

Sanatana Dharma and Swaraj Chetna

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Ever since Tamil Nadu Chief Minister's son Udhayanidhi Stalin publicly denounced Sanatana Dharma, a war of words has been unleashed by Hindutva forces on DMK and INDIA (the newly created front of opposition parties). Here we shall attempt to explore the Swaraj Chetna approach to this controversy.

The following points are noteworthy -

- 1) The words Sanatana Dharma doesn't find mention in the Vedas, which are claimed to be the original source of the Sanatana Dharma by the Hindutva elements. In fact, the words "Sanatana Dharma" were coined only in the nineteenth century to denote Hindu Orthodoxy (Brahmanism), as a reaction to the number of reform movements like Arya Samaj and Brahmo Samaj which advocated reforms in the orthodox practices of caste discrimination, untouchability, sati, prohibition of widow remarriage etc...
- 2) Even the word Hinduism may not be older than 400 years. It was probably the European colonial powers who came to India, who gave the common name "Hindu" to the diverse groups of faiths that were part of the Hindu tradition. Before that "Hindu" represented only a geographical location. Hinduism or Hindu Dharma included, among others, Vaishnavites, Shaivites, Lingayats, Kabir Panthis, Raidasis, and followers of various Bhakti traditions native to India, traditionally a country of diverse faiths. There was and is no distinct set of unique practices that could be identified with the "Hindu" faith. Sanatana Dharma, the name assigned to Hindu orthodoxy by its adherents, was just one of the many faiths within the Hindu fold and therefore cannot claim to represent all the faiths within the Hindu tradition. So the defenders of "Sanatana Dharma" cannot claim to defend Hindu Dharma or Hinduism.
- 3) Let us turn to the claim that Hindu Dharma is "Sanatana". "Sanatana" translates into English as "Eternal". The Hindu orthodoxy claims its superiority over other faiths on the basis of it being eternal. That is, the laws of Sanatana Dharma are eternal because they are based on the Vedas, which are claimed to hold eternal truths and themselves are claimed to be more than 5000 years old. But historians have assessed the period of Vedas to be around 1500 BCE,

much later than the period of Indus Valley Civilization. So the claim that Vedas are eternal is without any historical basis.

- 4) Those who are trying to impose the straight-jacket of Sanatana Dharma on Hindu society are the upper caste orthodoxy..The problem is that this upper caste orthodoxy wants to impose its dictates on how the lower castes should live and behave. The assigned role of lower castes as service providers (shudra) is claimed to have been ordained by God, being part of the grand design of human society as a hierarchical pyramid with Brahmins at the top and the scavenger castes at the bottom. This imposition of a role and a rank in hierarchy, not of their own choice, on the lower castes by the upper caste orthodoxy, denies the lower castes any semblance of autonomy or swaraj. It was this praxis of Sanatana Dharma that was attacked by Udhayanidhi Stalin. But it has been projected as an attack on Hinduism by the upper caste orthodoxy. It wants to deny the lower castes even the freedom to protest against the indignities and exploitation they have been subjected to for centuries, and which continue to this day. This denial of autonomy to lower castes by upper castes negates the principle of Swaraj understood as Autonomy of Autonomies and whose cornerstone is the principle of non-domination.
- 5) Swaraj Chetna is concerned primarily with the present, not the past nor the future. It is the ontology of human life situated in the current context of human-human and human-nature relationships that gives rise to Swaraj Chetna. This also means that Swaraj Chetna is contextual and limited to the specifics of the chunk of space-time that we find ourselves in.
- 6) Laws of nature have their basis in our understanding of the following interactions human-human, human-nature and nature-nature. The being and existence of every entity in nature are ordered by these laws. They are not enforced on it by any external agency outside of nature, On the contrary, every entity that exists in nature is endowed with its own inherent characteristics (Swabhava) and it is this that makes it obey particular laws and play certain roles (Swadharma). Neither the Swabhava nor Swadharma of any entity is determined or imposed by any external agency. On the contrary, both are inherent properties of the entity modified by the particular context or situation in which it finds itself placed at any given time.
- 7) This ontological basis of Swaraj renders any conception of eternal laws (Sanatana Dharma) prima facie untrue. Laws, especially of human society and

its evolution, are relevant and true only within particular contexts of space-time. Trying to extrapolate context-limited laws to regions far removed in space and time from where they were originally discovered is foolhardy and may even be dangerous.

To conclude, firstly, any conception of Eternal Laws (Sanatana Dharma) will contradict the ontological principle inherent in Swaraj and its context specific character. Secondly, Swaraj understood as Autonomy of Autonomies has no place for domination of one caste (varna) by another caste (varna) which is an essential feature of Sanatana Dharma.