

Secularism and Indian Tradition: The Relevance of The Vision of Vidyāpati

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At present, secularism is one of the most prominent issues which draws the attention of a very wide circle of the intelligentsia of the country. "Of all the public debates that engage intellectuals in India today", T.N. Madan, a sociologist who has intensively pondered on this question in the context of the socio-cultural tradition of India, asserts, "the most significant . . . and also the most contentious, is debate about secularism. It concerns not only the kind of polity we want to build but also the character of the society we wish to live in. . . ." This concept emerged and grew to the extent of signifying a dominant social force to reckon with in Europe before its arrival in this country. A brief historical background is given below in this context.

According to Peter Berger, the seeds of secularization "were sown in the Old Testament in the form of God who stands *outside* of the cosmos, which is his creation, but which he confronts and does not permeate. . . . This opens the way for . . . man's self making activity,"² which provides scope of making history. However, according to John Keane, the word "secular" began to be used in English from the thirteenth century 'to distinguish clergy living and working in the wider medieval world from "religious" clergy who lived in monastic seclusion.'³ Later, this sense of the word was strengthened as institutions concerned with civil, lay and temporal matters began to be distinguished from those which related to religious or spiritual life.⁴ From the sixteenth century, John Keane writes, "To 'secularize' . . . meant to . . . convert something of somebody from ecclesiastical to civil use or possession, while 'secularization' connoted a process of reducing the influence of religion."⁵ In the eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* defined secularity as ". . . worldiness, attention to the things of the present life, and' secularity as to convert from spiritual appropriation to common use . . . , and, 'secularization', as the 'act of secularizing'."⁶ John Keane contends that the present

secularist belief is virtually a continuation of the above idea which, of course, became quite dominant in the nineteenth century.⁷ Religion simultaneously began to be viewed as merely a reflection of humanity's early history indicating man's powerlessness in the face of nature. As science and technology came to tame nature, religion became practically obsolete to a great extent.⁸ Owen Chadwick describes the belief widely shared by the Western intellectuals in the second half of the nineteenth century that religion (Christianity) has ceased to be relevant to socio-political order that had emerged in the Western Europe.⁹ Liberalism and Marxism, though being opposed to each other, contributed to the rise of secularism,¹⁰ which, then, acquired the image of being opposed to religions in general, complementary to democracy, and a pre-requisite for the success of the projects of modernity and development. Political theorists in particular, Charles Taylor, for example, asserted its positive association with democracy.¹¹

This idea came to India in the last century. However, it "gained currency", according to Madan, "only since independence",¹² when policy makers opted for democracy as the most desirable path for the people of this nation-state. Here, the religious scenario has been quite different from that of the European societies. India has had a multi-religious background with Hinduism of all having the largest base as well as the longest history. So, secularism, as it was incorporated in our polity, began to be identified by its two constituents, one, religious pluralism and the other, *pañtha* or *dharma nirpekṣatā*. In the "Preamble" to the constitution, "Secularism is rendered in Hindi as the neutrality of the state in relation to different religious communities. . ."¹³ Religious pluralism requires religious tolerance which, according to Ashis Nandy, was much stressed in the course of freedom movement.¹⁴ However, secularism in India is supposed to be confronting serious threat. One of the chief sources of such a threat is thought to be the tradition of those forming the overwhelming majority of the population known as Hindus.

As early as 1963, Donald Eugene Smith wrote a book, *India as a Secular State*, that gave hope of being optimistic about the future of secularism in India. Simultaneously, it also expressed fear of the forces of Hindu communalism as a potential threat to it.¹⁵ In 1970s and 1980s, quite a number of intellectuals became anxious for secularism due to the recurrence of communal conflict, "accelerating pace of retreat from reason", and "the decay of rationality."¹⁶ The events of Amritsar (in 1984) and Ayodhya (in 1992) virtually confirmed the crisis of Indian

