

# Antiquity and Origin of the Term 'Hindu'

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The anti-Hindu historians like Romila Thapar <sup>1</sup> and D.N. Jha <sup>2</sup> have opined that the word '**Hindu**' was given currency by the Arabs in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. They however, do not explain the basis of their conclusion nor do they cite any evidence in support of their claim. Even Arab Muslim writers do not make such an extravagant claim <sup>3</sup>. Another theory propounded by European writers is that the word 'Hindu' is a Persian corruption of 'Sindhu' resulting from the Persian practice of replacing 'S' with 'H'. Even here, no evidence is cited. In fact the word Persia itself contains 'S' which should have become 'Perhia' if this theory was correct. The present paper examines the above two theories in the light of epigraphic and literary evidence available from Persian, Indian, Greek, Chinese and Arabic sources. The evidence appears to support the conclusion that 'Hindu' like 'Sindhu', has been in use since the Vedic age and that although 'Hindu' is a modified form of 'Sindhu', its origin lies in the Saurashtran practice of pronouncing 'H' in place of 'S'.

## 1. Epigraphic Evidence :

The Hamadan, Persepolis and Naqsh-e-Rostam Inscriptions<sup>4</sup> of Persian monarch **Darius** mention a people '**Hidu**' as included in his empire. These inscriptions are dated between 520-485 B.C.<sup>4</sup> This fact establishes that the term '**Hi(n)du**' was current more than 500 years before Christ. **Xerxes**, successor of Darius, in his inscriptions<sup>4</sup> at Persepolis, gives names of countries under his rule. The list includes '**Hidu**'. Xerxes was ruling between 485-465 B.C.<sup>4</sup> On a tomb in Persepolis, another inscription assigned to **Artaxerxes** (404-395 B.C.)<sup>4</sup>, there

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are three figures above which are inscribed 'iyam Qataguviya' (this is Satygidian), 'iyam Ga(n)dariya' (this is Gandhara) and 'iyam **Hi(n)duviya**' (this is **Hi(n)du**).

The **Asokan inscriptions** (3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.)<sup>5</sup>, repeatedly use expressions like '**Hida**' (हिद) for 'India' and '**Hida loka**' (हिद लोक) for 'Indian nation'. '**Hida**' and its derivative forms are used more than 70 times in the Ashokan inscriptions. For instance in the Jaugadha, separate rock edict II, the lines 3 &4, read,

सव मुनिसा मे पजा। अथ पजाये इछामि किंति मे सवेणा हितसुखेन युजेयु। अथ पजाये इछमि किंति मे सवेन हितसुखेन युजेयू ति **हिद**लोगिक पाललोकिकेण हेवंमेव मे इछ सवमुनिसेसु।

(All men are my people. I desire for my people that they may be provided with all welfare and happiness. I desire for my people, including the people of **Hind** and beyond and I desire for all men.)

The Edict further, says in lines 7 & 8,

मम निमित्तं च धमं चलेयू ति **हिद**लोगं च पाललोगं च आलाधयेयू।

(Dhamma may be followed and and the people of **Hind** and beyond may be served.)

The Ashokan inscriptions establish the antiquity of the name '**Hind**' for India to atleast third century B.C.

In Persepolis **Pahlvi inscriptions** of Shahpur II (310 A.D.) the king has the titles *shakanshah hind shakastan u tuxaristan dabiran dabir*, "king of Shakastan, minister of ministers of **Hind** Shakastan and Tukharistan".<sup>6</sup>

The **epigraphic** evidence from the Achaemenid, Ashokan and Sasanian Pahlvi records, puts a question mark on the theory about the term 'Hindu' having originated in Arab usage in the 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Literary evidence takes the antiquity of the word 'Hindu' back to atleast 1000 B.C. and possibly 5000 B.C.

## **2. Evidence from Pahlvi Avesta :**

In the Avesta, **Hapta-Hindu** is used for Sanskrit **Sapta-Sindhu**<sup>7</sup>, the Avesta being dated variously between 5000-1000 B.C. This indicates that the term 'Hindu' is as old as the word 'Sindhu'. Sindhu is a Vedic term used in the Rigveda. And therefore, 'Hindu' is as ancient as the Rigveda.

