

Hinduism

A Brief Historical Overview

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Introduction:

- A. The major religion of the Indian subcontinent
 1. ~80%, or 772 million people (90% of world's Hindus live in India)
 2. "**Hindu**" -- *Sanskrit*: "Dwellers by the Indus River"
 3. Claims to be oldest religion--dating back 3000 years
 4. Significant minorities in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Myanmar (Burma), S. Africa, Trinidad, Europe and USA
- B. Hinduism is difficult to define
 1. No founder
 2. Origin lost in antiquity
 3. Not "one" holy book, but many
 4. No single, unifying, under girding doctrine--great diversity in belief and practice
 5. Accommodates great variety of sects, cults, theologies, philosophies
 - a. Violent inter-sect/caste rivalries sometimes occur
 - b. Persecution over "heresy" is rare
 6. Polytheistic, but generally views all gods as aspects of the absolute, but unknowable, Brahman
- C. **Reincarnation** (transmigration of souls) is a generally held belief
 1. All things are part of the same essence
 2. Cycles of life and death may occur in many forms
 3. Karma: cause and effect--the deeds of the present life predetermine the next life
 4. Dharma: Hindu social/moral law
 5. Goal of Hinduism: To escape the cycle and merge with the absolute soul (atma), Brahman
- D. **Caste**: The historic characteristic of Hinduism
 1. Rooted in the "Vedas"
 2. Four primary castes, plethora of sub-castes
 3. Distinguished from non-caste, outcaste/untouchables

The Origin of Hinduism

- I. The precise origin of Hinduism is unknown--what is known:
 - A. "Mature Harappan Culture"
 1. Developed civilization of Indus R. Valley c. 2300-1500 BCE
 2. Had its own religion, although perhaps not uniform
 3. Invaded by Aryans (ethnic kin of Medes and Persians) c. 1500 BCE, thus, new forms of religion introduced
 - B. Aryan contributions
 1. Indo-European language
 2. *Sanskrit* writing system
 3. "**Vedas**"--collection of hymns to various deities, headed by:
 - a. Bramha--creator
 - b. Vishnu--sustainer/preserver
 - c. Shiva--destroyer
 4. Aryan worship
 - a. household religion
 - b. veneration of ancestors
 - c. Polytheistic--mostly male gods
 - d. No images/idols

- e. ritual sacrifice of animals, accompanied by hymns, incantations and sacrificial formulas recorded in *Vedas*
- II. The pre-Vedic period
 - A. Preeminence of "**Varuna**"
 - 1. Etymology: Gk. $\omega\rho\alpha\nu\omicron\varsigma$: heaven
 - 2. Upholder of physical and moral order of the universe
- 3. Aryans vacillated between *Varuna* and *Indra*
 - B. *Indra*--later associated with monsoon, warrior
 - 1. no high moral attributes
 - 2. if supplied with abundant offerings, asks no questions of the offerer
 - 3. delights in intoxicating "*Soma*" liquor
 - 4. the "sensual" *Indra* began to overtake, and ultimately usurp, the "moral and just" *Varuna*

The Vedic Period

- I. **Rig Veda** (Praise Hymns) Sanskrit "**Vedas**:" "knowledge"
 - A. Composed sometime between 1500 and 1200 BCE, the period of Aryan conquest
 - 1. Collection of 1028 hymns to various gods
 - 2. Next several centuries added "**Samaveda**," "**Yajurveda**" and "**Atharveda**" by first millennium BCE
 - 3. "**Brahmanas**" were added between 800-600 BCE
 - a. these explain and illustrate the significance of ritual
 - b. they were written in prose form
 - 4. "**Aranyakas**" and "**Upanishads**" were added between 600-300 BCE
 - a. *Aranyakas*: "Forest Treatises" are symbolic, magical interpretation of ritual formulae
 - b. *Upanishads*: lit. "sitting at the feet of a teacher," type of commentary, were the beginnings of Hindu philosophy, claim:
 - (1) "*apaurusheya*:" not of human origin
 - (2) "*shutri*:" heard, revealed
 - B. Vedic ritual is strictly prescribed--often to and with fire
 - 1. Always officiated by a priest with particular knowledge
 - 2. To communicate with deity
 - 3. Designed to secure/procure desired results
 - C. Many deities associated with natural forces
 - 1. *Varuna* (male): cosmic order and moral law
 - 2. *Indra* (male): thunder/monsoon, war
 - 3. *Agni*: fire, light
 - 4. *Surya* (male): sun
 - 5. *Ushas* (female): dawn
 - 6. *Vayu* (male): wind
- II. Relationship of Vedism to Hinduism
 - A. Veda is preserved traditionally in parts of India
 - 1. Seen as expressions of Hindu thought
 - 2. Major Hindu gods: e.g.. Shiva, Vishnu are minor deities of the Vedas
 - B. Vedic sacrifice has all but disappeared
 - 1. Concept that actions on earth influence events in heaven
 - 2. Replaced by goal of liberation from actions on earth, and life itself
 - C. Concepts of *karma* and *reincarnation* not found until Upanishads (600-300 BCE)

