

HINDU DHARM – GLOBAL RELIGION OF THE MODERN WORLD

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All over India and in almost every part of the world, there are millions of people who call themselves Hindu. Yet, the question “Who is a Hindu?” is often raised. Some people define Hinduism on geographical basis, while some others do so on the basis of system of worship and belief; there are others who link Hinduism to ancient Indian culture. This controversy about definition is unique to Hinduism. Other religions like Islam, Christianity etc. are devoid of any such dispute since they are based on one book. The belief in a sacred book is fundamental to such religions. Anyone believing in the book is a follower while anyone not believing in the book is an outsider to the religion. A Hindu is under no compulsion to believe in any book or any prophet or even a single system of worship or hall of worship. The freedom that a Hindu has makes it difficult to define Hinduism.

Before proceeding any further, one must understand the historical background that has led to this controversy. Hindus have been subjected to nearly a thousand years of slavery. The struggle for existence that Hindus faced during this long period is unique in human history. To understand this glorious struggle, one must compare Indian history with American history. It was approximately the same time when a group of persons reached America and another group of persons reached India. Both the groups were from the same part of the world and were of the same white race. At that time, population of America and India was nearly equal. Today, the original inhabitants of America have become almost extinct. Their civilization, culture and religion is almost dead; there are of course some remnants which are objects of wonder and are kept as curios displayed in a museum. The atrocities in India were identical to those in America, but the original inhabitants of India survived. A magnificent building that was an inspiration to many has been demolished completely and what has been left behind is only a mass of rubble.

All the traditional institutions of the Indian society were systematically destroyed during nearly a thousand years of foreign rule (first Islamic and later British, Portugese and French). Books were burnt. Persons who were active in preservation and growth of knowledge were forced by all possible means to give up their pursuits. Attempts were made to remove all symbols of Hindu religion from the surface of the earth. A grand civilization was reduced to ashes. Today, Hindu finds himself sitting with these ashes and a few semi-burnt pieces of what was once a magnificent building. He has a dream to reconstruct the grand building, to get back to the glory that seems almost fictional.

When Lech Walesa became the first non-communist President of Poland he said that it is easy to make fish-soup from a fish but it is very difficult to make a fish out of fish-soup. If the same example were to be applied to the Indian society and nation, one finds that India does not even have the soup - the colonial masters drank it. There are only a few skeletal remains. The present generation of Hindus has to reconstruct a new living civilization and rebuild the cultural edifice from these skeletal remains.

Hindus have survived the long arduous journey but have lost a lot. The biggest loss has been of self-identity. A person who has just escaped from a big terrible fire is primarily concerned with his burnt skin and the wounds rather than the torn clothes. The first fifty years of post-independent India have been spent on arranging for essentials for livelihood. Forgetting the old wounds, taking control of the life as it is, the Indian psyche has slowly started looking at its own identity and has started asking questions about itself. The question "Who is a Hindu?" is the first step in this search for self-identity. It is an attempt to seek the foundation stone for Hindu Reconstruction and Renaissance.

It will be relevant to discuss the various definitions of Hindu in vogue. One definition defines Hindu on geographical basis. It is said that the word "Hindu" is derived from the word "Sindhu" based on the contention that the aggressors from the Western side started calling persons living near river Sindhu as Hindu. Geographical definition of Hindu treats every person living in Indian sub-continent or having some emotional attachment to the Indian sub-continent as a Hindu. This is possibly the most narrow and restricted definition of Hindu. A slave often starts seeing himself through the eyes of the master. If it is accepted that Hindu is a distorted version of Sindhu, it will also have to be accepted that there was no Hindu in existence before the attack from the western side. If it is

accepted that only a person living on Indian soil is Hindu, the problem would arise about Hindu temples of Thailand. It is a well accepted fact that at one time, Hindu religion and culture exerted strong influence on the whole of Asia. If Hindu religion is based on devotion towards a block of land, it is obvious that Hinduism cannot spread beyond that block of land. If an appeal is made to the Hindus living across the world to be devoted to the Indian soil, such an appeal can possibly serve some vested interests but it will block the growth of Hindu religion. In such a case, instead of becoming a global ideological revolution, Hindu religion will become a vehicle to satisfy the interests of inhabitants of a particular land-mass.

