



Brahmanism and Shramanism

The tussle between casteism and inclusiveness has been going on for centuries in this land to the east of the Sindhu

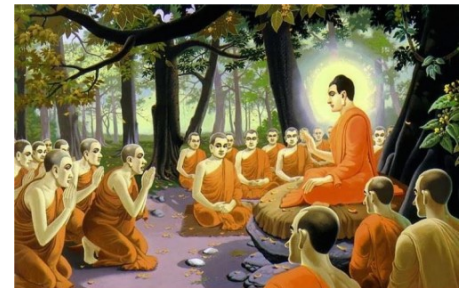
BY RAM PUNIYANI राम पुनियानी

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There is a lot of confusion about Hinduism as a religion, its relationship with Brahmanism and Shramanism. Adding to the confusion is the term Hindutva, which has presented newer politics in the language of religion.

The word “Hindu” came up only in the 8th century. To begin with, it was just a geographical category. This term was coined by the Arabs and Persians who came to this part of the sub-continent. As they crossed the River Sindhu, they used this river as a marker for the land to the east. They pronounced it as Hindu. Until then, the people of this land had many a religious tradition. Aryans, who arrived in waves of migration, were nomads and later a pastoral society, not a “nation state” as being asserted today. The Vedas and Smritis speak of life and norms in a pastoral society.

The social organization of that time was articulated in Manusmriti. The hierarchical varna system and later the caste system was the core of the social system. Dominance of Brahmins as a caste was undisputed and the social inequality was the central pillar of society. The dominated castes, the Dalits, were regarded as untouchables; they had to serve the upper caste. Other varnas also had their privileges marked out. The upper castes had rights and the dominated castes had duties to perform. It was a clear-cut “division of labour”!



It was in this context that Buddhism came up with a message of equality. This appealed to large sections of society, who opted for the values of social equality and embraced the religion. Ambedkar referred to the advent of Buddhism as a revolution. This changed the social equation and challenged the caste hierarchy. Alongside Brahmanism, other religious traditions existed. With Buddhism questioning the caste system, Brahmanism was forced to enter into a new phase. During this phase, Brahmanism broadened cultic practices and devised public ceremonies and rituals to influence the masses and wean them away from Buddhism. The term Hinduism started being used for the religions prevalent here. As Buddhism spread, the hold of the Brahmin landlord on the low castes got weakened. Shankaracharya led the movement that opposed Buddhism at the ideological level. Ambedkar called this a counter-revolution. This assault on Buddhism was duly supported by the rulers, including Pushyamitra Shunga and Shashank.

Buddhism was wiped out from the land in the process and all the other religious traditions, from animism to atheism, came to be lumped under the umbrella of Hinduism, a religion that had neither a prophet nor a scripture. The broad Hindu identity took shape with Brahmanism in command, subjugating other traditions and confining them to the margins of society. This is when, for the first time, Hinduism as a religion got an identity. The two major streams under this umbrella of Hinduism, Brahmanism and Shramanism, had contradictory beliefs, values and practices.

Brahmanism, based on caste and gender hierarchy, lorded over other traditions, all of which could be collectively called Shramanism. These traditions, such as Nath, Tantra, Siddha, Shaiva, Siddhanta and Bhakti, had values that were more inclusive. These belonged to the poorer sections of society and had practices that went against brahmanical norms, especially the caste hierarchy. Buddhism and Jainism also don't have a caste hierarchy. Hence, they are also Shramanic traditions, but they aren't part of Hinduism as each has its own prophet and the boundaries with Hinduism are well demarcated.

Historian Romila Thapar (“Syndicated Moksha”, *Seminar*, September 1985) sums up the process: “The Hindu religion as it is described today is said to have its roots in the Vedas. In any case, whatever we call the religion of these nomadic

clans, it was not the religion that is today known as Hinduism. This (Hinduism in its current version) began to be formulated only in the period of Maghadha-Mauryan state ...”

This process of brahmanical hegemonizing was further stepped up from the 19th century onwards. As the British colonialists could not be bothered to grapple with the multiple local traditions and as they did not understand the local diversity, they resorted to the guidance of Brahmins and recognized Brahmanism as Hinduism. Their major advisors in matters of religion were the Brahmins employed by them. These Brahmins projected the brahmanical texts as being key to understanding local religion. For the British, these became textbooks of the country's religions. Thus, this brahmanical core got a thicker veneer of Hinduism, which was constructed by bringing together diverse traditions with contrary values under a single label. In this construct, the brahmanical value system dominated. This is what led Ambedkar to say that Hinduism is brahmanical theology.

With the changes in the social system under British rule, with the rise of new social groups of industrialists and modern, educated classes, the landlords and former rulers, the allies of Brahmins, started feeling marginalized. New power equations arose, as a democratic, equitable society appeared to be in sight. This included the rise of a national movement, the nascent Dalitbahujan movement, and the ideologies of liberation put forth by Jotirao Phule and later consolidated by Ambedkar. This Dalitbahujan ferment posed a serious challenge to the hegemony of Brahmanism. Buddha's teachings became a threat to the former rulers and Brahmins, to the prevailing system. The threat became real with the Dalitbahujan ideology feeding off industrialization and modern education.

At this point, the landlord-Brahmin combine came up with Hindutva. First, they said education for Dalitbahujan was against “our” religion and later they formed political organizations in the name of religion to protect their sociopolitical interests. Hindutva, the ideology of Hindu nationalism, is repackaged Brahmanism for the political arena. Brahmanism used to undermine Dalitbahujans with the “Hindu” label. Now, they do it with “Hindutva”. All non-Muslim and non-Christian traditions like Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism have been incorporated under Hindutva. This is political construction of Hinduism not a theological one.

From Buddha to the medieval saint tradition to the movements led by Phule and Ambedkar, Dalitbahujans have been opposing the varna and caste system. Today, with the BJP-RSS coming to power, Hindutva is again trying to camouflage its basic opposition to the interests of the dominated castes.

The evolution of the Dalitbahujan ideology has seen three major stages and also three major opponents. Buddhism was opposed by Shakaracharya-rulers, medieval saints was opposed by the ideology the Brahmin clergy (supported by rulers), and finally the Phule-Ambedkar ideology of liberation being opposed by political Brahmanism (Hinduism) or Hindutva.

The non-brahmanical traditions of the dominated castes, the Dalits and Bahujans, are traditions of rebellion and resistance, the language of which keeps changing depending on the context. Today, they are pitted against an ideology of domination that has adopted the name of Hindutva and is trying to undermine Dalitbahujan interests in multiple ways.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ram Puniyani राम पुनियानी

Ram Puniyani is a former professor of IIT Bombay and a winner of 2007 National Communal Award.