



# S. Radhakrishnan

Prema Nandakumar

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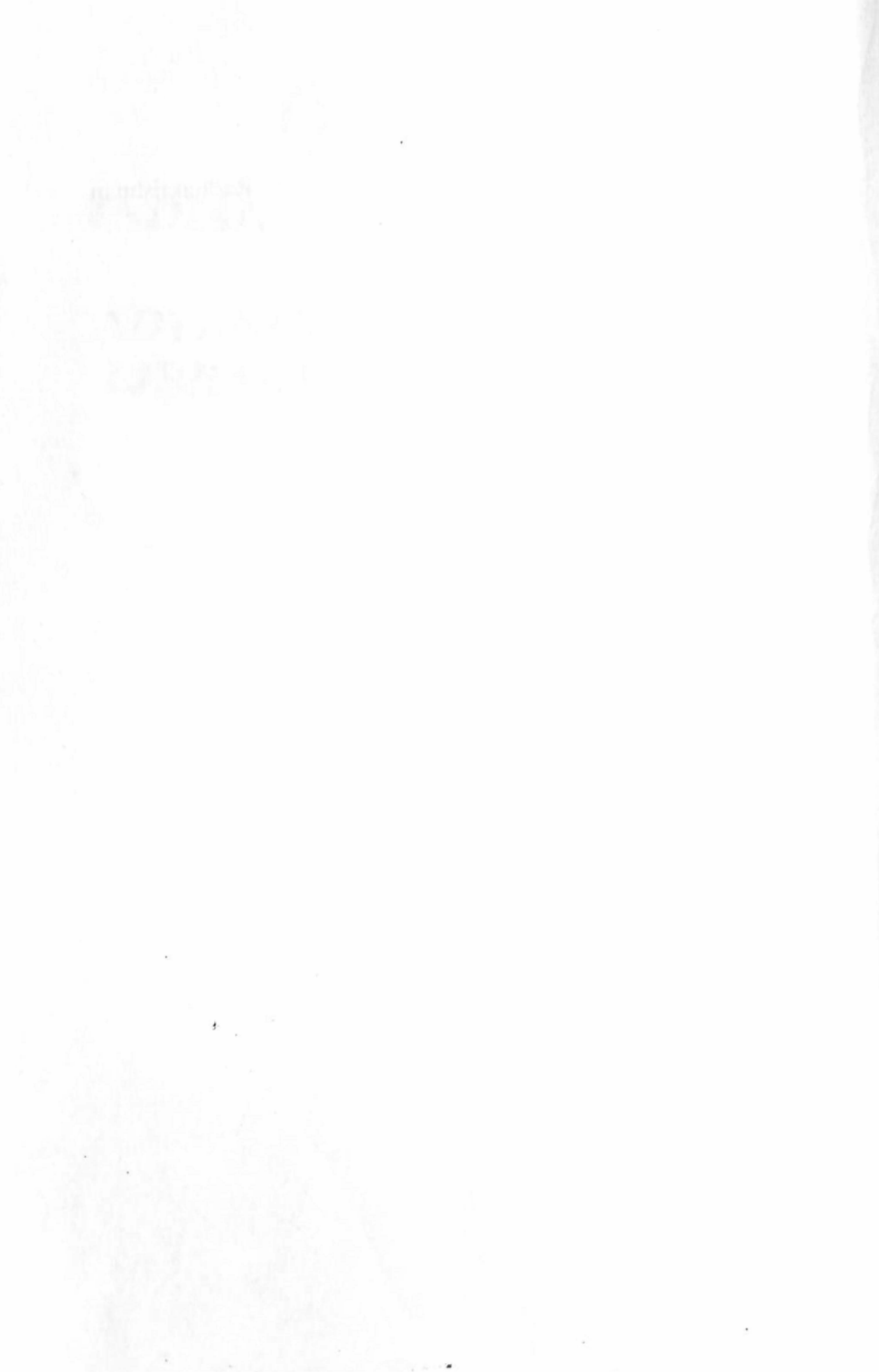
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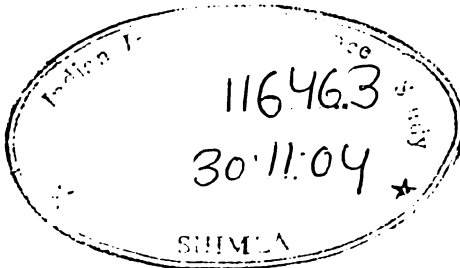


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## PREFACE

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan has an assured place among the 'Makers of Indian Literature' for he was not only the finest philosopher-statesman of our times but a powerful writer in English. Indeed, it was his mastery of the English language that facilitated his becoming a world-figure. He could interpret the rich and ancient Indian religion, philosophy and spirituality with masterful ease to Western audiences through his sonorously-tuned English that was enriched by Sanskritic phraseology and movement.

Radhakrishnan was a felt presence in the corridors of the Andhra University where I studied for several years. The university library which had been nurtured by him in its early years was an inspiration. It was a pleasant surprise to be asked by the Sahitya Akademi to write a monograph on this great personality for the 'Makers of Indian Literature' series. I am thankful to the Sahitya Akademi for this great privilege accorded to me to pay my homage to our nation's Acharya.

While Radhakrishnan's writings have been the mainstay in drawing my conclusions, I have benefitted much by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan's biography of his father. Spontaneous and critical help from my father, K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar and my mother Srimati Padmasani has sustained me throughout the writing of the book. My grateful thanks to them.

Srirangam, Tamil Nadu

Prema Nandakumar



# 1

## INDIA, THE GURU OF THE WORLD

Indian culture has an unrecorded history that stretches back several thousands of years. Even the limited span of 2000 years in record shows that the Indian genius has always given a spiritual thrust to our cultural evolution. Here literature, religion, philosophy, polity and sciences were never alienated from the spiritual view. There was no compartmentalisation either and always one discipline influenced and inspired another. According to Sri Aurobindo this was possible because the Indian's thinking eye "looks through the form, looks even through the force and searches for the spirit in things everywhere."

However, around the middle of last century, there came a real danger that Indian culture that had been reared on the infinitudes of the spirit might become a fossil as the ancient Greek civilisation. Indians turned to the West for almost everything. Writing about those days of slavish imitation, Sri Aurobindo burst out:

...economically we attained great success in destroying our industries and enslaving ourselves to the British trader; morally, we successfully compassed the disintegration of the old moral ideas and habits and substituted for them a superficial respectability; intellectually, we prided ourselves on the tricking out of our minds in a few leavings, scraps and strays of European thought at the sacrifice of an immense and eternal heritage. Never was an education more remote from all that education truly denotes...

From this self-destructive hypnosis the Indians were saved by

“the Master of a mightier hypnosis” who awoke them in time. Swami Vivekananda’s advice to the Indians to “awake, arise and stop not till the goal is reached” went home and India entered the high noon of her modern renaissance, spurred on by eminent personalities like Raja Rammohun Roy, Swami Dayananda and Sri Aurobindo himself.

India’s glorious past was thus saved. No more was it impractical to choose Sanskrit or other Indian languages for study. At the same time writers returned to the past for retelling ancient myths. Indian scientists looked for help in ancient insights. In all this, the English language, “the gift of Goddess Saraswati” (in C. Rajagopalachari’s words) played an invaluable part. As the twentieth century dawned, a new spirit was abroad. Indians mastered the English language in a very short time and through it quickened the Indian renaissance. The past came back in all its richness and the world sat up in wonder. Among the eminent Indians who made this possible was Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, a student of Sanskrit and philosophy.

# 2

## LIFE

The best introduction for Radhakrishnan's life may be had from the opening passage in his *My Search for Truth*:

I was born on September 5, 1888, at a small place, Tiruttani, forty miles to the north-west of Madras, in South India, the second child of Hindu parents, who were conventional in their religious outlook. I have not had any advantages of birth or of wealth. The early years of my life till twelve were spent in Tiruttani and Tirupati, both famous as pilgrim centres. I cannot account for the fact that from the time I knew myself I have had firm faith in the reality of an unseen world behind the flux of phenomena, a world which we apprehend not with the senses but with the mind, and even when I was faced by grave difficulties, this faith has remained unshaken.

Radhakrishnan's father, Sarvepalli Veeraswami was a subordinate revenue official in the court of a local zamindar. He had a large family to maintain but did his best to educate Radhakrishnan who studied in the Tiruttani Board High School and later in the Hermansburg Evangelical Lutheran Mission School at Tirupati. After passing the matriculation examination, he joined Voorhee's College at Vellore with a scholarship. He was married to Sivakamu when still a student at Vellore.

In 1904 Radhakrishnan passed the firsts arts examination with distinction. He was awarded a scholarship to study at the Madras Christian College for the B.A. course. Surprisingly enough, it

appears that he was more interested in the physical sciences but chose philosophy as he could get the needed text books for the subject free from a cousin who had just then graduated in philosophy! This way he could save a lot of expense. An accidental choice then, but which took him to the very heights of success, shaping his personal philosophy, according to Sarvepalli Gopal:

The fact that he was pushed into it and attained, in the process, deep scholarship and a world-wide reputation convinced him that his career was the handiwork of a power not himself, call it Nature, Fate, Providence, God or whatever. As his success blossomed Radhakrishnan was increasingly convinced that his life was being shaped by an unseen hand, much as he might try to mould it in different patterns; and more and more he committed himself, his decisions and his judgement, to his star.

Radhakrishnan was lucky in his teachers in the Madras Christian College. The legendary teacher of English literature, William Miller, and teachers of philosophy like William Skinner and A. G. Hogg were inspirations. They were not narrow-minded or bigoted like the missionaries Radhakrishnan had come across till then. He was captivated by their enormous scholarship and analytical thinking as also their faithful adherence to their own religion. One could remain in one's religious fold yet become part of a wider consciousness. The future *acharya* had thus a fruitful seed-time.

After obtaining his B.A. degree in 1906 with first class honours, Radhakrishnan wanted to study law. But there were no financial means to help him get into the law college. He had also to support his parents and younger brothers. So he accepted a scholarship of Rs. 25 per month and became a student in the M.A. class. During these years of struggle Radhakrishnan gave private tuition to supplement his scholarship. The external privations could not disturb his inner purpose which was to uphold the superiority of Vedantic philosophy.

This sense of purpose grew out of Radhakrishnan's student years which were spent in Christian missionary institutions where he was exposed to the Bible and denigratory remarks about Hinduism. Radhakrishnan had immense regard for the high level of education

imparted in these institutions but was deeply hurt within at the way Hinduism was desecrated in the classroom. Even a teacher like Hogg whose lectures and writings contained, according to Dr. Gopal, "a restrained hesitation of thought, a qualified moderation, a scrupulous regard for all sides of a case and an anxiety to ensure all the qualifications for any statement", could wound the young scholar by explaining the *Gita* as favouring the ascetic's denial of life. Radhakrishnan who had come under the spell of "the enterprise and eloquence of Swami Vivekananda" could not accept such a summing-up of the sacred text.

He began to read voraciously and stack away information within his computer-like brain that was to be hailed as a marvellous memory-house in later years. As Radhakrishnan proceeded with his studies, Hinduism appeared to be a wonderful universe. Yet it was being sidelined because of the 'punditry' of its exponents. In this state of affairs the whole of Indian philosophy was in the danger of academic extinction giving up the stage to the Western philosophers who had entered the Indian psyche along with Western education. Radhakrishnan felt intuitively that Indian philosophy was no hot-house plant and not all the sophistications of the modern world could convince him otherwise. As he says:

Even the poor illiterate villagers with their ancient household traditions and religious observances seemed to me to be more familiar with the spiritual mystery enveloping this world than the emancipated, comfort-minded intellectuals eager for life and adventure. They were aware of the ancient truths and maxims which the spectacle of human life has suggested to thinking minds in all ages."

Such thinking led him to write a thesis on *The Ethics of the Vedanta and Its Metaphysical Presuppositions* in partial fulfilment of the conditions for the M.A. degree examination. Fortunately he was encouraged by Hogg who guided his student with understanding and admiration. Indeed, Hogg gave him a handsome testimonial in which he referred to *The Ethics of the Vedanta*: "The thesis which he prepared in the second year of his study for this degree shows a remarkable understanding of the main aspects of the philosophical problem, a capacity for handling easily a complex argument besides more than the average mastery of good English."

The thesis boldly spoke of the weaknesses of the Hindu religion and advocated the jettisoning of religious practices that had lost their significance and appeared contradictory to a rational way of living. But materialism would be no answer. The Vedantic attitude of spiritual brotherhood should reflect in one's life to make it meaningful, fruitful and happy. Radhakrishnan averred that Hindu Vedanta, shorn of its superstitious accretions could provide the right philosophy for the present century which was struggling to overcome the dehumanisation of an industrial age. Vedantic ethics taught men to live an ideal life on earth and at the same time transcend this life by realising the oneness of one's self with the transcendent Supreme. Pragmatism and prayerful living could be blended into a wholesome union. One's spiritual yearning to gain Advaitic oneness need never come in the way of ethical living.

Having completed the M.A. course so well, Radhakrishnan could have gone abroad for higher studies but he had to start earning because of family circumstances. After trying hard, he managed to get a small post in the Madras Educational Service. Accordingly, he joined the Philosophy Department of the Madras Presidency College in 1909. In 1910 he underwent the training course in the Teacher's College, Saidapet, for the L.T. degree. Even at that young age his brilliance as an expounder of philosophical concepts was evident. In fact his Professor even persuaded Radhakrishnan to deliver a course of 12 lectures to his fellow-students! This was the time when he also prepared the handbook, *Essentials of Psychology* which was published by the Oxford University Press in 1912.

Radhakrishnan returned to the Madras Presidency College in 1911. It proved to be an auspicious beginning for to this day he is revered primarily as a teacher and his birthday is observed as the Teacher's Day by a grateful nation. As Dr. Balakrishna Joshi said, here was "a preceptor among pedagogues". Radhakrishnan's teaching of psychology, European thought and political philosophy were so popular that students from other colleges began to attend his classes! Nor did he distance himself from his students. His phenomenal memory for faces was a great advantage for all those who came into contact with him felt that he cared for them. Nor did the teacher cease to be a student. While he read widely books on Western thought, he also began a systematic study of the Sanskrit classics with the help of traditional pundits. He also began



writing research papers and publishing them abroad in journals like the *International Journal of Ethics* and *The Asiatic Review*.

Dr. C. R. Reddy, a great talent-scout was instrumental in getting Radhakrishnan out of his permanent tenure in the Madras Educational Service into the university atmosphere. Radhakrishnan became Professor of Philosophy in Mysore University in 1918. Already his creative pen had begun working feverishly and the first significant publication was *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* followed by *The Reign of Religion in Contemporary Philosophy*. It appears that he even tried his hand at creative writing and produced a novel, *The Crime of Leela* which has remained unpublished. With his mastery of the English language, Radhakrishnan could have entered the world of Indo-Anglian literature with a flourish as a novelist, but evidently he did not care to pursue the lead though at one time he did plan a 'series' of novels to project his views on Indian tradition and how best it can be absorbed in the light of Western civilisation. However, he did become a maker of Indian literature by mastering the English language for philosophical exposition. Professor J. H. Muirhead had shown him the right path when he said that Radhakrishnan would do well to prepare a standard book on Indian philosophy. The young professor now found his true vocation.

When the King George V Professorship of Mental and Moral Sciences in Calcutta University fell vacant in 1920, the Vice-chancellor, Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee invited Radhakrishnan to apply for the Chair. The appointment was most welcome for Radhakrishnan could at last be free of financial worries as the professorship carried the sumptuous salary of Rs. 1000 per month. The Mysore students felt desolate and gave him an emotional farewell.

Radhakrishnan began his university life in Calcutta with a public lecture at the Senate Hall. He soon plunged into work. A voracious reader and a tireless lecturer, Radhakrishnan was also an extensive writer. It was in Calcutta that he planned and executed the monumental two-volume *Indian Philosophy*. He was a Professor with a mission. He wanted to show the world that Vedantic Hinduism was the best choice for humanity to achieve global unity. Hinduism was to be considered no more as an abracadabra of ritualistic obscurantism. The two volumes achieved Radhakrishnan's mission very well. As he said with a pardonable

sense of pride in 1936, less than ten years after the publication of the second volume:

I know there are deeper students of philosophy and greater scholars of Sanskrit in this country. My ambition is not only to chronicle but to interpret and to reveal the movement of the mind and unfold the sources of India in the profound plane of human nature. There was a time when Indian philosophy was regarded as something quaint, strange, antiquated and incapable of playing a part in the world's spiritual awakening. That impression is slowly disappearing.

Calcutta brought Radhakrishnan very close to Rabindranath Tagore about whom he had already written a book. He organized the Indian Philosophical Congress and at its first session in Calcutta he had the satisfaction of installing Rabindranath Tagore as the first president. Earlier when Radhakrishnan had requested Tagore to write an introduction to his book on Tagore's philosophy, the poet had declined the task gently:

For about my philosophy I am like M. Jourdain who had been talking prose all his life without knowing it. It may tickle my vanity to be told that my writings carry dissolved in their stream pure gold of philosophical speculation and that gold bricks can be made washing its sands and melting the precious fragments—but yet it is for the readers to find it out and it would be a perilous responsibility on my part to give assurance to seekers and stand guarantee for its realisation.

However, the day was not far off when Tagore would be universally acclaimed as the philosopher of the Religion of Man.

In 1927 Radhakrishnan represented Calcutta University at the Congress of Universities of the British Empire in London. On an invitation from the Principal of the Manchester College at Oxford, he delivered the Upton Lectures in which he cleared some of the mists of misunderstanding that dismissed Hinduism as illusionism, a hapless doctrine of fatalism and a rigid mass of ritualism. The Hinduism outlined by Radhakrishnan was as ancient as the books described it but also scientifically dynamic:

The Hindu attitude to the Vedas is one of trust tempered by criticism, trust because the beliefs and forms which helped our fathers are likely to be of use to us also; criticism because, however valuable the testimony of past ages may be, it cannot deprive the present age of its right to inquire and sift the evidence. Precious as are the echoes of God's voice in the souls of men of long ago, our regard for them must be tempered by the recognition of the truth that God has never finished the revelation of His wisdom and love. Besides, our interpretation of religious experience must be in conformity with the findings of science. As knowledge grows, our theology develops. Only those parts of the tradition which are logically coherent are to be accepted as superior to the evidence of the senses and not the whole tradition.