secularism. Consequently, the state came to be perceived as being too weak to overcome the challenge of communalism, and counter the increasing use of Hindu identity in politics. Hinduism gradually began to be viewed by intellectuals as anti-democratic, anti-pluralist and anti-secular.¹⁷ T.N. Madan, for example, asserts that "... the classical Hindu religious tradition, enshrined in the ancient texts from the Vedas through the *smritis* to the Epics, does not recognise a mutually exclusive dichotomy of the religious *versus* the secular, nor the idea of religion as a private activity . . . if we seek to build an *ideology of secularism that volarizes human reason and agency, and reject religion . . . that is best privatized*. We shall have to look elsewhere than the mainstream of Hindu religious tradition for support"¹⁸ (emphasis added). For Madan, the ancient classical Hindu religious tradition "enshrined in the ancient texts", is the mainstream of Hindu religious tradition and this has no space either for the idea of dichotomy of "the religious *versus* the secular" or for that of religion as a "private activity". Under the circumstances, one should "look elsewhere", for support to secularism. He thinks of Cārvāka School in this context, but ignores it as "... it has been treated as minor if not aberrant."¹⁹ Even Buddhism and Jainism are not considered relevant as they are not materialistic ideologies in spite of being considered atheistic.²⁰ Thus, in the context of the ideology of secularism that "volarizes human reason and agency", and can allow religion to exist if it is privatized, Hindu and other ancient religious traditions are simply held deficient in such elements that could allow it to flourish here.

However, religious pluralism that supports pluralist society which Madan considers as an alternative ideology of secularism, is, according to him, congruent to some extent with Hindu religious tradition.²¹ Religious pluralism depends upon religious tolerance. Swami Vivekananda vigorously asserted it as a chief feature of Hinduism. He considered Vedanta most important, "foundation of all religious ideals of all times."²² Madan in his analysis of such Vedantic ideas of tolerance and harmony finds them as being more "inclusive and synthetic than pluralist."²³ Religious pluralism under the circumstances, is "realized through and maimed by the all-pervasive region of hierarchy in social thought and social practice."²⁴ The pluralism of the Hindu religious tradition is thus viewed as more hierarchical than egalitarian. So, in this context as well, Hinduism appears to be deficient and the intellectuals concerned with the issue of religion *versus* secularism in India find that there does not exist any other tradition within the

ambit of the vast history of Hinduism that could be of use in resolving at least in principle the crisis arising out of the perceived incompatibility between Hinduism and secularism. The crisis is mainly due to the fact that while, on the one hand, secularism is an indispensable ingredient of the current project that chiefly guides social engineering and development today. Religion, on the other, is a great social-historical motivating force that can neither be ignored nor can it be rejected, nor can it be suppressed by political force. Development of society is bounded to suffer under the circumstances and the threat of under development trends to be alarming. It is, therefore, necessary that religion, particularly Hinduism that is identified with the overwhelming majority of people, should not stand in the way of secularization. How is it possible? Should Hinduism be condemned and rejected? As said before, it is not at all feasible. Besides, it also not desirable. Even in the Western countries where secularism holds sway, by all means, the existence of religion is considered useful, rather necessary for the life of people.

Michael Mann, a sociologist, writes in this context: "Religion's extensive power declined as it lost much of its capacity for social organization to secular power sources. . . . *This does not render Christianity obsolete in general obsolete general: nor does it involve predicting any further decline. Christianity has retained a near monopoly over problems of meaning that emanate from key human experiences—birth . . . death . . .*"²⁵ (emphasis added). Max Weber had said earlier that such problems of meaning arise in the severest and most poignant manner in the lives of individuals when religion alone offers an explanation or a mechanism for adjustment.²⁶ Similarly, Richard Rorty, a philosopher, pleads in favour of religion saying that it is "appropriate for what we do with aloneness."²⁷ Religion, thus, still serves man where modern civilization is most prominent. Therefore, the question of discarding Hindu religion is not at all appropriate in the context of its interface with its secularism. But, the problem remains: How can one deal with its image of being anti-democratic and anti-secular as contended by intellectuals, described before?

