

Hinduism is one of the major religions of the world with considerable antiquity and complexity. It is identified by its ancient scriptures called Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas and Epics, its iconography and temple culture visible in India and abroad. The popular epics Ramayana and Mahabharata attract interest all over the world for their thematic stories. Many books publicise the spiritual symbolism of these facets of Hinduism. Author of this book deviates from this general trend and analyses Hindu symbolism in the light of sociological perspectives and scientific parallels visible in the ever changing Indian society in the form of cultural expressions.



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Flipside of Hindu Symbolism

Sociological and scientific linkages in Hinduism



M.K.V. Narayan

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(Sociological and scientific linkages in Hinduism)

by

M.K.V. Narayan



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This book is dedicated to my late parents and
my wife late Rukmani
who inspired me on these thoughts.

Preface

Human brain is the most complex endowment of man. The physical brain has evolved over the last couple of million years to a still more complex entity we call 'Mind'. Human mind's perceptions of its environment and its sense of 'time' have created civilisations, philosophies and religions in the past. Man discovered the intricacies of his environment to create science and technology to enhance his quality of life. In the course of this creative process, human mind has taken the path of **symbolism** as an effective tool to express and investigate complex ideas. Symbolism is the association of a complicated idea with a simpler idea or an image. It is as old as the human mind itself. We think in terms of symbols and we speak in terms of symbols. We communicate our ideas and our concepts through symbols. Our languages themselves are strings of symbols put together in a specific format we call grammar to convey specific ideas. Speech itself is nothing but practiced vocalization of symbols. Symbolism has helped to formulate complex mathematical relationships which science has effectively adopted. While science and technology has helped to enhance the physical comforts of humankind cultural advancements have helped to enhance the emotional comforts of people. For most people the vehicle for cultural advancement has been religion. Symbolism and ritualism are central to all religions.

The prophets and preceptors of many world religions used symbolism. I am told that Moses and Jesus Christ had employed parables to convey their ideas. Aesop's Fables and *Panchatantra* tales of mid-first millennium BC were symbolic in their construct. As I am most familiar with Indian culture particularly Hinduism, I would like to analyse the thought process that might have gone into by our ancestors who created the Hindu culture in the form of its philosophies, mythological stories and cultural practices. Hinduism did not evolve in isolation but in relation with other world religions

of the West and the East. Man being the same everywhere his thoughts also had centred on similar rudimentary ideas. The difference between religions becomes superficial if we ignore their dogmas and assertions. All religions have speculated on creation, pre-life and after life of man and dos & don'ts of the respective societies. They all believe in some god or gods, follow some prophet or other for guidance, and rely on some scripture or other. They only express their conjecture differently. In doing so Hinduism has boldly and extensively used symbolism that has given it wide scope for expressing its imagery. When I refer scriptures as imagery, I do not belittle some of us who revere them as revealed truth. Their unquestioning faith keeps the wealth of traditions alive in the society for some others to ponder over in future.

In this book, I intend to bring out the symbolisms apparent or hidden in the ideas of Hindu mythology, rituals and cultural practices touching upon some visible parallel scientific thoughts of today. Though in this book I have concentrated on Hindu thoughts mainly, it does not mean that I claim superiority of Hindu culture in relation to any other culture or religion of the world. *Vedic* culture is often identified with the so-called *Aryan* religion. In fact, even if we take *Aryan* migration as probable, though many contest it, their exclusiveness ended with *Rig Veda* period historically. The indigenous influence started emphatically from the *Yajur Veda* period itself. While *Rig Veda* gives only a passing reference with negative attributes to *Rudra*, *Yajur Veda* gives much importance to *Rudra* with many sacrificial rituals offered to him. Later *puranic* and *Bhakti* type of Hinduism was largely indigenous albeit housed in the classical *Sanskrit* language.

