HINDUISM

TO THE READER

Hinduism appears to be a very complex religion. Whether it means all things to all men or inscrutable to everyone, it has successfully survived even to this day. This small book is an attempt at making it a little less complicated, a little more intelligible, to the layman and a little simpler to adopt or follow.

There are already quite a few books on Hinduism, published not only by the Rama-krishna Order but also by others. However, one more book on the subject written from another angle will not, at least, create more confusion, even if it does not throw more light!

If the reader finds that it rather has some chinks, let us hope that these very same chinks may also let in some light on a few, hitherto little-known, aspects.

Let us wait and see!

Swami Harshananda

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa Deva ON HINDUISM

The Sanātana Dharma, the Eternal Religion, declared by the rishis, will alone endure.

The Eternal Religion, the religion of the rishis, has been in existence from time out of mind and will exist eternally. There exist in this Sanātana Dharma all forms of worship-worship of God with form and worship of the Impersonal Deity as well. It contains all paths-the path of knowledge, the path of devotion and so on. Other forms of religion, the modern cults, will remain for a few days and then disappear.

The Hindu Religion alone is the Sanātana Dharma....The Hindu Religion has always existed and will always exist.


Thus Spake Vivekananda

Mind you, we have no quarrel with any religion in the world. We have each our Ishta. But when we see a man coming and saying. "This is the only way," and trying to force it on us in India, we have a word to say: We laugh at them. For such people who want to destroy their brothers because they seem to follow a different path towards God-for them to talk of love is absurd. Their love does not count for much. How can they preach of love who cannot forbear another man to follow a different path from their own? If that is love, what is hatred? (III. 131-32)

You have withstood the shocks of centuries simply because you took great care of it, yet sacrificed everything else for it. Your forefathers underwent everything boldly, even death itself, but preserved their religion. Temple after temple was broken down by the foreign
conqueror, but no sooner had the wave passed, than the spire of the temple rose up again. Some of these old temples of Southern India, and those like Somanath of Gujarat, will teach you volumes of wisdom, will give you a keener insight into the history of the race than any amount of books. Mark how these temples bear the marks of hundred attacks and a hundred regenerations, continually destroyed and continually springing up out of the ruins, rejuvenated and strong as ever! (III. 289)

Mark me, then and then alone you are a Hindu when the very name sends through you a galvanic shock of strength. Then and then alone you are a Hindu when every man who bears the name, from any country, speaking our language or any other language, becomes at once the nearest and the dearest to you. Then and then alone you are a Hindu when the distress of anyone bearing that name comes to your heart and makes you feel as if your own son were in distress. Then and then alone you are a Hindu when you will be ready to bear everything for them, like the great example I have quoted at the beginning of this lecture, of your great Guru Govind Singh. (III. 289)

From The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda
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<td>उ u-u in full,</td>
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<td>ऊ ū-oo in boot,</td>
<td>थ th-th in thumb</td>
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<td>ऋ ṛ-somewhat between r and ri,</td>
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<td>ए e-ay in May,</td>
<td>ध dh-the in breathe</td>
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<td>ऐ ai-y in my,</td>
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<td>क k-k in keen,</td>
<td>ब b-b in bag</td>
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<td>ख kh-ckh in blockhead,</td>
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<td>ग g-g (hard) in go,</td>
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<td>च c-ch in chain,</td>
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1 Introduction

Hinduism is like a centre of gravity doll which always regains its upright position however much it may be upset. If neither external aggressions nor internal upheavals have destroyed it, if every such cataclysm has only acted as a catalyst to strengthen its inner fibre, it only speaks volumes of its power of resilience and survival.

Unlike some of the well-known religions of the world, Hinduism does not have a single founder, a single Book, a single Church or even a single way of life. It is precisely due to this factor-which, by the way, is its strength and not a weakness-that it has been able to withstand all the onslaughts of time or the barbarous invasions from outside.

Hinduism is like a noble mother who lovingly cares for all of her children, including those that may deny her. An atheist, an agnostic, even a blasphemer, has a place in it as much as a staunch believer. Such heretics are neither punished nor humiliated, but, just ignored. In case they-in course of time-repent and relent, they have every chance of redeeming themselves.

Hinduism is not idolatry, though the idols of gods-various facets of the Supreme Being-act as stepping stones to the highest mystical experience.

Hinduism is not fatalism, though it preaches through the theory of karma that one reaps what one sows.

