

The Religion of the Hindus - A Review

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Abstract: *The oldest of the four living religions is Hinduism. It predates the Aryan invasion of India and archeological findings revealed that a highly developed culture was in existence between 3000 BC and 2000 BC. Hinduism has grown gradually during the various stages of civilization. Sources: The sources of Hindu religion are the Srutis, Smritis and Darshanas. Basic features: The basic features of Hindu religion are (i) strong belief in the existence of Gods, and Goddesses, (ii) cult of image worships tinged with offerings of prayers, chanting of mantras and distribution of prasads. Hindus believe God to be formless, but we actually do not pray to the stone rather pray to the person figured in it, the psychological presence, the cosmic power, (iii) belief in the theory of karma, rebirth and the immortality of soul. Hinduism believes that the death is not the end of life because the soul migrates from one body to another. The doctrine of karma is nothing but causal law operating in the moral sphere, (iv) attainment of liberation-The destiny of man is the attainment of liberation (Moksha). Man wants to free himself from shackles of births and death. It is the attainment of spiritual status which is beyond space -time limit.*

Keywords: Hinduism, Srutis, Smiritis, Darshans

Among all the four major living religions of the world viz - Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, Hinduism is the oldest. It is very difficult to trace out the definite period of its origin but according to scholars it ranges between 2000 BC and 1500 BC. It predates the Aryan invasion of India. Archeological findings reveal that a highly developed urban culture was in existence between 3000 BC and 2000 BC in the ancient cities of Harappa and Mohanjodaro, the former situated at the bank of the river Ravi and the latter on the Indus. During the excavation, the excavators discovered the remains of place where ceremonial ablutions were performed, the worship of mother goddess figures seated on a stool like a yogi in meditation etc. Thus, it can be very well said that Hinduism has its roots during the Indus Valley civilization period.

Though Hinduism cannot exactly claim to be 'universal in scope like Buddhism, Christianity and Islam but it is the religion of India and a good sized minority in Pakistan. It has mothered more religions than of any other religions in the world. While Judaism forms the basis of two living religions - Christianity and Islam; Hinduism gave birth to three - Jainism, Buddhism and Sikhism. While Jainism and Buddhism came into existence around 6th century BC, Sikhism, the youngest of all religions in 15th century AD.

Hinduism has grown gradually during the various stages of civilization. As K.M. Sen¹ states-

"Hinduism is more like a tree that has grown gradually than like a building that has been erected by some great architect at some definite point of time. It contains within itself the influences of many cultures and the body of Hindu thought thus offers as much variety as the Indian nation itself". Similarly, Herbert Stroup² has also summed up the idea in the following words-

"Hinduism is not like a building planned by an architect and created in exact detail to specification. Rather it is like a river making its way from small and distant beginnings, meandering in its course as it finds the channels that will carry its flow, until by the time it reaches the open sea it has become so extensive as to seem unrelated to its distant source".

Sources of Hindu Religion

The sources of Hindu religion are categorised under three heads: - (i) Sruti (ii) Smritis and (iii) The Darshanas.

(i) *Srutis:-*

It comprises of Vedas, Brahmanas and the Upanisads. These texts / religious materials were either seen or heard by seers. Vedas are said to be anadi (beginningless) and they are regarded to be sacred. These are said to be authoritative and form the basis of Hindu religion. Its words are simple, significant and ancient, full of faith and devotion, confidence and certitude. In them are concentrated the eternal hope and consolation of man. It is difficult to conceive the earnestness of the sages from whose lips first issued the great prayer. 'Out of unreality lead me to reality; out of darkness lead me to light, out of death lead me to life eternal'¹. In the Vedas personalized forces of nature such as fire, wind, rain were recognized and hymns were sung in their praise, Brahmanas were treatise on sacrificial rites and priesthood and the Upanisads were philosophical writings in a developed form.

