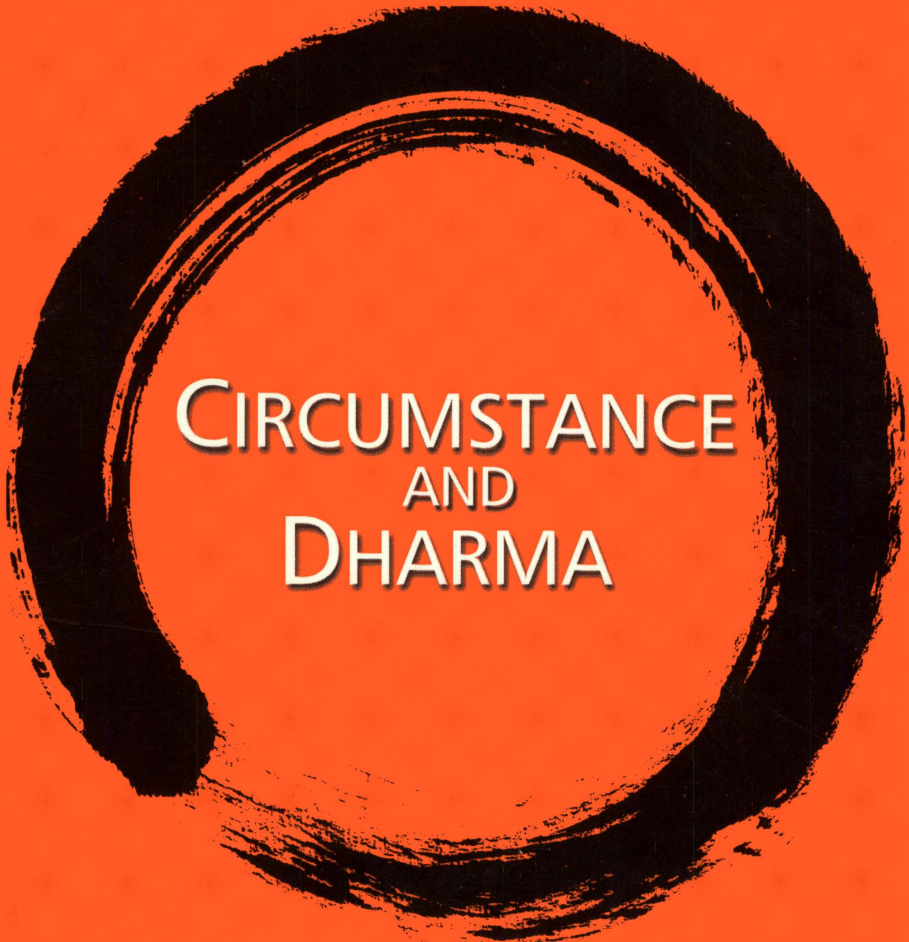


MARGARET CHATTERJEE



CIRCUMSTANCE  
AND  
DHARMA

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# Circumstance and Dharma

MARGARET CHATTERJEE



**Indian Institute of Advanced Study**  
**Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla**

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# Preface

These are the four lectures I had hoped to deliver at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla in response to Professor Peter Ronald deSouza's gracious invitation to come as Visiting Professor in 2008. I am extremely disappointed that a complete breakdown in health has made this impossible and I deeply regret the loss of an opportunity to meet old friends and make new ones. The lectures, under the general title of *Circumstance and Dharma*, reflect my personal belief that advanced research needs to focus on matters of direct importance to conditions in India today.

The material included is either out of print or published abroad, as follows:

- Lecture I 'Towards a Phenomenology of Circumstance' from *Communication, Identity and Self-Expression*, OUP, Delhi 1984.
- Lecture II 'The Concept of Commitment', from *History and Society*, Essays presented to Dr. Niharranjan Ray, (ed.) Debiprosad Chattopadhyaya, K.P. Bagchi, Calcutta, 1978.
- Lecture III 'The Concept of Multiple Allegiance', from *The Religious Spectrum – Studies in an Indian Context*, Margaret Chatterjee, Allied Publishers Private Limited, 1984.
- Lecture IV 'The Concept of Dharma', from *Facts and Values*, M.C. Doerer and J.N. Kraay (eds), Festschrift for Cornelis van Peursen, Martinus Nijhoff, 1986. I acknowledge with thanks their permission to include it.



## Towards a Phenomenology of Circumstance

There is no doubt that, even outside those styles of philosophizing which frankly depend on mathematical concepts, many key metaphors used by philosophers and / or models implicit in their thinking come from mathematics. The whole notion of linear argument as a continuous process is that of the path of a moving point where the point is the theme, the nerve of the argument. Aristotle, by no means as ostensibly Pythagorean a thinker as Plato, yet operates with a pyramidal metaphysic of being whose governing image seems to be the triangle. Philosophies which set their targets on infinity, not ununderstandably, often had a rather different lineage, for parallel lines, recurring decimals and the like provide linear models which fall short of the on-all-sides boundedlessness which the word 'infinite' conjures up in the imagination.

Although some circles have been regarded as vicious and others as teasing (the hermeneutic circle), the circle has on the whole been an object of fascination for philosophers, Pythagoras being among their number. It finds its place in magical and mystic cults as well. In Shaktism, incidentally, one could say, stretching a point perhaps, that linearity (*nāḍī*) and centrality (*cakra*) are combined. Tantric ritual practices provide multiple variations on the circle theme, all of which are outside the scope of this study. The closed figure exerts a certain attraction, whether it be the triangle or the circle. The circle, moreover, fascinates because of its centre. Who or what is at the centre? The prospect of being able to penetrate to the core, to bounce off the rim, go outside the

orbit, both fascinates and frightens at the same time. In an earlier age the infinite spaces were occasions of fright for Pascal. In the twentieth century they have become fields of actual exploration, and their imaginary denizens provide the *dramatis personae* for cartoon strips. As far as coteries are concerned, it may not always be an unmixed blessing to be numbered among those of the inner circle. The wheel has turned full circle—another image belonging to the same family and to which we shall return anon. Bergson was really the first philosopher to treat the *open* fearlessly. But even he still uses linear metaphors to do so. His rocket is a linear arrowhead flying upwards and dissolving in a thousand stars.

Primitive man was confronted, no doubt, by a host of enemies. But he was no less beset by a sense of being surrounded. The various inimical powers in the forest or in the desert, the chaos that lies beyond the isles, the icy wastes of the poles—out of such contexts the images of heroic figures are born. But not all can be heroes. Hence the need for the magic circle within which safety lies (in the *mandala* idea the efficacy depends on appropriate *mantras* as well), the ring which proclaims faithfulness amidst betrayal, the sure rim beyond which one may not (or *cannot*) venture. All this shows what a rich primeval experience there is behind our sense of the surrounding, all the more poignant since we have lost belief in the obliquely comforting surrogates—the Fates, the Furies, demons and devils on whom adversity can be blamed. The surrounding is a barricade which protects, a thicket which ensnares, an enveloping fog which blinds vision, a hurdle over which the adventurous may wish to leap. It can also be a source of excuse.

It is the 'circular' set of metaphors which gives the feel of repetition. The repetition may be comforting or otherwise. Generations in the Indian sub-continent thought of the wheel of births and deaths as inevitable, and yet freedom from this was devoutly to be desired. An agricultural people

find the cycle of seasons a reassuring framework for activity. What is fearsome is when the cycle is disturbed, e.g. when the rains fail, or any phenomenon which occurs normally with never-failing regularity, suddenly ceases to do so.

Of all metaphors to do with the circle, at both the folk and the philosophical level, in India it is the wheel which has the richest resonances. Modern Indian languages contain phrases such as 'the wheel of events', 'being caught up in a wheel or round' and the like. Two other phenomena which are part and parcel of the lifeworld of the villager, the oil-press and the grindstone, provide further examples of the humdrum, inevitable, and yet meaningful, round and common task. Like the blindfold bullock treading wearily round the press, we are caught up in the daily 'round' of *vyavahārika* (behavioural) activities. The village woman will say she has been 'at the *chakki* (mill) all day', not literally, although this no doubt will have been part of the day's work. But she has been circumscribed by the duties which fall to her lot. She has had no time for anything else.

The net provides another root-metaphor. 'I am caught up in a net'. Here there is both the sense of being enmeshed and *contained* (for quite a few nets have a round or roundish frame). The word 'chakkar' is used in common parlance in contexts of having to make several visits to get a job done (say, in government offices), being in a fix of some kind or other, having a look round on the off chance of finding a breakthrough (perhaps the officer will actually be 'in his seat'). Even the *parivrājaka* (wanderer or pilgrim), a model of the free man in a certain sense, does not proceed on his wanderings as a man does who sets out to reach a fixed destination, that is, straight. He goes roundabout, again a meaningful activity, given his liberation from the usual caste duties enjoined on the rest of society. I mention all this since, even though the rather insipid words of 'condition' and 'situation' (coupled with adjectives like 'good' and 'bad')

seem to serve in most Indian languages for the word 'circumstance' which is found in various European languages. Indian lifeworlds *do* contain both behaviourally and verbally the sort of thing I shall be seeking to elucidate in what follows—circumstance as the peculiarly personal perspective in the guise of which both nature and social reality appear.

We switch next to explore a cue from literature. The great Victorian novelist George Eliot, who had translated both Feuerbach and Spinoza, lived boldly in her personal pursuit of happiness, and her creativity was abundantly expressed in her total corpus of writings. She used two phrases which suggest a take-off point for reflection. In *Middlemarch*, probably the most 'metaphysical' of her novels, the following passage occurs:

And it seemed to him as if we were beholding in a magic panorama a future where he himself was sliding into the pleasureless yielding to the small solicitations of circumstance, which is a commoner history of perdition than any single momentous bargain.

Elsewhere she refers to the *density* of circumstance. It was perhaps not only because of the restrictions and constrictions of Victorian life that both George Eliot and Thomas Hardy show such deep awareness of the drag, the clogging effect, of circumstance. George Eliot had pondered long and hard over the dilemma posed in Kant's Third Antinomy. The novelist, whose art deals with the ways of men, is conscious not so much of the mechanical succession of events as of the density of their structure. The relevant image is that of a surrounding plenum, even an undergrowth through which one can scarcely find a path. The path in fact has to be *made*. To be swallowed up in the minutiae of everyday living, and these include the small solicitations of circumstance, is to be condemned, she suggests. To give up, to slide in the direction dictated by circumstance, to succumb, is indeed pleasureless, as all defeats are. The literary writer, particularly

the novelist, concerned as he or she is with the *narrative* of living, is often able to hit upon an expression more felicitous than any used by so-called professional philosophers.

The surrounding circumstances, not the philosopher's aseptic 'facts', which environ living and set the stage for decision, can solicit in many ways. Events can invite, challenge or beguile those on whom they impinge. The impact of these solicitations is always very marked on those who see their role in the world of affairs as meliorist, again a word used by George Eliot. The meliorist camp includes both those who see salvation in gradualism (the liberal approach) and those who see no alternative to a definitive rupture with given structures in society (the revolutionary approach). If in addition to this openness, I would even say vulnerability, the agent (for he or she is this, and not a mere observer) is also alive to the poignant beauty of what strikes him as significant detail, we have in him, I believe, one on whom the complexity of twenty-first century living imposes a characteristically heavy burden. And now we move beyond the range of the circumstances with which the characters in George Eliot's novels had to contend and return to the more strictly phenomenological analysis of our theme.

