

Dr Radhakrishnan as a Philosopher

Dr R. Subramony

Associate Professor and Head

Department of English

The Madura College (Autonomous)

Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India

raaja.dhruv@gmail.com

Abstract

Dr Radhakrishnan's thinking was Upanishadic. He also firmly believed in the birth of a new order based on ancient Indian wisdom. Drawing his inspiration from the Vedas, the Upanisads and the Gita, Radhakrishnan believed that humanity must become one. What kind of religion did Radhakrishnan advocate? Not a credal or dogmatic one, not an intellectual theology disputing over dogmas and contemplations. Radhakrishnan takes pride in the fact that Hinduism is not bound up with a creed or a dogma, with a founder – prophet or a historical personality, with a book like the Bible or the Quran, but a “persistent search for truth on the basis of a continuously renewed experience”. Radhakrishnan, as an ardent Hindu, could not transcend Hinduism itself. He was respectful of all religions, but it is ultimately Hindu standards by which he judged other religions. Hinduism was always for him the ideal religion, of course, a Hinduism re-interpreted, purged of all that he found distasteful in it. That President Radhakrishnan was a *dhvajasthambalam* in the temple of our nation's consciousness: upright and resplendent in rough weather and fair, inspiring us to a higher purpose. K R Srinivas Iyengar noted that without the reserves of the spirit, the inner poise, the hidden fire, all other

endowments cannot count for much. And the spirit that moved and sustained our ancient Indian *Rishis* and *Acharyas* is not foreign to Professor Radhakrishnan

Keywords: Philosophy, Bhagavad Gita, Upanishads, Hinduism, Unity of religions, humanity

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan was born in 1888 at Tirutani in the then Madras Presidency. He was educated at the Madras Christian College. He completed his MA thesis on “The Ethics of the Vedanta and its Metaphysical presuppositions”, in his twentieth year. As a teacher of Philosophy and as a writer he exhibited unusual dedication. He taught at the Madras, Mysore, Calcutta, Andhra and the Banaras Hindu Universities. After Independence, he became the chairman of the Universities commission, India’s ambassador to Soviet Russia, Vice President and finally the President of India. As Ambassador, he completed his English translation of the principal Upanishads. As Vice President and President he made innumerable speeches.

K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar, “Professor Radhakrishnan was hardly forty years old when his public image a spare tall figure, a keen yet serene face, a pair of eyes that showed no fret or wavering, alert head mounted by a white turban – was already as familiar abroad as in India. And the adventures of his mind and the pilgrimages of his spirit were recorded in a series of books that quickly arrested the attention of scholars all over the world. (573-574)

Radhakrishnan met Gandhiji during the latter’s visit to Madras in 1915 and wrote articles supporting the national movement. In 1918, he met Rabindranath Tagore. That year saw the publication of his book, *The Philosophy of Rabindranath Tagore*.

Radhakrishnan was appointed as Professor of Philosophy at the Mysore University in 1918. Three years later, he moved to Calcutta to become the George V Professor of Philosophy. In those times it was considered as the most important philosophy chair in India. He was invited to write an account of Indian Philosophy in the “Library of Philosophy” and to contribute the section on Indian Philosophy for the 14th edition of Encyclopaedia Britannica. He

was invited by the Manchester College to talk on Indian Philosophy. Oxford University, invited Radhakrishnan in 1926 to give the Upton lectures on *The Hindu View of Life*.

J H Muirhead commissioned Radhakrishnan to write a history of Indian Philosophy. The two volumes appeared in 1923 and 1927. They are masterly surveys on Indian Philosophy. Iyengar quotes S Kuppaswami Sastri as stating:

Professor Radhakrishnan's volumes on Indian Philosophy easily surpass works about the same subject in respect of form and matter, in respect of expository brilliance and estimative fact, and in respect of textual correlations and technical elucidations...the gripping and living interest of Professor Radhakrishnan's volumes, which successfully exhibit the course of Indian Philosophical thought as a perennial stream of progressive sweetness, and the ancient makers and moulders of this thought not as so many embalmed corpses, but as living embodiments of philosophical insight and continually suggestive forces of well regulated reason. (574)

