

Essence of Religion – Hinduism

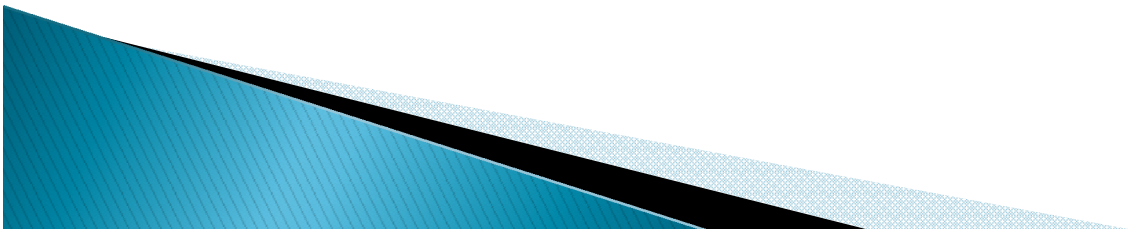
MCRHRD-17.09.2019

General Features of Religions

- ▶ Started by a particular person at a particular time in history
- ▶ The person claims to have had direct communication with God
- ▶ He communicates the directions from the God, which form the body of the religion
- ▶ This body of directions is a belief system about the nature of God located in heaven, devil in hell etc.,

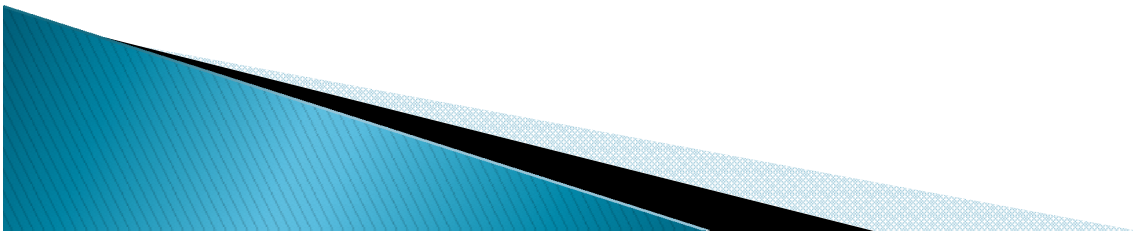
General Features of Religions – contd..1

- ▶ God has created the universe at some point of time. Time is reckoned from that point.
- ▶ This belief system cannot be questioned, there is no room for debate.
- ▶ Each religion claims that its own God is the true God. Followers of other religions are doomed to languish in hell



General Features of Religions – contd..2

- ▶ An organizational structure of the religious hierarchy, even at the world level
- ▶ Each religion has a basic text which is said to be the word of God or the message of God.
- ▶ This is the final authority on all matters
- ▶ There is a mandate to convert the whole world into one's own religion

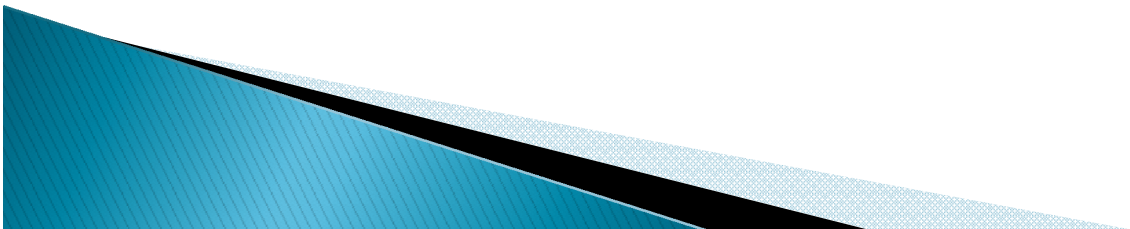


General Features of Hinduism

- ▶ It was not started by any single person at any point of time in history
- ▶ No person has claimed that he had communication with God or that God has given special instructions to him.
- ▶ There are several religious traditions (Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti, Ganesha etc), each having its own religious texts.
- ▶ Exclusive followers of these traditions are very few (such as Vaishnava, Shaiva, Shakta etc.). The common man accepts all traditions.

