Hinduism
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INSIGHT

# Hinduism

## A Splendrous Lotus with Four Superb Petals

For over 200 years, Western scholars have struggled to understand Hinduism, a faith whose followers seemed (to outsiders) to arbitrarily worship any one of a dozen Gods as the Supreme, a religion vastly diverse in its beliefs, practices and ways of worship. Some Indologists labeled the Hinduism they encountered polytheistic; others even coined new terms, like henotheism, to describe this baffling array of spiritual traditions. Few, however, have realized, and fewer still have written, that India's Sanatana Dharma, or "eternal faith, " known today as Hinduism and comprising nearly a billion followers, is a family of religions with four principal denominations Saivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism and Smartism. This single perception is essential for understanding Hinduisim and explaining it accurately to others. Contrary to prevailing misconceptions, Hindus all worship a one Supreme Being, though by different names. For Vaishnavites, Lord Vishnu is God. For Saivites, God is Siva. For Shaktas, Goddess Shakti is supreme. For Smartas, liberal Hindus, the choice of Deity is left to the devotee. Each has a multitude of guru lineages, religious leaders, priesthoods, sacred literature, monastic communities, schools, pilgrimage centers and tens of thousands of temples. They possess a wealth of art and architecture, philosophy and scholarship. These four sects hold such divergent beliefs that each is a complete and independent religion. Yet, they share a vast heritage of culture and belief karma, dharma, reincarnation, all-pervasive Divinity, temple worship, sacraments, manifold Deities, the guru-shishya tradition and the Vedas as scriptural authority. In this eight-page Insight, drawn from Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami's Dancing with Siva, we offer a synopsis of these four denominations, followed by a point-by-point comparison.

Each of Hinduism's philosophies, schools and lineages shares a common purpose: to further the soul's unfoldment to its divine destiny. Nowhere is this process better

represented than in the growth of the renowned lotus, which, seeking the sun, arises from the mud to become a magnificent flower. Its blossom is a promise of purity and perfection.

Saivism

Saivite Hindus worship the Supreme God as Siva, the Compassionate One. Saivites esteem self discipline and philosophy and follow a satguru. They worship in the temple and practice yoga, striving to be one with Siva within.

Shaktism

Shaktas worship the Supreme as the Divine Mother, Shakti or Devi. She has many forms. Some are gentle, some are fierce. Shaktas use chants, real magic, holy diagrams, yoga and rituals to call forth cosmic forces and awaken the great kundalini power within the spine.

Vaishnavism

Vaishnavites worship the Supreme as Lord Vishnu and His incarnations, especially Krishna and Rama. Vaishnavites are mainly dualistic. They are deeply devotional. Their religion is rich in saints, temples and scriptures.

Smartism

Smartas worship the Supreme in one of six forms: Ganesha, Siva, Sakti, Vishnu,

Surya and Skanda. Because they accept all the major Hindu Gods, they are known as liberal or nonsectarian. They follow a philosophical, meditative path, emphasizing man's oneness with God through understanding.

## What Is the Deeply Mystical Saiva Sect?

Saivism is the world's oldest religion. Worshiping God Siva, the compassionate One, it stresses potent disciplines, high philosophy, the guru's centrality and bhakti-raja-siddha yoga leading to oneness with Siva within. Aum.

Seated on Nandi, his bull mount, the perfect devotee, Lord Siva holds japa beads and the trident, symbol of love-wisdom-action, and offers blessings of protection and fearlessness. Mount Kailas, His sacred Himalayan abode, represents the pinnacle of consciousness.

Saivism is ancient, truly ageless, for it has no beginning. It is the precursor of the many-faceted religion now termed Hinduism. Scholars trace the roots of Siva worship back more than 8,000 years to the advanced Indus Valley civilization. But sacred writings tell us there never was a time when Saivism did not exist. Modern history records six main schools: Saiva Siddhanta, Pashupatism, Kashmir Saivism, Vira Saivism, Siddha Siddhanta and Siva Advaita. Saivism's grandeur and beauty are found in a practical culture, an enlightened view of man's place in the universe and a profound system of temple mysticism and siddha yoga. It provides knowledge of man's evolution from God and back to God, of the soul's unfoldment and awakening guided by enlightened sages. Like all the sects, its majority are devout families, headed by hundreds of orders of swamis and sadhus who follow the fiery, world-renouncing path to moksha. The Vedas state, "By knowing Siva, the Auspicious One who is hidden in all things, exceedingly fine, like film arising from clarified butter, the One embracer of the universe by realizing God, one is released from all fetters." Aum Namah Sivaya.

