1. The Eternal Religion

The correct name of Hinduism is *Sanatana Dharma*, The Eternal Religion. Being based on the Vedas and practised by the ancient Aryan race, it is also called the *Vaidika Dharma*. The Vedic Religion and the *Arya Dharma*, The Religion of the Aryans. As regards the origin and evolution of the word Hindu, Swami Vivekananda says:

"This word Hindu was the name that the ancient Persians used to apply to the river Sindhu. Whenever in Sanskrit there is an S, in ancient Persian it changes into H, so that Sindhu became Hindu, and you are all aware how the Greeks found it hard to pronounce H and dropped it altogether, so that we became known as Indians."

Some modern scholars, however, are of the opinion that this word also originated in our own country and is very ancient.

2. The Propagators of Hinduism

Unlike most world religions, Hinduism has no founder. It is not based on the spiritual experiences of a single individual, but on the intuitions and experience of a large number of seers, saints and mystics called Rishis. These ancient Rishis were only propagating this Eternal Religion and were not the founders in the sense that is normally understood and applied to other religions. Their experiences have been systematised and handed down as a great tradition. Religious men of countless generations have borne testimony to the truth and validity of the teachings contained in them. Even today these spiritual truths can be experimented on and verified in the laboratories of our souls, just as the statement about natural laws found in text-books of science can be tested and verified in the laboratory of science. None the less, Hinduism is as much a revelation as any other religion of the world. It goes even a step further and says that it is a continuous revelation. Hence, according to it, a single revelation or the revelations of a single individual do not exhaust the whole of the Truth. That is why it contemplates the advent of new Avatars, the introduction of new codes of law (*Dharma-shastras*) and the production of new editions of scriptures. The greatest strength of Hinduism lies in the fact of its being based upon certain eternal truths, rather than on a personality however exalted he may be. These truths are such that they can be verified by anybody at any time.

3. The Basic Scriptures of Hinduism

Hinduism is based primarily on the Vedas. Veda literally means knowledge or wisdom. It is also called *Shruti* which means what is heard or revealed. All other scriptures go under the omnibus term of *Smriti* (what is remembered). *Shruti* being divinely revealed to the great Rishis of yore in the depths of their mystical experience, its authority is supreme. *Smritis* are the secondary scriptures which derive their authority from the *Shruti*. Their business is to explain, elaborate and illustrate the fundamental teachings of the *Shruti*.

However, according to the Hindu view, revelations are not limited to any individual, time or place. Just as there have been revelations in the past, they can occur at present or in future also. The seer is only a medium to transmit to posterity the insight which he receives. Hence he is no more the inventor of the Veda than Newton is the generator of the law of gravity.

The Vedas are four in number - the *Rig Veda*, the *Yajur Veda*, the *Sama Veda* and the *Athrav Veda*. The *Rig Veda* is the most ancient scripture of the world. Lokamanya Tilak, on the strength of astronomical
evidences, concludes that it is at least 8,000 years old.

The **Rig Veda** consists of hymns which are mostly prayers. The **Yajur Veda** deals mainly with sacrificial rites. The **Sama Veda** contains a portion of the Rig Vedic hymns set to music. These have to be sung at appropriate stages during a sacrifice. The **Atharva Veda**, which is a later composition, consists mostly of morals and ethical codes as also a few worldly sciences.

Each Veda is usually divided into four parts. the **Samhitas**, the **Brahmanas**, the **Aranyakas** and the **Upanishads**. The **Samhitas** contain prayers and mantras used in sacrifices. Whereas the **Brahmanas** give the know-how of sacrificial rites, **Aranyakas** teach the art of certain types of meditation, based mostly on well-known sacrifices. The **Upanishads** contain the highest philosophical flights of the Vedic sages, which can be the pride of the whole human race for all time. Schopenhauer, the famous German savant, has declared: "in the whole world there is no study, except that of the originals, so beneficial and so elevating as that of the Upanishads. It has been the solace of my life, it will be the solace of my death".

Then comes the **Bhagavad Gita**, the most popular of all the Hindu scriptures. The **Gita**, as it is shortly called, is so well-known all over the world that it has been the second most translated work. Though the Bible ranks first in this regard it should be remembered that its translations were sponsored by the mighty machinery of the Church with the enormous material resources at its command. As for the **Gita**, its beauty, sublimity and universality prompted its admirers to translate it into different languages of the world.

There is a verse in Sanskrit which compares the **Upanishads** to a milch-cow and the **Gita** to its milk. In other words, the **Gita** gives the essence of the **Upanishadic** philosophy in a simple and practicable form. It is an integral part of the **Mahabharata** and is in the form of a dialogue between Sri Krishna, the great incarnation of God, and Arjuna, the great warrior prince. The battlefield was the place of its origination; and serious problems concerning life and death, duty and devotion, knowledge and meditation were discussed, and sensible solutions offered which hold good even to this day. Manliness and selfless devotion to duty are the keynotes of this great little scripture.

Any list of the Hindu scriptures is incomplete without the two great epics, the **Ramayana** and the **Mahabharata**. Though these two great books deal primarily with the story of Sri Rama and that of the **Kuru** race respectively, they can more rightly be called the encyclopedia of Hindu religion and culture. These two popular works have influenced and inspired the Hindu nation for thousands of years. They are technically called **Ithasa** (history) since they contain the history of the two most important dynasties that ruled and shaped the destinies of our motherland.

The **Smritis** of Manu, Yajnavalkya and **Parashara** of the **Puranas** including the famous **Bhagavata**, the **Agamas** and the treatises on the **Darshanas** are the other scriptures forming the magnificent edifice of Hinduism built upon the foundation of the Vedas. The **Smritis** are mostly codes of law intended to regulate Hindu society from time to time, according to the principles of the Veda. The **Puranas** are imaginative works woven round some historical matters. They aim at teaching religious truths through concrete examples. The **Agamas** are sectarian scriptures dealing with the worship of a particular aspect of God and prescribing detailed courses of discipline for the worshipper. The **Darshanas** are schools of philosophy. The orthodox schools among them try to develop, systematise and correlate the various parts of the Veda, each in its own way.

**4. The Philosophical Systems of Hinduism**

Ever since the beginning of civilisation, the innate curiosity of man has been urging him to delve into the mysteries of the universe. Who created this universe? Who am I?
Where did I come from? Where do I go after death? These were the fundamental questions posed by him. The relentless search for an answer to these basic questions has led to the origin and evolution of philosophy.

If the west sought in the external world for a solution, the Hindu sages turned their gaze inwards and discovered their own answers through meditation and mysticism. The Shaddarshanas (six systems of Hindu philosophy) were the result. Darshana means vision of truth. Unlike the west, where philosophy based on pure intellectualism and religion based on a few dogmas of the church are at loggerheads, philosophy in Hinduism has been a philosophy of religion and religion is based on the findings of philosophy.

