

Core Tenets of Hinduism

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Hinduism is often viewed as so complex that the task to even explain it appears daunting, let alone to grasp it. Yet, the uniqueness of Hinduism is that its basic principles, and its advice to solve the human problems, have never changed; they are just as relevant today as they were in ancient times. The basic core of this wisdom can be described, and understood, when studied well in a thorough structured manner, not unlike specialized fields as physics or medical science. This vision is clearer, more rigorous and even more 'scientific' than the principles of science that we are accustomed to judge things by. If properly understood, the Hindu vision unifies and incorporates the myriad varieties of practices, belief systems and even schools of thought within Hinduism, as well as those outside the Hindu system.

This is an attempt to state the basic framework of Hindu thinking, as an introduction.

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A. Who is a Hindu?

- Those who follow the teachings of Vedas
- They are called *Vedic* people, or *Vaidikas*
- The term Hindu was coined by people outside India (Persians), who based the name referring to those living close to river Indus
- Hinduism is also referred to as सनातन धर्म, or the perennial wisdom

Commentary

When Hinduism was being practiced as the path of Dharma, there were only different *sampradayas* or traditions. None of them were known as religions but they coexisted honoring their differences. Over time, various *sampradayas* became different religions. Some evolved out of Hinduism like Buddhism and Sikhism and some evolved independently around the world. As time, culture, society evolved, translation of *Sanatana* Dharma into Dharma practices, principles and perspectives continue to evolve within Hindu ocean. Some of the practices, principles and perspectives became different traditions though they all connect to the ocean of Vedic knowledge — just like rivers flow from ocean far and in different direction but the roots of all these rivers is still the ocean.

B. Scriptural Authority of Hindus

| Basics | Comments |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The authority is from the Vedas • The Vedas, meaning 'the knowledge' was segmented by rishi Vyasa into four, <i>Rgveda</i>, <i>Samaveda</i>, <i>Yajurveda</i>, <i>Atharvaveda</i>, so that it is easier to learn, preserve and recite by followers (so the names <i>Vedi</i>, <i>Dwivedi</i>, <i>Trivedi</i> and <i>Chaturvedi</i>) • For a long time, the Vedic mantras were not written down, but orally communicated from teacher to student; thus the name <i>Shruti</i>, or 'what is heard' • Some are in prose, but the majority are in verse form • There are six layers of literature that flow from the Vedas, and present the concepts of Vedas in different forms, for the benefit for people of different levels of understanding. The six are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • (1) <i>Shrutis</i>, The four Vedas: • (2) <i>Smritis</i>, or what is remembered (from the revelations). The two most famous <i>Smritis</i> are the Bhagavad Gita and Manu <i>Smriti</i> • (3) <i>Puranas</i>. There are 18 main <i>Puranas</i>, the most famous being Sri <i>Bhagavatam</i> • (4) <i>Itihasa</i>. There are two: about the two <i>main Avatars</i> of God, Lord Rama and Lord Krishna • (5) The Sutra literature. The two main ones are Brahma Sutras, in the form of 555 aphorisms by Sri Vyasa, and the other is Sankhya Sutras, which itself has been lost but inferred from a commentary on it, which is available. • (6) Commentaries and <i>prakarna granthas</i>, or independent works by authors over the years | <p>There is no known authorship of Vedas. It is considered to be अपौरुषेय (<i>apaurusheya</i>), or not created by human beings. It is considered to be the very expression of ईश्वर (<i>Ishvara</i>) God, and as such, always present, independent of time.</p> <p>It can be revealed to the very finely-tuned minds (called Rishis) at the beginning of a cycle of manifestation, much like the dawning of the thoughts on a new day.</p> <p>The act of revelation is like the radio or TV waves that are silently present, but not captured, except by finely tuned instruments.</p> <p>Beside the Vedas, all the literature is पौरुषेय <i>Paurusheya</i>, or having a human origin.</p> <p>While the Bhagavad Gita is the word of Sri Krishna, Sri Bhagvatam is about Sri Krishna. <i>Smritis</i> are the Vedic concepts explained aimed at specific types of people. Bhagavad Gita, for example, is aimed at active people, rather than renunciates.</p> <p>The Bhagavad Gita is especially well regarded. It is some time called the 5th Veda, partially due to the fact that it is in the words of Sri Krishna in first person, literally the word of God.</p> <p><i>Itihasa</i> consists of Sanskrit words Iti+ha+Asa, meaning this is how it happened. Hindus believe that both</p> |

