

Study Guide for Students
The Hindu Traditions: A Concise Introduction

Introduction: Hinduism in Time and Space

Overview of the Chapter

As a phenomenon of human culture, Hinduism occupies a particular place in time and space. To begin our study of this phenomenon, it is essential to situate it temporally and spatially. We begin by considering how the concept of Hinduism arose in the modern era as a way to designate a purportedly coherent system of beliefs and practices. Since this initial construction has proven inadequate to the realities of the Hindu religious terrain, we adopt “the Hindu traditions” as a more satisfactory alternative. The phrase “Hindu traditions” calls attention to the great diversity of practices and beliefs that can be described as “Hindu.” Those traditions are deeply rooted in history and have flourished almost exclusively on the Indian Subcontinent within a rich cultural and religious context.

Key Terms

Abrahamic traditions
Bhārata
Brahmins
Buddhism
Durga (Durgā)
Hindoo
Hindustan
Hindūtvā
Jainism
Parsis
pandit
Punjab (Panjab)
sanātana dharma
Shankaracharya, Adi (Śankarācārya, Ādi)
Shiva (Śiva)
Sikhism
Sindhu
tilak
Vedas
Vishnu
Zoroastrianism

Questions for Review

- Explain the development of the idea of Hinduism.
- Why is “Hinduism” a problematic concept? Why might “the Hindu traditions” be considered a more adequate alternative?

- Why do most Hindus live in India?
- What aspects of Indian culture may have contributed to (or been produced by) the Hindu appreciation of diversity and tolerance?

Questions for Further Reflection

- Why might persons interested in controlling others be concerned with understanding their religion?
- Why might Hindus have lacked a specific word for their religion prior to the creation of the word Hinduism?
- What is the value of determining a religion's "essence"?
- Can a single religion embrace monotheism, polytheism, and atheism?

1. The Indus Valley Civilization

Overview of the Chapter

What came to be called Hinduism was an amalgamation of beliefs and practices from several sources. This chapter focuses on the first of the two major contributors: the Indus Valley Civilization. In subsequent chapters we will focus on the second: the Indo-Aryans. The discovery of the Indus Valley Civilization in the nineteenth century revealed a sophisticated and long-forgotten ancient culture that appears to have contributed to the development of the Hindu traditions. In this chapter, we examine the architectural ruins and artifacts left by this civilization and contemplate their import for its inhabitants and for subsequent Hindu history. This examination reveals that the Indus Valley religion focused on maintaining ritual purity and the appropriation of divine powers to assist in reproduction and the maintenance of life. Finally, we introduce the Indo-Aryans with a brief discussion of their relationship to the dwellers of the Indus Valley.

Key Terms

Aryan question
 Aryans (Āryans) Harappa (Harappā)
 Indus Valley Civilization
 Indo-Aryan (Indo-Āryans)
 Mahayogi (Mahāyogi)
 Mohenjo Daro
 mother goddess
 Out of India theory
 Pakistan
 Pashupati
 ritual purity and pollution
 sacred
 swastika (svastika)

Questions for Review

- What is ritual purity and how does it differ from hygiene?
- Which aspects of the Indus Valley Civilization's religious practice may be present in the later Hindu traditions?
- How did the Indus Valley dwellers depict male and female sexuality?
- What evidence suggests that the Harappans venerated a mother goddess?
- What are the possible causes of the Indus Valley Civilization's decline?
- How have the Harappans' and Indo-Aryans' ambiguous origins been used to support the objectives of modern political movements?

Questions for Further Reflection

- Why do you think sexuality—whether it is being restrained or celebrated—is so important in religious practice?
- What social, political, and religious functions do symbols serve? Can a symbol itself become powerful, apart from the reality it represents? Consider the origin of the swastika and the meaning it attained as an emblem of the Nazi Party.
- Why is it important to theorize about an ancient culture, even when there is too little evidence to reach definite conclusions? What are the dangers of such theories?

