

CORE VALUES OF HINDUISM

Introduction

Hinduism is a collective term applied to many philosophical and religious traditions native to India. There are certain core values and beliefs of Hinduism which are prevalent among Hindus that they abide by. Out of many such beliefs, three are the most important ones - : 1. Punarjanama or reincarnation. 2. Karma or kamma (in Pali) and lastly 3. Dharma. The above three beliefs are related to each other in a chain of reasoning and are very important to the Hindu life. These beliefs have spread among people all over by wandering Brahmins, ascetics and devotional singers through popular media of Katha (Indian style of religious storytelling), Bhajan (type of Hindu devotional song) and Varta (message). And thus it is not surprising that even the illiterate villagers in remote villages are also aware of the values and beliefs of Hindu life.

Punarjanama or Reincarnation

Punarjanama or avagamana is a religious or philosophical concept that the soul or spirit, after biological death, can begin a new life in a new body. This doctrine is a central tenet in Hinduism. According to Hindu belief system, the present life has no meaning unless and until it has a link in a chain of births from the past into the future. In Hinduism's Rig-Veda, the oldest Indo-Aryan text, numerous references are being made to transmigration, rebirth and re-death in the Brahmins.

An old Brahmin of a village near Indore in Madhya Pradesh was of the opinion that: the existence of a person in the world is a transitional stage where a person is moving from past experience towards future worldly life. According to him, life is an ongoing process and it doesn't start with the birth of a new life and ends with the death of a person. Rather birth and death are mere concepts in one's life. He has compared a child to an actor and used acting as a metaphor to explain the concepts of birth and death. He explained, just as in case of acting, where an actor after his acting is finished goes back behind the curtains and changes and reappear on the stage as a new role, but there is hardly any change in him, same is the case for a child. After a child is born, or after the death of a person, his position almost remains the same. Lord Krishna had once said in the Gita that the soul leaves out the worn bodies and takes a new form just as a man discards his tattered clothes and wears new ones.

This continuous process of life even after death and the belief in the creation and destruction, forms the basis of Hinduism. This has been expressed in many popular sayings as "He who has come will go, and he who has gone will come again.", or in some similar sayings as "This universe is a circular passage; we keep on moving but we move in circles; this is an endless process."

According to Hinduism, a soul reincarnates again and again on Earth until it becomes perfect. This immortality of the soul is an important tenet of the theory of transmigration. The theory of transmigration of the souls emphasizes on the continuity of the soul. The soul is the 'Jiva'

and it's being considered as a part of God who is called "paramatma". The soul is immortal and eternal and it is been said that the soul cannot experience any pain or pleasure and cannot be cut by any sharp-edged weapon or neither can it be burnt by fire or drenched by water.

The body has been compared to a prison in many writings. The soul has been referred to as the prisoner for the sins of the physical self. At the time of death, the physical body and the gross mind return to the elements of the Earth. But part of the subtle body escapes and thus survives and accompanies the soul to the next world.

In the mid 1950s, the villagers of Potlode (a village near Indore, Madhya Pradesh) were not aware of the moment when the soul enters the body or when exactly it leaves the body. Though this process is an invisible one but according to Pannalal Darji, the jiva enters the body while it is still growing and it makes the foetus grow. Nothing would grow without the jiva and after it leaves the dead body, the jiva flies away leaving behind the plant/animal/human being's body and enters some other physical body. In this way the whole process occurs and the cycle of births and deaths goes on endlessly.

An old Rajput woman named Kala Bai made certain additions about jiva. According to her, since the jiva is the instrument for animation, thus as soon as the jiva leaves out the body, the dead body disintegrates into five elements: Earth, water, fire, heaven and wind. But the death of the body doesn't affect the jiva by any means as the death to it is like shedding old clothes and wearing new ones. People believe that each and every individual has to undergo a series of 'reincarnations'.

Ambalal Lohar of blacksmith caste is of the opinion that according to the holy Puranas (ancient Hindu texts), it is not always the case that a jiva is born in a human body. Each jiva has to pass through 8,400,000 different births and deaths and it is said that out of the eight million and four hundred thousand lives that the jiva lives, most of them are in the form of insects such as mosquitoes. This cycle of births and deaths continues endlessly unless the soul is exhausted and the jiva attains punya and emerges with the Supreme Soul i.e. the Paramatma. But this merging of the atma and the paramatma is a rare event as this happens once in a millennium years.

