

Man in Society according to Neo-Hinduism in the Light of the Christian Faith

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MAN IN SOCIETY

The concept of man in society is a modern concept. Of recent times we have come to accept not only the worth of the individual person of man as a separate entity, but also the collective significance of men and women in the network of human relations which we call society. Increasingly, we realize that only in as far as an individual is wholesomely related to others, constituting together a community, does that individual find full scope for self-expression and self-fulfilment.

This understanding of man implies that he is so made that, in order to grow into anything like perfection, his innate capacity to influence others and be influenced by others should be given sufficient scope. Personal relations which underlie the concept of man in society presuppose the view that there is the possibility of the meaningful confrontation of man and man in purposefully seeking a common good. Secondly, in modern times, we place great store by human personality. It is the worth and dignity of the human person that should be safeguarded, we claim. Moreover, we require that there should be freedom for the human person to establish and develop responsible relations with other human persons. Thus society is expected to provide the context of such a network of relations through adequate social institutions, such as the family and the State, to cite but two examples, in which responsible human relations can be fostered, and personality growth and fulfilment made possible.

'Personality' and 'community' seem to be the two emphases in the modern conception of human society. But these are closely bound up with religion, for essentially religion is concerned with the fulfilment of the human person, not in isolation of self but in community of being. The religious view of man therefore, in all cultures, has correspondingly changed in recent times in recognition of the new demand that contemporary life makes upon religion. All religions now have to reckon with man

in society, in all the complexities of the social, economic and political bonds which tie people together in a new sense of solidarity. Hinduism has been no exception. In a way the impact of this change has been perhaps more forceful in India than elsewhere. Also, the living nature of Hinduism as the dynamic faith of a people is in part responsible for its readiness to respond to the changing factors of contemporary life. Moreover, Hindu religion is very closely tied up with Hindu culture, so that any cultural change has corresponding consequences on religious thought and practice.

Fundamentally the new understanding of man in society involves a cultural shift of direction. In primitive culture everywhere it was the tribe that was determinative. The individual as such counted for very little. Any worth he possessed was derived from the fact that he belonged to a group. The myth of the blood-tie gave the tribe a sense of group solidarity. There was no confrontation of individual and individual but of group and group, for the individual was but part of a tribe. All decisions were group decisions, the individual conformed implicitly to the dictates of the collective decisions of the tribe as such. No greater disaster could overtake an individual than to be disowned by the tribe to which he belonged, and such social ostracism was the costly price of nonconformity. In primitive culture then the individual was made for society. As an individual person, man had no independent value. Rural culture in many respects still retains the characteristics of this primitive tribal culture.

With the development of commerce and industry, the adoption of a monetary economy, and the acceptance of the machine, the beginnings of an urban culture become manifest. It is now urged that the good of the individual is not always the good of the group. All rationalism tends towards individualism. Freedom is now demanded for individual initiative and enterprise. But it was increasingly concerned with self-aggrandizement and advance, whether in isolation or in close association with other individuals. Now man is no longer identified with the group but isolated from the group. It is man against society. In a sense this is characteristic of individual, of industrial culture as against agrarian culture, or urban economy as against rural economy. And religion in this age seems to have reflected that temper too. Sectarian Hinduism, for instance, is a phenomenon characteristic of that period of individualism in Indian history, as Protestant Christianity is representative of Western individualism. In either case, there is a corresponding emphasis in the religious evaluation of man and society, where primacy is given man and society is secondary in that it is regarded as contributing to the welfare of the individual which came first.

Several factors have contributed to the cultural change which followed the age of individualism. Some of these were referred to in the earlier section of this paper. In any case the change was necessitated by the new understanding of person and community. In part it was due to a reaction against the depersonalization

which followed in the wake of industrialism. In part also it was the result of fuller acquaintance with the psychology of the human person ; a closer understanding of the meaning of human relations involved in government which tended to place more and more emphasis on democratic control ; and in the greater recognition being accorded to the worthfulness of the human being, whether man or woman, and to the rights that inhere in the very fact of human existence. Thus emerges what may be called a societarian view of man, which in turn of modern times has considerably influenced religious thought and practice the world over.

