Chapter 7: Hindu Traditions

Chapter Overview

In this chapter on the Hindu Traditions, Vasudha Narayanan begins with a discussion of the origins and inherent difficulties with the use of the term Hinduism as a descriptor within religious studies. Narayanan explains that the term Hinduism is used as a fluid shorthand term for “diverse philosophies, arts, branches of knowledge, and practices associated with people and communities that have some connection with the Indian sub-continent and do not explicitly self-identify with another religious tradition” (p. 304). Having highlighted the diversity within and across the Hindu traditions, Narayanan then illustrates this complexity within the Hindu traditions by focusing on select practices and beliefs including *bhaki* devotions, the caste system and stages of life, the Brahman and Atman, *karma*, *samsara*, and *dharma*, the various schools of philosophy, and the sacred writings of the Vedas *Upanishads*, *Puranas* and *Dharmashastras*. Additionally, Narayanan illuminates key differences between men’s and women’s devotional practices, and explains the rationale for the disparities.

Narayanan focuses on aspects of the key deities in Hinduism in this chapter. For instance, Narayanan describes the significance and symbolism of the Hindu “Trinity” of Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahma, the popular deities Ganesha and Sri (Lakshmi), as well as the manifestations of the Goddess, such as, Parvati, Dugra, Kali, and Sarasvati. Narayanan also introduces us to devotional practices in the home and in the temple, during the festivals of Holi (the festival that enacts the destruction of evil), Navaratri (the festival devoted to the Goddess), Deepavali (Diwali, the festival of the New Year), and life-cycle events including birth and death rituals. Finally, Narayanan contextualizes Hindi practices in the framework of historical development by drawing our attention to environmental activism, the reform movements of the Brahmo and Arya Samajs, and India’s quest for independence, therein, providing examples of how change and adaptation occur within the Hindu traditions.

Learning Objectives are met when the student:

1. Identifies and outlines major religious teachers and Hindu traditions of South Asia.
2. Comprehends and paraphrases Vedic concepts such as karma, *samsara*, *moksha*, Atman, and Brahman.
3. Identifies and summarizes the epics of the classical period both in Sanskrit and in the vernacular languages, namely, the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and especially, the *Bhagavad Gita*.
4. Names and describes the major deities of the Classical Hindu pantheon, especially Vishnu, Shiva, and the great Goddess; the major festivals; life-cycle rites; and explains the significance of devotion (bhakti)
5. Identifies and paraphrases the ways by which the Hindu traditions have been transmitted and reshaped from the colonial to postcolonial periods within the Hindu diaspora therein summarizing the various roles of women and the value of the performing arts, such as, dance and music.

Study Questions

1. What is the literal meaning of *karma* and what does it evolve to mean in the *Upanishads*? Also, what is *samsara* and *moksha*, and how do they relate to *karma*?
2. What is the meaning and significance of the phrase “you are that” (*tat tvam asi*) as expressed within the *Chandogya Upanishad*?
3. According to the *Laws of Manu*, what are the four stages of life (*ashramas*) as intended for men who belong to the three higher classes in society?
4. What is the content and meaning behind the symbolism of the Dance of Shiva?
5. What are two of the changes that yoga has taken on since being introduced to North America?

Study Questions: Answers

1. The literal meaning of *Karma* is “action,” especially ritual action, but in the *Upanishads*, the term *karma* evolves to mean rewards and punishments attached to actions. The system of cause and effect associated with this understanding of *karma* requires *samsara*, that is, this continuous cycle of life and death, until one achieves liberation, known as *moksha*, through acquiring wisdom. (p. 311)
2. The phrase “you are that” refers to the relationship between Atman (i.e., the human soul) and Brahman (i.e., the Supreme Being). In the *Chandogya Upanishad*, “you are that” describes the idea that “you” are Atman and “that” is Brahman to express the unity of Brahman and Atman just as salt is united with water, once salt is dissolved within water. (pp. 312–313)
3. The first of the four stages of life (*ashramas*) as outlined in the *Laws of Manu* is known as studenthood, which is the time when a boy concentrates on their learning. The second stage is the householder, when a man marries, supports his family, students and repays debts to society. The third stage is forest dweller, when a man and his wife retire to the forest and live a simple life. The fourth stage is known as the ascetic, this is when a man renounces the world altogether and seeks enlightenment. (p. 324)
4. The Dance of Shiva depicts the idea of Shiva as the cosmic dancer known as Nataraja. Shiva represents the dancer and the ascetic, thus symbolizing mastery over universal energy and inner tranquility. Shiva has four hands in classic representations. One of the right hands holds an hourglass-shaped drum symbolizing speech and the divine truth heard through revelation. The other right hand is a gesture that grants fearlessness to devotees. One of the left hands holds a flame, symbolizing the destruction of the world at the end of time. The feet grant salvation and are worshipped to obtain union with Shiva. The left foot, representing the refuge of the devotee, is raised, signifying liberation. The other left hand points to this foot. Dancing through the creation and destruction of the cosmos, Shiva–Nataraja is the master of both the fierce, violent dance that gives rise to energy, and the gentle, lyric dance representing tenderness and grace. The entire universe shakes when he dances; Krishna sings for him, the snake around his neck sways, and drops of the Ganga River, which he holds in his hair, fall to the earth (p. 340).
5. The first difference is that yoga is seen in North America to be independent from any religious framework. Thus, one can practice yoga in North America without becoming Hindu. The second difference can be seen in the reason one practices yoga. While “Indian yoga” centres on developing moral discipline and meditation, with the goal of reaching higher consciousness and emancipation from samsara, “American yoga” focuses on physical well-being and stress reduction. (p. 357)

