

Aide Memoire L07

Aspects of Hinduism and its Godsⁱ

Historically the term '*Hinduism*' is comparatively new, although the sources of Hindu traditions are very ancient.ⁱⁱ Hinduism originated in India. The word Hindu is derived from the Sanskrit word *sindhu*ⁱⁱⁱ; the Persians in the 5th century BC called the Hindus by that name, identifying them as the people of the land of the Indus. The Hindus' own definitions of their community are "*those who believe in the Vedas*" or "*those who follow the way (dharma) of the four classes (varnas)*"^{iv} and *stages of life (ashramas)*"^v.

ⁱ The information was obtained from various sources

ⁱⁱ The term *Hinduism* was introduced in about 1830 by British writers. It denotes the Indian civilization of approximately the last 2,000 years, which evolved from *Vedism*, the religion of the Indo-European (Aryan) peoples who settled in India in the last centuries of the 2nd millennium BCE. Although this thesis is now disputed in that some scholars believe that the essential tenets of *Vedism*, predate the Aryan invasions. .

ⁱⁱⁱ "river", more specifically, the Indus;

^{iv} *varnas*" or social classes; namely *Brahmins* who serve as priests and teachers); *kshatriyas* whose duties include administration, soldiering and law enforcement; customarily employed in agriculture, commerce, and cow-protection, and *shudras* who provide service to members of the other three varnas. (In addition outside the caste system there is the *untouchables* allocated jobs such as latrine cleaners, tanners etc.

^v *Ashrama* divides man's life into four stages each of 21 years and specifies what one should do in each of the stages. Historically, it was only few Brahmanas who were found to make it through all the four *ashramas*. The four stages are: student life; household life; retired life and finally a life of spiritual meditation

Hinduism has had a profound influence on many other religions during its long, unbroken history, beginning about 1500 BC. The corresponding influence of these various religions on Hinduism (it has an extraordinary tendency to absorb foreign elements) has greatly contributed to the religion's syncretism—the wide variety of beliefs and practices that it encompasses. Moreover, the geographic and cultural, rather than ideological basis of the religion has given Hinduism the character of a social and doctrinal system that extends to every aspect of human life.

Fundamental principles

The canon of Hinduism is basically defined with regard to what people do rather than what they think. Consequently, far more uniformity in ritual than in belief is found among Hindus, although very few practices or beliefs are shared by all. No doctrinal or ecclesiastical hierarchy exists in Hinduism, but the intricate hierarchy of the social system (inseparable from the religion) gives each person a sense of place within the whole.

Hinduism has no definite starting point though the traditions which flow into Hinduism go back several thousand years and some practitioners claim that the Hindu revelation is eternal. It has no single doctrine and there is no single founder or teacher. Hindus believe in a universal eternal divinity called **BRAHMAN**, who created and is present in everything. All Hindus believe that there is only one Supreme Source (Brahman), God of everything, whilst affirming that Brahman can be called by many names, thought of in many forms, and worshipped in many ways. In allowing for this diversity, Hindus worship one God under many names. In the Rig Veda, the oldest Hindu scripture, the principle is expressed in this way: *“Truth is One; the wise call it by many names”*

No doctrinal or ecclesiastical 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. Two of their fundamental beliefs are that:

- Existence is a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, governed by Karma.^{vi}
- Hindus believe that the soul (*ātman*)^{vii} is eternal and passes through a cycle of successive lives be it human, animal or bird and its next incarnation is always dependent on how the previous life was lived.

Most Hindus believe that release from reincarnation (*moksha*.) *i.e* from the entire process: of the endless cyclic life of birth, life death and rebirth (*samsara*) can be counteracted by working selflessly for the good of society, expiations, and rituals and ultimately through the renunciation of all worldly desires. There are four different paths to achieve *mokasha*: the paths of spiritual knowledge; meditation; devotion to a particular god or goddess and good works.

