



2

Hindu Traditions

Chapter Overview

The word “Hinduism” originally referred to the religion of the people of India who did not belong to other known religions, such as Christianity, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, or Sikhism. There are between 950 million and 1 billion Hindus in India and around the world.

One theory on the origin of Hinduism is that it grew from a mixture of Indo-European (see Chapter 1) and Harappan (an Indigenous culture) religious elements. Harappan culture flourished along the Indus River circa 2750 BCE.

The holy scriptures of the Indo-European settlers of India are called the four Vedas. Vedic religion shares some features with the Greek and Roman religions, but also has unique elements. The Vedas were composed in Sanskrit. A subsection of the Vedic literature is the *Upanishads*, wherein the ideas of *karma* and *samsara* are introduced.

In addition to the Vedic literature, there are the two epics entitled the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The mid-portion of the latter is called the *Bhagavad Gita*. Both of these classics teach about religion. According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, there are three ways to obtain liberation from the cycle of reincarnation (the goal of the religion): (1) the way of action (*karma yoga*), (2) the way of knowledge (*jnana yoga*), and (3) the way of devotion (*bhakti yoga*).

Hinduism has many popular gods and goddesses like the elephant-headed Ganesha or Sarasvati, the goddess of learning. Other popular deities are Vishnu and his *avatars*, and Shiva and his wife Parvati (who both have several manifestations).

In a cosmic cycle lasting hundreds of millions of years, a Hindu tries to work out his or her liberation, particularly while in human form, through caste regulations and moving through the four stages of life: student, householder, forest-dweller, and ascetic. Further, Hinduism produced six major schools of philosophy: Samkhya, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Mimamsa, Yoga, and Vedanta. Each of these contributed to the wide diversity of religious thought aiding one’s quest for liberation. There also developed a large body of texts called *tantras*, which explain many ritual practices leading to liberation. The devotional movement (*bhakti*) became particularly important in South India and greatly influenced various arts nationwide, while the devotional movement in North India acquired a different focus of devotion and sometimes developed a synergistic relationship between Hindus and Muslims through the *Sant* tradition.

Hinduism is not only found in India. In classic times it spread to Southeast Asian countries, such as Thailand and Cambodia as well as Indonesia, and in the modern setting it is found in many countries around the world. We even find Hindu temples in Canada, the United States, and elsewhere in

the West with their rich symbolism of *nagas*, *lingas*, and many deities. The temples outside of India continue the tradition of following the religious calendar with their many festivals, such as Holi and Divali, to name only two, and the life cycle rites. The Hindu tradition continues to be observed around the globe through domestic worship and the use of healing practices such as Ayurvedic medicine. Women continue to participate in rituals that reflect their life cycles even though their roles have changed through the centuries.

The interface between India and the West in the early modern period inspired a number of important reforms and revivals in Hinduism, notably the Brahmo Samaj, Arya Samaj, and Ramakrishna movements. Some of these became very popular in India and even spread abroad. There are more recent developments within the tradition that address current concerns such as the Hindu tradition's adaptation to various contexts around the globe, the practitioners' resettlement, and construction of temples outside India. Additionally, environmental concerns and modern reproductive technology are areas in which Hindu practitioners are engaging. With the strength of their traditions, their religious institutions, their scriptures, and their religious culture, Hindus have been successfully facing challenges and adapting to new situations for eons. This is not abating as they move into the twenty-first century.

Learning Objectives

In this chapter, you are encouraged to

- understand the origins of the term “Hinduism” and its use as an umbrella concept for this religious tradition;
- trace the historical development of the Hindu tradition from the Harrapan culture, the introduction of the Indo-Europeans, and the foundational place of the Vedas;
- learn about the classical period of Hinduism and its core features: the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the three paths to liberation, various deities, the Hindu “trinity,” the concept of time, the Laws of Manu and the caste system, four stages of life, and attitudes toward women;
- identify the key schools of Hindu thought and *bhakti* practices as well as how Indian colonialism, the struggle for independence, and the creation of a secular state have affected Hindu thought and practice in modernity;
- outline the various rituals (calendrical and lifecycle) within Hindu temples and homes as well as the importance of the performing arts;
- identify recent developments within the Hindu tradition in response to changes in technology that affect globalization, diaspora communities, the environment, and reproduction.