In the **Avestan Gatha 'Shatir'**, 163<sup>rd</sup> Verse speaks of the visit of Veda Vyas to the court of Gustashp and in the presence of Zorashtra, Veda Vyas introduces himself saying 'man marde am **Hind** jijad'<sup>8</sup> - I am man born in '**Hind**'. Veda Vyas was an elder contemporary of Shri Krishna (3100 B.C.).

## **3. Greek Usage**

The Greek term '**Indoi**' is a softened form of '**Hindu**' where the initial 'H' was dropped as the Greek alphabet has no aspirate<sup>9</sup>. This term '**Indoi**' was used in Greek literature by Hekataeus (late 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.) and Herodotus (early 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.)<sup>9</sup>, thus establishing that the Greeks were using this derivative of '**Hindu**' as early as 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.

## **4. The Hebrew Bible :**

The Hebrew bible uses '**Hodu**'<sup>10</sup> for India, which is a Judaic form of '**Hindu**'. The Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) is considered earlier than 300 B.C.<sup>10</sup> Today's Hebrew spoken in Israel also uses Hodu for India.

## **5. The Chinese Testimony :**

The Chinese used the term '**Hien-tu**' for '**Hindu**' about 100 B.C.<sup>11</sup> While describing movements of the Sai-Wang (100 B.C.), the Chinese annals state that the Sai-Wang went towards the South and passing **Hien-tu** reached Ki-Pin<sup>11</sup>.

Later Chinese travellers Fa-Hien (5<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) and Huen-Tsang (7<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) use a slightly modified term '**Yintu**'<sup>12</sup> but the affinity to '**Hindu**' is still retained. This term '**Yintu**' continues to be used till today<sup>13</sup>.

## **6. Pre-Islamic Arabic Literature :**

**Sair-ul-Okul**<sup>14</sup> is an anthology of ancient Arabic poetry available in the Turkish library Makhtab-e-Sultania in Istambul. In this anthology is included a poem by Prophet Mohammed's uncle Omar-bin-e-Hassham. The poem is in praise of Mahadev (Shiva), and uses '**Hind**' for India and '**Hindu**' for Indians. Some verses are quoted below:

Wa Abaloha ajabu armeeman **Mahadevo**  
Manojail ilamuddin minhum wa sayattaru  
(If but once one worships Mahadev with devotion,  
One will attain the ultimate salvation.)  
Wa sahabi Kay yam feema Kamil **Hinda** e Yauman,  
Wa Yakulam na latabahan foennak Tawajjaru.  
( Oh Lord grant me but one day's sojourn in Hind,  
Where one can attain spiritual bliss.)  
Massayare akhalakan hasanan Kullahum,  
Najumam aja at Summa gabul **Hindu**.  
( But one pilgrimage there gets one all merit,  
And the company of great Hindu saints.)

The same anthology has another poem by Labi-bin-e Akhtab bin-e Turfa who is dated 2300 before Mohammed i.e. 1700 B.C. This poem also uses '**Hind**' for India and '**Hindu**' for Indian. The poem also mentions the four Vedas Sama, Yajur, Rig and Athar. This poem is quoted on columns in the Laxmi Narayan Mandir in New Delhi, popularly known as Birla Mandir (Temple)<sup>8</sup>. Some verses<sup>14</sup> are as follows:

Aya muwarekal araj yushaiya noha minar **Hinda** e,  
wa aradakallha manyonaifail jikaratun.

( Oh the Divine land of Hind, blessed art thou,  
thou art chosen land showered with divine knowledge.)

Wahalatjali Yatun ainana sahabi akhatun jikra,  
Wahajayahi yonajjalur rasu minal **Hindatun**.

( That celestial knowledge shines with such brilliance,  
Through the words of Hindu saints in fourfold abundance.)

Yakuloonallaha ya ahlal araf alameen kullahum,  
fattabe-u jikaratul **Veda** bukkun malam yonajjaylatun.

( God enjoins on all, follow with devotion,  
path shown by Veda with divine percept.)

Wahowa alamus **Sama** wal **Yajur** minallahay Tanajeelan,  
Fa e noma ya akhigo mutibayan Yobasshariyona jatun.

