



## One Nation and Many Religions

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### Spirit of Hinduism – Open and Universal

Hinduism postulates that Man's nature is divine and is essentially spiritual. Universal spirit/ consciousness / energy / intelligence / soul / divinity / Jiva / Atman is the essential nature and reality of Man. Man is 'spirit', the body and mind / intellect are only equipment to experience the world phenomena. While some major religions often claim that salvation is possible only through a particular faith, Hinduism accepts other religions as equally true, as will be evident from following statements in Hindu scripture. Truth/God is one; saints and scholars call it/Him by different names. Like water from the sky, falling on earth as rain, take different routes through rivers and rivulets, and finally merge with the ocean, so too all prostrations and prayers – in whatever name and form – reach the same God.

This concept is not just mere theory or an ideal. Sri Ramakrishna demonstrated the universality of religions in practice. He

lived like a Christian, and later as a Muslim, observing their respective rituals, and realised God. He then boldly declared, "whatever be the name and form or method of prayer, one can realise God in all religions". Such a broad minded and liberal view can be found only in a few civilisations or religions.

### World as one Family and Universal Approach

The inventions of Science and Technology (S & T), as seen in the spectacular achievements in space travel and Information Technology in communications, have brought the people of the world closer. TV, Internet and Multimedia have enabled people to understand other cultures better. But unification of people's mind in mutual respect is still a distant dream, an ideal worth striving for. A noteworthy statement in Indian scriptures: *ayaṃ nijah paro veti gaṇanā laghucetasām | udāracaritānām tu vasudhaiva kuṭumbakam || अयं निजः परो वेतिगणना लघु चेतमाम्। उदारचरितानां तु वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्।।* ("It is only the petty-minded who entertain thoughts like 'This person is from my clan.

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This person is an outsider' etc. In contrast, the large-hearted look upon the entire world as their own family.”).

The Indian civilisation declared 5000 years ago, “*Sarve Jana Sukhino Bhavantu*” (सर्वे भवन्तु सुखिनः) (let the whole world and people be happy). Thus, India and Indian Heritage Culture (IHC) can help to unify the minds of the whole of mankind, though adhering to different religions, races and languages.

Religion has been criticised for having divided people. Throughout history, people fought inter-religious battles in various parts of the world. In the name of Christ, who taught mankind to love even enemies, crusades were fought. Though India was attacked about 70 times (as per one historian), Indian soldiers did not cross her borders to conquer other countries. Similarly, though Christianity and Islam converted others, Hindus did not practise proselytization. This ideal of Hinduism can perhaps help inter-faith dialogue, understanding and harmony. Swami Vivekananda pointed out the universal approach of Hinduism in his historical address at the World Congress of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893. Since then, many Indian spiritual teachers have been following this approach and ideal of Hinduism of promoting unity of mankind in India and abroad. In the Satya Sai Ashrams, thousands of devotees from all parts of the world congregate to have his darshan. Festivals of most religions are observed in Sai Ashrams. Jesus is worshipped as an incarnation and this phenomenon is unique. People of various races and religions pray and sing together the glory of one God, known by different names. The Sai emblem shows the logo of all religions. Other religions

and their teachers do not show such benign universality.

There is apprehension that a spiritual approach can easily be turned communal by vested interests, creating inter-religious conflicts. Though Hindus form about 80% of the population. India established a secular democratic Republic in the true spirit of secular teachings of Vedanta and its profound concepts and bold postulations can be effectively applied in secular life as well.

### **Catholicity of Hinduism**

The universal spirit of Hinduism is manifest in India through the coexistence of several other religions. Besides Hinduism, it has Sikhs, Jains and Budhists religions which originated in the country. Jews, who were driven out of their homeland, were given refuge in India, and also provided with facilities for worship because of the religious tolerance of Kings and people of India and the belief of Hindus that all religions lead to God. Likewise Parsis of the ancient Zoroastrian religion of Persia (Iran) were given refuge in India, Christianity came to India before it went to Europe. They were given freedom to worship, preach and practice. All sects of Christianity have established in India. Islam came to India through the Malabar coast by travelling from the Arab countries. The Hindu Kings welcomed them as they believed Islam is another religion and another path to God. It is a recognised historical fact that the Cheraman Perumal, the then ruler of United Kerala embraced ‘Islam’ and lived in ‘Mecca’. He and his successors gave support to the Muslim traders and priests by

