

SOUL

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Excerpt from: Why I am not Hindu. Originally published by the Bihar Rational Society Bihar Buddhivadi Samaj, 1993. The excerpted portion, Moksha, Karmavada and Avatarvada, talks about SOUL.

The author starts his original paper with the following remarks:

“I have read and admired Bertrand Russell's Why I Am Not a Christian. On the other hand, I have also read and disagreed with M.K.Gandhi's Why I Am a Hindu. My acquaintance with these writings has inspired me to write this essay explaining, Why I am not a Hindu, though I was born in a Hindu family.”

Moksha, Karmavada and Avatarvada

Moksha is traditionally regarded as the highest end of life in Hindu religion. The "endless cycle of birth and death" is considered a bondage from which one must attain liberation (salvation), which is *moksha* or *mukti*.

This whole concept of bondage and liberation is based on the unproved assumption of life after death, and the existence of soul (*atma*), which continues to exist apart from the body even after death. In the famous words of Gita, the soul changes bodies just as human beings change clothes [1].

Now, there are no good reasons for believing in the existence of soul or life after death or rebirth. These beliefs are not at all supported by incontrovertible scientific evidence. According to S N Dasgupta *“there has seldom been before or after Buddha any serious attempt to prove or disprove the doctrine of rebirth. The attempts to prove the doctrine of rebirth in the Hindu philosophical works such as Nyaya, etc. are slight and inadequate.”* [2]

However, even before Buddha, Lokayat had disproved the existence of soul, life after death, rebirth, heaven and hell on an empirical basis, as these things are never perceived [3].

Thus, in absence of any evidence to the contrary, it is reasonable to believe that each one of us has got one and only one life. Once a person is dead, he is dead forever,

never to be reborn. Mind, consciousness, memory and life cannot outlast the destruction of brain and body. This is the harsh truth; howsoever we may dislike it.

The belief in soul seems to have originated from primitive animism [4]. If this belief continues to persist, in spite of total lack of evidence in its support, it is only because of human beings' inability to come to terms with, or to squarely face, the reality of death. One likes to believe that one's near and dear ones, who are dead and finished forever, actually continue to live in some other imaginary world, and that they will also be reborn one day. One draws comfort from the thought that one will not die even after death, and continue to live in some other form. It is paradoxical that, first, the fear of death and love of life makes one readily accept the belief in the immortality and rebirth of soul without adequate evidence, and, then, getting rid of this alleged cycle of birth and death itself becomes the topmost religious aim! [5].

The problem of getting "released" from the alleged cycle of birth and death is a pseudo-problem (in the sense that one is trying to get rid of something which simply does not exist) and *moksha* is an imaginary ideal, which has nothing to do with the reality. Instead of running after the imaginary ideal of *moksha*, it is far better to concentrate on improving and living well this one and only life, which we have.

Mimamsa, which is an orthodox Hindu school of thought, considers attainment of heaven (*swarga*), instead of *moksha*, as the highest end of life. References to heaven and hell are also to be found in the *Manusmriti*. The belief in heaven is fairly widespread at popular level. However, the ideal of the attainment of heaven, too, is based on unproved assumptions, like life after death and the existence of heaven, and, therefore, it cannot be accepted.

Another related doctrine is the Hindu belief in *karmavada* or the so-called 'law of karma'. According to this doctrine, every human being gets the fruits of his actions either in the present or in some future life. Whatever a human being is in his present life is the result of his own actions in the past life or lives.

This, again, is a totally unverified and unverifiable doctrine based on the assumption of the "cycle of birth and death". It is only a convenient tool for explaining away the perceived inequality in human society. The idea of *karma* is found in Buddhism and Jainism as well. However, these religions do not support *varna-vyavastha* (Caste system). But in Hinduism the doctrine of *karma*, along with the idea of god, has been used for providing ideological support to the unjust *varna-vyavastha* and for making it appear just and fair. In Hinduism the so-called 'law of *karma*' merely serves the purpose of legitimizing the unjust *varna-vyavastha* by making the Shudras and the "untouchables" meekly accept their degrading position as a "result of their own deeds" in imaginary past lives, and by assuring them "better" birth in "next life" if they faithfully perform their *varna-dharma* in their present lives [6]. In this way, this doctrine prevents them from revolting against this man-made undemocratic system, which has nothing to do with alleged past and future lives.

Lastly, I come to the Hindu doctrine of *avatarvada*. According to this doctrine, whenever religion is threatened in this world, god takes birth as an avatar to put things back into order. The Hindus, for example, popularly regard Ram and Krishna, as avatars.

Belief in *avatarvada*, too, is logically unjustifiable and merely makes one run away from one's own responsibilities. Instead of making efforts to improve their own condition, those who believe in *avatarvada* keep waiting for an avatar to take birth. Since God does not exist, there is no question of his being born on this earth as an *avatar*. (Let me add here that I also do not believe in the truth of statements like "Jesus is the Son of God" or "Mohammed is the messenger of god".)

Not only I do not regard Ram or Krishna (or anyone else) as an *avatar* of God, I also do not regard them as ideal personalities. Ram, as mentioned earlier, was an upholder, of the *varna-vyavastha*. His cruel behavior with Sita, after fighting a destructive war with Ravana to get her released, is too well known to need recapitulation [7].

Krishna, on the other hand, is portrayed in the Mahabharata as the teacher of Bhagvat Gita, a book which expounds untrue and harmful doctrines *avatarvada*, *karmavada*, *varnashram dharma* and the doctrine of *moksha*.

In Mahabharata Krishna adopts and advocates adoption of unfair means like lying and deception for

achieving one's ends. Obviously, he did not believe in the doctrine of purity of ends and means. There are several flaws in the character of Krishna as portrayed in the Mahabharata, Bhagvat and Harivamsa. These have been ably enumerated by Dr Ambedkar in his 'The Riddle of Ram and Krishna'. I refer the interested reader to this work for a fuller treatment of this subject [8].

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, I categorically reject major Hindu religious beliefs including the doctrine of the infallibility of the Vedas, *varnashram dharma*, *moksha*, *karmavada*, and *avatarvada*. I am not an admirer of Ram and Krishna, and I also do not believe in idol worship or the Hindu taboo of not eating beef. I support logical and scientific thinking; and a secular, rational morality based on human values of liberty, equality and fraternity. Therefore, I am not a Hindu by conviction, though I am a Hindu by birth.

NOTES

- [88] Bhagvat Gita. II: 20-25.
- [89] S.N. Dasgupta, A History of Indian Philosophy, Vol. I, p. 87.
- [90] Chatterjee and Datta. An Introduction to Indian Philosophy.
- [91] See M.N.Roy, "The Transmigration of Soul" in India's Message (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1982), pp. 4-6.
- [92] Probably "the cycle of life and death" is considered "bondage" because it will presumably lead to death again and again. So, primarily the doctrine of liberation seems to be a reaction against death.
- [93] "Those whose conduct has been pleasing will quickly attain a pleasing birth, the birth of a Brahman or a Kshatriya, or a Vaisya; but those whose conduct has been abominable, will quickly attain abominable birth, the birth of a dog, or a hog, or an Outcaste." Brihadaranyaka, quoted by J.N. Farquhar, *An Outline of the Religious Literature of India*, p. 34, Also see, S.N.Dasgupta, Op. Cit., p. 363.
- [94] See, my "Why I do not want Ramrajya" in Why I am Not a Hindu & Why I do not want Ramrajya (Patna: Bihar Rationalist Society, 1995).
- [95] B.R. Ambedkar, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 4, Riddles in Hinduism.