Hinduism has a rich cultural heritage spanning the past four thousand years or more. In this long epoch starting from the *Vedic* times and its evolution through *Epic* and *Puranic* periods in a multi ethnic and multi linguistic setting, the religion had absorbed many changes and modifications to blossom into modern Hinduism. In the course of this cultural saga it has assembled many scriptures, some highly conceptual like *Upanishads* and some more corporeal literature of mythological stories and episodes. Many scholars have given *Vedanthic* and spiritual meanings to the allegorical mythology and rituals. Popular belief in rebirth and its ramifications have given

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credibility to the spiritual explanations of mythology and rituals. If we come out of the bonds of spiritual stance for a moment and approach these texts with some rationality we may get a glimpse of the social evolution of the thought process that have gone into the stories and practices. We may also perceive some brilliant correspondence of some of the themes to modern philosophy of science. These have been treated in this book.

The introduction of the book gives background information of the evolution of human mind in general and the ancient Indian mind in particular. It touches upon the socio-historical background in the past. Then the book proceeds to analyse the symbolism in Hindu god concepts, mythology, iconography, rituals, poojas & festivals. Separate chapters are included for marriage customs and temple architecture as they reflect the ancient ideas in contemporary India. As India is fast moving into modernity in this economic and political world, influence of religion and philosophy on other spheres of activity will be palpable and to some extent unavoidable. Hence, some unemotional understanding of the moorings of our culture will help to place ourselves on firm footing to face the modern world.

My wife, late Rukmani had inspired me on this line of thinking by her discussions on mythology and support before she passed away in 1989. My late parents had narrated to me many mythological stories and episodes, which I have used here. Therefore, I would like to dedicate this book to their memory. I acknowledge the help in the form of thematic ideas, constructive criticisms and editorial suggestions given by Dr. P.Desikan and Dr.Gopala Rao. Dr. P.Desikan, a scientist in chemistry, well versed in *Vedanta* lives in India. His own worldview on religion sharply differs from mine but still our minds understand each other. Dr.Gopala Rao is a medical physicist and environment scientist based in US. Dr. Rao has published a book on *Mysteries of Life and Mysteries of Nature*. Dr. Desikan also has published books and articles on *Vedantic* ideas. My children were supportive in the effort of mine. I have included bibliography of references at the end. I acknowledge the indirect contribution by these authors.

Introduction

Cat on the wall

The world is divided between believers and non-believers. There are some who believe in religion and some in science absolutely. A major part of the world population perhaps is in between. These **middle-of-the-road** (MOTR) walkers have some belief in some religion and in some god, unfolding from their family background, to satisfy their need to defuse anxieties about life and to draw strength from a power source to meet their difficulties in life. Simultaneously they carry on with their professional life under the banner of rational thinking in science and technology, economics or humanities. This dispersal is rather skewed as majority of the world population is poor and not accessible to higher education and therefore tend to be near the believers' end of MOTR walkers with a hope on divinity to salvage them from poverty. The demonstration effect of the developed world life style through the high impact of media today enhances their craving for better life. At the extreme ends of the spectrum, to the left or to the right, small groups of people, well to do in economic life and well educated and intelligent, indulge in the debate on science versus religion vehemently. Those at the extreme left consider themselves as atheists or agnostics and those at the extreme right claim that everything comes out of their religion and philosophy. Both may have some political agenda too.

Somewhere in the middle of this complex spectrum there are two groups of people whom I would like to call 'Wonderers'. These creatures do not take any sides but simply wonder at some intelligible perceptions in both religion and science or try to find connectivity. One of these two groups just wonders and leaves it as a mystery. The other group tries to speculate some connectivity to the best of their understanding. I think that I belong to this last category of wonderers, a daydreamer so to say. Hence, I venture to write this book on the

flipside of Hindu symbolism trying to fish out possible interpretations. As an MOTR walker, I do not intend to take sides and leave the spiritual interpretations of religion to spiritualists and sceptical views to agnostics. I would just touch upon some visible perceptions of the Hindu religious texts and Hindu religious practices of rituals, festivals and art expressions. I feel that this can better be done with the help of symbolism connected to sociological moorings and linkage to scientific ideas to specific aspects of Hindu thought. I came across a similar attempt by a scientist Dr. Paul A. La Violette, who says in his book on Egyptian mythology: ¹

