The term Hinduism as we understand it today to describe a particular religion is modern, as also is the concept which it presupposes, both resulting from a series of choices made from a range of belief, ritual and practice which were collated into the creation of this religion. Unlike the Semitic religions, particularly Christianity and Islam (with which the comparison is often made), which began with a founder and structure at a point in time and evolved largely in relation to them, Hinduism (and I use the word here in its contemporary meaning) has been constituted largely through a range of reaction to specific historical situations. This is partly why some prefer to use the phrase Hindu religions (in the plural) rather than Hinduism. Ironically there has been little analysis of the various manifestations of Hinduism from a historical perspective. The normative and the empirical in the analysis of Hinduism are seldom interwoven. Comparisons with Semitic religions—particularly Islam and Christianity—are not fortuitous since these have been catalysts in the search for a structure among contemporary Hindus.

Whereas linear religions such as Buddhism and Jainism or Christianity and Islam can be seen to change in a historical dimension, both reacting to their original structure and the interaction with the constituents of historical circumstances, such changes are more easily seen in individual Hindu sects rather than in Hinduism as a whole. This may be a partial explanation for the general reluctance of scholars of Hinduism to relate manifestations of Hinduism to their historical context and to social change.

The study of what is regarded as Hindu philosophy and religious texts has been so emphasised as almost to ignore those who are the practitioners of these tenets, beliefs, rituals and ideas. The latter became an interest of nineteenth century ethnography but this was not generally juxtaposed with textual data. Furthermore, the view has generally been from above, since the texts were first composed in Sanskrit and their interpreters were brāhmaṇas. But precisely because Hinduism is not a linear religion, it becomes necessary to look at the situation further down the social scale where the majority of its practitioners are located. The religious practices of the latter may differ from those at the upper levels to a degree considerably greater than that of a uniform, centralised, monolithic religion.

Discussions on Hinduism tend to be confined to Hindu philosophy and theory. But the manifestation of a contemporary, resurgent, active movement, largely galvanised for political ends, provides a rather different focus to such discussions. It is with the projections of this form of popular Hinduism and of its past that this article forms a comment. The kind of Hinduism which is being currently propagated by the Sanghs, Parishads and Sammelans, is an attempt to restructure the indigenous religions into a monolithic, uniform religion, paralleling some of the features of Semitic religions. This seems to be a fundamental departure from the essentials of what may be called the indigenous Hindu religions. Its form is not only in many ways alien to the earlier culture of India but equally disturbing is the uniformity which it seeks to impose on the variety of Hindu religions.

My attempt here is to briefly review what might be called Hinduism through history, and observe the essentials of the earliest beginnings and the innovations introduced over time. More recent innovations of colonial times have sometimes provided the possibilities for the directions in which some segments of Hinduism are now moving. The study of Hindu philosophy and thought has its own importance but is not of central concern to this article. Religious articulation in the daily routine of life draws more heavily on social sources than on the philosophical or the theological.

Religions such as Buddhism or Islam or Christianity do diversify into sects but this diversification retains a particular reference point—that of the historical founder and the teaching embodied in a single sacred text or a group of texts regarded as the Canon. The area of discourse among the sects is tied to the dogma, tenets and theology as enunciated in the beginning. They see themselves as part of the historical process and of the unfolding of the single religion even though they may have broken away from the mainstream.

Hindu sects on the other hand generally had a distinct and independent origin related to the centrality of a particular deity and/or to a founder and to a system of beliefs. The latter could, but
need not be, related to an earlier system. Only at a later stage, and if required, were attempts made to try and assimilate some of these sects into existing dominant sects through the amalgamation of new forms of recognized deities or, of new deities as the manifestations of the older ones, and by incorporating some of their mythology, ritual and custom. Subordinate sects sought to improve their status by similar incorporation from the dominant sects if they were in a position to do so.

What has survived over the centuries is not a single monolithic religion but a diversity of religious sects which we today have put together under a uniform name. The collation of these religious groups is defined as Hinduism even though the religious reference points of such groups might be quite distinct. "Hinduism" became a convenient general label for studying the different indigenous religious expressions. This was when it was claimed that anything from atheism to animism could legitimately be regarded as part of "Hinduism". Today the Hindus of the Parishads and the Sanghs would look upon atheists and animists with suspicion and contempt, for the term Hinduism is being used in a different sense.

Hinduism as defined in contemporary parlance is a bringing together of beliefs, rites and practices consciously selected from those of the past, interpreted in a contemporary idiom in the last couple of centuries and the selection conditioned by historical circumstances. This is not to suggest that religions with a linear growth are superior to what may apparently be an ahistorical religion or one with multiple historical roots, but rather to emphasise the difference between the two.

In a strict sense, a reference to Hinduism would require a more precise definition of the particular variety referred to—Brahmanism, Bhakti, Tantrism, Brahma-Samaj, Arya-Samaj, Shaiva-Siddhanta, or whatever. These are not comparable to the sects of Christianity or Islam as they do not relate to a single sacred text and its interpretation. Many are rooted in ritual practices and beliefs rather than in texts and it has been argued that a characteristic difference relates to the orthopraxy of Hinduism rather than to an orthodoxy. Present-day Hinduism therefore cannot be seen as an evolved form with a linear growth historically from Harappan through Vedic, Puranic and Bhakti forms, although it may carry elements of these. In this it differs even from Buddhism and Jainism leave alone Christianity and Islam.

Its origin has no distinct point in time (the Vedas were regarded as the foundation until the discovery of the Indus civilisation in the 1920s when the starting point was then taken back to the previous millennium), no historically attested founder, no text associated with the founder, all of which reduces its association with historicity. This of course makes it easier to reinterpret if not to recreate a religion afresh as and when required.

Many of these features, absent in the religion as a whole, do however exist among the various sects which are sought to be included under the umbrella-label of "Hinduism" which makes them historical entities. But then, not all these sects are agreed on identical rites, beliefs and practices as essential. Animal sacrifice and libations of alcohol would be essential to some but anathema to others among the sects which the Census of India labels as "Hindu". The yardstick of the Semitic religions which has been the conscious and the subconscious challenger in the modern structuring of Hinduism, would seem most inappropriate to what existed before.

