

Dynamics of Being and Becoming in Hindu Thought: A Hermeneutic Exercise

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Every culture has a way of determining which ideas are important to it and which then get embedded in the history of that culture. These ideas which can be called unit ideas, then take hold of the imagination of its people and exert its influence on all walks of life as well as in all periods of its history. The West has its obsession with The great Chain of Being while in ancient India was laid the foundations of a striving towards a perfected state of Being. Both of these ideas though linked in some ways, developed their own complexes and diversified into many paths through the dynamics of the growth of ideas, that so characterize human ingenuity and originality.

This talk deals with one such idea in Hinduism which I have called Idea of Being and Becoming. This Being has nothing to do with the nature of ultimate Being in an ontological sense nor is it concerned with the eternal flux of Becoming so characteristic of Buddhism, for instance. I use Being here to stand for a sense of freedom, an urge to go back to one's own true nature and a state of heightened intuitive awareness, without being bound by man-made rules and conventions of society. Man is born free but is everywhere in chains need not apply to a sense of economic or political deprivation. Even in the midst of plenty and prosperity there have been expressions of dissatisfaction and a yearning for escape from the very factors that determine that plenty. Therefore, one of the chief characteristics of Being by this definition, is the act of withdrawal from a

rule bound society but not necessarily from an engagement with the world, from that state of being. It can be equated to Nivrtti as a concept.

This then can be interpreted as seeking to be alone , being in oneself , etc; and can be contrasted with the state of becoming or participating in the day to day existence in the world, bound by its rules and regulations.

When we examine the historical growth of Hinduism based on extant textual material, we notice this dichotomy of being and becoming evidenced even in the Rgveda, where we do not as yet discover the concept of liberation, characterized by complete withdrawal from the world of becoming, which is still to come at the time of the Upanisads.

Rgvedic society is a robust one where the members are involved whole heartedly with living comfortable lives within a harmonious concept of a principle of Unity amongst all that exists. It had a strong sense of commitment to the sacred expressed through its (yajnas). While the notion of dharma as understood in the Dharmasastras is still far away, the metaphysical concept of Rta as a cosmic force which sustains the universe within a physical and moral order has come to stay. The way that humans contribute to the sustenance of this physical and moral order is by the performance of yajnas. Further in the early Vedic period, we also have mantras that state that this Rta, which is also called Satya (Truth) and which underlies the universe, the rsis directly perceived as unfolding through successive layers of reality . And furthermore, any person performing yajna with faith can envision this Truth. There was built into the yajna performance the cultivation of a sense of selflessness i.e., a forgetting of one's ego. The notion of giving up the ego

will assume great importance in the later growth of Hinduism. In this period there is also the beginnings of the conviction, based on the unitive principle, that the structural constitution of the human being discloses the very structure of the world. But what is unique to this view is the strong belief that by staying in society and by following its code of yajna it was possible to maintain Truth for oneself. Thus Being and Becoming were not opposed to each other but could be achieved in the very act of living in harmony with nature and did not demand an abdication of worldly life. So Vedic society was structured round a conventional religious life of yajna as of paramount importance, and someone not following the yajna path would not be looked upon with favor.

It may appear then, that the life of a wanderer and a renouncer cannot be part of this early society, if by renouncer we associate the later notions of wandering in search of (moksa) after renouncing the world. But there we are mistaken. Even in the Rgveda, we discover individuals present in society who are wanderers and who are described as living in the world of Apsaras, Gandharvas and wild beasts, surely a reference to their abode outside the pale of human society. It also conveys a sense of mystery the parivrajya embodies. The sukta X.136 reads (in translation) Treading the path of Apsaras, of Gandharvas and wild beasts, the long-haired man who knows the heart comes, a sweet friend, most gladdening. It is significant that the parivrajya is long haired, a reference perhaps to his unconventional life style. They are called munis wearing soiled yellow clothes, and travel with the wind to where the devas are (X.136.2 & 4).

Verses like the above, make it clear that there were individuals who did not conform to the strict sacrificial path, which is the vedic path for attainment of a good life here on earth and ensuring an auspicious future existence, post mortem. If one pays attention to the munis traveling to where the devas are and also upholding the earth and heaven, the wanderers were perhaps those who were concerned with being as such, and not just becoming i.e., leading a virtuous life within the prescribed vedic mode of existence.

