

SARVEPALLI RADHAKRISHNAN

A CENTENARY TRIBUTE

What a privilege this day to pay tribute to the memory of our great
Philosopher-Statesman, Visvamanava, Lokacharya, Bharataratna, Rashtrapati
Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan! And a tribute to my land and culture which gave
birth to such a person a hundred years ago!

If today I had to choose five great Indians who together represent the
leadership of the New India which emerged from the colonial impact of
Western civilisation in the middle of this ^{ury} century, whom would I name? I
look at it from a world perspective, and I come out with five names -
Mohandas Karam chand Gandhi, the ^{ai} Vaisya from West India who was the ^{Spirit and soul of India} most
Western of them all; Sri Aurobindo, the Kayash ^t from Bengal who settled down
in the South; and finally the most faithful Brahmin from the South itself -
Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan.

All five were noble fruits of the great Indian heritage; all five reacted to
and learned from the traumatic Western colonial-cultural impact.

I wish I could have included two or three great Indian women in that group
of five. I find it difficult to put Sarojini Naidu or Indira Gandhi at that
level. I wish I could find an Adivasi, or a Dalit or a Jain or a Buddhist
or a Christian or a Sikh to put at that level. I can think of Ambedkar and
Jagjivan Ram, Rajendra Prasad and Jai Prakash Narain, Maulana Azad and Zakir
Hussein, Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, and E. V. Ramanswami Naicker; Ramana
Maharshi and Vinoba Bhave, and many others but I cannot put them on the same
level, especially if I envisage the New India which reacted to the western
world, and also if we take into account how the world sees India. That is
the way India has been for some time - three Brahmins, one Kayasth and one
Vaisya, all Hindus, towering over others.

*Rabindranath Tagore, the Brahmin philosopher-poet
from East India; Jawaharlal Nehru, the Brahmin
from West India who was*

It is a pity that many among our so-called secular elite regard Nehru alone as the representative image of India. In many ways he was the most characteristic modern Indian but also the least Indian of them all, in his mind very much a faithful son of the liberal west. The other four represent the true religious genius of India in its great pluriformity. Of the five, Radhakrishnan alone was a true Brahmin, Nehru and Tagore having abjured the practice of the Brahmin tradition. I have not included Ramana Maharshi among the five, mainly because his interaction with Western culture was quite limited.

The danger in conceiving Jawaharlal Nehru as the representative image of India is obvious. He stood, at least in his speeches, for a "clean break with the past". Ramana thus marks the opposite pole to Nehru. For Nehru, to progress was to go with the West. It is so today for many of our elite. Our prime minister Rajiv Gandhi has only lately been seized of the need to hold on to our heritage in hastening on to the "technological civilisation of the 21st century".

It is that Indian heritage which Nehru often ignored, to which Radhakrishnan held a torch and made it visible to the world. From his Spalding Chair of Eastern Religions at Oxford, and through his writings he made the Hindu heritage (which of course is but part, though substantial part, of the Indian heritage), understandable to the educated elite in the West. His ascetic and noble personality, his keen and sharp intellect, his unusual capacity for felicitous turns of the English phrase, and his compassionate care for the whole human race, touched the hearts and minds of many - particularly in the English-speaking world. What came through was always the universal humanity of a great Indian soul.

He was a great Lokācharya. His commentaries on the Prasthanathrayi - the Upanishads, the Gita and the Brahmasutras - are replete with insight and illumination. But what has always drawn me to Radhakrishnan was my observation that unlike many of the two or three hundred academic professors of Indian philosophy today, he practised much of what he preached. Radhakrishnan was a bhakta but not a bhakti yōgi; he was a great jñāni, but did not espouse or counsel jñānayōga as the exclusive path. He was in fact a true karmayōgi, while being at the same time a great man of ideas. Today, the world looks for such noble spirits - among the political leaders and religious acharyas in every country - but ^{also} ~~also~~ how little ^{one} ~~they~~ actually finds in either group!

