

COMMENTS ATTENDING SLIDE PRESENTATION:
TRADITION AND RELIGION IN INDIA

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Contemporary Indians take pride in pointing out that India is the world's largest democracy, that it is now self-sufficient in food despite its increasing population growing toward 800,000,000, and that it is making impressive advances in industry, technology and atomic research. A small urbanized elite has become semi-westernized, but for the mass of people in India, life has changed little. Indeed they have endured, unchanged, in their villages for thousands of years. It has been said that in India "air travel is in the 1980s, cars, are in the 1950s, and the telephone is in the 1930s."¹ Life in many villages is in the pre-industrial period, and in the more remote isolated areas it is even more primitive.

India, where one-sixth of the world's people and one-fourth of the world's cattle live, is "a tapestry of cultures, tongues, diets, deities and dress."² The state recognizes fifteen official languages, but more than 1,500 languages are spoken. The binding cord that holds this strange and fascinating people together is Hinduism.

An American scholar asserted that "Hinduism is the most confused, confusing and distinctive of all the world's religions."³ It has no founder, no central authority or organization, no single fixed creed. Hinduism is more than a religion - it is a total way of life. It gives India its unique outlook and character.

Each act of the orthodox Hindu's existence - rising in the morning, bathing, eating, and playing - is regulated by rituals. But not all Hindus are orthodox. Hinduism is flexible, it accommodates different beliefs and tolerates different points of view, including sects that are materialistic, agnostic, and atheistic. Hinduism was established before Moses received the Ten Commandments, and over the centuries it has rejected little and absorbed much. Rival beliefs are not feared, they are simply incorporated into Hinduism.

Hinduism is a monotheistic religion which believes in one supreme being which can manifest itself in many forms. The sacred triad consists of Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the protector; and Shiva, the destroyer. These three represent the birth-life-death cycle of all living things. The gods that appear to westerners as idols, are to Hindus manifestations of

the one supreme being who is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent.

At its most widely practiced level, Hinduism is pantheistic. Worshipping snakes, trees and local deities is commonplace among rural Indians.

An enormous amount of time and resources are devoted to religion in India. The landscape is dotted with Hindu temples with intricately carved gods and goddesses. A substantial portion of India's resources is spent building and maintaining temples. There are numerous religious holy days and festivals when work ceases. Indians spend much time in prayer. They would not think of making a major decision or beginning a major undertaking without first consulting an astrologer to make sure the time was auspicious. In the West if a man becomes unhappy or disturbed, he might seek help from a psychiatrist. In India, such a man would seek guidance from his guru and under his instruction chant appropriate mantras, do yoga asanas and meditation to bring peace to his tortured mind. In the homes a room or a portion of a room is set aside for religious worship. The goal of each Hindu is to bathe in the Ganges river. They believe that doing so washes away their sins. When Hindus die, their bodies are cremated and the ashes of the fortunate ones are thrown into the Ganges from where they will be reincarnated into another life. Varanasi, the oldest city in India, is a popular spot for pilgrimages to the Ganges.

Tradition and religion have a powerful impact on family life in India. The vast majority of Hindu marriages are arranged by the parents, who are careful to join couples not only from the same religion but also the same economic class and caste. For those that can afford it, the wedding ceremony is a festive as well as a sacred occasion. Indian life revolves around the extended family.

The Indian pursuit of religion means largely, if not exclusively, the pursuit of peace of mind. Hence the emphasis on detachment, otherworldliness, prayer, and meditation. As Indian journalist Kushwant Singh observes,

social service has never been given top priority by practicing Hindus, Muslims or Sikhs. You will seldom see Indian men of religion involve themselves in relief works following calamities like earthquakes, floods, droughts, famines, or epidemics. If you question them on the subject, you will get the stock answer: 'The government should do something about it.'⁴

Although over eighty percent of India is Hindu, other religions are practiced there too. The largest of the minority

religions are the Muslims, with approximately 80,000,000 adherents. Religious and political differences between Hindus and Muslims led to bitter fighting when India and Pakistan were divided following the British withdrawal after World War II. In some areas that friction has continued up to the present.

