

Hinduism

Of the world's major religions, Hinduism is possibly the oldest and most diverse. India, the birthplace of Hinduism, is large with many language families and Hindu traditions developed organically in distant places, combining unique local elements with ideas or practices begun elsewhere.

This diversity also occurs because Hinduism might be considered a collector religion. New ideas and practices often did not replace earlier ways but rather were added to them. Hinduism is less often either/or and more often both/and. Hence, the tradition can be quite lush, rich with varied ways of living.

Western conceptions of religion can influence our understanding of Hinduism. The distinctions between religion and culture are less relevant as Hinduism is about culture (celebrations, forms of dance), health (ayurvedic medicine), social status (caste), and much more. HInduism is a tradition that focuses on visuals and practices which contrasts with Western ideas that religions are foremost about books and beliefs.

The Emergence of Hindu Identity



Hinduism is often seen as less a single tradition than a **family of related traditions** which share some elements (karma, reincarnation, the Vedas).

Some claim there was no unified tradition until modern times, pointing instead to the immense variety of practices and beliefs. Ancient texts have no word for "Hinduism" and perhaps did not think of devotees as sharing one identity.



Hindu identity developed over time, partly in response to the **presence of others**. When Buddhism emerged, by rejecting the Vedas (sacred texts) and dismissing the deities, it made other groups seem more similar and connected.

When Islam arrived (12th century), it even lacked notions of karma and reincarnation, greatly increasing the sense of an "us" among people who held those beliefs.



Lastly, **British imperialism** encouraged separate religious identities. The British ran the schools and the bureaucracy and required people to choose which "religion" they were, ignoring how many Indians mingled traditions without any sense of conflict.

The British idea that religions are mutually exclusive (you are this or that) forced many to start choosing an identity. As a result, **stronger boundaries** developed and Hindu identity became more tightly defined.

The British also brought nationalism and, in the search to define India's national identity, some felt India should be "Hindu," giving rise to Hindu nationalism in the last century.

The following looks at how Hinduism evolved over time, considering five layers of development: the Indus, the Vedic, the Upanishads, Bhaki, and Western influence.

Indus (3500-1700 BCE)

- Earliest signs of civilization in India occur 5,000 years ago along the Indus river.
- Seals (stamps) show what some see as an early form of the god **Shiva**, sitting in a meditation pose.
- Archaeologists found many **lingams** (cylindrical stones associated with Shiva today).
- Other seals show **swastikas**, which indicate blessing.



Possible early form of Shiva



Shiva Lingam



Swastika

Vedic (Begins 1700 BCE)