“C.G. Jung has suggested that the striking similarities evident in myths from different cultures reflect the presence of universal motifs or archetypes embedded deep in the human psyche and arising from an impersonal collective unconscious expressed in myth through the language of metaphor. However, the specific sequences of images and events seen in the creation myths and esoteric lore examined here, metaphors sequenced in a certain logical order to portray complex scientific concepts is more appropriately attributed to the conscious than the unconscious mind.”

Dr. Paul deals extensively on the connectivity of scientific ideas such as quantum physics, closed and open systems, and ancient theory of ‘ether’ in space, and Order vs. Entropy theories with the symbolism embedded in Egyptian mythology. Following this idea, Hindu ancient thoughts reflected in the religious texts and mythical lore can be considered as the result of collective consciousness passed on from generation to generation first by word of mouth and later in written scriptures. If we believe in geological and anthropological science, the civilisations and concerted formation of major world religions started only after the end of last glaciations 11000 years back. It is very recent if we reckon in terms of number of generations rather than years. Only about 360 generations back the glaciations ended and agriculture was discovered. Only about 180 generations back the first civilisations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Indus Valley and China took shape. Only 86 generations back written script was in India. Only about 15 generations back modern science and technology appeared. A recent computer simulation study shows that about 150 generations back every one who lived on this planet earth was an ancestor in the family tree of every one of the 6.5 billion people living today.² There

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has been so much of inter migrations and inter mixing of populations in the old world. So all mythologies are interlinked and all sciences are interlinked. If every one of the hundred million people who lived 150 generations back were our ancestors, it is impossible to prove who originated which language, script, science, or philosophy. The later generations were only interpreting earlier common ideas.

Evolution of 'Extelligence'

Early humans (*Homo habilis*) became intelligent toolmakers in Africa about two million years back. Dolphins and parrots too are intelligent but they have no hands. Chimps and otters also can make tools intelligently like sticks and stones but they did not develop spoken language to communicate. Early humans (*Homo erectus*) became a nomad about a million and half years back and spread to Mediterranean Europe, South Asia and South East Asia. About hundred thousand years back humans (*Homo sapiens*) developed spoken language first by gestures and later by vocalisation of words. It was about 40 thousand years back when the real paradigm shift took place.³ It was when early man evolved a capability to express in symbolic language with specific words or pictures for things and actions understood by his clan members, referring to things not available for him to see, hear, smell, taste or feel. He could use words to describe past happenings and future expectations. Others understood these symbolic expressions and their brains saw the same picture as the speaker saw it in his own brain. Acquisition of such capability is evident in the pre-historic cave drawings and paintings in the Lascaux cave of France or the drawings in the Bhimbabataka caves of Northern India. When any humans saw these pictures, they could reconstruct in their brain the same action of hunting a boar or dancing in a camp just as the cave artist visualised. This was the beginning of portrayal of concepts through symbols by man that later took the form of words, spoken or written, still later to form a language of expression. It was the evolution of **symbolism**. It was the evolution of 'mind' within the physical brain.⁴

The 'mind' could express, formulate ideas, plan, reconstruct past happenings and visualise future happenings though not forecast it. Human mind made us conscious and self-conscious. The cave paintings of Europe and India and elsewhere were the beginning of

mythology. It was the beginning of evolution of human culture. Some call this as 'The Great Leap Forward'.⁵ In the next forty thousand years (1300 generations) the evolution of symbolism has taken leaps and bounds into literature, music, creative arts and high philosophy. The media of expression also have evolved rapidly from cave walls to parchments and palm leaves, or stone and clay etchings to books, electronic records and computers. It was a very rapid progress indeed. While it took a few hundred thousand years to develop speech, it was a matter of just two thousand years from parchment to computers. This exponential advance of the mind led to many cultural innovations from agriculture to machines and to aeroplanes and spacecraft in recent times. Another branch of advance was in religion and philosophy, which is our subject of study.

