

## HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

# INDIAN RELIGION

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**Overview** It is difficult to overstate the significance of religion in India, both historically and in modern times. The ancient Hindu texts of the Vedas are the oldest religious texts still recited and remembered. Buddhism, one of the few truly 'world' religions, originated and flourished in India until its demise starting around 1000 CE. Islam has been in India for than a millennium and represents a fascinating instance of religious synthesis, especially at the local level of practice and belief. In addition to these, there is Jainism, still a presence in parts of the country, Christianity, thoroughly assimilated and woven into the social fabric, and finally, the shamanistic systems of India's many tribal populations.

### Prehistory

**Shamanism** The archaeological record provides scant evidence of the religious practices and still less the beliefs of stone-age communities in India. We can only sketch an outline, relying mainly on the remains at burial sites, supplemented by studies of stone-age religion in other part of the world and ethnographies of the religious system of tribal populations still living near many sites. There can be little doubt, for example, that stone-age communities in India practiced a form of shamanism. Like the shamanism of tribes in modern India, their ancestors probably conceived of a spirit world, with numerous named forces, perhaps associated with other living things (animals, flowers, trees), topographical features (rivers and mountains) and, most important the sun and moon. Stone-age handprints on cave walls in Panna Dt. Madhya Pradesh are identical to those on the house walls of tribal people in nearby villages, where they perceived as 'good luck signs' that provide protection from a capricious spirit world.

**Shamans** We can also surmise that rituals and chanting were performed by specialists or shamans (although this term is often misused) in order to contact and communicate with these spirits. Several of the paintings in the Bhimbetka caves, for example, show a ritual-like dance with some masked dancers, who may be specialists.

**Animals** Large animals, such as tigers and lions, painted on the cave walls may represent objects of worship. Stone-age hunters elsewhere are said to have prayed to an animal spirit, asking it to manifest itself so that it could be hunted and then ritually sacrificed. Tribal populations in modern India believe that many animals have (or are) spirits that can be contacted through chanting by ritual specialists. Killing animals, especially those with whom humans feel a strong bond, is often ritualised with chanting, dancing and singing.

**Burial** Burial sites provide us with further hints of stone-age religion in India. Most graves were shallow pits in which the body was aligned east to west, suggesting a possible orientation with the sun. Burnt ash found at the bottom of the pits indicates some kind of funerary ritual. One site contained more than 150 bodies, with slightly more complex graves. A small niche was cut into one side of the pit, and the body and the goods were placed inside. The niche was then sealed with mud-bricks, presumably to keep the ancestor 'safe.' Grave goods, such as necklaces, bone ornaments and dead animals, indicate a belief that the dead person would make a journey to a spirit world where these possessions would be useful. Another theory is that digging graves and performing funerary rituals was a method of claiming new territory.

**Secondary burial** There is also evidence of 'secondary' burial, a reflection of more complex cosmological ideas. Secondary burials or funeral rituals are defined as any artificial structures made after death, such as grave pits, erect stones (dolmens) or mounds, which become the focus for human activity and/or thought. Another theory is that digging graves and performing funerary rituals was a method of claiming new territory.

**Fertility** Female figurines, shaped from stone and bone and found at stone-age sites, have been interpreted as fertility symbols. At one site in Madhya Pradesh, a large, shaped stone (dated to about 20,000 BCE) matches images that are today worshipped by nearby villagers as fertility symbols.

**Bhimbetka shrine** One of the Bhimbetka caves contains what appears to be a 'shrine' or ritual centre. A long corridor (about 25 metres long) leads to a large space with three other entrances. In the centre of this space is a tall, vertical rock with several small scooped-out depressions, which may have been used to produce music. In any case, it appears that the space was the site ritual activity.

**Baghor shrine** Another possible shrine has been located in a cave at Baghor, Madhya Pradesh. In the centre of a circular platform, 85 cm in diameter, made of sandstone and dated to about 9000 BCE, archaeologists found a natural stone with a complex design of triangles and colours. More fragments of this central stone were found and were joined together to form a pyramid. Tribal people living nearby also make platforms on which they worship triangular stones.

