



THE CONCEPT OF HINDUISM AND SOCIAL PROGRESS IN SAHGAL'S FINCTION

K. HANUMANTHA REDDY,
Lect. In English,
S.K.P. Govt. Degree College,
Guntakal, (AP) INDIA

ABSTRACT

The word 'Hindu' doesn't find its appearance in any of the original scriptures of the Hindus, compared to Christianity and Islam doctrines which have come into existence in a defined form by God to a particular person at a particular time and place. Religious doctrines in Hinduism are realized and expressed through a gradual process of reflection by different individuals, covering many centuries. Through gradual evolution, a wide spectrum of beliefs and rituals have got assimilated into the body of Hinduism. As there is no clear definition for the idea of god-hood in Hinduism, various creeds or cults which are considered divine manifestations complementing each other, orient to the infinity of truth and well-being of human race. The basic truth underlying Hindu religious evolution is that truth is unique but its interpretation is many sided. When compared to Islam or Christianity, Hinduism remains vague. Hinduism does put forward certain key concepts despite its doctrinal vagueness.

INTRODUCTION

What is called 'Hinduism' is the present day could not be destroyed as no invader or foreigner or practicing Hindu could explore Hinduism in depth. Its roots are embedded in mysterious sources. Its branches invaded space. Hinduism is all – pervasive, all – inclusive and percolating into depths. The peculiar feature of Hinduism is that it does not lend itself to be fitted into any rigid pattern or framework. Unlike the other great religion of the world; Islam and Christianity, it does not have one founder, one scripture, or one way of life. It is precisely due to this reason that it is sometimes dubbed, not as a religion, but only as a way of life or just a culture. S. Radha Krishnan expresses the same view that "Hinduism is more a way of life than a form of thought"¹

Hinduism is a progressive historical moment in the making. Its adherents are not custodians of a deposit, but runners carrying a lighted torch. The weaknesses of the Hindu faith which have drawn the institution into disgrace and have become obstacles blocking the way for

K. HANUMANTHA REDDY

1P a g e



social advance due to confusion between tradition and truth. One must preserve the spirit of truth which will guide us into all truth. God does not say ‘*I am tradition*’, but he says ‘*I am truth*’. Truth is greater than its greatest teachers. Hinduism insists on the upward striving, not only in the sphere of morals but also in that of intellect. It should not be regarded as either pessimistic or fatalistic. Hindu religious classics emphasize one’s duty to see all human beings in one’s own self and admit their value but not judge them by external standards.

At the root of Hindu philosophy, existence lies in the idea of Brahman i.e an eternal, infinite and transcendent cosmic reality which embraces various forms of beings existing in the universe. Man is considered an intelligent part of the variety of cosmic reality. As against one unique eternity, this variety is existent, mortal and Maya – trance the absolute point of view. Moksha lies in realizing and merging the identity of individual self with the cosmic self and the whole life is oriented to attain this goal.

Moksha can be attained by transcending the world of change through active but detached contemplative living and rigorous religious practice which facilitates man to awake to his true origin and gradual rise to his nature. Moksha can also be attained by rising from the state of ignorance (avidya) to the state of knowledge (vidya) and realization of the infinite and the eternal. In this pursuit, a deep insight into introspective experience of the individual’s oneness with the absolute is desirable .

Closely related to the idea of man’s return to the *Absolute* is the doctrine of the cycle of births and his indispensable acquaintance with *Samsara*. In the sixth century BC, a belief in change of form had developed into the doctrine of the transmigration of the soul due to the law of Karma, literally means deed. According to the law of karma, one’s next life is an extension of one’s deeds performed in the past. All living beings are trapped in the eternal cycle of birth, death and re-birth until Moksha is attained through pious actions, sincere meditation and staying away from material desires. The universe and its constituents including human society are seen as organic wholes in which jati, a form of life on the cosmic plane and a class or community on the social plane, has a specific task, dharma, to perform. An individual can attain self gratification and higher status only in the faithful adherence to his duty.