It is in the context of circumstance that we engage in problems that are *practical* rather than theoretical, and the practical enlists the manifold heights and depths of emotion too. It is circumstance which shakes us from the limit point of the observer. We are affected. We can no longer remain indifferent. To be circumstanced is not to be like an object in space. The very word circumstance evokes a model other than that of subject vis-à-vis a *Gegenstand*. We are 'surrounded'. This is expressed by 'um' in 'Umwelt'. The word *Raum* also has this 'feel'—a lived space which surrounds. Circumstances are to be contrasted not only with the confrontation model of subject and object (incidentally this model is a philosopher's darling and radically different from



a laboratory situation) and no less with the linear model of the process idea. Overtones from geometry are still there—the centre of the circle. But the centre is not a point. Even if we say the individual is at the centre, it is not the individual in isolation but the individual-in-relationship. The circular metaphor ceases to dictate. The rim is not a boundary. The periphery may expand in a frightening manner. The whirlpool is the appropriate image for the situation which sucks us down. In one of Sartre's novels, 'mud' is used as a metaphor, the clogging factor which holds back the pedestrian, and so Boueville is the place of stifling situations.<sup>1</sup> Or one can take analogies from rivers and seas. The swimmer can be caught in undercurrents (how true of tangles in institutional life), tangled up in weeds and so forth. One can be 'fenced in' by the actions of another.<sup>2</sup>

To be circumstanced is to be situated historically. At one extreme it is to be enveloped, not only trapped in a particular network, but caught in a generalized adversity, to be beleaguered. From circumstance springs curiosity, interest, threat and possibility. Circumstance both binds us to the totality of experiencing beings and yet demarcates us from them. For example, the candidate who arrives too late for the interview, the man who cancels his ticket at the last moment for a train which crashes, will each view circumstance differently. For the former it was a misfortune, and for the other, circumstance turned out to be a blessing. It is very odd that the very binding aspect of circumstance often makes us link it with chance. This paradox is elucidated if we think of circumstance as something which may strike us as both contingent and cut free from desert. 'It so happened that..., this is how it was...'

To contend with circumstances we certainly need to understand the structure of the situation that besets us. Circumstances always situate us some way or other in intersubjective relations and here, of course, comes the

crunch. Cooperation is a major factor which disperses density in favour of transparency. When we say 'circumstances were against him' this is often shorthand for referring to an intractable network of intersubjective hang-ups. It is almost impossible to say anything general about these intractable networks because it is of their essence that each is uniquely different from the rest. A distinction might be ventured between the turgidity of such networks and what was referred to earlier as density. The turgid structure in intersubjective relations is analogous to stagnation in the field of economics and indifference in the field of politics. It bears the sense of 'Nothing's happening'; 'I can't get things moving'.

The density type, however, carries the sense of hostile powers at work, sometimes identifiable, sometimes not. The individual caught in a dense network of circumstances experiences a sense of helplessness and frustration. All seems of no avail, not because, as in the case of turgidity, nobody bothers, e.g. the files are lost, or do not move, the official concerned is not in his seat, but because there seems to be a conspiracy to balk the individual at every turn. In a certain type of situation, things have gone so far that his 'intentions' are blocked irrevocably. If we compare turgidity to a stagnating economy we can liken the situation just mentioned to a galloping price economy where all control seems to have disappeared. Both turgidity and density are, in Indian terms, *tāmasika*, but density may have a slight edge over turgidity as far as suffering-potential is concerned.

Yet a lot depends, no doubt, on how circumstances are 'taken'. So far, we have thought of circumstance as battering us as the sea batters the grounded hulk of a ship. But is not circumstance often a sea which supports us, and which, for all its deeps and leviathans, is precisely that medium which keeps our frail bark afloat? We often say, 'He took it very well'. But this language is rather misleading, for it is not

that attitude can serve, if such be our temperament, to sugar the irrevocability of much that happens to us, but rather that the concept of circumstance is girt about with attitudinal frameworks (cf. the way 'fact' is girt about with categorial frameworks). These attitudes include ideological stances. But the latter do not exhaust them, for at the back of ideological stances lie non-verbalized sources in the psyche. Although the social scientist may try to trace the contours of these sources (a task which is the special concern of the psychologist), we never touch more than the tip of the iceberg. The basic stances of each individual lie deep in his personal history.

Circumstance can also be seen as a kind of knot which is made up of imponderables. The imponderables include sudden factors (making us remember that all the matters we are considering are cast in the temporal mode) which alter the weightage of elements, e.g. a new boss, a new alignment of political forces, one's own breakdown in health or the illness of someone else. Hinterland and context<sup>3</sup> set the scene for self-expression. The imponderables are 'set' within these. They are the coordinates, the lineaments of enabling determination and of boundary.

Another feature we have not mentioned so far is the sense of being betwixt and between that being in 'adverse circumstance' gives the individual. This again ties in with the 'being in a net', 'being caught up in' which we noticed earlier. To pin down exactly where the intractable elements lie can, but need not, serve to show the way to a breakthrough. Those organizing escape from a prison camp may discover that bribing a particular guard is the key to changing the situation. But a great deal of the horror of adverse circumstances lies in their anonymity, the faceless authorities, for example, with which one may have to contend.

But what of favourable circumstances? It provides wry comment on our human condition to reflect that this phrase

is so often used to underplay the achievement attained by another. 'His circumstances were favourable and so he was able to accomplish X'. It is strange, indeed, that human beings are often reluctant to give credit where credit may be due and to attribute success to factors belonging to the milieu. The crudest example of common reference to favourable circumstance is where we speak of 'affluent circumstances'. Not that such circumstances need be a spur to endeavour. What makes circumstances favourable lies elsewhere. It is the way that *possibilities* are built into circumstances that provides the ground for *intervention*, and that gives occasion for us to regard a particular set of circumstances as favourable or otherwise. But to say this pushes the analysis into the court of the very idea of possibility. Even at first glance it seems clear that possibilities are lodged in a nexus which lies at the crossroads of many networks, all of which involve in some way or other what other people are doing and intend to do. What is an option or genuine possibility for me need not be such for you. Stuart Hampshire once remarked that social change ensures that circumstances are always new. While this follows logically from the premise that conditions in society are never static, the real crunch is seen more poignantly in the life of the individual. In personal life it may be just the opposite; circumstance may be as recalcitrant as ever. The French adage '*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*' has the weight of generations of experience behind it.

We need to find an ontological foundation which will make feasible and reasonable the possibility of intervention in the teeth of circumstance, given that the main hazard we face in embarking on praxis is not the unintelligibility of circumstance but its intransigency. To begin with, the notion of circumstance provides us with new and strong evidence for rejecting the bifurcation of nature. The latter thesis has been under fire from several quarters for many years, and

in each case it has been found that the cast-iron boundaries set up by the Cartesian position fall down like a house of cards. What lingers is a kind of smog for which quantitative thinking is largely responsible. The intense selectivity of the latter, the simplification which it involves, singularly ill-suits it for investigating human phenomena. We have only to counterpose the concepts of event and circumstance to be aware of a radical qualitative difference between them. Unless this is conceded we can proceed no further in our analysis. It is not for nothing that Husserl saw the crisis of our times as rooted in the dangerous assumption made by the positive sciences and extending from them into other disciplines as well, that the Galilean approach provided a key which could unlock all doors. The positive sciences cannot accommodate the human phenomenon of circumstance. All that we would like to include under the latter will be classified by them under variables whose weightage can be computed objectively, but whose import in human terms slips through the net of numbers.

However, there is a discipline which is very concerned, indeed, with circumstance and which we have so far only mentioned in passing. I refer to history. Historians who plot the operations of forces, those who peer through ideological spectacles and those who have an eye for minute imponderables, to take a scatter—all alike are challenged by the quirky role played by circumstances in the affairs of men. Nothing brings this out more vividly and catastrophically in recent times than the surd element provided by the pathological assassin whose very role is shaped and enabled by circumstance and who, ironically, in his own person embodies circumstance for his victim. The assassin's act sets up a cluster of reactions which in their turn provide the circumstances which, for example, can influence an election, remove certain people from the scene, alter the balance of forces on the economic front and so on. The assassin is the

focal point, the centre, of his own act, but the consequences ripple out and overlap with other sets of rippling foci (if the tension between the two images can be pardoned). The historian tries to understand and interpret the interlocking networks set up by different sets of circumstances. Social phenomena are very evidently not a mere agglomerative set of personal frameworks of circumstance. The interaction is the thing. The historian (in order to limit the inquiry, I mention only a single representative of the social sciences), for all the *Ideenkleider* that he performs, still claims a certain objectivity for his findings, an objectivity which is of course significantly different from that of the natural scientist, but which yet claims to possess a certain freedom from bias. Whether a historian of one school regards a historian from a rival camp as being free of bias or not is a very different question.

But the single person, to whose fortunes we now return, cannot be neutral *vis-à-vis* circumstance, for the essence of circumstances is their relation to the focal centre, the person whose circumstances they are. The whole idea of circumstance would not have arisen had not meanings and facts impinged on each other. Now this impinging is something which is *ipso facto* barred from the viewpoint of the observer. It opens itself up only to the one who is involved. It is precisely the friction of personal 'intentions' with the status quo, which is of course not as static as the words suggest, which sets in motion the net (the *jāl*) of circumstance. To the extent that this is true, no two people inhabit the same lifeworld, something which, in the realm of the positive sciences, was seen by Adler, the psychologist, long ago.

It is in the light of personal intentions, which belong to overall life-plans, that circumstances appear as favourable or unfavourable. The favourable set of circumstances is still girt about with many imponderables, and these are distinct

from the unknown quantities of the positive sciences in their direct impact on ourselves. Imagine, say, a patient who has been admitted to a hospital where the best facilities for his malady are known to exist. A hundred and one unforeseen factors may bring it about that his admission there was to no avail, e.g. failure of X-ray facilities, of water or electricity supply, an accident involving the specialist who was to have done the operation, absence of a vital drug on the market, a lightning strike affecting doctors and nurses. 'The cluster of factors involved at any particular time, say, a set of experts... believed to favour a particular candidate, is negated at the last moment by hostile agencies which determine that the candidate shall not be one of those considered for the job. These examples bring out, not only the cruciality of the temporal factor, but the far-reaching nature of the relevancies that may be called into play, and likewise, how distinctive the criteria are which determine relevancy in the human sphere *vis-à-vis* those with which we operate in isolating systems in our investigation of nature.

The horizons which circumstances have are infinitely various precisely because of the complexity of the horizons which fan out as it were from each individual (and we should properly include groups too) involved in the case, the multiple sets of circumstances connected with all their life-plans, plus the interactions set in motion by the joint operation of all of these. It is not possible to foresee, still less to control, what others will do. New factors can at any time enter into the situation. But it is precisely this looseness of texture, the cracks or fissures in what may seem to be an inexorable net, that provide opportunity. It is here that we need to recognize the factors governing manipulability in human affairs, factors very different, indeed, from those of inertia, impact and resultant velocity. Modern life has added many new factors to those with which our ancestors contended, things like contacts, party support, institutional

procedures and the like. It is these which fortify our impression that the cluster of circumstances is, of all things, very unlike a grid. Also contributing to the non-grid-like structure of circumstances is the fact that the latter include what has been left undone. It is so often that gaps that mark the difference between favourable and unfavourable circumstances. The examples may work either way. The fact that *X* has not been able to speak to *Y* (given that he would have exerted a hostile influence) goes in *A*'s favour at the interview. The fact that *P* has not been able to speak to *Q* (he would have been in the candidate's favour if certain facts had been in his possession) works against *R*'s favour. In all such cases we usually say: 'It was all a matter of luck.' The popular mind, as we noticed earlier, tends to associate circumstances with chance. Reference to chance by human beings has always stemmed from a sense of the random element in human affairs.

Once we try to unravel why things happened as they did, the structure of circumstance shows its extraordinary complexity. Three brothers buy plots of land in an undeveloped area, having heard that a new district is to come into existence in the near future, and the district headquarters is to be situated very near the plots. For a variety of political and economic reasons the move does not take place. The investment proves to be a white elephant, for the land does not even have any resale value. The set of circumstances is more densely structured than what happens to the agriculturalist whose crops fail thanks to a poor monsoon, but no less catastrophic. Both examples situated circumstance firmly in the world of nature and the human world alike.

When all is said and done, what a man does in the face of circumstance, and we are always in *some* set of circumstances, can induce a certain Stoicism. Common speech also includes phrases like 'rising above circumstance', 'refusing to give in



to circumstance' and the like. The extent to which an individual is able to do this depends on resources which lie in personal history and which may very likely be obscure to the agent himself. And here the observer may have an advantage. The biographer, for example, is able to detect turning-point situations where basic attitudes were formed, flaws and strengths developed which in later life influence how circumstances are 'taken'. The historian and biographer are also often able to look at the objectified results of intersubjective operations 'cut free' from the nodal points of individual 'intentions'. Those who talk in terms of 'social forces' are most likely to follow this strategy. How they see things is very obviously different from how the agent sees them.

