

RELIGION AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

RELIGION is native to the human mind. In some form or other it has exercised profound influence on the course of human history. Its forms are many but its direction and progress have been steady. We may agree to trace it with the socio-anthropologist to a primitive state of mythical and mysterious religion of the tribe from which stemmed out all kinds of cultural activities. Supernatural religion yielded place to the natural religion of reason. Tribal religious and mythical culture was replaced by religion of the human mind or reason. Philosophic religion sought to discover order and cause in the world and gradually philosophy became man's increasing concern. Today the scientific spirit of enquiry is replacing philosophy by science, and the findings of science are accepted by philosophy as its premises and presuppositions. The tribal religion gave place to customary religion, and this in turn to philosophic religion and personal experience. The evolution of religion embraces in a sense all life though we may distinguish between the several stages of our institutions also. The tribal institutions in respect of family, race, state-organization or social authority have passed through stages till finally they are being incorporated in the present social context. But this social context is an

ever changing thing. The world's civilizations and cultures, being varied according to geographical and economic conditions, have never been for long permitted to grow up in isolation. Isolation is the most unreal thing in the universe. Ignorance of the existence of others has helped the isolationist policies but science has been the greatest breaker of ignorance and the walls of isolationist institutions have been removed. Thus institutions from the biggest to the smallest have been unable to remain static or maintain their status quo, and all that now remains is to adapt one's institutions to the pressing needs. This adaptation has however been so very constant and continuous that it has been somewhat of a myth to speak of an unchanging tradition. The intentions of the original institutions, conscious or unconscious, have played a guiding role, preserving the thread of continuity amidst all the changes, some of them very drastic and revolutionary and some of them rather trivial but necessary.

Andhra is a part of India and has been almost uninterruptedly so. Indian Cultural tradition is also its culture and heritage. There have been certain earlier primitive cultural groups (as in the agency Area) and somewhat spread at several centres which have been under going a certain amount of absorption and integration whilst a portion of them has almost led a kind of suicidal isolation due to its unwillingness or

incapacity for adaptation, Hindu religious and philosophic spirit by and large had made their integration possible, and gradually their cultural practices have been admitted to be performed by them, even after absorption. This is one of the reasons why Hindu religion, being tolerant and catholic has been able to give freedom of religious practice and even discovered deeper significance, even whilst insisting on the religious spirit in all practices. The acceptance of sacrifice even whilst spiritualizing its purpose and manner has finally made sacrifice a mystic symbolic set rather than an act of killing and cruelty. This shows how Hindu religion developed three aspects, namely the physical and material aspect (bhautika), the psychological aspect (adhyatmika) and the spiritual (divine or daiva) aspect. All progress is had by the intersection of the three. Physical changes could be made safely only when the psychological and spiritual truths are steadily pursued. Traditional Religion in India, being spiritual and psychological, has been able to make the physical adaptations to all and every type of condition safely and without imperiling itself. Even psychological religions (of the heart) have not been able to share the spiritual basis of the ancient Traditional Religious thought which enfolds all life.

What has been the historical tradition in Andhra in respect of religion? The earliest references to Andhra go

back to the period of the Mahabharata. There is no doubt that Andhra came under the Aryan influence, for the Ramayana does speak of this daksinapatha and the regions of Godavari. But it is not clear whether the Eastern coastal route was well known as contrasted with the Western route down the Vindhya.

Our knowledge of the period after Buddha is more clear, Andhra was indeed a very important centre of Buddhist religious life. The Asokan Empire extended upto Nellore in the South. The religious monasteries were strewn all over Andhra. The most important seats have been Amaravati and Nagarjunakonda. There have been about 27 Buddhist tirthas in Andhra desa right from Chicakole in the North town to Ongole, and the rock edicts of Asoka have been found in Gooty. The most important however among them had been situated on the banks of Krishna and a few on the Godavari. The story of this period has been of course well dealt with by scholars of Indian History. The decadence of this Buddhist period of roughly 1000 years of which the later 400 years have been the period of schools of Buddhism in Andhra, is clearly referable to the failure of pure moral religious thought to sustain itself even by means of the philosophical idealistic and sceptical arguments of Yogacara and Madhyamika variety. Scepticism is a good servant but a bad master.