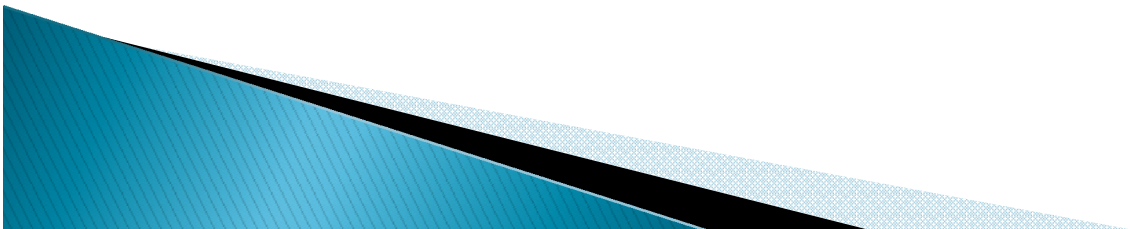
General Features of Hinduism– Contd..1

- ▶ All traditions accept the authority of the Vedas (Upanishads), which are the basic texts – the reason why the common man accepts all traditions.
- ▶ The Upanishadic idea of God is different from the idea of God in religious traditions.
- ▶ Upanishads talk of God at the philosophical level while the traditions like Vaishnavism, Saivism etc., talk at the level of religion



General Features of Hinduism– Contd..2

- ▶ Creation is said to be beginningless and it goes on in cycles – cyclical concept of time
- ▶ There is no concept of devil. Evil is explained as an integral part of nature.
- ▶ There is no central religious authority or hierarchy
- ▶ There is no mandate to convert people.



Religion Vs Philosophy

<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Belief System about God, heaven, hell etc.,	Based on Reasoning about the nature of reality
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Started at a point of time	A continuous process of enquiry
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– No room for questioning	Reasoning presupposes debate
<ul style="list-style-type: none">– The founder and the book are important	The subject matter is important

Hindu Religion Vs Hindu Philosophy

“What distinguishes the Vedanta philosophy from all other philosophies is that it is at the same time a religion and a philosophy” - Max Muller

India: What Can It Teach Us, 1882
talks at Cambridge University for ICS
Trainees

Hindu Religion Vs Hindu Philosophy– Contd ..1

- ▶ Different traditions glorify different gods as the Supreme God whereas Upanishads talk of an impersonal entity as the Supreme Reality.
- ▶ As per Upanishads, the Supreme Reality is सत्यम्, ज्ञानम्, अनन्तम्
- ▶ It is infinitely existing consciousness – denoted by the pronoun ‘It’.
- ▶ This understanding guided religion.
- ▶ Any god with a name and form is accepted from the point of common man but the Supreme Reality is quite different.

Upanishads on creation

- ▶ A passage from Taittiriya Upanishad (2-1) says this:
- ▶ The all-pervading space emerged from the eternal Consciousness.
- ▶ From space, emerged air.
- ▶ From air, emerged fire,
- ▶ And from fire, emerged water
- ▶ Earth (the solid matter) emerged from these waters
- ▶ The plant kingdom originated thereafter.
- ▶ Plants became the food for the living beings.
- ▶ And thus, all the living beings emerged ...

Upanishads on creation – Contd..1

- ▶ The Supreme Reality is formless – It is not even called the creator
- ▶ The universe/creation is a manifestation in that consciousness
- ▶ In other words, there is a manifesting power, called प्रकृति, in consciousness
- ▶ प्रकृति manifests as all the sentient and insentient things in the universe.

