HINDUISM AND THE WEST

A STUDY IN CHALLENGE & RESPONSE

—K. M. Panikkar

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SIR JADUNATH SARKAR MEMORIAL LECTURES, 1962

HINDUISM & THE WEST

A Study in
Challenge and Response

By

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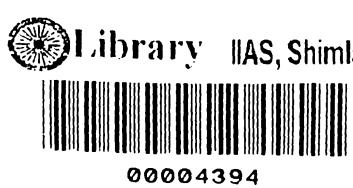

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Contents

FOREWORD

Sir Jadunath Sarkar's place in the world of Indian historical scholarship is so well assured as to need no comments here. His studies of Aurangzeb and of the later Mughals—to single out only two from a sizeable list of books and other learned contributions—will long remain monuments to his careful, thorough and painstaking research, not to speak of a remarkable lucidity in exposition. His work has left, indeed, an indeliable imprint on our knowledge of mediaeval Indian history.

In 1957, Panjab University decided to present a commemoration volume to late Sir Jadunath Sarkar. The work, when completed, ran into two volumes. The first was published in May 1957, and the second in March 1958, barely two months before the great historian passed away. The Syndicate of the University decided that, out of the sale proceeds of the two commemoration volumes, a fund be constituted to endow a periodical course of extension lecturers on different aspects of Indian history, to be delivered by distinguished scholars, from India or abroad, and the lectures should be subsequently published.

Sardar K. M. Panikkar, Vice-Chancellor, Jammu & Kashmir University, was invited to deliver the first series of these memorial lectures on the 2nd and 3rd of March 1962.

In his study of Hinduism and the West, he has presented an extremely provocative thesis that the outcome of Hinduism's encounter with the West in the nineteenth century was a synthesis of ideas which gave birth to "a new civilization". The latter, while deeply rooted in Hindu tradition had, nonetheless, been nurtured at the fount of, and "fertilized" by, Western ideas and cultural impact. The lectures were heard on both days with rapt attention by large audiences. I am sure that, in print, Sardar Panikkar's analysis will reach, and stimulate, even larger audiences than those which he addressed in the University in March 1962. The purpose of the endowment, undoubtedly, could not have been better served.

A. C. Joshi

Panjab University
Chandigarh,
June 15, 1963.

I. THE ENCOUNTER

Sir Jadunath Sarkar in whose memory these lectures have been endowed rightly deserves to be honoured as the father of Indian historical writing. It is well-known that unlike the Greeks, the Romans, the Arabs and the Chinese, the Hindus had no tradition of historical writing. While Indian literature from the time of the Vedas, especially the *Puranas* and the *itihasas*, apart from historical kavyas and prasastis, provide a great deal of material for the reconstruction of Indian history, neither Sanskrit nor any of the other Indian literatures included History as one of its main branches. India had no Herodotus, Tucydides, Livy, Josephus, Shu ma Chien or Ibn Kaldun. Both as a branch of letters and as a discipline or research, history writing in the modern sense in India is one of the products of British education. True, that the Muslims in India, following Islamic traditions elsewhere, had introduced the science of History into India and Ziauddin Barani, Kafi Khan, Badauni and other honoured names in Indo-Islamic historigraphy deserve to be remembered and recognised. But the Islamic tradition of history in India was a limited one and it is not to that source that our present science of History traces its origin. Officers of the East India Company from early days showed a marked interest in historical writing. From Orme to Vincent Smith there was a galaxy of writers, including James Mill, Elphinstone, Malcolm and Irvine whose contribution to the growth of Indian historical writing deserves recognition. Nor can we forget the great body of

epigraphists, archaeologists and others whose labours made available to us very valuable material for historical research. Historians of special periods like Duff, Cunningham, Wilks and Tod have also helped in the growth of Indian historical tradition.

The earlier generation of historians, as we have noticed, were Europeans. The first great Indian name in this field is that of Jadunath Sarkar whose work covering the whole of the 17th and 18th centuries stands unrivalled in the sweep of narrative, in the mastery of details and the comprehensiveness of research. Written with scrupulous fairness, after a full exploration of facts and an evaluation of motives, Sir Jadunath's work is a model for historians. It is but fitting that the tradition he created should be honoured in this country.

The subject that I have chosen today deals with the encounter between Europe and India in the 19th century and the response that this encounter brought forth in Hinduism. The importance of this subject for an understanding of modern India cannot be over-rated for what India is today is the outcome of the hundred and fifty years of contact with England during the 19th century and the fifty years that followed it.

The encounter between India and the West is something which is without parallel in history. The impact of Islam, starting with the invasions of Mohammed Ghori lasted for a longer period and in a measure is a continuing fact. But it has not had the same fundamental significance as the contact that India had with England. The dominance that Islam exercised in many parts of India was mainly political and military. Except for sporadic

efforts at conversion, there was no attempt to challenge the religion, philosophy or social life of the Hindus. Their laws were left untouched. The Islamic State did not enforce an educational system. In fact the Hindus and Muslims lived as parallel societies. This does not mean that they did not influence each other ; but that the institutions, beliefs and social structure of Hinduism were not interfered with and their assumptions challenged by the Muslims and vice versa.

Also from the point of view of culture, the two communities stood on a fairly equal footing. Islam in India could not claim to represent a higher civilisation. Nor did Islamic political dominance extend over the whole of India. At all times there were large areas outside the political and social influence of Islam.

The economic structure of the Muslim society in India also was not different from that of the Hindus. In fact, in commercial undertakings, in the management of finance, cultivation of land, and in industrial production the advantage on the whole lay with the Hindus. Also the Islamic states in India did not have a national policy of education. While a considerable number of Hindus of the higher classes learnt Persian and became no doubt Islamised in culture as Guru Nanak bewailed, the traditional education of the Hindus was left untouched and was responsible for the higher education and thinking of the Hindu people. In art, architecture and music, there was considerable interaction between the two civilisations, as the Moghul and Rajput schools of painting, the Indo-Saracenic architecture and other manifestations of cultural synthesis testify. However, in spite of this

co-existence extending over seven hundred years the influence of Islam on Hindu religion and social organisation was marginal. The great Hindu religious upheavals in the period of Muslim influence, apart from Sikhism, like the Bhakti movement, the devotional upsurge in Maharashtra, the revival associated with Ramananda and Vallabhacharya, to mention only a few, were untouched by Islam.

So far as Hindu Society was considered, the impact of Islam seems on the whole only to have made it more rigid. A study of the extensive *smriti* literature of the Muslim period including the encyclopaedic Todarananda, composed under the orders of Akbar's famous Revenue Minister, Raja Toder Mal would clearly demonstrate that Hinduism, far from liberlising itself under the impact of Islam, became stricter in its observations of rituals and caste rules, placing more and more emphasis on the prayaschitta, or the religious penances for social offences. Briefly, therefore, it may be said that the encounter between Islam and Hinduism became, after a short time, a problem of co-existence, with mutual toleration rather than the domination of one by the other.

Nowhere in the world, in fact, was there ever the kind of encounter which Hinduism and the West had in India. Such major encounters had led either to the displacement of civilisations or of a people. The most outstanding instances in the old world are those of Persia and Egypt. Both were ancient and historic civilisations but, faced with the power of Islam, they lost their identity in a greater Islamic civilisation. No doubt old Iranian influence has persisted and may be said to be a continuing influence in Persia. In Egypt, the displacement has been

more complete. Neither the Pharaonic nor the Greco-Roman civilisation of ancient times can claim to be represented in Egyptian life today. Egyptian civilisation during the last thousand and two hundred years is predominantly Arabic and Muslim. Similar is the case with the great civilisations which had flowered under Roman and Christian influences in Africa on the southern littoral of the Mediterranean. Today they are Islamic with hardly any important cultural roots in their pre-Islamic past.

Mexico and Peru, the two great empires where the pre-Columbian Americans had developed remarkably high civilisations provide other striking examples of the displacement of culture. In both these empires, the dominant Christian civilisation of Spain replaced the indigenous cultures to such an extent that though in Mexico the population is still predominantly non-European, the memory of Aztec and other cultures is only through the study of history and archaeology. In Peru the remarkable social and economic structure that the Incas created totally disappeared within a short time after the Spanish conquest. Today though one may speak of an Andean renaissance, it does not base itself on indigenous roots as the breach created by the Spanish has been too complete for an identification with the past. These are instances of the total displacement of culture.

