**Part I.9**

**The Hindu Response to Globalization**

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Globalization refers to an expansion beyond national borders that includes all aspects of human life and culture, but particularly related spheres of business, science and technology. It is the dominant theme of multinational corporations and the world media with its worldwide coverage of the news. We find people of all races, nationalities and religions participating in a global exchange of information, ideas and commodities.

Globalization has brought about a migration of many peoples, including a Hindu Diaspora. There are now significant Hindu minorities in North America and UK not as old indentured servants but as part of a new cultural elite of computer programmers, doctors and engineers. Peoples are mixing all over the world, as the whole planet gradually becomes a single melting pot.

However, globalization is often projected uncritically as if it reflected some necessary good for everyone. Certainly the benefits of globalization are evident in greater affluence, better communication and advancements in technology that have reached most of the planet. But globalization has its shadows with a deteriorating effect on the environment and an alarming persistence of poverty in various nations, including a few already extensively exposed to globalization. It remains to be seen whether the benefits of this current globalization will outweigh its long-term harm to the environment and to cultural diversity.

***Planetary Thinking***

A related term to globalization is ‘planetary.’ Some thinkers speak of a new ‘planetary age’, in which we are becoming cognizant of ourselves as citizens of the entire globe rather than only loyal to a particular country, culture or religion. Planetary could be called the positive side of globalization and implies a genuine concern for nature. It refers to a holistic vision of life and of the earth. It indicates the need to protect not only the natural environment, but also traditional cultures and non-western ways of living.

Perhaps the main idealistic pursuit in the West today is ecology, which flows out of this planetary vision. Ecologists are thinking in planetary terms, not simply in nationalistic or even human terms. Because of their planetary perspective, they are opposed to globalization in which business interests override human and natural needs, like the cutting down of the rainforests by multinational corporations.

***Multiculturalism and the Clash of Cultures***

A third related term to consider is ‘multiculturalism’. This implies that we must consider the needs and values of all cultures throughout the world—that no single culture should dominate all humanity. It means that not only European but also African and Asian cultural models have their importance and their place in the world order.

Yet multiculturalism connects with its opposite, the idea of the ‘clash of cultures’ made famous in the recent works of Samuel Huntington. In this view the different cultural spheres of the world, like the western European, Islamic or Hindu are like the hostile nations of old. We are in an era of cultural warfare, not so much through the battlefield as through the media and through economics. Cultural spheres rather than national boundaries are the main lines of division and confrontation.

Cultural chauvinism and isolationism still continues in the era of globalization, even among the countries supposed to be the most global in their views. For example, the average American, from the very country pioneering globalization, is unlikely to speak any language other than English and is unable to explain even the basics of foreign cultures or religions. During the 1991 Gulf War, for example, it was found that over fifty percent of Americans didn’t even know where the Persian Gulf was located on the globe. Americans remain apathetic about foreign affairs even while aggressively spreading their culture worldwide. The American view of globalization is people all over the world becoming American or adapting an American consumerist life-style. We must recognize that this is not true globalization at all and reflects a narrow point of view, not planetary thinking.

***The Down Side of Globalization***

The negative side of globalization is a disturbing neo-colonialism— the continued projection of western and European civilization and its values for everyone, just as in the colonial era. The new multinational corporations appear like a continuation of old colonial businesses like the East India Company. Modern technology allows companies to control other countries without the need of a military presence, through money, capital and media alone, which doesn’t necessarily make such control more just or less obtrusive.

Most of the values behind the current globalization are the same as those of colonialism, which are those of western culture. The West considers its culture to be universal, though it is only one of many in the world. The old colonial rulers had the same view of their culture as the best for everyone on the planet. The West sees not only its scientific view of the world as for good for all, but also its intellectual culture and its religions as the best, if not the only the legitimate ones. While Americans are proud of Asians wearing blue jeans they are quite suspicious of Americans wearing turbans or chanting Sanskrit mantras.

Slavery characterized the colonial era, along with a division of humanity into civilized and primitive nations. Such slavery was abolished by law but continues in a new form. The modern world has a corresponding division of rich and poor, developed and developing (or undeveloped) nations. Poor assembly line workers in Asia are much like the slaves of the last century and not always much better cared for. This gap between rich and poor nations is increasing rather than decreasing. The recent economic crisis in East Asia shows that economic development in the Third World may not be continuous but may go through a decline or crash before ever reaching its expected goals.

