

Transcending Religious Identity**Religious Studies**

Keywords: Religion, transcendence, Sanatana Dharma, Hinduism, hypocrisy, divisiveness.

Vijay Kumar Roy

Associate Professor of English, Department of English & Modern European Languages, University of Allahabad, Prayagraj-211002, UP, India

Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the evolution of religion and its relevance in contemporary society. It focuses on the journey of Sanatana Dharma, popularly known as Hinduism: how misbalance in religious and sociocultural life led it to divisive nature, and becoming a victim of hypocrisy and blind faith resulting in repulsion; how it became a strong political tool; how it affects identity of people; and why people prefer to be called humanists instead of being its followers in order to transcend their religious identity. The theories of the origin of religion have been explored along with some religious scriptures and their cultural significance in order to better understand the present relevance of religion.

1. Introduction

Religion undergoes an evolution process before it propounds a certain way of living. Its beliefs and practices depend on the geographical conditions of the followers. Even the scriptures of a religion have geographical influence. Many times the practices of the followers of the same religion differ from one place to another due to geographical condition. But in India there is a saying, “What you eat, so you become.” This proverb has become irrelevant today in the same way as that of “Eat an apple a day and keep the doctor away.” Religious identity has become a political tool; therefore, it does not attract the people of all socio-economic sections. The rise of education plays an important role in it. The dominance of hypocrisy and blind-faith has maligned the image of Sanatana Dharma/Hinduism so much that people hesitate to say and write the name of their religion. They prefer to be called humanists because no religion is left from blemish (“The Amsterdam Declaration”; “Humanism”). Such ideology makes them non-believers or atheists in the eyes of others but on the other hand they retreat into the original religion or true religion, away from hypocrisy and blind faith.

2. The Theories of the Origin of Religion

The Encyclopedia of World Religions (EWR), in the section of ‘animism’, mentions the theory of the origin of religion propounded by Edward Burnett Tylor in his ‘epoch-making book’ *Primitive Culture* “that animism—the belief in spirits—was the origin of religion.” (*EWR*, 2007, p. 20) It means, the belief system of a religion is primarily based on ‘belief in spirits’. Spirit is ‘a supernatural being’ as explained by Merriam Webster dictionary. Thus supernatural element plays an important role in religion, and actions of a supernatural being validate a religion and help in spreading it. The second theory came from R. R. Marett, another anthropologist, who suggests that before ‘animism’ there was ‘preanimism or DYNAMISM’. This earliest stage of religion had “not so much belief as emotional awe in the presence of an impersonal force, something like religious

electricity.” (EWR, 2007, p. 20) The third theory of the origin of religion came from W. Robertson Smith, who suggests ‘totemism’ as ‘the earliest religion’ (EWR, 2007, p. 20). Josef Haekel in *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines ‘totemism’ as a “system of belief in which humans are said to have kinship or a mystical relationship with a spirit-being, such as an animal or plant.” He further clarifies, “The entity, or totem, is thought to interact with a given kin group or an individual and to serve as their emblem or symbol” (Haekel, 2022).

The concept of ‘totem’ is very convincing to the Hindus as they protect and worship some animals (as ‘sacred cows’) and plants/trees (as sacred *tulsi* and *peepal*) having religious ‘relationship’ with them. Hindu gods and goddesses are also associated with animals, birds, plants, and flowers. Lord Vishnu is portrayed as resting on *Shesha Naga* (an enormous serpent) and riding on *Garuda* (eagle). Goddess Durga’s ride is lion. Goddess Lakshmi is shown riding on an owl. Goddess Saraswati’s rides are swan and peacock, and she holds a lotus flower in her hand. Lord Shiva is depicted holding snakes in His neck, and *Nandi* (a sacred bull) is His ride. In the sacred epic *Ramayana*, monkeys have been described as the army of Lord Rama who helped Him defeat *Ravana*. Hanuman, a deity with the head of a monkey and body of a human being, is known as the great devotee of Rama, and Hindus worship Him. The same belief is with the deity Ganesh, whose head is of an elephant and body of a human being. Peepal tree, tulsi (holy basil), cows, snake all are worshipped by the Hindus. Even harvest festivals (MakarSankranti, Baisakhi, Lohri, Bihu, BasantPanchami, Pongal and Onam) validate the concept of ‘totem’.

