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Hinduism and The Arts



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HINDUISM AND THE ARTS

Introduction

Hinduism is one of the world's oldest religions and has about 900 million adherents worldwide. The majority of Hindus live in India making up 80% of the country's population. This religion is somewhat different from other religions of the world because it does not have a single founder or a single universally accepted doctrine, and because it has absorbed into itself many different strands of mythology, ritual and principles.

Hindus believe that their religion has existed from the time of creation of life and that god transmitted divine knowledge to mankind for a style of life that would promote happiness and good health. This divine knowledge is contained in the four Vedas (the texts of Hinduism): Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sam Veda and Atharva Veda. According to Vedic philosophy God is one and he is without form or shape. He is said to be omnipresent and omniscient. Vedas propound the philosophy of trinity i.e. existence of god, soul and matter before creation, during creation and after creation is over. The three exist as independent entities with myriad opportunities to interact. God being the 'Supreme Being' always and every time. (1)

The people of India have a long, varied and exuberant artistic history. Their love of design and colour can be seen in the smallest of temples in the remotest of areas. Art enters the world of Hinduism from the very beginning, helping it to express, sustain and gain appreciation and popularity. India is known as the country of temples and across the country we find thousands of exquisite examples of artistic work in the form of architecture, sculpture, wall paintings, stupas and carvings.

The great poets of India wrote religious poetry/lyrics that are as popular today as they were thousands of years ago. Classical dances of India are based on religious stories and unfold these poetic epics through graceful body movement, expression and emotions as well as music and lyrics. Puppet theatre has been in use for thousands of years to entertain and teach people about the lives of Hindu religious heroes. Colourful puppets of Lord Rama, Krishna, Hanuman and others are still in use in many parts of India.

Indian film producers have made hundreds of films based on religious stories throughout the history of cinema. Hindu communities can now see the film versions of the Mahabharata, Ramayana, the life of Krishna, stories of Shiva, Shakti and other gods and goddesses.

Texts and Schools of Thought

The Vedas are at the foundation of Hinduism. There are four Vedas: Rig Veda, Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvaveda. **Rig Veda** is the ved of sciences. There are ten thousand, five hundred and eighty-nine mantras spread over ten mandals or ten major cantos. The original writings were in the Vedic language, which was later translated into Sanskrit by Vedic scholars. The **Yajurveda** comprises of one thousand and seventy-five mantras. These mantras inspired people to realize god in their inner-self. The emphasis here is on karmakand – the path to attain moksha (liberation of soul from the bondage of repeated cycles of births and deaths). The **Samaveda** also has one thousand and seventy-five mantras, which place emphasis on prayers for realization of the Supreme Being with the aim of communion of soul with god. The **Atharvaveda**, also known as the **Jynakand**, comprises five thousand, nine hundred and seventy seven mantras. These help and guide people in their quest of god and enable them to realise his presence in and around them.

As well as guidance on living a life of purity, righteousness and truthfulness, the Vedas prescribe a four-fold path to achieve the ultimate goal of being united with the Supreme Being. This four-fold path consists of dharma, artha, kama and moksha. Dharma takes one on the right course of life, artha enables one to earn wealth by the right means, kama enables one to achieve high ideals through hard work and moksha is the liberation of soul from cycles of births and deaths. Other important Hindu texts are the Upanishads, the Puranas, the Bhagvad Gita, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. All these texts and scriptures emphasise the need for one to be living in harmony: harmony within oneself, harmony within the society and harmony within the universe.

Originally, and for many millennia, the Vedic knowledge was passed on orally by rishis (priests) and sages. The written versions, initially in the Vedic language and subsequently in Sanskrit, were composed at a later stage in history. There are strong disagreements about the timing in history of the written form of the Vedas. Francois Gautier, in his book “The Indian Origin of Things” (publication forthcoming), presents empirical arguments to support the view that these texts were composed almost 7,000 years ago and not in 1500 B.C. as arbitrated by 19th century German philosopher Max Muller (2) The Vedas, it seems, are older then Western society ever previously imagined.

