

Hinduism



Introductory profiles adapted from
On Common Ground: World
Religions in America

Pluralism Project, Harvard University
Religious Literacy Project, Harvard
Divinity School
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Kirk Siang, "Temple Dome Figurines,"
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Religion profiles are adapted from On Common Ground: World Religions in America, a resource of the Pluralism Project (www.pluralism.org/ocg).

The Pluralism Project at Harvard University
The Religious Literacy Project at Harvard Divinity School

Tian Yake, "Arulmigu Subramaniam Temple, Nilai, India (2009), Flickr Creative Commons, <http://bit.ly/1VXKPn3>

Introduction

What we have come to know as "Hinduism" is a rich mosaic of a broad range of religious ideas, practices, and communities native to South Asia that has evolved over more than three millennia interweaving threads from many cultures and worship of the divine in diverse forms. It is one of the oldest world religions. The ideas and practices that form Hinduism spread in parts of Southeast Asia in the first millennium. Since the nineteenth century, Hinduism has reached many parts of the globe with Indian migrants and new followers who embraced it in these lands.

Although it is difficult to characterize core beliefs or practices to which every Hindu adheres, most Hindu communities acknowledge explicitly or implicitly the authority of a vast scriptural corpus known collectively as the Veda. Most also share the concept that the divine manifests in a diversity of ways and believe in the eternity of the soul reborn in body after body, life after life, guided by *karma*, the moral repercussions of human action. Around these broadly shared views, a rich network of thought and practices has developed over millennia with enduring contributions made in each era by different communities.

The precise origins of Hindu thought and practice remain unknown and are much debated in scholarship. Many scholars associate their origins with the nomadic tribes arriving in India from central Asia. Some trace the beginnings of the Hindu tradition to the archaeological remains of the Harappan Civilization, whose cultural centers flourished along the Indus River in the second and third millennia BCE. These latter scholars propose that the large public baths, clay seals depicting yogis, and terracotta figurines of the Harappan centers suggest early gestures toward the gods, temples, and social structures that developed in later periods and form important components of Hinduism today.

The Emergence of Texts and Development of the Tradition

The Vedas

The causes behind the disappearance of the Harappan Civilization in the early second millennium BCE remain an enigma and Hinduism's link to that civilization remains a matter of debate. However, by the mid-second millennium BCE there emerges clear evidence of the Vedic texts and traditions that consisted of recitation of hymns, chanting of mantras, and ritual sacrifices with offerings made to a wide array of deities both for personal favor and for reinvigorating the order of the cosmos. In view of most Hindus, the Vedic texts are revealed or heard (*śruti*) and not composed by humans. The earliest and the most revered of them is the *Rig Veda* (ca 1500 BCE), a collection of hymns that were recited at ritual performances. Along with praises of deities, many of whom represent natural elements, a sense of wonder about the nature and source of creation permeates a number of *Rig Veda* hymns. The famous *Nasadiya* hymn (*Rig Veda* 10.129), for example, expresses wonder at how the creation emanated from the time before time when there was "neither existence, nor non-existence." "What stirred?" the poet asks, and then proceeds to suggest that it was perhaps desire or poetic imagination. But in the end he concludes that no one can claim to know the process of emergence of the entire cosmos, perhaps not even the One looking down from the highest heaven.



A Vedic fire sacrifice in London, England (2012). Jason Khoo, Flickr Creative Commons <http://bit.ly/1UR5mau>

The religious orientation of the early Vedic culture was toward orderly functioning of the cosmos and the well-being of life on earth. Sacrifices were considered not just religious acts, but also efficacious operations for desired results such as getting proper rains. For this reason, their meticulous transmission of its knowledge was seen as critical. In this predominantly oral culture, hundreds of texts were transmitted orally in a meticulous manner by teachers to their disciples. While many features of the early Vedic tradition are not found in contemporary Hinduism, a link to it can be found in a number of Hindu practices today, especially in life cycle rituals, which continue to be focused on making life within the world sanctified and auspicious.