No one really can be satisfied with intellectual nihilism, for it does not satisfy the heart.

Even nightmarish reality is better than philosophic nihilism. Even the disciples of Buddhism (not Buddha) degenerated into intellectual gymnasts on the one side and on the other libertarians in morals. As Buddha long ago warned the admission of women into Buddhism as bhikkunis (swaminis) led to predicted and strange results when Mahayana Buddhism began to make headway. Tantricism or the practice of symbolic rites, the creation of a pantheon of Buddhas, and the acceptance of saktis (consorts) of these Buddhas and their hierarchy, brought in their train some of the most reprehensible practices. With the passing of the Pure Hinayana (or the Ethical Buddhism of the Buddha) passed away the cult of the Buddha from Andhra. Though gradual, its passing out of Andhra and ultimately from India has been dictated by the inner spirituality of Hinduism. Buddhism, it has been recently shown, was a brave and bold attempt to purify Hinduism, and though it succeeded in this very well, it developed its own weaknesses quite alien to it in a sense, and had to be forced out. Hinduism asserted itself in Andhra (as in every other part of India), through a return to the traditional form enunciated by the Veda and the Upanishads, without the glaring defects of sacrificial mysticism against which alone Buddhism protested. Further the extreme nihilism of Buddhism was replaced

by a fundamental faith in the living 'realisable' God; the Absolute Spirit or Brahman. The first development was the growth of the Bhagavata Religion, a revival of the Vasudeva Cult and the greater and greater study of the epics and the puranas. The age of the Puranas has been decidedly the age of the decline of Buddhism. In the South we find that this period is the period of the rise of the Tamilian Mystics and they belonged to the two major sects of Vaisnava and Saiva. United in their opposition to vedic religions, though differing from each other, they spread the spirit of Bhakti of God-love to all, without difference of Varna or ashrama, and taught that it is through Bhakti and Prapatti alone that salvation could be got, samsara could be crossed and bliss ever lasting gained. The Buddhists and the Jainas not having anything to offer except extinction and askesis, tried to get their new gods accepted, but they had neither reason nor tradition to buttress them up, and they ignominiously failed to attract and retain whatever loyalties the original religions demanded and got. Historically buddhists did encourage and improve the language of Telugu. "The period of Satavahana rule in the Deccan (about 225 B.C.-125 B.C.) witnessed the growth of commercial and colonial intercourse and the development of Buddhism and Buddhist Art. Nowhere can be seen today such a large number of ancient buddhist foundations as in Andhra. They are the relics of a culture which has gone

to make up Andhra civilization. All the earlier culture of the Deccan came to a definite shape under Buddhist stimulus out of which emerged the new Brahmanical culture of The Post-Satavahana Period. The third century A.D. was thus the culmination of one epoch and the beginning of another in political and cultural history"¹. The Pallavas (225-340 A.D.) were a telugu power. They gave a great impetus to Brahmanism. They ruled from Kanchi and their territory extended to Krishna. The revival of Brahmanism included the performance of sacrifices as detailed in the Brahmanas. The worship of Narayana was established in temples. The names of the Kings such as Sivaskanda, Visnugopa, Kumaravishnu, show the trend towards Brahmanism and it is perhaps a period when Buddhism was not yet completely out of the picture, as there is a name of Buddhavarman as one of the most brilliant kings of this period among the Pallavas. He was the son of Kumaravisnu. The Ikshvakus and Salankayanas (275-450 A.D.) also ruled during this period and there is no doubt that as the names suggests they were anxious to trace their lineage to the Vedic rishis like Vasista and Salankayana. As Dr. Subramaniam puts it "Within the small ambit of territory delimited by the kings of Kalinga north of the Godavari, by the Pallavas south of the Krishna and the Kadamba - Vakatakas war zone on the west, the Salankayanas ruled with the proud and great title of Maharaja, accelerating

