

## The Hindu and His World

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Rabindranath Tagore sees one factor which distinguishes Hindu thought from all others -- its geography. Classical Greek civilization -- being urban -- was a culture nurtured within city walls. Such a life results in an ultimate separation between the world inside the walls and that outside. Fortified with such barriers, man becomes suspicious of an, thing beyond them.

Indian civilization on the other hand grew out of life in the forests. When the first Aryans migrated into India (c. 3500 B.C.) they found a vast woodland which sheltered them from tropical heat and rain. Forests provided pasture for cattle, materials for building and fuel for their homes and sacrificial altars. Surrounded by such a friendly environment, and in constant contact with a living, growing nature, the Indian mind had no need of erecting walls. Consequently, the Hindu's religious philosophy centered on attaining truth by growing with and into his natural surroundings. The forest sages taught that man existed to realize the great harmony between his spirit and that of the world.

Thus, says Tagore, the contrast with the West is very distinct. While India emphasized the congruity between man and nature, the West stressed the cleavage. City dwellers felt as if man had to wrest his living from an unwilling alien power. The world was characterized and imagined as a hostile environment, which urban men felt they had to subdue.

And working from that viewpoint. European man creates a further artificial barrier, in the eyes of the Hindu. The Western man believes that there is a sudden unaccountable break between the human being and nature. That is, nature is limited to inanimate things and "beasts," which are considered on a "lower" scale of being. Whatever has the stamp of perfection on it, intellectual or moral, is exclusively human.

India, however, affirms the fundamental unity of creation. The earth is not merely an assemblage of physical phenomena we use and then discard. Quite the opposite: we need to establish a conscious living relationship to every aspect of nature. Instead of scientific curiosity or material greed, man should be impelled to realize the potentialities of nature in a spirit of sympathy, with a feeling of joy and peace. Everything physical has a living presence, and by meeting the eternal spirit in every object the individual becomes emancipated. His harmony with the All is established.

Tagore looks at the historical differences between the settlers of America and those of India to illustrate his point. European colonists, he maintains, ignored the forests. The great living cathedrals of nature had no deep significance for them. They sought only wealth and power from nature, never a sacred association. In India, on the other hand, every spot of natural splendor became a place of pilgrimage. From the Himalayas to the Ganges holy places became sites of great spiritual reconciliation between man's soul and that of the world. Indians even went so far in demonstrating this universal sympathy with life that they gave up eating animal food.

For Tagore, man is essentially not a slave either of himself or of the world; but he is a lover. His freedom

and fulfillment is in love, which is another name for perfect comprehension. By this power of comprehension, this permeation of his being, he is united with the all-pervading Spirit, who is also the breath of his soul. Where a man tries to raise himself to eminence by pushing and jostling all others, to achieve a distinction by which he prides himself to be more than everybody else, there he is alienated from that Spirit.

## 1. Historical Background: Hindu Scriptures

Unlike Buddhism, Christianity or Islam, Hinduism did not have a founder. It grew gradually over a period of 5000 years absorbing and assimilating a variety of religious and cultural movements on the Indian subcontinent. Therefore, it does not have an authoritative Torah or New Testament by which the true faith can be distinguished from heresies and misinterpretations. As has been pointed out by an unfriendly critic, Hinduism looks like a jungle of thought -- patterns, a mysterious world of high-soaring and deep-plunging thought, gorgeous and weird mythology, bewildering variety and rigid customs, noble ethical purity and startling license.

Hinduism often claims to be the religion of the Vedas -- in which case its earliest written records go back to at least 1200 B.C. These Vedas were introduced by Aryan tribes who migrated into India from the northwest for a period of 700 years. The *Rig-Veda*, an Aryan hymnal containing 1028 religious songs, represents the oldest Hindu scripture. The Sama-Veda, Yayur-Peda and Atharva-Peda -- collections of sacrificial hymns, ancient charms and primitive incantations -- came from remote antiquity; but in the form we now have them they are tentatively dated around 1000 B.C.

The second great section of sacred literature is known as the Upanishads. Of these two hundred and fifty metaphysical treatises, thirteen are considered the most important. Again, we cannot be certain when they were composed; probably the bulk of them were produced around 800-700 B.C. According to some scholars the Upanishads are "jumbles" of lecture notes, miscellaneous quotations, aphorisms, short hymns and formulae for memorizing." Yet others, no less famed, point to these writings as the most profound explanation of religious experience. No one will deny that Upanishadic texts have provided Hinduism with its deepest philosophy -- a type of metaphysical monism and pantheism popularly called "Vedanta."

The Hindu epics and Puranos ("ancient tales") in a broad sense are also part of Indian scripture and have been the most effective literary means for the popularizing of the faith. The two classical epics are the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The former, often termed "the fifth Veda" is an immense poem with 100,000 stanzas -- about seven times the length of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey combined. While the main story deals with the wars between rival royal dynasties, the epic includes many digressions on statecraft, the art of warfare, the caste system, fairy tales and mythical history. Most importantly it contains the Bhagavad-Gita, a religious and philosophical poem which purports to be direct revelation from the god Krishna. Tradition asserts that the epic was composed by the original compiler of the Vedas and dictated by the elephant-faced god of wisdom, Ganesha. Although the traditions are ancient, modern scholars date the *Mahabharata* somewhere from 1 A. D. to the middle of the 3rd century.

