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HINDUISM: AN OVERVIEW OF THE RELIGION

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Abstract

Hinduism is believed as the oldest religion in the world and it does not refer to a particular set of people. There is no founder of Hinduism. That is why Hinduism has not been made but has grown. Dharma means sustain. Dharma comes from the root "Dhre". Dharma that is why described binding force of society.

Originally, the term Hindu had its origin in the name of river Sindhu and the Hindu Vedas people who received on the bank of the river Sindhu and therefore, the term "Hindu" had its origin with reference to the geographical context. But later on these people moved to different parts of India and they were known as Hindus. Hinduism is a religion which is not a revealed religion. Revealed religion is that religion which has a founder. But Hinduism does not have any particular founder. Hence Hinduism is not a revealed religion like Islam, Christianity, and Judaism etc. The Islam religion is founded by Hazrat Mohammad; Christianity has been founded by Jesus Christ. But Hinduism has no definite founder. Therefore, Hinduism has developed from the ancient period to the modern age and in course of time has incorporated many new believes and ideas. Hinduism is a religion which is often compared to tree God, where the roots are submerged deep down in the soil and the branched are spread to all over. Thus though Hinduism is ruled in ancient past it has spread to different places at different times and has incorporated within it many new believes and ideas.

SCRIPTURES OF HINDUISM-

Hinduism is a religion which has many different scriptures. The different scriptures associated with Hinduism are the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas, the Ramayana and the Bhagavad Gita.

- **The Vedas-** The Vedas occupies a very important place in Hinduism. The Vedas contains the words and utterances of the different seers or the Rishis which contains the philosophical outlook and the religious outlook. There are four kinds of Vedas- Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda. The Vedas contains the important philosophical principle of Hinduism. It is also concerned with the rites and sacrifices which are enjoying for earning some earthly benefits.
- **The Upanishad-** The Upanishads or the end of Vedas, which is called the Vedanta. The Upanishads contains the philosophical ideas which are found in the Vedas. The Upanishads answer questions like the meaning of life. The Upanishads discusses the question relating to life, the nature of human life, the destiny of human life, questions relating to the self and soul, like the nature of the soul, the destiny of the soul etc. The Upanishads contains the knowledge which are transmitted by the Guru to the “disciples” or “Sisyas”. So the word “Upanishad” comes from the word “Upa” and “Ni” which means Proximity or closeness and “sad” which means Knowledge. So, the word ‘Upanishad’ refers to ‘the knowledge which is we had or acquire in close proximity to the Guru’. The great saint of the Upanishad is the Mahavakya- Tat Tvam Asi (That Thou Art) which means that the Individual self is the Absolute self which is the reality. So, according the Upanishads the individual self is not different from the Atman and there is a perfect identity of the Individual self with the Absolute self.
- **The Puranas-** The Puranas constitute one of the important scriptures of Hinduism. The word ‘Purana’ literally means that which is of old or that which is of ambiguity. The Puranas contain 400,000 couplets. The Puranas deal with different series relating to the genealogy of the Gods. The three important Gods mentioned in the Puranas are Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara. Out of the different there are eighteen numbers of Puranas. The most important among them are the Bhagavata Purana and the Vishnu Purana.
- **Ramayana and Mahabharata-** The two great epics of Hinduism are the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The Ramayana consists of 24,000 couplets and the Mahabharata consists of 19,000 couplets. These two epics deal with the concept of incarnation and avatara. Rama is the avatara discussed in the Ramayana and Krishna is the avatara or incarnation which is discussed in the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata tries to prove that good always prevails over evil.
- **The Bhagavad Gita-** An important part of the Mahabharata is the Bhagavad Gita. The Bhagavad Gita is in the form of dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna in the famous battle of Kurukshetra. The Gita explains Arjuna about the great ideal of Karma. According to the Gita the Karma should be performed at all cost without caring for its results. The Gita speaks of 3 Yogas- Jnana Yoga, Karma Yoga and Bhakti Yoga. Among the three Yoga Krishna gives much importance to the Karma Yoga and Bhakti Yoga. The next important ideal taught by the Bhagavad Gita is the Caste system.