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scholars have ascertained that the entire set of literature, individually and collectively unfold the vision of the Vedas. There is total consistency, even though the context may vary. This is systematically analyzed and called <i>tatparya nishcaya</i> or the ascertainment of the vision of the <i>shastras</i> • Beside Vedas, that deal with spiritual wisdom. There are <i>Upavedas</i> (secondary Vedas) and <i>Vedangas</i> (adjuncts to Vedas) that extend the knowledge of the various spectrums of human life. | <p>Ramayana and <i>Mahbharata</i> are actual historical events, and meaningful to study and learn from.</p> <p>Sutras are called aphorism, which means a definition based on precise, minimum number of words, like machine language in computers.</p> <p>Puranas are stories for easier understanding of spiritual concepts.</p> <p>Even though Vedas are the source of all Vedic/Hindu literature, because of its usefulness to the majority of active individuals, The Bhagavad Gita is considered a book that best summarizes the core of Hinduism. It may be compared to the Bible to the Christians, the Quran for the Muslims, the Grantha Sahib to the Sikhs</p> <p>The Vedas are segmented in 3 broad categories:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Karma Kanda – 80% of verses. Dealing with rituals, both for results in this life as well as in future lives 2) Upasana Kanda – 16% of the verses. Dealing with prayers to Ishvara, the God 3) Gyana Kanda – 4% of the verses. Dealing with knowledge of God, the world around us and the individual being. Consists of Upanishads, called Vedanta <p>The four Upavedas are;</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Ayurveda – medicines and health 2) Gandharvaveda – music and dance 3) Sthapatyaveda – architecture 4) Dhanurveda – archery <p>The 6 Vedangas are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Shiksha – phonetics 2) Chandas – prosody, the science of rhythm in poetry |
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| | <ol style="list-style-type: none">3) Vyakarana – grammar and linguistic analysis4) Nirukta – etymology; the science of how words are formed5) Kalpa – ritual instructions6) Jyotisha - astrology |
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Commentary

Bhagavad Gita embodies the core tenets of Vedic thought, and being a guide for the active person, it seems to be best suited to be called the basic text of the Hindus, as bible is for the Christians, or the Koran for the Muslims. When there is a need for deeper dive, we go into other texts to refer to. Hindus also have dharma *shastras* that follow the Vedas. Manu Dharma Sastra is only one of the many such books. In some ways, dharma *shastras* get updated based on time and context while Vedas remain as source of eternal wisdom. Bible and Koran are like Dharma *Shastras* but do not have scriptural reference like Vedas for them. That is why, Hinduism is able to embrace plurality and diversity, yet preserving the unity of the underlying vision it does not become 'person-dependent'.

C. Variations in Hindu Beliefs

| Basics | Comments |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are six <i>darshanas</i> or schools of thought that believe in the authority of Vedas. • They are called <i>Astikas</i>, as separate from <i>Nastikas</i> that do not believe in the authority of the Vedas • The two India origin religions, Buddhism and Jainism are <i>Nastikas</i>. • The six <i>darshanas</i> are: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) <i>Purva Mimamsa</i> 2) <i>Uttara Mimamsa</i> (Upanishads) 3) <i>Sankhya</i> 4) <i>Yoga</i> 5) <i>Nyaya</i> (primarily relying on logic) 6) <i>Vaisheshika</i> (scientific view, a precursor to the modern science) | <p>Please note that the designation <i>Astikas</i> and <i>Nastikas</i> are <u>not</u> in reference to belief in God, but in the Vedas.</p> <p>The 6 schools of thought agree on the goal of all human beings, which is attainment of total freedom from problems, total joy and immortality. However they differ on the methods of such attainment.</p> <p>All except Sankhya admit the presence of God</p> <p>Broadly speaking out of the 6, there are 3 pairs of philosophical cousins: 1) <i>Purva</i> and <i>Uttara mimamsa</i> 2) <i>Sankhya</i> (also called <i>nirishvara Sankhya</i>) and <i>Yoga</i> (<i>sesvara sankhya</i>) 3) <i>Nyaya</i> and <i>Vaisheshika</i></p> |

Commentary

Diversity and unity within diversity is not only accepted tenet of Hindu philosophy but practiced even now. That is why we have six major paths for worship and six *darshana shastras* and a statement in Rg Veda saying that paths are many but the truth is one. Hinduism allows for different people to follow different paths and different beliefs in addition to different practices but underlying values and principles converge to Moksha or freedom from bondage, even from birth or death.

