

## ABU RAYHAN AL-BIRUNI'S STUDY OF OTHER RELIGIONS: A CASE ON HINDUISM

\*<sup>1</sup>Abdullah Al Masud & <sup>2</sup>Md. Faruk Abdullah

<sup>1</sup> International Islamic University Malaysia, 50728 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

<sup>2</sup> Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin, 21300 Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia.

\*Corresponding author: [masudwrcdu@yahoo.com](mailto:masudwrcdu@yahoo.com)

Received: 07.04.2020

Accepted: 05.05.2021

### ABSTRACT

Studying other religions is a legacy left by medieval Muslim scholars. As a Muslim scholar, al-Biruni's *Kitab al-Hind* was a unique contribution to the study of Hinduism. This study explores al-Biruni's approaches to studying Hinduism, culture, and civilisation by reviewing related manuscripts and literature. Al-Biruni studied the Hindu scripture in its original language. He investigated Hindu theology and philosophy, their caste system in the society, law and ethics, rituals, and festivals. In *Kitab al-Hind*, an entire chapter was dedicated to Hindu scriptures which included *Veda* and *Puranas*. Concerning religious beliefs and divinity, there were various perceptions between the educated and uneducated people. *Murti puja* was a form of worship to express love and devotion towards God. However, the educated classes considered that idols were no more than intermediaries, and the idol-worshippers were being deluded from the actual worship of God. The Hindu caste system was established upon religious foundations where every caste used to have their mode of living and daily routine. Furthermore, Hindu rules, guidelines, and religious laws were developed by divine sages called *Rishis*, who provided laws of murder and theft, punishment of adultery, treatment for prisoners, and inheritance law. Al-Biruni took an objective, in-depth, scientific and authentic approach in presenting Hinduism, which made his work accepted by both Muslim and non-Muslim religious scholars. It is hoped that this paper would offer new perspectives to Muslim scholars on studying other religions, which may consequently enhance religious harmony in a multireligious society.

**Keywords:** Al-Biruni, Hinduism, religion, comparative religion, Muslim scholar.

**Cite as:** Al Masud, A., & Abdullah, M. F. (2021). Abu Rayhan Al-Biruni's study of other religions: A case on Hinduism. *Journal of Nusantara Studies*, 6(2), 116-132.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.24200/jonus.vol6iss2pp116-132>

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Several medieval Muslim scholars had contributed significantly to studying other religions and cultures, such as Ibn Hazm, Al-Jahiz, Al-Biruni, Shahrastani, Kiranvi, and Ibn Taymiyyah. Al-Biruni was claimed as the father of comparative religious studies (Kamaruzzaman, 2003). This is because Al-Biruni was an unparalleled intellectual in the discipline of religious studies. He had studied several religions and developed a 'scientific method' on how to study religion.

Al-Biruni was among the elite panel of the greatest scholars of all time to have performed the scholarship in various subjects of knowledge, including astronomy, history, mathematics, metaphysics, physics, geography, linguistics, earth sciences, and comparative religion. He was a master astronomer, theologian, historian, geographer, cosmopolitan in outlook, great philosopher, scientist, and Muslim scholar of the eleventh century.

Most of his contributions focused on studying science, mathematics, and philosophy. However, this paper will concentrate on his approaches towards studying Hinduism. He was a versatile genius who was respected and recognised by both Muslims and Western intellectuals as "one of the greatest scientists of all times whose critical spirit, tolerance, love of truth and intellectual courage were almost without parallel in medieval times" (Saleem Khan, 2001, p. 19).

It is crucial to rediscover al-Biruni's approach to study other religions in Malaysia, which is a multireligious and multicultural country, where Hindu-Muslim relations are important. Alatas (2016) pointed out that Muslim intellectuals have a great deal of responsibility to have a dialogue to examine the commonalities in values, belief, and culture between Hinduism and Islam to reiterate peace and harmonious living between the two religious communities.

This paper provides a short biography of al-Biruni and his contributions to comparative religion. Then, it discusses his contributions to the study of Hinduism through his famous work *Kitab al-Hind*. Al-Biruni's approach to studying Hinduism is discussed in several aspects: Hindu scriptures and texts, theological concept, Hindu idolatry, caste system, ethics and laws, rites and rituals, festivals, and holidays, philosophical concepts, and Hindu doctrines.

## 2.0 BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF AL-BIRUNI

Abu Rayhan Muhammad Ibn Ahmad al-Biruni was born on September 4, 973 (Allana, 1979), about five centuries before the Renaissance. There are controversies regarding his exact birth date and place. Some scholars said that he was born to a Tajik family but belonged to the Persian culture (Said & Khan, 1990). His lineage is not well-known (Kamaruzzaman, 1996). However, we know that he was an orphan in his early childhood and grew up in an elite Iraqi family (Shamsi, 1979). Al-Biruni states that “the Iraq family nourished me with their milk, and their Mansur took it upon himself to rear me” (Gafurov, 1974, p. 5).

