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Interaction and Integration of Hindu Faith and Primal Faiths with Special reference to Beliefs and Practices Adapted by Hinduism from Primal Traditions

H Chongloi*

Introduction:

Elasticity may be considered the celebrated trait of Hinduism, for in its religious history of about four millenniums, it is next to impossible to separate the different strands that had shaped Hinduism into clear-cut demarcations. A starting point in the study of composite Hinduism has been invariably the coming of the Aryans and their association with the Indus valley settlers, and the different aboriginal races of the land through the ages. The relationship between these cultural groups proved to be both sanguinary as well as peaceful integration. In the long-run, however, the artistic genius of the Aryans in composing hymns for the praises of their gods and goddesses, and their literary heritage proved decisive for them in obtaining the upper hand. But indigeneous religious elements survived, especially in what is called popular Hinduism. In this paper we shall first make a brief survey of the interaction and integration of Hindu faith and primal faiths at the socio-economic-political, religio-cultural realms in the sub-continent and secondly, to a special reference to some of the primal beliefs and practices, which have now become part and parcel of popular Hinduism.

Interaction and Integration of Hindu Faith and Primal Faiths.

Socio-economic-political

From very early period in the history of India interaction and integration of diverse races at political and socio-economic realm occurred. There was a long struggle between the Aryans and the aboriginal People, whom the Aryans called *Dasas*. Many of the Vedic hymns testified to the existence of kingdoms founded by the aborigines against whom the Aryans had pitted their might for political supremacy.¹ Even when the former were suppressed politically in course of time, that does not prevent continued interaction between the two races at socio-

* H. Chongloi is a D. Th. student at the North India Institute of Postgraduate Theological Studies (NIIPGTS) specialising in Primal religious Traditions.

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economic level. In many occasions an Aryan King make alliance with *dasa* tribes to fight against fellow Aryans.² Thus it would seem that friendly relations developed, at least now and then, even inter-marriage seems to have taken place. At the same time the Aryans became more and more dependent upon the vanquished races for their economic welfare and absorbed them into their society as the working class.³ They have a rich repertoire of epithets, which shows their contempt as well as an attitude to a foe deserving respect.⁴ Notwithstanding the perpetual enmity projected by the Vedas, there seem 'racial purity meant nothing to early Aryans; adoption of the autochthonous was always possible and practice'.⁵

It is in the *Dharma Sastras*, especially in *Manu Dharma* that we find more exacting laws against admixture in order that the twice born Aryan's purity may be maintained.⁶ On the other hand all the prohibitions in *Manu Dharma* against admixture could be drawn upon to assert that there was widespread inter-marriage among the various races of ancient India. In fact during the Epic period, as reflected in the Ramayan and Mahabharata, there was widespread cross-fertilization in social and religious spheres between Aryans and aborigines as a result of the alliances made in the course of Aryan expansion.⁷

The interaction took place more intensely at the economic sphere than any other, beginning from Vedic period down to the modern time. The Aryan conquerors soon became dependent upon the labours of the vanquished people for their economic welfare.⁸ The traditional division of labour, *varna* stressed the fact that economically the whole population is intricately bound together into one whole through the ages.⁹