Hinduism is not the caste system and its hierarchies, though the system is a part of its social arrangement, based on the division of labour.

Hinduism does not preach or uphold untouchability, though the Hindu society has practised it, firstly due to reasons of public health, and later, due to prejudices.

Hinduism is not responsible for the occasional stagnation of the Hindu society, though the society did, sometimes, stagnate due to its non-adherence to the fundamental principles taught by it.

An earnest study and analysis of such a unique religion is highly rewarding.

2 The Name

Strangely enough, 'Hinduism' is not its original name! In fact its adherents never gave it any particular name except 'dharma,' which simply means 'The eternal law that supports and sustains those who practise it'. Nor was there any need to do so since, being ancient-and in a way prehistoric-there was no other religion from which it had to distinguish itself from!

Actually, the origin of the words 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' is geographical. The land of the river Sindhū (Indus) and the people inhabiting it came to be known as 'Hindu' among the ancient persians, in whose language, the 'S' of Sanskrit became 'H'. And this name has
Looked at from this angle, all religions of Indian origin—whether it is Jainism, Buddhism or Sikhism—become different facets of Hinduism. However, in practice, the term is applied specifically to the religion dependent on the Vedas.

The word `Sanātana Dharma’ (the `Ancient and Eternal Religion’) is sometimes applied to Hinduism by its more orthodox followers.

3 The Book

The `Book’ or the Scripture of Hinduism is the Veda, with its fourfold division, viz., Rgveda, Yajurveda, Sāmaveda and Atharvaveda.

Being divinely revealed to the rṣis or sages of yore, the Veda is also called `Śruti’ (what is `heard’, hence `revealed’). Since it was not written by human beings, it is termed `apauruṣeya’ or `not created by the human agency’.

All the secondary scriptures that derive their authority from the Śrutis, that are to be kept in memory while practising their tenets, are accommodated under the omnibus term `Smṛtis’ (smṛti = remembrance). The various dharma-sūtras, smṛtis, itihāsas and purāṇas as also the nibandhas (digests) come under this category.

The Rgveda is primarily a book of prayers. The Yajurveda is a work of liturgical practices. The Sāmaveda comprises hymns, taken mostly from the Rgveda and set to music, to be sung at appropriate places in a Vedic sacrifice. The Atharvaveda is like an appendix supplying additional information on all aspects of the Veda.

Each Veda is again divided into four sections: Saṁhitā (collection of mantras), Brāhmaṇa (liturgical instructions, generally in prose), īraṇyaka (symbolical contemplation of Vedic rituals, to be practised in forests by the forest-recluses) and Upaniṣad (metaphysical reflections).

Among the Smṛtis or secondary scriptures, special mention must be made of the Bhagavadgītā, popularly known as the Gītā. It is a part of the great epic, the Mahābhārata, and is in the form of a dialogue between Arjuna, the Pāṇḍava hero and Kṛṣṇa, considered as an incarnation of God.

The Gītā contains wonderful ideas of ethics, religion and philosophy rolled into one integrated unit and can easily be declared as the Book for all the Hindus of the modern age.

The dharmaśāstra literature which is voluminous, deals with many aspects of the personal, the social and the legal life of the Hindus. Some of the books of this category are considered as an authority even today by the law-courts while deciding certain types of cases concerning the Hindus.
The purāṇas or mythological lore, are popular works with a mixture of ancient fables and didactic material aimed at educating the masses in our religion and culture.

The āgamas, a special class of literature, highly technical in nature, are the guiding lights for the construction and consecration of temples and images, as also the various ritualistic practices connected with them.

All these secondary scriptures derive their authority from the Vedas and are accepted as authorities as far as their tenets do not go against the spirit of the Vedas.

4 The Philosophy

Every religious system must have a basic philosophy to support it and sustain it.

Based on the teachings of the Vedas, including those of the Upaniṣads, six systems of philosophy-called `darśanas', products of intuitive thinking and vision (darśana = vision)-evolved over the centuries. These systems generally dealt with some common topics though they specialised in some areas. The common topics are: God; creation; human beings (and the living beings); the problem of good and evil; ethics and morality; destiny of man including the final goal of life; path to perfection.

The Nyāya system of Gautama has developed the science of logic needed for philosophical inquiry and disputations.

The Vaiśeṣika system of Kaṇāda advances the atomic theory of creation.

The Sāṅkhya system of Kapila propounds the theory of the animate souls and inanimate matter as the basic factors in creation.

