

## Is Hinduism a colonial construct?

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India as a country has witnessed the oldest civilization of the world. Undoubtedly, India has confronted the oldest of the living religions. Hidden in its layers are traces of many ancient practices that have been erased completely over time from the memories of the Earth. Human civilization is started from the beginning of Harappan and Indus valley civilization in Indian subcontinent. According to Darwin religion stems from human evolution and evolution of human beings can be explained as the machinery for survival. If we go in the detail of the earliest religion in Indian context then the term 'religion' is not appropriate. The practices, culture followed by our ancestors was mainly a way of living, a way of life and a belief system. Way of living often compares with 'Dharma'. And the 'Dharma' means "right action" and "the path of righteousness" as mentioned in various ancient texts and corpus. 'Dharma' should not be confused with the term 'religion' in modern scenario.

According to some scholars, people were followers of Brahmanical religion in ancient and medieval period. The notion of these scholars about Brahmanical religion is that it should be separated from "Hinduism". "Hinduism" has been a hotly debated topic since the beginning of British rule in India. It is associated with serious investigation of the fact that did 'notion of Hinduism' and term "Hindu" existed in ancient or in medieval time or the idea of "Hinduism" is a completely a modern phenomenon shaped by the concept of colonial rule and later on adopted by the people of subcontinent. In modern scenario Hinduism is seen as similar to religious notion of pre-colonial period. The antiquity of 'Brahmanism' not 'Hinduism' is difficult to understand because it is polytheistic<sup>1</sup> in nature and it does not have a founder and does not fit into the western definition of a religion. It is amalgamation of numerous indigenous cultures, subcultures and practices of the Indian subcontinent.

If we trace the construction and invention of 'Hinduism' then we have different schools of thought. Romila Thapar and Dermot Killingley argue about historical ambiguities and distribute the construction of modern Hinduism among British orientalist and missionaries and indigenous nationalists and geography.<sup>2</sup> Carl Ernst disagrees about the indigenous concept of Hinduism either of geography and religion. J. Laine argues that Hinduism was invented in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and also credits Indians for the invention not British. But several other scholars refuse that Hinduism was the invention of British. These scholars include Lawrence A. Babb, Wendy Doniger, Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, Alf Hiltebeitel, Cynthia Talbot, Thomas Trautmann, Peter van der Veer and David N. Lorenzen.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Syed Hussain Shaheed Soherwordi, 'Hinduism'- A Western Construction or an Influence?, South Asian Studies, p. 204

<sup>2</sup>David N. Lorenzen, *Who invented Hinduism?*, CUP, 2009, p. 630

<sup>3</sup>Ibid

First of all the term 'Hindu' is derived from Persian sources, and it is mentioned in *Kitāb-al-Hind* of Alberuni (1030 CE) as a religious designation.<sup>4</sup> Various sources indicate that the word 'Hindu' had a geographic, linguistic, or ethnic connotation. The term "Hindu" continued to have several meanings in subsequent times. According to Heinrich von Stietencron- 'Hindu' denotes the people of Hind, the Indians, and it occurs in the inscriptions of Darius I and other rulers of ancient Persia from the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. He also emphasizes that it was sad mistake of British to adopt this from the Persian administrators and believe that it was a religious term.<sup>5</sup> In Indian context the earliest use of the word in the Sanskrit language occurs in a 1352 inscription of Bukka, the second ruler of Vijayanagara's first dynasty, who described himself as being *hindurāya suratrāna* (Sultan among Hindu kings).<sup>6</sup> Rāṇā Kumbha also used same style as *hindusuratrāna* in an inscription dated 1439.

In Jain works such as the *Purātanaprabandhasamgraha*, VTK and KhG there is introduction of the term *hinduka*. Christine Chojniacki argues that if this neologism appears in Andhra inscriptions as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century and after 15<sup>th</sup> century it appears in Hindu works then to advance our understanding of the existence and status of Hinduism as a religion in the medieval period, we have to analyze the examples from the *Prabandha* literature to see whether the term *hinduka* had a geographic-ethnic sense and so characterized all the people living in *al-Hind* or alternatively whether it has restricted cultural and religious sense and applied to members of all sects called Hindus today.<sup>7</sup>