Among his many ideas, there are three that I would like to highlight on this occasion - first, the idea of the Fellowship of Faiths. It looks like an idea whose time has come. In about five years we should be celebrating the centenary of the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, where Swami Vivekananda threw out that challenge of the unity of all religions. Our world today is in birth-pangs, in agony striving to give birth to the new. The world-soul is waiting to be born, as Radhakrishnan put it fifty years ago. The time and the place is here now.

We should now move beyond our narrow religious and national parochialisms if that new world-soul is to be born. If a second world parliament of religions is to be held at the threshold of the 21st century in 1993, it cannot be an occasion for religions to advertise themselves, or for one religion to propose itself as the uniter of all religions. It should be a parliament to ponder two insistent demands of the hour - a) for deeper levels of meaning and fulfilment in human life, both personal and social, and b) for a comprehensive global self-awareness for all humanity in all nations - leading to justice and human dignity for all, to the abolition of war and of the habit of settling disputes by force, and to the caring for that delicate balance that sustains life called the biosphere.

The need for deeper levels of meaning and fulfilment is a global phenomenon, felt by many. Whether rich or poor, whether heavily armed or incurably corrupt, we all need to get to that discipline of inner life and of social life that will deliver us from the humdrum monotony of a pointless pursuit of soul-killing affluence and undelayed gratification, as well as from poverty, indignity and injustice. A World Parliament of Religions should discuss the various disciplines in the various religions, the Ṇidhidhyāsa or the Yōgāchara, the upasana that leads to vision, enlightenment and fulfilment. We can have a little bit of theology and philosophy - which in moderate doses usually can not do much damage. But what we really need is a way, a path, a course of exercises, a technology for the spiritual life, for social and personal self-discipline, for overcoming the tamas within us as individuals and as societies. Only religion can do this. And humanity desperately needs good religion.

¶ We equally need to broaden our horizons beyond national boundaries, and to make our 'we' as inclusive as possible - all nations, all people, all humanity. We are one humanity, but we are hardly aware of that fact. We are one with the natural environment on which we depend for our biological life. We need to become aware not only of our belonging to this global humanity and its global environment; we need also to see the alienating structures in the global political economy and in cultural and academic life in every nation. As religious groups decide to take a lead in the struggle against corruption, injustice and inhumanity in human relations at personal, inter-communal and international levels, religion will become a source of light and joy, of peace and justice, not of darkness and despair, not of conservatism and communalism.

¶ The time is now. And the place is here, in India. Not in the Western world which has only recently come to experience the rich variety of global religion and which sees it sometimes as a threat. Here in this land of ours where our navaratnās or navadharmās - the nine religions, live together in fruitful co-existence, despite provocations by interested groups, is the place for such a parliament - not in Chicago or Moscow, not in Tokyo or Nairobi. Of the nine religions of India - five are indigenous, four are West Asian. The five born in this land are 1) Adidharma, the primal pre-vedic pre-Aryan vision that once moved our ancestors before the Aryan invasions, and which still moves our Girijans, Dalits and Adi-dravidas as well as others, i.e. Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Buddhists, Christians and Sikhs, at the deepest level of our being; 2) the Great Sanātana-dharma, Vedic, Upanishadic, and post-Buddhist; 3) the equally great 'secular' Buddhadharma with its largely unexplored wealth of philosophical, logical and practical thought and experience; 4) the ascetic, ahimsa-based, life-respecting Jainatīrtha and 5) the last flower of Indian religion - the Khalsa of the Granth Saheb. The four west Asian religions to which this land has extended hospitality and given shelter for centuries - the religions of Zoroaster, Moses, Jesus and Mohammed. India the home of the nine faiths, can also be home to other religions - the Tao and the Shinto, the Primal Vision of the sub-sahara Africans and the Native Americans, of the Eskimos and the Maoris and many others besides.

