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THE RISE OF HINDU THEISM

A Common View Examined

This book purports to trace the doctrine of Grace in Christianity and Hinduism. In the foregoing pages we have attempted to trace it in Christianity and in this section we ought to attempt to trace it in Hinduism. Yet in so doing it is desirable to take account of a warning uttered by a South Indian proverb which says "It is only if there is a wall, that you can paint a fresco." The doctrine of Grace can exist only in a certain context. The context for Grace is Theism.

Macnicol in his *Indian Theism* lists three essential characteristics which should be found in any Theism; first, belief in God as a spiritual Being; secondly, a faith that His power is sufficient at the last to secure that the good will conquer; and thirdly, a conception that the relationship between God and His worshippers is moral.[1] In regard to Christianity, it is not quite necessary to prove its theistic character. There may be many who do not approve of Christianity because of its theism; because theism in their eyes is anthropomorphism. On the other hand, most Christian theologians will protest against Christianity being called a mere theism. But no one will deny that it is theistic.

The situation in regard to Hinduism, however, is different. Many have heard of Hindu polytheism and idol worship; but no one who knows anything of the matter regards this as essential Hinduism. What is generally regarded as essential Hinduism may be seen from the following quotation from a very enlightened Western writer:

> In Hinduism the conception of substance is more explicitly developed. Since substance is wholly abstract, it is for that reason undetermined, without any differentiation within itself. There is, therefore, only substance. . . . This one substance is formless. God, therefore, is now the formless One, Brahman. Brahman is abstract

[1] N. Macnicol, *Indian Theism*, Oxford University Press, p. 7.

> unity. . . . The element of worship in Hinduism corresponds to its conception of God. God is here substance, the undetermined, abstract, contentless, emptiness, vacancy. Now, worship means essentially annulling the separation between God and man. . . . Hence in Hinduism what man has to do in order to become identical with God is to empty himself of all content, to become the very vacancy which God is.[1]

It cannot be said that a Westerner should not be expected to have much acquaintance with Hindu thought, because there have been many Western scholars who have had a very profound knowledge of it. The quotation does not express a Western view of Hinduism, but a view that also finds wide acceptance in India. It is a view based on the interpretation stamped upon it by one of the great teachers of Hinduism, Sankara (A.D. 788–820). So profound was Sankara's genius, so passionate his belief in his cause and so tireless his activities, that his interpretation has come to be largely accepted as the orthodox interpretation of Hinduism. Three hundred and sixty-nine books are ascribed to him; 117 were listed in his memorial edition in 1910. Sankara's interpretation, already well implanted in people's minds, has received a tremendous impetus in recent times through the teachings of the great Rāmakrishna Paramahamsa[2] (1836–1886) and his disciple, Vivekānanda (1862–1902). Vivekānanda, in spite of his proximity to our time, is one of the towering figures in the history of Hinduism.

Hinduism has, therefore, been equated by students of Western philosophy in turn with the philosophies of Parmenides, Plato, Spinoza, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Kant and Bradley. Much as each one of these may differ from the others, yet there is enough in each to present a resemblance at certain points to this important tradition in Hinduism. J. N. Rawson, who does not agree at all with Sankara's view, in his very sympathetic commentary (published in 1934) on the theistic *Katha Upanishad* concedes that seventy-five per cent of the people in India had been admitting Sankara's view as correct

[1] W. T. Stace, *The Philosophy of Hegel*, Macmillan & Co., London, pp. 495, 497.

[2] Paramahamsa—literally, the great one who can say "I am He" (that is, God).

"till recently".[1] One may ascribe the phrase "till recently" to wishful thinking on this commentator's part. "A large mass of opinion", says Radhakrishnan, "inclines to the view of Sankara, who in his commentaries on the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gītā has elaborated a highly subtle system of metaphysics."[2]

The interpretation associated with Sankara did not start with him; but he was its most logical, consistent and uncompromising exponent. It has so permeated Hinduism that it is not illegitimate to speak of it, as we spoke earlier of another view in a different context, as a view that exercises in the atmosphere of Hinduism a "haunting omnipresence". There have been many protests against it and many denials of it; but it has an inconvenient habit of turning up at unexpected times and places, and shows no signs of disappearing to suit Mr. Rawson's wishes.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to deny that each of the two main sects that may be said to constitute the Hindu religion has the characteristics that enable it to be called a theism. Each has a definite God, whom it regards as supreme and benevolent. To each God the term *Īsvara* is applied, to distinguish him from the abstract Brahman of philosophy; and, says Hill, in his commentary on the Bhagavad Gītā, "Hindus in modern days mean by *Īsvara* very nearly what Christians mean by God." The worship and religious practices prevailing in respect of these gods contain many of the elements of undeniable theism.

