

SUMMARY

WHY I AM A HINDU

AN INSIDER'S GUIDE TO
THE HISTORY OF HINDUISM
SHASHI THAROOR



Summary of: “Why I am a Hindu” by Shashi Tharoor

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Why I am a Hindu (2018) is a masterful reflection on the impact of religion on one’s personal and national identity.

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Introduction

What role does religion play in your life? For many of us, it's something deep and personal that brings meaning to our lives. For many others, it's something to be avoided entirely. Both are completely valid responses to religion, and that's one of the reasons why we have secular spaces like educational and governmental institutions which are meant to function outside the bounds of religion and avoid pushing any one religion on others against their will. And although it might be stated that, in American society, secularism stands in direct opposition to religion, it functions a little differently in India.

Operating on the simple principle that a variety of religions should be allowed to coexist without any one belief system being privileged over others, India's culture allows Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and Sikhs to worship freely and equally. And that sounds like a pretty great way of life, right? However, Shashi Tharoor argues that this peaceful coexistence is now under attack by the Hindutva movement which now dominates India. The official ideology of India's ruling party-- the BJP-- the Hindutva movement is predicated on a desire to redefine Indian national identity, primarily through the exclusion of anyone who doesn't identify as Hindu.

Tharoor argues that this is not what Hinduism is about and that Hindutva is a perversion of true Hindu ideology. *Why I Am a Hindu* is his attempt to reclaim the tolerance, diversity, and openness that lies at the heart of Hinduism through a meditation on his personal journey with religion.

Hinduism is Grounded in Diversity

Every religion is unique in its own way. But some of the most well-known faiths-- Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, for example-- also have many fundamental beliefs in common. Although they may differ in practice, each of these three belief systems center around the idea that there is only one God and that he is-- or was at one time-- a real, living person. These religions also believe that theirs is the only true god and as such, subscribing to these faiths necessitates rejecting the idea that any other belief system can be valid.

Hinduism, however, operates on a different set of core beliefs. Rather than being based in monotheism like the religions described above, Hinduism is a pantheistic faith, which means that its followers believe in many different gods. Each person who practices the Hindu faith is free to choose which specific gods they want to worship and which sacred texts they read, as well as when and where they want to pray. These core tenets of Hinduism mean that it is, by definition, an inclusive, tolerant, and diverse belief system. And although all Hindus are striving for a common goal of achieving self-realization and oneness with Brahman (an androgynous being who represents truth), it also means that every believer's journey is deeply personal and unique to them.

And as we've already established, this profound commitment to diversity and personal experience means that Hinduism is intrinsically inclusive. So much so, in fact, that it's even unique in another way. Because unlike many other religions we've already discussed, Hindus even acknowledge the validity of other belief systems and are willing to engage with them!

Hinduism Respects Other Religions

Inclusivity of other religions is actually one of the fundamental tenets with characterizes Tharoor's personal experience with his faith. In fact, he observes that one of his powerful childhood memories is being taught that other sacred religious texts like the Torah or Quran, for example, were every bit as holy as the sacred texts of Hinduism. It was impressed on him that these texts are valid because, even if they uphold different belief systems, they still have valuable insight to offer on one's personal and spiritual development. And because of this, Tharoor developed not only a strong sense of respect for other religions but for books as a source of wisdom as well. In fact, he affirms that to this day, if he happens to accidentally drop or step on a book, he says a quick prayer of forgiveness for disrespecting this source of wisdom!

Indeed, this respect for all sources of wisdom and faith extends to every part of Hindu culture. Because as Buddhism and Sikhism flourish throughout India, attracting followers from a variety of different socioeconomic, Hinduism makes a calculated effort at unity and refuses to reject other faiths as enemies of their own. Rather than focusing on their differences, Hinduism seeks ways to connect with Sikhism and Buddhism, and even found that the three religions actually bear a few similarities.

