

# How to Teach Hinduism to Your Child?

**Dr. K. Aravinda Rao**

**EMESCO**

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**Dedicated**  
to  
**Sri Kalle Gundappa**  
my maternal grand-father  
and first teacher in Sanskrit  
who taught *Amarakośa* with great love

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## Transliteration key

The International Alphabet for Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) has been used to denote the Sanskrit words which are in Devanagari script. IAST is the most widely used key, which is also explained on the web. A brief table is given. However, it is best to learn the exact sounds from a teacher.

अ	a	as in sun	क	K	cut/kite	ट	ṭa	touch
आ	ā	Bald	ख	kha	Book-house, 'k' combined with aspiration 'h'	ঠ	ṭha	anthill
ই	i	Bit	ঞ	Ga	Gun	ঢ	ঢ়া	Dull
ঁ	ī	Beat	ঁ	gha	Pig-head, the sound 'g' in 'gun' with aspiration 'h'.	ঢ	ঢ়া	Godhead, aspiration as above
ঃ	u	Put	ঃ	ঁna	Lung	ণ	ঁna	under (retroflex)
ঁ	ū	Tool	ঁ	Ca	Chunk	ঁ	Ta	Path
ঁ	ṛ	Rhythm	ঁ	cha	catch-hold	ঁ	tha	The sound 'th' in 'thumb' combined with aspiration 'h'
ঃ	e	Date	ঃ	Ja	Jug	ঃ	Da	Then

ऐ	ai	Might	ঝ	Jha	Hedgehog, 'j' with aspiration	ঝ	dha	The sound 'th' in 'thus' plus aspiration
ओ	o	Oat	জ	ଝ	Bunch	ନ	Na	Number
ঔ	au	Out						
প	pa	Pot	য	Ya	Yet	ষ	ষা	shun
ফ	pha	Soup-hunt, aspiration as above	ৰ	Ra	Run	স	Sa	Sun
ব	ba	But	ল	La	Love	হ	ha	Hall
ভ	bha	Abhor, aspiration as above	ৱ	Va	Voice	ঞ	kṣa, combines the 'k' in 'king' with the sound 'sh' in Shaw	Rikshaw
ম	ma	Much	শ	ଶ	Sat	ঝ	Jñā	

# 1

## The Need for This Book

### 1.1. Globalized children

I write this book for the parents of today's globalized children. Students of higher classes can read it on their own. The subject is old but it has to be told in modern terms.

Perhaps, about fifty years ago, this book was not quite so needed, especially if we grew up in rural India. We were credulous children, never doubting anything that our parents or grandparents told us about gods, heaven, hell and all such things. We celebrated all festivals joyously and boisterously, worshiping which ever deity concerned. We would worship Sri Rama on the day of *Rama Navami*, worship the mighty god Shiva on the night of *Shiva Ratri* or goddess Durga on the day of *Durgashtami*. It never occurred to us to question why we had different gods and goddesses. We were willing to believe and admire what we were told about the demons slain by Rama or Krishna or Durga. Our childish curiosity was only about which god was more powerful – whether Hanuman or Rama. Whatever answer was given by our elders was quite alright for us.

Although the rituals and festivals continue to be performed with more zest than earlier, social change has brought about a great disconnect with the traditional lifestyle and value system. A significant change has been in our educational system, where anything to do with any religious text is meticulously avoided. Our school education does not expose the child to any religious

teachings and parents too, are isolated from any such study. The modern child in India is brought up to meet the challenges of an economically competitive environment without any regard to our cultural heritage.

This may appear good, because a child would grow up without any bias towards any religion. But religion is a reality which has become a globalized subject like all other aspects of human life. The western religions are seen marketing their religions in an intelligent and aggressive way. This is done at the community level by people who propagate their religion with a missionary motive; at the level of media through debates questioning several traditional festivals; at the level of films which ridicule Hindu manners and in a number of other ways. A modern Hindu child is unwittingly exposed to all this and may start doubting whatever semblance of religion he sees at home. Questions about why we have several gods, why we worship idols etc., remain unanswered. It is a testing time for the parents.

## **1.2. Competing religions**

It is also an unfortunate development that the secular nations of the West are becoming active defenders and propagators of their religion. This is the result of the conflict between the two dominant religions of the world. Sociologists have observed that while the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the century of reason, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is emerging as the century of religious revival. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw different shades of communism, Maoism, rivalry between communism and capitalism and other such ideological issues. This scene has changed and we now see religious extremism and civil wars between religious groups in several countries.

Indian children growing up abroad also face strange troubles. Schools abroad do give some introduction to major world religions, including Hinduism. But while other religions

can be easily understood and explained in a simple way, Hinduism is more complex because of several religious texts and several traditions of worship. As such, it is likely to be improperly or inadequately taught. Children sometimes get negative impressions of their heritage and sometimes get depressed because of ridicule by peers. If the core philosophy is not well understood by the parents they may be ill-equipped to meet such challenges.

*They have to update themselves if they have to answer their kids.*

### **1.3. What this book covers?**

People generally ask two types of questions regarding Hinduism. There are primary questions, such as: 'Why do we worship several gods?', 'Are we idol worshippers?', 'Are we asked to do work without expectation of reward?', 'Is everything destined by our *karma*?' and so forth.

There can be secondary questions, such as: 'What is the significance of vermillion or *tilak* on the forehead?', 'Why do we do *hārati* or circumambulation in a temple?', 'What is the significance of the sacred thread?' and so forth.

In this book I have tried to answer the questions of first type, which are more fundamental and important. These concerns can be addressed only if we understand the basic philosophy of the *Upanishads*. Questions of the second type are related to religious practices which differ from place to place.

A few chapters on philosophy have become inevitable to answer the basic questions and I apologize to the readers for the difficulty caused. They have to be digested slowly and clearly. I will present the basic facts based on the primary texts: the *Vedas*, the *Brahma Sutras* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

All other books such as the *purāṇa*-s, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are secondary texts, based on the philosophy of the primary texts. These relate to religious practices, rituals, festivals and ethical life. I have also explained certain social issues like caste and untouchability which have been wrongly linked with religion.

You may not straight away start teaching the contents of the book, but may wait for the inquisitive query from your child. The children are bound to ask the questions discussed in this book. It will be good to tell them when they do ask about it.

I have used the IAST transliteration key for Sanskrit words and expressions. The parents are advised to study it first to get the pronunciation right.

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## 2

# Who Are the Hindus?

## 2.1. Our name and spread

The commonly accepted derivation for the word ‘Hindu’ is that the ancient Persians, in their texts, referred to the river Sindhu as ‘Hindu’, as this is how they pronounced the sound ‘s’. They also referred to the people who lived around the river as Hindus. This name was adopted by various others who came to India either as invaders or visitors and the name got attached to us. This word is not in the Vedas or in the major *purāṇa-s*. Some scholars do claim that the word ‘Hindu’ is found in the *purāṇa-s* and also give a derivation, but this is debated.

It is estimated that nearly one-seventh of the world’s population are Hindus, followers of the most ancient living religion. It is the fourth largest religion in the world after Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. Both Buddhism and Hinduism originated in India, but Buddhism spread to China and other South Asian countries, while Hinduism is now mostly confined to India, although at one time it was spread throughout many of its neighbouring countries, such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

## 2.2. *Sanātana dharma*

*The actual term used in our texts for Hinduism is ‘sanātana dharma’.* This denoted the religion and culture until the British popularized the word ‘Hindu’. ‘Sanātana’ is that which is eternal

in nature and ‘*dharma*’ is that which holds the society together. It means the moral and ethical code which holds for all times for social harmony and integration. Religion and religious rituals were part and parcel of this *dharma*.

Sometimes it is said that Hinduism is not a religion but a way of life. This means that Hinduism is not like other religions. In other religions, there is only one book and one belief system about god, heaven and the devil. Hinduism has a number of belief systems under the umbrella of one single philosophy, as we shall see in great detail.

If you look at the map of present day India, the Himalayas are in the north-east, bordering China. Pakistan is on the north-west. At the time of origin of what we call Hinduism, the name of the country was ‘*Bharata-varṣa*’ covering areas right up to the present-day Afghanistan (called Gandhara in those days) on the north-west and up to Myanmar (Pragjyotisapura) in the east. The sister of the King of Kandahar (Gandhara) was the grand old lady Gandhari, the mother of the hundred Kauravas whom we see in the great Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*. All this land from Afghanistan to Kerala was the land of *sanātana dharma*. We had very friendly relations with another mighty empire of olden days, that is, China. A large contingent of Chinese soldiers, a golden sea of people, fought on the side of the Kauravas in the epic battle of the *Mahabharata*.

### **2.3. Cultural unity of India**

Historically, the whole of the Indian continent was one cultural unit. All our prayers and rituals show this. Take for example, this verse from our daily prayer:

*gainge ca yamune caiva godāvari sarasvati |  
narmade sindhu kāveri jalesmin sannidhiṁ kuru ||*

“Oh the holy rivers Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu (Indus) and Kaveri! Manifest your presence in this water”.

These words are recited by all those who do their daily prayers anywhere in the country. The devotee keeps water in a chalice in front of him and invokes waters of all holy rivers of the country into it. The prayer covers the whole of *Bharata Varṣa*. Many of our other prayers too, refer to the whole of India. We do pilgrimage to the twelve famous shrines of Shiva (*Jyotirlingas*) and the eighteen shrines of Shakti (*śakti-pīṭhas*) wherever we may reside. Incidentally we may note that one Shakti shrine is in Sri Lanka. Even an unlettered Indian, located anywhere in the country, has a sense of allegiance to all these shrines, which have become part of the Indian psyche. One has to listen to the majesty of *mahā-saṅkalpam* (a long hymn to our motherland) which is recited during the ritual of marriage, in order to understand the glorious picture of our country.

The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* contain several descriptions of the geography of *Bharata-varṣa*, as it was then called. There are details of several small kingdoms and their geographical details. The *Mahabharata* describes the kings who sided with the Kauravas or Pandavas in the war. Sanskrit literature abounds in such description of kingdoms. All these underline the cultural oneness of India.

The cultural unity of what are now called tribes and the mainstream population has also to be noted. The great epic, the *Mahabharata* describes how the five exiled princes stayed with the tribal people and accepted their help while dwelling in the forest. Yudhishtira sends them as spies to observe the governance by Duryodhana. Similarly, the *Ramayana* describes how the chiefs

of several tribes were invited on the eve of proposed coronation of Rama. Later, when Rama was in exile, he moved with Guha, a tribal chief and received his help. In another famous episode Rama held discussion on *dharma* with Sabari, a tribal woman. All this shows that the tribes were an integral part of Indian culture.

Professor Stephen Knapp notes how Indian culture spread to several East-Asian countries due to its sheer depth and breadth of vision – not its military might. Extensive research has been done by Professor Knapp about how the Hindu merchants were responsible for the spread of Hinduism in Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia and other such countries. The languages and diction of these countries bear testimony to the cultural connections.

**Parents may also see:**

- See “Proof of Vedic Culture’s Global Existence” and other books by Stephen Knapp

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# 3

## Hinduism – Not Merely a Religion

### 3.1. The basic structure of Hinduism

We find certain common features in major religions like Christianity, Islam or Judaism. They can be identified as follows:

- i. They are started by a particular person at a particular time in history.
- ii. The person claims to have had a direct communication with God.
- iii. He communicates certain orders or directions from the God which form the body of the religion.
- iv. This body of directions is a belief system about the nature of God located in heaven, the nature of hell, the nature of the devil etc.
- v. There exists only one God who has created the universe at some point of time. For instance, the Christian scholars have held that the universe was created in 4004 BCE as per their holy book. This applies to other religions too, as they too follow the same portion called the Old Testament.
- vi. This belief system cannot be questioned. There is no room for debate.
- vii. Each religion claims that its own god is the true god and others are false. Followers of other religions are doomed to languish in hell.

viii. Each religion has one basic text which is said to be either the word of God or the message of God. This text is the final authority on all matters.

Hinduism is much different in nature.

- i. It was not started by any single person at any point of time in history.
- ii. No single person claimed that he had communication with God or that God has given special instructions to him.
- iii. There are several religious traditions, each having its own corpus of religious texts describing its own god as the Supreme God. But all of them owe allegiance to the Vedas, which are the basic texts. The followers of Vishnu claim Vishnu to be Supreme while followers of Shiva, Shakti etc., claim their own God or Goddess to be the Supreme and others as lower.
- iv. Creation is said to be beginningless, because its beginning cannot be rationally established.
- v. These several belief systems or traditions coexisted fairly peacefully, with minor friction at some points in time.
- vi. Though the followers of these traditions worshipped several gods and sometimes maintained their own family god as supreme, they never denigrated the other deities as forms of the devil.
- vii. There is no concept of the devil in Hinduism. Evil is explained from a totally different perspective as we will see in a later chapter.
- viii. There are several texts in Hinduism, although the most basic texts are the Vedas. Traditionalists maintain that the Vedas

are self-revelations. Modern scholars, however, maintain that they were composed about five thousand years ago. In addition to these texts we have certain secondary texts, which are also held in high regard. Thus, as someone said, while the Western religions are called the religions of the book, Hinduism is a religion of the library.

### **3.2. Religion – A set of incontrovertible beliefs**

I hope you agree that no living person has seen either heaven or hell and no one has ever returned to tell us what it is. We must admit that any religion, as we see now, is structured around a set of beliefs – beliefs regarding creation of the universe by God, about heaven which is the God's abode where good people go after death. Hell is the place where the bad folks go and suffer for their bad deeds. Such beliefs existed all over the world and different religions visualized their own God forms, their own versions of heaven and hell, and their own norms about good or bad in society.

A majority of people have been made to accept such belief system as absolute truth and even now many continue to do so. This gives a lot of importance to the religious structure and the people in charge of that structure. Votaries of religion have always held that religion instills good values, social discipline and order. The very word *religion* is from a Latin root '*ligare*', to bind. Religion served the purpose of binding the society as a culturally homogenous unit. But unfortunately, it also resulted in claims of superiority of one religion over the other. Adherents of such religions also believed in a supposedly divine mandate that the whole world had to be converted to their own belief system. History shows that such views resulted in wars, conquests, conversions or genocides. This book does not discuss these.

### 3.3. Philosophy versus religion

Throughout history, there have been several people who questioned such belief systems. No one has seen God or heaven or hell but the books so solidly talk about these things. Hence, the non-believers or atheists had their own postulations about creation and about the human being's role in the universe.

We assume that the scientific spirit is a product of modern times but fortunately it is not so. Logical thinking is as old as the human mind. The ancient Indians (Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and others) had developed elaborate systems of logic. So too, did the Greeks, Romans and others. These thinkers were called philosophers, the lovers of truth. But quite often, the philosophical thought had nothing to do with religious structure. People of religion talked of a personal god in all grandeur while the philosophers turned to reason and hypothesis. We notice this among the Western philosophers who, sometimes, speak almost on the same lines as the *Upanishads* but they were like rebels, and some were excommunicated by the clergy. Religion and philosophy were on a collision course.

The following table will help clarify the difference between religion and philosophy.

Religion	Philosophy
Belief system or dogma about god, heaven, hell etc	Based on reasoning and enquiry about the nature of the highest reality
Usually started at a point of time by a person having communication with god	Not started by a person. It is a continuous process of enquiry

No room for questioning or debate. The founder and the book are important.	Reasoning presupposes debate. The subject matter is important. There is no founder in philosophical enquiry.
<p>It is applicable to a specific group of people.</p> <p>There is a mandate to convert the whole world to one's own religion.</p>	<p>It is universally valid and applicable.</p> <p>No such mandate exists. All ideas are freely discussed.</p>

### 3.4. Hinduism – Two levels of truth

Mankind cannot be happy with philosophy alone. It also needs a god on whose shoulders it can cry. Hence the *Upanishads* have accepted religion as a *lower level of truth* and the philosophical analysis as the *higher level of truth*. The *Mundaka Upanishad* calls the lower level *aparā* and the higher level *parā* (We will see this later in 8.4).

Indian sages examined the human mind and senses, the way we cognize the universe, the limitations of such cognitions and the nature of Supreme Reality. We find that the sages (we call them *r̥si-s* in Sanskrit) who envisioned the *Upanishads* used elaborate reasoning in seeking to know the ultimate reality, or God, as we call It. They also recognized the social need for religion and that only a tiny minority would engage in the philosophical quest. Hence the sages endorsed religion at the level of the common man in the early portions of Vedas and discussed philosophical issues toward the end of the Vedas. Hence we find stories of gods, demons and rituals at one level, and about human mind and its intricacies at another. A *distinct feature of these stories is that they are not disconnected from the philosophical concepts*. They

are symbolic or allegorical tales, conveying the philosophical concepts to the lay person. We shall see this in good detail in the forthcoming chapters.

### **3.5. Finally, is Hinduism a religion in the usual sense?**

We find some Hindu religious leaders saying that Hinduism is not a religion and that it is a way of life. If we say that Hinduism is a religion, then we are equating it with other religions which are mainly belief systems. If we say that it is not a religion, it would cause confusion in the minds of its followers. Hence many religious leaders observe that Hinduism is not a mere religion but something more. It is a religion which has been shaped by the philosophical thinking of the Upanishads. We will see this in the following chapters.

\*\*\*

# 4

## Hinduism – Shaped by Philosophical Thought

*“What distinguishes the Vedanta philosophy from all other philosophies is that it is at the same time a religion and a philosophy”*- Max Muller

### 4.1. Our interaction with religion

Many of us observe some daily rituals at home and have some idea of religious beliefs. When we go to a temple we see the priest chanting some prayers, breaking a coconut offered by us and giving us some delicious snack which was earlier offered to the god. The priest chants prayers which are composed in Sanskrit which most of us do not know. (Sanskrit was once known to everyone in society and hence the prayers were in Sanskrit). We go to different temples and see priests chanting different prayers. We may not know what the prayers mean but we have a good feeling when listening to the awe-inspiring sounds and taking part in the impressive ritual. We hardly realize that the prayers contain deep philosophical ideas.

Religion can be presented in two ways.

- 1) It can be told as a myth about the God, the demons (Satan, as called in Western religions), heaven, hell and related structures. The god has given some orders and one has to obey. This structure satisfies an innocent believer.

- 2) Religion can be an honest enquiry about the nature of the Supreme Being. We must keep in mind that it is man who is trying to know the nature of god. For that we have to know how far our instruments of knowledge are useful. The instruments we have are the five senses and the mind which coordinates them. Someone who wants to propose a religion has to keep this in mind and postulate an idea of god, demons, heaven and hell.

The major religions, as we saw above, fall under the first category. They have a sacred book which is said to contain the word of God. All people must obey unquestioningly. There can be descriptions of heaven with gold pavements, fabulous mansions and heavenly damsels. By contrast, there is a dark dungeon with hellish fires to punish the non-believers.

Hinduism approaches this subject at two levels, as I said above.

- 1) At the level of philosophy it examines the human being (all living beings in general) and his senses and mind. An episode in the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, illustrates this point. In that episode, the son goes to his father (who is a sage) and asks him to tell him about the Supreme Reality. The father says, 'You have got a body with flesh and blood, the five senses and mind. You also have the vital air which is enabling the body to live. Meditate on these and try to know truth.' The son starts thinking about them and finally arrives at the truth. We shall see this in detail in a later chapter. The idea here is merely to show that the sages had a logical approach to reality.
- 2) At the level of common man the sages did not prescribe any one belief system or mode of worship of a single

deity. Whatever the human mind can conceive is merely a partial truth, says the *Kena Upanishad*. No one can say, 'This is what is God, this is what the Heaven is'. Hence the *Upanishad* says, '*nedam yad idam upāsate*', which means 'What is worshipped (by people) is not the Supreme Reality'. The sages permitted different modes of worship which are all accepted as tentative or interim level of truth. This is the reason we find several gods being worshipped. We will see more about this in a later chapter.

#### **4.2. No single prophet in Hinduism**

*Hinduism was not propounded by a single prophet.* It did not originate in troubled times. There was no political power enforcing it and suppressing dissent. Scholars agree that the basic texts like the Vedas might have evolved over a period of a few centuries. Sages who renounced the world and speculated over the mysteries of the universe have given to us certain intuitive observations or 'revelations' in the form of the Vedas. These books have given to us both religion and philosophy.

The Vedas thus speak to us at two levels, as we learnt. From the point of the ordinary man, they tell of several deities and several procedures and rituals to propitiate the deities. They also speak of the heavenly worlds which are the fruit of such rituals. The common man is happy with them. The sages have structured our rituals in such a way as to incorporate the philosophical passages. The idea is that at some point a person performing the ritual would start thinking about the philosophical meaning.

The Vedas directly address the higher level too. The end portions of the Vedas are totally devoted to this. The uniqueness of Vedas is that both philosophy and religion are described in the

same texts by the same sages. They took a comprehensive view of society and addressed people of different maturity levels.

Religion and belief systems are accepted as a *lower level of truth* or empirical reality (*vyāvahārika satyam*) for the purpose of social guidance and harmony. This reflects a willing and knowing acceptance of an empirical god with a name and form for the purpose of devotion and worship. Great philosophers like Shankaracharya discussed abstract philosophy about a formless Reality on one hand and also wrote several hymns and prayers to several gods with forms, names and attributes.

Logical contemplation on the nature of reality is accepted as the *absolute level of truth* (*pāramārthika satyam*). This was conveyed to mature persons trained in the discipline of philosophy while the empirical level of god or goddess with name and form was for everyone. Most people are usually happy with the lower level, conducting rituals, seeking boons from different gods and seeking forgiveness. Very few are normally seen to be bothered about the higher level of truth.

This book, of course, tries to give a simple account of the philosophical level, as that is the only way we can answer the questions of modern students who demand deeper answers. Questions about religion will also be discussed in detail.

\*\*\*

# 5

## The Sacred Texts of Hindus

*“In the whole world there is no study so beneficial and so elevating as that of the Upanishads. It has been the solace of my life; and it will be the solace of my death. They are the product of the highest wisdom”.*

– Arthur Schopenhauer, the German Philosopher

### 5.1. Primary texts

If you visit a Hindu bookstore and look for ancient texts on Hinduism, you will find a number of books held as important. You may not know as to which one is more important and which one is not. Hence, it is necessary to know which are primary and important and which are secondary in nature. We do not have one single text attributed to a single prophet, as we saw above. Instead, we have several works which were revealed by sages over a period of time.

As Swami Dayananda Saraswati remarked, we are not people of the book but we are people of the library.

As I mentioned in the introduction (1.3), Hindus regard three texts as their primary texts: the *Vedas*, the *Brahma Sutras* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

***The Vedas:*** The most ancient and primary texts for the Hindus are the *Vedas*. The time of their composition is uncertain. Traditionalists even today maintain that the *Vedas* are directly revealed from the Supreme Being, called Brahman. But it can be reasonably established that they were the revelations of

several *r̄si*-s who had left their families, retreated to jungles and contemplated the mysteries of the universe with an enquiring mind. It was a time when there were no rigid boundaries for the countries as we see now, and it appears that they were composed around five to six thousand years ago. It is undisputed that the *Rig-Veda* is the oldest human document available. The language used is Vedic Sanskrit which is fairly distinct from the classical Sanskrit of the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*.

The antiquity of the Vedas was never a subject for debate until the Europeans came to India. The Indian tradition gave importance to what is told in a text but not to who told it or when. European tradition is quite distinct from this. They tend to examine the historicity and biography of a text.

Several European scholars studied the Vedas along with the whole mass of Sanskrit literature. Scholars like Max Muller were bewildered by the sheer volume and depth of Indian philosophical thought. It was not similar to what they encountered in other colonial countries. Their first problem was to fix the time of composition of the books. They could not accept the Indian view that the Vedas were composed thousands of years ago, as the Biblical scholars and religious heads like Bishop Ussher had established that God created the Universe in 4004 BCE. and nothing on earth could be dated prior to that. They accepted the Biblical chronology and so they had to map all other cultures and societies within the Biblical time scale. With all this, there is some agreement now amongst scholars that the Vedas were composed sometime between 2000 and 1500 BCE.

The initial portions of these Vedas contain prayers for different divine manifestations such as Agni (fire), Varuna (water), Indra, the master of all divine forms and so on. Along with these, certain rituals called 'yajña' are described in order to propitiate these deities. In addition, they discuss meditation on

various deities. All these are at one level which is traditionally called the *karma-kāṇḍa*, i.e. the portion of Veda which deals with deities and rituals and what we now call religion. This is what is referred to as the lower level of truth or empirical reality (3.4).

It is the end portions of Vedas which were the subject matter of serious interest among philosophers throughout the world. These end portions are called the Upanishads, and their teaching is called 'Vedanta' – 'anta' meaning 'the end' or the final word of the Vedas. This is what is referred to as the higher level of reality or absolute reality (3.4).

These portions of the Vedas are deliberations in what is now called philosophy. The subject matter is not the familiar social or political discourse which we normally associate with philosophy, but rather it is the deliberation on the nature of the Supreme Being, the nature of creation and the nature of human mind and senses. The final startling conclusion of the Vedas is that the individual and the Supreme Being are essentially one and the same.

***The Brahma-Sutras:*** 'Brahma' refers to Brahman, the Supreme Reality and the word *sūtra* means 'a formula'. Thus the word Brahma-Sutras means certain concise statements defining the Supreme Reality, its relation to the individual and to the world and how the Reality has to be known.

The Vedas, as generally agreed, were composed over a period of a few centuries in different parts of the country. Though the central philosophy is the same, the language and expression differ in them. It was necessary to explain certain apparent contradictions and demonstrate a unity of thought in the Vedas. The *Brahma-Sutras* do this job. These are several topics for discussion in this text. Each topic is covered by one or many *sūtra-s* or aphoristic statements. The topics discuss all

the important issues in philosophy and in religion. For instance, they discuss whether god can be a personal god or impersonal entity. They discuss whether there are several gods or one and whether we have to worship all gods or any particular one. They discuss whether god can have some chosen people and shower all his grace on them. This book is for rather advanced students as it is composed of weighty philosophical discussions.

**The *Bhagavad Gita*:** This is the most important text for Hindus. The primary fact to keep in mind is that it is not an independent text, but a small portion (700 verses) of the mighty epic the *Mahabharata* (100,000 verses). This epic deals with the great battle between two groups of royal kinsmen, the 'Kauravas' and the 'Pandavas'. It is encyclopedic in nature. It has several long passages about statecraft, morality, religion and philosophy. The *Bhagavad Gita* is one such philosophical passage of the *Mahabharata*. It is compulsory reading for every Hindu who wishes to understand the central doctrine of the Vedas. A traditional verse metaphorically compares all the *Upanishads* (the end portions of Vedas) to cows, Lord Krishna, the narrator to the milkman and Arjuna, the listener, to the calf. While the calf is the immediate beneficiary of the nectar called *Gita*, we are all the incidental beneficiaries.

