

Eötvös Loránd University
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KRISHNA'S SOCIETY

**APPLICATION OF MAX WEBER'S HINDUISM CONCEPT
IN SOCIAL HISTORY**

DOCTORAL THESIS

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I. Antecedents of the work (introduction, goals)

Max Weber is one of the most important sociologists whose work in different disciplines has been an unevadable starting-point up to the present day. Much of his extensive and vast work consists of his writings on the sociology of religion. In studying religions, Weber puts the greatest emphasis on Protestantism and only studies other religions for comparison's sake, so as to attain a better understanding of the unique economic-social formation of capitalism that is exclusive to the West, and the main source of which is the economical ethics of Protestantism. Still, his research into other religions is by no means of secondary importance: in his main work, *Economy and Society*, he presents his comprehensive sociology of religion and substantial studies are dealing with the analysis of individual world religions, among them, Hinduism.

In studying the sociology of religion, Weber sets out from the process of rationalisation, in conjunction with the „economic ethos” and religious faith of a socio-economic formation. He was led to the detailed analysis of world religions, among them of Hinduism, by the realisation that the emergence of economic rationalism also depends on the skills and propensities of people in leading a rational life. As part of his work, Weber gave a thorough analysis of the Hindu faith as well as the resulting social phenomena and arrived at a very consistent concept of the Hindu social system as well as a Hindu philosophy of religion.

The main goal of the present dissertation is to investigate how the International Society for Krishna Consciousness and its Hungarian branch, the Hungarian Society for Krishna Consciousness, representatives of the largest Hindu tradition, Vaishnavism, can be described and understood through Weberian concepts.¹ A number of scholarly works having been written on Krishna-believers the question may arise what additional benefit can be derived from yet another one? Furthermore, of all possibilities, why use Max Weber's concept as a starting point? The answer to both questions is that Weber's concept of Hinduism is so profound that it lends itself to a characterisation of the Krishna-conscious community that bears out hitherto hidden aspects and details, not only at the level of sociology but also in a historical context. For one, the Weberian concept is meaningful from the aspect of the philosophy of religion, therefore can help in

¹ There are several Hindu and Vaishnava denominations in Hungary, there are even communities that separated from the Hungarian society of ISKCON (International Society for Krishna-consciousness, founded by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada in 1966 to spread Gaudiya Vaishnavism globally), for instance, the „Hungarian Vaishnava” denomination: This work only deals with the Krishna-conscious community registered in 1989, therefore by Krishna-believers I always mean the Hungarian organisation of ISKCON, HSKCON or MKTHK (abbreviation of its Hungarian name).

discovering fine details. Thus the image outlined by the two detailed works of István Kamarás and Judit Farkas may be extended and more details may be exposed.

The classic question still arises: is it possible to thoroughly demonstrate in detail the religion and community of Krishna-consciousness merely by the methods of social sciences? This question was meticulously dealt with in the *Introduction* as its answer fundamentally determines the approach and the levels of interpretation in this work, and also the disciplines, tools and methods applied in the analysis. My examination resulted in the realisation that even though a thorough knowledge of the philosophy of Krishna-consciousness is required for a relevant interpretation, still, on its own, it is insufficient. If the researcher does not look at the subject and interpret it from the 'inside', from the perspective of and with the understanding of the practitioner, he will surely miss some of the finer philosophical details which may be of crucial importance in practicing the religion. He also lacks the religious experience that would naturally reveal the relationship and the effects of symptoms and events. Therefore a complex, relevant introduction to Krishna-consciousness both for outsiders (scholars or the interested public) and insiders (practicing Krishna-devotees) can best be achieved by a researcher who can integrate the viewpoint of scholarly discipline with that of the religious philosophy and experience of a practicing devotee. This paper is a novelty in that the writer has this complex approach.