We know little for certain about the Harappan religion and guesses include a possible fertility cult involving the worship of phallic symbols, a fire cult, perhaps a sacrificial ritual and rituals to legitimise rulership, some suggestive of an authoritative priesthood. The decipherment of the script will hopefully tell us more. It was earlier thought that with the ascendence of Vedic religion, the Harappan became a substratum religion, some facets of which surfaced in later periods. A different interpretation is now being put forward, and although tentative, is worth consideration. It is being suggested that some important aspects of Vedic religion may in fact have been incorporated from the earlier Harappan religion and this would include, the building of a fire-altar and even perhaps the soma cult. The Vedic compositions even if they might incorporate elements of the earlier religion, emphasise the central role of the sacrificial ritual of the yajña, are suggestive of some elements of shamanism, include a gamut of deities where the brahmana is the intermediary to the gods and worship focuses on rituals without images. Because of the pivotal role of the brahmana it is sometimes referred to as the beginnings of Brahmanical Hinduism to distinguish it from other important forms of Hinduism. The Vedic compositions and the DharmaSāstras (the codes of sacred and social duties) are said to constitute the norms for Brahmanism and the religious practices for the upper castes.
Brahmanism is differentiated from the subsequent religious groups by the use for the latter of the term Śramaṇa. The Buddhist and Jaina texts, the inscriptions of Asoka, the description of India by Megasthenes and the account of the Chinese pilgrim Hsiian Tsang, covering a period of a thousand years, all refer to two main religious categories: the brāhmaṇas and the śramaṇa. The identity of the former is familiar and known. The latter were those who were often in opposition to Brahmanism such as the Buddhists, Jains and Ajivikas and a number of other sects associated with both renunciatory orders and a lay following, who explored areas of belief and practice different from the Vedas and Dharmaśāstras. They often preached a system of universal ethics which spanned castes and communities. This differed from the tendency to segment religious practice by caste which was characteristic of Brahmanism. The segmenting of sects is of course common even among historically evolved religions, but the breaking away still retains the historical imprint of the founder, the text and the institution.

Brahmanism was free of this. The differentiating of Brahmanistic practice for a particular caste makes it an essentially different kind of segmentation. It was this segmentation which some Śramaṇic religions opposed in their attempt to universalise their religious teaching, as for example in the banishing of those monks and nuns thought to be creating dissection in the Buddhist sangha. The hostility between Brahmanism and Śramaṇism was so acute that the grammarian Panini, when speaking of natural enemies and innate hostility refers to this and compares it to the hostility of the snake and the mongoose. Literature dating to after the fifth century A.D. has derogatory statements about the Jaines as heretics and Jaina literature refers to the brāhmaṇas as heretics and liars. This indigenous view of the dichotomous religions of India is referred to even at the beginning of the second millennium A.D. by Alberuni who writes of the Brahmanas and the Sharmans.

Within Brahmanism there was also segmentation but seen from the outside it seemed an entity. Brahmanism did maintain its identity and survived the centuries although not unchanged, particularly after the decline of Buddhism. This was in part because it was well-endowed with grants of land and items of wealth through intensive royal patronage, which in turn reinforced its claim to social superiority and enabled it further to emphasise its distance from other castes and their practices. The extensive use of Sanskrit as the language of rituals and learning enhanced the employment of brāhmaṇas in work involving literacy such as the upper levels of administration and gave them access to high political office in royal courts. This again supported its exclusive status. The use of a single language—Sanskrit—gave it a pan-Indian character, the wide geographical spread of which provided both mobility as well as a strengthening of its social identity. Since it was also increasingly the language of the social elites and of administration, the establishment of new kingdoms from the latter part of the first millennium A.D. onwards resulted in an extensive employment of literate brāhmaṇas and especially those proficient in the Vedas, Dharmaśāstras and Purāṇas.

The Bhakti tradition of the first millennium A.D. is sometimes traced to the message of the Bhagavad-gītā, which was interpolated into the Mahābhārata, to give the Gītā both antiquity and currency. The Gītā endorsed a radical change in that it moved away from the centrality of the sacrificial ritual and instead emphasised the individual’s direct relation with the deity. An earlier formulation of a similar idea was current through the Upaniṣads where the sacrificial ritual was questioned, the centrality of rebirth was emphasised with release from rebirth being sought through meditation and yama and the recognition of the atman-brahman relationship. Many of the early Śramaṇa sects had also opposed the yajña. The Gītā did however concede that dharma lay in observing the rules of one’s own caste, svadharma, and the arbiters of dharma remained the brāhmaṇas. Selfless action as projected in the Gītā was the need to act in accordance with one’s dharma which now became the key concept.

This shift of emphasis provided the root in later times for the emergence of a number of Bhakti sects—Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, Śākta and other—which provided the contours to much that is viewed as "traditional Hinduism" or Puranic Hinduism as some prefer to call it. The Pāśupatas, the Alvars and Nāyānārs, the Śaiva-Siddhānta and the Lingāyats, Jñāneśvara and Tukārāma, Vallabhaārya, Mirā, Cītānīya, Śrīkārādeva, Basava, Lalla, Tulsīśāsā, and so on are often bunched together as part of the Bhakti stream. In fact there are variations among them which are significant and need to be pointed out. Some among these and similar teachers accepted the earlier style of worship and practice, others were hostile to the Vedic tradition; some objected to caste distinctions and untouchability, whereas for others such distinctions posed no problems. Some of the sects opposed to caste discouraged their members from worshipping
in temples or going on pilgrimages and from observing the upper caste dharma. A few felt that asceticism and renunciation were not a path to salvation whereas others were committed to these. Kabir and Nanak for instance, infused Sufi ideas into their teaching. These major differences are rarely discussed and commented upon in modern popular writing which is anxiously searching for similarities in the tradition. Yet these dissimilarities were to be expected and were in a sense their strength.

The Bhakti sects were up to a point the inheritors of the Śramanic tradition in that some were opposed to Brahmanism and the sacrificial ritual, most were in theory open to every caste and all of them were organised along sectarian lines. They arose at various times over a span of a thousand years in different parts of the subcontinent. They were specific in time, place and teacher, and were constricted in cross-regional communication by differences of language. They did not evolve out of the same original teaching nor did they spread through conversion; they arose as and when historical conditions were conducive to their growth, often intermeshed with the need for particular castes to articulate their aspirations. Hence, the variation in belief and practice and the lack of awareness of predecessors or of an identity of religion across a subcontinental plane. Similarities were present in some cases but even these did not lead to a recognition of participation in a single religious movement. With the growth of the Bhakti sects, where many focused on a single deity, the worship of the iconic image of the deity gained popularity, or else a few sects refused to worship an image at all. Image-worship was possibly encouraged by the icons which had been used by Buddhists and Jains from the Christian era onwards. Whereas Megasthenes visiting in the fourth century B.C. does not refer to images in discussing the religions of India, for Alberuni, writing in the eleventh century A.D., icons are a major feature of the indigenous religions.