This approach certainly electrified the distinguished audience. The lectures published as *The Hindu View of Life* later went into several editions and proved to be of lasting influence in the lives of many Westerners like L. P. Jacks and J. B. S. Haldane.

After his work at the Congress of Universities was over, Radhakrishnan visited the United States. He delivered the Haskell Lectures at Chicago and attended the International Congress of Philosophy at Harvard where he spoke on the role of philosophy in the history of civilization. He mesmerized his audiences with a judicious mixture of irony and humour while expounding the most obtruse philosophical problems in sonorous English garnished with Sanskrit phrases. Radhakrishnan's first visit across the black waters was literally a *vijaya yatra*.

When a triumphant Radhakrishnan returned to India, he found himself caught in the meshes of campus politics for the Vice-chancellor, Jadunath Sarkar was resented by the teaching staff. Radhakrishnan himself was fearlessly outspoken in his criticism of governmental interference in academic affairs. He had his teaching to do as also administrative work as the President of the Postgraduate Council. He was elected to the syndicate of the University and was an important member of the University Organization Committee.

But scholarship held the prime place and he could not rest on his oars just because the *Indian Philosophy* volumes had achieved a tremendous success. The best was yet to be! Some of the finest

work from Radhakrishnan began appearing now: *The Religion We Need*, *Kalki or the Future of Civilization*, and *The Heart of Hindustan*, he delivered the Hibbert Lectures at the universities of Manchester and London. These lectures which attracted large audiences were published as *An Idealist View of Life*. The book went into several editions and according to Dr. Gopal, "in the thirties Radhakrishnan became almost a cult figure in Europe and America".

Dr. C. R. Reddy who had been instrumental in getting Radhakrishnan into the Mysore University, invited him now to the Andhra University to deliver its first convocation address in 1927. Four years later Radhakrishnan became the Vice-chancellor of the Andhra University at Waltair. By now he was deeply interested in the problems of university education and this was a good chance to put his ideals into practice. With commendable ease, he went about his task to build an institution of excellence. The idyllic village of Waltair presented an Ashram-like atmosphere. The first task was to organise honours and postgraduate courses. The institution was to be free from governmental interference. Radhakrishnan managed to gather some very fine teachers for the science and arts faculties and roped in eminent personalities as C. V. Raman and M. Visweswarayya to help draft the syllabi for science and technology. He encouraged research by sanctioning advance increments. He used the model of Oxford in planning the residential university and even set up an employment bureau for students graduating out of the university's portals. He invited Rabindranath Tagore to come and spend some days in the campus and deliver special lectures. He strengthened the library and to this day the strong foundations laid by Radhakrishnan have endured in several wings of the university.

In 1936 Radhakrishnan returned to England for three years as the the Spalding Professor of Eastern Religions in the Oxford University. The professors, the students and also lay men loved him for his insightful lectures on comparative religion. Hence he was in great demand as a speaker and was invited to address churches, chapels and synagogues. He delivered the British Academy's Master Mind lecture on Buddha in 1937. While there was tremendous enthusiasm for his lectures in England, his fame was received with pride by Indians back home. Mahatma Gandhi, at that time still leading an enslaved nation wrote to Radhakrishnan

with a sense of fulfilment:

My experience makes me more and more convinced that we have not done justice to the inheritance left to us by our ancestors. We have been too lazy to understand its value for us and the world. I am glad therefore that you are successfully trying to interpret ancient Indian wisdom to the West.

By now Radhakrishnan's admiration for Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru had deepened. He never lost a chance to refer to them in an appreciative voice when delivering important speeches. Even when addressing a university convocation he did not hide his patriotic sentiments. He was for India's political independence and totally against armed repression. With his commanding position as a highly respected scholar in India and England, Radhakrishnan tried to impress upon the Secretary of State the need to listen to Gandhi. He went to South Africa in 1939 and spread the message of India's ancient wisdom to strengthen the morale of the embattled Indian settlers there. His comparatist approach brought out the affinities between Hinduism and Christianity so powerfully that an enthusiastic admirer wanted the learned professor to initiate a new world religion!

The outbreak of the World War brought him back to India. Presently he was appointed Vice-chancellor of Benaras University. He was not quite enthusiastic at first, but Malaviya and Gandhi favoured his taking up the onerous task. With his flair for widening the parameters of thought, he soon gave a larger definition for the term 'Hindu' in the institution's name. He established a chair of Islamic studies in the University and made it possible for women to take up Vedic studies.

These were no easy times for heads of premier institutions who had to face the contrary pulls of a powerful political movement for independence and the equally adamant power structure of the ruling elite. Radhakrishnan never concealed his patriotic sentiments and admiration for the leaders of the Indian National Congress; but as the academic head, he had to struggle tirelessly to protect the students from official wrath. Radhakrishnan rose to the occasion magnificently and his stature was a definite help. On one occasion, Michael Nethersole who had been placed in charge of the disturbed districts of the United Provinces openly rejected

the Governor Sir Maurice Hallett's advice to deal with Radhakrishnan firmly and is said to have exclaimed: "Your Excellency, you may be the Governor of the province, but can you ever hope to be a Fellow of the British Academy and of All Souls?"

Radhakrishnan also strengthened the academic life of Banaras Hindu University with his vote for excellence in the choice of university teaching staff and management of university administration. He kept up a busy schedule of lecturing too and delivered several Presidential and Convocation addresses throughout India which raised the listeners to a higher, more idealistic plane of consciousness.

After India became independent, at an age when most people think of restful retirement, Radhakrishnan cheerfully accepted challenging tasks. As the Chairman of the Universities Commission, he led a team of ten educational luminaries including Zakir Husain, Meghnad Saha and Lakshmanaswamy Mudaliar to visit the twenty-five universities in India and prepared a Report which remains one of the pillars of modern Indian education. The analysis of the problems facing these institutes of higher education and the proposals to improve educational standards was peerless and unexceptionable. It is unfortunate that purposive action did not result and most of the recommendations have gathered dust.

In 1949 Radhakrishnan became India's ambassador to Soviet Russia. A happy choice on the part of Jawaharlal Nehru, for the philosopher-statesman was the right person to rise above the fumes of the cold war. Stalin was not unhappy either and he held the scholar in great respect for his genuine concern to usher in global peace through *detente*. Stalin is reported to have commented after his first interview with the Indian Ambassador: "This man speaks from a bleeding heart, not like an ordinary ambassador". Though as an ambassador Radhakrishnan had heavy commitments (the Korean War, Soviet wheat shipments to India to tide over a famine), he continued to teach at Oxford and write scholarly tones. As R. Venkataraman says, "Kremlin or Kasi, Radhakrishnan's lamp of scholarship burned equally and steadily."

Radhakrishnan was elected the Vice-President of India in 1952. He presided over the Rajya Sabha with great distinction and received spontaneous cooperation from all the members. The Bharat Ratna was conferred on him in 1954. He became President

of India in 1962.

It was during his Presidentship that India was dealt a cruel blow by the Chinese aggression. However, Radhakrishnan's presence, his words of comfort and courage, kept up the Indian's morale for he plucked out of the terrible deep, a sense of purpose for the nation:

Owing to the difficult terrain and numerical superiority of the Chinese, we suffered military reverses. These have opened our eyes to the realities of the situation. We are now aware of our inadequacies and are alive to the needs of the present and the demands of the future. The country has developed a new purpose, a new will.

There were other shocks to come for Radhakrishnan. He lost his close friend, Jawaharlal Nehru in 1964. One can feel the deep anguish that underlies every sentence he spoke immediately after the irreparable loss:

By his own powerful and vibrant voice, which we will not hear any more, he created, moulded and inspired a whole generation of Indians, kindling in them a loyalty to the first principles which he held so dear. It is not enough to have great ideals. We have to work for their achievement. Time is the essence of the situation and Nehru had a great regard for the sanctity of time. The pitiless exactions of time take no denial and so the great leader has fallen.

If during the Chinese aggression Radhakrishnan had to strengthen the spirit of Indians not to give in to despair, 1965 brought another challenge to Radhakrishnan's philosophical statesmanship. The Pakistan War could have turned our heads with the euphoria of victory. But Radhakrishnan's correct words put the victory in proper perspective:

Pakistan assumed that India was too weak or too afraid or too proud to fight. India, though naturally disinclined to take to arms, felt the necessity to defend herself when attacked. Pakistan also assumed that communal disturbances would occur in the country and in the resulting chaos she could have her way. Her miscalculations must have come to her as a rude shock.

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Before the nation could recover from the loss of Nehru and the shockwaves of a regular war, Lal Bahadur Shastri died suddenly. But Radhakrishnan's presence was as always, reassuring. The Indian democracy did not falter for a moment. For no other nation in the world could be proud of possessing such an international authority on philosophy as its political head. These were glorious days for the Indian polity.

Radhakrishnan retired to a well-earned rest in Madras and continued to give intellectual leadership to eminent bodies like the Sahitya Akademi and the PEN All-India Centre. He was conferred the Fellowship of the Akademi in 1968 and awarded the Templeton Prize for progress in Religion in 1975. He passed away on 17 April, 1975.



# 3

## BIOGRAPHER

Essentially an interpreter of philosophy and religion, Radhakrishnan nevertheless secures a firm place in the field of Indian biography. As an expounder of Indian philosophy to the West which was largely uninformed or misinformed about it, Radhakrishnan knew that first of all, he had to make his subject attractive. With India's rich mytho-history on hand as well as the presence of great contemporaries, he had no problem. Thus, though it was Hindu ethics and the doctrine of Vedanta that drew him to Rabindranath Tagore first, the book on the poet is much more than that.

*The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore* was Radhakrishnan's first book. Tagore was then at the apex of his reputation as a Nobel Laureate. And yet the Professor succeeded in chaining the poet into the confines of a philosophical disquisition! He was not happy when critics abroad insinuated that Tagore had been inspired by Christianity. Radhakrishnan's book proved that Tagore's philosophical ancestry harked back to the Vedas and the Upanishads. Indeed, Tagore's advent was God's seal of approval for the future humanity: he was "one of the few representatives of the universal man to whom the future of the world belongs". This assertion of self-confidence placing a contemporary Indian on the highest pedestal carried the day. This was not dry philosophy but soul-stirring oration and the West liked it.

It was certainly a signal honour to our nation when Radhakrishnan was asked to deliver the British Academy Lecture in June, 1938. Radhakrishnan made an incandescent choice for the subject: Gautama Buddha. As a Hindu who had turned to the

well-springs of his tradition because of the denigration of India's religion by some foreign missionaries, and as a student of Sanskrit, one would have expected the choice of a Shankara or Ramanuja for his lecture. But Gautama Buddha? The rebel against Vedic religions who spoke in Pali and whose religion had almost ceased to breathe in India?

And yet, what a master-stroke to mesmerize the Western audience that had been drawn to Buddha's life in 1879 through Sir Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*! It was the *life* that had captured the attention of the West which found it comparable to the life of Christ. To the Westerners who were uneasy with the mysterious East, here was someone they could understand. As Eusebio L. Rodrigues says: "The solution offered by the Buddha was practical rather than metaphysical and had an instant impact on the disillusioned of the time."

In the next fifty years there was a perceptible flowering of Buddhist influence in the West thanks to the Theosophical Society, the Mahabodhi Society, the Parliament of Religions at Chicago, Lafcadio Hearn and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. The time was come now to reveal Buddha as a major pillar of India's *sanatana dharma*. As Sarvepalli Gopal, Radhakrishnan's son and biographer says, Radhakrishnan could now use an authoritative pulpit to proclaim that the Buddha was "a reformer of the Hindu faith rather than a breakaway innovator, and that his silence on ultimate problems implied neither agnosticism nor atheism but a refusal to speak of the Absolute of which he was aware because it was not directly relevant to ethical ways of living."

The lecture was delivered *ex tempore*. Radhakrishnan did not even use notes. He had assessed his audience intelligently. There was to be metaphysical speculation but that was kept in the background. The vision that arose in the hall was a royal prince becoming a mendicant, a rebel who takes on a powerful priesthood with nonchalant ease, a renunciate who readily bears the cross of suffering for saving humanity. Truly a Christ but who had lived five hundred years earlier.

Radhakrishnan goes straight to his subject and when he speaks the opening words with a sense of finality, there is no need for hesitant amblings to justify the choice of a Buddhist theme by a Hindu philosopher:

In Gautama the Buddha we have a master mind from the East, second to none so far as the influence on the thought and life of the human race is concerned, and sacred to all as the founder of a religious tradition whose hold is hardly less wide and deep than any other. He belongs to the history of the world's thought, to the general inheritance of all cultivated men; for, judged by intellectual integrity, moral earnestness, and spiritual insight, he is undoubtedly one of the greatest figures in history.

The shrewd orator refers to "one of the greatest figures in *history*, not *legend*. He knows his audience prefers time-bound facts, and the choice of this word assures the listeners that they have something firm to hold to. Buddha's life is then taken up for detailed treatment and we gain a purposive summary in effective prose. The miraculous is firmly if politely given short shrift. Even the crucial attack of Mara is suggested as a psychological experience. When such legendary occurrences are vital for the movement of the story, Radhakrishnan comes up with a Western parallel and there is immediately a comparatist illumination. Of Brahma's advice to Buddha:

This means, perhaps, that, as he was debating within himself as to what he should do, he received a warning, somewhat similar to that delivered by the demon of Socrates, against withdrawal from life."

What more does an open, liberal society want but Radhakrishnan's assurance that there is nothing esoteric in the Buddha's teaching:

In many of his discourses he is represented as arguing with his interlocutors in a more or less Socratic manner, and persuading them insensibly to accept positions different from those from which they started. He would not let his adherents refuse the burden of spiritual liberty. They must not abandon the search for truth by accepting an authority. They must be free men able to be a light and a help to themselves.

A discerning audience could not escape Radhakrishnan's proddings either. At a time when missionary activity was quite

widespread in India, Radhakrishnan offered thought-provoking matter:

Conversion by compulsion was unknown to him. Practice, not belief, was the foundation of his system. He wished to create a temper and a habit. We are unhappy because of our foolish desires. To make ourselves happy all that is necessary is to make ourselves a new heart and see with new eyes. If we suppress evil thoughts and cultivate good ones, a bad unhappy mind can be made into a good happy one. The Buddha is not concerned with changes of creed, he sits by the sacred fire of a Brahmin and gives a discourse on his views without denouncing his worship.

Radhakrishnan prefers not to go into tiresome biographical details for the sake of exotic colouration. He is interested in comparative religion for getting his ideas to pave the way for human unity:

The quiet end of the Buddha contrasts vividly with the martyr's deaths of Socrates and Jesus. All the three undermined, in different degrees, the orthodoxies of their time. As a matter of fact, the Buddha was more definitely opposed to Vedic orthodoxy and ceremonialism than was Socrates to the State religion of Athens, or Jesus to Judaism, and yet he lived till eighty, gathered a large number of disciples, and founded a religious Order in his own life-time. Perhaps, the Indian temper of religion is responsible for the difference in the treatment of unorthodoxies.

Radhakrishnan's *Mahatma Gandhi: Reflections on his Life and Work* was published in 1939. As the sub-title indicates, the book is not a mere homage to a great political figure for "the greatness of Gandhi is more in his holy living than in his heroic struggles". After all, it needs a para-human self-control to remain unaffected by power when one enters politics. And politics combined with religion and social science could prove lethal to one's equanimity. Radhakrishnan admires Gandhi precisely for this equipoise, a trait so characteristic of himself. Gandhi's pursuit of Truth fascinated him, as when the Mahatma declared:

To see the universal and all-pervading Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love meanest of creation as oneself. And a man who aspires after that cannot afford to keep out of any field of life.

Radhakrishnan himself could not confine his activities within the walls of the Academe and it is significant that he called his autobiographical fragment, *My Search for Truth*. Is not every life groping towards Truth, however unconsciously?

All the same Radhakrishnan the biographer is never the blind adulator. Gandhi's prescription of universal sexual restraint is rejected as not only unrealistic but a positive misunderstanding of the phenomenon of sex:

The sexual act is not a mere pleasure of the body, a purely carnal act, but is a means by which love is expressed and life perpetuated. It becomes evil, if it harms others or if it interferes with a person's spiritual development, but neither of these conditions is inherent in the act itself. The act by which we live, by which love is expressed and the race continued is not an act of shame or sin.

However, Radhakrishnan does not draw close to the several controversies that have trailed the Mahatma. The outline is clear, so why worry about the details? Let us be thankful, Radhakrishnan seems to say, for the gift of such a fine leader in these difficult times:

To be true, to be simple, to be pure and gentle of heart, to remain cheerful and contented in sorrow and danger, to love life and not to fear death, to serve the Spirit and not to be haunted by the spirits of the dead, nothing better has ever been taught or lived since the world first began.

The same thankfulness pervades in the description of Jawaharlal Nehru as "a great emancipator of the human race, as one who has given all his life and energy to the freeing of men's minds from political bondage, economic slavery, social oppression and cultural stagnation"

# 4

## INTERPRETER OF PHILOSOPHY

It is as a brilliant interpreter of philosophy that Radhakrishnan is known all over the world. The original meaning of philosophy in Greek meant 'love of wisdom'. This succinctly describes Radhakrishnan's approach. He was primarily a lover of wisdom and it hardly mattered that such wisdom originated in the East or the West. If there were jarring notes that led to hair-splitting theology, he simply steered clear of them and proceeded on the grand trunk road. For he had realised that the world granary of religions and philosophies contained mind-boggling riches and one should not waste one's lifetime in dry disputes. The crying need of the hour was to make the rich past intelligible to the aspiring present, and gather into one whole the structures that had been compartmentalised through several centuries.

This attitude gained for the world of scholarship a 'popular' writer and speaker in English on Indian philosophy for the first time. The two volumes of *Indian Philosophy* (1921, 1927) were truly epoch-making. The majority of educated Indians who had neither a traditional education nor Sanskrit scholarship became aware of their philosophical heritage through this publication. Radhakrishnan scrupulously avoided any show of vain scholarship. He did not highlight the differences that abound in India's philosophical systems. In introducing Indian philosophy, he was concerned with presenting a united front to the West and hence never tired of underlining the spiritual unity of the various metaphysical systems that had blossoms on the Indian soil. The substantial work of deep scholarship had an inspirational effect on the reader. One such was Jawaharlal Nehru who candidly confessed

in 1944, when he was in prison:

Some days ago, I thought suddenly of reading Dr. Radhakrishnan's *Indian Philosophy*. I intended reading the introduction and glancing through the other chapters. But having begun it, I grew rather fascinated at this adventure of ideas and now I am entangled in it.

