

Introduction to Hinduism

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3 sessions:

1) Origins & History

Today – 27th May
~ 4- 8 Millennia

2) Tenets & Practices

10th June

3) Fasts & Festivals

24th June

Hinduism hugely complex, diverse religion
with countless different sects

Adiga's 34000 deities ! Way short !! 330,000

Manifestations of One God – Param Pita Parmeshwar

Any Introduction to it can only be a broad
brush.

A general picture – **no** specific theological
constructs !!

HINDUISM - Origins & History

1st Texts on Indian History describe events from the 13th Century onwards !!!

By Muslim Scholars post Islamic domination of India

But a thriving civilisation existed a good 4000 years before that !

Reconstruction of Past Events done by contributions from other disciplines !

Archaeology, Astrology/Astronomy, Better reading of the Scriptures and philology (study of Languages)

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Hinduism has No Single known Founder – Origin of the Religion difficult to establish !

To a Hindu Sage/Rishi Question is irrelevant !

NAME ?

Ancient Name: **Sanatana Dharma**

Common/Current Name: **Hinduism** Originates from the Persian name – came into general use under British Rule

Civilisation based around the River Indus Valley around the time of the Persian ascendancy (~**1000 – 500 BC**)

Persian name for the River was **Sindhu** pronounced as Hindu – hence **Hindus, Hindustan & Hinduism**

Sanatana Dharma/Hinduism dates earlier than this naming period !

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Popular View: Vedic Religion brought by the Nomad Aryans from Central Asia to the Indus Valley

Timing: based on translations of Sanskrit Scripts by Christian Missionaries

– **Abbe' Dubois (1770-1840)** - trying to reconcile Biblical Chronology –

World beginning: **4000 BC** Great Flood: **2500 BC**

So the Aryan Invasion of India ~1700 BC

-Max Mueller (1823-1900) – great translator and believer of the Vedic Scripts concurred !

Till 1950 predominant western view:

Vedic Culture brought by the “Aryans” – destroyed the Pre-Vedic (Dravidian) Culture of Indus Valley ! Drove the Dravidians into Southern India

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HOWEVER:

Modern Archaeology finds say otherwise - from various sites:

Mohanjadaro & Harrappa (2600-1700 BC) in the Indus Valley

Dwarka & Lothal in Gujerat even earlier – circa 6000 BC

Indicate the Vedic Culture/religion prevalent well before 2000 BC

artefacts (“Lingas”, Mother Goddess Statues, Receptacles for Fire Rituals - Havan Yajya) relating to Vedic Prayers found

Scripted: Rig Veda – oldest of 4 – refers to largest Indian river – Saraswati. 72 times !

Decline 4000-3000BC before the “Aryan invasion” !

Indus Valley Civilization -> Saraswati Valley Civilisation

Vedic Calendar based on equinoxes & solstices indicating times of events in

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A satellite view of the Sarasvati River basin running from the Himalayan Mountains to the west coast



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YAJUR & ATHARVA Vedas (Younger than the Rig Veda) vernal equinox & summer solstice – date the events described at ~2400 BC

2 Main Epics of Hinduism – contain detailed description of the Constellations throughout the texts

Ramayana: Constellations depicted put the birth of **Lord Rama** at ~ 5100 BC supported by similar depictions during the 14 year exile of Rama - Puskar Bhatnagar & Others

Mahabharata: > 90,000 verses, X10 Iliad + Odyssey
Greatest Epic written

Exact Position of the stars recorded for the birth of **Lord Krishna** dates it as ~ 3200 BC

and Lord Krishna is the LAST-But-One Incarnation of God

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Conclusion on Origin:

“Aryan Invasion” bringing Vedic/Hindu Dharma – an unlikely, perhaps prejudicial description !

Origin of Hinduism is clouded in antiquity –

No identifiable Founder – Most likely the Vedas were conceived by many Rishis who spent their time pondering

“Who am I ?”

“What is the role of Man in the Cosmos ?”

“How should Human Beings behave in a harmonious Society

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History:

No Historical Texts prior to the arrival of the Islamic Culture in the 13th Century – **So ALL Historical Dates – Large Pinch of Salt !!**

Trace starting from the founding Scriptures

Vedas: 4 in all – Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda.

Warning: Translations by Western Scholars all follow Max Muller sticking to ~**1500 BC** for the Oldest Rig Veda !

The Rig Veda is the oldest (**around or earlier than 5000 BC**) and the others follow. Refers to end of last Ice Age.

Later followed by explanations of the mystical/spiritual aspects of the Vedas in the **Brahmanas & Upanishads**

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The Hymns in the **Vedas** were passed on within generations in Priest families.

Vedic Tradition preserved – memorisation by heart – deviations **NOT** allowed

Accuracy of pronunciation **essential** since Vedic Hymns used in Rituals and Procedures defined within the Hymns !!

2 sets of dynasties flourished side-by-side – Kings & Priests in mutual enlightened self-interest !

Kings & Priests prospered together !!

Mantras escaped Corruption BUT Original meanings of many LOST!

Some Mantras not essential to the Rituals may have been forgotten

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Epics next Sanskrit Texts to appear -

Ramayana - describing life of **Lord Rama**,

His birth (dated at ~ **5110 BC**), his marriage and his 14-year Forest Exile all dated astrologically - consistent !

Battle with the Demon King of Sri Lanka – **Ravana** - to free Sita followed by Return to Ayodhya – **DIWALI Festival**

Written by the Sage – **Valmiki** – A contemporary Sage during **Rama's** Life.