D. Hindu View of the God

| Basics | Comments |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hindus do not view whether there is one God or many Gods, but that <u>there is only God</u>, <i>Ishvara</i> (meaning everything there is, is God) • So ईश्वर is the undifferentiated intelligence behind the creation as well as the material of the creation • From the standpoint of the intelligent cause, Hindus worship ईश्वर as a masculine force (पुरुष), and from the standpoint of manifest universe as a feminine force (प्रकृति) • This can also be seen as a person and his/her skill (शक्ति <i>Shakti</i>). The person may display the prowess, such as a skillful dancer, or not do so • <i>Ishvara</i> has 3 powers inherent in him: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the power to create, Brahma or Hiranyagarbha - the power to sustain a creation – Vishnu - the power to erase and start over – Shiva • This is similar to an individual, called <i>vyashthi</i>. A person can create, either by thought or deed, sustain the thought or creation, and replace it with another thought or creation (more on the Hindu view of the world) • There is no concept of Devil in Hinduism • God is pure, kind and just (See the Hindu view of individual Being for more related concepts) • God can be seen either from a relative standpoint, as the controller of the laws of the universe (<i>Saguna</i>) | <p>These are major distinctions between Hinduism and other spiritual/religious thoughts:</p> <p>As far we know, all religions believe God as the ultimate creator of the world, all powerful and all knowing. Hinduism agrees with that, but goes much beyond that. It says the whole cosmos is the body of God as well. There are two examples generally cited to illustrate this concept. One is the spider. The subtle part of the spider, i.e. its mind, is the designer/creator of the spider web – how big it should be, and where to place it etc. And then the grossified part of the spider, its spit, becomes the web itself. It does not have to depend upon or import it from someone else.</p> <p>The second example is a dream. Here the person's mind creates a dream and all the constituents of the dream, namely people, sun and mountains come from the consciousness of the person, and not imported from anyone.</p> <p>This thinking is a major influence in the attitude of the Hindus as they deal with the world. This will be discussed later.</p> <p>In a similar vein, the arguments of one God versus many gods stems from a non-understanding of this truth. Everything is God alone, so there is no question of multiple gods.</p> <p>Yes, we do worship different altars, as <i>Ganesha</i>, <i>Saraswati</i> etc. but all prayers are ultimately directed at <i>Ishvara</i>, <u>the</u> God.</p> |

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| <p><i>Brahma</i>), or the absolute standpoint (<i>Nirguna Brahma</i>), as the reality of oneself.</p> | <p>There is no competing or disruptive forces toward God.</p> <p>As controller of the world, God operates as the inner controller of all beings (<i>antaryami</i>) or the external controller of natural laws (<i>bahiryami</i>), such as light and darkness, seasons, gravitational forces etc.</p> |
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Commentary

The concept of benevolent God and how God includes the universe and the darkness in the world and hence called *Isvara*.

The etymology of the word *Ishvara* is: *Isha*, meaning overlordship plus the suffix *varach*, meaning nothing but. The rest of the creation has some powers, but limited. But *Ishvara* is unlimited power. This power, or Shakti is manifest in two ways:

One, as a *bahiryami*, or outside controller. All the outside factors, such as the sun, gravitational forces etc. follow the strict order of the cosmos.

Two, as *antaryami*, or the inner controller. Here the order is more like a magnet that does not control, but through its power to attract, pulls things to itself. Similarly, *Ishvara* regulates all through a common power, that of seeking Ananda, or joy. Everyone is automatically drawn by the power of *ananda*.

For Hindus, God, world and I are one and the same. That is the reason why we don't have too much about relativism and society in scriptures. You and I, I and the animals, trees, nature, you and God or Goddess are ultimately one and the same, even though *nama*, *rupa* and *gunas* differ. So we worship everything as one. So we are not polytheistic but monotheistic.

It is like Government can have federal, state and local differentiations. We might look at the president as the head while accepting that Governor and Mayor are also heads. Similarly we have one God and there are many other minor Gods all representing the same consciousness.

Our practices and behaviors can operate in the truth of abstract of absolute truth, but in a context of relativity; so we need to honor and respect each other, learn from each other.

