

Eight

Unification and Purification of Hinduism

In India the divergences of worship between class and class or group and group are so great that some foreigners thought there was nothing like Hinduism that there is nothing in common at all between the *Todas* and the *Brahmins* in worship and that they reflected different levels of thought and had contents of truth or degrees of philosophy in them. Toda worship might simply amount to bowing to natural forces or a few objects whereas the worship by the highest cultured classes in temples and else where reveal a great diversity of philosophical systems, and of religious thought, Apart from this, the distinction between the worship going on in Siva temples, Vishnu temples, Jain temples and other temples, was noticeable enough. The differences were sometimes sought

to be bridged by enclosing Siva and Vishnu temples in the same compound or inside the same building. In some cases there was amicable worship of the different deities inside the same place but in others the differences of view were intensified by the closer contact. In some cases, the *bhaktas* of Siva claim that Siva should have priority in procession and that Vishnu's procession must follow. The other group contests this claim. These and other similar matters appear however to be a quarrel over trifles. But there was bitterness enough to take the differences to courts and even to the highest court like the Privy Council. It was not easy for anyone to say that there was a single religion called Hinduism, the characteristics of which one could set out. In any case, there was a war of literature going on during the last two or three centuries developing bitter antagonism between Siva and Vishnu faiths and between Jain and both of these and other similar religious institutions. The quarrels were always on non-essentials. But anyhow they prevented unity and sowed dissension. The consequence on society was to weaken society and demoralise religion. In order, therefore, to unify the people and to purify the religion and raise it to the highest grade, the one great thing needed was to discover what was the essential substratum of all these faiths called Hinduism and to bring in actual practice the adherents of all sects and views into one mass that could work harmoniously. Sri Sai has done marvellously good work in this connection. Having been brought up in his earliest years by a *fakir*, the idea of unity of God struck deep root in him. He changed at a very early age his residence and his caretaker, and coming under the Selu *zamindar's* care which naturally involved contact with various forms of gods. Baba thus naturally developed the feeling that the one God or *Allah* that he knew in his earliest years under the *fakir* was the same as Venkatesa whom his *Guru* at Selu worshipped, and that other gods or god-forms that were incidentally brought to Selu or were visited by his master were all forms of the same God, that is, the *Ekam Sat*, *Vipra bahuda vadanti*, which means, "The Real is one. The wise call it variously." *Angani Anya Devatah*, that is, all gods are part of God. So Baba had, as the backbone of his religion, the unity of God-head in all names and forms. This, is the feat that must be achieved by all in

India, and Hindus especially should attain unity and purity of religion. Therefore those who contacted Baba by worshipping him at Shirdi or elsewhere were deeply impressed with and felt this truth that all god forms such as Vittal Maruti etectra are God. "All that is *Allah*" was what Baba told the Rohilla. Baba constantly used one name for another, namely, Vittal for Khandoba or Maruti for Vittal, and it may be noted that advanced *bhaktas* following *Hari Hara Guha Bhajana Paddhati* do the same. He told Upasani Maharaj that he Upasani would get God's grace after four years of severe training at Shirdi. and the word he used for God's grace was "Khandoba's grace." When he referred to Upasani's residence at Shirdi, he would say "Vittoba's temple," but Upasani Maharaj corrected him and said it was Khandoba's, for Vittal's temple was inside the village and Khandoba's temple outside. Baba would again correct Upasani Maharaj and say, 'What is the difference between Khandoba and Vittoba?*' By persons who are ingrained in Hindu notions of difference between Siva and Vishnu, Khandoba would at once be declared Siva's *avatar* and Vittal as Mahavishnu's *avatar*, and so the two cannot be the same in their functions, their dresses, or their pleasures. The two, Mahavishnu and Siva, are severely contrasted daily by *murthy* minded Hindus, thus

Alankara Priyo Vishnuh

Abhisheka Priyas Sivah⁷³

that is to say, Vishnu is always dressed up in fine *pitambar*, that is, golden dress, and given a fixed number of ornaments, weapons, insignia, whereas Siva is either undraped as in the *Linga* or clad with tiger skin, and he wears his hair on the head in the form of a rough tuft. But Vishnu's hair is nicely combed and presentable. In the description of accompaniments also, living or other, the two are described differently and presented differently in temples. Mahavishnu is surrounded by Lakshmi, *bhaktas* and *bhagavatas*, all wearing *Namams*, whereas Siva is ash besmeared and surrounded by ghouls, demons, and fierce looking creatures, for he is supposed to dwell in the horrid cremation ground, which is considered a polluted place to visit. Hindu groups exultingly developed the peculiar merits, each of its own *Murthi* ideas, as contrasted with those of others;