We are going to know about the *Gita* in an exclusive chapter.

## 5.2. Secondary texts: – *Itihāsa* and *purāṇa*.

The Vedic sages had a plan for transmission of knowledge. They gave the core texts in the form of Vedas. As the philosophy of Vedas (Vedanta) is not easily understood by all, they also wrote popular texts to spread the message of Vedas. These popular texts are the *itihāsa* and *purāṇa-s*. The word *itihāsa* is a combination of *iti*, *ihā* and *āsa*, which mean 'thus it was'. It is basically a historical text. The word *purāṇa* means 'though old,

still relevant'. The content of *purāṇā-s* is mostly mythological in nature. Both *itihāsa* and *purāṇa* are secondary texts.

Sage Vyasa's line from the first chapter of the great epic *Mahabharata* defines the framework of these texts:

'*itihāsa purāṇābhyāṁ vedam̄ samupabṛmhāyet*'.

'The message of the Vedas has to be popularized through the *itihāsa* and *purāṇa* texts'. If Vedas were to be compared to texts of law, the above secondary texts can be compared to studies in case law. For instance, if the Veda says '*satyam vada*' (speak truth), the secondary texts give several examples of people who implemented this injunction, and how they came out successfully in spite of several obstacles during the course of such implementation.

The Upanishads are called the *śruti*, meaning they were directly heard from the creator and the secondary texts are called *smṛti*, meaning they were texts composed keeping the Vedic philosophy in mind. The latter follows the former like a faithful follower, says Kalidasa, poetically (*Raghuvamsa* 2-2). Though secondary in nature, these guided the society by creating the ethical edifice of religion.

Two epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were called *itihāsa* (closer to historical narrations). The *Ramayana* of Sage Valmiki is considered to have preceded the *Mahabharata* of Sage Vyasa. Rama of *Ramayana* and the Pandavas of *Mahabharata* are accepted as historical characters whose stories were perhaps glorified in the epics called *itihāsa*. They were called *avatāra-s*, the incarnations of God.

The mythological texts were called *purāṇa-s*. The *purāṇa-s*, however, are many in number and they belong to different traditions of worship. Some extol Shiva as Supreme, some extol Vishnu as Supreme and others extol Shakti, Ganesha or some

other deity. They describe the whole range of Hindu pantheon which was being worshipped in different parts of the country, as we saw above.

According to tradition, eighteen *purāṇa-s* are said to have been written by Sage Vyasa but the modern scholars dispute it. Whatever be their historicity, they seem to have brought all the belief systems popular in different parts of the country together under the umbrella of *Upanishadic* thought. They did an excellent job of harmonizing different systems. They also blended the mythological symbolism with the philosophy of the *Upanishads*. The *Vedas* and *Upanishads* postulate philosophical concepts and these concepts are dramatized in the form of allegorical tales by the *purāṇa-s*.

Though secondary in nature, they are vital from the point of view of value building in society. Family and social values from the hundreds of stories of the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and the *purāṇa-s*, are firmly embedded in the collective memory of even illiterate villagers. These secondary texts played an important role in keeping the Hindu society together even when it was under severe attack in the past one thousand years.

*Rule: In case of any contradiction or doubt on any philosophical, social or ethical concept, the general rule is that the primary texts prevail over the secondary texts.*

#### **Parents may also see:**

- Max Muller – *India: What It Can Teach Us?*
- Google search – ‘Ussher chronology’

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# 6

## Investigating the Idea of God

### 6.1. An exercise

If we were to gather a group of intelligent people together with the aim of discerning the nature of God who has created all the beings and this universe, we could come up with any of the following three scenarios.

*1) God as cosmic super cop, with functions, name and form.*

This is the basic level of thinking where God is someone who is infinitely more powerful (omnipotent), infinitely more knowledgeable (omniscient) than anything in the Universe. We may also say that he or she has a form like Vishnu, Rudra or Durga and that his or her location is a heavenly abode, up above in the skies. He or she would punish the wrong doers and reward the good. Here, the God is having a name, form and some attributes, in other words, some functions. Vedanta calls it '*sākāra* ('with form') and *saguṇa*' ('with functions') level. At this stage we can say that God is omniscient and omnipotent. The problem, of course, is that my god may be different from your god and that can lead to trouble.

*2) God as formless, but a person with functions of controlling the universe.*

This is a marginally more intelligent level. Here God is someone for whom we cannot think of any shape, but he is an infinitely powerful being and he has the functions of rewarding

the good and punishing the bad. In other words, he is a ‘*nirākāra*’ (formless) but *saguṇa* (with functions). *This is the level at which all world religions end.* The Western religions talk of a formless God, but one who has all of the above functions. Among the Indian schools of philosophy, the logicians (called *tārkika-s*), the ‘*sāṅkhya-s*’ and the Patanjali yogis believed in such a concept of God. Even at this stage we can say that God is omniscient and omnipotent. Even here my god may be different from your god.

3) *God as a nameless, formless, functionless, impersonal entity:*

The third group which takes this view is thinking along the lines of the sages of the *Upanishads*. The *Upanishads* say that what we call the Supreme Being (God) cannot be something saddled with the mundane supervisory activity of the world. They further say that the Supreme Being (referred to by the pronoun ‘It’) cannot be something which can be called a male or female or identified with human form. This being, whatever it is, cannot even be that which creates and maintains the universe, draws up some rules and regulations for all the celestial bodies to move in their orbits, and promulgates rules for humans to follow. If that entity were to have all these duties, then it would be somewhat like a cosmic super-cop. We cannot say that God is omniscient like a super computer and also omnipotent. God cannot be someone who is fond of a chosen tribe and who is punishing the other tribe like a group leader. In this approach there is no form and no attributes and hence no trouble. Such rational analysis leads to the following conclusion.

## 6.2. God is infinite existence of consciousness

The *Upanishads* call this level as *nirākāra* (formless) and *nirguṇa* (attribute-less). Apart from the *Upanishads* no other religious text in the world speaks at this level. God is Existence,

Consciousness and Infinity (*satyam jñānam anantam Brahma*), as the *Taittiriya Upanishad* says. For the purpose of verbal transaction it is named as Brahman. It is not a being or a person as we conceived at the first two levels and it is referred to not as *He* or *She* but as *It*.

The three words *satyam*, *jñānam* and *anantam* need some explanation.

The normal meaning of the word *satyam* is 'truth'. In philosophy it has a different meaning. It refers to something whose existence cannot be negated or denied in the past, present and future. Anything in creation undergoes change and decay. The human life is for a mere hundred years and the life of the planet earth is only for a few billion years. This universe itself did not exist a few billion years ago. But this principle called *satyam*, Existence, has always been here even prior to the origin of the universe. In fact, the concept of time is associated with events and the knower of such events. Hence time is an appearance in that Existence, which precedes time. Sikhism, following the same line, calls this *akāl*, beyond time. Existence of all beings and things is only a manifestation of this Supreme Existence.

The second word, *jñānam*, means consciousness or intelligence. It does not mean that God is all knowing, but that It is of the nature of consciousness, which is reflected in all beings. I, as a limited person, can cognize an object outside me. In this there is a knower, an object of knowledge and the process of knowing. This applies to all limited entities but not to Brahman. Brahman is infinite in nature and there is no knower and 'known' in Its case because nothing exists apart from Brahman. Hence It is of the nature of pure consciousness which is to be understood as distinct from our 'intelligence'.

*Anantam* is infinity. There is nothing which can be outside of It. The closest example we can think of is space, which pervades the whole universe. Vedanta says that even space is an appearance in that Supreme Being, which is here denoted by the word infinity. All that we see is pervaded by It and not apart from It.

It is thus clear that according to Vedanta *the ultimate reality is neither a man nor a woman nor is it in a human or any living form. It is of the nature of existence, consciousness and infinity.* The principle of existence is all over the cosmos. Everywhere we see things and say 'this exists' 'this exists' and so on endlessly. There is a principle of existence which underlies all that we see.

Likewise, the whole cosmos is permeated by consciousness, in other words, intelligence. Consciousness is manifesting along with existence in all things we see whether they are sentient or insentient. The human mind is said to be a smart 'reflector' of this consciousness in comparison with all other things. In fact, the human being himself is called a reflector of this consciousness.

The next attribute for the ultimate reality is infinity. Existence and consciousness are all pervading. All that we can conceive and beyond that too is that ultimate entity.

As we noted above, the scriptures have given the name 'Brahman' to this Supreme Being for the purpose of usage. The word Brahman literally means 'infinitely expanding'. All that we see as the universe must then, presumably, be the creation or manifestation of this entity.

If Brahman is such formless and nameless entity, what is the status of Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti and other deities? They are merely various forms visualized within the same Supreme Reality. This we shall know in the following chapters.

If we look at the world religions, they usually talk of a formless god, but the god is a male, and thus human and also partisan to his chosen tribe and so jealous that he punishes those who worship any other deity. He also creates man in his own image. He sends believers to heaven and non-believers to hell. It is to the credit of our ancient sages that they analyzed this issue dispassionately and proposed a universal concept of Brahman.

To conclude, we analyzed God at three levels:

<i>sākāra, saguṇa</i>	<i>nirākāra, saguṇa</i>	<i>nirākāra, nirguṇa</i>
1. God with a form like Vishnu, Shiva or Ganesha and functions such as creation, governance and protecting the good.	God without form but with all functions like creation, governance of the world, protecting the good.	An impersonal entity without form or any functions. It has nothing to do with the phenomenal world.
2. Traditions such as Vaishnava, Shaiva, Shākta (related to Shakti) in Hinduism come under this category	The Indian philosophical schools of <i>nyāya</i> (logicians), <i>sāṅkhya</i> and yoga schools come under this. The Western religions also come under this.	Vedanta alone talks of such level of Supreme Reality.

<p>3. These traditions are at the level of duality. God is the controller and the human being is the controlled.</p>	<p>These too are at the level of duality. God is the controller and the human being is the controlled.</p>	<p>Brahman alone exists and It is the only truth. The realized person is not different from Brahman. This is called the plane of non-duality.</p>
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### **The parents may also see:**

- [www.scienceandnonduality.com](http://www.scienceandnonduality.com)

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## How Did the Universe Come About?

*“It (Hinduism) is the only religion in which the time scales correspond to those of modern scientific cosmology. Its cycles run from our ordinary day and night to a day and night of Brahma, 8.64 billion years long, longer than the age of the earth or the sun and about half the time since the big bang. And there are much longer time scales still”*

- Carl Sagan, in “Cosmos”

### 7.1. Material for the universe

When we look at any object it is natural for us to assume the presence of its source or of a creator. The created object is called the effect and the creator is the cause. When we take the example of an earthen jar, we see that clay is the raw material (called the *material cause*) and the potter is its maker (called the *intelligent cause*). The question thus arises, regarding the cause of our visible universe, its maker and as to where the material has come from?

Different religions give different versions of creation of universe by God. These are called creation myths. God decides to create the universe and appears in the sky and creates the universe in a few days and also takes rest.

Upanishads give a different picture. They propose a hypothesis. A passage from *Taittiriya Upanishad* (2-1) of *Krishna Yajurveda* says this:

“The all-pervading space emerged from the eternal Consciousness.

From space, emerged air.  
From air, emerged fire,  
And from fire, emerged water  
Earth (the solid matter) has emerged from these waters.  
The plant kingdom originated thereafter.  
Plants became the food for the living beings,  
And thus, all the living beings emerged.”

We may wonder why there is no mention of God in the above passage.

We are concerned about us. The above passage says that all living beings, including humans came from the plant kingdom, which is called ‘*annam*’, the food, because they eat and get eaten. We too are called food. The sage, on discovering that he is nothing greater than ‘fodder’, cries out ‘I am food, I am food, I am the eater, I am the eater’ (*Taittiriya Upanishad*).

The above description from the Upanishad is not so far from the scientist’s view of the origin of earth. It is the hot airs or the nebulae which condensed to become fluid and thereafter solidified to become the stars and planets. Also, we do not have any problem with Darwin whose theory is opposed by some religions in the West. Vedanta does not claim that there is a creator sitting high above in skies, creating the cosmos from out of some material.

We should guard ourselves from over enthusiasm. We should not claim that all modern science is contained in the *Upanishads*. We can only say that the *Upanishads* made a rational and dispassionate enquiry, without any agenda to establish a religion or dogma.

The idea of 'all illuminining' *ākāśa* i.e. space, which was the origin of all, is something surprising at a time when all other cultures accepted only four elements: earth, water, fire and air. These five elements are like the raw material for all the living beings as we shall see later.

*What is the material from which Brahman created the universe and where did it come from? Let us try to follow what Vedanta says.*

In the earlier chapter we saw that Brahman is Existence, Consciousness and Infinity. In other words, it is consciousness existing infinitely around. It is not of the nature of a personal God. There cannot be anything un-pervaded by It.

Can we accept the model of a potter? If so, we have to accept that there is a material apart from what we have call Brahman, in which case, Brahman would be a limited entity, however powerful it may be. The material would be external to Brahman and Brahman would be limited to that extent. Hence *the material must be from Brahman itself.*

If we believe that the material is *from* Brahman, then, we would be assuming that Brahman is an entity with limbs or parts to it. It is facile to say that Brahman took a part from itself and fashioned the cosmos. There can be no parts in infinity. Brahman having limbs or parts would make It a limited entity. It would negate the infinite nature of Brahman, which we noted above.

If we propose that Brahman changed Itself into the cosmos just as milk changes into curd, then Brahman would no longer exist having transformed Itself into the universe. This cannot be the case. Brahman would then be a changing and impermanent entity. This would again contradict the nature of Brahman.

The only option which remains is to say that *it is Brahman which is 'appearing' as the universe, while itself not undergoing any change*. It is the *unchanging material cause and also the intelligent cause* of the universe. (Vedanta calls this the *abhinna nimitta - upādāna - kāraṇam*). In other words, Vedanta proposes that consciousness is manifesting as the universe (matter).

## 7.2. The concept of manifesting power, *māyā*.

Brahman being infinity, It has no action in Itself. It cannot have the duty of being the creator. How is it that space, the other four elements and universe emerged from that? The scriptures introduce a sort of interface called *māyā*. This is a hypothesis to explain the actionless consciousness appearing as universe. This *māyā* is described as *the manifesting power in Brahman*. It veils the real nature of Brahman from us and makes It appear or manifest as the universe. In other words, you and I are the same consciousness, appearing as individual entities. All the animals, plants and all the inanimate things that we see are all manifestations of the same consciousness.

We have landed in a situation where we say that the cosmos is 'appearing' and appearances are not real. This is a question which has perplexed the minds of the sages who revealed the *Upanishads*. Science, until recently, maintained that consciousness has come out of matter. Vedanta on the other hand, says that matter is appearing from consciousness. Science appears to be still undecided about the issue. The Vedantins too are undecided, and hence, they say that the existence or otherwise of the universe cannot be asserted. It is neither real nor unreal (neither *sat* nor *asat*).

*Vedanta says that this creation is a temporary appearance in māyā*. It appears and disappears. It is not a one-time activity of

God. In fact, what we call creator is only a function in *māyā*.

Western religions speak of only one creation. The Vedas speak of recurring cycles of creation. There arises a creation, which is then sustained for some time and then resolves into the above said *māyā*.

All of the above discussion may not be easily understood by a lay person. Hence the later texts, called *purāṇa*-s, presented these concepts in allegories and symbolic stories. The power of creation was called Brahma, a four-headed god, whose consort is Saraswati (symbolizing wisdom). The power of sustenance was called Vishnu, whose consort is Lakshmi (symbolizing wealth and resources). The power of resolving the universe was called Rudra, whose consort was Shakti (symbolizing the power of destruction). We will know about these god forms in later chapters.

### **The parents may also see:**

- *Taittiriya Upanishad* (2-1) any translation with a traditional commentary.
- Google search Carl Sagan's series on Cosmos.
- [www.wikiquote.org](http://www.wikiquote.org) for Ervin Schrodinger's remarks on Vedanta.
- Talks on YouTube by Swami Sarvapriyananda on Creation.

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# 8

## Man and Creator – The Truth

### 8.1. Understanding the connection between consciousness and creator

We saw above that some personal god did not abruptly appear in space and create the whole universe. We merely saw a phenomenon called creation and that Brahman (consciousness) had no direct activity in manifesting creation. The question then arises, what is a human being (or any living being) and who is the creator?

The Supreme Being was called Brahman, as we recall. It is consciousness existing infinitely all around. The *Upanishads* say that there cannot be anything other than consciousness. In such case where do we position the human being or the creator?

In the above chapter (7.1) we read the lines from the *Upanishad* about the emergence of the universe. They told that all living beings have come out of the plant kingdom. All these beings (both animals and plants) starting from a blade of grass to mighty trees and from an ant to a dinosaur do have some intelligence. This is to feed themselves, protect themselves and also propagate themselves. This suggests that all these beings seem to be a mixture of intelligence plus some other raw stuff. It is flesh, blood and bones in the case of mobile beings (called *jaṅgama*) and fibrous stuff in non-mobile beings (called *sthāvara*).

## 8.2. The cosmic mind – Iswara

In the earlier chapter (7.2) we noted the concept of a manifesting power in consciousness. If we visualize the impersonal entity Brahman as an ocean of consciousness, a mighty tidal wave arising in it can be compared to the cosmic mind. It is as though the notion of 'I' has arisen or manifested in pure consciousness. This first notion of 'I' is the cosmic mind. This is called Iswara in the *Upanishads*. Iswara too is consciousness, associated with the manifesting power of Brahman. (This word Iswara should not be mistaken for the mythological god Shiva, husband of Parvati).

Another way of understanding the idea of the cosmic mind is to look at it as the aggregate of individual minds. In other words, if we visualize all the beings in the universe collectively and look at it on a cosmic level, we can call it the cosmic mind. The cosmic mind has certain additional functions, such as governing the heavenly bodies like the stars, sun and moon. It is in charge of the cosmic order. This cosmic mind is called *Iswara*, the Lord and creator of the universe.

## 8.3. The individual mind – The *jīva*

The *Upanishads* say that the cosmic mind gives rise to the individual minds. The *Upanishads* also say that what we call mind in all the living beings is merely an insentient material, but very pure and sensitive material capable of reflecting consciousness (Brahman). It is somewhat like a mirror reflecting the sun. It is capable of interacting with the world around it through its senses and mind activated by the same consciousness. Thus we note that living beings are associated with some bit of consciousness, which we call intelligence. This tiny bit of intelligence is called the individual self, the *jīva* (this also includes plants and all animals).

We may compare this with a tiny ripple or a bubble in the ocean of consciousness or the mere space in a pot in the infinite, space like consciousness.

In the above example of the ocean, all that you see is water, but in different shapes and forms, such as giant waves, small waves, bubbles and foam. We see them all collectively as ocean. The nature of water does not undergo any change whether it is a giant wave, a tiny ripple or mere froth.

Take the example of space. The space in a room, the space in a vessel, the space in a huge building and the infinite space outside are all but space. The space does not undergo any change because of its apparent limitations like vessel-space, room-space or a building-space.

What we have noted as Brahman is not limited to the universe. Universe is a temporary manifestation in Brahman consciousness. This can be compared to the ocean or the space, as in the above examples.

All living beings have limitations of space and time. They live for a limited time in a specific place. Even the cosmic mind, is a limited entity compared to Brahman consciousness.

The *jīva* consciousness and the *Iswara* consciousness are said to be delimited, while Brahman is infinite.

*Iswara* is called the creator, and he is as much a limited being as the *jīva*, although he pervades and overlords the universe.

Consciousness cannot be viewed as a substance which can be divided into parts. Expressions such as 'pot-space' are only for the sake of illustration. Another example given is that of the sun getting reflected in different water bodies and appearing as myriad suns. Shankaracharya uses these comparisons in different

places to illustrate the point that consciousness is one and the same in all beings whereas the delimiting factors (the mind in which it gets reflected) can be different.

An ocean is a manifestation of water and so too a wave. The ocean is called the cause and the wave is called the effect, though they both are water. Similarly, the Supreme Consciousness manifesting as *Iswara* is the cause and manifesting as *jīva* is the effect.

#### **8.4. Iswara is visualized in several forms**

Vedanta has to take into account the requirements of human society. At all times, human beings envisioned a God-form and submitted themselves to His or Her will. This was a convenient and happy arrangement. It is a sort of utilitarian view of religion. The ancient seers did not want to dismiss such a comfortable notion and so they accepted different God-forms but treated them as a lower level of truth (*vyāvahārika satyam*), something which was true at a transactional level (as we noted earlier in 3.4). The higher level of truth, or the truth at the absolute level, is that Brahman has no direct connection with creation as we understand it.

For the purpose of devotees, the god or *Iswara* who is accepted at an empirical level can be a man or a woman. Thus we see a number of gods and goddesses in our religion. We shall see this further in chapter 10.

God is ‘intelligent’ (in the sense that he is a person who is omniscient and has the cosmic functions of creation, maintenance and dissolution) whereas Brahman is ‘intelligence’, pure consciousness.

The functions of creation, sustenance and dissolution are functions which we attribute to the cosmic mind *Iswara* but not to Brahman. These functions are given various names. Each cosmic function is visualized as a god. The function of creation is called Brahma (different from the Supreme Brahman which we saw above), a four-headed deity who keeps on creating the universe. His creative intelligence is visualized as his consort, Saraswati.

The function of sustaining the universe is visualized as Vishnu, a powerful male deity. All resources are required for sustenance of the universe and these resources are visualized as a female deity called Lakshmi, who is said to be the consort of Vishnu.

The function of dissolution of universe is visualized as Rudra, or Shiva and his power of dissolution is visualized as a female deity called Shakti, who is the consort of Shiva.

The Sanskrit word for power is *sakti*, which is of feminine gender. Hence these powers are visualized as wives of the Gods. Sometimes a god may be shown as having two wives. It is not as if these Gods have many wives and lead a polygamous life. When we say that the popular god Lord Venkateswara has two wives it means that he has two aspects of power – the resources (Lakshmi) to sustain the universe and the power to ensure dharma on earth (Bhudevi, the goddess of earth).

## **8.5. All forms are one**

While addressing two levels, and providing different prayers for different deities, the Vedas repeatedly confirm that all god forms are, indeed, one.

For instance, when you go to any temple and perform worship, you will find the priests chanting the mantra from the *Narayanopanishad* –

*sa brahma sa śivah sa hariḥ sendrah sokṣarah paramaḥ svarāṭ.*

“That (indwelling consciousness) is Brahma (the creator), that is Shiva, that is Hari, (the sustainer), that is Indra, and that is the non-perishing Brahman”. All these are the same as one’s own self because the consciousness is the same in one and all. We find several other mantras in the same vein. (Note the difference between Brahman and Brahma. The former is the infinite and the latter is the finite. The former is of neuter gender and the latter is of masculine gender).

There are several minor deities, like the fire god (Agni), the rain god (Varuna), the lord Yama (who confers the result of karma upon a person) and so on. These have to be understood as universal or cosmic functions visualized as gods.

When creation itself is a temporary appearance in Brahman, it follows that all these deities are also temporary appearances. Hence they are like tenure posts, valid as long as a particular cycle of creation appears in Brahman.

There is no uniform description of the trinity in the Vedantic texts because the function of Vedanta is to show that Brahman is all pervasive and what we think as a human being is nothing but Brahman itself. *Vedanta does not attach much importance to the description of deities.* This has resulted in a number of belief systems and stories of god under the broad philosophy of the Upanishads, as we shall see.

## **8.6. Debate about consciousness and matter**

This section addresses the three main traditions in Hinduism which interpret the Vedas in three different ways: *advaita* (non-dualism), *viśiṣṭādvaita* (qualified non-dualism) and *dwaita*

(dualism). These are difficult concepts for students. It is also difficult to discuss these in a primary text like the present one. However, a brief overview is needed for parents who may belong to any of these traditions. The majority of mankind, fortunately, does not belong to any of the above traditions and hence they can look at this issue without bias.

We see the world around us, with all its variegated gifts to man. We see the beautiful rivers, mountains and forests which we freely exploit. Not only humans but also animals do this. The trees too, have intelligence to some extent and they know how to survive. Thus, we identify two aspects in nature – one intelligent and the other non-intelligent; one is the enjoyer and the other is the enjoyed; one is the knower and the other is the known. In other words, one is sentient and the other is insentient. The body is made of matter, but somehow it also has intelligence.

The fundamental question about matter and intelligence is whether they are two different things or whether they are one. This is a question which engaged the sages who gave us the *Upanishads*. In chapter 7 we touched upon what might be the substance of creation and we saw that consciousness itself manifested as *jagat*, the universe, in other words, as matter. But this is only one view. This view is contested by other equally learned sages. We may briefly see their points of view.

The first view (the predominant view) is that there is only one entity, consciousness, which is manifesting as all that we see. How this happens is inexplicable. That is why the idea of *māyā* was proposed and *māyā*, the creative or manifesting power in consciousness is something inexplicable (*anirvacanīya*). The consciousness itself has no attributes and no activity within it. This is the Brahman we saw in chapter 7. This view is called

the *advaita*, non-dualism. Sri Shankaracharya is one famous proponent of this view.

The second view is that there are two aspects – sentient (*cit*), and insentient (*jada*), but both exist in the body of the Supreme Being, Vishnu. This Supreme Being is with all glorious attributes – omniscience, omnipotence and so on. He is a personal god who is closer to religion than the attribute-free Brahman. This view is called qualified non-dualism (*viśiṣṭādvaita*). Sri Ramanujacharya is the chief proponent of this school.

The third view is that the two aspects – sentient and insentient – are two distinct things. Materialist philosophers of all types held this view. According to them all the diversity which we see is real. All sentience is from the Supreme Being Vishnu, and the universe is his creation. All differences – that between one individual and another, that between *jīva* and the world, that between *jīva* and Iswara – are all real and irreducible. The god is a personal god, Vishnu and several forms of Vishnu, as in the above case. This view is called *dvaita*, dualism. The chief proponent is Sri Madhvacharya.

