THE HINDU ETHOS

ON BEING A HINDU. SIMPLY.

A short introduction to the Hindu religion

Part 3

Sengamalam
The term ‘Hindu’ as we understand it today is of rather recent origin compared to the history of Indian thought. The latter, in fact, pre-dates the former by several centuries. In one of his discourses my father-in-law – a traditional scholar and professor of Sanskrit, Philosophy and English in modern academia – observed: ‘The Indian thought structure is based on experience (as commonly available) ... experience extending to eternity.’ He went on to describe the great Indian thinkers who laid the foundations of what has come to be called ‘Hindu’ philosophy as: ‘Participants in a cosmic symposium on experience on the platform of time’. Their collected reflections constitute the corpus of classical Hindu religious literature, commonly believed to trace their origin to the Veda-s.
A major concern of this thought structure, as perhaps of all religions practised as philosophy, is the reconciliation of the three entities of matter, mind, and deity. The Indian thought structure, over time, has attempted to relate these three entities as co-operating with one another. While the interpretations may be many, it is important that most traditional schools of Indian thought saw harmony and co-operative co-existence in the relationship between the existential reality or the material world and the esoteric unknown or the celestial world.

This received notion of a collaborative cosmos helps the Hindu adherent view the deity, or God, as a positive source of security and support rather than a negative element of fear or a watchdog as it were. Through the centuries, Hindu religious narrative in all its forms – spoken, written, performing arts, sculpture, painting – has repeatedly re-affirmed the reassuring presence of a non-condemnatory God. To my mind, this belief in a non-judgemental God is the bedrock of the Hindu ethos.

But how can one reconcile this claim of a non-condemnatory God with the sermon detailed in the *Bhagavad Gita*, believed to be God’s own word? Doesn’t Krishna, the Gita-acharya, claim that he ‘annihilates
evildoers’ (... vinaashaaya cha dushkruthaam ..)? True, he does. But it is important to remember that he prefaces this declaration with the phrase ‘in order to protect the long-suffering ones’ (paritraanaaya saadhunaam ... – Bhagavad Gita: 4.8). Indeed, time and again the Hindu scriptures draw our attention to the fact that God takes up the cudgels on behalf of the meek and vulnerable. He remains nonchalant when he himself is abused or wounded. However, he cannot tolerate insult or injury to his devotees.

Another distinguishing feature of the Hindu religion is that it does not say: infinity cannot be imagined, and therefore, it should be a subject of acceptance, not cogitation. Rather, the finite mind is allowed to imagine the illimitable divine in an infinite number of ways. By presenting the divine in this manner, the Hindu religion makes it clear that the deity, which is beyond conception, cannot be limited by fallible human faculties. As a consequence, even while in awe of the supernatural ‘other’, who is beginningless (anaadi) and eternal (anantya), the Hindu can still identify with God as someone near and dear to be cherished. Indeed, Hindu scriptural literature celebrates God as one amongst us: He is born to mortals, has siblings and friends, lives, loves, plays and suffers just as if he were one of us. The stories of divine exploits that
pepper Hindu religious literature are not mere assertions of power and virtue, but equally narrations that are enjoyable and endearing: we get a peep into what God eats, how he plays, sings, loves, laughs, cries …!

The Hindu, therefore, perceives the divine at various levels: at one level he is an extrinsic God, residing in a heavenly abode that is beyond the reach of mortals. At another level he is all pervading, present everywhere, suffusing every material thing: Tinier than the smallest atom (anoraneeyana) and bigger than all that space can encompass (mahatomaheeyana). And he ever is intangibly, yet inseparably, fused with every being and every thing – veritably their life breath, their very essence (... karanda sil idandhorum idam thigazh porudorum ... Udan misai uyir ena karandhengum parandhulan ... – Tiruvaimozhi: 1.1.10 & 1.1.7). The devotee can also directly ‘approach’ God as he is found in temples, or simply enjoy the presence of the divine within his own heart.

The inclusive nature of the Hindu ethos can be traced to its most ancient texts. Indeed, to one who studies the religion with an open mind it would be apparent that the belief that everyone and everything is a manifestation of the divine is deeply entrenched. ‘He’s in this pillar that holds
up our palace and in a speck of dust, in you, in me, in it, them, in your very breath and mine .’ the child Prahlada is believed to have told his father, the narcissistic, wicked Hiranyakashipu who, exasperated by his son’s intransigence, barked: ‘Where is this Hari that you speak of? Where is this Hari that you worship against my orders? Where is this Hari whom you venerate when I, the most powerful in all the three worlds, is by your side? Where is this Hari hiding?’ The story of Prahlada finds mention in Bhagavata Purana and also in Vishnu Purana. The Bhagavata is believed to have been authored by Vyasa, who also wrote the Mahabharatha, and the Vishnu Purana is attributed to Vyasa’s father, Parashara. From which older resource Parashara got his story can only be a matter of speculation.