E. Hindu View of the World

| Basics | Comments |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Since the entire cosmos is considered the body of <i>Ishvara</i>, in the vision of Hindus everything is sacred. All beings and objects of the creation – whether people, animals, plants or natural resources - are a manifestation of God, who has, as it were, animated all names and forms in the universe with his/her limitless presence and knowledge. • Hindus see unity in diversity. The entire world is the family of God. (वसुधैव कुटुम्बकम्) • In the view of Hindus the universe is never created or destroyed. Rather, it being the body of <i>Ishvara</i>, it always is. Its appearance or disappearance is manifestation and un-manifestation, like days followed by nights in a living being • The nature of the cosmos is in the form of a tops down creation rather than bottoms up. The elements of the manifestation are already there in the universe (<i>Samashti</i>). The individual (<i>Vyashti</i>) invokes that based on eligibility and desire. • In the Hindu view, there are different places for human experience (<i>lokas</i>)- seven heavens and seven hells, beside the earthy existence which is more or less equally balanced between the two • In each cycle of birth and death, based on previous actions, the individual finds himself/herself in one of the <i>lokas</i> • In the Hindu view, heaven and hell are there but they are not permanent. The reason is that | <p>It is common to see Hindus doing puja in their homes; also to places and instruments; the carpenter does puja to the saw in hand; the rickshaw puller or the taxi driver does puja to the rickshaw or the car. This is a common sight among Hindus in India.</p> <p>Just like in the body of an individual, the hands are different than the eyes, yet if dust particle get into the eyes, the hands instinctively reach out to help the eyes. In the same view, even though there are differences between different communities, but life's issues being common, the Hindus tend to extend help instinctively to others.</p> <p>In the Hindu view, there cannot be an absolute creation. Something cannot come out of nothing. It must be there already, just not visible yet.</p> <p>Just like the cycles of night and days at the individual level, there is also a cosmic (Of <i>Brahmaji</i>) night and day, roughly corresponding to 4.2 billion years long for the cosmic days and the same duration for the cosmic dissolution (<i>pralaya</i>).</p> <p>This is like the ocean where the power to create a wave is already there. It is unlike a house which is bottoms up, where individual bricks put together make the whole house</p> <p>As an example, the unique love of a mother towards a child is universal, invoked as soon as a woman becomes a mother; it is not individually created by a new mother. The universal motherly love</p> |

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| <p>being the fruits of action (<i>karma phala</i>), they wear out over time, like any other effects of action.</p> | <p>flows from the total to each new mother naturally</p> <p>So also for various qualities. The new bird begins to flap its wings without being taught; the spider weaves its web without being prompted.</p> <p>The Hindu belief is that what is created is necessarily limited, both in time and space. It may for a long time, but eventually it wears out.</p> |
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Commentary

What makes Hinduism unique is tolerance (*sahanam*) and willingness to let different points of view to coexist — think about different traditions and different world views (*advaita* vs. *dvaita*, Siva vs. Vishnu, Shakti vs. Siva to list a few) that are accepted in Hinduism. While this creates confusion for the uninitiated, they require thinking on the part of students to see how we accept differences and do not worry about creating only one dominant view. It is that tolerance of differences that helps us to navigate towards one truth and release from bondage. In other words, it is the dielectric or bridging polarities and paradoxes that distinguishes and differentiates Hinduism from all other religions.

F. Hindu View of the Individual

| Basics | Comments |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NATURE OF THE INDIVIDUAL • Hindus believe every individual has 1) has a visible body – hardware, an invisible or subtle body – software, and 3) causal body, or ignorance of the fact that one is already limitless but does not know it. • The subtle body can be considered the soul of the individual. • Even after the fall of the body, the soul remains intact • So Hindus believe in reincarnation • The characteristics of the person, the ‘subtle body’, in the form of mental tendencies carry on to the next birth. Through the continuity of the soul ensures the appropriateness of the subtle results • The soul of the individual is also not everlasting. Once it realizes the oneness with God, it loses its sense of limited individuality. • THE LAW OF KARMA • The cosmic laws of God are infallible. Every action has an appropriate result • Results are in 2 parts: visible/immediate, दृष्टफल or invisible/subtle, अदृष्टफल • The subtle results are stored for fructification over time • The अदृष्टफल can either be good, पुण्यं, or bad, पापं • The fructification of stored subtle results of past actions may need | <p>Say a person walking on a busy street is suddenly forcibly pushed, falls down and is hurt. It turns out a passer- by saw him unaware of a speeding bus and saved his life.</p> <p>The visible result is an injury. The invisible result is the future blessings of saving a life.</p> <p>Action done for the limited self is like a sharp instrument, such as a knife in the hands of a toddler – it is likely to harm</p> <p>Whereas, actions done in the spirit of the harmony of the creation is like the knife as a useful instrument in the hands of an adult</p> |

