

# Toleration in Hindu Dharma.

By C. M. RAMACHANDRA, B. A., B. L., F. R. G. S., and C. S. KRISHNA IYER, M. A.

## INTRODUCTION

A study of the history of religions leaves a general impression on us that their votaries are intolerant towards their co-religionists. Intolerance is found not only towards a foreign faith but within the faith itself between one sect and another. Sometimes we find that an orthodox religionist would be more tolerant towards one who is a foreigner to his faith, for instance, a heretic. While such is the case of intolerance among the religions of the world, we have a different atmosphere in Hindu Dharma, a unique instance of toleration. There are a good number of sects among the Hindus, each having a different shade of beliefs and observances. One would expect intolerance among them. As a matter of fact, there are a few instances of such intolerance recorded in the history of our faith. But if we take generality into consideration, there is no intolerance among the various sects inside the faith. Scriptural texts enforce toleration among them. The ordinary man who believes in the faith never thinks of intolerance. Even towards the alien faiths, Hinduism never raises its finger. Even towards an aggressive foreign faith, Hinduism always had a welcome smile and not the arrogance of opposition or enmity. For this conception also there are injunctions of scriptural texts besides a good number of historical anecdotes. Let us now elaborate the

above view with illustrations and authorities.

## TOLERATION AMONG THE VARIOUS SECTS WITHIN THE FAITH

Says Bhartṛhari:—

“Though I do not recognize any difference between Maheśwara, the Great Lord of the world, and Janārdana, the inner soul of the universe, still my faith is in the One who has the new moon on His crest (that is, preferential worship).”\*

As already noted above, there may be a few extreme instances of rank bigotry in the history of religion in our country; but the general tenor and tendency of Puranic teachings is a broad toleration as between the various sects of Hinduism. To dispel some misconceptions which exist in certain quarters the following stories are culled out from Puranic lore in order to illustrate the above contention.

In the ‘Śeṣa Dharma’, which is a part of the ‘Harivaṃśa’, an episode occurs describing the previous births of Khara, Dūṣaṇa and Triśirā, the three Rākṣasas who were deputed by Rāvaṇa

\* महेश्वरे वा जगतामधीश्वरे  
जनार्दने वा जगदन्तरात्मनि ।  
न वस्तुभेदप्रतिपत्तिरस्ति मे  
तथापि भक्तिस्तरुणेन्दुशेखरे ॥

(Yairagya-Shataka)

to rule over Janasthāna. In the previous birth, they had been Brahmans known as Chandrakānta, Mahāmedha and Vijaya. They performed penance to obtain Śiva's favour. Śiva, pleased with the rigour of their austerities, appeared in person before them. They said:—

‘संसारविषवृक्षस्य छेत्ता भव महेश्वर ॥’

“O mighty Lord! cut Thou the poisonous tree of transmigration.” Śiva became wrathful at them as they characterized *Samsāra* as a poisonous tree and reduced Him to the position of a woodman. He cursed them that they should become Rākṣasas at the next stage of their existence. They became penitent and invoked His mercy. Śiva promised to give them liberation during His *avatāra* as Rāma when He would meet them in battle. His word was finally fulfilled.

The author of ‘Śeṣa Dharma’ concludes the above episode with a remark that there is no difference between Śiva and Viṣṇu and that there is no harm in thinking, what may sound strange, that Śiva was born as Rāma.

Again, in the same work an account is given of the previous births of Bāli, the Vānara king, and Matanga, the sage.

A Brahman called Suśānta did a penance. A *Śūdra*, Dharmasīla by name, served him, looking after his bodily comforts. Śiva appeared and the Brahman craved *Mokṣa* for both. Śiva was not prepared to grant liberation to the *Śūdra* as he had done no penance. On further solicitation

Śiva deferred the grant of the boon to the next appearance of the parties in the world. The *Śūdra* was born as Bāli and the Brahman as Sage Matanga. But the friends of the previous birth became enemies now. Bāli destroyed the hermitage of the sage, who in turn levelled a solemn curse against him. Śiva became born as Rāma and in His peregrinations in the South for fourteen years met the two persons, gave absolution to the sage by blessing him with His appearance and purified Bāli by killing him with His arrow.

Here, too, we note that Śiva became incarnate as Rāma. A third instance is found in Jaimini's *Aśwamedha*. Among the warriors who captured the sacrificial horse of the Paṇḍavas, a distinguished hero after exhibiting many glorious deeds of valour was slain by Arjuna. Śrī Kṛṣṇa ordered Garuḍa to throw the head of the dead hero at Prayag, the holy junction of the Ganges and the Jamuna. Garuḍa replied that the man had already been purified by the sight of the Divine Śrī Kṛṣṇa and that further purification at Prayag was superfluous. Śrī Kṛṣṇa replied that the holy Prayag would become all the more sacred by receiving the head of a valiant hero. Garuḍa proceeded to execute the errand. Meanwhile Śiva and Pārvatī were on their aerial tour. They noticed something in Garuḍa's beak. Śiva wanted the precious head for His rosary of skulls and commanded Nandī to bring it. Nandī pursued Garuḍa to get at the skull. While Garuḍa was going directly above Prayag, he dropped the skull. At once

Nandī took the skull to his master and it was added to His garland of skulls.