Jawaharlal Nehru acknowledged his deep debt to *Indian Philosophy* in writing *The Discovery of India*. Indeed, Radhakrishnan's volumes were neither too diffuse and unmanageable nor too compact and selective, says Prof. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar. The right size, the right approach, the right style, possessing the double merit as "an interpretation of Indian philosophy from within... also an exposition of Indian philosophical thought in an idiom at once intelligible and attractive to the West." Here "thought and feeling were both adroitly pressed into service, and vast comprehension went hand in hand with a lucidity and clarity that one seldom finds together in philosophical writing."

After *Indian Philosophy* was published we could converse easily about the Vedic beginnings and the Upanishadic metaphysics; the materialism of the Lokayatas, the Pluralistic Realism of the Jainas, the Ethical idealism of early Buddhism, the Theism of the *Bhagavad Gita*; the many schools of Buddhism; the Logical Realism of the Nyaya, the Atomistic Pluralism of the Vaisesika, the Samkhya system, Patanjali's Yoga, the Purva Mimamsa, the Brahmasutras; Sankara's Advaita, Ramanuja's Theism; Madhva's Dualism; Saktism, Saiva Siddhanta and the Vaishnavism of Vallabha and Chaitanya. Lest the reader shy away from the numerous systems, Radhakrishnan hastened to assure him of the basic oneness of Indian philosophy:

They are adapted to the needs of the slow-witted (*mandadhikari*), the average intellect (*madhyamadhikari*) and the strong-minded (*uttamadhikari*) respectively. The different views are hewn out of one stone and belong to one whole, integral, entire and self-contained. No scheme of the universe can be regarded as complete if it has not the different sides of logic and physics, psychology and ethics, metaphysics and religion. Every system of thought developed in India

offered it's own theory of knowledge, interpretation of nature and mind, ethics and religion.

*Indian Philosophy* opens with a poetic evocation of the land which was to inspire a rich culture. The Himalayan ranges and the seas on three sides offered security. A generous nature granted the needed leisure to cultivate the finer graces of living. India produced its own philosophical thought and was not influenced by the ancient civilizations of the West. It is unlike any other philosophy for it is held in thrall by the spiritual motive. And it has grown out of life and has never been away from it. Indian philosophy is also the most tolerant. It has never jettisoned reason, says Radhakrishnan:

It is a strange paradox, and yet nothing more than the obvious truth that while the social life of an individual is bound by the rigours of caste, he is free to roam in the matter of opinion. Reason freely questions and criticises the creeds in which men are born. That is why the heretic, the sceptic, the unbeliever, the rationalist and the freethinker, the materialist and the hedonist all flourish in the soil of India.

Indian philosophy cannot be viewed in clinical isolation and a historical approach is necessary to outline the 'growth' of the systems. Radhakrishnan makes a few broad divisions: the Vedic Period (1500 B.C.–600 B.C.), the Epic Period (600 B.C.–A.D. 200), the Sutra and Scholastic Periods (from A.D. 200).

The Vedic Period includes the hymns of the Vedas and the Upanishads. The various traditional interpretations of the hymns are taken into account and Radhakrishnan glances at some modern interpretations as well. The intuitive interpretation propounded by Sri Aurobindo is referred to by Radhakrishnan. But though he is reverential towards "the great Indian scholar-mystic" Radhakrishnan does not hesitate to hold to his own opinion:

When we find that this view is, opposed not only to the modern views of European scholars but also to the traditional interpretations of Sayana and the system of Purva-Mimamsa, the authority on Vedic interpretation, we must hesitate to follow the lead of Mr. Aurobindo Ghosh, however ingenious his point of view may be. It is not likely that the whole progress



of Indian thought has been a steady falling away from the highest spiritual truths of the Vedic hymns. It is more in accordance with what is known of the general nature of human development, and easier to concede that the later religions and philosophies arose out of the crude suggestions and elementary moral ideas and spiritual aspirations of the early mind than that they were a degradation of an original perfection.

However, Radhakrishnan does not view the hymns as nothing more than crude productions. He finds "the light of unaided reason" at work on the poetical souls of the early Vedic Aryans who had without doubt the same ancestry as that of the Zoroastrians of Iran. When writing about the Vedic pantheon, he provokes the reader to intellectual striving by projecting Occidental counterparts. Thus Varuna the god of sky is presented along with Greek Ouranos and the Ahuramazda of the Zoroastrians. While gods like Varuna and Agni can be easily described, how does one get the concept of 'Rta' across? Comparatist terminology gives a big hand here:

Rta denotes the order of the world. Everything that is ordered in the universe has Rta for its principle. It corresponds to the universals of Plato. The world of experience is a shadow or reflection of the Rta, the permanent reality which remains unchanged in all the welter of mutation. The universal is prior to the particular, and so the Vedic seer thinks that Rta exists before the manifestation of all phenomena.

Quotations from Hegel and Wordsworth give further help to the Western reader. Writing about the Vedic Surya, Radhakrishnan promptly refers to Plato's references to sun-worship in *Republic*. Usha (the Greek Eos) reminds him of Ruskin's quotable quote: "There is no solemnity so deep to a rightly thinking creature as that of the dawn." Aditi, the Mother of gods is seen as Anaximander's Infinite while Matarisvan invokes Prometheus and Soma the Greek Dionysos. There is never a dull moment as the grand study limns the progress of Vedic polytheism towards monotheism. Never a lack of colour as the entire Vedic cosmology

is reflected in the argument. Also the rise of caste. Priesthood which had been a separate profession to safeguard the Vedic anthologies now became a separate caste. With the introduction of the caste system, there was a clear loss of value-based life. "It (the caste system) tended to suppress free thought and retarded the progress of speculation. The moral standard sank. The individual who transgressed the rules of caste was a rebel and an outcaste. The Sudras were excluded from the highest religion. Mutual contempt increased."

In keeping with his view of a progressing religious and philosophical way of life, Radhakrishnan saw the Upanishadic Age as a definite rise in the spiritual consciousness of the people. It was certainly frustrating for him not to know about the personal lives of the Upanishadic thinkers for such historical knowledge would definitely aid the study of the works as philosophies that had emerged from a religious life. Particularly because, according to Radhakrishnan, the Upanishads are not favourable to the Vedas.

Radhakrishnan studies the Upanishads as metaphysics and ethics. The search for the ultimate Reality must start with the search for the self. The analysis of the self by Upanishads has been variously interpreted by scholars and theologians throughout India's spiritual history. What *is* self?

The Upanishads refuse to identify the self with the body, or the series of mental states or the presentation continuum or the stream of consciousness. The self cannot be a relation which requires a ground of relations, nor a connexion of contents, which is unintelligible without an agent who connects. We are obliged to accept the reality of a universal consciousness which ever accompanies the contents of consciousness and persists even when there are no contents. This fundamental identity, which is the presupposition of both self and not-self, is called the Atman. None can doubt its reality.

The self or Atman is the subjective reality and the Brahman is the objective. Brahman is Ananda. Though there is no biographical material for the Upanishadic seers available, the little that is available is put to good use by Radhakrishnan. The detailed discussions between Yajnavalkya and his two wives, Maitreyi and

Gargi, are made use of to prove that moral life is a God-centred life, “a life of passionate love and enthusiasm for humanity, of seeking the infinite through the finite, and not a mere selfish adventure for small ends”. Radhakrishnan found in the Upanishadic seeking after the infinite the seeds of Buddhist monasticism:

The unbounded aspirations of the soul for the ideally beautiful, the specklessly pure, are not answered by the objects limited in space, time and the shackles of sense. Many men there are who wish to realise the ideal of an absolutely worthy existence in love of another being. So long as that being is another human self, localised in space and time, the ideal is never attained... Many there were who left wife and child, goods and chattels, and went out as mendicants, seeking the salvation for the souls in poverty and purity of life. These groups of ascetics, who burst the bonds that bound them to a home life, prepared the way for the monasticism of the Buddhists.

However, the stern puritanical systems reared by the Carvakas, Jainas and Buddhists that emphasised the ethical “failed to supply any nutriment to the deeper spiritual wants and emotions” of the common mass. People wanted something to hold on to and this is how the *ishta devata* concept evolved in the history of India’s religion and philosophy:

The Bhagavadgita where Krishna is represented as an incarnation of Vishnu as well as the Eternal Brahman of the Upanishads, the Pancharatra system, the Saivism for the Svetasvatara and other later Upanishads, and the Mahayana form of Buddhism, where Buddha becomes an eternal God, belong to this religious reaction.

Though Radhakrishnan expertly analyses the core of Jain philosophy by comparing its metaphysical scheme with Leibniz’s monadism and Bergson’s creative evolutionism, it is evident that his heart has been taken over by the personality of Gautama Buddha. Some of the finest portions of *Indian Philosophy* belong to his study of an atmosphere, in Buddhism the concrete

embodiment of thought in the life of man". For, Radhakrishnan did not believe in abstract armchair philosophy. Long before he gave the British Academy lecture on Buddha as a Master Mind, the first volume of *Indian Philosophy* offered unreserved homage to Buddha:

The great Buddha typifies for all time the soul of the East with its intense repose, dreamy gentleness, tender calm and deep love. He is known by several names: Sakyamuni, the sage of the Sakyas; Tathagata, he who has arrived at the truth.

Radhakrishnan views Buddha as a reformer and not the maker of a new religion. Buddhism is India's *sanatana dharma* cleared of its unwanted accretions and made suitable for the needs of the age. According to him, Gautama Buddha removed from the Upanishads their tangle with Vedic polytheism, pushed to the background the Upanishadic statements on the transcendent Reality and gave importance to their ethical universalism. "Early Buddhism, we venture to hazard a conjecture, is only a restatement of the thought of the Upanishads from a new standpoint." There are certainly many common things between the Upanishads and Buddhism like the indifference to Vedic authority, the Karma theory, the doctrine of the non-permanence of the world and the individual self and the possibility of attaining Realisation.

But unlike the Upanishadic teachers, the Buddha refused to speculate on metaphysical problems. This compels Radhakrishnan's admiration. When a religious reformer and spiritual head avoids commenting on the Ultimate, it could be a frustrating experience to his followers. Why was the Buddha silent? Did he feel uncertain or was he afraid?

Since Radhakrishnan could not dismiss Buddha as a vague dreamer or a hypocrite, he feels that the Buddha was silent because he did not repudiate the Upanishadic conception of the Brahman as the absolute realm. Only, he did not wish to use any category of the empirical existence to describe what really is the indescribable Absolute. The need of the hour was not such vain speculation to *prove* something which cannot be proved but to apply oneself to prove it through one's life:

So Buddha exhorted his followers to withdraw from the strife of systems and direct their attention to religion as the life and the way leading to the attainment of truth. Truth will work itself out in us, when we free ourselves from prejudices, let reality reflect itself in us and modify our very being. Truth is to be found in life itself. It is not a matter of learned controversy but a spiritual necessity.

But Buddha's latter day followers did exactly that and all over India there sprang up various schools of philosophy like the Sautrantikas, the Vaibhasikas, the Yogacharaś and the Madhyamikas. The time was thus made ripe for the advent of Shankara. The second volume of *Indian Philosophy* deals in extenso with various philosophical systems like Nyaya and Vaisesika. Thought here gets repeatedly blocked by the by-lanes of metaphysical sophistry but Radhakrishnan takes it all in his stride. There is a veritable shower of philosophical phraseology in Sanskrit which often suffocates the English language. The publisher's editor, Muirhead, did have a problem with this style of Radhakrishnan that insisted upon vast stretches of Sanskrit words and phrases in Roman script and diacritical marks for it gave the writing an exotic appearance besides raising printing costs. However, Stanley Unwin saw that the book had future potentialities and thus *Indian Philosophy* became a forerunner of the style now generally used by Indians expounding their classics.

Of all the systems studied in his book, the Advaita of Shankara, like Buddhism, is of special interest for this was the philosophy that Radhakrishnan took up for elaboration as his own philosophy of life later on. Radhakrishnan always averred that the religious-philosophical life is a *must* for our rising above the merely mundane in everyday affairs. But neither religion nor philosophy should become a hurdle to prevent man from advancement; a religion that did not take into account the changed circumstances of life will be a hindrance and not a help in one's spiritual advancement. So every age must restate the details without, of course, losing sight of the essentials in one's traditional heritage. Next to Buddha, it was Shankara who came closest to this view of Radhakrishnan.

When Shankara appeared on the scene, India was a cauldron of numerous creeds and denominations, superstitions and

hair-splitting metaphysics:

Sankara appeared, at one and the same time, as an eager champion of the orthodox faith and a spiritual reformer. He tried to bring back the age from the brilliant luxury of the Puranas to the mystic truth of the Upanishads. The power of the faith to lead the soul to the higher life became for him the test of its strength. He felt impelled to attempt the spiritual direction of his age by formulating a philosophy and religion which could satisfy the ethical and spiritual needs of the people better than the systems of Buddhism, Mimamsa and Bhakti. The theists were veiling the truth in a mist of sentiment. With their genius for mystical experience, they were indifferent to the practical concerns of life. The Mimamsaka emphasis on karma developed ritualism devoid of spirit. Virtue can face the dark perils of life and survive only if it be the fine flower of thought. The Advaita philosophy alone, in the opinion of Sankara, could do justice to the truth of the conflicting creeds.

Sankara's metaphysical formulation of Monism did not, of course, come in the way of his being a poet, a mystic and a political genius. "There have been few minds more universal than his." Radhakrishnan's fascination for Shankara's Advaita does not come in the way of his appreciating Ramanujacharya's Visishta-advaita. His contrastive analysis of the two spiritual luminaries is sheerly brilliant for the balance of ideas and phrases:

...The best qualities of each were the defects of the other. Sankara's apparently arid logic made his system unattractive religiously; Ramanuja's beautiful stories of the other world, which he narrates with the confidence of one who had personally assisted at the origination of the world, carry no conviction. Sankara's devastating dialectic, which traces all—God, man and the world—to one ultimate consciousness, produces not a little curling of the lips in the followers of Ramanuja. Sankara's followers outdo the master, and bring his doctrine perilously near atheistic mentalism.

When we go through the two volumes of *Indian Philosophy*

carefully, it is this adroit projection of the people behind the systems that strikes us as the powerful magnet in Radhakrishnan's presentation. After all, Indian philosophy was not the spewing out of documents by some super-computers. The thinkers and spiritual personalities are of as much interest to our study as the systems themselves. They are the meeting places of philosophy and religion. As Radhakrishnan says in the conclusion to the two volumes of *Indian Philosophy*:

The names of Vasishta and Visvamisra, Vajnavalkya and Gargi, Buddha and Mahavira, Gautama and Kanada, Kapila and Patanjali, Badarayana and Jaimini, Sankara and Ramanuja, are not merely themes for the historian but types of personality. With them philosophy is a world-view based on reflection and experience. Thought, when it thinks itself out to the end, becomes religion by being lived and tested by the supreme test of life. The discipline of philosophy is at the same time the fulfilment of a religious vocation.

Radhakrishnan wields a number of stylistic devices to keep the reader's interest unflagging. For instance, the whole of Jain philosophy is presented in a series of short sentences:

If deliverance is to be achieved, the lower matter is to be subdued by the higher spirit. When the soul is free from the weight which keeps it down, it rises up to the top of the universe where the liberated dwell. The radical conversion of the inner man is the way to freedom. The apparatus of morality is necessary to bring about the reformation of man's nature and prevent the formation of new karma. The way to nirvana lies through the three jewels (triratna) of faith in Jina, knowledge of his doctrine and perfect conduct."

While strewing Sanskrit words and phrases with a prodigal hand all over the pages, Radhakrishnan also makes use of appropriate quotes from English literature. Thus here he brings in Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* to underline Jain humanism and assures us that we are not absolutely helpless in the hands of a blind Fate:

We do not have absolute fatalism, for though karma

decides all, our present life, which is in our power, can modify the effects of the past. It is possible for us to evade the effects of karma by extraordinary exertions. Nor is there any interference by God. The austere heroes are blessed not because of the uncertain whims of a capricious God, but by the order of the universe of which they themselves are a part”.

When Indian philosophy was presented in such an attractive manner, no one could brush aside the Indian heritage anymore. *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* (1936) which Radhakrishnan edited along with Muirhead was the right follow-up for *Indian Philosophy* which had stopped at the Chaitanya movement. The days of great philosophers were not past and there were already significant thinkers like Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo and Bhagawan Das. *The Hindu View of Life* (1927) and *The Idealist View of Life* (1932) are eloquent presentations mainly of Advaita Vedanta. These were originally delivered as lectures to a Western audience and the very opening of *The Hindu View of Life* threw out a challenge:

The dictum that, if we leave aside the blind forces of nature, nothing moves in this world which is not Greek in its origin, has become a commonplace with us. But it is not altogether true. Half the world moves on independent foundations which Hinduism supplied. China and Japan, Tibet and Siam, Burma and Ceylon look to India as their spiritual home.

Radhakrishnan clarifies at the outset that the term originally was a territorial and not a credal appellation. And that Hinduism is “a vast complex, but subtly unified mass of spiritual thought and realisation”. He commented that despite the message of Hinduism that we improve our knowledge of God, the mass of Indians have “carefully protected superstitious rites and customs” in the name of toleration. He also sought to link Hindu philosophy with its Western counterpart quite often to make himself easily understood by the audience: “The *neti* of Yajnavalkya reminds us of the *nescio* of Bernard, of “the dim silence where all lovers lose themselves” of Ruysbroeck, of the negative descriptions of Dionysius the Areopagite, Eckart and Boehme.”



While such juxtapositions were generally welcomed, there were a few raised eyebrows too. P.T. Raju, for instance, criticised Radhakrishnan for incorporating elements from Western thought in his interpretations as if he had found Indian thought to be incomplete. Richard de Smet found Radhakrishnan's enthusiasm for personal intuition in Advaita erroneous:

Sankara held that *Sruti* is the only reliable *pramana* or source of truth concerning the Brahman. The *Sruti* has to be investigated by reason but no independent search by unaided reason can win the truth which *Sruti* alone can yield. Reasoning here is powerless unless it first accepts the authority of the *Sruti* and then acts as its handmaid to manifest its intelligibility. Sankara's *brahma-jijnasa* is a strong form of *srutivada* and is similar to the scripture-bound theology of Christianity or Islam.

