CHAPTER FOUR: HINDUISM

Chapter Outline and Unit Summaries

I. Introduction: The Oldest and Most Complex Religion

A. Hinduism is Very Ancient and Immensely Complex

1. Name Derived from Sanskrit Name for River Indus, Sandhu
   a. Muslim Conquerors Used Generic Term “Hindu” for All in India who Refused to Convert to Islam
   b. British Colonialists Used “Hindu” in Same Way

2. Origins in Third Millennium B.C.E.

3. Includes Almost Any Form and Style of Religion Ever Known to Humanity, with Millions of Major and Minor Gods

4. Several Distinct Schools of Thought, No Identifiable Founder

B. Hinduism is Source of Three Other Religions

1. Jainism
2. Buddhism
3. Sikhism
4. Hinduism Survives as Mainstream Religion of India by Absorbing and Assimilating Potential Rivals

II. The Origins of Hinduism

A. Pre-Aryan India Before Aryan Migration in Second Century B.C.E

1. Native Peoples of India had Many Highly Developed Cities Along the Indus River

2. Pre-Aryan Indian Civilization Had Written Language

3. Pre-Aryan India Had Developed Religion that Might be Source of Some Later Hindu Gods and Practices

B. The Coming of the Aryans

1. Aryans Migrate into India Through Persia (Modern Iran) Between 1750 and 1200 B.C.E.
a. “Aryan”: Sanskrit Word Meaning “Noble Ones”
b. Similarities Between Persian Zoroastrianism and Early Hindu Vedic Literature
c. Early Aryan Migrants were Nomadic Shepherds Led by Tribal Chieftains called rajas

2. Early Aryan Civilization in India Sixth Century B.C.E.

a. The rajas Develop Minor Kingdoms
b. Aryan Civilization Develops Into Four Basic Classes, or varnas that Become Basis for Later Caste System
   a. Kshatriyas: Chieftains and Warriors
   b. Brahmins: Priests who Serve City Cults
   c. Vaishyas: Commoners and Merchants
   d. Shudras: Conquered Pre-Aryan Peoples who are Servants and/or Slaves of Aryans

C. Aryan Religion

1. Difficult but Possible to Discern Pure Aryan Religion from the Vedic Literature

2. Aryans Were Indo-European Polytheists Whose Gods Personified Natural Forces (Storm, Sun, Moon, Soil, Fertility) and Hence Have Animistic Roots

3. Chief Manner of Worship was Sacrifice

   a. Animals, Food, Drink, Plants Sacrificed
   b. Vedas Have Extravagant Formula for Sacrificial Offerings
   c. Aryan Horse Sacrifices the Most Expensive and Elaborate in Any Religion

III. The Vedic Era

A. The Vedas: The Oldest and Most Sacred Books of Hinduism

1. Basic Source of Hindu Understanding of Universe Upon Which All Later Hindu Texts Comment

   a. Word Veda Means Knowledge, Sacred Lore
   b. Uncertainty Regarding Time of Composition
   c. Oral Tradition Likely Began Before Aryans
d. Aryans Developed Oral Tradition and Created Texts

e. Final form of Vedas Written in Language Called *Vedic*, a Predecessor of Early Sanskrit

f. Vedas Function in Modern Hinduism Analogously to the Way the Hebrew Scriptures Function in Christianity and Islam

2. Four Basic Vedic Books

   a. The *Rig-Veda*: Collection of over 1,000 Hymns to Aryan Gods, Containing Their Basic Mythology
   b. The *Yajur-Veda*: Collection of Rites and Material to be Recited During Sacrifices to the Gods
   c. The *Sama-Veda*: Collection of Chants and Verses from Basic Hymns Sung by Priest at Sacrifices
   d. The *Atharva-Veda*: Collection of Rituals and Prayers for Domestic Use, as well as Spells and Incantations to Ward Off Evil