The six Darshanas are:
1. Nyaya of Gautama;
2. Vaisheshika of Kanada;
3. Sankhya of Kapila;
4. Yoga of Patanjali;
5. Mimamsa of Jaimini; and
6. Vedanta of Badarayana or Vyasa.

The Nyaya and Vaisheshika advance the atomic theory of creation. Sankhya propounds the theory of the animate souls and inanimate matter as the basic factors in creation Yoga deals mainly with the control of the mind. Mimamsa is more interested in upholding Vedic ritualism.

Last but not the least is the Vedanta, the pinnacle of all these systems. It can easily be called The Philosophy of Hinduism. Vedanta means culmination of the Vedas. It is based on the Upanishads, the Gita and the Brahma Sutras of Vyasa, and gives the most rational solution to the fundamental problems posed by philosophy.

Vedanta calls that Supreme Power which projects this universe, sustains it and withdraws it into itself as Brahman. It holds the individual soul (Atman) to be birthless and deathless, eternal and immortal. Attainment of liberation is possible through the knowledge of Brahman, by being devoted to this Brahman. A liberated soul will never again return to mundane existence. These are its teachings in a nutshell.

5. Ethical and Moral Principles in Hinduism

To love thy neighbour as thyself is supposed to be the golden rule. But to the Hindu who believes in the oneness of creation, there is nothing extraordinary in this. I love my neighbour because in the ultimate analysis, my neighbour is also myself -that is his line of argument. In fact the sole mission of his life is to realise this oneness. To him, spiritual life is impossible without a moral and ethical life. Therefore very great stress is laid on the latter.

The wonderful Hindu mind has condensed the whole gamut of ethical and moral principles in two simple words: Yama and Niyama. Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Brahmacharya and Aparigraha - these constitute Yama. Niyama consists of Shaucha, Santosha, Tapas, Svadhyaya and Ishvarapranidhana.

- Not to harm others whether in thought, word or deed is Ahimsa. But it is a virtue to be practised by the strong and the brave, and not by the weak and the cowardly.
- Consonance of thoughts, words and deeds is Satya or truth. It goes without saying that these must be right and good.
- Asteya is non-stealing, non-covetousness included.
- Chastity in thought, word and deed is the core of Brahmacharya.
- Not to accept anything from others, more than what is absolutely necessary for sustenance is Aparigraha.
- Shaucha is purity and cleanliness.
- Contentment, absence of greed and cheerfulness constitute Santosha.
- Austerity in the form of service, control of speech and mind-these are designated as Tapas.
- Study of sacred literature as also repetition of sacred mantras and prayers are termed Svadhyaya.
• Surrender of the fruits of one's actions, nay, the surrender of one's very self, is Ishvarapranidhana.

These are the ten cardinal principles of Hinduism.

6. Individual and the Society in Hinduism

According to Hinduism, spiritual freedom or Moksha is the ultimate goal of life. But desires and passions which obstruct this do exist in man, ever struggling to find an outlet. It is not very easy to get rid of them overnight. Realising this, the great Hindu sages have provided us with right avenues for directing and guiding them. Looked at from this angle the conception of the four Purusharthas (ends to be striven for, by man) viz, Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha is a unique contribution made by Hinduism. Acquisition and enjoyment of material wealth (Artha) and satisfaction of desires (Kama) should always be within the limits allowed by Dharma or righteousness. This helps their attenuation and man will become fit for Moksha or liberation in due course.

With this Moksha in view, Hinduism requires every man to pass through the four stages of life, technically called the Ashramas, viz, Brahmacarya (student-hood), Grahasthya (the stage of the householder), Vanaprastha (retired life in forest) and Sannyasa (life of complete renunciation).

Study of sciences (spiritual and temporal) and a life of strict discipline characterised by self-control are the essential features of the first stage. Acquisition, enjoyment and distribution of the good things of life within the framework of Dharma, mark the second stage. The five daily sacrifices known as Pancha Yajnas viz, Devayajna or sacrifice to gods, Pitriyajna or obsequial oblation to the departed manes, Brahmayajna or study of the Vedas, Nriyajna or serving fellow beings and Bhutayajna or feeding the dumb creatures, are obligatory on the householder during this stage. The third stage where in introspection is very important is only a stepping stone to the final stage of Sannyasa. This last stage which is the acme of life is distinguished by its total renunciation of worldly desires and a complete dedication to the attainment of Moksha.

Every rule has an exception. The ascent from Brahmacarya to Sannyasa need not always be gradual. So the scriptures allowed double or even treble promotion to qualified aspirants. They could embrace Sannyasa from any stage.

Just as the individual's life has been divided into four stages to facilitate spiritual evolution, the society also has been divided into four groups (Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras) to facilitate smooth working.

The Brahmanas were the custodians of spiritual knowledge. Simple living and high thinking as also acquisition and propagation of spiritual knowledge these were their primary duties. The Kshatriyas protected the society with the strength of their arms and were responsible for the maintenance of law and order as also justice. It was given to the Vaishyas to produce wealth and distribute it without being greedy. Those who lived by manual labour and service to others were categorised as Shudras.

There has been a good lot of criticism against this Varna system, as this four-fold division is often called. It is to be remembered that this grouping was based upon the mental make up and aptitudes of the individuals and as a recognition of the division of labour that already existed in the society and not upon birth. However, it is impossible to examine each individual determine what his aptitudes are and then fix his calling. And so heredity is made to serve as a sort of working principle. Normally, the son inherits the trade of his father as he shares some of his traits. But, this principle was never intended to be applied with an iron hand. It was flexible and violable. There is a lot of evidence in the scriptures to show that man's Varna depends upon his mental make up and the calling he chooses. There have been several cases where people born in lower castes have risen higher by their virtues and those born in he higher ones
have been degraded due to their vices. Hence it is obvious that the present day caste system, with its watertight compartments and mutual animosity is nothing but a gross degeneration of the once sublime idea that formed the basis of this division.

7. Women in Hindu Society

No bird can ever fly on only one of its wings. Women, being the other-wing of the society, it is but proper that their role be discussed here.

Ideals constitute the very heart and soul of a nation. Hence a real understanding of the Hindu nation and its womanhood would essentially depend on that of its ideals. An already stated, Hinduism considers Moksha or spiritual freedom as the *summum bonum* of life, whether for man or for woman. Consequently the disciplines described and the paths prescribed for the attainment of this *Moksha* are almost identical. Purity, self-control, devotion and austerity are as much necessary for woman as for man. However, Hinduism does not shut its eyes to the differences that do exist between man and woman, biological as well as temperamental. That is why it has defined their areas of activity depending upon their *Svadharma* or special characteristics and prescribed slightly different modes of life and discipline.

