

UNITED WE STAND, SURVIVE AND FLOURISH

**By
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Hinduism is, at its very core, a religion of unity, a religion of inclusion. Our scriptures teach “Vasudhaiva_Kutumbakam.” The Upanishads say, “Ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti...The truth is one, but the paths are many.” The scriptures explain the differences between the various paths, but never hold one in higher esteem than another. Thus, there is no place in our culture, tradition, faith or religion for exclusion, for prejudice, or for an “us versus them” mentality. One of the great pillars of Sanatan Dharma, and that which has helped it to withstand the test of time, is its unity in diversity, its ability to embrace innumerable sects into its arms.

Unfortunately, today we are seeing these very basic principles uprooted and undermined. It is not only other religions and faiths against which our people seem to be discriminating, but this discrimination is even taking place against members of our own Sanatan Dharma! Today, as I travel the world, I hear people make comments like “Oh, we are not part of that katha. That is being done by the other temple.” Or, “Our Janmashtami program is held here, and their program is held over there.” Or, “I won’t go listen to that saint speak. He is not from our sampradaya.” I hear complaints and criticisms from one group about the others. Suddenly the foundation of our great tradition seems to be splitting and splintering abroad. This is a great tragedy.

God is one – ultimate, omniscient and omnipotent. He manifests at various times throughout the history of the world when darkness is overpowering light, when evil is vanquishing righteousness, when adharma wields its insidious hand over dharma. Depending upon the time and the need of the people, God incarnates in such a form as to be most beneficial to those whom He will teach.

The same is true in personal worship – God appears to each of us in the form which is most suited to our own, personal spiritual development. Bhagwan Shri Krishna says “Ye yatha maam prapadyante,” meaning, “whichever form the devotee worships, in that form I appear.” This does make that particular form inherently or objectively “better” than the others. It just means that is the form which will be easiest for US to relate to and worship.

Additionally, as we talk about the various paths to God -- including Gyan, Bhakti and Karma -- which manifest in today's world as various branches of teaching, none is objectively superior to the other. Certain people are more inclined toward scriptural study and philosophy. Others are more inclined toward selfless service and humanitarian work. Still others are more inclined toward blissful love of God and the devotional aspects. For each of these paths, there are numerous branches, sects, and schools of teaching. In this way, everyone, whether they live in India or abroad, can find a particular group with whom to relate, a particular temple in which to worship, and particular practices which appeal most to their own, inherent sensibilities.

However, it must be remembered that this flexibility of Sanatan Dharma is there so that the maximum number of people can achieve the ultimate goal of God realization. It is NOT there so that we can break ourselves off into isolated groups, shunning others and disseminating only the teachings of our particular branch!

Hinduism is a great tree of life. We each live on a particular branch and eat the leaves of that branch for our nourishment. But, we must not cultivate the belief that our branch is superior in any way to the others. Nor must we mistake our branch for the tree itself. No branch is the tree. Only the tree is the tree. Yet, all branches are intricately connected to this tree and depend upon it for their very survival. An isolated branch, split off from the Mother Tree, will quickly become desiccated and perish. It is only by remaining closely connected to the Tree that any branch can survive.

Therefore, let us all choose our personal method of worship. Fine. Let us have our personal ishta devta. Wonderful. But, let us not forget that it is the Tree which sustains us, not the branch. That tree is Sanatan Dharma. That tree is our Indian Culture. Every branch stems from the same great trunk. Our roots are the same. It is the same soil which nourishes us. Thus, let us remember that we are NOT separate. Rather, we are one.

The Hindu groups must function like fingers on a hand. Sure one is longer, one is shorter. One is closer to the left, one is closer to the right. One is narrower, one is wider. But, they are part and parcel of the same hand. Only by working together, as a united hand can any beneficial work be done. A finger, by itself is virtually powerless. One, isolated finger, cannot do anything to benefit itself, nor anything which benefits the hand, nor anything which benefits anything! It is only by working in conjunction with the other fingers and with the rest of the hand that the fingers' potential is realized.

Similarly, all the Hindu groups are individual fingers – separated slightly, different in outward appearance. At times, they may stay apart. But, when necessary they

must come together. They are part of one divine Hand and they must work together for the benefit of themselves, for the benefit of Hinduism and for the benefit of the World.