

HINDUISM, THE MISUNDERSTOOD RELIGION

NALLUSAMY, Kanthasamy
MALEZYA/MALAYSIA/МАЛАЙЗИЯ

ABSTRACT

Hinduism is one of the world's oldest religions. This faith has faced many ups and downs during the passage of time. However, the theological and philosophical aspects of Hinduism together with the concept of God as the Almighty had made it easier to survive. But in recent times, Hinduism has been misunderstood not only by the followers of other faiths but some of the Hindus themselves.

The basic concepts of God, Soul and Bondage or technically, pati, pacu and paca have not been clearly understood. There is only one God but the concept of multiplicity has not been fully understood. The relationship of God with the soul and likewise the relationship of the soul with mala or impurities also have been often wrongly interpreted. The concept of anava, karma and maya in the religion is to assist Hindus in the right path and not a hindrance to their life.

This paper thus focuses on the various aspects which the followers have misunderstood the religion. The practicality of the religion, especially during festivals and religious programs, often contradicts with the basic tenets of Hinduism. Motivational talks with the religious themes often tend to give false ideas which clearly not present within the framework of Hinduism. Such attempts may affect the purity and the sacred teachings of Hinduism.

Key Words: Hinduism, religion.

Introduction

Among the religions practised in the world today, Hinduism has an antiquity of many years. Till today, there are no accurate or written documents to prove when Hinduism actually came into being. Most of the religions of the present world have a founder and a sacred scripture but Hinduism differs as it has neither a founder nor one scripture. Hinduism has existed since pre-historic times and has been passed down from one

generation to another. This religion identifies itself with many sacred texts, all of which are rich in devotion and philosophy. Generally Hinduism is made up of six sects, each having a Supreme God. The Hindu religion is rich with teachings and philosophical ideas. This subject matter needs experience and religious knowledge to be comprehended. May be the *gurus* and the religious personnel could understand and impart the knowledge of Hinduism. However, the modern priests and the Hindu followers have stressed much on devotional aspects forgetting the philosophical points. Though the followers of this faith devote and submit themselves to God, the Hindus and others at large have misunderstood the actual aspects of the religion.

At present it can be safely said that many Hindus are dwelling with negative influences. There is a wide erosion of knowledge about their religion. The stress on modern civilization and its subsequent materialistic thinking may have contributed to this growing disinterest. This unhappy state of affair is a cause for faithlessness. Many leaders, teachers and scientists are finding it increasingly difficult to explain the paradox of scientific progress and the deteriorating spiritual and morality status. The claim is that materialism based on Western modernity is the root cause. The copying of the Western fashions, styles, sophistication, and religious conversions seem to be some of the significant issues. However, this need not be seen as a narrow parochial concern. The main reason for the lack of faith may be the ignorance of the wealth of knowledge in our rich literature and also the absence of proper guidance and bad examples set by the fellow Hindus.

This paper thus attempts to discuss certain aspects that have been misunderstood. Each point tends to point the misunderstood aspect and puts forward the true teaching. At the end of the paper, suggestions are provided to remedy the situation.

Faith and Knowledge

Faith and knowledge are important in Hinduism. Faith has a four-fold aspect of test of time. In this limited conception of life, man cannot help but doubt himself, doubt humanity, doubt *Sanathana Dharma* and doubt "The Brahman". A man who has no faith in his own Atman cannot have faith in Brahman and a man who has no faith in Brahman cannot have faith in humanity. Therefore faithlessness throws the man in a state of doubt and unstable equilibrium. This situation destroys the moral fiber of humanity as well as the entire social fabric of the community at large. Man can

become suspicious of the other men and this suspicion is like a cancer which pollutes and degenerates the progress of a country and her people. Faith provides peace and this in turn is power. This faith is the means for knowledge and true knowledge is 'The Brahma Jnana'. Vedanta shows the value of the 'Brahman'.

Knowledge is the basis of Hinduism. The Vedas, the Upanishads and the Brahma sutras are *Srutis* of immense *Jnana* or knowledge, while all the other literatures like Tirumurais, Thirupugal, Nalayira Tivya Pirapantam, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Bhagavadgita, Saiva Siddanta texts and many others are *Smritis* of equally great *Jnana*. Basically Hinduism is known as *Sanathana Dharma*. *Dharma* has enriched the citizens of the world since time immemorial. Great Hindu intellectuals such as Valmiki, Vyasa, Thiruvalluvar, Sankrarchariar, Ramanujar, Madhavachari, Appar, Sundarar, Ramakrishnar, Thiagarajar, Vivekanandar, Ramanar, Tillakar, Radakrishnan and many other scholars have contributed incredible knowledge and philosophies to the World Society.

