

Hinduism is an ethnic culture, not a religion which centers around the personality of one teacher. Buddhism throughout its history remained the doctrine and the discipline of the Buddha, but even the great religion of Buddhism, after fifteen hundred or two thousand years, fell back again into the underlying basic culture of the country. It is as if the old Greek and Roman and Germanic religions had continued in Europe as a strong undercurrent beneath Christianity and eventually had reabsorbed Christianity instead of being completely destroyed by Christianity. In India no religion, no philosophy, no social reform has as yet proved strong enough to break down the tenacity of this old ethnic culture. Only a few sects, such as the Jains from the ancient period and the Sikhs from the medieval period, have been able to maintain any considerable amount of autonomy as comparatively small independent communities.

Hinduism is not at all a religion in the sense in which Christianity is a religion. The real Christians form only a community within a western nation as a whole. Within a western nation is found a smaller or larger number of Christians who by an act of volition join some church, pledge themselves to a belief in some definite set of dogmas, and undertake, more or less successfully, to follow certain rules of conduct. Christians form well-defined religious communities inside the social community as a whole. But, in general, one is born a Hindu and may not become a Hindu merely by an act of volition. On the lower levels of society, however, groups may tacitly be accepted by the whole community as Hindu on the ground of their having adopted Hindu customs, and may form lower caste groups. The word Hinduism denotes the whole social community and is comparable to our word Christendom rather than to the word Christianity. It is only a convenient designation applied to the whole culture, social customs, religious practices, and philosophical beliefs of some two hundred and fifty millions out of the three hundred and fifty millions of people in India. The Muhammadans (nearly eighty millions), the Christians, the Parsis, the Jains (who reject the Vedas and the Hindu gods and the Brahman priesthood but, in general, do follow Hindu social customs), the more uncivilized animistic tribes, and some other small groups are excluded. In India there is no sharp line of demarcation between

things which are religious and things which are social; but the Hindus form rather a social group than a religious group, and if any sort of unity and organization is to be found in Hinduism it must be sought on the social rather than on the religious side. Hinduism refers primarily to a peculiar social organization, the caste system, and caste is the only thing which really gives any strong semblance of unity to Hinduism. Caste, in spite of its power and tenacity, has no national organization and is not administered by a supreme council. The various social and religious groups which make up Hinduism are like stones held together tenaciously in a concrete binding, but it is difficult to describe the concrete which holds the different elements together so firmly. The tenacity seems to be due to a widely diffused but remarkably strong tendency of the whole people to maintain old norms of custom. There is in Hinduism no one scripture, no one prophet. There are many sacred books and many prophets, but for the most part the appeal is to anonymous authorities and to ancient sages.

A Hindu is not so much one who believes what Hindus believe as one who does what Hindus do, following certain immemorial social customs.