***Materialism for All***

Globalization is not so much a respect for cultures all over the world as it is a case of cultures all over the world following a western, particularly American life-style and mode of behavior. In the American model of life, business and money is the main concern, with material affluence the goal of all striving. The culture is one of entertainment and recreation, with shopping malls, giant movie screens and huge sports arenas as the modern temples.

This new multiculturalism expects everyone to pursue wealth and technology and follow the life-style guidelines of the western media. It has little concern for religion, which after all in the West, is mainly a formality that few take seriously. Or it turns religion into a business, honoring religions that use an aggressive and ruthless marketing of their products. It has no spiritual concern or regard for Moksha or liberation from the material world. It is quite happy in the material world and only seeks to find new ways to enjoy it better.

Yet the very success of this materialism has caused many in the West to begin to question it and look for a more spiritual way of life. This has brought them in the direction of the East and India in particular, pursuing Yoga and meditation, which are gradually becoming popular in the West.

***Globalization of Hinduism on a Spiritual Level***

The globalization of Hindu Dharma on a spiritual level occurred some time ago, going back at least to Ramakrishna in the last century. In fact modern Hindu gurus have been the main pioneers of a new universal, global or planetary spirituality, not limited to any particular church, savior or belief. They have not spoken or taught merely as Hindus, or as opposing other religions, but as seeking a spiritual approach that synthesizes the best in all human striving under the understanding that humanity is one family and all of the human spiritual heritage belongs to each of us.

Modern Hindu gurus have tried in a pluralistic, global and multicultural way to take what is best in all religions and respect the truth wherever it occurs. They have projected themselves more as universal teachers and their teaching of Yoga and Vedanta as universal paths, rather than portraying themselves as sectarian Hindus. Some have been projected as avataras of new global or planetary religions beyond any religious affiliation even that of Hinduism or Sanatana Dharma. These views have given Hindu gurus some popularity in the West and some following by western students, even by those who have not become Hindus or who have preserved their own religious beliefs.

Even Hollywood has taken an interest in Yoga and in Buddhism, showing that media influences are not always against the deeper knowledge behind the Indic traditions. New Age and counter cultural trends in the West carry a strong interest in Eastern religions, including various Hindu teachers and teachings. Hindu bhajans are beginning to become popular in the pop music circle in America. Ayurvedic medicine and even Vedic astrology are gaining adherents in the West, and often among the more educated and affluent members of society.

***Misuse of Hindu Tolerance***

Yet there has been a down side to this Hindu universalism as well. The Hindu recognition of Christ as a great yogi, for example, has been used as part of missionary propaganda to convert Hindus. Many Catholics claim to see value in Indian philosophies like Vedanta, but only like what earlier Christians saw in pagan Greek philosophers, a good philosophical base on which to build their own conversion efforts, not a genuine respect for an independent tradition.

Hindu tolerance of Islam has allowed many Hindu girls to marry Muslims and become Muslims but it has not resulted in Muslims respecting Hinduism or allowing their girls to convert to Hinduism to marry Hindu boys. In short this Hindu universalism has seldom been reciprocated and often been abused.

The multifaith era has some advantage for Hinduism because it recognizing a pluralism in religion, which is perhaps the essence of Hinduism, but even here Hinduism has not always done well. The problem is that multifaith groups tend to interpret religion in a Biblical sense as one God and one Book or even one prophet or savior, projecting a monotheistic model as universal for everyone. Western religious leaders only come to admire Hinduism when it appears like monotheism, when the *Vedas* are the Bible, or when Krishna is like the Son of God. Some Hindus are too quick to make these equations not realizing that they are not creating an understanding or tolerance of Hinduism but merely catering to western religious views.

***The Challenge to Hinduism from Globalization***

Hindu culture and spirituality, though spreading in their influence in the new global arena, are still being undermined by outside influences. The global age still poses a major challenge to Hindu spirituality through missionary efforts, just as in the colonial era. The global media and global money possess an inherent bias for western cultures and religions. Christian and Islamic groups have money and media power to target Hindus and continue to do so on a large scale, not only in the West where Hindus are recent immigrants but in India itself. For them globalization still means one religion for everyone and the end of religious traditions different than their own. While only about a fifth of Americans are fundamentalist Christians and while the predominant American culture tends to belittle them as backward, they still can mobilize massive resources for their overseas conversion efforts, holding a large fraction of the resources of an enormously rich nation.