In this context, the said contention of intellectuals regarding the image and understanding of Hinduism appears to be, rather, misplaced. They mostly depend on the ancient texts, the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Epics, etc., for understanding the Hindu religious tradition *even in the context of the crisis referred to before*. This is a crisis arising out of the perceived incompatibility between secularism and Hinduism. In

fact, this crisis of understanding of Hinduism seems to arise mostly due to the dependence of intellectuals interested in the study and exploration of Hinduism on the scriptures of ancient period when Hindus did not identify themselves with the word, Hindu. They do not identify their *dharma* as Hindu *dharma*. Hindus might have had a number of crises in the ancient period, no doubt, but it is impossible to think of a crisis relating to the Hindu identity in Hinduism in that period. Such a crisis of Hinduism emerged first in the middle ages after the arrival of Islamic forces which virtually threatened the very existence of the Indian sacred traditions. The fact that Hinduism is still alive indicates that it must have developed some strategy of adjustment with the hostile religious and political forces ingressing in India from outside at that time for its survival. Attempts must have been made for redefining the makers of its identity, its dimensions, and the course of the life held desirable from its points of view for reinforcing its viability, vigour and capacity to withstand the challenge that had become visible. Sorokin says that, "... in times of crisis one should expect an spurge of cognition ... most of the important generalizations about socio-cultural processes have indeed appeared ... in the periods of crisis ..."²⁸ Protestantism also arose when Christianity faced an acute crisis in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was not in a position to accommodate the ideologies of "class" and "nation" that had been emerging at that time and at the same time could not escape the tension between Church and merchants/capitalists.²⁹ The Protestant version of Christianity emerged as a result of such crisis which ensured its survival under the growing wings of secularism. So, some effort must also have been made at the intellectual level to project an image of Hinduism appropriate enough to counter the crisis of Hindu *dharma* as it had begun to be recognized by this identity in the middle ages.

In this context, it is first necessary to describe the nature of crisis as perceived by the followers of the Vedic *dharma* who had begun to identify themselves as Hindus in the middle ages. It has not been possible to take account of all the regions of India in this regard. Attention is focused on the eastern region comprising Mithila/Tirhut, Bengal, Assam and Orissa which formed practically a geo-cultural unit in the said period. This region had some common intellectual and cultural currents. Nyāya and Navya-Nyāya flourished here.³⁰ Brajaboli was a commonly accepted medium of communication of Vaiṣṇava songs.³¹ Tantric tradition was fairly widespread in the entire zone and

the cultural similarity of Miṭhila and Bengal was marked by even outsiders.³² Further, Hindu *paṇḍits* of this zone had maintained a long tradition of defending Vedic *dharma* against the charges of Buddhist and Jain logicians for about a thousand years until the end of the thirteenth century.³³ The Islamic political dominance developed a great deal in his very period. It was again a *paṇḍit* of this geo-cultural unit who applied his mind to observe and record the condition of people called Hindu by their Turko-Afghan lords and their men, realised the gravity of crisis relating to the socio-religious life that had begun to be recognized as Hindu life and *dharma*, and, then, presented a thoughtful understanding of Hinduism as its genuine version for its survival in future. This *paṇḍit* was Vidyāpati Thakur who lived in the second half of the fourteenth century and the first half of the fifteen century.³⁴

