

The Hindu Community

“There is something common in all living beings from the highest to the lowest, irrespective of species, caste or creed. We have all been created by God and this must never be forgotten. In his eyes, we are all equal. Our human frailties create differences among us.”

Bhagavad Gita

Origins

Hinduism is the name given to a set of religious traditions which originated in India. The religion was not founded by any one individual. Rather, it is the fusion of many religious beliefs and philosophical schools of thought. These have been ever growing over a few millennia. Accordingly, Hinduism is said to be a religion of a million and one Gods. Its origins are mixed and complex. Hinduism began with the Aryans, a group of nomadic warriors and herders who migrated into India around 1500 B.C. Their culture centred on the Veda, a set of hymns. Before the Aryans, between 2500 and 1500 B.C., the Indus Valley civilisation flourished. Since the civilisation was in decline when the Aryans migrated into India, it is impossible to know whether the two had significant contact. Hindus still consider the Vedas to be the most sacred of all literature. The Vedas were passed down orally by Vedic priests memorising every syllable. These texts were later written in the Sanskrit language.

Hindus do not call their religion by any name. The current name is the one given to their whole pattern of life and culture by outsiders who spotted them on the banks of the river Indus. To say what they practise as their mythological as well as spiritual tradition, they use the term ‘Sanatana Dharma’, which means ‘perennial righteous conduct’. At the outset, its emphasis has been threefold – purity of life, devotion to the Almighty and a yearning for spiritual salvation.

Teachings

The central belief of Hinduism is that the truth is one, but its nature is manifold. This explains why there are many religions in the world. Consequent to this belief, Hindu followers have no difficulty believing in one God and several Gods at the same time.

Central, also, to Hinduism are the concepts of reincarnation, the caste system, merging with Brahman (or the ultimate reality), finding morality, and reaching Nirvana (the peaceful escape from the cycle of re-birth).

Both humans and animal spirits reincarnate, or come back to Earth, to live many times in different forms. The belief is that souls move up and down an infinite hierarchy depending on behaviours practised in life. Today a Hindu can be polytheistic, monotheistic, pantheistic, agnostic or atheistic and still claim to be a Hindu. This open theology makes it difficult to discuss basic beliefs since there are many ideas about what Hinduism means.

The Hindu paths to salvation include 'The Way of Works' (rituals), 'The Way of Knowledge' (realisation of reality and self-reflection), and 'The Way of Devotion' (devotion to the god that you choose to follow). If the practitioner follows these paths, salvation can be achieved.

We also discover many Gods/Goddesses who are but the embodiment of certain virtues e.g. Learning, Wisdom and Arts is Goddess Saraswati, Wealth is Lakshmi, Power is Parvati. God is both He and She. The same divinity, which, when in charge of creation is called Lord Brahma (Creator God), while protecting, is called Vishnu; and termed as Shiva when He is about to destroy the evil world. Apart from its inexhaustible mythological panorama, Hinduism has also a long and living tradition of mystic and spiritual enquiry, practiced to attain Godliness. Hinduism respects all notions of God and even no-God. It does not discriminate between religions.

Hinduism shares many things in common with predominant religions of India such as Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. It is possible to find various sects within the Hindu community that are parallel to the specific faiths of the world. However diversified the practises of Hindus may look, one can perceive a unity in their one character – the tendency to change, to adopt and to assimilate.

Worship

Hinduism does not insist upon having faith in God, or any particular form or name of God. However, a Hindu may be found worshipping a presiding deity (of one's choice) calling it God or Goddess. The object of meditation may even be the Absolute Reality (Brahman), which has no attribute. The reward of a pooja (worship) can vary – anything from the material to some abstract thing, or even one's liberation from life. The realisation of God 'here and now' is held to be the ultimate ambition of a devotee. To motivate this, Hindu spirituality holds that every soul (spirit) is basically immortal and potentially divine.

A threefold path is laid down to access Divinity. A devotee can choose any of them accordingly to one's convenience. They are:

The Path of Action (Karma Yoga) in which the seeker endeavours to relinquish the rewards of one's actions by renouncing all desires.

