

# RELIGION IN INDIA

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**Hinduism** Hinduism is the oldest and dominant religion of India. Drawing on ancient Vedic literature from the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE, Hinduism contains a bewildering variety of gods and goddesses, complex rituals and the concepts of karma and reincarnation. Major philosophical schools differ on the precise relation between the individual soul and god, and on the means of achieving liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. The *bhakti* (devotional) movement, which began in the medieval period and continues today, moved away from esoteric contemplation and toward a more personal attachment to a deity. While Siva, Visnu and the goddess are worshipped all over India in different forms, local religion also includes hundreds of other deities. Hinduism is also found wherever Hindus have migrated, principally in Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Trinidad, the UK and North America.

**Buddhism** Buddhism grew out of Hinduism, in the 6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, through a rejection of the Hindu concept of the soul and the embrace of a more austere path to enlightenment. Buddhism holds that there is no soul (*atman*) that transmigrates. Only pure consciousness exists. Buddhism, like Christianity and Islam, but unlike Hinduism and Judaism, is centred on an individual (Gautama Buddha), his life, his trials and his ultimate triumph. Unlike Christ, however, the Buddha was merely a human being, although he was deified after his death. Buddhism spread all over India but by 500 CE had divided into two schools. Theravada Buddhism flourished in Sri Lanka, Burma and much of Southeast Asia. Mahayana Buddhism made its way over the Himalayas into Tibet, China and Japan. Within India, Buddhism ceased to be a major religion from the 12<sup>th</sup> century CE onward, and today it is practiced by about 1% of the population.

**Jainism** By contrast, Jainism never left India and remains a thriving, albeit small, religious community within it. Like Buddhism, Jainism is an offshoot of Hinduism and based on a historical figure who lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE (Mahavira, 'Great Hero'). Again like Buddhism, asceticism is central to Jainism. However, a key tenet of Jainism is the indestructible and immortal individual soul (*jiva*), which differentiates it from both Hinduism and Buddhism. Because all life has a soul, Jains practice a daily life of non-harming (*ahimsa*), including avoiding breathing in and killing insects. It is no surprise to learn that Mahatma Gandhi came from a region with a strong Jain community. Today Jainism (practiced by approximately .5% of India's population) is concentrated in the west, mainly Gujarat, and particularly among merchants and businessmen.

**Sikhism** Sikhism is a more recent development from Hinduism and one also heavily influenced by Sufi Islam. Sikhism was founded by Guru Nanak (1469-1539 CE), whose Panjabi songs reveal a search for a god beyond categories: 'There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim.' An iconoclastic dimension in Sikhism explicitly rejects the authority of a priestly class, although authority is vested in a series of 'gurus' and their songs and sayings. Sikhism is also shaped by the Panjab and its history. The warrior ethic of Sikhism was forged through opposition to Muslim armies in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and reinvigorated in wars against the British in the 19<sup>th</sup>. While Sikhism is a minority religion in an all-India perspective (about 2% of the population), it is the dominant religion in the populous Panjab.

**Islam** Muslim traders arrived on the southwest coast before 500 CE, and from 700 CE onward Muslim armies moved into northwest and western India. No major theological differences separate Indian Muslims (about 13% of the population) from Muslims in the Arab or Persian world. However, the practice of Islam in India has been influenced by its cultural context. Sufism, which was imported from Persia, blended with medieval Hindu

devotional cults, and tombs of Sufi saints (*pir*) became centres of pilgrimage, worship and learning all across north India. Sufi songs focus on a saint as a conduit to God, rather than on Allah himself.

**Christianity** Christianity has a long history in India but is concentrated in the regions where it first arrived in India. Christians settled in Kerala as early as 800 CE, but significant influence began with the arrival of the Portuguese, on the same coast, in 1498. Later missionaries from all over Europe worked on the southeast and southwest coasts. From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century onward, Baptists pushed into the tribal regions of northeast India. Today about 2.3% of the population is Christian. Like Islam, the doctrines of Christianity have not changed in India but practices have. Low castes who converted from Hinduism did not abandon all their religious ideas and practices. Spirit possession ('devil dancing') and animal sacrifices were banned for Protestant converts, but many other ritual practices continued, albeit in modified form.