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| <p>appropriate time, but will always be given</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The stored subtle results may be partially counteracted by remedial actions • The results are in the form of pleasures and pain • Action (कर्म) done for limited experience, such as pleasure and wealth, leads to limited results • The same action done keeping in mind the larger cosmic reality leads to purification of the mind, which leads to total freedom <p>• HINDUS VIEW OF THE GOAL OF LIFE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are two ways of achieving liberation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1) क्रम मुक्ति, step by step liberation . This is achievement of the not yet achieved. Here doing right actions is primary and knowledge on how to perform the right actions is secondary. This may result in going to heavens, and getting closer to God. 2) सद्यो मुक्ति, liberation here itself, while living. This is achievement of the already achieved, but not yet realized. Here knowledge is primary and doing action is secondary • In both cases, mental purity, right attitudes, developing love for others, | |
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Commentary

Our *Sankalpa* is very important and critical tool given for us to co-create our own future. I would add more about *Sankalpa* in addition to reincarnation, karma, dharma and liberation.

While we talk about different personalities and identities of individual in psychology and social sciences, Hinduism talks about different layers of an individual. The layering concept is very important because until we peel the outer layer, we might not discover the inner layer. One way to think about them is our inner most self is at the core of our identity and is the inner nature or DNA. It is *ananda* or happiness. It is causal meaning that it drives our actions and behaviors. Next layer is subtle and it contains our ability to discern, think and feel. It also is deeply connected with our *prana* or life energy. Then our physical body the outer most layer is what executes the action in the outer world.

Normally, we pay attention to our skin color, height, gender and body characteristics first. Next, we connect to their vitality, energy and then maybe their empathy, thoughtfulness and intelligence. Only few times we get impacted by their true nature. To be a good manager, teacher or a friend, we need to pay more attention to our deeper layers because they dictate our actions and our karma. When we understand each other and pay attention to each other, we might discover that some people are values driven and principles driven. They follow dharma more than money and power. In other words, they have more inner wealth no matter what their outer wealth is.

So according to Hindu perspective, each individual is manifestation of ultimate consciousness and it is up to that person to unfold and delayer himself or herself to reach moksha or liberation. It is our birth right.

G. Relationship between God, the World and the Individual

| Basics | Comments |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HINDU VIEW OF EVIL AND DEVIL • Hindus do not believe in evil • Hindus do not believe in a devil • Hindus view God as the ultimate mother and father, with total love for the individual, even when the individual does not seek God, and anxious for the individual to evolve to a state of total freedom and joy. • God is just and dispenses rewards and punishment for the deeds of each individual, ultimately for the good of the individual. • For Hindus, God is manifest as the order of the universe, which includes disorder. What one considers as disorder is usually an expression of another order • The essence of all beings is the same as the essence of God, purity and goodness. • Wrong actions may be done due to the ignorance of the pure self, and for which the individual may have to pay a temporary price, but the essential purity is not disturbed • The fructification of stored subtle results of past actions may need appropriate time, but will always be given • The stored subtle results may be partially counteracted by remedial actions • The results are in the form of pleasures and pain • Forgiveness, patience, lack of jealousy etc. are the means to the end. | <p>All human beings have a store of results of good and bad deeds in the past (पुण्यं and पापं)</p> <p>Thus, there may be an evil <u>deed</u>, but the person is not evil</p> <p>Just as a doctor sometime has to treat a disease with bitter medicine, even resort to surgery and hospitalization if needed, similarly, Hindus believe that the joys and sorrows that an individual encounters is as a result of actions, and the appropriate</p> |

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| | treatment has to be given to correct the mistakes |
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Commentary

As students of Vedanta, this holistic and integral perspective is very important. When you are *advaitin* or *dvaitin*, whether you worship, Shakti, Surya or Shiva or Vishnu — it is about paying attention to the relationship between you, others and the divine. In that relationship, which is not just dynamic but sacred, we discover all our answers and the way to hold that relationship is through humility, surrender and openness. Through deep listening and deep curiosity you work with others. In terms of feeling, deep empathy and compassion are most meaningful emotions that connect others to you and together you can discover the divine within and without. That is the journey of bhakti or love. It is the path of service that you have chosen today.