Overview of Hinduism

While many of us consider “Hindus” ourselves, yet most of us have little understanding about the core of Hinduism. I am making an effort to put forward most relevant philosophies of Hinduism and expect the readers to ponder over these points. I would try to cover Hinduism in broader sense, more specifically, would focus more on the core educations, and the philosophies which are common among various branches of Hinduism. The biggest fallacy about Hinduism is that –– it is a religion. Hinduism is not really a religion strictly, but rather it is –– a way of life, a philosophy which teaches human to live like human. If we go into the root of word “Hinduism” we find that in ancient time, Persians observed a culture, a civilization on the other side of river Sindhu. Their inability to pronounce the “Shaa” sound gave birth to word “Hindu” because they pronounced it “Haa” instead of “Shaa”.

I believe the teachings, philosophies and the culture of Hinduism existed much before than they were called Hinduism collectively. One of the main reason to believe that Hinduism is not really a religion is that within the Hinduism there are so many variations, different beliefs that at times one can really get confused. More specifically there is no universal belief that ties all the Hindus together across the India or elsewhere. For example within the Hinduism the “Sagun Bhakti Dhara” believes in idolatry whereas “Nirgun Bhakti Dhara” does the opposite and their beliefs are that God can’t be personified –– much like Islam. Another motivation to talk about the common practices is its relevance to much larger crowd.

One of the very common and first thing in Hinduism we do is pray to almighty God and request him/her

ॐ असतो मा सद्यागमय | तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय | मृत्योऽयोगमुं गमय ||
asato mA sadgamaya | tamaso mA jyotirgamaya | mRityormA amRRitaM gamaya ||

Which translates to

“Oh God! Lead us from the Unreal to the Real, Lead us from Darkness to Light, Lead us from Death to Immortality”

According to one of the most popular belief in Hinduism, God incarnates in various ages and this is when the evil forces and demonic power reach to its peak. According to one of the most popular scripture called Bhagwad Gita, lord Krishna (one of the avatar of lord Vishnu) says to his disciple/friend Arjuna.

यदा यदा हृदिरुक्तस्य, ग्लानिर भवति भारत |
अभ्युत्तानं सच्चिदा मुक्तः, द्वातद्वानं सुरुमयहं ||

Yada yada hi dharmasya, glanir bhavati bharata |
abhyutthanam adharmasya, tadatmanam srjamy aham ||
Which means
"Whenever and wherever there is a decline in religious practice and evil prospers, O descendant of Bharata, and a predominant rise of irreligion -- at that time I descend Myself."

Each time Vishnu incarnates as a simple human being, he lives like an ordinary man till the right time comes. Then he kills the demons, triumph the religion and go back to his place which is - - ksheer saagar (milky ocean). Having said that let's move on to some of the core philosophies, policies and educations of Hinduism which are much needed in day-to-day life.

One of the most important tradition in Hinduism is -- Guru-Shisya Parampra (teacher-disciple tradition). In old days, young kids, as old as 5 years, used to leave their homes and go to jungle to live there with their Gurus. The sole purpose was to make the kid stronger and learn various form of educations i.e. archery, social science, philosophy, music, medicines which are needed to become a successful individual in life.

One of the most amazing feature of Guru-Shisya Parampara is that the whole knowledge transfer was through oral techniques -- there was no written description about any art or technique. Everything Guru would teach would in form of conversation, students would learn and over the years it would be transferred to the next generation by means of conversations. I can correlate this to current day scenario and find it extremely useful for "serious" learning. For example when one knows that whatever next person is speaking at this point of time is the only knowledge -- one would be more focused rather if knows that this exist somewhere in the book and I can learn it later. **Good education can't be achieved by passive learning as most of us do now-a-days.**

Historically the Guru-Shisya Parampara is so important that one such conversion between a Guru and Shisya defined almost the core of whole Hinduism and eventually became the most practical conversation/teachings of Hinduism. The Guru was lord Krishna (one of the avatar of lord Vishnu) and Shisya was his friend, disciple -- Arjuna.

This is when there was a family battle between good vs evil, better known as Mahabharata, and Arjuna was in dilemma because on the other side the people who were there were his close relatives and distant family members. Now few things which I am going to emphasize from Gita are as following.

The foremost important thing in Hinduism is Karma -- which in layman’s word translates to “Duty”. The actual sloka is

कर्मण्येव बक्षिष्णस्ये मा फलेषु कदाचना ।
माकर्मफलहेतुर्घुरम, ते संतप्त्तुः अकर्मणि]॥

Karmanye Vadhi Karasthe Maa Phaleshu Kadachana,
Maa Karmaphal Hetur Bhurma, Te Sanghastva Akarmani

“Do your duty and don’t worry, think, expect the desired result -- it would follow”
In English translation:
“You have a right to perform your prescribed duty, but you are not entitled to the fruits of action. Never consider yourself the cause of the results of your activities, and never be attached to not doing your duty.”

