**Chapter 2: Hindu Traditions**

**Student Study Guide**

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.

Hinduism is remarkably diverse. It is deemed as a large banyan tree or a Venn diagram. An interaction can be seen between local practices as well as earlier Hindu traditions. However, there are various commonalities that make all these diverse beliefs fall under one large religious system.

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 *avataras,* and Shiva and his wife Parvati, who both have several manifestations. Shiva is famous for his dance and is called the king of dance or Nataraja, and symbolizes command of both the universal life force and peace within.

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. It is of great importance that one experience enlightenment, which is the only way to liberation from the continuous circle of reincarnation. 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. People who were going to assume power had to perform rituals from these texts. Its sources include the Brahmanic view (from Vedas and Upanishads), the Atharva Veda and rituals from northern India. 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, chakras,* the lotus flower 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. There is behavioral change as well. More and more Hindus are distancing themselves from arranged marriage. 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.

Just like any other religion, Hinduism is facing many challenges as well. There are internal challenges like the caste system and gender inequality. They demand dowries and are hard on the government to give them quotas in education and other fields. Many Hindus today are afraid of western values taking over traditional ones and are reminded of the golden age of Hinduism that should be restored. For political gains, long gone Muslim rule in northern India and the colonial era is used to divide religious communities and take away the protected status of minorities. This adds fuel to the fire when the West fails to paint an accurate picture of Hinduism. For example, images of an exotic spiritual experience are rampant and as rituals like Yoga are considered a mechanism to cope with stress.

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;
* learn that Hinduism is extremely diverse yet connected;
* 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 in different parts of India 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, the importance of objects like the *nagas, chakras*, and the lotus flower 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.
* understand the challenges that Hindus face today in terms of internal challenges, identity and representation in the world as well as their attitude towards different religious communities and minorities.

Key Terms

*acharya* The leading teacher of a sect or the head of a monastery. (pp. 73-74)

*advaita*Shankara’s school of philosophy, which holds that there is only one ultimate reality, the indescribable Brahman, with which the Atman or self is identical. (p. 108)

Alvars Twelve devotional poets whose works are central to the South Indian bhakti tradition. (p. 58)

*artha* Prosperity; one of the three classical aims in life. (p. 56)

*ashramas*Four stages in the life of an upper-class male: student, householder, forest-dweller, and ascetic. (p. 56)

**Atman** The individual self. (p. 40)

***avatara*** A “descent” or incarnation of a deity in earthly form. (p. 49)

**Ayurveda** A system of traditional medicine originally taught by sages. (p. 84)

Brahma The creator god; not to be confused with Brahman. (p. 40)

Brahmanas Texts regarding ritual. (p. 36)

***Bhagavad Gita*** A section of the Mahabharata epic recounting a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna explaining the nature of god and the human soul. (pp. 44-45)

**bhakti** Loving devotion to a deity who enters the world for the benefit of humans. (p. 108)

**Brahman** The world-soul, sometimes understood in impersonal terms. (p. 40)

**brahmin** A member of the priestly class. (p. 54)

*darshana* Seeing and being seen by the deity (in the temple) or by a holy teacher; the experience of beholding with faith. (p. 103)

Deepavali (Diwali) Festival of light in October–November, when lamps are lit. (p. 85)

**dharma** Religious and social duty, including righteousness and faith. (p. 33)

guru A spiritual teacher. (p. 74)

Holi Spring festival celebrated by throwing brightly colored water or powder. (p. 85)

**karma** Action, good and bad, as it is believed to determine the quality of rebirth in future lives. (p. 40)

**kshatriya** A member of the warrior class in ancient Hindu society. (p. 54)

*jnana*Knowledge; along with action and devotion, one of the three avenues to liberation explained in the Bhagavad Gita. (p. 61)

*kama* Sensual (not merely sexual) pleasure; one of the three classical aims of life. (p. 79)

*linga*A conical or cylindrical stone column, symbolizing the creative energies of the god Shiva. (p. 50)

***Mahabharata*** A very long epic poem; the mid-section is the Bhagavad Gita. (pp. 44-45)

**mantra** An expression of one or more syllables, used as a focus for concentration in devotion. (p. 31)

***moksha*** Liberation from the cycle of birth and death; one of the three classical aims of life. (p. 40)

*murti*A form or personification in which divinity is manifested. (p. 74)