But we in this land of the navadharmā seeking to bring world religions together for a "fellowship of faiths" has to be warned of two dangers. We Indians are great in organizing melas, even loan melas; but a sarva-dharma-mela, a festival of all faiths, can too easily become a mere mela and have no impact on the life of the world. On the one hand ^{the mela} ~~it~~ must celebrate, cerebrate and communicate our fundamental unity. But it must also confront our real disunity. It is so easy to say that all religions are at the bottom one. Easy to say, but as far as I can see, simply not true. To say that Sankara and Mohammed say the same thing can be characterized only as lazy. If a Hindu scholar really believes it, I should think that once he has read Mohammed, he has no need to read Sankara, since after all they say the same thing. We should not be lazy in making such unthought-out statements, even if we may have great authorities behind us. A Sarva-dharma-mēla must provide opportunities for examining all existing religious conflicts - especially the Hindu-Muslim, Hindu-Sikh and on the international scale, Muslim-Christian, Hindu-Christian, Buddhist-Hindu, Jewish-Muslim and other conflicts. The best contribution such a World Parliament of Religions with a Sarva-dharma-mela can make is in providing opportunities for small groups of leaders of conflicting religious communities to face each other and talk to each other in a spirit of honesty, humility, concord and amity. The first danger we have to guard against would be a lazy and unrealistic, and I may say insincere, being 'nice' to each other.

The other danger lies in bringing representatives of the 4000 million religious people of the world forgetting the other 1000 million who regard themselves as secular or non-religious. The success of a World Parliament of Religions would depend upon its capacity to comprehend all humanity - including those who despise or oppose religion. Our purpose is to pave the way to create a new world community of nations and cultures, in which communities which profess any religion or no religion can live together as members of one family. I am sure that Radhakrishnan, who regarded militant atheism more human than certain militant religions, could not have wished otherwise.

I hope his idea of a World Fellowship of Faiths will become real a few years before the centenary of the Chicago Parliament of Religions in 1993.

The second major idea of the great Philosopher Statesman and Lokācharya was the revision of traditional Vedānta in order to take the Vyāvahārika level of reality more seriously than in the past. He enunciated many of its principles - ^{l.g.} as dharma ^{or} social discipline and lokasamgraha ^a as world-ordering. In his UNESCO speech on Triumph of Man's Mind he argued for a world without war and rivalry, without national parochialism, without corporate pride and envy. We need to bring some order to the quarrelling world of nations and cultures and religions and anti-religions, where nations and religions and races and cultures hate and despise, distrust and fear each other. A uniting orderliness is what Radhakrishnan called for - lokasamgraha as bringing the world under human control, not conquering and dominating it, but re-orienting human nature in such a way that the world truly becomes the body of humanity as a single rich and diverse reality.

For Radhakrishnan as for Sri Aurobindo, the principle that makes Neo-Vedanta distinct from traditional Sankarite Advaita is the concept of devolution. In his most humanist lecture on The World's Unborn Soul, his own Inaugural Lecture at the University of Oxford (October 20, 1936), which now forms the first chapter of his Eastern Religions and Western Thought, he put it this way:

"when a man apprehends the supreme being, returns to the concrete, and controls his life in the light of its truth, he is a complete man ...personal life is not to be repressed in order to gain the end of religion. It is to be recreated and purified in the light of the higher truth. He in whom the spark of spirit glows, grows into a new man, the man of God, the transfigured person ... He works in the world with the faith that life in its pure quality is always noble and beautiful and only its frustration evil"¹

This is the same basic idea of Sri Aurobindo, expressed there in more metaphysical terms, of the upward evolution of the soul into super-mind and then its downward devolution in the supermind into the world in order to transform it.

Radhakrishnan's neo-Vedanta may not be as metaphysical as that of Sri Aurobindo, but it is perhaps more dialectical and more related to current social realities. He realized that the Sanātanadharmā has to be reinterpreted if it has to make sense in post-Islamic-invasion, post-European-colonial India. Radhakrishnan admired Raja Ram Mohan Roy, (1772-1832), whom he recognized as "the first Indian to realize the fundamental unity of spirit in the Hindu, Muslim and Christian religions"²

Radhakrishnan's Neo-Vedanta is eschatological. He believed in the coming Kingdom of God. This is an aspect which Neo-Vedanta will need to clarify as it goes on developing. The "coming age" of fulfilment can be conceived only on the basis of a scheme of understanding that relates the vyāvahārika to the paramārthika, so that the latter is reflected in the former, ^{to be} undergirded by it and nourished by it. Neo-Vedanta has to find a better grounding, ontologically, for the historical and the social. Radhakrishnan could see that the Jiva does not exist without the jada, the soul without the body. But he did not work out, as far as I know, a metaphysical-ontological basis for the body politic, for social formation, for time and history in relation to the eternal. This is a task which he has left ^{to} us to complete.