Looking back, sometimes a strange pattern emerges even in a sequence of events which are on the whole set in a tragic mould. Just as there is no explanation for *suffering* in the final analysis, so also there is none for circumstance. To find a certain meaning, often catastrophic, or at least laden with sad commentary, in the affairs of men, is not to find an explanation for the same. Even such a sketchy preliminary analysis as this shows that the friction of meanings and facts is essential to the phenomenology of circumstance. The way is made smoother for an understanding of this friction of meaning and fact if the latter itself is better understood. We tend to look on fact as the terminus of inquiry instead of seeing it as the matrix of problems and questions. But if we grant the latter way of regarding fact as valid, then we go on to discover many interesting overlappings among elements we usually tend to keep apart. Among these the overlap of personal and social (group or national) history—take the example of a man whose education was interrupted by a period of jail-going during a national movement and never completed later because of family obligations—is of special import. But, even the path we have so far covered shows,

not that man is the plaything of chance, nor that he is some kind of game-strategist or rule-follower, but that the circumference of events in which he plays the central role, for we speak of his personal history, is an expanding one. The 'circular' imagery with which we began and with which I tried to tie up, however loosely, the notion of circumstance, has philosophical resonances in that all such imagery expresses insights about the human condition.

In this brief study we have come full circle and confirmed the insights which centuries of experience in diverse cultures have left sedimented in our everyday language. Tangential though many of the happenings may seem to be that impinge on a man's existence (and we have definitely left the realm of geometry here), in terms of his lifeworld it is he who gives them meaning. Naturally meaning-bestowing activities take place in an intersubjective world.<sup>3</sup> In what may seem to be a world of sullen facts it is, after all, human activity which gives them meaning. Amidst the smoke of circumstance ever burns the steady flame of human freedom and dignity. The human person is the centre of gravity even when circumstances do their worst.

#### NOTES

1. Cf. the unceasing presence of mud in Erckmann-Chatrion's brilliant novel of French peasant life, *La Vie d'un Paysan*, or the squelching of mud familiar to the Indian village boy during the monsoon.
2. Cf. the theme of a popular song of Second World War vintage.
3. See my *Our Knowledge of Other Selves* (Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1963).



## II

# The Concept of Commitment

Excursions into human genealogy bring surprises and this is no less the case with excursions into the genealogy of the words we use. Of words in current usage 'commitment' is one where the exercise may bear some dividends, at least by way of clarification. The extent to which the language of commitment was originally tied up with religious conversion may come as a surprise to those who assume its secular, if not political, origin. A somewhat harsh passage addressed by John the Divine to the church members at Laodicea runs as follows;<sup>1</sup> '...I know all your ways; you are neither hot nor cold. But because you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.' He means to say that there is no halfway house as far as religious belief is concerned. The man who is converted in the religious sense turns his back upon one way of life and adopts another. This 'adoption' involves subscription to a set of beliefs and the following of certain patterns of behaviour.<sup>2</sup> This way of understanding conversion can be traced through as far as Kierkegaard and beyond. In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard describes the difference between the hot, cold and the lukewarm in a way which has scarcely been done more clearly since. The man who lives at the aesthetic stage flits from moment to moment seeking happiness in one experience after another in the manner of Don Juan. In simple language one could say that he blows hot and cold, He is a spectator,<sup>3</sup> uninvolved, and so bound to boredom and disillusionment. This lack of involvement is not to be confused with detachment which itself depends

on an ascesis of a rigorous kind. Kierkegaard's first stage, furthermore, carries with it a certain attitude toward time. The 'aesthete' lives in the present and fails to relate himself either to the past or the future. The past may be taken in its dual sense of one's own individual past and also the past of history. The aesthete is in the position of acquiring a past, in passing through a series of adventures, and yet having no inner understanding of what is happening to him.<sup>4</sup> In his absorption with his own experiences he is naturally indifferent to tradition, to history as the record of social experience. Unrelated to the past in both these senses, the aesthete may be said to be rootless. To be unrelated to the future is an equally serious condition, for this means being without hope. Each moment bears no promise of more. Indeed, this may be the last time. Ironically in this state where all is possible and nothing actual, man is most necessitated. This is so because the factors which determine mood are all outside the individual. The aesthete is lost in and to circumstance. He is unable to take a stand.

Kierkegaard explains taking a stand by highlighting the turning-point decisions which mark the leap from the aesthetic to the ethical and the leap from the ethical to the religious. These turning-point decisions are passionate experiences, highly subjective, and certainly ones which 'commit' one to definite styles of life, in the case of the ethical individual, to a life of conformity to the moral law, and in the case of the religious man, to a life of dialogue with, and obedience to, the one transcendent Being, that is God. No doubt Kierkegaard's understanding of commitment sets more store on encounter (in the Pauline manner) than on subscription to belief. This is because he was anxious to make his standpoint distinct from that of those contemporary churchmen for whom formal allegiance to a set of doctrines was equated with 'being a Christian'. Kierkegaard no doubt was concerned to advocate a religious way of life and in the

terms in which he understood it. But the ways in which his approach has nevertheless coloured secular understanding of commitment are worth attention. The 'uncommitted' man is the one who drifts, who is a spectator rather than an actor. He does not make history, rather he is the passive object of historical process. He has no policy for the future and so takes no hand in shaping events. The 'committed' ideologue undergoes, presumably, a crisis of conscience analogous to the Kierkegaardian *metabasis eis allo genos*<sup>5</sup> and in a mood of fervour he embraces a way of life which again, presumably, affects all he subsequently does.<sup>6</sup> In all these ways the Kierkegaardian leap bears some analogy to the activist's 'plunge'. Among the many differences (there is no need to spell them out here) is the fact that, for Kierkegaard, the life of faith was a solitary affair, a lone relation with transcendent Being, whereas the activist (not however the solitary rebel) joins with others of a like mind in attempting to bring about a new order. That the Messianic conception of a transformed society underwent a secularized sea-change in Marx's political eschatology is too well known to need more than a brief mention.

The different ways in which Kierkegaard and Marx reacted to Hegel have been the topic of a considerable corpus of twentieth century philosophical writing. Both men shared a common dislike of rationalist systems which seemed to steam-roller the individual. Both disliked the notion of *Zeitgeist* and both had a preference for concrete situations over abstract theory. Both made their starting-point the actual human condition rather than the requirements of pure reason. For both, strangely enough, the 'uncommitted' individual is an object of pity rather than condemnation. Both wrote of alienation, Kierkegaard of alienation between man and God through sin, and Marx of alienation between man and man through inhuman economic relationships. For both Kierkegaard and Marx there was no vagueness about the

remedy prescribed. For both, to shift to philosophers' language, 'to commit oneself', like 'to know', are incomplete expressions. One can only commit oneself to a particular way of life, and this, for the religious man no less than for the serious revolutionary, is spelt out in some detail, just as one can only know *something*. 'To be committed' is as meaningless as just 'to know'.

From the above it will be clear that the twenty-first century has travelled some distance from the usages briefly sketched above, and the new usages are unfortunately a lot less easy than the old ones to give content to. The philosophers' dichotomy between speculative philosophy, represented by Hegel, and its opposite, has developed in a multi-tracked manner. Kierkegaard and Marx reacted to Hegel in ways distinctively their own. A single speculative system can be countered not only by a non-speculative system but by another speculative system. Some would go further and say that to speak of 'system' at all is to admit speculation. For example, to extend the dialectical method to the history of societies, as Marx did, was certainly to employ speculation.

But with the further development of anti-Hegelianism, thought and action came to be regarded in a dichotomous manner, a manner which in fact collapses on the least reflection, with the exception of the limit case of reflex action. This came about through an identification of thought with theory and action with practice. The action advocated by Marx was on the other hand highly informed with theory, the dialectic of social change, and even the rationalist system of Hegel bore certain practical implications as far as statecraft and property relations were concerned. But not all twentieth century intellectuals took the trouble to analyse terms like 'condition' and 'situation' with the care of Marx, or Dewey, and these are the terms which serve to show up the untenability of maintaining a dichotomy between thought and action in the context of a meaningful analysis of commitment.

Another matter sometimes lay behind the discussion<sup>7</sup>, although somewhat covertly, the critique of contemplation. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the complexities of living, especially industrial living, along with its accompanying institutional frameworks, encouraged in certain quarters not only a devaluation of contemplation but a positive reaction against it. The need of the times seemed, and perhaps still seems, to lie in active tackling of the evils of social inequality, poverty and exploitation. The anti-contemplation advocates sometimes allied themselves with the anti-theory advocates although contemplation and theory are by no means the same thing, for those who have gone in for contemplation in a rigorous sense have done so out of a sense of commitment and using techniques which could certainly be classified under 'actions'. In India those who talked of commitment were in a peculiar position. They allied themselves against the contemplatives and followers of various godmen<sup>8</sup>, but invoked theory perhaps even more than their confrere ideologues in the West. They were reacting against two strands in the local culture, that which set a positive value on maintaining the status quo in the name of *dharma*, and that which set a positive value on meditation. Moreover, they wanted to expose the class allegiance of those who advocated material austerity for others but prosperity for themselves. All these were, and still are healthy reactions. But the timelag in the use of terms appeared at times in the usage of the word 'committed' to express all this. So much so that to write or speak of a 'committed' man at times almost carried the same overtones as writing or speaking of a 'good' man. That this should have been possible has come about thanks to the divergent experiences of Western countries and of India in the thirties and forties.

The thirties and forties saw the flourishing of totalitarian regimes in Europe and the collapse of two of these, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, as an outcome of the Second



World War. Many Nazis and Fascists, no doubt, were 'committed' to their respective ideologies in that they chose to join the parties concerned knowingly and of their own free will. Thousands of others, however, were caught up in the systems, hardly realizing what they were doing or what the consequences would be. In opposition to these regimes, especially in opposition to Franco's Spain, many well-meaning people became committed Stalinists. When Stalinism was exposed for what it was, their disillusionment knew no bounds. Their god had failed.

Talk of commitment *per se*, therefore, is more or less passé in western democracies since the western experience has been that it all depends on what one is committed to, that one may need to be committed to something very different tomorrow, and, in any case, what needs to be done in any particular situation cannot be found out through the mechanical application of a formula. Disillusionment in the two-thirds world has been of a different kind. It includes, for example, disillusionment with the persistence of colonial-style steel frames and value systems in the newly independent countries, failure to tackle seats of privilege because party power has to be maintained at all costs, inability of free governments to control sectional interests, and disenchantment with nationalization, planning, etc. as magic formulae for curing national ills, to mention only some of the elements which have impacted unfavourably on lifeworlds.

The western experience, then, must be borne in mind in turning to a searching critique of those who speak of commitment in an article written by Louis J. Halle in *The Virginia Quarterly Review* in the spring of 1973, the general tenor of which identifies commitment with fanaticism. Halle detects two underlying assumptions made by the advocates of commitment, that political issues are issues of right and wrong, and that intellectuals are enlightened and can therefore distinguish between the two. He could have added

that, as well as the belief that 'the others' are wrong, there is often the belief that they are wicked. To mention this is to be reminded of the theological ancestry of this whole question, a matter with which we began. It would appear to follow from the two assumptions cited, by converse, that the 'uncommitted' man is tolerant, as against the intolerance of the committed man; that he does not simplify political issues into issues of right and wrong, and that he does not endow intellectuals with any special political wisdom. A little reflection will show that these do not actually 'follow' at all because the term 'uncommitted' covers not only one but many possibilities.

The 'uncommitted' man (I use this customary parlance for the sake of argument) may not be tolerant but may be indifferent.<sup>9</sup> Alternately, he may be committed about some matters, in the sense of pursuing them with might and main, for example, he may feel committed to reading one newspaper rather than another, and yet 'uncommitted' about political matters. Or, about political matters, he may take a definite line about certain things, for example, the iniquities of racism, and either an inconsistent or 'indifferent' line about other political matters. The 'uncommitted' man may even be of the opinion that seemingly political issues only need to be tackled at the socio-economic level. In other words, a man uncommitted to political ideology, X may be committed to political ideology or Y to an ostensibly non-political ideology. This by no means exhausts the possibilities.

