
UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO HINDUISM

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

- To illustrate the basic religious tenets of Hinduism from the Vedic perspective; and
- To introduce the Hindu scriptures and rituals prevalent among the people.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Hinduism is one of the oldest living religions with a history stretching from around the second millennium B.C to the present. It forms India's religious and cultural system, encompassing a broad spectrum of philosophies ranging from pluralistic theism to absolute monism. Hinduism is not a homogeneous, organized system. It has no founder and no single code of beliefs. It has no central headquarters, and no particular organization to govern temporal power over its faithful. It does not have a single scripture, but has many sacred texts. It is diverse and no single set of beliefs can represent its numerous traditions. Infact the name Hinduism itself was first given by the Persians who called the people and the land beyond the river Sindh as 'Hindu.' Later, the Mughals and British endorsed its name. There is no direct reference from the ancient texts or any religious/political leaders calling themselves as 'Hindus' or their religion as '*hindu*.' There were '*Vedic*,' '*saiva*,' '*vaishna*,' '*sakta*,' and many other religious traditions, but not one single religion called Hinduism in the ancient and classical period. Great leaders like Adi Sankara himself identified six religious traditions in his time as '*shanmata*.' Even today, although Vedic tradition is 'projected' to be Hinduism, it would be scholarly to call Hinduism as 'plural religions of various traditions', a 'religion of religions.' Pluralism is the vein of Hindu tradition. '*Ekam sat viprah bahuda vadanti*' – 'Truth is one; people call it by many names' (Rig Veda I, 164.46), explains it all.

There are different belief systems found in Hinduism: Polytheism (belief in many Gods), Pantheism (God in all things), Theism (Personal God), and Monism

(Everything is One). Vedantic tradition claims that Absolute Monism (Brahman alone is the One and only truth) is the highest of all beliefs. There are still many traditions where gods like Vishnu, Sakti, and Siva are considered to be Supreme Beings in various Theistic traditions. That is the beauty of Hinduism, where for every class of worshipper there is a provision. It is the great power of assimilation and absorption that makes Hinduism great.

Vedic Hindus call their tradition *sanatana-dharma*, an eternal tradition without any particular history of a founder or the text. It is an eternal and universal law containing the truth that is divinely revealed to the ancient sages. It is thus called *apauruseya*, not of human origin. Hinduism is a synthesis of religion and philosophy, it is not just a set of religious rituals and codes of conduct, but it is a way of life.

1.2 HINDU SCRIPTURES

***Surti:* Vedas**

The Vedas and Upanishads, according to Hindus, constitute the fountain head of Indian philosophy, culture, and religion. They are taken as the result of divine inspiration and hence considered as primary revelation. The word 'Veda' means knowledge. The Veda is *apauruseya*, i.e. it does not owe its origin to any human agency. The Vedic truth is a non-personal truth. They are compiled by Vyasa. We have four Vedas or *Catur Vedas: Rig, Yajur, Sama, Atharvana*. The *Rig* Veda contains only hymns; the *Yajur* Veda contains the invoking accompanying sacrifice; the *Sama* Veda is full of sacred *Bhajans* and songs; the *Atharvana* Veda has collections of sacred formulas. The Vedas are divided into four, namely, *Samhitas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads*.

1. ***Samhitas:*** They are *mantras*, or hymns with rhythmical tones. The *Samhitas* are a collection of sacred devotional mantras mostly addressed to Nature gods and goddesses. They form the basis for the *Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads*. These incantations praising the supreme and personifying the gods are sung to propitiate gods during the *yajnas*, to protect oneself from evil forces and for seeking assistance in performing one's duties. It is said there are 20389 mantras in the *Samhitas*. Of these, approximately 10552 *slokas* are found in the *Rg* Vedas, 1975 in the *Yajur*, 1875 in the *Sama*, and 5987 in the *Atharva Veda*. These mantras are said to have divine powers and the effectiveness of the mantras depends upon the chanter's mental discipline, correct recitation, and breathing.

