

# Appropriating the Ancients: An analysis of the Philosophy of Hinduism

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## Abstract:

This paper tries to dissect and analyze the ancient religion of Hinduism, which is one of the most misunderstood religions in the world. It has apparent contradictions and the diverse faiths in it may make it seem like a loose group of divergent people. However, during the course of the paper, the author tries to explode many of the myths associated with it and explanations for many of the controversial theories are made in light with modern philosophers, particularly of the type of Ayn Rand. For the purposes of the paper, the most misunderstood concepts of God, Caste system, Selfishness, Non – Violence, Vegetarianism and Justice are dealt elaborately and many analogies for easy understanding of the philosophy are introduced. The concepts are treated as objectively as possible, to prevent any prejudice and bias and most of the impressions given by me are inspired from the popular philosophical beliefs of the Hinduism.

## 1 Introduction:

Religion is a grouping of people, who are distinguished by a particular set of moral and ethical characteristics that differentiate them from other collections of people. Religions were created and nurtured by a set of individuals, who preached a group of principles and believed that by following them the people would attain the highest good. Among the religions, Hinduism is one of the oldest and the most fantastic, and it is embellished by a host of practices that give it a peculiar position. Unlike other religions, it is not created out of intelligence of a single prophet and its ideals are as diverse as the people following them. In fact, Hinduism is just like our modern Academic community, where different group of people propose and publish their philosophical works, which are then validated, refuted or supported by others in the community. The ancient journals are believed to be the Upanishads and the authors are known as *Rishis*. This partly explains why there were so many contradictions within the same religion, but on detailed analysis many philosophers observe that all lead in the same direction.

Most of the authors concentrated on the concept of Brahman, the Universal God, and tried to put their own interpretations and analogies to enable their followers to understand the concept and to work on concrete issues like Politics, Justice and Production. Any democratic community would have its ideological conflicts and the different proponents fought on the specific interpretations of an accepted truth. A classical example for this could be the 1000 year ‘ideological war’ between the *Shivaites* (followers of Siva), *Vaishnavites* (followers of Vishnu) and *Tantrics* (followers of Shakti).

All of them agree that there is a single God, but differ on the particular form of Him. In this essay an analysis of these particular forms, practices and dogmas are dealt and their relevance in the present day context is examined. To complete the spectrum of analysis topics such as society, culture, politics and customs are necessary, as Hinduism is a peculiar religion, with its actual name, *Sanatana Dharma* roughly means a set of ideals for sustaining life in the world.

## **2 Concept of God**

### **2.1 God in Hinduism and Other religions:**

The most controversial entity that separates the Religions is the abstract being called the God. Almost every religion believes in the concept of a Supreme Person, who has created this world and the creatures within. Even, atheistic religions like Jainism have started to worship their holy saints called the '*Thirthankaras*', while most Buddhists have resorted to the worship of Buddha, though both the religions arose in opposition to the idol worship of Hinduism. Similarly, many Christians consider Jesus Christ as God, though Bible itself says that '*Yesu*' is just the messenger of the Father in Heaven.

The worship of God with a form is not a wrong concept, though all religions realize that it is not the *complete Truth*. However, many psychologists agree that giving a form to an entity being worshipped gives the feeling of closeness to the entity itself. Nevertheless, the selection of a particular form should help the people to enhance this relationship.

### **2.2 Development of various gods in Hinduism**

Hinduism differs from the other mature religions in this aspect. Throughout the ages, it has tried to institutionalize the concept of idol-worship as a means of attaining the highest truth for the common people, though the younger religions like Jainism, Buddhism and Christianity started with the concept of breaking this 'ignorance'. The Vedas speak of gods as physical elements, with Sun being the supreme and *Indra*, *Varuna*, *Vayu* and *Agni* as major deities each representing Heavens, Water, Air and Fire, respectively. This was similar to the Greek, Roman and other early religions of West Asia, where physical elements were manifested as gods. The Vedas describe lots of '*yajnas*' (sacrifices) to appease these gods, which they thought would lead to a happy life on earth.

However, as the religion was maturing in the later part of the Vedic age, the '*Rishis*' (saints and abstract philosophers) felt the need of representing abstract human qualities as gods, to bring the concept of god more within in the reach of common man. This gave rise to a host of *new* gods, partly inspired from the beliefs of other cultural groups (Dravidian and small tribals) that were being assimilated into the Aryan civilization. From the Harappan civilization they incorporated *Shiva* (an ascetic Tropical god) giving it forms such as *Pashupathi* (god mounted on a bull, found in Harappan remnants) and *Linga* (a cylindrical block over a stone base, got from south India). Some of the other gods integrated during this period were *Vishnu* (a pleasure loving god reclining over the ocean), *Brahma* (The four-headed Creator sitting in a lotus forever

meditating on the *Supreme One*), *Parvathy* (woman god representing the benign side of *Shakthi*, the Supreme energy) and *Vinayaka* (elephant headed god, the son of *Shiva*).

