

DAVID FRAWLEY



ARISE ARJUNA

HINDUISM RESURGENT
IN A NEW CENTURY

BLOOMSBURY

Arise Arjuna

Hinduism Resurgent in a New Century

*David Frawley (Vamadeva
Shastri)*

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Foreword

My memory is still vivid. It is as if I just finished reading the first edition of *Arise Arjuna: Hinduism and the Modern World* and have closed the book, coming away enriched and deeply moved. In that order. And now, twenty years later, its author Shri David Frawley or Pandit Vamadeva Shastri has afforded me the singular privilege and honour of writing a foreword to its much-needed, updated edition. Together with his companion volumes of *Awaken Bharata* and *How I Became a Hindu*, this book played a significant role in shaping my own convictions and greatly helped my intellectual evolution.

As Pandit Vamadeva Shastri himself says in this new edition, the book comes at a crucial juncture when Bharata walks towards the threshold of perhaps the most definitive Kurukshetra—the 2019 national elections. To appreciate the real significance of the upcoming elections, one needs to hark back to the dark decade of 2004–14.

Perhaps very few people will truly understand or even believe the scale and extent of destruction that Bharata underwent during this period. The most visible facet to many is the numerous corruption scams that occurred under the two-term Congress-led UPA government. Further, this extended to massive cultural denigrations culminating into the charges of Hindu and saffron terror and giving communist and leftist scholars the prime place in writing national textbooks. India's ancient cultural and philosophical traditions, its spiritual institutions and its rishis and gurus were called into question, if not rejected, by the academia and media, often with government approval, if not support. If you are the type to believe such things, I will say that Divine Providence, or the millennia of tapas of our rishis

saved Bharata on that fateful summer of 2014. There seems to be no logical explanation for the manner in which the adharmic forces were shattered so spectacularly in 2014.

However, that was a battle only partially won. The same adharmic forces are regrouping against Narendra Modi, the most important prime minister of recent decades, who is trying to awaken the dharmic ethos of the country. Given the events of the last four years, this time, these forces have dropped all pretences of decency, fairness and constitutionality and are openly calling for his removal even if that means splintering India with the assistance of foreign forces.

As with the previous edition, Pandit Vamadeva Shastri fittingly uses the metaphor of a dejected, demoralized and confused Arjuna refusing to fight the climactic Kurukshetra war to describe the current plight of Hindus in Bharata—only they're faced with a far greater and urgent calamity. However, on the positive side, with the ascent of Shri Narendra Modi as prime minister, Hinduism has also acquired a renewed prestige and interest globally. Indeed, while the move of the United Nations adopting the World Yoga Day maybe cynically interpreted as mere 'skillful diplomacy' by Shri Narendra Modi, its true importance lies elsewhere and is far deep-rooted. Numerous, similar efforts to spread various facets of Sanatana culture have also been accomplished in these four years. Constraints of space don't allow me to list them all. Which is what justifies the subtitle of Pandit Vamadeva Shastri's book—*Hinduism Resurgent in a New Century*.

However, a certain inertia also continues to cripple the Hindu psyche, which prevents it from asserting the innate, universal value of Dharma as also from defending it with vigour and confidence. Perhaps the rest of the problems that Hindus continue to face stems from this phenomenon of internalized cultural neglect and self-alienation. The clarity of thought and lucidity of Pandit Vamadeva Shastri's exposition of each of these problems is evident in the manner in which he has categorized the issues as well as in his treatment of them.

Of the numerous seeming complexities in 'understanding' Sanatana Dharma, the fundamental one is definitional in nature. Therefore, the first place to begin in understanding is not to view Sanatana Dharma through the prism of the term 'religion' as the

academic and intellectual class of the West defines it. This terminological problem is an evil in itself and clouds one's understanding and perception. Indeed, dubbing Hinduism as 'religion' is precisely what makes it easy to conjure non-existent parallels between Christian or Islamic fundamentalism and to lazily conclude that 'all religions are the same'. Because all religions have gods, not all gods are the same, and even worse, not all religions are equal. Yet, this obvious rebellion against logic has attained the status of a self-evident truth. This is one of the underlying strands that bind *Arise Arjuna*, and the book does a very good job of unclouding such sloppy reasoning and arrogant conclusions.

One can approach this problem by delving into ample instances that history provides us. A clear break occurred in Europe with the advent of Christianity and the sway it exercised after it became the state religion of the decaying Roman Empire in the fourth century CE. Every notion of human impulse, thought, behaviour, creativity and consciousness itself was supplanted by Christian dogma and superstition akin to how Lysenko 'interpreted' science so that it would 'obey' communism. For the next thousand years, Europe became the true Dark Continent.

However, what was occurring in Bharata during the same period? Beginning in the middle of the third century CE, the Gupta Empire ushered in a three-hundred-year period of flourishing glory making massive strides in astronomy, mathematics, medicine, music, dance, architecture, sculpture, temple-building, painting, literature, statecraft, maritime trade ... indeed, everything that the Guptas touched, they turned to gold. During the Gupta era, Bharata not only retained intact its hoary Vedic philosophical and spiritual traditions but also built upon them. It was the Guptas who gave us our current forms of puja, form and substance to our Vedic and Puranic deities.

And during the same period, Christian Europe was busy: engaging in blood-soaked Papal succession wars, burning 'witches', persecuting heresies, granting indulgences to all manner of criminals and banning free thought.

This lengthy account of recorded history is a tiny sample illustrating the fundamental difference between Sanatana Dharma and Abrahamic religions in conception, theory and practice.

Needless, Pandit Vamadeva Shastri clinically analyzes these facets in painstaking detail with fidelity only to truth. A high degree of intellectual integrity is one of the hallmarks of *Arise Arjuna*. Pandit Vamadeva Shastri does not shy away from giving a call to the Hindu society to introspect on some of the regrettable aspects of Hinduism and to reform them. This spirit of Truth is the same that animated our rishis and the Bhagavad Gita: to confront evil head-on, fearlessly. This spirit is also encapsulated beautifully in the Vedic tenet that avers: yenaiva sasruje ghoram tenaiva shantirastu nah (That from which we unleashed terror, let us use the same to establish peace). This is entirely consonant with our countless saints and scholars who drew from this inspiration and rescued and reinvigorated the Sanatana spirit each time it had touched a nadir. This is precisely the self-correction mechanism inherent in Sanatana Dharma.

Pandit Vamadeva Shastri fearlessly demolishes numerous distortions about Hindu Dharma relative to culture, history, politics and theology. He makes no concessions or apologies while exposing these. This approach is truly Sanatanic, what is traditionally known as the Brahma-Kshatra Samahara or the integration of Brahma (Universal non-dual spirituality) and Kshatra (spirit of valour aimed to protect and safeguard the noble).

This approach, in turn, is derived from Pandit Vamadeva Shastri's keen understanding of Vedanta as the bedrock and the fount of Sanatana Dharma. It can be argued that bereft of the inspiration of Vedanta, Bharata wouldn't have produced such eternal classics as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, nor given birth to immortal philosopher-saints such as Adi Shankara and Ramana Maharshi. In fact, Pandit Vamadeva Shastri's own journey of how he discovered Vedanta in the chapter, 'An American Discovers the Vedas', is intensely moving and elevating. The ultimate chapter in the book, it is profoundly ultimate.

The contrast cannot be starker.

There are other Americans, such as Wendy Doniger, Paul Courtright and Sheldon Pollock who discovered the Vedas too. What they found is well-known and doesn't need repeating here. The renowned Sanskrit maxim: yad bhavam tad bhavati (You will find exactly that thing which your proclivity dictates to you) is eminently

applicable in this case. One can illustrate this contrast with an extraordinary scene from the 1997 Telugu film *Annamayya* based on the life of the fifteenth-century saint-poet-musician, Annamacharya. In this scene, Annamacharya is shown to be an ardent sensualist in his early youth. And so, to temper his overt sensuality, the Deity Vishnu descends to the earth in human form and takes him to a temple whereupon Annamacharya points to him an array of erotic sculptures on its walls, and asks Vishnu what he feels about them. To this, Vishnu replies, ‘In those sculptures I behold the unseen parents of the entire inert and sentient cosmos engaged in the yagna of creation.’

Like the previous edition, *Arise Arjuna* is in the superlative league of the publications from the (late) Shri Sitaram Goel’s Voice of India, the publishing house which almost single-handedly stood up to Leftist bullying and narrative stranglehold, changed public discourse in Bharata and reawakened at least two generations of Hindus to the dangers confronting them and to the beauty and profundity of their ancient, unbroken Dharma. Like Shri Sitaram Goel, Ram Swarup, Arun Shourie, KS Lal, NS Rajaram, Koenraad Elst and others, Pandit Vamadeva Shastri wrote to defend and uphold Sanatana Dharma in an era where it was not only unpopular but hazardous to do so. Not many today can even imagine what would befall a writer who wrote in favour of the Hindu side during the Ajodhya Epoch of the 1990s. Indeed, in numerous ways, Pandit Vamadeva Shastri is more of a Hindu than Hindus accidentally born into Sanatana Dharma: he is a practising Hindu, which is indeed the first step to ‘understand’ Hinduism.

The updated edition of *Arise Arjuna: Hinduism Resurgent in a New Century* is a plea, call to action and an arsenal. It boldly and accurately says that the world will not be a poorer place if Abrahamic religions were to fade away but would certainly be a worse place if Sanatana Dharma was extinguished.

Arise Arjuna is a valuable addition to every thinking person’s reading repository and deserves the widest possible dissemination.

Om Tat Sat!

—**Sandeep Balakrishna**
Author of the bestselling book

Tipu Sultan: The Tyrant of Mysore

Preface

Arise Arjuna is my call to India and especially to Hindus to arise and face the daunting challenges posed by the world situation as of today. While historically India has been invaded by a diversity of enemies from many directions, Hinduism as a religion and as a profound ancient culture has also been targeted for conquest and conversion, particularly during the past few centuries. India's dharmic civilization and yogic spirituality though honoured in many circles in the world, are regarded as a potential threat to be removed by vested interests in the political and religious realms.

Given the size, scope and funding for those opposed to the resurgence of India's dharmic civilization, it cannot be defended in an apologetic, compromising or merely defensive manner. A bold, decisive and well thought-out strategy must be adopted and implemented on many levels reflecting the nature of society and the current technology in order to counter this assault. Yet, it must also promote the cultural strengths and spiritual power behind the Indic or Bharatiya civilization, and the many great yogis, rishis and sages who continue to support it by their influence.

Arise Arjuna is not a new book out for the first time but rather a new version of a book that has gone through a dozen reprints since it was first published in 1995, more than twenty years ago. Yet, this edition is not merely a reprint of the old. My aim with the new edition is to preserve as much of the original material as is relevant and yet update it in the light of current circumstances so many years later. I have thoroughly recast and rewritten the older text.

The book consists of what have also been different articles on related themes. So, they approach some of the key issues facing Hinduism today from various related perspectives. I have brought in my own voice and experience in a few instances to reveal the background of my ideas.

Looking Forward to 2019

The original book, though it warned of such events, was written long before the war on terrorism and attacks, such as 9/11. It was completed at a time when PVN Rao was the prime minister of India—before the Vajpayee and United Progressive Alliance (UPA) eras.

The original book came long before the time of Narendra Modi when the idea of a major Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) victory at a national level in 2014 was unthinkable. This new edition of *Arise Arjuna* is scheduled to appear during the prelude to the important 2019 national elections, which is a new Kurukshetra that will be crucial to the history of India. While the book was not written with reference to any single election, its ideas remain of particular relevance now. Will Arjuna arise for this 2019 battle that will be a watershed in the political scenario for the coming century? That is our new call for today.

The call for Arjuna, the inner warrior for Dharma, to arise remains more relevant now and has broader global implications for India's new prominence in the world. India is experiencing both economic development at home and a new expansion in the realm of foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific region and in the world as a whole. India's yoga and Vedic traditions are not only being revived within the country, but have also moved worldwide as part of a global dharmic awakening.

Themes of the Book

The topics presented here are among the most difficult and controversial ones, which many people may not want to examine for fear of offending someone. However, unless we critically examine the most intractable issues, I don't think we can arrive at the truth, particularly in this time of worldwide crisis, when the foundations of

what we call civilization are shaking, which requires that we question everything.

The ancient sages of India did not confine themselves only to spiritual teachings or metaphysical issues. They provided profound guidance about society and critiques of cultural and religious practices. They produced numerous Dharma sutras and many other teachings regarding conduct in the world at both individual and collective levels. Modern gurus who wrote on social issues include Sri Aurobindo, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Rama Tirtha and Ganapati Muni who provided the inspiration for what I have attempted in this book. This extends to gurus I have worked with, including Sadguru Sivananda Murty and Swami Dayananda (of Arsha Vidya).

Knowing Sanskrit, travelling widely in India and meeting people of all backgrounds have allowed me to see the tremendous ignorance and many misconceptions (often intentional) that have been created about Hindu Dharma and its representatives. People today rely on second-hand information, obtained mainly through media or academic sources, which are generally unsympathetic and inaccurate; so, the picture they get is highly distorted and requires a clear alternative to counter it. This is what has compelled me to speak out.

This book has a wide scope of subjects but all of these are important for understanding India today and show the need for a revival of the Hindu Dharma in its full scope and true spirit. *Arise Arjuna* is divided into four areas:

- 1) Social issues: Primarily, these are concerned with the misrepresentation of the Hindu Dharma both in India and in the West, and the need for a Hindu awakening.
- 2) Religious and spiritual issues: These take into account the Hindu view of religion and spirituality, the unity of all religions, and a critique of Islam and Christianity from a Hindu perspective, including a critical analysis.
- 3) Historical issues: This particularly deals with the Aryan Invasion Theory and the division of India along North-South lines (the Aryan-Dravidian divide).
- 4) Cultural issues: This is a discussion of Hinduism relative to the

world as a whole, and the value of Hindu culture and yogic spirituality for all humanity.

It is interrelated with my books and articles on Hindu Dharma, addressing the need for a Hindu awakening and a better understanding of this venerable tradition of Sanatana Dharma.

India is only slowly waking up to its real dharmic heritage, still recovering from centuries of domination and subversion, and is yet to function on the basis of its inner strength. However, even in this condition of dormancy, India has produced perhaps the greatest spiritual figures and gurus of modern times.

For India to truly arise, a new Arjuna spirit is required—a new daring courage, fearlessness and determination to face and overcome all obstacles. What could be more daunting than a great civil war in which one had to challenge one's own kinsmen and even one's teachers? The example of Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra illustrates this clearly. Yet for Arjuna to arise, there must be a Krishna to guide him. Today, there are many Arjunas, but India has also produced many great gurus and teachings in modern times to provide this guidance. But we must truly practise these teachings for them to work, and to do so on a daily basis.

My primary wish in releasing this new edition is for a new arising of Arjuna today, and for the twenty-first century.

—Dr David Frawley
(Pandit Vamadeva Shastri)

PART 1

Social and Media Issues in Hindu Dharma

We live in an era dominated by the media—both mainstream mass media and the new ever-expanding social media. The media is fast becoming the primary influence that shapes our thoughts and behaviour, starting with the youth. Yet, the role of the media is now also being questioned and its various biases and prejudices being exposed.

Today, the role of the media in shaping our views of Hinduism must be carefully examined as the media seldom includes any Hindu point of view, though other religious and spiritual groups are often given prominence. Unless Hindus address the challenges of the media age, they cannot expect their vast culture and spiritual traditions to be properly honoured and represented.

Hindus need to arise with a new voice and daring much like Arjuna, yet understanding the forces that rule the society of today. This is not only to save their profound spiritual and yogic traditions, but to bring higher dharmic values into the world. Our call for Arjuna to arise begins with addressing these media challenges as the basis for examining the spiritual, historical and cultural concerns that arise from these.

Arise Arjuna

The world is in a state of tremendous crisis with confusion and disorientation all around, and faces an uncertain future. Born of this is the conflict between stunning new technological capacities on the one hand, and an inability to go beyond humanity's old social divisions and inherent violence on the other. Unlike previous crises, which were local in nature, the fate of the globe is now at stake, as both humanity and life on Earth are threatened by our current civilizational order. And in this extremity, no nation has yet arisen as a reliable defender of the Truth or Dharma as a determined voice for the deeper spiritual regeneration of humanity that is desperately needed.

The old communist nations, after decades of floundering in confusion and corruption, have now long faded through perpetual mismanagement and with the collapse of their economic structures in the twentieth century. Only the ghost or shadow of communism lingers, while whatever idealism it might have had has been traded in for personal power or gain. The capitalist nations now strive to maintain their wealth and affluence by exploiting the planet and by consuming the future resources of humanity for transient enjoyment, claiming progress and global development in the process. They are supported by a powerful new information technology that is vastly improving communication but dangerously increasing commercial control of humanity and the exploitation of the world of nature. With new technological wonders and a greater alienation of human beings from nature and from each other, the world trundles along in a hesitant yet disturbed manner with little peace of mind anywhere.

The undeveloped countries falter under exploitation and corruption; this is what has plagued Africa and South America. Some poorer nations have fallen backwards and carve up their forests to cover short-term economic debts to wealthier countries. Others strain to recover from civil wars fed by arms suppliers from wealthy nations abroad that seem like a new epidemic on the planet. Yet, others are held back by ever-growing populations.

The environment of the planet is reeling under chemical and industrial pollution and toxic wastes permeate our air, water and soil which are becoming increasingly poisonous. While one can debate the details of global warming, the extensive damage and disruption to almost every ecosystem on the planet are easy to observe, with many forests obliterated and waters made unsafe to drink or even to bathe in. Earth is groaning under the weight of human greed and irresponsibility with a foreboding of a dangerous future, and little to make the youth look forward to. Will our civilization be able to continue without major problems in the natural world that we have spoiled? Even if we avoid nuclear or chemical warfare, our urban and industrial wastes may prove to be as lethal as our bombs. Our very medicine is making us dependent upon new designer drugs to counter our increasing pain and depression, and may eventually create new diseases to bring down our excessive numbers.

Most of the religions of the world, remnants of a worn medieval mindset, struggle between a new sterile secular modernism and an old, regressive and often violent fundamentalism. Some religious groups are still trying to impose their own will upon the world and convert the entire planet to their narrow beliefs—that theirs is the only true God, prophet, saviour or holy book—as if the acceptance of their religious dogma would somehow solve our deep-seated human problems and bring peace.

Religion-inspired terrorist attacks have become a way of life in major cities of the world, and the old sense of safety and security is gone, particularly for women and children. The global war on terror is becoming one of the longest wars in the history of the world, with no end in sight. Starting with airports and extending to public places and entertainment events, we must consider terrorist threats as part of our daily fare, the sad new normal as it were. Meanwhile, waves of

refugees are moving into many countries as a legacy of failed states. Yet, the new countries they come to, such as those of Western Europe, are finding them hard to assimilate as they cause social unrest and destabilization of their old cultural orders.

The great spiritual traditions of the East, Hinduism and Buddhism, struggling to maintain a respect for Dharma in the world today, do battle with the economic and ideological forces of the West, and there looms above them the continued shadow of proselytizing religions which would still destroy them if they could. They face a well-funded multinational missionary business with high-tech support and mass marketing to undermine their individually oriented meditation traditions.

Where Is India in This Crisis?

In this struggle, we must ask: where is India, the world's largest democracy and refuge of our ancient global yogic heritage? And what role does she have to play? India has her leftists and communists who have so far twisted her economy and tried to turn the hearts of her people against her spiritual heritage. She has new crony capitalists ready to make quick money or to ally themselves with foreign corporations that see India as a promising new market to exploit.

Where is the soul of India today? Where is her will? India tries to stand for peace, tolerance, the unity of humanity and respect for all religions. But her direction is not clear or aligned with her spiritual essence. It appears that India can't even discipline herself by the chaos that often occurs in the daily lives of the people.

Western secularism marks one line of attack against India while promoting a commercial culture caught up in superficial sensate culture under the guise of human freedom. Monotheistic religions, their exclusive belief systems and vast resources to spend on conversion, attack on the other side. India would like to please everyone. And each group—religious, ethnic or political within India—seems to want their own portion of the country, ever since the first partition that created Pakistan. Separatism takes many forms, with each group placing its own interests before that of the country as a whole. Everyone wants to take, and no one appears willing to give.

No one is standing firm to halt this tide of growing sectarianism, selfishness and materialism.

In this battle, the modern Hindu does not want to fight, or even to speak out. He accepts the growing secularism and sensationalism coming into his culture from the West, as perhaps necessary for economic growth and scientific development, and may see it as progressive, modern and humanitarian. He tolerates in silence the continuing assaults on his culture and values from Islamic and Christian forces within his own land as part of freedom of religion. He doesn't like to criticize anyone's religion even if they mock his. He seems weak, in disarray, without confidence or self-esteem. He appears to think that if he ignores these assaults against his culture, then they will go away in time, but like an infection, they continue to spread and poison the country. The image of the passive Hindu has arisen out of the image of the passive Indian:

They do not resist. They do not stand firm. You can take anything you want from them and they won't say anything. They retire in fear, though they hold on to their superstitions. First, they let the Muslims conquer them, then the British. They seldom fought back. They often joined hands with their conquerors and took sides against their own people. Now that they are free, they don't know who they are or what to do. They don't know how to rule themselves. They are used to being ruled. They are lucky their country doesn't fall apart. They are looking for a new conqueror, perhaps the economic forces of the West.

Such ideas about the people of India have been carried down the ages.

However, classical India was never passive and resigned, never gave up without resistance, never gave in without defending Truth and Dharma in all possible ways. India was a land of great sages and yogis, such as Buddha, Mahavira and Shankara, but they were not merely concerned with the transcendent, they tried to raise the country up and unite it towards a higher goal, turning it into a land where spiritual life was honoured and protected—which was necessary for it to flourish. India was the land of Lord Rama and Sri

Krishna, of great kings and warriors who knew how to rule according to a higher law and defend the spiritual life from assaults. India was not a land contracted in itself but open, creative and expansive, spreading its culture of yoga and enlightenment across the seas.

In time, the riches of India became the great spoil for the kings and armies of the Middle East and Central Asia to plunder and possess. Some of these forces gradually made headway into the country. Native dynasties arose over time and drove the invaders out. They did not compromise with outsiders who were inimical to their spiritual and cultural heritage. While Indian kings gave refuge to the oppressed, they did not bow down before the forces of exploitation. Islamic armies made dozens of invasions before they ever gained a foothold. The souls who strove so hard, who gave up everything, including their lives, to maintain a land where spiritual life could flourish, should not be forgotten. We must call on them to return again.

The New Dejection of Arjuna

Today India appears to be in the same state of dejection as that of Arjuna, standing between two great armies before a terrible yet unavoidable battle, where not to act is even a greater debacle than having to make the hard choice to fight.

He has no will to fight. He does not believe in his cause. He would rather let others win than have to challenge or defeat them, though he could. It is not simply cowardice that motivates him. It is a sensitive soul that does not delight in conflict and cannot confront those against him.

This is how the spirit of the country often appears. Even the Gita is interpreted not as a call to fight for Dharma but as a message of non-violence. Its message of courage, conviction and bold confrontation against the forces of adharma seems to have been forgotten. Instead of a call for Arjuna to arise, the Gita is interpreted more as a call for Arjuna to surrender.

Yet life is always Kurukshetra in one form or another, whether for each one of us, individually or for the communities that we are part of. There is always a difficult choice that has to be made, which may not be ideal but is unavoidable. Duality and struggle are parts of our human realm, and if we are cowered down by the opposition and meekly surrender, we are only letting the negative forces prevail without any challenge.

There are always two forces in life—not simply the good and the bad, but the ascending force of spiritual growth, and the descending force of worldly illusion and division. Nor are the two forces entirely separate. What is one day a spiritual force may in time become a force of ignorance and falsehood once its spirit is lost. These forces cut across humanity and may divide a nation or a family, not to speak of the world itself. To not be willing to face opposition, even from those whom we love if necessary, is to accept the force of decay, to fall into inertia and darkness. This does not mean that we need to be aggressive or violent, but to take a stand for Truth, even if the world turns against us.

Arise Arjuna! Yours is not a battle at one point of time only. It is an endeavour for all time. It must be fought over and over again, even for eternity. Truth cannot compromise itself with falsehood. Someone has to hold the limit. If not you, who will it be? And what will you say to your children or to future generations who will lose their inner freedom? What will you bequeath them having surrendered your soul without a struggle?

What would Arjuna say in these circumstances?

I will not give in, even one inch to the forces of destruction. If I must be sacrificed, so be it. But I will dedicate my total effort to the fight. Death in the battle is preferable to a life without dignity. The Dharma must be upheld. There is no other option. With adharma there can be no compromise. We cannot rest until it is completely removed and first it must be stripped from our own minds and hearts.

Such is the spirit that India and the entire world needs today. As an American who has followed Vedic teachings for over forty years, returning to the USA from India, I find some people who delight in the problems of India and others who ignore them, considering them to be of no importance. I tell them that to take pleasure in the problems of India is to delight in the sufferings of one's own mother, as India is the spiritual mother of the world. India is like the heart centre of the planet. That the heart of the globe suffers is not surprising when the head and the hands of the world (Western scientific and technological cultures) are acting without a heart, are living as if their petty pleasures alone were real, anaesthetized to the suffering of the majority of humanity. India may have difficulties, but these only reflect those of the world as a whole. Hence, my concern with the fate of India though I am not an Indian by birth. The fate of India mirrors the real condition of the world, of humanity and of nature.

Spiritual Guidance for the World

A force of inner strength and profound spiritual guidance for the world is unlikely to come from the countries of the West, even if they may aspire to be that force. The West is immature, distorted by its mass media and its culture of self-indulgence and attachment to the physical body. Its spirituality is mixed with a seeking of new sensations and material acquisitions, trapped in an outer view of reality, far short of any true renunciation or deeper realization. Most people are more concerned with their personal, emotional and family problems, not with any greater life of service or that of spiritual practice. Though there are those in the West who appreciate true spirituality and whose numbers are growing, they are still unprepared to produce the kind of spiritual leadership that the world needs.

Islamic countries remain caught in a spiralling karma of violence and oppression with a religion that has become more a political movement to gain worldly power than any inner spiritual search. Their religion is dominated by fundamentalism and militancy without any respect for life or any quest for Truth beyond all names and forms. Several Islamic countries, most notably Pakistan, now suffer

from conflict and civil war, which their export of terrorism only seems to be increasing, at home.

China, the second great culture of Asia, like India, unfortunately will take decades to assimilate the controversial ideology of communism and state control before recovering its dharmic roots. A new imperialism seems to be its latest cultural transformation that wants to again dominate the whole of Asia. China's great Buddhist and Taoist traditions though suppressed are slowly arising, but must compete with a new imperialism that is becoming the dominant national trend. Unfortunately, Tibet has become a sacrificial offering to the new Chinese ambition to conquer and reclaim its ancient economic and military prowess.

India alone as a country and a dharmic civilization has the potential to take the role of guiding the world according to dharmic principles and the vision of the sages. But if there is corruption in India, in its leaders and thinkers, it can have no moral force in the world or even within its own borders. Or, if India is unwilling to offend any country, group or religion by challenging the negative and thoughtless practices of our times, it will have no credible voice to follow.

To compromise with falsehood and oppression is not tolerance or non-violence, but self-destruction. To turn away in fear or hesitation, not to stand up for what one believes is true, is not modesty but self-betrayal. The world needs a spiritual and ethical force that speaks out, or a divine silence that makes us question all that we do. The leaders and educators of India, whether political, intellectual or religious, must arise with the force of Arjuna. They must defend humanity as a whole, the environment as a whole, the Earth as our mother, true religion as a force of universality and peace. This is not merely to tell everyone that they are right and approve of all cultures and religions, even when their armies are out there on the battlefield. It is to be the conscience of the world and of people who have been ignoring it to such a great extent and for so long.

The true leaders and teachers of India—those who are willing to defend at all costs the religion of Truth and the culture of universality—must arise like Arjuna. And if they do, Vishnu will come again and for the whole world.

However, for this to occur, India must undergo a radical change from what it has been since its independence in 1947. India today, though the situation is improving, does not represent the soul of India but more so its shadow. It is inexcusable for the land of the rishis to be filled with such corruption, ignorance and servility as pervades much of the country today. Those who know the true spiritual greatness of India can only be shocked and disheartened to see how little India is manifesting its true potential and *shakti* or spiritual force.

Yet the rest of the world is in a similar condition, if not worse, as they lack such a tradition to revive. The Western world has succeeded in greed, materialism and religious dogma, but not in the sphere of spiritual life for which it still looks to the gurus of India and Tibet. For this India, with all its shortcomings, still holds the torch that can light a new flame of awakening.

Let India awaken and for this, the true spirit of Arjuna must arise! This is the prayer for the next millennium and for the world's deliverance from the darkness of ignorance. The great rishis, yogis and gurus are there to guide us from within for this monumental effort.

The Crisis in the Psyche of India

A defeatist tendency—perhaps unparalleled in any other country in the world today—exists in the psyche of modern Indians. An inner conflict, bordering on a civil war, rages in the minds of the country's elite. The primary effort of its cultural leaders appears to be to pull the country down or remake it in a foreign image as if little Indian, and certainly nothing Hindu, is worthy of preserving or even reforming.

The elite of India seems to suffer from a fundamental alienation from the traditions and culture of the land that would not be less poignant had they been born and raised in a hostile country. The ruling elite appear to be little more than a native incarnation of the old colonial rulers who haughtily lived in their separate cantonments, neither mingling with the native people nor seeking to understand their customs. This English-speaking aristocracy prides itself in being disconnected from the very soil and people that gave it birth.

There is probably no other country in the world where it has become a national pastime among its educated class to denigrate its own culture and history, however great that has been over the many millennia of its existence. When great archaeological discoveries of India's past, such as the ancient Sarasvati River and its many archaeological sites, come to light, these are not a subject for national pride. Such discoveries are ridiculed as exaggerations, if not inventions, as if they represent the imagination of backward, chauvinistic elements within the culture that should provoke embarrassment among rational people.

There is probably no other country where the religion of the majority, however enlightened, mystical and spiritual, is ridiculed, while minority religions, however fundamentalist or even militant are doted upon. The majority religion and its institutions are taxed and regulated while minority religions receive tax benefits and have neither regulation nor monitoring. While the majority religion is carefully monitored and limited to what it can teach, minority religions can teach what they want, even if it is anti-national or backward in nature. Books that offend minority religious sentiments are banned but praised if they cast insults on majority beliefs.

There is probably no other country where regional, caste and family loyalties are put before national interest; this is a trend seen even among those who claim to be democratic, socialist or caste reformers. Political parties exist not to promote a national agenda of unity and development, but to favour one region or group of people at the expense of the whole. Each group wants as big a piece of the national pie as it can get, not realizing that the advantages it gains can mean deprivation for other groups. Yet, when those who were previously deprived gain power, they too seek the same unequal advantages that lead to further inequality and discontent.

India's affirmative action code is by far the most extreme in the world; it tries to raise up certain segments of the population regardless of merit, and prevents others from gaining positions however qualified they may be. In the guise of removing caste, a new casteism has arisen where one's caste is more important than one's qualifications either in gaining entrance into a school or in finding a job when one graduates. Anti-Brahmanism is another form of casteist thinking. People view the government not as their own creation, but as a foreign state from which they should take the maximum personal benefit, regardless of the consequences for the country as a whole.

Outside people need not pull Indians down, though there are enough trying to do so. Indians are already too busy keeping any of their people and the country as a whole from rising up. It seems they would rather see their neighbours or their nation fail if they are not given the top position. It is mostly outside India that Indians succeed, often remarkably well, because their native talents are not stifled by

the dominant cultural self-negativity and rabid divisiveness that exists in the country.

Political parties in India see gaining power as a means of amassing personal wealth and robbing the nation. Political leaders often include gangsters, charlatans and buffoons who will stop short at nothing to gain power, wealth or influence. Once they gain power, politicians routinely do little but cheat the people for their own advantage. Even honest politicians find that they cannot function without some deference to the numerous corrupt leaders who often have a stranglehold on the bureaucracy.

Politicians divide the country into warring vote banks and place one community against another. They offer favours, such as bribes, to communities to make sure that they are elected or stay in power, but then do little to really help them once elected. They campaign on slogans that appeal to community fears and suspicions rather than create any national consensus or harmony. They hold power based upon blame and hatred rather than on any positive agendas for social change. They inflame the uneducated masses with propaganda rather than work to make people aware of real social problems such as overpopulation, poor infrastructure or lack of education.

Should a decent government come to power and try to improve the situation, the opposition concentrates on pulling it down in every possible way; this is its main goal so that they can regain power for themselves, regardless of the good being done for the country. The idea of a constructive or supportive opposition is hard to find. The goal is to gain power for oneself and to not allow anyone else to succeed.

To further their ambitions, Indian politicians will manipulate the foreign press to denigrate their opponents, even if it means spreading lies and rumours and making the country an anathema in the eyes of the outside world. Petty conflicts in India are blown out of proportion in the foreign media, not by foreign journalists but by Indians seeking to use the media to score points against their own opponents in the country. The Indians who are responsible for the news of India in the foreign press spread venom and distortion about their own country; they do this perhaps better than any foreigner who disliking the culture, ever could.

Missionary aggression, which often uses bribery, is extolled as social upliftment, while Hindu efforts at self-defence against the conversion onslaught are portrayed as a rabid fundamentalism. One Indian journalist even lamented that Western armies would not come to India to chastise the political groups he was opposed to as if he was still looking for the colonial powers to return to save him!

Modern Indian politicians appear like colonial rulers looting the country, following a divide and rule policy to keep the country under their sway. Corruption exists almost everywhere and bribery is the main way to do business in nearly all fields. Recent efforts to reduce black money in the economy have met with complaints by the very people using it. In addition, India has an entrenched bureaucracy that resists change and stifles development, just out of sheer obstinacy and not wanting to give up any control. Now under Narendra Modi's administration, many are unhappy that they actually have to work.

The strangest thing about this sad circumstance is that India is not a banana republic of recent vintage, but one of the oldest and most venerable civilizations in the world. Its culture is not trumpeting a militant and fundamentalist religion trying to conquer the world for the one true faith but represents a vast cosmic vision. India has given birth to the main religions that have dominated Asia historically—Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism—which are noted for their tolerance and spirituality. It has produced Sanskrit, perhaps the world's greatest language and source of great mantras. It has given us the incredible spiritual systems of yoga and Vedanta and great traditions of meditation and Self-realization. As the world looks forward to a universal model of spirituality defined by consciousness rather than by dogma, these Vedic traditions form a powerful legacy to help create a new enlightened civilization.

Yet the irony is that rather than embracing its own great traditions, the modern Indian psyche prefers to slavishly imitate worn-out trends in Western intellectual thought, such as Marxism, or even to write apologetics for Christian and Islamic missionary aggression. Though living in India, in proximity to temples, yogis and great festivals, most modern Indian intellectuals are oblivious to the soul of the land and stay aloof from its traditional culture. They might as well be living in England or China for all they know of their own country and

its heritage. They are isolated in the prison of their own alien ideas as if in a tower of iron. If they choose to rediscover India, it is more likely to occur by reading the books of Western travellers visiting the country, than by their own direct experience of the people around them.

The dominant Indian intelligentsia cannot appreciate even the writings of the many great modern Indian thinkers, such as Vivekananda or Aurobindo, who wrote in superb English and understood the national psyche and worked on how to revive it again today. It is as if India's intellectuals were so successfully brainwashed against their own culture that they cannot even look at it, even if it is presented to them clearly in a modern and futuristic light!