Vidyāpati is well-known today as a great poet of Maithili. He belonged to a family which had enjoyed a very high status in the political and cultural life of Miṭhila right from the thirteenth century, when his ancestor, Karmaditya, was a minister in the court of the then Karnat king. His son, Devāditya, became minister of peace and war. His son, Dhireśwara, was a great scholar. Dhireśwara's eldest brother, Vireśwara, became minister of peace and war. His son, Chandeśwara, also held that position and wrote seven digests including *Rājanīti Ratnākara*, a very famous text on Hindu polity. Vidyāpati was the great grandson of Dhireśwara and following the tradition of his family became very close to the then ruling house of Miṭhila while pursuing the path of scholarship. So, statesmanship was his family heritage which, perhaps, made his scholarly vision quite broad. He wrote on varied subjects such as politics (*daṇḍanīti*), *dharmaśāstra* (sacred scriptures) war accounts, norms of communication, etc.³⁵ Besides, he also wrote songs in Maithili which influenced the literary tradition not only of Miṭhila but of the entire eastern region. He proposed a dictum to justify his decision of choosing his mother tongue, Maithili, to be the medium of his songs. It is in this context that one gets a glimpse of his liberal mind and insight. His dictum is *desil bayāna sab jan mīṭhā*, which means that the message communicated in *desil bayāna*, i.e. local dialect that is commonly used and shared by all in the community, is received by *sab jan*, i.e., all persons of the community, as belonging to their own intimate world. The dialects of the people; such as, Pali and Prakrit has also been used for communicating religious discourses in ancient India. Even in the middle ages, there must have been instances of the

use of local dialects in other parts of the country. But, to use it with the consciousness of its theoretical, socio-linguistic significance in the context of mass communication suggests the quality of insight that Vidyāpati possessed. It also indicates that he had the perspective of the totality of his society in his mind. He thought for all and, therefore, wrote devotional songs (*bhakti*) in the dialect used by all for reinforcing its power to function as an effective string of unity in the society of Mithila which already had sharp caste divisions. His liberal outlook is also indicated by his songs and poetry. He wrote songs of love of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa though he was not a Vaiṣṇava by faith. He did not belong to the sect of Śaivism, but his *Nachari* and *Maheśvāni* songs became so popular that a famous work of the sixteenth century, *Āin-i-Akbari* of Abl Fazl, also took due note of it.³⁶ He never became a follower of the Nāṭha cult. However, he wrote a book on Gorakhnātha. He was a keen observer of his society, culture and people with a strong concern for all.

It becomes evident as one goes through his book *Kīrtilatā*. Some eminent indologists have worked on it. V.S Agarwal also edited it and published his edition along with its Hindi translation in 1962.³⁷ According to him, *Kīrtilatā* was written in early fifteenth century and it "... relates the story of prince Kirti Sinha ... of Mithilā ... [who] approached Ibrahim Shan of Jaunpur, an emperor of Sharqui dynasty, for help in avenging his father's murder. ... Vidyāpati has described ... the city of Jaunpur, Turkman, soldiers ... army on the march ... [the description] throws much light on the history of that period."³⁸ According to Ramanath Jha, Vidyāpati lived for sometime at Nemisharanya (in western Uttar Pradesh) and was conversant with all the important places lying between Nemisharanya and Janakpur (now in Nepal tarai).³⁹ So, the account of Jaunpur that is available in *Kīrtilatā* is in all probability based on his personal observation and experience.

The description of the city of Jaunpur begins in the second chapter of *Kīrtilatā*. Vidyāpati describes, roads, palaces, market places, traders, and the crowd of men and women moving on roads, visiting shops, etc.⁴⁰ Then he describes the conduct of Turks. Below is given the transliterated Hindi version of the relevant portion of this description.⁴¹

kahīn par tarah-tarah ke guptācār the kahīn phariyādī . . . aur kahīn gulām . . . kahīn turk log hinduon ko genda kī tarah mārakar dūr bhagā rahe the . . . turk bāzār meṃ ghūmkar . . . herā namak [salt]

kara wasūl karatā hai . . . hindu aur turk hile-mile basate haiñ . . . eka kã dharma anya ke upahāsa kã kārañ ban jātā hai . . . kahīñ turk balapūrvaka raste jāte hūe . . . ko begār men pakarh letā hai. brāhmañ ke larke ko ghar se pakarh le ātā hai . . . 'hindu kahakar' dutakaratā aur nikāl detā hai . . . turkoñ ko chal āte hue dekhkar aisā pratīta hotā hai mānoñ ve hindūoñ ke samūha ko nigal jānā chahtā hai

