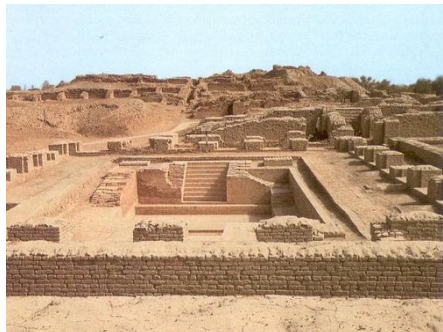


Hinduism's diversity owes greatly to its development over thousands of years, reflecting the various philosophies, practices, and adaptations that shaped or became part of the religion. Hinduism doesn't have a single founder nor a single point in history that can be pinpointed as its start. The ideas and practices that are a part of it emerged in the ancient Indian subcontinent (which includes current day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka), spreading over time to places such as Southeast Asia, and much later, the Caribbean, Africa, and the Western world. Although the origins of Hinduism are not clear, its early development has been firmly tied to the rise of ancient Indian civilization.



### Initial formation (~4000 BCE - ~800 BCE)

The origins of ancient Indian and Hindu civilization are not entirely known, but the Harappan era and the Vedic period profoundly shaped what became known as Hinduism. Much of what was known about ancient India in the 19th century was based on the theoretical proposition that all peoples speaking the same language must belong to a single race. Hence, the study of Sanskrit, championed by linguist Max Muller is central to this assumption. Then, in 1924, British archaeologists found evidence of great ancient cities throughout the Indus Valley (now in Pakistan).



*A ritual bath in Harappa.*

These cities, Mohenjo Daro and Harappa, revealed a community of about 30,000 people that enjoyed a municipal sewer system complete with drains and manhole covers, indoor plumbing, a standardized system of trade, and many other signs of an advanced society. The civilization, as more archaeological evidence was discovered, would grow from being known as the Harappan civilization to the Indus Valley and Indus-Saraswati civilization. Artifacts such as seals depicting swastikas and other religious imagery, and a ritual bathing site are consistent with the more thoroughly documented Hindu culture which existed a few centuries later. The origin and decline of these cities and of the

Indus Valley civilization is unknown. Early linguists attributed the decline to invading bands of Aryans, though modern scholars usually identify a major drought to the Saraswati River as the primary cause of decline. Both the Vedic and Harappan civilizations are contemporary and the nucleus of these civilizations is located in the same geographical region formed by the Indus and its tributaries.

The origins of Vedic civilization are still unknown and contested. Even though the terms Aryan and Dravidian are loosely constructed epithets denoting groups of people and never clearly indicated any race, 19th century readings of Muller, and many scholars after him, promoted the idea known as Aryan Invasion Theory. This theory was premised upon the claim that a nomadic race supplanted a native population and, through a combination of force, co-option, and intermingling, created what became Indian civilization and Hinduism. Much of Aryan Invasion Theory in the 19th century was based upon two assumptions: 1) that the earth, according to Biblical understandings of the time, was 4,000 years old, and 2) Sanskrit's similarity to modern European languages meant that the "Aryans" were a race from Europe and Central Asia. By the late 20th century, Aryan Invasion Theory was debunked by historians.

A more contemporary theory is based upon the idea that waves of migrating central Asian peoples settled in the Indus Valley starting around 1800 BCE, some time after the cities of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa were established. These people were later called Aryans, a group label derived from the Sanskrit word *Arya* (noble). Much of this theory - which is called Aryan Migration Theory or Indo-European Migration Theory - relied upon linguistic ties between Sanskrit and the modern Proto Indo-European languages, as well as mention of certain practices - such as the use of iron and horses - in the Vedas. It is thought that the confluence of local philosophies and those of the newcomers led to the emergence of Hinduism. Scholars who support this theory also now believe that the migrations likely took place from Central Asia, and cite similarities between ancient Persian religions like Zoroastrianism and Vedic Hinduism.

A competing theory states that the Aryans were indigenous to the Indian Subcontinent, and built the Indus Valley cities. Supporters of this idea cite archaeological evidence from the Harappan civilization, mitochondrial DNA analysis, textual evidence from Vedic writings, and the fact that beyond the Vedas, there is little archaeological evidence of a migration. Some anthropologists have observed that indigenous Aryans could easily have yielded the subcontinental population dynamics which we observe in ancient Indian history.