The strength and the soundness of a society are sustained by those of the family, and woman is the central figure in a family. Just imagine the tremendous responsibility that is placed on her! A *Griha* or home is no home but for the *Grihini* (the mistress of the family). Hence, the ideal placed before the Hindu woman is that of the ideal *Grihini*, who again is an ideal wife, an ideal friend and an ideal mother all rolled into one. It is Sita, Savitri, Damayanti and Gandhari the songs of the Hindu soil that have inspired the lives of millions of Hindu women for aeons.

Women had plenty of freedom in the Vedic and Epic age. They had equal opportunities and scope, especially in the religious and spiritual fields. They could undergo the *Upanayana* sacrament, study the Vedas, become teachers or even ascetics if they wished. But during the middle ages there was a criminal neglect of their welfare.

With the advent of modern education, the impact of science and western civilisation, things have changed no doubt, but the remedy seems to be worse than the disease! Now woman seeks to out-man man himself! Getting discontented with her role of child-bearing and home making she wishes to devote herself to some other higher activity! Consequently, homes are slowly being replaced by hotels! In the name of economic independence, life is tending to become more and more hectic, irregular and even vagrant! By engaging herself in activities, which prejudice the work of preservation, the modern Hindu woman is coming into conflict with her own inner nature. By blindly imitating man, she cannot be the giver of joy, the inspirer of activity and the consoler in distress that she has all along been. This is what the world famous scientist Dr. Alexis Carrel says: "The differences existing between man and woman are of a fundamental nature. Ignorance of these fundamental facts has led promoters of feminism to believe that both sexes should have the same education, the same powers and the same responsibilities. In reality woman differs profoundly from man. Every one of the cells of her body bears the mark of her sex. Physiological laws are as inexorable as those of the sidereal world. They cannot be replaced by human wishes."

What then is the solution? "But now female education is to be spread with religion as its centre. All other training should be secondary to religion," says Swami Vivekananda. Mahatma Gandhi exhorts our women not to ape the West but apply methods suitable to the Indian genius and Indian environment. Says he: "Theirs must be the strong controlling, purifying, steadying hand, conserving what is best in our culture and unhesitatingly rejecting what is bad and degrading. This is the work of

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*What every Hindu ought to know*
Sitas, Draupidis, Savitris, and Damayantis, not of amazons and proudes."

Will our mothers and sisters heed this advice?

8. Hindu Sadhanas

Spiritual disciplines are called Sadhanas. They are paths to perfection, roads to realisation of the truth. Since there are temperamental differences among the individual seekers of truth, Hinduism recognises the need for a variety of spiritual disciplines or Sadhanas. These Sadhanas can be brought under four broad categories called Yogas: the Karma Yoga, the Bhakti Yoga, the Raja Yoga and the Jnana Yoga.

**Karma Yoga** is the path of disinterested action suited to the active type. **Bhakti Yoga**, the path of love of God, is most suitable to the emotional type, **Raja Yoga**, the path of psychic control, is meant for the introspectives. **Jnana Yoga**, the path of discrimination and knowledge is ideal for those endowed with a sharp intellect and a keen power of discrimination. However, the four qualities of activity, emotion, introspection and intellect are found in everyone though in varying degrees. Hence, a balanced combination of all the Yogas, with more of one and less of others depending upon one's temperament, is desirable for quick results.

Do your work, the duties that fall to your lot, nicely and efficiently. But be alert, never get attached, either to the work or to the fruits thereof. This is the essence of **Karma Yoga**.

Love God with all your heart and soul. Cultivate an intimate loving relationship with Him. Surrender yourself completely to Him. Desire for Him alone and for nothing else. This is the core of **Bhakti Yoga**.

**Raja Yoga** prescribes an eight fold discipline leading to the perfect control of the mind and culminating in the vision of the Truth. **Yama** and **Niyama**, the moral and ethical disciplines already described, are the first two steps. **Asana** (steady and comfortable posture), **Pranayama** (rhythmic breathing and breath control), **Pratyahara** (withdrawal of the senses from their objects), **Dharana** (fixing the attention on the ideal), **Dhyana** (steady flow of the mind stuff towards the ideal) and **Samadhi** (perfect concentration on the ideal) these are the subsequent steps in that order.

Discriminate between the real (the Self) and the unreal (the world appearance). Give up the unreal mercilessly. Cling to the Self, the eternal and immortal reality. Hear about It, brood over It and meditate over It. Become one with it. This is the sum and substance of **Jnana Yoga**.

9. Place of Rituals, Temples and Festivals in Hinduism

Philosophy without religion becomes meaningless. Religion without rituals becomes insipid. The rituals of a religion, like the husk of a seed, preserve its life and make it germinate. It is only when the rituals are separated from the faith and assume an independent existence that they become mechanical and lifeless.

Human beings have not yet reached those heights where they can dispense with all sorts of symbols and rituals and devote themselves to purely abstract principles. A flag hoisting, an oath taking or a convocation is as much a ritual as worship or sacrifice. To give a concrete shape to the abstract spiritual ideals and to add colour and zest to life, Hinduism recommends the performance of several rituals. Out of these, a few are obligatory and the rest are optional.

Practice of meditation at sunrise, noon and sunset with the repetition of the famous **Gayatri Mantra**, worship of God through symbols and images, offering oblation into specially consecrated sacrificial fires these were some of the rituals obligatory on almost all the Hindus during the ancient days. Even to this day, these have been kept up though in a modified form, and with lesser intensity. A wisely planned and solemnly conducted ritual prepares the ground, creates the atmosphere, suggests the mood and predisposes the mind so that the spiritual aspirant may easily detach himself from the
world and feel the mysterious presence of the Supreme Power called God.

Hinduism considers religion and spirituality to be purely a personal affair. It concerns with the eternal relationship between the Eternal Soul and the Eternal God. Hence, the Hindu is obliged neither to build a temple nor pay a visit to it on any particular day. To him his own body is the temple, the abode of the Lord. However, for the sake of the ordinary people who are incapable of comprehending this truth, who always need an external support for the practice of their religion, temples are recommended. Even the temple is only an external symbol of this body. In fact, many of the technical names of the various parts of a temple are identical with the names of the various parts of the body. Actually the temple represents the Lord and His creation (the universe) in all its aspects.

Usually the gateway to a temple will be a massive and magnificent construction. When we stand in front of it we are made to feel so insignificant before the Lord of the universe! As we proceed inwards leaving behind the grand carvings and decorations of the outside, we notice that the sanctum sanctorum itself is small and dark. We can have the darshan of the Lord only when a light is lit up and waved before Him. This indicates that we have to leave the grand external world outside, direct our minds inward, light up the lamp of knowledge there and behold the Lord within the sanctum sanctorum of our hearts.