A Hindu holy man in meditation, Wikimedia Commons, User: Wise Druid <http://bit.ly/1Y3U1Iz>

Later sections of the Vedas, known as the Upaniṣads, introduced new concepts that have proven critical to the development of Hindu thought and practice since that time. The most important contribution of the Upaniṣads is a striking vision of human personhood as an eternal and immutable soul (*ātman* or *jīva*), which in its essence is identical with the Ultimate permeating all existence, known as Brahman. In Chandogya Upaniṣad for example, a sage explains that just as salt permeates every drop in a bowl of salty water, even though we do not see it, Brahman permeates all existence and every soul as its essential reality. *Ātman* is trapped in an endless cycle of rebirths guided by ignorance and the ethical repercussions of action (*karma*) in spite of its essential unity with Brahman. From this perspective, the goal of

human life becomes *mokṣa* or liberation of the soul from entrapment in a succession of bodies through disciplinary practices of body and mind such as yoga and deep mediation. Such disciplinary practices lead the practitioner to an experiential knowledge (*jñāna*) of the essential unity of *ātman* and Brahman. Hindu holy men and many lay practitioners incorporate yogic practices in their daily lives. The concept of Brahman as the foundation of the unity of all existence with its immense multiplicity of forms is closely linked to the idea of “many and One,” a well-known feature of the Hindu tradition through which worship of diverse manifestations of the divine is explained.

Post Vedic Traditions and the Caste System

In the post-Vedic era, thinkers and commentators outlined an ideal life for the Vedic ritual practitioner based on his life stage and social group. Based on the concept of *karma*, the society was classified in four broad hereditary social groups called *varṇas*: priests (*brāhmaṇs*), warriors (*kṣatriyas*), merchants (*vaiśyas*) and servants (*śūdras*). These were organized in a hierarchical order. It was propounded that a person is born in a specific group because of their actions in past life. Each group was associated with a distinct occupation and moral codes (*dharma*). Codes of proper behavior were also laid in accordance with stage of life (*āśrama*). A Vedic follower's life was divided in four stages - student, householder, forest-dweller, and full renouncer leading an ascetic life. This hierarchical classification of society became the basis of the complex Hindu caste system comprised of literally hundreds of castes. In this hereditary system, occupations were organized on a hierarchical scale based on the criterion of ritual purity. Priests or *brāhmaṇs* who studied sacred texts and performed rituals for others were given the highest place in the hierarchy. Officially their status was not associated with political or material power and this was often the case. However in many instances, religious status and political/economic power were mutually reinforcing. On the other hand, those associated with occupations that were considered polluting were marginalized in lower social-economic rankings. Some occupations were viewed as so polluted that those representing them became “untouchable” (now termed “Dalit”) for higher castes. Indeed, the practice of untouchability put many groups to a great disadvantage socially and economically for centuries. While the system remained unbending in

stratification at the highest and the lowest ranks (*brāhmaṇs* and Dalits), there was some flexibility in terms of upward movement for the middle castes. The worst impact of the caste system has been on the Dalits. A number of modern reform movements have sought to end the practice of untouchability.

The Epics and the Puranas

In the early centuries of the Common Era, new Hindu voices and new religious visions began to emerge. These were inspired by the growing popularity of epics such as the *Mahābhārata* (the story of a cataclysmic war between two sets of cousins) and the *Rāmāyaṇa* (the story of a great prince who battled a demon to rescue his abducted wife) as well as a new genre of texts called the *Purāṇas*, which contain elaborate mythology of deities. The deities who emerged as the most popular during this time were Viṣṇu, Śiva, and the great goddess, each of whom have multiple manifestations. In the epics and the *Purāṇas* the deities began to take on new roles and intervene more directly in the lives of human actors. The epics also offer models for dealing with complex moral dilemmas. Rāma, the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa* for example, is an incarnation of the great divine being Viṣṇu. Both as an ideal son and an ideal king he makes choices that are for larger good in moments of moral dilemma and establishes a kingdom based on righteousness. Krishna, another incarnation of Viṣṇu, advises the warrior hero Arjuna at a critical point in the *Mahābhārata* when he wishes to withdraw from the war against his wrongful relatives. Krishna's advice to Arjuna forms the most celebrated section of the *Māhābhārata* known as the *Bhagavad-gītā* or "The Song of the Lord." Here, Krishna identifies himself as the Brahman of the Upaniṣads, the underlying, unified being that underlies all phenomenal existence and advises Arjuna to perform his duty without getting attached to the consequences of his actions. He also introduces an entirely new path to liberation. This is *bhakti* or devotion to a loving god, a path open to all, not just the priestly custodians of the Vedas.



