

Symbolic Aspects of Hinduism by A.C.Sekhar

Hinduism though popularly considered as a religion. is really a way of life based on the oldest religion "Sanathan Dharma"

Unlike many other religions Hinduism has emerged not from the teachings of one single individual, but from the collective wisdom of several sages with one of the basic concepts that Creator and Creation are one and the same and inter convertible, which concept alone distinguishes itself from all other religions. In order to transmit the content of the wisdom of the sages to the common people to enable them to realise the truth of ULTIMATE REALITY and lead a quality life, as in the quests of modern Science and Technology, they conceived several symbolic objects, events, and rituals of convenient access to ordinary human beings. Considering that the human form is the best and the highest form of Creation, and that all activities of Nature existing in the Universe are self-contained in this form, they narrated also stories (Itihasas) which were easily understood and accepted even with some reverence by the common people.

Thus the human power of creation, creating anything new, which requires some knowledge is symbolised in the form of 'Brahma' with knowledge personified in his consort as 'Saraswathi'; 'Vishnu' with the aid of required wealth personified in 'Laksmi' is the human power of preservation; 'Shiva' with the aid of required capacity (Shakti) personified in 'Parvati' is the power of destruction or constructive change from the original to a new form or from one to another form of creation.

The seven horses of the Sun God suggest symbolically the seven colours of the rainbow in the sky, or those of the spectrum from the white light. Whether Rama of Ramayana and Krishna of Mahabharata existed as we were told or not they symbolise the expected qualities in the best of human beings. It is a common saying "Live like Rama and learn from Krishna" though these two 'gods' had somewhat diametrically opposite situations in their life stories.

The ten Avatharas or incarnations of God in the Hindu mythology seem to be symbolic of the theory of evolution, from 'Matsyavatar' to 'Kalikavatar' the gradual evolution of life as it first started in water, then gradually on land, and finally to the present day state of Man. They also symbolise the developing stages of spiritual path to perfection. The stories associated with each incarnation seem to suggest symbolically the energy levels in the life form of the particular incarnation or time period.

There are several other deities symbolic of the highest of the required qualities in human beings themselves. Similarly there are several auspicious events such as Makara Sankranti, Shivratri, Diwali, and several objects and logos like many idols, Swastik, OM, etc. symbolic of disciplines and concentration required for proper orientation of human MIND which has been recognised as the centre of all activities in this Universe. Thus the entire Hinduism seems to suggest a symbolic character of all that modern Science has revealed and is still revealing of our Universe.

Other religions also have symbols of their own; for example, the 'Dharma Chakra' or 'Wheel of Laws' in Buddhism is symbolic of duties in life; the five 'Kakas' together with a dagger and a shield in Sikhism are symbolic of valour and defence of Faith; the Cross in Christianity is a symbol of sacrifice and love; the Menorah of Judaism with seven lights is a symbol of God's creation of this world in seven days rotation; the Cauldron of Fire is a symbol of purity in Zoroastrianism etc. More details of these will be available in Swami Harshananda's book on 'Principal symbols of World Religion'. Some Hindu missionary organisations like Ramkrishna Mission, Chinmaya Mission are making deeper studies of these aspects Chinmaya Mission has brought out a book entitled

'Symbolism in Hinduism' in which several contributors have brought out lot of new ideas on symbolic character of various aspects of Hinduism. A deeper study of these aspects particularly in relation with modern Science and Technology will greatly help to follow an appropriate direction in our study of religion and in the progress of human beings in the new millenium.