Hinduism

Many of the peoples of South Asia, particularly in the modern nation-states of India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, practice some form of Hinduism and call themselves Hindus. It is estimated that there are approximately one billion Hindus, representing about 15% of the world population.\(^1\) Etymologically speaking, the term “Hindu” can be traced back to a Persian pronunciation of the Sanskrit name for the Sindhu River, or what is now called the Indus River in the northwestern part of the South Asian subcontinent (today in modern Pakistan). The Persians pronounced the “S” as an “H” and used the word to refer to the peoples who lived on the other side of the river. The term “Hinduism” is more recent. It is only in the first half of the nineteenth century that the abstract noun was introduced as such into the English language.

Since then, “Hinduism” has functioned as a very general umbrella category to describe a vast plurality of traditions that have existed on the subcontinent and beyond from the second millennium BCE to today. Hinduism does not have a single founder or unified system of belief. Although a reference to the Vedas (a set of ancient sacred scriptures) as divinely inspired is a common feature of many forms of Hinduism, there is no single model of salvation, and a rich diversity of religious customs and rituals. There is also a wide range of scriptural and devotional texts, each with their own genres, purposes, and doctrinal distinctions. Finally, there is also a complex philosophical tradition of many schools, debates, and positions. In modern terms, Hinduism can be described as the oldest living world religion on the planet. In more traditional terms, it can also be described as an all-encompassing culture, civilization, or “way of life.”\(^\text{iii}\)

Historical Beginnings and Sacred Scripture

Considerable controversy surrounds the origins of this ancient tradition. The earliest possible traces are found in the Indus Valley civilization, which flourished from about 2500 to 1500 BCE along the banks of the Indus River. This civilization was so extensive that it encompassed parts of what are now India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. The Indus Valley civilization was one of the world's earliest urban civilizations, along with its contemporary neighbors, Mesopotamia and Egypt. Archaeological evidence has revealed a highly developed and sophisticated urban culture.
The streets were constructed on a grid system that ensured smooth flow of drainage; cities were built with bricks; and houses were multi-storied. Large grain storage not only demonstrates the architectural abilities of these people, but also indicates their well-developed farming skills. Little is known about their religious beliefs, although some apparent similarities between the iconographic features of Indus Valley terracotta figurines and seals with those of Shiva and the Mother Goddess of the later Hindu pantheon have been speculatively noted.

In the early second millennium BCE, the Indus Valley civilization began to go into decline. Over the course of the ensuing centuries, a group of peoples who called themselves Aryans very gradually came into cultural and historical prominence, particularly in the northern regions of the subcontinent. The Aryans spoke a language called Sanskrit. Aryan culture eventually produced and transmitted at first primarily in memory and oral tradition, a collection of sacred texts called the Vedas. These are four Sanskrit texts—the Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Samaveda and Atharva Veda—that express the sacrificial, mythical, and social systems of a broad social and religious tradition known today as Brahmanism, so named after the brahmins or “priests” who were its highest authorities. Hindus commonly regard the Vedas as infallible eternal revelations of non-human origin that were “heard” by the ancient rishis or “sages.” Drawing on these Vedic notions of eternity and revelation, many Hindus commonly describe their religion as sanatana dharma, that is, as the “eternal code of life.”

Central to Brahmanical society was the varna system, otherwise known now as the caste system. There were four major varnas or social groups: the brahmanas (now comonly rendered as “brahmins”) or “priests,” the kshatriyas or “warriors,” the vaishyas or “merchants,” and the shudras or “servants” (more on the caste system below). Towards the end of the early Vedic period, the purpose and validity of the Vedic rituals and social traditions were seriously questioned and sometimes openly rejected. This resulted in the formulation of various new interpretations of the Vedic tradition, as well as entirely new religious systems, such as various Jain and Buddhist traditions. The latter new traditions rejected basic fundamentals of Brahmanism, such as the revealed and eternal status of the Vedas, the existence of the self or soul (which Jains affirmed but Buddhists denied), and the legitimacy of the caste system.