One of the main characteristics of the Hindu way of living, especially from the Upanisadic times, is its emphasis on withdrawal from a ritual based yajna, called the nivr̥tti-marga, contrasted with a conventional religious path of dharma called the pravṛtti-marga. These two paths of nivr̥tti and pravṛtti respectively, are woven into the fabric of Hinduism as colorful patterns from the time of the R̥gveda. Those colors were sometimes bright for nivr̥tti as in the period of the Upanisads, and sometimes faded for nivr̥tti but bright for pravṛtti as in the time of the Brahmanas but at no time in the history of Hinduism, has this twin ideology been absent from the scene. While my emphasis is on Hinduism in this context, it will be good to identify this twin ideology as part of the Indic civilization. This was a common pool from which many thirsty seekers like the Buddha, the Mahavira, the Vedantins of many shades, the bhakti schools of all persuasions, breakaway movements like the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj and even Guru Nanak who founded Sikhism in the 15th century, drank; while quenching their thirst in this common pool they also devised their own strategies to come to terms with the two concepts. In some the nivr̥ttimarga was emphasized, while in others pravṛtti got some edge over nivr̥tti.

Coming back to Hinduism, E.) we can distinguish generally, at least five distinct periods in its growth taking the early Vedic period as the first. (2) The second is the late Vedic period which covers the early Upanisads and Kalpasutra times which can broadly extend upto 300 C.E. The third period overlaps with (2) and is the classical period of the composition of the philosophical sutras, smṛti literature, and also the epic period i.e., from about 400 BCE to 400 CE. There was also a vigorous interaction between Buddhist schools by now. 4) The 4th is the Golden age of the Guptas and the age of the early commentaries on the six philosophical schools, an age of efflorescence of literary, artistic and philosophical activity as well.. It is the time of the early Vedāntins, the period of the Puranas and of Sankara the advaita philosopher par excellence. It can extend upto 1000 CE. (5) The fifth period is the period of the various reformers beginning with Ram Mohun Roy and extending to the present day. Within this time frame we can also have a sixth subdivision coming after the independence of India i.e., the post-independence period.

Nivṛtti and Pravṛtti did not have the same connotations in these various periods we have used heuristically to understand them. In the early Vedic period, we find the word *sat* being used in the sense of Existence or Being . For instance in the Nasadiya sukta, *Sat* and *Asat* refer to the reflections of the seer as to the nature of the Primal Entity. *Sat* and *Asat* are here visualized as positive and potential existence of the primal entity respectively.. There are three words used prominently in this Vedic period which are closely linked with each other. They are *rta*, *satya* and *tapas*. If *rta* stands for moral and

physical order understood both in a cosmic (samsti) and an individual sense (vyasti), satya will indicate a rootedness in that being. And both satya and rta are described as born of tapas. Thus one can understand tapas or sacrifice to be at the root of intuiting rta, and satya. A path of pravrtti or becoming can now be identified with the religious path of performing yajna, because, in one sense, it was an externalization of an eternal truth and, in another sense, the rsis were convinced that in that state of purity, rta can be intuited.

While the ritual of yajna was, in a sense, a reenactment of the Primal sacrifice/yajna depicted in the Purusasukta, one can imagine a sensitive person like the parivrajya muni going beyond the external performance and being able to intuit Rta, because of a heightened pure state of vision. The famous Rgvedic mantra that talks about the One Sat being spoken of variously by sages also describes the four levels of speech which are known by the wise who have divine knowledge.

If then we concede that the intuitive understanding of Being as shown above can come through a life of Becoming, i.e. through vedic yajna, we can ask ourselves whether the munis walking out of this way of life, were also seeking to intuit the same ultimate Reality. There is no doubt that the muni has stepped out of this conventional life of yajna, either out of disillusionment or through skepticism. We may never be sure of the motive behind his adopting a path of nivrtti. But it is not difficult to imagine that both disillusionment and skepticism can feed on each other and lead in the end, to abandoning the path of pravrtti. We have many mantras in the RV which express doubts in the minds of some

sis about the meaning of all that exists. It is therefore, not unreasonable, to assume that these mantras indeed refer to groups of individuals who questioned the accepted sanctity and efficacy of the ritualistic mode of life, to accomplish its avowed objectives. One mantra significantly questions the very existence of Indra, who by all accounts is one of the important vedic devatas. There is no Indra it says, who has ever seen him? Whom shall we praise? It is something to withdraw from the conventional way of Vedic life but we are not sure as to the purpose of this withdrawal. There is no specific goal mentioned as in the case of the later upasanas in the Upanisads, for instance, or as in the case of the later samnyasasramins.

