

Essays : 2

Conversion is Violence

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KEY TO TRANSLITERATION AND PRONUNCIATION OF SANSKRIT LETTERS

Sanskrit is a highly phonetic language and hence accuracy in articulation of the letters is important. For those unfamiliar with the *Devanāgarī* script, the international transliteration is a guide to the proper pronunciation of Sanskrit letters.

अ	a	(<u>b</u> ut)	ट	ṭa	(<u>t</u> ru <u>e</u>)*3
आ	ā	(f <u>a</u> ther)	ठ	ṭha	(an <u>th</u> ill)*3
इ	i	(<u>i</u> t)	ड	ḍa	(<u>d</u> rum)*3
ई	ī	(be <u>a</u> t)	ढ	ḍha	(god <u>h</u> ead)*3
उ	u	(f <u>u</u> ll)	ण	ṇa	(un <u>d</u> er)*3
ऊ	ū	(p <u>o</u> ol)	त	ta	(p <u>a</u> th)*4
ऋ	ṛ	(r <u>h</u> ythm)	थ	tha	(<u>t</u> hunder)*4
ॠ	ṝ	(mar <u>i</u> ne)	द	da	(<u>t</u> hat)*4
ऌ	ḷ	(revel <u>r</u> y)	ध	dha	(breath <u>e</u>)*4
ए	e	(p <u>l</u> ay)	न	na	(<u>n</u> ut)*4
ऐ	ai	(<u>a</u> isle)	प	pa	(p <u>u</u> t) 5
ओ	o	(g <u>o</u>)	फ	pha	(loop <u>h</u> ole)*5
औ	au	(lou <u>d</u>)	ब	ba	(<u>b</u> in) 5
क	ka	(seek) 1	भ	bha	(ab <u>h</u> or)*5
ख	kha	(block <u>h</u> ead)*1	म	ma	(<u>m</u> uch) 5
ग	ga	(g <u>e</u> t) 1	य	ya	(loy <u>a</u> l)
घ	gha	(log <u>h</u> ut)*1	र	ra	(<u>r</u> ed)
ङ	ṅa	(s <u>i</u> ng) 1	ल	la	(<u>l</u> uck)
च	ca	(<u>c</u> hunk) 2	व	va	(v <u>a</u> se)
छ	cha	(catch <u>h</u> im)*2	श	śa	(s <u>u</u> re)
ज	ja	(j <u>u</u> mp) 2	ष	ṣa	(<u>sh</u> un)
झ	jha	(hedg <u>e</u> hog)*2	स	sa	(<u>s</u> o)
ञ	ña	(bun <u>c</u> h) 2	ह	ha	(<u>h</u> um)
·	m̐	anusvāra	(nasalisation of preceding vowel)		
:	ḥ	visarga	(aspiration of preceding vowel)		
*			No exact English equivalents for these letters		
1.	Guttural	–	Pronounced from throat		
2.	Palatal	–	Pronounced from palate		
3.	Lingual	–	Pronounced from cerebrum		
4.	Dental	–	Pronounced from teeth		
5.	Labial	–	Pronounced from lips		

The 5th letter of each of the above class – called nasals – are also pronounced nasally.

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Introduction

Mahadbhyo namaḥ

Friends,

I have been thinking on this topic for a long time. It is clear to me, and perhaps to many of you, that there are two distinct religious traditions in the world.

One tradition does not believe in conversion. A Jewish person is born of a Jewish mother. A Zoroastrian is born of Zoroastrian parents. A Hindu is born of Hindu parents. And so too are the followers of Shintoism, Taoism and many other indigenous religious groups all over the world. They are born to be the followers of their religions. In other words, they are not given to religious conversion.

