
Journal of Religious Culture

Journal für Religionskultur

Ed. by / Hrsg. von Edmund Weber
in Association with / in Zusammenarbeit mit Matthias Benad
Institute of Religious Peace Research / Institut für Wissenschaftliche IreNIK
Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main

ISSN 1434-5935 - © E.Weber – E-mail: irenik@em.uni-frankfurt.de - web.uni-frankfurt.de/irenik

No. 122 (2009)

Raja Dharma

Hindu Democracy, Rational Government and Political Bhakti
according to
Swami Dayanand Saraswati

By

Edmund Weber

*"Great is the power and majesty of the Law."
"The Law is the real king."*

Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883), the founder of the *Arya Samaj* and one of the modern reformers of *Vedic Hinduism*, develops in his famous book *Light of Truth* (Benares 1875, Allahabad 1884) not only a Theology of the Divine Names, ethics of private life and a critical analysis of traditional religions in India and abroad. He also reconstructs the Hindu concept of ruling the society.

This is very surprising taking into consideration that he was a *sannyasin*. According to a widespread ideology, *Hindus* and particularly *sannyasin* are more interested in the life to come than in the world today. This assumption is definitely not true. The old but particularly the modern *Hinduism*, and *Dayanand Saraswati* is one of its prominent protagonists, is primarily committed to human *Seva* following the ethical maxim: *Narayanaseva is Naraseva*. Therefore, the ethics of good government are rightly one of the most important subjects of *Hindu* philosophy today.

Dayanand Saraswati treats this subject in the 6th chapter of *Light of Truth*.¹ Referring to the old *Vedic* traditions he defines as the realistic foundation of a government the *Raja Dharma*, the system of necessary conditions of good governance which have to be taken into account if someone wants to rule the society permanently, effective and peacefully in favor of the benefit of all the people.

Right in the beginning he defines - quoting the great *Manu* - the basic principles which have to be considered in view of the character of the ruling persons:

1. only persons who are qualified or fit in ruling should become rulers;
2. but every ruler has to be elected;
3. the qualified and elected rulers can get salvation.

I.

Dayanand Saraswati does not follow the ideology that everybody can become a real ruler, a *Dharmic* ruler, who is determined and able to maintain a balanced society, the social *Dharma*. The prevailing so-called qualification of rulers very often consisted and still consists in looking out for particular and short-termed interests so that the use of ideological, social, military and economic weapons to oppress the self-made contradictions within society becomes unavoidable. This *Adharmic* misbehavior, however, undermines or even destroys the balance of human society and discovers the disqualification of a government. The history is full of examples.

However, who are qualified to rule the society? Are these the hereditary castes of *Brahmanas* and *Kshatriyas*?

Dayanand Saraswati has a clear position in view of the so-called traditional caste-system. He does not use the term caste but class. The reason is that he does not want to follow the wrong hereditary caste system. Therefore his definition of members of a normative social class is very different to the usual understanding of castes to-day.

Raising the question who may be a right and legitimate *Brahmana*, *Dayanand Saraswati* answers: "He alone among all the four classes is called a Brahman whose knowledge is perfect who is most virtuous, and who is bent on doing public good"(154). By this definition everybody can become a *Brahmana*; it depends only on his education, his behavior and his *Seva* for the people. The status of a *Brahmana* does not depend on his physical birth and ancestry but on his *Brahmanical* qualification only.

The same principle he analogically applies to the other classes. Special functional qualification, adequate moral behavior, and social responsibility decide which class somebody will enter and then belong to.

Therefore, only those people who have got the qualification will enter the class of *Kshatriyas* and with the consensus of the people may become the leaders of the country.

II.

Dayanand Saraswati denies the Platonic ideology that the rulers get their legitimation to rule by their qualification as wise men. He requests the voters: "Let not ignorant fools be ever made members of the aforesaid three Assemblies ..." However: "On the other hand let learned and devout persons only be elected to such high offices"(167).

Although he stands for that only the highest qualified ones should get the ruling positions, he stipulates that they can come into power only by the election, the consensus and control of the people.

¹ *Light of Truth* or an English Translation of the *Satyarth Prakash* by Dr. Chiranjiva Bharadwaj, (1st ed.1915), New Delhi 1984

This democratic fundament of the *Vedic Raja Dharma* denies all kinds of hereditary succession, of murderous usurpation, military dictatorship, civil manipulation and theocratic terrorism, kinds which were and still are in vogue as methods to get and preserve public power.