There are six classical schools of thought in Hinduism. These are: Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaishesika, Mimasa and Vedanta. Nyaya is concerned with investigating and presenting logical arguments, while Vaishesika is principally a theory of atomism. Samkhya focuses on the reality of things, nature and evolution as well as the theory of innumerable eternal souls. Yoga provides the means of attaining disentanglement from the empirical world of suffering through a path that involves eight stages: restraint, discipline, posture, respiration, withdrawal from sense objects, concentration, meditation and trance. Within Yoga moral and ethical self-training is an essential part of the whole process and discipline refers to ascetic and religious practices. Mimamsa religion centred on the complexities of the Vedic ritual and sacrifice and, in so doing, became totally detached from the gods to whom the sacrifices were originally addressed. Vedanta gives

differing interpretations to the Vedic writings and represents several ways of interpreting the equation between the eternal self and the divine absolute. The more modern schools of thought include Brahmoism and Arya Samaj Vedic Mission.

Brahmo Samaj was founded in 1828. Rationalist and equalitarian, it held that mankind could achieve its full potential through the union of social reform and superstition free spirituality. It aims at purifying Hindu society by a return to the philosophical basis of ancient Hindu scriptures, rejecting idolatry and social evils like caste prejudice and suppression of women. Rabinder Nath Tagore, the poet, mystic, novelist and nationalist (referred to as the Shakespeare of India), was a follower of Brahmoism. The first Brahmo temple opened in Calcutta in 1830 and it was dedicated to 'the Eternal, Unsearchable, Immutable Being who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe.' (3)

Arya Samaj Vedic Mission was founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in 1875. Arya Samaj condemned idolatry, animal sacrifice, priest craft, offerings made in temples, the caste system, untouchability and child marriage on the grounds that all these lacked Vedic sanction. Swami Dayanand was a great scholar who believed in the infallible authority of the Vedas but was strongly against what he considered to be the corruption of the pure faith in his country. He is known to be the first rishi to write commentaries on the divine Vedas both in Sanskrit and in Hindi, unlocking the Vedic wisdom and making it available to the common man in the street. Arya Samaj Vedic Mission deserves much respect for social reforms particularly those that lead to the education and emancipation of women in India.

Sanatana Dharma is the traditional religion expression based upon the teachings of Vedas and it promotes worship through icons and symbols. Each of the many deities is regarded as a particular and useful form of the ultimate/supreme being. In the temples, Sanskrit mantras are chanted by the priest and bhajans/sankirtan (religious songs) sung for the deities involve the participation of the whole congregation. Murti puja (worship of deities), the four fold noble path, the four ashramas (stages of life), the caste system and the sixteen samskaras (religious celebrations at various stages of life and death) are all important aspects of this philosophy. Members of the Brahmin caste perform the sixteen samskaras and therefore play a consultative role throughout the lives of other Hindu people. The 'right' to perform these religious tasks places Brahmins in positions of power over the other caste groups as well as giving them the opportunity to develop expertise in the field of religious knowledge.

The Sixteen Samskaras

Samskaras create interest and impression on a personality in the process of formation. Celebrations are important ingredients of the Samskaras and involve elders, scholars and all the extended family members. It is a widely held belief that everyone in the world is conditioned by their teachings and their environment to some extent. Based on science and presented as art form, the Samskaras are strategies formulated by Vedic masters to serve the purpose of conditioning and developing a positive and dynamic personality.

The starting point of the Samskaras is 'Garbhadan' - the coming together of husband and wife for the purpose of conception. This is followed by the celebration of conception; ensuring the expectant mother is in good health and high spirits; birth of the child; naming the child; introducing the child to the sun and the moon; giving child solid food for the first time; hair cutting ceremonies; ear piercing ceremony; the religious thread (Janoi) ceremony after which the child is authorised to perform all rituals and begins studies; returning to home after studying period; marriage ceremony; detaching oneself from family ties and responsibilities and finally 'Antyeshthi' the last rites done after death.

Hinduism and Social Structure

The Indian constitution of 1950 forbade any form of discrimination based on caste and outlaws the idea of 'untouchability'. The caste system was originally based on division of labour but over centuries developed into a system of rigid social compartments, membership of which depended on ancestry, place of birth and occupation. Successive governments of India have been developing policies based on equality of opportunity to address issues of inequalities created by the caste system.

