

## TRADITION AND MODERNITY WITH RESPECT TO RELIGION IN INDIA

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If one casts about for the major factors which have effected a transformation of traditional beliefs in the twentieth century one can find the following, and this is by no means an exhaustive list:<sup>1</sup>

- (1) The scientific outlook
- (2) Secularisation
- (3) Religious pluralism
- (4) Distress stimulating a 'credibility crisis'
- (5) Democratic pressures sparking off revolt against hierarchies
- (6) Pulverization of society consequent upon industrialization with its attendant weakening of traditional allegiances.

I shall first comment on each of these in turn.

The scientific outlook, with its stress on verifiability, focuses attention on the natural world and shifts it away from the transcendent. In a pre-scientific era matters may be taken on trust in a way which comes less easily to an age used to experimental evidence. The modernist in religion, a man like Bishop Robinson for example, recasts traditional beliefs in a manner which does not give offence to the scientifically-minded. Transcendence is interpreted by him in a non-spatial way, in fact in a way much closer to what was traditionally regarded as immanence. The recasting of doctrines in a new language has been the work of the major theologians of this century, men like Tillich, Bultmann, Bonhoeffer and others. It is of course only fair to mention that the recasting of religious language did not have as its exclusive aim the bringing of theology into line with science. But it was one of the motivations no doubt, and the way in which many theological concepts were 'cashed' in terms of human experience shows a typical scientific concern with what Braithwaite calls 'empirical anchorage'.

The secularization of life is something that has been on the increase since the nineteenth century, especially in western societies. One needs at this point to draw a distinction between state and society. One can have the phenomenon — as in India — of a secular state along with a non-secular society. In a secular society matters like education and marriage are regarded as civil matters. Often a new set of rituals replaces the old. The sociologist will find in the ritualism of the party rally or the registry office material for study. But the secular *per se* excludes the sacramental and *ipso facto* has no official role for the hieratic functionaries concerned with religious rituals etc. Some may feel that the increase in state powers and responsibilities which is characteristic of almost all countries today leaves religion greater freedom in what they think to be its proper sphere — private belief and practice. As far as western countries are concerned another phenomenon is noteworthy — the entering of the church into the secular sphere, into the market-place. Evidence of this includes the documents of Vatican Council II, pop liturgies, worker-priests — to mention

only a few examples. The extensive reach of the secular world of economic-political activities has also sparked off yet another reaction — the growth of small religious commune-like groups, which are consciously reacting against certain aspects of modern urban societies, for example, their acquisitive ethos. Some of them revert to styles of behaviour familiar to the primitive church of the first century A.D. This is not an unusual phenomenon to find that the most 'modern' happens to be quite 'traditional'. In fact wherever a pendulum seems to be at work it is not surprising to find a reversal to an earlier form. We have in fact evidence of the co-existence of conflicting styles of modernity — the urban kind and the commune kind. This at least should warn us against treating modernity in any monolithic manner. Another interesting phenomenon is the current controversy in process in Catholic circles. The latest heresy is the revival of a form of the Latin mass which is the most traditional of all Catholic observances, but which has been outlawed by the present Pope.

The third factor, religious pluralism, works towards a transformation of traditional belief through bringing in an awareness of the fact that there are men of other faiths and that what others believe is to be respected. Knowledge of other faiths, or more especially *contact* with men of other faiths, engenders new insight into one's own. The fact of diffusion of ideas is a commonplace to the anthropologist. Of course there are forms of modernism which smack of eclecticism rather than anything else. Theosophy might fall into this category. A more interesting example of the outcome of inter-religious dialogue is to be found in Raja Rammohun Roy's response to Islam and to Unitarian Christianity so as to effect a new chapter in Hindu religious thinking. In more recent times the work of Swami Abhishiktananda, the French monk who entered deeply into Advaitic thought so as to make it his own, is no less remarkable an example. His thought was the subject of the Teape Lectures held in Cambridge in October 1976.

A chance of transforming tradition from within is lost, I think, and sadly so, if under a timid banner of secularism different communities remain in water-tight compartments, missing the chance of genuine dialogue. The least happy byproduct of religious pluralism is where, through economic-political reasons, communities retreat into their shells and regard others with suspicion, if not hostility. But as in the case of individual psychology, the water-tight compartment approach is invariably a token of malady. The comparative religionist can only hope that a growth of knowledge will lead to sympathetic interchange, if not to cross-fertilization. Indeed I would go so far as to say that the mark of modernity in a multi-religious traditional society, such as India's is, would be the presence of such sympathetic interchange. A clinical and aseptic humanism is a poor substitute for this.

