

HINDUISM

Inclusivity and relationship to other faiths

What am I going to talk about?

Sandy said:

“we are talking about inclusivity in relation to a variety of groups, including those of different faiths. A historical perspective, especially related to Hinduism's development and conflicts with other religions, as well as a brief discussion of polytheistic versus monotheistic religions and some of the important beliefs in Hinduism might be nice, but you are free to create this presentation as you like”

Should a Hindu talk about Hinduism?



I do respect very much the elephant, but would you give him the chair of Zoology?

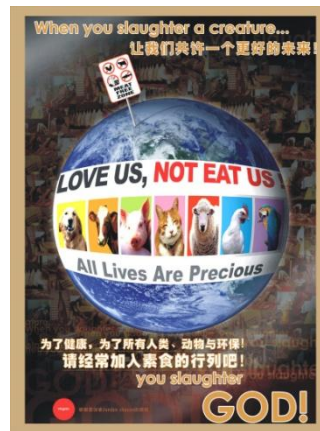
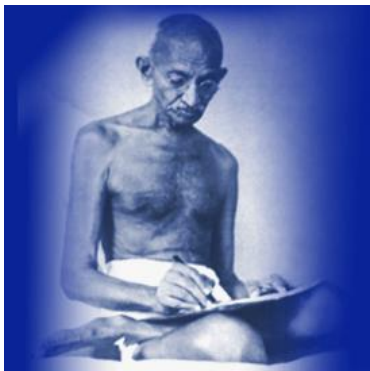
Roman Jakobson, on Vladimir Nabokov being considered for a professorship in Russian at Harvard

Hinduism is a religious *tradition*

- The common name given to a variety of beliefs that grew on the Indian subcontinent
 - ▣ No single creed, articles of faith or prophets
 - ▣ But there is a common framework of faith
- Could define it on the basis of its adherents
 - ▣ Once you carve out all the exceptions (Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs, Zoroastrians, Muslims, Christians, etc.), what's left are the Hindus
 - What they believe in is Hinduism
 - ▣ Around 80% of Indians are Hindus
- Significant Hindu population in Bali
 - ▣ Historically, also in Cambodia (Angor Wat)

Framework of Hindu belief: Ahimsa

- Ahimsa: “Absence of the desire to injure or kill”
 - ▣ Applies to relationship between humans and, later, between humans and animals
 - ▣ Of course, Hindu sages dreamed of ahimsa because ancient India was a very violent, war-ridden society



Ahimsa has a strong hold on the Hindu imagination and has been successfully used for revolutions of all kinds such as by Gandhi and Mahavira (founder of Jainism) and is the reason many Hindus are vegetarian.

Framework of Hindu belief: Dharma

- Dharma: “One’s righteous duty”
 - Support of temples, temple rituals
 - Adherence to social taboos (such as caste rules)
- ▣ The meaning of this has always been subject to debate
 - Dharma has been used by the powerful to keep power
- ▣ Hinduism evolves, driven by changes in the concept of dharma



At one point, dharma included a prohibition on crossing the sea.

1. Vivekananda was criticized for his visit to Chicago (1890s)
2. My ancestors at a “kittangi” in SE Asia (1930s) could not have religious weddings
3. Hindu temple in Pittsburg, PA

Framework of Hindu belief: afterlife

- Three related concepts:
 - ▣ Samsara: life is a cycle (born, live, die, reborn)
 - ▣ Karma: action and reaction (reap what you sow)
 - ▣ Moksha: release from cycle of rebirth (“salvation”)
- The Gita suggests three ways to attain Moksha:
 - ▣ Karma yoga (“Path of Action” i.e. living ethical life)
 - ▣ Bhakhti yoga (“Path of Devotion to God”)
 - ▣ Gnana yoga (“Path of Knowledge”, here referring to knowing what is eternal and what is temporary)

Framework of Hindu belief: diversity

- Belief in God (Bhakti) is only one of the paths
 - ▣ Some Hindus are atheists
 - ▣ No concept of heresy, apostasy or blasphemy
 - ▣ Devotion to any God is bhakti

The Velankanni shrine in S. India, a mid-16th century Catholic church.

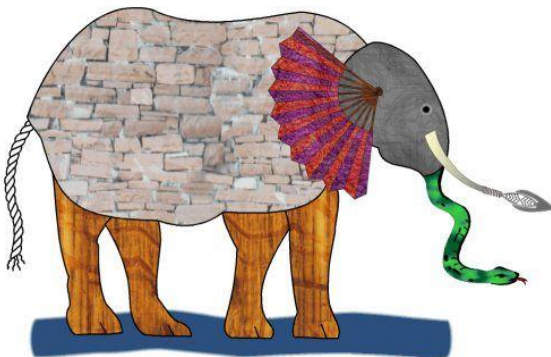


It was built by Portuguese sailors and honors a vision of a local shepherd boy of the Virgin Mary.

Most of the people in this picture are Hindus.

