

Al-Biruni's Views on Hinduism as Reflected in *Kitab al-Hind*: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Al-Biruni was an intellectual genius who wrote of *Kitab al-Hind* in the detailed account that provides all major doctrines of Hinduism. Al-Biruni got respectable status in the history of mankind after writing the *Kitab al-Hind*. Al-Biruni's assessment for *Kitab al-Hind* was unique in the cultural history of India, who became acquainted with a completely different culture, religion, and world view on the basis of personal observation, question and the study of Sanskrit text. Al-Biruni had a very comprehensive and moderate approach to explain the terminologies and intricacies of Hinduism. This paper will evaluate Al-Biruni's five important sections: first section introduces Al-Biruni's life and works; second section explains Al-Biruni's travel towards India; third section highlights Al-Biruni's study of Hinduism which encompasses language, belief, ideas, custom, taboos, codes and culture; fourth section illustrates institutions of Indian society of medieval time; the last but not least, provides valuable criticism on Al-Biruni's views on Hinduism.

Keywords: *Al-Biruni, Hinduism, Kitab al-Hind, Religion, Cast System, Culture, Hindu Rituals, Idol Worship*

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INTRODUCTION

Al-Biruni's Life and Works: A Brief Introduction

Abu Rayhan Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Biruni was one of the greatest scholars of medieval times. His contemporary eastern scholars called him *al-Ustad* (the Master). He was born in the suburb of Kath at al-Jurjaniyyah, Khwarizm (modern Khiva) on 4 September 973 AD [1]. Little is known about al-Biruni's upbringing, as he left no autobiographical writings. But what we can glean from available sources is that al-Biruni was born in a Shiite Muslim family from Tajikistan in Central Asia, situated in the west of China. Nothing is known about Al-Biruni's family background perhaps the reason was that none of his family members was ever able to rise to prominence before him.

Al-Biruni was a self-made man. He built his great reputation and fame solely on the merits of his remarkable works. He learnt astronomy and mathematics from his teacher Abu Nasr Mansur, a member of the family then ruling at Kath, and Abd al-Samad of Khwarizm. Being a student in his youth, Biruni's ability was recognized by his teachers. He made several astronomical observations at Kath in his youth [2].

Al-Biruni's first patron was the Samanid Sultan Abu Salih Mansur II who reigned in Bukhara till it was invaded by Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznah in 999. Later, al-Biruni went to Jurjan to the court of Abu'I Hassan Qabus ibn Washmjir Shams al-Ma'ali (r. 998-1012). However, al-Biruni found him harsh and indiscriminate. He left the place and went to Khwarizm and Jurganiyyah, [3] and joined the service of the Samanid prince Abu'l Abbas al-Mamun ibn Muhammad II. He was the best patron al-Biruni ever received [4]. He served the prince as a councilor or advisor.

Abu Raihan al-Biruni was a man of many talents. He was a comparative religionist, mathematician, astronomer, geographer, geologist, physician with deep interest in pharmacology, physicist, metaphysicist, geographer, historian, and above all a staunch humanist free from cultural chauvinism [5]. He was conversant in Turkish, Persian, Sanskrit, Hebrew

¹M. A. Saleem Khan, *Al-Biruni's Discovery of India: An Interpretative Study* (Denver, Colo.: IAcademic Books, 2001), p. 2.

²Bill Scheppeler, *Al-Biruni: Master Astronomer and Muslim Scholar of the Eleventh Century* (New York: Rosen, 2006), pp 64-68.

³Muhammad al-Hakim Said and Ansar Zahid, *Al-Biruni: His Times, Life and Works* (Srinagar, J & K: Venus Publishing House, 1996), p. 67.

⁴ Abdul Latif Samian, "Al-Biruni (Part I)", *Encyclopaedia of the History of Science, Technology and Medicine in Non-western Cultures*, ed. Helaine Selin (Dordrecht: Kluwer, cop. 1997), pp. 157-58.

⁵ Siddiqui, "Abu Raihan Al-Beruni: His Life and Works", p. 17.

and Arabic. He was a prolific writer, and his writings covered the areas of history, philosophy, society, culture, astronomy, mathematics, geography, and other areas [6]. He is credited with a large number of books. He wrote most of these books himself; while the scholars working under his directions penned the other [7]. According to a famous Orientalist, Percival Spear, Abu Rayhan al-Biruni is “one of the most gifted scientific men known to history” [8]. He was a prolific author, who contributed to a number of diverse disciplines by writing books and treatises.

Efforts for *Kitab al-Hind*:

Al-Biruni’s major work dealing with India was *Kitab al-Hind* (the Book of India, also translated as Indica), which is also known as *Tahqiq-i Hind* (An Enquiry into India). It was completed in 1030. Al-Biruni wrote *Kitab al-Hind* (The Book of India) in which he discussed his personal observations during his one decade long stay in India. He preferred to learn Sanskrit language to study Hinduism; moreover, he served himself to read the sacred, literary and other texts. In this respect, he spent a lot of time to interview the Hindu priests. Al-Biruni being as versatile a scholar studied Hinduism as a religion, its fundamental doctrines and practices, as well as the Indian geography, culture, traditions, and sciences. While conducting research on the different aspects of India, his approach was characterized by a sympathetic understanding.

Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznah was keenly interested in the scholarship of al-Biruni, and al-Biruni came with Sultan’s military expedition in India. Under the Sultan, over a period of 20 years, al-Biruni traveled all over the country, learning Hindu philosophy, mathematics, geography and religion from the Pandits, and in turn he taught them Greek and Arabic science and philosophy. He visited India in the most unfavorable period when recurrent invasions by Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznah had created emotions and feelings that were not free from prejudice [9]. In the military defeat by Sultan Mahmud, the Hindus saw a challenge to the Hindu Civilization and culture. He states that as long as he was ignorant of the Sanskrit language, he behaved like a disciple before the Hindu sages [10].

Al-Biruni’s book *Kitab al-Hind* is a voluminous work, which is divided in eighty chapters. It starts with a lengthy preface written by him. In the preface, he starts with a brief discussion on methodology, and tells the reader about tradition, hearsay and eye-witness accounts. Then he discusses the defects and shortcoming of the works by Muslim scholars pertaining to the religious doctrines of other faiths or sects. He maintains that while writing this book, he would avoid such mistakes. Then he discusses the aim of writing his book on India.

This discussion is followed by a list of contents, followed by chapters on various issues and topics. The first chapter of *Kitab al-Hind* is introductory in nature. From chapters 2-11, he discusses the Hindu religion and philosophy, including the belief in God, the belief regarding the created things, the concepts of heaven and hell, the relationship between the spirit and matter, the concept of transmigration of the soul, etc. From chapters 12-17, he discusses the Indian literature as well as metrology. Chapters 18-31 are devoted to the study of geography, cosmography, and astronomy. Chapters 32-42 study chronology and astronomy. Chapters 43-79 deal with manners, customs and festivals of the Indian society, while the last chapter, i.e. chapter 80 deals with astrology. The next chapter of the study highlights the study of Hinduism as a religion by al-Biruni. It discusses the generally prevailing attitude of the study of Hinduism in the medieval times, and how al-Biruni broke way from that prevailing trend. Then it explores his study of the major doctrines of Hinduism.

His Sojourn to India:

In 1017, Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznah conquered Mamun’s kingdom [11]. Al-Biruni and 5,000 other were taken as prisoner of war from Khwarzimid and held at Mahmud’s capital city of Ghaznah in 1018. Sultan Mahmud brought al-Biruni to Ghaznah, where he spent the rest of his life, except for short intervals when he accompanied the Sultan on his military campaigns into northern India [12]. Al-Biruni became one of the well-known figures associated with the court of Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznah. Sultan Mahmud was familiar with the reputation of Al-Biruni and fellow scholars at al-Abbas’s court prior to the conquest [13]. In this regard, he had made previous attempts to invite al-Biruni to his court.

⁶ D. J. Bollog, “Al-Biruni” in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, new edn., Vol. 1 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960), p. 1236.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Percival Spear, *The Oxford History of India* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), p. 209.

⁹ Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui, “Abu Raihan Al-Beruni: His Life and Works”, in *Medieval India: Essays in Intellectual Thought and Culture*, ed. Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui, vol. I (New Delhi: Manohar, 2003), 7.

¹⁰ Ibid., 18.

¹¹ Muhammad Nazim, *The Life and Times of Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznah* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1971), pp. 56-57.

¹² Al-Biruni visited India along with the armies of Sultan Mahmud of Ghaznah. He traveled in Punjab, Sind, and other places, and made friends with Hindu scholars.

¹³ Scheppler, *Al-Biruni*, pp. 64-68.

After conquest, al-Biruni was embraced as a valuable addition to the court of Ghaznah, and was encouraged to continue his studies under Sultan Mahmud's patronage. The Sultan provided conducive environment for the scholars in his Kingdom, but al-Biruni never had the type of respectful relationship with Mahmud that he enjoyed with other patrons [14]. The conquest of Khwarizm was just one of many victories Mahmud orchestrated as a military leader. He expanded his realm into a large empire that united Central Asia from Iran to western India. As a result, al-Biruni was stuck in Ghaznah between 1018 and 1020, but he continued to gain exposure to new knowledge and ideas.

Al-Biruni also served as royal advisor and possibly as tutor of Sultan Mahmud's sons. In the city of Ghaznah, al-Biruni's carried on his scientific work in collaboration with his teacher Abu Nasr Mansur. Under Sultan Mahmud, al-Biruni developed his fascination with Hindu religion and Indian culture. Scholars suggest that he took advantage of his time in Ghaznah to become expert in Sanskrit language. At that time, al-Biruni was twenty-three years old, and he benefited from his association with scholars and scientists of eminence attached to the royal court [15].

In 1030, Sultan Mahmud passed away and his youngest son, Muhammad succeeded him to the Ghaznavid throne. Shortly thereafter, in 1031, Muhammad's own brother Masud wrested control of the empire for himself. At that time, al-Biruni was fifty-eight years of age. During this brief period of turmoil and uncertainty, he feared that he would lose the work he had amassed over the past decade, and he would be released from the court and forced to seek patronage elsewhere. However, the new king, Sultan Masud had great respect for al-Biruni, and encouraged him to continue his work.

Al-Biruni developed with Sultan Masud a relationship based upon mutual admiration that he had never had with Mahmud. The new Sultan befriended al-Biruni, and provided him with wealth beyond his imagination. On account of this, al-Biruni included his patron's name in the title of his greatest work on astronomy and trigonometry entitled *Al-Qanun al-Mas'udi*. Sultan Masud rewarded him with an elephant-load of silver. Al-Biruni was overwhelmed but graciously rejected the generous gift. Al-Biruni repeatedly acknowledged his gratitude for the support of Sultan Masud [16]. The Sultan provided an environment that allowed him to devote his time and energy completely to the pursuit of knowledge. He enjoyed privileges which were reserved only for the most respected members of the court. Al-Biruni died in Ghaznah in 1048 A.D [17], at the age of 75, after having spent forty years in gathering knowledge and making his own original contributions to it. However, according to some scholars, he died in 1051 [18].