Global business presents a challenge to Hindu spirituality because it projects a materialistic model for the entire world, including for India. It is hardly a culture of enlightenment that global business is bringing to the world but junk food like coca cola, movies saturated with sex and violence, and a naive adulation of athletes and movie stars as the most desirable human types. Such a commercial culture undermines spiritual cultures like those in India. It places a strong imprint of enjoyment on the minds of people so that the pursuit of liberation, which implies simplicity and asceticism, is forgotten.

***Hindu Responses to Globalization***

However, there has been little organized Hindu response to globalization, either to its advantages or disadvantages. Hinduism tends to be otherworldly and not to react quickly to temporal changes. Hinduism also is not very well organized socially or intellectually to tackle such outer issues in a major way. Some Hindus think that they need not make any response to globalization other than to continue their spiritual practices. However, when they see their children adopting western commercial culture or changing to a hostile western religious belief they often have a rude awakening.

Perhaps the most obvious Hindu response is that to the global evangelical movement. Movements like Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), or its older prototype the Arya Samaj, have arisen to counter this trend, helping to reconvert Hindus who have joined these other religions. Yet even in spite of the rapid growth of such organizations, most Hindu groups make little effort in this regard, still thinking that the religion people follow doesn’t matter because all religions are good.

Another part is the Hindu response to global business. One effort, going back to Mahatma Gandhi, is to try to protect the villages of India from global business and promote a swadeshi movement. Another effort is to promote technological development but try to avoid western commercial culture as in the BJPs slogan of “computer chips yes, potato chips no.” A social and spiritual effort is that of the Swadhyaya movement of Pandurang Shastri Athavale which aims at creating a more indigenous Indic model for the spread of spirituality and the protection of families and villages. This is an important trend that needs more work and attention.

The Hindu response to environmental and ecological concerns, though rapidly growing, has also been rather weak. India has already been devastated in terms of its ecology and this trend is increasing at an alarming rate. There is little organized Hindu effort to counter this, the great Hindu tradition of Bhumi Puja and love for Mother Earth notwithstanding. That Hindus have forgotten their connection with the Earth is perhaps their greatest falling from their older and deeper traditions. The Hindu ecological movement needs to get much more attention and support from Hindu groups throughout the world.

The Hindu use of the global media remains inefficient, where a positive Hindu view is seldom presented. The notable exception to this is the Internet where, for example, the Hindu Universe (hindunet.org) is a well-organized and popular site. India has more software technicians than any country in the world so it has the capacity to increase its Internet presence dramatically. Magazines like *Hinduism Today* have arisen as a modern voice for the concerns of the Hindu community and to bring it together on a common platform. Though starting off from a very limited circulation base, the magazine continues to grow at a rapid rate. Unfortunately there are few efforts in this direction that do not get beyond promoting a particular sect.

Groups like VHP, not only in India but also in the West, have created meetings for Hindu religious leaders or Dharma Sansads in order to unite Hindus to face the challenges of the current era, as well as to dialogue with other religious groups. However some Hindus, being suspicious of any regimentation, have dismissed these efforts not as a real attempt to unite Hindu society but as having ulterior political motives. While one may question any such efforts, that a better organized Hindu response would be helpful I don’t think is really disputable to any one who really thinks about the dangers of this era.

***A Call to Action***

The main conclusion here, therefore, is that there should be a better Hindu response to globalization. While Hindus have the ideological foundation for this, they are weak in implementation. In projecting a united front or common cause, different Hindu groups should work out their responses in a typical pluralistic Hindu manner. They need all not agree with one another. They can tackle the matter from different angles and approaches. But action of some sort, wherever one can start, is necessary. The response should not only be spiritual but also in the educational, economic, scientific and media realms, recognizing the special challenges posed by the type of civilization that we have today.

As this action occurs a new churning will take place within Hindu Dharma that can revitalize and transform it once more for this planetary age, in which it can again extend throughout the world and spread its benefits to all peoples. Hindu Dharma has a cosmic vision that is quite in harmony with the planetary era and capable of receiving a global regard and aiding in a new global vision, if it would but communicate itself better in the global forum.