

HINDUISM

The term Hinduism refers to the civilization of the Hindus (originally, the inhabitants of the land of the Indus River). Introduced in about 1830 by British writers, it properly denotes the Indian civilization of approximately the last 2,000 years, which evolved from Vedism the religion of the Indo-European peoples who settled in India in the last centuries of the 2nd millennium BC.

The spectrum that ranges from the level of popular Hindu belief to that of elaborate ritual technique and philosophical speculation is very broad and is attended by many stages of transition and varieties of coexistence. Magic rites, animal worship, and belief in demons are often combined with the worship of more or less personal gods or with mysticism, asceticism, and abstract and profound theological systems or esoteric doctrines. The worship of local deities does not exclude the belief in pan-Indian higher gods or even in a single high God. Such local deities are also frequently looked down upon as manifestations of a high God.

In principle, Hinduism incorporates all forms of belief and worship without necessitating the selection or elimination of any. It is axiomatic that no religious idea in India ever dies or is superseded—it is merely combined with the new ideas that arise in response to it. Hindus are inclined to revere the divine in every manifestation, whatever it may be, and are doctrinally tolerant, allowing others — including both Hindus and non-Hindus — whatever beliefs suit them best. A Hindu may embrace a non-Hindu religion without ceasing to be a Hindu, and because Hindus are disposed to think synthetically and to regard other forms of worship, strange gods, and divergent doctrines as inadequate rather than wrong or objectionable, they tend to believe that the highest divine powers are complement one another. Few religious ideas are considered to be irreconcilable. The core of religion does not depend on the existence or nonexistence of God or on whether there is one god or many. Because religious truth is said to transcend all verbal definition, it is not conceived in dogmatic terms. Moreover, the tendency of Hindus to distinguish themselves from others on the basis of practice rather than doctrine further de-emphasizes doctrinal differences.

Hinduism is both a civilization and a congregation of religions; it has neither a beginning or founder, nor a central authority, hierarchy, or organization. Hindus believe in an uncreated, eternal, infinite, transcendent, and all-embracing principle, which, "comprising in itself being and non-being," is the sole reality, the ultimate cause and foundation, source, and goal of all existence. This ultimate reality is called Brahman. As the All, Brahman causes the universe and all beings to emanate from itself, transforms itself into the universe, or assumes it's appearance. Brahman is in all things and is the Self (atman) of all living beings. Brahman is the creator, preserver, or transformer and reabsorber of everything. Although it is Being in itself, without attributes and qualities and hence impersonal, it may also be conceived of as a personal high God, usually as Vishnu (Visnu) or Siva. This fundamental belief in and the essentially religious search for ultimate reality — that is, the One is the All — have continued almost unaltered for more than 30 centuries and has been the central focus of India's spiritual life.

In some perceptions, Hinduism has been called 'atheistic'. In other perceptions, and this is perhaps the more common one, it is labeled 'polytheistic'. The term 'polytheism' acknowledges the presence of a God-figure in a religious system, but in the plural. Thus it is said that Hindus worship many such beings we call God. But obviously this implies a very profound difference in the understanding of what such a 'God' could be. It is often said that Hindus worship three gods and they are in fact called the 'Hindu Trinity'. The gods involved are: Brahma, Visnu and Siva. The first is supposed to create the world (at the beginning of each cosmic cycle), the second to maintain it in being, and Siva, at the end of a cosmic cycle, to destroy it again. But then a further idea is added which is ignored by the proponents of the theory of a Hindu Trinity. What is added

invariably implies that, over and above these three figures lies a single reality. This 'one above the three' controls the activities of the creation etc. Brahma and the others, who carry out these functions, are merely manifestations of that highest being, or they relate to it in some other, equally secondary, form. This concept of a single, all powerful, eternal, personal and loving God, is the concept of "Bhagavan".

