

# Hindu, Hinduism & Hindutva

*Twists of the Hindu Identity thru the ages*

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## *(Part I: Hindu & Hinduism)*

Etymologically, the word *Hindu* has a twisted history; it had different meanings in different times. It is a foreign word, coined by foreigners, and the word is not to be found in any Indian language. We do not find its reference in any of the Vedas or in any other ancient *Hindu* scriptures. What we find, nearest to the modern word *Hindu*, is the term *Hapta Hendu* in the *Avesta* of Persia that recorded the teachings of the *Zoroastrianism* religion of ancient Persia; *Hapta Hendu* was the name of the land described to be the fifteenth land created by the *Zoroastrianism* God, *Ahura Mazda*. This *Hapta Hendu* is preemptively equated with the Vedic *Sapta Sindhu*. (meaning the land of the seven rivers). Both these terms, *Sindhu* and *Hendu*, are derived from the name of the river *Sindhu*, ('The Indus river' - the word 'sindhu' literally means 'river' in Sanskrit). It is most probable that originally the name of the river was *Xindhu* in pre-Vedic language, the way it is still pronounced in the Assamese language; the sound /x/ pronounced as /ch/ in the Scottish word '*Loch*' or German word '*Bach*'. That way *Hapta Hendu* may be equated to *Xopto Xindhu* in Assamese. It may be noted that the Assamese language still retain some correspondences of pre Vedic and Indo European languages which are not found in later Sanskrit language. Assamese culture also bears some strange correspondence with the Persian culture which indicates its ancient pre Vedic ties. It was most likely that the original *Xindhu* sound shifted to *Sindhu* in the later Vedic Sanskrit language. According to the linguist Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, the /x/ sound was there in the pre-Vedic Sanskrit language. This /x/ was

probably lost with Panini's 'Sanskritization' (5th BCE) process of the pre-Vedic language. There was sound shift in the Persian language too. While the original /x/ sound shifted to /s/ in Sanskrit, in the Persians language /x/ shifted to /h/. and thus the Persians called the river *Hindhu*.

When Darius of Persia conquered the Indus valley in 515 BCE, he mentioned the land as *Hi-in-tu*. This shows the gradual evolution of the word *Hindu*. The word *Hindu* was sometime used by the Persians for the river and sometime for the territory. Gradually, the term *Hindu* was used by all foreigners for the people living on the east of the Indus river, *Xindhu/ Hindhu/ Sindhu*.

Although both these words, *Hindu and Hinduism*, were coined and given by foreigners, the *Hindus* have taken both these words very passionately as their own. Since that time, the *Hindus* have been trying not only to define but also to defend the meanings of these two words for the last two hundreds and more years to the world audience. In the process the meanings of these two words have gone through various changes.

There were various problems in defining what *Hinduism* or its analogues, especially *Hindu Dharma* was. The word *Hinduism* is an English word. When the word *Hinduism* was first coined and used by the British around 1830 CE, they used it to describe specifically the beliefs and practices of those residents of India who had not been converted to *Islam* or *Christianity* and did not practice *Judaism or Zoroastrianism*. Thus the word *Hinduism*, as was first used, would mean to include all other religions of India including *Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism* etc. However, defining an overarching term '*Hinduism*' was not easy.

So the *Hindus* tried to debate, define and redefine the term *Hinduism* for what it would or should mean, and defend the same. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who is rightly called the Father of Indian renaissance, was one of the earliest Indians who tried to define and defend *Hinduism*. He tried it by forming a new religious organization called *Brahmo Samaj*. His definition of *Hinduism* obviously did not include *Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism* and others. Following Raja Ram Mohan Roy, others tried to define and defend *Hinduism* by forming various other organizations such as the 'Back-to-the-Vedas', the *Arya Samaj*

by Dayanand Saraswati and others. Swami Vivekananda who is credited with not only of raising the awareness of *Hinduism* to the western world but also of bringing it to the status of a major world religion during the late 19th century, did not actually like the term *Hinduism*, and used to call it as the *Vedantists*.

All these definitions were rather high level philosophical definitions of *Hinduism* that tried to define what *Hinduism* 'should be', and disregarded what 'it is' in reality, and did not include the various practices of the common people of the street. To the outsiders, and outside of philosophy, *Hinduism* remains as a confusing and allusive array of gods, mystics, gurus, sadhus, holy cows, temples and beggars. What was needed an overarching definition of *Hinduism* if it is to cover all.

