Defining Who We Are
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Hindus around the world are in the press and under global scrutiny as never before. Partly, this is a matter of the world's finally discovering India - exactly five hundred years after Columbus failed. Partly, this is a matter of India's finally rediscovering its own Hinduness - approximately 8,000 years after its progenitors farmed the Indus Valley plains. A little matter of fifteen centuries of foreign invasion and colonization had temporarily muddled the Hindu psyche. So while our forefathers quite obviously knew who they were in the cosmic scheme of things, we lost and must now regain their vision and integrated identity.

There are many definitions of who Hindus are. Political and cultural definitions, strange and ludicrous definitions. But at heart the definitions that are most meaningful, most enduring, are those of faith and spirituality. After all, India has been mother to more living religions than any other nation. Spiritual insight is her greatest resource, her most precious export.

HINDUISM TODAY is right in the midst of this exhilarating and exasperating effort to define Sanatana Dharma in a contemporary world, as you will see on pages 13 to 16. It is easy to say, and has been said a billion times, including in this column, that Hinduism has no fixed doctrine, no carved-in-stone creed. It's a true statement, for Hinduism is too vast, complex, diverse and self-contradictory to permit of a single affirmation of faith. Still, there is a need, a need for a creed.

Every religion has a creed of one form or another. A creed is an authoritative formulation of the beliefs of a religion, religious communities and, by extension, of individuals. It may be a formal declaration of doctrine. The Apostle's Creed is an example. In it Catholics confess their faith in Jesus Christ, in God the Father, in the

resurrection and more. Or it may be a terse testimony as in the well-known Islamic shahadah: "There is no God but Allah. Mohammed is His prophet." Hinayana Buddhists thrice recite the Triratna or Three Jewels: "I take refuge in the Buddha. I take refuge in the dharma. I take refuse in the sanga." Devout Jews affirm: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Blessed be His name whose glorious Kingdom is forever and ever." Such affirmations are declared daily by billions of devout people.

Historically, creeds have most often emerged whenever religions migrate from their homelands. Until then, the beliefs are fully contained in the culture and taught to children as a natural part of growing up. But when followers settle in countries where other faiths predominate, the importance of a simple statement of faith arises. A creed is the distillation of volumes of knowledge into a series of easy-to-remember beliefs, or shraddha. It summarizes the teachings, imbeds and thus protects and transmits the beliefs. Creeds give strength to individuals seeking to understand life and religion. Creeds also allow members of one faith to express, in elementary and consistent terms, their traditions to members of another.

What are ours? From ancient times we have the creedal mahavakya, "great sayings," of the Vedic Upanishads. Tat tvam asi is one such statement, declaring "You are That." Another is Aham Brahmasmi, meaning "I am God," and conveying with pithy potency a fundamental Vedic principle.

Sri Aurobindo offered a credo under the title "Three Fundamentals of Hindu Religion." For him the central ideas were: 1. There is One Existence to whom sages give different names. One without a second who is All that is, and beyond all that is, the Permanent of the Buddhists, the Absolute of the Illusionists, the Supreme God or Purusha of the Theists - in a word, the Eternal, the Infinite: 2. Man's approach to the Eternal and Infinite is manifold, and God manifests Himself and fulfills Himself in the world in many ways, each itself being Eternal, so all cosmic powers and all forces are manifestations of the One: and 3. The Supreme or Divine can be approached through a universal consciousness, by piercing through all inner and outer Nature each individual soul can meet That or Him in itself because there is something in the soul that is intimately one or at least intimately related with the one Divine Existence. Said Sri Aurobindo. "These three things put together are the whole of Hindu religion, its essential sense and, if any credo is needed, its credo."

In more recent times Dr. Karan Singh proposed five basic tenets in Essays on

Hinduism: 1. Brahman, God, is the unchanging, undying reality that pervades the entire cosmos: 2. The human entity is born again and again, moving towards perfection. Its immortal spark or Sell is called "Atman:" 3. Atman and Brahman are essentially one: 4. The supreme goal of life lies in spiritual realization whereby the individual becomes aware of the deathless Atman within him. Realization of Atman frees the soul, allowing it to transcend cycles of suffering, illness, old age and death; and 5. Actions are governed by the unerring law of karma, with pleasant fruits flowing from good deeds and unpleasant consequences from evil ones, thus giving great responsibility to the individual who holds in his own hands the key to his future destiny.

Sri Lanka's K. Navaratnam offered nine beliefs: 1. Belief in the existence of God; 2. Belief in the finitizing principle called anava or avidya: 3. Belief in the principle of matter, called prakriti or maya: 4. Belief in karma and reincarnation; 5. Belief in the indispensable need for a Guru to guide the soul to God Realization; 6. Belief in the necessity of temple worship for all beginners; 7. Belief in graded forms of religious practice, internal and external; 8 Belief in ahimsa, nonviolence, as the greatest dharma and virtue; and 9. Belief in mental and physical purity as indispensable for spiritual progress.

In a 1966 judgment the Supreme Court of India decreed Hindus are those who: "Accept the Vedas with reverence, recognize that the means of salvation are diverse, and realize the truth that the number of Gods to be worshiped is large."

We have collected dozens of such creeds. This month we focused on basic definitions for children. In designing our educational poster, the staff had a great time producing the colorful alphabet you will find on pages 14 and 15. For each of the 26 letters we composed a simple verse for kids to learn, from "A is for Aum" to "Z is for Zen." It's meant to serve as a child's first introduction to some of the beautiful concepts of Sanatana Dharma.

Once we had the kiddy katechism put together, our thoughts turned to older children and young adults. What would be the equivalent for them? Too old for the ABCs, they still need modern definitions of their faith. So the staff went back to the drawing board and pulled together Five Precepts. Five Prentices [see page 13]. These are a simple and highly-condensed summary of the more sophisticated Hindu tenets, a tool for parents to use in passing on tradition to older sons and daughters. The language is simple, but the ideas are very grown up.

These ten slokas constitute a concise creed and code of conduct. From the point of view of fathers and mothers with a love of dharma challenged by busy lives, they provide the minimal we need to know and teach to be good Hindus and pass on the universal principles of dharma.

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