Hinduism

Hinduism, one of the oldest religions in the world, is a complex mixture of the beliefs of four main groups of people:
1. The people of the Indus valley civilisation (approx. 2500–1500 BCE)
2. The Indo-Europeans who called themselves Aryans and who came into the country probably around 1500 BCE
3. The Dravidians, whose origin is uncertain but who are at present mainly in the south of India
4. The substantial indigenous populace spread all over India.

The Seals found in the excavations at the Indus valley sites of Mohenjodaro and Harappa in northern Pakistan suggest that theirs was a ritualistic religion that centred on phallic worship. According to some scholars, the horned god surrounded by animals found on the seals at these sites was a precursor to the Aryan god Rudra-Shiva. The religion of the Aryans during the Vedic times consisted of the worship of the elements through the agency of Agni, the god of fire. Offerings were made in elaborately constructed altars to the celestial gods who controlled the elements of nature. Although practiced amongst the higher society, Vedic religion did not adequately cater for the spiritual needs of the common man. With the assimilation of non-Aryan practices within Vedic society, the sacrificial religion gave way to the worship of images of gods installed at temples much later.

Social structure

Vedic literature, which was oral but well preserved, identifies four main loose groups, called Varnas. These are:
- the Brahmins who were in possession of ritual knowledge and acted as teachers and priests
- the Kshatriyas who were warriors and kings
- the Vaishyas who handled commerce, cattle raising and farming
- the Shudras who performed menial tasks.

As these divisions became entrenched, they became endogamous. Labour in a largely rural and agrarian society was divided according to birth and the occupations were hereditary. Today's caste system continues to find its justification in the Varna system. Even the word 'Hindu' is a misnomer. Before it was coined, religion in India was called Arya (civilised) Dharma or Sanatana (eternal) Dharma.
It was the people of Iran who took to calling the people living across the Indus river (Sindhu river in Sanskrit) ‘Hindus’, because H and S are interchangeable sounds in ancient Iranian.

Hinduism is a non-prophetic and hence adaptative and accommodative religion. For this reason, it is hard to define. One reasonable definition is: A Hindu is a person who accepts the authority of the four Vedas, accepts that there are various paths to salvation (Moksha) including those of other religions, and accepts that there are many modes of worship, such as abstract meditation on the divine and image worship. (Definition by B. D. Tilak, a prominent, 20th century social reformer from Maharashtra).

In studying Hinduism, one needs to be aware of the following points, which differentiate Hinduism from other major faiths.

- Because it has no single prophet, Hinduism is an unwieldy collection of the teachings of hundreds of seers (those with divine vision) and radical thinkers. This has resulted in the creation of many sects and cults.
- Hinduism is accretive. It has no single sacred book, such as the Bible, but several of them, namely:
  - the four Védas (literally, books of knowledge)
  - Upanishadas (philosophical treatises)
  - Puranas (myths about gods told in story form)
  - Smritis (that which is remembered and reproduced by the seers)
  - Kalpa and Shruta Sutras (that which is thought and heard from god and later reproduced by seers)
  - Dharmashastra (works on the conduct of rituals and rules of personal behaviour within the society)
  - Ramayana and Mahabharata (two great epics).
  - Amongst other things, all of them are didactic.
- For a very long time, Hinduism has had two main traditions: the Higher (Brahminic) tradition and Folk (village) tradition. There has always been an exchange between the two. Most of India is rural and the folk tradition has had a substantial impact on the practised morality. A large number of works exist in regional languages on folk-rituals and religious practices of the area.

Ancient seers believed that human society came out of primitive existence by evolving ethics and religion. In order for it to survive, the family and the nation’s ethnic groups had to be bound by ethical behaviour and rules of code of conduct.

THINKING PROMPT

In your opinion, is the accretive nature of Hinduism a strength or a weakness?

Existence and the purpose of human life

Hindus believe that the soul in all sentient life is indestructible and is a part of the divine. On the other hand, the bodily form is destructible and subject to the ravages of time. The ultimate goal of life is to free the soul from the innumerable cycles of births and deaths and achieve Moksha. This is the state in which the soul finally unites once again with Brahma, the ultimate, unmanifest principle.