According to the political system of *Raja Dharma* good governance is inextricably linked with personal qualification as well as with democratic consensus.

Democracy, the rule by the people, belongs as its first basic essential to the *Dharma* itself. The destruction of democracy is therefore the most disastrous outrage on the *Holy Law*. Without democracy there is no *Dharma*.

The *Dharmic* system of ruling the society consists not only in a democratically elected and controlled single ruler whose election was done but once; a *Dharmic* government embraces the ruling chairman and the so-called assemblies.

According to *Dayanand Saraswati* every good working society needs - besides the single head of state - three basic assemblies: a religious body, a legislative and a military one.

The reason for the associating of the assemblies with the head of state is "the benefit of the rulers and the ruled ones"(161).

In order to make the *Raja Dharma* work *Dayanand Saraswati* conceptualizes the cooperative system of the democratic institutions and therefore contradicts by all means any rule of a single person. He says: "... no single individual should be invested with absolute power". His argument is: "Even an act easy in itself becomes difficult to be accomplished by a man when single-handed"(170). Even if an "easy act" per se can be accomplished only by team-work how the very heavy task of ruling a country is manageable by a single person"(170).

This analysis of administrative work leads to the logical conclusion: "It is, therefore, a most dangerous thing to make one man a despotic ruler, or entrust a single man with the sole management of the affairs of the State"(170). *Dayanand Saraswati's* argument against one-man-rule is not ideologically or morally motivated, it is an absolute rational one.

The *Hindu* state doctrine has nothing to do with the rule of a single person he may be declared an incarnation of God, a heir of a powerful ruler, a dictator and so on: Hindu democracy is not rooted in ideological, metaphysical or mystical justifications, but is based on practical rationality alone. Therefore, the head of state has "constantly to consult with his clever and learned ministers"(170).

As chief of the executive government, the head of state should not even decide the executive affairs alone. Executive team-work excludes a regime of a single ruler who per se would be unable to be competent for all executive affairs. Therefore, says *Dayanand Saraswati*, about the head of state in this concern: "Having ascertained the individual opinion of each ministers and other members of the Assembly, let him abide by the decisions of the majority and do what is beneficial for him as well as for others"(171).

The ministers and the Assemblies are not only acting as consultants of the ruler; they make the decisions, the laws. The power of decision making belongs to the "majority" of the ruling bodies. The principle of majority is a basic element of *Hindu* democracy. The head of state has no right to make decisions by him alone; he is even forced to follow the decisions of the majority of the members of the political institutions.

Due to the rationally based co-operative constitution of *Hindu* democracy the elected head of state is not an autocratic tsar but only the president or chairman of the Political Assembly (163; 162).

The *Hindu* head of state is not a sovereign who is above the parliament and the *Law*: As all people he too has "to abide by the just laws passed by the Assembly, ..." (162).

The three Assemblies too are not isolated institutions of lawmakers. According to the *Hindu* concept of political management they are under the rule of co-operative consensus will say of reciprocal control and support. The assemblies have not only to co-operate with the head of state; they have to work together with one another and the single assemblies are not allowed

to create a monopoly of power: "Let the three Assemblies harmoniously work together, and (by that) make good laws"(163). Even more bodies are on duty to co-operate: "Let the three Assemblies, Military Councils, and the Army harmoniously work together to carry on the government of the country"(162).

However, all these officially ruling institutions, the head of state, the assemblies, the Military Councils and the Army, are not at all autocratic, neither as single ones nor altogether. There is no self-appointed elitocracy, no oligarchy of the assemblies possible when *Dayanand Saraswati* says: "Let a nation, therefore elect the *most learned* men, as members of the *Educational Assembly*, the *most devout* men, as members of the *Religious Assembly* and *men of the most praiseworthy character*, as members of the *Legislative Assembly*"(163).

The assemblies are under democratic control. Only if controlled by the people the government is allowed and has the duty to rule them.

If the ruling institutions – under the chairmanship of the head of state - execute autonomously but co-operatively their particular tasks then only the highest aim of the government can be realized: "Let each (of the assemblies) discuss and decide subjects that concern it, ..."(161).

