

Hinduism

(Notes from a class in "World Religions" taught at Redeemer College in the early 1980s.)

Founder

Hinduism has no founder, in comparison with Buddhism or Islam, but rather, it is founded upon a system. Therefore, it is not a creedal religion like Islam. One is born a Hindu, he does not become a Hindu.

If one is converted to Hinduism, he is considered an outcast. Thus, Hinduism is an ethnic, or a racial religion. Ages and ages of philosophical systems, animism and Western influence have made up the beliefs and the practices of Hinduism.

Vedic Period

Origin - This period covers from 1500 to 500 B.C. In an archeological discovery at Mahenjo-Daro in the Indus Valley, a civilization was found which was akin to the civilization in the area of Mesopotamia. These people were polytheistic and they placed emphasis on the Mother Goddess and Siva. At the same time Abraham left Mesopotamia, the Aryans left Central Asia and entered into India, through the Kyber Pass. These people were high minded and they brought to India their native worship and worship of the heavenly beings and natural phenomena such as fire, wind and storms.

The population of India at this time was Dravidian, who were fair skinned, Indo-European and spoke Sanskrit. They were descendants from the Northwest who came down and conquered the area known as the Punjab. The Dravidians were animists, and gradually the Aryans absorbed most of the Dravidian culture. The gods became multiplied and the sacrificial system became very elaborate. To this system hymns were added and specific directions were given for the conducting of the sacrifice. Only the priests (Brahmans) knew how to give the sacrifice properly. These priests also extracted favour for the people from the gods. This was the beginning of the caste system. The Aryans were divided into castes by their occupation.

- i) Kshatriyas - the warriors and princes
- ii) Brahmanas - were the priests and instructors
- iii) Valsyas - the farmers and the merchants

After many wars, India was finally brought under the Aryan rule and everyone had to recognize and acknowledge the Brahman system. There was a tendency to ascetic practices, and it began to be said that the gods had immortality. Orders of the ascetics aimed at obtaining miraculous powers by enduring extreme positions and temperatures of heat and cold, and by meditating for long periods of time.

HISTORICAL SURVEY

Philosophical Period 500 B.C. - 500 A.D.

This was the period in which the Aryan rule spread over India. The Brahmanas increased their rule over the Indians and the Sanskrit literature was spread.

First, there was the rise of the two gods: Shiva, the goddess of the prostitutes, and Vishna, the preserver, destroyer and reproducer. These two gods were often associated with the Brahma, who was the offspring of the eternal being. These three beings formed the triad, sometimes called the Trimurti, represented by the one body with three heads. Thus, Brahma is considered the Originator of the Universe and all visible things. Vishnu is the preserver and Siva is the goddess of the women.

Second, came the conception of the four great castes as the divine institution. This evolution of religious thought led to the conception of a creator as distinct from the Vedic gods. He is pictured as a being with 1,000 heads and arms and his body extends beyond the earth. Gods and men are supposed to descend from him. The Brahmins never suffered extinction. The Indo-Aryan colonies increased and absorbed the empire of Asoka (272-232 B.C.).

Neo-Brahmanism rose in 320 B.C. and remained until 60 A.D. Foreign rule came in but this faith was not destroyed. In 605 A.D. the ruler established national power and followed Hinduism. Brahmanism extended down into South India. The Hindu influence was obstructed by a great forest tract and the ranges which divide the north from the Deccan Plateau. No invasion occurred before the 7th Century B.C. The introduction of Brahman beliefs and practices into Southern India was later than to the north.

Finally, Brahmanism was established and the reaction against Buddhism and Jainism was complete. It controlled the laws and social institutions of the people. The caste theory was fully developed and the Brahmins were placed at the head of the society.

Neo-Brahmanism is called Hinduism. It developed by illustrations of creation in literature, legends of tradition and reconstructing tradition from the previous system. Deities were adopted and introduced to the people.

The Caste System

The caste system is an important part of the history of Hinduism. The origin of the caste is largely in the colour bar of the primitive tribes. It was developed by confining and dividing the groups to a given occupation. Therefore, a caste will tell of the work of the members. The castes started out with originally four divisions. As the Sudras became absorbed into the Hindu system, the Brahmins divided them up into different castes. This multiplication continued until there are now 3,000 castes in India. 'Dharma' is connected with the caste system. Translated, it means 'religion' or 'duty'. Each caste has its own book of laws and conduct for its members. There can be no intermarriage, no entering nor eating with members of the other castes.

Religious Beliefs

Idolatry and ritual is a part of the every day activities. Everything is done with a religious attitude, such as driving, cooking, washing, and sleeping. All these idols have to be worshipped before doing each duty. Idols are placed at bathing places and the bath is to be completed by throwing water over the idol in an act of worship.

Villages and communities have their own idols. The joint families are called cult groups. Life is divided into four stages:

- i) Studentship – a young person is placed under a teacher until age 16 or until he is married.
- ii) Householder – who performs the duties of sacrifices and raises a family.
- iii) Retiring stage – the person goes to the forest to meditate and has renounced the world.
- iv) Goes out and preaches the truth and lives to contact God.