3. Four Basic Parts to Each of the Vedic Books

   a. Hymns (*Mantras*) to the Gods, Considered to be the Most Ancient Material in the Vedic Literature
   b. Ritual Materials (*Brahmanas*)
   c. Forest Treatises (*Aranyakas*) for Hermits
   d. Philosophical Materials (*Upanishads*)

4. The Most Important Gods in the Vedas

   a. Indra, God of the Thunderbolt, Clouds, Rain, and Ruler of Heaven; Object of Most Hymns in Vedic Literature; Indra Conquers Vrtra, the Personification of Chaos
   b. Agni, God of Fire, Priests, and Priest of the Gods
   c. Varuna, God who Presides over the Order of the Universe and who Forgives Sins
   d. Vishnu and Rudra/Shiva Receive Only Minor Attention in Vedic Books but Later Become Major Gods in Hinduism

B. The Upanishads

   1. Collection of about 200 Vedic Philosophical Treatises

   2. Fourteen Principal Upanishads
3. Earliest Upanishad Originated in Ninth Century B.C.E.

4. Upanishads’s Place in Vedas: Organic Expression of Vedic Hymns and Rituals, Or Monistic Philosophy Contradicting Vedic Polytheism?
   a. Genre Differs from Rest of Vedas: Philosophical Treatises and Dialogues
   b. Contrary to Vedas General Polytheism, Upanishads Teach the Only Reality is Brahman, and Brahman is Eternal, Infinite, Unknown, Sexless, Impersonal
   c. All Other Gods are Expressions of Brahman
   d. It is False Knowledge / Illusion (maya) to Consider One’s Self / Soul (atman), or Anything, Separate from Brahman
   e. Upanishads Contradict Priestly/ Clerical Orientation of Vedas, Teach Meditation, Not Sacrifice, is Means of Worship
   f. Overcoming Ignorance (avidya) and Illusion (maya), not Performing Rituals and Sacrifice, is Meaning of Life
   g. All Acts (karma) Have Spiritual Consequences Corresponding to their Character
   h. Wandering of the Soul / Life Force after Death Into New Body (samsara)
   i. Goal of Life: Break Cursed Cycle of karma and samsara and Attain Freedom / Release (moksha) from Burden of Life
   j. Upanishads Abstract, Esoteric Philosophy Popular Only with Intellectuals, not Mainstream

C. The Law of Manu

1. Ethcial Text Written Between 300 B.C.E. and 300 C.E.

2. Illustrates Ethical and Social Standards Held as Ideals during the Classical Era of Indian History and the Effects of the Religious / Philosophical Teachings of the Vedas on Society

3. Reveals Roots of Social and Religious Traditions of Modern Hinduism

4. The Varna System of Social Stratification
   a. The Brahmin (Priest) at Top of Social Strata
   b. The Raja (Ruler) Second in Social Strata
c. The Vaishya (Artisans, Merchants, Farmers) Third

d. The Sudra (Servant) at Bottom of Social Strata

e. Each Caste has Own Proper Duties (dharma)
   (1) Members of Lower Castes Can Gradually Move Up to Higher Rank through Reincarnation if Carefully Follow dharma of Caste in this Life
   (2) People Could Also Move Down in Rank, even to Animal and Plant Level, if Commit Evil of Body, Speech or Mind

f. Upper Caste Males Expected to Pass Through Four Successive Stages in Life
   (1) Student of the Vedas
   (2) Marriage within Caste and Head Household
   (3) Retreat from Society to become Hermit and Learn Non-Attachment
   (4) Become a Wandering Beggar (sannyasi)

g. Women Have Constricted Social and Domestic Life
   (1) No Independence Allowed, Perpetually Under Control of Males
   (2) Bearing and Raising Children Central

5. The Law of Manu Teaches Cyclical View of Time / History

D. Jainism and Buddhism

1. Originate in Sixth Century B.C.E. and Challenge Mainstream

2. Both Reject Sacrificial System of the Vedas in Favor of Doctrine of Release from Life (moksha) Through One’s Accomplishments