The fourth theory came from James George Frazer who “hypothesized that a stage of MAGIC had preceded religion.” (EWR, 2007, p. 20) This is also convincing to Indians as even today people believe in exorcism and it is practised in rural pockets. Magic show was also very popular in India, particularly in fairs. Today it has lost its popularity (Ghosh, 2019). Kesteven and Fegan refer to the book *Empire of Enchantment: The Story of Indian Magic* (2018), written by Zubrzycki, and write that “Indian magic has a strong link to religion, specifically Hinduism”. “Zubrzycki says that magic in India goes as far back as 3500 BC, to the HarappanCivilisation, where people used talismans, amulets and charms.” Zubrzycki also writes in the same book that “There is evidence of Indian fortune tellers in the Roman Empire” (Kesteven and Fegan, 2018).

Though Wilhelm Schmidt rejected all these theories of the origin of religion and then the fifth theory of “primal MONOTHEISM” came out that was called the “first religion” that “had been the belief in a high god” (EWR, 2007, p. 20). Again all these five theories of the origin of religion were rejected by the anthropologists and they termed them as “misleading” but the first theory of Tylor continued its influence, and ‘Animism’ was called ‘paganism’, ‘heathenism’, and ‘savagery.’ (EWR, 2007, p. 20) There might be so many other theories too, but religion as ‘a set of beliefs’ remained more convincing to all. The beliefs might have developed due to natural calamities and fear from other kinds of ‘tragedies’ in early age and “the earliest human beings” might have chosen the ways to please invisible powers and natural phenomena with a hope of being spared from misfortunes. Such beliefs might also be the reason of strengthening relationship

between humans and natural objects. Ojowuro, in his book, *The Crisis of Religion*, writes that there is no “accuracy, how the first religion had ... evolved” (2010, pp. 21-22) but “the earliest human beings” “would have devised some ways and means to appease the powers they ... envisioned as the controllers of these natural tragedies, [in order] to guarantee the protection of their life from its disastrous rage” (Ojowuro, 2010, p. 24; also qtd. by van der Walt and Potgieter, 2012). The ‘powers’ associated with different natural objects might have been termed deities.

Coming to the practical relevance of belief system, Hinduism, being the oldest and the third largest religion of the world, was not founded by a single person. Its origins are unknown and it is called Sanatana Dharma (Eternal Religion). More than 90% of Hindus live in India but their traditions vary from place to place and they live and share beliefs of all other religions (O’Reilly, 2022).

