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The Vedic Religion: Introductory

The Religion without a Name

We speak of the "Hindu religion", but the religion denoted by the term did not in fact have such a name originally. According to some, the word "Hindu" means "love"; according to some others a Hindu is one who disapproves of *himsā* or violence. This may be an ingenious way of explaining the word.

In none of our ancient *śāstras* (scriptures) does the term "Hindu religion" occur. The name "Hindu" was given us by foreigners. People from the West came to our land across the Sindhu river which they called "*Indus*" or "*Hind*" and the land adjacent to it by the name "India". The religion of this land came to be called "Hindu". The name of a neighboring country is sometimes applied to the land adjacent to it.

Only when there are a number of religions do they have to be identified by different names. But when there is only one, where is the problem of identifying it?

All religions barring our own were established by single individuals. "Buddhism" means the religion founded by Gautama Buddha. Jainism was founded by the Jina called Mahāvīra. So has Christianity its origin in Jesus Christ. Our religion predating all these had spread all over the world. Since there was no other religion to speak about then it was not necessary to give it a name. When I recognized this fact I felt at once that there was no need to be ashamed of the fact that our religion had no name in the past. On the contrary, I felt proud about it.

If ours is a primeval religion, the question arises as to who established it. All inquiries into this question have failed to yield an answer. Was it Vyāsa, who composed the *Brahmasūtra* (one of the great inspired scriptures), the founder of our religion? Or was it Krishna *Paramātman* (Krishna as the incarnation of the Transcendent Unity) who gave us the Bhagavad Gītā? But both Vyāsa and Krishna state that the Vedas existed before them. If that be the case, are we to point to the *risis*, the seers, who gave us the Vedic *mantras*, as the founders of our religion? But they themselves declare: "We did not create the Vedas." When we chant a *mantra* we touch our head with our hand mentioning the name of one seer or another. But the sages themselves say: "It is true that the *mantras* became manifest to the world through us. That is why we are mentioned as the '*mantra risis*'. But the *mantras* were not composed by us but revealed to us. When we sat meditating with our minds under control, the *mantras* were perceived by us in space. Indeed we *saw* them; we did not compose them."

The sacred syllable *Om* in Devanagari

All sounds originate in space. From them arose creation. According to science, the cosmos was produced from the vibrations in space. By virtue of their austerities the sages had the gift of seeing the *mantras* in space,

the *mantras* that liberate men from this creation. The Vedas are *apauruṣēya* (not the work of any human author) and are the very breath of the *Paramātman* in his form as space. The sages saw them and made a gift of them to the world.

If we know this truth, we have reason to be proud of the fact that we do not know who founded our religion. In fact we must feel happy that we have the great good fortune to be heirs to a religion that is eternal, a religion containing the Vedas which are the very breath of the *Paramātman*.

Distinctive Features of Sanātana Dharma (Eternal Code of Conduct)

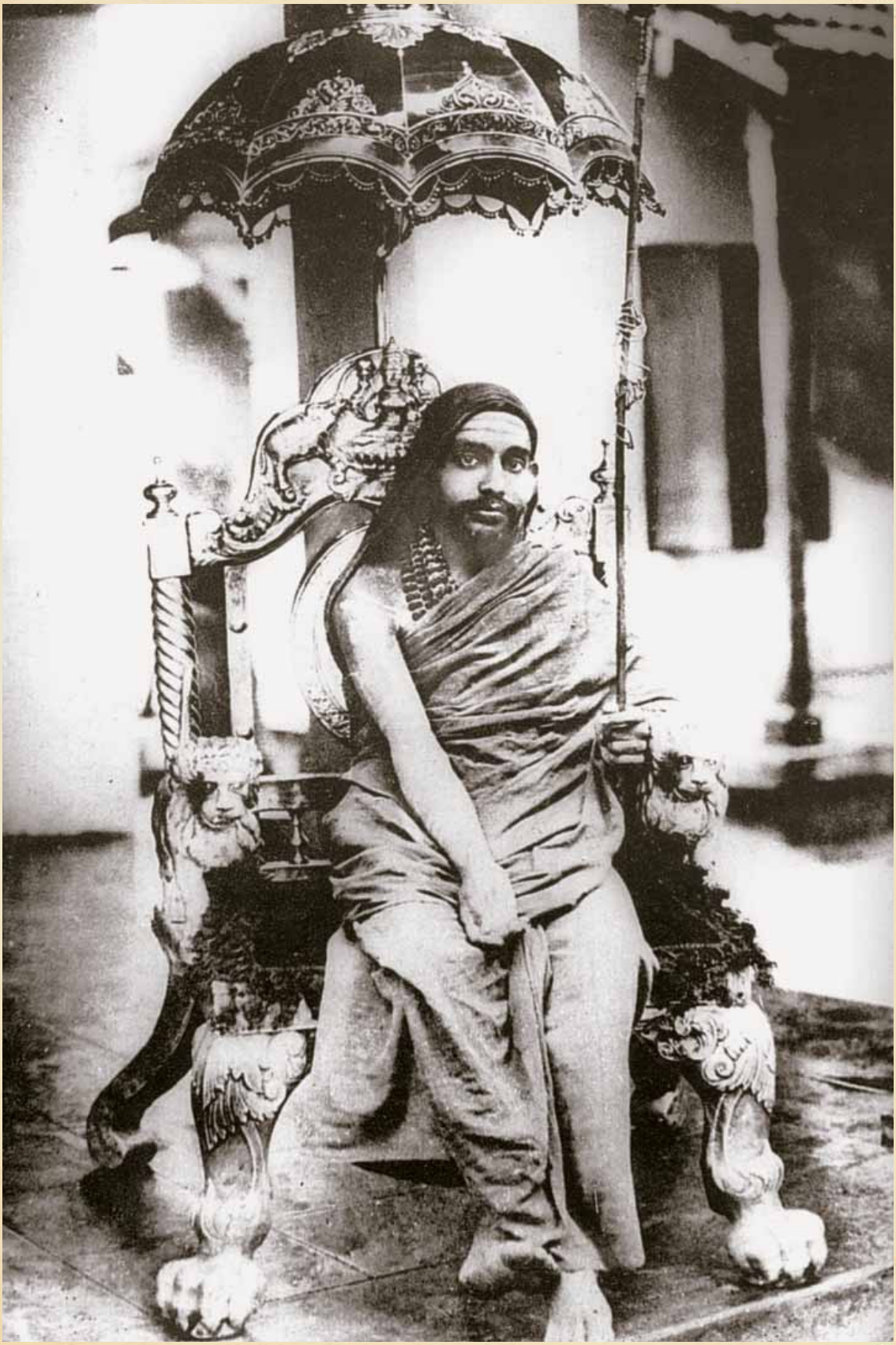
Our religion has a number of unique or distinctive features. One of them is what is called the theory of karma, though this theory is common to religions like Buddhism which are offshoots of Hinduism.