Religio-Cultural

As corollary to socio-economic interaction one can observe also of religio-cultural synthesis of Brahmanic Sanskrit tradition and various autochthonous religious traditions. The process seems to be mutual in the sense that Sanskritisation was a process to combat new challenges posed by heterodoxy on the one hand; and the attempt to upgrade themselves by various aboriginal traditions by association with Brahmanism, on the other.¹⁰ The result was popular Hinduism, a strange medley of religiosities. Thus Dandekar observes, "the genesis of Hinduism is the alliance of popular tribal religions with the variety of their gods and religious practices came to be loosely organized into one single multi-character whole, under the initiative and leadership of Vedism, which was held together by means of the thin thread of their allegiance to the Veda to combat heterodoxy, i.e., Jainism and Buddhism".¹¹ As early as the Vedic period the process had begun with the wandering renouncers Yogic tradition interacting and integrating with the Vedic ritual tradition that had sacrifice at its center.¹² The renouncers' tradition is considered as representing the primitive worldview, which was in the beginning, a counter-culture to Vedic sacrifices and their efficacy, and offered alternative way of liberation of *karma samsara*, *sanyasa*, and *ahimsa*, resulting in Vedism incorporating all these to build a more composite and strengthened system.¹³ Leaping across the centuries, during the Epic and *Puranic* times, and through the medieval ages, autochthonous religious elements are freely incorporated into Sanskrit tradition.¹⁴ We have more to say on this in the second part of the paper.

Primal Elements Preponderant in Popular Hinduism

Before going into the specifics, a general remark on the nature of popular Hinduism and how

primal elements are preponderant in it may be in order. It is generally observed that popular Hinduism is 'a strange medley of most diverse forms of religion, ranging from the most subtle and abstruse philosophy to primitive forms of animism.'¹⁵ Although Vedism and its offshoot Brahmanic Sanskrit tradition has in course of time commanded the 'master narrative' of the sub-continent's religious life, it is important to note that the Aryans, from whom this tradition emerges, are but a minority, occupying a relatively limited territory called *Aryavarta* within the country; and within that also, there are Aryans who did not conform to Vedism.¹⁶ As early as the Vedic period, Aryans have their theology of accommodation in the famous dictum, "Sat is One, sages call it by different names,"¹⁷ thus it is not surprising that indigenous cults were indiscriminately absorbed, especially so in the Epics and Puranas.¹⁸

Eric J. Lott has identify a huge list of items which are derived from folk traditions: female and mother-deities, *sakti* cults, *yonī-linga* averting evil eye, sacred trees, springs, pool, rivers, sacred bath, sacred rocks and hills, snake cults, avatar cults of fish, tortoise, boar, Narasimha, Rama-bhakti, temples, festivals, image *puja*, *nama-rupa*, drum dance, gurus, *yoga*, *mandla*-circles, *tantric* symbols and techniques, *karma-samsara*, *sanyasa*.¹⁹

The list above would suggest that there is no aspect of Hinduism, which does not incorporate something of primal elements. After much painstaking fieldwork, H.H. Presler thus concluded that in popular Hinduism primitive elements are preponderant over the other ingredient, namely, Brahmanism.²⁰

Special Reference to Primal Elements Adapted by Hinduism

We shall now proceed to the specific references to primal elements, which are being adapted by Hinduism. Many of Eric Lott's items will come along with some additions in our scheme of four specific areas envisaged for study here.

Gods and Goddesses: It is generally granted that the God Siva with all his ambiguous characteristics was a tribal deity incorporated in Brahmanical circle, identifying him with the Vedic god Rudra. How Siva penetrated into Brahmanical circle is alluded to in the myth of Daksa told in the Mahabharata. In the Myth Siva is said to be married to Sita, the daughter of Daksa, but the peculiar characteristic of Siva led to strained relationship between him and his father in law, and he was left out of invitation for the horse sacrifice performed by Daksa. Although Siva was not perturbed by the snub meted out to him, his wife was much agitated leading her to commit suicide. Siva then has to act and he acted decisively by making his presence forcefully felt, and though uninvited, took charge of the sacrifice.²¹ From the Epics and *Puranas*, we find that he was elevated to a supreme Being, and thus become the chief agent, so to say, for Sanskrit tradition in bringing various local deities, female as either his consort or daughter (e.g., Meenakshi and Manasa)²² to Hindu fold. Likewise, Vishnu avatars were largely an adaptation of primal people's animal veneration. Even the perfect avatar of Vishnu, Krishna is shown to be a deified tribal hero.²³ Vishnu is a peripheral god in the Vedas in the sense that only few hymns are addressed to him, but from about the eighth century BCE many aboriginal deities merged with Vishnu to produce the great stream of Vaisnavism. The first to come into contact with him seems to be the deified Vrsni tribal hero Vasudeva, who earlier was merged with the tribal Yadava deified hero Krishna, both of whom are incorporated into Vishnu.²⁴ Krishna later on become, as it were, the spokesman of Sanskrit tradition with the highest authority as he imparted lessons of diverse themes in the