giving land and properties to build mosques. But in the northern States of India, many Islamic conquerors forcibly converted people to Islam. But the Sufi Muslim mystics were welcomed. More recently the Bahai (World religion) followers received asylum in India, when persecuted in Iran. The largest Bahai Temple is in Delhi. The acceptance of such diversity is explicable only through the open tradition, and the catholicity of Hinduism. Let us now consider other religions born in India (Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism) which are a part of India's heritage and culture.

### **Buddha**

Buddha was born in 566 BC and died at the age of 80 in 406 BC. Buddha was born on the full moon day of Vaisakha (which falls in May-June). His attainment of enlightenment at the age of 35 and death at the age of 80 also took place on full moon day. Buddha preached compassion to all living beings.

The essence of Buddhism is contained in the first sermon, which he preached to the first five disciples at Sarnath, 10 Km from Varanasi. This sermon is called the Sermon of the Turning Wheel. This contains the four Noble Truths and the noble Eight Fold Path or the Middle Path.

Buddha spoke of the four Noble Truths which are: Life is suffering; Suffering is caused by human desires; Renunciation of desire is the path to freedom and This Freedom (Nirvana) is possible through the Eight-fold Path.

The way to Nirvana, freedom from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth is achieved by following the Noble Eight-fold Path,

namely : 1) Right understanding (insightful understanding of things as they really are), 2) Right thoughts (Thoughts based on renunciation, loving-kindness-compassion), 3) Right speech (Truthful, kindly, gentle and meaningful), 4) Right Action (Reverence for life, honesty and sexual propriety), 5) Right Livelihood (Abstaining from livelihood that brings harm to other beings), 6) Right Effort (Avoiding or overcoming evil things and of developing wholesome thoughts), 7) Right mindfulness (Active, watchful mind), 8) Right concentration (Concentration or one-pointedness of mind).

Buddha did not speak of a supreme creator God. Buddha did not encourage speculation on the origin and end of the world. He preached compassion. He laid stress on purity of conduct, clarity, calmness of mind development of wisdom and leading a life of virtue. Buddha advocated Ahimsa (non-violence), welfare of animals, protection of plant life and ecological preservation.

Swami Vivekananda said, "Buddha was a true Karma Yogi, selfless philosopher". Buddha is the only prophet who said, "I do not care to know your various theories about God. What is the use of discussing all the subtle doctrines about the soul? Do good and be good. And this will take you to freedom and whatever truth there is. He was absolutely without personal motives; a selfless soul spreading awareness about the right path to tread in life."

Buddhism spread to Sri Lanka and the East – Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, China and Japan. But Buddhism did not destroy local cultures, and coexisted along

with Confucianism, Taoism and Shintoism. Buddhism enjoyed a long existence in India. However, Sanathana Dharma – another name for Hinduism has the capacity of absorbing the teachings of other religions. “*āno bhadra krtavo yantu vishwatah*” (आ नो भद्राः कर्तवो यन्तु विश्वतः). Also the philosophy that all religions are different paths to God. Hinduism also accepted Buddha as another incarnation of God and absorbed Buddhism. This led to the decline of Buddhism in India. The resurgence of Hinduism with philosophical modes of thought and the Bhakti movement were other causes for decline of Buddhism in India. Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there has been an increase in the number of Buddhists, particularly in Maharashtra, as a result of conversion from Dalits. The inspiration for this came from Dr B R Ambedkar, who became a Buddhist.

### **Jainism**

Mahavira, the founder of Jainism, was born in 540 BC and died in 468 BC. Like Buddha he was born a prince, married and had a daughter but his real interest lay in the quest for salvation. At the age of 30, when his parents passed away, he left his home to lead the life of an ascetic. For 12 years he wandered from place to place, begging for food, meditating and subjecting his body to austerities of all kinds. At first he wore a single garment which he never changed; but after some months he discarded it also. In the thirteenth year of his ascetism, Mahavira found full enlightenment and Nirvana. He became a Jina, a victor over his own passions. His teaching led to the rapid spread and organisation of the Jainas or Jains as they are now called.