Each of these teachers based his arguments on the basic texts, the *Upanishads*, because the *Upanishads* speak both of a god with attributes and also of a Brahman who is attribute-free. Sri Shankara called them two levels of reality, one at the level of religion, to guide the common man and the other at the level of absolute reality. The god with attributes is for *upāsanā*, and through such *upāsanā*, the Brahman without attributes has to be realized. The other two teachers, Sri Ramanuja and Sri Madhva, however, did not see the two levels but rather accepted Vishnu as the Supreme God. They interpreted all passages relating to the impersonal Brahman as referring to Vishnu.

It may be relevant to see that the changing times could have influenced the thinking of these teachers. During the time of Shankaracharya, the very existence of Brahman was questioned by Buddhists and others who advocated nihilism. Shankara was able to dispel the arguments of the nihilists and establish a religion with a philosophical basis.

By the time of Sri Ramanuja there was considerable social ferment and disquiet in the Hindu society and hence he had to give more importance to a personal god and social harmony. He introduced *bhakti*, devotion to Vishnu, as a means to unite all sections of society. Thus we see the religious teachers, called *alwars*, even from the lowest castes in society.

By the time of Sri Madhwa, India was already under the ruthless invasion of the Muslims and so perhaps he had no great inclination to view the world as an appearance. He was also a wrestler who was said to have taken part in fighting the invaders. His followers consider him to be the incarnation of Vayu, the strongest among the gods. Sri Madhwa, like Sri Ramanuja viewed Vishnu as the supreme deity and as a personal god.

This book has broadly adopted the non-dual approach, as it is the oldest way of interpreting the *Upanishads* and also because we can thus counter all criticism relating to the multitude of gods, idol worship and many other questions at the philosophical level. Moreover, it is able to embrace all forms of god like Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesha, Shakti or any other form or formless god. The non-dualist enjoys the wonderful literature, music and other art forms of both Vaishnava and Shaiva traditions. He enjoys the poetic beauty of *Raghuvira-gadyam* (of Vishnu tradition) and simultaneously enjoys *Shivananda-lahari* (of Shiva tradition). He has the best of all traditions, without affecting his philosophical understanding.

The common man too, without knowing the intricacies of the above traditions, accepts all that is beautiful in all traditions. He enjoys the story of the marriage of Sita with the same spirit as he enjoys the story of the marriage of Parvati.

Returning to the old debate about consciousness and matter, we have to note that it continues to be the most important debate in modern science and the issue is yet to be resolved. Several modern physicists seem to be closer to the non-dualist way of understanding the universe.

**Parents may also see:**

- Erwin Schrodinger on Vedanta in [www.wikiquote.org](http://www.wikiquote.org)
- *Vasistha's Yoga* by Swami Venkatesananda, published by State University of New York Press, Albany. (This book gives an extremely clear account of the cosmic mind and the individual mind in relation to pure consciousness)

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# 9

## Who Am I?

*“The perennial philosophy is expressed most succinctly in the Sanskrit formula – ‘tat twam asi’(That art thou); the Atman, or the immanent eternal Self is one with Brahman, the Absolute principle of all existence; and the last end of every human being, is to discover the fact for himself”.*

- Aldous Huxley

### 9.1. Our identity

Vedanta teaches that the ultimate goal of a human being is to know his real nature. In any class on the *Upanishads*, the teacher will pose the question, “Who am I?” We have no doubt about our identity until we consider such question. Most of us have an identity card or a social security card. When we go out we carry a visiting card mentioning our status, qualifications and job details. When we come home we practice a particular religion or perhaps belong to a sect within that religion. In addition we are also male or female, father or son, husband or wife. Our identity depends on the relationships we have with various persons or institutions. All our interactions with our fellow humans are determined by our understanding of the above identifications.

Vedanta says that this is not your true identity. When a person is stripped of all the above identities, he is merely a human being. He is equal to any other living being. Like all living beings he exists, he experiences the world with his senses and has emotions like joy, grief, desire, love, hate and so on. He has a physical body,

supported by some energy system based on intake of food and five senses perceiving five different sensations – sound, taste, form, touch and smell. These sensations are transmitted to the mind where these impressions are processed and collated and the 'I' in him is formed from all these impressions.

## 9.2. Evolution of the body-mind complex

Our Vedic sages speculated on the formation of the physical body and came up with some interesting suggestions. In the earlier chapter on creation we learnt that it is consciousness which is manifesting in different ways, starting from a blade of grass to mighty animals. We recall the lines from the Upanishad saying that the five elements – space, air, fire, water and earth – appeared from the Supreme Being. Ironically, the Supreme Brahman has no action or doer-ship, we saw. The manifesting power in Brahman, called *māyā*, was the material cause for all of creation. *Māyā* cannot be anything other than consciousness. It is comparable to the giant wave, as noted in an earlier example. This was called *Iswara*, the overlord of the universe.

The actual process of the evolution of body-mind-complex is explained in the following manner.

The creative power *māyā* is said to have three characteristics or tendencies in it, called *guṇa*-s. These three are called *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. This is a hypothesis based on thorough empirical observation. If we observe human nature we find three tendencies. Some people are quiet, contented, peaceful and contemplative. This is called *sattva*. Some are aggressive, acquisitive and domineering. This is called *rajas*. Others are lazy, slothful, lacking in initiative and dull. This is called *tamas*. Psychologists may call them personality types. According to the ancient sages, all human activity – the good, the bad and the ugly – is the result of the three *guṇa*-s.

These basic tendencies can be seen in animals too. Some are quiet and bovine, some are aggressive and some are lazy, such as the python.

It is also observed that the characteristics of the food we eat influence our minds. Some types of food, considered *sātvic*, cause quietness and contribute to health. *Rājasa* foods cause heat in the body and related changes while the *tāmasa* foods cause dullness of mind. The depressants, such as alcohol, are derivatives of such food types only.

The sages observed these three dispositions or tendencies in everything in the universe. The *Bhagavad Gita* says that there is nothing in the universe which is not a product of the above three tendencies (18-40).

*Māyā*, otherwise called *prakṛti*, is the source for everything in the universe. The above three *guna*-s (on a scale of 1 to 100) intermix in an infinite number of combinations and produce the diversity in the universe. The first fallout of this is the five elements which we know – earth, water, fire, air and space. These five elements too have the three *guna*-s in them, which leads to further evolution. All living and non-living things are products of the five elements only.

The *sātvic* component of the elements evolves into the mind and senses of all animals, including man.

The *rājasa* component of the elements evolves into the vital air (the life force) and into the organs of action (hands, feet and other limbs) of all animals. This is called *prāṇa-śakti*. Living beings cannot survive without breathing.

The *tāmasa* component of the elements evolves into the gross parts consisting of blood, bones, flesh etc., in the body.

We have five senses, with each sense able to cognize only one sense object. The nose can only notice smell, the eye can only notice the form of an object and so on. The mind is able to cognize all of the five sense objects. The senses and mind are said to evolve as follows.

The *sātvic* component of space is said to evolve into the sense of hearing.

The *sātvic* component of air is said to evolve into the sense of touch.

The *sātvic* component of fire is said to evolve into the sense of sight (fire also gives light).

The *sātvic* component of water is said to evolve into the sense of taste.

The *sātvic* component of earth is said to evolve into the sense of smell.

The collective *sātvic* component of all the five elements is said to evolve into mind. The mind is able to collate the five types of sensory signals presented to it by the five senses.

The *Bhagavad Gita* summarizes the above discussion in the chapter relating to the connection between the physical body and consciousness (13:5-6). The *Upanishads* and subsequent texts of Vedanta discuss the above topic in much further detail but all that has been very briefly presented here.

### **9.3. The layers of personality**

If we analyze all of the above, we see that there are several layers in the personality of any living being. The first layer is that of the gross body with flesh, blood and bones. The *Upanishads* call it *anna-maya* sheath or the food sheath. The next level is

that of the life force, called the *prāṇa-maya* sheath. These two are of no use unless there is intelligence. Hence the mind and senses are said to be the next higher level, called the *mano-maya*, mind sheath. The next higher level is what we call the self or ego (the 'T') which is the agent experiencing all sense objects received from the five senses. This is called the *vijñāna-maya*, the ego sheath. The next level is the level of bliss which is experienced in deep sleep and which is said to be close to the bliss of Brahman. This is called the *ānanda-maya*, the bliss sheath.

The *Upanishads* say that the body-mind complex with the above five layers of personality is not you. If you wish to know who you are, you have to start analyzing the different levels. This is shown in an episode from the *Taittiriya Upanishad*.

#### 9.4. Bhrigu's episode

The *Taittiriya Upanishad* (3-1) narrates an episode in which the young sage, Bhrigu, approaches his father Varuna and asks him to explain the nature of the Supreme Reality. Varuna tells him, 'You have the following data. You have a body, you have the life force called *prāṇa* and you have the five senses and a mind. Contemplate on these and discover the Supreme'. The words of the Upanishad are, '*tapasā brahma vijijñāsasva*' – 'Know Brahman by contemplation'. He further explains the nature of that Brahman to be the cause of the origin, sustenance and resolution of all beings. Thus the father tells the object of enquiry, the material and tools of enquiry and the framework of enquiry.

This is the procedure adopted in the *Upanishads*. Everyone has to contemplate and discover the true nature of reality for himself.

Bhrigu contemplates what his father said. His first impression is that the body is the real self. He then realizes that the body is

of little use if there were no life force. Even life force is of no use if there were no mind to direct the activities of the sense organs. Bhrigu then identifies with this mind-self but later realizes that in deep sleep even the mind is withdrawn. Even when the functions of the mind were absent he was still experiencing the blissful sleep. This meant that his real self was not even the mind. He thus discards one layer after the other. Vedanta identifies five such layers: the body, the life force, the mind, the ego and the layer of bliss in deep sleep.

Bhrigu, by peeling off the various layers by such reasoning, realizes that his real self is the infinitely existing consciousness which is animating the whole body-mind complex. It is the principle of existence, consciousness and bliss which is also the nature of Brahman, the Supreme reality.

Vedanta does not speak in terms of individual souls created by God and which once created never die and linger on in several places like hell. On the other hand, Vedanta says that what is called the individual self, the '*jīva*', is nothing but consciousness which is reflected in the mind. We saw the example of pot space above. The mind, according to Vedanta, is only a reflecting medium. An individual considers himself a *jīva*, a limited entity, so long as he identifies himself with the body-mind complex. Once he overcomes this identification, he realizes that he is the same as the Supreme Self. The difference is due only to the perception.

Vedanta says that the *jīva* is not only a human being but all living beings. All living beings are by definition, the same as Brahman.

*The Gita* (5:18) says:

*śuni caiva śvapāke ca panditāḥ samadarśinah.*

“The wise persons see Brahman everywhere, be it in a person endowed with learning and humility, a cow, an elephant, a dog or a dog-eater”.

This is the reason why Hinduism does not hold that animals were created as a food for man. (This is also why animal sacrifice was permitted only during *yajña-s* but the general rule was *ahimsa*, avoiding the killing of any animal).

### 9.5. Does the self die?

The so called ‘self’ is like pot space, as we saw. Consciousness appears to be limited in the body-mind complex like space in the pot. Consciousness is never created, it exists at all times. Hence, Vedanta says that the *jīva* is never created, is never born and never dies. There is no birth or death for consciousness (*Gita* 2-20). The *Jīva* in the form of a living being is only an appearance in consciousness. The gross body is a product of the five elements: earth, air, fire, water and space. For the practical purpose of social guidance and discipline, Vedanta accepts the religious postulate of rebirth and speaks of a subtle body, composed of the mind, ego, the five senses and the life force. It is this subtle body which transmigrates into a new body when the old body falls away. Such transmigration continues so long as a person remains ignorant of his true nature.

The concepts of subtle body and transmigration are accepted in all Indian religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. They are also accepted in all South-East Asian societies. The reason for this will be explained in a later chapter.

Vedanta holds that a person gets rid of this subtle body only when he realizes that he is nothing other than the supreme consciousness. It is somewhat like the wave realizing that it is the ocean itself or the pot-space realizing that it is the infinite space.

The gross body and subtle body are merely the limiting factors for consciousness.

Hinduism does not hold that a *jīva* is born with sin. But he does carry the baggage of his past karma, both good and bad. If there is more good karma to his credit, he will enjoy good things in this life. If he has bad karma pending, he will suffer in this life.

This is not fatalism. It is only a result of the fruit of action. A human being has the free will to rectify his past through self purification as prescribed in the scriptures and thus neutralize his past *karma*. We shall discuss this further in chapter 15.

A person is not expected to remain at the human level indefinitely. He is exhorted to do *sādhanā*, that is, to undergo spiritual discipline along with contemplation and thus attain the status of Brahman. *Vedanta makes an emphatic statement that the knower of Brahman becomes Brahman.* This knowledge of Brahman is not merely an intellectual appreciation of the concept of Brahman. It entails undergoing an internal transformation and shedding one's limited identity of caste, class, sex and so on and merging of individual identity in the identity of Brahman.

*This can happen in this lifetime* and not after life. Every human being has the potential to realize the Supreme Being and become That. This status is called *jīvan mukti*, liberation from the limited self while being alive.

This practice and realization is not the preserve of just one class of people, such as the Vedic scholars or members of certain castes, as it is sometimes misperceived. This is a spiritual discipline recommended for every human being. Our history and literature abound in examples of such realized persons from every class. It is the highest goal set for a person, as we shall see when we study the human goals.

**Parents may also see the following YouTube videos**

- The Influence of Vedanta on the West
- ‘American Veda’ by Philip Goldberg

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## 10

# Why Do We Worship Several Gods?

### 10.1. The spirit of the Vedas

We saw that the Vedas postulate the Supreme Reality as infinitely existing consciousness. It is a formless, functionless entity. This is for a senior student. But the lay person needs a religion. He needs a god upon whom he can pour his requests. The Vedic sages did not prescribe or mandate one single god form for the lay person, but instead, admitted all existing forms of worship in different parts of the land as valid. The Vedas mention several deities such as Indra, Varuna, Agni, Rudra, Vishnu, Durga and others. There are hymns praising each of these as the Supreme Reality. To say that only one god form is correct is against the basic principle of the Vedas. The Vedas do not dictate, and hence we have different forms of worship.

### 10.2. A saint who established six religions

Can we imagine a religious leader who could establish six religions? The idea seems crazy. But that is what Shankaracharya did in India. He earned the title ‘the founder of six religions’ – *sanmata sthāpakācārya*. Let us see how it happened.

Shankaracharya was a saint born in Kerala. He lived in the early eighth century AD. He wrote commentaries on all the primary texts of Hindus and toured throughout the country. In those days it was a practice for the saints (and also for *sanyāsi*-s, those who renounced their worldly pursuits), to travel all over the land to engage in scholastic discussions.

The Indian sub-continent had a great variety of religious traditions. Different gods were worshipped according to local practices. The most prominent gods were, Shiva, Vishnu, Shakti (in several names such as, Durga, Kali, Ambika), Surya (the Sun God), Vinayaka (also called Ganesh) and Murugan, just to mention a few. Shankaracharya toured all over the country, having discourses with the learned scholars of the day. He noticed several sects and cults, all broadly owing allegiance to the Vedas but adopting certain non-Vedic practices like sexual orgies in grave yards, wearing garlands of skulls etc., in the name of worship or philosophical detachment. Shankaracharya disapproved of such practices but validated six prominent traditions which were compatible with the Vedic vision of the Supreme Being.

How did he reconcile all this? He chose six popular systems and explained in philosophical terms how the deities of those systems were merely manifestations of the one and the only Supreme Reality. The six deities were Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti, Ganesha, Murugan, and the Sun. Shankaracharya harmonized the existing traditions and told people that all the deities should be worshipped with equal regard. As a result, even today we find that except for the hardcore followers of Vishnu or Shiva, most of us go to all temples and show equal regard.

Shankaracharya composed hymns praising all the above deities and brought them under the umbrella of Upanishadic thought. To a lay devotee, these hymns appear as praises for his favorite deity. But one who is familiar with Vedanta would see that they all refer to the impersonal Brahman. This was one strategy to bring the seeker from a lower level of understanding to the right understanding.

Thus Hinduism can be viewed as a cluster of religious beliefs or traditions under the inclusive umbrella of Upanishadic thought.

### 10.3. The liberal, inclusive philosophy of the *Gita*

The *Bhagavad Gita* has this to say, which every Hindu child must know.

*yo yo yāṁ yāṁ tanum bhaktah śraddhayārcitumicchati |  
tasya tasyācalāṁ śraddhāṁ tāmeva vidadhāmyaham ||*(7-21)

“Whoever, with sincerity, desires to worship a deity in whatever form, I, the Supreme Reality, conform to his devotion in that very form”.

It goes a step further:

*ye'pyanyatā bhaktā yajante śraddhayā'nvitāḥ |  
te'pi māmeva kaunteya yajantyavidhipūrvakam ||* 9-23 ||

“Even those who sincerely worship other deities (as the case may be), do worship me only, though not in the prescribed manner”.

This is the most liberal and inclusive statement ever to be found in any religion. The *Gita*, encapsulating the spirit of the Upanishads, lays the foundation for the spirit of tolerance and respect for all traditions in Indian society.

The Supreme reality is the same for one and all whether one is in Alaska or in Timbuktu. One can worship the Supreme in any form or without any form. All prayers are answered by one and the same deity. We notice certain important points from our study of the *Gita*.

- Hinduism is a cluster of religious systems shaped under the umbrella of the *Upanishads*. Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shakti worship etc., are all religions validated by the *Upanishads*.

- At the level of the common man's religion it describes God as someone who rewards good and punishes evil, whereas Vedanta describes God at a different level for the seeker of truth.
- Hinduism does not say that one has to worship only one form of deity. There is freedom for the individual to choose his own deity and also to worship multiple deities at a time.
- The *Gita* says that people visualize deities according to their own nature and desires. Righteous people visualize deities with righteous qualities whereas the unrighteous visualize and worship deities for worldly results or for harming others.
- Different God forms are tools for meditation and concentration of mind. Meditation on such God forms is prescribed for purification of the mind of the seeker.
- Similarly the idol is only a tool which facilitates concentration of the mind. It is the concept behind the idol which is being contemplated, and not the idol as such. It is wrong to assume that we worship idols as such.
- It is wrong to think that we worship one particular God for wealth, another for wisdom and another for valor. We are always only invoking the one and only one Brahman in different manifestations. It is merely a convention that we worship Ganesha at start of any project, worship Goddess Saraswati when we appear for an examination and so on.
- If we closely watch the *mantra-s* during the Ganesha Vratam or Saraswati Vratam or any other specific worship relating to a deity, we find that the same deity is worshipped at two levels, one as the Supreme Being and the other as a functional God awarding a particular boon. The maturity of

the worshipper will determine whether he comprehends the deeper philosophical meaning.

#### **10.4. Is the student of Vedanta an agnostic?**

No. All the above discussion may appear like the version of a non-believer. The fact that Vedanta accepts a personal god as a lower level of reality does not mean that Vedanta is atheistic or agnostic. A student of Vedanta continues to worship his or her traditional god-form with great devotion and love, in order to attain purity of thought, to take support of the god in ridding oneself of his weaknesses and bad tendencies. Such worship is also as a matter of duty as prescribed by dharma. The enlightened person has to set an example for the unenlightened ones. His worship is not a pretentious or condescending act. He uses it as a means to attain self-realization. This is very well explained by Lord Krishna in the *Gita*. This is the thought of the Upanishads as analyzed in the *Brahma-sutras*.

#### **10.5. Vaishnavism and Saivism:**

Vishnu and Shiva are two prominent deities mentioned in the Vedas. They were more popular than other Vedic deities in different parts of the country. Shiva worship was popular in the north western parts – Kashmir, Afghanistan and beyond. Worship of Vishnu was prevalent in some other parts. Kashmir Saivism is a form of monotheism (very close to non-dualism and hence called Shiva-advaita) which accepts the above Vedantic thought but calls the Supreme Being Shiva (instead of Brahman) who has some attributes and an exclusive abode (Kailasa). A similar exercise was done by the worshippers of Vishnu who treated him as the Supreme Being who had some attributions and a special abode, Vaikuntha. Each has a hierarchy of attendant gods, divine musicians and so on.

Once we understand the spirit of the *Upanishads* with Brahman (Consciousness) at the level of Supreme Reality and a functional god at the level of religion (*vyāvahārika satyam*), we will understand all other forms of worship like that of Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti (Durga), Ganesa, Sun, etc., and we will have no difficulty accommodating them within that framework. The uniqueness of Hinduism is that it accommodated and harmonized all of them. Hence, these are not being discussed in detail. It is enough to know that each of these traditions has developed a theological system consonant with the Upanishadic thought, while viewing its own god as the Supreme Brahman. The mythological tales surrounding these schools can thus be understood accordingly.

#### **10.6. Historical reasons for multiple gods**

- There are certain historical reasons too for the existence of multiple gods. The Indian sages achieved a peaceful and harmonious integration of different systems, allowing them all to coexist. This is in sharp contrast with what has happened in rest of the world.
- History shows that when a new religion arose in the West, it wiped out all existing religions through varying degrees of violence and bloodshed by labelling them pagan or barbaric. The religious leaders recruited the aid of the kings or emperors and physically eliminated religions like Mithraism (a religion of the Roman Empire). The same happened in the Arabian Peninsula.
- There is no organizational or hierarchical structure in Hinduism, unlike in Western religions. The hierarchical structure in the Western world could wield enormous influence on the political system. This did not happen in

India as the method of the sages was to engage in discussions, scholastic debates and harmonize traditions. There was no teaming up with the political power as in the West.

- The priestly structure of Western religions has consolidated over the ages. There are global structures now. An order can be given by the religious high command and it will be obeyed down the line up to a remote parish in Alaska or a village in India. Hinduism has no such structure and hence did not develop leverage within the political structure.

A Hindu child is occasionally derided by his peers when he says that Ganesha with an elephant's head is a god or that Hanuman, a monkey king is a god. A Hindu parent has to take special care to explain the egalitarian Hindu view to a child so that the child will not feel shame, believing that he or she is from an inferior culture. The child will realize that the Hindu texts are remarkably compatible with science and cosmology and exceptionally open minded and tolerant. Parents may also be careful not to make their kids argumentative and aggressive about religion.

**Parents may suggest the following books to children:**

- '*The Story of Mankind*' by Hendrik van Loon (Google search) to see how religions spread by violence.
- '*The Story of Civilization*' by Will Durant in eleven volumes. The first and last volumes are highly recommended for the parents.

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# 11

## Gods and Demons

### 11.1. The view of the *Upanishads*

*'The battle between gods and demons is a symbolic description of the battle between good and bad in our own minds'.*

- Shankaracharya

It is doubtful that any other religious tradition has given such a clear and insightful interpretation of the meaning of gods and demons. But Vedanta gives this startling interpretation. Shankaracharya, the great Vedantin who wrote commentaries on the major *Upanishads*, the *Gita* and upon the *Brahma Sutras*, makes the above remark in his commentary on the *Chandogya* and *Brihadaranyaka Upanishads*. He says that the fight between gods and demons should not be seen as a fight between two warring groups residing in the sky. Gods are merely our own behavioural patterns purified by the study of scriptures and by pursuit of righteousness. Demons are our behavioural patterns driven by sensual desires. These two are engaged in constant battle in the human mind. The battle between gods and demons is a battle in human mind. (*Chandogya* 1-2-1). It is an *ādhyātmikasangrāma*, an inner battle which takes place in every human being and which has been going on perennially. Shankaracharya reiterates this idea in other works too.

### 11.2. Heaven and hell

In chapters 3 and 6 above, we learned that Hinduism speaks at two levels – the empirical (common man's) and the absolute

(philosopher's). Religion, with all its belief systems about heaven and hell, is accepted as the lower level of truth but a student of philosophy sees them differently.

The heavenly or hellish realms are not some three-dimensional places hanging out in space. Rather, they are states of mind creating various experiences. A miserable state of mind is one of the hellish worlds and a pure and happy mind is one of the heavenly worlds. The *purāṇa*-s speak of seven heavenly worlds and seven hellish worlds. The seven heavenly worlds are for seven types of virtuous lifestyles. For instance, a person performing rituals propitiating gods would attain a pleasurable world. Another person engaged in the pursuit of knowledge would attain a similar world, such as that attained by sages and saints. Similarly, we can visualize respective hellish realms. These heavenly and hellish worlds are called *loka*-s.

Shankaracharya explains the etymology of the word *loka*: *lokyate iti lokah* (commentary on the *Isavasya Upanishad*). That which is experienced due to the result of one's own action is a *loka* or a world. Villainous actions lead to miserable states of mind and benevolent actions lead to pleasant states of mind. Shankaracharya says that *loka*-s can also be the rebirths in a happier or miserable condition depending upon actions in this lifetime. *Lokyante bhujyante iti janmāni* – happy or unhappy lives, which are experienced, are themselves *loka*-s. We do not clash with other religions for space in heaven.

The common man of the present day is well informed and he does not tend to view heaven and hell as actual places. He can thus follow the explanation of *Upanishads* comfortably.

### 11.3. The lordly texts, the friendly texts and the lover's texts:

We recall that in the Vedic scheme of transmission of knowledge, the Vedas are considered the primary texts. The two epics, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* (which were considered as *itihāsa*) and the mythological tales (which were known as *purāṇa-s*) are considered the secondary texts.

The Indian tradition calls the Vedas the commanding or lordly (*prabhu-sammita*) texts because they instruct from the position of a lord (*prabhu*) or parent. The mythologies are called advisory and friendly (*mitra-sammita*) texts because they speak like a friend (*mitram*) and give several illustrations or case studies of people following the path of virtue or vice. Great poetry from visionary poets like Valmiki or Kalidasa conveys the message in a loving manner, like the pleasant advice of a wife (*kāntā*). These are called as *kāntā sammita*. Thus, the first type is commanding in nature, the second type gives friendly illustrations and the third type is like the counsel of the beloved to her lover.

The Vedas and *Upanishads* contain several instructions on *dharma* along with the philosophical discussions and concepts. Such serious reasoning is beyond the understanding of the lay devotee and hence these ideas are retold in the form of allegorical tales by the *purāṇa-s*.

### 11.4. Philosophical concepts as divine symbols

Let us consider the well known picture of the goddess Lalita, who is seen sitting over Lord Shiva. Why is she sitting on Shiva? This is a philosophical concept portrayed by symbol. Vedanta says that pure consciousness (Brahman) is the substratum on which *māyā*, its creative energy, manifests. Shiva-related *purāṇa* presents consciousness as Shiva in a reclining posture on a couch and presents *māyā*/energy as the goddess Lalita sitting over

Shiva. The philosophical concepts of consciousness (*cit*, which is a gender neutral word) and creative power (*śakti*, a word of feminine gender) are allegorically shown as male and female deities. In some traditions, the goddess is also shown as dancing on the body of Shiva.