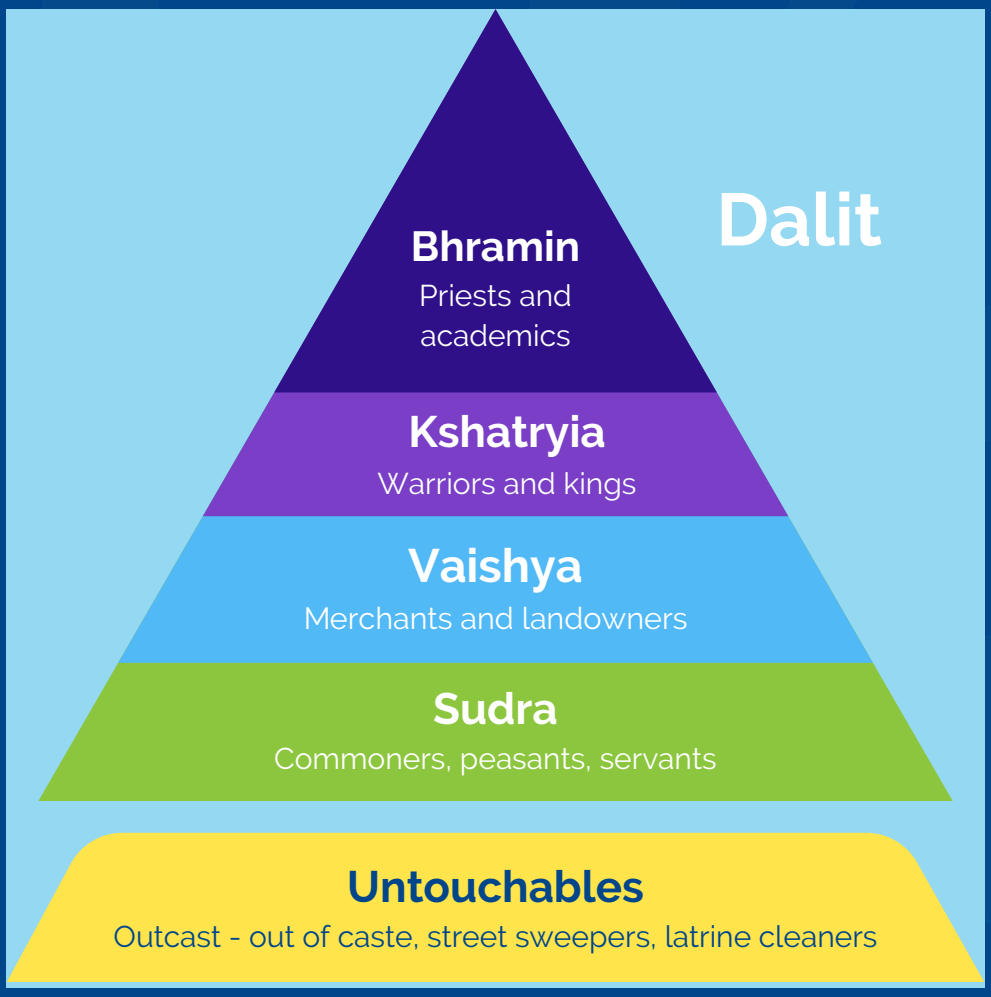


- The Aryans come to India with new religious ideas centred on the power of **ritual.**
- The Vedas (meaning 'knowledge') contain sacred knowledge of **fire sacrifice**.
- Fire sacrifice manipulates a power called Brahmin that somewhat forces the gods to bestow blessings.
- This sequence of cause (ritual) and effect (blessing) is **karma**, understood here as ritual karma. Doing the ritual correctly (cause), ensures the blessing (effect) will come.

Vedic

- Devotees worship **many gods**, not all of whom are benevolent.
- The power available through fire sacrifice means those who can do the sacrifices (know the sacred mantras and the procedures) gain the most status. The **caste system** emerges with priests at the top.

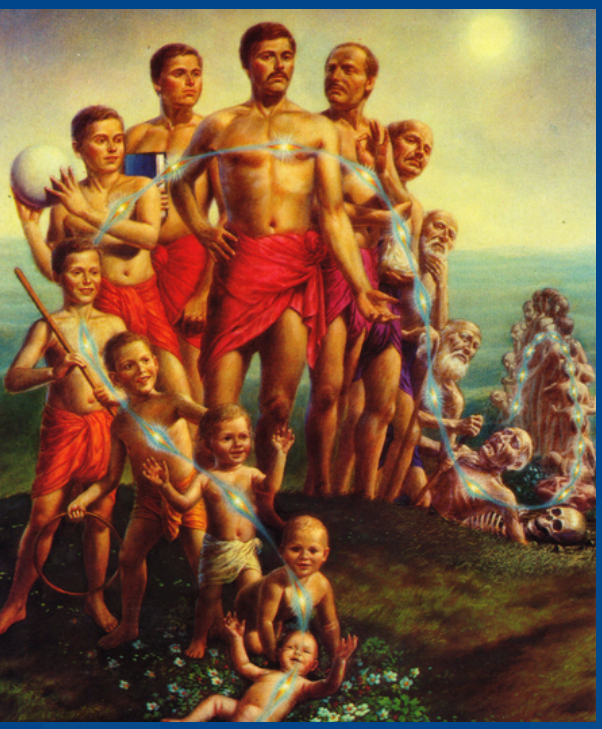




The Caste System and Dalits

- The four castes are priests, warriors/rulers, merchants and labourers.
- Others are deemed to be so polluted and polluting, they are outside the caste system.
- These outcastes or untouchables are also called **Dalits**. They can be forced to live outside the town, barred from some temples.

Upanishads (c. 500 BCE)



Reincarnation

- Indian society undergoes changes due to new technologies, urbanization, new military weapons.
- Amidst social chaos, some question whether rituals work. Where Vedic system relied on ritual, the Upanishads are the **philosophical questioning** of that inherited ritual system.
- "Shramanas" (strivers) emerge who ask big questions: the nature of the world, the self, divinity, and life. They are **spiritual experimenters** who engage in meditation, fasting, asceticism. Some write the Upanishads (texts).





- The Upanishads redefine **Brahmin** not as a power coerced through ritual but rather as the divine power behind all things. Brahmin is the mysterious force that you can never grasp and yet pervades everything. It makes everything potentially sacred (cows, rivers, mountains).
- This leads to the notion that one's true self (**atman**) is ultimately also Brahmin.
- Karma gets redefined as moral karma. Cause and effect now means your moral deeds create positive (or negative) karma. Karma is not a reward or punishment from a god; rather it is just a universal law that operates impersonally, like gravity.
- Upanishads develop idea of **reincarnation** where your karma causes your next birth. There is an escape from the cycle of endless births called moksha or enlightenment.

Bhakti (c. 500 CE)

- Some find the Upanishad's philosophies abstract. The Bhakti movement emphasizes heart and emotion. It is the **passionate love for god.**
- Where Brahmin is beyond personhood, bhakti focuses on **many personal gods** (some say millions of gods). Main gods include Shiva, Vishnu, the mother goddess (with many names) and Ganesh.
- **Stories** about the gods become central and are learned orally, through song, pageants and today, through comic books.