The integration of these gods into Hindu psyche was very popular and common men whole-heartedly took to the worship of these *new* gods. The *Rishis* also wrote many *Puranas* (epics depicting the gods as heroes) and they were widely accepted as philosophical and character building works. Many more gods were added to the list like the *Subramanya* (son of *Shiva* representing valor and youth), *Durga and Kali* (representing the other side of *Shakthi*, known for their cruelty in destroying the wicked), *Hanuman* (a devoted assistant of Lord Rama) and *Krishna* (the Lord of *Bhagvat Gita*, the holy book of the Hindus). The epics Mahabharatha and Ramayana have become world famous and many more interesting mythological stories were assimilated into the mainstream of Hinduism.

### **2.3 Understanding God as per Hindu Philosophy**

The presence of a Supreme Creator, sitting over the Heaven and controlling all the activities in the Universe, is yet to be accepted scientifically and it would be never be in the future, as fully understanding an entity would make it non-absolute and anything non-absolute would not be God. So, we would forever lack the complete understanding on God and the doubts regarding the origin (why did Big Bang occur? and what was the universe like, before it?) would forever remain unsolved. Hence, we would continue to put forward hypothesis and opinions regarding God, and they could be refuted by alternate belief and this battle is going to continue forever between the theists and atheists. But, the Hindu concept of God is slightly different.

Most Hindu philosophers agree to the principle of one Supreme Formless Being called the *Brahman*, but they don't believe in the fact that he can be realized with ordinary consciousness. As previously stated, anything understood by ordinary consciousness would make it non-Absolute and hence non-God. They believe in the concept of super-consciousness above the plane of normal rationalism, which alone can bring the understanding of the *Brahman*. This could be puzzling and bewildering for the rest of the world to think of a state beyond the ordinary rationalism, but the Hindus firmly believe in that. In fact, the one fact that is common to almost all sects of Hinduism is this concept of super-consciousness and most of the Hindu philosophers and saints forever ponder on ways to elevate the ordinary man to the realm of super-consciousness. This is called Realization or Mukti, though the latter word is now mostly taken for mixing of *Jivatman* (individual entities) and *Paratman* (sum total of all entities in the Universe). The different schools of thoughts in India, fight over the feasibility of various paths that might lead to this state and some of the commonly accepted paths according to Bhagvat Gita are:

#### **2.3.1 Raja Yoga**

This is the popularly known yoga tradition and nowadays most people take this as the only yoga. This combines a set of bodily exercises and mental exercises to prepare the mind to reach the absolute. It describes an eight fold path as

Yama -- Being truthful and leading a righteous life

Niyama - Doing the duties as a father, son, teacher, student, ruler, subjects etc.  
Asana – Maintaining a proper posture with a healthy body  
Pranayama – Maintaining control of the breath  
Pratyahara – Beginning to exercise the mind  
Dharana – Allowing mind to exhibit a continuous flow  
Dhyana – Concentrating the mind on the Supreme Being  
Samadhi - Realization

### **2.3.2 Bhakthi Yoga**

This is also most popular among the Hindus (though not as a Yoga), urging people to concentrate their energies on a *Ishta Deivata* (Personal God) and take Him as a part of the life. Since, the gods are given a human form, people might treat them as friend, son, mother, husband and believe the god to be their protector and guide. This gives a psychological strength in the times of distress and a popular Hindu legend symbolizes this.

*There was a man who suffered a lot in his life and finally after his death reached his Personal God. The man asked Him, what was He doing when he was suffering the hardships in earth. The God showed him the footsteps of the man followed by the footsteps of God, wherever the man went on earth. This stunned the man and when was closely observing the footsteps he found that in certain places there was only a single pair of footsteps and those were the times of deep distress. The angered man asked God, “When I was happy, you followed me and when I was in deep agony you left me as there was just a single pair of footsteps”. The serene God replied, “It was not your footsteps, but mine. It was I who was carrying you during the periods of the misery”.*

There are many heart-rendering stories in the Hindu mythology that show the power of true devotion and this is one fact that Hinduism shares with other religions of the world. In fact, most religions stop with just the Bhakthi (true devotion to God) and leaves their followers without much of alternate paths and choices of Realization.

### **2.3.3 Jnana Yoga**

*Jnana yoga* means the attainment of Realization through Knowledge. This is much like the modern philosophy and many Hindu saints have refuted the non-rational paths and contemplate that rationalism can only lead to super-consciousness. The Upanishads arose out of these *Jnana Yogis* and try to cover a wide realm of philosophy in their works. This path is now very less followed and concept of rational thinking was somewhat subdued in Hindus during the dark ages from 12<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> centuries A.D. due to foreign conquests, and after the rise of the famous Hindu philosopher Swami Vivekananda in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there has been some efforts in the enlightenment of soul with knowledge. A famous Hindu tale explains the relevance of *Jnana Yoga*.

