Basic Concepts of Hinduism
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Sureshwara, Bangalore The most influential religions today are Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism. The affinities between some of them are many; the differences are also many. But all of them have supplied answers to many great questions roused in every human mind by the mystery of life. All have brought strength to bear its sorrows, all have furnished assurances in the presence of death. All brought answers to man's prayers.

The idea or the philosophy of reincarnation cannot be divorced from the basic ideas of Sanatana Dharma, more popularly known both in the East and West as Hinduism. Therefore, a brief recollection of the religious philosophy of Hinduism is essential to fully understand the philosophy of reincarnation.

Thousands of years, ago sages or holy men stood on India's river banks and sang divine songs. Out of these divine chants and out of the wisdom and spirituality of the sages in the centuries since, has grown the religion known in the world as Hinduism, the faith of more than 600 million human beings in Indian alone. The available records indicated the existence of Hinduism as early as 5000 B.C., making it the oldest living religion today.

The ancient Hindu sages pondered the fact that all things eventually disappear. They were struck too by the eternal recurrance of life - by caterpillar that became a butterfly and butterfly that became a caterpillar. Individual bits of life, the sages reasoned, must be born again and again. And behind the impermanent material world the sages concluded must be the invisible source of these indivisible bits and of all things - pure and unchanging spirit.

The sublime objective of Hinduism is to achieve union with God - the eternal sprit which is Brahman. This union is achieved not only through ritual but through

common ideals of Hindu ethics: purity, self-control, detachment, truth, non-violence, charity and the deepest of compassion toward all living creatures. The Brahman or the ultimate reality can neither described nor debated. Hinduism shown great capacity for absorbing ideas and adapting to conditions. Hindu religious thought is dominated by the concept on monism - the oneness of all things. To Hindus all is Brahman, including you and me. When we have achieved God-Realization or Self-Realization, we flow back into Brahman - giving up a finite personality for an infinite one. Brahman the absolute is one, indivisible, unchangeable, beyond action and inaction beyond good and evil. Hinduism has no fixed creed by which it may be said to stand or fall, for it is convinced that the spirit will outgrow the creed. Hinduism is human thought about God in continuous evolution. It welcomes all new experiences and new expressions for truth.

The Hindu scheme of life is expressed in Sanskrit (the classical language of India) by the formula: DHARMA - ARTHA -KAMA - MOKSHA

Dharma denotes duty, Artha the wealth, Kama or human desires and Moksha - implies not the annihilation of the soul but the annihilation of its finiteness and the consequent realization of its unity or identity with Brahman. It means, therefore, not eternal death but eternal life. This formula indicates the ideal of a complete life taking into account all the facts of human life without doing injustice to the flesh or the spirit. This is proclaimed in a thousand different ways in all Hindu literature. Hence, Hinduism nowhere indicates or implies escape from the responsibilities of the earthly life. It only reminds us to concentrate all our efforts to achieve a strong healthy balance between the physical desires and spiritual needs, as long as the Spirit of man is separate from the Spirit of the Universe.

An important development in the period 2000 B.C., is the conception of the characteristically Indian ideals of the law of karma and fate, In fact, the law of karma is the fundamental basis of not only all schools of Hinduism but all schools of Buddhism and Jainism. A man is the creator of his own fate or karma. A man cannot fly from the effects of his own prior deeds, and he reaps that at the age, whether infancy, youth or old at which he had sowed it in his previous birth. To a Hindu all the inequalities of life can be explained by the doctrine of karma of fate. Karma is cause and effect applied to morals. Every action a man takes including those in his previous incarnations has inevitable moral consequences in this life or the next. In some it can affect a man through several reincarnations. An individual goes through this cycle of birth and death - reincarnations - until he attains union with the infinite. Liberation from the cycle of birth and death or the end of reincarnations is to be sought only through the realization of the identity of

Brahman and Atman - the spirit of the universe and the Spirit of man. This concept comes to occupy the foreground of a Hindu's religious life. All other things are subsidiary. This is essential in the concept of reincarnation and rebirth.

The common aim of all religions is spiritual life. The spiritual life insists on a change of consciousness for which all else is the means. Each of our religions have dogmas and creeds. But when we get down to the depths, we discover that all religions draw their strength from the same unfathomable source. The recognition of this fundamental unity should make possible for cooperation on a common basis for the good of mankind as a whole.

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