CHAPTER – II
GANDHI’S CONCEPT OF HINDUISM

The word religion comes from a Latin word ‘religare’. It’s meaning is ‘to bind again’. This meaning is similar to the meaning given at times to the word Yoga, to unify (or) to join. But the Latin etymology is not clear. In India the most popular term for religion is Dharma. It is derived from the Sanskrit root ‘dir’ that means ‘to support’ (or) to hold.

No one definition of religion seems comprehensive enough to include all the elements which appear generally as the structures of religion. One can analyze some of these elements under three main headings, each conveniently labeled with 3-C i.e. Creed, Code and Cult (or) the doctrinal frame work of religion.

The three elements of religion enumerated above are found in many forms and in various proportions in all serious religions. They may be said to correspond to the head (creed), hand (code) and heart (cult) of man. Thus in Hinduism they may be found under the forms of the Jnanamarga, the Karmamarga and the bhaktimarga.

**Creed** : Every religion is a philosophy of life. It has a set of presuppositions and of specific teachings that form a more or less consistent whole. They teach generally about the origin and the final destiny and the purpose of the universe.

**Code** : Religion is generally associated with a code of morality. Religious teaching includes definitive rules and obligations of men not only at the level of worship and rituals, but more importantly at the level of family and social life. This aspect of religion is very prominent in the Indian word Dharma, which may be broadly translated as ‘duty’.
Cult: Under this word one can include another aspect of man’s religiosity. His various attempts to establish an actual relationship with the ultimate pole of attraction, the Holy. This actual relationship is what gives meaning and value to the religious traditions. The cult may be at the level of external rituals: various forms of prayer and rites are customary or are even prescribed for a person or a group as means of establishing the contact with the divine. It is easy to condemn all rites as empty ritualism, as a pretense of religion where the heart is not found, and indeed many prophets of various religions have condemned this kind of formalism.

Classification of Religions: Among many classifications of types or religions, there are two most important basic types the Prophetic religions and the Wisdom religions, at times also called the extrovert and the introvert.

The Prophetic Religions (Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Islam) stress the transcendence, the beyondness of the religious pole of attraction. The typical religious figure is here the prophet, who speaks in the name of God bringing his word which is both teaching and command. In prophetic religion God’s word comes to man who is sent on a mission to build up to reform the world. Man’s involvement in the world and its history enters into the call that comes through the prophet. The relationship of the believer to the religious pole is interpersonal and supposes some form of metaphysical dualism.

The Wisdom Religions (Hinduism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Jainism) stress the immanence or the witness of the divine, rather than transcendence. They aim at enlightenment of the seeker whereby his whole life is lifted to a higher plane. They stress the personal inner experience of a higher state of consciousness as the essential element
of religion. Wisdom religions tend to a unitarian, even monistic view of the Universe. Sikhism probably has a fairly balanced composition of the two the (Prophetic and wisdom religions) elements.

A Short Historical Sketch of Hinduism:

With some convenient landmarks in the History of India is made for some generalizations. The first period may be said to extend from the earliest times to the birth of Buddha, or roughly from 2,000 B.C. to 560 B.C.; the second period from the birth of Buddha to the fall of the Mauryan empire, or roughly from 560 B.C. to 200 B.C.; the third period from the fall of the Mauryan empire to the rise of the Guptas, or roughly from 200 B.C. to 300 A.D.; the fourth period from the rise of the Guptas to the death of Harsha, or roughly from 300 A.D. To 650 A.D.; and the fifth period from the death of Harsha to the invasions of Mahmud Ghazni, or roughly from 650 A.D. to 1,000 A.D. These five periods constitute what may be called the ancient period in the history of India, said to be the ancient period of Hinduism in India.

The medieval period of our history may be said to begin with the eleventh century and end about the middle of the eighteenth. Its great characteristic, as we shall see, is the rise of a number of theistic systems of thought and the later Bhakti movements.

The modern period of our history may be said to begin with the establishment of the British Power in Bengal as a result of the Battle of Plassey in 1757 A.D. This period extending from the middle of the eighteenth century to the present day may again be sub-divided thus. The first sub-division may be said to extend from the establishment of the British power to the beginning of the freedom movement and the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 A.D. This is the period of Reform movements in Hinduism. The second sub-division may
be said to extend from the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 A.D. to the establishment of the Indian Republic in 1950 A.D. This is the period of the great modern Renaissance of Hinduism. Of course, these divisions are artificial, but they are convenient for our purpose here.

The Modern period during which British supremacy was established over the whole of India after the subjugation of the Marathas and Sikhs and the transfer of government from the East India Company to the Crown after the Great Indian Revolt, Hinduism had held on its own and had, a continuous development from 1200 A.D. to 1750 A.D. when India was under Turkish and Mughal rulers. In the light of this new knowledge many an evil custom in Hindu society, hitherto regarded as a decree of God, appeared in its true colours as the folly of man. Sati, infanticide, enforced widowhood, child marriage, untouchability, Purdah, Devadasi systems, the caste system and prohibition of foreign travel began to lose their tyrannical hold in the minds of Hindus. And reformers arose who were determined to purge the society of these evils. Along with the new knowledge came the fierce attacks of the early Christian missions on Hinduism and Hindu society.