When the Parsis came to Mumbai as refugees, being driven from Iran, they were welcomed and allowed to settle down. They were very faithful to their religion and they lived their religion. They did not cause any problem to others. The Hindus accommodated them, just as they accommodated the Christians, the Muslims and the Jews. Our vision of God allows that. We accept various forms of worship, and

many forms of prayers; one more really does not matter to us. In fact, some of our Hindu friends in their *pūjā* rooms have a picture of Jesus and they do not see anything wrong about it; nor do I feel anything wrong about it.

Religious aggression is the worst aggression

I would call the traditions of the Jewish, Zoroastrian and Hindu as non-aggressive traditions. Aggression is not merely physical. It need not be the Kargil type. There are varieties of aggression. One can emotionally be aggressive. In the United States, it is a crime to be aggressive towards the children. A simple scolding is looked upon as aggression. Verbally one can be aggressive. Physically one can be aggressive. Economically one can be very aggressive. And the worst aggression, which I consider more than physical aggression, is cultural aggression, religious aggression.

Hurt is born of many causes. I am hurt if somebody encroaches upon my piece of land that is vacant; it is a blatant aggression and I get hurt. While this encroachment itself is a source of hurt, it makes me more hurt if the law protects the one who has

encroached. That hurt cannot be easily healed, because it leaves me helpless and helplessness is a cause for hurt. If somebody physically hurts the other, it is obvious that it is a hurt. It is morally and legally wrong, and, therefore, attracts punishment.

If you are emotionally abused, then, that also is a great hurt. For instance, people in authority can abuse you. The employer can abuse you emotionally. The husband can abuse; wife also can abuse the husband. The in-laws can abuse. For all these hurts, at least, you can seek some redress somewhere.

But the worst hurt, I would say, is the hurt of a religious person. Whether what the person believes has a basis, it is not my domain of enquiry to say whether it has a basis or not. Each one is free to follow his or her religion, either due to faith or knowledge. The faithful believes in the whole theology and follows the myths therein, even though certain theocratic countries suppress this freedom.

*The religious person is the
basic person*

Basically, what is it that one is connected to as a religious person? If one is connected to one's parents as their son or daughter

then one is also connected to other people. One can also be father, husband, uncle, cousin, neighbour, employer, employee and so on. One has a number of hats to wear every day. The basic person 'I' plays different roles, day after day. A son is related to a person outside. A brother is related to a person outside. A citizen is related to the State. However, as a religious person, whom am I related to?

Let us, for the sake of convenience, call this religious person a devotee. To whom is that devotee connected? Certainly not to anyone here. One may be a religious son, a religious father, a religious brother, a religious husband and so on. In fact, if I am religious, the religious 'me' is going to pervade every role I play. Therefore, basically, first and last, I am a religious person, if I am one. That religious person is the basic person not related to anything empirical. He or she is related, of course, to a force beyond, whatever that force may be. Some may say that force is God, and he is in heaven. Some others may say he is in Kailāsa, Vaikuṇṭha and so on. But each person who is related to that Being is the one whom we call a devotee, and that devotee is the basic person.

***The religious sentiment is deep
and is to be respected all***

The hurt of this basic person is going to be deep, and true. There is no power that can heal that hurt. That is the reason why any religious sentiment if it is violated, in anyway, will produce a martyr out of a peace-loving person. There is a martyr ready to be born in that basic person. And thus, the religious sentiment seems to be the most sensitive. It is a very deep sentiment that has got to be respected by one and all, whether it is a Muslim sentiment or a Christian sentiment or a Hindu sentiment or a Jewish sentiment. If that respect is not shown, then the State has to protect that sentiment; it has got the responsibility to protect the religious sentiment of all the people. That is secularism.

In America, the religious sentiment of every individual is protected. You can go to the court and get an answer, if there is something wrong done to you as a religious person; there is justice. In fact, when you register an institution as a 'religious church,' they take it as a religious church. There is no necessity to even submit an income-tax return. Until there is a public complaint, they respect and they trust the institution.

On the contrary, if there is a 'Hindu Religious' institution, there is no tax exemption for the donor in this country.