2. The Noble Ones

Overview of the Chapter

Linguistic and textual analysis has conclusively shown that the people who occupied northwestern India (present-day Pakistan) and eastern Iran prior to the Axial Age were closely related, spoke similar languages, and held common religious beliefs. Most scholars think that these Indo-Iranians descended from the pastoral nomads who originated in the central Asian steppes. A small minority, however, believe that these people were indigenous to India. Following the view of the majority of scholars, this chapter explores the culture and religion of the Indo-Iranians prior to their split into two separate groups. The Rig-Veda and the Avesta, which later became foundational scriptures of Hinduism and Zoroastrianism, respectively, give us a glimpse of the Indo-Iranians' gods, their social and moral structures, their cosmology, and their ritual practices. Essentially, the Indo-Iranians' religion provided them the means to attain the goods necessary for a prosperous and stable life on earth. The gods were entreated for help in maintaining productivity and harmony in the here and now rather than to secure otherworldly salvation.

Key Terms

ahuras
 airyana waējah
 ariya
 Aryavarta

asha
 asuras
 Avesta
 Avestan
 deva
 daeva
 Dyaoš
 Dyaus-Pitr
 haoma
 Indo-Aryan
 Indo-Iranians
 Indra
 Irano-Aryans
 libation
 Mazda
 Mithra
 rita (rtá)
 Sanskrit
 soma
 Soul of the Bull (Geush Urvan)
 Varuna
 yajña
 yasna
 Zoroaster

Questions for Review

- What was soma or haoma, and what was its role in Indo-Iranian religion?
- In what ways are warrior-god Indra's ascendance and popularity related to cultural changes in Indo-Iranian society?
- Consider the societal structure of the early Indo-Iranians. How did this structure change as the peaceful, nomadic culture gave way to the heroic age of raiding?
- Why did Ahura Mazda attain such great significance for the Iranians but not the Indo-Aryans?
- What was rita or asha, and what role did this principle play in the Indo-Iranian worldview and religious practice?
- What was the Soul of the Bull, and what function did the Indo-Iranians believe it played in animal sacrifice? What does this divine being's place in Indo-Iranian theology suggest about the Aryans' relationship with animal life?

Questions for Further Reflection

- Does morality play an inherent role in religion? Why or why not?
- Why is ritual such an important aspect of the world's religions?

3. The World of the Vedas

Overview of the Chapter

Although the idea of an Aryan conquest of India is now disputed, the influence of the Aryans on Indian religion is undeniable. In this chapter, we begin to explore the Aryan contributions to the emergence of Hindu traditions. Our guide to these investigations is the rich collection of Aryan texts known as the Vedas, today regarded by Hindus as their most sacred and authoritative scripture. We can learn much about the Aryans' beliefs and practices by examining how these ancient texts envisioned the world and its creation, portrayed the functions of the gods and goddesses, and explored the nature and destiny of human beings. For a full understanding of the Vedic world we must also discuss the different kinds of ritual practices and consider the relationships among ritual, myth, and caste.

Key Terms

Agni
 apotropaic
 Atharvan
 Atharva-Veda
 atman (ātman)
 aum (or om)
 Brahman
 Brahmin
 evil eye
 Five Tribes
 ghee
 griha rites
 henotheism
 House of Clay
 Kubera
 manas
 mantra
 Prāvnava (Pravnavā)
 Purusha (Puruśa)
 rishis (rsis)
 Rudra
 Sama-Veda
 samhitas (samhitās)
 shrauta (śrauta) ritual
 shruti (śruti)
 Surya (Sūrya)
 Svarga
 sympathetic magic
 triloka (trīloka)

Ushas
 Vak
 Vritra (Vṛtra)
 Yajur-Veda
 Yama

Questions for Review

- Why have the Vedas never been widely read in India?
- How do the Vedic devas and devis differ from the god described by Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam)? What features do they share?
- What role does the concept of rita play in Vedic religion?
- Which aspects of Hindu theology suggest great reverence for oral language?
- What do the Vedas suggest about the Aryans' beliefs on life, death, and the afterlife?
- What are shrauta rituals, and what did sacrificers wish to accomplish by having these rites performed?

Questions for Further Reflection

- How do the Vedas compare and contrast to other scriptural traditions in the world's religions?
- What purposes are served by conceiving the great forces in life as personal beings?
- Why do you think creation and destruction are often linked together in cultural myth, as in the story of the Purusha?
- What makes a place sacred? Does the location's privacy or publicity affect this?