It has outlived the Christian propaganda of modern times as it outlived the Muslim oppression of the middle ages and the Buddhist schism of ancient days. It is now able to meet any of the World-religions on equal terms as their friend and ally in a common cause. This modern period may be subdivided into (1) The Age of Reform Movements (1750-1885 A.D.) and (2) The Age of the Renaissance (1885-1950 A.D.).
The present Renaissance is not confined to religion. The movement is a comprehensive one affecting almost all departments of national life. There have been new developments not only in religion, but also in literature, art, science, education, politics and social arrangements and manners. But this scholar’s aim in the following pages is to give an elaborate study only of Hinduism and Hindu religious reformation by describing work and doctrinal contribution of ‘Mahatma Gandhi’ who has made this New Renaissance glorious movements in the history of Hinduism in the modern period (1869 A.D. – 1948 A.D.).

What is Hinduism?

Hinduism is one of the ancient religions of the world. Scholars of Hinduism opine that it is not a mere religion but a way of life. The original name of Hinduism is ‘Sanatana Dharma’ which means ancient ethics, (literally Dharma connotes that which has to be adhered to’). It does not refer to religion alone but stands transcending the ambit of religion. Knowing the omnifarious nature of God, people worshiped God in different forms and called it by different names. “Hindusim is a growth of ages. The very name, Hinduism, was given to the religion of the people of Hindustan by foreigners”¹. This gave Hinduism a diverse look. So it was the Britishers who, on their advent to India, having found the diversity of the practice of religion, collectively called it Hinduism. As the name India was derived from the name of the river ‘Indus’ so was the name ‘Hinduism’.

The ancient period (2000 B.C. – 1000 A.D.) includes (1) Age of mantras, (2) Age of Brahmanas and (3) Age of Upanishads. These divisions are artificial and convenient so that one can understand the Vedic period, in the growth of Hinduism.
Hinduism is the religion of the Hindus. It is said to be the oldest of all the world religions. It is not founded by a saint or prophet like any other religions. Hinduism is a revealed religion. It is also known as Sanatana Dharma. It means Vaidhika Dharma or Eternal Religion.

Hinduism is the religion of Vedas. The Brahma Sutra and Vedas are the fundamental scriptures of Hinduism. It has in its fold many schools of thought like Vedanta, Saivism, Vaishnavism, and Saktism etc., even though it has various types of Creed, Code and Cults. Hence there is no quarrel or conflict among the different schools of thought, Creed, Code and Cult. This is the uniqueness of this religion-Hinduism.

According to Rig Veda, “Truth is one; sages call it by various names Ekam Sat Vipra Bahudha Vadanti”. Lord Krishna Says in Bhagavat Gita, “However men approach me, even so do I welcome them, for the path men take from every side is Mine.”

Hindu Ethics is based on the Yama (Self-restraint), Niyama (Religious observances or canons) and Ashramas (Brahmacharya, Grigasta, Vanaprasta and Sannyasin), Ethics governs all the stages of Hindu life.

In Hinduism, karma is given a wider meaning than mere ritual and is connected with the doctrine of rebirth. The law of karma and the process of Samsara become the fundamental bases not only of all schools of Hinduism but also of all the schools of Buddhism and Jainism.

The Vedas are eternal and the word of God. It’s root word ‘Vid’ means – “to know”. Thus the word ‘Veda’ means ‘knowledge’. The ‘Vedas’ are four:
1. RIG VEDA - Verses in praise of the Divine
2. YAJUR VEDA - Prayers offered at sacrificial ceremonies
3. SAMA VEDA - Verses Set to Music
4. ATHARVA VEDA - Book of Incantations, spells and magic.

The Vedas are the oldest literary productions of the world. Rig Veda is the earliest of the four Vedas. It has 1028 hymns. Vedas were learnt by the disciples from the preceptor, by hearing and repeating. Later on, the Vedas were set down in writing in the epic Age. Vyasa, codified the four Vedas.

1. Karma Kanda - It deals with various rituals
2. Upasana Kanda - It deals with worship or meditation
3. Jnana Kanda - It deals with knowledge or Nirguna Brahman

The Mantras and the brahmanas constitute Karma Kanda, the Aranyakas are Upasana Kanda and the Upanishada are Jnana Kanda.

- Brahmanas are the earliest prose text, containing observations on various sacrificial rites and ceremonies.
- Aranyakas, were more speculative than ritualistic.
- Upanishads, the esoteric treaties containing deep philosophical speculations about the Ultimate Truth.
- The Vedanta is a collective designation for the philosophy of the Upanishads. It means the end or goal of the Vedas.