The fourth factor I have called "Distress stimulating a 'credibility crisis' ". It is true to say, I think, that times of exceptional distress (war, famine, flood, oppression, other natural disasters of various kinds etc.) both weaken the structure of traditional belief ("How can a good God allow this?") and on the other hand turn a certain type of individual back to the security of traditional beliefs along with their institutionalized expression. One needs to tread warily here, for if it is true that sometimes distress weakens traditional belief it is no less true to say that absence of distress often has a precisely similar effect. The affluent society often seems to have no time for religion, although at the end of it all the mortician's sad duties may be dressed up with relics of traditional religious ritual. While distress of certain kinds, especially poverty, may reach

a vanishing point in sophisticated 'developed' societies, the distress of loneliness, of anomie may still remain. Modernity no doubt has its penalties. The consolations of celluloid and the juke-box are lonely consolations.

We come next to democratic pressures sparking off revolt against hierarchies. This is a matter especially relevant to communities which have an institutionalized form of religion. Traditional societies are usually credited with an ethos which although operating through a hierarchy is yet participatory. The 'modernist' today often strives to adopt the participatory element minus the hierarchy. Hence, for example, we have attempts at workers' participation in management, joint consultative committees in universities and so on. Ironically enough, secular states and societies have their own hierarchies and foci of power and the octopus-effect of the modern technocratic state can in a way be more frightening than the allegedly static framework of the so-called traditional society where at least each man knows who and what he is.

The twentieth century has seen a considerable growth of lay activities under the aegis of various religions. Connected with this is the ecumenical movement within Christendom, and the development of bodies like the World Council of Churches. This is, I believe, one of the most heartening aspects of the spirit of modernity in twentieth century religious life. There are also many associations which cross both political and religious frontiers in order to engage in philanthropic and cultural activities. If they have not as yet been able to make much of a dent on the political-cum-military leviathans which manipulate our destinies their witness is nonetheless important. At another point in the spectrum can also be reckoned the micro-level dealings of specific religious communities to put their own house in order as evidence of the impact of democratic pressures.

Finally, that pulverization in the context of urban living leads to a weakening of traditional allegiances, will be generally conceded to be one of the dominant characteristics of our times. This weakening need not be accompanied by modernization in its positive connotation (especially its connotation of conscious and deliberate seeking of social, economic and political goals). Only too often what is left is in the nature of a vacuum. It is also only fair to mention that pulverization can reinforce traditional allegiances on ethnic and regional lines (and this includes factors like religious observances). Calcutta, no less than New York, provides ample evidence of such 'emigré' groups.

If we turn from a consideration of these general factors to the Indian situation more specifically, the picture no doubt alters in some respects. To begin with, as in other aspects of the cultural scene, the Indian religious scene presents the co-existence of various stages of development (however I do not wish to commit myself to the evolutionary approach by my use of the word 'development'). The most potent factors making for a transformation of traditional ways of life are economic and political. But this does not mean that other ways of life are left behind. Consistent 'modernism' may be hard to find. It may even be hard to define what to look for. If one takes the six points with which we began and ponders over their applicability or otherwise one finds something like the following.

The scientific outlook may affect farming habits but has scarcely led to revision of Indian religious concepts. Indeed the tendency among philosophico-religious thinkers has been to continue in the exegetic tradition of the past and one looks in vain for a ferment of ideas parallel to what has been taking place in twentieth century theological circles in the west. Why this is so may well

occasion some reflection. In spite of appearances to the contrary, it is those religions which, over a period of history, developed marked credal positions that were ready to revise these from time to time. The content of 'logos' could be reviewed from generation to generation. Factors like the growth of nationalism (at work in Reformation theology) and the romantic movement (which encouraged a hermeneutic approach to the scriptures) made for a proliferation of religious ideas which paralleled other changes which were taking place in society. The cross-fertilization of traditionalism and nationalism fathered a variety of outlooks in India, ranging from Bankim and Vivekananda and terminated in the amazing synthesis of elements to be found in Gandhi's thought. But the nineteenth century association of religious movements with reform seems to have petered out after Independence. The last few decades have produced a number of cults which have had little to offer by way of new thought content or reformist zeal. Neo-Vedantic attempts seem to be tailored more for the trans-Atlantic market than for home consumption. The clientele at home are in the sixties and above age-group. The exegetic tradition continues undisturbed by the stimulus of new translations. It is left currently to American scholars to undertake the vast task of a new look at the Vedas. It has also been left to western scholars to distinguish between the concept of 'transcendence' and that of a 'transcendent entity' and to discern an element of transcendence in Buddhism. What of the absence of fresh theological thinking? It is not enough to say that religions which centre on *mārgas ipso facto* dispense with theologies, for what is under discussion is the very concept of rethinking a *mārga* or a theology, a task which was not shirked by our fathers in the nineteenth century. Vinoba Bhave ploughs a lone furrow, but an important one in his attempt to work out how science and spirituality can be related in free India.