The later Vedic period also saw numerous philosophical discussions that emphasized gaining spiritual knowledge over ritual practice and animal sacrifice. Even within Brahmanism, many different interpretations were formulated by different philosophical and ritual schools.
These are found in three classes of Vedic literature: the Brahmanas or “Priestly Books,” which provide commentary on the four original ritual hymn books (Samhitas); and the Aranyakas or “Forest Books” and the Upanishads or “Secret Teachings,” both of which offer various esoteric, spiritual, or internalized readings of the same Vedic traditions.

The Four Goals and Stages of Life

Early Brahmanism often expressed a tension or debate between two basic ways of life: that of the householder, who lived in the world and sustained the social order through the raising of a family, the acquisition of wealth, and the honoring of various social duties; and the ascetic or renouncer, who rejected the social world of family and society in order to seek different forms of divinity or “release” (moksha) from the cycle of birth and death (samsara). Eventually, these two different spiritual orientations were synthesized within a system known as the four “stages of life.” The debate between the householder and renouncer was resolved, at least in theory, by spreading these two worldviews out over a single ideal lifecycle. This ideal system came to be known as the varna-ashrama-dharma, which we might translate as the “Hindu social system” (dharma) defined by the “stages of life” (ashrama) and “caste” (varna).

This over-arching system in turn was organized around four “goals of life.” Hindu traditions generally offer four legitimate goals or life-purposes for its adherents to pursue. Together, these four goals nurture both spiritual integration and social harmony as part of everyday existence. They are: (1) dharma, a very broad and rich word that carries the connotations of virtue, morality, and the social-economic order; (2) artha, literally, “wealth,” but here standing in for the pursuit of all material and financial interests; (3) kama, literally “sexual desire,” but here also standing in for pleasure and aesthetics in general; and, finally, (4) moksha or spiritual liberation.

A few more words on each are in order here.

(1) The term dharma (literally, “upholding”) defies any attempt at an exact rendering in English. It is sometimes translated as “religion,” but this is not exactly right, particularly if one understands “religion” as something other than society and the natural order. Dharma is all of these things. One might think of it as the desirable socio-cosmic order, which defines an individual’s duties, obligations, and standard of conduct as a member of a particular family, community, and caste. The Hindu lawbooks define at least three levels of dharma—svadharma (“one’s own dharma,” that is, individual duty), sadharana dharma (“social duty”) and sanatana...
dharma (the Hindu “social system based on eternal revelation”).

(2) Artha is the pursuit of material wealth, prosperity, and success. Accruing wealth and land is important and essential so long as these are acquired by honest means and without anger, greed, violence, or pride. In short, the pursuit of career, success, and victory is encouraged when it is justified by the set parameters of one’s personal, social, and eternal revealed dharma. And such parameters are very different for a king or a warrior than they are for a farmer, merchant, or temple priest.

(3) The third goal, kama, recognizes and legitimizes the fundamental desires of human beings for pleasurable activities, such as sexual activity, art, literature, and recreation. Similar to artha, the Hindu canon provides detailed commentary on how a Hindu can determine if his or her action is a prescribed or prohibited behavior.

(4) Moksha is the ultimate and final goal of many forms of Hinduism (although not all). To understand moksha one must first understand the dual and linked notions of karma and samsara. Hindus believe in karma, a word that means, literally, “action,” but more specifically refers to the fundamental idea or belief that every action bears its own natural fruit or automatic future outcome, with “bad” actions leading to “bad” outcomes and “good” actions leading to “good” outcomes. A person acquires good or bad karma over his or her life span. This, in turn, particularly with the bad karma, results in bondage to samsara or the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Moksha is the release or liberation from this cycle so that one will never to be born again, which is understood to be a form of complete and total freedom. As with all major religions, there are multiple models of what moksha is. These range from final union with or absorption in a cosmic essence called brahman, through loving and devoted communion with God, to a divine life in some heavenly realm or paradise.

The basic key to all of this is that a particular “goal of life” may be perfectly appropriate or admirable at one stage of life but be inappropriate or prohibited at another. In short, there are different “goals of life” for different “stages of life.” Hence the ashrama system, a four-stage structure that enables males in the Hindu tradition to successfully achieve, ideally at least, the four goals of life (like all traditional major religions, the system is set up from and for the perspective of males). There are again four of these.