Hinduism is not only associated with the scriptures or the rights and rituals but it is also connected with philosophy. Accordingly Hindu religion is closely associated with Darshana or Indian Philosophy. The Hindu religion gives emphasize on Dharma. Regarding the question “What is Dharma?” Hinduism believes that the quotation of the term Dharma is very wide. It gives importance to morality, way of life, righteousness, conduct, duties and obligations etc. It also

means the performance of various rites and rituals as prescribed by the Vedas. Thus, by the word “Dharma” in Hinduism we do not mean a particular religion but it refers to a variety of ideas or thoughts. So, the meaning of the term “Dharma” in Hinduism has a very broad combination.

Hinduism also refers to the concept of Varnasrama Dharma. The word Varnasrama is a combination of 2 words- Varna and Asrama. The word ‘Varna’ refers to the caste systems prevailing in the society and the word asrama refers to the four different stages of life. The four different castes are the Brahmanas, the Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the Sudras. The Brahmanas are the priestly class. It is considered to be the highest class in the society. The duties of the Brahmanas is reading the scriptures and performing the various rites and ceremonies as prescribed in the Vedas. In the Hindu society the Brahmanas are highly honoured and they live on the food and other articles provided by the society. The Kshatriyas constitute the warrior class. The task of the Kshatriyas is to defend the country from internal disturbances and external aggression. The duty of the Kshatriya is to protect the country amidst any situation. The Vaishyas constitute the class of society which is associated with trade and commerce. All business activities are connected with the Vaishyas. The Sudras constitute the class of labourers. The task of the Sudra is to perform all forms of physical labour in the society. The division of the society into four different castes in Hinduism was originally based not on birth but on aptitudes and interest.

Asramas- The life of Hindu is divided into four Asramas means the four different stages of an individual’s life. Every individual being has to pass through different stages of life. The first stage is the stage of Brahmacharya. The Brahmacharya is the study life when the individual learns his lesson in the proximity or under the guidance of a Guru. So it is the stage of life when the guru teaches his pupil or the students regarding different matters like reading, understanding and interpreting the scriptures. The disciple also learns the art of warfare and many other things related to the spiritual life. The task of disciple is to follow the Guru in all aspects. It is also the duty of the disciple to serve the Guru by gathering food items, fruits from the jungle and also fuel from fire.

The second stage of life or asrama is Garhastya when the student returns home, marries and leads the life of a householder. The Garhastya stage is the stage when the householder has to perform various duties and obligations. He has obligations towards his family by looking after his parents, wife and children. He has due obligations and duties towards the society also. In this stage of life an individual has to perform different yajnas or sacrifices. They are- Deva Yajna, Pitri Yajna, Risi Yajna, Bhuta Yajna and Manushya Yajna. Deva Yajna is sacrifice towards the Gods of devatas. Pitri Yajna is sacrifice towards ones parents. Risi Yajna is sacrifice to the seers or Risis. Bhuta Yajna is sacrifice towards all beings and Manushya Yajna is sacrifice towards the human beings. In the stage of Garhastya the individual has to discharge duties towards the members of the society.

The third asrama is Vanaprastha. When after a certain age the individual retires to the forest and leads the life of renunciation. The individual gives up all attachment

towards material things and retires to the forest to live a life of contemplation and meditation. Sometimes the wife also accompanies the husband in the stage of Vanaprastha. In this stage the individual reads the scriptures, contemplates upon it and lives on some fruits and berries and simple food items. In the stage of Vanaprastha, however, the individual can sometimes return to his home for a temporary period when the children want him.

The last ashrama is the stage of Sanyasa. After crossing the path of Vanaprastha the individual enters the stage of Sanyasa and spends the life of complete detachment and renunciation. In this stage of life the person totally detaches himself from all earthly things and lives the life of a recluse. In this stage of life the person does not keep any relation with his family or other members of the society. The stage of Sanyasa is the last stage or last ashrama. When his life comes to an end.

The Hindu society has four different ends of life or Purusharthas- Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha. By Dharma we mean the way of life that one should live. Dharma is the proper mode of conduct or the proper way of living. According to Hinduism, by following the way of Dharma we arrive at Moksha which is the ultimate end or the Summum Bonum of life. Thus, Dharma is Moksha in its making. By Artha we mean the material comforts of life. The minimum amount of Artha or wealth is necessary for every human being. Without the minimum amount of Artha or wealth life is impossible. So Artha according to Hinduism must be enjoyed within the limits of Dharma. But Hinduism is against the environment of luxury. Luxury of any kind is not permitted by Hinduism. By Kama we mean sensual pleasure or the gratification of the senses. Kama is the natural craving of the human body. And it is allowed within the limit of one's family life. Moksha is the ultimate end of human life. The other three purusharthas namely Dharma, Artha and Kama ultimately lead to Moksha. The observance of Dharma and the enjoyment of Artha and Kama within the limits of Dharma ultimately lead oneself to Moksha which is the ultimate goal of human life.