Let us look at Halle's two assumptions more closely. First, that political issues are issues of right or wrong. Here it is clear that an uncommitted man, in the narrow connotation of 'not committed' to ideology X, may in a very definitive manner look at political issues as issues of right or wrong. The pacifist would be a case in point. Uncommitted to ideology X, he is nonetheless strongly committed to his pacifism. Whether pacifism should be described as an

ideology would take us into semantics. It may, in fact, often be the case that the man committed to ideology X will be least able to view political issues in terms of right or wrong. The criterion for him may well be what the leader says is right, or 'what the party says is right' or 'what country A, B or C does is right'. It may, of course, be objected that the criterion will still be that of right or wrong but that right and wrong are being interpreted not in a 'formal' manner but in a 'material' manner. It would then appear that where political issues were at stake there would be only two options. One of which *should* be opted for and the other eschewed. Less technically, political choices are between black and white. Let us consider this further.

In an earlier paper of mine written on ethical perplexity,<sup>10</sup> I suggested that whereas moral reflection may reveal a central territory of clear cases, where one can say that this is right and that is wrong, there are borderline cases where the question is that of more or less, of balancing factors, where, for example, we say, 'It is better to do this rather than that'. It may be that, in political matters, the clear case approach is less called for than the 'weighing of alternatives' approach. Why this might be so is because of the magnitude of the imponderables. But the consciousness of imponderables and the difficulty of weighing them is precisely the thing which the 'committed' man may diagnose as political immaturity, bad faith and the rest. This is not to deny that there can be clear cases of right and wrong in politics. There may be disagreement over the choice of examples but let me essay one. It would be right for a democracy to protect its minorities. But whether it would be right to protect a particular minority or weaker section by *positive* discrimination, say, to the extent of encouraging it to perpetuate its backwardness or separateness, can be a matter controversy. What would be right in the circumstances, better rather than worse, might not be easily

determined, and certainly not determined by quick reference to any mechanical formula or ideology. In fact, phrases like 'advisable in the circumstances', 'best in the long run', 'feasible at the moment' come to mind in the context of political issues. Often, when the word 'wrong' is used in a political context, another word can, without loss of clarity, be substituted in its place. For example, instead of saying, 'It would be wrong for an M.P. to vote against his party in a division', we can without loss of meaning, and even with some gain in clarity, say, 'It would be acting against the mandate given by his constituency for an M.P. to vote against his party in a division'. What I am suggesting is that the words right and wrong should not be used as vague terms of approbation and abuse. This is, needless to say, not to advocate the divorcing of morals and politics.

The second of Halle's assumptions concerns the belief that intellectuals have a special knack in being able to distinguish between right and wrong in political issues. If what has been said above can be reiterated, political situations are situations of complexity, where determination of what is feasible and what is best in the circumstances require knowledge of the facts, along with that of the interests of all concerned. Now there is no doubt that the word 'commitment' is utilized by intellectuals (a vague term but roughly designable as a sort of class, and, as Gandhiji rightly said, therefore to be distinguished from the masses) and those intellectuals who utilize it perhaps annex commitment initially for themselves, thereafter claiming that others *ought* to be committed. If Halle is on the right track in affirming that those who talk of commitment assume that intellectuals are specially enlightened and can therefore distinguish between right and wrong in politics better than the unenlightened masses can, we are on to something which not only does not seem to tally with the facts, but which tallies ill with the political method and 'style' of democracy.

That intellectuals should be in the vanguard of decision-making sometimes historically may have happened to be the case, but it is not an inevitable concomitant of the method of appeal to majority decision. In developing countries, intellectuals tend to dominate at the bureaucratic level rather than elsewhere. In other words those whose natural role is that of critics of the establishment become a part of it. It is this class in fact which is the most alienated from the masses and least able to speak on their behalf. Take the question of the drawing of a state boundary. The opinion of the intellectuals sitting in government offices, or in the legislature, may have no special weightage of wisdom over the opinions of the villagers in that particular area. Certainly we imagine that intellectuals *should* possess some kind of credentials as political educators. But there is no *prima facie* case for this. As far as commitment is concerned, not political commitment, but the step-by-step follow through of the implications of earlier decisions, this is best understood by the villager. To plant seeds is to be committed to seeing to their irrigation, weeding, protection from pests, harvesting of the crop and so forth. Moreover, if political education is confined to the pointing out of a commitment to vote in a certain way every five years, and this results in no tangible benefit, an electorate cannot be blamed for retreating to the multiple commitments of individual and group interests.

To return to Halle. He diagnoses twentieth century advocacy of commitment by some of the intelligentsia as a call to abandon thought for action, and, as such, stresses its dangers, if not its sinister possibilities, especially the possibility of abandonment of *thoughtful* and continued examination of the *changing* situation. It is not only the professional theoretician who runs the risk of being dubbed uncommitted, but the artist, too, has long been open to this kind of attack. Halle cites the example of Goethe studying minerals while Napoleon's troops were massing round

Weimar and Wanda Landowska recording Scarlatti in 1940 with the Nazis nearing Paris. The artist's prime commitment is to his craft. Commitment to an ideology *may* result in a work of art but it is more likely to result in propaganda. The artist who, in time of war, defends his abstention from war service by saying that he personifies the culture which others are fighting to defend may be regarded by the majority as a parasite. If he is a great artist, however, his defence can by no means be written off as a symptom of parasitism. The intellectual who is not an artist is in no position to exhort the artist to be committed.<sup>11</sup> At the most, in terms of his own commitment, he might exhort the artist to widen the range of his communication, so that what he expresses can reach the masses. But he is not strictly in a position to do this for a retreat from communication is itself a form of communication (cf. abstract painting, aleatory music and gimmicky poetry), and no one can dictate to the artist in which way he should communicate.

With this aside on the artist and his commitment let us return to the relation of thought and action and see if the word 'commitment' throws any light on the relation between the two. Kant's Copernican Revolution was in a sense the 'ancestor' of the subsequent approaches which shared in common the belief that it is human activity which bestows meaning on the world. For Kant, the activity was located in the formal a priori functions of reason, both theoretical and practical; for Marx, it was the ways in which men organize their economic relationships; for Husserl, it was the multifarious intentional acts of consciousness; and for the existentialists, it was the act of engagement. The history of science makes it clear that the relation of hypotheses to facts is not a mechanical one, and that hypothesis enters into the determination of fact. The situation is even more intricate when we turn to the relation between programme, policy and social reality. If physical facticity is a drag on many projects

in the natural sciences, it is human facticity, a shifting and changing affair, which can often be a drag on efforts to transform social reality for the better.<sup>12</sup> One could compare here Brunet's dilemma in Sartre's *The Iron in the Soul*<sup>13</sup> with the scientist's. Brunet says: It is true enough that I've got to work in the dark. But what alternative was there?— to do nothing?' The darkness is ignorance of what the others have done or will do. The scientist's dilemma is ignorance of the other aspects of the system he is dealing with, to say nothing of other systems, for example, how a particular pesticide will affect the ecological balance. An inelastic commitment to a particular policy in the face of counter indications is as 'unscientific' as the adherence to a particular hypothesis in the face of negative instances. The variables in social situations, as against laboratory situations, involve many factors which cannot be controlled. Here, of course, we reach a point of controversy. The totalitarian will maintain not only that the factors can be controlled but that they *should* be controlled.

The partial perspective, in Karl Mannheim's phrase, which an ideology represents, apparently provides a handy framework for decision-making, but the utility of such a framework is increasingly questionable as soon as provisionality, openness, and especially, the various imponderables of a multicultural society, are given due weight. It is worth pointing out that even a partial perspective, say secularism, does not 'entail' any particular policy for implementation. It might exclude, purely pragmatically, not logically, certain measures, for example, bribing one section of the community to perform hostile acts against another section. But it will not positively entail any particular measure any more than the general directives of a Constitution positively *entail* any particular legislative measure. As for the concept of 'total perspective', this seems to have content only as a regulative idea. Even a planning

authority, aiming at being as objective as possible, can never attain a total perspective, nor only because of the magnitude of present unknown factors, but because of inherent ignorance of the future. The coordinates of space and time are inescapable. In this connection Pierre Further makes an interesting suggestion—not to ‘eliminate the risks of temporality by clutching to guaranteed space, but rather to temporalize space... a scope, a domain which takes shape as I act upon it’.<sup>14</sup>

As it happens, the ideas that grow out of concrete situations as those concerned apply their minds to them, often show up the irrelevance of ideologies.<sup>15</sup> The man who finds a particular perspective unsatisfactory may do so not on the ground of personal vagary, in Dahrendorf’s phrase, but because he believes that social engineering in a piecemeal manner<sup>16</sup> is likely to do less harm than monolithic changes according to an ideological blueprint. Such a man, so far from claiming a total perspective recognizes only too well the limits of our knowledge. It may well be that it is on the basis of a commitment to the integrating perspective of humanism that he holds back from anything that smacks of totalitarianism. But there is a difference between such ultimate commitment and the particular commitments which could be described as the ‘break-up’ of the ultimate commitment in terms of policy. Particular commitments need to be subject to a constant process of revision. Self-criticism and particular commitments stand or fall together. The political fanatic is the one who not only makes a partial perspective into an ultimate commitment, but even a particular commitment becomes for him an ultimate commitment.

The question next arises whether there is any difference between individual and social commitment. Apart from questions like whether a concept such as that of ‘conscience’ can be extrapolated from the individual to the social level,



it seems pretty clear that a particular commitment at the social level will be a matter of policy, something which is the result of the push and pull of joint decision-making. A group can obviously be committed to a particular course of action. For example, a committee can be committed to producing a report by a certain date, in the sense that it is within their terms of reference to do so. A public body can deny that it is committed to do XYZ on a variety of possible grounds, e.g. that there has been no legislation which prescribes it, or no public statement of intention to undertake it.

An interesting issue concerns the ways in which one commitment may be said to be tied up with others. A commitment to produce a report within a certain time need not be tied up with three-hourly sittings each day. A commitment by an institution to increase the number of posts *is* however tied up with advertising the same in time. Failure to do so is not a failure of logical acumen but a matter of *mala fides*. The spelling out of what one is not committed to do, whether in the individual or group sense, brings in many questions concerning social dynamics.

Let us take the case of a college Principal who denies that he is committed to forwarding the demands of the Employees Union in his institution to higher authorities. A distinction will need to be made, as in the case of analyzing individual ethical situations, between the standpoint of the agent and the spectator. We will take first the standpoint of the college Principal. Let us, for the sake of simplification, exclude the case of written legal obligations where commitment can be established through legal interpretation. Barring this, failure to admit a particular commitment may be taken to arise from a certain interpretation of interests, whether in response to a pressure group or not, including under this that it is within one's interest to take account of other commitments. From the side of the other party in the dispute (the union workers are of course by no means 'spectators') the failure appears

as evidence of *mala fides*. The situation shows up the relation of alienation between the two.

Needless to say, the concept of 'not being committed to X or Y' by no means always involves alienation. Any particular commitment has a delimited range of reference depending on the relationship concerned. A good example would be the sort of thing set out in insurance policies. The class of things one is not committed to may often be clearly specifiable, for example. A, in marrying B, is specifically not committed to marrying C, D, E, etc. There are cases, however, where the self-limitation inherent in any particular commitment can become the shelter for excuse. For example, a government may maintain it is committed to the maintaining of law and order, but not to the provision of employment for all its citizens. This brings up the question whether it makes sense to say that one, whether individual or group, ought to be committed to XYZ. To take an example, it does make sense to say that 'All nations ought to be committed to the resolution of disputes by peaceful means'. In fact this brings out the point we have insisted on throughout, that to be 'committed' *per se* is vacuous, and that commitment is always to a certain course of action.

Let us next see whether the distinction between ultimate and particular commitment applies at the group level. One may well ask if an institution can be 'committed' (in respect of having an ultimate commitment) in the sense in which an individual can. Can the style of an ecclesia be adopted, say, by a civil service or a judiciary? Even if it were possible, there would still be the question whether it was desirable. Ultimate commitments are a matter for individual conscience or ecclesia/commune-type institutions. To speak of a judiciary, say, as being 'committed' (apart from the general sense in which everyone is supposed to do their duty as faithfully as they can and which would apply not only to the judiciary but to anyone whatsoever) is to confuse particular

commitment with ultimate commitment, and this usually through the mediating agency of a partial perspective. In an authoritarian regime the call for commitment *per se* is invariably a call for conformism, a ruling out of the possibility that one might be mistaken. My main caveat about partial perspectives should now be clearer, that those who adopt them are usually unwilling to recognize partiality. No doubt when the partiality is recognized, this kind of 'speculative instrument' (for this is what it is) can unlock some doors. The snag, in my view, is the temptation to regard a partial perspective as a master key, and for some, the temptation is almost irresistible.

