

***GANDHIAN HINDUISM***

**By Krishnan Nandela**

**Abstract**

Exclusive religious nationalism that is mired in superstitions and rituals is detrimental to the human society in general and the Indian society in particular. It is in this context that I want to explore the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi on the 'Essence of Hinduism' so that a new template of Hinduism or Gandhian Hinduism as I may like to call may emerge and remove the shackles of Hinduism that now appears to be perverted and gaining currency in the hands of the rightists in the country.

In a world that is globalizing in terms of dissipating national, regional and religious identities, religion and religious nationalism has assumed center-stage in the socio-political discourse of nation-states particularly India and elsewhere. It is a fact that since globalization happened in India in the early 1990s, the ascent of religion and religious nationalism also began with the rise of right-wing political parties and associations who espoused the cause of religion in their narrow worldview. Majority theocratic nationalism was quickly absorbed and followed by a significant number of people in India and the rise of right wing political formations and their affiliates around the country is a strong evidence of the magnetic power of religion and religious nationalism. The average Indian appeared to have lost his or her ascribed identity and in the absence of achieved identity, both men and women seems to have fallen prey to the exhortations of a perverted political leadership whose fundamental aim was to capture political power by misusing religion and the religious sentiments of the people.

There has been no religious renaissance in India since independence. Secular values were taught in our educational institutions and superstitions were sought to be wiped out. However, the program of secularization of our polity and freeing religion from superstitions was not strong enough. As a result, a majority people who will be scientific in temperament and modern in

outlook failed to emerge in the last seven decades and more since independence. In Gandhi's writings and writings particularly on Hinduism, I found the possibility of a fairly well reasoned religion known as Hinduism. Since Gandhi's Hinduism is at a great variance as compared to popular Hinduism, I may like to call it Gandhian Hinduism or simply Gandhism.

## **Prologue**

Exclusive religious nationalism that is mired in superstitions and rituals is detrimental to the human society in general and the Indian society in particular. It is in this context that I want to explore the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi on the 'Essence of Hinduism' so that a new template of Hinduism or Gandhian Hinduism as I may like to call may emerge and remove the shackles of Hinduism that now appears to be perverted and gaining currency in the hands of the rightists in the country.

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program of secularization of our polity and freeing religion from superstitions was not strong enough. As a result, a majority people who will be scientific in temperament and modern in outlook failed to emerge in the last seven decades and more since independence. In Gandhi's writings and writings particularly on Hinduism, I found the possibility of a fairly well reasoned religion known as Hinduism. Since Gandhi's Hinduism is at a great variance as compared to popular Hinduism, I may like to call it Gandhian Hinduism or simply Gandhism.

### **Origin of Hinduism**

The word 'Hindu' do not occur in the ancient Indian texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas and the Shastras or in any of the written records before the invasion of Alexander. Gandhi says that the Greeks described the inhabitants living to the east of the Sindhu river as Hindus because the letter 'S' was absent in the Greek alphabets and hence 'S' became 'H' in Greek. The religious practices followed by the people of Indus came to be known as Hinduism. The name 'Hindu' as a religious identity of a person and the term 'Hinduism' are therefore of foreign origin. **Asko Parpola**, an Indologist, working in the University of Helsinki writes in his book '*The Roots of Hinduism*' that the roots of the word 'Hindu' goes back to 515 BCE when the Persian king Darius annexed the Indus valley to his empire. Sindhu the Sanskrit name of the Indus River and its southern province, now known as Sindh, became Hindu in the Persian language. The Ionian Greeks serving King Darius did not pronounce the word correctly and in the Greek language Persian Hindu became Indos (Latin Indus) and its surrounding country became India. When the Persian speaking Mughals conquered northern India in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, they called the country Hindustan and its people Hindu. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the British also used the word 'Hindu' or 'Hindoo' to describe the people living in the subcontinent. Later, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the anti-colonialists adopted the term 'Hindu' to distinguish themselves from Muslims. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Hindu became the common name for all Indians who were not Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, Parsees etc. Thus Hindu became an exclusive term to describe one who practices some form of Hinduism. VD Savarkar used the word 'hindutva' wherein 'tva' refers to 'the quality of being a Hindu' in his book '*Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* (1938) which

was first published under a pseudonym in 1923. An East India Company merchant and evangelical Christian, Charles Grant is known to have used the term 'Hindooism' in 1787. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Hinduism became the common name for the native religion(s) of India excluding Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Indians having objection to a foreign term use the Sanskrit expression 'sanatana dharma' or 'eternal law or truth'. However, the term 'sanatana dharma' has no basis in any of the ancient religious texts. (Asko Parpola, 'The Roots of Hinduism' OUP 2015, p.3).