But Radhakrishnan was attempting "to look upon our ancient faith with fresh eyes" and confessed that "his work at best will be a personal interpretation and not an impersonal survey". Presently, Radhakrishnan was in his element as an interpreter of philosophy in *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (1939) where he sought to prove that Western thought had been influenced by the East. His enormous reading overwhelms us page after page as he glides with effortless ease through Buddhism, vedantic Monism, Plotinus and St. Francis of Assisi. Looking upon the supreme gains in spiritual life achieved by the great men of the West and the East, a certainty grows in us that all this has not be in vain. These men and movements are steady advances towards a Greater Dawn for the whole of mankind:

Whatever the individual has done, the race, too, may and should eventually succeed in doing. When the incarnation of God is realised, not only in a few individuals but in the whole of humanity, we will have the new creation, the new race of men and women, mankind transformed, redeemed, and reborn, and a world created anew. This is the destiny of the world, the supreme spiritual ideal. It alone can rouse our deepest creative energies, rescue us from cold reason, inspire us with constructive passion, and unite us mentally, morally and spiritually in a world fellowship.

# 5

## INTERPRETER OF SCRIPTURES

Radhakrishnan's translation and interpretation of select Indian scriptures have been a great inspiration for millions all over the world. His translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* published in 1948 contained a long introduction, transliteration of the Sanskrit text in Roman script, English translation and detailed notes. The *Gita* has been commented upon by numerous scholars and devotees and was of particular significance during India's freedom struggle. Some of the new commentaries have become classics. Bal Gangadhar Tilak's *Gita Rahasya* in Marathi, Subramania Bharati's translation of the *Gita* into Tamil and Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita* in English sought to give a contemporary interpretation to the scripture without invalidating its eternal message. Radhakrishnan's which became a popular publication soon is dedicated to the memory of Mahatma Gandhi. Conscious of writing in a world which had become a global village thanks to the communications revolution, Radhakrishnan sought to make his book legible for the common reader all over the world. He stated in his preface:

The chief problem facing us today is the reconciliation of mankind. The *Gita* is especially suited for the purpose, as it attempts to reconcile varied and apparently antithetical forms of the religious consciousness and emphasizes the root conceptions of religion which are neither ancient nor modern but eternal and belong to the very flesh of humanity, past, present and future.

Though Radhakrishnan tries his best to present an

uncomplicated edition, the scholar in him strains at the leash and at the very start of the illuminating introductory essay he draws our attention to the *Gita* as the inspirer of the Mahayana Buddhist works, *Mahayanasraddhotpatti* and *Saddharmapundarika*. He quotes the German Sanskrit scholar's reference to *Gita* as "a work of imperishable significance" and Aldous Huxley's eulogising it as "the most systematic spiritual statement of the Perennial Philosophy". He then goes to the phraseology of the traditional commentators. The *Gita* is both metaphysics (*brahmavidya*) and ethics (*yogashastra*), and conveys the ancient wisdom (*prajna purani*). It is a crystallised reconciliation of the varied systems in vogue at the time of inditing it on the Kurukshetra battlefield: "the Vedic cult of sacrifice, the Upanishad teaching of the transcendent Brahman, the Bhagavata theism and tender piety, the Samkhya dualism and the Yoga meditation."

When trying to fix the context in which the *Gita* was written, Radhakrishnan refers to the speculations of a host of Western critics (Garbe, Farquhar, Hopkins, Holtzmann, Keith, Barnetter, Rudolf Otto and Schrader). For the purpose of translation and commentary, Radhakrishnan depends on Sankara. All classical commentators are taken into account when writing the introductory essay, and thus we have a full view of the *Gita* as it has appeared to Indians down the ages. Thus even when the Upanishads declare that the Supreme is Unthinkable, and the *Gita* is itself described as an Upanishad, the scripture brings the Supreme within a 'thinkable' ambit:

The emphasis of the *Gita* is on the Supreme as the personal God who creates the perceptible world by His nature (*prakriti*). He resides in the heart of every being; he is the enjoyer and lord of all sacrifices. He stirs our hearts to devotion and grants our prayers. He is the source and sustainer of values. He enters into personal relations with us in worship and prayer.

But why of all gods in the Hindu pantheon, Vishnu gets in here as the Supreme? Radhakrishnan goes to the root of Vishnu which is from *vis.* to pervade. Vishnu is the great pervader, the indwelling universal. The *Taittiriya* Vishnu and His aspects: "To Narayana we bring worship: to Vasudeva our meditations and in this may Vishnu

assist us". All the same, Radhakrishnan does not forget to remind us of the historicity of Krishna who appears in the *Chhandogya Upanishad* and the *Mahabharata*. Krishna Vasudeva is a recurring figure in Indian culture. As for the *Gita* tying up a historical figure with the Supreme God, Radhakrishnan says this is a familiar enough occurrence, for the fully awakened soul always finds itself one with the Universal Self. The historical Krishna might have been speaking on the battlefield, but he had every right to speak of himself as the Eternal:

The divinity claimed by Krishna is the common reward of all earnest spiritual seekers, he is not a hero who once trod the earth and has now left it, having spoken to His favourite friend and disciple, but is everywhere and in everyone of us, as ready to speak to us now as He ever was to any one else. He is not a bygone personality but the indwelling spirit, an object for our spiritual consciousness.

Such a view helps Radhakrishnan effortlessly tackle the problem of incarnation. In the age of science and technology when scepticism is widespread, the *avatara* theory will not gain credence. How explain the past, then? Actually there is a very valid approach:

The subjective and the objective processes of the world are only the expressions of the higher and lower natures of the Supreme; yet in whatever is glorious, beautiful and strong, God's presence becomes more manifest. When any finite individual develops spiritual qualities and shows large insight and charity, he sits in judgement on the world and starts a spiritual and social upheaval and we say that God is born for the protection of the good, the destruction of the evil and the establishment of the kingdom of righteousness... The *avatara* is the demonstration of man's spiritual resources and latent divinity. It is not so much the contraction of Divine majesty into the limits of the human frame as the exaltation of human nature to the level of Godhead by its union with the Divine.

The *avatara* idea, however, is not jettisoned by Radhakrishnan. He sees it as a descent of the Supreme into the physical as an inward illumination when "the embodied human consciousness is uplifted

into the unborn eternal". It is as if God has chosen to come within our embattled body and guide us to the goal. And God does not fail to guide when the aspirant is sincere, earnest and full of faith. As for *maya*, Radhakrishnan warns us against using it to mean *illusion*. *Maya* is only delusion:

The world is not an illusion, though by regarding it as a mere mechanical determination of nature unrelated to God, we fail to perceive its Divine essence. It then becomes a source of delusion.

The major reason for interpreting an ancient scripture to the modern man is to get him help to live in this world with dignity and meaningful purposiveness. A broken image may be able to reflect the reality correctly, but is of no use as a guide to overcome the broken existence. As Radhakrishnan says, the problem facing man is "the integration of his personality", to place in a harmonious unity the soul and the body. According to him, the *Gita* looks upon the body and the soul as but the two aspects of the Supreme. There is no need to destroy the body to affirm the soul.

The Way of Knowledge and the Way of Devotion as described in the *Gita* are brought to us with great clarity. But it is Radhakrishnan's account of the Way of Action that attracts us most probably because he is able to relate it exactly to the context. Whatever the metaphysical formulations contained in Krishna's advice, the scene is etched deep in our heart of a despondent Arjuna's problem and how his guide solves the problem. Krishna the Guide does not dismiss the world as an illusion nor does he condemn action as a necessary evil:

He recommends the full active life of man in the world with the inner life anchored in the Eternal Spirit. The *Gita* is therefore a mandate for action. It explains what a man ought to do not merely as a social being but as an individual with a spiritual destiny. It deals fairly with the spirit of renunciation as well as with the ceremonial piety of the people which are worked into its code of ethics.

In tune with modern thinking, Radhakrishnan assures us that "the *Gita* asks us to live in the world and save it". As for the

problem of destructive action, he says that in the period of upheaval, one cannot escape from taking part in such action. As long as one can cultivate detachment from results and dedication to God, one remains a 'perpetual sannyasin'. Sankara too found no contradiction between practical work and spiritual freedom.

What about the Goal of life? Radhakrishnan prefers to leave the problem to the future and does not consider the Absolute as the Anandamaya consciousness which is our goal. Probably it would mean the next step in evolution or creation of a new cosmos, or just the reign of Absolute, who knows?

When the purpose of the cosmos is reached, when the kingdom of God is established, when it is on earth as it is in heaven, when all individuals acquire the wisdom of spirit and are superior to the levels of being in which birth and death take place, then this cosmic process is taken over into that which is beyond all manifestations.

Though four decades have now passed by since Radhakrishnan's *Gita* was published, it remains a great favourite with the discerning because of the effective translation, pointed notes and quotations from Western philosophers. One is astonished at the several identical strands of thought from all over the world. For instance, the eleventh verse of Chapter Two brings us Plotinus who considers 'battle horror as a stage-show: in all the changing doom of life, it is not the true man, the inner soul that grieves and laments but merely the phantasm of the man, the outer man, playing his part on the boards of the world.

Radhakrishnan is also always on the guard lest readers mistake the *Gita* as theistic abracadabra. The most important trial for our belief occurs during the *viswarupa darsana* when Krishna is transformed into a cosmic figure. The *Gita* daubs colourful paint while describing the astonishing occurrence. However, the insinuating voice of Radhakrishnan is close to our ear: "The vision is not a myth or a legend but spiritual experience". There is no need to be apologetic to the Western audience either because he comes up promptly with a couple of such occurrences in the history of Western religious experience: "The transfiguration of Jesus, the vision of Saul on the Damascus Road, Constantine's vision of the

Cross bearing the motto 'In this sign, conquer', Joan of Arc's visions are experiences akin to the vision of Arjuna."

Comparing the vision to a mystic experience, Radhakrishnan says such experiences are a help but they are not the goal. These experiences must be used to gain a permanent faith and transform our personality. This faith is the movement of surrender to the Supreme. Radhakrishnan's interpretation of the *charama sloka* (Ch. XVIII, 66) deserves special mention for it takes us to the doctrine of grace. Without the help from beyond (call it grace, intuition, what you will), man cannot gain perfection. Not by mere knowledge, nor action:

It is an unreserved surrender to the Supreme who takes us up and raises us to our utmost possible perfection. Though the Lord conducts the world according to fixed laws and expects us to conform to the law of right action based on our nature and station in life, if we take shelter in Him, we transcend all these. A seemingly outer help must come to man, for his soul cannot deliver itself from the trap in which it is caught by its own effort. When we wait on God without words and desire only His taking hold of us, the help comes.

Lucid and authoritative, Radhakrishnan's interpretation sometimes takes the help of so many quotations from outside (Evelyn Underhill, *The Bible*, Wordsworth) that one has the feeling of having stumbled upon an anthology of mysticism. It was not that he was a literary impresario but Hindu Vedanta was so vast and it was hard not to seek to convey a good deal to an audience that had welcomed the onrush of his style in *Indian Philosophy* decades earlier. But such quotation-studded interpretation never obfuscated the subject. In his hands, the scriptures became alive as the sublimities of thought were simplified to help the understanding of the common man. Though there is philosophical analysis, it is the warm glow of the scripture's applicability to our condition that engages Radhakrishnan's attention all the time. *Gita* the scripture is, of course, an adoration of the Supreme but it is also a practical code of conduct to realise human unity:

Anchored in the timeless foundation of our spiritual existence, the freed soul, the eternal individual works for the

jivaloka; while possessing individuality of body, life and mind he yet retains the universality of spirit. Whatever action he does, his constant communion with the Supreme is undisturbed.

For, by following the scripture, one can be transformed into the Omnipotent's pioneer personality, the human nature could become divine and engage itself in the transformation of the earth nature into a diviner living. This is true freedom:

His whole nature is subdued to the universal vision, is wrought to splendour and irradiated by the spiritual light. His body, life and mind are not dissolved but are rendered pure and becomes the means and mould of the Divine Light, and he becomes his own masterpiece. His personality is raised to its fulness, its maximum expression, pure and free, buoyant and unburdened. All his activities are for the holding together of the world, *cikirsur lokasamgrahama* the liberated souls take upon themselves the burden of the redemption of the whole world.

Radhakrishnan found this *Gita* ideal in the Buddha's personality. Apart from writing about Buddhism in detail in *Indian Philosophy* and choosing the Buddha as his subject for the British Academy lecture, Radhakrishnan also published an edition of the *Dhammapada* with a detailed introduction and notes.

Traditionally, the very best among Indian teachers have taken up the challenging task of interpreting three scriptures known as *prasthanas trayi*: the *Brahma Sutras*, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the Upanishads. Sankara, Ramanuja and Madhva Acharyas readily come to our mind in this context.

In our own time, Radhakrishnan has achieved this triune scholarship. His *Indian Philosophy* has more than 150 pages devoted to the Upanishads. *The Principal Upanishads* (1953) brings to us a detailed introduction that extols these scriptures as indispensable for gaining a universal outlook. Less concerned with the historical context that needed a constant juxtaposition with the Vedas and the Vedanta writings when discussing them in *Indian Philosophy*, Radhakrishnan is now more concerned with the text and is understandably apologetic about his translation:



Words convey ideas but they do not always express moods. In the Upanishads we find harmonics of speech which excite the emotions and stir the soul. I am afraid that it has not been possible for me to produce in the English translation the richness of melody, the warmth of spirit, the power of enchantment that appeals to the ear, heart and mind. I have tried to be faithful to the originals, sometimes even at the cost of elegance. I have given the texts with all their nobility of sound and the feeling of the numinous.

But Radhakrishnan is full of his subject and has true linguistic sensitivity. We have no complaints and are in fact caught up in the steady roll of his English that makes difficult passages sound convincingly understandable through generous explanations. For the Western reader, there are added comparatist props from Occidental philosophy. As when he explains the eleventh verse of Mandukya Upanishad which refers to dreamless sleep, *prajna*:

This verse affirms what Parmenides, Plato and Hegel assumed that the opposition of being and not-being is the original duality from the ontological standpoint. Being is *a priori* to non-being. The negation presupposes what it negates. Though being is *a priori* to non-being, being itself cannot be conceived without an opposite. Being, could never be being without being opposed to non-being. But there is something which is *a priori* to the opposition of being and non-being and that is the unity which transcends both.

Before we recover, the next verse introduces Lao Tze's Tao and Plotinus' *Enneads*. All this spread indicate the wide tolerance cultivated by Radhakrishnan in matters philosophical and religious. Surely, his was a movement towards the universal man. *Ekam sat viprah bahudah vadanti* (The Truth is One; the learned ones give it many names).

The *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Dhammapada* and the Upanishads have colourful backdrops in terms of real-life stories and Radhakrishnan does not ignore them. The battle of Kurukshetra, the renunciation of Buddha, the supernal personalities like Uddalaka Aruni and Raikwa the cart-puller provide the needed emotive background. The *Brahma Sutras*, however, have no such advantage. The 555

Sutras (brief sentences) are quite opaque. As Radhakrishnan says in *Indian Philosophy*:

They refuse, Proteus-like, to be caught in any definite shape. Their teaching is interpreted sometimes in the bright hues of theism, sometimes in the grey abstractions of absolutism.

But Radhakrishnan knows how to get the reader's attention from the very beginning. The preface to *The Brahma Sutra : The Philosophy of Spiritual Life* (1960) seeks to link metaphysical speculation with one's everyday life. Philosophy—at any rate Indian philosophy—can never be a mere academic exercise:

This book is not a product of purely scholarly interests. It has grown out of vital urges and under the pressure of a concrete historical situation. We are in the midst of one of the great crisis in human history, groping for a way out of fear, anxiety and darkness, wandering in search of a new pattern in which we can begin life over again.

For this new beginning, we need to gather the aids of religion, ethics and spirituality. The world has garnered a rich treasure-house in these matters. Though a good deal of it has now become redundant or useless, there are seminal ideas in our past culture that can be of great use in guiding our future. Among Indian classics, the *Brahma Sutras* along with the *Gita* and the Upanishads, remains an indispensable help to formulate a philosophy of life. "These texts are not only bound up with an historic past but are also a living force in the present."

Radhakrishnan does not consider the views on cosmology detailed in the *Brahma Sutras* as of great importance. Modern science has displaced these ancient views. But time has not dated the statements on the ultimate questions of philosophy adumbrated in the *Brahma Sutras*. Viewed in the background of one's own experience of life, these Sutras will provide the vital starting points for our enquiry into the nature of Brahman, the Ultimate Reality. Philosophical exegesis is thus no vain pursuit.

With heroic calm, Radhakrishnan takes up one sentence after another and gives a gist of earlier commentaries (from great

acharyas like Sankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, Vallabha, Sripathi, Vijnana-bhikshu and others) lacing them with comparable ideas from Western philosophers like Bergson and Samuel Alexander. He does not easily take sides but is clear tht we are moving on the evolutionary spiral as borne out by the Second Sutra, *Janmady asya yatah*. When Radhakrishnan does speak on his own, it is with the voice of healing, of hope:

The world is not perpetual repetition. It is a perfecting process making towards perfection. It will change and, if we are wise, it will change for the better and the forces of the world will back us. The future is open. When we face disaster, we begin to doubt and despair. Goethe once wrote: 'A man who is unable to despair has no need to be alive'. We are afraid that mankind will destroy itself. There is no inevitability about it. It will yet become a family. For the laws of nature and God cooperate with one another and the darkness we now are in is a herald not of death but of the dawn of a new era.

The Sutra, *Sastra-yonitvat* pronounces the Brahman to be the source of the scripture, the Vedas. The traditional view is that the Vedas were not indited by human beings but were revealed to the Rishis by the Supreme. Sankara feels that the word 'sastra' here means all scriptures including the epics and the puranas. Of course, living in a scientific age, we cannot continue to say that the scriptures are *not* the handiwork of human beings. These are times when we readily question the validity of the scriptures themselves and remain sceptical if someone insists that the scriptures are infallible words of the Supreme. Often, instead of taking in the changed scenario and seeking to review the word of God, we are myopic enough to oppose *all* scientific assault. "Disturbed by the attacks of modern knowledge and criticism, some people resort to what is called fundamentalism, a forthright assertion of complete verbal inspiration coupled with a total rejection of all that modern knowledge has contributed to a real understanding of the Scriptures."

