



The Eastern Way: Hinduism

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What Is Hinduism?

- Hinduism (/ˈhɪnduɪzəm/) is an Indian religion or dharma, a religious and universal order or way of life by which followers abide. The word Hindu is an exonym,[note 3] and while Hinduism has been called the oldest religion in the world, it has also been described as sanātana dharma (Sanskrit: सनातन धर्म, lit. "the eternal dharma"), a modern usage, based on the belief that its origins lie beyond human history, as revealed in the Hindu texts. Another endonym for Hinduism is Vaidika Dharma.
- Hinduism entails diverse systems of thought, marked by a range of shared concepts that discuss theology, mythology among other topics in textual sources. The major Hindu denominations are Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism, and the Smarta tradition. The six Āstika schools of Hindu philosophy, which recognise the authority of the Vedas, are: Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, Vaisheshika, Mimāṃsā, and Vedānta.
- Hindu texts have been classified into Śruti ("heard") and Smṛti ("remembered"). The major Hindu scriptures are the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Purānas, the Mahābhārata, the Rāmāyana, and the Āgamas. Prominent themes in Hindu beliefs include karma (action, intent and consequences) and the four Puruṣārthas, proper goals or aims of human life, namely: dharma (ethics/duties), artha (prosperity/work), kama (desires/passions) and moksha (liberation/freedom from the passions and the cycle of death and rebirth). Hindu religious practices include devotion (bhakti), worship (puja), sacrificial rites (yajña), and meditation (dhyāna) and yoga.

Hinduism Background



- While the puranic chronology presents a genealogy of thousands of years, starting with the Vedic rishis, scholars regard Hinduism as a fusion or synthesis of Brahmanical orthopraxy with various Indian cultures, having diverse roots and no specific founder.
- This Hindu synthesis emerged after the Vedic period, between c. 500[12]–200 BCE and c. 300 CE, in the period of the second urbanisation and the early classical period of Hinduism when the epics and the first Purānas were composed. It flourished in the medieval period, with the decline of Buddhism in India. Since the 19th century, modern Hinduism, influenced by western culture, has also a great appeal to the west, most notably in the popularisation of yoga and various sects such as Transcendental Meditation and the Hare Krishna movement.
- Hinduism is the world's third-largest religion, with approximately 1.2 billion followers, or 15% of the global population, known as Hindus. It is the most widely professed faith in India, Nepal, Mauritius, and in Bali, Indonesia. Significant numbers of Hindu communities are found in other countries of South Asia, in Southeast Asia, in the Caribbean, Gulf states, North America, Europe, Oceania, Africa, and other regions.[]



What Is Hinduism?

- Hinduism includes a diversity of ideas on spirituality and traditions, but has no ecclesiastical order, no unquestionable religious authorities, no governing body, no prophet(s) nor any binding holy book; Hindus can choose to be polytheistic, pantheistic, panentheistic, pandeistic, henotheistic, monotheistic, monistic, agnostic, atheistic or humanist. According to Mahatma Gandhi, "a man may not believe in God and still call himself a Hindu". According to Wendy Doniger, "ideas about all the major issues of faith and lifestyle – vegetarianism, nonviolence, belief in rebirth, even caste – are subjects of debate, not dogma."
- Because of the wide range of traditions and ideas covered by the term Hinduism, arriving at a comprehensive definition is difficult. The religion "defies our desire to define and categorize it". Hinduism has been variously defined as a religion, a religious tradition, a set of religious beliefs, and "a way of life". From a Western lexical standpoint, Hinduism, like other faiths, is appropriately referred to as a religion. In India, the term dharma is preferred, which is broader than the Western term "religion".
- The study of India and its cultures and religions, and the definition of "Hinduism", has been shaped by the interests of colonialism and by Western notions of religion. Since the 1990s, those influences and its outcomes have been the topic of debate among scholars of Hinduism, and have also been taken over by critics of the Western view on India.



What Is Hinduism?