The Path of Devotion (Bhakti Marga) in which one prays to God and performs the religious practises.

The Path of Knowledge (Jnana Marga), the intellectual approach to spirituality.

Places of Worship

The place of worship could either be a temple (mandir) or one's own home. Both communal (congregation) worship and individual worship are popular among Hindus. There are no rigid canons to be adopted for the course of a Pooja. People adopt various patterns of Pooja, using different prayers from various books. They may pray to any God or Goddess, or their favourite deity, no matter which temple they are in.

The duration of a Pooja could be anything from a few minutes to a large part of the day. The ingredients used in a Pooja (worship) include incense, camphor, offering of flowers, fruits or any type of food (always vegetarian), water, milk etc. The rituals may involve ringing a bell, singing or chanting, holding a lamp (Arti), kneeling down or folding hands etc. Hindus also have a wide choice of who they can worship – a deity, holy book, a drawing of the word AUM, etc. They may use red powder or white holy Vibuti to mark the forehead. Beads can be used in the course of a pooja. After the pooja, the congregation usually receives offerings as a blessing of the Almighty.

Practises

There are sixteen main Sacraments (Samskaras). These range from pre-conception to funeral ceremonies. Samskaras (Sacraments) are rituals and sacrifices. By virtue of their performances the life of the performer receives a higher security.

Birth

These Sacraments begin even before a child is born. Garbhadana (conception) is the fervent prayer for a child. This is done in order to fulfil the parental duties to continue the race.

Punsavana (fetus protection) is performed during the third or fourth month of pregnancy before the fetus is conscious. The prayers hope to invoke divine qualities in the child.

Simantonnyana (satisfying the craving of the pregnant mother) is similar to a baby shower. It is performed during the seventh month: prayers are offered for the healthy physical and mental growth of the child. Jatakarma is performed at the birth of the child. It is done to welcome the child into the family. Mantras, or verse prayers are recited for a healthy, long

life. The goal of this samskara is to provide a comfortable atmosphere for the child and mother. The naming ceremony, or Namakarna, is done according to scriptural procedures.

Marriage

A wedding is an auspicious, holy as well as a happy occasion for Hindus. It is a sacrament to mark the sacred contract receiving social recognition between two persons. It is a ceremony celebrated according to one's tradition. Arranged marriages are popular within the Hindu community. Consequently, a marriage paves the way for two families to unite. A token dowry may be given to the bride and groom as a gift.

In Britain, a Hindu marriage takes place before a Registrar but will also include a wedding officiated by a priest. The ceremony, which takes place in a temple or a hall, is attended by a large number of guests. The rituals, which can last for up to three hours, are highly symbolic, containing many prayers made through offerings to a holy fire in order to attain blessings for a happy, long and fruitful married life.

Funerals

A devout Hindu who is very ill or dying may wish to lie on the floor (close to Mother Earth) and may welcome someone reading from any of the holy scripture of Hindus, especially from the Bhagavad Gita.

Following a death, the whole family mourns for 10 to 15 days. Sometimes the family members and close relatives may not eat until after the cremation has taken place. Several ceremonies take place at and before the cremation under directions of a Hindu priest. The eldest son of the deceased has a major part to play in them.

Adult Hindus are cremated. Young children and infants are buried. In this country, the eldest son of the dead person will wish to press the ignition button at the cremation. Washing the body is a part of the funeral rites and will be done by close family. A non-Hindu touching the body may cause distress or offence in some families.

After returning from the crematorium, the family is involved in ritual washing and purifying of the residence. Some time after the cremation, the ashes are collected and scattered in certain places including rivers or the sea and other sacred waters e.g. the River Ganges in India.

Diet

Many Hindus are strict vegetarians and will not eat meat, fish, eggs or food containing egg. Others may eat meat and fish but not beef, and rarely pork. However, vegetarian food may be preferred especially on festivals and scared days, when killing is not desirable. Hindus generally avoid tobacco and alcohol, though the decision is of individual choice.

Dress

Hindus have no religious code for dress. There is no special requirement for men. The traditional dress of an Indian woman is a sari. Normally women cover their entire body when they take part in a religious activity. They may even cover their head with the fringe of their sari etc. In some northern parts of India, it is customary for men also to cover their head with some cloth. Hindus take off their shoes when entering a temple. They leave footwear outside when they participate in a *pooja*. Some married women wear a coloured spot, known as a Bindi, on the forehead. Jewellery worn by men and women usually has a religious or cultural significance and therefore should be respected.

Religious Books and Artefacts

Hinduism has a substantial collection of sacred writings that embody their beliefs, legends and religious practises. The earliest of them, the Rig Veda, is the first of the four basic books, which record the revelations and continue a long oral tradition. The Rig Veda is also a record of the earliest language and religion known to mankind. Vedas have mystical hymns, psalms of praise of Gods, and the belief in God as manifest in the powers of the elements or spirits of the universe such as wind, fire, water etc. The other Vedas are Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharvaveda. These are concerned also with the practical details of the sacrificial rituals, prayers and mantras and details of meditation, which are often symbolic. The best known among the later scriptures is the Bhagavad Gita (or Gita), meaning the “Song of the Lord”. The Gita is a part of the whole text of the Mahabharata, the Epic of India, one of the major texts. There are also four other major texts: Vedas, Puranas, Upanishads and the Ramayana.

The following religious items may be used as part of worship:

- Mala - prayer beads
- Murti - a deity, from 2 inches in height, made of either metal, wood, glass, stone or marble, or alternatively an image or photograph.
- Incense sticks and Diva (small lamp) - These are normally burned during prayer.
- Small bell - used when beginning and ending prayer rituals.
- Bhagavad Gita - Holy Book.

Rites and Initiation

For boys in the upper three castes, a second birth ceremony is performed. This is known as the thread ceremony or Upanayan. During the ritual the boys eat a final meal with their

mothers and then are introduced to manhood. After this ceremony, boys are expected to eat with men and take on more responsibilities. They 'die' of their young self, and are 'born' into their new, older self.

Festivals and Celebrations

If we count all the festivals of the numerous sections of Hinduism, the festivals are more than 300 in a year. The major ones are:

Maha Shivaratri

A day of fasting. Lord Shiva is worshipped through the night (usually in March).

Shri Rama Navami

The festival to worship Lord Rama (usually held in March or April).

Shri Krishna Janmashtami

Celebration of Lord Krishna's birthday (at midnight, usually in August).

Shri Ganesh Pooja

Worship of Lord Ganesh (August – September).

Navaratri

Nine nights to worship Power in order to destroy the evil (usually in October).

Diwali

The Festival of Lights and welcoming the new year (usually in November).

Holi

The Festival of Colours: to welcome the spring season, people rejoice by throwing colours at one another (usually in March).

Vaisakhi

Celebrated in the Punjabi community (usually in April).

Community

The caste system applies to the social pattern of Hindus, especially the social structure in India. A priest or a Pundit usually belongs to the Brahmin caste, but not necessarily. Priests are also appointed according to education, knowledge or authority in religious matters. There is no institution or organised hierarchy of priests in the Hindu faith as in comparison with other religions. A priest, either a man or a woman, may have some other job as well. He or

she leads in the temple and in communal worship, assists in explaining scripture etc, and officiates in the rites.

The caste system, as already indicated, refers to social divisions. It is integral to the belief of the Hindu, in the cycle of rebirths occurring in consequence of one's deeds. The structure of an exclusive and hierarchical caste system developed into a rigid social structure in medieval India. Hence a person's social and occupational status as well as the potentialities of a religious and spiritual career often be traced to the caste one belonged to. A rigid caste-awareness could have a say in the restrictions on marriage between castes, on eating, and other matters of social intercourse.

Such customs are rigid in the rural parts of India, but there are signs of rapid change and reformation thanks to education and natural changes that occur with the passing of time. In Britain, the differences are becoming increasingly blurred.

The Hindu Community around Calderdale.

The Shree Lakshmi Narayan Hindu Temple in Bradford, West Yorkshire is the largest Hindu temple in Northern England.

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