2. ***Brahmanas:*** They date back to 900 – 500 BCE, and they are the theological treatise that got developed after the *Samhitas*. They were written in prose and explained the sacred significance of the different rituals mentioned in some *Samhitas*, to those who were not familiar with them. They explain the hymns and the way the sacrifices are to be performed. They deal with *Karma* and rituals, and are guides for the proper performance of the latter. They discuss the rituals performed for specific purposes with the objective of getting a specific effect, the minute details of objects of sacrifices, and duties of the priest and others. These manuals of worship provide not only knowledge of the mechanical performances of the rituals, but explain how a performer can control the processes of nature and the gods. The *Samhitas* in each *Veda* had the *Brahmanas* associated with them, numbering around 1180. But only a few (22) are available now.

3. **Aranyakas:** They are forest treatises dealing with meditation or *upasana*, and were composed around 700BCE. Out of the 1180 *Aryanakas* only a few (6) are available now. They were for hermits who retired into the forest in search of knowledge and the ultimate truth, and were thus unable to perform elaborate sacrifices requiring a multitude of accessories and articles which could not be procured in the forest. They give mystical, symbolic, and philosophical interpretations in metaphysical and cosmic terms, and the inner meanings of the *mantras* of the *Samhitas*; and the rituals and sacrifices explained in the *Brahmanas* give the logical reasoning for following them. How to sit for prayer, which side to face, during what part of the day to offer the prayer, what mantra to be chanted, which ritual to be performed before and after prayer, and so on, are clearly explained here. They help in knowing the hidden meaning and significance of the rituals and sacrifice. It was the *Aranyakas* that paved the way for the *Upanisads*, which has become the source of all Vedic and Vedantic philosophy.

4. **Upanisads:** The term *Upanisads* comes from the terms *upa* and *ni* – under and near, and *sad* – to sit. It is the teaching the guru imparts when the disciples sit very near or very close to him. The *Upanisads* are referred to as *Surti prasthanas* or revealed scriptures, and as *Surti* or *siras* meaning the head or crown of the Vedas. They are known as *Vedanta*, meaning the last portion or essence of the Vedas. It is an ancient treatise which contains profound knowledge about God, man, and the universe. It is metaphysical and spiritual, with the firm belief in the reality of *Brahman*. It emphasizes the importance of ethical discipline as preparation for the realization of the supreme. According to the *Upanisads* one cannot realize the ultimate reality (*Brahman*) unless our conduct and actions are good. There are 108 *Upanisads*. The most important *Upanisads* are twelve in number. They are *Isa*(Yu), *Kena*(Sa), *Katha*(Yu), *Prasna* (Ath), *Mundaka*(Ath), *Mandukya* (Ath), *Aitareya*(Rg), *Taittiriya*(Yu), *Chandogya*(Sa), *Brhadaranyaka*(Yu), *Kausitaki*(Rg) and *Svetasvatara*(Yu). The *Upanisads* are also called *Vedanta* (not just the end of the Vedas, but the essence of the Vedas).

The subject matter of the entire Vedas is divided into three: 1. The *Karma Kanda* which deals with rituals. 2. The *Upasana Kanda* that deals with worship and meditation. 3. The *Jnana Kanda* that deals with the highest spiritual knowledge. A synopsis and classification of the contents of the *Upanisads* goes by the name of the *Brahma-sutras* or *Vedanta-sutras* whose author is Badarayana.

Vedangas

In addition to the Vedas, the Vedic literature consists of auxiliary texts known as *Vedangas* (limbs of the Vedas). They are designed to help us in the correct pronunciation of the terms, right interpretation of texts, and employment of the proper mantras during the course of sacrifices, rituals, and ceremonies. The *Vedangas* are six in number. They are: 1) *Siksha*: the science of proper articulation and pronunciation of *varnas* (letters) and words; it lays down the rules for the correct chanting of Vedic hymns. 2) *Chandas*: the science of prosody; it deals with the cadence and numbers of hymns. 3) *Vyakarana*: grammar; it lays down the grammar of the Vedic language. 4) *Nirukta*: etymological explanation of difficult Vedic terms; it gives the interpretation of the Vedic syllables. 5) *Kalpa*: procedural codes of the performance of sacrifices. *Kalpas* are in the form of *sutras* (a *sutra* is a distinctive feature of spiritual

and philosophical composition. It is a marvel of condensation- it is a cryptic form of expression). The *Kalpa Sutras* are three in number. They are *Srauta sutras*, *Grahya sutra*, and *Dharma sutras*. 6) *Jyotisa*: astrology or Vedic astronomy; it prescribes the appropriate times for performing Vedic rites and sacrifices;

Upa-Vedas: *Ayur veda* – medicine, *Dhanur Veda* – military science, *Gandharva veda* – music, *silpa veda* – dance, architecture, iconography, etc. Each *upaveda* is attached to one *veda*.