After centuries of research, the origin of Vedic civilization is still largely a mystery. Evidence exists to support a number of theories about the origin of Vedic civilization, and the people now known as Aryans. Current models will have to continue to evolve as new evidence is unearthed, and the sciences of archeology and genetics continue to improve.

Whatever their origins, the beliefs and practices of the inhabitants of the ancient Indus region formed the basis of Hinduism. These beliefs included: an emphasis on sacrificial rituals (*yajna*), and a reverence for deities personifying virtues, concepts, and natural forces. Some of those deities include Indra, God of Thunder; Varuna, God of the Water; Surya, the Sun God, and Agni, the God of Fire. Early concepts like Dharma and Brahman underwent development in this period, and cremation became common. All of these ideas are contained in the four Vedas, the primary scriptures which Hindus believe were realized through the meditations of ancient sages (they were originally preserved orally) during this period. Perhaps the most influential philosophical idea from this period, , that of religious pluralism and

religious freedom, was encapsulated in the Rig Veda verse: *Ekam Sat, Viprah Bahudha Vadanti* (The Truth is One; The Wise Call It Many Names).

### **Upanishadic period (~800 BCE - ~200 BCE)**

The Upanishads themselves comprise a diverse set of texts with different texts forwarding monist, dualist, and non-theist perspectives on God. The Upanishadic emphasis on dialogue, debate, and introspection, over ritualism and dogmatism would strongly influence later currents of Hinduism. The content of these works is derived from commentaries on the Vedas by priests and sages, and from the works of wilderness dwelling ascetics called Shramanas. These ascetics were responding in part to what they saw as the overly ritualistic aspects of Vedic Hindu tradition. The result of all this was that Upanishadic Hinduism was a more mystical, abstract, and fully elaborated belief system than that presented in earlier texts. In this period Hindus more clearly articulated the concept of Brahman (universal soul) and Atman (individual soul).

The Shramana movement also produced a number of distinct religions, including Jainism and Buddhism which survive into the present. Some ideas from these traditions fused with those of Hinduism and vice versa. Hindu philosophers also responded to them by more clearly formulating their contrasting beliefs. Debates and dialogues between Jains, Buddhists, and Hindus were common in the philosophical corpus of all three religions. Hindus also further elaborated on Vedic concepts like Dharma, Karma, Reincarnation, Moksha, Samsara, and Ahimsa, as did Jain and Buddhist thinkers.

In addition to strictly philosophical texts, the first treatises regarding law and morality called Dharmashastras were also written during this period. One of the better known of these is the Laws of Manu, which addressed subjects ranging from business ethics, interactions between caste groups, and the obligations of rulers to their people. A treatise on politics and economics called the Arthashastra was also composed during this period. In this text, Kautilya tried to describe how to realistically run a prospering kingdom, while also adhering to the proper duties of a king. However, it should be noted that while Dharmashastra and Arthashastra texts may have been informed by Hindu practices of the time, and may have even influenced Hinduism, they are not considered scripturally authoritative in the sense that the Upanishads or Vedas are considered.

### **Epic/Puranic period (~200 BCE - ~800 CE)**

Over hundreds of years within this period, the epic poems called the Ramayana and Mahabharata (which includes the Bhagavad Gita) were composed. These texts focused largely on dharma, or righteous conduct, often in morally uncertain circumstances. Devotionalism, or *bhakti*, starts in the Puranas. The Puranas contain complex stories and introduce new deities such as Ganesha, the Remover of Obstacles, Skanda, the God of War,



A painting depicting a scene from the Ramayana. Copyright 2017, Hindu American Foundation

various Shakti deities, Krishna, and other avatars of Vishnu, etc. Towards the end of this period, the philosophical school of Advaita Vedanta (non-dualistic Vedanta) emerged in the south of India.

By this point in time, the diverse array of philosophical insights which had emerged in prior ages began to coalesce into various schools of thought. Six of these schools of thought (darshanas) are the most well known. They are Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Sankhya, Yoga, Mimamsa, and Vedanta. Each has its own a unique perspective on cosmology, the nature of God, the universe, and the soul. In addition to purely theological questions, these darshanas addressed issues spanning the breadth of secular philosophy. Mimamsa explored ethics and philosophy of language. Nyaya and Vaisheshika explored logic in the conceptual and physical worlds respectively. Samkhya explored the relationship between spirit and matter, which influenced the meditative practices pioneered by the Yoga school. Of all the Darshanas, Vedanta, or the elaboration of Upanishadic philosophy has perhaps been the most influential on modern Hinduism.



