
HINDUISM

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India has been a home of many religions. Perhaps nowhere else in the world have so many people and so many religions found a home as in India. There is something unique in India that is conducive to the development of religious consciousness. India is truly a land of faith. We find here followers of almost all the major religions of the world.

It is difficult to say when Hinduism originated. However, it commands the allegiance of the major population of India. Also in other countries its impact has been felt through the centuries. Even today, many Hindus who have migrated to other parts of the world continue to perform traditional religious rites.

Hinduism does not owe its origin to any single teacher or book but to the collective wisdom and spiritual insight of many inspired seers known as "Rishis." Hinduism has grown gradually over a period of about 5,000 years, absorbing and assimilating a variety of religions and cultural movements on the Indian subcontinent.¹

From Hinduism, there evolved Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism. Hinduism is undoubtedly the oldest of all the great religions of the world. The term "Hinduism" is based on geography, coming as it does from one of the great rivers of India that run across the northern boundaries of India, known as the "Sindhu".

Hinduism is also called Santana Dharma (the eternal faith), because it is not based upon the teachings of a single preceptor but on the collective wisdom and inspiration of the great seers and sages from the very

dawn of Indian civilization.²

Literature

The earliest written records of Hinduism are the Vedas, that date back to between 3,000 and 1,200 B.C. The four Vedas are named the Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharva Veda. Among them, the Rigveda is the most ancient. Vedas were introduced by Aryan tribes who, according to some scholars, migrated into India from the Northwest.

The second great part of the sacred literature of Hindus are the Upanishads, about 108 metaphysical treatises, out of which fourteen (or thirteen) are called the most important.³ The bulk of them were produced in 800-700 B.C. However, it may be mentioned here that the dates are controversial. They contain religious and philosophical thoughts of ancient sages. They contain remarkable dialogues between the teachers and one or more pupils, dealing with the deepest problems of human existence, of death and other realms of being, or the goal of life and stages of spiritual realization. The Upanishads have provided a type of metaphysical monism and pantheism which is popularly known as Vedanta.

The Mahabharata, Ramayana and Puranas are also part of the Hindu scriptures. The Mahabharata contains a religious and philosophical poem called the Bhagavadgita. It is considered to be a direct revelation from Lord Krishna. The Ramayana is a poem that contains 24,000 verses about its hero, Lord Rama. Rama was considered the seventh incarnation of the Lord Vishnu. It is an epic of military valour and fidelity of the married couple, Rama and Sita. The epic to outsiders may seem more like a fairy tale than a holy scripture but for the pious Hindu, it teaches how important it is to keep one's promises, obey the will of one's parents, prove one's love for his wife and be courageous enough to overcome every obstacle.⁴ For a Hindu, Rama is an incarnation of divine virtue and valour, a perfect embodiment in human form of Vishnu's providential power.

The Puranas, as a whole, are ancient tales and

teachings designed to extol worship of the Hindu trinity of Gods, viz. Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the preserver, and Shiva, the lord of change or destruction.

Among the Puranas, of great value is Srimad-Bhagavata, which tells the story of Lord Krishna, the incarnation of Lord of Vishnu, one of the most popular incarnate gods of Hinduism. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are considered the incarnation of God, the Supreme.

Tantras also find place in Hinduism. There are sixty-four Sanskrit books containing conversations between Shiva and his divine consort Kali. They discuss how to obtain superhuman powers and ways to unite with the supreme spirit. Tantrism involves worship of divine energy in the female form of Kali, the consort of Shiva. The believer feels that since the ultimate bliss consists of the union of Shiva with Kali, man's supreme goal can only be obtained through sexual ecstasy.

