

HINDUISM IN THE SECOND MILLENNIUM

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Introduction

Origin of any religion can be traced to the inherent urge in man to go beyond sensory experience. Man cannot remain satisfied within the boundaries of objective experience which calls for an experience beyond itself. If man could remain satisfied within the ambience of sense-bound experience, no progress of knowledge, culture and civilization would be possible. So in everyone of us there is an urge to go beyond the ordinary run of life, and this "consciousness of the beyond is the raw material of all religions." Swami Vivekananda says that "the real germ of religion is the struggle to transcend the limitations of the senses" (*Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama Vol.II, p.59*).

Hinduism originated in the Vedic religion of the Aryans who were worshipping different natural forces by attributing a personality to each of them thus presupposing a conscious principle behind these forms. This lure of consciousness led them to one Ultimate Reality which is called by different names and worshipped in different forms. So Vedic Rsis declared, "Truth is one and sages call it by various names." This seminal vision of the Vedic seers accounts for the catholicity and all-absorbing power of later Hinduism which provided a fertile field for various kinds of experiments and explorations in the realm of religion, both theoretically and practically. Theoretically it gave rise to various philosophical schools encompassing all shades of philosophy ever thought of by mankind. And practically it evolved inexhaustible paths of spiritual practices to reach that ultimate Reality. Swami Vivekananda says, "from the high spiritual flights of the Vedanta philosophy, of which the latest discoveries of science seem like echoes, to the low ideas of idolatry with its multifarious mythology, the agnosticisms of the Buddhists, and the atheism of the Jains, each and all have a place in the Hindu religion." (*Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama Vol.II, p.6*). This intense and extensive religious activity induced Cramb to remark, the "India is not only the Italy of Asia; it is not only the land of romance, of art and beauty.

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It is in religion earth's central shrine. India is religion". (Quoted in the *Cultural Heritage of India*, Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Vol. IV, p.3). Arnold Toynbee's observation about India is worth remembering here: India is a world in herself; she is a society of the same magnitude as our Western society." (*The World and the West*, p.34)

In India philosophical enquiry was never divorced from religious quest—former providing a rational background to the latter which is a practical dimension of the former. Because of the fusion of these two there was hardly any fanatical or fundamentalistic approach to religion. E.B. Havell says: "In India religion is hardly a dogma, but a working hypothesis of human conduct adapted to different stages of spiritual development and different conditions of life." (*The History of Aryan Rule in India*, p. 170)

Hinduism, having its genesis in the integral vision of the Vedic seers, coursed through various stages of development swinging between degeneration and regeneration giving birth to different other religions such as Jainism and Buddhism, absorbing various elements of other religions that sneaked into the Indian subcontinent through the invasion of Greeks, Sakas, Kusans and others. By the time it reached the end of the first millennium of the Christian era, it had branched itself into various sects such as Vaisnava, Saiva, Sakta etc., developed various philosophical texts apart from Vedas such as Puranas, Smritis, Ramayana, Mahabharata (which includes the famous Bhagavad Gita) Sutra literature etc; it had given birth to a number of saints and philosophic luminaries such as Sri Krishna, Gaudapada, Sankaracarya and others—proliferated itself throughout the Indian sub-continent from Kashmir to Kanyakumari and Gandhara (Khandahara) to Kamrup (Assam)—forging a bond of religious affinity between various racial and linguistic groups.

The most conspicuous characteristic of Hinduism during the second millennium is its Bhakti movement which emerged to face the challenge posed by the invasion of Muslims that seemed to threaten the very existence of Hinduism. In contrast to the metaphysical speculations and as the result of confining to the elite of the populations that characterized the religion of earlier centuries, the Bhakti movement was a popular religious revolution, appealing to the emotional aspect of the masses. The number of saints of the Bhakti movement who sprang throughout the length and breadth of the country moved among the masses enkindling religious consciousness in them.

Philosophical Schools

During the early period of this millennium four important theistic schools of Vedanta arose in South India, namely, the Visistadvaita system of Ramanuja, the Dvaita system of Madhwa, the Saiva system of Meykandar and Veerasaiva system of Basava. The first one was propounded by Ramanuja who was supposed to have lived a long life of 120 years between 1017 AD to 1137 AD and he belonged to the lineage of traditional Vaisnava saints of Tamil Nadu called Alwars. Ramanuja's main concern was to establish a theistic school of Vedanta emphasizing the supremacy of Bhakti as a path of realization in contrast to the absolutistic school propounded by Shankara, in which the path of knowledge was given paramount importance.