II. Methods applied

The Krishna-consciousness movement, part of ISKCON, is presented using Weber's Hinduism concept in three steps in as many chapters. Chapter one describes Weber's philosophy of religion in general, whereas chapter two gives a detailed description of his concept of Hinduism. In the course of the latter discourse the *problems* (concepts of social history, sociology, categories and institutions) relating to the Krishna-consciousness movement and, specifically, the community of Hungarian Krishna-believers are presented. Chapter three tells the history of the Hungarian Krishna-conscious community, for the first time based on the comprehensive study of internal documents, publications and electronic conferences as well as on interviews with the spiritual and institutional leaders of the community.

The expounding of the subject is through a three step interpretation: (1) The candidate „transposed” the Weberian sociological categories relevant to the subject using the concepts and theories of the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, at the same time, interpreting, evaluating and supplementing them so that they become appropriate for the description of the society/community of Krishna-believers in the above mentioned complex way. (2) Wherever possible, these „recoined” concepts and categories were used to describe the socio-historical dimensions of the religious

movement of the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition or the Krishna-consciousness movement, and then (3) used the resulting categories and emerging questions to explain the history of the Hungarian Krishna-conscious community. Clearly, the socio-historical approach was not the only, and even not the dominant, approach in the study. Social history characteristically puts the emphasis on depersonified social structures, classes, institutions etc. which would not have been appropriate to apply narrowly in the case of ISKCON and/or HSKCON given that these are relatively smaller entities and their existence has been too short to apply the time-frame of social history.

III. Theses. Itemised summary of own findings

Before introducing the theses, it was necessary to briefly introduce Hinduism, its branch Vaishnavism, its sub-division, Gaudiya Vaishnavism, and its wing, Krishna-consciousness, the movement founded by A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada,. The conclusion is that Hinduism and Krishna-consciousness are only related at the level of religion and Krishna-consciousness connects to the social system of Hinduism only on the cultural level. Therefore neither is it part of or a variation of the Hindu caste system. The Krishna-consciousness movement considers the world concept and social system of *varnashrama* as the foundation, as it is described in the ancient Vedic scriptures and interpreted by the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, the social system from which the caste system evolved. Most characteristically, the Krishna-consciousness movement is a religious renaissance, an organic continuation of the reform movement of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, a return to the *bhagavata* religion, combined with the *bhakti* religiosity.

The main part of the study, Chapter 2, points out six groups of problems (categories and concepts) in connection with the detailed explanation of Weber's concept of Hinduism.

Problem 1: Relationship of Krishna-consciousness with Hinduism (the meaning of the word „Hindu” and difficulties of defining Hinduism).

The Weberian concept lends excellent points for the scientific analysis of the relationship of Krishna-consciousness and Hinduism. Weber has pointed out that the interpretation of Hinduism as a mere religion is quite misleading. Although there is a high degree of tolerance *among* various wings (sampradayas) in that they mutually recognise one another as true Hindus, or followers of the Vedas, this easily turns into rejection of someone who was not born into a Hindu family, for instance, a Western practitioner of Krishna-consciousness, even though he or she may strictly follow all the subtleties, rules and regulations of a given Hindu sampradaya. This bears out the unclear nature of the concept „Hindu”: although it is officially a term for a religion, still, in reality it is mixed with ethnicity, and the union of the two concepts „logically” lead to the understanding that

to be a Hindu you have to be born as a Hindu. Although Weber does not refute this concept explicitly, his conclusions imply that Hinduism is too complicated and controversial to lend itself to simple summary statements based on such uncertain premises.

Problem 2: „Hinduisation” or the model of adopting the Gaudiya Vaishnava culture: enculturation of Hungarian Krishna-believers. (István Kamarás on the circumstances of the conversion of Hungarian Krishna-believers; Judit Farkas on the resocialisation and enculturation of Hungarian Krishna-believers; enculturation of Krishna-believers on the basis of the Weberian model).