To elaborate little more, while we are doing our duty there is a part of brain also engaged in thinking about the desired outcome which restricts us to focus 100% on the job at hand. As a result eventually we may end up not giving our best to the task what we were suppose to do. This can also be explained in terms of process/method and result -- Follow the method, enjoy the process and fame would follow. After all, fame is always short-lived then why worry about that but rather enjoy the process which constitutes the most part of human life.

Often, when a pure, sincere believer believes that one must have a desire for the fruits of action to achieve something. I offer my point of view. It is obvious that you should have desire for a goal of your action, and the goal should be the destination itself. A traveller without a direction, is lost in this journey of life. That is what happens to thieves, dacoits, terrorists and others who are not very keen about the life and its intricacies. Either they are brain-washed, or are too weak-willed to do what they had wished to do, or perhaps they had no wishes and were thus led astray by the powers that be?

My interpretation is that this verse did not imply goal, but lust. Yes, lust is indeed evil and must be avoided while performing an action. When there is lust, a person goes to great lengths to achieve what he wants to and in that he forgets sense of good and evil. To some extent, one has to employ a sense of detachment with what he does. "Do your action in good faith, work the hardest, but do not go beyond that." Could that be the meaning of this shloka? I think yes.

Gita emphasis more on Niskaam Karma. Niskaam karma translates to “Detached Involvement”, which is neither negative attitude nor indifference; and has today found many advocates in the modern business era where the emphasis has shifted to ethical business practices adhering to intrinsic human values and reducing stress at the workplace.

Another core concept in Hinduism is Soul. Life is an eternity process which is also the journey of soul. The journey of the soul is continuous, just as a man gives up old worn out garments and wears new clothes in the same way the embodied soul "Ataman" gives up old worn out bodies verily accepts the new bodies." This is stated by Lord Krishna in the Bhagwad Gita, chapter 2, shloka 22.

वासांसिभीयानन्याय वहियाय, नवानीगृहसत्पिरो वपराणी |
तथा सरिरिनी वहियाय जतिनान् सन्तुष्टीयायी, संयतगानि देहि

Vasansi jirnani yatha vihaya, navani grihnati naro aparnai,
thata sarirani vihaya jirnanyanyani, sanyati navani dehi
Which means:
“The soul is eternal. Our existence is timeless; we have been here before in the past and will come in the future too. The actions of body, our words, and our thoughts leave imprints on our consciousness. The mind stores imprints in the form of Sanskaras or impressions. These impressions remain latent in the consciousness for a while before emerging as mental waves, which produce desires, fears and other emotions. Our past impressions carry weight and determine how well we can face the present moment and how well we can live life to its full capacity, free from fears and negative emotions.”

This philosophy is in agreement with past life regression (a well known scientifically proven technique in modern science) that provides a tool to relive events that lie at the root of a pattern, whether mental or physical. The pattern can be something that needs to be changed or merely understood. A past life regression also provides a gateway to a vast, invaluable resource of information on previous times, places, and cultures. It helps the individual clear mental impressions that may block one’s progress.

Another similar interpretation of life and death is

मृत्यु एक सरति है जिसमें कातर जीव नहाकर |
नति नूतन धारण करता है क़ाया रुपी बस्तूर बहाकर ||

Mratu ek sarita hai jisme kaatar jeev nahakar
Nit nootan dharan karta hai kaya roopi vastra bahakar

Which means:
“Death is merely a river, in which everyday creatures after taking a bath they throw the old cloths and get a new one -- as in a new body.”

Our soul is considered to be a part of the eternity process, and not body, that enables us to view past lives and transform various impressions negative or positive in a space surrounded by love and grace. We emerge having lived through our past impressions, more alive to the present moment and open to celebrating life.

Globalization seems a relatively new phenomenon to the human civilization but not to Hinduism. In fact, it is one of the core teaching of Hinduism. In order to respect everybody in the planet one of the teachings of Hinduism emphasize on the omnipresence of God. It says God is everywhere which mandates the followers to treat everyone with respect irrespective of their age, race, sex, cast, creed, religion, belief and location. This is also to make one conscious about his/her deeds because when you are doing something wrong, even if no one is watching you God is watching you. One famous quote says --

“Honesty is not about what you do when people are watching you”

In Gita lord Krishna says
"I exist in all creatures so the disciplined man devoted to me grasps the oneness of life wherever he is, he is in me"

Slightly related but deeply rooted concept in Hinduism is -- Paropkar. Paropkar means nothing but helping others without expecting anything in return by them. This as well stems from Karma. To exemplify from nature

परोपकारं बहुनृतिनद्या, परोपकारं दुहनृतिगाया |
परोपकारं फलनृतिवृक्ष, परोपकारं इदं शरीरं ||