Dates a **Fabrication by Author ?? Unlikely**
!!.....

So the Vedas – Rig, in Particular – are **Older**

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Mahabharata – describing the Great War of the Sub-Continent where all the Kings joined one side or the other in the battle of Kurkushetra –

Lord Krishna is a Major Character –
Bhagvad Geeta - an integral part of this epic –
is narrated by Him....

Lord Krishna's birth is dated at ~ **3100 BC**
from Constellations described in the Text

Written by the Sage – **Vyasa** – again not only a contemporary BUT also – like **Valmiki** - a bit player in the Epic itself (His sons fought on each side)

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Successive Scripts followed including additions to the Vedas themselves – further **explanations** of the Vedic writings as meaning lost in years of verbal transmission

Dharma Shastras: Hindu Law books

Time of authorship – list in antiquity

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Advent of Writing believed – ~ **600 BC**

Reaction to increasingly ritualistic and priestly traditions of Vedic Hinduism – **Mutual Self-Interest of Kings & Brahmins**

Majority of the People forced to accept arbitrary rituals and practices imposed by the Brahmins as the word of God !

Unjust and Rigid Caste System imposed !

2 Reactionary religions appear ~ **600 BC**

Buddha born **563BC** – for Hindus last Re-incarnation of God (**Vishnu**) BUT his Followers founded **Buddhism** – concentrating on Self-Enlightenment to attain Moksha ...

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Mahavir founded **Jainism** – Religion free of rituals – Ahimsa (Non-Violence) to all living beings.

600 – 200 BC 3 Religions (not too dissimilar) exist side-by-side. Predominance of one or the other dependent on the Kings and the extent of their kingdoms

Ashoka Maurya (304-232 BC) ruled ~90% of the sub-continent (**263-232 BC**)

Converted to **Buddhism** after seeing the carnage wrought by his greatest victory. Believed to have encouraged spread of Buddhism through Asia. Certainly sent his son to Sri Lanka to conquer and convert the populace !

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Mauryan dynasty collapsed ~185 BC and in the free-for-all that followed **Hinduism** recovered its grip on India.

Hinduism – always Geographically bound ?
NO !

Post Maurya dynastic rule (185 BC-400AD)
India split into small kingdoms – Italy in the middle ages – Largest only ~ 50%

and **Brahmanic Hinduism** re-established !

Bengal Sea facing kingdoms took **Hinduism** to SE Asia from ~150BC – 400 AD

Island of **Bali** – still predominantly Hindu – practising 11th Century AD **Hinduism**

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Spread of Hinduism to SE Asia ~150BC – 400 AD



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Powerful Hindu empires existed in SE Asia from **5th -15th Century AD** until overrun by the spread of Islam from India itself.

In India Muslim Scholars & Traders – contacts form **11th Century**

Followed by Military incursion – resulting in “**Bloodiest Period**” in Indian History resulting in

Delhi Sultanate (**1026-1526**) ~ 60 % of Sub-Continent

Mughal Empire (**1526-1858**) ~ 85%

Affect on **Hinduism**: forced conversions – banning of Hindu festivals etc.. Northern India (less in the South)

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Reaction:

Sikhism

**Guru Nanak's teachings reaction against both
Hinduism & Islam**

**Trying to merge the best practices & beliefs of
both.**

Welcomed by the then Emperor Akbar.

**Later Mughal Emperors felt threatened by
this new creed**

**Attempts to Eradicate Sikhism closer to
Hinduism**

Main departure from Hinduism

**“Path to God is via the Holy Book **Guru
Granth Sahib** NOT via ritualistic prayers to
idols through Brahmin Priests !**

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Hinduism itself reacted by going more rigid and conservative

Trend encouraged by the British from 18th Century onwards – only outlawing outrageous aspects/practices e.g. Suti

After 1857 – end of Mughals, start of British India – a lot of Hindu Intellectuals – some educated abroad - began to consider ways of reforming **Hinduism – relevant to the environment, bringing in a some gender/race/caste equality ideas**

Prominent – Swami Dayananda from Gujerat who believed in the infallible authority of the Vedas

Founded the Arya Samaj in 1875

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Arya Samaj :

main effort: Teaching of the Vedas (Sanskrit to Hindi) and setting up schools for the poor and in particular for Girls. Successful in the North but unable to have any impact in the South (non-Hindi speaking areas)!

Brahmanic Hinduism – too resilient !!

Extremely difficult to shake the Priests sway over the largely illiterate masses. Hence almost all reform movements unable to gain universal acceptance.

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Hinduism & the West

1960s counter-culture revolutions - an increasing number of Western devotees of various Hindu Gurus, Maharishis and their practices e.g.

Hare Krishna Hare Rama Movement,

Universalist teachings of such Hindu figures as Sri Ramakrishna,

various schools of yoga – physical & meta-physical.

Since 1990s ecstatic love-affair with yoga - new interest in the teachings of **Hinduism.**

Growing Indian Diaspora & temples in western cities – provide ready access to **Hindu spiritual & theological ideas.**

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No such access in Oxfordshire

Academics – Oxford Centre of Hindu Studies

BUT –

**NO HINDU TEMPLE WHERE HINDUISM
CAN BE and be seen to be PRACTISED !!**

**OHTCCP a rather belated effort to put this
right !**

Web: oxfordhindutempleproject.org