



Neo-Hinduism: Religio-Cultural Perspectives in Contemporary India

Umesh Kumar Khute

Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, INDIA
ukkh2009science@gmail.com

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Abstract

There is no any specific definition for Hinduism; it is something what we practice in our everyday life. From a historical point of view the tradition has travelled through various transitions, like Vedic set-up of society, Pauranic set-up of society, early medieval, medieval, and colonial and then post colonial. Each and every time has its own social and cultural set-ups through which a society moves in the journey of time. From ancient and medieval times the social order and hierarchies were much tough and strong, maximum social norms and values were directly devised on the basis of religious beliefs. But in the 21st century with introduction of universal laws of equality and emergence of modern state craft has brought various changes in our society. The main objective of this paper is to observe i. the effects of modern state craft and law over the traditional Hindu social structure, ii. to analyze and understand the notion of social mobility in respect to the notion of Hinduism, iii. to identify the effects of modern socio-economic dynamics over the ancient religious and social institutions iv. to see and observe the emergence of Neo-Hinduism as a product of negotiations between the inter and intra socio-cultural traditions. There is no doubt that still we are in the phase of social transition and the need of the time is to understand the means and mode of this transition. As earlier our social norms were govern by religions, right now it is by the national and international economic forces. Everything has been come under the relation of profit and loss and it is pathetic for our society because somewhere religions also talk about the morals and social responsibility but the economic forces only creates space for markets and raw materials.

Keywords: Hinduism, Neo-Hinduism, Social mobility, tradition and transformation.

Introduction

The understanding of Hinduism in contemporary India is really a challenge for Historians, Sociologists and as well as for social thinkers because, for each of disciplines the term Hinduism stands for different form, structure, traits. For many scholars the term Hinduism in itself is an attempt to project a consolidate religion while others believe that it is the association of various minor religious traditions which existed within a pan Indian structure.

Religion is the social product of time it has various direct and indirect functions, sometimes it works at conscious level and sometimes at sub-conscious levels. In the ancient times when the production and protection of surplus was the core to social relations at this time the notions of ethics and morality occupied space through the parallel propagation of religion. If we see the early forms of world religions either Christianity or Islam what they have done is to bring people together for a common cause and enhances a cultural wheel under which the individual behaviours and certain norms of social restriction were framed.

In relation to Hinduism we can see and observe the long run of changes and its transformations. It is believe that the earlier societies were mainly organized and regulated by the religious institutions or by the gurus, and for their personnel benefit they

followed various traditional and orthodox practices basically to sustain over the power.

If we see the sociology of religions particularly Hinduism then we would find that how it has evolved through various socio-historical processes and now it had reached at a new understanding with some supra-local qualities.

To sustain with the changing world Hinduism has also adopted and absorbed some universal elements of modern thoughts so that it could reinterpret itself towards more egalitarian society. They key terms like *Sanātan dharma*, *Satya*, *Brahma*, *Samskar*, *Varnashram dharma*, *Yoga and Karma* are being applying over society in completely different ways.

The term neo-Hinduism have been used among the social scientists and we can trace its roots from the time of nineteenth century when modern thinkers and social reformers had call for the change in the society because they knew that until there would be positive change in and at religious levels there would be no gain or effective results at social levels. In the list of early social reformers we can talk about *Raja Rammohan Roy*, *Swami Dayanand Saraswati*, and *Vivekananda* etc.

Tradition and transformation: In this section we will try to probe about our first questions that how the emergence of

modern state craft and law has made effect over the traditional Hindu social structure. As we know that that India has suffered a lot from the devils of colonialism, there was a long struggle for independence from the foreign rule. During this two hundred years of foreign rule various kinds of changes has taken place either on social frame or on economical and political frame.

Due to this foreign rule in India modern European thoughts and Ideas were gradually implanted and cultivated among the Indian intelligentsia. Western thoughts and practice have eventually exercised a profound influence on the thought and practices of Indian people. The Influence of west has been making itself felt in various ways there is first of all that influence which has come from side of religion, the religion which the westerns has brought with him in a universal religion while Hindu as National¹.

Now when we discuss about the tradition and transformation in tradition then first of all we have to understand the meaning of tradition. Tradition is something which derives from our life long experience of past and governing our lives at present either knowingly or unknowingly, and through the elements and traits of tradition one society makes significant difference from the other society. As far the consideration of elements of tradition we can think about the social codes of conduct of a particular society which is being accepted without any questioning. In the same line of discussion Hobbes argued that nature, man and society all should be explained in terms of motion, man is one creature who likes other creature and physical objects, is always moving he is engaged in incessant activity in order to construct a complex society².