Objects Of Worship

The Hindus have various number of objects vital to their religion:

- i) Water – is the most important and prevalent object of worship. The Ganges River is considered to be the most sacred as it is supposed to come from the great toe of Vishnu.
- ii) Plants and trees and animals – are worshipped because the Hindus believe in the doctrine of transmigration of souls. The souls of men can pass into trees and animals.
- iii) Brahmins – are object of worship as they are the highest in the caste system, and considered to be divine.
- iv) Ancestral worship – is common. It is believed that for three generations, the departed soul needs to be nourished by the descendants. Through the works of the living, the dead can be released from 'hell'.
- v) Trimurti – is the triad of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva. They are greatly worshipped.

Cow Worship

The veneration of the cow is ancient. An ancient law decreed the death penalty if a cow were killed. Cow protection is the dearest possess of the Hindu. He who is not a cow worshipper is not a Hindu. The most powerful means of purification is to consume the five products of the cow.

Idolatry

The original 33 gods have become the 330,000,000 gods and these are divided into 3 groups.

- i) Varuna – lowest level. This is the god of the cosmic order.
- ii) Aryan Supernals – nature gods e.g. moon, sun, fire.
- iii) Gods from the Vedantic philosophy.

These account for the popular idols and devotion of today. e. g. Brahma, Vishnu, Siva. Each god has a consort.

The chief views of Vedanti are centred in Brahma. He is the absolute and nothing else besides. He has no qualities, and is unknowable and is known as 'It'. He is limitless, above good and evil, beyond all appearances and is unchangeable.

The basic concept is the understanding that the Brahman is the great soul and the great person. This soul pervades our lives and it is the same as the Great Self, or the Soul of Brahma.

Realization comes by intimate discipline according to the rules and practices of Yoga, Through years of devotional worship and study, one may hope to come to the end of the struggle, attain salvation and find oneself.

Three Ways Of Coming To Realization

- i) Way of knowledge – This is an attempt to concentrate and to shut out all other thoughts but thoughts of God.
- ii) Ways of Work – to work one's way to realization. Action must be done without any thought of the results of work.
- iii) Way of devotion – the exercises are centred in a chosen deity through which he sees the all-embracing All.

Karma and Transmigration

The Vedic idea of the future life pictures the soul dwelling in an underworld of bliss or sorrow. Transmigration is the most characteristic of Hinduism today and took hold even before the rise of Buddhism. It is a desire to get rid of evil which is existence and to cast off the finite existence which holds the soul to the world. Every activity sets off a chain reaction and has a series of consequences. A man's life consists of good and bad evils and each of them bears fruit. At death, there is an accumulation of Karma in the form of merit or demerit. This determines his status in the future world. One may be in the state of a god or in a tree, depending on the present life. All poverty and suffering is depended and based upon Karma, because it is the result of the former life.

Nirvana

Nirvana is the hope of finding a way from the ceaseless round of action and rebirth. It is the state where the soul is released from its ceaseless pilgrimage by absorbing into nothingness which is the heart of the universe.

POPULAR HINDUISM

1) Primitive Customs

"It is the custom" is a quotation that puts the end to all the arguments. The most binding is cow worship. It is essentially for the Hindu to protect the cow. Cows are allowed to wander freely on the streets and are not allowed to be touched by anyone. The warning of their coming is made by the bell that they wear.

2) The sacredness of certain plants, rivers, tools and serpent worship go back very far. The Ganges River is supposed to purify the earth and to be a place for washing the sins of the people. The Ganges is the famous place for pilgrimages. It is heroic to die upon the banks of the river and a devotion to bathe in it.

3) Position of Women

The birth of daughters is not welcomed. They are a sign of sin in the previous life. Marriage is arranged by the parents. The betrothal is made when the child is 5 or 6 and the betrothal is binding. The men may marry again, but a woman is not allowed to remarry even if she is a widow. Consequently, there are many child widows in India.

One of the most ancient customs in Hindu worship is the provision of groups of dancing girls, who are to perform at the festive seasons and they act as religious prostitutes at other times.

Sati is a practice where a woman offers herself to be burned alive in her husband's funeral pier so she can accompany him to the nether world. This is supposed to be a sign of devotion to her husband.

BOOKS

A. Scriptures - known as Vedas.

- i) Mantras which contain hymns to the various gods, chants at the sacrifices and prayers.
- ii) Brahmanas – is the commentary of 'tie Mantras, with stories of myths and legends.
- iii) Aranyakas – contain instructions for the forest dwelling hermits.

iv) Upanishads – emphasize way of knowledge and devotion.

B. Vedanga - these are the sacred writings

i) Sutras – contain manuals of pronunciation, grammar and ritual.

ii) Codes of the law.

iii) Agamas – contain Scriptures and stories of the personal gods.

iv) Epics – emphasizes Karma and Yoga.

v) Darchanas – contain theology and philosophy.

vi) Purvanas – 18 volumes of tales of gods and goddesses.

vii) Commentators.

