

TOLERANCE AS A SOURCE OF IGNORANCE IN INDIA:
HOW POSTMODERNISM AIDS THE HINDU NATIONALIST ORTHODOXY

Meera Nanda
e-mail: meerananda@comcast.net

This paper will employ Karl Popper's distinction between a *tolerant society* and an *open society* to understand how Hindu orthodoxy perpetuates itself and how the current vogue of postmodern and postcolonial theory has helped the Hindu nationalist ideology. Tolerance of difference, it will be argued, can undermine the growth of critical rationality in a democratic society.

This paper will defend the following three theses:

1. The fabled Hindu tolerance toward other creeds thwarted the growth of science in India by thwarting the growth of second-order, heterodox traditions which could critically discuss the idealistic, spirit-centered myths of the Vedic orthodoxy.
2. The hierarchical tolerance of the caste society is a mechanism for self-aggrandization of Vedic orthodoxy. The Vedic and Vedantic holism declares itself to be the *summum bonum* of all thought, with empirical philosophies of nature as valid only within their own, this-worldly contexts suitable for some groups but not for others. It tolerates rational-empirical sciences but does not allow them to challenge the Vedic holism.
3. Postmodernist and multi-culturalist social theory bears an elective affinity with the traditional Hindu eclecticism, and has served the ends of Hindu nationalism.

This rethinking of the place of tolerance in Indian history is inspired by Karl Popper's distinction between a *tolerant society* and an *open society*. Popper's open society is a society which "not merely tolerates dissenting opinions but respects them" (*The Myth of the Framework*, p. 110). Respect for dissenting position, in Popper's philosophy, consists above all, in *critically engaging* with the opinions of those who you disagree with and *allowing the possibility of being challenged* by your opponents. It is not enough to accommodate dissenting opinions; an open society allows the dissenting opinions to interrogate the tradition.

The example of India, I will argue, provides a good illustration of Popper's view that tolerance of difference can actually *undermine* the growth of an open society. Hinduism in its classical epoch used the logic of caste hierarchy to justify the co-existence of contradictory truths, each valid within its own context and needs. In the modern and postmodern era, relativist theories of knowledge — justified either in scientific vocabulary borrowed from quantum physics and relativity theory, or borrowed from postmodern and postcolonial condemnations of universalism — have played into the hands of the Hindu orthodoxy.

Thus this paper will substantiate Popper's criticism of the Myth of the Framework.