The Sruti and Smrithi are the twin authentic sources and fundamental Scriptures of Hinduism. The Vedas are spoken of as Sruti. i.e. heard or revealed. Second set of scriptures are called Smriti. It lays down laws for individuals and for the society. Smriti means, the things remembered or learned.
Manu, was the earliest law giver of this world. Manu Dharma, shastras or the laws governing righteous conduct, come under the term Smriti. Different commentators of the Vedanta- Sutras have formed different views on the true nature of Brahman; but they all base their theories on the Supreme authority of Sruti. Adi Shankara, Ramanuja, and Madhava, Vallabacharya, Numbarkacharya and Tirumular etc., are the most illustrious commentators of Vedanta-Sutras.

Dharshanas are the schools of philosophy or system of philosophy based on Vedas. The Six Dharshanas or Orthodox systems of Indian Philosophy revealed by Hindu Saints are:-

- Purva Mimamsa (Jaimini) - Truths of Karma Kanda
- Uttara Mimasa (Maha Rishi Vyasa) - Vedanta
- Sankhya (Kapila mini) - Study of prakriti and purusha
- Vaiseshika (Rishi Kanada) - Analysis of the World of Experience
- Nyaya (Rishi Gautama) - pre requisite for all philosophical enquiry of Indian logic

In Hinduism, Dharshanas, are the 6 ways of looking at the Truth. The Orthodox system of philosophy believes in the authority of the Vedas. The Heterodox system of Philosophy does not believe in the authority of the Vedas.

**Heterodox** System of Philosophy may classified:

1. Materialistic School of Charvaka
2. Nihilam of the Madhyamikas (Buddhistic – 566. B.C)
3. School of Idealism of Yogacharya (Buddhistic)
4. That of presentationists by sautrantika (Buddhistic)
5. School of Representationists by vaibhastukas (Buddhistic)
6. The system of the Jainas (547 – B.C.)
The Sutras or aphorisms of Vyasa are the basis of the Vedanta philosophy. These Sutras have been variously explained by different Commentators. Each system of philosophy treats three main problems Viz, God, World and Soul.

1. Keval Advaita (Monism) - Sankaracharya says, “man is identical with Brahman or the eternal soul”
2. Visishta Adwaida (Qualified Monism) - Ramanujar says, “man is ray or spark of God”
3. Dwaita (Dualism) - Madhavacharya says “man is the servant of God”
4. Pure Monistic (Suddha Advaita) – Vallabhacharya
5. Saiva Siddhanta - May Kandar, Tirumular, Umapathi
6. Bheda Bhada (Dualistic Monism) – Numbarkacharya

Teaching of Sankara, “Brahman Satyam Jegat mitya Jeevo Brahmai Vanaparah”, “Brahman (Absolute) alone is real; this world is unreal; and the Jiva or the individual soul is non-different from Brahman”.

The Nirguna Brahman of Sankara is impersonal. It becomes a personal God or Saguna Brahman through its association with Maya. Brahman becomes the cause of the world through Maya, which is inscrutable mysterious power of Sakti. To Sankarar this world is only relatively real.

Saguna Brahman and Nirguna Brahman are not two Brahmans. Nirguna Brahman isn’t the contrast, antithesis or opposite of Saguna Brahman. The same Nirguna Brahman appears as Saguna Brahman for the pious worship of devotees.

Nirguna Brahman - Transcended view point
Saguna Brahman - Relative view point
According to Sankara, the world is relatively real, while Brahman is absolutely real. The world is the product of Maya. The unchanging Brahman appears as the changing world through Maya. Maya is a mysterious indescribable power of the Brahman, which hides the real and manifests the unreal. Maya is not real because it vanishes when you attain knowledge of the Eternal. It is not unreal also, because it exists till knowledge dawns on you. In the view of Sankara, Karma and Bhakti Yoga are the means to Jnana Yoga, which is Moksha.

**Gandhi’s Understanding of God and Religion:**

Mahatma Gandhi, was not only a philosopher and a freedom fighter but also a Hindu reformer and a humanist. This can be seen from his writing in 1931 in an article in Young India, “I am more a reformer than a politician”. He said “Religion is a matter of life and death. A man does not change religion as he changes his garments. He takes it with him beyond the grave”\(^2\). In 1928, during the First Annual Meeting of Federation of International fellowship at Sabarmathi Ashramam, Ahmedabad, he said, “All religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism... The aim of the fellowship should be to help a Hindu to become better Hindu, a Mussalman to become a better Mussalman, and a Christian to become a better Christian”.

Gandhi believed that, “By religion I do not mean formal religion or customary religion but that religion which underlies all religions”\(^3\).

Gandhi’s critique of Hinduism is rational and he approached it in a practical way. His main concern was action of constructive programme. His speeches, writings and actions were motivated by the true spirit of love and service towards humanity. His religious faith in Hinduism, was developed with the guidance of Raichandrabai.
Gandhi’s religious life was mostly influenced by the Bhagavad Gita. He had strong faith in Karma theory of Hinduism. And, he preferred to call himself a Sanatana Hindu. He spoke and wrote about Hinduism on different occasions (in a different manner) differently.