Concept of *karma* in Hinduism

The word karma in Sanskrit means "to do," or action. Karma in religious terms refers to intentional moral actions that affect one's fortunes in this life and the next. There is a universal cosmic law that governs the transmigration of souls which is known as karma. It controls births and deaths. Only from the laws of karma can we know and understand why some are born as insects and others as human beings or animals.

According to Rama Singh Chohan, only karma can give us the cause as to why some people are happy, successful, and occupy high status in society and others are incapable of doing so and also the reason why some are born disabled and poor while others are healthy and rich. The basis of the doctrine of karma holds the popular notion that every action has its reaction and that the type of action and reaction are causally connected. Shivji Ram, a Khati man is of the opinion that: being an agriculturist himself, nothing is more relatable to them

than the phenomenon that what they reap is what they sow. The logic behind is that good deed is always rewarded and bad deed is inevitably punished. And above all, God is just and He will do justice. Thus, the doctrine of karma is highly popular among the masses.

Thus, the concepts- transmigration of souls and karma, taken together means that the destiny and forms of one worldly existence is always determined by the behaviour of the soul (jiva) in previous life. The main idea behind the concept of karma is that a man's body, wealth, status, capacities, temperament, birth and experiences taken together acts as a compensation for his previous deeds, be it good or bad. It is inevitable that each and every act in present life has a consequence in the following life. The redemption will work itself out in a man's passive experience as well as in his other actions. After that, new karmas are formed from new actions which again results in making amendments in another life. In this way the cycle of karma and reincarnation continues almost endlessly.

The word karma primarily refers to "bad karma" – that which is accumulated as a result of wrong actions. Bad karma binds a person's soul/atma to the cycle of rebirth and leads to misfortune in this life and life after. There arise certain questions among human mind about karma: whether the destiny of a soul/atma is predetermined in all aspects or whether an individual has some power to take part in the forces of natural law that determine one's destiny. There are however various views regarding this matter. Some are of the opinion that an individual can do nothing about the destiny of karma as they are unable to participate in the working of the forces of natural law. According to them, karma is a cruel divine law that none can alter. Every action in the present life is a result of the behaviour in the past life and thus it is not possible for a person to act the way he wants. It is been said that there are cases where a person has done good karma all through his life but still find themselves in miserable conditions whereas there are people who have never done any good karma in their lives are successful and happy. But it must be bore in mind that this particular view is commonly held by poor and illiterate people.

There is another view prevalent among well educated people who have read Hindu scriptures and English books of karma. According to Ramanand Dube, Lord Krishna had said in the Gita that every man has the right to do karma which will determine his future. S. Radhakrishnan is of the opinion that though cards of life are given in front of us, we can never select them. It is our past karma that determines which card we will eventually choose. It can thus be said that more or less every individual agreed on the point that good karma leads to punya or spiritual merit, and bad karma leads to pap, or sin. It is believed that an elaborate system called divine accountancy controls the karma of every individual.

People believe that in the court of Yama (the Lord of Death), there is a clerk named Chitragupta who records every action performed by every individual in his book. It is believed that nothing can be hidden from him as he can read individual's mind and thoughts. Whenever a person does good karma, the individual is being credited with a merit entry, and as for the bad karma he is being credited with a demerit entry. After the death of the person, he is being taken to the court of Yama, and Chitragupta reads out the record of his thoughts and action. After balancing out his account, if it is found that his good karma exceeds his bad karma, then he is sent to Heaven and he is to reborn in a better form of worldly life. But, if the bad karma exceeds good karma then he is sent to Hell and is reborn in a baser form of life.

According to Baba Haridas Vairagi, life comes to an end after the jiva leaves out the body. The knowledge, actions, past life deeds of a man simultaneously extinguishes. Jiva is influenced by a person's conduct, behaviour, and deeds. A person with good deed will become good, and he who does bad deed will become bad. And thus it is been said that a person is full of desires; his desire is related to his will and eventually his will is connected to his deed and as a result his evolution.

Concept of *dharma* in Hindu Religion

Definition of Dharma

The third and the most complex concept of Hinduism is Dharma. The popular notion of Dharma is that: dharma is always good and right, and Adharma (not dharma) is always wrong and evil. Dharma is the path of righteousness and living one's life according to the codes of conduct as described by the Hindu scriptures. Hinduism describes dharma as the natural universal law which should be observed by every human being in order to be happy and contented and also to save him from degradation and suffering. Only dharma can lead a human being through a good path to attain spiritual merit.