He learned in his early life both in the traditional *maktab* and *madrasah* education systems (Said & Khan, 1990). He was also under the supervision of Abu Nasr al-Mansur<sup>i</sup> and learned mathematics and astronomy from him. At an early age, the fame of his scholarship spread, and he received immense support and patronage of the rulers of his time. When his fame reached Sultan Mahmud, he took al-Biruni to company him several times during his journey to India. During these times, he travelled to India and collected knowledge on its culture, beliefs, and people (Kamaruzzaman, 2003). The lifelong learner, al-Biruni, could read and write in five languages, namely Persian, Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, and Sanskrit and understand a little Syriac and Latin (Syed, 2009). He was devoted to knowledge that he learned Sanskrit from Hindu *Pandits*<sup>ii</sup> to study Hinduism and Indian philosophy. Ahmed mentions that al-Biruni spent about 14 years in India (Ahmed, 1979), while Said (1979) mentions that al-Biruni spent about 40 years in West Pakistan and South Afghanistan. He travelled extensively and maintained close contact with the people of the areas.

Al-Biruni contributed significantly to sciences and philosophy, which saw significant achievements across the Islamic empire. He contributed significantly through his 120 books and treatises on various fields of knowledge, with six of them on religion (Allana, 1979), while Kennedy mentions that al-Biruni wrote 183 books and treatises with a total of 13,000 pages equal to the weight of a loaded camel (Kamiar, 2009). He also wrote extensively on historical chronologies of ancient civilisations, along with the rise and fall of empires. Among his books, 18 of them were on astronomy, 15 on geography, four on light rays and sight, five on astronomical instruments and its usages, five on estimation and fixation of time, five on tailed stars, seven on astrology, 14 on light reading and humour, six on religious beliefs, and 22 books on miscellaneous subjects; five books were lost during his life after their completion, and a large number of his original texts were destroyed by Changez Khan in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century (Aziz, 1979). His prominent works were *Kitab al-Hind* (history and geography of India), *al-Qanun al-Masudi* (astronomy, trigonometry, solar, lunar, planetary motions, and related topics), *al-*

*Athar al-Baqia* (ancient history of nations and the related geographical knowledge), *al-Tafhim-li-Awail Sina'at al-Tanjim* (summary of mathematics and astronomy), *Kitab al-Saidana* (Indian Medicine), and *Kitab al-Jawahir* (precious stones) and many others (Hadi, 2015).

He died on September 11, 1048 (12<sup>th</sup> Rajab 440 AH) at 75 (Saffie, 2012). He was buried in the present Ghazni in Western Afghanistan, situated 90 km Southeast of Kabul, the capital city (Kamiar, 2009).

### 3.0 AL-BIRUNI'S WORKS IN THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS

Al-Biruni talks about religions and religious communities in many of his books. However, *Kitab al-Athar* and *Kitab al-Hind* offer valuable information on the religious traditions studied by him in a scientific, systematic, and methodological approach. *Kitab al-Hind* was written when he was 53 years old (Saffie, 2012), spanning thirteen years of his life from 1017 until 1030 (Sachau, 2000). This book addresses an in-depth study of Hindu religion and its civilisation on the inspiration of his friend, *Abu-Sahl 'Abu-Almun'im Ibn Ali Ibn Nuh at-Tiflisi* (Sachau, 2000). He includes Hindu religious beliefs, practices, metaphysics, customs, laws, scriptures, literature, sciences, geography, astronomies, myths, philosophies, societies, institutions, traditions, languages, and geography of the land so that reader can learn enough about their religion and civilisation in his books. This valuable book on Hinduism has been recognised by modern scholars in the study of religions.

At the age of 30, al-Biruni composed *Kitab al-Athar al-bakiyah anil kurun albakiyah or monuments or vestiges of generations of the past* to expose the idea of several religions written by the inspiration of a learned man who wanted to know different religious communities on their roots, epochs, branches, famous festivals, commemoration days and times, events, months, and years (Sachau, 1879). The addressees in this book are the Greeks, Romans, Persians, Jews and Christians in detail; on a minor scale, he discusses the Zoroastrians, Manicheans, Magians, Samaritans, Khawarizms, Sughdians and Sabians (Kamaruzzaman, 1996). This book focuses on the diets and festivals of the communities, rites and rituals, nature of days, nights, months, and years, calendars, lunar stations, myths and legends, superstitions, and popular practices.

Twelve religions and religious communities are addressed in the books of *Kitab al-Athar* and *Kitab al-Hind*. The twelve religions include Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, ancient Greek religion, ancient Persian religion, Zoroastrianism,<sup>iii</sup> Magianism,<sup>iv</sup> Manicheanism,<sup>v</sup> religions of the Khawarizmians,<sup>vi</sup> the Sughduans,<sup>vii</sup> the Sabians,<sup>viii</sup> and the

Samaritans<sup>ix</sup>. Along with these religions, he also focuses on cult movements such as Budhasaf, Mazdak, Musaylima, Bahafirid, al-Mukanna, al-Hallaj, and Ibn Abi-Zakaria.

#### **4.0 AL-BIRUNI'S APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF HINDUISM**

Al-Biruni showed his mastery to initiate his research on Hindu culture, philosophy, and science consisting of two volumes, 70 chapters, and more than 800 pages. Two-thirds of this book is written on Indian science, while other parts are based on religious, social, and philosophical issues relating to India and Hinduism (Yousuf, 2000). *Kitab al-Hind* focuses (Kamaruzzaman, 2003) on Hindus and their civilisation that deal with their religion, religious scriptures, language, literature, rites and rituals, customs and practice, law and governance, institutional structure, philosophy, science, mathematics, astronomy, geography, and history. Sachau mentioned that al-Biruni became an Indian for completing the study of Hinduism and added, "And certainly we do not know of any Indian like him, before his time or after" (Sachau, 1879, p. xxiv). Al-Biruni observed that the Muslim community in his time was unknown, and it was difficult to know everything about Hindus and their culture. After this realisation, he took the initiative to write about them without the fear to explore as much as he could wherever he could find credible information. This paper focuses on his approaches and views regarding Hindus and their civilisation.