Hinduism is the dharma of the people of our country. Upanishads make it very clear that dharma gives coherence and direction to the various activities of life. S.Radhakrishnan considers dharma to be “a word of protean significance”² and explains that it is the concept under which the Hindu “brings the forms and activities which shape and sustain human life”³. It is neither a religious creed nor cult imposing on ethical or social life. It is the complete rule of life, the harmony of the whole man who finds a right and just law of his living. Dharma, in a wide sense used to connote all the means for the achievement of various ends of life. It removes one’s owes and places in the highest bliss. A popular verse of the Mahabharatha says;



'I cry with arms uplifted, yet no one heedeth. From righteousness (Dharma) flow forth pleasure and profit. Why then do ye not follow righteousness?'

Dharma explains that while one's life is in the first instance for one's own satisfaction, it is more essentially for the community. Ethical life is the means to spiritual freedom as well as its expression on earth. Religion, the English word used for the Sanskrit word Dharma, doesn't have the broader connotation that dharma has, as dharma implies the whole complex theories and practices relating to the activities and aspirations of the material and spiritual life of the individual and the society. Hinduism is more a way of life than a form of thought. While it gives full liberty in the world of thought, it imposes strict code of conduct. The theist and the atheist, the septic and the agnostic may all be Hindus if they accept and follow the Hindu system of culture and life. Hinduism doesn't emphasize on religious conformity but injects a spiritual and ethical outlook in life. The culture and tradition of our motherland find its deep roots in Hinduism. All the wisdom courage and heroism that is found in the annals of our history sprang from Hinduism as it is in the blood and tradition of the Indian. Despite foreign invasions and impact of alien civilizations, Hinduism remains a major influencing factor in shaping the personality of the individual, in particular and the stance of the society, in general.

Sahgal feels proud of inheriting the Hindu heritage. She spoke about her own attitude to Hinduism,

"How does Hindu culture affect our conduct, our decisions, that sort of things? What kind of person is the inheritor of this inheritance? Hinduism is of interest to me because most of us are Hindus, but even those who are not, live under the social and psychological overhang of Hinduism. It is not something we can ignore, if we want to understand ourselves" ⁴

As an Indian, she knows the fact pretty well that Hinduism is both the despair and the hope of India. She understands quite clearly that various kinds of interpretations are attributed to every single doctrine of Hinduism and there is stagnation at different stages of the ancient tradition. Sahgal often finds her characters restrain from acting decisively and responsibly both in private and public life. She relates this self – imposed inability to the inadequate creed that people live by. Religion shows its effect on human action in diverse ways. Instead of becoming a creed of action, Hinduism becomes a creed of negation. Sometimes, it becomes a tool of exploitation in the hands of unscrupulous people.

Sahgal keeps the Individual as the cornerstone of her philosophy and religion the greatest motivating force for the individual. That is the reason why religion becomes one of the thematic concerns of her fiction. Some eminent critics like Jasbir Jain and J.K. Thomas feels



that her political concerns are also preoccupied with the theme of Hinduism. They have touched upon what the former terms as, “The politics of Hinduism in Nayantara Sahgal’s novels”⁵

Hindus, being the majority community, set the tone of the country in the matters of political and social activities. Sahgal advocates not only positive and healthy reinterpretation of the ageless religion by incorporating and highlighting virtues like action, decisiveness, responsibility and initiative but also a synthesis of the best qualities of all religions.

