

## **Open-Source Hinduism**

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### **Abstract**

Hinduism is often taken to be a religion in the Abrahamic sense of the term. But the strength of Hinduism lies in the fact that it does not have one God, one prophet, and one book. Hinduism has always been an open-ended process that is constantly evolving. There was always a liberative current in Hinduism that spoke of justice and equality. But today even the dominant current of Hinduism can be shorn of its caste and gender inequalities. Hindu cultural nationalism, which has often shown an ugly and intolerant side, is unable to find any scriptural sanction for its excesses. It would be more fruitful to see Hinduism as a spiritual laboratory than a religion in the strict sense of the term. Just as Open Source software can be modified and changed on an ongoing basis, Hindu spirituality can also evolve and change itself to suit the complex social and ecological problems the world is now facing.

### **Keywords**

Consumerism, Hinduism, nationalism, open-source, secularism, spiritual laboratory

**I**n India the great questions of civilization were not the exclusive preserve of intellectuals, theologians, and institutionally appointed religious leaders. These matters concerned everybody and continue to concern everybody, even if in the past the upper castes had unfair advantages in discursive matters. Despite the grave atrocities related to caste, communalism, and patriarchy, India has partially succeeded in re-inventing itself along pluralistic lines, even if this process has been accompanied by social turmoil. Present day conflicts related to religion, gender, caste, and social class go to show that the process of cultural renewal is alive and kicking. Hopefully the direction of renewal will tilt decisively towards perspectives that are pluralistic and compassionate.

Perhaps nowhere else in the world has the quest for meaning taken on so many different hues and forms and produced such a variety of perspectives on the goals of

human existence. So much so that it is not difficult to argue that the original connotation of the word “Hindu” would include all the perspectives and experiences of those who lived on the eastern side of the river Indus. These perspectives and experiences spanned the length and breadth of what is today known as India, and well beyond its present boundaries. They were modified, extended and re-invented over the centuries. This is not unlike open-source software that allows users to study, modify, and improve the software, and to redistribute it in existing or new forms. Thus Hinduism, in its best sense, may also be considered open source. In open-source Hinduism the fluidity of the interactive process allows the old and the new to constantly inform each other, mingling and creating new hybrids. Even if the communalists are doing their best to destroy much that is good in our heritage, open-source Hinduism remains a formidable foil.

When one lives in India the good and the ugly sides of religions are quickly apparent. On the one hand there are millions of ordinary people who go about their lives inspired by the humane values of their respective religions. On the other we frequently witness the murderous violence and mayhem that results from religious conflicts. Unfortunately, the good and the ugly exist side by side, and one wishes there would be less of the ugly.

Yet India has been the spiritual and political laboratory of people like Mahatma Gandhi who succeeded in fine-tuning the theory and practice of non-violent civil disobedience. Gandhi saw himself as a Hindu who was also “a Muslim, Christian and Sikh.” This apparent paradox of multiple religious belonging is essential to a proper understanding of Hinduism. Inclusive approaches were articulated from the beginning of history. The Vedas stated, “The truth is one, the sages call it by different names.” If all religions lead to the one Truth, the one Consciousness, then there is little scope for religious conflict.

Hinduism is clearly not a religion in the Abrahamic sense of the term. It is rather a spiritual laboratory that keeps itself open to both inside and outside influences. There is no single book, single messiah, single prophet, or single belief that holds it together. As a spiritual laboratory the one and the many, the immanent and the transcendent, the personal and the impersonal are all allowed to have their play. From the early anonymous scriptures to the later historical sages Hinduism has allowed freedom and liberty for religious discourse, cutting across caste and gender lines. Some might argue that this was not the case as far as the lower castes, especially the Dalits, were concerned. Untouchability arose from a notion of ritual pollution, which prescribed that the higher castes were purer than the lower ones. Lower castes, particularly the Dalits, were not allowed entry into the temple. Despite this, lower castes and Dalit saints emerged, especially in the bhakti tradition, across the length and breadth of the country. Sant Ravidas is well known example (Nadkarni 262-63).

Hinduism has received serious body blows in recent times. The Dalits have rightly nursed serious apprehensions and insist that Hinduism played a role in their social oppression. Sections of the secular lobby have rejected Hinduism as irrational and unscientific. The cultural nationalists have given it a bad image through their strident advocacy of a militant and aggressive Hindutva. Many feminists are shocked by patriarchal texts like the Manu Shastras. These are enough reasons for the liberal intellectual to consider throwing the baby out with the bath water. With all these serious anomalies would it not be better that Hinduism is at least ignored, insofar as that is possible, since it is unlikely to die a natural death in the near future? But any dispassionate observer of the Hindu heritage will admit that caste and gender can today be separated from Hinduism, that Hinduism can be vibrantly re-discovered or re-invented as a pluralistic, compassionate and socially liberative set of traditions and spiritual insights.