The Vedas contain beautiful hymns addressed to various powers of nature such as the sun, the moon, the ocean, the rain, and the dawn, all pervaded by a deep intuitive awareness of the essential unity and interconnection behind all these phenomena.⁵

There are five basic tenets of Hinduism that, if properly understood, provide the key to an understanding of this great religion. The first is the concept of Brahma, the unchanging, undying reality that pervades the entire cosmos. The Vedic seers could see that everything in the universe changes. Therefore, they called the creation samsara, i.e. that which (always) moves. But they also perceived that behind change there was an unchanging substratum from which the changing worlds emanated like sparks from a great fire. This supreme, all pervasive, entity known as Brahman or Para-Brahman has been beautifully described in various upanishads. The Mundaka Upanishad contains the following verse:

"Brahman verily is this immortal being.
In front is Brahman, behind is Brahman, and
to the right and to the left.
It appears both above and below.
Verily Brahman is the effulgent universe"⁶

The Upanishads believe in the undying soul (atman). According to these texts, the human entity is born again

and again across the eons, gathering a multitude of experiences and gradually moving towards the cherished goal of perfection. This universal spark is called atman. The deathlessness of atman is also spoken of in the Bhagavadgita.⁷ This is the second tenet.

The third tenet is that atman and Brahman are essentially one. The famous words "tat tvam asi" that thou art mean that atman is essentially Brahman.

The fourth major tenet of Hinduism is that the supreme goal of life lies in a spiritual realization whereby the individual becomes aware of the deathless atman within him. The realization of atman at once brings an entirely new dimension into the picture, and the realized soul transcends the cycle of suffering, illness, old age and death and all that is associated with it. Compare this idea of the deathlessness of atman to Buddhist nirvana, which is also beyond suffering, illness, death, etc.

The fifth tenet of Hinduism is that of karma (action) and its phala (result). Action is inevitable, the human individual is bound by the results of his actions. Pleasant fruits follow good deeds and unpleasant consequences are the result of evil actions. According to Hindu philosophy, while it is true that what we are today is the result of our past deeds, it also follows that we are the makers of our future by the way we act at present. Thus, far from implying fatalism, as some wrongly believe, karma gives a tremendous responsibility to the individual and places in his own hands the key to future destiny.

The Hindu concept of time is cyclical and not lineal. The universe is without beginning and end, and goes through recurrent phases of manifestation and dissolution.

According to the Hindu tradition, human life is divided into four Ashramas or stages, viz. Brahmacarya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha and Sannyasa. The ideal life-span of the Hindu is considered a hundred years, with each of these stages consisting of twenty-five year periods. The first twenty-five years one should lead a student's life, and the second 25 years is a householder's life. By 50 he should be ready to move on to the stage of semi-retirement (Vanaprastha Ashram).

Finally, at 75 he is expected to withdraw entirely from social life and become a sannyasi, or ascetic, by renouncing the world, freeing himself from all social responsibilities and concentrating exclusively upon the spiritual quest. This is called Sannyas Ashram. These are the ideals of a Hindu's life span. However, modern Hindus hardly follow them.

According to Hinduism, there are four goals of life. Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha. Dharma is a word pregnant with many meanings and interpretations. In it are implied such concepts as justice, virtue, morality, righteousness, law and duty. Artha, or wealth, is the second goal. It is interesting that Hinduism not only gives importance to wealth, but accepts it positively as one of the goals of life, provided its acquisition and utilization are in accordance with the broad principles of dharma. Wealth should not be acquired by wrong means i.e. against the basic tenets of dharma. The third goal is kama, or sensual enjoyment. Renunciation may be a way of life for the ascetic but it is certainly not suitable to the common man who has to look after family. Therefore the concept of kama is incorporated in Hindu ethos. The final goal of a Hindu is moksha (liberation), or the release from suffering, old age, and ultimately from death itself. It implies transcending both life and death by the attainment of that spiritual stage whereby man is liberated from the wheel of samsara, or the cycle of death and rebirth.