According to Gandhi, human beings are sparks of the Divine power. He has described all his experiments in his life up to 1925 in his Autobiography named “The story of My Experiments with truth”. He said ‘God is Truth’. He declared later, ‘Truth is God’. Further he said, “To me religion means Truth and Ahimsa”\(^4\) In every field of social activity, he had a scientific approach. He had rejected some custom that was against his reason. He wanted to verify even of the Shastras to reject some wrong interpretation. This can be illustrated from his following words, “I have suggested to seekers after truth the only safe rule for their guidance in studying Shastras, namely that they should reject whatever is contrary to Truth and Ahimsa, the true of foundations of all religions”\(^5\). He had spiritual approaches to the problem of untouchability. Gandiji believed in the absolute oneness of God and man and therefore also of humanity.

Gandhi was a believer of Advaitam (the Indian doctrine of Monism). And, he believed that the Nature and all that exist are parts of the divine. Answering a friend, Gandhi wrote, “I am an advaitist and yet I can support dualism. The world is changing every moment, and is therefore unreal, it has no permanent existence. But, though it is constantly changing, it has a something about it which persists and it is therefore to that extent real. I have therefore no objection to calling it real and unreal, and thus being called an Anekantavada or a Syadvadi... My Anekanatavad is the result of the twin doctrine of Satya and Ahimsa”\(^6\) As a worshiper of Truth, he considered and he firmly believed that, “I believe in the Hindu theory of Guru and his importance
in spiritual realization. I think there is a great deal of truth in the doctrine that true knowledge is impossible without a Guru”.... Three moderns have left a deep impression on my life, and captivated me: Raychandbhai by his living contact; Tolstoy by his book, ‘The Kingdom of God is Within You’ and Ruskin by his Unto the Last”.

To Gandhi religion was a human institution made by human ingenuity to solve practical affairs as well as spiritual matters. His oft-quoted passages can be cited. He said: “By religion, I do not mean formal religion, or customary religion, but that religion which underlies all religions, which brings us face to face with our Maker”\(^8\). And he further said, “What I want to achieve – what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years (before 1925) – is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain Moksha. (Literally freedom from birth and death. The nearest English equivalent is salvation). I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field, are directed to this same end”\(^9\). His idea of religion was not totally esoteric. He knew that every religion was connected with some belief system supported by rituals. He tried to get rid of the rituals as far as possible. “It is the permanent element in human nature which counts no cost too great in order to find full expression and which leaves the soul utterly restless until it has found itself”\(^10\).

He did not define religion in exact and definitive language. One of his attempts was to bring religion closer to common man. In that regard his religion was functional. But most of the times Gandhi felt that religion could not be understood without knowing its relation with God. According to him, “belief in one God is the cornerstone of all religions”\(^11\).
In his talk at the Theosophical Society in 1905 Gandhi said: “The main thing that distinguishes the Hindus is their belief that the Brahman or oversoul is all-pervading. What we all have to attain is Moksha or liberation. Moksha here meaning freeing oneself from the evil of birth and death and merging in the Brahman”. At that time his study of religion and spiritualism was not very deep. The influence of Gita on him was known. He had just made his entry into spiritualism. To Gandhi, “Truth is God”. Taittirya Upanishad puts Satyamjnanamanantam Brahman, meaning, ‘Truth is Brahma’, knowledge is Brahma and Infinite is Brahma. Truth also leads to Moksha.

Further, he said: “The ocean is composed of drops of water; each drop is an entity and yet it is a part of whole; “the one and the many.” In this ocean of Life, we are little drops. My doctrine means that I must identify myself with life, that I must share the majesty of life in the presence of God. The sum-total of this life is God”\(^{12}\).

He said earlier that though he was an advaitist, he found it difficult to remain always an ardent follower of advaitism. In his metaphysical discipline he tried to combine dvaitism and advaitism. With little hesitation he said: “I am an advaitist and yet I can support dvaitism”\(^{13}\). He believed that, God was the only truth. He wrote: “God alone is and nothing else exists”\(^{14}\). To an advaitist God is the only true reality and not his creation. But, in practice, Gandhi could not ignore the creation. To Gandhi God becomes supreme reality as He appears in his creation. So, both God and universe are real. Both atman and Brahma are real and they exist separately. Finally, the two become one... Gandhi Said : “The only way to find God is to see Him in his creation”\(^{15}\).
He further declared: “I may live without air and water but not without Him.”\(^{16}\) He also declared: “I could not live for a single second without religion”\(^{17}\). In 1928 he said, “All religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism”. Gandhi wrote: “Religion of our conception, being imperfect, is always subject to a process of evolution and reinterpretation”\(^{18}\).

Though a Vaishnava by birth, and visited Vishnu temple, Gandhi didn’t like the glitter and pomp of it. This was because he had also heard of immorality being practiced there.

In his childhood days, Gandhi was trained by his old servant to repeat the name ‘Rama’ (Rama nama) in order to ward off his fear of ghosts and spirits. Gandhi thought that it is this seed sown by that good woman that had made ‘Rama nama’ as an infallible remedy for him in any illness. He wrote: My nurse, an old servant of the family, ... suggested as a remedy for ... (my) fear of ghosts and spirits ... the repetition of Ramanama ( i.e. the name, “Rama” ) ... and so at a tender age I began repeating Ramanama to cure my fear of ghosts and spirits ... I think it is due to the seed sown by that good woman ... that today ‘ Ramanama’ is an infallible remedy for me ( in any illness) \(^{19}\).