Symbolic language triggered cultural evolution of humans. With the help of symbolic language, man could extend his thinking beyond the present. While some species of the animal kingdom developed intelligence to survive, man developed '**Extelligence**' or extended intelligence to probe into his past and future.⁶ It is this extelligence that led to world religions, philosophical doctrines, mythologies, literature and art.

Conditioning of Indian mind

Conditioning of the Indian mind was highly influenced by the collective memories of the past generations shared by all the peoples of the early Europe, Middle East, East Asia and Central Asia as much as the minds of early Europe, East Asia, South East Asia shared the past collective memories of India. This is evident in the fact that mythologies of all these countries have similar form of stories of mythical flood, hell and heaven after life, ogres and demons, nature gods and above all some common codes of human ethics. Even the Babylonian flood stories of Middle East as well as the Indian flood story (*Pralaya*) of the *Puranas* are associated with fish. These collective memories of different peoples have come down through a few hundred generations by the word of mouth through language. Collective memories generate ideas or 'memes' that replicate through minds and travel through time within a generation as well as from generation to generation. This is called 'memetic evolution'. 'Memes'

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are analogous to 'genes' in their nature of replication and mutation. When genes mutate, biological changes take place in the species and major mutations cause creation of a different species. Similarly, when memes mutate, cultural changes take place in a society and major mutations cause creation of separate cults or religions. A kind of meme named as 'virus of the mind'⁷ spreads from mind to mind very fast. In genetics, virus is defined as a sort of bacteria, which uses other living cells to spread its genes. It rides piggyback on cells and ensures its own replication. Similarly, a mind virus also spreads its existence to other minds through other more attractive memes. A classic example is modern advertisements. We see a new model car advertised with a picture of an attractive girl. Though there is no connection between the girl and the car, the advertisement catches our attention and we remember that model of car to buy. It works like a Trojan horse. The virus of salesmanship of the car brand enters our mind through the more attractive meme of calendar girl's picture. It is called 'pushing the sex buttons to sell the brand'. Repeated pushing of the button by advertising compels the buyer's mind to go for that brand when he wants a car. Such pushing of buttons to sell is widely used in religion too. Evangelist's proselytizing saying, "*Jesus saves you from sins*" is pushing the danger buttons to influence towards conversion. In Hinduism also, as in other world religions, the 'crisis' buttons were skilfully pushed by the religious preachers to sell their doctrines. – "*If you want to be reborn from a lower caste to a higher caste in your next birth (janma) you give donations (Dana) to priests*".

Coming to the Indian mind, we should consider the difference in perception of a western mind with respect to an eastern mind. The following extract from a Wall Street Journal article states:

"The cognitive differences start with basic sensory perception. In one study, Michigan's Taka Masuda showed Japanese and American students pictures of aquariums containing one big fast-moving fish, several other finned swimmers, plants, rock and bubbles. What did the students recall? The Japanese spontaneously remembered 60% more background elements than did the Americans. They also referred twice as often to relationships involving background objects ("the little frog was above the pink rock")... "Westerners and Asians literally see different worlds," says Prof. Nisbett. "Westerners pay attention to the focal object, while

Asians attend more broadly -- to the overall surroundings and to the relations between the object and the field." These generalizations seem to hold even though Eastern and Western countries each represent many different cultures and traditions." ⁸