The first stage of life is that of the brahmacharya or the “celibate student.” Traditionally speaking (the practices, of course, have changed dramatically with modernity and contemporary
educational practices), the student stage is aimed at the learning of a trade or profession, as well as one’s personal and social duties. The proper “goal of life” at this first stage, in other words, is dharma. The student might approach a guru or “teacher,” from whom he can learn the appropriate scriptures, rituals, philosophy, logic, and self-discipline necessary for a proper life for someone from his caste and community.

The second stage of life is that of the grihastha or “householder.” Generally speaking, this stage of life begins at the age of marriage and carries through the raising of the children and the establishment of the household. In many ways, this is the central pillar of the Hindu social system. This is reflected in the fact that there are not one or two, but three proper goals of life at this second stage: dharma, artha, and kama. The male householder must follow his duty, which involves procreating, producing a male heir, enjoying sensual pleasure, and financially providing for his family. The householder is also expected to provide financial resources to members of society who are in the other three stages of life, since they are not in a position to provide for themselves.

After the successful completion of the grihastha duties, the Hindu male is expected to gradually start the process of withdrawing from the world and preparing for death. This is the third stage of life, that of the forest-dweller or vanaprastha, which we might gloss here in a very modern way as the retired life. The proper goal of life at this stage is moksha, or release, although it is understood that this third stage is a kind of transition period or preparation for that final goal and not yet its full accomplishment. It is at this stage that the Hindu male surrenders his financial and familial duties to his sons and takes up a different set of activities: sharing wisdom, for example, and spending time reading scriptures and preparing for the final stage of life, which he may or may not reach in a particular life-cycle: that of the sannyasa or renouncer.

At this fourth and final stage of an ideal Hindu lifecycle, the man is expected to withdraw completely from the world. He now dedicates his days completely to meditation, scripture study, spiritual practice, and the pursuit of moksha, which is his central and proper goal of life now. He may choose to leave his family altogether and become a wandering ascetic or join a religious community of monks.

The Caste System
The Hindu caste system can be best understood as an intricate tapestry, with multiple layers of interwoven social values and competing but mutually related narratives. It is so deep-rooted that, from a distance, it appears that Hinduism and caste are intimately linked. Put very simple, caste is the social organization of classical Hinduism. Within its perspective, one could reasonably say that no person can be considered a Hindu who is not in and of a particular caste or recognized social group. Such a statement is problematic, however, since, as with most things religious, there are exceptions to this rule, particularly today with modern Hindus living outside of India.

At the most basic level, the Hindu caste system assigns everyone into four broad hierarchical categories known as the varṇa, as mentioned above. These are ideal conceptualizations that do not come close to describing the full range of social groups and occupations organized into each basic group. The Hindu canon itself often describes the brahmins as priests, intellectuals, and scholars, the kshatriyas as kings, governors, and soldiers, the vaishyas as farmers, merchants, and artisans, and the shudras as manual laborers and service providers. Most of the common Hindu rhetoric concerning the caste system revolves around the notion of function. The idea here is that everyone has an appropriate social role or function to play (one’s dharma), which in turn requires a particular set of values, social identities, and ritual practices.

The jati or “birth group” constitutes a second level of complexity. While the varṇa system is the ideal four-fold division of the general Hindu population, a jati is a person’s smaller and more immediate social group within which one marries and whose boundaries are controlled and marked by various purity and pollution codes. A brahmin, for example, is ranked in the hierarchy of the caste system higher than the kshatriya or warrior-king because a brahmin is considered to be purer than the king. But not all brahmins enjoy the same social status, since they are ranked differently between their respective jatis.

The ancient texts generally mentions four varṇas, but historically there has also been a fifth category that shifts from region to region and period to period but generally lies outside but still in relationship to the four-fold system. Hence the designations of the “Untouchables” of colonial India and the Dalits or “Crushed” of modern-day India. Such groups, who often perform the most polluting functions in society (such as sewer work or the disposing of animal carcasses) have lived in some of the most remote areas of India or outside the villages, although there are also sizeable urban populations as well. Even their shadows are considered to be...
impure and polluting.

The Hindu texts state that the male members of the first three castes have the right to be called *dvija* or “twice-born,” but only after a formal initiation ceremony in adolescence. The first birth is the physical birth, and the second is the spiritual birth, initiated by the guru in a formal ritual known as the *upanayana* ceremony. This does not apply to the *shudras* or the Dalits.