Bhagavad-Gita.²⁵ In this connection we have in the Puranas a narration of different non-Vedic gods asserting their supremacy over that of Aryan ones. Krishna's struggle with Indra, the practice of Vedic gods, and the rise of Siva cult in the Daksa myth are two instances.²⁶ So also the village goddesses (*grammadevi*), whose origin may be traced back to as early as pre-Vedic Indus religion, are absorbed into Hinduism to develop into a main branch in Hinduism called Saktism, with all their paraphernalia of orgiastic rituals known by the term *tantrism*.²⁷ The goddess cult in turn has been instrumental in incorporating autochthonous snake cults, which saturated popular Hinduism.²⁸ Kali, the famous goddess who delights in wine, flesh and animal sacrifice (Mahabharata IV. VI), in her various shapes is a non-Aryan goddess, suppose to be the goddess of Kiratas and other aboriginal tribes and was first worshipped by the Mlecchas, the thugs etc., to point out one as an example.²⁹

Festivals: It appears that primitive deities who were incorporated into Sanskrit tradition have brought with them, along with their votaries, much of the religiosities connected to them in their previous existence as tribal deities. Subhash Anand, in his studies of major Hindu festivals has shown that the celebrations of certain festivals have incorporated primitive elements.³⁰ We shall take two instances from his study. *Mahasivaratri* festival (which falls on the fourteenth day of the dark half of the lunar month) has retained much of tribal practices, which are considered even more acceptable to the deity than that of the Brahmins; such as practiced by Bhills tribal, of *linga* which presents fertility, water poured on the *linga* symbolizing the activated matrix of fertility; and offering *bilva* leave which stands for the presence of actual fertility.³¹ Again in the celebration of *Ganesh Chaturthi*, much of animal cultic practices remained not unexpected, since the god have originated from the Soundikas, a low caste of Bengal, coming down from the ancient cult of *Yakshas* and their king Kubera.³³

The famous *Holi* festival celebrated throughout the country is an adaptation of primitive tribes' festival, which was later on sanctioned and modified by adding *homa* sacrifice, and attached a legend to give the appearance of Brahmanic origin.³⁴

The pervasiveness of snake cult in Hindu religious tradition is very well noted.³⁵ Accordingly, *Naga Panchami* and *Mansa Panchami* are two widespread festivals of snake cults. Many myths of snake cult connected to these festivals bore the marks of garbling with Sanskrit traditions. One such myth narrates the struggle of Krishna with the river serpent *Kaliya*, and the eventual subordination of the latter, and the friendship that developed between the two.³⁶ Another such folk legend describes a ploughman who had killed young snakes while he ploughed on the festival day. The mother snake resolved to take vengeance and killed the man and all his family members. One of the ploughman's daughters was married in another village, and when the mother snake went to that village to kill her, she was found to be a faithful devotee of mother snake goddess. Through her devotion, the entire family members were restored to life again.³⁷ A legend connected with *Manasa Panchami* narrates how the mother goddess stood over Vishnu and other gods while they slept, and thereby attained the status of the queen of snakes.³⁸

H.H. Presler had noted the following as coming from the Dravidian and tribal culture. Festivals in honour of spirits of dead saints observed annually, annual worship with observances of their birthdays, as for instance of Hanuman birthday; plant worship and the festivals associated with them, as for instance the marriage of *tulsi* as the goddess residing in

the plant; appeasement of goddess *Shitala*, the resident deity of *neem* tree.³⁹ All these cults and the festivals connected to them, which are undoubtedly of primitive origin, have become part and parcel of popular Hinduism. Considering this fact, the shocking report of human sacrifice made on *Diwali* night by one Jaydev Singh, a resident of Kijurina, Godda district, Jharkhand in order that his prodigal son returns, is not after all that much shocking.⁴⁰