(. . . there were spies of different kinds . . . ; at one place there was complainant, at another, there was slave . . . at one place, Turks were beating Hindus and throwing them away as a ball. Turks collect *hera* tax from the market . . . Hindu and Turks reside side by side. The religion of one becomes the object of ridicule for the other. . . . At one place, Turks force those going on road to work as their *begārs* (drudgery). The son of a *Brāhmañ* is forcibly brought out from his house . . . [Turks] insult one calling him Hindu and then forcibly turn him out . . . the way Turks move indicates that they want to terminate the existence of Hindus.⁴²

It is clear from the above mentioned excerpts of *Kīrtilatā* that Vidyāpati used the word Hindu for those who were followers of Vedic path, that is, those who belonged to his own *dharma*. He has also described how this word was used by the Turks. He is probably one of the earliest Hindu scholars (*pañḍits*) to have used this identity for those who were called Hindus only by outsiders before. It seems that by his time, Hindus had assumed this identity and had begun to recognize its relevance in the context of their relationship with the Turks (the followers of Islam). Vidyāpati's description further throws light on the status of the image of Hindu identity in the eyes of Turks. It is evident from the account of Jaunpur, given before, that the word Hindu was used by the Turks as a word of abuse. V.S. Agarwal supports this observation of Vidyāpati by drawing evidence from other sources and says that during the early days following the arrival of Islamic forces in India, the word Hindu was used by them for abusing and insulting Hindus as this word used by them for abusing and insulting Hindus as this word meant servant, slave, black, etc.⁴³ Vidyāpati has, thus narrated the way Hindu as well as the symbols of their *dharma* were abused and subjected to violence. He found the dignity of Hindu *dharam* considerably undermined.

In the first chapter of *Kīrtilatā*, he raises a question:⁴⁴ " . . . *kī sansārahi sār . . . ?* (what is the essence or essential condition of social

existence of human being?) and, then, says: . . . *jīvan mān sain*" (to live with dignity). For him, the essential condition of the life of a human being as a human being is to live with dignity (*māna*). So, threat to it gives rise to the feeling of crisis. Vidyāpati, as said before, marked a serious threat to the dignity of Hindus and Hindu *dharma* in the context of their relationships with the Turks. His perception of such relationships might have alerted his mind to the crisis of existence of Hindu *dharma*.

Vidyāpati, however, is not alone to consider dignity as the most essential condition of the recognition of man as man. In the Western philosophical tradition, Hegel considered the "desire to be recognized as human being with dignity as a driving force in history What truly satisfies human beings is not so much material prosperity as recognition of their status and dignity."⁴⁵ The issue of dignity, however, has remained dominant in the India's world-view. For example, M.N. Srinivas found *māna* (self-respect or dignity) as a ". . . basic value . . . every one was sensitive about his self-respect including those who were desperately poor."⁴⁶ F.G. Bailey observed the people of Bisipara (in Orissa) engaged in a quarrel "less about acquiring control over material resources than about human dignity. . . ."⁴⁷ At Ekwari (in Bihar), the activities of naxalites against upper caste land-owners were perceived by the supporters of the former as struggle for *izzat* (dignity).⁴⁸ In the context of the traditional mode of justice that prevailed in the villages of India before Western legal system was introduced, Rudolph and Rudolph contend that village tribunals worked in a way to compromise differences so that parties to a case could go home "with their dignity intact."⁴⁹

Considering such a historically and spatially wide-spread appeal of this value, it seems that dignity or self-respect has remained very much institutionalized in the culture of this country. Vidyāpati, while considering it as an essential condition of man's social existence, was, perhaps, driven by the field-view in this context; that is, he stated what he observed to be commanding a strong appeal to the minds of people. Under the circumstances, any violation of this value by coercive physical forces of those belonging to a different religion that had not been born on the soil of India must have compelled the mind of a scholar-statesman like Vidyāpati to be sensitive to the crisis of survival of Hinduism.