According to Radhakrishnan, Sankara rightly holds the scriptures to be "records of the direct experiences of the seers, which are of a self-certifying character". While the experience of God cannot be adequately described by words, without these

declared intuitions of the Vedic seers, the nature of Brahman is inconceivable. For those with incisive intellect, it is possible to gain a rational knowledge of God. But then there are those whose sheer faith in the Scriptures bring them the God experience even when they do not feel alienated from the questing spirit of science:

In faith we believe with our hearts while in science we believe with our minds. But the word faith has another meaning. It is not merely acceptance of authority without proof or experience. It is the response of the whole man, which includes assent of intellect and energy of will. Men of faith are men of power who have assimilated the truth and made it into a creative principle. God becomes the light and life from which they act, the strange power beside which our own power is weakness. God is the name we give to that interior principle which exceeds us while forming the very centre of our being.

The very conception of the Sutras gives Radhakrishnan a futurological clue as well. We are obviously caught in a twilight period of man's evolution when science cannot answer all our questions. Long, long ago, when man was going through such a twilight period, Badarayana had sought to bring together in his Sutras the divergent views of Reality that obtained at his time. The Sutras could play that part once again in the fissured world of the modern thinker. Radhakrishnan's interpretation of Indian scriptures is no rigid repeat performance of traditional commentaries, but a rejection of fundamentalism and mere rationalism. It is a definite thrust to the next future of mankind:

*Samanvaya* or reconciliation is the need of our age. The global, all-comprehensive changes which are taking place represent something new in the structure of human society, though they are not deviations from the normal course of history. The world community which we envisage can be sustained only by a community of ideals. We have to look beyond the political and economic arrangements to ultimate spiritual issues. We have to fashion a new type of man who uses the instruments he has devised with a renewed awareness that he is capable of greater things than mastery of nature."

# 6

## INTERPRETER OF RELIGION

Born in an orthodox family, the religious way of life was natural to Radhakrishnan from his childhood. His first encounter with Christianity as a school boy was a definite challenge. He stood his ground well and thereafter had no problem. By not curling back into Hindu obscurantism nor succumbing to the missionary-style Christianity, he transcended both and soon became one of the finest interpreters of Eastern and Western religions for the modern man. Fanaticism was unknown in his dictionary. A Hindu every inch, an admirer of Sankara, yet Radhakrishnan was the propounder of universal religion. This was possible because the core of Hinduism had been illumined to him at an early age:

My religious sense did not allow me to speak a rash or a profane word of anything which the soul of man holds or has held sacred. This attitude of respect for all creeds, this elementary good manners in matters of spirit is bred into the marrow of one's bones by the Hindu tradition, by its experience of centuries. Religion tolerance marked the Hindu culture from its very beginnings... The famous Hindu scripture, *Bhagavadgita*, declares that if one has faith and devotion to the other gods, it is faith and devotion to the supreme One, though not in the prescribed way. The end of religion is an essential knowledge of God.

Secular to the core, he could approach, understand and admire any religion with equal felicity. He was loath to criticise other religions and he could never stand myopic criticism of Hinduism.

In fact the lectures of A. G. Hogg to the P.G. classes on ethics in the Christian College drove Radhakrishnan to examine his mother-religion consciously and critically. Surely it was not religion that had made his nation politically anaemic! A study of Barnett's *Hinduism*, Wilbernitz's *Bhagavad Gita* and Swami Abhedhananda's lectures on Vedanta convinced him of the strength of his vedantic heritage. He promptly went and chose for his M.A. dissertation the title, *The Ethics of the Vedanta and Its Metaphysical Presuppositions*. Sarvepalli Gopal has said that the choice of the topic might have cost Radhakrishnan his first class, but Dr. Gopal has also quoted the opinion of William Meston, a teacher of the Christian College:

He has displayed a power of clear thought, an independence of judgement and a capacity of accurate and rapid assimilation of what he has read which mark him out as possessed of high intellectual bent and attainments. Whatever he deals with goes through the mill of his own mind, and undigested opinion has no place with him.

It is not surprising that the teachers in the College were quite satisfied with the young man's boldness, for they also noticed that he was no obscurantist reactionary. With the same boldness that characterised his choice of a Hindu subject for the thesis while working in the Christian institution, he accepted the ills of Hindu religious practices that were listed out by the Christian missionaries. He abhorred fundamentalist priests and pronounced that much of the evil in the world (wars, religious persecution, massacre, burnings at stake, tortures) was due to such priestcraft. He also pointed out that this was a global phenomenon.

According to Radhakrishnan, if we draw aside the moth-eaten curtains of the superstitious excrescences that had inclosed the Hindu religion, we come face to face with a creative science of ethics that engages man in his journey to perfection. A reverence for God in the Hindu religion really meant a reverence for the fellow human being. In Dr. Gopal's succinct summary:

Moksha and dharma were the two poles of religion. Wisdom and love, insight into the Supreme and fellowship with other human beings had to go together. To revere God

was to respect mankind. Conscious of the failure, discord and impotence of finite existence, the mystic was inclined to enter into the solitude of the soul; but such an escape was to risk depriving religion of much of its content.

However, the recognition of Hinduism's innate strength did not mean the rejection of Christianity or any other religion for that matter. Though he did not accept the uniqueness of Christ, Radhakrishnan could transcend sectarian claptrap and reach out to the life-sustaining symbolic core of the religion. For instance in 1921 the bishops of the Church of England in India criticised Mahatma Gandhi's non-violence as an untrue representation of the ministry of Jesus and Radhakrishnan replied with a counterblast. It was Gandhi who represented the true spirit of Christ, not these religious heads who professed Christianity but remained in the same arms of the imperialists and oppressors of mankind!

Radhakrishnan the thinker found that the religious experience was not something expendable even in the technological age. Indeed, religion had become even more necessary for the modern man to draw him away from suicidal despair. Religion also had the capacity to inspire him to build a promising future. He found that each religion contributed to the global wealth of such needed inspiration. Though widely known as a writer of philosophy, 'religion' was the key-word in the writings of Radhakrishnan. He was to return to the subject quite often. The earliest work of Radhakrishnan on this subject is *The Reign of Religion in Contemporary Philosophy*.

Published in 1920, *The Reign* gave high importance to religious experience. Radhakrishnan could not accept the manner in which Christianity was increasingly fossilised and man became a stranger to his religion in his everyday life. No such danger threatened India which had always given rise to spiritual luminaries at frequent intervals to prevent any freezing of the race's thought. Radhakrishnan speaks of the genius of Indian religion as periodically breaking up the shackles of institutionalisation to keep the well springs of religious experience alive and creatively helpful to man on his journey to reach the Ultimate Reality. As he says in *Indian Philosophy*:

Whenever it (religion) tended to crystallise itself in a fixed

creed, there were set up spiritual revivals and philosophic reactions which threw beliefs into the crucible of criticism, vindicated the true and combated the false. Again and again, we shall observe, how when traditionally accepted beliefs become inadequate, nay false, on account of changed times, and the age grows out of patience with them, the insight of a new teacher, a Buddha or a Mahavira, a Vyasa or a Sankara supervenes, stirring the depths of spiritual life. These are doubtless great moments in the history of Indian thought, times of inward testing and vision, when at the summons of the spirit's breath, blowing where it listeth and coming whence no one knows, the soul of man makes a fresh start and goes forth on a new venture. It is the intimate relation between the truth of philosophy and the daily life of people that makes religion always alive and real.

Expertly Radhakrishnan sets aside demonology and occultism that were prevalent even in Vedic times and reaches out to the true religious experience that can stand the test of logic, metaphysics and Time. He finds the religion of the Upanishads closest to his heart as the Upanishadic seers eschewed traditionalism and encouraged the questioning, questing spirit. He proclaimed that this Vedantic spirit was the religion we need today. In a book, *The Religion We Need* (1928), he said that there was no divorce between the natural and supernatural laws as God's creation is an eternal process. In spite of our technological advance we need the religious experience to sustain us, to save ourselves from the brink of suicidal despair. This sustenance is not to be confused with mere intellectual sophistry or institutionalised, ceremonial celebrations:

It (religion) is spiritual certainty offering us strength and solace in the hour of need and sorrow. It is the conviction that love and justice are at the heart of the universe, that the spirit which gave rise to man will further his perfection. It is the faith which grips us even when we suffer defeat, the assurance that though the waves on the shore may be broken, the ocean conquers nevertheless.

This faith releases us from fear, from bondage, from narrowness. This religious faith can be cultivated through *dhyana* (meditation)



and *vinaya* (self-discipline). It can be sustained by a continuous infusion of moral heroism. This is not achieved by the mere rise of a magic wand. No, there are no short cuts to the religion we need today. 'Each individual must strive to spiritualise himself so as to become a fit member of the kingdom of spirit.' When such perfect perfection becomes a global phenomenon, the brotherhood of all men would become a reality. That would be truly the life divine. Human unity cannot be achieved on any other basis:

Human unity can be achieved on earth only by strong religious souls whose patriotism knows no limits of geography or of history, but only those of justice and truth, freedom and fair-play, God and humanity... Never in history was there a greater opportunity for religious geniuses who do not count the cost and are prepared to lose caste with the powers that be, the politicians, the merchants, and the traders in religion. A more vivid, a deeper sense of the one universal God is the profoundest need of our age.

Radhakrishnan had no doubt that Hinduism was capable of gifting to the world such a vivid, deeper sense of the one universal God through Vedanta. The mere resilience of Hinduism itself was a favourable point. The Aryan and the Dravidian have completely coalesced that one cannot separate the Vedic from the non-Vedic elements in modern Hinduism. No racial or geographical limits curb its progress. As he points out in *Religion and Society* (1947):

Its sway in early days spread to Champa, Cambodia, Java and Bali. There is nothing which prevents it from extending to the uttermost parts of the earth. India is a tradition, a spirit, a light. Her physical and spiritual frontiers do not coincide."

The Hindu concepts of the four *purusharthas*, Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha take charge of all aspects of human life and aspirations on earth. All the mundane details of life are constantly elevated to the spiritual plane and hence even the acts of one's everyday life become "in a real sense service of the Supreme". *Religion and Society* describes how this high ideal which had been realised through various means like yoga, temple-worship and religious institutions had fallen into decay everywhere. Our aim now should be to bring back the original intention of these aids to

gain religious experience. "The genuine forces of the new must be woven with the valid principles of the past into a new unity." Radhakrishnan feels that the best of the past is to be found in Sankara's religion "which is ever ready to assimilate alien faiths":

While the followers of Vaishnavism, Saivism and Saktāism, etc. were quarrelling one with another, Sankara lifted these popular faiths from out of the dust of mere polemics into the lucid atmosphere of eternal truth. He emphasised the religion of truth rooted in spiritual inwardness. The truth intended by all religions is the Atman; and until we recognise the oneness of our self with the reality that transcends all these imperfect characterisations, we shall revolve in the circle of samsara. From his philosophical point of view he declares that, though the Absolute is visualised in many ways, the underlying reality is the same. There are no degrees of reality, though there are degrees of truth, i.e. our ways of comprehending the real.

Other religions which came within the arc of Radhakrishnan's gaze do not receive the same unstinted praise as the Upanishdic religion. He finds Hinayana Buddhism's disgust of life neither pleasing nor practical; the Mahayana Buddhism, according to him, is more or less the religion of the *Bhagavad Gita*. He finds the Vaishnava religion of Ramanuja attractive but not convincing. And yet, nowhere does Radhakrishnan get caught in the Serbonian bog of credal polemics. His praise, when it comes forth, is unstinted; his criticism, muted. Any religion, however new, was welcome provided it cleansed the present and posited a great future. Radhakrishnan welcomes the Sikh religion as a timely saviour of all religions in India. Indeed, there can be no new religion under the sun! Only a cleansing gesture, a forward step. Introducing *The Sacred Writings of the Sikhs* (1960), he had drawn the reader's attention to the *Adi Granth's* containing hymns from Hindu and Islamic mystics:

This is consistency with the tradition of India which respects all religions and believes in the freedom of the human spirit. Indian spiritual tradition is not content with mere toleration. There can be no goodwill or fellowship when we only tolerate each other... We must appreciate other faiths,

encourage sacrificial living and inspire their followers to a noble way of life. The Sikh Gurus who compiled the *Adi Granth* had this noble quality of appreciation of whatever was valuable in other religious traditions. The saints belong to the whole world. They are universal men, who free our minds from bigotry and superstition, dogma and ritual, and emphasise the central simplicities of religion. The great seers of the world are the guardians of the inner values, who correct the fanaticisms of their superstitious followers.

Radhakrishnan paid deep homage to the Sikh religion for its emphasis on the presence of God in all creation. God is no metaphysical abstraction but is very much an experiential actuality. The core of the Sikh religion is best revealed by Guru Nanak's 'arati', quoted by Radhakrishnan to show how the saint saw through the incense and blossoms offered on gold plates studded with pearls in the sanctum sanctorum of the Jagannath temple and recognised the Absolute One (Ek Omkar) in the presiding deity:

The sun and moon, O Lord, are Thy lamps; the firmament  
Thy salver and the oils of the stars the pearls set therein;  
The perfume of the sandal tree is Thy incense; the wind  
Is Thy fan, all the forests are Thy flowers, O Lord of Light.

Radhakrishnan's clarity of perception illumines his writings on the religions from the West as well. *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (1939) is literally a search for 'the world's unborn soul'. Among Western religions, Radhakrishnan cannot find agreement with the Jews that theirs alone is the true one. It must be conceded, however, that the Jews did not embark upon the perilous adventure of converting the rest of the world to their 'true' religion. Christianity began as a gentle movement of voluntary suffering and universal love. However, according to Radhakrishnan, Christianity received its ethical passion from the Semetic religion, its dogma from the Greeks and its institutional trappings from the Romans. It was the Roman element that denied Christianity its universal outlook:

Their desire for world dominion transformed the simple faith of Jesus into a fiercely proselytising creed. After the time of Constantine, authorities, clerical and secular, displayed systematic intolerance towards other forms of religious belief,

taking shelter under the words 'he that is not with me is against me, and he that gathereth not with me, scattereth'.

Most of us who profess to be religious do so by habit, sentiment, or inertia. We accept our religion even as we do the Bank of England or the illusion of progress. We profess faith in God but are not inclined to act on it. We know the forms of thought but do not have the substance of conviction. When men have lost the old faith and have not yet found anything solid to put in its place, superstition grows.

The new superstitions are in no way inferior to those of ancient times in their acts of primitive barbarism. There is no one to restrain 'the predatory State'. Nationhood is one of these superstitions, a mysterious symbol "to whose protection we rally as savages to fetishes".

Interpreting world religions, Radhakrishnan is understandably frustrated that the religious experience has become just a habit for the modern man who has no time for its deeper implications. At the same time he sees that the modern man is thirsting for new experiences and is being beckoned by new horizons for the world has shrunk and the East and the West are no longer total strangers. In this crucible of the East and the West, mayn't a synthesis happen and a new religion, the religion of man, be born? At a time when fundamentalism is threatening the fabric of humanism all over the globe, it is good to remember an enlightened interpreter of religion like Radhakrishnan who had revealed to us the religion of man according to Rabindranath Tagore. After all we need not spurn religion as an obscurantist relic of civilization's nonage. Religion is indeed the Supreme's gift to man for achieving self-perfection. As Radhakrishnan stated with the authority of a community elder in *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*:

When man apprehends the supreme being, returns to the concrete, and controls his life in the life of its truth, he is a complete man. He reaches an almost inconceivable universality. All his powers which have been hitherto bound up with narrow pursuits are liberated for larger ends... The pride of a self-conscious individual yields to the humility of a God-centred one. He works in the world with the faith that life in its pure quality is always noble and beautiful and only its frustration is evil.

# 7

## PHILOSOPHER

Radhakrishnan was an expounder of philosophy and religion but he was also a philosopher in his own right. He was no mere academic philosopher and Sarvepalli Gopal cites several instances in Radhakrishnan's life that could only be termed as religious experience for they could be explained only by intuition and not merely by intellect. The externalities of religion did not detain Radhakrishnan, but he possessed a sense of the Beyond, a belief in the superior Guide from above:

As his success blossomed Radhakrishnan was increasingly convinced that his life was being shaped by an unseen hand, much as he might try to mould it in different patterns; and more and more he committed himself, his decisions and his judgement, to his star.

He could not think that one's life could be such a long series of 'accidents'. Having had no advantage of birth or wealth, he had had to struggle to obtain a collegiate education. Even the M.A. degree did not bring him enough financial sustenance and it was a long time before he could feel financially secure. And yet, at every crucial turn, the right decision was automatically made, and he could progress onwards with a sense of purposive urgency. Was it not because some Power other than the mortal eyes can see and recognise helped him take the right decisions at proper times? He said as much in 'Fragments of a Confession':

...when I look at the series of accidents that have shaped my life, I am persuaded that there is more in this life than

meets the eye. Life is not a mere chain of physical causes and effects. Chance seems to form the surface of reality, but deep down other forces are at work. If the universe is a living one, if it is spiritually alive, nothing in it is merely accidental. 'The moving finger writes and having writ moves on .

Radhakrishnan had not the theistic turn of mind to describe the 'other forces' as the grace of an *ishta devata* of the Hindu pantheon. In spite of belonging to the holy city of Tiruttani which is very close to the famous temple of Tirupati, Radhakrishnan does not refer to the Hindu gods and goddesses in his writings unless absolutely necessary. If he could not limit the Universal Power that guided his destiny to the figures of a Rama or Krishna or a Venkateswara, it was because he had burst the bonds of such Vedic-Puranic lore and had seen the Absolute at work. At the same time, because he had been brought up in an intensely religious atmosphere whether in Tiruttani or in the Christian missionary schools and colleges, his approach to philosophy remained religious and hence pulsated with life's experience of the Eternal.

Problems he had a-plenty when facing life as a young scholar. The genteel poverty of a lower middle-class home hung about him till he passed his thirtieth year. For long after that, he had to carry the burdens of a joint family. There were several personal disappointments and disharmonies. Success alone could not give him an anchor from these troubles. If Radhakrishnan managed to keep his calm and pursue his life's work unperturbed, it was because he developed a philosophy of life which is distinctly his own.

