The Hindu View of Community: Classical and Modern

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During the time of the British rule in India the isolation of India was broken and Hindus were brought into contact with European history, science and literature with the result that European political and social institutions, customs and manners widened their outlook and made them realize that the crude notions which had encrusted their religion during the medieval period were no longer tenable. One feels impelled to conclude that it is in these circumstances that any idea of community or solidarity of the people under the faith of Hinduism began to spring up. Prior to this period there may have been a few glimpses into this concept, but these were not always sufficiently developed and formulated into a theory of community as such.

The Arya Samaj, founded by Swami Dayananda (1824-83), became the spearhead of a dynamic type of Hinduism unifying all sections of Hindu Society and attempting to bring to light the inherent vitality of Hinduism. One cannot help feeling that it was Sri Ramakrishna (1836-86) who infused into his followers a spirit of renunciation and a zeal for the service of humanity. However, what does become clear is that even the Ramakrishna Movement contained no more than a marginal interest in the idea of community. I think it was Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) who, because of his interest in social service and relief work, could show glimpses of the idea of community within the framework of Hinduism and who gave to his followers the lasting conviction that it is through the efforts of a community of true sanyasins that the essential principles of Hinduism in terms of reshaping Hindu society could be upheld. Sri Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950) believed that all the political, social and economic problems which oppress humanity at the present time could finally be solved only by the society of individuals who experienced an integral yoga. Perhaps Sri Aurobindo in his full and free recognition of the value of the collective reshaping of society gave rise to this new idea of community among Hindu thinkers. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was not only a great religious poet but also a great prophet of humanity. In his world tours he called upon all nations to give up wars and exploitation and condemned the aggressive nationalism of the West as a crime against humanity. Mahatma

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Gandhi (1869-1948) started a programme of self-purification for the touchable Hindu through the service of the untouchables; this was particularly telling and constituted a challenge and a call for the whole nation. Gandhi's social concern was indeed remarkable; he made a landmark in the history of uprooting social injustice, especially untouchability.

The ultimate goal of the individual is liberation and it presupposes that the individual requires resignation and actionless contemplation, self-realization. On the other hand, stability and progress of society require that every individual plays his part in this world with active interest and a sense of responsibility. All too long, the way of works and the way of renunciation have been regarded as mutually exclusive and one was praised at the expense of the other. This tendency was dominant in the Vedic literature which laid down the idea of world-affirmation and world-negation. It is to the credit of modern Hindu thinkers that they have had insight into the concept of community and a view of life which no longer considers these two aspects as mutually exclusive but rather asserts that the claims of action and renunciation must be equally safeguarded. These thinkers try to synthesize two ways of life in such a manner that one does not become a hindrance to the other and that both together help to realize solidarity and progress for society and liberation for the individual.

All this foregoing explanation of the idea of community expressed by modern Hindu writers appears to give less than due weight to man's life and his social existence developed on the basis of the traditional four chief ends of man, namely *artha*, *kama*, *dharma* and *moksha*. The pattern for the individual life is called *ashramadharma* and the plan for the organization of society *varnashramadharma*. A joint family based on the community of blood, identity of interests, a spirit of sacrifice and of subordination of the young to the old, the offer of adequate protection and support to its weaker members such as widows, the aged and the infirm, and the unemployed was considered in the past to be one of the most beautiful, potent, and viable forces of the social life of Hindus. It was believed to be a school which prepares the individual for the larger community life. The first responsibility of a householder is to look upon his home as a trust handed down to him by his forefathers and which it is his duty to carry forward to posterity. Of all his duties the performance of the five great sacrifices is a matter of particular interest to us. These sacrifices are as follows: (*i*) a daily recitation of certain verses of the Vedas; (*ii*) the daily offering of water to the forefathers as a necessary link in the chain of historical and cultural continuity; (*iii*) a sacrifice offered to the gods, for example, a stick of fuel in the sacred fire symbolizing the grateful and humble recognition that whatever man has really belongs to god; (*iv*) the offering of food to all beings, representing a spirit of sacrifice which essentially serves as a check on the selfish tendencies in man and requires him to share his possessions

with his needy fellow-beings; and (*v*) the offering to men, i.e., the regular custom of hospitality practised by all Hindus.