He conceived of ultimate Reality as a Personal God full of auspicious qualities; the individual souls (*cit*) and material universe (*acit*) to be His attributes but inseparable parts of His being. The individual souls are many and the realization that they are inseparable parts of God leads to liberations, and this realization comes through *Bhakti* (devotion) and *praptti* (self-surrender). Ramanuja preached this path of Bhakti to one and all, without making any caste distinction, and accepted even the low caste people to his fold—making his sect a mass movement known as Srivaisnav, which in later period experienced a schism, dividing itself into two separate traditions known as *vadagala* (northern school) and *tenkala* (southern school). The *vadagala* school is oriented towards the study of Sanskrit scriptures and emphasizes self-effort as a necessary concomitant to God-realization, while the other school stresses the study of Tamil Vaisnava literature called *prabandha* and trusts more on irrevocable dependence on God. In later years Vedanta Desika, a great scholar, poet and philosopher, wrote several works in Sanskrit and Tamil explicating the Visistadvaita system.

Another theistic school that emerged during this period was the Dvaita school of Vedanta, established by Madhwa of Karnataka, who was an uncompromising critic of Sankara's non-dualism. He, with his powerful logic tried to substantiate the fundamental difference between god and soul, between god and material world, between individual souls, and between the soul and the world. In his philosophy, Sri Hari is the Supreme Reality (*Hari Sarvottama*) and all else is dependent on Him and unswerving devotion to Him alone leads to liberation. He traveled

throughout India preaching his version of Vedanta and established eight monasteries with the famous Vaisnava shrine in Udupi as their center.

With the advent of Nimbarka, a Telugu Brahmin, who later settled in Brindavan, a new cult called Radha-Krishna came into prominence. It is difficult to trace the exact origin of this cult since it is shrouded in mystery. Radha does not figure either in the Bhagavata or in the *Visnu Purana*. The intense love of the Gopis of Brindavan for Sri Krishna might have given rise to the concept of Radha as a symbol of the most passionate love which the human heart is capable of. Nimbarka popularized the Radha-Krishna cult by giving it a philosophical setting. His system of Vedanta is known as Dvaita-advaita or dualistic monism, because according to him, the relation between god and the world is one of identity in difference (*bheda-abheda*). The world is different from god, since its nature and attributes are different from those of god, but at the same time it cannot be entirely different from god, since it cannot exist by itself and is absolutely dependent on Him. The saintly poet of Bengal Jayadeva gave a boost to this Radha-Krishna cult by his famous lyric the *Gita-Govinda* which exquisitely depicts of *madhura* aspect of divine love between Radha and Krishna. He was followed by Chandidasa and Vidyapati in the early 15th century.

Another important philosopher who gave further thrust to Radha-Krishna cult was Vallabha (1479-1531 AD) who established his own monistic system, Suddhadvaita, "pure monism" expostulating Sankara's Advaita as impure, since it teaches the doctrine of Maya and gives Bhakti a lower status. For Vallabha the worship of Radha-Krishna is the only way to spiritual fulfillment. He regarded Krishna as the eternal Brahman and Radha his eternal spouse, and they sport eternally in the celestial Brindavan with their Bhaktas. Symbolically Brindavan represents the heart of devotees in which Krishna, the Supreme Lord, is in union with Radha, i.e., the individual soul.

Now we come to the very personification of divine love, Sri Chaitanya (1485-1533 AD) of Bengal who was inspired by the lyrics of Jayadeva, Chandidas and Vidyapati, and also by Sridhara's commentary on the *Bhagavata Purana*. He became intoxicated by the divine love for Krishna and renounced the world to devote himself to the spread of pure form of Madhura Bhava, extricating it from the association of eroticism. He made singing and dancing an essential component of Krishna worship.

He introduced the congregational chanting of the holy names of god (Sankirtana) and going round the town in procession singing the glories of Lord (*nagara-kirtana*). Thousands of people joined his fold without distinctions of caste, and thus brought about a great Vaisnava revival in Bengal. Even though Sri Chaitanya did not crystallize his ideas in the form of a philosophical system, his followers developed a philosophical school called *acintya-bheda-abheda* in his name later on.

The relation between the world of matter and soul, and god is inconceivable (*acintya*). The relation is one of simultaneous difference and non-difference. Though it is incomprehensible it is a fact and cannot be denied. The example given to substantiate this position is fire and its heat. Heat is neither identical with fire, nor different from it. So is the relation of world, soul and matter with god.

