SYNDICATED MOKSHA?

Part I

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The term Hinduism as we understand it today to describe a *particular religion* is modern, as also is the concept which it presupposes, both resulting from a series of choices made from a range of belief, ritual and practice which were collated into the creation of this religion. Unlike the Semitic religions (with which the comparison is often made), which began with a structure at a point in time and evolved largely in relation to and within that structure, Hinduism (and I use the word here in its contemporary meaning) has been largely a reaction to historical situations. The attempt to delineate a structure relates to each such situation. Comparisons with Semitic religions are not fortuitous since these have been catalysts in the search for a structure among contemporary 'Hindus'.

Whereas linear religions such as Islam and Christianity, and Buddhism, can be seen to change in a historical dimension both in terms of reacting to their original structure and the interaction with the constituents of historical circumstances, such changes are more easily seen in individual 'Hindu' sects rather than in 'Hinduism' as a whole. This may be a reason for the general reluctance of scholars of 'Hinduism' to relate the manifestations of 'Hinduism' to their historical context and to changes in society.

The study of what is regarded as Hindu philosophy and texts and beliefs has been so emphasised as almost to ignore those who are the practitioners of these tenets, beliefs, rituals and ideas. Furthermore, the view has generally been from above, since the texts were earlier composed in Sanskrit and their interpreters were brahmans. But, precisely because 'Hinduism' is not a linear religion, it becomes necessary to look at the situation further down the social scale where the majority of its practitioners are located. The religious practices of the latter may differ from those at the upper levels of society to a degree considerably greater than that of a uniform, centralised, monolithic religion.

Discussions on Hinduism tend to be confined to Hindu philosophy and theory. But the manifestation of a contemporary, resurgent, active movement, largely galvanised for political ends, provides a rather different focus to such discussions. It is with the projection of present day popular ideas of Hinduism and of its past that this article forms a comment. The new Hinduism which is being currently propagated by the Sanghs, Parishads and Samajs is an attempt to restructure the indigenous religions as a monolithic, uniform religion, rather paralleling some of the features of Semitic religions. This seems to be a fundamental departure from the essentials of what may be called the indigenous 'Hindu' religions. Its form is not only in many ways alien to the earlier culture of India but equally disturbing is the uniformity which it seeks to impose on the variety of 'Hindu' religions.

My attempt here is to look at some of the significant directions taken by various 'Hindu' sects which have an historical dimension and try and relate these to social change. The study of what is regarded as 'Hindu' philosophy and thought has its own importance but is not of central concern to this article. The manifestation of religion in the daily routine of life draws more heavily on social sources than on the philosophical.

Religions such as Buddhism or Islam or Christianity do diversify into sects but this diversification retains a particular reference point - the historical founder and the teachings embodied generally in a single sacred text. The area of discourse among the sects in these religions is tied to the dogma, tenets and theology as enunciated in the beginning. They see themselves as part of the historical process of the unfolding of the single religion even though they may have broken away from the mainstream.

'Hindu' sects generally had a distinct and independent origin related to their particular founder or cult. Only at a later stage, and if required, were attempts made to try and assimilate some of these sects into the dominant sects through the amalgamation of new deities as manifestations of the older ones and by incorporating some of their mythology, ritual and custom. Subordinate sects sought to improve their status by a similar incorporation from the dominant sects if they were in a position to do so.

What has survived over the centuries is not a single, monolithic religion but a diversity of religious sects which we today have put together under a uniform name. The collation of these religious groups is defined as 'Hinduism' even though the religious reference points of such groups might be quite distinct. There was a time when 'Hinduism' was a convenient general label among some scholars for studying the different indigenous religious expressions. This was when it was claimed that anything from atheism to animism could legitimately be regarded as part of 'Hinduism'. Today the new Hindus would look

upon atheists and animists with suspicion and contempt. The term 'Hinduism' is now being used in a different sense.

Hinduism as defined in contemporary parlance is a collation of beliefs, rites and practices consciously selected from those of the past, interpreted in a contemporary idiom in the last couple of centuries and the selection conditioned by historical circumstances. This is not to suggest that religions with a linear growth are superior to what may apparently be an historical religion, but rather to emphasise the difference between the two.