Finally, it must be observed that caste is the subject of much debate and controversy in the modern world and has taken on many of the same connotations that “ethnicity” and “race” have assumed in western cultures and their own debates around social justice (see chapter 10). There are large segments of the Indian population that have rebelled against the caste system as a form of social and economic injustice.

Hindu Souls

As we noted in chapter 9, one way to think about a religious system is to think about its conception of the soul and its salvation. There are numerous models of soul in the Hinduism. Probably the most common model comes out of the various theistic traditions, which conceive the human soul in various social relationships (as child, servant, friend, and lover, for example) with a deity (we will discuss the Hindu deities shortly). Here the model is fundamentally a devotional one, with the human soul relating to the divinity through surrender, temple and private worship, song, and loving “devotion” (*bhakti*), and the divinity responding by taking concrete form within personal visionary experience, the temple image, or—in its most famous “descents” (*avatara* or, more popularly after the Hindi, *avatar*)—as a human being, a god-man, or an enlightened spiritual teacher (*guru*).

There are also theistic traditions within Hinduism that consider the soul, in its deepest essence, to *be* both God and the material universe. In these traditions, many of which scholars call “Tantric,” the entire physical universe is a real manifestation of the Godhead, which includes the material universe but also overflows and transcends it. Here we might best think of the physical universe as God’s body. The universe is in God. God is not simply in the universe. But if God is everything, and more, then it logically follows that one does not have to “leave” or “give up” this world in order to get to God. God, after all, *is* the world, *is* the body, *is* one’s very soul. Not surprisingly, then, the goal of Tantric practice is not to try to release or separate the soul from the body and the world, but to realize one’s own, and the world’s, latent or secret
divinity. If the goal of ascetic forms of Hinduism is *moksha* or “release,” then, the goal of Tantric forms of Hinduism is *bhakti-mukti*, which we might poetically gloss as “sensual delight and spiritual flight.”

There are other models still. There is also, for example, a vibrant tradition of dualism, that is, a tradition of thought that understands the soul and the material world to be of two different and separable natures. The prime example here is Samkhya, which is one of the six orthodox philosophies of Hinduism and probably one of the oldest systems of thought on the subcontinent (and maybe the planet). Samkhya, literally “counting” or “enumeration” (for its penchant of teaching the existence of five of this, five of that, and so on), played a major role in the development of Indian religion and philosophy from the way it helped to shape the early practice and philosophy of yoga to the manner in which it was taught in the famed scriptural text *Bhagavad-Gita* or *Song of the Lord*.

Samkhya is what Western philosophy calls an interactive dualism, that is, it posits two basic “substances” or principles in the universe that are nevertheless interrelated. That is, there are two things in the universe; they are separate; but they also interact and so are not entirely separated. These two are *Purusha* and *Prakriti*, often translated as “Spirit” and “Nature.” All existence and all experience emerge from the relationship of these two fundamental principles. As we framed the matter in chapter 9, the human is two here, but the human is also twenty-five. Spirit is Spirit, but Nature evolves further into twenty-three further principles (the Sanskrit word here, *pravritti*, means, quite literally “evolution” or “rolling forward”), which include—from the most subtle or highest now—the intellect, the ego, the mind, all of the cognitive, sensory, and active capacities of the human being, and the basic elements of the world. The bottom line is this: *everything*, except for Spirit, is “material.” Thought, the sense of an independent self or ego, emotion, sensory experience—all of these are material processes or expressions of Nature (which is counted as the twenty-fourth principle of the system).

We might say, then, that Samkhya is a profoundly materialist philosophy (many would also describe it as atheistic). It is. But only up to a point, that is, up to the point of the Spirit, the other “half” of existence. Also relevant here is that among the twenty-three evolutes of Nature, *buddhi* or “intellect” (the word refers to that which is “awakened”) holds a particularly special place. Although still of a material nature, it alone of all material things has the unique ability to “reflect” pure Consciousness or Spirit into this world, like a mirror. It is said that this intellect,
when calm and pure, is like a crystal clear pot of water that reflects the transcendent sun outside into the body-pot—an Indian version of Plato’s parable of the cave.