Gandhi says; Hinduism is the most tolerant religion and the evidence of tolerance lies in the acceptance and peaceful coexistence of a variety of religions such as Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Islam which set their feet on the Indian soil much later in the day. Hinduism known to Gandhi is tolerant and inclusive. Gandhi quotes Tulsidas who says that "*The root of religion is embedded in mercy whereas egotism is rooted in the love of the body. Mercy should not be abandoned even though the body perishes*". Gandhi believed that the essential quality of a religion is **mercifulness** and that Hinduism as a religion is merciful to the followers of other ways of life as distinct from Hinduism as a way of life. ('The Essence of Hinduism', p.1 and Harijan, 30.11.47, p.446).

### **Who is a Hindu?**

Gandhi considered himself as a Sanatani (classical) Hindu for his belief in the Vedas, Upanishads, the Puranas and the writings of holy reformers. Gandhi added a caveat to his belief when he said, "not everything that goes in the name of Shastras needs to be believed as authentic". In his acceptance of the ancient texts, Gandhi applied the litmus test of the fundamental principles of morality and said that he rejected everything that comes with religion which contradicts the fundamental principles of morality. As a Sanatani Hindu, Gandhi was not obliged to accept the dogmatic interpretations of the texts by the pundits. As long as the general Hindu society accepts him as a Sanatani Hindu, Gandhi said, he shall remain so. One who believes in God, immortality of the soul, transmigration of the soul, the law of Karma and

Moksha and who tries to practice truth and ahimsa (non-violence) in everyday life, practices cow-protection and acts according to the law of Varna-ashrama is a Hindu according to Gandhi. (Young India, 14.10.26, p.356 & 'The Essence of Hinduism' p.3).

Gandhi believed that Hinduism entails a relentless pursuit of truth because truth is God. A person may not believe in God and still be a Hindu if he or she pursues truth through non-violent means. (Young India, 24.4.24, p.136). There may appear a small contradiction in the statements made by Gandhi with reference to belief in God as an essential qualification to be known as a Hindu in the Young India of 1926 and 1924. Gandhi clarified the contradiction by saying that the first definition of a Hindu was a general definition and that the second one was an exhaustive definition. Further, absence of belief in God itself does not disqualify a Hindu from being a Hindu. (Young India, 28.10.26, p.372).

Truth and non-violence are cardinal principles. Their practice leads to an orderly society. Belief in God need not be a qualification to be a Hindu and for that matter to be of any religious denomination. You can be a Muslim without the belief in Allah, a Christian without the belief in God and a Hindu without the belief in Bhagwan or Ishwar. There is no way that the existence of 'soul' can be verified and therefore its immortality or its ability to transmigrate from one body to the other and its final liberation from birth and death that is Moksha. The law of Karma is essentially fatalistic and that is a blemish which must be removed or sanitized. Karma or duty(ies) must be identified and one of the cardinal duties of a Hindu person or any person should be to make efforts to climb the hierarchy of Varnas. Varnas or occupations should be horizontally and vertically mobile and there should be no restrictions whatsoever on the mobility of varnas. Hindus need not be tied to cow protection. Animal protection should be discriminatory and utilitarian for one consumer becomes consumption for the other. However, the human being should be compassionate towards all creatures and practice non-violence towards animals to the extent possible. A big animal like a cow or a buffalo is used for its milk during its reproductive span. It is inhuman and barbaric to abandon or kill an animal which has

served the humanity. Upon the death of the animal, there should not be any restriction on the use of animal hides for they are used as an input in the leather industry.

