

CIS BULLETIN: HINDUISM

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Gary Leazer, Ph. D.

Statistics

Worldwide: 700-900,000,000 United States: 1,000,000-2,000,000
Major concentrations: India (98.6% of all Hindus live in India), Many Hindus also live in Nepal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, Malaysia, South Africa, United States, England, Guyana and Myanmar (Burma).

Introduction

Hinduism is the oldest living organized world religion. It is also the most difficult to understand as Hindus may be atheists, agnostics, pantheists, dualists, monotheists, or polytheists, depending on a particular interpretation of the voluminous and diverse scriptures, written over a period of nearly 2,000 years (1500 B.C.-A.D. 250). This complex family of beliefs has no single creed and recognizes no final truth or universal revelation. It is not a single faith so much as it is a system of many faiths existing within a single social network.

The term *Hindu* comes from the Persian word given to the region along the Indus River in northern India. Although it originally referred to the people living in the Indus River valley, today it applies only to members of the Hindu faith.

Hindu Scriptures

The diversity in Hinduism arises from its scriptures. There is no equivalent of the Christian Bible or Muslim Qur'an in Hinduism. Hindu scriptures include the Vedas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas, Upanishads, Epics, the Code of Manu and the Puranas. These scriptures would fill several feet on a library shelf.

The four Vedas are the oldest of the Hindu scriptures, having been composed between 1500 and 800 B.C. ("Vedas" may refer to the four oldest Hindu scriptures as well as to all of the Hindu scriptures.) The Upanishads are a large group of philosophical writings viewed as the "culmination of sacred knowledge" (*Vedanta*). The two Epics are the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. Within the Mahabharata is the Bhagavad-Gita (Song of the Lord), which tells of the Krishna mythology. A number of Hindu sects, including the Hare Krishna sect in the United States, base their teachings on the Bhagavad-Gita.

Hindu Teachings

♦ **God:** Hindu mythology is incredibly complex. Hindu scriptures claim there are 330 million gods, yet only one. These deities, and goddesses, demons, and heroes form a tangled web, which is often difficult to separate. There is Mitra, the sun god, and Surya, the sun goddess; Varuna, the sky god; Rudra, the god of violence, disease, and death; Agni, the fire god; Dhishana, the fertility goddess; and a host of other deities. Rituals, sacrifices and priesthood have developed around each of these many deities.

Behind these cultic deities, is Brahman or Brahman-Atman, the one impersonal, ultimate, but unknowable, Absolute Reality. The universe and all that exists is believed to be a part of Brahman who expanded itself to become the universe. *Atman* is the self or soul of all that exists, whether human, bird, fish, or rock. The *Atman* in these objects is Brahman itself. Hindus do not believe a person is "created in the image of God," but is God, or divine. Brahman is not "up there" or "out there," but is identified with all that exists.

Since an impersonal God is impossible to know, sectarian Hinduism personalizes Brahman as the *trimurti* (a Sanskrit word meaning "having three forms"): Brahma (Creator), Vishnu (Sustainer), and Shiva

(Destroyer). Although, Shiva is a popular god, most Hindus worship two of Vishnu's nine mythical incarnations or *avatars*: Krishna, mentioned in the Bhagavad-Gita, and Rama, mentioned in the Ramayana. A tenth incarnation or *avatar*, Kalki, who will end this age, has not yet appeared.

Numerous other popular deities, including Durga, a goddess often pictured wearing a necklace of skulls, are popular among Hindus.

Belief in astrology, evil spirits, and curses also prevail within popular Hinduism. Superstition is a major belief within Hinduism.

♦ **Creation:** Brahman alone exists; it is the only reality. Everything else is ultimately an illusion (*maya*). There is no beginning, nor conclusion to creation, only endless repetitions or cycles of creation and destruction.

♦ **Man:** The eternal soul, or *atman*, of man is a manifestation or "spark" of Brahman mysteriously trapped in the physical body. Repeated lives or reincarnations are required before the soul can be liberated from the body. Hindus speak of reincarnation (or *samsara*) as without beginning and, in most cases, without ending. Souls in humans, animals and plant life are reincarnated through literally thousands of lifetimes.

