



Volume I  
May 2006

# *Defining Dharma*

Perspectives on a  
Central Theme in  
Hinduism

# Swadharma

Harvard's Hinduism Journal

# The Role of the Hindu Diaspora in Bringing India's Traditions to the World

BY BALRAM SINGH

## The Concept of Hindu

The concept of India and the concept of Hindu are the same, at least linguistically speaking. The origin of the name India used by the British is the Indus River that flows from Himalayas in the northwest part of India and part of what is now Pakistan. The Indus river's actual name is Sindhu river, and in ancient times, the Persians of Iran referred to people living across the Sindhu River as Hindus, given that Sanskrit 's' is cognate with Persian 'h' linguistically.

The more ancient and original name of India is actually Bharata, which is also currently used in Hindi and other Indian languages, and is referenced in the modern Indian constitution as 'India that is Bharata'. More importantly, India's Bharata name comes from King Bharata who ruled, millenia ago, an India that encompassed from east of Iran to Indonesia. King Bharata was the son of King Dushyanta (a descendant of the ancient king Manu) and Shakuntala, the daughter of the famous sage of Vishwamitra. A major story of King Bharata is that he is the first known king who did not choose any of his nine sons as the heir to his throne, rather choosing a well qualified commoner, because he found none of his sons as qualified to be a king. Such a legacy is important one to remember in today's world, both within and without India, as so many rulers even in democratic system tend to promote their offspring into the political system.

The system of governance in ancient India, while different from Western democracy, has many instances of righteous kings who considered the interests of their subjects with utmost sincerity. However, that is not to

BALRAM SINGH is Director of the Center for Indic Studies, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth.

say that all the kings were noble, and there were obviously problematic kings. There are stories of numerous major wars within the land of Bharata (two major ones form the basis of famous epics *Ramayana* and *MahaBharata*), which were not fought for expansion of territories or power, but rather to reestablish righteousness (*dharmā*) as the overriding factor. In other words, these wars were fought to assert *dharmā*.

## Dharma and Hindu

There are many definitions of *dharmā*. Quite often, it gets translated as religion,

meaning of *dharmā*, one has no choice but to turn to nature to experiment and acquire the true meaning of *dharmā*. This is a legacy of India or Hindus that must not be forgotten by those who call themselves Hindus and those who want to know more about Hindus, because the fundamentals of Hindu thoughts and traditions derive from such an understanding of *dharmā*.

The understanding and practice of *dharmā* is subscripitive as opposed to prescriptive, and it applies to every aspect of life and living. So, there is a *dharmā* of a son, a daughter, a father, a mother, etc., as much as the *dharmā* of a tree, air, water, etc. People are generally free to subscribe to their own *dharmā*, as they understand it from the experience of their family, community, natural environment, and of course education. At the highest level, India does not have a record of injunctions for or against a given type of behavior or practice. With a long experiment and experience for a society like India that has retained its continuing civilization for millenia, many of its collective experiences have become traditions (translation of a Sanskrit word, *parampara*, which refers to great knowledge). With the passage of time, the basic meanings of many of the traditions get misunderstood or the traditions themselves become limited to rituals, which has caused much of

social stagnation and at times problems for the society. Nevertheless, India's fundamental principles moored in *dharmā* remain eternal, the basic foundations of its traditions strong, and essence of its practices fairly universal.

## The Diaspora

It is in the context of universality that India's traditions and practices must be looked upon by the 22-25 million strong



The approximate extent of King Bharata's empire. The brown line marks colonial India.

which is quite contrary to both the original and the pragmatic meaning of the word *dharmā*. According to sage Kanad, who provided the idea of the atom around 700 BC, *dharmā* is that which governs the birth and death of everything. This is a not just a secular definition of *dharmā* but a scientific one. It refers to all those forces involved in governing appearance and disappearance of material and non-material things in this universe. In order to determine the true



Indian diaspora living in all the continents of the world. Many times there are conflicting viewpoints on how to promote 'Indianness' while living in other sovereign nations having their own culture and traditions. Moreover, India itself now has a mix of diverse cultures and traditions, including those of Islam and Christianity. While there are ample examples of fusion of these traditions with the basic ethos of Hindus or India, the current political and religious environment in India and also in the world leads to many conflicts in representing India's many time-tested values to the outside world. This problem became acutely clear in recent controversy of portrayal of Hindus in California's sixth grade social studies books (Golden, 2006, Gaur – *Swadharma*). Most people who opposed the edits suggested by the Hindu groups belonged to groups representing communists, converted Christians, Muslims, and intellectuals representing colonial points of view of India (Agarwal, 2006). It is therefore advisable to refer to Hindu diaspora when trying to represent India's *dharmic* traditions, and include Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains into this group, just to avoid the representation problem in dealing with India's traditional heritage. Such a distinction is especially important for second and later generation Indian diaspora, so that they know of their heritage even as they learn and evaluate traditions of such heritage.

