

Ekam Sad Vipra Bahudāh Vadanti, G.C. Pande, Sampurnanand Sanskrit University, Varanasi, First Edition, 1997, pp. viii+87, Rs. 80 (language Sanskrit)*

Religion has not been a favoured area of interest among historians in India for quite some time.¹ In fact, this apathy has not been a special attribute of historians alone. Even an iconoclast like Nirad C. Choudhury had noted with sarcasm and sadness about half a century ago that he failed to raise any steam whenever he tried to discuss religion in a gathering of 'educated' Indians. The situation has not substantially changed since Choudhury wrote. Prof. G.C. Pande has been in the forefront of the very small minority of scholars who have retained an abiding interest in the study of religion. The qualities that distinguish Prof. Pande's work are not just the readiness to swim against the current. They are also leavened by the tools of study he uses; they try to integrate the best of both the modern western critical scholastic methods as well as the traditional way of looking at religion as an article of faith and spiritual fulfilment. He is thus able to steer clear of the excessive fervour of the faithful and the aridity of excessive empiricism. It was thus a happy decision on the part of the authorities of Sampurnanand Sanskrit University, Varanasi to have invited Prof. Pande to deliver the first Griffith Memorial Lecture. The work under review contains the two lectures that Prof. Pande delivered at Sampurnanand Sanskrit University. It was only appropriate that these lectures should have been delivered in chaste Sanskrit. Normally, a work in Sanskrit is expected to confine its theme to the traditional Indian discourse both in outlook and dimensions of subject matter. It is really remarkable that without any apparent violence to the texture of Sanskrit scholarship and its intellectual tradition, Prof. Pande should have been able effortlessly to weave into it the entire heritage of Western Scholarship on religion, from St. Augustine to Max Weber. Apart from the number of significant issues raised and discussed in the lectures, the work merits attention also because it in some ways

*The reviewer would like to express his indebtedness to an earlier review of the book by Prof. Nagin J. Shah

¹Recently, however, there has been a rekindling of interest in the history of Indian religions, especially of Hinduism. These studies are usually premised precisely on the grounds that Prof. Pande finds so inadequate and unacceptable. The ground on which Prof. Pande rejects these studies as unsatisfying has been dealt with later in this article.

represent the summation of Prof. Pande's views on religion and the place of Indian culture in the universe of religion. The work is a very valuable addition to the study of religion in general and Indian religious traditions in particular. But we feel that instead of viewing it as an individual work if we study it against the background of Prof. Pande's other works of the same genre, it may help us to get into the heart of Prof. Pande's thesis.

The view of religion that Prof. Pande espouses has been shaped and conditioned by the traditional Indian attitude towards religion and he makes no attempt to underplay it. This by itself is something of an achievement. The range and weight of his scholarship in Western intellectual tradition could have easily swept him off his ground. In this he stands in the same line as some of the greatest thinkers of modern India like Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Coomaraswamy, Gopinath Kaviraj, Radhakrishnan, Bhagawandas, etc., but unlike some of them he does not lay any claim to direct experiential apprehension of spiritual truth. His writings rather reflect an intellectual endeavour to comprehend the nature of religion and religious experience and communicate it in rational terms. His stand thus may appear to be akin to that of modern Western rationalists. But a dry rationalist-empiricist approach, according to Prof. Pande is an inappropriate way to understand religion. He believes that 'the perceptive understanding of religion requires it to be viewed as an inward experience'.² He thus finds the studies of religion and especially the studies of eastern religions and religious beliefs and practices, by Western scholars as suffering from 'curious opacity which arises from an excessive concentration on methodology without an adequate or sympathetic contact with the subject itself'.³ What this subject is and what is the appropriate methodology for its study? These questions form the central issues that Prof. Pande addresses in his Griffith Memorial Lecture.

In contemporary Indian languages the expression *dharma* is generally used to denote religion. This is not a satisfactory rendering of the term. Prof. Pande notes that actually there is no word in the Indian tradition that fully corresponds to 'religion'. According to him 'religion' primarily signifies belief in a supernatural Being or Beings accompanied by a set of practices held to be in conformity with the

²G.C. Pande, "Internationalizing the Study of Religion: Methodological Issues", the invited paper sent to the International Symposium on Internationalizing the Study of Religion, in USA in Nov. 1998.

