

## What is Hinduism ?

By Basanta Kumar Chatterji, M. A.

**T**O the casual observer it may appear that many conflicting creeds pass as Hinduism and hence Hinduism cannot be defined. There are the Śaivas, the Śāktas, the Vaiṣṇavas;—among Vaiṣṇavas, again, there are various subdivisions, all calling themselves Hindus. But it should not be ignored that there are some fundamental principles underlying all the different creeds, in which will be found the essential nature of Hinduism. The existence of different sects among Hindus can be explained by the fact that temperaments and capacities of men differ, hence different paths are suitable for different groups of men. But the paths are all true, as they all lead ultimately to the same God.

Hinduism is based on the Vedas. The Vedas exist in an unalterable form through an unending chain of creation and destruction along which the world proceeds. At the time of *Pralaya* or

Universal Destruction God alone exists. When He wants to create the universe, He creates Brahmā ( the Creator of the universe ), and then imparts to Brahmā the knowledge of the Vedas. Brahmā then proceeds to create the universe in accordance with the Vedas. From time to time Brahmā creates the particular Ṛṣis who are fit to receive particular Mantras of the Vedas. The Mantras were thus revealed to various Ṛṣis.

The Vedas can never be untrue. For the world has been created according to the Vedas and there can therefore be no disagreement between the Vedas and the world. The Vedas are thus true as well as everlasting. Hinduism, which is based on the Vedas, is thus true as well as everlasting. This is why Hinduism is called the *Sanātana Dharma*.

It is to the Vedas that the Hindus turn for a description of the nature of

God and the human soul, the means by which the human soul can attain God, and the state of the human soul on attaining God. It is to the Vedas that the Hindu turns for guidance as regards his duty in every possible situation. For the word *Dharma* as used by the Hindus represents the totality of duty,—duty of the individual to the family, to society, to the state, to mankind, to all living beings, to the forefathers, to the gods. It is a mistake to suppose that social customs have nothing to do with religion. Social customs may be conducive to the elevation of the human soul or to its deterioration. The former type is religious (Dharmic), the latter is irreligious (a-dharmic). The Vedas indicate the former path. A social custom which is opposed to the Vedas is of the latter kind. The social customs and habits which are based on the Vedas are conducive to the well-being of all men of all ages, and not merely of the Hindus. This has been expressly stated by the law-giver Manu:—

एतद्देशप्रसूतस्य सकाशाद्ग्रजन्मनः ।  
स्वं स्वं चरित्रं शिक्षेरन् पृथिव्यां सर्वमानवाः ॥

“All men of the world will learn proper conduct from the Brahmans of this country.”

After all, human nature is the same throughout the world, and the laws conducive to the benefit of one society would also be beneficial to other societies.

As stated above, the religion, manners, and customs of the Hindus are based on the Vedas. But the Vedas are very difficult to understand.

Portions of the Vedas have also been lost,—a contingency which was foreseen by the ancient sages. In order that the true spirit of the Vedas may be known to all Hindus of all times, the sages composed the Purāṇas, the Itihāsas (viz., the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*), and the Dharma-Śāstras. All these books constitute the sacred scriptures of the Hindus and are accepted as authoritative, subject only to the supreme authority of the Vedas.

We can now take a review of the fundamental principles of Hinduism, which are common to all the various sects and creeds which are included in the Hindu fold. The Hindu must accept as authoritative the Vedas, the Purāṇas, the Itihāsas and the Dharma-Śāstras. All these books contain eternal truths as revealed to the sages and must not be challenged by lay arguments. Arguments may be used for the purpose of the interpretation of the true spirit of the Śāstras. But human reason would be transgressing its limits if it proceeded to examine whether the Śāstras are correct or not.