Another important philosophical variant of this period is Saivism of which particular mention is to be made of Saiva Siddhanta and Virasaivism. The former is rooted in the sage Tirumular's monistic theism, which was later developed and systematized by Meikandar (1240 AD). According to Saiva-Siddhanta the Supreme Reality is Siva. His infinite love reveals itself in the five divine acts of creation, preservation and destruction of the universe, and obscuration and liberation of souls. Siva acts through Sakti. The universe evolves for the benefit of souls, and it is real. Even though souls are infinite, eternal and omniscient by nature like god, owing to ignorance their real nature is obscured and all suffering is attributed to it. One can overcome the ignorance by following prescribe *sadhana* with the help of a Guru and above all, by the grace of Siva. The spiritual practice and grace of God culminate in Jnana which is the ultimate means of liberation.

The Saivism assumed another dimension in Karnataka called Virasaivism under the influence of Basaveswara (1105-1167 AD) and his contemporary Saivite saints. He was a Brahmin by birth, though he rejected supremacy of Brahmanism and rebelled against the existing caste system trying to bring about a social revolution on the basis of social and economic equality. As a philosophical system Virasaivism is known as Sakti Visistadvaita which accepts god as non-dual but qualified by sakti. According to this system soul is inseparably related to God through the power called Sakti—His inseparable attribute, through which the creation of world takes place. In this system bhakti is emphasized as the sole means

of salvation. the followers of this system are called Lingayats because they worship Siva in the form of Linga and carry it with them always hung around their neck. Basaveswara and his followers made original contributions to Kannada literature by their Vachanas, small poetical verse containing moral and spiritual teachings with devotional fervour. Of these Vachanakaras, mention must be made of Akkamahadevi, one of the greatest women saints of India.

There were other followers of Siva cult called Pasupata Saivas of which mention can be made of Nakulisas, Kapalikas, Gorakhnathis. Sivadvaita school derived from Srikantha's commentary of Brahmasutra found an able exponent in Appayya Dikhit (1554-1626 AD), who explicated monistic theism through writings and sermons. Kashmir Saivism could not thrive during this period because of Muslim domination.

Saktism, based on the worship of the Divine Mother, witnessed remarkable growth during this millennium particularly in Bengal and Assam. A vast literature called the Tantras were developed pertaining to Mother worship, different forms of spiritual practices and Tantric philosophy. Of course, this literature had its origin in the previous millennium itself, but now it received a greater impetus and developed further.

Philosophically Saktism is more akin to non-dualism. It holds that Reality is *nirguna* and non-dual, and it manifest itself in the form of material and mental universe of diversity through the power called Maya. But here Maya is not a principle of illusion as in the case of Sankara's Advaita, but a real power of god and its manifestations are also real. Accordingly the ultimate Reality is considered to be Siva-Sakti where Siva stands for a non-dual principle. But in Saktism Sakti aspect of Reality is given more importance, worshipping it in the form of the Divine Mother. It asserts that one has to reach the ultimate Reality by propitiating the Divine Mother, who being pleased by the devotion of the aspirant withdraws her deluding aspect of Maya thereby allowing the aspirant to realize the truth.

The worship of god as Mother had its own impact on society, especially on the condition of women. It had a liberating effect on them, enhancing their prestige and giving them a status in society which they amply deserve. The Muslim author of Dabistan says: "The Agama favours both sexes equally. Men and women equally compose mankind. This sect

holds women in great esteem and called them Saktis, and to ill-treat a Sakti—that is a woman—is a crime.” (quoted in *Outlines of Hinduism*, by T.M.P. Mahadevan)

The Advaita school of Vedanta did not suffer a setback in spite of the exuberant growth of theistic schools during this period. Madhava-Vidyaranya of fourteenth century, who inspired Harihara and Bukka to establish the Vijayanagara Kingdom, was an illustrious proponent of the Advaita School. His famous work *Panchadashi* further elucidates the Advaita concepts, substantiating them with fresh arguments and illustrations. His brother Sayana wrote a famous commentary on the Vedas, which is a great authority on the Vedic studies even to this day. Another great Advaitic scholar and revolutionary saint was Madhusudan Saraswati whose monumental work *Advaita Siddhi* is supposed to be the final word on Advaita.

Other schools of thoughts also continued their onward journey being nourished by scholastic writings of different philosophers belonging to different schools. The Nyaya-Vaisesika schools found its able exponents in Annambhatta Viswanatha Pancanana, Jagadish and Bhaskra of the 17th century. Earlier to this, during the 15th century, a new school called Navya Nyaya was floated in Bengal. Vijnana Bhikshu of the 16th century contributed his mite to further the growth of Sankhya philosophy through his treatise. Yoga philosophy also witnessed significant growth through many commentators such as Gorakshanath, Vijnanabhikshu, Gheranda, Ramananda Saraswati and others. Even the Mimamsa school also got enriched from scholars like Madhavacharya, Apadeva and Appayya Dikshita.