The *Ramayana*, a poem of 24,000 couplets about Rama, the seventh incarnation of the god Vishna, is an epic of military valor and the unconquerable love of a married couple. The story begins when an upset king decides to abdicate in favor of his eldest son, Rama. On the day set for the change of rulers, the king's youngest wife asks a favor. Not realizing what the scheming woman desired, the king promised to grant her wish. She then demanded that her own son be crowned and Rama exiled for fourteen years. There was nothing to do but grant her what she wanted.

The queen's son was visiting a foreign land when news of his mother's trickery reached him. By the time he had returned home, the old king had died of grief and his rightful heir had gone into exile. After condemning his mother for selfishness and cruelty, the new king went searching for Rama. Finding him living in the jungle as a hermit, the king tried to persuade Rama to take his rightful place on the throne. Not wanting to break his father's promise, Rama refused, but after much pleading he agreed to serve as the regent for the new king, hence ruling without actually reigning.

Later the demon-king of Ceylon kidnapped Rama's wife, the beautiful Sita. When she refused to enter his harem, he imprisoned her in his impregnable castle. Rama looked everywhere for his wife to no avail; that is, until the monkeys told him what had happened. The monkeys then help him build a bridge over to the island of Sri Lanka. After many bloody battles, Sita is rescued and the demon-king slain. Since fourteen years had passed, Rama and Sita return to their home where he can reign as king.

While to outsiders the Ramayana epic may seem more like a fairy tale than holy scripture, for the pious Hindu it teaches how important it is to keep one's promises, obey the will of one's parents, prove one's love for his wife and be courageous enough to overcome every obstacle. For the Hindu, Rama is an incarnation of divine virtue and valor, a perfect embodiment in human form of Vishna's providential power. Also the Ramayana shows why Hindu worship the monkey god Hanuman: Rama would have been unable to rescue his wife and destroy the evil spirits ruling Ceylon without the aid of the friendly

monkeys.

Although the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad-Gita and Ramayana are the classic sources of Hindu religion, of at least equal importance for popular piety are the eighteen Puranas. As a whole, the Puranas are ancient tales and teachings designed to extol worship of the Hindu trinity. Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Siva the lord of change or destruction. Six Puranas exalt the god Brahma, six are devoted to Vishnu, and six to Siva. Among the separate Puranas of great value is the Srimad-Bhagavatam, from the Vishnu group, because it tells the story of Lord Krishna, one of India's most popular incarnate gods.

Mention must also be made of the *Tantras*, sixty-four Sanskrit books containing conversations between Siva and his divine spouse Kali. They discuss how to obtain superhuman powers and ways to unite with the Supreme Spirit. As handbooks for occult practitioners, they provide magical formulas and the meaning of mystical letters and diagrams. In addition, they describe a great variety of charms, all of which are supposed to have the power to influence people, make them fall in love, cure them of diseases, curse them with blindness, etc.

Tantrikism involves worship of the divine energy in a female form, Kali, the consort of Siva. The believer feels that since the ultimate bliss consists of the union of Siva with Kali, man's supreme goal can only be obtained through sexual ecstasy. In "right-handed" Tantra (the respectable variety), the union of husband and wife symbolizes the blissful union of the soul and God. "Left-handed" Tantra however, fosters sexual permissiveness. Hindu, Tibetan and Buddhist devotees of Tantrikism illustrated their faith with controversial paintings of a dark-skinned male and light-skinned female engaged in lovemaking; not to arouse erotic feelings but as pictorial representations of the mystic union of male and female aspects of the Godhead, from which the universe was created.

Because Hinduism has no sacred canon in the strict Judeo-Christian sense, and because the vast majority of Indians until recent years have been illiterate making a book religion virtually impossible -- whenever writing has been highly esteemed it became scripture. Besides the previously mentioned writings, among the influential Hindu books are the *Laws of Manu*, *The Ocean of Love* (Prem Sagar" -- a Hindi free rendering of the *Bhagavata Purana*), the lengthy hymnal of the South Indian Vishnavas, the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Tagore's *Sadhana* and *Religion of Man*, Vivekananda's speeches and the publications of Radharkrishnan, Aurobindo and Gandhi.

### **Growth and Development of Hinduism**

Quite appropriately, it has been said that Hinduism is the substance of Indian civilization and Indian civilization is the form of the Hindu religion. For more than five thousand years Hinduism has been the expression of the needs and aspirations of the Indian people. Consequently it has changed and grown in response to different cultural conditions and deeper religious insight.