Further, a scientific and objective approach to the role of woman in her family life discloses to us that her husband's religious life may indeed be deficient without her active participation in it. For much the same reasons, even from a philosophical point of view, there is no difference between man and woman. The deeper and more dynamic meaning of this is that woman is equally capable of attaining to the spiritual heights of a liberated individual. The most important sacrament for a woman is marriage. After marriage the conscientious performance of household duties is generally regarded as her crowning work. It is in respect to her role in the family that a woman's status becomes increasingly significant. In her role as the housewife she is responsible for the solidarity and stabilty of the family. In her role as mother, woman is regarded as divine.

A well-defined plan of life is based upon a proper observance of four fixed stages of a man, namely, brahmacharya, householder, hermit and sanyasin. This well-rounded and graded discipline is expected to bring about a physical and mental development in man which in turn guarantees the possibility of progress for the individual and society through service and sacrifice. This is perhaps the basic pattern that constitutes a stable society. This makes it clear why the organisation of the personal life of the individual is ethically based on the four stages of life and also that the whole range of the doctrinal spectrum of the caste system is a division of society into four major caste groups as these define duties. They confer no privilege. In fact, *varnashramadharma* is regarded as a healthy division of work based on birth. However, if we consider this complex of the caste system in more detail, it will be noted that it had become a deeply damaging process to some sections of society and led to untouchability. Untouchability has been described by Gandhi as "repugnant to reason and to the instinct of pity or love."[1] It was argued that this social pattern, as laid down in the Laws of Manu, written about the second century B.C., is the very essence of *dharma*. It is perhaps from this point of view that Professor R. X. Dandekar comments that "in the Bhagavad Gita there is an ethical idealization of the caste system which does not emphasize the difference and gradations among the castes, but stresses the important principle of the ethical interdependence involved in this system."[2] He adds: "The feeling that, by observing your dharma in the position to which you have been born, you are actively promoting the solidarity, stability and progress of society is in itself a reward greater than any other that can be sought after in this world."[3]

[1] *Gandhi's Ideas*, ed. C. F. Andrews (London, 1940), p. 41.

[2] R. N. Dandekar, "The Role of Man in Hinduism," in *The Basic Beliefs of Hinduism*, ed. K. W. Morgan (Calcutta, 1955), p. 145.

[3] *Ibid.*, *loc. cit.*

There are various theories that have been propounded in support of the caste system. They are as follows:

(*i*) The culturally superior Aryan invaders probably used the caste system to protect themselves from absorption by the barbarous aborigines.

(*ii*) It was an artificial creation of the Brahmin priesthood to maintain the purity of the Aryan invaders.

(*iii*) It was designed to protect the secrets of the profession or occupation of a particular group.

(*iv*) The various communal ritual rites or duties should be performed by persons who were duly qualified by heredity. This strict observance of special functions connected with ritual was partly responsible for the division of Indian communities.

(*v*) The social organization of the Aryans contributed much to the growth of castes.

(*vi*) The geographical isolation of the Indian sub-continent, the clash of cultures, the fusion of races, and a strict application of the doctrine of *karma* may have been other influences leading to the caste system.

One of the further arguments that has been put forward in support of the caste system is that the individual's own caste affords him social and economic security from his birth, as his status, social connections and occupation are already settled for him by his caste. Such defences are frequently offered. It is to the outside observer that the more serious social evils of the caste system are marked and alarming. I do not intend to discuss the question of the caste system in this paper, but must content myself with a note on it, namely that people made casteism accord with their beliefs, by force of which a stable society in India could be constituted because it still maintained a fundamental cultural unity. It is this sort of tendency in Hinduism that made people feel no obligation to resolve this basic problem of society in India.

As already remarked, it was the neo-Vedantists who made a noteworthy contribution to the restructuring of Hindu society from the standpoint of their Hindu community. There is something tremendously attractive and touching about these religio-philosophical thinkers of modern Hinduism whose works merit careful consideration in the following pages.

