Perspectives

Does Hinduism Lack Social Concern?

Though secular institutions and the state have emerged as major agents of social concern and development, it is still useful to highlight the humanist role of religion in these areas. By stressing humanism and social concern as the core of religion, parochial tendencies that could lead to violence may be checked. How far does Hinduism have social concerns? This issue is examined in this article both at the level of theory or doctrine and actual practice.

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I
Religion and Social Concern

Religion is difficult to define. Belief in god as a defining criterion of religion cannot hold, since it fails in cases like Buddhism and Jainism. The central idea in religion then turns out to be a path to salvation or liberation – a path usually taken in an institutionalised setting, aided by scriptures. As all religions agree, such a path cannot be found unless the interested person first takes the path of moral integrity. But the path of morality has no meaning without compassion and social concern – concern for social problems like poverty, hunger, deprivation, social discrimination and injustice including injustice to women, exploitation, illness and illiteracy. In short, acceptance of the path of morality has very much to do with acceptance of the dignity of all human beings, peace, humanism and even civic sense, and also a sense of personal responsibility towards them.

However, there has been serious scepticism about the social concern of religion. In his *Discovery of India*, Nehru observed: "The belief in a supernatural agency which ordains everything has led to a certain irresponsibility on the social plane" (1981: 511). It is ironical that in a book on history, Nehru should have undermined the historical role of religion in expressing and dealing with social concerns. But his observation is understandable, as most

books on religion have devoted only marginal attention to this dimension, with purely theological and metaphysical concerns occupying major attention. Nehru had another point too. He wanted to emphasise the role of the state in social development, rather than leaving it to the undependable and parochial care of private charity. He was right on this, no doubt, but leaving social concerns entirely to state care can also lead to a "certain irresponsibility on the social plane" as Nehru put it. This can be a serious issue, especially if state funds are inadequate and state initiatives in social development are marred by dishonesty, pilferage and sheer inefficiency.

There can, of course, exist social concern among private individuals and organisations, which are not inspired by religion. One need not believe in a personal god or follow an organised religion, and yet be good, compassionate, humane and socially-sensitive. But such a purely secular concern is confined to a small – though perhaps, also a growing – section of people, hardly adequate to make enough of an impact. The large mass of people are still influenced and motivated by religion, whether one likes it or not. Historically, religion has shown enough evidence of having rich potential for motivating and inspiring social concern, which can be used to supplement the efforts of both the state and secular humanist institutions in social development. It would also help in strengthening humanism in religion, as against parochial concerns leading to violence.

In a multi-religious polity such as in India, religion has played an important role in indicating identity [Jayaram 2004: 138]. But this has hardly come in the way of religion showing social concern. It may even create welcome competition among religions in providing social service. Communities, defined in terms of religions or caste identity have acted as clubs for mutual help among members, apart from their role as a lobby group to get benefits from the state.

As a matter of fact, every religion has shown social concern. Christianity, for example, preached the principle of "Love Thy Neighbour", following it up through a vast network of social service, healthcare and education throughout the world. Islam made it obligatory on the part of the wealthy among its followers to donate a fixed proportion of their income as zakat, the proceeds of which go to help the poor. Buddhism and Jainism made compassion a basic tenet of their religion, from which social concern followed directly and logically. In India, the charity of Jains is not confined only to members of the same religion. It has, however, ensured that no Jain boy or girl goes without education, and no Jain family goes without healthcare, shelter and even old-age security. A similar concern can be seen also among Parsees, Jat Sikhs, Syrian Christians, Bohras, Agakhanis and Khoja Muslims in India. Poverty, hunger and deprivation are practically non-existent or very low among these minority communities. The members of these religions have shown through their self-effort that being a minority religion in India was no liability.

What then about Hinduism? The bulk of the poor in India suffering from hunger, illiteracy and other forms of deprivation are Hindus. The question is: Is Hinduism also socially concerned, socially-sensitive? This paper probes this question at two levels: theory or doctrine and practice. Hinduism is selected here, both because I am more knowledgeable about Hinduism and also because Hinduism has been often attacked for social insensitivity due to the caste system and its alleged "other-worldly" orientation. Max Weber (1958) and K W Kapp (1963) were particularly bothered by the concepts of 'maayaa' and 'karma', which they felt, introduced fatalism and indifference

to human responsibility for social and economic betterment.