- Hinduism as it is commonly known can be subdivided into a number of major currents. Of the historical division into six darsanas (philosophies), two schools, Vedanta and Yoga, are currently the most prominent. The six āstika schools of Hindu philosophy, which recognise the authority of the Vedas are: Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, Vaisheshika, Mimāṃsā, and Vedānta.
- Classified by primary deity or deities, four major Hinduism modern currents are Shaivism (Shiva), Vaishnavism (Vishnu), Shaktism (Devi) and Smartism (five deities treated as equals). Hinduism also accepts numerous divine beings, with many Hindus considering the deities to be aspects or manifestations of a single impersonal absolute or ultimate reality or God, while some Hindus maintain that a specific deity represents the supreme and various deities are lower manifestations of this supreme. Other notable characteristics include a belief in the existence of ātman (self), reincarnation of one's ātman, and karma as well as a belief in dharma (duties, rights, laws, conduct, virtues and right way of living), although variation exists, with some not following these beliefs.



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- June McDaniel (2007) classifies Hinduism into six major kinds and numerous minor kinds, in order to understand the expression of emotions among the Hindus. The major kinds, according to McDaniel are
 - Folk Hinduism, based on local traditions and cults of local deities and is the oldest, non-literate system;
 - Vedic Hinduism based on the earliest layers of the Vedas, traceable to the 2nd millennium BCE;
 - Vedantic Hinduism based on the philosophy of the Upanishads, including Advaita Vedanta, emphasizing knowledge and wisdom;
 - Yogic Hinduism, following the text of Yoga Sutras of Patanjali emphasizing introspective awareness;
 - Dharmic Hinduism or "daily morality", which McDaniel states is stereotyped in some books as the "only form of Hindu religion with a belief in karma, cows and caste"; and
 - bhakti or devotional Hinduism, where intense emotions are elaborately incorporated in the pursuit of the spiritua



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- Michaels distinguishes three Hindu religions and four forms of Hindu religiosity. The three Hindu religions are
 - "Brahmanic-Sanskritic Hinduism",
 - "folk religions and tribal religions", and
 - "founded religions".
- The four forms of Hindu religiosity are
 - the classical "karma-marga",
 - jnana-marga,
 - bhakti-marga, and
 - "heroism", which is rooted in militaristic traditions.
- These militaristic traditions include Ramaism (the worship of a hero of epic literature, Rama, believing him to be an incarnation of Vishnu) and parts of political Hinduism. "Heroism" is also called virya-marga. According to Michaels, one out of nine Hindus belongs by birth to one or both of the Brahmanic-Sanskritic Hinduism and Folk religion typology, whether practicing or non-practicing. He classifies most Hindus as belonging by choice to one of the "founded religions" such as Vaishnavism and Shaivism that are moksha-focussed and often de-emphasize Brahman priestly authority yet incorporate ritual grammar of Brahmanic-Sanskritic Hinduism. He includes among "founded religions" Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism that are now distinct religions, syncretic movements such as Brahmo Samaj and the Theosophical Society, as well as various "Guru-isms" and new religious movements such as Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and ISKCON.



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- Inden states that the attempt to classify Hinduism by typology started in the imperial times, when proselytizing missionaries and colonial officials sought to understand and portray Hinduism from their interests.
- Hinduism was construed as emanating not from a reason of spirit but fantasy and creative imagination, not conceptual but symbolical, not ethical but emotive, not rational or spiritual but of cognitive mysticism. This stereotype followed and fit, states Inden, with the imperial imperatives of the era, providing the moral justification for the colonial project.
- From tribal Animism to Buddhism, everything was subsumed as part of Hinduism. The early reports set the tradition and scholarly premises for the typology of Hinduism, as well as the major assumptions and flawed presuppositions that have been at the foundation of Indology. Hinduism, according to Inden, has been neither what imperial religionists stereotyped it to be, nor is it appropriate to equate Hinduism to be merely the monist pantheism and philosophical idealism of Advaita Vedanta

Historical Origins of Hinduism



- To its adherents, Hinduism is a traditional way of life. Many practitioners refer to the "orthodox" form of Hinduism as Sanātana Dharma, "the eternal law" or the "eternal way".
- Hindus regard Hinduism to be thousands of years old. The Puranic chronology, the timeline of events in ancient Indian history as narrated in the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, and the Puranas, envisions a chronology of events related to Hinduism starting well before 3000 BCE.
- The Sanskrit word dharma has a much broader meaning than religion and is not its equivalent. All aspects of a Hindu life, namely acquiring wealth (artha), fulfillment of desires (kama), and attaining liberation (moksha), are part of dharma, which encapsulates the "right way of living" and eternal harmonious principles in their fulfillment.

