

Hinduism - its origins and history

Religion



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Hinduism

People have looked for answers to life's questions and explanation to natural phenomena since the beginning of time. The most primitive societies were united through these explanations, creating elaborate rituals to celebrate their answers to these questions. They worshipped gods, which represented things like fertility and rain, that they used to help answer these questions. This is how the origins of current major world religions formed. Hinduism, one of these religions, came out of India and dominates there today.

The origins of what became modern Hinduism originate from the beliefs and culture of the ancient people who lived in the valley surrounding India's Indus River (Wangu 14). The word Hinduism itself is derived from an archaic Sanskrit word, *sindhu*, which translates to river (Pecorino 1). The people living on this river were long-lasting, tranquil and tolerate to new ideas (Wangu 19). Hinduism's earliest stages played the role of defining the social structures of the people living on this valley (Wangu 14). These ancient people strongly emphasized hygiene, "fertility, sexual power, and certain sacred animals" (Wangu 16). It is important to remember the Indus society was blended with another society, shaping what Hinduism would become (Wangu 20). Over four millennia ago, Sanskrit speaking Aryans invaded the Indus river valley (Wangu 19). The beliefs of Aryans conflicted with the beliefs of Indus, but modern Hinduism will become a blend of Aryan and Indus views (Wangu 20).

Hinduism's history is divided into four major time periods: Vedic, Classical, Devotional, and Medieval (Pecorino 7; Pecorino 8). The Vedic period

originated sometime around 2000 B. C. E. (Pecorino 7). Around this time, many current aspects of Hinduism did not yet exist (Pecorino 7). Around 1500 B. C. E., Aryans arrived and helped aid the creation of Hindu gods (Pecorino 7). Classical Hindu civilization is defined by several other invading powers helping mold what Hinduism would later become (Pecorino 7). In the time period of India's classical Gupta dynasty, Hinduism's sacred laws were written, temples were constructed, and Hindu rituals were written down as instructions (Pecorino 7). The Devotional period of Hinduism is defined by a rise of Hinduism's popularity, and is also the time period when modern sects of Hinduism first began to appear (Pecorino 7). Medieval Hinduism contained a large scale composition of new Hindu texts and stories (Pecorino 8).

In the last two centuries, Hinduism has impacted many people and conformed to the new times (Pecorino 8; Pecorino 9). All Indian citizens are currently affected by Hinduism, for it is a chief component of India's social orders and government (Pecorino 1). Hindus have emigrated outside of India, spreading the religion out of India; not only do people outside of India now follow Hinduism, but religion has impacted the development of other religions (Pecorino 1.) Certain leaders in India have revised the religion in order to achieve their goals for their country (Pecorino 8). A common goal among these revising leaders is improving the lives of lower social classes (Pecorino 9). Ghandi has also strived remove British imperialism from India (Pecorino 8).

The life of Hindus is dictated by a unique social system and beliefs behind this social system (Pecorino 1). These social beliefs are based on the caste system and the idea svadharma (Pecorino 3). Svadharma requires followers

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of Hinduism to fulfill the social norms of the social class they are born into (Pecorino 3). Following one's svadharma faithfully can improve the quality of their next life (Pecorino 3). The three classes, or varnas, Hindus can be born into are " Brahman, or priestly; Kshatriya, or warrior; and Vaisya, or general populace" (Pecorino 1; Pecorino 3). Later on, a fourth class of servants, called Shudras, was added to this system (Pecorino 3). Following a person's life, their soul will enter another body or object, based on their karma (Pecorino 3). This cycle is called samsara and relies on the " merit and demerit that result from all the actions" a person collects, called karma (Pecorino 3). Negative karma can be appeased through moksha, which is " the renunciation of all worldly desires" (Pecorino 3).