the revival of Brahmanism and the resuscitation of Sanskrit language and literature." (p,93). The author further proceeds to show that 'the threads of their policy were taken up by the Visnukundins' and the 'Andhradesa is thus slowly lost to Buddhism with which her culture is saturated', and the Kadambas, the Gangas and the Pallavas of the South come within the sphere of the Gupta religious and cultural sway. The cult of the sacrifices was revived. Purvamimamsa was practiced to a fault. The Hindu temples begin to assume more and more importance and rulers gave grants to them. Patronizing of Hindu temples and practices was the order of the day. The way was prepared for the onrush of Kumarila Bhatta and Sankaracharya and the Bhakti schools which finally tolled the death-knell of Buddhism and Jainism which had by this time degenerated having lost all vitality, ethical and spiritual, in Andhra desa.

¹ Buddhist remains in Andhra (p.8); Dr. K.R.Subramaniam.

Thus a thousand years passed under the revived bhakti and jnana and Karma yogas of Hindu thought. It was the period of our wonderful literary activity. Cultural revival and spiritual exaltation went together with the founding of the Hindu dynasties. But it must be confessed as Andhra was sandwiched between the North and the South, it became the meeting place of cultures. The

Mahabharata was translated; so also the Puranas and the Ramayana. All literary creative powers and sculptural and artistic talent were utilised for the purpose of spiritual regeneration. Indeed it is even conceded that it is Andhra that influenced wonderfully the South East Asian cultural development and the Hinduisation of them is due to Andhra cultural enterprise. Enthusiasm and emotional sincerity are verily the characteristics of Andhra ethos. Bhakti therefore became a passionate concern. Godliness and Saintliness were the goals of cultural life. Temples sprang up all over the country, replacing the mounds and caves of the Buddhist monks. Buddhism had been the religion of recluses and monks, and though a religion of humanistic compassion it did not show a way of participation of all in the divine adventure. Hindu revival centring round the temple and the sacrifice, art and culture because the participation of all in the divine work, karmayoga, even of those who may have hardly any qualification in one direction finding a means to express their love and dedication became a recognized fact. It is this that prompted granting place for the laymen of the society that made for the powerful universal liberation of cultural activity. Instincts of man became holy not by disuse but by dedication to the higher end. The caste system too was revived but it did not seem to be so oppressive as the renunciation of all work and dedication, and did not

make for meaninglessness of oneself to oneself and to all. It is necessary to understand that any revival is impossible unless the common men are willing to accept it. People gave up the buddhist and jaina ways of life and elected to go back to a more concrete and realistic approach to the religious life. The Rulers only followed the wishes of the people. It is impossible on any other hypothesis to explain the complete disappearance of such an ethically noble humanistic religion. People were tired of nihilism and pessimism, and the spiritual genius of India returned to another method of integration of her spiritual adventure. This is the explanation of the rebirth of Hinduism. But it was the same as a decentralisation of religious culture through temples in every village and a community growing round it in a dedicated spirit of spiritual liberation, cooperative, organic, cultural and able all with the sense of community in God.

Saiva and Vaisnava sects arose. Later on the modified forms of Veera Saiva and Aradhya cults as well as Sri Vaisnava and Vaisnava cults of Sri Ramanuja, Madhva, Vallabha and Nimbarka and even Chaitanya in succession inspired the people of Andhra. Centred round wonderful temples, but linked up with one another by the hymnists, the age of revelation returned for a while to the South vying with the ancient Vedic mantra period. India was fused together by religious and cultural sentiment by these sons of God. The Moslem invasions and