The traditionalist definition of Hindu prescribes that anyone accepting the ancient Indian culture and traditions is Hindu. The philosophical bankruptcy of the traditionalist definition is of the same order as that of the geographist definition. The traditionalist mind is inherently conservative and is opposed to all change and growth. Everything old is considered good, while everything modern is looked down upon. The traditionalist treats the "*puratan*" (ancient) as "*sanatan*" (eternal or natural or essential) and sacred. The traditionalist invokes "*bhakti*" (devotion and faith) to close the mental doors to any fresh thought. This is contrary to the concept of Hindu. A closed mind cannot be the distinguishing feature of a Hindu. If Hindu religion was a closed-minded religion, there would have been no *Upanishads* and *Puranas* after *Vedas*. Diversity of opinion and clash of opinions is a frequent phenomenon in ancient Hindu texts. Considering the ancient as sacred will block the growth of Hinduism. Moreover, when only a few remnants of the ancient are available and the circumstances in the present time and world (*desh-kal*) are completely different, it is necessary to begin the job of reconstruction and renaissance by starting from first principles and fundamental values. The old can be a guide, but it is necessary to give up the presumption that everything ancient is sacred. Hence, the traditionalist definition of Hinduism is not only incomplete and shallow, it is a big obstacle in the growth of Hinduism.

Often attempts have been made to define Hinduism on the basis of some beliefs and/or symbols. For example - Hindu is one who worships *Ram*; Hindu is one who worships the cow; Hindu is one who worships *Krishna*; Hindu is one who considers Ganges to be sacred; Hindu is one who considers the plant of *tulasi* as sacred; Hindu is one who begins his worship with *OM*. Each of these is a belief of a section of the Hindus.

However, any one of the above individually or some/all of the above taken together cannot be considered to be the fundamental basis of Hinduism. The diversity of opinions and contradictions are too strong. A worshipper of Ram is a Hindu just as a worshipper of formless Supreme Being is also a Hindu; Ganges is considered sacred by many Hindus while there are others who have ridiculed it; idol worshippers are Hindus while there are some Hindus who are opposed to all idolatry worship; the devotees of *OM* and *Gayatri Mantra* are Hindus just as someone who considers *Krishna* to be his/her lover is also a Hindu; there are Hindus who follow a devotional life and there are Hindus who believe in self-attainment through work or knowledge. Clearly, Hinduism cannot be defined on the basis of any one belief or tradition or symbol.

There is one practical definition which is the most well accepted definition of Hindu. Every person whose parents or at least father is/was a Hindu and who has not accepted any other religion is a Hindu. For the past more than hundred years the rulers of India and the so-called guardians of Hinduism have accepted and adopted this definition. As per this definition a person can only be born as a Hindu, there is no way by which a person may adopt Hinduism or be converted to Hinduism. The damage that this definition has done to Hinduism has probably not been done by any other definition. At the time when Hinduism spread from Egypt to Japan, it is certain that there was no such definition of Hinduism. The damage that Hinduism has suffered by stopping the entry of people from other religions is possibly much more than the damage done by Christian missionaries and Islamic aggressors. Various visionaries like Swami Vivekananda, Swami Shradhananda etc. had in unambiguous terms pointed to the damage that Hinduism has suffered on this account. If Hindus are serious about Hindu Renaissance and dream of a glorious future for Hinduism in every part of the world, it will be necessary to make new Hindus in every nook and corner of the world. To do this Hindus must first free themselves of this heredity based (racial) definition of Hindu.

The definition of Hindu that seems plausible treats the word "Hindu" as being made up of two words *Ha* + *Indu*. *Ha* means the sky and *Indu* means the moon. This can be interpreted to mean that one who spreads cool light like the moon in the sky is a Hindu. Another word associated with Hindu is *Bharat*. Often the word *Bharat* is associated with the name of a King. The more logical interpretation is however to treat BHARAT as made up of two words *Bha* + *Rat*. *Bha* means Light and *Rat* means the

one who is full of or saturated with. In other words *Bharat* means The one Who is full of and spreads light. Looked at carefully, *Bharat* and Hindu have identical meanings. The word *Bharatvarsh* has often been used for a large part of land. *Varsh* means *varsha* or rain. Combining the meanings of *Bharat* and *varsh* we can understand that the word *Bharatvarsh* was used for the region where the Hindu knowledge rained or had influence. It is not proper to treat *Bharat* as only the name of a part of land. Instead of the geographical definition of Hindu as the one who lives in the land known as *Bharat*, it will be proper to say that wherever in the world there are Hindus, they will be full of light and spread light and there will be *Bharat*.

