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The Contributions of Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan

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As an academic, philosopher, and statesman, Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) was one of the most recognized and influential Indian thinkers in academic circles in the twentieth century. Throughout his life and extensive writing career, Radhakrishnan sought to define, defend, and promulgate his religion, which he variously identified as Hinduism, Vedanta, and the Religion of the Spirit.

Finding His Calling

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was born on 5 September 1888 into a Telugu Niyogi Brahmin family in a village near Thiruttani India, in the erstwhile Madras Presidency near the border of what is now Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu states. His father's name was Sarvepalli Veeraswami and his mother's was Sitamma. His early years were spent in Thiruttani and Tirupati. His primary education was at K.V. High School at Thiruttani. In 1896 he moved to the Hermansburg Evangelical Lutheran Mission School in Tirupati and Government Higher Secondary School, Walajapet.

Radhakrishnan was awarded scholarships throughout his academic life, studying at Voorhees College in Vellore and the Madras Christian College. He graduated in 1906 with a master's degree in Philosophy, a subject he studied by chance rather than choice. Being a financially constrained student, when a cousin who graduated from the same college passed on his philosophy textbooks to Radhakrishnan, it automatically decided his academic course.

Radhakrishnan wrote his thesis for the M.A. degree on "The Ethics of the Vedanta and its Metaphysical Presuppositions". In Dr. Radhakrishnan's words, "The challenge of Christian critics impelled me to make a study of Hinduism and find out what is living and what is dead in it. My pride as a Hindu, roused by the enterprise and eloquence of Swami Vivekananda, was deeply hurt by the treatment accorded to Hinduism in missionary institutions."

The thesis was intended as a reply to the charge that the Vedanta system had no room for ethics. The criticism of his guide, Dr. Alfred George Hogg and other Christian teachers of Indian culture "disturbed my faith and shook the traditional props on which I leaned." He was afraid that this M.A. thesis would offend his guide, instead Hogg commended Radhakrishnan on having done most excellent work.

This landmark event led him to his critical study of Indian philosophy and religion and a lifelong defense of Hinduism against uninformed Western criticism.

Radhakrishnan's Philosophy

There are a myriad philosophical constructs that Radhakrishnan explored over the course of his long career. Presented here are some key aspects of his teachings and works, especially looking at topics where he sought to reconcile the conflicts between the East and the West.

Professor Radhakrishnan was an idealist, an absolute idealist as distinguished from a subjective idealist. He posited that the Ultimate Reality is of the nature of spirit, which he called The Absolute.

Concept of Supreme Being and Creation

The Absolute is sat-chit-anand, i.e. pure existence, pure consciousness and pure bliss. It is beyond all the categories of thought we know; hence it can be described only negatively; meaning as not having a specific quality. This does not mean that Reality has no positive characteristics. Its true significance is that the positivity of the absolute is so inexhaustible that it bursts through all our thought forms.

The Absolute has infinite possibilities. One of them has become actualized in our present universe. The Absolute viewed in relation to the present cosmos can be called God. God is bound up with our world while the Absolute is not. God is immanent in the world; without His constant activity the processes of Nature cannot go on. But though immanent in the universe, God is not exhausted by it; He transcends its limits.

God, by His own power called Shakti or Maya, gives rise to Prakriti or Matter and then breathes his own spirit into it and this spirit manifests itself first in an inorganic matter, next as life in plants and mind in animals, and next as reason and free will in man.

The Doctrine of Rebirth

Dr. Radhakrishnan held that the doctrine of rebirth was more reasonable than the denial of rebirth. At the human level the goal of life is its perfection, the actualization of its great potentialities. One single span of life of sixty or even hundred years is not sufficient for this purpose. The goal of perfection cannot be reached in one single life time. Life in a given body must therefore be considered an episode in a longer career of the spirit. The Hindu Shastras sometimes speak of the human soul being reborn in the body of a lower animal. Dr.