What is the karma doctrine? For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. There is an ineluctable law of physics governing cause and effect, action and reaction. This law pertaining to physical phenomena our forefathers applied to human life. The cosmos includes not only sentient beings endowed with consciousness but also countless insentient objects. Together they constitute worldly life. The laws, the *dharma*, proper to the first order must apply to the second also. According to the karma theory, every action of a man has an effect corresponding to it. Based on this belief our religion declares that, if a man commits a sin, he shall pay the penalty for it. Also if his act is a virtuous one, he shall reap the benefits thereof.

Our religion further asserts that one is born again and again so as to experience the consequences of one's good and bad actions. "Do good." "Do not do evil," such are the exhortations of all religions. But Hinduism (and its offshoots) alone lay stress on the cause-and-effect connection. No religion originating in countries outside India subscribes to the cause-and-effect connection, nor to the reincarnation theory as one of its articles of faith. Indeed religions originating abroad hold beliefs contrary to this theory and strongly oppose the view that man is born again and again in order to exhaust his karma. They believe that a man has only one birth, that when his soul departs on his death it dwells somewhere awaiting the day of judgment. On this day God makes an assessment of his good and bad actions and, on the basis of it, rewards him with eternal paradise or sentences him to eternal damnation.

That the one and only *Paramātman* who has neither a form nor attributes is manifested as different forms with attributes is another special feature of our religion. We worship idols representing these forms of deities. For this reason others label us polytheists. Their view is utterly wrong. Because we worship the one God, the one Reality, in many different forms it does not mean that we believe in many gods. It is equally absurd to call us idolaters who hold that the idol we worship is God. Hindus with a proper understanding of their religion do not think that the idol alone is God. The idol is meant for the worshipper to offer one-pointed devotion and he adores it with the conviction that the Lord who is present everywhere is present in it also. We see that practitioners of other religions also have symbols for worship and meditation. So it is wholly unjust to believe that Hindus alone worship idols—to regard them with scorn as idolaters is not right.

That ours is the only religion that does not proclaim that its followers have an exclusive right to salvation is a matter of pride for us Hindus. Our catholic outlook is revealed in our scriptures which declare that whatever the religious path followed by people they will fi-



nally attain the same *Paramātman*. That is why there is no place for conversion in Hinduism.

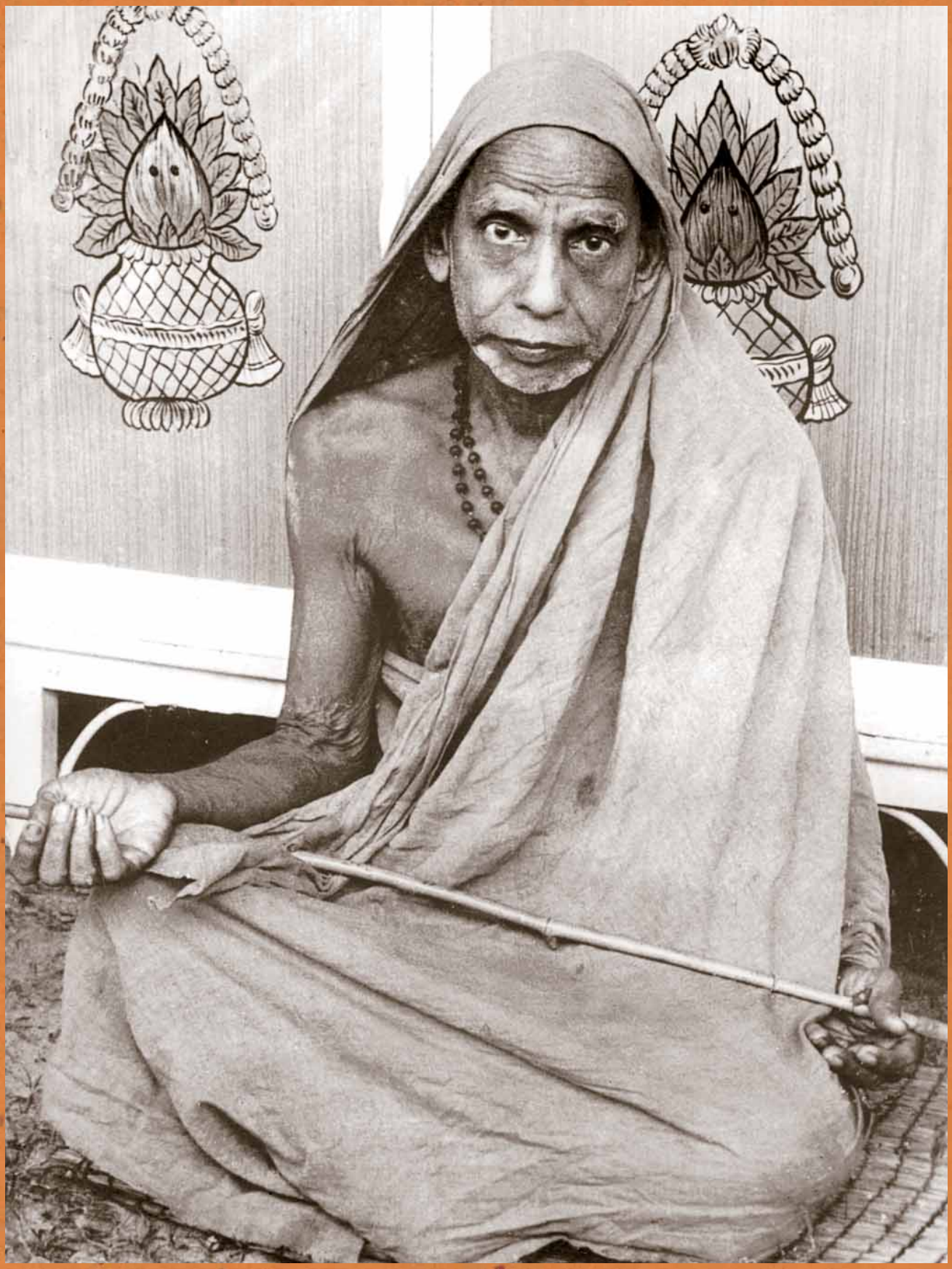
The countries are many and they have different climates and grow different crops. Also each part of the world has evolved a different culture. But the Vedas encompassed lands all over this planet from the very beginning. Later other religions emerged in keeping with the changing attitudes of the nations concerned. That is why aspects of the Vedic tradition are in evidence not only in the religions now in force but in what we know of those preceding them. But in India alone has Hinduism survived as a full-fledged living faith.

It must also be added that this primeval religion has regarded—and still regards—with respect the religions that arose subsequent to it. The Hindu view is this: "Other religions must have evolved according to the degree of maturity of the people among whom they originated. They will bring well-being to their adherents." "Live and let live" has been and continues to be the ideal of our religion. It has given birth to religions like Buddhism and Jainism and they [particularly Buddhism] have been propagated abroad for the Ātmic advancement (progress toward Self-realization) of the people there.