This position is accepted by all the Āchāryas or exponents of different sects of Hinduism. Śankarāchārya, Rāmānuja, Madhwāchārya, Vallabhāchārya, Nimbarkāchārya—all accept this position. It furnishes us with a means of determining the common features of Hinduism. Thus is laid down in the Vedas that God creates the universe out of Himself and absorbs it into Himself; that this periodical creation and destruction has been going on since time without beginning; that the human soul is born again and again as man or a lower being according

to the action done in this world; that particularly meritorious or reprehensible action causes a transition to heaven or hell, where the soul has to live for a limited time according to his previous action; and that after residence in heaven or hell the cycle of birth and death is resumed again; that action consonant with the injunctions of the Śāstras is good and that which is opposed to the injunctions is bad. As stated above, Śankara, Rāmanuja and all other Āchāryas accept this position. The difference between these Āchāryas lies in their opinion about the nature of God and the human soul. Their opinion in these matters is also based on the Vedas and other Śāstras. But they interpret the Śāstras in different ways. As to the rules of conduct—what is to be eaten or not to be eaten, who can be touched and cannot be touched, the rules of caste and marriage, the duties of a widow,—the rules in the Śāstras are explicit and there is hardly any scope for a difference of opinion. There is thus no difference between the various sects of the Hindus in these social matters.

Of late various reformers have appeared among Hindus, who declare that they accept those portions of the Śāstras which are in accordance with their reason or conscience, but not those which are against their conscience. This means that they place their own reason above the Śāstras. In other words, they consider themselves wiser than the author of the Śāstras. Due to attachment and prejudice, a man's knowledge is often clouded and he cannot see things in their true light. Even a very intelligent or altruistic man is not free

from attachment and prejudice. Hence their opinion cannot be accepted against the Śāstras. The author of the Śāstras (who is no other than God) is free from attachment and prejudice. He alone can see things in their true light.

A Hindu who accepts those portions of the Śāstras which appear to him to be good and rejects the rest shows scant regard to Śāstras. Does not a Mahomedan or a Christian do the same? He also accepts those portions of the Hindu Śāstras which appear to him to be good and rejects the rest. It has therefore been well said that a Hindu who does not accept the authority of the entire Śāstras is an *Alīka* Hindu, *i. e.*, a Hindu in name only, but not in reality.

The attitude of an *Alīka* Hindu to the Hindu Śāstras is not far different from his attitude towards the *Bible* or the *Koran*. He will no doubt accept a good deal of what is stated in the *Bible* and the *Koran*. He will reject those portions only which appear to him to be wrong. This is exactly his attitude towards the Hindu Śāstras.

A true Mahomedan accepts as authoritative everything in the *Koran*. A true Christian accepts everything in the *Bible*. In the same way a true Hindu accepts everything contained in the Śāstras. He may not be able to follow in practice everything laid down in the Śāstras. That is because his powers are limited. If he could follow every injunction, he would be a perfect man. Due to his imperfections he may not be able to follow every injunction of the Śāstras. But he must not reject the authority of any injunction of the Śāstras. He cannot

say that a course of conduct laid down in the Śāstras is injurious, or what is prohibited in the Śāstras is good.

If we carefully consider the lives and teachings of Hindu saints like Tulasidas, Chaitanya and Ramakrishna Paramahansa, we shall find that all of them took this view.

It is sometimes said that the rules in a society must change with time. But this is not true. It is not necessary to change with time the rules,—Obey your parents, Be kind to the poor, Speak the truth. It is also not necessary to change with time the duties of a student or a wife or a widow. It is true that some acts which were permitted in the past, e. g. *Niyoga* have been prohibited now, because they are not safe in view of the deterioration of human nature. But for a few additional restrictions of this nature, the code of rules remains the same. There has been no instance in

which a restriction which was once in force has now been removed.

To sum up, we find that the Hindu religion is based on the Vedas; that the Purāṇas, Itihāsas and Dharma-Śāstras embody the teachings of the Vedas; that there are some doctrines regarding God and the world which are expressly laid down in the Vedas and are accepted by all different sects of Hindus; that there is difference in some other doctrines because of difference in the method of interpretation of the relevant passages of the Śāstras; that as regards social rules the injunctions of the Śāstras are explicit; and that there is no difference of opinion in this matter between the different sects of the Hindus. The modern tendency to reject some portions of the Śāstras is not consistent with the traditions of Śānātana Dharma and must be ascribed to a desire for imitation of the West.



Lord Viṣṇu alone permeates you, me and all other beings. Then why are you so intolerant and why do you get angry in vain? Behold the one Self in all and get rid of the sense of diversity.

—*Śrī Śankarāchārya.*

One should love God with a guileless heart. What is there to conceal from a husband who has seen every part of your body?

—*Goswami Tulasidas.*

Do not inflict injury or pain on others; never tell a lie; do not commit a theft; be righteous in body, mind and speech and do not aspire for anything.

—*Lord Mahāvīra.*