The Vedas accepted as a rational and an intellectual world philosophy are not understood by the present day Hindus. Though they dictate and mention about these texts, but the actual message given by God is not understood. Vedas are not the work of human beings but many think the pre-historic preceptors composed them. These scriptures were actually given by the Almighty to the human mankind so that they can live peacefully with well-planned discipline. Just praying and offering valuable products to the God they prefer is not important but how they accommodate His teachings and message are more vital. Service to the fellow beings is the service to God. But many Hindus spend millions to sing the glory of God but fail to help the people stricken by poverty and those affected by natural calamity. They fail to understand or refuse to accept the importance of the welfare of the people. This has caused confusion among the Hindus and to a certain extent with other faiths. May be the Hindus are not abusing the faith but place their faith differently with predetermined parameters.

The Three Gunas

Hinduism identifies three types of man based on *gunas* or character. A spiritual guidance of a receptive nature conducts his life with the preordained power and knowledge. A great deal of man's variance of character springs from his destiny, environment and his guidance. Perhaps if a man experiences through his lethargic habit and character the lower instincts of life then his destiny is directly due to where he places his faith

and therefore cultivates the *Tamo guna*. This is merely a relative evaluation. Another man whose faith when attached to materialistic pleasures and self-gratification, develops an inherent nature of attachment and he believes the results to be of paramount importance from an egoistic point of view. His mind and heart will naturally follow his chosen and accustomed way. In this he places his faith and cultivates the *Rajo guna*. Finally, a third kind of man who has unquestioning faith in God, and naturally in his hour of need, he will call on “God” and receive his assistance from that ‘Brahman’. This man’s Faith is in the Divine. This must be natural, spontaneous and genuine. This may be a preordained *Satva guna*. Therefore, faith remains spontaneous in the three examples whilst each man’s application appears different. The unaccepted truth is that many Hindus think their mould of character is destined and nothing can change it. Man fails to understand the three *gunas* identified act as guidance and the people should plan their lives and advocate good habits.

Multiplicity of Gods

Another aspect which is often misconstrued is the number of gods in Hinduism. Many people, including Hindus and also followers of other faiths, think that Hinduism propagates the concept of many gods. This aspect has also down graded the actual truth of the teachings. Hinduism is not just a belief. It is scientific in nature. Hinduism believes in one god. It is monistic in nature. The Hindu pantheon is often seen as a misinterpretation. For a Hindu, God is one but performs various functions. He performs five main functions – creation, protection, destruction, allurement and grace. Each function is depicted with a different image and symbol. But this concept is often misunderstood as five different gods. Hindus pray to Siva, Vishnu, Brahma accepted as the Trinity, and many others such as Sakti, Muruga, Ganesha and so on to name a few.

People construct temples for their lovable Gods and the architecture too stresses the superiority of them. In many countries where Hindus dwell, we observe the emergence of numerous temples for different gods. Such attempts have again confirmed the concept of multiplicity. No organization or Hindu religious bodies endeavour to remedy the misconception but just ignore them. The younger generation too follows this trend and prays to numerous gods without actually understanding them. Thus there is a need to educate the people.

Like many other faiths Hinduism also advocates the concept of a single god. God is said to perform five main functions of which three is important.

God creates, God preserves and God destroys. When each task is performed, the Almighty takes a different name. The Creator is called Brahma, the Preserver is known as Vishnu while the Destroyer is Siva. There is only one God who performs these functions. This should be explained clearly. If we could relate this concept with our daily life, the householder may be taken as an example. The father of a family has many functions. He is the head and father for his children. He is the husband for his wife. He is a worker in a firm. He is a colleague for his friends. Similarly, the Almighty who is omnipresent and omnipotent takes various functions.

