

## Hinduism ?

Hinduism is one of the oldest religions of the world. It is undoubtedly the oldest of the living religions. Hidden in its layers are traces of many ancient practices that have been erased completely over time from the memories of the earth. Many scholars north of the equator may not agree with these statements because most of them read or believe that the history of the world began in Greece, meandered through medieval Europe and then moved on through the imperialism of Europe and the industrialization of the new world. For them the world beyond the Mediterranean in ancient times was mostly barbaric and where it was civilized was but a poor imitation of the Greek and Roman traditions. While ancient people believed that the earth was flat and lived in little worlds of their own, many educated people in the western world presently think and speak as if the world begins in Europe and ends in America! The European historians of early 20th century grudgingly accepted the period of Indian history as beginning around 2500 B.C. with the supposed origin of its predecessor, the Vedic religion. But this is not true. Hinduism is a much older religion, whose antiquity is difficult to fathom. It is a tradition that evolved out of the amalgamation of numerous cultures and practices, not just Vedic religion. Just as it is very difficult to trace the origin of mankind itself, it is difficult to measure the antiquity of Hinduism

### Is Hinduism a Religion ?

Truly speaking, when we talk of Hinduism, we do not know whether we are talking about a religion, or a group of religions, or a group of beliefs and traditions, some of which are diametrically opposed to each other. This sometimes gives rise to the argument that Hinduism cannot be considered as a religion in the strictest sense of the word, but as a concept that incorporates into itself many religious thoughts and world views.

What do we mean by the word "Hindu" and "Hinduism"?

Hinduism differs from other organized religions in the following aspects:

- It is not based upon a particular founder.
- It is not based upon a particular book.
- It is not controlled by a central institution or authority such as a church or a sangha or association.
- It is not averse to examine and assimilate fundamentally diverse thoughts and beliefs into its system.
- It accepts other religions as various paths to salvation and does not favor organized attempts to proselytize people.
- It has been evolving continuously, through internal reforms and as a reaction to the threats and challenges without.

### **Hinduism is continuation of traditions**

That Hinduism is not a religion in the strictest sense of the word, but an ancient tradition in continuity and in perpetual evolution is an unquestionable fact. To try to define Hinduism is like trying to put the waters of an unfathomable ocean into a small vessel, or to capture the essence of human life in a single word or phrase.

### **Hinduism is an Asvaththa Tree**

With a structured definition we may be able to capture the essential elements of Hinduism and satisfy our intellectual curiosity. But it is highly doubtful if that would justify the significance of a tradition that began in prehistoric times and eventually grew into a complex system of religious thought and beliefs, which we recognize today under the generic name of "Hinduism". And which has been still growing!

Hinduism can be truly called an Asvaththa tree whose roots are above and whose branches are spread throughout below. The roots are the traditions that we inherited from the Rigvedic Aryans or their ancestors. The branches are the various new schools of thought and practices that were incorporated into it during the subsequent periods in history. The trunk is belief in the eternal nature of soul and of supreme God who are central to Hinduism.

### **Hinduism is a way of life**

Hinduism, we are told, is not a religion at all, but a way of life. In a way this is quite true. According to the tenets of Hinduism, life and religion are inseparable. Religion is there every where, like the omnipresent Brahman, dominating and regulating every aspect of human life, infusing it with divine presence and making life more meaningful and purposeful to its followers.

It virtually controls every action of a devout Hindu. Though he has immense freedom to follow a path of his own choice, the invisible hands of religion mould his thinking at every step, making him almost slavish in his mentality towards his or her gods. Beneath his mind religion remains, like a substratum or the bed of a flowing river, influencing all his decisions and actions.

To understand the true nature and significance of Hinduism it is essential to examine the roots of the so called modern Hinduism and at the historical process from which it has emerged in its present shape.

### **An examination of the historical process**

Throughout its entire history, Hinduism was never static. It evolved continuously from stage to stage and went on transforming itself continuously. This was due to the self less and extraordinary contribution by

many scholars, seers, sages, institutions, kings and emperors, over a vast period of time.

By correcting, moulding, modifying, and integrating various aspects of the religion to suit the social, political, material, intellectual and spiritual requirements of the times, these great souls kept the religious lamp shining and vibrating. They provided knowledge and guidance to the multitude of beings, while barbarism and savagery still ruled many parts of the world.

### **Hinduism is like an ocean**

It was they who gave the religion the depth and complexity for which it is known today, making it, as far as possible, acceptable to a great majority of the Indian people. Because of them Hinduism became more or less like an ocean that would absorb every thing that flowed into it from all directions.

Like an ocean it remained stable and firmly entrenched in its place and went on absorbing new knowledge and religious insights from all directions, without losing in the process, its moorings and its original character. It did not compromise on its basic ideals, nor suffered unduly from the process of assimilation and adaptation.

Instead, it grew in strength and capacity, to illuminate and enlighten the ignorant minds, absorbing new thoughts and concepts, without discarding the old, without rejecting what it has already gathered. It integrated both the old and the new in a very peaceful and harmonious way.