Let me explain further. The Dalit prophet Ambedkar (mid-twentieth century “untouchable” leader), for example, has become a potent political and spiritual symbol throughout India. Some might even argue that he has displaced Gandhi as the most omnipresent symbol in India. We have had a distinguished Dalit president of India in K. R. Narayan. The chief justice of the supreme court of India, an eminent legal luminary, is a dalit. The chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Mayavati, has proved that even in the caste infested Hindu heartland of Uttar Pradesh a Dalit woman can brilliantly turn the tables on her political adversaries. It is of course highly debatable whether Hinduism has at all contributed to this emerging situation or whether secularism and Ambedkarism should take most of the credit. But there are scholars like Anantanand Rambachan who are talking of a “Hindu liberation theology” characterized by a preferential option for the poor, a focus on systemic evil, and a passion for justice that might transform oppressive structures that are economic, political, social, and religious.<sup>1</sup> All this is by way of showing that a new context is emerging in India where the authentic and liberative message of Hinduism can be disassociated from the oppressive caste and patriarchic structures. This is not to underestimate the distance to be still covered to rid our society of caste and gender inequities.

The scholar Vasudha Narayan states that it was only in the late eighteenth century the term Hindu was used regularly to refer to the dominant religion of India.<sup>2</sup> Harjot Oberoi states that the Vedas, The Ramayana, and the Bhagavad Gita, considered to be the main religious texts of the Hindus, do not mention the term Hindu (**Oberoi 16**). Even in the time of Muslim rule, Hindus were considered as those who were not Muslims, and included Sikhs, Jains, and Buddhists. There are of course others who argue that the word Hindu in its religious sense has a much longer history and has its origin in the rivalries between Hindus and Muslims between 1200 and 1500.

But whether Hinduism was popularized by the British or has a much longer history, the fact remains that it is today used to describe a plurality of communities who see themselves as different from other established religions like Islam and Christianity. Even if one concedes that Sikhism and Buddhism are distinct religions despite their intimate connections with what is broadly defined as Hinduism, the narrowing of the definition of who is today a Hindu would still make it a plural and varied tradition rather than a single religion in the sense of Christianity, Islam, and or Judaism.

Therefore, Hinduism does not refer to a single tradition or imply a single Hindu community, in the restricted use of the term. This constitutes the richness, openness and universal appeal of Hinduism. I would even go further to say that this is the uniqueness and genius of Hinduism. Few other traditions have creatively interacted with others, developed new perspectives and responded to the challenges of the modern era as much as Hinduism has. Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Swami Vivekananda, Narayana Guru, Ramana Maharishi, Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, and J. Krishnamurthi are good examples of this process in the last hundred and fifty years of our history. In more ancient times the Buddha, Ramanuja, Basava, and Kabir had stated the non-dogmatic and compassionate aspects of the Indian spiritual heritage. In our own time we have the example of Swami Agnivesh, M. V. Nadkarni, Anantanand Rambachan, and many others. Trying to cast Hinduism as a middle-eastern religion, as the cultural nationalists are attempting to do, through selective choice of texts, cultural traits, and deities, is negating the genius of a pluralistic historical process that was open source from the beginning.

“The whole world is a family,”<sup>3</sup> or Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, is another ancient statement (**Kale 104**). Perhaps the quintessential Hindu is Kabir, who sang:

I am neither in temple nor in mosque...

All the men and women in the world are His living forms.

Kabir is a child of Allah-Rama,

He himself is my Guru, my Pir. (**qtd in Thapar 309-310**)

Kabir sees Allah and Rama as two names for the same impersonal God. Ramakrishna, like so many others, was a Hindu and an effervescent part of the open-source process. Ramakrishna's spirit was able to slip into the experience of being fully Muslim. He also claimed the experience of being fully Christian. The Ramakrishna mission, like several other “Hindu” traditions, does not even call itself Hindu. Far from being a negative element this ambiguity shows that Hinduism is wary of definitions and that the ineffable

experience of the divine goes beyond all definitions and descriptions. This could be Hinduism's gift to the global community that is fast seeing the limitations of indefensible boundaries and hide-bound differences. The potential openness and pluralism inherent within the Hindu process would make it attractive to people all over the world who wish to transcend narrow nationalist and religious frontiers.

Gandhi went to great lengths to emphasize the open-endedness of Hinduism. His favorite song "raghupati raghava raja ram" is another good example of multiple belonging. The well-known line from the song "Eshwar Allah tero naam" (You are known as Eshwar and Allah) is familiar to every Indian. Ramachandra Gandhi, the grandson of the Mahatma, who broke fresh ground in contemporary open-source Hinduism, stated that if only all religions could add "non-violence" as one of their central truths we would move towards putting an end to the murderous violence unleashed in the name of God.

The open-ended nature of Hinduism is also apparent in the system of margas, or pathways to achieve spiritual liberation. Hinduism recognizes that human beings come with different mental chemistries. For some the spiritual quest will lead them to Jnana, where one finds liberation through insights and a deep intuitive understanding of the nature of reality. Even the notion of God can be excluded in the Jnana approach. Then there is Bhakti, where one finds fulfillment through intense devotion to a personal God. The overflowing love experienced for the personal deity also embraces other human beings. Bhakti has produced an enormous corpus of poems and songs, some of which have a strong egalitarian and gender sensitive appeal. Then there is karma, the path of action, best exemplified by Mahatma Gandhi, where the seeker finds the divine through service to one's fellow beings. An option for the poor is a strong element in Gandhi's approach to compassionate action.

