

## **HINDUISM by K M Sen (Pelican 1961)**

*[KM Sen was the father of Amartia Sen and remains a classic by a Hindu author]*

First, Hinduism exhibits wonder and awe at mysteries of existence. Second, Ethical care is born of awareness that all are creatures of the Supreme (therefore kin).

Contains influences of many cultures & has grown organically so it's very complex, but a basic unity of common religious assumptions, & shared behavioural conduct. "Hindu" from River Sindhu (Indus) where advanced culture evident by 2,500BC, with ascetic bathing rituals.

Invasion in 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC of Aryans speaking an ancient Sanskrit, with earthy polytheistic beliefs (*esp Rigveda*) Gods were forces of nature. This melded with Indus asceticism as found in the Vedas.

*Upanishads* (c800BC) centre on *Brahman* (all-pervading) and *Atman* (self) as the same – "Thou art That". All is one and unreality of 'world'.

*Bhagavad-Gita* slightly after *Upanishads* centres on our duty in the world.

All these strands come together around 800 – 500 BC to form present Hinduism.

400BC India is Buddhist under Emperor Ashoka.

Three main ways to reach God:

**Knowledge: *jnana*. Action: *karma*. Devotion: *bhakti*.**

### **SOCIAL IDEALS AND VALUES:**

Four stages of life: 1. *Brahmacarya* – education & discipline. 2. *Garhasthya* householder & worker. 3. *Vanaprashthya* loosening bonds. 4. *Sannyasa* hermit.

Thus loosen association with social life and attain *mukti* - release from reincarnation

So duties differ at different stages.

CASTE – the 'colours' (race?):

*Brahmin*: priests & teachers. *Kshatriya*: Warriors & aristocrats. *Vaisya*: traders.

*Sudra*: servants & cultivators. But actually myriad castes, providing stable system.

CUSTOMS:

*Mandira* Temple. *Pujas* for each god. Festivals for each life stage. Each god representing abstract concepts – Hinduism is an appeal to the imagination.

God is omniscient and in everything. So difference is everywhere in Hinduism.

**DHARMA: does not mean ‘religion’ but ‘civilisation’ to do with nature and behaviour of people. It is more important in Hinduism than belief/religion.** So Hinduism is more conduct than belief. God may appear differently to different people/temperaments and so different ways of meeting God allow divergent beliefs and practices.

### **HISTORY OF HINDUISM:**

**Indus Valley culture Age. Pre 2500 BC** 1917 Discovery of *Mahenjodaro and Harappa* urban culture. Yogis, animism. Some images, meditation. holy places of bathing offering great festive gatherings *Melas* according to astronomical calculation.

**Aryan Vedic Age:** Vedas are (c 2,000 BC) collections of prayers and ritual rubrics. God’s controlled destiny according to the sacrifices offered (usually by throwing onto fire). No images. Most important Rigveda. God’s taken from nature but grows into monotheism: “he is one, but wise men call him by many names.” Oral tradition through Gurus. Aryans were not vegetarian, slaying cows for guests, and open to violence. Developed ‘Forest Schools’, whereas pre-Aryans had holy places. Vedas chary of *Bhakti* devotion

**Upanishad Age:** 800 BC? Centres around *Brahman* (unity being) and *Atman* (soul/self). Through reincarnation person’s Atman is realisation of self. Upanishads replace strict ritual of Vedas with urge towards knowledge and devotion. Great Epic *Mahabharata* strong on human ethics - pacifism *Bhagavad Gita* crucial in this. Krishna dwells on immortality of soul. Cows become sacred probably because of their importance in rural culture.

**Synthesis:** School of Devotion arose in southern Dravidian country. Idols of deities was also non-Vedic, but their worship slowly accepted by Aryan minority as these crude divinities were developed and given overlay of Vedic philosophical content. Non-Vedic gods such as *Ganesha*, *Shiva* (with its phallic lingam) and *Kali* assimilated. **Trilogy occurred: Brahma (creator), Vishnu (preserver) and Shiva (destroyer).**

*Shiva* was fertility, then lord of yogi, Lord of Dance of creation and destruction.