Views on Religion

When al-Biruni came in India, he paid a lot of attention towards Hinduism. He evaluated following key features of Hinduism:

Views on God and Idol Worship

According to al-Biruni, the educated and enlightened [19] Hindus believed in the concept of oneness of God. They believed that God is one, eternal, and without beginning and end. He could act by freewill. He is the Supreme Power who is Almighty, All-wise, living and giving life. His sovereignty is unique and beyond all likeness and unlikeness. He could not be resembled with anything [20]. Al-Biruni concludes that the elites of all communities, including the Hindus, worship one God. It is the uneducated people who need concrete objects of worship. Therefore, the religious leadership frequently takes their susceptibilities into account, and gives them the concession to worship concrete objects such as idols, etc [21].

Moreover, Al-Biruni states that enlightened Hindus who are on the path of liberation, and those who study philosophy and theology, and who desire abstract truth are entirely free from worshipping the idols. They worship only one God [22]. Later, the *Arya Samaj* also preached the concept of monotheism, and argued that the four Vedas, which

¹⁴ Ibid., p.70.

¹⁵ Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui, "Abu Raihan Al-Beruni: His Life and Works", in *Medieval India: Essays in Intellectual Thought and Culture*, ed. Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui, vol. I (New Delhi: Manohar, 2003), p. 18.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Scheppler, Al-Biruni, p. 75.

¹⁸ Samian, "Al-Biruni (Part I)", p. 157.

¹⁹ Enlightenment is specific term which is used for well educated people.

²⁰ *Alberuni's India*, ed. Sachau, vol. 1, 22.

²¹ Yohanan Friedmann, "Medieval Muslim Views of Indian Religions," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 2(Feb 1975): 215.

²² *Alberuni's India*, ed. Sachau, vol. 1, 113.

alone can be accepted as inspired and authoritative Scripture, also give the same message of monotheism [23]. It is Brahman Who has abstract values. Brahman is transcendent from intelligence of human beings, and He cannot be limited in any material form.

Abu Rayhan al-Biruni writes in *Kitab al-Hind* that polytheistic expression of Hinduism is only limited for uneducated Hindus. He repudiated the idea that all the Hindus were idol-worshippers. He argued that the Hindus view their idols as worthy of worship in their own right. He argues that the unenlightened or lay Hindus were unable to conceptualize God as an abstract entity owing to their limited understanding [24]. Therefore, the uneducated people made concrete representations of their objects of devotion and worship. However, while doing so, they ignored the distinction between the material representation and the immaterial reality that it represents [25]. There are many words to describe the nature of God; however, the most relevant word is *acintya*, which means 'inconceivable' or 'beyond thought'. The true nature of God is, therefore, beyond the ability of human beings to understand. The Hindus try to conceive of God, and so they create an image of God in their minds. This mental image of God is an idol, since God is inconceivable, and beyond thought [26]. According to unenlightened Hindu perspective, there is little difference between a mental idol and physical idol, and one is just an extension of the other.

Indeed, Hindu temples are full of such sacred images of God, and Hindus have special ways to install and interact with these images in their temples and homes. In most cases these images are viewed, not as material images, but as spiritual forms. This is called seeing through faith.

Another Sanskrit word that describes the nature of idol worship is *sarva-gata*, which means literally 'gone everywhere.' In other words, *sarva-gata* refers to the all-pervading nature of God. God is in all things and in all places. The Hindus worship specific images that are described in scripture (*shastra*). The technical name for these sacred images of God is *arcya-vigraha*. *Arcya* means 'worship-able' and *vigraha* means 'form' and so *arcya-vigraha* is the 'form to be worshipped.' It is believed by the uneducated people that God agrees to appear in these special forms that can be understood by human beings in order to allow Himself to be worshipped [27]. Hindu devotees come to a temple bringing fruits and flowers, and with all their prayers and hopes, and stand before the sacred image and make their offerings and prayers through the sacred image. The worshippers approach these sacred images as the means to get to the God behind the image [28]. According to al-Biruni, the Brahmans worship the sun, stones and some animals, yet they do not consider these similar to God, only part of His creation [29].

According to al-Biruni, the uneducated adherents of other religions such as the Jews, the Christians and the Manicheans also used 'pictorial representations' of God in their places of worship. However, as far as Islam is concerned, it does not allow this kind of concession to the common people. Nevertheless, many Muslims hold certain objects such as the images of the Ka'aba in high esteem [30]. But these objects and images are merely respected and venerated, and not worshipped by the ordinary Muslims.

Concept of Metempsychosis (Transmigration of Soul)

Al-Biruni explains the concept of metempsychosis [31] of Hinduism, which is associated with particular group [32]. He describes the concept of metempsychosis in Hinduism, and quotes from *Gita*, *Vishnu-Dharma* and *Patanjali*. He devotes a complete chapter in his book to describe the relation of soul and matter [33]. He shows how the human soul strives to free itself from the worldly attachments. The migration of soul begins from low stages, and rises to higher and better stages. The differences of these lower and higher stages depend upon the differences of actions [34]. According to

²³ A. S. Geden, "God (Hindu)" in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, new edn., vi: 288.