I
Social Concern of Hinduism in Theory

I will not dwell much on these criticisms here, since I have shown elsewhere why the caste system, being basically an institutionalisation of economic interdependence in society, had developed in India due to factors that had nothing to do with religion and why the caste system is not intrinsic to Hinduism as a religion [Nadkarni 2006:76-129]. The "otherworldliness" of Hinduism is often attributed to regarding the world as maayaa in Shankara's philosophy. But in his philosophy, maayaa only means our tendency to miss the basic reality, 'Parabrahma', mistaking it to be the phenomenal world, and does not involve ignoring our duties in this world. Some others take maayaa to mean the creative power of god. Yet, others take it as our tendency to get bogged down in selfish sensual pleasures to the detriment of achieving our more noble ultimate goals. None of this means that the world is false and that we have no responsibility in it. In any case, it is a serious misunderstanding to call Hinduism as world-and-life denying or fatalistic (ibid: 28-32, 53-56). There is nothing in the basic nature of Hinduism preventing it from social concern. But this is a negative defence. Is there any positive side of its social commitment?

I will first examine doctrines or theories of Hinduism as seen from its scriptures and preachings of its acknowledged sants. Though there are tensions between precept and practice in every religion, no religious belief system would have any strength unless followed in practice to a significant extent. I will, therefore, probe into the practice of social commitment on the part of Hinduism or in Hindu society, in the next section.

Interestingly, Hindu ethics can be considered as secular in the sense that it does not require a fierce, monitoring god. The monitoring is taken care of by the Law of Karma operating automatically. It is essentially a moral law, intended to motivate social responsibility. The law does not mean destiny or fate. It simply means that, whatever I do has consequences not only for others, but also for me. I reap what I sow. But does a belief in the Law of Karma produce an indifference to social concern?

No. If I see a person in pain and do nothing to alleviate her pain believing it to be her karma, I incur the bad karma of losing an opportunity of helping and failing in my moral duty or 'dharma'. I should help as my duty and leave the result to the person's karma. Hindu scriptures are clear that our good deeds do count for the Law of Karma as 'punya', and a good deed means acceptance of social responsibility.

Simultaneously, another philosophical justification for ethics of social concern was also established before the end of the classical phase of Hinduism, i e, before the onset of the medieval age. This philosophy is based on the concept of god who is not only transcendental, but also immanent in the world. This makes all life sacred. Particularly, humanity is a manifestation of 'chit' (consciousness or intelligence implying free will) aspect of god, in addition to 'sat' (existence) and 'aananda' (happiness, bliss) shared by other beings as well. However, all life is to be respected, and in the Hindu epics and puranas, even animals are attributed with chit. The human body is especially considered the abode of god, as reflected in the verse – *Deho devaalayah proktah dehee devo Niranjanah* (the body is a temple and its dweller is no less than god – the one who is free from all blemish). Serving only one's own self on this basis amounts to hypocrisy and selfishness, but serving others especially the needy is serving god, since he is 'antaryaami' who dwells within us all. God is 'patita-paavan' (redeemer of the fallen) and 'deen-bandhu' (brother of the meek). He seems to prefer acting through humans.

Social commitment comes under dharma, an entirely ethical concept constituting the core of Hinduism. Its essence is moral duty. Dharma connotes rules of ethical conduct which ensure security and welfare of all. The emphasis here is not just on doctrine ('vichaara'), but on practice ('aachaara') – one's actual conduct according to dharma. Practice of dharma does not mean observance of rituals, but living a life of truth, non-violence, compassion and equal regard for others and their welfare, reflected in selfless service to society. A key verse relevant here is from Bhagavad-gita (the Gita henceforth): "He who judges pleasure and pain in others by same standard as he applies to himself, that 'yogi' is the highest" (chapter 6, verse 32). If I have a right to enjoy, I should not forget that others too have the same right. If I do not like to be exploited and harassed, I should not forget that others too do not

like it. That is basic dharma. This verse constitutes a forceful call for equality and social justice. The highest dharma is considered to be non-violence ('ahimsaa paramo dharmah') in a wider sense. It is not just non-killing, not even mere tolerance, but more. It is compassion, forgiveness, selfless help, peace and harmony. The Gita gives a long list of ethical values to be cherished and practised (10: 4 and 5; 12: 13 and 14; 16: 1-3).