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- According to the editors of the Encyclopædia Britannica, Sanātana Dharma historically referred to the "eternal" duties religiously ordained in Hinduism, duties such as honesty, refraining from injuring living beings (ahimsā), purity, goodwill, mercy, patience, forbearance, self-restraint, generosity, and asceticism.
- These duties applied regardless of a Hindu's class, caste, or sect, and they contrasted with svadharma, one's "own duty", in accordance with one's class or caste (varṇa) and stage in life (puruṣārtha).
- In recent years, the term has been used by Hindu leaders, reformers, and nationalists to refer to Hinduism. Sanatana dharma has become a synonym for the "eternal" truth and teachings of Hinduism, that transcend history and are "unchanging, indivisible and ultimately nonsectarian

What Is Hinduism?



- Some have referred to Hinduism as the Vaidika dharma. The word 'Vaidika' in Sanskrit means 'derived from or conformable to the Veda' or 'relating to the Veda'.
- Traditional scholars employed the terms Vaidika and Avaidika, those who accept the Vedas as a source of authoritative knowledge and those who do not, to differentiate various Indian schools from Jainism, Buddhism and Charvaka.
- According to Klaus Klostermaier, the term Vaidika dharma is the earliest self-designation of Hinduism. According to Arvind Sharma, the historical evidence suggests that "the Hindus were referring to their religion by the term vaidika dharma or a variant thereof" by the 4th-century CE. According to Brian K. Smith, "[i]t is 'debatable at the very least' as to whether the term Vaidika Dharma cannot, with the proper concessions to historical, cultural, and ideological specificity, be comparable to and translated as 'Hinduism' or 'Hindu religion'."

What Is Hinduism?



- According to Alexis Sanderson, the early Sanskrit texts differentiate between Vaidika, Vaishnava, Shaiva, Shakta, Saura, Buddhist and Jaina traditions.
- However, the late 1st-millennium CE Indic consensus had "indeed come to conceptualize a complex entity corresponding to Hinduism as opposed to Buddhism and Jainism excluding only certain forms of antinomian Shakta-Shaiva" from its fold.
- Some in the Mimamsa school of Hindu philosophy considered the Agamas such as the Pancaratrika to be invalid because it did not conform to the Vedas. Some Kashmiri scholars rejected the esoteric tantric traditions to be a part of Vaidika dharma. The Atimarga Shaivism ascetic tradition, datable to about 500 CE, challenged the Vaidika frame and insisted that their Agamas and practices were not only valid, they were superior than those of the Vaidikas. However, adds Sanderson, this Shaiva ascetic tradition viewed themselves as being genuinely true to the Vedic tradition and "held unanimously that the Śruti and Smṛti of Brahmanism are universally and uniquely valid in their own sphere, [...] and that as such they [Vedas] are man's sole means of valid knowledge [...]"

What Is Hinduism?