It is worthwhile to note, however, that despite the multiple forms in which a Hindu may ‘see’ God, their overarching conviction is: ‘Just as all waters that pour from the sky ultimately make their way to the ocean, so too worship of all forms of God is but veneration of the same divine being.’ This is the sentiment that finds expression in ancient Hindu thought, as seen in this verse that has its roots in antiquity, which continues to be a commonly recited verse in Hindu households: Aakaashaath pathitham
Lastly, what I would like to call a ‘culture of continuity’ runs through Hindu philosophical thought, not only connecting matter, mind and deity but seamlessly linking past, present and future; life and after-life; and explaining dualities and differences. This culture of continuity has helped the religion at two levels. At a theoretical level, it helps the foundations of knowledge retain its cultural moorings despite allowing for change to remain contemporarily relevant. And, as a religion in practice, it helps adherents negotiate the ups and downs of life with a fair degree of equanimity. The theory of an immortal soul, for instance, makes it possible to come to terms with death: after all, death is only for the physical body. In addition, the associated theory of karma makes each one the agent of their own destiny: individual lives are impacted by the consequences of one’s own choices and prayers for divine intervention are intended to be more palliative than prescriptive.

There are many other motifs that can be said to reiterate the culture of continuity in Hindu thought. For instance, I think it is significant that Death – the great
leveller, and Dharma – that which holds the cosmos together are both personified in the same deity, Yama, who is the God of Death as well as the Lord of Justice. (Interestingly, the term ‘kaala’ can refer to both time and death: the two incontrovertible constants in an ever-changing existence). One could also infer continuities in popular motifs that capture Hindu imaginings: doesn’t the same God who is an infant afloat on a leaf in the turbulent waters of the deluge at the end of one cycle of four yuga-s (Krta, Treta, Dwapara, Kali), become the Lord reclining on the waters of the ocean of tranquillity, engaged in meditative contemplation before setting in motion a fresh yuga cycle?

How the Hindu ethos becomes a lived experience

The principles of Hindu ethos discussed above constitute the structural framework of the religion. And within this framework seers, sages and litterateurs of diverse and even conflicting viewpoints have adapted their discourses, songs and stories for assimilation by people of all ages and capabilities.

A child exposed to stories from the Hindu scriptures learns early that while there are good actions and bad
actions, all actions – whether of thought, word, or deed – are evaluated on merit and motivation, and on a continuum rather than as opposites on a moral scale. Thus, while moral acts and ethics are well-defined, these are not cast in stone. In addition, goodness and badness are qualities that co-exist in all forms of life and no one is really all good or all bad. Animals, ogres and humans are all capable of noble acts. And even celestial beings can be guilty of pride, lust, greed and envy.

When Indra, the supreme ruler of celestial beings, rains down a ferocious hailstorm to spite the cowherd settlement of Gokulam where Krishna lives, God, in his incarnation as the much-loved Krishna, uproots an entire hill and all the people and animals of Gokulam huddle under it till Indra retires a week later, spent and humbled. Moral: God hastens to rescue his devotees regardless of whether the oppressor is a colleague, so to say, or an adversary.

Sita, considered by many to be an incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi, has to endure a trial by fire to prove her reputation after being held captive in an ogre’s palace for several months. To those who ask how this is justified, scholars draw attention to an earlier incident: Sita had
once caused deep anguish to her innocent brother-in-law, Lakshmana, by casting aspersions on his integrity – alleging, in fact, that he desired her! The moral: Inflicting unjustified pain on innocents is, well, unjustified, and you will have to pay for it regardless of any notional or real hierarchical position you might hold. Another story that upholds this moral is that of Drona, the royal teacher of warfare in the Mahabharatha. He had to face the ignominy of being beheaded during the epic battle on the field of Kurkshetra because he had once demanded an unfair compensation from an innocent student. Despite being an illustrious warrior, Drona had to lose his life when he was unarmed because he had once demanded the thumb of a student of archery when he caught him in a vulnerable moment. For an exemplary archer, the loss of his thumb is equivalent to the loss of his skill, veritably his life.

In fact, Hindu scriptures and mythology make it clear that God himself cannot escape retribution. For his act of stealth in hunting down the warrior monkey-king Vali, it is said, Rama, in his later incarnation as Krishna, was shot clandestinely by a hunter who mistook his supine frame for a deer’s. With story after story affirming and re-affirming the view, the Hindu child learns early that rewards and punishment accrue as a result of one’s own actions or
failure to act, and none, howsoever high, is blessed more or penalized less than any other.

Early in life, Hindu adherents are also able to figure out that the line between sentience and non-sentience is nebulous as is that between natural and super-natural beings. A sentient being can be turned into a rock or a tree for a serious misdemeanour – one that implies slight to a devotee or aggrieves them – with the caveat that the process shall be reversed a few generations hence, once certain conditions are met. Even celestial beings may have to descend to earth till they sufficiently recompense their misdeeds, after which they may return to their original forms and their original abode in heaven. On the other hand, even a bird that has shown exemplary behaviour can be blessed with moksha – the ultimate release from the endless cycle of birth and death. The Ramayana tells us that Jatayu, an eagle, was so blessed by Sri Rama.