Gandhi’s cousin who was a devotee of the Ramayana arranged for his second brother and himself to learn Ram Raksha. They learned it by heart and made it a rule to recite it every morning after the bath. They practiced it until they were in Porbandhar. When Gandhi was seven years old they reached Rajkot and the prayer was forgotten, because Gandhi didn’t have much belief in it. He recited it partly to satisfy his pride in reciting Ram Raksha with correct pronunciation.
It was the reading of the Ramayana before his father by a man with a melodious voice that left a deep impression on Gandhi. That man would sing the dohas (couplets) and Chopais (quatrain) and explain them losing himself in the discourse and carrying his listeners along with him. Gandhi must have been 13 at that time, but he could quite remember being enraptured by his reading. That laid the foundation for Gandhi’s deep devotion to the Ramayana which he regarded as the greatest book in all devotional literature.

Gandhi would attend “The Bhagavata” reading at Rajkot where the reciter didn’t inspire him. But, later Gandhi found that the Bhagavata as a book evoked religious fervor. It was in Rajkot that Gandhi got his early grounding in toleration for all of Hinduism and its sister religions. This was because his parents visited the temples of Vishnu, Shiva and Rama. They would also take or send their children there.

Among these temples, the temple of Rama had been the nearest and dearest. In 1933, Gandhi recalled his childhood days when he used to daily visit the Ramji Temple adjacent to his ancestral home. Rama, who resided then there in the temple, saved him from many fears and sins. Gandhi wanted all his Harijan brethren to visit this temple along with the millions of co-religionists or caste-men. Temple worship supplies that felt spiritual want of the human race. It admits of reform.

Gandhi’s intense sentimental love of Rama was always expressed by him throughout his speeches. He stated that Rama was his life. Rama was inclusive of his parents and brothers. Gandhi could see Rama in all women and men that made him consider all women as mother, daughter or sister and all men as father, brother or son according to their age.
For Gandhi, the name ‘God’ didn’t appeal, but the very thought of Rama, thrilled him. Gandhi said that by repeating the name of Rama with sweetness and devotion one can even make the singing bird to pause and listen to the saying of ‘Ramanama’. Saintliness of Gandhi’s mother, with her daily prayer, attendance at temple, her vows, fasting and moral truth became Gandhi’s “sole objective” in his childhood itself.

Unlike an average Hindu, Gandhi didn’t accept the authority of a priest. And he also didn’t visit any temple. Praying daily, keeping vows and working for religious reforms were his religious activities. All the essential ideas of traditional Hinduism were instilled in him during his youth-hood itself.

A Gujarathi instructive Stanza, gripped Gandhi’s mind and heart. Its precept or principle of returning good for evil became his guiding principle:

For a bowl of water, give a good meal,
For a kind greeting, you bow down with Zeal . . .
But the true noble (behaviour) that all men know as one
And return - with gladness – good for all evil done.

In England, Gandhi’s Hindu heritage was awakened by some Theosophist friends. During Gandhi’s Second year in England, two Theosophists talked to him about Gita. They were reading Sir Edwin Arnold’s translation – “The Song Celestial” and they invited Gandhi to read the original with them. Though Gandhi had not read the Gita, he could point out the areas where the translation failed. The verses in the second chapter that dealt with the evils of the senses made a deep impression on his mind that it rang continuously in his ears. For him that book was a priceless worth and the impression created then continued to grow in him.
A brother, who belonged to Theosophist Movement, recommended him “The Light of Asia” by Edwin Arnold. Gandhi was also introduced to Madame Blavatsky (the inventor of Theosophy) and Mrs. Besant, and was advised to join the society, which Gandhi politely declined. Madame Blavatsky’s “Key to Theosophy” stimulated in him the desire to read books on Hinduism and they enabled him to get rid off the wrong belief that Hinduism was rife with superstition.

Ray Chandbhai (Raj chandra) guided Gandhi by writing letters from India. Some of his friends sent him Narmada Shanker’s book “Dharma Vichar”, Max Muller’s book, “India – What can it Teach us ?” and the translation of the Upanishads by the Theosophical Society. All this enhanced his regard for Hinduism. Gandhi’s sense of Hindu identity grew stronger and more substantial during his years in South Africa. Theosophist friends in South Africa expected that Gandhi should be helpful to them.

Gandhi read Swami Vivekananda’s “Raja Yoga” with some of his friends and read M.N. Drivedi’s Raja Yoga with others. Gandhi read Patanjali’s “Yoga Sutras” with a friend and the Bhagavad Gita with many. Gandhi and his friends formed a sort of seekers’ club where they had regular meetings.

Gandhi decided to learn by heart one or two verses of the Gita everyday. He turned to this ‘dictionary of conduct’ for a ready solution to all his troubles and trials. Words like aparigraha (meaning ‘non-possession’) and Samabhava (feelings of oneness and equality with others) gripped him.

