

Hinduism on the wings of Liberty and Vitality

by Lakshmi Persaud

Guest Speaker

20th anniversary celebrations of the Hindu Women Organisation of Trinidad and Tobago.

22nd September, 2007.

I would like to convey my warmest congratulations to you, as you celebrate your 20th anniversary. I trust you will be strengthened by what you have already accomplished, for we live in troubling times.

Over the years you have shown bravery and courage in trying to bring to our notice the need for an improvement to the lives of the disadvantaged and the vulnerable, be it amongst squatters or in the homes where domestic violence continues unabated.

We are in a country not genuinely multicultural, this has enabled a smallness of outlook to grow. Its very spirit is confined to narrow sympathies, with an opus operandi that seeks to threaten your cultural memory. You have, however, sought to support and strengthen the immense value of this memory, to the young and the old in having art and short story competitions. You have opened gifts—the life stories of those who added to our understanding of courage and what is meant to live the good life. You have contributed to children's libraries. Your aims and objectives to promote the quality of life of all peoples, and to join with others to do so, will play a useful part in building a viable, healthy democracy which is still in the making.

You have also dared to face head on, the savage thrusts upon your cultural inheritance by those in positions of influence. This deliberate, vicious, pulling apart is destructive. We either stand together, work together for a better country or we all perish. Do not put your faith in oil and gas, for by themselves, they have never given peace of mind or genuine development. These can only be obtained by good governance, uncorrupted institutions, a society at peace with itself, where hard work and enterprise are rewarded and not savagely extorted from the engineers of development. We have benefited immensely from the discoveries and inventions of countries where such values abide.

What will hasten our demise is if politicians' chicaneries and not merit are made the pivot of our society. Every field of endeavour is becoming far more complex and difficult. Excellence in them has always mattered; today, it is crucial. That large difference—between being offered life or death in the hospital or high court, between living in a failed state or a civilised one depends on it.

Already, our ineffective law enforcers and poor governance have created a climate in which robbing, cheating, lying, killing and kidnapping have become either a culture or an industry. They are profitable and safe criminal activities. Here the criminals' rewards are far higher than their risks; they see their profitable crimes as rational crimes.

We accept such violence as the norm and close our ears to the heart wrenching cries of mothers, fathers, children, husbands, wives — victims of crimes, pleading that their wretchedness be brought to an end. The killing rate is 19 times that of England and Wales. It is not surprising, that many see themselves at the cross roads of despondency, and a future without hope.

But there is a chink of light in this misery. There are men and women today in the Caribbean, from diverse backgrounds who have the courage to ask us to stop playing foolish games with the lives of others, to be discerning, and who can differentiate between what is of worth in our midst from what is ugly and destructive. They have no racial or tribal preferences. Theirs is what is of great value to the growth of the human spirit and genuine development. We need to encourage these men and women to play a larger role in guiding this troubled island where its citizens distrust those who are meant to protect them.

On a very special day, our parents' cultural memory was held high on a rostrum by such a man and kept there aloft by his articulate voice. He did this on the day he gave his memorable address, not only to those specially invited to Stockholm but to the far larger world's eyes and ears, for it is a time when all are focussed on the Nobel Laureate. What a privileged place and time he chose, to recall our forefathers' memory and his own. Why? He does tell us. But more of that poetry later.

I am now going to narrate to you a short story that illustrates what I believe the basis of Hindu culture, energised by its source country India, is really about. This story was told by Orson Welles but I came to it through Maurice Saatchi's article 'Google Data versus Human Nature' published in the financial Times on May 29th of this year (2007). I shall call it 'The frog and the scorpion'.

The scorpion wanted to cross a river, so he asked the frog to carry him.

"No," said the frog. "No, thank you. If I let you on my back, you may sting me and the sting of the scorpion is death."

"Now, where," asked the scorpion, "is the logic of that?" (For scorpions always try to be logical.) "If I sting you, you will die and I will drown."

So the frog was convinced and allowed the scorpion on his back. But, just in the middle of the river he felt a terrible pain and realised, that after all, the scorpion had stung him.

