
HINDUISM

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Introduction:

Hinduism is a vast and profound religion. It is the world's oldest religion. It has no beginning as it predates recorded history. Historically Hinduism has developed over about 4,000 years and has no single founder or creed.

It worships one supreme Reality (called by many names), teaches that all souls ultimately realize truth. There is no eternal hell or damnation. It accepts all genuine spiritual paths. Each soul is free to find his own way, whether by devotion, knowledge, meditation and yoga, or selfless service. In its diversity, Hinduism hardly fits most Western definitions of religion, rather, it suggests commitment to or respect for an ideal way of life, known as Dharma. Hinduism believes in philosophy of karma, rebirth, God as a creator of the universe, and immortality of Soul.

There are over 800 million people mostly in India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Malaysia, Indonesia, Africa, Europe and North and South America follow Hinduism.

Major Scriptures and Sects:

The Vedas, the Upanishads, the Brahma Sutra, the Bhagavad Gita, the Agamas, and the Puranas are the major scriptures of Hinduism. There are four main denominations: Saivism, Saktism, Vaisnavism, and liberalism (non-sectarian forms).

Goals:

The ultimate goal of Hinduism is Moksha or liberation (total freedom). This is the personal and direct realization of one's true self, which liberates one's from the cycles of rebirth, or Samsara. This realization is termed Nirvikalpa Samadhi and is the totally transcendent culmination of yoga.

Religious Philosophy and Practice:

Hinduism believes that each soul is free to find his own way to liberation by following the path of devotion (Bhakti), knowledge (Jnan), yoga and meditation (Ashantang Yoga), or selfless service (Karma).

The path for Saivism divides the spiritual progress of the soul into four progressive stages of belief and practice, called Chariya, Kriya, Yoga, and Jnana.

The spiritual practices in Saktism are similar to those in Saivism. There is more emphasis on Sakti, God's power as opposed to being, and on embracing apparent opposites: male and female, absolute and relative, pleasure and pain, cause and effect, mind and body.

Vaishnavites believe that religion is the performance of devotions (Bhakti), that man can communicate with and receive the grace of Lord Vishnu.

Most Liberal or Smarta Hindus believe that liberation is achieved through the path of knowledge (Jnana yoga) which is defined as intellectual and meditative.

It believes in One, all pervasive Supreme Being who is both imminent and transcendent, both Creator and Unmanifest Reality.

The universe undergoes endless cycles of creation, preservation, and dissolution.

All souls are evolving towards a union with God and will ultimately attain spiritual knowledge and liberation from the cycle of rebirth. Not a single soul will be eternally deprived of this destiny.

Karma is the law of cause and effect by which each individual creates his own destiny by his thoughts, words, and deeds. The soul reincarnates, evolving through many births until all karma has been resolved.

A spiritually awakened master (Guru) is essential to know the transcendent absolute, as are individual discipline, good conduct, purification, self-inquiry, and meditation.

No particular religion teaches the only way to salvation above all others, but all genuine religious paths are facets of God's pure love and light, deserving tolerance and understanding.

Hindu philosophy is essentially a philosophy of values. Hindu sages classify the values into four groups. They are Kama (psychophysical values), Artha (economic values), Dharma (moral values), and Moksha (spiritual values). Moksha or liberation is the highest value of the human life. The final destiny of all souls is union with the Supreme.

Love, nonviolence, good conduct, and the law of Dharma define the Hindu path. All life is sacred and to be loved and revered, in the practice of nonviolence (Ahimsa). Hinduism is a mystical religion, leading the truth within, finally reaching the pinnacle of consciousness where man and God are one.

Stress is placed on temple worship, scripture, and the master (Guru) and disciple (Shishya) tradition. Festivals, pilgrimages, chanting of holy hymns and home worship are dynamic practices.

Caste System:

The ancient texts suggest four great classes (castes); the Brahmins or priests, the Kshatriyas or warriors and rulers, the Vaisyas or merchants, and the Sudras or farmers and laborers. Some of the Sudras are classified as Untouchables, which includes those whose occupations require them to handle unclean objects. The classical works on man's duty (Dharma) specify the distinct roles each caste is expected to play in the ideal society.

Stages of Life:

The classical works also outline four ideal stages (Asrama) of life, each with its own duties:

Studentship (Brahmacarya): from initiation (childhood) until marriage (5 - 25 years)

Householdership (Grihasthya): raise family, provide support, and take part in the uplift of the society (25 - 50 years)

Forest dwelling (Vanaprasthya): transfer household duties to grown up children and retire (50 - 75 years)

Renunciation (Samnyasa): give up the attachment to all worldly things and seek spiritual liberation (75 - 100 years)

Major Religious Symbol - OM:

The Sanskrit Om symbolizes God in Hinduism. God is one, however, sages call Him by various names. Though these names differ from one another, all of them have sprung up from the same basic source of all sounds called Om. Hence, Om represents all names of God.

Om comprises of three independent letters a, u, and m. Each letter has its own meaning and significance. The letter "a" represents beginning (adimatva), "u" represents progress (utkarsa), and "m" represents limit or dissolution (miti). The word Om represents the power responsible for creation, development, and dissolution of this universe, which is God Himself.