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A GLIMPSE INTO HINDU RELIGIOUS SYMBOLOGY

HINDUISM

Hinduism is not a particular system of thought, but a commonwealth of systems; not a particular faith, but a fellowship of faiths. In its all-comprehensive aspect it represents a synthetic culture that includes what may be called Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism, Tāntrikism and other paths leading more or less to the same goal.

It is not the product of the spiritual genius of any single individual, however great he may be. Under the inspiration of the divine Cosmic Principle immanent in all, countless prophets, saints and seers have flourished from time to time since the most ancient days, all helping the eternal stream of spiritual life flow with its many branches and tributaries towards the Ocean of Existence, Knowledge and Bliss.

The term 'Hinduism' denoting Indo-Aryan culture and thought is not a happy one. It is derived from the word 'Sindhu,' which was distorted by the ancient Persians, who called both the river—the Indus of the geographer—and the people living on its banks by the name of Hindu. Thus the religion and philosophy of the Hindus have come to be called Hinduism. But the orthodox Hindu prefers to use the term *sanātana dharma*—the Eternal Religion—which includes religious and philosophical thought and the practical code of conduct as well.

We had various systems of thought in the India of the past. But modern Hinduism is practically synonymous with the Vedānta which includes not only monistic but also qualified non-dualistic and dualistic systems of thought. The Vedānta—which may be taken as the final word of Hindu spiritual culture—looks upon all religious systems as different approaches to the one Truth, the ever-pure, infinite, all-pervading Being who manifests Himself in and through man and nature, and yet remains transcendental without exhausting Himself in His manifestations and expressions.

It recognizes all prophets and divine personalities as different embodiments of the same Principle that stands at the back of them all and inspires them all. It believes in the potential divinity of all souls, and encourages them to follow their own paths according to their spiritual capacity and tendencies. It asks the followers of all religions and

philosophical systems to preserve their distinctive features and to assimilate the truths of others as much as possible. The true Vedānta attempts to combine religion and philosophy, faith and reason, intensity and extensity of outlook and vision. It holds strict ethical discipline, scrupulous performance of duty and earnest spiritual culture to be the means to the realization of God—the Divine Principle in whom we live, move, and have our being.

NEEDED THE RIGHT INSTRUMENT OF VISION

Four blind men wanted to know what an elephant was like. One touched the leg of the animal and said, "It is like a pillar." Another touched the trunk and said, "It is like a thick club." The third touched the belly and said, "It is like a big jar." The fourth touched the ears and said, "It is like a big winnowing basket." Thus they began to quarrel amongst themselves. A passer-by, seeing them thus quarrelling, said, "What is it you are disputing about?" They told him all and asked him to settle the dispute. The man said, "None of you has seen the elephant. It is not like a pillar; its legs are like pillars. It is not like a strong club; its trunk is so. It is not like a huge jar; its belly is like that. It is not like a winnowing basket; its ears are such. The elephant is a combination of all these—legs, trunk, belly and ears, and is yet something more."

The moral of the story is that those who have seen only one aspect of the Divine take the part to be the whole, forgetting the other aspects, and quarrel amongst themselves. While the true seer who has known the Truth in its manifold aspects sees each in its own place in relation to the whole, which is something more than the combination of its modes and expressions.

Further, it is not enough if we merely want to see a thing; we must have the eyes also to see it. To receive the message broadcast from a distance, we must know how to attune our radio to it. It is not enough if we approach the Truth; we must possess the necessary instrument of knowledge without which we can never know the Truth, and may even run the risk of forming a distorted idea about it.

It is essential for the aspirant to possess the proper qualifications for knowledge. Without the preliminary moral discipline and mental preparation there can never be any true spiritual vision. All our spiritual teachers declare with one voice that the aspirant, in order to

attain to the Highest, must possess keen intelligence and perfect control of the senses, abstain from doing injury to others, ever do good to others, be perfectly pure in body and mind, and possess a strong faith in himself and in the grace of the Universal Being from whom his existence is inseparable. "Such a person," says the Tantra, "is competent; otherwise he is unfit for spiritual practice."

