REL104

Lecture 2

1. Last week, we read about and considered indigenous religious traditions. Our examples were from Native American and African contexts, and also Hmong Shamanism. In many ways, our next religion, Hinduism, is an amalgamation of many indigenous traditions. In its many forms it is ancient, perhaps the oldest organized religion. However, we also have to remember that what we in the West call Hinduism is really a collection of thousands of different religious foci. There is no one way to be a Hindu. Most people and families (castes and classes) choose to worship a specific deity who is the manifestation of the divine. As we will see in the lecture notes this worship includes a long history and different approaches to the divine that seem to continue influencing modern practices.

Hinduism represents our first foray into a culture that is truly different from our own. We may find similarities, but the cultural and religious practices of the Indian subcontinent are so different that we can never truly understand what it means to be Hindu in that context. Also, unlike the religions from last week, Hinduism includes a great deal of vocabulary and a deep philosophy. The philosophical understanding of Hinduism is very complex and can be confusing.

**Lecture notes for sections**

* 1. **through 3-3**

This lecture will cover the information from the reading, but sometimes in a different order. This should make it easier to understand, as I have added some information to that which was presented in the reading.

**1. Hinduism** is most concentrated in India; India is a subcontinent, somewhat isolated from the rest of the world (the Himalayas form its north-east border). Hinduism is the majority religion in India, but Islam is also practiced there. There are often strained relations between Hindus and Muslims, and this tension plays greatly in history. India has a huge diversity of religious traditions, and we will discover that this **diversity is also found in Hinduism itself-there are many ways of being Hindu**.

What does our author say about “Hinduism” and thinking about it as a unified religious tradition? (“Hinduism” as a religion is a concept which was brought to India from other peoples. It is a generic term, and umbrella term, that blends the many regional religious practices…it is a somewhat false concept.) The author also notes that contemporary Hindus have largely accepted the term Hindu.

**2. The history of Hinduism**-Hinduism existed first as an oral tradition (like most). This is evidenced by discoveries in the archeological record made in the Indus Valley, which is now mainly in Pakistan. The author noted four main periods in the development of Hinduism:

1. **Vedic**-oldest, oral tradition that is ultimately written down, this is called the Vedas, which are sacred texts. Another name for this type is “sacrificial Hinduism” as sacrifice is a big part of the rituals of Vedic Hinduism (not human sacrifice).
2. **“Philosophical” (Vedanta)** Hinduism-this sacred text is the **Upanishads**, developed from Vedic Hinduism.
3. **Classical Hinduism**-some consider this a period within the Philosophical or Upanishadic period.
4. **“Devotional” (bhakti)** Hinduism-this is the form that most of us would be familiar with, it is the “stereotypical” presentation of Hinduism to the west. It is polytheistic, and its sacred text in Bhagavad-Gita.

**3. Vedic Hinduism**-This is the original type of Hinduism discovered in the Indus Valley, (part of the archeological record). What were found were the remains of the Harappa culture (3000-1750 BCE approximate times). The Harappa culture is later considered the Dravidians as referenced in the book.

**Harappa Culture**-stable culture, existed as a number of city-states, (like the ancient Greek city states), they were good at architecture, good city planners, they had streets that ran on the grid system, there is even some evidence that they had running water and plumbing. But the problem with being so advanced is that they were the target for invasion, because they had the goods and resources that other people wanted.

As the author notes, there is different opinion on whether the culture was invaded or just resettled, but what is not disputed is that in approx. 1500 BCE, the Aryan culture came down from the north and began to live among the Harappa.

Aryan culture was nomadic and warrior-like. They traveled on horses, and were able to move far distances. This warrior culture supports the idea that the invasion was a war-like conquest. The Aryans brought weaponry and soldering techniques with them. Being nomadic, the Aryans did not build cities, but they evidenced other forms of cultural creativity.

They had a very strong **oral tradition** (poetry, songs, storytelling, chants and prayers) which could be carried with them wherever they went. It is believed that they had their own polytheism (maybe related to the Greek and Roman gods).

This oral tradition is eventually written down (1500 BCE) around the time that they encounter the Harappa. This is the date of the oldest written version of their beliefs, but Hindus believe that the tradition itself is much older. **This written, Aryan tradition, which invaded the Harappa, becomes the Vedas.**

Vedic Hinduism then is the result of the intermingling of the Harappa and Aryan cultures, and the written Vedas are the sacred scripture.