#### **4.1 Hindu Scriptures and Texts**

Religious scripture conveys God's word as guidance and instructions that follow ethical teaching in our worldly and spiritual lives. To study any religion, the first and foremost duty is to study its scriptures. Al-Biruni understood that one must study Hindu literature to learn about its culture and civilisation. He learned Sanskrit to research, understand, dialogue, and communicate with Hindus. He became proficient in the language and was able to analyse, critique, examine, and compare the details of their religion, doctrine, philosophy, science, institution, and civilisation. Although the Hindu literature is vast, al-Biruni studied what was available to him. His masterpiece, *Kitab al-Hind*, reveals his proficiency in Hindu scriptures. He translated two Sanskrit books into Arabic; one called *Samkhaya*, which deals with the creation of things and their types, and the *Patanjali* that deals with what happens after the spirit leaves the body.

In *Kitab al-Hind*, al-Biruni includes an exclusive chapter on Hindu scriptures and starts his discussion with the most sacred of them, *Veda*. He defines *Veda* as 'knowledge of that which was before unknown', according to the Hindu beliefs and 'promulgated by the mouth of

Brahman'. Al-Biruni states that Brahmins recite and memorise it without understanding the meaning and teach it to *Kshatriyas* but strictly prohibit hearing, pronouncing, and reciting it for *Vaisya* and *Sudra* castes. If anyone were to be charged with such a crime, the penalty is to have their tongues cut off (Sachau, 2000). After this, he addresses the main contents of *Veda*, consisting of commandments, prohibitions, various kinds of sacrifice to the fire, hymns of praise, and the statements of reward and punishments. Like other ancient texts, *Veda* is preserved and transmitted by memory in a metrical composition consisting of *Solaka* to protect its modulation. They avoid using pen and preserving it in written forms. According to their traditions, *Veda* was lost many times until *Vasukra*, a Kashmiri Brahmin, wrote it down because he was afraid that it might be forgotten and vanished from the reciters' memory. There were specific procedures and prohibitions related to the recitation of *Veda*. According to the Hindu tradition, *Vyasa*<sup>x</sup> classified *Veda* into four parts: *Rigveda*, *Yajurveda*, *Samaveda*, and *Atharvaveda*, which have their approach to reading (Sachau, 2000).

Al-Biruni also mentions that *Puranas* means 'first' and 'eternal', and it was composed by the *Rishis* (sages). It contains 18 books regarding stories about animals, human beings, and angels. He read a few books among them. *Smriti* is derived from *Veda* and contains injunctions and prohibitions composed by the 20 sons of Brahman. *Samkhya* and *Nyayabhasha* are books on religious subjects composed by *Kapila*. *Patanjali* is a book on salvation and how to achieve 'union of the soul with the object of its meditation'. *Mimamsa* by Jaimini is on the interpretations of *Veda*, while *Laukayata* by *Brihaspati* and *Agastyamata* of *Agastya* are books on the sense. Al-Biruni includes those books that composed the six pupils of *Vyasa*, one of which is *Manu*. *Bharata* is another text by *Vyasa* that Hindus hold with veneration and respect. It has 18 parts and 100,000 *slokas* on various subjects of religion. Al-Biruni lists the 18 parts and narrates stories related to the writing of the book. After the 18 parts, another part contains the tradition related to *Vasudeva* (Sachau, 2000).

The Hindu texts also address subjects related to geography, physical sciences, cosmology, astronomy, and other sciences of the Hindus in several chapters in *Kitab al-Hind*. He mentions the scriptural text and traditions for the verification of each topic. He was fully aware that the Hindu texts and scriptures guide and govern every aspect of Hindu life and civilisation.

#### **4.2 Theological Concept**

The discussion of Hindu theology is an integral part of the Hindu religion and civilisation. Al-Biruni mentions this discussion and analyses and explains them in the second chapter of *Kitab*

*al-Hind* on religious beliefs and divinity. He mentioned a great variety of the perception of religious belief between the educated (*al-khas*) and uneducated (*al-amm*) classes. The educated class (*al-khas*) is represented by the Brahmins who believe in one God (*al-wahid al-azali*). Al-Biruni quotes many verses and texts from the Hindu scriptures, i.e., *Patanjali*, *Gita*, *Bharata* and *Samkhya*, in his famous book (Sachau, 2000). He summarises the theology of the educated class as follows:

The Hindus believe concerning God that he is one, eternal, without beginning and ending, acting by freewill, almighty, all-wise, living, giving life, ruling, preserving, one who in his sovereignty is unique, beyond all likeness and unlikeness, and that he does not resemble anything, nor does anything resemble him (Sachau, 2000, p. 27).