occupation of Andhra brought in a new challenge from about the middle of 13th century. Hindu institutions and the temples (the soul of the village and the community) were again under strain. They suffered seriously during the earlier period of Islamic fanaticism. Islam could not uproot wholly religious tradition. It could only displace the some of the customs of the converted. Islam promised the actuality of equality which was but the promise of the equality in realization of Hinduism. The Islamic tradition brought into contact with the Vaisnava and Veera saiva mysticism presented no large differences except in the type of worship and the name of the Godhead worshipped. Iconic worship is the major difference between Islam and Brahmanism as revived by Vaisnava and Saiva and the Tantric agama and the Saiva agama. The social differences were sought to be annulled by these evangelical schools. Andhra had the full experience of these religious and mystic forces. The great temples did produce some very great saints, Ramdas, of Bhadrachalam, Annamacharya of Tirumalai Tirupati, Potana of Vontimitta, not to speak of Vallabha and Nimbarka and the great acharyas of Sri Vaisnavism who had propagated and preserved the ancient traditions of spiritual bhakti movements.

The change during the early part of the Nineteenth century regarding the ideal and type of education to be given to Indians, the great decision of some of the

leading thinker in Bengal like Raja Ram Mohan Roy to adapt western modes of life and to adapt our religious tradition to the western standards, as also to prevent certain absurd practices like sati, and others and bring about social reform by abolishing all that was distinguishable from western ways of life, provide the beginning of the modern period. The Religion of Brahmoism, which was sponsored by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, was in fact a Christian version of Upanishadic teaching, the content was surely the Hindu theistic Upanishadic thought, but the form was adaptation of the Christian way. But it was a very attractive attitude and the advanced minds of that period joined it. Andhra was also influenced by this Religious Social Movement and some of the most important personalities produced by this were the Raja of Pithapuram, Sir R.Venkataratnam, J.Venkatanarayana and others. English Educational institutions were also founded and Brahmo Samajams were started everywhere. A later development more suited to the genius of Andhra was the bhakti movement initiated by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. The social reform movements were also enthusiastically taken up by the Andhras. The Theosophical movement was another of the religious influences which helped to modify the attitudes. The energetic cooperation of Andhras in the Gandhian Programme and political struggle is incomparably one of the bright chapters. All

these various movements brought out the fact that the original form of the traditional religion must undergo change. It is true that the spiritual and sentimental attachment to ancient culture was stronger than ever. The innumerable ashrams, almost with a minimum of one ashram for a district, the large number of Divine Life Societies and Theosophical Lodges and Samajas, show that there has happened a spontaneous urge for spiritual life on the part of the people. The questions that are of the greatest importance today is: is religious spirit more widely prevalent or less widely prevalent today? Are we attached more to the form or to the spirit? What exactly is the content of one Spirituality, is it Vedic, Upanishadic, Buddhist, or Bhakti; or is it even considered that the social frames of the earlier religious life are no longer needed? Such as for instance the family organisation, institution of marriage or caste. Are these the essentials of religion or not?

So long the impacts have been purely religious or social; whilst we admitted the social changes more or less we did not change the religious traditional attitude. That was our substance of culture, a matter of spirit and the psyche rather than the physical. But when the challenge is not from the spiritual or religious or social patterns, but from the changes in the environment initiated by industrialization and urbanization and the break up of the family unit by employment distribution it has now

become a problem of real seriousness. The world has shrunk in space and time and commercial life has involved us completely in the prosperity and poverty of other countries and nations. Our study of ourselves in every sphere is under the general check-up of comparison with the rest of the world. Isolated in a way we hardly compared ourselves with others, but now it seems almost impossible to miss comparing ourselves with others. This has led to appraisals and valuations. The industrial developments though few at present are going to be speeded up. The duty of the modern citizen of Andhra is to find out what would be the consequences of these changes in the ways and modes of life on the family, marriage, employment, arts and crafts, initiative in religion and realisation of freedom, and so on, including such important problems of genetics as heredity and culture, and other values.