Another important aspect of Hindu thought is the concept of incarnation or avatara, the descent of God in human form. In keeping with its concept of cyclic time, Hinduism holds that there have been innumerable such descents (avatars) of God in the past and will be more in the future. Lord Krishna himself tells Arjuna, his disciple, in the Gita, the most sacred book of Hindus, as follows:

"Whenever righteousness declines, O Bharata, and unrighteousness arises, then do I appear myself on earth. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of evil doers and for the re-establishment of righteousness, I come unto being age after age." (Bhagavadgita IV 7-8)

While the teaching of the Upanishads is portrayed in the peaceful setting of forests, that of the Bhagavadgita is on the battlefield. The teacher and the pupil, Krishna and Arjuna, in the midst of war bugles and cries, begin dialogue on metaphysical matters. Arjuna's nerves, suddenly fail him when he sees his own relations and teachers arrayed against him. He is overcome by a great wave of revulsion, and at that critical juncture, implores his teacher and guide to show him the correct path. He is not able to understand how he can kill his own relations and fellow beings. The setting of the Bhagavadgita dialogue is thus similar to the present human predicament. Man today finds himself in the midst of serious inner conflicts. It is on the battlefield of life that he needs correct guidance. This explains the special appeal of the Gita to modern man. In fact some scholars have interpreted Gita as conflict within a man regarding duty versus running from it.

It is important to note that in the Gita, Krishna appears as the divine being in all his terrifying majesty that transcends both the manifest and the unmanifest forms. Krishna grants Arjuna's request and gives him a celestial eye with which he sees divine transfiguration. The divine in the Gita is not a non-personalized concept, but implies the personality raised to divine majesty. In the eleventh chapter, Krishna reveals to Arjuna his divine form, which encompasses the entire cosmos and yet includes the calm that lies behind all manifestation. It is this vision of divinity that is described as having the splendour of a thousand suns rising simultaneously in the sky.

The concept of avatara in Hinduism is predominant. The most popular are ten avataras, of which strangely the ninth is Buddha himself. Although Buddha is not presented in the scriptures in a commendatory way, the inclusion of the Buddha reveals the great capacity in Hinduism to absorb even heretical religions. It seems the fame and influence of the Buddha was so great that he could not be ignored. He was therefore, absorbed into the Hindu pantheon. As he is included in the list of ten avataras, he is revered today by Hindus also. Indeed, although technically the number of Buddhists in India is small (it has increased recently with Dr.

Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism), many of Buddha's teachings, such as his stern condemnation of animal sacrifices and casteism have begun to appeal to modern Hindus.

Hinduism has always reserved its deepest veneration for those who are following the spiritual path and have in some way realized the divine. Scholars are respected, rulers are feared, but real veneration is reserved only for men on the divine path, who constitute a race apart, the race that never dies. This, I think is found in many religions of Asia, which shows the basic unity in approach.

It is a remarkable fact, which is largely responsible for the continued vitality of Hinduism through the ages, that it has in every century produced a number of such divine souls. These great souls, by the sheer force of their spiritual realization, kept the inner power of Hinduism intact and re-illuminated Hindu society in times of great adversities and ordeals. Had it not been for these great divine beings, truly the salt of the earth, Hinduism, which sometimes had to undergo severe persecution for centuries, would have vanished from the face of the earth.

There were great teachers (acaryas) in Hinduism who proclaimed different theories regarding God, individual soul and world and established their different schools. Among them Shankaracharya stands the foremost. However, while learned scholars proclaimed and disputed these various theories presented by different schools, the mainstay of Hinduism has always been devotion to a deity representing some aspect of the incarnation of the divine.

Popular Hindu worship revolves round three major deities, viz. Shiva, Vishnu and his incarnations, and some goddesses. Shiva is invariably worshipped along with a lingam, a powerful symbol representing the creative force behind all manifestation. He is also worshipped in his role as the cosmic dancer, Nataraja, his dance symbolizing the eternal wheel of the cosmos where millions of worlds are destroyed every moment and millions of others spring into existence to the best of the eternal rhythm. It may be remembered that Shiva (the destroyer), Brahma (the creator) and Vishnu (the preserver) are not three different gods, but three

aspects of the same divine being.

The major focus of devotion in India is the goddess in her numerous forms. She is worshipped as Parvati, the consort of Shiva, Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu, and Sita and Radha as the consorts of Sri Rama and Sri Krishna respectively. However, she is not only worshipped as a consort, but in her own right as the essence of power and beauty; as Durga, with 18 arms, riding a lion and scattering the demon hordes like chaff, as Kali the fierce, naked goddess, standing upon a corpse and drinking the blood of her fleshy enemies, as Saraswati, the goddess of art, poetry and music, the patron goddess of all learning and wisdom.⁸

In addition to Shiva, Vishnu and the goddesses, there are numerous other deities who are the objects of devotion and worship by Hindus down to the present day. Among these, the elephant-headed Ganesha, remover of obstacles, stands the foremost.