The caste system divided society into four major groupings:

Brahmins – the priests and scholars
Khatriyas - warriors, rulers, administrators
Vaisyas – the traders
Shudras – The cultivators

Those who were not part of these four groups were referred to as untouchables/harijans. Mahatma Gandhi painstakingly campaigned and helped set up policies and procedures to improve the lives of these communities and, in today's India, we begin to see progress with some people from these humble groups attaining high positions in employment and the business world. Another great proponent of civil rights in India was iconoclastic social reformer Dr. Ambedkar (1891-1956) who devoted a good part of his work to the cause of improving life of the 'untouchables'. Dr Ambedkar was the first 'untouchable' to gain a college degree in India.

General Beliefs of a Hindu

The Arts are intricately entwined into the lives of Hindus and if we examine the general beliefs of Hindus we can see how this transpires. The general beliefs of a Hindu are: that there is a universal eternal soul called Brahman who created life and is present in every form of life; that the soul passes through a cycle of successive lives and its next incarnation is always dependent on how the previous life was lived; that in order to free oneself from the cycles of births and deaths one needs to tread the path of righteousness and truthfulness. The belief in re-incarnation and karma helps individuals to adjust to situations and come to terms with their losses and misfortunes i.e. 'I must have done something dreadful in my previous life to suffer this fate in this life'

A Hindu household is likely to have images and icons of favoured deities in some part of the house; a Hindu will visit a local temple where there will be presence of artistic architecture as well as sculptured statues of deities dressed in colourful garments; A Hindu will participate in religious dancing (e.g. garbha dance during the Navratri Festival) generally during festivals and celebrations; the prayers offered to god/deities involve sankirtan/bhajans (hymns and songs) that are sung in temples and at home.

Worship/bhakti is an important aspect of Hinduism and although all deities are held in high regard, an individual can have favourites i.e. Shiva, Krishna, Rama, Durga Mata, Ganesha, Hanuman or other. Hindus will possess one or many intricately sculptured ornaments depicting the deities as well as paintings, tapestries, household objects and linen and other artefacts with religious themes.

It is important to mention here (as a way of illustrating how religion practices cross over into everyday life for a Hindu) that strict Hindus are vegetarians and even those who are not vegetarian will refrain from eating non-vegetarian food on Tuesdays as this day is devoted to several deities and is regarded as a religious day. In India meat shops are closed on Tuesdays and some restaurants do not serve meat dishes on this particular day of the week.

Hindu Festivals

Festivals in India are a combination of religious ceremonies, processions, music, colour, dance, rituals and worship. The date of each festival can vary each year, this is because the days are dependent on the lunar calendar.

Mahashivratri - (Jan/Feb) Celebrates Shiva's emanation of the universe through his cosmic dance. Worshippers fast all day and at night gather at temples and stay awake singing devotional songs hoping to gain an enlightening experience.

Holi – (Feb/Mar) Festival of Colours, primarily a northern festival, but celebrated in other parts of India as well. People squirt colour or rub dry powder colours on each other and give gifts/sweets. Homes and streets are covered in colour as people trick each other into getting covered in paint. People are generally in a jolly mood hoping to fill their lives with happiness, excitement and enjoyment.

Janamashtami (Aug/Sept) – The birthday of Lord Krishna is celebrated all over India. People gather at temples and holy places to celebrate this occasion with devotion.

Raksha Bandan (August)- This is a special day when sisters tie a decorative wristband on their brothers and brothers in return promise to safeguard them throughout their lives. Women and girls who do not have a brother can choose a cousin or a good male relative or neighbour to fulfil this role.

Ganesh Chaturthi (Aug./Sept.) People purchase brightly painted images of Ganesh (Elephant god) and worship these for a number of days before bathing them and leaving them in rivers, lakes and seas on the day of the festival.

Dussehra (Sept/Oct) A ten-day period during which the epic of Ramayana is dramatised on stages in towns and villages. On the tenth day huge effigies of Ravana, his brother Kumbakarna and his son Meghnath are burnt. Dussehra is the day when Ravana was killed and several weeks later comes the better known Diwali to celebrate the victory.