**-Sacrifice** is very important, as mentioned earlier, and many things constituted sacrificial offerings from food to animals. The person who made the sacrifices was a priest. They were called the **Brahmin**, and eventually this name designates the highest social class, the class of priests. This is because priesthood was hereditary, passed from father to son.

The Vedas themselves are a collection of writings-prayers, chants, songs, poetry, stories, etc. There are 4 main collections of writings: **Rig Veda** (hymn knowledge), **Yajur Veda** (ceremonial knowledge), **Sama Veda** (chant knowledge), and **Atharva Veda** (knowledge from the teacher Atharva).

The **Upanishads** are late additions to the Vedas, and form the basis of philosophical Hinduism. They are a series of poems and stories, and even though they were a late addition to the Vedas, they can also stand alone, or apart from the Rig Veda. They can be considered complete in their own right, and to such an end, they are the sacred texts of philosophical Hinduism. We are beginning to see that Hinduism’s diversity grows somewhat organically from within its own traditions.

**4. The Upanishads and philosophical Hinduism**. Why philosophical? A time of questioning society and the religious practices…movement to some form of mono or pantheism…related to the first concept that of Brahman (not Brahmin). Much of the questioning is around the importance of sacrifice and the role of the priest. The reading from the Upanishads that praises meditation over sacrifice is an example of this time of questioning, (pg 69, 3-2b). The author of this short piece is suggesting that sacrifice does nothing (may even hurt) to help the practitioner be free from reincarnation. He suggests that the priest (Brahmin) should go and learn something from the forest-dweller who is practicing meditation.

**Brahman** is ultimate reality-(How would you describe this?) Brahman exists, can be known through reason and experience. Brahman is not what we would consider a God, but an impersonal force, (doesn’t know human beings as individual), but it is the unifying reality of the universe. To know Brahman is to experience Brahman, you can’t talk about, or think about Brahman. Words cannot adequately describe this ultimate reality.

**The experience of Brahman leads to the realization that all reality is ultimately ONE, and Brahman is the ONENESS of all reality**. Therefore, Brahman is beyond concept, yet it is insisted that Brahman can be known through experience. (Here is where some aspects of devotional and philosophical Hinduism combine, one of the ways that Brahman is experienced is through meditation enhanced by yoga.)

How does one come to see that all is ONE? This is the next concept, that of **Maya**. What is Maya? Maya is the **state of illusion** that we walk around in when we think that reality is of our own making, when we think that reality is diverse. We mistake our thoughts of reality for reality itself. Maya does not only have a negative connotation. The world is not false, but it is real in a way that is different from how we assume it to be. The world is not static, nor is time part of the real reality. The goal of philosophical Hinduism is to get out of this unreal reality, to break-through the illusion. One of the ways to do this is through meditation (yoga). One must cultivate a mental discipline that clears the thoughts (illusions) and connect with Brahman (reality as it actually is). The payoff for experiencing Brahman is to enter a new state of being-**enlightenment**.

The next concept, intimately related to Brahman, is that of **Atman,** what is Atman? In one sense it is soul, but not in the individual way. **Atman is not that which makes each creature unique (that is Jiva); it is rather that which unites all together in the ultimate reality of Brahman.** When you are able to understand the ultimate reality that all things are ONE, you will realize that Atman is Brahman, the Brahman found within all things. At this point, Brahman and Atman are the same things. The Atman is immortal, because Brahman is immortal. If you are not enlightened, your Atman is reincarnated into another body for as long as it takes you to achieve enlightenment. Once you are enlightened you are no longer subject to reincarnation.

**Samsara** is the wheel of death and rebirth. This is the state your Atman is in while you remain in **Maya** (illusion), until you achieve enlightenment and experience **Moksha**, liberation from the wheel. You no longer come back; your soul is united with Brahman.

**Karma** is the natural force that governs how (what form) you come back, and if you must still be reincarnated. Karma is the weight of all of your past actions both good and bad. At the moment of your death what determines how you come back is good karma vs. bad karma. (You may come back in a higher social class, or a lower one or even as an animal.) Reincarnation is a bad thing, because you always risk being reborn into a life of more pain and suffering. Karma is the moral judgment placed on each of your actions.

Even good karma is not always a good thing…it implies attachment to the life of illusion, hence philosophical Hinduism promotes detachment.