Given such a twisted and self-negating national psyche, can there be any hope for the country? At the surface, if we look back over the past since independence in 1947, the situation looks dismal. India appears like a nation without nationalism or atleast without national pride or a real connection to its own history. Self-negativity and even a cultural self-hatred abound. The elite that dominates the universities, the media, the government and the business arenas is the illegitimate child of foreign interests and is often still controlled by foreign ideas and foreign resources. It cannot resist a favour or a bribe and there is much money from overseas to draw upon. Indian politicians do not hesitate to sell their country down the river and it does not require a high price.

Fortunately, signs of a new awakening can be found, steadily growing since 2014. There is a new interest in the older traditions of the country and many people now visit temples and tirthas on a regular basis, where great crowds of people can often be found. Many young people now want to follow the older heritage of the land and revive it in the modern age and are looking once again to figures, such as Shiva, Rama, Krishna, Arjuna and Hanuman.

The computer and information revolution and the new science are connecting with the great intelligence of the Indian psyche that produced the unfathomable mantras of the Vedas. Slowly but surely, a new intellectual class is arising, and now many important journalists and writers on social media are writing and exposing the hypocrisy of the anti-Hindu Indian elite. Yet, only if this trend grows steadily and

rapidly, can there be a lasting counter to the older defeatist trend of the country. This requires great effort, initiative and creativity, not simply lamenting over the past but envisioning a new future in harmony with the deeper aspirations of the region, a bold spirit of Arjuna arisen in the light of Krishna.

Meanwhile, overseas Hindus have become successful, well educated and affluent, not by abandoning their culture but by holding on to it. They regard their Hindu culture and dharmic educational values not as a weakness but as a strength. Free of the Indian nation and its fragmented psyche, they can proudly draw upon their cultural resources in a way that people born in India seldom can. Perhaps, they can return to the country and become its new leaders.

However, first this strange alienated elite has to be removed and they will not go without a fight. The sad thing is that they would probably rather destroy their own country than have it function apart from their domination and control. The future of India looks like a new Kurukshetra and it requires a similar miracle for victory. Such a war will be fought not on some outer battlefield but in the hearts and minds of people, from where they choose to draw their inspiration and find their connection with life. Its battlefield is the media and educational realms, though it will have ramifications on the streets and in the villages.

Yet, regardless of outer appearances, the inner soul of India cannot be kept down any longer. It has been nourished by many centuries of tapas by great yogis and sages and has great resilience and powers of awakening. This soul of Bharat Mata will rise up again through the forms of Kali (dissolution) to Durga (strength) and Sundari (abundance). The question is how long and difficult the process must be. The deciding moment is now.

Hindu Dharma at a Turning Point

A new 'Quit India Movement' has arisen in recent decades. Unlike the old 'Quit India Movement' which was established by Indian freedom fighters to remove the British rule, the recent movement has an opposite intent—to embrace Western materialist culture and abandon traditional Hindu culture and spirituality perhaps altogether. Such Westernized thinkers may not actually leave India physically, but certainly have exited from any traditional culture or appreciation of India's great gurus and philosophies. Modern Hindus are trained to look at their own tradition with alien values and suspicious eyes. The intellectual elite of India takes pride in being in contact with the latest developments in American or European culture, art, science and technology while remaining ignorant and unappreciative of traditional dharmic teachings.

Not all of these Westernized Hindus have actually studied in the West, nor do they need to. The educational system of India itself follows primarily Western standards and values at a cultural level, perhaps even more so than the Western world today that is slowly trying to open up to other cultures. While the British may have left India physically, their emulators still run much of the country and see it largely like the British did, as a realm to be remade in a Western image. However, it is not merely a British model that they follow but a Marxist-socialist model with its atheistic and anti-nationalistic orientation. The stifling bureaucracy of India, which is only slowly beginning to break down, carries on a British kind of administration

with an additional imitation of Soviet-style policies introduced by Nehru to thwart the development of capitalism.

A number of Hindus have been immigrating to other countries, mainly for career benefits. There are now significant Hindu minorities in the United States, Canada, Great Britain and Australia, which were not there even a few decades ago. Perhaps strangely, Hindus abroad appear to appreciate their own culture better than Westernized Hindus residing in India, particularly in its urban centres, such as Delhi, Mumbai or Kolkata. The reason is that Hindus abroad, living apart from their cultural base, can better perceive its value. They have seen the limitations of Western culture—crime, drugs, promiscuity, greed and lack of spiritual values—demonstrated daily through the mass media. This makes traditional Hindu values of family, natural living, learning and spirituality more appealing along with seeing how yoga and meditation have so positively impacted the West.

Many people in the East and West see the social problems of modern India and blame the Hindu religion because it is still followed by the majority of people in the country. This is strange if we think carefully because India has largely been ruled by Westernized leaders since the partition of India 70 years ago, and prior to that was subject to the foreign rule of the British and the Islamic rule of Afghans, Arabs and Turks. All of these foreign powers have tried to reduce or remove any Hindu influence from the country. India has not been under predominantly Hindu rulers probably since the thirteenth century. How can then Hindu Dharma be the cause of the country's economic or social problems today?

However, a new movement is now developing to counter this long process of cultural disruption. Many Hindus today are looking to rediscover their Hindu roots, and this has also become a strong movement among Hindu emigrants to foreign countries. This movement is not simply a regressive return to medieval Hindu values, but a rediscovery of the importance of Hindu culture and dharmic spirituality for the future as well as for the past. It includes discovering the relevance of yoga, Vedanta, Ayurveda, Vedic mantras, classical Indian art and culture and the Hindu view of humanity and nature. Many Hindus in India are now working to make Hindu

Dharma into a stronger living presence in the country, with social, cultural and intellectual, as well as religious and spiritual influences. This I would call the 'new Hinduism', for those who are embracing Hinduism from both a point of tradition and one of modernity, recognizing its real meaning as Sanatana Dharma (the Eternal Tradition) and relevance for the entire world.

For example, the new Hinduism is bringing back traditional Hindu accounts of history, such as the rejection of the Aryan Invasion Theory that recent archeological discoveries in India, like the rediscovery of the Sarasvati River, are also proving. They are rejecting the idea that the history of India should be written from a European perspective as if anything good in India only came from the West (which is the present view). They hold that yogic values and a culture of Dharma has an important place in the educational system of India today, which should not merely imitate Western intellectual or political trends, especially Marxist views that have dominated most of the universities of India over the past several decades.

Westernized Hindus often try to hide or deny their Hindu roots. They do not like to be seen going to temples though they may go to churches and mosques as a demonstration of their universality in religious thoughts. They ignore Hindu social causes, such as the mistreatment of Hindus in Islamic countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh or Malaysia, or the fact that Hindus working in Arab countries are not allowed to practise their religion in public. However, they will take a stand for Palestinian rights in order to show their humanitarianism and global concerns.

Such Westernized Hindus are naturally suspicious of the new Hinduism that questions how they have lived their lives. They like to label it out of hand as fundamentalist, backward, or fascist, even though Hinduism is the most liberal, universal, syncretic and diverse of all the world's major religions, with its many deities, sages, scriptures and yogic practices. Westernized Hindus appear to take pride in denigrating Hindu Dharma. They like to paint Hinduism as fundamentalist and dangerous while promoting a tolerant and respectful view of Christianity and Islam. They have little tolerance for Hindu religious groups, such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), which they deem as regressive, but they have tolerance for

Jihadi Islam, which they are willing to excuse as caused by poverty or colonialism, not by religious prejudice. They fail to acknowledge how much India has long suffered from centuries of attacks from aggressive and intolerant Islamic armies.

The West Looking to India

Contrary to this East to West movement is a smaller but important movement within the Western culture itself. The new popularity of Eastern spirituality, yoga, Ayurveda and Vedanta shows an opposite movement from West to East. There are now ashrams, temples and yoga centres throughout the Western world and much of Asia. Gurus from India have gained large followings globally across North America and Great Britain, Europe and Russia. Hindu spirituality, being projected as being enlightened, futuristic and universal in orientation, has become appealing to people from all over the world. This movement, which began largely in the 1960s, is progressing well into another century. This interest in India's culture and spirituality has now extended to Eastern Europe as well since the collapse of communism. It has, at times, proved to be popular in Islamic countries as well if allowed, and has made its mark in Israel.

Hindus trained in Western intellectual culture are often perplexed by this worldwide honouring of India's dharmic tradition. They may feel guilty that those born in the West can find enormous value in the spiritual traditions that they have never studied or taken seriously. They might think that such Westerners are uneducated, misinformed, or constitute merely some fanatic fringe of progressive Western society. However, most Westerners involved in Hindu or Buddhist-based teachings are well educated and include scientists, artists, doctors and teachers.

My search for enlightenment and Self-realization has made me a part of this West to East movement. I discovered yoga and Vedanta teachings at a young age, after having first studied Western science, art, philosophy and religion. I found in Hindu teachings a science of spirituality that shows us how to look at ourselves and at the vast universe in which we live—we are not an external phenomenon but are a part of the universal consciousness that transcends time and

space. Such spiritual knowledge and realization are almost non-existent in Western religion or intellectual culture which has not yet understood the deeper layers of consciousness like that of the Hindu sages.

I have visited India many times over the years, and have had a number of discussions with modern Hindus of various persuasions. There, I came across the 'quit India for the West' movement first hand. I was appalled at how little so many Hindus valued or understood about their own tradition. They would equate Hindu spirituality with superstition that was at par with caste and untouchability. They were fond of quoting Marx or Shakespeare but would certainly not mention the Bhagavad Gita, which they regarded as regressive. They followed the ideas of materialists and atheists, such as Freud and Marx, to interpret the Vedas or still held the views of Max Mueller as final if they studied the Vedas at all. While I was interested in visiting temples and ashrams in India, they wanted to talk about the latest developments in Western politics or movies. While I was a vegetarian, they ate meat, even beef. While I admired the sculptures in Hindu temples, they preferred modern art. While I admired Indian classical music, they liked European classical music, or even modern Western popular music if they were younger in age.

Yet more surprisingly, I discovered that the same Westernized anti-Hindu attitudes were common in the English language press of India, which appeared more appropriately as the press of a foreign or non-Hindu country than that of a land where over 80 per cent of the people are Hindus (the vernacular press is better, I might add, but still reflects the same trends). The English language press of India appears as an Indian version of the Western news media, with the same reports and views, only with a more leftist political orientation. There is little of anything in them of dharmic spirituality, or little positive is said about Hindu culture.

If we look at the English language press of India, the term 'Hindu' occurs mainly in relation to negative appellations, such as backward, fundamentalist, chauvinist or even fascist, not only in small or fringe Hindu groups, but also in some of the largest Hindu religious organizations and associations. Even the term 'Hindu terrorism' has been widely used, though no real instances of it have ever been

proved. The Western news media would rarely if ever, apply such negative terms to a majority religion such as Christianity or Islam in their own countries, particularly to the largest groups representing these religions. Meanwhile, I saw that non-Hindu groups are seldom criticized in the Indian press, which would make it appear that Hinduism is more intolerant than other religions, which is hardly the case as Hinduism has no global conversion agenda as they do.

While in India, I also came across the idea of new Hinduism, which I had gained an appreciation for, through my own studies. Studying the Vedas in the original Sanskrit, I discovered that what the Vedas actually said was quite different than their modern interpretations by Western academics and even by some Indian scholars. The Vedas were twisted by Western scholars to fit into a Eurocentric view of history that saw no significant indigenous civilization in India in spite of its vast Vedic literature and the yogic, Vedanta and Buddhist teachings that came from ancient India.

I was appalled to learn that these colonialist views of the Vedas were still taught in schools in India today (and embraced by the anti-colonialist Marxists). I decided to take it upon myself to help correct these wrong views, which I attempted to do in various books and articles over the past few decades.

I met with representatives of the new Hinduism—modern Hindus seeking to rediscover their Hindu spiritual roots—on my visit to India. They had a broad view of Hindu Dharma as part of a movement towards a global culture and universal spirituality, or Hinduism as Sanatana Dharma. Such individuals were generally highly educated, knew a number of languages, had travelled to many countries and valued Hinduism from a standpoint of intelligence and modernity, not out of lack of contact with the greater world.

To my surprise and chagrin, I found that these were often the same people that the English language press of India would blindly label as fundamentalists. Though they were gentle people overall, the media was likely to portray them as dangerous and violent. They were called fascists not for any aggressive religious conservatism, but for finding real value in Hinduism and for not embracing materialist political values. These dedicated Hindus demonstrated an appreciation of religion, spirituality and science, such as I found in no fundamentalist

groups in America, or even among the most orthodox of the Abrahamic traditions. As I met these representatives of new Hinduism before I knew of the social and political polarization of India, I could not be influenced by the negative portrayals of them in the press when I did discover these, which existed in abundance, particularly in the 1980s when I began to spend significant time in India.

Perhaps the greatest irony of this situation is that Western-educated Hindus are looking for a universality, humanitarianism and enlightened attitude about life, such as already exists within their own tradition that they are denigrating without ever deeply examining. True enlightened culture does not reside in liberal or leftist politics but in the science of yoga and in the practice of meditation. There is no conflict between traditional Hindu or dharmic values and the most enlightened and global values of humanity.

One can promote Vedic values, which rest upon honouring all life as sacred, and be modern, futuristic, and universal in one's views. India's rishi culture is a culture of Dharma, a yogic way of life in harmony with the universe, recognizing the same Self or Atman in all beings, which connects us to the entire cosmos as a single being. That is why the teachings of Hindu Dharma through yoga, Vedanta and Ayurveda are spreading worldwide and being taken up by enlightened thinkers and innovators. These core Vedic insights and ways of knowledge need to be honoured in India, taken up by its intellectuals, and looked at in a positive light by the media. Hindu thinkers must also become more active and expressive, willing to debate and dialogue in order to show the relevance of their great tradition of inner knowledge extending from the ancient past to the new century and information technology era.

India's Problems and Their Solution

Today, there is certainly much wrong with India and many domains of its life and society require major improvements. Yet, it is wrong to think that these problems are simply caused by Hindu Dharma or would be removed by its rejection. Certainly, they are not caused by Hindu spirituality, which is the most comprehensive, liberal and

expansive in the world with its view that the entire world is one family and the entire universe is one Self. Some of these problems, such as the caste system, have their roots in the older Hindu social system. Yet, these are not based on a real understanding of Hindu cultural forms but on their misapplication through time in which they have become rigid, and need to be removed from.

There are some Hindu groups which could be called fanatic, backwards or superstitious. Yet these represent only a very small part of Hinduism and there are very few of the Hindu groups which have been accused of these things. Compared to monotheistic religions, the percentage of Hindus who have exclusive and intolerant ideas about religion is very minor. In fact, most so-called fundamentalist Hindus have a far more liberal view of religion than orthodox or even liberal Christians and Muslims, extending to their most prominent religious leaders.

Most of the problems of modern India have been caused by Nehruvian socialism and communism. In this regard, the economic and social problems in India have their parallels in what similar socialist states experience. In addition, many problems in India have their roots in centuries of foreign domination that causes people to lose their self-respect and to cease making efforts to improve themselves. This has been aggravated by the prevalence of anti-Hindu ideological movements, such as communism, Christianity and Islam, which still maintain a strong missionary presence in India.

What the English media of India portrays as a battle between modern secular liberals and backward Hindus, is more accurately a struggle between a corrupt and rigid leftist elite and Hindu spiritual groups concerned with the welfare of the country. The so-called militant Hindu fundamentalists are seldom either militant or fundamentalist, but simply a voice of political dissent that aims at greater national unity. The so-called secular liberals include corrupt politicians sustaining themselves by various vote banks through promoting social division along religious and caste lines—the very things they accuse the Hindu groups of doing.

Each country, like each person, has a soul and a destiny. India too has her soul and destiny, which is to be a land of religious freedom, yoga and spiritual practices. Unless a person lives up to their soul

value or Dharma, he or she cannot be successful or happy in life. The same is true of a country. It is not the soul or Dharma of India to become another economic giant like the USA, which is not to say that India needs to remain poor. It is not her Dharma to become another communist land, and communism is already a thing of the past. Nor is it her Dharma to adapt an exclusive religious belief like that of Islam or Christianity, which claim that other religions are false, inferior or out of date. Above all, it is not India's Dharma to slavishly imitate the West in culture, mind or religion.

India must wake up to her destiny, which is to revive her dharmic spiritual culture and yoga traditions and share it for the benefit of all humanity. This requires that the intellectual elite of the country cease denigrating the soul of India in hasty and superficial attempts to be modern and humanitarian, or rich and famous. It requires a new Hinduism that corrects the social evils of the older Hinduism while maintaining the greater spiritual basis of the tradition.

Such a new Hinduism or awakening to Sanatana Dharma, the universal tradition, is essential not only for India but for the entire world. Without reconnecting with our older spiritual traditions and their yogic sciences, we will not have the foundation to move forward to a true enlightened age of humanity. Fortunately, India appears to be beginning this awakening, however slow, difficult or painful it may be, and it may prove unstoppable for the future. The next few years are critical for this dharmic transformation of the country. A spiritually awakened India is crucial not only for India but for the world as it is falling more into chaos, division and new threats of war. India's message of Dharma, however, cannot spread if it is not first embraced within the country, and above all by its leaders and educators.

Misrepresentations of Hinduism in the Press: Ayodhya and Babri Masjid¹

Hindus do not have a history of invading other countries, promoting any form of aggression or domination at military or political levels. They have not sent missionaries to other countries preaching to them that their own religions are evil and trying to persuade or intimidate them to adopt Hindu beliefs. They have not economically exploited other countries as their colonies. They have never said that Truth or God belongs only to Hindus, and those who believe otherwise are unholy, sinners and ought to be condemned.

Hindus have a history of respect for all religions, which is almost unparalleled in the rest of the world. Yet we find that in the news media, including that of India itself, anti-Hindu attitudes are common as if it were the Hindus who were responsible for religious violence in South Asia. Hindus are spoken of in a negative way that is not done to religious groups whose behaviour has been far more violent, exclusive or oppressive. Anti-Hindu statements appear to be acceptable and few question them, while those who do are branded intolerant.

Let us take the instance of the Ayodhya incident in the December of 1992. Newspapers throughout the world stated that 'Hindu Militants Destroy Mosque' projecting the image of Hindus both as

militants and as mosque destroyers. But what really did take place and what is the history behind it?

Hindu groups did demolish a structure that was built by a Muslim invader, Babar, in the sixteenth century, and it had at times been used as a mosque over the centuries, but not for many decades. Some say that the structure was not originally constructed in the style of a true mosque, lacking minarets and other architecture that is typical of a mosque. Yet the site had been regularly used for Hindu worship all along, more so recently after Hindu religious statues appeared there in 1949 CE. A steady stream of thousands of Hindu pilgrims come to worship Lord Rama there every day, though the site is closely guarded by police and with walls and fences.

Hindus claim the site as the original location of a grand Hindu temple dedicated to Lord Rama, an avatar or divine incarnation. In 1528 CE, this was demolished and replaced by a mosque as a victory monument by the invading armies of the Mughal king, Babar, whose armies attacked India from Central Asia. Over the centuries Hindus and Sikhs fought dozens of battles to reclaim the site and succeeded several times in holding it under their power for short periods of time. In the nineteenth century, the Hindus brought a case in the British courts to reclaim the site. The British, who never favoured Hindu causes, did rule against the case and did not recognize the injustice involved.

The Babri Masjid site is not located in any Muslim holy place, such as Mecca or Medina but in one of the seven sacred cities of the Hindus, Ayodhya. While Hindus all over the world know of Lord Rama and Ayodhya, very few Muslims outside of India know anything of Babri Masjid. Calling the site a mosque is thus inaccurate. It should have been called a disputed structure from the very beginning.

Yet, the press did not say that ‘Hindus destroy a disputed structure in their sacred city of Ayodhya, which Muslims had not used as a mosque for decades’, because this would not be much of a story, and not provoke the outrage against Hindus the media wanted to promote. The result was that the press not only misrepresented what the Hindus had done but inflamed Islamic sentiments, which added fuel to the Muslim riots that followed, initiated by the Muslim community of

India, Pakistan and Bangladesh on the belief that one of their most sacred sites had been wrongly desecrated by the idolatrous Hindus.

During the Islamic invasions of India—which were not provoked by any Hindu attack on Islamic lands and which lasted for over a thousand years—tens of thousands of Hindu temples were destroyed; in fact, this was the case with most of the temples that existed throughout the subcontinent at that time. A number of important Hindu temples, such as Somnath, were repeatedly destroyed after Hindus rebuilt them. The many great temples that Chinese travellers in the seventh century saw throughout India—Hindu, Buddhist and Jain—can rarely be found today except in ruins.

These temples were not abandoned suddenly, nor did they disappear of their own accord. The invading Muslims willfully destroyed them in an attempt to force Hindus to convert to their faith or to steal the jewels that Hindu temples abounded in. The most sacred temples of the Hindus, such as those built on the birthplaces of Rama and Krishna, were special targets. Not only were the temples destroyed, they were replaced with mosques, converted into mosques or bricks from demolished temples were used to build mosques. The history of the Islamic invasion of India—which involved genocide and enslavement of Hindus—is not well known today, particularly in the West where the history of Asia is not considered to be important. Some would like to pretend that it didn't happen at all, or that the scale of atrocities was small, that its intentions were not conversion but military conquest, or that being a thing of the past, we should forget about it in order to protect communal harmony.

India was partitioned in 1947 in favour of the Muslim minority which claimed that it could not have its rights in a Hindu majority state. In the process, most Hindu temples left in Pakistan were neglected, taken over or destroyed. The real history of India is one of Hindu temples being destroyed on a massive scale, and yet this is seldom recounted. In the Ayodhya incident, this tragic history was conveniently ignored and not deemed relevant.

At the same time as the Ayodhya demolition, and in retaliation of it, dozens of Hindu temples were destroyed in Pakistan and Bangladesh. Some were attacked in Great Britain and other countries outside of India. Yet such stories were treated as mere footnotes to the

Ayodhya mosque destruction as if the Hindus were responsible for them by what they did with one disputed mosque, and Muslims were not responsible for their own actions once provoked by Hindus, however much more destructive they were. Yet, by the same logic, the Hindu demolition of the Babri Masjid was in fact, an effort to rectify the greater destruction done by Muslim armies to Hindu temples in the past. Why should it not receive the same consideration?

If we look at how the news media treated the event, it appears that one Hindu demolition of a disputed mosque was more newsworthy and an expression of greater intolerance than the Islamic destruction of any number of Hindu temples. Is this not prejudice and an anti-Hindu attitude of great proportions? Why is the destruction of Hindu temples not a newsworthy item, but the destruction of one disputed mosque worth global headlines? In fact, Muslims also destroy mosques of other Muslim sects, such as the Ahmadiyya mosques destroyed in Pakistan, and this is surprisingly not treated as a newsworthy item. The Saudis have destroyed most of the Islamic monuments in Saudi Arabia because their strict Wahhabi form of Islam does not allow the worship of any monuments or individuals.

The real question that should arise after the Ayodhya incident is as to why did Hindus finally take to this demolition when for over a thousand years they have allowed their temples to be routinely destroyed and turned into mosques with little retaliation? The question itself provides the answer. Whether one approves of the act or not, such an oppressive history can create a sense of injustice for which vindication may be sought, particularly if it is not addressed through legal means within a reasonable period of time. The news media also failed to give importance to the fact that the Ayodhya dispute had been in the courts of India for decades, with no decision as to whether the structure was really a mosque or a temple that had been stolen.

Hindus are waking up to the history of their oppression like many other oppressed people in the post-colonial era. Like other oppressed groups, this awakening can involve a release of anger that can be disturbing. Yet it cannot be simply condemned as the news media has attempted to do. It is a part of the process of rectification that must

eventually find its balance. Given the modern information age when the facts of history can no longer be hidden, and when oppressed groups of all types are seeking to gain recognition, we must expect that Hindus will also go through this same process, and in fact need to do so. Westerners may not be accustomed to regarding Hindus as an oppressed group, but if we examine the history of India, we see that Hindus have been subject to massive racial and religious oppression, along with economic and military aggression since the Muslim invasions of the eighth century, followed by the actions of the British and the Portuguese in the colonial era. This has included genocide from Islamic armies and British-induced famines in India. So far, modern India has not yet adequately dealt with this past.

What should interest us is not why Hindus took to this demolition, but as to how Hindus could tolerate the massive destruction of their temples for so many centuries with such forbearance. This is an act of tolerance unprecedented in Western history. That it should now appear to be coming to an end should not shock anyone. The real wonder is that it has lasted for so long. The issue should get us to look at the historical grievances of the Hindus, which they are certainly entitled to claim.

After so many decades of turbulence, the building of the Ram Mandir in Ayodhya cannot be delayed much longer. Certainly, Babri Masjid will never be rebuilt and the idol of Ram at the current site will not be removed. It is hypocritical in this circumstance not to go forward with the Ram temple which will put the issue permanently to rest. This is one of the main challenges for India today.

Media Treatment of Other Religions

To further examine the issue of anti-Hindu attitudes in the press, let us compare how India is treated with respect to the other countries. The first is Saudi Arabia in which all religions are illegal except for Islam. Other religious practices are not allowed except in private, and that too only for foreigners. There is no difference between the Church, State and police, which are all run according to traditional Islamic law. By all accounts, Saudi Arabia is a fundamentalist state. It has funded various Islamic fundamentalist groups all over the world

through the years, including the many madrasas that foster terrorist Jihad. However, the West calls Saudi Arabia a 'moderate' Islamic country. If Hindus were to try to do in India even a small portion of what the Saudis have done, the world community would be appalled and might even take up arms against them.

Why is Saudi Arabia treated specially? The answer is simple, because of world dependency on Saudi oil. Economic need, unfortunately, fashions the global press and structures global ethics. We can ignore the intolerance of those we want good business relations with. Since the Western world, which dominates the mass media, has had little economic need for India, India is treated unfairly in the press (though with the economic liberalization of India, this is slowly changing). There is no comparable need, economically, to cater to the Hindus, and no threat of Hindu retaliation economically or through terrorism, so they can be unfairly condemned or bullied as is convenient.

Next, let us compare how India is treated relative to China, a communist party dictatorship, whereas India is a democracy. China has long held a special trading status with the United States, in spite of China still being formally a communist country. Anti-Chinese attitudes are seldom found in the press, except as sidelights. The Chinese are not seriously criticized for their militancy as in the South China Sea—and no real action is taken against them—though they sell weapons of mass destruction and nuclear technology to other countries, including Pakistan. The Chinese campaign of genocide in Tibet, and the destruction of Tibetan culture, is glossed over or just made a footnote when the Dalai Lama visits. Even the Chinese policy of suppressing the Muslims in their western province of Xinjiang is ignored by Muslim countries throughout the world, including Pakistan which protested strongly on the minor Babri Masjid issue.

Why is China treated differently than India? There it is also an issue of economic gain apart from fear of China's size and power. It is curious to note how humanitarian issues follow economic imperatives and that countries that are economically valuable are excused for their violations of human rights, while countries with lesser economic importance can be denigrated with alleged human rights violations, likely to be exaggerated.

Next, let us compare how the Hindu minority is treated in Islamic countries with the way the Islamic minority is treated in India. Pakistan eliminated most of its Hindu minority long ago through forceful conversion or genocide. Few Hindus are left in a land where before partition, they formed a large minority. Before partition, both Lahore and Karachi, today the largest cities in Pakistan, had Hindu majorities. Those Hindus left are among the poorest and most ill-treated in the country. Hindus in Pakistan routinely have their women abducted and forced into Islamic marriages, and there is little Hindus can do about this, except pay large bribes if they can manage to get the money. Yet, few media or human rights groups even in India care to mention this fact. The Hindu minority in Bangladesh has also been oppressed and dispossessed of its property and is dwindling in numbers. Yet, the global press does not mention this either. While it is recognized that the genocide in Bangladesh in 1971–2 was one of the worst in history and numbered up to three million people killed, the press seldom mentions the fact that it was mainly Hindus who died, and that it was largely a religion-based genocide.

On the other hand, though Muslims may be subject to some degree of discrimination in India, their numbers have grown, and Muslim refugees continue to come to India, many millions from Bangladesh alone. Muslims have occupied major government positions in India including that of the president (the only exception being the position of the prime minister) while Hindus in Pakistan have had minimal political power or presence. The number of mosques is increasing rapidly in India while the few temples left in Pakistan are rarely more than ruins. Clearly, India has not stifled Islam the way Pakistan has stifled Hinduism. Yet the media seems only concerned about the rights of Indian Muslims, not the rights of Hindus in Pakistan or Bangladesh who don't seem to be counted as human beings.

Why is there such a disparity of treatment? Are Muslim lives and rights more important than those of Hindus? Should not all human beings have equal rights? The greater number of Islamic countries and the influence of petrodollars is certainly part of this disparity, as is the fear of Islamic terrorist retaliation. Indian media's own lack of concern for Hindus is another important factor. This goes back to Congress and leftist influences that are opposed to the Hindu religion

as their main political opposition and have long been cultivating minority Islamic vote banks.

Distortions about Hindu Gurus and Practices

The Western press often proclaims Hinduism as being based on polytheism and idolatry, not on monism and yogic spirituality which it really is. Hindu practices of yoga and meditation, its seeking of cosmic consciousness and view of Self-realization as the highest goal of life, and its many great modern sages, such as Ramakrishna, Aurobindo and Ramana Maharshi, are seldom given credit in the mainstream Western media, though they are well known to many yoga practitioners. The sophisticated nature of Hindu philosophy, psychology and cosmology are generally ignored. Western news media from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) to the New York Times' accounts of India focus on social evils, such as the caste system, mistreatment of women and dowry deaths, without showing the deeper side of Hinduism. This would be like representing American culture through drug addiction, sexual promiscuity and divorce courts and ignoring the other aspects of the culture.

If the spiritual teachings of India are mentioned, the Western media labels them as 'cults' even though they have been the fabric of one of the greatest civilizations of the world throughout history. How would Western people feel if predominant Western religions were called cults in the Eastern world? How would Christians feel if the news media of India called Christianity a cult? Christian missionaries in India have broken up families and sowed dissension in Hindu society far more effectively than any so-called Hindu cult leaders in the West.

Some Hindus claim that Hindus must be subject to a higher standard, that their tradition does not allow violence or intolerance that other religions may accept or even promote. Hence, oppression of Hindus does not bother them as much as Hindus oppressing non-Hindus. Yet, to create a higher standard for Hindus does not mean to misrepresent their behaviour relative to other groups. We cannot say that temple destroying is all right for Muslims because it is part of their religion, but reclaiming Hindu sacred sites that have been turned

into mosques is not right for Hindus who should follow a policy of total non-violence. There must be a single ethical standard for all human beings. The higher standard of tolerance in Hindu Dharma does not mean that anything that suggests intolerance among Hindus should be broadcast to the global media as a great evil, while intolerant actions among other groups, particularly against Hindus, should be ignored as a courtesy to the religions involved to promote harmony with them.

Anti-Hindu attitudes should be questioned as ethnic and religious discrimination; old missionary denigrations of Hindus should be deemed superstitious, primitive and backwards. As long as such negative attitudes persist in the world press, they will breed further misunderstanding and conflict. Yet, the place where these anti-Hindu attitudes must first be changed is in the English language press of India. We cannot expect the global press not to follow anti-Hindu attitudes that derive from India itself. And India can never rise up as long as it is attacking its own ancient dharmic civilization.

This doesn't mean freedom of the press should be challenged or curtailed. Freedom is essential in the dissemination of information, and no religion should have control over that. But Hindus should stop being passive relative to India's news media and enter into a dialogue with it, questioning or criticizing it when it misrepresents their traditions, or creating an alternative media that better represents their views. We see a number of new movements in this direction today with a Hindu voice arising more strongly and challenging long-standing anti-Hindu prejudices. The youth of India is slowly awakening to the greatness and importance of its Hindu and yogic heritage.

As someone from America who has studied the deeper side of Hinduism and learned how much Hinduism is misrepresented and misunderstood, I have been compelled to speak out on these issues. Greater communication would go far in correcting such enduring anti-Hindu prejudices. Given the extent of the problem, it will take time to correct and the vested interests opposed to it will not give in easily. However, there are now those who are presenting the truth about Hinduism and the history of India and the old distortions will no longer go unchallenged.

A Hindu voice needs to be raised again and without it, Hindu temples are likely to remain in ruins, casting a shadow on the future of Hinduism. This Hindu voice must not simply be a religious protest; it must address the media and the political realities of the world today in all their complexity. Jai Sri Ram!

Hindu Fundamentalism: What Is It?

Fundamentalism is an easily discernable phenomenon in belief-oriented religions, such as Christianity and Islam which have a simple and exclusive pattern to their faith. They generally insist that there is only one God, who has only one Son or final Prophet, and only one true scripture, which is literally God's Word. They hold that belief in this one God and his chief representative brings salvation in an eternal heaven and disbelief causes condemnation to an eternal hell. Muslims daily chant 'There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his (last) prophet'. Most Christians, whether Catholic or Protestant, regard belief in Christ as one's personal saviour and the only true way to salvation.

Fundamentalists are literalists in these traditions who hold rigidly to their beliefs and insist that since their religion alone is true, other religions should not be tolerated, particularly in the lands where members of their religion are in a majority. Fundamentalists generally hold to their religion's older social customs and refuse to integrate into the broader stream of modern society that recognizes freedom of belief.

Fundamentalism can usually be discriminated from orthodoxy, but tends to overlap with it, particularly in the case of Islam. Most orthodox Christians and Muslims tolerate those of other religious beliefs, though they may not agree with them and may not be involved in the militancy and social backwardness of fundamentalist groups. They usually have little trouble functioning in modern

society, though they may keep to themselves in matters of religion, and still regard that theirs is the only true religion. The strictly orthodox in these religions, however, may not be very different from fundamentalists and often support them.

While the news media of the Western world and of India speaks of Hindu fundamentalism, no one appears to have really defined what it is. Is there a Hindu fundamentalism comparable to Islamic or Christian fundamentalism? Using such a term merely assumes that there is, but what is the evidence for it? Are there Hindu beliefs of the same order as the absolute beliefs of fundamentalist Christianity and Islam?

Yet, if we look deeply, we can discover that whatever problems might exist in Hinduism, no fundamentalism like that found in Christianity or Islam can exist in Hindu Dharma. Hinduism is an open and diverse tradition with many names and forms for the Divine, many great teachers and divine incarnations, many sacred books and a pursuit of Self-realization that does not recognize the existence of any eternal heaven or hell. There is no monolithic and triumphal faith called Hinduism with a set system of beliefs that all Hindus must follow which can be turned into such a rigid fundamentalism.

Fundamentalist groups insist that theirs is the only true God and that all other gods, deity names or forms are wrong. Islamic fundamentalists insist that the only God is Allah, and will not accept Hindu views of Brahman or Ishvara, much less deity forms, such as Shiva, Vishnu, Devi or Ganesha. Christian fundamentalists will not accept Hindu views of the formless Brahman or Hindu gods and goddesses, and would regard them as unholy. Yet, even a belief in god is not necessary to be a Hindu, as non-theistic Hindu systems as Samkhya reveal.

For those who speak of Hindu fundamentalism, we must ask the question: which one god do Hindu fundamentalist groups insist upon as the only true God, and which gods do they claim are false except for Him? If Hindus do not insist upon the sole reality of the one Hindu God, can they be called fundamentalists like the Christians and Muslims?

Islamic fundamentalists consider that Islam is the only true religion, that no true new faith can be established after Islam and that

with the advent of Islam, all previous faiths, even if they were valid up to that time, became outdated. Christian fundamentalists hold that Christianity alone is true, that Jesus is the only saviour, and that other religions are false, if not the work of the devil. Even orthodox people in these traditions may hold these views.