Let us see whence we have come. 'Commitment' is a relatively new word in western social thinking although we had no difficulty in tracing the idea back in time in the context variously of religious conversion, the ethic of the revolutionary, existentialist engagement, and decision-making in general. The quest of meaning in action is an objective which unites the Marxist, the pragmatist, the existentialist and the *karmayogin*. There is a risk, however, in over-philosophizing about the issue. The man escaping from a concentration camp, the commune member doing his stint with the washing-up, the sculptor chiselling his stone, the wakeful parent tending a sick child, the toddler at play, all find meaning in action. The actions even in this small list of examples are very diverse. The commitments involved are likewise very diverse. There would be no sense in saying to any of the individuals concerned that they '*should be committed*' *per se*. A man can only be committed to *something*. We then noticed the difference between ultimate and particular commitments and the role of partial perspectives. One major question remains, whether there can be 'reasons for' ultimate commitments.

This question has been discussed at length in the considerable literature on humanism which has appeared

in recent years. The ground for heart-searching has been the suspicion that those who appealed to ultimate commitments were appealing to something irrational and that the rationality of a standpoint could be measured by the reasons given for holding it. Here we run into a difficulty. For while it is the mark of a particular commitment that reasons can be given for it, indeed a particular social commitment can only be embarked upon as the terminus of a round of argument, ultimate commitments seem to be like logical stoppers or verificatory termini. Either one sees or one does not see. One of the basic differences, for example, between the authoritarian and the liberal is that the latter thinks, on the one hand, that certain freedoms are to be preserved at all costs, even, say, at the cost of inefficiency, and on the other hand that outside the spheres of the pure sciences and the verification of simple sentences like 'There is an elephant in the front garden', most questions about human affairs are susceptible of a whole range of answers. Does being rational always involve the ability to give reasons? Yes if among 'reasons' we include appeal to attitude, belief and standpoint. This, no doubt, leads to a certain regress. But to be able to identify and articulate the grounds of ultimate commitment is the prerequisite of any *dialogue* between people holding different ultimate commitments. The dialogue may even reveal a community of ultimate commitment at certain points. The greater part of our disagreements concern ways and means of attaining certain objectives, especially in the area of socio-economic thinking. The particular commitments we may make along the line are, or should be, as tentative as the scientist's temporary try-out of particular hypotheses. The only criterion in both cases is their practical utility.

This may seem too lukewarm a position to have reached about a concept wielded with vigour by many as a way of distinguishing between the good and the bad. But, in some

uses of 'committed', Genghis Khan and Al Capone appear to qualify no less than Albert Schweitzer and Mother Teresa. It is such uses of 'committed' that I have excluded as vacuous. I have also tried to uncover uses of the word where dogmatism and fanaticism are smuggled in by the back door. Our commitments must have an identifiable content. That content in turn needs to be subjected to a constant process of criticism. As ultimate commitments one might suggest the following in the context of all lifeworlds:

- It matters what one does.
- One should as far as possible act knowingly, not unthinkingly.
- Knowledge, the pragmatic assessment of the situation, needs to be supplemented by compassion.
- Actions should be shaped by reference to the common weal.

Spelling this out in terms of particular commitments is a matter of the collective pooling of wisdom, devotion and work of those concerned. It is not a matter of any great difficulty to give intellectual assent to the four points mentioned above. But as Dag Hammarskjöld once remarked: 'The great commitment is so much easier than the ordinary everyday one, and can all too easily shut our hearts to the latter'.

#### NOTES

1. *Revelations*, ch.3, v. 16
2. Believing, saying and doing are all bound up with commitment. To what extent they can be said to be *criteria* of commitment needs further exploration.
3. The words 'aesthete' and 'spectator' have a common root.
4. Cf. St. Augustine's inner understanding of his own past history, after his conversion.

5. Cf. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*.
6. The gap between profession and practice can occur both in the case of the adherent of a religious way of life and the man who subscribes to a secular ideology.
7. Notably in some countries in the two-thirds world.
8. To use a term coined by Peter Brent.
9. It is precisely this sort of uncommittedness which arouses the ire of the ideologue, an attitude which seems to the latter to involve conservatism in politics and a policy of *laissez faire* in economics.
10. *Journal of the Indian Academy of Philosophy*, Calcutta, 1966.
11. One of the things that existentialists stress, following Nietzsche, is the creativity of action. The snag is that authenticity as a criterion of ethical actions offers no way of discriminating between creative and destructive action.
12. Social change can be for the better or for the worse.
13. Penguin edition, p. 289.
14. *Educacao-e-Vida*, 1966, pp. 26-7.
15. See Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin edition, 1972.
16. The piecemeal social engineer meets his biggest challenge in the time factor. Cf. Coretta Scott King: 'For our children have only one life to live, one education to get, one chance of dignity and peace. That is why we need freedom now, not ten years hence. In ten years our own children will be well through their schooling'.



### III

## The Concept of Multiple Allegiance

One of the common stereotypes regarding Hindu lifeworlds centres round the concept of tolerance, an elastic term which in this context has a rather different connotation from what it had in John Locke's England. Of course, there have been many ready to disclaim the applicability of the concept to the Hindu syndrome, since some look upon 'Hindu religion' as a question begging term. The caste system, and attitudes to those outside the fold, *inter alia*, have been cited by the disclaimers. Those who support the 'tolerance', view have appealed to the capacity Hindu communities have had, historically, to *assimilate* elements from outside, whether these be people, customs, ideas, or what have you. This, plus a hierarchical social structure and a belief-system centring on the notion of stages of life and patterns of behaviour appropriate to them, makes for a culture-pattern which accommodates diversity, which, one could say, is 'hospitable'.

The factors which determine the *limits* of this hospitality are as interesting as those which encourage it. Dietary habits, for example, can give way before the demands of factors as various as hospitality, the alleged requirements of social ambition e.g. consumption of liquor by the *nouveau riche*, medical necessity, and so on, or they may be reinforced in a kind of backs-to-the-wall attempt to assert cultural identity.

In what follows, the concept of multiple allegiance is not taken as equivalent to that of tolerance which seems to be ambiguous and weak in terms of explanatory power. Rather an attempt will be made to see if multiple allegiance, which



seems to contrast with commitment, can throw any light on the hospitality of Hindu worldviews. Reference will also be made to Christian communities in the West by way of comparison.

The history of Christian peoples reflects the operation of the Either-Or principle in a variety of ways. Not that there have not been impressive syntheses, of which the Book of Common Prayer is a well-known example. But institutionalization, on the one hand, and the development of credal systems, on the other, have tended to rule out the both/and approach. To the Jew and the Christian, religious life is associated, if not identified, with religious commitment. One can be a Catholic or a Protestant; can believe in the Trinity or not, and so forth. Admittedly many of the sects which grew up were historical attempts to have one's cake and eat it, But these compromises in turn solidified into positions about which a stand had to be take one way or another. For example, if Tractarianism satisfied the High Anglican's craving for some of the consolations of Roman Catholicism, it was none the less true that to be an Anglo-Catholic from the 1830s onwards has meant, *ipso facto*, not to be a Low Churchman. My point is that even where a new sect initially reflected a compromise or synthesis, the adherence it subsequently called for tended to be of an exclusive kind.

The proliferation of sectarianism in nonconformist Christianity provides an interesting illustration of what I may call the single-allegiance principle. To be a Plymouth Brother is, *ipso facto*, not to be a Methodist, a Presbyterian, or the like. Certain compatibilities, however, show themselves in 'fringe' activities in religious life. Let me essay some examples. A Plymouth Brethren family may send their children to a nearby Baptist Sunday School. This may come about for a variety of reasons, e.g. friendship among the children in the respective communities (the neighbourhood

principle), or the attraction of a specific facility (a club, provision for music). A certain amount of coming and going is found in attendance at women's meetings, again with non-doctrinal factors like the popularity of a speaker, the reputation of parties, socials and outings, coming into operation. The hardcore participants in the fringe activities in each case will usually be the same as the participants in the regular acts of worship. But one can still not generalize about compatibilities at the non-conformist level as one can, say, about the incompatibilities between Catholic and Protestant, e.g. the unlikelihood of a Catholic child attending a Protestant Sunday School. The ecumenical movement represents a broad-based move towards the discovery of a common platform, both doctrinal and liturgical, which, it seems to me, is as different from tolerance, on the one hand, as it is from 'compatibility' on the other. It may be noticed, moreover, that even where 'integration' has taken place, original denominational allegiances may show themselves when the question of receiving the Eucharist arises, or at times of weddings and funerals. There is one further compatibility which can be found sometimes in the 'mixed marriage'. The child of a Methodist and a Baptist may, say, attend a Methodist church and a Baptist Sunday School. The 'parallel' in India might be the situation of the child of a Hindu/Sikh marriage performed in a *gurudwara* (a very common practice in North India).

The crucial matter, however, in Christian communities (I am not considering here 'non-believers' or the occasional dilettante church visitor) concerns 'initiation' ceremonies, to use an anthropological term. Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, etc. have different rites for initiation into church membership. So, the test of primary allegiance for 'professing' Christians will be which rite is followed, irrespective of the number of fringe activities in which a person may take part in other denominations. The

experience of conversion works against the likelihood of plural participation, in so far as the converted man will most probably remain in the community in which he 'saw the light'. The exclusive demands of this association in terms of attendance at church meetings, say, may in practice rule out participation in fringe activities in other denominations. What keeps the new adherent on the rails, so to speak, is his membership in an institution and the doctrinal complex to which he *ipso facto* subscribes in becoming a member of the institution.

In so far as churches in the west act as foci for a considerable amount of social activity, this social function can, even so, in varying degrees be cut adrift from the core religious function of the church and in that way attract those 'outside' in the sense of 'in other churches' or 'in no church at all'. In our time, a 'successful' youth club will often have this function, the connotation of 'successful' being understood to be 'successful in attracting young people'. A 'live church' is marked by the variety of its activities beginning with Sunday worship, and proliferation of meetings of various kinds, e.g. children's worship, young people's activities, scripture study, women's guilds, etc. The point is that the various activities take place under particular religious auspices and on the premises of the institution in question. It is noteworthy that an apparently secular activity. e. g. an annual women's outing including picnicking, sight-seeing, organized games, etc. can take place under religious auspices. Likewise, fund-raising comes into the picture just as it would in any secular organization. Needless to say, someone who participates in the activities of a particular church may also participate in various non-religious organisations as well. In spite of all the variations mentioned above, the chances are that the 'practising' Christian will focus his devotional life in the particular institution of which he is a member. This is where he 'belongs'.

Let us see how all this compares with Indian religious behaviour, bearing in mind that the two mainstays of 'consistent' or 'one-stream' religious behaviour for the practising Christian are the institution to which he belongs and the doctrinal complex to which he subscribes in so belonging. We have seen how, other things being equal, belonging to institution X and subscribing to its doctrines is, *ipso, facto*, not to belong to institution Y, Z, etc. or subscribe to their doctrines. Bearing in mind the absence of institutionalized religion or credal complexes it becomes easy to see the extent to which the Hindu is free from the Either/Or compulsion which besets the Christian. He is, especially, free from the saved/unsaved dichotomy. In being 'on the way' he is neither radically sinful nor completely 'saved'. His progressive liberation extends over many lives and this mitigates the urgency of his taking a stand here and now. The fractional view of truth makes not only for modesty of claims to truth, but encourages an extension of insights through further fractions. In the absence of belief in one Saviour, 'one Name through whom ye may be saved', new claimants can elicit homage. Furthermore, the very absence of institutionalized religion serves to make attractive the proliferating religious and religio-political organizations which can provide a locus for piety and for social activities (even gymnastics and drilling) which bring people together outside the festivals determined by the calendar. A lacuna in Hindu religious life is thereby filled.