**5.** **Bhakti, devotional** Hinduism-The Bhagavad Gita will constitute for us the beginning of the section on Devotional Hinduism. It is here where philosophical and devotional intersect. Our author also relates this to the Classical period of Hinduism

**Bhagavad Gita**-long poem that tells the story of Prince Arjuna. Basically, he is set to inherit his father’s throne, but other family members want to take it from him. By rights, he should fight those who challenge his claim to the throne, but he doesn’t want to fight his family, or face death. His chariot driver is named Krishna, and is a manifestation of the god Vishnu, even though the prince doesn’t know it. (We will discuss Vishnu in detail later, but you should know that Vishnu is the most popular god today.) Krishna gives Arjuna the advice that he should fight his family, because it is his duty (**dharma**) to fight for what is right, to be what he is meant to be, which is king. Arjuna wavers until Krishna, impatient, appears as Vishnu, and commands Arjuna to do his duty. Arjuna fights and wins. This of course establishes the power of Vishnu, but it also justifies the caste system.

Devotional Hinduism takes the impersonal concept of Brahman and gives it the personal face of Vishnu/Krishna. Enlightenment is no longer only for those who free themselves, there is now a **merciful god** who will free people if they worship him. Vishnu is the face of the merciful Lord who asks for devotion in return for moksha.

-Devotion to a god/goddess takes on more ritual form, worshiping specific deities at temples by offering food and gifts. It should also be noted, that the deities that are worshiped in Hinduism are many, and that they developed over a long period of time, some are pre-Vedic, but that most people choose to worship only one deity who represents the unifying ultimate reality to them. Also noted by our author is how different gods have different names in different parts of India, or how they evolved into other gods.

A quick note about gods and goddesses: **they usually have multiple arms/heads/eyes**, etc. Why is that? (This stresses their supernatural powers.) Also, all gods and goddesses have the 3rd eye in the middle of their forehead. It represents the faculty of intuition, 6th sense, which all deities have. Many Hindu women, and some men in certain castes, wear a dot in their forehead to represent this.

The three main gods: they have been particularly important in Hinduism (trinity) **Trimurti**

1. **Brahman**-creator god of the universe, shows up in Hindi cosmogonies, is the least worshipped god, personal god, who is considered the personal aspect of Brahman (ultimate reality). He himself is created by Vishnu.
2. **Vishnu**-god of preservation of the universe, most popular god of devotional Hinduism, Brahman brings the universe into being, but Vishnu sustains it in its existence. Vishnu has 10 avatars (incarnations) and it is thought that he takes these forms at times of great need. These avatars are the forms that Vishnu uses to disguise himself in order to appear to humans. 9 avatars have already been manifested (Krishna, Rama, Siddhartha). Krishna and Rama are the avatars of Vishnu that are most worshiped. The 10th, final avatar will appear at the end of the world, and will be the judge of the world. (Messiah like)
3. **Shiva**-destroyer god. Remember, destruction is not considered a negative thing in Hindu culture; it is simply that which must happen in order for reconstruction to begin. Shiva is worshiped with fear and awe, because the forces of destruction and recreation are so fundamental to all of life. Note: Shiva’s 3rd eye is closed, and when it opens, the whole universe will be destroyed.

These three gods (although worshipped to varying degrees) are often pictured together in Hindu art. This makes sense, as creation, preservation and destruction/recreation are the important elements of all life, and have particular importance in Hinduism because of their belief in reincarnation.

**-Goddesses**: Many are different manifestations of the one goddess. The goddesses of Hinduism are interesting because of their portrayal as being both loving and cruel. It’s like two sides of the same coin, example, why worship female divinity? (fertility/birth/etc.) Something like birth is also a seeming paradox, the same way goddesses are. Birth is a time of great joy, yet great fear, it is fraught with potential dangers. It is new life that is brought about through loss of blood, something that is close to death. The mother (animal or human) is often capable of both incredible tenderness and nurturing and violent protective behavior.

a. **Devi(Parvati/Laksmi)-**great mother, foundation of all of the female goddesses

b. **Durga**-destroys evil

c. **Kali**-goddess of death, most feared of all gods and goddesses, wears a necklace of skulls, her fangs drip with blood. Calcutta (Kolkata) named for Kali, Kali’s stairs

d. **Shakti**-female consort/wife of every god, every god has a shakti (divine energy), gods are immobile, cannot act without their shakti, gives them their divine energy to act. Many shakti are worshiped as well. (Note: goddesses can act without the gods however).

Goddesses are important and powerful, which is remarkable when you consider some of the attitudes and practices towards women in India.