(ii) *Smiritis:-*

Almost all the authoritative texts such as the Dharmasastras (Manu and Yajnavalkya), the Puranas and the epics (Ramayan and the Mahabharata) fall under this category. The Dharmasastras depict the laws and regulations, commentaries etc. of personal and social subjects and also contain instructions on the administration of government and the ways of justice. The Puranas form the materials for story tellers and minstrels and contain almost all the subjects of human appeal, culture and practical matters. The Ramayan and the Mahabharata are two great epics and almost all the Hindus are familiar with them. The central religious teaching of the Mahabharata is enumerated in the Gita which is the most popular ethical book of the Hindus. It analyses in detail the reconciliation of Karma, Gyan and Bhakti yoga, the ideal of perfect surrender of God and the ways of liberation. It gives us a conspectus of the Divine, transcendent and immanent.

(iii) *The Darshanas:-*

It comprises of mainly the six orthodox and three unorthodox systems of philosophy. Nyaya - Vaisheshika, Samkhya - Yoga and Mimamsa - Vedanta fall under the first category. Charvaka, Jainism and Buddhism fall under the second

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category¹. All the aspects of religion in its broader perspective such as the existence of God, world evil and suffering, karma and rebirth, human destiny (moksha) and the Hindu ethics of prayer and worship etc. are dealt with in the systems.

In this connection, let me add that in order to have a full-fledged view of Hindu religion one has to dive deep into the sea of the religious texts mentioned above because unlike other religions of the world the religions teachings of the Hindus are not codified in a single book. Because of the flexibility of Hindu religion, it has become such a great religion. A Hindu is allowed to choose any path and satisfy his needs towards religion. A Hindu is not forced to follow certain principles and is at liberty to quench his thirst by drinking the nectar of honey flowing profusely from any of the religious books.

Basic features of Hindu Religion

The basic features of Hindu religion are (i) strong belief in the existence of God (ii) cult of image worship tinged with offering of prayers, chanting of mantras and distribution of prasads (iii) belief in the theory of karma and rebirth, immortality of soul and (iv) attainment of liberation (moksha). These have been discussed below:-

(i) Belief in the existence of God:-

Despite the differences of beliefs and practices among the Hindus, there is seldom any Hindu who does not believe in God. The God of Hinduism is flexible in the sense that the Hindus believe not only in one God but many Gods. Their belief ranges from polytheism of the Vedas to abstract monism of Sankara. The Vedas were polytheistic in nature in the sense that various Gods and Goddesses such as Varun, Mitra, Agni, Indra etc. were worshipped and hymns were sung in their praise. They were actually personification of the powers of nature like sun, earth, winds, rain etc.

Though later on an indication towards monotheism is also seen when the Vedas declare that one reality is called by different names (Ekamsadviprabahudavadanti). In the later Hinduism too we find a tendency of polytheism in the sense that the above Gods and Goddesses were replaced by Visnu, Siva, Ganesh, Kartikaya, Hanuman (male gods) and Parvati, Durga, Kali, Saraswati, Lakshmi (female gods) etc. However, almost every Hindu believed that there is in reality one God and these are his manifestations. Accordingly, to Hinduism God is three in one. He is the Creator (Brahma), Preserver (Visnu) and Destroyer (Shiva/Mahesh). He does not create the world out of nothing (ex nihilo nihil fit) but out of external atoms, space, time, ether, minds and soul. He is the creator in the sense that he is the efficient cause of the world and not the material cause. He is both immanent and transcendent. He is the preserver because the world exists at his will. There is a saying that not a blade of grass can move without his will. He is the destroyer because he lets loose the forces of destruction when the exigencies of moral world require it. He is the directive cause of the actions of all living beings. While man is the efficient instrumental cause of his actions, God is the efficient directive cause (prayojakarta). Thus God is the moral governor of the world of living beings including ourselves, the impartial dispenser of the fruits of our actions (Karmaphaldata) and the Supreme arbiter of joys and

sorrows¹.