However, it may be remembered that the worship of these various deities is by no means mutually exclusive. While each Hindu has a special family deity called—the Ishta devata, he often worships three or four different deities during his daily prayers, and pays homage to any deity in a temple he may visit. Thus, worship sometimes crosses barriers of sectarianism.

It may also be pointed out that in Hinduism, certain symbols are important for the purpose of meditation. The most important of these is OM, which is described in the scriptures as being the audio-visual symbol of Brahman itself and is endorsed with a wealth of symbolism.

Meditation on the symbol and sound of OM is an important aspect of Yoga, a word that has gained much currency of late throughout the world. Even Buddhists adopted this symbol in invocation to Buddha.⁹ One of the significant aspects of Hinduism, whether it is Yoga or any other system of philosophy, is discipline and teaching. The importance of a guru, or teacher, remains supreme. The guru in the Hindu tradition is to be venerated even more than one's parents, because while our parents give us physical life, it is the guru who brings about the crucial spiritual rebirth, the only way man can fulfill his cosmic destiny. The guru is worshipped like an incarnation of God.

In spite of the Muslim rule over India, with its severe persecution of Hindus, a movement arose that was known as the Bhakti (devotion) movement. There arose a series of extraordinary saint singers who preached the gospel of divine love and ecstasy. While previously Sanskrit held sway, and the Hindu teachings had been almost exclusively in this sacred language of the Hindus, the new movement broke away from the rigid and conservative Brahmin-dominated tradition, and for the first time the regional languages and dialects were used to propagate the message of the saint singers. This movement revolted against the rigid caste restrictions and taboos that had become negative features in classical Hinduism. The saint singers not only came from all castes and communities, including Muslims, but women also took part. Their message was addressed to the common man, irrespective of one's caste, creed and sex. Ramananda, Guru Ravidas and Kabir, by sheer dint of their spiritual merit, rose to become the most respected religious teachers of their times. Kabir tremendously influenced India in his day. There is an interesting, perhaps apocryphal, tradition about his death. It is said that both Hindus and Muslims claimed his body, the former insisting that he should be cremated and the latter insisting that he should be buried. When the shroud was removed, however, the body had disappeared and in its place was a heap of flowers. These flowers were divided between the contending parties. The Hindus carried off their share of flowers and cremated them with great devotion, while the Muslims buried their share with equal veneration.

The Bhakti movement produced great literary figures. Two figures of particular importance are Tulsidas (author of the Ramacharita-manas) and Surdas, who composed beautiful poems directed in praise of Lord Krishna. Both Surdas and Tulsidas, along with other devotional saints, gave a tremendous boost to popularize Hinduism. In fact, the Bhakti movement demonstrated the resilience of Hinduism, its capacity to enable its followers to restate and re-interpret the eternal verities in the light of changed circumstances.

In Kanatakka, in South India, the great saint Purandaradasa sang about the glory of God and won a vast following. In Bengal, Jayadeva, a poet devotee,

composed one of the post-classic Sanskrit masterpieces in his poem Gita-Govinda relating the story of Sri Krishna. An extraordinary saint called Chaitanya, popularly known as "Mahaprabhu" (the great lord) and considered by his devotees to be an incarnation of Sri Krishna himself, founded the Vaishnava movement in Bengal. The special features of his movement were group singing (kirtans) and chanting by groups of devotees wandering from village to village and from town to town. Often the men involved in chanting would be thrown into a trance or "fit of ecstasy" as they contemplated the glory of Krishna.

In Maharashtra, in West India, the saints Tukaram and Jnaneshwar also influenced the Bhakti movement and were instrumental in the revival of Hinduism. The great woman saint of the Bhakti movement was Mirabal, a Rajput princess who was married at an early age to the Rana of Udaipur. In childhood she became a devotee of Sri Krishna and dedicated her life to him. Even after her marriage she continued to devote her entire time to the worship of Lord Krishna, incurring the displeasure of her husband, who even tried to poison her. By Lord Krishna's grace, however, the cup of poison turned into honey and she danced into ecstasy before the image of the Lord. Mirabal subsequently renounced the worldly life and wandered through India singing her beautiful compositions, which are among the most moving devotional songs of Hinduism.