Framework of Hindu belief: God

- Hinduism is polytheistic with a rich pantheon
 - ▣ The modern philosophy is that the pantheon is how an inadequate human mind visualizes God, not that there are all those gods
 - ▣ The important thing is the effect of devotion on the believer, not God's response to bhakti



*O how they cling and wrangle, some who claim
For preacher and monk the honored name!
For, quarreling, each to his view they cling.
Such folk see only one side of a thing.*

Parable of Blind Men and an Elephant Udana 68-69

Roots of Hinduism

- Hinduism came about as the Indus Valley civilization died out and was replaced by the Vedic one
 - ▣ The two sets of ideas merged to give rise to Hinduism

2200 BC	Indus valley cities	Seals possibly depicting early versions of Shiva, fertility goddesses, ritual baths
1600 BC	Rig Veda composed and transmitted orally, even though writing was used for other things	Horses (can't thrive in India) figure prominently; so, composers were probably invaders, bringing a Greek-like pantheon centered around Indra

- Hinduism centered around Shiva and Vishnu by 800 BC
 - ▣ Most Hindus today honor both these “deities”

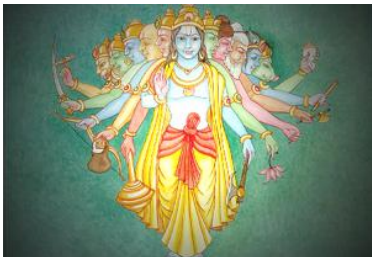
The Nataraja temple in Chidambaram, one of the 5 most important Shiva temples, includes a shrine to Vishnu.

A Chola king had the Vishnu idol installed within the temple to force the Vishnu-worshippers and Shiva-worshippers to intermingle.



Evolution of Hindu Belief

- Vedic (1600 BC)
 - ▣ Gods (Indra and his devas) and Demons (Asuras) are always in conflict
 - ▣ Men conduct sacrifices to feed the gods; in return, the gods protect men
 - ▣ Sacrifices started out being of horses, but transformed to be just of ghee (beginnings of ahimsa)
- Post-Vedic (800 BC)
 - ▣ Meditation supplanted sacrifice
 - ▣ Through meditation, one could attain spiritual power
 - ▣ The starting of a theory of Dharma based on ethical living
 - ▣ Pantheon started to center around Shiva (destroyer) and Vishnu (preserver)
 - Brahma (creator) is a third member of the Hindu trinity, but he's not prominent



Vishnu in a form that shows all of his incarnations; Dancing Shiva; At least one temple in Kerala lists the Buddha as one of the avatars of Vishnu, giving a possible insight into how the avatar system came into being.

Evolution of Hindu Belief (contd.)

- Bhakti (400 AD)
 - ▣ Devotion to specific avatars of Vishnu (Rama, Krishna) instead of abstract ideals of meditation
 - ▣ Idol worship became common
- Arya Samaj, Brahmo Samaj (1875 AD)
 - ▣ Reform movements that arose to combat social practices
 - Such as treatment of widows, caste discrimination, etc.
 - ▣ Also pushed the monotheistic interpretation of Hinduism's many gods
 - ▣ Idols continue to be in temples, but now justified as a way to concentrate the mind of the believer

Hinduism adapted to new beliefs

- Sankara (600 BC) responded to Mahavira (Jainism) and Buddha
 - Buddha criticized the extreme ways of ascetics, and argued for moderation
 - Sankara updated Hinduism with the idea that the soul is eternal and that one's body was immaterial ("Advaita")
 - Harkened to the yoga of knowledge but in reality, Hindu beliefs changed to accommodate the critics
 - Mahavira criticized the violence in sacrifices
 - Prompting Hinduism to honor vegetarianism (in practice, only about 30% of Hindus are vegetarian, but it remains an ideal to many of the others)
 - Still, the conflict between Hindus, Jains and Buddhists was often bloody
- In response to Islam (~600 AD), the Bhakti movement became very popular
 - Most classical music in India comes from this period
 - Much more marketable than Sankara's abstract philosophy!
- In response to Christianity, reform movements (such as Arya Samaj, 1875)
 - Opposed injustices in social structure of Hinduism
 - Tried to get rid of idols completely but failed
 - Instead, the modern view took hold: that idols are not gods but are needed to concentrate the mind of the believer

Coexistence with other faiths

- Hindus are famously tolerant of tiny minorities
 - ▣ Christianity in India dates to the time of the apostles i.e. pre-New Testament
 - ▣ Small Jewish communities remained in India until very recently
 - ▣ Zoroastrians (“Parsis”) are spectacularly successful
 - ▣ Jews and Parsis came to India because they were being persecuted elsewhere
- Some reform movements grew into separate religions
 - ▣ Jains remain a well-respected minority
 - ▣ Sikhism came as a reaction to the casteism and weakness of Hindus
 - Has to constantly assert its independence (that it is really a different faith!)



St. Thomas Mount, Chennai where the apostle Thomas is believed to be buried

The main thoroughfare in Madras was called Mount Road until its name was changed to Anna Salai. The city's name is now Chennai.