The Yoga system of Patañjali, while accepting the Sāṅkhyan theory of creation, adds Īśvara or God as the missing element in the process of creation. It, however, concentrates on the eight steps of spiritual practice needed to attain perfection.

The Mīmāṁsā system of Jaimini devotes its attention mainly to the interpretation of Vedic sentences, developing in detail a theory of knowledge-six ways of knowing-and stressing the importance of Vedic rites.

The Vedānta system of Bādarāyaṇa Vyāsa is the crowning glory of Hindu philosophy. It calls the Supreme Power which projects the universe, sustains it and withdraws it into itself as Brahman. It holds the individual soul, ātman, to be eternal and immortal. Attainment of mokṣa or liberation from the cycle of births and deaths is possible through the knowledge of Brahman, by being devoted to Brahman. A liberated soul will never again return to mundane existence. This is its teaching in a nutshell.
Different views of interpretation of the Upaniṣads and the Brahmaśūtras-a special treatise on the Upaniṣads-have resulted in three main branches of Vedānta philosophy-Advaita, Viśiṣṭādvaita and Dvaita-and their variants.

By the by, the Upaniṣads, the Brahmaśūtras and Bhagavadgītā have been considered by the orthodox sections of Hinduism as the three foundational works of Vedānta philosophy (technically called prasthānatraya).

One doctrine on which all these schools of philosophy are agreed upon is that of karma and rebirth. As you sow, so you reap. This principle when extended to the moral and spiritual field, becomes the doctrine of karma. A person is free to do good or bad deeds in life. Accordingly he will also get good or bad results. The intensity of such deeds may be such that the results cannot be exhausted in one life. Hence one has to admit of future births. This fact has been accepted in the Hindu scriptures.

5 The Religion

Religion is applied philosophy. Hindu philosophical systems-especially the Vedānta-accept two things, viz., that God is one but can manifest himself through various names and forms; and that God-realisation is the final goal of life which gives infinite bliss and puts an end to saṁsāra or transmigration.

Broadly speaking, this can be achieved either through the jñānamārga (the path of knowledge) or through the bhaktimārga (the path of devotion). In the former one has to contemplate on one's ātman or the Self through the process of elimination, that he is not the body-mind complex but the soul, of pure consciousness and bliss. In the latter, the seeker has to meditate on any aspect of God with faith and devotion, and to repeat the mantra (the divine name of that aspect) duly received from a competent guru (spiritual preceptor).

The various deities of the Hindu pantheon like Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Śiva-the Hindu Trinity-or their manifestations like the ten avatāras (incarnations, Rāma, Kṛṣṇa and others) or other associated deities like the Devi (Divine Mother) or Gaṇapati, are all different manifestations of the one Supreme God called `Brahman' in the philosophical works. Even as sugar-dolls, though with various names and forms, give the same sweet taste when eaten, meditation on any of these deities will also give the same superconscious mystical experience, experience of unalloyed bliss.

The particular forms of the deities and their mantras (mystical formulae) to be used in meditation have been handed over to us by a galaxy of saints and seers. They have been well-tested over the centuries. They are very much in vogue even today.

This takes us to an allied topic, that of Hindu temples and image-worship. As already pointed out in the introduction, Hinduism is not idolatry. It is worshipping God in and through the idol. The idol, sculptured as per the directions given in the Mūrtiśilpaśāstra or iconography, is an aid to internal meditation. In the process of spiritual evolution, the mind is raised from the
idol to the living form of the deity in one's heart and ultimately to the universal beatific presence of the Divine.

Apart from the images, certain non-anthropomorphic icons or symbols like the śivalinga, the śālagrāma, the śrīcakra and yantras, are also in vogue in Hinduism for purposes of worship.

If God is omnipotent and omnipresent, nothing prevents him from manifesting himself in the idol in a subtle form. It is this conviction that has led to the ceremonial consecration of images in the Hindu temples, making them 'alive' as it were. Then, even the formal ritualistic worship of the idols becomes legitimate. That many a Hindu saint has scaled great spiritual heights by contemplation on these divine forms or even by the worship of consecrated idols is proof enough, of this principle.

If the Christians kneel before the crucifix, the Muslims kiss the Kaaba stone, the Sikhs worship their Book (the Ādi Granth), the Jains and Buddhists worship their images, or for that matter, a patriot salutes the national flag, there is no reason why a devout Hindu should not worship his images.