The United States is a modern example of an encounter leading to the displacement of peoples. No doubt other earlier instances are available in history, the displacement of the Celts by the Angles and the Saxons in England, the Gauls by the Franks etc., but these however are unimportant for our purpose.

A case which is sometimes instanced as being parallel to the encounter between India and Britain is that of China and the West. But the differences between the two are fundamental and their experiences provide no parallel at all. Unlike India, China was never occupied by a Western power. A central government of China existed all the time and consequently, though that government was often powerless and dependent on foreign support, Western penetration outside the Treaty ports and the settlements constituted no challenge to the Chinese way of life. The administration of the country outside a few settlements was in the hands of the Chinese. There was no comprehensive system of education organised by a foreign government and controlled mainly by foreigners. No foreign legal system and judicial machinery were imposed on the Chinese people (outside the concessions) till practically the last days of the Kuomintang government. Till the downfall of the Manchus in 1911-12, the Chinese looked upon the Europeans as uncivilized barbarians whose unrighteous power they were forced to acknowledge. In the period after the first Revolution "Westernism" no doubt had a vogue but conditions had, after the first Great War, changed in Europe itself, and other doctrines and ideologies had begun to challenge the postulates of Western civilisation that the relations between the West and the East in China had ceased to be an immediate problem. The challenge in China came from Communism.

Before analysing the nature of the encounter between India and the West, it may perhaps be necessary to examine why, in spite of prolonged contact extending

over centuries, the challenge of the West to India became a problem only by the end of the 18th century. Europeans knew India from at least the conquest of Alexander of the Persian Satrapy in West Punjab. It may still be a matter of speculation how far Greece and India were familiar with each other's civilisation. That Indian religious thought was not unfamiliar to European scholars as early as the 3rd century A. D. is established by the fact that towards A.D. 235 there was published in Rome a treatise entitled a Reputation of All Heresies which contained a faithful summary of the doctrines of the Upanishads. It is, however, strange that though much information about India penetrated into Europe and was available in medieval literature, there is hardly any allusion to Europe and its people in Sanskrit or other Indian languages. With the arrival of Vasco da Gama and the establishment of Portuguese trading posts on the West coast and in Bengal it might be thought that the situation would have undergone a change. But that was not so. Europe no doubt acquired more knowledge about the products, industries and trade in India ; but the people in India outside the coastal areas where the Portuguese and later the French and the British had established their authority, had no knowledge or interest in these foreign people or their culture. Broadly, this was true of the European administrators and other personnel. Apart from a few leading missionaries like Robert de Nobili, they also were not interested in the culture and civilisation of India. This situation continued till the end of the 18th century.

This lack of curiosity on the part of Indians in the affairs of the foreigners and the total ignorance about

their civilisation are in strange contrast to the reaction of Japan to the foreign merchant community represented by the Dutch. In Japan from the earliest days of European contact, there was a group of people, who, moved by high intellectual curiosity, not only learned the Dutch language and studied the sciences then cultivated in Europe, but conducted a persistent enquiry into the sources of European power. Curious as it may sound, the *Rangkusha group*, as this circle of students was called, provided the background for Japan's successful attempt in a short time to master European techniques. Neither in India, nor in China was there a similar group interested in understanding the West till poltical power had gone into European hands.

European nations thus continued to live in their coastal factories and to carry on their trade without influencing Indian life and thought in the least degree till the last quarter of the 18th century. With the conquest of Bengal, the situtation began to change. After the Regulation Act of 1773 the Company's authority in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa was organised on a government basis. The people of the three provinces came into contact with them as rulers, and the interests of the British also extended beyond those of trade. Gradually, with the spread of empire all over India (1818), from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin (excluding the Punjab), Britain and India stood face to face in a historic encounter which was to last over a century and a quarter.

The two civilisations that thus met in a historic challenge were altogether dissimilar. The Hindus had been integrated as a people at least 2000 years before

this historic encounter and claimed a civilisation going further back into antiquity. Though subjected to foreign conquest over large areas they had again emerged without loss of their identity and in spite of 600 years of Muslim power in Hindustan, constituted the principal element in the population. They were, however, without effective political organisation. Their economy was based on handicraft and village industries ; over large areas they were under feudal control. A rigid system of caste, while binding Hindus together and separating them from the rest as a people also divided them into ineffective groups kept apart or by strict rules about food, marriage and social relationships. Bound down by customs, usages and superstitions like child-marriage, compulsory widowhood and split up into castes and sub-castes without any obvious forces of social integration, the Hindus appeared to be a people stunted in their growth and with nothing valuable to contribute to the world. As against this great mass of humanity counting no less than 150 million people even at that time stood Great Britain in the panaoplied might of her imperial greatness, the representative of an aggressive civilisation which claimed the entire globe as its inheritance, wealthy and powerful as a result of the new industrial revolution, possessing advanced techniques in peace and war, and more than all, enjoying a political organisation which enabled her to unite strength with liberty. She professioned a religion which its supporters claimed was based on higher principles of morality, ethics and social purpose. Great Britain's authority was already world-wide. Its ships patrolled the seven seas. It had humbled the might of France under Napoleon and was

in the nineteenth century the uncontested leader of the world.

The British challenge to the Hindu people was at all levels and in every sphere. The missionaries not only questioned the validity of the Hindu faith, but denounced it as dark superstition. The weaknesses of the Hindu social organisation were too many and too glaring to need any one to point them out. Politically, the Hindus were made to feel that they were a subject race without rights, incapable of organising themselves into a modern state. The handicraft economy of the Indian people which had attained a certain state of efficiency was subjected to pressures of new industrialisation leaving a trail of misery behind it. Everywhere the Hindu people seemed to be breaking down in this fateful encounter. How the Hindus readjusted themselves to the new conditions and emerged again as a free people will be dealt with in the next lecture. Before we come to an analysis of the processes and movements which enabled the Hindus to do so, it is necessary to understand clearly some of the differences between the two societies that faced each other in so dramatic a manner.

The first essential difference was in the attitude towards change in social matters. It is a characteristic of all early civilisations to look upon the past as the age of perfection and generally to hold the view that with time things tend to become worse and worse. The Hindu theory of *yugas* expressed this point of view. Everything was perfect in the Satya Yuga. It was the age of purity, when perfect *dharma* (righteousness) prevailed. With every succeeding *yuga* things became worse, until in *kali* or the

present age, things became degenerate and hopeless. The belief that the golden age was in the past and the world was living in an iron age was commonly held in Europe in the Middle Ages. It was only with the new discoveries in science, starting with Galileo, that people began to question the wisdom of the ancients and the perfection of the golden age in the past. And yet it took the West over two hundred and fifty years before the doctrine of progress came to be accepted. The bitter fight between what was called the Ancients and the Moderns which shook the intellectual life of Europe at the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century was the last struggle of those who believed in progress. The great period of Enlightenment in Europe of which the central figures were Voltaire and the Encyclopaedists believed that the state of the world could be improved by the application of intelligence to human affairs, and that changes in social organisation and laws worked for and deliberately brought about to meet the needs of the time constituted the method of progress. After the French Revolution this came to be accepted view of Europe, more especially when Darwin's doctrine of evolution demonstrated that change was the order of nature and the world itself and the creation with it was changing slowly through biological and other processes. The industrial revolution that took place in Great Britain in 18th century and the revolution in transport and locomotion by the use of steam power brought home the truth that controlled and directed change was the basis of progress. The West that faced India in the 19th century believed in change, in the

examination of the validity of institutions, in legislation for the purpose of improving social conditions.

This was contrary to the established views of the Hindus at all times. Apart from their belief in the theory of *yugas*, the Hindus believed not only that their religion was based on eternal principles, on *Sanatana Dharma*, but that their institutions, laws, customs, were based on unalterable *smritis*, the authority of which could not be questioned. Change as such was, as in Europe previously, considered as a form of degeneration. This was so clearly the case that radical thinkers, whether in religion, philosophy, who desired to change social practices or law always claimed that they were only restoring the purity of ancient teachings. All the *Acharyas* professed to be only commentators of the sacred texts and claimed to derive their views from the revealed texts of the Vedas or from the Upanishads. Thus Sankara's Advaita Vedanta, for example, was promulgated as a commentary of the Brahma Sutras and was further supported by expositions of the Upanishads and the Gita. Similar is the position with other *Acharyas* also. When it came to law and social thinking, this desire to prove that the doctrines enunciated were in conformity with orthodox doctrines and involved no change was even more pronounced. The extensive *dharma shastra* and *smriti* literature all affirm that they are not departing from the original teachings of Manu, Yajnavalkya and other early law givers. Through what Henry Maine described as a process of legal fiction, these commentators, while denouncing change, gave new meanings and new interpretations. Though the changes they introduced were significant, society tolerated the process only

because through plausible arguments it was sought to be proved that they represented the true teachings of the ancients and involved no change.