Tagore describes the relation of the Supreme Person to the manifold appearances by saying that the Supreme is the unity of the manifold. Just as a true poem is not a construction according to the rules of rhyme and metre, but an expression or creation, so also the world is not a construction but an expression or creation.[4] In

[4] Cf. *Creative Unity* (London, 1922), pp. 34-35.

his explanation to Einstein of his concept of the relation of God and the world, he said: "If there be any truth absolutely unrelated to humanity, then for us it is absolutely non-existing." In the same conversation, he said: "The infinite personality of man comprehends the Universe. There cannot be anything which cannot be subsumed by the personality, and this proves that the truth of the universe is human truth."[5] Further, D. S. Sarma observes: "Tagore speaks of God as king, master, friend, father, poet, bridegroom or lover, and not as any mythological deity or avatar."[6] For Tagore, "Reality is the expression of personality like a poem, like a work of art. The Supreme Being is giving himself in his world and I am making it mine, like a poem which I realize by finding myself in it . . . From this . . . I know that it has been given to the personal *me* by a personal being."

"The feeling of perfection in love, which is the feeling of the perfect oneness, opens for us the gate of the world of the infinite One, who is revealed in the unity of all personalities . . ."[7] All these statements of Tagore explain to us that Tagore cannot think of the ultimate reality apart from humanity. He insists that "the truth of the universe is human Truth." It has been well said that Professor Radhakrishnan is the most important creator of modern Hinduism: he brings out a new dimension of the Absolute not implied in classical Hindu writers' thought. He writes: "Becoming, which is the union of the two principles of being and non-being, is alone real."[8]

From these passages it can be noted that there are striking similarities between his understanding of the nature of Brahman and that of Tagore, and also that of Aurobindo Ghose which we shall see when we discuss his religious thought. Tagore's Absolute is the Supreme Person "humanized," and only thus can human beings understand him. Radhakrishnan understands Brahman as definable by certain epithets or categories such as joy. How his definition of Brahman is akin to Aurobindo's view of the ultimate reality will be shown when we explain Aurobindo's position. For Radhakrishnan, "God, the absolutely External, is to be grasped in the becoming of the existence." This means that Radhakrishnan questions the traditional concept of Brahman as it is in itself as immutable and eternally cut off from appearances.

Gandhi declares: "To me God is Truth and Love, God is ethics and morality . . . He is all things to all men . . . He is ever forgiving for he always gives us the chance to repent . . ."[9] In Gandhi's own words, "I am part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find him apart from the rest of humanity . . .If I could persuade myself that I

[5] *The Religion of Man* (London, 1931), p. 225.

[6] D. S. Sarma, *The Renaissance of Hinduism* (Benares, 1944), p. 388.

[7] *Personality* (London, 1921), pp. 69, 83-84.

[8] *The Reign of Religion in Contemporary Philosophy* (London), 1920), p. 168.

[9] *Young India*, March 5, 1925.

should find him in a Himalayan cave, I would proceed there immediately. But I know I cannot find him apart from humanity."[10] For him, "His divine essence is both Truth (Satya) and harmlessness (Ahimsa)."[11] From these statements it becomes obvious for us that there is a striking similarity between Gandhi's understanding of God and Tagore's Absolute described as the Supreme Person. Like Tagore, he contends that he cannot understand God apart from humanity. Gandhi writes: "Only remember that Truth is not one of the many qualities that we name. It is the living embodiment of God, it is the only life, and I identify Truth with the fullest life, and that is how it becomes a concrete thing. God is his whole creation, the whole existence, and service of all that exists . . . Truth . . . is service of God."[12] According to Gandhi, we must build a social structure rooted in principles of truth and freedom and equality. To him, "Religion is the service of the helpless . . ."[13] "The purpose of life is undoubtedly to know oneself . . . The instrument of this knowledge is boundless selfless service."[14] The datum of all religious formulations of Gandhi is that God is not a mere abstraction, but is revealed in the contingent stuff of human living. Moreover, Gandhi's acceptance of an essential connection between the individual and the general good, more precisely of the principle that he is his brother's keeper, forms the organic centre of his philosophy of life. This study of Gandhi's system of ideas shows that he identifies truth with the fullest life and that he cannot think of transcendent being apart from humanity.

Sri Aurobindo Ghose held fast to the idea that humanity can be spiritually unified and collectively redeemed, and that, if this ideal is actualized, the whole universe will then be transformed into "the Kingdom of God on earth," to use his oft-repeated phrase. He remarks: "Our life is affected not only by its own energies but by the energies of others and by universal Forces, and all this vast interplay cannot be determined in its results solely by the one factor of an all-governing moral law and its exclusive attention to the merits and demerits, the sins and virtues of individual human beings."[15] To him, "At present mankind is undergoing an evolutionary crisis in which is concealed a choice of its destiny."[16] The concept of the "Gnostic" being and the community is the last theme of his system.