A religious sentiment has to be respected by everybody, whether he or she believes in my religion. Just because I do not believe in or subscribe to your ideas, you cannot stand on my toes! If my ideas and my belief systems are not acceptable to you, I give you the freedom not to accept them. But you do not have any business to stand on my toes to hurt me in any manner.

In fact, I will fight for your freedom to think differently. You must be free enough to differ from me. Bhagavān has given us the faculty of thinking, of discrimination. We are not shy of enquiries. Our whole method of enquiry is to invite *pūrvapakṣa*, objections. We will create objections that cannot even be imagined by others and then answer them. We welcome objections because, we want to explore and find out the truth is. But that is entirely a different thing. You have the freedom to differ from me; I have the freedom to differ from you. This is freedom that cannot be violated.

Conversion is violence

Giving the religious freedom to the other is the attitude of the non-aggressive traditions.

On the other hand, the second category of religions, by their theologies, are committed to conversion.

Conversion is not only sanctioned by their theologies but it is also practised by their followers. It is their theology. They have a right to their own belief systems. But they do not have a right to thrust them on you. They are free to believe that unless one is a Christian, one will not go to heaven. They have a system, a set of non-verifiable beliefs, *nitya-parokṣa*, on which they base their theology.

Someone says, “I have been sent by God to save you.” I can also say the same thing. I will have ten people with me, because I can talk. I can say, “God sent me down to save all of you!” Someone else can say, “This is God speaking. I did not send him down.

This is a non-verifiable belief as you can see. If there is something you have got to say to make a difference in my life, I am ready to listen to you. If there are some who are ready to listen to a life in a believed heaven, let them have the freedom to do so.

That there is a heaven is a non-verifiable belief. That, following this person, I will go to heaven, is another non-verifiable belief. That I will survive death is a non-verifiable belief.

There is nothing wrong in believing. But we have to understand that it is a non-verifiable belief. And having gone to heaven I will enjoy heaven is yet another non-verifiable belief. The intriguing thing is that there is another person who says: "I am the latest. Do not follow that person; follow me." That really confuses me. That person has really no argument to prove that he is the last; the claim is non-verifiable. And what is promised is again not verifiable.

I say, let those non-verifiable beliefs be there. I want them to have the freedom to have those beliefs, even though I will not advocate any of them. But what is the basis for that person to come and convert me? If one is convinced of something, one can try to convince me, but not convert me. Did you ever notice a physics professor knocking at your door, asking for your time so that he can talk to you about the particles? Never! If you want to learn physics, you have to go to him.

However here, every day, I am bothered. At the airport I am bothered, in the street corners I am bothered, at home I am bothered. They want to save my soul!

This is not merely an intrusion; it is an aggression. There are varieties of intrusions. If the sound is too much outside, with loud speakers blaring, well, it is an intrusion into my privacy; I can complain; yes, we do have laws,

but they do not seem to exist, because there are 'in-laws' at right places, you know!

Nobody has any business to intrude into my privacy. Someone comes and tells me that my soul has to be saved, that I am condemned. But I do not look upon myself as condemned for someone to come and save me. We do not have a word in Sanskrit for salvation because, salvation implies that you have been condemned. Unless you are condemned, you need not be saved.

The aggressive religion comes and tells me that I am damned. I have to believe that first. Then he appoints himself to save me. This is very interesting. This is how some of the trade union leaders work. They create a problem and then appoint themselves as leaders to solve it. Thereafter, they become inevitable.

Instead of the word 'salvation' we have a word '*mokṣa*'. Here, among the dignitaries there are many *gurus*. All of them have a common word and that common word is *mokṣa*. Is it not true? For every one of them it is *mokṣa*.

