Hinduism Essay, Research Paper

Hinduism

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Introduction

Hinduism – stands for the faith and the way of life most of the people who live

in India.

Hinduism is such an ancient religion that it had many types of beliefs

and religious practices. Around 1750 BC Aryan invaders from central Asia

settled in North – West India and introduced their own religious ideas.

Slowly the Hindu came to accept the idea of the existence of an eternal

supreme being. They called this being, Brahman. Hindus also worship different

gods which individually represent one particular aspect of Brahman. The most

popular one of the lesser gods are Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver),

and Shiva (the destroyer)

Hinduism has no founder. It is a religion that has slowly developed over a

period of time.

Hindu Beliefs

Hindu Gods

The Hindus have four gods Brahman, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. There

main god is Brahman. He is the origin and the sustainer of all life, and the

goal of all things. He is eternal and omnipotent and only he is real. They

believe that Brahman is so great that he cannot be explained in human words

because all humans are imperfect and Brahman is perfect.

Shiva

Shiva is usually depicted with six arms each one representing a

different function to preform. He is known as the destroyer and restorer of

life, symbol of the reproductive force of nature, philosopher and sage. He has

a third eye which signifies wisdom or higher consciousness. He has a blue

throat which is a result of him swallowing a full cup of mans sins. Worship of

Shiva includes fertility rites and veneration of the symbols of male and female

sex organs. Most Hindus imagine Shiva as being in deep meditation high in the

Himalayas. Shiva is the ultimate god who holds in divine tension the

preservation and destruction of the cosmos, both its birth and death. At times

he is portrayed as the great ascetic. He is often depicted as the reconciler of

dualities such as good and evil, eroticism and asceticism, his creative energy

is depicted in the Lingam and Yoni. Shiva is frequently shown in loving union

with his consort Parvati (another form of the great goddess)

Shiva devotees are called Shaivites, and devotion usually takes the form

of Yogic practice. Shiva is often pictured, in one of the best known religious

images from India, as the lord of the cosmic dance. Shiva “LORD OF THE DANCE”.

He is surrounded by flames (energy of the universe) and snakes (representing

creative power). His upper right hand is holding a drum (to beat the rhythm of

the time) while the upper left hand holds a flames (element of destruction).

His second right hand is raised for blessing, while his second left hand points

to the raised left foot (symbolizes release). The right foot treads on a dwarf

that represents ignorance and spiritual blindness.

Life Before and After Death

A Hindu believes and hopes that eventually his soul will join with

Brahman. They welcome death as a step towards gaining this everlasting union

with him. They believe that their souls were never born and therefore never

dies, but it moves on from one body to another. This movement form one body to

another in the cycle of birth death and re-birth is called reincarnation. This

belief that a person will be born again following the death is linked with the

law of karma. They also believe that the type of existence a person will

experience in the next life depends on the good and bad karma built up in the

previous life.

The white cows are considered holy because they believe that they are a

symbol of “atman”, which means the soul in all living things.

The Caste System

A caste is a group of people with a particular place in society. Hindu

people are born into their caste, wether high or low, they must accept their

place without question. This means that a person can only be born a Hindu. To

maintain purity Hindus can only marry within their caste, they can only eat with

members of their caste, and the men follow occupation of their caste which are

passed from father to son.

The difficulty that arise by the observing the caste system is that

there are a large group of people who are classified as being outside of the

caste system, some examples of this are untouchables and outcastes. These

people are among the poorest and least educated people in India and they do all

of the dirty work. Even though the government has passed laws against

classifying people as untouchable, they still feel that customs die hard,

therefore, there is still discrimination and hostility against them.

A Diagram of the Caste System

mouth = Brahmins

Priests

arms = Kshatriya’s

Warriors

thighs = Vaisya’s

Skilled workers

and Traders

feet = Shudra’s

Unskilled

workers, servants

Rituals of Life in Hinduism

The name for the series of rituals for various phases in a Hindus life

is sanskaras.

Conception: in the early days of marriage even before the children are conceived,

the parents pray and meditate on the kind of child they wish to have. During

pregnancy a number of rites are performed. The gods are asked to protect the

unborn child, and to strengthen the mother spiritually, mentally and physically

so that a healthy child is born.

Name-giving: on the eleventh or twelfth day after birth a name is chosen for the

baby. The choice of name is very important, it must be on which is hoped will

bring good fortune. A boys name may indicate heroism and a girls name may be

one which indicates beauty. Parents would choose the baby’s name as a result of

praying and making vows to their god in thanks to him that they had a child. The

name is given in a very simple way. The father leans over the baby and says

into its ear “Now your name is …”

The Thread Ceremony: This ceremony is a very important stage in the life of a

Hindu boy, that is if he belongs to one of the three main castes. This ceremony

is considered a birth by which a person is given a new king of life. The

ceremony takes place any time between the boys seventh and twelfth birthdays.

The ceremony involves putting the sacred thread across the boys body from his

left shoulder to his right hip. Once he has received the thread he is allowed

to recite passages from the Veda and perform the rituals described in it.

Marriage: It is very important for a man to be married since it enables him to

have sons who will continue his family line. Many Hindu marriages are arranged,

this means that the parents find a suitable partner for their child. The

parents make sure that this person is from the same caste and they also make

sure that the couples horoscopes are a good match.

Funeral: The last ceremony in the samskaras takes place when a person dies. A

funeral ceremony is held, at which the body of the dead person is cremated.

When a person dies their body is wrapped in a cloth and then taken away for

cremation. No food or refreshments are served at the funeral because death and

anything to do with food must be kept separate.

