

Sannyasa and Society.

By Brij Lal Sharma.

One day, while he was returning from England in 1933, the first officer on board the ship asked the author: "Do you think Buddha would have missed the light, if he had taken his wife and child along with him?" Here we have the problem of *Sannyāsa* thrown into sharp relief. The pathway to God lies through renunciation, and everything depends upon the meaning we give to the word. For nearly fifteen centuries the institution has been sadly out of touch with realities.

Great and honourable has been the part played by *Sannyāsa* in growth and unfoldment of Hindu culture. It embodied some of the highest virtues that man thirsts for, and its discipline and detachment provided a vehicle for expression of the spiritual longings of the race. Coming as it did after *Brahmacharya*, *Gr̥hastha* and *Vānaprastha*, after bodily and mental training of earlier youth, after coloured experiences of married life, and progressive detachment from worldly things for things divine, it rounded the life of the individual into a perfect whole, and gave it meaning, dignity and power. As leaves come naturally to a tree, and ecstatic utterances to a poet, *Sannyāsa* was the fruit into which the throbbing life of man in the end ripened. It was a flowering and a fulfilment, a consummation and a perfection. It brought to one's sojourn on earth the beauty and

grandeur of the sunset and the evening sky.

For, then, life was not so overbalanced, reeling like a drunkard from excess to excess. It worshipped neither delirium nor death, neither trembling timidity nor shameless daring. Life for the forest-dwellers of India was a unique experience, an opportunity from which could be wrested the key to the riddle of existence. It was a trust which society placed in the hands of the individual to fulfil according to his age and station. Life was a great adventure, a moment of incredible possibilities; but it was also a great responsibility, a burden worthy of human spirit to bear. It was a gift which needed an appropriate mood to yield its riches. The heart hungering for light and freedom had to pass through a course of discipline which alone entitled it to spiritual experience. Rights could not be enjoyed without duties, nor freedom without subjection to law. The spiritual meaning of existence ran like a golden thread through all the episodes of life. *Sannyāsa* was the last stage of this discipline which transformed the human soul.

The individual's relation to society was not precarious, but an intimate one. No one had the right to lead his or her life as he or she liked. There was no individual apart from society. A baby could not flower into manhood and personality without human attention

and care, though an abstraction might. His thoughts, feelings and actions, his joys and sorrows, failures and achievements, became explicable only in a system of human relations. Man thus, being dependent for his reality upon his fellow-men and women, living and dead, owed them a debt of gratitude which he had to discharge by observing the commands of society and serving social ideals. He dare never forget that in his striving lived the striving of the whole human race, and that no emancipation existed for him unless it be in and through society. But this was not all. If the individual could not exist apart from other individuals, he was not merely a product of social forces either. For, that could never explain progress. If all individuals were complex arrangement of social forces, they would be monotonously alike, mere reflections of one another. There is something in every man which transcends his immediate environment, human and objective. It is a thirst for the great beyond which ever stings him to look beyond the present, to overcome his limitations, and endlessly surpass himself. The institution of *Sannyāsa* recognised this uniqueness of the individual. There was a sense in which one had the right to make or mar his life, but only after a long period of discipline and service.

In time this high idealism which governed the four stages into which life was divided was forgotten. Perhaps it was never rigidly adhered to, although it must have evoked enough enthusiasm to assume an institutional shape, an institutional shape which has come

down to our own times, though broken and lop-sided. Then came Buddhism with its relentless insistence on the evils of *Samsāra*. Its eightfold path was steeped in social spirit; but the negative character of its morality triumphed in the end. It was easier to avoid than to do things. If one ceased from implicating oneself in *Samsāra*, avoided works with their causes and effects, and stood fast in renunciation, there could be no more rebirth and misery. As time passed Bhikkhus and Arhants increased in number till we find Hiuen Tsang in the seventh century counting hundreds and thousands of them as he made his way down the Punjab to Pāṭalīputra. The structure of Hindu society must have considerably helped Buddhism to spread all over India. In those days there were no railroads or telegraph communications, radio broadcasters or newspapers; communications were slow and books were not easy to get. To start a new religion was no joke. Only personal touch between the preacher and the people could do the trick. If the Sannyāsīs who lived outside towns and hamlets could be converted, they would carry the new idea far and wide; for, Sannyāsīs, in their search of truth, moved from place to place, receiving light from those who possessed it and scattered it among the people. Besides, Buddhism was the first religion to proselytize. Its conversion and enlistment of men, fired with the zeal to carry joy and freedom, not by force but by persuasion, to every human soul, within and without India, produced a revolution in Indian society. These pioneers changed Hindu outlook on

