'Hindusim' - A Western Construction or an Influence?

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the meaning of the word 'Hinduism' in different periods of time, this essay will proceed to analyse the biases that have been attributed to Europeans writing about Hinduism and India in general, and turn to the efforts made in the twentieth century to overcome these biases. In the light of these arguments, we will endeavour to find a balance between hegemonic European discourse and extreme cultural relativism, and finally discuss the usefulness of the definition of 'Hinduism' as a specific and unitary religion. This paper will also examine the Western contribution to the creation, adaptation, and understanding of Hinduism, tracing its historical roots, and examining the separation of popular Hinduism from real Hinduism, through authority given to the importance of scripture. This should enable us to justify that it is the Western interpretation and consequently our understanding that has been constructed, not the religion itself.

KEY WORDS: Hinduism, Sub-continent, Vedas, Orientalism, Moghals, British.

Introduction

'Hinduism' has been the subject of an ongoing debate since the beginning of British rule in India. The interpretation of indigenous religious beliefs and practices on the part of the British was a natural result of direct contact with a different culture and society; the nature of such interpretation is what many scholars of the last two centuries-Indologists, theologians, historians and postcolonial theorists among others - have been trying to determine.

It is argued that the terms of Hinduism and Hindu were created by outsiders in colonial times, in order to explain and interpret India's religious and social life. There were believed to be many localised religions throughout India, though in interpreting it as just one strand of religious thought, it became easier for outsiders to grasp (Oddie, 2003: 156). There is little doubt that Western Rule in India impacted on society, and in turn on the religious practices of Hindus, though it is the extent of this that should be scrutinised. The idea that Hinduism is a Western

construction would imply it as being created as an ideology, as opposed to an impartially interpreted ancient religion.

In fact, interpretations may vary according to different systems of classification, and the argument that many scholars have recently supported is that the European rendering of Indian civilisation – including religion - is an intrinsically biased one. However, at the same time, it is difficult to imagine a truly 'neutral' point of view in the treatment of any cultural issue.

'Hinduism': Origins of the Word and Changes in Meaning

It is first necessary to establish that Hinduism, despite its uniqueness, is a religion in its own right, as opposed to being a collection of ideas, or a Western creation. Religion can be categorised into two main models; the river and the arboreal model (Flood, 1996: 16). The river model states that there are many streams of belief which all flow into one main religion, whilst the arboreal model is the exact inverse, having several traditions branching from main belief system. Christianity can be seen as fitting into the latter, whilst Hinduism is closest to the River model. It is a vague interpretation however, and would be more accurately described as a number of quite distinctive rivers. On this alone, it is possible to segregate Hinduism from other world religions, which is why some have argued its religious foundations dubious. A striking feature is that it is polytheistic, meaning there is no single founder as there is with Christianity and Islam, making a unified system difficult to construct. It is also defined by othopraxy as opposed to orthodoxy; focussing on practice not belief. The structure of Hinduism is distinctive in the fact that focus on the social aspect of is key. This does not however mean that Hinduism cannot be deemed as a religion. Emile Durkheim's definition of religion as *"a unified set of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things which creates a social bond between people"* (Flood, 1996: 9) is extremely fitting with regards to Hinduism. This is also true of Jawaharlal Nehru's, the first prime minister of independent India, interpretation, when he described Hinduism as being *"all things to men"*. Fuller (1996) argues that Hinduism should not be thought of as a tradition, indigenous category, or concept, but as religion founded on structured relationships and as coherent and distinctive. Those within religion, put emphasis on more than just the deities and their commands, and focus on social customs, and separate worship group. Spear, highlights the ambiguity of Hinduism by likening it *" to a vast sponge, which absorbs all that enters it without ceasing to be itself…like a sponge it has no very clear outline on its borders and no apparent core at its centre"* (Inden, 1990: 85). Therefore, although Hinduism may be vague in form, its centrality to Indian society should be stressed to emphasis it as a religion. So whilst we can establish it as a religion, it is necessary to examine its history, in order to establish the extent of Western influence and construction through their interpretation.

