



## RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND HINDUISM

Dr. Srivastava Devi Prasad\*

PDF Scholar

JNV University Jodhpur Raj.

Email-sriva1582@gmail.com

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Let us first analyze the word "tolerance", as the topic of the paper is **RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE AND HINDUISM**. This sense is best conveyed by a quotation from a Standard English dictionary:

"... the disposition to tolerate or allow the existence of beliefs, practices or habits differing from one's own; now often freedom from bigotry, sympathetic understanding of others' beliefs, etcetera, without acceptance of them..."<sup>1</sup>

The above sense of the word which is now the main or usual sense became prominent perhaps only in the 17/18th centuries when Western Europe first saw the dawn of the age of tolerance.<sup>2</sup> The original uses of the word referred to tolerance of metals, gold or silver coins, of bridges to bear stress, or the capacity of a person to bear pain and suffering, *i.e.* the quality of endurance or the ability to bear irritants or pressures, etc. These uses have all become the specialized meanings of the word. The use of "tolerance" has now pushed aside other uses into the conceptual background, as it were.

Some other definitions- "Tolerance is the ability to forgive those who tend to speak before thinking."<sup>3</sup>

Let us now distinguish the concept of tolerance from some other psychologically related or cognate concepts with which it is liable to be confused. (1) A tolerant person may, but need not, be a skeptic or atheist. Indeed, tolerance is perfectly compatible with the most passionate and profound religious faith or commitment to basic values as also with skepticism. (2) A tolerant person may, but need not, be indifferent to religion. Even if he is indifferent himself, a truly tolerant person would respect a person who is genuinely religious, and if the tolerant person be also brave enough, he would stand up for the rights of the religious person. "I do not believe a

word of what you say, but I shall give my life to defend your right to say so”, admirably sums up the matter. (3) A tolerant person may, but need not, be secular in the current sense of keeping the functions of the church and of the state apart. If a religious person upholds the organic unity of the church and of the state and if his religion does not demand any discrimination against other groups or within his own group, the practice of tolerance would be quite possible in consonance with his religion. Since, however, most religions do, in fact, have some in-built elements of inter-group or intra-group discrimination (in some form or other), tolerance cannot be put into practice without separating the church from the state and viewing religion as primarily a moral-spiritual experience rather than a set of political and socio-economic laws binding upon its followers. But secularism is neutral with regard to belief in God and the hereafter, and commitment to secularism does not imply or even suggest that the secular person is a theist, atheist, or agnostic, though it certainly does imply de-linking the respective spheres of religion and state. (4) A tolerant person may, but need not, be apathetic towards persuading others to his own values or beliefs. Apathy is not any index of tolerance, but only unconcern for others. But the concern of a tolerant person for others is always tempered by sympathy and tender humility instead of being a conceited imposition of one's own values as the one and only truth. (5) A tolerant person may, but need not always or habitually, practice a discreet silence in the face of conflicting truth-claims. Tolerance is not passive acquiescence to opposed views for fear of giving offence to others or the fear of communication. Tolerance is perfectly compatible with free communication and spontaneous self-expression in an atmosphere of mutual respect and good will.<sup>4</sup>

In the long run, communication helps to promote tolerance and greater harmony despite making un-bridged differences clearer or more articulate. (6) A tolerant person may, but need not, be given to habitual appeasement of those who disagree with him. Tolerance is an intrinsic value like love or beauty, while appeasement is a strategy for avoiding conflict and achieving success. It may lead a man to voluntary risks and sacrifice for impersonal ends, while appeasement implies expediency and following the least line of resistance. Indeed, a tolerant person may well be extremely firm and unbending in discharging his moral obligations and in resisting moral evil.