-While it is the goal to become enlightened and achieve Moksha, it is believed that some people will never achieve it. There is a heavy emphasis on free will-we can forever make bad choices.

A final note on the first section of the readings: On page 73, the author talks in depth about modern politics. It should be noted that the political party he mentions, BJP, recently won big in India. The new Prime Minister is none other than Narendra Modi, the man mentioned in the book. His conservative party won on the promise of fixing the economy through jobs. No one is sure if they will continue on with the push for “Hindu-ness” as it notes in the book.

**Lecture notes for sections**

* 1. **through 3-6**

**6. 4 stages of life** and legitimate life goals that can maximize a person’s potential for achieving moksha:

a. **Student**-this stage lays a religious foundation, but the student stage is also about the pursuit of pleasure, the time before there are higher responsibilities.

b. **Householder**-marriage and family life, for some the pursuit of wealth

c. **Retiree**-pursue dharma (religious duty) which will help you towards moksha

d. **Sannyasin**-not for everyone, it is the stage of renunciation, can hasten the liberation/enlightenment process. **Asceticism**: give up everything, devote the rest of life to pursuit of enlightenment. Can join a monastery, **Ashram**, or wander as a beggar. This type of begging also allows others to earn good karma, **it is an honor to give to Sannyasin beggars**. This type of renunciation helps you develop genuine egolessness.

**7.** **Yoga** is one of the disciplines associated with devotional Hinduism. However, like Hinduism itself, the line is not so clear. Some of these types of yoga are more connected with philosophical Hinduism (those that seek to connect to Brahman) and some are more akin to devotional Hinduism (those that focus on devotion to a deity). It should be mentioned that we have created two distinct categories and a somewhat artificial line between these two types of Hinduism. Many Hindus include devotion to a deity as part of their work towards experiencing Brahman and becoming liberated from samsara (wheel of birth and death).

**Western vs. Eastern view of yoga-**In Hinduism, the goal of yoga is to aid one in meditation and/or devotional practices. The physical aspect is really a means to the end of encountering Brahman. In the west, we focus first on the physical aspects as a way to achieve greater flexibility and relieve stress. Sometimes, we stumble upon some type of internal/meditative result accidentally, but it is usually not our first intention when we practice. This is the intention of the east, and the physical benefits are really an afterthought.

The importance of meditation for both types of Hinduism cannot be underrated. Meditation frees the mind of thought, particularly of the thoughts to separateness and individual cares that make experiencing Brahman impossible. Meditation is a practice that builds mental discipline, and allows the person not to be controlled by his/her thoughts. This is somewhat strange to us in the West, **we are a thinking culture**, we value our thoughts, but for Hindus, our thoughts are still part of Maya (illusion). Our thoughts are not the real reality. The ultimate goal of meditation is to encounter Brahman, the immediate goal is to stop mistaking our thoughts about reality for reality itself.

Yoga literally means **yoke**, and there are many forms of yoga.

a. **Jnana** Yoga (knowledge yoga) is part of philosophical Hinduism. It encourages intellectual studying of the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita in order to build a mental discipline that allows the person to break through Maya

b. **Karma** yoga (action yoga) this is associated more with devotional Hinduism. Gandhi practiced this. Enlightenment is achieved through right action (usually unselfish action) and is not considered an intense mental discipline like jnana.

c. **Bhakti** yoga (devotion yoga) one looks outside of oneself and focuses on devotion to a deity. One can achieve enlightenment by devotion and offerings made to the gods/goddesses.

d. **Raja** Yoga (royal yoga) this is the type of meditation yoga that we are familiar with, includes a mantra and a practice of emptying the mind. It can be both philosophical and devotional, depending on the image or phrase that is used in meditation.

e. **Hatha** yoga (force yoga), this is the type popular in the West. Hatha and Raja are often used together. Both focus on breath, and the postures (asanas) of hatha are used by those who are meditating to aid in the process.

f. **Kundalini** yoga (spiritual energy, like a snake), movements that open the seven chakras, and bring the person joy and insight.

**8. Hindu Ritual**

Hindu ritual can be divided into **temple worship** and **domestic worship**, although some of the symbolic elements happen in both settings. It is a part of Bhakti (devotional Hinduism) but is influenced by philosophical Hinduism. The purpose of devotion to a god/goddess is to gain good karma, and receive forgiveness for sins, hence helping the person become liberated from samsara (death and rebirth).