### Indus Valley Civilisation

**Speculation** While little is known of the religion of the IVC, the archaeological evidence is suggestive. One example is the bust of a 'bearded man', which was conveniently identified as a 'priest,' though this is unsubstantiated. More promising are various scenes on the seals that appear to show religious figures or actions. A man in a yoga pose, with an animal headdress, looks like an early form of Siva, while other scenes resemble animal sacrifice. There are also a number of female terracotta figurines that have been identified as 'mother goddesses' who symbolise fertility. Much of this, it has to be emphasised is speculation and may be erroneous. As an example, worked stone pieces that had once been claimed as phallic symbols, associated with Siva, turned out to be domestic pestles.

**Structures** In contrast to Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilisations, the Indus Valley civilisation seems to have lacked any large temples or palaces that would give clear evidence of religious rites or specific deities. Although a large building (12 metres high) in Mohenjo-Daro is often identified as a 'citadel,' there is no evidence that it had a ritual function. Similarly, the function of the so-called 'great bath' at Mohenjo-Daro (12 x 7 x 2.5 metres, with two sets of stairs) remains a mystery. Many scholars believe it would have had a ritual cleansing function, but this interpretation may be an example of reading back from later Vedic culture.

**Burial** Funeral practices included burial and cremation. Unlike in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, however, the people of IVC did not bury the dead with items of wealth. Instead, we find common pots, beads and ornaments. The pots, and frequent animal bones, may have been thought to provide water and meat for the dead person in some kind of an after-life. The body was usually separated from the earth by a shroud, coffin or layer of clay, which it is tempting to interpret as a concern with ritual purity. In any case, the usual orientation of the body (head to the north and feet to the south) is striking because south is the direction of death in the Vedas and later Indian religions.

### Indo-Aryan Civilisation

**Indo-European** The religion of the early Indo-Aryans was a branch of a wider set of Indo-European beliefs and practices found among ancient Greek, Norse, Iranian and Germanic peoples. Key features of this reconstructed religion include a sky-father god, a myth of dragon slaying and a myth of two brothers who create the world from a sacrifice. The Vedic sky-father god Dyaus Pitr is cognate with the Zeus and Ju-piter. A Vedic god, Indra, slays a dragon. And a Vedic myth explains the creation of the world from sacrifice.

**Vedas** The religion of the Indo-Aryans is encoded in a remarkable set of Sanskrit oral texts known collectively as the Vedas (after the Sanskrit word for 'knowledge'). There are four Vedas, composed from about 1200 to 900 BCE and then memorised and transmitted by specialists (Brahmins) to the present day. These ancient texts are filled with optimism and exuberance, a celebration of life and wonder at the magnificence of the world. The gods are benign and protective, especially if men continue to honour them with sacrifice.

**Rig Veda** The oldest of these four texts is the *Rig Veda* (c. 1200-1000 BCE), which contains speculation about the cosmos, its origins and order, its guardians and enemies. Some of its 1028 verses are charms and curses, intended to protect the cattle-keeping Indo-Aryans from disease, accident and misfortune.

**Later Vedas** The three other Vedas (Yajur, Sama and Atharva, c. 1200-900 BCE) also contain imprecations but focus on rituals. These later three texts describe and explain the complex techniques necessary for conducting the ceremonies, with an emphasis on the power of breath, spoken words and the one who speaks them, the Brahmin priest. Specific form of words, or mantras, are said to be imbued with magical power.

**Pantheon** Vedic religion is pantheistic. Rather than a single, all-powerful creator god, it encompasses many diverse gods and goddesses, most of whom are associated with natural forces. Chief male deities include Dyaus Pitr (sky-father), Varuna (guardian of cosmic order), Agni (fire), Indra (a sky warrior who succeeded Dyaus as 'king of the gods'), Yama (lord of the underworld) and Surya (Sun). Vac (goddess of speech) and Ushas (Dawn) are the only prominent female deities.