**CONCEPT OF TOLERANCE IN INDIAN** - Recently Reacting to the increasing dialogue on “intolerance” in the country, the Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama said the Indian Constitution stressed on secularism and religious freedom. Speaking at the launch of Tawazun India, a city-based thinktank that focuses on “counter extremism”, here on Sunday, he said India was the best example of religious tolerance, where non-violence and religious harmony was propagated as early as 3,000 years ago. Stressing on the need to educate the young in secularism and teach them the “goodness of being peaceful”, he said secular ethics should be part of modern education. He said the attack on people in Paris was a setback to people in France, but a strong will among the multi-religious population in Europe should prevail and the elders should tell the young about peaceful existence.

“I have observed ‘secular disrespect’ in the West... There are mischievous people in all faiths. The perception of Islam is wrong; it is a peaceful community,”<sup>5</sup> he argued.

As I have observed by the studies of Indian literature there is no exact equivalent of the word "tolerance". The word "ksama" which has been used in the Gita and other works means endurance, which was also the original sense of the English word. Likewise, the Sanskrit word "sahana" also means endurance or forbearance, while the derivative "sahanasilata" means the trait or character of endurance. The word "ksama" as used in modern Hindi means forgiveness. The expression "sarva-dharma-samana-bhava" has been coined in some quarters for secularism in the highest sense. But, as we have seen, tolerance is a wider concept than "equal respect for all religions", since tolerance

applies to much that is not religion, say, art, literature, manners, morals, and taste, etcetera, or even opposed to religion.

The absence of a Sanskrit word, however, does not mean that the attitude or value of tolerance was not known in ancient India. The Jaina doctrine of anekanta-vada and the Hindu approaches of adhikara and ista-devata capture the spirit of tolerating plural truth-claims in all walks of life. Viewed as a methodological concept, anekanta-vada is a subtle and fruitful analytical tool. Likewise, the Hindu meta-theory of philosophy that philosophers give us different partial views or perspectives (darsana) of one and the same reality, which accommodates all the partially correct views, none of which is, however, totally true, also makes the same point and serves the same purpose.<sup>6</sup>

### **What is Hinduism -**

Before we get to explore what is this “tolerance in Hinduism” that we are talking about, we need to understand Hinduism better.

Hindu is not a religious word but a geographic word wrongly propagated by Muslims invaders. Since Hinduism is a geographically and time bounded term, it is used interchangeably to convey both religion as well as culture. Religions are stagnant and have fixed set of laws, rules and doctrines. Since **Hinduism does not have any such doctrines or rules, it is not called as a separate religion and is better known as the cultural way of living lives** so one has the absolute liberty to choose or influence your faith, beliefs, deities etc. There is no compulsion of going to temples. **Hindus have the right to worship even Jesus or Allah or adhere to atheism.** Hindus are not punished or threatened for not praying or believing in God, though the scriptures do urge followers to chant the holy name of God so as to get liberated from the rough path of materialistic pains and gains. Hinduism is the amalgamation of all kinds of worships with no mandate of any kind of selection or elimination.

In the view of some other great scholars hinduism is generally regarded as the world's oldest organized religion. It consists of "thousands of different religious groups that have evolved in India since 1500 BCE."<sup>7</sup>Because of the wide variety of Hindu traditions, freedom of belief and practice are notable features of Hinduism. Most forms of Hinduism are henotheistic religions. They recognize a single deity, and view other Gods and Goddesses as manifestations or aspects of that supreme God. Henotheistic and polytheistic religions have traditionally been among the world's most religiously tolerant faiths. As a result, India has traditionally been one of the most religiously tolerant in the world.

Hinduism has grown to become the world's third largest religion, after Christianity and Islam. It claims about 950 million followers -- about 14% of the world's population.<sup>8</sup> It is the dominant religion in India, Nepal, Mauritius and among the Tamils in Sri Lanka. So Hinduism is a global religion. But in the view of some scholars Hinduism is perhaps the least propagated among its own followers.