As an uneducated group (*al-amm*), they have many perceptions of God and divinity assisted by anthropomorphic doctrines and activities; they have wives, children, and physical structures. Many Hindu laymen believe God is as small as a point that is “twelve fingers long and ten fingers wide” (Sachau, 2000, p. 31). Al-Biruni mentions that this is a general perception of uneducated people globally. Even in the Muslim society, some have erroneous tendencies and philosophies like the *Jabariyyah* sect (Sachau, 2000). According to him, the uneducated do not represent religion. No one should mind their misconceptions of religious theories and doctrines. Accordingly, the Hindu religion and their philosophy should be understood only from their scholars, the Brahmins, who are trained to maintain their religion (Sachau, 2000).

Al-Biruni addresses the Hindu gods and goddesses in various chapters of his book where Brahman is compared to an *Asvatta* tree (Sachau, 2000), and Vishnu is considered the centre of the earth in the divine form which creates this universe with five elements: heaven, wind, fire, water, and earth (Sachau, 2000). With reference to *Samkhya*, al-Biruni mentions three classes of created beings: (a) spiritual being is the highest, (b) men are the middle, and (3) animals are the last. There are 14 species of these three classes; eight belong to spiritual beings: *Brahman*, *Indra*, *Prajapati*, *Saumya*, *Gandharva*, *Yaksha*, *Rakshasa*, and *Pisaca*, while the class of man has only one. Five species are from animals: cattle, wild beasts, birds, creeping living things, and growing living things, i.e., trees (Sachau, 2000).

Al-Biruni discusses three forms of Vishnu: *Brahman* or *Prajapati*, who is the creator of the world, *Narayana* is the preserver of the world, and *Mahadeva* or *Rudra* is the destructor of the world (Sachau, 2000). He does not mention the name of *Shiva* because, as Sachau points out, India at that time of al-Biruni was *Vishnuitic* in practice (Kamaruzzaman, 1996).

### 4.3 Hindu *Murti Puja*<sup>xi</sup>

*Murti puja* is a form and symbol of worship of any physical objects representing God to demonstrate love and devotion towards God. This practice became popular in the later Vedic period and emerged in several parts of India. In regard to idol-worshipping, al-Biruni was uncertain of its exact origin because it was practised by uncultured and uneducated lower classes within many societies and communities. It was a memorial of particular prophets, sages, angels, and persons of the society whose memories were kept alive (Sachau, 2000).

According to al-Biruni, idolatry appeared in the Hindu society, starting with king Ambarisha, a powerful and great king who abandoned his kingship for devotion and worship; it was believed that he had conquered the whole world in a week (Madan, 1990). To immortalise the vision, he was instructed to make an idol of himself; hence, idolatry was introduced into the lives of the Hindus. Another view says that idolatry began with Narada, who is Brahmin's son, and he wanted to view the Lord. All he managed to see was a fiery human shape, and this was immortalised in the form of an idol (Sachau, 2000).

Al-Biruni briefly elaborated Hindu idols and their origin, how they evolved, and how they were venerated, such as the detailed measurements for each idol, materials used, procedures and rituals involved, and unique requisites required of idol makers. He also addresses *Aditya*, a famous idol of *Multan*, which was dedicated to the sun. He also mentioned *Cakrasvamin*, another Hindu idol venerated in Taneshar city and the wooden idol *Sarada* in Kashmir. Each caste has its idols. He reasoned that, like Greeks, idol-worshipping is practised by the uneducated Hindus. The educated classes realise that idols are no more than intermediaries, and they regard the idol-worshippers as being deluded from the true worship of God (Sachau, 2000).

### 4.4 The Caste System

Al-Biruni observes that the ancient kings spent time in their office to impose laws and regulations into different classes and castes. They prohibited these classes and castes from communicating with each other and differentiated their duties and activities based on their social position where no one can cross the limit of their class (Sachau, 2000). After mentioning the caste of ancient Persians, he addresses the Hindu caste system as *Varna* (colours) or *jataka* (births), which was established upon religious foundations. According to al-Biruni, the caste system belongs to the mother. This means that the child's caste is determined by the caste of the mother (Sachau, 2000).

There were four castes in the beginning, but other castes start to emerge after that. Among them, *Brahmins* are considered the best of humankind with the highest social status created from the head of the *Brahman*. In contrast, *Kshatriya* was created from God's shoulder and hands and are very near to *Brahmins* in social status. It is followed by *Vaisya*, who came from the thighs of Brahman, and *Sudra*, who was created from the feet of God (Sachau, 2000).

Concerning their occupations and duties, al-Biruni mentions that they had different occupations and duties according to their social position and were not allowed to live together in the same place. Al-Biruni discusses other castes briefly compared to *Brahmins*. According to Puranas, the *Kshatriyas* take their *yajnopavita* at the age of twelve, and they govern people, defend them, and offer fires. *Vaisya* is considered the farmers who practise agriculture and cultivate the land while the *Sudras* perform menial services, and they even work as servants to the *Brahmins* by taking care of their affairs and serving them (Sachau, 2000).

There are different opinions regarding *Moksha* or liberation. Some believe that *Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas* can attain liberation (Sachau, 2000), and both have the permission to read and learn *Veda*, but *Kshatriyas* do not teach it (Sachau, 2000). However, other groups view it differently. In *Gita*, *Vasudeva* said to *Arjuna*, "God distributes recompense without injustice and partiality" (Sachau, 2000, p. 104). Al-Biruni also mentions the quotation from *Gita* in support of equality of men in the eyes of God (Sachau, 2000).<sup>xiii</sup> Al-Biruni depicted an accurate picture of their beliefs and practices followed by each caste from the birth of a child onwards.

