

Hinduism : The Faith Eternal

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The subject cannot be defined exactly, nor can it be explained fully. It can only be felt and experienced. It cannot be defined because definitions constrict and circumscribe, and what is circumscribed cannot be complete, cannot be free, cannot go beyond a certain dimension. Yet, Hinduism, which is timeless and also within time, has to be explained in some way, catching a few glimpses from here and there, and thereby we must try to know a little about what the ancient tradition is, what the holy religion is, what *sanātanadharmā* is, and why it is relevant even to this day.

India had to undergo one political crisis after another. It had to face foreign forces. It had to face people who proselytized the Indians at the point of sword, or by some other mischievous methods. But, despite, all these attacks, all these machinations, all these setbacks Hinduism lives even today. Rather, it is the religion of the future if humanity is to survive.

Hinduism has meant differently to different people. Its most ancient name is *sanātanadharmā*. I must say that it is *dharma*. To begin with, it is *dharma* and *dharma* has to be understood in its right perspective. Then it is *sanātana* or eternal. This has to be taken in an adjectival sense rather than in the sense of a noun. It is a different matter that in the 19th century it got a new perspective in the form of a noun when the Arya Samaj was set up in 1875 by Swami Dayananda Saraswati. Dayananda belonged to Gujarat. He established his Arya

Samaj first in Mumbai and two years later in Punjab. You all know that he had his own philosophy, his own ideology, his own way of looking at things.

So, starting with the first thing, that is, Hinduism is a *dharma*. And *dharma* cannot have a name. Defining Hinduism is like defining the five elements of Nature. You cannot measure the earth fully. You cannot measure the volume of water all over the earth and even beyond. You cannot have the gravity of other five elements existing right in front of you. You cannot also measure space. Likewise, Hinduism cannot be defined. It cannot be covered by any such definition. All Hindus have their own views about their own religion. And those who are not Hindus have also their own views, and the views keep changing. But, when it comes to *dharma*, it does not change. It is permanent. It is eternal. It is the centre of life. It is duty, it is righteousness, it is divine law, and it is much more than all these because, *dharma* is at the root of what we know as *sanātanadharmā*. It is the quintessential element of what we now know as Hinduism. And the *sāmānyadharmā*, which is to be distinguished from *svadharmā*, obviously rests on the ten principles mentioned in the *Manusmṛiti*. Manu has given ten characteristics of *dharma*. He says,

*Dhṛiti kṣhamā damah asteyam shoucham
indriyanigrahaḥ
Dhi vidyā satyam akrodho dashakam
dharma lakṣhanam.*

The value of these ten principles is very profound. *Dhriti* is *dhairya* or patience or perseverance; *kshamā* is forgiveness; *damah* is self-control; *asteyam* is non-stealing; *shouca* is cleanliness (both physical and mental). *Dhi* is intelligence; *vidyā* is true knowledge or wisdom; *satyam* is the truth; and *akrodha* is absence of anger. These are the ten formulations of *dharma* which make Hinduism move and go. As people have been adhering to these principles of righteousness they have been achieving wonderful things in almost all walks of life. You see, there is not a single domain in which the Hindus had not contributed whether it was the concept of the zero in mathematics, the decimal system, or architecture and engineering, and yoga. Hinduism is in fact eternal because it is based on *satya* or Truth and *rita*, ie the cosmic order.

Not person, but principle

Swami Vivekananda rightly observed that Hinduism does not rest on persons, but on principles. When we talk about persons, they may have their limitations. They may also change from time to time. But this does not happen when we stick to principles. Principles do not change provided they have some connections with the cosmic order or if they are rooted in Truth. Swami Vivekananda has pointed out this weakness of many religions which are based on personality. Indeed, if you take away the prophet from Christianity, what remains? If you take away the prophet from Islam, what remains? You may take away Guru from certain religions and what remains? You may take Bahauallah from the Baha'i and what remains? By contrast, there are in Hinduism thirty-three million gods and goddesses as per the popular belief. But even if all those gods and all their

incarnations are removed, Hinduism will live as before. Therein lies its greatness. Because of this quintessential element Hinduism has survived despite all vicissitude and it will survive. It is a different matter that these days we have critics, academics and scholars of comparative religion who just talk about caste, untouchability, superstitions, and consider these all to be the Hindu way of life, which it is not.