*There was a student and his teacher sitting on a riverbank and were pondering over Philosophical thoughts. Suddenly, the teacher asked the student to observe a particular star in the clouded night sky. He was confused and unable to view the right star. Then the teacher slowly raised his arms and pointing out at a particular direction he*

*asked the student to concentrate. The student was now able to view the star and understand it. This is the essence of Jnana Yoga. It tries to show a direction (got from previous experience) for its followers to ponder upon the truth that is present, but not seen due to the clouds of ignorance and countless other diversions present around it*

### **2.3.4 Karma Yoga**

*Karma Yoga* means attainment of God through productive work. According to Lord Krishna, this is the most desired of the practices in reaching God as it doesn't require any major sacrifices and it can be simple enough to be followed even by a commoner. It urges the people to continue in whatever productive work they may be in (so long it doesn't violate the established laws of the land) and put their full concentration in doing the work rather than in its fruits. But, this could be puzzling to rational people of the West as it is proved that only those people with a strong desire towards the goal can only achieve the goal. The *Karma Yoga* doesn't refute this, but suggests that by concentrating more on a work (whose fruits are already known and rationalized), we can get much more enjoyment than the actual fruit itself. For eg. we recognize Albert Einstein more for his work on Relativity (*Karma*) than the Nobel Prize (*Fruit*) got for Photoelectric effect. This is further explained by a following story.

*There was a man, who hearing about a famous Roller Coaster wanted to ride in it. He was told that it was extremely fantastic and was worth the expense. So, he fought hard and boarded the mega-Roller Coaster and was expecting that it would bring him the great joy. While the Roller coaster was in its full swing, he was busily concentrating on the joy he is going to get at the destination. Finally after a 10-minute ride, he was brought back to the same place and he indignantly asked the driver, "I was told that this Roller coaster would bring me joy, but I'm cheated and brought back to the same place". The driver politely replied, "This is the joy of journey and not of destination".*

The *Karma Yoga* is the only 'religion', which urges man to do more of economically productive work and assures that such a thoughtful concentrated work could lead to the God faster than other paths. Its philosophy can be summed up by the famous statement, "If you are a sweeper, sweep like how Michelangelo did his painting".

## **2.4 Relevance of Hindu concepts of God to Modern Philosophy:**

The concept of God, as stated earlier would forever be a bone of contention between the rational philosophers. A famous Tamil (a language of South India) poet says, "Those who haven't gone can't see, and those who have gone (and seen), can't be seen". So, I would refrain from making any sweeping assertion about the presence or absence of God as a Supreme Being. This section would just examine the Hindu concept of God, from an earthly point of view.

### **2.4.1 Necessity for the portrayal of God**

Is it necessary to have and portray a God? If yes would it require a Form? The need for a God is left to the reasoning of an individual. Nevertheless, many social thinkers are of the view that having a Supreme entity regulates the lives of common man to a path towards righteousness. This may not be entirely true as the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which

as seen a remarkable upsurge in religious interests (Rightists have begun to take charge in many Asian and European countries) has been the most calamity prone and people seem to have forever moved away from righteousness. The concept of an all-encompassing God is particularly disturbing to the rationalists and concepts such as ‘*What is Righteousness?*’ and ‘*Is being Selfish wrong?*’, are oft asked. So, how does Hinduism answer this?

The Hindu philosophy believes that the Self is the supreme and there could be nothing wrong in pondering over the Self and doing actions as commanded by the inner Self. If selfishness means being guided by *Inner Self* then Hinduism clearly supports that. Hinduism explains that *ManSakshi* (Internal court) is the best institution for offering Justice and the only person to be condemned is one who tries to subdue the Self to accommodate the whims of other. Adi Sankara (the greatest Hindu Philosopher of the 10<sup>th</sup> Century) in his classical work, *Bhaja Govindam* (Worship the Supreme), says that breaking of bondage artificially created by men between themselves and the fellow men has to be broken first, in order to reach Realization. This is consistent with the revolutionary thoughts of Ayn Rand, Patrick Henry and other American philosophers who believe that highest good can be reached only when individual men consider themselves to be independent and perform actions as commanded by the rational Self. Curiously, developments in distributed computing, Object Oriented programming, System design from individual cooperating entities, have all prove to the point that a set of distributed, independent and rational beings can do more good to a society than a centralized commanding entity.

