



Introduction to Dharma Traditions:

Who and Where are Hindus?

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Introduction

Is Hinduism a religion? Yes. And no. It actually depends on what definition of religion is used and how one defines “Hinduism.” Religion is often defined as: the belief in the existence of a god or gods, and the activities that are connected with the worship of them; or one of the systems of faith that are based on the belief in the existence of a particular god or gods, or in the teachings of a spiritual leader.¹

But the **Dharma Traditions** are far more expansive than this. They are spiritual traditions focused on philosophies, teachings and practices toward the primary aim of managing and ultimately freeing oneself (*mokṣa* or *nirvāṇa*) from the effects of life’s repetitive ups and downs (*saṃsāra*). The Dharma traditions include Hindu Dharmas – but also **Buddha Dharma, Jain Dharma, Sikhī/Sikh Dharma, regional/tribal Dharma traditions, and Zoroastrian tradition**. Hindu cultures are even more expansive, including knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, customs, norms, ethics, values, laws, institutions, worldviews with connected practices, music, dance, art, poetry, cuisine, festivals, special occasions, etc.

“Hinduism” is recognized by academics and governments as a world religion based on definitions given to it during the British colonial period. **Hindu Dharma traditions** refer to the variety of spiritual traditions that developed in Indic civilizations that remain when Buddha, Jain, Sikh, and Zoroastrian Dharma traditions are distinctly identified owing to their founders/teachers. The Hindu Dharma traditions are the unique and distinct monotheist traditions of Śākta, Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, Smārta, Kaumāram Dharmas and others, the non-theist traditions of Lokāyata, Mīmāṃsā, etc., and the regional/tribal traditions such as Kirāt Mundhum, Sanamaha, Sarnā Dharma, etc. All in all, there are over 600 distinct Hindu Dharma traditions.

Insofar as legal protections and religious freedom policies in the modern world are afforded to people of a recognized “religion”, Hindus are entitled to all the rights and protections associated with such policies by utilizing the Hinduism umbrella. Practitioners of the Hindu Dharma traditions have generally accepted the term “Hindu” in place of their actual spiritual tradition in order to refer to their religious or spiritual affiliation in official settings in the modern world, such as in academics, for

¹ <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/religion>

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citizenship, legal purposes, etc. In other contexts, they will also refer to their specific spiritual traditions as they have unique and distinct sources of knowledge, practices, philosophies, etc.

Identity – Who Are Hindus?

Hindus are people whose worldviews are established in or are enriched by Hindu philosophies and teachings. Hindus may undertake various Hindu spiritual practices, whether or not they're guided by a spiritual teacher or follow a particular Hindu Dharma tradition. They also may not undertake any such practices, but simply enjoy Hindu ideas and culture. Hindus do not have to swear an oath or pledge of allegiance to adhere to any key concepts. There is no specific set of practices that all Hindus have to maintain.

The Hindu Dharmas are non-proselytizing (apart from a few postcolonial movements). As such, the majority of the world's ~1 billion Hindus are primarily Asian (mostly Indian, Nepali, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan, Bhutanese, Indonesian, Thai, etc.) in origin. These peoples known as Hindus today originally identified themselves through their family, clan, tribe, or regional or pan-regional spiritual tradition.

There are, however, Hindus from non-Asian backgrounds. Because Hindu philosophies, teachings, and practices are considered universally accessible through sincere study, reason, and experience apart from special revelation, these Hindus, though born to families of other religious backgrounds, have adopted Hindu Dharma. As such, today's Hindu identity is a combination of heritage, culture, and/or spiritual tradition.

Modern Hindus may identify in various ways. 'Cultural Hindus' or 'Heritage Hindus' are from the ancient Indosphere or their diasporas, were raised in a household that describes themselves as Hindu, observe certain aspects of their ancestral familial/clan/tribal/regional culture i.e. art, music, dance, poetry, cuisine, festivals, special occasions, etc., and are more likely to identify with the geography and culture of their heritage rather than with a spiritual tradition. They may not be deeply familiar with the spiritual aspects of that heritage, specifically around philosophies, teachings, and spiritual practices, but may participate in family and community ceremonies.

'Spiritual Hindus' or 'practicing Hindus' are those who actively engage in spiritual philosophies, teachings and practices with varying levels of consistency, or observe various aspects of the culture and spirituality derived from a Hindu Dharma tradition. They may or may not have a Hindu heritage. If they do, they may largely embrace their familial/ancestral culture (knowledge, beliefs, art, music, cuisine, festivals, special occasions, customs, norms, social behaviors, etc.) and spiritual tradition(s) and/or that of another Hindu Dharma tradition. They may identify as Hindu (cultural) and by their Hindu Dharma tradition, region/linguistic group and/or clan/tribe, for example, Hindu Śākta or Tamil Hindu Śākta, or Hindu Vaiṣṇava or Gujarati² Puṣṭimārg³ Vaiṣṇava⁴ Modh⁵. If they do not have a

² Region of origin

³ Specific tradition of a given Hindu Dharma

⁴ Hindu Dharma

⁵ Clan

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Hindu heritage, they may adopt a specific Hindu Dharma tradition, and largely embrace the culture (knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, customs, norms, ethics, values, music, dance, art, poetry, cuisine, festivals, special occasions, etc.) and spiritual traditions of the Hindu Dharma tradition they adopted, and may prefer the name of the tradition over 'Hindu,' as an identity term, e.g. Śaiva, Vedānta, Yoga, etc. Some may adopt the regional culture of the founder of the tradition, for example Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavas in the West who adopt Bengali cultural norms.

