

## HINDU-MUSLIM UNITY IN SRI AUROBINDO'S LIGHT

MANGESH NADKARNI



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It seems best to begin by acknowledging that my attempt at writing this paper may well be an exemplification of the well-known adage from Alexander Pope which goes: fools rush in where angels fear to tread. For I am no specialist in modern Indian history or politics, nor do I have any special qualifications to be heard on this subject. Furthermore, I do realise that this is too convoluted an issue for anyone to be able to deal with it comprehensively, or even adequately in a brief paper. But I believe that even a little can help when it is offered with a sincere goodwill, and if this little is of any value, then those more competent can develop it further.

I do believe that Sri Aurobindo has left us some invaluable insights that can enable us to understand better the difficult and puzzling problem of Hindu-Muslim unity and thus help us in finding a lasting solution to the problem which has so far defied our political sagacity. As Sri Aurobindo predicted, in his August 15, 1947 message to the nation, the creation of Pakistan has not solved this problem but has only aggravated its virulence. Neither the Hindus nor the Muslims, whether in India or in Pakistan, have benefited from the partition.

The problem of coming to terms with Islam in its current phase is not unique to India but it occurs here in a particularly difficult and complex form because of our peculiar history and it seems to be our destiny to find a

solution to it. Are we equal to this? As the Mother, Sri Aurobindo's collaborator, once said: "India has become the symbolic representation of all the difficulties of modern mankind. India will be the land of its resurrection – the resurrection to a higher and truer life. ...India represents all the terrestrial human difficulties and it is in India that there will be the cure." (CWM, Vol. 13, p. 376) It is because I too share this hope that I have taken up this issue in this paper.

Sri Aurobindo's writings on the Hindu-Muslim situation in India mostly belong to the period before 1910, when he was writing as a journalist for the *Bande Mataram* and the *Karmayogin* under the stress of events developing from day to day. That was the time when the British administration was deliberately fanning Hindu-Muslim tensions in what is today Bangladesh and elsewhere in India, and Sri Aurobindo often attempted to expose these machinations. So it is not always easy to infer how exactly he would have reacted to the complexities of the current situation muddied by the disastrous developments of the last 80 years in the relationship between the communities. However, some of the major trends which were to gather force during the subsequent decades were already perceptible during the first decade of the century and Sri Aurobindo has commented on some of them. These comments contain useful pointers to his thinking. And yet when talking about Sri Aurobindo one must remember that his perceptions of events and his entire thinking underwent a revolutionary transformation after he took up yoga seriously a couple of years before he came to Pondicherry.\*

Unfortunately, there is a further difficulty here. Whatever Sri Aurobindo might have to say on this problem is open to the charge of partisanship. Although Sri Aurobindo was primarily a mystic and a yogi with a global vision and is one of the greatest names in the spiritual annals of humanity, he came from a Hindu stock, and for that reason alone some people have looked upon him as the representative of the Hindu view. But to limit Sri Aurobindo to Hinduism is like characterising modern science and technology as purely Christian, since by and large they originated in the Christian countries. Besides, there have been some mischievous attempts in recent years to portray Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo as primarily Hindu nationalists, or champions of militant Hinduism. This is a travesty of truth. As for Hindu nationalism, Sri Aurobindo held that it was an anachronistic

\*Some of the articles from the weekly *Karmayogin* were brought out in a book form in 1918 under the title *The Ideal of the Karmayogin*. A fourth revised edition of this was published in 1937. A reviewer of this fourth edition had claimed that these articles had been thoroughly revised by Sri Aurobindo and that they were an index of his latest views on the burning problems of the day, implying that there was no substantial change in his views during the 27 years since these articles first saw the light of day. Writing to this reviewer, who was presumably an old associate of his, Sri Aurobindo observed: "How do you get all that? My spiritual consciousness and knowledge at that time was as nothing to what it is now – how would the change leave my view of politics and life unmodified altogether?"

notion in the 20th century, and if these two great men were 'militant' about anything, it was about spirituality as the universal religion of man, and not about any sectarian religion. In fact, Sri Aurobindo held that the time for religions was over, whatever their need and justification at a certain stage in human history. He believed that mankind was entering the age of universal spirituality. He has categorically declared that his Ashram and his teachings were not based on Hindu religion or culture or any religion or nationality, but on the Truth of the Divine which is the spiritual ideal behind all religions and on the truth of the supramental consciousness which is not known to any religion.