3. Misbalance in Religious and Sociocultural Life

Sanatana Dharma has more than one religious scripture, so is the belief of its followers. These scriptures are understood as “classical texts”; but there is a “wide gap between the ideas found in classical texts and the beliefs” of the common masses (Pattanaik, 2003, p.4). The “ideas” in the “classical texts” “came to be seen as the” “high,” “pure,” “true,” “classical,” and “greater” “Hindu religion” but “beliefs” “qualified as” “low,” “corrupt,” “fallen,” “folk,” and “lesser.” (Qtd. by Pattanaik, 2003, p.4) Through these observations of Al Beruni, a tenth-century Arab scholar, and of the Europeans, Devdutt Pattanaik corroborates the reality of the Hinduism. For the Europeans, “tantric texts” were “lower” and India was a land of witchcraft. The Europeans also found “scriptural foundation” in the upper caste people that “the lower castes” were prohibited from (Pattanaik, 2003, p.4). Such misbalance in sociocultural life of Indians gave rise to blind-faith; though the propagators of blind-faith did not come from “the lower caste” social structure but from the upper caste. Women were more religious-victims. “Some myths, including stories from the BIBLE, subtly or blatantly consign women to subordinate positions. The same is true of many stories told by early Buddhists. Women have suffered from rituals as well, such as SATI (widow burning) in traditional Hinduism” (*The Encyclopedia of World Religions*, 2007, p.148.) Tulsi’s *Sri Ramacharitamansa* (2019), a religious text, more popular in the Northern India, has description of ghosts, and some controversial verses about women (Sundara-Kanda, Couplet 58, quatrain 3, etc.) besides the many revered ones. However, it succeeded in establishing its popularity in society and it is the most recited sacred book. The same author wrote *Hanuman Chalisa* which is also recited and listened by the people with full reverence. Its one of the popular couplets is: “Yugsahastrajojan par Bhanu/ Leelyotahimadhurphaljanu” (lines 43-44; Chaupai 18). These lines are discussed and made believe by the preachers that Hanuman, in his childhood, swallowed the Sun, thinking it as a sweet fruit. The most striking thing is the distance from the earth to the Sun and its composition. There are numerous examples of what Indian society is injected with but they are not openly and scientifically discussed due to political reasons. Such factors do not allow new knowledge to enter Indian culture. Therefore, the original *Ramayana* by

Valmiki could not create equal space in society as did *SriRamacharitamansa*. Though Valmiki is known as the foremost poet. Also there is a character of Shabari, an old woman devotee of Rama belonging to a tribal community, whose treatment with Rama is always forgotten in social discussion and mainstream media but the image of angry Rama, ready with the bow and arrow to dry the sea, has been put in the minds of Indians. The similar hypocrisy is there in the worship of goddesses but not a single girl-child was sent to *gurukul*, the ancient education system, except an idol of goddess Saraswati made available there. Why and how Sambuk, a Shudra ascetic in the *Ramayana* (Uttar-Kanda, Chapters 75-76), was killed and why this incident is kept away from the public debates. All these seek attention of progressive society. One of the most important reasons of sociocultural misbalance is appropriation of controversial religious verses, and reverence of a particular social group. This is how the rise of hypocrisy and blind faith led Indian society to divisive nature.

4. Religious and Philosophical Implications

The Bhagavad Gita (2000) (popularly used as *Gita*) is the most revered scripture in Hinduism. It is said to be the words of Lord Krishna and a religious as well as a philosophical book. It is considered the essence of the Vedas (*Gita* 9.17; 10.22; 15.15). It has the gems of knowledge and is the ocean of peace and happiness. This scripture suggests that there is one God, the Absolute. Lord Krishna says to Arjuna: “There is nothing whatsoever higher than Me, O Arjuna! All this is strung on Me as clusters of gems on a string.” (*Gita* 7.7) This book is the source of true religious path to attain ‘self-knowledge’, ‘self-realisation’ and eternal bliss. It teaches us that true religion is righteousness. Lord Krishna says: “Whenever there is a decline of righteousness, O Arjuna, and rise of unrighteousness, then I manifest Myself!” (*Gita* 4.7) The “decline of righteousness” results in the “rise of unrighteousness”. Merriam Webster dictionary defines “righteousness” as “morally right and justifiable”. In practical life “righteousness” cannot be defined in several ways, and “unrighteousness” cannot be justified. Further Lord Krishna says: “For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the wicked, and for the establishment of righteousness, I am born in every age.” (*Gita* 4.8) There are many translators and commentators of *Gita* in different languages. In English, most of them use the word ‘righteousness’ for ‘dharma’ (religion). It means religion is meant for righteousness.