Radhakrishnan rejected this theory as unpalatable. However degenerate a person might be, the body a soul acquires after physical death cannot be entirely different in its organization from the one it leaves behind; it must be of such a character as to make the soul feel at home in it. The human soul can never feel comfortable in the body of a snake or a dog or a tiger. All that can happen is that the new body which the soul gets may have some animal qualities. At any rate, rebirth in an animal body must be a very exceptional occurrence, if it happens at all.

Buddhism and Hinduism

Radhakrishnan held that, far from being an innovator, Gautam Buddha took his stand on the philosophy of the Upanishads and tried to popularise their teachings. He pointed out that the view of the Buddha that man is nothing but an aggregate of five Skandas can be understood only against the background of the Upanishadic conception of the Absolute Brahman. He stated that "without a positive experience of the immutable, absolute Being, Buddha could not have had his fundamental feeling of the mutability of all things in the world: Without a background of the eternal, unchangeable perfection, it would be impossible to apprehend the transient and changeable as such. It is only when we reach a higher truth that we feel the inadequacy of a lower truth and discard it. It is because the Buddha had attained the Real that he perceived the fleeting as fleeting and discarded it. He saw that there was a Reality beyond the empirical succession of the universe that responds to the confidence of those who trust it. To this Reality he gave the name Dharma. For him, Dharma is the staying power of the universe. It is the reality underlying the sensible world and determining it. According to him, insight into Dharma is enlightenment, and the object of his eightfold path is the winning of this enlightenment. Buddha had thus an experience of the Absolute and he emphasized the ethical aspect of it."

This attempt to establish a close relationship between the teachings of the Buddha and the philosophy of the Upanishads is attributed to Dr Radhakrishnan.

Intuition

"Intuition", anubhava or "religious experience", has a central place in Radhakrishnan's philosophy as a source of knowledge which is not mediated by conscious thought.

According to Radhakrishnan, intuition is of a self-certifying (svatassiddha), self-evidencing (svāsaṃvedya), and self-luminous (svayam-prakāsa) character. In his book, *An Idealist View of Life*, he made a powerful case for the importance of intuitive thinking as opposed to purely intellectual forms of thought. Intuition entails pure comprehension, entire significance, and complete validity. It is both truth-filled and truth-bearing. It is its own cause and its own explanation. It is sovereign. Intuition is a positive feeling of calm and confidence, joy and strength. Intuition is profoundly satisfying - it is peace, power and joy.

Intuition is the ultimate form of experience for Radhakrishnan. It is ultimate in the sense that intuition constitutes the fullest and therefore the most authentic realization of the Real (Brahman). The ultimacy of intuition is also accounted for by Radhakrishnan in that it is the ground of all other forms of experience. All creativity and indeed all progress in the various spheres of life is the inevitable result of intuition.

Intuition plays a specific role in all kinds of experience of which Radhakrishnan discerns five sorts of experience:

Cognitive Experience

- Sense Experience
- Discursive Reasoning
- Intuitive Apprehension

Psychic Experience**Aesthetic Experience****Ethical Experience****Religious Experience**

Dr. Radhakrishnan played a key role in the modern renaissance of Hinduism, which according to Professor D.S. Sharma, “has given a fresh lease of life to this ancient religion”. In his Idealist View of Life, Dr Radhakrishnan has given a lucid account of the Hindu theory which is free from all mythology, and places before us a spiritual view of man, and the universe and the destiny of man. To have revived the spiritual view of life and to have cleared some of the wrong ideas about Yoga, Tyaga, Dharma, Jnana, Moksha, and Maya are indeed great services done by the eminent scholar and philosopher.

To the West, he seemed to be the typical Western intellectual, while the East regarded him as a sage, who symbolized the ancient wisdom of the Orient. As a conversationalist, he was always thought provoking and scintillating, but he never tried to monopolize the conversation. He was as good a listener as a talker. Though words came to him in a torrent, he knew the value of silence - which in his case was more eloquent than the rhetoric of brilliant men.

In this way, Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan played a key role in presenting Hinduism in the philosophic constructs of Western world, and bringing the ancient religious tradition into the modern age.

Bibliography

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