³ibid.

belief. 'Creed, conduct and law are, thus, the usual constituents of religion'. Although the expression religion and *dharma* do cover some common ground, Prof. Pande believes that in actuality they represent two distinct outlooks. The restrictive attribute of creed is not an essential ingredient of *dharma*; *dharma* thus represents a wider outlook than religion. Thus the study of *dharma* as a discipline (*dharmaśāstra*) became primarily the study of one's ritual obligations (*karmakānda*), the social ethics (*ācāra*) and law (*vyavahāra*). The study of belief or beliefs, including those concerning soul, God, after-life, etc., did not form the subject matter of *dharmaśāstra* proper, these were the areas that belonged to *darśana* or *ādhyātmaśāstra*. *Dharma* thus has comparatively less of sectarian narrowness. As a vehicle expressing the deep-seated and irrepressible yearning for spiritual and religious fulfilment, the term *dharma* seems preferable to religion.

The modern study of religion is a child of Western parentage. The discipline that it has given birth to is variously called the science of religion, comparative religion or history of religion. Generally, such studies are based on the premise that the claim of truth of religion is not maintainable. Sometimes when the possibility of existence of any higher truth in religion is conceded, this concession is allowed usually only to one's own religion. Anthropologists, sociologists and historians view religion only as a cluster or clusters of superstitions and vested interests. Marx and his followers see in religion a means to perpetuate the oppressive economic and social dominance of the ruling class. Historians view religion as systems of beliefs and attitudes evolving through and formed by the growth of social and economic formations. Such studies, based, as they are, on the complete denial of an important aspect of human aspirations, i.e., the hunger of soul, cannot be truly satisfying.

The quintessence of all religions, asserts Prof. Pande, consists of a luminous insight into the apparent mysteries of human life and the cosmos and into man's relationship with the universe. It is this foundational vision, which is inspirational in origin, visualized and communicated by a seer or seers (*ṛṣi*) that provides the seed for the development of a religion. The nature of a religion can be seen in its pristine form at this stage. This vision is also often regarded as revelation. The next stage in the passage of religion witnesses the growth of a text claiming to embody the visualized or the revealed truth. The emergence of commentaries on the original text represent the third and the growth of philosophies developing around them represent

the fourth stages. From the tenor of Prof. Pande's formulation it would be hard to describe these as progressive stages in the evolution of a religion. They may represent a process of elaboration, but not necessarily progress. In fact they may represent stages of progressive loss of purity. It almost parallels the passage of the four *yugas* in the early Indian concept of *yugāntara*. All religions have two dimensions: an inner spiritual one and an external formal one consisting of ritual, conduct and a code of behaviour (*karmakānda*, *ācāra* and *vyavahāra*). Unfortunately in the modern studies of religion, it is this formal aspect which not only becomes the focus of study, but also delimits the areas of interest. The spiritual dimension is either dismissed as superstitious mumbo jumbo or a sinister and seductive strategy to perpetuate the system of exploitation of the oppressed. When the attitude is not so unsympathetic, the domain of the spiritual is handed over to the neuroscience for study based on 'empirical scientific' methodology. Prof. Pande argues with cogency and vigour for the recognition of the validity of the traditional method of spiritual praxis or *sādhana* and *yoga*.

The study of religion, Prof. Pande emphasizes, needs to distinguish between *agama* (revelation), *ādhyātmaśāstra* (theology) and *darśana* (philosophy). 'The *agamas* or the revealed texts are systematized by exegesis, commentaries and topically arranged treatises. The task of systematization involves the use of rational arguments (*anukūla tarka*). . . . This further entails a discussion of purely philosophical and logical issues (*anviksa*). . . . Since the debates were with the orthodox as well as heterodox schools, the philosophical debates had to be purely logical.' In the amplification of a religion or religious point of view revealed texts, theological systems and philosophical formulations appear to form a continuous series. Nevertheless, asserts Prof. Pande, it is important to distinguish the *agama* or revelation from its subsequent interpretation and systematic theology and philosophy. The revealed texts have a catholic suggestivity and are expressions of experiential vision and moral wisdom. These can be appreciated in a spirit of simplicity and reverence. ' . . . revelation is needed only for what cannot be determined from any other *pramāṇa* or means of valid cognition. Thus only intimations of praxis for transcendent realization would constitute the core of revelation.'

There is an essential unity of character in this kernel of religion contained in the various versions of revelations; it may be expressed in diverse modes and idioms conditioned by the factors of time and space.