In a strict sense, a reference to 'Hinduism' would require a more precise definition of the particular variety referred to - Brahmanism, Brahmo-Samaj, Arya-Samaj, Shaiva Siddhanta, Bhakti, Tantricism or whatever. Present day 'Hinduism', therefore, cannot be seen as an evolved form with a linear growth historically from Harappan through Vedic, Puranic and Bhakti forms, although it may carry elements of these. In this it differs from Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and Christianity.

Its origin has no distinct point in time (the *Vedas* were regarded as the foundation until the discovery of the Indus Civilisation in the 1920s when its origin was then pushed back), no historically attested founder, no text associated with the founder, all of which given it an element of a historicity. This of course makes it easier to reinterpret if not to recreate a religion afresh as and when required.

Many of these features, absent in the religion as a whole, do however exist among the various sects which are sought to be included under the umbrella-label of 'Hinduism' which makes them historical entities. But, then, not all these sects would accept certain rites, beliefs and practices as essential. Animal sacrifice and libations of alcohol would be essential to some but anathema to others among the sects which the census labels as 'Hindus'. The yardstick of the Semitic religions which has been the conscious and subconscious challenger in the modern recreation of 'Hinduism', would seem most inappropriate to an understanding of what existed before.

Historically, we know little for certain about the Harappan religion except for a possible fertility cult involving the worship of phallic symbols, a fire cult, perhaps a sacrificial ritual, all suggestive of an authoritative priesthood. The decipherment of the script will hopefully tell us more. The Vedic texts perhaps incorporate elements of this religion but emphasize the central role of the sacrificial ritual or *yajna* and include a gamut of deities. A substantial element of shamanism can also be noticed. The Vedic texts and the *Dharmashastras* (the codes of sacred and social duties) are said to constitute the norms, for Brahmanism and the religious practices for the upper castes.

Brahmanism is differentiated from the subsequent religious groups by the use for the latter of the term Shramanism. The Buddhist and Jaina texts, the inscriptions of Ashoka, the description of India by Megasthenes and the accounts of the Chinese pilgrims in the first millennium A.D. all refer to two main religious categories: the Brahmans and the Shramans.

The identity of the former is clear. The latter were those who were often in opposition to Brahmanism such as the Buddhists, Jainas, Ajivikas and a number of other sects associated with both renunciatory orders and a lay following, who explored areas of belief and practice different from the *Vedas* and *Dharmashastras*. They often preached a system of universal ethics which spanned castes and communities. This differed from the tendency to segment religious practice by caste which was characteristic of Brahmanism. The segmenting of sects is of course common even among historically evolved religions but the breaking away still retains the historical imprint of the founder, the text and the institution.

Brahmanism was free of this. The differentiating of Brahmanistic practice for a particular caste makes it an essentially different kind of segmentation. It was this segmentation which some Shramanic religions opposed in their attempt to universalise their religious teaching. The hostility between Brahmanism and Shramanism was so acute that the grammarian Patanjali, when speaking of natural enemies and innate hostility refers to this characteristic of Brahmans and Sharamans in the same category as the snake and the mongoose and the cat and the mouse. This indigenous view of the dichotomous religions of India is referred to even at the beginning of the second millennium A. D. in Arab sources which speak of the Brahma and the Samaniya.

Brahmanism did maintain its identity and survived the centuries with fewer fundamental changes, particularly after the decline of Buddhism. This was in part because it was well-endowed with grants of land and items of wealth through extensive royal patronage, which in turn reinforced its claim to social superiority and enabled it further to emphasise its distance from other castes and their practices.

The extensive use of Sanskrit as the language of rituals and learning gave Brahmanism access to high political office and proximity to the royal courts. This, again supported its exclusive status. The use of a single language - Sanskrit - gave it a pan-Indian character, the wide geographical spread of which provided both mobility as well as a strengthening of its social identity.

The Bhakti tradition of the first millennium A.D. is sometimes traced to the *Bhagvad-Gita* and its message, which text although historically post-Buddhist, was interpolated into the earlier *Mahabharata*. The *Gita* moved away from the centrality of the sacrificial ritual and instead emphasised worship through devotion to the deity and selfless action projected as the need to act in accordance with one's *dharma*. Dharma now became the key concept.