Hindus believe that there is a cycle of 8 400 000 sentient forms among which human life, being endowed with moral reason, is the best. Therefore, humans also carry the biggest burden of responsibility. The purpose of life, is best explained by the Theory of Karma (the principle of causality) and the Hindu belief in reincarnation. The state of Moksha is achieved only after one lives out the Karmic consequences of one’s good or bad actions. One is therefore responsible for one’s actions in this life because it has a bearing on the future. Simultaneously, one lives out the consequences of past actions. Unless the thirst for existence is extinguished, new Karma, leading to rebirth, arises constantly. The soul must return again and again to work off the consequences of Karma.
Human nature, good and evil

In the Rigveda, ethical and moral ideals were tied to the concept of universal law. Thinkers of the time were amazed by the regular occurrence of day and night and seasonal changes. They were petrified by storms, floods and earthquakes, which occurred frequently. They reasoned that these phenomena occurred as a result of a natural universal law and named it Ruta (ru pronounced as in crusade), the universal truth. Vedic gods had the task of maintaining and protecting Ruta. It was believed that the favour of these gods was won by performing ritual sacrifices, which in turn produced rewards for the performer. However, humans were capable of manipulating this law to their own advantage. The tampering with and breaking of the universal law was termed Anruta, which was considered as evil and untruth. Suffering and pain was considered to be due to not performing these rituals. Hence worldly pleasures came to be associated with performing good acts and unhappiness with bad ones.

This shows how, in Hinduism, beliefs, rituals and ethics are closely interwoven.

The concepts of good and evil are also tied to the theory of Karma. Hindus consider that these concepts are contextual and not absolute. The definitions of both will depend on the circumstance. Human nature is neither good nor evil. Thus, in the Bhagvatgita, Lord Krishna advises Arjuna, the hero, that on the battlefield it is his duty to fight his adversaries, even if they are his relatives and elders. Killing in this case is justified by the concept of duty of a Kshatriya (warrior) to uphold the principles of statecraft. Arjuna is a king and it is his duty to protect his subjects and the state from the evil at any cost.

Man is, however, responsible for his actions. If he uses freedom for his own benefit, then he would be performing an evil act. Evil is thus considered to be the result of our deviating from our duties as laid down by the society.

THINKING PROMPT

Compare the Hindu concepts of good and evil with those in one of the other religious traditions you have studied.
The individual and the community

Dharma, the code of conduct required of an individual, is dependant upon one's duties as defined by the society at large and one's station in life. Human endeavour is divided into three essential duties:
1. **Yajna** (sacrifice of any kind for someone else)
2. **Dana** (giving away material goods)
3. **Tapas** (meditation aimed at achieving Moksha).

The concept of **Varnashramadharma** (Varna-Ashrama-Dharma) – the four stages in the life of an individual belonging to the higher three Varnas) – specifies the duties of an individual at each of these stages.
1. The first stage, that of **Brahmacharya** (cultivating the Brahman), requires the person to study diligently and acquire the knowledge essential for his/her profession.
2. In the second stage of **Grihasthasthrama**, the person should marry, raise a family and become a responsible member of the society.
3. In the third stage of Vanaprastharama, the person, while still a part of the society, should start withdrawing from all social concerns and give up most possessions.
4. In the final stage of Samnyasa or total renunciation, the individual should discard normal clothes and wear an ochre robe and leave the community altogether in favour of a secluded life in search of the ultimate. It is a common practice to perform symbolic cremation for an individual who takes Samnyasa to symbolise his final journey, which does not require him to be a part of the Hindu society. His only quest from now on is to seek the inner self.

The place of reason and the paths to salvation

Hinduism accommodates reason within the theory of Karma and Moksha. Therefore, one has to accept the next birth as a consequence of the good or bad Karmas performed in the previous life.

Religious **preceptors** have also suggested many ways out of the cycles of birth. One such path is to avoid philosophical thought and simply follow the path of **Bhakti**, the unquestioning and total devotion and surrender to one's chosen god. This is the path followed by members of cults such as the Hare-Krishnas. The grace of God can also be obtained by following a path of knowledge (**Jnanayoga**). Such knowledge (**Jnana**), which is the knowledge of the **Atman** and the self, cannot be gained by mere philosophical pursuits or by blindly performing rituals. The only way to attain it is by practising yoga meditation, undertaking severe self-discipline, following **ascetic** practices and finally achieving control over greed, lust and selfishness. Moksha can also be achieved simply by being a responsible member of the society, by doing good to others and by following the Dharma as required. This last is called the path of action, or **Karmayoga**. It is important to realise that all these paths overlap and hence the individual must decide what he or she should do. There is no absolute in any of the paths. The **Dharmashastras** consider ethical behaviour as the most important vehicle for achieving Moksha.