The present state of religious belief in Andhra is clearly to be gleaned from the social feeling and sentiment for religion in the countryside, and the spiritual feeling for culture in the urban population. This includes a consideration of the reactions of the different sections of the people, to the concepts of Religion and industrial development and ancient modes of religious life. The reactions are diverse. There is no doubt that herculean efforts are being made to canalise the materialistic attitude which has gripped the industrially minded and

lower groups into fruitful religious ideals which are socialised so to speak. The religion of the sanctuary and solitude and isolation is sought to be replaced by the religion of service and dedication and community. This has attracted a large body of people. The temples have been taken over by the Government for the proper administration of its Conduct, and it is remarkable that the number of pilgrims to these temples which have been indeed a great experiment in decentralized religion, is increasingly great. Both the illiterate and the literate, the well-educated England-returned and trained professors and politicians and all, have felt the Influence of spirituality through temples. The rise in Income of the temples such as that of Tirupati during the past ten years shows the phenomenal influence of temples. This is in sheer contrast with the claim that science has a tendency to minimise the influence of the temples. It is certainly clear that religion and science are not opposites except when science is unwilling to recognize that certain phenomena are beyond it and are not its province, and when religion also concedes that scientific discoveries and technological developments and industrial expansion are capable of being yoked to human welfare and performed in the spirit of dedication to God's glory. A new yoga is the need. To industrialize production in such a way as not to lead to robotisation of man, or to make man just a cog in the machine though a well-looked after

cog, but to make him realize the spiritual nature of all activity is the goal of the new Karma yoga. Thus religion and industry could cooperate in the endeavour to realise more fully the spiritual meaning of all life. The new bhakti yoga is to worship God as the One Supreme Being taught in all religions and to recognize that God is in the temples no less than in the hearts of seekers and in all beings high or low, has gained currency. Education which was devised for producing servants for Colonial powers is now being adapted to cultural conditions and the restoration of cultural values in all directions to suit our traditional spirituality is occupying the primal place. The distortion of ideas about our own culture requires to be rectified, for the application of western standards in every case to weigh and test Indian cultural tradition has been found to be the one way to go wrong.

The standards of the west which the earlier reformers adopted have been just the 19th century ones, and our knowledge of our own traditions had neither been full or informed. Thanks to the improvement of our knowledge it is possible to arrive at a proper appraisal of spiritual tradition and its institutions and shape our future not merely in a spirit of nationalism but in the context of the World Unity. The varied advice and attraction of material prosperity, the glamour of scientific progress, operate in one direction, towards the adoption of the western concept of progress. In the meanwhile the west

is suffering at least in the conscience of its leading lights nostalgia for spiritual values. An integration between secular prosperity through whatever means – India has chosen the socialistic, panchasila, path towards material prosperity and spiritual advancement - and ultimate trans-social values is the way out promised by its tradition. The call to world welfare (lokaḥ samastah sukhino bhavantu) at once an ideal and a prayer to the highest Spiritual Power governing the worlds is not a vain call. Through all the clash of tongues and colours, this call and prayer has been uttered not in vain. The message of Asoka and Akbar, Ramanuja and Sankara, is securely held in the conscience of the people of Andhra. The reformist mind has turned its work to creative Endeavour. Tinkering with social forms without an organic conception of the iha and para, this world and that beyond, man and his Godhead - spiritual Soul, has at least been found out to be inappropriate. Scientific developments have entailed certain forms of social development in the West; it is necessary to see that we do not merely accept them as such and in the form that they come, for they have been found to be inappropriate even in those countries. To break away from tradition is neither easy nor desirable; we have always to reckon with fundamental psychological phenomena of atavism and regression and pathological difficulties. Trees uprooted die, but men uprooted from tradition suffer.

Tradition is not static but a dynamic soul of the people. India has recovered again and again her soul through her tradition, even as our survey of Andhra Religious history shows. It is true of other states as well. A more conscientious approach to the great tradition, an enlightened adaptation of that which is valuable in it to suit our scientific age and a definite faith that history has lessons to offer in its philosophy are necessary. Slogans are of no use except for hasty consumption.

We are members of the new world in birth. We are successors of a great and vital tradition, which has served us faithfully through history. We indeed are charged with the new adventure and a new creative possibility of spirituality, which is our claim and our heritage for being what we are - the advance guard of the human race.