Although there is an emphasis on personal spirituality, Hinduism's history is closely linked with social and political developments, such as the rise and fall of different kingdoms and empires. The early history of Hinduism is difficult to date and Hindus

^{vi} In Hindu and Buddhist philosophy, the quality of somebody's current and future lives is determined by that person's behaviour in this and in previous lives. To a Hindu *dharmā* means that which prevents one from going down, ruining oneself in any manner and which makes for one's welfare, progress and well-being all round. Thus, *dharmā* has more to do with the nature and behaviour of men than with their beliefs.

^{vii} *Hindus* believe that there is a part of Brahman in everyone and the spiritual goal in human life is for that part to become one with the spirit of Brahman

themselves tend to be more concerned with the substance of a story or text rather than its date.

The Vedas are the most ancient body of religious literature, considered as an absolute authority revealing fundamental and unassailable truth. Believers consider that the texts were received by scholars directly from God and passed onto generations by word of mouth. However, its content is practically unknown to most Hindus, and it is seldom referred for literal information or advice. Yet venerated from a distance by every traditional Hindu and those who reject its authority (such as Buddhists & Jains) are regarded as unfaithful to their tradition. Vedic Hinduism can be seen through its manifestations such as rituals, sculptures, temples, dance, music, mantras and yoga including meditation, science and philosophical systems. The Vedic rituals and religious practices are based on the spiritual core. This transfer of tradition from generation to generation forms an important aspect of Vedic Hinduism. The various rituals (*samskaras*) are carried out at various stages of life of a Hindu to awaken, strengthen, nourish and refine the mind so that it can advance towards the spiritual knowledge. Temples and festivals play an important role in sustaining and transferring the Vedic tradition and culture.

Hindus may be broadly divided into two groups:

- **Worldly.** Those who seek the sacred and profane rewards of this world (health, wealth, children, and a good rebirth),
- **Renunciatory** Those who seek release from the world based on the *Upanishadic*^{viii} philosophy of the unity of the

^{viii} *Upanishadic* a sacred Sanskrit text belonging to a set that forms the basis for Hindu philosophy and doctrine. They date from 400 BCE and represent the last stage in the tradition of the Vedas,

individual soul, or *ātman*, with *Brahman*, the universal world Soul, is represented in the cults of renunciation (*sannyasa*)

The **Bhagavad-Gita**^{ix} attempts to reconcile the two types of Hinduism by offering a third way entailing worshipping lesser gods, who emanate from the *Supreme Brahman* (Pure spirit)

Hinduism does not force anybody to accept particular dogmas or ways of worshipping. Hindus may pray to their personal God in any form they desire to visualize him. Hinduism tells everyone to worship God according to his own faith. Hence all sorts of religious faith, various forms of worship and diverse kinds of rituals and customs have found their honourable place side by side in Hinduism and are cultivated and developed in harmonious relationship with one another. **Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan**, a philosopher and the second President of India, wrote *'While it gives absolute liberty in the world of thought, it enjoins a strict code of practice. The theist and the atheist, the sceptic and the agnostic may all be Hindus if they accept the Hindu system of culture and life. ..what counts is conduct, not belief.'* Thus, Hinduism is basically more a matter of conduct than of belief. There is neither an exclusive, authoritative scripture, nor a 'church' to define and to teach the faith. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that a non hindu finds the Hindu religion confusing.

HINDU GODS

Hindus declare that there is only one Supreme Being (**BRAHMAN**) and he is the God of all religions. There is no "other God." Thus the Biblical Commandment "*Thou shalt have no other God before me,*"

^{ix} A Hindu religious text in which the god *Krishna* teaches the importance of detachment from personal aims, the fulfilment of religious duties, and devotion to Brahman. **Bhagavān** (Lord) is a word used to refer to the personal aspect of God in general; it is not specific to a particular deity

is interpreted by Hindus as “*Thou shalt not deny the Ultimate Reality or worship any power other than the Ultimate Reality.*” He is the unchanging, infinite, immanent, and transcendent reality which is the Divine creator of all matter, energy, time, space, being, and everything beyond in this Universe. However the Supreme Being or God, the personal form of the Ultimate Reality is conceived by Hindus as having various aspects and these are manifested through a myriad number of gods who are worshiped as an expression of an aspect of the *Supreme Being*. For example, the goddess *Saraswati* represents the learning, knowledge, and the musical and the artistic aspects of *BRAHMAN*. Thus, if a Hindu wants to pray for acquiring knowledge and understanding, he prays to *Saraswati*. Just as sunlight cannot have a separate and independent existence from the sun itself, a Hindu deity does not have a separate and independent existence from *BRAHMAN*.