Thus in the most difficult period of Hindu history, they produced a galaxy of saint singers drawn from all corners of the country. They were re-expressing the great Vedantic truths--the unity of atman and Brahman, of the human and the divine--in a popular parlance that took the message down to the most humble villages, where the majority of Hindus have always lived.

The Renaissance of Hinduism

The entire history of Hinduism, looked at from a certain angle, can be seen as a constant process of challenge and response. By the time the British arrived in India, Hinduism had reached perhaps its lowest ebb. All sorts of superstitions and undesirable practices flourished in the name of religion, and caste taboos had

become so rigid that Hindu society was under great stress and was facing disintegration.

It may be pointed out that Hindus, who had a thousand years earlier sent their great missionaries to the four corners of Asia, had now begun insisting that anyone returning from abroad would have to undergo purification rites. Women had become virtual slaves within the joint family. Widows were treated with great cruelty. Also theologically, the great Vedantic truths that lay behind Hindu thought had been absorbed by the jungle growth of superstitions and corrupt practices. Indeed, it was one of the darkest periods in Indian history, and it seemed that Hinduism had at last exhausted its spiritual reserves and would gradually fade away in the face of the new onslaught of Western materialism. However, once again a miracle of regeneration was witnessed, and Hindu society produced a series of remarkable men who, by the sheer power of their spiritual insight and illumination, rekindled the dying spark.

Bengal spearheaded the great movement for social reform and the cultural revival of Hinduism. Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), the father of modern India and a man of unusual intellectual ability, took a leading part in starting English middle schools in Bengal. In 1828, he founded the Brahma Sabha later to develop under his successor, Devendranath Tagore, into the Brahmo Samaj.

The Brahmo Samaj, as well as its offshoots, strongly attacked idol-worship and undesirable social customs such as compulsory "Sati" (the immolation of widows upon their husband's funeral pyre). The leaders of this movement, especially Kashab Chandra Sen, were influenced considerably by the style of the Christian missionaries who had become active under British rule. Many of their prayer meetings were modelled after Christian church services.

Under the influence of Brahmo Samaj, various other movements, notably the Prarthana Samaj and the Theosophical Society (founded by Madame Blavatsky) started. Mrs. Annie Besant's contribution in revitalizing Hinduism is of no less significance. Simultaneously, the rediscovery of the ancient Indian texts by European scholars such as Max Muller, Oldenberg, Fergusson and Cunningham, and the works of

Western archaeologists and linguists, brought into light the remarkable achievements of the Hindu past which had been ignored or virtually lost during the centuries of foreign rule. These new movements and discoveries gave the 19th century Hindu a new awareness of his rich cultural heritage and renewed pride in his ancient religion.

The major figure in the Hindu revival was Swami Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883), who founded the Arya Samaj in 1875. Unlike the Brahmo Samaj or its offshoots, which were considerably influenced by Christians, the Arya Samaj was militantly a Hindu fundamentalist movement. Swami Dayanand passionately advocated a return to the pristine purity of Vedic Hinduism, and criticized and virtually denounced the post-Vedic Hindu scriptures such as the Puranas. He also condemned idol worship and caste distinctions. He advocated full equality for women, initiated a widespread educational campaign with a special emphasis on girls' education, and launched a crusade against the concept of untouchability. The Arya Samaj movement was able to establish a chain of educational institutions within India.

The other leaders of the revival movement were Sri Ramkrishna Parama Hans (1836-1886), Swami Vivekanand (1863-1902), Sri Raman Maharshi (1879-1950), Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) and Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948). Each of these men, drawn from the very heart of the Hindu tradition, re-interpreted the eternal truths of the Hindu scriptures in light of their own extraordinary attainments. Sri Ramkrishna showed that, far from being a dying religion, as some of the newly educated intellectuals had begun to believe, Hinduism was an inexhaustible fount of spiritual inspiration.

