

COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL IN THE LIGHT OF HINDU RELIGION

Prof. Dr. J. D. Baskara Doss

Vice President, Curriculum Director
National Institute of Leadership
Training, Chennai-80.

Indian Scenario before Christ

As acknowledged by a great many scholars of the West and the East, the heritage of Indian religion and spirituality is very rich and the contributory factors of Dravidian elements towards this is highly commendable. Buddhism and Jainism were the two major atheistic or agnostic religions originated in India in the 6th century B.C. and they flourished throughout the length and breadth of the country. As is evident from history, there was no theistic religion followed by the Indians during the era prior to Christ.

No doubt, people were worshipping nature, ancestors, warriors and heroes, minor gods etc., In many places sacrificial worship was very much prevalent and we have no recorded evidence to show the practice of monotheistic religion including Hindu religion or Hinduism. In fact, the name Hinduism is not to be traced in the Indian History Before 1794 A.D. This name was first used by Sir William Jones, the former supreme court Judge of British India and there after this name had gained the currency of permanent usage by everybody. It would be appropriate to call the religions developed in India by the name 'India Religion(s)'. Therefore, Hinduism is just 216 years old!

How old is Indian Christianity?

Christianity in India is almost as old as Jesus himself! It was the direct disciple of Jesus, Apostle Thomas, who propagated Christianity in Indian soil in 49 A.D. when he was in Taxila during the reign of Gondopharus and in 52 A.D. when he landed in Kodungallur (Muziri) and spread the gospel message of Jesus from Malabar Coast to Coromandal coast till his martyrdom in 72 A.D. in St. Thomas Mount.

Jawaharlal Nehru writes in his "Glimpses of World History," you may be surprised to learn Christianity came to India long before it went to England and Western Europe, and when even in Rome it was a despised and proscribed sect-within hundred years or so of the death of Jesus, Christian missionaries came to South India by sea"¹. This fact was further strengthened

by S.Radhakrishnan thus;"Christianity has flourished in India from the beginning of the Christian era. The Syrian Christian of Malabar believe that their form of Christianity is Apostolic derived directly from the Apostle Thomas"².

A hoard of many other historical references have been evidenced by great many scholars to support this fact.

Thomas Christainity and Hindu Religion

The Supreme Court of India in its judgment pronounced recently had held that Hinduism is not a religion but it is a way of life. It is absolutely true that Hinduism is synonymous with 'Hindutva', a way of life, where people have no social equality. It upholds the hierarchy of caste system through Hindu sastras and the tenets of Indian philosophy.

But Hindu Religion, as such, is different from 'Hinduism,' and it is this name which refers to 'sixfold religion' viz., Saivism, Vaishnavism, Saktam, Gaumaram, Ganapatyam and Sauram. These six religions are conglomerated into two major religions namely, Saivism and Vaishnavism. At the present scenario, Saivism and Vaishnavism are collectively referred by the common terminology-Hindu religion.

The roots of popular Hindu religion cannot be traced in the four Aryan Vedas or in the other Brahminical literature.

Saivism and Vaishnavism were the resultant products of Tamil Bhakti Movement of Alvars (Vaishnavite saints) and Nayanmars (Saivite saints) of Tamil Nadu and ofcourse it was Saint Thiruvalluvar's Thirukkural which had set the wheel in motion.

But a careful analysis and scrutiny show that it was the apostolic mission of St. Thomas in the Tamil country had contributed a lion's share to the origin and development of Saivism and Vaishnavism-they developed around 7th century of Christ Era.

Saivism and Vaishnavism and the Holy Bible

The name of the Supreme God of saivism is Sivan and Vaishnavism is Vishnu. In fact, they are not two different gods but two different names of one God. The Tamil proverb 'Ariyum Sivanum Onnu, Ariyathavan Vaayila Mannu'. ie., 'Ari' (Hari-Vishnu) and 'Sivan' are one and the same God-justifies this.

It is significant to note that Lord Siva is known by the names: 'Centhazhalon', 'Thee Vannan', 'sheyon', 'Sivan'- all Tamil names, which mean, the 'One who is as red as the fire'. In the same way Lord Vishnu is

known by the names: 'Megan', 'Mega Vannan', 'Mukil Vannan', 'Vinnu' (Vishnu)-the Tamil names which mean the 'One who is as dark as the cloud'.

