

Hindi Beliefs: From Monotheism to Polytheism

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Abstract

Religious culture was out of access for Indian public, and deep philosophical religious texts were exclusively for the class of privileged and clergymen; So over many years, popular religion was collected in a book called Veda (means the Indian knowledge) including poems, legends and mystical chants which sometimes were obscure. This set is known as the world's oldest religious book and the mother of religions. Most researchers do not remember it as a religion, and consider it as culture and rituals of living. Religion, ritual and popular beliefs in India were accompanied with the fabulous ambiguous curious adventures. What is understood from the appearance of Hindu ritual is polytheism, idolatry and superstition. But it is not true. The history of Hinduism and its branches expresses the monotheism and belief in the unity of the creator. As the Hindu-Iranian Aryans were always Unitarian and were praising various manifestations of nature as gods. They never were idolaters and believed in monotheism, although they had pluralistic beliefs. The interpretation of monotheistic in Semitic religions¹ is different from Hinduism as a gradually altered religion. My field researches in India and dialogues with Hindu thinkers demonstrated that today's common ritual in Hinduism is a distorted form of a monotheistic belief, that originally had believed in the Oneness of the Creator, as mentioned in the Upanishads. However, like other Abrahamic monotheistic religions which believe in the unity of the Creator with differences in other specifications and interpretations of the universe, Hinduism is a kind of primary believe in oneness of God that has had distortion by historical reasons. Nowadays, Hinduism has a long distance from its monotheistic origin.

Keywords

Monotheism, Polytheism, Hinduism, Mysticism, Allegory.

Introduction

Origin of Hinduism beliefs, common ritual in India which has more than a billion followers, is a dispute subject. Regarding to the multiplicity of nowadays deities and the vast possibilities of interpretations for Hindu followers, this argue remains dispute. As the study of the literature of research shows, there are conflicting opinions about Hindu monotheism. On one hand, there are critical works which claim that Hinduism is not monotheistic and it is a polytheist religious (for example, the book of "What does Buddha say and who is Brahma?" by Mohammad Mahinpou, 1961). On the other hand, there are researches which claim that Hinduism has monotheistic origins religion but it has had metamorphoses over the years. Jalali Naeini in the translation of Upanishads in Persian (named The Great Secret) (2002), the article of "Religions in India" (2003) by Fathollah Mojtabayi, and the book of Morteza Motahhari entitled "The Perfect Human" in a quote from Tabatabaei's books ("Al-Mizan" and "The Qur'an in Islam") have expressed this opinion.

In a mystic view, there is a kind of Monotheism and Unitarianism in the essence and truth of all religions. On the basis of the theory of the Primacy of Existence (by Molla Sadra), all elements in the universe, despite differences in their natures, are derived from the existence of God. God, as the origin of creation, is the being exactly, and what is derived from God is not anything but being. Despite the apparent independence, all objects are one thing and have the same properties. There is nothing that does not exist. However, the apparent differences represent a plurality (Ebrahimi Dinani, 2009: 47 & 55). Many similarities can be seen in the rituals² and customs of different religions, as mentioned by thinkers such as Ibn Arabi, Shabestari, Coomaraswamy, Radha Krishnan, Mojtabayi, Shayegan, Tabatabaei and others. The present study will broadly refer to opinions of these experts about Hinduism and Islam and is intended to remove the veil of ambiguities in the field of Hindu polytheism and idolatry.

Hypothesis

Hinduism is a gradually altered ethic whose folk interpretations have been distorted because of being latent for the special class. Despite its polytheist appearance, the fact of Hinduism is Monotheism and belief in unity. the interpretation of monotheism in Hinduism is different from Semitic religions.

Sacred Realm of Religions

Religions have been divided into Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic. Abrahamic includes Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and sects separated from them; and non-Abrahamic means other religions. All religions are monotheistic according to the mystical approach; because each religion has a center of sacred realm. This Center is a light, which rays of light are coming toward it. Mojtabayi considers this center of sacred realm as God that the followers of the religion believe in. This sacred realm can not be anything else a single realm. For example Vishnuism is a monotheistic religion, because Vishnu is considered as the one god. Shivism is a monotheistic religion and defines other deities and worshiped creatures as the manifestations of the unique truth.

The essence of the Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic religions is one: presence in the sacred realm and the joining its center. Belief and the relationship between the worshiper and the worshiped is also the same in both groups. So the natural trend to religion in human beings, has acted in different forms at different places (Mojtabayi, 2003: 20, 21, 38, 39). As stated by Ibn Arabi: All creations of God have beliefs towards him, and I believe in all of their beliefs. Mahmud Shabestari has a poem with the same theme: If a Muslim knew what an Idol is, he would defiantly see religion in idolatry.

