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**Oldest Religion of the world: Hinduism**

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Hinduism is an Indian religion, or a way of life, widely practiced in South Asia. Hinduism has been called the oldest religions in the world, and some practitioners and scholars refer to it *Sanātana Dharma*, "the eternal tradition," or the "eternal way," beyond human history. Scholars regard Hinduism as a fusion or synthesis of various Indian cultures and traditions, with diverse roots and no founder. This "Hindu synthesis" started to develop between 500 BCE and 300 CE following the vedic period (1500 BCE to 500 BCE).

Although Hinduism contains a broad range of Philosophies, It is linked by shared concepts, recognisable rituals, cosmology, shared textual resources, and pilgrimage to sacred Sites. Hindu texts are classified into Śruti ("heard") and Smṛti ("remembered"). These texts discuss theology, philosophy, mythology, vedicyajna, Yoga, agamic rituals, and temple building among other topics. Major scriptures include the Vedas and upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita and the Agamas, sources of authority and eternal truths in its texts play an important role, but there is also a strong Hindu tradition of the questioning of this authority, to deepen the understanding of these truths and to further develop the tradition.

Prominent themes in Hindu beliefs include the four Purusarthas the proper goals or aims of human life, namely Dharma (ethics /duties), Artha (prosperity/ work), Kama (desires/passions) and Moksha (liberation/ freedom/ salvation) karma (action, intent and consequences), Samsāra (cycle of rebirth), and the various Yogas (paths or practices to attain moksha). Hindu practices include rituals such as puja (worship) and recitations, meditation, family-oriented rites of passage, annual festivals, and occasional pilgrimages. Some Hindus leave their social world and material possessions, then engage in lifelong Sannyasa (Monastic practices) to achieve Mokshn. Hinduism prescribes the eternal duties, such as honesty, refraining from injuries living beings (ahimsa), patience, forbearance, self-restraint, and compassion, among others,. The four largest denominations of Hinduism are Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism and Smartism.

Hinduism is the world's third largest religion, with over billion followers or 15% of the global population, known as Hindus. Hindus form the majority of the population in India, Nepal and Mauritius. Significant Hindu communities are also found in other countries.

**Etymology**

The word *Hindu* is derived from the Indo\*Aryan/Sanskrit root Sindhu, the Indo-Aryan name for Indus River in the northwestern part of the Indian subcontinent (modern day Pakistan and northern India). According to Gavin Flood, "The actual term 'Hindu' first occurs as a Persian geographical term from the people who lived beyond the river Indus (Sanskrit: Sindhu)", more specifically in the 6<sup>th</sup>-century BCE inscription of Darius 1 (550-486 BCE). The term Hindu in these ancient records is a geographical

term and did not refer to a religion. Among the earliest known records of 'Hindu' with connotations of religion may be in the 7th-century CE Chinese text *Record of the Western Regions* by Xuanzang, and 14th-century Persian text *Futuhu's-salatin* by 'Abd al-Malik Isami.

Thapar states that the word *Hindu* is found as *heptahindu* in Avesta- equivalent to Ringvedic *sapta sidhu*, while *hndstn* (pronounced *Hindustan*) is found in a Sasanian inscription from the 3rd century CE, both of which refer to parts of northwestern South Asia. The Arabic terms *al-Hind* referred to the people who live across the River Indus. This Arabic term was itself taken from the pre-Islamic Persian term *Hindū*, which refers to all Indians. By 13th century, *Hindustan* emerged as a popular alternative name of India, meaning the "land of Hindus".

The term *Hindu* was later used occasionally in some Sanskrit texts such as the later *Rajataranginis* of Kashmir (*Hinduka*, c. 1450) and some 16th- to 18th-century Bengali Gaudiya Vaishnava texts including *Chaitanya Charitamrita* and *Chaitanya Bhagavata*. These texts used it to distinguish Hindus from Muslims who are called *Yavanas* (foreigners) or *Mlecchas* (barbarians), with the 16th-century *Chaitanya Charitamrita* text and the 17th century *Bhakta Mala* text using the phrase "*Hindu dharma*". It was only towards the end of the 18th century the European merchants and colonists began to refer to the followers of Indian religions collectively as *Hindus*. The term *Hinduism*, then spelled *Hindooism*, was introduced into the English language in the 18th-century to denote the religious, philosophical, and cultural traditions native to India.

### **Definitions**

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, monotheistic, monistic, agnostic, atheistic or humanist. Because of 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 categorized 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 others faiths is appropriately referred to as a religions. 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.

### **Typology**

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. Classified by primary deity or deities, four major Hinduism modern currents are Vaishnavism (Vishnu), Shaivism (Shiva), Shaktism (Devi) and Smartism (five deities treated as same). Hinduism also

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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 existence of ātman (soul, 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).

McDaniel (2007) classifies Hinduism into six major kinds and numerous minor kinds, in order to understand 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 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 spiritual.

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, such as Ramaism and parts of political Hinduism. This is also called virya-marga. According to Michaels, one out of nine Hindu 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 salvation-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.

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 typology of Hinduism, as well as the major assumptions and flawed presuppositions that has 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 monist pantheism and philosophical idealism of Advaita Vedanta.

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**Indigenous understanding****Sanātana Dharma**

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". The Sanskrit word *dharma* has a much deeper 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.

*Sanātana Dharma* refers to the "eternal" duties all Hindus have to follow, regardless of class, caste, or sect, such as honesty, refraining from injuring living beings, purity, goodwill, mercy, patience, forbearance, self-restraint, generosity, and asceticism. This is contrasted with svadharma, one's "own duty", the duties to be followed by members of a specific varna and jāti. According to Knott, this also, "refers to the idea that its origins lie beyond human history, and its truths have been divinely revealed (Shruti) and passed down through the ages to the present day in the most ancient of the world's scriptures, the Veda." (Knott 1998, p. 5)

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica,

The term has also more recently been used by Hindu leaders, reformers, and nationalists to refer to Hinduism as a unified world religion. Sanatana dharma has thus become a synonym for the "eternal" truth and teachings of Hinduism, the latter conceived of as not only transcendent of history and unchanging but also as indivisible and ultimately nonsectarian.

**Hindu modernism**

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 a great appeal, not only in India, but also in the west. Major representatives of "Hindu modernism" are Raja Rammohan Roy, 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 (1863–1902), 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

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to reconcile western rationalism with Hinduism, "presenting Hinduism as an essentially rationalistic and humanistic religious experience."

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."

### **Western understanding**

Western scholars regard Hinduism as a fusion or synthesis of various Indian cultures and traditions. which emerged after the Vedic period, between 500-200 BCE and c. 300 CE, the beginning of the "Epic and Puranic" c.q. "Preclassical" period.

Hinduism's tolerance to variations in belief and its broad range of traditions make it difficult to define as a religion according to traditional Western conceptions.

Some academics suggest that Hinduism can be seen as a category with "fuzzy edges" rather than as a well-defined and rigid entity. Some forms of religious expression are central to Hinduism and others, while not as central, still remain within the category. Based on this idea Ferro-Luzzi has developed a 'Prototype Theory approach' to the definition of Hinduism.

### **Conclusion**

Hinduism is a major religion india. Hinduism was followed by around 79.8% of the country's population of 1.21 billion (2011 census) (960 million adherents). Other significant population are found in Nepal (23 million), Bangladesh (15 million), and the Indonesian island of Blai (3.9 million). The majority of the Vietnamese Chan people also follow Hinduism. Demogeophically, Hinduism is the world's third largest religionsafter Christianly and Islam.

### **Referance**

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