

What is Hinduism

Hinduism in English language is commonly defined as the religious and cultural tradition of Hindus. It is the oldest surviving religion in the world. It is however not just a religion, but a way of life. Hindus prefer to call their religion as "*Sanatan Dharma*". "Sanatan" means eternal and "Dharma" means natural law or righteousness.

The word "Hindu" is of Persian origin. Persians first came to India around 500 B.C. through the North-West part of India. They used the term "Hindu" to identify the inhabitants along the river Sindhu in the North-West part of India. "Sa" is pronounced as "Ha" in Persian, hence Sindhu was pronounced as Hindu. Gradually this term started to be used for most of the Indian population, barring those who belong to other religions, like Christians, Muslims Jews, etc. The term "*Hinduism*" was first used by the Orientalists, the Western scholars in early Nineteenth Century who undertook the translation of Sanskrit scriptures and reconstruction of Aryan past. Hinduism is now a global religion. It has spread out from India to several parts of the world, not because of conversion or coercion like many other religions, but because of migration of Hindus to other countries and due to its ability to attract people from other cultures.

Hinduism is unique in many respects. It does not have a single founder and there is no single historical event which can be identified as being the origin of Hinduism. There is no single holy book, like in Islam or Christianity, but has a multitude of scriptures, e.g. Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, Bhagavad Gita and epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana, which deal with the concepts, beliefs, rituals and spiritual aspects as well as the way of life. It is also unique in the sense that it has accommodated in its folds, the religious and cultural perspectives other than its own, resulting in a wider variety and practices. Thus, although there is quite a bit of diversity in the practice of Hinduism, there is unity in its concepts and beliefs and that is why Hinduism is often described as "*Unity in Diversity*".

Origin of Hinduism dates to Pre-historic era, which has involved a kind of complex assimilation of ideas from two very ancient cultures, the Indus Valley Civilisation on one hand and beliefs and practices of the Aryans on the other. Inhabitants of Indus Valley Civilisation possibly formed the religion of Indus Valley Civilisation which remains conjectural. About Aryans one theory is that they migrated to India from Central Asia around 2000 B.C. Other historians believe that India was their original homeland and Aryan culture is a development from Indus Valley Civilisation.

Thus, Hinduism seems to have developed as an amalgamation of religious faiths and rituals of various races of Indus Valley Civilisation and those of Aryans, though it is the Aryans' culture which has provided the "master narrative", absorbing and controlling other discourses. Hinduism has its roots in varied scriptural traditions encompassing the images of gods in Vedas, philosophy of rebirth and liberation in Upanishad, tales of gods and heroes illustrating 'Dharma' in epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana, development of ideas of personal deity in Bhagavad Gita and ideas of worship in Puranas.

Hinduism represents a wide spectrum of beliefs and practices ranging from worship of trees and stones on one hand to very profound, abstract, and metaphysical speculations on the other. It has evolved from multiplicity of ideas which have largely never been discarded but have been retained alongside each other. At the philosophical level, it is impossible to categorise Hinduism into a belief system, like monotheism, polytheism, pantheism, monasticism and so on.

Concepts and Beliefs

Scriptures like Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas. are the basis of various concepts, beliefs and rituals of Hinduism. Most important of all are the Vedas, which are a large body of literature composed in Sanskrit. Vedas are regarded to be of eternal origin. They are revered as revelations to the *Rishis* from *Brahma*, the creator of this Universe. They in turn passed them on as oral tradition to their pupils through generations till finally composed by Maharishi Vyas in Sanskrit into four books of knowledge, e.g. *Rig Veda*, *Sam Veda*, *Yajur Veda* and *Atharva Veda*. Vedas are the most ancient

among world's scriptures. Max Muller, the famous Indologist described them as the oldest book in the library of mankind.

Existence of God

Most Hindus believe in the existence of God, a transcendent God beyond the Universe. There are some who do not believe in the existence of God. Hinduism is often characterised as being polytheistic, having multiple deities as objects of worship. In early Vedic texts, there is a mention of thirty-three deities in the pantheon, divided into three groups of eleven each; one group associated with heaven, second one with earth and the third one with water and atmosphere. They were usually centred on three deities governing the natural phenomena e.g., Sun for the heaven, Fire for the earth and Vayu or Indra for the atmosphere. Vedic *seers* in search of truth very soon discovered and realised that there is only one *Supreme Reality*, of which the various gods worshipped by men are only partial manifestations. The Vedic passage commonly quoted in support of this concept is; *"They call Him Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni and even the fleet-winged celestial bird Garuda. Reality is one, sages speak of it in different ways"*.

The different aspects or manifestations of the Supreme Reality are symbolised in the form of many gods and goddesses. They are not viewed as separate or rival powers, but as different functions, different aspects and different ways of understanding and approaching the one Reality, the Supreme Reality.

Idol or Image worship- a misconception

A misconception generally exists that Hindus worship idols or images. The fact is that an idol or image is a device for harnessing the eyes and mind on God. When there is nothing for the Mind to attach itself to, it will slip away from meditation. Therefore, the Mind will meditate on some form, remembering that the form or image is a superimposition and not the reality. It is worth mentioning that these images or idols can only become objects of worship after they have been fully consecrated (*Pran pratishtha*) and the very life principle, as it were having been infused into them by the priest and the worshipper.