The term Hindu is Persian for the river Indus, which is derived from Sindu, making it noticeably the only world religion (aside from Judaism) to be named after a place, as opposed to a founder or doctrine (Inden, 1990: 85). It was first used by the Persians to designate both the river and its valley, and consequently came to indicate the indigenous people of that area. It was in the 17th century that the term 'Hindu' was first used in the English language. There is some disparagement as to whether it was used to refer to those of indigenous religion, excluding the Islamic faith or whether, as Flood (1996: 5) argues, that it was in reference to Indians of any religion. Regardless, it wasn't until the 19th century (1830) that those known as Hindu were classed as part of the religion of "Hinduism" (Flood, 1996: 8). It is interesting to note that an "ism", is almost always used to denote to an ideology or philosophy, as opposed to a religion, and may here be interpreted as a Western modernisation. The British then refocused their ideas of Hinduism to refer to the Brahmins within high caste who followed the teachings of the dharma within the ancient Sanskrit texts. Whilst the British were defining and redefining the term Hinduism with regards to their understanding of it, it shouldn't be overlooked that Hindus had an awareness of the term Hindu themselves; there is reference in Sanskrit and Bengali scripture as early as the 1500 (Oddie, 2003: 161) .

It is important to stress that there was a definite consciousness within society of being Hindu during pre colonial times. Before the Moghuls reached India, in 1000AD, there was no unified sense of religion, but a fragmented belief system of many diverse strands with localised practices and rituals. After the first Muslim invasions, the word was used to distinguish the indigenous masses of the Indian subcontinent from the new conquerors. The geographical connotations of the word 'Hindu' were thus overcome by a new, broader meaning – it came to encompass the whole of the native culture, as opposed to that of the Muslims. When Islamic rule began, the first signs of unification became apparent, as a distinction of us and them, insiders and foreigners, began to be made (Oddie, 2003: 159). The differences were not just found in religious practice but also in terms of social behaviour organisation, language, dress, and housing. The differences acted as a unifying device for those who were native to India. It was in the 16th and 17th century when Shivaji, the founder of the Martha Empire, was in conflict with the Moghuls, that Hindus were first recorded as referring to themselves as such, and religious awareness began to spread. The new meaning was brought further in the eighteenth century by the British, who assuming the unity of 'Hindu culture' started to study one of its most obvious expressions, religion, as a whole – hence the word 'Hinduism' was invented to designate the 'religion of the Hindus' (Oddie, 2003: 156).

The 'Unity' and 'Essence' of Religion

Indian religion was thus perceived as a unity by outsiders. This led to a search on the part of the British for an encompassing 'system' that would make sense of the whole ensemble of religious beliefs, practices and philosophies that were held to be part of it. This idea came from the Christian conception of religion, i.e. an organic and homogeneous system based on a few sacred written texts, with a fix set of beliefs and one God as the object of devotion, allowing for but little variation.

The *Vedas* and other ancient texts were thus considered by Europeans to be the Hindu 'Bible'; the social division in castes became the 'essence' of religion, together with the idea of *Brahman* as the only God, while all the other deities were regarded as mere expressions of His different features (also including ideas of Trinity); the popular manifestations of faith were classified as 'superstition', in contrast with the liturgical rituals of the Brahmins (Marshall, 1970: 24-27).

The first Europeans to write accounts of India thus relied on *their own* categories rather than Indian ones to represent Hinduism; one might argue that in order to make an unknown culture comprehensible to Europe, it was perhaps more 'natural' and certainly easier for missionaries and Indologists to use their own system of classification in describing new concepts and ideas.

However, looking at Hinduism more closely, we realise that it is actually very different from what eighteenth and nineteenth century writers described it to be. While the *Vedas* are central for many Hindus, others reject their authority; monotheism, polytheism, animism or even a sort of atheism stand side by side, together with very different ideas of cosmogony; the concepts of *karma* and rebirth, which some scholars sustained to be an underlying feature of Hinduism, are not in fact shared among all Hindus; the principle of non-violence (*ahimsa*) coexists with blood ritual; ascetism with sexual metaphors; etc. In fact, it seems impossible to find even one single belief, value or ritual common to all Hindus (von Stietencron, 1989: 14).

Considering these variations, regarding not only formal expressions of devotion but also fundamental traits that normally distinguish one religion from another, the fact that Europeans regarded Hinduism as 'irrational' – as we will see – is hardly surprising. Its irrationality, however, seems to derive more from the imposition of Western categories upon Indian religion, rather than being intrinsic to 'Hinduism' itself.