Though instead of spreading its message to the masses, other stories got rooted in the minds of people due to several reasons; one of them is to keep them away from true knowledge and true religion (‘righteousness’). Generally Hindu families do not compel their children to read religious texts. They advise the children to chant some mantras after taking bath in the morning but not compulsorily. According to Hinduism, the purpose of true religion is to achieve *moksha* (salvation) – free from the cycle of death and rebirth. Western philosophy also promulgates that “The purposes of the practice of a religion are to achieve the goals of salvation for oneself and others” (Swinburne, 2007, p.159). But in practical, the characteristics of a true religion are not found in religious practices today. Personal, social, spiritual, and constitutional values are missing in society. Blind faith and materialism dominate religions. “Unless applied to our daily life,

religious knowledge has not much relevance. Religious values like *karuna*-mercy, *ahimsa*-nonviolence, *satyam*-truthfulness, *titiksha*-forbearance, etc. are increasingly neglected in the world today.” (Singh, 2015, p.14) Instead of filtration and purification of religious practices, recently ‘religious extremism’ and ‘hate crimes’ have increased (Sahgal, 2021; The Hindu Bureau, 2024). Religions have failed to develop universal brotherhood, equality, justice, and liberty.

A religion is considered to have civilizing and uniting forces even in state of diversity. But Hindus, being divided into four *varnas* (social classes: *Brahmin*, *Kshatriya*, *Vaishya*, and *Shudra*; and numerous sections and subsections among them), do not come out from the deep rooted social evils like casteism. It was not easy for the *Shudra*, lowest in hierarchy, to enter temples and worship there. Even education was out of their reach. They were not allowed to read religious texts. Called untouchable by so called upper castes, social criticism and torments were their fate. (Bose, 2005; Shepherd, 2023) The life and works of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar are often recommended for such examples. Shudras also remained away from constitutional rights. Mandakranta Bose and Kanchalliah Shepherd in their writings have elaborated on the fate of the Shudras. However, Tylor calls Indian religion as “the great Asiatic systems” but it is used as a political tool for social hierarchy so that the so called upper castes choose the way out to be always respected by others: “they lie too low for interest and even for respect.” (Tylor, 1920, p.22)

Though, the rise of education in India saw radical changes in society in which political leaders played pivotal roles and awakened the marginalized sections to speak for their constitutional rights in which reservation was one of them meant “for the advancement of the historically depressed and socially backward sections of the society” (Suri, 1994, p.37). They also warned the common masses to understand the thousands of years of slavery under the privileged class in which religious dogmas kept the marginalized class away from the mainstream. The voice came from throughout the country and social and political scenarios changed but still there are various hurdles before them to enjoy justice, liberty, equality, and social prestige (Patnaik, 1985; Modern Slavery in India, 2023; Issues of Social Justice).

5. Conclusion

This study has examined different theories of the origin of religion and how Sanatana Dharm gets its connection with them, and its followers live and share beliefs of all other religions but deep-rooted social evils and religious hypocrisies have overshadowed this oldest religion of the world consequently people feel happy to be called humanists instead of being associated with it.¹

¹ **Declaration:** This is the revised version of the paper presented at International Conference on Cross-Religious Exchanges in Eastern Indian Cultural and Literary Traditions organised by KIIT School of Language & Literature, Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology (Deemed to be University), Bhubaneswar, Odisha, India, Feb. 15-17, 2024.