Gandhi is widely criticized as a proponent of the Varna-ashrama system. Yes, Gandhi was a proponent of the Varna system and belief in the varna-ashrama system was a cardinal qualification to be a Hindu according to Gandhi. However, Gandhi's Varna system had internal flexibility and the varnas were mutually tradable in the Hindu society. In Gandhi's Varna system, a shudra must perform his hereditary duty and if he is capable of performing priestly duties he must perform them without sacrificing or rejecting his ancestral duties. This flexibility is true for all the varnas in Gandhi's scheme of the Varnashrama system. A brahmin was free to pick up arms and learn the techniques of warfare or perform the duties of a shudra or for that matter perform the duties of a vaishya but not without performing his ancestral priestly duties. For Gandhi, the varna system was not hierarchical. All the four varnas were equal in status and functional to the society. The four varnas were placed horizontally and mutually replaceable. However, in reality the varna system was hierarchical and there were religious and social disabilities imposed on all the varnas. Failing to follow the rules of social intercourse invited harsh and inhuman punishment in proportion to the status of the varna in the four fold division of the society. Gandhi at a personal level rejected anything that is not appealing to his sense of justice or anything that is unreasonable. To Gandhi, the rigid varna system and the social and religious disabilities imposed by Manusmriti were not acceptable. Gandhi's varnashrama was open to all and therefore the criticism is not valid. The Varnashrama system came into existence in the early Vedic age (2500 BCE to 1500 BCE). It consists of the four Varnas (occupations): Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and the Shudra and the four ashramas or the four stages of life each having 25 years, beginning with the Brahmacharya Ashram in which a person is expected to be celibate and acquire skills and education to be employable. It is followed by the Grihasthram in which a person acquires a house, gets married and begets children. On completion of 50<sup>th</sup> year of life, a person is expected to enter the Vanaprasthahram or live in the forests for the next 25 years. A period during which, a person is expected to meditate and

acquire knowledge and wisdom. The last 25 years of life are to be spent in Sanyasahram. This is the stage in the life of a person where he or she becomes a Sanyasin or a person who has renounced everything and lives the life of a mendicant. The Sanyasin is expected to deliver the knowledge and wisdom acquired to the people. In its original form, there was both vertical and horizontal mobility in the system. It was the Indian version of division of labor and division of life in terms of duties. The Varna-system was akin to the Class system of today. However, the system became closed and rigid and transformed into Caste system during the later Vedic age (1500 BCE to 500 ACE), a period during which Manusmiriti or Manavadharmashastra was written.

KP Shankaran in an article titled ‘Gandhi and the Varna Question’, Indian Express dated 25<sup>th</sup> February 2019 stated that Gandhi never practiced Varna dharma and his ashrams were free from Varna dharma (free from the rigid caste based Varna dharma). Gandhi’s concept of swaraj was also free from religion and caste says Shankaran. However, Gandhi constantly defended the Varnashrama system (as explained earlier) which was non-hierarchical and based on the principle “Let us not want to be what everyone else cannot be”, a principle that was the epitome of Anasakti yoga or non-attachment with the consequences of one’s actions. The philosophy of Anasakti yoga is embodied in the Bhagwad Gita. The Mahatma was a follower and an advocate of the philosophy of Anasakti yoga. Gandhi believed that one should not aspire for a profession, instead practice what one is ordained to practice according to the tradition into which one is born. Untouchability as an abhorrent practice which was a part of the degenerated Varna system had no basis either in the Bhagwad Gita or the other scriptures. Gandhi had rejected the practice of untouchability and went on to rechristen the erstwhile untouchables as ‘Harijan’ or people of the God. By 1933, Gandhi’s views on the Varna system underwent a change for the better. Gandhi accepted the argument that birth alone cannot determine the Varna of a person and quotes the words of Yuddhistira in the Vanaparva of Mahabharata: *“Truth, charity, forgiveness, good conduct, gentleness, austerity and mercy, where these are seen, O King of the Serpents, there is a Brahmin. If these marks exist in a Shudra and are not in a Dvija, the Shudra is not a*

*Shudra, nor the Brahmin a Brahmin.*” Gandhi reformed his belief in the Varna system by saying that “Mere birth counts for nothing. A person must show corresponding works and character to establish his claim by birth.” However, the Mahabharata is not consistent on the merit-basis of varnas. In the ‘Draupadi-swayamwar’ episode, Karna was not allowed to participate due to his low place on the Varna hierarchy. The same is true of Eklavya, whose art of archery knew no bounds. Dronacharya, the teacher of the Pandavas was unjust in asking for the thumb finger of Eklavya in the form of Guru-dakshina or payment for the services of a teacher when he actually taught nothing to Eklavya. The Mahabharata’s ambivalence with regard to the Varna system proves the fact that the ancient Indian society recognized only the ascribed status and largely ignored the achieved status of a person who is born low on the hierarchy.