A perusal of these books—*An Idealist View of Life*, *Kalki or the Future of Civilization* and *Recovery of Faith* gives us the assurance that Radhakrishnan's philosophy is the fruit of his deep involvement with comparative religion in the light of his personal experience of a para-normal Providence, an Absolute Guide from the beyond. He had travelled much in the realms of faith with a sense of creative adventure because he was himself a man of faith. He had of course not been blessed with visionary ecstasies but had definitely felt the presence of a Guardian Power close to him. This feeling could not be explained scientifically, nor expressed symbolically. Though not a writer of poetry, he read poetry with involvement and found that the presence of a Guiding Power had been projected by others too and hence he felt assured that he was

on the right path. As always, Radhakrishnan did not readily attribute a familiar form like Rama or Krishna to this Power. But the Supreme's existence and the Supreme's guidance to mortal man for the transformation to the divine ideal were both experienced facts to Radhakrishnan. As he wrote while commenting on the eleventh verse of Chapter IV in the *Bhagavad Gita*:

God meets every aspirant with favour and grants to each his heart's desire. He does not extinguish the hope of any but helps all hopes to grow according to their nature. Even those who worship the Vedic deities with sacrifices and with expectation of reward find what they seek by the grace of the Supreme. Those who are vouchsafed the vision of truth convey it through symbols to ordinary people who cannot look upon its naked intensity. Name and form are used to reach the Formless... From the point of view of metaphysics (*paramartha*), no manifestation is to be taken as absolutely true, while from the standpoint of experience (*vyavahara*), every one of them has some validity. The forms we worship are aids to help us to become conscious of our deepest selves.

Radhakrishnan lived very much in the scientific age and was exposed to its triumphs and horrors all over the world. But the man of faith from the temple-town of Tiruttani could not be swept off his feet by scientific and technological marvels. The more he watched the technological maturing of the modern man, the deeper was his faith in this Guide. Between intuition and intellect, the former held the controls. Without intuition, our sensory perceptions and analytical skill can lead us nowhere. He said in *An Idealist View of Life*:

Both the recognition and creation of values are due to intuitive thinking. Judgements of fact require dispassionateness; judgements of value depend on vital experience. Whether a plan of action is right or wrong, whether an object presented is beautiful or ugly can be decided only by men whose conscience is educated and whose sensibility is trained... Sensitiveness to quality is a function of life, and is not achieved by mere learning. It is dependent on the degree of development of the self."

Radhakrishnan's *An Idealist View of Life* was widely welcomed as a fresh breeze in philosophical circles when it was published in 1932, and C.E.M. Joad even published a book on his philosophy titled, *Counter-Attack from the East*. He did not favour the Indian's monism, but welcomed Radhakrishnan's approach as an attempt to synthesise religion, philosophy, politics and culture into one organic whole. But there was some criticism too. Leonard Woolf was particularly virulent and published a book, *Quack! Quack!* to castigate the 'intellectual quackery' of the twentieth century anti-intellectuals who were dangerously drawn deep into the quicksands of misty mysticism. Radhakrishnan's cry that he considered intuition as a necessary help to the intellect did not convince his critics easily. But he took the criticism in his stride and moved forward on his path like a royal elephant and his stature as a philosopher continued to grow. *Kalki or the Future of Civilisation* (1929) which is a near-contemporary of *An Idealist View of Life* had a big part in making this reputation.

The earlier part of *Kalki* is a harrowing picture of universal decay and chaos. Is there any segment of modern life that has not been infected by confusion? All the time-tested institutions are about to crumble! Chaos reigns in religion. Marriage is no more a sacrament. Multiplication of wants and wilful wastage mark our economic relations. Industrialisation has turned the creative craftsman into a mindless robot. In this century we had opted for democracy almost everywhere. Yet, we have only succeeded in making a mockery of democracy. International relations are a chaos of contraries all the time. Is there a future for our civilization?

Man, the combative animal, is still untamed. Economic success is our highest ideal, and almost all our wars are due to economic causes. Economics is our religion. Empire is big business. We wage wars to increase our trade, extend our territories and acquire colonies. For the sake of business and markets, we sacrifice our intellectual freedom as it may produce doubt, our emotional sympathy for it may impair our efficiency in the exploitation of labouring-class and government of backward races, and our imagination as it may interfere with firmness.

Such is the voice from *advacatus diaboli*.



At this bleak stage of unrelieved failure, Radhakrishnan's *advocatus dei* insinuates that all is not lost. All is never lost precisely because creation is no accident and one can trace a purposive growth through the aeons:

The endowment of matter with the attribute of life and the successive emergence of qualities like mind, intellect, and spirit show a steady onward direction, in spite of frequent degeneration and stagnancy, cruelty, and stupidity. The general direction of organic evolution is towards ever-increasing perfection."

Drawing his immediate strength from scientific philosophers like Whitehead and Thomson, Oliver Lodge and Lloyd Morgan, Radhakrishnan finds that the universal principle of life immanent is at the roots of this evolutionary spiral. At the same time he would not scuttle the existing religions as not of significance any more:

To believe that we have the exclusive possession of truth or that our reading of the meaning of the universe is accurate is an illusion of egotism. Every religion represents the soul of the people, the inner law of its being and aspiration. Each group has the divine within it into which it grows... A single religion for all mankind will take away from the spiritual richness of the world. If we want to prevent the sterilization of the mind and the stagnation of the soul of humanity, we must not repudiate or refuse recognition to any one of the historical religions.

The religion of the future will place the stress on spirituality and character so that the perfected individual could work for world-redemption. In marriage the bond of union must be recognised as both physical and spiritual. Radhakrishnan set his face sternly against the dissolution of marriages too easily:

If we recognise that the institution of marriage is for the purpose of furthering the growth of two individuals through obstacles and delays, we shall take every difficulty as a challenge to further effort. A perfect marriage represents the highest achievement of our purpose. It demands that we cling to each other in spite of mutual misunderstanding, wild moods

and impulses, idiosyncrasies and unlikenesses, may, I would ask in spite of mutual sins. Divorces are always degrading .

While wealth need not be spurned, money should not become the dictator of our lives. As for democracy, it must be remembered that “to be least governed is to be best governed”. Increased bureaucratic control at very point can fatally choke the polity. In international relations, we must work for nothing less than world unity. In conclusion, Radhakrishnan walks out of his metaphysical palace to place his faith in the religious man—the man of intuition, vision—to save the future of mankind:

Religious idealism seems to be the most hopeful political instrument for peace which the world has ever seen. We cannot reconcile men’s conflicting interests and hopes so long as we take our stand on duties and rights. Treaties and diplomatic understandings may restrain passion but they do not remove fear. The world must be imbued with a love of humanity. We want religious heroes who will not wait for a transformation of the whole world but asset with their lives, if necessary, the truth of the conviction, ‘on earth one family’, heroes who will accept the motto of the great Stabtholder: ‘I have no need to hope in order to undertake; nor to succeed in order to persevere’.

The third seminal work which makes a positive statement of Radhakrishnan’s philosophy was published in 1955. Between the earlier books and *Recovery of Faith* lay two world wars and the Atom Bomb. Radhakrishnan was now more convinced than ever that only the religious man can save the future for humanity. For, as he stated at the very outset of his introduction to *Recovery of Faith*: “Science with its new prospect of a possible liquidation of the world by man’s own wanton interference reminds us of the warning that the wages of sin is death”. Man has advanced science and this science is now the artificer of his end: such is the terrible despair that holds us in thrall today.

However, Radhakrishnan reminds us that mankind has often been a victim of such moments of despair. St. Augustine and St. Jerome lamented the fall of Rome; Thucydides sorrowfully recorded the downfall of the Athenian Empire; and even four thousand years ago an Egyptian papyrus recorded that an unstoppable decay had

infected the civilization. What makes our own times different is the division of the globe into two warring camps in terms of the cold war; and the discovery of the nuclear power that could end the globe's existence without a moment's notice:

With all the resources at our command, with all the gifts with which we have been endowed, with all the powers that we have developed, we are unable to live in peace and safety. We have grown in knowledge and intelligence but not in wisdom and virtue. For lack of the latter, things are interlocked in perpetual strife.

To be told that our present times is only an acuter image of past moments of despair is no comfort. Radhakrishnan quotes Whitehead and warns us against a sense of helplessness, as if we were meant for inexorable destruction by the hand of Fate. "To assume that we are helpless creatures caught in the current which is sweeping us into the final abyss is to embrace a philosophy of despair, of nihilism. We can swim against the current and even change its direction.

Radhakrishnan's advice is to avoid simplistic views of man, nature and god. Calvin, Kant, Spencer, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Spengler. The present condition of man has provoked all these and many more to analyse it and come up with their several views, none of which seems to be really inspiring man to exceed himself. "We seem to have become apathetic, even cynical, and certain that no action of ours can prevent the triumph of evil we see around us."

And yet, there really is no need for such a feeling of helplessness for the human being is really a creature of freedom. You may hem him in with ever so many 'isms' and superstitions and traditions; he would yet triumph. As long as the spark of faith remains a part of the human make-up, nothing can daunt humanity from arching forward. Even the theory of an inexorable fate or unchangeable *karma* can be changed by the unflagging will of the human being:

Man has to travel the which leads him from the basest in his nature upward to the noblest that raises him above his animality. The human individual is not a mere object among objects, a thing among things, without meaning for himself. He is not a psychological process which is completely conditioned. He is a victim of *karma* or necessity, if he is

objectified and deprived of his subjectivity. It is possible for man to escape from the objective happenings. He can be himself. The whole history of mankind is a continuous endeavour to be free. The great lights in human form, the Buddha, Socrates, Zoroaster, Jesus, reveal to us the divine possibilities of human nature and give us the courage to be ourselves.

Though the sabre-rattling of superpowers and the acute irritations of trigger-happy minor powers make it appear that the nuclear doomsday is just round the corner, Radhakrishnan assures us that "the trend to annihilation is not inevitable". To arrest the trend in this scientific-technological nightmare which has led humanity to Hitler's Auschwitz and Truman's Hiroshima-Nagasaki, man must recover his faith in the spirit and with the spirit's power rebuild his world:

Belief and behaviour go together. If we believe in blood, race and soil, our world will be filled with Belsen's and Buchenwalds. If we behave like wild animals, our society will be a jungle. If we believe in universal spiritual values, peace and understanding will grow. A good tree bringeth forth good fruit". Radhakrishnan reminds us of Goethe's message that the epochs dominated by belief "have a radiance and bliss of their own" while the epochs where unbelief crackles its 'miserable victory' remain sterile for all posterity. Radhakrishnan's own view is clear:

Human societies like human beings live by faith and die when faith disappears. If our society is to recover its health, it must regain its faith. Our society is not sick beyond saving for it suffers from divided loyalties, from conflicting urges, from alternating moods of exaltation and despair. This condition of anguish is our reason for hope. We need a faith which will assert the power of spirit over things and find significance in a world in which science and organisation seem to have lost their relationship to traditional values.

Religious discipline has a definite place in this scheme for man's recovery of faith in his future. Though all the religions of the past have acquired base accretions, their mystical core remains intact. When we seize upon this truth, we are immediately linked to the

Transcendent Supreme and open the score for global fraternity.

Radhakrishnan passionately believed in this possibility. It was his prayer, his hope. He reiterated the need for the world to come together when he was a member of the International Committee for Intellectual Co-operation from 1931 to 1938. Two decades later, after witnessing the horrors of the Second World War and placed on the brink of a perilous Nuclear Doomsday, Radhakrishnan stated in no uncertain terms that the future survival of mankind lay in global unity and this global unity can be ushered in only by an inter-faith dialogue and inter-religious understanding:

A study of the different forms of religious life may give us some idea of the deep significance of religion for the life of man. The different religions are to be used as building stones for the development of a human culture in which the adherents of the different religions may be fraternally united as the children of one Supreme. All religions convey to their followers a message of abiding hope. The world will give birth to a new faith which will be but the old faith in another form, the faith of all ages, the potential divinity of man which will work for the supreme purpose written in our hearts and souls, the unity of mankind.

# 8

## EDUCATIONIST

Teacher; vice-chancellor; educationist. Radhakrishnan's life-long involvement with Indian education was to benefit the academic community immensely. He was a staunch supporter of university autonomy and his convocation addresses repeatedly exhorted the institutions to become transformational instruments by using the rich cultural past of India to shape her great future. He declared that a university stands "for humanism, for tolerance, for the adventure of ideas and for the search for Truth" and frowned upon universities becoming mere diploma mills:

The value of the university training consists not so much in the information acquired as in the scientific habits developed. The student should learn to distinguish knowledge from opinion, fact from theory, should be able to weight evidence, argue closely and state and examine fairly the opponent's point of view. The spirit of research is nothing else than the carrying out of this attitude of free enquiry and rational reflection.

Though in the earlier part of his Professorship at the Calcutta University Radhakrishnan preferred not to get involved with the university's administrative affairs, he was drawn into campus politics when Jadunath Sarkar took over as the vice-chancellor. Unfazed by Sarkar's ignoring his achievements in the annual report of the university, Radhakrishnan hit out at the way universities were teaching students to bend and bow but not think and act. Presently Radhakrishnan was unanimously elected as President of the Post-graduate Council of Arts. It was thus an open cleavage

between the vice-chancellor and the academic staff. When the vice-chancellor asked for police help to deal with the student protesters against the Simon Commission, there was a clash and some students were injured. Radhakrishnan was asked by the syndicate to conduct an inquiry and he criticised the vice-chancellor for having called in the police.

Radhakrishnan himself became the vice-chancellor of Andhra University in 1931. He had delivered the first Convocation Address of the University in 1927 where he had sought to prove that the university ideal was nothing new to India. Radhakrishnan's pride in the past could always have effective contemporaneous thrust, and the educational field was to receive a good deal of strength from this attitude. India had Takshasila, Nalanda, Vikramasila, Dharanikota, Benares, Navadwip and other educational centres:

The Universities, the whole body of teachers and pupils, had something like a corporate existence. These seats of learning were responsible for developing the higher mind of the country, its conscience and its ideals. They helped to produce what we might call a university world, a community of cultural ideas, a profound like-mindedness in basic aims and ideas. In the altered circumstances of today, it is the universities that have to assume the leadership in the world of ideas and ideals.

What Radhakrishnan saw as actually happening was a steady erosion of all values and the descent of a disturbing veil between the teacher and the taught. There was also a lack of autonomy and without university autonomy, the institutions could not be progressive. Now he had a wonderful opportunity for during the first five years of Andhra University's existence not much had been done to build the institution. His five years in Waltair was marked by all-round development. An educational visionary was at work and with speed he got together a galaxy of youthful greats (Humayun Kabir, Hiren Mukherjee, T. R. Seshadri among them) as teaching staff. He gave no chance for partisanship in academic appointments and the university flowered brilliantly.

In his convocation address four years earlier, Radhakrishnan had asked the fledgeling university to pay adequate attention to the cultural past so that the students could play an appropriate part in

the Indian renaissance. But his viewpoint was not that of a reactionary. He was asking for greater understanding, large-hearted absorption, purposive creation:

The constructive conservatism of the past is the middle way between the reactionary and the radical extremes. If we study the history of Indian culture from the beginning of its career somewhere in the valley of the Indus four or five millenniums ago down till today, the one characteristic that pervades it throughout its long growth is its elasticity and ability to respond to new needs. With a daring catholicity that approached foolhardiness on occasions, it has recognised elements of truth in other systems of thought and belief. It has never been too proud to learn from others and adopt such of their methods as seemed adaptable to its needs. If we retain this spirit, we can face the future with growing confidence and strength.

At the same time he did not reject the scientific-technological age. It is true our civilisation has been reared on the spirit but it has not rejected the strength of outer organisation. Hence, it must be the endeavour of universities to improve our knowledge of science and technology to give a better deal to the unfortunate millions of an underdeveloped sub-continent:

A spiritual civilisation is not necessarily one of poverty and disease, man-drawn rickshaw and the hand-cart. It is one thing to say that wisdom is more precious than rubies and the wise man is happy whatever befall him and quite another to hold that poverty and ill-health are necessary for spiritual advance. While poverty is spiritual when it is voluntary, the crass poverty of our people is a sign of sloth and failure. Our philosophy of life recognises the production and increase of health among legitimate aims of human endeavour.

It is significant that in an article titled 'Indian Philosophy' written by him about 1931, he quotes a significant passage from Sri Aurobindo's article in the *Arya*:

If an ancient Indian of the time of the Upanishads, of the



Buddha, or the later classical age were to be set down in modern India...he would see his race clinging to forms and shells and rags of the past and missing nine-tenths of its nobler meaning...he would be amazed by the extent of the mental poverty, the immobility, the static repetition, the cessation of science, the long sterility of art, the comparative feebleness of the creative intuition.

Thus it is clear that Radhakrishnan wanted to pursue an integral scheme of education which would encourage the sciences and at the same time break down the compartmentalising walls that kept the humanities and the sciences separated. All these ideas had now a chance of being put into practice. He started honours and postgraduate courses in various disciplines. He was able to get C. V. Raman draft the syllabi for science. As he desired, studies in technology were started with M. Visveswarayya drafting the syllabus. Large buildings for sciences and humanities and a fine library as well as hostels for students took shape. Radhakrishnan also encouraged scientific and creative writing in Telugu, instituted endowment lectures and even got Rabindranath Tagore to give lectures and direct a dance drama. There had to be, of course, a considerable flow of funds but Radhakrishnan's excellent rapport with his Chancellors and others government functionaries assured a smooth passage for all indents. His international stature won him the admiration from several principalities and generous endowments came from the rajahs as well. The most important contribution came from the raja of Jeypore who sustained the college of science for several years.

Though Radhakrishnan had hoped to be relieved of university administration for good when he accepted the Spalding Chair at Oxford, the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 brought him back to India. Presently he became the vice-chancellor of Banaras Hindu University and skilfully piloted the institution between the contrary pulls of the government and the Congress. When the government ordered the army to occupy the campus, he dealt with the issue firmly, stood on the side of the patriotic students and won the day. Not all the might of the government could make him renounce the ideals of university autonomy that he had been advocating since his early days at Calcutta University. Nor would he gie up his reverence for Mahatma Gandhi and friendship with

Jawaharlal Nehru to please a set of bureaucrats. In fact he invited Mahatma Gandhi as the Chief Guest at the Special Convocation of the University's silver jubilee in 1942. He even conferred honorary degrees on nationalist leaders like Rajendra Prasad and Jawaharlal Nehru!

When India became free, Jawaharlal Nehru invited him to head the Universities Commission which included eminent educationists like Zakir Husain, Arthur Morgan, the first president of the Tennessee Valley Authority and James Duff, the vice-chancellor of Durham University. The report of the Universities Commission along with the volume *Education, Politics and War* as well as his numerous Convocation addresses are records of an educationist of rare calibre.