Besides the crisis existing in this context, there was also another kind of crisis due to the activities of a multitude of religious sects,

each claiming to be most genuine and authentic. Vidyāpati observed this situation quite closely and has described it in his book *Puruṣa Parīkṣā*. Grierson translated this book into English and it (*The Test of a Man*) was published by The Royal Asiatic Society, London, 1935.⁵⁰ The relevant portion of this book is cited here from *The Test of a Man*.

There be several kinds of heretics . . . such as Buddhists, materialsists (Cārvāka, etc.) and the like, and many sectarian teachers—Logicians, Philosophers, Ritualists (Mīmāṃsīkās, Kumārila Bhaṭṭa, Prabhākara, *et al.*), and others—who preach varying creeds with mutually opposing dogmas, and who are skilful each in finding arguments on his side . . . there be many eloquent teachers, each affirming the truth of his own creed, and owing to the opposition of their dogmas there ariseth confusion as to righteousness (*dharma*). . . . Heretics are ever intent upon refuting the arguments of other teachers, while each insisteth of the truth of his own belief. Enemies are they of the Vedas, while men versed in the Vedas are enemies of their beliefs. Thus as they mutually argue, in the uproar of the words of war (*vagyuddha kolahale*), the intellects even of the clear headed go astray . . . among sectarian teachers (*tīrthikas*) also there are many diversities of belief. Some prefer to worship Śiva, others Viṣṇu. . . .⁵¹

Vidyāpati, as his above mentioned description indicates, found the religious space of his society quite agitated by the pressure of a number of religious ideas and forces, all competing with one another and simultaneously creating a crisis for common men for whom it was practically impossible to decide which one was most desirable of all.⁵² thus the socio-religious life of the people in the fifteenth century was afflicted with crisis at two levels. At one level, there was crisis of social existence of Hinduism due to its status and dignity being undermined by the Turks. At the other level, the authenticity and genuineness of Vedic tradition was at stake due to the challenges of a number of sects and religions all of which were integral parts of Indian tradition. Vidyāpati was, perhaps, very sensitive to the crisis from within and also to that from outside. He not only recorded his reflections but presented his thought having enough potentiality to tackle the said crisis (at least in principle) in such a way that life in society could be lived with dignity by all.

Then, he proceeds to describe what is *dharma* and who is *dhārmika* (righteous). He presented his understanding of *dharma* as one of the *puruṣārthas* to be attained by man in his famous treatise on *daṇḍanīti, Puruṣa Parīkṣā*. He says in this context the following:⁵³ " . . . *dhātūh prapañca yātrā jatoṣi tatkulkramagatameva pathanāmanūsāra. sa eva . . . dharmah*".⁵⁴ Grierson has translated this proposition into English in the following words. "Follow thou only the path that hath come down in the tradition of the tribe in which by the decree of the Almighty

thou hast been born. That alone is righteousness". Thus, *dharma* of one is to observe his/her *kulācāra*, that is, rites, rituals, practices, etc., traditionally followed in his/her family/lineage. Grierson has used the word "tribe" for *kula* mentioned by Vidyāpati. But, the appropriate term of *kula* is family or lineage. This understanding of *dharma* obviously has no room for the conflict of different religious ideas. Following one's *kulācāra* implies performance of rituals and practices within the domain of his/her family. *Dharma* was, thus, confined to the private realm of family. It was thought to be matter of personal faith in the religious practices pursued traditionally in one's family.