The form of *ardha-nārīśvara* is another intriguing symbol. Shiva is shown as one half of the body and *śakti* as the other half. Consciousness and manifesting power become two inseparable parts of one body, the creation. The dance of this man-woman form is the eternal dance of consciousness and energy. This symbol illustrates the same concept of consciousness and manifesting power, likely visualized by another sage.

Vishnu, relaxing in an ocean of milk is another symbol. This is the ocean of consciousness and the Supreme Being Vishnu is in contemplation (*yoga-nidrā*). He is equivalent to Brahman in Vedanta. He is beyond the functions of creation etc. From his navel emerges the lotus from which the creator, called Brahma, is born. The eternal Vedas are the guide for him in the process of creation.

The dance of Shiva is another symbolic presentation of the cosmic scheme. Shiva pervades the whole universe, as shown by the circle around him. The flames around the circumference of the circle are the creative energy. He has four hands, each with symbolic meaning. The drum in one hand symbolizes creation and the fire in the other symbolizes *laya*, or withdrawal of creation. Another hand assures *abhaya*, fearlessness due to knowledge and the other hand points downward towards the demon under one foot. The demon is the ego.

## 11.5. The story of marriage *sans* lust

A popular tale about the marriage of Shiva and Parvati includes an episode in which Shiva turns Kama (the Indian version of Cupid) to ashes by his angry looks of blazing fire. Shiva has a third eye on his forehead, symbolizing knowledge. In the earlier part of the story, gods stand vanquished by the demons and are looking for some strategy to regain their kingdom. They are told by the creator god that the son born to Shiva and Parvati would be able to destroy the demon king. But Shiva is in deep meditation and would not be disturbed for several ages. The gods must disturb his meditation and ensure that he gets married. They find a lovely bride, Parvati, who also falls in love with Shiva, and starts serving him, though Shiva takes no notice of her. The gods plan to unite them by sending Kama, otherwise called Manmatha (literally, one who churns the mind). When Kama disturbs Shiva by shooting his flower arrows and draws his attention to lovely Parvati, Shiva for a moment casts his loving glances on Parvati. Immediately he becomes alert and looks around for the cause of such disturbance in his mind. When he sees Kama, the god of love, Shiva grows angry and opens his third eye, emitting flames that burn Kama to ashes.

The symbolism is profound. The fire of knowledge kills Kama, which, in Sanskrit means desire and lustfulness. This is the message of the *Gita* too. Action without desire, performed for universal good, is *karma yoga*. Marriage is sacred as a *yajña*, according to Vedic custom. The relationship between a man and a woman is a sacred arrangement for the perpetuation of dharma. In the present tale, a combination of knowledge (Shiva) and action (*śakti*) without lust (Kama) is shown as producing a child who has the power of restoring the good forces, in other words, the gods. This is what is advised to the newlyweds too, as we see

from the *mantra-s* relating to marriage. Love, not lust, should predominate in order to have children with good character.

Victory over Kama, desire, is the important message in the episode of Krishna dancing with a number of *gopi-s*. Krishna represents the Supreme Lord and the *gopi-s* represent pure love towards the god.

Vanquishing Kama is an important theme in the Buddhist texts too.

Most of the characters in the *purāṇa-s* have names which symbolize some human folly such as arrogance, avarice, cruelty, rapaciousness, lust and so on. When these demons are shown as killed by the deities, we should understand that the particular folly is cured and not that the God is fond of killing. *Bhagavat Purāṇa* or *Devi Bhagavatam* are books in which almost all characters are allegorical representations of human characteristics.

## 11.6. The blissful Prahlada

We know the story of the boy Prahlada who was tormented by his father Hiranya-kasipu, the demon king. Hiranya-kasipu means 'a man on a golden mattress'. He represents greed, avarice and the arrogance of wealth. Prahlada means 'a person in a blissful state'. Prahlada is enjoying the bliss of Brahman, which is far away from greed, avarice and arrogance. The father wants the son to come to his line of thinking. The earlier story tells that two attendants, Jaya and Vijaya, who served Lord Vishnu, were cursed when they behaved arrogantly with sages. They were banished from Vishnu's abode, consigned to reside on earth forever. When they repented, Vishnu gave them the option that instead of perennially languishing as demons they could return to heaven if they took three births as demons and were killed

by Vishnu himself. They accepted this option, and one of them was born as Hiranyakasipu. He is unaware of his earlier heavenly status, and hence defies Lord Vishnu, (representing the cosmic dharma) and decrees that all gods and demons should worship him. His son Prahlada, a devotee of Vishnu, does not do so. The demon king grows angry and starts tormenting Prahlada. Finally he has to be vanquished by Vishnu who comes as the avatar Nrisimha, the lion-man, to save his devotee Prahlada. The symbolism is clear. Greed and the arrogance of power cannot coexist with the bliss of Brahman, represented by Prahlada.

### 11.7. The buffalo demon and other tales

Another popular story is that of Mahishasura, the buffalo demon. He is the personification of cruelty, lust and ignorance. Goddess Durga slays him in the text, the *Devi Bhagavatam*. It is the abominable qualities which are ‘slain’ not a person. Hence we should not construe that the goddess is fond of bloodshed. It is a long allegorical tale where the subalterns of the demon king represent a variety of vices. They are vanquished by the attendants of the goddess who represent godly qualities.

In the same text, when an attendant goddess ‘slays’ another demon, there are graphic details of the process of killing. The demon’s name is Rakta-bija. This means that every drop of blood falling from his body would produce another demon of equal strength. This illustrates the idea that evil predispositions and latent impressions (*vāsanā-s*) in the mind have the potential to rise up even with the slightest opportunity. Should even a trace of evil persist, it will come back to active life like a bad virus. Hence in this story, the goddess stretches her tongue so wide that not a single drop of blood falls upon the ground. She catches every drop of blood and kills the demon. This symbolizes the

philosophical message that evil dispositions must be totally eradicated from the mind of the seeker of liberation.

The slaying of the demon Vritra by Indra, the king of gods, is a Vedic story. The word Vritra means that which envelopes or covers a thing. It symbolizes ignorance because ignorance envelopes our right understanding and makes us perceive things wrongly. The gods were once overpowered by Vritra. A sage named Dadhichi sacrifices himself and offers his backbone (the vertebral column) as a weapon to be used against Vritra. The backbone contains a nerve called the *sūṣumnā*, which contains and directs the *kundalini* energy. This is the power sought by the yogis. Indra slays the demon with the weapon acquired from the sage. Ignorance and wrong understanding are eradicated by right knowledge arising from contemplation.

Another story is that of the demon king, Bali. As the name indicates, he is one with enormous strength, both physical and spiritual. However, he is arrogant about his powers. His egotism and defiance of the gods (the good forces of the world) are his downfall. As he is a mighty demon he defeats the gods and drives them out of from heaven. The gods approach Vishnu to restore their kingdom. Vishnu appears in the form of the boy sage Vamana and approaches Bali who, at that time, happens to be doing a *yajña*. It was customary for the kings to grant boons to sages at the time of *yajña*. Vamana makes a strange request and seeks space measuring three foot lengths. The king grants accordingly. Vamana then grows in size, occupies the whole universe and covers the whole earth (which was earlier lorded by Bali) with one foot. He then covers all the heavenly worlds (which were also conquered by Bali) with another foot. He needs more space to place his foot but finds none. Bali realizes that the visitor is Vishnu and suggests that Vamana place his foot on

his head. Vishnu asks Bali to go into the nether worlds, leaving the heavenly worlds to Indra. There are several long chapters in the *Bhagavatam*, recounting this story, explaining its symbolism. Bali symbolizes egotism. Vedanta teaches that the individual self (*jīva*) is a mere reflection of the Brahman consciousness and it is by sheer ignorance that the *jīva* presumes himself to be the doer. This sense of doership in action must be eliminated; that is the moral of the story.

Another popular tale is the subduing of the multi-headed snake Kaliya by little Krishna. The poisonous snake enters the river Yamuna and Krishna's friends are terrified. Krishna jumps into the lake, pulls out the demon, subdues it, catches it by its tail and dances on the heads of Kaliya, suppressing them when they attempt to rise. In some stories, Kaliya is a five-headed snake. In the *Srimad Bhagavatam*, it has one hundred and one heads. This story is symbolic. The pure waters of the river represent the mind. The five-headed serpent symbolizes the five sense organs which pollute the mind. The dance of Krishna symbolizes the dance of God (the meditation on God), which alone purifies the mind. In the story of the multi-headed serpent we can take the heads to symbolize the innumerable negative tendencies in the human mind. Such tendencies can be controlled only by devotion to God.

A school boy can enjoy these stories as stories, a devotee can enjoy them as the play of God and a philosopher can enjoy them as eternal truths.

### **11.8. The weapons of gods**

In almost all stories, the gods and demons have weapons like swords, bows, arrows, maces and discs (chakra). These too, symbolize certain human characteristics. For example,

the weapons of Vishnu are described in a few verses in the *Bhagavatam* (Book 12- chapter 11). The name Vishnu means ‘the all pervading one’. The life force in the universe is said to be the mace of Vishnu and this is said to symbolize the intellect in humans. Water (one of the five elements) is said to be the conch and this is said to symbolize the ego principle in living beings. The fire element becomes the circular disc weapon in the hand of Vishnu and is said to symbolize the mind in living beings. While offering prayers to Vishnu, the devotees mention this symbolism and recite mantras saying, ‘We bow to the disc symbolizing the speed of mind, we bow to the conch symbolizing ego’ and so on.

There is a celebrated text called the *Lalitā-sahasra-nāma*, the thousand names of Lalita. In that, the weapons of the goddess are described in the very beginning. The symbolism is explained in the text itself. The names say *rāga-svarūpa pāśādhyā krodhākārāñkuśojovalā*, which means that desire is the snare which the goddess has in one hand and anger is the spur, the sharp iron prod (which controls the elephant) in another. This means that desire is permitted to a limited extent but anger (which is associated with knowledge) must control desire. The goddess has two more weapons – bow and arrows. She has a sugar cane bow which represents mind (*manorūpekṣu kodandā*). Like the sugar cane, the mind is filled with delectable juice presented by the five senses. The five flowery arrows represent the five senses (*pañcatanmātra sāyakā*) which reach out toward all the enticing objects we perceive. This is a hymn to Lalita, the Goddess (representing *māyā*) that we see in a *purāṇa*. Millions of people, perhaps recite this every day, little realizing the philosophical meaning, but feeling extremely rewarded by the prayer itself. Lalita is praised here as the deity who would fulfill desires and also as the consort of the Supreme Being.

Stories relating to all deities indicate that the so called weapons are not physical weapons but that they are the characteristics associated with the cosmic being, whether it is called Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesha, Shakti or by any other name.

Such tales abound in our *purāṇa-s*.

Some *purāṇa-s* extol Vishnu and some extol Shiva as the Supreme Being. Others extol Shakti, Ganesha or some other as the Supreme Being. This should not be viewed as a contradiction because these were likely composed by supporters of the respective sects. (Tradition has it that it was the sage Vyasa alone who composed all of the eighteen *purāṇa-s*, to unite the different belief systems. Some moderns say that the name Vyasa was more of a title than reference to a single person.) They could have originated in different parts of the country where those particular traditions were prevalent. However, we see that they all broadly follow the philosophical framework of Vedanta, while presenting various characters and stories in their narrative.

We also saw (in chapter 10) in great detail how different traditions were harmonized in Indian society by sages and philosophers.

*Caution: The above interpretations on symbols and stories are according to the original texts themselves or according to the traditional commentators who had a thorough and comprehensive knowledge of Vedanta. We cannot attempt our own interpretations of the symbols.*

### **11.9. There is no concept of devil in Hinduism**

In order to explain the evil in the world, religions typically portray God as representing good and the devil representing evil, as polar opposites. God throws the devil and his team into hell.

We do not have the concept of the devil in Hinduism. If we accept the devil as something apart from God, God would be a delimited entity, however powerful he may be. God would be in heaven and the devil would be reigning in hell and there would be a constant tussle between the two. This would not present God in the correct light.

Very often, Lord Yama is mistaken to be the Hindu equivalent of the devil of the Western religions. This is incorrect. Yama is one of the deities in charge of punishing the bad, somewhat comparable to the correctional administration (prisons department) of God. Yama is one of the functionaries among gods. In the *Kathopanishad*, Lord Yama is shown as the teacher of the knowledge of Brahman to mankind. He is thus a venerable character.

In the Indian tradition good and evil are explained in the framework of the three *guna-s*. We noted (in 9.2) that there are three *guna-s*, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* in *māyā*, the power of manifestation that arise from Brahman. This power is otherwise called 'prakriti'. What we call evil is a product of *rajas* and *tamas*. The suppression of *sattva* by *rajas* and *tamas* results in evil tendencies. If such evil reaches a peak it can only be resolved by the cosmic design of an *avatāra*, which is the means to restore the balance among the *guna-s* and righteousness in the universe.

The *Gita* says that whenever there is ascendance of evil and suppression of the good, the cosmic being manifests in some form to restore order and protect the good (*Gita* 4-7 & 8). The ten *avatars* of Vishnu are the well known examples of this.

There is an interesting discussion in the *Bhagavatam* (1<sup>st</sup> chapter, 7th canto) between the sage Suka and King Parikshit. "How can God have enmity with the demons, when He is

supposed to be equally kind to all?” questions the king. The sage replies that in reality, the Supreme Being is above all this. It is the *māyā* which is the manifesting power in the Supreme Being in which the three *guṇa-s* manifest. What we see as evil is only an interplay of the three *guṇa-s*. The empirical god, whom we call the creator, is only a manifestation in the creative power of the Supreme Being. When there is an upsurge of *tamas*, there is a cosmic design to control it by unleashing the *sattva guṇa*.

The empirical god appears as though he is the vanquisher and the vanquished (*Bhagavatam* 7-1-6).

This is why the demons vanquished by the God merge in the same cosmic being. The same text in the *Bhagavatam* gives examples of demons and other evil persons who were killed by different avatars of Vishnu and how they merged in the same avatar-person after their demise. Hiranya-kasipu, the demon king merges in the avatar of Nrisimha (the man-lion), and Sisupala, the evil king merges in the avatar-person Krishna. This means that evil is something which gets subsumed in the cosmic being.

As we noted in 11.1 the demons are our own evil tendencies which are externalized or projected as external entities in the *purāṇa-s*. Thus, when we read a *purāṇa* we are seeing our own greed projected as Hiranyakasipu, our own ego is shown as Bali and our own negative tendencies are shown as Kaliya.

Good and evil cannot be different from the cosmic being, as they are manifestations in the same consciousness. The Supreme Consciousness is untouched by all this.

## 11.10. Wrong understanding of Hindu texts

In 5.2 we saw the sage Vyasa explaining the framework of *itihāsa* and *purāṇa*, which were designed to convey the complicated message of the Vedas to the lay devotee in terms of understandable tales, such as those mentioned above.

Some modern writers, ignorant of the philosophical tradition and some others due to an agenda to undermine the Hindu tradition, have ignored the ancient commentaries and the framework in which these texts are to be understood. Some have given racial interpretations with an intention to divide the Indian society (for political or missionary reasons) and some others have superimposed the Western ideas of repressed psychology, which are alien to the Indian psyche and culture. It is a grave offense to the sentiments of millions of Hindus to say that Ganesha had a lustful eye on his mother Parvati or that Lakshmana in the *Ramayana* had lusted for Sita, or that Sita had a passionate eye for Hanuman. Some Western writers have indulged in such uncivil practices in the name of freedom of expression. Hinduism is taught from an anthropologist's view, thereby giving racial interpretations, while other religions are taught from the theologian's point of view. A Hindu parent thus has the additional burden of understanding such distortions in order to guide the child properly.

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## 12

# Do We Worship Idols?

### 12.1. The idea of God becomes the idol of God

The *Vedas* (*Upanishads*) speak of different types of meditations. One can meditate on god as though god is seated in one's heart. One can meditate on the Supreme Being as located in the sun or moon or in any other object.

We have seen that the mythological tales symbolically depict the philosophical concepts. These concepts are given a shape and form by seekers probably for easy recapitulation and the practice of meditation. Such captivating stories, besides being the creative expressions of the sages, were likely intended for the lay person.

For example, we noted that the Supreme Reality was described as infinitely existing consciousness. There is a manifesting power in which the three *guna-s* – *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* – manifest. If we want to represent these ideas through a symbol we can do so in the form of Shiva or Vishnu or another god. Applying this to Shiva, we can see that he is a three-eyed god, moving naked, carrying a trident (*triśūla*) in his hand and moving on a bull. He also has a snake around his neck. The symbolism is that the whole universe and beyond is the body of Shiva and hence there is no possibility of further cover (clothes) on him. Thus he is naked. The three characteristics – *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* – are the trident in his hand. The bull represents dharma. The third eye represents the fire of knowledge which destroys ignorance. The snake around the neck symbolizes the yogic power.

We can apply the same to the form of Vishnu too. Etymologically, the name 'Vishnu' means 'all pervading'. He is said to be dark in color, the color of the sky, which represents his infinite nature. His four hands represent the four human goals – *dharma, artha, kāma* and *mokṣa*. The snake which serves as his hood is the yogic energy, as in the case of Shiva and some other gods. The discus, *chakra*, in his hand is called *sudarśana*, 'right understanding', which destroys ignorance. The mace, *gadā*, represents *dharma*. The conch is *pāñca-janya*, the five elements which are the cause of creation.

The Vedas gave several *mantra*-s for the various deities. In the Vedic literature there are certain hints to show the existence of idols or temples. However, the practice of meditation was in vogue in those days and hence the mantra itself was like the temple of a deity. The seeker was meditating on the mantra itself while visualizing the deity described in it. It appears that the same mantra was later represented in the shape of a diagram called *yantra*. This was a drawing or a pictorial representation of the same. Later it evolved into a three-dimensional representation, which is an idol. Thus we see mantra, *yantra*, pictures and idols, all forming aide-memoire for the seeker. (Such symbolic representation is seen in all ancient religions).

The initial portions of Vedas speak of *yajña*-s, fire rituals, which did not require the presence of a temple. All they needed was a fireplace into which various offerings were made to deities while invoking those deities. The middle portions of the Vedas talked about *upāsanā*-s, (as noted earlier) which were meant for meditating on the nature of a particular deity. Texts like the *Chandogya Upanishad* spoke of several such *upāsanā*-s. During such meditations the worshippers meditated on the mantra of the particular deity and also kept a small symbolic object in

order to focus their mind. They visualized their deity in this object. For instance, a special stone called a *sālagrāma* could be used to visualize Vishnu. An oval-shaped stone could be used to visualize Shiva. A diagram (called *yantra*) could also be used for such visualization.

It is generally presumed that these symbols gradually became more elaborate depending upon the imagination of the devotee or the person who prepared the object for concentration of mind. The person who made such objects started making these objects in an artistic, exquisite human form and thus became a professional sculptor. An elaborate science called *āgama-śāstra* developed, which nevertheless derived its basic doctrine from the Vedas.

A verse from the *Rama-Tapaniya Upanishad* (a minor Upanishad) explains thus:

*cinmayasyādvitīyasya niṣkalasyāśarīriṇah .  
upāsakānām kāryārtham brahmaṇo rūpakaṇpanā .*

“The Brahman, the Supreme Reality, is of the nature of *cit*, that is, intelligence, and it is non-dual. It has no parts in It and has no body. Visualization of some shape for It is merely to facilitate the seekers”.

Another well known verse from a *smṛti* says this:

*agnir-devo dvijātīnām muniñām hr̥di daivatam .  
pratimā sthūla-buddhīnām sarvatra vidiṭātmanām ..*

“It is the Agni, the fire God, who is worshipped by *dwija-s*; the saints visualize god in their own hearts. The laymen need an idol or a symbol for devoting their attention. The wise persons see divinity everywhere”.

## 12.2. Expansion of idol culture

Perhaps it is the Buddhists and Jains who have sculpted the largest idols in the world. The most famous and largest statues of Buddha were found in the Bamiyan caves in Afghanistan, although Buddha himself did not advocate the idea of God or idol worship. Similarly, very huge statues of Mahavira are to be seen in Karnataka and several other places. The Buddhist and Jain practices could have influenced the Hindus or the practice may have co-existed in all traditions.

Hindus, as we noted above, worshipped different deities and had visualized certain scenes around the idea of that deity. For instance, the worshippers of Vishnu held that Vishnu resided in Vaikunta with his consort Lakshmi. Worshippers of Shiva held that Shiva resided in Kailasa with his consort Parvathi. Other minor systems too developed in the same way.

It is difficult to say whether the worship of Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti, Ganesha etc., existed in the society as local traditions of common people even as the sages were engaged in philosophical contemplation on the nature of reality. If they had already existed, it is possible that the Vedic sages adopted them into the Vedic hymns and molded them to fit into the philosophical framework. Thus they allowed the local traditions to continue and at the same time gave them philosophical meaning.

The sages appear to have done another ingenious job of establishing relationships among these deities. Shakti, otherwise known as Parvathi, was treated as the wife of Shiva by the followers of Shiva. A different power or Shakti, known as Lakshmi, was treated as the wife of Vishnu by followers of Vishnu. Ganesha was made the son of Shiva and Parvathi. It was a very harmonious integration of deities under the umbrella of

the Upanishads, without compromising the basic philosophical doctrine of the Upanishads.

Vedanta treated the above three major deities, that is, Brahma, Vishnu and Rudra as associated with the three *guna-s*, *rajas*, *sattva* and *tamas* respectively, corresponding to the three cosmic functions of creation, sustenance and dissolution. They are not three different 'persons' but three aspects of the same functional god.

### 12.3. Respecting cow and nature

The primary texts like the *Upanishads* do not seem to have any reference to worship of cows. Such worship appears to have started at a later date, under the influence of the mythological texts which are secondary in nature. In *Srimad Bhagavatam* there is an incident of beating of a cow and a bull by Kali (not Kālī, the goddess). The cow represents earth and the bull, the vehicle of Shiva, represents dharma. This incident is at the time of transition from Dwapara yuga to Kali yuga. It symbolized the decline of dharma due to the unrighteous rule of selfish kings. Harming a cow was considered a serious sin.

The cow was the most important participant in a *yajña* because of its milk, butter and other products. From this point of view, the cow is important even now. Several cows were given as gift in olden days.

Texts like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have innumerable references to the sacred nature of the cow. The cow was an important component of the economy in olden days. In the *Mahabharata* we see that the Kauravas, while trying to track the Pandavas during their period of exile, attacked the kingdom of Virata and took away enormous cattle wealth. It was called *go-grahanam*, capturing the cows/bulls. There are several stories of

kings donating thousands of cows to sages. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (of *Yajur-Veda*) describes how king Janaka gave thousands of cows to the sage Yajnavalkya.

Respect for nature is seen in several daily practices of Hindus, particularly in rural India. When a person gets up from the bed in the morning he says a small prayer to mother earth seeking permission to set his foot on her. When a person takes a dip in a river (all rivers are considered holy) he seeks forgiveness of the river for polluting it with his bodily dirt. When a person builds a house and starts digging the ground, he seeks pardon, as he is hurting the earth as well as the worms which may be there in the soil. The Vedic sage seeks permission of the tree to break a twig from it for performance of a ritual. Several people have trees as their *gotra*, which means that they have to respect and protect those trees. The *Ramayana* describes the sacred trees in Chitrakuta and Panchavati where Rama had built huts and resided. Sita was a great lover of nature. A healthy respect for nature is thus built into the psyche of the Hindu, which is apparent in rural India even today.

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## 13

# Enjoy Your Temple Visit

### 13.1. The emergence of temples

We have seen how the *purāṇa*-s present the philosophical ideas in the form of stories which can be enjoyed by all people, in different maturity levels. The Hindu temple is another medium which presents the same philosophical ideas and stories from the *purāṇa*-s in the form of exquisite sculptures and paintings. A visit to an ancient temple is like recapitulating a *purāṇa*.

As mentioned previously (12.1), we are not certain whether temples existed in Vedic times. We noted how the idea of God developed into the idol of God. When an exquisite idol is created, it requires a proper setting. Thus temple was a natural development. Different traditions developed their own scriptures, known as *āgama*-s. These are to be classified as secondary texts. We find *āgama*-s relating to Shiva, Vishnu and Shakti. These books give meticulous details about the style of worship, the design and décor of temples, and the methods of construction. They also describe the physical features including the proportions of limbs of various male and female deities. Thus, an ancient Hindu temple became an artistic representation of the philosophy of its particular school.

The Hindu temple is generally called a *mandir* in northern parts of India and is called a *deva-sthāna* or *devālaya* in the southern states. Etymologically, *mandir* means a place of worship or a place where people rejoice. The word *deva* means ‘shining’

or 'luminous'. It denotes knowledge or intelligence. The words *sthāna* and *ālaya* mean 'a place'. The word *ālaya* also means a place where one merges into something else. Thus the *ālaya* is a place where the devotee merges with the deity.

The *Srimad Bhagavatam* of the sage Vyasa (Ch. 10-79) recounts the pilgrimage of lord Balarama to various sacred shrines throughout India, which he undertook as he did not want to participate on either side in the war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Several pilgrim centers of southern India are also mentioned in this chapter.

Several *purāṇa*-s mention the importance of the *tīrtha-yātrā*, pilgrimage. It is in these texts that we get the description of the eighteen centers of Shakti, twelve shrines of Shiva and others. This shows that temples have been in existence for more than three thousand years.

### 13.2. Temple symbolism

Every temple has the sanctum sanctorum, called the *garbha grha* (the womb-house) where the lord is located. Around this there may be three or more perimeter walls. The number of walls is also symbolic. Three walls represent the three *guna*-s, indicating that the seeker must go beyond the three *guna*-s. Five perimeter walls represent the five sheaths in the body, indicating that the seeker must go beyond the five sheaths to know the lord. The temple priest is often our best guide regarding these symbols, depending upon the tradition.

Some old temples are designed based on the pattern of the human body. The Atman (the individual self) is the *garbha grha*. Different *chakra*-s of the body are represented by different parts of the temple. Thus the whole temple is considered to be the body of the deity.

