

Hinduism's struggle to be modern

The story of Vivekananda as the sovereign symptom of his religion's attempt to turn liberal

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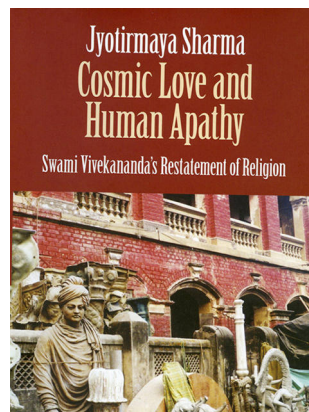
Sometime in the late nineteenth century, long after the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel had published his masterwork *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), there began in Europe the resurgence of a philosophical anxiety. This was not the moral anxiety of empire per se. Rather, it was the inner anxiety of Europe's own decline and decay; a wariness set in by its unbridled capitalist expansion and concomitant cultural alienation; a worry, above all, that it was not merely the imperial headlands and marketplaces of Europe but the continent's very spirit that was in crisis. By the end of the First World War, spiritual anxiety had turned into brute pessimism. Faced with a continent destroyed irreversibly by war and with the grimness of limitless technological war waged on nature and species alike, intellectuals like Paul Valéry, Oswald Spengler, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger amongst others closed philosophical ranks. Their plea for Europe's cosmopolitan generosity turned into an obsessive focus on its provincial authenticity. The desire to recover Europe's dignified smallness mutated, in time, into a categorical inability to see beyond Europe. Rather than an ontological questioning of modern Europe's capitalist and colonial foundations, the crisis of Spirit forced an anxious return to that very Spirit, under whose shelter bourgeois statism now aligned itself with rhetorics of tradition, civilisation, and destiny. Spirit returned not in crisis as one might have expected from the rhetoric of the times but rather in stridently humanist form, bringing with it the exclusions and hierarchies that constitute modern humanism as such. And the dialectical logic of empire and nation was such that it returned everywhere. In his third book of what is now the most sustained multi-volume project of engaging with modern Hinduism, Jyotirmaya Sharma reopens the philosophical pathways to apprehend that universal return of Spirit, the life of that metaphysical universalism, on Indian shores. For whether it was Europe or India, national destiny had never been more strongly braided with spiritual responsibility than it was in the late nineteenth century. The reconstruction of the

political as the spiritual in India, a measure that called for the realignment of spiritual means towards geopolitical ends, required a deft conceptual move. It is in the context of this move that Sharma invokes, in the subtitle of his new book, the nineteenth century's "restatement of religion".

The book's protagonist is celebrated Vedanta thinker Swami Vivekananda, in whose moral and political itinerary Sharma identifies modern Hinduism's decisive turn towards a disenchanting, scientific, and rational religion, one that carried with it the burden not only of theological explanation but also political redemption. Religion, in letter and spirit, now broke decisively from its mystical lineage where practitioners such as Chaitanya and Ramakrishna had placed it, and was turned unabashedly into an ally of normative politics. We must take the meanings of "normative" carefully here. For it is not that Vivekananda rescued religion from passion, anger, strength, and other unquantifiable and universal emotions. Rather, he aligned them with the imperative of "intense activity," decisively placing the metaphysical laws of action and mastery over and above the morals of everyday equality and justice.

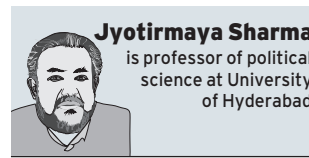
Departure from guru

Few matched the young Narendra's stature in the eyes of his guru Ramakrishna, and as Sharma shows, much of this purchase owed to Narendra's hermeneutic skill and scriptural mastery. Yet, Narendra took leave from his guru's mirthful beliefs quickly and decisively, eschewing emotive and corporeal content characteristic of older *bhakti* traditions and enunciating a new mode of action in which empirical facts and consequences came to be privileged over invisible communions. The book begins with that a dramatic scene in which Vivekananda feigns exactly such a trance that had been the hallmark of Ramakrishna, only to mock and poke fun at it after he had fooled every other disciple present into buying the authenticity of his fit. There was laughter all round! Writing with a rare kind of sensitivity to the theoretical import of such moments, moving from anecdote to anecdote—a method that reminds the reader of Michel de Certeau, Jacques Le Goff, D. R. Nagaraj (from whose work the



Cosmic Love and Human Apathy

Swami Vivekananda's Restatement of Religion; Jyotirmaya Sharma; HarperCollins Publishers India, A-53, Sector 57, Noida-201301. Rs. 499.



book's title is inspired) and Sumit Sarkar -- Sharma sets the tone brilliantly. The departure from mysticism and such notions as *moksha* had begun to take form as soon as Ramakrishna had died. In their place was privileged the super-rationalistic idiom of *dharma* and responsibility. Mystical insanity was now barred in the name of reason. Is it, Sharma forces us to ask, this metaphysical seriousness dating back to the late 19th century, this war on pleasure and love and enjoyment, that now returns so frequently to political Hinduism in the form of its own violent madness? There are two conceptual axes along which Sharma recovers the genealogy of this moral psychology. The first is the young Narendra's dissatisfaction with Ramakrishna's understanding of responsibility, which led to the disciple's re-articulation of duty. This involved Vivekananda's turn away from the radical phenomenology of *bhakti* traditions that had allowed Ramakrishna, in the heydays of colonial *chakri*, to gain such influence amongst the emerging middle classes in Bengal. Marked as they were by physical drudgery and temporal discipline, Ramakrishna's mysticism gave colonial middle class lives a new cognitive horizon in which ecstatic escape

promised relief and liberation. Vivekananda found such escape not only maddening, indeed an action befitting the mad, but also irresponsible. In its stead, moral and physical courage became for him the only ground of legitimate passion for the divine.