DIFFERENT APPROACHES TOWARDS MOKSHA

Hinduism recognizes three different paths or approaches for the attainment of the Supreme goal of life which is Moksha. The different approaches are- Jnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Karma Yoga. According to Hinduism, Moksha or liberation can be attained by following either the path of Jnana Marga or Bhakti Marga or Karma Marga. Jnana Yoga is the path of knowledge or intellect. This path is reserved for the intellectual few who are wise enough to know the ultimate truth. By following the path of Jnana a person can attain the Summum Bonum of life. By exercising his intellect or reason the person is able to discriminate between right and wrong, between real and unreal. Thus the Jnana Yogi by means of the exercise of reason and intellect can know the true nature of the "Self" or "Atman". The path of knowledge or Jnanamarga is reserved for only a selected few. The path of Jnanamarga is a difficult path as all people are intellectually not strong enough. Most people are swayed by emotions. The path of Bhaktiyoga or devotion is reserved for those who are more emotional in nature. The ordinary people are mostly attracted towards the path of Bhakti or emotion. The path of

Bhakti involves love, devotion, attachment, attraction etc. Bhaktimarga involves prayer towards the Supreme Being accompanied by attraction and desire to in close with the Supreme Being. The path of devotions towards the Supreme Being may involve different kinds of relation. The relation between the finite and the infinite, the worshipper and the worshipped, the individual and the Supreme Being may involve various forms.

Karmayoga is another path by means of which we can get self-realisation or moksha. The word Karma refers to various meanings Karma means any action voluntarily and by Karma we also means sacrificial rites. But in order to get liberation or Moksha the path suggested by Hinduism is Niskama-Karma that is work done without attachment towards the fruits. According to Hinduism we should work for the sake of our duty and not for the sake of getting happiness or reward. If work is done with attachment then we fall into bondage of the soul. Only work that is done without attachment purifies the soul and leads to moksha or salvation which is the Summum-Bonum of life.

HINDU MODE OF WORSHIP

According to Hinduism, worship are of two kinds- Private and Public. In the private mode of worship the Hindus worship their own Ista Devata or to choose deity in their own homes. Hindus have their own Ista Devata whom they pray or worship in their private homes and in the public mode of worship the Hindus gathered in public temples and pray together. In the public mode of worship various rites, ceremonies, sacrifices etc are held where people gathered and offer congregational worship or prayer. The Hindu way of worship offers several steps Mudra and Nyasa are resorted to. Mudra is a certain gestures which express the intention of the worshiper and Nyasa means putting the hands in different parts of the body. There are several steps involved in the Hindu way of worship. For example-Acamana, Asana, Pranayama, Aghamarsa, Uttering the Gayatri Mantra, Japa, Surya Upasana or offering to the Sun God. Acamana is purifying the body with water preferably water from a sacred river or ordinary water. Asana is a particular posture in which the worshipper sits. Pranayama is breathe control. The control of the breathe comes down the mind and helps towards concentration. Aghamarsa means to get rid of all sins in which the body and the mind are concerned. Uttering the Gayatri Mantra is the Hindu way of worship. The Gayatri Mantra is considered to be very sacred in nature. Japa means uttering of the mantra in a continued way. Surya Upasana or offering to the Sun God. In Hinduism offerings are made to the Sun God specially in the form of water. It occupies a very important place in Hinduism.

WHOM DO THE HINDU WORSHIP

It is believed that the Hindus worship a number of 33 crores of Gods and Goddesses. The Gods of Hinduism during the Rig Veda period are Indra, Varuna, Mitra, Agni, Soma, Usha and many others. During the Rig Vedic times there were many different Gods and Goddesses of Hinduism. So the seers of the Rig Veda period prayed to different Gods of nature. But the seers of the Rig Veda realized

that behind all the different Gods and Goddesses there is one Supreme God who rules over the universe. Now the different Gods and Goddesses are divided into three different classes during the Rig Vedic period. They are-

- Prithivisthana or Earthly Gods.
- Antarikshamsthana or atmospheric Gods.
- Dyasthana or Celestial Gods.