Apart from the first factor on our list, the impact of the scientific outlook, what about the others? Secularism may be state policy, but the state is willy-nilly involved in vast expenditure on humanitarian grounds on the occasion of traditional events like the Kumbha Melā; Vedic ceremonies are performed at official inaugurations and so forth. I mention these not by way of criticism but so that the implications of secular state policies in a non-secular society can be reflected on. Religious pluralism has yet to engender the ferment of fresh thinking which could be expected of it. It is political rather than religious factors which are currently responsible for a sense that human misery can be tackled and that *duḥkham* need not be an inalienable part of our lot. Distress has not stimulated a credibility crisis to the extent that it has in the minds of many who belong to the Judaeo-Christian tradition. There are both philosophical and sociological reasons for this, but we shall not enter into those here. Of all the elements in traditionalism that die hardest the fact of hierarchical ordering whether of society, of stages of life, or what have you, seems to be the toughest. Again it is economic and political forces which seem to be the vehicle of change, but thanks to the water-tight compartmentalization of many aspects of Indian social life inconsistencies are tolerated even by the educated and the wheels of time grind slowly in this respect.

Now changes in men's religious beliefs and practices are both a result of social change and a means of bringing it about. Nor should it be assumed that changes are always for the better. Each change can be assessed on its own merits. The objective observer of the contemporary Indian religious spectrum finds a welter of phenomena of which only a few will be singled out here point-

wise for the sake of convenience.

(1) Priestly duties in certain areas are performed by people of lower castes or by tribals, and this shows the assimilative characteristic of mainstream Hinduism which is not particularly modern but which can be said to be on the increase in modern times. This has not come about through religious pressures but for socio-economic-political reasons, especially the desire of the underprivileged to find a place in the sun.

(2) New cults are attracting the middle classes, and these range from the sheer magic practised by various 'god-men' to a meditative spiritualism of a man like Ramana Maharshi or J. Krishnamurti. This, again, is nothing new in principle but perfectly compatible with a tradition which accommodates diversity. Magical practices in India by those with *alaukika* powers have always been concerned with this-worldly matters, with *abhyudaya*, prosperity in this life. Meditative spiritualism sets its sights on 'higher' matters. It attracts especially those older in years, who traditionally are supposed to leave behind 'worldly' matters at this stage in their life. Something very traditional, therefore, now appears in a modern guise and attracts a highly educated clientele.

(3) The political exploitation of caste has become conspicuous in post-Independence India. Now there has been some controversy as to how this phenomenon is to be interpreted. Some see it as a reinforcement of the caste system. On the other hand, the Rudolphs,<sup>2</sup> among others, have looked at it in another way — caste organizations enable a traditional society to participate in the modern situation. Specialists in industrial relations have noticed how traditional concepts like that of *varṇa* and caste come into play in the factory situation.<sup>3</sup> It can also be said that, if caste organizations become involved in the democratic electoral process, this eventually operates to destroy the caste structure, as the electoral process is basically egalitarian and competitive, whereas caste is essentially tied up with a non-competitive guild-style economy.<sup>4</sup>

The new role of caste in the contemporary political situation is one of severe adaptive strategies that can be noticed today. Another noteworthy example is the involvement of the joint-family in industry. This applies especially to castes and communities traditionally engaged in business, e.g. the Vaiśya communities, Gujaratis, Chettiars, Jains, Marwaris, Parsis, Khojes, Bhaibandhs, Suvarna Baniks etc. It will be noticed that different religious faiths are represented in this list.

(4) The admixture of a religious component can be identified in the content of social change in sensitive areas such as the north-east hill regions and Jharkhand where people are seeking both a political and a cultural identity. An 'indigenized' form of Christianity sometimes becomes associated with sub-nationalism. The phenomenon has political rather than industrial overtones (this vis-a-vis the Weberians).