*Gold coins from Chandragupta II*

During this period, Hinduism flourished under patronage of the Gupta Empire, and also spread from south India to Southeast Asia along maritime trade routes. As scriptural Hinduism became more diverse and local, distinct sects evolved around specific deities, most significantly Shiva, Vishnu, and Shakti. Different sects emphasized different Puranas and tantras (texts on ritual and meditation). This diversified form of Hinduism was the form exported to southeast Asia. For instance, the Srivijaya and Medang

empires in modern day Indonesia patronized Hindu temples. The early Khmer empires, located in modern day Thailand, Cambodia and Laos, were Hindu as well. It was also during the latter Gupta period when Hindu scriptural concepts of varnas likely became fused with a social classification known as jatis, laying the groundwork for what would evolve into a more ossified caste system that diverged from Hindu scriptures.

### **Medieval (~800 CE - ~1700 CE)**

The concept of Bhakti (intense, loving devotion to God) which initially arose in the Epic/Puranic period saw its fullest expression in the Medieval period. Though it is now a common Hindu practice, before this period religious literature was rarely written or composed in common vernacular languages.

The Bhakti movement proved particularly prolific, and focused mainly though by no means exclusively on Vishnu and Shiva. Many devotional songs and poems were composed by Bhakti saint poets. In the south these were spread by religious artists called Alvars and Nayanars. In the Bengal region, the Vaishnava (Vishnu worshipping) saint Chaitanya emerged to spread devotion to Krishna. Interaction and syncretism with Islam occurred, particularly with Sufism under patronage of Mughals like Akbar and Dara Shikoh. In central and northwest India, Bhakti ideas interacted with Sufi Islam and Sikhism, the latter of which emerged in the 16th century and evolved over two centuries through the succession of

10 Gurus. Syncretism and synthesis is noted in the poetry of Kabir, Guru Nanak, and several of the other Sikh gurus.

Women made major contributions to Bhakti art and philosophy all across India. For instance, in the north, the Rajput princess Mira Bai wrote bhajans (religious songs) to Krishna, which are still popular today. In the South, Andaldevi was a female saint who led the Bhakthi Movement. Her own poetic compositions, as well as hymns about her, continue to be sung and chanted every winter to this day. Akkamahadevi was another famous female saint who made major contributions to Bhakti literature. Towards the end of this period, and into the modern era, Bhakti poets from Maharashtra such as Soyarabai and Bahinabai would be very important in speaking out against caste oppression, priestly privilege, and the oppression of women.

Around this time temple architecture in Southern India reached an apex in complexity and artistic form. This is most evident in such sites as the temple complex at Hampi, built in the Vijayanagara Empire, though the preceding Chola dynasty also built a number of impressive temples. Temples became the geographical and cultural center of city metroplexes, serving as a hub for secular and spiritual learning, celebrations of festivals and milestone events in devotees' lives, and dedication of the the arts and aesthetic studies. Aside from being centers of cultural awakening, temples in this period also functioned as community centers that provided food and shelter to those of lower socio-economic status in the society. These temples also were responsible for irrigation projects and agricultural management which allowed for much larger populations to subsist on the Deccan plateau. As a result of South Indian temple networks, Hinduism underwent intense syncretism, blending traditions from north and south India, mirroring a similar phenomenon which was simultaneously occurring in Southeast Asia. In Southeast Asia as well, temple construction was at a high point during this period. Angkor Wat, one of the most famous Shiva temples in the world, was built in the 12th century by the Khmer Empire in modern day Cambodia.



In addition to popular religious movements, the medieval period also produced innovations in more intellectual forms of Hindu philosophy. Adi Shankara, one of the most influential Hindu philosophers in history, lived towards the start of this period (788 - 820 CE). He systematized the Advaita school of Hinduism which asserts that the individual soul (atman) and God (Brahman) are identical. Realization of this fact, and shattering the illusion of separateness is said to result in spiritual release. Though he grew up in the Kerala region of south India, he traveled widely throughout the entire Indian subcontinent engaging in debates with other theologians, and establishing monasteries.

Other philosophical schools also emerged during this period. Ramanuja (1017-1137 CE) was a Hindu philosopher. His school of Vishishtadvaita or qualified non-dualism profoundly influenced the Bhakti Movement. According to this school, atman or individual souls make up a dependent part of Brahman. Brahman, atman, and the universe together are the inseparable whole. Moreover, Brahman is a personal god, namely Vishnu, and devotional practice was emphasized.