Events in one's life are determined by actions performed in previous lifetimes, according to the law of *karma*. *Karma*, which "traps" one's soul in the body, literally means "action" – whether it is good or bad, religious or secular. Everything done in a lifetime – in thought, word, or deed – ordains one's destiny in future existences. A Hindu believes his/her present life was determined by his/her actions in previous existences.

Hindus have no concept of rebellion against a Holy God. Ignorance of one's personal divinity and violation of caste rules are humanity's problems.

At death, the soul goes to an intermediate state of punishment or reward before rebirth in another body. Rebirths are re-experienced until the *karma* has been removed by various rituals to allow the soul's reabsorption into Brahmam.

Most Hindus speak of unity (loss of personal identity) with Brahmam after the cycles of reincarnation are completed. A few Hindu theologians, including Ramanuja (12th century A.D.), preached that the soul enjoys "Vishnu's presence in full consciousness" in a heaven pictured as a paradise with trees and rivers.

♦ **Liberation:** "Salvation" is not a good term to describe the elimination of *karma* and the Hindu idea of liberation or emancipation from the cycles of reincarnation.

Liberation, or *moksha*, requires a complicated discipline (*yoga* or *marga*) taught by *gurus* or religious teachers. While all religious practices are accepted as valid paths for liberation, Hindus usually choose one of three disciplines: the way of works or duties (*karma yoga*), the way of knowledge (*jnana yoga*), or the way of love and devotion (*bhakti yoga*).

Karma yoga requires the fulfillment of prescribed rites, ceremonies, and social obligations. The Code of Manu gives a list of dietary laws, social regulations, domestic rites, public ceremonies, and religious duties for members of each of the four castes. Deities must be properly worshipped; food must be presented to them before family members can partake. The Code of Manu states a wife's duty is to humbly serve her husband in household duties.

Jnana yoga, the path of knowledge, appeals to those who have a strong intellectual bent. Meditation to control the mind and senses is

essential to realize that the entire universe and all that exists are one and the same Brahman.

Bhakti yoga, the path of love and devotion, involves surrender of the self to the deity or divine being, private acts of devotion, and temple worship. The Bhagavad-Gita, the best-known Hindu scripture, stresses *bhakti yoga* as a true way of liberation. *Bhakti yoga* is the most popular of the three paths, although Hindus may follow more than one path.

Stages of Life

In classical Hinduism, four stages of life were emphasized, especially for upper-caste male Hindus. The four stages are: youth, adulthood, middle age, and old age. A student (age 8-18) studies under a *guru* (teacher). An adult householder leads an active married life, accumulates wealth, enjoys pleasure and observes religious duties. At middle age, the householder retires to the forest to lead a life of reflection and meditation. Finally, in old age, the forest dweller becomes a wandering ascetic. The last two stages are honored more in spirit than in practice.

A system of four castes has long divided Indian society. The origin of the caste system is uncertain; it may have been based on the color of one's skin or on one's occupation. A fifth division, called outcastes, is technically not a caste. Traditionally, one is born into a specific caste or outcaste and must remain in that caste. Persons, known as outcastes, have escaped the stigma of that division by converting to Buddhism or Christianity in recent years. Efforts to eliminate the caste system in India have been met with mixed results.

Folk Hinduism

Most Hindus live in fear of good and evil spirits and deities. Each spirit or deity must be offered sacrifices to prevent disaster or guarantee security and success. These spirits live in trees, stones, water, literally everywhere, and cause diseases, death and all kinds of evil. Millions of Hindus resort to ritual purification (washing in the Ganges River is a popular type of purification where occasionally millions of Hindus will wash in the river at certain auspicious times), divination, astrology, and use of charms, amulets, and other occult practices. Pilgrimages to sacred places are widely practiced. While Hindus normally adopt a single god or goddess, they generally honor other gods or goddesses out of fear. Veneration of cows, snakes, monkeys and rats are common among many Hindus.

Daily offerings should be made to gods, ancestors, seers, animals, and the poor, although these offerings have lost popularity in recent years. Tending sacred household fires, reciting sacred texts, repeating *mantras*, meditation, and *yoga* exercises may be performed.