The diversity of modes and expressions of the essential 'truth' has long been recognized and appreciated in India. It has been the homeland of varieties of faiths and communities living on the whole in peaceful co-existence and harmony. The vision of unity amidst diversity has a long and continuous history; it has been a part of the very grain of Indian culture. What the sage Dhīrghatama had declared in the *Rgveda*, 'Truth is one though wise speak of it differently', has been echoing and re-echoing through the whole of the religious history of India. 'The Buddha had echoed this and pronounced the diversity of formulation to be the inevitable result of the one-sidedness of human thought and speech.'⁴ The Jaina theory of *syādvāda* is based on the recognition of the validity of opposite standpoints in understanding the nature of reality. Abhinavagupta and Madhusudana Sarasvati too were strong advocates of the doctrine of *prasthānabheda* or the plurality of approaches to reach the Truth. The Indian rulers generally followed the policy of religious toleration, Aśoka, the Great, being a particularly eloquent advocate and practitioner of the unity of faiths. To Dara Sukoh, the eldest son of Shahjahan, there was no real difference between the Vedāntic and Islamic mysticism. During the modern period Ramakrishna Pramahansa exemplified in his own personality and spiritual practices the unity of the different paths of spiritual *sādhanā*. During the beginning of British rule in India, when Hinduism invited severe criticism from Christian missionaries for idolatry and superstitious practices, Indian thinkers and savants like Ram Mohan Roy responded by advocating 'a kind of comparative religion unknown in the West at that time'. Ram Mohan Roy argued with force and reason that all religions, Christianity, Islam or Vedānta contained the same central truth. Thus, there was no necessity for a Hindu to convert to Christianity in quest of truth. The theosophists concurred with this view. Mahatma Gandhi was a living embodiment of this principle and popularized this point of view among the masses. Coomaraswamy, Bhagawandas, Gopinath Kaviraj, etc. tried to give systematic and intellectual articulation to this point of view. Prof. Pande, however, emphasizes the fact that this unity was not conceived as the unity of the formal doctrines and practices of various religions. It would be wrong to interpret it as the 'unity of historical systems of beliefs and practices'. It was the unity of the mystical, transcendental, spiritual and moral truth that was highlighted in the Indian tradition. 'The

⁴ *ibid.*

emphasis on spiritual truth and illumination places the truth of religion above the plane of empirical reality. . . . Revealed truth is held to be personally testable and thus forms the subject matter of philosophical reason as much as empirical truth'.⁵ Prof. Pande implies that personal experience of exceptional people who have the capability of traversing the whole of the difficult path, the razor's edge, does not deserve to be dismissed because it is not open to verification within the ordinary everyday 'empirical' methodology. He emphasizes at the same time the fact that all empirical verification demands strict adherence to the prescribed method of experimentation. Even the realization of spiritual truth can be verified if one follows strictly the prescribed methods.

'Ultimate spiritual authority in India is in practice held to belong not to ancient books or their learned expositions, but to those who are believed to have personal experience of spiritual truth. Spiritual truth is not held to be something totally beyond the human ken, revealed once for all to some incarnation or prophet of God. Nor is it something to which man can attain only in the life after death. Spiritual truth is capable of being reached while a man yet lives; this attainment of spiritual truth is profoundly different from its appreciation in merely faith or philosophy. It is a living vision, which transforms the inner life . . . of the person who attains it.'⁶ *Sādhanā* or *yoga* is the commonest names given to the means of attaining the spiritual truth. This *sādhanā* or the seeking of spiritual truth in Indian tradition recognizes and respects the differing paths that may lead to its realization. 'Just as different rivers flow towards the same ocean, so with their diverse tastes and inclinations do men approach the Lord.' 'Teaching differs according to the individuality of the seekers'. The religious and spiritual tradition of India thus rejects the notions of one true religion or a 'single spiritual straight jacket'.⁷

Religion, according to Prof. Pande, is founded on an intense awareness of human mortality and vulnerability. This awareness leads to a belief in the existence of a super reality beyond the fragility and mortality of this life. Moral life, on the other hand, presupposes 'the sense of individual freedom as well as of universal humanity'. The Indian concept of *sādhanā* integrates and includes all these and goes

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ C.C.Pande, *Foundations of Indian Culture*, vol. I, Delhi 1990, p. 1.

⁷ *loc.cit.*, p.3.

beyond them. It goes beyond the earnestness (*samvega*) of a moral or religious person. 'It presupposes certain maturity and wisdom (*viveka*) towards life, a realization of the inadequacy and unsatisfactoriness of the life of egoism and acquisitiveness (*dukkhabodha*, *uparati*, and *mumukṣa*). It presupposes an unvarnished perception of the inherent limitations of worldly satisfactions, along with a firm faith in the capacity of man to attain to values of lasting and universal character (*śraddhā*). It requires fortitude and determination (*dhṛiti*, *vīrya*).' Indian culture, Prof. Pande urges, cannot be followed only through the analysis of its social code or structure without understanding the spiritual ground on which the code and structure stood.

SIBESH BHATTACHARYA

Fellow, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla