Definition: Hinduism from The Macquarie Dictionary

Obsolescent

1. the dominant religion of India, evolved from the teaching of the Vedas, comprising a complex body of religious, social, cultural, and philosophical beliefs, and characterised by a system of divinely ordained caste. Although it has a general tendency towards pantheism, in its popular form it is polytheistic and is marked by an absence of creed or dogma, an elaborate ritual, and a belief in reincarnation.

Summary Article: Hinduism


Like the other world religions born during the so-called Axial Age (c. 800–200 BCE) Hinduism is a complex religious system, with tremendous regional variation. So much so, that past critics have argued that there is no real Hindu religion. Despite these assertions there are shared elements that comprise a core we can call Hinduism. This entry delineates a brief history of Hinduism, followed by an elucidation of the most central tenets, texts, and rituals. It concludes by examining the ways in which Hinduism has been a conduit facilitating larger economic and geopolitical forces, as well as how it has reacted against these universalizing, convergent global forces.

Unfortunately, much of India's ancient past remains murky, but the last quarter century has provided some clarity as archaeological and textual evidence has improved (Kenoyer & Heuston 2005). Most scholars agree there was an urban society in the Indus Valley that was as complex as the earliest city-states in Sumer (e.g., Ur); two cities have been excavated partially supporting this assertion: Harappa (the eponymous for the civilization) and Mohenjo-daro. This society seems to have lasted from about 2600 to 1300 BCE (Kenoyer 2000). Reasons for its collapse are elusive, but most scholars once thought it had to do with an “invasion” of Aryans from the Caucus region of Asia—either by conquest, or as is more recently argued, that the Aryans peacefully coexisted and eventually surpassed the Harappans following a shift in the path of the rivers and, with it, the source of their soil's fertility (Keay 2000). Many contemporary Indian scholars, though, question whether or not the Indus Valley people ever came into contact with the Aryans in the first place (Thapar 2004).

Again, scholarship is at the mercy of archaeology and the origins of the older form of Hinduism, known as the Vedic religion, are hard to trace. Based on the holy scriptures called the Vedas, the stirrings of Vedic religion and the familiar caste system may have emerged as early as the fourteenth century BCE. The problem, of course, with establishing a firm date is that the Vedas were passed down orally, and were heavily guarded, for nearly three millennia before the British managed to convince a number of Brahmins (the priestly caste) to share some of their secrets. That Brahmans across India with little knowledge of each other were repeating equivalent versions of the Vedas makes it quite probable that these texts were nearly identical to the oldest Axial Age versions, and perhaps even pre-Axial Age versions. This spoke to the painstaking memorization process and the ritual adherence and fear of supernatural sanctions imposed for improperly conducting Vedic rituals (Basham 1989).

While speculative, the rise of a hereditary priestly class is likely to have occurred for similar reasons as

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it did elsewhere. It is probable that the uniquely Indian caste system had already begun to take shape during the Harappan civilization, and was institutionalized by the Aryans. As the Aryans grew increasingly sedentary, agricultural concerns replaced older concerns centered on warring, raids, and pastoralism. The gods, as in other ancient societies, needed to be fed, and it was up to the religious elite to figure out what the “terms of exchange” were to be. The new opportunities available to religious actors led to more complex bases of knowledge and practices, greater group closure, and social mobility. Thus, with a switch in the mode of production, the rajanya’s status diminished in relation to the priestly class as the risks of sacrifice replaced those of warfare (Keay 2000: 24–36). This complexity is reflected in the “ritual exactitude” that is the hallmark of the Brahmanic class. For example, the Fire Sacrifice was an annual ritual meant to reenact the original Creation, and whose formula had to be precisely conducted or “all cosmic processes would cease, and chaos would come again” (Basham 1967: 241). By the end of the Bronze Age the familiar caste system had been institutionalized, favoring the priestly class (brāhmanas), then the knightly class (kṣatriyas), the middle-class farmers and later merchants (vaiśyas), and the mass of non-propertied laborers (śūdra). Over time, these four distinct groups would become highly differentiated as thousands of subdivisions formed along occupational and regional lines.