That monism and theism are at bottom antagonistic is obvious. It is equally obvious that in Hinduism both do exist. Whatever be the influence one may have on the other, or however one may forget or ignore the existence of the other, it cannot be imagined that one draws its subsistence and inspiration from the other. So that there must have been a theistic strand in the Hindu tradition all along; and there must have been another philosophic tradition in Hinduism, besides monism, whose wellsprings could keep theism alive. We may often see a Hindu cult, theistic in religion and monistic in

[1] J. N. Rawson, *The Katha Upanishad*, Oxford University Press, p. 33.
[2] S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, Allen & Unwin, London, p. 139.

philosophy. But if the atmosphere and tradition of Hinduism had been entirely monistic, no theistic cult could have flourished in it. In the three chapters of this section we shall attempt to give some idea of the atmosphere in which Hindu Theism has existed and draw attention to the doctrine of Grace, when it appears. In the present chapter we shall try to see how theism arose in Hinduism.

Vedic Times

The Āryan people[1] do not constitute the entire racial stock of India, nor even its main one; yet their coming into India largely made it what it is. They are generally supposed to have come from the tablelands of Central Asia; and are assumed to have come in successive batches between 2000 and 1500 B.C.[2] Recent archæological excavations at Mohenjodāro and Harappā have shown that a high degree of civilization existed among the people whom the Āryans found here. Yet though the people of Mohenjodāro and Harappā have left many other evidences of their culture, they have left behind no literature. So a history of religion in India is compelled to start with the religion of the Āryan people.

The first and the most important piece of literature that has come down from these early people—containing some of the earliest extant literature in any language in the world—has a collection of 1,022 hymns composed at various times from about 1500 to 1000 B.C. It is called the *Rig Veda*, the word Veda being derived from the root *Vid*, "to know". It is related to the Greek word *οἶδα* (know) and the Latin word *video* (see). The term Veda is also applied to three other collections of a somewhat later time which do not, however, command the same status as the Rig. The lyrical compositions are called *mantras* (sacred texts); and as a body are called *samhitās* (*samhita*= collection). Certain other types of literature besides lyrical compositions came later to be added to each of the Vedas, so that the term Vedas began to have a more comprehensive meaning.

[1] Though the term "Aryan" was originally intended by Max Müller to have only a linguistic significance, it has come to be applied to a racial stock.

[2] Article by B. K. Ghosh in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol I; Luzac & Co., London, p. 139.

However, for an insight into the earliest religion of the Āryan people it is to the *Samhitā* of the Rig Veda that we must turn. The common name which signifies a god in Indian language is *deva* (Greek θεός and Latin *deus*), basically meaning "a shining one". There are chants to many *devas* in the Rig Veda. The gods are mostly associated with nature powers. The most important of them were the heaven gods, *Dyaus* and *Varuna;* the sun gods, *Sūrya*, *Savitri*, *Mitra* and *Vishnu;* the god of the wind, *Vāyu*; of the thunderstorm, *Indra* and *Rudra*; of fire, *Agni*. Altogether the Rig Veda admits the existence of thirty-three gods. Worship of any particular god was dictated by the likes and dislikes, the moods and circumstances of the worshipper. This may be called polytheism; but there was another feeling constantly emerging, and undermining the practice of offering equal and indiscriminate worship to every god: the search for a unifying principle. This has by some been called quasi-monotheism. Max Müller called it "henotheism", a term which etymologically signifies worship of one god, but which he defined as "the belief in individual gods, alternately regarded as the highest". There was in the Rig Veda no attempt to dismiss as non-existent the gods other than the one worshipped for the time being. What is in evidence is the belief that the god worshipped temporarily summed up the power of the other gods and represented all that just then was of meaning to the worshipper. But since allegiance could always be transferred from one to another, the powers of all the gods merged into a common pool.