Saints and their Contributions

Apart from these philosopher-saints and philosophical schools that enriched and reinforced the religious atmosphere of the second millennium there were other god-intoxicated saints who breathed a fresh life into it. These saints can broadly be classified into Vaisnavas, Saivas and Saktas. Vaisnava saints can further be classified as worshippers of Rama and of Krishna.

Let us first take up saints who gravitated towards Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu. Foremost among them is Ramananda, a Brahmin-saint of North India, born in Allahabad, who lived during the first half of

the fifteenth century. He was the first Bhakti reformer to use Hindi to preach his doctrines. Like other reformers, he was also opposed to the caste system, untouchability and religious bigotry. He had twelve disciples consisting of all castes—even an outcaste and a Mohammedan. He taught that was the Supreme Lord, and that salvation could be attained by devotion to Him and repetition of His name. Although very little of his life is known, it seems that he exerted a tremendous influence among the people and his Math in Benaras became a great center of religious activity spreading its luster far and wide among all classes of men.

Ramananda's Mohammedan disciple Kabir (1440-1518) lived in Benaras and was from a weaver community. He also derived inspiration from Sufism, a Mohammedan sect influenced by Vedanta. He was a great devotee of Rama and also a great mystic. But being non-sectarian, he tried to forge a bond between the Hindus and Muslims. He was quite radical in his condemnation of caste distinctions, superstitions, rituals and blind acceptance of the authority of Vedas and Koran. His songs are very popular and sung all over India.

Guru Nanak, a great saint of Punjab, was a junior contemporary of Kabir and was influenced by both the Hindu and Muslim saints and their writings. He traveled extensively in North India trying to reconcile the conflict between the Hindus and Muslims, and singing hymns on Rama. He had a large following. The religion he preached was monotheistic, and he believed in karma theory. Though he remained basically a Hindu, his later followers formed themselves into a separate sect called Sikhism, with their own scripture, the *Grantha Sahib*, which is being worshipped as the word of god.

Another great saint who dedicate his whole life to Rama, was Tulsidas. His magnum opus, the *Ramacharitanamas*, in Hindi has captured the hearts of innumerable people of North India, and is still sing and taught with great devotional fervour, and even now thousands of people gather to listen with avid attention to discourses on this immortal work. Farquhar writes, "Indeed it is one of the greatest books of modern Hinduism and has probably influenced a far larger number of Hindus these last three centuries than any other book" (*An Outline of the Religious Literature of India*, p.329). Tulsidas belongs to Ramananda sect. In his early life he lived a debauched life, but there came a sudden transformation in his life which made him snap all worldly ties. He wandered far and wide singing

the glory of Rama in ecstatic devotion and inspiring people to lead a religious life. Mention can be made of another great saint called Ramadas of Bhadrachala in Andhra Pradesh who composed a number of exquisite songs on Rama which are even now being sung by the devotees in South India. There was another great saint called Samartha Ramadas who was an inspiration behind the achievements of the great king Shivaji. He popularized the worship of Hanuman—*sankata mochan*—one who delivers the devotees from their troubles.

Now we come to the great saints of Maharashtra who were devotees of Krishna, centring round Pandharapur, a great pilgrim center whose presiding deity is called Vithoba or Vitthala (one of the names of Sri Krishna). First and foremost among them was Sant Jnaneswar. He wrote a famous commentary on the *Bhagavad Gita* in Marathi which bespeaks of his great poetical and mystical flair. It is said that he lived only for twenty years, and passed away in 1300 AD. He composed many *abhangas*, short poems in praise of Vithoba. He was followed by Namadeva, Eknath, Tukaram and several other men and women saints belonging to different castes. They all composed *Abhangas* that are very popular among Vaisnava devotees all over India, especially in Maharashtra.

In Karnataka there came a host of saints who called Haridasas, Purandara Dasa being foremost among them. Several hundreds of songs in Kannada, mostly on Krishna and Rama have been attributed to him. Being a great musician these songs have been set to musical tunes and thus he has merited the appellation of the great grand-father of Carnatic music. He was followed by Kanaka Dasa, Vijaya Dasa and others who brought religion to the doors of the common masses by numerous devotional compositions between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries.

However, the *keertanas* on the deity Sri Rama composed by the great Saint Tyagaraja of the South gave the tradition of Carnatic music a strong impetus. Saint-composers Muttuswami Dikshitar and Shyama Shastri were great musicians in this tradition and exerted a strong influence on the social and cultural life of the people.

Another great saint-devotee of Lord Krishna was Mirabai (1498-1546 AD), a Rajput princess of Mewar, later snapped all worldly ties and spent her entire life in total surrender to her Divine Lover, Krishna. The

lyrics that she composed bear witness to her ecstatic love for the Lord, and they are among the most popular musical compositions of India.

