Defining Hinduism

At any time definitions are a difficult thing to attempt but the problem becomes all the more ticklish when we have to deal with a vast and complex subject such as Hinduism. What is Hinduism? "Is it a museum of beliefs, a medley of rights, or a mere map, a geographical expression?" Obviously it is a stupendous task to codify Hinduism. Embracing the whole gamut of mortal experience within its fold as it were, concerned with the fate of man right from the cradle to the grave and even beyond, starting with the material and the mental and stretching right up to the intangible realms of the spirit, Hinduism is, perhaps more than any other religion of the world, a way of life rather than a compact, neatly sorted set of principles or a bundle of "academic abstractions." W.J. Wilkins states:

... with the Hindu, religion is not a thing for times and seasons only, but professes to regulate his life in its many relations. It orders ceremonies to be performed on his behalf before he is born, and others after his death. It ordains those attendant on his birth, his early training, his food, his style of dress and its manufacture, his employment, marriage, amusements. It seeks to regulate not only his private life, but also domestic and national. To treat of the ordinary life of the Hindu is to describe his religion.
Nehru opines: "Hinduism as a faith is vague, amorphous, many-sided, all things to all men. It is hardly possible to define it, or indeed to say definitely whether it is religion or not, in the usual sense of the word." Indeed, Hinduism is such a diversified, all-absorptive, all-embracing religion that it includes within its range all varieties -- "from the grossest materialism to the all-pervading Brahmanhood which does not exclude any conceivable or inconceivable thing." No wonder in view of this all-inclusive character of Hinduism Nirad C. Chaudhuri comments: "One might also apply to Hinduism some notions of Hindu philosophy and logic. Of the Universal Soul (Atman) Hindu Philosophy says that to every description or classification only one reply is possible: Neti. Neti, Not this, Not this. So to every definition of Hinduism one is compelled to say that it does not apply."

But though the subject does not lend itself to an easy summing up, it is nevertheless possible to arrive at a more or less comprehensive concept of this elusive term 'Hinduism'. There is a fundamental unity underlying this rich variety and endless diversity that goes by the name of Hinduism and a consensus can, no doubt, be reached on the basic tenets of this religion. In this we are legitimately helped and guided by the pronouncements of our authentic scriptures, of our sages and seers or even by the self-explanatory mode of their lives.
Range and Dimensions of Hinduism

Hinduism first originated in a small territory in the Indus River Valley and its hold initially was confined to a small group of Aryans only. But as it moved down the corridors of history, it slowly spread to the whole of India, later spilling over even to the boundaries beyond. It showed wonderful elasticity as in the course of centuries it absorbed and assimilated, accepted and adopted much that was new and alien to it. Today this multi-dimensional phenomenon covers within its range almost everything under the sun. Whether it is an abstract subject like God, or the soul, or life after death, or a more concrete problem of life on the earthy plane involving mundane issues, Hinduism has pronounced views to offer on them all.

With great force and facility Hinduism teaches us to make the best of our brief stay in this world. It guides the average human being about how best to exploit his capacities and potentialities and how best to capitalize on the environments. To the extra strong among us it teaches how to transcend the relative plane of existence and attain the sublime heights beyond this elemental world. It lays stress on the division of individual life into four Ashramas for a consummate flowering of our personality and insists on breaking up of our society into four castes to ensure a harmonious working at all levels. Karmas (actions bringing upon oneself inevitable results, good
or bad, either in this life or in a reincarnation, of man on this earth, the lure of heaven or the terror of hell, enjoyment, renunciation, retribution, transmigration of the soul—all are equally the concern of Hinduism. Thus, the elaborate digressive myths of the Puranas, the long sprawling epics of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the terse, pithy aphorisms of the Upanishads, all equally form a part of this splendid religion. As Radhakrishnan says: "By accepting the significance of the different intuitions of reality and the different scriptures of the peoples living in India, Hinduism has come to be a tapestry of the most variegated tissues and almost endless diversity of hues."7

Range and Dimensions of Hinduism in the Present Thesis

Treatment of Hinduism in the present study will be confined and limited, for obvious reasons, to its use and application in the Indo-English novel from 1947 to 1977 only. However, as Hinduism touches life at different grades, this comprehensive exposition of it has to move at physical, moral and spiritual planes. For purposes of convenience I will start with the physical and the material and from this concrete, practical side of Hinduism, slowly move on to the more difficult scale of the ethical and the spiritual.
Purpose and Mode of Life

The Oriental in general is credited with being introverted and subjective by temperament. This is more so in the case of the Hindus. To the Hindu, life on this earth is a means and not an end in itself. It is an opportunity given by God to break free from the cycle of birth and death by cutting loose the bonds of passion and attachment. The spiritual motive dominates his life and in his view God-realization — the realization of one's true nature and identification with the divine ground of all beings — is the sumnum bonum of human existence. The Hindu code, therefore, ordains that the life of an individual may be lived in such a disciplined way that the attainment of this highest aim is made possible. With this end in view, Hinduism recommends division of individual life into four Ashramas or stages. The nature of this division clearly indicates that to the Hindu "life is a pilgrimage to the eternal life through different stages."\(^8\)

The Four Ashramas

The first period is that of training and discipline of body and mind. During this period a man is supposed to lead a
life of perfect celibacy, to study the scriptures, to acquire knowledge of various arts and equip himself for the battlefield of life in every way — physical, intellectual and moral. This is the period when "plastic youth is moulded to a life of duty."^9

The second stage is that of the householder. Marriage has great significance in the Hindu code though at the same time one is expected to take up different pursuits for the individual and social benefit at the householder's stage of life.