A performance of the Ramayana epic by traditional Indonesian dancers, Yogyakarta, Indonesia (2013). Ridho Nur Imansyah, Flickr Creative Commons <http://bit.ly/1Lu8AvC>

In the centuries following the composition of the epics and the *Purāṇas*, texts, practices, and institutions focused on devotion to various manifestations of the deities began to dominate the religious landscape of India. Images of deities began to be worshipped by priests in temples built by wealthy patrons or devotional communities and by individuals in their homes. These forms of worship became the core of religious life for most Hindus, just as the fire sacrifices formed the core of religious life in Vedic times. Pilgrimage sites and festivals associated with mythology also gained popularity and gave rise to a vibrant religious ethos inscribing space, yearly calendar and ritual life. In many ways, this ethos continues to define the Hindu tradition today.

Devotion in the Vernacular



A group of women sings devotional songs in Gujarat, India (2010). Nevil Zaveri, Flickr Creative Commons <http://bit.ly/1VY0cf6>

Even as the elite courtly and temple cultures continued to produce philosophical, theological, ritual, and literary works in Sanskrit, the pan-Indic language of religion and learning, another development that deeply influenced the Hindu ethos in India was an outpouring of devotion in vernacular languages in new poetic and narrative styles. Devotional songs and sacred narratives in regional languages were made popular among the masses by saintly poets and itinerant performers.

Beginning in the Tamil-speaking south in the late centuries of the first millennium of the Common Era and spreading gradually throughout the entire subcontinent, the vernacular expressions of devotion in poetic, musical, and narrative genres were eagerly incorporated in their religious lives by common people. Through these genres, philosophical concepts of the Upaniṣads, sacred narratives from the epics and the *Purāṇas* as well as teachings about moral duty and compassion became accessible to people with new interpretations.

For example, a hymn by a fifteenth century poet-saint of Gujarat named Narasinha Mehtā defines a religious person in terms of compassion and humility. This hymn and the poet's sacred biography containing narratives about his association with Dalits were deeply inspiring to Gandhi. Such songs and narratives remain some of the most beloved religious expressions in various regions of South Asia and among diaspora communities migrating to different parts of the world today. The development of vernacular devotional expressions coincided in many parts of South Asia with the encounter with Islam resulting in a mutual creative exchange. *Bhakti* songs and narratives share a number of culturally embedded images and motifs with Islamic mystical Sufi literature in South Asia.

Modern Hinduism

A new chapter in the history of the Hindu tradition was added as a result of the encounter with European communities that arrived in India first for trade and later competed for establishing reign. The interactions with Christian communities and missionaries led to a period of introspection and reform among Hindus in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. During this period, a number of reformers led movements against “untouchability” and for greater equality for women in all areas of family and public life. At the same time, the encounter with modernity in the context of colonization also led to a sharpened sense of distinctive identity and defensive attitude among some groups. Both the spirit of reform and the sharpened sense of identity kindled during the nineteenth century continue to inform life of Hindu communities today with far-reaching social and political implications. While Hindu traditions had reached parts of South East Asia centuries ago, the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries also saw migration of large groups of Hindus to various parts of the world. A

number of early migrants left South Asia as indentured laborers; many in the late twentieth century migrated as professionals. Large Hindu diaspora communities have settled now also in UK and the US.

Drawing from various layers of its long history, “Hinduism” today includes many diverse strands of thought and practice both in India and throughout the world. Some Vedic rituals are still performed, both domestically and publically; rites of worship performed in large temples or before an image of the deity on a small domestic altar also continue to be performed. Hindu practices have been democratized to a great degree since the mid-twentieth century. Even though instances of discrimination are reported, the law that forbids barring any Hindu from full participation in temple worship on the basis of caste is gradually being implemented, and women have begun to assume roles ranging from gurus and scholars to temple priests.

Suggested Readings:

Flood, Gavin. *An Introduction to Hinduism*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Klostermaier, Klaus K. *Hinduism: A Beginner's Guide*. Oneworld, 2008.

Kumar, P. Pratap, ed. *Contemporary Hinduism*. Acumen, 2013.

Pechilis, Karen, and Selva J. Raj, eds. *South Asian Religions: Tradition and Today*. Routledge, 2013.

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The Many and the One – Unity and Diversity

The Hindu tradition is remarkably diverse not only in terms of languages and cultures of its followers, but also in terms of the objects and ways of worshipping as well as authoritative sacred texts. This internal diversity is held together philosophically through the concept of Brahman as the underlying reality of all existence. Thus, multiple divine forms worshipped by various communities are viewed as manifestations of one Ultimate. In addition to popular deities such as Śiva, Viṣṇu, Durgā (a form of the great goddess) and elephant-headed Gaṇeśa, natural elements like the sun and rivers are viewed as divine forms worthy of worship.