THE PREREQUISITES OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Those who seriously want to lead the higher life should know that, as Patanjali, the great author of the *Yoga Aphorisms*, declares, non-injury, truthfulness, non-acquirement of any possession by unfair means, chastity, etc., form the first of the eight limbs of *yoga*. It is not possible for us to practise fully these virtues all at once. But we should make a sincere beginning and strive our best to march towards the ideal step by step. And to the extent we become pure in thought, word and deed, we become fit for the practice of the "inner" *yoga* of concentration and meditation that leads to the realization of the Self.

The teacher of the Upanishad also lays great emphasis on the necessity of moral and mental qualifications: "Neither those who have not refrained from wickedness, nor those who have not restrained their senses, nor the unmeditative, nor those with unpacified mind, can attain to the Self—even by knowledge." It is not possible for a person who is immoral, who has not controlled his senses, to get knowledge, but even if by a miracle he gets it, he cannot know the Truth.

It is a matter of common knowledge that the Upanishads, representing the highest meditations and knowledge, were primarily meant not for beginners, but for advanced souls who passed through the preliminary moral and spiritual disciplines, of which the *Dharma Sūtras* and *Dharma Śāstras* and other treatises speak in details. "Self-restraint, self-sacrifice and merciful benevolence" is the theme of the Upanishads and the means to spiritual illumination. And the seer speaks in no uncertain terms when he says: "He who is devoid of proper understanding, who is thoughtless, and is always impure, never attains the goal. But he who is intelligent and ever pure and with a controlled mind, reaches the Highest Goal from which there is no return."

The reason why so much stress is laid on these prerequisites is that our spiritual disciplines further our evolution, which implies an inner transformation, a movement towards the Truth, so that, although we

may begin with simple disciplines, we may take up as we advance the higher practices to come nearer and nearer to the Truth.

MAN'S SEARCH AFTER THE DIVINE A NECESSITY

But why should we care for the Truth or for God, if divine realization is such a troublesome process? The answer is that there are many who cannot help it. The hungry man needs food and he cannot do without it. This has been so throughout the history of mankind. As Śrī Kṛishṇa says in the *Bhagavad-Gītā*: "Four types of persons worship God—the distressed, the seeker after enjoyment, the seeker for knowledge and the wise." The man of spiritual illumination to whom God is the only reality spontaneously worships Him and speaks of His Glory out of the fulness of his love and devotion. He looks up to God out of his innate goodness. But for others who seek divine protection for being saved from the miseries of life, or want divine aid for the fulfilment of desires, or yearn for Him for the satisfaction of the hunger of their souls—God is a constitutional necessity. And specially with reference to such persons it has been said, "Were there no God, it would have been advisable to invent one." And probably man's necessity is also God's opportunity. For He, the Soul of our soul, the Life of our life, the Spirit dwelling in us all, is ever anxious to reveal Himself to us. But how often does He knock at the door of our heart and out of ignorance and perversity we send Him away and continue to live a life of bondage, misery and sorrow! And when we want Him, He seems to be highly pleased to come in touch with us. And having established contact with us, the Divine Alchemist transmutes all the baser metals of our desires and passions into the pure gold of devotion and divine love!

DIFFERENT CONCEPTIONS ABOUT GOD

But what is the nature of the Divine Being whom men seek? The conceptions vary with the growth and knowledge of the seeker. Observes Sri Ramakrishna: "The ignorant man thinks God is somewhere beyond the skies. The advanced soul realizes Him in his own heart. The perfected sage sees Him both inside and outside." And he further says: "God is formless and God is with form too. And He is that which transcends both form and formlessness. . . . God with form and without form are not two different beings. He who is with form is also without form. To the devotee God manifests Himself in various forms. Just

think of a shoreless ocean, an infinite expanse of water—no land visible in any direction—only here and there are visible blocks of ice formed by intense cold. Similarly, under the cooling influence, so to say, of the deep devotion of His worshipper, the Infinite reduces Himself to the Finite and appears before him as a Being with form. Again, as on the appearance of the sun, the ice melts away, so on the appearance of knowledge, God with form melts away in the formless.”