However, what is the aim of this democratically based ruling teamwork system? *Dayanand Saraswati* continues: "and adorn all men with knowledge, culture, righteousness, independence, and wealth, and thereby make them happy"(161). He is very clear in this concern: "Let them all (the assemblies) be of one mind in affairs that promote the happiness of all (men)"(163).

The highest aim of the ruling corporations is not to subdue, to exploit and to manipulate the people but to create their happiness. This happiness is not in favor of an ethnic group, a caste, a particular religious community or the upper or middle class; on the contrary *Dayanand Saraswati* demands from the rulers to do everything for the happiness of *all men*.

III.

The *Hindu* democracy does not only mean the establishment of reasonable formal structures and functions of the ruling system; it includes predominantly a very material aim: the satisfaction of all the needs and aspirations of all the people on earth.

However, that happiness should not be realized through the use of products of the industry of illusion but through the development of scientific education, cultural erudition, moral reinforcement and personal independence.

The government has the duty to develop the education of all people; everybody shall get the chance to understand life and world in a scientific manner and should not be condemned to be mentally manipulated by egoistic people whose interest is directed towards exploitation of cheap workers.

The cultural erudition targets the forming of a personality by "the ten-fold right conduct of life"(153). Who has realized this ten regulations is able to forgive (152), to control his thoughts, to be honest, to be mentally and bodily clean, to direct his senses in the path of rectitude and freedom from sin (153), to develop one's intellect and to avoid intoxicants, to acquire correct knowledge of all things – from earth to God and its proper application, to practice truthfulness, freedom of wrath by cultivation of calmness of mind.

These ten regulations are made for all people, not for a minority of high castes. The rulers of society have to educate everybody - he may be a *Brahmana* or a *Dalit* by birth - in the same way and targeting his cultural elevation without any prejudice.

All men should get by this democratic system of government the chances to take over enlightened and competent responsibility for their existence and to realize a satisfying life. This - as *Dayanand Saraswati* says - adornment of all men includes material wealth!

He, a sannyasin, does not preach secular ignorance, secular amorality, uncultured behaviour and personal dependence to an irrational authority; in the same way he does not propagate material poverty as means of enlightenment, of morality, and of independence. He indeed declares that material wealth of all men is one of the fundamental aims of government and an integral element of human happiness. Only this *Vedic* reciprocal system of democratic rule guarantees and becares the happiness of the people.

IV.

Otherwise, if this democratic "system be not followed and the king be independent of the people, and have absolute power" (162), and becomes by that an autocratic ruler, "He would impoverish the people – being despotic and hence arrogant – and oppress them, aye, eat them up, just as a tiger ..." (162).

It's indeed very surprising that *Dayanand Saraswati*, a sannyasin, considers as the first consequence of an essentially *Adharmic* rule of an undemocratic and uncontrolled despot the impoverishment of the masses. Poverty is the first, necessary and horrible product of autocratic dictatorship.

In the eyes of *Dayanand Saraswati* democracy and welfare of the people are fundamental aims of Hindu *Raja Dharma*; and both are closely and essentially connected: Undemocratic rule produces poverty, and happiness is possible through democracy only.

The positive functioning of the *Raja Dharma*, the heart of the society, which is the fundament of human happiness including freedom from poverty, depends on the people's power to control the ruling persons and institutions.

The *Dharma*, the fundament of human existence and happiness, can only be realized by the *Raja Dharma*, the really democratic political system. *Dayanand Saraswati* knows that an effective democratic control of the ruling persons and institutions is not enough to reach and save the aim of a government will say happiness of all men. Without rulers qualified in *Raja Dharma* happiness of the people can't be realized.

V.

However, before *Dayanand Saraswati* describes the qualification of the head of state, he makes the sharp statement on the true ruler of the world by quoting the great *Manu*: "The Law alone is the real king, the dispenser of justice, the disciplinarian. ... The *Law alone* is the true Govenor that maintains order among the people. The *Law alone* is their Protector" (164-165).

Dayanand Saraswati does not think that the happiness of the people depends on the arbitrary benevolence or ability of human rulers alone. The ultimate condition and base of happiness for all men is the *Law* as an internal power, "striking fear into the hearts of the people and preventing them from committing crimes ..." (165).