Madhva (1238 – 1317 CE) would become another influential philosopher during this period of history with his Dvaita school of Vedanta. Madhva was a critic of Adi Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta and Ramanuja's Vishishtadvaita. Madhva's Dvaita school asserts that reality is plural – Brahman or God is the independent reality, and creation, including atman or individual souls, always dependent. All souls are separate and distinct from one another. Brahman in this school is also a personal god, namely Vishnu. Madhva also hailed from the south, but his influence was widespread.

New schools of Hindu philosophy began to emerge in this period as well, with critical approaches to exegesis. Navya Nyaya (New Logic) was one such school, which we might call "modern," in that it sought to apply the tools of Indian philosophy to previously unconsidered logical and philosophical problems. It emerged in modern day Varanasi and the Bengal region. The intention of these philosophers was to make a close analysis of logical and linguistic categories of thought as a way of ascertaining truth, and thereby attaining spiritual release. Philosophers of this school were known for subjecting scriptural claims to the tests of logic and personal experience.

### **Modern (~1700 CE - ~2000 CE)**

A variety of different Hindu reform and revival movements occurred in the early colonial period, partly as a consequence of contact with European liberalism and Christianity. Some of these thinkers, such as Ram Mohan Roy, were impressed by the teachings of Jesus and sought to find common ground between Hinduism and Christianity, particularly Unitarianism. The Brahmo Samaj which he founded was one of the major vehicles for reform in Hindu society in Bengal. Brahmo Samajis were instrumental in the abolition of Sati, and made early steps towards securing legal equality for women and "lower" castes. Though the original Samaj had fragmented into smaller organizations by 1900, its philosophy would go on to influence thinkers like Rabindranath Tagore and Aurobindo Ghose. Tagore in particular wrote countless poems, stories, songs, and philosophical works exploring Hindu themes which are still widely read and performed today all over the world.

On the other side of India, in Punjab, the Arya Samaj, founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati, represented a different model of reform. This was a revivalist sect that sought to return purely to Vedic Hindu practices, including the rejection of caste and worship of murtis. Both Brahmo and Arya Samaj are still small, but active religious communities. In Maharashtra, social reformers such as Tarabai Shinde and Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule built on the ideas of early modern and medieval proto-feminist Bhakti poets, and brought ideas of gender and caste equality into the public arena. They fought to advance female education and undermine caste hierarchies mainly by establishing schools for these underprivileged sectors of society.

Starting after the British abolition of chattel slavery in 1838, the British began importing large populations of indentured laborers from India to the West Indies. In places like Guyana, Suriname (a Dutch colony), Antigua, Trinidad, and other Caribbean British and Dutch colonies, Hinduism



*Dayananda Saraswati*

developed some unique features. Popular texts like the Ramayana and Bhagavad Gita were the main sources of scriptural authority, rather than the Upanishads or the Vedas. Caste restrictions were completely eliminated from Hindu communities, Sunday worship became a common tradition, and starting in the 1910s, the Arya Samaj sect gained an unusual degree of popularity.

Hinduism was also “discovered” at a mass level in the United States. Interest was piqued by Swami Vivekananda’s speaking tours, particularly his speech at the World Conference of Religions in Chicago in 1893. However, even before Vivekananda, western philosophy had already taken notice of Hinduism. American Transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau found inspiration in the philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita. In Europe, Schopenhauer, and to a lesser extent Nietzsche, were heavily influenced by the Vedas and Upanishads.

Many Indian independence leaders, most notably Mahatma Gandhi, drew from Hinduism in their peaceful struggle for freedom. Gandhi cited his daily readings of the Gita as inspiration. In addition, leaders such as Nelson Mandela took inspiration from Hindu teaching in their own social justice struggles.

### **Key Takeaways**

- Hinduism is notable for its multi-millennium long history of pluralism and peaceful interaction, both internally and with other religions.
- Hinduism is simultaneously incredibly ancient, and constantly in a state of evolution.
- Hinduism has always encompassed a wide range of beliefs and traditions, but all are unified by a respect for the Vedas, Upanishads, and Epic texts, and shared metaphysical concepts such as *samsara*, *karma*, *dharma*, and *moksha*.
- While Hinduism started in India and is deeply intertwined with Indian culture, it also has a long history in South and Southeast Asia, and a more recent history in Africa and the Americas. It is in this sense a world religion.