2.1: Hinduism: Introduction

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If you have iTunes on your computer just click and you will be led to the listings.
http://phobos.apple.com/WebObjects/MZStore.woa/wa/viewPodcast?id=117762189&s=143441

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Hinduism is a religion with various Gods and Goddesses. According to Hinduism, three Gods rule the world. Brahma: the creator; Vishnu: the preserver and Shiva: the destroyer. Lord Vishnu did his job of preserving the world by incarnating himself in different forms at times of crisis.

The three Lords that rule the world have consorts and they are goddesses too. Consort of Brahma is Sarasvati; goddess of learning. Vishnu’s consort is Lakshmi; goddess of wealth and prosperity. Shiva’s consort is Parvati who is worshipped as Kali or Durga.

Besides these Gods and Goddesses there are a number of other Gods and Goddesses. To name a few of them, there is Ganesh; who has an elephant’s head and he is also a son of Shiva and Parvati, Hanuman; who is an ape, Surya; Lord of sun, Ganga Ma; Goddess of river Ganges; Samundra; Lord of the sea, Indra; king of the Gods (but he isn’t an important God), Prithvi; Goddess of earth, Shakti; Goddess of strength. The Hindus call their Goddesses ‘Ma’ meaning mother.

Some gods have more than one name. Shiva is also known as Shankar, Mahadev, Natraj, Mahesh and many other names. Ganesh is also called Ganpati. God Vishnu incarnated 9 times to do his job and in his every appearance he had
a different form which are also worshipped as Gods. Among his appearances, he appeared as Rama, Krishna, Narsimha, Parsuram and Buddha. Krishna also has different names, Gopal; Kishan; Shyam and other names. He also has other titles with meanings like ‘Basuri Wala’ which means the flute musician and ‘Makhan Chor’ which means the butter stealer. There are also Gods who can change their forms, for example: Parvati can change into Kali or Durga.

Not all of these Gods are worshiped by all Hindus. Some Hindus worship only Vishnu. Others worship only Shiva. Others worship only the Goddesses and call these Goddesses collectively as Shakti meaning strength. Many of these Goddess worshipers worship Parvati in her images as Kali or Durga. People who worship Shiva or Vishnu also worship characters and images connected with these Gods. Vishnu worshipers (Vaishnaites) also worship his appearances. Shiva’s worshipers (Shaivites) also worship images of bull called Nandi, who was Shiva’s carrier and a unique stone design connected to Shiva. There are also Hindus who worship all the Gods. There are some Gods who are worshiped all over India like Rama and Krishna and other Gods who are worshiped more in one region than the other like Ganesh who is worshiped mainly in west India. Hindus also worship Gods according to their personal needs. People who engage in wrestling, body building and other physical sports worship Hanuman, who in Hindu legends was an ape with lot of physical strength. Businessmen worship Lakshmi, Goddess of wealth.

Though these Hindus worship different idols, there are many Hindus who believe in one God and perceive in these different Gods and Goddesses as different images of the same one God. According to their beliefs idolatry is the wrong interpretation of Hinduism.

Hindus believe in reincarnation. The basic belief is that a person’s fate is determined according to his deeds. These deeds in Hinduism are called ‘Karma’. A soul who does good Karma in this life will be awarded with a better life in the next incarnation. Souls who do bad Karma will be punished for their sins, if not in this incarnation then in the next incarnation and will continue to be born in this world again and again. The good souls will be liberated from the circle of rebirth and get redemption which is called ‘Moksha’ meaning freedom. Hindus normally cremate their dead ones, so that the soul of the dead would go to heaven, except in a few cases of Hindu saints, who are believed to have attained ‘Moksha’.

The main Hindu books are the four Vedas. They are Rig Veda, Sama Veda, Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda. The concluding portions of the Vedas are called Upanisads. There are also other holy books like Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata etc. The different Gods and Goddesses in the Hindu mythology are derived from these books. Ramayana and Mahabharata are the most popular Hindu books.

The main story of Ramayana is the story of Lord Rama. Rama was born in a royal family and was suppose to be the king, but because of his step- mother, he was forced to exile from his kingdom for fourteen years. During this period his consort Sita was kidnapped by a demon called Ravan, who was king of Lanka. Rama with the help of his brother, Lakshman, and an army of monkeys under the leadership of Hanuman, rescued Sita. Many Indians believe that the present day Sri Lanka was then the kingdom of Lanka.