There are also the famous “nondual” (advaita) traditions, which tend toward what we call idealism, that is, the position that Mind is all that truly exists, and that the material world is a manifestation, if an illusory one, of this cosmic Mind. Hence the common assertion one finds in Hindu contexts that everything is brahman (the cosmic essence of all subjects and objects), and that the world as we know it is maya, that is, a “magical illusion,” at once real and not real at the same time.

Many of these Hindu traditions justify their claims about the soul through an interpretation of the same set of ancient texts—the Vedas again. Part of the Vedas, as we have already noted, consist of a class of texts called the Upanishads or “Secret Teachings.” In one of these secret teachings, dated somewhere in the fourth to second century BCE, we find a most famous poetic expression of the human as two. It goes like this:

Two birds, companions and friends,

nestle on the very same tree.

One of them eats a tasty fig;

the other, not eating, looks on.

In various schools of Hinduism, these two birds are understood to symbolize the two strata of the human being: the ahamkara or “I-maker,” that is, the social ego who experiences life, suffers, and dies in the cycle of birth and death; and the grand Witness or Self (atman), who looks on, undisturbed in its transcendent immortality and freedom. Whether the relationship of these two birds is one of dualist separation (as we find in Samkhya), devotion, surrender, and loving communion (as we find in the theistic traditions), identity (as we find in many of the Tantric traditions), or idealist illusion (as we find in the nondual tradition) depends on the communities, soul-practices, and texts we are examining. All of these options are open and alive in Hinduism.

Beliefs and Ritual Culture

The study of Hindu beliefs and worldviews can be challenging. For starters, with respect to deity or God now, Hindus may be monotheistic, polytheistic, pantheistic, panentheistic, agnostic, or atheistic. (For definitions of each of these terms, see the Glossary). Philosophically, they may be
dualists, monists, or pluralists, that is, they may think of reality as composed of two basic substances, of one single substance, or of many different substances. There are also the questions of whether God has a form or is formless, whether God is personal or impersonal, and whether God takes on a human form as guru or deity. The belief in the latter possibility has resulted in the aforementioned concept of the *avatar*, a “descent” or manifestation of God, who is believed to take the form of a human being and descend to earth in order to battle evil and disorder and to restore the proper *dharma* whenever it wanes. Over the centuries, these differences and debates have resulted in a vast array of sects, mythologies, and ritual systems.

There are hundreds, if not actually thousands of local gods and goddesses (as well as many Hindu versions of an evolutionary polytheism [see chapter 1] that understands all of these gods and goddesses as local manifestations of a single cosmic God). The number of deities is so large that one is yet to come across a treatise that includes all the popular, local, tribal and aboriginal gods, goddesses and spirits. The gallery of gods and goddesses includes soft, beguiling figures, withdrawn ascetic representations, mesmerizing gods, and terrible, frightening imagery. But some deities from this vast gallery have greater reach and larger followings, and a few have assimilated many of the others over the centuries. One might list here Durga, Ganesha (the elephant-headed God), Kali, Lakshmi, Shakti (the Great Goddess), Shiva, and Vishnu. Rama and Krishna are also especially beloved deities. Both are *avatars* or manifestations of Vishnu.

Each of these deities receives *puja* or ritual devotional “worship.” The ritual of *puja* is a common sight at temples, street side shrines, courtyards, and household shrines. People and families gather around and collectively adorn the image with beautiful fresh flowers, burn incense sticks, light butter or oil lamps to the accompanying sounds of bells, gongs, conch shells, and recite *mantras*. By such means, the worshippers seek *darshan* or “seeing.” A Hindu does not say, “I am going to worship.” Instead she or he says, “I am going for a *darshan*,” or, “I am going to take *darshan*.” In other words, Hindus go to the temple or to the shrine in order to “see.”

One may ask: “See what?” The fundamental idea here is that one can commune with a deity through the ritual act of sight. Something of the deity is communicated or transmitted into the worshipper through such a seeing. Many Hindus believe that the deity actually resides in the physical image, that the eyes of the image provide deliverance to the worshiper, and that it is through the deity’s eyes that one gets *darshan* of the divine.
Rituals are an integral part of Hindu life. The scriptures prescribe specific sets of rituals for every conceivable life event, from birth to death. There are prescribed rituals for the naming of a child, the feeding of the first grain of cereal to an infant, the shaving of the infant’s head to offer the original hair with which one was born, the writing of the first letter, the first day of school, the reaching of puberty, and the events of marriage, childbirth, and, of course, death.