As we have mentioned that coming of colonialism to India brought various new things which made an impact over the traditional values and thoughts. The powerful set of influence has come along the lines of science, literature, and what we want of a better term we may call culture¹. What the basic thing they implanted over India is the concept of modern state and law which operates on the ideology European notion of justice and equality for all. Earlier Indian society was divided over the caste and other social hierarchies and other orthodox ritual practices.

Gradually the seeds of transformation blooms over the period now days with the coming of globalization and free market economy the traditional values and so called norms of societies are being changing. So the basic question here is that what the elements were in the past which leads us to this traditional transformation and where we are going.

Through the prism of religion we see it better because as we know religion is also changing within society due to gradual change at socio economic domains of society. Earlier, it means before the coming of modern state craft structure it was different after the European intervention it also experienced change and

now in the age of globalization due to strong market forces we can still observes another kind of change.

Notion of social mobility and Hinduism: Social mobility is the best view point to observe the freedom of society because through the angle of social mobility we can easily judged a society that how much social freedom and restriction is working within the paradigm of society. As we know that Hindu society was earlier divided on the basis of caste and it has been readout by the scholars that it is/was a occupation bound practices which can and should not be broken in any terms. The Idea of 'union' on which Hindu society was constituted and the attempt to establish the social productive system on the basis of family or caste occupation was newer fully realised in practice³.

So due to the boundation of caste a social hierarchy was created in Indian society and as a result of it the process of social mobility was blocked completely. But the major question is again the old debate that is caste system defines Hinduism and if it is then with the process of social reforms caste was challenged in many ways, and another thing is that in modern days as results of these social reforms at some extant we have eliminated the caste problem but not the caste identity. If we think that the notion of caste has been changing in various ways then is it due to the change in the genetics of Hinduism or it is a result of more open society which is operating on the profit relations.

We all know that as the process of historical journey of time Hinduism is also changing according to modern needs and demands if it will not then it will not sustain, and in another way we can also argue that due to the flexibility of its nature it is still existing. But at one level we have to accept that social mobility or the social freedom to get a position in society without any restriction is now not operating through the markers of religion or we can say that Hinduism due to challenges from the Islam and Christianity has evolved himself more smartly.

Effects of modern socio-economic factors over older religious Institutions: Due to the coming closer of nation sates and liberal international boundaries trade and market forces has evolved themselves in such a way that religious identities are matter of nothing. The Age of computer technology and space walk has completely changed the understanding of religion in early days it was basically a social matter but now days is completely personnel, anybody can fallow any religion there is full freedom over choice and this freedom has given a transformation to each religion. Now a days each and every religious organization is trying to show himself more rational more scientific and more egalitarian.

Human development at the scientific front has completely changed the religious Institution but another way it has increased the level of competition among the religious institutions and organizations.

From another point of view we can also observe a kind of revival within the religions so that it could be accepted among the masses without any pre-conditions and prepositions.

Emergence of Neo-Hinduism: There are many definitions for the term Neo-Hinduism some call it an organized form of Hinduism for better propagation at mass level some call it restructured Hinduism to sustain in modern worlds or it also seen as Hindu reform movement by the western stimulations. We can start it from the certain religious figures the most notable of who was *Kabir* in whom we see the binding elements taken from the Hindu and Mohammad religions, but the meeting of the adherent of the two religions has not usually led to such results¹.

The Neo- Hinduism is a form of newly constructed and reformulated form of Hinduism, there were many exponents who has given their lots of efforts for the modernization of old Hinduism. Various scholars have also reformulated the meanings of *Bhagwat Gita* in order to keep a pace between the old traditional religious norms and modern understanding like the central teaching of the Gita can be beautifully summarised in this sentence of Annie Basent “it meant to lift the aspirant from the lover level of renunciation, where objects are renounced, to the loftier heights where desires are dead, and where the Yogi dwells in calm and ceaseless contemplation, while his body and mind are actively employed in discharging the duties that fall to his lot in life”⁴. In the list of these exponents we can talk about

Raja Rammohan Roy, Swami Dayananda Sarswati, Swami Vivekananda, etc.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Hinduism has accepted the modern trends and given various freedoms to its old followers so that they could cop up with the new socio-psychological demands. At cultural levels there is now nothing as a distinctive culture everything has mixed with the texture of international supply and demands.

Religion and society are inseparable to each other that are why when society will experience any kind of change it will also make effect over the genetics of religion and it's vice versa.

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