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TRAVEL. DRAW CONNECTIONS.

RELIGION: HINDUISM



ABSTRACT:

This document is designed to provide a comprehensive background on the history of the Hindu religion, the central tenets of the faith, the relevant religious symbolism, and primary related religious movements. Particularly when accompanied with our Hindu Architecture primer, this document should prove helpful toward understanding this religion's rich cultural legacy.

Related Approach Guides

- “Indian Art & Architecture: Hindu”
- “Religion: Buddhism”
- “A Walk Through Khajuraho”
- “South Indian Dynasties' Hindu Architectural Legacy”

THE HISTORY OF HINDUISM IN INDIA

EARLIEST BEGINNINGS

Born in India, Hinduism (or Santana Dharma or Brahmanism) is the world's oldest existing major religion.

- Most elements of present day Hinduism descended from a blending of the religious beliefs of the Aryans (a white race of semi-nomadic people from Eastern Turkey, the Ukraine and Iran who likely penetrated into Indian territories, specifically West Punjab, around 1300 -1100 BCE) and those of the earlier, indigenous peoples who were the founders of the Indus River Valley civilization (this civilization was either about to dissolve or had already dissolved as early as 1600 BCE).
- The Aryan settlement of northwestern India -- the area around the Indus and Ganges rivers -- probably occurred between 1300-1100 BCE.
 - The tribes of the Aryans were successful at taking over this land versus the indigenous population due to their use of two-wheeled chariots.
 - Beginning around 1000 BCE, the Aryans expanded from their point of entry into subcontinent eastward along the Gangetic plain, forming their first agrarian settlements in this area around 600 BCE. This expansion was driven by a change of climate (drying conditions in the northwest) and the use of iron (which made cultivation easier), as well as a desire on the part of some Aryans to escape the kingdoms of the northwest.
 - This transition from semi-nomadic life to settled agriculture that accompanied this expansion set the stage for a mixing of cultures with indigenous peoples; these indigenous people would come to have an impact on the nature of the dominant religion.
- Current archaeological and literary evidence suggests that an ancient form of Hinduism was formed somewhere around 1400-1100 BCE, with the arrival of the Aryans. However, we do not see a written text, the Rig Veda, emerge until approximately 500 BCE; the Rig Veda's content was preserved through oral tradition until then.

TOTAL NUMBERS OF FOLLOWERS*

- Christianity – 2.1 billion
- Islam – 1.5 billion
- Hinduism – 900 million
- Chinese traditional religions (Taoism and Confucianism) – 394 million
- Buddhism – 376 million

*Data pulled from www.adherents.com

CORE ELEMENTS OF THE HINDU RELIGION

THE MAJOR TEXTS OF HINDU THOUGHT

Hinduism is based on the revealed knowledge of the Aryans' Veda (the primary text of the Hindu faith, equivalent to the Judeo-Christian Bible or the Islamic Koran) and is the direct descendent of the Vedic religion first begun by the Aryans.

- **The Veda**
 - The Veda consists of 4 books: the Rig Veda, the Sama Veda, the Yajur Veda and the Atharva Veda. These are derived from fundamental "truths" derived from the Gods/Supreme Being and created over thousands of years, rather than the words or life of any inspired person (such as is the case in Buddhism, Jainism, and the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions).
 - Much of the Vedas are composed as hymns (with specific rhythm, meter, and pronunciation) that be sung or chanted. This is how they were passed down, reportedly unaltered, though the generations prior to the writing down of the text.
 - The Vedas revolve around enabling cult worship, and include four categories of texts: holy words (mantras), commentaries on the sacrificial rituals (Brahmana), instructions for rituals (sutras), and somewhat later, philosophical treatises (the Upanishads).
 - The oldest of the Vedas, the Rig Veda, was probably composed somewhere around 1500-1300 BCE and traces the period of Aryan colonization of India (moving from West to East along the plain of the Ganges).
 - The Veda was transformed by India's indigenous religions. It is important to note, however, despite the "foundational" nature of the Veda to Hinduism, the Vedas were transformed by the religions indigenous to the Ganges River valley. These indigenous religions generated the philosophical elements -- the concept of atman-brahman, samsara, karma (all discussed before) -- that dominate most of Hindu thinking to this day. Even the Gods of modern day Hinduism (discussed below) are entirely different and go by different names than those of the Vedas.
- **The Upanishads**
 - The Upanishads is the philosophical portion of the Veda, effectively functioning as an interpretation or commentary on the earlier Veda, written in prose rather than as hymns. They were composed around 600 BCE (compositions began 1000 BCE -- note

that 600 BCE coincides with the transition to agriculture and the increased contact with indigenous Indian peoples mentioned above) and represent the final stage in the tradition of the Vedas.

