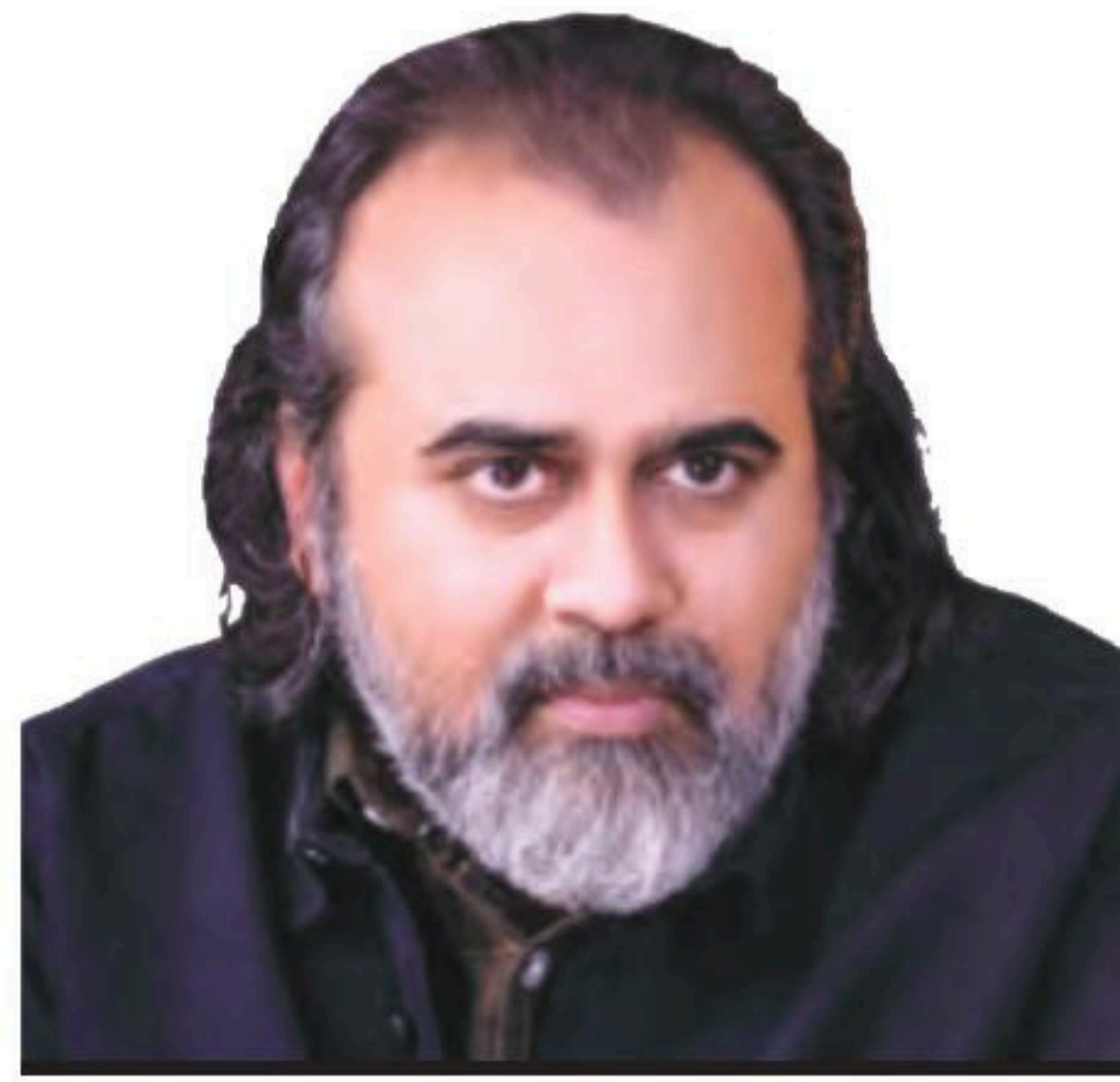




## Sanatan: Tradition loudly possessed, quietly unread



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The word “Sanatan” means eternal. It is now among the most fiercely contested words in Indian public life, invoked to denounce, defend and mobilise, with an urgency that might suggest the arguers possess some acquaintance with the tradition the word names. The urgency disguises a near-universal absence of that acquaintance. Its label is loudly possessed, while its philosophical core is quietly unread. A label offers identity without the cost of inquiry; the tradition’s core offers inquiry without the comfort of a pre-settled identity.