References

1. Humanists UK. (n.d.). *Humanism*. <https://humanists.uk/humanism/>
2. Department of Legal Affairs, Government of India. (n.d.). *Issues of Social Justice: Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes – An Unfinished National Agenda*. <https://legallaffairs.gov.in/>
3. Walk Free. (2023). Global Slavery Index/Country Study: Modern Slavery in India. <https://www.walkfree.org/global-slavery-index/country-studies/india/>
4. Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Spirit. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved August 11, 2024, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/spirit>
5. Humanists International. (n.d.). *The Amsterdam Declaration*. <https://humanists.international/what-is-humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration/>
6. Basu, Deepankar. (2019, January 1). Dominance of Majoritarian Politics and Hate Crimes Against Religious Minorities in India, 2009–2018. *UMass Amherst Economics Working Papers*, 272, 1-82. <https://doi.org/10.7275/15242824>
7. Bose, Mandakranta. (2005, April 20). Why Can't a Shudra Perform Asceticism? Shambukain Three Modern South Indian Plays. *The Ramayana Revisited*, edited by Mandakranta Bose, Oxford Academic, pp.125-148. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195168321.003.0006>
8. Ellwood, Robert S., and Gregory D. Alles, editors. (2007). *The Encyclopedia of World Religions, Revised Edition*, Fact on File.
9. Ghosh, Tanushree. (2019, September 24). Indian Magic History Hasn't Been Fully Explored. *The Indian Express*. <https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/art-and-culture/indian-magic-history-hasnt-been-fully-explored-6022292/>
10. Haekel, J. (2022, September 8). *Totemism*. In *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/totemism-religion>
11. Kesteven, Sophie, and Fegan, Sasha. (2018, August 12). How India's Magic Tricks Shocked and Enchanted the West. *ABC News*. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-08-11/indian-magic-and-how-it-enchanted-the-west/10077740>
12. O'Reilly, David. (2022, March 3). Exploring Religion and Identity Politics. *Pew*. <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/trust/archive/winter-2022/exploring-religion-and-identity-politics-in-india>
13. Ojowuro, A. (2010). *The Crisis of Religion*. Verity Publishers.
14. Patnaik, Utsa, & Dingwaney, Manjari. (Eds.). (1985). *Chains of Servitude: Bondage and Slavery in India*. Sangam Books.
15. Pattanaik, Devdutt. (2003). *Indian Mythology*. Inner Traditions International.
16. Sahgal, Neha, & Research Team. (2021, June 29). Religion in India: Tolerance and Segregation. *Pew Research Centre*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/06/29/religion-in-india-tolerance-and-segregation/>
17. Shepherd, KanchaIlaiah. (2023, August 15). The Right to Religion and the Shudra Predicament: In Conversation with Articles 15 and 16. *The Leaflet*. <https://theleaflet.in/the-right-to-religion-and-the-shudra-predicament/>
18. Singh, T. D. (2005; 2015). *Essays on Science and Religion*. The Bhaktivedanta Institute.

19. Suri, K C. (1994, Jan.-March). Caste Reservations in India: Policy and Politics. *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, 55(1), 37-54. JSTOR. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41855679>
20. Swinburne, R. (2007). The Purpose of Religion. In *Faith and Reason*. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199283927.003.0005>
21. *The Bhagavad Gita*. (2000). (Trans.Sri SwamiSivananda). The Divine Life Society. (All translations used in the paper are from this edition.)
22. The Hindu Bureau. (2024, Updated February 27). 75% of Hate Speech Events. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/75-of-hate-speech-events-in-bjp-ruled-states-report/article67888978.ece>.
23. Tulsidas. (2019). *Sri Ramacharitamanasa*. Gita Press.
24. Tulsidas. *Hanuman Chalisa*. <https://www.indiatemple.org/chalisa-hanuman.php?>
25. Tylor, Edward B. (1871; 1920). *Primitive Culture*. Vol. 1. John Murray.
26. Valimiki. (2063, SakaSamvat). *SrimadValmikia Ramayana*. 30th reprint. Gita Press.
27. van der Walt, Johannes L., & Ferdinand J. Potgieter. (2012). The Origins of Religion as an Historical Conundrum: Pedagogical and Research Methodological Implications and Challenges. *ERIC*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED567071>
28. Wibisono, S., Louis, W. R., and Jetten, J. (2019, November). A Multidimensional Analysis of Religious Extremism. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 1-12 (Article 2560). DOI: <https://www.doi.org.10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02560>
29. Zubrzycki, John. (2018). *Empire of Enchantment: The Story of Indian Magic*. Hurst and Company.