A western mind sees a focussed perception of things whereas an eastern mind sees the totality of the picture with the background facts. What could be the reason for this? Our brain reconstructs the nets from memory to match the nets of sensory stimuli. When our eyes see a picture, many visual inputs are entering the eyes including the objects and their surroundings. Our brain filters these pictures to select the most relevant nets and hides the rest. This filtered net is conveyed to the brain, which does the job of matching it with the known memory net. Then recognition and identification follows to give the final perception. This means that the final perception much depends on the available memory nets in the brain accumulated from childhood. In other words, the perception is dependent of the accumulated memory, which in turn depends of the society the individual lives in⁹. The difference between the perception of the western mind, and the eastern mind can be attributable, I feel, to the difference in population density between eastern countries and the western countries and its diversity. Most of the cities of Asia are crowded compared to the West particularly America. In a milieu of denser population, one has to consider a wider focus of perception to survive and to let others survive. In India particularly the very high diversity of mixed cultures due to past invasions, migrations and assimilations the need to recognise and live with varying perceptions has made the Indian mind wide focused. This has influenced the religious doctrines, philosophical ideas and social practices too.

Hindu Scriptures

Hindu scriptures are voluminous and in many forms. The oldest are *Vedic* texts. *Rig Veda* is the oldest and is an anthology of subjective concepts about nature and sacrificial rites as practiced some four thousand years back. The anthology consists of separate individually complete hymns, 1028 in number each with about ten verses (*slokas*)¹⁰. Starting from *Rig Veda* the *Vedic* literature comprise later texts *Sama Veda*, *Yajur Veda* and *Atharva Veda* together called *Samhitas*, commentaries on *Samhitas* called *Brahmanas* and *Aranyakas*

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as well as still later philosophical treatises called *Upanishads*. In all these texts, symbolism was used as parables and examples to illustrate ideas, but it was from the much later *puranic* literature, symbolism took the form of story telling. *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and all the *Mahapuranas* composed in the mid first millennium BC and after, highly relied on mythological stories to emphasise *Vedic* and post-*Vedic* concepts. Many of these stories incorporated folk lore of the *pre-Vedic* tribes of India. It was in this time that oral versions of scriptures were put to writing as and when *Prakrit* and *Devanagari* scripts evolved. Earlier oral compositions were kept alive for hundreds of years with astonishing fidelity by a unique system of recitation called *guru kula* system. These developments took place not only in Hinduism but also in Jainism and Buddhism. By this story telling method of propagating religious concepts, Buddhism and Hinduism were competing with each other. Hinduism was preaching the importance of orthodoxy and Buddhism was dealing with pragmatism and middle path. While Hinduism succeeded in establishing wide following in India by this, Buddhism spread to outside India. *Ithihasas* and *Puranas* composed between mid-first millennium BC to late first millennium AD contain innumerable stories and concepts which influenced Hindu practices and rituals in later years till modern times. They however went through modifications, additions and deletions to suit the contemporary social changes.

The change over from the *Vedic* ritualism of nature gods and sacrificial form of worship to philosophical inquiry leading further to *puranic pooja* form of worship was due to a subtle intellectual movement against *Vedic* ritualism that took place from 6th century BC. This subtle movement took the form of reformatory compositions of doctrines of *Upanishads*, *Buddhist* scriptures, and *Jaina* scriptures. An interesting extract from a book by Jayant Gadkari¹¹ goes like this:

“We may start with a general statement that what ever may be the nature of these philosophical thoughts, whether spiritual or materialistic, whether theist or atheist, they were all directed against the yajna sacrifice system involving excessive slaughter of animals and endless burning of dairy produces and the resulting impoverishment of the masses. They were also motivated against the continuous warfare between kings and oligarchies for supremacy and

power and the resulting violence and carnage. Still more important was the need to bring the heterogeneous people from different tribes and clans, at different stages of development, under the flag of common beliefs, faiths and moral codes for peaceful functioning of the territorial society. The visionaries desired to put forward universal concepts and faiths, transcending the barriers of tribalism and localism, unconnected with the traditional rituals of diverse communities. The Indian constitution (of today) may be described as the twentieth century version of this desire to universalise concepts and faiths."