Origin of Dharma

There are various sources of the principles of dharma. The sacred literature of the Hindus acts as a storage to spiritual wisdom, divine knowledge and logical analysis. The sacred literature of the Hindus is mainly written in Sanskrit language and it consists of the Vedas, Upanishadas, Samhita, Brahmana, Ramayana and Mahabharata (the Epics), the Puranas, the Nitis and the Dharmashastras. These were not available to the villagers and even the Brahmin of the village who has got the power to read the scriptures didn't have the knowledge to understand those, neither the time to cultivate such knowledge. It is ideally preferred that the Brahmin should read, understand and interpret the Vedas and other religious scriptures to the other castes of the society. The Purusha Sakta in the hymns of Rig Veda contains the theory of the divine creation of the four Varnas which states that the main function of the Brahmins are to teach, read and write, and offer and officiate at sacrifices. Thus, the Brahmins led a life of study, meditation and delved into the mysteries of God and dharma; in exchange of the benefit of the society that they provide with, they were offered free hold and rent-free lands, alms. But the Brahmins in present day don't have the urge to pursue the understanding of the higher philosophy of dharma. Nowadays, rural Brahmins are so busy that they hardly get any time for devotion or for studying religious texts.

It has been found that among the people of a village near Indore, Madhya Pradesh (Potlode), there are three origins for the interpretation of the dharma- the first source is that of myths and legends (mostly borrowed from the Puranas and the Epics). An example can be given of the myth of Savitri-Satyavan, which describes the story of a just woman who revived her dead husband from the God and acquired three boons from him- the first being, long life and prosperity of her husband, the second was a son and a heir for her father, and the third for the lost throne of her father-in-law. Again, there exists another myth of King Nala and Queen Damayanti who lost everything in the face of dice but then regained everything through

righteous action. There are several other myths as well which include the myth of Jaratkaru who was an unmarried sage and was told by his suffering ancestors to get married so that to have a child so that he could get an heir. There are many myths and legends involving Lord Rama in his conquest over the Rakshasha king, Ravana. There are also various stories from the Mahabharata- the tale of the Pancha Pandava (the five brothers) and their queen Draupadi. She was a righteous woman and defeated the unrighteous ones in the Great Battle of Bharata by her just and right values. Hanuman, was also associated with numerous legends for his service towards Rama. Hanuman worship is very popular among villagers of all castes and he is offered coconut while worshipping on most festive days and in times of distress. The worship of Ganapati or Ganesha also involves myths and legends. He is given the singular honour of being worshipped first in every ceremony for being wise and devoted to his father, Lord Shiva. All these stories, legends and myths have a moral in them, and the moral is being emphasised when the myth is being told in a particular ritual occasion. Few examples can be given, when Monday coincides with a fortnightly New Moon Day, women of Brahmin caste and other clean castes fasts for a whole day and then breaks the fast in the evening after the Moon and Death god is worshipped. The aim of this ritual is the effort by the women for the prolonged lives of their husbands. Many songs are also associated with these myths, known as bhajans, which are sung at the time of the performance of the rites.

In the villages, Rama Charit Manas is the most important of all the other sacred books. Rama Charit Manas is a modified version of the Ramayana. It is written by a seventeenth century poet Tulsī Das in Hindi language. The book is divided into 7 divisions and has depicted Rama as an ideal man in every sphere of life. He has been referred to as an incarnation of god Vishnu. He is regarded as a man of rights for his righteous conduct and behaviour and he did everything in order to live according to dharma. The Ramayana by Tulsī Das was extremely sacred to the people of North India. It is being read by everybody who can read Hindi, and those who can't, the professional priests read for them. Listening to the Ramayana and reading it is regarded as acts of dharma.

Another popular book which is read by the educated people is the Bhagavatgita or Gita. The Gita is also written in Sanskrit language and divided into eighteen chapters. The book contains the message given by Lord Krishna to Lord Arjun just before the Great Battle of Bharata (Mahabharata) and ways suggested by Lord Krishna for the emancipation of the human soul from the cycle of rebirth and karma. It is regarded as the doctrine of karma, dharma and rebirth. The myths and the Ramayana and Mahabharata are very popular among the Brahmins and other clean castes. Among the Shudra varnas and other untouchable castes, these books were not so very popular.