The British Entry into the Subcontinent and its Effects on 'Hinduism'

It was when the British, East Indian Trading Company took over power from the Moghuls in 1857 that the Western construction of Hinduism, allegedly commenced. It was the Trading Company, not the British Crown who held power

in India, until 1859 when rule was transferred. The Trading Company attempted to concern themselves chiefly with the wealth and economy of the country and distance themselves from matters of politics. It was decided that to maintain power and prevent any potential uprising, they should govern Indian people with their own laws and beliefs in terms of domestic rule. It is this period that is thought of as a major turning point in the development of Hinduism. Oriental scholars were employed to translate the ancient Sanskrit texts of the Brahmins into English, in order to rule with it. The scriptures however proved very difficult to translate, especially from a neutral non ethnocentric stand point. Alexander Dow was one of the leading scholars of the translation of the scriptures (Marshall, 1970: 3). Sanskrit was completely foreign to Western scholars so it was necessary for high-caste Brahmins to first translate the Sanskrit to Persian, and from this translated it into English. It was then codified by Dow in order to assist with future translations. The complication of the translations meant scholars struggled to resist projecting their own Christian beliefs onto Hindu law. However to sight Hinduism as the construction of Western thought, is King (1999) believes a little flattering; the contributions of the Bengal scholars and Brahmins should not be overlooked.

Prior to the translation, the scriptures were only available to the highest caste, the Brahmins, the British however made them openly available to everyone. There is much argument surrounding this point, with the British accused of overemphasising the text as key to everyday Hindu practices. It has since been argued that the ideas were focussed too heavily on the model of Christianity, in regards to the role the Bible plays. At the time Christianity was considered the purest form of religion by the West, leading to non-existent parallels with structure and the centrality of text, being made. However it became apparent that as the vast majority of Hindus were illiterate they did not in fact follow the texts at all relying on oral and visual tradition instead. Despite this, scholars did not factor this into their interpretation of Hinduism. In order to explain it away, they made the distinction of real Hinduism and popular Hinduism with the latter often dismissed as no more than superstition.

Regardless of this interpretation, it is apparent that within the texts there are large sections missing on key parts of Hindu belief such as Brahmanhood and Untouchability. The scriptures tend to focus more on land ownership and food and gift exchange, and whilst the Vedas do contain large amounts of sutras, the Grihya rituals (which are domestic rites concerned with sacrifice) are noticeably missing (Das, 1977: 2). They are dependant on popular tradition, being passed through society via more simplistic methods such as oral traditions. Due to the fact that a large proportion of citizens were illiterate, Indologists tried to argue that true Hinduism bore little relevance to them, with the foundations of their beliefs no more than mere folklore. Srinivas (Das, 1977: 5) however stresses that *"Distinction between Sanskritic and non-sanskritic Hinduism also existed outside the Sanskritic texts",* implying the difference as more structure and interpretation based. Many of the scriptures such as the Dharmaranya Purana, are myth centred,

with the myths of creation including, the creation of Dharmaranya, and the creation of Vanikas are presented, and taken to be empirical fact. French anthropologist Levi-Strauss (Das, 1977: 16) however warned against scholars doing this, arguing *"myth is certainly related to given [empirical] facts, but not as a representation of them"*. So whilst the British were successful at discovering the laws for certain domestic rites, such as inheritance and marriage, they failed to interpret the practices relevant to everyday Hindu life, as applicable to their rule.