Hindus are not of a single formal faith. They are divided into Shaivites (those who worship Shiva), Vaishnavas (those who worship Vishnu), Shaktas (those who worship the Goddess), Ganapatas (those who worship Ganesh), Smartas and a number of such other groups. These are constantly being revised relative to modern gurus around whom new movements may be founded, such as the Swaminarayan movement, the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda groups or the followers of Sri Aurobindo. Those whom the media might call Hindu fundamentalists are divided up into different sects.

Which common belief can be found in all these Hindu groups that constitute Hindu fundamentalism? Which common Hindu fundamentalist platform do the different sects of Hinduism share? Is it a Shaivite, Vaishnava, Shakta or another type of fundamentalism? How do such diverse groups maintain their harmony and identity under the Hindu fundamentalist banner? While one can make a code of belief for Christian or Islamic fundamentalism, what code of belief applies to Hindu fundamentalism of all the different sects? Can one call those who believe in the law of karma to be fundamentalists? All Hindus accept dharmic principles of living and the need for sadhana or spiritual practices, including yoga and meditation, but emphasize individual search over any formal or enmasse belief. Hindu Dharma is more a way of knowledge than a belief system.

No Hindu—including a so-called Hindu fundamentalist—would insist that there is only one true faith called Hinduism and that all other spiritual paths are false. Hindu Dharma contains too much pluralism to allow for that. Its tendency is not to coalesce into a fanatic unity, but to embrace many paths in an overall universality that cannot be limited to any of them.

Fundamentalist groups insist upon belief in the literal truth of one book as the Word of God, which they base their behaviour on. Muslim fundamentalists insist that the Koran is the Word of God and that all necessary knowledge is contained in it. Christian

fundamentalists say the same thing of the Bible. Again, even orthodox or ordinary Muslims and Christians often believe this. Hindus have many holy books, such as the Vedas, the Agamas, the Puranas, the Bhagavad Gita, the Ramayana and so on, which contain a great variety of teachings and different points of view, and not one of these books is required to be literally followed by all Hindus. Which single holy book do Hindu fundamentalists hold literally to be the Word of God, which they base their behaviour upon? Christian and Islamic fundamentalists flout their holy books and are ever quoting from them to justify their actions. Which Hindu Bible do the Hindu fundamentalists carry to quote and preach from and find justification in? The most common Hindu text is the Bhagavad Gita, which teaches unity, the acceptance of many paths and many approaches to Self-realization.

Fundamentalist groups are involved in proselytizing and in conversion activities to encourage other people to adopt their beliefs. They promote missionary efforts throughout the world to bring the entire world to their views. This is also true of ordinary or orthodox Muslims and Christians. Fundamentalists are merely more vehement in their practices and are more likely to resort to violence. What missionary activities do Hindu fundamentalists promote throughout the world? What missions in other countries have Hindu fundamentalists set up to convert Christians, Muslims or those of other beliefs to the only true religion called Hinduism? How many Hindus are motivated by a missionary spirit to discredit people of other religious beliefs in order to convert and save them from damnation?

Fundamentalist groups not only condemn those of other beliefs to an eternal hell, they may make death threats against those who criticize their beliefs. Which Hindu has ever condemned non-Hindus to an eternal hell, or issued declarations asking for the death of anyone for abandoning Hinduism for another religion? Where have Hindus ever stated that it is punishable by death to criticize Krishna, Rama or any other great Hindu leader? There are certainly plenty of books, including many by Christians and Muslims, which portray Hinduism in a negative light. We find such books readily available in

India. Yet, if Hindus in turn, question such distortions they are called fundamentalists.

Fundamentalists insist upon returning to some traditional law code like the Islamic Sharia or Biblical law codes, which are regressive by modern standards of justice and humanitarianism. Which law code do Hindu fundamentalists seek to re-establish? Which Hindu groups are agitating for the return of the law code of the Manu Samhita, for example (which incidentally has a far more liberal and spiritual law code than the Sharia or the Bible)? In fact, very few Hindus have even read Manu Samhita, a law code of two thousand years ago, or have a copy of the book among their sacred texts.

Fundamentalists are usually opposed to modern science. Christian and Islamic fundamentalists reject the theory of evolution and insist that God created the world some mere six thousand years ago. Even in America, Christian fundamentalists are trying to have this creation theory taught in public schools and would like to have the evolution theory replaced. Which scientific theories are Hindu fundamentalists opposed to and try to prevent being taught in schools today? The Hindu view of time and space is in fact more extensive than that of even modern science.

Fundamentalism creates various political parties limited to members of that religion only, which aim at setting up religious dictatorships. Which exclusively Hindu religious party exists in India or elsewhere in the world, and what is its common Hindu fundamentalist platform? Who is asking for a Hindu state that forbids the practice of other religions and allows only Hindu religious centres to be built? This is what fundamentalist groups are asking for and what they have instituted in a number of countries where they have taken power, such as in Iran and in Saudi Arabia.

Fundamentalism is often involved with militancy and sometimes with terrorism. Which Hindu minorities in the world are violently agitating for their separate state? How many planes have Hindu fundamentalists hijacked, how many hostages have they taken, how many bombs have they planted? Which terrorist activities are Hindu fundamentalists promoting throughout the world? Who must go through special airport security to deal with the threat of Hindu

terrorism, even in India or Pakistan? Which countries are stalking down Hindu fundamentalist terrorists who are plotting against them?

Saudi Arabia is regarded as a pious or orthodox Islamic country, and is usually not called fundamentalist even by the news media of India. Non-Islamic places of worship cannot be built there, by law. No non-Islamic worship is allowed in public. Visitors must hide their religious practices so as not to offend the Saudis and cannot even bring their religious books with them. Traditional Islamic law, including mutilation for various offences, is strictly enforced by a special religious police. If we apply any standard definition of fundamentalism, Saudi Arabia is certainly a fundamentalist country. Which Hindu community insists upon such domination of one religious belief, law and social practices like that of Saudi Arabia?

Hindu Fundamentalism and Hindu Resurgence

Hence we must ask: what are so-called Hindu fundamentalists accused of doing? Is it the belief in the unique superiority of their religion, the sole claim of their scripture as the Word of God, their saviour or prophet as ultimate for all humanity, that those who believe in their religion go to an eternal heaven and those who don't, go to an eternal hell, the need to convert the world to their beliefs—these views are found not only in Christian and Islamic fundamentalism but even among the orthodox. There are no Hindu fundamentalist statements of such nature. Can we imagine any Hindu swearing that there is no God but Rama, that Tulsidas is his only prophet and that the Ramayana is the only true scripture—that those who believe differently will be condemned by Lord Rama to eternal damnation and those who criticize Tulsidas should be killed?

Hindus are called fundamentalists for wanting to retake a few of their old holy places, such as Ayodhya, out of the many thousands destroyed during centuries of foreign domination. Several Hindu groups are united around this cause. They are not seeking to take over or destroy the holy sites of other religions. If it is fundamentalism, what is the fundamentalist ideology, belief and practice behind it? Hindus, alone of all people, have failed to take back their holy sites after the end of the colonial era. If they are fundamentalists for

seeking to do so, then what should we call Pakistan or Bangladesh who have destroyed many Hindu holy sites and were not simply taking back Islamic sites that the Hindus had previously usurped?

Hindus today are called fundamentalists for organizing themselves politically. Yet, members of all other religions have done this, while Hinduism is by all accounts the least political of all religious groups. There are many Christian and Islamic parties throughout the world, and in all countries where these religions are in a majority, that make sure to exert whatever political influence they can. Why shouldn't Hindus have a political voice even in India where they are a majority?

There are those who warn that Hindu rule would mean the creation of a Hindu theocratic state. Yet, what standard Hindu theology is there, and what Hindu theocratic state has ever existed? Will it be a Shaivite, Vaishnava or Vedantic theocracy? Which Hindu theocratic model will it be based upon? Is there a model of Hindu kings, such as the Caliphs of early Islam to go back to, or like the Christian emperors of the Middle Ages? Which famous Hindu king was a fundamentalist who tried to eliminate all other beliefs from the land or tried to spread Hinduism throughout the world by the sword? Does Rama or Krishna provide such a model? Does Shivaji provide such a model? If no such model exists, what is the fear of a militant Hindu theocratic rule based upon?

Traditional Hindus do exist. There are Hindus who are caught in conservative or regressive social customs, such as untouchability or mistreatment of women, which must be countered. There are serious problems in Hindu society that must be addressed, but these should be examined as per their nature and cause; these are not some uniform Hindu fundamentalism but wrong practices that are often contrary to real Hindu thought. To lump them together as problems of Hindu fundamentalism fails to examine them adequately but, rather, uses them as a scare tactic to discredit Hinduism as a whole. There are some Hindus who may believe that their religion is superior and want to keep it separate from other religions. In this regard, they are no different than most Christians and Muslims.

The fact is that there is no monolithic fundamentalism possible among Hindus who have no uniform belief structure. A charge of social backwardness and discriminatory attitudes can perhaps be

made against Hindus but this is not the same as fundamentalism which misinterprets Hinduism as a religion of militancy and aggression. The charge of fundamentalism is usually made against Hindu groups, such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), which does not support the caste system and other such backward customs anyway.

What is called Hindu fundamentalism is in fact generally a reaction to Islamic, Christian and Communist fundamentalisms, which are all organized according to an exclusive belief system and a strategy to take over the world. These three fundamentalisms are attacking India from within as well as threatening it from outside. Islamic terrorist activity continues in India, particularly in Kashmir. India is under attack by self-proclaimed Islamic states, such as Pakistan, where Hindus have already been almost eliminated. Under these circumstances, why should it be wrong for Hindus in India to want a national government that defends their rights? What other country is willing to defend the rights or traditions of Hindus? Christian and Islamic missionary activity continues strongly in many parts of India. Do these missionary groups portray Hinduism as a valid religion in its own right even in a Hindu majority country?

Hindu Dharma is a very tolerant religion and consists of enhanced spiritual teaching; it is often said to be the mother of all spiritual traditions in the world. No other religion in the world accepts such a diversity of beliefs and practices or is so ready to acknowledge the validity of other paths. The idea of the unity of all religions was practically invented by modern Hindus such as Ramakrishna, Vivekananda and Gandhi. As Hinduism is by nature a tolerant religion, even a little intolerance among Hindus is regarded as Hindu fundamentalism. And the charge of intolerance can be used to discredit Hindu groups, who are extremely sensitive to such a negative portrayal.

Throughout history, Islam and Christianity owing to the exclusive nature of their beliefs, have generally been intolerant religions (though there have been exceptions). They have not accepted the validity of other religious practices and contain in themselves little diversity as compared to Hinduism. How many Christian or Muslim leaders proclaim that all religions are one or that Hindus and

Buddhists have as valid a religion as they do (and therefore do not need to be converted)? As these religions are generally intolerant, their members have to be extremely intolerant to be called fundamentalists.

Hindus often have a double standard in religion that works against them. They try to tolerate, accept or even appreciate exclusivism, intolerance and fundamentalism when practised by those of other beliefs. For example, how many Hindus criticize the far more obvious fundamentalism and exclusivism among Christians and Muslims? Other Hindus, even when justified, may regard any Hindu criticism of other religions as intolerance. In addition, even pride in Hinduism is called fundamentalism for those who don't want Hindus to awaken.

A related term that we sometimes meet with in the Indian press is 'Hindu chauvinism' though terms such as 'Christian chauvinism' or 'Islamic chauvinism' do not occur. Chauvinists believe in the special superiority of their particular group. This term is used mainly relative to white chauvinists, those who think that whites are genetically better than dark-skinned people, or in the case of male chauvinists or those who think that men are inherently better than women. Hindus may praise their religion and use a flowery language in doing so, but they do not claim that Hindus own the Truth and those of other backgrounds cannot find it. Christians and Muslims routinely believe that only members of their religion go to heaven and everyone else, particularly idol worshippers such as Hindus, suffer damnation. Which Hindu fundamentalists have similar ideas? The Vatican has warned its monks and nuns not to experiment with yoga and Eastern forms of religious practice, which it branded as selfish, false and misleading.

Hindus suffer from a lack of pride in their own traditions which silences them or makes them apologetic. The British treated them as racially inferior and both Christians and Muslims treated them as religiously perverted. That some Hindus may now express pride in their religion is a good sign and shows a Hindu awakening. Unfortunately, the groups who may be challenged by this awakening have labelled this pride as intolerant. Naturally, some Hindu groups may express this pride in an excessive way, just as happened with the Black Pride idea in America during the Civil Rights Movement. This

is only an attempt to counter a lack of pride and self-respect, it is hardly the assertion of any enduring cultural militancy and does not have the history like the fundamentalism of Christianity and Islam which goes back to the early eras of these faiths.

Such terms as 'fundamentalist' and 'chauvinist' are much less applicable to Hinduism than to other religions and generally are a great exaggeration. They are a form of name-calling, and do not represent a clearly thought-out understanding. It is also interesting to note that many of the people who brand Hindus in this light are often themselves members of more exclusivist ideologies including Marxism, which have their own agenda to gain world-domination and to take over India.

This does not mean that Hindus should not be criticized. On a social level, many Hindus are trapped in backward social customs, or caught in the corruption or materialism of modern society. On an inner level, Hindus often suffer from lack of creativity, initiative, and original thinking. They want to imitate either their own older thinkers, whose teachings may not be entirely relevant today or, if modern, they imitate the trends of Western culture which are *unspiritual*. As a group, Hindus mainly suffer from passivity, disunity and a lack of organization, and they are poor at communicating who they are to the world as a whole. Relative to their own tradition, their main problem is that they fail to study, practise or support it, or to defend it if Hindu teachings are misrepresented or if Hindus are oppressed.

These are not the problems of an aggressive or militant fundamentalism but the opposite, that of people who have lost confidence in themselves and in their spiritual traditions. Hindus are not in danger of being overly active and militant but of remaining so passive, resigned and apologetic that they are unable to function as a coherent group or speak with a common voice about any issue. They have been slow even to defend themselves against unwarranted assaults, much less to assert themselves or to attack others. There is no danger of a monolithic fundamentalism in India, such as in Iran or Saudi Arabia. The danger is of a divided and passive religion that leaves itself prey to external forces and thereby gradually disintegrates. More determined activity among Hindus, almost

whatever it might be, would be a good sign as it shows that they are not asleep! To brand such activity, which may be agitated at first, as fundamentalist because it causes this sleep to be questioned, is a great mistake.

In this regard Sri Aurobindo's insight may be helpful. He said, 'The Christians brought darkness rather than light. That has always been the case with aggressive religions—they tend to overrun Earth. Hinduism on the other hand is passive, and therein lies its danger' (Aurobindo 2000, 177).¹

It is time Hindus stopped accepting wrong designations and negative stereotypes of their wonderful religion. Certainly, aspects of Hinduism need to be reformed, and Hindus are not all required to agree with each other or accept any dogma, but there is nothing in this beautiful spiritual tradition that warrants such debasing depictions as terrorism, fundamentalism and chauvinism. If we look at the aspects commonly ascribed to fundamentalism in other religions, we find few of these even among so-called Hindu fundamentalists.

Those who accuse Hindus of being fundamentalists should question as to what they are saying. What is the fundamentalism they see, or is it merely a reaction to the oppression that Hindus have passively suffered for so long? As long as Hinduism is devalued and misrepresented, we must expect Hindus to take a stand against it. Hindus must strive to defend Hindu Dharma as best as they can. This requires projecting a positive Hindu spirit, a yogic spirit that can attract all Hindus and turn their support of their tradition in a spiritual direction. It requires not condemning other Hindus who are struggling to uphold their tradition as they understand it to be, but arousing them to the true basis of their tradition in higher consciousness.

To routinely raise negative stereotypes as fundamentalist or fascist relative to organizations that are merely trying to bring a sense of unity and common cause among Hindus is a gross abuse of language. What Hindus need is to wake up and unite, to recognize their common dharmic heritage and work together to manifest it in the world today, just as modern teachers, such as Vivekananda and Aurobindo did. Such great gurus did not speak of Hindu fundamentalism. They recognized Hindu backwardness but sought to

remedy it by going to the core of Hindu spirituality, yoga, Veda and Vedanta, the spirit of unity in recognition of the Divine Self in all, not by trying to cast a shadow on Hinduism as a whole.

India Is More Than Any Nation-State

India is often criticized for not succeeding in becoming a unified and disciplined modern nation-state like the countries of Europe or the United States. The ongoing disunity and separatist movements within the country appear to attest to this fact. However, the problem is not as simple as this might suggest. India is a subcontinent comparable to Europe as a whole, and not a small country such as Germany or France. India has a larger population than the whole of Africa or all of Europe, which is about one-sixth of the world's people. If India has had difficulty in maintaining its unity, it has fared much better than Europe, which even today is divided into various small states, much as if the different states of India were independent nations. Though the European Union (EU) was created to bring unity to Europe at least on an administrative level, the continued existence of the EU, or its ability to represent Europe as a whole, is now in doubt.

The European concept of nation-state originally reflected small countries that were homogenous in terms of culture and population, such as nineteenth-century Germany, France and England. It was a narrow idea of nationhood with a short history, creating nations out of countries whose existence could only be traced back a few centuries, which encompassed small geographical regions with people belonging to the same ethnic groups and speaking the same languages. Such narrow nation-states fragmented the subcontinent of Europe and caused two devastating world wars in which tens of millions perished. This nation-state idea could never work for a larger

region, such as India or China, and has long become regressive in the European context. Europe has had to work hard to counter the divisions and prejudices this restricted idea of nationhood has created and still has far to go in order to do so.

Europe did have its colonial empires, but these were basically an imperialistic rule of one European nation over colonies outside of Europe, not an integrated administration encompassing the whole of the European subcontinent. Many great intellectuals of Europe, such as Voltaire and Goethe, hoped for a greater European cultural identity, but their ideas could not triumph in the political arena because of the growing ascendancy of nation-states. Europe failed through history in uniting as a subcontinent, though some attempts in this direction, which eventually fell short, were made particularly under Napoleon.

The only country of comparable size that has succeeded better than India in maintaining its unity as a country is China. Yet, China has a lesser diversity of people than India with the Han Chinese making up 90 per cent of the population, and China has often resorted to violence and genocide to maintain its central rule. For example, in recent times, China has strictly controlled its Islamic population and repopulated its Uighur Islamic region with Han Chinese so that the Muslims are becoming a minority in their own region. China is attempting the same repopulation strategy in Tibet. While China may have succeeded better than India in maintaining the unity of a larger nation-state, it has succeeded only through brute force, which most Indians are not likely to emulate or want to see occur in their own country.

Islamic countries overall have failed in producing any large nation-states like India, China or the United States, though they did have large empires till the Ottoman rule that extended into the early twentieth century. The Islamic world today consists of individual countries, such as Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia or Saudi Arabia, which include fledgling democracies, military dictatorships and medieval-style monarchies, often at odds with one another. Islam so far has failed in producing any real secular state in the Islamic heartland of the world. Secular Turkey is now aspiring to be a new Caliphate or religious empire taking the Islamic world backwards.

The United States has better succeeded in maintaining unity over a large land mass because it was populated by immigrants from distant lands who were willing to give up their separate identities, though it did have its North-South divisions and slavery issues. The US massacred or relocated the indigenous people, the native Americans, so they could not pose any problem.

We see, therefore, that developing a unified but diverse culture in a large and highly-populated region, such as India is attempting, has not been accomplished anywhere in the world. The main problem India has is with the consequences of the partition that created Pakistan. It has resulted in various separatists movements of different religious, regional or political persuasions, each hoping to have a state or territory of its own. Pakistan has faced the same problem, already becoming divided into two countries of Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Modern India has not gone through such a nationalistic phase of small nation-states such as modern Europe, dividing the country. It has not had a period, such as modern Europe, in which the different states within India have functioned as different countries or regarded themselves as separate nations. Part of the fragmentation in modern India has occurred because some parts of the country, such as Tamil Nadu for example, have had such nationalistic sentiments, but these have dissipated over time or remained in the background as cultural differences. It is easy to observe from Europe that such small nation-states wreak havoc upon a subcontinent and if India were to be divided into them, it would have had similar wars, genocides and relocations of population, followed by a long-term seeking for reunification along economic lines as is the case with Europe. This is unlikely to happen owing to the cultural unity of India in its dharmic traditions that prevail in the local cultures of the North and South.

The concept of nationhood must be revised today, not only in the case of India, owing to the problems nationalism has caused all over the world. The great countries of the future will not be narrow nation-states in the nineteenth-century European style model. They will be unified regions that have an organic unity in their common land and culture. Only those parts of the world that succeed in creating larger self-supporting nations will be likely to prosper in the twenty-first century. India, China, the United States, Brazil, Russia, Indonesia and

Australia are regions of such size that have the capacity to prosper in this manner. Europe has tried to create a largely European Union beyond its many small countries, but has a long history of fragmentation to overcome in order to achieve this. Smaller nations will end up being dependent upon such larger nations as they cannot easily be self-sufficient economically or technologically, and their cultures are also likely to decline or be absorbed into a greater body.

The fact that India has not become a nation like the states of Europe is only to be expected. What India needs is a broader model of a country than such narrow nationalism allows. It requires developing not only a unity through the diverse cultural and economic basis of the Indian subcontinent, but also a unity that integrates the diversity rather than suppresses it. This agrees with the nature of Indian civilization which is based upon Hindu Dharma and its diversity that has always been synthetic in nature. It requires a dharmic view that a country should be rooted in the land and its cosmic connections, not just on the basis of a political formation or man-made laws.

Such a redefinition of national identity is not only what India needs, but also what the rest of the world looks out for. This broader concept of regional states leads to internationalism and eventually to a global approach in which the various geographical areas of the world can be brought together into a larger organic unity that includes the entire planet. To create this is not only the challenge of all present governments and closely connected with ecological thinking, but also requires a spiritual view to really accomplish this goal. India can pioneer this ecological, organic and spiritual idea of a country if it can awaken to its inner potential. The problem is that internationalism today is neocolonialism or, largely the imposition of Western political and commercial values upon all countries. True internationalism must have spiritual and yogic values, a recognition not only of human unity, but the unity of the human beings with all of nature and of the universe as a whole. This is the Hindu idea of rashtra or a region ruled by dharmic principles.

Mystic India

There is another way in which we can understand India as a nation, which is more in harmony with its yogic culture and ancient history. There are spiritual, occult and psychological forces working behind countries, affording the nation a certain character, temperament and way of action. In this regard, India as a country has probably the oldest psychic formation, and the most powerful insight of any land, holding the energy of the great rishis and yogis that have guided it over the millennia and still support it from the inner realms.

This soul of India is called Bharat Mata, meaning Mother Bharat or Mother India, who is a spiritual manifestation of the Divine Mother, not just a cultural image. Bharat Mata is also Ma Durga, the Divine Mother in her protective role as the guide and support of all. She is Mother Earth and Mother Nature in all her beauty and abundance. India is a spiritual formation, a land of the Divine Mother, a land of the gods or devas and its numerous great rishis and yogis, which represents the Mother's force or shakti. Mother India is lauded through '*Vande Mataram*' meaning, 'we worship the Mother'.

India is the spiritual mother of humanity, the mother of all mystical paths, yogic disciplines, meditative approaches and transformative mantras. This is the reality of India on the subtle planes of consciousness that has only become partially manifest in the physical Earth through history, still struggling to emerge into the material world. In this regard, Mother India reflects a great aspiration for the future unity of humanity that must surely be revealed, centuries though it may take to fully blossom.

Yet, because India is a spiritual formation of divine knowledge and devotion, it remains under attack by the undivine or asuric forces of ignorance, division and violence. These forces of destruction have prevailed in humanity historically, and are on the ascendant today with so many weapons of mass destruction and new forms of mind control in the high-tech era. For these asuric powers of ignorance, India is the ultimate target to keep the Earth and humanity asleep to its spiritual destiny, in denial of its role in the evolution of consciousness. Throughout history, there have been many asuric assaults on India extending to attacks on its gurus, sadhus and temples. Such forces of darkness remain entrenched and must be countered with realism, determination and vigilance. Today, after a

long period of foreign rule, India is waking up to its spiritual and yogic destiny, which is of tremendous benefit to humanity, but will arouse the enmity of the powers of darkness that have long dominated our material world.

This mystic India of yoga and Self-realization forms the true basis of India as a nation, not any mere constitution or system of politics, valuable as these may be. Mystic India is the India that seekers come to from all over the world, hoping to find their great master or guru and an inner experience of divinity and transcendence. Our outer ideas of ourselves as merely physical bodies and of our country as a political or economic entity are only illusions of the outgoing mind. There are sacred forces within and around us, far more important and powerful than our human technology. One experiences these higher powers of the sacred alive in India and as an integral part of its ancient dharmic heritage.

The web of cosmic forces and psychic energies in India remains the strongest on the planet. For India to arise and Bharat to awaken requires that India's role as the World Mother comes forth again, once more enshrined in the land and in the educational system with respect. This requires a radically different view of the nation and a looking beyond modern political formations, however useful these may be at an outer level. Ultimately, we must discover the entire universe within ourselves.

Time for Lord Rama to Return to Ayodhya

The Ramayana has been the most popular, widely recited and enthusiastically performed story in Asia from India to Indonesia for at least two thousand years. Its characters are embedded in the culture and history of the entire region and reflected in the names of its people and places. Even countries, such as Indonesia that later gave up Hinduism for Islam, did not relinquish the Ramayana in the process.

Both Hindus and Buddhists have long embraced the wonderful saga of the Ramayana and its unforgettable characters. The Buddhists embraced Rama as a Pratyeka-Buddha or special Buddha form. Lord Buddha hailed from the same Ikshvaku dynastic tradition as Lord Rama. The great Buddhist poet, Ashvaghosha, who wrote the Sanskrit classic story, *Buddhacharita*, the Life of the Buddha, honoured Valmiki, the author of the Ramayana, as the foremost of India's poets and his Ramayana as the most famous of poems.

The capital, Ayutthaya of Thailand, was named after Ayodhya of the Ramayana and its kings are called Rama, deriving their authority from his mystic image. A princess of Ayodhya named Suriratna is recorded to have gone to Korea and become the queen of a powerful dynasty two thousand years ago, for which the Korean government in 2001 inaugurated a special memorial in Ayodhya in India.

The story of Lord Rama remains alive and is spreading globally today. The worship of Sita-Ram carried out by great gurus from India has now reached the entire world through devotees, and chants of

‘Ram Ram’ reverberating regularly in numerous countries. The recent Hindu diaspora has also carried the fame of the Ramayana and created new shrines and temples in diverse lands from the island of Trinidad in the Caribbean to US, UK and Australia.

Why No Rama Temples in Ayodhya?

Ayodhya is an ancient Vedic city first mentioned in the Atharvaveda as the City of the Devas, founded by Manu himself, the first legendary lawgiver and king. Ayodhya is the first such Vedic city to gain enduring recognition in Vedic texts. The Sarayu River on which it was located is prominently mentioned in the Rigveda as a stream of great waters flowing to the sea, and being one of the three main rivers of India along with the Sindhu and Sarasvati.

Ayodhya is the most honoured of the seven sacred cities of classical India. It was the capital of the famous kingdom of Kosala and of the ancient solar dynasty, Surya Vamsha, ruled by its primary branch of the Ikshvakus that wielded extensive power and influence. Many great kings of the Ikshvakus are mentioned in Sanskrit literature back to the most ancient Rigveda. These include Mandhata, Purukutsa, Trasadasyu, Harishchandra, Sagara, Raghu, Dasharatha, as well as Lord Rama and Lord Buddha.

Yet, during the many decades since India’s independence in 1947, no international centre for promoting the Ramayana has been created at Ayodhya to beckon the numerous pilgrims and tourists who revere this magnificent story; nothing has been done to provide for the accommodation of these tourists who come from all corners of the globe; neither has there been any informative programme or cultural celebration to promote the great epic. India has been disrespectfully silent and unsupportive of the tradition of its greatest king and icon of Dharma that all Asia reveres. It appears that India is denying its own heritage, legacy, ruling power and international influence, accepting a subordinate if not alien status for what should be a matter of its greatest national pride. Though the Indian Independence Movement lauded and exalted the need for Ram Rajya, no Ram Rajya has been brought even to Ayodhya, and because of that, it has remained elusive in the country as a whole, where Dharma has not properly flourished.

No major modern Rama temple in Ayodhya has been built to celebrate the long-awaited independence of the country and to link it to its millennial past and great dynasties of history. Ancient Rama temples were destroyed centuries ago, and not allowed to be rebuilt during the long period of hostile Islamic rule. In fact, there are no major older Rama temples anywhere in North India, much less in Ayodhya where one would certainly expect to find them. Lord Rama was the ideal dharmic ruler of India and Ram Rajya the ideal dharmic rashtra of the nation. The invaders and their descendants were likely to have sought to destroy any Rama temples, as his heritage discredited their right to rule that was not based on Dharma, which they enforced through intimidation, violence and genocide.

Some leftist scholars state that there was originally no Rama temple in Ayodhya but only a mosque, which fanatical Hindu groups decided to destroy. Yet, think about it logically. Either Hindus did not build a Rama temple at the most sacred site of their most honoured teacher and avatar, Lord Rama, or Muslim armies destroyed it and built a mosque instead as they commonly did with Hindu temples in India. Let us not be naïve or hypocritical. A temple must have been there. The location of the mosque appears very obtrusive and was challenged by the Hindus who continued to worship Lord Rama at the site for centuries since it had been destroyed in 1528 CE.

One can certainly see the remains of temples in the construction of the Kashi Vishwanath Shiva temple in Varanasi, or of the Mathura Krishna Janmabhoomi temple. In these instances, there is a clear historical record of the tyrant, Aurangzeb, having proudly destroyed these sites. Are we to believe that Ram Janmabhoomi was different?

Ram Janmabhoomi Since 1947

After the independence of India in 1947, Hindu groups, notably the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), asked for the return of the site of Ram Janmabhoomi, the traditional birthplace of Lord Rama. Wasn't it natural that after the end of the long period of foreign rule the traditional sentiments for Lord Rama as the ideal ruler were honoured again?

Yet, the freedom of India did not release Lord Rama from exile from his place of birth but only continued his humiliating confinement to it.

Jawaharlal Nehru was opposed to the presence of Hindu idols at the Babri Masjid site in 1949 and wanted them removed. Over time, he made no effort to restore the Rama temple. While Sardar Patel managed to get the Somnath temple in Gujarat rebuilt, Nehru did not support the return of any major temples back to the Hindus, particularly the Ayodhya site, though Pakistan took over the numerous Hindu temples left in its portion of older India. Rajiv Gandhi, on the other hand, in 1986 persuaded the Uttar Pradesh chief minister to open the Babri Masjid and allowed Hindu religious rites inside the disputed structure. Yet, Rajiv Gandhi and later Congress governments, came to oppose the building of a new Ram temple, continuing Nehru's opposition to it.

As a result, the Rama temple in Ayodhya became a matter for the courts, not so much to decide as to postpone and hope that it would go away. The courts failed for decades to provide any definitive ruling, afraid of offending one party or the other. Impatient Hindu groups took the Babri Masjid down on 6 December 1992, as part of ongoing demonstrations. Yet, still the case has continued undecided in the courts. Though occasional court rulings are made after years of deliberation, the case gets taken to another court, or other objections arise to litigate the whole issue again.

The Ram Janmabhoomi site, as I have myself personally seen, sadly resembles a war zone with fences, towers, guns and military patrols, though a steady stream of pilgrims comes to worship the Rama murti which first appeared on the site in 1949. It is hardly a respectful situation for Sri Rama; a greater disregard for such a sacred figure is hard to find anywhere else in the world.

Indeed, it seems that secularism in India strangely can be defined as refusing to allow any Rama temple to come up in Ayodhya. Anyone who supports a Rama temple is likely to be labelled communal, those who do not and lament the loss of Babri Masjid are hailed for their liberalism.

Archaeologists, such as BB Lal, the former head of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), and KK Muhammed,

confirmed that there were clear remains of a temple from their detailed excavations at the site. Yet, leftist historians and their allies in the communist and Congress parties tried to deny this information for political reasons. Ayodhya has more than 150 sacred sites honouring events in the Ramayana. Yet, Marxist historians in India tell us that there never was any great Rama temple in Ayodhya. Would all these ancillary sites be there if there was no great central temple for them to come up around?

Meanwhile, the Shia Muslims have declared their willingness to give up the site, which by all indications was likely a Shia mosque to begin with. They have included it along with nine mosques to be returned to Hindus as having been built on Hindu temples. Yet, the Sunnis still stand in the way though the Babri Masjid is not one of their main sacred mosques.

Necessity of a New Honouring of Ayodhya

Ayodhya should be developed as a national heritage site for India. Lord Rama is its greatest hero and most enduring national symbol. The Ramayana is its most celebrated poem, story and epic. There is no other befitting response to the history of the country.

Yet, Ayodhya should also become a global heritage site, given its vast international connections. Ayodhya has carried India's dharmic civilization and the idea of dharmic rule and Ram Rajya to the world as a whole. Sri Rama is its pivotal figure. Bringing the devotees of Rama back to India is a wonderful way for India to share its great culture with the world.

Diwali, celebrating Rama's return to Ayodhya after his victory over Ravana in Sri Lanka, remains the most important festival and holy day in all of India, and is celebrated with great fervour throughout the country. Yet, it was only in 2017 owing to the direction of Yogi Adityanath, the new BJP chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, that a massive lighting of ghee lamps occurred in Ayodhya along the Sarayu River to celebrate Rama and Sita's return. This is likely to become a yearly affair now. The question is why did it take so long to do this? India's politicians celebrate Diwali but ignore its most important national significance.

Yogi Adityanath is restoring and renovating Ayodhya as a tourist and pilgrimage site, for which he has been severely criticized in the media. His projects include a 108-feet-tall statue of Lord Rama to be built on the Sarayu River in Ayodhya, along with new roads and infrastructure for pilgrims and tourists. Meanwhile, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led central government is creating an entire Ramayana tourist circuit to share the great Ramayana heritage. They are creating the stage for Sri Rama's return. Meanwhile, the courts are still examining the case with their typical hesitation and delay.

Why has modern India not been proud of Ayodhya, its ancient capital of Dharma and Ram Rajya, and has not restored it? This is a blatant cultural negation and abandonment; an independent country denying, not embracing its glorious past and spiritual connections. Is Ayodhya denigrated because it is Hindu and not Abrahamic or Marxist in its aspiration? Ayodhya is to Hindus what Jerusalem is to Christians or Mecca to Muslims. Don't their sentiments count in India and cannot some of the desecrations of centuries of anti-Hindu rule be removed in free India? Or, is India still hostage to foreign rulers or their sympathizers who dominate certain political parties and media houses?

It is time to reverse this horrible national neglect and fully restore Ayodhya and its global heritage, including Ram Janmabhoomi as its central point. It will come to pass; there is no doubt about it. The question is how much more delay and how much more suffering will be caused along the way.

May the light of Sri Rama and his entire parivar again manifest through India, starting with Ayodhya! It can show India's maturity and confidence as a nation, honouring its civilizational heritage and becoming a light for the entire world.

This reclaiming of India's great heritage, starting with Ayodhya, is a vital issue of history, culture and the definition of the country and its identity. Yet the issues of Hinduism in India extend to deeper spiritual and religious concerns that we will examine in the next section of the book.

PART II

Spiritual and Religious Issues: A Vedantic View

The Hindu tradition has a very different view of spirituality than other religions of the world today. Yet, as the third largest religion in the world after Christianity and Islam with more than a billion followers, its views are seldom studied or understood. The principles behind Hinduism are rooted in its yogic spirituality, vast culture and profound Vedantic philosophies, including the theory of karma and rebirth leading to Self-realization.