²⁴ *Alberuni's India*, ed. Sachau, vol. 1, 122.

²⁵ Finbarr B. Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval 'Hindu-Muslim' Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 27.

²⁶ W. Crooke, "Images and Idols (Indian)" in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, new edn., vol. vii, 143.

²⁷ *Alberuni's India*, ed. Sachau, vol. 1, 122.

²⁸ A.B.C, "Hinduism" in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, new edn., vol. vi, 710.

²⁹ Friedmann, "Medieval Muslim Views of Indian Religions," 214-21.

³⁰ *Alberuni's India*, ed. Sachau, vol. 1, 111.

³¹ The Australian aborigines believe that an infant is a reincarnation of deceased ancestors and that the soul is continually reborn. Some Indonesian peoples hold that ancestral souls reside in sacred animals, sometimes in preparation for a new incarnation. Similarly, several tribes in western Amazonia avoid eating certain animals, such as deer, because they believe ancestral souls have entered the animals' bodies.

³² *Alberuni's India*, ed. Sachau, vol. 1, 50.

³³ *Ibid.*, 45-49.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

Hinduism, a human being is composed of spirit (*jiva*), which is a portion of *Isvara* (the divine entity), of whom our bodies are the coats. The spirit cannot die. At death, the spirit leaves the body behind 'like a worn-out cloth', and goes into the next world, dressed in other bodies. Then it puts off another of these and goes on to *Svarga* (the heaven), and is very happy there, till this spirit is also worn out. In the next world, a very good human being is happy, but does not stay long; and a bad person is very unhappy, and suffers a great deal [35]. Al-Biruni devotes a full chapter to the concept of retribution in paradise and hell in Hinduism [36]. According to the enlightened Hindus, the soul is an independent being, and it also exists without the body. However, the unenlightened Hindus cannot image the existence of soul without a body [37].

Concept of Salvation (*Moksha*)

The term *Moksha* literally means release, liberation or escape, the attainment of which is the ultimate goal of all Hindus [38]. According to al-Biruni, liberation is union with God [39]. In other words, *Moksha* is seen as the soul's liberation from the cycle of life and death, or the cycle of birth and re-birth, a re-establishment in one's own fundamental divine nature and may include union with or joining God. Al-Biruni further argues that the human soul is bound up with this world, and the reason of this bond is ignorance. Liberation or *Moksha* can be attained through knowledge and by overcoming ignorance and abstaining from evil. Cupidity or greed, wrath or anger and ignorance are the chief obstacles to the attainment of liberation [40].

Al-Biruni mentions the various stages of knowledge on the basis of *Patanjali* and *Gita*. When a person's spiritual power prevails over his bodily power, then he is gifted with the faculty of doing eight different things, which are as under:

- 1) The faculty of making his body so thin that it becomes invisible to the eyes.
- 2) The faculty of making the body so light that it is indifferent to him whether he treads on thrones or mud or sand.
- 3) The faculty of making his body so big that it appears in a terrifying miraculous shape.
- 4) The faculty of realizing every wish.
- 5) The faculty of knowing whatever he wishes.
- 6) The faculty of becoming the ruler of whatever religious community he desires.
- 7) That those over whom he rules are humble and obedient to him.
- 8) That all distances between a person and any faraway place vanish [41].

Al-Biruni informs about the virtuous behavior according to the Hindu religious law. The following are the nine commandments or rules for attaining good behavior: (1) A person shall not kill. (2) Nor lie. (3) Nor steal. (4) Nor whore. (5) Nor hoard up treasures. (6) He is perpetually to practice holiness and purity. (7) He is to perform the prescribed fasting without an interruption and to dress poorly. (8) He is to hold fast to the adoration of God with praise and thanks. (9) He is always to have in mind the word *OM* [42], the word of creation, without pronouncing it [43].

Al-Biruni also tells about that a number of steps of attaining salvation: (1) The practical path leading to *Moksha* or salvation demands that a person should detach himself from the external world, and concentrate on the internal one. (2) The second part of the path of liberation is renunciation based on the knowledge of evil. A person should avoid the don'ts. (3) The third part of liberation is worship, and the acts and duties of worship are distributed among the body, voice and heart. For example, the body should fast, the voice should recite the sacred texts, and the heart should have honest intentions [44]. Al-Biruni also compares the Hindu belief in salvation to the doctrines of other religious traditions.

Concept of Heaven (*Swarg*) and Hell (*Narg*)

Hinduism emphasizes the concept of reincarnation, as well as the concept of birth and rebirth, therefore, the concept of heaven is not very important. The heaven is conceived as a temporary phase until the next birth, while the permanent state that Hindus aspire to is *Moksha* or salvation or liberation. Entry into heaven or hell is decided by the Lord of death *Yama* and his karmic accountant, Chitragupta, who records the good and bad deeds of a person during his lifetime. It

³⁵ A.B.C, "Hinduism" in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, new edn., vol. vi, 708.

³⁶ Alberuni's *India*, ed. Sachau, vol. 1, 59-67.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁸ Hinnells, *The Penguin Dictionary of Religions*, 218.

³⁹ Alberuni's *India*, ed. Sachau, vol. 1, 81.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 68-72.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴² The term Om is the title of God in Hinduism, which is used for remembrance or for invoking his powers or blessings.

