

THOUGHTS ON EVOLUTION

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Hinduism, the most ancient of world religions currently in practice, represents a complex conglomeration of ideas that emerge from the distant mists of time. The dating of these thoughts, recorded in an endless array of Hindu *Shastras*, is virtually impossible. The Seers of yore who experienced these Truths during *nididhyâsana* (deep contemplation) remain anonymous, for the messenger was considered less important than the message. Our Scriptures are replete with presentation of ideas suited to the understanding of seekers at different levels of understanding. Thus, a cursory study of our religion may create a misimpression that there are contradictions in the diverse views and concepts of God presented.

The early evolution of human thought proposed ideas of elemental deities, a thought supplanted by a proposition of a single God (*Ishvarâ*) possessed of a tripartite power of Creation, Sustenance and Destruction, giving rise to beliefs in *Brahmâ*, *Vishnu* and *Shivâ*. In addition, it is accepted that the numerous manifestations of power (linked to different deities) are but the power of One only.

However, what about Creation and Evolution? Who created the Universe and all its constituents? The earliest recorded writings, the *Vedâs*, present this thought:

The *Nâsadiya Shukta* (*na asat* = "not the non-existent") from the *Rig Vedâ*, dealing with the origins of the universe, reads:

*Existence was not there; nor non-existence,
there was no realm of air, no sky beyond it.
What covered the mist? Of whom was that?
Who knows then whence it first came into being?
He, the first origin of this creation,
whether he formed it all or did not form it,
Whose eye controls this world in highest heaven,
he verily knows it, or perhaps he knows not.*

*Who really knows? Who shall declare it here?
Whence was it born? Whence issued this creation?
Even the Gods came after its emergence.
Then who can tell from whence it came to be?
None knows when creation has arisen;
Whether He made it or did not make it,
He who surveys it in the highest heaven,
Only He knows, or maybe even He knows not.*

*That One without vibration began to vibrate by its own Power,
Other than that there was nothing beyond.*

- Rig Veda 10.129.1-7

Interpreting these passages Swami Vivekananda, the first and foremost exponent of the Vedas in the West, says:

This Prâna existed then, but there was no motion in it, Vibration was non-existent. Then when the Kalpa (Creative Cycle) begins, after an immense interval, vibration commences, and Prâna (Vital Energy) gives blow after blow to Akâsha (Potential Space). The atoms become condensed, and as they are condensed, different elements are formed.

Vivekananda had expressed these thoughts in 1890 in the West, almost a century before scientists developed the concepts of Big Bang and Blackholes.

The later *Purânic* view asserts that the universe is created, destroyed, and recreated in an eternal repetitive series of cycles. In Hindu cosmology, a universe endures for about 4,320,000,000 years, the length of a cycle, which is considered as one day of *Brahmâ*, and it then goes into involution (*Pralaya*); *Brahmâ* then 'rests' for one night, which is just as long as the day. The cycles repeat for 100 *Brahmâ* years (311 trillion, 40 billion human years) which represents *Brahmâ's* lifespan. *Brahmâ* represents the creative potential of the Supreme.

An interesting article on this subject, sourced from Wikipedia, expresses the views of some eminent scientists, and I quote:

Science writers Carl Sagan and Fritjof Capra have pointed out similarities between the latest scientific understanding of the age of the universe, and the Hindu concept of a "day and night of Brahmâ", which is much closer to the current known age of the universe than other creation myths. The days and nights of Brahmâ posit a view of the universe that is divinely created, and is not strictly evolutionary, but an ongoing cycle of birth, death, and rebirth of the universe.

According to Sagan:

The Hindu religion is the only one of the world's great faiths dedicated to the idea that the Cosmos itself undergoes an immense, indeed an infinite, number of deaths and rebirths. It is the only religion in which time scales correspond to those of modern scientific cosmology. Its cycles run from our ordinary day and night to a day and night of Brahmâ, 8.64 billion years long, longer than the age of the Earth or the Sun and about half the time since the Big Bang.'