Modern India's resurgence and the Indian Independence Movement was inspired by such great gurus as Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo. The Bhagavad Gita was probably the most revered book from Lokmanya Tilak to Mahatma Gandhi during the Independence Movement. In this section, we will examine the importance of Vedanta for the future of India and for the future of humanity, including a Vedantic view as to what true spirituality is meant to be and how it contributes to the ongoing dialogue between religions.

In this section of the book, we will examine Vedanta and Hindu spirituality and show their relevance, universality and their specific points of view.

Vedanta, Unity and Universality.

‘Truth is only one,’ thus have the sages declared since the time of the most ancient Rigveda. If we had no sense of this one Truth, why would we strive to know anything at all? The recognition of an underlying order, harmony or law behind existence is the basis of all systems of knowledge. Even to speak of falsehood or unreality is only possible if one recognizes a lasting truth relative to which it can be compared.

If such a truth or rationale for existence can be found, it cannot be a mere material or unconscious force. The very fact that the world is intelligible indicates that its basis is intelligence. An insentient force cannot produce order, nor can it organize itself, much less perceive itself. This means that there must be a universal power of consciousness for there to be any order to the world and to the movement of the forces which constitutes it.

And if this one Truth is a power of consciousness, how can it be apart from our own awareness? How can any cosmic consciousness be separate from the consciousness of the individual? How could any form of life or mind be excluded from it? Therefore, the one Truth must reside within us and within all beings. It cannot be something peripheral or extraneous to who we are, but must dwell at the core of our beings as the underlying power of consciousness itself. Truth cannot be other than our true nature. We can only find peace of mind when we have discovered that Truth and come to live according to it, which is to live in it as our real Self.

The unity of Truth is the fundamental principle of the Vedantic system of philosophy that has guided India since ancient times. An

intuition of unity occurs in the nobler aspirations of all human beings regardless of time and culture, though it has not always been proclaimed as clearly and logically as in Vedanta. Yet the unity of Truth is not merely a philosophical theory, much less a religious belief. It reflects our highest and most direct experience—that of our own consciousness itself divested of all limiting preconceptions in which we discover the entire universe and all beings to exist within ourselves. If there is only one reality, how can it be different from who we really are?

If we affirm that the divine or unlimited Truth is one, and then proclaim that we are separate from it, have we not contradicted ourselves and denied our own capacity to know the Truth? To affirm that Truth exists is to acknowledge that it is part of our own being. Once the mind is cleared of its outer conditioning, this unity of Reality shines forth like the sun divested of the clouds. All those who have purified their minds through the practice of deep meditation can realize this oneness of the universe. To discover it, we must value the life and teachings of those who have realized it, and shape our action and behaviour accordingly. It cannot be arrived at through the mind alone but only through the totality of our life and our every action.

The Nature of Truth

What is the ultimate Truth that all human beings seek? The mind is only satisfied with a Truth that never fluctuates or ceases to be valid. Truth is that which is eternal, consistent, self-evident and absolute. It cannot change its nature or it would not be Truth. For example, the true quality or property of fire is that it burns. Fire cannot cease to burn without ceasing to be fire.

What then is the true quality or property of a human being? It is not our possessions that are transient and external. It is not our worldly professions, which are outer occupations and social roles. It is not our bodies that are born, grow, decay and die. It is not our minds that are constantly changing with every thought, emotion and sensation. Nor is it our various national, ethnic, cultural or religious identities, which are similarly limited within the field of time and shift according to circumstances. Our true nature resides in our

awareness of the Truth, our consciousness of the Eternal and the Infinite as the immutable facts of existence. That alone has the power to take us beyond death and overcome the forces of division and destruction that abound in this transient world. Only what has no form, what transcends materiality and circumstances, can be ultimately real or true. Yet what has no form is not any mere emptiness or a vacuum, but the nature of consciousness itself beyond all material limitations.

Unity and Universality

The statement that Truth is only one does not mean that Truth has only one name or can only be expressed in a single formulation. It is not a statement of limitation or qualification on Truth. That Truth is one means it is universal, innate in all beings and inherent in all existence. Truth is both one and infinite, which means that it extends beyond all boundaries and definitions. It cannot be circumscribed by any belief, idea or personality, however great these may appear to be.

That Truth is only one indicates it has innumerable formulations and expressions. The unity of Truth is an inclusive unity, not an exclusive singularity that cannot tolerate any other point of view. Truth is not one thing opposed to another but that which transcends and includes within itself all things. Truth is like the ocean that can accept all streams without being increased or decreased. To uphold the unity of Truth correctly, we must affirm its infinity and universality and not limit it to any human formulation. Truth is not a thing of the marketplace, some form of information, someone's opinion, or any form of dogma or propaganda. It is found in the nature of existence, and cannot be reduced to any external form or expression. It transcends all organizations and classifications.

Truth is not a mere material thing that can be possessed by anyone. No particular group, institution or culture can own it. No one can control, dispense, or rule over it. It is beyond all saviours, prophets, holy books, churches and temples. Truth is a perception, not an external structure. It is an individual realization, not a collective belief.

Truth, therefore, resides in our own direct experience of reality and not in any external place or person. It cannot be given to us by another, nor can any other person, whatever they may do, substitute for our own direct contact with the Truth. Though others may guide us to Truth, and such guidance is usually essential, the ultimate goal is the freedom of our self-awareness, not subjugation to a particular belief or group. The ultimate Truth belongs to the individual in his or her communion with the reality of being both within and without.

Today people, particularly in the western world, are worried about the influence of cults, especially on their children. Whatever teaches us that Truth lies outside ourselves—that Truth is not inherent within us but rests upon some external saviour, church or holy book—is a cult or a mystification. Truth transcends all externalities and should never be made hostage to any of them, or it is not Truth but illusion.

Towards a Science of Consciousness

From the scientific point of view, we all live under the same universal laws. Gravity functions the same for all people regardless of age, sex, race, religion or culture. The rains do not fall according to political or religious boundaries. The great forces of Mother Nature do not function according to human opinions and their prejudices of class and creed. There is only one Truth governing the entire universe of mind and matter. Yet, most of the time, we miss this one Truth, simple though it may be, and become caught in the various glittering phenomenon of the external diversity that arise from it.

Just as there is only one science based upon the unity of physical laws for all human beings, so there must be only one spiritual science or science of consciousness based upon the unity of spiritual laws for all creatures. There are no different sciences for different people, races, cultures or religions. There is not a Russian science as opposed to an American science, or a Christian science as opposed to a Buddhist science. There is not one set of physical laws for people of one religious belief or identity and another set for those who think differently. Fire is not wet and water dry for some people, while fire is hot and water wet for others. The elements do not change their nature according to our opinions or speculations. So too, a true

religion cannot have one set of truths only for its members and a different set for non-believers.

Recognizing the unity of physical laws governing the universe, all scientists share the same knowledge and look for a Truth that stands on reason and experiment and does not cater to personal, social or cultural biases. In the same way, people of all religions should examine their beliefs and ideals and find out what is really valid within them. We must treat the different religions of the world, whether they have many adherents or only a few, from the standpoint of a deeper spirituality. The different religions of the world should be scrutinized like various scientific laws and theories to see how and whether they work. We must examine them objectively, with care as in examining a subtle object under a microscope, and find out to what extent or in what manner they may be true, not merely in theory but in practice.

In this way, we will discover that some religious ideas may be true for all people and at all times, others are partially true, and yet others may not be true at all, or at best an inferior truth valid only at a certain level. Outward moralistic or ritualistic religious beliefs with rewards and punishments must be replaced with an inner way of meditation to free the mind from its conditioning and to realize our true nature. Otherwise, our religions remain at a childish level, and we have not yet really addressed the spiritual potential of humanity.

Vedanta, Spirituality and Religion

Vedanta is a spiritual science of consciousness of the highest order. It aims at connecting us with the universal Truth, and does not stop short at limited, partial or preliminary truths. Vedanta examines all the ideas and practices of its own Hindu tradition, and finds that some of them represent the highest Truth, whereas others are preliminary or partial teachings. At first, the Divine is worshipped externally from a distance, but this is only preliminary to discovering the Divine within us.

Vedanta finds different levels of truth in the religions of the world, which exist not only to link mankind to the one Truth but also serve lesser goals of moral upliftment or merely social control. Vedanta

takes us to the highest level of religion, which is a practical path of Self-realization. This takes us beyond religion in the ordinary sense of belief and faith, in fact beyond all externalities to our true Self. From the standpoint of Vedanta, all forms of knowledge are only aids to self-knowledge, gaining which we go beyond them, including all religious beliefs and religious piety. Religion, properly employed, should serve to take us to the point of self-inquiry, to direct us to the path of self-knowledge, or such religion that is deficient and may even become an obstruction.

The Religion of Truth and Science of Consciousness

Just as there is only one Truth, there is only one true religion, which is the religion of Truth, not any mere human dogma. Everything apart from this universal Truth is not a religion in the real sense of the word—that is, not a means of linking with what is Real—but a form of ignorance or illusion. Yet, it is not only the truth of religion but also the truth of all ways of knowledge, our search for the Eternal at all levels of our lives and cultures.

Truth is the only true religion and science as well. In this regard, Truth is even greater than God. If one has to choose between Truth and God, one should choose Truth, because even God has to bow down before Truth. God may only be an idea, a concept, or sometimes merely a name or prejudice invented by the human mind, but Truth is the Reality that we cannot ignore. The truth of who we are is something that we cannot escape. It is that immutable or eternal Truth that we must seek, not mere transient information or emotional satisfaction. Such higher Truth is an inner awareness, not an idea or theory.

The true religion is Truth, but what we call religion is not always the Truth. In this regard, all religious teachings should be put to the test of Truth, and only what survives that test should be concentrated on, with the rest discarded as inessential. This will allow us to create a spiritual path for all of humanity that is free from illusion and exploitation. We should hold on to the Truth, even if it requires letting go of what may commonly be regarded as religion.

The highest Truth of Self-realization is not limited to what we call religion, or to what exists in the predominant religions of the world today. Truth is found to some degree in all human pursuits of knowledge including science, art and philosophy. Many tribal beliefs of so-called primitive people contain great truths of a living connection with the universe that is more real than organized religious activities and their artificial practices.

Yet the ultimate Truth is only found when we go beyond all names and forms, when we remove the veil of appearances and perceive the underlying Existence-Consciousness-Bliss at the heart of all life. This message of Vedanta is not limited to any religion, philosophy or science but is the ultimate goal of all humans striving for knowledge and happiness. Religion is not the end but the means to connecting with our true Reality, which can only be discovered inwardly through profound meditation and experiential spirituality at an individual level.

Naturally, our interpretations of this one Reality that is infinite and eternal vary because our minds are different and have limited perspectives on life. Each of us look upon the world from the unique perspective of our mind-body complex and its changing conditions. We see things relative to the limited perspective of our senses. We interpret things relative to the limited opinions of our minds. We function through the limitations of language. We ourselves are limited entities, functioning in separate vestures (body and mind), confined to time and space, and hence trapped in limited perspectives that cause us to misperceive any greater reality. However, the Reality itself is not tainted by such limited formulations of it.

Without unity, there cannot even be multiplicity. Without the one, there cannot be many. Without pure being, any type of action and becoming is not possible. However much we are trapped in outer appearances, we can never accept them as truly real, or find lasting fulfillment within them. Our inner being will search yet deeper for the eternal Truth that dwells within us and will not be satisfied with anything less.

The Challenge of the Present Age

All true spiritual teachings aim at the realization of Truth in our own consciousness, which is the unification of the individual with the universal Reality. This is the ultimate goal of both science and religion. This truth is clearly and directly presented in the profound teachings of the Vedanta and the overall dharmic traditions, as well as indicated by various great thinkers, mystics and poets.

All the problems in the world today arise from an inability to grasp the underlying oneness of life. The divisions of nations, religions and cultures derive from this fundamental ignorance of the unitary nature of existence, as does our exploitation of the Earth and her resources. Only if we perceive another person as fundamentally different from ourselves, can we harm or exploit them. Only if we see the natural world as mere raw material for our convenience, can we damage it for our own gratification. If we see us self-reflected in all beings, which is the Truth, we cannot wish any harm to anyone, and we treat all things with respect, finding all life to be sacred.

Without addressing this core problem of the failure to understand the unity of life, we cannot expect to be able to solve our other problems in a lasting manner. Today, it is of utmost necessity that all those who are conscious of this underlying unity act in such a way as to make others aware of it. This does not necessarily require overt actions but does require that we make a statement by the way we live and think, as well stand by what we say.

The great Vedantic gurus of modern times, starting with Swami Vivekananda, Swami Rama Tirtha, Ramana Maharshi and Sri Aurobindo, extending to Swami Chinmayananda and Swami Dayananda to name a few, have presented this supreme Truth of oneness in lucid teachings and in the examples of their own lives. To discover how to live in harmony with this unitary Truth, and realize it in the modern world, we can look to their lucid teachings. The example of these great Vedantic teachers can serve as a beacon for the coming millennium.

Yet, it is not enough merely to adulate such exemplary figures though we must honour them. More importantly, we should follow their teachings in our daily lives with yoga, mantra, meditation, service to others and following dharmic values. We must similarly afford these great teachers a place of honour in our educational

systems, and revere them as our true leaders and guides. If we fail to afford them the recognition they deserve as the voices of Truth, then we cannot get beyond the problems that we have today.

A culture is the outcome of its leaders and the ideals that the citizens represent in their own lives. Let us look to leaders who have embodied the highest ideal of Self-realization. A culture that does not recognize the value of Self-realization cannot endure, nor can it create unity or lasting peace for anyone. On the other hand, a culture based on Self-realization can never be overcome by the forces of time. To develop such a culture, one must bring the message of Vedanta into all of life, which is also to introduce related aspects of Vedic knowledge, such as yoga, Ayurveda, and the Sanskrit language into our lives. This is to revive a culture of the Dharma, a spiritual field of human growth towards Self-realization. To create such a Vedanta that again encompasses all life and is relevant to the entire world is the key to the spiritual transformation of humanity that the coming millennium requires.

Practical Vedanta, the Real Message of Swami Vivekananda

What was the real message that Swami Vivekananda carried with him when he came to the West from India in 1893? Those in the West regard Vivekananda as the great emissary of yoga in its philosophy and practice. Those in India see Vivekananda as the great reviver of Hindu Dharma and Indian thought that motivated India's Independence Movement. Yet, others view Vivekananda as the voice of a new universal religion synthesizing the religions of the world, based on the teachings of his exalted guru, Paramahansa Ramakrishna.

All these groups have some validity to their views, but may not accurately represent the scope of Vivekananda's profound message. Other groups in India—including communists and Christians who appear to have little in common with Vivekananda—have tried to discern in his various statements a justification for their perspectives, portraying him as a social reformer, helper of the poor and oppressed or even a rebel against Hinduism.

Vivekananda did frequently speak of yoga but for him the term was not the central focus of his teaching. He talked little of asanas or yogic postures, which is what yoga means to most Westerners today and what most Western yoga teachers study and teach. He was not an exponent of physical yoga but of all the different branches of yoga and Vedanta as knowledge, devotion and service, which he identified with the essence of Hindu Dharma, as a 'Hindu monk' as he called himself in the West.

To Vivekananda, the most important spiritual teaching for humanity was Vedanta, the summit of Vedic philosophy, which teaches the unity of the Self and the Absolute. Vivekananda emphasized the great Vedantic statement of 'I am Brahman!' or 'I am God!' as the highest Truth for all people. According to Vedanta, the essence of all science and religion is the knowledge of oneself in one's deeper nature as pure consciousness transcending all time, space and material embodiment. Vivekananda emphasized Jnana Yoga or the yoga of knowledge, which is Vedanta, particularly in its advaitic form, the meditation path leading to knowledge about the Self.

Bhakti Yoga, the yoga of devotion, was also very important to him; he was proficient in chants to different Hindu deities, such as Shiva and Devi, and even composed his own. Raja Yoga, emphasizing the development of the will, was significant for him as well. He saw that gaining control of the will and developing the power of self-determination were the keys to the growth of intelligence and character. He did not neglect Karma Yoga or the yoga of action either. He emphasized the need to work continually for the upliftment of humanity. His entire life is an example of spiritual work and selfless service. He mentioned Hatha Yoga which revolves around asana and pranayama, the least, although he did recognize its usefulness as a support for deeper yogic disciplines.

Over the last century, many Americans have taken up the physical side of yoga but few have given the same attention to the yoga of knowledge which is Vedanta. Americans frequently talk of yoga and exercise, yoga and health, yoga and psychology, yoga and various new therapies and practices. Yoga as sadhana or spiritual practice is not well understood, though many yoga students in the West take up pranayama, mantra or meditation hoping to achieve some higher consciousness and bliss. In this regard, it is important to look back to Vivekananda to understand his transformative message for India and the world.

Swami Vivekananda was a great patriot of India and perhaps the central figure of the modern Hindu renaissance. He spoke eloquently as a Hindu and encouraged Hindus to honour and promote the traditional spiritual culture of their land. He affirmed the unity of the

entire Hindu-Vedic tradition through the Vedas, Puranas, Tantras and modern teachers, as one movement of sadhana and Self-realization. Unlike many modern Hindus, he did not hide his Hinduism, make excuses for it, or apologize for it. He felt the superiority of the spiritual cultures of Asia, particularly India, over the materialistic cultures of the West.

While he recognized the critical social and economic problems of modern India, he looked up to the West only for practical help, not for spiritual or religious guidance. He travelled all over the world as a kind of missionary for Hinduism, promoting Hindu culture and values and regarded its spiritual teachings as valid for all humanity. He was the greatest exponent of modern Hinduism and paved the way for Hindu teachers to travel throughout the world and establish various centres in which footsteps many have followed.

Yet for Vivekananda, the essence of Hinduism was Vedanta, the way of Self-realization, not the Hindu social structure dating from medieval times. Vivekananda was a great reformer against the rigidity of caste, the mistreatment of women and the other social ills that must be changed. Vivekananda showed Hindus that what was wrong with India was not owing to its yogic spiritual tradition, but because this tradition had been misunderstood and misapplied. However, Vivekananda was not just a philosophical Hindu rejecting Hindu culture and history. He also was a great lover of Sanskrit, the Vedas, temple worship, Hindu music and all of Hindu culture. He did not seek to impose this culture on others, but he was happy to share it with all.

Vivekananda was a universalist who taught that there is only one supreme Truth behind the different religions, philosophies and sciences of the world. He accepted what was helpful or uplifting from wherever he saw it in any religion or culture, or in any person regardless of his or her background. He spoke of the good in many different religions, including Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. He admired what was valuable and innovative in modern science and philosophy, and praised even atheists for their intellectual contributions, humanism and free thinking.

Yet, this does not mean that Vivekananda merely approved of all religious teachings, or thought that all religious practices are equal or

good. He criticized the dogma and church-bound authoritarianism of Christianity and, for this reason, a number of Christians sought to discredit him and personally attacked him. In India, he worked to counter the influence of Christian missionaries who were trying to destroy the faith of Hindus with harsh and aggressive conversion tactics.

Speaking about Hindus and Christians in America, Swami Vivekananda boldly said,

And whenever your Christian ministers criticize us, let them remember this: if all of India stands up and takes all the mud that is at the bottom of the Indian Ocean and throws it up against the Western countries, it will not be doing an infinitesimal part of that which you are doing to us. And what for? Did we ever send one missionary to convert anybody in the world? We say to you, ‘Welcome to your religion, but allow me to have mine’.

While Vivekananda admired the sense of brotherhood found within the Islamic community, he daringly questioned the validity and finality of Mohammed’s revelation. He spoke out against the violence perpetuated in the name of Islam, particularly the record of Islam in India and its campaigns of cruelty and destruction aimed at destroying Hinduism. He also criticized the materialism of modern European thought and its inability to provide answers to the fundamental questions of human life, death and immortality, regardless of Europe’s advancement in science and technology.

Practical Vedanta

The universal spirituality that Vivekananda taught was a modernized form of Vedanta and Hinduism with its broad approach to Truth. He did not seek to replace Hinduism with another religion, nor did he proclaim all religions to be the same. He looked beyond the name of religion to the actual practices and sought the highest spiritual practices for all human beings. He saw Hinduism as the great mother into which all the others spiritual paths could be integrated. He did

not regard it as another creed like the rest but as an open tradition capable of harmonizing all genuine spirituality

For Vivekananda, Vedanta was not merely an abstract philosophy to be thought about or discussed intellectually. It was not a teaching to be limited to a select group of sadhus who lived apart from the world. He taught 'practical Vedanta', a way of self-knowledge in daily life to help us do the best in all of our endeavours. Practical Vedanta for him meant bringing the spirit of Self-realization into all human affairs and into society as a whole. Practical Vedanta means independence, freethinking, nobility of character and respect for the Divine in everyone. It means truthfulness, compassion, integrity and not compromising with the forces of ignorance and injustice.

According to practical Vedanta, none of us are limited or weak. None of us are fallen and in need of redemption. We are not sick, or in need of comfort or healing. We are not this little body or limited mind. We are not even souls or children of God. We are God. No, we are greater than God. We are—each one of us—the Self of all beings. This entire universe of matter and mind is no more than our shadow. It is beneath our dignity as the master of the universe to be dominated by anger, fear or desire, to want anything or to be the slaves of anyone's opinion. Our true place in life is to manifest the glory of this Self, not to indulge in petty entertainment, in the hoarding of possessions, the pursuit of fame and power, or other lesser goals that breed corruption.

Swami Vivekananda was called 'the lion of Vedanta'. This is perhaps the best way to remember him. He took the teachings of Vedanta and Hinduism, and made them appealing to the modern world not by compromising them, but by boldly and fearlessly declaring the Supreme Truth they are based upon. He took the knowledge of the ancient seers and rishis and placed it in a futuristic language, pointing out the way for humanity to follow in the ages to come. To honour Vivekananda therefore also means to recognize and honour the great tradition from which he came, and to seek to share that with everyone. But above all, it means to practise Vedanta, which is to be the Self, and nothing less, to not be dominated by the world but to uplift the world in all that we do.

Practical Vedanta, Politics and Education

Practical Vedanta can include an active defence of Hindu Dharma. One is reminded of the example of Swami Vidyanaraya who in the fourteenth century helped establish the kingdom of Vijayanagar in South India to protect and preserve the Vedic Dharma. Those working in the social realm should have the Vedantic attitude to raise the Self in all, not to promote weakness, dependency or partiality. The rights of Hindus as representatives of this dharmic tradition need not be sacrificed for political expediency in India or in the diplomatic realm.

Above all, practical Vedanta should be part of education, teaching control of the mind and senses, and how to access a deeper intelligence and insight. If this cannot be brought into public education, it should be brought into private education. Vedanta is something every temple should offer. Practical Vedanta means bringing Vedanta into society without compromising its value or its depth. It includes yoga at various levels as a way of Self-realization. Practical Vedanta is the best system to raise the spirit of India, not socialism or any other leftist ideology, nor blind consumerism. Let that greater message of Swami Vivekananda be remembered: you are not this limited body or mind but the consciousness behind the entire universe!

Unity of Religions or Unity of Truth

An attitude of tolerance—a kind of ecumenical spirit—has gained favour with many people today, particularly in India. It states that all religions are one and worthy of equal respect. It often adds that a person can find Truth by following with faith the religious tradition in which he or she is born, whatever it may be. According to this view, the great religions of the world represent various paths founded by God to bring all people to the same realization with regard to their local culture and individual needs, implying that God has given you birth in the religion that best suits you spiritually. The differences between religions are merely differences of name and form that have arisen to communicate the same Truth to people of different countries or cultures.

Those who espouse such views may have pictures of Christ or the Pope, Mecca or a Sufi saint, Hindu or Buddhist deities or gurus, or other icons from different religions. They may honour the holy days of different religions, such as celebrating Christmas, Eid, Diwali or the birth of Krishna. They may build holy places that have sections for all the main religions of the world—a Hindu window, a Christian window, Islamic and Buddhist sections and so on. They tell Muslims that it is fine to be a Muslim, the Christians that it is fine to be a Christian, the Hindus that it is fine to be a Hindu and so forth—that all are equally great and valid religions, regardless of whatever sect, or branch of the religion the person may belong to.

Yoga groups having this view may tell people that by following yoga, a Christian will become a better Christian, a Muslim a better Muslim, and so on. They tell people that one need not change their religion but that yoga will make them better at their own religion, whatever it may be. If a Christian comes to a Hindu espousing this ecumenical spirit and asks how to find God or Truth, they will be told to return to their own religion and try to become a better Christian instead. They will be discouraged from becoming a Hindu or from adopting specific Hindu practices. This, in fact, happened to me on several instances when I asked yoga or Hindu teachers to make me a Hindu because I felt a greater affinity to the Vedic teachings than to anything coming from the West.

Those holding this unitary view try to avoid any criticism of other beliefs and give the impression that all religions, however diverse and contrary they may appear, are right in their own ways. They make it seem that whether one visits Kailas, Mecca or Rome, whether one prays, fasts or practises meditation, it is all part of the same exalted human aspiration for the Divine and none of these approaches are necessarily better than the others.

While much has been said to support this view, it remains a vague generalization that falls apart under careful examination. It may reflect a noble sentiment, a powerful wish, or an aspiration for peace, but taken so far that it inhibits clear thinking. It can end up equating teachings superficially, mixing up doctrines of different types and discouraging discrimination or debate. To acknowledge the value of religious aspiration in its many forms is not necessarily to equate these forms or make them the same. While it is crucial we find the unity behind our human aspiration to seek the transcendent, pretending that religions with their many differences are already one, cannot achieve this. To discover the real unity behind religions is a great endeavour that requires a tremendous inquiry and deep examination until we arrive at the core of Truth hidden behind the veils of forms and dogmas.

Some may argue that though there may be major differences between religions, it is better to emphasize their common factors, however limited they may be, in order to gradually bring them closer together. This view is perhaps more sound; however, our goal is not

merely to bring religions together, but to find Truth. We should not sacrifice Truth by glossing over the differences between teachings in order to make different religions accept one another. Doing so would be akin to accepting their convenient partitioning of humanity into religious camps.

That all religions as we know them are one, is a pleasant thought and can succeed in bringing together the more open or mystical elements in religions, but cannot deal with their deep-seated differences. To truly unify religions requires finding the universal Truth behind and beyond religion. This is more a matter of transcending religion, as we know it than it is of affirming it. To proclaim the unity of religion without establishing the Truth behind religions gives rise to many wrong perceptions. It confuses tolerance with Truth and avoids any deeper examination of religious doctrines.

We should certainly respect the Truth wherever we find it. However, this does not mean that we have to put all religious teachings on the same level in order to do so, or that we have to bow down before all religious authorities and institutions. The many differences between religions, like those between cultures also have their beauty, importance and uniqueness. Moreover, just as all cultures have not developed all fields of human endeavour to the same degree, so too all cultures have not developed experiential spirituality to the same degree.

Different Paths

What do we really mean when we say that all religions are one? Is it merely a slogan designed to cover the differences between religions so that we can live together without having to question our different beliefs? Is it a political strategy designed to create peace between the conflicting religious groups? Is it the strategy of new spiritual or religious groups to gain converts from people of all backgrounds?

Obviously, those who honour a transcendent unity behind religion as a whole cannot accept the dogmatic claims of any one particular religion. For example, if religions other than Christianity are true, then Jesus cannot be the only Son of God, nor can the Christian heaven and hell be ultimate realities. The same case exists with Islam.

If other religions are true, then Mohammed cannot be the last prophet, or the Koran the final revelation for all humanity. The limited dogmas of religions, whatever they may be, which reduce Truth to a name, form, person or institution would not be acceptable. If we scrutinize the subject, we will see that the attempt to find validity in many different religions challenges those religions that claim they possess the sole or final Truth.

There is a unity to Truth and to what could be called the spiritual or mystical experience, but this is not equally accepted by all religions, particularly in their majority forms. All religions as they represent themselves do not recognize the same goal of spiritual enlightenment. For some, their heavens are merely glorified versions of their physical worlds. The unity of religions is an ideal, not a fact, and requires a considerable reshaping of the roles of different religions. The obvious fact that the news demonstrates daily is not that all religions are one, but that religions are divided against each another, trying to expand their followings in a state of conflict, not of harmony.

The religions of the world today are very different and are often hostile entities just as different countries are. Like countries they may make alliances, even targeting a religion that is a common enemy. Such alliances cannot be looked upon as a unity but are matters of convenience.

Truth indeed is one, like the sun that shines equally on all people. There is not a different Truth for people of different religious beliefs any more than there is a different sun or moon. There are also many paths to Truth, both known and unknown. Truth is infinite and can be approached through a great diversity of paths and be expressed in innumerable names and forms. It has the room to accommodate any number of teachings and embraces the entire universe. But because Truth is one and has many possible approaches does not mean that all religions must be true to the same degree or in the same manner.

That there is some aspect of Truth in all religions does not mean that all that is done in the name of religion is worthy of respect, or that Truth abides only in religions. There is so much falsehood in what we call religion that it would be a violation of Truth to accommodate it. In addition, there are aspects of Truth outside of

religion—in art, science and philosophy—and the entire world of nature reflects the presence of the Divine. What we call religion neither owns nor dispenses Truth, whether by any one religion or by all of them put together. We can compare the unity of religion with unity in other aspects of life. Establishing unity in a field of knowledge, such as science, does not mean establishing identity between all scientific theories or removing any questioning. Because justice is one, we cannot say that all the governments of the world are equally good.

Moreover, while there are many paths to Truth, all paths do not lead to Truth. There are many paths that lead to falsehood. Nor do all paths that lead to Truth go all the way to Self-realization, some stop short. Of the paths that lead to Truth, some are direct while others are convoluted and take many detours. A path can only take us in the direction that it leads and as far as it goes. This means a religious teaching that does not recognize the higher Truth of religion, which is Self-realization, cannot lead us there but has to be abandoned along the way.

A superficial sense of the unity of religions fails to set up a universal standard of Truth. It gives the impression that Truth is merely a matter of belief and that whatever is done in the name of religion is right, however diverse or apparently contradictory these practices may be. It also fails to understand the true spirit of Hinduism as Sanatana Dharma (the Eternal Tradition) which is not based on belief and cannot be represented by any single teacher, messiah, deity, book or practice. There is perhaps a greater diversity of religious practices within Hinduism than outside of it. Making Hinduism into one religion among many narrows down the scope of what Hinduism represents, which is not one religion as opposed to others, but an open tradition of spiritual practice, not confined to any dogma.

Appearing to go beyond social prejudices, a superficial ecumenicalism caters to the existing names, forms and vested interests that use religion for their own ends. It sanctions organized religion as a way to Truth, when it is usually an obstacle to it. It fails to recognize that in most of the world, inner spiritual practices have

only been possible outside of the official religions, and that those who have attempted such practices have faced criticism and ostracism.

We need not give credence to organized religion in order to appear tolerant, and as long as we do so, we may not be promoting Truth but oppression. There is a karma for our action, and we cannot escape merely by performing actions in the name of a belief. If our religious practices are based upon exploitation, we will have to experience the negative results of that action, whatever our leaders may tell us. If someone under the name of a religion—whether our own or that of other people—is promoting what is false or causes harm, we need not passively accept it because it is part of their religion, under the guise of tolerance.

One could argue that if one looks deeply, one will find the same Truth of Self-realization and recognition of God as the core of all religions, including those that are outwardly opposed to these ideas. But when one gives credence to such religions, it is not these spiritual practices one usually gives validity to, but the existing practices and hierarchies within the religions as they are today.

Spiritual practices, like any other actions, have specific results. If we are seeking to climb a mountain, several routes are possible, but not all are equally valid. Moreover, following a path that leads away from the mountain will never take us to the top, whatever that path may be called. Spiritual practices are like different vehicles. Some are like airplanes, some are like bullock carts. While all may take us somewhere, they are hardly all on the same level, or all equally recommended for travel.

For example, while the giving of charity can be good (it can also be evil if it is based upon an attempt to convert others), it cannot take us to the ultimate Reality which requires meditation. Charity and meditation are not both equally valid methods of finding Truth. To promote universality, we should not feel compelled to give people the impression that discrimination in their actions is not required. Otherwise, we are encouraging people to follow the religion that most caters to their prejudices, not that which encourages real spiritual growth.

Religious Dialogues

Some years ago, as a follower of Hindu-based yoga teachings, I told a neighbour who followed a Christian evangelical belief that I also accepted Christ as a yogi. He asked me then why didn't I accept Jesus as my personal saviour and the Bible as the Word of God and stop doing such un-Christian practices? When I told him that it was my belief that what Christ originally taught was the same as Hinduism, he said that he didn't believe it. While I referred to Biblical verses or statements that suggest a yogic mysticism in Christianity, he could easily refute them to his own satisfaction as he claimed to know the Bible better than I did. He said that if the Christianity I accepted was the same as Hinduism, then it was not the Christianity that he or other Christians believed in, so why should I choose to call it Christianity at all? This taught me a lesson and showed me the confusion caused by simplistically equating different religions.

I had to admit that Christianity as it developed historically, and as the great majority of Christians believe, is not something that I, accepting the spiritual teachings of the Hindu tradition, can accept. I don't think that it is necessary to attend a Christian church or to follow Christian prayers. I can't accept Jesus as my personal saviour; in fact, I don't see the need of such a saviour at all. I certainly don't think that it is necessary to promote conversion to Christianity; I think it is harmful. I can't look up to Christian leaders who do not understand karma and rebirth, or equate them with the great yogis of India such as Ramana or Aurobindo. Though I admire some of the teachings of Jesus, I cannot see him as unique, and such spiritual wisdom can be found clearly and comprehensively explained in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Many Westerners are abandoning Christianity for the spiritual traditions of India, some have already given up Christianity at a young age.

So rather than creating confusion by saying that I am also a Christian, I merely state what I think is true, even if it goes against what Christians believe. Let the members of different religions define their religions as they like. It is not my place as one who is not a member of their belief to tell them what their beliefs really mean. However, I must tell them what I think is the Truth, even if it is not accepted in their religion as they know it.

Unfortunately, Hindus think that people of different beliefs honour the mysticism that Hindus see behind all religions, but this is rarely the case. Hindus talk to members of other religions as if it were the mystical side of the teaching that they were following, even though such people may be fundamentalists in trying to convert them. This prevents Hindus from understanding other religions or communicating to them what Hinduism truly is about. It makes Hindus vulnerable to be deceived by members of other religions who take a liberal appearance to attract Hindus, not because it represents what they truly believe. We should note that both Christianity and Islam in India have taken on Indian features and that the mysticism Hindus see in them may come from within the Indian context; this argument is particularly relevant when we don't see this happening in the other countries where these religions predominate.

Hindus don't know how to engage in a dialogue with those of other religious beliefs. They think they should agree with what members of other religions propose, or that they should ignore them and go their own way, keep to themselves, and not express contrary opinions. Hindus appear to think that it is a sin to disagree with non-Hindus on religious matters, however much Hindus may disagree among themselves, and however much non-Hindus may criticize Hinduism! This is curious because classical India was the opposite. Spiritual teachings of all types were critically scrutinized, examined in detail, and questioned at all levels; such as we find in the various systems of Indian philosophy—Vedic, Buddhist and Jain.

Hindus should be capable of dialogue with other beliefs without either agreeing with them or having to turn away. It is not wrong for Hindus to state what they hold is true, even if other groups may not accept it. Nor is it wrong for Hindus to criticize the practices of other religions, if they don't agree with them. Hindus should be friendly and considerate in their communication, yet they can do so without having to surrender their opinions or to agree with whatever non-Hindus have to say. Such debates occur in all fields of knowledge, and were always promoted by Hindu sages. Hindus should reinstate it today, not merely bring different groups together to agree with one another, but to openly examine religion and spirituality so that the real truth behind it can be known for the benefit of all.