Navaratri “Nine nights”; an autumn festival honoring the Goddess. (pp. 85-86)

***om***A syllable chanted in meditation, representing ultimate reality, the universe, or the relationship of the devotee to the deity. (p. 95)

*prasada*A gift from the deity, especially food that has been presented to the god’s temple image, blessed, and returned to the devotee. (p. 75)

**puja** Ritual household worship of the deity. (p. 83)

***Puranas*** “Old tales”; stories about deities important after the Vedic period. (p. 48)

***Ramayana*** An epic recounting the life of Lord Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu. (p. 44)

*rishi* A seer; the composers of the ancient Vedic hymns are considered rishis. (p. 31)

*sadhu* A holy man. (p. 73)

*samnyasin* A religious ascetic; one who has reached the last of the four stages of life for a Hindu male; see *ashramas.* (p. 108)

***samsara*** The continuing cycle of rebirths. (p. 40)

*sati*The self-sacrifice of a widow who throws herself onto her deceased husband’s funeral pyre. (p. 71)

***shruti*** “That which is heard”; the sacred literature of the Vedic and Upanishadic period, recited orally for centuries before being written down. (p. 36)

**shudra** A member of the lowest of the four major classes of Hindu society. (p. 54)

***smrti*** “That which is remembered”; a body of ancient Hindu literature including the epics, as well as law codes. (p. 42)

*tilaka* A dot or mark on the forehead made with colored powder. (p. 83)

**tantra** An esoteric school outside the Vedic and brahmanical tradition using controversial ritual practices. (pp. 60-61)

**Trimurti** The three-form god including Brahman, Vishnu, and Shiva. (p. 53)

**Upanishads** Philosophical texts on the theory of Vedic ritual and the nature of knowledge. (pp. 39-40)

*upanayana*The initiation of a young brahmin boy into ritual responsibility, in which he is given a cord to wear over his left shoulder and a mantra to recite and is sent to beg for food for the day. (p. 88)

**vaishya** A member of the third of the four major social classes of Hindu society. (p. 54)

**Vedas** The four collections of hymns and ritual texts that constitute the oldest and most highly respected Hindu sacred literature. (pp. 36-39)

**yoga** A practice and discipline that may involve philosophy, concentration, and physical exercises. (pp. 59-60)

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. Is Hinduism a diverse or unified tradition?
3. What was the standard view in the early twentieth century on the origins of Hinduism?
4. 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?
5. What four important concepts are introduced in the *Upanishads* and what do they mean?
6. What is the most famous section of the *Mahabharata* called and what does it teach?
7. What are the three Hindu ways to liberation?
8. What are the four stages of life and what is the major activity involved in each?
9. Who was Shankara and what ideas did he contribute to the Indian spiritual dialogue?
10. What is tantra?
11. How is South Indian devotion different from North Indian devotion?
12. Who are the three gods of the Hindu *trimurti* and why is labelling the Hindu traditions “polytheistic” problematic?
13. Who is Nataraja and what do his four hands represent?
14. List some of the sources for Tantra.
15. How did the Arya Samaj movement reform aspects of the Hindu tradition? What was this in response to?
16. What is a *naga, chakra* andthe lotus flower? Where are their images found?
17. What are the key elements of a Hindu funeral right? How are funerals related to a state of pollution?
18. 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?
19. What are some of the challenges Hindus all over the world face regarding their relationship to other religious communities? How do they keep their identity intact and how are they represented in the world?