Capra, in his popular book, '*The Tao of Physics*', wrote:

This idea of a periodically expanding and contracting universe, which involves a scale of time and space of vast proportions, has arisen not only in modern cosmology, but also in ancient Indian mythology. Experiencing the universe as an organic and rhythmically moving cosmos, the Hindus were able to develop evolutionary cosmologies which come very close to our modern scientific models.'

There are postulates that the world came into existence by the thought of God; there are others who say that it never came into existence - it is there, as it is, and nobody created it. There are some schools of thought that ascribe Creation to a Personal God (or *Ishta Devatâ*), which is an idea echoed by the later Semitic religions

(Judaism, Christianity and Islam). There are other schools of thought following the *Upanishads* that describe Creation as a ‘spontaneous expression’ of *Parabrahman* (Supreme Consciousness). That is, a material world that is born from Spiritual Energy.

If we study and make inferences from the *Srimad Bhâgavatam*, we see sequential and progressive evolution of life, becoming more complex with each successive metamorphosis. These views are in tandem with some scientific propositions that posit the initial birth of a unicellular organism that undergoes physical evolution into more complex creatures, leading to the present man. Lord *Vishnu*, the sustainer of *Prakriti* (or Nature), is seen to create a series of *Avatârs* that evolve in creation from an aquatic life, to an aquatic-terrestrial life, to a terrestrial life, going progressively from lesser to more complete physical evolution. See below:

British geneticist and evolutionary biologist, John Burdon Sanderson Haldane, (who in his later life moved to India), observed that the Dasavatâras (ten principal Avatârs of Lord Vishnu) are a true sequential depiction of the great unfolding of evolution. The Avatârs of Vishnu show an uncanny similarity to the biological theory of evolution of life on earth.”

Evolution can be observed to be in three stages:

1. *Evolution of the body* – here there is progressive transformation of the gross body, commencing with the amoeba, and progressing to the currently evolved man.
2. *Evolution of the mind* – here one sees progress in the mental and intellectual capacities of the evolving human mind.
3. *Evolution of the Spirit* – The primitive man gradually develops an idea of self-preservation, later to be stunted with selfishness. With the growth of consciousness, the selfish spirit now needs to evolve to a state of selflessness, where its attempts at self-preservation do not falter to a state where the security of humanity is put at threat.

In the *Avatârs* of Vishnu, we see progressive growth in Stages 1 and 2 cited above, with evidence of the development of a universal consciousness in some who reach great heights, like Sri Krishna and Lord Buddha. When all humankind reaches this stage, it remerges into the Supreme Consciousness, completing thereby the circle from where it has started.

A description of the Ten *Avatârs* is as follows:

Avatârs	Explanation	Evolution
Matsya	First <i>Avatâr</i> is a Fish , which is an aquatic creature.	If we compare it with biological evolution on different Geological Time Scale first developed life was also in the form of fish which originated during the Cambrian Period (542–488.3 million years ago) .