How far this belief that change was something bad and that everything new was to be equated with evil or at least to be considered irreligious may be seen from the fact that Ram Mohan Roy, the first radical innovator in modern India and a reformer by temperament, in arguing for a higher position for women in Hindu society had to claim that what he was pleading for was a restoration of the privileges Hindu womenhood had enjoyed under ancient scriptures. Again he sought to relate the new religious sect he founded, the Brahmo Samaj, to the teachings of the Upanishads though it was frankly based on modern ideas. The great reformer in fact did not claim to be an advocate of change, but only to be a champion restoring the purity of ancient teachings.

There were two other ideas alien to the general conception of Hinduism which added to the significance of the encounter between the two civilisations. The first related to the idea of community; the other to nationalism. The Hindus were partially integrated as a people as early as the 4th century B. C. through their broadly uniform domestic rituals and general conceptions of law. But all through history, till the 19th century, they never developed into a community mainly as a result of the essentially divisive nature of the main social institution they created — the caste system. The caste system, originally a process of integration, degenerated early into a system of division and sub-division till at last the broad four castes disappeared into innumerable sub-castes,

thereby rendering the development of a common Hindu feeling or a realisation of a sense of Hindu community difficult. The Muslims were of course different. They were (and are) among the most integrated communities in the world, and yet living face to face with them for over 600 years the Hindus never developed a feeling of communal solidarity. The reason for this was that ever since the arrival of Islam, the Hindus and the Muslims have lived as parallel societies. Also there was no racial feeling which created a gulf between the two.

The situation was different in the case of the British. They did not function basically as a religious group as did the Muslims. They functioned as "Europeans", as a racial group, as a community organised as against all others, with their own way of life. The sense of racial arrogance which developed with the acquisition of political power emphasised this sense of community. In the period after the Mutiny, when the Anglo-Muslim alliance was forged, Britain recognised the solidarity of the Muslims and their sense of community which was so marked a feature of Islamic society. This constituted a major challenge to the Hindus who began to realise that though they numbered (in the second half of the 19th century) no less than two hundred millions, they were only an inchoate mass and were not organised into a single community.

The second idea was that of nationalism. Nationalism no doubt was a late development in Europe also. The Middle ages recognised no doctrine of nationality, but though the general principle of nationalism was a feature only of the 19th century, the growth of the modern state

in England, France and Spain had, even in the 16th century, developed a sense of identity which later became transformed into a territorial nationalism. In India among the Muslims there was undoubtedly a feeling of unity. Among the Hindus there was only a vague conception of *swadharma* which the Mahrattas in the early period of their imperial growth had exploited. But by and large the sense of nationlism was absent. Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Willington, noted at the beginning of the century that of all the people of India only the Mahrattas possessed a sense of nationalism, and even they lost it for a time with the loss of their empire.

In the 19th century, people in different parts of India did not think themselves as Indians. The sense of belonging to a single country was absent. All the wars that took place between Britain and the Country Powers, except the Mahratta campaigns, were based on dynastic loyalties and not on a national conception. Only in 1857 during the Mutiny was the imperial idea revived to give a national colouring to the revolt of the Great Dispossessed. Few people, in fact, will differ from the following analysis of the situation in respect of national feeling in the early 19th century given by Dr. R. C. Majumdar: "We learn from Bishop Heber who travelled over North India in 1824 that the people in U. P. regarded the Bengali as much a foreigner as the English..... to the Bengali the Marathas were not only as much foreigners as the English but they were hated foreigners..... The conception of India as a whole was to be found only in the literary works of a past age and still survived in theory, but it had no application to actual politics till the sixties or seventies of the 19th century".

That this was true could be demonstrated by the fact that the British conquered India not only in alliance with Indian princes but with armies recruited in India. The troops of the Muslim viceroy of the Deccan marched with those of the British to attack the Muslim Sultan of Mysore. Raghoba betrayed the Marathas and fought along side with them against his own people. The Sikh princes of the Cis-Sutlej area were allied with the British against the Sikh Government at Lahore. The strange fact is that while in a hundred years of political authority in the settlement areas of China, the British were unable to raise a single battalion of Chinese troops, their army in India was predominantly recruited from among Indians and fought not only without hesitation but with zeal against other Indians. The Indian army's loyalty was not affected by nationalist considerations till the very end but only by religious factors. From the Vellore Mutiny to the upsurge in 1857 all the instances of army disaffections relate British interference with religious habits and customs, the only thing which was vital in India at the time.

The most direct challenge to Hindu society did not, however, come from any of these ideas and doctrines. They only posed problems, the successful solution of which was necessary for India to emerge into a new progressive world. But a far-reaching threat to her whole structure was involved in the idea of equality which was unequivocally introduced into her legal system by Macaulay's Penal Code. Equality was not one of the principles accepted by Hindu society. In fact it was categorically denied by the system of caste, the major social institution of the Hindu

which was erected on the principle of quality based on birth. The whole social system of the Hindus was hierarchical, based on caste privileges and this extended even to the operation of law. Under the Hindu system punishment for the same offence varied according to caste. To strike a Brahmin was a much more heinous offence than to strike a Sudra. The punishment for the first was much more serious than for the second. Besides, the vast body of the so-called untouchable classes had but limited civil rights. The new penal code categorically provided for equality of all before law. This was even at the time recognised as a challenge to Hindu conceptions and Rajas and Pandits protested vehemently against being treated on equal terms with tenants and Sudras. In Europe itself equality had come to be accepted as a general doctrine only after the French Revolution. Even then there was no political quality as a property qualification was for long considered necessary for acquiring the right of franchise. In India its introduction at a time when caste system was still powerful was indeed a challenge to the very basic conceptions of Hinduism.

Another major result of the impact of Europe on India was the spirit of criticism. In India, the orthodox view had always been that philosophical speculation could claim validity only by connecting itself with scriptural authority, thereby limiting the scope of criticism. The critical method first applied by the European scholars to the whole range of oriental learning, beginning with the Vedas themselves, and to the national traditions embodied in the Puranas, great encyclopaedias which formed the basis of popular education in India, led to very strange

results. The claim of the Vedas to be revealed texts of secret wisdom to which all schools of philosophy had to trace their origin, was found to be untenable. Even the extreme antiquity claimed for the Vedas came under dispute. The Puranas were discovered to be a miscellaneous collection of legends, mythologies and pseudo-scientific disquisitions, no doubt of the highest value as embodying national traditions, and as representing a great and vital literature, but not particularly important as educational works which they were considered to be in the past.

The critical approach was not confined to sacred texts and ancient books. It affected all institutions, customs, manners and beliefs. Scholars, both European and Indian, exposed the origins of caste, for so long considered a divinely ordained institution. It was shown by a critical study of the Vedas that the Aryans had no developed caste system, that even in later times, the distinctions of caste had not become rigid. The taboo on the use of beef was shown to be of later origin. Scholarship established beyond doubt that the cow was freely killed for ceremonial and other purposes in ancient India; that marriage before the age of puberty which was considered mandatory in the case of higher castes had no scriptural authority to support it; that the *rishis* and religious teachers were not always Brahmins: in fact that many of the ideas accepted unchallenged by the Hindus lacked scriptural authority. In this way the spirit of criticism laid the foundations of the new social order in India. A few outstanding contributions by Indian scholars trained in critical methods of Europe may be specially alluded to here

because of their wide-spread influence. Rajendra Lal Mitra's Indo-Aryans established the fact that Aryan institutions were not peculiar to India and were spread over many areas; Dr. Shridhar Ketkar's History of Caste in India, demonstrated the gradual growth of that institution and its anthropological character. Ramakrishna Bhandarkar's Vaishnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious Sects proved beyond doubt that the more important religious sects among the Hindus did not have a vedic origin, but had come into existence in comparatively recent times. The recovery of the Buddhist texts mainly as a result of the work of European scholars showed that the Indian tradition was not exclusively Hindu, and that a rival religion with another, though allied, philosophy had flourished in India for over a thousand years and had contributed greatly to Hindu culture.