Smṛti: *Smṛti* literally means recollection or memory. It is a secondary authority; it derives its authority from *Sūṛti*. Its object is to expand and exemplify the principles of *Sūṛti* or the Vedas. The *Smṛti* consists of the *Gita*, *Brahma Sutra*, *Itihasas* (epics), *Puranas* (chronicles and legends), *Sastras* (codes of law), *Agamas* and *Tantras* (manuals of worship).

Bhagavat Gita: ‘*Bhagavad*’ means Lord, *gita* means song. So ‘Song of the Lord.’ This is the literature written in poetic form around 200BCE. In the battle of *kurusetra*, Lord Krishna urges Arjuna to do his duty, good or evil, without any attachment for the fruit of actions (*niskama karma*). The Gita in short beautifully harmonizes the philosophy of action, devotion, and knowledge. Every person has three *gunas* - *sattva* (principle of light), *rajas* (source of activity), and *tamas* (responsible to resist the actions).

Brahma Sutra: Badarayana or Vyasa wrote the *Brahma Sutra*. It contained the Upanisadic teaching dealt in four chapters, covering 555 *sutras*.

Sastras: These are codified laws regulating the society from time to time. The important law givers are *Manu*, *Yajnavalkya* and *Parasara*. Their codes of law are known as *Sastras*. The *Dharmasastra* constitutes another very important source of Indian ethics and philosophy in which detailed rules of conduct and practical moral instructions are given. *Manu Smṛti*: according to *Manu*, by following *dharma* one attains perfection. *Manu* prescribes duties for all the four stages of life and the four different categories of persons in the society. This book of *Manu* comprises the laws of *Manu*, which have become Aryan laws. *Manu* was considered to be the great law giver in the Vedic period.

The Itihasa: These are the epics. The two well-known epics are the *Ramayana* by Valmiki and the *Mahabharata* by Vyasa. The aim of the epics is to drive home to all, the laws of the *Smṛtis* and the principles of the *Sūṛti* by means of the exploits of their great national heroes – Rama and Krishna. The **Ramayana** is the account of the deeds of a divinely great hero who set an example for the entire human race. It deals with ideal conditions of humanness, a sense of brotherhood, obedience to moral law, firmness of character, honesty, sacrifice, and unbounded goodness. The **Mahabharatha** has a more profound theme which involves history, mythology, ethics, and metaphysics. E.g. the history of the *Bharadas*, a royal family of North India which got divided into two parties, the *Pandavas* and the *Kauravas*, and so war breaks out between them. It is an encyclopedia of Hindu *dharma*.

Eighteen Puranas: These consist of chronicles and legends, and the genealogy of kings. They are the instruments of popular education. They are treatises of history and of cosmology, with various symbolical illustrations of philosophical principles and so forth. According to tradition there are eighteen *Puranas*. The doctrine of avatars (divine incarnation) is fully developed in the epics and the

Puranas. The purpose of an avatar is for the protection of the virtuous, the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of *dharma* (moral order.) According to the Puranas there are ten *avatars* of Vishnu. *Matsya* –fish, *kurma* –tortoise, *varaha* – boar, *narasimha* – the man-lion, *vaman* – dwarf, *parasurama* –Rama with the axe, *ramacandra* – hero of the Ramayana, *krisna* – the god of the Bhagavad Gita, *Buddha* – the founder of Buddhism, and *kalki* – the hero on a white horse who is to come at the end of the *kali-yuga*.