⁴³ Alberuni's *India*, ed. Sachau, vol. 1, 74-75.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 76-80.

must be noted that *Yama* and Chitragupta are subordinate to the supreme Lord Ishvara (God) and work under his direction. Entry into heaven is only dependent on one's actions in the previous life and is not restricted by faith or religion [45]. Al-Biruni informs that according to the Hindus, the life in this material world is also a kind of heaven which a human being earns as a reward because of his good deeds in his previous life. Heaven is a higher stage of it, where a person lives in a state of bliss [46].

In Hinduism, there are difference of opinion among the Hindus that whether or not there is a hell. For some it is a metaphor for a conscience. But in *Mahabharata*, there is a mention of the Pandavas and the Kauravas going to Hell. Hells are also described in various Puranas and other scriptures. For instance, Garuda Purana gives a detailed account of Hell, its features and enlists amount of punishment for most of the crimes like modern day penal code. It is believed that people who commit sin or *paap* go to Hell, and have to go through the punishments in accordance with the sins they committed. As mentioned above, the record keeper in *Yama's* court is Chitragupta, who reads out the sins committed by the people, and *Yama* orders the appropriate punishments to be given to them. These punishments include dipping in boiling oil, burning in fire, torture using various weapons, etc. in various Hells [47]. Individuals who complete their punishment are reborn according to their fortune. All of the created are imperfect and thus have at least one sin to their record, but if one has led a generally pious life, one ascends to Heaven or *Swarg* after a brief period of expiation in Hell.

According to al-Biruni, the Hindus speak in their traditions of a large number of hells, as well as their qualities and their names, and for each kind of sin they have special hell. The number of hells is 88,000 according to the *Vishnu-Purana* [48]. For instance, the person who makes a false claim and who bears false witness, he who helps those two and who ridicules people, goes into the *Rauravahell*. He who sheds innocent blood, who kills cows, goes into *Rodha*. He who kills a Brahman, and he who steals gold, the princes who do not look after their subjects, he who commits adultery with the family of his teacher, or commits incest goes into *Taptakumbha*. He who connives at the shame of his wife for greediness, commits adultery with his sister or the wife of his son, sells his child, is stingy towards himself with his property in order to save it, which goes into *Mahajwala*. He who is disrespectful to his teacher and is not pleased with him, despises men, commits incest with animals, contemns the Veda and Purana, or tries to make a gain by means of them in the markets, goes into *Savala*. He who does not honour the right of parent and grandparents; he who does not do his duty towards the angels, the maker of arrow and spear-points, goes to *Lalabhasha*. He who takes the honey out of the beehive goes to *Vaitarani*. He who takes away by force the property and a woman of others in the intoxication of youth comes to *Krishna*. He who cuts down the trees goes to *Asipatravana*. The hunter and the maker of snares and traps go to *Vahnijuwal* [49]. In a nut shell, according to Hinduism, there are different degrees and types of hell, and there are separate hells for each sin committed in this world.

Observation on Social Life

Al-Biruni deeply observed Hindu society, and he highlighted followings important factors of social life.

Caste System

Caste has been seen as essential as well as a unique institution of Hindu society from the very beginning. Membership in Hinduism is also defined as the observance of caste rules and respect for the Brahman. It is not a religious concept, but it is closely associated with Hindu religion and society [50]. The historical development and theory of caste has been studied and analyzed by H. Hutton in his classic *Caste in India* and more recently in by L. Dumont in his book *Homo Hieraricus*. It is a much studied phenomenon in the contemporary times, but al-Biruni was the first outsider to study the Hindu caste system from an outsider's perspective. Despite that, he tried to study it in an objective manner, and refrained from criticizing or challenging it from the point of view of the Islamic ideal of equality.

Al-Biruni was a supporter of the Hindu caste system [51]. He sketched the classical pattern of the four castes. The Hindus call their castes *varna* (colours) and from a genealogical point of view, they call them *jataka* (births). These castes from the very beginning were only four:

- 1) The highest castes are the Brahman, of whom the sacred books tell that they were created from the head of Lord Brahma. The Hindus consider them as the best of the whole humankind, and are responsible for religious functions.

⁴⁵ Latif Malik, *Abu Raihan Al-Biruni* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel, 1965), 375-82.

⁴⁶ *Alberuni's India*, ed. Sachau, vol. 1, 61.

⁴⁷ Malik, *Abu Raihan Al-Biruni*, 353-55.

⁴⁸ *Alberuni's India*, ed. Sachau, vol. 1, 60.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 60-61.

⁵⁰ Hinnells, *The Penguin Dictionary of Religions*, 76.

⁵¹ *Alberuni's India*, ed. Sachau, vol. 1, 99-100.

- 2) The next caste is that of the Kshatriya, who were created from the shoulders and hands of Lord Brahma. Their degree is not much below than that of the Brahmans, and their duty is to defend the country.
- 3) The third caste is Vaisya believed to be created from the thigh of Lord Brahma, and they are involved in agriculture.
- 4) The last castes are Sudra believed to be created from feet of Brahma. The Sudra are born to serve the people of the higher castes [52].

In addition, there are outcastes as well, including the people who are not considered a part of any of these four castes. These people belong to lowest professional castes involved in social functions such as cleaning the dirt, and removal of dead, etc. They are called Hadi, Doma, Candala and Badhatau [53].