A distinction is made in Hinduism between 'saamaanya dharma' and 'svadharma'. The former is basic, common to all. The second is relative and includes inter alia, 'varna-dharma', specific to occupations or calling (nothing to do with caste, derived from birth). The status of the second type of dharma is regarded as subordinate to the first, and if there is a conflict between the two, the former prevails. If there is a conflict between different values within the former, leading to a moral dilemma, *Mahabharata* suggests a solution, *Yadbhootahit-amatyantam etat satyam matam mama*. ("what is ultimately good for the welfare of all beings is what I consider as Truth") (Shanti Parva 329-13). Thus the ultimate test of what is moral is what promotes the welfare of all (not the welfare of the decision-maker alone). The earnest prayer everyday is *sarveshcha sukhinah santu, sarve santu niraamayaah, sarve bhadrani pashyantu, maa kaschit dukhamaapnuyaat* ("let all be happy, let all be free from illness, let all find security, may no one face sorrow"). The stress is on 'sarve' – all. The Gita calls upon all, not just to mutter such prayers, but to actually act selflessly.

Freedom is valued in a wide sense and is prayed for not merely for one's own self, but for the whole group or community, as reflected in a verse from *Rigveda* (VIII 68.12). The prayer is: "Give freedom ('uru') to our body; give freedom in our dwelling; give freedom in our life".[1] The prayer is not for 'moksha' or liberation from the cycle of births and deaths. It is for freedom in this very world, including freedom from deprivation.

Mahabharata subordinates what is traditionally regarded as the ultimate goal, viz, moksha, to dharma of compassion:

Naaham Kaamaye raajyam
na svargm na chaapunarbhavam /
praaninaam dukkhataptaanaam
kaamaye dukkhanaashanam //

("I desire no kingdom, no heaven, not even moksha for myself; I desire only

that beings afflicted by sorrow be relieved of it".)

Liberation here is the liberation from suffering and sorrow of others, not of one's own self.

The same sentiment comes out strongly in a 'subhaashita': "The one who declares those who are oppressed and harassed as his own (and helps them), he is to regarded as the real saint; it is here that god is to be seen".[2] The well known sant, Narsi Mehta, reflects the same in his famous song, which was Gandhi's favourite "Call that one a true Vaishnava who feels the suffering of others, who seeks to relieve others' pain and has no pride in his soul".[3]

Compassion and help to others in need is a highly cherished value in Hinduism right from the Vedic phase. 'Daan' (charity) was recognised as the most potent way of earning punya (merit qualifying entry to heaven). The call to help others and not be selfish comes out clearly and loudly from the following verse in *Rigveda* (X 117.6).

Mogham annam vindate aprachetah satyam braveemi vadha itsa tasya/ naaryamanam pushyati yo sakhaayam kevalaagho bhavati kevalaadi//

It means: "The person who has no concern (for others) earns his food in vain. I tell you the truth – it is as good as his death. He, who feeds neither the good and the learned nor a friend and eats all by himself, only sins all by himself".

We are familiar with the proverb, "A friend in need is friend indeed". *Rigveda* (X 117.4) says almost the same thing: "*Na sakhaa yo na dadaati sakhye sachaa bhuve sachamaanaaya pitvah*" (A person is no friend, if he does not help the needy, but one who helps is a real friend.) *Padma-puranam* declares, "those who always feed the crippled, the blind, children, the old, the ill, those helpless and pinched by penury, will enjoy bliss in heaven; there is no end to the punya accumulated by constructing wells and tanks, where aquatic animals and those moving on land drink water when they desire, for life is centred on water".[4] The Gita not only values generosity and charity, but also adds that it has to be without any contempt towards the beneficiary. A gift, given with contempt to the receiver, is 'taamasik' for the Gita. It is much lower in status than the selfless gift given with humility, considered as 'saatvik'. The poor are to be regarded in Hinduism as 'Daridra Naraayana' (those among whom god is present), who should be served with respect and love.