### Tolerance vs. Acceptance

The whole intelligentsia seems to have bought this politically expedient word, "tolerance," as the panacea for world's ills. While tolerance could mean sympathy for other's beliefs, its primary and common meaning, "to endure pain or hardship," does not bode well for tolerance to be embraced readily. Tolerance gives a message that every time I see you I feel pain that I manage to endure. How long would such a state last without exploding? In reference to India, the word that I think describes the practice is at least acceptance, if not celebration. I know numerous examples throughout the history, and still today that, when left alone by politicians, ideologues, and religious demagogues, people in India happily live in harmony while celebrating their differences.

Tolerance is a good beginning for those civilizations which lack memory of their ancestral culture, a collective wisdom integrated over a long period of time and space. Voltaire once said tolerance "...is the consequence of humanity? We are all formed of frailty and error; let us pardon reciprocally each other's folly -- that is the first law of nature." This idea of promoting tolerance, however, has not been a central part of human existence based on the historical track record. While it is good to be forgiving, tolerance in itself does not in

long term invite progressive interaction in a society.

Acceptance of differences is a key factor to further progress and ultimate enlightenment, because differences are the most noticeable thing around us. Acceptance of differences ensures one's own existence – it removes our insecurity and distrust about others. And, consequently, it makes us less vulnerable to manipulation by priests as well as political pundits. For a true acceptance, however, a series of things need to happen. Acceptance is a mutual action with utmost sincerity to create mutual understanding.

Mahatma Gandhi once said: "It is the duty of every cultured man or woman to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world. If we are to respect others' religions as we would have them respect our own, a friendly study of the world's religions is a sacred duty." In practical terms, sympathetic and friendly studies need to have noble goals. For example, pursuit of truth brings scientists from varied fields to study and collaborate with each other, with enormous interest, efforts, and respect. Most funding agencies in the United States outline the need of multidisciplinary approach clearly and consciously.

Pursuit of the truth can be the ultimate uniting factor for the people of this world. And, the Indian concept of '*ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti*' (truth is one, sages call it in various ways), is light years ahead of today's concept of might is the right way to enforce 'truth.'

At the same time, acceptance is not painless for both the accepting and the one being accepted. Acceptance involves knowledge of others. Considering the vast number of people one has to know, it is generally done by profiling the general characteristics of a group to identify and label. Despite many valid arguments against profiling and labeling, profiling and labeling precede acceptance – it is only natural and inevitable. However, acceptance does not mean adoption of other's way of life or living. Humans are too unique to be treated with strict common rules – freedom is required and diversity is its innate expression. This is the essence of Hindu philosophy.

For the concept of the acceptance to work though mutual respect, trust, and dependability is required. As an example, acceptance of the different ways of life is no where more visible than in India, where there are about 68,000 *jaatis* (also referred to as castes). Many in the media and intellectual



*A sculpture showing the chariot of Arjuna and Krishna from the epic Mahabharata at a roundabout in Jakarta, Indonesia.*

circles mistakenly consider *jaatis* of India as a curse (and rightly so, when *jaatis* become an instrument of discrimination), but in reality *jaatis* are the result of acceptance of the ways of life for different groups of people. While *jaatis* in India may belong to same faith, their lifestyles, including mode of worshipping, marriage, food, and social habits are quite different. Acceptance of them as such provides them the freedom to live their way of life, and in many ways contribute to the society at large. The culture of acceptance practiced in India for millennia is equally applied to people of different faiths, especially in rural India.

Those who propound just one way of life have been responsible for major oppression and exploitation through colonization, slavery, imperialism, and communism, snatching freedom of the people at every step. Multiculturalism being displayed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a great acknowledgement of the need for differences to exist in the interest of the society's progress. Mark Twain remarked: "It were not best that we should all think alike; it is difference of opinion that makes horse races." However, multiculturalism must be practiced based on the acceptance as in acknowledgement of other's way of life, rather than simple tolerance. Then only one can learn from other's experiences with open arms, an approach most beautifully expounded by Gandhi: "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stifled. I want all the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any."