Another major impact of Europe on India was a new world consciousness. While Islam in India had a much greater knowledge of the outside world and there is the evidence of Hindu empires in the East to prove that so far at least as China and South-East Asia were concerned, the Hindus also had some knowledge of them, it is an indisputable fact that most non-Islamic countries in Asia had no sense of their own position in the world. The Chinese viceroy Lin, addressing Queen Victoria as the chieftainess of a tribe is the measure of the Asian view of other countries. This was much more so in India which, because of its geographical isolation, continued for a very long time to treat the rest of the world as non-existent. The people of India had a rude shock in the 19th century when they found that their country was

passing under the political authority of a group of merchants who had settled down in some out of the way ports. But the realisation of India's position in the world did not come to the people at large till the beginning of the 20th century. It was not a pleasant fact to realise that the traditional *Jambudvipa* which they identified with India was but part of a wider world in which many nations with greater power, and more vital civilisations existed. Till the later part of the 19th century, to the people outside the great port towns and industrial centres, the Europeans were only *firinghis*, strange people armed with superior weapons. It is only the 20th century that brought the nations closer and made the people of Asia gain the first glimmer of a world community.

Apart from that relating to the realm of ideas the most important feature of Britain's encounter with India related to economic organisation. The East India Company itself was a supreme example of the commercial organisation of Britain. But at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century the Company had become transformed mainly into a governing corporation. With the abolition of the monopoly in trade other British firms began to operate in India, slowly developing processing industries, plantations and engineering concerns. England had behind her a hundred years of revolutionary development in industries. With the new opportunities that India afforded, the British began to establish large-scale factories with up-to-date machinery. They also introduced their system of joint stock companies for financing projects and for the management of factories. The industrial revolution in England meant essentially two

things : the movement of production from cottages to factories, resulting in a rapid urbanisation and, secondly, the utilisation of machinery and new techniques. Industrial Revolution was in fact the change-over to large-scale production through the use of machinery in factories located in convenient sites. There was also of course the essential element of power, steam and coal. So long as Britain was only buying Indian products, the challenge of industrialisation was not serious. But with the American Civil War, the manufacture of cotton textiles in large-scale industrial establishments with modern machinery and techniques came into existence as a major industry. From that time India began to face the problem of a new economic life. No doubt it was slow in assuming national proportions because Britain's own financial and industrial interests stood in the way of a rapid and large-scale industrialisation of India. But it became obvious by the last quarter of the nineteenth century that India will have to face problem of industrial production on modern lines. Though the challenge was taken up seriously only after independence, the problem had been posed much earlier and recognised as involving basic changes in India's traditional organisation.

The demand for industrialisation, no less than the desire to acquire knowledge raised the question of mastering the new techniques. What the Japanese intellectuals of the *Rangkusha* group realised as early as the 17th century became clear to Indians only by the end of the 19th century. The challenge in the matter of prosperity, progressive economy and national power which the West posed at the material level was essentially a question of

acquiring the knowledge of new sciences and of mastering the new techniques. Naturally Britian was not anxious to provide the facilities for this. In the educational system she developed in India in the 19th century very little provision was made for the study of science or of higher technology. No doubt at Roorkee and in the Presidency towns there existed engineering Colleges attached to the universities with limited accommodation for the training of the junior engineering staff required for government public works. But for higher-education in technical subjects Indian youngmen had to spend years in Great Britain which the enthusiasm and desire of learning of the middle classes in India enabled an increasing number to do. So far as science and technological studies were concerned, it was the wisdom and vision of groups and individuals that showed the way. The Bengal Council of National Education during the agitation following the partition of Bengal established the great college for technological studies at Jadavpur which after over fifty years of existence has today blossomed into a university. The far-sighted industrialist and patriot, Jamshedji Tata, recognising that industrial advance was nowhere possible without high scientific and technical education endowed the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore. Maharaja Sayaji Rao Gaekwar established an independent Kalabhavan technical institute in Baroda. Thus India independently of government, herself awoke to the challenge of science and technology. In the years following Montagu-Chelmsford reforms which associated Indians with government, this was converted into a national policy and under popular leadership science studies began to be encouraged in Indian universities.

The main challenge of the West was in respect of religion of the Hindus. This appeared to the Europeans as a mass of superstitions, backed by extravagant rituals, inhuman customs and often primitive social usage which were considered to have religious sanction. The Hindu religion was described as idolatrous. Its popular forms were poly-theistic. Its many gods had strange shapes, numerous arms and were sometimes portrayed as curious mixtures of animal and human forms. Some of its sects believed in rituals which were alleged to be immoral. Apart from these aspects of religious worship and ritual, the social customs and usages for which religious sanction was claimed appeared to be barbarous and primitive. Such, for example, were the dedication of women to temples as *devadasis*, early marriage of girls, compulsory widowhood even when the marriage was not consummated, leading to the strange phenomenon known as child widows. Above all, there was the organisation of caste which also the orthodox claimed to be a part of Hindu religious organisation. The practice of untouchability by which many millions, officially classed as Hindus, were kept outside Hindu life and denied elementary human rights was also considered to have the sanction of religion. The higher aspects of Hindu religion were then the exclusive possession of a limited class of learned people recruited from the upper castes.

As against this disorganised and inchoate mass of sects and creeds, with no defined dogma, no organised priesthood, no officially accepted scriptures, with its doctrines overgrown with superstition and primitive beliefs, stood Christianity—the accepted faith of the

dynamic and expanding civilisation of Europe. In the 19th century, Protestantism at the height of its prosperity, had taken to evangelism which in earlier periods of history had been left to the Roman Catholics. India seemed to open up a wonderful field for mission work. Though the British government professed religious neutrality, it maintained a Christian religious establishment of its own.

The parties seemed to be unequally matched. Not only to enthusiastic missionaries but to competent observers it appeared that the result was a forgone conclusion. Macaulay, the great historian and the author of the Penal Code and the educational system of India, wrote to his father. "It is my firm belief that if our plans of education are followed up, there will not be a single idolator among the respectable classes in Bengal thirty years hence ; and this will be effected without efforts to proselytise, without the smallest interference with religious liberty ; merely by the material operation of knowledge and reflection"

Education was to be the great and unfailing instrument with which to wean away the people from the degrading and polluting worship of idols. The new ideas from the West and the teachings of Christianity could be depended upon to undermine the structure of Hinduism. Education in English had a respectable history in Bengal even before the government under the inspiration of Macaulay made it the official programme. Forward looking Bengalis were clamouring for English education a quarter of century before Macaulay's famous minute ; but it is all the same true that from a marginal effort by a few it became the official policy in 1835, and the object as Macaulay frankly

declares was to allow the light and air of Western knowledge to penetrate into the dark recesses of Hinduism.

Thus the issues were joined. India and Hinduism stood face to face with Europe and Christianity. The advantages on the side of the West seemed to be overwhelming. The displacement of culture which overtook the civilisations of Egypt and Iran seemed inevitable in India, and yet after a century and a half, strangely enough, it was India and Hinduism that came out triumphant from the encounter. The India that emerged independent in 1947 had upheld her cultural integrity and her historic identity. The Hindu religion emerged stronger, more united, capable of meeting the challenge of other religions with complete self-confidence, ready in fact to carry the war into other camps. Out of the sects, groups and castes a community arose which could form the major basis of an Indian Nation. These were the unexpected results of the Great Encounter. In the next lecture we shall examine how this was achieved.

2. THE RESPONSE

We saw in the last lecture the comprehensiveness of the challenge that the encounter with the West through Britain presented to India and especially to Hinduism. The outcome of this encounter, the re-emergence of India as an independent nation in the middle of the 20th century after a century and a half of subjection and pressure from external forces, has been as unexpected as it has been striking. We shall try and analyse in this lecture the causes which led to this result.

The challenge of the West as we noted was both secular and religious. In the secular field it covered both ideas and organisation. In the religious fleld it concerned beliefs, dogmas, rituals and institutions through which the faith of the people was demonstrated. In the secular field, India not only accepted but assimilated the ideas which the West represented. Historically even in Europe those ideas were being translated effectively into institutions only in the 19th century and so India could legitimately claim that she was a sharer in those ideas and not one who was borrowing it without experience. Industrialisation in India, for example, began no doubt on a small scale, at the same time as in many European countries.