In the third stage a man is supposed to leave the world mentally and firmly get over his intense involvement in the worldly affairs. He is supposed to purify his mind and work at wiping out the worldly impressions imbibed in the course of last twenty-five years and thus get ready for the ultimate goal of God-realization. According to the Hindu ideal: "Each individual is called upon at a certain stage of his life to give up his wife and children and his caste and work. The last part of life's road has to be walked in single file."^10

In the final stage of life, man is supposed to devote himself wholly and solely to the work of works, the realization of the spiritual goal of life. As the Hindu attaches supreme importance to the unfolding of his divine self, every member of the clan — a king or a commoner — was expected to devote himself to the realization of the task before the ultimate dissolution of the body took place. The aim of the
recluse in this final stage of life is not to save his skin by avoiding worldly entanglements but to acquire that perfect equipoise of mind that will enable him to remain unruffled even in the face of the wildest storms. It is not a negative state, a lack of courage or shrinking from natural responsibilities, but a positive state that brings out the best in man, endowing him with an equanimity that cannot be disturbed, a mind that cannot be buffeted by the play of circumstances outside. In this last stage of life man hopes to reach that blessed state of mind when even the great kings and emperors of the world are no more than mere pawns on the chessboard of a game he plays to please himself and the rise and fall of the universe itself is a mere pastime to entertain him.

The balance in this division is heavily tilted in favour of inner purity, discipline and spiritual training, but Hinduism refrains from upholding any particular stage at the cost of others. It does not condemn one in favour of another as "every state is necessary, and in so far as it is necessary it is good. The blossom does not deny the leaf and the leaf does not deny the stalk nor the stalk the root. The general rule is that we should pass from stage to stage gradually."11

_Upanayana Ceremony_

There are some important ceremonies that are of vital interest to every Hindu. One such ceremony is _Upanayana —_
investiture with the sacred thread ceremony. It is the most significant of all the purificatory rites enjoined by Hinduism. At this ceremony a coil of three threads commonly called the Yajnopavita or "sacrificial thread" is worn over the left shoulder and allowed to hang down diagonally across the body to the right. The wearing of this thread by the dwija — the three twice-born castes (the Brahmin, the Kshatriya and Vaisya castes), was supposed to confer on the recipient a second spiritual birth. In the words of W.J.Wilkins: "The simple necklace of thread is the mark of the spiritual aristocracy of India and an earl (in England) is not more proud of his coronet than is the Hindu of this thread which marks him as a special favourite of the gods."

This ceremony is performed by the Guru, a man altogether distinct from the priest. When putting the sacred thread round the neck of the disciple for the first time, the Guru also gives him some important Mantra (a mystical formula of invocation or incantation). So this important function is also known as the ceremony of initiation.

Horoscope

To quote Wilkins again:

Perhaps the most important ceremony connected with the birth of a Hindu child is the preparation of his horoscope. The moment of birth is carefully noted, and from this the astrologer prepares a
more or less elaborate forecast of the child's fate.... Where evils are indicated or good foretold in this prophetic scroll, the Hindu seeks deliverance from the one and to gain the other by liberal donations to the gods.13

Surprising as it may seem, even in the present scientific age, events are often determined by what is written by astrologers. Success and happiness in the married state are assumed to be under astral control. Marriage arrangements, therefore, are broken off if the horoscope indicates any incompatibility between the bridegroom and the bride. There is a similar dependence on the horoscope in many other fields of life too.

Death-Rites

As observed earlier, Hinduism concerns itself with the life and career of a person right from the moment of his birth, if not earlier. And this hold of Hinduism on its wards does not cease with the cessation of breathing. It attends to and takes charge of their welfare even beyond death. The scriptures prescribe the funeral rites to be performed at the burning of dead bodies and give directions as to the subsequent ceremonies. The solemn conduct of funeral rites, the tender treatment of the last remains, an affectionate regard for the memory of the departed soul — all these are cherished and stuck to perhaps more tenaciously in Hinduism than in any other religion of the world.

Utmost importance is attached to Sradha ceremonies — i.e.,
offerings to deceased persons and *pitris* or ancestors generally. A man is enjoined upon to perform important rites at the death of his father or other elders and of his children as well. These ceremonies are believed to give liberation to a man after his death, a thing of uppermost importance to the Hindu. As these last religious rites are believed to be most successfully performed by the male descendants, a great sense of urgency is attached to the birth of a son. At birth, when the first breath is drawn, a discrimination is made in favour of the son due to a number of factors but perhaps the deepest root of this preference is in the last stated fact.