We can perceive the strains of these thought processes in the mythologies, *poojas* and festivals, modern religious rituals, marriage customs, temples and practices of worship. We can also perceive some relevance of these thought processes to the parallel system of scientific thought process that forms the basis of today's science and technology. I believe that human brain uses the same logical lines to contemplate either religious doctrines or scientific doctrines to arrive at some conclusions. The only difference is that in science observations and measurements form the basis on which further logic is applied whereas in religion and philosophy intuitive axioms are used to build up further logical conclusions. We should consider that western success of modern science and technology is a recent phenomenon, just 10 to 15 generations old. During this period, India was under many feudatories centrally controlled by either Mogul rule or British colonial rule. Scientific adventurism could not have survived under such circumstances.

This book

This book is an attempt to correlate the ideas expressed in the foregoing paragraphs about the nature of mind in general and the Indian mind in particular with modern Hinduism. I intend to visualise the ancient collective thoughts from the available sources to day and to analyse the Hindu scriptures and modern religious practices, to find patterns, connectivity and linkage with social changes and contemporary scientific ideas. Swami Swahananda¹² in his book on Symbology says:

"Of all religions, it is Hinduism that has consciously and boldly accepted symbolism. Other religions of Indian origin have also

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done that. According to Hindu philosophy, the divine has both personal and impersonal aspects. Symbols of the personal aspects satisfy philosophic sense of the devotee, yet make easy the grasping of the absolute."

After introducing the line of approach used in the analysis of Hinduism I venture to analyse in the chapters each aspect of contemporary Hinduism as perceptible in the sense of impersonal symbolisms. Philosophical and spiritual symbolisms are kept out in this presentation. The first chapter examines the concept of god in India as it has evolved. It further goes into the stages of evolution of different godheads over time with symbolism as the vertebral support of conceptualisation. The complexity of Indian religious perception with many gods and goddesses in the scene has been discussed. The next two chapters deal with examples of *Vaishnavite* and *Shaivite* mythological stories indicating inherent symbolism. Hindu iconography is highly developed over many centuries. This forms the theme of the next chapter. Two chapters are earmarked for discussion on the details of some popular rituals, *poojas* and festivals in vogue now. Some of the customs have come to exist as a symbolic expression of age-old beliefs and developments though they may not have relevance now. There after, different marriage customs of India have been presented with the same analytical treatment. Marriage traditions followed today have connections to past social scenarios. The temple culture in India is now highly popular and displays many artistic expressions in architecture, ritualistic expressions and forms. The underlying symbolisms have been brought out with a questioning attitude of why and how. Positive and negative influences of temple culture on society are briefly dealt with. Music is inseparably inter-twined with Hindu religious practices. The penultimate chapter discusses this in some detail. Finally, various symbolisms and connectivity dealt in the chapters are summarised in the concluding chapter. The relevance of these symbolisms to the changing social structure of India has been discussed with a prognostic approach.

Indian history is complicated and obscure. There is no authentic documentation of the incidents of the past prior to the middle of first millennium BC. Archaeological evidences are also scarce and ambiguous. Western intellectuals had cobbled up a history

based on their understanding of the religious texts in *Sanskrit* through Indian priests with the knowledge of the language. This history is riddled with controversies over past migrations and time lines. Therefore, I have tried to keep clear of these controversies. However, for the sake of reference lines, the dates I have used for some past connectivity are from sources generally agreed in the apolitical circles. They may appear contestable to some readers. In many places, I have used the word 'Orthodoxy' instead of 'Brahmanism' or 'Aryanism' for obvious reasons of avoiding debatable assertions. Similarly, many negative aspects of the Indian past such as hierarchy of castes, untouchability, minority religions, and status of women are only touched upon in the passing where it is not possible to avoid reference. Opinions may vary sharply on these points. The purpose of this book is only to bring to focus certain patterns and linkages as I see them as relevant. Readers may either accept or reject the points expressed.

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