Held Together By Plurality, Not Homogeneity

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The Supreme Court’s recent description of Hinduism as ‘the collective wisdom...of centuries...that has no single founder, no single scripture and no single set of teachings’ is to be commended, particularly at a time when diversity is imperiled on many fronts.

What makes the spiritual history of this land unique is that it has engendered a ‘tribe’ of seekers, not believers. The subcontinent’s strength is that it has been held together by plurality, not homogeneity. When you say ‘I believe’ you are fundamentally saying ‘I am unwilling to admit that I do not know’. But when you admit that you do not know, you are in a state of wonder; your awareness is alive and responsive; and above all, you are not threatened by diversity. In fact, you embrace it.

And so, the word ‘Hindu’ encompasses a mind-boggling multiplicity of sacred texts and practices. This harmonious diversity has been possible because seekers are not fuelled by belief, only by a profound sense of enquiry. Even today, in a single Indian family, it is possible to have people worshipping many different gods. This makes India the ultimate spiritual democracy.

At the same time, ours is a godless culture. Our ultimate aim was never god or heaven; it has always been mukti, liberation. We have thousands of gods, but we know we created them. We have mastered the technology of god-making: we are aware that an idol is a yantra, a subjective tool that can be employed for our well-being and spiritual growth.

The Supreme Court has also pointed out that the state should not interfere with ‘religious freedom’. This is an important assertion. Just as religion must respect the civil rights and liberties enshrined in the Constitution, it is vital for the state to respect freedom of faith. There is no fundamental conflict here.

Spirituality and reason are not antagonistic. This spiritual culture tells you that if you have a questioning mind, you don’t discard it; you simply learn to employ it to grow. This is jnana yoga, the yoga of knowing. Spirituality and reason are considered mutually exclusive, but the spiritual process in this tradition is not belief. It is simply the recognition that there is an intelligence in the universe far beyond our limited logic. As a guru, I actively encourage people to doubt, because spiritual awakening requires erasure of all indoctrination.

It is important to also remember that if certain spiritual practices have traditionally been limited to closed communities, it was not necessarily a matter of discrimination. The highly sophisticated understanding of consecration and temple-maintenance in this culture required specialised training of the clergy, often possible only within families or small groups.

To jump to conclusions about elitism, therefore, would be facile. The democratic spirit is about being inclusive, not indiscriminate. To allow the power of arithmetic to destroy the ancient wisdom of sages would be unfortunate.

For example, I have consecrated the Dhyana linga, a sacred energy form, in a manner that anyone can enter the sanctum. But the Devi shrine requires only trained people to enter the sanctum. This is not discrimination. The complex science of consecration entails different approaches for these yantras or devices to be effective. It would be tragic if a myopic worldview demolished this ancient science, unique to this land.

We live in an incredibly composite culture that celebrates multiple paths to the divine, and freedom as our birthright. If we disturb this distinctive civilizational unity through populist ideologies or dogmatic belief systems, we run the risk of losing access to a precious and profoundly liberating font of wisdom.

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