AREAS OF THE GREATEST INFLUENCE

1. India – is the home for the Hindu religion and is mostly confined to that country. Hindi is the most widely used language in India. When India received her independence in 1947, the people were speaking 179 languages and 544 dialects. Hindi was made the official language because it was already spoken by 1/2 of the population.

Socially, Hindu religion has made the woman's lot in India a burden. When still a child, she would have to marry an older man and become a slave to his other wives. The widowed children were considered outcasts, and most of them became prostitutes in the temples.

2. Pakistan – Hinduism is a minor religion in comparison with Islam.

3. Ceylon – Hinduism is prominent in the northern part of the country.

4. Bhutan – is in the north east part of India and is completely mountainous, Hinduism is the major religion.

CHRISTIAN MISSION IN THESE COUNTRIES

1) William Carey - was the first missionary to India. He was converted at the age of ten. He had a great desire to do missionary work. He formed the Baptist Missionary Society and became its first missionary. He went to India and worked at Serampore with two other men. Here, the Bible was published in 40 languages as well as other tracts and Christian work. He passed laws forbidding child sacrifice and the burning of women.

2) Chaplains of the East India Company Some of the chaplains were concerned for missionary work, and one of them was David Brown. He conducted a school for Hindus. Henry Martin, another chaplain, became familiar with the language and translated the New Testament into Arabic, Persian and Urdu.

3) Anglican Bishops – Some Anglicans, such as Heber and Wilson, went to India to establish churches and missions. Bishop's College was built for the training of ministers, teachers and it helped to translate the Bible.

4) British Societies Several missions were represented, such as Church of England, Free Church in Scotland. The Irish Presbyterians worked in Kathiawar. The British and Foreign School Society organized schools for girls in Calcutta. The Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society worked in Calcutta, Madras and Bangalore.

5) American Societies The Presbyterian church started work in the Punjab area, while the Associate Presbyterian Synod worked in the aborigine tribe. The American Baptists worked in Calcutta and it reached out into the hill tribes. The Methodist Episcopal Church worked in Barcilly, which is in the north-western province. Gradually, all the missionary work was extended into West Pakistan.

6) European Societies The Basal Evangelical Missionary Society worked in Mangalore and on the Malabar Coast. The German Evangelical Lutheran Mission worked among the primitive people in Nagpur and the Ganges Valley. The Noravians tried to find a way into the Tibet country.

7) Recent Societies. The Christian and Missionary Alliance has been doing good and strong work in India since 1887: The Ceylon and India General Mission started in Ceylon and moved in to South India. The Indian Mission works in the states of Hyderabad and Mysore and in the Central Provinces. The Mennonites work in the Behar field. T.E.A.M. began to work in the Khardesh field among the aborigines. They have also worked in West Pakistan and on the Tibet-Nepal border.

METHODS USED

i) Evangelism – is done by preaching tours and establishing churches.

ii) Education – places emphasis on higher education. Most of this is promoted by the Scottish missionary societies. Schools were founded, some for Christian teaching, others for the emphasis of winning the non-Christian.

iii) Medicine – William Carey opened a leprosarium and trained nationals. Medical work is carried on in the Bhil field, in Jhansi and Ludhiana.

iv) Zenana Work - work among the women where no men were allowed. This was developed by Amy Carmichael and by the Dohnaver Fellowship.

v) Publications – This was promoted with the help of the British and Foreign Bible Society and the Bible Societies from Scotland and America. Only two dozen major languages have the complete Bible.

vi) Student work – This is mostly done by the National Union of Evangelical Students of India. It is carried on in Madras City and Madras Province.

vii) Bhutan – This country is completely closed to the Christian gospel and to any form of missionary work.

viii) Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) – The Protestant church has just recently been able to get into Ceylon and make any progress. The missions that worked there were the London Missionary Society, the Wesleyans and the Anglican Church Missionary Society. The Ceylon and India General Mission worked in Ceylon, but it discontinued. Plans are being made to re-enter into that country.

Personal Summery

I have appreciated doing this study for several reasons. From reading about the heathen religions, I have realized just how valuable and precious Christianity is and should be for the Christian. This was particularly brought home to me by reading Vos's book *Religions in the Changing World!* There is vivid description of the people who are chained to their sins and imaginations trying to find heaven and peace of mind. All their aims and desires can be satisfied in Christianity.

Then, from reading about the extreme hold these religions have on the women and the treatment of them, I have been made truly thankful for what Christ has done for womanhood and that He has allowed her to be free from sin and has given her a place to serve and love Him.

In doing this study, I have realized more clearly just what the Christian missions are up against. Truly, behind all this heathendom, is the rule of the devil, for I cannot see where Christ is given any place of worship in these religions. Therefore, if one is planning to go to work in these countries, I don't think that the subject of complete dedication and consecration to Christ can be overstressed.