RV X.136 has to be read carefully to discover what the goal of the munis were which led them to discard the yajna mode of religious life. Are they also in search of Rta like the other rsis or are they different in some significant way. Unfortunately we do not have many suktas like RV X 136 for comparison in the RV. This sukta mentions the many qualities of the munis and mantra three uttered by the munis themselves says In the ecstasy of munihood, we have ascended on the wind, and only these bodies of ours are what you mortals see. Some scholars like S.C. Bose, Ranade and Belvalkar see a reference to yogic powers in this verse. Even without making that commitment we can discern that, in the state of munihood, there is complete bliss and a sense of total freedom expressed as moving through the wind .. The munis seem to have access to the devas who are not many gods, as mistakenly understood, but are those, who in the past, reached that state, due to intuiting the concept of Rta. So there is a structured relationship between the One Unity, the devas and humans here.

We now have a clue to unravel the mystery of the path of the munis. The twofold divergence of paths as the path of action (yajna marga) and the path of knowledge (jnana marga) have their seeds sown in the conventional yajna performance of the rsis and the free path of the munis respectively. These two paths will continue to doggedly follow the trajectory of Hinduism throughout its history up to the present day. While the performance model came to be identified with the path of dharma, which like the vedic model, assured abhyudaya or worldly welfare for its performers along with the promise of intuiting the ultimate rta, the knowledge model advocated a withdrawal from the performance aspect but assured the attainment of rta/moksa which in itself was a complete value. Thus again, the later samnyasin wanderer is brought to mind. We can thus assume that the muni, because of the description of his being close to the devas and moving with the winds, withdraws from the conventional mode of action and seeks the ultimate reality, rta, within the mystery of his heart.

Late Vedic Period.

By the time we come to the second period of the early Upanisads, which can be any time between 800 B.C.E. to 300 B.C.E. we know that the four fold varna division of society had hardened and we also know that the four purusarthas as well as the karma theory, connecting it with transmigration and dharma/adharma were all well entrenched in the tradition.

This is also the period of the Kalpasutras (srauta, grhya and dharmasutra) and a time when the sramana schools like Jainism and Buddhism asserted their presence with their questioning of the authority of the Vedas and valorizing the life of a monk in a sangha. Side by side with these developments was the growth of the fourfold asrama system which along with the purusarthas became the hallmark of Hinduism. But it is important to bear in mind that dharma as the bedrock for human welfare and correct behaviour still held sway in spheres other than the spiritual. Meanwhile the concept of dharma had also changed. Thus even while the Upanisads were proclaiming moksa to be the highest value we find kings like Janaka and Ajatasatru, who acknowledge that moksa is the highest personal value to be striven for, but continue to rule their kingdoms in a dharmic way, in accordance with rajadharma. Thus another concept that came into prominence was that a person like Janaka was a jivanmukta (liberated while embodied) even while continuing to perform his duties in a detached way, in keeping with his dharma.

As the formative period of these different ideas, one also notices an accommodation and flexibility in pursuing the twin concepts of pravrtti and nivrtti in this second phase. While on the one hand, only those who withdrew from the world and embraced the samnyasasrama qualified for the ultimate goal, moksa, there was accommodation for people like Janaka, who could pursue both a dharmic way of life while discharging his obligation to society and a path of nivrtti in order to gain the highest value of moksa. There was a combining of an active life with a mental attitude of detachment. We thus see the munis withdrawing from a conventional life style during the early Vedic period,

undergoing some modifications in this phase. The Arthashastra and Megasthenes account also point to the fact that there were a number of wandering ascetics much like the wandering munis of Vedic times, at this time

Moksha is now understood as an identity between the individual atman and the absolute paramatman. It is the Rta concept of unity that has taken on a new garb in this identity relationship. Whereas in the early Vedic period even those who led a householder's life dedicated to yajna, were assured a realization of Rta, in this period the experience of Brahman was restricted only to those who abandoned selfish interests. Ideally those were the ones that chose the last samnyasasrama. At this time, we could say that, pravrtti and nivrtti coexisted in a friendly way;; thus pravrtti was informed by dharma even while moksha was acknowledged as the highest value.

Classical Period

The third phase or the classical phase which can be placed between 400 B.C.E and 400 C.E ushered in the composition of sutras for the six schools of Vedic thought and is also the period of compilation of the epics and the early smrtis like that of Manu, Yajnavalkya etc; it is also a definitive phase when both pravrtti and nivrtti got defined both in a religious and philosophical sense as well as in the lived world. One can view this cluster of literature as setting down the values to be followed in an individual's life.