And yet it is always possible to cite out of context from the vast body of Sri Aurobindo's writings, or from his casual talks recorded from memory by his associates, or from his correspondence with his associates some remark or sentence which is critical of Muslims in India or of Islam. And in the opinion of the keepers of the nation's secular conscience that is enough to characterise him as a champion of militant Hindu nationalism. Strange indeed are the measures and criteria some of the leaders of public opinion in our country have evolved by which a person's genuineness as a secularist is to be judged. He who hopes to be counted among the accredited secularists must hold Hindus and Muslims equally guilty in every instance of communal disturbance; he should hold Hinduism and Islam equal in everything, except that he is free to damn Hindu culture and Hindu scriptures, but he should say nothing critical about Islam either in India or anywhere else in the world. Finally, a secularist must make fun of all religions.

Sri Aurobindo makes a distinction between two aspects of religion – religion as spirituality, and as religionism. Sri Aurobindo rejects religionism or sectarianism in religion and is an ardent advocate of spirituality as he writes:

"It is true in a sense that religion should be the dominant thing in life, its light and law, but religion as it should be and is in its inner nature, its fundamental law of being, a seeking after God, the cult of spirituality, the opening of the deepest life of the soul to the indwelling Godhead, the eternal Omnipresence. On the other hand, religion when it identifies itself only with a creed, a cult, a Church, a system of ceremonial forms, may well become a retarding force and there may therefore arise a necessity for the human spirit to reject its control over the varied activities of life." (SABCL, Vol. 15, p. 166)

The failure to make this distinction is at the root of a lot of confused debate on these issues in this country. If espousing the cause of spirituality makes Sri Aurobindo a fundamentalist, then that would make Jesus Christ and Buddha too fundamentalists!

Religionism has not been the only perversion of true religion. There is another, against which too we must guard ourselves. This perversion sets in when religion tends to mean, as it has often done, something different and

remote from earthly life, leading to ascetic renunciation. The spirituality of which Sri Aurobindo has been the most articulate spokesman in our time respects the freedom of the human soul, because it is fulfilled by freedom; and the deepest meaning of freedom is the power to expand and grow towards perfection by the law of one's own nature. True spirituality gives freedom to philosophy and science, to man's seeking for political and social perfection and to all his other powers and terrestrial aspirations.

Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo exemplify best the spirit of liberalism which has created out of the medieval Hinduism a vibrant, modern Hinduism, more than willing to reaffirm what is basic to the Hindu faith – respect for all religions.

I will begin with a quotation which presents succinctly Sri Aurobindo's approach to the solution of the Hindu-Muslim problem. It is essentially a spiritual approach and I am convinced that there is no purely external, legal or diplomatic solution to this problem, although we may have to find the external means to give a practical shape to this inner spirit of Hindu-Muslim unity.

“Of one thing we may be certain, that Hindu-Mahomedan unity cannot be effected by political adjustments or Congress flatteries. It must be sought deeper down, in the heart and in the mind, for where the causes of disunion are, there the remedies must be sought. We shall do well in trying to solve the problem to remember that misunderstanding is the most fruitful cause of our differences, that love compels love and that strength conciliates the strong. We must try to remove the causes of misunderstanding by a better mutual knowledge and sympathy; we must extend the unfaltering love of the patriot to our Musalman brother, remembering always that in him too Narayana dwells and to him too our Mother has given a permanent place in her bosom; but we must cease to approach him falsely or flatter out of a selfish weakness and cowardice. We believe this to be the only practical way of dealing with the difficulty. As a political question the Hindu-Mahomedan problem does not interest us at all, as a national problem it is of supreme importance.” (SABCL, Vol. 2, p. 24)