Mahabharata is a family epic. In this epic the Pandva family and the Kaurav family who are cousins fight with each other for the control over a kingdom. Kaurav family, which consisted of 100 brothers rule an empire. The five Pandva brothers ask for a small kingdom which belongs to them. The Kauravs refuse to give the Pandvas the kingdom so there is a war between the Pandvas and the Kauravs in which it is believed that all the kingdoms of that period in India took part. In this war the Pandvas, with the help of Lord Krishna win the war. Before the commencement of the war, while the two armies are facing each other, one of the Pandva brothers Arjun gets depressed. Arjun is depressed because he has to fight against people whom he knows, loves and respects. At this point Krishna, (who was also a king of a kingdom, and participated in this war only as the chariot driver for Arjun) convinces Arjun to fight. Krishna lectures Arjun about life, human beings and their religious duties. He explains to Arjun that he belongs to a warrior caste and he has to fight for
that’s his destination in this incarnation. Those chapters in the Mahabharta which are Krishna’s discourses on religious philosophy are called Bhagvad Gita. Because of it’s importance the Bhagvad Gita is considered as a separate holy book. Another Hindu holy book that deals with religious duties is ‘Law of Manu’ or the ‘Dharma Shastra’.

In the wars that occur in the holy books, as in Mahabharta, the different sides had different war weapons which had characters similar to modern day war weapons. In some stories the traveling vehicles were normally birds and animals. But these animals and birds had features similar to modern day aircrafts. There were even aircrafts with over velocity of light. The main war weapons were bows and arrows. But these arrows were more like modern missiles than simple arrows. These arrows were capable of carrying bombs with destructive power similar to modern day chemical, biological or even atom bombs. Other arrows could be targeted on specific human beings. There were even arrows capable of neutralizing other arrows, similar to modern day anti-missiles.

Hindus have many holy places. Badrinath, Puri, Dwarkha and Rameshwaram are four holiest places for the Hindus. Other holy places are Varanasi, Rishikesh, Nasik, Pushkar, Ujjain and other places. Some rivers are also holy to them. Among them are Godavri, Yamuna and above all Ganges which the Indians call Ganga. Another holy river is Sarasvati and it is invisible. Hindus also worship and respect some animals and birds like cobra, apes, peacocks and cow. Hindus also respect some trees and bush trees. The famous and the most respected bush tree is Tulsi.

Some of the Hindu customs, which exist or existed, do not have their bearing in Hindu scriptures but became part of Hinduism in different ways and fashion. For example, the Hindus see in cow a sacred animal. Religiously there is no reason to see cow as sacred and it is believed that cows were made ‘sacred’ to prevent their slaughter during periods of droughts and hunger. Cobra worship also is not found in Hindu scripts. This custom became part of Hinduism when some Indian tribes who use to worship cobra adopted Hinduism. Burning of the widow on the dead husband’s pyre also has no religious justification. This custom, outlawed in 1829, was probably brought to India by the Scythians invaders of India. Among the Scythians it was a custom to bury the dead king with his mistresses or wives, servants and other things so that they could continue to serve him in the next world. When these Scythians arrived in India, they adopted the Indian system of funeral, which was cremating the dead. And so instead of burying their kings and his servers they started cremating their dead with his surviving lovers. The Scythians were warrior tribes and they were given a status of warrior castes in Hindu religious hierarchy. The different castes who claimed warrior status or higher also adopted this custom.

There are four castes in Hindu religion arranged in a hierarchy. The highest caste is Brahman, and they are the priest caste of Hinduism. After them are the Kshatria, who are the warrior castes. After them are the Vaishya caste, who are business people. And after them are the Sudra, who are the common peasants and workers. Below these four castes there are casteless, the untouchables. The four castes were not allowed to have any physical contact with the untouchables.

Each caste is divided into many sub-castes. The religious word for caste is Varna and for sub-caste Jat or Jati. But sometimes in English the term caste is used in both cases. Religiously, people are born in a caste and it cannot be changed. Each caste has some compulsory duties, which its members must do. Each caste has professional limits which decides what profession each caste can follow. Each caste members can have social relations only with its caste members. Religiously this includes marraige and even eating only with caste members. Please note that socially the caste system is different from the religious form of caste system.

How did Hinduism originated is a difficult question. The accepted theory is that Hinduism was evolved after the historical
meeting between the [Aryans and Dravidians](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Achieving_the_Dream/Book%3A_World_Religions/02%3A_Section_2%3A_Hinduism/02...). Some claim that Hinduism is mainly an Aryan culture whereas the others claim that it is mainly a Dravidian culture. Religiously the Vedas were given by Brahma.

Before Hinduism there existed another religion in India called Brahmanism and its followers were called Brahmans. The Brahmans were the spiritual and moral guides of the Indian society. The members of this religion were a close sect and others could not join it. The Brahmans slowly started accepting others into their religion and so was created Hinduism which included in it the customs which aren’t the part of the Vedas. One of the reasons the Brahmans accepted others to their religion was the fear to lose their status as moral guides to priests of a new religion that started in India, namely Buddhism. The Brahmans even accepted Buddha as a Hindu God and part of his teachings and philosophy like non-violence into their religion. — © [Aharon Daniel](https://human.libretexts.org/Courses/Achieving_the_Dream/Book%3A_World_Religions/02%3A_Section_2%3A_Hinduism/02...), Israel 1999-2000 allowed to use