The great Indian scholar, philosopher, statesman and former president of India, Sarvepalli Dr. Radhakrishnan, tried to explain for the Westerners, in easily understandable terms, the classical *Hindu* thought. He came up with an overarching definition of *Hinduism*, as described in his popular work, "*The Hindu View of Life*". He tried to define *Hinduism* broadly thus:

"*Hinduism* is not a definite dogmatic creed, but a vast, complex, a subtly unified mass of spiritual thought and realization. Its tradition of the godward endeavor of the human spirit has been continuously expanding through the ages." ..... "Hinduism does not believe in bringing about a mechanical uniformity of belief and worship by a forcible elimination of all that is not in agreement with a particular creed. It does not believe in any statutory methods of salvation. Its scheme of salvation is not limited to those who hold a particular view of God's nature and worship.".. "The theist and the atheist, the skeptic and the agnostic may all be *Hindus* if they accept the *Hindu* system of culture and life." In essence, what he said was that *Hinduism* is not one religion but an umbrella of many religions. Thus his view is quite opposite to those of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Arya Samaj, Vivekananda and others.

We find similar view of *Hinduism* by that of the eminent Sanskrit scholar J.A.B. van Bitten in the 1986 Encyclopedia Britannica: "In principle, *Hinduism* incorporates all forms of belief and worship without necessitating the selection or elimination of any. The *Hindu* is

inclined to revere the divinity in every manifestation, whatever it may be, and is doctrinally tolerant ... *Hinduism* is, then, both a civilization and a conglomeration of religions, with neither a beginning, a founder, nor a central authority, hierarchy, or organization.”

However, the arguments continued since such broad definitions of *Hinduism* was not acceptable to many of the reformed religions such as *Buddhism*, *Jainism* and *Sikhism* and many other sects of *Hinduism* such as the *Bhakti* movement and the *Ramakrishna Mission*. The later, in fact, preferred to isolate itself from *Hinduism*, and recently declared itself as a non-*Hindu* minority religion. So basically, the *Hindus* (Indians) could not come up with a single definition of term *Hinduism* that could include at least *Buddhism*, *Jainism* and *Sikhism* as well. So when the dusts settled, we have these religions (*Buddhism*, *Jainism*, *Sikhism*) separated from *Hinduism*.

### (Part II: *Hindutva*)

Up to this time, *Hinduism* was being defined based on ideologies. And in spite of the different ideologies of India: *Hinduism*, *Buddhism*, *Jainism*, *Sikhism*, *Islam*, *Christianity*, *Zoroastrianism* and others, nobody saw any problem in building India as a secular nation based on the Indian constitution. That was what the founding leaders like Gandhi, Nehru, Patel and others believed. Nehru wrote in his '*Discovery of India*', (written in prison) "Though outwardly there was diversity and infinite variety among our people, everywhere there was that tremendous impress of oneness, which had held all of us together for ages past, whatever political fate or misfortune had befallen us. The unity of India was no longer merely an intellectual conception for me: It was an emotional experience which overpowered me. The essential unity had been so powerful that no political division, no disaster or catastrophe had been able to overcome it...This cultural inheritance of the ancient Indian past, as well as what followed it in later years, is not confined to any one race that inhabited India or came to it. It is the common heritage of all of us, to which every race in India contributed..." In this, Nehru truly expressed the voice of the Indians and millions of Indians still

passionately support the views of Nehru and other liberal leaders.

However, in the early twentieth century, some *Hindus* decided to think otherwise and decided to give *Hinduism* a new political and martial twist. For this they coined a new word *Hindutva*. In 1923, V. D. Sarvakar, a revolutionary *Hindu*, the originator of *Hindutva* ideology, wrote a paper titled '*Hindutva: Who is a Hindu*' (written in prison) where he tried to define what *Hindutva* would be. The paper investigated the causes of the downfall of the political powers of the *Hindus* since the downfall of the Maurya empire, and tried to seek remedial measures. It was this paper that set the ideas and objectives of *Hindutva* in motion.

For the causes, Sarvakar plainly declared that it was *Buddhism* which was the culprit for India's political downfall. It was as if the *Hindus* have suddenly woke up, one thousand years after the disappearance of *Buddhism* in India, and suddenly realized that it was *Buddhism* which was the cause of all the past and present calamities of India. So the *Hindutva* ideology that evolved, was basically an anti-*Buddhist* martial ideology where the *Hindutva* propose to build a new political and military *Hindu* nation opposed to *Buddhist* ideas and values. It was as if *Hindutva* was trying to oust *Buddhism* one more time from the land of its birth that already ousted it more than 1000 years ago. In this new *Hindutva* nation *Buddhists* would, obviously, be second class citizens. For contradictory reasons, the new *Hindutva* nation would also be devoid of the *Muslims* and *Christians* in nation building. Thus the *Hindutva* India would not be a secular India.