According to the Yoga philosophy God is the supreme person who is above all individual selves and is free from all defects. He is the perfect being who is eternal and all pervading. He is omnipotent and omniscient. He is the Supreme Ruler of the universe and has infinite knowledge and unlimited power. Sri Sankara, the chief exponent of Advaita Vedanta believes that the Absolute reality or Brahma is of the nature of existence (sat), consciousness (cit) and bliss (ananda). According to him the self (jiva) and Brahman are identical as there is no reality anywhere other than Brahman. From the empirical / practical (Vyavaharikadristi) standpoint God is the creator, preserver and destroyer of the world and is therefore omnipotent, omniscient being. He then appears to be possessed of all these qualities and is known as Saguna Brahma or Iswara and becomes the object of worship but Sankara does not believe in the reality of the world because according to him the world appears to be real because of ignorance (maya). Creatorship of the world is not God's essence, it is accidental and does not touch his essence. From the transcendental standpoint (paramarthikadristi) God is conscious, real and infinite (Satyam, Jnanam, anantam Brahma). God here becomes attribute less hence Nirguna Brahma. The Hindus believe God to be an object of worship and hence believe in the practical standpoint of Sankara. But Ramanuja believes that Jiva and Brahman are identical in a special sense, so his philosophy is termed as qualified monism (visistadvaita). According to Bhagwat Gita (which can be regarded to be the Bible of the Hindus) the whole world is the Supreme manifestation of God. God is Purusottama. God resides in the heart of every individual. The devotee should surrender and throw himself at the mercy of God. As the Gita says:

"Merge thy mind on Me, be My devotee, prostrate thyself before Me, thou shall come even unto Me. I pledge thee My troth, thou art dear to me. Abandoning all dharmas, come unto Me alone for shelter; sorrow not I will liberate thee from all sins"¹.

According to S. Radhakrishnan –“The Gita recognizes that the one infinite can be approached and worshipped through any of his aspects. This tolerant spirit has made Hinduism a synthesis of different kinds of worship and experience, an atmosphere unifying many cults and creeds, a system thought or a spiritual culture based the fact that the one truth has many sides”².

(ii) Cult of image worship:-

The Hindus who believe God to be formless worship him through images. The image is merely a symbol of the Supreme God head, intended to evoke a sense of the vast and ultimate reality. It suggests the essential truth of the real that is beyond all forms. The contention of Heraclitus that he who prays to an image is chattering to the stone wall is not correct because we actually do not pray to the stone rather pray to the person figured in it, the psychological presence, the cosmic power. Among the four stages, Identity with the Supreme is the highest, the stage of meditation is the second, the stage repeating hymns and mantras the third and the lowest is the form of external worship. We are permitted to go for image worship so long we do not attain the spiritual maturity to

realize the presence of the Supreme which is exclusively left to the saints and seers and much beyond the capacity of common man. Among the various Gods and Goddesses image worship in the form of three deities along with their consorts are very prominent among the Hindus. Brahma the creator is linked to Saraswati the Goddess of learning, Visnu the protector has Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth and prosperity as his consort and Siva, the destroyer is linked to Sakti (kali) the Goddess of Power and Destruction. Visnu, furthermore is portrayed in Hinduism as being incarnate in human form. Rama and Krishna are regarded to be his incarnations. They are regarded to be avatars by Hindus and are worshipped everywhere. Even Sita, Rama's wife regarded to be a model of self-sacrificing womanhood, his brother Laksman and even Hanuman are being worshipped by the Hindus. In some of the states of India we find the Hanuman and Krishna temples exist in large numbers and there is seldom any Hindu who does not visit these temples and worship them. Siva is an important deity in Hinduism. The great God Siva has revealed himself in three primary forms - animal (the Bull), anthropomorphic or human and phallic (the linga). The Sivalinga is an object of veneration and worship. Siva's active power or Sakti (Kali) is expressed in female form in the worship of the various consorts of the deity. Brahma is the only deity, who though regarded by the Hindus as the Creator of the universe is not worshipped like other deities. His only image is installed at Puskar where he is worshipped. He is regarded to be the one Reality who is pure existence as stated by Herbert Stroup. He is not directly discoverable, but he reveals himself, super-personal though he maybe in a variety of divine forms and as such. He is there not the object of cult worship. So, we find here that God is worshipped through images, in different forms of puja; prayers are offered by chanting of mantras and at the end prasada is offered to his devotees. Vivekananda came down heavily on those preachers of Brahmo Samaj such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Dayanand Saraswati who condemned idolatry and said that they were at liberty to worship God without form discarding any external help but then they should not condemn others who cannot do the same. In his words: -