During the period of medieval or pre-colonial India the notion of 'Hinduism' was in dormant phase. It was not before the late 18<sup>th</sup> century or early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries that it was adopted by Western especially British scholars to formulate and create the notion of Hinduism in the sense in which we understand it today. The British borrowed the word "Hindu" from India, gave it a new meaning and significance and reimported it into India as a reified phenomenon called Hinduism.<sup>8</sup> John Stratton Hawley views that Hinduism was invented by the British, the word itself was born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a notoriously illegitimate child. The father was middleclass and British and the mother, of course was Indian. The circumstances of the conception are not altogether clear.<sup>9</sup>

'Hinduism' in dormant phase had changed into lively debating issue when the British officers and administrators started to get knowledge about the subject population, their

<sup>4</sup>D.N. Jha, *Rethinking Hindu Identity*, Equinox, London, 2009, pp. 15-16

<sup>5</sup>David N. Lorenzen, *Who invented Hinduism?*, CUP, 2009, p. 635

<sup>6</sup>D.N. Jha, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-18

<sup>7</sup>Christine Chojniacki, *Shifting Communities in Early Jain Prabandha Literature: Sectarian Attitudes and Emergent Identities*, Studies in History, Vol. 27, Issue 2, August 2011, p. 214

<sup>8</sup>Ibid, p. 19

<sup>9</sup>David N. Lorenzen, *op. cit.*, p. 633

social customs, manners and codes. The British rule was seeing these things as a necessary prerequisite for developing permanent institutions of rule. The establishment of Asiatic society of Bengal mainly aimed on to learn ancient texts or corpus by Western scholars and translate them into English and made beneficial for government as well as indigenous people. These western scholars also argued about the necessity of government intervention to liberate Indians from their religions that were full of superstitions, idolatry and tyranny of the priests.<sup>10</sup> The introduction of English education brought people with a body of thought and they started to question many of fundamentals assumptions upon which the fabric of traditional values rested. Indian reformer of this period started to rediscover reason and science in their civilization, and to reposition the modernization project within a cultural space defined by Indian tradition. These new intellectual stirrings created a reform mentality that did not reject Indian tradition, but sought to change certain 'unreasonable' aspects of Hindu society, which did not conform to their new 'rationalist' image of a glorious past.<sup>11</sup>

In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century a series of social reforms started under the influence of Raja Rammohun Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, Vidyasagar. Dayanand invoked the authority of the Vedas as the most authentic religious texts, and sought to purge Hinduism of all its post-Vedic accretions. Here Western Orientalist came to touch in his discourse and tried to project "Hinduism" as a "religion of the book", like Christianity and Islam.<sup>12</sup> On the authority of the Vedas, he attacked idolatry, polytheism, ritualistic religion dominated by the Brahman priests. Although, these ideas influenced militant groups and these groups started to preach religion of the Vedas and was attacking Muslims and retrieving lost ground by initiating *suddhi* or reconversion of those who were lost to the three proselytizing religions of Christianity, Sikhism and Islam.<sup>13</sup> These communal forces also strengthened by the ideas of James Mill about the division of Indian history into Hindu, Muslim and British period. Thus, these above things are throwing light on how 'Hinduism' with the stigma of communalism was widening their legs in the society. It was also only during this period that Hindus revivalist and chauvinist started using the word to establish their national identity, oppose colonialism and imperialism and promote Indian nationalism. In the support of this argument D.N. Jha argues that the quest for India's national identity through the route of Hindu religious nationalism began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and has continued ever since. The people also found it a convenient solution not only to distinguish their faith from Islam and Christianity but also to counter and dispel any notion of superiority expressed or implied by the rival faiths.

In the response of reform movements some scholars have tried to project 'Hinduism' as having a "dynamic character", *sanātanadharmā* and drew references to itself in ancient Indian literature.<sup>14</sup> And it was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that it came to be labeled *sanātanadharmā*. The term can be translated in a variety of ways: "eternal religion" or "eternal law",

"unshakeable, venerable order", "ancient and continuing guideline" or "the eternal order or way of life".<sup>15</sup> Hinduism is also seen as a monolithic religion in which there is "agreement about some static universal doctrine".

The stereotyping of Hinduism as eternal, monolithic, tolerant and non-proselytizing began soon after its invention in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>16</sup> Jha contends that, despite mutual borrowing of India's religious traditions have no means always coexisted harmony. Puranas mentions about centuries long Saiva-Vaisnava tussle involving all castes. History is full with violent clashes between Hindu sects as well as intra communal conflicts. There is also evidence of conversion or even forced conversions. And if we believe in 'holiness' of cows as this whole ideology created by 'Hindutva' propaganda then Vedas and ancient corpus refuse such notion and cows were not 'unslayable' in ancient times, but were killed for ritual and food purposes. We should consider that injunctions against beef eating and cattle killing emerged during medieval period, when Mughal emperors banned killing of these animals in the consideration for Jain and Brahmanical feelings of respect for the cow.<sup>17</sup> The 'Cow' emerged as a symbol of communal identity in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and for communalists in India, it has become a 'tool of mass political mobilization' in a modern scenario.

