

4-4 Brahmanism and the Origins of Hinduism

The religion of the overwhelming majority of Indians is Hinduism, the fourth largest in the world with about 1 billion adherents. Hinduism is both more and less than a *religion* as the West understands that term: it is a way of life, a philosophical system, an inspiration for art, and the basis of all Indian political theory in the past. But it is not a rigid set of theological doctrines. And it possesses almost innumerable localized variations in manner and content.

In Hinduism's earliest form, this was not the case, and each of the four classes played a rigidly defined role. Vedic Hinduism was highly ritualistic and exclusive in nature. The priestly caste—Brahmins—had power by virtue of their mastery of complex ceremonies and their semimagical knowledge of the gods. As in other agrarian civilizations, religious practice was limited to the enactment of highly formal, public rituals that only the priests—the Brahmins in this case—were thought to be competent to direct. Scholars give the name [Brahmanism \(The earliest form of Hinduism. Its practices and doctrines were restricted to the priests, or Brahmins.\)](#) to this early form of Hinduism.

The more educated people gradually became alienated from this ritual formalism and sought other explanations for the mystery of human fate that allowed them to experience the divine in ways that met their personal spiritual yearnings in more satisfying ways. Following the fifth century B.C.E., three new modes of thought gradually became established in India: *Jainism* (JEYE-nism), Buddhism, and [Bhakti \(BAHK-tee\) Hinduism \(\(BAHK-tee\) A popular form of Hinduism that emerged in India near the end of the first millennium B.C.E. The opposite of Brahmanism, it emphasizes individual spiritual devotion to a particular god, for example, Shiva, Vishnu, or Krishna.\)](#).

Jainism is limited in its historical appeal. It is less a supernatural religion than a philosophy that emphasizes the sacredness of all life. In modern India, the Jains comprise a small number of high-caste people representing perhaps 2 percent of the total Indian population.

Hinduism retained its caste-based ritual formalism, but a new version called *Bhakti* gradually surfaced. Those who resisted conversion to Buddhism and who remained faithful to the old tradition began apprehending the old Hindu gods in different ways. Rather than remaining as mere abstractions or as capricious superbeings demanding worship and sacrifice, these gods steadily assumed more personal attributes that made them more approachable. This change allowed individuals to seek spiritual fulfillment by devoting themselves to individual gods.

In its modern form the Hindu faith has evolved greatly and is a product of the slow mixing of Brahmanism with religions of the earlier agrarian cultures and with groups who migrated to the subcontinent in later centuries. Many of Hinduism's basic principles still reflect the

patriarchal and class-conscious society founded by the Aryan conquerors. A revealing glimpse at early Hinduism is given by the [Laws of Manu \(A section of the Hindu Vedas that provides instruction in the rules of living for the various classes of society. The text is written as if the philosopher Manu were speaking the lines.\)](#), excerpted in [Framing History: Society & Economy](#). One's birth family determines one's caste, as it does the relationship of men to women and husbands to wives.

Framing History

Society & Economy: The Laws of Manu

The Laws of Manu are an ancient compilation of teachings from Hindu India. Manu was a being, simultaneously human and divine, from whom devout Hindus could learn what was needed for perfection and the attainment of *moksha*. Manu's laws were the cornerstone of Hindu traditional opinion on the rights and duties of the sexes, of family members, and of castes. These opinions and prejudices did not change substantially until recent times. The attitude of the Laws of Manu toward women and the lower castes are especially revealing. (*Note: The Sudra [SOO-drah], or Shudra, are the lowest of the four original castes of India established during the Aryan epoch.*)

8. Let [a man] not marry a maiden (with) reddish (hair), nor one who has a redundant member, nor one who is sickly, nor one either with no hair (on the body) or too much, nor one who is garrulous or has red (eyes) ...

11. But a prudent man should not marry (a maiden) who has no brother, nor one whose father is not known, through fear lest (in the former case she be made) an appointed daughter (and in the latter) lest (he should commit) sin.

15. Twice-born men [Brahmins] who, in their folly, wed wives of the low (Sudra) caste, soon degrade their families and their children to the state of Sudras.

17. A Brahmin who takes a Sudra wife to his bed will (after death) sink into hell; if he begets a child by her, he will lose the rank of a Brahmana.

46. Sixteen (days and) nights (in each month), including four days which differ from the rest and are censured by the virtuous, (are called) the natural season of women.