Hindus view the cosmic activity of the *Supreme Being* as comprised of three tasks: *creation, preservation, and dissolution and recreation*. Hindus associate these three cosmic tasks with the three deities, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. *Lord Brahma* brings forth the creation and represents the creative principle of the Supreme Being. *Lord Vishnu* maintains the universe and represents the eternal principle of preservation. *Lord Shiva* represents the principle of dissolution and recreation. These three deities together form the Hindu Trinity the *Trimurti*—the most supreme individual deities. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva are **NOT** three independent deities. They represent the Supreme Being, but in three different aspects.^x of the *Samsara* - the cycle of reincarnation or rebirth

^x The oneness of the three gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva is brought out by the mystic symbol AUM where 'A' represents Vishnu, 'U' Shiva and 'M' Brahma."

In their personal religious practices, Hindus may worship primarily one or another of these deities, known as their "*Ishta Devata*," or chosen deity. The particular form of God worshiped as one's chosen ideal is a matter of individual preference, although regional and family traditions can play a large part in influencing this choice. Hindus may also take guidance about this choice from scriptures. Many Hindus worship *Shiva*, *Vishnu*, or the Goddess (*Devi*),^{xi} but they also worship hundreds of additional minor deities peculiar to a particular village or even to a particular family while still believing in the overarching concept of the Supreme being,

Although Hindus do worship deities other than their chosen deity from time to time, depending on the occasion and their personal inclinations, it is not expected that they will worship, or even know about, every form of God. Hindus generally choose one concept of God and cultivate devotion to that chosen form, while at the same time respecting the chosen ideals of other people. Popular choices include Krishna, Rama, Kali and Ganesha.

Krishna is the embodiment of love and divine joy that destroys all pain and sin. Krishna is the protector of sacred utterances and cows

Rama is the seventh avatar^{xii} of Vishnu in Hinduism, and a legendary king of Ayodhya in ancient India. A significant section of Hindus do not doubt his historicity, and consider him an actual king who ruled over a large part of what is now India from his capital Ayodhya.

^{xi} Devi is synonymous with Shakti, the female aspect of the divine ,

^{xii} Avatars are manifestations of god who come to earth as human beings to help in their struggle towards enlightenment and salvation

Kali a Hindu goddess associated with eternal energy. The name *Kali* means "black", but has by folk etymology come to mean "force of time (*kala*)". Despite her negative connotations, she is today considered the goddess of time and change. Although sometimes presented as dark and violent, her earliest incarnation as a figure of annihilation still has some influence. More complex Tantric beliefs sometimes extend her role so far as to be the "ultimate reality" or Brahman. She is also revered as Bhavatarini (literally "redeemer of the universe"). Comparatively recent devotional movements largely conceive *Kali* as a benevolent mother goddess. *Kali* is represented as the consort of god Shiva, on whose body she is often seen standing. She is associated with many other Hindu goddesses like ***Durga***, ***Bhadrakali***, ***Sati***, ***Rudrani***, ***Parvati*** and ***Chamunda***.

Ganesha although he is known by many other attributes, his elephant head makes him easy to identify. *Ganesha* is widely revered as the Remover of Obstacles and more generally as Lord of Beginnings and Lord of Obstacles. He is also known as ***Ganapati***, ***Ekadanta***, ***Vinayaka***, ***Heramba***,

Each god/goddess has his/her attributes, iconography and spouse thus the variety and number of gods and their entourage is bewildering. The point to remember is that **ALL** are an expression of an aspect of the ***Supreme Being*** but to the devout it makes easier to worship an individual aspect represented by its image as the concept of a Divine creator of all matter, energy, time, space, being, and everything beyond in this Universe makes it difficult for the worshipper to seek a particular favour from an overwhelming God. **However the Hindu does not worship the image but the aspect that emanates from BRAHMAN**