( Overflowing with knowledge are Sama and Yajur for Man,  
Brothers, follow the path which guides you to salvation.)

Wa isa nain huma **Rig Athar** nasahin ka Khuwatun,  
Wa asanat Ala-udan wabowa masha e ratun,

( Also the two Rig and Athar(va) teach us fraternity,  
taking shelter under their lusture, dispels darkness.)

## 7. 'Hindu' in Sanskrit Literature :

Another doubt created by the modern day anglicized historian is that the term 'Hindu' is not found used in Sanskrit literature. This misconception can be dispelled by quoting from Sanskrit works<sup>15</sup> :

Meru tantra (मेरुतन्त्र) (4<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D.), a Shaiva text, comments on 'Hindu'.

हीनं च दूष्यत्येव हिन्दुरित्युच्यते प्रिये ।

(Hindu is one who discards the mean and the ignoble.)

The same idea is expressed in Shabda Kalpadruma (शब्दकल्पद्रुम),

हीनं दूषयति इति हिन्दू।

Brihaspati Agam (बृहस्पति आगम) says,

हिमालयं समारभ्य यावदिन्दु सरोवरम्।

तं देवनिर्मितं देशं हिन्दुस्थानं प्रचक्षते।।

(Starting from **H**imalaya upto **I**ndu waters is this God-created country **H**industan)

Parijat Haran Natak (पारिजातहरण नाटक) describes Hindu as,

हिनस्ति तपसा पापान् दैहिकान् दुष्टमानसान्।

हेतिभिः शत्रुवर्गं च स हिन्दुरभिधीयते।।

(Hindu is one who with penance washes one's sins and evil thoughts and with arms destroys one's enemies.)

Madhava Digvijaya (माधव दिग्विजय) states,

ओंकारमूलमन्त्राद्य पुनर्जन्मदृढाशयः।

गोभक्तो भारतगुरुर्हिन्दुर्हिसनदूषकः।।

(One who meditates on Omkar as the primeal sound, believes in karma & reincarnation, has reverence for the cow, who is devoted to Bharat, and abhors evil, is deserving of being called Hindu.)

Vridha Smriti (वृद्ध स्मृति) defines Hindu as,

हिंसया दूयते यश्च सदाचरणतत्पर।

वेदगोप्रतिमासेवी स हिन्दुमुखशब्दभाक्।।

(One who abhors the mean and the ignoble, and is of noblebearing, who reveres the Veda, the cow, and the deity, is a Hindu.)

Similarly other Sanskrit works which use the term 'Hindu' are, Kalika Puran, Bhavishya Puran, Adbhut Kosh, Medini Kosh, Ram Kosh etc <sup>8,15</sup>. Even Kalidas has used a derivative form 'Haindava' <sup>16</sup>.

### **8. 'Hindu' and 'Sindhu'**

Another theory says that 'Hindu' originated from the Persian practice of replacing 'S' with 'H'. This does not seem to be true is evident from the fact that Sindh has not become Hind and both Sindh and Hind exist in Persian as well as Arabic. The inscriptions of Darius and Xerexes which describe India as Hi(n)du, also use the term 'Sugd' for Sogdiana. This 'Sugd' should have become 'Hugd' as per this theory. The Pahlvi inscription of Shahpur II, uses 'S' in Shakastan and Tuxaristan.

But it cannot be denied that Hindu is a form of Sindhu. It needs to be realised that this change from S to H is common in Saurashtra where Sorath becomes Horath, Somnath becomes Homnath and so on. The form Hindu is therefore, likely to have come from Saurashtra.

It should also be noted that as per Nirukta rules of grammar, in the Vedik language, replacement of S with H is permitted <sup>17</sup>.

### **9. Conclusion :**

Epigraphic evidence takes the antiquity of 'Hindu' back to atleast 500 B.C. Use of 'Hindu' as part of 'Hapta-Hindu' in the Avesta suggests that 'Hindu' is as old as 'Sindhu' and therefore, belongs to the Vedic age.

Regarding the origin of 'Hindu' from 'Sindhu', the Saurashtran practice of pronouncing 'H' in place of 'S' provides the answer.

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