Worship: It has been said that Vedic or Brahmanic ritual tradition has sacrifice at its centre.⁴¹ But image worship or *puja*, which is traceable to the Mohenjodaro-Harappa culture, and various primitive forms prevailed among non-Aryans have gradually taken central stage in Hinduism, especially so from the Puranas.⁴² Although it is not unanimously accepted, S.K. Chatterji holds that *puja* is a Dravidian form of worship, the word being derived from Dravidian *pu* (flower) plus 'ge' 'to do,' (palatized to *je*).⁴³ In any case *puja* is a popular form of non-Vedic worship modified with elements of the cult of Vedic rites, viz., that of *yajna*, and incorporated in the Hindu system of *Devapuja*.⁴⁴ Collaterally, much elements of *Devapuja*, the worship of mother goddess has its origin in ancient tribal and indigenous traditions of India, from which they evolved.⁴⁵ The *tantric* worship of goddess or *Sakta tantrism*, especially what is called 'Left Handed *Tantrism*,' where the forbidden five Ms, i.e., wine (*madya*), fish (*matsya*), meat (*mamsa*), parched grain (*mudra*) and sexual union (*maithura*) and consumed or practiced is non-Vedic and frowned upon by orthodox Hindus.⁴⁶ The Vedic sacrifices have somehow disappeared in orthodox Hindu life, perhaps because of the influence of the renouncers traditions of Buddhism and Jainism,⁴⁷ but animal sacrifices and blood offerings to primitive deities survived,⁴⁸ especially to ferocious goddesses like Kali, Durga, Camunda, and forms a vital part of popular Hinduism till today. Many of the village goddesses rose to prominence by becoming consorts of Vishnu or Siva and even foreshadow their spouses in course of time. Goddesses such as Durga, Kali, Uma, Parvati, Kenya Kumari, Korravai etc., whose names are not found in the Vedic literature, command more worshippers than the Vedic gods.⁴⁹

Superstitions: Finally, we shall briefly dwell on superstitions in popular Hinduism. Primitive religion is being associated with superstitions; like beliefs in impersonal power of mana, omen, taboo, magic; transitional supernatural powers of animated objects, metamorphosis, lycanthropic, totemic; personal supernatural powers of departed souls of ancestors, fetishism etc. But it has been shown that all of these beliefs and practices are found to have permeated popular Hinduism.⁵⁰ So also the beliefs and practices such as ordeals, oath, curse, evil eye, divination, religious symbols, rites, found their ways into Hinduism with their primitive votaries.⁵¹

Conclusion

This brief survey would suffice to show that there was interaction and integration between Brahmanic Sanskrit tradition with primitive religions and that primal elements are being indiscriminately absorbed into Hinduism so that it has become a religion with fluid boundary, and is an amorphous religious system where all forms of religiosities thrive within it. To conclude this discussion the observation of A. Eschmann on Hinduism becomes appropriate: "Two basic doctrines have given Hinduism an extraordinary capacity to incorporate and amalgamate other religions and cults. They are, that God or Brahman is within everything, and therefore appear everywhere; and that whoever is born in India is essentially a Hindu."⁵²

We are also reminded of the words of Jawaharlal Nehru who is quoted to have said, "Hinduism is all things to all men".⁵³