Gandhi downplayed the most likely historical meaning of the Gita in order to interpret its content as against violence, and so he defended
his views with remarks like; Though ‘Chapter 2’ gives a violent interpretation, the concluding verses prevent any such interpretation. It is a fact that a literal interpretation or understanding of the Gita leads one in a sea of contradictions. “The letter truly appears violent but the spirit gives life and peace”28.

Recalling the early days of his marriage, Gandhi admitted that he never gave Kasturbai the same freedom of action that he enjoyed. He further stated that, Kasturbai did not have the capacity to exercise it either. Hindu women never had such capacity, which was a defect of the Hindu Society29.

Gandhi’s Concept of Hinduism:

Gandhi said that he did not make a deep study of the Shastras (scripture) from a scholar’s point of view. His knowledge of sanskrit was almost nil. But he had understood the Shastras from the point of view of dharma. He had known that one can attain moksha without reading the vedas.

In 1921 Gandhi spoke at the Suppressed Classes Conference, held at Ahmedabad, “I have always claimed to be a Sanatani Hindu. It is not that I am quite innocent of the scriptures. I am not a profound scholar of Sanskrit. I have read the Vedas and the Upanishads only in translations. Naturally therefore mine is not a scholarly study of them. My knowledge of them is in no way profound, but I have studied them as I should do as a Hindu and I claim to have grasped their true spirit. By the time I had reached the age of 21, I had studied other religions also”30.

Gandhi had found the right method for reading Shastras by which he would reject any restriction that is opposed to truth, non-violence and
bramacharya. He believed that the Shastras are not above reason. Any Shastra that taught him to drink liquor, eat meat and do any other wicked deed is unauthentic and cannot be called a Shastra.

Gandhi believed that Bhagavat Gita didn’t subscribe to the practice of untouchability. On the contrary, Bhagavat Gita thought him that all life is one and has come from God and so it must return to him.

According to Sanatana dharma as taught by the Venerable mother (Gita), life does not consist in mere outward rites and ceremonies but in inward purification. Gandhi said that he had visited and conveyed this message of Gita to millions of people. His belief in the message of Gita had grown stronger and he firmly believed that there is nothing wrong in claiming himself a sanatana Hindu. And he hoped that God will seal this claim with his death.

Gandhi claimed the status of an orthodox and conservative Hindu, when he encountered strong religious opposition to his movement to abolish untouchability; yet the following remarks showed that most of the readers to whom he addressed then remained unconvinced. When Gandhi was questioned why he called himself an orthodox sanatani (conservative) Hindu and Vaishnava, he gave a wide definition of a sanatani Hindu and complete description of a Vaishnava.

According to Gandhi “The central principle of Hinduism is that of moksha. I am ever striving for it. All my activities are for moksha. I have as much faith in the existence of atman and in its immortality as I am certain of the existence of my body and its transience “...I have always believed that there are no more than four varnas (general castes). I believe that one acquires one’s caste by birth. “It is certainly necessary that the numerous castes should become fewer, and this can
be brought about by the councils of the various castes without injury to Hinduism.... "Now remains the issue of untouchability. Nobody can trace the origin of this practice... That an untouchable cannot live in our neighbourhood and cannot own land, that an untouchable must, on seeing us, shout: ‘Please keep at a distance! do not touch me!’..., - this is not Hinduism. That is Dyerism – Satanic Activity or dictatorship”31.

He developed his confidence in Hinduism gradually. Before his South African days Gandhi had some hesitation about Hinduism. His interest in Hinduism, he said, grew by reading Blavatsky’s Key to Theosophy. He even had contacts with the atheist Bradlaugh. His early attraction for Theosophical Society cannot be ignored. At this point, Raichandbhai’s guidance was important for him. Raichandbhai was not a Hindu in the orthodox sense. But, he helped Gandhi in dispelling many doubts about religious matters. At the same time, the emergence of Vivekananda who brought new glory to Hindu religion by focusing its universalism from the days of Parliament of Religions of 1893; the year Gandhi went to South Africa, had a salutary effect. The revival and resurgence of Hindu religion took place under Vivekananda’s leadership. It cannot be conceived that Gandhi was out of his influence.

In South Africa, the Theosophical Society invited Gandhi in 1905 to speak on Hinduism. In this lecture of Gandhi, Hindus were identified with Indians. He said: “I am to speak to you no doubt about the Hindus; but the ways and manners of the Hindus and other Indians were all but identical”. He declared, “Hindus are not considered to be the original inhabitants of India. According to Western Scholars, the Hindus as well as most of the European peoples lived at one time in Central Asia. Migrating from there, some went to Europe, some to Iran, others moved South-eastwards down into India through the Punjab, and there spread the Aryan religion”32.
His religion was a means to the realization of God. He could not live without God, nor could he live without religion. Religion and God both were indispensable for him. It is important to note the following reply of Gandhi to Dr. S. Radhakrishnan’s three questions, namely (i) what is your religion?, (ii) how are you led to it?, and (iii) what is its bearing on social life?, Gandhi replied:

1. My religion is Hinduism which, for me, is the religion of humanity and includes the best of all the religions known to me.
2. I am being led to my religion through Truth and Nonviolence, i.e., love in the broadest sense. I often describe my religion as religion of Truth.
3. Realization of Truth is impossible without a complete merging of oneself in and identification with this limitless ocean of life. Hence, for me, there is no escape from social service, there is no happiness on earth beyond or apart from it. This is the broad view of what Gandhi thought about Religion and Hinduism.