**Joint Family System**

There is a world of difference between the family life of the Hindu and what the word 'home' connotes in the English-speaking lands. The Hindu family is matriarchal, patriarchal and even hierarchical in pattern. Respect for elders is ingrained deep in all hearts. The supremacy of the father and mother is simply unquestioned — the sons continuing to obey and submit to their parents even when the former have gone grey with age. Wilkins writes:

On his marriage, an Englishman sets up an establishment of his own. The Hindu conducts his bride to his father's house, in which a room is provided for her. And whilst she is under the control of the senior lady in his
family, and finds her society amongst the other ladies, he is subject to his father and passes his time with the gentlemen, as he did before his wife came there..........................

During the day the gentlemen occupy the public rooms, transacting their business, or amusing themselves, whilst the women in their part of the house are engaged in household duties or in their own forms of recreation. It is indecorous for a man to speak to his wife during the day, their only time for conversation is when they retire to their apartment.14

In this patriarchal state of society all family property was supposed to be held in common by a sort of joint ownership, with the father or principal person in a household being regarded as a head partner. Wilkins sums up the position aptly:

The Hindu family system may be described as a sort of Joint Stock Company, in which head of the family is managing director, with almost unlimited powers; or as a little kingdom, in which he is an almost absolute sovereign. The sons, grandsons, nephews, who form the family, regard their earnings as belonging to the common treasury; and their expenditure is under the direct control of the Karta or head. ..........................

Next in authority to the Karta is the grihini; or chief wife in the family. This may be the wife or it may be the mother of the Karta. In all matters, relating to the management of the house, and to the conduct of the female members of the family, her influence is as great as that of the Karta in all that concerns the men. ... She superintends, if she does not actually do, the cooking and it is quite possible for her to make the home a happy or miserable one for the younger women... 'The grihini leads a life of self-denial. Her personal comforts are few [when, as frequently happens, she is a widow]. She lives upon the coarsest of meals and wears the commonest of raiment. She works from
morn till night. She fasts twice or thrice a month, and keeps vigils for securing the blessing of the gods towards her children, and, to make assurance doubly sure, commands her daughters and daughters-in-law to do the same. ... It is her pride to enforce purity and cleanliness with the utmost rigour. ... And other members of the family must follow her lead. Added to all this is the observance of religious festivals, the main object of which is to secure the prosperity of the family.15

It is explicitly laid down in the Hindu scriptures that a man must pay the highest respect to his parents, in fact, to all persons older than himself. The Taittiriya Upanishad declares emphatically: "Let your mother be a God to you; let your father be a God to you ..."16 Manu in his Law-Books asserts: "A youth who habitually salutes and constantly reveres the aged, prospers in four things, knowledge, reputation, fame and strength."17

Caste System

One unique institution of Hindu society is its caste system. Just like the life of the individual, the society too, according to the Hindu code, is divided into four parts, Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra. For how long this system has been in vogue, it is difficult to say exactly, but indications are that it has been there almost ever since the inception of the Hindu society. The first foreshadowing of the institution of caste can be traced as far back as the
celebrated Purusha-sukta of the Rig-Veda: "When they divided him (the embodied spirit), how did they cut him up? What was his mouth? What were his arms? and what his thighs and feet? The Brahmin was his mouth, the kingly soldier was made his arms, the husband-man his thighs, the servile Sudra issued from his feet."18

Eminent authorities on Hinduism claim that the central motive in introducing this caste division was to cut out "cold and cruel competition" and establish "harmony and co-operation" as the law of social life. They claim that it was intended to be something purely 'functional' — the function of the different castes being regarded as equally important to the well-being of the whole. Each caste was given its special purpose and function in recognition of the fact that "the serenity of the teacher, the heroism of the warrior, the honesty of the businessman, and the patience and energy of the worker all contribute to the social growth. Each has its own perfection."20 The Brahmins, assigned the duties of reading and teaching, were thus supposed to guide policy and preserve and maintain the ideals of the nation. To defend the people was the chief duty of the Kshatriyas. Vaisyas were the agriculturists, artisans and merchants, who were responsible for the economic well-being of the society. The Sudras were the labourers or unskilled workers whose principal duty was to serve the
before-mentioned classes.

It is possible that the system of caste division was the outcome of tolerance and trust. It might have aimed at finding a peaceful and democratic solution to the problem of racial conflicts, natural to a society peopled by various racial groups as India was. But whatever the intentions behind it, in actual practice writings on the subject were interpreted to mean that a Brahmin was by birth and divine right at the head of all creatures. He inherited superiority as his birthright, was created a leader of mankind, a sort of deity in human shape. No doubt, here and there in Hindu literature we come upon the idea that caste is a question of character, that one becomes a Brahmin by virtue of one's deed — not by family or birth — and that even a Chandal may be regarded as a Brahmin if he is of pure character. To quote from the Mahabharata:

190 Q. Is a person Brahmin by deeds or by birth?

A. A man is a Brahmin by deeds and not by birth. Truth, alms-giving, forgiveness, good conduct, want of cruelty, austerities and mercy, wherever these are to be found, he is a Brahmin, O king of the Nagas, for this is the law.