Diwali (Oct/Nov) known as the Festival of Lights, commemorates Lord Rama's victory over Ravana and his return to the city of Ayodhya. To celebrate people light up their homes, shops and streets with lamps, candles, divas (oil lamps) and hold firework displays. As well as feasting, people engage themselves in the worship of the Goddess Lakshmi, praying for prosperity and good fortune.

The popularity and the attention given to festivals varies from place to place across the Sub Continent and there are some festivals that may be celebrated in one state of India but not in others. For instance, worship of Kritikeya (Lord Shiva's other son) receives more attention in Tamil Nadu than other parts of India. Another interesting festival which is not known in northern parts of India is 'Onam' the only major Hindu festival that celebrates the reign of an Asura (demon) king.

Visual Arts

Painting, Sculpture and Architecture

Paintings of large tempera murals on the walls of the Ajanta caves date back to the 4th Century. This period of time is referred to as the golden age of India, a time of luxurious living and splendour as well as prosperity. Being essentially religious, these paintings depict permanent human values/principles and provide records of the social texture of the times.

Architecture and sculpture in India is basically religious in its themes and development. It is therefore necessary to have some understanding of the religion to fully appreciate its beauty. Sculpture is an integral part of architecture and it is often difficult to tell where a building ends and sculpture begins. Examples of such work can be seen in the Hoysala temples of Karnataka, the elaborate Sun temples of Konarak and the Chandela's temples at Khajurao. The visual artwork in these places is both aesthetically stunning and shows an astonishing level of craftsmanship, it is difficult as a result to decide which element to marvel at more.

Indian sculpture dates back as far as the Sub-Continent's known history: statuettes showing considerable artistic skill have been found in the ruins of Mohenjodaro and Harappan in the Indus Valley (4). Most Indian sculpture is concerned with living things particularly the human body. Some of the finest ancient sculptures have been found in

India's many extraordinary cave temples, such as those on Elephanta Island near Mumbai and the Ajanta caves in Aurangabad.

Performing Arts

Music

Music has been given great importance in Hinduism especially by the Vaishnavite sects (those who worship Lord Vishnu). Indian music is said to be linked to philosophy and religion, with the emphasis more on melodic effects than harmonic variation. The best known instruments include the vina, sitar, the tamboura, tabla and small kettle drums that are played with the fingers.

During the ancient period priests sang Vedic hymns based on notes assigned by rules that were codified in the Chaudogya Upanishad (1800 BCE). These priests were called Samvedis or Samans and a number of ancient musical instruments such as conch (shankh), lute (veena), flute (bansuri), trumpets and horns were associated with practices of ritual singing. (5)

The origins of Indian classical music can be found in the oldest scriptures, the Vedas. Samveda, one of the four Vedas, describes music in great detail. The prime themes of Hindustani music are Rasleela (Hindu devotionals of Krishna and nature in all its splendour). Carnatic music, although similar to Hindustani music, includes themes of Devi worship, Rama worship, descriptions of temples and patriotic songs. Sri Purandara Dasa (1480-1564) is known as 'the father of carnatic music'. Carnatic music originates from the south of India. Bharat Natya Shastra from around 5th Century A.D. and Sangeeta Ratnakara from 13th Century A.D. are considered the earliest forms of this type of music/dance. Carnatic music is based on 22 scale note contrary to the 12 note scale that is used in western music. It places greater emphasis on melody rather than on harmony amongst instruments. The instruments that accompany one or two main performers (vocal or instrumental) are wind or string instruments: the violin, the flute, the ghatam (a large clay pot used as a percussion instrument), and the mridangam (a double headed drum). (6)

All the performing arts in India –dance, drama and poetry are based on 'nine sentiments' described below. Indian classical music is no exception:-

Shringara - romantic and erotic

Hasya – humourous

Karuna – pathetic

Raudra – anger

Veera – heroic

Bhayanaka – fearful

Vibhatsa – disgustful

Adbhuta- amazement

Shanta - peaceful

Hindus believe music can be a spiritual discipline that takes us on the path to self-realization. The ancient Vedic scriptures give godly importance to sound and vibration as well as identifying these as Anahata Nad (unstruck sound) and Ahata Nad (struck sound). The tradition of Indian classical music is an oral one. It is taught directly by the guru to the disciple.