Women make offerings on the bank of the Ganges River in Varanasi, India (2007). Wikimedia Commons, Dennis Jarvis <http://bit.ly/1OQTC5W>



Shiva as Nataraja, "The Lord of Dance." Tamil Nadu, India, c.950-1000. In the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Flickr Creative Commons, Mark6Mauno <http://bit.ly/1gmFHIZ>

The ways of worshipping also vary greatly among Hindus. Depending on the inclination of an individual, various channels of religious experience are recognized as valid within the three broad religious paths – knowledge (*jñāna*), devotion (*bhakti*), and action (karma). It is not uncommon to find one person devoted to study of sacred texts, another to meditation, a third to daily worship of images of the divine and the fourth dedicated to serving people or animals in a single family. Other popular devotional acts include pilgrimage to sacred sites that are associated with religious narratives, fasting on certain days of a week or month, and feeding holy people as well as the poor. Art is also a vital channel of religious expression in the Hindu tradition. Music, dance, and painting are pursued as paths for approaching the divine not just by the specialists; they are incorporated in religious lives of communities in acts such as singing of devotional songs in community gatherings, festival dancing, and drawing colorful designs at one's door steps daily. Supporting aesthetic expressions of devotion, many Hindu deities themselves are depicted engaging in artistic acts in myths and images.

A corollary of the immense internal diversity within the tradition has historically been acceptance of diversity within a cultural milieu. Hindu communities have shared common ground with

followers of other religious traditions since ancient times. In the fifth century before the Common Era arose Jainism and Buddhism in the heartland of the Vedic culture; a small Christian community has flourished in South India since the early centuries of the Common Era; and Islam arrived in India in the early phase of its spread. While the Hindu nationalist groups of India in more recent times have engaged in conflicts with non-Hindu communities, at times turning violent, the long history of the tradition has generally been that of coexistence with acceptance of difference.

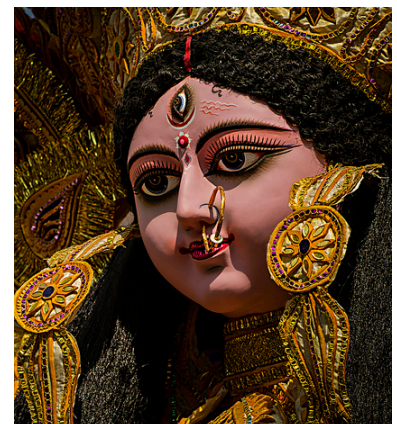
Suggested Reading:

Eck, Diana. *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. Columbia University Press. 1998.

Eck Diana. *India, A Sacred Geography*. Harmony. 2012.

The Divine and the Human Feminine

Like all other aspects, the perspective on the feminine in Hinduism is also complex and layered. One often finds contradictory currents in the tradition. Traditionally the Hindu society has been patriarchal. Yet it is also the world religion with remarkably strong presence of female deities. Some goddesses like Lakṣmī and Pārvatī are consorts of major deities like Viṣṇu and Śiva; some are powerful independent goddesses who can turn fierce and destructive, especially against evil-doers. Some are worshipped widely in India with major temples and festivals; others



An image of the goddess Durga in Calcutta, India (2012). Rajarshi Mitra, Flickr Creative Commons <http://bit.ly/1NwX7jb>

are regional goddesses worshipped as protectors of the specific locale. All are viewed as manifestations of the great goddess praised in the *Purāṇas*. They are given the title of “mother” and are associated with different aspects of life. Lakṣmī, for example, is associated with prosperity; Saraswatī with knowledge and the arts; and Durgā with protection. Many are honored with elaborate festivals with distinctively regional aspects in various parts of India. The nine day festival for Durgā for example, is celebrated in Bengal in eastern India enthusiastically with elaborate structures raised at street corners. In Gujarat, western India, the same festival is celebrated with group dancing in open spaces for nine nights.

The power and status of female deities however, does not translate directly in the empowerment of women in the Hindu society. In sacred texts, often contradictory injunctions and references to women are found, at times in the same text. In some places women are praised as worthy of veneration and men are asked to always keep them happy; in some others women are referenced as full of vices and unworthy of any freedom. In traditional patriarchal milieu women’s lives have been carefully regulated in their roles as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers. Loyalty to one’s husband has been considered so central to a wife’s role that in higher castes, widows were not allowed to remarry and in a few contexts even encouraged to climb the funeral pyres of their husbands (in an act called *satī* which was much publicized in European writings during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries).