Mokṣa is not a word which is equivalent to salvation. It is derived from the verbal root *mokṣ*, *mokṣaṇe*. It means freedom from bondage. All of them use the word *mokṣa*. Even the other schools of thought such as

the Sāṅkhyas, Vaiśeṣikas, Naiyāyikas use this word. In fact, if *mokṣa* is not an end in view, it is not a school of thought to discuss. We all have a *mokṣa*. Even the Cārvāka, the materialist, has his own concept of *mokṣa*. ‘The body perishes,’ and that is *mokṣa* for him. He says, ‘*bhasmībhūtasya dehasya punarāgamanam kutaḥ*, who returns once the body dies?’ So the word *mokṣa* does not mean salvation. It refers to freedom from bondage.

When I look into these theologies, what I see is very interesting. I need not say anything to prove that they are illogical. I have to merely state what they say.

You must have heard of ‘Godfather’; the Mafia don is called the Godfather. He makes an offer that you cannot refuse.

He comes and tells you: “I am buying your house.”

You may say, “I am not selling.”

He says, “You are selling. I am buying your house!”

You reply, “This is my house, I am not selling.”

He says, “You are selling it and you are selling it at this price.”

He even decides the price and then tells you, "I know exactly where your children study and when they come home." He threatens you and buys the house. So a Godfather is one who makes an offer that you cannot refuse.

Now, what about God, the Father? He is even worse. This is the aggressive religious tradition that says either you follow this person or you will be condemned eternally to hell. This is worse than the offer of a Mafia don!

In the other case at least, I can do something. But here God, the father is not even visible. I cannot do anything to him. This is the non-verifiable belief on which a religion is based. Yet, one has the right to follow that religion. All I say is that the person who follows that religion does not have anything much to offer to me. If he thinks he has something to offer to me, let him have the freedom to think so. But he has no freedom to intrude into my privacy.

Conversion is done by any means, by marriage, by enticement or by some preaching that creates a fear, "If you go to heaven, you will enjoy this and that. You will have beatitude and be saved; otherwise, you will go to hell." So, more out of fear of hell, one may choose to go to heaven. The aggressive

religious tradition says and does all this to convert others to their religion.

I say this is wrong because if a Hindu or a Jew or a Parsi is converted, the entire family and community of that person are hurt. Even the converted one must be hurt deeply. He could be debating whether he was right in getting converted. He is also hurt.

Please tell me, what is violence if what hurts, is not? What hurts is violence. It is not ordinary violence. It is violence to the deepest person, the core person in the human being. The religious person is the deepest. And if that person is hurt, I say, it is violence. It is pure violence. And what does it do? It wipes out cultures.

I would like to go to Greece and see the live culture of the people who lived there. Where is that culture now? I have to imagine how they might have lived. I only see the huge monuments that are left behind. Similarly, many other cultures have been totally destroyed. The native cultures of South America, North America and Australia have all been destroyed. What about the Hawaiian culture? Gone! All the indigenous cultures in Africa have been destroyed. How many cultures, for the past two thousand years, were methodically destroyed? Humanity is the sufferer, the poorer for it. (Applause).

We need all cultures. Let the humanity enjoy the riches of the different cultures. Let it be a mosaic of cultures. Each one has got some beauty. With the destruction of a given religion comes the destruction of the culture that always goes with a religion. When a new religion replaces the old, a culture is destroyed.

After converting, they may try to preserve the art forms like *Bharatanāṭyam* with the themes of the new religion. But without Lord Naṭarāja where is *Bharatanāṭyam*? Without devotion, where is *nāṭyam*?

Please understand, the culture of people cannot be retained if their religion is destroyed. While this is true with reference to all cultures, definitely it is true with reference to our culture because you cannot separate it from our religion.

Our religion and culture are intertwined. Our religion has gone into the fabric of our culture. When I say, ‘*namaste*’ to you, it is culture. It is religion. When you are drawing *rangoli*, it is religion; it is culture. There is a vision behind all that. Every form of culture is connected to religion and the religion itself is rooted in its spiritual wisdom. This is because we have a spiritual tradition. Therefore, there is no cultural form unconnected to religion. Destruction of

culture is destruction of religion. Destruction of religion is destruction of culture. If this destruction is not violence, what is violence, I would like to know?