There were many other contradictions and distortions of facts, and one does not need to be scholar to see that the Sarvakar's paper was written not only with obvious distorted views of history but also with distorted views of *Buddhism* and its impact in India. Three major Indian kings, Asoka (3rd BCE), Kaniska (2nd CE) and Harsa (7th CE) who were able to unite a major part of India and build big Indian empires, were also those who predominantly patronized *Buddhism* and ruled India through the *Buddhist* law of universal brotherhood. It was primarily with the disappearance of *Buddhism* from India that the country could not stand united, and fell prey to foreign invasions.

The scholarly view of the impact of *Buddhism* in India is very

positive, quite opposed from what *Hindutva* is proposing now as can be seen from the quote below from a prominent *Buddhist* scholar and historian, D. C. Ahir: “Buddhism dominated the Indian scene for more than 1000 years, from Asoka (3rd BCE) to Harsha 7th CE). And those 1000 years were the greatest in Indian history. The name and fame of India rose to the highest peaks in those centuries, and in the realm of art and literature, learning and piety, Indian achievement reached heights still unsurpassed. But, alas, later Buddhism declined in India, and ultimately disappeared from the land of its birth.”

Regarding, Sarvarkar, it may be mentioned here that his political career was quite eventful and colorful. In 1948, he was arrested and placed on trial for the murder of Gandhi. Despite numerous and damning ties that were revealed between himself and Nathuram Godse, the assassin, Sarvarkar was acquitted in 1949. With the fresh rise of *Hindutva* movement in recent times, Sarvarkar's fame has also rose posthumously. In 2003, BJP prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee unveiled a portrait of Sarvarkar in the Central Hall of Parliament. The portrait now sits directly across from that of Gandhi as if raising Sarvarkar to the equal status of Gandhi.

All this shows that the popularity of the *Hindutva* ideology although it was based of distorted views. The original paper written by Sarvarkar was read just prior to starting of the RSS, and as such this paper is considered the founding document of the RSS that trains the youth to understand the *Hindutva* ideology, the predominant form of *Hindu* nationalism in India today. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) adopted it as its official ideology in 1989. It is championed by the *Hindu* nationalist volunteer organization Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and its affiliate organizations, notably the Vishva Hindu Parishad, along with the older term Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation).

Regarding the disappearance of *Buddhism* in India, the country of its birth, many scholars were puzzled and many tried to explain the possible reasons. Lin Yutang, the eminent Chinese scholar, writer and the author of the famous classic *The Wisdom of China and India* spent some time on the subject and commented, “One cannot help being curious about the fact that the *Hindus* have rejected *Buddhism* as the

*Jews* have rejected *Christianity*. One should have thought that a nation would have embraced the teachings which seem to other nations their most important contribution to the world and the highest manifestation of their spirit. Yet this is not the case. The only clue I can find seem to lie in the fact *Jesus* attacked the established priestcraft of His time, as *Buddha* rebelled against the teachings and the sacerdotalism of the *Brahmans* ”....” It seems that the established priesthood was too strong for the revolutionary teachings and the *Brahmans* felt an injured pride in the presence of *Buddha*. ....Yet this cannot be the whole explanation.” .... “Probably both *Judaism* and *Hinduism* had older, truer and deeper roots in their racial consciousness, and that *Buddhism* and *Christianity* had those universal, idealistic qualities which detracted from their national character.”

Sarvarkar's comment on *Buddhism* seems to support this view of *Hindutva* nationalism. Regarding *Buddhism*, he commented, “The (Hindu) leaders of thought and action grew sick of repeating the mambos and jumbos of universal brotherhood....So the leaders of thought and action of our race had to rekindle their Sacrificial Fire to oppose the sacrilegious one and to re-open the Vedic fields for steel, to get it sharpened on the altar of Kali.”

While these comments are unfortunate and surprising, yet it is not fully understood why the *Hindutva* is opposed to *Buddha's* teachings of *universal brotherhood* which were similar to those of *Jesus Christ* based on which the whole west is immensely benefited in their progress in the modern world civilization and in conquering the world. But that was not the case. In contrast, the *Hindus* have characteristically rejected *Buddhist* principle of *universal brotherhood* and apparently accepted the Laws of Kautilya (*enemy of thy enemy is your friend*). Along with that the *Hindus* also have accepted *varnasramadharma*, the caste system.

Thus the dominant reason for the demise of *Buddhism* was the constant and persistent opposition to *Buddhism* by the *Brahmanical* system armed with its *varnasramadharma*, the caste system, and many a times with violence. Believing in universal brotherhood, *Buddhism* refused to recognize the superiority of the *Brahmin* caste, and as a result by the

12th CE, *Buddhism* has completely been wiped out of mainland India. It was in the absence of *Buddhism* that the subsequent downfall of India and dominance by foreign power of the country occurred; it was mostly due to India's lack of unity caused by the re-emergent caste system in India since the Gupta age which has been playing havoc in India making it the only country in the world with a caste system based on religion.

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