Women at prayer in Varanasi, India (2012). Sergio Carbajo, Flickr Creative Commons
<http://bit.ly/1UUPrYx>

At the same time, Hindu women’s lives have not been without religious agency. Women have been important participants in household rituals and life-cycle ceremonies. They observe many rituals on their own using texts in their regional languages. Numerous examples of women poets and saints (Āṇḍāl 8th century, Mīrā, 16th century) as well as queens and warriors (Laksmibai of Jhansi, 19th century) are also found in the long history of Hinduism. These women are honored by the Hindu society today and seen by young women as inspiration. Since the nineteenth century, numerous Hindu women have made strides in all areas of knowledge and public life, even though in conservative circles women’s lives continue to be regulated by restrictive norms.

Suggested Readings:

Kinsley, David. *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*. University of California Press. 1988.

Leslie, Julia. Ed. *Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*. Fairleigh Dickinson Univ Press. 1991.

Padma, Sree. Ed. *Inventing and Reinventing the Goddess: Contemporary Iterations of Hindu Deities on the Move*. Lexington Books. 2014.

Pintchman, Tracy. Ed. *Women's Lives, Women's Rituals in the Hindu Tradition*. Oxford. 2007.

Cycles of Time – Cosmic and Earthly

A notable feature of Hinduism, which it shares with other Indic traditions, is an understanding of time as cyclical rather than linear. According to Hindu understanding, the creation goes through cycles of existence and dissolution. The vast duration of time when the creation is in existence – spanning trillions of years – is followed by dissolution when the universe is reabsorbed in Viṣṇu who sleeps on primordial waters. When Viṣṇu awakes and creates out of himself Brahma, the deity who creates the world, a new cycle of creation starts. There is no end of time and nothing is really completely destroyed forever. Both creation and dissolution are alternate states in an unending cycle.

The vast spans of cosmic time are balanced by division of earthly time in small units within a lunar calendar. Days are divided in auspicious and inauspicious blocks; specific days of lunar cycles are marked for fasting and ritual performance, seasons are marked by festivals that are linked to mythology and have regional flavors. The festival of Holi during the spring, for example, is celebrated in many parts of north India with people throwing colors at one another and singing songs. The festival also has a myth about a devotee of Viṣṇu associated with it. Most festivals have motifs of dissolution and re-generation incorporated in them. During the goddess festival, for example, an image of the goddess is installed on the first day and submerged in a body of water on the last. Conceived in terms of cycle of re-births, human life too is regulated with rituals. The three most commonly observed life cycle rituals are giving of name, wedding, and cremation at death.

Suggested Reading:

Zimmer, Heinrich. *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*. Princeton Bollinger. 1992.

The Invention of Traditions

While communities following Hindu thought and practices discussed above have flourished on the Indian subcontinent for at least three millennia, the concept of “Hinduism”—as a world religion, as a unitary, coherent package of beliefs and rituals—emerged only in the nineteenth-century colonial context via processes that have been much-debated in scholarship over the past three decades.

The term “Hindu” is derived originally from a Persian word indicating those who live “beyond the Indus River.” It came to be associated with various regional, cultural, and religious identifications over time. With the arrival of the British East India Company to Indian shores in 1608, and the gradual expansion of Company control over trade, political rule, and education in subsequent centuries, however, the meaning and significance of “Hindu” among European officials, missionaries, scholars, and Indian intellectuals grew increasingly complex. In the late eighteenth century, the newly emergent evangelical British Christian denominations took aim at the “idolatry” and “savagery” of “Hindoo” practices, as missionaries failed to understand the significance of divine images or rituals of animal sacrifice. Such contemporary visions of “excess” were countered by early Orientalist scholars such as William Jones (1746-1794) with accounts of sophisticated philosophical wisdom from ancient Sanskrit texts and H. T. Colebrooke (1765-1837) with exploration of Sanskrit works to understand the logic of Hindu ritual life. Indian scholars such as Rammohan Roy (1772-1833)—influenced by his knowledge of Islam, contact with British Unitarians, and his reading of Hindu texts—interpreted the Vedas and the

Upaniṣadic Brahman from a monotheistic perspective, called for rational religious forms of worship, and actively engaged in social reform. He was the first to use the term “Hinduism,” in 1816, to refer to a coherent, pan-Indic set of religious ideals and practices.