Hindus worship a huge variety of gods, called puja, for three general reasons (" Worship" 1; Courtright 1). The first of these reasons is to " improve the circumstances of the worshipper" (Courtright 1). They believe worship can improve their quality of life or stop reincarnation (Courtright 1). A second reason Hindus worship is to keep themselves pure (Courtright 1). Certain rituals demand the worshipper do the ritual often to keep their purity (Courtright 1). The final reason is that Hindus believe they can sacrifice earthly possessions for their own goodness (Courtright 1). Puja involves three different practices: " images (murtis), prayers (mantras), and diagrams of the universe (yantras)" (" Worship" 1). Puja is often done on one's own time, through repetition of gods's names and offerings, around one's own personal shrine in their home (" Worship" 1). This occurs three times daily (" Worship" 1). A large number of deities are acknowledged by every Hindu, but most have a dominant loyalty to only one. (Pecorino 4) A popular one of

these gods is Shiva, who is a violent cannibal that represents what you shouldn't be (Pecorino 4). Another god, who is the creator of the universe, commonly worshipped is Vishnu (Pecorino 4). Devi, the most commonly worshipped goddess, keeps male gods in working order (Pecorino 5).

Hindus participate in many different kinds of rituals for a variety of reasons (Courtright 1). Rites of passages, called samskaras, are the most rudimentary Hindu ritual (Pecorino 5). These are centered around events such as puberty, marriage, pregnancy, first time receiving a haircut, and funerals (Pecorino 5; Pecorino 6). A common ritual is religious sacrifice, called yajna (Courtright 1). These rituals occur in both public places and individual homes (Courtright 1). Fire, that represents the god Angi, is always used (Courtright 1). Hindus believe that sacrifices involving fire help connect the universe's many different forces (Courtright 2). Hindus began meditating, another common ritual, in order to find answers to life's questions and to balance the power of sacrifices with one's individual powers (Courtright 3). The fire used in the sacrifice ceremonies began to be paralleled with the rise in body temperature meditating creates (Courtright 4). The practice of meditating dates back to the Vedic period (Courtright 3).

Hindu temples are lively centers for rituals and Hindu culture (Pecorino 6). These temples are centered around a shrine, that represents the worshipper's heart ("Worship" 1). A tower representing a passed Hindu's journey to Heaven and a Brahmin, which is a Hindu priest, are also other important features of temples ("Worship" 1). Events like sunrise and sunset ceremonies, washing one's self, puja and sacrifice occur in temples (Pecorino 6).

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Hinduism, being a relatively peaceful religion, had very few conflicts; however, there are three major tensions involving India's ethnic and religious groups. These are ethnic conflicts in the states of Assam and Punjab and a Muslim vs. Hindu conflict, the latter being the most dominant (Weiner 1). The conflicts in Assam have resulted in 4000 deaths, as a result of organized crime against Hindus (Weiner 1). These conflicts lie in the fact that Hindus are a minority of the area (Weiner 1). The issues of Punjab lie less in ethnic differences and is more of a power struggle (Weiner 3). Sikhs, the second major ethnic group of Punjab, wants just as much economic and political power as Hindus possess (Weiner 3). These violent uprisings are a result of the greater income of Punjab (Weiner 3). The offset of Hindu-Muslim tensions are an effect of the partition of 1947 (Weiner 5). This document said that Muslims were to blame for India's cultural divisions (Weiner 5).

Being written in Northwestern India as early as 1500 B. C. E., the Rig Veda would become the first, and most important, religious Hindu text (Pecorino 1). The sixth hymn of Rig Veda's first book is a devotional hymn to the god Indra. This hymn is written one sentence per line, possibly hinting at the simplistic writing style of early Hindus. This hymn has several references to nature as Indra arrives, such as "lights are shining in the sky," and "wast born together with the Dawns" (Griffith 1). This shows how closely intertwined Hindus believed gods to be with nature. Also at the time of Indra's appearance, sacrifice is performed (Griffith 1). We can see the relationship between the performance of sacrifices and gods here. The third line of this hymn states that Indra "[made] light where no light was" (Griffith

1). This can imply that Hindus do not believe one has saw the light until believing in Indra.

Hinduism is a complex set of beliefs that dictate the social life of Indians, ancient and modern (Pecorino 1). A belief of many gods, not worshipped by all Hindus, lead Hindus to have sacrifices and worship often throughout the day (Pecorino 4). Hindus tried to be the best person they could possibly be, in order to escape the cycles of reincarnation (Pecorino 3). This explains the general peacefulness of the religion. The Hindu religion did not stay in India, for it has had global effects (Pecorino 1).