**-Temple worship**-again, like the naming of gods and the understanding of how a god related to Brahman (ultimate reality) there are **many variations of temples** and temple worship throughout India. The gods in the temple are treated as noble guests and their images are treated with hospitality (bathing, feeding, etc.) The gods are **both transcendent and immanent** (from discussion in lecture 1). The god, the whole god is present in the image in the temple (immanent) AND still present beyond reality in heaven (transcendent).

**Murti**-Most devotees of a particular god believe that the god takes form in, is incarnated in, the image/statue that they worship. So a murti is more than just a picture or a statue; the god/goddess is actually present in the image while at the same time being more than the image. The divine cannot be captured in the image.

**Domestic worship**-This is actually the more frequent and probably more important form of worship. Most Hindu families have a room or section of a room set up as a shrine to the god that the family is devoted to. Again, the image of the deity is treated as a guest.

**9. Issues of society**-As noted above, the Bhagavad Gita tells a story that deals with duty and leads to the acceptance of the caste system. Arjuna is a prince/warrior, Krishna/Vishnu tells him to do his duty, **the caste system is based on the belief that your first obligation is to do your duty**, which you are born into: (our author notes that the real social system in India is much more complex than this, with many subcastes.)

1. Brahmin-priests

2. Warrior/nobility

3. Merchant-(Gandhi’s caste)

4. Peasant-day laborers

5. Untouchables-technically, outside of cast altogether, they do the dirty work and are considered Outcastes. They are not a caste, in a way, less than human, and very poor.

Untouchables call themselves **Dalit**, because it is a “neutral name” and not as stigmatized. In contemporary India, particularly in the urban areas, they have made some progress (there are a few members of this social class that are in parliament). The man in the video on the funeral rites at Varanasi is an Outcaste/Dalit. It is his job to touch the deceased so that the family of the deceased is not made impure by touching the dead body. Interestingly, one of the perks of his work (I believe the video shows others doing it) is that he has first right to any jewelry or other precious metals that do not burn in the fire. The family cannot touch them, so those who tend the fires sift through the wet ashes to find it. It is a form of secondary income.

Other concepts in society:

**Kama**-sensual love. Hinduism is not a religion that views the body and sexuality as something that is bad. While recognizing that sexual energy is powerful and best used in marriage, their religious traditions and stories give a great deal of attention to the erotic relationships of the deities and their mates. Kama is a goal of human life, and one of the goals of marriage. “A wife is her husband’s partner in kama as well as in dharma.”

**Suttee/Sati-**Is the practice of women throwing themselves on their husband’s funeral pyre. It can be explained by understanding the overall status of Hindu women in general.

The supplemental reading on the **Laws of Manu as they relate to women** is quite eye-opening:

-A woman is considered **property** of a man, first her father, then her husband, then of a son or nearest male relative (if she doesn’t practice Suttee).

-A woman may not own property, nor may she initiate divorce.

-Another practice, that of **bride burning** (which is also illegal) is another symptom of this problem. A woman leaves her family to live with her husband’s family. Arranged marriages are the norm, and the husband is often looking for someone who will manage the house and take care of his elderly parents. Most households are multi-generational. The bride is often the “low man on the totem pole.” She has the least rights in her house, and must follow the orders of her mother-in-law. Not all mother’s-in-law are horrible, but it is a possibility. Sometimes, the husband’s family, if they find the bride not up to their expectations, or if they feel that her family should have paid a higher dowry for her, (maybe she’s not good at her chores), will burn her, killing her to free up their son to find a better wife.

-Female infanticide and gender based abortions. Sons are desired because they will take care of their parents in old age. Daughters are expensive because the family will have to pay a dowry to marry her off and she will go to live with her husband’s family. This means that even when girls are born (not aborted) they are often treated worse; they receive less food and less education. This is particularly the case in more rural areas.

**Wedding video on pg. 82, 3-4b**

Most interesting to me is the connection between the way women are treated and the wedding ceremonies. When we view the videos on the weddings, we see the pageantry, the rich colors, the gold bangles, the henna tattoos. It is quite a spectacle. I recently read an article discussing the recent issues regarding women in India (several high-profile rape cases, most recently the brutal rape and hanging of 2 teenage girls). The author noted that the way women are treated in wedding ceremonies shows how little society cares for women. Where we in the West see beauty and pageantry, she sees this: the groom walks tall and straight. The bride is weighted down by bangles and yards of cloth. Her head is bowed; she wears a chain that attaches her to the groom. She is beautiful but voiceless and powerless.