Throughout the nineteenth century—and particularly following the transfer of power over much of the Indian subcontinent from the East India Company to the British crown in 1858— terms “Hindu” and “Hinduism” were increasingly incorporated in public discourses and nationalist movements. Two very different approaches to Hinduism as it emerged in the nineteenth century are represented by Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) who represented Hinduism at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and Dayananda Saraswati (1824-1883), the founder of the Arya Samaj movement. Drawing on the ideas of Upaniṣads, Vivekananda interpreted Hinduism as a religion of universal acceptance to Western (mainly American) audiences and in India preached service to the impoverished millions of the country. Saraswati also taught about equality of all human beings but he sought to define India as a Hindu nation with its social and cultural forms rooted in the teachings of the Vedas. Saraswati’s exclusive focus on the Vedas and Sanskrit provided a precursor to the twentieth-century Hindu nationalist movements that interpreted “Hinduness” not simply in religious or cultural terms but associated it emphatically with Indian nationhood.

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Dalmia, Vasudha, and Heinrich von Stietencron, eds. *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity*. Sage, 1995.

Llewellyn, J. E., ed. *Defining Hinduism: A Reader*. Taylor and Francis, 2005.

Pennington, Brian K. *Was Hinduism Invented? Britons, Indians, and Colonial Construction of Religion*. Oxford University Press, 2005.

van der Veer, Peter. *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain*. Princeton University Press, 2001.

Interpreting Tradition and Redefining Identity

In the period following Vivekananda and Saraswati, with the term “Hindu” firmly established in public discourses as a set religious system, the trends of interpretation, reform, and revivalism of pride in ancient roots continued. The scathing criticism of “Hinduism” by European officials, missionaries, and scholars who were steeped in enlightenment ideas of personhood and society and were often not familiar with the underlying cultural presumptions of the Hindu society jolted many among those who identified as Hindu into self-examination and/or defensiveness. The first led to social reforms; the latter contributed to what is known as revivalism, leading eventually to Hindu nationalism.

The portrayal of Hindu social system as grossly unjust and its treatment of women as brutal led many reformers to launch movements opposing practices such as “untouchability” and *satī* as well as advocating widow remarriage, women’s education, and their participation in public life. Some also rejected image worship and embraced monotheism. Many leaders interpreted Hindu thought and

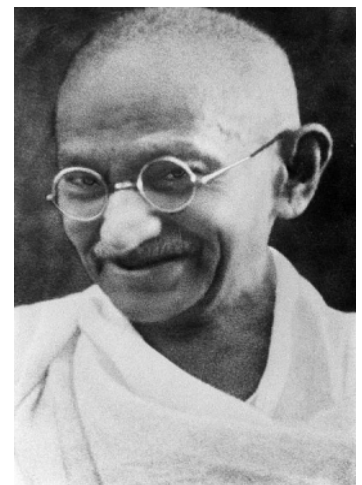
practice to align them with “modernity” as they perceived it in their encounters with Europeans. The reforms initiated in this manner have been beneficial to the Hindu society to a considerable extent. By the early twentieth century, a class of educated women had entered public life. Even though there is still a long road ahead, a large number of Hindu women have made strides in social and political spheres. In the religious sphere too, female spiritual teachers and priests have been getting recognition. Similarly in the area of caste discrimination, while there is still a great deal to be desired in the area of eradication of “untouchability,” caste hierarchy is gradually loosening, especially in the cities.

In addition to reform, a corollary of interpretation of Hinduism as a tradition in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century India was a sharpened sense of distinctive religious identity among its followers. In the millennia prior to widespread Euro-American contact and colonial rule, religious identities throughout South Asia tended to be particular, context-sensitive, and fluid to an extent. While most available sources for the study of precolonial India are overwhelmingly *brāhmaṇ*—presenting the views of elite males for the consumption by elite males—much evidence suggests that “Hindu” identities were far less fixed than they would later become. To be a devotee of Śiva, for example, marked one a “Śaiva,” but did not imply in any way that Viṣṇu, the goddess, and other divine beings were irrelevant. The medieval *bhakti* poet-saints sing the praises of multiple deities, even while recognizing their favorite as supreme. Large temple complexes contain shrines to all major divine beings—often including the Buddha and the Jina (Jain teacher)—and the medieval inscriptional record reveals patterns of royal patronage that cut across religious boundaries without notice.