If you see the ancient temples of southern India, you find a system called *pañcāyatana* – the worship of five deities. If a Vishnu follower were to build a temple, he would place the idol of Vishnu central and place the other four deities – Shiva, Shakti, Sun and Ganesha – in the four corners. If a Shiva follower were to build a temple he would place Shiva's idol in the center and the others in the four corners. This system of accommodating all forms was perhaps influenced by Shankaracharya who has been called the establisher of the six systems of worship (see 10.2).

Gods and their wives are not to be taken literally. We considered the symbolism of gods, goddesses and their weapons in an earlier chapter (7.2). For example, the intelligence needed by the creator Brahma is represented by Saraswati. Similarly, Lakshmi is the power of Vishnu and Parvati is the power of Shiva for purposes of sustenance and resolution.

If Lord Venkateswara is standing with a wife on each side, your child should not mistake this for bigamy. The symbolism is that one wife represents wealth (Lakshmi) and the other represents the world (Bhudevi). The Lord is said to take care of the whole world by fulfilling the needs of the people. Other gods and their wives must be understood in like manner.

Sometimes the god is seen having four hands. Generally, these four hands represent the four human goals: *dharma*, *artha* (prosperity), *kāma* (desire) and *mokṣa* (liberation). *Dharma* is social order, and this is normally shown as a weapon in one hand. The palm of another hand which gives boons, is shown pointing downwards (called *varada mudra*), symbolizing that it grants the desired boons. Another hand, usually holding a flower, symbolizes desire. The fourth hand, held in *abhaya-mudra*, symbolizes knowledge. According to Vedanta, knowledge alone gives fearlessness. In other words, this hand represents liberation.

### 13.3. Our frame of mind

The *Gita* says that four types of people seek God: those who are in distress, those who want prosperity, those who are seekers and lastly the realized persons (*jñāni*). Most of us fall under the first two categories. We visit temples to obtain blessings for a particular need. With great devotion we convey our anxieties and desires to the god and find solace.

Krishna says that a true seeker must be interested in God in order to get rid of the impurities of mind and become eligible for the knowledge of Brahman. Devotion to God keeps him away from impure associations and is known to be the best means for purification of mind. A *jñāni* too participates in worship like any other person though he has no desire, no anxiety whatsoever. He realizes his self as not different from Brahman but still he worships a deity as a continuance of earlier habit and to serve as a role model for others.

We have a popular type of worship which has sixteen types of services (*sodāsa-upacāra-pūjā*). This is usually performed at home, but also in the temples. The procedure is similar to welcoming an honored guest into your home. You provide him with a respectable seat, and otherwise attend to his needs until you see him off. This is performed as a daily worship in the temples, with ornate and spectacular ritual. In some temples it is also accompanied by classical dance and music dedicated to the particular deity. All this is a great visual treat for a devotee.

For one who is philosophically inclined, Sri Shankaracharya has written about *mānasa pūjā* (silent worship within the mind) of the attributeless Brahman. This is done without any external material offerings. The real *darśanam*, vision, of the Lord is to understand the divine nature and not merely to see the Lord's

idol from close quarters or touch it or linger in its presence. The real *prasādam* is to attain tranquility of mind – not to eat the delicious offering made to the Lord.

The temples of Tamil Nadu are a real wonder. A visit to an ancient temple is like studying a philosophical text. If you visit a Vishnu temple, you will find stone panels or paintings all along the walls, showing the ten incarnations of Vishnu. You will also find other stories depicted, from the *Bhagavatam* and other texts, such as the saving of the king elephant, the story of Vishnu in the form of the seductive damsels Mohini to delude the demon Bhasmasura.

In a Rama temple we find the entire Ramayana depicted in stone sculptures or paintings. Similarly, in a Krishna temple we see all the divine *līla-s*, such as the taming of the serpent Kaliya, or the rescue of the cowherd boys from demons. The cosmic dance of Shiva, swallowing poison to save the world, punishing Daksha by Virabhadra and other such *līla-s* of Shiva are similarly found in a Shiva temple.

Texts relating to the building of temples were given the preeminent status of a subsidiary Veda, otherwise called *upaveda*. A sculptor had to know as much about religion as any scholar in order to depict the nature of deities and demons appropriately.

Temples have served the great purpose of being religious, cultural and educational centers. They were the centers for dance, music and sculpture, as well as religious discourse. These were the places where great sages such as Vyasa stayed and did *tapas*. Still today they radiate the energy of the sages' intense meditations, which we should try to feel.

The thousands of inscriptions engraved on the temple walls are a great source of history. Ancient temples have elaborate architectural details. Each temple and tradition is unique. Having a guide explain the various sculptures in the temple will greatly enhance your visit. We need not rush into the sanctum sanctorum to have a mere glimpse of the Lord. Appreciation of the whole temple is a rewarding spiritual experience.

We are not required to be ostentatious devotees. Lord Krishna says that a mere trifle of a present, like a flower or a fruit or even a leaf – given with dedication – is enough for the Lord (*Gita* 9-26). Devotion is the legal tender in the realm of God. However, temples have evolved ostentatious styles of worship and sadly, the system has been commercialized. This is because the Indian governments, following an archaic law enacted by the British, are using temples as a source of income. Thus, we may sometimes see apathy, bureaucracy, patronage and commercialism in Hindu temples in India.

But the spirit of the deity remains a powerful force, as does the timeless reverberation of the energy and devotion of all people, who, over the centuries have worshipped there with a sincere heart. We can surely open ourselves to it and feel the presence of the great sages of yore.

### **Suggested further reading:**

“*India: A Sacred Geography*” by Diana L. Eck (Harmony Books, 2012). This is a highly readable book covering all traditions and sacred places in the country)

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## 14

# Are We Asked to Work Without Desiring the Fruit?

### 14.1. The meaning and framework of karma

This is a common misconception about the Hindu system, arising from the oft quoted statement from the *Gita*. In the *Gita* Krishna tells Arjuna:

*'karmaṇyeva-adhikāraste mā phaleṣu kadācana'* (2-47).

“Your eligibility is to perform action (*karma*); but never for the fruit thereof.”

In the second line of the same verse Krishna says, “Do not be the cause for the fruit of action; likewise do not give up karma enjoined on you”.

This statement confounds the superficial reader. Does it mean that the line from the *Gita* is referring to modern day secular duties like attending office, performing duty as a CEO of a multinational, and not expecting the pay slip? Surely the *Gita* is not saying so.

The above statement of Krishna has to be understood in the overall context of the meaning of *karma*. Though the word '*karma*' literally means 'action', in the *Gita* and *Upanishads* it refers to ethical actions prescribed or permitted for a person. It also refers to unethical, prohibited, actions. The *Gita* is referring to the religiously enjoined duties of different categories of people.

There are four types of actions described in the scriptures.

1. Mandated duties,
2. Occasional but obligatory duties
3. Rituals/actions for wish-fulfillment
4. Prohibited actions

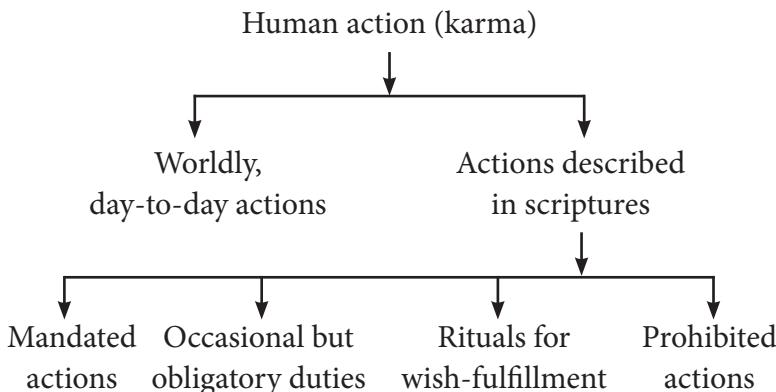
The *first* is a compulsory duty, called *nitya-karma*, daily activity. It refers to the self-purifying actions such as contemplation of the Gayatri mantra, study of the scriptures, worshipping gods, social activities like giving food to guests, feeding the poor, feeding animals etc. These are extolled as the five-fold *yajña*-s are to be performed *every day* by a householder. Non-performance of these would yield a negative result called sin.

The *second* type of *karma* is connected with special occasions like new moon day, full moon day or a festival day. There are also special rituals for occasions such as childbirth, initiation of a boy into Vedic study, marriage and so on. These are what sociologists call rites of passage. They involve certain philanthropic actions like giving food to people or making different types of donations (*dānam*). They are compulsory on such specified occasions and non-performance would yield a negative result.

The *third* type of *karma* is not exactly a duty, but an action motivated by the individual's desire to achieve prosperity and success in society. It may be a specific desire like that of king Dasaratha in the *Ramayana* who performs a great *yajña* in order to have a son. It may be a general desire to attain heaven after this mortal life is over. Or a person may wish to achieve certain social or financial goals which are valued in the world. The scriptures take into account all such human desires and ambitions and have described several *karma*-s or rituals to achieve them.

The *fourth* type of karma is prohibited actions. These are clearly spelled out in all societies and religions. All instructions like “thou shalt not do this” come under this category. Performance of these actions results in sin.

Here is a diagram of the types of *karma*:



We should know two words here: *punyam* and *pāpam*. *Punyam* is a sort of spiritual merit accruing to a person from performance of the above said rituals and other good deeds. *Pāpam* is a demerit accruing to a person who commits prohibited deeds (*adharma*). These acts of *punyam* and *pāpam* may give results either in this life or in later births.

The *nitya-karma* (compulsory rites) and the obligatory rites on special occasions (items 1 & 2 above) do not result in *punyam*, though their non-performance leads to *pāpam*.

The third type of activity, noted above, motivated by individual desire, produces a spiritual merit called *punyam*. Performance of an evil deed or prohibited action causes spiritual demerit. Thus, a person normally accumulates a mixed bag of

merit and demerit over a period of time. There are innumerable actions, good and bad, done by a person, knowingly or unknowingly, in one's lifetime. These get exhausted only by experiencing their fruit. It is not possible in this current life to exhaust this and hence a person must take up another birth.

Rebirth implies further activities, good or bad, and further accrual of the fruit of such actions. Further rebirths are then needed to exhaust this accumulated baggage of good and bad. A person is thus said to transmigrate from body to body as we noted above. This unending cycle of transmigration is called *samsāra*. Etymologically the word *samsāra* means 'moving around'. A person moves around as though in a cycle of birth and death.

Although the scriptures mention the above four types of actions, we also see activities related to one's own profession or job. Though the *Gita* does not explicitly refer to such work, we have to infer that such work should also be done in a righteous and ethical manner and the unethical performance of one's job should be considered prohibited action.

Thus we see a framework of action and its inevitable results. An ordinary person not concerned about movement through the cycle of birth and death may continue to perform actions in pursuit of his desires (item 3 above). But someone who wants to break free from that cycle would have to find a skillful way of doing actions but escaping their result. This is where desire-free action comes in.

## 14.2. Desire-free action

We shall now see the relevance of what is called desire-free action or work, which is done without expecting result. In Vedanta, it is called *niṣkāma karma*, also known as karma-yoga.

Desire-free action is essential for the person who wants to be on the path of knowledge, first, in order to attain purity of mind and secondly, in order to get out of the cycle of birth and death. It is not for those who are unconcerned with realization.

Karma cannot be avoided by any of us, as it is the driving force for the very existence of human society. Moreover, not doing karma, i.e., the avoidance of duty, is itself karma, so it entails demerit. Hence, the *person who wants to break free from the cycle of transmigration* has to think of an intelligent way to do karma and still get out of the cycle of births. For this, the *Gita* suggests *karma-yoga*.

*If the baggage of karma causes rebirth, the intelligent way to avoid rebirth is to do karma but not claim the result.* Do it with an attitude that you are doing it as your duty to society, as an offering to the cosmic being (we may call it god), and as your contribution to the collective good (*loka-saṅgraha*, as the *Gita* calls it). Then you will not be touched by the results of that karma, says the *Gita*. This attitude toward work is called *niṣkāma karma*, a desire-free action (*kāma* means ‘desire’ and *niṣkāma* means ‘desire-free’).

The important result of desire-free action is that it leads to purity of mind, which is essential for self-realization. A person with a bundle of desires can hardly do any self-enquiry. There is a principle of inter-dependence in the whole cosmos and everyone has to play his role. This person engaged in *niṣkāma karma* does his portion of duty as the individual’s contribution to the cosmic order. This makes his mind pure and eligible for study of the scriptures.

*Niṣkāma karma*, by itself, will not lead to realization and avoidance of the cycle of birth and death. Why? This is because

it can merely ward off the result of karma done in this birth but cannot neutralize the pending baggage of karma-s, good and bad, of previous births.

To neutralize the pending baggage there is only one way prescribed in the scriptures. One is asked to pursue scriptural studies and go through the three stages – called *śravanam* (grasping the meaning of Upanishadic statements such as ‘that you are’, at an intellectual level), *mananam* (logically analyzing the subject and internalizing it) and *nididhyāsanam* (to be firm in that state of awareness). It is this three-tiered spiritual exercise which finally results in realization of the self.

*Niṣkāma karma* is thus a *strategy* and the first step for those who are on the path of self-realization. It is a step in the long process of self-purification.

A person who has this attitude toward work is called a *karma yogi*. It is called *yoga* because it is a means to unite the individual with the universal self. This *karma yoga* is a preparatory step for such union. This is what the *Bhagavad Gita* is all about.

The difference between *karma* and *karma-yoga* can be understood from the following table.

karma	karma-yoga
1. Karma (ritual), done with expectation of worldly or other-worldly result.	Karma done not expecting any result.
2. Result is for the self.	Karma is done as an offering to the divine and in the process it helps others.

3. Working according to one's own ambitions.	Working in accordance with the divine will or acting as an agent of the divine.
4. Not connected with purity of mind.	Selfless action gradually leads to purity of mind.
5. It is for worldly success.	An exercise on the spiritual path.
6. The baggage of karma grows.	The baggage decreases.
7. It binds a person to the cycle of transmigration.	It prepares the ground for release from the cycle of transmigration

### 14.3. Desire-free action – Is it relevant in the modern context?

The idea of karma-yoga had a particular relevance for Arjuna who was about to plunge into war. As a warrior, he had to do his rightful duty or dharma as an offering to the collective good. But how does modern man, not knowing about actions mentioned in scriptures and bogged down with deadlines, relate to this desire-free action?

The principles can indeed be applied to present day secular work. In secular work too, there are several instances where public good is involved and where one is capable of doing better service. The *Gita* says that even day-to-day activities can be done with the awareness of the divine in us and as an offering to the collective (5-9). This is possible both in private sector functioning and in governmental positions.

One who merely does this *niṣkāma-karma* is surely avoiding the fruit of actions done in this lifetime, but the karmas of previous lives may be pending. If he wants to get rid of them,

he must attain knowledge of the self, through the three-tiered discipline of study, affirmation and bringing it to experience.

To sum up, Krishna teaches that you must give up the fruit of action if you want to come on to the path of knowledge, that is, if you are a seeker. But if you want to enjoy worldly achievements, you may do so and continue to stay in a transmigrating existence.

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## 15

# Does Hinduism Advocate Fatalism?

### 15.1. What Vedanta says

By the word fatalism we usually mean a sense of resignation and helplessness. As Edward FitzGerald wrote:

*The Moving Finger writes and having writ  
Moves on: nor all your piety nor wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a line,  
Nor all your tears wash out a word of it."*

Man is said to be powerless against the divine will which is predetermined. When people talk about the karma doctrine in Vedanta they usually imply the above meaning. But this is incorrect, according to Vedanta philosophy.

We saw the framework of karma in the preceding chapter. Our actions give results, good, bad or mixed. These results may befall either in this very birth or in a later birth. Any birth is thus the result of previous action. This rule applies right from an ant to the largest living animal and from a blade of grass to the tallest tree. (In our tradition, animal and plant life are also due to the *karma* of an individual during a previous existence).

Animals and plants have no chance of doing *yajña*-s, *upāsanā*-s or *karma-yoga*. It is only the human being who can do good or bad deeds. Scriptures exhort a person to do good karma and neutralize the bad effects of earlier bad karma, if any. Scriptures talk about *puruṣakāra*, human effort, needed to

neutralize the effects of bad *karma* and to progress spiritually. All scriptures, exhorting a person to do right action, would lose their relevance if we did not accept that a person can change the course of his life.

### **15.2. The human being – Creator of his own future**

Whether born as a lower animal or as a human being, a living being is experiencing the fruit of previous action and is called *bhoktā*, the one who is eating the fruit of action. This fruit may be sweet or bitter. The human being, however, is a *kartā*, an actor, too. He has been given the liberty, intelligence and guidance from the scriptures and gurus to help him in choosing his course of action. An animal or plant is merely a *bhoktā* but not a *kartā*.

When a person is born, he or she is born with some inbuilt tendencies or predispositions called *vāsanā-s* in Vedanta. The past karma is like an arrow shot from a bow and which cannot be taken back. It will yield a particular result. As the child grows, his exposure to scriptures gives him an opportunity to change the course of his earlier dispositions. All spiritual discipline described by various systems of yoga and Vedanta relates to this purification of predispositions or latent tendencies. Human effort for betterment is like an arrow which is cocked on a bow and kept ready for release. He may release it in whatever direction he chooses.

### **15.3. Why is the karma doctrine adopted in Vedanta?**

There are several reasons why the doctrine of karma is accepted in Vedanta.

- a) It has evolved to instill a sense of justice. A person should feel accountable for the good or bad actions he does. Otherwise there can be irresponsible conduct in society.

- b) There are innumerable actions by a person in one's lifetime. All actions cannot give results immediately in the same lifetime. Hence rebirth has to be accepted as a corollary.
- c) Some human actions are punishable by law, but others come under the purview of ethics, e.g., not respecting elders, not performing mandated duties etc. A person should have the fear of sin.
- d) It is accepted to explain the disparity in the world. Why is someone born poor and another rich? One is born in a royal family and another in a poor hutment. One is born with a sound body and another is born lame. One is born with pious tendencies and another with criminal tendencies. We would have to say that God is partial in his creation if the idea of *karma* were not to be accepted. Diversity shows that the human being is responsible for his action.
- e) Management and regulation of human activity in the society is important for social leaders, who include theologians, moralists and philosophers. The karma doctrine stands justified from all these angles.

The Scriptures also say that actions like *karma yoga*, devotion to God, meditation and other practices of yoga lead to purification of mind. This becomes meaningful only when we accept that a person has the free will to choose his action. The scriptures repeatedly say that a person has to strive for the highest goal. In fact the *Gita* enumerates several paths (actions) to attain that goal. A person can choose a path which is ideal to him.

A look at world religions shows that all the Asian and South East Asian religions accept the idea of karma and rebirth. Buddhism, though silent on the existence of God, believes in

karma and rebirth. Thus half of humanity accepts this principle.

#### 15.4. *Karma-bhūmi*

There is a general misconception that the landmass of India is *karma-bhūmi*, a sacred place, where alone all our rituals and prayers fructify. But to extol the greatness of our land is only an idea from the *purāṇa-s*. No doubt our land is sacred, as evidenced by the many sages born here, and our many sacred places and rivers.

The expression *karma-bhūmi* literally means ‘the plane of action’. The human being alone is a *kartā* and *bhoktā* as we saw in 15.2 above. We know that the human being alone is capable of performing actions, good or bad. All *yajña-s*, austerities, penances and charitable activities can be done in the human lifetime only. Vedanta says that it is the human life which is the *karma-bhūmi*.

We need not, however, enter into dispute with those who call India *karma-bhūmi*. But such contenders should consider that what was called Bharata varsha is not the delimited India that we see today. Bharata varsha extended to lands beyond Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Burma. People of these lands do not now call their land *karma-bhūmi*.

Do our rituals give result outside India?

Sometimes, Hindus living abroad entertain this dilemma because of the ultra-orthodox teachings of people who do not have the right background in Vedanta studies. When we understand that the human life (and not India) is the *karma-bhūmi*, we will also realize that rituals, worship and meditation would give result anywhere in the world. A proper study of the *Gita* would dispel all such doubts.

Returning to the topic of fatalism, we see that the scriptures recommend *karma-s* to get rid of the bad effects of earlier *karma*. This is nothing other than free will. Initially, we notice the operation of past karma (fate, if we can call it so) but later we see the operation of free will to steer one's own way. In other words, we have a mixture of what we may call determinism and free will in our tradition.

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## 16

# Have The Scriptures Created Caste?

### 16.1. Vedas – Varna is based on qualities

Hindu society suffered a great deal and continues to be under great attack mainly on this issue. We have to see what the primary scriptures say about this. The *Upanishads*, our primary texts, speak only of *varṇa*, which, in later times, got fossilized as caste. Let us examine some of these texts.

a) The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (of *Shukla Yajurveda*) gives this account: “In the beginning there was only one *varṇa*, that is, Brahmin. It was not able to fulfill the needs of society and so it created *kṣatriya*, the warrior wing” (Br.U 1-4-11). “Even this was not adequate and so it created the trading wing called *vysya*. When this too did not fulfill the social needs it created the working class which was called *sūdra*. It was also called Pushan, which means one who feeds and nourishes the society (Br.Up. 1-4-12 & 13).

The same passage further reads: “The creator himself took shape as all the four categories” (Br.Up. 1-4-15).

b) In one famous passage called *puruṣa-sūktam*, the Rig Veda visualizes the whole creation as a manifestation in the Supreme Reality, the Brahman. This manifestation is visualized in the form of a human being. The passage starts with the words “This universal being with thousand heads, a thousand eyes, a thousand feet has pervaded the whole universe and exists beyond”. This has been interpreted figuratively to mean that the

heads (the intelligence) of all beings (humans, animals and all living entities) are the heads of the universal being. Similarly, the sense organs and limbs of all beings are the senses and limbs of the universal being.

This passage goes on to describe the head, shoulders, thighs and feet of the universal being.

“Brahmin (the intellectual) became the mouth (spokesperson for the society), *kṣatriya*, the warrior became the shoulders, the *vysya* became the thighs (the support structure) and *śūdra* formed the feet (for different services)” (Rig Veda 10-90).

It is very clear that this passage too has to be understood figuratively and not as though Brahmin came out of the mouth of the universal being and that others came out from the other parts of the body. The normal division of work in any ancient or present day society would show the presence of the above four categories. It is the so-called intelligent minority who become the spokespersons and policy makers. Those who are physically powerful become the rulers. These positions are attained through individual aptitude and caliber.

- c) The oft quoted line from the *Bhagavad Gita* says this:  
*cāturvarṇyam mayā srṣṭam gunakarma vibhāgaśah* (4-17).

Krishna says clearly that the categorization into *varṇa* and allocation of duties is according to *guna*-s (which are explained in 9.2). This is repeated by Krishna in the eighteenth chapter (18-41) where he says that the duties of persons are decided by their *guna*-s, their innate tendencies, aptitudes and qualities. The commentators, particularly, Nilakantha is very emphatic about the *guna*-s. He says that if a Brahmin does not possess the qualities as defined for him, he should be deemed a non-Brahmin and put in the appropriate category. If a *śūdra* has the merit and qualities

expected of a Brahmin, he should be categorized as Brahmin (See Nilakantha's commentary on *Gita* 18-41).

This was the arrangement in the Vedic times and later too. The division of people into different *varnas* was based on their basic aptitudes, tendencies or dispositions called *guṇa-s*. We saw this word 'guṇa' above. The three *guṇa-s*, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* which are the building blocks of *prakṛti* (*māyā*), are also the building blocks of every sentient and insentient thing on earth.

The sage Vyasa, born to a fisherwoman, is worshipped as the incarnation of Vishnu. He reorganized the Vedas, wrote the Mahabharata, wrote several *purāṇa-s* and is treated as the first guru of mankind. His birthday is celebrated as the guru's day (*guru-pūrṇimā*) in India. Similarly the sage Valmiki, the author of Ramayana, belonged to the hunting tribe but he is revered as a great sage by all the pundits. Suta, the narrator of all our *purāṇa-s* and writer of the Vedanta text *Sūta-saṃhitā* was a person of lower caste. Sri Shankaracharya is said to have read this book several times before writing the commentary on the *Brahma Sutra-s*.

The *guṇa-s* mix in infinite number of proportions to evolve into the world of diversity we see. There is predominance of one *guṇa* or the other in all things in nature (which is the basis of Ayurveda, the Indian system of medicine). In the case of human beings, those who have predominance of *sattva* are those who will be truthful, righteous, humble, compassionate, generous and contented. These are the people who are the intellectual mentors of a society. Those who have a predominance of *rajas* have two distinct tendencies i.e. (a) aggressive, valorous, bold, violent and domineering and (b) acquisitive, creating wealth and mercantile. These were called *kṣatriya* and *vysya* respectively. Lack of initiative, sloth and dullness are the characteristics of *tamas*. Those who had such qualities were called *śūdra-s*.

## 16.2. Also clarified in the *Mahabharata*

The problem arose when the descendants of these persons claimed to be in those categories whether they had merit or not. Society cannot agree with a bureaucrat's son claiming to be a bureaucrat and an army general's son claiming to be a general.

The *Mahabharata*, the great epic, has several passages (particularly in *Shanti Parva*) discussing the above points. It appears that even by that time there was dilution in the character of the Brahmins and they had become pleasure seekers. Vyasa says that some of them who were power mongers became *kṣatriya-s*. By their unbecoming and improper conduct, they also became *śūdra* (*Shanti Parva*, Ch 188, 11-18). The commentator Nilakantha, on the authority of the Vedas, concludes emphatically that conduct and qualities define *varṇa*.

## 16.3. The concept of *dwija*

One word which has to be correctly understood is 'dwija', meaning 'the twice born'. Out of the four *varṇa-s*, the first three, that is, the Brahmin, *kṣatriya* and *vysya* were collectively called 'dwija', because they all underwent the initiation ritual, which was treated as a second birth for them and they studied the Vedas. The Gita defines *vysya* (who is also a *dwija*) as follows:

*kṛṣi gaurakṣya vāṇijyam vaiśyakarma svabhāvajam*

This means that all those who are involved in agriculture, cattle rearing and any type of trade, were called *vysya-s*. All these were called *dwija-s*, the twice born.

According to the above, most of the present day lower castes are really to be called *dwija-s*. Hindus worship Lord Krishna as one of the highest deities. He was a cattle-herd and thus by his own definition he was a *dwija*. However his descendants consider

themselves as *śūdra*-s because at some point in history they had given up Vedic learning, just as most of the Brahmins have done now.