“The system of Indian music known as Raga Sangeet can be traced back nearly two thousand years to its origin in the Vedic hymns of the Hindu temples, the fundamental source of all Indian music. Thus, as in Western music, the roots of Indian classical music are religious.” Ravi Shankar, world renowned sitarist and composer.

Nritya – Indian Classical Dance

Ancient rock carvings and sculptures show that the art of dancing was connected to the temples. Even today, many of the Indian classical dances such as: Bharat Natyam of Tamil Nadu; Odissi from Orissa; Kuchipudi from Andhra Pradesh, Kathkali from Kerala and Kathak from North India, are religious and mythological in nature.

In Indian classical dance the performer is usually the actor and often the musician as well as the dancer. The songs to which Bharat Natyam is performed, even when dealing with romantic themes, are usually addressed to Hindu deities, with a special reference to Shiva as Natraja – Lord of Dance. Dance of the Maharjis (women dedicated to singing and dancing) is for Lord Jagan Nath (Krishna) in his great temple at Puri, Orissa, India.

The beautiful Ramesvara cave temple (no. 21) at Ellora contains rock carvings showing Shiva as Lord of Dance (Natraja) surrounded by gods, celestials and musicians. The cave temple (no 1) on Elephanta Island (near Mumbai), still one of the greatest creations of Indian sculpture, shows Shiva as the Supreme Lord. There are many sculptures and rock carvings of dancing girls and musicians in the caves at Aurangbad, Maharashtra. (7)

The practice of dedicating women to temples began during the early centuries and by the 7th Century this tradition was firmly established. There is no mention of devdasis (temple women dancers/servants of God) in the Vedas, but the Agni Puran and Bhavishya Purans specifically stated that the best way for a man to obtain Suryaloka (heaven of the Sun God) was to dedicate a group of dancing girls to the temple of Sun. (8)

Devdasis were wedded to the deities and could not therefore marry mortals. Some ancient temples became institutions for women dancers and in the 10th Century there were 400 to 500 devdasis in the famous Sun temples of India*. Kings and rich civilians, who had collections of sculptured deities, started employing attractive, talented servants to perform different rituals for the deities such as bathing, dressing, offering flowers, music and dance. At one time these women were regarded as honourable professionals and they contributed to development of many of India's classical performing arts. Some of the devdasis were highly accomplished and earned a great deal of wealth and contributed some of this to charitable causes. In later centuries, and according to some

accounts particularly during in the Mughal and British empires, the role of the devdasis morphed into that of courtesans and prostitutes. Their offspring, finding they had no easy place in society, became the wandering musicians and artistic communities of the times. Whatever became of these women they have left a legacy of fine arts and crafts behind that is appreciated to this day.

**In Somnath Temple there were 500 dancing girls and in the great Tanjore Temple built by Raja Chola (10th Century) there were four hundred. Temple women are depicted in the Hoysala sculpture – source 'The Arts of India' by Basil Gray.*

Natya – Drama and Theatre

Bharata Muni's 'Natya Shastra' (2000 BC to 4th Century A.D.) was the earliest form of dramaturgy written anywhere in the world. Bharata attributes the divine origin of Indian theatre to the 'Natya Veda' the holy book of dramaturgy created by Lord Brahma. According to the legend the very first play was performed in heaven when the gods, having defeated the demons, were enacting their victory.

In traditional Hindu drama, expression was achieved through music and dancing as well as acting. Recitation, singing and dancing are integral elements of Indian theatre. Indian theatre encompasses all forms of literature and fine arts into its physical presentation. (9)

Ritual Theatre

Ritual theatre emerged in India during the medieval period and was purely religious. The followers of the 'Bhakti Movement' believed that man could approach god directly without the need for a middle man (sacred interpreter). The chanting of God's name and the performing Ramleela, Krishnaleela and Rasleela are excellent examples of this kind of theatre. Other examples include the Prahlada Nataka of Orissa, Teyyam, Krishnattam and Muttiyettu of Kerala and Terakutu of Tamil Nadu as well as others. (10)

Traditional Folk Theatre

During the 15th and 16th Centuries this form of theatre became popular. It was purely devotional in tenor and typically revolved around religion, local legends and mythology. Later it began to focus on folk stories of romance and biographical accounts of local heroes. Ritual theatre and folk theatre developed side by side, mutually influencing each other.

