Sankaracarya's influence on the Indian religious mind--A bird's eye view

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India became a society having replaced religion with humanism quite early. The Western world came to this stage only after the greater acceptance of Darwinism. Even so, until today, finding a basis for morality outside a belief in God remains one of the West's main concerns. This issue was resolved early in India however, through the rejection of religion, which had created enormous chaos in many parts of the country due to practices such as large scale animal sacrifices—causing serious problems for farmers—and through other modes of exploitation of the people by priests. Anti-priest and anti-religious attitudes thus grew among the people. The replacement of religion was led by movements of Jainism and Buddhism, which introduced a new mode of social cooperation with reason as the basis of morality. These movements introduced moral bases against the killing of living things, against the abuse of sex, the avoidance of liquor and respect for the truth. The movements naturally became very popular due to the benefits they brought to the people; the end to the destruction of their cattle and agriculture, and to problems brought about through the abuse of priestly positions.

The horrors and suffering wrought by the abuse of clergy can be evidenced from the writings of many Western poets and authors, who have developed much bitter criticism and satire against the clergy. Peoples' anger against the exploitation of religion by priests played a great part in revolutions and great religious reforms. In India this happened a few centuries before the Common Era. This priest-less and religion-less India influenced Emperor Ashoka into embracing this new situation and establishing a political bond with the religion-less movements. Ashoka became an ardent propagandist of this new order based on reason.

Not surprisingly, this period became India's golden age of progress in economics, social development and culture. Later ages were to marvel at the great achievements of India during this time, when India's influence spread to other countries and regions. That was without doubt India's great age of glory and the most productive and creative age of the Indian mind.

In the 20th century, Sri Aurobindo lamented the death of the Indian mind and devoted the latter part of his life to recover the lost mind of India. Living in Pondicherry, he tried to motivate young people to regain their lost heritage. Another great Indian, Dr B R Ambedkar, attempted to pursue the same goal as Sri Aurobindo through attempts to reawaken the Untouchables, renamed Dalits by him. In an attempt to reclaim India's lost glory, he publicly became a Buddhist together with a large gathering.

How did India lose its great mind? How did Indian decadence begin? The answer lies in religion, in the process of replacing reason with religious beliefs and cults. This began with the assassination of the last Maurya king and by burning Buddhist libraries. The path was then forged to return to the hegemony of Brahmins and a caste-based social order. The reestablishment of caste-based India and the death of Indian Humanism happened at the same time, although it did not happen overnight. Visva Mitra's assassination of the last Maurya king happened in 185 BCE, while the final wiping out of Buddhism in India happened only after the eighth century of the Common Era. The process was a slow elimination of the secular mindset among people throughout the country, replaced by one absorbed in religious beliefs and

dependent on cults and rituals. This new mindset became the greatest barrier for people's progress. Light disappeared and darkness descended on the Indian soil.

The man who was destined to bring about the death of the Indian mind, (which Sri Aurobindo later vowed to revive), was intellectually a brilliant Sankar known as Sankaracarya, who brought about the revival of religion with his poems and hymns. He introduced a kind of theism, complete with myths and rituals. Indians of later generations were indoctrinated and immersed in such ritualism and worship. Whether there is any other nation as deeply enslaved to its rituals and religion as India is hard to tell.

It must be noted here that there may have been many 'Sankaracaryas'—'head of monasteries'. Some scholars mention 144 Sankaracaryas, with the original Sankaracarya to have lived in 509 BCE. Others speak of 35 Sankaracaryas. The one referred to in this article lived around 800 CE. His teaching was quite different to that of earlier Sankaracaryas, who rejected the existence of a personal god. Sankaracarya of 800 CE was the first Indian to accept and propagate the concept of monotheism as part of the modern Hinduism. He reintroduced the idea of caste. His teachings brought about the dark ages that were to follow in India.

According to David Reigle, Indian author Phulgenda Sinha notes the difference in India's cultural heritage pre and post 800 CE:

Considering the whole history of India from the most ancient to the contemporary period, I found a distinct dividing line in the literary and philosophical heritage of the country, making it appear as if there were two Indias—one which existed from ancient times to 800 A.D., and another which came after 800 A.D. India prior to 800 A.D. produced philosophers and writers who accepted Man as the supreme being. They talked about two main entities: Purusha (Man) and Prakriti (Nature). Man can liberate himself from dukha [sorrow or unhappiness] and can attain sukha (happiness) by acquiring proper knowledge, mastering certain teachings, following certain practices, and by working according to the Samkhya-yoga theory of action.

India after 800 A.D. adopted quite a different outlook. The ideas proposed by writers and commentators were now mostly matters of belief and faith, colored by religion, mysticism, and caste. Not Man but God was held to be supreme. Man could do only what was predestined by God [David Reigle, "Original Sankaracarya," www.easterntradition.org/original%20sankaracarya.pdf].

Furthermore, Sinha asserts that religious intolerance began

when the Brahmans accepted monotheism and began interpreting the whole religious history of India, from Vedas to Upanishads, in a completely new way. The most interesting points in this interpretation were that the status of Brahmans as a caste and class was strengthened, all the gods and goddesses of Vedas were superseded by a single Almighty God, and religious persecution began with a sense of crushing the enemies. It happened with the coming of Shankaracharya [David Reigle, "Original Sankaracarya"].

The rise of monotheism and religion gave rise to religious wars, which were largely the cause of India's ruin. Sankaracarya's philosophy justified the caste system which graded human beings into different categories, and thus divided Indian society. Plato spoke of people's friendship towards each other as an important characteristic of a nation; the caste system removed any such possibility. Britain thus found it easy to conquer the religiously and socially divided India.

Twentieth century India has seen many attempts to replace religion with reason, and the attempt to regain the creativity and power of the Indian mind. By now however, religion has exploited politics to such an extent that it has not proved easy to bring about unity and friendship amongst Indians. Moreover, religion so deeply embedded in rituals and myths is not easily replaced. Similarly, any imagination rooted in religious explanations and world views cannot be easily replaced. Above all, when the mind is so divorced from ethics and morality and so easily adjusts to manipulation, it is difficult for reason to take hold. The division sowed by religious philosophy disrupts the nation building process.

In the West, replacement of religion took place mostly due to science, and particularly due to Darwinism. In the Christian West, the belief in one God was established and all explanations regarding the world and society were based on this belief. When the belief that God created the world was lost, these religious explanations lost their validity.

The acceptance of science in India has unfortunately not led to the same result. The internal process influencing the mind has not changed due to science. Perhaps the manner in which Indian religion has affected the Indian mind is different than in the West. The kind of religion that was established in India needs to be understood better if the enterprise undertaken by Sri Aurobindo, Ambedkar and other modernizers, including the country's first prime-minister Jawaharlal Nehru is to succeed. In gaining such an understanding, the study of the work of Sankaracarya of the eighth century needs to be better appreciated. Sankaracarya's monotheism was of a different kind from its Western counterpart. The understanding of his work may be useful in ending the dark impressions left over the Indian mind by his religion.

The greatest treasure of any nation is the mind of its own people. When that is darkened by mistrust, the resulting negative mindset can be the greatest obstacle to creativity and positive development. Sankaracarya's religious philosophy continues to generate such negative spirits.