This shift of emphasis provided the root in later times for the emergence of a number of Bahkti cults - Shaivite, Vaishnavite and others - which flourished from the mid-first millennium A. D. and provided the contours to much that is viewed as traditional 'Hinduism'. The Shiva Bhakti of the Pashupatas, the Alvars and Nayannars of the Tamil speaking areas, the Shaiva-Siddhanta and the Lingayatas, Jnaneshvara, Vallabhacharya, Mira, Chaitanya, Shankaradeva Basava, Vemana, Lalla, Tulsidasa and Tukaram, are often bunched together as part of the Bhakti stream.

In fact, there are variations among them which are significant and need to be pointed out. Some among these and similar teachers accepted the earlier style of worship and practice, others were hostile to the brahmans and did not accept the Vedic tradition; some were non-caste and objected to caste distinctions and untouchability, whereas for others such distinctions were normal. A few felt that asceticism and renunciation were not a path to salvation whereas others were committed to these. Kabir and Nanak infused Sufi ideas into their teaching.

These major differences are rarely discussed and commented upon in modern popular writing which is anxiously searching for similarities in the tradition. Some of the non-caste sects discouraged their members from going to temples or on pilgrimages and observing the essentials of the upper caste *dharma*. That these dissimilarities were to be expected and were in a sense their strength, is seldom argued.

The Bhakti sects were in some ways the inheritors of the Shramanic traditions. They arose at various times over a open of a thousand years in various parts of the subcontinent. They were specific in time, place and teacher but were limited by the language which they used. They did not evolve out of some original teaching or spread through conversion; rather, they arose as and when historical conditions were conducive to their growth often intermeshed with the need for particular castes to articulate their aspirations. Hence the variation in belief and practice and the lack of consciousness of an identity of religion across a sub-continental plane. Similarities were present in some cases but even these did not lead to a recognition of participation in a single religious movement.

With the growth of the Bhakti cults, the worship of the iconic image of the deity gained popularity, possibly influenced by the emphasis on the icon in Buddhism and Jainism. Whereas the Greek, Megasthenes, does not refer to images at all, the later Chinese and Arab accounts make icons a major feature of the indigenous religions.

This was also the period which saw the currency of the Shakta sects and Tantric rituals. Regarded by some as the resurgence of an indigenous belief associated with subordinate social groups (gradually becoming powerful), it was clearly popular at every level of society including the royal courts. The attempt in recent decades to sweep it under the carpet or to give a respectable 'gloss' to its rituals is largely because of the embarrassment these might cause to middle-class Indians heavily influence by Christian puritanism and somewhat titillated in imagining erroneously that Tantric rituals consist essentially of pornographic performances. That there has been little effort to investigate and understand such cults derives also from the attempt to define 'Hinduism' as Brahmanism or upper caste rituals and such cults were alien to traditional Brahmanism.

Another noticeable manifestation of indigenous religion is what has recently been euphemistically called 'folk Hinduism' - the religion of the untouchables, tribals and other groups at the lower end of the social scale. This is characterised by a pre-dominance of the worship of goddesses and spirits represented symbolically and often anionically and with rituals performed by non-brahman priests for a variety of reasons, not least among them being that since the offerings and libations consisted of meat and alcohol they would be regarded as polluting by brahmans. Needless to say, such groups would not be able to afford the costly donations required of a brahmanical *yajna*. For the upper caste 'Hindus' these groups were (and often still are) regarded as 'mlecchas' or impure and certainly not a part of their own religious identity (however insistently the Registrar General of the census or politicians may try to include them as such!).

The sects included in the honeycomb of what has been called 'Hinduism' were multiple and ranged from animistic spirit cults to others based on subtle philosophic concepts. They were oriented towards the tribe, the caste and the profession. The social identity of each was strongly imprinted on its religious observances.

This may in part explain why the word *dharma* became central to any understanding of this indigenous religion. It referred to the duties regarded as sacred which had to be performed in accordance with one's *varna, jati* and sect and which differed according to each of these. The constituents of *dharma* were conformity to ritual duties, social obligations and the norms of family and caste behaviour as stipulated in the *Dharmashastras*. It has

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been argued that there is an absence of theology as also of any ecclesiastical authority both of which again point to the difference between these religions and the Semitic. A major concern was with ritual purity. The performance of sacred duty heavily enmeshed in social obligations was so important that absolute individual freedom only lay in renunciation.