In temples, deities are awakened and bathed each morning before prayers, garlands, food and water are offered. Incense is burned and *mantras*, words or phrases believed to have auspicious qualities, are chanted. Finally, the deities are dismissed and the ceremony concludes. At special times, the deity is taken on a procession around the streets near the temple.

Each Hindu has a home shrine for his/her chosen deity. The deity is treated as an honored guest in the home. A ritual similar to the one in the temple is conducted in the home.

Role of Women in Hinduism

The Code of Manu plainly states that women need the control and protection of their father, husband, son or other male. Women are not considered equal to men in Hindu society; they are believed to be emotional, sensual, and potentially destructive to social order.

Marriages are generally arranged, usually soon after puberty. The proper duty of a woman is to respect, obey, and worship her husband even if he is devoid of good qualities. A husband's duty is to protect his wife.

Hindu tradition holds that after her husband's death, a woman of whatever age, may not remarry. The practice of *sati* (a widow being burned alive with her husband's corpse) was outlawed in the early 1800s, although an 18-year-old widow was burned on her husband's pyre as recently as 2002. The courts ruled her death was a suicide.

The status of women in Hinduism has improved, especially since Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's tenure in office.

Religious Festivals

Hundreds of religious festivals fill the Hindu's calendar. Festivals are held in honor of deities, snakes, cows, rivers, hills, plants, ancestors and spirits. Other festivals are dedicated to eclipses, solstices, equinoxes, and the stars. Festivals may involve fasting, bathing, reciting chants, taking vows, lighting fires, games, gambling, drinking, and offering gifts to Hindu priests (*brahmins*).

The Cluster of Lights (Divali or Diwali) in October or November lasts four or five days, depending on the area in India. Homes are lighted with clay oil lamps and the windows kept open to welcome goddesses Parvati and Lakshmi into the home. The festival concludes with every Hindu male dining in the home of a sister, cousin, or other female relative and giving her gifts.

Holi is celebrated in February or March to commemorate the youthful deity Krishna. Bonfires are lit and evil influences are symbolically burned.

The birthday of Ganesha, the popular elephant-headed god of good luck, is celebrated in August or September.

It almost seems that celebrating a festival is more important than the reason for doing so.

Hinduism in the United States

Christian missionaries and merchant seamen were the first to bring reports of India to the United States. Books about India and Hinduism, as well as many of the Hindu scriptures, became available to the American public soon after the American Revolution. Englishman Sir William Jones, who lived in India, is credited with being the first to introduce Hinduism to the West in writing. He composed many of the hymns to the Hindu gods in *Asiatick Miscellany*, which first appeared in 1785. Harvard University library acquired a copy prior to 1800.

American Transcendentalists, such as Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, wrote about Hinduism in popular magazines.

Several Hindus attended the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893, including Swami Vivekananda (1862-1902), a disciple of the late Swami Ramakrishna (1836-86).

Many Hindus and their religious leaders came to the United States when the Asian Exclusion Act was repealed in 1965.

Many Hindus have become small business owners in motel lodging and fast-food restaurants in the U.S. Some Hindus are university professors, physicians and astronauts, such as American-born astronaut Sunita "Suni" Williams, who carried a copy of the Bhagavad Gita on the space shuttle Discovery for its December 2006 flight. She will spend six months on the space station.

Hinduism has impacted the United States in ways far beyond the number of adherents who live here.

Several "Christian" sects have accepted Hindu ideas, including the Church of Christ, Scientist (Christian Science) and the Unity School of Christianity.

The New Age Movement is thoroughly Hindu in its worldview.

Hindu-based sects include the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishna), Transcendental Meditation, and Theosophy.

More traditional Hindu movements have found homes in the United States, including the Ramakrishna Mission and Vedanta Societies, Sri Aurobindo Society, Satya Sai Baba Movement, Self Realization Fellowship, and International Sivananda Yoga Society.

Large Hindu temples are becoming more common in the United States, although most are smaller house temples.

Hindus have become more "evangelistic" in recent years in the United States while Christian missionaries and converts in India have been harassed and beaten. As Christianity and Hinduism confront one another, tension will continue to be high.