Sacred story in comic book form



Murti (sacred image)

- Critically, **Hinduism does not moralize questions about divinity**. It is no sin to think there are many gods or just one, since divinity is never truly knowable. Hindus can be monotheist, polytheist, pantheist, animists or even a combination of these.
- Moral questions hinge on doing your **dharma** (duty) which includes religious and moral obligations.
- **Murtis** (blessed images) house divinity.
- The main practice is darshan (to see and be seen by the gods), achieved by visiting the murtis.

- Home altars are common.
- An **ishtadevata** is one's personal deity, the face of god that one connects with most. Devotees may mark this devotion on their face at the temple with clay and powders.



Home Altar

Western Influence (c.1750 CE)

- **British Protestant influence** through schools and bureaucracy privileges monotheism, books, and beliefs over polytheism, images, and practices.
- British schools and census foster the idea that religions are mutually exclusive, which leads to greater boundaries and if one is now "Hindu," creates a greater need to define Hindu.
- British also bring **nationalism.** Identity had been local (based on caste, village, and family) but there is now a need to define an identity for "India." Some decide India is the Hindu nation, which can lead to demonizing religious minorities (especially Muslims). India experiences rise of Hindutva or Hindu nationalism.







The 20th century has seen the rise of Hindu nationalism.



Hinduism today **combines all five layers explained above.** Its diversity encompasses the philosophy of the Upanishads, the bhakti love of god, and reverence for the Vedas. These are not denominations but are all parts of a tapestry which are woven together and which lends Hinduism such **variety and richness.**

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Quote & Story

“First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.”

Mahatma Gandhi

Source: https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/25-inspiring-quotes-from-mahatma-gandhi-ravi-pratap-singh/

Thou Art That – Chandogya Upanishad

Svetaketu [*Svetaketu: young man, the son of sage Uddalaka, represents seeker of knowledge] went to his teacher’s house when he was twelve years old and studied the Vedas till he was twenty-four. Then he returned to his father, serious, considering himself well read and arrogant. His father said to him: "Svetaketu, since you are now so serious, think yourself well read and are so arrogant, have you, my dear, ever asked for that instruction by which one hears what cannot be heard, by which one perceives what cannot be perceived, by which one knows what cannot be known?" Svetaketu asked: "What is that instruction, venerable Sir?"

"As bees, my dear, make honey by collecting the juices of trees located at different places, and reduce them to one form, "And as these juices have no discrimination [so as to be able to say]: 'I am the juice of this tree,' or 'I am the juice of that tree'—even so, indeed, my dear, all these creatures, though they reach Pure Being, do not know that they have reached Pure Being. (6.9.1-2) "Now, that which is the subtle essence—in it all that exists has its self. That is the True. That is the Self. That thou art, Svetaketu." (6:9:4) "These rivers, my dear, flow—the eastern toward the east and the western toward the west. They arise from the sea and flow into the sea. Just as these rivers, while they are in the sea, do not know: ‘I am this river’ or ‘I am that river,’ "Even so, my dear, all these creatures, even though they have come from Pure Being, do not know that they have come from Pure Being. Whatever these creatures are, here in this world—a tiger, a lion, a wolf a boar, a worm, a fly, a gnat, or a mosquito, that they become again. (6:10:1-2) "Now, that which is the subtle essence—in it all that exists has its self. That is the True. That is the Self. That thou art, Svetaketu." (6:10:3)

Story Cont'd

"Bring me a fruit of that nyagrodha (banyan) tree." "Here it is' venerable Sir." "Break it." "It is broken, venerable Sir." "What do you see there?" "These seeds, exceedingly small, "Break one of these, my son." "It is broken, venerable Sir." "What do you see there?" "Nothing at all, venerable Sir." The father said: "That subtle essence, my dear, which you do not perceive there—from that very essence this great nyagrodha arises. Believe me, my dear. (6:12:1-2) "Now, that which is the subtle essence—in it all that exists has its self. That is the True. That is the Self. That thou art, Svetaketu." (6:12:3)

"Place this salt in water and then come to me in the morning." The son did as he was told. The father said to him: "My son, bring me the salt which you placed in the water last night." Looking for it, the son did not find it, for it was completely dissolved. The father said: "My son, take a sip of water from the surface. How is it?" "It is salt." "Take a sip from the middle. How is it?" "It is salt." "Take a sip from the bottom. How is it?" "It is salt." "Throw it away and come to me." The son did as he was told, saying: "The salt was there all the time." Then the father said: "Here also, my dear, in this body you do not perceive Sat (Being); but It is indeed there." (6:13:1-2) "Now, that which is the subtle essence—in it all that exists has its self. That is the True. That is the Self That thou art, Svetaketu." (6:13:3)

Source: http://yogananda.com.au/upa/Chandogya_Upanishad.html