When Udhayanidhi Stalin declared that Sanatan Dharma was like dengue and malaria, to be eradicated and not merely opposed, the response unfolded with perfect predictability. Critics attacked a version of Sanatan Dharma that bears little resemblance to what

the term philosophically denotes. Defenders rushed to protect a version they have largely never read. The actual philosophical tradition sat untouched by either side, as irrelevant to the noise as a library to a riot outside its doors.

The critics have genuine grievances. Caste discrimination, patriarchy and the ritual exploitation of the vulnerable are real, documented and still operative. Periyar E. V. Ramasamy’s long campaign against them represents one of modern India’s more serious engagements with social oppression. The criticism arises from lived experience. Warranted indignation, however, is not the same as accurate targeting. The social evils that animated Periyar did not arise from the philosophical core of Sanatan Dharma. They arose from the ego’s capacity to commandeer any available language in service of exploitation. The exploiter and the tradition the exploiter has hijacked are not the same thing. The social evils were committed in its name, not in its spirit; to discard the tradition on this basis is to throw away the antidote because the poison was administered in the same bottle.

What does Sanatan Dharma actually mean? The root “dharma” denotes the fundamental obligation one owes to one’s own existence. “Sanatan” denotes that which holds true irrespective of time, place or circumstance. What qualifies as eternal in this sense? Ritual varies by village, belief by century, and custom by caste and region - all contingent. What remains constant across all times, geographies, genders and religious affiliations is the inner human condition: restlessness, fear, bondage to desire, and the persistent sense that something essential is missing. This condition belongs, as the tradition diagnoses, to the structure of the ego that has not yet turned to examine itself. The dharma that arises from this eternal condition is equally universal: to move, through honest inquiry, from bondage towards understanding. It is not a religion in the conventional sense, but a description of the ego’s most fundamental predicament and of what it owes itself in response.

The tradition distinguishes sharply between Shrutis — the Vedas and Upanishads — and Smritis, which includes the Manusmriti and the Puranas. The texts containing caste hierarchies and patriarchal injunctions belong overwhelmingly to the Smriti category, composed between one thousand and fifteen hundred years ago, far more recent than the Vedic core they claim to elaborate. Sanatan Dharma, properly understood, is Vedantic. The lived tradition did not consistently honour this hierarchy. Yet the canonical core’s method — inquiry



rather than acceptance — dissolves caste readings on the tradition’s own terms. The Vajrasuchika Upanishad makes this explicit: caste belongs only to the ego, which is to say it is the ego’s construction, not a feature of any reality the ego did not itself produce.

Three categorically distinct things are routinely conflated. Sanatan Dharma is a philosophical orientation directed towards liberation from inner bondage, indifferent to creed and community. Hinduism, as the Supreme Court of India has rightly observed, is a vast and internally inconsistent collection of belief systems held together largely by geographical provenance. Hindutva is a political ideology, barely a century old, that seeks to define national identity through cultural markers whose roots lie largely in the Mughal and British periods. When critics attack Sanatan Dharma and mean practised Hinduism, they target a real problem under the wrong name. When defenders protect Sanatan Dharma and mean Hindutva, they mount a real defence of the wrong object.

The central word of Sanatan Dharma is not belief but *jigyasa* — the hunger to know. The tradition tells the seeker that received beliefs, accumulated from family, culture and community, are themselves the primary obstacle to liberation. A true Sanatani is not someone who believes more intensely; he is someone who examines his own beliefs more rigorously than anyone else’s. By the criterion the tradition itself provides, a Muslim who sincerely inquires into the nature of his own inner bondage qualifies as a Sanatani under the tradition’s own definition. Conversely, the person who recites mantras without inquiry and wears religious identity as scaffolding for the ego does not qualify, regardless of the label claimed.

The most pointed irony of this controversy is that Periyar, the figure critics invoke, was animated throughout his life by a refusal to accept received authority, a rage against exploitation disguised in sacred language, and a commitment to rational inquiry over hereditary belief. Within the framework of Sanatan Dharma properly understood, this disposition is not antithetical to the tradition; it is, in the most precise sense, the tradition itself. Annihilation of Caste is not a rejection of inquiry; it is a sustained accusation that the practised tradition refused to apply inquiry to itself. BR Ambedkar was operating against its institutional capture, and that operation was itself an exercise of the method. The label belongs to the egos that fight over labels. The method remains available to anyone willing to undertake it.

Sanatan Dharma is among the most rigorous philosophical traditions humanity has produced. That its foundational texts now sit largely unread, while superstition and communal aggression are carried out in their name, is not the fault of the tradition. It is the fault of those who invoke its name while fleeing from its demands.

The question that should trouble everyone involved — defender and critic alike — is this: what exactly were you fighting over?

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