
Chapter 1: The Scholar and the Devotee [1]

The Search for Origins [5]

View 1: Hinduism as sanatana dharma – the eternal tradition/religion. On this view, its origins lie beyond human history and are divinely revealed (shruti) and passed down in the Veda (the world’s oldest scriptures).

View 1a: The Hindu Nationalist view. The divine truth was revealed to the Aryans, a noble, enlightened race which inhabited India thousands of years ago, and in whose language, Sanskrit, the Vedic scriptures are transcribed. On this view, Indian adherents of post Aryan Indian religions like Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs are also Hindu.

View 1b: Hinduism predates the Aryans, and is traceable to the indigenous inhabitants of India before the Aryans arrived.

View 2: Hinduism is traceable to the Indus valley civilization of about 2500-1800 BCE (The Aryans arrived around 1500 BCE).

Chapter 2: Revelation and the Transmission of Knowledge [12]

Storytellers and Shankara-acharyas: Handing down Hindu Teachings [12]

Sampradaya – oral tradition – an institution centered round a guru in which theological and ritual traditions are passed down and sustained from generation to generation.

One sampradaya was formed by the 9th century teacher Shankara, still passed on in several monastic institutions in various parts of India. People trained in this tradition – Shankara-acharyas are themselves charismatic figures, but must also pass on Shankara’s teachings. They are both brahmins and gurus.

Shruti and Smriti: Revelation and Tradition [14]

Shruti (“revealed”) texts have been divinely revealed to the early sages (rishis). Written in Sanskrit, and dated between 1500 and 300 BCE. Key examples: The Vedas and Upanishads.

Smriti (“remembered”) texts are of human composition (albeit based on divine truths). Key examples: the Epics (e.g., the Bhagavad-Gita and the Ramayana), Puranas (e.g. the Manusmriti), and Sutras.

The Brahmin and the Transmission of Ritual Knowledge [17]

Brahman: creative power/truth, or by the early Upanishads, the impersonal cosmic principle or absolute reality.

Brahmin: a ritual specialist associated with brahman; one who recites Vedic hymns; priestly cast. Highest of the varna.

Varna: the four traditional Aryan social classes, identified in Rig Veda 10.90 with parts of the body of the cosmic person Purusha:

- Mouth – brahmins
- Arms – warriors
- Thighs – commoners
- Feet – servants (shudra)

(Contrast with jati, the caste system (see p. 22), although brahmins are also at the top of that.)
**Dharma** – truth, law, duty, obligation (sometimes thought of as religion). Has a **general** (the harmony of the world) and **personal** (one’s individual duty) application – brahmins help with both: they perform sacrificial rituals to petition the gods to maintain the natural world, and they initiate individuals into new life-roles (like being “twice born” or performing marriages or funeral rites, although brahmins’ purity prevents them disposing of the body or performing exorcisms.)

The Guru and the Transmission of Spiritual Knowledge [21]
Unlike brahmin, **gurus** can come from any caste, and do not need to know scripture (they can even be illiterate). Example: **Anandamayi Ma**, born 1896 [23].

Chapter 3: Understanding the Self [26]

**Vedanta** and **Vedantins** [30]
**Vedanta**: a philosophical system in which scholars have focused on the study of Vedic texts concerning **brahman** (ultimate reality), e.g., the **Upanishads**, the **Bhagavad-gita**, and the **Brahma-sutra**. Three major **vedantins** in Hindu tradition:

1. **Shankara** (788-820)
   Shankara’s view on vedanta was **advaita** (non-duality): ultimate reality (brahman) and the self (**atman**) as identical. One only realizes this when one attains a higher level of consciousness.

2. **Ramanuja** (1017-1137)
   Qualified non-dualist (**vishishtadvaita**) vedanta. Accepted Shankara’s claim that ultimate reality was non-dual, but denied Shankara’s claims that our senses mislead and that brahman is impersonal and without qualities. According to Ramanuja (who worshipped Vishnu, and promoted the religion of the **Vaishnavas**, his followers), **brahman** is the supreme **person** of the Epics and **Puranas**. Just as the human body is the instrument of the self within, so the world and the selves are related to God.

3. **Madhva** (13th century)
   Dualist (**dvaita**) vedanta. Brahman and atman are separate, and selves are distinct from each other and God. To be liberated from suffering and rebirth requires divine grace and active devotion, and the Lord should be worshipped in the form of an **icon** (**murti**). Madva placed an icon of Krishna in his monastery in Udiipi, where it remains today.