Research Questions

1. The holy word “Om” or “Aum” is said to be filled with power. What do the separate sounds of the word represent? Are these representations the same for all who hear this word? Or are there multiple meanings and interpretations of this word?
2. The Goddess appears in multiple forms, from Parvati, to Durga, to Kali. What do these different forms represent? What is the relationship between these different forms of the goddess?
3. Holi is the festival that enacts the destruction of evil. Explain the key features of the festival, and how this festival enacts the destruction of evil.
4. Shankara of the Vedanta school of philosophy is known for his idea that reality is non-dual (*advaita*). Why is this idea of reality significant for ideas about how liberation works in Hindu thought?
5. *Bhakti* is a type of Hindu devotion. What are the key elements of *bhakti* as practised in the North Indian context?
6. What are possible explanations that account for the popularity of Ganesha who is often considered the most beloved of all the Hindu gods?
7. The Hindu “Trinity” consists of the gods Brahman, Vishnu, and Shiva. What is the relationship between these three gods of the “Trinity”? Why is it significant that there are three gods in relationship?
8. Why are the *murtis* central to Hindu temple practices?
9. Ghandi was central in the process of achieving Indian independence from England. How did Ghandi’s practice of non-violence contribute to India’s quest for independence?
10. Hindu environmental activists often take inspiration from the *Song of Peace*, which links the process of peace to the healing of plants, trees, and the world in general. How does the *Song of Peace* and environmental activism connect to ideas found in Hindu thought?

Reflection Questions

1. Do you think that women are more attracted to *bhakti* rituals of female deities, and men more attracted to *bhaki* rituals of male deities? Or do you think that one performs *bhakti* rituals of a particular god/goddess that are based on what one is devoted to?
2. Why do you think scholars focus on the Vedas when the general population does not?
3. Which of one of the festivals do you find most significant for understanding Hindu practice?
4. Why is it significant that not all life-cycle events have the same importance for all communities?
5. Dance is considered to be a way to make the Vedas, and hence revelation, accessible to all. What is it about dance that makes this possible?

Additional Resources

1. Hindupedia: The Hindu Encyclopedia <http://www.hindupedia.com/en/Main_Page>

Hindupedia is “devoted to educating the public about all aspects of Hinduism ranging from history and philosophy to current events that impact Hindus. We are the only online Hindu encyclopedia that provides the public with a traditional perspective on our religion and way of life. There are [6,002](http://www.hindupedia.com/en/Special:Statistics) articles on Hindupedia.”

1. Internet Sacred Text Archive: Hinduism. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/index.htm>

The Internet Sacred Text Archive has made available a number if Hind writings including several texts of the *Upanishads*; the *Bhagavad* Gita; and the *Ramayana.*

1. Astrojyoti.com. <http://www.astrojyoti.com/scripturesindex.htm>

This website contains a wide breadth of material including a comprehensive online index and the full texts of Hindu scripture, namely, the Vedas, the *Upanishads* (which are provided separately), the *Puranas* and the epics including the *Bhagavad Gita*.

1. The Indus Civilization. <http://www.harappa.com/har/har0.html>

Site with extensive information of the Indus Civilization, including an introduction, essays, and many images contained within twenty-two slideshows with 1,000 slides from various scholars of the ancient Indus Civilization (3500-1700 BCE), which includes “seals, jewelry, figurines and other artifacts from Indus times through beautiful photographs and captions by the archaeologists and experts who unearthed, study and explain them.”