NOTES

1. Cf. Hari Pada Chakravarti, *Vedic India: Political and Legal Institutions in Vedic Literature*. (Calcutta: Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1981), p. 21-55.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
3. Cf. Shakuntala Rao Shastri, *Aspirations From a Fresh World*, Reprint, (Bombay: Bhartya Vidya Bhavan, (1961), chapter two.
4. Cf. Wilber Theodore Elmore, *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism*, (Madras: CLS, 1925), p. 3.
5. D.D. Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline*, Second edition, (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1975), p. 81.
6. Some of these strict regulations are found in *Manu*, 3, 17; 11. 68; 8. 371-2; 10. 16; 5. 85; 10. 51.
7. Cf. R.C. Majumdar, *Ancient India*, Reprint, (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1991), pp. 195-204.
8. Cf. Shakuntala Rao Shastri, *Op.cit.*, Chapter two; H.H. Presler, *Introducing Strangers to Hinduism*. (Allahabad: North India Christian Tracts and Book Society, 1978), p. 125.
9. Cf. M.N. Srinivas, *Social Change in Modern India*, Reprint, (New Delhi: Orient Longman 1998), pp. 3 f.
10. Cf. R.N. Dandekar, *Insights Into Hinduism*, (Delhi: Ajanta Publications, 1979), p. 28.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Israel Selvanayagam, "The interaction and Integration Between the Sanskrit and Folk Traditions" in *Religion of the Marginalised: Towards a Phenomenology and Methodology of Study*, Edited by Gnana Robinson. (New Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), p. 85 ff.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
14. Cf. A. Eschmann, "Hinduisation of Tribal Deities in Orissa: The Sakta and Saiva Typology" in *The Cult of Jaganath and the Regional Tradition of Orissa*, edited by A. Eschmann, H. Kulke and G.C. Tripathi, (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1978), p. 85.
15. Cf. Henry Whitehead, *The Village God's of South India*, (Calcutta: The Association Press, 1916), p. 13; H.H. Presler has concluded that popular Hinduism is the product of two ingredients, namely, Brahmanism and Tribalism, cf. his two books *Introducing Strangers to Hinduism*, (Allahabad: North India Christian Tracts and Books Society, 1978) and *Primitive Religions of India*, (Madras: CLS, 1971).
16. H.K. De Chaudhary, *God in Indian Religion*, (Calcutta: Author, 1969), p. 8; D.D. Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline*, Second Reprint, (Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1975), p. 85.
17. The full text of Rig Veda 1, 164, 460 from which the quotation is taken read: "they call him (Sat) Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni, or Heavenly Sun-Bird Garumat. The seers call in many ways that which is One; they speak of Agni, Yama, Matarisvan." *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Theodore de Bary, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 5 f., quoted in S.J. Samartha, *One Christ—Many Religions: Towards a Revised Christology*, Third edition, (Bangalore: Sathri, 2000), p. 92 and note no. 14 of chapter 6.
18. Cf. H.K. De Chaudhury, *Op.cit.*, p. 52.
19. Eric J. Loti, "Investigating Folk Religion: Problems and Prospects" in *Religion of the Marginalised: Towards a Phenomenology and the Methodology of Study*, edited by Gnana Robinson, (Delhi: ISPCK, 1998), p. 58.
20. Cf. his two books cited already.
21. Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, (New Delhi: Foundation Books, 1998), pp. 29, 153.
22. Case studies of these two goddesses were made in the research paper.
23. Integration between the Sanskrit and Folk Traditions Few Examples" in *Religion of the Marginalized.... etc.*, *Op.cit.*, p. 89 f.
24. Cf. R.N. Dandekar, "Vaishnavism: An Overview" in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 15, edited by Mircea Eliade, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 169f, Dines Chandra Sircar has pointed out the presence of the non-Aryan blood among the Vrsni and Yadava clans, although they claimed Kastriya origin. In any case, the religions of these tribal groups are considered decidedly non-Vedic in essence, cf. Dines Chandra Sircar, "Early History of Vaishnavism" in *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. VI.,

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Reprint, edited by Haridas Bhattacharya, (Calcutta: The Ramkrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1969), pp. 108-111.