In *A Time to Be Happy*, Sahgal discusses the inherent duality of Hinduism as a result of the diametrically opposite interpretations of the theory of Karma. The law of Karma prevails in the world of *Samsara*, where our deeds lead to higher or lower status in the world of time. The knower of the self ceases to be stained by action. He goes beyond the ethical, though rooted in it, ‘anyatra dharmat’⁶. The path of virtue and vice is a means, not an end. The end is beyond the law of injunction and prohibition of good and evil. According to Aristotle Nous is never wrong⁷ ‘which means our activities, being inspired by the divine, can’t be wrong. The life of the spirit is not restricted by any formulas. It breaks its bond and finds its own way to enrichment of its own. The liberated spirit conforms spontaneously to the ethical norms. Every religion sets before us the goal of liberation, which has a sense of exaltation, a sense of freedom and victory over the world, evil and death.

The law of Karma, the inescapable law of cause and effect in spiritual things, lays down that death does not end the chain. The body is not the agent for the activities one carryout but that which dwells in the body: which does not die with death but takes a lodging in another tenement. The spirit within continually shapes itself and builds its future accordingly. The new tenement is one that suits the shape; the soul has worked itself into. It is wrong to interpret Karma in terms of what is understood by the word fate. Destiny as formulated in Vedanta does not involve an unscientific tendency towards natural cause or a breakdown of faith in human efforts which are fatalism. Karma is the un alterable law effecting the deeds of previous birth.

The Karma theory encourages passivity in the present life indicating that the present is already shaped by the past. However, the narrator says, ‘*the doctrine can also be taken as a challenge for it is within human capacity to shape a better future*’ (161). He also interprets this theory of Karma in a positive way. He feels that Karma mainly means living one’s life and doing one’s duty to the best of our ability in whichever capacity we happen to have been born in.

The narrator also points out that the paradox one can find in Hinduism is not at all paradox as forthright sensuality and stoic renunciation are the two sides of the same coin. They are the two contrary attitudes that create the pattern of Indian life. Moreover both of them belong to



India and Hinduism proclaims that there is time for everything and everything is right in its appropriate time. The Hindu view of the individual and his relation to society is the synthesis and gradation of the four-fold objectives of life i.e the purusardas - desire and enjoyment (kama), interest (artha), ethical living (dharma) and spiritual freedom(moksha).

As the contradictory elements such as violence, and non-violence, spiritualism and materialism, acquisition and renunciation are permitted by Hinduism, it becomes very difficult for the common man to follow the right path at the right time. So, there is a need for a clear vision that discerns the subtle variations among these opposing forces that exist in humanity. The narrator, though a bachelor, yet takes interest in solving the problems of his friend, Sanad's family. As he is a staunch loyalist of Gandhian ideology, he participates in freedom movement and is imprisoned. Having firm faith in rural development, with infinite patience, he is determined to take up the task of village development. But he never yearns for the leadership. His attitude is a perfect illustration of the idea of non attachment which according to the Bhagavathgita, '*a man ought to live in this world like a lotus leaf, which grows in water but is never moistened by water*'. So, a man ought to live in the world giving his heart to God and his hands to work.

Swami Vivekananda considers the entire world as the manifestation of God implying that there is no difference between love for humanity and the devotion to God. Sohan Bai, a friend of the narrator, also reminds that Gandhiji also suggested the same thing. Personal enrichment may bring us close to limited humanity where as philanthropic outlook will certainly chain us to the vast humanity.

Sahgal is well aware of the fact that India has made a travesty of religion though the Indians are deeply religious. As she does not support everything in the name of tradition, she emphasizes the need for a review and enlightened attitude in the modern times. In her *A Time to Be Happy*, Sahgal vividly portrays how some people have become mere prisoners of the conventions. Raghubir, a clerk in Sanad's office, refuses to become a salesman as it impairs his dignity as a Brahmin like him. Prabha, the wife of Harilal, accepts her husband's second marriage as she thinks that a wife should not question her husband.

Sahgal projects the different dimensions of Hinduism in the novel. Through the narrator, She reveals how the doctrines of Karma and non-attachment make human life meaningful and useful.

In *This time of Morning* , Sahgal depicts the different kinds of approaches to Hinduism: positive approach to it as a living faith and the exploitation of it for personal advantages.