Trimurti

This represents the three major aspects of the Supreme Reality or Godhead; *Brahma*, the creator; *Vishnu*, the preserver and *Mahesh(Shiva)*, the destroyer. These powers coexist and operate in an interconnected manner and are inseparable. They are conceived as a deity and artistically represented as a three-faced human figure. They are the three qualities of His primal nature (*Prakriti*) and three aspects of His will and consciousness (*Purusha*). *Prakriti* is the ultimate cosmic energy, the primal matter existing eternally and *Purusha* is the conscious principle of creation.

Brahman

This is the name for the Supreme Reality or Absolute Supreme. He is also described as Universal Soul, which is infinite, immanent, and transcendent reality. He is the Divine ground of all beings on this universe. As per the Upanishads, the whole universe is a manifestation of *Brahman*.

Atma(Soul)

Hindus believe in the existence of *Atma(individual Soul)*, which is eternal, invisible, immortal, indestructible and beyond the grasp of Mind and Senses. Upanishads suggest that *Atma (Soul)* and *Brahman (Universal Soul)* are two aspects of the same Supreme Reality. *Atma* is identical with the *Universal soul*. *Atma(Soul)* exists in all living beings, including plants and animals. A devout Hindu tries to discover his true Self through the paths of devotion (*Bhakti*); path of actions (*karma*) and path of knowledge and wisdom (*Jnana*).

At the time of death of an individual, it is only the body that dies and the Soul acquires a new body.

Reincarnation or Cycle of Birth & Death(Samsara) and Moksha or Liberation

Hindus believe that every individual has to pass through a series of lives and deaths(reincarnation) either on earth or elsewhere on the universe, before one obtains *Moksha or Liberation*, which is the ultimate aim of a Hindu, i.e. to unite with the Absolute Reality or the Universal Soul. This can only be attained by transforming human consciousness. Hindu sages and seers have prescribed the ethical and religious disciplines which contemplate *Moksha or Liberation*, i.e. the Path of Personal Salvation.

Dharma

It is not easy to translate the word “*Dharma*” into English. It can be described as a path of righteousness. It can also be defined as the “*Law of Being*” or that which binds the people of this world and the whole creation. *Dharma* implies duty, a course of conduct in relation to one’s occupation, position or the stage of life and moral and spiritual development. It involves doing right for the individual, the family, the community and for the universe. The source of *Dharma* is ultimately from the Vedas but other scriptures were also formulated between 8th & 4th centuries B.C. within Vedic traditions concerned with rituals and laws.

Bhagavat Purana describes four aspects for the path of Dharma; *Austerity(Tapa)*; *Shauch(Purity)*; *Kindness & Compassion(Daya)* and *Truthfulness (Satya)*

Manu Smriti describes ten essential rules for the observance of Dharma:

Dhriti(patience); *Kshama(forgiveness)*; *Dama(Self-control)*; *Asteya(honesty)*; *Shauch(purity)*; *Indriya-nigrah(control of senses)*; *Dhi(reasoning)*; *Vidya(knowledge & learning)*; *Satya(truthfulness)*; and *Akrodh(control of anger)*.

Karma

Karma literally means “action” or “deed”. Broadly it is described as “*Law of Karma*” or “*Law of Cause & Effect*” or “*Action & Reaction*”, which governs all the life. Hindus believe that all actions undertaken by an individual, not only the physical actions but also those conducted by the Mind produce reactions and results. This is the theory behind the concept of “*Samsara*”, the Cycle of birth and death and rebirth(Reincarnation). *Karma* refers to the totality of our actions and their concomitant reactions in the present life and previous lives, which taken together determine our future lives. Vedic message is “*As we sow, so shall we reap*”. Every good thought, word and deed begets a similar reaction which affects our next lives and every unkind act or thought or an evil deed comes back to affect us either in this life or the next.

Lord Krishna in Bhagavad Gita emphasises the term “*Nishkama Karma*” or desireless action. It means to attain detachment or renunciation from the fruits of one’s *Karma*, thus transcending *Karma* and being liberated. This does not mean to stop doing one’s work, but not to be attached to the results of the actions. One should surrender completely to God and offer all your actions to Him, acknowledging Him as the real doer.

Moral tenets of Hinduism

There are some eminent moral tenets of Hinduism, e.g. Purity, Self-control, Truth, Non-violence, and Detachment.

Purity refers to both ceremonial purity and moral purity. Purification baths, ceremonials, and regulations regarding food and drink prescribed in Hindu scriptures are meant to purify Mind and Spirit.

Self-control implies both, control of flesh and control of Mind. It considers all the factors of human personality; the Body, Mind and Spirit and prescribes a graded discipline for all.

Truth as a cardinal virtue in Hinduism means more than just truthfulness. It also means the eternal reality. Pursuit of truth, wherever it may lead to and whatever sacrifices may need to be made is indispensable for the progress of mankind. Hinduism is therefore never opposed to scientific progress or speculations or metaphysics and ethics.

Non-violence is associated with truth and the two together are the highest virtue.

Detachment is the higher phase of Self-control. It means to overcome what is evil in life and to become independent of what is good, including family ties, domestic affections and so on. So long as one is attached to these earthly goods, one is only at the lower level of spiritual ladder and complete liberation from this world and union with the Supreme Reality is not possible.