

## Hindu versus Hindu: What Ram Manohar Lohia wrote in 1950 on liberal and fundamentalist Hinduisms

Translated from the Hindi by Pavitra Mohan

The longest battle in India, ongoing for past five thousand years, is between liberal and fundamentalist Hindus. There does not seem to be an end in sight. A lot of what happens today in the country is on account of this battle.

In all religions, at one time or other, there have been battles between the liberals and the fundamentalists. Barring the Hindu religion, however, such battles always led to bloodshed and separation. In almost all such cases the conflicts are resolved after varying periods of time. In the Hindu religion however, the battle between the two groups continues, in which sometimes one side wins and at other times, the other.

**There has not been open bloodshed, but the fight has never been resolved either. The questions surrounding these differences remain cloaked.**

There have been fights and differences within every religion such as Christianity, Islam and Buddhism. In Catholicism there was once a predominance of orthodox bigots. Protestants, who were liberals then, challenged them. But we all know that following revolutionary reforms, the Protestant sect was also infiltrated with bigotry. There are still many differences between Protestants and Catholics, but it is difficult to call one of them liberal and the one bigoted.

If the differences in Christianity were because of social organisation and principles, the differences between Sunnis and Shias in Islam owe their origin to historical reasons. Buddhists were divided into the Hinayana and Mahayana sects because of disagreements on religious principles. This division had nothing to do with how their society should be organised.

There was no similar division within the Hindu religion. However, it progressively continued to break into smaller sects. The new sects would, however, invariably return to the folds of the main religion as new sections. That is why differences on basic principles never came out in the open at once, nor were the social struggles ever resolved.

Though the Hindu religion is as swift as the Protestant one in giving birth to new sects, it cloaks the new sects in a shroud of unity. In that sense, it is closer to the Catholics who, by quelling internal differences, project a semblance of unity. So it is in Hinduism – while there is orthodoxy and superstition, there is also a possibility of new thoughts and enquiries.

**In order to find out why Hinduism has not been able to resolve the fight between fundamentalism and liberal thoughts, we have to examine the longstanding differences among them on some basic issues. On the four big and important questions related to *caste, woman, property and tolerance*, the Hindu religion continues to alternately take fundamentalist and liberal viewpoints.**

Four thousand years ago, or maybe earlier, some Hindus would insert molten lead in the ears of other Hindus because the caste system dictated that Shudras did not have the right to hear the Vedas. Three hundred years ago, Shivaji and his dynasty had to accept that they would always have a Brahmin minister, so that the kings could be crowned in accordance with Hindu rituals.

Two hundred years ago, in the battle of Panipat, which helped the British cement their rule in India, one Hindu king fought with another Hindu king because he, in keeping with his higher caste, wanted to have his army tent stationed on higher land. Some fifteen years ago, a Hindu threw a bomb at Mahatma Gandhi because he was demolishing the caste system. In some areas, even now, a Hindu barber will not shave an “untouchable” Hindu. They may not have any hesitation in working for a non-Hindu, though.

From the form, language and expanse of the ancient literature of India, it appears that the opposition to the caste system happened in two distinct eras. In one era, it took the form of criticism, and in another, of vilification. An effort was made to demolish caste in every form in the Upanishad.

One thing is clear – the golden periods of the Gupta dynasty and Maurya dynasty came after a long period of extensive opposition to the caste system. But the system never ended. In some periods, the shackles are somewhat loosened, in others they are tightened again.

**When it comes to the caste system, the liberals and the fundamentalists have coexisted with each other. In the current time of Indian history, there is a dominance of the liberals and the fundamentalists do not have the courage to resist. But bigotry is trying to preserve itself by entering liberal thoughts.**

If it is not the right time to talk of castes based on birth, then they try to talk of castes by work. Even if people do not approve of the caste system, they also do not do anything to oppose it. There is also an environment (among the liberals), where their mentality and their rational beliefs do not converge. As an arrangement, the caste system seems to have loosened somewhat, but as a mentality, it persists. There is a strong suspicion that this fight between fundamentalism and liberal thoughts will not be resolved for now.