There are also those who do not identify as Hindu, but may espouse or partake in Hindu philosophies, teachings and practices because of personal preference, custom or marriage, and identify with other Dharma traditions. The Dharma traditions have historically been and continue to be syncretic, especially in regions of India where marriage between Hindus and Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs and Zoroastrians is common. They may identify as "spiritual" or with the religion of their family even though they espouse or partake in Hindu philosophies, teachings and practices because the Hindu Dharma traditions do not demand 'conversion' or denouncing one's former religion or culture and the other religion requires exclusive allegiance or commitment. For example, there are Christians who also practice Vedāntic methods, and Indian Muslim women who engage in *Devī vrata* (spiritual observance).

Key Hindu Concepts

Hindus affirm the reality of the multiverse, all its evolutes and all life. Hindus have different philosophies to understand their connections to it all, as Hindu Dharma traditions work with an individual's understanding. The majority of Hindus believe in a Supreme Being, but they are not required to, and a good proportion of Hindus do not. Hindus can range from theists to non-theists to atheists, and have the freedom to move through that spectrum as one's life unfolds. Hindus range from monotheists (veneration of the Supreme/Divine Being) and monolatrists/henotheists (venerating the Supreme Being without denying the existence of others), to nontheists (who see no credible evidence for the existence of a Creator but acknowledge the eternal nature of the multiverse, the essence of life, and the source of both), and atheists who do not believe in anything that cannot be empirically verified.

Hindu Dharmas teach that there is no credible logic that justifies the existence of an absolute evil or devil. They also teach that all beings have selfless, impulsive, and selfish natures in varying proportions. It is up to the individual to learn how to manage these traits in order to change for the better. The Hindu Dharma traditions do not promote ideas of an eternal hell, or that any individual or group is ever condemned to eternal damnation. States of existence that are characterized by tranquility, excess, enjoyment, or suffering exist for all beings. Most Hindu Dharma traditions hold that all beings are innately eternally blissful and that knowledge helps them uncover and exist in this frame of mind. Hindu Dharma traditions also do not promote ideas of being a people who should extend dominion over others due to notions of supremacy. On the contrary, all people have equal, inherent worth and rights to exist, inclusive of all worldviews, genders, sexualities, ancestry, provenance, etc. Moreover, Hindu Dharma traditions do not promote ideas of conversion, expulsion or eradication of those who disagree with them.

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Navigating plurality of thought and practice is inbuilt in Hindu philosophies, because Hindu Dharma traditions are seeker traditions, not believer traditions. Their prime value is compassion, so although pluralistic inclusivity is prized, those who step over well-reasoned ethics will be challenged. In other words, they are wisdom traditions. They seek reality, whether personal, situational, or existential. This gives rise to a variety of sometimes opposing views, all of which exist harmoniously more or less, which is possible only through core and common teachings such as self-discovery, self-management, compassion, and pluralism. In order that this plurality be harmonious, the ancient Hindu seers developed robust forums for discussion and idea-sharing. Misconceptions were clarified. Where a singular consensus was not reached, a wise consensus on the diversity was rationalized and accepted. Because pluralism is a core Hindu value, Hindu Dharma traditions are numerous and non-centralized, with no central or worldwide Church or Ummah, and no single supreme religious leader equivalent to the Pope, Grand Mufti or even a Chief Rabbinate.

This ethos of harmonious plurality continues even today. Generally speaking, Hindus view religious hegemony or populism, which all rely on frameworks beyond the ethics of the traditions, disapprovingly. This means that there is not one view that can be presumed to be representative of all Hindus. Even where there are commonalities, Hindu philosophy and Hindus themselves recognize that not all may share those views and that everyone has the right and freedom to form and hold their own views. Hindus affirm individual autonomy, especially in one's spiritual journey.

The Hindu Dharma traditions prioritize inner transformation via logic, reasoning, and the chief of all practices: meditation techniques. Meditation in the Dharma traditions (Hindu and non-Hindu alike) grounds itself on *samatva*, or a thorough awareness and ability to manage one's actions, emotions, thoughts, and memories. *Vijñāna* is an advanced meditation platform for delving into the inner, eternal truths for true insightful awareness, called realization. In contrast, meditation in Abrahamic religions concerns itself with contemplation of scriptural verses or visualizations of the lives of the saints/prophets. The Hindu Dharma traditions also teach devotional, esoteric, yogic, artistic, scientific, and materialistic pursuits – all of which are valid ways to live out one's spirituality. Additionally, some Hindu Dharma traditions do use aspirational requests (*prārthanā*) to seek assistance during acute distress.