This was also the period which saw the currency of the Śākta sects and Tantric rituals. Regarded by some as the resurgence of an indigenous belief associated with subordinate social groups (gradually becoming powerful) it was, by the end of the first millennium A.D., popular at every level of society including the royal courts. The attempt in recent times to either ignore it or to give a respectable gloss to its rituals or their manifestation in the art of the period, is largely because of the embarrassment these might cause to middle-class Indians heavily influenced by Christian puritanism and somewhat utilised in imagining erroneously that Tantric rituals consist essentially of pornographic performances. That there has been little effort, except in scholarly circles, to integrate such groups into the definition of Hinduism derives also from the attempt to define Hinduism as Brahmanism based on upper caste rituals and such cults were initially alien to traditional Brahmanism.

Another noticeable manifestation of non-Brahmanic religion is what has recently been euphemistically called "folk Hinduism"—the religion of the untouchables, "tribals" and other groups at the lower end of the social scale. This is characterised by a predominance of the worship of goddesses and spirits (bhūta-pretas) represented symbolically and often aniconically and with rituals performed by non-brāhmaṇa priests: the later for a variety of reasons, not least among them being that since the offering and libations consist of meat and alcohol, these could be regarded as polluting by brāhmaṇas. Needless to say, such groups would not be able to afford the costly donations required of a brahmanical yajña. For the upper caste Hindus these groups were (and often still are) regarded as mlecchas or impure and not a part of their own religious identity. Interestingly attempts by Hindu missionaries to proselytise among such groups, lay particular emphasis on prohibitions on meat-eating and alcohol in every-day life.

The sects included in the honeycomb of what has been called Hinduism were multiple and ranged from animistic spirit cults to others based on subtle philosophic concepts. They were oriented towards the clan, the caste and the profession or else on the reversing of these identities through renunciation. The social identity of each was imprinted on its religious observances. The deities worshipped vary, the rituals differed, belief in after-life varied from the theory of karma and saṃsāra to that of svarga and naraka, heaven and hell. In the same Mahābhārata, where the characters of the narrative find themselves in heaven and hell at the end of the story, Kṛṣṇa preaches release from rebirth which is a very different eschatology.

This variance may in part explain why the word dharma became central to an understanding of religion. It referred to the duties regarded as sacred which had to be performed in accordance with one’s varṇa, jāti and sect and which differed according to each of these. The constituents of dharma were conformity to ritual duties, social obligations and the norms of family and caste behaviour preferably as stipulated in the Dharmaśāstras or accepted as
incontrovertible rules of behaviour. As has been noticed, theology although not absent, is not to the fore, nor any ecclesiastical authority, both of which again point to the difference between these religions and the Semitic. A major concern was with ritual purity. The performance of sacred duty heavily enmeshed in social obligations was so important that absolute individual freedom only lay in renunciation.10

But the significance of dharma was that it demarcated sharply between the upper castes—the dvijas or twice-born—for whom it was the core of the religion and the rest of society whose conforming to dharna was left somewhat in abeyance, as long as it did not transgress the dharma of the upper castes. They were to that extent without dharma or had their own. In trying to redefine Hinduism today as a universalising religion, the implicit attempt is to try and include those without the recognised dharma, who have in the past been excluded; but the inclusion is not divorced from the terms of the upper caste dharma and this raises problems.

Hindu missionary organisations, such as those attached to the Ramakrishna Mission, the Arya Samaj, the RSS and the Vishva Hindu Parishad, taking their cue from Christian missionaries are active among the adivasis, mainly scheduled castes and tribes. They are converting these latter groups to a Hinduism as defined by the upper caste movements of the last two centuries. Not surprisingly there was a difference of opinion among some members of the upper castes in the early twentieth century on whether such groups can be counted dharma, who have in the past been
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of Muslim rule than in the earlier period and many of the facets which are regarded today as essential to Hinduism belong to more recent times. The establishment of the sects which accompanied these developments often derived from wealthy patronage including that of both Hindu and Muslim rulers, which accounted for the prosperity of temples and institutions associated with these sects. The more innovative sects were in part the result of extensive dialogues between gurus, sādhus, pirs and Sufis, a dialogue which was sometimes confrontational and sometimes conciliatory. The last thousand years have seen the most assertive thrust of many Hindu sects. If by persecution is meant the conversion of Hindus to Islam and Christianity, then it should be kept in mind that the majority of conversions were from the lower castes and this is more a reflection on Hindu society than on persecution. Upper caste conversions were more frequently activated by factors such as political alliances and marriage circuits and here the conversion was hardly due to persecution. Tragically for those that converted on the assumption that there would be social equality in the new religion, this was never the case and the lower castes remained low in social ranking and carried their caste identities into the new religions.

When the destroying of temples and the breaking of images by Muslim iconoclasts is mentioned—and quite correctly so—it should however at the same time be stated that there were also many Muslim rulers, not excluding Aurangzeb, who gave substantial donations to Hindu sects and to individual brāhmaṇas.

There was obviously more than just religious bigotry or religious tolerance involved in these actions. The relationship for example between the Mughal rulers and the Bundela rajas, which involved temple destruction among other things, and veered from close alliances to fierce hostility, was the product not merely of religious loyalties or differences, but the play of power and political negotiation. Nor should it be forgotten that the temple as a source of wealth was exploited even by Hindu rulers such as Harsadeva of Kashmir who looted temples when he faced a fiscal crisis or the Paramāra ruler who destroyed temples in the Chalukya kingdom, or the Rāstrakūta king who tore up the temple courtyard of the Pratihar ruler after a victorious campaign. Given the opulence of large temples, the wealth stored in them required protection, but the temple was also a statement of political authority when built by a ruler.