One Reality – Multiple Gods

- ▶ When reality is one, no single tradition can be called as absolutely true
- ▶ Hence accepted all existing traditions
- ▶ Hinduism accepts three levels
 - God with name, form and functions such as creation, governance etc., eg: Vishnu, Shiva etc.,
 - God without name and form but with functions such as creation etc., eg: Nyaya, Sankhya schools
 - An impersonal entity without name, form or functions. It is not even the creator

One Reality – Multiple Gods – Contd ..1

- ▶ The Philosophy of Upanishads is conveyed in the Gita
- ▶ यो यो यां यां ... 7-21 “Whoever, with sincerity, desires to worship a deity in whatever form, I,, the Supreme Reality conform to his divotion in that very form.”
- ▶ येऽप्यन्यदेवता भक्ताः ... 9-23 “Even those who sincerely worship other deities (as the case may be), do worship me only, though not in the prescribed manner.”
- ▶ A very liberal and inclusive statement which is usually not found in religions

One Reality – Multiple Gods – Contd ..2

- ▶ This philosophy enabled sages to harmonize different traditions
- ▶ Eg: Shankaracharya – षण्मत-स्थापनाचार्य
- ▶ There is no mandate that one has to worship only one form of God. There is freedom to choose his own deity as per his own nature
- ▶ Different God forms/idols are tools for meditation and concentration of mind so as to understand the Supreme Reality gradually

One Reality – Multiple Gods – Contd..3

- ▶ Indian sages harmonized different traditions instead of eliminating them – they worked out relationship among the gods – eg: Shakti as the wife of Shiva and sister of Vishnu, Ganesha as the son of Shiva etc.,
- ▶ Upanishads are clear about reality – चिन्मयस्य अद्वितीयस्य ... उपासकानां कार्यार्थं ब्रह्मणो रूपकल्पना
- ▶ Self-purification and attaining god-like equanimity and universal love is the final goal.

Varna and Caste

– Mentioned in Scriptures

Not mentioned in Primary texts , but mentioned in secondary texts

– It is based on the guna, the innate tendency

Based on professional skills

– There are only four varna-s depending on the predominance of one of the three guna-s

There are hundreds of castes depending on professional skills

– It is a personality type, universal in nature

It is a sociological phenomenon

– Very flexible in earlier days but became rigid in later days – Acharya decided varna. Eg: Jabali

Caste groups continued to be homogenous groups – to preserve trade skills

Gita on Varna and Caste

- ▶ Predominance of *sattva* – pursuit of knowledge, truthfulness, compassion, contentment etc – called Brahmin – teaching and priestly duties
- ▶ Predominance of *rajas* – aggression and dominating tendency – called *kshatriya*, warrior class
- ▶ Predominance of *rajas* can also produce acquisitiveness, greed and pursuit of wealth – called *vysya*, the trading class
- ▶ Predominance of *tamas* – lack of initiative, inattentiveness, sleep etc – called a *sudra*

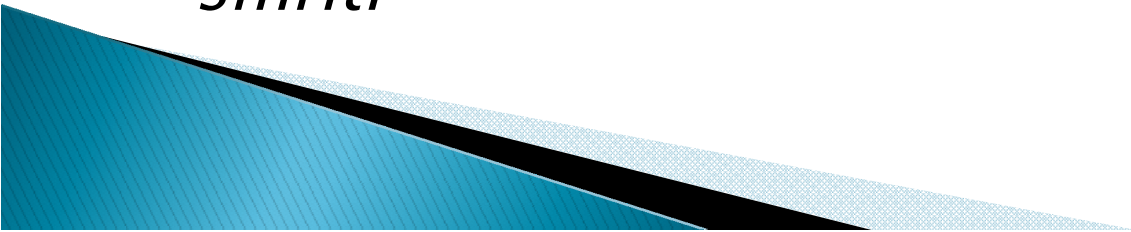
Gita on Varna and Caste – Contd..1

- ▶ The above categorization based on the innate tendencies of people and not on birth
- ▶ *Mahabharata* discusses *varna* in several passages – यक्षप्रश्नः, नुहुषप्रश्नः, धर्मव्याधः etc.,
- ▶ It shows that *varna* was a debated issue even then
- ▶ *Mahabharata* clarifies that *varna* has to be decided by qualities and not by birth