When there is a fairly common opinion among Hindus about who their saints and leaders are, and which their scriptures are, there is very less understanding of the formal definitions and concepts that they teach. Almost every Hindu would agree on many of the names of their saints and leaders – Rama, Krishna, Vyasa, Suka, Sankara, Alwars, Nayanmars, Ramanuja, Madhva, Caitanya, Vallabha, Nimbarka, Maratha and Kannada saints like Jnaneswar, Tukaram, Purandaradasa, North Indian saints like Kabir, Tulsidas, Surdas, Meerabai, modern saints and leaders like Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Ramana, Gandhi, Tilak, Tagore, Aurobindo, Bharati, etc. But, if we ask the person, “What was the leader’s

understanding of Hinduism?”, “What did the leader teach about Hinduism?”, he will not know. The kind of answers we might get are like “Hinduism cannot be defined.”, “Hinduism is merely a way of life.”, “There is no common concept of Hinduism.”, etc. Much of these statements are unfounded. We can easily find that more than 99% of the Hindu saints and leaders in the past thousand and more years share a set of basic principles (called Vedanta) that are common.<sup>9</sup>

Almost every Hindu knows that the Vedas, Gita, Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, various stotras and scriptures are the ones that define the concepts of Hinduism.

Here are listed some of the high level common salient concepts. References to the relevant verses in the Bhagavad Gita are given in brackets.

1. The individual **jiva** is an independent entity, who expresses and experiences through the body and mind. (15.7, 15.8, 15.9, 15.16, 2.12, 2.13, 2.22) \*\*
2. The jiva is wholly responsible for all the situations faced in life. (6.5)\* The jiva cannot escape the good and bad consequences of its actions, even by death. (6.41, 6.42, 16.18, 16.19, 16.20, 9.3, 13.22)\* This is called the **Law of Karma**.

3. **Isvara** is the sum total of all that exists. (7.4, 7.5, 11.7, 11.13, 11.38)\* Isvara is that Supreme Being. So, Isvara is everywhere as everything. (11.5, 9.4, 13.14, 13.15, 13.16, 13.17)\* , Isvara is not different from the whole of existence. It is Isvara, as it were, that enjoys or suffers as the jiva itself. (13.15, 13.23, 9.24)\*

4. Isvara has created, or rather has become or appears as, the **jagat** (Universe) for the benefit of the jivas to express and experience, by which they will mature in wisdom.. (9.17, 10.20, 13.17)\*

5. Isvara's teachings are available in the form of the **Vedas**, which was revealed to rishis in the distant past. (4.1)\* Isvara teaches the jivas through various saints in all places in all ages. (4.3, 4.34 Any teaching of anyone in any age is acceptable as authentic if it does not contradict the Vedas. (4.1, 4.2, 4.3, 13.25, 13.26, 16.23, 16.24)\*\*

6. By having a relationship with Isvara, which is based on faith, gratitude and love, the jivas can face the ups and downs of life with poise. The relationship will help them to be honest, compassionate, disciplined, unselfish, peaceful and happy even under extreme situations in life. (12.13-12.20, 9.34, 12.6, 12.7)\* This relationship is called **Bhakti**.

7. To develop the relationship with Isvara, **worship** is a very effective exercise. Isvara can be worshiped as without form or through any form. It depends on the temperament of the worshiper. (12.2, 12.3, 12.4)\* Isvara can be worshiped as any aspect of Nature or any form. (11.5)\*

8. Different forms of mental worship is called **meditation**. Hinduism has developed a detailed system of preparations and procedures of meditation that is suitable to people of different temperaments. (6.10-6.28)\*

9. As Isvara is the whole of existence. Thus, every moment of life is an interaction with Isvara only. So, doing full justice to the current situation in which the jiva is placed by doing its duty as an offering to Isvara, is itself a form of worship of Isvara. (18.46, 9.27, 11.55)\*This is called **Karma Yoga**.

10. When the jiva understands fully and deeply that it is not apart from Isvara, the goal is reached. Freed from the cycle of desire, action and result, the jiva merges with Isvara and attains real peace. This goal is called **moksha** – freedom. (13.31, 13.32, 6.29, 6.30, 6.31, 2.71, 2.72)\*

With these as the common salient points Hinduism gives that freedom to the individual. Hinduism provided the basic principles of honesty, love, discipline and unselfishness are upheld. Hinduism also encompasses various non-Vedanta viewpoints, which differ from the above listed points to various degrees. However, as mentioned earlier, almost all of the today's practicing Hindus would agree with the above mentioned points.

