

REFERENCES OF THE SANATAN DHARMA SINCE THE DAWN OF THE CIVILIZATION: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Achintya Mahapatra, Ph. D.



Scholarly Research Journal's is licensed Based on a work at www.srjis.com

Hinduism or Sanatan Dharma is the oldest religion in the world. Hinduism is world's third largest religion after Christianity and Islam. Hinduism is the dominant religion in India, where Hindus form about 84 per cent of the total population. Hinduism is also known as *Sanatan Dharma* or the everlasting religion. Hindu religion is based on the concept that human and animal spirits come back to earth to live many times in different forms. The Hindus believe that a soul moves up and down hierarchy on the basis of behaviour.¹

The word "Hindu" is a geographical name without any religious meaning. It is derived from the Sanskrit word, *Sindhu* the name of the Indus Valley region of seven tributaries of Indus River. Persians who invaded India in 6th Century BC who had no "S" in their alphabet changed the "S" to "H" and called "Sindhu" as "Hindu" (Hindustan, Hinduism etc). "Sindhu" might have assumed a sacred meaning as it became later, the birth place of the four Vedas.²

Early History of Hinduism

Hinduism during Indus Valley Period:

In 1921, archaeologists' uncovered evidence of an ancient civilization along the Indus River, which today runs through northwest India into Pakistan. The so-called Indus Valley civilization (also known as the "Harappan civilization" for one of its chief cities) is thought to have originated as early as 7000 BC and to have reached its height between 2300 and 2000 BC, at which point it encompassed over 750,000 square miles and traded with Mesopotamia.

Some writings of this period have been discovered, but unfortunately in such small amounts that they have yet to be deciphered. Knowledge of this great civilization's religion must therefore be based on physical evidence alone. Baths have been found that may indicate ritual bathing, a component of modern Hinduism. Some altar-like structures may be evidence of animal sacrifice, and terracotta figures may represent deities. An important seal features a

¹ <http://www.culturalindia.net/indian-religions/hinduism.html>.

² Mazumdar and Puselkar (1951), *Vedic Age*, Delhi, pp. 144-165.

horned figure surrounded by animals, which some conjecture is a prototype of Shiva, but it could be a bull parallel to that found on Mesopotamian seals.³

The Indus Valley culture began to decline around 1800 BC, due possibly to flooding or drought. Until recently, it was held that the Aryans invaded India and Iran at this time. According to this hypothesis, both the Sanskrit language and the Vedic religion foundational to Hinduism is attributable to the Aryans and their descendants. The original inhabitants of the Indus Valley are thought to have had a Dravidian language and culture, which became subordinate to that of the invading peoples.⁴

The numerous seals and figurines discovered in the excavations carried out at various sites connected with the Harappan culture point out to the religious beliefs of the Indus Valley people.

Worship of Mother Goddess: A large number of excavated terracotta figurines are identified with some female energy or Shakti or Mother Goddess, who is the source of all creation. She is wearing numerous ornaments and a fan-shaped head dress. It is concluded from the smoke stained figures that the people offered burnt incense before her.

Worship of Pashupati or Lord Shiva: The Pashupati seal in which the three faced male god is shown seated in a yogic posture, surrounded by a rhino and a buffalo on the right, and an elephant and a tiger on the left, make the historians conclude that the people of those days worshipped Lord Shiva who is the Lord of the Beast (Pashupati) and the male principle of creation. Discovery of a large number of conical or cylindrical stones show that the people worshipped lingam, the symbol of Lord Shiva.

Worship of Trees: The worship of trees was widespread. The Pipal tree was considered most sacred. One of the seals shows a god standing between the branches of a people tree and the god was being worshipped by a devotee on his knees. The discovery of a large number of seals with pipal trees engraved on them suggests that this tree was considered sacred, same as some nowadays Hindu do.

Other Objects of Worship: People also worshipped animals such as the bull, buffalo and tiger. The worship of mythical animals is evident from the existence of a human figure

³ Dr. Prasanta Banapili, Temples and Maths of Raygada District – A Study

⁴“Indian Religions and the Hindu Tradition” (2002)The Cambridge Illustrated History of Religions, Cambridge University Press,.

with a bull's horns, hoofs and a tail. Besides animals, these people also worshipped the Sun, the Fire and the Water.

Faith in Magic, Charms and Sacrifices: The discovery of amulets suggests that the Indus valley people had belief in magic and charms. Some seals have figures of men and animals in act of sacrificing. This shows that sacrifices played some part in their religion.

Belief in Life after Death: The people of Indus Valley disposed of their dead either by burial or by cremation. They buried their dead together with household pottery, ornaments and other articles of daily use. Even when they cremated the dead, they preserved the ashes of the bodies in clay urns. Both these practices show that people believed in life after death. The existence of public baths suggests that people believed in ritual bathing. The religious beliefs such as the worship of Shiva, animals and trees, show that the religious beliefs of the Indus Valley people were the foundation on which the modern day Hinduism grew up.