#### 4.5 Ethics and Laws

Al-Biruni discussed the laws, ethics, and professions of each caste. For example, each person has his shape of the tablecloth to identify his caste. They have their mode of living and daily routine. He mentioned that Brahmin divided their lifespan into four periods: childhood, marital life, preparation for liberation, and path to liberation where they have specific obligations and duties. Worship, almsgiving, piety, sacrifice, and personal cleanliness are essential and universal duties of Brahmins who have dietary and eating regulations. Any kind of pollution is a severe offence to them. They observe regular prayers which involve praises, glorifications and prostrations. The sun is the *qibla* of their prayers (Sachau, 2000).

Al-Biruni also states the nine commandments of the Hindu religion (Sachau, 2000), which lead man to ethical teachings. Giving alms as much as possible in a day is obligatory besides paying tax to the ruler from their earning income from crops and cattle. However, Brahmins are free from these taxes. Taxes to the government are compulsory for other classes,

including the portion of almsgiving and taxes. Any percentage and usury are strictly prohibited (Sachau, 2000). The life of a Brahmin can be summarised as worship-centred and ritualistic, from morning to night, from birth to death.

Hindu rules, guidelines, and religious laws were developed by divine sages called *Rishis*, who are not from the prophet, i.e., *Narayana*, who came only to eradicate the evils from the world (Sachau, 2000). The Hindu law of murder, theft, punishment of adultery, treatment for prisoners, and inheritance (Sachau, 2000) were discussed in detail in his book. Al-Biruni mentions that all kinds of killing were forbidden, but later, this rule was mandatory only for Brahmins. He also displays a list of what would be permitted to kill or not (Sachau, 2000). In regard to Hindu marriage and married life, al-Biruni states that they have very complex customs from marriage engagement to childbirth. Guardians normally arrange marriages. Marriages among relatives are strictly forbidden, whereas marriage to strangers is highly recommended. Marriage to four wives is allowed, although some consider the number of wives depends on castes. He also addresses the menstrual course, pregnancy, and childbirth (Sachau, 2000). A widow is not permitted to remarry; she can choose either to live the life of a miserable and badly treated widow or burned with the corpse of their dead husband. Widows of kings are always burned with their husbands (Kamaruzzaman, 1996).

#### **4.6 Rites and Rituals**

Al-Biruni describes the role of fire which is at the centre of Hindu rituals, sacrifice, and worship and is “the nearest road to God” (Sachau, 2000, p. 168). According to the Hindu faith, fire is a mediator between people and the Devas, which work by protecting from all evils and play a vital role in purification. He explains the Hindu rites and rituals but did not comment or criticise them. He offers a brief discussion on the events of the day and their celebrations. Al-Biruni states the sacrifice of *asvamedha* or horse sacrifice (Sachau, 2000).

In the case of pilgrimage, he mentions that Hindus have pilgrimage. Although it is not obligatory, many devotees perform it. Benares is like *Makkah* to Hindus for pilgrimage where they visit and venerate their religious rituals and functions. There are many holy ponds in which Hindus worship by bathing, as mentioned in *Vayu* and *Matsya Puranas* (Sachau, 2000). With regard to fasting, al-Biruni defines it as abstaining from food for a given period, and it has different modes and purposes. The eighth and eleventh days of every month are fasting days except in the case of the leap month (Sachau, 2000).

Al-Biruni addresses that the Hindus followed the tower-graves for burial celebration similar to the practice by the Zoroastrians, but *Narayana* instructed them to burn the dead body

by fire. The dead body is washed, embalmed, and shrouded and then burned with sandalwood. They believe that the flames carry the soul of their dead body to God. The remaining ashes and other remains are thrown into the running water or *Gangas*. Those who cannot burn the body would throw it into the river (Sachau, 2000).

#### **4.7 Festivals and Holidays**

Hinduism has many religious festivals as per the Hindu calendar throughout the year, depending on the movement of the sun and moon. Hence, the events are held at different times in different years. The causes and themes are also different. According to al-Biruni, some are held for admiration of their deities, some for commemorations of historical events, while others are related to seasons and celestial orders. From his account regarding Hindu festivals, *Vasudeva* is the most venerated among all Hindu deities. Several celebrations are held for him. *Sivaratri* festival is held for the deity *Mahadeva* where he is worshipped throughout the night (Sachau, 2000).

Al-Biruni also mentions that some festivals are held for Hindu female goddesses and are observed by females where they dress up, perform the rites, give alms, and entertain themselves with games. *Vasanta*, *Harbali*, *Dhruragriha*, *Gurana Batry*, and *Mahatry* are festivals for women. *Caitra-cashati* is for the Bhagavati where cleaning and giving of alms are the main events. *Mahanavami* is held for the sister of Mahadeva. *Gauri-tritiya* is held for the remembrance of *Gauri*, who is the wife of *Mahadeva*, while *Dibail* is for *Lakshmi*, the wife of *Vasudeva* where they light up lamps throughout the night (Sachau, 2000). The most significant festival among Hindus is *Vasanta* which is held during the night of the full moon of the vernal equinox in the veneration of Brahmins (Sachau, 2000).