"Logic!" cried the dying frog as he started under, bearing the scorpion down with him. "There is no logic in this!"

"I know," said the scorpion, "but I cannot help it - it is my nature."

Close observation has demonstrated time and time again that human nature too, readily defies logic and rational thought.

The sages of India were fully cognisant of this, yet they were optimists, believing that human nature was like wet clay - malleable. And just as in the hands of caring, skilled potters, aesthetically beautiful forms are created, so too, they believed our nature can be transformed into a thing of beauty.

But in order that we are in no doubt of what we are up against, i.e. the savagery, of the propensities of human nature, its vigour, intelligence and dynamism, this is how Krishna puts it in the Gita. It was a dire warning: "It has been said 'Great are the senses', greater than the senses I say is the mind, greater still than the mind is understanding. What is greater than understanding is that, that desire, that wrath, that quality of passion that is ravenous."

And how does this crafty human nature go about its seduction? Krishna: "The shape of the desire for the desired is like fire and insatiable. The senses, the mind and the understanding are said to be its seat; with these, it deludes the self, after having enveloped knowledge itself." So teachers, parents, priests, lecturers, writers, Prime Ministers, Presidents and journalists, be aware, be alert, lest you christen your cherished opinions 'Facts'.

But all is not lost to unbridled desire. The Gita points out that there is another side to human nature - its divinity. We have that spark of the divine within us, it says, and if nourished, strengthened and exercised, we will have the energy of stars, perform miracles like the Mahatma, Nehru, and Mandela. We will manage the unmanageable. These men faced enormous odds and yet managed to lead their people to the Promised Land. They were never covertly mean, narrow nor limited in their perception of what comprises a nation as we are.

Hindu culture has grappled with a rich, complex history of invasions and migrations. This led to a vast internal diversity - of several races, written and spoken sophisticated languages with long, proud histories, 28 of which are official, religions, customs, ways of thinking and all the attitudes that flow from such disparities. How then could such an immense variety come together to form a nation of one billion and not fall apart when much smaller countries with far fewer complexities have become failed states?

I believe the philosophers and sages of Hinduism have played no small part in setting the spiritual direction of an Independent India. Why do I think so?

There are two characteristics of Hinduism which are commendable, but when combined, single it out from other religions. First it is neither fundamentalist in its teachings nor intolerant or disrespectful of other religions. Hinduism offers the others, respect, a genuine legitimacy, and so does not attempt to convert anyone to its thinking. Time and time again the tomes that make up Hindu literature say, there is not one pathway to God but many. The sages saw legitimacy in any avenue which led to ultimate Enlightenment, as long as the means justify the end.

The second valuable characteristic is this: Hinduism states, that the most important thing about a man is his behaviour, not his religion. This emphasis on the overwhelming importance of behaviour lies at the very essence of Hinduism. It cuts through all the humbug surrounding religion. It is a timeless concept, indispensable to peace and harmony amongst all nations. Later, other religions appeared and they gave belief primacy of place.

Dharma is the personal basis of behaviour. Dharma rests on virtue. Its foundations are truth, duties, responsibilities, affection and compassion. This is why the radiant light of Dharma topples the very concept of the caste system. We see this as early as the Chandogya Upanishads (800 BC) which narrates with poignancy a story that caste should be determined by conduct not by heredity. It would be worth your while to read it.

The sages also considered that we divide our life into stages, which broadly are: a time for absorbing, learning, and the awakening of our entirety, in order to develop the fine qualities of discernment or judgement. The first stages are meant to provide us with a strong foundation to assist our maturity. When that comes, we are expected to be well equipped to carry out our duties and responsibilities honourably to family and country. The final stage begins in the late autumn of our lives which gives way to the cold winds of winter. Now, there is more time for reflection and meditation. Each age we are told has its own pace, philosophy and behaviour, which we should welcome. It is a pity that old folks in the West are too often pressured to appear forever young and so fall prey to the seductive magic of advertisements which are superficial, unable to fill the spiritual vacuum within.