This classical period was perhaps the age when nivrtti assumed its brightest face. The influence of nastikas like the Buddhists, Jains and Ajivikas was felt in the religious

devaluation of the Vedic way of life. While, on the one hand, the life of nivrtti and withdrawal from the world was gaining ground, on another front, there was a reformulation of the ritualistic mode of life in the rise of bhakti or devotion gaining an upper hand over the Vedic yajna mode. But whatever the religious expression, moksa was the highest value sought after, whether through withdrawal from the world or by practicing devotion. And moksa could only be achieved by subordination of the ego; thus there was an emphasis on nivrtti in this phase. The samnyasasrama was already incorporated into the social fabric by now and lent legitimacy for individuals to assume the samnyasa mode of life anytime they chose. Moreover, since bhakti was in its nascent stage as a religious model, and the elaborate agama texts dealing with temple rituals were still in the making, we can assume that Being or Nivrtti was paramount in this third classical period. Since the samnyasasrama was also not institutionalized like the Buddhist sangha at this stage, there must have been a proliferation of samnyasins wandering about and recalling to mind the parivrajya muni image of Vedic

The Golden Age of the Guptas

The parameters of the third age generally continued up until this 4th period which can be placed between 350 BC to 750 CE. This is the heyday of bhakti when a number of Puranas were composed on the religious front and commentaries on philosophical sutras held sway. There was also a revival of Vedic sacrifice and we hear of cakravartins like Pallava Sivakandavarman and Chandragupta I performing the asvamedha sacrifice. The Vedic dharma was revived by the kings and existed side by side with worship of

Siva and Visnu. Buddhism as well as Jainism were also in existence along with other sectarian movements. It was a time when there was an outburst of bhakti religious poetry in the South and a number of the eighteen mahapuranas were composed which glorified bhakti or devotion to a deity as the way to moksha. As Bharatavarsha had already been subject to many foreign invasions by now, the attempt of the Gupta kings was to reconcile the new bhakti cults with the old Vedic rituals and social theories, (cf. Classical Age, 297-298) and they succeeded in great measure due to their spirit of toleration of all religious expression.

Along with the developments of Vedic dharma and popular devotional movements, rigorous philosophical debates based on the original sutras and commentaries on them, made sure that the value of moksha as the highest to be aspired for, was not forgotten. Sankara, the advaitin looms as a towering personality in this period, with his unrelenting pursuit of realization of one's true nature as Brahman as the ultimate moksha.

Given the importance of bhakti and temple worship, as also the reaffirmation of Vedic yajna, catapulted dharma back to centre stage during the Gupta period. Religion was more oriented towards the lived world and thus pravrtti or becoming had an edge over nivrtti or Being in this period. But one very important development took place at this time which had a lasting impact on the twin concepts of pravrtti and nivrtti and that was the establishment of the 4 mathas by Sankaracarya of Advaita fame, in the four corners of the land i.e., in Dwaraka, Puri, Jyotirmath and Sringeri (Kanchi is also mentioned as the fifth matha by some scholars.) Till now the Hindu samnyasin led a

wandering life which resembled the lifestyle of the Rgvedic parivrajaka/muni. The Buddhist sangha was already in existence and it is quite likely that the success of the Buddhist sangha could have inspired Sankara to do the same for Samnyasins of the Advaita persuasion. So, even though the importance of nivrtti was devalued in an atmosphere of bhakti and revival of a grhastha's life based on Grhyasutras samskaras, moksa being the highest value was already established on a firm footing during the classical period and was reinforced during this Gupta age through the commentaries and debates conducted amongst rival philosophical schools at Varanasi and in other places. Sankara also established the tradition of writing commentaries on important Vedanta works and that kept the nivrtti ideal alive in the minds of people as the highest value to be striven for. Sankara also introduced a new dimension to the life of a samnyasin. While so far the samnyasin worked for his own moksa, living very often a secluded life, Sankara expanded the functions of a samnyasin to include what is known as lokasangraha. In his own life Sankara traveled the length and breadth of the country working for the spiritual upliftment of the people at large. It is reasonable to argue that Sankara must have preached Vedic dharma as well as the ideal of moksa; as contrasting modes of living, with different ends in view. The Sankaracaryas of the four mathas, even to day, go out into society and talk about both Vedic Dharma and the moksa ideal, thus continuing the tradition.

One can summarise by saying that though nivrtti lost its hold on the minds of the people due to the upsurge of the devotional movements and a return to Vedic dharma practices in this age, Sankara's one-pointed effort in the direction of promoting both moksa as an

ideal and advocating a life of a samnyasin in order to achieve it, and also strengthening the institution of samnyasa by establishing mathas for them to stay and promote this ideal, and amalgamating it with lokasangraha, once and for all made moksa part and parcel of Hindu thought and praxis. These innovations and interpretations will continue to engage religious developments in subsequent periods of Indian history.