Another meaning of the word Hindu can also be considered. In Sanskrit, ocean has been called as *Indujanak*, the father of *Indu* (moon). The meaning of the word *Ha* in a Sanskrit dictionary is water as well as sky. If we take a comprehensive view of the meanings of *Ha* and *Indu*, we see the complete universe from the ocean to the sky in the word *Hindu*. Hence, it will be proper to conclude that a Hindu is someone who believes in everything from the ocean to the sky.

The totality of the sky including the earth and the oceans is named as Universe or Cosmos and is known by the word *Brahm* in Sanskrit. This Universe or Cosmos is *shashwat* or eternal, in other words it has always been and shall always be, though it may keep changing. Hindu sees himself as a part of the Universe or Cosmos. A Hindu's belief, faith, actions, lifestyle, thoughts should be in accordance with the rules of the Cosmos. There could possibly be different views about the Cosmos between two persons due to different perspectives. However, if the difference of views is due to different perspectives and not due to pre-conceived notions, both the persons, though holding divergent views are Hindus.

While understanding the word *Hindu*, it is also necessary to understand the word *Dharm*. The word *Dharan* and *Dharm* have the same root. *Dharan* means to wear or to carry and *Dharm* refers to what is put on. *Dharm* can be compared to clothing. Just as a person changes his clothes as per the time-place and his own personal requirements, the *Dharm* for a Hindu is constantly changing. This concept of *Dharm* is neither possible nor imaginable for any one-book-based religion. A hindu's *Dharm*, on one hand helps him live his life as per the requirements of the cosmos and on the other hand, assists him in acting as per his own nature and aptitude.

Just as cosmos or universe is considered to be constantly changing but *shashwat* or eternal, *Dharm* is considered to be under constant change but still *sanatan* or permanent.

Oneness with the Cosmos and the concept of a *Dharm* that is in accordance with this oneness can be said to be *Hindu Dharm*. This complex philosophy has been elaborated by the aphoristic words **SATYAM SHIVAM SUNDARAM**. The three words define the Hindu way of life as completely and correctly as is ever possible. An English translation of the aphorism can be Truth, Universal Welfare & Nice feelings of the Inner Being. The translation is not very accurate. (Incidentally, it may be mentioned that Greek and early Christian authors also seemed to believe in this triad of Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram. Augustine devotes much space in *The City of God* to a discussion of Greek philosophy. In the Augustinian synthesis of Christ and Plato, the classical triad of virtues - truth, beauty, and goodness - become part of the Christian ethic.)

It is important to understand each of the concepts to fully appreciate the Hindu mind.

SATYAM – The first fundamental condition for Hindu *Dharm* is *Satyam* or truth. The cosmos or the world is experienced by us through our senses and we make an image of the world or parts of it on our mind. If the image corresponds to the world as it exists, the image is truth or else it is not truth. Our capacities and abilities to see, observe, experience and understand are limited. Hence, our ability to create mental images of the world is limited. Just as four blind men described an elephant in four different ways, we make different images of the world. For example, a biologist and a poet look at a flower in different ways. Hindu accepts this difference in perspective and therefore opinions, while at the same time giving utmost importance to *Satyam* or truth. If any idea or thought is against truth, a Hindu can never accept it.

The evaluation of the correspondence between the image and the world is by means of evidence or proof. There can be an epistemological debate about the suitability of different types of possible evidence and proof. It is likely that some types of evidence are accepted by one while the same types of evidence are rejected by others. Such a difference of opinion is well-accepted. For example, the experience of God by the inner self has been accepted as sufficient evidence for the existence of God by some while others have refused to accept such experience as evidence. This led

to different versions of truth for theists and atheists. But both are Hindus because both believe in Truth. Hinduism is possibly the only major religion of the world which accepted atheism.