The writers also considered foods: the types that are good for our health, the proportions and the order in which they should be eaten; for our physical well being, we are offered yoga exercises and massages; for our mental health, there are meditation exercises i.e. the art of intense focussing to attain a deeper perception, a greater clarity, as well as the discarding of destructive impulses within.

For our senses there are delicious foods, the most sensuous the world knows. In Hinduism, food is synonymous with affection and this is why my mother would hurry to the kitchen and ask our cook Daya to prepare something quickly, while she engaged a friend who just happens to stop by, with close queries about herself and her family. For our other senses there are: dazzlingly beautiful jewels; dances-classical and folk; chants at ceremonies, music—devotional and joyous; yet all the while they kept reminding us of those quiet joys of satisfaction that come from conducting ourselves appropriately, caring for family and communities.

Neither did they forget the art of love making and provided the world's great manual on the subject: the Kama Sutra. No other culture has done so, made a wholesome art of it, in order to prevent it from becoming mean, exploitative, dark and demeaning. Ladies and gentlemen such was their affection for the human race; their concerns were that we take the right turnings at each junction of life.

What are the traditions enabling one billion people with a mind-boggling diversity, to unify into a great, dynamic nation, confident today, rapidly growing and moving forward into the 21st C.

It is I believe two of its Hindu traditions. They are the traditions of 1) Liberty of thought and 2) the Vitality of its content.

Hinduism's liberty of thought and the vitality of its content come from its long, uninterrupted rich history. As early as in the period of the Upanishads round about 800 B C, when several cultural streams within India were mingling, many schools of philosophy flourished. Amongst them the Sankhya school. It regarded the universe as having evolved from a basic given substance Prakrit and not through any divine creativity or direction but in accordance to its own inherent direction. Here was the very beginning, the earliest record of rational thought, of secular misgivings of a God.

This liberty to think freely, encouraged diversity, permitted a wide spectrum of behaviour, from which has come the vitality of its content. It was the time, (800BC) when girls were encouraged to go to school. What a difference it would have made to India and the world, if such an idea were held on to and continued, spreading out of India, to all the continents at such an early date.

Hinduism's influence on government can be seen in the very fact that there is no Hindu state. The citizens of India are citizens of a secular state with the joy, that privilege, to express their diverse cultures and their individualities without being disadvantaged by government's preferences in anyway. Fully aware of this, its citizens do not hesitate to express their differences confidently and openly. They dress, pray, socialise in their own preferred ways.

For example, in a recent BBC programme on schools in India, we saw how the ancient and the modern are meshing to assist India's children. In a school in Pune, the computer master also takes the meditation classes. In the school, meditation is being used as a means to assist children with poor learning skills as well as those with disruptive class behaviour. And again in Britain, yoga exercises and meditation are being used to assist prisoners to give their better selves the opportunity to improve and so heighten their sense of self worth. It is exciting to learn that Ike Patterson on leaving prison, here in Trinidad, says that while he was an inmate, he was able to discover his better self and change the course of his life with the help of Raj yoga, introduced by Kay Narinesingh.

If there is a single thing the universe tells us, it is, its sheer delight in variety, be it earthly rocks or stars; the animate or the inanimate, in the ephemeral; in shadows or human imagination. Therefore, we ought to be wary of any government, any school of thought, that wishes to put us in a box they have constructed in their own image.

Amartya Sen the 1998 Nobel Laureate in Economics reminds us that this vitality gives India, the ability to persistently produce constructive responses to external influences. More recently we see the very temperament of Hinduism, in the unique method (the Satyagraha movement) India devised and carried through to regain its independence from a superior thinking imperial governance, at a time when no non-white British colony had done so. It was no mean feat.

What was remarkable is that India regained itself from this British arrogance, this imperialism; neither did it seek to mimic it. For example on the one occasion that Prime Minister Nehru publicly criticised a judge, he apologised the next day and wrote a contrite letter to India's Chief Justice. In this way the country's infant democratic institutions were well nurtured. The people saw that the rule of law was supreme, that no one was above it, not even the prime minister, who had publicly acknowledged that it was so and must remain so. India with its one billion people is the world's largest democracy. Its democratic institutions have played no small part in its rapid modernisation. Hinduism, I believe has played a part in the tone and colour of its foreign policy.