Puppet Theatre

Recent discoveries made by archaeologists at Harrappa and Mohenjodaro in the Indus Valley, uncovered parts of clay dolls with holes for strings, supporting the theory that puppet theatre existed more than 5,000 years ago.

Puppet theatre is still popular in the southern states of India. Puppeteers' leather dolls are masterpieces of folk-art and many of India's puppets are based on Hindu mythologies. The artists belong to nomadic tribes and are always on the move taking their puppets and theatre equipment with them wherever they go. The performances usually start with an invocation to Lord Ganesh (Hindu god who banishes all troubles) and Saraswati (the goddess of learning) and normally the core of the performance presents detailed and dramatically prolonged episodes from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, stories from the Puranas and the Devi scriptures.

Photography

Interest in photography grew in India following the 'Indian Mutiny of 1857/58' and the early photographers in India were mainly British. Some photographed as amateurs and others were employed to photograph for recording purposes. Photography became an essential element of the 'Archaeological Survey of India' established in 1861 and still in existence.

The connection between photography and Hinduism is therefore in the recording and presentation of religious and historical discoveries (paintings, sculpture, architecture and other artefacts). Nowadays, of course, people use the latest technology i.e. camcorders, digital cameras to record their visits to places of interest and generally photos of deities and temples can be bought on the street to add to their mini temples/shrines at home.

Cinema/Film Industry

India has one of the largest film industries in the world producing over 800 films a year. Religious myths, folk tales and legends of India have come to life through Indian cinema. Hinduism is portrayed through moral behaviour of pious characters, through devotional songs and through the presence and worship of deities to whom a devastated individual turns for help in dire circumstances.

The film industry was first established in India by Dhundiraj Govind Phalke who mortgaged his life insurance policy to raise enough money to travel to London to buy filming equipment. The earliest religious films, made by him, during the silent era were: Raja Harishchandra (1913) the story of a legendary king of ancient India whose life exemplified the pursuit of the ideal of truth; Shri Krishna Janma (1918) the story of the birth of Lord Krishna which has a distinct message of tolerance in its last sequence, where people from all castes offer obeisance to Lord Krishna. Many, many religious films have been produced over the last nine decades. Dhundiraj is highly respected in the film industry and to achieve the Indian Government's "Dada Saheb Phalke Award" (which he received in 1969) is the burning desire of every filmmaker in India.

More recently the Hindu community has turned to watching Ramayana, Mahabharata and Krishana on their television sets as videos and DVDs became available. The Hindi film formula of virtue triumphing over vice and modernity can easily be identified with the teachings of Hinduism. Furthermore, the religious epics and legends are now available in Animation form so that children can learn about their religion in an enjoyable way.

Story telling - Katha

Storytelling known as 'katha' is another art form that has been used for thousands of years and is still practised in Hindu temples all over the world. It is still a strong tradition for Hindu women to go to the temple to listen to 'katha' on certain religious festival days i.e. Karvachauth (women fast all day for the well being of their husbands and in the evening, before breaking their fast, they dress up and go to the temple to listen to katha)

Katha was the art form used to outreach to people in villages who had no other means of religious instruction. A priest would stay in the village for a number of days or weeks reading katha to the villagers at a set time each day and people would gather around him and spend hours listening. Food and shelter was provided by heads of the village and generally the priest was given much respect by all. As a child I recall a priest staying at my grandfather's house in the village Kang Sahbu (8 miles from Jalandhur) and people gathering at the house every evening to listen to katha from the Ramayana. The priest sang the verses and then translated them.

Literature and Poetry

Hindu poets/religious scholars have, through their great works, provided a continuum for the Hindu religion as well as a literary treasure trove for subsequent generations. Over the centuries thousands of poets/scholars have gained appreciation of their works and made a place for themselves in Indian history. Within this article I can only mention but a few:-

Ved Vyasa is accredited as the scribe of both the Vedas and the supplementary texts, Puranas. A number of Vaishnava traditions regard him as the avtar (reincarnation) of Lord Vishnu and he is also considered to be one of the seven immortals who are still in existence according to Hindu belief. He is also known as the author of 'Mahabharata' as well as an important character in it. Vyasa's 'Jaya' the core of Mahabharata has 18 chapters within it that constitute 'the Bhagvad Gita' (most sacred text of the Hindus). Ved Vyasa's work deals with diverse subjects such as geography, history, warfare, religion and morality.