If each member of these castes adheres to his customs and usages, he will obtain the happiness he wishes for. If anybody wants to quit the works and duties of his caste, he has to adopt those of another caste. If it would bring a certain honor to the latter, it is a sin, because it is a transgression of the rule. Hindu differs among them as to which of these castes is capable of attaining to liberation. Liberation is common to all castes and to the whole human race, if their intention of obtaining is perfect.

In the Hindu society, the people of various castes are assigned their specific roles, as mentioned above. The Brahmans are entrusted with the performance of all religious rites and rituals. In fact, in Hinduism, there exists a detailed system of life for a Brahman, which has been discussed by al-Biruni in detail. A Brahman's life is divided into various stages, and he has to perform specific duties during these stages [54]. He enjoys certain privileges such as saying prayers, reciting the *Veda*, and offering sacrifice to the fire.

The Kshatriya reads the *Veda* and learns it, but does not teach it. He rules the people and defends them, for he is created for this task. It is duty of the Vaisya is to practice agriculture, cultivate the land, and raise the cattle. The Sudra is like a servant to the Brahman, taking care of his affairs and serving him. He is not allowed to say prayers, recite the *Veda*, and offer sacrifice to the fire like Brahmans. If a Sudra or a Vaisya is proved to have recited the *Veda*, his tongue is to be cut off as a punishment. However, they are allowed other works of piety such as alms-giving. If a person adopts the occupation of some other caste, which is not allowed to his caste, he is considered guilty of committing a sin or crime, which they consider only a little less than the crime of theft.

Al-Biruni's Observations on Some Peculiar Hindu Customs

Al-Biruni scrutinized several peculiar customs of the Hindus which he found to be very strange. He says that many Hindu customs differ from those of his country. Some of these are as follows: [55]

- The Hindus do not cut or remove any of hair of body.
- After having meals, the Hindus do not make use of the remainder of it, and the plates from which they have eaten are thrown away if they are earthen.
- They have red teeth as a result of chewing areca-nuts with betel-leaves and chalk (*pan*).
- They drink wine before taking their meal.
- They do not eat the meat of cows.
- They use turbans for trousers lined with two cords. The string by which the trousers are fastened is at the back.
- They wear a girdle or a sacred thread called *yajnopavita*, passing from the left shoulder to the right side of waist.
- In all circumstances and emergencies, they take the advice of the women.
- When a child is born people show particular attention to the man, not to the woman.
- They do not ask permission to enter a house, but when they leave it they ask permission to do so.
- In their meeting they sit cross-legged.
- They spit out and blow noses without any respect for the elder ones present, and they crack their lice before them.
- They consider sneezing as bad omen.
- They use black tablets for the children in the schools, and write upon them along the long side, not the broad side.
- They write with a white material from the left to the right [56].
- They write the title of a book at the end of it, not at the beginning.

Punishments and Expiations

⁵²Ibid., 100-101.

⁵³Ibid., 101-2.

⁵⁴ See details in *ibid.*, vol. II, 130-35.

⁵⁵Ibid., vol. I, 179-83.

⁵⁶ This is in contrast to the scripts of Arabic or Persian languages in which people write from right side to the left.

According to al-Biruni, the Hindus relate that originally the affairs of government and war were in the hands of the Brahmins, but the country became disorganized, since they ruled according to the philosophic principles of their religious codes, which proved impossible when opposed to the mischievous and perverse elements of the populace. They were about to lose the administration of their religious affairs. Therefore, the penal code is exercised by the kings, not under the religious scholars [57].

Al-Biruni informs that according to the Hindu law, if the murderer is Brahmin, and the murdered person belongs to another caste, the murderer should fast, pray, and give alms as a punishment. If the murdered person is a Brahmin, the Brahmin murderer has to answer in a future life; for he is not allowed to do expiation, because expiation wipes off the sin from the sinner, whilst nothing can wipe off any of the mortal crimes from a Brahmin. Moreover, as for crimes such as killing of a cow, the drinking of wine, whoredom, especially with the wife of one's own father and teacher, Brahmin or Kshatriya are not killed as punishment, but their property is confiscated, and they are banished from their country [58].

If a man of a caste under those of Brahmin and Kshatriya kills a man of the same caste, he has to do expiation, but besides the king inflicts upon a punishment in order to establish an example. The law of theft directs that the punishment of the thief should be in accordance with the value of stolen object. Accordingly, sometimes a punishment of extreme or middling severity is necessary, sometimes a course of correction and imposing a payment, and sometimes only public shame and ridicule. If the object is very precious, the king blinds Brahmin and mutilate him, cutting off his left hand and right foot, or the right hand and left foot, while they mutilate a Kshatriya without blinding him, and kill thieves of the other castes. An adulteress is driven out of the house of the husband and banished [59].

Festivals and Festive Days

Al-Biruni observes that most of the Hindu festivals are celebrated by women and children only. The second of the month Caitra is a festival to the people of Kashmir, called Agdusand celebrated on account of a victory gained by their king, Muttai, over the Turks [60]. On the 11th there is a festival called *Hindolicalaitra*, when they meet in the temple of Vasudeva, and swing his image to and fro, as had done with him when he was an infant in the cradle. They perform the same in their houses during the whole day and make merry. On the full moon's day of Caitra, there is a feast called *Bahand* and it is festival for the women. They put on their ornaments and demand presents from their husbands. The 22nd is a festival called *Caitra-cashati*. It is day of merriment holy to Bhagavati when people use to wash and to give alms. The 3rd Vaisakha is a festival for the women called Gaurtr (*gauri-tritiya*) and holy to Gauri. It is considered the daughter of the mountain Himavanta and the wife of Mahadeva. They bathe and dress happily. They worship the image of Gauri and light lamps before it. They offer perfumes, abstain from eating and play with swings. On the 10th Vaisakha all the Brahmins whom the kings have invited proceed forth to the open fields, and there they light great fires for the sacrifices during five days till full moon. There are many other similar festivals and festive days in Hinduism.