Concept of God

God is the supreme reality and thought for life. He is at once the Absolute philosophy and supreme personality whom men adore and worship. He is supreme Spirit or Intelligence. He has no form (*arupa*) and does not have a name. Numerous names given to the Hindu god often misinterpreted as He has form and name. Actually God is nameless and formless. The Vedas define 'God' as Pure Intelligence, a Perfect Being, a principle. His existence is known as *svarupa laksana* meaning. He is Pure Being, He could not be comprehended and He is Light. In other words, He is impersonal being an omniscient Being. But people consider him to be personal thereby he takes the concept of *tatasta laksana*, where he takes all 'possessions'. We give him a form, a name, an abode, a family and so on. When our relationship matures day by day, the Hindu would understand His actual state. However, it is totally not wrong to worship Him as it is presently practised all over the world. He may manifest Himself in many ways and the devotees attain divine knowledge by being taught intuitively by the innate God.

Concept of Soul

Pati or soul in Hinduism has to be vividly understood. "It is formless and all pervasive but unlike that of matter, it exists in becoming one with the thing it dwells in for the time being (body or God). Its eternal intelligence and power are concealed by the *Pasa* or bondage of *anava mala* and hence called *pasu*" (Siddhiyar, Sutra IV). But this concept of soul is always misunderstood. There are two important features of the soul. One, the soul never stands alone, all by itself; it is always present in association with the world or God. Two, the soul assumes the nature of which it is associated.

God created the soul is a misappropriation in Hinduism. God does not create the soul although he renders the physical body. God and soul belong

to the same category because they both are intelligent beings (*cit*), have emotions (*iccha*), have intellect (*jnana*) and will power (*kriya sakti*). But there is a difference. Firstly, God forever remains Pure and untainted by the *malas* whereas the soul is tainted. Secondly, God undergoes no change in His condition, attributes and powers but the soul from the beginning is enveloped by ignorance. Thirdly, God is ever all-knowing and omniscient but the soul though have the ability to know could only do with the assistance of God's help.

Hinduism allows the soul to become one with God with proper devotion and getting rid of all impurities in the present world. God Himself shows the way to devoid all unwanted qualities. It is up to the individual Hindu to understand this concept and avoid rebirth. Otherwise, he will be born many times unable to swim the ocean of birth.

The Three Impurities

The individual soul which is born in this world is to understand itself and do away with all sufferings. But what happens normally is that instead of getting rid of his negative elements, he or she in fact collects and increases his or her evilness. Hinduism, Saivism more specifically, talks about three impurities, viz. *anava* (egoism), *karma* (actions) and *maya* (illusion) which readily cling to the soul once he is in the world. These negative aspects encourage one to crave for worldly pleasures thereby forgetting the importance of worship and the realization of the Almighty. In other words, the soul is prevented from moving onwards the kingdom of God, but has been driven to a state of disrepute owing to the allegiance to the impurities. This pathetic situation paves the way for the soul to experience pleasures and pains alternatively and the karmas ensure repeated births and deaths. This process goes on and on. Hinduism explains how the soul could solve the problem and attain liberation. This world gives numerous opportunities for the soul to eradicate the impurities. Ego is diverted to feel proud as the devotee of God. Actions are performed as God-centered service and not self-centered. Fame and deeds are not lured by *maya*. Here the soul realizes its intuitive nature and pray for wisdom and love of God. This faith and intuitive wisdom treats human race as one and God as one. Thus the soul inadvertently brings better understanding and this is necessary for peace. St. Thirumular explains this clearly. He says, "... those who know themselves are those who worship the Feet of the Lord; they are those

who stand in the said beautiful way (meaning those who love God and take themselves to His worship); such of those who know themselves are philosophers and the lord will make them as His relatives”(Tirumantiram, 251). The above concept of *malas* or impurities is not fully understood by the Hindu folk.

Anava

Egoism never fails to exist in the life of an individual. The word ‘Anavam’ in Tamil is nothing but arrogance. It is egoism or self-assertion (Kathiresu, 1950:42). It is nothing but ignorance and darkness. One must understand that the basic Hindu teaching is submitting to god and always considering himself inferior to Him. When he performs any function or establishes relationship with fellow human beings, he must avoid being egoistic. Words such as ‘I’, ‘Mine’, ‘Myself’ and so on should be eradicated from the mind of a Hindu. He must understand that egoism could engender lust, desire and hatred all evolving from the pride of status, birth, colour, caste, book-learning and wealth. Unfortunately, we do not see this happen in our everyday life. One of the reasons for mutual disrespect and misunderstanding is egoism.