### Role of Hindu Diaspora in a Globalized World

As globalization is taking its roots throughout the world, and Indian government recognizes the value of its diaspora, it is important to review the role this group can play not only for itself and India but for the peace and prosperity of the whole world. Members of Indian diaspora are in the top five billionaires, Hindu Americans remain the highest income and educated group, Hindu Americans control over 35% of hospitality sector real state accounting for about \$40 billion of the market value, and Hindu diaspora outside India has a GDP of about \$1 trillion. However, what is the long lasting effect of Hindus is not just the economic but also the lessons of harmonious life, be as a family, a community, or as

professionals.

India's value systems have been adopted throughout the world in ancient times. For example, despite Thailand officially being a Buddhist country, it continues to relish the essential human values of Ramayana through its *Khon* and *Lakhon* forms of drama-dance tradition based on *Ramakian*, the Thai version of Ramayana. The current king of Thailand is known as Rama IV. In Indonesia, Ramayana and MahaBharata govern much of the social and cultural milieu, despite Indonesia being the largest Muslim country in the world. At a traffic roundabout on one of the busiest arteries of Jakarta stands a monumental sculpture facing the central bank on one side and the national monument on the other. It depicts Krishna and Arjuna in a chariot drawn by several horses. The sheer size and magnificence of this famous scene from the Mahabharata has no parallel even in India.

The list of India's outside admirers is long and cuts across all section of life – Albert Einstein, Neils Bohr, Erwin Schrodinger, Max Muller, Mark Twain, Will Durant, Martin Luther King, George Harrison, David Frawley, Robert Blackwill, Bill Clinton, to name a few. What is so unique about India that it has remained the zenith of philosophy, science, music, and culture for thousands of years? The answer lies among other things in the nature's benevolence on India. India's geography, geology, and demography provide natural settings for human learning, leading to the philosophy of its diverse culture and traditions. India is the only country blessed with the highest mountain peaks of the Himalayas on one end and the lowest level of earth on the other (the ocean), with numerous geological formations in between. India is the only country on earth which witnesses six clear and distinct seasons during the year. Such crisp variation in seasons and weather could support many diverse species of life in India. Although there is no complete record of all the life-forms anywhere in the world as of yet, India's share of life-forms tops that of any other country in the world, with 75,000 animal species and 45,000 plant species counted so far. These natural forces have resulted in a myriad of diversity in the people who inhabit that part of the planet, be it the area of language, food, attire, traditions, and even deities.

India's tradition of celebrating diversity remains the key to its success in the spiritual growth of its people, and its natural resources

of fertile land and the world's most amenable weather to human living lends support for its prosperity and leisure time for developing thoughts in science and philosophy. In other words, India is truly a special land where ideas and observations intertwine to create an understanding of harmonious living. There is plenty of evidence of this when one examines numerous philosophical and spiritual thoughts originating from time immemorial, be it Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Dvaitism, Advaitism, Sankhya, Vaishesika, Yoga, Vedanta, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Sufism, etc. These ideas have generally been living in peace with each other, which is more than what can be said for rest of the world.

India therefore deserves homage on its merit of being the land of ideas and the practice of harmonious living and celebrating the diversity of mutual understanding. Being associated with people of India through blood relations is just an added reason for the Indian diaspora in general, and the Hindu diaspora in particular to promote the values and traditions of India by becoming the living examples, not for any egoistic reasons but simply in service of the adopted lands.

Members of Indian diaspora are already playing some, albeit quite inadequate, role to fill in the vacuum, but even those efforts are not well coordinated and get marred with emotional outbursts than a systematic approach to make a significant difference. Some deep pocket persons of Indian origin (PIO), with all their good intentions, fund academic programs in some famous US universities, which hire faculty members, many of whom hold a visceral hostility towards Indian culture and traditions. More needs to be said on this topic in the future to gauge the depth of problem being faced by the Indian culture.

### References

- Agarwal, V. (2006) Who are opposing the Hindu initiative to end discrimination in California textbooks? India Post, January 25, 2006.
- Golden, D. (2006) Defending The Faith: New Battleground in Textbook Wars: Religion in History. The Wall Street Journal, January 25, 2006.
- Hector, A. and Hoover, R (2002) Darwin and the First Ecological Experiment. Science, 295, 639-640.
- Johnson, P. (2004) Want to Prosper? Then Be Tolerant. Forbes, June 21, 2004.