The Gita provides guidance for day-to-day living, and throws no hint that the mundane world is unreal and unworthy of serious attention just because it is perishable. The Gita was a revolutionary text in several respects and strengthened social concern. It turned the concept of Karma as ritualistic practices during the Vedic phase, into selfless service to 'loka', the people. The concept of Karma-yoga as action without selfish attachment, for 'loka-sangraha' (maintenance or nourishment of this world) or plainly 'loka-hita' (welfare of people), forms a basic guiding principle of the Gita. The Gita similarly turned the earlier concept of 'yajna', as ritualistic offering of food in sacrificial fire or even animal sacrifice, into sharing with others what one has. The philosophy is that we have received everything that sustains us from god, and we repay our debt to god through yajna, by sharing with others what we have with us – be it food, wealth, knowledge, or simply labour or work. The word, 'shram-daan', may have been recently coined, but its basis is found in the Gita. The Gita also preached equality and declared that 'varna' is not based on 'jaati' (birth) but on one's aptitude or calling. What is more, the Gita's emphasis on Bhakti laid the basis for the subsequent democratisation of Hinduism during the medieval age. Though origins of Bhakti can be traced to Rigveda itself, Gita formally recognised Bhakti as a valid path of god realisation, along with 'jnaana' (knowledge) and karma (selfless work). The significance of Bhakti was that unlike jnaana and karma, it could be practised by all, lowest of the low, meekest of the meek. At one stroke, Bhakti took the poor and the deprived within its scope, and was instrumental in broad-basing Hinduism. The first rendering of the Gita along with explanation appeared in a spoken language of people, Marathi, only during the 13th century. It was by Jnaneshwar (1271-96) in Maharashtra. This made the Gita even more popular, and made people take interest in the original too. It was this work which spurred the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra.

Much earlier to Jnaneshwar, Bhakti movements were started in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. Tamil Nadu, in fact, had its own text – *Thirukkural* believed to be written in the early part of the first millennium. Like the Gita, *Thirukkural* laid emphasis on compassion to all, helpful nature, humanism, truthfulness, hospitality and so on. It deplored caste distinctions.

Thirukkural was in Tamil, people's own spoken language. It was no surprise that the Bhakti movement started first in Tamil Nadu around sixth century CE, much before it spread to the rest of the country. The Bhakti sants composed their songs in people's local languages only, rather than in Sanskrit, and yet the Bhakti movements spread with remarkable speed from one region to another in India. The sants came from all castes including the untouchables and women too. Bhakti movements attempted to democratise the Hindu society as never before, and, encouraged even the lowest of the low dared to protest against various social evils including oppression of women and the hegemony of upper castes.[5]

The Bhakti movements could not, however, end the caste system. It continued because the economic conditions responsible for its emergence, also continued, as Srinivas (2003) pointed out. Poverty aggravated during the British period, thanks to the decline of indigenous handicrafts and industry, and enhancement of revenue assessment, which broke the back of peasantry. Ironically, with the entry of the British, a modern power, a premodern feudal structure was firmly established and strengthened during the British period. The caste inequalities further aggravated.[6] The situation could not but have greatly widened the divergence between the human values preached in the scriptures and actual working of the Hindu society, which has been taking long to correct. The social conditions posed a great challenge to leading thinkers and reformers in Hinduism during the modern period, which they took up with remarkable alacrity and reach.

Right from Raja Rammohun Roy (1772-1833) to Mata Amritanandamayi (1953), leaders of Hinduism have put social reform and social service as uppermost among their priorities. Swami Vivekanand (1863-1902) was typical in reflecting this mood. He asserted, "It is an insult to starving people to offer them religion; it is an insult to a starving man to teach him metaphysics".[7] As Jones observed, "The Ramakrishna Math and Mission, with its system of hospitals and dispensaries, and its extensive relief projects, added to Hinduism a dogma of social service and a successful programme based on that dogma" [Jones 1989: 216]. The values of modern age since Renaissance in Europe – humanism, equality, equal regard for women and women's emancipation,

uplift of the hitherto deprived, equality before law, secular education, liberty and human rights – received unanimous acceptance and support of reformers and leaders of modern Hinduism. Interestingly, this meant no rejection of Hinduism, but only rediscovery of its human values. But how much of it actually was, or at least was tried to be, put in to practice? How far did they succeed? This takes us to the next section.

III
Social Concern of Hinduism in Practice

Social concern as evidenced in practice can be assessed at three levels (a) as reflected in codification in law books; (b) as reflected in the day-to-day behaviour of people; and (c) as reflected in institutions.[8]