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. 31)
2. Hinduism is an extremely diverse religious tradition. There are different manifestations and names of the same god in different regions. There are local deities as well that sometimes hold more importance than the popular deities in general. Every region and community has their own gods and goddesses, however, they also consider popular deities their gods. Local practices and mainstream religious traditions are often practiced together. So, in this way they all fall under one big umbrella, or as Hindus call it, a banyan tree or a Venn diagram. The social hierarchy, religious festivals and rituals, caste system and common texts are some of the things that connect widely distributed communities and regions. (p. 33)
3. 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. 33)
4. The four Vedas are the *Rig Veda*, the *Sama Veda*, the *Yajur Veda*, and the *Atharva Veda*. Each Veda has four sections: the *Samhitas* (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. 36)
5. 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. (p. 40)
6. 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. 44-45)
7. 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. 45-47)
8. 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. 56)
9. 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. (pp. 57-58)
10. 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 centered on *shakti* and is believed to led to liberation. The main divisions are the left-handed and right-handed schools. (pp. 60-61)
11. South India produced the 63 *Nayanmars* (devotees of Shiva) and the 12 *Alvars* (devotees of Vish-nu) 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. 64-68)
12. The three gods are Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver), and Shiva (the destroyer). La-belling 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. 53)
13. Nataraja the king of dance is a representation of Shiva the cosmic dancer. He dances with fierceness representing his domination over all energy but also dances gently to represent peace within. He has four hands. One of his right hands has a hourglass-shaped drum representing sound that is spoken or godly commandments. The other right hand represents him giving the gift of fearlessness to his followers. One of his left hands is holding a flame representing annihilation that will occur at the end of time while the other points to his left foot which represents his followers’ salvation and liberation. (pp. 50-51)
14. Tantra’s concepts and practices are both inclusive and exclusive of mainstream Hindu religious tradition consisting of Vedas, epics and Puranas. Its sources include the Brahmanic philosophy, the Atharva Veda and rituals that emerged from northern India. The Brahmanic philosophy sprung from Vedas, Upanishads and Puranas. The Atharva Veda focuses on magic and ways to dominance while rituals that arose in northern India revere goddesses and yoginis. These rituals were followed by people in power and it was a way to validate their rule. (pp. 60-61)
15. 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 savior god but rather through a life of active human service to other human beings. His thinking was in response to the ideas of modernity. (p. 71))
16. A *naga* is a serpent whose image is found in engravings around trees and in the iconography of Shiva or Vishnu. The chakra has different meanings including but not limited to the wheel of dharma, weapon of Vishnu, and energy point at the bottom of the human spine. A Sri-chakra represents male and female energies. Mostly, it is seen in Vaishnava art and temples are designed after it. Lotus flower, the national flower of India, can mean prosperity and wealth and can be connected to the popular deities and their many manifestations. It can also mean auspiciousness which is found on two levels, i.e. fertility, which means richness in food and offspring, and also a way to achieve liberation. It can be seen among the images of deities in temples and Hindu and Buddhist religious movements all over the world. (p. 79)
17. Except in the deaths of infants or ascetics, Hindu practitioners are cremated when they die. The rites are usually performed by the eldest son of the deceased, 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. 91-92)
18. 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, and sonograms and amniocentesis are used to determine the sex of the fetus in order to abort female fetuses, which is legal and accepted. (p. 103)
19. There are internal challenges like discrimination on the basis of one’s caste and gender inequality which manifests itself in the form of demand of dowry at weddings. For political gains, often the idea of a golden past is used to feed hatred towards anything that contradicts with Hindu religious beliefs and practices. The biggest opponents are considered Western influences and colonialism. Another challenge which has given birth to fundamentalist political parties is a blurred line of separation between the state and the church. All religious traditions are supposed to be respected, however, Hindus are struggling with the idea that minorities are given special treatment. Hinduism has been reduced to a pagan religion and stereotypical images like materially poor but spiritually rich and the importance of yoga. Laws of Manu, although not followed everywhere in India, have also given Hinduism a bad name. (pp. 104-105)

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?” and consider the ongoing philosophical debate about the nature of Brahman. 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 in-carnation 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.

6. Racism is still a significant problem in the West and even though steps are taken to eradicate it, there are still incidents occurring that point out how rampant it is even today. How do Hindus, when facing racism elsewhere in the world, justify the caste system in Hinduism?

7. It is deemed by some adherents of Hinduism that they had a “golden” past when Hindu dharma ruled. They explain that colonialism and Western influences are polluting Hindu thought. Does this belief hold any truth? Has this increased intolerance among Hindus? What are some of the traditional values Hindus refer to that are currently under danger of being lost because of Western influences?

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.

Ram Madhav on Hindu nationalism. 47.29 minutes. Aljazeera Programmes

God’s Business: Hinduism Goes Global. Aljazeera Programmes

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Vivekananda, Vedanta network: [www.vivekananda.org](http://www.vivekananda.org)

M.K. Gandhi Institute for Non-Violence: [www.gandhiinstitute.org](http://www.gandhiinstitute.org)

Ramakrishna, Vivekandanda Center of New York: [www.ramakrishna.org](http://www.ramakrishna.org)

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

Saurabh B’s e-spiritual hub: [www.devotionalindia.com](http://www.devotionalindia.com)

Ved Puran: <http://www.vedpuran.com/>