"I do not condemn it (image worship) Aye, where would I have been if I had not been blessed with the dust of the holy feet of that orthodox, image worshipping Brahmana (Ramakrishna)".

(iii) **Belief in Karma and Rebirth and the Immortality of soul**

Hinduism believes that death is not the end of life because the soul transmigrates from one body to another at death. Soul is immortal and it never dies. The idea of rebirth is linked with the Law of Karma. As you sow, so you reap. The doctrine of karma is really nothing but the causal law operating in the moral sphere. Just as every effect is supposed to have a cause in the physical world, in the same manner pleasures and pain of life are supposed to be the effects of human actions, which are therefore the causes of man's suffering and enjoyment of the worldly life. A good action produces pleasures and a bad action pains. Action that falls within the domain of Law of Karma is a voluntary action which the agent undertakes after due deliberation only with a view to doing good to himself (svakalyan) either directly or indirectly. Hence, it is just and

proper that he alone should reap the fruits of all his actions, if not in this birth then certainly in some other births as otherwise justice is violated. Thus as a necessary corollary of the doctrine of Karma, the ancient sages have formulated further the doctrine of births and rebirths.

The belief in the law of Karma along with its supplement in the form of the theory of rebirth is therefore necessary to explain the apparent inequalities of life. In actual life virtuous are often found to suffer and grown under the heavy burden of pains and miseries whereas vicious persons are found to prosper. Again persons born of the same parents are brought up in the same environment attain different grades of success in life. Some are learned, some idiots, some happy and some miserable. We may ask - Are all these inequalities man-made and removal by human efforts? At least equality cannot be attained in respect of the span of life and also in respect of the mental sufferings of man. We often come across persons, who are so constituted that in spite of their best efforts, they cannot be happy even though they enjoy all sorts of physical comforts. The sages of ancient India have tried to explain such apparent anomalies of life through Karma and rebirth.

The law of Karma can very well be traced to the Rgvedic conception of Rta. The sages of Rg Veda seem to believe that all activities of the world are regulated by the cosmic law in the form of Rta. In the Brahmanas we find a further elaboration of the ideas of karma and rebirth. In the Sathapatha Brahmana, it is stated that a man is born again and again as a reward for knowing certain mystery. He also received rewards or punishments according to his good and bad action. In the words of Deussen - "... The idea of recompense is formulated, involving the necessity of setting before the departed different degrees of compensation in the other world proportionate to their knowledge and actions"¹. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan has pointed out that there are different views about future life in the Brahmanas. In his words "In the Brahmanas we do not find anyone view about the future life. The distinction between the path of the fathers and that of the devas is given. Rebirth on earth is sometimes looked upon as a blessing and not an evil to be escaped from. It is promised as a reward for knowing some divine mystery. But the most dominant view is that of immortality in heaven, the abode of the Gods"². In the Upanisads we find that thoughts and desires, ignorance and impurity, nature of one's deeds leads to rebirth. In the Brhad Aranyaka Upanishad the idea of soul re-entering the body has been expressed through similes and analogies. In the language of Yajnavalkya -