In all cultures man has been regarded not only as a separate individual but as an individual who is involved in a group. In fact, the earlier view of man would seem to be of man only in relation to the group of which he formed part. Individual was derived from the social worth of the group to which he belonged. In Hindu culture this view of man persists. The caste system, which until recent times was the accepted pattern of group life in Hindu culture, was a powerful factor in deciding the status, occupation and worth of any man. Even today the tendency persists to regard any man in terms of the caste group with which he is identified.

The bonds of group life, with which go certain accepted rights and duties comprised in what may be called *kula dharmā*, are of course different from the rights and obligations which are connected with the modern understanding of belonging in society (*lokasamgraha*). The difference is due to our conception of society as it is now being subject to radical change. The change is both inevitable and enforced ; it is brought on by the rapid advance in industrialism, technology and the art of governments ; and to a large extent this change has come to us from the outside world.

MOVEMENTS IN HINDUISM

The beginnings of this new impact in traditional Hinduism are manifest as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century. From then on there has been a steady modification of the concepts of man and of society in Hindu thought and practice. Perhaps the greatest force in making for this change was nationalism. In the earlier phase the primary concern was to achieve political independence by throwing off foreign rule. In its later phase the chief preoccupation is nation-building, the creation of a stable social structure, a pattern of society which will promote a sense of national community, economic security and social justice. This later phase of nationalism is a living force in our day.

One of the characteristic features of Indian nationalism is that it has been closely bound up with religion. Nationalism in India from its early beginnings turned to religion for its inspiration and drive. This has been very obvious in the teachings of all national leaders, beginning with Ram Mohan Roy on to Vinoba Bhave. To state it briefly, they laid emphasis on (i) worthfulness

of the human individual ; (ii) the equality of the sexes ; (iii) freedom from social restrictions which prevented the development of individual personality ; (iv) development of a sense of social solidarity which transcended the distinction of class, caste and creed ; and (v) realization of social justice in the concrete situations of everyday concern.

In the earlier stages, all these efforts were limited to the activity of small groups of interested reformers. These were largely drawn from the Hindu intellectuals, and the concern was concentrated on the removal of caste disabilities and the restoration of rights to the woman in society. The spread of education which was increasingly influenced by Western liberalism was another important factor. The very ideal of nationalism which claimed freedom as a birthright was due in great part to the new education.

From the beginning of the twentieth century there is a noticeable trend towards accepting Western values in regard to the understanding of man and of society. The humanism of Tagore, the revolutionary political activity of the Terrorists, led earlier by Aurobindo and later by Subhas Bose, the fierce religious nationalism tending towards Hindu communalistic movements headed by Tilak, Savarkar, and Golwalkar, and the mass movement of satyagraha which was the final phase of nationalism inspired by Mahatma Gandhi—all these were undoubtedly influenced by Western concepts in regard to man and society.

But at the same time increasing emphasis was also placed upon the tendency to relate these new ideas to the traditional concepts of Hindu religious orthodoxy. To some extent this was due to the desire to show that in accepting these Western concepts they were *not* accepting Christian doctrines. A determined effort was made to indicate that not only were these ideas related to traditionally accepted doctrines but the claim is now set forth that they are in fact derived from and based upon scriptural sanctions. At first the reformers turned to the Upanishads. This was true in the case of the Brahma Samaj. But for lack of sufficient emphasis in Upanishadic literature for a theistic justification for the new teaching about man in society, a later generation of reformers under the leadership of the Arya Samaj turned instead to the Vedas, the Rigveda in particular. More recently, however, needed scriptural support has been found rather in the Bhagavad Gita. This is not surprising because in a special sense Gita teachings lend themselves to the social needs of the modern Hindu man. The Sankhyan analysis of human nature is easily adapted to the contemporary need for explanation of economic and social disparity. Similarly, the Gita doctrine of *nishkama karma* seemingly gives support and provides the motive for social service. Likewise, the Gita emphasis on *svadharma* and *lokasamgraha*, both re-interpreted so as to provide a dynamic and religious faith to the modern Hindu understanding of personality and community. Also, the Gita teachings about *varna dharma* and *karma samsara* are frequently cited to explain the modern view in regard to caste and the persistent belief in transmigration.