Ours has been a land of temples. There is no town or village without a temple, be that of Shiva or Vishnu, Devi or Hanuman, Ganesha or Subrahmanya. They are standing monuments to the continuing spiritual traditions of our country. And they have played a very significant part in the community life of our country, helping to preserve and enrich our religion and culture, arts and crafts through jatras, rathotsavas and festivals.

Festivals connected with certain sacred days and associated with certain temples or rivers or places of pilgrimage, have been another potent factor in the religious life of our society. Though the rules and regulations of a festival introduce an amount of austerity in personal life, they also tighten this burden and elevate the mind when performed properly. A rathotsava (temple-car festival) or a mela (religious fair) has its own story to tell and lessons to teach. The former seems to signify that if you are too busy to go to the Lord, He Himself will come to you! The latter provides an opportunity for like-minded devotees to congregate in a place and strengthen one another spiritual vibrations. That is why they have become part and parcel of our life, for centuries.

10. A Few Rituals and Sacraments of Hinduism

It will not be out of place here to dilate a little upon a few of the more important rituals and sacraments that have embellished Hinduism since ages.

Sandhya, Puja and Homa are the most important rituals still in vogue. Jatakarma & Namakarana, Annaprashana, Upanayana, Vivaha and Antyeshti including Shradha are the more common Sanskaras or sacraments prevalent even today. Sandhya is the ritual practised at dawn, noon and dusk. Ceremonial sipping of water (Achamana), rhythmic breathing (Pranayama), expiation of sin (Aghamarshana), offering water to Sun-god (Arghyapradana), repetition of the Gayatri Mantra coupled with meditation on Sun-god and obeisance to Sun-god (Upasthana) these comprise the ritual.

The mode of Puja or worship is a replica of the services that are usually rendered to a beloved guest or an honoured king. Only, the King of kings is the recipient here! After invoking the presence of the Diety (Avahana), a seat is offered (Asana); the feet are washed (Padya); a respectful offering of water mixed with sandalwood paste and rice is made (Arghya); sandalwood paste is smeared (Chandana); flowers are offered (Pushpa); incense is burned (Dhupa); lighted lamp is waved (Dipa) and food offering is
made (Naivedya) along with drinking water (Paniya). Finally the Deity is given a farewell (Visarjana).

Homa is actually Vedic sacrifice adopted to Agamic requirements. It is nothing but Puja offered to the Deity invoked into the sacrificial fire. Except in some details it is almost identical with Puja.

Samskara literally means a purificatory rite. It is socio-religious in character. By performing it, the life of the Hindu is sanctified.

Though the Samskaras are sixteen in number, only the principal ones mentioned above, will be dealt with here.

Jatakarma is the rite performed immediately after the birth of the child. Repetition of a mantra for the generation of talent (Medhajanana) and wishing the baby longevity and strength are the main items involved.

Namakarana or name giving ceremony is performed usually on the tenth or the twelfth day. The choice of the name for the child is generally associated with religious ideas.

Anna-prashana in the first feeding of the child with solid food which has been previously consecrated by offering it to various deities.

Upanayana or the sacrament of initiation into higher life stands for taking the child to a teacher for education. From the cultural point of view this is the most important sacrament. The most striking feature of the Upanayana lies in the belief that by its performance the initiate is given a cultural and spiritual rebirth. It is a great advance over the primitive types of initiation like the endurance test, temporary seclusion or mutilation of the body still current among many religious communities.

Receiving the loin-cloth (Kaupina) and the girdle (Mekhala), investiture with the sacred thread (Yajnopavitadharana), initiation with the Savitri Mantra (better known as the Gayatri) and going round for aims these constitute the most essential aspects of the ritual. The first symbolises the beginning of a life of self-control. The Yajnopavita suggests that from now on, his life is a continuous sacrifice. The Gayatri is particularly apt for a celibate student seeking intellectual development in the right direction. It marks the beginning of a life-long spiritual struggle. Going round for aims reminds him of his dependence on society whose debts he has to discharge throughout his life.

Of all the Hindu sacraments, Vivaha or marriage is considered to be the most central one. Hinduism rightly emphasises the importance of the life of the householder. The sacrament of marriage impresses upon a person that earthly life is not to be despised; rather it should be consciously accepted and elevated to the level of spiritual experience. Marriage is not a license for indulgence, but a human institution aiming at moderation in conjugal life leading ultimately to the conquest of self. It is essentially a fellowship between a man and a woman who seek to live creatively in a partnership for the pursuit of the four Purusharthas. Besides the two parties to a marriage the bride and the bridegroom there is the third party, Dharma, (their joint religious duty) through which only they have been united. Consequently, a Hindu marriage is considered to be too sacred to be dissolved.

The most important steps of this sacrament are: Kanyadana (gift of the bride to the bridegroom by the legitimate guardian), Vivaha homa (marriage offerings in sacred fire), Panigrahana (clasping the hand of the bride by the bridegroom), Saptapadi (walking seven steps), Ashmarohana (mounting the stone), Suryalokana (looking at the sun) and Dhruvadarshana (gazing at the Pole star).

Panigrahana symbolises that the bridegroom has taken over her responsibility here Afterwards. Saptapadi is symbolic of prosperity and felicity. At the end of this ceremony the bride passes into the family of the bridegroom. Marriage is regarded as complete with it. Suryalokana indicates that the sun is a witness to the sacrament.
Ashmarohana and Dhruva Arundhati darshan represent stability and constancy.

The last sacrament in the life of the Hindu is Antyeshti. Since a Hindu consecrates his entire life through the performance of various sacraments at suitable stages, at his death, his survivors consecrate the event by death rites for his future good and spiritual felicity. Though performed after a man's death, this sacrament is no less important, because for a Hindu, the value of the next world is higher than that of the present.

It is customary to drop Ganga-water and Tulasi leaves into the mouth of the dying person. The body is carried on a bier by the nearest relatives and friends of the deceased. It is then either cremated or buried according to the custom of the community. If cremated, the ashes and the bones are later on collected and immersed in the sacred waters of the nearest river. If buried, a mound is raised over the remains as a mark of remembrance Shraddha or offering to the dead also forms an important item of the last rites. It is performed on the eleventh or the thirteenth day after death and consists of Homa, Pindapradhana (obsequial offering of rice balls) and feeding the Brahmanas.

11. Reform Movements in Hinduism

Hinduism is like the centre-of-gravity doll which regains its equilibrium howsoever it be disturbed. Wave after wave of alien invasions have come and gone upon this sacred land but none of them really succeeded in uprooting it. That is because the basis of Hinduism is strong and sound. Standing firmly on this, it has always shown a remarkable dynamism, a unique capacity for change and adjustment whenever circumstances have demanded it.