4. Rebirth and Karma

Overview of the Chapter

Philosopher Karl Jaspers termed the period from approximately 800 to 200 B.C.E. the Axial Age, a pivotal point of change for the foundations of spiritual practices throughout the Eurasian continent. Most pertinent to our discussion is the emergence of classical Hinduism in India. As the Axial Age took hold in the subcontinent, the emphasis on ritual gave way to a theology more concerned with the final human destiny. We will discuss new concepts, distinct from the Vedic tradition and key to classical Hinduism, in the Upanishads, a Hindu scripture revered as shruti, and the philosophy of Vedanta, the end of the Vedas. We will also look at the development of such ideas as reincarnation, samsara, and karma.

Key Terms

Axial Age
 ethicization
 fruiting of karma

karma
 Nachitekas
 redeath
 reincarnation
 samsara (samsāra)
 transmigration of the soul
 Upanishads (Upaniśads)
 Vedanta (Vedānta)
 Yama

Questions for Review

- What changes in Indo-Aryan society and culture contributed to the advent of the Axial Age in India?
- Which aspects of Vedic ritual came under criticism during the Axial Age?
- How does the story of Yama and Nachiketas reflect the changes in Indian thought taking place at this time?
- What are the Upanishads, and what is their relationship to the Vedas?
- How did the concept of karma develop from the Vedic period to the Axial Age?

Questions for Further Reflection

- In the tale of Yama and Nachiketas, the young Brahmin claims that wealth and prosperity “weaken the power of life.” If material possessions are ultimately unimportant, what does this suggest the highest goods of life may be?
- How does shruti compare and contrast to concepts of revealed knowledge in other religious traditions?
- What are the consequences for humanity if existence is driven by desire?

5. Dharma and Caste

Overview of the Chapter

In addition to new ideas about the nature of life, the Hindu traditions were also defined by evolving social arrangements. This chapter discusses the social foundations of Hindu life, as does the next chapter on gender and the life cycle. We will observe how the relatively simple stratification of Aryan society transmuted into the exceedingly complex caste system. Spurred by the same dynamics that prompted speculation about the nature and destiny of human beings, what was once a division of labor became more deeply embedded into the Hindu social and religious fabric. Rules regulating appropriate behavior within and between castes were developed and joined to the emerging ideas about the soul. These regulations had—and have—tremendous impact on Hindu social life, governing not only one’s work but also matters such as marriage, diet, and hygiene.

Key Terms

Ambedkar, B. R. Brahmin
 caste
 Dharma-Shastras (Dharma-Śāstras)
 Dalits
 dharma
 harijans
 jati (jāti)
 Kshatriyas (kśatriyas)
 Laws of Manu
 once-born (advija)
 outcaste
 Shudras (śūdras)
 twice-born (dvijas)
 untouchable
 Vaishyas (vaiśyas)
 varna

Questions for Review

- What are the social and cosmological consequences of failing to fulfill one's dharma?
- How do the concepts of karma and dharma support the perpetuation of the caste system?
- In what ways are dharma and rita similar? How are they different?
- Could the caste system function without Hinduism? Could Hinduism exist without the caste system?
- What aspects of Indian society are dictated by varna?
- How do the duties of each varna help uphold the caste system?

Questions for Further Reflection

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of basing social structure and hierarchy in religious practice or spiritual attainment? What are the advantages and disadvantages of basing social structure and hierarchy in wealth and fame?
- Are there analogues to untouchables in other cultures?
- The legal abolition of untouchability has failed to end discrimination against Dalits; what might put an end to this practice?
- India's society has remained essentially unchanged for more than two millennia. What cultural and economic consequences might be the result of such a stable society?

6. Men, Women, and the Stages of Life

Overview of the Chapter

As with caste, specific patterns of behavior for men and women became a facts of daily life during the classical period. In this chapter, we will examine the traditional stages of life for men and women in Indian society. The Laws of Manu set out four orders, or

ashramas, for males: student, householder, hermit, and renouncer. Although the Laws of Manu do not name specific stages for females, they do set forth rules governing the female life cycle in terms of a woman's dependence on her father, husband, and sons. Thus, the three stages of life for Hindu women—girlhood, marriage, and widowhood—are characterized by the men upon whom they are dependent.