I have spoken about the special characteristics of Hinduism from the philosophical and theological points of view. But it has also another important feature which is also distinctive—the sociological.

All religions have their own philosophical and theological systems. Also all of them deal with individual life and conduct and, to a limited extent, with social life. "Look upon your neighbor as your brother." "Regard your adversary as your friend." "Treat others in the same way as you would like to be treated yourself." "Be kind to all creatures." "Speak the truth." "Practice non-violence." These injunctions and rules of conduct relate to social life up to a point—and only up to a point. To religions other than Hinduism social life or the structure of society is not a major concern. Hinduism alone has a sturdy sociological foundation, and its special feature, *varnāśrama dharma*, is an expression of it.

Varna dharma (caste system) is one concept and *āśrama dharma* (four stages of life) is another—together they make up *varnaśrama dharma*. *Āśrama dharma* deals with the conduct of an individual during different stages of his life. In the first stage, as a *brahmacārin* (student), he devotes himself to studies in a *gurukula* (*āśram*, or home of a guru). In the second stage, as a youth, he takes a wife, settles down in life, and begets children. In the third, as he ages further, he becomes a forest recluse and, without much attachment to worldly life, engages himself in Vedic karma. In the fourth stage, he forsakes even Vedic works, renounces the world utterly to become a *sannyāsin* (ascetic who has renounced the world) and turns his mind towards the *Paramātman*.



These four stages of life or *āśramas* are called *brahmacarya* (student), *garhasthya* (householder), *vānaprastha* (forest dweller) and *sannyāsa* (ascetic).

Varna dharma (caste) is an "arrangement" governing all society. It is very much a target of attack today and is usually spoken of as the division of society into *jātis* (sub-divisions of the castes). But *varna* and *jāti* are in fact different. There are only four *varnas* but the *jātis* are numerous.

Critics of *varna dharma* brand it as "a blot on our religion" and as "a vicious system which divides people into high and low". But, if you look at it impartially, you will realize that it is a unique instrument to bring about orderly and harmonious social life.

The Vedas, the Root of All

We find that there is but one scripture as the source common to the different sects and schools of thought in the Hindu religion.

This source includes the Upanishads. The great teachers of the Śiva, Vishnu, and Śankara traditions have written commentaries on ten of the Upanishads. The Upanishadic texts proclaim that the *Brahman* is the one and only Godhead. In one Upanishad It is called Vishnu;[1] in another It is called Śiva.[2] All the deities mentioned in the Vedas—Mitra, Varuna, Agni, Indra and so on—are different names of the same Truth. So it is said in the Vedas: "*Ekam sath viprā bahudhā vadanti*." (It is the one truth, which *jnānins* call by different names.)

It emerges that for all the divisions in our religion there is but one scripture—a scripture common to all—and one Godhead which is known by many names. The Vedas are the common scripture and the Godhead common to all is the *Brahman*. Thus we can say with finality, and without any room for doubt, that all of us belong to the same religion.

The Vedas that constitute the scripture common to all and which reveal the Godhead that is common to us also teach us how to lead our life, and—this is important—they do us the ultimate good by showing us in the end the way to become that very Godhead ourselves. They are our refuge both here and in the hereafter and are the source and root of all our different traditions, all our systems of thought. All sects, all schools of our religion, have their origin in them. The root is one but the branches are many.

The Vedas are the source not only of the various divisions of Hinduism, all the religions of the world may be traced back to them. It is our bounden duty to preserve them for all time to come with their glory undiminished.

The Vedas in their Original Form

Some do not seem to attach any special significance to the fact that the Vedas are in Sanskrit. They think that these sacred texts could be known through translations.

Nowadays a number of books are translated from one language into another and in this process the original form or character is changed or distorted. The words spoken by a great man on a particular subject may not be fully understood today. But if they are preserved in the original in the same language, there is the possibility of their meaning being fully grasped at some future date. You use a beautiful word to convey an idea in your language, but its equivalent may not be found in any other tongue. Also, it may become necessary to express the same in a roundabout way.

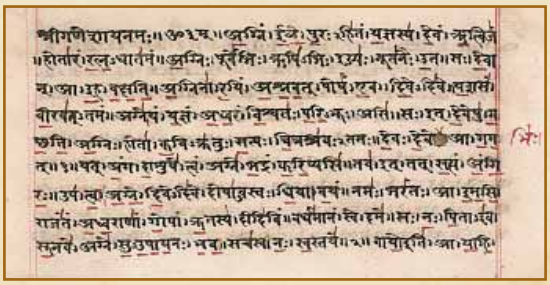
There is also the possibility that the opinion expressed first, in its original context, may not come through effectively in a translation. We must consider the further disadvantage of the translation being circumscribed by the mental make-up of the translator, the limita-

tions of his knowledge and understanding of the subject dealt with. The translation done by one may not seem right to another. When there are a number of translations of the same work, it would be hard to choose the right one. We shall then be compelled to go back to the original.

This is the reason why I insist that the Vedas must be preserved in their original form. They are the source of the philosophical systems associated with the great *ācāryas* (teachers). These masters evolved their doctrines without making any modifications in the Vedas to suit themselves; nor did they establish any religions of their own outside the Vedic tradition. The source, the root, of their systems of thought is one and the same—the Vedas. It is because this source has remained unchanged in its original character that thinkers and teachers have, from time to time, been able to draw inspiration and strength from it to present new viewpoints. But these viewpoints have not meant the creation of new religions. The reason is that all of them—all these systems—belong to the larger system called the Vedic religion.

Veda *parayanam* (reading religious texts)

Homam (ritual Vedic sacrifice) in progress at Kumbakonam Sankara Mutt



Page from the *Rigveda*

The Vedic Religion and Varna (Caste) Dharma

What is Varna (Caste) Dharma?

In other countries other physicians have prescribed medicines in the form of their own religious systems. Would your doctor like to be told that he should treat you in the same way as another doctor treats his patient? There are several systems of medicine. In one there is a strict diet regimen, in another there is not much strictness about the patient's food. In one system the medicines administered taste sweet; in another they taste bitter. To be restored to health we have to follow strictly any one method of treatment, not insist on a combination of the various therapies.

Other religions lay down only such duties as are common to all their followers. In the Vedic religion there are two types of *dharma*, the one being common to all and the other to individual *varnas* (castes). The duties common to all Hindus, the universal code of conduct, have the name of *sāmānya dharma*. Non-violence, truthfulness, cleanliness, control of the senses, non-acquisitiveness (one must not possess material goods in excess of what is needed for one's bare requirements, not even a straw must one own in excess), devotion to *Īśvara*, trust in one's parents, love for all creatures—these form part of the *sāmānya dharma*. Then each *varna* has its own special code of conduct or *viśēsha dharma* determined by its hereditary vocation.