The Hindu society and polity were, by and large, supposedly governed by texts called shastras, especially *Manusmriti* (MS) and Kautilya's *Arthashastra* (AS).[9] They were intended to serve as law books, but as guidelines, not ironclad rules. On the whole, shastras tried to impart authenticity to the oppressive caste system and subordination of women, irrespective of what the Vedas, Upanishads and the Gita said on these issues. Upper caste dominance and patriarchal values proved to be too strong for even these holy scriptures, and probably created most of the divergence between doctrinal humanism and what was in fact practised. The shastras merely reflected it. However, shastras themselves conceded that wherever there was a conflict between them and the scriptures, the latter prevailed. Moreover, shastras were many and there was no unanimity among them. Stringent and at times inhuman punishment in one shastra did not tally with lighter punishment for the same offence in another shastra. This meant not only greater discretion on the part of authorities or courts, but also that no single shastra could be followed literally in exclusion. It also meant that provisions in shastras were no reliable pointers to actual practice. Customs mattered more than the shastras. Even customs were flouted on numerous occasions. For example, in spite of provisions against it, social mobility was not uncommon [Nadkarni 2006: 84-86]. Though asceticism was denied to shudras, "there is ample historical evidence to show that shudras and low caste people in general did become ascetics and their ascetic status was recognised by civil authority" [Olivelle

1993: 194]. Nevertheless, shastras had influence as law books even up to the British rule.

Despite commitment to the caste system and patriarchy, the shastras were not totally devoid of social concern and sense of fairness and justice. Actually, they were supposed to ensure them. For example, both *MS* and *AS* emphasise good governance, promoting the welfare of people. The former warns the king to guard against officers exploiting or harassing people, and asks him to confiscate their property and even banish those who illegally take money and property of people (I. 111 and 112). *Naarada Smriti* enjoins upon kings not to discriminate between believers (in Vedas) and those who do not believe, but be fair to all in providing protection.[10] Similarly, *MS* says that king shall not leave the guilty unpunished, be it his friend, relative or priest. *AS* lays down the guiding principle for kings – "In the happiness of people lies the king's own happiness, in their welfare his welfare; he should follow what promotes peoples' welfare, and not just what pleases him" (I 19.34). *AS* envisages a (pre-modern) welfare state where public services and infrastructure are provided by the king; and the rights of women, consumers, borrowers, wage earners, patients and even prisoners, are ensured and unfairness avoided. While business and industry were encouraged, earning wealth had to be subject to dharma and unfair dealings banned.

Though *MS* is generally condemned as anti-women, an observation therein became famous as quite favourable to women: "where women are respected, gods are pleased; where they are not, no sacred rites will yield rewards; where female relations live in grief, the family wholly perishes; but where they are happy the family always would prosper" (*MS* III 57 and 58). A person, casting baseless aspersion on a woman, was to be fined heavily (VIII 225). According to both *AS* and *MS*, destitute women were to be given special attention by the king and were to be helped with raw material for handicrafts or given other help. Such of those women who were disabled from going out, had to be provided with help at their doorstep. The wife has an absolute right of maintenance against the husband. "The husband could not proceed on a journey without making proper provision for her maintenance and household expenditure. If he married a second time, the first wife has to be properly provided for" [Altekar 1999: 215]. The

12th century jurist, Vijnaaneshwara, maintained that if a husband abandons a virtuous wife, or wilfully misappropriates her property, she could move a court of law to get her grievances redressed (ibid: 215-16). *AS* grants wife's right to even refuse sexual intercourse with her husband, if she already has borne him sons or wants to lead a pious life (3.2.45). The wife also had a right to abandon her husband, if his character is bad, or is away from her for a long time, or threatens her life, or is impotent (3.2.48). Women were allowed the right to remarry under certain conditions, including continued absence during particularly fertile periods, or neglect of her and children's maintenance (3.4.24,25). Remarriage of widowed women was permitted, even encouraged during the Vedic period. There was no practice of 'sati' or 'suttee' during the Vedic and Upanishadic era. In *Ramayana*, king Dasharatha's three wives did not become satis, but *Mahabharata* does mention such cases. Altekar also observes that the practice degenerated in the areas where it was prevalent, since women were subtly encouraged to commit sati with the motive of cornering their 'streedhana'.

The position of shudras and untouchables was much worse than that of women in the matter of rights. Shastras gave them no right to education, particularly the study of the Vedas, and discriminated against them in awarding punishment for the same offence.[11] Similarly, the offence of killing a brahmin was regarded as more serious than that of killing a shudra. There was no equality before law in several respects. The craze for hierarchy went to such a length that *MS* said that, if a low caste person sat on the same seat with a high caste person, buttocks of the former were to be branded or gashed! (VIII 281). Yet, employers of shudras had duties towards them, ensuring that they are adequately fed, clothed and sheltered, looking after them in emergencies like illness and death and contingencies like marriage in their family, and to see that their hard work is properly rewarded (X 124). In cases of theft, the king had to restore the lost property to all losers including shudras (*MS* VIII 40). However, shudra slaves had no property right. Though there was a ban in *MS* social mobility, *MS* itself allowed shudras to engage in handicrafts as independent business and calling, in case they were unable to find service with upper castes such that they could avoid privation and hunger (X 99).

