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Category : [January 1985](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jan. 02, 1985

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The Structure & Strength of Hinduism

Kathirswami, Siva One of the secrets to understanding the complex spiritual heritage called Hinduism is to study the mechanics of lineage. As in a great mosaic, the smaller groups are the units that give the whole its existence. It is with this understanding that many contemporary scholars have questioned the idea of a one religion in India. Some Indian scholars have even said, "The term Hinduism is a misnomer. It is of foreign origin derived from the word Hidu (.i.e. Sindu) in the records of the Achaemenian kings of Iran." In response one might say that the world Hinduism has become an established term and it is not going to go away. Even so, it is only a broad label denoting all those faiths that are rooted in the transcendent truths of the Sanatana Dharma.

But to recognize that Hinduism is not a single organized religion like the Catholic Church is not to say that there is no organization within Hinduism. In some ways Hinduism has the most complex dynamic vital religious organization of all. On the surface we have the obvious classical categories of the six philosophical darshanas and the religious denominations of Saiva, Vaishnava, Sakta and Smarta/Vedantins. But even these denomination do not describe the actual structure of religion in India. For within of them there are many separate, distinct living streams of religious traditions, numerous lines of initiation, through living preceptors. The Sanskrit term for "spiritual lineage" or living stream of tradition" is sampradaya. It is these many sampradayas that form the intricate, organic structure of the manifest Sanatana Dharma in the actual life of the people. Hinduism is the sum total of thousands of sampradayas and by understanding the nature of and relations between the various sampradayas, we can come to a more discriminating understanding of understanding of Hinduism.

A careful examination of the theologies of each sampradaya reveals that many of their beliefs differ one from another. Some are diametrically opposed. For example, the Smarta sampradayas that stem from Adi Sankaracharya teach that Vedanta is the universal theology which encompasses all Hindu deities. But the many Saiva Sampradayas have worshipped only Lord Siva with single focus from time

immemorial. The Natha sampradayas teach that manifest being is an emanation of Lord Siva. But the Different Smarta sampradayas teach that manifest being is an illusion, a product of mysterious Maya with no relation to the Supreme. The Meykandar sampradaya teaches that God, soul and world are three eternal entities but the Natha sampradaya teaches that God, soul and world are one. Some lineages are mystical, others philosophical or socially oriented. Some are ritualistic, others concerned only with yoga.

It is typical of the great tolerance within Hinduism that despite these paradoxes all the sampradayas have existed side by side for thousands of years. Each sampradaya freely developed its own scriptures, temples, deities within them to worship, mystical heritage, succession of gurus, monastic order and family groups of devotees. They are loosely interwoven into the incredible tapestry of Indian religious life - a remarkable flexible and strong structure rooted in the Sanatana dharma.

Through the traditional theological debates between the distinct sampradayas, the knowledge is handed down with ever sharpened relevance and renewed vitality. Each sampradaya clarifies and proclaims its knowledge of God, souls and world. It delineates personal sadhana and worship and outlines the dharma for each individual and the group to which he belongs. When a Hindu follows a sampradaya that suits his spiritual needs, within its teachings he finds peace of mind and contentment of heart. He has found a clear path to tread that his svadharma, the way that his personal nature and which will allow him to move most quickly toward Truth or God. He has found his place in Hinduism, much like an ardent Christian might find solace in a particular denomination whose teachings and people are "right" for him, or as a sincere Jew would be drawn to a special rabbi.

Sampradaya also has another important meaning. It refers to the oral teaching of deep personal knowledge of a religious tradition, such as from Guru to disciple or mother to daughter. The transmission has a power that makes the tradition live on. It comes down and lives in the hearts of the next generation through the action of sampradaya, a power that carries devotees forward in spiritual unfoldment, giving fulfillment and purpose to their life on earth. It is power that invading nations and religions have never been able to conquer.

Unfortunately, many Hindus are no longer aware of the great theological traditions and dialectics of their spiritual heritage. Many have gone astray or abandoned their

ancestral sampradaya and are now living outside tradition. They do not have even the basic knowledge of fundamental concepts such as karma, reincarnation, the five bodies of man and the three worlds of existence. They are caught between established traditions which they do not understand, the folklore of puranic legends and social/political forces of struggling Hindu communities inside and outside of India. While some parents base what little religious life they have left on the most shallow understand of Vedanta, they are totally cut off from the great orthodox Smarta Sampradaya of Adi Shankaracharya that carries the power of the Advaita Vedanta tradition. They may put Buddha, Krishna and Nataraja on their home altar. But their intelligent youth know that Buddha did not preach about God, the children also may think that Krishna is the fellow who stole butter, and Nataraja is the destroyer. Parents are unable to resolve the obvious contradictions. They do not want to "indoctrinate" their youth who are left in confusion that leads to total rejection.

This has precipitated the present crisis in the passage of the Hindu tradition from this generation to the next. Intelligent and aware, today's children demand knowledge in answer to their questions, knowledge that is clear enough for them to believe and implement in their lives. Where parents have failed to provide this, youth have drifted into the bhoga loka of materialism, proud of their "sophisticated" modern attitudes but forever cut off from the great spiritual heritage of their ancestors.

In the face of this impending disaster for Hinduism, the meaning and potency of sampradaya has renewed significance. This is becoming increasingly apparent as Hindus around the world seek spiritual direction authority from the heads of these orders and paramparai when temple plans are to be blessed or institutions inaugurated to provide religious teaching for the generations to follow. The knowledgeable Hindu recognizes that his religious roots lie in one or another of these great lineages. He realizes that where the continuity of sampradaya has been cut off, there begins the death and extinction of one more facet of Sanatana dharma. It is not enough to say that we will be good Hindus. This is like saying we will be good professionals. But it is one thing to be a doctor, and another to be a good engineer and another to be a fine artist. We must know what we are, if we are to proceed. It is not enough to know that truth is one and paths are many. We must choose either the north face of the mountain or the east face and then climb Mount Everest on one of them.

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