#### **4.8 Philosophical Concept**

Hindu philosophy is one of the oldest philosophical thoughts and traditions influenced by Buddhist and Jain philosophies. It was originated in India and contained concepts about epistemology, metaphysics, morality, logic, language, ethics, or cosmology. Al-Biruni explains philosophical issues on created things, *intelligibilia*, and *sensibilia* and the connection between the soul and matter. He states that all created beings have unity and several forms like *Purasha*, which means man, shapeless, or absolute matter which is dead and abstracts with three potential powers: *sattava* attributes for angel, *rajas* attributes for man, and *tamas* attributes for animal and nature that have three powers, namely *Vyakta*, *abstract*, and *prakriti*. On the other hand, according to Hinduism, the universal existence of the world has five elements of matter:

heaven, wind, fire, water, and earth that are called *mahabhuta*. There are five senses, called *indriyani*, viz. hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, and touching (Sachau, 2000).

With regard to the soul, al-Biruni says that the soul is united with the body, which does not influence matter. The body has two natures of elements composed of male elements, viz. bones, veins, and sperm and female elements, viz. flesh, blood, and hair (Sachau, 2000). Regarding action, al-Biruni mentions the different views of Hindu beliefs. *Vishnu Purana* states that matter is only an agent of actions and the voluntary action is to belong to Vishnu, whereas the *Samkhaya* school of views are the source of action where matter depends on three primary forces: angelic, human, and animal, which are related to matter and not the soul (Sachau, 2000).

#### 4.9 Hindu Doctrines

According to al-Biruni, Hinduism flourished in the doctrine of metempsychosis, reincarnation, or the transmigration of souls that live in the bodies of different beings. This doctrine was developed in ancient philosophy and has existed in the greatest religions. This doctrine was developed from the Hindus perception of the nature of the soul that tries to unite with the higher absolute intelligence which can acquire knowledge. The soul has a nature like rain that originates from heaven (Dar, 1979). After it passes away, the soul migrates from one body to another through lower or higher birth, which depends on one's actions (Sachau, 2000).

Higher birth will bring into the world of rewards, while lower birth is a punishment (Kamaruzzaman, 1996). The situation depends on the deeds of this life. In regard to this discussion, he also addresses the classification of world or *loka* in Hinduism, which consists of the upper, the lower, and the middle. The upper is called *savarloka*, i.e., paradise; the lower is *nagaloka* or *naraloka*, which is hell; and the middle is called *madhyaloka* or the world of men. Man has to earn the upper world to receive his reward, while the lower world receives the punishment. On the other hand, the middle world is for those who receive reward and save them from hell but not enough to enter heaven. This retribution does not depend on deeds but intention (Sachau, 2000).

Al-Biruni discusses the Hindu concept of *Mokhsa*, release, or liberation, as the freedom from the cycle of birth and death (Sharma, 2000) or union with God. Liberation can be attained through real knowledge, which has three approaches for its acquisition: "by spontaneous inspiration, by inspiration through a long period, and by process of learning" (Kamaruzzaman, 1996, p. 146). Cupidity, wrath, and ignorance are the greatest enemies of man and the main barriers to attaining *Mokhsa*. He also quotes from *Patanjali*, where the path of liberation is

divided into three: the detachment from the worldly life, renunciation, and worship that God will help a man attained liberation (Sachau, 2000).

## **5.0 AN EVALUATION OF AL-BIRUNI'S WORK**

Al-Biruni conducted accurate fieldwork in India and investigated Hindu religious traditions in detail following a rigorous research methodology. His book, *Kitab al-Hind*, is a valuable source for Indian culture and civilisation. He was the first Muslim scholar who depicted a sound interpretation of the cultural history of Hindus. Many Muslim writers and scholars have written on the Hindu religion, philosophy, and culture. However, none of them was from the Muslim community on Hindu culture, civilisation, religion, philosophy, manner, and customs. Al-Biruni showed his mastery and great understanding in his study, where he was in close contact with the Hindu society for 14 years and learned the Sanskrit language from Hindu *pandits*.

Another critical factor in al-Biruni's work is his objectivity. He was direct and open-minded, with no hesitation to explore the truth. Sachau mentions that "He abhors half-truths, veiled words, and wavering action. Everywhere he comes forward as a champion of his conviction with the courage of a man" (Sachau, 2000, p. XIX). Through his study of Hindu culture and civilisation, he focuses on authentic, scientific, and objective information (Mir, 1979). His understanding, ideas, opinions, and scholarship were not confined to a certain circle but included scholars from the East and West. Hindus and Muslims have accepted his writings, theories, and treatises. Al-Biruni presents accurate concepts of Hindu doctrines that are unbiased and impartial. Nasr (1979) stated that al-Biruni does not only address the doctrines of India but offers metaphysical and philosophical ideas and interpretations.

Furthermore, al-Biruni developed an in-depth scientific methodology. He suggested five important factors to understand the religion and culture of the Hindus, which are the language (Sanskrit), principal religious treatises, religious attitudes, customs, and attitudes towards other religions. Moreover, he adopted a comparative approach where he compared Hinduism with Greek religions, Christianity and Judaism. He would make conclusions on the comparisons and place a platform for dialogue for those who would like to have a dialogue with the Hindus. He adopted a phenomenological approach that concerns the experiential side of the religion (Hadi, 2015). Therefore, al-Biruni's method can be classified as scientific from the perspective of empiricism which claims that knowledge should be achieved through experiments and observations. In contrast, rationalism argues that knowledge can be achieved through reason and logic before experience. According to empiricism, the primary source of knowledge is observing the world through our senses (Markie, 2004). Al-Biruni precisely

adopted this empirical approach as he developed the knowledge of Hinduism from his careful observation for a lengthy period.