(5) The association of revivalism with right-wing chauvinism has historical roots in nineteenth century nationalism but appears new from particular regional bases. Historically there are weighty precedents for the association of nationalism with religion. Some of the educated elite may find religious sanction for the transition from nationalism to internationalism, but they are a minority. That nationalism can act as a *substitute* for religion, or more strictly, attract an allegiance usually associated with religion, is also a familiar phenomenon. Those who pursue a secularist policy can add grist to their mill by enlisting nationalist sentiment. If such enlisting has religious overtones the

process is, of course, self-stultifying.<sup>5</sup> This is why some organizations known for their erstwhile Hindu chauvinist image are now trying to project a new image.

(6) The institutions which guard Hindu cultural traditions exhibit a complex relation between sacred and secular which goes against the 'anti-modern' tendencies. Baidyanath Saraswati's recent study<sup>6</sup> of the Nīlakaṇṭha syndrome<sup>7</sup> brings to light many important features of this centre of Hindu culture. Some of the *maṭhas* (there are about 300 *maṭhas*, *āśramas* or *akhārās* in the city) maintain gymnasia, Sanskrit *pāṭhaśālās*, and Ayurvedic and homeopathic dispensaries. Sacred ritual enlists associates of various kinds — Domas, florists, barbers, boatmen and musicians — so that the number of professions involved covers many castes. The shrines, which may be Brahmanic or non-Brahmanic, are conducted in a business-like way, and can be bought and sold. Baidyanath Saraswati concludes that the sacred is "a tool in the various spheres of man's creativity."<sup>8</sup>

(7) Leftist advocacy of 'irreligion' has not had in India the impact that it has had in some western countries (especially those like France where anti-clericalism has attracted considerable sections of the student population since the time of the French Revolution) largely owing to two factors, fragmentation of the leftist movement, and the stealing of socialist thunder by the incorporation of socialist strategies into government programmes. The anti-establishment stances of the leftists have therefore concentrated on politics and economics and they have had little to say e.g. against Hindu beliefs etc. Moreover, as they have on occasion found themselves in alliance with the government, the credibility of their anti-establishment image has been weakened. At any rate, unlike in many western countries, the Marxists in India are preoccupied less with anti-religious stances than with more pressing political concerns. Whereas in some countries, extreme leftism and nationalism have made a powerful combination, this has not been conspicuous so far in India. At least one consideration which stands in the way of this happening is the extra-territorial allegiances of some of the parties concerned. Ideologies, as substitute religions in western democratic countries, attract but a minority. It is only in countries where there has been systematic promotion of a communist ideology as a *conscious model*, that it could become a substitute religion for the majority.

These few examples are perhaps sufficient to warn us against polarizing tradition and modernity in any simple manner. What seems most needed is a selective approach towards tradition, and more dialogue between the articulate members of the various communities at a level where interchange has not been vitiated by the power-struggle which tends to snarl up human encounters. Such interchanges took place in traditional societies in the past in places like Alexandria, Jerusalem and Multan. Their importance lay not in the eclectic outlook which a few may have acquired as a result, but in an adventure of mutual understanding, something which can contain both the awareness of common territory and recognition of the distinctive and the unique. To be able to bring about such a climate of thought would be the most telling evidence of modernity of outlook not only in India, but indeed elsewhere too.

## FOOTNOTES:

1. I have not listed the currently fashionable word 'humanism' for two reasons. Firstly humanism seems to me to be to a large extent a function of one or more of the factors listed. Secondly, wherever humanised ideologies have been prevalent they have served not so much as transformers of religious beliefs as a *substitute* for them.
2. *The Modernity of Tradition*, L. I. & S. H. Rudolph, Orient Longman's, 1967.
3. Those who interviewed workers in the Bata factory in Batanagar, West Bengal came upon interesting sophistries e.g. "I am not touching the leather. The machine does that. I tend the machine." Education plus job-shortages are driving out defensive stances such as this. Incidentally there is a large proportion of Brahmin workers in this factory.
4. This point was stressed in the writings of Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose.
5. An actual example of a similar self-stultifying process was found in Congress encouragement of the Khilafat movement in the years following the end of the first Great War in the hope of bringing Muslims into the nationalist movement. The encouragement of extra-nationalist allegiances could not be expected to foster nationalism.
6. *Kashi: Myth and reality of a classical cultural tradition*. Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Simla, 1975.
7. Nīlakaṇṭha is the Supreme deity of the city of Benares.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 46.