But who is this Hindu Bhagavan? At least to us the outside observers he is not one, but many. Siva, Visnu, Krsna, Rama, Karttikeya and Ganesa may be mentioned as the most important Bhagavan figures. But to speak of many Bhagavans has nothing to do with 'polytheism', for in terms of Indian society, different groups have their one and only Bhagavan. In most cases a particular Bhagavan-figure may look the same as deva. By 'looking the same' is meant here: possessing the same external characteristics (including name) and having the same or very similar stories told by his mythical deeds. From this follows that the individual (or, in practice, far more often, the group to which he belongs, and this is more frequently by birth than by choice) makes a decision as to how to regard such a figure. Visnu could thus be the Bhagavan for some people, a minor manifestation of Siva for others, a godling for a third group, possibly an evil demonic being for a fourth and Isvara for a fifth. But this does not mean that every single religious individual in India ends up with a Bhagavan.

Although those Hindus who particularly worship either Vishnu or Shiva generally consider one or the other as their 'favorite god' and as the Lord and Brahman in its personal aspect, Vishnu is often regarded as a special manifestation of the preservative aspect of the Supreme and Shiva as that of the destructive function. Another deity, Brahma, the creator, remains in the background as a demiurge. These three great figures (Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva) constitute the so-called Hindu Trinity (Trimuriti, "the One or Whole with Three Forms). This conception attempts to synthesize and harmonize the conviction that the Supreme Power is singular with the plurality of gods in daily religious worship. Although the concept of the Trimurti assigns a position of special importance to some great gods, it never has become a living element in the religion of the people.

Brahma, the first of the three Hindu gods, is called the Creator; he is the father of gods and men, the Vedic Prajapati, the lord of creators. The term is used for the Absolute, or the Ultimate Principle, beyond which nothing exists or has any reality. In the Upanishads, Brahma is said to be beyond all description.

"This universe was enveloped in darkness - unperceived, indistinguishable, undiscoverable, unknowable, as it were, entirely sunk in sleep. The irresistible self existent lord, undiscerned, creating this universe with the five elements, and all other things, was manifested dispelling the gloom. he who is beyond the cognizance of the senses, subtle, indiscernible, eternal, who is the essence of all things, and inconceivable, himself shone forth. He, desiring, seeking to produce various creatures from his own body, first created the waters, and deposited in them a seed. This (seed) became a golden egg, resplendent as the sun, in which he himself was born as Brahma, the progenitor of all worlds. The waters are called nara, because they are the offspring of Nara; and since they were formerly the place of his movement (ayana), he is therefore called Narayana. Being formed by that First Cause, indiscernible, eternal, which is both existent and non-existent, that male is known in the world as Brahma. That lord having continued a year in the egg, divided it into two parts by his mere thought." In the Mahabharata and some of the Puranas, Brahma is said to have issued from a lotus that sprang from the navel of Vishnu.

In picture Brahma is represented as a red man with four heads, though in the Puranas he is said to have had originally five. He is dressed in white raiment, and rides upon a goose. In one hand he carries a staff, in the other a dish for receiving alms. A legend in the "Matsya Purana", gives the following account of the formation of his numerous heads :- "Brahma formed from his own immaculate substance a female who is celebrated under the names of Satarupa, Savitri,

Sarasvati, Gayatri, and Brahmani. Beholding his daughter, born from his body, Brahma became wounded with the arrows of love and exclaimed, 'How surpassingly lovely she is !' Satarupa turned to the right side from his gaze; but as Brahma wished to look after her, a second head issued from his body. As she passed to the left, and behind him, to avoid his amorous glances, two other heads successively appeared. At length she sprang into the sky; and as Brahma was anxious to gaze after her there, a fifth head was immediately formed".

At present times Brahma is not largely worshipped by the Hindus. It is said that the universe will come to an end at the end of Brahma's life, but Brahmas too are innumerable, and a new universe is reborn with each new Brahma.

VISHNU is called the second person of the Hindu Trimuriti or Trinity: but though called second, it must not be supposed that he is regarded as in any way inferior to Brahma. In some books Brahma is said to be the first cause of all things, in others it is as strongly asserted that Vishnu has this honour; while in others it is claimed for Siva. As Brahma's special work is creation, that of Vishnu is preservation. In the following passage from the "Padma Purana", it is taught that Vishnu is the supreme cause, thus identifying him with Brahma, and also that his special work is to preserve:

" In the beginning of creation, the great Vishnu, desirous of creating the whole world, became threefold ; Creator, Preserver, Destroyer. In order to create this world, the Supreme Spirit produced from the right side of his body himself as Brahma ; then, in order to preserve the world, he produced from his left side Vishnu ; and in order to destroy the world, he produced from the middle of his body the eternal Shiva Some worship Brahma, others Vishnu, others Shiva ; but Vishnu, one yet threefold, creates, preserves, and destroys : therefore let the pious makes no difference between the three."