"As a caterpillar, when it has come to the end of a blade of grass, in taking the next step draws itself together towards it, just so this soul in taking the next step strikes down this body, dispels its ignorance and draws itself together for making the transition"³. In the Mahabharata also, the law of karma has become a vital force holding firmly the civilisation of ancient India and this has been simplified through innumerable legends, stories and their clear indications of rebirth resulting from the acts performed in their previous lives. Death, according to the Mahabharata is simply a change of form. In the Gita we find the ideas of karma and rebirth in a very clear manner. The Gita aims at

revealing to us the secret of karma. "Duty for the sake of duty" should be the motto and there should be no hankering for the results. The immortality of soul as expounded by the Gita also serves as an explanation for the existence of an after birth. When Arjuna refuses to fight in the battle, Lord Krishna explains to him in various ways that death is not a complete extinction of life. The soul that resides in living being does not die despite the call of death. The soul cannot be destroyed through arms, it cannot be burnt, it cannot be made wet with water nor can air dry it¹. The Gita explains the process of the soul taking rebirth through an analogy. Just as when the garments become old and are torn off, similarly the soul leaves the old body and enters into a new one².

In the different systems of philosophy too the idea of karma & rebirth have also been explained. In the Samkhya Karika a man reaches upwards through virtue and through vice migrates to the bodies of animals, reptiles, birds etc. In the Nyaya system it is stated that an individual is born with Samskaras which are nothing but accumulated thoughts of the past lives in subtle forms. When an infant is born he shows the instinct of suckling and the fear of death which the baby has not experienced in this life. Even though during this short span of present life he has not perceived anything that could give rise to fear or joy, still the infant seems to go through these experiences. So the legitimate inference is that these experiences are possible in him because of the Samskaras or impressions of his previous lives.

(iv) Attainment of Liberation (Moksha)

The destiny of man according to man is the attainment of liberation (moksha). It is the summum bonum of life according to Hinduism. Man wants to free himself from the shackles of births and rebirths. It is release from all sorts of worldly bonds and it can be directly experienced only and cannot be expressed through language. It is the attainment of spiritual status which is beyond space time limit.

In the Samkhya doctrine of liberation we find that men are the victims of three kinds of pains viz the adhyatmika, adhibhautika and adhidaivika. The first is due to intraorganic causes like bodily disorders, mental sufferings like fever, headache, pangs of fear, anger, greed etc. The second is produced by extra organic natural causes like men, beasts, thorns etc- instances like murder, snake-bite prick of thorns etc. The third is caused by extra-organic supernatural cases like the pains inflicted by ghosts, demons etc. As we know men desire to avoid every kind of pain. We cannot have only pleasure and avoid pain. Liberation (mukti) is therefore complete cessation of all pain without a possibility of return. Ignorance is the cause of suffering according to Sankhya. Even the Upanisads say so. Freedom from suffering is to be attained through right knowledge. If we have perfect knowledge about reality and the uneducated masses understand the same, one can attain liberation. According to Samkhya, liberation can be attained both in this life and life hereafter. The former is called jivanmukti and the latter videhmukti. Videhmukti ensures absolute and complete freedom. Samkhya also believes that liberation can be attained in this life. According to him liberation is the identity of the self and Brahman which is real. Bondage is due to illusion and liberation is the removal of such illusion. It is a state of positive bliss (ananda) because Brahma is bliss and liberation

is identity with Brahman. Bhagwat Gita emphasises the role of niskama karma in attainment of moksha though it preaches that liberation can be attained through jnana (knowledge), bhakti (devotion) and karma (moral actions). Though the concept of ignorance and liberation were not seen during the Vedic period but the ultimate end for them was to attain swarga. In Hinduism too Heaven (swarga) and Hell (narak) are not completely absent as certain sections of the Hindus believe in heaven and hell.

To sum up, it can be said that the vast literatures of Hindu thought gives us immense thinking about the religion of the Hindus and its impact on human beings.

References

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- [2] Herbert Stroup- "Four Religions of Asia" (1817) p-37
- [3] S Radhakrishnan- Religion and Society p-109
- [4] For the purpose of depicting Hindu religion, Jainism and Buddhism have not been considered as they are different religions
- [5] Nyaya Bhasya 4.1.21
- [6] Bhagwat Geeta XVIII – 64-66
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