Another aspect of religious growth during this millennium which draws our special attention is the construction of many important temples dedicated mainly to Siva, Visnu and the Divine Mother. Of these, special mention can be made of the following ones: Brhadesvara temple in Tanjavur (built by a Chola king around 1000 AD), the Lingaraja temple in Bhuvaneswar (during the 11th century), the temples of Belur and Halebidu in Karnataka (built by a Hoysala King in 1150 AD) Minakshi temple in Madurai (built by Nayaka rulers in the 17th century) and the famous Sun temple of Konark in Orissa.

As mentioned earlier, the most striking feature of the religious movement of this period is Bhakti. D.S. Sharma divined certain special characteristics of this Bhakti movement through a careful analysis. They are follows:

1. Belief in one supreme god of love and grace.
2. belief in the individuality of every soul, which is nevertheless a part of the divine soul.
3. belief in salvation through Bhakti.
4. the exaltation of Bhakti above Jnana and Karma and above the performance or rites and ceremonies.
5. extreme reverence paid to the Guru.
6. the doctrine of Holy Name.
7. initiation through a mantra and a sacramental meal.
8. the institution of sectarian orders of Sannyasins.
9. the relaxing of the rules of caste, sometimes even ignoring all caste distinctions.
10. religious teachings through the vernaculars.

(Sharma D S, *Hinduism Through the Ages*, Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, p.59).

Modern Reformist Movements

We have dealt with the developmental and regenerative aspects of Hinduism that helped in strengthening the moral and spiritual fibre of the

society during the critical situation of the millennium. But there is also a retrogrative aspect of the same which cannot be overlooked. The Muslim domination in India had its own negative impact on Hinduism and it tried to preserve its identity by making itself more rigid. Its age-old customs and traditions, its decadent caste-system, many superstitions and all sorts of rituals got their sanctions as distinctive marks of Hinduism. Today, Americanization of the world in the name of globalization has caused the rise of fundamentalism. Similar was the case in India during the second millennium. During the earlier millennium Hinduism could absorb so many other alien religious sects through its accommodative character. But during this period Islam could not be absorbed in the same way and thus remained as a great threat to Hinduism. Many Hindu kingdoms rose to the occasion and tried to protect their religion through might. Innumerable saints all over the country did the same by strengthening the spiritual moorings of the people. And other sectarians tried to preserve it by sticking on the external accretions such as customs, traditions, rituals etc.

This tendency became much more dominant and widespread with the coming of Europeans who tried to conquer India not only politically, but also culturally. So British domination in India produced two classes of people—one holding on to the old customs, traditions and also caste system irrespective of whether they were good or bad, and the other, lured by the glamour of western culture, rejecting and ridiculing everything that was old. The abject poverty of the country that was brought about by the systematic and surreptitious draining of India's wealth to the west, made the Europeanized Indians blame the Hindu religion for all the ills of the society. Christianity with its proselytizing missionary zeal, made its inroads into the Indian society, fuelling this hostile atmosphere.

At this supremely critical juncture there arose many reformist movements and great towering personalities to cry a halt to this new cultural invasion through the rejuvenation and regeneration of Hinduism so as to meet the modern challenges. The first important reformist movement that took its birth in Bengal was founded by Raja Rammohan Roy (1772-1833 AD). His monotheistic philosophy was based mainly on Upanishadic teachings, and he rejected image-worship and taught a simple form of religious practice consisting of prayers, devotional singing and meditation. His religious ideas clearly bear the stamp of Christian influence. He vigorously gave himself to social reforms such as the

abolition of *sati*, child marriage, caste rigidity etc. to work out an propagate his religious and spiritual ideas, and continue the social reforms initiated by him, he started an organization called the Brahma Samaj. He was followed the Debendranath Tagore, Keshab Chandra Sen, Pratap Chandra Mazumdar and other illustrious leaders.

Another fire-brand of Hindu reform movement was Swami Dayananda Saraswati who established the Arya Samaj, basing his religious concepts on the earlier portion of the Vedas with the purpose of reintroducing a Vedic way of life. He vehemently opposed social evils such as the caste system based on birth, polygamy, untouchability, early marriage and others. He systematized his philosophy, in the famous work *Satyartha Prakasha*, in which he upholds a Vedic way of life and condemns in severe terms later accretions to Hinduism, and also other religious beliefs. The Arya Samaj that he founded is still actively working for the cause of Hinduism through social reforms and philanthropic activities.

There were other great personalities who contributed to this process of regeneration. To mention a few of them: Bankim Chandra Catterji, Ishwara Chandra Vidyasagar, Balagangadhra Tilak, Gopalakrishna Gokhale and many others. Two great ladies of foreign origin, Annie Beasant of the Theosophical Society and Sister Nivedita, assiduously tried to make the Hindus fell proud of their own religion. Annie Beasant actively involved herself in the freedom movement and Nivedita played a significant role in women's education and in rousing the national consciousness of some of the great personalities of the time.