and the *Vishnu Mala kandanam* by *Saivas* and the *Saiva Mata Kandanam* by the *Vaishnavas* gave plenty of scope for hairsplitting, philosophising, and bitterness for centuries, and in practice, often the followers of each kept themselves apart from the others. Even in the Valmiki Ramayana., Bala Kanda, there is a chapter showing that Siva came to conflict with Vishnu, and even after they stopped their fight, their followers continued their fight. This unedifying spectacle of degrading religion by enthusiasm over unessential and exulting over differences has worked sufficient harm already to the great neglect of the essence of religion that should alone be stressed by all sensible and truly religious persons. Baba, therefore, drew the attention of all his *bhaktas* to the fact that whether you called your God, Siva or Vishnu, he is the Supreme Power that is responsible for the creation, maintenance, and the withdrawal of the world, and he gives you all that you need and finally the highest bliss at his own feet. This, being the central essence of all Theism, is or should be the central plank for unifying all branches and sects of Hindus and also unifying Hinduism with Islam and other theistic religions. In fact, world unity of religions can be achieved mainly on this basis. Sporadic teachings on the same lines existed. For example,

Sivasya Hridayam Vishnuh

Vishnoscha Hridayam Sivah

Ishadapi Antaram Kritva

Rouravam Yati Manavah⁷⁴

This means, Siva is the essence or heart of Vishnu and Vishnu is the heart or essence of Siva. Any one who makes the slightest difference between the two goes to Hell. There are many similar authorities. But why go to authorities? Does any one think that God, omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient, who is responsible for the creation, maintenance and dissolution of the universe can be many? If there are many, the universe will be a chaos, not a cosmos. The above are functions or aspects of one and the same God. Baba was always impressing this silently on all. We have the opposite ideal deeply ingrained in us. We are bodies, we think. So we think Siva, Vishnu and Brahma are embodied beings, *murthis* with eyes, legs, nose and crown. It is absolutely essential for the seeker after

salvation to shed these and consequent differences. So Baba stressed unity just as even Srimad Bhagavata stresses unity. The *Vedas* on which all schools rely seem to support the idea of multiplicity of Gods and in fact multiplicity of objects in the universe. In Srimad Bhagavata⁷⁵ Sri Krishna says.

Mam Vidhatte Ahhidhane Mam

Vikalpya Apohyate Tvaham

Eiavan Sarva Vedarthah Sahda Asthaya Mam Bhidam

Mayamatram Anudya Ante Pratishidya Prasidati

that is *Vedas* enjoin Me, Me they express. What is stated tentatively to be refuted is I. This is the import of the entire *Vedas* with Me as their substratum, that is, the *Vedas* affirm the existence of duality and that duality is but a illusion. Refuting that duality at the end, the *Vedas* are satisfied. Baba did not stop with stating the principles on which all could be brought to a common basis. He went further and worked out the actual unity of the groups by bringing men from different groups and making them all form one solid block of Sai devotees under his own care. Those who came to him saw in him their only God, recognised him as their *Guru Deva* and that was the highest religious sentiment that they had and there was no possibility of their tearing themselves off into divisions, though their original loyalties were in other respects maintained. Baba hated intolerance and made people tolerate each other's views and peculiarities. He did not allow the Hindus under him to fight against the Muslim devotees. He removed disparities and made them work in unison as fellow devotees, as brothers in Sai faith. Thus, he worked out not merely the unification of Hinduism but also the unification of Hinduism with the other great religion in India, namely, Islam. Especially under Sufi influence, one sees that it is impossible to distinguish the essence of Hinduism from that of Islam. When the essentials of Sufism are put forward, it is difficult to say whether those essentials do not constitute real worship according to the Bhagavata doctrine as well as esoteric Christian doctrine. Sai Baba is both a perfect *Sufi* and a *Parama Bhagavata* following the Bhagavata or *Parma Guru* of the Guru Gita embodied in *Skanda Parana*. The one thing that religions must agree upon is that God, the Supreme Power, is *Sat Chit Ananda*; the highest

bliss that man can know is represented to be God, and God is, therefore, the ultimate goal of all religious striving, and every effort should be made by every sincere and honest seeker of truth to realise this real *Sal Chit Ananda* as the basis of the Universe and the basis of his own personality. All personalities will, therefore, finally merge in the one grand personality, *Paramatma*, that is God, which is Love. This is the essence of Baba's teaching and practice and is well fitted to be the basis of unification of all faiths in India and in the world.

BUT HOW CAN POLYTHEISM AND MONOTHEISM BE RECONCILED?