Conflict with proselytizing faiths

- Buddhism and Hinduism had centuries of conflict
 - Ashoka, founder of one of the first Indian empires, converted to Buddhism, and started to spread the faith
 - Now, pretty much wiped out in India, coopted by Hinduism
- Islam and Christianity associated with invaders
 - Islam brought by the Turks, Christianity by the British
 - Claimed to be the one true faith, so intolerant of natives
 - Religion of the powerful vs. the religion of the ruled
 - Not a good dynamic for tolerance
- Converts tended to be either people who wanted to retain their power, or they tended to be Hindus who were persecuted under the earlier (Hindu) rule

Persecuted Hindus?

- When the Vedic people invaded, they cleared forests and displaced indigenous peoples (“tribes” in Indian parlance)
 - The Vedic people considered them outside the caste system (“untouchable”)
 - Did work that was considered ritually polluting (cleaning bathrooms, carrying corpses)
 - Downtrodden people, whose accents and manners limited their social mobility
 - These people have been the prime conversion target of Christian missionaries
- Hinduism makes it easy for social elites to use Dharma for propaganda and to entrench themselves
 - The Ramayana does propaganda
 - Written around the time of the first kingdoms (200 AD)
 - Glorifies “Ram Rajya”, rule by a wise king
 - Stories grafted onto the Mahabharata entrench the idea of knowing your place
 - What happens if you insult a Brahmin (Vashista destroys a whole army with a chant)
 - Discourage learning skills beyond one’s caste (Drona demands Ekalavya’s thumb)
 - The caste system was one big “legacy admission”
 - Idiot sons of priests and warriors could remain well-to-do (contrast with Confucianism)

Social Mobility

- Still, European observers overestimated effect of caste
 - ▣ Thinking it similar to their class system, only more rigid
 - ▣ Social mobility in ancient India was tied to one's kin: your caste wasn't fixed
 - A whole clan could move and establish somewhere else in a different social status
 - Treat a group too badly, and they could rebel and your town could lose its potters, or whatever
- My clan, for instance, started out as small-time salt merchants
 - ▣ Started trading overseas
 - Gained money but lost social status (crossed the sea!)
 - Had to find wives from a clan of fishermen (dropping even further in caste hierarchy)
 - ▣ With the money, built a series of temples and installed non-Brahmins as priests (!)
 - Thus, elevating another out-of-status group to the top of the pyramid
 - Leading to intense negotiations, reinstatement of social status
 - But the tradition started then, of not having a Brahmin preside at weddings, continues today
 - Bunch of temples in South India with non-Brahmin priests
- Now a days, a lot simpler: rural people simply escape into the anonymity of the city
 - ▣ Hindus' profession no longer determined by caste
 - ▣ I don't know the castes of many of my classmates in college (hard to tell, and I didn't ask)
 - In North India, people use subcaste as a last name; in the South they often don't

Caste in India today

- Choice of Hindus' spouses often limited by caste
 - ▣ Marriages tend to be arranged within closely knit communities, so few marriages outside clan (“subcaste”)
 - Indian newspapers occasionally carry stories about angry families killing brides who elope in order to marry someone outside caste
 - ▣ In this sense, casteism is rampant in modern India
- One's opportunities are limited by caste
 - ▣ But “only” in the sense that caste is a proxy for wealth and social status
 - ▣ Affirmative action exists in colleges, jobs for lower castes and tribes
 - As in the US, this is becoming controversial
 - Caste is starting to become a poor proxy for being disadvantaged
- The parallels to race in America can be striking
 - ▣ Except that you can't tell someone's caste by looking

આપ લગ્ન કરવાનું વિચારી રહ્યા છો ?
અત્યારેજ gujaratimatrimony.com પર રજીસ્ટર કરો.



Ad for a
singles
website,
Indian-style

Militant Hinduism

- “Beware a majority with a victimization complex”
 - Islam and Christianity came to India as invading faiths and converted millions of Hindus
 - The prospect of social mobility a huge inducement for tribals and other persecuted Hindu minorities
 - Entire clans convert, not just individuals
 - Reaction was a militant Hinduism that looks at any Islamic or Christian aid to the poor with suspicion



RSS, a militant Hindu organization, is commonly accused of having fascist tendencies

Their rallies often spark religious riots

Suggested reading:

- Wendy Doniger: “The Hindus: An Alternative History”
 - The influence of low-status groups and minorities on the development of Hinduism
- Hermann Kulke and Dietmar Rothermund: “A History of India”
- Ramesh Menon: “The Ramayana: A Modern Translation”
 - A translation of the Ramayana that retains the magic of the original
- S. Radhakrishnan: “The Bhagavadgita”
 - Translation of the Dharma explained by Krishna to Arjuna
 - Widely considered the most important text in Hinduism
 - Do the right thing, but do not expect to be rewarded for it
 - To fight injustice, it is necessary to take up arms, but do so in sorrow