Key Terms

Atman The individual self. (p. 38)

avatara A “descent” or incarnation of a deity in earthly form. (p. 45)

Ayurveda A system of traditional medicine originally taught by sages. (p. 78)

Bhagavad Gita A section of the *Mahabharata* epic recounting a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna explaining the nature of god and the human soul. (p. 42)

bhakti Loving devotion to a deity who enters the world for the benefit of humans. (p. 60)

Brahman The world-soul, sometimes understood in impersonal terms. (p. 38)

brahmin A member of the priestly class. (p. 51)

dharma Religious and social duty, including righteousness and faith. (p. 29)

karma Action, good and bad, as it is believed to determine the quality of rebirth in future lives. (p. 37)

kshatriya A member of the warrior class in ancient Hindu society. (p. 51)

Mahabharata A very long epic poem; the mid-section is the *Bhagavad Gita*. (p. 35)

mantra An expression of one or more syllables, used as a focus for concentration in devotion. (p. 29)

moksha Liberation from the cycle of birth and death; one of the three classical aims of life. (p. 37)

om A syllable chanted in meditation, representing ultimate reality, the universe, or the relationship of the devotee to the deity. (p. 89)

puja Ritual household worship of the deity. (p. 77)

Puranas “Old tales”; stories about deities important after the Vedic period. (p. 41)

Ramayana An epic recounting the life of Lord Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu. (p. 41)

samsara The continuing cycle of rebirths. (p. 37)

shruti “That which is heard”; the sacred literature of the Vedic and Upanishadic period, recited orally for centuries before being written down. (p. 33)

shudra A member of the lowest of the four major classes of Hindu society. (p. 51)

smrti “That which is remembered”; a body of ancient Hindu literature including the epics, as well as law codes. (p. 41)

tantra An esoteric school outside the Vedic and brahmanical tradition using controversial ritual practices. (p. 57)

trimurti The three-form god including Brahman, Vishnu, and Shiva. (p. 49)

Upanishads Philosophical texts on the theory of Vedic ritual and the nature of knowledge. (p. 37)

vaishya A member of the third of the four major social classes of Hindu society. (p. 51)

Vedas The four collections of hymns and ritual texts that constitute the oldest and most highly respected Hindu sacred literature. (p. 33)

yoga A practice and discipline that may involve philosophy, concentration, and physical exercises.

Study Questions

See below for answers with page references.

1. What is the origin of the word “Hinduism” and how does this equate to the Sanskrit word “dharma”?
2. What was the standard view in the early twentieth century on the origins of Hinduism?
3. What are the titles of the different Vedas, their four sections, and an example of an *Upanishad* associated with each of the first three Vedas?
4. What four important concepts are introduced in the *Upanishads* and what do they mean?
5. What is the most famous section of the *Mahabharata* called and what does it teach?
6. What are the three Hindu ways to liberation?
7. What are the four stages of life and what is the major activity involved in each?
8. Who was Shankara and what ideas did he contribute to the Indian spiritual dialogue?
9. What is tantra?
10. How is South Indian devotion different from North Indian devotion?
11. Who are the three gods of the Hindu *trimurti* and why is labelling the Hindu traditions “polytheistic” problematic?
12. How did the Arya Samaj movement reform aspects of the Hindu tradition? What was this in response to?
13. What is a *naga*? Where is its image found?
14. What are the key elements of a Hindu funeral rite? How are funerals related to a state of pollution?
15. How do the Vedas support some of the goals of artificial insemination? Overall, are Hindu texts sources for guidance in the use of modern reproductive technologies?

Reflection Questions

1. The *Upanishads* and the *Aranyakas* were written in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, heralding a change in how ritual sacrifices were conceptualized, shifting from a tradition of external sacrifice to appease the gods, to one of internal sacrifice to undertake philosophical inquiries and self-reflection. How did the context of seventh and sixth century BCE create the conditions for such a shift in thinking?
2. Read the document, “How Many Gods Are There?” (p. 39) and consider the ongoing philosophical debate about the nature of Brahman (pp. 38–39). How are the two related? What is being debated?
3. In the *Puranas*, Vishnu is reincarnated as several well-known figures. In some texts, his ninth incarnation is Krishna, while in others it is the Buddha. What is the significance of having the founder of a different religious tradition portrayed as an incarnation of Vishnu?
4. “Mahatma” Gandhi promoted social reform and wanted to eradicate oppression. He disapproved of the caste system in India and welcomed outcastes, such as the Dalits. Why do you think the Dalits rejected the name “Harijan” (“children of God”) that Gandhi had bestowed on them?
5. What holds together the Hindu tradition when even a celebration such as Navaratri means vastly different things to different Hindu communities and is celebrated in different ways? For example, in Tamilnadu the festival is for women and involves dolls representing various goddesses, whereas in Ramnagar people re-enact the *Ramayana* story.