It gives full freedom to people in terms of faith and practice. Let us pray god to give us enough strength, wisdom and power to tolerate the cheap deeds of greedy materialistic man and fight

against evil and unrighteousness. Social gradation by caste has been not only the *de facto* social reality in Indian society from time immemorial, but is also a *de jure* and sacred institution sanctified by all her scriptures, and traditionally deemed to be the very foundation or backbone of the Hindu religion (varnasramadharma)

Some modern Hindu thinkers and writers (including Radhakrishnan) are inclined to hold that the caste system was originally a function of the actual endowment or personality structure of a person who acquired the status of a Brahman or Ksatriya or lost it, instead of being born as such. This is certainly a logically possible situation.

But it seems to me there is no evidence to support this historical claim, which, for all we know, might well have been the case. But even if we do accept this line of thinking, only a measure of occupational mobility was allowed to the upper or twice-born castes leaving the Sudras and the out-castes patiently to serve the higher castes as expiation for their sins karma in previous generations.

The following few quotations from innumerable Hindu sources will illustrate the spirit of

tolerance found in hindu religion- As men approach me, ‘so do I accept them: men on all sides follow my path, O Partha’ (Arjuna). (*Gita*, 4:11)\*

Even those who are devotees of other gods, worship them with faith, they also sacrifice to Me alone, O son of Kunti (Arjuna), though not according to the true law.(*Gita*, 9:23)\*

Whatever form any devotee with faith wishes to worship, I make that faith of his steady. (*Gita*, 7:21)\*

Whatsoever being there is endowed with glory and grace and vigor, know that to have sprung from a fragment of My splendor. (*Gita*, 10:41) \*

All paths of realization, though manifold and different according to (different) traditions, flow to you only, even as all streams of Ganga flow into the ocean.<sup>11</sup>

Mankind, in turn, carries a special responsibility to honor the underlying equality of people and unity of existence because it is believed to be the most spiritually evolved.

Every being, with their varying likes and dislikes, their unique personalities, and their different cultures, not only connect with one another in their own unique ways, but connect with the Divine in their own individual ways.

**Why Hinduism is the most tolerant religion-** Hinduism is considered as the most tolerant of all the popular religions of the world. Hinduism has the distinction of being highly tolerant compared to other modern religions. “Tolerance in abundance” is the hallmark of

Hinduism. One of the foremost reasons behind tolerance of Hinduism is the acceptance of all faiths as-Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Muslims – is there in the history and geography books for everyone to see.<sup>12</sup> Even within Hinduism there are innumerable sects and sub-sects, which peacefully coexist. Even major religions like Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism are really sects within Hinduism.

Sri aurobindo, one of the greatest philosopher of all times declared that Hinduism would rise not only in India but all across the world.

**1. Hinduism gives infinite chance for a person to reach the goal.** Every good and bad action is appropriately rewarded. However, that is not the end. Even the most cantankerous person is given as many number of chances that takes for him to see the light of wisdom.

**2. One need not accept Isvara as even a person.** As long as a person accepts the basic moral principles of honesty, compassion, discipline and unselfishness, he is appropriately rewarded by the basic law of Nature itself. Moksha is the understanding that the individual is never separate from the whole. Acceptance of Isvara is only a psychological convenience.

**3. There is no restriction that a person should worship Isvara** as only without form or a particular form. The all-knowing, compassionate Isvara will surely know however and through whichever form that the person worships. Putting restriction on the way of worship would be to deny Isvara the basic qualities of all-knowing and compassion.

**4. Every person is free to worship in his own way.** In the same family different people can worship in different ways. Some people may not worship at all. The same person may go through different phases when different ways of worship would appeal to him the most.