Irrespective of the shastras being the sole cause for social evils in India or not, in the wake of criticism of social evils in the Hindu society spearheaded by Raja Rammohun Roy, Swami Vivekanand, Mahatma Gandhi and others, the importance of shastras drastically declined and modern legislation took place. The British established equality of all before law as a basic principle of governance. Not only was sati banned, many other reform measures found their way into legislation both in British India and the princely states. After independence, Hindus willingly preferred to go in for a modern legislation in the form of the Hindu Law and a new Constitution for India instead of adhering to the shastras. Untouchability and discrimination based on caste were made illegal and women's status improved. Women were given the right to property including immovable property along with right to inherit, right to divorce and alimony, and right to franchise. Taking dowry is now a criminal offence, and a recently passed legislation curbs domestic violence against women. The so-called Hindu Law has hardly anything to do with Hindu shastras, and owes inspiration to modern values of justice and fairness.

Many Hindu leaders right since Raja Rammohun Roy found Hindu society to be in urgent need of social reform, apart from the need of overcoming economic backwardness and poverty. Swami Vivekanand, when he visited Kerala, called the Hindu society there "a madhouse of casteism". Even if the common masses were found wanting in social concern, Hindu leaders had it in ample measure. It was because of Raja Rammohun Roy's energetic campaigning against suttee, that the British government under William Bentinck took courage to ban the outrageous practice, which the powerful Mughal emperors could not do earlier. The story of social reform movements is too well-recorded and known to detain us here. Panikkar has insightfully remarked, "India's independence and emergence into the modern world would hardly have been possible without the slow but radical adjustments that had taken place within the fold of Hinduism for a period of over 100 years" (1953: 319).

Several Hindu religious leaders took up the cause of the poor, not just by way of charity, but by mobilising them to end heir exploitation. Shri Narayan Guru (1854-1928) in Kerala lifted a whole untouchable caste – ezhavas, into the mainstream in this way, quite within the framework of Hinduism itself [Nadkarni 2006:102-03]. The Christian theology of liberation as applied to Latin America came into prominence during the 1960s. It may surprise us that an attempt was made towards a Hindu theology of liberation in 1910s and again in 1930s. Swami Vidyanand took the lead in mobilising peasants in Bihar to resist their exploitation by landlords in the 1910s and 1920s. Subsequently, Swami Sahajanand Saraswati took up the cause of peasants and agrarian labour during the 1930s and 1940s. He was foremost in starting the Bihar province Kisan Sabha, and later, All-India Kisan Sabha in 1936 along with NG Ranga. He saw no contradiction between his being a monk and also a peasant leader to secure justice for the poor peasants. When landlords asked him how he, as a 'sannyasi', could get involved in such mundane issues as peasant problems, he quoted a Sanskrit verse to the effect that it is the selfish that seek their own individual liberation to the neglect of others but that he could not do, and had to identify himself with the lives and interests of the poor [Das 1982: 84]. He also gave a theoretical base to his approach by asserting that "there is no contradiction between the moral stance (dharma) of the Gita and that of the Marxists" in his *Gita-Hridaya*, a Marixst reading of the Gita published in 1948 in Hindi [Agrawal 2006: 29]. However, the Swami did not launch his struggles under the banner of Hinduism or the Gita.

He himself kept the struggle firmly on a secular footing, since he needed to involve all those interested, including the communists. In a sense, he contributed to aborting what would perhaps have developed as a Hindu Theology of Liberation. But the idea emerged again; several Hindu monks, as for example, Swami Agnivesh, have interpreted the Hindu ideal of moksha as liberation from exploitation, poverty and deprivation, and not in its traditional metaphysical sense. Gandhiji challenged a whole empire and launched the people's struggle for India's freedom, on the basis of the twin principles of truth and non-violence, which he asserted constituted the core of Hinduism. Almost single handed, Sant Gadgebaba (1876-1956), coming from a poor social background, fought social evils like dowry, drinking, casteism and illiteracy among the poor, moving from village to village in Maharashtra. He also started several 'dharmashaalaas' particularly for the deprived castes.