3. Both Rejected Vedas as Sacred Scripture and the Caste System; Release is Possible for all Who Live Rightly

4. Both Too Austere to be Acceptable to Average Person, Eventually Main Teachings Absorbed by Hinduism

E. Bhagavad Gita

1. Epic Poem of Indian Culture and Religion, Analogous to Homeric Poems of Greek Culture and Religion

2. Bhagavad Gita is Chapters 25 to 42 of the Longer Epic Called the Mahabharata (thirteen volumes in English translation)
a. *Mahabharata* is Story of Struggles Between Two Leading Families from Beginning of Indian History

b. *Mahabharata* Written Over Long Period, but *Bhagavad Gita* Written and Inserted into it Between Second and Third Century B.C.E.

c. Families in *Mahabharata* Have Final Epic Battle between 850 and 650 B.C.E.

d. The *Bhagavad Gita* is Dialogue Prior to Battle Between the Warrior Arjuna and His Charioteer Krishna

   1. Arjuna Ponders Folly of War, but Krishna Lectures Him that it is the Religious Duty (*dharma*) of his Caste to be a Warrior
   2. Krishna Lectures Arjuna on the Doctrines of the Upanishads
   3. Krishna Reveals Self as Incarnation of the God Vishnu

e. Religious Implications of *Bhagavad Gita*

   1. Duties of One’s Caste are Religious
   2. One Incurs Bad *karma*—and Possibly be Trapped in Cycle of *samsara*—if Disobey Duties of Caste
   3. Variety of Means of Release (*moksha*) from *samsara*, Including Asceticism, Meditation, Devotions to and Worship of Gods, and Obedience to Duties of Caste
   4. Vishnu Comes to Earth in Multiple Incarnations to Help Humans, Whom He Loves
   5. Devotion (*bhakti*) to Vishnu—and other Gods—is Valid within Hinduism

IV. Postclassical Hinduism

A. The Distinction Between Classical Indian Religion (*Brahminism*) and Post-Classical Religion (*Hinduism*)

1. Classical: Greco-Roman Style Religion of Pantheon of Gods Worshipped Publicly Through Sacrificial Activity by Priests

2. Post-Classical: Worship of a Few Major Anthropomorphic Deities Through Individual Love and Devotion

3. Shift in Basic Attitude Toward Life Away from Classical Optimism to Post-Classical Life-Denying Pessimism
B. Devotion to Three Major Gods

1. Path of Devotion (bhakti-marga)
   a. Particular Gods Express One Function of Brahman (creation, destruction, preservation)
   b. Post-Classical Hindus Tend Also to See All Functions of Brahman in One Particular Deity
   c. Devi: Great Feminine Goddess, Source of other Goddesses Like Brahman is Source of Gods

2. Brahma the Creator
   a. Post-Vedic Deity, Object of Much Mythology
   b. Receives Least Attention Among the Three Major Gods, Has no Cult of Devotees
   c. Wife: Sarasvati, Goddess of Knowledge, Poetry, Speech, Wisdom

3. Shiva the Destroyer
   a. Post-Vedic Deity Developed from Aryan God Rudra
   b. Among Most Popular God in Post-Classical Hinduism
   c. The God of Death, Destruction, Disease, but Also of Reproduction Sexuality, Fertility, and Dance
   d. Favorite God of Hindu Ascetics
   e. Devotees (Shivaites) Tend to Equate Shiva with Brahman of the Upanishads
   f. Consorts of Shiva Also Popular
      (1) Kali: A Goddess More Terrible than Shiva
      (2) Paravati: Opposite of Kali, Feminine Goddess of Fertility, Perfect Wife / Mother