Another trend is towards re-emphasizing the Vedantic doctrine of unity in diversity, with particular reference to the modern understanding of man in society. It is contended that while individual differences ought to be granted as both valid and necessary for personality development, it is at the same time argued that, despite the empirical fact of diversity, there is underlying it all a unity of being which is ultimate and transcendental. In neo-Hindu interpretation of man in society there has been a steady movement from the nineteenth century on towards a revival and a restatement of the Vedanta as providing for this new concept a sufficient metaphysical basis. The first step towards this end was taken by Ramakrishna Paramahansa. It was later developed by Swami Vivekananda and members of the Ramakrishna Order. Today it is being expounded with considerable vigour and acceptance by Dr. Radhakrishnan. Radhakrishnan has no difficulty in accepting the wealth of meaning content that modern Western thinkers put into such terms as personality and the community, but at the same time would claim that he sees no difficulties in reconciling them with the basic affirmations of Vedanta. What is more, he would go further and maintain that these modern concepts are in fact derived from the Vedanta view of life.

The aftermath of freedom and independence in India brought into relief problems created by the persistence in some form or other of the traditional understanding of man in relation to society as crystallized in caste system, and in the joint family as a social institution, with its characteristic conception of the marriage relation, the status of the woman, and hereditary occupational bias. They came into conflict with the new way of life made necessary by the acceptance of the democratic principle as conditioning social and political institutions as well as the adaptation of an industrial economy with which is associated a different conception of work. Even more so, the modern emphasis upon a this-worldly character of life and work, introducing a new secularism, a different understanding of history as determined by human decisions and directed to the realization of ends that further good of man and society in the here and now.

To some extent, these conflicts are resolved in new Hindu thinking in the central concepts of Ramrajya and Sarvodaya which constitute the main teachings of Mahatma Gandhi and his disciple, Vinoba Bhave. As they are now interpreted these ideals bring to bear new standards of conduct for modern Hindu man in contemporary Hindu society. The terms employed in the exposition of these ideals are all derived from classical Hindu religious usage—*ahimsa*, *asteya*, and *aparigraha*. But as they are reinterpreted today to provide the basis of a new Hindu social ethic they acquire totally different meanings. *Ahimsa* does not merely stand for non-injury but provides a sacred principle which invests human life with infinite worth. Likewise, far from being limited in meaning to 'stealing', that is misappropriating others' goods,

asteya has come to be applied to all forms of economic exploitation which may be described as social injustice. This is obvious in the way Vinoba Bhave proclaims his gospel of bhudan yajna in its wider application of the fivefold various dāns (bhoomi, srama, sampat, buddhi, and jivan). Similarly the word *aparigraha*, which means literally 'non-grabbing', is employed to convey the idea of covetousness. This is because Vinoba maintains that the sole proprietor of all goods is God Himself. On this basis he establishes the Sarvodaya doctrine of trusteeship of all property. And property is not only understood in terms of economic wealth but of all individual possession. This teaching is strangely parallel to the Christian understanding of all endowments as 'talents' to be utilized not for self-advancement but for 'the welfare of all' (Sarvodaya).

IN THE LIGHT OF CHRISTIAN FAITH

It is true that Hindu leaders refuse to admit that Christian teachings have influenced all these re-interpretations. Nor may we, as Christians, take credit where credit is not due, for the fact remains that such influence as we may claim is not that of authentic Christian faith. What the Hindu has appropriated is his own interpretation of Christian values. These values have been partly taken from our imperfect preaching of the gospel. But in great part it is due to the impact of Western thought. Also, the Hindu, however willing to restate the fundamentals of his faith, does not want to cut loose from the ancestral moorings of traditional orthodoxy. This is apparent from the fact that in neo-Hinduism there is conscious effort to seek scriptural support at every step, to maintain a continuity, however tenuous, with past heritage and to safeguard the essential identity of Hinduism among the religions of the world.