Hindu Dharma traditions deal with conflict by teaching that issues are to be arbitrated on the basis of logic and reason; the individual time, place, and circumstances; life lessons available through oral and textual sources of knowledge; guidance from trusted spiritual seers or mentors; and consideration of the impact a decision will have on others. Because of the reliance on logic, context, and individualized application of teachings to the circumstance, there is no retributive divine justice as found in other world religions and their associated cultures. All Hindu Dharma traditions teach *sevā* or selfless service – serving others without wanting personal or communal rewards for doing so. Indeed, knowledge that there will be rewards or side benefits, overt or covert, would invalidate the *sevā*.

The primary focus and priority for Hindus is peace, compassion, non-harm, and logic. However, when such rationality fails to prevent a threat, Hindu philosophy advocates for individuals to proactively defend themselves and those in need. Hindus do not view the kind of non-violence that

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results in total passivity as a rational position. Many indigenous Hindu schools of self-defense techniques evolved, such as Seelambam (popularly thought to be one of the many contributing ancestors of Shaolin Kung Fu through the Buddhist monk Batúo/Buddhabhadra, originally from the Indosphere), Kalaripayattu, Śastravidyā, Mallavidyā, and more. According to colonial records, these self-defense schools were outlawed by the British in order to remove the ancestral science of self-defense from Indians, thereby making them easier to subjugate. Yet even when Hindu rulers had armies, they never once in the entirety of history invaded other nations at the behest of their “religion” in order to convert or “civilize” the non-Hindus of those lands.

Key Hindu Practices

Hindus practice spirituality in many ways. There are no required practices or vows to consider oneself a Hindu. Instead there are many optional practices outlined in Hindu sources of knowledge or preserved through familial-ancestral or community traditions. The practices are intended to help individuals of all temperaments in their quests for *mokṣa* (spiritual freedom). Because the temperaments of various individuals differ, different practices will be best suited for them, hence the wide variety available.

Meditation is the chief practice taught by the Dharmas, whether theist or non-theist. For the theist Hindu Dharma traditions, practitioners may engage in devotional practices including ceremonies, chanting, contemplation, study and reflection, and/or other practices as suggested by their spiritual teacher. Most (but not all) Hindus occasionally go on spiritual journeys, known as *yātrā*. Many Hindus sometimes go on spiritual retreats for temporary periods of more dedicated practice, known as *vāsa* or *anuṣṭhāna*. To augment moderation and self-restraint, Hindus may undertake periods of fasting, silence, simple living, etc. Other Hindu spiritual practices include dance, drama, singing, and other enactments of spiritual stories or embodiment of spiritual energies (especially mediumship). These examples and others can be done individually or as a group, depending on the person, tradition, and situation.

Special occasions for Hindus include (but are not limited to):

- Commemoration of the birth, death or other events in the lives of significant spiritual teachers.
- Ceremonies for life cycle and transitions: birth, naming, starting studies, graduation, marriage, death, memorials.
- Festivals associated with the Illumined Beings and/or Supreme Being of a given Hindu Dharma tradition.
- Festivals on the annual cycles of the solar system and earth: Lunar and solar new year, equinoxes, new and full moons, etc.
- Ceremonies to bless new dwellings, vehicles, infrastructure, commodities, etc.

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Hindus are at home across the globe today. Over a billion Hindus live in India, 28.6 million in Nepal, 14.3 million in Bangladesh, 5.2 million in Pakistan, 4.7 million in Indonesia, 3.3 million in the United States, 3.1 million in Sri Lanka, 1.9 million in Malaysia, 1 million in the United Kingdom, 828,200 in Canada, 684,000 in Australia, 670,000 in Mauritius, and 505,000 in South Africa. Another 5 million Hindus live widely spread across the world, on every continent. Some countries with smaller total populations have large Hindu percentages, including Fiji and several in the Caribbean region such as Guyana, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago, due to the history of indentured labor bringing Hindus to the region.

In the United States, currently about 87% of Hindus are immigrants, while 13% were born in the US. Not all Hindus are of Indian or Asian origin. In the US, 4% of Hindus are white, 2% are black, 1% are Latino, and 2% are other/mixed ethnicity. US Hindus educationally outperform the country's general population, with 48% holding a postgraduate degree and 29% holding an undergraduate degree. This is largely due to immigration policy selecting for highly qualified immigrants; cultural values also play a role. While education does correlate to a higher average household income, it is a harmful myth that all or most Hindus in the US are highly wealthy. In fact, two-thirds of US Hindus are below median income. US Hindus are also currently a youthful demographic; 90% of them are below the age of fifty. Most of them speak multiple languages: English plus their ancestral language, and in some cases additional languages.

In summary:

Hindus are people who acknowledge, have heritages in, and/or practice the Hindu Dharma traditions. The Hindu Dharmas (not equal to "Hinduism" even though most use it as shorthand in official settings) represent the continuation and evolution of ancient spiritualities that indigenously developed primarily in South, Southeast and the rest of Asia. They do not require people to espouse any particular beliefs, and have an inclusive pluralistic approach to the world and its peoples. Their main goal is to guide humans to manage or free themselves from the repetitive ups and downs of life.