This was the experience of a comparatively modern man who lived and preached towards the middle and close of the last century, and who without the aid of book-learning realized God in His manifold aspects and spoke of Him to many a world-weary soul turning to him for light and guidance.

In our study of the Hindu scriptures we come across various conceptions of the Godhead. Some devotees speak of Him as possessing both divine forms and attributes. They want to establish personal relationship with Him. Others speak of Him as being endowed with infinite power and knowledge and other qualities, and think that though formless, He assumes various forms. While they take note of the personal aspect, they stress particularly the impersonal aspect, of which the former is a manifestation. Sometimes we find the devotees combining all the conceptions more or less. But usually they worship the Divine through particular forms or manifestations which serve as props for supporting their faith and devotion.

During the early stages of their spiritual life, most devotees cannot help associating human forms and sentiments with the Divine, and thinking of Him as outside of themselves. Sometimes we find that, as the result of self-purification brought about by sincere devotion, the devotee gets a vision within himself of the same Divine Being he has been worshipping as an outside object. Then he realizes Him as the Indwelling Soul, as the Ear of the ear, the Mind of the mind, the Life of life. Next he finds Him in all things and beings—the One Deity “who is in the fire, who is in the water, who pervades the whole universe,” who has become man and woman, youth and maiden, and is born in manifold forms. God, to him, is the Principle immanent in all beings and things. He is not merely the God of gods, but is also the true Self of all, the Life Universal. Proceeding further the seer realizes Him as the Transcendental Entity who is “beyond speech and thought,” who is “invisible, devoid of all connotations, unthinkable, indefinable, essentially of the

nature of Divine Consciousness alone, peaceful, of Supreme Bliss—the One without a second.”

SYMBOLS POINTING TO THE TRUTH ARE INDISPENSABLE

Throughout the history of the Hindu religion, symbols and forms, and Personal conceptions of the Divinity have played a great part in the path of worship. And this has been so more or less in all religions and in all countries.

Our vision is limited, and all that we see is coloured by its limitations. We say we see light, but what we see is not light as it is, but only a reflection, and that also only within a certain range. Our understanding is also circumscribed. We try to know a thing, but find its real nature hidden from us. And what we know, we know through the coloured glass of our mind, through the medium of what Śaṅkarāchārya calls *kāla*, *deśa* and *nimitta*—the time, space and causation of modern philosophical phraseology. In short, we are bound to the domain of the finite, of symbols, which point to the Truth, but are not able to express It truly and fully.

Again, there are symbols and symbols—the real ones and the false ones. The mirage has got the appearance of water, but it is a delusive phenomenon which has nothing to do with water. If we take it to be a symbol of water, it will prove to be a false one; while the wave may be recognized as a true symbol of the ocean because it rises out of it, is in touch with it, and also gets merged in it. Like the ocean, it is made of the same substance, water.

Further, there are, as we shall see, lower and higher symbols. The alphabet or the image is a symbol of the sound or name, the sound or name a symbol of thought, and even thought becomes a symbol of the Reality which it tries to express, but can do so only inadequately.

In Hinduism the domain of symbols and worship of divine personalities is a vast one, and therefore I shall deal with only some of the symbols and divine personalities used in worship and meditation, from the Vedic times down to our present days.

SYMBOLS IN ANCIENT AND LATER HINDUISM

The simple-hearted Vedic *rishis* worshipped Indra—the thunderer and the giver of rains, Mitra—the god who regulated the course of the sun, Varuṇa—the god who dwelt in the bright blue sky and released the