If these attributes are seen in a (born) Sudra and are not found in a (born) Brahmin, then that Sudra is not a Sudra, nor is that Brahmin a Brahmin.
Oh Serpent! Wherever these qualities are to be found, the law declares him to be a Brahmin, and wherever these qualities are not found (in a Brahmin), he, O Serpent, should be regarded as a Sudra.

191 Q. Can a Sudra become a Brahmin?

A. Yes.
By rightly performing these duties, O goddess, a Sudra becomes a Brahmin and a Vaisya becomes a Kshatriya...

By the good merits of these works a Sudra, though born in a low caste family, becomes a twice-born sanctified person when he has studied the laws and the Vedas.21

The sprinkling of such lines here and there, however, did not count for much. The main stream of Hindu thought continued to follow the line of thinking that there was something basically good or bad about the different castes existent in the society. It meant that superiority or inferiority, virtue or vice were inherent and not a matter of training or tradition. With the passage of time, this belief in the intrinsic superiority or inferiority of a particular caste came to be the worst tool of oppression and repression. The supremacy of the Brahmin in the social order led to a terrible dehumanization of the human element. In sharp contrast to the supremacy of the Brahmin was the pathetic condition of the Sudra, the lowest in the scale. The Sudra came to be castigated as an untouchable, though in the original caste division there was no stigma
attached to him.

Position of Women in Hindu Society

So far as the social status of a Hindu woman is concerned, the Hindu literature comes up with contradictory views on the subject. There are sacred Hindu texts which exalt and raise her to great heights. Sayan, commenting on Rig-Veda, says: "The wife and the husband, being the equal halves of one substance, are equal in every respect; both should join and take equal part in all work, religious and secular."°

A peep into the early Sanskrit literature thus shows that women were given a full chance of self-elevation and they were in no way inferior to their menfolk in moral or intellectual realms. They suffered from no checks or restrictions of any kind and could, like Gargi in Brahmanavayak Upanishad, rise to any heights.

But this high position of women, we find, was much degraded after the code of Manu. The condition of women, as depicted by this great Hindu Lawgiver, amounted to a complete abnegation of what in these days would be called 'women's rights'. According to his code of domestic life: "By a girl or by a young woman, or by a woman advanced in years, nothing must be done, even in her own dwelling-place, according to her mere pleasure. In childhood, must a female be dependent
on her father, in youth on her husband, her lord being dead, on her sons. A woman must never seek independence.\textsuperscript{23}

Thus we see that whereas in Vedic times woman was treated with great respect, the standards were lowered in Manu's time. After the Muslim invasions, things became still worse. And even today, in this age of freedom, democracy and women's liberation, the supremacy of the male goes unquestioned in the majority of the Hindu families. While every Hindu wife is most anxious to have sons, daughters are seldom prayed for or welcomed. Hindu wives not blessed with sons give costly presents to the deities, undertake journeys to shrines, endure severe fasts and incur great expense to obtain them. And it is not something surprising either. There are not only secular but also religious reasons at the root of this craving for a son. A son is required to perform the funeral rites of his parents and remoter ancestors. If these are not properly performed, a father must suffer in hell until someone releases him.

But whereas in theory the inferiority of women remains a fixed dogma with the Hindu, the practice luckily does not conform to the theory. The influence of the Hindu women in their families is great. As R.N. Dandekar puts it: "All that needs to be said in this connection is included in the dictum, namely, that a home
is not really a home unless a woman (grihini) presides over it." As Wilkins states:

"The Hindu women, ignorant and degraded though they be, exert great influence on their husbands and children. ... Keshub Chundra Sen, in one of his addresses in England, teaches in a humorous way that women exert great influence in the homes of India as in other countries. 'Woman has been defined as an adjective, agreeing with the noun man. I should rather say that man is a noun in the objective case, governed by the verb woman'.

Divorce

Divorce is not a commonly accepted practice in Hindu religion which recommends the ideal of monogamy for all. It may well be because the Hindus lay great stress on the spiritual ideal of marriage and regard the marriage relation as indissoluble. Hinduism seeks to sublimate sensual love into self-forgetful devotion and believes: "Instincts and passions are the raw material which are to be worked up into an ideal whole." Marriage for the Hindu, thus, is not the end of the struggle; it is but the beginning of a strenuous life where we attempt to realize a higher ideal by subordinating our private interests and inclinations. Radhakrishnan sums up the Hindu view on the subject in the following words:

In the first moments of infatuation we look upon our partners as angels from heaven, but soon the wonder wears away, and if we persist in our passion for perfection, we become agitated and often bitter. The unrest is the effect of a false ideal. The perfect relation
is to be created and not found. The existence of incompatibility is a challenge to a more vigorous effort. To resort to divorce is to confess defeat. The misfits and the maladjustments are but failures.27

Because of the great significance of the marriage contract among the Hindus, even if there are irreconcilable differences between the two parties, open rupture is very rare, if not altogether impossible. A sense of honour and propriety or fear of scandal restrains them from having recourse to a separation even where there is sufficient justification for it.