Whenever the essential core was forgotten and too much fuss was made over the non-essential crust, there has always been a reaction and a rebellion from its own ranks to put things in their proper perspective and show a better way in conformity with the times. When the simple Rig Vedic religion was developed in course of time into a highly complicated labyrinth of sacrifices, there arose the dynamic sages of the Upanishads condemning it in no uncertain terms and preaching the direct method of realising the truth through contemplation and knowledge. This was the first reform movement.

This was further supplemented by the next movement started by the Gitacharya Sri Krishna who reconciled the warring groups of his times, who were advocating either action or knowledge or contemplation or devotion. He provided a place in his system for every one of these in such a way that one need not be in conflict with the others.

Then came Gauthama Buddha, the compassionate, who was more interested in the greatest good of the largest number than in the philosophies of the privileged few. Teaching simple moral and spiritual principles bearing more directly on the life here than on the life hereafter, he captured the hearts of millions and set a dynamic spiritual revolution into motion.

Buddha's apparent condemnation of the Vedic religion and his discreet silence on the life hereafter were thoroughly misunderstood and even misrepresented by his later followers. It was given to Shankara, the first missionary Hindu monk, to make a whirlwind tour of the country, expose their fallacies and re-establish the pristine glory of Hinduism. By admitting Buddha into the galaxy of incarnations the Post-Buddhist Hinduism sealed the fate of Buddhism in India once for all.

Then followed an era of invasion and conquest by foreigners and it looked, as though the Eternal Religion would just collapse. However, the task of keeping it very much alive was admirably fulfilled by the various Bhakti movements started by Ramanuja, Madhva, Basaveshwara, Chaitanya, Ramananda, Kabir, Nanak, Mirabai, Tulasidas, Tukaram, Purandara Das and a host of others. Special mention must be made of the Sikhism of Nanak, which effectively prevented large number of
people from being forcibly converted into Islam. No less important was the movement started by Ramanuja to broaden the outlook of Brahmin orthodoxy.

The British conquest as also the impact of western civilisation with its science, technology and Christianity gave another shaking to the native religion and culture. Bang came the reply in the form of several reform movements each trying in its own way to set things right. If the Brahma Samaj and its offshoot, the Prarthana Samaj tried to give a Christian look to Hinduism, the Arya Samaj tried to bring back the pure Vedic religion. The Theosophical Society too tried to do its bit with its mystical and esoteric doctrines. However it was Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda who struck a perfect balance between the past and the present, the East and the West by showing the people how to combine the best of both. This regeneration is still continuing through the work of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission and other organisations drawing inspiration from them.

A very recent attempt at uniting the Hindu society, protecting and spreading its religion and culture, is the formation of the Vishva Hindu Parishad which is steadily gaining ground.

12. Special Contribution of Hinduism to World Thought

Hinduism has made a very significant contribution to world thought in propounding the three doctrines of Karma and Rebirth, Adhikara Bheda and Avatara Vada.

The doctrine of Karma is nothing but the extension of the well-known principle, As you sow, so you reap, to the moral and spiritual field. We have to reap the consequences of our actions sooner or later. The present is the result of the past and the future will be the result of the present.

The doctrine of rebirth is a logical corollary of this theory of Karma. We may burn our finger in fire for only a few seconds but it takes a couple of weeks to cure it completely. Similarly since it is not possible to experience the result of all the actions that we do in one short life, it is reasonable to admit of our future lives. The wide variety and differences among human beings, which have no logical connection with the present life, force us to hypothesise about their causes existing in past lives and resulting in the present ones. Since Hinduism posits the soul as eternal and immortal, the theory of Karma and Rebirth fits in admirably with it. This is the best hypothesis that the human mind can conceive of, to solve the problem of good and evil, to explain the variety and diversity in the universe.

The doctrine of Adhikara Bheda is the recognition of the simple fact that the same cap cannot fit everybody. In any field especially in the spiritual field, capacity and necessity should be the deciding factors and not merely the desire or ambition. A blind man is certainly unfit to become a pilot and the tame should never attempt Mountain-climbing, however intense their desires may be! That is why like a loving mother catering to her children with a variety of dishes depending upon their digestive capacities, Hinduism has opened up manifold spiritual paths to suit a variety of tastes and temperaments. If the intellectual is recommended Jnana Yoga, the active person finds an outlet for his energies in Karma Yoga. If the emotional type finds a solace in Bhakti Yoga, the introspective one finds his peace in Raja Yoga. Thus no one need be disappointed.

The Avatara Vada—the doctrine of descent of God on earth, declares that the Supreme Power descends on this earth wherever and whenever necessary to restore the spiritual balance and to help genuine religious aspirants in their struggle for perfection. This is truly a marvellous doctrine filling the hearts of millions of aspirants with tremendous hope. An unbiased study of the spiritual history of mankind proves this beyond all doubt. It is foolish to limit the powers and capacities of the Almighty God by arguing that He descended only once in a particular chosen land and that He will never
come again. Regitementation in religion and proselytisation with political motives which are doing immense harm to humanity have their origin in such bigotry.

13. Hinduism: The Religion Universal

Any religion to be universally acceptable, must appeal both to the head and to the heart of the maximum number of people. And Hinduism does it. The dizzy heights of its Advaita philosophy can easily slake the thirst of the brainiest of philosophers. Its conception of the Personal God can more than satisfy the refined theologians. The modes of Bhakti enunciated as well as the rituals recommended soothe the hearts of the emotional types. The advocates of activism are easily accommodated by the doctrine of selfless action. And the mystics can always count upon Yoga.

Hinduism considers that man is potentially divine and not a sinner. Hence, even the worst of sinners finds a place in its bosom. He has not committed any sin but only mistakes, says Hinduism, because he had forgotten his essentially divine nature! What a wonderful doctrine! What a marvellous psychology!

By declaring that the whole universe is but the projection of the Cosmic Mind, and that a fundamental thread of unity passes through the innumerable and diverse manifestations in it, Hinduism carries conviction to the modern scientists also.

Even the agnostics and the atheists find a place in it because Hinduism preaches that to be good and to do good is the whole of religion, all other things being secondary.

Gross materialists, instead of being condemned, are advised to be a little less selfish while enjoying the good things of life!

If this is not the Religion Universal which other one can be? In fact Hinduism being more a way of life than a dogmatic creed, the whole of humanity ever struggling from lower truths to higher truths come under its protective wings whether they accept it or not.

