

Hinduism I: Early History and Basic Concepts

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Hinduism: The Term

Hinduism is an umbrella term. Some are elite others are devotional. Many practices are regional. Hinduism is a very flexible religious tradition, adapting and incorporating many traditions, and tries to provide a path for everyone.

A **hindu** is someone who:

- accepts the vedas as authoritative
- accepts the caste system (not applicable outside india)
- self defined

The Indus Valley Civilization

Centered around harrapa and mohenjo-daro

- Active 3000-1500BCE
- urban centers
- streets in grid pattern
- indoor plumbing
- governed by theocracy

Symbols are found here that will later be incorporated

- Water - there are large tanks throughout the city meaning water was used in religious practices
- Fertility - female, male, animal, and nature symbols
- Proto-Shiva - the god of all dualities, a very thin figure seated in meditation with a helmet of horns in between the horns are vines, it has an erect phallus

Indo-Europeans

The term for the mass migration into india around 1500BCE. At this time the indus valley civilization was in decline and were probably overcome by the incomers through war. Some scholars think they conquered through assimilation instead of war.

- about 12 tribes
- cattle herders (pastoralists)
- three classes, warriors, priests, herders
- the **Arryans** are the tribe that settled into india

The religion of the indo-europeans was called the vedic religion because they are based on the Four Vedas or the **Veda** (this is the four Vedas and the three commentaries attached to each).

The Four Vedas

The Vedas were heard by the elders.

Rig

- hymns of praise to gods and goddesses
- oldest and most important

Sama

- liturgical arrangement, organizes the order in which the hymns should be sung

Yajur

- outlines the formulas used during sacrifice
- outlines where the formulas are to be used
- describes how a sacrifice should be performed

Atharva

- The most recent
- day to day needs of people
- spells and charms
- information on medicine

Vedic Religion

Vedic religion focused on worship of the gods through sacrifice, petition, and praise, in order to reap benefits both now and in future life.

They believed that the breath (or **atma**) lived on after the body so they believed in heaven after death.

Most vedic gods were nature figures:

- **Ushas** the dawn
- **Varuna** cosmic order (brought good or evil to humans)
- **Agni** fire

Sacrifice was very important. Sacrifice is what brings order out of chaos. Human order is based on the sacrificial order so human and cosmic order are eternal and define.

The creation of the world and human order is outlined in the **Hymn of Parusha** from the rig veda. There is more than one creation myth, but this is the biggest. Purusha was a great being where all living and non living things are a quarter of him and the heavens are three quarters. The gods sacrificed him out of which the veda was formed along with all animals.

- mouth = brahman
- arms = kshatriya
- thighs = vaishyas
- feet = shudra
- mind = moom
- eye = sun
- mouth = indra and agni
- breath = wind
- navel = atmosphere

- head = heaven
- feet = earth
- ears = quarters

Through sacrifice:

- the world was made
- the world is sustained

Gods and humans work together to maintain order.

The Three Commentaries

Each Veda has three commentaries on it.

- Barhamana
- Aranyaka
- Upanishad

The commentaries comment on the meaning of the text. They keep the tradition living because the understanding of the text can change throughout history.

Brahmanas These were written in 1000-800 BCE. These were ritual manuals and laid out the powers of the priest, but they also contain speculations on the nature of the religion. It asks if there are many gods or only one and what is it that is important about the sacrifice.

Aranyakas These written in 1000-800 BCE. They work as a bridge between the brahmanas and the upanishads. Commonly they are referred to as the forest books because they speculate on things on the part of hermits that went to live in the forest to think about these things.

Upanishads Most important of the commentaries. Often called the Vedanta (end of the Vedas). They contain the culmination of the speculation about humans, the cosmos, the sacrifice and their relation to each other. Here we find many ideas that are not found in other texts. For instance sacrifice is internalized and cosmologized. This means that the sacrifice is transformed into inner asstetic meditation. Mediation creates a fire inside thus the sacrifice is internal. What happens within a person has a consequence in the cosmos connecting the 2.