Caste: Out of the multiracial nature of Indian society and its history of invasions, the caste system developed. With each wave of conquerors feeling powerful, they quickly placed themselves at the top of whatever stratification they found. And so caste became of social significance, with no essential worth to religion, though it did abide there also. Caste had an economic element; skills were passed on from father to son, a sort of rigid guild system. The stability and the security it offered the artisan skills, provided a firm base for operational efficiency. This too may have helped to prolong its presence.

Caste will lose its significance as time and age demand. Already in the marriage columns of Indian newspapers where young persons advertise for a spouse, it is not uncommon to read: "Caste not important." In India's rapidly modernising society, a new social hierarchy is developing. It is based on education and the professions.

One needs to be reminded, that though the history of those in the upper echelons of power is likely to vary from country to country, once power becomes entrenched, the outcome is the same everywhere. It perpetuates itself like a virulent virus for a long time before disintegrating by its own engendered corruption. We do not have to look far for examples of this. It is in the home, where children and mothers are battered; in the school, the play ground, with their bullies; at the work place, in governments' tribal dissembling, in the church itself, covering up what is rotten.

And now, as promised: Here is a small extract of that Nobel Laureate's address, recalling our forefathers' cultural memory, on Dec. 7th 1992, when the world looked to him and listened:

"The small population of Felicity is East Indian and on the afternoon that I visited it... all the faces along the road were Indian, which, as I hope to show, was a moving, beautiful thing, because this Saturday afternoon Ramleela, the epic dramatisation of the Hindu epic the Ramayana, was going to be performed, and the costumed actors from the village were assembling on the field strung with different-coloured flags... and beautiful Indian boys in red and black were aiming arrows haphazardly into the afternoon light... Deities were entering the field. Costumed actors were arriving. Princes and

gods, I supposed. What an unfortunate confession! Nobody in Trinidad knew any more than I did about Rama, Kali, Shiva, Vishnu, apart from the Indians, a phrase I use pervertedly because that is the kind of remark you can still hear in Trinidad: 'apart from the Indians'. They were not amateurs but believers. There was no theatrical term to define them. They did not have to psych themselves up to play their roles. Their acting would probably be as buoyant and as natural as those bamboo arrows criss-crossing the afternoon pasture. They believed in what they were playing, in the sacredness of the text, the validity of India... The name Felicity made sense..."

"Here in Trinidad I had discovered that one of the greatest epics of the world was seasonally performed, not with that desperate resignation of preserving a culture, but with an openness of belief that was as steady as the wind bending the cane lances of the Caroni Plain... Why should India be "lost"... why not the perpetuation of joy in Felicity... I am only one eighth the writer I might have been, had I contained all the fragmented languages of Trinidad."

This, Ladies and gentlemen is the perception of our Nobel Laureate, a poet, a St Lucian, a West Indian, a man - Derek Walcott. I recommend his address to you in its entirety. His remarkable prescience enabled him to speak, on that special day, of where the moral laxity warmly embraced in Trinidad and Tobago had already led us, in his words, to become a people "incapable of imaginative complexity," a people "encouraging the delights of mindlessness, of brilliant vacuity."

There is a large impairment in the government's understanding of what the modern world is about, where the 21st Century is rapidly moving towards, how other emerging countries are challenging the developed world by their larger proficiency. This impairment enables the aerial roots of covert racists, kidnappers and other criminals to find safety here. Every Trinidadian knows that their children cannot have a worthwhile future in such a socio-economic climate.

I shall now close with just one of the many beautiful, moving tales taken from the Mahabharata. I first came to this epic through my mother who quickly acquired the skills of Scheherazade of the Arabian nights, to encourage me to stay and help her shell a mountain of pigeon peas. I succumbed and owe a lot to the simple fact that pigeon peas have shells. I shall call it 'The disrobing of Drupadi'.