Some scholars, like Professor D.S. Sarma of Madra, divide Indian history into six periods from 2000 B.C. to 1885 and a seventh, the present age, which signals the dawn of a new day.. Since Christians find that the Bible provides a pattern for the history of restoration, it may be of value to see how far the scriptural model fits the pageant of Indian experience.

The first period of Indian history begins in the third millennium B.C. and concludes with the birth of Buddha (560 B.C.). Archeologists have unearthed many signs of prehistoric men living in India and at about the time of Egypt's pyramid builders, the subcontinent had civilizations equal to those around the Nile and Tigris- Euphrates rivers. An Indus Valley culture -- not discovered until after World War I -- was particularly noteworthy. Living in well-constructed cities, Indus Valley merchants, artists and farmers practiced ceremonial bathing and venerated trees. Beyond that, they also worshipped the Mother goddess and a fertility god like Siva and believed in sacred bulls. Thus they provide a key to understanding much of later Hinduism. In south India another civilization called Dravidian was equally well developed prior to the Aryan invasion of 1500 B.C.

Like the Hebrew invaders of Palestine, the Aryans conquered a people in many respects far more civilized. The Aryans swept down into northwest India, gradually subjugating a large part of the area. Nothing could halt their chariots and expert archers. A modern writer has compared the Aryans to the Vikings: both were hard-fighting and heavy-drinking warriors who worshipped the gods of fire and thunder. They celebrated by getting intoxicated on soma and conducting bloody animal sacrifices. The Aryans -- like the Dravidians -- did not build temples. They prayed at a sacred fire, with their rulers serving as priests.

Brahminism, the first stage of Hinduism, represents a synthesis of the victors' religion and that of the conquered. The Aryan gave to India the hymns of the *Rig-Veda*, Sanskrit as a sacred language, some of the gods, and the basis for the Hindu epics. The Indus Valley people and Dravidians were responsible not only for the reverence given the cow, river and snake, but also phallic worship, veneration of Siva and Kali, and caste.

Once the Brahmins had tightened their hold on India, their priestly rule became intolerably oppressive. Caste regulations were continuously made more detailed and rigidly enforced. Far too often Brahmanism was just the celebration of expensive sacrifices, elaborate rituals and social stratification in the extreme. Many must have cried out for social reform and spiritual revitalization.

Buddhism and Jainism in the 6th century B.C. represent two powerful attacks on the religion of the Brahmins and signal the beginning of a new era in Indian history -- from Buddha's birth to the fall of the Mauryan empire (200 B.C.). Since other parts of this book will deal with the religious reform movements, we turn directly to the important political developments of this period. After the death of Alexander the Great, an exiled soldier and his Brahmin priest advisor were able to stage a coup d'état and rather quickly establish India's first empire covering all of north India. The new emperor, Chandragupta Maurya, relied on sheer military power -- a standing army of 600,000 infantry, 30,000 cavalry, 9,000 elephants and strangely enough, a personal bodyguard of well-trained women soldiers. His military state lasted 150 years. After twenty-four years on the throne, however, the emperor joined the Jains, abdicated, became an ascetic and starved himself to death. His grandson, Asoka, became India's most important ruler until the time of Akbar the Great in the 17th century. Asoka reigned forty years, was famed as a patron of Buddhism and (legend says) had become a monk prior to his death in 232 B.C.

This second period in Indian history was characterized by two features: a widespread attack upon the established Brahmin faith and the birth of the first great empire. Both attempts at social change were led by the warrior class. On one hand India sought a faith which did not restrict men on the other, it welcomed greater political unity. Each reform, however, was somewhat frustrated. Jainism and Buddhism, in spite of temporary successes, were unable to displace Hinduism's caste structure. As for the Mauryan dream of a centralized India, that was not accomplished until the British occupation of the 18th century.

The third stage extends from the fall of the Mauryan empire to the rise of the Guptas dynasty (200 B.C.-300 A.D.). During these years the two Hindu epics took their final form, the influential legal code of Manu was created, and some of the Puranas were composed. Buddhism adopted more and more features of Hinduism until the Mahayana school became firmly established. Politically at this time, Indians expanded their influence over Sumatra, Java, Borneo, Malaysia and Indo-China.

So far as religion is concerned, the epic age saw the creation of what most Hindus now believe and practice. As students of Indian piety tell us, Brahmanism became Hinduism. The sacrificial altar of the past was replaced by the temple. To make the metaphysics of the Vedanta a faith of the masses, emphasis was placed on the personal God rather than the Absolute. Devotion to the Lord of all the worlds and Friend of every living thing was stressed. Most noteworthy was the popularization of the avatar doctrine: out of compassion for mankind Vishnu comes to earth and incarnates Himself as our protector, guide and companion. Such a belief reinforced image worship, religious processions, holy day festivals and pilgrimages to sacred shrines.

Next came the golden age of Hindu India (300-650 A.D.). A new dynasty created a second Gupta empire covering most of northern India which lasted for about a century and a half before the Huns swept down, shattering everything. Not until the 7th century could a new monarch, Harsha, temporarily restore some semblance of peace and order in the area, but this vanished again after his forty year reign.