The core of Jain ethics is the doctrine of Ahimsa or non-violence that is non-injury to

all living beings. Ahimsa signifies love all creatures and forbids any harm being caused to any living being. In its insistence on non-violence Jainism goes much further than other Indian religions. Jain monks usually carry a feather duster to brush ants and other insects from their path and save them from being trampled upon. They wear veils over their mouths to prevent minute living beings in the air being inhaled and killed. This emphasis on non-violence has prevented Jains from taking to agriculture as a profession since cultivation involves killing insects and pests. Thus Jains have confined themselves to commercial activities and have become money lenders. Jainism does not proselytise. There may be five million Jains now. In their zeal of love for animals, they maintain hundreds of Goshalas, where cattle and buffaloes are maintained after their productive life is over. They actively oppose slaughter of animals for meat. Jains donate liberally for animal welfare activities. Jains are strict vegetarians. The whole world owes a great deal to Jainism for advocating vegetarianism. Jains have contributed greatly to India's cultural heritage Principles of Ahimsa, Compassion and Charity and co-existence in harmony with other religions. They have also contributed to growth of Indian economy, industries, architecture, education and health care.

### **Sikhism**

The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak (1469-1539) was born to a small Hindu farmer-trader and village revenue official in a place later named Nankana Sahib. It is not far from Lahore in Pakistan. Nanak married early and had two sons. One morning while bathing in a rivulet flowing by the town of

Sultanpur where he worked as a keeper of the grain store, he had a Divine revelation.. Thereafter, emerging from the rivulet he went into the town and the first words he uttered were: “There is no Hindu, there is no Mussalman.” For the next 24 years, Guru Nanak, accompanied by Mardana, a Muslim follower, travelled all over India, spreading his message of love, faith, truth and equality. He visited Hindu centres of pilgrimage. He visited Muslim centres also, both in India and abroad, going as far as Mecca and Baghdad.

Contrary to the medieval Indian practice of renouncing the world for spiritual elevation, Guru Nanak believed that the world is worth living in. He believed that it is possible to live pure amid the impurities of life. To practice his teaching of equality, Guru Nanak started the institution of langar (a community kitchen), in which all had to sit in line without distinction of high and low, rich and poor, etc. while they were fed. Guru Nanak preached strict monotheism and described the creator as Ikk, one without a second. Guru Nanak was succeeded by nine other Gurus. The tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, revolutionised the Sikh faith and transformed it into a militant faith. He founded the Khalsa (the pure), the Sikh brotherhood. His first five disciples were given new names and a suffix “ Singh”, meaning “lion” or “lion-hearted”.

The Guru Granth Sahib is the holy book of Sikhism. It was compiled by the Guru Arjan, the fifth Guru. It contains the hymns of all five Gurus, some excerpts from ‘Devi Mahatmyam’, Markandeya Purana of ancient India as well as some precepts from Baba Farid of Pakpattan, the Muslim mystic.

There is no priesthood in Sikhism. The Sikh temple is called the Gurudwara. The only object of veneration in the Gurudwara is the Guru Granth. No idols or images are permitted inside a Gurudwara. The Guru Granth is enthroned on a high seat or pedestal, under a canopy. The congregation takes place in the presence of the Guru Granth and the official could be anyone from those present, who holds a whisk in his hand which he keeps swinging in veneration. The Holy volume is opened ceremoniously in the early hours of the morning after *ardas* or supplication and the first hymn on the left hand page is read to obtain what is called the Vak or the day’s lesson or order. At the end of the evening service the Holy Book is closed again after a short prayer and put to rest for the night.

### **Christianity**

The coming of Christianity to India in the first century AD is associated with the legend of St. Thomas, who is believed to have arrived in Malabar (part of present – day Kerala) on the West Coast in AD 52. He was welcomed by the Hindu Kings. After establishing a number of Christian Churches along the coast, he travelled overland to the East coast to a place near Madras (Chennai) city, where he preached and spread the new religion. It is believed that he died in AD 68 at Mylapore in the vicinity of Madras. His tomb is in a cathedral on St. Thomas Mount in Madras.