Authority

The higher tradition within Hinduism considers the Vedas to be the supreme authority. Opinion of scholars well versed in Vedic teaching is sought in the resolution of disputes dealing with the conduct of rituals. On the other hand, **Smritis** such as the **Manusmriti** and **Yajnavalkyasmitri** are consulted in dealing with problems associated with codes of conduct. Tradition plays a very important role, especially in the folk religion. The majority of rituals that follow the Hindu religious calendar and the worship of totems, animals and the like, are the province of womenfolk and are home-based. Most of these are observed according to the family tradition.

A great seventh century CE scholar and religious preceptor, the Adi-Shankaracharya (the first Shankaracharya), was responsible for the resurgence of Hinduism after the demise of Buddhism and Jainism in India. He established four seats of learning in the four corners of India to further Hindu thought, a tradition that is still maintained. The opinions of the current Shankaracharyas occupying these seats are still sought in the resolution of religious disputes. They are however not binding and
act only as advice. Contemporary cult leaders, such as the Satya-Saibaba and Mahesh Yogi, exert authority over their followers. Hinduism has no equivalent for the papal authority in Christianity or the authority of the Mullahs in Islam.

Core values and principles

The creation of a perfect society and a perfect individual bound by the rules of the society was the supreme ideal of the Vedic seers. Works such as the Manusmriti spelled out in meticulous detail the rules of behaviour for people in all walks of life. The core values are best understood by looking at the following examples.

The teacher/family priest gives the following advice to a young boy, eight years of age, at his threading ceremony:

Always speak the truth and follow your Dharma. Serve your parents and your Guru. Piously observe the control of senses and activity. Observe Brahmacharya (cultivate Brahman by observing celibacy and undertaking studies) and study at least till the age of 25. May your life be the manifestation of divinity. Nature and the written word are also Gurus. Please your parents and acquire knowledge from your books. May the auspicious blessings of the Lord be with you always.

During the wedding ceremony, the groom makes two important pronouncements while holding both hands of the bride:

Oh Bride! By taking me as your husband, you promise to stay with me until old age. Four gods have handed you over to me to undertake our duties as members of the society. I hold your hands in front of the fire to seal our union.

Oh Bride! You are like the Rigveda while I am like the Samaveda. I am like the skies while you are like the earth. Witnessed by Agni the fire god and the priests, we will marry each other, love each other, endear each other with our virtuous behaviour and have children. We will love each other without malice and live for a hundred years.
The groom also takes a vow by saying that, 'From now on, I will not transgress the rules laid by the society in terms of observing the Dharma, in earning money to support my family and in enjoying sexual pleasures'.

Aphorisms – wisdom statements to guide conduct

Aphorisms are concise statements, often in verse, that spell out the message of ethical behaviour. These abound in Hindu literature. The following are some examples:

1. (The concepts of) Heaven and hell are simply manifestations of one’s thought processes. Control over fanciful thinking leads to heaven; succumbing to it is hell. (The Mahabharata: Vanaparva, 211.19)

2. The son should follow his father in performing his duties. He should also do whatever his mother asks him to do. A wife should speak softly in a sweet voice to her husband. Brothers and sisters should not envy one another. They should love one another and always speak nicely. (The Atharvaveda, 3.30.2–3)

3. You all should walk together and pray together. Let your minds become as one. May you have identical determination to achieve moksha. (The Rigveda: 10.191.2)

4. May God bless us and sustain us both. May we both get the strength (to pursue an ethical path) at the same time. (The Kathopanishad, 1.1)

5. May (speaking) the truth protect me from (unwanted influences) all directions. (The Rigveda, 10.37.2)

6. Education, fortitude, patience, determination, forgiveness, control over mind, pure thinking, seeking the truth, control of anger and humility are the ten the determinants of ethics. (The Manusmriti, 6.92)

Bhartruhari, the great poet-king, wrote his well-known collection of 300 verses on physical love, ethics and ascetics (100 verses each) approx. around the 11th century. Two examples of his verses on ethics (Neetishatakam) are:

1. Those who are devoid of education, knowledge, morality, virtuous behaviour, generosity and ascetic traits are a burden on this earth. They are mere beasts in human form.

2. I bow to those who exhibit:
   - a desire to remain in the company of the virtuous
   - respect for the parents, the Guru, and the elders
   - desire to acquire education and knowledge for ever
   - a wariness of idle talk
   - control of their senses
   - a devotion to Lord Shiva.

**THINKING PROMPT**

Interpret verse 1 of Bhartruhari in your own words and discuss it in terms of your own social group.
Hinduism and other world religions

Perhaps because Hinduism considers religion to be an eternal search by human beings, it accepts that there are innumerable ways to approach god and to achieve salvation. Thus it is apparent that even within Hinduism there are many ways to godhood. Active tolerance of other beliefs is witnessed in the following aphorism from the Upanishadas:

There is only one truth, but the wise address it differently.