The second difference between the liberal and fundamentalist Hindus is in how they view women. Modern literature tells us that only a woman knows who her child’s father is. Three thousand years ago, Jabala had disclosed that even she did not know who her child’s father is. In Indian mythology, her name is mentioned with respect as an evolved [woman](#).

The literature of the liberal age cautions us that we should not try to find the origins of a family because, like the origins of river, there is always some filth there. It further tells us that the rape does not pollute a woman. In any case, she renews herself every month. A woman also has the right to divorce and to property. In the golden periods of the Hindu religion, we see this liberal attitude towards women, while in the fundamentalist periods, women have been considered properties of their husband, father or son.

Women in India at this moment are in a strange situation in which there is liberalism as well as bigotry. There are other parts of the world where it is easy for a woman to achieve a respectful position, but to get equal rights within the family and in marriage are difficult. I have read papers that argue against a woman’s right to inherit property on the logic that she may fall in love with a person of another religion and may change her religion.

Till the time there is a difference between men and women's rights in relation to marriage and property, legally, socially and in mentality, the bigotry will never end. This desire to see a woman as a goddess who should never get off her pedestal induces suspicious and unnecessary thoughts even among liberal-minded people. Till the time Hindus do not accept the woman as an equal human being, liberalism and bigotry will continue to coexist.

Hinduism propounds the philosophy of non-attachment to material goods and property, which makes it really liberal. However, the fundamentalist describes the principle of karma in a way that ascribes a high value to power, wealth and birth. The question of whether property should be owned individually or collectively is a recent one. However, in the form of attachment or detachment to property and the arrangement for possession of property, this question has always been alive in the Hindu mind. As with other questions, this question of attachment or detachment to possessions and property has not been concluded. One or the other viewpoint gets primacy in turn, depending on the time and the person.

**It is commonly accepted that tolerance is a special characteristic of Hinduism. This is not true; though open bloodshed has been largely desisted. The Hindu orthodoxy has always tried to create a semblance of unity by oppressing the non-dominant sects and beliefs, but it has not been successful.**

Such an effort at suppression was largely considered childish. Since the principle and practice of tolerance in Hindus was largely applied to its own sects, when faced with differences, the tolerance predominated over use of power. However, this principle of tolerance is different from the European principle of tolerance, which, in Voltaire's words, meant being ready to fight for the right of the opposition to express their own views, even when you do not agree with their viewpoints.

As opposed to this, in the Hindu religion, the basis of tolerance lies in accepting that various viewpoints can be right, depending on the context and time and place. The liberal Hindu is not willing to judge what is right or desirable, he does not want uniformity, he wants unity in diversity, which till recently has helped to thread different sects in one garland. So his tolerance is based on the premise that one should not interfere in someone else's life because of the belief that differing viewpoints can manifest truth in different ways, they may not be wrong.

On the other hand, fundamentalist Hindus have tried to forge unity based on uniformity. They have never been successful. Behind their efforts probably lay the clamour for stability and power, but the results of their actions were always adverse. I do not know of any period in Indian history when fundamentalist Hindus could bring unity, stability or prosperity. Whenever there was stability and unity, there was a predominance of Hindu liberals in terms of caste, women, property and tolerance.

**Whenever there has been a predominance of fundamentalism, the country has been divided politically and socially. I cannot say that whenever the country was divided, there was a predominance of Hindu fundamentalism, but I can say with certainty that whenever the country was united, there was a predominance of liberal values in the Hindu mind.**

To unify India, the efforts of Indian people and Mahatma Gandhi have been successful, albeit partially. There is no denying that the liberal streams of the past five thousand years have strengthened these efforts of unification. However, the immediate source of these efforts – whether it is the illustrious tradition of Kabir, Chaitanya and other sages, or the legacy of more recent religious-political leaders such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and the rebel maulvis of Faizabad – is not clear. And then the

fundamentalist streams of the last five thousand years are also weakening these unification efforts. One thing is clear though: if these fundamentalist streams fail this time, they will not raise their heads again.