I would like to submit that there is more wisdom in these few lines of Sri Aurobindo's than in all the discussions and deliberations that have been held on this subject during the last several decades. Let us highlight the main points of this agenda for bringing about the two communities closer:

- a) Hindu-Muslim unity cannot be achieved through sheer political cleverness or by flattering the Muslims.
- b) This unity can be achieved only through cleansing our hearts of prejudices and clearing our minds of the cobwebs of misunderstanding.
- c) We must extend to the Muslim brother the love of the patriot remembering that Mother India has given him too a permanent place

in her bosom.

- d) An attitude of weakness and cowardice on the part of the Hindus will never conciliate the Muslim brethren.
- e) The Hindu-Muslim problem is a national problem, like the problems of poverty or overpopulation in India; it is not a problem to be solved through political adjustments and horsetrading.

Sri Aurobindo was opposed right from the time of the Morley-Minto reforms to the deliberate attempts being made by the British regime to encourage the notion that Hindus and Muslims were two separate political units, having separate political, economic and cultural interests because he felt that this would preclude the growth of a single and indivisible Indian nation. He always maintained that as a political question the Hindu-Mohammedan problem did not interest him at all, but as a national problem he thought it to be of supreme importance. It is for this same reason that he was unhappy with Gandhiji's overzealousness about the Khilafat question: Gandhiji went on to declare that the Khilafat question was in his view more important than the urgent matter of independence. His attitude can be seen from this brief excerpt from one of his writings at that time: "I would gladly ask for postponement of Swaraj activity if thereby we could advance the interest of the Khilafat." (*History of the Freedom Movement in India* by R.C. Majumdar, Vol. 3, p. 81) As the historian R.C. Majumdar wrote: "If a hundred million Muslims in India are encouraged to feel they should be more interested in the welfare of Turkey and other Muslim States outside India than that of India itself, they will hardly be able to feel that they are an integral unit of the Indian nation." This meant basically encouraging the pan-Islamic movement in India which cut at the very root of Indian nationality. R. C. Majumdar sums up Gandhiji's role in these words: "His anxiety for the Hindu-Muslim unity deserves all praise, but his was a sentimental approach." I am not interested here in discussing the related issues of how hard the British tried to create a wedge between the Hindus and Muslims or how Gandhiji in spite of his most honourable intentions failed in bringing the two communities together.

As we all know, the Hindu-Muslim problem has been rendered so very difficult because of the tormenting memories of our history. It is easy to whip up among the Hindus passions of revenge and hostility over the humiliation and oppression they are believed to have suffered according to history books during the long years of Muslim rule in India. From the Muslim side, it is equally easy to depict independence of India as a dispensation that gives the majority Hindu community all the power and prestige and reduces the Muslims to the status of a minority community at the mercy of the majority community. It has therefore been easy to whip up passions among Muslims at their allegedly fallen state by reminding them that not long ago they were the masters of the Hindus. So the field in India has always been fertile for bigots and fanatics, whether Hindu or Muslim, to sow seeds of disharmony

and conflict and to reap a rich harvest of communal strife, riots, bloodshed and destruction of innocent lives.

Then there is a further complication. The basis of Islam is a creed, and there is no salvation outside this creed. Because of this, a certain kind of sectarian universalism comes natural to it – those who profess the creed, no matter of what nation, race, or community belong to a universal Islamic Society, and those who do not accept this creed cannot be part of this Society. As in other religions, in Islam too there are highly evolved people who are capable of transcending this exclusiveness. But Islam in India and in most places outside India as well has not yet undergone the churning process of liberalisation Hinduism underwent in India under the impact of the intellectual, rationalistic, cosmopolitan, mundane and humanistic thought of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe. Modern Hinduism reflects the influence of such reformist movements as Brahma Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna–Vivekananda movement, etc.