penitent from sin, Agni—the god of fire, spoken of sometimes as father, and also as brother, kinsman and friend. Savitṛi—the solar deity who stimulated life and activity in the world was invoked for guiding the understanding of the devotee. It was a very striking fact that at the very dawn of man's spiritual consciousness some of the Vedic seers, while most others prayed mainly for material welfare and happiness, could recognize the presence of an Indwelling Spirit at the back of each and every natural phenomenon. And behind their apparently polytheistic conceptions there lay a deeply engrained monotheism that was clearly expressed, as each god was invoked and worshipped as omnipotent, omniscient, and even omnipresent. Truly speaking, many of the seers, specially the advanced ones, felt that they were worshipping one and the same Divine Being under different names. This is made clear in the well-known hymn that declares: "To what is one, sages give many a name. They call Him Indra, Mitra, Varuṇa and Agni" (*R. V. I.164.46*). And this wonderful current of applied monotheism has been flowing uninterruptedly even to the present day.

There has taken place a great revolution in the Hindu religion, specially with reference to the symbols and names associated with worship and prayers. Names like Vishṇu and Rudra that were once of minor importance came to be prominent in later times, while those of Indra and Mitra and others have been practically forgotten and replaced by other names. Besides, the worship of Vishṇu, Śiva and the Divine Mother in some form or other and of incarnations and prophets like Rāma and Kṛishṇa has become popular everywhere. But in the midst of all these phenomenal changes, the Hindu devotee's conception of the Highest Deity, his highest spiritual hopes and aspirations, his desire to seek divine aid and guidance, and his yearning for spiritual communion have remained unchanged. With the march of time it has been recognized even more than before that the Impersonal Principle is the background of all holy symbols and divine personalities representing it in some form or other. There are religious bigots who speak of the superiority of their particular gods, incarnations or prophets, but true seers having the synthetic vision regard them all as different expressions of the Impersonal and the Supreme which, like the ocean, may give rise to innumerable waves, but remains infinite and unfathomable as ever. Indeed, men of the highest spiritual illumination have realized that whatever may be the symbol or personality one may begin with, the highest

goal of spiritual life lies in the ultimate experience of the Impersonal, the One without a second, in which the worshipper, nay, God, souls and the universe, get merged and become one and infinite.

SYMBOLS AND DIVINE PERSONALITIES IN MODERN TIMES

In Vedānta we have got monistic meditations that negate the non-Self and assert the Self:

“I am neither the mind nor the intellect, neither memory nor ego. I am not the senses of hearing or touch, smell or sight. I am not the body, neither ether nor earth, nor fire, nor air. I am Absolute Knowledge and Bliss. I am the All-pervading Self. I am the All-pervading Self.”

“I am the Self, changeless and formless, all-pervading and omnipresent. I am beyond the touch of sense-attachment. I am beyond all bondage and relative knowledge. I am the All-pervading Self. I am the All-pervading Self.”

Such meditations, if practised by one who has made himself perfectly free from desires and attachments through strenuous disciplines, may be said to be the direct path leading to the realization of the Absolute.

This is in line with the approach to the Reality followed by some of the boldest of the Upanishadic seers who thus meditated on the Immutable: “It is neither gross nor minute, neither short nor long, without eyes or ears, without the vocal organ or mind, without interior or exterior.” “This Immutable is never seen, but is the Witness; It is never thought, but is the Thinker; It is never known, but is the Knower.”

Besides these conceptions of the Absolute, Transcendent Reality—the One without a second, there are the ideas of the Immanent Divine Principle manifesting itself through finite forms and yet remaining Infinite and Formless—the One in the many, which appeal even now, as they did in olden times, to many aspirants who prefer to worship the Impersonal, as they feel no interest in the personal aspects of the Divine.

Like the seers of the Upanishads they meditate: “He is below, He is above, He is at the back, He is in front, He is in the north, He is in the south, He indeed is everywhere and in everything.” “He is subtler than the subtlest, vaster than the vastest, the Self seated in the heart of all beings.” He exists in and through the earth, air, sun, moon and stars; He dwells in all beings; He inhabits the eye, ear, mind and

intellect; He controls everything and every being from within; He is the Internal Ruler, the Immortal Self of the worshipper.

But even this form of impersonal meditation is too difficult for most devotees.