He said, “I call myself a sanatani Hindu because: 1. I believe in ... all that goes by the name of Hindu scriptures, and therefore in avatars and rebirth, 2. I believe in Varnashrama Dharma (duties entailed by varna) in a sense in my opinion strictly vedic but not in its present popular and crude sense, 3. I believe in the protection of the cow in its much larger sense than the popular; 4. I do not disbelieve in idol-worship.”

Gandhi could not be described as a religious conformist even during the period of early 1920s, when his sense of Hindu identity was more clear:
Gandhi expressed that his unconventionality as a Hindu can be carried only up to the point of rejecting the divinity of the oldest Shastras (scriptures) if they could not convince his reason. But, he had found by experience that if he wished to live in society, he must limit his independent utterances to matters of first-rate importance. Later he described Hindu society as rife with gender bias. "(Not) every word of the printed works passing muster as shastras is, in my opinion, a revelation... Nothing in the shastras which is manifestly contrary to universal truths and morals can stand. Nothing in the shastras which is capable of being reasoned can stand if it is in conflict with reason."36

According to his belief, a Hindu is anyone who, born in a Hindu family in India, accepts the vedas, the Upanishads and the puranas (epic myths) as holy books; who believes and practices the five Yamas of truth, non-violence, etc. and who believes in the existence of the atman and the Paramatman; supremacy of Moksha, Varnashrama Dharma and Cow-protection etc. Besides, believing in all these, whoever, has been born in a family belonging to the Vaishnava sect; who possess the qualities described in Narasingh Mehta's devotional song entitled "Vaishnavajana", is a Vaishnava. Gandhi firmly believed that he possessed all the characteristics described by him and also he strived to strengthen them. So, he didn’t hesitate to call himself with all firmness that he is a strict Sanatani Hindu and a Vaishnava.

Gandhi believed that the most important outward form of Hinduism is cow-protection. He regarded that the Hindu world as impotent because not a single Hindu was a capable of giving that protection. He said, "I believe that the most important outward form of Hinduism is Cow-protection. I regard the Hindu world as impotent because at present not a single Hindu is capable of giving that
protection. Among those impotent people, I believe myself to be the least impotent"37.

Gandhi believed that the essence of Hinduism is truth and non-violence. He hadn’t seen anyone who respected truth as he had been doing right from his childhood. He said “I believe the essence of Hinduism is truth and Non-violence… I firmly believe that I am overflowing with love. I have not felt ill will against anyone even in a dream”38. Gandhi didn’t feel ill will against anyone even in a dream. He didn’t have any hatred even towards General Dyer. Wherever he had seen misery or injustice, he had felt troubled in his soul.

Moksha is the central principle of Hinduism. Gandhi said that he always strived for it. All his activities were for moksha. He also had much faith in the existence of atman and in its immortality as he was certain of the existence of his body and its transience. Gandhi happily declared himself a staunch Santani Hindu for these reasons.

Removal of Untouchability:

Gandhi believed that there are no more than four Varnas and that one acquires one’s caste by birth. According to Gandhi castes are subjected to increase and decrease. A man may be expelled and excommunicated from his caste, but not from Hinduism. This can be done only by his own willingness.

Gandhi felt the necessary for reducing the number of castes to a fewer. This he believed, can be brought about by the councils of the various castes without damaging Hinduism.
Gandhi told that the origin of the practice of untouchability can’t be traced. All the restrictions and discriminations towards the untouchables and forcing them to shout to inform their arrival etc all are not Hinduism. It is Dyerism.

He spoke at a meeting in Bhuj on 22.10.25, he said “if untouchability among Hindus was not removed, Hinduism would be destroyed” and he added, “I have identified myself with Hinduism. I live for it and wish to die for it”. In Nov. 7, 1933, Gandhi started his All India Harijan tour and the next day, at a huge meeting at Chitnis Park, he declared, “Removal of untouchability is my Religion”.

Again, he observed: “Religion which takes no account of practical affairs and does not help to solve them, is no religion”.

In 1925, he said, “I have so often said that my effort for the removal of untouchability is an integral part of my life, and you cannot isolate it from my other activities. I would not be a true Hindu unless I live and move and have my being in trying to rid Hinduism of this curse.”

Later he said, “I must say this that whether in prison or outside prison, Harijan service will be always after my heart and will be the breath of life for me, more precious than the daily bread. I can live for some days at least without the daily bread, but I cannot live without Harijan service for one single minute ... My life is a dedication to this cause.”