The European adoption of the term "Hindu" gave it further currency as also the attempts of Catholic and Protestant Christian missionaries to convert the Gentoo/Hindu to Christianity. The pressure to convert, initially disassociated with European commercial activity, changed with the coming of British colonial power when, by the early nineteenth century, missionary activities were either surreptitiously or overtly, according to context, encouraged by the colonial authority. The impact both of missionary activity and Christian colonial power resulted in considerable soul searching on the part of those Indians who were close to this new historical experience. One result was the emergence of a number of groups such as the Brahma Samaj, the Prarthana Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission, the Theosophical Society, the Divine Life Society, the Swaminarayan movement et al., which gave greater currency to the term Hinduism. There was much more dialogue of upper caste Hindus with Christians than there had been with Muslims, partly because for the coloniser power also lay in controlling knowledge about the colonised and partly because there were far fewer Hindus converting to Christianity than had converted to Islam. Some of the neo-Hindu sects as they have come to be called, were influenced by Christianity and some reacted against it; but even the latter were not immune from its imprint. This was inevitable given that it was the religion of the coloniser.

The challenge from Christian missionaries was not merely at the level of conversions and religious debates. The more subtle form was through educational institutions necessary to the emerging Indian middle class. Many who were attracted to these neo-Hindu groups had at some point of their lives experienced Christian education and were thereafter familiar with Christian ideas. The Christian missionary model played an important part, as for example in the institutions of the Arya Samaj. The Śaiva Siddhānta Samaj was inspired by Arumugha Navalgar, who was roused to re-interpret Śaivism after translating the Bible into Tamil. The movement attracted middle-class Tamils seeking a cultural self-assertion. Added to this was the contribution of some Orientalist scholars who interpreted the religious texts to further their notions of how Hinduism should be constructed. The impact of Orientalism in creating the image of Indian, and particularly Hindu culture, as projected in the nineteenth century, was considerable.

Those among these groups influenced by Christianity, attempted to defend, redefine and create Hinduism on the model of Christianity.
They sought for the equivalent of a monotheistic God, a Book, a Prophet or a Founder and congregational worship with an institutional organisation supporting it. The implicit intention was again of defining “the Hindu” as a reaction to being “the other”; the subconscious model was the Semitic religion. The monotheistic God was sought in the abstract notion of Brahman, the Absolute of Upaniṣads with which the individual Ātman seeks unity in the process of mokṣa; or else with the interpretation of the term deva which was translated as God, suggesting a monotheistic God. The worship of a single deity among many others is not strictly speaking monotheism, although attempts have been made by modern commentators to argue this. Unlike many of the earlier sects which were associated with a particular deity, some of these groups claimed to transcend deity and reach out to the Absolute, Infinite, the Brahman. This was an attempt to transcend segmentary interests in an effort to attain a universalistic identity, but in social customs and ritual, caste identities and distinctions between high and low continued to be maintained.

The teaching of such sects drew on what they regarded as the core of the traditions, where the notion of karma and samsāra for instance, came to be seen as uniting all Hindus, even though in fact this was not the case. The Upaniṣadic idea of the relation between Ātman and Brahman was seen as a kind of monotheism. The need for a Book, led to one among a variety of texts being treated as such—the Bhagavad-gītā or the Vedas. The Prophet being an altogether alien idea, could at best be substituted by the teacher-figure of Kṛṣṇa, even though he was neither Prophet nor son of God. Congregational worship, not altogether alien to lower caste forms of worship, was systematised and became the channel for propagating these new versions of Hinduism. The singing of hymns and the common chanting of prayers became an important part of the ritual. The discarding of the icon by both the Brahma Samaj and the Arya Samaj was an allergic reaction. It was seen as a pollution of the original religion but, more likely it was the jibe of idol worship from the practitioners of Christianity and Islam which was a subconscious motivation. This was not a new feature, for some Bhakti teachers had earlier pointed out the incongruity of worshipping images rather than concentrating on devotion to the deity. A reaction against the icon, but a substitution virtually for the image by the Book, was and is, the centrality of the Guru Granth Sahib in Sikh worship.

Much of the sacred literature had been in earlier times orally preserved and served a variety of social and religious ends. The epic narratives of the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa were converted to sacred literature by depicting Kṛṣṇa and Rama as avatāras of Viṣṇu. The narration then became that of the actions of a deity. Interpolations could also be added as and when required, as for example the Gītā. This is a different attitude from that of the Semitic religions to the centrality of the Book, or for that matter, from that of the Sikhs to the single, sacred text. The imprint of the idea of the sacredness of the Book, or the sacredness of the Book itself, is suggested in some late texts such as the fifteenth century Adhyātma-Rāmāyaṇa where it says that the reading of the text is in itself an act of worship.22 Interestingly interpolations became far less frequent when the text is written. These new religious identities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were in part the inheritors of the older tradition of combining social aspirations with religious expression and establishing new sects. But at the same time they were conscious of the attempt to create a different kind of religion from the past and which gave currency to the term Hinduism.

Traditional flexibility in juxtaposing sects as an idiom of social change as well as the basic concepts of religious expression now became problematic. In the absence of a single “jealous” God, often associated with monotheism and demanding complete and undiluted loyalty from the worshipper, there were instead multiple deities, some of which were superseded over time and others which were created as and when required. Thus the major Vedic deities—Indra, Mitra, Varuna and Agni—declined with the rise of Siva and Viṣṇu at the turn of the Christian era. The latter have remained major deities supported by sects which are not always in agreement about what the deities represent for them. This has not prevented the creation of an altogether new deity, as has been witnessed in the last half century with the very popular worship in northern India of the goddess, Santoshi Mā.

The attitude to deity would in part support the argument that it is not theology which is important in Hinduism but the mode of worship. The Vedic yajñā has a carefully orchestrated performance of ritual with the meticulous ordering of every detail including the correct pronunciation of the words constituting the mantra. Worship as bhakti in Puranic Hinduism is more personalised and informal. The earlier emphasis on oblation and sacrificial ritual was now transformed into sharing in the grace of the deity and devotion to the
The sectarian identity can change. The idea of conversion was much debated in the nineteenth century when various organisations wished to both reform and expand the Hindu identity as they saw it. Possibly this was also tied into the increasing consciousness of numbers with the notion of majority and minority communities being introduced into politics. Earlier it had been argued that each sect had its own regulations, obligations and duties which often drew both on religious antecedents and social requirements. Gradually if a sect acquired a large following cutting across castes, it tended to become a caste in itself. This further endorses the notion that it would perhaps be more correct to speak of the Hindu religions rather than of Hinduism. Some would argue that the correct term for the latter would be sanatan dharma.