Also, Hinduism, having no revealed scripture and no set of unchanging dogmas had no insuperable prejudice against new ideas. In fact the most remarkable thing from the beginning of the 19th century was the enthusiasm with which large sections of Hindu middle classes demanded Western education and accepted Western ideas. Thus the new world which Western education opend to

them did not appear to them a hostile world against which they should close their mind or fight with the weapons of prejudice or pre-conceived ideas. This is best exemplified by the growth of the social reform movement all over India which was spearheaded mainly by high caste Hindus and which in time converted the entire intelligentsia of the country. The acceptance of secular ideas, the doctrine of change and progress, of equality etc., was easy and met with very little effective opposition. Equally in the field of economic and political organisation the ideas of the West found ready acceptance.

These were not, however, the real issues at stake. As T. S. Eliot has pointed out, the true basis of culture is religion. What preserved the integrity of India and of her civilisation was the great movement which reformed and unified Hinduism and enabled it to withstand the challenge of Christianity in a much more effective manner than it had done in the case of Islam. In the earlier period, it was not by reform, though reform movements were not lacking, but by greater orthodoxy that Hinduism saved itself. Hinduism in its encounter with Islam, broadly speaking hugged its superstitions. Not only did not give up its customs and usages but held fast to them; in fact it became more orthodox and rigid. In the 19th century it undertook a great liberal counter-reformation, which after an early period of new sects became a broadly unifying movement, purging the main body of its accretions and giving aid and support to a social reorganisation which after centuries re-laid the foundations of integrating the Hindu people into a single community. It is this

remarkable response to the challenge of the West that is fundamental to an understanding of new India.

The first reaction of the impact of the West and of Christianity on Hinduism were defensive. The educated classes especially in Bengal felt the need for reform which within the frame-work of Hindu philosophy accepted the new ideas. The Brahma Samaj of Ram Mohan Roy is the outstanding example of this reaction. While it did not cut itself away from the main traditions of higher Hindu thought, it was in the main an attempt to meet Christian criticism. Though later under the leadership of Keshab Chandra Sen & others the Brahma Samaj came closer to Hinduism, it was still basically a compromise with Western conceptions and Christian ideas. More significant as a genuine reaction to outside pressure was the Arya Samaj which Maharshi Dayanand started in the Punjab. The Arya Samaj differed from other Hindu sects in three main features ; a revealed scripture, a closely knit organisation of membership, and the acceptance of converts. Having in the Punjab to face both Islam and Christianity the Arya Samaj armed itself with those characteristics of its opponents which seemed to give them strength ; the revealed nature of truth, sense of community and conversion. Besides, the Arya Samaj also shed those aspects of Hinduism - idol worship, polytheism and caste - which had come up for the greatest amount of criticism from outsiders.

The success of both these reform movements was rapid and in a way electrifying to the whole body of Hinduism, but they were sectional and regional. The Brahma Samaj was limited to Bengal. The activities of

the Arya Samaj, both social and religious, were confined to the Punjab and Western Uttar Pradesh. The Prarthana Samaj a conservative reform movement among the higher casts was confined to Maharastra. If similar movements started all over India, the unity of Hinduism itself would have broken up. What was required was not a new sect, however vigorous and effective, but a movement which would reform Hinduism from the inside and would be accepted as orthodox everywhere. Such a spirit began to manifest itself in the last quarter of the 19th century. Everywhere in India new voices began to be heard emphasising the spiritual truths of Hinduism, awakening in the young men of the country a new faith in their own religion. The central figure of this movement was Sri Rama krishna, a mystic Yogi whose remarkable life has now become overladen with legends. He was a saint in the traditional style of Hinduism, a highly evolved spiritual personality who claimed to have direct realisation of Divine Grace. He made a deep impression on the Bengali society of his day, and among those who came under his influence was Keshab Chandra Sen, a celebrated Brahma Samaj leader who had till that time been the champion of Westernisation. But it was among the younger generation that Ramakrishna had the greatest influence. He not only arrested the movement among the intelligentsia for a general breakaway from Hinduism, but revived their faith and provided them with a dynamic view of life. The most notable among his disciples was a young graduate of the Calcutta University, Negendra Datta who, initiated as a monk under the name Vivekananda, became in truth the apostle of a new Hinduism.

Fired by a revivalist zeal he toured the length and breadth of India spreading the gospel of Vedanta. A prolonged visit to America and a tour in England inflamed his patriotism, his desire to rejuvenate Hindu society and to give Hinduism a social purpose. His fervent declaration that he did not "believe in a religion that does not wipe out the widow's tears or bring a piece of bread to the orphan's mouth" expresses clearly the changed temper of Hinduism. His own mission he described as follows : Answering the question "What do you consider to be the function of your movement as regards India", the Swami said, "To find the common bases of Hinduism and to awaken the national consciousness to them". The common basis he found in the Vedanta which he interpreted in popular phraseology and preached untiringly all over India.

"All the philosophers of India who are orthodox have to acknowledge the authority of the Vedanta and all our present day religions, however crude some of them may aprear to be, however inexplicable some of their purposes may seem, one who understands them and studies them can trace them back to the ideas of the Upanishads. So deeply have Upanishads sunk into our race that those of you who study the symbology of the crudest religion of Hindus will be astonished to find sometimes figurative expressions of the Upanishads. Great spiritual and philosophical ideas in the Upanishads are today with us, converted into household worship in the form of symbols. Thus the various symbols now used by us, all come from the Vedanta, because in the Vedanta they are used as figures".

Again : "Thus the Vedanta, whether we know it or not, has penetrated all the sects in India and what we call Hinduism, this mighty banyan tree, with its immense and almost infinite ramifications, has been throughout interpenetrated by the influence of the Vedanta. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we think the Vedanta, we live in the Vedanta, we breathe the Vedanta and we die in the Vedanta and every Hindu does that".

He not only preached this gospel, but trained up a body of missionaries, men of education, pure life and religious zeal, to carry his message to the villages.

There were innumerable other sanyasins and learned men who though belonging to no particular sect were preaching the same message all over India. Swami Ram Tirtha in the Punjab proclaimed & taught the truth of orthodox Hindu thought. Ram Tirtha, like Vivekananda was thoroughly grounded in the learning of the West. As a Vedantic thinker he was perhaps more profound than Vivekananda but his teachings had only a local significance for, unlike Vivekananda, he was not fired by a missionary zeal to save society from ignorance and superstition. Two other names deserve mention. Shanmukha Dasa, better known by his lay name Kunjan Pillai Chattampy revived in the South the traditions of Sankara and restored the authority of the Vedantic doctrine among educated Hindus of Kerala. His friend and co-worker, and it is claimed by some, an early disciple, Sri Narayana Guru, was the originator of a spiritual and moral revolution among a populous community known as Ezhavas, among whom he now receives divine honours. Sri Narayana, like

Ramakrishna was a god realised soul, a saintly personage with a deep sense of social problems.

The contribution that the Theosophical Society, under its American founder and organiser Col. Olcott and afterwards under Mrs. Annie Besant made towards the revival of faith among the Hindus also deserves special mention. Though it was esoteric knowledge that the Theosophical Society emphasised, its leaders were active in the promulgation of Hindu religious ideals among the educated classes, thus preparing the ground for a revival of Hinduism. Especially, Mrs. Besant by her translation of the Gita (The Lord's Song) and her lectures on the Upanishads gave a definitely Hindu angle to the work of the Theosophical Society of India. The educational work of the society is also important. The Central Hindu College at Benares became in time the nucleus of the Benares Hindu University and did much in its earlier days to strengthen the faith of the Hindus in their own religion.