Coming back to our point, Hinduism is essentially *sanātānadharmā*. Our rishis and munis did not give all these principles specific names because they are meant for all times. They were as valid in the past as they are in the present and will continue to be so in future. Why? Because that is *rita*, the cosmic order, which is the substratum of existence. Without the cosmic order nothing happens. The sun and moon shine, weather changes, seasons come and go and many more things happen. It is all a part of the cosmic order. And we are no different. That is what the Hindu sages told us. Our body is a part of the cosmic body, our mind is a part of the cosmic mind, our consciousness is a part of the cosmic consciousness. So this is one order; this is one unit.

Again, Hinduism believes in differentiation which is why, as individuals, we can choose our own path depending on our mental dispositions or inclinations. One can go ahead and follow the path of devotion (Bhakti-yoga), or realize God through knowledge (Jñāna-yoga). Similarly, many spiritual aspirants try to control the fluctuations of their mind and be a *rāja-yogi* or be a man of action and become a *karma-yogi*. So, in Hinduism one can choose the path of one's choice depending on one's capabilities, one's mental proclivities and taste, and the circumstances in which one is placed. This is something very unique which you do not find in other faiths although they

are also valid paths that ultimately lead to the one.

Then, there must be a way which is the ultimate way and is rooted in the internal or inner nature of man. This inner nature is a part of outer nature. But what we do is to concentrate only on the outer nature in a regimented fashion. Sometimes we do not use our minds. We do not realize what we are. And therein lies a great concept of Hinduism—that man is divine. Never forget the glory of human nature, as Swami Vivekananda rightly said and added that we are the greatest god that ever was or ever will be. ‘Christ and Buddhas are but waves on the boundless ocean which *I am*.’ And on another occasion he said that it does not matter if Mohammad or Christ were good or great. But does it affect our own greatness? Do we become great by going through their lives, by following their ideals? Can we do that? Yes, it is possible, said Swamiji, because in Hinduism anybody can become divine. There is no restriction. There is no single prophet. There is no central organization in Hinduism to control everything. There is no set principles. One cannot only choose one’s path, one can also choose many more things on the way and ultimately attain perfection. That is what the goal of Hinduism is—to reach perfection. A common man will just go on a pilgrimage and through that pilgrimage he will try to realize because he cannot read or understand scriptures or he has no time for all this. Another man, an intellectual perhaps, can follow the path of *jnāna-yoga* and move from one scripture to another—think sometimes in a cynical way, sometimes in a sarcastical way, or just ignore the vital lessons contained in the scriptures, or may even raise objections. But, ultimately, Hinduism being the quest for the ultimate reality, all those paths have the same goal.

Everyone is moving along that path.

We also have a few more insights on Hinduism. But let me tell you that some people believe that even the very word ‘Hinduism’ is a misnomer. It is a misnomer because it has come to us from the Persians. It has come to us from the Greeks. The Greeks called the Hindus *Indoi*. Be that as it may, there are so many controversies even relating to its origin because Hinduism is said to be the religious faith of the Aryans. Western scholars have always tried to show that—the Aryan Hindus came from outside. But the scientific and archaeological researches of the present day have definitely shown that the Aryans belonged to this very land. It is regrettable, however that the Western theory of Aryan invasion has been taught in the history textbooks for the last many years, from the time when I was a student, to present times by historians and some of these textbooks have been published by top publishers including NCERT. There we find that the Aryans came from outside. Then they defeated the Dravidians resulting in the Aryan-Dravidian cultural divide. They have claimed that Hinduism does not have its roots. It is not indigenous. This distortion of fact needs to be understood because this is a sacred land, the ‘*punyabhumi*’ as Swami Vivekananda called it. This is the land, I should say, in which hundreds of thousands of schools of thoughts have grown over the centuries. But the thoughts of all those schools were focused only on one thing—the ultimate Reality. Whether they were atheist, gnostics, or theists, or henotheists, polytheists or monotheists, whatever term or name you give them, they were all speculating on the ultimate Reality.