#### **2.4.2 Concept of Self:**

The concept of *Selfishness* portrayed by Hinduism can immediately attract opposition from everyone. Most Hindus believe that the highest good is in attaining *Selflessness* and argue citing many of the great Philosophers. However, sometimes their knowledge of their own religion could be less, and often they need to be explained about the merits of their own religion. Each and every man is born different with different physical qualities, mental virtues and enormous desires. Thus, defining a common proper path can be extremely difficult and the best way is to help the people to understand themselves. The concept of *Svadarma* (*Personal Righteousness*) can be explained with a small analogy. People can model themselves as an object, whose properties can't be changed by anyone other than the person herself. The object can be wrapped with an interface to deal with other entities through proper protocols and actions are to be guided by the inner object after clearly analyzing the merits to be accrued to the Self. Truth, Liberty and Justice can be best attained with this principle, as Truth is the most efficient way to perform an action and Justice is a concept that could be best understood by a rational person willing to permanently safeguard her liberty from the clutches of slavery. This is a hard psychological truth and is to be experience and not told. Therefore, we find that although Hinduism never tells its followers to be Selfish, but by urging to come out of bondage and perform action in a disinterested (not uninterested) way, it is close to the principles of modern philosophy.

*Karma Yoga* advocates a set of principles that would make the work much more efficient and productive. It asks its participants to merely enjoy the action currently done and not to bother much about its fruits. This might not lead to indirection as *Karma Yoga* expects its followers to be rational enough to understand the fruit of their action. *Karma Yoga* is not in denying the fruit, but in not pondering over the fruit. Excessively pondering over the fruit might take the concentration away from the immediate action and might hinder the attainment of fruit. For eg. a soldier in a battlefield is told to focus on his role in the immediate battle and not on the pervasive action of War itself. In fact, the recitation of *Bhagvat Gita* itself occurs in the battlefield, where Lord Krishna asks Arjuna to perform his duties in a disinterested way and gives the most famous quote on *Karma Yoga*

*“Man doesn’t attain freedom from action without entering upon action; nor does he reach perfection merely by ceasing to act...Go on efficiently doing your duty without attachment. Doing work without attachment man attains the Supreme ”*

Bhagvat Gita (Chap III, v 4,19)

While speaking of Karma Yoga, an interesting analogy comes to the mind.

*There were 4 rivers, the daughters of a mighty mountain and each set off their journey towards the sea. While they were moving, an engineer saw the scope of building a dam to harness their potentials and built the dam. When the first river saw a huge dam wall obstructing its path, it was bewildered and immediately came running to the father and cried that an obstacle prevents her from reaching the goal. The second river was slightly bold and it tried to really crush the dam with its full force and break the obstacle but failed and got lost immediately. The third river was clever and it tried to overwhelm the dam by filling it completely through hard work and succeeded in opening the floodgates. But, it missed the direction completely after it was opened, as the river didn’t think of the means to control its aggression after the gates were opened. The fourth river being a karma yogi was disinterestedly filling the dam with the maximum possible water and after the gate was opened it calmly reached the destination. The first river represents the idler, who at the first instance of obstacle forgets the duty. The second represents an unthinking mad man, who tries to break the obstacle thinking it as a demon. The third river represents the blitzkrieg success persons, who taste a sudden success but lose direction due to over-aggression. The last represent the real successful person like Albert Einstein, coolly doing their duty and calmly attaining their destination.*

#### **2.4.3 Necessary for a human form for the gods**

Hinduism portrays the gods as abstract human qualities and they are present to improve the psyche to conquer over the everyday sufferings. The gods are just like human beings having marriages, children and other human traits, but show a point to the worshippers. Lord Ram represents perfection and righteousness, Krishna portrays statesmanship and wisdom, Vinayaka depicts happiness and joy, Parvathi characterizes kindness and motherly affection, Shanmuga symbolizes valor and youth, Shiva represents simplicity, Brahma characterizes calmness and serenity, Hanuman signifies devotion and duty-consciousness, and the famous Kali characterizes the just anger in destroying the wicked.

The gods thus represent the human traits and by knowing the relative merits and timing of each action, we might lead an efficient life on earth. *Shakthi* is portrayed as the benign *Parvathi* in most ancient Hindu temples and in south Indian temples (the oldest of Indian temples) it is very rare to see *Kali*. This means that to deal with people we need to practice more of calm and kind manners and only in exceptional cases anger is allowed. Ram is the perfect god in Hindu philosophy and he has all the traits that a man is expected of and so he stands as an example of how humans can lead their life with his inspiration. The epics go to show how individual actions lead to their results and encourage men to lead their life taking inspiration from the gods.

Unlike other religions, Hinduism gives full freedom for its followers to have their mode of worship and even atheists can be Hindus, as Truth, Justice and Liberty can also taken to be gods while leading a life true to those principles. In fact, the epic Valmiki Ramayana (the story of Lord Rama) was itself a secular work emphasizing the virtues that a man must hold in his life. However, Hinduism requests the people to not to stop with just the idol-worship, and encourages people to go for the higher planes of *Formless Worship*. Many of the philosophy applicable for the commoners can be refuted while going towards the higher planes. This is essentially because, Hinduism has been organized in an academic fashion, where people in different stages of growth might be there and for each level a set of understandable and applicable philosophies need to be invented. While doing this, there might be contradiction visible to those trying to jump between different levels and can be explained by the following analogy.

