Chapter 2

Hinduism’s Four Denominations

Hinduism Is A Splendid Lotus with Four Superb Petals

Saivism

Saivite Hindus worship the Supreme God as Siva, the Compassionate One. Saivites esteem self discipline and philosophy and follow a sat guru. 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 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.

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.

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 Hinduism 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-disciple 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.
**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.

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**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.
The worship of Vishnu, meaning "per-vader," 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, Madhava, Nimbarka, Vallabha, and Chaitanya. Vaishnavism stresses prapatti, single-pointed surrender to Vishnu, or His ten or more incarnations, called avatars. Japa is a key devotional practice, as is ecstatic chanting and dancing, called kirtana. Temple worship and festivals are elaborately observed.

Philosophically, Vaishnavism ranges from Madhava'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.

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.

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.

Smatra 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 Shankara, "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 Ishtha Devata. Each God is but a reflection of the one Saiva Brahman. Shankara organized hundreds of monasteries into a ten-order, dasanami system, which now has five pontifical centers. He wrote profuse commentaries on the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras and Bhagavad Gita. Shankara 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 ornamens are made, it remains in itself unchanged. Such is Brahman, and That art Thou." Aum Namah Sivaya.
Comparing the Four Major Denominations

On the Personal God/Goddess
SAIVISM: Personal God and temple Deity is Siva, neither male nor female. Lord Ganesha and Karttikeya are also worshiped.
SHAKTISM: Personal Goddess and temple Deity is Shri Devi or Shakti, female, worshipped as Saraswati, 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, worshipped as Vishnu, Siva, Shakti, Ganesha and Surya or another Deity of devotee’s choice, e.g., Kumara or Krishna.

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.
VAISHNIVISM: No special importance is given to Shakti. However, there are parallels wherein the divines 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.

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.
VAISHNIVISM: God Vishnu is loving and beautiful, the object of man’s devotion, pleased by our service and surrender.
SMARTISM: Shiva appears as a human-like Deity according to devotees’ loving worship, which is sometimes considered a rudimentary, self-purifying practice.

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.
VAISHNIVISM: Vishnu has ten or more incarnations.
SMARTISM: All Deities may assume earthly incarnations.

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.
VAISHNIVISM: God and soul are eternally distinct. Through Lord Vishnu’s grace, the soul’s destiny is to worship and enjoy God.
SMARTISM: Shakti is a divine form of the Absolute Brahman. Within maya, the soul and Ishvara appear as two. Jnana (wisdom) dispels the illusion.

Spiritual Practice
SAIVISM: With bhakti as a base, emphasis is placed on tapas (austerity) and yoga.
SHAKTISM: Emphasis is on bhakti and tantra, sometimes occult, practices.
VAISHNIVISM: Emphasis is on supreme bhakti or surrender, called prapatti. Generally devotional and nonasoteric.
SMARTISM: Preparatory sadhanas are bhakti, karma, jnana yoga. The highest path is through knowledge, leading to jnana.

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 sarupu 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 Saktaism on God’s Power as opposed to Being, on mantras and yantras, and on emancipating oppositions: 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.

VAISHNIVISM: 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 Vaishnavities is chanting the holy names of the Avatars, Vishnu’s incarnations, especially Rama and Krishna. Through total self-surrender, prapatti, to Vishnu, to Krishna or to his beloved consort Radharoni, 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, curb good karma and purify the mind. These are bhakti yoga, karma yoga and japa yoga, which certain Smartas teach can also bring enlightenment.
FOUR FACTS OF HINDUISM
KARMA, REINCARNATION, GOD’S ALL-PERVASIVENESS AND DHARMA ARE THE ESSENCE OF THE FOUR VEDAS AND THE FABRIC OF HINDUISM. LIVE THEM, ENJOY THEM AND TEACH THEM TO ALL WHO WILL LISTEN.

KARMA
According as one acts, so does he become. One becomes virtuous by virtuous action, bad by bad action. —Yajur Veda, Br. Upanishad 4.4.5

God’s cosmic law of karma governs all our experiences through cause and effect. Through karma, our thoughts, emotions and deeds—whether good, bad or mixed—return to us. Karma is not fate. We have free will. No God or external force is controlling our life. By applying the wisdom of the sages to the experiences encountered in life, we resolve our karma rather than create new karma. To be responsible for our karma is strength. To blame others is weakness. Therefore, remember God’s great law of karma and act wisely. Life is the classroom. Karma is the teacher. God Ganesa is the Lord of karma.