I say, CONVERSION IS VIOLENCE. (Applause).
It is rank violence. It is the deepest violence.

Not only that, in our *dharma-śāstra* it is said that if somebody forcefully occupies another's piece of land, that person is called an *ātātāyī* and for such a person, in our *dharma-śāstra*, there is capital punishment.

Occupying another's land, another's house or flat against the will of the owner is a grave *pāpa* according to our *dharma*. Many times, when the owner asks, "Give me back my house," the tenant invariably replies, "I am sorry. I cannot give you the house, because my children are going to the school in this area. Please find a similar house for me, only then will I move." When the owner finds such a house for him, the tenant says, "It is too far away from the school. Please find something in the same neighbourhood." It means, "I would like to be here." If you go to the court, 25 years would be gone. Occupying another's house against the will of the owner is not *dharma* in our culture. Someone's *kṣetra* belongs to that someone; it has nothing to do with another person.

Kṣetra-apahārī is an *ātatāyī*. The one who does arson or poisons somebody is an *ātatāyī*, and there is capital punishment for him. One who kidnaps another's wife is an *ātatāyī* and there is capital punishment for him. If there is capital punishment for occupying a land of another, think of what would be the punishment for the destruction of religion and culture.

Suppose, an *aśastrapāṇī*, unarmed person, is killed, the punishment is capital. Karna in the *Mahābhārata* uses this argument when he was completely unarmed. He said to Arjuna, "I am an *aśastrapāṇī*; you should not hit me now." Kṛṣṇa had to tell Arjuna that Karna was not unarmed, but was disarmed. There is a lot of difference between the two.

A Hindu is an *aśastrapāṇī*. A Jewish person is an *aśastrapāṇī*. A Buddhist is an *aśastrapāṇī*. A Parsi is an *aśastrapāṇī*. They are all non-aggressive. When you try to convert them, it is like hurting an *aśastrapāṇī*.

You cannot ask me to change the genius of my culture, the genius of my religion. It is because of the tradition of my culture and religion that I do not convert. It is not a situation where, you convert and I convert. And the one who has a better organisation is going to convert more number of people. It is not a percentage game of the market.

Here it is one-sided. I cannot change the genius of my culture which does not believe in conversion. You be a Christian, you be a Muslim. You pray; it is fine for us. I let you be a Muslim or a Christian, even though I do not say, "All religions have the same goal." I do not commit that ubiquitous mistake.

You please follow your religion; you have the freedom. Do not ask me to convert others to my religion like you, because I cannot convert. It is because my parents did not believe in it, my grand parents did not believe in it. My *ṛṣis* did not believe in it and, therefore, I do not believe in it. One cannot go against the genius of one's culture in order to be on par with others. It is not only our culture; it is true of other cultures also. The number of the Parsis is dwindling. I loathe seeing the destruction of the Parsi culture. They are harmless and good people. But now they are the losers.

Jewish people are also the losers; their numbers are also dwindling. They are fighting to preserve their culture and religion. They are not converting. There is no evangelism, no proselytization, in Judaism. There was never any inquisition. They were the sufferers; they were the victims of aggression, and planned aggression, for ages.

Conversion, therefore, is not merely violence against people; it is violence against people who are committed to non-violence. (Applause).

I do not say Hindus do not fight. They can fight very well. Please do not come and tell me, "Put your house in order." I will put my house in order, in my own time and in my own way.

If two brothers are fighting over an empty piece of land next door, and a third man occupies the land saying, "Since you two are fighting, I am occupying this piece of land." Is there logic to this? Some people advance this logic to me and say that since we are all fighting, they have come in. We may be fighting amongst ourselves but we have to settle that among ourselves. That does not mean that the other person can be violent.

