

Article by Maria Wirth

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Though I have lived in India for a long time, there are still issues here that I find hard to understand. For example, why do so many educated Indians become agitated when India is referred to as a Hindu country? The majority of Indians are Hindus. India is special because of its ancient Hindu tradition. Westerners are drawn to India because of Hinduism. Why then is there this resistance by many Indians to acknowledge the Hindu roots of their country? Why do some people even give the impression that an India which valued those roots would be dangerous? Don't they know better?

This attitude is strange for two reasons. First, those educated Indians seem to have a problem only with "Hindu" India, but not with "Muslim" or "Christian" countries. Germany, for example, is a secular country, and only 59 percent of the population are registered with the two big Christian churches (Protestant and Catholic). Nevertheless, the country is bracketed under "Christian countries" and no one objects. Angela Merkel, the Chancellor, stressed recently the Christian roots of Germany and urged the population "to go back to Christian values." In 2012 she postponed her trip to the G-8 summit to make a public address on Katholikentag, "Catholics Day." Two major political parties carry Christian in their name, including Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union.

Germans are not agitated that Germany is called a Christian country, though I actually would understand if they were. After all, the history of the Church is appalling. The so-called success story of Christianity depended greatly on tyranny. "Convert or die" were the options given—not only some five hundred years ago to the indigenous population in America, but also in Germany, 1,200 years ago, when the emperor Karl the Great ordered the death sentence for refusal of baptism in his newly conquered realms. This provoked his advisor Alkuin to comment: "One can force them to baptism, but how to force them to believe?"

Those times, when one's life was in danger for dissenting with the dogmas of Christianity, are thankfully over. Today many in the West do dissent and are leaving the Church in a steady stream. They are disgusted with the less-than-holy behavior of Church officials and they also can't believe in the dogmas, for example that "Jesus is the only way" and that God sends all those who don't accept this to hell.

The second reason why I can't understand the resistance to associate India with Hinduism is that Hinduism is in a different category from the Abrahamic religions. Its history, compared to Christianity and Islam, was undoubtedly the least violent as it spread in ancient times by convincing arguments and not by force. It is not a belief system that demands blind acceptance of dogmas and the suspension of one's intelligence. On the contrary, Hinduism encourages using one's intelligence to the hilt. It is an enquiry into truth based on a refined character and intellect. It comprises a huge body of ancient literature, not only regarding dharma and philosophy, but also regarding music, architecture, dance, science, astronomy, economics, politics, etc. If Germany or any other Western country had this kind of literary treasure, it would be so proud and highlight its greatness on every occasion. When I discovered the Upanishads, for example, I was stunned. Here was expressed in clear terms what I intuitively had felt to be true, but could not have expressed clearly. Brahman is not partial; it is the invisible, indivisible essence in everything. Everyone gets again and again a chance to discover the ultimate truth and is free to choose his way back to it. Helpful hints are given but not imposed.

In my early days in India I thought every Indian knew and valued his tradition. Slowly I realized I was wrong. The British colonial masters had been successful in not only weaning away many of the elite from their ancient tradition but even making them despise it. It helped that the British-educated class could no longer read the original Sanskrit texts and believed what the British told them. This lack of knowledge and the brainwashing by the British education may be the reason why many so-called "modern" Indians are against anything Hindu. They don't realize the

difference between Western religions that have to be believed (or at least professed) blindly, and which discourage, if not forbid, their adherents to think on their own, and the multi-layered Hindu Dharma which gives freedom and encourages using one's intelligence.

Many of the Indian educated class do not realize that those who dream of imposing Christianity or Islam on this vast country will applaud them for denigrating Hindu Dharma, because this creates a vacuum where Western ideas can easier gain a foothold. At the same time, many Westerners, including staunch Christians, know the value of Hindu culture and surreptitiously appropriate insights from the vast Indian knowledge system, drop the original Hindu source and present it either as their own or make it look as if these insights had already been known in the West. As the West appropriates valuable and exclusive Hindu assets, what it leaves behind is deemed inferior. Unwittingly, these Indians are helping what Rajiv Malhotra of Infinity Foundation calls the digestion of Dharma civilization into Western universalism. That which is being digested, a deer for example, in this case Hindu Dharma, disappears whereas the digester (a tiger) becomes stronger.

If only missionaries denigrated Hindu Dharma, it would not be so bad, as they clearly have an agenda which discerning Indians would detect. But sadly, Indians with Hindu names assist them because they wrongly believe Hinduism is inferior to Western religions. They belittle everything Hindu instead of getting thorough knowledge. As a rule, they know little about their tradition except what the British have told them, i.e., that the major features are the caste system and idol worship. They don't realize that India would gain, not lose, if it solidly backed its profound and all-inclusive Hindu tradition. The Dalai Lama said some time ago that, as a youth in Lhasa, he had been deeply impressed by the richness of Indian thought. "India has great potential to help the world," he added.

When will the Westernized Indian elite realize it?

~ Maria Wirth
(freelance writer who has lived in India for the past 33 years)

Arsha Vidya Newsletter

Annual Subscription: Rs.180/-

Published by V. Sivaprasad

Trustee, Sruti Seva Trust, Anaikatti, Coimbatore 641108

Edited by

S. Srinivasan - 0422-2657001

**Printed by B. Rajkumar,
Rasi Graphics Pvt. Ltd.,**

40 Peters Road, Madras 600014. Ph. 28132790, 28131232