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Hinduism- a mass of contradictions

It is interesting to note that the religion does not seem to scoff at the idea of the non-existence of God. Even those who do not believe in the existence of God can call themselves proudly Hindus, though it is doubtful whether they would ever gather a wider acceptance.

Today there are a number of people among Hindus who are basically non-believers of God and who do not accept any religion to conduct their activities. Still it is very doubtful whether any Hindu would consider them as non-Hindus. In this article we will examine the contradictions inherent in Hinduism and try to formulate a fair idea of who a Hindu is.

That Hinduism is mass of self-contradictions becomes very clear when one goes through the richly engrossing stories of the Hindu mythology. It is amusing to note that the Trinity of Gods would rarely discriminate between a god and a demon while bestowing favors upon them, as long as they fulfilled certain conditions.

Sometimes they would be extremely generous to some wicked soul from the underworld in granting boons, well knowing that it would lead to trouble and disturbance. It is as if they have chosen for themselves the principles of non-discrimination, secularism and equality of opportunities!

Some of the demons and villainous characters in the epics and puranas were also great devotees, who by virtue of their devotion and strength of character went to heaven after their demise, though while alive they committed many heinous crimes.

Examples of some apparent contradictions:

In the following lines we highlight a few of the well known contradictions inherent in the traditions of Hinduism. It must be added here that Hinduism does not consider these contradictions as irreconcilable. At the deeper level they all merge into one harmonious whole. But on the surface they seem to contradict each other.

All the apparent contradictions like the devas and the asuras, like the many manifestations of Iswara, resolve themselves harmoniously, almost mysteriously into an acceptable single truth. It is as if what is contradictory outside is in league and harmony with the Truth inside.

The devas and the asuras in reality are working for the same end!. The asthikas (believers) and the nasthikas (non-believers) at the end of their debate prove the same point : that any conclusions we draw about the Absolute Truth, with our semi-evolved consciousness in incomplete and imperfect. When Truth in all its full glory stands in front us, we are as helpless, as imperfect, as ignorant , as innocent or as wicked as an insect in front of man!

Such a reconciliation of divergent truths into one harmonious whole, which is difficult for a novice to understand, aptly summarizes and concludes what Hinduism in essence actually

declares to us: that the One (Truth) manifests itself into many (truths) at the time of creation and that the many (truths) slowly in the end resolve themselves into One Truth again ! Let us now examine a few of the apparent contradictions that baffle many who are not familiar with Hinduism:

1. One God Vs No God
2. One God Vs Many Gods
3. Vedic rituals Vs Spiritual practices
3. The path of Knowledge Vs the Path of Devotion.
4. Saivism Vs Vaishnavism
5. Purusha Vs Prakriti
6. Monism Vs Dualism
7. Vedas Vs Tantras
8. The concept of Divine origin of man Vs Caste System
9. The concept of renunciation Vs the concept of four Purusharthas.
10. The concept of self-control Vs the revelry of gods.
11. The concept of monogamy Vs the polygamous gods.
12. Hindu ethics Vs the behavior of gods.
12. Worship of Mother Goddess Vs the Devadasi system and the position of women in society.
13. Ritualism Vs Spiritualism.
14. Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu Vs Buddha's own teachings about God, gods and the Vedas.

And so on.

Hinduism truly believes that when one goes beyond the sensory field there are hardly any rules. Whatever that is within in the field of illusion is also strictly a part of illusion, whether it is a moral code, a particular belief or a way of doing things.

True freedom is when you break through all barriers of mental conditioning and try to transcend your limited vision and all manner of choosing, discarding and selecting. For that you need not have to worship God as others do, or seek Truth like others.

You can pursue your own path and follow your own convictions, as long as it is in harmony with your true nature. You may worship God in whatever way you want. You may even deny Him, because understandably you are living in a state of ignorance and illusion. You may consider Him either as the Known or as the Unknown, either as the Being without form or as the Being with innumerable forms.

The choice is yours. It is ultimately your salvation. They are your decisions and those actions that you would undertake to pursue such decisions are also essentially your actions only. And you alone would suffer from the consequences.