Unlike ancient China, Egypt, or Mesopotamia which saw the near constant rise and fall of regional political and religious centers, ancient India – after the Harappan civilization – was notable due to a general lack of political or religious centralization until the Mauryan Empire (c. 320–200 BCE). Despite sacrifice being the most important function of the Brahmans, they never created a temple-centric religion. Instead, the early Brahmans appear to have been competitive with each other for clients, which was key to the intense proliferation of rival religious ascetics beginning around the sixth century BCE. Founders of new religions like the Buddha and Mahāvīra (the founder of Jainism) emerged offering new soteriological solutions to the old Vedic problems of transmigration of the soul. In reaction to these new movements, the Brahmans began to formalize their teachings, beliefs, and rituals and erect a true priesthood. By the rise of the Mauryan Empire, and especially Ashoka’s reign (c.268–233), much of Hinduism was shaped, more or less, into what it is today. In the face of Ashoka’s election of Buddhism to a state religion, Hinduism was formalized; it would not be the last time Hinduism was strengthened in the face of external threat.

Hinduism as a national religion became firmly ensconced in India for good in opposition to the foreign occupations by the Muslims (999–1757) and then the British (1757–1947). Like other conquered lands, India was subjected to Muslim policies meant to assimilate cultural variation and encourage conversion whether by coercive tactics or material incentives. Hinduism became the source of resistance, however, and the Indian strategy was to absorb Islam rather than be absorbed. The outcome of the Muslim invasion was the emergence of new religious forms, both in terms of an Indian type of Islam as well as syncretic movements; ultimately, however, Hinduism was not displaced. With the British colonization and the hard-fought independence, Hinduism became a true national identity forged with a political identity, a shared national history, and a source of pride. British colonial strategy helped harden the lines between religious systems and contributed greatly to Buddhism’s disappearance from India as well as Hinduism’s elevation to a truly nation-state religion. It was again seen as a key source of resistance to their militarily superior conquerors. Thus, the narrative of independence from oppressors became, in part, the narrative of Hinduism; and has undergirded the occupation of modern Kashmir and the belligerence towards Muslims both in Kashmir as well as between Pakistan and India.

Perhaps only two elements of the Hindu faith are universally accepted: the sacred and true nature of
the Vedas and the practice of caste. From region to region, and village to village, different aspects of Hinduism are emphasized, yet these two elements remain central to ritual and belief.

Sometime between 1500 and 1000 BCE, the four Vedas were created (Hutchinson 1969: Chapter 3). The Vedas are both historical texts as well as lists of incantations for successful ritual. The most important, the Rig Veda, is a collection of past seers’ or rishis’ hymns and poems; again, these poems were intended for oral transmission. The other three Vedas are: Sama Veda, or verses arranged for ritual purposes, the Yajur Veda which are sacrificial formulas meant to be chanted by priests, and the Atharva Veda, consisting of magical spells for various situations like conception, success in battle or any competition, and other moments humans would like to control through supernatural means. These documents are considered shruti, or “heard” and are akin to the prophecy of the Israelites (Rowley 1956).

In addition to these four texts, three other important classes of texts are typically included in the Vedic traditions and are often referred to as Vedas: the Brahmanas (or “Priestlies”), the Aranyakas (“Forest Books”), and the Upaniṣads. The Brahmanas (composed sometime between 1000–300 BCE) are an extensive set of priestly comments, which include numerous sacrifices that seem to have facilitated the institutionalization of the priestly caste’s domination. Again, the emphasis on precision in ritual activity and the importance of both exactitude and the priestly function are underlined in the Brahmanas; in one instance in the text, a priest remarks “that the sun would not rise if the Brahman priest did not correctly perform the daily sacrifice” (Hutchinson 1969: 74). Also found in the Brahmanas are the minor deities Vishnu and Śiva, both of which would become two of the three primary deities in contemporary Hinduism. The Aranyakas are simply a record of ascetics seeking salvation through withdrawal from society into the woods, though the line between the Aranyakas, and say the Upaniṣads, is quite blurry as the names of specific poems and writings often overlap.

