Future of Hinduism

Bollywood and Beyond: Hinduism Changing the World

The ideals of Hinduism, such as pluralism, dharma, ritam, and nonviolence hold important lessons for the future of Hinduism in particular and for humanity in general.

By Pankaj Jain
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In his 1964 Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "We have learned to fly the air like birds and swim the sea like fish, but we have not learned the simple art of living together as brothers." I think the future of humanity is nicely summarized in these words. In addition to living together with humans, we also need to learn how to live harmoniously with our environment. The threat of climate change challenges us to learn and practice new ways of relating to our natural resources. Can Hinduism present us some ideas to deal with these issues challenging the present and the future of our world?

The challenges of interconnectivity are both increasingly globalized and increasingly local. Just as an example, now within the U.S., there are more than 700 Hindu temples and their associated communities, according to the Pluralism Project of the Harvard University. Although the United States is often referred to as a melting pot absorbing different ethnicities and races, the history of Hindus living in India presents a much longer tradition of accepting even larger number of diverse people, such as the Greeks, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Zoroastrians, and Huns in ancient times, and the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhists in the last century.

It is this Hindu past of religious acceptance and harmony that goes even beyond the human species. Hindus not only have accepted humans of diverse races but have also accepted divinity in non-Human forms. A Hindu can worship a stone and/or a specific mountain, the water and/or a specific river and/or the ocean, a plant, an animal (not just a cow but a snake or a rat or any other species), a bird, the earth, the sky, the sun, the fire, and so on. It is widely mentioned that Hindus have 330 million gods, but perhaps it is better to say that Hindus have infinite number of gods and goddesses, because everybody and everything is potentially divine according to its philosophy. Its practitioners are simply trying to live up to the Hindu ideal of visualizing divinity in every part of the universe, every particle of the ecology. And following this infinite number of divinities, there arose thousands of different castes, tribes, and other socio-religious communities who not only tolerated each other but even accepted each other's spiritual path. Thus, there is no false god or true god for Hindus.
The most fundamental concept of Hinduism is *Dharma*, which etymologically means "that which sustains." Indeed, the very foundation of dharma is based on sustainability of not just the human society but its related Vedic concept of *Ritam*, which includes the entire universe. There is a famous hymn in the *Rigveda* that describes the creation of the entire universe: how a cosmic person is transformed into the ecological entities (the sun, the moon, the wind, the sky, and so on) and the human society (different social classes). This interconnectedness of humans with the ecology can be a very promising message for the contemporary problems of global climate change.

It was the Hindu idea of non-violence as immortalized by Mahatma Gandhi that Dr. King witnessed in his 1959 visit to India and later adopted in his own movement in the U.S. The Hindu practices of yoga and meditation are now helping millions of Westerners improve their health. Hindu idea of revering the Mother Earth is also increasingly shared by many Westerners in their quest to save the planet. In August 2009, *Newsweek* ran a story titled "We Are All Hindus Now" based on the Pew Forum Survey showing that 65 percent of Americans believe in multiple paths leading to God. Similarly 24 percent of Americans say they believe in reincarnation, according to a 2008 Harris poll, another major Hindu (also Buddhist and Jain) belief. More than a third of Americans now choose cremation, according to the Cremation Association of North America, up from 6 percent in 1975, which is yet another practice of the majority of Hindus.

Another major cultural presence largely representing the Hindu way of life is "Bollywood," a popular name for the Indian film industry. India not only produces the largest number of films each year (in Hindi and other Indian languages) but Indian films are now enjoyed in African countries, Middle Eastern countries, South East Asian countries, and Australia, Europe, and North America. According to a *Businessweek* report, Bollywood sold more than 3.2 billion movie tickets in 2009, much more than Hollywood. This globalization of Indian films has not only shown a glimpse of Hindu culture worldwide but in turn Bollywood films themselves have now started becoming more global in appeal, for instance, by deemphasizing the village life and the caste system. The future of Hinduism, as depicted in Bollywood at least, seems to be led by the urban globalized Hindus.

Ironically, Hindus themselves need to be reminded of Hindu ideas now to save their land of origin India from the assaults of all kinds of pollution. The Bishnois, a Hindu community in Northern India, is famous for its earliest ecological sacrifice in 1730, in which a woman named Amrita Devi led 362 other Bishnois to sacrifice their lives to protect their sacred tree. The public memory of this event continues to inspire environmental movements, such as the Chipko and the Appiko. However, Indian rivers, mountains, forests, and air are under tremendous pressure due to rising economy and growing population. The future of Hinduism is thus increasingly dependent on how successfully Hindus learn and apply their teachings in everyday life.

To conclude, Hindu ideas and practices are slowly entering and transforming the Western lifestyle. Hindus in turn are becoming more aware of the global problems such as the climate change. The ideals of Hinduism, such as pluralism, dharma, ritam, and nonviolence are some important lessons for the future of Hinduism in particular and for humanity in general. If today's
Hindus can take inspiration from their own teachings, they can ensure a healthy and prosperous future for themselves, their diverse neighborhoods, and their natural resources.

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