It is of course difficult to follow certain paths like for example the path of the formless or the Unknown. But if some one wants to follow them, there is nothing that one can do. There are many paths that lead to Him and how can one say anything with conviction and finality on such issues?

How can any one frame any rules about the One who is beyond all rules? How can any one say anything with certainty about the One who is beyond the known as well the unknown? "He who says he knows Him knows Him not, but he who knows that He knows Him not really knows Him"

Rigid approach to theological matters is therefore not central to Hinduism. What is important is relentless pursuit of Truth through intelligent discrimination or proper use of ones buddhi. The books and the teacher can only suggest ways and means. It is up to the individual to decide what is best for him.

Surprisingly, as we have seen in the previous pages, even the word Hindu is not a Sanskrit word. It is derived from the name given to the river "Sindhu". For several centuries the word was used to denote the people of the subcontinent, not people of a particular faith. Hindustan was the land that existed beyond the river Indus, and those that lived there were referred to as Hindus. Thus we can see that the word Hindu was originally meant to define people living in a particular region rather than those practicing a particular religion.

Hindu society was as complex in ancient and medieval India as it is today, consisting of divergent groups of people, following different faiths, worshipping different gods, speaking different languages, and belonging to different social and ethnic backgrounds. There were Buddhists and Jains and even among the so called Hindus there were a number of divergent beliefs and practices.

Yet to the observant foreigner, in that medieval environment they all appeared to be bound together by some invisible bond, as if they all evolved together distinctly, as if they were one group of people who shared a long tradition and a great many common beliefs.

And how correct they were in their observation! From the global perspective, even today, if you set aside religion and look at the people of the subcontinent, they all undoubtedly represent one distinct group, possessing certain characteristics that are unique, unusual and peculiar to themselves.

Hinduism is very much like a giant banyan tree:

We can define Hinduism as a set of religious beliefs, practices, and traditions that has been gradually evolving over a period of time in the Indian subcontinent with its primary roots in the Vedas but like a giant banyan tree with its secondary roots deriving succor from all directions and various sources, providing shelter to many divergent beliefs and practices and still spreading farther and farther from its base.

The Beliefs of a Hindu :

For our understanding we may also define a Hindu in the following manner. A Hindu believes:

1. in the omnipresent existence of One Imperishable Universal-Self and also in the existence of many individual Selves.
2. in the existence of various manifestations of God starting with the Trinity.
3. in the existence of various paths to reach God, especially the path of knowledge, the path of renunciation, the path of devotion and the path of action.
4. believes in the eternal and immutable nature of self.
5. believes in the theory of karma and reincarnation.
6. believes in the evolution of not only man but all the beings.
7. believes that the path to God are many and hence tolerates other forms of religious worship and practices.
8. believes in the concept of maya or illusion.
9. believes in the sacred knowledge of the Vedas, the Vedanta, the Bhagavad-Gita etc.
10. and also, understandably, either in some or in all or in none of the above!

Although this definition does not take into consideration many divergent views and approaches to the understanding of the vedantic philosophy, this can be regarded as the broad definition of a Hindu for our understanding.

Dimensions of Hinduism:

It may also be noted that Hinduism has many dimensions. There is a scholarly dimension (the systems or traditions based on gnana or knowledge), a devotional or popular dimension (the systems and traditions based on bhakti), a physical dimension (the esoteric, fierce and sexual cults of tantrism) and a folk dimension (the traditions of superstition, obscurantism, animism, animal sacrifices etc, practiced by rural people, tribals etc.)

The strength of the religion lies in its emphasis on individual choice, in seeking spiritual answers, in its unconditional freedom to its adherents to explore the vast unknown areas of Truth and in its indifference to the concept of proselytization.

Truly Hinduism is a living and continuing tradition, a group of religious and spiritual beliefs tested for long in the furnace of human knowledge and spiritual wisdom and accepted as valid milestones in the spiritual achievements of Indian subcontinent.

In whatever direction the mankind may progress, whatever new scientific truths it may unravel and revel in, Hinduism surely has the tenacity and sagacity to survive and continue for generations to come perhaps assuming greater vigor, greater wisdom and wider responsibilities.



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