Two more aspects of Hindu religious practices need mention here: celebration of festivals and visiting the places of pilgrimage.

Festivals are occasions for exercising greater self-control through fasting, keeping vigil and special worship of God. They are also occasions of joy—once the religious vows are over-feasting and family/social reunions.

Visiting places of pilgrimage—especially the places surcharged with the spiritual power by the association of great saints—will help in therecharging as it were, of one's spiritual aspirations.

It should be noted that visiting places of worship, observing religious festivals and going on a pilgrimage are common to almost all the religions of the world.

It will not be out of place to mention here that the Hindu religious works which advocate rituals or pilgrimage are also bold enough to declare that the best worship is the worship of the Supreme Self within and the best pilgrimage is resorting to the God in one's own heart!

It is necessary to state here another important doctrine of Hinduism, that of avatāra or incarnation of God in the human, or even non-human, form. As per this doctrine, God incarnates himself on this earth whenever dharma declines and adharma (unrighteousness) is on the ascendent, to restore the balance. This he may do by punishing or destroying the wicked and protecting the good through whom alone dharma can survive and thrive. For God incarnating himself thus, there are no limitations of time or place or number.

Now a word about the maṭhas or religious institutions. There are innumerable of them all over India (and even in foreign countries) catering to the spiritual needs of their flock.
pontiffs of these institutions have kept alive the spirit of their religion and culture through their lives and propaganda. Some of them like the Maṭhas established by Śaṅkara (A.D. 788-820) have a history spread over several centuries.

6 The Society

In spite of constant invasions from outside or battles among the various rulers inside, the Hindu society has successfully maintained remarkable stability, both at the family level and at the social level. This is not a little due to the puruṣārtha principle, the varṇa system and the āśrama scheme of life. Whenever they have been understood rightly and implemented properly, they have acted as a bulwark against the unsettling conditions or factors.

The puruṣārthas (ends to be striven for in life) are four: dharma (righteousness), artha (wealth), kāma (desires) and mokṣa (liberation).

Hinduism permits the acquisition of wealth and the enjoyment of the legitimate pleasures of life. But they should always be within the perimeters of dharma, the greatest good of the greatest number. Since the enjoyment of the pleasures of the flesh can never give satiation or ultimate satisfaction, the human being-if he has been trained properly in the true values of life-will gradually develop spiritual aspirations and strive for mokṣa, freedom from transmigratory existence.

For the successful implementation of this, the āśrama scheme of life gives it a concrete shape. The varṇa system offers it an organisational structure to work it out.

The four āśramas are: brahmacarya (student-hood), gārhasthya (state of a householder), vānaprastha (life of a forest recluse) and saṁnyāsa (monastic life).

Brahmacarya, the first stage, is the period of education and training, usually spread over twelve years from the age of seven. Gārhasthya is the married state when the person is expected to raise a family and discharge his ṛnas or debts to the gods, the forefathers and the society. Being the sole earning member, the householder is the kingpin of the entire social structure. When the householder attains the age of 50 or 55, he is expected to retire into the forest for a life of contemplation, after handing over his responsibilities to his eldest son. Around the age of 60 he is to renounce everything and take to the life of a parivrājaka (peripatetic monk), devoting the entire time for spiritual pursuits.

The pursuit of the four puruṣārthas by the individual needs the security of a proper social set-up. This is provided by the varṇa system. In the early Vedic society, there seems to have been a natural division of labour based more on the inborn abilities and propensities. Those of the intellectual type, who followed the principle of simple living and high thinking, took upon themselves the task of acquisition and distribution of knowledge and wisdom. They were called ‘brāhmaṇas.’ Those who were physically strong and tough chose to dedicate their life for protecting the society from external aggression and maintain internal law and order. They took to arms and became the ‘kṣattriyas’. A large majority of people engaged themselves
in economic pursuits, in the acquisition and distribution of wealth and goods. They were known as the ‘vaiśyas’. The rest contented themselves in supplying manual labour for all the other three sections. They were designated as the ‘śūdras.’

As the society grew in size and complexity, the varṇa system was gradually metamorphosed into the jāti system or the caste system since it was easier and more natural for a person to adopt the calling of the forefathers than seek a new one. Heredity, thus, became a working principle.