From this it is apparent that the Western scholars were never able to reach the crux of the true meaning of Hinduism. Hinduism was always seen as the *"Other"* (Flood, 1996: 8) in reference to Christianity, not as a real religion in its own right by scholars. This is connected to the practices and beliefs such as samsara and karma, which were completely alien to British thought at the time. In order to understand the teachings, interpretation had to be based on something they were familiar with, namely the Christian religion. The scholars Jones and Halhed used the Christian idea that all men are descendants of Noah, and undertook the task of proving similarities within race and linguistic form of the Europeans and the Indians (Marshall, 1970). It can be argued that the beliefs, practices and doctrines, do show some similarity in their application, though Jones and Halhed, refute this, claiming there is major disparity between the east and west, arguing Hinduism as *"inherently backwards"* (Marshall, 1970: 20). Further research into the Sanskrit scriptures attempted to prove that there were linguistic similarities to Latin and Greek. However there was never any real scientific proof for this stream of thought. Jean Bouchet tried to create links between Hinduism and Christianity in arguing there *are "resemblances between Abraham and Brahman, and Krishna and Moses, as well as the Hindus' confused idea of the trinity"* (Marshall, 1970: 24). The contemporaries of Jones and Halhed, Holwell and Dow however, disputed these similarities arguing that the belief system of Hinduism had been long established before Christianity. The fact that Western thought attempted to rationalise Hindu practice through Christianity, shows that it was well established prior to British rule. Ronald Inden was highly critical of the arrogance of Western scholarship, criticising the western interpretation as nothing more than *"epistemological assumptions and political biases"* (Flood, 1996: 19). Towards the end of the 18th century the attitude of Europeans towards Hinduism, was that of disgust and ridicule. The European thought process could simply not comprehend the idea of multiple deities; seeing *"repellent images and barbarous customs"* (Marshall, 1970: 20). It wasn't until the end of the 19th century attitudes shifted to become more tolerant.

This was partly due to the influence of missionaries within India, who attempted religious harmony, whilst spreading the message of Christianity. Though the true essence of Hinduism was repeatedly misinterpreted, it is important to see how British rule and Christian missionaries did impact on the awareness of being Hindu. Many of the British laws enforced, such as the banning of infanticide, human sacrifice, and most notable Sati, all contributed to

reformulation of tradition. The practice of Sati, widow burning, was outlawed in 1829, and caused major protest. Hindus argued that the practice was in their scriptures, and therefore their right; the British however viewed it as barbaric and an infringement on women rights. The practice itself was not particularly widespread, though with the prohibition, numbers increased as a form of protest (Mani, 1990). Though it was unintentional, the actions of the British forced a sense of community and unity that had not been apparent before, with large numbers of Hindus mobilised in attempt to protect their traditions (Oddie, 2003: 171). Missionaries were also influential through the mass-conversions of over 300,000 Hindus, to the Christian religion. Ultimately this meant that those of Hindu practice began to incorporate Christian ideals, though at the same time it also created further unification of Hindus propelling them together in a sense of self defence.

The 'Adoption' of the Hindu Identity

If Hinduism is a European misconstruction, one might wonder why those who are referred to as 'Hindus', and who did not recognise themselves as such before the arrival of foreign rulers, did not reject this term.

The coming into contact with European culture caused cultural and religious matters to gain political value, provoking a greater sense of unity among Indians. This happened for various reasons. First of all, the differences between the dominators and the subjects were greater than those among Indians themselves - in fact, this also applied to the Muslim invasions, and it was as a consequence of this that Hindus in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries began to call themselves by that name (Oddie, 2003: 160).

Another factor involved was the spread of the English language in India, which caused Indians to adopt English terminology and some of the preconceptions inherently present within it (Oddie, 2003: 162).

On the more strictly political side, the British interference with Indian religious practices was of great importance, especially since the colonial rule had always promised a policy of non-interference with Indian culture and society. The banning of *sati* ('widow burning' on her husband's pyre) in 1829, which caused great alarm and the Christian-biased government of Madras by Lord Tweeddale (1842-48) that provoked riots and mobs against Christian villages are only two of many examples (Oddie, 2003: 169-171).

Restrictive measures such as these gave origin to a deep division between the colonial rulers and their subjects, who came together in order to contrast British interference (e.g., through actions that ranged from petitions in favour of *sati* to the creation of Hindu 'missionary' associations, and, in more extreme cases, to riots and mutinies such as those of 1857) (ibid.).

Many Indians thus started to adopt a communal 'Hindu' identity; a fact that was caused by these and other factors, including, ironically, the influence of

Christian ideas (e.g. a sense of community, ideas such as "love thy neighbour", etc.) on Indian subjects (Oddie, 2003: 178).