I do not want to give the impression that every Hindu is a shining example of this liberal spirit. Far from it. But the Hindu temper as a whole in the country is to a considerable extent influenced by this liberal spirit, and the spirit of tolerance of other religions is traditional to the Hindu ethos. Otherwise, following the examples of Pakistan and now also of Bangladesh, which do not complain of any Hindu-Muslim problem at all, India too could by now have eliminated this problem. But we have not done so, and therein lies the glory of this country. And so we continue to struggle with this problem. And yet it must be recognised that in very many Hindu minds there is a feeling that our Muslim brother is the 'other', an alien – not one of us. I will take up this issue again presently.

To return to our main point: Swami Vivekananda had the greatness to say "The Mohammedan conquest of India came as a salvation to the downtrodden, to the poor. That is why one-fifth of our population have become Mohammedans." (Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. III, p. 294) This is what Swami Vivekananda was capable of saying nearly a hundred years ago to his fellowmen. In a letter he wrote to a Muslim friend of his, he once said:

"I am firmly persuaded that without the help of practical Islam, theories of Vedantism, however fine and wonderful they may be, are entirely valueless to the vast mass of mankind. We want to lead mankind to the place where there is neither the Vedas, nor the Bible, nor the Koran; yet this has to be done by harmonising the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran. Mankind ought to be taught that religions are but the varied expressions of THE RELIGION, which is Oneness, so that each may choose that which suits him the best.

For our own motherland, a junction of the two great systems, Hinduism and Islam – Vedanta brain and Islamic body – is the only

hope. I see in my mind's eye the future perfect India rising out of this chaos and strife, glorious and invincible, with Vedanta brain and Islamic body." ("Swami Vivekananda and Universal Religion" in *Swami Vivekananda: A Hundred Years since Chicago: A Commemorative Volume*, Ramakrishna Math, Belur, Howrah, 1994)

In this, Swami Vivekananda embodies the spirit of modern Hinduism. To take another example, in his *Essays on the Gita*, written nearly 80 years ago, Sri Aurobindo had this to say about his attitude regarding scriptures such as the Veda, Upanishads and the Gita:

"First of all, there is undoubtedly a Truth one and eternal which we are seeking, from which all other truth derives, ...But precisely for that reason it cannot be shut up in a single trenchant formula, it is not likely to be found in its entirety or in all its bearings in any single philosophy or Scripture or uttered altogether and for ever by any one teacher, thinker, prophet or Avatar. ...Secondly, this Truth, though it is one and eternal, expresses itself in Time and through the mind of man; therefore every Scripture must necessarily contain two elements, one temporary, perishable, belonging to the ideas of the period and country in which it was produced, the other eternal and imperishable and applicable in all ages and countries." (SABCL, Vol. 13, p. 2)

On the other hand, very little seems to have happened in the Islamic world in the way of reform movements to bring to it a comparative liberal spirit and to change the stamp of the temperament of its adherents. If anything, there has been among Islamic nations a fundamentalist revival which is opposed to any kind of reformist spirit. For instance, Bahaism in Iran which has given quite a different stamp to the temperament of its adherents is unfortunately proscribed in many Muslim countries, and in the country of its origin, Iran, it remains the object of severe persecution. Compare what Sri Aurobindo had to say about scriptures with this from a recent letter written by a leader of the Muslim community to the Editor, *Sunday* (10-16 July 1994): "The Muslim, by definition, believes in the Koran, every word of it, as the word of God. He has no right to pick and choose in the Koran. He accepts it in its entirety as the Last and Immutable Message of God to mankind and if he questions one word of it, he is outside the pale. Therefore he has no authority to change a word, a comma, or a full stop." I don't deny to anyone the right to hold such views, but the contrast between this and the views held by such leaders of the Indian Renaissance as Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo should not be lost sight of.