The very fact that the caste system has survived for millennia shows that there must be something worthwhile and useful in it. Any person born in a particular caste feels a sense of belonging to that group of society which gives him a sense of psychological security. It also helps him to learn the hereditary trade natural to his caste and practise it without unhealthy competition. Endogamous marriage system unites the members of the caste into a well-knit group who can come to one another’s rescue in times of need.

Allied to the caste system is the problem-call it a blot-of untouchability. What started originally as temporary segregation of persons due to certain biological or ritual conditions, or, permanent segregation due to reasons of public health and sanitation-as in the case of those engaged in certain abominable professions-became a lasting feature and was gradually extended to more sections of the community, to the detriment of the society as a whole. This development has nothing to do with Hinduism as such, but only due to the inborn weaknesses and prejudices of human beings in general. Such prejudices have existed in all societies throughout the history of mankind.

Here, we can dilate a little, on the status and condition of women in India. During the Vedic age they were given a high place in the society. The mention of women sages like Vāc, Ambhrṇī, Romaśā and Gārgī in the Vedic lore corroborates this view. Women could undergo the upanayana sacrament and pursue Vedic studies. Those who chose this path were called ‘brahmavādinīs.’ The others who did not pursue this path but chose to enter into the married life straight-away, were called ‘sadyovadhūs.’ Co-education seems to have existed in the earlier period. Kṣattriya ladies got training in the use of arms and other martial arts. Both kanyāvivāha (marriage of a pre-puberty girl arranged by her parents) and prauḍhavivāha (marriage after attaining puberty) were prevalent. Under certain circumstances, the girl had the freedom to choose her husband.

The wife known as ‘gṛhiṇī’ was considered as ‘half’ of the husband and constituted the real ‘gṛha’ or home. She was called ‘sāmrājñī’ (the queen or the mistress of the home) and had an equal share in the performance of religious rites.

Divorce and remarriage of women were allowed under very special conditions.

Shaving of the hair and wearing red saries by the widows or their committing sahagamana (dying on the funeral pyre of their dead husbands) was never compulsory. On the other hand, the elders in the society had always tried to prevent sahagamana. The former
custom seems to have been confined to a small section of the brāhmaṇas, that too in South India. The idea, perhaps, was that their life should be similar to that of the saṁnyāsins.

It is interesting to note that veśyās (prostitutes) were allowed to make a living, in the society, but were regulated by a code of conduct specially made for them!

The devadāsī-system (devadāsī = a girl or a woman `married' to the God in a temple and expected to spend her life as his servant-maid) seems to be a later development.

7 The Way of Life

Hinduism is sometimes dubbed as `a way of life', and not a religion. It is better to have a way of life that helps one to elevate oneself and be useful to the society, than have a religion that makes an individual dogmatic and the society anti other societies!

Actually Hinduism is a comprehensive system that incorporates in itself all aspects of human life: philosophy, religion, ethics, all facets of culture including the various arts, sciences and literature.

If life has to flow smoothly, it must have a smooth way to course through. And, Hinduism has provided this through the principle of sāmānya-dharmas (ethical values common to all) and the institution of saṁskāras (sacraments). The sāmānya-dharmas train a person to tune his life to be in harmony with the society whereas the saṁskāras prepare him to refine his own life.

The sāmānya-dharmas are: ahiṁsā (non-violence), satya (speaking the truth and keeping up one's word), asteya (non-stealing), dayā (compassion), titikṣā (forbearance), vinaya (humility), indriyanigraha (restraining the senses, self-control), śānti (keeping the mind at peace), śauca (purity of body), tapas (austerity) and bhakti (devotion to God).

The saṁskāras, which exercise a subtle purifying and refining effect on the psychic personality, are sixteen. However, only five are in vogue even today and may, therefore, be considered as important. They are: jātakarma, nāmakaraṇa, annaprāśana, upanayana, vivāha and antyeṣṭi.

Jātakarma, performed as soon as the baby is born, is aimed at giving it a long life, good health and intelligence.

Nāmakaraṇa is the ceremonial act of naming the baby, generally performed on the 10th or the 12th day after birth. The name chosen is usually that of a god or a goddess or a saint.

Annaprāśana is feeding the child for the first time with solid food, normally in the seventh month. The food should have been consecrated by ceremonially offering it to the family deity.
With upanayana begins a period of Vedic studies and spiritual discipline. It indicates a second-spiritual-birth. Hence the name 'dvija' (twice-born) for anyone who has undergone this sacrament. Initiation into the Gāyatrī mantra and investiture with the yajñopavīta (sacred thread) are the main items of this rite. The Gayatrīmantra is a universal prayer whereas the yajñopavīta is a symbol which indicates to the boy that his life henceforward is dedicated for the good of the society.

