Universalism
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The Urge to Merge

Palani, Sivasiva Hindu spiritual imagination and creativity are endlessly protean, capable of the most radical changes, fearless about cobbling new interpretations. It is a strength which if not feared must be admired by all who witness its courageous and sometimes foolhardy self-transformations. So prolific is this ability to cross-pollinate, gene-splice and hybridize philosophies that the question is often raised whether there exists a singular thing we can call Hinduism. "The answer to this question," one academic said, "has always seemed obvious, but never quite clear. Of course, Hinduism exists - but then what exactly is it? This is probably the most enduring puzzle of South Asian studies."

Thus it is that a newcomer to Hinduism is confounded by a wild assortment of denominations. One is austere, while its neighbor is a hedonistic reveler in things worldly. One is based solely on the power of the Guru to illumine, while the next holds as its first principle a denial of all masters and the elevation of the seeker's autonomy. One shouts from the rooftops that "Man may become God," while nearby another is preaching that "God has become man, the avatar is here." The Westerner, accustomed to tidy definitions of the orthodox and the heterodox, is astounded to discover that all these - and much, much, more - enjoy the community's reverential acceptance. "They are trying to find God," the man in the village street thinks to himself, "and that is more important than how they are trying."

Universalism is an amazingly widespread phenomenon in the Hindu experience, so new there is no Sanskrit term for it. By universalism we mean the all-embracing spirit which spurs Hindus to find a common ground in all religions, to put crosses, crescents and Stars of David on their letterheads and to prefer irenics to polemics. This urge to merge traditions has neither equal nor parallel in any other faith.

Up until a few centuries ago, India knew precious little of what lay outside its borders. A highly sophisticated system of coping with indigenous schools of thought, which shared basic precepts, had evolved. When India encountered Islam and Christianity through invaders and colonizers, it turned its genius on the problem and found ways to get along, even to embrace foreign thought, slightly redefined - redefinitions that missionaries thought insidious, for they allowed the Hindu to both acknowledge another spiritual tradition and hold tightly to his own.

Neo-Hindu, neo-Vedantic universalism is burgeoning these days. It appeals to a growing congregation of seekers who intuit that religious contentions are wrongheaded and dangerous. It appeals also to those who have stopped believing the preacher's sermon or have had uninspiring experiences in a church or group and turn away from anything institutional. If their spiritual aspirations are not entirely dismantled, they often take refuge in universalism, enjoying its vision of the oneness of paths and its avoidance of the dissention and disagreement that religions can indulge in.

For all its merits, Hindu universalism has some serious drawbacks. For one, it is seldom truly universal. I cannot think of a single group that draws equitably from all traditions. What usually happens is that the outer trappings are sanitized, but the inner teachings remain Hindu. Classes are held on the Gita, hatha yoga and Patanjali's Yoga Sutras to guide meditative disciplines. An ayurvedic diet is followed and simple puja offered in the ashram shrine. Satsang is held each evening. Hardly universal.

Another problem is that universalism can engender a wishy-washy approach to the serious business of seeking the Divine. In trying to be all things, aspirants fail to be any completely. Traditions which demand much of their followers also give them much by way of spiritual fire, intense commitment, cultural treasures and exacting disciplines. These are essential on the spiritual path. There is something powerful about the devotee who is one-pointed, fervent, standing with all his might upon his small rock. He has a passion and coherence that the universalist wandering his wider sandy beach does not possess.

Another problem with Hindu universalism is its survivability. Can it preserve the very things which gave it life? Like a father who sees his son leave the home and renounce his family, we are pained when Hindu universalists reach the point where they "transcend" Hindu dharma. Our sorrow is twofold: first, groups tend to live

only as long as their leaders, and second followers and their children are denied the richness of culture and lifestyle that nurtured the leader in the first place. It often happens that a Hindu leader of a universalist movement will himself maintain a private Hindu lifestyle sharing it sparingly with disciples, even if they seek it out. Followers sense there is more, and long for the fullness of the master's way, for all that he had on his own sacred journey. But the fear arises, and it is a genuine apprehension, that by bringing Hindu ways into the group those who came for other reasons will be offended and may leave. Ironically, those who desire the undiluted tradition of the master are compelled to seek it elsewhere.

Another difficulty with universalism is that it is frequently reabsorbed into the surrounding religious environment. The followers of Paramahansa Yogananda are a case in point. He taught a broad universalism to many Americans who read Autobiography of a Yogi and were enthralled. Yogananda initiated them in the mystical and meditative arts, but not into Hinduism. During his life, things went well. After he passed, however, many were drawn back into the Christian community from which they had come. Even leaders, initiated swamis, eventually left Yogananda's path, reembracing Christianity. Never having been required to espouse Hinduism, monks took off their robes, replaced bhajans with hymns and allowed their spiritual center of gravity to return to their childhood samskaras.

Sri Ramakrishna is sometimes listed among the universalists, and certainly his disciples were its eloquent spokesmen. But his cosmic vision was inextricably linked to his Hinduness. Similarly, the Sai Baba movement, though it bears a cross and crescent among its institutional symbols and propounds a wide universalism, is unabashedly Hindu and those who approach it are taken by the hand and drawn nearer to Sanatana Dharma, not away from it. This seems to approach an ideal for Hindu groups, a gentle tension between the spirit which must break all the magic chains and soar sacred winds of consciousness and the body which must have its earthy place and sustenance.

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