It is difficult to say how long people will continue to owe allegiance to the religions that arose in various countries during historical times. I say this not because I happen to be a representative of Hindus nor is it my wish to speak in demeaning terms about other religions. My wish is indeed that people following different religions ought to continue to remain in their respective folds and find spiritual fulfillment in them. I do not invite others to embrace my faith. In fact I believe that to do so is contrary to the basic tenets of my religion. Nothing occurs in this world as an accident. People with different levels of maturity are born in different religions: so it is ordained by the Lord. I believe that a man grows inwardly by practicing the tenets of the religion of his birth.

If I speak about what I feel to be the worthy features of Hinduism—features that are not found in other religions—it is neither to speak ill of the latter nor to invite their followers to our side. Non-Hindus attack these unique aspects of our religion without taking the trouble of understanding them and some Hindus themselves are influenced by their views. That is why I am constrained to speak about the distinctive doctrines of our religion. Acceptance of concepts like karma, the Lord's incarnations, etc, will in no way weaken their [non-Hindus'] attachment to the basic beliefs of their own religions. What is the fundamental concept of any religion, its living principle? It is faith in the Lord and devotion to him. For others to view these special concepts of Hinduism sympathetically does not mean that their faith in God or devotion to him will be affected in any way.

I say all this not because I think that other religions are in any trouble, nor because I have reason to be happy if indeed they are. I merely repeat the view that lack of faith in religion—indeed atheism—is growing day by day everywhere and that all religions are struggling for their survival.

Divided by Work but Still of One Heart

Any society has to depend on the proper execution of a variety of jobs. It is from this social necessity that the concept of division of labor arose. But who is to decide the number of people for each type of work? Who is to determine the proportions for society to function in a balanced manner? In the West they had no answer to these questions. Everybody there competes with everybody else for comfortable jobs and everywhere you find greed and bitterness resulting from such rivalries. And, as a consequence of all this, there are lapses from discipline and morality.

In our country we based the division of labor on a hereditary system and, while it worked, people had a happy, peaceful, and contented life. Today even a multimillionaire is neither contented nor happy. Then even a cobbler led a life without cares. What sort of progress have we achieved today by inflaming evil desires in all hearts and pushing everyone into the slough of discontent? Not satisfied with such "progress" there is talk everywhere that we must go forward rapidly in this manner.

Greed and covetousness were unknown during the centuries when *varna dharma* flourished. People were bound together in

small well-knit groups and they discovered that there was happiness in their being together. Besides they had faith in religion, fear of God and devotion, and a feeling of pride in their own family deities and in the modes of worshipping them. In this way they found fullness in their lives without any need to suffer the hunger and disquiet of seeking external objects. All society experienced a sense of well-being.

One more point must be considered. Even if you concede that the social divisions have caused bitterness among the different sections here, what about the same in other countries? Can the existence of such ill-will in other lands be denied? The differences there, based on wealth and status, cause bitterness and resentment among the underprivileged and poorer sections. In America, it is claimed that all people have enough food, clothing, and housing. They say that even a domestic servant there owns a car. It is reasonable to infer from this that the Americans are a contented people. But what is the reality there? The man who has only one car is envious of another who has two. Similarly, the fact that one person has a bank balance of a hundred million dollars is cause for heart-burning for another with a bank balance of only a million. Those who have sufficient means to live comfortably quarrel with people better off over rights and privileges. Does this not mean that even in a country like the United States there are conflicts between the higher and lower classes of society?

It seems to me that better than the distinctions prevailing in the West—distinctions that give rise to jealousies and social discord—are the differences mistakenly attributed to the hereditary system of vocations. In the old days this arrangement ensured peace in the land with everyone living a contented life. There was neither envy nor hatred and everyone readily accepted his lot.

The different types of work are meant for the good of the people in general. It is wrong to believe that one job belongs to an "inferior"

category and another to a "superior" type. There is no more efficacious medicine for inner purity than doing one's work, whatever it be, without any desire for reward and doing it to perfection. I must add that even wrong notions about work (one job being better than another or worse) is better than the disparities and differences to be met with in other countries. We are [or were] free from the spirit of rivalry and bitterness that vitiate social life there.

Divided we have remained united, and nurtured our civilization. Other civilizations have gone under because the people of the countries concerned, though seemingly united, were in fact divided. In our case, though there were differences in the matter of work, there was unity of hearts and that is how our culture and civilization flourished. In other countries the fact that there were no distinctions based on vocations (anyone could do any work) itself gave rise to rivalries and eventually to disunity. They were not able to withstand the onslaught of other civilizations.

It is not practicable to make all people one, nor can everyone occupy the same high position. At the same time it is also unwise to keep people divided into classes that are like water-tight compartments.

The *Dharmaśāstras* (scriptures on *dharma*) have shown us a middle way that avoids the pitfalls of the two extremes. I have come as a representative of this way and that is why I speak for it: that there ought to be distinctions among various sections of people in the performance of rites but that there must be unity of hearts. There should be no confusion between the two.

Though we are divided outwardly in the matter of work, with unity of hearts there will be peace. That was the tradition for ages together in this land—there was oneness of hearts. If every member of society does his duty, does his work, unselfishly and with the conviction that he is doing it for the good of all, considerations of high and low will not enter his mind. If people carry out the duties common to them, however adverse the circumstances be, and if every individual performs the duties that are special to him, no one will have cause for suffering at any time.

Why Only in This Country?

How did we lose our inner vitality? By giving up our traditions we have become weak. What was it that nurtured our civilization and kept it growing for thousands of years? By parting with our traditions we descended so low as to be ashamed of calling ourselves heirs to this civilization. The fact is that, so long as we practiced *varna dharma* (caste system), which is unique to our country, our civilization stood like a rock arousing the admiration of all the world. But after this *dharma* began to decline we have been on the descent day by day.

Why should this country alone practice *varna dharma*? Because this *dharma* is necessary if we want to sustain a civilization that can promote the growth of philosophy, nourish our arts and culture, inspire us more and more in our inward search and help us in the realization of the Godhead. If the *varna* system is followed at least in this country, it will be an example to the rest of the world.

If there is no *varna dharma*, it means at once the growth of social disharmony, the rise of jealousies, and discontent among the people. Men will compete with one another for the jobs they like or are convenient to them. There will be competition for education on the same lines. Since all will not succeed in their efforts or in their desire or ambition being satisfied, the result will be hatred and resentment everywhere.

No civilization can flourish in the absence of a system that brings fulfillment to all. *Varna dharma* brought fulfillment and satisfaction to all.

The Varadaraja Perumal Temple Tank at Kanchipuram

The Conflict between Tradition and Modernity

Politicians and intellectuals alike say that *varna* (caste) is part of an uncivilized system. Why? Who is responsible for the disintegration of so worthy an arrangement as *varna dharma*?

These are questions that I raised earlier and I shall try to answer them. The wrong ideas that have developed about *varna dharma* must be ascribed to the Brahmins themselves. They are indeed responsible for the decay of an ages-old system that contributed not only to our Ātmic advancement (progress toward Self-realization) but also to the well-being of the nation as well as of all mankind.