The roots of Hinduism

The roots of the Hindu *dharma* lay in

the Vedas. The Vedas, as Swami Vivekananda rightly pointed out, are not a set of books: The root of the word 'Veda' is *vid*. *Vid* means, to know. That divine and revealed knowledge which came through the rishis became the Veda. We do not say that the Vedas were written. They were never written. The Vedic rishis perceived the *mantras*, perceived the hymns. They were *drashtā*, not *kartā*. They saw the sacred hymns coming through the firmament of their pure, transparent minds. That spiritual knowledge which has survived to this day. When Henry David Thoreau read the Vedas he said that going through one hymn, one verse made me understand the reality, the truth, and it is worth the entire material possession that I have. Such is the quality of the Vedas! But you will be surprised to know that before Swami Vivekananda went abroad, barring a few enlightened intellectuals like Ralph W. Emerson and Thoreau, people generally took the Hindus to be fiendish race that worshipped innumerable deities, including serpents, plants and trees. But when the British Indologists of the eighteenth century which included John Zephania Holwell, Nathaniel Brassey Halhed, Alexander Dow, Charles Wilkins and Sir William Jones came to Calcutta and did a lot of work, they proved that the earlier perceptions of Hinduism were wrong. Then and then only that some intellectuals started proving the mysteries of Hinduism and trying to redefine it.

When I was talking to you about *dharma*, I perhaps missed one point and it is that *dharma* has its root in the word *dhri* which means, to uphold, to uphold the cosmos, to uphold the universe. *Dharma* is not religion because there can be many religions, but only one *dharma*. Religions can divide mankind and they have been doing so for ages, but *dharma* unites.

Dharma has that integratic element in it which lasts, which continues, which was, is, and shall be. All these orientalist, I have already referred to, tried to re-define Hinduism in the light of *dharma*, in the light of the basic principles. Some of them learnt Sanskrit from the pundits. Pundits in those days would not normally impart the language of the gods to foreigners. But somehow they learnt Sanskrit. They studied the scriptures. They interpreted the philosophical texts and the result was that there was a flood of literature in most parts of the world where people started feeling that Hinduism was *not* barbaric; Hinduism was not the religion of the primitive people, but it was an ennobling religion that could raise one's consciousness to a higher level.

Nineteenth century finally became known for the great contribution of Swami Vivekananda, the foremost disciple of Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa. Percival Spear, in his *The Oxford History of Modern India* writes that if Rammohun was the mind, Dayananda, the physical arm and Sri Ramakrishna was the soul of modern India. Imagine! A foreigner calling Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa 'the soul of modern India'. Although Sri Ramakrishna was a Bengali, his spirit had travelled all through India and created a new renaissance. As a result of certain British policies, the rise of the new middle classes, the introduction of new means of transport and communications, the proselytizing activities of the Christian missionaries there came a renaissance. That renaissance defined what Hinduism is today.

In medieval times Hinduism was defined by different sects differently. It was defined by the Vaishnavas in one way, by the Shaivas in a different way. And then again, the Shaivas too had their own denominations. There were Pāshupatas,

there were Kālmukhas, there were Veerashaivas, there were Pratyabhijna of the Kashmir Shaivism school—all belonging to the Shaiva tradition. There were also the Shaktas. Through methods of worship, their philosophy, their ethics, their solution to metaphysical riddles, their answers to eschatological questions—they also defined Hinduism in some respects. And before that, there were the Vaishnava schools of Rāmānujāchārya, Madhvāchārya, Nimbārkaāchārya, Vallabhāchārya, Chaitanya, Mira Bai, and many others, which tried to put things in their own perspectives. Much before that, Ādi Shankarāchārya, who can really be called a renaissance man, welded different communities, different religious orders under the Advaita Vedanta doctrine. But times changed and with the change in times the perception of the people has changed. As long as the personalities were there, their ideas were alive. But after a few centuries the ideas remain but the spirit behind those ideas begins to slacken off. And this is what happened in India.