*There was a man who wanted to learn different ranges of knowledge and randomly picked out few books to satisfy his appetite. When he took over the first book, meant for kindergarten children, he saw the lesson saying that the “Sun rises in the east and sets in the West”. He tossed up the book and randomly picked a second book, a class III Science book, he saw the lesson, “The sun is stationary and earth moves around it”. He was literally confused and took out a third book, a class 10 Physics book, where he saw “The sun together with the rest of solar system moves around a central plane of the Milky Way”. The bewildered man took up the final book, a research work meant from top Astronomical Scientists, where he saw “There might be no motion in absolute space and every object may be experiencing movement only in the relative Space-Time plane of the body”. The man became mad and concluded that the entire academic system is at fault, forgetting that he was the one to have made the mistake of haphazardly reading works meant for different ages of people. A three year old kid can’t be directly told of the Space-Time plane and even if it is wrong, the ancient science and classical mechanics are relevant in the present day to understand the mysteries of the complex physical world.*

We may now understand why Hinduism has seemingly contradictory practices and we come to know that it allows each one to choose their own methodology after knowing their real mental capacity. This explains the real success of Hinduism as a religion that has kept faith for over 4000 years withstanding thousands of conquests and competing philosophies. It is in fact a religion of religions, as any philosophy can be

readily fit into it, as it allows its followers to practice any ideology that might deem fit to the person and allow him to conduct the activities of everyday life efficiently.

### **3 Schools of Thought:**

The Hinduism being a diverse religion, sports a number of different philosophies in it, applicable to different types of people. Some of them include the Advaita, Dvaita, Visistadvaita, Sankya and Nyaya schools of thought. But, Advaita and Dvaita are the most popular and let us briefly analyze them.

#### **3.1 Dvaita (Dualism):**

Sri Madhvacharya founded the dvaita system, and it preaches a dualistic system of philosophy. It recognizes two distinct entities in universe – The Jeevatman (the individual souls) and Paramatma (The Supreme Being). It advocates that man has a natural instinct to reach and assimilate with the Supreme One, just like the rivers trying to reach and get one with the sea. This is the idea of liberation. This type of philosophy is identical with many other religions including Christianity, which urges man to look beyond the earth and reach God by making the soul purer. This philosophy is much easier to understand as common man always have an idea of a powerful being, the God, who controls the world and by his grace and kindness we the individual souls carry out our activities. It gives a sense of assurance to them and encourages a moral and spiritual life. This may be one of the reason why India didn't face any moral or ethical crisis for thousands of years till the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

#### **3.2 Advaita (Non dualism):**

The more interesting and more unique philosophy of Hinduism is the Advaita school of thought, practiced by the legendary Adi Shankara (circa: 10<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.). It says that there is no dualism in the universe; there is only one entity, the Brahman; it is manifested as all the beings in the world. But, the ordinary persons are deluded by a force called *Maya* (illusion) and this is responsible for seeming Myth that man is different from God. When one overcomes *Maya*, he could see that he is God – *Aham Brahmasmi* (I'm the Supreme Power) and the famous Hindu saying *Tat Tvam Asi* (I'm not different from You) goes with it. This is more like the modern philosophy, saying that man is not a controlled entity and he is weak and timid, only until he realizes himself. Once a man has overcome the shackles of *Maya*, he has the great truth waiting for him, that he is no different from God. A small analogy is worth mentioning.

*The rivers all get rains from the clouds and water from glacier, which beautifully manifests as diverse streams rising aloft a big mountain. Initially the river has no idea of direction and goes by the steepness of the plain. After a while it comes out of the mountain and slowly curbs its speed, while realizing that it has be more streamlined, and does effective work to the community. At the end, it comes in sight of the sea, knowing the entire purpose of its course and happily embraces the sea. Once it merges with the sea, there is no identity of the original river. The water again evaporates and manifests as rains and glaciers. This process is supposed to go on forever and there is no difference between the water in the river and of the sea (apart from the salt and dust). This is how man goes by in his life. Initially, he has a little sense of direction and by the slow*

*'maturement' he identifies himself with a direction and then finds that there is a big ocean body before him and he needs to merge with the body. Only when he reaches the body, he realizes that he is not different from it. This process is called liberation, according to advaita.*

By this analogy we can realize that *Dvaita* (dualism) is indeed a part of the *advaita*, but only as a last but one stage. *Advaita* activists also agree that *Dvaita* can be practiced by common men and once they reach a certain level of maturity, they can go for the tougher *Advaita*. A more interesting and traditional analogy indicating these two systems goes like this:

*There were two birds sitting on a tree, one above and one slightly below. The bird at the top is always serene and takes fruits without the illusions of pain and pleasure. It is beyond the extremes and finds calmness and serenity above the realms of these. The bird below it takes some fruits and enjoys them, while other times mistakenly tastes some bitter fruits bringing pain. This bird has a natural tendency (desire) to taste them again and again, thus bringing a cycle of enjoyment and agony. While doing this, it always views the bird at the top as one eligible for worship and slowly moves towards it, enduring all the associated difficulties. Once it has reached the top of the tree, the other bird disappears and it realizes that it has so far seen its reflection of itself at the top of the tree. Thus man tries to reach the supreme, and purifies himself and once he reaches the ultimate realization, he knows that world (and God) is a reflection of Himself.*

Now, for the modern thinkers, this might seem to be leading to fatalism. Man needs to do nothing, he has no sins and no virtues - is a sure recipe for a disaster, they may contend. But, one who has studied Hinduism thoroughly well, never feels that kind of a mindset. Hindu culture, as already said, advocates morality, integrity, ethics and duty as essentials for a man and if someone comes to these higher reaches of philosophy, he is expected to have these ideals and thus, Hinduism guards itself from fatalism. If someone is not comfortable with these ideas, he might continue doing his duties well and that duty can lead him toward liberation. Thus, *Jnana* (Knowledge), *Bhakti* (Worship) and *Karma*(duty) can run in parallel, and a man is expected to be the follower atleast one of these. This may be acceptable to the modern thinkers.

#### **4 Dharma – The Concept of Universal Justice:**

Among the Hindu ideals, the greatest feature is one of the Dharma. It is such a complex word and is so difficult to be translated in other languages. It roughly means any set of activities that sustains life in the world. Morality, Honesty and Truth are essentially parts of the Dharma, as they are the ones required for a stable society. A really *Selfish* person must be *Dharmic* (follower of Dharma) to protect himself and safeguard his interests. Dharma can be suited to the prevailing trends, while noting that there are many instances where we can fall back to our ancient idea banks to solve current problems. The Hindu books are really written to enable the proper implementation of Dharma and they give a lot of flexibility in this, as it should be open to practise in a diverse set of conditions. It is something like the universal system of Justice. No one can escape from the wheels of the dharma and the epics give real-life examples of how dharma can be

practiced. It is a comprehensive guide as to how man can adjust to various conditions and adapt himself to the prevailing conditions. Mahabharatha is one example of an epic, which portrays various doubts arising in man and advices on how a man has to solve them. We can briefly examine some of the situations.

#### **4.1 War of righteousness**

It might seem puzzling to some people, as to how a war can be allowed by dharma. In fact, had we not defined that dharma is the system of sustaining life and if an act kills people would it not be adharma (Anti-Dharma)? But, this is dealt beautifully by Ved Vyasa (the author of Mahabharatha). In the final war of the epic, the truthful side endures all the difficulties of life and claim the land, which they actually own (and currently held by the opponents). But, the other side refuses to obey the system of justice and openly breaks the laws of the land. The truthful side is headed by a kind man called Yudistra, who fears that this might lead to war and elimination of his kith and kin (both the sides are cousins of each other). He is now advised by the sages that by leading a just and truthful war, Yudistra won't be breaking Dharma, as he really deserves the land while the opponents break the justice. If he doesn't fight, it might lead to be belief that injustice could sustain in the world and could prove to be destroyer to the very side he is sympathizes for. Thus, a rightful war is advocated, so that justice might be established in the world, even if it comes at the cost of beloved friends, relatives and kind men. The readers are well advised to read a good interpretation of Mahabharatha to really understand the concepts of Justice according to Hinduism.

#### **4.2 Sathya Vs. Dharma (Truth Vs. Justice)**

While analyzing the concepts of Justice, sometimes a discrepancy arises between Sathya (Truth) and Dharma. Sathya is truth and honesty and essentially a part of Dharma. But, there are occasions wherein both may lead to a collision course. For eg. when we need to protect the country, we may perform various activities (such a spying, tactful diplomacy, proactive armory) which might not be concordant with truth. But, the nations need them and if they are not properly done, the nation might be open to an attack, thus destroying the Dharma of the nation. So, Hinduism advices that in extreme conditions when Dharma is confronted by Sathya, it is better to follow the earlier. This is practiced during the assassination of *Bhisma, Dhrona and Karna*, powerful warriors of the unjust side who could not be killed by normal means, and the truthful side needed certain tactful activities to kill them, or otherwise, Dharma might have been destroyed in the system. However, it is imperative to note that this type of Dharma is applicable only to those who lead a justful organization and practice the tenets of Justice. This makes Hinduism much more versatile making it more closer to one's life.