The caste system as it stands today is undoubtedly a discredited and an abhorrent system. It continues to be practiced in an abhorrent manner with impunity and immunity in certain parts of the country and subtly in all walks of Indian life, save exceptions. The Varna-ashrama system in its original form was a piece of classical genius of the yore. People in India need to be shorn off the caste system. The space for caste in identity documents needs to be abrogated and the use of surnames needs to be banished to remove all vestigial traces of the despicable system. A person should only be identified with his/her name followed by mother’s and the father’s name. Affirmative action by the government and non-government agencies should be based on objective criteria such as income which is a quantitative criterion. One may develop qualitative criteria to determine the social backwardness of a person. However, caste should not find a place in the list of such criteria.

### **The two aspects of Hinduism**

Gandhi distinguished between historical Hinduism and the Hinduism of the Gita. Historical Hinduism is characterized by untouchability, superstitious worship of stocks and stones, animal sacrifice etc. The Hinduism of the Gita, the Upanishads and Patanjali’s Yogasutras constitutes the pinnacle of non-violence and oneness of all creation, pure worship of one immanent,

formless and imperishable God. Gandhi believed that non-violence or ahimsa was the glorious aspect of Hinduism and it is to be followed by one and all and not only by the Sanyasis. (Harijan, 08.12.46, p. 432 and 'The Essence of Hinduism', p.4). The Bhagwad Gita appears in the Bhisma Parva of the Mahabharata (chapters 23 – 40). Krishna, born Kshatriya provides counsel to Arjuna another kshatriya. Krishna is also the incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The Mahabharata was not secular for the people of Mahabharata. It does not mean, 'Sarva-vyakti Sam-bhava'. It is discriminatory and the Bhagwad Gita is part of a discriminatory epic. Varna-ascription by birth is a blemish of the Hindu social hierarchy and unless this blemish is removed, it will be difficult to offer secularized Hindu texts to the Hindu people who were and are socially discriminated and marginalized. The blemishes of the Hindu religion need to be removed, historical and otherwise, before it is delivered to the people of India.

### **Hinduism is a dynamic religion**

Gandhi believed that Hinduism is subject to the laws of nature. The roots of Hinduism are one and inseparable and over the years it has developed many creeds or branches. However, these creeds or branches cannot be separated from the roots. Hinduism is based and not based on scriptures at the same time and it has multiple sources. The Gita is one such source which shows the way without influencing rituals and customs. Gandhi compares Hinduism with the Ganges which assumes provincial character in the regions in which she flows. Gandhi says that custom and rituals do not constitute religion. The classical texts of Hinduism such as the Shastras, Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis, Puranas and the Itihasas came up in different points of time and hence it can be justly said that Hinduism is not a stagnant but a dynamic religion. Each of these texts came out in response to the challenges faced in their own times and hence they appear to be conflicting with each other. These texts do not lay down the eternal truths afresh but only show the way that these eternal truths were practiced during their times. A practice may be good in a given period of time. However, if people continue to practice in all times, they may become despondent and hopeless. Gandhi says that there is no sense in upholding or reviving the practice of animal sacrifice, dismembering of law breakers, polyandry, untouchability and child

marriages. Knowledge is boundless and truth is ever unfolding. By knowing the self, one may know the universe. The endless pursuit of truth is based on the practice of Yamas (cardinal virtues) and Niyamas (casual virtues). According to Yogashastra, the cardinal virtues are Ahimsa (non-violence), Satya (truth), Asteya (non-stealing), Brahmacharya (Celibacy), Aparigraha (non-possession) and the casual virtues being Shaucha (bodily purity), Santosha (contentment), Tapas (forbearance), Swadhyaya (study of scriptures) and Ishwara Pranidhana (resignation to the Will of God). The pursuit of truth is not possible without faith and devotion. However, faith and devotion should be used by the human being as tools in the pursuit of truth. A person therefore cannot be faithful to untruth or be devoted to untruth. Gandhi says that a Sanatani Hindu is one who can chant the Dwadashamantra from the Bhagvata (Om Namoh Bhagvate Vasudevaya) from the heart. Dwadasha means twelve stots (hymns) which are sung in the praise of Lord Vishnu.