Another source of dharma is the one which is universally accepted by all the castes. According to many, the nature of dharma is very complex, and it tends to be so more for the uneducated and illiterate ones. The principles of dharma are very enriching and deep, and so average common men tradition. Thus, tradition can be said to be an important and best source of dharma. Since traditions vary from region to region and from one caste to another, thus, naturally people draw from the tradition of his particular castes. A story that is well known among the villagers and often narrated by the elders is that of the hunters and the Brahmin.- A Brahmin was once told by his teacher to go and learn from a hunter the secrets of dharma. The Brahmin was taken aback as to how was it possible for a hunter butcher, who killed animals and sold their flesh, could possibly know the secrets of dharma and teach it to a Brahmin. The hunter-butcher then told the Brahmin that though he is from a lower and

unclean caste, he has intensely followed his duties in every possible way; he has followed the trade of the caste which includes killing and butchering innocent animals and selling them off in the market, lived truly and honestly as a member of his caste and worshipped the deities of his caste. He strictly followed his caste traditions and that was the reason why it can be said that he has pursued dharma and has done good karma. He said that being born into a low or a high caste is an ascribed one; one has no hand in it. But to abandon duties is a bad karma and one should be shameful for it. Even if the duties include unclean and polluting karma, it doesn't pollute the soul of the individual. The uncleanliness and pollution arising from the karma are mere atonement from the past karma. If the atonement is carried out properly, then only can the soul attain higher form in the next life. And if a person doesn't carry out his duties satisfactorily, then he will be deemed and made to suffer in the next life.

Postulates of Dharma

There are three broad categories of the principles of dharma. There are certain codes of moral conduct which are universally applicable in India. Respect is shown towards elder people, and the most popular way of showing respect is that of greeting them. For example, when a person meets an older man, he bends the upper part of his body and touches the feet with his hands and shows respect to him by this gesture. To an unrelated elderly man, a person younger to him only salutes him by uttering salutation without the gesture. Women on the other hand are supposed to show respect to their elders by covering their faces by a veil and also by avoiding them in their lives. In ceremonies, she is expected to salute her elders by touching their feet with both hands and then placing her hand on her forehead. Younger men are supposed to greet and salute the elders first and also have to observe certain rules and regulations in their speech and behaviour towards elders. An example can be, they are not supposed to laugh out loudly, nor express their opinions unless asked for. They should never address an elderly man by his name but by kinship terms such as Ba(sir), Ma(mother) and so on.

According to Ram Charan Khati, there are certain moral rules of behaviour which include a person to be kinder towards his younger ones, respectful towards his elder one and friendly towards equals. He should be obedient enough and decent in his behaviour. A person should help a person in distress and thus can he earn respect by everyone in the society. He should respect and believe in Gods and should visit temples and observe the rituals and fasts properly. All these moral principles are the first category of rules of dharma and these should be followed in order to lead a normal and healthy life. In this way, he can gain punya for his soul and can gain merit entry, which will help him in his next lives. If he continues to abide by the rules and regulations of the dharma, he will be regarded as a holy man and will earn respect from every member of his society. And if he discontinues with the rules and ignores them, he will be considered as morally degraded and will be disregarded by the members of the society.

The second category of the principles of dharma includes all the rules of behaviour and rites which leads to the acquisition of extra merit for the person who abides by them. The rules of dharma includes- giving alms to Brahmins, mendicants, temples, to the needy, wells and tanks, special devotion to Gods, Brahmins and cows. Ratan Lal Bania is of the opinion that, those who want to earn extra punya can follow several traditional paths- they can read

scriptures to gain an insight of the divine knowledge, meditation and self concentration, may perform special worship and sacrifices, may bathe in the waters of the seven sacred rivers to wash off their paap and gain punya. All these acts are considered to be pious and one who does this is considered as a righteous man and respected by all.

All these rules and rites are optional in the sense that they are like the injunctions of the first category. When correctly observed may lead to extra merit to the soul of the devotee. The difference between these two rules lies in the consequence that will result from the non observance of the sacred rules and rituals. The non-conformity may lead to sin and may be regarded as a bad karma which may affect his soul in his next worldly existence.

