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Chapter I

BELIEFS

THE complexity of Hinduism is so great, the forms which it assumes are so protean, that it defies precise definition. It is a composite religion made up of many conflicting elements; at the same time it is a social system, of which the basis is caste. It is the product of many centuries of growth and compromise, during which such widely divergent beliefs as pantheism, theism, polytheism, and animism have received recognition. It has neither a common creed nor uniformity of worship. It knows little of dogma; it acknowledges no stereotyped and unchanging canons. It allows of the greatest possible freedom of thought as apart from practice, as is frankly admitted by Hindu scholars. "Hinduism", wrote one, "includes all shades of faiths—monotheism, pantheism, agnosticism, atheism, polytheism, and fetishism. So long as a Hindu conforms to the customs and practices of his society, he may believe what he likes."¹ Similarly Professor Radhakrishnan points out that Hinduism is more a way of life than a form of thought. "While it gives

¹ P. N. Basu, *Hindu Civilization under British Rule* (1894), vol. 1, p. 87.

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absolute liberty in the world of thought, it enjoins a strict code of practice. The theist and the atheist, the sceptic and the agnostic may all be Hindus if they accept the Hindu system of culture and life." "What counts is conduct, not belief."¹

Considered purely as a religion, i.e. without reference to its social organization, Hinduism may be described as a conglomerate of cults and creeds. The non-Aryan tribes who were admitted to the fold of Hinduism and the Hindus of Aryan descent reacted on one another, the former adopting the rites and customs of their conquerors, while the latter assimilated some of their less civilized cults and incorporated in their system the objects of popular devotion. The higher and lower forms of religion still coexist side by side. At one end of the scale, therefore, is the cultured monotheist or the eclectic pantheist for whom no mysticism is too subtle. Pantheists actually form a small minority, and the great majority of Hindus are theists believing in one personal god, though they are at the same time polytheistic in their religious observances. At the bottom of the scale is a great multitude of people in a low state of religious development, some of whom have scarcely risen above mere fetishism.

The essence of the higher Hinduism is pantheism, the belief in the unity of being. According to this, everything that exists is Brahma, the

¹ *The Hindu View of Life* (1931), pp. 38, 77.

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Absolute and Eternal, the Supreme Spirit which pervades the universe, and is the soul of all, of man as well as of the world at large—an idea which is expressed in the famous passage in Pope's *Essay on Man*:

All are but parts of one stupendous whole,
Whose body nature is and God the soul,
That, changed through all, and yet in all the same,
Great in the earth as in the ethereal frame. . .
Lives through all life, extends through all extent,
Spreads undivided, operates unspent. . .
To him no high, no low, no great, no small;
He fills, he bounds, connects and equals all.

So instinct are these lines with the spirit of pantheism that a learned Brahman, hearing them for the first time, started from his seat and asked for a copy of them, saying that the author must have been a Hindu.¹ Enlightened Hindus themselves summarize their pantheistic belief in a saying that knowledge of eternal truth belongs to those, and only those, who see but One in the manifold changes of the universe.

With this system of religious philosophy has grown up a belief in a triad of gods, the first and highest manifestations of, or emanations from, the universal spirit, viz. Brahmā,² Vishnu and

¹ W. Ward, *View of the History, Literature and Mythology of the Hindoos*, vol. 1, Introd. p. lvii.

² The accented *ā* distinguishes this god from the neuter Brahma (with no accent), meaning the Infinite, Absolute and Eternal.

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Siva, who together symbolize the creation, preservation, dissolution and renewal of the world. Brahmā is the creator, Vishnu is the preserver, and Siva or Mahadeva (Mahadeo), meaning the great god, is the destroyer; but the last stands for reproduction as well as dissolution, for there is an endless series of births, deaths and rebirths, so that death is the portal to new life and destruction involves renewal.

The more thoughtful believe that the Supreme Spirit is immanent both in the world and in the souls of men, but the great majority do not look beyond a personal god to an impersonal spirit. The personal god is conceived of as Vishnu or Siva; Brahmā, having finished the work of creation, is no longer an active force. His work is done, and there is nothing to hope or fear from him. There are not half a dozen temples dedicated to him in all India, and his name is seldom heard. Actually, therefore, the belief in a triad is not operative. Owing to the elimination of Brahmā, Siva and Vishnu reign alone, and both Saivas and Vaishnavas claim their particular god as the Supreme Being with the attributes both of a creator and a redeemer. It was the part of Vishnu, as maintainer and preserver of the universe, to deliver it from the power of evil, and for this purpose he revealed himself from time to time as an Avatar or incarnation in human form, for example as Rama and Krishna. Originally perhaps he was re-

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garded as the saviour of men from evil spirits and demons, but this conception was sublimated by thought and given a higher meaning. It was held that the god incarnated himself in human form in order to maintain righteousness. Rama is thus said to have been sent so that he might establish a reign of righteousness, and Krishna announces in the *Bhagavata Gita* "As often as virtue declines or vice increases, I create myself anew, and thus I appear from age to age for the preservation of the just, the destruction of the wicked, and the establishment of virtue".