Pilgrimage in Hinduism

In Hinduism, *yatra* means traveling under auspicious circumstances. Pilgrimages are not obligatory for the Hindus, but are considered meritorious. Al-Biruni gives a long list of the holy places and the stories which are attached with these places. The sacred place is the home of many gods, who are worshipped by the pilgrims [61]. In addition, there are some holy regions, some venerated idol, or some holy rivers. For instance, Benares is a holy city of the Hindus. Some of them want to live there to the end of their lives. They believe that if a murderer enters the city of Benares, he obtains forgiveness. In addition to Benares, Pukara, Taneshar, Mathura and Kashmir etc. are also holy places for Hindus. Ganges or Ganga is a holy river for the Hindus, and its water is considered to be sacred.

Economic Regulations in Hinduism

Al-Biruni held the view that it is obligatory for the Hindus to give alms every day as much as possible. They do not store wealth and riches. Those who earn by the crops or from the cattle are bound to pay tax on soil or pasture-ground to the ruler of the country [62]. He also pays him one-sixth of the income in lieu of the protection given by the state to the subjects, their property, and their families. The same obligation rests also on the common people, but they generally lie and cheat in the declarations about their property. Moreover, traders and businessmen also pay a tribute for the same reason. Only the Brahmins are exempt from all these taxes. Usury is forbidden in Hinduism. However, only the Sudra are allowed to take profit if it is not more than one-fiftieth of the capital.

⁵⁷ Alberuni's *India*, ed. Sachau, vol. II, 161.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 162.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Malik, *Abu Raihan Al-Biruni*, 368-74.

⁶¹ A.B.C, "Hinduism" in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, new edn., vol. vi, 709.

⁶² Malik, *Abu Raihan Al-Biruni*, 340-42.

Food Restrictions in Hinduism

The question of food is considered highly important from a religious point view in India, and is elaborately discussed in the sacred books [63]. Al-Biruni gives a list of permissible animals, and comments on the sacredness of cow. In Hinduism, it is allowed to kill certain animals by means of strangulation. The meat of cows, parrots, nightingales, all kinds of eggs and wine are forbidden. However, the wine is allowed to the Sudra. He may drink it, but dare not sell it, as he is not allowed to sell meat. Al-Biruni further informs that some Hindus assert that in the ancient times, it was allowed to eat the meat of cows, and there also existed sacrifices of animals including cows. After that time, however, it was forbidden for religious reasons.

Concept of Fasting

Al-Biruni observes that in Hinduism, fasting is voluntary as well as supererogatory for the Hindus. Fasting is abstaining from food for a certain length of time, which may be different in duration and nature. Hindus observe fasts in order to seek the nearness of god. A part from certain Hindu festivals like Shirati and KarvaChauth, etc. there are also specific days on which the Hindus keep fast [64]. For instance, people fast on Tuesdays for Lord Hanuman, the Indian monkey god. On Fridays, the devotees fast for the goddess of Santoshi Mata. These fast are different in nature. In some fasts Hindus are allowed to eat simple food like as fruit and milk, but they are not allowed to have proper meal or eat heavy food [65]. They have belief that with doing so, they can make happy their gods and can achieve prosperity and goal of their life. Most of the Hindus fast regularly, while some fast on special occasion and festivals.

Critical Appraisal on Al-Biruni's Views about Hinduism

Al-Biruni writes in his *Kitab al-Hind*:

The book is not a polemical one. I shall not produce the arguments of our antagonists in order to refute such of them as I believe to be in the wrong. My book is nothing but a simple historic record of the facts. I shall place before the reader the theories of the Hindus exactly as they are... [66]

He excelled getting the knowledge about India. Al-Biruni's research was based on original and reliable information. He must have studied something about India and Hinduism in the works of earlier historians and geographers. According to Syed Hasan Askari Kazmi, al-Biruni must have derived his preliminary knowledge about India from the writings of Fazari, Yaqub ibn Tariq, Ali ibn Rabban (also known as Zain), and Abdullah ibn Muqaffa [67].

In the words of a renowned scholar, Ahmad Hasan Dani:

...it is the first great book on the cultural history of the Hindus from the pen of a Muslim scholar. No Muslim has ever reached the depth and the extent of the scholarship that Alberuni could master... none of them possessed as deep an insight into the Hindu ways of living, thinking and acting as Alberuni could acquire within the brief span of life that he spent in the country [68].

In the words of another historian, Mohammad Yasin:

The *Indica* is not the outcome of an arrogance of a victor over its conquered, but the urge of an inquisitive and scientific mind to understand the culture and rich heritage of an ancient and hoary civilization [69].

Karen Armstrong has same views about enlightened Hindus, who worship only one Supreme God [70]. To her, concept of God varies on the basis conscious level of people; consequently, the people who had higher conscious level, they were follower of one God. According to Karen Armstrong, the people who have lower conscious about God; they prefer to worship of idol or image in the history of God. In this regard, Karen Armstrong and al-Biruni share similar views about the worship of idols.