If that *Law* rules supreme, and the rulers administer it rightly, only then "the people never go astray, and consequently live in happiness" The "rightly administered Law makes all men happy" On the other hand, if the rulers administer the *Law* wrongly, if they are malevolent, low-minded, unjust etc. then the *Law* itself will destroy them and the whole order of society.

No wonder it is the rightly administered or with other practically worshipped *Law* which "greatly promotes the practice of virtue, acquisition of wealth and secures the attainment of the heart-felt desires of his people" (165).

The *Law* is not a sleeping power. It is an always moving power which works in any case: either positive or negative. There is only a positive or negative use or administration possible; a neutral relationship is impossible. This power is a friend or an enemy due to its treatment by the rulers and the people.

In the eyes of *Dayanand Saraswati* the human rulers are not the *Law*, they are obedient servants or even slaves of the *Law* only. The term lawmaker shows how arrogant modern political thinking has become. With wonderful words *Dayanand Saraswati* praises the mighty *Law*:

"Great is the power and majesty of the Law."

However, if the *Law* is powerful and majestic then the human rulers as its executors need special qualifications which mobilize the positive power of the *Great and Majestic Law* and do not erase its horrible wrath.

The rulers cannot be ignorant of the *Law* because as servants of the *Law* they have to know the intension and regulations of his master. They have to be just because as a servant he has to fulfill the commands of his lord.

Therefore, the *Law* needs always rulers who are men or women of learning and culture and they have around them only wise and good men all the time.

VI.

Dayanand Saraswati raises the question: Is salvation for rulers possible? His answer about the only adequate religion of politicians is very clear: Their professional worship consists in doing their political duties, in executing the "business of the state"(173). *Dayanand Saraswati* emphatically declares that exhausting and strict ruling is as such the only religious *Seva* of a ruler: "To devote himself day and night to the affairs of the State without allowing anything to go out of order is the highest duty of a king, aye, this is his worship, this is his communion" (173).

The worldly political activity and his total indulgence to it, if in accordance with the *Raja Dharma*, is the true religion of a ruler. His ritual activity is reduced to a private morning meditation (181; 189), and a private *Homa* which, however, he may deliver to his chaplain (181): "Let him retain a chaplain and a spiritual teacher to perform *Homas* and *Yajnas* suitable to different seasons and other religious duties for him in the palace"(173). His religious service is his secular service: "...and let him always devote to the business of State"(173). The business of state is his communion, his *Prasad*, his highest personal joy and most powerful support, too.

He will get his salvation, his ultimate justification, his self-realization only by ruling the State in accordance with the *Great and Majestic Law*. Therefore, politicians who think that their political activities have nothing to do with their eternal salvation are completely wrong. Even if they pilgrimage to the holiest temples, give millions of dollars for the rescue of poor people, kiss the feet of *Babas* and so on – all these activities are useless if they are done to please the God for their own favor or to compensate their own political incapacity, mistakes or even crimes.

There is no way out for the rulers. They can get their eternal salvation, their absolute fulfillment of their existence only by doing "good business for the State". If the rulers don't do "good business for the State" all their other religious actions like pilgrimages, pujas, temple building, and so on wouldn't help. *Dayanand Saraswati* bars every ideology of corrupt, incompetent and cruel politicians who use non-political rituals and *Gurus* to save themselves in the eyes of God.

There is no way out: The religion of acting politicians is only secular governance and nothing else. As long as they are rulers their religious worship, their way to please the God and get his favor, consists only in political *Bhakti*. They have to become political *Bhaktas* who completely surrender to the *Great and Powerful Law* by executing and defending it by all means including their own life.

Therefore, the only God the politicians have to worship, they have to enjoy with their daily *puja*, is the *Great and Powerful Law*, the *Dharma*. And the politicians are priests only of this Great and Powerful God. This is their religious, even sacred status under the human beings.

VII.

In summary we can say: The *Raja Dharma* is far from being a theocratic system, is far from being a defender of castes system, far from being ignorant of the world.

Just the opposite is true: the *Hindu* concept of governance is very critical against the rule of hierarchs, despots and clans, of social apartheid and economic exploitation, and of political corruption. It favors political democracy, qualification and co-operation, and has as its fundamental aim the welfare of the respected masses.

Indeed, by insisting on democracy, rational governance and political *Bhakti* and in this way guaranteeing the productive and progressive self-criticism of the society, the *Hindu* model of *Raja Dharma* suits best with the modern society, its problems and possible solutions.