Hinduism during the Vedic Period

The Vedic Religion is based on the teachings of the Vedas which signifies the way of living a sin free life. The Vedas are the teachings of the religion of Hinduism. There are different types of Vedas, each signifying different facts and opinions about the religion. The main text of the Vedic religion is the Rig Veda. The Rig Veda itself contains some 1,028 hymns of praise to a predominantly male group of deities who seem to personify various powers of nature such as fire, sky and rain. The fact that the hymns demonstrated a strong relationship with the presence of nature illustrates the Aryan feeling towards nature. The Rig Veda mainly concentrates on symbolism rather than mythology.⁵ Although the hymns are based on symbolism, it is sometimes possible to gather various mythical themes. Another aspect that is mentioned in the Vedas is the 'panch mahabhutas'. These are the five constituents which makeup life on this planet, they are: (i) Akash (Sky), (ii) Vayu (air), (iii) Agni (fire), (iv) Jal (water) and (v) Prithvi (earth).

The Adityas or "Sons of Aditi", a group of divinities of fluid number, contains as core gods: Varuna, a stern but just king-figure; Mitra, Varuna's constant partner; Aryaman,⁶ a more shadowy figure than Mitra and Varuna, though frequently joined with them. They are

⁵Rig Veda Samhita (Sanskrit),(1994), Nag Publishers, Delhi.

⁶ Whose name means "arya-hood", an otherwise uncommon combination of an adjective with a primary suffix, indicating a rather artificial formation (as found also in some other Indo-Iranian words from the sphere of religion and society).

followed in enumerations by the still more vague but evidently popular *Bhaga* (share), a god of good luck, and *Arnsa* (lot), a still more obscure figure.

The Asvins are divine twins who perform miraculous cures and rescues. The Maruts, a group of spirited youths, a sort of Mannerbund, are often associated with Indra. Pusan, a “pastoral” god of somewhat bizarre appearance and behavior, nonetheless protects and makes thrive many aspects of daily life.

Usha ‘Dawn’ is the most prominent goddess in Vedic and functions as the friend of poets. Other deified natural phenomena in this sphere include Surya ‘Sun’, rather “the male one belonging to the sun”; Dyaus ‘Heaven, Sky’ (or Dyaus Pitar ‘Father Sky’) and his consort, Prithivi ‘Earth’, who has complementary maternal characteristics; the Apas ‘Waters’, an undifferentiated group of female divinities often called “divine ladies” (Narten 1971); Vayu or Vata ‘Wind’; and Parjanya ‘Thunder’. It is notable that, as in many Indo-European (and other) civilizations, fire is regarded as masculine and water a feminine deity, while the “elements” fire and water exist separately as grammatical neuters (*athar-*, *udr-/udn-*). This seems to be a very old notion.

Certain gods are merely deified roles or concepts, like *Savitar* (Impeller). Some of these, like *Tvastar* (Fashioner), acquire a certain amount of personality.

The two great gods of later Hinduism, Visnu and Siva, are not at all prominent in Vedic, though they do appear there. Although the Vedas are very much alike except in their content of hymns, they all have the same principle, all Hindus should lead a sin free life. Within the Vedic religion, Hindus believe in many gods and goddesses. Some of them are human (e.g. Krishna, Rama, some animals (e.g. fish, monkey, rat, snake), (some animal-humans as in the case of Ganesh who has the head of elephant with trunk and the body of a human), and some others are natural phenomena (e.g. dawn, fire, sun).⁷ Their number is generally believed to be 330 million.

According to Hindu belief, god incarnates and for example takes the form of human being and other animals and appears in this earth in that form. Gods and goddesses were born like human beings and had wives and children. No god possesses absolute power; some of the gods are weaker than each other, but no individual God has all the power, yet they believe Brahman is the superior that makes up the earth.

⁷ Radhakrishnan, S., (1962) *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. I, Princeton University Press, Princeton, p.77
Copyright © 2018, *Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies*

Hinduism during the Medieval Period

In medieval period Hinduism was a major religion. Bhakti cult became popular in which devotion was offered to some personal God whose worship as was believed would lead to salvation. Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu, Lord Rama and Lord Krishna were worshipped. The female aspect of God or Shakti or mother power was also worshipped in various forms like Kali, Uma, Durga, Chandi and Lakshmi Devi. Development of this cult had its superstitious side too.

The Hindu belief with regard to God that he is one, eternal, without beginning and end, acting by the free will, almighty, all-wise, living, giving life, ruling, preserving, one who in his sovereignty is unique, beyond all likeness and unlikeness, and that he does not resemble anything nor does anything resemble him. They continue to believe in the doctrine of human equality defined from the view-point of salvation. According to the Hindu philosophers liberation is common to all classes⁸. The doctrine of untouchability also reached its high watermark in the eleventh century.⁹ Popular religion had become the monopoly of the Brahman and the lower classes were prohibited from studying the Vedas. The Hindu society continued to be cemented into unity under the influence of Bhakti.

