

# Hinduism

*K.M.Sen*

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Religion is a human artefact, catering to deeply felt needs. But in order to be effective, it cannot be sensed as such, but needs to be thought of being of a divine origin, independent of human control; because after all, what could we expect of an idol fashioned entirely out of ourselves, in what ways could it help us and transcend us? Thus a student of religion faces two contradictory forces. On one hand he must have a sympathetic mind, feel that religion is important and compelling, on the other hand, his attitude must be one of detachment and unsentimentality, tracing its development as one of a merely historical fortuity being nothing but a human artefact. On one hand you have the powerful illusion, on the other hand you show the mechanism behind the magic.

To the outside Western observer, Hinduism appears as a pagan atavism, a fossilized set of ritual and belief reflecting a primitive and emerging civilization. Polytheism is surely just the initial stage later to be fashioned into monotheism as exemplified by the great procelysizing religions of the world (and eventually in a truly scientific age to be dissolved into atheism.) We all know of the ancient Indo-European myths of the Greeks and Romans as well as the Norse. Is not Hinduism simply a survival of out-dated Indo-European practices?

The overarching thesis of the author K.M.Sen<sup>1</sup> is that Hinduism is more than meets the eye. That far from being a polytheistic religion, it is ultimately monotheistic, with the abstract and formless God - Brahman, being the ultimate divinity, of which all others are but useful props for the imagination during devotion, a fact that even the unsophisticated devotee understands. As such Hinduism is, unlike its modern political revival, very tolerant, it is in sense an eucumenial and universal religion, capable of absorbing all kinds of external religious influences as its own. In fact Hindu religion has a philosophical aspect of quite some intellectual sophistication, and as such close to the pre-Socratics such as Parmenides as well as the later refinements by Plato in its rejection of the world of the senses (Maya). Even in early Western philosophy there is not a definite demarcation between religious faith and philosophical speculation and reflection. Be it as it may, it could be part of a special pleading of the author, giving to Hinduism a greater legitimacy than would be apparent from its merely vulgar manifestations, and an undue emphasis on certain historical aspects of it.

One of the most interesting questions asked by the author is of course the relationship between the beliefs and practices of the invading Aryans<sup>2</sup> and those of the resident Dwardian people. It is of course fraught with danger to try and identify different strains as coming

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<sup>1</sup> Incidentally the grandfather of the well-known economist A.Sen, who as the older Sen is putting the final touches on his book before his death, has already done his Ph.D. and provided assistance to his grandfather.

<sup>2</sup> An unfortunate term, as the author notes, in view of the use made of the notion by the recent Nazis.

from different traditions, the author even tentatively accords the practices of idol-worship to Greek influence through the invasion by Alexander the Great.

Another key idea in Hinduism is that religious practice can be implemented in three different ways. Either through knowledge, and that is of course the one preferred by those of a philosophical mind, or through good conduct, and here we see parallels with Christianity, or finally through devotion. Thus Hinduism provides a great variety of rituals, none with any special authority, thus leaving the precise way of practice to the discretion of the individual. There is unlike the case of Christianity and Islam no sacred texts, nor any established churches setting down once and for all the authoritative way. This of course conducive to a proliferation of different sects and a tolerant attitude. Indeed, as noted above, Hinduism can be seen as a universal religion, in which Islam and Christianity would fit naturally as subsects. Jesus being yet another guru, with a set of teachings concerned with good conduct rather than through knowledge and intellectual inquiry. And of course Christianity, as seen through the prism of Hinduism, is cut down to size and significance.

Now concomitant with Hindu development there have been various off-shoots. Buddhism, an agnostic religion if any, being an Indian gift to the rest of the world. Although Buddhism enjoyed supremacy in India, starting with the endorsement by the emperor Akosha around the time of Christ, its importance eventually declined on the sub-continent, surviving only in Sri Lanka, as well as in the northern reaches of Tibet and Nepal. But its legacy in South East Asia as well as in China, and by extension to Korea and Japan, remains important to this day. However, as many people seem to think, it is not fruitful to inquire into the differences between Buddhism and Hinduism, this bespeaks a confusion of categories. Hinduism is not a religion as much as a general context for such, and Buddhism is thus a particular form of Hinduism. Clearly, apart from its particular doctrines, there is much in its actual ritual and devotion, that shows strong influences from Hinduism, out of which it is naturally grown. One crucial aspect of which being the transmigration of souls, clearly a defining feature of Hinduism, and of course being central to the whole idea of Buddhism<sup>3</sup>. Another, less well-known, development of Hinduism, or maybe rather variation on its theme, is Jainism, one of the striking features of which being the sanctity of life, even the killing of insects is prohibited. Now carried to an extreme this is indeed an untenable position that any sustaining life is ultimately based on the killing of other life, yet as a guiding principle it is commendable. Sikhism is a fairly recent religion, and as a sect very forceful and successful in creating a social cohesion among its adherents. Here we may think of a Muslim influence on the general Hindu ambience, and indeed some observers may categorize it in the Islamic fold, although that would of course be a rather crude thing to do.

Sikhism leads to the question of artificially created religions. Religions not so much based on revelation as on committee work. Admittedly much of established Christianity

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<sup>3</sup> One may think that if religion is taken too abstractly in order to avoid literal embarrassment it becomes, in the notion of Popper, simply unfalsifiable and consequently insipid. One unifying feature of most religions being the notion of a soul as something immaterial and thus potentially indestructible, and hence subjected to a critical and potentially devastating inquiry. Of course soul may be taken in a very abstract sense, with consciousness merely being a manifestation of it. Clearly a succession of consciences may then be connected by a purported underlying 'soul' without being subjected to a definite falsification.

is of course based on committee work when it comes to voting on the finer points in the creed. After all this was the way that the final schism between the Eastern and Western division of the Church come about. A failed, if valiant attempt, to do so, of trying to forger out of the various elements of the prevailing religions, an encompassing one, was initiated by the Mughal emperor Akbar, something which is emphasized by the author as an example of the basically tolerant relations between Islam and Hinduism in the history of India, and contrary to the prevailing sectarianism of today.

Sen sees Hinduism as an adjustment to circumstances, a religion, or rather a general fram eof mind capable of absorbing and internalizing external influences. In this context the caste system is an embarrassment with its concomitant shameful inequities. It is not at all clear how it did evolve, and whether it really reflects the domination, as that of the upper castes, of an invading conquering population. Contrary to popular belief throughout the history of Hinduism, figures of importance and influence have not always been Brahmins, but even low-cast or even out-caste have sometimes played decisive roles. Sen points out the long anti-caste tradition in Indian history, how the idea of caste being racially based, has been rejected and the ideas of brotherhood proposed as logical alternatives. Sen assumes that in the end the caste system will simply be abandoned as being outmoded and reflecting nothing deeper than temporary Brahmin political dominance.

Finally Hinduism has no holy script, no ultimate authority as to codification, a fact that has greatly contributed to its tolerance and flexibility, as noted above. But as far as founding myths it too can be said to be based on an epic, similar to the historical books in the Bible or the Illiad and Odyssees in Greek mythology. Those stories are indeed great stories, and Sen speculates that maybe the rich tradition of stories in the world ultimately stems from India, examples of which being the well-known fables, such as those collected by Aesopius and later by Fontaine. Clearly much of the phantastic fairy-tales with which we are regaled as children, must have Indian roots.

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