Valmiki Maharishi Valmiki is the author of the Hindu epic 'Ramayana' which tells the story of a prince, Rama of Ayodhya, whose wife Sita is abducted by the demon (Rakshasa) Ravana. Many Indian communities accept Maharishi Valmiki as the author of the 'Yoga Vasistha' (the basis of the practice of yoga we know today) this art was taught to Rama when he was disillusioned with the world at large. 'Ramayana' is an incredible piece of work that discusses a wide array of philosophical issues and it is said to have been written 5,000 years ago. (11)

Kalidasa (approx.100 B.C.) Known as the Preceptor of all Poets through his title 'Kavikulaguru', he wrote plays and poetry largely based around Hindu mythology and philosophy. 'Shakuntla' is the last and most famous of his plays and has been translated into English and German. Kalidasa was also an avid astrologer, 'Uttara Kaalaamritam' a work on astrology is attributed to him. Kalidasa was a fervent worshipper of the goddess Kali.

Bhavabhuti (800 A.D.) From Padampura, Vidarbha, India. An 8th Century Scholar who wrote plays and poetry in Sanskrit. His works are considered to be equivalent to works of Kalidasa.

Jayadeva from Orissa (1200A.D.) Considered one of the greatest poets of all times, as well as a being dancer, musician and teacher. Among his compositions is the well known 'Gita Govinda' which became popular throughout India within a short period of its composition perhaps because it was regularly preformed in the Jagan Nath Temple of Puri. Jayadeva's wife Padamavati was an accomplished temple dancer.

Tallapaka Annamacharya (1408-1503) from Andhra Pradesh, composed more than 32,000 Sankirtana (songs) in praise of the Lord Venkateswara (the deity of seven hills in Trimula, India)

Purandara Dasa (1484-1564) from Maharashtra follower of Lord Vishnu is known as the father of carnatic music. He is believed to have composed 475,000 songs. His musical compositions are in the Kannada Language, the state language of Karnataka.

Surdas (1483-1573) Hindu poet who was blind from birth lived in Brindaban near Mathura and became a famous musician who composed 100,000 songs out of which 8,000 are still known.

Tulsidas (1532-1623) Considered to be the most famous of Hindi poets during the reign of Akbar and Jahangir. Tulsidas wrote 12 books, one of these is devoted to Lord Rama and this particular version of the Ramayana is very popular in northern India.

Rabinder Nath Tagore (19th Century) known as Shakespeare of India. He was a Poet, a Playwright, Mystic, Novelist and Nationalist. He won the noble prize for Literature in 1913.

Sharda Ram Phillauri (1837-1881) a dedicated scholar and proponent of traditional Sanatana Dharama, he studied Hindi, Sanskrit, Astrology and Music. He wrote "Om Jai Jagdish Hare", which is chanted by millions of Hindus in temples and at home, all over the world.

Reaching Hindu Audiences

The most important symbol in Hinduism is the 'AUM'. All our mantras, worship and Yajnas begin with the chanting of 'Aum' (also spelt OM). This symbol is also important to Sikhs, Buddhists and Jainis although the pronunciation may be slightly different. Hindus may have this symbol on their jewellery, clothes or on ornaments and paintings in their home.

Hindus generally give respect to all other religions because they believe these to be different paths leading to the same destination. Many churches have been transformed into Hindu temples by the Hindu community which shows that Hindus do not have a problem with using a venue that has been used for worship by other faiths.

Hindus are comfortable in all venues provided the needs of vegetarians are respected and vegetarian and non- vegetarian foods are displayed separately.

Any artistic event with religious themes would be of much interest to a Hindu audience. Poetry recitals, classical dance and theatre plays with religious content are enjoyed and appreciated. The film industry of India certainly realised this at an early stage and hence we find some kind of religious input in most films. We also find that the current trend in Indian films is the depiction of an understanding and awareness of many faiths and many cultures.