⁶³Alberuni's *India*, ed. Sachau, vol. 1, 60-61.

⁶⁴J. Jolly, "Food (Hindu)" in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, new edn., vol. vi, 367-69.

⁶⁵Ibid., 342-45.

⁶⁶Alberuni's *India*, ed. Sachau, p. 7.

⁶⁷Syed Hasan Askari Kazmi, *The Makers of Medieval Muslim Geography: Alberuni* (Delhi: Renaissance, 1995), 40.

⁶⁸Abu Rayhan Al-Biruni, *Alberuni's Indica*, Abridged and annotated by Ahmad Hasan Dani (Islamabad: University of Islamabad, 1973), see Introduction, 1.

⁶⁹Mohammad Yasin, *Reading in Indian History* (New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers, 1988), 29.

⁷⁰Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: From Abram to the Present: the 4000 year Quest for God* (London: Mandarin, 1994), 40-41.

Moreover, al-Biruni believed in advancing the cause of mutual understanding among people belonging to different faiths and cultures [71]. Therefore, he undertook research on Hinduism and India, so that the Muslims could know and understand them. His aim was to develop a sympathetic attitude among the Muslims regarding Hinduism as a faith, though it was very different from their own faith.

Al-Biruni's relations with Hindu scholars were normal, because he had spent a lot of time with Mehmud, who had not good image Hindu community. Moreover, he could not visit to Benares and Kashmir to learn Hinduism those were the center of Hindu scholarship [72]. However, Al-Biruni chose limited people for questioning and answering during his research. According to Jacques Waardenburg, Al-Biruni's method for studying Hinduism is neither apologetic nor polemical but observational and descriptive. Al-Biruni adopted two sense of values in the form of criticism and appreciation for Hindu culture and religion. In one hand, he criticizes caste system in Hinduism and preferred the superiority of Islamic law over Hindu law. Furthermore, he emphasized on the life style of moderate Muslims, who are better from unclean customs of Hindus. However, he also criticized the Arabs who destroyed Iranian culture that was not better from Hindu ones. Alessandro Bausani provides valuable criticism on Al-Biruni's approach towards Hinduism owing to unavoidable limitations [73]. He states that Al-Biruni lacks to develop proper theoretical approach; moreover, it seems as static. Al-Biruni overemphasizes the asymmetry and he neglected order of Hinduism that deals spiritual aspect of life. Al-Biruni hesitated to explain the relation of Hinduism with Islam who failed to find the harmony between two religions. Al-Biruni did not evaluate impersonal character of the Semitic divinity. Al-Biruni avoided pursuing logical approach to discern the symbols in Hinduism and key features of pantheism. Generally, Al-Biruni had not interest in symbolism of Hinduism, which can be compared with Semitic Islam. There is no doubt he associated with Hindu popular religion, but he could not develop enlightened approach for the primitive values of non-literate people and religion.

Franz Rosenthal highlighted Al-Biruni's views: Al-Biruni holds same views for both Indian and Greek civilization: the philosophers of India and Greece had high philosophical thinking about truth and One God, and they brought same message as prophets did. Arthur Jeffery and W. Montgomery Watt evaluate Al-Biruni's contribution for Hinduism; moreover, they appreciate Al-Biruni's approach subject of empirical research.

CONCLUSION

In contemporary times, objectivity is cherished as a crucial goal for the historians, though according to more recent historians, complete objectivity cannot be attained by historians, who are essentially human beings with their own likes and dislikes, and sometimes prejudices and preferences. However, it has been mistakenly assumed by the scholars and the common people alike that there was no concept of objectivity in medieval times, and therefore, the writings of the historians and scholars of those days were marred by subjectivity, since they were not conscious of the notion of objectivity at all. On the contrary, historical evidence suggests that some of the medieval thinkers and scholars were very conscious about their own views, predilections, preferences, and they tried their utmost not to let these interfere with their writings, including the works of history. The issue of objectivity becomes more crucial when an alien religious tradition is being studied and an alien culture, land, people, and its knowledge traditions are analyzed by a scholar. In such a case, objectivity becomes a challenge for the scholar.

His approach was very scientific, objective and unbiased. Moreover, as a scholar, he greatly appreciated and respected the Indian contribution to sciences, particularly in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, medicine, etc. made by the Hindu sages. He did not hesitate to acknowledge the intellectual debt, and he owed to the Indian scholars and scientists. He adopted unbiased approach to study Hinduism as a religion regarding acceptance and rejection over the validity of Islam. His aim was not to convert the Hindus to Islam by showing them the falsity of their beliefs and doctrines. Moreover, as a scholar, he greatly appreciated and respected the Indian contribution to sciences, particularly in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, medicine, etc. made by the Hindu sages. He did not hesitate to acknowledge the intellectual debt he owed to the Indian scholars and scientists.

While studying the Hindu beliefs and practices, an important finding of al-Biruni was that there is a concept of monotheism among the educated Hindus, and it was only the uneducated or the common people who practiced idol-worship. He developed a deep insight into Hindu ways of living, thinking and acting. He was endowed with a deep insight in the then Indian society and culture as well. He recorded very valuable information about the customs of the people. He provided important information regarding the caste system of the Hindu society. Despite some shortcomings, his work on India is unmatched, and has no parallel. That is why *Kitab al-Hind* is still read by many people with great interest.

⁷¹ Yasin, *Reading in Indian History*, p. 22.

⁷² Jacques Waardenburg, *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 28.

⁷³ Ibid.