Following *Vasco da Gama’s discovery of India for trade with Portugal, several other European countries such as Spain, France, Holand (Dutch) and British (East Indian Company) came to India for trade. The traders were welcomed by the costal Indian*

*kings and other rulers and assisted them with land and facilities for settlements and religious practice. They also spread Christianity by Missionaries and through various means including in some places using monetary and other inducements, and also by the Portuguese and British/French rulers for political advantages. The Hindu kings/ or rulers and priestly class were generally tolerant, because of the Hindu belief that all religions are pathways to God. The then prevalent caste system in the practice of Hinduism also became a major reason for people belonging to lower castes to get converted. While Hindus disseminated based on caste system within the Hindu community, Christians and Muslims were accepted in the Society as equals. The Syrian Church, and its adherents, the Syrian Christians, are concentrated on the West Coast of India in Kerala. Elsewhere in India, Roman Catholics and Protestants have a strong presence. Christians, Missionaries and religious authorities contributed richly to India through education, healthcare and infrastructure development.*

### **Zoroastrianism**

The Zoroastrians, known also as Sun worshippers are the followers of Zoroaster, the great prophet of Persia (Iran), who lived about 700 years before Christ and founded a religion and guided people to worship the one and only one God, whom ordinary humans cannot see, but could be seen through the all powerful Sun, the sustainer of life on earth. He advocated good against evil and promoted ethical living, generating wealth and welfare for the society. However, when Islam established itself in Persia, they were converted forcibly or executed. Many escaped to India and

other countries. India welcomed the Persians (known later as Parsis in India). There was a large exodus of Parsis to India in the period of AD 785 onwards. The Hindu Kings, known for their tolerance of other religions and beliefs that all religions are pathways to the one and only one God, welcomed the Parsis and gave them refuge. One interesting story is said about a Raja. In Gurarat in AD 785 a group of Zoroastrians reached Sangam, a small fishing village on the West Coast of Gujarat where the local Hindu Raja gave them shelter. The Raja then asked them what they wanted. They asked for freedom of worship and freedom to bring up their children in their own tradition. The Raja asked them what they would do for the country of their adoption in return. The high priest asked for a bowl to be filled with milk. He then stirred a spoonful of sugar in the bowl and asked, "Do you see the sugar in the bowl of milk?" All shook their heads. "Sir", said the priest, "We shall strive to be like this insignificant amount of sugar in the milk of your human kindness." Today the Parsis form a numerically small, but vibrant community who have contributed to the country as captains of industry like J. N. Tata and J R D Tata, Ardeshir Godrej, scientists like Dr. Homi Jehangir Bhabha and Dr Homi Sethna; and Zubin Mehta, renowned orchestral conductor.

### **Islam**

The coming of the Arabs, Turks and Afghan traders brought a new religion – Islam – which was founded in Makkah (Arabia) by the Prophet Mohammed, who was born in the year AD 570. The Prophet preached the unity of God, who is one and unique, and who has no partner and no equal. The

strict monotheism of Islam contrasted with the polytheism of Hinduism which allowed worship of 'Ishta Devatas' (favourite Gods), in various forms and names for the common people in general to make worship of God easy for all except the highly enlightened who can realise God as 'one formless energy, capable of human or any shape out of love and compassion as per the desire of the devotees'. The Islamic idea of the Unity of God was most strictly forceful. It refused to give God shape or form; but gave God positive attributes by calling him the Great Provider (Al Razzaq), Ruler of the Universe (Rabb-ul Aalameen), Merciful and Just (Al-Rahman, al Raheem) and the final arbiter of human actions (Malik – I – Yawmiddeen – Master of the Day of Reckoning). Islam came to India not with the Arab conquerors of Sind, as believed by some, but through the Arab sailors of the spice trade on the Malabar Coast. The great ruler of the Region, Cheraman Perumal built a mosque, the oldest in India. He converted to Islam, abdicated and went to Mecca (8<sup>th</sup> century A.D.). Later many rulers of the Malabar Coast welcomed and supported the traders, gave them land and place for worship and recruited them for their Naval brigade. There has also been innumerable forced conversions in North India by invaders/ conquerors and Muslim Rulers.; But the Hindu belief that God can be worshiped in any form and name and that all religions are pathways to the only 'one' God, has an inbuilt tolerance to all religions. Largely due to this the Hindu and Indian Muslims (converted and the next generations) lived in harmony in India and fought for independence of India from the British. Arabs and Moghuls contributed richly to India's cultural and economic growth and development. Although