- The term Vaidika dharma means a code of practice that is "based on the Vedas", but it is unclear what "based on the Vedas" really implies, states Julius Lipner.
- The Vaidika dharma or "Vedic way of life", states Lipner, does not mean "Hinduism is necessarily religious" or that Hindus have a universally accepted "conventional or institutional meaning" for that term. To many, it is as much a cultural term. Many Hindus do not have a copy of the Vedas nor have they ever seen or personally read parts of a Veda, like a Christian, might relate to the Bible or a Muslim might to the Quran. Yet, states Lipner, "this does not mean that their [Hindus] whole life's orientation cannot be traced to the Vedas or that it does not in some way derive from it".
- Though many religious Hindus implicitly acknowledge the authority of the Vedas, this acknowledgment is often "no more than a declaration that someone considers himself [or herself] a Hindu," and "most Indians today pay lip service to the Veda and have no regard for the contents of the text." Some Hindus challenge the authority of the Vedas, thereby implicitly acknowledging its importance to the history of Hinduism, states Lipner

Modern Hinduism



- Beginning in the 19th century, Indian modernists re-asserted Hinduism as a major asset of Indian civilisation, meanwhile "purifying" Hinduism from its Tantric elements and elevating the Vedic elements. Western stereotypes were reversed, emphasizing the universal aspects, and introducing modern approaches of social problems. This approach had great appeal, not only in India, but also in the west. Major representatives of "Hindu modernism" are Ram Mohan Roy, Swami Vivekananda, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Mahatma Gandhi.
- Raja Rammohan Roy is known as the father of the Hindu Renaissance. He was a major influence on Swami Vivekananda, who, according to Flood, was "a figure of great importance in the development of a modern Hindu self-understanding and in formulating the West's view of Hinduism". Central to his philosophy is the idea that the divine exists in all beings, that all human beings can achieve union with this "innate divinity", and that seeing this divine as the essence of others will further love and social harmony. According to Vivekananda, there is an essential unity to Hinduism, which underlies the diversity of its many forms. According to Flood, Vivekananda's vision of Hinduism "is one generally accepted by most English-speaking middle-class Hindus today". Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan sought to reconcile western rationalism with Hinduism, "presenting Hinduism as an essentially rationalistic and humanistic religious experience"

Global Hinduism

- This "Global Hinduism" has a worldwide appeal, transcending national boundaries and, according to Flood, "becoming a world religion alongside Christianity, Islam and Buddhism", both for the Hindu diaspora communities and for westerners who are attracted to non-western cultures and religions.
- It emphasizes universal spiritual values such as social justice, peace and "the spiritual transformation of humanity". It has developed partly due to "re-enculturation", or the pizza effect, in which elements of Hindu culture have been exported to the West, gaining popularity there, and as a consequence also gained greater popularity in India. This globalization of Hindu culture brought "to the West teachings which have become an important cultural force in western societies, and which in turn have become an important cultural force in India, their place of origin"



What Is Hinduism?



- Hindu beliefs are vast and diverse, and thus Hinduism is often referred to as a family of religions rather than a single religion. Within each religion in this family of religions, there are different theologies, practices, and sacred texts. Hinduism does not have a "unified system of belief encoded in a declaration of faith or a creed", but is rather an umbrella term comprising the plurality of religious phenomena of India. According to the Supreme Court of India,
- Unlike other religions in the World, the Hindu religion does not claim any one Prophet, it does not worship any one God, it does not believe in any one philosophic concept, it does not follow any one act of religious rites or performances; in fact, it does not satisfy the traditional features of a religion or creed. It is a way of life and nothing more".
- Part of the problem with a single definition of the term Hinduism is the fact that Hinduism does not have a founder. It is a synthesis of various traditions, the "Brahmanical orthopraxy, the renouncer traditions and popular or local traditions".
- Theism is also difficult to use as a unifying doctrine for Hinduism, because while some Hindu philosophies postulate a theistic ontology of creation, other Hindus are or have been atheists.[]

Denominations of Hinduism



- Hinduism has no central doctrinal authority and many practising Hindus do not claim to belong to any particular denomination or tradition.
- Four major denominations are, however, used in scholarly studies: Shaivism (Shiva), Shaktism (Shakti or Devi), Smartism (Shiva, Vishnu, Shakti, Ganesha, Surya and Skanda), and Vaishnavism (Vishnu and avatars Krishna and Rama).
- These denominations differ primarily in the central deity worshipped, the traditions and the soteriological outlook. The denominations of Hinduism, states Lipner, are unlike those found in major religions of the world, because Hindu denominations are fuzzy with individuals practicing more than one, and he suggests the term "Hindu polycentrism".
- There are no census data available on demographic history or trends for the traditions within Hinduism. Estimates vary on the relative number of adherents in the different traditions of Hinduism. According to a 2010 estimate by Johnson and Grim, the Vaishnavism tradition is the largest group with about 641 million or 67.6% of Hindus, followed by Shaivism with 252 million or 26.6%, Shaktism with 30 million or 3.2% and other traditions including Neo-Hinduism and Reform Hinduism with 25 million or 2.6%. In contrast, according to Jones and Ryan, Shaivism is the largest tradition of Hinduism. [