THE ETHICAL LEVEL

Unlike many other religions, Hinduism is not generally presented as a system of ethics. Consequently, the Hindus are often charged with not attaching much importance to ethics: "In India the ultimate goal of life is salvation. Morality is only a secondary concern."28

This fallacy might have risen from the fact that ethics is not for the Hindus the ultimate destiny that man may aspire to. The Hindu philosophy, in Dandekar's words, "transcends the realm of ethics."29 It lays stress on the need to realize the universal divinity, to achieve inner peace, to break down the barrier of ego and to realize our true self. And at
this highest level of spirituality, morality is of little avail. But though the Hindus do believe that there are courses beyond the moral to be traversed and heights still greater to be attained, there is no denying the fact that ethics for them forms the indispensable basis of all spiritual progress. No superstructure of morality can be built on a life of dissipation, self-indulgence, indiscipline or selfishness. Some of the important ethical principles discussed and recommended in Hindu religious texts are detailed below.

Nonviolence

On the moral plane one supreme law governing the conduct of a true Hindu is that of nonviolence. He is supposed to be utterly nonviolent and is meant to refrain from inflicting injury on any living being. In the words of Radhakrishnan:

To shrink from torturing the brute creation, to be sorry for a hunted hare, may be, according to our modern notions, silly sentimentalism fit only for squeamish women. But in the Upanishads love of brute-creation is considered to be a great virtue. Kindness and compassion for all that has life on earth is a general feature of Indian ethics. It is a crime to kill a deer for sport or worry a rat for amusement.

Diet

The moral principle of nonviolence in Hindu philosophy is realized in daily life in the form of vegetarianism. With
reference to the subject of diet, it is clearly laid down that as a general rule the eating of flesh and fish by twice-born men was prohibited — beef especially was the supreme taboo for all Hindus — and that the drinking of liquor was included among the five great sins.

Austerity

Great virtue is attached to austerity in general. The Hindu believes that man, if he hopes to live in peace and sanity, must refuse "to follow helpless and miserable the flesh that rages and riots. But this spirit of renunciation did not degenerate in the Upanishads into the insane asceticism of a later day, which revelled in the burning of bodies and such other practices."

Renunciation

In the Hindu view of life material renunciation is considered to be the chief path to deliverance. It is because the Hindus attach far more importance to renunciation than acquisition and possession that the monks, sadhus and sannyasins have always held such a pride of place in our society. In ancient India though the sannyasin was poor and penniless, lived on daily charity and had no power or authority of any kind, he was still held in such high esteem that the emperors bowed to him. Such was the reverence for holy life.
The life of the Sannyasin, as visualized by the Hindu, is a positive state. It is not meant to be the existence of a runaway coward or the life of blank passivity. A sannyasin is not a frustrated soul who takes to the life of solitude because he has suffered a shipwreck in life. Rather, he is a man of self-control and spiritual vision who has purified himself of all egoism. Renunciation, when rightly understood, means the surrender of all notions of I and mine, and not the giving up of the work enjoined by the scriptures. In Radhakrishnan's words: "Mahadeva, the prince of ascetics, drank poison for the sake of the world. Freedom on the highest level of existence expresses itself on the lower as the courage to suffer, sacrifice and die." 32

The Hindu religious texts ask us to renounce selfish desires but not all interests:

If a man's desire is the flesh, he becomes an adulterer; if things of beauty, an artist; if God, a saint. The desires for salvation and knowledge are highly commended. A distinction is drawn between true desires and false ones, and we are asked to share in the true ones. The filial piety and affection of a Naciketas, the intense love and devotion of a Savitri are not faults. The Lord of all creation has Kama in the sense of desire. 'He desired (akamayata) let me become many'. If the Lord has desires, why should not we? 33

Renunciation in the true spirit not only helps us gain immortality but also lends us better grace in our everyday life. As Radhakrishnan writes: 'By renunciation thou shouldst
enjoy' says the *Isa Upanishad*. We can enjoy the world if we are not burdened by the bane of worldly possessions; we are princes in the world if we do not harbour any thought of covetousness. Our enjoyment of the world is in direct proportion to our poverty. \(^3\!\!4\)

To despair of humanity and retire from the world in frustration is not the right interpretation of the Hindu spirit of renunciation. Bitterness against the world or peevish withdrawal from life is far from the spirit of Hinduism. Rather, the *Isa Upanishad* declares: "Only performing scripture-ordained works, should one desire to live a hundred years." \(^3\!\!5\)

What we are asked to do is not to forsake the world as such but transcend our world of little vanities, to pierce behind the veil and realize the presence of God in the world of nature and society.

**Detachment**

The doctrine of non-attachment or detachment is the lifeblood of Hinduism. Till the ties with the material are completely snapped, no spiritual greatness worth the name is realizable. And to realize this freedom from the bondage of outward things, we need not go to the solitude of the forest. True religion is more a matter of mind than any outward physical phenomenon. It means the curbing of our passions and the taming of our wild impulses. And this may be done by developing
a spirit of detachment and indifference to the results of our action or cultivating the spirit of Yoga, or impartiality.