52. But those (male) relations who, in their folly, live on the separate property of women, (e.g., appropriate) the beasts of burden, carriages, and clothes of women, commit sin and will sink into hell.

55. Women must be honoured and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law, who desire (their own) welfare.

56. Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards.

59. Hence men who seek (their own) welfare, should always honour women on holidays and festivals with (gifts of) ornaments, clothes, and (dainty) food.

114. Without hesitation he may give food, even before his guests, to the following persons, (viz.) to newly-married women, to infants, to the sick, and to pregnant women.

166. A shepherd, a keeper of buffaloes, the husband of a remarried woman, and a carrier of dead bodies, (all these) must be carefully avoided.

181. What has been given to a Brahmana who lives by trade that is not (useful) in this world and the next, and (a present) to a Brahmana born of a remarried woman (resembles) an oblation thrown into ashes.

191. But he who, being invited to a [ritual of atonement], dallies with a Sudra woman, takes upon himself all the sins which the giver (of the feast) committed.

239. A ... village pig, a cock, a dog, a menstruating woman, and a eunuch must not look at the Brahmanas while they eat.

Analyze and Interpret

How do these laws differ, if at all, from the attitudes toward women reflected in the code of Hammurabi? Where did women find better protection and justice, by modern standards?

Source: Chapter III of The Laws of Manu, found in G. Bühler, Sacred Books of the East: The Laws of Manu (Vol. XXV). Oxford, 1886.

But Hinduism is different from the religions of the West in its insistence on the illusory nature of the tangible world and the acceptance of an individual's fate in earthly life. Its most basic principles and beliefs are as follows:

1. The nonmaterial, unseen world is the real and permanent one.
2. The universe works as a Great Wheel, with epochs, events, and lives repeating themselves, never ending. The individual dies, but the soul is immaterial and undying. So it reincarnates (*samsara*), being born, living, and dying again and again and again as the Great Wheel turns and its karma determines the next caste into which it will pass.
3. Conceptually, [karma \(\(KAHR-mah\) In Hindu belief, the balance of good and evil done in a given incarnation.\)](#) (KAHR-mah) resembles the ancient Egyptian *maat* (Chapter 3)—the notion of order and “rightness” that is built into the structure of the universe. Like *maat*, too, it has a moral dimension: As a soul goes from one life to the next, good and

bad deeds committed by an individual in a given life are tallied up. “Justice” is rendered as good karma, which results in birth into a higher caste in the next life—bad karma, into a lower one.

4. One must strive for good karma by following the code of morals prescribed for one's caste, called **dharma** ((DAHR-mah) [A code of morals and conduct prescribed for one's caste in Hinduism.](#)) (DAHR-mah), as closely as one can. One meaning of dharma is “duty”; one has a “duty” to obey the rules of caste.

The gods **Brahman** ((BRAH-mahn) [The title of the impersonal spirit responsible for all creation in Hindu theology.](#)) (BRAH-mahn; the impersonal life force), **Shiva** ((SHEE-vah) [A member of the high trinity of Hindu gods; lord of destruction but also of procreation; often pictured dancing.](#)) (SHEE-vah; the creator and destroyer), and **Vishnu** ((VISH-noo) [One of the high Hindu trinity of gods; the god who preserves the universe and karma.](#)) (VISH-noo; the preserver) dominate an almost endless array of supernatural beings. Most Hindus are devotees of either Shiva or Vishnu as the foremost deity, but they worship them in a huge variety of rituals.

Shiva in the Dance of Life.

One of the great trinity of Hindu deities, Shiva is sometimes portrayed as a female. Shiva is the god who presides over becoming and destroying, representing the Great Wheel of the universe.



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When a person has lived a life in perfect accord with his or her dharma, death leads to final release from reincarnation and the great Wheel of Life. This release is [moksha \(\(MOHK-shah\) The final liberation from bodily existence and reincarnation in Hinduism.\)](#) (MOHK-shah), and it is the end for which all good Hindus live. Moksha is the end of individuality, and the individual soul is then submerged into the world soul represented by Brahman. A classic analogy is a raindrop, which, after many transformations, finds its way back to the ocean that originated it and is dissolved therein.

Chapter 4: Central Asia and India's Beginnings: 4-4 Brahmanism and the Origins of Hinduism

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Printed By: Colin Morris-Moncada (006279659@coyote.csusb.edu)

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