Most scholars like Sachau, Chaterji, and Jeffery recognise al-Biruni's translations and comprehension of the scriptures. They said that his translation is accurate and careful in his study (Kamaruzzaman, 1996). Sharma (1983, p. 4) supported the accuracy of al-Biruni's translation and understanding as "the as we know it". He was always eager to attribute all ideas and quotations from their accurate sources.

Finally, al-Biruni's passion for knowledge has kept a legacy for contemporary scholars. Al-Biruni's desire and urge for learning brought him to India for knowledge. He had a scientific mind that leads him to an inclusive study of Indian culture and civilisation. His two qualities (Yarshater, 1976) are as follows: 1) his investigative curiosity and thirst for knowledge, which led him to conduct extensive research without any prejudice to the race, language, beliefs, authors, and of spirit, and 2) his objectivity which differentiated himself from his peers and colleagues. His masterpiece, *Kitab al-Hind*, is considered one of the authentic sources of Indian culture, philosophy, history, geography, astronomy, astrology, literature, language, science, art, and religion. Among the 80 chapters of *Kitab al-Hind*, almost 48 chapters were related to the science of India. The first 12 and last 17 chapters were related to Brahmanical religion and the philosophy of India.

## **6.0 CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, al-Biruni was a rare genius and exceptionally brilliant for his century. All times, he produced invaluable contributions to humanity. He earned his place among the world's greatest scholars and scientists. He was an unparalleled figure for his passion for research, observation, and discovery in sciences and social sciences. His book offers valuable and authentic information concerning the Brahmanical religion of India for anyone who wants to discuss Hinduism on religion, science, and literature based on their civilisation. In the study of Hindu culture and civilisation, he was academic, rational, and free from doubt. He verified reports and supported his accounts with observations which is the academic approach to modern knowledge. No history of India concerning mathematics, astronomy, astrology, geography, and religion is complete without recognising al-Biruni's immense contributions in these fields.

Based on the analysis of al-Biruni's approach, this study puts forward a few suggestions for contemporary Muslim researchers in the field of comparative religion. Firstly, scholars need to get authentic data from original sources. As discussed earlier, al-Biruni referred to the

original scripture of Hinduism to get the authentic information. Therefore, it is highly recommended for scholars to gather authentic data from the primary sources of religion. Getting authentic data is not only al-Biruni's approach, but it also follows the guidance of the Quran, which advises believers to verify information (Al-Quran, 49:6).

Secondly, researchers must practise fairness in the study of other religions. Scholars should avoid biases caused by their prejudice and emotion. For more justice, a conclusion should be made based on evidence. This principle is also in line with the Quranic teaching, which prescribes believers to be fair with other groups or sects due to their hatred (Al-Quran, 5:8). Furthermore, fairness is a prerequisite for a research outcome to be accepted by scholars of other faith.

Thirdly, contemporary scholars need to consider an empirical approach to studying other religions, which should be evidence-based. Along with rationalism, religion can be studied from an empirical perspective. This approach can be accomplished through applying an observation method which was the case for al-Biruni, where he made a conclusion based on years of observations on the practice of the people.

Finally, al-Biruni should be an inspiration for contemporary scholars for conducting an in-depth study on other religions. Scholars should be open-minded to study other religions based on facts. For this purpose, a new language should be learnt, if required. An extended period should be also devoted to carrying out rigorous research.

## REFERENCES

- Ahmed, N. (1979), Some glimpses of Al-Biruni as a geographer. In H. M. Said (Ed.), *Al-Biruni commemorative volume* (p. 141). The Time Press.
- Alatas, S. F. (2016, September 10). Against the grain: Al-Biruni the starting point for improving Hindu-Muslim relations in Malaysia. *The Edge Malaysia*.  
<https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/against-grain-al-biruni-starting-point-improving-hindu-muslim-relations-malaysia>
- Allana, G. (1979). Abu Rayhan Muhammad Ibn Ahmad al-Biruni (973 A.D. – 1048 A.D.): A restless genius in search knowledge. In H. M. Said (Ed.), *Al-Biruni commemorative volume* (pp. 149-157). The Time Press.
- Aziz, G. R. (1979). Al-Biruni and his academic conquests In H. M. Said (Ed.), *Al-Biruni commemorative volume* (pp. 158-159). The Time Press.
- Dar, B. A. (1979). Al-Biruni on Hindu religious thought. In H. M. Said (Ed.), *Al-Biruni commemorative volume* (pp. 336-343). The Time Press.