As Śrī Krishṇa has put it in the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (XII.5), "Greater is the difficulty of those whose minds are set on the Absolute. For the heights of the Absolute are very hard for the embodied being to reach." But often it happens that the symbol or the personal aspect of the Divine does not appeal to the philosophic sense of the devotee, while the Impersonal appears to be an abstraction and is beyond his reach. Hence the worship and meditation of the Impersonal through the personal aspects and symbols has been most popular in Hinduism in almost all forms of spiritual practice.

The true devotee sometimes looks upon the divine form he worships as an embodiment of the divine attributes that reveal the Supreme Principle in some way or other. In his worship of the same God the undeveloped devotee thinks in a crude way, takes everything more or less in a material sense, while the more evolved soul thinks in terms of the higher aspects. He means by the symbol or form a divine idea, and this idea again becomes a symbol of the Reality that is at the back of all. This is the course of progress a devotee follows if he persists in the worship of the "chosen ideal" or the Deity or the aspect of the Divine that appeals to him most.

Siva is one of the gods of popular Hinduism. The gross-minded worshipper may take Him to be the God of destruction dwelling in the lonely mountains or on the cremation ground. But to the evolved devotee He is the embodiment of renunciation and the destroyer of evil. He is, besides, the personification of contemplation and divine consciousness. Thus does the advanced worshipper sing His glory: "O Lord, Thou art the Universal Being without a second. Thou art everything. Thou art the One Truth, and verily there is nothing but Thee. Therefore, O Thou Destroyer of misery, in Thee, the Great God, do I take refuge."

The materially minded worshipper of Viṣṇu sees in Him the God of protection and preservation who, out of His infinite mercy, incarnates Himself for the good of His devotees. But the devotee of the highest type sees in Him the embodiment of the Divine Principle permeating the entire universe, in whom is being enacted the world-play with its creation, preservation and dissolution. And he prays: "Lord, Thou abidest in

all; Thou art all; Thou assumest all forms. Thou art the origin of all. Thou art the Soul of all. Salutations to Thee!"

The worship of the Divine Energy or Mother-Power is prevalent in some form or other in most parts of India. She has many forms and symbols. Sometimes She is symbolized as the Goddess of death, playing the dance of destruction. In the form of Kālī, She is represented as the Power of creation, protection and destruction, and also as the Power in which all things rest after dissolution. She stands on the still, prostrate form of Śiva, the representation of the Absolute. This is symbolical of the entire cosmic process having the transcendental Reality as its basis. Again, She in one form is the relative, and in another form Śiva, the Absolute. And Reality is beyond both life and death, and as such the devotee should neither cling to life nor be afraid of death. He should rise above both the pleasant and the terrible to the transcendental plane from where he can say, "The shade of death and immortality—both these, O Mother, are Thy grace." And addressing Her the devotee says, "Thou hast neither name nor lineage, neither birth nor death, neither pain nor pleasure, neither friend nor enemy, neither bondage nor freedom. Thou art the One without a second, known as the Being Supreme."

Rāma is one of the incarnations of Viṣṇu, and is the embodiment of the devotion to truth and duty, for the sake of which he is prepared to make any sacrifice, however great. The ordinary worshipper stresses his lovely form and noble attributes. But the illumined devotee sees him immanent in all, and prays, "Thou art the embodiment of the highest virtues. Thou art the Indweller, the Supreme Being. Thou art the greatest Refuge and Saviour of mankind. Thou art the stainless, changeless, indestructible, pure and eternal Wisdom and Truth."

The Kṛṣṇa-ideal in its various forms is very common, but is also most misunderstood by many. Crude-minded critics take his sport in a vulgar sense. But devotees like Ramakrishna, who never knew what immorality was and were the embodiment of purity and holiness, saw in him the highest ideal of divine love, which can be realized only by those who have become free from all traces of sensuality and crudeness. Realizing his "Universal Form," manifest in every individual, the devotee makes obeisance to him saying, "Salutations to Thee before and to Thee behind. Salutations to Thee on every side. O Lord, Thou art everything. Infinite in power and infinite in prowess, Thou pervadest all; Thou art all."