700 BCE to AD 800

- III. Some basic Vedic beliefs
 - A. Belief in types of heaven and hell for the dead, based upon quality of earthly life

- B. *Reincarnation* appeared after 600 BCE
 1. First adherents confined to small groups of *ascetics* (persons who practice severe self discipline and abstain from all forms of pleasure, esp. for religious/spiritual reasons)
 2. First expounded in the *Upanishads*
 - C. *Upanishads*
 1. Last stage of interpretation of *Vedas*
 2. Beginning of Hindu philosophy
 3. Developed concept of single supreme being, Brahman
 4. Investigation of the nature of reality
 - D. Concept of reincarnation firmly established by the time of Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama, c. 560-480 BCE)
 1. Main concern shifted from sacrificing to please, pacify and influence deity to desire for release from the cycle of birth and death
 2. Sacrifice became less frequent as it was replaced by reverence for all living things, called "*Ahimsa*," which became one of the chief teachings of Jainism
- IV. Shift in primary gods reflected in devotional literature
- A. The *Upanishads*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and *Puranas* serve as the wellspring of modern Hinduism
 - B. Brahma, Indra, Agni, Varuna were gradually replaced by Vishnu, Shiva, Shakti
 1. Many earlier gods assimilated into these three
 2. "*Divine incarnation*" accommodates older gods into newer ones
 - C. "*Mahabharata*," epic of the Bharata dynasty
 1. World's longest poem
 2. Legend of power struggle between two families
 3. Contains "*Dharma*:" an extensive code of conduct for seeking release from the birth/death cycle
 4. Contains "*Bhagavad Gita*:" (lit. "Lord's Song") the poetic dialogue between prince Arjuna and his charioteer, *Krishna*, an incarnation of Vishnu
 - D. "*Ramayana*"
 1. Epic on the life of Rama and his adventures
 2. 24,000 couplets long (couplet: two successive lines of verse, rhyming and of the same length)
- V. **Puranas** (lit. "old") c. AD 10th century, but possibly as late as the 17th century
- A. "The scriptures of the common man"
 - B. Mainly to glorify Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva
 - C. Simple poetry for the ordinary reader, containing a variety of legends
 1. Eighteen principal puranas survive
 2. Ascribed to "*Vyasa*," the mythical arranger of the Vedas
 3. *Pantheism* and *polytheism* are further developed
 4. The "thrice eleven" gods of the Vedas become 330 million (33 crore)
 5. Indra becomes a subordinate god, and Varuna is reduced to rule over the waters
 6. Krishna becomes the greatest incarnation of Vishnu
 7. Shiva, Durga and Kali come into being

AD 800 to AD 1800

- VI. Division of Hinduism into sects and schools of philosophy
- A. Six schools of philosophy emerged, all believing in:
 1. Transmigration of souls
 2. Authority of Vedas
 3. Brahma as creator of the world
 4. Responsibility of each individual for his actions

- B. The six schools include:
1. "Nyaya:" includes analysis of logic | *these four involve "yogic"*
 2. "Vaisheka" | *practices, metaphysics,*
 3. "Samkhya" | *and epistemology*
 4. "Yoga" |
 5. "Mimamsa:" identifying the performance of ritual and sacrifice with goal of liberation from birth/death cycle
 6. "Vedantic:" including the *Sankara* and *Ramanuja* schools
 - a. Sankara: taught *monism*, that is, god, matter and the individual soul are "one"
 - b. Ramanuja
 - (1) God, matter and the individual soul are separate realities
 - (2) Purpose of the soul: to serve god
 - (3) Purpose of the body: to serve the soul
 - (4) Purpose of meditation: to contemplate god
- C. Later schools of Hindu thought
1. *Basava*, c. 12th century AD
 - a. Possibly influenced by Islam
 - b. Rejected the Vedas, as well as all forms of image worship
 - c. Rejected all caste distinctions
 2. *Kabir*, a hymn writer, c. 15th century
 - a. Denied image worship, caste, asceticism, the sacred texts and pilgrimages
 - b. Accepted reincarnation
 - c. Primary deity: Rama
 3. *Guru Nanak*, a disciple of Kabir: Sikism
 - a. Basically Hindu, but assimilated elements of Islam and Christianity
 - b. Officially denies image worship
 - c. Has a form of baptism and communion meal
- VII. The British and European arrival of the 18th century
- A. By this time (end of 17th century) writing of hymns had ceased
 - B. There were no advances in Hindu thought for the next century
 - C. Hinduism had become a conservative religion, steeped in tradition
 - D. A rigid social order had developed and was preserved by complex rituals and regulations
- VIII. Summary AD 800-1800
- A. During this period Hinduism fragmented
 - B. Most devotional hymns were written
 - C. Hinduism was influenced by Islam (although Islam in India was more influenced by Hinduism)
 - D. Hinduism was influenced by Christianity
 - E. Sikkism originated