## What Is the Magic and Power Of Shaktism?

Shaktism reveres the Supreme as the Divine Mother, Shakti or Devi, in Her many forms, both gentle and fierce. Shaktas use mantra, tantra, yantra, yoga and puja to

invoke cosmic forces and awaken the kundalini power. Aum.

Shakti, depicted in Her green form, radiates beauty, energy, compassion and protection for followers. Wearing the tilaka of the Shakta sect on Her forehead, She blesses devotees, who shower rosewater, hold an umbrella and prostrate at Her feet.

While worship of the divine mother extends beyond the pale of history, Shakta Hinduism arose as an organized sect in India around the fifth century. Today it has four expressions devotional, folk-shamanic, yogic and universalist all invoking the fierce power of Kali or Durga, or the benign grace of Parvati or Ambika. Shakta devotionalists use puja rites, especially to the Shri Chakra yantra, to establish intimacy with the Goddess. Shamanic Shaktism employs magic, trance mediumship, firewalking and animal sacrifice for healing, fertility, prophecy and power. Shakta yogis seek to awaken the sleeping Goddess Kundalini and unite her with Siva in the sahasrara chakra. Shakta universalists follow the reformed Vedantic tradition exemplified by Sri Ramakrishna.  "Left-hand " tantric rites transcend traditional ethical codes. Shaktism is chiefly advaitic, defining the soul's destiny as complete identity with the Unmanifest, Siva. Central scriptures are the Vedas, Shakta Agamas and Puranas. The Devi Gita extols,  "We bow down to the universal soul of all. Above and below and in all four directions, Mother of the universe, we bow." Aum Chandikayai Namah.

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## What Is the Devotional Vaishnava Sect?

Vaishnavism is an ancient Hindu sect centering on the worship of Lord Vishnu and His incarnations, especially Krishna and Rama. Largely dualistic, profoundly devotional, it is rich in saints, temples and scriptures. Aum.

Vishnu is the infinite ocean from which the world emerges. He stands on waves, surrounded by the many-headed Seshanaga, who represents agelessness and is regarded as an extension of divine energy and an incarnation of Balarama, Lord Krishna's brother.

The worship of Vishnu, meaning "pervader, " dates back to Vedic times. The Pancharatra and Bhagavata sects were popular prior to 300 bce. Today's five Vaishnava schools emerged in the middle ages, founded by Ramanuja, Madhva, Nimbarka, Vallabha and Chaitanya. Vaishnavism stresses prapatti, single-pointed surrender to Vishnu, or His ten or more incarnations, called avataras. Japa is a key devotional sadhana, as is ecstatic chanting and dancing, called kirtana. Temple worship and festivals are elaborately observed. Philosophically, Vaishnavism ranges from Madhva's pure dualism to Ramanuja's qualified nondualism to Vallabha's nearly monistic vision. God and soul are everlastingly distinct. The soul's destiny, through God's grace, is to eternally worship and enjoy Him. While generally nonascetic, advocating bhakti as the highest path, Vaishnavism has a strong monastic community. Central scriptures are the Vedas, Vaishnava Agamas, Itihasas and Puranas. The Bhagavad Gita states, "On those who meditate on Me and worship with undivided heart, I confer attainment of what they have not, and preserve what they have." Aum Namo Narayanaya.

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## What Is the Universalistic Smarta Sect?

Smartism is an ancient brahminical tradition reformed by Shankara in the ninth century. Worshiping six forms of God, this liberal Hindu path is monistic, nonsectarian, meditative and philosophical. Aum.

Adi Sankara lived from 788 to 820 ce, a mere 32 years, yet he gave Hinduism a new liberal denomination Smartism. Here, wearing sacred marks, he holds his writings and is flanked by the six Deities of the Smarta altar: Surya the Sun, Siva, Shakti, Vishnu, Kumaran and Ganesha.