In pictures Vishnu is represented as a black man with four arms : in one hand he holds a club ; in another a shell ; in a third a chakra, or discus, with which he slew his enemies ; and in the fourth a lotus. He rides upon the bird Garuda, and is dressed in yellow robes.

This deity is worshipped not only under the name and in the form of Vishnu, but also in one of his many incarnations. Whenever any great calamity occurred in the world, or the wickedness of any of its inhabitants proved an unbearable nuisance to the gods, Vishnu, as Preserver, had to lay aside his invisibility, come to earth in some form, generally human, and, when his work was done, he returned again to the skies. There is no certainty as to the number of times he has become incarnate. Ten is the commonly received number, and these are the most important ones. Of these ten, nine have already been accomplished ; one, the Kalki, is still future. "Some of these Avatars are of an entirely cosmical character ; others, however, are probably based on historical events, the leading personage of which was gradually endowed with divine attributes, until he was regarded as the incarnation of the deity himself." These are Fish (Matsya), Tortoise (Kurma), Boar (Varaha), Man-Lion (Narasimha), Dwarf (Vamana), Rama-with-the-Ax (Parasurama), King Rama, Krishna, Buddha, and the future incarnation, Kalki. Preference for any one of these manifestations is largely a matter of tradition. Thus, Rama and Krishna are the preferred ones.

The classical narrative of Rama is recounted in the Ramayana by the sage Valmiki, who is the traditional author of the epic. Rama is deprived of the kingdom to which he is heir and is exiled to the forest with his wife Sita and his brother Lakshmana. While there, Sita is abducted by Ravana, the demon king of Lanka. In their search for Sita, the brothers ally themselves with a monkey king whose general, Hanuman (who later became a monkey deity), finds Sita in Lanka. In a cosmic battle, Ravana is defeated and Sita rescued. When Rama is restored to his kingdom, Sita's chastity while captive is doubted. To reassure them, Rama banishes Sita to a hermitage, where she bears him two sons and eventually dies by reentering

the earth from which she had been born. Rama's reign becomes the prototype of the harmonious and just kingdom, to which all kingdoms should aspire. Rama and Sita set the ideal of conjugal love; Rama's relationship to his father is the ideal of filial love; and Rama and Laksmana represent perfect fraternal love. In all but its oldest form, the Ramayana identifies Rama with Vishnu as another incarnation and remains the principle source for Ramaism (worship of Rama).

In the Mahabharata, Krishna is primarily a hero, a chieftain of a tribe, and an ally of the Pandavas, the heroes of the Mahabharata. He accomplishes heroic feats with the Pandava prince Arjuna. Typically he helps the Pandava brothers to settle in their kingdom, and when the kingdom is taken from them, to regain it. In the process he emerges as a great teacher who reveals the Bhagavadgita, the most important religious text of Hinduism. In the further development of the Krishna myth, it is found that as a child, Krishna was full of boyish pranks and well known for his predilection for milk and butter. He would raid the dairies of the gopis (milkmaids) to steal fruit, milk, and butter, and would accuse others for his misdeeds.

Krishna is the most celebrated deity of the Hindu pantheon. He is worshipped as an independent god in his own right, but is also regarded as the eighth incarnation of Vishnu. In the course of life he was supposed to have had 16,108 wives and 180,008 sons. In the epic he is a hero, a leader of his people, and an active helper of his friends.

Shiva is the third person of the Hindu Trinity. As Brahma was Creator, Vishnu Preserver, in order to complete the system, as all things are subject to decay, a Destroyer was necessary and destruction is regarded as the peculiar work of Siva. It must be remembered that, according to the teachings of Hinduism, death is not death in the sense of passing into non-existence, but simply a change into a new form of life. He who destroys, therefore, causes beings to assume new phases of existence - the Destroyer is really the re-Creator; hence the name Siva, the Bright or Happy One, is given to him, which would not have been the case had he been regarded as the destroyer, in the ordinary meaning of that term.