**5. There is no restriction of race or gender or place or period** when or where or to whom

Isvara is directly accessible. Any sincere seeker can directly interact with Isvara. As long as the interaction informs and inspires the person to be honest, compassionate, disciplined, unselfish, peaceful and happy, it is acceptable as with Isvara.

**6. There is no restriction on the number of sects** that can come and serve people. Every age demands different groups of people, often led by one or more teachers with their own set of teachings, who will approach Isvara in their own peculiar way.

7. Hindus are open to other religions **Hindus are absolutely open minded** and nurtures the good things coming from all directions, best expressed in the vedic verse as “aa no bhadrāh kratavo yantu vishvatah”.

**8. Hinduism recognizes different spiritual paths to attain salvation** (moksha) just like you can reach the mountain by choosing any one of the several paths. Hinduism not only

promotes tolerance but also respect the religious, cultural and traditional beliefs of other religions as one of the alternate ways to realize the ultimate truth (God). Below verse says the same Ekam sat vipraha bahudha vadanti Truth is one, the wise call it by many names. Same was said in a different way by lord Krishna as "Whoever invokes a deity by whatever name, it is me he invokes"<sup>13</sup>

**9. Hinduism is open to critics and criticism** Hindus are aware that all religions or critics do not have the same level of goodness and truth, yet they grant them the freedom to express their views.

**10. Hinduism thinks the universe as one big family** Hindus believe this world as one big family 'vasudhaiva kutumbakam'. Thousands of foreigners come every day in northern India with a quest to seek spirituality. None of them are asked to convert by authentic Indian gurus.

**11. Hindus embraces all religions** Oneness and inclusiveness is the soul of Hinduism. This is why there are millions of deities in Hinduism. **Hindus embraces all cultures and spiritual path to reach the same supreme god.** One concept which makes Hinduism completely different from other religion is atheism. You can be an atheist and Hindu both.

**12. Hinduism does not believe in conversion** Hindus don't have any interest in converting

peoples of other faith. There is no concept of conversion in Hinduism because essence of god is in everyone. Only there is a need to invoke your inner consciousness to connect with supreme god through yoga and meditation.

**13. Hindus believe everything is god and god is in everyone** Followers of sanatana dharma believe in the manifestation of god in every particle, every atom and every molecules of this universe. By accepting everything as divine, Hinduism see this universe as a big family (vasudhaiva kutumbakam).

**14. Since everything is divine, whom to hate? A true Hindu accepts all living beings as the manifestation of the same supreme god that's why well said -Om sarve bhavantu sukhinah. Sarve santu niraamayaah. Sarve bhadrani pashyantu. Maa kaschid dukhbhaag bhavet. May all beings be happy. May all beings be healthy. May all beings experience prosperity. May none in the world suffer.**<sup>14</sup>

**15. Hinduism offer freedom in rituals and practices** Hinduism is the religion of freedom. It allows absolute freedom in faiths and beliefs with regards to questions on Soul, God, Creation, goal and forms of worship. Hinduism lays emphasis on finding the absolute truth through yoga and meditation, instead of following the dogmas and beliefs written in All of them are happy to follow the rituals of singing prayers and chanting mantras.<sup>15</sup>

**16. Hinduism does not have a single holy book Unlike other religions, Hinduism is not derived from the teachings of any prophet or book nor does it state revelations in any book as the final and fundamental doctrine.** Hinduism believes that truth can never be defined by only one person of any sect, creed or community. Hinduism does not have the teachings recorded from the single source of knowledge or wisdom

**17. Hinduism was not founded by any prophet** Hinduism is the only religion that is not founded on any single historical incident or events of modern history. Unlike Islam, Buddhism and Christianity, Hinduism was not founded by a single person. Origin of Hinduism is beyond the boundaries of recorded history.

**18. Hindus see deity in guest** Hindus believes in “athithi devobhava” i.e Guests are god. Thereafter, it is believed “god may come uninvited in the form of guest.” So, all guests are treated as divine in Hinduism.