We must scrutinize how the elements fire and cloud used to signify the Supreme Lord. We have the answer in the Holy Bible. God encountered Moses in the form of fire on the mount Horeb-at that time Moses knew not the nomenclature of God³. When Moses went upon the Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, it was wrapped in fire and smoke as the Lord had descended upon it. Likewise when the people of Israel were led out of captivity from Egypt, God went forth in the pillar of cloud during day. The Lord used to speak to Moses from the cloud in the meeting of tent. 'The God the Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there and proclaimed the name of the Lord'⁴. The Israelites, throughout their journey in the wilderness, knew the appearance of God in the form of fire and cloud. Eventually, it is not illogical to conclude that it was the Old Testament which had given rise to Sivan and Vishnu.

But a new meaning has been attributed to the word 'sivam' which means love-'Anbae Sivam' (God is Love). So the fundamental doctrine of Saivism is the Love of God reflected on the sinful human beings. The name 'Vishnu' is the corrupt form of the Tamil word 'Vin' (sky) and the fundamental doctrine of Vaishnavism is the avatar hood (incarnation) of God to redeem the world from the clutches of sin and the devil. The main purpose of avatar in mythological exposition in Vaishnavite writings clearly expose that the Lord emanated as an avatar to protect the human beings from the deceptive designs of the demon which had enslaved the human beings.

Basic doctrines of Christianity are the basic doctrines of Hindu Religion

We had already pointed out that it was the apostolic mission of St. Thomas had given birth to the development of Hindu Religion. The doctrine of Incarnation, the doctrine of Trinity the doctrine of fulfillment of sacrifice, the doctrine of forgiveness of sin, the doctrine of salvation by faith are some of the important and principal doctrines of Christianity.

The coequality of theological doctrines of Christianity and Hindu Religion have been scholastically brought out by eminent critics. A few of them shall be presented in the following lines.

Avatar doctrine

The meaning of the Sanskrit word 'avatar' is 'the process of coming down' – it means that the Supreme Lord Almighty's process of descending in this mundane world as a human being. The Vaishnavite theology exemplifies this dogma with the term '*divyam janma*'⁵ a clean expression of divine birth. This refers to the 'virgin birth' of Jesus. Avatar is the opposite of ascension- it does not give any room for the deification of the human beings of any rank, elevated to the level of godhead.

Saivasiddhanta emphasises that the unseen and unperceivable God lost his transcending nature and came into this world as a human being and offered himself for us.

“Akalamaai Yaarum arivarithu Apporul

Sakalamaai Vanthathenru unthipara

Thaankat thanthathenru unthipara”⁶

Thirumoolar praises the incarnate God who came down to this world in order to equalize the consequences of sin (the first sin)⁷. Sivagnanbhodam in its aphorism text elucidates that the Lord had enveloped the human nature so as to redeem the lost soul.⁸

The sanctuary of Vaishnavite temple is adorned with the image of Vishnu unlike the Saivite sanctuary, because God descended as an avatar. Bhagavad Gita says that god’s incarnation was to protect the righteous and to annihilate the unrighteous.⁹ This phenomenon was prophesized by Jesus in Matthew 13:41-42. Adam’s sin was the root cause for the decline of ‘dharma’ and uprising of ‘adharma’ and it had necessitated the Supreme God to send his son to save the world. This is reflected in Gita 4:7.

Fulfillment of sacrifice:

The major Indian Religions do not advocate sacrificial worship and this sacrificial worship was stopped in the Christ Era. The Old Testament mode of worship was to offer sacrifice. The New Testament puts an end to this as the ‘*supreme sacrifice*’ was historically offered by Jesus Christ. That is why Saivism and Vaishnavism reverentially follow the practice of adorning their foreheads with ‘KunKumam’ and ‘Naamam’(the red line in between the white ‘thiruman’. The Passover practice of applying blood is still in vogue by way of applying ‘Kaavi’ (Red lines) on the walls of the Hindu temples.

The empty ‘pali peetam’ (sacrificial) altar) in the Hindu temples bear witness for the fulfillment of sacrifice. Every Hindu temple has a sacrificial altar but not bloody sacrifice is offered.

In Bhagavad Gita the incarnate God says:

‘cha atra tehe aham eva ati yajna’¹⁰

‘Aham yajna’¹¹

‘Aham hi sarva yajnam bokta’¹²

‘yajnam’ means sacrifice-God himself became sacrifice.

Thirumangai Alwar praises God that he himself is the Veda, sacrifice and the universe.