Gandhi said that he had found the homes of ‘Bhangis’ (untouchable scavangers) far cleaner than many Vaishnava houses. Gandhi was astonished at the truthfulness, simplicity, kindness and
other qualities of these people. The entry of this cruel practice of untouchability into Hinduism and the powerlessness to ensure the protection of mother cow had made all the Hindus impotent. Without getting rid off these Dyerism, Gandhi said, the Indians did not have the right to ask that they be freed from the Dyerism of the British.

Gandhi cited various reasons to assert himself a Sanatani Hindu that included his firm belief in Hindu scriptures and therefore in avatars and in rebirth; his belief in Varnashram Dharma was strictly in vedic sense but not in its present popular and crude sense and his belief in idol-worship and cow protection.

Gandhi said he also believed in the Bible, the Koran and the Zend-Avesta to be divinely inspired as the Vedas but he did not accept every word and every verse as divinely inspired. Gandhi selected any religious aspect on the criteria of reason and humanitarian morality.

He said, “The Hinduism of my conception is no narrow creed. It is a grand evolutionary process as ancient as time, and embraces the teachings of Zoraster, Moses, Christ, Mohammed, Nanak and other Prophets that I could name”42.

Trying to explore the hidden treasures of ancient culture, Gandhi had found that whatever was permanent in ancient Hindu culture was also to be found in the teachings of Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed and Zoroaster . . . Gandhi could visualize how safe the road would become in front of us regarding the rejection of untouchability, the Devadasi-institution, drunkenness, and animal sacrifice . . as they didn't appeal to our moral sense.
While responding to Sir Govindrao Madgaonkar, who was a judge at Bombay, Gandhi replied that he didn’t believe that all the printed words of Shastras are revelation. Nothing in the Shastras that is manifestly contrary to universal truths and morals, and that cannot stand the test of reason will have any impact within him. He will reject such things on the basis of this ‘caste has to go’. In his letter to Shyamalal (Secretary, Kasustrba Gandhi Memorial Trust) he wrote, “Caste must go if we want to root out untouchability”. Gandhi insisted this in his own words thus “Abolition of untouchability is demolishing all the social inequalities. If untouchability is abolished at the same stroke, caste hierarchy will also go”\(^{43}\).

Further he elaborated this idea in 1935 as, “The caste system is the very antithesis of Varnasharma. The sooner it is abolished the better”. Later he said, “when all become casteless monopoly of occupations world go”\(^{44}\).

Overall, Gandhi, used every opportunity to express his views on untouchability in Hinduism as strongly as he could. He considered the removal of this curse as his life time ambition. He was of the firm view that untouchability cannot be eradicated without abolishing castes.

**To Sum Up :**

Gandhi always claimed himself to be a ‘Sanatana Hindu’. At the same time he didn’t claim himself to be ignorant of scriptures. But he declared that he was not a profound scholar of Sanskrit. That is why he had read the Vedas and Upanishads only in translations. Naturally then these studies cannot be a profound but its true spirit had been grasped as Gandhi has done. By the time he had reached the age of 21, he had studied Hinduism and other Religions also for which, his stay at London (1888-1891), South Africa (1893-1914) had contributed a lot.
Gandhi, increased his faith in Hinduism gradually with the guidance of Raichandrabhai, who was not a Hindu in the orthodox sense. For all his spiritual doubts, clarification and ambiguities, Gandhi had sole reference book in “Baghavad Gita”.

Gandhi was a believer of Advaitam, which is the Hindu doctrine of Monism. According to him, “belief in one God is the corner stone of all religions”. And he said, “the only way to find God is to see Him in his creation”. For Gandhi, God becomes supreme reality as he appears in his creation. The central principle of Hinduism is that of moksha. He believed that the essence of Hinduism is Truth and Ahimsa (Non-violence).

Gandhi claimed Hinduism as his religion. For him Hinduism is the religion of humanity and includes the best of all religions known to him. He believed Hinduism as a religion of Truth and Ahimsa. He always reiterated his belief in Hindu Scriptures, Vedas and Varnashrama Dharma. When Gandhi declared his belief in Varnashrama Dharma, it was strictly in the Vedic sense, and not in its present cruel sense.

In 1925, Gandhi spoke at a meeting in Bhuj, “If untouchability among Hindus was not removed, Hinduism would be destroyed”, later he said, “I have identified myself with Hinduism. I live for it and wish to die for it”. Further he said, “removal of untouchability is an integral part of my life”.

Gandhi who proudly and fondly declared himself a ‘Sanatana Hindu’ and his religion as Hinduism, in his later years (1933) presented a refined and exalted opinion that ‘removal of untouchability’ is his religion. For the removal of untouchability Gandhi wanted to get rid off castes first. He said that he didn’t know the origin of caste and didn’t
want to know that. But, he declared, that he knew that caste is harmful to national growth and spiritual development. With this understanding of Gandhi’s views on caste a detailed study on his concept of “Caste and Varna” is essential to analyse the topic in hand – “Gandhi’s concept of Inter-caste Marriage”.

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