**Sacrifice** At the heart of Vedic religion is the fire sacrifice. Many hymns invoke Agni (fire) and Soma (an intoxicating libation), the two principal elements of the sacrifice. Brahmins conduct this sacrifice on behalf of others who wish to increase their wealth or progeny, or to ward off disease and misfortune. The fire sacrifice is still performed today, in a much changed form, during Hindu weddings.

### Classical Period

**Hinduism** In the first part of this period, Hinduism underwent a fundamental shift, away from the external, sanguine outlook of the Vedas and toward the internal, sceptical contemplation of the Upanishads (c. 800-300 BCE). In broad terms, the early emphasis on ritual as action was replaced by an examination of ritual as symbol. Knowledge of the sacrifice became more important than actually performing the sacrifice. And the greatest knowledge was knowledge of the self or soul (*atman*). This shift was also deeply influenced by the emergence of Buddhism and Jainism.

**Buddhism** Buddhism grew out of Hinduism in the 6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE through a rejection of brahminical authority and the Hindu concept of the soul. Buddhism announced the startling claim that there was no 'soul', no permanent self, and that everything was in flux. The only reality was pure consciousness (*nirvana*). In proposing a more open yet austere path to enlightenment, Buddhism split into two wings: the Theravada/Hinayana (now found in Sri Lanka, Burma and Southeast Asia) and the Mahayana (found in Tibet, Nepal, Japan and China). Both schools developed sophisticated philosophical and philological traditions, the first in Pali, the second in Sanskrit and Tibetan.

**Gautama Buddha** Tradition holds that the 'historical' Buddha, a prince named Gautama, was born at Lumbini, on the Indian-Nepalese border, in the mid-6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. However, there had been no material evidence to support this claim until 2013, when archaeologists digging at Lumbini uncovered the remains of a timber structure (called a 'shrine') dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Whether the founder of Buddhism was born in that century or later, there is little doubt that there was an historical figure in the middle of the first millennium BCE who changed the course of Indian and world history.

**Jainism** Like Buddhism, Jainism is an offshoot of Hinduism and based on a historical figure (Mahavira, 'Great Hero') who lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE. Again like Buddhism, asceticism and non-violence are 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. Jains made a significant contribution to literature and philosophy, especially in south India, and won patronage from important rulers up to the medieval period.

**Devotionalism** Devotionalism (*bhakti*) was a pan-Indian religious movement that began toward the end of the classical period. Although it affected Buddhism, its primary imprint was on Hinduism. In this new religiosity, an individual worshipper imagined and nurtured a direct bond with a specific god or goddess. Contemplation of abstract spiritual ends gave way to more active engagement with deities, who were given human-like qualities of generosity and compassion. Although devotionalism was signalled in the late Upanishads, it flourished under the patronage of the Gupta rulers, especially in their state support for the worship of Visnu and Lakshmi.

### Early Postclassical Period

**Devotionalism** The second historic shift in Indian religion (after the turn the ritualism in the Vedas to speculation in the Upanishads) was the development of devotionalism, known as *bhakti* ('to share in', 'to belong to'). Characterised by an intense and personal attachment to a particular god or goddess, saint or guru, devotionalism illustrates the regionalism of the period. Until the bhakti movement, religious thought had been expressed almost exclusively in Sanskrit, the preserve of ritual specialists and court poets. Then, beginning in about 500 CE in the Tamil country, religious poetry, myth and song were composed and sung in the languages of common people. Favoured by royal patronage, the movement spread across the face of the subcontinent and has been the life-blood of Hinduism ever since. Even Buddhism, which the bhakti poets 'sang out of India,' was affected by devotionalism. New Mahayana figures, such as bodhisattvas (Avalokitesvara and Maitreya) and goddesses (Padmini and Tara) were worshipped in shrines and with rituals similar to those in Hinduism.