REINCARNATION
After death, the soul goes to the next world, bearing in mind the subtle impressions of its deeds, and after reaping their harvest returns again to this world of action. Thus, he who has desires continues subject to rebirth. —Yajur Veda, Br. Upanishad 4.4.6

Reincarnation is the natural cycle of birth, death and rebirth. We are not the body in which we live, but the immortal soul which inhabits one body after another on the Earth during its evolutionary journey. Like the caterpillar’s transformation into a butterfly, physical death is a most natural transition for the soul, never to be feared. We are now the sum total of all our past lives. The actions and reactions we set in motion in our last life form the tendencies in the next. Reincarnation ceases when all karmas have been resolved, dharma has been well performed and God fully realized. This is known as moksha, or liberation from rebirth.
THE ONE, ALL-PERVASIVE SUPREME BEING

Self-resplendent, formless, unoriginated and pure, that all-pervading Being is both within and without. He transcends even the transcendent, unmanifest, causal state of the universe.

—Atharva Veda, Mundaka Upanishad 2.1.2

God is a one Being, yet we understand Him in three perfections. Paraśiva, Absolute Reality, timeless, formless, spaceless, is His unmanifest first perfection. His second perfection, Pure Consciousness or Parāśakti, is all-pervasive, infinite, and is found in every action and particle of His creation. His third perfection, Primal Soul, Paramēśvara, is our personal Lord and Ruler of all three worlds. Pūjā, bhajana, prayer and meditation are all worshipful means of communion with God and the Gods, who are real beings dwelling in the inner worlds. They can and want to help us in every aspect of our life. The Gods have established many temples to allow us to communicate with them.

DHARMA

There is nothing higher than dharma.

Verily, that which is dharma is Truth.

—Yajur Veda, Br. Upanishad 1.4.14

Dharma is God’s divine law prevailing on every level of existence, from the sustaining cosmic order to religious and moral laws which bind us in harmony with that order. It is piety and ethical practice, duty and obligation. Dharma is to the individual what its normal development is to a seed—the orderly fulfillment of an inherent nature and destiny. Hindu dharma is embodied in the ten yamas (restraints) and ten niyamas (observances). The yamas are noninjury, truthfulness, nonstealing, sexual purity, patience, steadfastness, compassion, straightforwardness and moderate appetite. The niyamas are purity, remorse, contentment, giving, faith, worship, scriptural study, cognition, vows, recitation and austerity. Noninjury, ahīṃsā, is the cardinal virtue, the mahāvrata.
NINE BELIEFS OF HINDUISM

Our beliefs determine our thoughts and attitudes about life, which in turn direct our actions. By our actions, we create our destiny. Beliefs about sacred matters—God, soul and cosmos—are essential to one’s approach to life. Hindus believe many diverse things, but there are a few bedrock concepts on which most Hindus concur. The following nine beliefs, though not exhaustive, offer a simple summary of Hindu spirituality.
1. Hindus believe in a one, all-pervasive Supreme Being who is both immanent and transcendent, both Creator and Unmanifest Reality.

2. Hindus believe in the divinity of the four Vedas, the world’s most ancient scripture, and venerate the Āgamas as equally revealed. These primordial hymns are God’s word and the bedrock of Sanātana Dharma, the eternal religion.

3. Hindus believe that the universe undergoes endless cycles of creation, preservation and dissolution.

4. Hindus believe in karma, the law of cause and effect by which each individual creates his own destiny by his thoughts, words and deeds.

5. Hindus believe that the soul reincarnates, evolving through many births until all karmas have been resolved, and moksha, liberation from the cycle of rebirth, is attained. Not a single soul will be deprived of this destiny.

6. Hindus believe that divine beings exist in unseen worlds and that temple worship, rituals, sacraments and personal devotionalas create a communion with these devas and Gods.

7. Hindus believe that an enlightened master, or satguru, is essential to know the Transcendent Absolute, as are personal discipline, good conduct, purification, pilgrimage, self-inquiry, meditation and surrender in God.

8. Hindus believe that all life is sacred, to be loved and revered, and therefore practice ahimsā, noninjury, in thought, word and deed.

9. Hindus believe that no religion teaches the only way to salvation above all others, but that all genuine paths are facets of God’s Light, deserving tolerance and understanding.

FROM THE SACRED TEACHINGS OF SATGURU SIVAYA SUBRAMUNIYASWAMI

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