These were but the beginnings. It is the revival of Vedanta as the philosophic background of modern Hinduism during the last decade of the 19th and the first quarter of the 20th century that constitutes a religious movement of national significance. Its roots undoubtedly lay in the Upanishads and other philosophical works of Hinduism an intensive study of which also became popular at this time. But it was the rediscovery of the Bhagavad Gita as the supreme scripture of Hinduism that enabled the leaders of thought to re-establish Hindu orthodoxy. At least from the 3rd century A. D. the Bhagvad Gita had been one of the authoritative texts of the Hindu doctrine. Embedded in the great national epic of the Mahabharata, and held in

veneration by all sects professing Hinduism, it had as early as the 6th century A.D. come to be regarded as the most authoritative expression of Hindu thought. It was commented upon by the great philosopher Sankara in the 8th century to provide support for his theory of renunciation. In fact no one who had not commented upon the Gita and based his teachings on its text was entitled to be considered a jagadguru or Universal Teacher. All the founders of medieval sects in Hinduism appealed to it through interpretation and commentary for authority for their special doctrines. How this religious text, which for nearly 1500 years had acquired the undisputed position of a scripture to which very polemical writer or apologist turned for arguments in support of his thesis, became the most influential single book providing inspiration for a social, ethical and spiritual regeneration of the Hindus, is one of the strangest developments of our time in India. The clearest evidence of the supreme importance of the Gita in modern Indian life is provided by the fact that almost every national leader of importance excepting Nehru has written commentaries on it and Nehru himself has at least on one occasion quoted from it to confound a Communist who had the temerity to quote the Gita in support of his view. The prophet of Indian nationalism Bal Gangadhar Tilak wrote while in jail in Mandalay his epoch making work, *Gita Rahasya*, or the Secret of the Gita. Mahatma Gandhi, the Swatantra leader C. Rajagopalachari and Dr. Radhakrishnan, the President, are but a few of the more important leaders who have commented on the Gita.

It is Tilak's *Gita Rahasya*— which marked the change.

Tilak showed for the first time that the message of the Gita was not renunciatory and other-worldly as others had taught before, but it was essentially a scripture preaching a dynamic social ethic, a doctrine of social activism, where action for human good without personal attachment is preached as the first imperative.

The Gita is of course primarily religious in its teaching. Its context is man's dejection in the face of duty which seems to him not only unpleasant but wholly abhorrent to his being. Its surrounding is a battle-field on which two mighty armies are arrayed ; but the person who asks for advice is the first man of the age, *Nara*, the representative human being, and the Preceptor speaks with the voice of supreme authority of God. Clearly the context is artificially created to emphasise the psychological conflict, for, it is not to be conceived that Krishna elaborated his teachings and delivered so profound a discourse on the field of battle with both the armies watching. The context is therefore no argument against its being fundamentally a religious book, dealing with the highest problems of religion. It is in that sense that the great teachers of the past have interpreted the Gita.

It should also not, however, be forgotten that in the genuine and religious tradition of India, the Gita still continues to be interpreted as a text expounding purely spiritual truths of universal validity. The most outstanding example of such a re-interpretation is Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita*, undoubtedly one the most germinal books of religious thought that modern India has produced. As Sri Aurobindo has himself stated "whatever the system (of the Gita) may be, it is not as the commentators strive

to make it, framed or intended to support any exclusive school of philosophical thought or to put forward predominantly the claims of any one form of yoga. The language of the Gita, the structure of thought, the combination and balancing of ideas belong neither to the temper of a sectarian teacher, nor to the spirit of a rigorous ayalytical dialectics cutting off an angle of truth to exclude all others ; but rather there is a wide, undulating, encircling movement of ideas which is the manifestation of a vast synthetic mind and rich synthetic mind and rich experience..... Its aim is precisely the opposite to that of the polemist commentators who found this scripture established as one of the three highest Vedanta authorities, and attempted to turn it into a weapon of offence and defence against other schools and systems. The Gita is not a weapon of dialectical warfare : it is gate opening to the whole world of spiritual truth and experience, and the view it gives us embraces all the provinces of that supreme region".

What provided the dynamic for the modern interpretation was the Gita's uncompromising emphasis on action, its description of the ideal man as one who, with a mind which has attained equality, performs his duties in this world without desiring selfish ends and solely for the benefit of the world and considers such action as a dedication to God. These basic conceptions of the *Sthitprajna* or the person of equable mind, of *Nishkama karma,* or action without desire, or attachment, of *Loka sangraha* or welfare of the world, and *Brahma Yajna*, are the main ideals of Hindu activism and therefore they deserve to be examined in greater detail.

The extended meaning to the duty of action preached in the Gita arises from Krishna's teaching on sacrifice or *Yajna*. *Yajna* is derived from the root *Yaj* to offer. Traditionally it means ritual sacrifice as taught in the Vedas to propitiate the Gods and Manes. The Gita, however, poured scorn on those who practised Vedic rituals. Krishna begins his teaching by warning against those who are engaged in arguments about Vedas (Vedavadaratah) which recommend many different rituals and says clearly that their minds will never get illumined. Again the Gita qualifies the Vedas as prescribing the means for worldly enjoyment and warns his disciple against it. (*Traigunya Vishaya Veda, Nistraigunyo bhavarjuna).* The means for worldly enjoyment, of *Traigunya* (the three human qualities) is the object of *Yajna* or ritual sacrifice. After such an unambiguous condemnation of ritualism, the Gita proceeds to define what true sacrifice is. The *Yajna* preached in the Gita is not ritualistic but service for the world performed selflessly. The *Brahma Yajna* on which emphasis is laid is the dedication of all action to the welfare of the world—for *Laka Sangraha* (literally, maintenance of the world) and not ritualistic *Yajna*. About the latter, Krishna says that unillumined persons do such rituals for their own benefit and no doubt they receive the benefits they crave for, but for the *Sthitprajna* there is only one sacrifice, that is the dedication of all his actions to the welfare of the world.

Loka Sangraha or the welfare of the world as the motive and object of all action is the special contribution of the Gita to Hindu religious and social thought. It follows naturally from the doctrine of unattached action

which is the central theme of Krishna's teaching. If action is to be selfless and is to be without reference to the fruits thereof (in relation to the actor) then the question naturally arises, why should any one persist in a course of action ? The old theories of *Yajna* or sacrifice provided a simple answer : action is to please the Gods and to derive worldly benefits through them. Since that is not *Nishkama Karma* or action without reference to the result for the actor, the Gita rejects it and supplies the answer that the object of all action should be *Loka Sangraha* or the welfare of the world.

The social theory behind the *Loka sangraha* doctrine of the Gita is most important. The conception of a world order which it is the duty of the individual to uphold by dedicating the activity towards that end, runs all through the teachings of the Gita. The earlier forms of Hindu religion had no such conception. Nor did the later thinkers who built up the comprehensive structure of Upanishadic thought devote any attention to social development. The Hindu doctrine of society as a caste organisation *(Chaturvarnya,* the four orders) developed independently of religious thought, and is not connected with the spiritual teachings of the Upanishads. For the first time the Gita gives a social content to religion and emphasises the welfare of the world as the purpose of all action. The doctrine of sacrifice is thus given a wholly different meaning by Krishna.

What is the social order that the Gita contemplates ? It is a structure based on *Swadharma* or the duty of an individual in terms of this quality and his action. "*Swadharma*" the law of one's own nature, though devoid

of merit is preferable to the Dharma of another though well performed. Death in performing one's own dharma is good. The acceptance of another's duty is fraught with terrible consequences", so the Gita declares. Doctrinal teachers had given the word *Swadharma* a meaning in terms of caste society. The upholders of reaction saw in this statement a justification of their cherished view that man must be content with the station in which he is born, and held that the text provides the authority for a rigid conservatism. The text however would not bear this interpretation. What the Gita emphasises is the necessity of holding fast to *Swadharma*, one's own righteous way. It is the selfrealised attitude towards *Loka sangraha* or welfare of the world that is *Swadharma* and not the duties prescribed by Manu and the law-givers for the different castes. It is contrary to the whole spirit of Gita to strain into this clear text the meaning that Krishna has said that if a man is born an untouchable he should feel content with his lot and perform his functions with complete detachment for the welfare of the world. Far from this being the case, the Gita teaches the equality of man in society for the *Chaturvarnya* (the four-fold order) Krishna claims to have created, is based on quality and action that is on the individual's own merit and the line of action he chooses to follow. There is not a single line in the Gita which upholds the hierarchical view of hereditary castes. In fact, as stated above, Krishna must be said to have excluded birth as defining one's status in life (which is the basis of caste) by his positive statement that the four orders were created by him on the basis of *Guna* (quality) and *Karma* (action). The *Swadharma* that Krishna preaches therefore

is the self-realised duty of the individual in accordance with the law of his own nature, which he cannot betray and to which if he is not true, he would most surely meet with dire consequences.