**19. Hindus visualize the divinity in every living being** Hinduism believes in the divinity of all living beings and therefore practices ahimsa or non-violence against animals. In the true sense, Ahimsa does not mean non-violence and is best defined as “the absence of desire to

harm” or “causing the minimum harm possible”.. **This is the reason why Hinduism encourages vegetarianism and polluting the environment is declared as a punishable offence in manu smriti.** The Indian art of Vastu-shastra was idealized to construct building without obstructing the natural flow of air, rivers, flora and fauna. This ensured the peaceful existence with the deities (Vayu, varuna, agni etc) of materialistic world. **Hinduism states that “Nature can fulfill everyman's need but not everyone's greed”.** This is the prime reason why trees, air, rivers, mountains, Sun, Moon, planets, and even animals are worshipped in Hinduism.

**20. There is only one reality(God) in Hinduism** Hindus believe in only one reality. This reality transcend everywhere and in every living beings. One reality is worshipped as the trinity gods: Brahma (Creator), Vishnu (Preserver) and Shiva (destroyer). **Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are not different gods, but the manifestations of the same supreme divine god.**<sup>16</sup>

**21. Best example of tolerance in Hindus** Best example of tolerance in Hindus is glorified in swami Vivekananda words at world religion parliament, where he started by saying “I am proud to belong to a religion which had taught the world tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal tolerance, but we accept all religions as true. My nation had always sheltered outsiders - for instance, fleeing Israelites and Zoroastrians.”

**22. Hinduism encourages intolerance against Evil** Though Hinduism is very tolerant in general, it does not justify intolerance against evil and adharma. **All Hindus are inspired to resist evil and are taught to not tolerate injustice, violence or adharma(Unrighteousness).**<sup>17</sup>

This is the centric message of bhagavad gita, mahabharata and all puranas **Note that even the fight against evil has some rules and ethics.** Hinduism believes in convincing your evil

opponent multiple times to follow the ethical path and still, if the mutual conflicts remains or arises, then kill him in **an honorable way to protect the pious, destroy evil and re-establish the rule of law and justice.**<sup>18</sup>

**23. Hinduism spreads the message of universal brotherhood** Devotees should follow the one (Guru) who preaches the message of universal brotherhood, unity and harmony. Imminent faith among the masses turns a human into a saint.

**24.**Two of these core beliefs are that of the **oneness of existence and pluralism.** ‘Ajyesthaso akanishthaso ete sambhrataro vahaduhu saubhagaya’ No one is superior, none inferior.

**What Supreme Court of India says about tolerance in Hinduism** According to 1996 judgment of honorable Supreme Court , Hinduism or hindutva can be defined as “Hindutva is indicative more of the way of life of the Indian people. It is not to be understood or construed narrowly.

It is not Hindu fundamentalism nor is it to be confined only to the strict Hindu religious practices or as unrelated to the culture and ethos of the people of India, depicting the way of life of the Indian people. Considering Hindutva as hostile, inimical, or intolerant of other faiths, or as communal proceeds from an improper appreciation of its true meaning.”

**Conclusion** Hinduism is like a big ocean that opens his arms for every river irrespective of its place of origin. In this big ocean of Hinduism, everyone and everything is allowed. Hinduism is like a world wide web that is open and accessible by followers of all faiths,

places, societies, countries etc. This is the reason why non-Hindus continues to flourish in India while Hindus are severely exploited in all other nations. Because of the tolerance of Hindus and non-tolerance of other faiths, Percentage of followers belonging to minority religions like Christianity and Muslims have increased in India whereas the percentage of Hindus living in non-tolerant countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Indonesia etc have declined by more than 500% percent. This elasticity and flexibility in theologies and philosophies (discussed above) makes Hinduism the world oldest tolerant religion and way ahead of all other modern religions as terrorist and religious attacks across the world, one would realize the utmost importance of religious tolerance in this materialistic world as Hinduism has.

Tolerance of Hindus has set the ideal environment in India for peaceful co-existence of all 9 major religions including Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Bahai's and Zoroastrianism.

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