And that brings us to the ease with which complex ideas are presented to and imbibed by children in Hindu homes almost before the infants are on their feet. Not only are concepts such as death and re-incarnation absorbed early by Hindu children, they are also exposed to nuances of Hindu philosophical thought. One popular children’s story,
regular fare in most Hindu households, provides many philosophical truths in one neat package: the twin notions of God’s omnipresence and his easy accessibility:

Once, the divine sage Narada is presented a very special mango fruit. Narada, after due deliberation, decides that more than he, this is a present worthy of the divine couple Parvathi and Shiva. Seated in their heavenly abode in Mount Kailasa, the divine couple who receive the fruit with joy, feel that their children deserve to eat the special fruit more than they.

After much thought, they decide to give away the fruit as a prize to that of their two offspring who is able to take a tour of the universe in the shortest time.

While their younger son, Murugan, promptly flies off on his mount, the peacock, to physically cross oceans and mountains, Ganesha, the elder son, simply walks around his parents and wins the prize. ‘As parents you are my universe, and as God, you symbolise the whole universe,’ says
Ganesha, justifying his claim to be anointed the victor.

Narada is a popular character in stories from the Hindu scriptures. He muddies the waters to bestir the staid Hindu world, shaking them out of their tendency to fall back on the inevitable decree of destiny, the inviolability of the law of karma, and generally using philosophy as a crutch to compensate for acts of omission and commission. But as the story that follows illustrates, the Hindu religion doesn’t balk at poking fun even at Narada – a divine seer, a favourite of God Vishnu, and one with whom Sri Krishna identifies himself in the Bhagavad Gita (10. 26).

One day, an apparently smug Narada approaches Vishnu and asks, ‘Who among your devotees do you think is most devoted to you?’ When Vishnu names a poor fisherman in a remote village and says he considers that unremarkable human being to be his most ardent devotee, Narada’s pride takes a beating, and he makes haste to visit the fisherman in
person – incognito, of course – to find out what makes the humble fisherman exceptional.

For weeks on end Narada remains on earth, carefully following the fisherman’s every move. All the sage could see was the same scene repeated day after day: At the fag end of the evening, after several hours of exhausting work, the fisherman thanks God for seeing him through one more day, and drops off to sleep. After several days of this, a bemused Narada confronts Vishnu with the conundrum: ‘How can a person who manages to squeeze in a thought for you just once before he drops off to sleep at night be a more ardent devotee than I, who thinks of you all the time, sings your praises, and recites your name non-stop?’

Vishnu responds by placing a cup, filled to the brim with oil, in Narada’s hands. He then asks the sage to walk from sunrise till sundown, cup in hand, taking care not to spill even a drop of oil, and then come back for the answer. A puzzled Narada complies. When he returns at
sundown, Vishnu asks the sage how many songs he had composed in his praise.

‘Compose songs in praise of you? Why, I had no time to even think of you! All I could think of was the oil. I wasn’t supposed to spill even a drop, in case you don’t remember,’ a piqued Narada responds.

Vishnu smiles, ‘Ah, but the fisherman was able to squeeze in a thought for me day after exhausting day!’

Narada retreats, chastised but thoughtful.

And so one can go on and on – for stories that reflect the Hindu ethos pepper everyday conversations, political discourse, judicial pronouncements and all manner of interactions. None can know or has known all that has gone into making the corpus of Hindu literature what it is. For instance, since my child was a fussy eater I would tell her this story so she would finish up what was on her plate, whatever it was!
All the foodstuff you throw will slowly make their way to the sea. There, Annapoorni, the Goddess of Food, lives. And she’ll feel very sad. She’ll sit on a rock in the ocean and cry. Her sisters, Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth and Saraswati, the Goddess of Learning, will then be very upset. Then, no one can say what will happen. Now, one doesn’t want to disappoint the Goddess of Wealth and the Goddess of Learning, does one?

I don’t know where I heard the story or what inspired it. But this story is symptomatic of the hundreds of stories of wrong versus right or good versus evil that a Hindu child grows up hearing.

Every family has its own favourite tales from the treasure-trove of Hindu mythology: tales that have taken on subjective shades depending on the narrator’s creativity and proclivities. However, the culture of continuity makes sure that though the same tales take on different shades of meaning, the fundamental values they propagate are similar across households and across generations.

From sacred received knowledge to irreverent regurgitations, the Hindu doctrine has allowed itself to be
shaped with infinite generosity, making light of the excesses of creative individualisation, and crass or even perverse subjectivity. And, it is a matter of pride for the Hindu that theirs is a philosophy that allows for such limitless assimilation and growth, unfettered by programmed, rigid conceptions of the inconceivable universal spirit and other constraining dogma. If it has ingested and made its own ideas that belonged to other lands, peoples and traditions, that is as it should be, for a foundational tenet of the Hindu religion is: ‘May good things from all sides come to us’. This is how the finite mind is trained to come to terms with the unknowable and to ford the turbulence of existence.
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