Kailas, the P.M.'s reliable assistant and a sincere follower of Gandhian principles, stresses the importance of interpreting Hinduism as a living faith and points out that there is every

K. HANUMANTHA REDDY

5P a g e



need for following the path of the enlightened religion. But for a while like Arjuna in the Mahabharatha, he too falls into a kind of dilemma as a result of which he renounces the social activities. When the call comes from his political idealist, the P.M. to shun his silence, he comes out from his passivity and accepts the chief-minister-ship of U.P. to rededicate himself and makes determined perseverance for the welfare of the society.

Hari Mohan, a business man and for a while the minister of Industries in the Government of UP, exploits religious sentiments for his own political advantage. He instigates communal feelings and creates riots to demonstrate his power over a considerable part of the state, U.P. Sahgal not only reveals the beauty and grace but also the traditional value of the Ganges in the purgation process of the individual's Karma. Hari Mohan, a dissolute man, tries to wash off his sins at the Magh Mela.

“Here as he bathed just before sun rise, the magic of the Ganges held him. This was the holy water that cleansed corruption, conferred benediction and promised salvation. For uncounted centuries the devout and the lowly had believed in it. The river was a place of pilgrimage all year round” (190)

The Ganges stands as a replica of purification of sins people commit. Hari Mohan wants to purify himself by taking a holydip in the sacred river. If people like Hari Mohan change their amoral life, it will be a good sign for the growth of healthy society.

Being every inch an Indian, Sahgal shows her sensitive awareness and re-enacts the Indian myths and cultural symbols. For instance, she artistically exploits the ancient myth of the Ramayana. Hari Mohan recalls,

“. . . . Isolated like a pearl among wooden beads, this had been the day of Salt Satyagraha at the Bharadwaja Ashram. Kailas and a band of workers had broken the law by manufacturing salt in the tin pans near the Ashram, the legendary site where Rama and Bharat had met during Rama's exile. It was the place where Bharat had embraced his beloved brother and urged him to return to his kingdom and had taken his slippers to set on the throne when he had refused” (81)

Myth and reality are meticulously interwoven into a single perception in the context of contemporary history. Lord Rama's reign is often referred to as individuals who are strictly adhered to morality and ethical values which constitute a welfare society. While stressing the efficacy of moral and ethical values in personal life Rama tells Lakshmana:



'I bear arms for the sake of truth. It is not difficult for me to gain the whole universe but I desire not even the suzerainty of the heavens if it is to be unrighteousness'⁸

Rashmi, the only daughter of Kailas, inherits the legacy of her father and seeks the blessings of Lord Ganesha who, it is believed by millions of Hindus from time immemorial, to overcome her obstacles. Keeping in mind religious fervour of Hindus, Tilak organized Ganesh festival and roused patriotism to emancipate the motherland from the clutches of the British.

Sahgal, in *This Time of Morning* reiterates that Hinduism is an integral part of Indian society. Having firm faith in Hindu Philosophy of Karma, Kailas renounces passivity and actively involves in politics where as Hari Mohan also realizes his past deeds and begins a new phase in his life.

Chandigarh, the setting of *Storm in Chandigarh*, gains religious prominence as it is situated near Kurukshetra, where the mighty battle between Pandavas and Kouravas took place in the Mahabharatha. It is in this battle field that the Lord Krishna enlightened Arjuna by preaching the Bhagavatgita whose influence on the Hindus can hardly be exaggerated. The Bhagavathgita clearly reveals that Men cannot commit themselves to any course of action based on cowardice. They have to act on some principles. They have to go forward without fearing of its perils. They have to perform their duty without aspiring for any reward. Besides rituals, The Bhagavtgit is preoccupied more with ethics than morality.