There arose many other organizations to preserve Hindu culture, to uphold the Hindu way of life, and to protect t the Hindu customs and traditions adapting them to modern situation. The Sanathana Dharama Rakshini Sabha took its birth in Bengal during last decades of the 19th century to defend idol-worship, rituals, ceremonies and Sanskrit education. Many other organizations followed suit in other parts of the country, with the same mission such as Bharata Dharam Mahamandala, Sanathana Dharma Sabhas, Nigamagama Mandali and others. But in course of time all these organizations merged into one unit called Bharat Dharma Mahamandal. All India Hindu Mahasabha founded at Allahabad in 1910 had a political overtone although working for socio-religious regeneration. One of its top leaders was the great Madan Mohan Malaviya (1861-1946),

the founder of the Benaras Hindu University. Another great leader of this organization was Vinayak Damodar Savarkar who upheld the concept of Hindutva.

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and its sister organizations like Vivekananda Kendra of Kanyakumari, Hindu Seva Pratishthan are doing commendable work in preserving Hindu culture, in the dissemination of Sanskrit study, in highlighting and rejuvenating ancient Hindu wisdom in medicine and science.

Revival of Hinduism

But all these reform movements touched only the periphery of Hinduism. What was required was reauthentication and restoration of the spiritual edifice which had grown into a colossal structure with the contribution of varieties of spiritual practices and experiences down from the Vedic seers, by actually living that condensed wisdom and not theorizing them. This stupendous task was accomplished by an unlettered spiritual giant, Sri Ramakrishna, who "was the consummation of two thousand years of spiritual life of three hundred million people" (Romain Rolland, *The Life of Ramakrishna*, Calcutta: Advaita Ashramam, xxii). He was the very personification of the Hindu religion, undergoing the experiences of almost all the spiritual practices of that religion, absorbing within himself the spirit of all sects such as Vaisnavya, Saiva, Sakta etc., being at one with both theism and absolutism, encompassing within himself the entire gamut of religious lore of Hinduism and giving equal stress to both the householder's and the Sannyasin's life. He even went beyond the traditional boundaries of the Hindu faith and plunged into the religious practices of Islam and Christianity, thus demonstrating through his personal super-conscious experience that all religions lead to the same goal. The great Western Sufi Frijtjof Schuon declares: "Sri Ramakrishna was a universal figure. In Sri Ramakrishna there is something which seems to defy every category. He was like the living symbol of the inner unity of religions."

Sri Ramakrishna found an able disciple to spread his message all over the globe in Swami Vivekananda. A spiritual colossus, Vivekananda's was a multi-dimensional personality with prodigious memory, divine oratory, extraordinary scholarship, tremendous dynamism and above all a heart throbbing for the suffering humanity. Equipped with

these qualities Vivekananda made a debut into the world of activity and traveled extensively in India and abroad preaching the universal message of Vedanta as exemplified in the life of his master, Sri Ramakrishna. He established the Ramakrishna Math and Mission with the twin ideals of 'individual salvation and social welfare'—a religious organization where the monastics and the laity are committed to their spiritual development through service to their fellow beings. With branches spread over India and abroad, this organization is trying to propagate a pure and rational form of religion with an universal outlook and is contributing its mite to mitigate the sufferings of people through its hospitals, educational institutions, rural development activities and relief operations. Prof. Floyd H Ross, in his article on Vedanta and the West says: "One of the most vital contemporary religious and educational movements in India today is the Ramakrishna Movement. Under the leadership of men trainee in the spirit of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, the Ramakrishna Centres are living examples of how the timeless truths of the past have value when they are continuously relived and reinterpreted in the present." Prof. Carl Thomas Jackson in his thesis on the Ramakrishna Movement says, "The Ramakrishna Movement has been a rather universal movement with a significance out of proportion to its size...The movement's work represents a significant development in the history of modern Hinduism and in the interpretation of world's great religion."

The impact of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda on some of the savants who arrived on the national scene was quite vivid. Sri Aurobindo (1872-1950) who derived inspiration from them, was a revolutionary turned mystic and he helped in rejuvenating the mystical tradition of Hinduism through his intense Yogic practices and extensive writings. The center that formed around him in Pondicherry is actively involved in spreading his message through preaching, publications and educational services.

