Hindu Renaissance: The Power of Vedanta
Category : April/May/June 2011
Published by andre on Mar. 03, 2011

Hindu Renaissance

The Power of Vedanta

How my father's profound grasp of philosophy sustained a family of enlightened Hindus and prepared each of us to be a global citizen

by Anita Raina Thapan

A a child of two civilizations--indian and French - I am in a position to appreciate the power of the Hindu way of life when it is backed by knowledge and right understanding.

My father, a British Indian Army officer, met my mother, the daughter of a French colonial civil servant, in Saigon at the end of WWII. Theirs would be a lifelong relationship of devotion, commitment and struggle. Neither family was happy when the young couple announced their intention to marry. Political conditions in India, the Far East and France in the late 1940s also delayed matters considerably; but finally, after four long years of waiting, they were married in India in 1949.

My Mother Becomes a Hindu

My father, a Kashmiri pandit, was deeply rooted in Hinduism. He had a sound understanding of the Bhagavad Gita and also of our great epic literature. He had made it clear to my mother that since they would always live in India, the family would have to be Hindu and my mother would have to adopt the ways of the Indian family. As a first step, before the wedding, a shuddhi ceremony was performed for my Catholic mother. She was then declared a Hindu and, thereafter, married by Arya Samaj rites.

Converting to Hinduism was not difficult for my mother. The Catholicism that she

had been exposed to by the French nuns in Saigon created a great distaste in her heart. The French community in the city was small; when any particular member was absent from Sunday service at the cathedral, it was noticed. Whenever my French grandmother abstained from Sunday service because of an ailing child, my mother, being the eldest of her siblings, would have to do penance for her mother the following day. She never understood the logic of the practice, finding it cruel and unjust; and she grew up disliking the church. In contrast, Hindu philosophy, as explained to her by my father, appeared logical, wise and humane. So she set out to adapt to her new life with single-minded devotion and soon became the beloved of the Kashmiri family.

Understanding Hindu philosophy was one thing, but the lived faith in India seemed quite different. As my mother discovered, India, too, had its share of blind superstition, caste injunctions and innumerable rituals which did not always make sense. However, my father's wisdom based on the Gita was an anchor which provided stability. It was the sane voice of a reasoned and lived faith. It gave her the strength to live through many trying times.

The Gita's Influence on My Childhood

As a young child, I was sent as a boarder to a convent because missionary schools in India were, at that time, considered to be the best in terms of education and discipline. Besides, my father was posted in small cantonments where schooling was not always great. The German Catholic nuns in my school were horrified to hear that my Catholic mother had two children who had never been baptized. That, I was informed, was a great sin, and the nuns set about praying daily for the soul of my mother. So, as a child, I agonized about what was right and what was wrong until my father took me out of the convent! All my misgivings were slowly put to rest by his firm and convincing reasoning.

The philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita left its imprint on me through his attitude and advice at crucial moments of my childhood. I found that setbacks which the world considered as "failures" were not considered so by my father if I had worked and done my best. They were celebrated for the sincerity of intention and effort, which he emphasized, would, in the long run, bear fruit. At the same time, when I met with well-deserved failures, instead of being punished, my father would patiently explain that playfulness at the wrong time and lack of focus could only lead to such pathetic results. He would brush aside my tears assuring me that no successful individual had reached her goal without failure, that I must learn from such sorry experiences and ensure they never happened again. Then they would have served a worthy purpose.

I Discover Chinmaya Mission

It was only when I became a mother myself that I truly began to appreciate the vital need of passing to the young generation a thorough understanding of Hindu philosophy, symbolism and ritual. This deep aspiration led me to enroll in the university for a second Master's degree--in ancient Indian history. It was at that time, too, that Swami Chinmayananda came into my life. This happened a few years after my father's premature death.

A dear family friend, inspired by Swami Chinmayananda, started Chinmaya Bal Vihar classes in her home. (She later took sannyas and became Swamini Gurupriyanand.) Delighted at the classes, I promptly enrolled my sons, aged four and seven. For the next three years, Sunday mornings became the highlight of the week. The children excelled in devotional singing, acting out stories from the scriptures, chanting the Gita and understanding the wisdom of Hindu culture through the medium of story.

We had the opportunity to meet Swami Chinmayananda several times. We visited the ashram in Sidhbar, Himachal Pradesh, to attend camps, and the children soaked in the values and discipline of ashram life.

Education Deters Conversion

After three years, in 1991, we moved to Manila, Philippines, where I saw the vital role played by the Bal Vihar in the local Sindhi community. Since the 1970s, the Sindhi community in Southeast Asia had become increasingly concerned by the younger generation's growing susceptibility to the "Born Again" Christians. Several conversions had taken place. At the time, the religious life of the community revolved around rituals, with no understanding of their significance. There was no knowledge of Hindu philosophy, and the local temple offered no spiritual guidance.

It was in the 1980s that the Chinmaya Mission found its way to this region and started working to instill pride in Hindu religion and tradition. Teaching that the Bhagavad Gita is the Hindu equivalent to the Bible or the Koran, the Chinmaya Bal Vihar helps the youth maintain their Hindu identity while growing up in a Christian or Muslim country. Visiting swamis of the Mission reinforce this pride and identity,

and trips to pilgrimage sites and ashrams in India create bonds with their land of origin.

From my extensive interviews with the Sindhi Christian groups and missionaries in charge of them, as also from the sevikas conducting Chinmaya Mission Bal Vihar classes, it became apparent that conversion to Christianity seemed to have slowed down in the 1990s as the effects of the Chinmaya Bal Vihars began to be felt.

In today's age of scientific enquiry, Vedanta, as expounded by Swami Chinmayananda, gives young people a whole new perspective on life. It challenges the intellect, inspires devotion and selfless service and evokes great reverence and awe for the depth and scope of Hindu thought. Above all, it offers the vision of unity, which is the greatest need of the world today.

Swami Chinmayananda set in motion a great Hindu renaissance reaching Hindus across the world. His successor, Swami Tejomayananda, has knitted these different communities into one large family. Thanks to these great masters, I, like numerous others, have found my path. They have given me clarity, conviction and direction. They have touched my mother's heart, bringing her solace in the evening of her life after the loss of her husband and son. Above all, they have anchored my children in an enlightened Hinduism even as they have blossomed into global citizens, at ease in any culture and society.

Anita Raina Thapan's e-mail is phoenvix4me _@_ gmail.com