There was one agency which had its roots in religious articulation and which could legitimately transgress the rules of caste and this was the range of renunciatory orders. Some of these orders restricted themselves to recruiting only brāhmanas, but in the main most of them recruited from a variety of castes. Even among the latter, although theoretically the orders were open to all, there was a tendency to prefer caste Hindus. Open recruitment was possible because renouncers were expected to discard all social obligations and caste identities, and were regarded as being outside the rules of caste and dharma. Joining such an order was also in some cases the only legitimate form of dissent from social obligations since it required the revoking of these obligations. The multiplicity of renouncers in India has therefore to be viewed not always as inspired by otherworldly aspirations but also by the nature of the links between the social forms and dissent. The Śramanic religions were similar to these sects in that they did recruit members from a range of castes although, as was the case also with Indian Islam, Indian Christianity and Sikhism, converts often retained their original caste identity, especially in the crucial area of marriage connections.

Religious sects battened on patronage, whether royal or from other members of the community. Even the renunciatory orders were not averse to accepting wealth which ensured them material comforts as is evident from the many centres of such orders scattered across the Indian landscape over the last two thousand years. The wealth ranged from small donations of labour and money to extensive grants of land. The pattern of patronage to Buddhism is repeated with other religions. Some would argue that the correct term for the latter would be sanatan dharma.

Deity was conceptualised in a variety of ways—abstract, aniconic, an image or an image elaborately sculpted and housed in an equally elaborate temple. Devotion could also be expressed in various ways. There was no requirement of uniformity in methods of worship or in who performed the ritual. There was little ecclesiastical order involved and no centralised church. The caste of the worshipper frequently conditioned the nature of the ritual and the method of worship. This included the caste of the priest, the contents of the offering, the language and form of the prayer and even at times the particular manifestation of a deity. This was evident in even the diversity of shrines and temples in a single village.

Because worship was so closely tied to caste and recruitment to caste was by birth, the question of conversion became irrelevant. In its absence, sects emerged either independently, or through segmenting off or amalgamating with similar sects. The religious sect was also an avenue to caste mobility. Origin myths of middle and lower castes often maintain that the caste was originally of higher status but a lapse in the ritual or an unwitting act of pollution led to a loss of status. Imitation of higher caste norms or the dropping of caste obligations would normally not be permitted unless justified by the creation of new religious sect. The latter would initially be regarded with hostility by the conservative but if it became socially and economically powerful it would be accommodated. The absence of conversion accounted for the absence of distinction between the true follower and the infidel or pagan. Yet, distinctions of another kind were more sharply maintained, particularly among sects with a substantial upper caste following. There was an exclusion of all those who were regarded as outside the social pale and who came under the category of mleccha—the untouchables, some lower castes, the "tribals" and Indian Muslims and Christians. They were segregated because they performed neither the ritual duties nor the social duties required by the dharma. That in many cases they were prohibited from doing so, such as entering the temple for worship, did not prevent their being excluded. There was little active attempt to change this and where it was attempted, such as in the shuddhi movement of the Arya Samaj, the results were negligible.

It is often said that one is born a Hindu and one cannot be converted to Hinduism, for the caste identity is determined although the sectarian identity can change. The idea of conversion was much...
to the patronage of the elite, although some did maintain a reciprocal relationship with the lower castes. The initial radical thought of some of these orders was marginalised by their need for patrons. Where such economic wealth helped these sects to build institutions, whether that of the swaṅgha, the matha, or the khāṅgha, it provided them with access to political power with the result that politics and religion were intertwined. The real texture of Indian social history in the second millennium A.D. has been by-passed with the obsessive concern with simplistic Hindu-Muslim relations to the exclusion of the pertinent investigation of how politics and religion at some levels were interrelated. A further aspect is that in many cases these sectarian institutions were also centres of literacy and literacy was a powerful mechanism of social control.

Caste identities, economic wealth, literacy, and access to power also contributed to providing the edge to sectarian rivalries and conflicts. Hsiian Tsang and Kalhaṅga record the persecution of Buddhists by Saivas, and Karnataka witnessed the destruction of Jaina temples in a conflict with the Saivas.29 Once the Buddhists and Jainas were virtually out of the way, hostility among the Hindu sects remained, even between ascetic groups, as is evident from the pitched battles between the Dasanamis and the Bairagis over the question of precedence at the Kumbha Mela.30 Antagonism of the latter kind was not that of the Hindu against another religion but that of particular sects hostile to each other. An assessment of the degree of tolerance and non-violence, has therefore, to take into account sectarian aggression. It is true that there were no Inquisitions. This was partly because dissent was channelled into the creation of a separate sect which, if it became a renunciatory order, was less directly confrontational in society. Breakaway sects or new sects, even where they did not form renunciatory orders, found a rung on the social hierarchy of sects and their continuance and status was dependent on the social groups who became their patrons and supporters. Among the Hindu sects there was no centralised church whose supremacy was endangered by the emergence of new sects. However social subordination, justified by theories of impurity, replaced to some degree the inequities of an authoritarian church.

Religious violence is not alien to Hinduism despite the nineteenth century myth that the Hindus are by instinct and religion a non-violent people. The genesis of this myth was partly in the romantic image of the Indian past projected for example, by scholars such as Max Müller.31 Added to this were the requirements of nationalism maintaining the spiritual superiority of Indian culture of which non-violence was treated as a component. Non-violence as a central tenet of behaviour and morality was first enunciated and developed in the Śramanic tradition of Buddhism and Jainism. These were the religions which not only declined at various times in various regions of India, but were persecuted in some parts of the sub-continent. One is often struck by how different the message of the Gītā would have been and how very much closer to non-violence if Gautama Buddha had been the charioteer of Arjuna instead of Kṛṣṇa. Gandhi’s concern with ahimsā is more correctly traced to the Jaina imprint on the culture of Kathiawar. Not that the Śramanic tradition prevented violence, but at least it was a central issue early on in the ethics of Buddhism and Jainism and only later enters the discussion of some Hindu sects.32