**Local** All these major religious traditions exist on various levels, from the canonical text to the local shrine. While practices at the local level sometimes deviate from what the priestly elite recommends, interaction between these various strata is generally fluid and mutually influential. Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and Jains are all capable of shifting from one level to another, just as they move between different linguistic registers.

**Tribal** One religious tradition that exists only at the local level, and in considerable diversity, is tribal religion. Although tribal religion, just like 'tribe,' resists convenient definition, we can say that large populations of communities in northeast and central India practice a system that includes elements of shamanism and animism. In some areas, these rituals and beliefs have borrowed heavily from Hinduism and, more recently, from Christianity.

## Reading

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## Discussion questions

Buddhism and Jainism are said to have developed as reform movements within Hinduism. Analyse the factors that led to one of these reform movements. Consider theological, political and economic reasons.

Buddhism was once a major religion in India. Since about 1000 CE., however, it declined, although it experienced a mini-revival in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Analyse the reasons for these fluctuations in the popularity of a religion that spread throughout Asia but is only a minor faith in the land of its birth.

Christianity and Islam could be considered the two 'outsider' religions in India. But both have assimilated and borrowed much from the Indian/Hindu culture around them. Analyse the nature of that assimilation process for either Christianity or Islam, identifying specific features that have been adopted, adapted or rejected. Is it now an 'Indian' religion?

Hinduism, like all religions, exists on several levels. There is an historically long textual level, which provides authority and rules. Then there is the local level, where people

actually practice those beliefs. Analyse the relationship between these two levels, by studying local Hinduism in practice.

Tribal religion in India is poorly understood, although the corpus of published research is growing. Analyse the religious system of one tribe (or group of tribes in a region), paying attention to elements of shamanism, animism and features borrowed from Hinduism and/or Christianity.

## Texts

### 1. The Four Noble Truths of Buddhism

1. Life is suffering (*dukkha*).
2. The cause of suffering is desire.
3. The cessation of suffering is *nirvana*.
4. The eightfold path leads to the cessation of suffering.

### 2. Jaina scripture, translation by H. Jacobi, 1895

All men who are ignorant of the Truth are subject to pain; in the endless *Samsâra* they suffer in many ways.

Therefore a wise man, who considers well the ways that lead to bondage and birth, should himself search for the truth, and be kind towards all creatures.

'Mother, father, daughter-in-law, brother, wife, and sons will not be able to help me, when I suffer for my own deeds.'

This truth should be taken to heart by a man of pure faith; he should (therefore) cut off greed and love, and not hanker after his former connections.

Cows and horses, jewels and earrings, cattle, slaves and servants: all these (possessions) you must give up in order to obtain the power of changing your form at will.

Everything that happens to somebody, affects him personally; therefore, knowing the creatures' love of their own self, do not deprive them of their life, but cease from endangering and combating them.

Seeing that to accept (presents) leads to hell, one should not accept even a blade of grass; only to preserve one's life one should eat the food that is put in one's own alms-bowl.

### 2. Hindu poem by Surdas (15<sup>th</sup> c. CE), translation by K.P. Bahadur, 1998

The voice falters  
when it sings of the deeds of the Lord  
who's an ocean of mercy.  
He gave guileful Putana, who posed as his mother, a  
mother's reward!  
He of whom the Vedas and the Upanishads sing as the Unmanifest,  
let Yashoda bind him with a rope,  
lamented Ugrasena's grief,  
and after killing Kansa made him king  
paying him obeisance, bowing low;  
Freed the kings held captive by jarsandha  
at which the kingly hosts sang his praises;  
removing Gautama's curse  
he restored life to stone-turned Ahalya:  
'All in a moment he rescued Braj's ruler from the sea-monster running to his aid as a  
cow to her calf,'  
he came hastening to rescue the king of the elephants;

he got Namadeva's hut thatched.  
says Suradasa, O, make Hari hear my prayer.

4. Sikh poem by Guru Nanak (15<sup>th</sup> c. CE) [translator unknown]

God is the One mystic Sound,  
His name is Truth,  
He is the Creator,  
Without Fear,  
Without Enmity,  
Timeless Form,  
Unborn and Self-existent,  
Known by the Guru's Grace.  
He was the Truth in the beginning,  
Truth when time began,  
even now He is the Truth and will always be the Truth.