Only liberalism can bring unity in India. India is an old and a big country. No power other than human desire can bring unity here. By its very nature, fundamentalist Hindutva cannot give birth to such a desire. Liberal Hindutva can, as it has, several times in the past.

The Hindu religion, in a narrow sense, is not a religion of politics, principles or organisation. However, in the political history of the country, the big efforts at unification have been inspired by it, and it has also been the medium of such efforts. In the Hindu religion, the big fight between fundamentalism and liberalism can also be considered the fight between the forces of fragmentation and unification of the country.

**The fight between fundamentalist and liberal Hinduism is cloaked in the question of what the attitude towards Muslims should be. However, we should not forget for a moment that this is only a superficial issue: the deeper issues which have not been resolved are more decisive.**

The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi was not so much a result of a conflict between Muslims and Hindus as it was the outcome of a war between liberal and fundamentalist forces within Hinduism. No Hindu before Gandhi had inflicted such deep wounds on fundamentalist forces with respect to their attitude towards caste, women, property and tolerance. So the whole poison that led to such an attack was accumulating.

There was an earlier attempt on Mahatma Gandhi's life. At that time, there was a clear motive of preserving the caste system, and thus protecting the Hindu religion. On the surface, this last and successful attempt at killing him looked like an attempt at protecting Hinduism from Islam. However, any student of history would have no doubt that this was a big gamble that the losing fundamentalist forces wagered to win against liberalism.

Gandhi's assassin represented the fundamentalist element which always lives inside a Hindu mind, sometimes dormant, sometimes manifest; in some minds inactive, in others, alert. When the pages of history see Gandhi's assassination as one more incident in the longer war between fundamentalist and liberal Hinduism, and incriminates those who were angered by his acts against the caste system and in favour of women, against property and in favour of tolerance, the inaction and indolence of the Hindu religion may end.

Today the fight between liberalism and fundamentalism has taken the form of a fight between Hindus and Muslims. No Hindu can be tolerant towards Muslims unless he also raises his voice against caste and property, and for rights of women.

**The fight between liberalism and fundamentalism has reached its most complex stage, and maybe it is close to an end. If fundamentalists win the battle, they will divide the nation, not only along the lines of Hindus and Muslims, but also along castes and regions. Only liberal Hindus can maintain and sustain a united state. The fight of five thousand years has come to a stage where as a state and political collective, the existence of the people relies on the victory of liberalism over fundamentalism.**

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Today, the religious and humanist question is primarily a political question. The only road ahead for a Hindu is to bring in a revolution or fall and perish. He has to think and feel like a Muslim or a Christian. I am not talking of Hindu and Muslim unity, which is a political, organisational, or at best, a cultural issue. I am talking of harmonious unity of Hindus with Muslims and Christians. Not in the religious beliefs or behaviours, but in the belief that “I am that”.

Achieving such a harmony may be difficult and they may have to face bloodshed. Here I would like to remind everyone of the American Civil War, where four lakh people killed their own brethren, and more than six lakh people were killed. At the time of victory however, Abraham Lincoln and fellow Americans demonstrated a similarly harmonious unity between the northerners and southerners.

Whatever may be the future of India, Hindu has to change himself and show such a harmonious unity with the Muslim. Amidst the Hindu belief of oneness among all beings, it is also a political necessity for India that Hindus feel such a unity with Muslims. There may be big obstacles on the way, but it is clear on which path the Hindu mind should tread.

When challenged, fundamentalism survives by hiding within liberalism for survival. We should not let that happen this time. The question is clear. Any settlement will lead to a revision of previous mistakes. We have to end this dangerous conflict.

A new Indian consciousness will arise when the intellect meets harmony – this will make the principle of unity in diversity not an indolent, but an empowering, principle. Further, such a consciousness will joyfully acknowledge clean worldly needs, and yet be mindful of oneness among all beings.

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