Vivāha or marriage is considered cardinal among all the sacraments. Since the gṛhastha (the householder) is the supporter of the other three āśramas, his role has been eulogised highly. Kanyādāna (gifting of the bride to the groom by the father of the girl) and saptapadī (walking seven steps together) are the most important parts of this sacrament.

Antyeṣṭi (the last sacrifice) is the last of the sacraments. It is the consigning of the body of the dead person to the fire after death. This is performed by the relatives of the deceased. The ashes are generally disposed off in the waters of a river or sea and obsequial rites-known as śrāddha-performed as directed by the scriptures.

Out of these saṁskāras, nāmakaraṇa, vivāha and antyeṣṭi are common to all sections of the Hindu society, though there may be variations in details.

8 The Culture

As stated in the foregoing pages, though Hinduism posits mokṣa or emancipation as the final goal of life, it does not advocate the neglect of mundane life. Keeping this in mind, the Hindu scriptures categorise vidyā or knowledge into two groups: parā-vidyā (spiritual wisdom) and aparā-vidyā (secular sciences).

Whereas the former fulfils the ultimate purpose of life, the latter embellishes life here and now. Hence both are needed by all.

The aparā-vidyā has a large number of branches. The enumeration of these rises sometimes to 64! These arts, crafts and sciences help the human beings not only to beautify or refine their physique but also sharpen their intellects and add to their external comforts.

A few of them may be listed here: vocal and instrumental music, dance and drama, making of flower-garlands, colouring of cloth, decorating one's body, decoration of the house, water-sports, hair-dressing, culinary arts, preparation of musical instruments, hand-writing, drawing and painting, wood-work, metal filigree work, making of ornaments of gold and precious stones, gardening, various types of physical exercises and feats and so on.

Apart from these there were several other fields in which great progress had been made by the ancient and medieval Hindus. Some of them were: medicine and surgery, veterinary sciences, military sciences including the building of warships, chemical sciences including alchemy, astronomy and astrology, mining and metallurgy, and many others.
One characteristic feature of the basic works all these sciences is that they claim their origin from God himself and that their propagation is for the benefit of the world as a whole!

That Hindu religion, philosophy, mythology and culture had spread to several parts of the world is now an established fact of history.

9 The Survival Instinct

‘Survival of the fittest’ is now a well-known adage. Hindu religion and society have proved it over the millennia beyond all doubt.

However, this ‘fitness’ in the case of Hinduism is not just biological. It is psychological and cultural, firmly based on the spiritual. History is replete with instances of many an ancient civilisation and culture disappearing totally, though they were powerful and hence ‘fit’ in the darwinian sense!

The secret of this survival instinct is the scientific spirit that Hinduism has exhibited throughout its history. Every time there was an upheaval, either from within or from without, it has responded vigorously, intelligently and prudently. It is this inherent vitality that is at the root of all the reform movements in Hinduism.

The sages of the Upanishadic age, were the forerunners of all the reform movements. The religion of the Ṛgveda which was simple and elegant, had, by the period of the Brāhmaṇas, deteriorated into a bewildering maze of sacrifices, which the common people could not understand, let alone perform. So, these sages rejected them and advocated meditation on and knowledge of the ātman as the essence of our religion and thus saved it.

Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa heralded the second reform movement. He set at rest all disputes regarding the relative superiority of jñāna, karma or bhakti over one another and brought about a balance and harmony among these various forms of spiritual disciplines. His greatest contribution, however, is his unambiguous declaration that one must perform one's duty for duty's sake and contribute to the social well-being. His continuously active life itself is a glorious demonstration of his philosophy.

The third reform movement was initiated by Mahāvīra and Buddha who banished dry and useless logic from the field of religion and substituted it with simple, but life-giving, moral and ethical principles which can give peace and joy here and now.

However, when in course of time, their teachings were misunderstood and misapplied, resulting in the desertion of Vedic religion by large numbers, Śaṅkarācārya appeared on the scene to resuscitate and re-establish it. His was the fourth reform movement.