Monier-Williams has done the earliest detailed studies on religions in India. In his work "Hinduism" he argues that Hinduism is one religion, or it is not a simply a collection of sects, beliefs and practices. Basically he tries to present standard model about the indigenous religion. Modern scholars follow three different models or formats in their writings for the introduction of Hinduism. Some in terms of major metaphysical and theological concepts (Karma, samsara, dharma, God, bhakti); some in terms of the textual history of gods, schools of thought, and rituals; and some of them in terms of a catalog of sects, beliefs and practices, these three models represent three different master narratives: one metaphysical, one historical and one classificatory.<sup>18</sup> Monier Williams also goes in step-by-step historical survey of the development of Brahmanism.

European travellers and missionaries identified and noticed the specific characteristics of worship and culture in the religious lifestyle of indigenous people. The Portuguese accounts use the term Gentoo with reference to the Brahmanical religion in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is derived from the word 'Gentio', it could refer to those who were pagan, gentile or native. Portuguese texts distinguish gentios, meaning Hindus from Muslims (moros) and native Christians. Early Italian and Spanish texts also use the word 'gentile' for "Hindu" in the context of India.<sup>19</sup> In the work of Robert Sewell 'A forgotten empire: - Vijayanagara: - A contribution to the History of India' published in 1900 mentions about Portuguese travellers Domingo Paes (1520) and Fernando Nuniz (1536) and their experiences about the culture and belief system of society. Paes describes a round temple made of a single stone covered with sculptures and floral ornamentation, a porch with pillars and an enclosure wall surrounding it with 3 entrance

<sup>10</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey To Partition And After*, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2015, p. 138

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 146-147

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 154-156

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 155

<sup>14</sup> D.N. Jha, *Rethinking Hindu identity*, Equinox, London, 2009, pp. 19-20

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 25

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 48-50

<sup>18</sup> David N. Lorenzen, *Who invented Hinduism?*, CUP, 2009, p. 636

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, pp. 639-640

gates. There are many idols that are worshipped, which take male, female and animal forms. Nuniz and Duarte Barbosa also make similar statement and give detail description of worship system and practices of indigenous religion.<sup>20</sup>

Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg was the first of the Tranquebar protestant missionaries in India. His writings provide a first-hand account of the practitioner's beliefs and traditions. He uncovers Brahmanical practices with the help of Tamil and Sanskrit knowledge. He also presents a coherent account of the Brahmanical and local deities worshipped by the people. He wrote an interesting treatise in German called 'Genealogy of the South-Indian Gods- A Manual of the Mythology and Religion of the people of Southern India, including a description of popular Hinduism in 1713. It provides detail analysis and understanding of the local customs, in this case related to the Tamil speaking South India. Ziegenbalg's genealogy consists of four parts. First deals with the supreme or the universal being. Second focuses on the Mummūrti, i.e., Isavara, Visnu and Brahma and their families. Third part Includes the Grāmadevta , tutelary deities and demons – these all are described as protectors of fields, villages and towns from evil spirits and also from plagues, famine, pestilence, war conflagration etc. Fourth chapter is about Pitāri, Cāmundi and Durga, and much repetition about the iconography and temples of the deities.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, we are able to appreciate the western interpretation of Hinduism was highly influential, it cannot be attributed to its creation. The fact that we can trace Hinduism's roots back to 16<sup>th</sup> century Brahmin texts, travellers and missionary writings give us evidence that it was in existence and established before colonial rule. The religion of the Brahmins can be considered one of the oldest religious and philosophical systems and can be seen as the basis of Hinduism. The fact that the British created an India through the naming of Hinduism and the translation of ancient texts does not mean it was their construction.

In conclusion, in the words of D.N. Jha the study of religion need not to be biased and shouldn't strengthen the stereotypes which feed religious fundamentalism and who necessarily take upon themselves the task of defending "the religiosity of religion". Historians cannot be the custodians of religion their task is to critically examine it.

## References

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<sup>20</sup> R. Mahalakshmi, *From Gentoo to Hindoo: Ziegenbalg's Genealogy of Hindu Gods and Goddesses*, pp. 6-8

<sup>21</sup>Ibid. ,pp. 9-16