Key Terms

ashrama (āśrama)
 bindi
 brahmacarya
 dowry
 forest dweller
 guru
 householder (grīhastha)
 Lalla (Lalleshwari, Lal Ded)
 sannyasa (sannyāsa)
 sannyasin (sannyāsin)
 sati (satī)
 sindura
 stridharma (strīdharma)
 upanayana (upanāyana)

Questions for Review

- Like caste, specific patterns of behavior for men and for women became a daily fact of life during the emergence of classical Hinduism. How do caste responsibilities and gender roles intersect to determine the expected stages of life for Hindus?
- According to the Laws of Manu, what are the four asramas, or orders, which males undergo? What are the three stages of life for women?
- What roles do ritual and ceremony play in the transitions from one life stage to another?
- How might a life of renunciation help a Hindu better understand atman and Brahman?
- How do the Indian and Western perspectives on marriage differ? How are they similar?
- What is the Hindu household dynamic like throughout the various life stages for men and women?

Questions for Further Reflection

- What are the social and personal benefits to envisioning the final stage of life as one of renunciation?
- Are there advantages to making marriage a family decision rather than simply an individual one?
- What are the possible benefits of a learning environment in which students cannot criticize their teachers? What are the benefits of a learning environment in which students are encouraged to be critical of their teacher's lessons?

- Do you think the traditional stages of life for men and women could be compatible with gender equality in Indian society?
- How does the Hindu concept of feminine purity and “auspiciousness” compare to Western religious and cultural views on female sexuality?
- Many religious traditions besides Hinduism encourage a life of renunciation. What are the possible spiritual benefits of living outside of normal society, regardless of faith?

7. The Way of Action

Overview of the Chapter

In the classical era, Hindus defined the fundamental problem of existence as samsara, the cycle of continual transmigrations of the soul. As Hindu history unfolded, three traditions emerged as ways to reckon with this problem. This chapter focuses on the first of the three ways, the path of action; subsequent chapters will cover the other two. The path of action is the most important religious discipline for the majority of Hindus. The principal feature of this form of spirituality is the performance of meritorious religious deeds, including rituals, festivals, and pilgrimage.

Key Terms

bhakti-marga
 darshan (darśan)
 four goods of life
 gayatri-mantra (gāyatrī-mantra)
 Holi
 jñāna-marga
 karma-marga (karma-mārga)
 kolam
 moksha (mokśa)
 namkaran
 Thai Pongal
 prashad (praśad)
 puja
 samskaras
 saptapadi (saptapadī)
 shraddha (śrāddha)
 tarpana
 Trimarga (Trīmārga)
 yatra (yātrā)

Questions for Review

- Why is samsara the “central problem of life” for Hindus?
- What are the three paths of the Trimarga?

- Why do most Hindus choose the path of action, even though following the karma-marga will keep one's soul bound to the cycle of reincarnation?
- What are the four goods of Hindu tradition? What are the consequences of pursuing each of these goods?
- How can attending religious festivals and making pilgrimages garner positive karma?

Questions for Further Reflection

- What is the value of continuing to observe rituals associated with the life of a deceased individual well after his or her funeral?
- Why might the Western perspective on reincarnation be much more idealistic than the Hindu belief in samsara?
- What social and cultural functions are served by marking life transitions with ceremony?
- Do worldly obligations and pleasures inherently hinder spirituality?

8. The Way of Knowledge

Overview of the Chapter

The way of knowledge is rooted in the philosophical speculation and ascetic experimentation of the early classical period in Hindu history. This spirituality came to focus on discovering the true essence of the human being and the fundamental principle of the whole of reality. The Upanishads, the collection of texts in which this path was first recorded, declare that to know the human essence is to know absolute reality. On this basic vision was founded not only a discipline for liberation, but also a powerful philosophical perspective that deeply influenced many of the Hindu traditions.