This is a question on which theoretical differences of opinion exist in abundance, and theoretically one can go on maintaining that monotheism and polytheism reflect different levels of thought and action and that the two are poles apart. In one sense that is true. Yet it is also the truth recognised in the lives of great souls and in the history of nations that the two co-exist and are reconcilable in Mysticism. This is well illustrated in Hinduism. Is God really one or many? Are the various forms of worship of various gods and goddesses reconcilable with the worship of one God? In the case of the one God, is worship necessarily external and formal or might it be equally advantageous, if not more advantageous, without external formalities? Is the realisation of pure *Satchitananda* a form of worship? If it can be termed worship, then probably the term worship must have an extended significance which ordinarily it does not have. When a person is simply enjoying *Satchitananda* he is generally referred to as in a blissful state, and he might even express his own condition by the words *Mainm Allah Hum*, I am God, *Aham Brahmasmi*, *Soham*, That is, if the individual soul has so completely surrendered itself to and got identified with the *Paramatman*, then there may be no such thing as relation of one soul to another. Worship is usually understood as the attitude of one soul, a *Jiva*, towards God, viewed not as identical with it, but as in some way different from it, though the Godhead might include the *Jiva*. One might worship a God which includes oneself because it includes others also, and is thus different from oneself. If worship must necessarily connote differences between the worshipper and the worshipped, it is not correct then to say that the merger of the individual soul in the *Paramatman*

is an act of worship. It may be the ultimate end of worship. There in *Atma Nivedana* worship ends. But ordinarily no one would think loss of identity is worship. In fine flights of poetry, as in the pages of Wordsworth, we come across passages where the soul is lost in admiration of the beauty, the infinite character and the glories of Nature treating them as expression of love and joy arising on God's Visitation. That is described sometimes as an act of worship as loss of self is only temporary. Even the person who worships a God-form is lost in it for a time and then comes back to himself and treats that form as different from himself. A mystic has various stages, one stage of which is losing himself in Nature or in a God-form other than Nature. Thus Nature and he are two different objects, and that is how the term worship may be applied to such cases. But apart from verbal differences, taking only the essence into consideration, if God is bliss and man is only a spark from God, the spark, after much *sadhana*, gets reabsorbed in the original flame from which it came. Then, the process of approaching, absorption and getting back may be called worship. But the end, that is being permanently part of the original flame or bliss or love, is called worship, as means and end are bundled together as in Bhagawad Gita⁷⁶. Worship is usually described as a *sadhana* or means, and the end of it is reaching God. Persons of all grades of development were flocking to Baba's feet, and a very large number of them were incapable of any *laya* or merger in God. But a few like Wordsworth's 'youth at sunrise' quoted in a 'later chapter occasionally touched that *laya*. Once Balwant Khaparde and Bhishma went out in the morning when dew was falling and the Sun was just rising. The Sun's rays hit them and threw their shadows behind them. Their shadows began with their feet and continued right on to the distant horizon, and at the horizon there was a rainbow caused by the piercing of the dew by the Sun's rays. Thus the long shadow of each of them was crowned with a halo of the iridescent seven coloured rainbow. This struck each of them as marvellous. From each one, who is finite, goes out an infinite shadow which at the other end is crowned with divine glory! This was by the rays of the Sun who sends his rays upon all. The Sun is typical of God. The halo of glory cast round the head of the shadows was also

typical of Godhead, and so each one had a feeling that he himself was identical with that elongated shadow which had a crown on its head. Therefore each one dimly sensed his divinity. The finite body and its infinite and glorious shadow were really one. The Sun showed the oneness. That was the mystic meaning to be attached to their morning experience of the Sun, the dew, and their shadows. They communicated their experience to G.S. Khaparde who said that Baba had kindly given them a mystic experience of *Atmananda*. With this uppermost in their minds, they went to see Baba. Baba gave them a smile of approval and said nothing. One would take it that Baba set his seal of approval on their interpretation of this natural phenomenon of having long shadows of themselves crowned with divine glory, and considering the same as typical or significant of their being in essence divinity, something infinite, blissful, and beautiful, and that their *Jivas* must be recognised by each one of them as being the *Paramatma*, that is, Divine, as was demonstrated by their blissful *laya* absorption for a moment. Baba similarly expressed his approval of the use of music also for purposes of enabling the *Jiva* to get *laya* in bliss. Baba himself in his early days used to dance with tinklets tied to his feet singing rapturously songs of Kabir, some of which undoubtedly referred to the beauty and blissfulness of infinite Godhead. Baba must have enjoyed what Tyagaraja says is enjoyed by the *bhakta* in moments of musical *laya*,

'*Gitarthiamu*' Mokshamu Galada asks Tyagaraja, that is, Is it possible for a man whose mind does not melt with music into *laya*, to obtain *laya* in any other way into God?. Baba told Rangari that on the night previous to his coming, there was *bhajan* and music, and all night he was in rapture. 'They abused me', Baba said.

Tyagaraya who like most Hindus revelled in meditating on the details of God forms attained *laya* or mystic absorption especially with the aid of music. Sufi and Christian adorers of God without form also succeed often times in merging their selves in rapt communion with God. Both these groups of mystics show that concentration in the end gives the longed for bliss of God and is the way to reconcile all religious differences. Baba as the pastmaster of mystic bliss

and lord of *siddhis* or psychic powers flowing from mystic concentration helped on the reconciliation of these apparently conflicting faiths of Polytheism and Monotheism.