Although István Kamarás and Judit Farkas have presented from several perspectives how the Hungarian Krishna-believers adopt the Gaudiya-Vaisnava culture, the Weberian concept of Hinduism was a very easy to use model for the deeper understanding of the process of enculturation of Krishna-believers. The model of the Hinduisation of animist tribes seemed the most appropriate analogy to the enculturation of Krishna-believers, as they also relate to Hinduism as a foreign, external culture, similar to the beginner in Krishna-consciousness. At the same time, the analogy was severely limited by the fact that Weber was thinking about conversion at the level of the society, the community. According to him, Hinduisation is impossible at the level of the individual, whereas the transition, the conversion to Krishna-consciousness takes place exclusively at the level of the individual or the family. Therefore Weber’s steps had to be „transposed” not only to the Krishna-believers, but also from being applied at the social level to being applied to the individual. Weber’s model of enculturation was a useful tool not only for the description of the important steps of the adoption of Krishna-consciousness, but the negative directions of development at the community or social level could also be detected with its help through easily identifiable, alarming symptoms.

Problem 3: Hinduism and missionary activity (the concept of „dharma”, the philosophical and sociological foundations of mission, Hinduism interpreted on the basis of Shankara’s monism).

Weber defines *dharma* as pertaining to caste which gives the unique duties of a particular caste which is different from those of any other. Dharma is one of the key concepts of the whole Indian civilisation and its meaning underwent many changes during the millenia. It provided the foundations for heterodox religions as well, such as Buddhism or Jainism. However, to understand the complex concept of *dharma*, one has to be aware of the foundations of the philosophy of the Hindu religion.

The Vedic scriptures present the social order of *varnashrama-dharma* as given by God, and performing the duties according to *varnashrama-dharma*, i.e. according to the *varna* (caste) and *asrama* (age and situation in life) has the purpose of satisfying God. It is the so-called *upadharma*, which helps people to fulfil *sanatana-dharma*. For, beyond the *dharmas* varying with the social

strata, there is the eternal (*sanatana*) *dharma*, which applies to all people, which, according to the monotheist (dualist and personalist) Gaudiya Vaishnava, is the loving service of God, Krishna. The concept of *sanatana-dharma* is indispensable for understanding why Vaishnavism, especially Gaudiya Vaishnavism is a missionary religion. The purpose of the Vaishnava mission is the education of the whole mankind about their ontological duty, *sanatana dharma*, so that the ultimate self-realisation, the return to the transcendental world, to the association of God, becomes attainable. This is, however, only relevant to those who postulate God as a person in His ultimate form, such as the Vaishnava. The impersonalist, monist schools like the followers of Shankara, the Mayavadis, however, do not acknowledge the natural position of living entities as servants of God, therefore, according to the Vaishnavas, they deprive people of the possibility of self-realisation, This renders the missionary activity necessary. In fact, the tenet that Hinduism is not a missionary religion is rooted in the monist, Shankara-inspired understanding of Hinduism, thence the questioning of the *bona fide* nature of those movements like Gaudiya Vaishnavism, that endeavour to spread the faith in any way. Pointing to a single principle the monist philosophy of religion may well be closer to scientific rationalism, as the literature on Hinduism Weber used in his work, than the dualist understanding of the Vaishnava; still, it is far from being so dominant among the *brahmanas* as claimed. Suffice it to say that, even at the present day, Vaishnavas make up about 70 percent of all Hindus.

Problem 4: The decisive characteristics of Hindu culture (non-violence, vegetarianism, respect for cows, importance of purity, endogamy [endogamy within ISKCON; the institution of marriage in the Hungarian Krishna-believer community]; death ceremonies, position of women [position and role of women in the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition, in the history of ISKCON and in HSKCON; the reinforcement of the principles of gender roles in the Hungarian community].

In Weber's concept there is a hint of a refined cultural dimension of „being Hindu” that Weber only touches upon, without expounding its ramifications. However in this Hinduism the special characteristics of Vedic culture that have their continuity are manifest, characteristics which provide the foundation of Hindu pride leading to a sense of superiority. These characteristics are not always appreciated in Western science, some scholars even disdain them. Without a proper treatment of these cultural traits an adequate understanding of Hinduism and Krishna-consciousness is not possible, therefore this paper discusses them in detail both in theory and in application.