Some Hindus think that it is against Hinduism to criticize other religions and that all the great modern teachers of Hinduism taught complete equality of all religions. Let them read such teachers as Aurobindo and Vivekananda more carefully. They tried to resurrect the ancient Truth of Hinduism and Sanatana Dharma and project it in a modern way as a universal path of Yoga and Self-realization. Let them note the example of such great sages as Ramana Maharshi, who never visited any churches or mosques, though many existed in the town where he lived, though he did reside at and followed his practices in the local temple for many years. Ramana Maharshi said that religion in the ordinary sense is only necessary to take us on to a path of Self-realization, after which it can be set aside. This draws into question religions that do not direct us to Self-realization or recognize it as their goal. Such gurus recognized a unity of truth in the self of all, but they did not bow down to the religious institutions and dogmas in the world.

Note here the statements of Swami Dayananda Sarasvati (Arsha Vidya), head of the Hindu Acharya Sabha, in his booklet *Conversion is Violence*. Swami Dayananda divides religion into aggressive religions, such as Christianity and Islam and non-aggressive religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Judaism. He explains how aggressive religions often use the violence of conversion to promote their power in the world, which is against the true teachings of Dharma (Sarasvati, 20).¹

The Religion of Truth

The true spirit of universality does not bow down to mere personalities, vested interests or names and forms. The true spirit of tolerance is to promote the Truth, not to compromise with falsehood. According to the Upanishads there are two forces in the universe—vidya (knowledge) and avidya (ignorance)—which move in opposite directions, to the extent that one is pursued, the other is lost. To sanction beliefs based on ignorance as valid ways to Truth is the denial of Truth.

This does not mean we should self-righteously condemn the practices of others, or that we should claim that Truth is limited to our

point of view. We must afford everyone the freedom to discover the Truth. But we must see things as they are, and in our communication tell what we perceive as the Truth. Hence, if someone asks what we consider the best way to discover Truth, we are performing a disservice if we direct them back to the religion they are following if its practices do not lead to consciousness of unity.

The truth is that what we call religion, particularly in the Western world, is usually opposed to Self-realization. The organized religions of the world may have more mistakes than paths to enlightenment, and at best have preliminary value. Nor should leading an organized religion necessarily be looked upon as a sign of greatness in a person. Many great saints and sages, including some of the greatest, never founded any religion and have been forgotten by history. Those whom we regard as the founders of a religion, on the other hand, may not have subscribed to the beliefs and practices of their so-called followers.

If Hinduism has any value, it is not as a means of giving credence to anything that might call itself religion but to give credence to the individual—the real bearer of the flame of the sacred—to pursue his or her path to enlightenment. Hinduism in its true sense is the religion of the individual (Atman or Purusha). It provides tools of yogic practices and meditation so that we can come to our own direct experience of Truth or the Divine. Hinduism does not insist upon any particular approach or dogmatic formulation. In this respect, Hinduism or Sanatana Dharma regards the setting up of dogma as *unspiritual*. The openness of Hinduism should not be used to sanction any religious dogma, though it does not prevent us from respecting the Truth in whatever form we encounter it.

There is no Dharma higher than Truth. In that spiritual Truth, all the accepted and most prominent religions of today may not be equal or have the same place. Some may have a minor place and other teachings not formally religious may have a more significant value. And the ultimate Truth may go beyond the boundaries of all that we might call religion. The temple of Truth cannot be constructed by making all religions equal but by ending the hold of all dogmas over the human mind.

The book of Truth may not consist of equal selections from the most prominent scriptures of the world today. It may give more weight to teachings not recognized as scriptures or perhaps not even regarded as religious. Nor may the vision of Truth interpret the so-called scriptures of the world in the same way as most of those who believe in them. The vision of Truth, which is the Infinite and Eternal, may ultimately have little to do with any set formulation and may be discoverable only to the extent that we go beyond words, names and identities.

It is necessary to revive the religion of Truth, which is the spiritual science of consciousness as well, not to sanction religious beliefs of all kinds. This religion of Truth is Sanatana Dharma or the Eternal Religion that is the foundation of Hinduism. To re-establish it, we must set up universal truths, such as the evolution of the soul through the cycles of rebirth, and a spiritual science, including the practice of yoga and meditation. This requires that we go beyond religious teachings that do not acknowledge such truths.

We must affirm Truth both inside and outside religion, not merely affirm religion as we know it as Truth. Such is the real spirit of tolerance and universality but it may require abandoning rather than upholding the religions that exist in the world today. All that we call religion requires a reformulation in the light of universal Truth and the pursuit of Self-realization. Hinduism, with its many paths, yogis, sages and philosophers, provides important keys of how to do this. This is evident in the sublime teachings of the Vedanta, the core wisdom of Sanatana Dharma, and the ultimate science of Self-realization.

Unity of Religion and Religious Tolerance

Today, those who like to proclaim that all religions are one, seldom define what all religions have in common. Generally, those who believe in the unity of religions say that all religions recognize God and have as their goal the ultimate realization of God. Let us look at the different religions of the world and see what they really have in common, starting with the idea of God itself.

Do all religions recognize God? God is the term of Abrahamic monotheistic religions and implies monotheism—that there is only one God who is the creator of the universe—which is not the view of reality that we find in all religions. This monotheistic concept of God is not the same as the Brahman, or the Impersonal Absolute of Hindu thought, or the Atman, or Supreme Self. It is akin to the Hindu concept of Ishvara or the Cosmic Lord but not identical with it either, as Ishvara is the cosmic manifestation of Brahman. While Hindus may accept God as a term for the Supreme Reality (which they may not define in a monotheistic sense), it is very rare that followers of Western religions will use such terms as Atman or Brahman as equivalent to God or Allah, perhaps because of these differences of meaning.

Moreover, several religions do not recognize God or a cosmic creator at all. This includes Buddhism which has always criticized Hinduism for postulating the existence of a creator. Buddhism recognizes a Spiritual Reality or One Mind, but this is quite removed from the Biblical or Koranic God who created the world out of

nothing; for instance, one Buddhist thinker called the Biblical God ‘a primitive idea’. Jainism, Taoism, Shinto and a number of other religions do not have such a Creator God either but see karma or simply nature as the creative force. Some Hindu groups, such as the Samkhya, are not theistic either.

Many religions, including Hinduism, have a multiplicity of deities or names and forms of Spiritual Reality. This is also not accepted by monotheistic religions, which have branded religions that are not strictly monotheistic as polytheism and idolatry and are thereby heretical or sinful.

Rather than saying that all religions are based upon a recognition of God—which is not true—it is more accurate to state that all religions recognize a Spiritual Reality which may be variously called God, Allah, Buddha, Shiva, Vishnu, Tao, or any number of names according to the particular system involved. This Spiritual Reality may be defined according to monism, monotheism, pantheism, polytheism, or any number of ideas or made to transcend all ideas. There is hardly any universality for the term, God, or the concept of monotheism in all religions. To build the unity of religions around the idea of one God can cater to the prejudices of monotheistic beliefs, which would like to regard themselves as the universal factor in religion, when they are only one single approach.

All religions stress the need to relate to a Spiritual Reality but they are hardly unanimous about what the correct relationship is. Similar to their differences about the nature of Spiritual Reality, all religions do not share the same goal of their practice. Most religions do not regard union with God or mergence in Spiritual Reality, which is generally the Hindu view, as their goal. They do not see themselves as paths to God but only as ways of relating in a better way to God whom they may conceive of as being quite different from us, the mere creatures that He has created. The Christian goal is to go to heaven, generally with a resurrected physical body, and then dwell in the eternal presence of God and Jesus (who also dwells in a resurrected physical body). The Muslim goal is similar, heaven or paradise. Self-realization in the Vedantic sense is not the goal of these religions and may be regarded as delusions. Even a number of mystics, including some in Hindu Bhakti traditions, have as their

goal, not complete union with God but nearness, proximity or being in the same world with Him in some sort of subtle or divine body.

In addition, all religions do not follow the same practices or subscribe to the same ethics, though they generally stress some idea of the good or holy. For example, the non-violence of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain thoughts is not accepted by some religions which regard it as a form of cowardice. Many religions classify the failure to perform particular prayers or rituals or subscribe to certain religious beliefs as on par with moral depravity. Here, we can note the Catholic view that it is a mortal sin not to go to church on Sunday, just as theft or murder are mortal sins, or the general Christian view that those who don't believe in Jesus, however otherwise good people they may be, must go to hell. Islamic views are of the same order. Nor do all religions have the same view as to what constitutes a religious person or a religious order. For example, several religions, such as Judaism, Islam and Protestant Christianity, do not have monastic orders and have been opposed to them or even regard them as unholy. While most religions have some form of prayer or ritual, the yogic and meditational practices of Hinduism are rarely found in monotheistic religions, except among mystics who were generally oppressed or branded as heretics (except in the case of Judaism where mysticism was generally part of the religion).

The fact is that a person will not get the same realization through all religions as through Vedantic paths that teach Self-realization. Many religions neither recognize Self-realization as their goal, nor teach methods to achieve it. How could they possibly lead anyone to it when they don't even recognize it as valid? This explains why such realization as stressed in Vedanta, that of the unity of Brahman (the Absolute) and Atman (the Self), is practically unheard of in a number of religions, and why in the last two thousand years there are very few figures such as the great yogis who have lived in the Western world. Otherwise, such Westerners as myself, who was raised a Catholic, would not need to turn to teachers from the East to find teachings that they couldn't find in their own religious training.

The most we can say about any common goal of all religions is that all religions direct us to a relationship with a Spiritual Reality as they have conceived it to be which is quite variable. The relationship

stressed may not be a realization at all—which implies a radical change of consciousness—but conversion to a belief or pattern of behaviour in which we maintain our ordinary human mentality, only oriented in a different direction. If it is a mystical experience of the Divine that they seek, it can occur on different levels and in different ways, and may not be conceived as Self-realization.

The conflicts between religions have existed because such differences are inherent within them. Some religions insist upon a personal Creator God as the Supreme Reality who may be limited to a particular book, saviour or prophet. Others look to an impersonal Reality, to a multiplicity of gods and to a variety of spiritual books or teachings. Some religions are based upon meditation. Others are against meditation and consider that belief or prayer is sufficient. Some religions are inclusive and try to draw other religions into them. Others are exclusive and try to stand apart in their beliefs from other religions.

If these differences did not exist, it would be difficult to explain why religions have had so much trouble with each other through the course of history, and why they still have problems today in spite of all the improvements in communication. All the many religious conflicts must go back to something more fundamental than semantics, or merely failing to see that they are all saying exactly the same thing in different words, or they would not be so much of a problem. So, getting beyond these conflicts requires much more than an equation of terminology. It requires looking for a universal spirituality beyond the religious dogmas in the world today which still divides humanity into warring camps.

According to religious synthesizers, all religions are the same thing only in a different garb or according to a different name. But is this really true? For example, one can call Islam Christianity in another garb, though this is a generalization that is not entirely accurate. One can call Buddhism, particularly the Tibetan form, Hinduism in another garb and not be very wrong. But, can one call Buddhism merely Islam in another garb? Can one call Hinduism merely Christianity in a different form? This hardly seems accurate, and in fact, denies each its characteristic nature.

Similarly, one cannot honestly call a Hindu temple merely a mosque in another form, or the Koran the Upanishads or the Buddhist Sutras in a different language. Nor can one honestly say that Mohammed is merely the Buddha in another garb, or Krishna as he appeared relative to the needs of medieval Arabia. Yet, this is what we are telling people when we say that there is no difference between these various religious teachers, books, or places of worship. One can certainly respect many great human beings, but this does not require that we equate them with the highest sages.

This idea that all religions are the same covers the differences within religions as well as between them. If one says that Christianity can provide a person with spiritual realization, which Christian group are they referring to? Are such different sects as Jehovah's Witnesses, Southern Baptists and other evangelical and fundamentalist groups on par with the contemplative orders of Catholicism in this regard? Does this mean that we can place an evangelical preacher, such as Billy Graham, at the same level as the great sages of Hinduism, such as Ramana Maharshi? To some degree, one can equate a number of Sufi doctrines with Vedanta, but does this mean Islamic preachers can teach or even accept Vedanta?

Those of a mystical bent of mind can read a yogic spirituality into the Bible or the Koran, claiming these books reflect an understanding of karma, reincarnation or even subtle yogic practices. Even if they are right in some instances, this does not change the fact that the great majority of people in these religions do not see such teachings there.

A facile synthetic vision can read a deeper spirituality into the symbols of the Book of Mormon, the preaching of fundamentalist Christians, or various recent New Age books, or even works of science fiction. Those inclined to read spirituality into religious symbols and doctrines can do so everywhere. Does this mean that such inner meanings were always intended? If so, why should we stop merely with the dominant religions of the world? We can read enlightenment into any of the aspirations of humanity. Some synthesizers have gone so far as to read mysticism into Karl Marx, in which case spirituality loses its meaning and becomes equitable with any sort of idealism or noble sentiment. Such synthesis unites everything by blurring any distinction between higher and lower

teachings which may end up denying the value of the spiritual path altogether.

Religious Tolerance and Freedom

That we cannot simply equate all religions does not mean we should not tolerate different religions. Intolerance of other human beings and acts of inhumanity towards our fellow men and women are unacceptable regardless of our religious beliefs and are contrary to the real spirit of religion or even common courtesy. We should and must tolerate all religions—and also atheism and agnosticism—as different approaches to life that people should be free to follow as long as they don't try to impose their views upon others. Otherwise, there can be no peace in the world, and we will live not in a free society but in a theocratic police state. It is easy to tolerate those who are like us, but we must also learn to tolerate those who are different.

We should be open-minded and large-hearted and allow people the freedom to find Truth. We should be friendly and just with those who have different religious or political views than ourselves, or we would not qualify as kind people, much less spiritual. We should recognize the different levels and temperaments of people and their different views of reality. We must accept that there will always be a number of different types of spiritual teachings among human beings and different cultures.

Proclaiming that all religions are one fails to deal with the reality of the differences between them. It tries to whitewash them when a number of them cannot be reconciled. For example, the law of karma and the cycle of rebirth is either a fact for all people and the idea of sin or salvation leading to an eternal heaven or hell is wrong, or vice versa. Both are not merely different words for the same Truth. Pretending that all religions are the same does not really eliminate these differences. It tries to ignore the differences in order to create tolerance. Such a tolerance may break down when the reality of the differences is discovered.

On the other hand, if we recognize that there are major differences between religions and allow for freedom in human religious inquiry, then such differences need not become a problem. The clash of ideas

in the pursuit of Spiritual Truth, like the clash of ideas in science or philosophy, does not have to become a factor of social conflict, nor do we have to try to stifle it in order to maintain social harmony, which is only to suppress our own intelligence.

What brings about real tolerance is allowing different views to exist, not pretending that such differences do not exist. The point is that society should tolerate all religions even if all religions are not the same; also, in society we ourselves should tolerate all religions even if we individually may not agree with them or may oppose them intellectually. What cannot be tolerated is violence used to promote a particular belief which destroys all tolerance.

True tolerance is based upon respect for freedom, not the assumption that everything tolerated must be good or the same. It allows people the freedom to make mistakes and discover for themselves what is true. This same sense of freedom allows us to critically examine various views and reject them if we wish, and to communicate freely to society the reasons behind what we have decided. Criticism of religion, just as critical examination in other fields of learning like science, should also be tolerated or religious tolerance itself is not real. This is not to encourage everyone to aggressively criticize the religions of other people, but to prevent the suppression of Truth under the guise of not offending anyone's religious belief.

We should acknowledge the different religions of humanity, like the different arts and sciences, taking from them what we find to be of most value, but this does not require that we don't recognize any higher or lower teachings within them or must find them all to be good. We can also have our personal preferences in religion, just as we have them in our food, clothes or job.

One may prefer one particular religion or spiritual path, but one should be willing to accept that other people may prefer their religion, and yet others may not accept any religion at all. One should be friendly and considerate with those of different beliefs, neither having to impose one's views upon them nor force such different views into a single formulation. One should be able to question the beliefs of others rationally and sincerely in one's effort to find the Truth, just as others should be able to question our beliefs.

It should not be a problem for anyone if a person is a Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim, atheist or anything else. That should be the person's own right, their own affair which it is not for us individually to judge. Religion should be an individual matter, not a state or community-enforced belief. Each individual should be free to critically examine all religious teachings and reject what they don't find to be true. Insisting that people accept the validity of all religions, just like insisting that they accept the validity of one religion, can be a form of social domination, not furthering the individual in his or her own discovery of Truth.

This is no different from how the different sects of Hinduism relate to each other. A Shaivite and Vaishnava, for example, don't have to agree on all aspects of their beliefs to have harmony with one another. Each can think his particular formulation of Divinity to be superior to the other. Vishnu can be made into the greatest devotee of Shiva or vice versa. We don't have to insist that we all agree with one another, which is childish, and much of the beauty of life is that we do see things differently. But we do have to learn to be considerate with those who don't agree with us. And regardless of our personal preferences, we should seek to find out what is true through spiritual practices, and not merely be content with a belief or theory which is always arbitrary.

Hinduism has always regarded freedom or liberation, moksha, as the real goal of life. It leaves people free to discover whether the principles and views of Hinduism or Sanatana Dharma are true, and does not seek to enforce them upon people, even those born as Hindus. This freedom of inquiry is the basis for real tolerance. The second factor is non-violence and its sister principle of non-interference whereby we allow others freedom to discover Truth. Through these principles, the variegated behaviour of human beings can be brought into harmony.

True religious tolerance does not consist of reducing all religions to a single mould but of allowing the full range of human religious experience to flower without the control of any overriding dogma, hierarchy or institution in the external world. This allows us to transcend religion and does not place us under the rule of any organization. Religion is only an aid in our own Self-realization, and

when it becomes an end in itself, it loses its validity. We should make human beings subject neither to one religion nor to all religions. Rather, we should make religion subordinate to the Self of all creatures. We should not seek to make all religions good when religion itself is not the goal and when some religions can be harmful. We should see religions for what they are and discover the Truth of what we are, in which all religions, indeed all worlds, are but our shadow.

Ram Swarup: Hindu View of Christianity and Islam

Many books in the world today provide critiques of different religions from both religious and non-religious standpoints. Most religions have their own books stating their views relative to other religions pointing out the unique validity of their faith and countering any criticism directed towards them. Yet, it is difficult to find Hindu critiques of Abrahamic religions, though much criticism of Hinduism, generally inaccurate, is easy to find from Christian and Islamic perspectives.

Perhaps, the most important and extensive Hindu critique of Abrahamic religions in the last few decades is that by Sri Ram Swarup. He has addressed this in many books and articles spanning several decades (Swarup 2000, 2001, 2003, 2009).¹ Notably, Ram Swarup examines monotheistic religions from the standpoint of yogic spirituality and points out the difference between religion as an internal quest or sadhana that has predominated in dharmic traditions and religion as an external conversion-oriented social movement in Christianity and Islam.

Lack of Any Hindu Point of View on Hinduism

There are several reasons for there being a lack of books explaining a Hindu point of view. It begins with the fact that in the Western world there is no existing scholarly tradition that can present or defend Hindu Dharma with clarity and depth, or perhaps even knows what it

is. This is very different from Christianity and Islam that have their own voices and defenders throughout Western intellectual circles.

The available literature on Hinduism generally comes from two sources. The first is academic Western scholarship which is largely a holdover from the colonial era that has little understanding of Hinduism or direct experience with its practices. These scholars are largely either Christians or Marxists in their background. They represent a critique of Hinduism from a non-Hindu or anti-Hindu point of view. Ironically, their books are looked upon as authoritative by those seeking to learn about Hinduism, while the same people look to Christians to explain Christianity or Muslims to explain Islam. Hindus uncritically regard such non-Hindu authorities on Hinduism as valid merely because they may teach at prestigious Western universities or are writers for major Western publishing houses.

The second source of books on Hinduism is the work of various swamis and gurus, particularly those who have come to the West. Yet, their works promote the particular approach of their teacher and, with few exceptions, seldom examine Hinduism (Sanatana Dharma) as a whole. While they provide excellent knowledge of yoga practices and philosophies, they do not leave the reader with a curiosity to explore Hinduism overall. Hence, there are many books on yoga and meditation or general books of wisdom by teachers from India, but it is difficult to find any comprehensive explication of Hindu Dharma within them. Many individual Hindu gurus are more recognized or respected in the West than the Hindu tradition itself from which they derive. Of course, they are not looked upon as Hindus, but as universal teachers.

In India, there is a reluctance to provide a Hindu critique of other religions for different reasons. India as a Hindu majority country has a policy of not offending minorities in matters of religion. As India's minorities are Christian and Islamic, little criticism is allowed of them—neither by the media nor by the academia. Even an accurate account of how these groups have functioned historically in India, which has included persecution or, in the case of Islam, genocide of Hindus, has been suppressed in the name of communal harmony.

This reluctance to allow Hindus in India to provide a critique of other religions is strange because in Christian or Islamic countries,

Hinduism, if tolerated at all, is explained in a negative manner as consisting of strange cults, idol worship, caste oppression, widow burning and dowry deaths. As a writer on Hinduism in the United States, I have to frequently deal with these negative stereotypes, not only from the point of view of evangelical Christians but often from Catholics as well. Even in the academic circles in America, there is a reluctance to accept that Hinduism is a religion at all. One university published the view of a prominent American professor of Asian Studies that Hinduism is a modern political expropriation of various unrelated cults for nationalist ambitions, and that prior to the last century, there was no such thing as Hinduism in India, and no such thing as India as a country!

Yet even those in the West who may be sympathetic towards Hinduism have little understanding of the forces arrayed against it. Most liberally minded people in the West do not realize that the Christian fundamentalist and evangelical groups that they criticize or even ridicule in America are engaged in massive conversion efforts in India, particularly in South India and in the tribal regions, openly spreading distortions about Hinduism with little being done to counter them. They think that the days of missionary activity ended with the colonial era. The result is that they are remarkably misinformed about the ongoing missionary assault against Hinduism, including those who may practise Hindu-based yoga or meditation approaches. Few people in the West can provide an accurate account of what Hinduism is, and what its primary principles or dharmic values are. And even those who may be sympathetic to Hindu teachings are inclined to accept distorted views of Hinduism because they do not find any other point of view represented.

While it is right for non-Hindu religions to criticize Hinduism, it appears that it is not right for Hindus to express their own point of view, even in India. If it is not acceptable for Hinduism in India to defend itself in the current information (or disinformation) war, where is it to be given a voice? One can find numerous books criticizing Christianity and Jesus, for example, including some by great Western thinkers, such as Voltaire and Nietzsche. Both the Bible and the Koran contain much criticism of pagan religions and their cultures.

Why cannot pagan religions provide critiques of the very beliefs that have been attacking them for centuries to the point of genocide?

Message of Ram Swarup

Ram Swarup (1920–98) was probably the most important and cogent writer on Hinduism in the last half of the twentieth century. The Prime Minister of India, Atal Behari Vajpayee, spoke of him as ‘a representative of India’s rishi tradition in the modern age’.

Ram Swarup developed a redefinition of Hinduism that has motivated such an important spiritual movement as the *Hinduism Today* magazine in the West. Following the inspiration of Ram Swarup, Sivaya Subramuniaswami of *Hinduism Today* magazine boldly proclaimed, ‘Hinduism is unique among the world’s religions. I boldly proclaim it the greatest religion in the world’ (Subramuniaswami 2000, 405).² Which swami in India would say this and would he not be called communal and intolerant for saying so?

I had the good fortune to meet Ram Swarup on a number of occasions since 1991, and also his erstwhile colleague, Sita Ram Goel. Sita Ram Goel (1921–2003) was equally active and also a great inspiration to many, including myself. While Ram Swarup provided the ideas and insights, Sita Ram provided the practical application and in-depth scholarly research. The two made a formidable team in the development of a new Hindu intellectual class and have become almost legendary in this regard. Sita Ram was more outspoken and visible, but he always referred to Ram Swarup as his guru. He also wrote more books, though both were prolific in their publications.

Ram Swarup was always gentle, cordial and receptive, never seeking to impose himself on anyone, always inquiring as to your views first. Yet, a few short statements or phrases of his were sufficient to trigger new ways of thinking and transformative insights in others. He had a remarkable ability to influence others without any overt effort, owing to the clarity and sheer truthfulness of his ideas. He led a simple life and was never involved in any type of promotion or self-glorification.

Ram Swarup hardly began as some staunch Hindu revivalist and never put on any religious garb or marks of piety. He worked with Sufi groups looking for Hindu-Muslim harmony at a mystical level but in the end, found them to be intolerant. He asked one Sufi as to how to create a unity of all religions; the Sufi replied that all religions could become one if they accepted Islam. He worked for a time with Swami Abhishiktananda, the French Catholic Priest who also dressed as a Hindu Swami and visited important Hindu gurus. With Swami Abhishiktananda, Ram Swarup and Sita Ram Goel tried to support Hindu-Christian harmony, and yet were disappointed and had to leave, seeing that such groups could not give up their conversion-based mentality or biases in favour of Christianity even while claiming to honour Hinduism and its gurus, such as Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi.

Among Hindu gurus, Ram Swarup began in the Gandhian tradition of ahimsa and long referred to himself as a Gandhian. Later, he was highly influenced by Sri Aurobindo and his strong defence of the Indian Kshatriya tradition. Most notably, he was a staunch anti-communist and provided detailed critiques of communism in the 1950s and 1960s where scarcely an intellectual voice against the communists could be raised in India.

Also significantly, he was connected with Sri Anirvan, a great yogi of Bengal. Sri Anirvan was one of the most important Vedic scholars of all time, whose long commentaries on the Upanishads and the Rigveda are unparalleled for their depth and understanding of Vedic teachings and of the times that gave birth to them (Anirvan 2013).³ Yet, Anirvan was also a practical psychologist of great depth. Through Anirvan's profound examination of the human mind, Ram Swarup realized how the yogic theory of consciousness can explain the different religions of the world, including their extreme forms of behaviour.

Yogic Spirituality or Religious Faith

Ram Swarup presents a logical and profound critique of Christian and Islamic theology from the standpoint of yogic spirituality. He clearly discriminates between yogic spirituality as the essence of dharmic

traditions and the exclusive belief systems of Christianity and Islam that follow another stream. His views are always informed and compassionate but straightforward, not hiding the facts but revealing the Truth for the benefit of all.

Ram Swarup applies the yogic understanding of different states of consciousness to discuss various religious experiences and the different types of insight, realization or samadhi, which can occur on a number of levels. This is a very different view than of those who equate all religions as valid. Yogic texts contain clear delineations of states of consciousness from the ordinary to the highest. Self-realization, which cannot be equated and which are not all wholesome, includes a variety of states in which there can be profound inspirations mixed with personal or collective prejudices. To merely promote religious fervour, imagination or heightened emotion without a yogic purification of body and mind can have dangerous side effects and end up causing fanaticism and violence.

Most religions do not follow the model of yogic spirituality if we clearly examine their teachings. They reflect a very different view of religion and spirituality, of which many types have existed throughout history. To try to turn all religions and all forms of mysticism into versions of yogic spirituality is neither intellectually accurate nor sensitive to what these religions actually say. On the contrary, it represents the view of those who have not really looked into what non-yogic religions are all about. Those trained in the unity tradition are inclined to read a yogic kind of spirituality between the lines of all religious teachings even when they are not there.

There are obviously other models of religion than yogic spirituality as the various religious teachings in the world clearly reveal. Most religious groups do not emphasize a yogic purity of body and mind, nor do they teach yogic meditation practices, or have a yogic goal, such as liberation from rebirth and unity with the divine. They do not look to meditative gurus as their guides or even honour them. They do not emphasize an internal yogi-like quest as the true religious life but prefer aggressive external actions, even holy wars, to spread their faith.

Whether the yogic model of spirituality is not the only approach or is not valid, or whether some religions are deficient, depends upon

whether one considers the principles of yogic spirituality to be universal. But to pretend that all religions derive, at least originally, from a model of yogic spirituality and therefore must lead to a yogic type of spirituality, cannot stand scrutiny. It is neither fair to yogic spirituality nor to other religions to assume that they are simply the same thing in a different guise, or misinterpreted.

The non-yogic type of religion still prevails in the world today, evidenced by competing for warlike creeds trying to convert the world. We cannot merely wish this aggressive model of belief-based religions away under the pretext that they do not represent the original or real teachings of their religions that were more yogic in nature. To understand any religion and how it functions, we must examine it according to the views of its actual followers, not according to some imaginary yogic origins that they would not accept in any case.

We must remember that the Bhagavad Gita (XVII, 2–4)⁴ teaches that shraddha (faith) can be tamasic (ignorant or blind), rajasic (aggressive) or sattvic (peaceful and calm). Not all faith is sattvic or enlightening, and draws us into meditation. Rajasic faith can make us want to conquer the world in the name of our belief. Tamasic faith can promote spiritual blindness and destruction. And even sattvic faith is not enough for Self-realization but only a foundation from which it can be pursued. We must be very discerning of the religious views that we follow, just as we must be careful of what we eat or drink, or what medicines we take. There are many powerful and subtle forms of maya or illusion in the spiritual realm that we can be deceived by if we are not careful, and would lose ourselves in.

Ram Swarup copiously quotes from original Christian and Islamic sources. His writings include what these religions actually have to say about themselves so that those who have misinterpreted them from a Hindu perspective can recognize their errors. His work is not a mere traditional Hindu reaction against the Western or the modern world. He has a global and futuristic vision that examines the spiritual problems of humanity, which Hinduism offers an important, if not crucial, insight about.

Ram Swarup discusses Paramahansa Ramakrishna, the great Hindu guru and avatar who is looked upon for his idea that all

religions are the same. He notes that Ramakrishna practised Islam for three days in a highly unorthodox manner, visualized Christ but never really practised Christianity or went to any churches. In contrast, he practised Hindu teachings of yoga, Vedanta and tantra on a daily basis for over thirty years, working as a priest in a Hindu temple. Ramakrishna's real point was not that all religions are the same and equal ways to Self-realization, which is not even true of all the branches of Hinduism, but that there is something good in all religions just as there is in all people. His life message was that Hindu Dharma could encompass all the religions of the world as aspects of its broader and more universal teachings and understanding of higher states of consciousness.

Hinduism has its metaphysics of karma and rebirth, quite unlike the heaven-hell doctrines of Christianity and Islam. Hindu Dharma views liberation, Self-realization or communion with the Divine as the highest goal, not merely salvation from sin that is the Christian view. Hinduism emphasizes inner spiritual experience gained through self-discipline, yoga and meditation, leading to samadhi, a radical change in consciousness. It does not look to prayer or good works as sufficient, or mere belief in any faith or dogma. While it is true that some Christian and Islamic mystics have views or practices akin to yoga or Vedanta and are engaged in the inner quest, these individuals have been exceptions, were generally persecuted and rejected, and represent little of what occurs in the name of these religions today.

Hindu Dharma begins with the statement from its oldest Rigveda 'that which is the One Truth, the sages call by many different names' (I.164.46).⁵ This is quite a different statement from 'There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his final prophet', or 'Jesus is the only Son of God'. For this reason, Hindu Dharma has maintained a broad and comprehensive spiritual approach and not become a proselytizing ideology. A Hindu defence of indigenous people and their cultures and of the Earth and of animals provides Hinduism with a crucial voice today when our planet is dominated by economic and ideological interests that are threatening its very life. Ram Swarup echoes this Hindu conscience and is willing to proclaim it to the world which needs to hear its message.

The Legacy of Ram Swarup

India must arise out of the intellectual morass it has fallen into through intellectual appeasement in the name of religious harmony. Ram Swarup shows how to reverse this dangerous and confusing process. How his books are accepted is a good measure of how India is willing to honestly deal with its own conscience. Hinduism is a voice of Truth that should be shared with all humanity. Apologists of Hinduism and Hindu appeasers of non-Hindus have missed the spiritual essence of the tradition, which is that Truth is greater than all beliefs, authorities, books and institutions.

In addition to his influence on the Hindu mind, Ram Swarup also inspired Western pagan thinkers to revive their ancient traditions. He explained how the same denigrations and distortions that are cast on Hinduism have been placed on their religions as well, starting with the derogatory terms of pagan, polytheist and animist. He provided an insight and articulation that they can adapt to the intellectual challenges in their own culture. He has brought to the front the role of Hinduism as the defender of all native and consciousness-based spiritual traditions that have been attacked by missionary forces and exclusive, belief-oriented dogmas. This new Hindu-pagan alliance must be vigorously pursued and allowed to grow in a natural and supportive manner. It can change the face of world religion for centuries to come, awakening deep currents of experiential spirituality. It can link humanity once more to the Divine presence in nature and her mystical formations of lands, plants, animals, clouds and stars—the sacred realm of Brahman.

Ram Swarup has awakened a new generation of thinkers both in the Hindu movement in India and in the neo-pagan movement in Europe to counter the distortions about them that have been rampant for centuries. The very religions denigrated by monotheistic traditions as idolatrous, perverse or superstitious, whether those of the Hindus, Celts, Greeks and Romans or pre-Islamic Arabs, have mystical traditions with yogic connections to which can be added the native and indigenous traditions of the world.

Let us not forget that Christian and Islamic philosophers and mystics borrowed heavily from such pagan thinkers as Plato,

Aristotle and Plotinus. They benefited immensely from Greco-Roman and Indic traditions of learning on many levels, including science, medicine and mathematics—though outwardly, they hypocritically tried to eliminate their spiritual and religious traditions as being superstitious.

Ram Swarup's legacy plays a key part in this awakening of all native traditions, of which Hindu Dharma is the largest and perhaps the oldest. These traditions of experiential spirituality that work through nature are rising again and Hindu Dharma can be their greatest friend and ally. It is crucial that the new generation of Hindu thinkers studies the works of Ram Swarup carefully and continues the lines of research that he has pointed out, on both intellectual and spiritual levels. Yet, we must always remember his colleague Sita Ram Goel along with him and examine his books carefully as well.

PART III

Historical Issues: **Unity of India, the North and the** **South**

Having examined the issues of religion and spirituality, we cannot forget their historical and cultural implications. History is used to define countries, cultures and civilizations. Yet we must remember that the Western view of history and society that has dominated the world for centuries is not the only one, and has been subject to a great deal of revision over time. India has its own traditions of history and its own civilizational values that are equally important.

In this section we will examine key historical issues, not denying current scientific interpretations, but placing them in the context of traditional Indian points of view, not just of Western cultural theories. This includes the origins of Indian civilization from the standpoint of archaeology and its Vedic connections and their implications for understanding India and its cultural divisions, particularly the North and the South. There is much to be examined here that few Indians are truly aware of.

Questioning the Aryan Invasion/Migration Theory.

Since the time that this topic was examined in my earlier books, including this book and the *Myth of the Aryan Invasion* (1994), the idea of Aryan invasion has been largely refuted. The archaeological evidence has shown to be against it, with nothing concrete to support it. Yet, the basic ideas behind the invasion theory have not been given up; they are merely recast as a 'migration', continuing with the same placement of Vedic culture and its origins outside of India. The invasionists quickly reformulated themselves as migrationists, yet never apologizing for their error or lack of evidence for their original views. Many of the same problems that existed with the invasion theory still exist with the migration theory.