Hindus are generally known to be tolerant and peace loving people. They do not have a problem integrating and adapting their life styles to fit in with the indigenous people of their host country. Their desire to excel in every field, no doubt, stems the emphasis placed in Hindu families on religious teachings and the importance of what is considered to be a good upbringing.

The last two decades have witnessed many Hindu children taking up careers in the Arts. There are now numerous musicians, artists and actors from Hindu communities all over the world. The importance given to the medical and legal professions as the careers of choice for educated Hindus in Britain is slowly expanding and developing to allow more creative careers to also be acceptable.

Funding

Up until recently Hindu temples have been self-sufficient as a result of donations and offerings from community members. However, as the needs of the community grow (in particular the needs of children and elders) temples have found it necessary to receive help for setting up care centres, yoga classes, Hindi language classes and other group activities.

Sources of funding may raise some ethical questions for some Hindu communities due to their principles and beliefs. For example, gambling is considered to be an evil that led to the downfall of the 'Pandavas' in the epic of Mahabharata. Generally, the National

Lottery in UK is not considered to be a serious form of gambling when compared with the serious gambling that takes place in casinos etc. The choice of accepting funding, therefore, from Lottery monies would very much be at the discretion of the executive committees of each religious organisation.

Conclusion

Within this article, I think it is fair to say, that I have been able to illustrate the deep connection between Hinduism and the Arts, by directing the reader to the evidence that is available in religious texts, visual and performing arts and historical buildings and sites of India. Throughout the known history, Hinduism and the Arts have developed together, mutually influencing and enhancing each other's glory and appreciation.

Brij Bala Duggal
(Author)

Personal Profile

I came to Britain when I was eleven years old. I attended the Government Secondary School in Jalandhar City, India before coming to Britain where I completed my secondary and higher education. After getting married and raising six children I returned to education as a mature student, attaining a post graduate Certificate of Qualification in Social Work. I went on to work as a social worker for Birmingham City Council from 1982 and progressed from Children and Families Social Worker to Senior Social Worker and then Team Manager. For almost ten years I managed 'Bharosa', a project set up by Social Services to help the victims of domestic violence from often hard to reach Asian communities across the Birmingham area. I also contributed to the setting up of the 'Reducing Domestic Violence Project' for the City Council in (2000) I have attended Management Development and Project Management courses at Birmingham University and have also received valuable 'in house' ongoing training throughout my career.

My childhood experience was that of being brought up in a strict Hindu Kshetrya family. I remain a practising Hindu and I maintain close links with Hindu religious organisations in this country and have held key active positions in such organisations including General Secretary to Arya Samaj (Vedic Mission), West Midlands and Trustee and Chairperson of the Bhagvad Mata Temple in Staffordshire.

From a very young age I developed interests in music, singing, dance, drama and literature. My love of the Arts (in the broadest sense) has remained with me throughout my life and is a legacy I like to think I have or will pass on to my children and grandchildren. As a child I remember attending 'Ram Leela' (open theatre productions of the Ramayana story) held annually in Jalandhar. I was fascinated by the acting/drama and dialogues and this thrill of live arts has stayed with me. I treasure memories of going to some of the festivals outlined in my paper as a young girl with my parents. Celebrating religious events through artistic experience was always a lively and enjoyable time for me. As an adult I can now appreciate the importance of encouraging and introducing younger people to artistic and creative activity as early as possible and the benefits this can bring about. I still enjoy attending theatre and music performances (across the cultural spectrum) whenever I can. Living in another country can often dilute some of the customs and traditions that we remember from our country of origin but as people become more and more aware the old traditions are being revived and it is certainly exciting to see younger people, often third and now even fourth generation Asians, interested and even participating in and developing the rich artistic heritage of the country of their ancestry.

I would like to express my thanks to the Arts Council, West Midlands for taking an active interest and making this information available to people to enhance their understanding of Hinduism and its relationship to the Arts. It is always an important and worthy endeavour to increase our understanding and appreciation of one another in a multicultural society.

I would also like to thank Sharon Duggal (my daughter) for editing this document.

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