life, an outlook which sought expression in a burst of literature, art, painting, philosophy, social work and political administration. But in time the inner fire began to fade and hordes of Bhikkhus and parsons swept the country,—young lives blasted by ignorance, wound-up human gramophones ready to pour forth all they had learned but never understood, carrying with them, wherever they went, poverty, superstition and spiritual night. What might have gone to give beauty and strength to the social structure, strayed into arid region of pitiless asceticism to corrupt, rot and be reduced to dust.

Śankara ended the agony of the dying faith only to produce another agony which darkened the spiritual horizon of India for centuries to come. His doctrine of *Māyā*, which in his system embodies some of the subtlest thinking man has done and represents at once the triumph and tragedy of intellect, became a boomerang in the hands of his followers. Although he himself was at pains to show that not the world, but our idea of it, was false, and that in consequence there stretched before man the unending possibility of knowing and becoming the unique and the infinite, his successors thought otherwise and turned the world, which provides us with warmth, society and sustenance, into an awful spectre staring maliciously in our face. Life being a horrible illusion, the least one could do was to have anything to do with it. It is from here that *Sannyāsa* assumes the familiar shape it has to-day.

Anybody could adopt *Sannyāsa* at any time. A child of ten had as much right to denounce the fraudulent world as a man of seventy. Once the environment of man was exposed as rotten to the core, it mattered little when and how one secured freedom from it.

It will be evident that this new conception of *Sannyāsa* is widely different from the original one. The ancient *Sannyāsa* was never anti-social in its aim or practice. The world for it did not stand as a divine joke. The modern institution of *Sannyāsa* is definitely anti-social. The world for it is not a help to realise spiritual harmony, but a lion in its path. Its very recklessness strikes at the root of family, indeed at the whole web of tender feelings, affection and love which holds society together. It is selfish because it pursues its end in opposition to social requirements and health. When a bachelor leaves his parents, when a husband deserts his wife and a father his children in search of a balm for his anguished soul, he does so without a qualm of conscience; it is his own well-being that to him matters most. Individualism with its assertion of the freedom of a part in opposition to the freedom of the whole, which the ancient Rṣis avoided, now becomes his creed. *Sannyāsa* of this kind is not only selfish, it is a cloak to hide the indolence of the individual. Logic of facts and stern necessities of life are a challenge to a stout heart, but terror to a feeble one. Add to this the teaching of the learned that this logic is a sham and the sternness a delusion, and you get the disposition

which adopts *Sannyāsa*. If we take away the genuine desire for truth which perhaps fires every Sannyāsi's heart, we are left with cowardice, egoism and blindness.

What is renunciation? Is it a mere denial, an unmeaning negation of all that exists or one has; or is it a training, an order? The ancient idea of renunciation was a comprehensive one. Nor was it simply negative in character, for it had a positive content. From the moment of its birth the child entered upon a career of renunciation and adventure. First there was ignorance to be renounced. With the adoption of *Brahmacharya* the child had to seek light and knowledge. Ignorance is not a mere absence of knowledge. If that were so, we should have no hesitation in describing objects of nature as dunderheads and dollards. Ignorance is a knowledge, though partial, incomplete and confused. When it is said that knowledge destroys ignorance, what is meant is not that light overflows the empty darkness of the soul, but rather that the light brightens, that our previous knowledge ripens into a fuller comprehension. We renounce our bare, unrelated and disordered facts for a richer harmony of clear meaning. There is such a thing as love of ignorance which is as difficult to renounce as love of possessions. At bottom, the task of education is to induce the child to renounce its chequered knowledge for the clear illumination of understanding. Since knowledge never loses its incomplete character, however far we may pursue it, life becomes a series of

endless renunciations and rewards. *Brahmacharya* taught humility and ambition to our intellect.