**Philosophy** A parallel shift occurred in Hindu religious philosophy, as illustrated by Shankaracharya. Shankaracharya was a religious philosopher who lived in South India, probably in Kerala and probably in the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> c. CE. He is arguably the most influential theologian in all Indian history. Tradition holds that he became a wandering ascetic at an early age, travelled north to Benares and debated with religious

thinkers all over India. It was a time of fierce rivalry, and even violence, between Hindus, Buddhists and Jains. In this maelstrom Shankaracharya wrote commentaries on major Hindu texts to explicate the *advaita* or 'non-dualism' school of Hinduism, which claimed that beneath the flux of our impressions there is an unchanging reality. This is the *brahman*. All else is *maya* or illusion. Although he did not agree with the emotive devotionism that was sweeping south India at the time, he did provide Hinduism with an uncompromising foundation in its battle against rival religions.

**Buddhism** Buddhism grew out of Hinduism in the 6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE through a new eschatology (*nirvana*) and the embrace of a more austere path to enlightenment, especially in the Theravada/Hinayana school. This new, heterodox belief system also rejected the domination of Hinduism's priestly elite in favour of monks and laymen and laywomen, who could follow the path of non-violence and virtue. This ideology, which appealed to the emerging mercantile and trading communities in the cities, was patronised by the Mauryan Empire and spread quickly all over India, including the far south, where it played a major role in literary, social and political life.

**Jainism** 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 and non-violence are 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. Jainism also spread through mercantile groups and contributed to literature and scholarship in many regional languages.

**Islam** As these large scale developments were unfolding, another key event occurred when Muslims arrived in the subcontinent in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. Indian Islam did not diverge much from Islam in the Arab or Persian world, although Sufism (itself a Persian import) became a major force and comingled with forms of local Hinduism. For example, Hindu devotionism and Sufism both focus on a saint as a conduit to divine power, rather than on God himself, and the cults of the Sufi saints (*pir*) became almost indistinguishable from their Hindu counterparts.

#### Late Postclassical Period

**Islam** Early Indian Islam was guided by the Qur'an and the Sunna, which tradition held were the words and principles of the Prophet. Thus, the Islam practiced in Delhi in this period would have differed little from that observed in Baghdad or Damascus. There were minor differences, however, especially in the interpretation of Islamic law (*shariah*), resulting from a recognition that adjustments had to be made when Islam conquered people of different faiths.

**Sufism** Islam during the Delhi Sultanate was also tempered by the Sufis, the wandering Muslim mystics who took their name from the coarse wool tunic they wore. Sufis represented the ecstatic impulse suppressed in legalistic schools of Islam and expressed in their statement: 'Mystics learn from God; scholars learn from books.' Although Islam held that the only path to Paradise was unwavering faith in God, Sufi saints believed that one could draw closer to God during one's lifetime and thereby experience mystical oneness. As singers and poets, they helped to spread Islam through the countryside in a way that traditional Islamic teachers could not. The Sufi poet-saints were virtually identical to the poet-saints of devotional Hinduism. Both groups sang of a direct, personal contact with the divine, a power that they believed transcended petty social categories like caste and religious identity.

**Hinduism** Devotionalism, which had begun centuries earlier in the Tamil country, spread like wild fire across the entire subcontinent during this period. Hindu poet-saints composed songs in Kannada, Marathi, Malayalam, Telugu, Gujarati, Hindi and Assamese, which sang the praises of deities in the language of common people. The Chola kingdom in the far south and the Vijayanagar kingdom in the Deccan provided the patronage to promote the worship of Visnu and Siva in large temples and local shrines. The philosopher Ramanuja (c. 1017–1137 CE) established a theological basis for devotionism with his school of *Vishistadvaita* ('qualified non-dualism'). He explained that a worshipper need not merge into oneness with god (the goal of the rival *Advaita*, or non-dualism, school). Instead, the worshipper could become immersed in god, while still retaining a personal identity; indeed, that personal identity was a prerequisite to forming a bond with god.