Hindu Scripture



- The ancient scriptures of Hinduism are in Sanskrit. These texts are classified into two: Shruti and Smriti. Shruti is *apauruṣeyā*, "not made of a man" but revealed to the rishis (seers), and regarded as having the highest authority, while the smriti are manmade and have secondary authority. They are the two highest sources of dharma, the other two being *Śiṣṭa Āchāra/Sadāchāra* (conduct of noble people) and finally *Ātma tuṣṭi* ("what is pleasing to oneself")
- Hindu scriptures were composed, memorized and transmitted verbally, across generations, for many centuries before they were written down. Over many centuries, sages refined the teachings and expanded the Shruti and Smriti, as well as developed Shastras with epistemological and metaphysical theories of six classical schools of Hinduism

Hindu Scripture



- Shruti (lit. that which is heard) primarily refers to the Vedas, which form the earliest record of the Hindu scriptures, and are regarded as eternal truths revealed to the ancient sages (rishis).
- There are four Vedas – Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda. Each Veda has been subclassified into four major text types – the Samhitas (mantras and benedictions), the Aranyakas (text on rituals, ceremonies, sacrifices and symbolic-sacrifices), the Brahmanas (commentaries on rituals, ceremonies and sacrifices), and the Upanishads (text discussing meditation, philosophy and spiritual knowledge).
- The first two parts of the Vedas were subsequently called the Karmakāṇḍa (ritualistic portion), while the last two form the Jñānakāṇḍa (knowledge portion, discussing spiritual insight and philosophical teachings).

Hindu Scripture: The Upanishads



- The Upanishads are the foundation of Hindu philosophical thought, and have profoundly influenced diverse traditions.
- Of the Shrutis (Vedic corpus), they alone are widely influential among Hindus, considered scriptures par excellence of Hinduism, and their central ideas have continued to influence its thoughts and traditions.
- Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan states that the Upanishads have played a dominating role ever since their appearance. There are 108 Muktikā Upanishads in Hinduism, of which between 10 and 13 are variously counted by scholars as Principal Upanishads

Hindu Scripture



- The most notable of the Smritis ("remembered") are the Hindu epics and the Puranas.
- The epics consist of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The Bhagavad Gita is an integral part of the Mahabharata and one of the most popular sacred texts of Hinduism. It is sometimes called Gitopanishad, then placed in the Shruti ("heard") category, being Upanishadic in content.
- The Puranas, which started to be composed from c. 300 CE onward, contain extensive mythologies, and are central in the distribution of common themes of Hinduism through vivid narratives. The Yoga Sutras is a classical text for the Hindu Yoga tradition, which gained a renewed popularity in the 20th century.

Hindu Beliefs



- Prominent themes in Hindu beliefs include (but are not restricted to)
 - Dharma (ethics/duties),
 - Saṃsāra (the continuing cycle of entanglement in passions and the resulting birth, life, death, and rebirth),
 - Karma (action, intent, and consequences),
 - moksha (liberation from attachment and saṃsāra), and the various yogas (paths or practices).
- However, not all of these themes are found among the various different systems of Hindu beliefs. Beliefs in moksha or saṃsāra are absent in certain Hindu beliefs, and were also absent among early forms of Hinduism, which was characterized by a belief in an Afterlife, with traces of this still being found among various Hindu beliefs, such as Śrāddha. Ancestor worship once formed an integral part of Hindu beliefs and is today still found as an important element in various Folk Hindu streams