**Puja:** (worship) rather than Vedic sacrifice probably derives from Dravidians.

Yogic Practice of Shakras, Vedic chanting.

### **INFLUENCE OF BUDDHISM & JAINISM:**

Vedic interest in God had been replaced by anthropocentric strains. Vedic hope of pleasant life in heaven challenged by renunciation and selfless work. Transmigration of souls in Upanishads and later questioning of deism. So now in eastern India arose two new contemporaneous religions.

Both anti-Vedic and anti-caste. Both seek escape from cycle of births.

**Jains** added five vows (not kill, lie, steal etc) Vegetarian austerity.

**Buddhism** 6<sup>th</sup> cent BC Guatama Siddhartha. Middle path, non-violence, renunciation, escape from rebirth. State religion under Ashoka in 3<sup>rd</sup> Cent BC. Used parables to teach (assimilated by Hindus) founded universities,

### **THE EPICS:**

The two most famous are the *Ramayana*: just king Rama has wife Sita taken by king of Ceylon. (The culture spreads south) and the *Mahabharata* the great war. They tell us of unified Indian culture and stories behind many practices today, esp *Avatara*, where the Supreme can be appreciated even by the least sophisticated. This is unlike the Upanishadic storm and nature gods. Avatars portray ethics too: -

*Rama*: sincerity, honesty. [*Sita*: chastity, kindness)

*Krishna*: The concept of *Brahman* is the force behind *Krishna* who alternatively speaks as a human being.

Epics also include philosophical discussions – esp in *Gita*. Reinforces Caste but many heroes from lower castes and remarkable women within Patriarchy.

### **SIX SYSTEMS OF PHILOSOPHY:**

Most fully developed by 200 AD. OF the Sutra period come:

*Nyaya*: (logical methods, similar to Aristotle!), *Vaiseshika*: (nature of the world – earth, water, fire, air plus soul and ether. Also accepts personal God) , *Samkhya*: (causation, Light ~ energy ~ darkness, the soul's freedom coming from knowledge),

*Yoga*: (freedom comes not from intellect at all but exercise of mind and body),

*Purva-Mimamsa*: (study of *Dharma* or right action with help of infallible Vedas) ,  
**Vedanta**: (most influential school. World is vast illusion since nothing exists but *Brahman*. However, some hold the world as a manifestation of Brahman. Freedom is oneness of self with the Absolute)

### **BHAKTI & THE DEVOTIONAL SCHOOL:**

The paths of knowledge and karma (religious performance) can feel exclusive so devotion has taken prominence. Love of Supreme Person (not abstraction) “The stone image speaks not, see the Lord within”. Ancient devotional songs. Some unfortunately take love in literal sense.

*Vishnu (black)*: with *Krishna* as incarnation. Sometimes *Rama* also an incarnation.  
*Shiva*: seems non-Aryan origin. Quite a lot of sophistication can be around Shiva.

RAMANANDA (c 1400 AD) Contact with Islamic Sufism enhanced Bhakti schools & Ramananda made it very popular. Beauty of world, open to Sufis. *Hari* God’s name.

### **RECENT TRENDS:**

To stop conversion to Christianity many reforms enacted and old traditions restored. Rammohan Roy (c 1800) offered *Brahmo Samaj*, a Hindu Revivalism. Progressive socially and honouring the Upanishads. Rabindranath Tagore (1861 – 1941) used his poetry to include Outcastes to broaden this vision. Another group (*Arya Smaj*) cried ‘back to the Vedas’. Separate from this intellectual trend was a more *Bhakti* approach of Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1834 – 1886) with few theological implications. Upanishads appeal to intellect, Bhagavad Gita to action (Gandhi)

*The Rest of the book is devoted to long extracts from the Hindu scriptures.*