In consequence, it may be pointed out that from the standpoint of Christian faith the understanding of man in society in neo-Hinduism is limited. The limitation would seem to be due to (i) want of a realistic understanding of man as a sinful creature, (ii) the tendency to explain the nature and destiny of man in terms of a metaphysics of ultimate being rather than in terms of a theology of the purposive Will of a personal god, (iii) the persistence of a view of world life as in some way severely apart from transcendental Being and conditioned by its own principle of karma samsara, (iv) the unwillingness to totally discard outworn social institutions because they have been hallowed by time and therefore need to be preserved in some way or another as being traditionally Hindu, and (v) the understanding of all religious beliefs as some form or another of self-discipline (yoga) whereby man through his own efforts can achieve perfection.

Merely to indicate that Hindu metaphysics does not justify the contemporary Hindu concern in life in the here and now does not help. The fact remains that modern Hinduism is tremendously concerned with all that life in our world means and ought to mean for modern man. It would look as though modern

Hindu secularism served as a much-needed corrective wherever religion has tended to become other-worldly and pietistic. The real problem in Hindu India is to effect a synthesis between the traditional world-view and contemporary secularism. Thoughtful Hindu leaders are wrestling with this problem and it is in relation to this concern that the good news of God incarnate in Jesus Christ will have to be spelled out.

Much has been said and written about personality in recent times, both from the purely psychological and from the more definite Christian point of view. And perhaps we have learnt a great deal from the writings of the great Jewish thinker, Martin Buber. The essential nature of personality consists in the fact of the responsible relationship between living beings where the other being is fully grasped and treated now as a subject and now as an object. One of the significant developments in contemporary Hindu society, as we have noticed earlier on, is the growing awareness that men are set in a world of personal relations with other persons. And, as Dr. H. H. Farmer has argued in his book, *Towards Belief in God*, 'It would seem therefore legitimate to expect that our awareness of one another as personal beings should afford some clue to our awareness of God as personal. If there is a divine reality which is (a) akin to ourselves in respect of being intelligent purpose, yet (b) always non-akin to ourselves in respect of being divine, it is to be expected that He should disclose Himself to us in a way which (a) is similar to that in which we become aware of one another's intelligent personal purpose, yet which (b) has, without losing similarity, a certain distinctive quality of its own conformable with its distinctive origin.'

Again, Hindu thinking obviously believes in the agency of man and his capacity to order world life with purposive determination to realize common good. Thus the responsibility of man for his action, and its consequent effect on his nature and destiny have given new importance to world life and history, in Hindu thinking. Whether Hindus are conscious of this shift of emphasis or not, the fact remains that modern Hinduism is evolving a new conception of history.

This has become inevitable in modern Hinduism, obviously because of a shift of religious interest, beginning with the nineteenth century, from speculation about the nature of the Absolute to a new understanding about the nature of man. In other words, the determinative doctrine in the evaluation of the Hindu outlook of life is no longer derived from its classical theology, but is being built upon a new anthropology. This anthropology is perhaps still in the making. Nevertheless, the primary question that is of dominant concern to the modern Hindu thinker is the nature and destiny of man—what is man and whither is he bound?

If this analysis is true—and there are valid reasons to hold that it is—then it follows that this new conception of history in the making in modern India will have to come to terms with the classical view about God and Reality that had so long held the field. Certain consequences are inevitable. One is that an attempt

should be made to reconcile the new anthropology with the classical theology. This is a task which is by no means easy because far in Hindu thinking the affirmation of the reality of the one has always been at the expense of the reality of the other. The Christian view of man as God's creature and of God as man's Creator has provided the solution in Christian thought. But in Hindu thinking to accept the doctrine of the creation would be to do violence to the nature of God as Absolute Being, who cannot be in any way involved in world life. Secondly, Hindu thinking will have to come to terms with the whole idea of personality as applied both to finite and infinite being. And at the heart of the modern view of personality is the belief in the possibility of relationship. Thirdly, there is a new demand for the realization of true community. Such community is the consequence of purposive endeavour in which responsible beings enter into creative relationship, because they are bound together as persons in relation to the Person.

The dignity of man is that he is the child of God, capable of communion with God, the object of the Love of God—such love as is displayed on the Cross—and destined for eternal fellowship with God. His true value is not what he is worth in himself or to his earthly state, but what he is worth to God; and that worth is bestowed on him by the utterly gratuitous Love of God.

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