Orientalist Discourse

The acceptance of the concept of Hinduism on the part of 'Hindus' consolidated its reification in what Edward Said calls 'Orientalist discourse'. In his most influential work, *Orientalism* (1978), Said argues that Europeans writing about Middle-Eastern and Asiatic countries have created a specific discourse that produced a stereotypical and distorted representation of the 'Orient'. (In fact, this also applies to the visual arts: many Orientalist paintings were produced in the nineteenth century, often by painters who had not even visited the countries they were depicting). Such representation constructed a structural opposition between the male, rational, superior West and the female, imaginative and inferior East. Hinduism was hence represented as an irrational religion, often compared to a jungle, in contrast to the rational and ordered idea of Christianity (Inden, 1990: 86-87).

Although some early writers explicitly claimed the inferiority of Oriental cultures, this bias, Said argues, has remained implicit in discourse to the present day, causing scholars to unconsciously reproduce this misrepresentation. Said writes:

> "The things to look at are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, not the correctness of the representation nor its fidelity to some great original. (...) I believe it needs to be made clear about cultural discourse and exchange within a culture that what is commonly circulated by it is not 'truth' but representations" (Leitch et al. (ed.), 2001: 2007).

Hence we can also point out that although we have generally referred to a 'Western' reification of Hinduism, this construction branches out in a few different (but strongly interrelated) 'sub-constructions', as representations vary according to the social, historical, and cultural background of who makes them. We will thus go on to analyse the main constructions of Hinduism produced by the West.

Utilitarian and Evolutionist Representations

The materialist, secular point of view that characterised utilitarian thought invariably led to the interpretation of Hindu attention to ritual as the symptom of a lower level of evolution. Utilitarians considered reverential and ceremonial conduct as the opposite of practical, 'useful' and rational conduct (Inden, 1986:

418). James Mill's *History of British India* (1858) describes Hindu cosmology as disordered and deformed and Hinduism in general as pervaded by "folly" and "absurdity" (Inden, 1990: 91-92).

The discovery that the *Vedas* were produced earlier than the Bible gave origin to the idea that they were the oldest religious texts of the Aryans (including both Europeans and Indians); hence, from the study of Brahmin ritual (which is based on the *Vedas*), it was possible to understand *"the religion of man (...) at his moment of origin"* (Inden 1990: 98). This developed in the evolutionist idea that Hinduism was the religion of humanity at a less developed stage than that of Western civilisation, which had reached the top of the evolutionary scale with Christianity.

Idealistic, Romantic and Psychoanalytic Interpretations

Hegel, the eighteenth-century German philosopher, spread the idea of an India dominated by imagination in two of his works, *The Philosophy of History* and *The Philosophy of Mind*. He classified reason or understanding (*Verstand*), as the highest, spiritual faculty, and representation (*Vorstellung*) and 'creative imagination' (*Phantasie*) as the lower faculties dealing with the material world and passions. While the former was, 'naturally', associated with the West, Hegel held that India's *Geist* (i.e. its 'spirit') was dominated by Imagination. Hence came the explanation for Hinduism's contradicting and irrational features, e.g. the coexistence of an extreme Brahmin rituality with a pervasive mysticism in 'popular' Hinduism (Inden, 1990: 94-96).

Hegel also argued that in the spiritual development of humankind, India had the same characteristics as the mental condition of a person sleeping just before waking up (Inden, 1990: 96); a view that was also adopted by Romantic and psychoanalytical theorists.

German Romanticism exalted the 'irrationality' and Imagination that Hegel, the utilitarians and other representatives of the Enlightenment considered as the reasons for India's inferiority. Romantic philosophy, in fact, denied the existence of an abstract, all-encompassing Reason, arguing that both rationality and emotions were essential for the contemplation of the Sublime. Hence mysticism and the search for self-disintegration in an impersonal *Brahman* were highly thought of among the Romantics. Nevertheless, India came to represent, in their view, a land characterised by the uncontrolled predominance of Imagination, just as the West represented rationality taken to the extreme (Inden, 1990: 93).

The view that Indian civilisation was pervaded by imagination and the metaphor of the dream were also supported by Jungians. In fact, they visualised the West as corresponding to the conscious stratum of the human mind, while the East represented the unconscious one (Inden, 1990: 123). In analysing Louis Renou's account of Brahmin rituals in *Religions of Ancient India*, Inden (1986) has also highlighted the Freudian interpretation of Indian religion by Indologists.