Om' is an eternal, universal sound and is hailed as Shabdha Brahman, the ultimate principle of speech sound. It denotes the supreme spirit. 'Namoh' is a humble salutation. 'Bhagvate' is the supreme divinity, known generally as God. 'Va(a)sudevaya' literally means 'the son of Vasudeva' and refers to Lord Krishna, who was born the son of Vasudeva. 'Vasu' can also mean 'the one, who is the life force of all beings' and 'Devaya' is the Almighty. Hence 'Vasudevaya' can also mean 'the supreme divinity that lives in all lives.' The mantra can thus be elaborated to mean 'Oh Lord Krishna, the son of Vasudeva, the God who dwells in all beings, I bow down to you with all reverence and offer you my humble prayers.' Gandhi had earlier said that a Hindu need not believe in God and in consonance with that statement, one may or may not chant the mantra and yet be a Sanatani Hindu.

### **Contribution of Hinduism to human civilization**

Gandhi believed that Varna-ashrama dharma was a unique contribution of Hinduism to the world. Hinduism has saved the Hindus from *bhaya* or fear. Gandhi distinguishes everyday Hinduism from pure Hinduism. Everyday Hinduism is a parody of pure Hinduism. The physical

body of the human being is a limitation of the soul that resides in. Spiritualism ingrained in Hinduism helped the Hindu way of life to outlast all other civilizations born on earth. The Babylonian, the Syrian, the Persian and the Egyptian civilizations were long buried in history and the Hindu civilization survived because it is rooted in spiritualism. Gandhi believed that materialistic civilizations have a short shelf life and spiritual civilizations are lasting as long as humanity continues to prosper on earth. (Young India, 24.11.27, p.396 and 'The Essence of Hinduism', ps. 7-9).

Gandhi believed that while being faithful to one's own religion, one has to be watchful of the shortcomings and act to remove the limitations. At the same time, one must not consider other religions as inferior or superior to one's own. Rather, one should look at the beauties (goodness) in other religions and incorporate them in one's own. Gandhi therefore believed religion must evolve and be dynamic. An evolving religion cannot remain stagnant, it will always give and take from others all that is good in itself and all that is good in others. (Harijan, 12.8.33, p. 4 and 'The Essence of Hinduism', p.10).

Gandhi believed that the chief value of Hinduism is that it holds all life as one i.e. all life coming from one universal source. The source may have different names such as Allah, God or Parmeshwara but the source is one. Gandhi believed that God is one and may have many names as enunciated in a Hindu scripture called Vishnusahasranama or the thousand names of Vishnu (God). One may therefore go on to give many more names as long as God remains one and hence God can be nameless too.

Gandhi believed that salvation is not the private preserve of human beings alone and that other creatures are also capable to achieve salvation and hence the human being is not the creator or the lord. The human being is therefore just one form of life. The ideal of salvation sets a limit to human wants and therefore to exploitation of resources. Salvation is the anti-thesis of 'unlimited human wants'. Gandhi believed that Hinduism does not believe in indulgence and multiplication

of wants. For him, the mindless pursuit of material wants will only prevent the union of human beings with the Universal Self. (Harijan, 26.12.36, p.364 and TEH, p.11).

The Vedas, Upanishads, Smritis, Puranas and the epics are the Hindu scriptures and this ocean of scriptures is in a state of everlasting swell as generations and ages go by, they add a few more drops to this ocean. The list of scriptures therefore becomes infinite. Anything that is not appealing to reason must be rejected for unreason cannot be a part of the scriptures, believed Gandhi. The Smritis contain much that cannot be accepted as the word of God and those ideas are not authentic. The Smritis are concerned with eternal truths and must appeal to any conscience. Nothing can be accepted as the word of God which cannot be tested by reason. Even the most sanitized version of the scriptures cannot escape interpretation. However, Gandhi does not rely on the interpretation by learned men and women but the experiences of saints and seers and their sayings. However, in the modern world there are no saints and seers in the classical sense of the term. Therefore, the scriptures can only be tested for their validity and utility – material and spiritual, by men and women of intellect and reason.

Gandhi believed that there is no relation between Hinduism and caste. Caste is a custom which has no basis in religion. Gandhi believed that caste is harmful to both spiritual and national growth. Varna and ashrama are not concerned with castes. Varna is the ancestral occupation which each one of us has to follow to earn our bread. Varna assigns duties and not rights. Gandhi believed that the Varna system of occupational distribution was functional to the society. The occupations were not hierarchical according to Gandhi and the fruits of labor were identical irrespective to the Varna or occupation followed by the person. Arrogation of a superior status by any of the Varnas over another is a denial of the law of Varna and the practice of untouchability is unconcerned with the law of Varna. Gandhi's God was one and formless and religion was the vehicle to spiritualism. Gandhi abhorred the despicable practices of degraded Hindus and believed that they do not represent the faith.