Gita on Varna and Caste – Contd..2

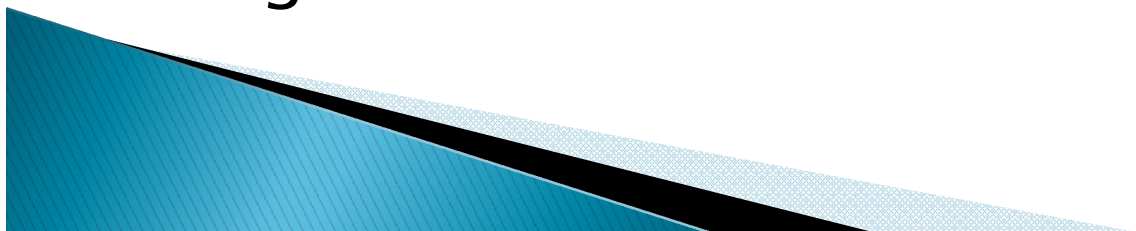
- ▶ Commentary under verse 18-41
- ▶ यस्मिन् कस्मिन्श्चिद् वर्णे शमादयो दृश्यन्ते स शूद्रोपि एतैः लक्षणैः ब्राह्मणः एव ज्ञातव्यः । यत्र च ब्राह्मणे अपि शूद्रधर्माः दृश्यन्ते सः शूद्र एव । तथा च आरण्यके सर्पभूतं नहुषंप्रति युधिष्ठिरवाक्यम् – “सत्यं दानं क्षमा शीलम् आनृशंस्यं तपो घृणा । दृश्यन्ते यत्र नागेन्द्र स ब्राह्मण इति स्मृतः” । तथा “यत्रैतल्लक्ष्यते सर्प वृत्तं स ब्राह्मणः स्मृतः । यत्रैतत् न भवेत् सर्प तं शूद्रमिति निर्दिशेत्”
- ▶ - www.gitasupersite.iitk.ac.in

Caste as it is now

- ▶ Village was an economically self-sufficient unit – people developed skills in different trades
 - ▶ Such people got established as castes
 - ▶ Industrialization eradicated caste in Europe – we missed industrialization – colonial rule – 24% GDP coming down to 1.5%
 - ▶ Several *vysyas* gave up the Vedic rituals and started calling themselves as *sudras*
 - ▶ There is no concept of untouchable – अस्पृश्य in the *Gita* or in the *Upanishads* or in the *Manu-smriti*
- 

Dharma Shastra-s evolve

- ▶ *Hindu Dharma* is not inflexible
- ▶ Permanent aspects of *dharma* and changing aspects of *dharma*
- ▶ *Tai.Up.* (1-11) talks of changing value system and how *dharma* has to cope with it
- ▶ The ancient sages updated *dharma* texts (*smriti*) as per changing times
- ▶ The present religious leaders are somehow silent but they have not opposed social legislation



Religion – world over

- ▶ Pew Research Centre – (US based) analyzes religious trends all over the world
- ▶ Official religion – 70 Christian Countries – 50 Islamic – no Hindu Country
- ▶ *The Clash of Civilizations* by Huntington – Political conflicts would have a cultural basis.
- ▶ *Faith in the Halls of Power* by Michael Lindsay, sociologist – growing influence of religion in US foreign policy – applies to other Western countries

Religion – world over – Contd..

- ▶ International Religious Freedom Act (US)
- ▶ US Commission on International Religious Freedom (UICIRF)
- ▶ Dropouts from religion – increasing SBNRs – Hence, pressure on vulnerable countries.
- ▶ Globalization of Religion
- ▶ *American Veda* – Philip Goldberg
- ▶ *Journey of Upanishads to the West* – Swami Tathagatananda

Thank You

Dr. Aravinda Rao