This fundamentalism may very well be a passing phase during which Islam is establishing its own identity and gaining confidence in itself after years of suppression at the hands of Western imperialism and culture, and once this has been achieved, the Islamic religious mind may go on to breathe more freely and give a wider scope for the liberal spirit in it. There are signs

that this phase in the development of Islam is already in progress in such countries as Turkey, Egypt and Indonesia. Within Islam in India too we see a tussle going on between the liberal elements and the extremist elements as in other religions. Our attempts should be to strengthen the hands of the liberal elements and not to pamper to the whims of the extremists for winning their votes. Nevertheless, it is not realism to ignore this growing hold of fundamentalism on Islam in India even today. The politicization of Islam has added fuel to the fire of fundamentalism.

Sri Aurobindo had a clear recognition of these singular difficulties and therefore he recognised that co-existence with a community such as Islam required a federal spirit, even wider than that which has made India the most tolerant country in the world to other religious faiths and modes of worship. There will have to be such a genuine spirit of federalism as would convince Muslims that it is not the goal of Hinduism either to destroy Islam or to absorb it within Hinduism. This would necessitate evolving a formula of national unity by expanding the old idea of federalism. Sri Aurobindo was very clear on this issue so many decades ago, for he said:

“The Mahomedan, the Hindu, the Buddhist, the Christian in India will not have to cease to be Mahomedan, Hindu, Buddhist, or Christian, in any sense of the term, for uniting into one great and puissant Indian Nation. Devotion to one’s own ideals and institutions, with tolerance and respect for the ideals and institutions of other sections of the community, and an ardent love and affection for the common civic life and ideal of all, – these are what must be cultivated by us now, for the building up of the real Indian Nation.” (SABCL, Vol. 27, p. 46)

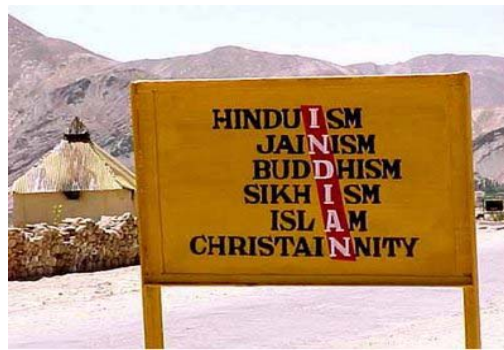
The broad humanist Hinduism which is based on the heritage of Vedanta expounded not only by Sri Aurobindo but also by Swami Vivekananda, and by academic philosophers such as Dr. Radhakrishnan and Dr. Dasgupta, it will be granted by all, is the Hinduism which has this spirit of genuine federalism. In the very first chapter of his *Essays on the Gita*, Sri Aurobindo had the audacity to ask his readers not to be limited by the Gita, or for that matter by any scripture of the past:

“We are not called upon to be orthodox Vedantins of any of the three schools or Tantrics or adhere to one of the theistic religions of the past or to entrench ourselves within the four corners of the teaching of the Gita. That would be to limit ourselves and to attempt to create our spiritual life out of the being, knowledge and nature of others, of the men of the past, instead of building it out of our own being and potentialities. We do not belong to the past dawns, but to the noons of the future.” (SABCL, Vol. 13, p. 8)

Or consider the following from Swami Vivekananda:

“I shall go to the mosque of the Mohammedan; I shall enter the

Christian's church and kneel before the Crucifix; I shall enter the Buddhist Temple, where I shall take refuge in Buddha and his law. I shall go into the forest and sit down in meditation with the Hindu, who is trying to see the Light which enlightens the heart of every one. Not only shall I do all these, but I shall keep my heart open for all that may come in the future. Is God's book finished? or is it still a continuous revelation going on? It is a marvellous book – these spiritual revelations of the world, the Bible, the Vedas, the Koran, and all other sacred books are but so many pages, and an infinite number of pages remain yet to be unfolded. I would leave it open for all of them." (The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Mayavati Memorial Edition, Vol. 2, p. 374)