Former President of India, Shri R Venkatraman states, in his essay "The Philosopher of Religion and the spirit, "Aware of the clash between the contending materialist systems of the world, with their narrow nationalisms and colonial appetites, he came to the conclusion of knowledge and power were not enough, and that a national and spiritual reawakening was essential for the world."(6)

More books were to emerge from S. Radhakrishnan's pen. *Contemporary Indian Philosophy* was published in 1936, *Religion and Society* in 1947 and *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* in 1939. Radhakrishnan's classic commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* emerged in 1948. He dedicated this book to Mahatma Gandhi. He met Gandhiji who said to him "I am your Arjuna, you are my Krishna."

Radhakrishnan explained the different aspects of Hinduism with clarify:

Every sinner has a future even as every saint has had a past. No one is so good or so bad as he imagines. The great souls of the world address themselves to the task of rousing the divine possibilities in the publicans and the sinners....

Hinduism is a movement, not a position, a process, not a result, a growing tradition, not a fixed revelation. Its past history encourages us to believe that it will be found to any emergency that the future may throw up, whether on the field of thought or of history (Iyengar 575)

Radhakrishnan was soaked in the classics of India. For him the texts of yore had to be interpreted according to the challenges of modern times.

About the Bhagavad Gita, he stated in a wonderful introduction:

The teaching of the Gita is not presented as a metaphysical system thought out by an individual thinker or school of thinkers. It is set forth as a tradition which has emerged from the religious life of mankind. It is articulated by a profound seer who sees truth in its many-sidedness and believes in its saving power. It represents not any sect of Hinduism but Hinduism as a whole, not merely Hinduism but religion as such, in its universality, without limit of time or space, embracing within its synthesis the whole gamut of the human spirit ... (3)

R Venkatraman wrote that President Radhakrishna was a *dhvajasthambalam* in the temple of our nation's consciousness: upright and resplendent in rough weather and fair, inspiring us to a higher purpose.”(11) K R Srinivas Iyengar noted, “without the reserves of the spirit, the inner poise, the hidden fire, all other endowments cannot count for much. And the spirit that moved and sustained our ancient Indian *Rishis* and *Acharyas* is not foreign to Professor Radhakrishnan.(581)

Dr Radhakrishnan thinking was Upanishadic. He also firmly believed in the birth of a new order based on ancient Indian wisdom. Drawing his inspiration from the Vedas, the Upanisads and the Gita, Radhakrishnan believed that humanity must become one. In his Kamala lectures, he stated:

If the old world has to die in violence, in catastrophe, in misery, terror and chaos, it should fall bringing down with it much that is good, beautiful and true, spilling the blood, wasting the lives and warping the spirits of many, it is because we are unable peacefully to adjust ourselves to the new world, which all the time has been indivisible in essence and now is passing to become indivisible infant. (19)

This vision of unity is more clearly expressed by Radhakrishnan in his introduction to *The Principal Upanishads*:

Essential unity with God is unity with one another through God. In the sense of heightened awareness we do not forget the world, which seems strangely of one piece. We are lifted out of provocation into perspective, as we become aware of something vaster, profounder, more ultimate than the world. (123-4)

Paul Mar Gregorius wrote that it was because of this deep Upanishadic faith that Radhakrishnan was every inch a *Visvamanava*, a universal human being (305). Gregorius further noted:

What kind of religion did Radhakrishnan advocate? Not a credal or dogmatic one, not an intellectual theology disputing over dogmas and contemplations. Radhakrishnan takes pride in the fact that Hinduism is not bound up with a creed or a dogma, with a founder – prophet or a historical personality, with a book like the Bible or the Quran, but a “persistent search for truth on the basis of a continuously renewed experience”. Radhakrishnan, as an ardent Hindu, could not transcend Hinduism itself. He was respectful of all religions, but it is ultimately Hindu standards by which he judged other religions. Hinduism was always for him the ideal religion, of course, a Hinduism re-interpreted, purged of all that he found distasteful in it. (307)

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