As the Lord declares:

Abstaining from a work by right prescribed
Never is meet! So to abstain doth spring
From 'Darkness', and Delusion teacheth it.
Abstaining from a work grievous to flesh,
When one saith, 'Tis unpleasing' this is null!
Such an one act from 'Passion'; nought of gain
Wins his Renunciation! But, Arjun!
Abstaining from attachment to the work,
Abstaining from rewardment in the work,
While yet one doeth it full faithfully,
Saying, ' 'Tis right to do!' that is 'true' act
And abstinence!36

The perfect man, the ideal man, according to Hinduism, does all work in the spirit of detachment. Passion imprisons our spiritual nature. It deadens discretion and fetters reason. So Lord Krishna urges his favourite disciple to shun the deadly enemy: "Fixed in Yoga, do thy work, O winner of wealth, abandoning attachment, with an even mind in success and failure, for evenness of mind is called Yoga."37

Celibacy

The Hindu scriptures give us a code of duties, without which the moral ideal will be reduced to a mere mockery. One important feature of this code is that to control all forms of conduct is regarded as virtuous and its opposite vicious. Hence great virtue is attached to Brahmacharya (celibacy), provided the person is endowed with some spiritual and intellectual
assets and this mode of life is taken up with the aim of attaining something higher and more sublime in life. In fact, Hinduism regards celibacy as the sine qua non of spirituality. It is the cornerstone of all divine knowledge.

**Guru — The Spiritual Guide**

It is a firm conviction with the Hindus that a Guru or spiritual guide has to play an all-important part in the spiritual uplift of a man. The Guru, they believe, is nothing but God incarnate who has condescended to come down to the earth for the spiritual welfare of his wards. They further hold that "no right path in religion can be found without instruction, through initiation, by a qualified guide. Therefore, when a man or woman has chosen a Guru he or she also follows his directions without question, surrendering all his or her spiritual and moral freedom and judgement."³⁸

**Cow**

The cow is the sacred animal of the Hindus. It is believed to be a symbol of innocence, gentleness and prosperity. Cow-worship is an important feature of Hindu society. Love and respect for the cow is a sentiment very close and dear to the hearts of the Hindus in general and the unsophisticated, simpleminded villagers in particular.
Hinduism, thus, insists on a moral life. The Hindu sacred texts do not advocate knowledge in the narrow sense of the term as the sole means to salvation. They boldly declare: "The Self is not known through study of scriptures, nor through subtlety of the intellect, nor through much learning. ..." Right living is also insisted on. "By learning, a man cannot know Him, if he desist not from evil, if he control not his senses, if he quiet not his mind, and practice not meditation." A candidate for theology must possess both moral and spiritual attainments, if he is to be taken seriously. Moral life just cannot be separated from the knowledge of the highest order — i.e., divine knowledge.

THE SPIRITUAL OR METAPHYSICAL LEVEL

From the moral, the Hindu moves on to the more abstruse, the more abstract spiritual or metaphysical planes of existence. Some of the salient features of this aspect of Hinduism are mentioned below.

Concept of God

The concept of God in Hindu religion is a puzzling subject for a novice in the line. Here we have a full army of gods — all concretized in human or animal shape, consecrated in the temples and worshipped in the abodes of brick and stone. There is thus the stone-image god and then there is the pantheistic
concept of God. God is there in each and every object; it is present in every particle of dust and sand. This last point—the all-pervasiveness of God—this unity in the diversity of life, is one main theme of the Hindu scriptures. It is the central metaphysical thought percolating through the veins of Hindu society.

There is, however, no inherent contradiction involved in these various concepts of God. It only shows that the Hindus believe God-realization to be an evolutionary process. We have to vary our notions of God continually until from the world of notions we pass into the heart of reality itself. The Hindu accepts the fact that the search for God can be pursued at various levels and in various directions and feels sympathy with every stage of the search. Radhakrishnan expounds the thesis beautifully:

The same God expresses itself at one stage as power, at another as personality, at a third as all-comprehensive spirit, just as the same forces which put forth the green leaves also cause the crimson flowers to grow. We do not say that the crimson flowers are all the truth and the green leaves are all false. ... The bewildering polytheism of the masses and the uncompromising monotheism of the classes are for the Hindu the expressions of one and the same force at different levels.

Advaita

The philosophy of non-dualism is the main dynamic force of this ancient religion. It is the chief doctrine of the
Vedanta philosophy, "a system in which human speculation seems to me to have reached its very acme." According to this ideology, Brahman is the only reality manifesting itself into multifarious names and forms. In showing that the Supreme Brahman is at once cause and effect, the following illustrations are most popularly used: what gold is to ornament, what iron to armaments, what yarn to cloth, what milk to curds, what earth to a jar, the same is the universal essence called Brahman to this phenomenal world. These illustrations, first contained in Vyas's aphorisms on Vedanta, have become proverbial today and are further corroborated with lines such as these: "The sea and its waters are one, yet waves, foam, froth, etc., differ from each other." "As milk changes to curd, and water to ice, so is Brahma variously transformed and diversified." The Upanishads work this lionhearted roar again and again: "Truly has this universe come forth from Brahman. In Brahman it lives and has its being. Assuredly, all is Brahman. Let a man, freed from the taint of passion, worship Brahman alone." 