Modern Hinduism

- IX. Arrival of British colonialism and denominational missionaries
- A. Hindu revival spawned in the early nineteenth century
 1. Hinduism and nationalism became intertwined
 2. Most Hindus rejected Christianity, but were strongly influenced by its social consciousness
 - B. Men and movements of influence
 1. Rammohan Roy
 - a. Promoted British educational pattern

- b. Called for the end of Sati (William Carey, Baptist missionary known as the "father of modern missions," is widely credited in his campaign against Sati) (Sati is the practice of a widow voluntarily immolating herself upon her dead husband's crematorial pyre)
 - 2. Dayananda Sarasvati
 - a. Rejected idol worship and the caste system
 - b. Urged the use of Western technology
 - 3. Narendranath Datta (aka. Vivekananda)
 - a. Founded the Ramakrishna mission to send out monks to do good works and promote scholarship
 - b. Carried the message of Hinduism around the world, including the USA
 - 4. Mohandas K. Gandhi
 - a. Known as the father of independent India
 - b. Successfully mobilized much of India to resist British colonialism by peaceful non-cooperation
 - c. Resulted in the end of British colonialism
 - d. Assassinated by an Rashtrya Swamisevak Sangh (RSS) Hindu extremist, N. Godse
- X. Modern gods: Mainly Vishnu, Shiva and Shakti
- A. Vaishnavism (Vishnu) c. 7th century BCE beginnings
 - 1. Regarded as sustainer of creation
 - 2. Worshipped as Krishna (Bhagavad Gita)
 - 3. Worshipped as Rama (Ramayana) symbol is usually a bow and arrow, devotees wear trident shaped mark on forehead
 - B. Shivaism (Shiva, lit. "Auspicious One")
 - 1. Regarded as destroyer and restorer (old must die before new can come)
 - 2. Merged roles of various earlier gods
 - 3. Occasionally paired with Shakti, sons are Kanda and Ganesha
 - 4. Appears variously as beggar, hermaphrodite, dancer (Nataraj)
 - 5. Symbols include the lingam (phallic symbol), and trident; devotees wear horizontal marks on forehead
 - C. Shakti, the mother goddess (lit. Power), appears in various forms:
 - 1. Parvati: beautiful, benevolent woman in middle age
 - 2. Kali: giant, black skinned female figure with a blood red tongue
 - 3. Wears a garland of skulls and human appendages around neck and carries assortment of weapons
 - D. Ganesha (elephant/man): prayed to before undertakings
 - E. Lakshmi: wife of Vishnu; patroness of wealth
 - F. Sarasvathi: goddess of learning and arts
 - G. Hanuman (monkey): allied with Rama against Ravena (Ramayana); personification of the power of god on earth
 - H. Manasa: goddess of snakes
 - I. Nagaraj: king cobra
 - J. Other things revered:
 - 1. Cattle: revered even by non-vegetarian castes
 - 2. Monkeys, tree squirrels and some snakes (e.g.. king cobra)
 - 3. Trees: banyan and tulsi
 - 4. All rivers are at least somewhat holy: Ganges is holiest, said to flow from the head of Shiva
- XI. Temple worship
- A. Place to call god's presence and entertain as royal guest
 - B. Hindu home usually have a "pooja" room for worship, or something similar, where images of favorite deities are kept
 - C. Worship is individual, not corporate, consequently, temples lack the meeting halls of mosques and church buildings

The Caste System

- XII. Rooted in the Vedas
- A. Four interdependent, specialized classes, or "Varnas," lit. "colors"
 - 1. Brahmins: priestly caste
 - 2. Kshatryas: warriors
 - 3. Vaishyas: agriculturists, merchants
 - 4. Shudras: added somewhat later, were servants and laborers
 - B. Rig Veda 10:90 legitimized the caste system
 - 1. Origins of cosmos depicted in the sacrificial dismemberment of the primeval deity "Purusha"
 - a. Head: Brahmins
 - b. Arms: Kshatryas
 - c. Loins: Vaishyas
 - d. Feet: Shudras
 - 2. The hymn also underlies the importance and creative power of sacrificial ritual
 - C. During AD 1st century 4 basic castes multiplied into many "jati"
 - 1. High castes dependent upon lower to remove impurities, solving the problem of impurity/pollution
 - 2. Marriage restrictions maintained purity
 - 3. Caste associated with particular specialties, encouraging economical interdependence
 - 4. Discrimination based upon caste was banned in 1947
 - D. Untouchables
 - 1. Termed outcaste: called "harijans" (children of god) by Mohandas K. Gandhi
 - 2. Impure due to occupations: e.g.. slaughter, handling corpses, body waste
 - 3. No social mobility--remain in caste born into

Conclusion

- A. Veda was regarded early as sacred and authoritative
- B. Preserved via elaborate techniques of memorizing and reciting, some parts bearing the family names that the section was assigned to
- C. The Vedic ritual survives among only a few modern day Brahmins (highest caste)
- D. Though largely ignored, still held as the "touchstone" of Hindu orthodoxy

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