Vidyāpati, then, describes the righteous. In this context he also discusses who is unrighteous. The unrighteous, according to him, are⁵⁵ . . . hypocrites . . . they come under the category of swindlers . . .". Vidyāpati has used the words *dambhika* and *vancaḥkagana*,⁵⁶ which have been translated by Grierson into English as "hypocrites" and "swindlers", respectively. It is quite important to note that Vidyāpati did not mention one as being unrighteous on the basis of his following a non-Hindu *dharma*. For him, rather, all those who followed their respective *kulācāra*s were righteous. However, he categorised them into three groups⁵⁷: first, the genuinely righteous (*tātvika*); second, *tāmas*, those affected by *tāmas* (the cause of illusion); and, third, *anāśavī*, those being unrighteous in the beginning but become righteous as they realize the correct path. Of these, the first category has been supposed to be the most desirable one, because, according to Vidyāpati, the characteristic of this is to live one's life without ever indulging in *parahiṃsā*, and without ever having any desire of *paraḍravya* and *parastrī*.⁵⁸ According to Monier-Williams⁵⁹, *hiṃsā* implies mental *hiṃsā* as bearing malice, verbal *hiṃsā* as using abusive language against someone, and physical *hiṃsā*, causing physical injury to some living creature. So, remaining far from *parahiṃsā*, *parastrī* and *paraḍravya* in one's life has been thought to be the most desirable religious conduct. These are, in fact, moral precepts of universal value, which, according to G.C. Pande, are known as *sādhāraṇadharmā* in Indian tradition since ancient days.⁶⁰ The word *sādhāraṇa*, according to Monier-Williams,⁶¹ signifies what is universal or common. So, *sādhāraṇadharmā* is supposed to relate to life and activities one behaves with others. In the sphere of his interactions and relationships with others, *sādhāraṇadharmā* directs him not to commit *hiṃsā* (violence), and not to have desire of *parastrī* and *paraḍravya*. The word *para* stands for "another", "different from one's self."⁶² This *dharma* is concerned

with those activities which involve an individual's interactions with *para*, i.e. others. Such interactions belong to the sphere of common life, beyond the domain of his private or family sphere.

There is another important point to note in this regard. There is no religious element in the contents of *sādhāraṇadharmā*; no worship, no prayer, no chanting of mantras, no religious rite, fasting, ritual, etc. it is simply a set of moral and humanistic precepts, which, if followed sincerely, have the potentiality of preparing and nurturing a tolerant situation in which no body can be subjected to violence, non woman can be sexually exploited and no one can be economically oppressed. The dignity of each and everyone can be supposed to remain intact in such a situation. The contents of *sādhāraṇadharmā*, thus, broadly relate to secular aspects of life though they are recognized in Indian tradition as *dharma*. Such a recognition, in fact, sanctifies them and, thus, accords legitimacy to them. *Sādhāraṇadharmā*, perhaps, due to being held as legitimate, has existed not only in scriptures and books of Hinduism, but in the minds of people at large. K.S. Mathur, an anthropologist, in the course of conducting his research in the villages of Madhya Pradesh in late 1950s, prepared a list of the principles of *dharma* as recognized and believed by his rural respondents. The villagers held *sādhāraṇa-dharma* as "general rules of dharma meant to be observed by all", commanding highest importance and only then, they considered the position of *jāti/varṇa dharma*.⁶³

This field view indicates the existence of the idea of *sādhāraṇadharmā* as a constituent of people's world-view. Tolerance has, therefore, remained a visible characteristic of Hindu religious tradition. Ashis Nandy's contention that traditional or pre-modern India had enough capacity of tolerance does not, therefore, seem to be far from truth.⁶⁴ Further, in this context, it may be noted that *sādhāraṇadharmā* that promotes and perpetuates tolerance has no space for the imagination of Hindu *rāṣṭra* or nation. Its precepts are universalist in nature and cannot be pressed to remain captive within any imagined boundary of nationality. Hindu religious tradition, however, can be forced to accommodate the ideology of Hindu nationalism only by undermining its most vital elements that is *sādhāraṇadharmā*. Vidyapati considered it very important and virtually ignored *jāti/varṇa dharma* in the context of identifying the main constituents of *dharma*. For him, as mentioned before, *dharma* included only *kulācāra* and *sādhāraṇadharmā*.

