Origins of Hinduism

Until the 19th century, Hinduism was considered the indigenous religion of the subcontinent of India and was practiced largely in India itself and in the places where Indians migrated in large numbers. In the 21st century, while still centered in India, Hinduism is practiced in most of the world's countries and can thus rightly be considered a world religion. Its creation, unlike that of some world religions founded by known historical leaders, reaches into prehistory; we do not know the individuals who first practiced the religion (or set of religions that have merged to constitute present-day Hinduism) nor know exactly when its earliest forms emerged.

Hindu is a term from the ancient Persians. The Sindhu River in what is now Pakistan was called the "Hindu" by the Persians (the first textual mention occurred perhaps in the last centuries before the Common Era [CE]). The people who lived in proximity to the Sindhu therefore came to be called Hindus.

In academic terms the Hindu tradition, or Hinduism, is usually referred to as Brahmanism in its earlier phase, before circa 300 BCE, and referred to as Hinduism after that. In common usage, the term Hinduism is used for the entire span of the tradition.

For at least two reasons the Hindu tradition contains the greatest diversity of any world tradition. First, Hinduism spans the longest stretch of time of the major world religions, with even the more conservative views setting it as well over 3,000 years old. Throughout this expanse of time, the Hindu tradition has been extremely conservative about abandoning elements that have been historically superseded. Instead, these elements have often been preserved and given new importance, resulting in historical layers of considerable diversity within the tradition. Second, Hinduism has organically absorbed hundreds of separate cultural traditions, expressed in as many as 300 languages. As a result, Hindu tradition is metaphorically like the Grand Canyon gorge, where the great river of time has sliced through the landscape, leaving visible successive historical layers.

Some practices of Hinduism must have originated in Neolithic times (ca. 4000 BCE). The worship of certain plants and animals as sacred, for instance, could very likely have very great antiquity. The worship of goddesses, too, a part of Hinduism today, may be a feature that originated in the Neolithic.

The first attested elements that can be argued to be "Hindu" are found in the Indus Valley civilization complex, which lay geographically in present-day Pakistan. This civilization complex, which is contemporaneous with Sumeria and matches it in complexity and sophistication, is dated 3600–1900 BCE. Many seals found at Indus Valley sites were apparently used to mark commercial goods and had engraved upon them pictures that some have related to later Hinduism. One is the "proto-Shiva" seal, which shows a person, seated in a cross-legged position, with a headress with horns on it and what appears to be an erect phallus. The headress is said to relate to the later god Shiva's title of "Lord of the Animals," and the erect phallus is said to be related to the common icon of Shiva, the lingam, which is phallic in shape. Some see his seated posture as being the yogic lotus position. Shiva is known for his yogic practices.

Other Indus Valley seals seem to depict what came to be known as the "Seven Mothers," still worshipped in contemporary Hinduism. Additionally, B. B. Lal, the most prominent Indian archaeologist of the Indus Valley culture, argues that other artifacts and fire sites of the Indus Valley complex appear to be designed for rituals associated with the Vedic ritual tradition, which is usually dated many centuries later.