



General Overview of Hinduism

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The concept of Hinduism refers to all the religions and religious groups which have originated in South Asia and which demonstrate general acceptance of the Vedas, of Vedic-Brahmanical values, rituals and myths, and of the social organisation of *varnashrama dharma*.* It would be more correct to talk about Hinduisms (in plural) or about Hindu traditions, as the use of plural indicates more accurately the great variety and diversity of the religious traditions, subsumed under the term “Hinduism.”

There are different ways of classifying Hindu traditions. If the classification is on the basis of texts, we refer to Vedic Hinduism, Upanishadic Hinduism, Classical and Epic Hinduism, Bhakti Hinduism. If we use a theistic classification, we talk about Vaishnavism, Shaivism or Shaktism. If the classification takes into account language, we point to Sanskrit Hinduism or the Brahmanical tradition, and popular Hinduism or the folk tradition in the vernaculars.

Generally, scholars outline six epochs in the development of Hinduism – pre-Vedic nature religion (- 1750 BCE), Vedic religion (1750-500 BCE), ascetic reformism (500-200BCE), classical Hinduism (200BCE-1100CE), sectarian Hinduism (1100 CE-1850CE), and modern Hinduism (1850 CE-present day).

The concept of *varnashramadharmā*, or the Vedic ordering of life is central to Hinduism. It involves the observing of rights and duties according to one’s *varna* (social stratum) and following the prescribed sequence of *ashrams* (stages in life) in one’s personal life. It applies to men of the upper three *varnas* only. Traditionally, women are expected to follow *stridharma* (the *dharma* of women).

Four *purusharthas* (aims of life) inform the life of a Hindu – *dharma*, or moral/religious duty, in the sense of observing *varnashramadharmā*, outlined above, *artha* (material gain, prosperity), *kama* (desire, the enjoyment of life, also linked to procreation), and *moksha* (liberation, or release from the cycle of *samsara*, or transmigration).

In Vedic times, the notion of *karma* signifies the Vedic sacrifice and its effects, believed to be infallible. In the *Upanishads*, a new meaning of *karma* arises. *Karma* means all human activities and their consequences. Good deeds leave a positive imprint, and bad deeds a negative one. Good *karma* leads to a higher rebirth, bad *karma* to a lower one.

The four *varnas* (the brahmins, kshatriyas, vaishyas and shudras) are complemented by over 3000 *jatis* (“birth groups” or subcastes). Each *jati* has its own restrictions on intermarrying and sharing food. Although one’s *jati* is determined by birth, a certain amount of upward and downward mobility is possible. The untouchability has been outlawed in India, but people who come from these backgrounds, still face discrimination and marginalisation. The untouchables are also called *nihspishya*, *harijans*, *dalits*, “scheduled castes.” The *caturvarna* system (four-

varna system) expressed hereditary division of labour, but also religious hierarchy. It is believed that people were born into their respective castes because of the *karma* that they had accumulated in previous lives. Nowadays, the principles of purity and pollution are generally observed in marriage and commensality (or sharing of food).

Bibliography

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