This was the spirit which inspired the Indian Renaissance, and if this spirit is recognised and encouraged, those belonging to the minority religions should have no reason to feel threatened by the dominant Hindu community. But unfortunately, there has been a tendency in the country to dismiss all this as another version of Hindu revivalism! The leftist, secularist intellectuals in the country have taken great delight in condemning this spirit of Indian Renaissance as empty sentimentalism. The secularist wisdom in this matter decrees either that all scriptures are old wives' tales, or that the Christian should stick to his Bible, the Muslim to his Koran and the Hindu to his Gita! Furthermore, it should also be understood that there is bound to be within the folds of such a credal religion as Islam a fairly strong element which regards the intolerance of other religions as the mark of a true believer. Dogmatism and fanaticism are not the exclusive bane of any particular religion. The blind obedience to an authority, whether that of a text, or of a person, or of some set rules, and the waning of the inner spirit of religion, its spiritual core, are blights that can affect the followers of any religion. But tolerance of other religions has never been claimed as basic to Islam, at least in India except among the Sufis, whose influence is negligible on the opinion-makers among the Islamic leadership. As Sri Aurobindo is reported to have once said in an informal chat with his disciples: "You can live amiably with a

religion whose principle is toleration. But how is it possible to live peacefully with a religion whose principle is I will not tolerate you'? How are you going to have unity with these people?"

If such a religion finds itself in the position of a minority, it can easily develop a persecution complex. Then the more fanatic followers of this religion will find various means of exploiting their minority status to blackmail the majority community. On several occasions in India we have failed to make a distinction between the moral and political blackmailing tactics of a few hooligans and the genuine aspirations for social and economic justice of the silent majority in our Muslim population. The vote arithmetic on which our democracy is based has even encouraged these hooligans. Giving in to the blackmailing tactics of such groups is dangerous to both the communities. A sentimental approach or one which is overtly moralistic only adds fuel to this conflict situation. A firm and impartial handling of conflicts arising out of this mindset is as important for our political health and stability as safeguarding the identity of the minority religions. Otherwise, there will be a backlash from the majority groups which will feel justified in using the force of their strength to teach the trouble-makers a lesson. We have often reached such flashpoints of communal tension in India by not being honest and straight about these problems and by taking a diplomatic attitude and resorting to political conciliation in such situations. A purely opportunistic and political approach in such a situation is bound to aggravate it.

As I have observed above, the Hindu-Muslim conflict in India has been particularly sharp for various historical reasons. What actions or policies pursued by the majority Hindu community can be legitimately interpreted as threatening to the identity of Muslims in India, and when any direct or indirect retaliation by the Muslims can be regarded as a legitimate way of expressing a real grievance and when it is a mere black-mailing tactic – these are difficult judgments to make. No purely rational or external or legalistic way can ever be devised to settle these questions. The only answer to this problem is for both the communities to understand each other better and move closer spiritually. If that has to happen, we must encourage within the country the liberal spirit of the kind which was the inspiration behind the Indian Renaissance. Only on a spiritual basis can Hindu-Muslim unity be realised. But unfortunately, as I said earlier, spirituality is today either a misunderstood or an ill-understood concept in India.

I feel that India has not yet been able to find a lasting solution to the Hindu-Muslim problem because Hinduism has not yet been able to discover the spiritual strength needed to do this. I referred earlier in this paper to the feeling in very many Hindu minds that the Muslim is for some reason an alien. For the most part this feeling is no more than a subtle mental reservation which is in a dormant state most of the time, but it can be provoked and awakened, and it can colour his perception of things happening around



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him. This feeling, however subtle it may be, is a sign of weakness because at its source you will find that it is born either of an irrational fear or of a feeling of superiority, both vis-a-vis other religions, and particularly Islam. This might well be the last vestige of the religious ego, the bane of all religions. Hinduism must acquire the strength to reject this weakness. To expect the Hindu to totally rid himself even of this feeling of reservation about Muslims is in one sense asking too much of him, living as he does surrounded by countries which swear by Islamic fundamentalism. But he will have to prove himself equal to this difficult challenge. It is not going to be easy, but as the Mother, Sri Aurobindo's collaborator, once hinted, it seems to be the destiny of India to try and find a solution to this most difficult problem.