Many centuries ago, the Basava movement had similarly underlined its commitment to the poor. Doing away with the caste system, while embracing gender sensitivity, was also an important part of its spiritual quest. In one of his most celebrated poems, Basava suggests that the spiritual quest must make an option for the poor:

The rich  
will make temples for Siva.  
What shall I,  
A poor man do?

My legs are pillars,  
The body the shrine,

The head a cupola  
of gold.

Listen, O lord of the meeting rivers,  
Things standing shall fall,  
But the moving ever shall stay. (qtd in Ramanujan 1)

The poor man carries the temple in his body. Basava is clearly implying that God stands with the poor man. “Things standing shall fall, but the moving ever shall stay” can be interpreted as “what is rigid, pretentious and clichéd will decay, and what is fresh, light and spontaneous will flourish.” “Things standing” may also refer to a rigid notion of religion that is enmeshed with the caste system. The temple, into which a lower caste person cannot enter, shall fall.

Jnana, Bhakti, and Karma are not mutually exclusive streams. They generally tend to overlap with each other. Thus the mystic and intellectual who follows the Jnana approach may also be drawn to aspects of Bhakti and Karma. And likewise, the followers of Bhakti and Karma may be enriched by Jnana, and so on.

I have often felt that the rise of a belligerent cultural nationalism is partly due to our inability to develop and nurture a strong sense of inclusive secularism. By inclusive secularism I mean a perspective where a rational and scientific worldview engages with an inner spiritual or religious quest. A secularism that is exclusive, like the dominant French variety, is suspicious of religion and can easily become rigid and intolerant, providing grist to religious extremists who gleefully characterize it as secular-fundamentalism.

An exclusive secularism can also be co-opted by market fundamentalism that overlooks the need for human community and substitutes extreme individualism and soulless consumerism in its place. It must also be pointed out that today’s religious traditions have certainly not been bastions against consumerism and that both secular and religious individuals are equally seduced at a subliminal level by the bombardment from hundreds of sophisticated advertisements that suggest that the highest meaning of life is to be an enthusiastic consumer.

We live in a world where money (artha) and pleasure (kama) are projected as the main goals of life. We have forgotten personal and social responsibility (dharma) and ultimate meaning (moksha). In the context of the commercialization of values many people search for an inner orientation that emphasizes the human potential to be much more than a mere consumer. The restlessness emerging from a soulless consumer-oriented world leads to a crisis of identity where people seek references that will give

purpose and meaning to their lives. The human being is not a mere combination of biological factors, but is constantly recreating herself. The human journey is an ongoing process and will never find closure. Every regressive step in our history had to do with the closure of the human spirit.

Open-source Hinduism also includes secular spirituality. Sensitive and inclusive varieties of secularism carry an ethical and spiritual core. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, was a good example. He saw science not only as a tool to eradicate poverty and disease but as a means to stamp out superstition and religious obscurantism. He recognized that inner change acted on the outer environment and vice versa. In 1945, he wrote from prison in Ahmadnagar Fort that “some kind of ethical approach” to life was necessary, even if he did not see religion as an answer. He was, what I would call, a secular-spiritual person. And the secular dimensions of open-source Hinduism have inspired some of the finest secular-spiritual persons in this country like Shabana Azmi (the actress), Aruna Roy (the activist), U. R. Anantamurthy (the novelist), and Dr. Siddalingiah (the dalit poet). And there are many hundreds and thousands of others like them who provide hope, compassion, color and song to this “ancient-future” civilization.

The challenge of open-source Hinduism in the twenty-first century is to articulate relationships at three levels: relationship with the self, relationship with society, and relationship with nature. Transformation at these three levels becomes difficult without challenging the modern notion of the human being as homo economicus, where material accumulation and competition are the dominant drives. The original Latin meaning of competition was not cutthroat competition but “running together,” as my friend Patrick Viveret, the French philosopher, states. It did not mean that some would win and others would be eliminated. We are today faced with the daunting task of joining hands with business and religious leaders, politicians, civil society leaders, media, and others to create an economic process that reverts to the original meaning of competition. In the present vertical model the human being is almost mechanically driven to compete with others to reach the top without sufficiently realizing the horizontal potential of relating to others and with nature. It is only a movement away from the vertical to a horizontal trajectory that can re-ignite the joys of conviviality, well-being, and ecological interconnectedness.

## **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> See Rambachan. In this book, Rambachan offers a fresh interpretation of Advaita Vedanta as a life-affirming path that **“provides a powerful impetus for a life of service and compassion” (7)** For him, Advaita is not trapped in illusionism.

<sup>2</sup> Narayan writes: “The religion has no single founder, creed teacher, or prophet acknowledged by all Hindus as central to the religion, and no single holy book is universally acclaimed as being of primary importance” (10).

<sup>3</sup> Kale 104, verse 133. The full verse reads:

He is “ours,” that one is the “other,”  
Such is the calculation of the narrow minded;  
For the liberal minded, however,  
The whole world is one family!

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