4. Vishnu the Preserver
   a. The God of Love, Benevolence, Forgiveness, Play
   b. Appeared in Nine Different Forms (avatars) to Assist Humans (e.g. Krishna in Bhagavad Gita)
   c. Tenth Avatar of Vishnu, Kalkin, Will Come at End of World to Judge Wicked and Reward Virtuous
   d. Devotees (Vaishnavites) Tend to Equate Vishnu with Brahman of the Upanishads, Compose Poems and Songs
e. Wife: Lakshmi, Guardian of World’s Welfare, 
    Goddess of Fertility, Wealth, Victory

C. Devotion to Knowledge (jnana-marga)

1. Piety for the Intellectuals and Leisure-Class Based on a 
   Philosophical System (darshan)

2. Systems All Based on Vedas, Aim at Release, Believe in 
   Rebirth and Pre-Existence

   a. The Sankhya System

      (1) Atheistic System without Personal Gods
      (2) All Springs from Only Two Forces: Spirit 
          and Matter
      (3) Influences Buddhism and Jainism

   b. The Yoga System

      (1) “Yoga” Derived from yuj, “to yoke, join”
      (2) Follows Sankhya Philosophical System, 
          Teaches One Should Yoke Individual Spirit 
          to God, the Atman, to Brahman
      (3) Developed by Patanjal, 2nd Century B.C.E., 
          Codified in Yoga Sutra
      (4) Emphasis on Meditation as Means of 
          Release from Cycle of Birth, Death, Rebirth
      (5) Raja Yoga Stresses Mental and Spiritual 
          Development to Superconsciousness
      (6) The Eight Steps of Raja Yoga Practice

   c. The Mimansa System

      (1) Based on Study of Vedic Scriptures and 
          Mimansa Sutra (200 B.C.E.)
      (2) Developed by Kumarila and Prabhakara in 
          Eighth Century C.E.
      (3) Primary Concern: Avoiding Rebirth by 
          Obeying Laws Laid Down in Vedas and 
          Performing Rites Established in Them
      (4) Early Forms Were Atheistic but Later Forms 
          Contain Prayers to Shiva

   d. The Vaisheshika System
(1) Originates in Sixth Century B.C.E. Along With Buddhism and Jainism
(2) Primary Text, *Vaisheshika Sutra* by Kanada
(3) Vaisheshika Means “Particularly:” Universe Has Nine Distinct, Particular Eternal Elements: Earth, Water, Air, Fire, Soul, Mind, Ether, Time, Space
(4) No Gods Necessary to Universe

e. The Nyaya System

(1) Adaptation of Vaisheshika System in Third Century B.C.E. by Gautama in *Nyaya Sutra*
(2) Gautama the “Aristotle of India”
(3) Atheistic System Stressing Logical Analysis

f. The Vedanta System

(1) Vedanta Means “End of Vedas,” Meaning it is Peak of Vedic Teaching and Based Largely on Upanishads
(2) Badarayana Composed *Vedanta Sutra* First Century B.C.E.
(3) Monistic System: Only Brahman Exists
(4) Humanity’s Problem is Ignorance of Brahman and Illusory Nature of World
(5) Advaita Vedanta (Non-Dual) Developed by Shankara in Ninth Century C.E.
   a. Shankara Devotee of Shiva
   b. Shankara’s Commentary on *Vedanta Sutra* Classic of Medieval Hinduism
   c. Shankara Fierce Opponent of Buddhism, Helping to Destroy it in India and Restore Hinduism
(6) Ramanuja in Eleventh-Twelfth Centuries C.E. Taught Qualified Vedanta Dualism
(7) Madhava in Thirteenth Century C.E. Brings Fully Dualistic Perspective into Vedanta

V. Muslim Influences in India

A. Origins of Muslim Presence in India

1. Northwest India Conquered by Muslims circa 712 C.E.
2. Turkish General Mahmud of Ghazni Invaded India Seventeen Times in Eleventh Century C.E.