The Brahmin relinquished the duties of his birth—the study of the Vedas and performance of the rites laid down in the Vedic tradition. He left his birthplace, the village, for the town. He cropped his hair and started dressing in European style. Giving up the Vedas, he took to the mundane learning of the West. He fell to the lure of jobs offered by his white master and aped him in dress, manners, and attitudes. He threw to the winds the noble *dharma* he had inherited from the Vedic seers through his forefathers and abandoned all for a mess of pottage. He was drawn to everything Western, science, life-style, entertainment.

The canonical texts have it that the Brahmin must have no love for money, that he must not accumulate wealth. So long as he followed his *dharma*, as prescribed by the *śāstras*, and so long as he chanted the Vedas and performed sacrifices, he brought good to the world, and all other castes respected him and treated him with affection.

Others now observed how the Brahmin had changed, how his life-style had become different with all its glitter and show and how he went about with all the pretence of having risen on the scale of civilization. The Brahmin had been an ideal for them in all that is noble, but now he strayed from the path of *dharma*; and following his example they too gave up their traditional vocations that had brought them happiness and contentment and left their native village to settle in towns. Like the Brahmin they became keen to learn English and secure jobs in the government.

A question that arises in this context is how Vedic studies which had not suffered much even during Muslim rule received a severe setback with the advent of the European. One reason is the impact of the new sciences and the machines that came with the white man. Granted that many a truth was revealed through these sciences—and this was all to the good up to a point. But we must remember that the knowledge of a subject per se is one thing and how we use it in practice is another.

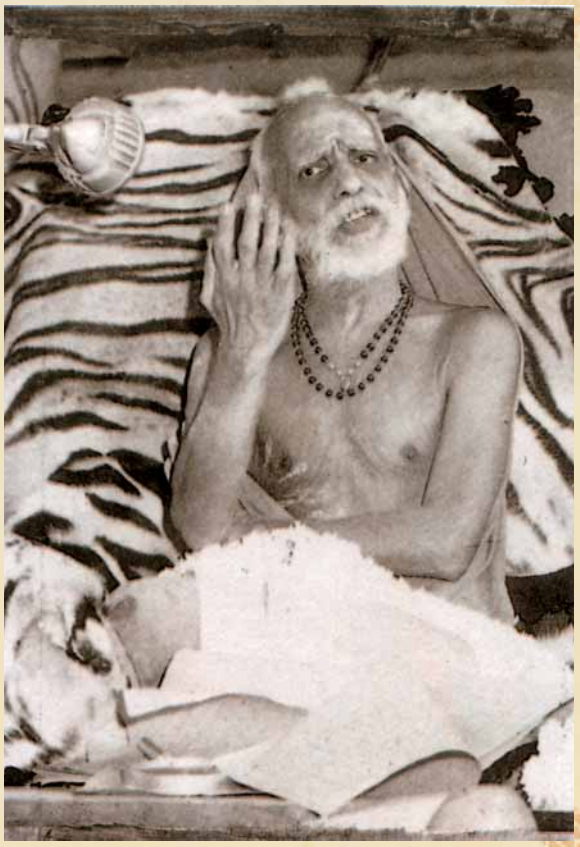
The introduction of steam power and electricity made many types of work easier but it also meant comforts hitherto unthought-of to gratify the senses. If you keep pandering to the senses more and more new desires are engendered. This will mean the production of an increasing number of objects of pleasure. The more we try to obtain sensual pleasure the more we will cause injury to our innermost being. The new pleasures that could be had with scientific development and the introduction of machines were an irresistible lure for the Brahmin as they were to other communities. Another undesirable product of the sciences brought by the white man was rationalism which undermined people's faith in religion and persuaded some to believe that the religious truths that are based on faith and are inwardly experienced are nothing but deception. The man who did not give up his duties even during Muslim rule now abandoned them for the new-found pleasures and comforts. He dressed more smartly than the Englishman, smoked cigarettes, and even learned to dance like his white master. Those who thus became proficient in the arts of the white man were rewarded with jobs.

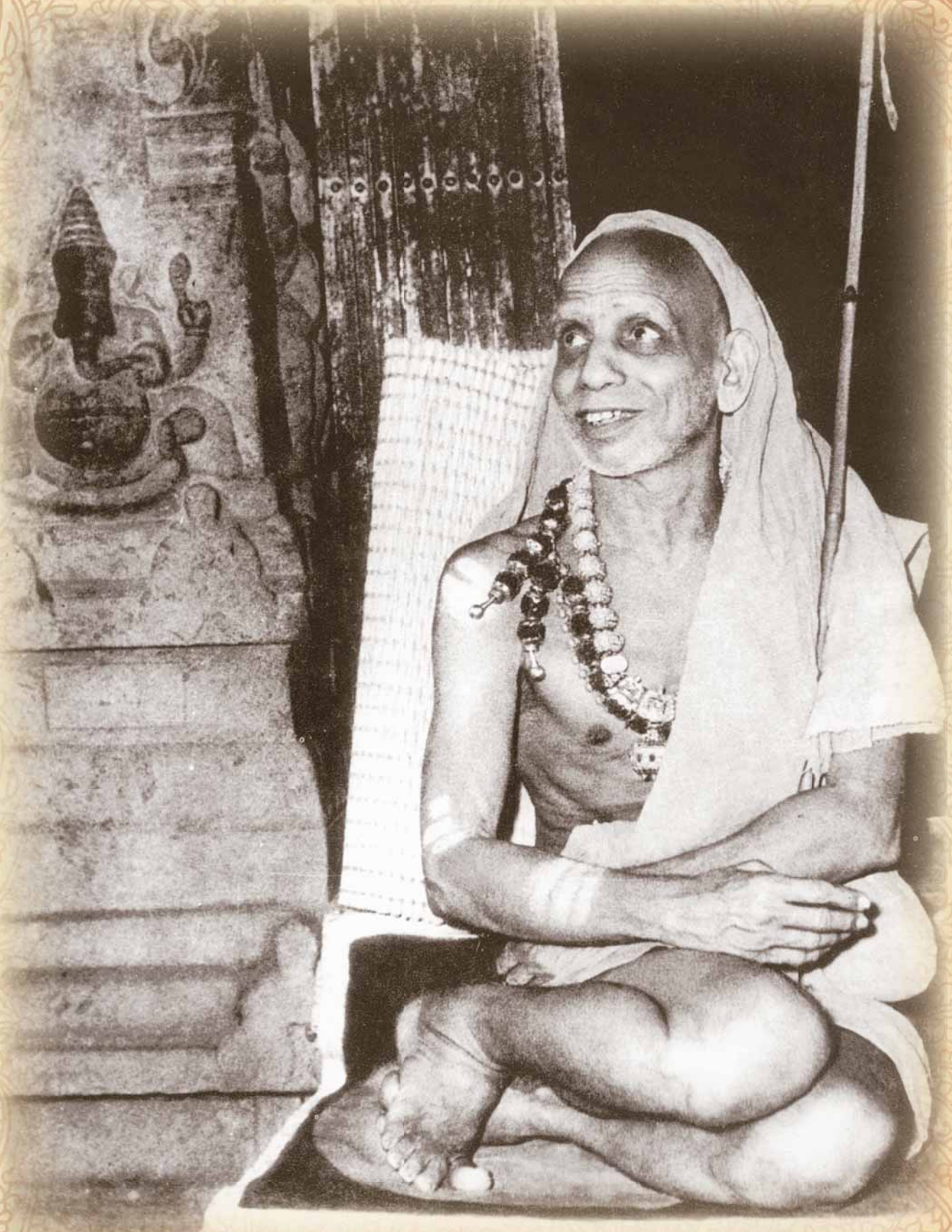
Now occurred the biggest tragedy.