Radhakrishnan assimilated many ideas of western liberal humanism, the Christian concept of the eschatological or coming Kingdom of God, and the positive values of modern scientific-technological civilisation, into his thought, seeking to integrate them. But he did not work out a consistent epistemology or ontology on the basis of which he could create a philosophically coherent Neo-Vedanta. That is a task for Hindu philosophers today. They will have to pay attention to the foundations in the Indian tradition for the priority Radhakrishnan gives to persons, and the doubtful logical-metaphysical basis for the distinction he makes between the material and the spiritual.

The third contribution of Radhakrishnan that I want to highlight is his more generous assessment of the Indian heritage. He always included in that heritage Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism as well as comparatively modern Hindu thinkers like Ram Mohan Roy, Ramakrishna, Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi - all of whom he calls "ecumenical men" or viśvamānava, a title which today I would give to Radhakrishnan himself.

But what makes the minorities insecure in our country today is the tendency to identify Indian identity with Hindu identity. And Radhakrishnan's definition of a Hindu is as follows:

"A Hindu, for our purposes, is one who adopts in his life and conduct any of the religious traditions developed in India on the basis of the Vedas. Not only those who are born of Hindu parents, but those who trace Hindu ancestry on either side and do not belong to Islam or Christianity, are Hindus"³

Now where does that leave Sikhs, Jews, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Jains, Bahais, Dalits and Tribals? Unless Hinduism acknowledges itself to be only one of the nine religions of India, and gives up the claim of being the religion of India, its claims to being all-inclusive can be seen by the rest of us only as a totalitarian and undemocratic claim. What is the logic of insisting that religions born in a land have greater rights than religions which have come from outside? Would you accept the same principle in say, Thailand or Sri Lanka, where Buddhism and Hinduism are both imported from the outside? Can the principle be applied to Europe or America?

Radhakrishnan, with all his nobility of soul, could not quite rise above this parochialism of the majority community in our country. His treatment of Buddhism and Jainism sounds quite supercilious and somewhat patronising. He could hardly justify the freedom of a human being to be converted to the religion of his choice, but he fervently justified the reconversion to Hinduism of Hindus who had embraced other religions by choice or force.

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If the hundred million Muslims, twenty-five million Christians, twenty million Sikhs, as well as the millions of dalits and tribals in our country are to feel secure in their Indian identity which they want to affirm as distinct from Hindu identity, there has to be a genuine reform movement in Hinduism which helps it to be more respectful and democratic towards non-Hindus in this country. In principle Radhakrishnan as a Viśvamānava would have agreed with this view. He wanted upanayana to be given to all Hindus - whether Brahmin or non-Brahmin⁴.

Our majority community has not always been willing to acknowledge the fact that much of what we regard today as Hindu came from outside India - with the Aryan invasions, with the immigration of Śakas and others from Central Asia, with the astronomy and mathematics we received from the Sumerians and Chaldeans, with the stimulation we received from the European Yavanas in the 4th century BC (Alexander's invasion) and in the Bactrian Greek Kingdoms in India of Demetrius and Menander, with the middle Eastern immigrations of Jews, Christians and Muslims from the first century to the 20th, with the Tibetan and Chinese help by which we have rediscovered the Buddhist scriptures which had been destroyed by the Hindus - the list can be very long. I think enough has been said on a very sensitive point. To say more would be to step on the toes of my friends. Radhakrishnan would not have approved that. He was a viśvamānava and wanted all of us to be visvamanavas.

It is to this great viśvamānava of India whose birth centenary we celebrate this year, I pay this humble and I hope honest tribute.

Notes :

1. Radhakrishnan Reader, Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan, Bombay, 1969, pp. 409-410, italics added.
2. Fellowship of The Spirit: VIII. Radhakrishnan Reader. p.459.
3. Hindu Dharma, Radhakrishnan Reader. p.202.
4. Hindu Dharma Radhakrishnan Reader, p.201.