Problem 5: *varnashrama* and the caste system (the transformation of the *varnashrama* into the caste system according to Weber; *varnashrama* and the caste system in the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition; historical context of Gaudiya Vaishnavism; theories in ISKCON to realise *varnashrama*).

Weber made some important statements as to the difference of the caste system and the original Vedic *varnashrama* system when he stated that even though the Vedas mention the four main castes or varnas, they do not recognise the concept of caste or the content of the caste system as they developed into being the most characteristic feature of Hinduism; he also states that the social structure of *varnashrama* is a historically existing formation but the *varnas* never were the castes in the Hindu sense, rather, they were status groups. At the top level of the caste system were the *brahmanas* who had the monopoly of ritual knowledge and the secrecy of their knowledge was automatically preserved by the monopoly of educating their children. The ability of *brahmanas* to teach was perceived as if they were born with it. However, Weber was well aware that in Vedic times the priesthood had not been a closed, hereditary status group. With this statement, Weber put the seal of approval on the endeavor of many Vaishnava teachers who fought for the right of all to achieve salvation through sacred knowledge and religious rituals, for *sanatana-dharma* applies to all living entities. Performing important religious activities and achieving the status of spiritual master is, thus, not reserved for those born as *brahmanas*, because it is not birth that qualifies one but the high level of devotion to God, i.e. a high standard of fulfilling *sanatana-dharma*.

It is one of the key endeavours of ISKCON and especially HSKCON, making a decisive impact on the lives of the members philosophically, organisationally, and also at the level of everyday religious practice, to attempt to apply the *varnashrama* system in the modern age. This is the pivotal subject of this paper. Weber's concept also helped to grasp this highly complex subject. Even though he did not deal with the specific differences between Vedic *varnashrama* and the caste system, his sporadic references assemble into a thought-pattern which greatly matches the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition's approach to the essence of, and relationship between, *varnashrama* and the caste system.

The greatest theoretical impediment in the way of the recreation of *varnashrama* in modern times by the Krishna-conscious practitioners, in which all problems of interpretation are rooted, can be summed up in the question: „How can one be a Vaishnava while not being a brahmana?” It is a fundamental tenet of Vaishnavas, supported by Vedic scriptures, that a Vaishnava is a top quality self-realised *brahmana*. However, „brahmana” is a well-defined *varna* (occupational position), whereas „Vaishnava” denominates the practitioner of self-realisation through a specific method, someone who believes in Vishnu as the supreme personal form of Godhead. The two categories are, thus, incongruent. At the same time, it is the axiom of Hindu philosophies of religion that the transcendental platform can only be attained by one who is fixed in goodness. The *brahmanas* have the best chance, given that they are defined by the very mode of goodness. Vaishnava opinion argues, however, that neither the platform of goodness, nor the methods of self-realisation can be

monopolised by any *varna* but they are attainable to all through endeavour, out of free will. The result is a paradox: whereas one must be born as a *brahmana* to be a *brahmana*, for this status requires such a high level of qualities that unless one possesses most of them at the beginning of one's life, the chances of obtaining them and being able to discharge the specific *brahmana* duties are slim; still, by principle, anyone can become a Vaishnava and attain the highest spiritual position.

Resolution of this paradox has at the same time offered the apology of the modern age history of Gaudiya Vaishnavism and on the level of theory it also sheds light upon the difficulties ISKCON and HSKCON have been facing while endeavouring to restore *varnashrama*. Difficulties originate in the insufficient understanding of the definition, the role and the importance of *varnas*; and in missing the absolute primacy of acts aiming at self-realisation over the duties of a *varna*.

The key to the riddle is the double meaning of the category of '*brahmana*': on one hand, a *brahmana* is someone who, elevated to the level of goodness, follows the brahminical way of life (which is, essentially, the complex *asrama-dharma* providing a framework for self-realisation), and, on the other, a *brahmana* is one who is engaged in the occupation of a *brahmana* by studying and teaching scriptures, performing sacrifices on behalf of himself and of others, and giving and accepting charity. The brahminical way of life is prescribed for all Vaishnavas, and they are also *brahmanas* in this sense, but not all Vaishnavas are able to follow the occupation of a *brahmana*. By *varna*, i.e. occupation, someone may even be a *shudra*, but by his way of life and level of consciousness determined by his endeavour for self-realisation he may be a most elevated *brahmana*, i.e. Vaishnava .