Sharma's second conceptual axis is that of judgment, and it is here that Vivekananda acquires an even more troubling silhouette. In place of an egalitarian mysticism, Vivekananda put in place a hierarchy of religions and beliefs. His was a world in which religion could be understood within the limits of reason alone. So that while truth could be reasoned and posited in different ways, sought in multifarious activities and faiths, the most authentic and sovereign Truth could be sought in the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* alone. Love of God in no way mandated a non-hierarchical communion with the divine and human others. Instead, love was now rehabilitated in the empirical ability to see God. Needless to add, only a few were gifted with this faculty. Thus *bhakti*'s radical rejection of *Varnashramadharma* as the foundation of personal obligation (*svadharm*a) was decisively reversed. In its place, Vivekananda recuperated the Kshatriya kings of antiquity as exemplars of just action.

Like Gandhi who would arrive at this scene of high seriousness less than quarter of a century later, Vivekananda latched onto the monarchical idea of *Kshatriyadharm*a as the founding ground of moral responsibility. Religious morals, thus understood, could be firmly positioned as the vehicle of national destiny, one in which theology might be muscled into and blended seamlessly with projects of spiritual restitution and political sovereignty. Hinduism was not merely a non-dualist (*advaita*) theory of being and affection anymore, in which one was required to be equally indifferent to sorrow and joy. Instead, it was a cognitive horizon on which others could be judged, ranked, asked to conform, barred, mastered. In Vivekananda, political Hinduism attained its most reasonable, instrumental, and sovereign onto-theologian. In his hierarchical universalism, Spirit acquired a moral psychology appropriate to modernity.

It is important to place Sharma's remarkable work in its

global context. For while the author takes his own knowledge of philosophical sources lightly, moving his narrative elegantly and briskly, he never lets the reader forget that the stakes of this question are conceptual. Here and there, thus, he gestures towards Vivekananda's debt to the European tradition, to figures as diverse as Kant, Berkeley, Schopenhauer, and Müller. Yet the question at the heart of this work is not merely of one religion but of Spirit at large. At stake here is the spirit of religion *as such*, of the attendant dangers of Spirit's alliance with modern statism and capital. There is a danger of losing that philosophical story at the heart of this book, unless one resists anachronistic polemic and pays attention to Sharma's astute footnotes.

Indeed, intellectual historians tend to forget that the idea of Spirit is a profoundly modern one. That what we call, somewhat loosely, the spiritual is not the same as that which was called, for an earlier epoch, the mystical. Thus the spirit invoked in Montesquieu's *The Spirit of Laws* (1748), which strove to establish such categories as good government, legitimate force, and general obedience as universal norms merely encapsulated the symptomatic ambitions of liberal morality. Hegel's own masterwork cannot be extricated from his struggle to formulate a logical approach to the problem of force, recognition, and misrecognition that the modern capitalist society throws at its subjects. And then, there was Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) that finally connected, in the most unequivocal fashion, the inwardness of Protestant Christianity with the brutal aggression of its capitalist spirit. It was Weber who warned that Spirit (*Geist*) marked not the triumph of the mystical but rather its defeat; the ushering in of a carefully structured system of appropriation and extraction of which modern religion was a constitutive part. Under the figure of Spirit, as both Hegel and Weber had warned, reemerged not merely a plea for restituting the transcendence of the soul (hence the resonance between Husserl's phenomenology and the *Upanishads*), not merely a strange narcissism posited as "cosmic love", to use Sharma's pithy expression. Under the

sign of Spirit also emerged a profoundly instrumental worldview, one that would colude with the most modern forms of domination.

The return of Spirit was thus always going to be a violent and exclusionary affair. If one follows the idioms of Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (1909), it was also a peculiarly civilisational affair. Spiritualisation of politics is not some purist return to universal ethics or justice that we should necessarily feel happy welcoming. Often, it has marked the return of orthodox and ever tightening exclusions of beliefs, tribes, castes, and even species from the realm of morals. Between Weber and Heidegger, thus, there was the young Ambedkar in New York (1916) who had called spiritualism the unethical apparition of "brute force," the self-legitimising and ritualised "force of law," the deathless "ghost" of violence masquerading as religious generosity and universalism. It was Ambedkar who formulated the idea that we should be wary of narratives of crisis; that the category of crisis *as such*, whether of self, soul, or tradition, was less poignant than it was a warning of a new hegemony, a new conservative consensus, a new economy of contempt beginning to gather force.

In *Cosmic Love and Human Apathy*, Jyotirmaya Sharma has given us a fearless genealogy of that crisis, one that Hinduism dangerously proclaimed, and too often does on its own behalf. Picking up the Indian prehistory of Vivekananda's attempt to posit the spirit of Hinduism as universal religion on the one hand, and on the other hand recovering the modalities of that onto-theological alliance between orthodox belief and exclusionary statism, he has woven together the most sophisticated and unsparing critique of political Hinduism to emerge in some time. Vivekananda is not a Hindu supremacist in his story. He is merely the sovereign symptom of Hinduism's struggle to become modern and liberal. The consequences of that mutually nourishing tension between religion and liberalism play out in our own time with alarming normalcy. And it is this terrifying normalcy of liberal Hinduism, its appropriation of critique of and for itself that Jyotirmaya Sharma has courageously and scrupulously breached for us.