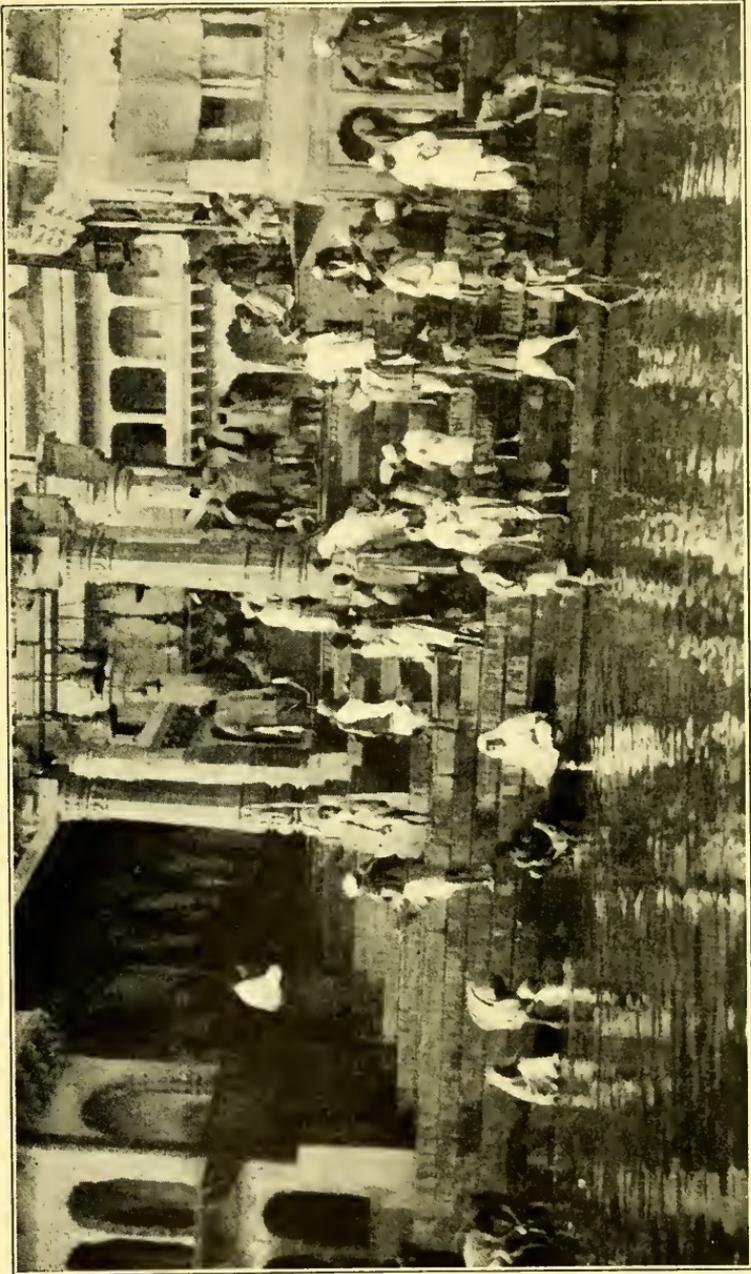
Primarily a Hindu belongs to some hereditary social group which has definite functions to perform in the larger group of Hindus as a whole. A few of these hereditary groups do seem to go back originally to religious sectarian differences of belief, but such groups have not broken radically with Hindu beliefs and practices as the Buddhists and Jains and Sikhs did, and therefore are looked upon as orthodox. Secondly he may belong to some definite religious sect. Some of these religious sects have a strong belief in some favorite deity of a high cosmic nature, but the majority of the people believe in many gods and spirits without much choice between them, and in time of stress tend to turn to some local divinity which is nearer and can devote more of his or her time and attention to the needs of the village than a far distant and more universal cosmic deity could be expected to do.

These Hindu religious sects have no such unity as the Christian sects which, in spite of more or less antagonism towards each other, all believe in one definite scripture and one prophet or savior. Hinduism has many prophets and many scriptures. In India if a man conforms to the particular usages of his own hereditary social group and to certain general customs of the whole social group he may

believe in any god or gods (or in no gods) and may worship them in any way he pleases, he may hold any belief he pleases about the nature of his salvation and the way by which it may be attained, about god, soul, and the world. The unorthodox man, the one who is excommunicated, is the one who breaks with traditional social customs. About the only beliefs which are universal are *karma* and transmigration, a vague recognition of the sacred character of the ancient Vedas, and acceptance of the Brahman priesthood.

Hinduism, therefore, has not been a great missionary religion and has not spread widely outside its own country like Buddhism and Christianity which teach a universal way of life and way of belief for all men and which are independent of particular countries and social environments. One cannot think of Hinduism in any other country than India unless a large group of Hindus were to migrate to that country, as happened in Indo-China and Java.

It has been vigorously debated whether we ought to employ the word Hinduism at all in a religious sense. Some insist that the word, if it is to be used at all, ought to be used in a purely social sense, and that in speaking of Indian religion as opposed to Indian social customs we really ought to employ the names of the various religious sects without trying to lump them all together under one name. There is much force in this objection for there are millions who belong to no organized religious sects, whose religion is vaguely animistic, but who are, nevertheless, Hindus in the social sense of the word. On the lower levels of Hinduism there is no very clear line of demarcation between the so-called clean and unclean castes, and at the very bottom of the social scale it is doubtful whether many groups can properly be called Hindu at all in either a religious or a social sense. Still it is convenient to use the word Hinduism loosely as descriptive of all the different forms of religion practised in this whole social group of two hundred and fifty millions of people in India. There is need of some word to mark them off religiously as well as socially from the rest of the population and to suggest the extent to which religion, in the narrower sense of the word, has been integrated into the whole of social life; and in spite of great religious diversity there is a considerable unity in this diversity.



VISANT GHAT AT MUTTRA