I have long been a student of history and have commonly contemplated its course through the different countries and cultures of the world. First, it was American history that fascinated me as a youth but I soon shifted to Europe and its more complex, colourful and culturally diverse past. Yet, I ended up with ancient history as the most interesting subject as well as the most enigmatic and misunderstood of all. After all, it dealt with the origins of civilization and with the older mysterious cultures that viewed life in radically different ways than we do today. For the ancients, everything was sacred, which permeated even the ordinary affairs and artifacts of daily life. I sensed early on that we had greatly misinterpreted our

ancient past that breathed with the gods and connected us to realms, far beyond our modern mundane preoccupations.

Egypt formed my first fascination with the ancient world. From the first pharaohs before 3000 BCE to the last pharaohs in the Greek era was a period of three thousand years, much longer than the two thousand years of history that have transpired since. I intuitively felt that in the monumental pyramids, temples and sculptures of ancient Egypt was a connection to the eternal and the infinite that later civilizations lost. There was something profound about the ancient world that our modern world seems to have sadly forgotten. While less technologically developed, they maintained a greater sense of the cosmic life and may have had more direct ways of connecting with cosmic energies. I sensed this in my examination of the profound symbolism of the Egyptian Book of the Dead which indicated the soul's existence on several levels, more subtle and profound than our limited physical reality.

A few years later, I discovered India and its similar vast ancient history that reminded me of what ancient Egypt had taught me. Yet India, unlike Egypt, has a vast literature and spiritual tradition that has remarkably maintained its continuity to the present day; this, while the Egyptian pyramids are mute museum pieces of history. The profound civilization of ancient Egypt declined and disappeared two thousand years ago, leaving much speculation as to what it was; yet India, though suffering many invasions and long periods of foreign rule, preserved a similar ancient culture of eternity, mysticism and mystery that the rest of the world progressively lost and denied. With the Vedic literature of ancient India, we also possess today the authentic voices of the ancient rishis, of the great seers and yogis who lived in the eternal and the infinite long before our fall into divisive creeds, religions and political ideologies. The Vedas constitute humanity's greatest heritage from the ancient world and its secret wisdom traditions that we can still learn from, today.

This search through India's ancient history led me to a deep study of the Rigveda, the oldest Sanskrit text and perhaps the oldest book in the world. I spend many years translating and commenting upon the Rigveda in several books I wrote on the subject (Frawley 2016).¹ Somehow, I was able to cross the turbulent river of time and return to

the Vedic world as a living experience of wonder and vision, touching the feet of the rishis as it were. In fact, I was happier and more inspired studying the Vedic mantras than in reading modern writers and their personal mundane views. I felt more at harmony in the mysterious Vedic world than in our modern consumer culture. I learned about similar groups of seers throughout the ancient world, among the Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Celts, Persians, Chinese and native American groups, such as the Mayas and the Incas.

I had long sensed intuitively that there was a much deeper spiritual knowledge among the ancients than the civilizations that came later. Spiritually, in contrast to materially, history was more a downward spiral, a loss of deeper awareness, rather than spiritual progress. Successive new religions scaled down and limited the deeper experience of consciousness into dogmas used to gain worldly power. Yet, in spite of this, many people today retain a regard for the ancient which we see in the popularity of books and films on ancient mysteries, though the academic realm prefers to reject such ideas as mere imagination.

In my studies, I discovered many commonalities between India and ancient Egypt in terms of symbolism and practices with common images of the sun, the dawn, the sacred bull, cobra, and the lotus, with the pre-eminence of a sacred priestly class and a sacrificial ritual for going beyond death. I found a special connection between the Egyptian Book of the Dead and the Yajurveda, the Veda of sacrificial rituals which had keys to its practices and symbols and followed a similar orientation. Clearly, the Vedic texts were of a similar antiquity to the civilization of ancient Egypt, if not older, and contained keys to the wisdom of the entire ancient world.

I first looked into the Rigveda according to the insights of Sri Aurobindo in his books on the Vedas (Aurobindo 2012a, 2012b).² His Vedic teachings opened the Vedic world for me, though I later developed views of my own as well. Clearly, the Rigveda is a text of monumental spiritual and cosmic knowledge with many profound secrets of yoga, mantra and higher meditation practices. While my primary concern with the Rigveda was on the level of spiritual practice and yoga sadhana, I could not help but note its significant historical implications, given my interest in ancient history. I would

write several books on these historical topics as well, and will provide a brief overview of them here.

Most notably, from the historical side, I discovered over 150 references to the samudra or ocean, including ships with a hundred oars. For me, the Vedic culture was clearly a maritime, ocean-going culture, travelling and trading by river and sea in many directions. This, I have noted in my book *Gods, Sages and Kings* (Frawley 1999, 45–66).³

Yet, when I looked into existing historical accounts, even in India, I saw the prevailing view was that the Vedas were products of primitive invaders from Central Asia, nothing like the great civilization of Egypt. For Western historians of the Vedas, there was no great Vedic civilization, no contact with the ocean, and no profound yogic culture such as I had already discovered to be the case. I was not entirely surprised by these views as modern historians overall had a tendency to denigrate all ancient civilizations as superstitious. I could see how little understanding of mantras and symbols they had, which blocked them from any deeper Vedic insights.

The Term ‘Aryan’

The ancient history of India has been described in relation to a group of people called ‘Aryans’, with the Vedic term ‘Aryan’ for nobility taken over and redefined as some original ethnic group of Indo-European speaking people. Examining this issue, I began to see how a false view of ancient India was put together out of European political concerns, not out of any deep study of the ancient Vedic texts, which were superficially recast according to the theory with little regard for what the texts actually said.

Even in the nineteenth century, some European scholars, such as Max Muller, did state that ‘Aryan’ is not a racial term and that there is no evidence that it ever was used in the Vedas. We should clearly note that there is no place in Hindu literature where ‘Aryan’ has been equated with a race or with a particular set of physical characteristics. The term Arya means ‘noble’ or ‘spiritual’, and has been so used by Buddhist, Jains and Zoroastrians as well as by Hindus. Religions that

have called themselves Aryan have members from many different ethnic groups. Ethnicity was never a bar for anyone joining any type of Aryan Dharma.

‘Aryan’ is an epithet of respect. We could equate it with the English word ‘Sir’. We cannot imagine that a race of men named ‘Sir’ took over England in the Middle Ages and dominated the common people who were of a different race, merely because most of the people in power were called ‘Sir’. Yet, this is the kind of thinking that has been superimposed upon the history of India.

European scholars redefined ‘Aryan’ not in terms of nobility but to indicate a group of nomadic people from Central Asia who invaded Europe, West Asia, Iran and India in ancient times, often in a destructive manner. The Aryans became synonymous with the primitive horsemen of the Steppes, not the great rishis and sages of Vedic, Buddhist and Jain traditions.

Background of the Aryan Invasion Theory

Out of this European concept of ‘Aryan’ came the theory of the Aryan Invasion of India (AIT). According to this theory, the Vedic people were barbarian hordes who overran Northwest India after 1500 BCE. They were said to have destroyed a more advanced Dravidian civilization of the subcontinent as is evident from the ruins of the Harappan or Indus Valley Civilization (IVC). This theory is diametrically opposed to the traditional Hindu view of Vedic culture that regards it as indigenous to India, arising on the Sarasvati River west of Delhi, and sees it as a culture of great spirituality ruled by seers and yogis.

This invasion idea was invented by nineteenth-century European thinkers and was blatantly mixed with colonial and missionary policies from the beginning. Great yogis, from Sri Aurobindo to Paramahansa Yogananda and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, questioned it. It had no basis in the extensive Vedic and Puranic literature, which does not recognize any origin outside India for the Vedic people, or of Aryans as any kind of race. Yet, owing to the European intellectual domination of the world which mirrored its political control, this idea

became regarded as truth and has become almost an article of faith in academic circles.

Most notably, the European-devised Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT) reduced the ancient history of India to a brutal invasion, a destruction of an older more advanced Indus civilization, with the perpetrators, the invading Aryans, given the mantle of sages by the ignorance of later generations! Perhaps no theory so served politics and was used to denigrate the civilization of a conquered country, encouraging its people to become British by education and worldview. The idea arose from it that there never was any indigenous civilization of India or its continuity over time, but rather a country and culture put together by invaders with the Aryans as the first and the British as the last.

Recently, however, this idea has been challenged by a number of scholars from the East and the West, from various points of view. Its opponents are becoming more numerous, raising more objections, showing new astronomical, archeological, skeletal, DNA and geological evidence in favour of dismissing the theory. Meanwhile, there has been no substantial evidence to support the theory apart from the uncertainty of linguistic speculation, with nothing proven in the archaeological record to show it. Everything that has been proposed to support it has been found to have not really occurred or to have other causes.

For examples, the Harappan cities are now been found to have been abandoned due to environmental and geographic changes, not destroyed by outside invaders; similarly, the horse, thought to have been first brought by the invading Aryans has now been found to have existed already in many Harappan sites. Contrary to the theory, the picture that has emerged is that of an indigenous and organic development of a civilization in ancient India going back to 8000 BCE (Bhirrana site in Haryana) with no break in continuity and no significant outside invasions or migrations. Indeed, it appears that in the coming years, the Aryan theory will soon be discarded all over the world.

The Geological Survey of India (GSI) has mapped out the course of the ancient Sarasvati River on which most Harappan and pre-Harappan sites are located, especially in the Kurukshetra region of Vedic fame. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), particularly

the works of Prof. BB Lal, has mapped out many ruins with several sites now larger than Mohenjodaro and Harappa; the Rakhigari site which is the largest is also the most notable and located in the Kurukshetra region.

The Aryan Migration Ploy

Since the archaeological evidence has disproved any destructive invasion, the old proponents of the Aryan Invasion Theory are now calling it a migration. Under the guise of a hard-to-disprove migration theory, they continue to portray the Vedic people and Vedic literature as intrusive to India, rather than as its authentic voice and record. They also remain hesitant to make the ancient Sarasvati region Vedic, though the Vedas speak of the Sarasvati River as their ancient homeland; the river had dried up around 2000 BCE or long before the supposed Aryan invasion/migration that is generally dated after 1500 BCE. Clearly, the Aryan Migration Theory is subterfuge to cover the fall of the Invasion Theory, keeping its conclusions in place while ignoring its deeper shortcomings.

Now the question arises, why cannot textbooks in India be changed, particularly as the Aryan theory has frequently been used to discredit the culture of India and the Hindu religion? One would expect that textbooks in India would be the first to change in this matter, and not continue to follow those in the West. Surely, if new data arose in a European country such as Greece showing the greater antiquity of its ancient civilization and literature, the entire country would be quick to proclaim the new information.

Unfortunately, India has lacked the political will to acknowledge or confront its past, particularly if it gives credence to its Vedic tradition that several political groups oppose. The Aryan Invasion Theory became a subject of political importance in the country, and politics is always willing to twist things for its electoral needs.

The British rulers of colonial India, Marxists scholars and politicians, Dravidian nationalists, caste-reform advocates of various types, Christian missionaries and Muslim groups have used the Invasion Theory to discredit or divide Hindu culture, particularly to attack its Brahmanical side. Even today one can see 'Brahmins go

home (to Central Asia)' painted on walls as political propaganda in South India. Dravidians, the lower castes, and Muslims have at times identified themselves with the pre-Aryan indigenous people of India whom the invading Aryans were supposed to have conquered and enslaved. Clearly several groups have their identity invested in the Invasion Theory that would be disconcerting to lose. On the other hand, many of the founders of the Indian Independence Movement, such as Aurobindo, wrote against this theory. It was important to them to restore Indian identity to re-establish the credibility of ancient Indian civilization and its continuity over the ages.

Yet whatever one's social views, history should be examined according to the facts. Today, when the facts question the Aryan Invasion/Migration Theory, it should no longer be portrayed as something proven to be true. A country's ancient history should not be held hostage to modern politics. India must now look at its ancient history anew, in the light of the collapse of the Invasion/Migration Theory. This reveals a greater continuity to Indian civilization that hopefully can bring more wholeness to the country.

If the Aryan theory is not true it means that India has the oldest most continuous civilization in the world going back five thousand years or more, with the oldest and most extensive literature (the Vedas), and is, therefore, one of the great cradles of world civilization that rival those of Egypt and Mesopotamia, much larger in size and population and outlasting them in its continuity. It is a heritage to be proud of however one may wish to interpret it. Whether one accepts a deeper spirituality in the Vedas or not, it is clear that such a profound and vast literature of many thousands of pages requires a vast civilization to produce and support it, which is what we find in the ancient Harappan sites along the Indus and Sarasvati rivers.

Combining Vedic literature, the largest remaining literature from the ancient world, along with the Harappan ruins, the largest urban civilization in the ancient world, makes great sense, particularly as both describe the same region of north and west India and the same river systems of that bygone era. My colleague NS Rajaram called this idea 'Frawley's Paradox' for my idea that separating Vedic literature from Harappan architecture made no sense. It creates a useless paradox that can easily be solved by equating the two.

Over time, I have come to write many books and articles on this topic, from translations of Vedic hymns to several books on history (Frawley 1997, 1999, 2015; Feuerstein et al. 2008).⁴ I was particularly honoured to do a book on India's ancient history and its cultural legacy for the Swaminarayan order and the Akshardham temple in Delhi (Frawley and Rajaram 2008).⁵

Researching both the literature and the archaeology of ancient India together is bound to unfold many deep secrets not only about the origins of civilization but about the true meaning of world spirituality that is yogic in nature. We will see that Vedic literature represents Indian civilization from its most ancient period and carries on the light of the ancient sages and rishis. Vedic texts show the development of civilization in ancient India from the early development of agriculture to pre-urban and urban eras. We note that the Vedic texts contain many layers suggesting a great compilation over a very long period of time. It is time for India and the world to embrace its profound and incomparable Vedic heritage!

The Myth of the Aryan- Dravidian Divide

Having travelled throughout India for several decades, including spending much time in South India, I have been trying to make sense of the proposed Aryan-Dravidian divide, especially the call for a pure Dravidian culture different from the Vedic that one hears of in Tamil Nadu and is echoed in other Dravidian dominated states.

The first thing one notices during such travels is the names of people. The purest Sanskrit names are found in Tamil Nadu, extending to Dravidian political leaders, such as Jayalalitha and Karunanidhi. Moreover, the South Indian languages of Telegu, Kannada, Tamil and Malayalam contain large numbers of Sanskrit loan words, sometimes extending to over half the vocabulary. Yet, many other of their terms show Sanskrit origins. This linguistic connection that goes back to the earliest period is just the beginning of numerous connections between the cultures of South and North India.

If you are looking for the region of India where ancient Vedic teachings are best preserved, you will find it in Dravidian Kerala, where ancient Vedic rituals and fire sacrifices (yajnas and homas) are regularly performed with precision and devotion, reflecting ancient Vedic texts.

In the South, one finds the largest Hindu temple complexes, dwarfing any such structure in the North. Such are Kanchipuram, Tiruvannamalai, Madurai, Chidambaram, Tanjavore and Rameshwaram, among many others. Yet, the temples are dedicated to

the same great deities, such as Shiva, Vishnu, Devi and Ganesha as in the North, not to any unique Dravidian deities not found in the rest of India. South Indian temples reverberate with the same Sanskrit mantras as in the North with the same chants in Tamil as the Hindi ones in the North. Again, it is not that great Northern temples did not exist historically, but they were repeatedly destroyed by hostile armies, which history records relative to Somnath, Mathura, Varanasi and Ayodhya. Some of these temple cities in the South, such as in Madurai/Mathura reflect the names of prominent sacred cities in the North.

Spiritual and Yogic Correlations

The great Dravidian gurus, such as Tiruvalluvar of Tamil Nadu, teach the same basic truths of yoga and Vedanta in their own language and experience. Some Northern teachers, such as Patanjali, the compiler of the Yoga Sutras are more honoured in the South today than in the North.

Dravidian nationalists tell us that Lord Shiva was a Dravidian God expropriated by the Northern Aryans. Yet, Shiva is the great deity of Varanasi, Kashmir, Kedarnath and Kailas in the north, with the Ganga flowing down from his head as a Himalayan God. Varanasi is said to be one of the oldest cities in the world as Lord Shiva's abode. Clearly Shiva is an all-India deity. In fact, we read of Shaivite kings and kingdoms from Central Asia to Indonesia, Indo-China and the Philippines in ancient and medieval times, not limited or centred in South India and reflecting Vedic and Sanskrit chants such as Om, the Mrityunjaya Mantra or the Shiva Mahima Stotra.

The primary Vedantic teachers over the last 1500 years have come mainly from the South: Shankara of Advaita Vedanta (non-dualist), Ramanuja of Visishtadvaita Vedanta (qualified nondualist) and Madhva of the Dvaita Vedanta (dualist) school. Shankara is from near Kochi in Kerala. Ramanuja is from Tamil Nadu, while Madhva is from Karnataka. There was no imposition of Northern Vedic philosophies on Dravidian philosophies in the South, but there are accounts of Southern acharyas taking Vedantic teachings to the North.

If one does pilgrimage to the Char Dham in North India—the four Himalayan sacred sites of Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri and Yamunotri—one learns these revered shrines were renovated by Shankara, the great Vedantic guru from Kerala, who clearly regarded himself as an all-India teacher, not a mere Dravidian guru. Priestly families from the South run many Himalayan temples, as in the case of Badrinath today, where the Rawat or chief priest must be chosen from certain Kerala families.

South India also had strong influences from Buddhism and Jainism which came from the North. Buddhism and Hinduism reached Southeast Asia as far as Indonesia from the Chola kingdom centred in Tamil Nadu, who clearly were proud of their culture that reflected that of India as a whole.

Tamil and Sanskrit

Sanskrit learning is best preserved in South India today, including Vedic chanting of the Krishna Yajurveda school. Many of the Sanskrit chants used in Hindu rituals throughout India are those of Southern teachers, starting with Shankara from his Bhaja Govindam to the Ganga Stotra. South Indian temples resonate with Vedic chanting in their own profound Krishna Yajurveda style.

Of course, Tamil and Sanskrit are structurally very different languages, but both have been used together in South India for as long as recorded history, sharing common scripts, such as the old Grantha script from which the modern Tamil script arises. Grantha in turn, arose from the Brahmi script of North India, which reached Sri Lanka over 2500 years ago. Sanskrit has been used side by side with Tamil since as long as we can trace the history of the region. Agastya, who is highlighted as the great guru of South India, is present in the most ancient Rigveda.

South India, Modern Yoga and Vedanta Gurus

Many great Vedantic teachers of modern times including Swami Dayananda (Arsha Vidya), Swami Chinmayananda and Ramana Maharshi have come from the South. There is more Vedanta studied in the South than in the North. The great Paramacharya of

Kanchipuram, Chandrashekhara Sarasvati whom Mahatma Gandhi honoured, was regarded as the authority on Hindu Dharma.

Many prominent gurus bringing yoga to the world have come from South India: Swami Shivananda and many of his disciples, Krishnamacharya, BKS Iyengar and Pattabhi Jois. Many of India's prominent spiritual gurus today were born in the South, including Mata Amritanandamayi (Ammachi), Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Jaggi Vasudev.

If you wish to study traditional Ayurvedic medicine, you will discover the most authentic traditions in the South, particularly in Kerala that has a vast tourist industry based upon Ayurveda. Older Vedic culture is much more alive in the South. Traditional Hindu sacred dance or Bharatnatyam is very popular in Tamil Nadu and is linked to dance forms throughout India and Southeast Asia. Even South Indian movies more commonly depict Hindu stories and deities than do the Hindi movies of the North, seen even as recently in the *Baahubali* blockbuster movies.

Unity of India's Cultural Traditions

The Aryan-Dravidian divide is largely a modern political construct. The culture of South India has been intimately interwoven with Sanskrit, Vedic philosophies, Vedic culture and yoga as long as we can trace it.

Certainly, there are cultural variations in India, including between the North and the South, just as there are in Europe or any subcontinent. But there is clearly a common culture that goes back many centuries and cannot be divided by Aryan versus Dravidian theories. Whichever tradition—Vedic or Tamil—is older, historically, is still debatable; however, they have been strongly connected to each other throughout their long histories as far back as they can be traced.

I have proposed in several of my books on ancient India starting with *Gods, Sages and Kings*, that Vedic civilization was maritime and the many Harappan sites along the ocean in Gujarat indicate connections further South (Frawley 1999).¹ It is possible that Vedic or Harappan civilization either came from the South or went South at a very early period. It was clearly easier to travel by sea than to cross

the high mountains into Central Asia. We will examine this Aryan-Dravidian question in greater detail in the following chapters.

Yet as a final note here, my own study of the Vedic teachings has been inspired primarily by gurus from South India, Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi, Kavyakantha Ganapati Muni and Kapali Shastri, as well as the Paramacharya of Kanchipuram. I have found the temples of Tamil Nadu to be the most magnificent, intricate and beautiful in the country. I have never seen any divide between Dravidian and Aryan traditions or yoga practices. I am sure that most who visit India feel the same, that one more strongly experiences ancient India and its dharmic traditions in the South, except for perhaps the Himalayas. We hope that this continues for all times. South India reflects the whole of traditional India in many ways that should not be forgotten.

The Aryan-Dravidian **Controversy:** **Race, Language and Rishis**

The British ruled India, as they did other lands, by a divide and conquer strategy. They promoted religious, ethnic and cultural divisions among their colonies to keep them under control. Naturally, these policies entered the intellectual and religious realms, where British thinkers and their hired hands, such as the German Max Mueller, functioned as soldiers in an intellectual war against the cultures of the countries that the British ruled, however old and venerable these cultures were. The same simplistic ideas used for political domination were applied for interpreting the culture and history of India, as dividing a culture intellectually is the key to controlling it in the political realm. Regrettably, many Hindus have uncritically come to believe these foreign ideas and denigrations of India's vast ancient dharmic civilization as part of their Western education, though a deeper examination reveals they have no objective or scientific basis.

One of the most important of these European ideas is that India is a land of two races—the lighter-skinned Aryans and the darker-skinned Dravidians. The Dravidians were the original inhabitants of India, authors of the Indus Valley civilization, who the invading Aryans from Central Asia conquered, dominated and expropriated much of their culture from. From this came the idea that what is called Hindu culture was originally Dravidian, and only the latter was

borrowed by the Aryans who, however, never gave the Dravidians proper credit for it.

This idea of Aryans versus Dravidians was fashioned into a powerful tool, if not a weapon to turn the people of South India against the people of North India—as if the Southerners were a different and maligned race, with the North Indians as their racial oppressors, not the British. The Aryan-Dravidian divide between the North and South became one of the main ways the British tried to divide and weaken India. Though it had no basis in the history or culture of India, either in North or South up to that time, there were efforts to prop it up by various groups who wanted to divide or weaken India.

Twentieth-century Dravidian politicians unfortunately took up this new European idea and used it to promote Dravidian nationalism, placing the Southern Dravidians against the North Indians or Aryans. They aimed to recreate what they regarded as the purity of an original Dravidian culture by eliminating so-called intrusive Aryan influences, such as the Vedas, which they regarded as foreign along with their alien Sanskrit language. In this process, they didn't realize that they were only promoting a modern European idea of who they are, not of any original Tamil heritage.

Racial Theories of Humanity and Civilization

The nineteenth century was the era of European imperialism. Many Europeans believed that they belonged to a superior white race and that their religion, Christianity, was superior compared to which other religions were barbaric, particularly an ancient Asian religion, such as Hinduism, which used many idols. The Europeans felt that it was their duty to convert non-Christians even if it required intimidation, force or bribery. They looked upon non-Christians as children who had to be disciplined in order to become truly civilized like the Europeans.

European thinkers of the era were dominated by a racial theory of humanity based primarily on the colour of skin. They saw themselves as belonging to a superior 'white' or Caucasian race. They had

enslaved the Negroid or ‘black’ race. As Hindus were also dark or ‘coloured’, they were similarly deemed inferior.

About this time, similarities between Indo-European languages became evident. Sanskrit and the languages of North India were found to be relatives of the languages of Europe, while the Dravidian languages of South India belonged to a different language family. By the racial theory, Europeans naturally felt that the speakers of any original Indo-European language must have been ‘white’, as they were not prepared to recognize that their languages could derive from darker-skinned Hindus. As all Hindus were dark in complexion compared to Europeans, it was assumed that the original white Indo-European invaders of ancient India were assimilated by the dark indigenous population, and left their mark more on North India where people have a lighter complexion than on South India.

Hindus became victims of British colonial and European racist thinking about history. The Nazis later took the idea of a white Aryan superior race to its extreme of brutality, but they did not invent the idea, nor were they the only ones to use it for political gain. They followed what was a common idea of nineteenth-century European thought, which yet lingers today in many parts of Europe.

The Racial Interpretation of the Vedas

European Vedic interpreters used the racial idea to explain the Vedas. The Vedas speak of a battle between light and darkness, between the Sun God and his deities of light and the demons of darkness. This war between light and darkness was turned into a war between light-skinned Aryans and dark-skinned Dravidians. Such scholars did not bother to examine the fact that many religions and mythologies—including those of the native Americans, Egyptians, Greeks and Persians—contain the idea of a battle between the forces of light and darkness (symbolic of the conflict between truth and falsehood), but we do not interpret their statements racially. In short, the Europeans projected racism into the history of India and accused the Hindus of the very racism they themselves were using to dominate India.

European scholars proposed that caste in India was originally defined by skin colour, which is how they translated the Sanskrit term

varna, the basis of the fourfold division of Indian society. In Vedic thought Brahmins are said to be white, Kshatriyas (warriors) red, Vaishyas (merchants) yellow, and Shudras (servants) black. Hence, scholars proposed that the Brahmins must have originally been white Aryans and the Dravidians the dark Shudras that the Aryans enslaved.

However, the colours of different Vedic classes refer to their gunas or temperamental qualities, different energetic types of human beings. White is the colour of intelligence and harmony (sattva guna), black the colour of darkness and ignorance (tamo guna), red the colour of action and energy (rajo guna), and yellow the colour of trade and expansion (also rajo guna). To turn these into races is simplistic and incorrect. If so, where is the red race and where is the yellow race in India?

The racial idea reached yet more ridiculous proportions. Vedic passages speaking of their enemies (mainly demons) as without nose (anasa) were interpreted as a racial slur against the snub-nosed Dravidians. The same Vedic demons are also described as footless (apada). Where is such a footless and noseless race and what does it have to do with the Dravidians? It is more likely a comparison of demons and snakes. Yet such 'scholarship' is accepted in books on ancient India, some published in India and used in schools in India till the present day.

This idea was taken further and Hindu gods, such as Krishna, whose name means dark, or Shiva who is portrayed as dark in complexion, were said to have originally been Dravidian gods taken over by the invading Aryans, under the idea that Dravidians as dark-skinned people must have worshipped dark-coloured gods. Yet, Krishna and Shiva are not black, but dark blue. Where is such a dark blue race? Different Hindu deities, such as the different varnas, have different colours relative to their qualities. Lakshmi is portrayed as pink, Saraswati as white, Kali as blue-black, or Yama, the God of death, as green. Where have such coloured races ever existed in India or elsewhere?

In a similar manner, some scholars pointed out that Vedic gods, such as Savitar, have golden hair and golden skin, showing blond and fair-skinned people living in ancient India. However, Savitar is a Sun God and Sun Gods are usually gold in colour like the sun, as is the

case of the ancient Egyptian, Mayan and Inca Sun Gods who were similarly associated with gold as the most precious metal. This is from the simple fact that the Sun has a golden colour. What does this have to do with race? And why should it be a racial statement in the Vedas but not elsewhere?

Aryan and Dravidian Races

The idea of Aryan and Dravidian races is the product of an unscientific culturally biased form of thinking that saw race in terms of colour. There are, scientifically speaking, no such groups as Aryan or Dravidian races. Three primary races were postulated as the Caucasian, the Mongolian and the Negroid. Both the Aryans and Dravidians were regarded as branches of the Caucasian race, generally placed in the same Mediterranean sub-branch. Yet today even these racial classifications are being questioned by modern science and recognized only as broad generalization at best.

There are differences of skin colour in India, notably between those in the North and those in the South but this is not a racial division. It is not a division between white and black but between different shades of brown. Meanwhile, the two groups have shared a common culture for thousands of years. For example, if we take a typical person from Punjab, another from Maharashtra, and a third from Tamil Nadu, we will find that the Maharashtrians generally fall in between the other two in terms of skin colour. Yet we also find the same Hindu temple culture in the North and the South.

North and South Indian Religions

Scholars dominated by the Aryan-Dravidian race theory tried to make some Hindu gods Dravidian (non-Aryan) and other Hindu gods Aryan (Vedic), even though there is no such division within Hinduism. This is based upon a superficial identification of deities with colour, Krishna as black and therefore Dravidian; this, we have already exposed as the bias to think that sages or deities were named only after the colour of their skin. In the Mahabharata, Krishna traces his lineage through the Vedic line of the Yadus, a famous Aryan people of the south and west of India, and there are instances as far

back as the Rigveda of seers whose name meant dark (like Krishna Angirasa or Shyavashva Atreya).

There are Shaivite elements in the Indus Valley or Harappan civilization, with the existence of the Shivalinga-like sacred objects and seals resembling Shiva with three heads sitting in meditation. However, these same sites located mainly on the Vedic Sarasvati River also contain Vedic-like fire altars replete with all the traditional offerings, again refuting such simplistic divisions, not to mention swastika symbols, peepal leaf motifs and the famous Brahma bull. The religion of the Indus (Sarasvati) culture includes many Vedic as well as Puranic elements.

Aryan and Dravidian Languages

Indo-European and Dravidian language families have important differences. Their ways of developing words and grammar are different. However, it is a misnomer to call all Indo-European languages Aryan. The Sanskrit term 'Aryan' would not apply to European languages, which are materialistic in orientation, because 'Aryan' in Sanskrit means spiritual. When the term 'Aryan' is used to indicate certain languages, the term is used in a European sense that we should remember is very different from its traditional meaning, and implies a racial bias that the Sanskrit term does not have.

We can speak of Indo-European and Dravidian languages, but this does not necessarily mean that Aryan and Dravidian must differ in culture, race or religion. The Hungarians and Finns of Europe are of a different language group than other Europeans, but we do not speak of a Finnish race, or the Finns as being non-Europeans, nor do we think that their religious beliefs must therefore, be unrelated to the rest of Europe.

Even though Dravidian languages are based upon a different structural model than Sanskrit, there are from 30 to 70 per cent Sanskrit words in South Indian languages such as Telugu and Tamil, which is a much higher percentage than in North Indian languages such as Hindi. In addition, both North and South Indian languages possess a similar construction and phraseology that links them closely together, which European languages do not share. In short, the

language compartments, like the racial ones, are hardly as rigid as thought.

If we examine the oldest Vedic Sanskrit, we find similar sounds to Dravidian languages (the cerebral letters, for example), which are not present in other Indo-European dialects. This shows either that there already were Dravidians in the same region as the Vedic people, or that Dravidian languages could also have been early offshoots of Sanskrit, which was the theory of the modern rishi, Sri Aurobindo.

Vasishta and His Guru, Agastya

Vasishta, the most famous of the Rigvedic rishis and author of the greatest number of hymns of any rishi in the text, is clearly described in the hymns of the Rigveda as the younger brother or disciple of Agastya, the great rishi of the South. ‘This Vasishta was your only birth when Agastya bore you forth from the people’ (VII, 33.10).¹ Agastya bringing Vasishta forth from the people suggests that he took him on as a disciple.

‘Born at the sacrificial session, directed by prayers, in a common vessel both (Mitra and Varuna) poured a common seed. Then Mana (Agastya) came forth from the middle, and then they say was born the Rishi Vasishta’ (VII.33.13).² This passage suggests initiation and a common heritage for Agastya and Vasishta as brothers.

Vasishta was born from an apsara, a nymph or wife of a gandharva, connected to water (VII.33.12).³ Elsewhere Vasishta is enlightened by Varuna while on a ship on the sea. ‘When Varuna and I ascend into the ship, then we move into the middle of the ocean. Then when we travel through the crests of the waters we will swing on the swing for pleasure. Varuna placed Vasishta in a ship. Skillful, he made him a rishi through his greatness’ (VII.89.4–5).⁴

Vasishta returns from the sea to Varuna’s great home or temple of a thousand doors (something like Dwaraka). ‘Lord Varuna, they have come to your vast abode, your home with a thousand doors’ (II.88.5).⁵ Such a great house with a thousand doors suggests a big temple by the sea.

Agastya is the great guru of the Tamil tradition and founder of the Tamil language. In the Rigveda, he is a special devotee of Vak or

speech (I.167.3).⁶ He is connected to Southern Vedic people, Turvasha and Yadu (174.9).⁷ His wife, Lopamudra, was traditionally regarded as a princess of Vidarbha in Maharashtra. The Tamil Alvars, some of whom are dated back to the late Vedic era, have miraculous or non-human births, such as Vasishta and Agastya in a pot.

It appears that Vasishta in the Rigvedic account came from the South, whether Gujarat or further South. Agastya, therefore, appears as one of the great gurus of the entire Rigveda. As Vasishta's guru, he could also be considered a guru of the family of Veda Vyasa, who as Parasharya was a Vasishta. Agastya bridges both Vedic and Tamil traditions and appears at the origin of both, suggesting a common origin or continuity between the two. Agastya is the great guru of both the Vedic people and the Tamilians. This naturally has many implications and requires further research and examination.

The kings of South India, such as the Chola and Pandya dynasties, relate their lineages back to Manu of the Vedas. The Matsya Purana makes Manu, the progenitor of all the Aryas, originally a South Indian king, Satyavrata from Kerala. The two cultures are so intimately related, it is difficult to say which came first. Any differences between them appear to be secondary, and nothing like the great racial or cultural divide that the Aryan-Dravidian idea had promoted, exists.

Dravidians as Preservers of Vedic Culture

Through the long and cruel Islamic assault on India, South India became a land of refuge for Vedic culture, and to a great extent remains so till the present day. Dravidians do not have to feel that Vedic culture is any more foreign to them than it is to the people of North India. They need not feel that they are racially different than the people of the North. They need not feel that they are losing their original culture by using Sanskrit. Nor need they feel that they must assert themselves against North India or Vedic culture to protect their real heritage.

Hindu Dharma has never suppressed indigenous cultures or been opposed to cultural variations, as have the monolithic conversion-based religions. The Vedic rishis and yogis encouraged the

development of local traditions. They established sacred places in all the regions in which their culture spread. Nor did they find local or tribal deities as something to be eliminated as heathen or pagan. They respected the human aspiration for the Divine that we find in all cultures and encouraged diversity and uniqueness in our approach to it.

The people of North India also need not take this North/South division as something fundamental. It is not a racial difference that makes the skin of South Indians darker but merely the effect of climate. Any group living in the tropics for some centuries or millennia could eventually turn dark. And whatever colour a person's skin may be has nothing to do with their true nature according to the Vedas that see the same Self or Atman in all.

The Aryans and Dravidians are part of the same dharmic culture and we need not speak of them as separate. Placing them at odds with each other serves the interests of neither but only damages both, which is what those who propound these divisive ideas are seeking. It is time, therefore, to look beyond the Aryan-Dravidian difference, which is much smaller than believed, and look at the greater commonality of Hindu or Bharatiya culture.

The Ancestry of Ravana

A close study of the Ramayana, particularly the last book or Uttara Kanda, reveals that Ravana, the enemy of Lord Rama, was not a Dravidian, as many people claim, but was related to the present people of Sri Lanka, who are considered to be Aryans—that Ravana was a migrant to Sri Lanka from the Vedic family of the Yadus from which Krishna came. The first wave of migrants to Sri Lanka from the North were perhaps from Gujarat and of the Yadu family, which dominated the southwest of India and from Gujarat had access to the sea on which they travelled far in their trading and colonizing ventures.

