

Hindu Concepts Beyond the Indian Subcontinent



Do you think Hindu spiritual traditions existed only in Ancient India? Where do you think Hindu Dharmas exist outside of India today?

- How have Hindu traditions, ideas, and institutions extended beyond India?
- How do they continue to shape other cultures?



Pan-regional people groups, while still indigenous and ancestral, spread and settled beyond their original geographic regions”
(Hindu Histories, Center for Advancing Pluralism, 8).

What is the Indosphere?

- The “Indosphere” refers to the cultural sphere historically influenced by Indian civilization.
- It includes all of South Asia, and most of Southeast Asia, and Central Asia.
- The influence came through trade, migration, spiritual teachings, and shared practices.
- Influence **did NOT** come through conquest.

Pan-Regional Dharma Traditions

- Pan-regional traditions emerged from tribal and clan alliances formed for trade, protection, or cultural exchange.
- These included Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, Śākta, Kaumāram, Smārta, and others.
- These traditions incorporated local beliefs while maintaining common Hindu philosophical ideals.

Cultural Exchange and Trade

- Ancient Hindu societies traded throughout Asia, Asian and Pacific Islands, and as far as Ancient Greece, Egypt, and East Africa.
- Knowledge centers like Takṣaśilā attracted students from across Asia and beyond.
- Items traded included spices, textiles, metal goods, and ideas. The ideas included language, law, astronomy, and medicine.

Hindu Numeral System, Decimal Place Value, and Zero

What was invented?

- **Hindu-Arabic Numerals (0–9)**: The number system we use today originated in India around the 5th century CE.
- **Decimal System**: A base-10 system where each digit's position represents a power of 10.
- **Zero (0)**: Invented as a numeral and a concept in India by mathematicians such as **Brahmagupta** (7th century CE).

Why are the Numeral System, Decimal Place Value, and Zero so important?

- Allowed for advanced calculations, record keeping, and the development of modern mathematics.
- Revolutionized commerce, science, and technology.
- Made arithmetic simpler than older systems like Roman numerals.

How did the new systems spread?

- Traveled through trade and scholarship to the Islamic world, where scholars translated Hindu texts.
- From there, it reached Europe and transformed global learning.

Its Everyday impact:

- Used in money, measurements, science, coding, engineering, and education.
- Essential for computers, phones, GPS, and any digital system.

Surviving Traditions Outside India

Even today, the mutual influence of Hindu spiritual traditions with local regional/tribal traditions can be seen in :

- Indonesia: Āgama Jāvā (Kejawen)
- Vietnam: Dao Luong, Dao Mao
- Thailand: Buddha Dharma, Siva-Buddha, Saiva Dharma, and regional/tribal traditions.
- Philippines: Anito (pre-colonial elements remain)

Belief / Practice	Indonesia (<i>Āgama Jāvā / Kejawen</i>)	Vietnam (<i>Dao Luong / Dao Mao</i>)	Thailand (<i>Dharmic Traditions</i>)	Philippines(<i>Anito Beliefs</i>)
Ancestor Worship	Families honor spirits of ancestors with prayers	Ancestors are remembered in ceremonies	Part of traditional stories and home practices	Very strong — ancestors are venerated and gifts are dedicated in their memory. worshipped and given offerings
Karma	Belief in cause and effect (do good, get good)	People believe actions bring good or bad outcomes	Taught in stories about kings and heroes	Similar ideas about balance and respect
Meditation	Used in quiet reflection or nature-based practices	Part of prayer and spiritual thinking	Used in temples and by monks	Sometimes used in ceremonies or prayers
Veneration of Spirits or Deities	People pray to Hindu deities and local nature spirits	Veneration of Shiva and local deities	Hindu deities like Vishnu and Shiva are honored	Supernatural beings and deities are deeply respected
Temples / Ceremonies	Shrines and temples with mix of Hindu and local styles	Temples built for Hindu and local deities	Temple ceremonies are predominantly Buddhist, but also have some that follow ceremonies from Āgama Śiva-Buddha, Hindu, Regional/Tribal Dharma traditions or a combination	Shrines built at home and in nature

Art, Architecture, and Language

Examples of Hindu influence in architecture:



Angkor Wat (Cambodia)



Prambanan Temple (Indonesia)



Paśupatināth Temple (Nepal)

Art, Architecture, and Language

- Language: Sanskrit/Pali terms appear in laws, temple inscriptions, place names, and personal names.

Can you read this Sanskrit phrase?

gajāḥ phalāni khādanti

Art, Architecture, and Language

- Art: Hindu deities and epic stories appear in art, sculpture, literature, dances, storytelling, etc.



Misconceptions About Hinduism

- Colonial scholars have inaccurately portrayed Hinduism as caste-based, Sanskrit-grounded, and India-only.
- Hindu traditions were actually diverse, adaptable, and widespread.
- Many traditions blended with local customs, challenging the idea of a single, fixed “Hinduism”.

Review Questions

How do these facts change your view of Hinduism?

Why is it important to learn about cultural diffusion and influence?

Why do you think some traditions survive even after thousands of years and foreign rule?