The Gita's view of society, as indeed the general Hindu view, is a hierarchical organisation based on functions and qualities. It upholds a doctrine of harmonies. In Hindu practice this ideal of social solidarity had crystallised into that strange and all-pervading organisation with which Hinduism itself came to be identified — the system of caste. Whatever its origin, caste led in time to a fragmentation of society, each fragment walled off and kept isolated from the other. But the doctrine behind the conception of the four castes or the fourfold division of society, was simple enough, though in fact this division of *Chaturvarnya* was never more than a theorisation of social thinkers. The *Chaturvarnya* postulated a *body social*, and the analogy of the limbs of the body found expression in the doctrine of Brahmins being born from the head, the Kshattriyas from the arms, the Vaisyas from the thighs and the Sudras from the feet of the creator. This symbolism is so much a part of Hindu tradition that the word *bahuja* (born from the arms) is a common synonym for the *Kshattriya* or the warrior caste as *padaja*, born from the feet, is for the Sudra.

This conception of the four-fold order of society was a rationalisation and had no relation at any time to the facts of caste. As Sri Aurobindo has put it : "In point of fact" he says "the verses of the Gita have no bearing on the existing caste system because it is very different from the ancient idea of *Chaturvarnya*, the four clear-cut orders of

the Aryan community and in no way corresponds with the description of the Gita. Agriculture, cattle keeping and trade of every kind are said here to be the work of the Vaishya ; but in the later system, the majority of those concerned in trade and in cattle keeping and artisans, small craftsmen and others are actually classed as Sudras—where they are not put altogether out of the pale and with some exceptions the merchant class alone, and that not everywhere, ranked as Vaishya. Agriculture, government and service are the profession of all classes from the Brahmin down to the Sudra. And if the economic divisions of function have been confounded beyond any possibility of rectification, the law of the *guna* or quality (as declared by the Gita) is still less a part of the later system. There, all is rigid custom, *acara*, with no reference to the need of the individual nature. If again we take the religious side of the contention advanced by the advocates of the caste system, we can certainly fasten no such absurd idea on the Gita as that it is a law of a man's nature that he shall follow without regard to his personal bent and capacities, the profession of his parents or his immediate or distant ancestors, the son of a milkman be a milkman, the son of a doctor a doctor, the descendants of shoemakers remain shoemakers to the end of measurable time, still less that by doing so, the unintelligent and mechanical repetition of the law of another's nature without regard to his own individual call and qualities a man automatically furthers his own perfection and arrives at spiritual freedom".

In fact, there is nothing in common between the caste system and *Chaturvarnya*. *Chaturvarnya* or the fourfold order of society is a doctrine of social solidarity. Caste—

the essential principle of which is division based on birth —is the very opposite, a doctrine of fragmentation.

The Gita by declaring that the fourfold division was divinely ordained and represented a permanent feature of social organisation did not support the caste system. In fact its denial of birth as the basis of the orders, and its emphasis on quality and action for differentiating the functions give to the social teaching of the Gita a significance and a progressive quality which is contrary to the conception of caste. Further, the doctrine of *Swadharma* or the law of the one's own nature on which the Gita bases its whole doctrine of action is fundamentally opposed to the theory of an unchanging caste and duties based on it.

The Gita's teaching on this matter is very emphatic. "Death in one's own law of nature is better for man than victory in an alien movement. To follow the law of another nature is dangerous to the soul, contradictory as we may say to the natural way of his evolution, a thing mechanically imposed and therefore imported, artificial and sterilising to one's own growth towards the true nature of the spirit. What comes out of the being is the right and healthful thing, the authentic movement, not what is imposed from outside or laid on it by life's compulsions or the mind's error".

This functional view does not stand in the way of progress for clearly in any organised society there must be people whose *gunas* or inner qualities compel them to intellectual or mental pursuits, others whose nature impel them to organisational or political leadership, many more who devote themselves to trade, commerce and Industry and the large masses who are workers. From the point of

view of the Gita, all including the *papayonayah,* the lowest, are entitled to equal development so long as they cultivate the equable mind, work incessantly with the sole object of general good and dedicate their works to God. The Gita is thus essentially a scripture of democracy in the truest sense.

An even more significant teaching in the Gita is its doctrine of the rejuvenation of society. Krishna declares : "Whenever and wherever *Dharma* declines and unrighteousness prospers, I shall be born in successive ages for the purpose of destroying evildoers and re-establishing the supremacy of the moral law".

The Gita thus foresees the inevitable decay of all institutions and the necessity at different times of revolutionary changes to restore the harmony of life. While the Gita emphasises that there are permanent social values it does not give support to the doctrine that what exists is always the best and that change in itself is something to be resisted. It goes much beyond this. The Gita emphasises that social institutions are liable to decay and petrification, when the original values are lost sight of and social chaos follows as a result of which the purposes behind social organisation begin to be misunderstood or misinterpreted. At such times, qualitiative change or revolution according to the Gita is a divinely ordained process.

This sublimation of the doctrine of change is one of the major contributions of the Gita to modern India.

To a static society held down by custom and tradition and suffocated by the accretions of ages, the teaching that change is divinely ordained when society has *decayed,* came as a life-giving revelation. There it was provided in the

most authoritative text that Dharma requires to be restated in every age and society must be reorganised to suit new needs. No stronger weapon could have been put in the hands of those who desired to reshape Indian society and give it purpose and validity. The old doctrine of *Avatars* or reincarnation of godhead found a new meaning, for in the past, the text which said that whenever Dharma decays I shall be reborn was interpreted literally as a promise of God to take human shape to set matters right. Like many other teachings of Hinduism it was perverted into a doctrine for the acceptance of the present on the plea that when it suits God, He will be born on earth and change things by his direct action. It became therefore in the hands of sectarian teachers another argument for passivity.

The new doctrine of the yoga of action gave this text an extended content and a new significance which infused into the Indian mind a religious fervour enabling it not only to give vigour to political action but to transform Hinduism itself from a static organisation to an intensely vital and dynamic force.

The revolutionary dynamic of this triple conception of *Sthitprajna,* the man of equable mind, of *Loka sangraha* - welfare of the world and of *Nishkama Karma* - action dedicated to God - lay hidden for a thousand years owing to the dominance of the renunciatory creed of which the philosopher Sankara was the champion. As we have seen, the earlier religious thinkers only used the Gita to support their own previously enunciated religious doctrines and paid no attention to the social ethic of Krishna's teachings or to their political implications. The depression to which

Hindu society fell during the period when the Gangetic valley was under authority of Muslim rulers helped the doctrine of renunciation by the widespread escapism to which orthodoxy had sunk. It is thus only in the 19th century that the Gita emerged as a gospel preaching the ideal of the *Karma yoga* - of selfless action in this world for the benefit of this world.

The reformist thinkers of the 19th century were, as we have noted before, impressed by the social purpose and wide humanism of Christianity and the earliest spiritual stirrings of educated India was towards a dilution of Hindu religion with Christian thought which is best exemplified by the Brahma Samaj in its first phase.

A partial attempt to break the renunciatory tradition came from Vivekananda, himself a monk, who had renounced the world whose lectures on the Karma yoga showed that renunciation need not be identified with a withdrawal from the world and its activities. The *Sanyasa* or the monastic order of the Ramakrishna Mission was an attempt to reconcile the *Loka sangraha* doctrine with worldly renunciation. The monks of that order did not retire into the forests or into secluded Asrams for acquiring divine realisation, but pursued a career of service in all fields of social activity.

A more positive statement of the gospel of action came from Tilak, the philosopher and scholar who was the leader of the activist school of Indian nationalism. His emphasis was on Krishna's call : "Therefore arise, and fight the battle of Dharma". He viewed all the doctrinal teaching of the Gita as having the sole purpose of energising

Arjuna into action. The oft-repeated "Therefore arise" could in his view be understood only if we kept in mind that the purpose of Krishna was to enable the disciple to gird up his loins and face the problems of life in a manly way. The context of the Gita lent itself well to this purpose. In the battle-field where, faced by redoubtable enemies, Arjuna is assailed by doubt about his duty as a warrior and feels dejected at the prospect of having to be the cause of widespread destruction, he turns to his *guru* and guide and asks for direction. Krishna's answer is a clarion call to take up arms and fight in the cause of righteousness. It was easy for Tilak, the fearless champion of activism in politics, to arouse the young men of India by appealing to the Gita itself. The *Gita Rahasya* or the Secret of the Gita in which he expounded with a wealth of scholarship and an unimpeachable orthodoxy, this doctrine of energism is a remarkable book. It makes no direct allusion to politics. The doctrines of *Sthithi Prajna*, *Loka sangraha* and selfless action — the idea of the Karma Yogin are expounded with an objectivity which forgets all political controversies. But the political meaning was clear enough because of the author's own background and the political circumstances of the time in India. Bal Gangadhar Tilak had twice been convicted to long terms of imprisonment, in one case, for suspected encouragement to terrorists who appealed to force to secure freedom for their country. He was the recognised leader of the "Extremists" in India who considered it their duty "to rise up and fight" the foreigners on Indian soil. To Tilak, therefore, India was a *dharma kshetra*—the field of righteousness—and the inactivity which seemed to have gripped India was but a

reflection of the unmanliness that Arjuna felt on the field of battle. To him it was clear that it was only through the message of the Gita that India could save herself.