Paropakaram Vahanti Nadya, Paropakaram Duhanti Gaaya
Paropakaram Phalanti Vriksha, Paropakaram Idam Shareeram

Which means:
“Rivers flow for Paropkar, Cows give milk for Paropkar, Trees bear fruits for Paropkar, similarly this body is also meant for Paropkar”

Last but not the least, and very important one is the interpretation of word “religion” itself in Hinduism. What really religion means in Hinduism? In Hinduism, the closest word to religion, or other way round, is Dhrama which doesn’t really translates to faith, beliefs and religious practices or worshipping the Gods etc. What really and precisely it means is that “The most appropriate, morally correct and righteous action in all circumstances”. For example -- If one sees a hungry person -- then his Dharma is to feed him. If one sees someone who has lost the direction -- then his Dharma is to tell him the right direction which leads to his destination. If one sees someone who needs blood urgently -- then his Dharma is to donate blood to him. One thing you can notice is that it applies almost everywhere -- ranging from mundane life to even spiritual life and beyond.

This is really Dharma (more precisely) and its English translation (religion) really means in Hinduism. Hinduism is very broad and flexible as well. Within Hinduism there are branches which doesn’t believe that God has the human-like appearance. It won’t be exaggeration if I say Hinduism is of secular in nature because the common practices in Hinduism are followed by all common people despite of their differences and beliefs. This whole thing can be summed up nicely in one word -- “Sarv-Dharm Sambhawa” -- which means All religion are same.

To bolster my above claim, for example -- in Hinduism we consider guests as God “Aatithi Devo Bhav”. You go to any Hindu or Muslim or Cristian family in India and if they have lived long enough there they would threat their guests in same manner which is not observed anywhere else in the world. They have became Hindus in a way that most of them have common values -- its the culture which is the core of Hinduism and not the beliefs per se.

Another valuable thing which has been given to world by Hinduism is Yoga. Source of Yoga is Hinduism; The original book is called “Yoga Darshnam” by Patanjali. Later it was spread to
other part of Asia and world by various other religion such as Buddhism. The well known 8 forms of yoga which are described in Yoga Darshanam are.

1. yama, ethics, restraint and ahimsā,
2. niyama, cleanliness, ascetism, etc.
3. āsana, posture
4. prāNāyama, breath-control
5. pratyahāra, sense-withdrawal
6. Dhāraṇā, concentration
7. dhyāna meditation, and
8. samAdhi, oneness in quality of jivaatma and Paramatma (but eternal difference in quantity) with the Pranava of the Ishvara.

Social interaction is also an important element of Hinduism, precisely that's why there are so many festivals -- just to encourage the frequent meeting of people and exchange of ideas and thoughts. Hinduism has lots of festivals; such as “festival of light” better known as Diwali, “festival of color -- Holi” and many others. In fact if you look at Hindu calender every second day is a festival -- no exaggeration!. Each day of week is dedicated to one or few Gods in Hinduism. For example, Sunday -- Sun God, Tuesday -- lord Hanuman, Thursday -- lord Vishnu, Friday -- Goddess of Wealth (Lakshmi), Saturday -- Sani God. I would rather avoid talking about the festivals here because there are simply too many and it wouldn't be possible to even overview them. These enormous number of festival signify one thing which is -- life is celebration so don’t miss even a single opportunity to celebrate it.

Hinduism has 330 million Gods and Goddesses -- 10% higher than the whole USA population. They all have well defined designations in the Gods’ hierarchy and they are well described in various scriptures. Four Vedas, eleven Upnishad and various Puraan have enormous knowledge about the various aspect of human life.

To conclude, the broader interpretation of Hinduism is that Hinduism is not really a religion or belief per se but rather a way to live life. Think of Hinduism a big old tree whose branches are religion if you wish. Gautam Buddha was Hindu before he started Buddhism, Jainism has its root in Hinduism. Sikhism is the most recent branched out belief from Hinduism. Lord Ram is worshipped in a large part of Malaysia. Many temples of Hindu Gods and Goddesses are still present in Kambodia, Java and Sumatra. In fact, most of the south asian religions either stem from Hinduism or influenced heavily by Hinduism.

Finally nothing can summarize Hinduism better than the following shloka

अयम नाचि परोबिति, महना लघु चेतसाम ||
उदार चरितानाम तु, वसुधाव कुतुमब्रम ||

Ayam nija paroveti, Gadna laghu chetsaam |
Udaar charitanam tu, wasudhav kutumbkam ||

Which means:
“This is mine, that is yours; This kind of calculation is done by narrow-minded people. For broad-minded and liberalist this whole world is like a family”

- Raj Parihar

Disclaimer

* The above views are personal and were presented at Multi-Religion Conference at Rochester, NY, USA by author.

References
1. Srimad Bhagavad Gita
2. Subhasit Shloka in Sanskrit
3. [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)