THINKING PROMPT

Comment on the importance of the above aphorism.
Find similar statements of tolerance in other religious traditions.

Its accretive nature has made Hinduism highly syncretic and, in comparatively modern times, it has been influenced by other faiths such as Christianity and Islam. For instance, the concepts of heaven and hell that did not exist in the higher tradition but which were borrowed from Christianity, have appeared in the popular tradition. It is also common for Hindus to worship the Dargas of Pir, memorial places where sufi saints (Islamic mystics) have been buried.

In modern times, in response to Christianity and Islam, thinkers such as Vivekananda, Ram Mohan Roy, Ambedkar, Ranade, Agarkar, Tilak, Dayananda Saraswati and Gandhi criticised the inequalities of the caste system, untouchability and the demeaning of women that had crept into Hinduism. They reminded Hindus of their ideal past in the fields of ethics and Dharma and brought about many welcome changes in current Hindu thought.

Contributor - Jayant Bapat
Rujuta Bhide, a 3rd year University Student reflects:

Sometimes I wonder if I am really Hindu.

This is a difficult question. I don’t go to the temple every week or have incense sticks burning all day at home. I could not recite most Sanskrit verses – I have not studied the language. I don’t believe in the caste system and would like it abolished at all levels. I won’t necessarily have an arranged marriage and there most certainly won’t be any dowry. Having lived in Australia for most of my life, I will probably exchange gifts and decorate the house at Christmas rather than at Deepawali. So does this mean I am not a true Hindu? Perhaps, and yet it is my religious beliefs that comfort me more than anything else when I’m having a streak of bad luck. I don’t feel restricted in any way by the Hindu religion; on the contrary, it is the belief in a sheltering superpower that gives me confidence to challenge any situation. The Hindu notions of respecting my elders and fulfilling my duties to family and community are a benevolent force in my life. Despite its ancient roots, its teachings are still very relevant today and perhaps the fact that I can turn to Hindu philosophies for answers when all else fails does make me a true Hindu.

Glossary – Hinduism

Accretive: something which continues to grow.

Anruta: the opposite of Ruta, which is the Law of order in nature according to Vedic religion. Anruta is therefore the breakdown of the laws of nature, created by man’s selfishness and greed.

Agni: the Hindu god of fire. Hindus believe that offerings made into fire to Agni go upwards to the gods who reside in the space between the skies and earth called Antariksha. Agni is therefore a messenger between humans and gods. Offerings are also purified by fire, which is why Hindus cremate their dead.

Aphorism: a concise statement of a principle or truth. In Hindu literature, aphorisms are often in verse form.

Aryans: also known as Indo-Europeans, the Aryans were nomadic warrior tribes who entered India probably from Central Asia or Russia between 2000–1500 BCE. They spoke Sanskrit, which is considered to be the mother of the Indo-European languages. Aryan, Dravidian and indigenous cultures eventually coalesced to produce the present-day Hindu society.

Asceticism (adjective: ascetic): an act of renouncing material comforts. An ascetic is a person who gives up material comforts.

Bhakti: absolute and fervent devotion to god. A Bhakta is a fervent devotee. Bhaktiyoga is the path of Bhakti aimed at achieving Moksha, freedom from rebirth.

Brahmacharya: literally, cultivation of the Brahman. However, according to the accepted meaning of the term, Brahmacharya means celibacy. It is the preferred first stage in life of an individual when he embarks upon the path of learning.

Brahman: the ultimate principal that creates, maintains and finally destroys the universe. According to Vedic thought, everything is born out of Brahman and eventually unites with it. (Brahman is not to be confused with Brahmin, the priestly caste in the Varna system).

Dharma: the term Dharma can mean either religion or the code of conduct in society. Thus Hindu Dharma is Hindu religion. However, the Dharma (expected code of conduct) of a Brahmin is to teach and act as a priest.

Dharmashastra: The science that specifies details of Hindu rituals, duties of individuals belonging to each Varna, and the details of the worship of various gods and goddesses, etc.

Dravidians: a term used to describe four groups of people who currently occupy Southern India and speak the following languages: Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and Kannarese. Although their exact origin is uncertain, some scholars believe that the Dravidians may have originated in the Mediterranean. Dravidian languages are quite different from North Indian languages, which are derived from Sanskrit.
Endogamy (endogamous): marrying within one's own group. Castes and Sub-castes are endogamous groups.