Religions and beliefs, all around the world, have faced many changes. They sometimes become so far from their origin that recognizing the substance and essence of the religion which was proposed from the beginning, is very difficult or even impossible. As it is evident in history, since the philosophy and essence of Hinduism had been taken into concession of the privileged and clergymen, popular religion was collected as a collection of poems, legends and mystical chants in the book of "Veda". This book was promoted by clergymen for people. Over time, changes and deviations have been occurred so that it led to idolatry (Mahinpou, 1961: 7-6). Hence, to identify and study different religions, there are circumstances presented by experts to achieve the truth of the religion. For this purposes, Fathollah Mojtabayi enumerated four conditions: First: the language; second: intention to understand religion not to reject it; third: feeling emotion to the religious people, because in addition to being a creature of God, God loves them, so we should see how God has been manifested to these

people; and fourth, to have a common religious experience. He knows Phenomenological method and comparative studies as the most effective methods in researches about religion (Mojtabayi, 2003: 17, 19).

Philosophy of Hinduism

The original Hinduism has deep differences with what is now common between Hindus. The majority of Hindus are so involved in rites and rituals that it seems that the time has stopped for them. Despite scientific and technological capabilities, some of Indian intellectuals are even bonded to superstitions as opium. Although some of Islamic traditions and rituals have been transformed into misguided and superstitious, in India, Muslims, Hindus, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, Jainists and followers of different sects emerged from these religions, are all trapped in ritual outwards, whether their religion is politically independent or not. It seems that, religion in India has a role to stabilize the tolerance and conciliatory attitude. Hence, to identify and analyze the status of Hinduism, according to History of this religion, a summary of key issues in this regard will be mentioned. In Hindu philosophy, there is no contradiction between the belief in God, who contains all and is ever-present, and in various Hindu gods. Statues of gods help to focus on love and worship in religious rituals they are imaginary manifestations of the Unique God and all are respected. But these figures are not Brahma, Vishnu or Shiva exactly. They are just known as sculptures and signs for them. In fact, it is accepted that only God is absolute. He is the only omnipotent lord (Keshitimohan, 1975: 49, 50). This view is especially for Indian and Iranian religious people. Such an obvious acceptance of plurality can not be found anywhere else. Among the religions that have strong philosophical framework, only the thoughts of Iranians and Indians contain this plurality. "What distinguishes the Iranian Indian and people from other nations of the ancient world is that they have not had idolatrous beliefs or Ancestorism. Their gods were generally manifestations of beneficial nature. Each of these gods was worshiped, due to its impacts on the nature and human life. The sun and the sky were in first places, as in Rigveda, the book of Aryans migrated to India, the sun and the sky are frequently mentioned in chants" (Moin, 1976: 36). "Lots of Aryan deities were related to natural phenomena and their worship was depended to the changes in day and night, cold and heat weather, and summer and spring"(Zarrinkoub, 1985: 26); (Fig. 1).

The belief of Indian privileged people about God who is named Ishvara (means the generous and the free of need who gives but does not take) is that he is unique, eternal and everlasting; he has no start or end, he is omnipotent, wise and talented.

In the book of Gita which is a part of the book of Bharat, it is also states: "I am whole beings, and the beginning of my existence has not been a birth, and my being never ends by the death, and I have not intended a reward or punishment for my work, and I do not belong to a particular class to have enmity with one or friendship with a tribal (Birouni, 1983: 14, 15). Coomaraswamy believes that Hinduism is not merely a polytheistic religion like Paganisme of Greeks and Romans. The hypothesis of polytheism of Hindus is always based on a series of transcendental and figurative forms where the myths and masters can be seen as the attributes of God (Shayegan, 1983: 3).



Fig. 1. A sacred tree of a Shiva temple, Pushkar, India. Photo: Shohreh Javadi, 2012.

Upanishads and Unity

At the time of Akbar (1542-1605), his son, Jahangir, his grandson Shah Jahan and sons of Shah Jahan, many Hindu religious and philosophical texts were translated into Farsi. Until that time, Muslims considered Hindus as infidels and idolaters; however, they understood that there is a spirituality and mysticism in Hinduism.