[10] *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, eds. R. K. Prabhu and U. R. Rao (2nd ed. Madras, 1946), p. 30, quoted by H. T. Mazumdar, *Mahatma Gandhi: Peaceful Revolutionary* (New York, 1952), pp. 30-31.

[11] *Gandhi's Ideas*, p. 47.

[12] *Harijan*, May 25, 1935.

[13] *Young India*, August 14, 1924.

[14] Letter to an English friend, Muriel Lester, June 21, 1932, quoted in Mahadeva Devi, *The Diary of Mahadeva* (Ahmedabad, 1953), p. 184.

[15] *The Life Divine*, revised and enlarged ed. (Calcutta, 1939), Vol. II, p. 795.

[16] *The Life Divine*, Vol. II, p. 1159.

He writes: "The liberated soul extends its perception of unity horizontally as well as vertically. Its unity with the transcendent One is incomplete without its unity with the cosmic Many." "The spiritual man has not stood back altogether from the life of the community; for the sense of unity with all beings, the stress of a universal love and compassion, the will to spend the energies for the good of all creatures, are central to the dynamic overflowing of the spirit." "The Buddhist elevation of universal compassion, karuna and sympathy (Vasudhaiva kutumbakam, the whole earth is my family) to the highest principle affection, the Christian emphasis on love indicate this dynamic side of the spiritual being."[17]

This is an admirably ingenious attempt by Aurobindo, who has described the fundamental principle of life as living for others wherein the purpose of our life will be realized. His idea of the community is highly significant when seen from the perspective of Indian society. Like Radhakrishnan, Aurobindo maintains that becoming is the only being. The transcendent Being cannot be understood except in relation to existing human beings.

Sri Ramakrishna cried out: "Oh mother, let me remain in contact with man; do not make me a dried up ascetic."[18] He wholeheartedly supported the idea of world affirmation. Swami Vivekananda never ceased to emphasize Sri Ramakrishna's principal goals, namely "to realize the truth," and "to help the world."[19] He remarks: "If you want to find God, serve man."[20] The Upanishad declares: "May your mother be God to you; may your father be an object of worship to you; may your preceptor be an object of adoration to you." To this he adds: "May the suffering millions be the object of reverential service to you."[21] All this indicates that the Swami saw clearly that selflessness is the life and soul of all kinds of service. His biographers say: "Of the numerous triumphs one of the greatest was the conversion of his Gurubhais (his brother monks) from the individual to the national idea of the religious life, in which public spirit and service to fellowmen occupied a prominent place."[22] One cannot fail to be impressed by the fact that Vivekananda was not satisfied with the individualistic salvation of classical Hinduism. His understanding of one's religious experience is not a flight into a fantasy of individualism; to serve one's fellowmen is for him the all-

[17] *The Life Divine*, Vol. I, p. 62; Vol. II, p. 900 and fn.

[18] As cited in *Swami Vivekananda Centenary Volume*, ed. R. C. Mazumdar (Calcutta, 1963), p. 253.

[19] As quoted by M. M. Thomas, *The Acknowledged Christ of The Indian Renaissance* (London, 1969), p. 125.

[20] Romain Rolland, *Prophets of the New India*, trans. Malcolm-Thomas (London, 1930), p. 237.

[21] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. VI (Calcutta, 1956), p. 288.

[22] As quoted by D. S. Sarma, *The Renaissance of Hinduism* (Benares, 1944), p. 264.

consuming purpose of life. In fact, the idea of the individual as reaching the fulfilment of his personality in the service of the community is certainly far more movingly portrayed in Vivekananda's writings than in any contemporary Hindu writer's work.

With Swami Vivekananda, Reality cannot be understood except in relation to the relative reality of the world. He further argues that "Truth does not pay homage to any society ancient or modern, society has to pay homage to it or die."[23] He repeatedly says: "The Order of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission is to serve a double purpose—salvation of one's own self and good of the world."[24] It is thus against individualistic salvation that these neo-Vedantic thinkers revolted and consequently emphasized the idea of the liberated individual's place in the context of the community.