In *The interpretation of dreams*, Freud outlines the main features of dreams; namely, 'condensation' (the repetition of elements), 'displacement' (which makes important things seem irrelevant and vice versa), and 'secondary revision' (which provides the irrational nature of dreams with a rational façade). Inden shows how Renou describes Vedic rituals as being characterised by both condensation and displacement, while he himself, as the 'rational European', takes the task of providing a secondary revision to make sense of the 'irrational' ritual actions (Inden, 1986: 411-414).

Structuralist Analysis and the Search for an Indian 'Ethnosociology'

In the twentieth century, structuralists introduced a different – one could say, almost revolutionary - conception of Hinduism, based on the assumption that it possesses an inherent rationality. Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* advanced the idea that the system of caste is based on a dichotomy between purity and pollution; Madeleine Biardeau has interpreted Hinduism as a rational system of interrelated symbols and ideas (Inden, 1990: 125).

Nevertheless, McKim Marriott still considers these interpretations to be biased, on the grounds that they continue to make use of Western categories of thought. Thus he argues for the necessity to create an 'Indian ethnosociology', i.e., to find – and perhaps, even create – indigenous Indian categories to finally explain Hinduism from an internal, non-biased perspective, rather than from an external and 'hegemonic' point of view (Gerow, 2000: 410-13).

Conclusions: the 'Neutral' Point of View and a New Conception of Hinduism

As we have seen, it is very difficult to find an objective perspective on the question of Hinduism. Even Marriott's proposal of an Indian ethnosociology, appealing though it may be, presents a few problems. The potential resort to the creation of new, 'artificial' indigenous categories could, in fact, result in yet another inauthentic explanation of Hinduism. More importantly, as Gerow points out, Marriott himself assumes the unity of Indian thought and categories (2000: 417-19), a fact that, paradoxically, assimilates him to those very Europeans who perpetrated Orientalist discourse.

The debate seems to go round in a vicious circle. After contemplating various possibilities and interpretations, it appears obvious that *there is no such thing as a neutral viewpoint*. However, this does not mean that no interpretation is valid. We must endeavour to find a happy medium between a 'hegemonic' perspective, and one that is so internal to the matter discussed that it fails to recognise its more general features. Fuller, on this point, highlights the benefits of the encounter

between cultures, arguing that the interaction of external and internal cultural viewpoints is, in fact, the basis for all comparative anthropology (2004: 9-11).

In conclusion therefore, we are able to appreciate that whilst the Western interpretation of Hinduism was highly influential, it can not be attributed with its creation. The fact that we can trace Hinduism's roots back to 16th century Brahmin texts, gives us evidence that it was in existence and established before colonial rule. The religion of the Brahmins can be considered one of the *"world's oldest, religious and philosophical systems"* (Wikipedia, 2006), and can be seen as the basis of Hinduism. Despite the fact that there was a lack of centralised religion pre-colonial rule, there was still a sense of being Hindu, and of being indigenous to India. The fact that the British created an idea of India through the naming of Hindu*ism,* and the translation of ancient texts, does not mean that it was their construction. The fact that society and religion were not systematically separate for Indian people, meant that as British rule developed, Hindu practices also had to. The Westernisation of Hinduism occurred chiefly through textualisation, and emphasises the way the Western world see Hinduism from an ethnocentric view point. It is unmistakable that the Western comprehension of Hinduism was in fact through the Christian model, though it is important to regard Hinduism as a religion in its own right.

These reflections finally bring us back to the concept of Hinduism. After a careful analysis, it is undeniable that the idea of Hinduism as a unitary religious system was, at least originally, imposed on Hindus from the outside; but it is also true that the word has come to bear new meanings for the Hindus themselves (Flood, 1996: 8). In any case, the extreme internal contradictions and loose boundaries of Hinduism remain, indicating its limits in making sense of such a vast and varied religious reality. W. C. Smith points out that *"the mass of religious phenomena that we shelter under the umbrella of that term, is not a unity and does not aspire to be"* (1991: 66). Perhaps, as von Stietencron (1989: 20) suggests, this word should undergo yet another change of meaning, and come to designate a category or group of coexisting, interrelated, but distinct religions with a common cultural and political history, rather than a single, 'irrational' religion.

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