Although Sikhs believe there is only one god, they place a high priority on acts of love towards others and their god, and cherish a strong belief in the equality of all people. Because Hinduism has very similar tenets, Sikhs and Hindus can embrace this commonality and enjoy a mutual respect. Likewise, Buddhists respect and emulate the logic and devotion of the Hindu faith, while Hindus seek to learn and share in Buddhists' passion for the emotional aspect of faith.

The Rise of Hindutva

In light of this information, you can see how Hindutva is inherently at odds with the inclusivity of true Hinduism. But how did it originate and why was its ideology developed? Tharoor believes that studying this is critical to abolishing Hindutva and this chapter is dedicated to that exploration. So, let's take a look at a few basic facts. We know already that Hindutva is the official ideology of the BJP and that the BJP-- also known as the Indian People's Party-- controls India's current government. And although they've only been in power since 2014, they adopted Hindutva as their official religion of sorts in 1989.

So, what does that mean in practice? Well, for starters, Hindutva means "Hinduness." It doesn't claim to be Hinduism so much as it seeks to focus on what they believe to be the essence of Hinduism. That idea was popularized by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, who, in 1923 authored a book entitled Essentials of Hindutva. Savarkar's manifesto claimed that Hindus were the oldest inhabitants of India and as such, that could only mean that India belonged exclusively to Hindu people. This resonated strongly with many nationalists, including a far-right thinker named MS Golwalkar, whose 1939 text, We: Our Nationhood Defined, argued that nationality is determined by culture instead of where you were born.

He further developed Savarkar's claims by asserting that even if a person is unarguably of Indian heritage, they cannot truly be Indian if they are not Hindu. According to his definition, an Indian who practices Islam might share the same geographical boundaries as her Hindu counterparts, but because she does not share in Hindu culture, she cannot claim to be a "real" Indian. And although this could not be more clearly in opposition to Hinduism's fundamental inclusivity, this ideology-- and both Savarkar and Golwalkar's texts-- are foundational principles for the BJP to this very day.

You might have already noticed that these exclusionary and nationalistic tenets of Hindutva bear a strong resemblance to Nazi ideology, and if you

guessed that Hindutva draws heavily on Nazi ideals, you're exactly right. Both Savarkar and Golwalkar were known Nazi apologists and Savarkar even wrote the foreword for a book by Indian Nazi Savitri Devi. Likewise, Golwalkar notoriously suggested that India should implement its own Holocaust to purge the country of non-Hindus.

In light of this, it's easy to see how violence, hatred, and exclusion would follow naturally from Hindutva. So, let's take a look at what happens on national and local levels of government when a country's leading party proudly embraces Hindutva as their national ideology.

A Hindutva Government Promotes Violence

The title of this chapter probably comes as no surprise, but the truth of Hindutva violence in practice is scarier than you might think. That's because daring to be Muslim in a Hindutva government is a decision that means literally taking your life in your hands. In fact, thanks to the influence of BJP member and Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, Yogi Adityanath, Islamophobia isn't just nationally sanctioned-- it's actively promoted. Before being elected to government office, Adityanath led an extremist hate-group whose sole aim was to physically assault Muslims. He even served prison time for hate speech after calling a popular Muslim bollywood star a terrorist, an accusation which was based solely on the celebrity's religious beliefs. And in 2017, he even followed Donald Trump's lead and attempted to enact a ban barring Muslims from entering India.

His efforts have instigated a dramatic and divisive change throughout India. For not only has there been a spike in deliberate violence against Muslim citizens, anything even associated with Islamic beliefs is being targeted as well. And because India's culture is a rich tapestry comprised of multiple religious and cultural threads, the war against Muslims often amounts to a war on Indian heritage. One particularly heartbreaking example is the damage being done to the Taj Mahal. Although it's one of India's most famous national landmarks and biggest tourist attractions, because it falls under Adityanath's jurisdiction in Uttar Pradesh, he refuses to fund its upkeep because of its Muslim history. As such, one of the seven wonders of the world is now falling into disrepair, and its decline is already so significant that American basketball star Kevin Durant triggered a minor international scandal when he called attention to the tragedy during a 2017 visit.