Tilak's commentary on the Gita was written in Mandalay jail and when it was published young India accepted it as it revolutionary doctrine. The British Government was not unaware of the dynamite that the Gita contained, for long before Tilak's book had been published, he had been preaching its message from a hundred platforms. The authorities even considered seriously the question of proscribing the Gita ; but a book which masses of men use as daily prayer and which has been translated into every Indian language and which was considered the most sacred text by Hindus of all denominations could not be proscribed as a seditious volume.

If activism was what Tilak emphasised, it is the *Sthit Prajna* doctrine — that of selfless service that Gandhiji taught by his commentary on the Gita. Gandhi's exposition of the Gita was not a learned one. It was not a work of objective scholarship like that of Tilak, or of inspired interpretation like that of Aurobindo. Gandhiji believed in selfless action for the good of the world and he found that doctrine stated with unambiguous lucidity and authority in the Gita. He was in fact the embodiment of the Gita ideal of the equable mind devoted to action meant for the benefit of all—the *Sthit-prajna* who unmoved by anger or by fear had his feet planted firmly in the world and directed all his action to the benefit of the world. He was the true *karma yogin* and his commentary on the Gita is therefore a statement of his personal *credo*.

Gandhiji's special contribution to the integral teachings of the Gita is the emphasis which he places on the means. There was a suggestion in Tilak's *Gita Rahasa* that the Karma Yogin's action, as it was dedicated to God, was above moral laws so long as the object was clearly understood to be the common weal. It is this unexpressed doctrine of Tilak that Gandhiji sought to set right by his commentary on the Gita and the practical interpretation he gave to it through his own life.

To Gandhiji it was not sufficient that the ideal should be *Loka sangraha* or the welfare of all. It was even more important that the means should be ethically right. For action to be *Brahma Yajna* or sacrifice or dedication to God must be pure and uncontaminated not merely by selfishness but by anything which injures others. His doctrine of *Ahimsa* or non-violence was therefore not the creed of pacifism or the denial of force, but an emphasis that the force of action should not be such as to injure the true nature of another's law of life—of the Swadharma of the opponent.

The most comprehensive interpretation of the Gita—in the sense of being the most integrated in its spiritual values is the one by Sri Aurobindo. The background of the author is important. Sent to England at the age of four and brought up in the classical tradition of the West, with a training in Greek and Latin, Aurobindo appeared on the Indian political stage as the advocate of a violent revolution. He was the inspirer of the terrorist movement in Indian politics and was arrested in connection with the Alipore Bomb case. But he underwent a spiritual transformation during his incarceration in jail, and it was a new Aurobindo who settled down to a life of religious austeri-

ties, study and contemplation in Pondicherry, then the capital of French India (1911). From that time for a period over 40 years (died 1952) he was one of India's great spiritual teachers. His final teachings are embodied in a great work entitled the "Life Divine", but the work which has had the greatest influence in shaping the thought of modern India is his "Essays on the Gita". Published originally over a period of 4 years in a magazine entitled the "Arya", edited by him ; this new interpretation won immediate recognition as a masterly exposition of the permanent truths of the Gita in the context of modern life and in the language of modern thought.

Aurobindo's commentary is primarily a work of religion, but in view of the author's training and background it has had a wide social significance. It emphasised the ethical nature of the Gita's teachings, tore down mercilessly the obsecurantist interpretation that polemical writers had given to its social message and for the first time helped the Indian public to understand its teachings in terms of life's problems.

The Gita has thus become the scripture of the new age, the main foundation on which its ethic, its social doctrines and even its political action depends. Its message is carried daily to the common man in a thousand new popular versions, as the number of books on the subject published every year in every language amply testifies. It is the inspiration and guide of modern Hindus and no one can claim to understand the developments which are taking place in India who has no appreciation of this fundamental fact.

Other factors and personalities also contributed directly to a universalisation of Hindu thought and to a general

awakening of social conscience. Rabindra Nath Tagore, the Nobel Laureate, revived the earlier Vaishnava tradition of devotionalism which had a great influence on the educated youth of the country. Tagore's Hibbert lectures entitled the Religion of Man was an eloquent statement of higher Hinduism — a poet's interpretation of its universalised doctrines. Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy, in his *Dance of Shiva*, and in numerous other essays interpreted the symbolism of Hindu religion.

This was, it may broadly be claimed, a universalisation of Hinduism, a movement meant to take it above the conflicts of sectarian doctrines and philosophies. It is indeed significant that though the last quarter of the 19th century and the first half of the twentieth century produced many leading religious figures who added depth and content to Hindu religious experience and bore testimony to its truth like Sri Aurobindo, Sri Ramana Maharshi, and others, none of them has founded a new sect but have contented themselves with expounding their teaching within the framework of Hinduism.

Another significant fact in respect of this great movement of reformation was what may be called the extension of religion to the entire community. The orthodox Hindu view originally was that religious teachings, its discipline, rituals and its philosophical knowledge should be confined only to the three castes, Brahmans, Kshatriyas and Vaisyas. Later, in effect, it was confined only to a small class of learned Brahmans and very exceptionally to men of the higher castes. The translation of the Hindu sacred texts like the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita into English made it available to the new middle classes educated in

English without reference to caste. With the growth of the democratic feeling, communities to whom this knowledge was denied, began to resent this denial. The leaders of reform were themselves not upholders of caste and pleaded strongly that all classes including those who were then known as untouchables should have full access to religious knowledge. The Arya Samaj was of course the pioneer in this, But it was Gandhiji who made the abolition of untouchability and temple entry for the Harijans a national issue, thus taking Hinduism to the very doorstep of those whom it had despised and excluded. With the abolition of untouchability and the opening of Hindu religious institutions to those who had been considered untouchables in the past, the Hindu religious reformation may be said to have been completed.

But an important aspect of this reformation, its practical embodiment, remained to be completed and that was the reorganisation of the Hindu society. Without the Hindu people being endowed with social institutions in keeping with modern ideas the reformation of Hindu religion would have remained ineffective. Even during the British period some advance had been made in this direction as a result of the pressure of public opinion, one notable example being the raising of the age of consent for the marriage of girls. Legalisation of widow-remarriage, the right of marriage according to civil rights, the abolition of the *devadasi* system, etc., are other notable examples. It was only with reluctance, on the pretext of religious neutrality that the British government in the face of growing public demand agreed to social legislation. Consequently, India had to wait for her independence

before a comprehensive reorganisation of Hindu social institutions, marriage, inheritance, women's rights in family property, apart from the abolition of untouchability, could be undertaken. As it is the work of independent India, it follows outside our present discussion except to the extent of emphasising that this immense legislative effort was essentially the ratification of ideas and principles accepted by the Hindu public as a result of the impact of the West.

The historic confrontation of two civilisations extending over 150 years ended peacefully in 1947, with the withdrawal of British power from India. Hinduism emerged triumphant, purged of its age-long accretions, strengthened by the assimilation of new ideas and purposes, its ideals universalised, and its social organisations modernised by an extensive overhauling of its laws. The honours of the encounter were not, however, wholly with Hinduism. Not only were many of the ideas for which Europe stood accepted and assimilated but what the French would call the *presence occidental*, that is the continuing influence of Europe in many spheres, is a major fact in contemporary Indian history. But with all that the Indian people have also shown that what they borrow they could assimilate and endow with specifically local character. For example, the democratic institutions which India has borrowed from the West are now being given new depth and content through what is known as *panchayati raj* in conformity with Indian tradition of devolution of power to local areas without, however, weakening the authority of the centre. Similar modifications could be seen in the organisational aspects of India's borrowing. However, when all

allowances are made for such modifications and for the undoubted fact of India's identity, it would have to be conceded that the outcome of this great encounter has been a synthesis of ideas out of which a new civilisation rooted in Hindu culture, but fertilised by Western ideas and contacts, has begun to take shape.