Key Terms

Advaita Vedanta
 apophatic theology
 asceticism
 ashram
 atman (ātman)
 Brahman
 jñāna
 negative theology
 nirguna
 shramanas

Questions for Review

- How did the concepts of atman and Brahman change from the early Vedic period to the emergence of the classical era?

- What is atman? How is it similar to the concepts of mind, spirit, and consciousness? How is it different?
- What is maya? How does it help perpetuate the cycle of reincarnation?
- When trying to understand ultimate reality, why might an apophatic, or negative, approach work better than positive theology?
- How does renunciation help followers of the jñāna-marga understand the truth?

Questions for Further Reflection

- What are the theological advantages and disadvantages of conceiving ultimate reality as devoid of all qualities and characteristics?
- From whence does thought arise?
- Is it possible that there is no human essence?
- What are the consequences of conceiving the ultimate and the self as the same, rather than distinct from one another?

9. Seeing God

Overview of the Chapter

Because of its many gods and the prominence of images in its worship, early Western interpreters generally regarded Hinduism as a crude and hopelessly idolatrous religion. This view still lingers in the Western imagination, due in no small measure to basic misunderstandings of the nature of Hindu theism and iconography. In this chapter, we will explore the dynamics of Hindu theism in theory and practice. We shall see how the immense pantheon of the Hindu traditions and devotion to images actually militate against idolatry, the confusion of the absolute with the relative. We will also explore some of the various rituals associated with worship. The god Shiva, one of the most widely revered Hindu deities, will be the focus for our investigations.

Key Terms

aniconic
 arati
 Ardhanarishvara (Ardhanārīśvara)
 bhakti
 Ganesha
 Ganga (Gangā)
 iconic
 idolatry
 lingam
 Mahayogi
 murti
 Nataraja (Natarāja)
 puja (pūjā)

saguna Brahman
Shakti (śakti)

Questions for Review

- What are iconic and aniconic images? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each kind of depiction?
- Why do anthropomorphic images of the devas often include distinctly non-human features?
- How can Hinduism be both monotheistic and polytheistic?
- What is the difference between nirguna and saguna Brahman?
- How can venerating divine images actually prevent idolatry?
- What might be the consequences of venerating only mental images of God, such as anthropomorphic metaphors?

Questions for Further Reflection

- Is it ultimately important to try to understand the divine – that which is beyond human conception?
- What spiritual needs are met through worship that engages all of the senses?
- How could conceptualizing God as gendered affect the relationship between deity and devotee?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of worshipping a god with human-like characteristics?

10. The Way of Devotion

Overview of the Chapter

Hinduism offers multiple paths for reaching divine reality because different people require different spiritualities. Previously, we have explored two such paths, the ways of action and knowledge. In this chapter, we will look at a third, the path of bhakti, or devotion. Oriented towards faith in a personal deity of choice, the path of devotion is a road to god heavily traversed by Hindus. Our introduction to bhakti practice will be through one of the most important and beloved of Hindu texts, the Bhagavad-Gita. This wonderful story of a warrior's dilemma and the counsel of the god Krishna has been a treasure trove of spiritual enrichment for centuries.

Key Terms

adharna
Arjuna
avatars (avatāras)
Bhagavad Gita (Bhagavad-Gītā)
bhakti

Gita Govinda
 International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)
 Krishna
 Mahabharata (Mahābhārata)
 Puranas (Purānas)
 Radha
 Ramayana (Rāmāyana)
 smṛiti
 Trimurti (Trimūrti)

Questions for Review

- Why might the bhakti-marga, the path of passionate devotion to god, be more widely followed and accompanied by more popular literature than the path of knowledge?
- At the end of the Bhagavad Gita, Arjuna claims that his doubts about going to war have been dispelled by Krishna's teachings and manifestation as god. As a reader, do you find Krishna as persuasive as Arjuna did?
- How does the Bhagavad Gita explore the relationships between the ways of action, knowledge, and devotion?
- Why is Arjuna's conflict and his subsequent dialogue with Krishna so relatable to Hindus across age, caste, and gender boundaries?
- How is smṛiti different from śruti? Why do you think the Gita, a work of smṛiti, is more popular and well-read than śruti like the Vedas and Upanisads?