Agamas: These are the scriptures dealing with the worship of a particular aspect of God. They prescribe detailed courses of discipline for the worshipper. Each *agama* consists of four sections. They are philosophy, mental discipline, rules for the construction of temples and images, and religious practices. The *agamas* are divided into three, according to the deity that is worshipped: the *Vaisnava agamas* (also called the *pancaratra* and *vaikhanasa agamas*) for Vishnu, the *Saiva Agamas* for Siva, and the *sakta agamas (tantras)* for Sakti. Each glorifies its particular deity. The name of these *agamas* are *Kamigam, Yogajam, Sivithiam, Karanam, Ajitham, Deeptham, Sukshmam, Sahasram, Hamsamam, Suprabhedam, Vijayam, Niswasam, Swayambhuvam, Agneyam, Veeram, Rauravam, Makutam, Vishalam, Chandra Jnanam, Mukha Bimbam, Purotgeetham, Lalitam, Siddham, Santanam, Sarvoktam, Parameswaram, Karanam, Vathulam*.

1.3 VEDIC DEITIES

The religion of the Aryans was at first simple. They believed in many gods, and almost every phenomenon in nature which impressed their imagination was regarded as a deity. Thus, Indra was the god of storm, thunder, and rain. The brilliant sun above and fire below were worshipped as the gods Surya and Agni. The beauty of dawn led to the creation of the goddess Usha, and the vast expanse of heaven, to that of Dyaus. These gods were at first worshipped in a simple way. A fire was kindled, to which ordinary articles of food and drink like milk, ghee, rice, etc. were offered as oblations. This was accompanied by beautiful hymns addressed to the gods. Later, the rituals of worship became more elaborate and complicated, and priests were employed to perform it on behalf of the worshippers. In the *Rg Veda* many different deities are mentioned, but all are not equally important. Among them the main gods are Indra, Agni, Varuna, etc.

Indra: Indra's power is praised in more than three hundred hymns in the *Rg Veda*. He possesses all human virtues in the superlative degree. He is the Hero, the man-God of the Vedic times. He blesses men in all their enterprises. He organized the whole universe. He fixed the earth and the mountains in their places. He has measured the space, stretched out the sky, and created both the sun and sunrise. He established the universe and its functions. Indra is the chief of warriors, endowed with matchless power. As the protector of warriors, he is hailed as commander-in-chief in the struggle of the invading Aryans against the original inhabitants of the land. Indra is the drinker of *soma*, helping and encouraging those who sacrifice.

Agni: Agni is the god most frequently mentioned over two hundred hymns. He represents, in fact, one of the cornerstones of the Vedic world structure. He is one of the most comprehensive symbols of the reality. Agni, like life-giving warmth, is spread everywhere. Agni is the leader of the gods, an envoy among

the gods, and between gods and humans. He is the priest of the gods, their tongue, and the spokesman to them on behalf of humans. Secondly, Agni has a clearly terrestrial character. He is a cosmic power. He is the fire, he is earthly, 'the navel of the earth, and the 'fruit of the womb' of the world. He is the sun, the seed of all, the leader and lord of the earth. Agni is the one who presents the sacrifice, renders it acceptable and pleasing, transforms and divinizes the gifts offered, and brings together the whole cosmos. His burning flame of sacrifice may also consume sins and wickedness, and demons and foes. Nothing can withstand him; everything must be burned and transmuted into light.

Varuna: Varuna the mighty Lord establishes control and surveys both the operation of cosmic law, and the deeds and activities of men. He is the god of justice. In him resides power to inflict punishment or to free men from their sins, to produce in them a sense of fear and humility, and the admission of guilt and regret. Varuna is a water-god. As lord of the waters and rivers, he is the dispenser of rain.

1.4 YAJNA: VEDIC SACRIFICE

Sacrifices form the central theme of the Vedic religion and philosophy. The sacrifices not only please gods but also feed them. Through them sins are also atoned for. The important *Vedic* sacrifices are the *Srauta* sacrifices and the *Grihya* rituals. The *Srauta* sacrifices are divided into the *nitya* (regular) sacrifices and *naimitika* (occasional) sacrifices. The *Nitya* sacrifices are 1) *Agnihotra* (fire offering) 2) *Darsa Purnamasesti* (new and full moon sacrifices) 3) three four-month sacrifices: i) *Vaisvadeva* ii) *Varuna Praghasa* iii) *Sakamedha*. The *Naimitika* sacrifices are 1) *Pasubandha* and 2) *Soma*. The *Grihya* rituals, refer to five daily sacrifices (*Panchamaha-Yajnas*) to be performed daily: 1) the sacrifice to the gods (*Deva-Yajnas*) 2) the sacrifice to the beings (*Bhuta Yajnas*) 3) *Pitr-Yajna*- sacrifice to the departed souls, 4) *Brahma Yajna*-recitation of Vedic texts, and 5) *Manusha Yajna* (Sacrifice to men).