It must be realised that Islam came to India as a foreign body imported into the country and it affected Hinduism in many different ways. Unlike the previous waves of invasion that merged and were lost in the general life and consciousness of India, Islam maintained its integrity and in turn infused India with a Semitic tone. The impact of Islam on India was psychologically cataclysmic; India could not just go back to being what she was before. It is not the question of tolerating and accommodating other religions that we are talking about here. Hinduism has an enviable record on that. It is not even the question of racial and cultural blending which has taken place in many parts of the world. What India faces today is the problem of spiritual fusion with other religions, particularly with Islam, and of achieving unity among religions on a vast scale.

Islam proved to be a great challenge to Hinduism because the latter had lost the strength and dynamism it once possessed, and Islam is rightly contemptuous of all weakness. Like Islam, Hinduism too during the Vedic times had the zeal to conquer "the world for God" but this was an altogether different notion of conquering the world. Intolerance towards the followers of other religions or trying to convert them to one's own religion was no part of this Vedic sense of conquering the world for God. In the Vedic ideal, it meant bringing perfection not only to the human soul but also to the

instruments of the soul, to the human body, which is constantly plagued by disease and the threat of dissolution, to the life-energies which are tormented by the vagaries of desire and the frustrations they cause, and to the mind which is constantly troubled by doubt and disillusionment. This Vedic ideal includes in it the mastery and the perfection of the external world. This emphasis on perfection of the whole of life, not just the soul, will make Hinduism dynamic and world-affirming. One of the weaknesses of Hinduism during the last millennium has been its excessive world-negating stance; it tends to take for granted that this world is meant to be given up, since it is *jada*, *mithya*, the field of incurable ignorance. So what happens to the external manifestations and institutions of our lives and our religion is not important. This is the way, unfortunately, our scriptures have been interpreted during the last thousand years and this has created some kind of debilitating block in the very psyche of the Hindu community.

But there can be another interpretation of the Vedas and at least some of our major Upanishads as can be seen in Sri Aurobindo's writings on them. It is that this creation is a manifestation of the Divine Being, not an evil or falsehood in itself but something which becomes meaningful as the consciousness of man evolves. There must therefore be a way to overcome the evil in the world today. This would mean that we should accept the world but be fully committed to the elimination of whatever is imperfect in it, and thus fulfil the purpose of life. In other words, the concept that this world can be changed and made the dwelling place of the Divine or of the Supreme perfection has to be the new emphasis of Hinduism today. Only a return to such a dynamic, world-affirming Hinduism will ever be able to conciliate Islam and win its respect. To negate the world is to admit that it does not belong to God. One can never conciliate Islam on the basis of such weakness.

As I said earlier, Sri Aurobindo did not think that there was any purely political or external solution to the Hindu-Muslim problem. Since he held that unity must first be realised within before it can manifest without, he firmly believed that the best approach to fostering the unity between the two communities was still the spiritual approach. He said:

"If we are to create a common sentiment, it can only be by awakening in their hearts the sentiments of common brotherhood with their Hindu fellowmen. To do this we must first nourish the sentiment ourselves. A political show or talk of brotherhood will not serve, for it will ring false to the ear of feeling; and no true unity can be effected by insincere professions... By the natural conversion of brotherly feeling into love and service the gulf which is yawning wider and wider between the two communities may be bridged. It cannot be done by diplomacy, it cannot be done by logic, it can only be done by the appeal of heart to heart." (Sri Aurobindo and the New thought in Indian Politics by Haridas and Uma Mukherjee, p. 295)

The time has come to implement these guidelines that Sri Aurobindo has laid down during the early years of the century now that we are the masters of our own political destiny. We should ask ourselves what measures we have taken to bring Muslims into the mainstream of our national life by attending to the real problems they have been facing, namely the problems of housing, education and job opportunities. We should refuse to give into the temptation of exploiting them as communal vote banks, because that is a sure way of marginalising them.