Kurma	Second <i>Avatâr</i> is in the form of Tortoise (which is both aquatic and terrestrial).	In geology also the first reptiles come as second important evolution, which originated in Mississippian Period just after the Amphibians. It is the earliest of two sub periods of the Carboniferous Period lasting from roughly 359 to 318 million years ago.
Varâha	Third <i>Avatâr</i> was in the form of Boar .	Evolution of the amphibian to the terrestrial (land) animal.
Narasimha	The Man-Lion (<i>Nara</i> =man, <i>simha</i> =lion) was the fourth <i>Avatâr</i> .	This may be related with the Ape Man . The term may sometimes refer to extinct early human ancestors, such as the undiscovered missing link between apes and humans.
Vâmana	Fifth <i>Avatâr</i> is the dwarf man.	This may be related with the first man originated during Pliocene Period , a period extending from 5.3million to 2.6 million years before present. It may be related with the Neanderthal Man. Neanderthals are classified either as a subspecies of <i>Homo sapiens</i> (<i>Homo sapiens neanderthalensis</i>) or as a separate human species (<i>Homo neanderthalensis</i>). The first proto-Neanderthal traits appeared as early as 600,000–350,000 years ago. Neanderthals were generally 12 to 14 cm (4½–5½ in) shorter than modern humans.
Parashurâma	This is the sixth <i>Avatâr</i> . Man has progressed physically, but lacks full mental control.	It has similarities with the first modern man, originated during the Quaternary Period or the man of Iron Age . It is the most recent of the three periods of the Cenozoic Era . It follows the Neocene Period , spanning about 2.6 million years ago to the present.
Râma	This is the seventh <i>Avatâr</i> , as an evolved man.	In the great epic of Rishi Valmiki, the <i>Râmâyana</i> , Sri Râma is described as the perfect man on earth. He represents the perfection of man in the Modern Period. He is evolved both physically, mentally and is endowed with spiritual wisdom. He has his senses under control, and believes in equality for all.
Krishna	The eighth <i>Avatâr</i> of Vishnu represents a highly evolved individual, in body, mind and spirit. He represents the ultimate expression of spirit as man.	This incarnation is highly evolved spiritually, being evolved to a state of cosmic consciousness. His philosophy, which condenses all the principal teachings of the Primary Truths, the <i>Shrutis</i> , shows how living in this world one can still be free of its snares. His birth is suggested as being around 5,000 BCE.
Buddha	The ninth <i>Avatâr</i> of Vishnu represents a further evolved spiritual being.	This incarnation sees a unity of all existence, including all forms of life, human and animal, with no distinction. Here a strong message of <i>Ahimsâ</i> is delivered. This Incarnation appeared around 500 BCE.

Despite all this evolution to man, man remains the chief threat to the existence of humanity. In his selfish drive for self-enrichment, man has brought extreme threats to the world in terms of both destruction of life-sustaining nature, and the development of tools of mass destruction. In the failure of man to understand the true meaning of peace, he uses aggression and threats to establish peace, a foolish venture indeed. Although man claims the highest position in the 'food chain', he is very undeserving to be seen as a custodian of life on earth. Having developed the body and mind, what is now needed is an expansion of consciousness from selfish to selfless pursuits. This can only come with an expansion of consciousness that embraces all as One. These are the teachings of the *Shrutis*. Thus has been postulated the advent of one further *Avatâr* yet to come to bring to a completion the Circle of Life, where the beginning of individual consciousness will merge with the Supreme Consciousness, where *Âtman* will merge into the *Paramâtman*.

It is important to note that although Hinduism accepts physical evolution, as described above, its primary concern is Spiritual Evolution. It believes that although some men might have been monkeys in their evolution, this is not invariably so for all humans.

In 1859, Charles Darwin, a British Scientist, published a book called '*On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*'. In it, he proposed that the plants and animals best suited to their environment are more likely to survive and reproduce, passing on the characteristics, which help them to survive, to their offspring. Gradually, the species adapts to prevailing environmental circumstances, and change over time. The *Srimad Bhâgavatam*, like all the *Purânas*, is a product of an oral tradition, and its dating has varied widely from about 3,200 BCE (from Indian sources) to 9th or 10th CE according to Western authors! In any event, the Indian records antedate Darwin's theory by many centuries.

Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886), the Guru of Swami Vivekananda, used to say that *Brahman* (Supreme Consciousness) and *Shakti* (Energy) are One.

The *Mundaka Upanishad* (1.1.7) says,

Just as a spider projects its own web and then reabsorbs it into its own body, so also that One reality projects this varied universe and then reabsorbs it into Itself.

The *Ishâ Upanishad* (4) similarly says,

The One ultimate Reality is the state of absolute non-vibration. At the same time, It covers everything faster than the speed of mind. The same Upanishad further states (5), It vibrates and It vibrates not.

The *Kathâ Upanishad* (2.3.2) says,

Whatever we see in this universe is due to the vibration of Prâna (Vital Energy).

The *Brihadâraryaka Upanishad* (1.2.1) says,

There was nothing whatsoever in the beginning. It was covered only by 'death', or lifeless existence.