It is important to compare the commitment of a Hindu towards truth with that of the followers of other religions. For a Christian, every word in Bible is the ultimate truth. During the reign of the Church, any attempt to even collect evidence that might contradict something written in the Bible was considered blasphemy and was punishable by death. Apparently, some holy book says that a man has more teeth and ribs than a woman has. During the medieval period, it was blasphemy and criminal offence to try to gather evidence against the sacred book by counting the teeth or ribs of men and women. For hundreds of years no one in Europe could hence count teeth or ribs. In any single-book-based religion such problems are likely to occur at some time or the other. Both Christianity and Islam have at some points in their history opposed science since it clashed with the truth as provided in their sacred books.

Hinduism has never and can never be opposed to Science due to the fundamental belief in truth. It was this belief in truth that led to the development and growth of science and knowledge in ancient India. The glow of science and knowledge made the Hindu full of light and the region that was illuminated by this shower of light was called *Bharatvarsh*.

SHIVAM - After accepting Truth, it is necessary to go a step further and look at the welfare of the world. Every act, belief and thought of a human being must be evaluated on the basis of the criterion of welfare of the world. An act or belief or thought is not proper or acceptable if it does not promote the welfare of the world even though it may be based on Truth. For example, a person's strong desire may be a reality or a truth but if the satisfaction of the desire does not lead to universal welfare, it is not proper to permit the person to satisfy his desire.

Just as there can be differences of opinion and perception in matters related to truth, there may be differences of opinion regarding the concept of universal welfare, which may change from time to time and from region to region and also based on the nature and aptitude of various individuals. Such differences of opinion are well accepted and though there may be debate or discussion to resolve the differences, there is no attempt to iron out all differences and arrive at a uniform standard code. The acceptance of differences based on the needs of

place-time and individuals has led to Hindu Dharm becoming different for each person, for every region and from time to time. However, if anyone ignores the argument of welfare and advances quotations from any book as an argument, he is not a Hindu.

The concept of *SHIVAM* as universal welfare based on the realities of time and place is deeply embedded in the Hindu psyche. On various occasions this has been demonstrated. For example India was one of the first few countries in the world to accept abortion since the majority of the population (Hindus) appreciated the benefits of legalized abortion without any religious restrictions. Even in matters like giving electoral rights to women there has been no dispute since the issues are examined on merits rather than on the basis of books written a few centuries ago.

The examples of accepting contradictory actions and beliefs based on different ground realities are too numerous to cite. There are Hindus who are strictly vegetarians while there are others who are permitted to eat meat. There are Hindus who fast on some days during the year while on the same days there are Hindus who would eat meat and offer meat to their family deities. The opposites are always justified by logic of welfare or *Shivam* as might be existing at that time and place.

SUNDARAM – Along with *Satyam* and *Shivam*, the third fundamental foundation stone of Hindu thought is *Sundaram*. Anything that leads to nice (or “*Su*”) feelings in the inner being of a person can be called as *SUNDARAM* or aesthetic. It is very difficult to define the nice feelings in the inner being and each person may have his own opinion in the matter. The purpose of all arts is to give pleasure by creating nice aesthetic feelings. A Hindu accepts all arts and accepts each person’s version of *SUNDARAM*. Hindu accepts freedom of the individual in this regard, subject, of course, to *Satyam* and *Shivam*.

It may seem strange that something as obvious as aesthetics needs to be defined as a key fundamental block of a belief system. Yet if we look at the treatment of the subject by other religions, the distinction is too glaring. Islam treats all visual arts like painting and sculpture as forbidden and even puts strictures on music. Christian churches have also from time to time made attempts to prescribe what is right and what is wrong in arts. In more than five thousand years of history of Hinduism there have never been any attempts of similar nature.

SATYAM SHIVAM SUNDARAM – the triad expresses completely and comprehensively the essence of Hindu *Dharm*. It may well be asked that which of the three is more important and in case of conflict, which one should be given priority. There have been different opinions in this regard, yet a prominent view has been that the conflicts among the three are only apparent. Deep within there is a unity in the three elements of the triad. So, any fundamental conflict is not possible. This school of thought believes that the aphorism literally translates as *Satyam* is *Shivam* and *Shivam* is *Sundaram*. In other words the aphorism affirms the unity of the triad. So a Hindu is expected to follow all three elements of the triad and give due importance to each in his life. However, even while giving due importance to all three, it is likely that an individual may emphasize one or the other element depending on one's own nature and aptitude. For example, truth may be more important for a scientist while aesthetics may be the central concern for an artist. Both are members of one unified society and many such different persons combine together to form a balanced society which has the correct combination of *Satyam*, *Shivam* and *Sundaram*.

