

Early History of Hinduism

Hinduism is derived from the Persian word for Indian. It differs from Christianity and other Western religions in that it does not have a single founder, a specific theological system, a single system of morality, or religious organization. Its roots are traceable to the Indus valley civilization circa 4000 to 2200 B.C.E. Its development was influenced by many invasions over thousands of years. One of the major influences occurred when Indo-Europeans invaded Northern India (circa 1500 to 500 B.C.E.) from the steppes of Russia and Central Asia. They brought with them their religion of Vedism. These beliefs became mixed with the indigenous Indian beliefs.

During the first few centuries of the Common Era, many sects were created, each dedicated to a specific deity. Typical among these were the goddesses Shakti and Lakshmi, and the gods Skanda and Surya. Hinduism grew to become the world's third largest religion, claiming about 13% of the world's population. It is the dominant religion in India, and it is also widespread in Malaysia and Sri Lanka. Hindus totaled 157,015 in Canada's 1991 census.

Sacred Texts

The most important of all Hindu texts is the Bhagavad Gita which is a poem describing a conversation between a warrior Arjuna and his charioteer Krishna. The Vedas survive in the Rigveda, a collection of over a thousand hymns. Other texts include the Brahmins, the Sutras, and the Aranyakas.

Hindu Beliefs and Practices

- The monotheistic principle that all reality is a unity and the entire universe is one divine entity is at the heart of Hinduism. Deity is simultaneously visualized as a triad:
- Brahma: the Creator who is continuing to create new realities
- Vishnu: the Preserver, who preserves these new creations. Whenever dharma (eternal order, righteousness, religion, law and duty) is threatened, Vishnu travels from heaven to earth in one of ten incarnations.
- Shiva: the Destroyer is at times compassionate, erotic and destructive.

Simultaneously, many hundreds of Hindu gods and goddesses are worshipped as various aspects of that unity. Depending upon one's view, Hinduism can be looked upon as a

monotheistic, trinitarian, or polytheistic religion.

The Rigveda defines five social castes. According to this system, one's caste determines the range of jobs or professions from which one can choose. Marriages normally take place within the same caste. In decreasing status, the five castes are:

- Brahmins (the priests and academics)
- Kshatriyas (the military),
- Vaishyas (farmers and merchants)
- Sudras (peasants and servants).
- Harijan (the outcasts, commonly known as the untouchables)

Although the caste system was abolished by law in 1949, it remains a significant force throughout India, particularly in the south. Humans are perceived as being trapped in samsara, a meaningless cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth. Karma is the accumulated sum of one's good and bad deeds. Karma determines how you will live your next life. Through pure acts, thoughts and devotion, one can be reborn at a higher level. Eventually, one can escape samsara and achieve enlightenment. Bad deeds can cause a person to be reborn at a lower level, or even as an animal. The unequal distribution of wealth, prestige, and suffering are thus seen as natural consequences of one's previous acts – both in this life and in previous lives.

Meditation is often practiced, with Yoga being the most common. Other activities include daily devotions, public rituals, and puja a ceremonial dinner for a god.

Hindu Sects and Denominations

Modern Hinduism is divided into four major devotional sects: Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism, and Smartism. Vaishnavism and Shaivism are generally regarded as monotheistic sects: each believes in one supreme God, who is identified as Vishnu in Vaishnavism and Shiva in Shaivism.

Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism are the most prevalent Hindu sects; among these, Vaishnavism is the largest. The devotional sects do not generally regard other sects as rivals, and each sect freely borrows beliefs and practices from others.

In addition to the four theistic sects, there are six schools of Vedantic philosophy within Hinduism. These schools tend to emphasize Ultimate Reality as Brahman, the great "Self" who must be realized to attain liberation.

The six Astika (orthodox; accepting the authority of the Vedas) schools of Hindu philosophy are Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Yoga, Purva Mimamsa (also called just 'Mimamsa'), and Uttara Mimamsa (also called 'Vedanta'). Of these six, three continue to be influential in Hinduism: Purva Mimamsa, Yoga, and Vedanta.

Holy Days in Hinduism

1. Maha Shivarathri, is a festival dedicated to Shiva in mid-February
2. Holi, a spring festival, is held in early March. It is a carnival-like celebration featuring bright colors, bonfires, and pilgrimages. It is dedicated to Krishna or Kama, the God of Pleasure.
3. Ramnavami, the anniversary of the birth of Rama, is held in late March. Rama was an incarnation of Vishnu.
4. Wesak, the birthday of the Buddha is celebrated in early April by Buddhists in the Mahayana tradition.
5. Dusserah, a festival celebrating the triumph of good over evil is in early November. It is derived from early Hindu stories of struggles between a Goddess and a demon.
6. Diwali, the Indian Festival of Lights is held in mid November. It is mainly dedicated to Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth. It is the Hindu New Year.