14. Ubiquitous Hindu Culture

It is this very universality of Hinduism that carried it far and wide into the world beyond the borders of Bharat. Along with its civilisation and culture, philosophies, arts and sciences, mythology and rituals, Hinduism has practically inundated all the major cultural regions of the world. It is a well-known historical fact that the countries of South East Asia, Sri Lanka, West Asia, part of the African continent, Europe and America are full of the impress of Hindu culture and civilisation. The Sanskrit language, the two great Epics, temples dedicated to Shiva, Vishnu and Ganapati, and a few of the rituals and sacraments are to be found even today in Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Cambodia and Philippines. There is overwhelming evidence to show that the great sage Agastyajourneyed to those lands, spreading the unfailing message of the Eternal Religion. Shustery says in his Outlines of Islamic Culture that the Haj pilgrim while approaching the great Mosque at Mecca had to wear the dhoti and the uttareeya (upper cloth)! As regards the teaching of the Christian missionaries like Plotinus, Clement, Gregory, Augustine and others Dean Inge was obliged to declare: "it is the ancient religion of the Brahmins (that is) masquerading in the clothes borrowed from the Jewish, Gnostic, Manichaean and Neoplatonic allegories." Diwan Chamanlal has accumulated unassailable mass of evidence in his Hindu America to show that the Hindus migrated to the American continent long before Columbus. The effect of Hindu culture is evident even to this day, especially in Mexico. Should we not be proud of this?

15. Hindus outside India

This takes us to the next topic, that of the Hindus living outside their Motherland. In proportion to the spiritual and cultural debt that is cast upon the world by Hinduism, the number of Hindus who live outside India is rather small. Though this is a glorious tribute to its non-aggressiveness and cultural refinement Hinduism certainly did not try to
spread by force or fraud - it is also a sad commentary on the strength, wisdom and foresight of the Hindus living here.

The fourteen million Hindus living outside and scattered over several countries are today badly in need of our help. They want religious institutions to bring them together and inspire them. They want preachers to educate them in our Dharma. They are eager to learn the more tangible rituals and sacraments to purify and sustain themselves.

Any further delay and neglect on our part will hasten their decay. And, the grave sin will be squarely ours! Should we not hurry up to offer them what they are hankering for?

16. Criticisms Galore

In spite of its most sublime theories, universal doctrines and an unlimited capacity for tolerance and adjustment, no religion on earth has perhaps been so much misunderstood, deliberately distorted and mercilessly criticised as this Mother of all religions. Brushing aside all unjust criticism based more on spite than on solid truths, it is still worthwhile considering some of the more common, apparently reasonable and sometimes genuine, criticisms in the spirit of an honest enquiry after truth.

FIRST OBJECTION: There are innumerable gods and goddesses in Hinduism as also countless religious works leading its adherents to utter confusion and bewilderment.

Well, this may appear so to one who has not understood the spirit of Hinduism. But to one who has understood that it is one and the same God that has manifested Himself through all these forms, there is no problem, no confusion, much less any bewilderment. One who has known the nature of water will never be confused or bewildered if he encounters ice, bubble or steam. *Rig Veda* itself has unequivocally declared that the Truth is one and the sages call it by various names. As regards the countless religious works, they are meant for different types of people who are in various stages of intellectual and spiritual evolution. A post-graduate student and a higher secondary student are not supposed to exchange their text-books and books and thereby get bewildered! It is here that a correct understanding and appreciation of the doctrine of *Adhikara Bheda* comes to our aid.

SECOND OBJECTION: Hinduism preaches rank idolatry and encourages superstition.

Idolatry means worship of idols considering that they themselves are God. No Hindu ever worships a stone or a metal image with this attitude. He always worships God through them. If an objection is raised even against this, then there is no reason why the Christians who worship the image of Jesus and the Bible or the Mohammedans who kiss the Kaaba stone or the patriots who salute the national flag, should not be dubbed as idolators!

Even Hinduism considers image-worship as only the primary step - like using an abacus to teach arithmetic to children - and exhorts its votaries to rise gradually to the highest level wherein they will have the direct experience of the all-pervading Supreme Power.

As for superstition, the less we talk, the better. The merciless witch-hunting carried on in Europe during the middle ages or the considering of number thirteen as unlucky even during this twentieth century by the Western society, are just two concrete examples which reveal who is really more superstitious. Actually most of the Hindu practices dubbed as superstitions have deeper philosophical and psychological truths behind them than meets the eye. Even granting that superstitions do exit, they are all harmless. Lastly, the blind belief of the modern man in science and technology, as if they are omnipotent, forgetting that they have miserably failed to give him peace of mind (which alone is the aim of life) is the greatest superstition of all!
THIRD OBJECTION: The caste system has divided the Hindu society into numberless groups engaged in mutual hatred and fighting. A religion which shelters such a system is no good.

The caste system is a logical extension of the Varna system whose underlying philosophy has already been explained. There is no country, no race or society in this world which is free from caste system in some form or the other. Even in the so-called socialistic countries, where all are supposed to be equal, it is an open secret that some are more equal than others! A society based on the division of labour is far superior to a society divided on the basis of wealth or colour of the skin. What is to be condemned is not the caste system as such, but the claim to privileges by certain castes or the hatred and ill-will towards the other groups. The division of an office into several departments is only a matter of administrative convenience. That does not mean that these departments should fight one another. If it is remembered that there is no bar on practice of true religion by any member of any caste, all this fuss becomes meaning-less. Hence a religion that has invented such a wonderful social institution is not only good but has also rendered signal service to mankind by showing the right path.

It is interesting to note that both Swami Vivekananda and Mahatma Gandhi who themselves did not belong to the highest caste, have upheld and admired the caste system in its true form.

FOURTH OBJECTION: The doctrine of Karma has introduced fatalism and lethargy, and has killed the initiative among the Hindus.

The alternatives to the doctrine of Karma and Rebirth are the positing of a partial and unjust God or to accept the theory that the origin of this universe lies in an accident or chaos. These alternatives satisfy neither the theologian nor the logician and much less a scientist. As already pointed out, this theory of Karma is the most sensible and reasonable hypothesis which helps not only explaining the gradation and variety in the universe but also in leading a good life.

As regards the objection as such, we say that quite the opposite effect will be produced if the doctrine is properly understood and applied. If my present state is the result of my previous actions, that gives me a tremendous hope and opportunity for shaping my future by my present action. This is the Hindu attitude. Consequently, a Hindu who has understood the spirit of the Karma theory is a dynamic believer in himself. Of course, fatalism and lethargy have often crept in to the detriment of the Hindus. But this is solely due to the misunderstanding of the Karma theory. Ignorant and half-baked people who misunderstand, and misapply even sublime theories are not confined to the Hindu society alone but will be found all over the world.

FIFTH OBJECTION: In the name of the doctrine of Adhikara Bheda, Hinduism has meted out very unequal treatment to its adherents and has done great injustice to them.

Whenever understood properly and practised sincerely this doctrine has always helped, and not hindered, the material and spiritual progress of the Hindus. To say that all men are born equal or made equal, is a blatant denial of facts and experience. But this does not mean that people should not be given equal opportunity and scope for self-development. In fact Hinduism has been more liberal and generous towards the weaker sections of the society. As in every other society, there have of course been a small minority of black sheep who have exploited and wronged the masses. However, taking the Hindu religion and society as a whole and comparing it with others, this doctrine has worked more as a blessing than as a curse.

