



History of Indian Religion, People and Culture: A Critical Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper is devoted to a critical study of the origin, history and growth of culture, religion and people of India. In order to understand the feelings and attitude of V.S.Naipaul who visited India several times and presented his opinion about the people and culture of India, it is imperative to know the various aspects of the religion and culture of India with reference to its people and environment. In his visit to India and some Islamic countries, V.S.Naipaul has presented his realistic portrayal and also the exposure of the various abnormalities and irregularities in the religion and culture of India. V.S.Naipaul has also shown his satiric approach and views while visiting various cultural and religious places of India. Now let us analyse the religion, culture and people of India specially the religious beliefs and conventions, rites and customs and above all its cultural heritage and hegemony.

KEY WORDS

Indian Religion Culture, Hinduism, Tribal Literature, Religious Tolerance, Holy Scripture.

This paper focuses on the history of Indian religion, people and culture. To give a proper definition of religion is not easy but very difficult. So many people, social scientists, philosophers have tried their best to define religion in their own ways. The most common definition of religion is that it is one of the system of beliefs that is based on a belief in a God or Gods. In other words, the belief in a God or Gods are the activities connected with this is generally known as religion such as

worshipping or praying in a building such as a church, temple or mosque. The following are the definitions of religion:

1. Religion is a specific fundamental set of belief and practices generally agreed upon by a number of persons or sects. (www.dictionary. com)
2. Religion is a belief in a divine or super human power or powers to be obeyed and worshipped as the creator (s) and ruler (s) of the universe. (www. collinsdictionary. com)
3. Religion is the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a person God or Gods. (www. oxfordictionary. com)
4. A personal set or institutionalised system of religious attitude, beliefs of practices is known as religion. (www. merriamwebster. com)
5. Religions do not come from without but from within (Swami Vivekanand: Pearls of Wisdom, Ramkrishna Mission Ashram, Culture, 1988, P.134)
6. Religion is not in doctrines and dogmas nor in intellectual argumentation; it is being and becoming, it is realisation. (Vivekanand., 135)
7. Religion is a way of achieving union with the Ultimate Reality is not merely the end of a process of ratiocination but is an act of faith based on experience. Religion required a growth from the unregenerate to the illumined consciousness called differently by different religions. (Radhakrishnan, S., 19)

Thus, religion is such a belief in which all human beings want to associate themselves to a super human power or the ultimate reality in order to illumine the consciousness and lead a life of morality and spirituality.

The word 'Religion' derives from the Latin word 'Religio'. which means reverence for God or Gods, careful pondering of divine things and 'piety'. Cicero, the great philosopher thought that the term religion derived from the verb 'releare' which means 'to re-read of God over a tent'. On the other hand another great writer Lactantius was of the view that religion means to 'fasten' or 'bind'. He says in his famous book 'Divine Institutions': "The term 'religare' is tied to God and bound to him by the bond of piety and it is from this, and not, as Cicero holds, from the careful study that religion has recieved its name. (www. Jstor. org)

The Origin of Religion

It is very difficult to know the exact origin of religion. It remains unknown even today the exact time when human first became religious. Some researches in the field of Archeology show some credible evidence of religious cum ritualistic behaviour from around the middle paleolithic era (45&200) thousand years ago.

The earliest evidence of religion can be seen in the ritual of the treatment of the dead body. This ritual burial shows that there is a possible belief in the after life. The organised religion can be seen in the neolithic revolution around the world. After the invention of agriculture man started living a stable and permanent life, particularly on the bank of the rivers. This agricultural revolution gave birth to various forms of religion in man's life:

...While bands and small tribes possess supernatural belief, these beliefs do not serve or justify a central authority, justify transfer of wealth. Organised religion emerged as a means of providing social and economic stability. (www. wikipedia : Evolutionary Origion of Religions.)

Religions of India

Hinduism: Hinduism is the major religion of India. The term 'Hindu' was not applied to the followers and invaders who came to India. They meant by this term the people inhabiting 'Indus Valley'. Later on this term Hindu was used to describe those people who follow a particular faith that is Vedic Dharma or 'Sanatan Dharma'. Today this religion is followed by not only the people of India but also some people of Nepal, Bhutan, Burma, Bangladesh, Srilanka, Indonesia, Guyana, Fiji, Palecistan and Mauritius.