### **Gandhi's reply to the critiques of Hinduism**

Gandhi questioned as to how can a religion be devoid of merit and yet be practiced by the likes of Chaitanya, Dnyandev, Tukaram, Tiruvalluvar, Ramkrishna Paramahansa, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Maharshi Devendranath Tagore, Vivekananda and others. A religion must be judged by the best it has produced and that alone can be used as a standard to aspire to. (In reply to the indictment of Hinduism by Dr. Ambedkar in the annulled annual conference organized by the Jat-Pat-Todak Mandal of Lahore in May 1936).

In reply to a letter on the maladies of everyday Hinduism, Gandhi accepted the criticism that the many *maths* and their administration is a disgrace to Hinduism. The money received by these *maths* and temples do not return to the people in the form of service and this evil practice must be ended or mended.

One of the letters received by Gandhi has this to say: Hinduism as expounded by the likes of Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan and one that is practiced in the routine course of life is in sharp contrast to one another. There are millions in the country who go to bed on empty stomachs and these millions cannot be anxious to seek entry in the temples. The Church collects money from the rich and the poor are taken care of by providing free health and educational services. Religious worship is open to all denominations of Christians unlike the Hindus. The temples and *maths* do not provide any service to the poor, instead they use the money to promote superstition and oppress the poor. The heads of the *maths* live princely lives and when they move out of their *maths* in ornately decorated palanquins, cars, elephants, camels with a train of disciples, the villagers are left to exploitation by the threat of ostracism and excommunication from their castes for failing or refusing to contribute to the coffers of temples and *maths*. There are lawyers who collect dues from the followers real and otherwise and serve the interests of religious heads, swamis and gurus. The state of affairs in the Hindu society is worse than *popery* in its worst days. The money so collected is not properly accounted for and this machinery of exploitation is also supported by the so called intellectual leaders in the Hindu society. Are the Hindu gods so ravenous that they require such an annual collection with complete indifference to those who

give it? The letter asks Gandhi as to why the maladies of everyday Hinduism are left unquestioned.

Gandhi admitted to the grave limitations of daily Hinduism as pointed out in the aforesaid letter and said that many *maths* and their administration are a disgrace to Hinduism and efforts must be made to erase the disgrace. Gandhi also admitted to the humanitarian work done by the Christian mission. However, economic relief was necessary across the caste hierarchy. The Harijans or the depressed castes are afflicted by special disabilities and it is the duty of superior Hindus to unshackle them. Subliminal Hinduism has percolated down to the masses and the good part of the culture embodied in Indian villagers is comparable to any other villagers in the world. The travelogues of Hieun Tsang and others bears testimony to the fact that the Indian villagers conduct themselves with restraint and that their homes are decorated and these good aspects are due to the religion that has bound them together from times immemorial. Hindu reformers have successfully combated prejudice, superstitions and abuses. The poor are being provided with relief through free kitchens and medical services. The *maths* must be reformed and the revenue system must be overhauled and free primary schools must be established. Gandhi accuses the writer of the letter by casting aspersions on the services provided by the Christian mission as to having an agenda of religious conversion. Gandhi also questions as to why the Christian missions should receive non-Christian aid while they are pregnant with an aim that is repugnant to the non-Christian sentiment? (Harijan, 6/3/37, p.28 & TEH, p18).

### **The essence of Hinduism**

In the aftermath of temples being opened for the Harijans by the King of Travancore in the year 1936, Gandhi addressed many public meetings to explain the essence of Hinduism. In a speech at Quilon, Gandhi declared that he has found his key to confusion in Gayatri mantra and the Bhagwad Geeta. The essence of Hinduism lies in the first verse of Ishopanishad and that is enough for Hinduism to last for-ever. The first verse of Ishopanishad is divided into four parts. The first part says: "I-shavasyamind sarva yatkinch jagtya jagat". It means, "All this that we see