Muslim mosques facing Mecca are numerous in northern India. The dietary laws of Hindus and Muslims are different. Hindus worship the cow. The Muslims eat it. Hindus, if non-vegetarian, eat pork. The Muslims, like the Jews, consider the pig unclean.

Muslim invaders conquered much of India and ruled the country for nearly three centuries. Muslim architectural influence can be seen in the many magnificent palaces left from that era. The Red Fort in Delhi is a fine example of Muslim architecture, Fatehpur Sikri, the palace of Akbar the Great, is another. But the most impressive of all is the Taj Mahal at Agra. Built from 1631 to 1653 by Shah Jahan, it was constructed as a tomb for his wife, Mumtaz. Though never cleaned, this 17th century marble structure is regarded by many as the most beautiful building in the world.

Another minority religion in India is Christianity, with approximately 18,000,000 followers located primarily in the south. According to tradition, the apostle Thomas brought Christianity to India. A church in Madras named for him claims to hold his remains. Christian growth came under the British rule. Christian churches can now be seen in the Kerala countryside and in urban areas such as Madras and Calcutta. The lasting impact of Christianity is evident in schools and colleges, such as Madras Christian College, as well as in increased social awareness and social services, including hospitals and clinics in various parts of the country, and Mother Teresa's work with the homeless and diseased in Calcutta.

In Sarnath, outside the holy city of Varanasi, a young nobleman, Gautama, was born in the 6th century B.C. Known as Buddha, he became "enlightened" and sought to alleviate human suffering through self-denial and purification of the spirit. At Sarnath, where this stupa dedicated to Buddha is located, he gave his first sermon and built a monastery for his followers. After his death, Buddhism spread across Asia to Thailand and Burma. In India, however, Buddhism was absorbed by Hinduism. To Hindus, Buddha became one of the manifestations of the Hindu god Vishnu. Ironically, India, the birthplace of Buddha, has few Buddhists today.

Other minority religions in India include the aggressive Sikhs of the Punjab and the gentle Jains who renounce all worldly possessions and try not to harm any living thing. Some Jains, regarding clothes as a source of pride, go naked, while others

wear masks over their mouths for fear of accidentally inhaling insect and killing it.

Unlike the western mind which views time as a steady progression, and which "knows" that events of the past, present and future are distinct, the Indian mind "knows" just the opposite. For Hindus, everything that happens has happened before and will happen again; anything that has not happened will never happen. Time, thus, is viewed as a revolving cycle without beginning or end, and everything in the universe is bound together within the constantly repeated cycle of time.

Because of such concepts, tradition is stronger in India than in the West. Instead of striving for innovation, Indians emphasize traditional music and dance, performed today just as it was hundreds of years ago. Traditional family ceremonies continued without change with the men segregated on one side and the women on the other. Despite the leadership of Indira Gandhi, few Indian women have been liberated by western standards. Men often wear western style clothes while women continue to wear saris. Shorts are not worn by Indian women, nor are bath suits. In the villages where seventy percent of the people live, most work is done in the traditional manner. Fishermen fish from the shore in primitive boats. Bricks are made by hand. Craftsmen carve their statues and ornaments by hand. Beautiful wool and silk carpets are made in Kashmir by hand labor, a slow and tedious process that takes months to complete a small rug. Farming is done with few machines. Instead of tractors, plows are usually pulled by bullocks or camels. India is a poor country with very cheap labor. Gasoline is expensive and electricity is inadequate so machines are shunned and traditional means of labor are continued. Thus, beneath the thin veneer of western influence, traditional India remains largely unchanged.

NOTES

¹Trevor Fishlock, India File, (New Delhi: Rupa & Co., 1985),

p. 9.

²Ibid., p. 5.

³Joe David Brown, India, (New York: Time Incorporated, 1986), p. 30.

⁴Khushwant Singh, We Indians, (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1984), p. 43.