3. Sultanate of Delhi Formed in Thirteenth Century C.E.

4. Moghul Turk Dynasty Rules India in Sixteenth Century C.E.

5. Today More Muslims in India than Anyplace Else in World

B. Muslim and Hinduism in Conflict

1. Monotheistic Islam versus Polytheistic Hinduism

2. Iconoclastic Islam versus Hindu Sacred Images

3. Muslims Sacrifice of Cattle versus Hindu Veneration

4. Muslim Egalitarianism versus Hindu Caste System

5. Hindu Theology Not Altered Due to Contact with Islam

6. Sikhism Seeks to Reconcile Islam and Hinduism

VI. Modern Hinduism

A. Christianity Influences Hinduism in Modern Period

B. British Rule India for Three Centuries

1. Missionaries Come Only in Nineteenth Century

2. British Outlaw Suttee and Child Marriage

C. Modern Hindu Reformers

1. Ram Mohan Roy (1774-1833), the “Father of Modern India”
   a. Respected Christianity, but did not Believe in Divinity of Jesus
   b. Monotheist Who Opposed Polytheism as Idolatry
   c. Formed Major Nineteenth-Twentieth Century Reform Movement, Brahmo Samaj (Society of God)

2. Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886)
a. Philosophical Proponent of Advaita Vedanta Who Taught all Truth was Essentially One

b. Vivekananda (Narendranath Dutt, 1863-1902) Most Famous Disciple

   (1) Traveled World Teaching Ramakrishna’s Idea that Hinduism was Essentially Vedanta
   (2) Impressed Parliament of Religions in Chicago (1893) with His Ramakrishna-Vedanta Version of Hinduism

c. Paramahansa Ananda (1893-1952) Develops Ramakrishna and Vivekananda’s Ideas in United States

   (1) Forms Self Realization Fellowship
   (2) Blends Vedanta with Gospel

3. Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948)

   b. Political Reformer Who Combines Training in England as Lawyer with Thoreau’s Ideals of Civil Disobedience to Resist British Colonial Rule of India
   c. Opposed Caste System, Called “Untouchables” the harijan, “Children of God”)

4. Unifying Object Concern Among Reformers: Caste System

   a. Development of Caste (from Portuguese word casta, breed-race) System into Modern Form Begins in Eighth Century C.E.
   b. Four Basic Castes Develop into Thousands of Sub-Castes Based on Vocations, Ethnic, Religious Lines
   c. Modern Castes Dictate Diet, Vocation, Place of Residence, Choice of Mate, Interactions with All Outside Caste
   d. Greater One’s Contact with “Pollutants” of Blood, Death, Dirt the Lower One’s Caste: One Becomes an “Untouchable”
   e. Brahmans Seek Purity from Pollutants, Practice Strict Vegetarianism
f. Despite Sanction in Vedic Literature, Caste Discrimination Outlawed in 1948 Constitution of the Republic of India
g. Caste System Still Firmly Entrenched in India

VII. Hindu Holy Days

A. Holi

1. Most Popular Hindu Festival, Celebrated in February / March to Welcome Spring

2. Basis in Fertility Festival, Worship of Kali

B. Divali

1. Celebration of the Hindu New Year in November

2. Basis in Worship of Kali and Lakshmi

C. Dasehra

1. November Festival to Honor Durga, a Consort of Shiva

2. Celebrates Durga’s Victory Over Buffalo Demon

VIII. Hinduism Today

A. The Challenges of Modernity to Traditional Hinduism

1. Modern India is Democracy

2. Modern Indians Assume Their Lives in This World Can be Improved, Progressive Optimism is Warranted

B. Specific Political Issues

1. Rise of Fundamentalist Hinduism and Demands for Hindu Theocracy in 1990s

2. Volatile Pakistan – Kashmir Issue
3. Militant Sikh Independence Movement Challenges Unity of India

4. Minority Status of Hindus Outside India Posed Problems

**Key Names, Concepts, and Terms**

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