Another great saint and mystic of the modern times who tried to revive the traditional Vedantic path of Knowledge is Ramana Maharashi, the sage of Arunachala. His method of self-enquiry has attracted many great men in India and the west and has evoked considerable interest in the minds of the people at large. Drawn by his utter simplicity and love, and also by his teachings, many devotees from India and abroad gathered around him and formed an organization for the spiritually hungry. This

Ashrama is spreading the sage's message through a number of publications, magazines and other preaching activities.

Mahatma Gandhi's contribution to the religious outlook of the Hindus is another striking feature. His strict adherence to truth and non-violence, his non-sectarian approach to religious practices, his universal outlook, his practice of poverty and chastity and so many other extraordinary moral and religious virtues made him a great hero of the day. In spite of his political involvement, he remained a religious seeker. Though he was much influenced by the Hindu thought—especially by the teachings of *Bhagavadgita*—the teachings of Jesus Christ and Islam gave him great solace. He also derived his inspiration from the writings of Tolstoy, Henry David Thoreau and John Ruskin. His uncompromising adherence to principles, a sterling character and his extraordinary personality induced Albert Einstein to make the following significant statement about Gandhiji: "Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a man in flesh and blood walked upon this earth." He is even hailed as the Man of the Millennium.

Hinduism Abroad

R.C. Mojumdar says, "No study of Hinduism can be regarded as complete and satisfactory which does not take into account the part played by it in lands far beyond the frontiers of India" (Swami Jagadiswarananda, *Hinduism Outside India*, Nagpur: Ramakrishna Math, p.5). He further says, "It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the part played by India in the civilization of Northern and Eastern Asia is akin to that of Greece in the civilizations of Europe" (ibid). It is beyond the scope of this article to go into the details of how Hindu culture penetrated the lives of the people living abroad. During the first millennium itself Hinduism had entered the South-East Asian countries like Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia etc., first through the merchants and then got established there with the colonization of the region by the Hindu dynasties. Hindu customs and traditions, Sanskrit learning, temple worship, different Hindu sects—mainly Vaisnavism and Saivism took roots in these regions. Many existing temples bear witness to this fact. One the temples at Angkor Vat, built during the beginning of the second millennium, is considered to be one of the most wonderful structures of the world. But the later half of the second millennium witnessed a sad decline of Hinduism in these countries because of the lack of state patronization, and also due to its tendency of

exclusiveness and lack of communion with the main land. And so its place of prominence was acquired by other religion, mainly Buddhism and Islam. But even now marks of Hindu culture can be noticed in the Sanskritised names of persons and places, and popularity of Ramayana and Mahabharata, especially in Indonesia, where it seems, people consider themselves as Hindus culturally and Muslims religiously. Saivism is very much alive in the northern part of Sri Lanka even now.

There are sufficient evidences to believe that Hinduism made its way to Polynesian islands and from thence to Central America where it gave rise to the Mayan civilization. Hindu immigrants in Fiji islands, Caribbean islands, Mauritius, African countries and other places are still practicing Hindu religion holding on to their cultural roots.

Hindu thought and wisdom had reached the western countries much before the Christian era. The great Greek philosopher Pythagoras came across Indian thoughts during his sojourn in Egypt, and his philosophy bears the mark of their influence. The Greek chronicles record the meeting of a Hindu sage with Socrates. And neo-platonism is a blend of Plato's philosophy and Vedanta. It seems there was a popular saying referring to India among the Romans: *Ex Orient lux; ex occident lex* i.e., "Out of the East light, out of the West laws."

This Hindu and western dialogue was perhaps discontinued for many centuries and revived again during the second millennium, with the translations of some of the important Sanskrit texts into Persian language. Alberuni, a great Muslim scholar of the eleventh century, give a detailed account of the religion, philosophy, literature, geography, astronomy, customs and laws of India in his work *Tahiqiq ma lil-Hind*. Abul-Fazl, the court historian of Akbar wrote objectively about Hinduism in his famous Persian work *Aini Akbari*. During this period *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Yoga Vasistha* were translated into Persian by a group of scholars. Dara Shukoh, son of emperor Shahjehan (1628-58) had great admiration for Hindu Philosophy and mysticism. He translated the Upanishads into Persian, which were later rendered into Latin and thus helped modern European thinkers to imbibe Hindu ideas. Many other liberal Muslim-Persian scholars helped Hinduism go beyond its frontiers.

During the British rule too Hindu ideas traveled to Europe through the rendering of some of the important Hindu works into English.

