



I am Hindu — not a Sanatani

The values of our Constitution must guide us, not ideas that promote inequality

IN GOOD FAITH ∞ BY MILIND SOHONI

AS A PROFESSOR at IIT-Bombay and a teacher of development practice, I would like to share with Anurag Thakur, Minister, Youth Affairs, why I am a practising Hindu but not a Sanatan Dharmi.

I use a common definition of Sanatan Dharma as one that regards the spirit of Bhagavad Gita and the *Manusmriti* as guiding doctrines for our society. The key word is, of course, “*sanatan*” — what is eternal or timeless. Sanatan Dharma makes important assertions about knowledge, as something that is taught, *karma*, or actions and duty, and finally, social organisation, which includes *varna*. Let us look at each of these in some detail and their current relevance.

The first is the nature of knowledge. In both texts, the word *dnyan* is what is closest to knowledge. Other words such as *vidya* and *shastra* usually mean proficiency in the scriptures or rituals. *Dnyan* in Sanatan Dharma is the spiritual understanding of the soul and the unchanging universe or Brahman as opposed to the changing material world. Moreover, the material world of the bodily senses and social relations is the ephemeral world of *maya*, which must be transcended to achieve true knowledge.

Ironically, modern-day scientific knowledge or Science is very much the opposite. It is the study of material change and its causes and the formulation of theories that have predictive value. These are rooted in empirical measurements and are both falsifiable and reproducible. This makes modern science a social

enterprise and its methods, namely observation, documentation and argumentation, accessible to anyone. Such a Science has also led to democratisation in the areas and questions it pursues, and a publicness about its findings. This has eventually led to material well-being within scientific societies and a better understanding of nature, society and sustainability.

Unfortunately, the Sanatan Dharma viewpoint of knowledge does not recognise that sophisticated knowledge is also required to improve public services and governance or develop new professions. And yet this exalted view drives our higher education and the imagination of Science in our society. We celebrate Chandrayaan’s journey to the moon but fail to study the everyday ordeal of the ordinary commuter.

This view of science has led to an abject failure of our scientific and technical agencies to measure the current state of our society. Or to provide and plan for the basic material welfare of our people. Our agricultural productivity lags behind most G20 countries. We have some of the most polluted rivers and air in the world, and we cannot make some of the most basic engineering gadgets. The challenge of climate change looms but we are hardly prepared. Moreover, this divorce from empirical measurements and documentation of the real world has created a large pool of graduates who have very few skills to earn a living.

Let us come to the second feature of Sanatan Dharma — *karma*, or duty. Sanatan society has a fixed hierarchy of roles called

varna and each comes with a prescribed set of duties. A person’s *varna* is generally decided by birth and the advice is to be subservient and stick to the prescribed duties. There are no civil society or cultural roles such as the citizen, the author or the public intellectual. The resulting cultural impoverishment and the paucity of job definitions continue to this date. Moreover, the primary concern of Sanatan society is stability rather than social change. Much of the modern development agenda of universal health or education has come from outside it.

Another doctrine of Sanatan Dharma is the theory of rebirth and a cosmic system of rewards and punishments on accumulated *karma*. This converts the accident of being born into a slum as a likely punishment for bad *karma* of previous births. Indeed, this makes it easier to blame the poor for their condition and to stack the law against the lower classes. They oblige — the death of a relative due to unavailability of oxygen is seen as a matter of fate and not poor governance.

Social rigidity in Sanatan society causes rents and monopolies, which are seen even today. Redistribution of wealth happens through charity. Both giving and receiving charity are good *karma*. This explains why our farmers, instead of demanding good irrigation services, receive handouts without any sense of indignity. The noble king obliges by calling it a *samman* — an honour.

Finally, the *varna* system and gender inequality are perhaps the most indefensible

features of Sanatan Dharma. These were also the most severely enforced — by religious and royal decree and by vigilante actions. Such enforcement continues to this date. A deeper consequence of the *varna* system is the lack of conviviality and fraternity in our society. This was pointed out by Ambedkar in *The Annihilation of Caste* (1936). Such a society fails not only to protect itself from external invaders but also to identify common societal concerns and evolve the necessary civil society to address them. Historically, the absence of such collective action has led to extreme inequalities, and an acceptance that an elite 5 per cent — be it super-rich merchant families, Mughal potentates, an elite bureaucracy or muscular *lalas* of the hinterland — will rule over a permanent underclass with great ease and little accountability.

The core values of the Preamble to our Constitution are justice, liberty, equality and fraternity and the main agenda is of securing them for our citizens. These arise not from Sanatan Dharma but from the spirit of enlightenment and hope which was prevalent then and remains a guiding light for the world. These words are not merely liberal mouthfuls but concrete recipes for a people to develop materially, spiritually and culturally. They will enthuse our youth to join hands as equals to shape a common future. And develop the culture of science and the spirit to overcome the challenges that lie ahead.

The writer teaches at IIT Bombay