Up till now all members of society had their hereditary jobs to do and they did not have to worry about their livelihood. Now, with the example of the Brahmin before them, members of other castes also gave up their traditional occupations for the jobs made available by the British in the banks, railways, collectorates, etc. With the introduction of machinery our handicrafts fell into decay and many of our artisans had to look for other means of livelihood. In the absence of any demarcation in the matter of work and workers, there arose competition for jobs for the first time in the country. It was a disastrous development and it generated jealousy, ill-will, disputes, and a host of other evils among people who had hitherto lived in harmony.

Ill feelings developed between Brahmins and non-Brahmins also. How? Brahmins formed only a small percentage of the population. But they were able to occupy top positions in the new order owing to their intelligence which was the result of the spiritual efforts of their forefathers. They excelled in all walks of life—in administration, in academics, in law, in medicine, engineering, and so on. The white man made his own calculations about developing animosity between Brahmins and non-Brahmins and realized that by fuelling it he could strengthen his hold on the country. He fabricated the Aryan-Dravidian theory of races and the seeds of differences were sown among children born of the same mother. It was a design that proved effective in a climate already made unhealthy by rivalry for jobs.

The Brahmin spoiled himself and spoiled others. By abandoning his *dharma* he be-





came a bad example to others. Now, after he had divested himself of his *dharma*, there was nothing to give him distinction, to mark him out from others. As a matter of fact, even by strictly adhering to his *dharma* the Brahmin is not entitled to feel superior to others. He must always remain humble in the belief that "everyone performs a function in society; I perform mine". If at all, others respected him in the past and accorded him a high place in society, it was in consideration of his selfless work, his life of austerity, discipline, and purity. Now he had descended to such depths as to merit their most abrasive criticism.

Is it not better then to starve and yet be attached firmly to our *dharma* so long as there is breath in us? Is not such loyalty to our *dharma* a matter of pride? Why should we care about how others see us, whether they honor us or speak ill of us? So long as we do not compete with them for jobs they will have no cause for jealousy or resentment. Let them call us backward or stupid or think that we are not capable of keeping abreast of the times. Are we not now already their butt of ridicule? Let us be true to our *dharma* in the face of the mockery of others, even in the face of death. Is not such a lot preferable to suffering the slings of scorn and criticism earned by forsaking our *dharma* for the sake of filling our belly? People nowadays die for their motherland; they lay down their lives for their mother tongue. Was there any demonstration of faith like this, such willingness to die for a cause or a belief, when the British came here with their life-style? At that time did we protect our *dharma* with courage, in the belief that even death was a small price to pay for it?

The Lord himself has declared in the Gītā that it is better to die abiding by one's *dharma* than prosper through another man's *dharma*. Brahmins who had seen no reason to change their life-style during the long Muslim period of our history changed it during British rule. Why? New sciences and machinery came with the white man. The motor car and electricity had their own impact on life here. Brahmins were drawn to comforts and conveniences not thought of before. This could be a reason for their change of life, but not a justification.

The Brahmin is not to regard his body as a means for the enjoyment of sensual pleasures but as an instrument for the observance of such rites as are necessary to protect the Vedas—and the Vedas have to be protected for the welfare of mankind. The basic *dharma* is that to the body of the Brahmin nothing must be added that incites his sensual appetite. It was a fundamental mistake on the part of the Brahmin to have forgotten the spirit of sacrifice that imbues his *dharma* and become a victim of the pleasures and comforts easily obtained from the new gadgets and instruments. There is pride in adhering to one's *dharma* even when one is faced with adverse circumstances. Brahmins (during British rule) committed a grave mistake by not doing so and we are suffering the consequences. See the ill-will in the country today among children of the same mother. We have created suffering for others also. At first Brahmins were denied admission to colleges and refused jobs. Now things have come to such a pass that other communities also suffer the same fate.

All was well so long as man, using his own innate resources, lived a simple life without the help of machines. With more and more factories and increasing machine power, life itself has become complicated. The situation today is such that everyone is facing difficulties in getting admission to college or in getting a job.

People ask me: "What is the remedy today? Do you expect all Brahmins to leave their new life-style and return to Vedic learning?" Whether or not I expect them to do so and whether or not such a step seems possible, I must ask them to do so (to return to their Vedic *dharma*). Where is the need for a *gurupītha* (*āśram*) or a seat on which an *ācārya*

(great teacher) is installed if I am to keep my mouth shut and watch idly as the *dharma* that is the source of everything is being endangered? Even if it seems not possible (Brahmins returning to the *dharma* of their birth) it must be shown to be possible in practice: that is the purpose of the *āśrams*. They must harness all their energies towards the attainment of this goal.

The Least Expected of Brahmins

This is the least Brahmins can do to preserve the Vedic traditions. Arrangements to impart Vedic learning to children must be made in every Brahmin household. I know that there are not enough teachers, a sad reflection on the state of our *dharma*. Considering this and the likely economic condition of parents I would suggest that Veda classes may be conducted for all children together of a locality or neighborhood. Children of poor families may be taught on a cooperative basis.

Veda *patashala* students at Vishnu Kanchi

Step by step in this way the boys will be able to memorize the *mantra* part of the Vedas and also learn how to conduct rites like *upākarma* (first step for a young boy to become a Vedic student). I speak here about *prayoga*, the conduct or procedure of rites, because in the absence of priests in the future everyone should be able to perform Vedic rites himself.

Young Brahmins in the temple at Madurai

The sound of the Vedas must pervade the world for all time to come. Everyone must sincerely work towards achieving this end. It is your duty to ensure the good not only of the Brahmin community, not only of all the castes of India, but of all the countless creatures of earth. It is a duty imposed on you by *Īśvara*—it is a divine duty.