The stage is set for what I call 'multiple allegiance'. Moreover, where religious life is not founded on historic events (the prophets, the birth of Christ) but on mythic participation in sacred space and time, room is left for foci of religious observance to be built up round historic movements (cf. the Arya Samaj), leaders and present-day charismatic figures, which can provide foci of inspiration and comfort consonant with the cultic figures of mediaeval

Hinduism, that is to say, with those aspects of Hinduism that fall outside the mainstream pattern of Brahmanism. Added to this is the fascination of the 'holy man' who can attract even more attention than the 'good preacher' in Christian circles. The holy man is not an intermediary, but the immediate focus of a kind of decentralized spiritual power. At one extreme this power may be *alaukik* in the literal sense, i.e. supra-natural or magical. But at the other end of the spectrum we confront a kind of saintliness which is recognizable even in the absence of strange powers and, indeed, whose best evidence is the absence of such powers (cf. Sri Ramakrishna and Ramana Maharshi).

All this provides a background for understanding the educated Hindu who begins his day with listening to a discourse on the Gītā early in the morning in a city park (prefaced perhaps by some yogic exercises in the same place), performs his own ritual pūjā at home or in the temple and perhaps has 'darshan' of Sai Baba at an evening gathering. His daughter's wedding may be performed at a *gurudwara*, and traditional 'havan' offered at the funerals of his family members. To complicate it further, taking this as a North Indian example, he may well be a member of the Arya Samaj on the ground that his father was a leading light in the movement in pre-Independence days. In Bengal a typical cluster of allegiances may run something like this: visits to the temple (or ritual gestures as one passes by in the tram), attendance at the Ramakrishna Mission lectures, and attendance elsewhere under various auspices wherever discourses on the Gītā might be held. Such practices constitute important elements in the lifeworld of one who goes in for them.

At this point, it might be worth while to look a little closer at the link between personality cults and powers. Twentieth-century existentialist thought has familiarized us with the distinction between an ethic of the person and an ethic of

principle. We have in Indian religious studies a distinction between the 'saviour' cults and Brahmanism. Drawing on these two sets of distinctions we can gain an insight into what some of the twentieth-century cults provide. They seem to stand halfway between the full-fledged 'saviour' cults and *dharma*. But they do so in very different ways. Much is usually made of the point that allegiance to the core figure in no way conflicts with traditional belief. The intellectual content and the directedness of the 'therapy', however, varies greatly. The combination of devotion plus belief in miracles to be found in the Sai Saba cult ties in with traditional belief in the *alaukik* powers of holy men. The Krishnamurti adherent is of a radically different kind. The discourse method, the questioning technique, the refusal to acquiesce in easy answers and indeed refusal of any claim to be a 'saviour' (it was this that sparked off his breakaway from his original patron) and the complete absence of any 'miraculous' setting, ties in with the intellectual approach to be found in the Upanisads. In the Sri Ramakrishna and Ramana Maharshi type of devotionism (I refer to the attitudes of their devotees and not to their own modes of religious experience) we have a less intellectual style of religiosity, centered in a figure who attracts by the very authenticity of his own religious experience. They exemplify the great tradition of those who, in the eyes of their devotees have risen above daily bondage and who are therefore both exemplars and independent foci of devotion.

In eastern India the reform movements during the last part of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century threw up two major figures who elicit the devotion of many. One of these was Sri Ramakrishna, already mentioned, and the other was Sri Aurobindo. In both cases institutions have grown up round these central figures, and in the latter case there are also cultic practices of an elaborate kind. In the *pūjā* room of many Bengali houses pictures of Sri

Ramakrishna and Sri Aurobindo take their place beside those of Kali, Krishna and other deities. Where the family is Aurobindite, pictures of the founder and of the Mother may even be found in every room and incense be burned at certain times during the day in front of these pictures. Whereas 'magical' elements appear to be absent in the practices of the devotees of the Mother in the shape of gnomic messages, amulets, icons, etc. one key to the multiple allegiance situation in Bengali religiosity is the historical compatibility of Tantrism with Hinduism and Buddhism. Furthermore, the 'pantheon' idea (as likewise, the belief in 'saints' in Catholicism) presents an open-ended model which can admit of successive additions. The kathenotheist form of early Indian religion makes room for the admission of many gods, each with specific functions, along with special deference given to one of the gods. The modern form of this allows for the routine Hindu observances during the calendar year, e.g. the performance of Durga pūjā, Lakshmi pūjā, Kali pūjā, etc. plus, say, a family allegiance to Sri Aurobindo, with attendant visits to the Pondicherry ashram, financial commitments to the latter, and so forth. There is no doctrinal incompatibility between allegiance to Durga and allegiance to Sri Aurobindo or Sri Ramakrishna. In fact if we take as evidence of the content of religious life the 'icons' to be found in the pūjā room (a neglected source of evidence, I think) the multiple allegiance hypothesis may be found to show a near-Protean form. For, along with Kali, Sri Ramakrishna and Sri Aurobindo, pictures of Mahatma Gandhi, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, and Subhas Chandra Bose may well be seen. Respect and reverence are akin to worship, and the 'great soul' readily receives homage, even devotion, which in Hindu religiosity in no way strikes a discordant note within the diapason of an individual's religious life. The attainments of others along the spiritual path confirm faith in the possibility of spiritual heroism, and the constant

remembrance of the cloud of witnesses encourages the devotee on his daily path. The co-presence of mythic and historical figures does not appear incongruous. In fact the presence of historic figures who have lived mightily, maybe in very different fields, bridges the gulf between mythical heroes and common-or-garden mortals which *dharma*, abstractly conceived, cannot.

The incompatibilities, the Either/Or elements we noticed earlier in the context of Christian communities, are much harder to find in Indian religious life. Let us try to find a few examples. A Brahma Samaj family, committed to Unitarian theism, may be expected not to undertake a pilgrimage from *pandal* to *pandal* at Durga *pūjā* time. The lady of the house may nevertheless keep a supply of sweets in readiness for visitors who come to convey Bijoya greetings. In this case a doctrinal reservation (rejection of polytheism) in no way interferes with a cultural observance. It is, however, by contrast, impossible to conceive of a Baptist smearing himself with ash on Ash Wednesday, or a Quaker visitor to the Vatican receiving the Holy Eucharist at St. Peter's. The comparison is perhaps not quite on all fours, but I let it stand by way of provocation.

Regional and historical factors lie behind the particular groupings of allegiances and likewise behind the 'limits of hospitality' we find in Indian religious life, rather than the doctrinal issues which gave rise to sectarianism in Christendom. Questions remain, e.g. whether there is anything special about multiple allegiance within *today's* religious spectrum in India, and whether this is an urban phenomenon rather than otherwise. The innovations in contemporary Indian religious life have by no means been determined by "genteel strata of intellectuals devoted to the purely cognitive comprehension of the world and of 'meaning'", in Max Weber's phrase. With the exception of the Ramakrishna movement, contemporary cults are not



conspicuous for their zeal in social reform. They live side by side with orthodoxy, without an attempt to transform it. They are thus to be contrasted with the reformist movements of the so-called Bengal Renaissance which cast a critical eye on the 'great tradition' and latter-day offshoots of movements like the Arya Samaj, which were originally reformist but which now appear to be carrying on a rearguard action against progressive social change. The type of religiosity developed seems to be devotional rather than contemplative. While some movements in north and west India conflate political rightism and Hindu chauvinism and are as such markedly xenophobic, the 'god-men' cults appear to be mostly apolitical although there are some exceptions. If attendance at mass gatherings is any criterion of the 'reach' of these cults, the main clientele seems to be middle-class, and the mood seems to be inspirational rather than that of contemplative mysticism or ecstasy. We have an interesting contrast here with the grass-roots appeal that characterized the saviour cults of the Middle Ages. The weakening of the nationalist impulse (a post-Independence phenomenon) and the pulverization brought about by urban living and the consequent hunger for some of the aspects of organized religion are some of the factors which lead the middle-aged and elderly middle-class to seek for a renewal of inner religion combined with the 'warmth' of congregational attendance. Excessive politicization of public life can bring about a reaction, a search for reassurance in community, something which, as such, is by no means other-worldly.

I now recapitulate the drift of the foregoing discussion. Indian religious life has shown and still shows a contrast to the decisional pattern which characterizes Christian communities in the west.<sup>1</sup> The injunction 'Come ye apart and be separate' gave a sanction to the preservation of institutional identity through adherence to distinguishable doctrinal positions. 'Belief', 'adherence', or 'acceptance'

all involve taking a stand, and this in turn involves the rejection of positions not believed, not adhered to, etc. The word 'allegiance', on the other hand, I have taken to indicate something rather different. No doubt an element of response to something possessing authority can be taken as built-in to the former set of terms. Allegiance specifically I take to involve a combination of 'allying oneself with', 'respect', 'admiration', 'reliance on', which is not exclusive, but which is capable of extension and addition such that no contradiction or inconsistency or even emotional incompatibility comes into it. This seems to me to characterize the religious consciousness evidenced in the diverse 'iconography' of the *pūjā* room, that aspect which struck Raja Rammohun Roy and the early missionaries alike, as the least congenial aspect of Hinduism.

We have here also, it seems to me, a further example of the expansion of concepts operative at the human level (respect for '*gurujan*', admiration of charismatic characters, etc.) so that they acquire a religious dimension or at least a quasi-religious dimension. This capacity for expansion can take its place beside the analogical path familiar in Christian thinking, as something idiosyncratic in Indian religious consciousness. The feature I have in mind is the reaching out from a human or 'natural' base to the spiritual dimension, however a reaching out which is expressed neither in the formalized strategies of argument nor in less overtly intellectualist forms of symbolization.

The diversified iconography of the *pūjā* room and middle-class patronage of contemporary religious cults alike illustrates what I call the phenomenon of multiple allegiance. This seems not only to be a more precise concept than that of tolerance, but moreover, to be quite distinct from the latter. It also needs to be distinguished from (i) ecumenical 'outreaches' in Christendom. (ii) evidences of fertilizing influences from the Indian philosophico-religious corpus of

concepts in recent Christian theologizing in India, and (iii) the synthetic (I use the word in the Kantian sense) theologizing which in Sikhism brings together strands in Hindu and Islamic thought.

The phenomenon of multiple allegiance illustrates how religious life proliferates in the attempt to satisfy human needs, say, the need for frequent congregational participation apart from the calendar of festivals, or for a more personalized spiritual direction (cf. the types of questions put to Krishnamurti at his meetings). Such developments cannot be classified as rational or irrational. They grow out of new situations, for example, urban loneliness, or a retreat from politicization. Some of the new cults, moreover, show an interesting shift from the classical concern with liberation to a quest for meaning (or meaningfulness) in life. The phenomenon of multiple allegiance in Hindu religious life, whenever this occurs, (and it is not a widespread phenomenon), may even serve as a useful brake on fundamentalism, and in this respect, in lifeworlds where it is present, it might be considered to have some positive ethical value.

#### NOTES

1. For the sake of simplicity and to make the contrast more marked I have only taken into account Christian communities *outside* India.

## The Concept of Dharma

The concept of *dharma* (roughly translated as 'righteousness') is one of the most challenging in Indian philosophical thought. It seems to cut across so many conceptual distinctions – legal, social, moral, religious – that to those attaching importance to these divides it may appear to be less challenging than confusing. And yet there is something fascinating about a term whose usage spans millennia and which gives evidence of a sustained effort to come to grips with the friction of fact and meaning, institution and ideal. To this day, to say that a man is *dhārmik* (righteous) indicates the highest commendation. Whether one ought to be *dhārmik* or not is something which could be paralleled by whether one should be moral or not. In both cases, to pose the query is to reveal that the speaker has asked a question which does not strictly make sense.

The vast period of time over which the concept of *dharma* developed needs to be recalled. The early Vedic period dates from around 1500 B.C. when the Aryans invaded India from the northwest and settled in the plains of Punjab. The *Ṛg-Veda*, consisting of hymns in praise of the gods, might have been composed around 1200-1000 B.C. This is the period when the concept of *ṛta* (cosmic order) was born. *Ṛta* is both the law of righteousness and of cosmic equilibrium and combines in itself the notion of an integrated whole in which gods, men and nature participate. The whole thing was kept going by an intricate web of religious ceremonial which centred on various sacrifices to be made. The Vedas, whose

message was believed to have been revealed to rishis or seers, were followed by elaborations called *Brāhmanas*, *Āranyakas* and Upanishads. Their contents range from instructions as to how sacrifices should be performed to meditative works which are philosophico-poetic in nature. *Śruti* (what was heard and *smṛti* (what was remembered) were regarded as *sanātana dharma* (eternal law) and passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth.