Different interpretations of Sanskrit phrase **Tat tvam asi** (“that you are”), found in the **Upanishads** and the **Brahma-sutra** (which summarizes the vedantic teachings of the **Upanishads**):
Shankara – should be read as saying you are the same as the world
Ramanuja – the sentence suggests that brahman (tat) and atman (tvam) were distinguished but related.
Madhva – the two are quite separate.

Which vedanta a Hindu follows will shape his or her behavior: prayer and worship do not make sense if one follows Shankara, but will on the others’ views.

Karma, Yoga, and the Self [34]
An individual’s personality or self transmigrates at death to a new body, and this cycle of rebirth (**samsara**) is fuelled by a chain of cause and effect linked to action (**karma**). “Renouncers” try to escape the pain associated with this cycle, and according to Krishna in the **Bhagavad-gita**, the way to do this is through **yoga**. The three main kinds are **karma yoga** (offering your actions as spiritual offerings to the gods), **jnana yoga** (the path of knowledge) and **bhakti yoga** (the path of devotion). (The yoga with which we are familiar in the west is **hatha** yoga. The yoga that involves levitation is **siddha** yoga.)
Chapter 4: Divine Heroes: The Epic Tradition [40]
Ramayana: The Story [42]
Dasharatha the king of Ayodhya has several sons by three wives. One of them, Kaikeyi, persuades him to banish her eldest stepson Rama so that her son Bharata will be in line to be king. He does, and Rama leaves out of duty to his father, accompanied by Sita his wife and Lakshmana his loyal younger brother. After some travelling, Sita is kidnapped by the Ravana, demon-king of Lanka. With help from the monkey prince Sugriva (whom he helps first) and the divine monkey Hanuman, they destroy Ravana and rescue Sita. However, Sita has to undergo an ordeal by fire to prove her chastity to Rama. Then Rama returns and rules Ayodhya. However, rumors persist about Sita and Rama banishes her. She takes refuge with Valmiki (who narrates the Ramyana), gives birth to Rama’s twin sons and later disappears into the earth whence she first arose. The grieving Rama ascends to heaven with his followers.

Dharma and the Ramayana [43]
Dharma (law/duty/truth) is evinced in the behavior of characters in the Ramayana, particularly Rama and Sita. Your dharma depends on your varna (social class) and ashrama (stage of life), hence varna-ashrama-dharma. This does not apply for women, however, who have duties as daughter then wife (stri-dharma).

Sita, Devi, and the Goddesses [45]
Sita’s role in the Ramayana can seem boring, but it is open to interpretation, and there are different versions of the Ramayana in which her role is different. In the popular Hindi version she has heroic strength. In the Tamil Iramavataram, she is shown as justifiable angry and sarcastic, and in women’s folk songs she is portrayed as the wronged heroine.
Sita is not a goddess. There are many goddesses, all of whom are seen as expressions of the one great Devi. These include the clever Parvati, the powerful warrior Durga (slayer of the buffalo demon Mahisha, who was assured that he could not be killed by any man), Santoshi Ma, bringer of peace to the home, or Kali the terrifying mother. Devi also has titles like Mahamaya (great illusion) and Shakti (creative power).

Chapter 5: The Divine Presence [50]
Idols or Icons? [50]
Ramanuja and later vedantins taught that the Lord manifests in five forms:
1. the supreme transcendental form
2. in its emanations (avatar)
   (For example, Vishnu had ten famous avatars: Matsya, the fish, Kurma, the tortoise, Varaha, the boar, Narshimha, the man-lion, Yamana, the dwarf, Parashurama, Rama with the axe, Rama, Krishna, Buddha and Kalki, the white horse, who will come at the end of the dark age.)
3. in the heart or self of each individual
4. as the inner controller of the universe
5. as the divine presence within consecrated icons (special statues set up by brahmins in temples)

In this fifth form, the Lord is most approachable. Usually these icons take human form, but Shiva rarely manifests as such and is most often seen as the linga, a smooth cylindrical stone (which, if found in nature, can be worshipped without being consecrated).
Other supernatural entities can inhabit objects: bhuts, female ghosts, or mata, local goddesses. Mahatmas (great selves), of which Gandhi is the most famous example, are humans whose actions show their selves to be self-realized. Finally, people can become possessed, so that gods or goddesses speak through them.
Hinduism is both monotheistic (one Lord) and polytheistic (many gods) [57-8]. Can you say the same about Christianity?