Social concerns shown by Hindus did not take long to be transformed into institutional efforts. Individual charity and efforts at social reforms, howsoever sincere, could not produce an impact until like-minded individuals came together in a collective effort, where the effort could be synergetic and also sustainable. That is how right from the 19th century, reform movements as well as social work got organised under the banner of the Brahmo Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Arya Samaj,

Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, and many others. The trend has not abated but has gained momentum as more institutions like the Brahmakumaris, ISKCON, and the Art of Living are also in the field and doing wonderful work not only for Hindus, but also others. Apart from social service, these organisations and their workers strive to elevate the moral and spiritual level of people, dissuading them from drugs, alcohol and smoking, and making them derive greater happiness and joy from simply being better human beings at peace with others as also with their own selves. Traditional maths and temples started giving more and more attention to social service, to such an extent that practically every math is now engaged in social service. The famed temple at Tirupati was in the field of social service right since the 16th century by developing irrigation works in a drought-prone region [Rao 2004:81]. The temple has, in the modern age, branched out in the field of education (from primary to university) and health care. The modern age gurus like Sri Sathya Saibaba, Mata Amritanandamayi, Sri Sri Ravishankar and others are known now for their social service in many countries of the world in almost all continents through their vast institutional network, catering to the spiritual as well as mundane needs of Hindus and non-Hindus alike, and spreading the message of peace and love.[12] New caste associations also sprang up to take care of the social, economic and spiritual needs of their fellow caste brethren.

In spite of a huge proliferation of social service institutions among Hindus, the task remains challenging. Atrocities on dalits, dowry-related deaths of women, poverty and illiteracy among Hindus in India are significant problems. Many children have no homes let alone schooling. Lack of consideration for others' inconvenience and civic sense on the part of even the educated middle class are other serious problems that bring down the prestige of India. How do we meet this challenge?

The level of education and training of Hindu priests in traditional maths and 'pathashalas' hardly equips them with the knowledge of human values enshrined in our scriptures; they do not even know the meaning of many mantras they mechanically chant.[13] Hindu priests are thus hardly comparable with Christian priests in offering any leadership and raising the moral and spiritual level of devotees. Sensitivity to social issues that cry for attention hardly comes on their agenda. The vast vacuum is only inadequately filled by Hindu monks and voluntary social workers. They are much fewer in number relative to need. Religious institutions depend mainly on part-time or seasonal voluntary workers or on retired persons to run their social services. This cannot go far. They would also need full time dedicated and professional workers to make a sustained impact and to widen their reach. Social work as a professional course is now offered by most universities, graduates from which can be recruited for the purpose.

Taking a more serious humanist path on these lines and making it the core of expression of Hinduism will bring greater glory to the religion than wasting energy and resources on elaborate ceremonies or on narrow agenda that spreads hatred. Indeed, this applies to all religions. After all, the true test of religiosity is in our becoming better human beings. **EPW**

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Notes

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1 The original is: *uru naastanve tana/uru kshayaaya naaskridhi/uru no yaandhi jeevase.*
2 The original is: *Taaditaah peeditaah ye syuhu taan mama iti abhyudeerayet /sa sadhu iti mantavyah tatra drashtavya Ishwarah//.*
3 The translation is by Charlottee Vaudeville (1987: 39-40).
4 As quoted (in English) by Kane 1977, Vol V, Part II, pp 934-35.
5 For more details on the course, spread and significance of Bhakti movements, see Nadkarni (2006), Chapter 5.
6 See Nadkarni 2006, pp 123-29.
7 Cf His Address at the Parliament of Religions, Chicago, September 20, 1893, reproduced in *Collected Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol I: 20.
8 N Jayaram suggested this analytical scheme.
9 For *Arthashastra*, Rangarajan (1992) edition is used here; For Manusmriti, Buhler's translation is used (1886).
10 As quoted by Jois 1997: 47.
11 Cf Kane, op cit, Vol IV, pp 80-81.
12 Almost all these institutions have their websites about their social service work. Due to space constraint, these details are not given here.
13 Arya Samaj, Mata Amritanandamayi and a few others have launched 'gurukuls' for training of Hindu priests, taking into account the deficiencies pointed out here. They admit students from all castes. The Mata's organisation trains women priests also. The brahman mathas are yet to see the light of the day in this respect.

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