in this great universe is pervaded by God". The second part is read as: "Ten tyektyen bhunjitha" which means: 'Renounce it and enjoy it.' The final and third part is read as: "Ma grugha kasyasvidhvanam" which means: 'Do not covet anybody's wealth or possession.' Gandhi believed that the Gita is a commentary on this verse of Ishopanishad. Anyone who understands and practices this precept becomes a wise citizen. Gandhi believed that the key to salvation was renunciation. Elaborating on the first verse of Ishopanishad, Gandhi said that 'Isha' means the creator or the God who is all pervasive. Possession and accumulation is ludicrous because everything is owned by the creator. Renounce it and enjoy only what is required for your growth. But before enjoying material wants, dedicate everything to Krishna (krishnarpanmastu sarvam). Renunciation and dedication gives you the right to partake in the material needs of life. Bhunjitha or enjoyment is the reward for renunciation. It further says that 'do not covet what belongs to another'. The Ishopanishad mantra therefore constitutes the religious philosophy of all religions. According to the laws of interpretation, anything that is inconsistent with Shruti (shruti means 'thus heard' or things spoken by God and heard by man) and the Ishopanishad is a Shruti) must be rejected completely. (Harijan, 30/1/37, p407 & TEH p.23). The principles of universal brotherhood and equality follow from the Ishopanishad and if one have to consider one Hindu; one must be faithful to the Ishopanishad. (Harijan, 30/1/37, p.409, TEH, p.24).

The Ishopanishad is a good counter-balance to the uncontrolled growth of capitalism in which wealth accumulates and more often man decays. Wealth must be produced for there can be no consumption without production. Capitalism goes wrong when wealth is accumulated for the sake of accumulation and when it is not equitably distributed. Conspicuous consumption and malfeasance on the one hand and food poverty on the other cannot simultaneously exist. The Ishopanishad is therefore a good antidote to the maladies of capitalism and material life in general. The Ishopanishad although very useful and meaningful to spiritual life is believed to be a revealed text and the belief that things inconsistent to God's own words should be rejected cannot be accepted because everything is revealed by the human being to fellow human beings and the law of interpretation should be such that anything that is inconsistent with reason or logic should be rejected completely.

### **Why I am a Hindu?**

Responding to a letter by an American friend which asks Gandhi to explain the difference between Christianity and Hinduism and as to why after studying the two religions, Gandhi chose to be a Hindu, Gandhi said if the Christian missionaries had refrained from espousing the teachings of the Christ and instead only led a Christian life, Indians would have profited just by living amidst the Christians. Faith must be self-propagating and not proselytizing. If you live the faith that you believe, it will propagate by itself and if you tell others about your faith with a view to convert, there will always be resentment amongst those who are steadfast in their faith. Gandhi was thus opposed to the proselytizing character of the Christian faith in India. Gandhi avoided comparing Christianity with Hinduism but gave a reply on as to why he is a Hindu?

Gandhi found Hinduism to be the most tolerant amongst all religions. Hinduism is not dogmatic and offers the freedom of self-expression. Hinduism is inclusive and assimilating all that is worthy of assimilation in other religions. Hinduism believes in the oneness of life and that all life is sacred. The belief in transmigration or rebirth flows from the belief that all life is sacred. Gandhi believed that cow worship has contributed greatly to the evolution of humanitarianism. The law of Varna-ashrama is the magnificent consequence of the search for truth. However, Gandhi admitted that the contemporary practices of cow worship and Varna-ashrama are a caricature of the original ideas. The greatest expression of non-violence although common to all religions is founded in Hinduism. (Young India, 20/10/27, p.352 & TEH, p.28).

### **Gandhi's understanding of Hinduism**

Gandhi claims himself to be a Sanatani Hindu. For him, the distinguishing feature of Hinduism was cow worship and protection of the cow was the supreme duty of every Hindu. He mentions about the Vedic references of cow sacrifice and beef eating by Brahmanas and says that these references need not be taken literally. Gandhi called himself a Sanatani Hindu because, he believed in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas, scriptures, incarnation (avatars) and rebirth. He believed in the law of Varnashrama in the Vedic sense of the term, cow protection and idol