Isa Upanishad asserts:

Filled with Brahman are the things we see,
Filled with Brahman are the things we see not,
From out of Brahman floweth all that is,
From Brahman all — yet is He still the same.
The various objections to the Vedantic theory are effectively treated by Sankra and one may do nothing better than quote the whole context as such:

'How can this Universe, which is manifold, void of life, impure and irrational, proceed from him who is one, living, pure and rational?' We reply: The lifeless world can proceed from Brahma just as lifeless hair can spring from a living man. 'But in the universe we find him who enjoys and him who is enjoyed; how can he be both?' We reply: Such are the changes of the sea. There is no difference between the universe and Brahma. The effect is not different from its cause. He is the soul; the soul is he. The same earth produces diamonds, rock-crystal and vermilion. The same sun produces many kinds of plants. The same nourishment is converted into hair, nails, etc. As milk is changed into curds, and water into ice, so is Brahma variously transformed without external aids. So the spider spins its web from its own substance. So spirits assume various shapes.

As a corollary to this view is held the belief that the same Brahman is the final goal of the universal efforts of evolution. When one achieves this final goal of Brahmahood, one is free or emancipated. He who has not yet realized that Brahman is both creation and creator, actor and act, is still under delusion; he babbles like one asleep.

Transcending Body-consciousness

To touch the highest heights in the abstract spiritual realms Hinduism suggests perfect disidentification with the body. It insists on owning, accepting and then living up to the truth that we are not this body, nor the life of the
senses, nor the mind, nor any of the paraphernalia of the ego. We are, in fact, a divine spark from the divine spirit pervading the whole universe. We are, in fact, the spirit — undying, eternal, without beginning and without end.

Maya or Theory of Illusion

When it is realized that the whole universe is a manifestation of the Divine Spirit — only a little bubble on the vast Pacific — the world as we know it and see it becomes non-existent, something insubstantial and unreal. It is the Lord all around that we, in the narrowness of our thinking, regard and accept as the phenomenal world — solid and real. We forget the substratum and are lost in the apparent manifestation only. The wood is lost in the trees. The rope is mistaken for the snake. This is illusion, sheer Maya.

The theory of Maya is one of the pillars on which Vedanta, as represented by Sankara, rests. It assumes two main levels of reality — transcendental or absolute and phenomenal or empirical. The main tendency of this thought is to repudiate the reality of the phenomenal world and to liken the world to a maya, mirage, flash of lightning or froth. As Dandekar puts it:

It unequivocally asserts that all that we see before us is basically an illusion, a false presentment of god or the ultimate reality, an imagined transformation of the supreme being. The usual analogy in this respect is that of the rope which, under certain circumstances,
appears as serpent. It is pointed out that so long as
the world appears, it is in the Brahman which is the
only reality. This does not, however, affect the
transcendent character of the ultimate reality, Brahman,
in the same way as the essential 'ropeness' of the rope
is in no way affected by its transient appearance as
serpent.47

The universe and all that it contains is an emanation
from God. And yet, though all things are really forms of God,
men think of themselves as something different from Him. This
is Maya — all illusion or delusion. The pain, miseries and
vexations of life come from the influence of Maya, from the
individual imagining himself to be separate from the Divine
Being. To be delivered from the illusion, which has somehow
come to dominate the race of man, is the end of all endeavours
— the final stage in our evolutionary process. The Vedantists,
an influential school of Hinduism, argue that as the world of
nature is unreal and human history illusory, we should do our
best to overcome this illusion, to get beyond this veil of
Maya in order to realize what truth is.

The Upanishads indicate what is meant by realizing the
Truth. It consists in realizing our identity with God. The
moment this is done and the personal soul is set free from
this self-imposed ignorance by a proper understanding of the
truth, the illusion vanishes. Identity of the narrow individual
self and of the whole phenomenal universe with the only really
existing spirit is re-established. Now man's separate existence
ends and he gains true blessedness in reunion with the Divine.
States of the Spirit

The illusive and unreal nature of the world around is logically, rationally and scientifically explained by referring to the three states of human experience — waking, dream and sound sleep. Whereas doctrines of all the other religions of the world are based on the one state of waking, the Hindu takes into account the other two states of dreaming and sound sleep too. In the waking state all the things of the world around seem to be real; but they cease to exist for us when we pass into the dreaming state. In the latter condition, we create a new world of our own, as real and true-looking as the one in the waking state had seemed to be. When we pass into sound sleep, both the worlds — the waking and the dreaming — cease to exist, but still we live and on waking claim a very soothing experience. That, the Hindu declares, is our real self — the eternal and conscious witness to all these states.