I am telling you all these because I told you in the beginning that Hinduism has been defined in different ways. And we are just talking about those purest souls who realized and put things in their own ways.

But with the dawn of modernity, the arrival of Swami Vivekananda on the scene and his great guru, the guru of humanity, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, a new approach to religion, a new approach to Hinduism developed. And under that umbrella came most of the people. I am yet to come across a person or a member of a group, not attached to the Ramakrishna Mission, who has a word of criticism against Sri Ramakrishna or Swami Vivekananda. Why? Because they all accept their universality, their greatness, their contribution.

I have said already that Hinduism is a quest for the Divine. Swami Vivekananda rightly deserved that man is divine and this divinity has to be realized by controlling our internal nature. He said, we may take the help of scriptures, rituals or anything of that sort to attain our goal. Rituals are not to be rejected altogether, worship is not to be rejected as you just cannot find out God in an abstract way. It is very different. Very few can do that. But we can approach God with form rather easily. So for the majority *sākāra* worship is very helpful. From *sākāra* to *nirākāra* (God without form) is the gradual journey. That is why image worship has been recognized in India. Why only India? It is imperceptibly in vogue in other religions as well. Swamiji in his lecture on Hinduism at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago on 19th September, 1893, had very boldly pointed out that if you call our Hindu image worship as idolatry, then the same practice exists even among the Christians, the Muslims, and others. He said, ‘Superstition is a great enemy of man, but bigotry is worse. Why does a Christian go to church? Why is the cross holy? Why is the face turned toward the sky in prayer? Why are there so many images in the Catholic Church? Why are there so many images in the minds of Protestants when they pray? My brethren, we can no more think about anything without a mental image than we can live without breathing. By the law of association, the material image calls up the mental idea and *vice versa*. This is why the Hindu uses an external symbol when he worships. He will tell you, it helps to keep his mind fixed on the Being to whom he prays. He knows as well as you do that the image is not God, is not omnipresent. After all, how much does omnipresence mean to almost the whole world? It stands merely as a word, a symbol. Has God superficial area?

If not, when we repeat that word “omnipresent”, we think of the extended sky or of space, that is all (C. W. I. pp. 15-16).

So, for ordinary persons, this may be the first stage. A person who does not know how to swim, needs the help of an inflated rubber tube to get into the pool. But once he learns swimming, he does not need such props. Swamiji used to say that it is good to be born in a church, but bad to die there. Why I am referring to this aspect is the fact that many people belonging to the monotheistic, or semitic religions suffer from a superiority complex. They love to believe they are superior to the Hindu idolaters.

Swami Vivekananda proved that image worship had a psychological and a scientific basis, for you become what you think you are. When you have the picture of Lord Hanumān before you, you feel strength. When you place the picture of Goddess Durgā before you, you feel the pulsation of *shakti* in you. Keep the picture of Buddha before you and you feel you are having peace within. So this is the law of association. Swamiji explained this vital point.

Caste aspect

There was another aspect which is now no more relevant—the aspect of caste in Hinduism. It was usually believed by many that Hinduism and caste were synonymous. But you do not find caste in the sense of inequality in the Vedas, *Upa-vedas*, or in the eighteen puranas. You do not have the word ‘Caste’ even in the *dharmashāstras*. The *Manusmṛiti* is often quoted by critics to prove the prevalence of evils connected with the caste system in Hinduism. But we should know that these critics quote a few statements out of text and present them in such a way that castes look like an evil. We

also need to know that our scriptures do not talk about caste inequality, rather they focus on the divinity of human beings. Perhaps you already know that even people belonging to the so-called low caste had risen to the position of the brahmins, and they were worshipped. Take for example the case of Chokamela, or of Narhari, or of Ravidasji, or of many *Vārkarī* and other saints who were accepted and revered by the people. Moreover, the *sants* of those time would accept as their disciple anyone who had *shraddhā*. If somebody had faith he was accepted and given spiritual lessons.