In the *Ayodhya-kanda* of the *Ramayana* we find a passage relating to the killing of an innocent boy by king Dasaratha (sarga 63). The boy was the son of a *śūdra* mother and a *vyśya* father. While lamenting over the body of his son, the father recalls how the son was performing *Sandhyā* every day and reading out the scriptures for him. This passage shows that the son of a *śūdra* mother was performing the rituals as performed by the Brahmins.

We also see that until recent years, most of the present day *śūdra*-s wore the sacred thread and performed the daily rituals just like the Brahmins. Social change in modern India has been so fast that these classes are gradually forgetting their traditional learning, although they actively continue to be in the Hindu mainstream.

#### 16.4. Varna and caste – Examples of later teachers

*Varna* is not the same as caste. *Varna* is mentioned in the *Upanishads* and in the *Gita* but not caste. *Varna* arises from the differential manifestation of the characteristics of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* in people, whereas caste is because of the trade with which a person or a group of persons were involved. India, until recently, was mostly a rural society and a village was an economically self-contained unit where the weaver produced the cloth, the ironsmith produced implements, the goldsmith created ornaments and so on. The professions need expertise and occupational skills. People with such special skills tended to form close groups called castes. They preserved these skills by

marriages within those groups. Thus these groups consolidated further and developed an identity.

We can summarize this in the following table.

<i>Varna</i>	Caste
1. Mentioned in scriptures	Not mentioned in the primary texts, though they are mentioned in the secondary texts
2. It is based on the <i>guna</i> , the innate tendency in a person	Based on the professional skills and sociological factors
3. There are only four <i>varna-s</i> as a result of the predominance of one of the three <i>guna-s</i>	There are hundreds of castes depending on their professional skills
4. This division is universal in nature because the <i>guna-s</i> exist in all beings all over the world	Castes differ from culture to culture depending on the sociological needs and fancies
5. It is a personality type	It is a sociological phenomenon

Various occupations and trades are mentioned in *Sri Rudram*, the most ancient portion from the *Rigveda*. *Sri Rudram* is one of the most famous passages meant for seeing oneness in the universe and seeing all beings in the universe as manifestations in Brahman. Thus the passage mentions various castes, occupational groups like arrow makers, bow makers, chariot makers and even thieves and dacoits as manifestations of one Reality. All these trades come under the definition of *Vysya* as they were connected with economy. This passage shows how castes had developed by the time of the *Rig Veda* depending on the societal needs of the day. If we were to rewrite *Sri Rudram* today we may have to include computer operators, bullet makers etc.

Another means by which castes came about was through inter-marriage among different *varṇa*-s. The *Manu-smṛiti* and other *Smṛitis* give some details of this process. The *smṛiti* writers wanted to discourage inter-marriage among *varṇa*-s, especially any relationship between a Brahmin woman and a *śūdra* man. Their offspring were called *cāṇḍāla*, the lowest of castes.

A highly sensitive subject is that of the untouchability of the so called *cāṇḍāla*-s. There is no mention of untouchability in the *Manu-smṛiti* but somehow it evolved as a social practice. Great sages like Shankara, Ramanuja and others have always approached the issue truthfully and honestly. There is a story of Shankaracharya which runs as follows.

Once, when Shankaracharya was walking in the streets of Varanasi (Benaras), a *cāṇḍāla* came across his way. Shankara seems to have initially asked him to give way and move aside, as was the practice in those days. The *cāṇḍāla* is said to have questioned Shankara to clarify as to whether the body has to move away or the consciousness because according to Shankara the body-mind-complex is merely an appearance and all beings are manifestations in Brahman. Shankara realized his mistake and bowed before the *cāṇḍāla* and said five verses in Sanskrit which end with the line “*cāṇḍālośtu sa tu dwijośtu guru-ṛityeṣā maniṣā mama*”. It means, ‘when a person realizes that he is none other than the Supreme Consciousness it is irrelevant whether he is a *cāṇḍāla* or a *dwija* (the body mind complex is irrelevant) and he has to be revered as a guru’.

Sage Ramanuja, in a similar vein, taught the Narayana mantra from the rooftop of the temple when all the priestly class held that it was a blasphemy to reveal the mantra to people of all castes. He seems to have said, “if I have to go to hell by revealing

the mantra to all, I would happily go, but let all others attain heaven by knowing the mantra". Several persons from lower castes were accepted as gurus in the Ramanuja tradition. They were known as *alwars*, some of whom belonged to the lowest caste.

The core ideal in Hinduism is collective good and hence it provides for changes in social customs which are the external aspects of dharma. The *Taittiriya Upanishad* (1-11) refers to the standard behavior of wise, impartial, selfless and truthful persons as the ideal to be emulated. This becomes the ideal for all others whenever there is a doubt. Shankaracharya himself, in his commentary on the *Brahma-Sutras* (3-1-25) mentions that whatever is deemed right at a particular time, context and place may not be right in another time, context and place. There are certain unchanging values in dharma and some others which undergo change. Untouchability which was held right at some time is definitely not right at all times. It conflicts with the eternal truth of the equality of all beings.

The upper *varna*-s in society seems to have developed a vested interest in perpetuating the discrimination. In some cases this was due to the ignorant notion that their superiority was god-given. There was no economic exploitation as in the case of slavery in the Western world. There was no buying or auctioning of persons and no one was kept in chains. They were allowed to study the secondary texts like the *purāṇa* and *itihāsa* but not the primary scriptures, the Vedas. Certain menial and unclean jobs were assigned to them. In the course of time the society practiced physical segregation of the *candāla* caste.

Social inequality and spiritual inequality existed simultaneously.

Hindu society rectified the mistake of social and political inequality by prohibiting untouchability and making it a seriously punishable offence. This was done as soon as the Hindu polity came to power in 1947 CE after thousand years of social turmoil due to foreign invasions and rule. Political and social equality was ensured.

Spiritual inequality is as undesirable as social inequality. This inequality has now disappeared in urban areas because of social change. The governments have introduced the study of scriptures for all castes in the Vedic schools run by the government and this is not objected to by Hindu leaders. However, Hindu religious leadership has not formally come out actively advocating this. This is because the Hindu religion does not have any organizational structure like other religions. There is no decision-making body to address this issue. It is, however, possible for Hindu organizations to develop a credible body of religious heads and put an end to this stigma on our noble and egalitarian dharma.

Admission of spiritual equality should not cause fears in the orthodox, as it does not mean that the orthodox have to give up their study of scriptures and disinherit themselves from tradition. It only implies that the knowledge would be willingly shared by all and a better synergy built up in society. As we saw above in the comment by Nilakantha (para 16.2), all those who have the qualities mentioned for a Brahmin should be treated as such.

Critics of Hinduism took great advantage of this fault-line and denigrated Hinduism. A great deal of guilt is heaped on the so-called upper castes of Hindu society, disregarding human conduct throughout the world.

## 16.5. What does history show?

History shows that the burden of guilt must be shared by the whole of humanity for atrocities on fellow citizens throughout the ages.

The ancient Greek and Roman societies had slavery as an established institution. In fact the spread of Christianity in the initial days was among the slaves in the Roman Empire. During the middle ages, Western society was divided into three classes – workers, soldiers and the clergy. Social stratification existed in China, Japan, Egypt and other such ancient cultures.

History shows how the Spanish inquisition initiated one of the most hideous crimes perpetrated in the name of religion. The most pious religious leaders invented the most horrible torture mechanisms and killed hundreds and thousands of people from the middle ages down to 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Over centuries, the Africans were physically abducted, chained, turned into slaves and auctioned in open markets throughout Europe and America until the 19th century. Abraham Lincoln had to lay down his life for this cause. African Americans did not have even voting rights until the 1960s in the enlightened society of USA whereas voting rights were given to all castes and tribes in India the moment India obtained freedom in 1947 CE. There have even been black churches and white churches in Western society until recent years.

Gandhiji was thrown out by a white British man while he was travelling by train in first class in South Africa. Non-whites were prohibited from travelling in the first class.

Millions of Jews were killed in the enlightened twentieth century in Europe by highly religious persons.

In contrast, we find that there was no slavery whatsoever in India and there was no torture of the untouchables from any account of history. Several foreign travelers wrote about the social conditions in India but there is no mention of any such abominable practice of torture. The so-called upper castes merely went home, bathed and muttered a few mantras if they touched a *cāndāla*, but there was never any persecution.

The reformation of Hindu society will be possible through scriptural education and developing a religious authority, and reiterating the spirit of the *Upanishads* in order to bring about greater harmony in society.

**Parents may be aware of:**

- World History
- The History of Slavery,
- History of Genocide
- Spanish Inquisition

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## 17

# The Four Human Goals

### 17.1. The ambit of human activity

A goal is something which we want to achieve. Very often our goals are not decided by us, but are set by the environment around us. They are set by the social values and aspirations of the contemporary society. My neighbor's son is admitted into a prestigious school and I too, push my child in that direction. Similarly our career and financial goals are influenced by others.

However, if we examine fundamental human nature we can identify certain goals which have timeless relevance. The ancient Hindu tradition (right from the Vedic times) had identified four human goals or objectives – called *puruṣārtha*-s. The word *puruṣa-arta* means that which is desired by a person and that which is to be achieved by a person. These are:

*dharma* – universal ethical and social norms to be followed,  
*artha* – material prosperity needed for fulfilling economic needs,  
*kāma* – sexual needs, by way of marriage and other desires  
*mokṣa* – enquiry into the nature of the Supreme Reality, which alone gives meaning to life.

The first three relate to worldly advancement. The last one is the highest goal, which is freedom from the worldly actions and this is attained by the path of knowledge.

The first three are mandatory for all persons in society. The last one, liberation, is commended to all but not mandated. We may note that *artha* and *kāma* are sandwiched between dharma and *mokṣa*. It means that *artha* and *kāma* have to be achieved within the framework of dharma. The most fundamental requirement is *dharma*, without which there cannot be social order.

The word *dharma* cannot be easily translated into English because it is a broadly comprehensive word encompassing three aspects: religion, philosophy and ethics. The word literally means ‘that which keeps the society from falling apart’ (*dhāraṇāt dharma ucyate*). This is a comprehensive code of conduct which has evolved from the teaching of the Vedas, arising from an awareness of the relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm (as we noted earlier). It is the cosmic law of harmony.

There is a famous adage – ‘*dharma rakṣati raksitah*’ which means that *dharma*, if protected, will protect us all. How does it protect us? Dharma is not like law, which is enforced by the state. If I do not follow the road rules or some other rule or law I can be prosecuted. It is not so in the case of dharma. Our body falls sick if we eat gluttonously but there is no rule that we should not eat so. There is no rule that we should not abuse nature, but if we do so, it will lead to ecological disorders. If you do not respect your parents or your elders, no law can punish you, but the *dharma* will retaliate in the long run. Respecting neighbors or helping the poor is part of dharma but no law can punish us if we do not do so. Social harmony would deteriorate if *dharma* is not followed. We can see the collapse of family values, particularly in the Western societies, and the consequent social and economic problems. This is due to neglect of *dharma*.

*Our rights are taken care of when we perform our moral and ethical duties. That is how dharma protects us if we protect it.*

The concept of ‘*dharma*’ is central to Hinduism. The four human goals are so designed that a person is allowed to pursue his needs in accordance with *dharma*, while being on the path of *mokṣa*. This was the message of *karma-yoga*, as told by Krishna in the *Gita*. The central theme of the *Mahabharata* is *dharma*. Its hero is Dharma-Raja, born to Kunti by the boon of the god of *Dharma*. Throughout the text we find several discussions on *dharma*.

Hinduism has prescribed certain duties (*karma-s*) for all people, as we saw in an earlier chapter. Social behavior will be erratic if there is no direction. Hence the religious texts have prescribed certain compulsory duties and other activities like *yajña*. All these come under the fold of *dharma*.

An important lesson in the *Upanishads* is that you must obey the law of the land wherever you go. ‘Whenever in doubt about what is right and what is wrong, or about correct behavior, follow what the righteous, selfless and enlightened men do in that society’, says the *Taittiriya Upanishad* (1-11) to the student at the time of graduation.

The second objective is *artha*, wealth. This is essential for any society. Our texts say that one should pursue wealth and knowledge with the notion that one has no old age and death; thereafter, one should follow *dharma* with the notion that death can overtake him at any moment. This tells us that acquiring wealth is very important but at the same time it must be in accordance with *dharma*.

Wealth is not an obstacle in the path of self-realization. We saw the examples of philosopher kings earlier. They were kings, having enormous wealth, but they were wise persons with no

sense of clinging or attachment to their wealth. The story of the churning of the ocean makes an interesting point. When the goddess Lakshmi arose from the ocean all those present desired her. She was looking for someone who did not desire her and she found Vishnu relaxing unconcerned. She went and placed a garland around his neck. The symbolism of Lakshmi pressing the feet of Vishnu is that Vishnu is one person who is not a slave to wealth.

It is wrong to assume that Hindus did not give importance to *artha*. In fact, Hindus were the best traders until middle ages (when invaders ravaged the land) and they spread Hindu culture throughout the South East nations. All of our literature speaks of the importance of generation of wealth. The well known text *Subhashita* of Bhartrihari devotes a whole chapter to the importance of wealth. Lord Krishna asserts that wealth is a manifestation of the divine (*Gita* 10-23).

This view is also taken toward *kāma*, desire (including sexual desire). No religion can frown on sexual desire which is natural to any living being but this too should be in accordance with dharma. Krishna says – ‘I am *kāma* which is in accordance with dharma’ (*Gita* 7-11). Desire is divine when it follows dharma. In fact, our texts say that not having sex with one’s wife in accordance with dharma would result in sin.

The Hindu tradition has given preeminent place to the fourth goal, *mokṣa*, liberation. The human mind is full of anxieties, bondages, love, hate, pride about one’s own achievements – all of which perpetually bind a person. Liberation is to become free from all these things. Mere renunciation is not the remedy, but renunciation must be associated with knowledge of the Supreme. Knowledge alone liberates a person from his notions of limited self.

The first three goals must be properly followed, as they involve self-discipline and purification of mind. They are needed for social stability. Thereafter, a person becomes eligible for pursuing the highest goal. At this point, he has attained adequate spiritual maturity to pursue the path of knowledge. One cannot directly appreciate the path of knowledge without the preparatory discipline.

A modern student is aware of the hierarchy of human needs, as explained by Maslow. As a social animal, a person has certain basic bodily needs, security needs and self-actualization needs. Society gives scope for everyone to achieve his potential while satisfying his needs and fulfilling his ambitions. Maslow seems to have adopted the idea of human goals to propose his theory of human needs.

## 17.2. The four phases of human life (*āśrama-s*)

The Hindu texts have divided human life into four phases: *brahmacharya* (student studying scriptures), *grhastha* (a married householder), *vānaprastha* (retreat from active social role – meditating on the Supreme) and *samnyāsa* (renunciation of worldly pursuits and meditating on the Supreme). The four human goals are linked to these four phases of human life.

Student phase – Inculcating dharma

Married person/ householder – *dharma, artha* and *kāma*

Retreated from active life – dharma and *mokṣa*

Renounced person – follows only *mokṣa*

## 17.3. Dharma and religion

Dharma is defined in the *Mahabharata* and in the *Manusmṛiti* as “that which is followed by the wise, truthful and selfless people (who are unaffected by likes and dislikes) and which emanates from their innermost heart”.

Quite often what religion says agrees with the principles of dharma. However, sometimes it may not be in accordance with dharma. The distinction between dharma and religion can be seen as follows:

Dharma	Religion
1. It is a universally applicable ethical code.	Religions have evolved to take care of particular societies or tribes.
2. It is a value system which has evolved without reference to god.	It is totally god-centered. It is centered round the directions of a particular god, which may be harmful to followers of other religions.
3. The value system is man-centered.	It is god-centered.
4. It seeks universal peace and justice.	It seeks to enlarge its following.
5. It is flexible according to time and place ( <i>Taittiriya Upanishad</i> 1-11).	It is the word of God and hence inflexible.

#### 17.4. The difference between heaven and liberation (*mokṣa*)

Religions usually talk of heaven as the highest goal and stop with that, but Hindu texts talk of *mokṣa*. What is the difference?

Hinduism talkss of different heavenly worlds, such as Vaikuntha (the abode of Vishnu, attained by the devotees of Vishnu), Kailasa (the abode of Shiva, attained by his devotees), Swarga (the abode of Indra) and so on. Personal inclination can also influence the afterlife. People who lead very austere,

disciplined lives would go to what is known as *tapo-loka*, where *tapas* is predominant. People who have performed rituals for wish fulfillment (described in 14.1) would attain a heavenly world where such desires are fulfilled. The abode of Indra is the heaven generally referred to. It is the result of good deeds like *yajña* or charitable activities. You have good food, drinks and all the sensual pleasures you can imagine. In short, it is an extension of sensual pleasures. But this is a reward for the righteous life led in this world. Like all rewards, it has a time limit. One who goes to heaven has to return to earth after the exhaustion of the *punyam*, as we saw in an earlier chapter.

*Mokṣa*, on the other hand, is the state of realization that the individual is not different from Brahman. *It is not a place to attain, but it is a frame of mind.* At this stage there are no desires, as the individual has no sense of inadequacy remaining within. He is the all-pervading consciousness in which all heavens manifest as petty achievements. This stage is due to knowledge of Self and so it is eternal.

Heaven which is defined in religion is limited in time, but *mokṣa* is eternal. The path of dharma leads to heaven, but it can lead to *mokṣa* only when associated with *jñāna* or self-enquiry.

Religions normally tell a person to be a believer, to be follower of a faith, a defender of faith and a soldier of the god who is advocated by that faith. This idea is alien to Hinduism as the Vedas do not advocate any particular god form or belief system but permit all god forms as a lower level of truth and admit the Supreme Consciousness as the absolute level of truth. The individual is told to know truth, which is Brahman and that is liberation.

The difference between heaven and liberation can be summarized as follows:

<i>Swarga</i> (Heaven)	<i>mokṣa</i> (liberation)
1. Achieved through austerities, rituals, charity etc.,	Realized only by knowledge.
2. Duration – corresponds to the quantum of good deeds and hence there is a return from heaven.	Realization is not a place. It is a state of enlightenment and hence there is no idea of return.
3. It is a place of enjoyment described in a religious texts.	It is a state of awareness.
4. Heaven is an extension of sensual pleasures.	It is not so
5. Heaven is in the realm of religious belief.	Liberation is due to philosophical understanding and hence it goes beyond religion.
6. It is a relative truth.	It is the absolute truth.
7. It is a lower goal	It is the highest human goal

### 17.5. The realized person

The Vedas advocate a religious life as a foundation. After a person is disciplined in religion and after attaining spiritual discipline, such as restraint of senses, truthfulness, equanimity etc., he is asked discover his Self through a process of enquiry.

How is this done? We noted above that the *jīva* is nothing but consciousness and existence, appearing as though delimited by the body mind complex. When a person identifies himself with the body mind complex and develops an identity such as belonging to a caste, a race, religion, sex, etc., he develops so many binding factors around him. Vedanta asks him to know his real self by negating all these imposed identities. He must

first get rid of the external identities like caste, religion etc., and then slowly get rid of the internal identities such as the body, mind, and so on. This knowing is through a long process of self-purification and contemplation, as described in the texts.

Dropping all identities will leave a person as nothing but the existence-consciousness principle, which is the same as Brahman. Just as Brahman has no doer-ship in It, so, too, the *jñāni* has no doer-ship in him. He may be performing some duty, but he does it as an actor in a play.

For him, religion, caste, sex, nationality, etc, (which define our identity) are only details of a temporary address. His real address is that he is none other than the existence-consciousness principle.

Such a person is said to have gone beyond the Vedas: ‘*yatra vedā avedā bhavanti*’ – says the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. The Vedas cease to be relevant at that stage because they talk more of the worldly man. A realized person has gone beyond worldly attachments. The *Bhagavad Gita* says the same. Krishna tells Arjuna, ‘The Vedas are like a small puddle of water to a person settled in the knowledge of Self, which is like the huge sea’ (*Gita*, 2-46). Vedas exhort a person to become a *jñāni*, the realized one. Krishna calls him a *sthita-prajña*, one with right understanding.

Vedanta also says a *jñāni* is equal to Brahman itself. A person who knows a pen does not become a pen and one who knows a book does not become the book but the scripture asserts that one who knows Brahman becomes Brahman.

## **17.6. He goes beyond caste and creed**

It is natural that he goes beyond social identities. That is why *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* calls him ‘*ati-varṇāśrami*’. He

is the one who transcends the *varṇa* and *āśrama*. He is neither a Brahmin nor a person of any other *varṇa* or caste. He goes beyond the *āśrama*-s – the four stages of life. Though he is not bound by the duties prescribed for these positions or stages in life, he *may* still perform those duties in order to set an example for others. Krishna calls it '*loka saṅgraha*'. If a wise man does not perform actions, all others would follow suit, and there will be chaos in society. Hence though the *jñāni* transcends the level of religion, he still performs rituals etc., for the sake of others, to be a role model for others. In other words, a *jñāni* is one for whom morality and discipline are his very nature.

A *jñāni* may cease to perform rituals when he takes up the position of a monk and renounces all worldly activities. This stage is called *saṃnyāsa*.

Vedanta also says that the *jñāni* goes beyond good and evil. This does not mean that he can do anything without consequence. It only means that his mind is so purified that he would never do any prohibited action, and is not affected by the fruit of any actions.

Does the result of actions affect a *jñāni*? In cases where he has a societal role to play, as in the case of king Janaka, he may perform action. Krishna exhorts Arjuna to emulate Janaka, who was a *jñāni*. What happens in such a case?

In the case of the *jñāni*, there is action, but there is no actor, says Vedanta. He has no sense of ownership in whatever actions he performs. He is well established in the idea that he is nothing but mere existence-consciousness (which is Brahman), and that all activity is that of the body-mind-complex, which is a product of *prakṛti*. Hence, a *jñāni* may be fully engaged in activities, but the fruit of actions do not stick to him. The difference between a

karma yogi and a *jñāni* is that the sense of doer-ship (idea that 'I am the doer') exists in the case of the former but not in the latter.

This is what Krishna says about the tradition of philosopher kings who had realized Brahman but at the same time conducted their worldly duties for the welfare of humanity (*Gita*, 4-2). A modern example is that of Nisargadatta Maharaj who made his living by running a small shop while being a great *jñāni*. Throughout Indian history, the realized persons were revered by the society and mighty kings bowed before them.

**Parents may also see:**

- History of Dharma Shastra by P.V.Kane



## 18

# *The Bhagavad Gita*

*“In the philosophical teaching of the Gita, Krishna has all the attributes of the full-fledged monotheistic deity and at the same time the attributes of the Upanishadic Absolute” .... “It was as if an empire spoke to us, nothing small or unworthy, but large, serene, consistent, the voice of an old intelligence which in another age and climate had pondered and thus disposed of the same questions which exercise us.... The Bhagavad Gita is an empire of thought”.*

- Ralph Waldo Emerson

*“The Bhagavad Gita is the most systematic statement of spiritual evolution of endowing value to mankind. The Gita is one of the clearest and most comprehensive summaries of the spiritual thoughts ever to have been made”*

- Aldous Huxley, the British philosopher

*“In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonal philosophy of the Bhagavat Gita, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial”*

- Henry David Thoreau – American Philosopher

### 18.1. Why should we read the *Gita*?

A religious and innocent person might reply, “We read the *Gita* for attaining *punyaam*”. But it should not be so. The reason we should read the *Gita* is likely clear by now from our preceding discussion. However, this table provides a brief overview:

Major World Religions	Hinduism
1. Have one text	Multiple primary texts
2. Founded by a single person at some point of time in history	Not founded by one person – the major texts are the contribution of hundreds of thinkers
3. Postulate one personal god	Addresses two levels: multiple gods are accepted from the point of religion and the common man. One impersonal reality is accepted at the philosophical level.
4. Religion and philosophy are not connected	Religion, rituals, culture and philosophy are all intertwined
5. Belief system	Partly belief system combined with philosophical reasoning
6. Supposed mandate to propagate religion. Hence other faiths are denigrated.	No such mandate. A Hindu is at the receiving end of denigration or distorted presentation

Hence we must know the *Gita* to answer basic questions, such as:

- Are we polytheists in the negative sense as projected by others?
- Do we worship idols without any meaning?
- Have our scriptures created the caste system?

Clear answers to the above questions would give your child a sense of confidence, self-esteem and self-assurance in his relations with his peers and the educational system in the schools. The *Gita* is one single text which can clarify most of these questions.

At a higher level, the *Gita* is the greatest guide for self-purification, internal growth and self-realization.

### **The divine charioteer**

Most of us have seen the portrait of the teaching of the *Gita*. Arjuna is seen sitting at the base of his chariot, having dropped his bow and arrows. Krishna, the charioteer is seen standing and delivering his message. The *Kathopanishad* has a *mantra* which describes this symbolically. The *jīva*, traversing in this world, is the master of the chariot. The human body is compared to a chariot, the intellect is the charioteer and the mind is the reins. The five senses which pull a person towards a variety of sense objects are the five horses. The chariot has to move in the proper direction, guided by the intellect and achieve the worldly goals and the higher goal of self-knowledge. In the case of the *Gita* Lord Krishna is himself the charioteer who is leading Arjuna to his goal.

### **18.2. The context of the *Gita***

In the preceding chapters, I have been citing from the *Gita*. As we know, the *Gita* is a conversation between Lord Krishna and Arjuna, the Pandava prince, who was facing a dilemma about his duty. It is a tiny portion of only about 700 verses out of the 100,000 verses of the *Mahabharata*, written by the sage Vyasa. During the course of conversation, Krishna gives a comprehensive picture of human activity (karma), the fruit of that karma and the spiritual disciplines which one has to

undergo to graduate to the level of knowledge. Krishna's main teaching is that every person, placed in any *varṇa* or *āśrama* (a stage of life such as, bachelor, householder, spiritual seeker and renunciate) has a duty enjoined by dharma and that duty has to be performed. Thereafter, it is also a recommended goal to strive to know the Supreme Reality.

The word 'Gita' literally means 'that which is sung'. It is figuratively applied to any passage in the ancient texts like the *Mahabharata*, the *Srimad Bhagavatham* or the *purāṇa*-s where the nature of *jīva*, Iswara and Brahman are discussed in a comprehensive way and the oneness of *jīva* and Brahman is revealed. There are several *Gita*-s in our tradition such as, *Uddhava Gita*, *Dattatreya Gita*, *Ashtavakra Gita*, *Parasara Gita*, *Sruti Gita* and so on. Of all these, the most comprehensive one is the *Bhagavad Gita* we are talking about.