#### Early Modern Period

**Islam** During the Mughal Empire, Sunni and Shia Muslims generally practiced Islam in accordance with scripture and followed the guidance of traditional Islamic scholars in the interpretation of *sharia* law. However, Sufism (which had come to India in the 14<sup>th</sup> c. CE) was also extremely popular. Sufi mysticism, which

dismissed institutions in favour of a personal bond between believer and god, engaged people through ecstatic singing. Nevertheless, and predictably, Sufis formed their own organisations, called orders (*silsilah*), with spiritual leaders and large shrines. The most successful orders were the Suhrawardi and the Chisthi, which cultivated sophisticated Persian poetry. With its shrines, singing and egalitarianism, Sufism played a major role in the accommodation of Islam with Indian traditions, as illustrated by the synthesis created by Akbar. At court, he gathered around him a wide spectrum of theologians—Sunni, Shia, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Jain, Jewish and Catholic. Akbar led a pious life, and could be seen sweeping the floor of the mosque he had built at his new capital, Fatehpur Sikri (near Agra). He also openly opposed Islamic legal scholars by citing Sufi principles, which traditionalists regarded as heresy.

**Hinduism** Hindu devotionalism continued to spread during this period, especially to the eastern corners of the subcontinent. Chaitanya in Bengal and Sankaradeva in Assam led popular movements promoting the worship of Visnu. In south India, partly in reaction to the Islamic threat from the north, kings built large temples that employed thousands of Brahmins. However, at the local level, the theologies of Hindu devotionalism and Sufi mysticism were very similar, and the Hindu cults of deified heroes were little different to the Muslim cults of saints.

**Christianity** At first, Christianity was practiced mainly on the southwest and southeast coasts, where Europeans had established trading centres. Although the number of converts was low, church spires soon dotted the shorelines, and the new faith slowly worked its way into the lives of low-castes, particularly the fishermen (who may have felt an affinity with Christ). In fact, by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Christian churches and congregations appeared in Madras and Calcutta, the Indianisation of Christianity, with its doctrinal concessions to local cultural practices, led to the Jesuits being withdrawn from India (and other parts of Asia).

### 19<sup>th</sup> Century

**Hinduism** Hinduism was reformed by both urban and rural elites, who pulled it in different directions. The Brahma Samaj, formed in 1828 by English-educated intellectuals in Calcutta, encouraged a monotheistic and rational Hinduism that opposed the worship of idols, child marriage, dowry, *sati* (widow self-immolation) and caste inequality. The opposite trend, to recover old practices, was spearheaded by the Arya Samaj movement in the Gangetic heartland. This reform movement was led by the firebrand Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883), who promoted cow protection and denounced both Christianity and Islam.

**Islam** Muslim reform movements centred on two institutions, close to Delhi. The Aligarh movement, led by Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-1898) and based at the Anglo-Oriental College. Khan believed that Islam and modernity were not incompatible and argued that one could be a good Muslim and have enlightenment ideas. An alternative approach, centred on the Deoband seminary, taught a version of pure Islam in confrontation with infidels, both Hindu and British.

**Christianity** Christianity grew into a major cultural presence in India, especially through the Protestant missions that spread all over the country. They established schools, translated the bible into dozens of languages and eventually developed a distinctive literature, which Indianised Christian story material.

### Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century

**Hinduism** Hinduism underwent considerable reform through the agency of the Bengal Renaissance, Gandhi's campaigns and other attempts to accommodate an ancient religion to modernity. Continuing a trend the arguably began in the classical period (with the Gupta Empire), religion became ever more closely entwined with politics, as religious identity provided a rallying cry for mobilising popular movements.

**Buddhism** After nearly disappeared from India centuries earlier, Buddhism made a startling comeback during the early twentieth century. In western India, a movement of Neo-Buddhism led by Dr Ambedkar appealed to many low caste Hindus. A similar movement was led by elites in the Tamil-speaking region, as part of an anti-Brahmin crusade.