Bhaktivedanta Swami has enunciated to his followers that without following *varnashrama* it is not possible to rise to the level of goodness, i.e. become a *brahmana*, and then a Vaishnava. Interestingly though he was not always of this opinion: his concept of *varnashrama* underwent three phases of development. During the last period (between 1974 and 1977), most relevant to the present endeavours of HSKCON he identified *varnashrama* as an important means to spreading the faith, and a structure that needs to be realised within the society of ISKCON, the members of which are not all *brahmanas*, but are of all other *varnas* as well. The paper has shown that the crucial question determining the success of the *varnashrama* experiments is whether the *brahmanas* of ISKCON can adapt the regulations of the *varnashrama-dharma*, especially the *varna-dharma* determining the occupational positions, to the modern age.

Problem 6: Krishna-consciousness as a church institution (a brief summary of the history of the development of the Gaudiya Vaishnava organisation; the biggest risk of institutionalisation being hypocrisy; the Gaudiya Vaishnava interpretation of and solution for hypocrisy; direct countering of hypocrisy only as a last resort; the ambivalence toward the organisation and its consequences;

Bhaktivedanta Swami's principles of organisational management; organisation and management being an integral part of *varnashrama*; the history of the development of the organisation of HSKCON).

Weber had a special interest in organisations and pointed out one of the peculiarities of Hinduism, namely, that the Hindu religions, opposed to the Western, had never established firm church institutions and a hierarchy. The religious status of individual practitioners was established mainly by personal charisma, which was not underpinned by any kind of institutional position as such institutions did not exist. Through the special relationship of the Bengali with the British, and thus with Western culture, however, the Gaudiya Vaishnava acaryas have realised the importance of solid religious organisations, also present in the Krishna-conscious movement. This paper gives a detailed description of the organisational theory of Gaudiya Vaishnavism, and the history of their institutions, especially that of HSKCON.

Chapter 3 presents the history of Krishna-consciousness as part of ISKCON on the basis of detailed events during the period of 1975 to 2009. Four main factors were discerned in the analysis influencing the nature, frequency and trend of the events affecting the Hungarian Krishna-consciousness movement externally and internally in the past 35 years.

(1) The political situation of the day in Hungary, especially the reigning government's policy relating to small churches. For instance, when a politician, political party or a government agency drove an open assault against the Krishna-conscious believers out of distrust and prejudice toward new religions emerging in Hungary and out of favouritism toward those large churches that had long been on the scene in Hungary; or when discriminatory laws were being introduced against small churches, the life of HSKCON was driven by political struggle and open publicity campaigns.

(2) Situation of the Hungarian economy and the income level of the society as well as global problems also clearly influenced the life of HSKCON. In periods of economic buoyance when incomes increased, it was a lot easier also for HSKCON to finance its activities and could start large scale investment projects. In times of downturns of the world politics or economy, or in times of natural disasters, when the rapid deterioration of the ecology became clear, HSKCON was quick in identifying the inherent threat and adapted its strategic concepts and system of management, and also offered practical help to the disaster stricken.

(3) Naturally, the developments of the Hungarian Krishna-conscious movement were greatly influenced by the performance of specific religious, cultural and missionary activities as introduced by Bhaktivedanta Swami and implemented by ISKCON.

(4) The visionary and decision making leaders of HSKCON have also been of decisive influence without a doubt.

In the *Summary*, after presenting the methodological conclusions of the paper, the candidate presents those results of the research that can not only point towards new directions of research but also points out the challenges that face the growing Krishna-conscious community, which may well be a relatively new movement in Hungary, but which is based on a several thousand years old tradition.

IV. Literature forming the basis of the theses and the candidate's previous publications on the subject of the paper

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