Dara Shikoh, a son of Shah Jahan, ordered to translate Upanishads³. He also wrote a few books on religious interactions between Hindu mysticism and Islamic mysticism and made numerous attempts to show that divine and spiritual aspects in both of Hindu religion and Islam are in fact the same. Dara Shikoh said that religion is different from jurisprudence (Mojtabayi, 1983: 23 and 29). The Great Secret (Serr-e-Akbar), is the name of the Persian translation of fifty Upanishads, by Dara Shikoh. Akbar and Dara Shikoh had an ambitious wish to realize a world religion (the divine religion) in order to make the unity of Hindus and Muslims, and to prove the equivalence of theoretical knowledge in Islam and monotheist Advaitia⁴. Although these efforts couldn't lead to place Hindi thinking in Islamic culture, they lead to an excellent period in the field of Islamic and Hindu thought that its undoubtedly values is not yet known (Shayegan, 2003: 9). There is a fixed principle in the "Upanishads" that all objects, whether material or spiritual, whether human, animal, vegetable, astral bodies, souls, gods and etc., all are submerged in the sea of the unity. The universe of unity is beyond the sensible world. It is the utmost of material world, inherently unlimited and substantive. He is the perfect in justice (Noss, 2002: 149).

"The Upanishads are collections of diverse contents including quotations, proverbs, songs and chants whose component are often not correlated completely. Teachings of the Upanishads can be interpreted as "Divine Science and Unity". Their contents are on the basis of non-duality" (Upanishads, 2002: 108). Tabatabai, one of the most prominent thinkers of philosophy and contemporary Islam, argues that Upanishads contain pure monotheism. Describing the attention of Tabatabaei to Upanishads, Motahhari says: "Several years ago, when he [Tabatabaei] read the Upanishads for the first time, he was surprised and said that there are too significant contents in these books which has not had enough attention"(Motahhari, 1993: 137).

Allegorism in Hinduism

Radha Krishnan says: as we perceive a substance in various states because of numerous accidents, likewise, the absolute nature is perceived in various forms because of various religious narrations (Radha Krishnan, 1965: 346). Additionally, Biruni Iranian famous scholar (973- 1048), in the book of «Tahghigh» Ma Lel-Hend" (Searching what is for India) says: The public is incapable of understanding a purely abstract concept and wills to understand it in a tangible form; as different tempers are interested in tangibles and detest from rationalities. Except scholars who are rare in any time and place (Biruni, 1983 : 83). Biruni believes that the behavior of Hindus is not idolatry, but it is like the behavior of our people [Muslims] in holy places and before the sacred objects (Ibid.: 27) (Figs. 2 -3). Many of the rules that we know as religious commandments, in Christianity, Islam or other religions, are customs, traditions and rules that already existed in the society (Mojtabayi, 2003: 39). Each of Brahma, Shiva, Vishnu and Krishna, that are various manifestations of God are, has temples where the religious people come to pray every sunrise and sunset. This ritual has conflicts with acceptance that these gods are various manifestations of God and his attributes. Not compatible. However, the conflict between the ancient texts of Hinduism with current rituals seen today can be interpreted so that along history, since the truth and real texts of Hinduism were forgot, the deities of the cult gradually recognized as independent gods and were praised independently. The Holy Quran has also described the attributes of God and heaven and hell and the world of abstracts in a mundane material verbal form. While Rahman, Rahim, Karim, Ghaffar, Jabbar, Alem, Qasem and etc. are adjectives that have never been portrayed, angels with the different tasks, with golden wings and shining faces and glory (such as Gabriel (Jibra'il)) which are materialistic values are embodied in the words. Paradise has been described with fruit trees, rivers filled with milk and honey, the Kawthar spring and beautiful nymph that are material and known by human beings. And Hell and its doom are explained with fire and hot tar and etc. that suffer our earthly life.

What Muslims believe decisively is the Unique Absolute Creator. His special holy shrine is Kaaba and his global message is an afflatus sent in the Holy Quran and it is current by The Prophet and his successors for ever.



Figs 2 & 3. Muslims and Hinus in Haji Ali Dargah, Mumbai, India. Photo: Shohreh Javadi, 2012.