The *Puranas*, collections of ancient religious tales and extravagant mythology, came from this golden age, providing the real Hindu Bible of the common people. Worship of specific gods and goddesses (called "sectarian Hinduism") became normative. Men now concentrated their devotion on Vishnu, Siva, Shakti (the divine Female), Surya the sun god, or Ganesha, the elephant-faced god of revelation. While this change was taking place in popular Hinduism, the scholars developed the six orthodox schools of Indian philosophy to combat the heresies of Buddhism and Jainism. Also at this time devotees of Shakti created Tantricism, with its mystical ritualism designed to give adepts supernatural power through to a rigidly segregated society and union with the Mother goddess.

India's fifth period covers in succession the breakup of India into small warring kingdoms; the Muslim invasion beginning with Mahmud Ghazni (998); the creation of the Islamic Mughul empire; its ascendancy and decline; the establishment of British rule in Bengal (1757). Since the time involves a thousand years, our treatment must be extremely sketchy. For Hinduism this long period saw the appearance of Shankara, the father of Vedantic philosophy, and Ramanuja, his peer and rival. Shankara (b. 788), often called the Aquinas of India, expounded and systematized an interpretation of the Upanishads which came to be known as the philosophy of non-duality. Seven basic principles provide the pillars of his metaphysical system:

1. The eternal, impersonal Absolute (Brahmin) is the only ultimate Reality.
2. Maya (illusion) is the power by which the Absolute appears to us in a transient universe of time

and space.

3. Causality explains the universe but not the nature of the Absolute.
4. Man's spirit is identical with the Supreme Spirit.
5. Sin and suffering originate from our failure to realize our essential oneness with the Absolute.
6. Liberation cannot be achieved by action (karma) or devotion but only by means of illumination (jnana).
7. Solely because of our ignorance do we see diversity, multiplicity and finiteness where there exists in reality only the oneness of Brahman.

Ramanuja (b. 1137) gave India's classic defense of personal theism as a conscious reply to Shankara. By contrast to the latter's philosophy of non-duality, Ramanuja recognized three ultimate realities: God, the soul, and the realm of matter. He insisted on the superiority of devotion (bhakti) to the personal God over metaphysical illumination. Finally, instead of interpreting the final goal of man as mystical absorption, he stressed the ultimate enjoyment of personal bliss with -- but not in -- God.

In general, the appearance of the Muslims should be considered the chief characteristic of this fifth period. For good or ill, the religion of Allah made a decisive impact on Indian life and thought. Hindus can never forget or forgive the way Muslims smashed the idols, converted many temples into mosques, and forced millions to accept a new creed or face death. This intolerance, say Christians like Toynbee and Hindus like Radhakrishnan, is a defect of all the Semitic religions based on the Old Testament and its concept of the jealous God. However, it should also be noted that in a positive fashion Indian Islam did inspire several reform movements among the Hindus. It likewise gave to India some powerful emperors like Akbar the Great and Shahjahan, and it produced artistic masterpieces of which the Taj Mahal and the Great Mosque at Delhi are precious examples. Nor was the influence completely one-sided in favor of the Muslims. Indian thought greatly affected Islamic mysticism and in several cases made Muslim religion a little less intolerant of other faiths. From the standpoint of Hinduism, the Muslim invasion begins a period of alien conquest and foreign domination. Muslim power, however, was concentrated in north India.

The sixth period in Indian history is marked by the arrival of the Western imperialists-Portuguese, Dutch, French and British. There is no way to overlook the enormous impact which the West made on the subcontinent, but probably nationalists exaggerate the destructive and demoralizing effects of the two centuries of rule by the British raj. With the European soldier, civil servant and merchant came the Christian missionary. Again the Hindu faith faced a resolute foe, yet in the long run the Christian may turn out to have been a friend in disguise. There is no doubt that the missionaries stimulated social improvement and Hindu religious reform. While never becoming more than a tiny minority Christians often forced India to come to terms with the modern world and -- though this was seldom their intent -- they introduced Indian literature to the West.

A new day dawned for India with the departure of the British army and administrators. Nevertheless, the joy of liberation was muted by the tragic separation of the Hindu and Muslim: there were terrible communal riots, rampage, bitterness between India and Pakistan, and war over disputed Kashmir. Nevertheless, free India can be proud of making Radhakrishnan its second president; the Oxford professor was excelled by none as a Hindu apologist. The new India was likewise proud of putting untouchables in positions of political influence, and of honoring capable women like Madame Pandit in the United Nations and Indira Gandhi in the prime minister's office.

Though the Indian Republic under Nehru's guidance decided to be a secular rather than a Hindu state, disappointing many religious traditionalists, since World War II there has been a growing popularity for Indian religion. One aspect of this is a regular parade of Hindu holy men to the West: Swami Prabhupada of Hare Krishna, Meher Baba, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and others. Hinduism these days has enthusiastic disciples in Boston, Buenos Aires, Berkeley and Basel as well as Bombay. In India and elsewhere Hindus look to the immediate future as a time of unparalleled hope.