But national monuments aren't the only ones suffering under a Hindutva government. Deliberate government neglect is resulting in the social and economic collapse of multiple cities. Many cities like Agra, which is also under Adityanath's purview, desperately need tourism to boost their

economies and pull them out of poverty. However, without adequate government funding, they cannot finance basic repairs to their city which would make them an attractive tourist destination. Observing that updated tourist brochures don't even acknowledge the Taj Mahal or list Agra as a possible destination, Tharoor theorizes that the BJP is actively seeking to deter visitors from touring Muslim sites.

The BJP is Attempting to Eliminate Tolerance

Tharoor argues that the “People’s Republic of India” doesn’t seem to value the welfare of its people at all, and sadly, the deliberate discouragement of tourism is only one example. Because in addition to assaulting citizens and depriving cities of funding, the BJP is also actively impeding social progress. Although Hinduism famously celebrates diversity and sexuality, the BJP flagrantly disregards such inclusive figures as Ardhanarishwara-- a hindu deity with a half-male, half-female body-- and seeks to abolish tolerance toward LGBT people in any form.

Returning to outdated rules like a ban against gay marriage is only one example, but it’s one that Tharoor is actively fighting. However, his attempts to have this law amended in parliament was not simply met with resistance, it was immediately dismissed. Refusal to question the status quo or discuss a more progressive future is yet another national detriment which Tharoor attributes to the prevalence of Hindutva ideology. The same is true of the ongoing national controversy regarding cows. Although Hinduism traditionally prohibits the consumption of beef due to a belief that cows are sacred, by Hindu principles, the decision to eat beef or not should also be left up to personal choice.

However, the BJP is actively seeking to eliminate free will in this respect by legislating everything from what people are allowed to eat-- through a national policy prohibiting all citizens from consuming beef-- to what farmers are allowed to do with their cows. The controversy has even escalated to such an extent that over 136 people have been murdered as a result of legal disagreements about cows, including one 16-year-old Kashmiri Muslim boy who hitch-hiked using a cattle transport truck. Incidents like these have only increased in frequency and severity since the BJP took power, proving that when government meshes with intense prejudice, no one is safe.

Peace Can Only be Achieved Through the Rejection of Hindutva

If you, like Tharoor, find yourself reaching the end of this summary and wondering what can be done to eliminate prejudice and return to the inclusive tenets of true Hinduism, the good news is that the answer is very straight-forward. Having examined the disparities between Hindutva and Hinduism, Tharoor concludes that Hindus have to reclaim the pride and truth of their religion by rejecting the horrors of Hindutva. For although he is proud to be Hindu and proud to be Indian, Tharoor asserts that Hindutva offers nothing to be proud of.

Fearing for both the collapse of his country and the perversion of his faith, Tharoor calls attention to such atrocities as the claims that Hindu men have raped Muslim girls or cheered as people of other faiths are being burned alive. Such things can never be compatible with a religion that prides itself on respect, tolerance, and inclusivity, and Tharoor laments that if Hindutva prevails, young people will lose the meaning and history of Hinduism, learning instead that violence and bigotry is the legacy of their faith. For this reason, he asserts that the only hope is to acknowledge that Hinduism is being attacked from the inside and distorted into something toxic.

Hindu people have many reasons to be proud of their faith and its 4,000 year history. They can likewise take great pride in India and its rich culture and heritage. But as Tharoor affirms, national and religious pride should never be predicated on violence or exclusion of others. Instead, Hindus should be proud of their traditional commitment to diversity, living into that legacy rather than the toxic tenets of Hindutva.

Final Summary

Hinduism is a beautiful religion grounded in tolerance, diversity, inclusion, and respect for other beliefs. As such, the practice of this faith is a deeply personal and spiritual experience that brings great meaning and purpose to the lives of its followers, especially leading politician Shashi Tharoor.

However, Tharoor wants readers to know that Hinduism has been co-opted by extremists and Nazi sympathizers and that Hindutva is nothing but a perversion of Hinduism. For this reason, it must be rejected and eliminated so that people around the world can embrace the beauty and tolerance of the Hindu faith.