SIXTH OBJECTION: A religion which confers the status of the highest incarnation of God on a mythical and immoral person like Sri Krishna is paving the way for the whole society to become likewise.
Bitter criticism and ridicule of Hinduism as also malicious propaganda against it, very often centres round the life, personality and doings of Lord Sri Krishna. A dispassionate study and analysis will however reveal the hollowness of these arguments.

At the very outset, let it be known that Sri Krishna's historicity has been established beyond doubt by several scholars including Sri Aurobindo. The mighty river of Hinduism will continue to flow on irrespective of the historicity of Ramas and Krishnas (who are just ripples in this river) because it is based on eternal principles and not on personalities.

The earliest reference to Sri Krishna and an unfoldment of his true personality occurs in the great epic and history of the Hindus viz, the Mahabharata. Curiously enough, this epic has always treated him as a Kshatriya King. The mighty river of Hinduism will continue to flow on irrespective of the historicity of Ramas and Krishnas (who are just ripples in this river) because it is based on eternal principles and not on personalities.

The secondary scriptures like the Bhagavatam which deal with Sri Krishna's story in greater detail, were actually written several centuries later and hence need not be taken as literally true. Even according to these scriptures, Sri Krishna was a small boy at the time of the Brindavan Leela. Again, the tradition of considering oneself as the handmaid of God and love Him as one's husband (whereby the baser instincts are sublimated) is not peculiar to Hinduism alone. It exists among the Christians and the Sufis also. The reference to brides of God in the Bible or the Christian nuns considering themselves as brides of God does not certainly warrant us to brand either God or Christ as polygamous or immoral!

Moreover, the very same scriptures that describe his Rasakrida also describe the innumerable miracles performed by him. Why don't then, these wise critics, accept these miracles also as true? If these are accepted, it will be established that Sri Krishna was God Himself, since no ordinary being can ever perform them. And God's actions are above all human logic and comprehension!

The critics often jeer at Sri Krishna because he had sixteen thousand wives. Perhaps, it is more due to jealousy than any moral sense because he could manage sixteen thousand wives whereas they can hardly manage one! Since these poor girls had been deserted by their own people just because they had been in the captivity of the demon Narakasura, Krishna the rescuer, had no option but to legally accept them as his wives so that he could shelter them. This is one explanation.

Then there is the other, the real explanation, which describes the esoteric significance of this. Sixteen thousand really represents sixteen. The mind, the five senses of cognition, the five organs of action and the five fundamental elements (like the earth etc.) - these are the sixteen. The zeros signify the number- less products, variations and manifestations of these sixteen. Sri Krishna is the Purusha or the self who liberates them from hellish ignorance (Naraka) and redirects them unto Himself.

Contrary to the objectors' contention, Lord Krishna has been the unseen dynamic power guiding the Hindu religion and society in the right direction through his Gita ever ringing its message for thousands of years. He is the greatest national hero and guide, and it is a pity that the sons of our own soil often disown Him.

17. The Menace of Materialism

At this juncture it is necessary to pinpoint the menace of materialism also. Hinduism has never forbidden the acquisition and enjoyment of material wealth, comforts and pleasures. It has only introduced the safety-valve of Dharma, that is all. If Artha and Kama become the sole aims of life and Dharma is totally neglected, then it becomes
gross materialism, which is another name for the law of the jungle. Now-a-days the tendency towards such materialism is increasing to the detriment of our nation. Hence comes the necessity to recognise and check this menace.

A glance at the so-called advanced and civilised countries of the world will reveal what havoc has been brought about by materialism. Incidence of the most heinous crimes and awful mental illnesses is increasing at an alarming rate. According to a report put up by the police department of the U.S.A., the average rate of crimes per hour is as follows: one murder, theft of forty cars and ten robberies! That is why many of the Western savants and scientists are fast turning towards religion for solace and succour.

Atheism, the counterpart of materialism, is another evil that is trying to sway the minds of men. Even a little of serious thinking will convince us how hollow the arguments of atheism are. That the universe was formed by a fortuitous course of atoms, can no more be believed than that the accidental jumbling of the letters of a word making set would fall into a most wonderful treatise of philosophy! Actually the sciences are maps of universal laws; the universal laws are channels of universal power; and the universal power is but the outgoing of a Supreme Universal Mind.

Every nation has its special characteristic trait. In our country it is religion. If it goes "India will die in spite of politics, in spite of reforms, in spite of Kubera's wealth poured upon the head of everyone of her children."

18. The Internal Dangers

Now let us turn our attention inwards and find out what exactly ails our society from within.

The most serious defect of an average Hindu is his physical weakness and consequent cowardice, often clothed in high-sounding words like _Ahimsa_. Swami Vivekananda called weakness as sin and death. He exhorted our young men to develop muscles of iron and nerves of steel. _Upanishads_ declare that there is no salvation for the weak! There is a lot of truth in that saying of Darwin, survival of the fittest.

Two Hindus cannot join together and work. Obedience and cooperation are allergic to our constitution! Jealously seems to be in our blood! We seem to forget that this has been the greatest single factor for our downfall over the centuries. Unless we learn to put away our petty jealousies, subjugate our ego and organise ourselves unitedly, there is no hope for us.

Neglect of intellectual life seems to be another disease ailing us. The great Rishis, our forefathers, astonished the world with their wonderful discoveries in several fields of knowledge through hard work and deep thinking. In our generation, even a small boy must have a ready-made notes to pass his examination! There is no short-cut to knowledge. Let there be no illusion about it! Unless we, especially the younger generation, wake up and cultivate a real thirst for knowledge, develop the capacity to think deeply and intensely, we just cannot compete with the other nations of the world!

Lethargy is yet another disease which is eating into our vitals. A Hindu thinks but rarely acts - thus remarked an English officer once.

The last but not least of our weaknesses is our ignorance of our own religion. An average Christian or an average Muslim is better informed about his religion than an average Hindu. Whereas they have a positive and dynamic faith in their religion, most of us not only lack such faith but even go to the extent of deriding our own _Dharma_. It seems to have become a fashion to do so, especially among our students going abroad!

A Hindu child learns very little about our _Dharma_ and culture either at home or at school. Parents and teachers, most of whom are themselves ignorant in this respect, cannot guide the youngsters. Or, if they try to guide, it is like the blind leading the blind! No wonder that these youngsters are fast
failing an easy prey to alien influences! It is the foremost duty of the parents and elders to learn a little more about our glorious Dharma and culture, and to impart it effectively to their children and wards. On the negative side, let them take all the necessary steps in counteracting the mischievous and malicious propaganda of the enemies of our Dharma.

