

TOLERANCE, THE SHEET ANCHOR OF HINDUISM

By Dr. M.N. Buch

Of the extant, professed and practiced religions there are two mainstream origins to which these religions can be traced. The oldest origin is that of the Sanatan Dharm, popularly called Hinduism and its derivatives, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, etc. On a metaphysical plane Shintoism, Taoism and Confucianism have similarities, not necessarily in terms of divinity but certainly in terms of philosophy.

The other mainstream, also very ancient, is that of the Semitic religions, of which the oldest is Judaism, followed by Christianity and Islam. The main difference between the Semitic religions and those which belong broadly to the Sanatan Dharm is that Sanatan Dharm is inclusive, catholic and all embracing while the Semitic religions tend to be exclusive and firmly anchored to an immutable belief which is contained in the Old Testament of the Bible for the Jews, the Old and New Testaments for the Christians and the Holy Quran for the Muslims. For the followers of these religions these books are divinely revealed, contain the total and absolute truth and may not be questioned. It is true that Christianity from 15th century onwards did begin to tolerate dissent and moved towards separation of temporal and spiritual powers, thus opening the path for liberalism. Judaism and Islam preferred to follow the path of orthodoxy, which is why both in Israel and in the Islamic States the influence of the house of worship over the house of government is very strong. Even the most liberal of Islamic States is not secular, nor is the exclusivity of the religion in any way diluted. When dealing with the Islamic world, therefore, this is a fact which the rest of the world will always have to keep in mind. This is not to say that there should necessarily be conflict, that the Christian world should always be in a crusade mood or the Islamic world should also be in a state of Jihad-e-Kabeer. Nor does it mean that the present day Christian countries will revert to Victorian Evangelism, but it does mean that because the semitic religions believe that a person not of the Faith has no right to salvation, therefore, there will always be debate at some level, may be only the subconscious, between the followers of the Faith who are the chosen ones and the nonbelievers, who have no hope of salvation.

How does this compare with the Sanatan Dharm? Sanskrit is of the language of the Vedas and, therefore, of the Sanatan Dharm in totality. Sanskrit has no word for religion. In Arabic religion translates as mazhab. Dharma, on the other hand, transcends religions because it is the exact antithesis of adharma or the negation of dharma. Dharma is truth, Dharma is the right path, Dharma is one's conscience, Dharma is one's actions or karma. Therefore, the Sanatan Dharm gives complete freedom to every human being to seek his own path to salvation. This does make the religion polytheistic because the Sanatan Dharm firmly believes in the one Brahmatma and considers moksha, or complete submergence in the Brahmatma, the ultimate salvation. However, there are many paths to salvation and every human being can choose his own, be it Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism in its nirankar form or aakar form, the existence of God in many deities or one single deity, even atheism or denial of divinity, provided one's karma is right and one follows the path of dharma. It is for this reason that the Sanatan Dharm has no single scripture which contains the immutable truth. Even the Vedas themselves are a collection of the wisdom of seers, sages, thinkers, observers of nature, poets and writers. The Gita is a battlefield exhortation to duty and the Upanishads, Purans, etc. are all interpretative texts rather than complete scriptures. Because the Sanatan Dharm is inclusive it excludes no faith, no beliefs, no scriptures. Every human being has the freedom to accept what his conscience tells him to accept.

If there is such total freedom of belief or disbelief in the Sanatan Dharm, if it does not have a single scripture which is the benchmark against which all of man's actions are to be judged, if it excludes nothing, then obviously a Sanatan society has to be tolerant because it has nothing against which it can compare actions and be judgemental. To many Hindus Ram is God, but to some Ravan is God. Both are right. To many Hindus a temple to Ram is an act of faith but to all Muslims the Babri Masjid is an act of faith. An exclusive religion can exclude a temple but an inclusive religion cannot reject a mosque. An exclusive religion can pronounce on blasphemy, apostasy and heresy, but for an inclusive religion no one is heretic, apostate or blasphemous. The strength of Islam is its belief in the Quran, Allah and the Prophet. The strength of Hinduism is that there is room in it for Islam, there is respect in it for the Prophet, there is acceptance in it of Allah, but there is equal acceptance and respect for all other beliefs. This makes Hinduism indestructible. Ever since the unfortunate campaign for the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya there has crept into Hinduism, by which I mean the Sanatan Dharm, a degree of unwonted orthodoxy, rigidity and an insistence that anyone not a Hindu is hardly a human being and has no right to live in India. The entire concept of Hindutva is one aimed at forcing this country into the mould of a single religion, which religion itself is amorphous and has no definable shape. Neither Valmiki nor Tulsidas ever claimed that the Ramayan is the one and only scripture of the Hindus and that there could be no other true scripture. Suddenly Ram has become central to Hindu faith almost to the exclusion of everything else. This great and gentle king, this avatar of Vishnu who was incarnated on earth to rid the world of the weight of its own sins, has suddenly been made central to sectarian disputes which have no place in the Sanatan Dharm. This is in fact a direct attack by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad on the very divinity of Ram.

I started by saying that it is tolerance and acceptance of all which makes Hinduism indestructible. Now we have our own Maulanas who are preaching exclusivity and are hitting at the very roots of the Sanatan Dharm, tolerance and inclusiveness. Which is the Quran that they are going to obtain as a revelation, which enables them to claim that they are the only possessors of the absolute truth? Who is the Prophet through whom they will obtain this revelation? The day when Sanatan Dharm loses its tolerance the religion will be dead and thrown on to the scrap heap of history in the same manner as the religions of ancient Egypt, ancient Greece and ancient Rome. 'Finis' would be written to Hinduism, not by Jihadis, not by the Taliban or LeT, not by Christian preachers but by the very people who claim to be guardians of Hinduism, the VHP. I do not fear Osama Bin Laden as much as I do Ashok Singhal and Praveen Togdia. May Parameshwar save Hinduism from their clutches.