worship. Gandhi believed that all religious texts were divinely ordained. However, Gandhi believed in subjecting the religious texts of all denominations to the test of reason and morality and reasserted that anything that is repugnant to reason and moral sense must be rejected. One who has not attained perfection in Ahimsa (non-violence), Satya (truth) and Brahmacharya (celibacy) and renunciation will not understand the Shastras in their true or correct sense. The Varna or occupations were hereditary and cannot be disregarded. The division of Varnas into numerous castes is unwarranted according to Gandhi. Gandhi believed that the four-fold classification of occupations was adequate. He felt that the proscriptions on inter-dining and inter-caste marriages were unreasonable. While the duties of each Varna are given, there cannot be a hierarchy amongst the Varnas. Gandhi believed that all Varnas were equal and all were free to acquire skills and learning possessed by others but not without holding on to one's own hereditary occupation. Pride in one's own calling is unbecoming and unwarranted. Varnashrama is self-restraint and lead to conservation and economy of energy. It is the Hindu version of the concept of specialization that came along with the industrial revolution in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Abstemiousness from intoxicants and meat aids in the evolution of spirit but it is not an end in itself. Cow protection is central to Hinduism. However, one who kills a human being to protect the cow is not a Hindu. Hindus must protect the cow by tapasya, self purification and self-sacrifice. He exhorted the Hindus to conquer the Muslims with their love. Gandhi accepted idol worship as being natural to human beings though idols did nothing to inspire him. He felt images were an aid to worship. Gandhi believed that Hinduism was assimilating and not exclusive and definitely not proselytizing. He felt that the practice of untouchability was abhorrent and excrescent and rejected all evil practices such as animal sacrifice, devdasi system etc. A religion which practiced cow protection and worship cannot be imagined to be practicing untouchability. Gandhi says, "Let us not deny God by denying to a fifth of our race the right of association on an equal footing." (young India, 6/10/21 & TEH, ps. 30 to 36).

### **Epilogue**

Based on Gandhi's interpretation of Hinduism, the basic principles of Hinduism can be listed as follows:

1. Tolerance.
2. Inclusiveness.
3. Mercifulness.
4. Peaceful coexistence.
5. Truth.
6. Non-violence.
7. Charity.
8. Forgiveness.
9. Good conduct.
10. Gentleness.
11. Austerity.
12. Non-stealing.
13. Non-possession.
14. Contentment.
15. Forbearance.
16. Renunciation.

These principles are germane to a society that is human and orderly. In fact these are universal principles found in all religions. These principles need not be owned by Hinduism alone as a religion. They should be considered as the commonwealth of all humanity on earth. We may add more to these as long as they are not paradoxical and are contributing to both individual and social welfare, material and spiritual of the human society. To these we may add; Liberty, Equality and Fraternity so that inadequacies of organized religions are taken care of and the list of principles become more complete.

I have avoided principles such as Karma and Moksha because Karma is based on the principle of rebirth and Moksha is the final liberation of soul from the cycle of births and deaths. Karma is also fatalistic because of the belief in good karma and bad karma. The belief that bad karma is the cause of a bad station in the present life is fatalistic and regressive and it feeds and justifies the rigid Varna (caste) system. Rebirth cannot be verified and is therefore an unreasonable idea. Death is the liberation from life and there is no rebirth and therefore the only liberation from life is death. Life is mortal and humanity should be free from the fear of mortality.

Gandhi was wrong in insisting to follow the traditional station of one's own life. His idea of Varna-ashrama was utopian. The Varnas or occupations were functional to the society but they cannot be hereditary. There is no reason why one should inherit one's own traditional occupation even if one were to believe that all Varnas or occupations were equal in status. In reality, they were not equal for they were unequally compensated. The rewards to the four Varnas and their social status in the society were unequal. Therefore the karma or duty of a person is to climb the ladder and assume a higher Varna. The invisible hand will always dovetail individuals into different classes and occupations and the occupational requirements of the society will always be fulfilled by the invisible hand. If a person ceases to perform a traditional occupation because it is considered relatively low in station after acquiring higher order skills, the vacancy thus created will be filled by the invisible hand and therefore the society should be rest assured that all the required occupations will be adequately resourced.

The entire body of religious literature needs to be re-written. All unreasonable and unjust ideas need to be edited by subjecting them to the test of reason and rationality. The belief that they were revealed by God should be replaced by the fact that they were revealed by men unto men so that there is order and communion in the society. Modern humanity can only be governed by modern laws and principles that are universal. One cannot imagine order and communion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and thereafter by holding on to disparate, divergent and conflicting ideas of the ancient world. The modern society of today and tomorrow needs universal laws, principles and

ideas that will hold them together as human beings and not disjoin them as Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Jews and what have you as a relic of the past.

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**Bio**

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