“Vedamum veliyum vinnum iru sudarum aathiyum aanaan”¹³

Countless references for the fulfillment of sacrifice could be cited from Saivite scriptures and Vedantic texts as well.

Tirune God:

The doctrine of Trinity is the contribution of Christianity to the world religions. This dogmatic principle is the underlying doctrine of Saivism and Vaishnavism. The Saivite theology explains this as ‘*Para*’, ‘*Apara*’ and ‘*Parapara*’, the Vaishnavite theology explains this as ‘*Paraswarupa*’, ‘*Vibhava swarupa*’ and ‘*Antaryami swarupa*’. Though the Vyuha concept is clubbed with Vibhava (Inearnate) it was devised by the Vrishni family to include its heroes into the realm of avatar doctrine. The ‘*Arca*’ form was introduced into the Vibhava by Acharyas like Ramanuja saying the deity resides in the idol. (The idol worship is an expression of the avatar of God in human form). The Christian Trinity is compared in the following table.

| | Trinity | Saivism | Vaishnavism | Christianity |
|-------------------|-----------|----------|--------------------------|---------------------|
| Transcending form | Formless | Param | Para | God the Father |
| Incarnate form | With form | Aparam | Vibhava Vyuha Arca | God the Son |
| Indwelling form | Semiform | Parapara | Antaryami | God the Holy spirit |

Forgiveness of sin and salvation:

The Christian doctrine of ‘Adam’s sin’ (original sin) and ‘Individual sin’ are termed by Saivism as ‘*sahaja malam*’ and ‘*Kanma malam*’ and by Vaishnavism as ‘*Janma bhandam*’ and ‘*Karma bhandam*’ (Gita). Thirukkural terms these as ‘*Irul ser Iru Vinai*’ (two sins leading into hell). These two sins were forgiven by god by the power of his suffering grace (Thavam-Penence).

According to Alwar

“Paaramaya Pazha vinai parraruththu ennaith than
Vaaramakki vaiththan vaiththanri ennul pukunthaan
Kora maathavam seithanan”¹⁴

When it comes to the saving grace of god the devotee is expected to seek refuge in him leaving behind him his false hope of his own self-righteousness and his virtuous deeds. It is God who is victorious over sin and death and he alone can forgive sin and redeem a sinner and grant him 'mukti' according to Gita. It says:

“Completely relinquishing all dharmas,

seek Me alone for refuge

I will release from all sins”¹⁵

For this, Vaishnavism prescribes 'prapatti'-complete surrender-the kitten submitting to the mother cat (marjara) and the young one of the monkey clinging on to the belly of the mother (monkey-morkata)- these two types of complete surrender and this 'prapathi' is explained as the change of the heart on the part of the devotee and his absolute confidence on the saving grace of God. This is what Christ had taught as saying: “come to me all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”¹⁶

‘Communicating the gospel in the light of Hindu religion’ is a possible and positive approach which is the need of the hour. It should form as the core of the ‘End Time Ministries’ as the seed of salvific message had already been sown by the ‘Indian Apostle’(St.Thomas), Bartholomew and other missionaries from the very beginning of the era of Christ, i.e., from the very first century.

We should be aware of the fact that distortions, destructions, misinterpretations, devised scholastic commentaries, vulgar mythical expositions etc., have taken avenues into the originally conceptualized early writings. Then it may not be a problematic task for an evangelist to make use of the Hindu scriptures, their propositions, their faiths etc. as the imminent and powerful tools to ‘demolish the arguments’ (St. Paul)

References:

1. Jawaharlal Nehru, Glimpses of World History, 1934, Quoted by: Pothan, The Syrian Christians of Kerala, Asia Pub. House, Madras, 1963, p.3.
2. Radhakrishnan, s., East and West in Religion, 1958, Quoted by: Pothan, op.cit., p.3.
3. Exodus, 3:1-2
4. Ibid, 34:5
5. Bhagavad Gita, 4:9
6. Thiru Unthiyar, 1.
7. Thirumoolar, Thirumanthiram, 113.
8. Sivagnanabhodam, 8.
9. Bhagavad Gita, 4:8.
10. Ibid, 8:4.
11. Ibid, 9:16
12. Ibid, 9:24
13. Nalayira Thiruvap Prabhandam, 1786.
14. Ibid, 931.
15. Gita, 18:66.
16. Malthew, 11:28