1. Hinduism Today. <https://www.hinduismtoday.com/>

Founded in 1979, this popular magazine, connected to the Himalayan Academy, seeks to foster Hindu solidarity and diversity; inform and inspire Hindus and non-Hindus alike; dispel myths and misinformation on Hinduism; promote the sacred Vedas; and nurture the spiritual Hindu renaissance. In addition to the magazine, this website has provided resources on news, education and Hindu basics.

1. History of Hindu India. (2014). Editors of *Hinduism Today*. The Himalayan Academy. <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLkA3jcdbA5kTwKf5gHchrJliKCMTM__7B>

"The History of Hindu India" is a series of five documentaries on the history of Hinduism in India from ancient times to the present day with running times ranging from around seventeen to twenty-three minutes.

1. Wendy Doniger. 2014. *On Hinduism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
2. William J. Johnson. 2010. *A Dictionary of Hinduism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
3. David Kinsely. 1998. *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition*. New Delhi: Motilal Banasidas.
4. *Elements*: *Fire* (1996); *Earth* (1998); *Water* (2005). Written and directed by Deepa Mehta.

In this critically acclaimed series of three controversial films. Mehta examines a range of social issues in modern India (pre- and post-colonial). In *Fire* (1996), Mehta interrogates the issues of arranged marriage and homosexuality in the patriarchal culture of India. In *Earth* (1998), Mehta focuses on the religious conflict associated with the partition of India and the emergence of Pakistan. In the third, *Water* (2005), Mehta examines the marginalization of widows in rural India, misogyny and suicide in India.

Field Work Guidelines

If you are interested in doing fieldwork, you need to plan and organize your fieldwork experience as thoroughly as you can. Generally, you can divide your fieldwork experience into three stages: Planning, during, and after your fieldwork.

Planning Your Fieldwork

*Research:* Begin by researching the individual, group, or place you would like to do work on or with. Visit websites if available, and read any available scholarship.

*Make Contact:* Contact the person, group, or administrators of the place you would like to research. Give as much information as possible about your project so that your contact can guide. Often your contact will be able to help you understand the rules for conduct that will be needed during your fieldwork. Remember to be polite and courteous.

*Questions:* Based on your research and interests, create a set of questions you would like to answer during the course of your fieldwork.

*Ethics Approval:* Some projects need to have ethics approval, especially if your research involves people. The guidelines for applications for ethics approval may differ depending on the organization or university you work with; thus, please contact your organization or university to find out more about this process.

During Your Fieldwork

Often, there are specific rules for conduct when you visit sacred spaces and/or interview people, and usually, these rules can be seen before you enter a site, or spoken about before you interview people. It is best to find out about these rules before you begin your fieldwork. There are some general rules that should be followed at all times: Always be polite and courteous, dress modestly, and participate where appropriate.

*Be polite and courteous:*

1. Introduce yourself. If you are visiting a sacred site or a worship centre, you will be able to find people who are either there to meet you specifically, or would like to help you during your visit.
2. Leave your camera, phone, notebook, or laptop in a bag or even at home unless you have received prior permission to use these items.
3. Be aware of signs. Signs have important information about the place you are in, thus, look for the signs and the information they give.
4. Be respectful of the people and your surroundings. Do not disturb the rites or the privacy of the people. While there are times when you may be invited to participate, please remember that if you are not invited, you should keep a respectful silence and distance from the rite. Also, people may be curious about why you are visiting or conducting your research. Try to answer their questions as best you can. They may be able to provide you with additional information and further help.

*Dress modestly:*

1. Rules for appropriate dress are often important when visiting a place or a group. Please follow these rules if you have been given them.
2. For Hindu sacred sites, these rules usually mean that knees, shoulders, and heads should be covered for both men and women, and loose dress worn. Shoes also may need to be removed. Often, if you are not dressed appropriately, you may be given appropriate attire, or you may not be allowed into a site.

*Participate Where Appropriate:*

1. If you have been invited to participate, please do so!
2. Generally, follow the guidelines that have been given to you, or the people around you. The best tip: Stand when people stand, and sit when people sit.
3. Ask questions. If you are not sure what to do, ask the people around you. Most people will be happy to help you out.
4. If you are interviewing a particular person or people, make notes on the questions that you ask, and answer any questions that you are asked as well.

After Your Fieldwork

1. Make a comprehensive set of notes on your experience as soon as you are able. The better your notes are, the more you will be able to draw on later.
2. Thank anyone who has helped you with your experience, and acknowledge their help in the written version of your work.
3. Follow up with the people or the place that you have visited. If you have used information from any interviews, offer to send a copy your work to the place or the people you have met.