Karmaphal

Though the world phenomenal ceases to exist or have any meaning for us when we go beyond time, space and causation, on the lower plane, when we are still not free from the childish dreams of profession, position, relationship, etc., we are told not to forget that the world is governed by certain moral laws. They are as systematic and inexorable as the physical laws themselves. One such — very important for frail human beings —
is the law of Divine retribution, of Karmaphal. Nothing in the
world goes unpunished or unrewarded. As we sow, so shall we
reap. This faith in the Karma or Karmaphal theory has a very
far-reaching effect. It helps people to keep to the right
path and also to bear things more calmly and face disaster with
fortitude. Commenting on this doctrine, Radhakrishnan remarks:

The law of Karma is the counterpart in the moral
world of the physical law of uniformity. ... According to the principle of Karma there is nothing
uncertain or capricious in the moral world. We reap
what we sow. The good seed brings a harvest of good,
the evil of evil. ... The attempt to overleap the
law of Karma is as futile as the attempt to leap over
one's shadow. It is a psychological principle that
our life carries within it a record that time cannot
blur or death erase.48

The Karma theory is thus simply another name for the
type of cause and effect. It is our actions in our previous
birth that control our present and govern our fate today just
as what we do today will decide our lot tomorrow.

Fate or Predestination

Perhaps no doctrine in Hinduism is more commonly and more
implicitly believed in than that the varied experiences of
human life are arranged by the deity, and that it is useless
to oppose the Divine decrees. As a newborn child lies by its
mother's side, the ruler of the world writes a sketch of its
career on its forehead, and what is written is inevitable. A
man in sorrow may often be heard remarking, "It is written."
This fatalism has the negative effect of paralyzing effort. Men, disinclined to do their best in life, turn it into a message of despair.

However, there is also a brighter and more attractive side to this faith in the Fates above. If there are conspicuous vices flowing from this philosophy, it has also conspicuous virtues to commend it. It gives the Hindu great fortitude to oppose the inevitable evils, a fortitude such as the Stoics might attribute to their ideal age. And we may safely say of him what Macaulay in his essay on Warren Hastings says of a Bengali in particular: "He has been known to endure torture with the firmness of Mucius, and to mount the scaffold with the steady step and even pulse of Algernon Sidney." It is not that the Hindus do not feel or are insensitive to the blows of fate, but they believe that whatever comes is their fate, and must be patiently endured.

**Liberation, Emancipation or Mukti**

The cycle of birth and death goes on till we realize our true self and attain liberation. This liberation or _Moksha_ is the highest goal laid down by the Hindu religion. Says Swami Shankracharya: "What greater fool is there than the man who having obtained a rare human body, and a masculine body too, neglects to achieve the real end (viz. liberation) of this life?" It is the state of complete deliverance or emancipation.
Moksha does not mean ascending high into some geographical regions invisible to us mortals. It is a state of spiritual realization. As Dandekar puts it: "... moksha consists in throwing off the shackles of individuality and thereby passing into the mystic state of spiritual union with the Supreme being."\textsuperscript{51}

Death

When the body and things of the world are rejected as chaff only, an outer garment at its best, death naturally ceases to have any terror in the Hindu eye. Death causes dissolution of the body but that is no cessation of life by the highest standards of Hindu philosophy. Ever since the ancient Vedic period the Hindu was convinced that death was not the end of things. Just as day follows night, life follows death. Beings who once had been, could never cease to be. The current of life flows on and on even after the physical end has come. Says the Lord in the Bhagavada Gita: "In fact, there never was a time when I was not, nor when you or these kings were not. Nor is it a fact that hereafter we shall all cease to be."\textsuperscript{52}

Hindu Mythology

Hindu Mythology is a very colourful thing. It refers to
so many Avatars of God — incarnations of the Lord on this earth. Whenever there is degeneration in the human ranks, whenever virtue subsides and vice prevails, the Lord comes down in human or other form to help mankind. These different incarnations of the Lord are the subject of different great epics and all the rich Mythology of the Hindus. These Avatars are many in number and always bring about triumph of the good over evil. Whenever the rot sets in, it is a call to the Divine to turn the tide. These Mythological accounts of Divine Godheads save things from looking too gloomy.

We thus see that in this conglomeration of ideas called Hinduism there is room for a vast range of emotions. Being very ancient, this religion has experienced many a rise and fall. It has passed through various vicissitudes. It was relegated to the background by Buddhism. It experienced a revival with the coming of Swami Shankracharya. In modern times again, it was diluted by the cultural currents around. But though altered and liberalized here and there, in fundamentals, it, astonishingly enough, remains the old religion still.

Hinduism makes a fascinating study. Over the centuries a mysterious aura has developed round this ancient religion—especially in the eyes of the foreigners. Something supernatural has come to be associated with it — specially with the Yoga part of it. And because of Hinduism, the whole land of Bharat has come to be looked upon as a land of mystery and miracles.
References and Notes


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15Ibid., pp. 20-23.

17 Quoted from Manu by Monier Williams in Indian Wisdom (Delhi: Indian Reprint Publishing Co., 1974), pp. 248-49.

18 Ibid., pp. 24-25.

19 The Hindu View of Life, p. 111.

20 Ibid., p. 108.


22 The Hindu View of Life, Footnote on p. 63.

23 Wilkins, Quoted from "Dharma Sastra" on p. 180.


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43 Wilkins, p.307.

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45 "Isha" in *The Upanishads*, p.27.

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48 Indian Philosophy, I, 244–45.

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Now I want to write recollections of my own country. Yes, I want to write about my own country till I simply exhaust my store.

Katherine Mansfield.