The *Gita* is not just a book for old and retired persons. It does not advocate pessimism or withdrawal from action or total renunciation. It also does not advocate war. It advocates right action to promote righteousness in society.

The teacher and the pupil in the *Gita* are householders both, warriors and men of action. The place of discussion is the war field. It is about a dilemma which everyone faces about performance of one's duty or dharma. Most of us are persons of the world and whatever we read should be relevant to us. Krishna takes care of this and talks about the *pravṛtti* dharma, human activity for a successful worldly life. Arjuna is merely an incidental character, but the message is intended for all of us. Many other issues relating to the nobler aspects of life, such as the pursuit of the *jñāna* path, the nature of divine, exercises in self-purification and so on are told in pursuance of answering some of the doubts and

queries raised by Arjuna. Thus the book covers two paths – the path of action and the path of renunciation.

The context of the *Gita*, as we saw, is Arjuna's despondency. He sits in his chariot, totally grief-stricken, having laid down his weapons. He faces the moral dilemma of being duty-bound to wage a war which will result in a lot of bloodshed of his own kith and kin as well as the death of several others. But it was Arjuna who took the lead in making all preparations for war, personally requested Krishna to help him in the war and to be his chariot driver. Krishna has come at Arjuna's request only. Hence, Arjuna's despondency perplexes Krishna who starts reminding him about his dharma.

In the course of the conversation, Krishna paints the larger picture of the nature of dharma, the nature of divinity and the duties of human beings in different situations. Krishna's teaching is a sort of counseling. While doing so, Krishna is not encouraging war but is only reminding Arjuna of his forgotten duty. Sri Shankaracharya, while commenting on the *Gita*, clarifies this: 'In this passage Krishna is not prescribing war, but merely removing the delusion in Arjuna's mind about his duty' (2-16).

### **18.3. An outline of the *Gita***

The seven hundred verses of the *Gita* are divided into eighteen chapters. The first chapter is about Arjuna's grief. *Arjuna represents everyman and hence his grief and dilemma are universal.*

Krishna begins by giving a philosophical picture of the nature of the self. This forms the second chapter. This is also called the path or yoga of knowledge. One may wonder why Krishna was teaching Vedanta in the battlefield. We must keep in mind that Arjuna belonged to a warrior clan and his study included

the Vedas as well as statecraft. He would have been familiar with the principles of dharma, at least theoretically. Hence Krishna addresses him on this same level. He says, ‘the self is eternal, it is neither born nor dies. Perform your duty as a warrior and fight’. In this context we see the most popular passage of the *Gita*, that which relates to *sthita-prajña*, a person of equanimity.

The third chapter addresses another important concept – *karma yoga*. It talks about desire free action. We looked at this in an earlier chapter. It is the most relevant message to all of us.

- *Karma yoga* is a strategy to avoid the fruit of action, that is, rebirth.
- It is a surrender of the individual effort (*vyasti*) to the welfare of the collective (*samaṣti*)
- Krishna calls it *loka saṅgraha*, keeping the society together, by preventing normless behavior in society and by being a good role model.
- This involves a proper understanding of the cosmic scheme of inter-dependence.
- Karma yoga does not mean that the person performs duty in a perfunctory manner. A karma yogi does his duty with greater zeal and vigor.
- Karma yoga, because of its selfless nature, is a means to purify the mind and prepare a person for the next higher level, the path of knowledge.

In any social structure, it is the duty of the state to establish order. This is explained by Krishna in the beginning of the fourth chapter. From the time of creation, this eternal philosophy has been transmitted through a long lineage of philosopher-kings (*rājarṣi*). The commentators say that the objective of this yoga

is to invigorate the *ksatriya dharma* which is essential for the protection of society.

Krishna is an *avatāra* or a special manifestation of the divine for a larger social purpose. The meaning of *avatāra* is also mentioned in chapter four. Such manifestation is to restore social order whenever evil overwhelms and undermines the good. It is a cosmic design to restore order.

This chapter also interprets the word *yajña* in a broader sense to include any noble activity done for the betterment of society. *Yajña* is not a mere fire sacrifice organized by a group of Vedic scholars. Whatever karma that is done for the welfare of humanity is called ‘*yajña*’. Krishna speaks of different types of *yajña-s* – those involving charity, welfare activities, exercises in self-purification or enquiry into the nature of divine. *Yajña* is an activity for social good. One who has not attained the maturity needed for self-enquiry will have to initially perform socially useful actions for self-purification. The highest *yajña*, however, is knowledge.

Chapters five and six give more details of the path of knowledge and of the path of action. The spiritual practices of self discipline, concentration, meditation and *Patanjali yoga* are discussed in these.

The six chapters from chapter seven through twelve describe the nature of Reality at two levels: the level of Brahman without attributes and the level of a god with name and form. We learned about these two levels in the earlier chapters. People are comfortable with a god with attributes, a god who listens to their prayers and answers them.

The tenth chapter explains that whatever magnificent manifestation we find in the world is merely a glimpse of the

magnificence of Brahman. Seekers can worship these forms in order to understand the glory of Brahman.

The eleventh chapter describes *viśvarūpa*, the cosmic form, which is familiar to most of us. This is quite symbolic. Arjuna sees gods, demi-gods, demons, humans and all living beings in that cosmic form. In this context, the cosmic form is symbolic of the function of dissolution (*laya*). To symbolize dissolution, it is shown as having innumerable mouths devouring all the beings. All beings are seen being crushed in the mighty jaws of that cosmic form. This is similar to the dance of Shiva or the dance of Kali at the time of dissolving creation.

In the twelfth chapter, Krishna makes an important point. Those who follow the path of knowledge attain Brahman on their own, whereas those who follow the path of devotion to a god form are assisted and helped by that god to attain the Supreme goal. In the case of a devotee, God carries him like a cat carries its kitten. A seeker however, must cling tightly like a monkey's baby holding onto its mother's belly while the mother jumps from tree to tree. Krishna is making the point that this latter path is strenuous.

The study of Vedanta is not an intellectual exercise but rather it is one of self-transformation. Vedanta says that the *jīva* becomes Brahman by understanding Brahman. This understanding is explained from chapter thirteen onwards. These chapters tell us how to distinguish the real from the unreal, the sentient from the insentient. To state this in modern terminology, they tell about matter versus consciousness.

The *Gita* devotes an entire chapter (fourteen) to describing the three *guna*-s *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* and their interplay which creates the whole universe. We also find discussion of the divine

versus demonical nature in the subsequent chapters. Chapters fourteen to seventeen in particular are of great interest to a student of psychology interested in the various traits of human behavior, personality types and right action.

The final chapter reviews all the concepts relating to the path of action and the path of knowledge and urges Arjuna to follow the dharma enjoined on him.

All the eighteen chapters of the *Gita* bear the name 'yoga'. This should not be mistaken for the eight-limbed yoga of Patanjali (which, of course, is the subject-matter of the sixth chapter). The word 'yoga' means 'to yoke' or 'to unite'. Thus the word 'yoga' is used in the sense that each chapter presents a particular way to unite the *jīva* with the divine.

In this text, there are several places where Krishna refers to Himself. In all these places, whenever he says 'I', the 'I' does not refer to the Krishna, the Yadava king. It mostly refers to the Supreme Brahman (which we discussed in the beginning of the book) and rarely to Iswara, the *saguṇa* form of Brahman. This has to be carefully discerned from the context.

#### **18.4. What is spiritual progress?**

There are three stages in what we call spiritual progress. The first level is to understand what the primary texts (the Upanishads) tell us about the nature of *jīva*, Iswara and Brahman. In Vedanta this is called 'śravanam'. The next step is to logically evaluate this under the guidance of a teacher. This level is called 'mananam'. The third and final level is the internalization and assimilation of what has been learned. For instance, the *Upanishad* says – 'that you are' and 'I am Brahman'. Assimilation means to experience these statements. One has to achieve self-purification of the highest level in order to experience this. The seeker must drop his identification with the body-mind-complex and identify with

the Supreme Consciousness which is the only illuminating factor in the whole universe.

The *Gita* is like a how-to guide for these spiritual practices. To start with, one has to purify one's actions through *karma-yoga*. This has to be followed up by other techniques of mind-discipline. *Karma yoga* leads to purification of mind, to some degree only and hence should be followed up by meditation. Such meditation can be on a *saguṇa* form of god or on the *nirguṇa* Brahman. A person gradually gives up *karma yoga* before he moves on to this mode of meditation. Meditation involves controlling the base impulses of the mind and withdrawing the sense organs from sense objects. *Karma yoga* gives us the internal strength to move on to this next level. The controlling of impulses is possible only by proper discrimination (*viveka*) and understanding of what is real and what is unreal, what is eternal and what is ephemeral.

At the primary level, when a person is in *karma yoga*, he is the doer, though he is not the enjoyer of the fruit of his karma. The next level is that of devotion to some god-form, where a devotee surrenders his acts to the God and works merely as an instrument. At the final level, the *jñāni*, a realized person, knows that he is one with the Supreme Consciousness which is untouched by any activities of the body mind complex. He is neither the doer nor the enjoyer. He knows that it is the body-mind-complex which is the doer of all actions and whatever such a realized man does is for the welfare of the cosmic order or dharma. The *Gita* gives examples of this, such as philosopher kings like Janaka.

Controlling the mind is the toughest task. Concentration of mind is focusing the mind on a particular thought just like focusing a beam of light through a convex lens. The body and mind are interdependent and conscious control of the body will

aid in controlling the mind. This is the secret of yoga, and will help us move on to the next level, which is meditation on Brahman. Meditation is a flow of similar thoughts and the avoidance of all dissimilar thoughts. In this process, the physical habits of the seeker also play an important part and hence the *Gita* gives several tips regarding proper posture, diet and sleep habits. The aim is to establish a harmonious way of life, conducive to dissolving the ego-mind and abiding as Consciousness Supreme.

The *Gita* makes a brilliant analysis of human nature. Human nature does not change with changing technology or globalization. Behavioral patterns and social institutions may change but not the essential qualities of mind – love, hate, desire, determination, fear, courage, anxiety and such. These are determined by the three *guṇa-s* – *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, which are the constituents of every being. The *Gita* makes a study of all these. Krishna exhorts us to break free from the influence of the three *guṇa-s*. One who does so is a *jñāni*.

Similarly, fortitude and application to one's work depends upon the predominant *guṇa* of a person. Some are *sāttvic*, pursuing noble objectives while some are *rājasa*, pursuing material achievements in an aggressive way. Some others who are *tāmasa* in nature might pursue ignoble activities, or employ ignoble means. All human behavior is determined by the predominant *guṇa-s* in a person. A person's spiritual achievement is also determined by the same. The *Gita* gives an analysis of the divine wealth which is harmonious with yoga and the demoniac wealth which is an obstacle to yoga. It acts as a hand-holding guide to spiritual progress.

The *Gita* portrays a vast canvass, addressing people of all walks of life. A selfish person may continue to do selfish actions but the *Gita* warns that such a person will be eternally caught in

the cycle of transmigration. It advises him to perform action as an offering to the collective.

Thus, the *Gita* teaches us about the nature of the absolute and the nature of the *jīva* and shows the unity of both. The highest human goal, liberation is a state of internal transformation which is achieved by removing the dross of the mind, the notion of ego and the factors of identity which a person superimposes on himself. The *Gita* is thus not something to be known at the intellectual level, but it is one which attempts to change our personality. It teaches us how to discard our lower self and identify with a higher self.

### **18.5. Do not ‘read’ the *Gita* – ‘Listen’ to the *Gita* taught by a master**

This is the advice given by the *Mundakopanishad*. However brilliant a person may be, he may not be able to reconcile some of the apparently contradicting lines of the *Gita*. A person could end up with wrong ideas of its teaching. Hence a person has to listen to one or many competent teachers in order to understand various lines in the right context.

#### **Parents may also see:**

- Recommended listening:
  - Talks (in English) by Swami Paramarthananda on the *Gita*
  - Talks (in Hindi) by Swami Akhandananda Saraswati on the *Gita*
- The author’s book “*A Guide to Bhagavad Gita*” published by Emesco Books, Hyderabad (see Amazon.in)
- See also: <https://www.youtube.com/user/advaitaacademy/KarnamAravindaRao> for detailed classes (in English) on the *Gita* along with Shankara’s commentary

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# 19

## The Meaning of *Om*

### 19.1. How are symbols formed?

*Om* is the most sacred symbol in the Vedic literature. According to a traditional verse, two sounds, *Om* and *atha*, burst forth from the mouth of the creator at the time of creation. Hence these are said to be highly auspicious. Several *Upanishads* too talk of the glory of *Om*. It is interesting to see how the symbol has been explained in the Vedic literature.

If we consider the symbols which are commonly known to us, we note that in order to denote gravity by a symbol, we have chosen the letter *g*. We have accepted *m* to represent mass, *v* to represent velocity, *r* to represent radius and so on. Such concepts are simple in nature, and we could represent them by the initial letters of those words. They are mere symbols, and they do not describe mass or velocity or gravity. We do not meditate on the symbols *g*, *v*, *r* etc., to understand gravity, velocity or radius. However, in the case of *Om*, it is said to be both a symbol and also a name denoting the underlying philosophical meaning. Spiritual seekers are thus advised to meditate on *Om* in order to understand the Supreme Reality, known as Brahman in the *Upanishads*. Thus *Om* is a word which describes Brahman, as noted in the above chapters.

### 19.2. The problem of denoting Brahman

When we choose a symbol for such an entity, we must consider our own situation. Our existence has a three-fold limitation: by place, by time and by being a specific individual. For instance, when I am in my home I am not in my office. This is

limitation by place. I exist now but did not exist 100 years ago and will not exist 100 years later. This is limitation by time. I am X but not Y. This is limitation by form – being a person or object. These limitations apply to all things in the universe. The earth, the sun, the stars, the constellations – all have a time frame. They have a time of origin and time of disappearance. Brahman cannot have such limitations. It must be an eternal entity existing in the past, present and future, which is never negated. It must be only one without a second. It must be of the nature of intelligence, but not a limited intelligence, as is the case with all living beings.

The *Mandukya Upanishad* provides an in-depth discussion on *Om*. It says that “whatever is seen is *Om*”, meaning that whatever was, is and will be in the universe in past, present and future is *Om*. One might question whether you and I are also *Om* and whether all objects around us are *Om*. The answer is ‘yes’. How is this explained? It is explained by showing that all the names and forms conceivable in the human mind can be visualized in the symbol *Om*.

Sri Shankaracharya explains this in his commentary and says that the sound *Om* is formed as a result of combination of three sounds: *a* (pronounced as in *sun* or as in *bath*), *u* (as in *put*) and *m* (as in *room*). In any language a combination of the sounds *a* and *u* leads to the sound *o*. Thus *Om* is a combination of the above three sounds.

### 19.3. How does *Om* represent eternity and infinity?

The most primary sound made by a human being when he simply opens his mouth and releases air from the vocal chords, is the sound *a* (pronounced as in *sun* or as in *bath*). That is the primary cry of a child too. The closure of all sounds is when the person closes the lips, while the breath continues with a humming sound through his nose. That sound is ‘*m*’ (as in *room*). The transition between ‘*a*’ and ‘*m*’ is achieved by slowly closing the

mouth while at the same time releasing air and this produces the sound ‘u’ (as in *put* or in *pool*). All human vocal expressions start with opening and closing of mouth. All of the words which we utter are modifications within the ‘a – u – m’. All verbal activity of human beings in all languages is contained in these primary sounds. In other words, all the names and sounds associated with them can be represented by ‘Om’, which has been a symbol to denote all sounds for all describable things.

Names denote objects. When all sounds or names are denoted by *Om*, it follows that all external objects in the universe are represented by *Om*.

Vedanta makes a similar observation about the forms (*rūpa*) of objects. When we say the word ‘pen’, the image of a pen appears in the mind. It is an experience in mind. If I eat an ice-cream, it is an experience in the mind, when I smell a perfume it is an experience in the mind. All objects exist in the mind as experiences. In other words, all forms are appearances in the Atman, the self.

Vedanta analyzes all objects from the cause-effect point of view. When you take a pot, it is only a modification of clay. When the pot is destroyed, what remains is clay and as the *Upanishads* say the name is only for name-sake, but the truth is clay. Clay itself is a modification (*parināma*) in *māyā*, which is the manifesting power of consciousness. With respect to consciousness, clay is merely an appearance. Thus all forms are but modifications with respect to *māyā* and appearances (*vivarta*) with respect to consciousness. Objects may differ from one another. A pot is not a cloth and vice versa but behind all objects, the principle of existence is common. Thus Vedanta concludes that all forms are appearances in consciousness (*caitanya*) and all sensory experiences of such forms / objects are appearances in consciousness.

Thus we see that all names and sounds can be taken as modifications of 'Om' and all forms can be taken as appearances in consciousness. The name and form of an object are inseparably linked. Hence for the purpose of meditation, the word 'Om' is equated with the Atman, which is another name for consciousness. The practitioner has to meditate on 'Om' as comprised of all conceivable objects and slowly deny the content of the same and concentrate on the *caitanya* (consciousness), symbolized by 'Om'. The practitioner gradually becomes stabilized in such consciousness. He meditates on the only one Reality which is behind all names, forms and their experiences.

The *Mandukya Upanishad* further states, 'Past, present and future, all is Om'. This means that all human experience of names and forms at all times is contained in the one and only consciousness, that is, Brahman. This is explained in the *Vedanta Pancadasi* by the sage Vidyaranya in the very opening verses of his book. All human experience is at three levels – waking, dream and deep sleep. The mind and sense organs are active in the waking state and perceive all sense objects. In the dream state the sense organs are withdrawn but the mind is active, creating a world of its own. Thus, we notice the presence of intelligence during waking and dream states but we are not conscious of the same during deep sleep. After we awaken, we become aware of its presence even in the deep sleep state. Thus consciousness is present in all three states and beyond. This continues for days, years and ages, throughout eternity. Hence, for the purpose of meditation, the word 'Om' is used to cover all the three states of experience and also to indicate the consciousness beyond the three states. Specifically, this is done as follows.

The sound 'a' represents the waking state, *jāgrad avasthā*, 'u' represents the dream state, *swapna avasthā* and 'm' represents the deep sleep state, *suṣupti avasthā*. As we noted above, the mind is active in the dream state and creates an internal universe of its

own. In deep sleep, however, the mind is withdrawn from both the external and internal worlds. It is in a state of ignorance. But these three states are mere delimiting factors or different phases in consciousness, whereas consciousness itself is beyond the three stages and is known as '*turiya*'. This word literally means a fourth stage but it is not really a fourth stage but a stage in which the three other stages merge. Thus the meditation on '*Om*' is done as the consciousness present in all the three stages and also beyond the three stages. The practitioner meditates on the fact that there is only one reality in all states of existence. Thus, all human experience can be represented by *Om*.

#### 19.4. The *Kathopanishad* on *Om*

The *Kathopanishad* says that this is the most commended '*ālambanam*', a support, to *know* either the Supreme Brahman or *attain* any desired God like Vishnu, Shiva, etc, with a form and attributes. The *Upanishad* instructs that you may stop at whatever stage you choose. You may stop at a lower level, the level of *saguṇa* worship or you can continue to the end of the journey and reach the thought-free state.

The *saguṇa* stage is the mode of duality where the worshipper believes he is different from the deity and seeks the blessings of the deity. He worships God saying '*Om namaśśivāya*' '*Om namo nārāyanāya*' etc., and so equates the symbol '*Om*' with his particular god.

The *nirguṇa* stage is the mode of non-duality where the objective of the petitioner is to negate his ego (mind) or, in other words, dissolve his limited wave-consciousness in the greater ocean of consciousness. We may note that mind is used as a tool for meditation, but ultimately the mind itself is resolved. At this level, the practitioner negates all the names and forms. Whatever is name is not a name but consciousness. Whatever is a form (*rūpa*), is not a form, but consciousness. This negation of names and forms (*nama-rūpa*) enables the practitioner to

dissolve the whole *jagat* in *Omkāra*. Hence the *Upanishadic* saying, ‘everything is *Om* only’.

*Om* is used in a more practical context during the *yajña*-s, as we see in the Gita (17:24). Krishna explains that when the *mantra*-s are recited by the scholars of the relevant *Veda*, the main priest says ‘*Om*’, which is a sign of approval. It means, ‘So be it’, or ‘It has the approval of the Supreme’. The *mantra*-s commence with *Om* and after recital their approval is also sealed by *Om*.

*Om* is a sacred symbol for all the Indic religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. We may also see the similarity of *Om* with the holy word of Christians and Muslims - ‘amen’, which also means ‘so be it’ in the sense of approval, a interesting coincidence.

### **Suggested Listening:**

- Talk by Swami Tattvavidananda on *Om* in *Mandukya Upanishad*
- Talk by Swami Veditatmananda on *Om* in [www.avgsatsang.org](http://www.avgsatsang.org)
- Talk by Swami Sarvapriyananda on *Om* in the YouTube



## 20

# Yoga

### 20.1. Yoga is universal

An important aspect of Indian culture which has now become universal is Yoga. Yoga is as old as the *Vedas*. We have seen that the *Vedas* talk of *upāsanā*, meditation, as a preparatory step for inquiry on Brahman. Other schools of Indian philosophy, such as Buddhism, Jainism and Sankhya, had their own versions of Yoga. The most extensive Yoga tradition is that of Patanjali, whose classic work, the *Yoga-Sutra* is now universally known. Patanjali's system accepts the authority of Veda whereas the Buddhist and Jain systems do not. Thus both the pro-Veda and anti-Veda schools have acknowledged the usefulness of yoga. Yoga is said to have travelled to China and other south Asian countries through the Buddhist monks who brought Buddhism to those countries. All these countries have their own Yoga traditions now.

Our normal understanding of Yoga is that it involves flexing the body in several odd shapes and control the breath in several odd manners. But the bodily postures, the *asanas*, are a very small aspect of the yoga discipline. It is a much more profound philosophical practice, than is generally known. The Sanskrit root '*yuj*' is used in three different senses: 'to yoke', 'to concentrate the mind' and 'to restrain oneself'. It is a process of uniting the individual self (as discussed in earlier chapters) with the universal self by the techniques of self-restraint and concentration of mind.

## 20.2. Body and mind work together

Yoga works on the understanding that the body and mind interact together. If the mind is brought under discipline, the body too, will benefit. Likewise, deliberate control of bodily actions and impulses will have an impact on the mind too. This leads to habit formation. The mind is required to have a proper disposition in order to receive the knowledge of the scriptures. The sages of old have discovered that a conscious control of our sense organs leads to controlling the tendencies and dispositions of the unconscious mind. It is a slow process, but a very effective one.

This process of uniting the individual self and universal self is not through any activity like *yajña*, but by a mental process of realization. We saw that according to Vedanta the *jīva* is not different from Brahman but we are unaware of this. If we want to become aware of it there are two levels which we must explore: 1) understanding at an intellectual level by study of the scriptures and 2) experiencing the same. The first level is possible if we seriously contemplate the teachings. The second level demands a process of internal transformation. Yoga helps in achieving this internal transformation.

The body is like a chariot for you and me who are the masters (18.1). The five senses are the horses which pull the chariot toward whatever external objects attract. The mind is the reins, controlling the horses. But this mind itself is like a monkey, the books warn, and as we too, know all too well. It jumps all around. Controlling the mind is a challenging task. This is the subject matter of Yoga.

The body and mind are continuously seeking after several external objects and hence compel a person to take up various

activities. But letting the senses run rampant only leads to our downfall. There is a need to control them.

### 20.3. The cleansing process

If we want to clean a dirty pond, we need to flush it with a lot of pure water. An impure mind is a flow of unrestrained thoughts, like a flow of dirty water. Some noble thoughts must be introduced to the mind and such thoughts should then continue as a permanent stream. The thoughts should also be single pointed and focused, like the light waves in a laser beam.

How to achieve this? We start with deliberate control of the body and mind. Patanjali offers step-by-step guidance on how to control the external organs, the sense organs and the mind, and, at a later point, to bring the wandering mind to focus upon a single object.

This is what is known as Patanjali's eight-limbed Yoga – a system with eight progressive steps, each leading to a higher level. Conscious control of the body and mind, placing the body in various postures etc., are the initial stages which are the external steps. Success in these stages will gradually lead to the higher stages, which address our inner life, such as meditation.

The first internal step is concentration of mind on an object. This can be on an object in front of us or on some part of our own body like heart or the center of the eyebrows (chakra-s as they are called) or the focus can be on a *yantra* or an idol. This is to be combined with *prāṇāyāma*, regulation of the breath.

The next step is meditation. This entails a continuous stream of thoughts on a particular idea. The commentator Vyasa called it a *citta-srota*, a stream of consciousness. It should be a stream of similar thoughts, undisturbed by dissimilar thoughts. Certain

statements from the scriptures, such as ‘That you are’ ‘All this is Brahman’, etc. are the subject matter for contemplation.

*Upāsanā*, as noted above, is a similar exercise, but it is focus on a particular deity, quite often with the objective of seeking a boon. Meditation can be on a god with attributes or on Brahman devoid of attributes. The seeker of self-knowledge, however, meditates on Brahman, devoid of attributes.

#### **20.4. How to begin?**

Yoga must be learned from someone who knows the tradition, a teacher who knows not only the physical aspects of yoga but the philosophy as well. To start with, it may be enough for your child to practice the physical aspects of the Yoga. However, some basic theoretical knowledge of Patanjali’s text would be of great use for the parents. We know that the highest goal of Yoga is self realization through internal transformation. A modern man is usually content with the simple objective of attaining better health and overcoming anxieties. Psychology has adopted several ideas from the Yoga systems and has achieved good results in the field of medicine.

#### **Parents may see:**

- The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali by Edwin F. Bryant

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# 21

## Customs, Beliefs and Rituals

### 21.1. The secondary questions

We have now come to the secondary questions. As mentioned in the introduction (1.3), the primary questions were about the nature of reality, the number of gods, idol worship and such. The secondary questions are about day-to-day customs and rituals. What is the significance, we ask, when our elders ask us to place a dot of vermillion on the forehead, when you are asked to wear a sacred thread, when you are asked to go round the temple or follow some such ritual?