Then came a series of invasions by savage tribes, the impact of which was felt both at the social and at the religious levels. It was at this most critical period of our history that a
series of great religious and spiritual leaders like Rāmānuja, Madhva, Vallabha, Caitanya, Śaṅkaradeva, Basava, Ramānanda, Kabir, Tulasīdās, Mīrā, Tukārām, Purandaradāsa and scores of others descended on our soil and protected our religion, culture and society from the onslaughts of these alien hordes. But for these great and noble souls who initiated the Bhakti Movements, Hinduism might have all but disappeared from its own land. This was the fifth reform movement.

When we lost our freedom to the British during the nineteenth century, a different kind of problem was created by the planned import of cultural and religious ideas from the West. As a reaction to this came the sixth reform movement aiming at Hindu renaissance. Rājā Rammohan Roy, Svāmi Dayānanda Sarasvatī, Mahādeva Govinda Rānade, Annie Besant, Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahaṁsa and Svāmi Vivekānanda were the important leaders of this movement. As a result of their ceaseless, and even aggressive efforts, Sanātana Dharma, not only recovered its balance, but made inroads into the bastions of Western culture and civilization. The movement has gained further strength through the lives and work of Ramaṇa Maharṣi, Śrī Aurobindo and a series of spirituo-cultural organizations.

10 In the Modern Context

THE MALADIES

A society can progress well only when it stands on a firm base, on a sound, time-tested, value system.

Fortunately, the religion of the Hindus has such a value system, which has weathered many a storm and has stood the test of time!

But, unfortunately, the Hindu society, especially during the recent past, has not risen to the heights necessary to deserve such a religion!

During its epic journey through the centuries, the Hindu society has encountered many problems and difficulties. Some of these still continue, may be in a modified form, may be in an acute form too. For instance, the brāhmaṇa-priests do not wield that influence which they exercised centuries ago though they still have their say in temples and places of pilgrimage. But caste animosities including the practice of untouchability, especially in rural India, are still rampant. Too much emphasis on individual mukti or liberation has contributed to a loosening of the social bonds.

The various kings who ruled different parts of this country with the help of their mercenary armies and battled with other kings to fulfil their personal ambitions prevented the rise of Indian nationalism.

The modern period, especially after political independence, has engendered its own problems, thanks to the quantum jump in the modes of transportation and means of communication. Infatuation with the glamour of the Western nations has resulted in aping their
customs and manners without imbibing the better side of their culture. The tragedy is that this has often been done at the cost of the old and time-tested values. Consequently, God has been replaced by mammon! Other effects of this worship of the mammon, especially since both the husband and the wife are working, are the loosening of the family bonds and the consequent damage to the psyche of the children in the family. Neglect of the aged is another aspect of the same problem.

Another factor which is engaging the attention of the thinking sections of the Hindu society is—unfortunately—the aggressive postures adopted by some religions of Semitic origin vis-à-vis Hinduism and Hindu society. The self-righteous attitude of the representatives of these religions and their refusal to have an honest dialogue with the Hindu leaders is creating problems and tensions which can easily be avoided once the real meaning of the word ‘conversion’ is understood. For a Hindu, conversion is spiritual, a change from the brute level to the human level and ultimately to the divine level. If conversion is the result of proselytization which very often uproots a person's cultural and national moorings nurtured over generations and if such converted persons become anti-national and rebellious, no society worth the name can tolerate it. Unfortunately, it is exactly this that is happening, not only in India but also in many other—especially the underdeveloped—countries.

The Hindu society being an open society and a soft target for the aggressive propagators of these religions, is yet to learn and evolve an effective antidote, to protect itself from their machinations.

THE REMEDIES

The remedy for a weakness is not brooding over that weakness but meditating upon the strength that can effectively offset it.

Almost all the maladies of the Hindu society stated earlier, are the results of weakness, whether physical or intellectual or moral or spiritual.

First and foremost, the Hindus should develop ‘muscles of iron and nerves of steel’ (as Svámi Vivekānanda put it). This will help them too overcome their fear-psychosis and will engender a spirit of adventure.

They should make an earnest study of the basics of their religion and develop a righteous pride in belonging to such a great religion. Hindu religious institutions and leaders should take the trouble of producing simple and easily understandable literature for the benefit of the common masses. They should also utilize the modern methods of mass communication for this purpose.