Grihashastrsha: (Grihastha: a married man; Ashrama: a stage in one's life) the second stage in the life of an individual according to Hindu thought. After completion of his education, a man gets married, performs duties appropriate for his Varna, brings up a family and fulfils his role as a responsible member of the society.

Jnana: knowledge. In the context of Hindu religion, it is the knowledge about the inner self.

Jnanayoga: the path of gaining knowledge about self (Atman) and realising the ultimate truth, leading ultimately to the state of Moksha.

Karma: literally, a deed. However, in the broader context of Hindu thought, Karma is the principle of causality resulting from action. Since the process of living depends upon good or bad action, the sum total of Karma over a person's life has a bearing upon his next birth and the cycles of births and deaths through which he must pass. Eventually, when the total effects of one's Karma are quenched, one achieves the state of Moksha; i.e., freedom from re-birth.

Karmayoga: the path recommended to be followed by a householder in order to achieve salvation. Plain living, high thinking, humility, virtuous behaviour, good moral conduct and devotion to god are the main attributes expected of a person in his role as a responsible member of the society. Hindus believe that this is the ideal path for the average person in his quest for Moksha.

Mahabharata: one of the greatest books and the longest epic in the world. Anthological in content, it seems to have been compiled over a long time, most probably between 850 and 650 BCE. At present the Mahabharata consists of 18 chapters containing a total of 110,000 verses. The main story, that of a struggle between the Kshatriya kings Kauravas and Pandavas, who are cousins, occupies only a small portion of the entire work. The rest of the book contains a mixture of unrelated material consisting, amongst other things, of history, geography, mythology, fairy tales and the philosophical Bhagvat-gita.

Mismomer: an unsuitable name.

Moksha: freedom from re-birth. The concept of Moksha is related to the theory of Karma. Although akin to salvation, Moksha is not the same as reaching heaven. Rather, it is the unioning with Brahman, the ultimate principle from which we are born in the first place.

Pir: a Muslim holy man. The place where a Pir is buried is called Darga.

Preceptor: one who delivers rules and codes of conduct.

Ramayana: next to the Mahabharata, the second great epic of India. It consists of seven sections with a total of 24,000 verses and tells the story of the victory of King Rama over Ravana, the king of Sri Lanka. The story is believed to depict the triumph of Aryan civilisation over indigenous cultures. The original Ramayana is thought to be of Buddhist origin. However, its present shape and structure, acquired probably around 250 CE, shows a brahminical Vedic authorship.

Ruta: the law of natural order, which regulates and controls the forces of nature such as rain, wind, thunder, storms and light. The opposite of Ruta is Anratha.

Rudra-Shiva: one of the main Hindu gods of today, Rudra-Shiva is believed to be a synthesis of the fierce Vedic god Rudra of the Aryans and the benign god Shiva of the Dravidians. Shiva’s consort is Parvati whose other names are Uma and Durga. Shiva and Parvati have two sons: the elephant headed Ganesha and Kartikeya, also called Murugan.

Sanatana: literally, eternal or perpetual. However, in the context of Hinduism, it has been used to mean orthodox.

Seal: an engraved metal or stone object.

Syncretism (Syncretic): to reconcile the differences and attempt to blend together different belief systems.

Tapas: one of the ways of realising god as prescribed in Hindu thought. The practice of Tapas may involve harsh training of the mind and the body by denying oneself food and drink, subjecting the body to extremes of heat and cold and undertaking Yogic postures for prolonged periods. While undertaking such practices, the mind concentrates on the divine.
**Threading ceremony**: a child belonging to the three higher Varnas, Brahmmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, undergoes the ritual of Threading ceremony around the age of eight. Symbolically, this ritual is the means by which a child is admitted into the Hindu fold. At the ceremony, the Guru (the priest) gives him the *Gayatri mantra*, the most sacred Mantra for Hindus, and the sacred thread. The child is required to take a vow to commence learning of the scriptures and remain celibate until he completes this task.

**Unmanifest**: an object that cannot be easily seen by the eye.

**Unrita**: destruction of the universal natural order, mainly by man.

**Varna**: literally, Varna means colour. During the Vedic times, Indian society was divided into four loose groups called Varnas. These were: Brahmmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras. These divisions were based on the function allotted to each of these groups. It was possible to change one’s Varna by changing the occupation. Later on, the divisions became entrenched and gave rise to the castes and sub-castes of today.

**Varnashramadharma**: the duties required of an individual according to his station in life.

**Yajna**: literally, sacrifice of any kind for someone else. In the context of Hindu ritual, Yajna is making offerings of butterfat and other foods into fire in the belief that Agni, the god of fire, will take them to the gods in the skies.