The two most important schools of Bhakti were Saivism and Vaishnavism. Shaivism has many divisions and contains Shaivism proper, Saktism and other minor systems. It is also known as the Dravidian system.¹⁰ The inscriptions of Mohenjo-Daro as interpreted by Haras speak of the divine Triad consisting of Siva, Muruga and Karttikeya. Lord Shiva was not only a destroyer but also a creator and a preserver. During this period Siva was also called Pashupati, the Supreme Being with the whole of humanity as his folk. King Harsha used to practice Saktism or Tantrism.

The main Shaiva sects are the Yatis, the Arhats, the Ganagirs, the Pasupatas, the Lakulisas, the Kapalikas, the Kalamukhas, the Nathas and the Rasesvaras. The Shaiva philosophy is that Shiva has no end or beginning, free from defects and knows everything.

⁸ R.C. Majumdar (ed), (1988), *The History and Culture of the Indian People, VI, The Delhi Sultanate*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, p. 565.

⁹ Hamid Husain Manak, (2007), *Sufism and Bhakti Movement: Eternal Relevance*, Vedam Books, New Delhi.

¹⁰ Maity S.K. (1983), *Cultural Heritage of India*, Abhinav Publications, Delhi, pp.26-27.

The three fundamental principles or categories of Shaivism are the Lord (Pati), soul (Pasu) and the world (Pasa).¹¹

The basic works of Vaishnavism, during the Medieval period were the Pancharatra Samhitas were formulated. The association of Ram with this cult was developed during this period. Lord Rama was also regarded as the 'avatar', incarnation, of Lord Vishnu. Ramanuja, Madhava, Nimbarka, and Vallabhacharya among others greatly contributed to the evolution of Vaishnavism during this period. Vaishnavism had also witnessed steeping rise of flourishing in South India between seventh and tenth centuries. Twelve Alvars or saints had distributed Vaishnavism to the common people with their devotional hymns in South India. The temples which the Alvars used to pay visits are presently known as Divya Desams. Vaishnava practices improved in popularity due to the tremendous influence of sages like Ramanujacharya, Madhvacharya, Manavala Mamunigal, Vedanta Desika, Surdas, Tulsidas and several others.

Hinduism during Modern Period

In the philosophical (Vedanta) side, Hinduism has two divisions: Dvaita and Advaita. **Dvaita** philosophy was founded by Shri Madhavacharya. It says that *jivatma* (individual souls) are different from the *paramatma* (the Supreme Soul). The **Advaita** philosophy is thought to be proposed by Shri Gaudapadacharya. Advaita literally means 'not-two' in Sanskrit. It argues that *jivatma* is a part of *paramatma* itself. Sri Aadi Shankara, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Swami Vivekananda were some of the notable persons who advocated *Advaita Vedanta*. Out of these Saivism and Vaishnavism are the two important divisions. The Saivites worship *Lord Shiva* and the Vaishnavites worship *Lord Vishnu* (or one of his avatars). There are many sub-sects within Saivism and Vaishnavism.

The sub-sects of Saivism include *Pashupata Saivism*, *Saiva Siddhanta*, Kashmir Saivism, *Siddha Siddhanta*, Lingayatism, Kalamukham and Kapalika. Though there are some differences between these sub-sects, all of them centre around Lord Shiva.

The sub-sects of Vaishnavism include Kumara-sampradaya, Brhahma Sampradaya, Rudra-sampradaya, Sri Sampradaya, Ayyavazhi and Swaminarayan sect. All these sub-sects centre around Lord Vishnu (or his avatars like Krishna). The Kumara-sampradaya, founded by Nimbarka, is based on Dvaitadvaita philosophy.

¹¹ Dr. Prasanta Banapili, Temples and Maths of Raygada District – A Study
Copyright © 2018, Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies

Shaktism is based on the worship of Shakti and is still famous among the Hindu women of India. *Ganapatyam* is based on the worship of Lord Ganesha. *Kaumaram* is based on the worship of Karthikeya (Muruga). It is popular in South India, especially in Tamilnadu. Lord Muruga himself is considered to be a Tamil God. *Sauram* is based on the worship of Surya.

There is also an atheistic school of thought called *Caravaka*. It is also called *Lokayata* and is mainly associated with materialistic philosophies. Another materialistic philosophy is *Samkhya*, which advocates Dualism. Sage Kapila is regarded as the founder of Samkhya school of thought. *Purva Mimamsa* philosophy contains both *theistic* and *atheistic* doctrines. It is more concerned about *Dharma* rather than God.

The above discussion gives a picture of the major cults followed in India in different regions. However out of all the cults the three cults which most Hindus follow and build temples in large numbers are *Saivism*, *Vasishnavism* and *Shaktism*. Thus it is important to discuss these three cults in some detail.