The concept of *dharma* evolved out of *ṛta* and encapsulated the basic meanings of the latter, a proper course of which the natural powers of sun, earth, the seasons, etc. were exemplars (cf. 'the *dharma* of water is to flow'), parallelism between the functional distinctions among the deities and their counterparts in society, and the role of both humans and gods in preserving the balance of parts of all that is. That human beings live in families, clans and other settled communities, that land and cattle have to be tended, and that what people do makes a difference to how things are, are all perceived as of the very nature of existence, but nonetheless as matters which are accompanied by certain ingrained responsibilities. The intermeshing of the natural and the normative is taken for granted. Maybe an agricultural people is well situated to grasp this. Etymologically the root *dhṛ*, means 'to hold, have or maintain'. *Dharma* is an ontological principle, but is no less regulative.

From about the sixth century B.C. to the twelfth century A.D. the literature concerning *dharma* proliferated into law books, the epic works the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyana*, the mythology of the *Puranas*, and eventually the political thinking of the modern era. The ethico-religious concepts of a traditional hierarchical society understandably concerned themselves in large part with relations of values and institutions rather than with personality, based, as the latter is, on a principle of individuality. *Dharma* is a social concept. It did not function in isolation but along with *artha*

(wealth) and *kāma* (desire), the three known jointly as the *Trivarga* (three-fold principles). Whatever brief later speculative thinkers came to hold in favour of *moksha* (liberation) or *apavarga* (a principle beyond the *Trivarga*) it was the threefold values of *artha*, *kāma*, and *dharma* which governed the lives of the majority. Early Indian thinking was frankly this-worldly and concerned with practical matters having to do with the pursuit of prosperity (a matter which, after all, the rest of us do think of when the New Year comes round). Meditative philosophic thought added what has been called the 'atman-centric predicament'<sup>1</sup> (*atman* meaning noumenal self), the idea that there is not merely an attunement between the self and ultimate reality but, as the Advaita Vedantins would say, an identity between them. To bring in the concept of *moksha* (liberation) is to claim that man has a trans-social destiny which, while not cancelling out *dharma*, takes a man beyond it. This raises the whole question of the relation of the so-called *puruṣārthas* (goals of man) to each other, and to this we must now turn.

In Hindu thought four goals of life-values are spoken of, the three values that make up *Trivarga*, plus *moksha*, which is of later origin. The definition of the first, *artha*, is given by Vatsyayana as follows:

*Artha* is the question of arts, land, gold, cattle, wealth. . . . and friends. It is also the protection of what is acquired, and the increase of what is protected.<sup>2</sup>

The arts referred to here are those of politics, commerce, techniques of survival and so on. The connotation of *artha* indicates what people in ancient India associated with prosperity. It includes the degree of independence involved in economic well-being and the ability to protect oneself. It is the realm of 'having' where this is regarded as the legitimate base for all other activities. To have land and cattle, but no friends, is to be poor indeed. Ritual activities were largely concerned with this dimension of life, and we find

in fact a dual criterion of legitimation offered as far as *artha* is concerned, the religious and the pragmatic. The notion that wealth was 'profane' would have been quite unintelligible to the ancient Hindu. An interesting gloss on the legitimacy of worldly pursuits was provided by *Jnanadeva*, the saint from Maharashtra, who asked a religious aspirant how he could attain *moksha* if he could not succeed in a lesser task, namely, looking after himself and his family.

The pursuit of *kāma*, or the satisfaction of desire, is no less appropriate than the pursuit of *artha*. *Vatsyayana* wrote the *Kāma Sūtra* around A. D. 400, and it is clear that he thinks of desire in an extended way:

*Kāma* is the enjoyment of appropriate objects by the five sense of hearing, feeling, seeing, tasting and smelling assisted by the mind together with the soul.<sup>3</sup>

To say that *kāma* concerns the erotic is to recognize its involvement with the fine arts.

But as soon as we use the word 'appropriate' in the context of both the acquisition of wealth and the satisfaction of desire (in their extended connotations), the need for a regulative principle becomes apparent and this is where *dharma* comes in. Although much of the literature on *dharma* suggests a rather rigid canonical model of precepts which must not be infringed upon, there is another side to the story, the one which legitimates what we in fact value, while recognizing the need for a principle of regulation. *Dharma* is the third of the *puruṣārthas*, and *vis-à-vis* the first two, appears in the form of moral law. This is where the plot thickens, for *dharma* is not a monolithic concept but differentiates itself into the sorts of *dharmas* to be followed over the lifetime of man.

The various *dharmas* are classified into *sādhāraṇa-dharmas* (literally 'ordinary' *dharmas*, or those obligatory on all), *varṇa-dharmas* (those varying with one's station in life) and *āśrama-dharmas* (those varying with stages in life). Manu, about whose dates there is much disagreement among scholars,

summarizes the ordinary or general *dharma*s as harmlessness, truth, integrity, purity and control of the senses, these being rough translations of the original terms. *Varna-dharma* was in ancient times identified with caste duties, the original idea behind this being much the same as the principle of 'my station and its duties'. The implication is that, general duties apart, many obligations vary in relation to one's function in society. The duty of the teacher, for example, differs from that of the soldier. The kind of crisis that Arjuna faces in the *Bhagavad Gītā* illustrates the clash of the general duty of harmlessness or nonviolence and the caste duty of the *kṣatriya* (member of the warrior caste), namely to fight. The problem of the conflict of duties remains as baffling as it does in any other system of thought, except that Indian reflection adds the injunction to examine one's true nature and proper course of action in keeping with it and to discover an overriding consideration therein.

The message of the epic literature, however, might well be taken to be something like this. No matter how sincere the effort may be to do the best in the circumstances, there is a momentum in events and a destiny which shapes our ends and which leaves behind much that is disastrous. It is in order to set up a kind of protective barrier against this that the ancient Hindus laid such stress on equilibrium in society. The chaos that they envisaged was not of the cosmic kind Greek imagination conjured up, but the nightmare possibility of a society where anything goes. It is almost as if they had glimpsed in idea the cut-throat style of living of a competitive society and opted for a stratified society in which each man had his allotted place. The factual and the prescriptive are mutually involved in an interesting way on such a model. Diversities of function are factual matters and out of these a set of obligations arises. There is also, along with such a view, the belief that traditional roles should be perpetuated on the ground that it is good to do what one



can do best. Modern thinking would at this point come up with a query as to the role of judgement in all this. Are prescriptions to be read of, as it were, from roles? We need, I feel sure, to bear in mind the context of a traditional society whose economic life centred on crafts which, for centuries (and this used to be the case in many parts of the world) were perfected through skills handed down from father to son. Radical questioning and self-searching held full sway in a different context, that of metaphysical thought. At the everyday level, fact and evaluation remained bound together in Hindu ethical thinking through appreciation of the components of situation and circumstance.

This comment can be further borne out with reference to the third type of *dharma*, that which varies with stages in life. The four *aśramas* (stages of life) are described as *brahmacharya*, *gārhasthya*, *vanaprastha* and *sannyāsa*. The first (student life) is typified in the life of preparation and self-discipline. The full connotation goes beyond the narrower meaning of continence. The second or householder stage is where the facticity of the pursuit of *artha* and *kāma* comes into full play. The *dharma* of the householder also sets a value on links with the past in various ways, ceremonies for the benefit of ancestors, perpetuation of family lines, and the following of the teachings of saints and sages. The householder, situated in the present as he is, is bound by invisible but strong cords to the past and the future. These are the facts of his being where-he-is. His recognition of this as good, and as indicating his role at this particular stage in life, bears him up in this, the busiest, part of his pilgrimage.

The third stage, *vanaprastha*, retreat to the forest, is analogous to what we mean today by retirement, and significantly, in industrialized societies it often takes the form of a shift from the city to the country. The difference is that whereas in our day we think of retirement as a time for new activities, especially new forms of sociality, the ancient Hindu

thought in terms of gradual withdrawal from society, assimilating, as he did, societal bonds to 'bondage'. The texts go into detail concerning change of diet and habits at this stage, much of which makes good sense. It is also worth remembering that Indian philosophy tends to blur the distinction between means and end, so that, to take an example, fasting is looked on both as instrumental to health and self-purification and as discipline as an end in it self. The retired man free of familial obligations is still within society and has obligations towards it. The *Rāmāyana* tells how Sita was looked after by Valmiki in his hermitage when she was alone in the forest. But since each stage can be regarded as a preparation for the next, the forest-dweller's stage gives way to that of *sannyāsa* or complete renunciation. The ascetic is free of all possessions and also free from the practice of rituals. He has shed all attachment. While from one point of view the *sannyāsīn* (the one practising *sannyāsa*) has gone beyond the bounds of society, from another point of view a societal system that sanctions *sannyāsa* is in fact making room, almost as a safety valve, for those who serve society best by 'being a friend to all'.

The discipline of the four stages is a discipline of growth, of progressive non-attachment. Even the householder, who may be supposed to be attached to his family and his possessions, needs to learn that the time will soon come when all these will have to be given up. The value put on detachment in the Indian tradition can also be seen as a determination not to be submerged by fact. Facticity was usually seen by Indian thinkers above all in the prevalence of suffering in the human condition. The Buddha began his meditation on the condition of man with what suddenly struck him as most crucial about this condition—the inevitability of the facts of old age, sickness and death. Was it out of a rare courage or forgetfulness that longevity was nevertheless regarded as good? Death was never regarded

as a bourn from which no traveller returned, for the soul would return again and again until all potencies had been worked out. The longer the life the more the opportunity to fulfill positive *karmas* and the less need for too many rebirths. Such may be the implicit motive behind this way of thinking. To phrase it like this is to see how the four *aśramas* are connected with the fourth *puruṣārtha*, *moksha*, to which we turn next.

If *dharma* means righteousness, *moksha* is usually translated as freedom or liberation. It might be useful at this point to compare the four *puruṣārthas* with Plato's distinction between *eikasis*, *pistis*, *dianoia* and *noesis*. Plato's is a noetic ladder of ascent where, so the Divided Line analogy tells us, there is a coherence between the first and the second and between the third and the fourth. The first two deal with the sensible world and the latter two with the intelligible world. Plato is very clear on the point that there is no route to *noesis* other than through *dianoia*.

Comparison with the *puruṣārthas* is suggestive. The bottom two are worldly. There is no route to the fourth other than via the third. But the progression is not a cognitive one. Moreover the highest term is not spoken of in terms of the good but rather incorporates the insight that freedom from the bondage of suffering is at first sight the highest state to which a human being can aspire. The metaphor of ascent in Plato is here paralleled by the metaphor of a journey within. Phenomenologically, no doubt, the triad of truth, beauty and goodness is not the same as the triad *satcitānanda* (truth, beauty and bliss). Both express in different ways how the ultimate was conceived by two remarkable, ancient cultures. The Platonic return to the cave resembles the Mahayana Buddhist position rather than the Vedantic one. And yet the Platonic and the Vedantic viewpoints show considerable similarity of insight in their quest for the transcendent and their conceiving of this as an ethico-metaphysical endeavour.

But whereas the shift from *dianoia* to *noesis* is a shift within the overarching framework of the intelligible, the transition from *dharma* to *moksha* seems more radical; this now has to be elucidated. Even though the word *dharmik* serves in common Indian usage for both 'righteous' and 'religious' (equating these almost in the Judaic manner), there is a tendency among scholars to stress that religion, strictly speaking, goes beyond the realm of morality into the realm of 'realization'. The nearest analogy to this position that I can think of would be regarding a 'holy will' in the Kantian sense as a realizable ideal for the human being. On Kant's view, of course, it is no such thing.