Smarta means a follower of classical smriti, particularly the Dharma Shastras, Puranas and Itihasas. Smartas revere the Vedas and honor the Agamas. Today this faith is synonymous with the teachings of Adi Shankara, the monk-philosopher known as shanmata sthapanacharya, "founder of the six-sect system." He campaigned India-wide to consolidate the Hindu faiths of his time under the banner of Advaita Vedanta. To unify the worship, he popularized the ancient Smarta five-Deity altar Ganapati, Surya, Vishnu, Siva and Shakti and added Kumara. From these, devotees may choose their "preferred Deity, " or Ishta Devata. Each God is but a reflection of the one Saguna Brahman. Shankara organized hundreds of monasteries into a ten-order, dashanami system, which now has five pontifical centers. He wrote profuse commentaries on the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras and

Bhagavad Gita. Sankara proclaimed,  "It is the one Reality which appears to our ignorance as a manifold universe of names and forms and changes. Like the gold of which many ornaments are made, it remains in itself unchanged. Such is Brahman, and That art Thou." Aum Namah Sivaya.

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## Comparing the Four Major Denominations

As just seen, the spectrum  of Hindu religiousness is found within four major sects or denominations: Saivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism and Smartism. Among these four streams, there are certainly more similarities than differences. All four believe in karma and reincarnation and in a Supreme Being who is both form and pervades form, who creates, sustains and destroys the universe only to create it again in unending cycles. They strongly declare the validity and importance of temple worship, in the three worlds of existence and the myriad Gods and devas residing in them. They concur that there is no intrinsic evil, that the cosmos is created out of God and is permeated by Him. They each believe in maya (though their definitions differ somewhat), and in the liberation of the soul from rebirth, called moksha, as the goal of human existence. They believe in dharma and in ahimsa, noninjury, and in the need for a satguru to lead the soul toward Self Realization. They wear the sacred marks, tilaka, on their foreheads as sacred symbols, though each wears a distinct mark. Finally, they prefer cremation of the body upon death, believing that the soul will inhabit another body in the next life. While Hinduism has many sacred scriptures, all sects ascribe the highest authority to the Vedas and Agamas, though their Agamas differ somewhat. Here, now, is a brief comparison of these four denominations.

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On the Personal God/Goddess

Saivism: Personal God and temple Deity is Siva, neither male nor female. Lords Ganesha and Karttikeya are also worshiped.

Shaktism: Personal Goddess and temple Deity is Shri Devi or Shakti, female, worshiped as Rajarajeshvari, Parvati, Lakshmi, Sarasvati, Kali, Amman, etc.  the Divine Mother.

Vaishnavism: Personal God and temple Deity is Vishnu, male. His incarnations as Rama and Krishna are also worshiped, as well as His divine consort, Radharani.

Smartism: Personal God and temple Deity is Ishvara, male or female, worshiped as Vishnu, Siva, Shakti, Ganesha and Surya or any Deity of devotee's choice, e.g., Kumara or Krishna.

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On the Nature of Shakti

Saivism: Shakti is God Siva's inseparable power and manifest will, energy or mind.

Shaktism: Shakti is an active, immanent Being, separate from a quiescent and remote Siva.

Vaishnavism: No special importance is given to Shakti. However, there are parallels wherein the divine consorts are conceived as the inseparable powers of Vishnu and His incarnations: e.g., Krishna's Radharani and Rama's Sita.

Smartism: Shakti is a divine form of Ishvara. It is God's manifesting power.

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On the Nature of Personal God

Saivism: God Siva is pure love and compassion, immanent and transcendent, pleased by our purity and sadhana.

Shaktism: The Goddess Shakti is both compassionate and terrifying, pleasing and wrathful, assuaged by sacrifice and submission.

Vaishnavism: God Vishnu is loving and beautiful, the object of man's devotion, pleased by our service and surrender.

Smartism: Ishvara appears as a human-like Deity according to devotees' loving worship, which is sometimes considered a rudimentary self-purifying practice.

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On the Doctrine of Avatara

Saivism: There are no divine earthly incarnations of the Supreme Being.

Shaktism: The Divine Mother does incarnate in this world.