Although Siva and Vishnu were left supreme, they were not left alone, for the subtle minds of the Brahmans proceeded to give them female consorts, as well as to Brahmā. The consort of Brahmā is Sarasvati; that of Siva is known variously as Uma, Parvati, Bhavani, Durga, and Kali; that of Vishnu is Lakshmi. The union of a god with a goddess is given mystical meanings. Spirit is regarded as a male principle and matter as a female principle, and their union is necessary for creation. The god and his consort are said to typify the sources of reproduction in which male and female are united, and to be symbols of a single divine power with male and female aspects. A more general explanation is that a deity has a dual nature, one quiescent and the other active, and the active power, which is known as *Sakti* and is described as the "female

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energy” of the god, is personified and regarded as his wife. An idea of the mystical nature of, and the attributes ascribed to, *Sakti* may be gathered from a description given by a Brahman who abandoned Hinduism and became a Unitarian: “In the beginning there was *Sakti* or Power. It is somewhat parallel with St John’s ‘In the beginning was the Word’. This Power was like the Word of the Evangelist, a term of broadest import, including power in all its elements, creative, sustaining, redeeming, sanctifying, destroying—in short, denoting the whole substance of God, or it was God.”¹

Whatever may be the genesis of the idea, there is no question that the goddesses are regarded not as impersonal abstractions of power, but as personal deities. As such they make a peculiar appeal to the minds of Hindus. The lower classes regard them as powerful to curse as well as to bless; but the more intellectual look on them as divine mothers, whom their worshippers can approach as children do their mothers, and to whom they can give a selfless love.

The process of deification did not stop here. Lesser gods and goddesses were added in ever growing numbers till there was a crowd of deities, many of them adopted from the more primitive peoples who were admitted to Hinduism with

¹ J. C. Gangooly, *Life and Religion of the Hindoos* (1860), p. 258.

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the gods whom they worshipped. The total number of deities is said to be 33 crores, i.e. 330 millions, which, like the phrase "Their name is legion", merely implies an innumerable host. In many parts of the country the minor gods receive as much or even more reverence than the major gods. Hanuman, the monkey-god, for example, is extremely popular, under the name of Maruti, in the Deccan, and Subrahmanya, a son of Siva (also called Skanda and Karttikeya), in Madras. To the more advanced thinkers a plurality of gods does not necessarily involve polytheism, for they are regarded not as separate deities, but as manifestations of one and the same God. God is one, but his aspects are many. He appears in many forms, and it is a case not of a multiplicity of gods but of the multiformity of one God. The unintellectual, however, are less discriminating and look on each and every god or goddess as a separate being.

Among the few distinguishing central concepts of Hinduism are the beliefs in *Karma* and the transmigration of souls. The soul survives the disintegration of the body and is an enduring essence, which passes through a succession of existences numbering, it is said, 84 lakhs, i.e. 8,400,000, and extending from material substances, like rocks, stones, etc., to vegetable, animal and human life. A man's state in any particular life is determined by actions (*Karma*) in

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previous lives. As he sows, so shall he reap, or, to quote a Hindu saying, "the body is the field, the soul is the cultivator; virtue and vice are seeds, and the soul must reap as it sows". This is an inexorable law, the working of cause and effect.¹ If there is a balance of good to a man's credit, he gets the benefit of it by being reborn on a higher plane. If he has given himself up to wickedness, he sinks lower at rebirth. Each man lays up a stock of good and bad deeds and, so to speak, accumulates moral capital. The debit of vice can be wiped out by the credit of virtue, and men may thus rise on stepping stones of their dead selves to higher things.

This belief may be described as a working hypothesis of the riddle of existence. It explains the patent inequalities and enigmas of life, the fact that one man is born to honour, another to dishonour, that the wicked so often flourish and the good have to endure misery and suffering. In one respect it may be regarded as a pessimistic doctrine, for a man's present is fashioned by a past of which he has no memory or knowledge, and no effort of his can improve it. It has, on the other hand, elements of optimism, for a man can rise to a better state in future lives by

¹ "The fixed arithmic of the Universe . . .

Watchful, aware, implacable, unmoved,

Making all futures fruits of all the pasts."

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virtuous conduct. In this sense he is the architect of his fortunes and master of his fate.

According to the pantheistic doctrine emancipation from the long chain of existences is finally obtained when the human soul loses its individual existence by being united with and merged in the Universal Spirit from which everything came and to which everything will eventually return. "The soul enchained", said a modern teacher of Vedantism, Ramakrishna Paramhansa (1834–86), "is man; free from chains, it is God. . . . As a piece of lead, thrown into a basin of mercury, is soon dissolved therein, so the human soul loses its individual existence when it falls into the ocean of Brahma."¹ Other Hindus, however, hold that while salvation consists in the union of the soul with God, it does not lose its identity. Spiritual beatitude and release from rebirths are obtained not by the soul's reabsorption in the Supreme Spirit, but by its communion with God, whether conceived of as Brahmā or as Siva or as Vishnu.

There are three ways by which this consummation may be reached. The first is the way of knowledge (*Jnana-marga*), which consists mainly of meditation on the divine spirit, through which spiritual knowledge of it is obtained. The second is the way of works (*Karma-marga*), which in-

¹ F. Max Müller, *Ramakrishna: His Life and Sayings* (1898), p. 145.

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cludes not only right action or righteous conduct, but also the performance of religious rites, austerities and other acts conferring religious merit. The third way is *Bhakti-marga*, which means ardent faith in and devotion to a personal god, who is generally conceived of as an incarnation of divinity, such as Rama or Krishna. All three help to bring the soul into communion with God by freeing it from obsession by the senses and from entanglement by the fleeting interests of this life. True knowledge of God, it has been said, is ultimately the same as love of God, and both necessarily result in the surrender of the self to divine influence and bear fruit in virtue and righteous conduct.

Together with the belief in metempsychosis there is a popular belief in heavens and hells to which the souls of the good and wicked pass after death. The soul has first to cross the river of death, a river of blood and filth, which separates the earth from the realm of Yama, the god of the dead. To ensure a safe passage a cow is often brought into the death chamber and its tail placed in the hand of the dying man, though this will be ineffectual unless the cow is given away afterwards to the Brahmans. If a cow cannot be got into the room, or if the commotion would be too much for the dying man, or if he is not strong enough to hold its tail, a rope is put into his hand, the other end