Sectarian institutions acted as networks across geographical areas, but their reach was limited except among some renunciatory orders. Bhakti as a religious manifestation was predominant throughout the subcontinent by the seventeenth century; yet curiously there was little attempt to link these regional movements to forge a single religious identity. Each tradition used a different language and there was no ecclesiastical organisation to integrate the development. There was however the gradual building up of network around Kṛṣṇa worship at Brindavana and later Rāma worship at Ayodhya which incorporated the teacher and disciples from eastern and southern India, with new foci of worship and the demarcating of a sacred topography associated with the life-cycle of the deity incarnate and a renewed emphasis on the benefits of pilgrimage. One of the side effects of pilgrimage is that it can increase the catchment area of worshippers. Nevertheless even pilgrimage tended to remain largely regional, as for instance in the pilgrimage to Pañḍharapura in the worship of Viṣṇu as Viṣṭha which followed a well-defined circuit relevant only to Maharashtrian worshippers. The limitations to pilgrimage lay both in the nature of the cult and also in problems of distance and easy transportation. The Bhakti sects saw themselves as self-sufficient, with religious forms closely tied to local requirements. The closest to ecclesiastical organisation were the mathas associated with Śāṅkara-cārya, but these had a limited religious and social jurisdiction.

A suggested historical explanation for the spread of Bhakti sects links them to the feudalising tendencies of the period after A.D. 500 and parallels have been drawn between the loyalty of the peasant to
the feudal lord being comparable to the devotion of the worshipper for the deity.\textsuperscript{33} The Bhakti emphasis on mokṣa through devotion to a deity and through the belief in karma and samsāra was a convenient ideology for keeping subordinate groups under control. It was argued that they might suffer in this life, but by observing the dharma they would benefit in their next birth. The onus of responsibility for an unhappy condition was therefore on the individual and not on society. This gave the individual an importance which was absent in real life and therefore served to keep him/her quiescent. An explanation which requires lower castes to admit to misdemeanors even in a previous life, would hardly be widely acceptable. Common as was the belief in karma and samsāra it did not preclude the growth at a popular level of the concepts of heaven and hell. The multiplicity of memorials to the dead hero—the hero-stones—which increase in number after A.D. 500, and are found scattered in many parts of India, make it evident by symbol if not by inscription that the hero on dying a hero’s death, was taken up to eternal life in heaven.\textsuperscript{34}

The segregation of social communities in worship and religious belief and the absence of an over-arching ecclesiastical structure demanding conformity, was characteristic of the Hindu religions. Attempts at introducing an authority were made on a small scale, and however, sectarian rivalries existed, sometimes taking a violent form which the nineteenth century invested indigenous Indian religions.\textsuperscript{22} Patronage. This might partially explain the notion of tolerance with existence. The clash could come in the competition for support and funds and concerns related to the upper castes. The segregation led to the possibility of each group leading a comparatively separate existence. The clash could come in the competition for support and patronage. This might partially explain the notion of tolerance with which the nineteenth century invested indigenous Indian religions. However, sectarian rivalries existed, sometimes taking a violent form and the coming of Islam added to the number of competing sects. It was however within the broad spectrum of what has been called Puranic religion and that of the Bhakti sects that there was a dialogue between these and Islam resulting in some mutual borrowing. Curiously there was little overt interest in Islamic theology among learned brahmans. There are hardly any major studies of Islam in Sanskrit whereas the regional languages do provide evidence of a lively interest, either directly or indirectly, in the religious interface between Hindu and Islamic religions.\textsuperscript{35} Interestingly, Muslims were referred to not as such but as either Turska/Turk, Śaka, Yavana or mleccha. The first three have a historical ancestry and were used for people coming from central Asia or west Asia and the last referred to social distance. It is strange that what we today see as an essentially religious difference does not get projected in these terms although it was evidently present.

The more learned among Muslim authors such as Abu’l Fazl merely give resumés of Brahmanism when it comes to details about the indigenous religions, presumably because this was the most prestigious. There is much less detail of the other sects except in a generalised way. Abu’l Fazl refers to the strife among the various indigenous religions which he attributes to diversity in language as well as the resistance of Hindus to discuss their religions with foreigners.\textsuperscript{36} He lists four kinds of worship among Hindus: the pre-eminent is the puja of the image, the second is the yajña or sacrificial ritual, the third is dāna or gift-giving and the fourth is śraddha offered in honour of the ancestors.

Islam and Hinduism are generally projected as two monolithic, antagonistic religions, face-to-face. For the conservative in Islam the Indian experience must have been bewildering since there was no recognizable ecclesiastical authority to which it could address itself. It faced a large variety of belief systems of which the most noticeable common feature was idol-worship—but even this was by no means uniform. This may also partially account for the success of the Sufis as agencies of conversion to Islam, their beliefs and religious practices sometimes being more flexible and varying as compared to the Islam of the theologians.

It is often said that the Hindus must have been upset at seeing Turkish and Mongol soldiers in their heavy boots trampling the floors of the temples. This would certainly have been traumatic. But the question arises as to which Hindus were thus traumatized? For the same temple now entered by mleccha soldiers was in any case open only to the caste Hindus and its sanctum would have been barred to the larger population consisting of the indigenous mleccha. The feelings of the latter were of little concern to the caste Hindus who had worshipped at these temples. The trauma was therefore more in the nature of the polluting of the temple rather than the confrontation on any substantial scale with another religion.

Brāhmaṇa-Sramaṇa hostility did not disappear over time. It kept cropping up and books authored by brahmaṇas in the first millennium
A.D. often refer to Buddhists and Jainas as heretics—pakhandas—and the same word is used in some Jaina texts for brahmanas.76 Brahmanism was also distanced from certain Bhakti sects and some Šākta groups, since the latter in particular had religious offensive to Brahmanism. Inevitably however with the increasing incorporation of Tantric ideas into the religion especially of the elite groups, one expression of the claim to legitimacy was the "Sanskritisation", literally, of the texts of such sects. This required both the accommodation of some categories of brahmanas priests in the performance of the ritual, when with decline of Vedic ritual by this time other forms of ritual held out a more promising patronage for the brahmanas; as well as a process of "brahmanisation" of the priests who had earlier performed the rituals. The separateness of such sects was forced to narrow though not to amalgamate, when they were all, brahmanas, śramanas and the rest, forced to come under the single label of Hindu. A formal closeness was imposed on them by the coming of Islam and the categorisation for the first time of all indigenous cults as "Hindu" where the term carried the connotation of "the Other".