In all these modern Hindu writers' works we can discern an intense interest in the idea of community and also in its corollary, the concept of God as "humanized." For example, Tagore held that "without the world God would be phantom; without God, the world would be chaos."[25] It has also become axiomatic for Gandhi that God is revealed in his significance for humanity. God is not known to speculative thought. Again, traditional individualistic salvation is no longer to be the general emphasis of the religio-philosophical thinkers of renascent Hinduism like Radhakrishnan, Gandhi, Aurobindo, Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. That is, one of the insights of these men is that they, under the spell of the Christian idea of society, learned to imbue the structure of modern Hinduism with ethical ideas of human solidarity and called for modification of classical Hindu ethics. It is not an exaggeration to say that Radhakrishnan offers more structural assistance to this new trend of thinking which stresses the role of the individual in society over against the traditional individualistic concept of salvation. Radhakrishnan elsewhere writes: "The liberated individual works for the welfare of the world . . . Love to God expresses itself in love to creation . . . He (the sage) is conscious of the wider destiny of the universe."[26]

The Christian Church in India cannot afford to ignore the incentive which Radhakrishnan's writings give to the vast majority of people in India to lay stress upon religious and ethical values of society. For Tagore, "To live the life of goodness is to live the life of all."[27] A genuine concern for the welfare of the whole is a dominant feature of modern Hindu theology and this is because the intelligentsia of modern India have come to realize that those who seek to

[23] As cited in *Swami Vivekananda Centenary Volume*, p. 344.

[24] *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. VI, p. 504.

[25] As cited in V. S. Naravane, *Modern Indian Thought* (London, 1964), p. 136.

[26] *Eastern Religion and Western Thought* (Oxford, 1939), paperback ed. 1959, pp. 100-101.

[27] *Sadhana*, pp. 56-57.

save their lives in isolation will lose them. Another feature of renascent Hinduism is its emphasis on love—the way of love as being plainly a preparation for one's true selfhood.

Under the leadership of Vivekananda, the Ramakrishna Mission called for radical modification in society. His urging people to humanitarian and compassionate action is significant and praiseworthy. His own words are: "He who serves all beings serves God indeed."[28] The Sarvodaya movement whose principal concern is "the welfare of all" is vigorously carrying on its programme of land distribution to the landless in the country.

All this goes to show that the "enlightened" of renascent Hinduism have played a highly significant role in stressing this spontaneous social concern within Hinduism: they saw the final concerns in social rather than in purely personal dimensions. Thus their new ethics marks a real advance on the classical idea of one's true freedom as achieved in isolation. Indeed, these eminent thinkers see the redeemed man as part of corporate humanity.

But reflection poses further questions: Can this new dimension of life in recent Hindu theology come close to the Pauline perspective on the corporate community? To be more precise, can the Hindu faith in its renascent form have a doctrine of the Church in the sense of fellowship expressed in the corporate act of common worship which is considered to be the indispensable focus of the community's life? Can it put "a visible human community at the centre of its creed"? It is true that Radhakrishnan advanced the idea that the meaning of history is to make all men prophets to establish a kingdom of free spirits. But it might be asked whether this kingdom of free spirits can be squared with "corporate Samadhi,"[29] if there is any such thing in present day Hinduism. The late Dr P. D. Devanandan, motivated by an apologetic concern, pointed out that in Hinduism "there can ... be no such community as the Church claims itself to be, where there is an inflow and outflow of personal influence which is transforming."[30] Perhaps Dr Devanandan's comment stems from his understanding that the corporate fellowship of the community of believers united with Christ, embodied in Paul's phrase "in Christ," is not the same as the experience of the pure selfhood which is none other than the individual's integral experience on which both Radhakrishnan and Aurobindo constantly insist. The élite of modern India rightly stress the importance of community in relation to the individual and the Christian apologist fully agrees with them on this, although he would point to the fact that their idea of society stops short of the corporate fellowship.

[28] As quoted by W. Stewart, *India's Religious Frontier* (London, 1964), p. 89.

[29] I owe these expressions to Bishop J. E. L. Newbigin, *A Faith for this One World?* (London, 1961), pp. 40-41.

[30] P. D. Devanandan, *The Gospel and Renascent Hinduism* (London, 1959), p. 37.