Vishal Dubey, the central character, is highly critical of the taboo-ridden system, the noiseless chaos and the funeral march of Hinduism. He vehemently condemns the Hindus for whom the modern world has become too much. According to him,

"....tradition has to be upheld and used in a big enlightened way. But it hasn't so far. We've got this superb intellectual heritage supporting feeble issues like the preservation of cows, and we don't seem to be able to climb out of stagnation into highroad where the fresh air blows. We have the unholy trappings of tradition going on and on while the reality of it isn't there at all"
(11-12)

He believes that they are going to pieces as they lack courage to face challenges of change. He advises Saroj, the wife of a businessman, Inder that it is better to experiment with one's own life, test everything considered sacred and oppose it if it is not suitable to the present context. But she opposes his views and tells that there is also courage in holding on to the age old things.



Before his assignment as the liaison officer between the centre and the two warring states, Haryana and Punjab, Vishal Dubey is keenly interested to explore the role of a Brahmin in the contemporary culture. He wants to go back to the roots of Hinduism and find out the significance of Brahmins and whether they have any constructive role to play in the modern world. According to the Upanishads, the true Brahmin is said to be one who has sensed the deepest self and acts out of that consciousness. He is expected to embody the law of self dedicating love, the grace and joy of souls in the consciousness of the service where hatred, violence and fanaticism will be unknown. It is the duty of Brahmins to lay down the science of values, draw out of the blue prints for social reconstruction and persuade the world to accept the high ends of life. His intellectual introspectrum is not that of a spiritual recluse but that of a Karma Yogi, man of action. Vishal Dubey comprehends his role as a Brahmin and introspects himself.

Vishal Dubey grows and mellows in search of real values in life. He wants to do research on ‘The role of Brahmanism in our culture’ at New England University. But he could not fulfill his desire on account of his assignment in Chandigarh. According to the Bhagavadgitha,

‘men of all classes, if they fulfill their assigned duties, enjoy the highest imperishable bliss.’⁹

Having understood the book in true sense, Vishal Dubey feels that true bliss lies in performing his duty. Ironically, it is in Chandigarh that he learns and performs the duty of establishing the great tradition of peace, tolerance and culture and also courageous resistance to evil. As he realizes that violence spreads only because it is tolerated, he suggests Harpal Singh, the C.M. of Haryana that there is a need for taking a stand against violence. He motivates his subordinate officers to meet the needs of people. With his indomitable will-power, he restores peace and tranquility in the two states.

Sahgal depicts different kinds of stagnation of tradition in *Storm in Chandigarh*. Despite her husband Inder’s inhuman attitude, Saroj remains calm. The complacency of Saroj is undoubtably a product of the religion. Inder’s idea of male domination though it is something derived from the religion suggests that he has understood religion only superficially. Mara, the wife of Jit Sahani, the pioneering Indian liquor manufacturer, thinks that Hindu heritage is a dead burden as some of it is rotten. She realizes that even the most westernized Indians cannot escape from the impact of Hinduism as it is inherent in so many ways in their thinking and their attitudes.

Harpal Singh tries to find the path of enlightened religion and comes out of passivity to fight against the violent attitude of Gyan Sing while Gyan Sing misuses the religious sentiments of the people for his personal gains. Vishal wishes to shoulder the onus to spread the superb intellectual heritage of Hinduism and provides the answers in many ways that would best suit

K. HANUMANTHA REDDY

8P a g e



our temperament. He has deep faith in Nishkama karma i.e the dynamic aspect of action. He turns to decisive action and tackles the problems of violence and communal disharmony. He advises Harpal Sing, not to submit passively to the threats of Gyan Sing, the C.M. of Punjab. Vishal Duby with his immense mental strength and shrewd insight into the problems, uses his scholarly approach and eases the tension between the states. He successfully completes his task of restoring normality in both the states. Through the portrayal of the principal character, Vishal Duby, Sahgal vividly shows the impact of Hinduism on Indians and their approach to Hinduism under the changed circumstances.

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