In the colonial context of encounter with European powers steeped in Enlightenment ideals of personhood, separation of church and state, and democracy, forms of identity began to change, and new forms began to emerge. In the mid-nineteenth century, when the new British Raj (empire) sought to enumerate colonial subjects on the basis of religion, specifying their religious identities caused great confusion. A number of people checked both “Hindu” and “Mohammedan” in early versions of the census. Gradually however, the term “Hindu” as an identity marker grew stronger during the struggle for independence from the British rule.

The British Partition of Bengal in 1905 into Hindu-majority and Muslim-majority areas generated a merging of religious and national identities. The All-India Muslim League was founded the following year – 1906 – to promote Muslim interests. In 1914 Hindu Mahasabha, a political organization to promote Hindu interests was established. From 1920s onward when the freedom movement picked up momentum, many Muslims feared that an independent India would be dominated by Hindus and the seeds for the 1947 Partition of the Subcontinent into the independent nation-states of India and Pakistan were sown.

Three figures with Hindu backgrounds played significant roles in the religio-political discourses during this period and have had far-reaching influence in shaping independent India: 1) Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), 2) Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883-1966), and 3) Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891-1956).



Mahatma Gandhi, photographer unknown. Wikimedia Commons <http://bit.ly/1F2xANO>

Gandhi, perhaps the most globally celebrated Hindu of the twentieth century, honored by the title Mahatma or “Great Soul” (1869-1948) by many, invoked explicitly Hindu rhetoric throughout his public career as an advocate for non-violent resistance to the British rule and an independent India focused on the needs of the poorest and most disenfranchised. His *satyāgraha*—literally “grasping for truth”—campaigns promoted a vision of relative truth (*sat* or *satya*) rooted in the needs to those whom he sought to help; for Gandhi, such political activism was simultaneously a religious endeavor, involving firm commitments to the Hindu values of *ahimsā* (non-violence) and self-suffering (*tapas* or *tapasya*). Always ecumenical in his quest for an independent India focused on democratic and economic self-sufficiency, he sought to transform Hindu society from within by promoting the causes of the marginalized. Under his leadership, women and members of non-elite castes entered public life in large numbers. He also strove to end the practice of “untouchability” and was often bitterly opposed by high-caste Hindus including some of his close relatives. While drawing on Hindu rhetoric in his speeches, Gandhi held to an inclusive understanding of Hinduism. In his ashrams (communes), hymns from diverse religious traditions were sung. He envisioned an independent India where many religions would coexist as branches of a single tree. Soon after India’s independence, on January 30th 1948, Gandhi was killed by an associate of the Hindu nationalist organization RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) who saw him as endangering Hindu interests and favoring Muslims.

Since Indian Independence, many Gandhi-inspired religious and cultural organizations have continued to advocate for peace and social justice using the techniques of *satyāgraha* and *ahimsā*. The Chipko Andolan began using Gandhian methods in the early 1970s to protest rampant deforestation in the Himalayan foothills. Its participants literally hugged trees to protect them from being felled. The Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), founded as a women’s trade union in Ahmedabad in 1972, continues to employ Gandhian principles of non-violence and economic self-sufficiency in its many programs for poor women. Gandhian techniques of nonviolent resistance and his advocacy for peace have inspired activists not only in India but in many parts of the world.

During the early twentieth century (alongside national independence movements informed by ecumenical views of leaders such as Gandhi) Hindu nationalist movements flourished in which Vinayak Damodar Savarkar emerged as an important leader. His influential 1923 pamphlet “Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?” introduced the notion of Hindutva or “Hindu-ness” into Indian public discourses. Here Savarkar argues for Hindutva as a unifying cultural and political force that unites the people of India and forms the basis of its authentic nationhood. Savarkar’s use of Hindutva to encompass all of Indian culture, religion, and politics is championed today by a closely allied set of political and cultural organizations known as the Sangh Parivar. In public discourses on religious conflicts in India, the ideology of Hindutva is often a key contributor.

In addition to the movements for freedom and social reform led by members of Hindu high-castes, a number of Dalit communities also sought to gain social recognition and economic rights for themselves. Some gained them through education made available to them by Euro-American Christian missionaries. Some acquired them



Ambedkar as a student (1911),
photographer unknown. Wikimedia
Commons <http://bit.ly/1Nx3Cm9>

through legal means. The most well-known Dalit leader of pre-independence India was B. R. Ambedkar. Even though he had the privilege of elite education at Columbia University through scholarships (one of which was offered by an Indian king) he remained dedicated to the rights and dignity of the members of “untouchable” communities all his life. After independence, as the first law minister of India and the chairman of Constitution Drafting Committee, Ambedkar contributed greatly to the guarantees it offers for basic human rights to all Indian citizens. The Indian constitution gives freedoms of religion and expression; and it renders illegal “untouchability” or any form of discrimination on the basis of caste. It is important to note that close to his death in 1956, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism along with his followers initiating a new chapter for that tradition in India.

