Facing the Gritty Reality of Hinduism

Back in India, Gandhi was surrounded by and immersed in the all-encompassing reality of practical Hinduism in its ritual, social, and sectarian manifestations. His attitudes to these realities are investigated in this chapter.

RITUAL HINDUISM

Gandhi reserved his outright condemnation for only two current Hindu ritual practices, animal sacrifice and the dedication of devadasis. In the matter of ‘the cruel slaughter of goats before the Mother in the sacred eighth day of Navaratri, the day of sacrifice, and on the auspicious Dashera day’, he wrote:

We believe it to be the duty of every Hindu to stop, as early as possible, this violence which some Hindus, believers in the duty of compassion, commit on the pretext of offering a sacrifice to the Goddess. If we appeal to our Muslim brethren to stop cow-slaughter, we on our part must stop this violence.¹

Apropos of the Kali temple in Calcutta, his plea was passionate:

The mere thought of the Kali temple fills me with horror. How can the place be called a temple at all? In literal truth rivers of blood flow there every day. Who knows what the thousands of goats slaughtered there in the name of religion say in the court of God? How infinite is Mother Kali’s patience? Does she really demand cruel sacrifices? People who offer them tarnish her sacred name.²

In 1942, when the President of the trustees of the Sirsi temple in Canara abolished the custom of animal sacrifice, Gandhi rejoiced: ‘This is
indeed good news. Shri Keshwain deserves congratulations for his humanitarian spirit. Those who wish to may eat what meats they like, but it is defaming God to offer sacrifices in temples.\textsuperscript{13}

In each case, Gandhi put forward that the act of animal sacrifice was one that could not be a religious act because it violated the fundamental moral order of non-violence. When confronted with the fact that sacrifice, and even animal sacrifice, was practised in Vedic times, he explained as follows:

If the \textit{rishis} and \textit{munis} of the past had sacrificed animals, it is my firm belief that at that time the need for such sacrifice was felt; however, today there is no need for doing so; it is a savage and cruel practice. I regard such acts of offering animals as sacrifices as not only not religious in this age, but as irreligious acts.

He went on to suggest that the \textit{Gita} proposed a new interpretation of sacrifice in tune with our world: ‘the meaning of \textit{yajna} approved by the \textit{Gita} is: It is an act which is performed solely for the sake of service or from a purely altruistic standpoint’.\textsuperscript{4}

In a speech at a public meeting in Karaikudi Gandhi referred to the persisting custom there of ‘consecrating’ young girls to God, calling them \textit{devadasis} (servants of God), and actually making them into temple prostitutes.

A lady doctor . . . tells me that the rich people of Chettinad had a due share in perpetuating a hideous immoral custom of assigning girls of tender age to a life of shame under the name of religion. She tells me that there are many \textit{Devadasis} in your midst . . . Let not possession of wealth be synonymous with degradation, vice, and profligacy . . . There are, I am sorry to say, many temples in this country which are no better than brothels.\textsuperscript{5}

When an Andhra graduate who had married a \textit{devadasi} wrote to Gandhi about the ostracism, the stigma of prostitution that clung to them even when they had totally severed their connection with the custom, Gandhi wrote back to him suggesting ‘ways of working at the problem’. First the employers of the \textit{devadasis} and the \textit{devadasi} community should be targeted in order to stop the vice. But that was not enough. As ‘Hunger knows no sin’, an innocent source of livelihood should be found for the \textit{devadasis}, who for the moment had no other way of supporting themselves.\textsuperscript{6}