To proceed, we have already noticed that there is a profoundly ontological dimension about *dharma*. *Dharma* both is and ought to be. There is probably a similar tangle involved in discussions about value in some other systems of thought in that values qua ideals *are* in a paradigmatic sense. What is required, from our own human perspective is an actualization of them in the course of life. The trouble is that if the supreme value is seen as beyond good and evil (apart from the difficulty of giving a connotation to 'supreme' divorced from 'good'), as the concept of *moksha* has it, we are in the paradoxical position of lifting it out of the context of living altogether. Other problems include these: how to describe what is presumably beyond description: how to commend as a supreme terminus of the human quest what is supposed to be beyond the sphere of human judgement: and how to prescribe action in conformity with an ideal whose inner meaning connotes the very cessation of action, since all actions bind. The concept of *moksha* in Indian thought represents an extreme form of the urge to 'get away from fact'.

Hindu thought takes the web of human obligations to be, then, intricately structured indeed. A more person-centred philosophy makes room for the ebb and flow of activities

respecting others. The ancient Hindus retained what they regarded as the 'privilege' of opting out of these activities for exceptional individuals whose special gifts (and this included inclinations) allowed them to leave aside normal social duties before they had been through the traditional sequence of stages of life. The rest of humanity, however, was in a sense 'condemned not to be free.' or at least constantly reminded of the extent to which the world of getting and spending is ever with us. There was also a concept of *jivanmukti* (freedom within this life) which some systems made room for, but this was envisaged in terms of detachment rather than anything else.

The only route to *moksha* is through *dharma*, since freedom is seen, on this view, not as a presupposition of action but as the culmination of life. It requires a switch in thinking to be able to regard freedom as in opposition to responsibility – freedom being attained after responsibilities are over (on the extreme form of the theory as against the *jivanmukti* form). This shows how different the Indian treatment of freedom is from what we may be accustomed to in other philosophical traditions. It all springs from the conviction (or more properly, presuppositions for it does not seem to have been radically questioned except by the Carvakas and a few others whom orthodoxy probably suppressed) that the wheel of facticity must revolve and that it is possible for man to acquit himself creditably in the asceticism which ordinary living involves, but that the ultimate *desideratum* could be a state of being where empiricity would be completely overcome. There are branches of the Indian cluster of philosophies, Jainism and Hinayana Buddhism, where the highest value is placed on incorporeal existence, that is a state of being after the death of the body. Hinduism at least had the merit of including the possibility of liberation during one's lifetime. If one recasts the idea of detachment which goes along with this as a near Stoic refusal to be

overwhelmed by the devastating effect of circumstances, one perhaps comes close to what the concept might have meant in the lifeworld of a people who are distant in time and whose way of life has in large part to be reconstructed imaginatively. The theory of separate karmic lines prevented the Hindus from having an 'Atlas-complex' (seeing themselves as called upon to remedy the ills of the world). But the karma theory did not stand in the way of the Mahayana Buddhist's compassionate concern to alleviate the suffering of humanity.

*Dharma* and *moksha* in fact are concepts which cannot really be divorced from a host of other terms with which we cannot deal here. Among these the self, *karma*, *samsāra*, and *Brahman* are the most important. *Dharma* is a concept which has much bearing on the way in which the empirical self, which is particularistic, is distinguished from the Self seen in a transcendent manner, that is. as identical with ultimate reality or Brahman. Not all systems make this conflation. But the Vedantic way of thinking does, and it is this approach which has perhaps been philosophically the most influential in India to this day. *Karma* (which shares the root for the verb 'to do') is the law of action according to which whatever we do is retrospectively conditioned and prospectively determinative. It is not as cast-iron and deterministic a concept as it sounds, for it accommodates the presence of unfulfilled potencies which permit leeway for choice. If it were not so there would have been no place for the concept of *dharma* which is clearly concerned with what one ought to do. This part of the theory can well be compared, for example, with Sartre's tandem affirmation of facticity and freedom, of course just at the level of analogy. *Samsāra* refers to the ongoing course of change to which human beings are subject in a chain of births. It is a concept which in many ways takes the place of evil, for it is seen as something which is inexorable, terrifying and yet challenging

(if all of these are mutually compatible). *Dharma* is really the mitigating factor in a world governed by *samsāra*, but from which *moksha* or liberation was believed to be both desirable and possible. The ancient Hindus were deeply conscious of the binding force of actions in the sense that whatever we do affects both ourselves and others. This being 'condemned not to be free' at the empirical level is the form which finitude takes in Hindu thought. The causes of this condition are further spelled out in terms of factors such as cosmic ignorance and inordinate craving. The language varies. In any case it is taken for granted that man is destined for something else in spite of this vast cosmic trap, and this without benefit of a concept of an overriding Providence who has a design for each of His creatures.

It is this long-term prospect (which is the nearest to hope that one can get to in Hindu thinking) that poses a problem regarding the relation between *dharma* and *moksha*. If *moksha* is what is valued supremely, this seems to relegate *dharma* to what is to be finally transcended, and this looks very much like a philosophy of 'beyond good and evil' which would give us pause. We can move from this to certain other difficulties.

*Dharma*, as has been shown, is a cosmic principle of ontological status, a principal of individual growth (*svadharmā*, or one's own *dharma* which is not a matter of choice but of discovery), and a regulative principle in the face of our relations with others. The sources of *dharma* are not confined to philosophical and legal texts, but also include customs, the habits of good men and the conscience of the enlightened. The last of these sources is especially relevant in modern times, when reformist thinkers like Mahatma Gandhi have advocated a rethinking of *dharma* in order to bring about desirable changes in Hindu society. This is to say that the concept has been appealed to in recent times in order to justify change rather than to legitimate the *status*

*quo*. Purely secular thinkers however have doubted the wisdom of invoking a concept which on the whole has had conservative connotations and, in their view, is associated less with evaluating prevailing states of affairs than with perpetuating them.

To what extent is *dharma* concerned with adjustment to a life of bondage and to what extent does it take us beyond it? The answer may need to combine both alternatives. In this respect once more we have an analogy with other traditions which insist on the autonomy of the ethical and yet conceive it as a path to the spiritual (if this unexamined distinction can be pardoned). It certainly looks as if the concept of *moksha* takes us beyond the distinction of 'is' and 'ought' to being, but in the sense of being-beyond- good-and-evil. And yet the liberated man is often referred to as one in whom the *sattvik* (which can be variously translated as purity, goodness and the like) and *guṇa* (quality) prevails. Now the three *guṇas* (the other two being *rajas*, energy and *tamas*, inertia) operate at the empirical level. It should be mentioned, however, that this way of putting it is more characteristic of the Sankhya system than of any other. The 'realized soul' according to the *Upanishads*, is *guṇatīta* (beyond the *guṇas*). The matter of course, needs to be taken historically (never an easy thing to do in inquiring into Indian philosophy), noting the early connection of *dharma* with sacrifice in the Vedic era, the later less ritualistic ways of relating the temporal and the eternal, and its use as a ground for questioning norms and values. Although the etymological meaning of *dharma* is tied up with conservation<sup>4</sup>, insights into what needs to be conserved evolve as time goes on. This shows the fertility of a concept which, although avowedly referring to what transcends space and time (what is *sanātana* or eternal), yet requires human agency to manifest it. This can be restated something like this: the man of moral integrity articulates Being in his daily activities.



This I believe to be an important insight in the context of relating authenticity both to adjudication between possibilities and therein plumbing an ontological stratum which must be accessible to us in some sense, clouded though our vision must needs be. In other words, in Heideggerian terminology *dharma* (rather than the 'concept of dharma') straddles the ontological and the ontic.

The treatise which, to my mind, presents the whole question of the content of *dharma* in the most poignant way is the epic *Mahābhārata*. The *Bhagavad Gītā* which is part of this, links up the imperturbability of the *dhārmik* man with faith in God. An element of grace enters what is otherwise a rather Pelagian model. The argument of the *Gītā* passes over what would strike us today as a crucial matter, the role of individual conscience in situations where *prima facie* duties seem otherwise to be clearly indicated, and presents *bhakti* (devotion) as the route to freedom. The medieval *bhakti* cults, expectedly, had far less to say about *dharma* than say, Manu did. More illuminating in my view is the stance taken by Yudhishthira in the *Mahābhārata*, his realization that not only *adharma* (that which is contrary to *dharma*) brings sorrow, but so also does *dharma* itself. This is a deeply paradoxical insight for one who was said to be *dharmarāj* (the king of *dharma* or *dharma* incarnate) We reach here a central theme in all epic literature the apparent futility of human efforts, the devastation left behind after heroic deeds, the terrible solitude of the one who enters fully into the infinite extent of human suffering. The *Mahābhārata* is believed to describe events which took place around 1000 B.C. and was written somewhere between 200 B. C. and A. D. 400. The original was called *Jaya*, which means victory. Victory can be hollow and apparent failure can be heroic. And this is but one of the many layers of meaning that can be discovered in this striking work.

Another thing which the long history of the concept of

*dharma* seems to me to show is that the clogging effect of fact on human ethical endeavour arises less from the bondage imposed by the physical world than from the intractable nature of human institutions. Both the legalistic aspect of *dharma* and, its more general concern with the pattern of a life which is worth living brings out the intransigent character of those structures which man has made for himself. The structure of kingship and its responsibilities, familial obligations, and other societal frameworks, seem to get snarled up in such a fashion that the path of duty is alternately unclear, hazardous, or an even deeper insight, productive of catastrophes unintended by the agents. And yet the regulative function of *dharma* is inevitably mediated through institutions. An epoch and a generation which struggles to recast institutions is in a position to appreciate this. Even so, a modern critic will certainly react against the non-egalitarian bias of some of the attendant concepts, the idea of caste duties for example. The non-Hindu will find strange the notion of duties being performed with an eye to the merit believed to be built up thanks to proper performance. How was this concern for the accumulation of good *karmas* reconciled with the advocacy of disinterestedness? Was it a kind of *Weltschmerz* that gave rise to the stress on *moksha* by later Hindu thinkers?

Whereas *moksha* was a concept reserved for some of the philosophical systems it was the concept of *dharma* which retained its hold over popular thought and practice. Almost every innovator in social thinking in the modern era in India has appealed to *dharma* in the service of a critique of social factuality. Under the influence of various liberating tendencies in society, for example, it is often pronounced that caste is no longer associated with *dharma*. On the other hand, it is only fair to grant that *dharma* is also appealed to in defence of regressive positions.

In conclusion, to my mind the literature reveals not only

a *vérité de culture* but a *vérité de la condition humaine*. It takes the form of poignant grappling with the contrast between the facticity which enables and the facticity which embroils; the need for roots and the need for branches; the temptations to soar beyond the values embodied in everyday life and seek an empyrean beyond it. Here etymology is suggestive. The sphere of fire, the sun, was as potent a symbol for the ancient Hindus as it was for the Greeks. What beckons is a light which is blinding in its intensity. It is *tapasya* (the austerity which sears) which leads us in this direction. In the meantime we are tried in the refiner's fire—the daily round and common task—the realm of *dharma*.

## NOTES

1. Daya Krishna, *Social Philosophy: Past and Future*, Shimla. Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1969, pp. 12-13.
2. *Kama Sutra*, 1, 1.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Cf. Abel Bengaigne, *La religion Vedique d'après les hymnes du Rig-Veda*, III. Paris: 1963, p. 210.



This book comprises four lectures by the author which she was to deliver at IAS. These four lectures under the general title of *Circumstance and Dharma* include *Towards a Phenomenology of Cicumstance*; *The Concept of Commitment*; *The Concept of Multiple Allegiance*; and *The Concept of Dharma*.

The lectures reflect personal belief of the author that advanced research needs to focus on matters of direct importance to conditions in India today.

**Margaret Chatterjee** has been Chair in the Department of Philosophy, Delhi University, and Director, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. Her other assignments include a Professorship in Comparative Religion at Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, and Visiting Professorships at Drew and Calgary Universities. She has taught philosophy at Westminster College, Oxford, and Bryn Mawr, given the Teape Lectures at Cambridge, and been Lady Davis Visiting Professor at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. Formerly President of the International Society for Metaphysics, she has published widely in the fields of philosophy and religious studies, having at one time been Spalding Visiting Fellow in Indian Philosophy and Religion at Wolfson College, Oxford. Her recent publications include *Studies in Modern Jewish and Hindu Thought* (Macmillan, London, 1997), *Hinterlands Horizons* (Lexington Books, Md, 2002), and *Lifeworlds, Philosophy and India Today* (IIAS, Shimla, 2005).

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Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla - 171 005  
Tel: 0177-2830006, 2831375  
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