There are three hymns in particular which are regarded as throwing light on the persistently recurring tendency to believe in the possibility of the One behind the many. The Creation Hymn, the Hymn of the Golden Germ and the Purusha (Person) Hymn. The Creation Hymn starts with the lines:

> Non-being then existed not nor being,
> There was no air, nor sky beyond it;
> What was concealed? Wherein? In whose protection?
> And was there deep unfathomable water?

and ends with the stanza:

> Where from, then, this creation has arisen,
> And whether He has or has not produced it—

He who surveys it in the highest heaven,
He only knows, or even He may not know.[1]

The Hymn of the Golden Germ begins with the stanza:

Hiranyagarbha [the Golden Germ] came in the beginning,
Of every creature born the one sole Lord;
The earth he has supported and the heaven;
What God shall we adore with our oblation?

The Purusha Hymn starts with the stanza:

The Person [Purusha] had a thousand heads,
A thousand eyes, a thousand feet;
He filled the earth on every side
Yet stood ten fingers' length beyond.[2]

In these hymns scholars have claimed to discover almost every aspect of Hinduism: monotheism, pantheism, polytheism and monism. Monier Williams thinks that there is an intertwining of the first three elements.[3] Hardly anybody, however, has asserted that there is any clear monotheism. One cannot say here we are on the cross-roads, from which there might be movement along any road. Rather, we are at the market place where many roads meet. Obviously diverse elements are present in these hymns and there is a tendency to keep all of them side by side, without an attempt at choosing.

The search for a unifying principle behind the acknowledged existence of many gods led to the elevation of some gods over the others, and a tendency to concentrate on one above all others. For a considerable time the sky god, *Varuna* (Greek οὐρανός), occupies a pre-eminent place in the pantheon. He is often regarded as the supreme deity, "king of the gods", "the king both of gods and men", "the king of the universe". Apart from this, he is also invested with a certain moral grandeur, not possessed by any of the others. It is said that he seems to pass beyond his physical limitations (as a sky god) and to take his place as the moral lord of the conscience of men. Macnicol quotes Professor Bloomfield as saying that in his period of greatness Varuna stands like a Jewish prophet by

[1] Translation Macdonell, quoted in J. N. Rawson, *The Katha Upanishad.*
[2] Translation Kaegi and Peterson, quoted *ibid.*
[3] M. Monier Williams, *Brahmanism and Hinduism*, p. 17.

the side of a priest of Dagon.[1] The following quotations from some of the hymns to Varuna will throw light on the character and status ascribed to him:

> Whatever law of thine, O god, O Varuna as we are men,
> Day after day we violate,
> Give us not as a prey to death, to be destroyed by thee in wrath
> To thy fierce anger when displeased.
> To gain thy mercy, Varuna, with hymns we bind thy heart, as binds
> The charioteer his tethered horse. . . .
>
> Varuna, true to holy law, sits down among his people; he
> Most wise sits there to govern all.
> . . . . . .
> Now saw I him whom all may see, I saw his car above the earth;
> He hath accepted these my songs.
> Varuna, hear this call of mine: be gracious unto this day:
> Longing for help I cried to thee
> Thou, O wise god, art lord of all, thou art king of earth and heaven:
> Hear as thou goest thy way.[2] I: 25

There is hardly a hymn to Varuna in which there is no prayer for forgiveness, as may be confirmed from the following:

> If we have sinned against the man who loves us,
> have ever wronged a brother, friend or comrade,
> The neighbour ever with us, or a stranger,
> If we, as gamesters cheat at play, have cheated,
> done wrong, unwittingly or sinned of purpose,
> Cast all these sins away like loosened fetters,
> and Varuna, let us be thine own beloved.[2] V. 85: 7–8

It cannot be denied that here we are in the presence of something truly grand and noble. As time goes on, however, Varuna loses his place to Indra, the god of thunder. The chief function of the god of thunder was to bring rain. He went armed with thunderbolts, and accompanied by wild winds, the *maruts*.

[1] N. Macnicol, *Indian Theism*, Oxford University Press, p. 11.
[2] A. C. Clayton, *The Rig Veda and Vedic Religion*, C.L.S. London and Madras, pp. 129, 150.