- The philosophical concern of the Upanishads is the nature of reality, with a development toward the belief on how the individual self (atman) is unified with the Brahman (the supreme spirit and ultimate reality) in nirvana.
- The teaching based on the Upanishads is known as the **Vedanta**, meaning "the conclusion of the Veda".
 - The Brahma Vedanta is the starting point of the Vedanta philosophy. It is here that the core teachings of the Vedanta are set forth in a logical and consistent framework, as seemingly contradictory statements within the primary Upanishad text are reconciled.
 - The overlying theme of the Brahma Vedanta is that prevailing religious ritual be discarded in favor of the individual's quest for truth through meditation and reference scriptural evidence.
 - Despite the aim of clarity that the Brahma sutras sought, there remained a good deal of room for interpretation, resulting in the formation of numerous Vedanta schools, the foremost of which is **Advaita Vedanta**.
 - Advaita Vedanta advocates that Brahman is the only reality and the world in which we live is entirely illusory. Our inability to recognize this illusion (called maya) is what causes all of the suffering in this world. Only by recognition of this illusion and the achievement of true knowledge of Brahman can liberation from this cycle of lives in this world be attained. The key to this path of Brahman knowledge is to recognize that there is no difference between the individual soul (atman) and Brahman; therefore, liberation results from knowing this indifference -- this recognition of the singularity of individual and supreme gives the Advaita ("not two-ness") Vedanta its name.
- **The Bhagavad Gita** ("Song of God")
 - The Bhagavad Gita is an ancient Sanskrit text comprised of 700 verses from the Mahabharata (discussed below). The text consists of a conversation between God (in the form of Krishna, an avatar of the God Vishnu) and Arjuna (a warrior and proxy for humanity) that takes place on the battlefield, as Arjuna expresses his desire to avoid the confrontation. Fundamentally, Krishna argues that despite the difficulty of embarking upon such a confrontation (due to his attachment to his brethren on the opposing side), Arjuna should follow his duty (dharma, in the form of the demands of the divine) by fighting. In this way, Arjuna eschews his temporal ego associated with the ephemeral world (the one that is telling him not to engage in the war) in favor of his immortal self (atman); in so doing, Krishna argues, he will cast aside the illusion (maya) associated with this relative world and enter the realm of the Supreme (Brahman). This purely philosophical text is also analyzed by the Vedanta schools and is seen as a junior partner to the Upanishads.

- Brahmins (priests or teachers)
- Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors)
- Vaishyas (skilled labor)
- Shudras (unskilled labor)
- Below these 4 castes are the untouchables.

MAIN HINDU DOMINATIONS

- Vaishnavism (devotees of Vishnu). This is the largest Hindu denomination in India, more focused on loving adoration than contemplation to achieve oneness with Vishnu (worship driven more by the heart than the mind). Vaishnavites are recognizable due to their shaved heads and the placement of designs with white clay on their foreheads (tilak).
- Shaivism (devotees of Shiva). Shaivites are recognizable due to the three horizontal lines of black ash on their foreheads (tilak) or the lingam draped around their neck. This is a highly contemplative denomination.
- Shaktism (devotees of Devi, the Goddess, wife of Shiva). Similar to Shaivism, Shaktism stresses the active or ritualistic portion of the faith, over contemplation, however. They are sometimes recognizable due to the red mark (tilak) on their foreheads.

THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT

- "Bhakti" means "devotion"
- Although bhakti has manifest itself in many faiths (Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, etc), bhakti is most prevalent in Hinduism as a guiding principle. There are two bhakti canons: one for Shiva (called the Tirumurai canon) and one for Vishnu (called the Nalayira-Divya-Prabandam canon).
- The logic underlying the practice of bhakti yoga
 - As stated above, this is the most popular of the four yogas and the easiest for most people to realize.
 - It is important to note a key difference in bhakti yoga versus other forms: unlike other forms, practitioners of bhakti do not attempt to identify the godliness in themselves; rather they look to elements outside of themselves, and in doing so, shift their interests and affections to a personal god who is experienced as distinct from themselves.
 - That said, bhakti focuses on a religious experience that centers on the formation of an intimate relationship with one's personal deity that shapes all of existence. It argues that liberation from rebirth (moksha) was not achieved through the following of rules, regulations or societal ordering; rather, it was achieved through simple devotion to the Divine.
 - This naturally challenged the status quo, wherein the people relied upon priestly religious authority and sacrificial practices for spiritual fulfillment.
 - This movement can be looked at as a continuation of the initial liberalization in Vedic thinking that began with the movements of Jainism, Buddhism, and Upanishadic thought.