Hindu Devotional Traditions

Very broadly speaking, there are three different devotional traditions within Hinduism, each dedicated to a different major deity: the Shaiva, Shakta, and Vaishnava traditions, devoted, respectively, to Shiva, Shakti or the Goddess, and Vishnu and his incarnations.

The Shaiva devotees believe in and pray to Lord Shiva. They believe that Shiva is the Creator and Destroyer. He is the Supreme Being. The linga is the central icon of Shiva and is considered to be his highest form.

The Shakta devotees, on the other hand, focus their worship on the Devi or Great Goddess, the Divine Mother. Shaktas share many traditions and rituals with Shaivas, however, and for this reason some texts do not make a distinction between the two. There are literally thousands of forms of the Goddess, many of which are exclusive to a particular geographic region, temple, or family. Amongst the most popular and well known are Durga, Lakshmi, Parvati and Kali.

Vaiṣṇava devotees worship Vishnu, but also his two major avatars, Rama and Krishna, as well as Hanuman, the monkey-god who is considered to be the ideal devotee of Rama and a model for all human devotees. Particularly important within this tradition is the practice and theology of bhakti or “loving devotion.” Here devotion is presented as both a means to salvation and an end in itself. Such devotion is at once the love of, faith in, and surrender to God.

The Hindu Diaspora

There have been countless and no doubt mostly forgotten intellectual exchanges, spiritual missions, forced and voluntary migrations, military campaigns, colonial enterprises, and business ventures between Europe and India over the last few thousand years, as well as between various Islamic, Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu traditions. Islam, for example, has been an integral part of
the South Asian religious scene for well over a millennium now. And the British Christian presence during the colonial period played a major role in the development of modern and global forms of Hinduism in the modern period.

One remembered and clear marker in this vast history is Vasco da Gama’s arrival in India by sea in 1498, which in turn opened India to the western world and, eventually, to modernity, European colonialism, industrialization, and westernization. In 1893, Hinduism as a world religion was introduced to the West by a charismatic Bengali guru named Swami Vivekananda. A handsome young man wearing orange robes, Vivekananda mesmerized the audience with his speech to the World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago. The New York Herald reported: "Vivekananda is undoubtedly the greatest figure in the Parliament of Religions. After hearing him we feel how foolish it is to send missionaries to this learned nation." Since then, western cultures, particularly in Europe and the U.S., have been influenced by many tenets and practices of Hinduism, including and especially those revolving around Advaita Vedanta (a traditional philosophical school re-visioned for the modern world by a traveling charismatic spiritual teacher and monk named Swami Vivekananda), various forms of meditation, and the *chakras* (subtle circular “energy centers”) of Tantric yoga.

The nineteenth century is widely considered to be a kind of transformative turning-point for the modern envisioning of Hinduism. It was here, of course, that the word itself was born. It was also here that many of the ancient traditions of India took on new forms in response to British colonialism and western science and technology. The influence of the British crown was at its peak. Hindu traditions that were largely insular in the past centuries began to respond to the Christian presence and its theological challenges. Figures like Ram Mohan Roy, Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda, Dayananda Sarasvati, and Mahatma Gandhi were a part of this Hindu reform movement. They worked and taught, in quite different ways and in often different directions, to renew and revision their cultural and religious traditions.

India won its independence from England in 1947. The years of struggle to claim a religious space within India itself, combined with the often difficult social realities of multiple minority immigrant communities around the world, helped to produce a resurgence of religious nationalism within both India and the Hindu diaspora. One result was the *Hindutva* movement, a type of modern Hindu fundamentalism that seeks to advance and support the essential “Hinduness” of Indian culture, sometimes at the expense of other religious communities and
cultural traditions. On the Indian subcontinent, religious violence, often between Hindus and Muslims, has claimed thousands of lives. The 2002 Gujarat riots and the 1992 destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, for example, both led to large-scale bloodshed. Indian media also consistently report atrocities inflicted on young adults on occasions that Hindu fundamentalists consider to be immoral or western intrusions, for example, Valentine’s Day.