Prominent Orientalists who helped this process of transmission were Charles Wilkins (1755-1836), who translated the *Bhagavadgita*, Sir William Jones (1746-94) who translated the *Abijnana Sakuntala* of Kalidasa, *Gita Govinda* etc. H.H. Wilson who translated the *RgVeda*, and Prof. Max Muller, who published the 50 volume *Sacred Books of the East*, to mention only a few. Sir Monier Williams, who produced both Sanskrit-English and English-Sanskrit dictionaries, made a very significant remark on Hinduism in one of his speeches: "Indeed, the Hindus were Spinozists 2000 years before the birth of Spinoza, Darwinians centuries before the birth of Darwin, and evolutionists centuries before the doctrine of evolution had been accepted by the Huxleys of our times, and before any word like evolution existed in any language of the world"(quoted in *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, Vol.IX, p.25).

German philosophers like Schelling, Fichte, Friedrich Schlegel and Schopenhauer derived inspiration from the mystical ideas of the Upanishads and the *Bhagavadgita*. Transcendentalism of America also owes much to the Hindu philosophy. Writings of American Transcendentalists like Emerson, Thoreau and Walt Whitman reveal considerable Hindu influence. The Theosophical Society founded by Col. Alcott and Blavotsky is partly based on Hinduism, and is rendering great service in spreading the message of Hinduism through publications and preaching activities.

These stray instances of Hindu influence, which made a significant contribution in shaping the philosophical trend of the modern West, especially American, did not, however, capture the imagination of people of the West at large. The real awakening of the West to the Hindu religion was to take place on September 11, 1893, when Hinduism hit the Western world in a big way through Swami Vivekananda who burst into prominence from anonymity, with his universal message of the Vedanta at the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago. He and his brother disciples established Vedanta Societies in America and Europe, to carry on the preaching activity on a permanent basis. Some of the greatest thinkers and writers like Aldous Huxley, Christopher Isherwood, Gerald Heard drew inspiration from the Vedanta and through their writings it suffused into the main stream of Western thought.

This was the beginning of the great dialogue between the East and the West. The plaque installed in the Art Institute of Chicago, where the Parliament of World Religions was held, reads as follows: "On this site between September 11, and 27, 1993, Swami Vivekananda, the first Hindu monk from India to teach Vedanta in America, addressed the World's Parliament of Religions, held in conjunction with the World's Columbian Exposition. His unprecedented success opened the way for the dialogue between Eastern and Western Religions."

Following this many Indian Gurus of various religious denominations went to America and other Western countries, and created considerable interest in Eastern mysticism. Many organizations like the Hare Krishna movement (ISKON), Yogada Satsanga Society, Vipassana meditation centers—to mention a few—are attracting religious seekers to this Oriental wisdom. The Hindu temples that have risen in different western cities have also played a significant role in drawing many earnest seekers from the West to Indian techniques of Yoga and meditation. A recent report in the *Time* magazine states: "Fifteen million Americans include some form of Yoga in their fitness regimen and 75% of all US health clubs offer Yoga classes." Their interest in the Ayurvedic system of medicine and some other sciences has necessitated a working knowledge of Sanskrit—a language in which the ancient wisdom of the Hindus is capsuled. The Hindustani and Carnatic music traditions and the Dances like the Bharata Natya and others have engaged the attention of serious artistes.

These and many more facts bear testimony to the recent spurt of interest in the Hindu religion and culture all over the Western world. It seems that Hinduism has something to offer to world's peace and harmony. Great historian Arnold Toynbee says: "Religion is the most important concern of every human being who passes through this world. Religion knows no barriers of nationality. It may speak through a Hindu mouth or through a Christian one or through a Muslim one; but if the message does truly come from the source of truth it speaks to each one of us direct. This (latter point) is the special insight of Hinduism, and the special gift that Indian religion has to give to the world."

Buddhism too, has been very successfully invading the Western world, and it seems it is more successful in capturing the imagination of Westerners. Different techniques of meditation originating from Buddhism

and Hinduism are increasingly gaining grounds in the West, not only as spiritual practices, but also as a cure for stress and strain. "The introduction—or, better, the reintroduction—of meditation to the West may prove to be one of the most significant events of the twentieth century." (Roger Walsh, Ed., *Paths Beyond Ego*, p.54).

These non-sectarian and universal ideas and practices of religion are of supreme necessity in the present context of globalization of everything including terrorism, to give relief to the people who are oppressed by commercialism, consumerism and violence which are ruling the roost. On 11th September 1983, at the World's Parliament of Religions, Swami Vivekananda declared, "Sectarianism, bigotry and its horrible descendant fanaticism have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilizations and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons, human society would be far more advanced than it is now. But their time has come" (*Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol.1, p.4). But unfortunately his prediction has not come true yet. It is the irony of history, that on the same day, 11th September, the same "horrible demons" hit the American society in the most devilish fashion sending shock waves all over the world. Let us hope and pray fervently that good sense will prevail upon the people of the world and we realize the ideal of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbhakam* (the world as our family) at the earliest.