The third category of the principles of dharma includes the rules that are regarded as the most essential ones. These include the rules which are prohibited and are asked not to do. The prohibitions are based on the notion of purity and pollution which is believed to have a ritual sanction, deeply rooted in mystical beliefs and thus termed as ritual rules, rather than moral rules. The main distinction between the two types of rules is the sanctions and consequences that result out of the non-conformity to it. The everyday life of a person revolves around these ritual prohibitions. For example, these rules include, whom one can marry and whom one cannot and also the behaviour that one should observe. If these prohibitory ritual rules are correctly observed, then it can lead to a merit entry for a person and failing to do so may result in demerit entry for a person. The rules of ritual prohibition are based on the popular notions of purity and pollution violating which may lead to pollution of the person involved. Thus, those who indulge in committing ritually prohibited acts are considered as impure resulting in the loss of his group status and expulsion from his caste. However, the expelled member can be readmitted in his caste by certain religious and social traditions. It consists of three acts: the admission of his guilt by the expelled person, his penalization by the caste members, and his readmission by symbolic act of co-dining. Penance wipes off the ritual taint off the person. Moreover, if a person commits a prohibitory ritual act, then he becomes not only polluted, but also polluting and a potential threat to the entire community. The main function of the penance is to restore the person to his group and to his normal ritual status and in this sense it is a purificatory ritual.

Categories of the Principles of Dharma

The principles of dharma can be categorised under the following groups:

1. Sarva sadharan dharma, or rules of dharma which are applicable and observed by all the Hindus in the community
2. Jati dharma, or rules of dharma which are applicable and observed by a particular jati.
3. Kula dharma, or rules of dharma which are common to and observed by a kula.
4. Vishesh dharma, or special rules
5. Apad dharma, or rules of dharma which are meant to be observed in the time of distress.

Every Hindu is a member of his village community and the community itself is a part of the regional community. A person's religious behaviour is conditioned by the sarva sadharan dharma which involves the worshipping of Gods, observing certain rituals and festivals and abiding by certain rules which are common to all the Hindus, such as sanctity of the cow etc.

Jati dharma is the most important set of rules. A man is born into a particular caste which is considered to be an ascribed status as he has no hold in which caste he will be born into. He will be respected by all if he obeys every rule of his caste minutely and in this way he can escape the penalties of not carefully obeying the rules of the dharma. Being expelled from his caste is considered to be dishonour for the person and it means that he has not observed the rules of jati dharma that was prescribed to him by destiny with dedication. Not observing the rules and norms of one's own caste results in a demerit entry in after-life. And in present life, it gives rise to a state of ritual pollution unless he is purified by means of purificatory observance, and only after the ritual is over do the group members readmit the person in their group. Moreover, each patrilineage has its own ritual-there are certain domestic rituals which are connected with changes in the form and membership of the household and lineages. Ideal interaction patterns between different relations in the family and lineage are invested with mystical and moral force in order to keep the unity and bonding among the family members. However, there are certain special rules as well which are meant for certain persons and age-groups, for example- children, insane, disabled etc who are not expected to perform and follow all the rituals as prescribed by dharma. The king, local chief also fall under such special group as they are not bound by such rules of conduct. For each such special persons, there exists a separate set of rules which are prescribed by tradition and religion.

All the rules of dharma are suspended when a person goes out of cultural context and an example can be given, when a villager goes to a city or travel over long distance; he can't follow all the rules as he does when he is at the village. He is forced to break certain rules when he is outside such as eating food at public shops or he may have to sit beside an untouchable or may have to have a talk with a person whose caste and status he is not aware of. Many such cases can be found where a person acts in a totally opposite way in such circumstance. In Hindu scriptures, it is laid down that a person may overlook or ignore a particular rule of dharma if he is in distress. Cases can be traced where famous sages were forced to have impure food in order to save their lives. In a similar way, rules of dharma also don't apply for sanyasis, those who have renounced the worldly affairs. Rules of dharma, thus, are meant only for those who live in a conventional setting in regular life. For example, for a Hindu villager, his village is his natural setting and he has to perform his righteous conduct in that conventional setting. The town or a city is a different kind of setting which characterises industries, offices and mechanized form of life-there the pattern of life is totally different. A person's actions outside his conventional setting are not considered to be his social action and thus, he is not judged on the basis of his action in that setting. The meaning of the word dharma is 'to hold' which comes from a Sanskrit word dhr. For example, a dharma of fire is to radiate heat and the heat burns to ashes most of the objects which comes into the contact of the flames.

Conclusion

Socially, dharma is composed of all the moral rules and ethical codes, beliefs, concepts and theories that holds a society together. Thus, all phenomenons such as superstitions, myths, legends, magic aims at strengthening the social order. With the help of the dharma, the social group maintains itself as an integrated group. Only a righteous action can serve this purpose solely. And thus, dharma is a way of living and behaving in society. Dharma is a scheme of values and the Hindus believe that dharma is the law of the universe. Most of the Hindus believed that if the principles of dharma are not abide by properly, and the rites and

rituals not performed rightly, it will lead to chaos and disorder in the society and society will eventually come to an end and ultimately wither away.