Serious efforts should be made to strengthen the internal bonds in the family system. Genuine unselfish love for one another, respect for the elders, consideration for the aged, the infirm and the sick, tenderness towards the young ones and giving them a sense of security, decent and dignified behaviour towards the women—these are the traits badly needed to be cultivated in every home.
The more advanced sections of the society whether in respect of education or culture or wealth, should make special efforts to bring the backward sections also to the same level of progress they themselves have achieved. They must develop the attitude that the whole society is like a family and that it is their duty to help others even as the elders in a family help the youngsters with affection. Otherwise, there is the grim prospect of the weaker sections, exploited and oppressed over the centuries, leaving the Hindu society for good. The responsibility for this would then squarely rest on the shoulders of the advanced sections!

Those who had left the Hindu fold, either due to ignorance or illtreatment, should be welcomed back into the fold with love, and given due recognition, status and protection.

Though the caste system has worked well over several centuries, imparting stability to the Hindu society, in modern India it is leading to many unhealthy trends such as casteism at the cost of Hinduism.

Since the constitution of free India gives full freedom to everyone to choose any profession or any way of life within the frame-work of the law of the land, the very basis of the old caste system has been knocked off. Hence, those who preach or practise or nurture casteism should be considered as enemies of Hinduism and the Hindu society.

If persons of a particular caste (based on birth) want to preserve their traditions, they are free to do so within their group. But, outside, they must subscribe to and practise the general principles of Hinduism and Hindu consciousness.

There is an urgent need to give a new look to the Hindu society, to make it more homogeneous, or at least, more united. In this context, evolving a few simple saṁskāras common to all the Hindus, which can make every Hindu feel he is a Hindu and belongs to a great brotherhood, is a must. Heads of the various maṭhas (monasteries), Hindu religious sects and denominations should put their heads together in this regard.

Other programmes which may help in `Hinduising' the Hindus (if such a word can be used) are: regularly visiting temples once every week, group bhajans or prayers, conducting religious sacraments like upanayana or marriage or rituals like Satyanārāyaṇa-pūjās for large groups either in temples or dharmaśālās, meaningful celebrations of Hindu festivals with large public participation avoiding the irreverent aberrations as seen sometimes in the religious processions as those of Gaṇapati or Durgā, more vigorous religious propaganda using all the modern means of communication and so on.

11 Epilogue

Hinduism appears to many as a jigsaw puzzle. But, if one knows where to put the pieces, not only is the puzzle easily solved, but also gives rise to a beautiful picture.

Hinduism is a **religion** because: It accepts the existence of God and posits him as the
final goal or our life. It places before us many paths that suit persons of different temperaments, but leading to the same beatific experience of that God.

   It gives the moral and ethical disciplines that help a human being to purify himself and become fit for the pursuit of God.

   It provides enough scope and opportunity for its adherents to get emotional satisfaction through its rituals and festivals.

   It recognises the shortcomings of the powers of the human intellect in matters spiritual and experiential, and hence gives due recognition to the revealed word of God, the Vedas.

   Following the maxim that the same cap cannot fit everybody, it gives different modes and methods of sādhanās or spiritual disciplines to aspirants of different temperaments.

   It makes the life of even a tyro or an average votary colourful and joyful through its series of festivals and sacred days, every one of which has a solid philosophical basis too, capable of elevating the person spiritually.

Hinduism is a **philosophy** because: It has given, through a rational analysis and in a convincing manner, a knowledge about the ultimate truths behind man and the universe, as also the final goal and the path.

   It has given freedom of thinking and expression to all schools and sub-schools of thought, though they may not agree among themselves. Differences of opinions are respected whereas the spiritual seekers are given the full liberty to opt for any one of them.

Hinduism is a **culture** because:

   It encourages all aspects of culture like music, dancing, drawing, sculpturing, and other arts, but as reflecting the glory of the divine and also as aids to spiritual evolution, if the right attitude is adopted.

Hinduism is **both ancient and modern**, ancient in its eternal value-system, but modern in that it is always open to new ideas and everready to replenish its treasure-house of knowledge, wisdom and virtues.

Hinduism has **survived** the vicissitudes of history and onslaughts of time, exactly because of the various factors mentioned above.

   The least that such a religion deserves is a sympathetic study of its tenets that will go a long way in understanding it.
List of Books for Further Study

1. Aspects of Hinduism
2. Facets of Hinduism
3. Hinduism through Questions and Answers
   all by Swami Harshananda
4. Hinduism
   by Swami Vivekananda
5. The Essentials of Hinduism
   by Swami Bhaskarananda
6. Hinduism (Its meaning for the liberation of the spirit)
   by Swami Nikhilananda
7. Hinduism at a Glance
   by Swami Nirvedananda