According to the ancient Indians, Shiva primarily must have been the divine representative of the fallow, dangerous, dubious, and much-to-be-feared aspects of nature. He is considered as the ultimate foundation of all existence and the source and ruler of all life, but it is not clear whether, Shiva is invoked as a great god of frightful aspect, capable of conquering impious power, or as the boon-giving Lord and protector. He is both terrible and mild, creator and agent of reabsorption, eternal rest and ceaseless activity. These contradictions make him an ironic figure, who transcends humanity and assumes a mysterious grandeur of his own. His myths describe him as the absolute mighty unique One, who is not responsible to anybody or for anything. As a dancer, his pose expresses the eternal rhythm of the universe; he also catches the waters of the heavenly Ganges River, which destroys all sin; and he wears in his headdress the crescent moon, which drips the nectar of everlasting life. Sometimes in the act of trampling on or destroying demons, he wears around his black neck a serpent, and a necklace of skulls, furnished with a whole apparatus of external emblems, such as a white bull on which he rides, a trident, tiger's skin, elephant's skin, rattle, noose, etc. He has three eyes, one being on his forehead, in reference either to the three Vedas, or time past, present and future and in the end of time, he will dance the universe to destruction.

It is said that without his consort Mother Goddess, no Hindu god is much use or value to anyone. He may strut about, but his powers are limited. To be complete he requires a Devi, "Goddess," who takes many different names and forms, but always embodies Shakti. In some myths Devi is the prime mover, who commands the male gods to do work of creation and destruction. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, all three have their own consorts.

Sarasvati, the goddess of wisdom and science and, the mother of Vedas, is Brahma's wife. She is represented as a fair young woman, with four arms; with one of her right hands, she is presenting a flower to her husband, by whose side she continually stands ; and in the other she holds a book of palm-leaves, indicating that she is fond of learning. In one of her left hands, she has a string of pearls, called Sivamala (Shiva's garland) and in the other a small drum.

Lakshmi, or very commonly known as Sri, is the wife of Vishnu.

"Sri, the bride of Vishnu, the mother of the world, is eternal, imperishable ; as he is all-pervading, so she is omnipotent . Vishnu is meaning, she is speech ; Hari is polite, she is prudence ; Vishnu is understanding, she is intellect ; he is righteousness, she is devotion ; Sri is the earth, Hari is the support. In a word, of gods, animals, and men, Hari is all that is called male ; Lakshmi is all that is termed female ; there is nothing else than they." Lakshmi is regarded as the goddess of Love, Beauty, and Prosperity and is also known as Haripriya, "The beloved of Hari", and Lokamata, "The mother of the world".

Uma or Kali, is the consort of the Hindu god Shiva in her manifestation of the power of time. As Shiva's female consort and a destructive mother goddess, she inherits some of Shiva's most fearful aspects. She is frequently portrayed as a black, laughing, naked hag with blood stained teeth, a protruding tongue, and a garland of human skulls. She usually has four arms: One hand holds a sword, the second holds a severed human head, the third is believed by her devotees to be removing fear, and the fourth is often interpreted as granting bliss. Kali is beyond fear and finite existence and is therefore believed to be able to protect her devotees against fear and to give them limitless peace.

The canon of Hinduism is basically defined by what people do rather than what they think. Consequently, far more uniformity of behaviour than of belief is found among Hindus, although very few practices or beliefs are shared by all. A few usages are observed by almost all Hindus: reverence for Brahmans and cows; abstention from meat (especially beef); and marriage within caste (jati), in the hope of producing male heirs. Most Hindus worship Shiva, Vishnu, or the Goddess (Devi), but they also worship hundreds of additional minor deities peculiar to a particular village or even to a particular family. Although Hindus believe and do many apparently contradictory things, each individual perceives an orderly pattern that gives form and meaning to his or her own life. No doctrinal or clerical hierarchy exists in Hinduism, but the intricate hierarchy of the social system (which is inseparable from the religion) gives each person a sense of place within the whole.