Those Gods who rule over the earth or prithivi are known as the Earthly Gods. Those Gods who rule over the atmosphere are known as the Atmospheric Gods. And those Gods that rule over the heaven are known as Dyasthana or Celestial Gods. Each group consists of 11 Gods and Goddesses.

The Hindus also believe in the worship of the 9 planets or Nabagraha. They are- The Sun, The Moon, Mercury, Mars, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn, Rahu and Ketu. These planets the Sun God and the Moon God are prayed at the time of calamities and misfortune. The Hindus believe that the worship of the Nabagraha or 9 planets can save them from various evils.

Besides these the Hindus worship five important Gods and Goddesses. They are- Siva, Sakti, Vishnu, Ganesha and Surya. The worshippers of the Siva are called Saivas. The worshippers of the Sakti are called the Saktas. The worshippers of Vishnu are called the Vaishnavas. The worshippers of the Ganesha are called the Ganapatyas. The worshippers of Surya are called the Surya Upasakas. Out of these five the first three Gods and Goddesses that is Siva, Sakti and Vishnu are more important and they have a large number of followers. The Ganapatyas and Surya Upasakas are less in number.

Siva is an important God of Hinduism. The worshippers of Siva are called Saivas. The Saivas worshipped Siva and even the other Hindus pray to Siva. Siva is believed to be a great God or Mahadeva. There are different images of Siva. Siva is prayed in the form of a Linga, which is a phallic symbol. Offerings are made to the Siva linga. Siva is also worshipped in the form of an image which is calm and serene whose eyes are closed, who carried a crescent or the half moon in his hair, who wears a garland of snake, who wears a tiger skin and whose forehead is smeared with ashes. Siva carries a trishul and a dambaru. Siva is also worshipped in the form of a dancing God Natraja.

SELF AND LIBERATION

In Hinduism we have the concept of self or liberation. Hinduism gives us two different concepts of self- one is the individual or the empirical self and the second is the universal or absolute self. Thus Hinduism makes a distinction between Jivatma and Paramatma. The Jivatma is the individual self and Paramatma is the universal self. The individual or the finite self is the part of the universal or Absolute self. According to the Upanishad, the individual self is born from the Absolute self and after liberation it merges with the Absolute self. This is expressed in the Mahavakya as- 'Tat tvam asi' meaning of it is That thou art. Hinduism divides the self or soul into three parts-

- The Gross soul
- The Subtle soul
- The Causal soul

The gross soul consists of the intellect, the mind, the five vital breathes, the five organs of knowledge and the five organs of actions. The Subtle self is the medium through which the gross self operates. It is by means of the subtle self that the affects of our actions are transmitted from this birth to the next birth. So the subtle self is the means through which the law of karma operates. The Causal self is the source of or the cause of both the gross and subtle self. The causal self can be experienced in the state of unconscious or deep sleep. So Hinduism makes a difference between these three different classes of self. Hinduism accepts the Law of Karma and the Law of Karma operates through the medium of the self or soul. At the time of death our body is destroyed but the soul remains and it is by means of the soul that the Karmafalas of our present birth is carried on to the next life. So if we do good deeds we are rewarded in our next life and if we do bad deeds we are punished in the next life. Thus, Hinduism believes in the transmigration of soul. Hinduism accepts three different types of Karmafalas- The Sancita Karma, Prarabdha Karma and Sanchiyamana Karma. Sancita Karma are those Karmas the affects of which are accumulated from the past life. Prarabdha Karmas are those karmas that have begun to bear fruits and Sanchiyamana Karma are those karmas the affects of which are being accumulated. Thus Hinduism believes that due to our right knowledge and good Karmas the Sancita Karma and Sanchiyama Karmas are destroyed but the Prarabdha Karma that has begun to bear fruits remains. The Prarabdha karmas are destroyed only after Liberation or Moksha has been attained.

CONCLUSION

According to Hinduism, liberation is a state of Sat-Cit-Ananda. In the state of liberation there is no desire or passion. It is a state of perfect happiness and bliss. Thus according to Hinduism, Liberation or Moksha is the goal of human life.

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