Vaishnavism: Vishnu has ten or more incarnations.

Smartism: All Deities may assume earthly incarnations.

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On the Soul and God

Saivism: God Siva is one with the soul. The soul must realize this advaitic (monistic) Truth by God Siva's grace.

Shaktism: The Divine Mother, Shakti, is mediatrix, bestowing advaitic moksha on those who worship Her.

Vaishnavism: God and soul are eternally distinct. Through Lord Vishnu's grace, the soul's destiny is to worship and enjoy God.

Smartism: Ishvara and man are in reality Absolute Brahman. Within maya, the soul and Ishvara appear as two. Jnana (wisdom) dispels the illusion.

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Spiritual Practice

Saivism: With bhakti as a base, emphasis is placed on sadhana, tapas (austerity) and yoga. Ascetic.

Shaktism: Emphasis is on bhakti and tantra, sometimes occult,  practices. Ascetic-occult.

Vaishnavism: Emphasis is on supreme bhakti or surrender, called prapatti. Generally devotional and nonascetic.

Smartism: Preparatory sadhanas are bhakti, karma, raja yoga. The highest path is through knowledge, leading to jnana.

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Major Scriptures

Saivism: Vedas, Saiva Agamas and Saiva Puranas.

Shaktism: Vedas, Shakta Agamas (Tantras) and Puranas.

Vaishnavism: Vedas, Vaishnava Agamas, Puranas and the Itihasas (Ramayana and Mahabharata, especially the Bhagavad Gita).

Smartism: Vedas, Agamas and classical smriti Puranas, Itihasas, especially the Bhagavad Gita, etc.

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Regions of Influence

Saivism: Geographically widespread, strongest in South and North India, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

Shaktism: Geographically widespread, most prominent in Northeast India, especially Bengal and Assam.

Vaishnavism: Geographically widespread, especially strong throughout India, North and South.

Smartism: Geographically widespread, most prominent in North and South India.

Paths of Attainment

Saivism: The path for Saivites is divided into four progressive stages of belief and

practice called charya, kriya, yoga and jnana. The soul evolves through karma and reincarnation from the instinctive-intellectual sphere into virtuous and moral living, then into temple worship and devotion, followed by internalized worship, or yoga, and its meditative disciplines. Union with God Siva comes through the grace of the satguru and culminates in the soul's maturity in the state of jnana, or wisdom. Saivism values both bhakti and yoga, devotional and contemplative sadhanas, or disciplines.

Shaktism: The spiritual practices in Shaktism are similar to those in Saivism, though there is more emphasis in Saktism on God's Power as opposed to Being, on mantras and yantras, and on embracing apparent opposites: male-female, absolute-relative, pleasure-pain, cause-effect, mind-body. Certain sects within Shaktism undertake "left-hand " tantric rites, consciously using the world of form to transmute and eventually transcend that world. The "left-hand " approach is somewhat occult in nature; it is considered a path for the few, not the many. The "right-hand " path is more conservative in nature.

Vaishnavism: Most Vaishnavites believe that religion is the performance of bhakti sadhanas, devotional disciplines, and that man can communicate with and receive the grace of the Gods and Goddesses through the darshan (sight) of their icons. The paths of karma yoga and jnana yoga lead to bhakti yoga. Among the foremost practices of Vaishnavites is chanting the holy names of the Avataras, Vishnu's incarnations, especially Rama and Krishna. Through total self-surrender, prapatti, to Vishnu, to Krishna or to His beloved consort Radharani, liberation from samsara (the cycle of reincarnation) is attained.

Smartism: Smartas, the most eclectic of Hindus, believe that moksha is achieved through jnana yoga alone defined as an intellectual and meditative but non-kundalini-yoga path. Jnana yoga's progressive stages are scriptural study (shravana), reflection (manana) and sustained meditation (dhyana). Guided by a realized guru and avowed to the unreality of the world, the initiate meditates on himself as Brahman, Absolute Reality, to break through the illusion of maya. Devotees may also choose from three other non-successive paths to cultivate devotion, accrue good karma and purify the mind. These are bhakti yoga, karma yoga and raja yoga, which certain Smartas teach can also bring enlightenment.