#### **4.3 Svadharma (Act of being true to oneself)**

A more interesting and a widely misunderstood concept of Hinduism is the concept of *Svadharma* (the act of being true to oneself). This gives a set of ideals that one might follow to sustain himself. Is it not true that religion is made for man and the not other way round? All the set of ideals that a man ever practices (or should practice) are the ones that sustains himself. A stunning explanation of this could be got from the famous *John Galt speech* in the legendary novel *Atlas Shrugged*, written by Ayn Rand.

So, a religion should ideally offer a man a set of principles to make life more easier, with lesser doubts and confusions and greater productive work. This is the Hindu concept of *Svadarma*. It advocates people to be true to their own and not be someone else. It abhors imitation and adores originality. Lord Krishna in Bhagvat Gita says that, "One's one duty well done, but devoid of merit, is better than other's duty possessing merit". So, if some one is a real painter he should concentrate more on exhibiting his talents by drawing exquisite pictures, rather than imitating a doctor simply because of the doctor's high position in the society. The *Svadarma* further adds that, if one is steadfast in a career chosen by his own will and judgment, he could attain equal merits of a person performing a more 'dignified' activity. This is similar to the present day American community, which treats Tiger Woods, Sean Canary, Albert Einstein, Rockfeller, and Andrew Carnegie all with almost equal respect, though varying in the quality of their actions.

#### **4.4 Varnasrama (Caste system):**

The one system, which attracts every critic of Hinduism, is the caste system. They might say that it is an ancient method of racism and it was a system that destroyed the confidence of the lower caste people and endangered the 'Dharmic' fabric of the society. Their arguments are not far from truth. In fact, in late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century (when the world took interest in Hinduism) the caste system had degenerated in to a sort of racist and discriminating practice. But is this the true idea behind its original inception? How could a set of well-spoken Hindu intellectuals bring about such a 'nasty' system? Before going into it, let me now give a situation for the readers to analyze.

*In the 17<sup>th</sup> century academicians felt the need for a division in education so that philosophy may be separated into fields like arts, science and mathematics to enable the practitioners to specialize in a particular field. Then engineering and fine arts took a separate identity from the sciences and arts. The fields were further subdivided into hundreds of subfields in this century. Now, there is a tendency in many places, wherein a businessmen might want his children to be businessmen and similar tendency is also found in doctors, engineers and accountants. This might not be so visible, but definitely there is an inclination for a person to follow the suit of his successful father. If this happens for a sufficiently long time, by 3000 A.D., we might find that there would be many families boasting a 1000 year lineage of doctors, artists or engineers. If few strong people among these groups, claim their right to have exclusive hold over their particular community, we might see many groups having distinct identities based on birth. These groups might discourage the intermixing and by claiming exclusive right, they might deter outsiders from entering their field. If this goes on for another 1000 years, by 4000 A.D. we might have a situation wherein people might have their jobs decided simply out of their birth and not according to their merits. However, was the system designed for this? Was it not created to maintain a healthy competition and distinctness between men of different profession caliber and talent? The dirty situation in 4000 A.D. would be caused only due to the men holding such myths and the system in itself doesn't practice discrimination.*

Now, pull the situation 2000 years back in time frame. Thus, the original system created for professional specialization in 1000 – 500 B.C. became a caste-based system and it was not the fault of the religion in itself. It was created by some disturbed souls, who tried to prevent competition in their field by restricting outside entry and made it a part of the custom itself, quoting from intellectuals originally supporting the system. In fact, the legendary Ved Vyasa (who gave the written form of Vedas, Mahabharata and Brahma Sutra) was a son of a lower-caste woman, but this did not deter his entry into the philosophical field. The four principal caste divisions may roughly correspond to Brahmins (academicians and philosophers), Kshatriyas (Warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (Accountants and Businessmen) and Sudras (Workers and may sometimes be engineers and artists). Thus, the philosophy of caste is just a professional division rather than a discriminatory racist system.

## **5 Social customs:**

Hinduism is also famous for its rich tradition of social customs and many have interesting origins. They also convey some rich philosophical meanings. While speaking of social customs, many people might believe *Narabali* (Human sacrifice) and other crude practices are also part of Hindu religion. This has given Hinduism a position of ‘black cult ‘ with horrible practices, and the profusion of corrupted ‘saints’ in India as well as abroad (who give themselves fashionable names like *Acharya*, *Yogi*, *Maharishi*) have strengthened this idea further. How could such contradictory things be there in a refined religion. This is a natural phenomenon for Hinduism. Since, Hinduism has embraced a host of faiths, many times the wrong doing of a sect (who have not philosophically adhered to Hinduism) gives the entire religion the feature. For eg. in most traditional homes having rich cultural background of uncorrupted customs (most of the north Indian customs were corrupted by repeated invasions and conquests) Kali and other ‘crude’ gods are not worshipped and in most historic temples, we won’t find Kali or other ‘cruel’ gods. These set of gods and other associated features like human sacrifice were practiced by a lot of tribal sects (who were not philosophically a part of Hindu religion) and their entry into Hinduism while continuing such heinous practices got Hinduism itself the bad name. The Vedas don’t sport such crude things and as the religion now matures itself, the assimilations have become fairly smooth and many of the atrocious practices are wiped from those sects of Hinduism. In another 100 years, we might see a more regular and a disciplined set of Hindu customs, as the assimilations were over just now.