Many things in this world cannot be scientifically validated. Nevertheless, their usefulness is seen. For thousands of years and throughout the world, our ancestors observed nature and natural phenomena and discovered certain useful practices. There is much to learn from tribal culture, which we so often look down upon. There is a great deal of unexplored medical knowledge, for example. All these are empirical truths. This is similar to the modern practice of experimenting with new medicines on guinea pigs before giving them to humans. This is also an empirical method.

Customs and beliefs are common to all societies and not merely to Hindus. The Hindu beliefs can be broadly categorized as those connected with a religion, those which cultivate strength of mind or good habits, and those with medicinal value.

## 21.2. The rationale

People observe customs more willingly if they are introduced to them as part of religious practice. Some examples are the age-old practice of massaging the body with oil on festival days, applying turmeric paste (by women) on the face, hands and feet, the use of neem leaves during festivals, storing and drinking water from copper vessels, wearing a garland of beads, eating basil (*tulasi*) leaves and using them during worship and so on. Orthodox people bathe thrice daily and do their compulsory prayer (*sandhyā-vandan*), along with regulation of the breath (*prāṇāyāma*). This contributes to good health.

Some customs have a philosophical meaning. For instance, a sacred thread around the body is worn by the *dwija*-s (the three communities, as we saw in chapter 16). This thread consists of three long strands joined as a loop. The three threads symbolize the three *guna*-s. A person is expected to meditate on the Gayatri mantra and transcend the three *guna*-s. Another practice pertains to the monks of the dualist order. They carry three thin sticks tied as a bundle. This is called *tri-danda* and the person who carries it is called a *tri-dandi*. The stick symbolizes control. The person who is a *tri-dandi* is said to have controlled his mind, speech and the body, which are the three important organs to be controlled by a saint. Another practice is the drawing of vertical vermillion lines on the forehead by people of one sect and horizontal white lines by people of another. This has philosophical meaning. The red vermillion dot is to be placed on the forehead by both men and women. The point at which the dot is placed is said to be an important chakra (*ājñā chakra*) as per the Yoga system. Lord Shiva is said to have his third eye – the wisdom eye – at this place.

Some other beliefs are meant to give confidence and

courage to a person. For instance worshipping Lord Hanuman leads to *sankata mocan* – release from all troubles. Worship of Lord Ganesa removes all obstacles. You are advised to read the *Sundara kanda* (a part of the *Ramayana*) for smooth success in any endeavor. In case of drought people perform the worship of Shiva or recite the *Virata-parva* (a part of the *Mahabharata*). This may result in rain or not but the community is engaged in some form of worship without getting disheartened. Our texts say - *yūdrśī bhāvanā yatra siddhirbhavati tādrśī* – the result of prayer will depend on the strength of your prayer.

Some customs are meant to promote good conduct in society. During the nine day festival, the *nava-rātri*, there is a practice of decorating young girls as the goddess Durga and worshipping them. This is to instill the idea of purity and self-discipline in the young girl. Some customs are mere eulogies, meant to praise a particular habit. You will have a long and healthy life if you wake up before sunrise. Sexual intercourse during the day will result in unrighteous children. Salutations to the Sun (Surya-namaskara) along with the mantra will result in spiritual merit. There are six different *āsana*-s in the above practice. They all contribute to good health.

### **21.3. Rituals – Blend of truth and beauty**

Hindus have sixteen *samskāra*-s, purifying rituals, starting from the time a person enters the mother's womb until death. The first ritual is the causing of pregnancy, *garbhādhānam*, which has to be performed with a pious frame of mind. There are rituals while the child is still in the womb, rituals after child birth, ritual when the child undergoes initiation into studies, ritual relating to marriage and so on until the last ritual relating to death. The sociologists call these rituals *rites of passage*. There

may be some regional variations in different parts of the country but the *mantra*-s are drawn from the same Vedic passages. All variations should be taken as equally valid. A person can follow any tradition which is handed down to him by his parents.

For Hindus the daily meal must be visualized and performed as a *yajña*. The cosmic being (which we saw in an earlier chapter) is present in the form of fire in all living beings. The food we eat is like the offering to that fire. The air we breathe has five different functions in the body and they are said to be associated with the fire in the body. When we begin our meal, we offer five small morsels to the five different airs in the body, reciting mantras like *prāṇāya-svāhā*, *apāṇāya- svāhā* and so on. These are like the oblations put into the fire during the *yajña*. Such perspective would stop a gluttonous attitude to food and strengthen the idea that the human body is a mere product of the macrocosm and should be protected for the performance of dharma. Following this ritual during lunch is said to be equal to a *yajña*.

Several rituals like *vratams* for Ganesa, Gauri, Satya-Narayana, Ananta Padmanabha, Vara-Lakshmi etc., are mentioned in the *purāṇa*-s. During these rituals certain standard passages from the Vedas are recited. For instance, the *puruṣa-sūktam*, *rudram*, *uttara-nārāyaṇam*, *śrī-sūktam*, *mantra-puṣpam* etc., are recited as part of the rituals. A person with a working knowledge of tradition would know that all these are philosophical passages. In addition, the idea of god itself is a philosophical symbol as we saw in 11.4.

Ritual would be ignored as meaningless if the story behind it were to be a myth or mere belief. Ritual would be 'live' when the story behind it has some underlying philosophy. In fact, philosophical ideas are depicted as mythological stories (11.5,

11.6 and 11.7). Even a highly rational mind would not feel inhibited from performing such rituals.

Truth (underlying philosophy) and beauty are keeping our rituals live. There is a lot of beauty, elegance, aesthetic appeal and pageantry associated with rituals. Traditional music and dance are also part of such rituals. Certain virtues like charity, serving of food etc., are compulsory during the rituals. While doing some charity, *mantra*-s which mean, “Ganesa is the giver, Ganesa is the receiver” or “Ananta is the giver, Ananta is the receiver”, are told. This implies that we are acknowledging the divine presence in all fellow beings.

These rituals are like a preliminary training for the higher level, which is the knowledge of self and realization.

#### **21.4. Hindus and vegetarianism**

There is a general impression among people that Hinduism advocates vegetarianism. This does not appear to be correct. In the Vedic rituals there appears the practice of offering animals during the *yajña*, though meat-eating was restricted to such occasions only. In the story of the sage Agastya, we see that goat meat was offered to him as part of a ritual. Lord Rama is said to have given up eating meat during the absence of Sita. Hanuman tells Sita about this when he meets her. Bhima, (the Pandava prince in *Mahabharata*), in his disguised role as a cook in the house of King Virata, distributes meat to his brothers and to his wife Draupadi. Such examples abound in our books. We need not be alarmed to note it because they were from the warrior class and meat was their normal food. *Ayurveda*, the science which draws its spirit from the *Vedas*, advocates meat eating for bodily strength. The *Manu-smriti* devotes a whole chapter on which animal can be eaten and which should not be eaten. In the

light of this, one can follow one's family tradition and decide on meat-eating without the notion of sin.

The sacrifice of animals during the *yajña*-s seems to have been given up sometime after the advent of Shankaracharya. This could be due to the criticism from the Buddhists. Brahmins in most parts of the country became vegetarians and led a very restrained life. They can continue to be so without looking down upon those who may eat meat. Cruelty to animals is more an ethical issue now and not a religious one.

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## 22

# To Sum Up

What all I have presented in this book is from the teaching of Vedanta by renowned teachers of the mainstream traditions. Those familiar with Hindi may listen to the talks of Swami Akhandananda Saraswati in [www.maharajshri.net](http://www.maharajshri.net). Those who wish to learn through English may listen to Swami Tattvavidananda in [www.avgsatsang.org](http://www.avgsatsang.org) or Swami Paramarthananda in [www.vedantavidyarthisangha.org](http://www.vedantavidyarthisangha.org) or any other teacher learned in the scriptures.

We saw the following as the broad features of Hinduism.

- It is the most ancient surviving religion in the world, dating back at least five thousand years.
- It was not started by a single prophet. The ancient seers, whose practice was to renounce the world and spend their time in contemplation, revealed certain eternal truths.
- The sages had no agenda to start or establish a religion. Their idea was merely to know the ultimate reality.
- It did not originate from strife. It evolved in a peaceful time, in a well developed civilization, when philosopher kings ruled.
- It has been wisely stated that Hinduism is not comparable to a well trimmed tree but it is like a banyan tree which has grown over a period of time, with various branches and aerial roots.

- It is a unique religion (apart from the related Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism) which has evolved from philosophical reasoning.
- Rituals and meditations are in two tiers – one at the level of a personal god and the other at the level of Brahman.
- Unlike any other religion it speaks of the evolution of universe, the formation of living beings and of the mind and senses.
- We do not agree with the view of Biblical scholars that the universe was created in 4004 BCE. Instead, our texts talk in terms of billions of years and several cycles of creation.
- It is probably the only religion which urges a person to go beyond the religious texts and discover one's self.
- The Hindu child can be proud that within Hinduism all religions are equally valid for self-purification, and there is no blasphemy regarding how anyone may choose to visualize his own personal deity.
- It does not say that man is born a sinner. On the other hand, it says that he is not different from the divine. It says that he has forgotten his real nature due to ignorance and that he has to get rid of that ignorance.
- God can be worshipped in any form, i.e., as a *yantra* (a diagrammatic representation on a metallic sheet), a mantra (spoken words), an idol or symbol of any type. Such form is merely a medium for achieving concentration and purification of mind, and for contemplation.
- We do not worship different gods, but rather contemplate upon the same truth in different forms.

- God is not vindictive or jealous, and does not have any favored race or tribe (*Gita* 9-23, 29).
- Hinduism does not stop at a mere intellectual level of understanding of reality, but entails an internal transformation, a total negation of the ego and losing oneself in Brahman. At the philosophical level it teaches that the individual is nothing other than the Supreme Brahman.
- Religion and ritual are accepted as a lower degree of reality whereas philosophical doctrine and knowledge of the Self are the highest degree of reality.
- Dharma, although defined as timeless ethics, is not inflexible. There are certain unchanging aspects of dharma like truth, compassion, non-violence, etc. But what constitutes ethical behavior in any given context or circumstance may vary. This was explained in the context of untouchability.
- Hindu society has had different texts of dharma for different periods. The *Manu smriti* (code) was for the earliest times, the *krta-yuga*, and it was not even followed in the last several centuries. The British emphasized parts of it in order to portray a negative picture of Hinduism. The *smriti* for the *kali-yuga* is known as the '*Parasara smriti*' and this too, is subject to change. The eternal doctrines of Vedanta about *jīva*, *Iswara* and Brahman are untouched by these changes in dharma which relate to social conduct.
- We are not a proselytizing religion, because the Vedas recognize different forms of worship. Hence we never invaded any land nor forced our religion on others.
- A Hindu child can be proud to say that Hinduism can never be fundamentalist in nature. It does not claim to be

the only path to god. (To say that one's own faith or belief alone leads to god is mere ignorance or fundamentalism. It would mean that prior to the origin of those religions those billions of people who were born and died were precluded from salvation. *Imagine how peaceful the world would be if all religions acknowledged that different paths can lead to the same end*).

- Hinduism is a religion (along with the other Indian religions Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism) which is never at odds with any other religion. The formula for world peace is built into the Hindu religion and philosophy.

**Parents may also see:**

- 'All about Hinduism' by Swami Sivananda, at [www.swamisivananda.org](http://www.swamisivananda.org)
- [www.maharajshri.net](http://www.maharajshri.net) for the talks of Swami Akhandananda Saraswati Maharaj
- [www.avgsatsang.org](http://www.avgsatsang.org) for talks by Swami Dayananda Saraswati and others

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## 23

# A Word on Sanskrit

*“Two years spent in the study of Sanskrit under Charles Lanman, and a year in the mazes of Patanjali’s metaphysics under the guidance of James Woods, left me in a state of enlightened mystification” – T.S.Eliot in “After Strange Gods”*

*“The Sanskrit language, whatever may be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure; more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin and more exquisitely refined than the either” – Sir William Jones, Chief Justice of India under the British and founder of the Royal Asiatic Society.*

*“If I was asked what is the greatest treasure which India possesses and what is her greatest heritage, I would answer unhesitatingly that it is the Sanskrit language and literature and all that it contains. This is a magnificent inheritance, and so long as this endures and influences the life of our people, so long will the basic genius of India continue.” – Jawaharlal Nehru in ‘Discovery of India’.*

### 23.1. Sanskrit – Once the unifying language of India

Very rarely do we realize that Sanskrit was the link language of the entire Indian subcontinent for millennia. It was the language of all educated people just as English is today in India. The whole culture of ancient India is known only through Sanskrit.

Just as the word English does not mean Christianity, Sanskrit does not mean Hinduism. Hence, it was not only the religious texts, but all works in science, astronomy, mathematics, literature and the arts were written in Sanskrit. It was the lingua franca, abiding side by side with the mother tongue of a particular region in the country.

All of the scriptures of the Indian religions (Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism) are written in Sanskrit. This was not to keep them from the common man, but to reach out to a larger population throughout the country and to preserve them for posterity.

The Vedas, the basic texts of Hinduism were studied by all scholars from Kashmir to Kerala. The Buddhists, who disagreed with the Vedas, had initially tried to write in Pali, a regional language, in order to reach out to the masses, but this narrowed their sphere of influence. Hence they switched over to Sanskrit in order to spread their message. Thus we find Buddhism spreading all over the country in later years. Hundreds of volumes of Buddhist and Jain works are thus written in Sanskrit.

The Upanishads talk about eminent teachers like Yajnavalkya who were called *mahā-sālāḥ*, which means those who had a large infrastructure to accommodate thousands of students. Admissions to these schools were done through a *homa* called *āvahantī*, (*Taittiriya Upanishad* 1-4-2) inviting students and there used to be a graduation ceremony at the end of Vedic learning. The passage in *Taittiriya Upanishad* (1-11) is a commencement speech by a sage to the students graduating from the school.

The Interaction of scholars all over the country was naturally in Sanskrit just as it is in English now. We saw the example of Shankaracharya, the noted teacher from Kerala, who moved

throughout the country up to Kashmir, held discussions with the scholars, and propagated the Upanishadic doctrine. Many scholars from all parts of the country have commented on what Shankara has written in Sanskrit. The universities of Nalanda, Takshasila, and the traditional schools of Kashi and Kanchi had scholars from different parts of the country. The books of Kalidasa were commented upon by Mallinatha Suri, a scholar from Telangana. Jagannatha Pandita of the Godavari region was a noted scholar in the Moghul court. The works of the Buddhist writer Aswaghosha were discovered during the British rule in Afghanistan. One can enumerate several such examples.

Sanskrit continued to be the unifying language even after the Middle Ages, despite the Muslim invasions. However, social change has been more rapid ever since the Europeans arrived. This coincided with industrialization and consequent modernization. Added to this, the colonial masters had an agenda of denigrating and 'uprooting' (to use the word of Max Muller) the local cultures in the countries they ruled. Modernization has brought positive social change in several fields, but growing dissociation from Sanskrit is producing a culture lacking in self-confidence and disinherited from its roots.

### **23.2. Antiquity and uniqueness**

Vedic Sanskrit existed at least three thousand years prior to the time of Christ. The Rig Veda is acknowledged to be the oldest written document of mankind. The language is clearly distinct from the later day Sanskrit, which was called classical Sanskrit. For instance, the language of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* is known as classical Sanskrit.

The uniqueness of Sanskrit is its unchanged structure over the millennia.

If you take a text of 10<sup>th</sup> century English, you cannot make heads or tails of it. Even Chaucer's English is fairly inscrutable. It is so with almost all languages, including Indian languages. Languages do change over time, but miraculously Sanskrit has been consciously preserved in an absolutely unchanged form for at least the last three thousand years.

The great grammarian Panini who lived around 600 BCE (near a village called Shalatura, located near Lahore, in present day Pakistan), recorded certain rules of grammar in his book the '*Ashtadhyayi*', which means a book in eight chapters. He noted that prior to him, there were several other grammarians whose rules he cites. It was the greatness of Indian scholars that they meticulously followed these rules of grammar, rules regarding formation of words, which have served to preserve the language to date. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, which were written more than three thousand years ago, can be understood by the present day reader if only he learns Sanskrit.

Vedic Sanskrit is a bit different. The language is much older and the teaching was through oral tradition. Some portions of the Vedas would have been totally inscrutable but for the commentaries of sage Vidyaranya of 15<sup>th</sup> century.

### **23.3. Sanskrit and Indian languages**

Some have a wrong understanding that Sanskrit was the language of the priestly class only. This is totally incorrect. It was the language of the whole society. A story goes that King Bhoja made a proclamation all over his kingdom that whoever could not compose Sanskrit poetry had to leave the kingdom. Soldiers looked around and took a weaver to the king saying that he was the one unlettered person in the land. When he was presented before the king, the weaver came out with a poem, thus showing

his skills in Sanskrit. The king was happy. It is a mere story to illustrate how prevalent Sanskrit was. Most of the writings on matters of science, astronomy, astrology, language, medicine, architecture, statecraft, *dhanur-veda* (battle craft), veterinary sciences relating to horses and elephants and other sciences were obviously written by professionals in those fields and not by the priestly class.

Until recent years, we saw renowned scholars of Sanskrit from all sections of society. A history of Sanskrit literature would give countless examples for this. Social change has compelled people to switch over to English and other modern studies. Only those who were connected with priestly work continued to recite Sanskrit mantra-s because of their profession. This has what has given rise to the mistaken idea that Sanskrit was a language limited to Brahmins. A look at the Sanskrit catalogues would open our eyes to the wealth of knowledge in Sanskrit, most of which is unrelated to priestly class.

Almost all Indian languages, except the Dravidian languages, originated from Sanskrit. The diction of even the Dravidian languages is of Sanskrit origin to a certain extent (up to about 50%). Several stone inscriptions in Sanskrit are found in various locations throughout the country. Most of the regional religious literature is derived from the Sanskrit texts with some minor changes. If a person knows Sanskrit, he/she would have better knowledge of literature in his/her own mother tongue, be it a north Indian or Dravidian language.

Moreover, as all regional languages like Hindi, Telugu or Gujarati have undergone significant change over the centuries and the old books are now intelligible only to advanced scholars. A serious student who wants to know the Indian or Hindu or Buddhist or Jain tradition will more comfortably and directly

know through the books in Sanskrit than through the regional language works, which are translations or adaptations of the Sanskrit works. The easier and appropriate method for a modern scholar to access the primary sources of our religion and culture is to learn Sanskrit.

### **23.4. Sanskrit, around the world**

Hundreds of Western scholars have studied Sanskrit in the last four centuries alongside Latin and classical Greek, due to the similarity in structure and diction. The scholars were of two types – those who studied with an open mind and those who studied with a missionary agenda to denigrate and uproot a culture. Indological studies have caused both benefit and damage to the Indian society. Exposure to Indian texts led to what was known as the age of enlightenment (18<sup>th</sup> century). Philosophers like Schopenhauer and others were deeply influenced by the *Upanishads* and Buddhist works.

This interaction has given birth to a new discipline called linguistics, the roots of which can be seen in Panini's grammar. Modern psychology borrowed several concepts and insights from the discipline of yoga. Even today, several European and American scholars are continuing the study of Sanskrit, treating it as an international heritage. If one knows Sanskrit, one can also know any of the European languages in a much more thorough way, as they are mostly derived from Latin. Many Japanese scholars too, are proficient in Sanskrit as much of the Buddhist literature is in Sanskrit.

### **23.5. Is it easier to know our culture through Sanskrit or through a native language?**

This is not a question for those who live in India. It is a question relating to the Indian diaspora in rest of the world. Several parents outside India are realizing that it is easier to

know and preserve our culture through Sanskrit than through their own mother tongue. For their children, both Sanskrit and the mother tongue of parents are equally alien.

Social change has given an unexpected advantage to Sanskrit. We all want our children to know something of our culture, but we presume that our kids can know it through our mother tongue. But the contemporary literature, films and media in our regional languages hardly represent our culture. In fact, they are poor imitations of the Western social norms, and are thus far removed from our culture. Our culture, no doubt, was preserved in regional languages by writers a few centuries ago, but that literature is pretty old by now. Tulsidas or Surdas in Hindi or Kamban in Tamil cannot be understood by a modern child (parent too), as the languages have undergone a lot of change. The only Indian language which remains unchanged is Sanskrit.

When we visit a temple, whether in India or USA or UK or any other place, the priest would chant the prayers in Sanskrit. The Vedic mantra-s are common whether it is a south-Indian or a north-Indian one. You may be a Bengali, or a Tamil or a Gujarati, but the mantra-s are the same. A simple course in Sanskrit would directly keep us in touch with the thinking of the *Upanishads*. The parents may have to ponder on this.

#### **Parents may also see:**

- Samskrita Bharati, an organization dedicated for modern methods of teaching Sanskrit. (Google search and see Wikipedia)
- You Tube videos produced by Rashtriya Samskrit Samsthan, New Delhi.
- “*Empires of the Word – A Language History of the World*” (2005), by the British scholar Nicholas Ostler. The book is

available in pdf form online, and it is a compulsory reading to know the glorious and peaceful spread of Sanskrit throughout South East Asia.

- Sri Sripada Abhayankar is doing an extraordinary work in teaching Sanskrit.

His sites are:

संस्कृताध्ययनम् – <http://slabhyankar.wordpress.com/>

गीतान्वेषणम् – <http://study1geetaa2sanskrit.wordpress.com/>

उपनिषदध्ययनम् – <http://upanishat.wordpress.com/>

<http://slez-musings.blogspot.com/> संस्कृत-प्रसूतीः <http://sanskritaprasruti.wordpress.com/> सरलं संस्कृतम् – <http://simplesanskrit.wordpress.com/>

संस्कृत-व्याकरणस्य अध्ययनम् – <http://grammarofsanskrit.wordpress.com/>

- A few other Sanskrit/Hinduism related websites:

[arshavidya.org](http://arshavidya.org)

[atributetohinduism.com](http://atributetohinduism.com)

[chinmaya.org](http://chinmaya.org)

[hinduismtoday.com](http://hinduismtoday.com)

[himalayanacademy.com](http://himalayanacademy.com)

[a library of Sanskrit texts](http://a library of Sanskrit texts)

[online Sanskrit dictionary](http://online Sanskrit dictionary)

[online Sanskrit documents](http://online Sanskrit documents)

[sivananda.org](http://sivananda.org)

[sanskrit.org](http://sanskrit.org)

[Sanskrit on the radio](http://Sanskrit on the radio)

[chitrapurmath.net](http://chitrapurmath.net) “Learn Samskritam Step by step”

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## 24

# A Word to Parents

### 24.1. Understanding social change

It is a truism to say that social change is occurring at an accelerated pace. Religious and cultural institutions are under pressure due to this change and the advent of social media and other technologies.

We cannot stop social change, but we should learn to cope with it while preserving the basics of our religious traditions and values. Inability to cope with technological change will have impact on our culture. Western society has been talking about coping with social change for a long time. Alvin Toffler wrote a book called '*Future Shock*' some fifty years ago on this subject and what he observed is relevant still today. Western societies too, seem to grapple with the issue.

As I said in the introduction, there is a competitive environment between the two dominant religions for global domination. They have been aggressively trying to defeat each other. The struggle is seen in several forms such as terrorism or fundamentalism across the world. The European nations are worried about demographic changes which may undermine their culture. They are intent on spreading their religion in free and liberal societies like India. An easy way (though not a civilized way) to proselytize is to portray the targeted religion wrongly, misrepresent the religious texts and create divisions in society. I have touched on this in the earlier chapters.

Religion, like all other issues, is thus globalized. While other religions are fighting for domination, Hinduism is fighting for survival. We are not a proselytizing religion. There can only be an outflow from Hinduism. Hence, as Swami Chinmayananda once remarked, *the Hindus should be converted as Hindus*. What the swami means was that Hindus in general do not bother to know about their own religion. Most of us are innocent followers of rituals. We will be able to survive only when we know our roots properly and feel proud about it.

The wealth of Hindu texts is vast like an ocean; I have given just a mere glimpse of them. My effort is to enhance the perspective of the modern parent and student.

## 24.2. What we can do

- Parents must gain knowledge of the fundamentals of Hinduism. This is essential to answer our kids' questions. Books like '*All about Hinduism*' by Swami Sivananda should be read. Such books are available on the Internet.
- We must be aware that a lot of adverse literature is being produced by writers (particularly Western writers) vulgarizing Hinduism. Hence it is needed for parents to have some idea of the secondary texts too.
- Let religion be not a burden to your child. It can be fun. Visiting a temple, listening to some stories etc., can be done in a casual and natural way. The idea is to build up the right *samskāra*-s. The word *samskāra*, besides meaning a purifying ritual, also means a disposition or tendency. This is built over a period of time.
- The child need not be burdened with knowledge of names of characters in the *Ramayana* or the *Mahabharata*. Let them

learn about them slowly. You may have some introductory books like the books, such as those by Rajagopalachar for children.

- Children imitate parents. It follows that we too should have some religious regimen at home. Hindu houses normally do have a prayer corner. At least a few minutes a day can be earmarked for prayer.
- We may not be good at chanting prayers and *mantra*-s. Still we can keep the booklets which we receive from the Ramakrishna Mission, Chinmaya Mission or T.T.D., and do our best to be familiar with them.
- Every household can have (at least in prose texts) the *Ramayana*, *Bhagavatam* and *Mahabharata*. Children will look into it at some point of time if there is no conscious pressure on them.
- We can occasionally watch devotional programs on TV, so that our children, too, will view them by default. Similarly, a few devotional journals can be on our table.
- It is also good for parents to practice some yoga and *prāṇāyāma*. Over time, the children will try to follow.
- It will also help if you can teach some verses (from the *śataka* literature) to children. They may not immediately learn them fully but in the course of time these verses will help in building a strong character.
- Children will grow in self confidence when they understand the basic philosophical ideas of our religion. A modern child will understand philosophical ideas more easily than the stories.

- Too much orthodoxy on the part of parents may create negative tendencies in the child. We need not be too strict about external practices.
- Know your child. The influence of fellow students and teachers is strong. The child will trust us and share with us only when we are friendly. This friendly relationship will help us in giving proper advice.
- A broad study of world history is also helpful to understand the evolution of different religions and to recognize the glorious tradition of Hinduism.
- Knowledge of Sanskrit will enable the child to understand our egalitarian tradition.

**Parents may also see:**

- *'The Wonder that was India'* – by A.L. Basham
- *'All about Hinduism'* – by Swami Sivananda
- *'Breaking India'* – by Rajiv Malhotra and Aravindan Neelakandan. The talks of the writers can be found on YouTube.

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