The larger Vedic rituals were primarily dedicated to Agni and Soma. Agni was a divine messenger and intermediary. The offerings of ghee were poured into sacrificial fires installed on altars, and Agni transmitted them to the gods. Special libations were made of juice extracted from the stalks of the soma plant. Remnants of the offerings were consumed by the celebrants. The ceremonies were accompanied by recitations from the Rg Veda and chants from the Sama Veda. According to the Rg veda (7.26.1), pressed juices unaccompanied by sacred hymns have no effect. The celebrations required the execution of multifarious activities, from the different Vedas, distributed among priests who officiated on behalf of, and for the benefit of, a ritual patron, the *yajamana*. Rituals, along with meters and chants, are depicted as instruments used by gods and demons to fight and conquer each other, and sometimes to create.

The recitations that accompany the rites often express specific desires — for health, strength, sons, victory, heaven, and immortality. The list of wishes and desires is not so different from that of modern man. It is not exclusively spiritual nor is it wholly materialistic. The reason for performing a specific ritual is stated to be the desire for a particular fruit or effect. 'He who desires heaven shall sacrifice with the *agnistoma* ritual – *agnistomena svargakamo yajeta*'. Yet, the *Srauta sutras* of the late Vedic period offer several definitions of ritual.

It comprises of three things: *dravya* – the substance used in the oblations, *devata* – the deity to which oblations are offered, and *tyaga* – renunciation of the fruits of the ritual acts. The *tyaga* is a formula pronounced by the *yajamana*, or patron, at the culmination of each act of oblation, when the officiating priest, on behalf the *yajamana*, makes the oblation into the fire for one of the gods; for example, ‘this is for Agni, not for me’ – *agnaye idam na mama*. Recitations are more important than acts. The unintelligibility is an inherent feature of the *mantras*. *Mantras* are significant not as meaningful expressions, but as units recited on specific ritual occasions. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of rituals for the civilization and religions of India. Ritual activity is physical activity and is therefore primarily related to the body, unlike thinking or believing.

The quintessence of the Vedic Revelation is Yajna or sacrifice. Sacrifice is in fact an ancient, far-reaching, and pervasive intuition of the *Surti*. The conception of the sacrifice, varied through the ages. The basic characteristic of *yajna* seems to be that of an action that reaches where it intends to reach, that really and truly offers something, and that stretches out and extends itself. Sacrifice effectively ‘creates’ that is, it acts, is efficient, and produces what it intends. To perform the sacrifice is not to participate in a good act or to do good to the gods, to humankind, or to oneself; it is to live and to safeguard the existence of the whole universe. It is the act by which the universe itself continues in existence. Worship does not consist solely in prayer or feeling or knowledge; it is action, an action by which duality is transcended and dissimilarity is banished. This act contains within itself, essentially, a sacrificial aspect; a death and a becoming; a doing or *karman*. This word, which in the course of time will take on numerous other meanings, has here the significance of ‘action’, understood as the act of worship and sacrifice. Action that does not include an element of making and remaking — creation and redemption — does not deserve the name. Salvation is rendered attainable by worship and worship must need entail sacrifice, for only sacrifice can produce the essential conversion. There is no other way to salvation except through sacrifice, for salvation is not attainable except by means of a break, a leap onto the other shore, or some sort of transference into a supra-natural order. Man can be saved only by the performance of sacrificial worship; apart from such worship he is powerless and at the mercy of blind forces. But the genuine idea of sacrifice was soon degenerated into mere ritualism and magic. Sacrifices came to be regarded as the magical means, having the automatic power to bring about any wish of the sacrificer. They were even used to make evil fortune fall on gods as well as one’s own enemies.