A further crisis came with the arrival of Christianity riding on the powerful wave of colonialism. This experience of both Roman Catholic and Protestant Christianity was very different from the much earlier arrival of Syrian Christianity which came in the wake of traders and had a limited geographical reach. In the projected superiority of Semitic religions, it was once again the Hindus who were regarded as "the Other" and this again included both the Brahmanic and Śramanic religions. This time the Christian dialogue was with Brahmanism and this was not altogether unexpected considering that the Indian middle class was to emerge from the ranks of the upper castes, and among these, initially, the brahmanas, were the more significant.

Inevitably the Brahmanical base of what was seen as the new or neo-Hinduism was unavoidable. But merged into it were also various practices of upper caste worship and of course the subconscious model of Christianity and Islam. Its close links with certain nationalist opinion gave to many of these neo-Hindu movements a political edge which remains recognisable even today. It is this development which was the parent to what I should like to call Syndicated Hinduism and which is being projected by some vocal and politically powerful segments of what is referred to as the Hindu community, as the sole claimant to the inheritance of indigenous Indian religion.

It goes without saying that if Indian society is changing then its religious expressions must also undergo change. But the direction of this change is perhaps alarming. The emergence of the powerful middle-class with urban moorings and a reach to the rural rich would find it useful to bring into politics a uniform, monolithic, Hinduism created to serve its new requirements. Under the guise of such a Hinduism, claiming to be the revival of an ancient, traditional form, but in effect being a new creation, an effort is made to draw a large clientele and to speak with the voice of numbers. This voice has been created to support claims of majoritarianism based on a religious identity in the functioning of democracy.

The appeal of such a Hinduism to the middle-class is obvious since it becomes a mechanism for forging a new identity aimed at protecting the interests of the middle-class, even if this is not made widely apparent. To those lower down in society there would be the attraction of upward mobility through a new religious movement. Such groups having forsaken some of their ideologies of non-caste religious sects, as from the Bhakti tradition, would have to accept the dharma of the powerful but remain subordinate. A change in this direction has introduced new problems. In wishing away the weaknesses of the old, one does not want to bring in the predictable disasters of the new.

Perhaps the major asset of what we call Hinduism of the premodern period was that it was not a uniform, monolithic religion, but a flexible juxtaposition of religious sects. This flexibility was its strength and its distinguishing feature, allowing the inclusion even of groups questioning the Vedas, disavowing caste and the injunctions of the Dharmaśastras. The weakening or disappearance of such dissenting groups within the framework even of religious expression would be a considerable loss. If Syndicated Hinduism could simultaneously do away with social hierarchies, this might mitigate its lack of flexibility. But the scramble to use it politically merely results in realignments within the hierarchy.

Syndicated Hinduism draws largely on reinterpreting Brahmanical texts of which the Gita is an obvious choice, defends the Dharmaśastras and underlines a brand of conservatism in the guise of a modern, reformed religion. The model is in fact that of Islam and Christianity. There is a search for a central book and recently, on the wave of the Ramjanmabhoomi agitation, there has been a focus on the Rāmāyana with the insistence on the historicity of Rāma which makes him into
a founder. Ecclesiastical authority is sought for in requesting the Śankarācāryas to pronounce upon all matters religious, social and political. Meetings of the dharmaśaṅkhas call upon dharmaśaṅkhas, sādhus and sants to give opinions on any matter of importance, which is then said to be binding even if opposed to the Constitution or the rulings of the Supreme Court of India. This is described as the Hindu Vatican. That these persons may be self-appointed sants and sādhus is of no consequence. Worship is increasingly congregational and the introduction of sermon-style homilies on the definition of a good Hindu and Hindu belief and behaviour, are becoming common at marriages and funerals and register a distinct change from earlier practice. This form of Hinduism ends up inevitably as an over-simplified Brahmanism with garbled versions of elements of Bhakti and Puranic forms of belief and practice, largely to draw in increasing numbers of supporters.

The call to unite under Hinduism as a political identity is if anything, anachronistic. Social and economic inequality, whether one disapproves of it or condones it, was foundational to Brahmanism. To propagate the texts associated with this view and yet insist that it is an egalitarian philosophy is hardly acceptable. Some religions such as Islam are, in theory, egalitarian. Others such as Buddhism restrict equality to the moral and ethical spheres of life. The major religions arose and evolved in societies and in periods when inequality was not only a fact of life but was not questioned as a matter of right. The social function of these religions was not to change this but to ameliorate the reality for those who found it harsh and abrasive. Further, as a proselytising religion, Syndicated Hinduism cannot accept a multiplicity of religious statements as being equally important. Clearly some beliefs, rituals and practices will have to be selected from among an extensive range, and be regarded as essential and therefore more significant. Such an essentialising of scripture invests it with the potentialities of fundamentalism. This is a substantial departure from the traditional position. Who does the selecting and from what sources and to what purpose, also becomes a matter of considerable significance. In the absence of a single, authoritative scripture, those who make this selection will be questioned by others, unless they can back up their selection with the threat of force or control over power. This assertion is also encouraged by the success of comparable organisations in various parts of the world, based on a sharply contoured body of belief and practice backed by scripture emanating from a religious tradition.

Equally important to Syndicated Hinduism is the means of its propagation. It uses a variety of existing organisations from the erstwhile rather secretive RSS to the strident Bajrang Dal. The thrust is aggressive and categorical rather than persuasive. There is an impressive exploitation of modern communication media—audio-visual and print—with a substantial dose of spectacle, drama and hysteria. Television serials on Doordarshan, such as the Rāmāyana and the Mahābhārata present what is intended to be the received version of these texts and others such as Chanakya are an evident underlining of Hindu nationalism with the pretext of using history. Received versions are an attempt to erase variants. Television serials have accelerated the pace of propaganda from the more slow-moving, “mythological” films of earlier decades. The resort to media presentations gives it a veneer of modernisation, but the essential message remains conservative.