Karma

The concept of karma is also very much wrongly interpreted. What does karma mean? Karma means ‘action’ or ‘deed’. Hindus believe that whatever their deeds are in this present birth, they will reap the fruits accordingly in the next birth. Rebirth is accepted widely in Hinduism and this indirectly encourages a Hindu to perform good and ethical deeds in order to have a better birth later. There is also the concept of heaven and hell which relatively directs the devotees to crave for heaven where life is bliss. The law of karma is often related to the cause and effect. According to the law, What we sow we shall reap in this or future lives. Good actions or *punyakarma* will bring loving reactions while selfish, hateful acts or *papakarma* will bring suffering. In brief, every action that we perform in life, every word we utter, even every thought that we think, has its reaction.

The law of karma is a divine, self-governing system of justice that automatically creates the appropriate future experience in response to the current action. Karma punishes misdeeds and rewards good deeds whether they are known or not. Through understanding the consequences of their reactions, individuals sooner or later learn to refrain from committing a

particular misdeed. Any good system of justice does not want repeating offenders. It wants individuals to understand the error of their ways and reform their behaviour. Karma is our teacher. It teaches us to refine our behaviour.

Karma also refers to our individual karma that we carry from life to life, both the karma to be resolved in this life, and the karma to be resolved in a future life. The law of karma is slow. Consequences or fruits of actions may not come for a number of lifetimes. This means the karma we are born with is comprised of rewards and punishments from many past lives that have yet to manifest, and are yet to be resolved.

Our actions in the present are creating what we will experience in the future, even in future lives. The point here is that when we think of karma, we tend to think of the past. We reflect upon the rewards and punishments from the past that are now manifesting and what we must have done to create them. However, we must also think about our future in this life and lives to come. Our actions in the present are influencing that future, making it pleasant or unpleasant. Therefore, before acting, one has to reflect on the action's karmic consequences and thereby consciously mould his future.

The ultimate future to consider is liberation from the cycle of birth and death. As long as we have karmas to resolve, we will be reborn on Earth. Thus, individuals who are intent upon spiritual progress take the creation and resolution of karma quite seriously. Not only do they strive to act wisely in the present, they perform extra religious practices to rid themselves in this life of karmas that would normally only manifest in future lives. This is a profound practice performed by sagacious *rishis* especially.

Karma can be managed effectively by the following ways: (I) Forget anger toward all who have offended you, for it gives rise to teeming troubles; (II) Why should those who rejoice when destiny brings them good moan when that same destiny decrees misfortune?; (III) If you return kindness for injuries received and forget both, those who harmed you will be punished by their own shame; (IV) All suffering recoils on the wrong doer himself. Thus, those desiring not to suffer refrain from causing others pain; (V) What good is a man's knowledge unless it prompts him to prevent the pain of others as if it were his own pain?; (VI) Draw near the Feet of Him who is free of desire and aversion, and live forever free of suffering; (VII) Be unremitting in the doing of good deeds; do them with all your might and by every possible means; (VIII) Not allowing a day to pass without doing some good is a boulder that will block your passage on the path to rebirth; (IX) The highest principle is this: never knowingly

harm anyone at any time in any way; (X) As the intense fire of the furnace refines gold to brilliance, so does the burning suffering of austerity purify the soul to resplendence.

When all bad things happen to a Hindu, he blames karma. He says even if he strived harder to do better, it has no effect. Therefore he thinks it is futile to try again. Such a misconception must be totally rejected. Firstly, karma could be changed through the principle of effective karma management. Secondly, how we live in this life creates the karma you will face in your future lives. So why don't we use the law of karma to create a future that is filled with pleasant experiences rather than painful ones? The second false concept is saying that my life is miserable. Everything goes wrong when my stars changed. So I must have special prayers to get rid of karma. This misconception should also be rejected that it attributes the cause of problems to the stars rather than our own actions in the past. We must remember that planets and stars do not determine our karma or the actions of others. It is self-created and we are the source for all good, bad and mixed deeds.

Maya

Maya is defined as pure and simple insentient matter consisting of bodies, organs, words and objects of enjoyments created from the elements which were and are in existence from eternity (Katiresu,1950:46). Many Hindus are unaware of *maya* that can obstruct an individual's wish to be with God. Those who gain pleasure in worldly life and forget the effects of temporary pleasures will definitely find it difficult to have unison with God. Though *maya* is indestructible, but it could cause delusion. Hindus must understand that *maya* is not a compulsory phenomenon but a result of ignorance, egoism and desire. The simplest way to get rid of bondage is just to understand the everlasting grace of the Lord and find ways to be with Him.