**Islam** Having lost their prestige and much of their culture in post-Mughal India, Muslims found a new source of inspiration in pan-Islamism as symbolised by the Ottoman Caliph. In 1919, after the defeat of Turkey and its allies by Britain and its allies, Muslims in India had another cause to unite them: anti-colonialism. This 'Khilafat' Movement argued that it was the duty of Muslims to defend Islam and *sharia* law against its enemies, including western countries. In the 1920s, thinking turned toward post-Independence and the need for a

separate Muslim nation-state. Since Independence, Muslim revivalism in India has concentrated on social and cultural issues.

### Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century

**Shiv Sena** The harnessing of religion by political movements, a trend that began during the nationalist era, shows no sign of abating. A revealing example is the Shiv Sena ('Siva's Army'). This Hindu nationalist political party began as an agitation in the 1950s for a separate Marathi-speaking state to be carved out of Bombay Province. After Maharashtra was duly created in 1960, protests against non-Marathas began. The easy targets were Gujaratis, who controlled commerce in Bombay, and South Indians, who held professional positions. Later the Shiv Sena allied itself with the Bharatiya Janata Party and stoked anti-Muslim feelings.

**Communal violence** More broadly, the psychological divide between Hindus and Muslims has been deepened by the ongoing dispute over Kashmir and the threat of jihadism, especially following the attacks in Bombay in 2008. In 1992, a mob of religious activists, with the tacit approval of the authorities, demolished a mosque in Ayodhya because they claimed it had been built over a Hindu temple. This event sparked a series of bloody attacks and reprisals in north India. In 2002, Hindu activists clashed with Muslims in rural Gujarat, leaving two thousand Muslims dead, with the apparent complicity of Narendra Modi, then Chief Minister of Gujarat and later Prime Minister of India. New wealth has also enabled people to display their prosperity by building temples and mosques, which then act as lightning rods for conflict.

**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.

### Discussion/questions

1. Some researchers claim that the people of the Indus Valley civilisation practiced a form of proto-Hinduism. They point, in particular, to an apparent image of Siva on one of the seals, to numerous goddess-like figurines and the 'Great Bath' at Mohenjo-Daro with its implied interest in ritual purity. Many others have questioned these claims, although there is a general consensus that the religion of the Indus people contributed to the development of Hinduism in the long term.
2. The oral composition and transmission of the Vedas is one of the most astonishing achievements in world history. However, even today scholars persist in saying that the Vedas were 'written'. Why does the written word have a superior status in today's world? When did writing overtake orality in status? How does an oral/aural culture differ from an essentially graphic/visual culture?
3. There is a case for arguing that the historical Buddha is the single most influential person in Indian history. And his influence has been magnified many times over by the 'story' of his life that has now become inseparable from the history of Buddhism. This illustrates the power of what is now called 'life-history.'
4. Devotionalism dominates this period of Indian history. Poets, singers, mystics and saints expressed a new kind of relationship between people and gods. Although this personal, emotional and painful bond was articulated first in the Sanskrit text of the Bhagavad Gita, it flowered in the regional languages of India from about 500 CE onward. Map the geographical spread of this religious-cultural movement from Tamil to Assamese, by identifying key texts and poets.
5. The Mughal Emperor Akbar created and patronised a syncretic form of Islam at his court. A large element of this synthesis was Sufism, which remains a major strand of Indian Islam. In fact, in many respects, there is little visible difference between the practice and theology of Sufism and devotional Hinduism. Despite this long-standing and deep cultural accommodation, conflict and violence between 'Islam' and 'Hinduism' continues.
6. Neo-Hinduism, often thought to have begun with the Hari Krishna movement in the 1960s, can in fact be traced back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Brahmo Samaj in Calcutta. What effect did this reform movement, among English-educated urban elites, have on Hinduism as practiced in the countryside?

7. 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.

### Reading

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