But, the significance of *dharma* was that it demarcated sharply between the supper castes - the *dvija* or twice born - for whom it was the core of the religion and the rest of society who were regarded as neither requiring nor praising any *dharma:* they were *dharma* in every sense of the word. The attempt today in trying to redefine Hinduism is the implicit attempt to hold up the *dharma* of the *Dharmashastras* as essential to this religion even for those traditionally regarded as *adharma.*

'Hindu' missionary organisations, taking their cue from Christian missionaries are active among the *adivasis*, untouchables and economically backward communities, converting them to a 'Hinduism' as defined by the upper caste movements of the last two centuries. What is important to such missionaries is that these communities declare their support for the *dharma.* That this 'conversion' does little or nothing to change their status as *adivasis*, untouchables and so on and that they continue to be looked down upon by upper caste 'Hindus' is of course of little consequence.

The origin of the word 'Hindu' is geographical and related to those living in the Indian subcontinent. The Sindhu (Indus) river was referred to as Hindu by the Achaemenied Persians and as the Indos by the Greeks. the Arabs referred to it as al-Hind. Thus the inhabitants of al-Hind were the Hindi. The term Hindu was first used to mean all those who lived in al-Hind but were not Muslim. In terms of religious definition, reference is made in Persian sources to various Hindu religions, the earlier texts mentioning forty-two and the later ones listing at least five. Some descriptions suggest Brahmanism and others include a variety of sects.

'Hindu' became a term of administrative convenience when the rulers of Arab, Turkish, Afghan and Mughal origin - all Muslims, had to differentiate between 'the believers' and the rest. Hindu therefore referred to the rest.

The first step towards the crystallization of what we today call Hinduism was born in the consciousness of being the amorphous, undefined, subordinate, other. In a sense, this was a reversal of roles. Earlier, the term *mleccha* had been used by the upper caste Hindus to refer to the impure, amorphous rest. For the upper caste man, the Muslim were of the same category as the untouchables and certain low castes and all were debarred from entering the sanctum of the temple and the home. Now the upper castes were clubbed together with those beyond the social pale as 'Hindus' - undoubtedly a trauma for the upper castes.

This perhaps accounts in part for the absurd statements made by upper caste Hindus today that Hinduism in the last one thousand years has been through the most severe persecution that any religion in the world has ever undergone' (Karan Singh). Such statements can only come from those who conveniently forget that the last thousand years in the history of Hinduism has witnessed the establishment of the powerful Shankaracharya *mathas, ashrams* and similar institutions attempting to provide an ecclesiastical structure to strengthen conservatism, the powerful Dashnami and Bairagi religious orders; the popular cults of the Nathpanthis; the extremely significant sects of the major Bhakti teachers such as Tukaram, Namdeo, Vallabhacharya, Chaitanya, Dadoo and, Kabir, not to mention Nanka; and more recently, the very influential Brahmo and Arya Samaj.

In fact, many of the facets which are regarded today as essential to popular 'Hinduism' come from this period. The establishment of the sects which accompanied these developments often derived from wealthy patronage which accounted for the prosperity of the temples and institutions associated with these sects. Where then is the severe persecution? The last thousand years have seen the most assertive thrust of the major 'Hindu' sects.

If by persecution is meant the conversion of Hindus to Islam or Christianity, then it should be kept in mind that the majority of the conversions were from the lower castes and this is more a reflection on 'Hindu' society than on persecution. When the destroying of temples and the breaking of idols by Muslims is mentioned, and quite correctly, it should at the same time be stated that there were also some Muslim rulers - not excluding Aurangzeb - who gave substantial donations to Hindu sects and to individual brahmans. There was obviously more than just religious bigotry or religious tolerance involved in these actions.

Nor should it be forgotten that the temple as a source of wealth was exploited even by some 'Hindu' rulers. Those who refer to Mahmud of Ghazni's destruction of Hindu temples and the carrying away of their wealth generally prefer to ignore the statement of Kalhana in the *Rajatarangini* that Harshadeva, an eleventh century king of Kashmir and therefore a close contemporary of Mahmud, defiled and looted temples when he required funds for the State treasury. He appointed a special officer whose function was to seize the images and the wealth of temples. Given the opulence of most temples, such evidence may be forthcoming from other areas as well. The wealth stored in them required some to be walled in and defended almost like fortresses.