Someone says we must have ecumenical dialogue. I have attended some of these dialogues. but I stopped attending them, because I do not see any use in it. On one such occasion, I said, "I can have a dialogue with a Christian if he is ready to change, if convinced, after the dialogue." Is he, if convinced, going to change his stand? Is he going to stop conversion? Do not ask me to have a dialogue with you when you are

standing on my toes. You just move away. Then we can have a dialogue.

The world religious conferences are only meant to neutralise any protest against conversion. That is all, for they do not want to stop conversion. So what is the use of saying, “We are all same. We are all going to the same God?” It is something like saying, your property is my property; my property is your property; your money is my money; my money is your money. Therefore, let my money be with me and let your money also be with me! (Laughter). This is all wrong thinking.

All forms of prayer are valid. I can accept because of my understanding of the *śāstra*. But they do not accept that. Surely, the Lord will understand if I pray in Tamil or Latin or Greek. He will understand in whichever language I pray. A Hindu does not have this kind of a notion that it has got to be in one language, it has got to be in one form, and so on.

They do not accept any of that. And they preach. It is not that they preach their own religion. They preach against other religions. I consider that kind of preaching as violence. They have got away with it for two thousand years. I want them to know

that this is violence. I am hurt and many others like me are hurt. Millions are hurt.

There are so many other issues to be discussed with reference to conversion. But I have only one to discuss here which is the violence that is allowed to be perpetrated against humanity, against cultures, against religions. That is the only issue here; there is no other issue. (Applause).

Violence is the only issue. Humanity should not stand with hands down and allow violence to be continued against a person who is non-violent.

There is another important fact in the Indian context I want you to know. I am a Swami committed to *ahimsā*, non-hurting. A *sannyāsī*'s vow is *ahimsā*, really. It is nothing but *ahimsā*, *sarva bhūtebhyaḥ abhayam*. I am taking this *sannyāsa* and offer complete assurance to all the beings and to all the *devatās* that I am not a competitor to any of them and that I will not hurt any of them, *kāyena, vācā, manasā*, by deed, word and thought. That is *sannyāsa*. I am aware of this; I am a *sannyāsī*.

Imagine now that I am in Rishikesh. Suppose, two people approach me and I welcome both of them. They are religious

priests from different religions. I respect them. I give them seats. They try to argue with me about something. I talk to them politely and friendly. Next, they pick up a quarrel with me, and then start to beat me. They go on beating me black and blue. Then, I see a policeman standing there. I implore him, "Please stop them. I am committed to non-hurting. I do not want to fight them back. You please do something."

The policeman says, "This is a matter between religious people. I am secular. (Applause). I am not supposed to interfere." I appeal to him, once, twice, thrice. He does not respond to me positively. Then I decide that I have to protect myself. My *śāstra* will forgive me. Even though I am given to *ahimsā*, still I can protect myself. I decide to take care of myself. The best form of defence is offence. I begin to defend myself. But the policeman stops me and says, "They are minorities. They have to be protected and you should not fight against them." (Long applause).

"Hey, policeman, you are supposed to protect me. You are the Government. You are the State. You are supposed to protect me. You cannot remain a silent spectator." But he does.

This is the situation that prevails in India.

You have to change the whole blessed thing here. If the constitution has to be changed, let it be changed for good. (Applause). My *dharma* is not violence. It does not allow conversion, and that *dharma* has to be protected. The State has to protect it. If the protector does not protect, people should have a new protector to protect. That is all. (Long applause).

Conversion is violence. It breeds violence. Do not convert because you will be converting the non-violent to be violent. You are doing something wrong, drastically wrong. This error has to be realised. The sooner it is corrected, the better it is for all of us, even for Christians and Muslims.

I want the Islamic culture to be there. I want the Christian culture to be there. I want the Hindu culture and every other culture to be there. Every culture is to be protected. That is secularism.

Thank you. (Standing ovation)

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