The Radhakrishnan Report has been rightly described by Prof. Ramesh Mohan as "a well thought-out blue-print for the reconstruction and development of higher education in post-Independence India" provided to the nation for the first time. The Report pleads for an integral view so that equal importance be given to general, vocational and professional education. Far from making simplistic declarations, the Report noted that higher education was a complicated affair that took within its arc politics, administration, the professions and commerce. And that it is those involved with higher education that had the greatest responsibility in shaping the new India:

If India is to confront the confusion of our time, she must turn for guidance not to those who are lost in the mere exigencies of the passing hour but to her men of letters and men of science, to her poets and artists, to her discoverers and inventors. These intellectual pioneers of civilisation are to be found and trained in the universities, which are the sanctuaries of the inner life of the nation.

Teaching and research should go together. The educational problem should be linked to the social problem and one must also take into account the spiritual and material needs of our community. With foresight the Report recommended university courses in agriculture, commerce, education, business administration, public administration and industrial relations. Religious education was also considered a necessary part of the

discipline. The Report boldly called for the regional medium of instruction at the university level without of course sacrificing a competent knowledge of English:

English must continue to be studied. It is a language which is rich in literature—humanistic, scientific, and technical. If under sentimental urges we should give up English we would cut ourselves off from the living stream of ever-growing knowledge... English is the only means of preventing our isolation from the world, and we will act unwisely if we allow ourselves to be enveloped in the folds of a dark curtain of ignorance.

Among examination reforms, mention must be made of the recommendation regarding the objective testing of candidates. It was also hoped that government jobs would be delinked from university degrees. Of particular interest is the key-person in the university system, the Professor:

The gradation of university staffs is based on considerations of experience, scholarship, research, and teaching ability. The highest grade, namely that of a Professor, should obviously require the presence of *all* these at a high level. Normally the Professor ought to be a person who has taught the highest classes for a considerable number of years, has established his position for scholarship, is not merely a narrow specialist but has wide interests and broad outlook, so that he can inspire and stimulate his colleagues in the department and effectively contribute to the solution of academic problems of the university. It is equally important that he should have a keen interest in the advancement of knowledge. He should not only be in touch with the latest developments in his branch of studies, but he should himself be an active member of the caravan which is carrying forward the precious burden of knowledge."

The report also took within its ambit other pressing subjects like reservations, women's education and rural universities. It also recommended financial comfort for these institutions of higher learning:

We see no possibility of the Provinces providing the whole of the necessary expenditure, burdened as they will be with the no less acute needs of extending basic, secondary and technical schools. Generous grants from the Centre must be forthcoming; and these grants the Centre will not, and should not, allocate blindly or mechanically. A Central University Grants Commission, working through the Ministry of Education, must allocate the sums made available by the Central Government.

Funding from government, however, should not mean a loss of autonomy. The Report made this very clear:

Higher education is undoubtedly an obligation of the State, but State aid is not to be confused with State control over academic policies and practices. Intellectual progress demands the maintenance of the spirit of free enquiry. The pursuit and practice of truth regardless of consequences has been the ambition of universities.

Whenever Radhakrishnan spoke on education, he raised the subject from the hucksterings of the academic marketplace to a higher level so as to instil a sense of idealism in his listeners. He considered education as not merely a passport to societal superiority or an office job. Education must discipline and inspire the human being to exceed himself so that Radhakrishnan's ideal—the emergence of the religious man—would be realised. He spoke of education as the pathway to the recovery of man's spirit. Right education can create discerning human beings who would reject dogmas and recover the pure springs of the religious spirit. As he affirmed in *Education, Politics and War*:

The end of education is self-knowledge, in so far as the self is a calm discriminating spirit. When we know the inner man, not as a Teuton or a Gaul, not as a soldier or a priest, not as a member of the hungry proletariat or the class of bourgeoisie but as a man facing what is permanent in the world, are we truly human. Our education should confirm the spontaneous aims and ambitions of the child mind which identifies itself with the whole of humanity, if false education does not

interfere with these natural impulses.

Radhakrishnan found the spiritual view of ancient Indian education the best choice for today. It is not enough to be a *mantravid* (knower of texts). Education triumphs only when the student becomes *atmavid* (knower of the self). A tremendous responsibility rests with the teacher who would achieve this transformation and help the emergence of the spiritual man:

True religion affirms that the image of God is in each man, whatever may be his race or sect. It is founded on self-knowledge and not on knowledge of some other self, even though that self may be a Buddha or a Christ, on delicate sincerity and not imitative energy. genuine spirituality goes beyond all religious denominations and demands a humanisation or spiritualisation of the world in all its aspects. Spiritual awareness and social harmony are the two sides of a free society. The sense of human need is there and the teacher can satisfy it by giving to the youth an idea of the fundamental power and worth of man, his spiritual dignity as man, a supra-national culture and an all-embracing humanity.

# 9

## STATESMAN

Of the many facets of Radhakrishnan, the public has loved most the philosopher-statesman for he was indeed Plato's ideal come true. A universalist to the core, he was already India's unofficial cultural ambassador when he made his triumphant sojourn to Oxford and delivered the Hibbert Lectures at Manchester and London. In 1930 he succeeded Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose as India's representative on the International Committee of Intellectual Co-operation set up by the League of Nations. Independent India found him as our Ambassador to Moscow, Vice-President and President of India.

These were jobs that called not for mere political cleverness but far-sighted statesmanship. Radhakrishnan's training had been admirable for to be successful as a vice-chancellor is no easy task. The job calls for an ability to get on well with people. His enormous scholarship in world literature and philosophy coupled with a refreshing modernistic outlook crowned with a universalist vision brought him unprecedented success in his gubernatorial posts. The remarkable philosopher and historian of world philosophy and religion had now the added advantage of putting into action his theories for a new world order based on human unity. The important volumes that contain his statements on the state of the world and global unity include *The Heart of Hindustan, India and China, Is This Peace, East and West: Reflections* and his speeches as the President of India.

Any talk of global unity should be preceded by a proper understanding of one's own nation. *The Heart of Hindustan* educates us about the name and nature of Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Buddhism for all these religions form the fabric

of India's Arya Sampath. They are all the heartbeats of our nation which is a sterling example of universal harmony: "All religions she welcomed, since she realized from the cloudy heights of contemplation that the spiritual landscape at the hilltop is the same, though the pathways from the valley are different." Hinduism itself was based on Dharma which is more of a ethical scheme of life.

Drawing closer to Islam, Radhakrishnan finds that the religion has great possibilities of creative growth on the Indian soil for most of the seminal ideas of Islam are to be found in the absolutistic interpretation of the Vedanta and the Sufi interpretation can rise to greater heights in the future:

With a spacious spiritual background, it is the privilege of the Indian Moslem to interpret the faith of Islam in its truest, highest and noblest sense, so as to distinguish it from the creed professed today by the ignorant bigot, the political intriguer and the religious fanatic. If the Indian Moslem combines his inherited tradition with his acquired faith and effects a synthesis of the old and the new, he will be led to emphasize those neglected aspects of the truth of Islam which really promoted culture and civilization and brought to life a dying world discard those unimportant details which happened to be exaggerated out of all proportion on account of historical accidents.

Radhakrishnan also found identities between Hindu thought and Christian doctrine. Vedanta speaks of the *paratva* (transcendent nature) and the *saulabhya* (easy accessibility) of the Supreme. One could note the symbolism in Christianity as well:

The doctrine of the trinity not only sought to provide a place for Jesus in the unity of God but also tried to correct the one-sided view of God adopted in the Old Testament. God is not merely the infinite majesty seated on high (the Father), but is also the heart of love (the Son), and the immanent principle of the world process (the Holy Spirit). God is not the transcendent, remote from the world, but Infinite love who pours Himself out unwearyingly into the uplift of the world."

Having become aware of the rich Arya Sampath of our nation, one should proceed towards an intelligent awareness of one's neighbourhood. Radhakrishnan was an admirer of the ancient culture of China and hoped very much that India and China would be great friends. He visited China as the Vice-President of India. He was definitely unhappy with the political set-up in that vast country. A tireless advocate of the democratic system, he wanted China to introduce free elections. Such statements could not have pleased Mao. And yet, Radhakrishnan's stature was so high that his visit to China in 1957 went off cordially. Never one to deny praise where it was due, Radhakrishnan praised the Chinese government for their tremendous achievements in the farm sector and in industry. He conveyed his disappointment that the People's China was absent from the United Nations. However, he saw that in the name of ideological progress, a great culture was being pulverised in many ways. As a lover of the best in the past, he could not remain silent and told his hosts that this culture that had grown through several thousand years should not be destroyed for ever.

What he had actually seen happening in China must have played its own part in the swift decisions Radhakrishnan took while directing Nehru's approach to the problem of Chinese aggression later. For, he knew that more than the political subjection, the policies of China would spell the end to the glorious civilisation of India nurtured on the primacy of the individual spirit. But he saw to it that the resistance was not accompanied by hatred. He did not countenance any hate campaign against the Chinese people during those dark days.

Another remarkable success of Radhakrishnan's statesmanship was his ambassadorship to the Soviet Union. He certainly had no sympathy for the Marxian philosophy that was atheistic and which gave no importance to the individuality of man. As with China, he was quite outspoken in his speeches and writings. Sarvepalli Gopal reports that once he even carried openly the anti-communist collection of essays, *The God that Failed* when flying into Moscow. But the Soviets apparently liked him for he was always ready to listen and to discuss. Indeed, Stalin's spontaneous invitation for a visit from Radhakrishnan made history! Radhakrishnan's eloquence and obvious sincerity seems to have moved Stalin deeply and he is said to have remarked: "This man speaks from a bleeding heart, not like an ordinary ambassador."



The secret of Radhakrishnan's statesmanship lay in his global outlook. Western education had not westernised him and he even continued to wear Indian-style clothes. Even as he admired his own country's heritage without remaining blind to its defects, he could admire any country and its people without failing to recognise their defects and drawbacks. His personal views never interfered with his anxiety to seek global remedies. From those early days as a Professor who wrote *The Heart of Hindusthan*, Radhakrishnan had urged the unity of mankind. As a statesman also he wanted the East and the West to come together so that there could be universal peace. This was how there could be a chance for the flowering of the religious man who could help humanity ascend the next step in evolution. Speaking of universal goodwill may appear to be a mockery in the modern world riven by mutual rivalries, but is there anything that cannot be achieved by faith? On the assumption of office as the President of India, he said:

We love life and should believe in the holiness of life. This faith will give us the strength to overcome mental obstacles and moral inertia. We should not put national security above world safety. The absolute sovereign nation-State is outmoded. Behind all national interests there is an irreducible minimum of values and aspirations which are the common possessions of mankind... On the basis of the community of ideals and aspirations we can build a world society which will protect national values and preserve world security. If moral imperatives do not shape the pattern of our behaviour, national and international, there will be fear for the future.

Was this mere starry-eyed idealism born of the expansive euphoria on assumption of the high office? Apparently not. Even when under severe pressure, Radhakrishnan's faith did not desert him. He confirmed that the Chinese aggression which brought darkness at noon to India only meant that we should strengthen our defences. For the rest, the move should always be towards global unity. Even the threat of a neighbouring country playing with nuclear weaponry should not push us into the dangerous habit of piling up arms for arms' sake. Broadcasting to the nation on the eve of the Republic Day in 1967, he said:

The other day, a film was shown depicting modern war—children howling with pain and blinded with nuclear flashes, women crying over the dead bodies of their babies, bodies hurled about with disfigured faces. By adopting retaliation in kind, what do we achieve? The victims of modern war cry out against our unforgivable indifference, our criminal connivance in the evil that is done in our name. What greater error could there conceivably be than that these terrible weapons can protect us against our own timidity, short-sightedness, selfishness and lassitude? We must learn that the only remedy for curing man's inhumanity to man is courage, vigour and confidence.

Radhakrishnan had to speak very frequently on national and international fora and there had to be iterations and reiterations of his views. However, he never sounds repetitive. His marvellous handling of the English language by lacing it with Sanskrit and encrusting it with quotations from great thinkers kept the audience spellbound and also inspired them. Further, the occasional touch of humour enhanced Radhakrishnan's oratorical brilliance. His presence was an assurance that India was moving towards her destiny as the guru of the world. As R. Venkataraman says:

President Radhakrishnan was a *dhvajasthambham* in the temple of our national consciousness: upright and resplendent in rough weather and fair, inspiring us to a higher purpose. He was an eloquent preamble to our national aspirations, the colophon to our collective thinking. Whenever he toured the country, he conducted what could be called a Krishna-Arjuna-*samvad*, allaying fears, clearing doubts, instilling confidence and hope. And when he visited other nations as President, such as the USSR, the UK and the USA, he was received as a sage and a statesman, a modern day equivalent of Plato's ideal philosopher-king or as a *rajarsi* and not a mere Rashtrapati.

# 10

## THE UNIVERSAL MAN

Blossoming at the fag-end of modern Indian renaissance, Radhakrishnan's pride in his country's heritage was immense. He was a sincere patriot, but not the patriot-type which proclaims: My country, right or wrong. He never sought to draw a veil over our weaknesses or defend our mistakes. But he literally glowed when he spoke of the nation's Arya Sampath: the sum total of its culture that excluded nothing from its universal grasp. Such Sattwic patriotism is the *adhara sruti* of his writings and is revealed best when he deals with great Indians past and present. His volumes on *Indian Philosophy* echo with Miltonic sublimity when he begins a roll-call of self-effacing great thinkers as this passage dealing with the Upanishadic Age:

So careless were they of personal fame and so anxious for the spread of truth that they fathered their views on the honoured deities and heroes of the vedic period. Prajapati and Indra, Narada and Sanatkumara figure as dialecticians. When the history of the great thinkers of the Upanishad period with their distinctive contributions come to be written, the following names, if we leave aside the mythical ones, will stand out: Mahidasa Aitareya, Raikva, Sandilya, Satyakama Jabala, Jaivali, Uddalaka, Svetaketu, Bharadvaja, Gargayana, Prataradana, Balaki, Ajatasatru, Varuna, Yajnavalkya, Gargi and Maitreyi.

It is also significant that Gautama Buddha was the subject of Radhakrishnan's British Academy Lecture. According to him, no

personality in the whole of the world's past could vie with the Buddha who combined renunciation and rebellion, royalty and mendicancy for the lofty ideal of ridding man of sorrow. Buddha had lived 500 years earlier than Jesus Christ and had exemplified to perfection the best in Christianity! The silent pride of being an Indian, of belonging to a nation that was sattvic and spiritual peeps through every word he wrote. Thus Radhakrishnan, while describing the Buddha's *parinirvana*:

Taking leave of the pleasant city of Vaisali with his favourite disciple, Ananda, he rested on one of the neighbouring hills and looking at the pleasant scenery with its many shrines and sanctuaries, he said to Ananda, *citram jambudvipam, manoramam jivitam manushyanam*. 'Colourful and rich is India, lovable and charming is the life of men'... 'Verily I say unto you now, O monks: All things are perishable; work out your deliverance with earnestness'. These were his last words. His spirit sank into the depths of mystic absorption and when he had attained to that degree where all thought, all conception disappears, when the consciousness of individuality ceases, he entered into the supreme *nirvana*.

Himself one dedicated to the concept of the universal man, Radhakrishnan was thus drawn naturally to those of his contemporaries who were not stained by narrow nationalism. He admired Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. When Tagore was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1913, Radhakrishnan prepared a book on the poet's philosophy which he found to be truly in the tradition of Hindu Vedanta. Though he knew no Bengali and had to work with English translations, he could gauge accurately the poet's philosophical thrust which insinuates the importance of intuition to link man to the Absolute.

For Radhakrishnan who held on fast to the hope that the emergence of the religious man was still possible in this flawed world, Mahatma Gandhi was a prime ideal. Gandhi's secularism which was a rare inter-faith dialogue that took the ideal to the masses through his bhajan programmes was a good augury for without faith in a Power above us, mankind could get lost in the desert of Unbelief. Radhakrishnan was moved by Gandhi's

non-cooperation which appeared to him almost a spiritual movement. Thus Sarvepalli Gopal on Radhakrishnan's view based on his notes written in February 1922 when the movement was still in its nonage:

Gandhiji was no mere worldly politician depending on mechanical devices for the attainment of self-government. He applied religion to politics and sought to convert the world of nations to the higher law of love. The central interest of the movement in India was a religious one. No one could say if Gandhi would succeed but at least the votaries of spirit should pray the success of a holy experiment not so much for the sake of India as for the future of the world.

This reverence grew deeper with the passage of years. Radhakrishnan's *Mahatma Gandhi: Essays and Reflections on His Life and Work* was published in 1939. He is positively gleeful that the arid atheism of modern political thought had been rejected by Mahatma Gandhi. The religious spirit was no more anathema to the public worker:

For Gandhi there is no religion apart from human activity. Though in the present circumstances of India, Gandhi happens to be a political revolutionary who refuses to accept tyranny or acquiesce in slavery, he is far from the uncompromising type of revolutionary whose abstractions force men into unnatural and inhuman shapes. In the acid test of experience he remains, not as a politician or a reformer, not as a philosopher or a moralist, but someone composed of them all, an essentially religious person endowed with the highest and most human qualities and made more lovable by the consciousness of his own limitations and by an unflinching sense of humour.

Gandhi is not a mystic, not a victim of dreams and hallucinations. But he is aware of the indwelling universal, God who pervades the whole of creation. The existence of Gandhi's God cannot be proved scientifically. But the existence of such a godly person in the shameful, destructive arena of politics, is itself the undeniable proof of God's existence. Nor is Gandhi a solitary instance, a sudden

occurrence, a unique aberration. He is but a link in the termless golden chain of India's spiritual tradition that has upheld the ideal of the universal man all the time.

Gandhi is also the representative of India's spirit of religious tolerance. Islam and Christianity also appeal to Gandhi though the driving force in his life is naturally Hinduism. Gandhi belongs to the highest levels of spirituality precisely because he is prepared to work at the lowest level of constructive work:

Gandhi is among the foremost of the servants of humanity. He is not comforted by the prospect of the distant future when faced by the threat of immediate disasters. He joins forces with men of fixed convictions to work by the most direct means possible for the cure of evils and the prevention of dangers. Democracy for him is not a matter of phrases but of social realities. All his public activities in South Africa and India can be understood only if we know his love of the common man.