### **Hinduism's External Features**

Hindus call themselves believers in the eternal and universal religion; modern writers emphasize this by pointing out how tolerant Hinduism has been in accepting an amazing variety of beliefs, rituals and conflicting theologies, as well as a multiplicity of gods favored by this or that minority. However, Hindu orthodoxy does have within it certain distinct limits to its seemingly catholic sympathies. They fall roughly into four categories: acceptance of the Vedas as scripture, tolerance towards image worship, veneration of the cow, and acceptance of caste.

The good Hindu must accept the absolute authority of the Vedas as divine revelation. Most defenders of

orthodoxy add that one must also accept the inspiration of at least the Upanishads and Bhagavad-Gita. Mahatma Gandhi, for example, claimed to be an orthodox Hindu because he believed in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas "and all that goes by the name of Hindu scriptures, and therefore in avatartas (incarnate gods) and rebirth." Many, however, denied Gandhi's Orthodoxy and it was a Hindu fanatic who assassinated him.

Nevertheless, for Gandhi such a belief was not limiting. The father of modern Indian independence claimed that he did not believe in the exclusive divinity of the Vedas. For him the Bible, the Quran and the Zoroastrian Zend Avesta were as divinely inspired as the Vedas. To accept the authority of the Vedas in his opinion did not require him to accept every word and every verse. He declined to be bound by any interpretation however learned, if he felt it to be repugnant to reason or morality. He compared his attachment to Hinduism as equal to his love for his wife. Nothing elated him so much as the Bhagavad-Gita and the Ramayana. But while he was a reformer through and through, as he put it, his zeal never caused him to reject the essentials of Hinduism.

The orthodox Hindu allows the cult of sacred images. Gandhi publicly stated that he did not disbelieve in idol worship, even though he personally felt no veneration for any of the religious idols. Images are an aid to worship. Idol worship is part of human nature, in his opinion; and therefore he did not consider it a sin.

Ram Mohun Roy, one of the apostles of modern reform Hinduism, denounced image worship, however. According to the Hindu scriptures, the best way to secure immortal bliss is the purely spiritual contemplation of the Supreme. Idol worship, in his mind, is intended only for persons of limited capacity. If the Vedas tolerate idolatry it is only for those who are "totally incapable of raising their minds to the contemplation of the invisible God of nature." When Ram Mohun founded the Brahma Samaj, India's first society for the creation of a noble Hinduism which Christian missionaries could not attack, he forbade the use of any graven image, statue, carving, painting or picture within its meeting houses. At the same time he commanded his followers never to revile, or be contemptuous of any object of worship used by other men.

Attacks on Hindu image worship came from the Muslims and the Christians: from the Muslims because they were against all visible representations of the divine, and from the Christians because Hindu worship was (1) considered idolatry, (2) Indian religious symbolism was grotesque and (3) the statuary and carvings were obscene. Muslim warriors and Mughul rule, often simply smashed the Hindu idols and turned the temples into mosques. Christian missionaries could only ridicule the Hindu gods and demand that the British government suppress Hindu immorality.

Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Zimmerman voices a typical complaint against the ugliness of the Hindu idols: "... whilst the cultured and art loving Greeks made their gods beautiful the Oriental has often given hideous shape to some of his, as though he had no eye nor love for the beautiful, for at times the outward expression is more demonical than divine and hideous enough to frighten the children and give the nightmare to adults."

Kali, the Mother goddess, seems to substantiate his point. She is regularly depicted in fearsome shape -- a black female with bloodshot eye, fang-like teeth, tongue thrust out, blood on her face and bosom, hair matted. Around her neck hangs a chain of skulls, corpses form her earrings and her waist is girded with skulls. In two of her four hands she holds a noose to strangle her victims and an iron hook to drag them to their doom.

Yet, just such a goddess inspired Sri Ramakrishna, India's most noted 19th century saint. The sole purpose of his existence was to see this Divine Mother. When She did finally reveal Herself to him, he said that the temple and all other objects vanished before his eyes. He had no idea of what was going on in the outer world; but within he felt an indescribable felicity like he had never known. When the presence of the Divine Mother was later gone, and he regained consciousness, there was only the word on his lips: "Mother."

Dr Zimmerman is unappreciative of the "Divine Mother"; he is equally sharp in his denunciation of obscene Hindu temple carvings. Writing about "the most indecent realism of figures imaginable, far surpassing the most vulgarly obscene figures discovered in Pompei," he concludes: "These striking examples of phallic worship I have seen on the temples and sacred cars in certain cities of India, and they should make every Hindu with a moral sense of refinement blush because these disgraceful representations are retained by their religion, and in defiance of every sense and standard of decency in our modern civilization."