There have also, of course, been more positive and hopeful developments in what is in reality a millennia-long global cross-pollination between European, Islamic, and Indian civilizations. The increased awareness of Hindu yogic practices and philosophy via both popular culture and technical scholarship, for example, has led to a renewed awareness of these cultural resources among Hindu youth and otherwise westernized or secular individuals. Like their counterparts in Europe, the States, and other parts of Asia, many youth of the subcontinent are especially interested in the esoteric and mystical forms of Hindu spirituality.

Glossary

*Aranyakas*  “Forest Books,” a genre of Vedic literature
*ashrama*  stage of life
*avatar(a)*  “descent,” manifestation, or incarnation of God
*bhakti yoga*  the practice of devotion to a deity
*Brahma*  the Hindu God of creation
*Brahmanas*  a genre of Vedic literature
*brahmana*  “priest,” also rendered as *brahmin*, the highest of the four general castes
*brahmacharya*  the stage of life of the celibate student
*darshan(a)*  a ritual or sacramental “seeing” of a deity, formally in a temple or image
*Devi*  “Goddess,” a general term for the Hindu Goddess
*dharma*  the cosmic, social, moral, and economic order of Hindu society
*Durga*  a popular Hindu Goddess
*dvija*  “twice-born,” attributed to the three highest castes of the four-fold system
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>grihastha</td>
<td>the state of being a householder</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ganesha</td>
<td>a Hindu God, popularly known as the “elephant-headed God”</td>
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<tr>
<td>jati</td>
<td>a subdivision of the fourfold caste system, communities within the castes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kali</td>
<td>a Hindu Goddess associated with death, sexuality, and spiritual liberation</td>
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<tr>
<td>kama</td>
<td>sexual desire, but also any aesthetic pleasure</td>
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<tr>
<td>karma</td>
<td>“action,” here used in the sense of the moral law that good actions lead to good results and bad actions lead to bad results</td>
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<tr>
<td>Krishna</td>
<td>a central Hindu deity considered an incarnation of Vishnu</td>
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<tr>
<td>kshatriya</td>
<td>the second group in the fourfold caste system, commonly associated with kings, warriors, and civil authorities</td>
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<tr>
<td>linga</td>
<td>central icon of Shiva</td>
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<tr>
<td>moksha</td>
<td>spiritual liberation from the cycle of birth and death</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parvati</td>
<td>the wife of Shiva</td>
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<tr>
<td>puja</td>
<td>ritual of devotional worship of a Hindu deity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rama</td>
<td>a central Hindu deity considered to be an incarnation of Vishnu</td>
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<tr>
<td>sadharana dharma</td>
<td>codes that guide people in appropriate everyday action</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shaiva</td>
<td>a devotee of Shiva</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shakti</td>
<td>a devotee of the Goddess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>samsara</td>
<td>the round or cycle of birth and death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sanatana dharma</td>
<td>the Hindu social system as eternally revealed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sannyasa</td>
<td>a Hindu ascetic or renouncer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shiva</td>
<td>a major Hindu deity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shudras</td>
<td>the last group in the caste system, commonly associated with laborers and service providers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>svadharma</td>
<td>codes that guide an individual’s actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upanishads</td>
<td>“Secret Teachings,” a class of Vedic literature that emphasizes the internalization or spiritualization of earlier Vedic practices and ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaishnava</td>
<td>a devotee of Vishnu and his incarnations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
vaishyas the third group in the caste system, commonly associated with farmers, merchants and artisans

vanaprastha the third stage of life, the retired life

varnas the fourfold caste system

Vedas the four texts widely considered to be the sacred scriptures and ultimate authority of Hinduism

Vishnu a major Hindu deity whose incarnations are Rama and Krishna

* * *

Finally, two simple but helpful linguistic notes.

1. First, many common Hindu expressions and technical terms, which are derived from the modern Indian vernacular language of Hindi, drop the “a” of the original Sanskrit word from which the Hindi expressions are in turn derived. So “Ganesha” becomes “Ganesh,” “avatara” becomes “avatar,” “darshana” becomes “darshan,” “Rama” becomes “Ram,” and so on. Either expression in these pairs is technically correct, although the latter shorter ones are now the more common and less technical ones.

2. Second, all “a’s” in Sanskrit words are long, that is, they are pronounced like the “a” in “tall” and never like the “a” in “cat.”

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