It is important that we perform this duty we owe to the people of the present. But it is equally important that we perform it so as to be saved from committing a crime against future generations. "As it is nobody cares for the Vedas," you are likely to tell me. "Who is going to care for them in the coming years? What purpose is served by all the efforts we take now to keep up their study?" I do not share this view. When the wheel keeps turning, that part of it which is now down has necessarily to come up. Modern civilization with its frenzied pace is bound to have its fall after attaining its peak. We have been carried away by the supposed comforts made possible by advanced technology. But one day we will realize that

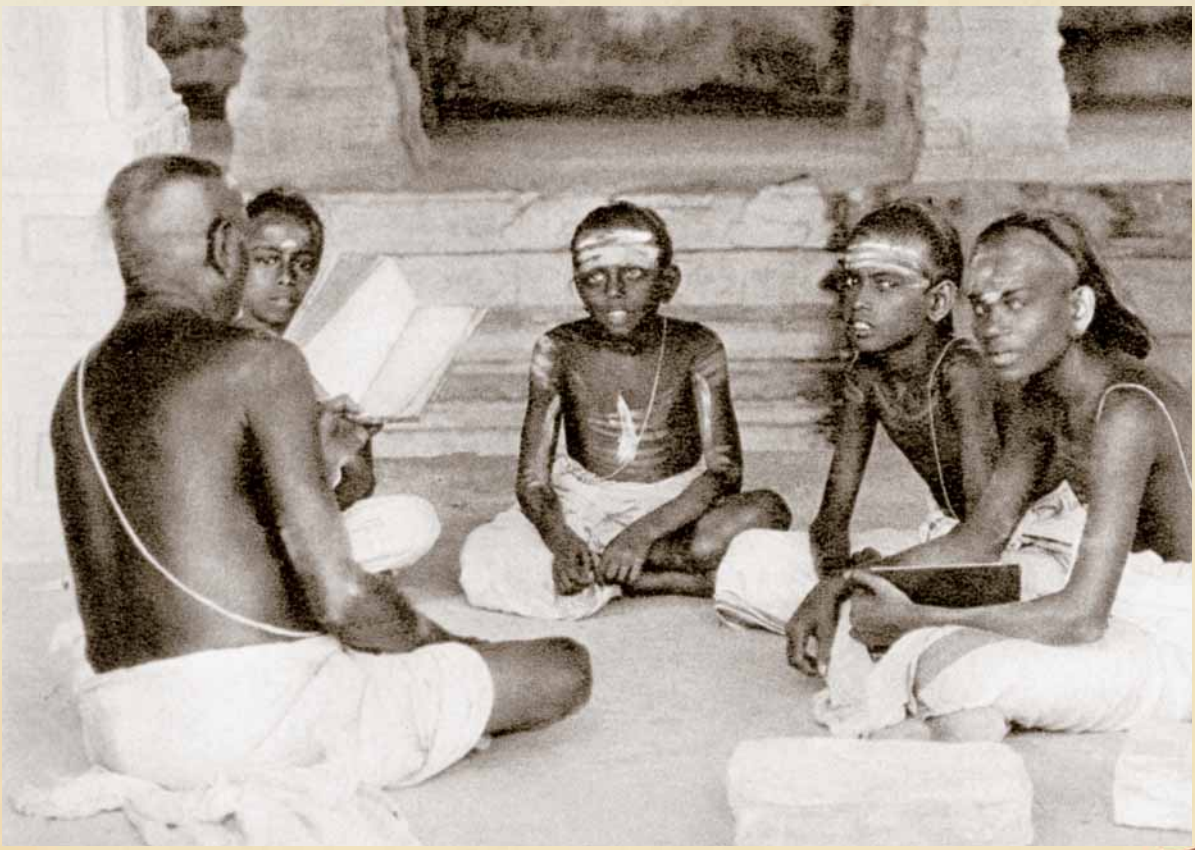
they do not give us any feeling of fullness and that we have indeed created only discomforts for ourselves through them.

Preserving the Vedas: Why it Is a Lifetime Mission

"The sages transcended the frontiers of human knowledge and became one with the Universal Reality. It is through them that the world received the Vedic *mantras*," this is one of the basic concepts of our religion. If you do not accept that human beings can obtain such Ātmic Power as exemplified by these seers, any further talk on the subject would be futile. One could point out to you great men whom you can see for yourself, great men who have perfected themselves and acquired powers not shared by the common people. But if you think of them to be cheats or fraudulent men, any further talk would again be useless. In our present state of limited understanding, the argument that denies the existence of anything beyond the range of human reason and comprehension itself betrays the height of irrationalism.

Are sounds and vibrations spontaneously produced? No. If vibrations arise on their own they will be erratic and confusing and not related to one another. But what do we see in the cosmos? There is a certain orderliness about it and one thing in it is linked to another. What do we infer from this? That a Great Intelligence has formulated this scheme that we see, that it has created it from its own vibrations.

The Vedas are sounds emanating from the vibrations of this Great Intelligence, the Great



A Vedic teacher with *sishyas* (pupils) in Rameswaram

His Holiness Śri Jayendra Saraswati with young Brahmins

Gnosis. That is why we believe that the *mantras* of the Vedas originate from the *Paramātman* himself. We must take special care of such sounds to ensure the good of the world. Yes, the Vedic *mantras* are sequences of sounds that are meant for the good of the world.

Whatever is present in space is also present in the individual being. These elements exist in the human body in a form that is accessible to the senses. The sounds a person makes in his throat have their source in space in a form not audible to us. The radio transforms electrical waves into sound waves. If a man can grasp the sounds in space and make them audible, he will be able to create with them what is needed for the good of the world. Yoga is the science that accomplishes such a task. Through yogic practice (perfection) one can become aware of what is in the macrocosm and draw it into the microcosm. I shall not be able to give you proof of this in a form acceptable to human reason. Yoga transcends our limited reason and understanding. The purpose of the Vedas is to speak about matters that are beyond the comprehension of the human mind.

You must have faith in the words of great men or else, to know the truth of such matters, you must practice yoga strictly observing its rules. It may not be practicable for all those who ask questions or harbor doubts about the Vedas to practice yoga in this manner. Even if you are prepared to accept the words of a true

yogin, how are you, in the first place, to be convinced that he is indeed a true yogin and not a fraud? Altogether it means that you must have faith in someone, in something. Later such faith will be strengthened from your own observations, inference, and experience. There is no point in speaking to people who have either no faith or refuse to develop it through their own experience.

There is a state in which the macrocosm and the microcosm are perceived as one. Great men there are who have reached such a state and are capable of transforming what is subtle in the one into what is gross in the other. I am speaking here to those who believe in such a possibility.

When we look at this universe and the complex manner in which it functions, we realize that there must be a Great Wisdom that has created it and sustains it. It is from this Great Wisdom, that is the *Paramātman*, that all that we see are born and it is from It that all the sounds that we hear have emanated. First came the universe of sound and then the universe that we observe. Most of the former still exists in space. All that exists in the outer universe is present in the human body also. The space that exists outside us exists also in our heart.

The *mantras* of the Vedas are remarkable in that they bring blessings to the world in the form of sound—even if their meaning is not understood. Of course, they are pregnant with meaning and represent the lofty principle that it is the One Truth that is manifested as all that we perceive. They also confer blessings on us by taking the form of deities appropriate to the different sounds (of the *mantras*).