Without denying the erotic practices connected with "left-handed Tantrikism" in times past and the rather earthy attitude of Indians by comparison with the Victorians, one should at least read Gandhi's reply to those who condemned Hinduism for licentiousness: "...millions are unaware of the obscenity of many practices which we have hitherto innocently indulged in. It was in a missionary book that I first learnt that sizzlingam (the ordinary phallic symbol for Siva) had any obscene significance at all... It was again in a



missionary book that I learnt that the temples in Orissa were disfigured with obscene statues. When I went to Puri it was not without an effort that I was able to see those things. But I know that the thousands who flock to the temple know nothing about the obscenity surrounding these figures. The people are unprepared and the figures do not obtrude themselves upon your gaze."

Besides accepting the authority of sacred scripture and the right to worship images, the orthodox Hindu believes in veneration of the cow. Gandhi called it the central fact of Hinduism, the dearest possession of the Hindu heart. "No one who does not believe in cow protection can possibly be a Hindu." Cow worship meant to him the worship of innocence, a vow to protect the weak and helpless. It takes the human beyond concern for himself. Through the cow man is enjoined to realize his identity with all that lives. If an Indian acts cruelly to his cattle, he disowns God, declared the Mahatma.

Albert Schweitzer felt that "reverence for life," all life without exception, was one of Hinduism's great contributions to mankind. For him and many others the Indian doctrine of ahimsa -- refraining from killing -- was far superior to the Christian doctrine that man alone was made in the image of God, with the right to dominate or exploit the rest of creation.

Gandhi knew from bitter experience how easily the ahimsa idea could be misinterpreted or violated. Some Hindus, notably the worshippers of Kali, practiced animal sacrifice -- the beheading of young goats to appease the Divine Mother's thirst for blood. Others let their cattle starve, used iron goads to drive their oxen, and castrated their bulls. To counter these abuses, the Indian leader publicly favored the merciful killing of suffering cows, rabid dogs, destructive monkeys, poisonous snakes and incurably ill humans. Of course, traditionalists violently objected. Replying to them he pointed out that it is impossible to sustain one's body without the destruction of other living things to some extent, that all of us have to destroy some life to sustain our own bodies as well as those under our care. Yet one should resort to killing as little as possible, only when it is unavoidable, after exhausting all remedies to avoid it.

A fourth tenet is seen in the orthodox Hindu's commitment to the caste system as a useful, divinely-ordained structuring of society. This most complex institution is very difficult to understand and at least in practice is almost impossible to defend in a democratic world. Certain factors, nevertheless, should be taken into account.

Caste seems to have originally been a method by which the Aryan invaders of India enforced their rule over the vast multitude of subject peoples they had conquered. Restrictions were instituted and perpetuated to keep a ruling minority from being swallowed up by the captive majority. Many have shown that caste is not an essential part of the Vedic religion of the oldest Hindu scriptures -- because the hymns of the Rig-Veda predate the Aryan migration. As a purely convenient technique by which a privileged ruling class consolidated its power, the caste rules against intermarriage and inter-dining are understandable and represent a social pattern carried out by many conquerors: the Macedonian Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt, the British civil servants in India, the French colons in Algeria and the Yankee missionary class in Hawaii, for instance.

However, originally, Hindu caste also represented a form of racial segregation. The fair skinned Aryans considered themselves a master race, God's chosen people, destined to rule over the darker-skinned peoples they had subjugated. According to Hindu mythology, the Brahmin priestly class was created from the head of God, the warrior caste from His arms, the merchants from His thighs and the laborers from His feet. Other, non-Aryan races by contrast sprang not from God but from the darkness cast aside by the Creator when he formed the world. This theory, revived by the Nazi-Aryan "supermen" after World War I, now has few defenders in India because nearly everyone is dark-skinned.

Caste has been interpreted by certain Hindu apologists as a useful and valid analysis of men's different functions in society. Brahmin -- represent the moral and intellectual leaders of a nation, the Kshatriyas its guardians and protectors, the Vaisyas its monkey makers and the Sudras its average workers. In this sense, the Hindu caste system can be seen as an Indian counterpart to the good society envisioned in Plato's ideal Republic.

According to some Indian writers, caste is not all evil. By defining everyone's role in society, it eliminated the undesirable competitive spirit which they feel is the curse of capitalist countries. It tended to cultivate a cooperative spirit because each group had a recognized function in a well-adjusted social order. By keeping the Brahmins free for religious and scholarly pursuits, caste exalted the wise man above the soldier and profiteer, hence stimulating the cultivation of literary and aesthetic works.

The evils of such a rigid stratification of society are obvious, especially since the Sudras and the outcastes ("untouchables," "unapproachables," "unlookables") form the bulk of the Indian population. For this reason repeated efforts have been made to break down the caste system: by Buddha who disregarded the rules, by Vishnaivas and Saivite saints who welcomed disciples from all castes, by Muslims who gave positions of responsibility to non-Brahmins, and by the Christian missionaries who gained converts predominantly from the untouchables. And by Hindus themselves, via the various 19th century Hindu

reform movements, or through the untiring efforts of Gandhi.