Unlike most of the modern teachers who offered "a life of general goodwill, conventional morality or vague aesthetic affection", the Mahatma exemplified "the note of strength and stark reality" attuned to sanctity. And the prophet was so very human, with his puck-like humour. When Radhakrishnan wanted to dedicate his translation of the *Bhagavad Gita* to Gandhi, Gandhi said quite seriously: "I am your Arjuna, you are my Krishna". When the Mahatma was assassinated, Radhakrishnan was prostrated with grief. This was the loss of a rare being who had understood completely the concept of the universal man! In his address at the memorial meeting held in the All Souls College, Oxford, Radhakrishnan once again referred to the religious man in the Mahatma, one who practised what he preached, the heroic warrior who died "with the name of God on his lips and love in his heart". Surely Gandhi was a symbol of the next step in evolution, the universal man:

Gandhi had the faith that the world is one in its deepest roots and highest aspirations, he knew that the purpose of historical humanity is to develop a world civilization, a world culture, a world community. We can get out of the misery of

this world only by exposing the darkness which is strongly entrenched in men's hearts and replacing it by understanding and tolerance. Gandhi's tender and tormented heart heralds the world which the United Nations wish to create. This lonely symbol of a vanishing past is also the prophet of the new world which is struggling to be born. He represents the conscience of the future man.

Jawaharlal Nenru could not be called a 'religious man' but Radhakrishnan always distinguished between the true religion of the spirit and credal religion which is entangled in stultifying dogmas. Hence, he could admire Nehru also for being 'spiritual'. "Possessed of a scientific temper, he was interested in the empirical route to reality." Like Gandhi, Nehru was also a harbinger of future humanity: "This most lovable and magnanimous of men is an earnest of the age to come, the age of world men with world compassion."

Radhakrishnan reacted to the great men of his time thus because he also worked on the same wavelength of a world-view. One could compile sumptuous volumes out of the tributes paid to him by learned thinkers even in his lifetime. For C.E.M. Joad, he was 'the bridge-builder' who would bring down the opaque curtains that divided one land from another and kept cultures apart. The modern age aspired for a unified, integral social reality and this could be made possible if we recognised the basic spiritual oneness of mankind. Radhakrishnan was the eloquent speaker of such oneness. The past and present should be made to chime together and the whole world resound to the sounds of the brotherhood of man. Radhakrishnan never tired of sounding the tocsin of togetherness. Thus George P. Conger regarding Radhakrishnan's travels with affection and admiration:

With his unique dual appointment at Banaras and Oxford, like a weaver's shuttle he has gone to and fro between East and West carrying a thread of understanding, weaving it into the fabric of civilisation. We hear him and hear of him in China and South Africa, in Chicago and Mexico City. Naturally he has been a shining figure in UNESCO. Lately his ancient but eager young mother-country has claimed him for one of its most important ambassadorships. Except for an

occasional Marcus Aurelius, philosophers will never be kings, but sometimes a philosopher wields among his contemporaries an influence which any king might envy.

After the ambassadorship, the post of the Vice-President. When Radhakrishnan became the President of India, he was already advanced in age but where was retirement for this remarkable orator carrying around the message of the universal man? Malcolm Adiseshiah records that as President Radhakrishnan spoke at the *samskara sadas*, the *urs* of Hazrat Kwaja Nizamuddin, Guru Nanak Dev's birthday, the world fellowship of Buddhists, the welcome to the Pope, *Visva Hindu Dharma* and other important religious and philosophical functions:

Similarly, his philosophy of friendship for all nations led him to make 102 addresses on India and other nations (such as Bulgaria, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, the UAR, the USA, the USSR, the United Nations, etc.). His most moving addresses as President was when he dealt with the subjects of education and culture, covering the message that all disciplines have one end, that a university is a touch of the universal, of the sanctity of the individual, the relationship between knowledge and wisdom and between dedication and discipline, of science as a habit of mind, and of faith rooted in reason.

When a volume, *Radhakrishnan-Comparative Studies in Philosophy* was presented to the renowned scholar on his sixtieth birthday, the editors, D.M. Datta and P.T. Raju, actually referred to him as "a liaison officer between the East and the West" and rightly praised him for his efforts towards ushering in a change of approach by world thinkers. Thanks to his tireless dissemination of the integral view, the East has recognised the need to master Western science and the West has realised that if the spirituality of the East was properly understood, "a way could be found to overcome its frantic competitiveness and achieve the inner and outer peace it has hitherto lacked."

It is also appropriate to mention here that the citation presented to him by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan's Kulapati, K.M. Munshi, on the occasion of the conferment of the title of Brahmavidya Bhaskara on Radhakrishnan, speaks of his "remarkable



contribution towards a harmonious synthesis of all that is best, noble and inspiring in the cultures of the East and the West, and presenting a new spiritual outlook, transcending race, country and time". Indeed this is the aspect which comes to our vision immediately when his name is mentioned. Paulos Mar Gregorios has rightly related his vision of global unity to the message of the Upanishads. Radhakrishnan has referred to the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God scores of times as in this passage from *The Principal Upanishads*:

Essential unity with God is unity with one another through God. In the sense of heightened awareness we do not forget the world, which seems strangely of one piece. We are lifted out of provincialism into perspective, as we become aware of something vaster, profounder, more ultimate than the world.

Paulos Mar Gregorios calls Radhakrishnan a *viswamanava*. Radhakrishnan's universalist outlook, however, did not come in the way of encouraging the various cultures to follow their own genius in growth. The kind of enforced cultural integration attempted in China was not to his liking. He saw the whole world as a great family of nations living in peace and sharing prosperity. If nations learnt to be democratic in their political and social spheres, they would find it quite natural to be at peace with every one else. Not that Radhakrishnan was a dreamer of impossible utopias. He was very much part of the harsh and hard world of international statesmanship and knew how ideals were always knocked about in the stress of international diplomacy. But faith he had in abundance. And faith did not desert him even in the face of the nuclear vampire.

Margaret Chatterjee has traced the impact of Sri Aurobindo on Radhakrishnan's views regarding the 'integral consciousness' of the future man and the possibilities of a 'world-soul':

From Plato to Sri Aurobindo can be detected a certain stream of thought according to which institutions are the reflection of an inner counterpart. This counterpart has to be brought to birth and nurtured. Radhakrishnan always maintained a careful balance between idealism and

commonsense. For this reason he was able both to invoke the concept of a world-soul and say that, 'A new kind of diplomacy which does not depend on war or threat of war has to be organised.' A change in the hearts of men and a new style of peace-making with its appropriate institutional apparatus was needed. The Aurobindonian echo persists but is transformed in tune with the practical requirements of conflict resolution.

A universal man. A practical idealist. If in spite of all the inseparable problems that have plagued India, the country has remained democratic and continued to have a high place in the comity of nations as a Guide, it has been in a large measure due to having had Radhakrishnan as our Ambassador to Russia, our Vice-President and our President during the years immediately following our Independence in 1947.

# 11

## THE STYLE IS THE MAN

One of the most intriguing happenings in this age of near-total technology was Radhakrishnan's wide circle of listeners for his speeches on philosophy. Can philosophy be interesting? Can it be of use to our everyday life? But then he made philosophy an exciting subject even for the students! This was no easy task for one can always cheapen a subject and hurtle down from the sublime to the ridiculous, if liberties were taken with subjective disciplines like religion and philosophy. Radhakrishnan was very much a class-based teacher who gave regular lectures, dictated notes and corrected answer papers. But he was also something more. He kept abreast of the knowledge-explosion and thus even his notes, according to Khasa Subba Rao, "bore no stereotyped form and they came out unrecorded from mind and memory, with skilful upto-date improvisations that made them look refreshingly original each time."

D. Anjaneyulu has analysed some of the ingredients of Radhakrishnan's success as a teacher of philosophy. Radhakrishnan used the comparative method extensively at a time when it was very sparingly used. This method made it easier to understand the subject on hand and widened one's horizons of knowledge. Radhakrishnan adopted the inter-disciplinary approach as well. Philosophy and religion were explained through literature, history, politics and science:

Contemporary sensibility, with a classical background served to strengthen Radhakrishnan's position, in his conscious effort to reconcile the past with the present. It fitted him for his self-chosen role as a creative interpreter, very

different from that of a faithful chronicler of facts and a narrow, literal-mind commentator of sacred, traditional texts. The philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore and the personality of Mahatma Gandhi were not isolated from the world of academic thought, the latest and maturest fruits of a dynamic socio-cultural tradition going back to Valmiki, Vyasa and Kalidasa, Buddha, Mahavira and Kabir.

And, of course, Radhakrishnan's mastery of the English language stood him in good stead throughout his career as a writer and speaker. If he mesmerized his Indian audiences with his sonorous handling of the English language, he inspired his English audiences with a creative use of the language to put across abstruse problems of philosophy. And all his lectures were garnished with becoming wit and scintillating epigrams. The listeners knew for certain that this was no mandarin come to mystify them further. Here was a guide to lead them from the known to the unknown. Writing about the reception to Radhakrishnan's Hibbert Lectures at Manchester and London, Sarvepalli Gopal says:

They were the largest gatherings seen at either place since the First World War at public lectures on a philosophical subject; and the striking feature was that most of those present were young men and women straight from classrooms, officers and factories, 'listening to a profoundly religious man expounding to a generation which has largely lost its religion a profoundly religious way of life'. After the last lecture at London the audience lined up to shake hands with the speaker; and many whom he did not know wrote to thank him for his utterance: 'In you a great dream is realised—the East bringing its own message in our own language thro' one who knows all about Western thought.'

It is in this context that Radhakrishnan must be hailed as a maker of Indian literature. Though we have him no more with us to listen to his oratory in person, the writings are there as springs of creative energy. A harmonious blending of Sanskrit words with easy-flowing English sentences, backed by clear, cloudless thinking make his writings a connoisseur's delight.

There is oratory, but no theatricality. Radhakrishnan prefers

commonsensical words and rejects floweriness almost as if a technician is at work, assembling an effective instrument. This was a shrewd move to make Eastern thought graspable by the Western mind which had already condemned it as obfuscating mysticism and had rejected the Vedic heritage as barbaric pantheism. A characteristic Radhakrishnan piece is this on the non-image of the Supreme is the renowned temple of Chidambaram when we read *Religion and Society*:

In the temple of Chidambaram, dedicated to Siva as Nataraja in the holy of holies (*garbagriha*) there is neither image nor superscription. Worship is directed, not to any limited embodiment of the deity, but to the all-enfolding cosmic spirit which is formless, yet contains all forms, the light which is the source of all lights. On a bare wall, in a dark room a garland, which is visible and tangible, is hung round the neck of the Invisible and the Intangible.

The balanced sentences, the touch of mythology, the presence of a Sanskrit word or two and the implied clarification regarding the misunderstood Hinduism for the westerner. India is not a land of promiscuous idol worship, but a culture which knows the highest truths and is able to get them percolated into the consciousness of the common people through image (and even non-image) and ritual. Coming from "the spare tall figure, a keen yet serene face, a pair of eyes sparkling and unwavering, an alert head mounted by a big white turban", the words caught the attention of the listener with inescapable sureness.

And yet, Radhakrishnan is no missionary. Nor are there visionary flights in his writing, nor flights of fancy. Nor academic jargon nor ridiculous pedantry. With Radhakrishnan, the style was the man. He spoke and wrote as he was: a man of erudition and common-sense. A person who could think and analyse and come down to the intellectual level of his listener-reader only to raise him to his own higher level; an ideal teacher; a man of gentle wit and un-advised compassion.

Open Radhakrishnan's book anywhere at random. The first thing that strikes us is the enormous scholarship. A voracious reader all his life, and blessed with a phenomenal memory, he scattered choice quotations with a prodigal hand. All this came from his first

hand reading. Was this possible for one who had a punishing schedule as an administrator, ambassador and President? But then, Radhakrishnan literally lived with his books. Stalin who was preparing to receive Radhakrishnan as India's envoy, seems to have said: "I would like to meet the ambassador who spends all his time in bed—writing."

Books had indeed become a second nature to Radhakrishnan. *Indian Philosophy* which catapulted him to fame when he was just thirty-five years old, stands as an eloquent witness to the hard work that brought him enduring renown. While the texts are encrusted with quotations, almost every page has a few footnotes and often they contain thought-provoking quotes that enlarge the horizons of our understanding. A carefully-planned large volume or a brief review: it was all the same for Radhakrishnan. The scholar must be present with the library at his beck and call. He might be writing just a review of Sir Ahmed Hussain's *Notes on Islam* but there will be space for A.E., Amir Ali, Jalaluddin Rumi, Dara Shukoh, the Aga Khan, the Bible, Sir Abdur Rahim, Sir Charles Townshend, Leigh Hunt, Al-Hujiviri, Chaitanya, Kabir and Nanak.

But the power of Radhakrishnan's clear thinking keeps us in thrall and we never feel crowded out. Within a brief space he tells us a good deal about the doctrine of Islam and quotes liberally from the Koran and draws a helpful exercise in comparatism. The integrator is at work:

Ignorance of other's faiths is the mother of injustice and error. Some of the practices of the uncultured Moslems blinded the eyes of the Hindus to the ideals of Islam. While there is much for Islam to learn from a sympathetic understanding of Hinduism, there is also much for Hinduism to learn from Islam... We must also learn to democratise our institutions and do away with the wrangling creeds, unintelligible dogmas and oppressive institutions under which the soul of man is literally crushed. Both Islam and Hinduism at their best teach that true religion, is to serve God in truth and purity and obey His laws reverently in all the affairs of life."

Radhakrishnan's style matured quite early in his career. The first volume of *Indian Philosophy* was published when he was

thirty-five. It was a massive undertaking for the young scholar but there are no apologies or uncertainties in the preface:

The naive utterances of the Vedic poets, the wondrous suggestiveness of the Upanishads, the marvellous psychological analyses of the Buddhists, and the stupendous system of Sankara, are quite as interesting and instructive from the cultural point of view as the systems of Plato and Aristotle, or Kant and Hegel, if only we study them in a true scientific frame of mind, without disrespect for the past or contempt for the alien. The special nomenclature of Indian philosophy which cannot be easily rendered into English accounts for the apparent strangeness of the intellectual landscape. If the outer difficulties are overcome, we feel the kindred throb of the human heart, which because human is neither Indian nor European.”

The problems of rendering Indian philosophical nomenclature into intelligible English was no easy task. Fortunately, Radhakrishnan had a will, and the way opened itself.

It had not been easy at first. Sarvepalli Gopal writes:

Muirhead, who had planned to include them (the two volumes of *Indian Philosophy*) in the distinguished ‘Library of Philosophy’ series of which he was the editor, was himself so taken aback by the size and cost of printing, with Sanskrit passages in Roman script and diacritical marks, that he left the final decision to the publishers, George Allen and Unwin. The head of the firm, Stanley Unwin, was shrewd enough to see the potential of this work and recognised that steady sales over the years would soon cover the heavy costs at the start.”

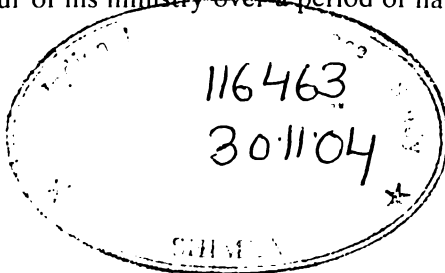
Stylistically the swing from East to West and back was a masterstroke. Radhakrishnan could always produce an appropriate parallel from the West and just when the East appeared to withdraw into its inviolable mystery, this ‘parallel’ trapped the reader back into attentive study. For instance, the references to the universe as *nissatta* (nonentity) or *nijjiva* (soullessness) are taken to mean that this world is unreal but not non-existent. What then do we do with some of the early teachings of Buddha that give a subjective

interpretation of the world? Thus Radhakrishnan:

The latter is more Kantian while the former is more Berkeleyan. We may say that the later interpretation corresponds to the hypotheses of Schopenhauer that the metaphysical principle is the will to live, and things and persons are varied objectifications of the one will to live. It is also sometimes suggested that our imperfection called ignorance breaks up the one continuous cosmic process into the individual persons and separate things.

Radhakrishnan was to continue in this fashion for nearly half a century. And yet, he never became a caricature of himself. The inner fire that illumined the early works (*The Hindu View of Life*, *The Heart of Hindusthan*) shed the same steady, purposive glow in the works belonging to the 1960s like *Religion in a Changing World*. The unceasing industry, wide reading and healthy intellectual adventures continued even when he was in the midst of quick-moving events and was imprisoned by the shackles of public life. Besides, the style inspires us even today because the man who wielded the pen was a superior being. To conclude in the words of Prof. K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar:

Memory and industry, curiosity and sense of adventure, adaptability and the readiness to meet any new challenges whatsoever, all make an impressive budget of qualities. Yet these alone cannot explain the phenomenon that is Professor Radhakrishnan. Without the reserves of the spirit, the inner poise, the hidden fire, all other endowments cannot count for much. And the spirit that moved and sustained our ancient Indian *rishis* and *acharyas* is not foreign to Professor Radhakrishnan, and it is this alone that can explain the splendour of his ministry over a period of half a century.





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SARVEPALLI RADHAKRISHNAN (1886-1975) scholar, biographer, philosopher, educationist and statesman was among the few people in world history who though being a professional philosopher of eminence rose to be the head of a vast country.

Author of numerous scholarly works in Indian philosophy and culture, it was due to his tireless effort that the East recognised the need to master Western science and the West realised the need to understand Indian philosophy as the way to "inner peace".

Extraordinary felicity with the English language and Sanskrit make his writing a connoisseur's delight; because of this, a large section of educated Indians, who had no formal foundation in Sanskrit scholarship became aware of their rich philosophic heritage.

Radhakrishnan's life-long commitment to education continues to influence the Indian academic community. A staunch supporter of university autonomy, his convocation addresses repeatedly exhorted institutions to use India's rich cultural past as a means of achieving social transformation.

Radhakrishnan also gave intellectual leadership to eminent literary bodies like the PEN All-India Centre and Sahitya Akademi, of which he was elected President in 1964. A Knighthood was conferred on him in 1931. He was also awarded Fellowship of the Royal Society of Literature, London in 1953 and that of the Sahitya Akademi in 1968.

As a statesman he has held the posts of Indian ambassador to erstwhile USSR, the Vice-President and later the President of the Indian Republic.

PREMA NANDAKŪMAR (b.1939), the author of this monograph, is a writer and critic in Tamil and English, with many published books and numerous articles.



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