Finally, the Upaniṣads, probably created during the Axial Age (c.800–500 BCE) consists of the writings of 10 to 13 sages and their philosophies and represented a tremendous break, in many ways, from the older Vedic traditions. Salvation became the central focus of teaching and ascetic practice. That is, breaking the avidyā-karman-samsāra cycle became the overarching soteriological concern: avidyā, which literally means ignorance, is the notion that the material world and human life is defined by suffering, yet humans are often ignorant or unaware of this suffering; karma amounts to the belief in the moral quality of every action; while samsāra is the belief in transmigration of souls. Linked together, it is the notion that the material world is suffering, but most humans are unaware of why and how to break through this illusion; their deeds, ultimately, are moral and sanctioned by the supranatural; and until a person is aware and begins to follow one of the paths to mokṣa (enlightenment), their ātman (self/soul) will continue to be reborn, often in a lower social position than before owing to the person’s evil deeds in a previous life. The ultimate goal, then, of the ascetics was to find a way to break the cycle and achieve salvation: rather than be reborn, one rejoined their ātman (self or soul) with the transcendent, singular supranatural force or godhead Brahman. The material world was conceptualized negatively and the focus was on otherworldliness. The overriding emphasis was on ascetic practices like yoga, or later, disciplined monastic life, which was meant to negate the self in order to break the cycle.

Consequently, the widespread belief in avidyā-karman-samsāra served to reinforce the caste system, which is founded upon each person fulfilling their dharma – that is, there particular duty as defined by their caste and social position. On the one hand, a set of ethical imperatives guided
people’s lives and pushed them to be good humans, while on the other, these same ethical imperatives were tied to an imperative to respect the caste system or face supranatural consequences manifest in rebirth into lower and lower social positions. It is no wonder the caste system remained unchallenged for millennia and still exerts some social force on contemporary Indian society (Dumont 1966).

With the formulation of the *Upaniṣads* between the eighth and sixth centuries BCE, Hinduism began to synthesize much of the previous Vedic rituals and beliefs with Axial Age elements. Three major aspects of contemporary Hinduism began to take shape. First, the teachings found in the *Upaniṣads*, the Sāmkhya (a classical school of Indian philosophy denying the existence of god while regarding the universe as being split between consciousness and physical matter), and yoga were considered equivalent. Second, the three paths (*mārgas*) to salvation were delineated as equivalent (see later). And, third, the historicity of humanity was posited and elevated as religious truth. These three elements were crystallized in the *Mahābhārata* – a 90,000 verse poem detailing a protracted war and eschatology. The god Brahmā asks a number of gods and demons to become incarnate to essentially provoke a war that will cleanse the Earth and will be followed by a new king’s reign and the restoration of the world. In the sixth book, the famous *Bhagavad Gātā*, Lord Krishna reveals he is an avatar of Vishnu the god of maintenance or preservation (though Vishnu has been the author of destruction and resurrection). Along with Śiva, the god of destruction, and Brahmā, the god of creation, these three gods represent theTrimurti or Indian trinity. Like the Christian counterpart, the three gods are not really different gods, but rather three “faces” of a singular, transcendent force that is beyond simple distinctions like good and evil.

What, though, is salvation? Hinduism offers humans four ultimate ends to which adherents should be devoted to achieving. First is *dharma*, translated to be righteousness or duty. Moral virtue is the most basic and important goal, and its fulfillment varies across castes and their subdivisions. *Artha*, or material profit and power, is important as it supports human activity and allows people to pursue *dharma* as well as the third end, *kama*. Kama derives from the Indian god of love, and refers to the enjoyment of various aesthetic and visceral pleasures including sex and art. Finally, *moks.a*, or emancipation, is the supreme and ultimate end toward which Hinduism directs its adherents. *Moks.a* is the end of suffering brought about by breaking the *avidyā-karman-samsāra* cycle and returning one’s *Atman* (or self) to the *Brahman* (or ultimate reality); put another way, it’s the negation of selfhood.