The Vedic Rishis discovered these cosmological truths not through empirical observation but through intuitive insights gained in *Samâdhi* (Deep Absorption).

French philosopher Amaury De Riencourt writes in '*The Eye of Shiva*',

The cardinal fact is that contemporary physics finds a remarkable echo in Eastern, and not Western metaphysics; and that one of the prime elements of this conjunction is the monistic, and not monotheistic vision of underlying reality.

Riencourt here alludes to the Semitic monotheistic views on the creation of the universe by a Personal God. He further says,

'There can be no doubt that the Upanishads are based on the most profound study and understanding of human nature ever achieved, one with which we twentieth century Westerners, in spite of our vast present day knowledge, have not yet fully caught up.'

'The Vedas were the brilliant product of intuitive insight, not of the logical intellect. The essence of the Upanishadic teaching, to the extent that it can be coherently summarized, lies in the thesis that the Absolute is not separate from man and nature but immanent in both. The transcendent outlook of the Vedas (an outward projection of Vedic man's unconscious) becomes an insight into the immanent nature of the Absolute: The infinite is not beyond the finite but in the finite. Man's goal is union with the Divine, the Absolute (Brahman), which is the basic principle of Monism. Already, we can detect in Indian Culture an emphasis on the recovery of a latent Being, rather than the striving to Become – Becoming being unreal since the process of time has no reality whatsoever. "

In 1932, the celebrated scientist Albert Einstein proposed the equation, $E=MC^2$ which implied the interchangeability of Matter with Energy. Science tells us that matter or energy cannot be created or destroyed, but may be interchangeably transformed. The Supreme Consciousness, which is a 'form' of great potential Energy, can transform into Matter. The 'Big Bang' postulated to precede creation is an example of conversion of Energy into the Matter that makes up the universe with all its constituents, including insects, animals and man.

A true understanding of the beginning of the universe in the undivided and all-pervading Consciousness, which is the eternal substratum of this cosmos, can presently only be gained in the intuitive, mystic and spiritual way. Science still greatly lags behind, and when, one day, when it closes the gap sufficiently, meta-science will become science. This will bring us to the outer fringes of the mind and thought.

This brings us to the third stage, the evolution of Spirit (or Consciousness). The evolution of consciousness does not end with man. When man is described as being in the image of God,

Hindus see the image of God as being Spirit, and not physical being. For there to be further evolutionary growth, there must be an *ascent in the process of evolution from humanity to Divinity*, a stage that acts as a link between man and the ultimate Godhead. There are references to higher category of levels of life, beyond the human state, as recorded in the *Upanishads*. There are the levels of the realms above even the best of human beings, those of the *pitris, gandharvas, Devâs*, the higher states of being in higher realms, which are experienced on the journey to ultimate fulfilment as *Ishvara* (Cosmic Consciousness) and finally *Brahman* (Supreme Consciousness). Swami Krishnananda says that man has to evolve further; currently he occupies a place probably midway between God and an unevolved being. The large unused potential power of the brain bears testimony to the incomplete evolution of man at present.

Swami Krishnananda further states:

Up to the level of the animal, penultimate to the human stage, the process of the ascending series of evolution is spontaneous, without the lower species having to exert on its part or put forth any special effort to evolve into the higher level. The reason for this seems to be that Nature in its all-inclusiveness works automatically, of its own accord, in the case of the species in which the egoism of self-consciousness has not properly manifested itself. But from man onwards a consciousness of effort on one's part appears to be inseparable from natural evolution, though the universal working of Nature cannot be said to have ceased its functions even then, - indeed Nature's work is not complete until the Absolute is realised in a state of Universal Selfhood. The restlessness, the finitude, the consciousness of limitation from every side, the incessant and resistless longings for expansion of one's suzerainty in larger dimensions of space and endless life in time, nay, even the compulsions of being born and dying, announce in loud voice that man is far from the expected perfection to be reached in Nature's scheme of evolution, and there is a long way higher up, from man to Godman, and from Godman to God Himself.