

PRESS NOTE

January 30, 2018

HINDUISM AND HINDUTVA

A Conclave organised by former Civil Servants and Armed Forces Veterans

30 January 2018, Indian Social Institute, New Delhi

On 30 January 2018, retired civil servants and veterans of the armed forces jointly organised a conclave on '**Hinduism and Hindutva**' at the Indian Social Institute, New Delhi. This followed an earlier conclave on '**A Fractured Polity: The Relevance of Gandhi Today**' organised on 10 October 2017, which was addressed by Justice A P Shah, Mrinal Pande and Ramachandra Guha. The speeches are available on YouTube ([Justice A.P. Shah](#), [Mrinal Pande](#), [Ramachandra Guha](#)) These civil servants and veterans have also raised severe concerns about the present situation in a series of open letters over the last few months: on vigilantism and hyper-nationalism; the suspicious death of Justice Loya; and violence and discrimination against minorities in India. (See: [Retired Civil Servants open letter - 10 June 2017](#), [Armed Forces Veterans open letter - 30 July 2017](#), [Retired Civil Servants Letter 02 December 2017 - Enquiry into Judge Loya's death](#), [Armed Forces Veterans letter to Supreme Court & Bombay High Court on Judge Loya's death](#), [Retired Civil Servants open letter - 28 January 2018](#)).

The Conclave on Hinduism and Hindutva began with all observing silence for two minutes in tribute to Mahatma Gandhi on the anniversary of his death. It was chaired by Air Marshal Vir Narain (Retd), and addressed by Prof Ram Puniyani (Retd), Shri Ashok Vajpeyi IAS (Retd) and Swami Agnivesh. The speeches were video-recorded and live-streamed on Facebook and can be accessed at ([30 January Conclave - Speeches](#)) or <http://bit.ly/2EheBTS>.

Air Marshal Narain began the proceedings by asking why a group of retired civil servants and veterans have chosen to speak out at this moment, though they are not known for making public statements. The reason was that they have sworn allegiance to the Constitution of India, and this is a post one does not give up after retirement: it is a life-long commitment. They are speaking now because they think constitutional values are under threat.

Professor Ram Puniyani (retired, IIT Bombay) began by taking the audience into a fascinating detour into “communal historiography” aided by the British policy of ‘divide and rule’ for their own interests. He pointed out how, over time, with the rise of new social and economic groupings like industrialists, the working and middle classes, the ‘perks, powers and privileges’ of the ruling classes like Rajas and Nawabs were threatened. These groups camouflaged their political interests behind the banner of religion, and created the Hindu Mahasabha and the Muslim League. Though they claimed that their religion was under threat, it was actually their power which had been threatened. As a result, the core ethical aspects of

religion were displaced by concerns about religious identity.

Professor Puniyani contrasted these Hindu and Muslim nationalisms with *Indian* nationalism as practiced in different ways by Bhagat Singh, Ambedkar, and the Indian National Congress of Gandhi, Maulana Azad, and Annie Besant.

The need of the hour is to focus upon liberty, equality and fraternity, and improving the living standards of the poor and disadvantaged in India, rather than upon emotive issues of religion, orchestrated for political gain by whipping up hatred against minorities.

This orchestration often takes place through the rewriting of history. For instance, many Muslim kings such as Akbar had Hindu officers, and even Hindu leaders such as Shivaji had Muslim bodyguards; indeed, Muslims formed a considerable portion of his army. Yet we do not see these complexities.

Shri Ashok Vajpeyi pointed out that religions today have grown intolerant, even of their own plurality, and violent as well. As a result, they have ceased to make spiritual progress. Though the Constitution of India is a socio-political document, not a spiritual one, the values of freedom, justice, equality, fraternity stressed in the Constitution are essentially spiritual values.

What is distinctive about Hinduism is its plurality, and the fact that it is born out of a sense of *lila* (joy), rather than a consciousness of sin. That plurality is reflected in the six schools of philosophy and in the absence of a single book or God. It has

been the fount of a great deal of creativity, and has allowed for much by way of dissent and criticism – even of the Gods. Unfortunately, this pluralistic and open metaphysical structure has not translated into an open social structure: the caste system, whatever its origin, is simply unpardonable. Recent research affirms that there has been a lot of violence displayed by Hindus in the past. In any case, both in terms of spiritual and creative progress, Hinduism seems to have hit a roadblock, and one does not see spiritual leaders come out and condemn violence in the present moment. However, Hindutva should not be seen as a religious movement at all, but rather as a 19th century attempted Semitization of the religion, which has led to violence, hatred, and the ‘othering’ of minorities.

In fact, votaries of Hindutva, with their adherence to a single doctrinal interpretation blissfully ignore the richness and diversity of thought that Hinduism offers. They are ignorant of the Indian intellectual tradition. They may say, for instance, that the Gita should be the Holy Book of India. However, our tradition is one in which one makes a book one’s ‘own’ by writing, commenting upon it: thus Tilak, Aurobindo, Radhakrishnan and Gandhi. Which RSS leader has written a commentary on the Gita?

It is a shame that so few people are speaking out today about the current situation; that this group has done so is commendable. After all, as the poet said, *even if nothing comes of my speaking out, at least someone spoke – and that is something.*

Swami Agnivesh began by invoking both 'Om' as well as 'Bismillah', saying that he would anger either Hindus or Muslims if he invoked only one of these. But in fact, there is only one religion, and it stands for truth, compassion, love, and justice: values recognised by believers and non-believers alike. All great souls in the various religious traditions have reminded us that God does not live outside us, but within us. A focus on the external realm leads us to divide god for our own purposes: we then focus on 'religion' rather than *dharm*, peddle it in the marketplace, and create strife. We end up caring more for the purity of our temples and other places of worship than for our own purity.

Swamiji pointed out that we do not get to choose the religion into which we are born; the earliest source of religious indoctrination arises in the family His own childhood was 'religious' in nature because it involved practices and rituals which were not to be questioned; at the same time, many injustices in the form of untouchability and bonded labour were not questioned.

Seen correctly, religion involves rationality as well: one must question what one sees, rather than accepting things blindly, like sheep. Followers of false *sadhus* and *babas* make the mistake of not questioning their leaders, but this is not the path of true spirituality. One should in fact be sceptical of all organised religions

as opponents of true spirituality.

Different people realise this truth in different ways. His own realisation came from reading the Vedas in college (they do not teach discrimination themselves, and nor does the much-maligned Manu Smriti; these are later interpolations). Gandhiji said earlier that God is Truth but later came around to the view that Truth is God. That is the knowledge which leads to true religion rather than sectarianism. *Satyam vada* (Speak the Truth) and *Dharmam chara* (Do what is right) are the very essence of religion.

He commended the organisers – retired citizens who could have lived a quiet life – continuing to ask questions: “It is a courageous thing you are doing, to keep standing up and questioning.”

More than a hundred participants attended the Conclave. There was a general consensus about the need for concerted action to preserve our Constitutional values and rebuild our democratic institutions. It was also agreed that Hinduism as a religion should be distinguished from Hindutva as a political project, and that new narratives would be needed to resist to the forces of communal polarisation.