Four paths are provided to achieve these ends. *Bhakti mārga* (personal devotion) finds its classic statement in the later Indian writing, the *Bhagavad Gītā* though it is likely older. The most widespread of the three, *bhakti* is essentially personal devotion to Krishna (an avatar of the god Vishnu) that can be cultivated through one’s daily tasks. A second path is based on ritual works or *karma mārga* and has generally been the path of the aristocracy because of the time and the money necessary to devote their lives to moral and ritual actions. The types of actions they pursue vary tremendously, though five daily obligations seem ubiquitous: offerings to (i) the gods, (ii) the seers, (iii) the forefathers, (iv) lower animals, and (v) to humanity. Sacrifice, devotional reading and study, as well as the giving of food and alms generally meet each of these obligations. A third path, *jnāna marga*, or the pursuit of philosophic/metaphysical knowledge, has generally been the path of the religious virtuosi. Based on the contemplative knowledge of the seers in the Upanishads, the ultimate goal is “the direct experience of this vision of the One Supreme Reality” (Hutchinson 1969: 165). The *Mahābhārata* has been said to proclaim the superiority of the first way, though it is likely to have been emphasized because it is the most plausible path the laity can follow while still performing the daily economic rounds. The idea of

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“yoga” has sometimes been considered a fourth path. Yoga has various meanings: “method,” “meditation,” and as it can also confer supranatural powers on its practitioners, it has also meant “force.” However, yoga is typically associated with the three former paths and is often used in place of mārga.

Unlike its counterparts – especially Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam – Hinduism was rarely co-opted by a political entity to justify or provide impetus for invasion, expansion, and conquest; and, while it has spread into Southeast Asia and is the religion of Bali, it has never reached the level of conquest Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism have. To be sure, the current Indian government is strongly opposed to Pakistan and its claims to Kashmir, at least in part, on religious grounds. Nevertheless, India has more often been the conquered rather than conqueror. First, Alexander of Macedonia destroyed what was left of the Mauryan Empire; then, the Islamic invasion took place around 999 CE; and finally, India saw nearly two centuries of occupation by the British Empire lasting until the middle of the twentieth century. Hinduism, when compared again to its counterparts, never produced strong efforts to proselytize, though like the ancient Israelite religion, there were groups and individuals who sought to spread the message. Indeed, part of Christianity’s success in missionizing the “New” World came from the imperialist ambitions and successes of empires like Spain, England, and France. But, it would be incorrect to assume Christianity’s successes in proselytizing are due solely to political power: a strong drive to spread the word of the Bible is deeply engrained in the doctrine of the Church and the spirit of the New Testament. Yet, in Hinduism – perhaps more so than Buddhism – the desire among religious virtuosi and elites to turn inward and the emphasis on the world being illusory, and with the most appropriate path for commoners to follow being their dharma, has led to a relatively bounded religious sphere rooted primarily in India. To be sure, the components for holy war are found in the Bhagavad Gātā in the form of dharmic war. And, there are fundamentalist Hindu’s who see the ultimate end as the re-elevation of the Rama and the institutionalization of an orthodox version of Hinduism.

Finally, it is worth noting, though, that in the face of massive global economic forces wrought by the world system’s unique dynamics, India’s caste system in particular has been weakened. As Western corporations found a large, educated work force willing to work for low wages, they began to relocate to India. The needs of a capitalist economy (i.e., a labor market free of the irrationalities of a rigid caste system) have penetrated the religious sphere in India, but this likely has its most powerful effects in urban areas while leaving the rural populations relatively untouched.

SEE ALSO: Buddhism; Ideology; National Identity; Religions, global; Resistance Movements; Social Movements; Sufism.

REFERENCES


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