SATYAM SHIVAM SUNDARAM can also be expressed as Science, Ethics and Art. Any one who accepts the triad as fundamental basis of his belief system is a Hindu, irrespective of his/her geographic location, race, national loyalties, system of worship, deity of worship, food habits, language, etc. Defined in this manner, Hindu *Dharm* becomes a truly global religion of the modern world. Acquiring strengths from its ancient roots Hindu *Dharm* becomes the human-values-based religion of the modern scientific age. The ability to constantly transform itself enables Hindu *Dharm* to rejuvenate and always be fresh and new. Hindu *Dharm* is neither "opium for the masses" nor does it bind anyone in perennial chains. Hindu *Dharm* is the liberator of mankind and is an engine of growth, prosperity and fulfillment for the individual as well as for the society on a long term sustainable basis.

From the muddy cesspool of history, one can always pick some instances that support the above view and also some that do not. History cannot and should not become the guide or touchstone for philosophy. However, surprisingly the above definition of Hindu *Dharm* finds extensive support in an analysis of the Indian psyche as it evolved over the centuries and faced a diverse set of circumstances. But the most surprising part comes when one tries to understand the preachings of Lord Jesus Christ in the light of the basic principles of Hinduism.

If one studies the preachings of Lord Jesus Christ, devoid of the views of others who followed him as well as of the various churches, one finds a striking similarity between him and many Hindu saints (for example Sai Baba of Shirdi). The concept of church was not given by Lord Jesus Christ. Neither did the Lord write the Bible nor any other book. It may not be improper to say that the Lord was a Hindu. The relationship between the teachings of Lord Jesus Christ and the essentials of Hinduism needs to be studied. It may also be interesting to explore the etymology of the word Christianity which has an identical sound as "KRISHNA NEETI" (the ethics of Lord Krishna). This is not the subject of this essay and will need more research. However, based on initial impressions, it may well be concluded that Lord Jesus preached a version of Hinduism and was crucified for his revolutionary ideas. The scenario that seems likely is that after the death of Jesus, his followers started a process of compromises which led to the acceptance of Old Testament, writing of the New Testament in a form acceptable to the ruling classes and foundation of the Church.

It may be further added that just as Lord Jesus Christ's sayings were misused and distorted by Church, there are attempts to narrow and restrict Hinduism. The churchification of Hinduism is a danger that needs to be guarded against. In recent years, people who know nothing of Hinduism have emerged as the self-proclaimed defenders of the faith. They are interpreting Hinduism in their own way and are declaring their versions to be the official versions. For a religion which does not even prohibit the eating of human flesh, vegetarianism and non-violence are being declared as fundamental values. Hindus are being asked to be loyal to a geographic entity or a nation. There is even an attempt to show that Hindus are one race. The harm that such ignorant proclaimed defenders of the faith may inflict on Hinduism is enormous. It must be remembered that the dark ages of Europe were not a result of anything that Lord Jesus said.

European Renaissance was an attempt to break the vice-like grip of the church on all aspects of European life. It was a revolt against the Church and not against Lord Jesus Christ. As years have passed, the influence of church in European (and American) life has decreased considerably. Nowadays, a Christian takes almost all important decisions of his life based on his own self assessment and intellect. The life of a Christian is now regulated more and more by *SATYAM SHIVAM SUNDARAM* though he/she himself/herself would not define it that way. Concern with ecological considerations and serious attempts to live life as per nature's

laws can also be seen as an attempt to attain the oneness with cosmos which is most fundamental to Hinduism.

The move of the world to a more rational and humane existence is in fact a move towards Hinduism. It is time that Hindus realized this and took up the leadership in this ongoing historical movement which has transformed the world in the past four/five centuries. As men and women across the world (from all races and communities) understand and adopt the "Global Religion of the Modern World" – Hindu *Dharm* based on *Satyam, Shivam, Sundaram* – they will not only transform their own lives but will also make the world a better place to live in.



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