Caste Distinction

It is regrettable to note very often caste is related to the teachings of Hinduism. Many believe that Hinduism advocates the distinction of human beings based on caste. Till today, this concept has deep rooted in the minds of the Hindus and others who do not lucidly understand about caste. Many people including the followers of other faiths often ridicule Hinduism as differentiating human beings on the basis of caste. Caste definitely does not apply to Hinduism because it is a universal religion with the aim of bringing into fold all races, white, dark and brown together. 'Laws of Manu'

which were only a social code and the description of caste in them have been misunderstood. But the actual phenomenon is that Hindu religion has nothing to do with the social stratification. The primitive Hindu society had classified the people into four classes, viz. Brahmins (the priests), Ksatriyas (the rulers), Vaisyas (the traders) and the Sudras (the labourers) based on the duties performed by each group. In any society all different classes have to work together so that the society could function. There is no such thing as different status based on birth. According to the *Manu Dharma*, there exist only two castes, the good and the evil, based on one's conduct. If he is a person of good virtues, then he is from a good status. On the other hand, a person who is evil is often said to be from a lower caste. The actual concept of Hinduism is based on the conduct of a person and not of his birth. Unfortunately, people have misunderstood and segregated themselves under different castes. The challenge is to change the mind set through proper understanding of the religion. It should be stressed that the concept of Hinduism is similar with that of other religions.

Concept of Bhakti

Briefly, *Bhakti* is man's love of God and the response of God to Man's feeling is Grace. Many believe *bhakti* is restricted to offerings, praising hymns and regular service. Thus we see devotees who pray in the temples regularly without fail still find themselves entangled with lots of unsolved problems. Therefore there is a need to fully understand the concept of *bhakti*. A virtuous life is important. Faith, purity, self-control, self-conquest, detachment and truth are all required. Faith is a primary requirement where the devotee should improve and understand about Hinduism with the contact of sages and devotees together with the knowledge of devotional books and admiration of the Almighty. Purity means the purity of both mind and body. All the external purification ceremonies sponsored by the religion could support the purity of mind and spirit. The main task is to achieve godliness. Self-control means controlling both the body and the mind. One should avoid doing things which bring sins to him. The positive aspects such as patience, forbearance, modesty, humility, self-sacrifice and self-effacement will bring about self-control.

When one can control his mind, he is actually practising self-conquest. This will help him to get liberation. Detachment is the next step of self-conquest. We must overcome evil and be independent of good things in life. Family ties and love for children, relatives and friends are all good but blindly associating with them will only bring attachment. Selfishness must be removed. Truth is the main moral aspect. In Tamil it is termed

as 'satyam'. One must accept that God is the highest Reality and has all eternal values of righteousness, justice and beauty. Truth may be expanded to other forms like harmlessness, justice, forgiveness, modesty, chastity and so on.

Conclusion

The question now is how far will Hinduism be able in the present age to preserve its soul, maintain its individuality, conserve its strength and at the same time satisfy the deepest aspiration of the modern Hindu? How is she to combat the new forces of bigotry, fanaticism, sectarianism, violence, descent, conversion, hate and ridicule? It is only when a religion meets all these demands perhaps then it can justify its healthy existence and claim a spiritual wisdom and develop an intellectual community. This is possible only when Hinduism is able to stand the tests of time. Perhaps then the present renaissance can be said to have fulfilled its purpose.

What keeps the modern Hindus indifferent, withdrawn and ignorant? A soul searching appears essential. Every Hindu shall begin to read, reflect and research. Hinduism is the mother of all philosophies. It can be admired as an intellectual science or a scripture or poetry or a philosophy or a revelation or an experience or a teaching or a way of life. It certainly is an intellectual search and a scientific foundation for the youth. In good faith, the Hindus should be able to close ranks and with good *Bhakti*. Hindus should remain united, peaceful, compassionate and productive. All Hindus must unite to form a truly tolerant and intellectual society. Therefore, to make a great future, the secret lies in accumulation of power, co-ordination of wills. Being of the one mind is the secret of the Hindu society. Hindus, fighting quarrelling among themselves, about all trivialities such as Dravidians and Aryans, Brahmins and non-Brahmins, rich and poor, high caste and low caste and all that disorganization and dissensions must stop. The further the Hindu is away from the accumulation of *Jhana* and *Bhakti* the further is his goal. Dissension and misconception are going to make the future feeble. The accumulation of willpower, co-operation of the people, co-ordination of action, into one focus of achieving unity under the huge banyan tree called Hinduism is significant.

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