1.5 PURUSA SUKTA: THE COSMIC SACRIFICE

The idea of a cosmic sacrifice, in which a primeval person creates the world through his own sacrifice and dismemberment, is the basic theory of rituals adopted in the *Brahmanas*. Here *prajapati* takes the place of *purusa*. *Purusa Sukta* (Rg Veda 10: 90) refers to a primordial world-creating *yajna*. All of existence comes into being through this power. It affirms the underlying unity of the human, cosmic, and divine realities; for all are seen as emerging from the same original reality of the cosmic person. In this hymn, reality is conceived of as a gigantic person; everything that exists is part of this cosmic person. The greatness of this person is emphasized by noting that he has a thousand heads, eyes, and feet; an extraordinary person indeed. Infact, the next line says

that although he envelops the whole world, he is greater than this earth, going beyond it in all possible ways. In seeing the universe as a person, one saw that they were concerned primarily with human becoming and with the relationship between cosmic and human becoming, and they regarded human existence as the most basic and profound mode of existence. Verses 11-14 of the Rg Veda 10:90 present us with a number of instances of correspondence between the cosmic person and human society, and between the person and the natural world. These correspondences establish the inter-connectedness of the social classes, features of the natural world, and even the gods. Both the order and relationships within these spheres are seen as established in the originating source of all existence — the primordial person. These verses emphasize the unity of all existence.

Hiranyagarbha: *Hiranyagarbha* is the cosmos, the golden egg, with the sun in it. He is the great *deva*, the source of light and heat and life, movement, and time. Heaven is peopled with the *devas*. They perform a continuous sacrifice in the heavenly fire. *Indra* drinks soma, and when soma is poured into the fire, clouds are formed. *Maruti* the wind helps. It rains. Lightning and thunder accompany. *Vayu* is a *devata*. A similar sacrifice is performed for the *yajamana* by the priests. The *yajamana* becomes *Vishnu*; his body is the seat of another sacrifice by the gods within. There is warmth and light, and sight. There is soma – the body-fluids. There is air-breath, speech, *mantra*, and the *indiriyas* – *Indra*. At the centre of the macrocosm there is fire, the sun, and *Vishnu*. Also at the centre of the *vedi* there is *yajamana*, the microcosm, *Vishnu*, in whom there is life and consciousness. At the center of the universe too there is life and consciousness.

1.6 HINDU SACRAMENTS (SAMSKARAS)

Rites pertaining to the stages of life are called *samskaras*. These *samskaras* are religious acts of purification and they are the ceremonies for sanctifying the body, mind, and intellect of the individual, so that the person may become a full-pledged member of the community. The most important *samskaras* are

- 1) **Garbhadhanam** or conception: seeking the help of the gods to secure a child. Here the husband prays that a child may be conceived. Thus the first dawning of the new life is through the vibration of *mantra*. R.V X. 1xxxv. 21, 22).
- 2) **Pumsavanam:** (Ensuring a male offspring) In the third month of pregnancy it is performed with mantras, R.V 1. i. 3: III V.XXXVII.2 for the forming of male child.
- 3) **Simanthonnayanam** (Parting of the hair) During the pregnancy period, the husband parts the hair of the wife from the front backwards. This is intended to ensure fertility for the wife and exuberance and heroism for the child. It is performed during the seventh month of the pregnancy, with the *Rig Veda mantras* XC xxxi. 10. cl xxx iv.I, II xxx ii . 4-8. These three *samskaras* protect both mother and child in order to shape the developing body.
- 4) **Jata-karmam** (Birth-Ceremony) This is performed immediately after birth. The father breathes three times on the child and then draws in his breath. Here the father welcomes the new born child, praying for its new life,

intelligence, wisdom, and well being, and feeds it with gold, honey, and butter.