### **5.1 Festivals:**

Festivals are innumerable in Hinduism and each one has a mythological and a practical meaning. The most famed is the *Diwali*, which is festival of lights and crackers and really the most important of the festivals. In this part, I won’t explain the mythological meanings or other features. Festivals in Hinduism are normally associated with an agricultural or climatic activity. During festivals, the people enjoy themselves by getting wishes from elders and there is naturally a profusion of money into the economical system. The festivals encourage diverse dishes and promote good interaction in the society. It is the time for enemies to reunite and the varied festivals increase the health of the economy, build good bonds and create diverse opportunities to exhibit one’s

talents. For eg. in a predominantly south Indian festival called *Navarathri* (comes during September – October) ladies exhibit their talents in the variety of dishes they make as offering to God with girls exhibiting their music talents by singing in praise of God while the boys exhibit their talents in decorating and arranging idols depicting various historic and social scenes, making the entire house a sort of museum. Thus, Indian festivals are more for the development of people and this is expected, as the religion is itself like a Personality Development course.

### **5.2 Vegetarianism:**

Another controversial concept of Hinduism is Vegetarianism. While, we see that in Vedic scriptures people might quote cow slaughter etc. it was later abolished and vegetarianism has now become a virtue of Hinduism. Even today, many orthodox Hindus (Brahmins) don't touch non-Vegetarian food, while the other sects partially follow them. Is Vegetarianism a good practice? It was more born out of necessity and it was strengthened by the scientific findings of the sages. The animal based food providing just 1 calorie requires 10 calorie of original plant food (due to the elevation in food chain) and imagine a over-populated country like India requiring ten times more food? They need the entire Asia to supply them food and moreover, the refuse from these food processing cites, might completely poison the river and ground water systems of India. In fact, the refuse from cow slaughter industries could have alone poisoned the entire Gangetic valley (now the people are doing precisely that, breaking Hindu faiths and destroying Yamuna and Ganga rivers) had the original inhabitants been beef eaters. A vegetarian food is also more suited to tropical climates, it encourages healthy thinking due to low fat content and most importantly it is a part of a elative philosophy called *Ahimsa* meaning Non-violence. Thus, the vegetarian philosophy has been born taking cognizance of ground facts and based on sound logic.

### **5.3 Ahimsa (Non violence)**

Ahimsa is a real example of the Hindu philosophy. It is most elative and extremely thought out. Contrary to popular belief, it is not a mere abstention of violence and tolerance of faiths, but much more than that. It is a belief of acceptance. It is a belief of recognizing the self and doing activities that heal the self rather than harm it. However, it never comes in the way of a righteous war, as Dharma takes precedence over all other philosophies of Hinduism. In fact, Mahatma Gandhi, the greatest proponent of this philosophy had advised Hindu women in *Naokali* (now a part of Bangladesh) to use their courage in stopping the atrocious raiders raping them, due to their being a religious minority. Ahimsa, unlike tolerance and abstention, is a positive quality and is not the mere absence of something. It is the understanding the psychology and we know from recent studies, that if a man exhibits uncontrolled anger and hatred towards another entity, he hurts not that entity but himself. The hatred and anger emotions have very strong waves associated with them in the brain, and if a person couldn't get over it, it could really wreck him, the classical example being Adolph Hitler. So, Ahimsa is not the principle of a coward and weak entity, but those of a strong being, able to control and channelize the emotions and use it for his own development.

If Mahatma Gandhi, had taken force, we might wonder if India could have got freedom at all. He was a rare Indian fully in possession of the knowledge of freedom, which is a positive quality and not the mere absence of external force. His way of action did not only put psychological pressure on the British and their government, but also created a great group of people, which later formed a source of much of the intellectuals of the nation. Thus, the philosophy of Ahimsa is more of channelizing the strong emotions for productive purposes, rather than a timid principle of cowardice.

## **6 Conclusion**

Although it is impossible to give a complete coverage of Hinduism, in this paper I have tried to explain the popular and misunderstood principles of Hinduism in the light of modern philosophical works. The concepts of God, Non violence, Justice and Caste system were considered by the author to be the most misunderstood features of Hinduism and hence special emphasis was on them and comparisons were done with modern theories. While doing an objective research, I tried not to take sides, between modern philosophy and traditional Hinduism. My conclusion of this paper is that, Hindu principles in their originality are not far off from modern research findings and this may explain why it has lived ceaselessly for 3000 years. However, due to the conglomeration of many sects, there is sometimes an apparent contradiction but they were shown to be applicable to different nature of people, making Hinduism an Academic religion.