Research Paper Topics

1. Three theories are posed in your textbook for how and why the Indo-Europeans came to inhabit the Indus Valley region, none of which are conclusive. How are political, racial, religious, or nationalist agendas reflected in some of these theories?
2. Trade routes provide avenues for trading more than just commercial merchandise—they also allow for the transmission of cultural and religious ideas and practices. Which countries in Southeast Asia embraced the Hindu *Ramayana* and how do they continue to express this tale today?
3. The Hindu concept of the four life stages has transformed through time. Explore the aims of this concept, how the participants and approaches have altered in response to a change in context, and how it may alter in the future.
4. Explore Patanjali’s concept of the eight limbs of the Yoga school of Hinduism. How does the notion of “yoke” fit within North American understandings of yoga?
5. Compare and contrast the various understandings of Tantra put forth by the Shaiva, Shakta, and Vaishnava communities.

6. The first World Parliament of Religions was held in 1893 in Chicago. Vivekananda was one of the Hindu representatives to attend. What form of the Hindu tradition did he represent and what aspects would have appealed to a North American audience and why?
7. What is Ayurvedic medicine? What principals ground and guide its use? How is it used today, in India and North America?
8. The feminine principal and women have played a powerful role in the Hindu tradition, yet currently, they frequently lack authority. What is the difference between power and authority? How has this difference developed?
9. Diaspora communities are those that live outside the original homeland. Select three case studies of temples in North America and research temples in India. What are the continuities and adaptations between Hindu temples in India and those in North America?
10. Research the Hindu environmental group Bishnoi. What is their mission statement and how do they use Vedic principles to further their cause? Are there parallels in North America with other Hindu eco-activists?

Additional Resources

Audio-Visual

Masala, 1992, Dir. *Srinivas Krishna*. 106 minutes. Divani Films and Téléfilm Canada.

Hinduism: Faith, Festivals, and Rituals. Films for the Humanities and Sciences. 50 minutes.

Print

Doniger, Wendy. 2014. *On Hinduism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kurien, Prema A. 2007. *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Pintchman, Tracy, ed. 2007. *Women's Lives, Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Internet

