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Fundamentals of Hindu Dharma

Aryan, Non-Aryan and Sanatan Dharma

Thousands of years ago, there lived a people on the north-western part (now in Pakistan) of the Indian subcontinent, whose primary roots appear to be on the banks of Indus while their secondary roots extended up to the borders of Iran in the west and to the Gangetic plain in the east.

These people were highly skilled in various aspects of life, mastered cultivation and animal husbandry, fought wars with the help of advanced weaponry, had fun in gambling and drinking, loved kinship, and wished to have a pleasurable life after death.

As their cultivated tastes developed and evolved, they came to be known as Āryans, meaning noble or of high culture.

Some of the more noble ones turned their gaze inward to contemplate and meditate on the inner nature, instead of chasing the external. These were the spiritual ones. These greats cracked the mystery of existence.

The knowledge that they acquired came to be known as Veda – meaning knowledge.

The people, who lived in the Indian subcontinent thousands of years ago, practised the way of life based on the spiritual realisations of the great sages.

With time, many of the Indians opted or were coerced to take the spiritual path shown by the sages who were not from the tradition of these sages. These converts were named after their master. It was thus that Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and Christianity took roots in Indian subcontinent.

Those who continued to follow the path of the Vedic sages came to be known as Hindus. They are spread all over the world, but are predominantly present in India and Nepal.

The spiritual values preached and practised by the Aryans came to be known as the eternal way, *Sanatana dharma*.

The Four goals in life

The sages taught that God alone is real and that the goal of life is to be one with Him. This is known as spirituality that comes through freedom at all levels.

But not everyone is ready for the ultimate freedom, so the sages gave us four different foals in life which are based on freedom at various levels. These are known as *Purushartha*, aims in life -- *artha, kama, dharma, moksha*.

The physical freedom comes through *artha* (wealth), the emotional freedom comes through *kama* (enjoyment), the freedom from inauspicious births comes through *dharma* (religious practices), and freedom from existence comes through *moksha*.

The four aims in life are performed in accordance with the words of the masters. Unbridled pursuit of *artha* degenerates into greed, uncontrolled *kama* become lust, *dharma* without detachment results in endless births, and unguided struggle for *moksha* leads to lunacy.

The sacred books of Hindu religion discuss ways and means to attain the four

Purusartha. With time, the principles, practices and sacred books grew into unfathomable size.

Who is a Hindu?

Sages made things easy by asking their disciples to do the essential practices. With time, this resulted in spiritual and religious kinship, known as *gotra*, named after the sage.

Who is a Hindu? Anyone who has a *gotra*, is a Hindu. A Hindu follows the traditions of *gotra*, or teachings of some saint or family priest, who follow one of the Hindu scriptures. One who wants to be a Hindu can acquire a *gotra* through discipleship.

Castes and Varnashrama Dharma, Dharma

To maximise the potential of the society which in the earlier times had limited resources, countries all over the world had the system of trade guild, which in India came to be known as *jati*, which literally means “the clan in which one is born”.

The sages prescribed duties for these *jati*, also known as caste. The sages taught how one could attain spirituality through the practice of their caste-born duties. This resulted in *jati dharma*.

Jati dharma and *Gotra dharma*, when applied to a locality, gave birth to *Kula dharma*. The idea was to lead a person to spiritual freedom by the path of least resistance.

All this became unmanageable and confusing. So, the sages of the later period brought all this under four categories, known as Varna (class).

There were four Varnas - Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra, who were dedicated respectively to learning, protection, economy and service.

The practices of each Varna were known as *Varna Dharma*. Each Varna defined one’s responsibility towards the society.

Duty towards oneself was defined by *Ashrama Dharma*. There were four of these – *Bramcharya*, *Garhasthya*, *Vanaprastha* and *Sannyasa*, based on one’s stage in life.

Dharma (Hindu practices) comprised *Gotra/Kula dharma*, *Jati dharma* and *Varna-Ashrama dharma*.

Unlike the fundamental spiritual truths, these three are highly flexible.

Dharma is like the projection of the spiritual light on the screen of the society. The sages composed new books to align the dharma in line with the changing times. These books came to be known as *smritis*, of which of which *Manusmriti* is most famous.

The Sacred books of Indian traditions

Every religion has four kinds of practices and books – Philosophy, Mythological stories, Code of Conduct, and Rituals

The four classes of books in India, based on the Vedas are – Upanishads-Gita, Itihasa-Purana- Smritis – Purana-Tantra

The Vedas

The records of the spiritual wisdom of the Indian sages that they acquired in the depths of contemplation came to be known as the Vedas.

Vyasa is believed to have collected the corpus and organised them into four Vedas – *Rig Veda*, *Sama Veda*, *Yajur Veda* and *Atharva Veda*. These are the source books of spiritual, religious and social life of the Hindus.

The Vedas are mostly about prayer for prosperity, purity and perfection in life. *Gaytri mantra* is one of the more famous mantras of the Vedas.

The Vedic mantra, *Ekam sad viprah vahudha vadanti* – Truth is one, sages call it by various names, has become the defining trait of religious inclusiveness.

The Upanishads

The Upanishads belong to the last part of the Vedas and are also known as Vedanta. Over the period these have come to serve as the main philosophy of the Hindus.

There are hundreds of Upanishads. Of these, *Isa*, *Kena*, *Katha* and *Mundaka* upanishads are more famous. The central teaching of every Upanishad is that the individual is one with the universal. It signifies oneness through freedom from the limited.

The ideal of the Upanishads is to lead people towards freedom from the eternal cycle of life and death, here and now. This is known as *jivanmukti*.

Gita

Gita is the essence of Hindu scriptures and Hindu way of life. Its recital, study, application and meditation are greatly effective to lead a spiritual life, as also to lead a meaningful and dignified life. It is also recited as a farewell to a departed soul.

Itihas-Purana-Tantra-Smriti

Later sages created numerous scriptures based on the Vedas and the Upanishads. These contain spiritual truths, rituals of worship, divine stories, and codes of conduct.

Of the many other scriptures of the Hindus, the more popular are *Valmiki Ramayan*, *Mahabharata*, *Gita* and the *Puranas*. Many Hindus also adhere to *Tantras* as a way of life and mode of spiritual practices.

Sacred works like *Bhagavatam*, *Ramcharitamanas*, *Durga Saptashati/Chandi*, and many other such works are recited daily by millions.

Sacred books based on the Vedic tradition are available in every language where the Hindus live. Each of these books is sacred for those who follow them.

The tradition of the sages in Hindu religion continues. The words of these sages, coming from every part of the continent, are as good as the Vedas for their followers.

In the present times, *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna* has come to be respected as a unique work. It is the living record of religion and spirituality of the Hindu race as practised by Sri Ramakrishna.

A book is considered sacred by the Hindus only if it leads a person towards spiritual enlightenment. Of these, the spiritual truths remain the same, while mythologies, rituals and

way of life change with time and place.

Stories of Ramayana, Mahabharata and Puranas are meant to impart religion and mould life, values, practices, ideals etc. through stories. If these stories are not used for personal upliftment, these then end up becoming mere fantastic stories.

The rituals help a person grow in love of God through acts of worship. If the rituals are not used to make the inner life rich, these then become a meaningless mockery.

Code of conduct (popularly known as Smritis) helps a person to become noble and from there to attain spiritual wisdom. If these codes are not used with the higher aim, it creates unnecessary bondage on the society.