The Ramayana tells that Ravana, the king of Sri Lanka, had close connections with the northern regions of the Yadus, which included Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, parts of Maharashtra and Rajasthan up to Mathura, south of Delhi. Ravana was related to Lavana, also regarded as a Rakshasa of cruel temperament, of Madhupura (Krishna's Mathura) in the region of the Surasenas, who was conquered by Rama's brother Shatrughna.

After worshipping a Shivalinga on the banks of the Narmada, in the more central Yadu region, Ravana was captured and held under the control of King Kartavirya Arjuna, one of the greatest Yadu kings. Later Ravana abducted Sita nearby on the banks of the Godavari. It appears that Ravana had territory in this Yadu region of India, reflecting his ancestral connections. In this same region, Rama encountered Ravana's sister, and Ravana abducted Sita after Rama and Sita wandered unknowingly into his territory.

By caste, Ravana was known to be a Brahmin, a descendant of the Rishi Pulastya. Ravana was a famous teacher of the Samaveda, and a great devotee of Lord Shiva and had visited Mount Kailash. Ravana was well versed in Sanskrit and composed the famous 'Shiva Tandava Stotra', one of the greatest and most intricate of Sanskrit poems. While one may argue that such a composition was of a later time than Ravana, it still shows a tradition that connects him with Sanskrit. Clearly, Ravana was part of Vedic and Sanskrit culture. He is portrayed as a migrant to Sri Lanka and captured the city of Sri Lanka from Kubera.

We should note that the Rama-Ravana story has similarities to the deva-asura conflict in ancient Hindu literature. In the original story found in the Puranas and in the Mahabharata, the devas or suras had Brihaspati of the Angirasas as their guru, while the asuras, daityas or rakshasas had Shukra of the Bhrigus as their teacher. In other words, both groups followed the Vedic teachings, as the Angirasas and Bhrigus are the two main families of Vedic seers. The deva culture, as described in the Manu Samhita, was centred on the Sarasvati region in northwest India. The daitya (asura) culture was located in the region of the Bhrigus in the southwest of India by the Arabian Sea, as evidenced by the Bhrigu city Bhrigu-kaccha or Baruch, near modern Baroda. Varuna, the God of the sea, was the father of the Bhrigus, as the original Bhrigu Rishi was called Bhrigu Varuni. Gujarat was also the region of Sharyata Manava, one of the early sons of Manu, who founded the city of Kushasthali (later called Dwaraka), whose guru was Chyavana Bhargava, but whose kingdom was destroyed by the asuras, who were perhaps these same daityas.

After a period of conflict, the deva and asura groups forged an alliance. Yayati, the great king in the line of Manu, had two wives. The first was Devayani, daughter of Shukra of the Bhrigus, the guru of the daityas or asuras. The second was Sharmishta, daughter of Vrisha Parvan, king of the daityas. In this way, Yayati allied himself both with the daitya kings and their gurus, bringing the bloodlines of both devas and asuras and their gurus together.

Yayati's youngest son Puru, born of Sharmishta of the asuras, inherited his central Sarasvati kingdom, which became the basis for the Bharata Dynasty of later India including the Kurus, under whose

patronage the Vedas were compiled. Yayati's oldest son, Yadu, took over the region of the daityas. The Yadus became a very powerful military people, perhaps reflecting their daitya connections. The Dravidians were regarded as descendants of Yayati's second son, Turvasha, who was also a son of Devayani and in the line of the Bhrigus and often spoken of as together with the Yadus as Turvashas and Yadus.

In this regard, Rama's defeat of Ravana reflects other battles to subdue the Yadus, which are the main conflicts mentioned in Vedic and Puranic literature. These include Parashurama's defeat of the Yadus (Kartavirya Arjuna), Sagara of Ayodhya's defeat of the Yadus (the Haihayas), and Divodasa of Kashi's defeat of the Yadus (Vitihavya). The Yadus had perhaps the largest kingdoms of the Vedic people and required keeping their prowess in check. Ravana was probably another militant Yadu similar to Kansa, the Yadu king of Mathura, who oppressed Krishna and his family. Yet the Yadus also produced many great sages, such as Krishna and Ravana's own brother Vibhishana, and the other Aryan groups produced their share of evil men as well, such as Duryodhana, the enemy of Arjuna, who was of the Kuru-Puru line.

Sri Lankan Buddhists, such as predominate in the country today, traditionally held Ravana in respect, regarding him as one of their own ancestors. The famous Buddhist Sutra, the Lankavatara, looks to Sri Lanka as a holy land and the Sutra is given in honour of Ravana himself, who is styled as the king of the Yakshas, much like Kubera in Hindu thought.

The conclusion of this story is that the recent tendency of South Indian politicians to look up to Ravana as a hero is misplaced and not in accord with historical accounts. Ravana more properly belongs to the people of Sri Lanka, whose ancestry derives from the North, as does his brother Vibhishana who was an ally of Rama. Unfortunately, various groups have tried to use the Ramayana for political gain without adequately examining the details of the story! Lord Rama was not the first Northerner to come to the south of India and he only visited there. The Yadus had long before migrated to Sri Lanka. Rama came not as an intruder but as a liberator, freeing the South from the rule of Ravana and returning it to the rule of its own native people.

PART IV

Cultural Issues: **A New Vision of Hindu Dharma**

Hindu Dharma is under a cultural siege in India. The ramifications of this must be clearly understood, and also their crucial implications for the future. While many traditional cultures of the world are disappearing and being absorbed into the new West-dominated world culture in which commercial values prevail, Hinduism continues the ancient spiritual traditions of humanity in their full depth and diversity.

Certainly Hinduism, Buddhism and the dharmic traditions of India remain alive and are having a greater global impact, but they are also under growing challenges in India itself down to the rural level. While their meditational teachings are spreading, their support in their own countries is being undermined. This is not just the case with Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet but with many Hindu traditions in India. It has now become fashionable for India's intellectual elite to go against Hindu festivals and temple worship and not to examine the deeper dharmic teachings and philosophies that have been the basis of India's old millennial civilization. Hindu Dharma must create a compelling new vision for the upcoming century, which it can do if it returns to its deeper Vedic roots.

Why Saying ‘I am a Hindu’ Should Command Respect

Saying ‘I am a Hindu’ is likely to meet with denigration in the West and even in India.

Yet, for someone born in the West or even in India to say that they have become a Yet, a Buddhist or a Muslim does not meet with the same negative response. On the contrary, he may be looked upon favourably as being an example of open-mindedness and religious tolerance.

Like a number of Westerners starting in the 1960s, I became immersed in Hindu-based practices of yoga and Vedanta, extending to the worship of Hindu deities, such as Shiva and Devi. When people asked me what religion I followed, I realized that I was clearly a Hindu in my way of life, from puja and pilgrimage to mantra and meditation. I decided to formally become a Hindu to affirm this, particularly when I saw Hindus in India remaining under extensive conversion assaults. My Ayurvedic guru in Mumbai, Dr BL Vashta organized a simple ceremony at a nearby Hindu temple, Masoor Ashram of the Arya Samaj, and I formally became a Hindu. The simple shuddhi practice was short and uncomplicated and affirmed what I was doing and how I was already living.

Students of Yoga and Vedanta

However, most people in the West who take up yogic teachings do not formally call themselves Hindus, even if they adopt Sanskrit

names relating to Hindu deities. This is owing to deep-seated propaganda against Hinduism as characterized by backward social customs, not enlightened spiritual teachings. They call their Sanskrit names their spiritual names, not Hindu names, and they honour their guru as a realized soul and great master, but seldom as a Hindu.

Many yoga students claim to be followers of their particular guru or sect, as if these were self-contained, not recognizing that their lineage goes back to older Hindu traditions. They may study Hindu texts, such as the Bhagavad Gita as part of their training but don't see anything Hindu about it. Others claim to be part of a universal tradition of yoga that includes all religions, of which Hinduism is only one. Yet, all follow ideas and practices rooted in the Vedas, Bhagavad Gita and Yoga Sutras—prime sources of Hindu thought—overlooking the fact that they are benefiting enormously from Hindu teachings.

Some yoga teachers say practicing yoga will make a Christian a better Christian. I had given up Catholicism a number of years before I became a Hindu because I could not accept the theology, rituals, or conversion efforts behind it. The law of karma, rebirth and the pursuit of liberation in Hinduism made much more sense to me, not the heaven, hell, sin and salvation of Christianity. If practising yoga and meditation, with statues of Shiva and Devi in my shrine, made me into a better Christian, it was not something any mainstream Christian group would acknowledge or recommend. In any case, there was no Bible or Jesus in my house and I felt no need for them.

There are certainly those in the West who want to become Hindus, but find little support even from Hindu organizations. The most helpful group promoting Hinduism I discovered was *Hinduism Today* magazine and the thoughtful, articulate Western Hindu swamis associated with it, notably their great guru, Subramuniya Swami. In India, most helpful were the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) and authors Ram Swarup and Sita Ram Goel, who wrote extensively on modern challenges to Hindu Dharma.

The Situation for Hindus Today

To tell Christians or Muslims today that you have become a Hindu in order to advance spiritually is to invite ridicule and charges of idolatry and superstition. Academicians disparage Hinduism as a strange set of sensational or erotic cults, ignoring its profound meditation-based philosophies—a negative approach they would not take relative to any of the other major religions of the world. They ignore the extraordinary gurus arising from the Hindu tradition, ancient or modern whose science of yoga and meditation is almost unknown in Western religions. They fail to mention that Mahatma Gandhi called himself a proud Hindu. Yet, to call oneself a proud Hindu is rare in India, though there is probably no other spiritual tradition in the world of such vastness, depth and antiquity with regard to higher awareness and our inner connection to the divine.

The success of the Hindu community in the US and UK is slowly muting these anti-Hindu criticisms but has not yet removed them. Hindu-Americans still have to face religious and racial prejudices both for the images of their deities and the colour of their skin. Their children are too often subject to bullying in the schools for their Hindu background. Western textbooks are only slowly changing from their old colonial stereotypes of Hinduism as caste, cows and curry to a recognition of the philosophical and cultural depth of Hinduism.

Yet, even in India, you will not find a single department of Hindu Studies at any major universities, even at Banaras Hindu University (BHU). You can find a lone Hindu department at Oxford in UK, run largely by non-Hindus, but none elsewhere at any major universities in the West. This is though Hinduism is the third-largest religion in the world and has the oldest and most diverse literature of any religion. You can find in India many schools teaching aspects of Hinduism, such as Vaishnavism or Shaivism, Sanskrit or Vedanta. But they offer little in regard to teaching Hinduism overall, relating to its common principles and practices.

Clearly, there has been a long history of maligning and suppressing Hindu Dharma that continues worldwide today at an educational and media level. There has been a deliberate strategy both to discourage people from becoming Hindus and to discourage Hindus from asserting their own identity and asking for their own human rights. The influence of vested interests from missionary,

colonial, Islamist and Marxist groups is easy to discern behind these concerted anti-Hindu efforts, which often has extensive political, financial and media support.

Today in India, when Hindus question this long-standing and well-funded anti-Hindu bias that they continue to face, they find themselves demeaned as 'intolerant' as if Hindus had never faced intolerance and do not do so today. Hindus are shamed as intolerant by a media that excuses Jihadi terrorism as caused by poverty and lack of education or communist genocides as unfortunate events of the past, best forgotten. Fortunately, there is a new awakening to the value of Hindu Dharma and its yoga and rishi traditions. To respect Hinduism is to respect our ancient spiritual roots and our potential for higher consciousness. Hinduism is part of a cosmic vision that even modern science is beginning to aspire to.

So, let all Hindus say with pride and knowledge, 'I am a Hindu'. If anyone has a problem with a person proudly saying they are Hindu it is a religious prejudice that not only Hindus but anyone who believes in freedom of religion must challenge.

The Importance of Hindu Identity.

If you do not value your own tradition, other people will not value it either, however important it may be for everyone. If you have no conviction as to the value and relevance of your spiritual tradition for the entire world, no one else will either, even if the path that they follow may be much more limited. People would rather follow a person who has conviction, even if misplaced, than someone with little conviction though they otherwise are on the right path.

Hindu Dharma is the planet's primary representative of Sanatana Dharma, the universal tradition of cosmic knowledge and Self-realization behind all spiritual and religious paths, and all quests for knowledge, including science, psychology and philosophy. It teaches us how to discover the entire universe within us as a manifestation of our own deepest awareness. Such a profound view of life is almost unheard of in any other religion, science or philosophy, particularly in the Western world.

Yet, after many centuries of foreign rule and sustained forceful efforts to convert them, including an educational system that intentionally demeans them, Hindus have lost the confidence and breadth of thought that should be inherent in their tradition of Sanatana Dharma. They may appreciate their own particular guru, sect or sampradaya, but seldom recognize the common background tradition of Sanatana Dharma and its overall supreme value for humanity and all creatures. Their sense of Hindu identity is not robust

or expansive, but contracted and in doubt, wounded and in need of healing.

The Issue of Hindu Identity

As Hindu Dharma is inherently formulated as a universal tradition, Hindus can be too quickly inclusive and uncritically accepting of other spiritual and religious groups, even those trying to convert them. Hindus do not like to assert their identity; in fact, they are often apologetic about it. I have heard a number of Hindus state when asked about their religion, 'I am a Hindu but I accept all other religions as well. I follow the Gita but also accept the Bible and the Koran'. This is usually said, one should note, without such Hindus having actually studied other religions in any detail or read their scriptures in any detail, which they may not approve of if they did.

To preserve Sanatana Dharma for all humanity, a strong sense of Hindu identity must prevail among Hindus, affording Hindus the confidence to learn, practise and share their vast tradition. This statement at first may sound contradictory; saying to be truly universal I must first preserve my separate identity. That is not what is meant here. What is meant is that the Hindu heritage of Sanatana Dharma and its yogic spirituality will not be preserved if Hindus do not regard it as their own and uphold its traditions in their own lives and practices. There must be a local adaptation of this inner spirituality that is the basis of Hindu identity. This has always occurred through different gurus, lineages and sampradayas that must also affirm their greater connections in Sanatana Dharma.

Unfortunately, Hindu identity is compromised in the world, even in India, where only recently has it been gaining any positive value at all. Even today we find some people who follow Hindu traditions, such as yoga, Vedanta, Vaishnavism or Shaivism, stating that they are not Hindus. Of course, this is abetted by the government and educational policies that pander to minorities while taxing and regulating majority Hindus. This means that any pride in a Hindu identity requires political and social changes in India.

Some claim that Hindu is just a geographical term and so has no religious connotation. If this is the case, what do you tell Hindu

children in the West—who certainly cannot be called Hindus in the geographical sense as they live outside of India—when they are asked what their religion is? If the term Hindu is not appropriate, what better term is there? There is no other religion box Hindu children in the West can mark that can substitute for it when they are asked to fill out information forms about their religious background. Western society recognizes their religion as Hindu and relates to it accordingly, whatever they may think.

One can claim that Hinduism is not the best term for Hindu Dharma that is much more than a religion in the Western sense of religion as a monolithic belief system. Yet, having Hinduism accepted as a religion in the West affords Hindus many benefits, socially and politically, which cannot be underestimated, extending to legal recognition for marriage, institutions, education and other social protections and human rights. Whatever qualifications one may have about the accuracy of the Hindu word, one must accept that it is how Sanatana Dharma is best represented in common discourse in the world today.

Hinduism and Tolerance

Hindu Dharma is accepting by nature of its universal orientation. Hindus do not become intolerant by saying that they are Hindus, but instead make others aware of the vast scope and relevance of Hindu Dharma. To say ‘I am a Hindu’ is a way of breaking down religious barriers and taking humanity back to its common spiritual origins to the great seers and yogis of ancient times. Hindus should be proud of their identity and their preservation of Sanatana Dharma that other people and cultures have lost and replaced with more limited beliefs.

Unfortunately, India’s leftist media intentionally gives the impression that even to call oneself Hindu is intolerant and communal, but to call yourself Christian or Islamic is progressive and tolerant, even if you are following their fundamentalist sides. The fact is that Hindus are still targeted for humiliation and conversion by those who follow exclusive and intolerant forms of Christianity and Islam—and this is occurring regularly throughout India itself! Hindus

have no comparable predatory agenda and funding to convert non-Hindus, nor the exclusivist mindset to do so!

How do you tolerate someone, whose primary principle is that ‘we will not tolerate you’? How do you include someone in a universal vision of Truth, who has a contrary exclusive view and considers that Truth belongs to their group alone and all others are false?

Such convictions are not simply personal or intellectual opinions but allied with global missionary movements and global jihad. Saudi Arabia funded madrasas, which are now spread throughout Africa and Asia as the main education centres for Islam, and which certainly do not teach one to honour Hindu Dharma. Nor does the Catholic church or Evangelical Christians respect Hindu Dharma and its extraordinary yogic and philosophical teachings.

Uniqueness of Hindu Dharma

Hindu Dharma cannot be simply equated with other religions—particularly with conversion and belief-oriented traditions—as simply one path among many. The goal of Hindu Dharma is recognition of a Supreme Being and Self-realization. This is not the goal of Western religions, though there may be rare mystics among them who are oriented in this direction because it is the ultimate goal of all human life.

Hindu Dharma is inclusive of all sincere religious and spiritual practices. It can accept use of images or non-use of images, elaborate rituals or no rituals, devotional worship or a purely philosophical approach. Hindu Dharma is a spiritual art and science that seeks to preserve and make available to all sincere seekers all genuine approaches to universal Truth and happiness, which vary at an individual level according to spiritual growth and karma.

Indeed, there is a greater variety of spiritual views within Hinduism than probably in any other religion. That is how Hindu Dharma reflects its origin in the idea of Sanatana Dharma, a universal and eternal path that is perpetually renewed. Sanatana Dharma cannot be sustained or preserved without a Hindu identity that honours it and remains rooted in its ancient origins. Its corpus of knowledge and

wealth of history requires a tremendous effort to uphold it in every generation.

Hindu Dharma's profound teachings about the universal nature of consciousness will not reach the world unless Hindus are willing to make the effort to learn, share and express them. Hindus should honour their identity in this universal Vedic tradition of spiritual knowledge, and promote it for the benefit of all humanity. Otherwise, the loss will be irreparable for everyone and for many centuries to come.

A Hindu identity is the need for Hindus today, but a true Hindu identity that continues the legacy of the great yogis and rishis, of kings and warriors. It is time for the Hindu mind to awaken and assert itself as the dharmic conscience of humanity. Yet, it must not just meekly accept anything that calls itself religion as somehow inherently valid. Hindus must learn to show the unique value of their venerable traditions, along with their universal relevance. All that is honoured as yoga, Vedanta or Vedic knowledge in the world is because the Hindu tradition has developed and maintained it over thousands of years.

The Value of Hindu Culture for the World

To find Truth, great sages have instructed us that one must go beyond all outer barriers of race, creed, caste, nationality or culture. Only those who can step beyond the outer identities that divide human beings can arrive at the one source of all—the true Self beyond time, space and circumstance.

This, however, does not mean that culture has no purpose or value in spiritual life. Many of the same sages were founders, upholders or reformers of culture. Many left not only profound teachings on spiritual knowledge but detailed studies on the arts and sciences, even social and political issues. This was the tradition of the Vedic seers who first established Hindu culture in ancient times and were called ‘bhutakrit’, worldmakers or establishers of culture.

If we look at humanity through history, we can observe that men and women who have gained spiritual realization have not come equally from all cultures, which would be the case if culture was merely a neutral factor in spiritual life. Some cultures, particularly in India, have created an environment that has enabled a number of eminent spiritual personages to arise in every generation. An ongoing stream of great gurus and yogis has continued in India from ancient to modern times.

Other cultures, including those of the European and Islamic worlds, rarely produce comparable spiritual figures and may not afford them much value when they have arisen within their ranks. Their religious trumpet finds their one Son of God or one final

prophet as if only one supreme religious figure were possible. Emphasizing only one such figure prevents others from developing or from being recognized should they arise. The concept of a person who has achieved Self-realization—a human being who has recognized the Divine or the Truth in his or her own consciousness—is not formally recognized by most cultures at all; it is regarded as a heresy or delusion.

Dharmic traditions recognize that Truth can be found through many different sages, and must ultimately be realized by each individual through his or her own direct experience. This is very different from exclusivist approaches that recognize primarily one great being who existed at one time, and require that all people look to that one person and his authoritative revelation for establishing their relationship with God. Such a negative attitude about the human capacity for spiritual knowledge can stultify not only the spiritual potential of the culture itself, but also the individuals within it.

While outer deficiencies such as overpopulation or lower levels of income in India today may be visible to the outward eye, this should not detract us from appreciating India's inner and historically enduring qualities. Nor should it prevent us from extracting the higher values of Indian culture from its outer forms, and implementing them in our own lives, using them to fill the growing spiritual deficiencies in cultures throughout the world.

If we look at India over the last hundred years, we can observe a stream of great spiritual personages including Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Rama Tirtha, Aurobindo, Ramana Maharshi, Anandamayi Ma, Shivananda, Chinmayananda and Dayananda, to mention but a few, and all great individuals, not the products of any school or organization, or clones of one another. If we look at the West or the Islamic world over the last thousand years, it is difficult to find such enlightened individuals. Without proper cultural support, such a wonderful assembly of yogis could not arise or would not be appreciated. While these sages are the fruit, the culture is the field that nourishes the trees (teachings) on which they grow.

Hindu Culture and the Global Yoga Movement

The many Hindu gurus who have come to the West over the past century brought little of Hindu culture along with them until recently. Perhaps they did not want to impose Hindu culture on Westerners who might not appreciate it. They were under the impression that Hindu practices, like the worship of images, would be looked at unfavourably by Westerners with their un-iconic religious backgrounds, and could be used as a pretext for rejecting their teaching. They stressed yoga and meditation practices and avoided forms and images. Often they encouraged Westerners to maintain their own cultural and religious identities, though these were opposed to the deeper practices they taught.

The result of this approach was that the worship of the gods and goddesses, Hindu devotional paths, pujas and rituals were little known or understood in the West outside of a few special groups who promoted them. Many Western followers of Hindu Yoga teachers have never entered a Hindu temple or have seen a puja being performed, except as a curiosity. Yet, this situation is changing today in the twenty-first century with the Hindu diaspora and the greater Western receptivity to bhakti (devotion) and kirtan. Hindu temples now exist in most major cities in the West, including magnificent monuments, such as the Swaminarayan Mandirs, which means that more people are recognizing the beauty and power of Hindu temples. The Western yoga community is becoming more aware of Hindu deities, such as Rama and Krishna, Shiva, Devi and Ganesha.

Ayurveda, the Vedic medical system of mind-body healing, has received recognition throughout the world, with Ayurvedic books, herbs and healing practices becoming popular in many countries. Vedic astrology has become recognized and popular in astrological circles. Hindu music has made a mark of its own on world music alongwith traditional dance. Sanskrit is gaining respect as the language of yoga and higher consciousness. More people than ever are studying Sanskrit today, though this trend is more prominent in yoga studios or Vedic schools than in universities.

Yet limitations remain. Sanskrit poetry, drama and aesthetics, the most extensive, intricate, profound and spiritual in the world, is little known or appreciated. The Vedas and Upanishads, the great source teaching behind these numerous currents, are gradually becoming

known, but are still rarely studied by those who practise or teach yoga! The Yoga Sutras are now widely used and studied, though seldom understood in depth. The Bhagavad Gita has a place in yoga and in world religious studies, though again not always with its inner meaning revealed.

Perhaps, this hiding of Hindu cultural forms, which occurred among the educated in India as well, might have been necessary when the West was still dominated by Christianity, but it is no longer true and becoming counterproductive as people all over the world are looking for new spiritual ways of life and expression. For example, a religion of the Divine Mother, such as Hinduism, is much more clearly articulated than monotheistic traditions, and is gaining adherents everywhere. Other spiritual traditions have not adhered to their cultures or background as much as in their coming to the West. Chinese and far Eastern culture, Chinese medicine, Chinese astrology (I Ching), martial arts, Japanese poetry (haiku), and Chinese and Japanese painting are as well known along with the meditation tradition of Chan or Zen. Much of the popularity of Tibetan Buddhism has come from the pujas, visualizations and devotional meditations they teach their followers, along with Tibetan chants.

An American Yoga teacher and friend of mine, who also studies Tibetan Buddhism, told me once that he was given a great new secret and powerful meditation lesson by a lama unlike anything he had gotten from his yoga teacher, though he had lived and studied with him for four years in South India. This practice was meditating on a Tibetan deity and offering a puja to it. When I told him that such puja and devotional meditation was the main practice of Hinduism and was much more developed in the Hindu tradition than the Buddhist, who had largely adopted it from the Hindu, he was shocked. Why had he not heard of this from his own teacher? When he had asked for religious instruction from his Hindu teacher, he was told to stick to his Christian approaches, which was particularly disturbing to him as his own religious background was Jewish!

Hindu Culture and its Profound Relevance

Culture is not necessarily detrimental to the spread of spiritual knowledge, but can be a vehicle for it, particularly in the case of the spiritual culture India has developed. Indian or Bharatiya culture has nothing to hide or to be ashamed of as some young Hindus may think. It is not inferior to Western intellectual and commercial culture, but a superior culture of yoga and consciousness, and a potential means of uplifting Western culture beyond its outer view of life. In the spiritual, philosophical and aesthetic realms, Hindu culture far excels the West today.

Modern Hindus in India are apologetic about their culture, and its many temples, rituals, chants, festivals, forms and images. If they have a spiritual side they are more likely to connect with formless meditation techniques, where there appears to be little concern or even a disdain for Hindu culture. They may prefer Western intellectual culture in their personal lives and books they read, which appear more sophisticated and progressive. They lack an appreciation of the beauty and intricacy of their own cultural and artistic traditions.

It must be admitted that much of Hindu culture today, like its old temples, is in decay or in need of repair. This should not be a pretext for abandoning it in favour of a spiritually inferior culture that has a better presentation in the media or material world; there is a need for reviving its true greatness. Once we understand the importance of culture in the spiritual life, we will begin to appreciate what Hinduism has been all about. The spiritual path is Rama, but a spiritual culture is Sita. Rama must win back and save Sita or he cannot fulfill his destiny.

Hindus should honour their vast spiritual tradition including not only its profound philosophies such as Advaita Vedanta, but its magnificent cultural forms—particularly its culture of devotion (bhakti) that is one of the most sublime and exalted the world has produced. They must recognize the importance of their spiritual culture for all humanity, which is spiritually starved and deprived of deeper cultural inspiration in this era of mass media entertainment.

Individuals in the West who have true spiritual aspiration often fail to go far on any spiritual path because there is little in their outer culture that supports it. Most of the world is confined to the sterility of a materialistic and intellectual culture, or that of dogmatic and

exclusive religions, which form a desert for the soul or the inner being. Without the waters of a true spiritual yogic and dharmic culture, the soul of humanity may not be able to flourish.

Hindus need to stop dissociating their traditional culture from its higher spiritual traditions. There is no conflict between Vedantic philosophy and Hindu ritualistic and devotional forms. In fact, the latter has provided the ground in which the former is able to grow. Hindus should no longer deny the integrality of yogic spirituality and Hindu culture, but rather show it as a model for the integration of yoga into other cultures.

This does not mean that Hindus should impose their cultural forms on others, but they should share them and allow others to use and adopt them. For this, Hindus must uphold the value of Hindu culture in their own lives and in India itself. This is not to encourage a mere superficial Hindu pride or cultural elitism. It is to stop the process of devaluing this great culture, which alone of the world's cultures truly supports the complete revelation of the spirit or inner Self.

While spiritually advanced individuals may have little need for outer forms, the world needs a broad creative and spiritual culture to nourish the wide diversity of human temperaments. It is not enough to teach people the value of meditation and otherwise educate them along scientific, intellectual or technological lines, or place them back in their own religious and cultural backgrounds that are inimical to the spiritual quest. This is not transcendence of culture; it is acquiescence to non-spiritual or materialistic cultural values that prevent the spiritual life from truly flowering.

The majority of people find an easier access to the spiritual life if they are first exposed to a spiritual culture, for example, a spiritual philosophy, poetry, art, music, or medicine. We need a broad field (prakriti) of cultural growth in order to support the widest and most diverse set of approaches to the spirit (purusha). Individuals are so different that the example of any one teacher or spiritual path is not enough. Hence the linking of the spiritual life to all aspects of life and culture is essential. While a rare individual can go directly to Truth (pure consciousness), cultures need to explore the domains of the mind, art, philosophy, medicine and science. While the evolution of the individual can follow a vertical ascent, culture moves slowly,

expanding horizontally before being able to rise to a new level vertically.

The forms of Hindu culture are among the most spiritually oriented in the world, reflecting the profound teachings and practices of yoga. They can form the basis for a new spiritual world culture that embraces the whole of life. Such domains of culture directed toward the spiritual quest as art, music, poetry, philosophy and literature have had their greatest development in India. It is not just yoga, meditation and renunciation of the world that India has to offer but the abundant forms of a magnificent spiritual culture. Naturally, these cultural forms must be modified, adapted and reoriented relative to time and place. Most of the aspects of Hindu culture that are objected to in the West, like the hereditary caste system, are not in harmony with their original meaning anyway. To defend Hindu culture is to return to its higher and more yogic forms. It does not require hiding its present inadequacies. All the world's cultures require ongoing reform and renovation. It is not denying one's culture to do this but affirming its creative capacity.

Naturally, those who have their own cultural preferences may object to any apparent glorification of Hindu culture. They would prefer it if Hindu culture would stay hidden and lacking in confidence so that they can spread their own cultural forms without competition from Hindus. Western culture, whether atheist, Christian or Islamic, is still trying to impose its cultural forms as superior in India itself. And Hindu culture seldom makes an effort to defend itself from their well-planned and funded assaults. While in recent years a stronger Hindu voice has arisen to defend Hindu culture in India, the opposition to it has also become more shrill and devious.

Hindu Culture, Not Simply Indian Culture

There are those who do not like the term 'Hindu culture' and would prefer the more general term 'Indian culture'. To them, the term 'Hindu' connotes a religious limitation but 'Indian' is more embracing of the diverse culture of the subcontinent. However, the culture of India is primarily Hindu and Sanskritic. Even the Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs, and to some extent the Muslims and

Christians of India, have followed a Hindu or Sanskritic type of culture. The term Bharatiya Samskriti can be helpful in this context, as it connects to the older dharmic culture of Bharata.

The music of India is Hindustani, based upon Hindu traditions going back to the Samaveda. Hindu temple dance in one form or another, dominates the traditional dance forms in every state of India. The native medicine, Ayurveda, is rooted in the Vedas themselves, as is jyotish (astrology). Classical poetry and drama traditions revolve around Hindu images and sacred stories. The exercise tradition of Hatha Yoga is rooted in the older monastic sadhana tradition. The literature and philosophy all look back to Sanskrit, which derives from the Vedas. The ideas and forms of Hindu Dharma permeate all aspects of Indian culture, far more than Christianity permeates the culture of Europe, which contains considerable pre-Christian Greco-Roman and post-Christian Western intellectual influences.

Unfortunately, many modern Hindus are rushing to embrace a superficial Western culture, imitating its more mundane forms of thought and expression. This may be a great loss not only for India but also for the entire world. There are enough people in the world exploring mass media culture, writing superficially about political affairs or common human emotions. There are enough students studying Western philosophy and art. How many educated Hindus know Shakespeare and how many know Kalidas and Bhartrihari, spiritually enlightened Indian poets whose knowledge of consciousness dwarfed not only that of Shakespeare but also that of Einstein? Why aren't there Kalidas festivals in India comparable to the Shakespeare festivals in England and in other English speaking countries?

Why should the youth of India focus their studies on Western thinkers while much greater figures in the culture of India be ignored throughout the world? Why should they emulate such thinkers as Marx or Freud, when they have those from Shankara to Sri Aurobindo, who could contain the entire minds of all these Western thinkers in one corner of their much vaster awareness? India's place is to pour forth the glory of the spirit and universal consciousness through every cultural form. It should not merely conserve but renew

and expand its extraordinary heritage, and allow the rest of the world to benefit from it.

For this, Hindus must show their dedication to their dharmic culture as a form of national, regional and world culture. To do this, they must be willing to express their profound culture to the entire world as the gift of the great rishis and yogis. This does not mean that Hindus should not use current information technology but should adapt to develop and share their own traditions, not just to mimic Western culture. Fortunately, many young Hindus are getting this message and looking at their Hindu heritage with a renewed pride and vision of the future. Such a new creative Hindu outlook can greatly enrich culture everywhere.

Today there is little of real culture left in the world, regarding culture here in its higher sense of refinement as art, music, philosophy and spirituality. Modern consumer culture is taking over in every country, except where fundamentalist religion holds on with its rigid and sterile practices. Western intellectual and artistic culture has been in decline for several decades, where a growing vulgarity has come in to replace it. Yet this cultural vacuum is a great opportunity for a higher spiritual culture, such as the dharmic culture of India, to move in and take the culture to a higher level.

However, for this to occur, Hindus must first awaken to their heritage and its universal relevance. This is one of the most important endeavours for the future of humanity. Perhaps, as Westerners like myself learn to appreciate Hindu culture, which for us is like the grace of the Divine Mother, Hindus will begin to recognize their rich heritage and once more develop it for the benefit of all.

East and West, Going Beyond the Barriers

One of the most common divisions in culture is that of humanity into East and West. While this can be a convenient way to designate different types of cultures, it is not a rigid boundary. We have heard 'East is east and West is west and never the twain shall meet'. What does this division mean and can we go beyond it?

We are all essentially human beings. Geographical, religious, political, cultural and intellectual distinctions are secondary to the basic unity of human nature. Each one of us possesses the same basic desires and fears, seeking of happiness, knowledge and security, and a mysterious longing for immortality. There is no human being who has ever lived who is not at the core, fundamentally akin to us. In Vedic thought, this is not merely a physical or species-based kinship, we are all manifestations of the same Divine Self and unitary consciousness.

Today, we are entering into a global age and the barriers that have traditionally existed between people are gradually going down. This we can observe as Western materialistic culture is moving towards the East, and while Eastern spiritual culture is moving, at least to some degree, to the West. Even on a geographical level, Asians are relocating to the West and constitute now a significant minority in Europe and America. Similarly, a number of Europeans live or travel in Asia, and this trend is likely to grow in the future.

We can observe that all the things Westerners have done, Easterners can do and, at least in individual cases, have done. Similarly, all that Easterners have done, Westerners can do and, at

least in individual cases, have also done. Easterners can be great scientists or technocrats. Indeed, India is producing many of the best doctors, engineers and computer experts in the world. Westerners can take up the practice of Eastern yogic and meditational disciplines. As time goes on, such phenomenon as the worldwide diffusion of ideas, will become more common.

The East-West division as we know it today was originally invented by the Europeans as an expression of cultural superiority, particularly in the realm of science and technology. Everything to the east of them became the realm of the backward Easterners, whether it was such diverse groups as the Arabs, Hindus or Chinese. Eastern culture was defined in several ways. Generally, it was regarded as mystical, unscientific, otherworldly, traditional, group-oriented and autocratic. This definition was relative to Western culture that defined itself as practical, scientific, this-worldly, non-traditional, individual-oriented, and democratic. Today the division is often simplified with the materialistic West versus the spiritual East (though it would be more appropriate to regard all of the cultures of the world today as materialistic with the spiritual East being more of the past than of the present).

What is Western culture and what constitutes it? Western or European culture has a base of Judeo-Christian religious and Greco-Roman intellectual values, on a diversity of predominately Indo-European languages, people and their native beliefs. Out of this arose European art and culture and the developments of modern science and technology. Western culture, therefore, is a mixed affair, put together from different sources over time, not a pure breed of any type.