Vivekananda, Vedanta network: www.vivekananda.org

M.K. Gandhi Institute for Non-Violence: www.gandhiinstitute.org

Ramakrishna, Vivekandanda Center of New York: www.ramakrishna.org

ISKON, <http://iskcon.org/>

Study Questions: Answer Key

1. “Hinduism” derives from the word “Sind,” the name of the region of the river Sindhu. The British used the word to mean the religion of any Indian who was not a Muslim, Christian, Parsi, or Jew. There is no word for “religion” in Sanskrit, but some consider “dharma” to come close. “Dharma” for Hindus means righteousness, justice, faith, duty, and religious and social obligations. It does not cover all the things that are sacred for Hindus. (p. 29)
2. The standard view was that Hinduism originated from a fusion of the Indigenous religions of the Indus Valley (or Harappan culture) with the faith of the Indo-Europeans who migrated to India between 1750–1500 BCE. (pp. 31–32)
3. The four Vedas are the *Rig Veda*, the *Sama Veda*, the *Yajur Veda*, and the *Atharva Veda*. Each Veda has four sections: the *Sambitas* (hymns), *Brahmanas* (rituals), *Aranyakas* (forest compositions), and *Upanishads* (“sitting near” philosophical works). The *Chandogya Upanishad* is connected to the *Sama Veda* and the *Brihadaranyaka* is connected with the *Yajur Veda*. (p. 34)
4. The first of the four concepts is *karma*. Karma means “action” and is connected with the notion of rewards and punishments arising from various actions. The second is *samsara*, which is the continuing cycle of death and rebirth. The third concept is Atman, which is the Sanskrit word for the human soul. Finally, Brahman is the name for the Supreme Being. (pp. 37–39)
5. The mid-section of the *Mahabharata* is called the *Bhagavad Gita*. Taking place at the outset of a great war through a discussion between Krishna and the warrior Arjuna, the *Bhagavad Gita* teaches about loving devotion to Krishna, selfless action, the nature of God and the human soul, how to reach liberation, how to attain righteousness, and how to act justly in war. (pp. 42–43)
6. According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, liberation from the cycle of birth and death can occur through (1) the way of action, (2) the way of knowledge, and (3) the way of devotion. The way of action involves unselfish duty without fear of punishment or hope of reward. The way of knowledge involves gaining scriptural knowledge through which one may then gain transforming wisdom that also destroy one’s past karma. The way of devotion involves surrendering to Krishna, after which all sins will be forgiven. (pp. 42–44)
7. The four stages of life are student, householder, forest dweller, and ascetic. In the student stage, one should be celibate and concentrate on learning. In the householder stage one repays one’s debt to society, one’s forefathers, and the gods by marrying and supporting a family. The forest-dweller stage should begin when a man’s children have become householders. Then, he and his wife should retire to the forest and be devoted to reciting the Vedas. Finally, in the ascetic and final stage the elderly man renounces all material things and seeks liberation. (p. 52)
8. Shankara lived around 800 CE and was an interpreter of the Vedanta philosophy. He held that reality is ultimately non-dual (i.e., all is Brahman), that Atman is identical to Brahman, that our not knowing this is due to illusion and ignorance, and that liberation is possible in this lifetime. (p. 54)

9. Tantra, meaning “to stretch” or “to expand,” is a body of ritual practices and the texts that interpret these practices. It developed around the fifth century, perhaps from indigenous cultural influences. Some Hindu movements incorporated tantric elements. Tantra has its own yoga, called *kundalini*, which is centred on *shakti* and is believed to lead to liberation. The main divisions are the left-handed and right-handed schools. (p. 57)
10. South India produced the 63 *Nayanmars* (devotees of Shiva) and the 12 *Alvars* (devotees of Vishnu) of devotional Hinduism. These masters wandered from temple to temple singing the praises of their chosen god. The North, under Islamic rule, produced an innovative setting for the arts. This influenced the devotional movement in the North where rituals tended to focus on Rama or Krishna. Also this environment produced the Sant, poet-singers who sang about the Brahman without attributes. (pp. 59–65)
11. The three gods are Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver), and Shiva (the destroyer). Labelling the Hindu tradition polytheistic is problematic because Hindus do not give equal importance to all three deities, as a matter of fact, Brahma is not worshiped as a supreme deity as he is considered to only be the agent of the supreme deity who created him. Followers of Vishnu or Shiva understand that creation, preservation, and destruction are three parts of one integrated process. The three gods are acting together in a constant cycle of creation, preservation, and destruction rather than as separate entities. (p. 49)
12. The Arya Samaj was founded by Dayananda Sarasvati. He thought that the Vedas were not at odds with science or reason and that salvation was not through renunciation or appeals to a personal saviour god but rather through a life of active human service to other human beings. His thinking was in response to the ideas of modernity. (pp. 66–67)
13. A *naga* is a serpent whose image is found in engravings around trees and in the iconography of Shiva or Vishnu. (p. 74)
14. Except in the deaths of infants or ascetics, Hindu practitioners are cremated when they die. The rites are usually performed by the eldest son where water and balls of rice are offered to the ghost of the deceased in order to quench their thirst and offer sustenance for their journey. On every new-moon, offerings of sesame seeds and water are made to the soul of the departed. The family is considered to be in a state of pollution during a period of time (12 weeks to one year) after the death. An “adoption of auspiciousness” ceremony ends the state of pollution and any remaining rites and constraints are performed on the first anniversary of the death. (pp 85–86)
15. Traditional teachings emphasize reproduction as a duty. There are many stories that involve supernatural means of conception and childbirth that can help support the concept of technologically assisted conception for a couple who is experiencing difficulties. However, religious texts are not authoritative when it comes to the use of reproductive technologies as there are texts maintaining the life of an unborn fetus, as sonograms and amniocentesis are used to determine the sex of the fetus and abortion is legal and accepted. (p. 96)