Sound does not bring any benefits, any fruits, by itself. *Īśvara* alone is the bestower of benefits. However, instead of making the fruits available to us directly, he appoints deities to distribute them in the same manner as the king or president of a country appoints officials to carry out his dictates. The *mantras* represent various deities in the form of sound. If we attain perfection (*siddhi*) by constant chanting and meditation of a *mantra*, it should be possible for us to see the deity invoked in his physical form. The deities also arise if we make offerings into the sacrificial fire reciting specific *mantras*. If a sacrifice is conducted in this manner, the deities give us their special blessings. We do not pay taxes directly to the king or president. In the same way, we pay taxes in the form of sacrifices and Vedic chanting to the aides of the *Paramātman* for the sake of the welfare of the world. The sounds of the *mantras* constitute their form.

The Vedas have won the admiration of Western scholars for their poetic beauty. They bring us face to face with many deities—they bring us also their grace. Above all, through

Deity at the wall shrine of Kailasanatha temple at Kanchipuram

the Upanishads they teach us the great truths relating to the Self. The Vedas are thus known for the profundity of the truths contained in them, but their sound is no less important. Indeed their sound has its own significance and power. All *mantras*, it must be noted, have power, not only Vedic *mantras*.

The Vedic *mantras* do good to all creatures in this world and the hereafter: we must have implicit faith in this belief. It is not proper to ask whether what we ourselves cannot hear with our ears will be heard by the seers. There is such a thing as the divine power of seeing and hearing. Our sight is dependent on the lens in our eyes. Were this lens different what we observe would also be different. Through the intense practice of yoga we can obtain the divine power of seeing and hearing.

We must not inquire into the Vedas with our limited powers of perception and with our limited capacity to reason and comprehend. The Vedas speak to us about what is beyond the reach of our eyes and ears and reasoning—that is their very purpose. There are things that we comprehend through direct perception. We do not need the help of the Vedas to know about them. What cannot be proved by reasoning and what is beyond the reach of our intellect—these seers have gifted us in the form of the Vedas with their divine perception.

The question that now occurs is why there should be a separate caste committed to Vedic learning and Vedic practices even if it is conceded that Vedic *mantras* have the power to do good.

In answering this question we must first remember that the Vedas are not to be read from the written text. They have to be memorized by constant listening and repeated chanting. The learner then becomes a teacher himself and in this manner the process goes on from generation to generation. Maintaining such a tradition of learning and teaching is a whole-time occupation. Neither the teacher nor the taught may take up any other work.

We must also remember that the Brahmin is expected to master subjects other than the Vedas also, like the arts and crafts and the various sciences. He has in fact to learn the vocations of other *jātis* (sub-divisions of castes)—but he must not take up any for his own livelihood. It is the responsibility of the Brahmin to promote knowledge and culture. He is expected to learn the hereditary skills of all *jātis*, including the art of warfare, and pass on these skills to the respective *jātis* to help them earn their livelihood. The Brahmin's calling is learning and teaching the Vedas. According to the *śāstras* he must live in a modest dwelling, observe strict rules and vows so as to gain mastery of the *mantras*. He must eat only as much as is needed to keep body and soul together. All temptations to make money and enjoy sensual pleasures he must sternly resist. All his actions must be inspired by the spirit of sacrifice and he must pass his days sustaining the Vedic tradition and practices for the good of mankind.

It is the duty of other *varnas* (castes) to see that the Brahmin does not die of starvation. They must provide him with the bare necessities of life and such materials as are needed for the performance of sacrifices. Wages are paid to those who do other jobs or a price is paid for what they produce. The Brahmin works for the whole community and serves it by chanting *mantras*, by performing sacrifices, and by leading a life according to the dictates of religion. That is why he must be provided with his upkeep. The canonical texts do not say that we must build him a palace or that he must be given gifts of gold. The Brahmin must be provided with the wherewithal for the proper performance of sacrifices. In his personal life he must eschew all show and luxury. It is by taming his senses—by burning away all desire—that he gains mastery over the *mantras*.

All mankind, all creatures of earth, must live in happiness. Everybody must practice his allotted *dharma* for the good of all with the realization that there is no question of any work being "higher" than any other or "lower". Preserving the sound of the Vedas must remain the duty of one class so as to ensure plenty in this world as well as to create universal Ātmic uplift. To revert to the question I put to you first. Leaving aside the vocation of the Vedic

Initiation into Vedic instruction or sacred knowledge

Donning the sacred thread

dharma, let us assume that the hereditary system is beneficial in respect of all types of work. But why should the preservation of the Vedic *dharma* be the lifelong vocation of one class? It is now established, as I conclude, that however it may be with the other vocations, whether or not they exist, whether or not there is a mix-up in them, the pursuit of the Vedic *dharma* must remain a separate calling.

Our society must be one in which there are no differences of high and low. All will then live in harmony as the children of *Īśvara* without fighting among themselves. They will live as a united family helping one another and spreading a sense of peace and happiness everywhere.

My Work

It does not matter if you are unable to create conditions in which Brahmins henceforth will make the pursuit of the Vedic *dharma* their lifelong vocation. All I ask you is the minimum you can do: make arrangements to impart to your children the Vedic *mantras*, to teach them the scripture for at least one hour a day from the time they are eight years old until they are eighteen. Teach them also the *prayoga* (the conduct of rites). Do this on a cooperative basis in each locality. If you succeed in this you will have truly honored me with a shower of gold coins.

It gives me joy that more and more *bhajans* (sacred singing ceremonies) are conducted in the towns than before, that work connected with temples is on the increase, and that purānic discourses (discourses on traditional stories) are given more often than before. But we must remember that the Vedas constitute the basis of all these. If our scripture suffers a decline, how long will the activities based on it survive? The Vedas must be handed down from father to son, from one generation to the next. It is because we have forgotten this tradition that our religion itself has become shaky. All the trouble in the world, all the suffering and all the evil must be attributed to the fact that the Brahmin has forsaken his *dharma*, the Vedic *dharma*.

I am not worried about the system of *varnas* being destroyed, but I am worried about

the setback to the welfare of mankind. I am also extremely concerned about the fact that, if the Vedic tradition which has been maintained like a chain from generation to generation is broken, it may not be possible to create the tradition all over again.

The good arising in a subtle form from the sound of the Vedas and the performance of sacrifices is not the only benefit that constitutes the welfare of mankind. From *Vedānta* are derived lofty truths that can bring Ātmic uplift to people belonging to all countries. How did foreigners come to have an interest in our *Vedānta*? When they came to India they discovered here a class of people engaged in the practice of the Vedic *dharma* as a lifetime calling. They were curious to find out in what way the Vedas were great that an entire class of people should have dedicated themselves to them all their life. They conducted research into these scriptures and discovered many truths including those pointing to the unity of the various cultures of the world.

His Holiness Śri Jayendra Saraswati at the *homam* venue

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