What calls even the most popular Muslim to mosque and shrines is a direct communication with God (prayer). or resorting to the saints, the characters were real. Obvious differences can be seen in the resort in Islamic thought and in Hinduism. Attributes of God in the Islamic ethic has never been portrayed and has not manifested in human or animal figures. But the effects of his characters emerge in nature, such as in animals, plants, humans, and what is on the earth or in the sky, which are called signs of god (Ayat). These signs help to think about the truth of human and nature to prove the existence of God. However, about abstract creatures, like the devil and angels, there are poems and even some paintings based on the Holy Quran and Hadithes (qouts of saints). The comparison by Biruni on the appearance of Muslims and Hindus rites, is something that every Muslim who visit India, especially Shiites, face. However, it is the apparent. It should be acknowledged that the manifestation of the attributes of God in Hinduism is limited to the allegories and it never exceeds. It has been suspended in the statues, whereas the role of Unique God hidden in these statues is so faded that the made idols are worshiped instead of God. Tabatabaei says: the Mystical contents of Upanishads have no goal but a careful and profound unity. However, these speeches have been expressed so frankly that for a reader who doesn't have enough knowledge of mystical issues, these mot words will cause to superstitious thoughts. They can't understand more than a perception of reincarnation and idolatry thoughts from these statements which carefully describe the truth of monotheism. As

an evident, theories of the orientalist who have studied Sanskrit and Hindi mysticism can be considered. If a person studies Upanishads deeply, he or she will see that they have no purpose other than pure monotheism and unitarianism. However, since they have expressed frank and wrappers, unfortunately in the public opinion a kind of idolatry is emerged (Tabatabaei, 2007: 38).

Tabatabaei in the 10th volume of *Al-Mizan* says that: What is derived from the book of Upanishads sometimes does not match Brahmacharya beliefs. The problem with this religion and social traditions is that although its structure can be understood by few people in each time, it can not be useful for the whole society. This doctrine is beyond the public conception and focuses on specters and understanding and wisdom of public, who are not familiar with theology, can not understand such issues. Since humans are innately and by the creation life collectively, if they have a gap in the understanding of life rules, and only a handful of people understand these rules and traditions, imposition of such a religion and tradition to the society opposes the nature and the way of creation.

We can see that most of researchers have confirmed two things: First, Hindu texts were not accessible for all and it was taken into concession of a specific group of Brahmanas. So the lack of public awareness of the content of their religion provides the space of individual interpretations and led to the widespread myths and superstitions. Second, Hindus believe proves the existence of a Unique God, although it considers its manifestations in human built objects.

Conclusion

Monotheism and manifestation of God in the genetic developmental religion, culture and rituals of Hinduism has been Allegoristic. In the original Hindu beliefs, there are teachings about the origin and the essence of the unique god (Prajapati) and resurrection (Mahapralaya). But over time, Brahmans distorted the true essence of the religion, and popular religion gradually fell in a trend to becoming superstition and idolatry. Brahmacharya rose up and the Hindu Trinity (Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva) emerged.

In a mystical viewpoint, many religions have a monotheistic essence; however, the interpretation of monotheism in Semitic religions is different from Hinduism⁵. God has been perceived in different ways for religious people. What distinguishes Islamic monotheism from the Iranian and Hindu monotheism is different understanding of God or the unique essence. In Islamic thought, the narration of the adjectives of god comes in the words. This is different from the Hindi and Iranian allegorism and manifestation of god in human and animal statues and icons.

What has increased the adventures of these ancient rituals up to now, and has led to the poverty and superstition for more than a billion Hindus with a rich civilization, is surely the exploitation of colonialists of vast territories of India that has made India a museum of religions and beliefs. In fact, the colonization and exploitation of distorted beliefs and religions have entered Hindus into the world of allegory and superstition; Although there is a kind of monotheism in the nature of these superstitious beliefs.

Endnotes

1. Perhaps the word of Semitic can be replaced by the words of Abrahamic (Mojtabayi, 2003: 20).
2. Ritual: The superficial shell of religion, or manifestations of the essence and the nature of the beliefs and religions.
3. Upanisads: Means to sit close and allusions to learn the secrets of religion; It is the name of philosophical, moral, and religious treatises. These short treatises have been written after the Vedas and caused a turn in the superficiality of Vedas. Upanishad is composed from three components of "Upa" (near), "Ni" (low) and "Sad" (sit). According to Max Muller, it means the oral teachings of the masters for his close disciples. A number of researchers believe that the word Upanishad means the internal truth and the coded knowledge. Shankara says that Upanishad comes from the root "Sad" which means demolition. Because he thinks that the ultimate goal of Upanishad is demolition of ignorance and offering divine wisdom (Shayegan, 1983: 96).
4. Advaitia: Unity free from duality. For more information, see Shayegan, 1983.
5. Islam's interpretation of the monotheism has fundamental difference with other religions. This subject will be explained in another article.

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