Another factor of increasing importance to this Syndicated Hinduism is the trans-national dimension in what might be called the Hindu diaspora—the dispersal of Hindus in various parts of the globe. In the pre-modern period there were Indians settled mainly as traders in many parts of Asia, but these were small settlements. The large colonies of present times are related to colonial needs. These are the result either of migrations in the nineteenth century when immigrant labour was moved by the colonisers to other parts of the British empire such as to Guyana, Surinam, Trinidad, Malaysia and Fiji, or of traders being inducted into east and south Africa, or of the arrival of workers and/or professionals in the United Kingdom, North America, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, after 1947, in search of better job opportunities. Such communities settled outside India, experience a sense of cultural insecurity since they are minority communities, frequently in a largely Christian or Islamic society. Their search is for a form of Hinduism parallel to Christianity or Islam and with an idiom comprehensible to these other two which they can teach their children (preferably we are told, through the equivalent of Hindu “Sunday” schools and video films). These communities with their particular requirements and their not inconsequential financial support also provide the basis for the institutions and propaganda for, Syndicated Hinduism.

The importance of this diaspora is reflected not only in the social links between those in India and those abroad supporting this new form of Hinduism, but also in the growing frequency with which the Sanghs and Parishads hold their meeting abroad and seek the
support and conversion of the affluent. \textsuperscript{41} Conversion often takes the form of re-establishing faith in this new Hinduism and creating a demand for the overt expression of this loyalty as a form of identity. This is not to be confused with the guru-cult in affluent societies where there is little attempt to convert people to Hinduism, but rather to suggest to them methods of “self-realisation” irrespective of their religious affiliations.

The creation of this Syndicated Hinduism for purposes more political than religious and mainly supportive of the ambitions of an emerging social class, has been a long process during this century and has now come more clearly into focus. Whatever political justification it might have claimed in the past as a form of nationalist assertion against British rule, no longer exists. Its growing strength relates to a number of features which have come to dominate the contours more particularly of urban middle class Indian society today. Changing social mores result in a sense of insecurity, particularly as the move towards a consumer oriented society is now on the increase and keeping up with the consumer market is seen as a necessity. The change in the economy brings in greater scope for individual enterprise, witnessed in the phenomenal expansion of the Indian middle-class, not just since 1947 but more so in the last two decades. But the required competition implicit in a liberalised, marked economy also increases the sense of insecurity. The injection of egalitarian ideas into a hitherto hierarchical society creates its own forms of social disequilibrium. The solution is sought in the search for a scape-goat or an enemy within and here the politics of the partition of India in 1947 return forcefully in the building up of hostility against the Muslims, hostility which can easily be extended to Christians and when occasion demands, to Sikhs. This hostility further feeds the insecurity and sense of powerlessness of those communities which are smaller in numbers and often disadvantaged. There is also the tacit recognition that the lower castes cannot be subordinated for long given the use of the ballot and the concession to reservations in the struggle for a place in the corridors of power. But the concern for the lower castes and Dalits is essentially a form of tokenism. The ideology of Syndicated Hinduism remains an ideology endorsing the status of the middle-class. \textsuperscript{42}

Social groups in the past have expressed their aspirations in part by creating new religious sects. We are now witnessing a movement that seeks to go beyond sectarian appeal and claims to represent “the Hindus” and insists on a particular identity for all those who are technically called Hindus, irrespective of whether they wish it or not. In a sense the notion of “the Hindu” as it evolved in Islamic writing has now come to fruition in this claim. The emergence of Syndicated Hinduism is different both in scale and scope and is not restricted to the creation of a new sect but a new religious form seeking to encapsulate all the earlier sects. The extensive use of the media is a paradigm change in communication and permits of the possibility of reaching an all-India audience. The sheer scale as well as motivation, call for concern. Syndicated Hinduism claims to be re-establishing the Hinduism of pre-modern times: in fact it is only establishing itself and in the process distorting the historical and cultural dimensions of the indigenous religions and distorting them of the nuances and variety which were major sources of their enrichment. The survival and continuation through history of many such religious manifestations was not only through power and dominance but also in many instances through the sense of security that their presence and existence would not be prohibited. There is something to be said for attempting to comprehend the real religious expression of Indian civilisation before it is crushed beneath the wheels of the Toyota-rathas.

\textbf{NOTES}

1. This article was first published under the title of “Syndicated Moksha”, in \textit{Seminar}, September 1985, No. 313 and intended for the general reader. It remains substantially the same except for some up-dating and the addition of a few references. I would like to thank Kunal Chakravarty for his comments on the earlier article.

Reference is made in this article to “the Semitic religions”, a term used for Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It refers primarily to the fact that their scriptures were written in the Semitic languages, such as Hebrew and Arabic, and to the similarities in their religious tradition. The term is not intended to mean the Semitic race, since this would exclude the major point under discussion which is the structure of belief and practice, very different from that of Hinduism.


5. This is clear from the well-known Schism Edict of Asoka. Bloch, op. cit., 152-3.
6. S.D. Joshi (ed.), *Patañjali Viṣṇuṣvara Mahābhāṣya*, Poona 1968, 2.4.9; 1.4.75.
20. These were so endemic that there are miniature paintings of the Mughal period depicting such battles.
22. Sporadic killing apart, even the violence involved in the regular burning of Hindu brides, does not elicit any threat against the perpetrators of such violence from the spokesmen of Hinduism. Feminist groups are the main agitators against such acts.
25. For example, N. Wagle, "Hindu-Muslim interactions in medieval Maharashtra", in G.-D. Sontheimer and H. Kulke (eds.), *Hinduism Reconsidered*, Delhi 1997, 134-52.
28. The Rājā Śrīyamucavasaka Sangha and the Vishva Hindu Parishad in particular, is evident from a reading of their periodicals and literature.
29. Given today's centrality of the notion of profit and the market and the message of the media, the sale of cassettes and tapes with pre-recorded hymns and sermons in support of uniform practice and belief, are often on sale where there are large gatherings, such as at funerals.
30. According to *Fortune International*, Indians in the USA are the richest foreign born group, in Britain they own 60 per cent of all retail stores, and in Hongkong, control a tenth of its exports.
31. The most recent example of this was the conversion organised by the Vishva Hindu Parishad in Washington in 1998 to commemorate the anniversary of Vivekananda's visit to America. Where, a century ago, Vivekanand was virtually introducing Hinduism to an international audience as a religion giving to tolerance and religious laissez-faire, what was now being commemorated in his name was an aggressive, assertive, outgoing drive for a religious identity with strong political aspirations for Hindus both in the United States and in India.
32. This was demonstrated for example in the anti-reservation movement by members of the middle-class taking to the streets and to self-immolation, when the V.P. Singh government announced the implementation of the Mandal Commission Report.