**Chapter 6: Hinduism, Colonialism, and Modernity [67]**
The *pizza effect*: when Hindu practices are absorbed by non-Indians abroad (for example nineteenth century American writers Emerson, Thoreau and Walt Whitman, via the translations of the Briton William Jones) and then their versions in turn return to India and shape the traditions there (just as Pizza was invented by Italian Americans but has been embraced in Italy). Ghandi is an example of someone who read the *Bhagavad-gita* for the first time in English in England. He embraced many elements, but rejected the notion of untouchables, and, while accepting the ‘Sita’ model of women’s roles, argued for their rights.

**Chapter 7: Challenges to Hinduism: Women and Davits [80]**
Caste and Gender: Who is a Hindu? [81]
Varna (social class), jati (caste) and dharma (duty) are all much discussed in the *Manusmriti* (written by Manu in the second century BCE) which severely constricts the roles of both women and lower classes or castes. Those outside the varna system were called chandalas and were barred from owning property, regarded as impure, forced to live outside of the village and perform its most demeaning tasks. The higher classes should fear the polluting presence of such people, needing ritual purification after contact. Also impure was a menstruating woman, and women were barred from religious scriptures and spiritual progress.

However, the fact of powerful goddesses in Hinduism provides a resource for arguing for inclusion, and female reformers have challenged the marginalization of women, as have lower caste members for chandalas and dalits (untouchables). But even today, the fact of dowry, whereby the parents of a daughter have to pay for her to get married results in men marrying women for their dowries and then killing them, and the abortion of female fetuses (a 1986 report showed that of 8,000 abortions after a sex test, only one was male).

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891-56) was an influential Columbia-and-LSE-educated untouchable, who returned to India, became involved in national politics and assumed a leading role in the constitutional drafting committee after Indian independence. He said, of rejecting Hinduism for Buddhism, to fellow dalits:

> I tell you all very specifically, religion is for man and not man for religion. To get human treatment, convert yourselves... Convert for securing equality. Convert for getting liberty... Why do you remain in that religion which prohibits you from entering a temple... from drinking water from a public well? Why do you remain in that religion which insults you at every step?

Religion and Protest [91]
Not all dalits have abandoned Hinduism: many have reclaimed symbols that they think can affirm their humanity. Different groups of Punjabi dalits have associated themselves with Valmiki (the narrator of the *Ramayana*) and to revere Ravidas, a dalit poet. Some Epics have been reinterpreted: for centuries in south India, a version of the *Ramayana* has been told with Ravana as hero and Rama, signifying the north Indian, brahminical worldview, as villain.

**Chapter 8: Crossing the Black Waters: Hinduism beyond India [94]**
Unlike Christianity and Islam, Hinduism has remained predominantly in India and Nepal, suggesting that Hinduism is an ethnic, rather than a universalizing religion. This is reinforced by the traditional view of India as the Hindu universe, ritually purified and surrounded by the “black waters.” However, there have been influential figures like Ghandi and Ambedkar who have crossed these waters, and Hindu communities have
sprung up in places like Thailand, Mauritius, the US and Britain. Members of this **diaspora** are torn between two requirements.
1. the need to created a strong, unified Hindu identity which can be articulated publicly and compared with other world religions (something stressed by the **Vishwa Hindu Parishad**), and
2. the desire to stress the openness of Hinduism to other religions, and the diversity within it.

**Chapter 9: Hindu Dharma, Hinduism, and Hinduisms** [109]

Unlike Christianity, for example, Hinduism has no founder, a multitude of scriptures, brahmins rather than priests, and no central institution like The Church. Ritual, myth and ethics are important, but **belief** less so, because there is no core **creed**. Furthermore, Hinduism extends into a complex socio-economic world of caste and popular practices. Modern Hindu philosopher **Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan** declared Hinduism to be ‘a way of life’.

**The Etymology of ‘Hindu’**
The term originated among newcomers to India (Persians and Turks especially) to denote inhabitants of India. In this usage it includes Buddhists, Jains, et. al., and was purely ethnic. But with the discovery of the British of the Vedic scriptures and the brahmins, it became used in a religious way, to be identified with the religious traditions of the Aryan people.

Nowadays, ‘Hinduism’ covers not just the divisions of **Vaishnavism** (worship of Vishnu), **Shaivism** (worship of Shiva) and **Shaktism** (worship of Devi), but a variety of different philosophical approaches (e.g., Shankara v. Ramanuja v. Madhva) and the clash between “orthodox” Brahminism and the criticisms of this from **dalits** and from more traditional ritual practices. So Hinduism can be both an ethnic religion and a major world spirituality.