25. *Ibid.*
26. Cf. S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life*, Reprint, (New Delhi: Harper-Collins, 2000), pp. 26-7; Gavin Flood, *Op.cit.*, p. 29; Wilber Theodore Elmore, *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism*, (Madras: CLS, 1925), p. 5.
27. Cf. Andre Padoux, "Hindu Tantrism" in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade, Vol. 14, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 274-80; H.K. De Chaudhury, *Op.cit.*, p. 51; Gavin Flood, *Op.cit.*, p. 161.
28. A comprehensive discussion of snake cult is Prodyot Kumar Maity, *Historical Studies in the Cult of Goddess Manasa: A Socio-Cultural Study*, (Calcutta Punthi Pustak, 1966). Also cf. A.L. Basham, *The Wonders That was India*, (New York: Grove Press, 1959), pp. 309-312.
29. Cf. S. Radhakrishnan, *Op.cit.*, p. 30, and note no. 1 of the same page.
30. Subhash Anand, *Major Hindu Festivals: A Christian Perspective*, (Bindra, Bombay: St. Paul Publication, 1991).
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 30-1.
32. Cf. A.L. Bhasam, *Op.cit.*, p. 317.
33. Subhash Anand, *Op.cit.*, pp. 77-80.
34. Cf. H.H. Presler, *Primitive Religions of India*, (Madras: CLS, 1971), pp. 203 f; David C. Scott, "The Hindu Religious Tradition" in *Religious Traditions of India*, Reprint, edited by P.S. Daniel, David C. Scott, G.R. Singh, (Delhi: ISPCK, 2001), p. 78.
35. Cf. P.K. Maity and H.K. De Chaudhury's books already cited.
36. Cf. M.M. Underhill, *The Hindu Religious Year*, (Calcutta: The Association Press, 1921), p. 123 f.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
39. H.H. Presler, *Introducing Strangers to Hinduism*, *Op.cit.*, pp. 246-7.
40. Gautam Sarkar, "Grandson Sacrifice to get back son" in *The Telegraph*, Tuesday 20 November 2001, p. 8.
41. Israel Selvanayagam, *Op.cit.*, p. 85.
42. Cf. H.K. De Chaudhury, *Op.cit.*, p. 26.
43. S.K. Chatterji, "Race Movement and Pre-History culture" in *History and Culture of Indian People*, Vol. I., quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 26.
44. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
45. Cf. N.N. Bhattacharya, *Indian Mother Goddess*, (New Delhi Manohar Book Source, 1977), pp. 17 ff; G.R. Bhandarkar, *Vaishnavism, Saivism and Minor Religious Systems*, (Strussburg: Verlag von Karl J. Trubner, 1913), pp. 142 ff; A.K. Bhattacharya, "A Non-Aryan Aspect of Devi" in *The Sakti Cult and Tara*, edited by D.C. Sircar, (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1971), pp. 56-60; B.P. Sinha, "Evolution of Sakti Cult in India" in *Ibid.*, pp. 46-7.
46. Cf. Gavin Flood *Op.cit.*, pp. 189-99.
47. Cf. Israel Selvanayagam, *Op.cit.*, p. 86.
48. Cf. A.L. Basham, *Op.cit.*, p. 339.
49. Cf. Gavin Flood, *Op.cit.*, pp. 180 f; K.M. Sen, *Hinduism*, (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961), pp. 58 ff.
50. H.H. Presler, *Introducing Strangers to Hinduism*, *Op.cit.*, pp. 95-106.
51. *Ibid.*, pp. 106-120.
52. A. Eschmann, "Hinduisation of Tribal Deities in Orissa: The Sakta and Saiva Typology", in *The Cult of Jaganath and Regional Tradition of Orissa*, edited by A. Eschmann, A.H. Kulke, G.C. Tripathi, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1978), p. 79.
53. Gavin Flood, *Op.cit.*, p. 7.