Hinduism is, in fact, nothing but a pursuit of spirituality or unfoldment of spirituality and perfection in man. It is unfoldment of whatever is good in man, and man includes woman. In the *Bṛihadāraṇyaka* Upanishad it is very clearly stated that God is one, and He divided Himself into two—man, and woman. The Hindu wife is called *ardhāṅgini* or *sahadharmini*. You do not find any religion except Hinduism where women had composed sacred hymns. It is on record that there were twenty-nine such women contributors to the Vedas. Even among the Ālvārs (Vaishnava saints), and Nayanar (Shaiva saints) you find women all over. If you go to the *Vārkarīs* or if you go to the other sects of Maharashtra, Mahānubhava, for example, you would find that discrimination against women did not prevail.

In those days when things were not that safe, when there were no roads, when people would live in forests, obviously, women had to be confined to the homes. And since it was an agricultural society, it was not expected of a woman to take to the field and leave the household chores. Scholars sometimes do not understand the situation that prevailed in ancient times and they

denigrate Hinduism by saying that Manu wanted women to remain in somewhat cloistered position all the time—at the time of birth, in youth, and when she grew old—always she was subjected to the tight grip of man. They ignore such statement of Manu that gods are pleased with those families in which women are duly honoured.

So, you see that the actual status of women as sanctioned by the scriptures was very good. In the Vedas, and subsequently in the later literature, you find that women were given position of eminence. This we find in the Gupta and the Maurya period, or even in later times. Situation changed when the foreign aggressors invaded India.

Another aspect which comes to my mind is the Hindu concept of reverence for life. We consider everything to be sacred. We worship even the snakes. We observe Nāgpancami which is dedicated to the snakes. Then we have the concept of the five types of *yajnas*. *Yajnas* do not always mean pouring oblations into the fire. There are other kinds of sacrifice as well. One such is *bhutāyajnā* where you feed the insects and all those creatures who cannot earn their livelihood. There is *Nriyajnā* where you feed human beings. There are also *devayajnas* and so on. So you feed the spirits, you feed the plants, you feed the guests, you feed those creatures who are helpless, and ultimately you do your duty to society, to humanity as a whole.

The Vedas never looked at the world in a way where one would be different from the other. It is the unique concept which crystallized into Advaita Vedanta, first explained in the most comprehensive way by Shankarāchārya, and subsequently, towards the end of the 19th century, by Swami Vivekananda. Advaita Vedanta preaches reverence for life. So we are taught to see life in everything. We are very careful about

so many things that move, and even we worship things that do not move. We worship even the mountains. According to Hinduism, everything and everyone is worthy of our worship. So we cannot be just dubbed as nature worshippers.

We do we talk about ecological problems nowadays? Because man is now cut off from nature. Man is cut off from the creatures of nature. But if you go to the ancient times and read what the scriptures say, you would find that life is all one. There is a common spirit, a common thread running through all existence. And if it is a common spirit it has to be taken care of. There is one *Bhumisukta*, perhaps in the *Atharva-veda*, and there are hymns that refer to water and other primary natural elements; because if you pollute those elements, if you become careless about those elements, then there is going to be chaos and this is happening today—whether it is global warming, environmental pollution, dearth of drinking water, and natural calamities like the Tsunami. These were not heard of before. There are also recurrent earthquakes. All these are happening because we have moved away from our axis, we have moved away from the path of the rishis.

Without going into further details, I would like to say that Hinduism has its relevance. If you are confused, bewildered and restless, what you need to do is to meditate, and meditation has been accepted all over the world in one form or another, to have the body, mind and the spirit in order. Following those principles which the Vedic seers laid down, you get up early in the morning, take your bath, do *svāddhāya* and *puja* for achieving your mental balance and then become a *karmayogi* throughout the day. This mode of life also is fast becoming acceptable. The science of Ayurveda too is

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