

Hinduism

by Steven Cory

During the fourth century B.C. Aryans – the same people that developed Greek culture – conquered much of the present-day India. Their pantheon of gods, similar to that of the Greeks, combined the indigenous Indian traditions and practises that came to be known as Hinduism. ‘Orthodox’ Hindus can be either pious worshippers of a god or atheists, self-negating ascetics or men of the world.

Hinduism had never been a missionary religion until the twentieth century and is largely limited to India and groups of emigrant Indians.

Advaita Vedanta, which believes in complete identity between the inmost self and the impersonal, ultimate God, is the most common form of Hinduism in the West. **Jainism** probably represents the most ancient, pre-Aryan elements of Hinduism. The **Sikh** religion attempts to unite elements of Hinduism and Islam.

God

Many gods or incarnations of gods are worshipped by Hindus. Chief among them are **Shiva**, a fierce figure representing both the creative and destructive sides of divinity as well as the ideal of yogic meditation, and the **Vishnu**, who incarnates himself many times through history in order to bring the message of salvation to man. Vishnu’s incarnations (or **avatars**) include **Rama**, a benevolent king, and **Krishna**, an impetuous, violent, and erotic figure. The gods are sometimes amoral; their freedom from the usual restraints necessary to humans is often celebrated and they are often represented with sexual imagery. Many lesser cults worship a complex variety of gods, all of whom are usually seen as manifestations of the one supreme being, **Brahman**.

Brahman is seen by many Hindus as a personal, loving God who desires the salvation of all men. More usually, however, he is described as a supreme, impersonal being completely above all creation and uninvolved with life on earth.

Man And The Universe

The material universe is not the creation of a personal God but is rather a sort of unconscious emanation from the divine. As such it is;

- 1) beginningless, and some would say endless, and
- 2) unreal, an illusion because the only true reality is Brahman. Hindus believe that the universe ‘pulsates’, recurrently being destroyed and recreated over periods lasting 4 billion years. The world is seen as a huge series of repeated cycles, each cycle being nearly a copy of the last.

Man is compelled to play a part in this gigantic, illusory, and wearisome universe. Each human soul is also beginningless and has gone through a series of incarnations. Hinduism ‘solves’ that problem of the existence and evil in a fairly neat manner: all present suffering, it says, is exactly deserved, being the paying back of one’s **Karma**, the accumulation of deeds done in past lives; and all present evil will be exactly repaid in the form of suffering in future lives. As a result traditional Hinduism often has not

paid much attention to relieving the suffering of people, although social reform movements have arisen in the last century.

Life is seen as basically painful, full of distress that is only temporarily masked by earthly pleasures. But underlying the unreality and misery, the human soul is identical with supreme **Brahman**, who has no part of this sorry universe.

Salvation And The Afterlife

The final goal of salvation in Hinduism is escape from the endless round of birth, death and rebirth. That can mean an eternal resting place for the individual personality in the arms of a loving, personal God, but it usually means the dissolving of all personality into the unimaginable abyss of Brahman.

Four Yogas, or ways of reaching such salvation, are described;

- 1) **Jnana Yoga**, the way of knowledge, employs philosophy and the mind to comprehend the unreal nature of the universe;
- 2) **Bhakti Yoga**, the way of devotion or love, reaches salvation through ecstatic worship of a divine being.
- 3) **Karma Yoga**, the way of action, strives toward salvation by performing works without regard for personal gain; and
- 4) **Raja Yoga**, 'the royal road', makes use of meditative yoga techniques. Raja yoga is usually viewed as the highest way, but for the majority of people, who cannot become wandering monks, the other ways are considered valid.

Most Hindus consider that they have many incarnations ahead of them before they can find final salvation, although some sects believe that a gracious divinity will carry them along the way more quickly.

Morals

Because of the vast number of reincarnations of any given individual, Hinduism recognises that most people's lack of spiritual development means they must lead normal lives. However, it is thought that as a person matures he can grow closer to the ideal of full renunciation of the personality. Thus, pursuit of wealth and love of the opposite sex are considered proper to certain stages of life, but when people grow old they often leave behind their worldly possessions to pursue the life of a wandering monk.

Yet no matter what stage of life one is in, 'renouncing the fruits of your labours' is the supreme law of morality. Hindus seek to remain conscious of the illusory nature of this world and so progressively deny themselves, at least in thought, all forms of material, emotional, and even spiritual rewards and property.

For centuries the notions of reincarnation and karma have been used to support the cruelties of the Indian **Caste System**, which relegates the majority of people to poverty and subservience. Probably as a result of Western influence the caste system has been substantially dismantled, although the idea that all human suffering is deserved is still responsible for a great deal of injustice.

Worship

Hindus have a magical and legalistic notion that one can acquire spiritual 'points' through contact with all manner of holy objects and persons; that is by and large the Hindu notion of grace. At least among the uneducated an image of a family god is kept in the house, and villages generally have their local icon as well. Animals such as cows, monkeys, and snakes are revered. Certain rivers – the Ganges in particular – are thought holy, and bathing in them is thought to improve one's karma.

Even among more intellectual Hindus certain portions of scriptures are memorized and chanted, sacred stories are acted out in plays and songs, and gods are prayed to in an ecstatic manner. Holy men are highly revered, and in serving them Hindus hope that some of their holiness will rub off and aid them to salvation.