19. Some Problems and Possible Solutions

Every nation, every society, has its own problems. We too have ours. Let us consider a few of the more important ones and discuss the possible solutions.

The first problem that often agitates the minds of the enlightened Hindus is that of caste. The rigidity of the caste system, the consequent social inequalities, the hatred and animosity it has bred, are threatening our society with disintegration and destruction.

Well, this problem has been made sufficiently complex that, there cannot be an immediate ready made solution. Economic upliftment of the masses, a proper type of education enlightening them in the fundamental principles underlying our Dharma and culture these will help to a great extent in levelling and cementing out society. In addition, a sincere spirit of give and take must be infused among the various caste groups. The more educated and cultured groups of our society (from any caste), especially the Brahmans, must recharge their own lives with the high spiritual ideals that once guided them and take up their spiritual mission through Simple living and high thinking. Swami Vivekananda who was not a Brahmin himself by birth, makes an impassioned appeal for the restoration of the original four Varna system by merging all the sub-castes in the respective major caste.

In this connection, the treatment meted out to the Harijans by the so-called caste Hindus, deserves special mention. For centuries together these poor people have been given a treatment which even the brutes do not deserve! It is a wonder how they have continued to remain as part of the Hindu society in spite of the crimes and atrocities committed against them! If the Hindu society does not wake up to their problems and try for their upliftment through education and improvement of economy, they will all be absorbed one day into the folds of alien faiths! Let us remember that whoever goes out of the Hindu Dharma is not only lost to us, but also we have in him one more enemy!

The second problem we have to face is that of conversion. The overt and convert methods of the Christian missionaries in perverting the faith of our people are well-known. How to stop this? Let us try our best to Hinduise the Hindus first by a proper dissemination of our Dharma. At the same time let us keep an eternal vigil over the nefarious designs of others to convert our people.

Let us remember that the doctrine that a Hindu is born and not made, is absolutely false. For hundreds of years our Dharma has quietly absorbed people of alien faiths without fuss. As regards the question of reabsorption, Swami Vivekananda's observations are interesting and instructive: "Returning converts will gain their own castes of course. And new people will make theirs." The advanced sections of our society can render signal service to the new converts by voluntarily coming forward to absorb them into their own fold.

It is here that the orthodox traditional monasteries can play a major part. In the earlier years they have done a wonderful job of keeping aloft the burning torch of our Dharma. However with the accumulation of wealth their men decayed. Pelf, prestige and power became their primary concern. Even today if they wake up to realities, give up their fossilised ways of thinking and acting and move with the changing society, all the while sticking to the eternal values in our Dharma, they can achieve still greater wonders what with their learning, wealth and prestige. They should make vigorous efforts for the propagation of the core of our
**Dharma**, simplify the rituals, draw up a code of conduct practicable for all the Hindus, make the four sacraments of *jatakarma, upanayana, vivaha* and *antyeshti* simple and obligatory on all the Hindus and issue injunctions to their respective followers to reabsorb and rehabilitate the reverts. This will go a long way in making the Hindu society more homogeneous and united.

And now a word about our temples and priests: Though the temples should be the holiest of the holy places, they are usually kept awfully dirty with the pilgrims and visitors adding their share! The noise and disorder in temples far exceed our devotion! The nuisance and harassment that the poor pilgrims have to put up with at the hands of the greedy and ignorant priests is disgusting. What is the solution? Apart from renovating old temples and building new ones, we have also to take the trouble of keeping them clean. Our public has to be vigorously educated in this.

As regards the priests, colleges for training them should be established and only such qualified priests should be employed in the temples with decent salaries.

### 20. What Every Hindu Ought to Do

After thus touching upon the glories, the maladies and the remedies of our religion and society let us now dilate a little upon what every Hindu ought to do, with himself, his family and the society.

The first and foremost thing that every Hindu ought to do is to cultivate tremendous faith in himself. Development of brawn and brain along with the conviction that we are essentially divine this is the way to achieve it.

Equally important is the nurturing of even greater faith in that Supreme power whose sparks we are. A reverent study of the lives and teachings of men of God is a great aid in this direction.

Next, we must have abundant *abhimana*, a sense of dignified pride that we are the descendants of the great Rishis of yore. Their wonderful achievements in various fields are our proud heritage. Let us be worthy of them, nay, let us try to excel them! It is here that a devout study of our scriptures helps us greatly. Every Hindu must at least be familiar with the Bhagavad Gita and the great characters of the two Epics.

Cultivation of the ten virtues listed under *yama and niyama* is a must.

The importance of silent meditation which calms the mind and soothes the nerves, cannot be over emphasised. Meditation is to be practised at least twice a day after learning about it from a proper preceptor.

The family is the fundamental unit of society. Again, the strength of the society and that of the family depends upon the character of the individuals who constitute them. Hence a very great responsibility is cast upon the head of the family. It is his duty to pay special attention to bring up the people under his care, especially on the moral and spiritual side. This can be achieved by his leading group meditations and chanting as also the observance of sacred festivals (with greater stress on the side of austerities) in his household. Occasional or regular visits to temples and pilgrimages to important Kshetras should also be undertaken.

Contact and cooperation with *Mathas, Ashramas* and other religious institutions is another essential thing. It is obvious that we can do better service if we work through an organisation. For the last thousand years or more, Dharma has been understood and practised only in its personal aspect to the exclusion of the social aspect. This has resulted in tragic developments such as (i) good and pious religious men joining hands with foreign aggressors without their religious conscience being in the least troubled; (ii) the performance of rites only with a view to acquiring personal religious merit without caring for its social effects; (iii) the wrong interpretation of the Shastras. Hence, every Hindu must remember this social aspect of our Dharma constantly and emphasise it as the supreme need of the hour.
Finally every Hindu has to cultivate equal respect for all other religions too, because Hinduism preaches that these also lead to the same goal. However, it goes without saying that his relationship with his own religion should be considered as very special.

21. Conclusion

Though religions are many, the Religion is only one. It is the Religion of Man. Man is essentially divine and not a sinner. The goat of all religions is to help him realise his inner divinity.

Hence the Hindu has no quarrel with anybody. He concedes that there can be as many paths as there are persons. Ultimately, every man has his own religion. What suits one may not and need not suit another. That is why he shows a remarkable spirit, not only of tolerance but even positive respect, towards other faiths. What has gone on for thousands of years can go on for thousands of years more.

However, when others attack his religion he has no option but to fight back, at least in self-defence. Some of the observations made in this booklet are to be understood only in this light. It is only to prove that none is perfect.

It is the duty of all religious groups to find out the areas of agreement and cooperate in them. Where we differ let us agree to differ honestly; let us live and let others also live peacefully. In fact, if all understand and practise the essence and the spirit of their own religions properly, peace will certainly reign on this earth!

Let us humbly pray for it!

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