Samsara and Karma

The Upanishads represent the culmination of brahmanical thought. Over time a notion developed that life and death are not a permanent thing. We eventually fall from heaven to be reborn. This is called **samsara**. In the west reincarnation is considered a positive thing (we can go back and do better this time). With samsara the repeated birth/death is a bad thing. Ideally we want to stay in heaven instead of being reborn. Think of having the same thing over and over, no matter how good that thing is you'd eventually hate it.

Karma propells the wheel of samsara. **Karma** means act or deed or performance. It has different meanings for the various religions.

- Vedic - the act of sacrifice
- Hindu - following your role or duty, called **dharm**
- Buddhists, Janes and Hindu - being a moral person

Karma is treated as a law of cause and effect. The effects for karma is consistent to the deeds you did in your life. If you were a scrouge in your life then in the future you will be in need of charity.

Karma doesn't determine your life or rebirth, it conditions it. Think of it as setting the parameters for your existence. You can still do what you want in life, but Karma makes it easier or harder to do so. It limits your potential (think of a short person trying to play basketball). Karma controls where we begin (physical, social, and character conditions). Karma also controls your luck throughout life.

Basically we are all trapped on a wheel (samsara) powered by our past actions (karma). We are reborn into three spheres:

- superhuman realm: where the gods live
- the realm of humans and animals
- the realm of ghosts and demons

The gods can never get off the wheel. They are simply taking advantage of their good karma at this moment to be reborn as gods. Animals also cannot get off the wheel, they are suffering the effects of bad karma. Only humans can get off the wheel. This is why human life is considered rare and precious.

A popular story is that a human rebirth is as rare as a turtle that lives on the bottom of the ocean that only surfaces once every thousands years surfaced at the exact moment a yoke dropped down putting it on the turtle randomly.

We should focus on doing actions that will improve our karma. A special kind of knowledge can free us from samsara.

Brahman, Atman, and Moksha

Atman = Brahman.

Brahman originally referred to the words used in the sacrifice. Through the speculative period it came to mean the one reality. This refers to the power that stands behind everything, and the reality that permeated everything.

Atman originally meant breath. The atman is what goes to heaven after death. Eventually it came to be understood as the soul or essence of a person, their true self.

Brahman is the cosmic soul and atman is the individual soul, thus these two are the same,

Brahman is the one power; the source of all.

Story A boy went away to school and when he comes home he believes he knows more than his father. His father asks him if he has learned an instruction containing many paradoxes (where the unlearned becomes learned, unheard heard, and so on). His father explains that through a lump of clay knowledge of all clay may be learned. The modification is only through speech (basically its only the name we give things, we must learn its true self). In the beginning this world was just being, one only with a second. Some say that in the beginning there was nonbeing but how could being come from nothing? The being thought to self, may I be many and may I procreate and thus made fire. Fire did the same thing and made water. Water did the same and made food. Then being wanted to make names and forms (let everything be tripartite). When you keep breaking things to their essence we find the essence that they come from and it is this that we are all made of. This is the one, the brahman.

Monism is the concept of one reality

Tat Tvam Asi - that you are

Moksha - knowing that atman and brahman are one at the core of your being brings you freedom from the wheel.

Jivamukti - a freed soul, one that has attained moksha, when this soul dies atman merges with brahman

Summary

The speculative period of the brahmanas and upanishads changes ideas about sacrifice, the nature of reality, and the goal of life. Sacrifice is internalized and cosmologized. Samsara-Karma-Moksha, new ideas about reality are introduced. Brahman the one reality (the cosmic soul) is introduced. The cosmic soul is the human soul (Atman = Brahman). Understanding this unity brings moksha and breaks you out of samsara. Proper actions (gaining good karma) can bring us closer to this but will not get us fully to moksha.

Defintions

Veda

samsara

karma

moksha

Brahman

Atman

Rig

Sama

Atharva

Ushas

varuna

Agni

Aryan

Purusha Sukta

Brahmana

Aranyaka

Upanishad

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