The Western world looks back at two primary cultural eras: ancient Greece and the Renaissance. Both of these eras were creative because of an interchange of ideas with many outside sources. Renaissance thinkers studied Greek, Roman, Middle Eastern and sometimes Indian sources, moving beyond the restriction of their studies by Christian dogma. The ancient Greeks and Romans took much from Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia and India. They were not Christians but pagans with a religion and culture much like other pagan countries extending to India. Greek temple worship, mystical

philosophy and use of astrology resemble similar traditions in India, and there was often a historical connect between the two.

These interchanges were not signs of the poverty of their culture but their openness. Yet, besides these two great cultural eras of European thought, the religious era of early Christianity overshadows them in the Western mind. It occurred in two main periods, the first was at the close of the Roman Empire, whose collapse was hastened by Christianity, when Rome became officially Christian in 319 CE. The second was the period of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation that came after the Renaissance and gave greater power to Christianity again. The religious movement of Christianity was exclusive, not synthetic, and covers the otherwise syncretic nature of Western culture from the Greeks and the Renaissance. The early Christians destroyed much of the older Greco-Roman culture.

Western culture is generally defined in two ways, which though contradictory, are usually combined. First, it is regarded as scientific and rational, as opposed to oriental culture that is unscientific and mystical. Second, by its Christian religion (with which Judaism and Islam may be combined), it is regarded as humanitarian and monotheistic, while Eastern religions are viewed as otherworldly and polytheistic or monistic.

That the Christian religious tradition is not necessarily scientific or rational is well known to everyone. The ongoing battle in the West between science and religion, or Church and State, cannot be missed by any thoughtful person. The rejection of the authority of the Church was necessary for the development of science in the first place. Yet, many evangelical groups today still promote a literal Biblical idea of creation that the world is only six thousand years old—an idea that is in total denial of the evidence of science. On the other hand, Hindu and Buddhist accounts of the origin of the universe, with multi-billion year cycles of creation and destruction, is much more in harmony with modern science, though these dharmic traditions were not originally looked to as anything rational by the Western mind.

The Western scientific background originates from the pre-Christian Greeks and their rationalism. Yet, in terms of religion, the ancient Greeks—as all the pre-Christian people of Europe—practised a religion like the oriental or the Hindu. They used a variety of

images, practised temple worship, maintained a sacred fire and often had gods of the same name and function as the Hindus. Similarly, the accusations of polytheism and idolatry made against oriental religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, are the same as those made against the pagan Europeans from whom science and rationality first arose. In time, Christianity (and later Islam as well) adapted the pagan philosophies of the Greeks (Plato and Aristotle) along with Greek medicine, science and other cultural factors as it had no real philosophy or science, no comparable intellectual culture of its own.

On the other hand, oriental cultures, such as India, have had their own traditions of rational philosophy much like the Greeks, as we can see in the Upanishads, Samkhya, Vedanta, Nyaya-Vaisheshika and the Buddhist schools, which similarly emphasize reason and dialectic but combined with ethical and meditational disciplines. In fact, Greek philosophy, such as that of Plato or Parmenides, has many affinities with the Hindu. Similarly, Greek medicine and astronomy has much in common with Ayurvedic medicine and the astronomical systems of India.

The philosophical and religious background from which science emerged via the Greeks has more in common with Hindu and Buddhist traditions than the Judeo-Christian tradition. We can see this today when many scientists have found a common accord with the insights of Indian philosophy from the Buddhist voidness to the Cosmic Dance of Lord Shiva. Therefore, there is no reason to associate Western science with Biblical traditions by way of ideas or inspiration. The basis for Western science can be found in the free inquiry of the Greeks represented by their religion, and as Greek mythology clearly indicates, it has much depth yet to be explored. Hindus have a similar tradition of sacred stories and symbols that is more profound than the Greeks and is more concerned with the yogic quest for higher awareness.

Moreover, dharmic spirituality is not necessarily unscientific or irrational. It is part of an entire science of yoga that is laid out as systematically as any modern science. Hindu and Buddhist teachings are not filled with dogma and superstition, but with various methods of inquiry and detailed experiments in consciousness. This has attracted many Westerners to them, not in denial of rationality, but as

an extension of rationality to a spiritual level. Therefore, the oriental and the pagan is the mother not only of mysticism, but of science and philosophy, which takes us back again in a Vedic direction.

Therefore, to say that scientific Westerners should not adapt Eastern spirituality because it is irrational, does not make any sense. The criticisms of Eastern spirituality as being unsuitable for Westerners are perhaps more appropriate for Christianity and belief-based religions, which tend to be anti-rational, than for Hinduism and Buddhism, which honour rational and experiential approaches to spiritual life. We mean that as rational people we need a rational system of spirituality that would align us with the so-called Eastern religions, as well as with the mysticism of the ancient Greeks and Romans. If we are saying that as rational people all religion should be rejected as irrational, we should recognize that Eastern religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, are not religions in the Western sense of the word, but ways of clearing the mind of all preconceptions and prejudices for the direct perception of Truth. It is wrong to equate them with monotheistic faiths.

Other people say that since Western culture is individualistic, Westerners should not follow Eastern culture because it is traditional and authoritarian and denies the freedom that is the real spirit of Western culture. However, Hindu thought is the most individualistic in the world. It teaches that the individual, that you yourself are God or the Divine power behind the universe! It does not subordinate the conscious individual to any authority or belief but emphasizes to be true to our own deepest nature, that the highest Truth is to be who we really are apart from all external conditioning influences. Freedom or moksha is the very goal of Hindu thought, but this is not freedom within the field of time (which being limited is the realm of bondage) but freedom to transcend time.

Western tends to mean modern, as Eastern tends to mean ancient. However, in a hundred years, India or China could be at the forefront of technology or what we now call Western civilization. In the thirteenth century, the Chinese had gunpowder and the compass, the basis of modern technology, and the Europeans were technologically primitive. Such temporal distinctions are seldom enduring.

Yet, by Western culture today—neither Western religious nor Western intellectual culture is usually meant—what is meant is Western commercial culture: popular music, movies, ways of dressing, fast food and so on. Western popular culture is more of an anti-culture than a true culture. It not only destroys the culture of the countries it invades, it has already undermined the culture, ethical or aesthetic refinement that had previously developed in the West. Most of great Western art seems to be a thing of the past, with little great art added since the advent of modern technological culture after the Second World War.

Hence, when Westerners insist upon maintaining the purity of Western culture, what do they mean? Do they mean upholding Christianity? Do they mean upholding Greco-Roman or European intellectual values? Do they mean upholding modern Western popular culture or Western business interests? Is there a cultural purity or homogeneity in any of this? And what do so-called progressive Easterners mean when they speak of bringing in the benefits of Western culture? Apart from technological expertise and practical conveniences, the West does not have so much to offer, particularly at a spiritual level.

Most interestingly, the division between East and West is often made into a one-way street. In America, we are told, particularly by our religious leaders, that we should not adopt Eastern spiritual or religious teachings because they are foreign and ‘Eastern’ and not appropriate for us ‘Westerners’ who should follow a Western religious or spiritual path, meaning Christianity. However, Western Christian groups don’t hesitate to try to convert the people of Asia, which has always been one of their primary goals. Western missionaries don’t tell Easterners that their Western Christian religion is not appropriate for the people of Asia who should follow an Eastern religion more in harmony with their cultural background, such as Hinduism or Buddhism. Western religious leaders treat their religion as having global relevance, but they do not like it if people of Eastern religious backgrounds consider that their traditions also possess a global significance. This is an obvious cultural prejudice. Is not religion meant to deal with what is universal anyway?

If Western religious groups really believe in the division of East and West, the first thing for them to do would be to stop trying to convert the people of Asia. What they believe in is not that there is a rigid division between East and West, but that the East should be Westernized. In fact, Western religions in Asia are usually not promoting the scientific, rational or progressive side of Western culture, but imposing on the East the irrational, unscientific and unspiritual part of their religion that is being rejected in the Western world. The forms of Christianity in India are overall much more fundamentalist than those in the West.

Japan became a modern Asian culture that can compete with the West in science and business by adapting its own Buddhist and Shinto traditions to the conditions of the modern world, not by becoming Christian or Islamic. The Philippines, on the other hand, perhaps the staunchest Christian nation of Asia, remains among the most backward. Hence it is not Western religion that is benefiting Asia, but the confidence of the people of Asia in themselves and their own traditions and their ability to adapt themselves to the changed circumstances of the modern world.

While Western culture is exporting itself to Asia, the division of East and West is used to prevent Eastern culture from being imported to the West. However, if Western culture is going to be exported to Asia, Eastern culture must come to the West. The trade of ideas and culture can no more be a one-way street than the trade of merchandise. If the East can benefit from Western culture, then certainly the division between East and West is not real. Then the West can benefit from Eastern culture without people losing their real nature, which after all is a matter of the heart, not of geographical divisions.

And we should ask, where is this mythical boundary between East and West located? Is Eastern Europe of the East because it is 'Eastern' or the West because it is European? Is the so-called Near East part of Eastern culture or of the West because much of it is equivalent in longitude with parts of Europe? What about Africa or South America, which are on the same longitude with Europe and North America, the bastions of the so-called West? Their older native and indigenous cultures resemble the Eastern or Asiatic more than the

Western or European. Are the Native Americans Easterners or Westerners? Their culture and racial type is more of Asiatic, yet they are the native people of a region regarded as Western.

On what basis do we make the distinction of East and West? If it is by race, we must remember that many of the people of Asia—like those of India and the Middle East—are of the same Caucasian race as the people of Europe. If it is by colour of skin, we should note that the Northern Chinese have a white skin colour like the Europeans. If it is by language, we must note that most of the languages of India and Iran are of the same Indo-European family as those of Europe, while those of the Near East are of different families like the Semitic. By the logic of language, India would belong to the West and Saudi Arabia to the East. If it is by religion, there are a number of Christians and Muslims in Southeast Asia. Are they Easterners or Westerners? Muslims share the same Abrahamic religious background as the Christians. Are they therefore Westerners?

If the division of East and West is by technological advance, then Japan belongs to the West, and as various Asian countries develop economically, then we would have to say that they have joined the Western world, even if they may have preserved their older Eastern religious practices.

The Chinese were originally suspicious of Buddhism because coming from India to the West, it was considered to be a Western religion. The Romans regarded Christianity as an Eastern religion and were suspicious of it. On the other hand, the pre-Christian Greek, Roman and European religions had deities and practices and a social culture close to the ancient Vedic, evident from abundant similarities of language and customs. Would we say therefore that the ancient Europeans were originally Easterners like the Hindus but became Westerners through the adaptation of Christianity, another Eastern religion?

Westerners have designated the majority of the world to be Eastern. It appears that whatever seems different than the North American and Western European, can fall under the label Eastern. Yet such cultures as India and China, which are lumped together as Eastern, are quite distinct from one another. All these so-called

Easterners are not alike. They are a far more heterogeneous group than so-called Westerners.

Islam derives from the same religious background as Western culture and their Koran is based upon the Bible. Islamic civilization used Greek philosophy and Greek medicine (Yavana/Unnani), as did the Christians. We could argue from their Biblical and Greek influences that Muslims and Europeans are both Westerners. Certainly, Hindus see their religions in the same light and has often styled both of them as Yavanas or people from the West.

The division of East and West is generally a one-sided affair, a barrier protecting Europe and North America from outside influences, particularly those of religion, while they spread their culture all over the world. However, we don't reject a peach because its original home in China makes it an Eastern fruit. So too, knowledge and culture are things that are universal. And many aspects of our culture today have come from quite diverse places throughout the world. Just as Europe and America have a strong cultural and religious effect on Asia, so India, Japan, China and other Asiatic countries affect Western cultural and religious views in ways that we may not yet suspect. In fact, the essence of culture lies in broadening one's cultural base so as to include as much of human culture as possible. This is what is regarded as being cosmopolitan rather than provincial.

Just as we all use different food items that have been developed throughout different parts of the world, so have different cultures and sciences developed in various lands. We should use each of these for its objective worth and not be disturbed by differences of names. Nor will we find that only our culture is valuable. We will discover something of value in each culture. We are all human beings and all human culture belongs to each of us. Whatever any human culture has produced is part of our own humanity. The racial, linguistic, religious and cultural divisions between people should not be taken rigidly. They are the different facets of the same gem of our common humanity. Like the different petals of a flower, each has its unique place and beauty but this need not serve to make them hostile or alien to each other. This doesn't mean that all cultures are simply the same or equal, but that they are all part of a greater human culture that contains all human possibilities.

What does the East have to offer the West? It is obviously a much older, better developed, wiser and more tolerant, as well as more scientific approach to the spiritual life, the culture of Dharma. Similarly, the West has to offer the East a more scientific, and often more humane and practical way to organize the outer life. Those of us who are Westerners may have to humble ourselves a little to recognize what the East has to offer, but we must face the facts. If we truly want to develop on a global level, we must take the best from all cultures. When Westerners refuse to examine Eastern spiritual teachings because it may cause them to question their assumed Western identity, they are only cutting off a part of their greater and deeper humanity.

If Westerners truly aspire to help the people of Asia, they should teach them practical and humanitarian ways to organize their societies. When they try to convert them to Western religions they are doing both of them a disservice because religion is what the East already has, and what the West needs to seek from it.

Such Asian cultures as India and Tibet developed a greater knowledge of consciousness or the internal world, just as Europe and America developed a greater consciousness of the external world. Westerners need not feel culturally denigrated by benefiting from the wisdom of India any more than Hindus have to feel debased by taking on the benefits of technology from Europe and America. Just as the people of Asia must adapt modern technology to their own environment, so must those in America adapt this yogic science of consciousness to their own lives. It is an issue of human growth, not of the advancement of one geographical region only.

Naturally, it is hard to understand foreign cultures, just as the sounds of a foreign language will not at first make sense. It is easier to see the faults rather than the merits in one's neighbours. If we look for differences, we will find them, but if we look for unity, that is also there. It depends on where we place our attention and what we value in life.

Our true goal as a species should be to create a common spiritual and sacred culture beyond all mere geographical or social divisions. 'All the world is one family' is a great statement from the Vedic tradition, which tradition therefore belongs to all of us. The challenge

today is to create a global culture. This is to recognize our common human heritage in all culture, and to anchor that culture to spiritual values, the pursuit of Self-realization as the real goal of humanity.

An American Discovers the Vedas

Why would an American dedicate himself to studying the ancient Vedas of India? And how could an American, coming from a totally different cultural background, including an early Catholic upbringing, find a deep affinity with the Vedic teachings, which most Hindus today themselves can't relate to? How did such a person get started in studying the Vedas at a young age when the term Veda was almost unknown in America? In the modern world it seems that everyone, including Hindus, are trying to adopt Western culture with its scientific advances and economic affluence, picking up its popular culture and lifestyle as well. Why would a person move in the other direction and look to the East, particularly when it was not a matter of academic study, nor did it promise any material reward?

As I have written many books and articles on the Vedas and travelled through America and India promoting Vedic knowledge, I am often asked such questions, particularly by Hindus in India or Indo-Americans, who usually do not have the time or are lacking in the motivation to seriously examine their own tradition. Confronted with an American dedicated to the Vedas, Hindus find me not only an anomaly but also a question mark on what they are doing. Sometimes, they find it an inspiration to re-examine their roots.

This is a difficult query for me to answer as events unfolded of their own accord. I will begin by relating something of my personal life. There was nothing in my family or educational background that would explain my connection with the Vedas or India. I was the

second in a family of ten children, born in a small city in Wisconsin in the Midwestern United States in 1950, in the middle of the twentieth century. Both my parents came from strict Catholic backgrounds, my father of Irish ancestry and my mother German, and both were raised on large dairy farms. One of my uncles was a priest and a missionary to South America, whose example my mother wanted me to follow.

My parents did not have extensive education, which was not unusual for farm families of those times. My mother did not complete high school. My father went to college briefly and served in the army in Europe during World War II. Though my parents were open minded, and my father had a curiosity about the world and its different people, they never oriented me in the direction of India or anything mystical. My mother encouraged a religious attitude in me according to her Catholic background.

I attended Catholic schools until the age of ten. We were taught to look at Protestants, much less non-Christians, with suspicion. Asia was like another world, a land of backward, primitive people needing conversion. We frequently moved our residence as my father was a realtor, and eventually settled down in Denver, Colorado in the Rocky Mountain region. There, we switched to public school which took us out of the shell of our Catholic beliefs and gave me my first exposure to the realm of science, which I found much more appealing and expansive than the dogmas of the church that had been the basis of my earlier education, in which there were no science classes at all. Yet, public schools had no mention of India either, except as a big country in Asia suffering from poverty, overpopulation and social backwardness.

I had an inquisitive mind and began developing my own studies outside of school. I had an interest in geography and became aware that there was much more to the world than America. Foreign lands of all types, particularly Europe, fascinated me. I began my own reading starting with science and history, which broadened my view of life and caused me to question my Catholic upbringing. I found the ideas of modern astronomy, such as the vastness of the universe and the relativity of time and space, to be much more intriguing than Christian views of creation that seemed artificial and stultified.

I left the Catholic Church of my own accord at about the age of thirteen. This resulted from the clash between the church and science in my studies and the discovery that the church often stood for political oppression and social exploitation, and not always things, holy. I learned about the history of the Popes and began to see that religious institutions were more political establishments than spiritual movements. I felt that if there was a God, it was an impersonal reality, not a personal God with his own whims, judgements and partialities, his chosen people and his special church such as I was taught. Yet, though I left the church, I still felt a spiritual reality in life, which I found in nature, particularly in the high mountains which I loved and which suggested an expansion of awareness.

By the time of high school, my own studies were of more interest than the classes I was taking in school. I had an intellectual awakening at about the age of sixteen that caused me to examine European literature, symbolic poets, existential philosophers and psychologists, such as Freud and Jung. I felt that American culture was very superficial compared to the European. Yet, examining the mystical and poetic sides of the European mind, I also eventually found European thinkers to be lacking in depth. I realized that the great intellectuals and artists of the West, the geniuses who were regarded as the West's highest human types, were plagued with doubt, depression and uncertainty; they sometimes took drugs, went insane or committed suicide. They obviously had not found any lasting peace or ultimate Truth.

At about the same time, starting as a secondary interest, I began examining the Eastern spiritual traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism. Some of this came as part of the 1960s counterculture movement, which included a fascination with Eastern gurus, but most was the product of my own independent philosophical quest. Between these different Eastern teachings, I found a common truth—consciousness as the supreme Reality and meditation as the way to realize it. Yet, it was in the teachings of yoga and Vedanta that I found views that best resonated with my inner being, particularly the recognition of a supreme Self (Atman) and pure Existence (Brahman) as the highest Truth. I remember walking home from high school one

day and looking up at the blue sky and realizing that it was the presence of Krishna, who represented the cosmic power of bliss.

After high school I attended college where I found little interest to engage my spiritual search. I remember taking a class on cosmology and metaphysics, which was in the graduate studies department though I was a freshman. I thought the class might have something mystical in it. Instead, I discovered that it was a science class with a few cosmological speculations thrown in on the side, generally of a materialistic nature. The teacher mentioned religion and spirituality as mere speculative footnotes, not to be taken seriously. This caused me to realize that the academic world had no capacity to answer the real questions of life and consciousness.

About this time, I came into contact with local spiritual teachers and yoga groups in Denver, through which I learned about various gurus and practices, including yoga, pranayama, mantra and meditation, which I began to do on a regular basis, particularly through the teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda. Later, I moved to California and visited the many more spiritual groups there, including several Hindu and yoga groups. However, I never really connected inwardly with the spiritual groups in America. I had more interest in India and in teachings that were more traditional in nature. I had a serious bent of mind and did not feel satisfied with American groups which were largely social movements or cults centred around one person, in which one's personal relationship with the teacher outweighed any real interest in spiritual studies, which often did not go very far. I have always distrusted mass movements and fads of all types, including the popular spirituality that has developed in the West.

Over time, I came to learn of the teachings of great modern gurus of India, notably Paramahansa Ramakrishna, Ramana Maharshi, Anandamayi Ma and Sri Aurobindo. In their teachings, I felt something powerful that resonated with me on an inner level. As several of these figures had already passed away, I wrote to their centres in India and developed contact with their living disciples. Most importantly, I corresponded with Anandamayi Ma for several years, which was a tremendous inspiration and formed a deep psychic connection that encouraged me in my studies and sadhana. But more

so than any particular teacher, the Vedantic philosophy interested me, particularly the Upanishads, which appeared as the ideal combination of a spiritual philosophy of Self-realization and mystical poetry. I felt in the Upanishads the core teaching that I was searching for in all spiritual teachings, philosophy and science.

This led me to the works of Shankaracharya, the great commentator on the Upanishads according to the system of Advaita Vedanta. The Advaitic view of the pure unity of Truth and the illusory nature of the world, agreed with my experience of life through the political and social turbulence of the late 1960s and 1970s. Yet, I was also drawn towards the earlier Vedas and their mysterious mantras, with which most Vedantic teachers have little concern. I had a sense of the importance of things ancient, and wanted to know the earliest spiritual teachings of humanity. The idea of the ancient rishis and seers appealed to me and I wanted to know who they were.

I had a poetic bent of mind and wrote poetry of a mystical and symbolic type since the time I was sixteen. I used images of the dawn and of the night, of fire, of the wind, and the sun, along with that of gods and goddesses, with the forces of nature appearing as powers of interplay of both the human and cosmic mind. Later, I found that these same images predominated the Vedas.

Of the modern yogis, Sri Aurobindo was the greatest poet, and so his work had an appeal to me. The beginning of the chapters in his book the *Life Divine* contained Vedic quotes, particularly from the Rigveda, which I found to be particularly inspiring. I noted in a list of his books that he had several books on the Vedas themselves, such as the *Secret of the Veda* and *Hymns to the Mystic Fire*. This aroused my interest in the Vedas and I ordered these books and studied them with great interest, meditating carefully upon them.

My encounters with the Vedas through Aurobindo's books were not mere intellectual experiences. They represented an experience of vak or the Divine Speech, of the Goddess Sarasvati herself. I felt the presence of the Vedic dawn, like the dawn of cosmic creation, and the building of a new world for the Divine.

I aspired to know what the Vedic rishis themselves saw and felt. I decided to look at the Vedas and Upanishads in the original Sanskrit. As there were no teachers available to me where I lived, I started with

the Vedic Sanskrit texts and grammar books and began trying to figure out the language for myself, starting with the oldest Rigveda. It was a rather unusual and haphazard way to learn Sanskrit, starting with the most difficult and oldest part of the language, but somehow it worked and there were no alternatives at the time.

The Vedic language unfolded its deeper meaning through my study of the images, sounds and roots upon which the language was based. I felt an inner affinity with the teaching so that I did not find the texts difficult to understand, though the grammar was often cumbersome. I soon discovered that the interpretations accepted for the older Vedas as Aurobindo had noted, were indeed limited if not erroneous. As a result of this research, I later produced a book on the Upanishads and the Vedas. It traced the Vedantic teaching of the Supreme Self found in the Upanishads back to an origin in an earlier Vedic vision in the mantras of the Rigveda. This was the opposite of the way it is usually explained in, which is to view the Upanishads as exalted philosophy developing from a crude Vedic ritualistic base.¹

Meanwhile, a friend of mine, who had become a disciple of Sri MP Pandit, a noted yogi, author and secretary of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, recommended that I visit Pandit during his upcoming trip to the United States in 1979. I knew that if anyone might understand my views on the Vedas it would be him, as Pandit had written many books on the Vedas and Upanishads, in light of Sri Aurobindo's yoga. Meeting with him, I explained my views that the Vedas contained a science of Self-realization hidden in their teaching, from their very first mantra to the Divine fire (agni). He was happy to know of my work and told me that he would publish it in India. He encouraged me to follow up my studies, which he explained was a kind of Divine mission given to me.

I told him that I was not academically trained, nor had I yet studied in India, and that my work was personal and not intended for publication. I said that I did not feel qualified to comment on the Vedas in a public way. He replied it was good that I wasn't academically trained, that it gave me a direct and independent insight, so that I would not just merely repeat the same errors as other scholars. He told me to trust my vision and take up my Vedic mission. If I had such insights and had produced such work, it was for a

greater purpose and should not be limited to my private study. He said he would publish my writings in India to aid in the process.

Naturally, this encouraged me to continue my Vedic work with more effort and dedication. I worked on the Rigveda itself and in four months produced a five-hundred-page book on the Vedas, which I mailed to Pandit and he began serializing it in *World Union* and other publications of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1980.

I sent articles to other publications in India, including to the ashram publications of Ramana Maharshi and Anandamayi Ma, as well as to Motilal Banarsidass, India's primary publisher of Indological books. These articles were invariably published, which additionally encouraged me in my research. Thus my Vedic work began. I never had a plan to do such a task or much encouragement in my personal life to support it. And in retrospect, it would appear to be a ludicrous endeavour to attempt, particularly at my young age and background, working largely on my own.

After developing a foundation of Vedic studies, I gained many contacts and much support for my work throughout the world. I have since then taken many trips to India and studied and discussed the Vedas with many teachers, which would require a number of separate stories to relate. I was drawn into other Vedic disciplines as well. I have worked extensively with yoga, Ayurveda and Vedic astrology, expanding the range of my original Vedic research. Later, I discovered many of the same ideas and inspirations behind my Vedic studies occurred in the works of Kavyakantha Ganapati Muni, the chief disciple of Ramana Maharshi. I took on Ganapati's work through K Natesan of the Ramanashram who was one of his oldest living disciples and had collected all of Muni's writings. My Vedic views became the foundation for understanding the greater field of Hinduism and Sanatana Dharma.

In India, I experienced the Vedic vision not only in the people but in the temples and in the landscape of both the North and South. I learned traditional Vedic chanting which opened up another level of teaching for me. I came into contact with a number of great gurus both known and unknown in the West and with important Hindu groups and organizations.

What was it that I discovered in the Vedas? What made the Vedas more important to me than other spiritual or intellectual teachings? It was not just philosophy or poetry of an exalted nature. Nor was it the later portion of the Vedas alone, the Upanishads. My focus was the most ancient Rigveda and its wealth of mantras and symbols. The Rigveda, for me, is the doorway to the mind of the rishis, to the cosmic mind itself, the very heart of creation. The Vedic vision is a universal mantric knowledge that integrates all aspects of human knowledge including yoga, philosophy, poetry, psychology, mythology and ritual. The Vedas are like an ongoing explosion of insights with every sort of colour and form, music and vibration, merging ultimately into a pure lightning illumination that has no end.

The Vedas are a living teaching and we can still contact the Vedic rishis within us. There is no gap of time or culture in consciousness between those of us who live today and the Vedas of many thousands of years ago. The Vedas transcend time as the mantras of eternity. Nor do I see the Vedas as merely Indian or Hindu, limited by geography or community. The Vedas are the heritage of the greater spiritual humanity from which we have fallen and to which we must all strive to return to restore our unity with the universe as a whole. The Vedas are inherent in each one of us by the very fact that we are human beings, bearing the seeds of a higher consciousness. The Vedas are part of us or, to be more accurate, we are part of the Vedas. The Vedas reflect the cosmic intelligence that works throughout the universe, upholding the great beauty and harmony of life. We live in a Vedic universe reflected in the cosmic sounds of the Vedas. The problem is that we have forgotten how to read that Vedic language of light and are caught in the shadows of the material world that draw us into duality, conflict and sorrow.

The Vedas exist at the core of all genuine efforts to connect with Truth through the great forces of Mother Nature and Cosmic Intelligence. In that yogic alignment with the Universal Being, we can begin to access the Vedas and bring them into our lives. The Vedas are not merely particular books—though the Vedic texts are authentic reflections of the inner Vedas—but are the very vibrations of the Divine Word, the Primal Sound, the voice of original Reality.

I don't find the Vedic mantras usually hard to understand. What could be more obvious than the dawn and the sun that rises every day? Yet the dawn and the sun are not mere outer realities, they are outer symbols, intimations of an inner reality of enlightenment and illumination that is our true home, the Supreme Self or Paramatman. The Vedas speak the language of nature as a poetry of consciousness, which is the true meaning and beauty of all that exists in the realm of name and form. To me, what is hard to understand is not the Vedas, but the modern world with its media and technology that alienates us from nature, its commercialism that warps our minds, its endless desires and sensations that keep us ever restless and disturbed, its artificial dogmas and ideologies which cloud our perception and divide us up into hostile camps, compared to which the Vedic world is indeed paradise.

Another aspect of my connection with the Vedas perhaps goes back to the truth of karma and rebirth. There is really no reason why a person of my background would take to this Vedic work. The only answer is the samskaras, the impressions from previous births. This was a knowledge that I was born with, the result of a previous life, which I have since come to remember in various aspects. For example, when I received my first copies of the Vedas in Sanskrit, it was not something ancient or foreign that I saw but an old friend and companion. It was as if I could see the Vedas chanting.

I don't approach the Vedas from an academic or personal perspective. To approach the Vedas, I first put my mind into a silent state and let the teaching unfold itself without the interference of my own thoughts or ideas. This is not done through mental effort, though there is the effort of concentration. It is like opening an irrigation channel to a great river and letting the water come in. It occurs through turning the mind within.

The great beauty of Hindu Dharma is that the impression it creates within us, remains with us life after life. It is not a religion limited to only one lifetime. Its benefits carry through all of our lives to the final liberation of the spirit. In this regard, the subtle impressions of the Vedas can be found in each one of us, if we know how to look deeply for them. While unusual, I don't think what I have experienced with the Vedas is unique. I think that many more people, in East and West,

will come to it in time. The Vedas are not only our most ancient past, but the key to our ultimate future, both of which reflect an inspiration.

The message of my encounter with the Vedas to modern Hindus is this: your dharmic tradition is perhaps the greatest treasure of all humanity. Please cherish it, sustain it, practise it and share it with all. Whatever deficiencies may be in India, or in Hindu culture, should not get a person to forget the power of the Vedas. The Vedas are like the sun. In them is the key to all light, life and love, through which all problems, individual or collective, can be solved.

Let us not forget our global Vedic heritage and rediscover it throughout the world. For those who already have access to Vedic knowledge, please study, preserve and share it. All Vedic knowledge and the universe itself is a manifestation of the same cosmic sound, 'Om' that is the mantra of your own inner consciousness that is the Self of all.

From the Vedic Vision to Defending Hindu Dharma

To bring my lifestory into the context of this present book, my perception of how the Vedas were distorted both relative to their inner yogic meaning and outer historical implications led me to a similar discovery relative to Hindu Dharma itself.

I learned that Hindu Dharma had been misinterpreted at both levels as well. First, Western scholars could not understand the deeper yogic and cosmic meaning of Hindu teachings, whether Vedas and their cryptic mantras, Puranas and their magical stories that were deemed mythology, tantra and its profound energetics reduced to sexuality, and even yogic states of higher awareness looked upon as psychological derangements.

Second, there was a willful distortion of Hinduism by religious and political vested interests that created a negative colonial and missionary narrative of primitive, idolatrous, superstitious and backward Hindus, not the great civilization of India that the Greeks, Romans and others had looked up to. The accounts of ancient India that we find even in India's textbooks seldom did justice to what I saw as the depth and vastness of Vedic culture and Hindu Dharma.

In 1988, I was discussing these issues in depth with my Ayurvedic guru, Dr BL Vashta of Mumbai, who was also a well-known leader and journalist of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh). He asked me to write a few articles discussing these topics and my views of Hindu Dharma. Returning to the USA, I took up this inspiration and the first article that developed was what I called *Arise Arjuna*, which arose first as an article and a few years later became the first chapter of this book.

Since then, the Vedic inspiration from my youth has continued to motivate me in many areas of Vedic studies and teachings from yoga and Ayurveda to the most ancient Rigveda. I now see a new Arjuna spirit arising in India among the young and the old. Sanatana Dharma moves forward, but the Kurukshetras of the information age remain to be faced with wisdom and determination. More Arjunas are needed on every level of society and in every aspect of information and education. Jai Sri Krishna! Jai Sri Ram!

Notes

Part I

Misrepresentations of Hinduism in the Press: Ayodhya and Babri Masjid

[1](#) This chapter includes my views in reaction to the Ram temple issue in the years following the destruction of the Babri Masjid in December 1992, and how the media in India and in the world responded to it. I am including that material not only by way of perspective and as part of the original version of this book, but also considering that today this case is still an important issue in the courts, religious affairs and politics. Little has been done in more than twenty-five years since to resolve the case, but only to delay and distort, which shows the lack of responsibility in dealing with it and an attempt to suppress it. The issue is reaching crisis proportion again and if left unresolved, it is likely to result in more problems, if not violence.

Hindu Fundamentalism: What Is It?

[1](#) Aurobindo, Sri. (2000). *India's Rebirth: A selection from Sri Aurobindo's writings, talks and speeches*. Paris: Institut de Recherches Évolutives and Mysore: Mira Aditi Centre.

Part II

Unity of Religions or Unity of Truth

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- [2](#) Subramuniaswami, Satguru Sivaya. (2000). *Loving Ganesa*. Kapaa: Himalayan Academy.
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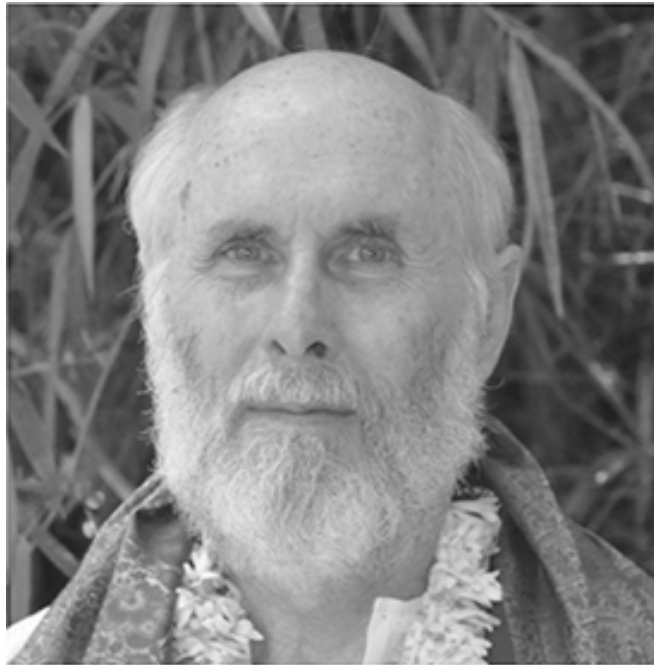
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About the Author



Dr David Frawley, D Litt, (Pandit Vamadeva Shastri), born in 1950, is an American Hindu and a Vedic teacher and Hindu acharya. He is the author of more than fifty books published in over twenty languages worldwide. His fields of expertise include yoga, Ayurveda, Vedanta, Vedic astrology and ancient Vedic texts. He has also written on historical, social and cultural issues confronting Hinduism and India today.

Honoured with the Padma Bhushan Award (the third highest civilian award of the Government of India) in 2015, Dr Frawley has a D Litt

from S-VYASA (Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana), Bengaluru, and another D Litt from Dr Ram Manohar Lohia Avadh University, Uttar Pradesh. He is also the recipient of a National Eminence Award from the South Indian Educational Society (SIES), Mumbai.

Vamadeva, as he is popularly known, carries on the teachings of Kavyakantha Ganapati Muni, the chief disciple of Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi. He is a disciple of Sadguru Sivananda Murty of Andhra Pradesh and has been associated with many Hindu organizations including Swaminarayan BAPS, Chinmaya Mission, Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Sri Ramanashram and the magazine *Hinduism Today*. He is the director of the American Institute of Vedic Studies (www.vedanet.com).