Then came renunciation of egoism and insistence on service, the two cardinal principles of *Grhastha*. Here, too, renunciation was not an abstraction. A man had to get married, settle down and discharge all the duties of his new station. He was not called upon to sacrifice his ego for the larger interests of his family and society,—for that would be self-destructive,—but to preserve a balance between his personal and communal needs. Family is a product neither of unselfish devotion nor of crass egoism. Unselfish devotion, if rigorously pursued, would lead to the extinction of the devotee, defeating the object of family and society. Reckless egoism, devouring everything round it, would collapse under the weight of its own enormities. The bow had to be attuned to the lyre. Man had to learn restraint as well as expression. He owed service and claimed satisfaction. *Grhastha* naturally offered a much wider field for training body, mind and speech than *Brahmacharya* did. It touched life on more points than one. It made demands on the intellect; for, life needed planning and constant adjustment, vision and foresight, it pressed will into the service of society; for, unless things were willed, intellect was impotent: it regulated the springs of feelings, whose absence robbed life of all warmth, whose excess burned it up. As a son, father, husband, friend, craftsman, buyer and seller, master and servant, citizen and a subject, a man came into contact

with varied sides of life, and, thus, not only became a lever for moving the huge edifice of society towards its destined end but, enriched and tested by all he had met, emerged, like a great painting, an epic or a musical composition, peculiarly complete in himself. *Grhastha* enabled man to create a life in which could "the heart and soul and sense in concert move".

Besides, in this station alone could he harmonise the relation of man and woman, surely the most pressing problem of all times. How could a man speak of all life, if he had never known the life of woman? Man as such, independent of the other sex, standing by himself, is a starved, muscleless, bony specimen of life crying for completeness. The meaning of man's existence can only be discovered through the life of woman, and *vice versa*; a man or a woman who has sought it in any other way has missed it. Or is it that the ultimate reality is significant only for the male sex? And if the reply is in the affirmative, pray, on what ground is this distinction drawn? And if the distinction is arbitrary, then how audacious it is to give spiritual lessons to women! A heartless asceticism may be good for stones, but has no meaning for ordinary men and women who throng the highways of the world. Truth is simple in its unity, but complex in its structure; and truth that leaves a woman out is not a truth, but a delusion. *Grhastha* enabled men and women to perfect their lives in each other and seek the beyond with a full tide of development. Divine, into

which human personality is growing, is a unity of the male and the female.

The task of renunciation did not end with *Grhastha* but continued into *Vānaprastha*, in which the individual had to pay more attention to the spiritual than the empirical needs of his nature, more to the eternal than to the fugitive. He had to remember, to borrow a metaphor from Tagore, that his life was not simply to be squandered in giving strength to the stem of society, colour and texture to its leaves, wealth of form and fragrance to its blossoms, but was to be preserved and perfected in the fruit, which was its salvation. One had to wean oneself from family, social and worldly attachments, like the sap which rushes on to the fruit. The renunciation was to be gradual. One had to disengage oneself from the embrace of life, and not to cut the clinging bonds with a knife. The renunciation was both easy and difficult. It was easy because it came at the end of experience and disillusionment; it was difficult because the likes and dislikes of the individual hardened into habits and tendencies, which were by no means easy to uproot.

After this came the last and largest renunciation of all—the renunciation of the fear of death. Just as a fruit slowly dries up at its root preparatory to its parting from the stem, even so the home-sick soul, discovering his meaning within his own self, renounced the fear of death and therefore the love of life and, lacking nothing, became unique and universal. This was *Mokṣa*, salvation, freedom.

To compare modern with ancient *Sannyāsa* is to compare a four-square block of wood, with its polished surfaces and straight sharp lines, to a living, flowering tree. The modern institution is lifeless, perverted, unnatural. It is not a growth, but a sword-cut; not a harmonious blending of thought, action and feeling,— of childhood, youth and old age, but a product of personal grievance and impulse. Doubtless there are honourable exceptions among Sannyāsis, but the institution in the main stands condemned. It is a parasite which fattens itself on the blood and toil of others, a pretence which parades itself as perfection. It has not plumbed the depth of life, known joys and sorrows in all their gleaming variety, suffered and pondered and reaped serenity, but is grounded in superficial manifestations of life; and by slamming the doors of the senses in the face of truth, beauty and harmony of the world, and so impoverishing the mind and producing concentration, still and steady as a flame, it attains the peace of the desert, the calm of desolation and ruin.