- Gafurov, B. (1974). Abu Rayhan Mohammad Ibn Ahmad Al-Biruni: A universal genius who lived in central Asia a thousand years ago. *In the Monthly UNESCO Courier, June 1974, 27<sup>th</sup> year*. UNESCO.
- Hadi, M. A. (2015). Biruni's contribution to the comparative study of religion. *VFAST Transactions on Islamic Research, 6*(1), 1-9.
- Kamaruzzaman, K. O. (1996). *Early Muslim scholarship in Religionswissenschaft: A case study of the works and contributions of Abu Rayhan Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Al-Biruni*. International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC).
- Kamaruzzaman, K. O. (2003). Al-Biruni: Father of comparative religion. *Intellectual Discourse, 11*(2), 113-138.
- Kamiar, M. (2009). *Brilliant Biruni: A life story of Abu Rayhan Mohammad Ibn Ahmad*. Scarecrow Press Inc.
- Madan, G. (1990). *India through the ages*. Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India.
- Markie, P. (2004). Rationalism vs empiricism. In E. D. Zalta (Ed.), *Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/rationalism-empiricism/>
- Mir, M. W. (1979). Al-Biruni's research methodology. In H. M. Said (Ed.), *Al-Biruni commemorative volume* (p. 227). The Time Press.
- Nasr, S. H. (1979). Al-Biruni as philosopher. In H. M. Said (Ed.), *Al-Biruni commemorative volume* (pp. 400-406). The Time Press.
- Sachau, E. C. (2000). *Al-Biruni's India: An account of the religion, philosophy, literature, geography, chronology, astronomy, customs, laws and astrology of India* (Vol. 1 & 2). Routledge.
- Sachau, E. C. (1879). *The chronology of ancient nations, (al-Athar all-bakiyah anil kurun albakiyah) or monuments or vestiges of generations of the past*. William H. Allen & Co.
- Saffie, S. N. (2012). *Methodology of Al-Biruni (973-1051) and Al-Faruqi (1921-1986) in the study of religions: A comparative study*. International Islamic University Malaysia.
- Said, H. M., & Khan, A. Z. (1990). *Al-Biruni: His times, life and works*. Renaissance Publishing House.
- Said, H. M. (1979). Concluding address. In H. M. Said (Ed.), *Al-Biruni commemorative volume* (pp. 136-138). The Time Press.

- Saleem Khan, M. A. (2001). *Al-Biruni's discovery of India: An interpretative study*. Academic Books.
- Shamsi, F. A. (1979). Abu Al-Raihn Muhammad Ibn Ahmad Al-Biyruni 362/973 CA. 443/1051. In H. M. Said (Ed.), *Al-Biruni commemorative volume* (pp. 260-288). The Time Press.
- Sharma, A. (2000). *Classical Hindu thought: An introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Sharma, A. (1983). *Studies in Alberuni's India*. Otto Hassassowitz.
- Syed, M. H. (2009). *Biographical encyclopedia of Islam* (Vol. 3). Anmol Publications PVT. Ltd.
- Yarshater, E. (1976). *Biruni symposium*. Iran Center, Columbia University.
- Yousuf, A. F. (2000). A socio-cultural, religious analysis of Al-Biruni's contributions towards the study of Sciences, Mathematics and Philosophy. *IJUM Engineering Journal*, 1(2), 45-51.

---

<sup>i</sup> He was a notable mathematician and astronomer of his time. He was the guardian as well as a teacher of Al-Biruni (Shamsi, 1979).

<sup>ii</sup> The word 'Pandit' comes from Sanskrit and is synonymous with "Purohita". It refers to a Hindu teacher, scholar or master who has enough knowledge about the four Vedas, Hindu rituals, philosophy, laws and religion.

<sup>iii</sup> Zoroastrianism is the oldest, ancient and pre-Islamic religion contains both monotheistic and dualistic features, founded by the Prophet Zoroaster in Persia present day Iran in the 6th century BCE. *Ahura Mahda* is the supreme being of this religion.

<sup>iv</sup> They were existed before the time of Zoroaster. But in modern time they are the followers of Zoroastrianism and *Shamsiyya* or sun worshippers' sect (Sachau, 1879).

<sup>v</sup> Manichaeism is a dualistic religious movement in Persia in the 3rd century AD founded by Iranian Prophet Mani (c. 216-274 C.E.), who was known as the "Apostle of Light" and supreme "Illuminator". He claimed to be the final prophet for all religions and believed that his views were the most advanced and perfection of all religious wisdom.

<sup>vi</sup> Al-Biruni only discussed their eras and geology of their kings and their deep interest in astrology as well as their festivals, rituals and customs commended by God and some are held in commemorations of the deeds of their ancestors (Kamaruzzaman, 1996).

<sup>vii</sup> They are influenced by Zoroaster's teachings. They have their own rituals and festivals and memorial days.

<sup>viii</sup> Sabians are the people of the books mentioned in the Holy Quran who were the followers of the Prophet Daud and followed the revealed book Zabur.

<sup>ix</sup> Samaritans are an ethno-religious group of Semitic inhabitants closely related to Judaism. Al-Biruni calls them "al-Lamasasiyya" who has their own Torah. Their doctrines are syncreticism of Zoroastrianism and Judaism. (Kamaruzzaman, 1996, p. 207)

<sup>x</sup> Vyasa is respected and admired figures from Hindus sage and *Rishi* who classified Hindus scripture *Veda* into four parts. Krishna *Dvaipayana* is holding the present *Vyasa* title that is regarded as an incarnation of the God *Vishnu*.

<sup>xi</sup> *Murti puja* is a Sanskrit term where *murti* means an image, statue or idol of a god or goddess and *puja* means worship or a ritual offering to honour a god or goddess. Generally, *murti puja* denotes that worshipping any physical objects as a representation of god to show honour and love towards god.

<sup>xii</sup> Vasudeva says, "In the judgment of the intelligent man, Brahman and the Candala are equal, the friend and the foe, the faithful and the deceitful, nay even the serpent and the weasel. If to the eyes of intelligent all things are equal, to ignorance they appear as separated and different".