He ignored *varṇāśramadharmā*, perhaps, because this *dharma* had

lost much of its relevance by the fifteenth century. In the fourteenth century, the age long association of *jāti/varṇa* and kingship had been demolished by Chandeshwara. K.P. Jayaswal, who edited Chandeshwara's digest on polity, *Rājanīti Ratnākara*, says in his "introduction" that "The Delhi emperors had been on the throne, even over Hindu Kings . . . there was no hope of a Hindu restoration. Theories must change with facts, and Chandeshwara, an old statesman realized that the *Aitareya* and *Saṅgītha Brāhmaṇas* had ceased to rule. He laid down the definition – one protects is the king . . ." ⁶⁵ Earlier, a king had to be a *kṣatriya*. But, following the dictum of Chandeshwara, political domain was made free from caste/*varṇa* consideration. The contention of Nicholas B. Dirks ⁶⁶ is, this, supported by Chandeshwara's verdict which, however, stand questioning the validity of Dumont's view. ⁶⁷

Further, so many sects had emerged by the fifteenth century, a brief description of which had already been given before. These sects must have absorbed quite a sizeable population of different caste groups. For such people, their *jāti/varṇa dharma* must have become irrelevant. Besides, Vidyāpati, perhaps, did not notice any positive factor of *jāti* order tint the context of *dharma*. While describing the most desirable category of the righteous in his book, *Puruṣa Parīkṣā*, he cites the example of *kāyastha*, not that of a *brāhmaṇa*, nor that of a *kṣatriya*. He found *brāhmaṇ* and *kṣatriya* both inferior to *kāyastha*, in righteousness. ⁶⁸ He might have further considered that those aspects of *jāti/varṇa dharma* which were followed at the level of *kula* or family had been accommodated in *kulācāra* and the rest, which related to the sphere beyond *kulacāra* had practically become insignificant. Thus, he virtually ignored *varṇāśrama dharma* while advancing his understanding of Hinduism. It is quite significant to note that by doing so, he reduced the scope of hierarchical tolerance of Hinduism and strengthened its egalitarian dimension.

Now, one can assess the relevance of the said fifteenth century version of Hinduism to the conditions of secularism. In 1938, John Keane endorsed the proposal of Richard Rorty regarding the relationship of a secular, democratic state with religion, ⁶⁹ Rorty suggests that ⁷⁰ "modern democracies . . . should privatize religion without trivializing it . . . citizens living together in an open society are certainly entitled to freedom of religious worship. But the problem is that religion usually functions, especially outside the religious community . . . as a conversation stopper. Communication among the citizens is threatened by the

silence, antagonism . . . threats of violence. A democratic polity has no choice but to enforce a pact: religious believers must be guaranteed their freedom to their god in private, in exchange for non-believers' entitlement to live without religious bigotry . . . within the public domains of civil society and the state." In this context, one may raise a question—is there any contradiction between the understanding of Hinduism as posited by Vidyāpati and the "pact" proposed by Rorty? As discussed before, according to Vidyāpati, one's *dharma* is to follow his *kulācāra*. So, his religious activities are his private family affair. The other obligation regarding his *dharma*, is to follow *sādhāraṇadharmā* in the course of pursuing his life in civil society. The contingency of functioning of religion as a conversation stopper may not be supposed to arise if the religion itself enjoins tolerance on its followers in the context of their interactions and relationships with others—followers of other religions and non-believers. *Sādhāraṇa-dharma*, as discussed before, precisely does so. Vidyāpati's version of Hinduism is a part of Indian tradition, and further, it qualifies to be such a part that apparently appears to be conducive to the secular pursuit of our polity. However, it is desirable that other versions of Hinduism advanced in the middle ages in other parts of the country should also be searched out and, then, all of them should be analysed for gaining a vision of Hinduism appropriate to the ideals of our democracy.

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