Swami Vivekanand, a Hindu monk of extraordinary intellectual achievement and a disciple of Sri Ramkrishna, succeeded at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, in re-asserting the values Hinduism represented. He restated the tenets of Hinduism in light of the present situation in the world. He reaffirmed not only the divinity of God, but also the inherent divinity of man. A special feature of his teachings was the social context and his intense emphasis on service to the poor, the down-trodden, the sick and the hungry.

One of his celebrated remarks was that, "It is an insult to preach religion to a man with a hungry stomach," and the only way God could appear before the masses of India was in the form of bread. He stressed the primacy of a spiritual life and preached a doctrine of inner strength and spritual power, which alone could free India from her material, intellectual and spiritual bondage. Vivekanand emphasized the essential unity of all religions.

Sri Raman Maharshi's teachings expound the Vedantic path of self-knowledge. According to him, the quest for self-knowledge is at the heart of the spiritual endeavour. He explained the process of spiritual introspection with great clarity.

Another luminary was Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, who was gifted with a brilliant mind and deep psychic powers. He took a keen interest in the freedom movement in India along with the national leaders. His political philosophy was called "spiritual nationalism." He rejected the traditional Hindu concept of individual salvation, and stressed those aspects of the Hindu tradition that laid emphasis on raising the collective consciousness of the race.

The great personality Mahatma Gandhi finally came on the Indian scene. He was rightly called the "Father of the Nation." He not only gave political leadership during the freedom movement, but introduced new concepts of Satya (truth) and Ahimsa (non-violence), which he made the cornerstones of his political philosophy. It should be noted that Gandhi's approach to politics was deeply grounded on Hindu principles. He himself was a devout Hindu and will go down in history as one of the greatest social reformers that Hinduism produced.

Gandhi's main contributon to Hinduism was the manner in which he approached the problems of the so-called untouchables, whose ill-treatment has been one of the most disgraceful features of Hindu society. He also involved women in large numbers in the freedom movement.

Gandhi's autobiography, "My Experiments with Truth," is a remarkable document and shows Gandhi's deep commitment to the fundamental ideals of Hinduism. He stressed the Hindu concept of the essential unity and the harmony of all religions, and his prayer meetings would contain readings from other religious scriptures in addition to

those from Hinduism. No other saint or leader of public movements encouraged the reading of scriptures from other religions.

Finally, Hinduism retains an inner dynamism and presents certain key concepts that are particularly relevant in this nuclear age, not only to the Hindu but to the entire human race.

I will end this paper with two beautiful couplets from the Bhagavadgita :

"Hold pleasure and pain, profit and loss, victory and defeat to be the same; then brace yourself for the fight. So will you bring no evil on yourself." (II. 38).

"And action alone is your proper business, never its fruits; let not your motive be the fruit of action, nor your attachment to mere worklessness." (II. 47).

This is the inspiring message from the scripture that is the essence of Hindu ideals. How relevant it is, even in the modern age.

Notes:

1. Cf. Y. O. Kim, "Hinduism" in World Religions (New York, 1982), pp. 3-4.
2. Cf. Karan Singh, "Hinduism", Religions of India (ROI) (New Delhi, Clarion Books, 1983), p. 19.
3. There is a controversy over the number of Upanishads, but thirteen or fourteen seem to be Principal Upanishads. Karan Singh says, "... out of 108 Upanishads, at least fourteen are of major importance" (ROI, p. 21). R. E. Hume has translated the major Upanishads into English under the title, The Thirteen Principal Upanishads (London, Oxford University Press, 1931).
4. Cf. Kim, op. cit., p. 6.
5. Cf. ROI, p. 20.
6. Cf. Mundakan Upanishad, 2.2.12
7. Cf. Bhagavadgita, II. 23
8. ROI, p. 32.
9. In the invocation of the commentary on the Arthavini-scaya-sutra before "namo buddhaya", OM is used. Cf.: Arthaviniscaya-sutra and its Commentary, ed. N. H. Samtani (Patna, K. P. Jayaswal Research

Institute, 1971), p. 71.