Thus, even prior to the birth of an independent India after World War II, an Indian critic of the caste system could point to the signs of its future demise. The nationalists realized that a country with a large percentage of its inhabitants victimized by an oppressive social structure "could neither fight for independence, nor keep it, if and when won." Hindu leaders recognized that the "depressed classes" were becoming Christian or Muslim, and this manpower drain threatened whatever influence Hinduism might have in a free India. Western educated Indians, a small but powerful pressure group, agitated for social justice. And the British occupation authorities granted concessions to the "intouchables" whenever they were in a position to do so.

Before 1947 the outcastes were allowed to enter most of the Hindu temples and walk along the main roads -- a victory for Gandhi. Outside the privacy of their homes, all Hindus in the cities were free to disregard caste and usually did so. Inter-dining in the restaurants had become accepted and intermarriage had begun to be tolerated. Village life, nevertheless, moved slowly, making significant reform difficult.

Free India made caste changes easier. No longer could Hindu traditionalists blame attempts at democratization on the British imperialists and their Christian agents. The fact that the government was in the hands of secular-oriented Indians like Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi meant that the Hindu traditionalists had little influence in deciding national policy. Caste in its worst forms was doomed.

Nehru's ideas on caste reveal the opinions of a large portion of India's educated elite. He told his countrymen repeatedly that they were too much in the grip of the past: a past symbolized by a narrow religious outlook, an obsession with the supernatural, the speculative and the excessively mystical. When Hindus talked of going back to the Vedas he dismissed their dreams as idle fancies. India must lessen her religiosity and turn to science.

In that spirit free India's first prime minister looked at caste as a prison, stunting the Hindu soul. For him, the day-by-day faith of the orthodox Hindu is more wrapped up in considerations of what to eat and what not to eat, who to eat with and who to keep away from, than with religious values. Rules and regulations of the kitchen dominate his life. All this is symbolized and bound up with caste. For Nehru, in the social organization of today, caste has no place at all.

### **The Hindu Ceremonies**

According to ancient Hindu religious law and traditional practice, a Hindu youth submits to twelve basic purification rites from his conception until he marries. Among the most important of these is the Upanayana sacred thread, usually occurring between the age of seven and ten, confers upon a boy the status of the "twice-born" and is his formal initiation into one of the three higher castes.

Until the performance of this rite, the child is treated as a member of the servant Sudra caste. Before the investiture, an orthodox Brahmin cannot eat with his son. Until he wears the sacred thread the boy is also not allowed to repeat any of the verses of the sacred Vedas. An astrologer fixes the date and time for the ceremony, in one of the five auspicious months in which the sun is moving north-ward toward the ecliptic. The rite is held between 6 a.m. and noon, the most fortunate part of the day. It must take place when the sun is exerting strong influence upon the earth.

Prior to the ceremony the boy's head is shaved, then he is bathed and anointed with perfumed oils. The officiating priest formally presents the child to the household gods; after which he bows to his parents and assembled guests. He sits on a wooden stool facing his father while the priest repeats Vedic chants. When these are complete the boy bows down to his father, touching his parent's feet with folded hands -- a symbol of the utmost respect and obedience. As the father blesses his son, the guests shower rice on the child for good luck. A fire is lit with sacred twigs and fed continuously with clarified butter as a reminder of the divine presence.

The sacred thread, now to be presented, consists of three white cotton strands each made of three finer threads twisted together. These represent the trinity Brahma, Vishnu and Siva. The family priest places the string on the left shoulder of the boy, passes it across his body and ties the two ends under the right arm. Vedic verses are then chanted by the priest and attending Brahmins. After the girding of the thread, the boy has to repeat the sacred Gayatri prayer which is believed to possess miraculous powers:

*This new and excellent praise of thee, O splendid playful sun, is offered by us to thee. Be gratified by this my speech; approach this craving mind as a fond man seeks a woman. May that sun who contemplates and looks into all worlds be our protector. Let us meditate on the adorable light of the Divine Ruler. May it guide our intellects. Desirous of food, we solicit the gift of the splendid sun with oblations and praise.*

In ancient times, following the thread ceremony the boy was taken from home to the abode of a guru for his education. Because in those days a student was required to beg for his food, a beggar's staff is



presented to him as a symbol of the ascetic life of those seeking knowledge.

Some Brahmins change their sacred threads annually. After the initiation rite is completed, the beggar's staff is taken from the boy and he is dressed in the clothes of a householder. In place of the staff he is presented with an umbrella, the sign of prosperity and dominion. A feast for the guests and gifts for the attending Brahmins conclude the celebrations.

Besides solemn daily rites and special festivals at the Hindu temples, there is also ceremonial worship performed in the home as thanksgiving for favors received from the gods. A ceremony honoring the five great gods of sectarian Hinduism is typical. Five stones are used to represent the divinities: Vishnu by a black stone, Siva-white, Ganesha-red, Shakti-varicolored, and the Sun-a crystal. These rocks are arranged in a circular metal disc with the symbol of the favored god placed in the center. Within reach of the worshipper are also a vessel filled with water, a conch shell and a small hand bell. A plate containing Tutsi leaves sacred to Vishnu, Bilva leaves for Siva, perfume, flowers and fruit is placed on the right side of the officiating priest.