Hindu religion has some certain beliefs and systems which are as follows:

- (a) **Belief in many religious ideas:** Hinduism is not centred at only one belief of the omnipotent 'God'. While the Vedas describe 'God' as 'Omniscient' and 'Omnipresent', there are some other beliefs also which has many religious ideas. This is why it is known as a family of religion or a way of life.
- (b) **The theory of Reincarnation:** One of the salient features of Hinduism is the belief of the doctrines of the continuous cycle of life, death and reincarnation. The Hindu also believe that according to the theory of 'Karma' the has to take birth after death.
- (c) **The theory of Atman:** This theory shows that all living creatures have a soul and they are all part of the supreme soul that is 'God'. So the duty and religion of every soul is to attain supreme bliss or 'Moksha' or 'Salvation'. It is after gaining this salvation, the soul becomes an eternal part of an Absolute Soul. About 'Atman' it is said:

The 'Atman' is considered indestructible and passes through an endless migration or incarnations of human, animal or super human forms. The nature of its incarnation depends on good and bad 'Karma' (deeds) in previous births. Good or bad is defined according to 'Dharma'. (Religions of India, 27)

- (a) **The Concept of 'Purusharth':** Every Hindu has to perform four types of Pureshartha or pursuits: (1) Dharma, (2) Earth (material pursuities) (3) Kama (love or desives) and (4) Moksha (Salvation) According to scriptures, a succesful life is that which associates and integrates all these four pursuits in life. At the same time a Hindu has some certain obligations to perform, that is, obligations to God, to ancestors and to sages and to fellow human beings.
- (b) **Reverence for all living creatures:** The most important feature of Hinduism is that the people belonging to Hinduism give respect to all living creatures including that plants and the trees, mountains and rivers. They worship the river Ganga as their mother. Besides the Ganga, they also worship some other well-known rivers in India. They even worship the plant 'Tulsi', 'Neem', and 'Peepal'. This shows their ecological consciousness. They even worship the cow as their mother. They also worship the earth and often attribute motherly affections to the earth.

Thus, through these various ways of life and worshiping not only a single God but visualising God in all human beings including the floras and faunas, the Hindu religion is the most comprehensive and inclusive religion of the world. They think that a soul tormented with remorse for its deeds is in hell and a soul with the satisfaction of a life well lived is in heaven. About this religion S. Radhakrishnan in his famous book *The Present Crisis of Faith* rightly observes:

Religion is a way of achieving union with that Ultimate Reality called God. Believing in the Ultimate Reality is not merely the end of a process of retoncination but is an act of faith based on experience. Religion requires a growth from the unregenerate to the illumined consciousness called differently by different religions. (Radhakrishnan, Crisis of Faith, 19)

The Hindu attitude to religion is interesting. While fined intellectual beliefs mark off one religion from another, Hinduism sets no such limits. Intellect is subordinated to intuition, dogma

to experience, outer expression to inward realization. Religion is not the acceptance of academic abstraction or the celebration of ceremonies, but a kind of life. (Radhakrishnan, 3)

The Hindu culture and civilization is also richly influenced by the 18 *Puranas* which are considered to represent the devotional sects. They deal with the divine geneology, creation, recreation and dissolution. Apart from these great religious epics and scriptures, the Sanskrit literature has given birth to a number of great poets and their works which are also central to the formation of culture in Indian society.

It is interesting to note that with the passage of time Indian society has given birth to a number of illogical superstitions and some irrelevant '*Sanskaras*' and *Karmakanda*. Due to the bad effects of *Karmakanda* and superstitions, casteism, untouchability and other social evils came into existence in Indian society. Many great people of India like Mahatma Gandhi, Swami Vivekananda, Tilak, Raja Ram Mohan Roy—to name only a few, fought against the superstitious beliefs and practices which had crept into the religion. They hold the view that God is always impartial to both the saint and the sinner, the rich and the poor, the rough and the sublime. God is not angered by the neglect or pleased by prayer. On the other hand, God loves all beings alike. If a person repents for his sins and changes his behaviour, God assists him in his endeavour. The reward for virtuous living is the good life itself. S. Radhakrishnan in his famous book *The Present Crisis of Faith* rightly observes:

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Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the Nation, has also developed his own concept about Indian religion. He strongly believes in the unity and integrity of all religions. He never hated any religion of the world. His main concept is that every man and woman of any religion is good. He has a dream of an India in which all communities shall live in a perfect harmony. There should be no room in such an India for the curse of untouchability or the curse of the intoxicating drinks and drugs. In *Young India*, he holds the view:

My patriotism is subservient to my religion. I cling to India like a child to its mother's breast, because I feel that she gives me the spiritual nourishment, I need. She has the environment that responds to my highest aspirations. When that faith is gone, I shall feel like an orphan without hope of even finding a guardian. (Gandhi, M.K.,4)

Swami Vivekanand, a great thinker and social worker of India has developed his own concept of religion. He thinks that service to the poor and the needy people is the real essence of religion. He never believes in the outward ostentations and other rituals to please and placate God, rather, he thinks that the true purpose of religion is to awaken the masses to the right path. He is of the view that the masses who comprise the lowest castes; through ages of constant tyranny of the higher castes and by being treated by them with blows and kicks at every step, they have totally lost their manliness and become like professional beggars. They pay for our education, they build our temples, but in return they get kicks. If anybody is born of a low caste in our country, he is gone for ever, there is no hope for him. And came and see in Travancore, the most priest ridden country in India...where every bit of land is owned by the brahmins. He says:

Religion, which is the highest knowledge and the highest wisdom, can not be bought, nor can it be acquired from books. (Vivekanand, III)

At another place, Swami Vivekanand develops his own concept of religion by loving the poor and the destitutes saying:

Our mission is for the destitute, the poor, and the illiterate peasantry and labouring classes, and it, after everything has been done for them first, there is spare time, then only for the gentry. Those peasants and labouring people will be won over by love... "one must raise oneself by one's own exertion"—this hold good in all spheres. We help them to help themselves... The moment they will come to understand their own condition and feel the necessity of help and improvement, know that your work is taking effect and is in the right direction. (Vivekanand, 427-28)

It is interesting to note that the influence of Islam can be seen in the Hindu way of life. In the Hindu religion caste system was strongly observed but after the effect of Islam many religious movements and Bhakti movements came into existence by the great efforts of the sufi saints. The sufi saints influenced much on the Bhakti movement which had given birth to saints poets like Kabir and Raidas and many more who strongly advocated the need of fraternity and equality among people. These saints poets believed in Nirgun Brahma which is the part of Islam. As a result the Bhakti cult gave relief to the Dalit and the deserted of the society who were under the clutches of untouchability. In south India, the saint poets like Shakaracharya, Ramanuja and Basava began to reinterpret Hinduism in terms of Islamic monotheism. The great impact of Islam can be seen in the division of the nation in two parts or, rather say, three parts—India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. This division made Hindus more orthodox in views and visions in comparison with what they were in the past.

The linguistic synthesis also played an important role in giving, birth to a new language 'Urdu' which is a miniature of Persian, Arabic and Turkish words. This Urdu language has given birth to a number of great poets like Amir Khushboo and Malik Mahammad Jaisi. The Urdu language also gave a new vibrancy and vigour to Indian film industry, Architecture of both Hindu and Muslim religions also play an important role in giving the shape and design of homes. Islam borrowed the design of lotus, Kalash, Mango leaves from the Hindu architectural forms, similarly the massive structure of mosque, domes, tall minarets, huge walls are the influences of the Muslim architecture.

Christianity has one faith in God but God is revealed himself as three persons—The 'Father', the 'Son' and the 'Holy Spirit'. Jesus is God, the son, the form of the virgin Mary who conceived the Holy spirit. According to Christian belief, the incarnation of Christ as a human being is a part of divine plan for the atonement of the sins of the mankind.

The Bible is the holy book of the Christian. It has two parts—the Old Testament and New Testament. The old Testament was originally written in Hebrew language. It contains the sacred scriptures of the Jew as well as the early Christian scriptures. The New Testament was written in the second half of the 1st century. It consists of 27 books and was originally written in Greek. It contains the life and deeds of Christ and other saints.

According to the belief of Christianity, man has a body and a soul. The former perishes and the latter survives eternally. In this regard, Christianity is similar to Hinduisim. The Christianity does not believe in the transmigration of soul. The salvation of an individual is possible when he accepts Jesus as saviour. The other important features of Christianity is that Jesus is the saviour of mankind. God punishes the evil and rewards the good.

According to Christianity, Sunday is considered as Lord's Day. On Sunday, the Christians go to churches and worship God. The symbol of a cross which a Christian wears reminds the crucifixion of Christ to save mankind. There are two major groups in Christiansm—the Catholic and the Protestant. The Protestant emerged in 16th century and they claimed that the church and the society was in a state of crisis. They demanded reforms and so they are called protestant. While the Catholics do not believe in reform. The Catholic strongly believes in the authority of the Pope.

Sikhism: Sikhism is a religion established by Guru Nanakdev who is supposed to be the founder and the first Guru. The 10th Guru or the last Guru was Guru Govind Singh.

There are some certain religious practices in this religion. The followers of Sikhism believe in one God, 10 Gurus and Guru Granth Sahib. They don't believe in gambling or the exploitation of the poor. They are also dead against drug and opium. Every sikh is to be initiated into the faith through Amrit ceremony. Worship of idols, Graves, Tombs or monastries are strongly forbidden. The Sikh also follow the five symbols which are called the Panch Kakar. The 5 kakars are (a) Kesh (hair), (b) Kara (Iron bangle) (c) Kripan (Sword), (d) Kangha (comb) and (e) Kachha (underwear)

CONCLUSION

Thus this brief analysis of the various religions and the religious practices of India clearly shows that India is a country of a number of religions, beliefs and practices. So it is very difficult to judge an individual or an idea or a place without knowing the various features of religions which are strongly rooted in the very texture of Indian religious mentality and thoughts. In order to study the various travelogues of V.S.Naipaul, a basic concept of all prevalent religions of India is very necessary because only in the light of the knowledge of religions and faiths of India, a proper and critical study of the various works particularly the travelogues of V.S. Naipaul is possible.

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