Worship

Daily Rituals

Those of the highest and priestly caste and others who wear the sacred thread ,

observe five obligations each day:

1. They must always worship Brahman either directly or through other

gods

2. They must give reverence to the saints and holy men by reciting the

Veda. Usually this consists of a repetition of the Gayatri Mantra

3. They must show respect for their parents and elders

4. They must give shelter and alms to the poor or holy men

5. They are instructed to feed animals because Hindus believe all living

things form one community

A Hindu performs some simple daily rituals at the beginning of each day which

include:

1. As he rises from bed he places his right foot on the ground first in

order to make a good start to the day

2. He says a prayer as his foot touches the ground which he believes was

created by god

3. He carefully cleans his teeth and tongue and then has a bath using

running water. This daily bath is very important since Hindu

must not eat any food or say any prayers before

having a bath.

4. He may also put his forehead on the mark of the god he worships. For

instance three horizontal lines indicates the god Shiva, and three

vertical lines the god Vishnu. This is called a tilaka mark and it

is usually made with red powder or paste.

Puja

Puja is the most common form of Hindu worship. This is worshiping a god,

using mantras and making offerings. Usually Hindus prefer to worship one

particular god. This god is chosen according to their personal wish, or because

of a family tradition, or even because it is the main god of the area that they

live in. Puja begins very early in the morning and continues intermittently

throughout the day. The image is “Wakened up” with the lighting of the lamp,

with the chanting of mantras and with the sounds of music. The image is washed

and anointed with ghee clarified butter. It is touched with powders, hung with

garlands, and offered flowers. Incense is burned and atrii is performed,

especially anjali, which is done by putting then hands together and raising them

up to the forehead or breast. Also a Hindu may kneel and place the forehead on

the ground in front of the image. Both of these actions are acts of homage to

the gods.

Yoga

Yoga is a form of meditation which is practiced by many Hindus. The

word “yoga” means yoking disciplining and it is a means of achieving mastery

over the mind by means of exercises. The idea is to cut oneself off from the

world and concentrate on Brahman. Hindus teach that Karma decides what form a

person will take in the next life. Karma, they say is an action done in a

lifetime wether good or bad. A devout Hindu tries to avoid building up bad

deeds so as to total as little bad karma as possible. On way to do this is to

cut himself off from the from the world and concentrate on Brahman by practicing

yoga.

Hindu Holy Books

Veda The Veda is the most ancient of all books. Veda means divine

knowledge. The Veda was composed between 1200 BC and 500 BC. It is composed of

three sections:

The Rig-Veda – is a collection of hymns dedicated to 33 gods especially to Indri

and Agni. This section consists of 1000 hymns arranged in ten books each of

these books has a number of verses.

Brahmans – this section describe the various Vedic religious rights and

ceremonies and explains what they mean

Upanishads – this section contains discussions in prose and verse, of the most

important topics in the Hindu faith (Brahman, re-incarnation and the law of

karma, and the creation)

Laws of Manu

Laws of Manu was written about 250 BC. This book shows how important

Hindu beliefs are in everyday life. They give detailed instructions about what

Hindus may and may not do.

The Epics

The Epics were written after the Veda around 500 BC. The book contains

two important poems called the Mahalarata and the Ramayoud. These poems are

important to people of the Hindu faith because they are two of their favorite

stories and they teach them about how to live.

Pilgrimage

A pilgrimage is a journey made by a follower to a holy city, shrine or

temple.

There are many important places of pilgrimage in Northern India, and

often associated with the River Ganges. The main centers are Rishikesh and

Hardwar where the Ganges descends from the Himalayas, Vrindavan and Mathura on

the river Jumna which are associated with the god Krishna, the meeting of the

River Ganges and Jumna at Allahabad and the most sacred of the Indian cities,

Benares also called Vanenasi.

Going on pilgrimage plays an important part in Hinduism. There are a

number of reasons for Hindus making a pilgrimage. They may wish to have a

closer experience of the god that they worship, or they may wish to wash away

their sins by bathing in a holy river. They may intend to pray for favors

already received. The parents of a family will go to a site of a miracle in

order to pray for the birth of a child or for a child to be cured of a long time

sickness.

There is no fixed time to go on a pilgrimage for. Many Hindus make a

pilgrimage at festival time. Kumbla Mela is a great bathing festival held once

every twelve years during the month of Magh which is January-February. The most

important center during the festival is Allahabad.

When on pilgrimage Hindus usually take gifts with them to present to the

god at that shrine in the place they are visiting. The gifts could be money,

food, cloth or flowers. The pilgrims spend their time in worship both praying

and bathing. They wear their best clothes and eat festive food. They go

sightseeing, meet old friends and buy souvenirs.

Shivarati

this festival is dedicated to Shiva and is held in January-February and

lasts thirty-six hours. The name of this festival means “night sacred to Shiva”,

because worship goes on throughout the night. Compared to other festivals it is

a solemn occasion marked by fasting. Some devotees of Shiva do not sleep, eat

or drink for the thirty-six hours. During the night Shiva is worshiped with

singing and dancing in shrines dedicated to the god. In the shrine is a small

stone pillar representing the god Shiva around which people assemble and perform

puja. Offerings are made by pouring milk, honey and melted butter over the

linga. When the fast ends at about four o’clock much feasting follows with

sweet potatoes and cucumbers among the many foods eaten. The people remember a

story which helps to explain why they fast and keep watch throughout the night.

The story tells of a hunter who was once chased by a tiger, he climbed a tree to

escape, and he had to perch the whole night as the tiger crouched below. To

make sure he did not fall asleep he plucked the leaves one by one and dropped

them on the ground. There was an image of Shiva under the tree, as the leaves

fell Shiva felt he was being worshiped and blessed the hunter.