- 5) ***Nama-karanam*** or the naming ceremony takes place on the tenth day. Here the name is given to the child according to his own caste.
- 6) ***Nishkramanam***: Taking the child out of the house so that it may see the sun.
- 7) ***Annaprasnam***: The first feeding of the child with solid food (rice) in the sixth month.
- 8) ***Chudakaranam***: The rite of the tonsure ceremony.
- 9) ***Karnavedham***: Piercing of earlobes. By all these ceremonies the young body is constantly guided and guarded.
- 10) ***Vidhyarambam***: It is done at the beginning of the sacred thread ceremony.
- 11) ***Upanayanam*** (Initiation by a teacher): With this sacrament, the stage of youth is said to begin with the life of study. The *Upanayanam* is the ceremony of the investiture with the sacred thread. It is the initiation ceremony, which is the second birth given by the *Acharya*. It constitutes the boy a twice-born. The *Acharya* teaches him the *gayatri mantra* and gives him a staff. He is a *brahmachari* who is bound to lead a life of chastity or celibacy.
- 12) ***Samavartanam***: It is done at the return of the student to his parental home which was preceded by many rites and offerings. Before this sacrament, the student offers the teacher a gift and he receives permission to take a formal bath, which marks the close of his pupilage. He then returns home and performs this *Samavartanam*. After this ceremony he is called a *Snataka*, one who is ready to marry and enter into the household state.
- 13) ***Vivaha (Marriage)***: The priests of the families of the bride and bridegroom make the *ajya* oblation into the domestic fire. The bridegroom grasps the hand of the bride (*Pani-Grahanam*). The bridegroom then leads the bride thrice around the fire and then makes her step on a stone, which is symbolic of steadfastness. Then many offerings to the fire are made. The most vital ceremony is the *Sapta-Padi* (seven steps), which the couple take together in the northern direction. This is symbolic of their friendly co-operation in life. After the wedding, the couple pass three nights taking part in special sacrifices, and following abstinence and charity. With certain rites on the fourth day they are allowed to have marital relations (*Garbhadhana*).
- 14) ***Antyesti or Funeral Rights*** Cremation is the *Vedic* rule. Burial is allowed in the case of children less than two years of age. The main features of the cremation ceremony are the following: the dead body is taken to the *smasana* and placed on the funeral pyre. The wife of the deceased is then made to lie down on the pyre by the side of the dead. Some close relative of the husband then makes her rise from the pyre with the *Rig Vedic* stanza x. 18.8. According to the *Rig Veda*, a goat and a cow are sacrificed and burned together with the dead body. When the dead body is being burned, the dead man is addressed with the *Rig Vedic* verses, X.147, 8. 10-14, 17. 3-6, 18. 10-13, exhorting him to go forth by those

ancient paths where the fathers of old have gone, to meet the two kings *Yama* and *Varuna*, and to gather himself to the fathers, to leave all blemish behind, to run past the four-eyed brindled dogs – the two sons of *Sarama*, etc. Then on the tenth day the bones are gathered in an urn and deposited in a pit. The deceased is addressed with the verse: approach the mother earth R.V. X.I xxxv. 21,22. Thus the whole life of the *Aryan* is thus guarded from conception to cremation.

1.7 IMPORTANT HINDU VIRTUES

Ahimsa (non-violence), *samyam* (control of mind and senses), tolerance of different beliefs, opinions, religious traditions and persons, hospitality, compassion, protection, respect for all living beings and for the sanctity of life, wisdom to sort out right and wrong, austerity, celibacy, honesty, cleanliness, and charity.

Manu Smriti (*Manu*, VI, 92) prescribes the tenfold system of virtuous duties: Contentment; abstention from injury to others; resistance to sensual appetites; abstinence from theft and illicit gain; purity, chastity and cleanliness; coercion of passions; acquisition of knowledge; acquisition of divine wisdom; veracity, honest and fidelity; and freedom from wrath and hatred.

1.8 LET US SUM UP

Hinduism, one of the most ancient religions in the world, has the dynamics of being traditional yet allowing itself to be innovative, largely accommodative, and inclusive of many religious traditions. The scope and range of Hinduism as a religious tradition are too vast to be confined in strict structures of formulated creed, a specific code, fixed sacred texts, or regulated ritual practices. As a peculiar amalgamation of various sectarian faith traditions with their own specificities, it exhibits an inner dynamism of being largely accommodative in many aspects, and significantly unyielding in the fundamental elements. In the absence of any centralised body of authority and power to decide upon crucial matters, Hinduism has the inner dynamism of being a uniting force. Vedic tradition has rendered itself as offering a main thread, connecting all diverse religious cultures and traditions in India.

1.9 KEY WORDS

Yajna - Vedic idea of sacrifice where the god Agni takes a central stage.

Purusa sukta - Famous Vedic idea of a cosmic sacrifice where a primeval person creates the world through his own sacrifice and dismemberment.

Upanayanam - It is an initiation ceremony for the students by a teacher.

1.10 FURTHER READINGS AND REFERENCES

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