Questions for Further Reflection

- What are the benefits of a religious approach that offers many avenues for spiritual fulfillment?
- Is it possible to have a religious experience without devotion?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of studying a sacred text from a historical and literary standpoint, without the insights and biases of spiritual interpretation?

11. The Goddess and Her Devotees

Overview of the Chapter

Worship of the goddess is a long-established tradition in India. In this chapter, we study the essential features of goddess worship, which is known as Shaktism. We will examine the principal manifestations of the goddess as consorts to the great gods and as the autonomous devis. In discussing how concepts of the divine female function in relation to divine males, we will see that the feminine energy revealed by the goddess is essential to Hindu theology. The chapter also explores the practices and concepts of Tantra, an esoteric yogic discipline usually associated with Devi, the origins of which may date to the Indus Valley Civilization.

Key Terms

cool goddess
 Durga
 grama-devata
 hot goddess
 Kali
 kundalini (kundalinī)
 Lakshmi
 Mahadevi
 Mata, Ma, Amman
 Navaratri
 Panchamakara (The Five Ms)
 Parvati
 Sarasvati
 shakti
 Shaktism
 Tantras
 Tantrism
 Thags

Questions for Review

- What are the distinguishing features of “cool” and “hot” goddesses, respectively?
- Why do images of devis often appear alone, while devas are rarely depicted without their female counterparts?
- What is shakti? How is this principle related to shiva?
- What is “left-handed” Tantra? How is this practice used to inspire spiritual growth?
- How is tantric ritualized sex a form of worshiping the goddess?
- Why are the goddesses’ manifestations often more powerful than those of the gods?

Questions for Further Reflection

- What are the potential dangers and benefits of indulging in sensual pleasure for spiritual purposes?
- How might a goddess’s childlessness affect her image as a mother of all creation?
- What purposes are served by venerating the destructive and monstrous manifestations of divine power, in addition to the creative and benevolent aspects?

12. The Modern Period

Overview of the Chapter

The greatest challenges for the Hindu traditions in the modern era have come as the result of forces from beyond India’s borders. Islam, which was introduced into India in the medieval period, has had a long and highly ambivalent relationship with the indigenous

Hindu traditions. Likewise, Hindus' interactions with the British, who colonized India in the eighteenth century, have been both positive and negative. Now that Hindu perspectives and practices have begun to move beyond the subcontinent into the West, they have been met with a similar ambivalence.

Key Terms

Akbar, Jalāl ud-Dīn Muhammad
 Arya Samaj (Ārya Samāj)
 Bhaktivedanta, A. C.
 Brahma Samāj
 Delhi
 Gandhi, Mohandas K.
 Jinnah, Muhammad Ali
 Kabir (Kabīr)
 Kolkata (Calcutta)
 Maharishi Mahesh Yogi
 Mughals
 Rajneesh, Bhagwan Sri
 Ramadan
 Roy, Rammohun
 Sarasvati, Dayananda
 sati (satī)
 satyāgraha
 shirk
 Sikhism
 Vivekananda
 westernization
 World's Parliament of Religions

Questions for Review

- Why have the Muslim and Hindu communities often been in tension with one another throughout India's history? Are there any notable exceptions to this conflict?
- Why were the Sufis so successful in converting Hindus to Islam?
- Are you convinced by the Two-Nation Theory, as presented by Muhammad Ali Jinnah? Why or why not?
- How did industrialization and urbanization under British colonialism challenge traditional Hindu practices and beliefs?
- What are the Brahma Samaj and the Arya Samaj? How do these Hindu movements represent different responses to the British presence in India?
- How has Hindu influence been received in the West?

Questions for Further Reflection

- Is it possible for vastly different religious communities truly to understand one another?

- What are the advantages and disadvantages for a state that encourages the separation of religious and political affairs? What are the advantages and disadvantages for a state in which religion and politics are inseparable?
- Do you agree or disagree with Gandhi's belief that the end never justifies evil means?
- What are the consequences of a fundamentalist interpretation of sacred scripture?
- Westernization has had a profound impact on the world's religious, cultural, and political landscape. Do you think Western influence has been primarily positive or negative?