When Prince Duhsasana dragged Queen Drupadi to the great hall of the assembly in the presence of the elders, statesmen and intellectuals, she questioned them: "How could you have sat there and by your silence permitted a most vile entrapment to have been enacted by experts in the art of cheating?" And with an Attorney's thrust asks: "Where is the legitimacy of this? How can a man who has been ensnared in a game and cheated, a man no longer free, stake me as a wager?" Then, as Duhsasana approached her with the intent of disrobing her, she cried out asking God not to abandon her in her dire plight. "You are my sole refuge. Protect me!" there and then Vyasa, the compiler of the Mahabharata, described to us the miracle. "For from on high came yards of resplendent silk that wrapped her form, and the more the determined Duhsasana pulled at her saris, with purpose, the more she was clothed, so at no time was her nakedness known." Vyasa continued "Soon a mountain of silk cloth was piled up before the assembly till Duhsasana weary, exhausted, fell."

Then the significance of what they saw held them. And there came to pass from amongst that august gathering, like the rising sun at the very beginning of dawn, when night knows it must recede, rose Vikarna, one of the youngest present; and facing his elders, scribes and intellectuals, head held high, addressed them. 'Tell me to what purpose is education, to what purpose is learning? Explain to me the purpose of years of study, of deep reflection and thought, if on an occasion such as this, you are unable to rise from your seat and forbid this shameless act.' His youth and passion for dharma made his skin glow and his eyes shone as newly born stars. A few elders understood what had happened that

day and how they had failed themselves miserably and so dharma itself had fallen with them. They had failed to grasp the very essence of being. An eerie, unearthly silence held the hall. It had become a large vacuum, as if already they were empty of worth. Heads bowed in shame, faces covered, some wept in anguish at the enormity of their fall, others remained stilled, their breathing muted. But Karna, a close ally of Duhsasana, rose and addressed Vikarna: 'You are but a stripling, by your ignorance and rashness you are injuring the very family which gave you birth. It is an ill bird that fouls its own nest.'

Alas crucifixion still awaits those who dare to differ from the ruling tribe. Ladies and gentleman these stories of the Mahabharata were being composed throughout the first millennium BC and perhaps took their present form between the fourth and second centuries B.C. Yet as you can see, they are as relevant to us now as they were then to the gatherings of men, who came to listen and to learn a long long time ago.

Today is one day; tomorrow, another. The very openness of Hinduism facilitates Hindus to adapt and change rapidly to changing socio-economic situations. With its principles of liberty of thought, openness, tolerance and constructivism, Hinduism will survive and develop healthily into the future. If Hinduism fails, the very purpose of being is lost, for the one is the carrier of the other.

At present vegetarians and meat eaters, ascetics and readers of the Kama Sutra, those whose devotional meetings take place around a sacred fire and those who meet at the banks of rivers, streams and the ocean's shore; scholars, atheistic philosophers; men of action and devotees seeking God, all continue to say with enthusiasm and confidence that they are Hindus, judging themselves by dharma, by their behaviour, their conduct to all things, and by nothing else; for in truth nothing else matters. The thousands of victims of priests who are paedophiles know this to be true.

I trust you will understand why I would from time to time gladly fill the imagination of the young around me with ancient tales of Abhimanu, Drupadi, Daniel in the lion's den, the death of Hector, as well as the more recent battle, the battle of Isandhwana at which the Zulus fought bravely against British invaders and of many more. I wish to offer them a world's feast, one that would enable them to be at ease with all cultures. I hope you will too to the nation's children, so that all our future home grown poets would understand the spirit of Ramleela.

I sincerely wish you the very best and hope, life's wondrous majesty, beauty, vitality and diversity will embrace this young small nation and this Hindu Women Organisation will grow further, develop and expand under the guidance of dharma. Thank you for inviting me to celebrate with you.

As I close I would like to thank those who have helped to guide my thinking on Hinduism: When I left my parent's home, where the foundation was laid, my further understanding has come from the BBC- its several sophisticated episodes of the Mahabharata time and time again as well as to my readings. I would like to single out a small Penguin. It is simply called: "Hinduism" and is just over 100 pages. The author is a remarkable scholar, the late K.M.Sen, grandfather of Amartya Sen, the Nobel Laureate, who has written its compelling foreword.