In my discussion here I have deliberately avoided mentioning the current conflict between the ideologies of the so-called secularists and the so-called champions of Hindu nationalism. In my view these so-called secularists are motivated by genuine humanitarian considerations but in practice they seem to be perpetuating a mix of the political and sentimental approaches which have so far proved disastrous. From political platforms we preach that religion should be kept out of politics, but how do we keep religion out of politics as long as we can not eschew the temptation of depending on religious vote-banks? That is the surest way of politicising religion and politicising religion is the easiest way of getting caught in the vicious grip of fundamentalism, and fundamentalism is a game at which many can play; we should not look surprised when we find that Hindus can be made to play it as zealously as any other religious group in the country.

Regarding the ideology of the so-called champions of Hindu nationalism, it is possible to infer what Sri Aurobindo's reactions to their ideology would have been from the comments he made a long time ago (*Karmayogin*, Nov. 6, 1909) on the ideology of a group called the Hindu Sabha, which was started in Bengal in the first decade of this century. Sri Aurobindo said in his article that if this Hindu Sabha stood for a new spiritual impulse based on Vedanta, the essential oneness of man, the lofty ideals of brotherhood, freedom, equality, and a recognition of the great mission and mighty future of the Hindu spiritual ideals and disciplines and of the Indian race, then it would be serving a great objective. If, on the other hand, it is inspired by motives of rivalry against the Mohammedan intransigence and by a desire to put the mass and force of a united Hinduism against the intensity of Muslim self-assertion, then it has to be regarded a retrogressive movement and must be rejected. Sri Aurobindo was categorical that Hindu nationalism had probably a meaning in the times of Shivaji and Ramdas, probably it was both possible and necessary at that time, but in presentday India such an ideology had no place. Under modern conditions, there was room only for an Indian nationalism. (SABCL, Vol. 2, pp. 259-62)

What lessons can we then draw from this analysis of the problem of Hindu-Muslim unity in Sri Aurobindo's light?

- a) Hindu-Muslim unity can not be achieved through political cleverness, or by flattering the Muslims. It can be achieved only by

cleansing our hearts of prejudices and our minds of misunderstandings.

b) The Hindu must extend to the Muslim brother the love of the patriot realising that Mother India has given him too a permanent place in her bosom. Nothing should be done which would threaten the identity of the various religious minorities of India.

c) The temptation of exploiting the Muslim community purely as a vote-bank must be given up. The real economic, social and educational interests of this community should be addressed so that the community does not feel marginalised.

d) The problems created by religious fundamentalism should not be papered over; we should learn to make a clear distinction between the real interest of a community and the attempts it can make to exploit its minority status. Thuggery and hooliganism must be severely dealt with, no matter in what community it is found. The liberal elements within Islam should be encouraged.

e) It should be remembered that by weakness and cowardice one can never conciliate Islam. Hinduism should be more dynamic and world-affirming and revive its commitment to the ideal of making our terrestrial life perfect. More clearly and decisively than ever before, Hinduism should rise above mere religiosity and reveal its true nature as a spiritual culture; only then will it be able to fulfil its historic mission of showing to the world how to fuse spiritually with other religions on a vast scale.

I can think of no better way of concluding this paper than by quoting a part of Sri Aurobindo's message of 15 August 1947:

"India is free but she has not achieved unity, only a fissured and broken freedom...But the old communal division into Hindu and Muslim seems to have hardened into the figure of a permanent political division of the country. It is to be hoped that the Congress and the nation will not accept the settled fact as for ever settled or as anything more than a temporary expedient. For if it lasts, India may be seriously weakened, even crippled: civil strife may remain always possible, possible even a new invasion and foreign conquest. The partition of the country must go, – it is to be hoped by a slackening of tension, by a progressive understanding of the need of peace and concord, by the constant necessity of common and concerted action, even an instrument of union for that purpose. In this way unity may come about under whatever form – the exact form may have a pragmatic but not a fundamental importance. But by whatever means, the division must and will go. For without it the destiny of India might be seriously impaired and even frustrated. But that must not be."

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