Jaimini weaves the story in a beautiful way to suggest that Śiva and Viṣṇu vie with each other to do honour to a good soul. In the *Bhāgavata*, Śrī Kṛṣṇa says:—

मङ्गक्तः शङ्करदेवी मद्देवी शङ्करप्रियः ।  
उभौ तौ नरकं यातो यावच्चन्द्रदिवाकरौ ॥

“A devotee of Mine who hates Lord Śankara and a lover of Śankara who hates Me, both these go to hell and rot there till the sun and moon endure.”

Hence it is clear that there is no religion so tolerant as Hinduism. Conversion and missionary zeal have no place in Hindu religion, as salvation is open to all who are true to their God.

#### TOLERATION OF HINDU DHARMA TOWARDS OTHER FAITHS

In the *Gītā*, Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa says:—

येऽप्यन्यदेवता भक्ता यजन्ते श्रद्धयान्विताः ।  
तेऽपि मामेव कौन्तेय यजन्त्यविधिपूर्वकम् ॥

“Even those who worship *other* deities with faith, worship Me only, O ! son of Kuntī, though contrary to rules (of the Vedas).”

In our *Sandhyā* (daily prayer) we read:—

‘सर्वदेवनमस्कारः केशवं प्रति गच्छति ।’

“The salutations to all other gods go to Keśava ( Lord Viṣṇu ).”

There are a good number of systems of philosophy within the fold of Hinduism, varying from the blind faith of a savage to the high intellectual and philosophical faith of Monism. But yet all these different faiths are

regarded as different royal roads which take a devotee to their common destination, that is, salvation. Such a broad-minded notion makes it impossible for one to hate a man of an alien faith, nor does it induce him to persecute others. If Hindu Dharma has within itself various shades of faith, the other alien faiths will naturally find their prototypes within the Hindu faith itself. Hence a Hindu will see nothing strange either in the faith or in the tenets or in the observances of an alien faith with which he comes into contact. Hence complete toleration has always been the motto of the Hindu Dharma towards other alien faiths, even to the detriment of its own followers. For in several instances the alien faith which spread among its people became in course of time a thorn in its sides and threatened its very existence.

Let us now give a few instances from history wherein the Hindu Dharma extended its doctrine of tolerance towards the incoming alien faiths.

( 1 ) The aggressive conquest of Persia by the zealous Arabian Muslims and the intolerant persecution levelled by the faithful against the ‘infidel’ Parsis forced the latter to migrate to the western coast of India for the preservation of their faith. When the Parsis landed on the coast of Gujerat, the then ruling Hindu sovereign ( the Yādava king ) sought for the advice of the sage at the Dwārakā Śankara Mutt, as to how he should deal with the incoming foreigners. The holy apostle of Hindu Dharma advised the sovereign to treat the Parsis as his guest ( *atithi* ) and to give them

shelter. The Parsis were thereafter permitted to land and were given protection. To-day we find them rich and prosperous and helping the cause of national uplift in the land.

(2) When imperial Rome conquered Palestine and drove the Jews from their land of birth, various tribes were scattered throughout the length and breadth of the land. A few tribes came all the way to India and landed on the west coast. The then Rajas of Cochin, though they were orthodox in their faith, allowed the refugees to settle in their cities and even synagogues were allowed to be built and the Jews were permitted to observe their own form of worship. Even to-day in the city of Cochin we find a separate quarter inhabited by the descendants of those refugees.

(3) During the early Christian era, apostles and other evangelists went abroad and spread their gospel among the foreign peoples. One apostle, St. Thomas, seems to have come to India. The people who adopted the new faith became known as St. Thomas Christians. They were allowed to settle and to spread their religion in the country. It may be curious to note that they began to flourish in the midst of orthodoxy on the western coast. The Hindus not only allowed them to build their churches, but even encouraged them by making grants of fertile lands to their institutions. As a result, we find on the west coast, especially in the ancient principalities of Cochin and Travancore, more

Christians than the Hindus themselves. Toleration had developed into leniency and ultimately tended towards cowardice.

(4) The last faith which came to India, which was both aggressive and emphatic was Islam. Though there is not much in common between Islam and Hinduism, the Hindus treated the newcomer as an honoured guest. In fact, great philosophers and devotees saw the same principles in both the religions and preached the idea of toleration to followers of both the faiths. The great Nanak and Kabir are such eminent examples. Better angels of toleration cannot be found in any other land.

#### CONCLUSION

We have given above a few illustrations to show how tolerant the Hindu faith is within itself as well as outside. In fact, it affirms that there is an element of truth in every religion and that one should follow his own faith without embracing any other faith. It further says that one should follow the observances of the country where one resides. The crux of the idea is clearly expressed in the answer given by Yudhiṣṭhira to the question put in by the Yakṣa in the episode of the 'poison pool' in the *Vanaparva* of the *Mahābhārata*. It is this:—

"Logic is fickle, Vedic texts differ. There is not one *Rṣi* whose opinion is not divergent. The truth of religion is hidden in the cave (abstruse). What the great ones (of a particular place) follow is the Path."

