

Observations & Views:

Spirit Of Indian Religions

In ancient India, labels such as Hinduism and Jainism did not exist. There were various schools of thoughts. Some exchange of ideas took place between them. There were healthy discussions and debates between the followers of different schools of thought but seldom any hard feelings. Individuals, even those belonging to a single family, could follow any school of thought, perhaps choose a mix of concepts belonging to different schools and change their mind at any time. Religion served its genuine purpose – of maintaining harmony in society and making everyone happy. This is the glimpse of eternal universal religion.

Here is an interesting example of an exchange of concepts between religions. Jains believe that the universe was not created by any supreme or superhuman entity and that it evolves according to the laws of nature. According to A. L. Basham,¹ “SAMKHYA [school of thought] resembles Jainism in its rigid dualism and fundamental atheism. ... Creation, or rather evolution, is not due to the operation of a divinity, but to the inherent nature of PRAKRITI – a term loosely translated ‘matter’.” The terminology is somewhat different but the concepts are identical. Similar concepts appear in Gita.²

NA KARTRITVAM NA KARMAANI LOKASYA SRIJATI PRABHUH |
NA KARMAFALASAMYOGAM SVABHAAVASTU PRAVARTATE |5.14|

God creates neither agency nor action for the world; neither does he connect action with its fruit. It is nature that is at work.

An important Jain concept is that God does not reward, punish or forgive worldly beings for their good or bad deeds. All are responsible for their deeds, acquiring appropriate karmas and suffering their consequences. A worldly being goes through these processes on account of delusion and ignorance. Further, one can get deliverance from karmas through self-endeavor. Gita presents a similar concept in the following verse:

¹ The Wonder That Was India by A. L. Basham, Grove Press Inc., New York, 1959, page 324.

² From Gita according to Gandhi by Mahadev Desai, published by Navajeevan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1984, page 219.

NAADATTE KASYACHIT PAAPAM NA CHAIV SUKRITAM VIBHUH I
AJNAANENAAVRITAM JNAANAM TEN MUHYAANTI JAMTAVA I5.15I

God does not take upon Himself anyone's vice or virtue; it is ignorance that veils knowledge and deludes all creatures.

The above couplets echo the SAMKHYA doctrine that God (PURUSH) does not act, only nature (PRAKRITI) acts. This doctrine is similar to the Jain karma theory.

Such exchange of ideas is a unique feature of Indian religions. In the article 'We Are All Hindus Now', Lisa Millar states:³ "The Rig Veda, the most ancient Hindu scripture, says this: 'Truth is One, but the sages speak of it by many names.' A Hindu believes there are many paths to God. Jesus is one way, the Qur'an is another, yoga practice is a third. None is better than any other; all are equal. The most traditional, conservative Christians have not been taught to think like this. They learn in Sunday school that their religion is true, and others are false. Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.'"

In sum, Indian religions are different; they are inclusive, liberal and tolerant of different views.

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An Example Of Tolerance⁴

Muslims and Hindus in India Hold Joint Celebrations of Ramadan and Ganesh Chaturthi

Often in India fighting erupts between Hindus and Muslims. In Mumbai, celebrations are in full swing for Islam's Ramadan and Hinduism's Ganesh Chaturthi. This year both holidays started on August 23, prompting this joint celebration. During the festival Muslims sang hymns and offered prayers to the Hindu elephant-headed god Lord Ganesh, while Hindus feasted at Muslim households as they sat down to eat after their day of fasting for Ramadan.

³ Newsweek Magazine, August 31, 2009, page 70.

Find this article at <http://www.newsweek.com/id/212155>

⁴ From RELIGION & ETHICS NEWSWEEKLY of August 28, 2009.