To prepare himself for worship, the worshipper sips and swallows water while the twenty-four names of Vishnu are recited. He then pays homage to the water vessel, conch shell and bell.

*O bell, make a sound for the approach of the gods, and for the departure of the demons. Homage to the goddess Ghanta (bell)....*

Following these preliminary ceremonies, the service proper begins -- a ritual consisting of sixteen stages: (1) invoking the presence of the gods, (2) offering them a seat, (3) providing water for washing the gods' feet, (4) offering them rice, (5) giving them water to drink, (6) offering milk and honey to bathe in, (7) providing Tulsi leaves as symbolic clothes, (8) more leaves for upper garments, (9) offering perfumes and sandalwood paste, (10) offering flowers, (11) giving incense to the gods, (12) prayer for illumination, (13) offering of food, (14) reverential circling of the shrine, (15) recitation of Vedic texts and offering of flowers, (16) final act of adoration.

The pattern of worship -- though on a much more elaborate scale -- is conducted in the great temples daily. These temples represent the actual houses of the gods or goddesses made visible in idols. Each day the priests carry out a ritual of waking, bathing, clothing, feeding and entertaining the resident deity, his wife and companions. For the laymen religion refers not to congregational meeting for prayer and instruction, but instead to visits in the presence of the god. Individually, they present him a gift and walk around the temple admiring the god's living quarters.

### **Hindu Renaissance: Accomplishments and Aspirations**

The movement for Hindu revival, which has done so much to restore Indian self-respect and promote social reform, has no one date of origin. With justification Oriental scholars point to a variety of incidents that were critical in the formation of this renaissance. There was the surprise outcome of the Russo-Japanese War of 1905: for the first time a non-Christian and non-Western nation battled and defeated a Western Christian power. The myth of Western invincibility was shaken. Another critical moment was Swami Vivekananda's electrifying speech in defense of Hinduism at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. Of no less impact was the publication in Europe and America of *The Sacred Books of the East* under the editorial guidance of Max Muller. Some scholars credit Ram Mohun Roy's creation of the reformist Brahmo Samaj in the second decade of the 19th century or the establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885, which eventually was instrumental in ending British domination, as of prime significance. Whoever is most correct, it stands to reason that all of these factors worked to stimulate a rebirth of Hinduism and to spread the Hindu message to every part of the globe.

The Hindu Renaissance is certainly one of the striking sociological phenomena of our age. It seems to bear out what Oswald Spengler called "The Decline of the West" and what Paul Tillich dubbed "the end of the Protestant Era." Westernization would continue economically, scientifically and industrially, but politically and religiously its worldwide advance had been halted. Japan first, then India, had forced the Western world into a retreat, the end of which we have yet to see. Churchmen, looking at what has taken place, dejectedly reconcile themselves, in their words, to a "post-Christian world."

No doubt the Hindu Renaissance has raised the status of India in the eyes of the world. In every arena -- political, religious and social -- she has given positive proof that her ancient spiritual fire is still burning within. At least according to one Hindu historian, Hindus believe that this once-conquered nation, with her masses still subject to intolerable poverty, is, in her rebirth, presently in a position to give light to the world enveloped in darkness.

In the religious sphere, the Hindu revival has reminded Indians that their faith can exist apart from the mythological, ritualistic and obsolete sociological forms in which it has oft become embedded. Vedanta philosophy and the religion of spiritual experience are independent of and supersede caste, superstition

and ritual.

Socially too the specifics of change are noteworthy: "Today Sati (the voluntary suicide of widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands) has become an incredible thing of the past. Child-marriages and polygamy have become illegal. Widow-marriages have been made possible. Provision is made for divorce. Foreign travel has become very common. The ban against inter-dining has been lifted. The caste system has become less rigid. And, thanks to Mahatma Gandhi, the demon of untouchability has been overthrown. Women have become educated and have begun to occupy the highest offices in the State.

India has come down to earth, so to speak. Though the Gita taught that man should strive for spiritual freedom in society, discharging one's duties faithfully, India had forgotten. When she lost her political independence, the nation sought refuge in asceticism and otherworldliness. The law of karma was used to cloak neglect of one's neighbor and the downtrodden. But through the renaissance, adjustment came in the form of reconciliation with the scientific and political ideas of the West. New knowledge in geography, history, astronomy, civil rights and social obligations was incorporated into Hindu thought. Radhakrishnan has been of immense value in this matter.

Finally the reformers had awakened Indians to the importance of unity. This has been reinforced by their struggles against Christian missionaries in the field of religion and "misguided Muslim separatists" in the field of politics. In the past unity had been fostered by the annual rounds of festivals and pilgrimages. In recent years -- since the granting of independence in 1947 -- an Indian communal feeling has been generated by the nation's revival of Sanskrit, Indian history, philosophy, music and traditional dance. Activities that encourage pride in their land and heritage have been vigorously promoted.