Suggested Reading:

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Michael, S. M. *Dalits in Modern India: Vision and Values*. Sage Publications, 2007.

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Post-Independence India

The day of independence for which literally hundreds of thousands of Indians had fought, came with unimaginable tragedy and pain when the British left an India partitioned into two nations - the Islamic State of Pakistan and secular India. This was the second major fragmentation along religious lines after the 1905 partition of Bengal within the British Empire. The mass migration of an estimated fourteen million people was unprecedented in human history and the violence that ensued took the lives of between 200,000-500,000 people. The sad and complex effects of the event continue to unfold in both India and Pakistan, often in the form of religious violence. With India and Pakistan maintaining a tense peace, and violence couched in terms of Hindu-Muslim riots or Hindu-Christian clashes often dominating global media headlines, it comes as a surprise that such religiously infused large scale communal conflict was hardly known on the subcontinent before the colonial period. In the encounter with European colonial powers, notions of religion and identity shifted dramatically to create the tense sectarian landscape of modern South Asia.

Within India, Hindu nationalist ideology has gained currency in some groups with important political implications. For example, followers of Hindu nationalist ideology destroyed the Babri Masjid (built by the Mughal Emperor Babur in 1528) in Ayodhyā in 1992 because they



Children celebrate Holi in India (2011), Wikimedia Commons, User: Patrick <http://bit.ly/1LNQPax>

claimed that the mosque stood on the site of the Hindu god Rāma's earthly birth. This act led to Hindu-Muslim violence in cities throughout India. In 2002, communal violence in Gujarat in western India took hundreds of lives; a majority of them of Muslims. In the wake of these incidents of violence, the definition of "Hinduism" as a tradition with distinct boundaries that developed during the colonial period and informs the Hindutva rhetoric of the Sangh Parivar has grown increasingly exclusive in some sections of the Hindu society. Yet as many academics point out, the actual events mask the complex undercurrents of socio-economic rivalries reinforcing and politicizing the boundaries of identities. Participants in the destruction of the Babri mosque, for example, were mobilized through rallies across India to collect bricks to build a temple to Rāma at the mosque site in Ayodhyā. A number of these participants tended to be urban, young, male, relatively high caste, under-employed, and frustrated. They were keenly aware that with the legal provisions of affirmative action for the underprivileged communities in education and employment, they were on uncertain and not privileged grounds. The incidents demonstrate how insecurities of groups in a given context play an important role in shaping their attitudes toward those whom they identify as the "other."

An important challenge for Hindus in India today is to retrieve for contemporary times helpful resources from its rich history of acceptance of diversity. Another is to make its contribution in ensuring the implementation the provisions for equality of all – regardless of caste, gender, and religion – incorporated in India's constitution. At this time, these remain ideals to be achieved fully. Yet in India's multi-cultural milieu, a number of Hindu festivals and aesthetic expressions offer opportunities for people of diverse background to come together forgetting the social barriers to a great degree in the moment. These moments offer opportunities to build bridges.

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Hinduism Beyond India

Beyond the shores of India, Hinduism has flourished in South East Asia in Bali as a majority religion for centuries. During the colonial period, a sizable number of Hindus migrated to parts of the British Empire – Africa, Caribbean islands, Fiji - as clerks, soldiers, merchants, and indentured (bonded) laborers. While



A Vedic fire ritual (2012), Mahat Tattva Dasa, Flickr Creative Commons <http://bit.ly/1MrEfnf>

those with resources were able to keep ties with their communities and returned home after a period, few indentured laborers had this hope. Many of them retained their religio-cultural heritage, but radically transformed Hindu practices in their new homelands. Since the latter half of the twentieth century, Hindus from various regions of India have migrated in large numbers to the United States, the United Kingdom, and other European countries. While they have necessarily modified their tradition in accordance with their new environments, they have also added to the richness of the cultural milieu of their new countries. Some festivals and religious expressions that bring together diverse people in India, also do so on these new shores. In addition to native Indians, a number of Westerners have been following the Hindu tradition in various forms in different parts of the world. In recent years, a few groups in some African countries have also accepted Hinduism as their faith expanding the horizons of the Hindu world.