Mahatma Gandhi and Muslim leaders such as Moulana Abdul Kalam Azad wanted freedom for an undivided India, this did not happen. India got divided as Pakistan – a Muslim Nation and the India (the remaining part) as a Hindu majority, but a secular Nation, in the true spirit of Hindu culture, and philosophy, '*Vasudaiva Kutumbakam*' (वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्) ( World is one family).

### The Sufis

Apart from the Muslims who came as traders, the influence of Islam came with the arrival of mystics from Persia. The Sufis, as they were called settled initially in Sind and Punjab from where their teaching spread to the Deccan and Bengal. Sufism in India began its real history with the arrival of Kwaja Muin-uddin Chisthi. He was born in Sistan in about 1142 and was educated in leading intellectual centres in Eastern Persia. He arrived in Delhi in 1206 and moved on to Ajmer by the end of the year. He died in 1236 in Ajmer. In the history of Sufism in India, Muin-uddin Chisthi's name and shrine are unrivalled. Hundreds of thousands of pilgrims visit his shrine each year during his *Urs*. His shrine greatly increased in importance from the time Akbar began to make his pilgrimage there. Other Muslim emperors followed suit, and left an impressive shrine in honour of the saint. Ajmer became leading Muslim pilgrim centre in North India. Among Sufi mystics who influenced Indian Heritage, mention must be made of Baba Farid Shakkar Ganj's 'Treacle Trove' whose verses find a place in the Adi Granth. Sufi saints and scholars considered different faiths as different paths to the same and one God. The Sufi poet and philosopher, Kabir was a saint to Muslims, Hindus and

Sikhs alike, and his philosophy was similar to the *Isavsyopanishadic* thought of Unity of God, although called by different names by different faiths.

## JEWS

Yet another religious community, which forms part of the religions and cultural mosaic of India, are the Jews who first came to Kerala as traders well before the Christian era. Later they came as refugees, and in the first century AD, there was a large settlement in Cochin. According to Christian tradition, when St. Thomas arrived on the West Coast, he was received by a Jewish girl. Forty Jews agreed to be baptized by him and entered the Christian fold. But the majority stuck to their faith. A further ancient community of Indian Jews, the Beni Israel, has lived for many centuries on the West Coast and is now centred in Bombay (Mumbai). With the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, many Indian Jews migrated to Israel, leaving only a remnant behind in India. Members of the Jewish community, who have achieved eminence, include: Ruby Myers whose screen name was Sulochana, one of the highest paid film stars in the early days of the Indian film industry; David, veteran character actor; Major General J. F. R. Jacob,

Chief of Staff of the Eastern Command during the 1971 war and Nissim Ezekiel, poet.

## Bahai

The Bahai Religion is perhaps the latest attempt and youngest religion / faith founded in Persia (Iran) in Mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to spread the philosophy that all religions are leading to the only one God, although one refers to God by different names. Bahai Religion advocated universal religious tolerance and acceptance of all religions, Oneness of Mankind. The faith was designed to be a universal/world religion embracing all faiths, adoption of a universal language, abolition of extremes of wealth and poverty, institution of a World Tribunal for adjudication of disputes between Nations and establishment of Universal (World) peace. However, there was considerable resistance and persecution from the Clergy and Government, and many followers migrated to different parts of the world. India welcomed the migrants wholeheartedly. The largest Bahai temple in the world is in Delhi.

## Reference:

1. "Prof. N.S.R. – His thought, his ideas" – published by Indian Heritage Academy. [www.heritage.cartman.co.in](http://www.heritage.cartman.co.in)



**YOU ARE STRONG WHEN YOU KNOW YOUR WEAKNESSES.  
YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL WHEN YOU APPRECIATE YOUR  
FLAWS. YOU ARE WISE  
WHEN YOU LEARN FROM YOUR MISTAKES.**