

What is Smartism?

Smartism is a sect of Hinduism that allows its followers to worship more than one god, unlike in sects like *Shaivism* and *Vaishnavism*, in which only Shiva and Vishnu are worshipped, respectively. Smartas, followers of Smartism, may actually worship one or more of the five main Hindu gods - Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesha, Surya and Shakti - as they are all considered equal. This practice is called *panchayatana puja* in Sanskrit.

Smartism was founded by the Hindu spiritual guru, Adi Shankaracharya. The idea behind the founding of Smartism was to do away with certain practices in Hinduism, such as animal sacrifice; and also because Adi Shankaracharya believed in the concept of *Advaita Vedanta*, in which *Brahman* is the fundamental and highest reality above all gods.

Smartism follows the *Vedas*, the sacred Hindu texts, and abides by orthodox Hindu philosophy. The sect recognizes God as both *Saguna* and *Nirguna*. God as *Saguna* is a representation of infinite nature and traits such as love, compassion and justice. God as *Nirguna* symbolizes pure consciousness, or *Brahman*, the creative principle and key concept of the *Vedas*.

Smarta Hindus view the different manifestations of God as equivalent. They accept all major Hindu gods and are commonly known as liberal or non sectarian.

The Smarta tradition that developed and expanded with the Puranas genre of literature. This **Puranic** religion is notable for the domestic worship of five shrines with five deities, all treated as equal – Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesha, Surya and Devi (Shakti).

The Smarta tradition contrasted with the older Shrauta tradition, which was based on elaborate rituals and rites. There has been considerable overlap in the ideas and practices of the Smarta tradition with other significant historic movements within Hinduism, namely Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Shaktism.

Smarta is an adjective derived from Smriti. The Smriti are a specific body of Hindu texts usually attributed to an author, traditionally written down but constantly revised, in contrast to Śrutis (the Vedic literature) considered authorless, that were transmitted verbally across the generations and fixed.

A. History

The revived Smarta Tradition attempted to integrate varied and conflicting devotional practices, with its ideas of nondual experience of Atman (self, soul) as Brahman. The rapprochement included the practice of pancayatana-puja (five shrine worship), wherein

a Hindu could focus on any saguna deity of choice (istadevata) such as Vishnu, Shiva, Durga, Surya or Ganesha, as an interim step towards realizing the nirguna Brahman. The growth of this Smarta Tradition began in the Gupta period (4th-5th century CE), and likely was dominated by Dvija classes, in particular the Brahmins, of the early medieval Indian society. The Smarta Tradition competed with other major traditions of Hinduism such as Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Shaktism. The ideas of Smarta Tradition were historically influential, creative with concepts such as of Harihara (half Shiva, half Vishnu deity) and Ardhanarishvara (half woman, half man deity), and many of the major scholars of Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism and Bhakti movement came out of the Smarta Tradition.

B. Philosophy and Practices

Saguna and Nirguna Brahman

According to Smartism, supreme reality, Brahman, transcends all of the various forms of personal deity. The Smartas follow an orthodox Hindu philosophy, which means they accept the Vedas, and the ontological concepts of Atman and Brahman therein. The Smarta Tradition accepts two concepts of Brahman, which are the saguna Brahman – the Brahman with attributes, and nirguna Brahman – the Brahman without attributes. The nirguna Brahman is the unchanging Reality, however, the saguna Brahman is posited as a means to realizing this nirguna Brahman.

The concept of the saguna Brahman is considered in this tradition to be a useful symbolism and means for those who are still on their spiritual journey, but the saguna concept is abandoned by the fully enlightened once he or she realizes the identity of their own soul with that of the nirguna Brahman. A Smarta may choose any saguna deity (istadevata) such as Vishnu, Shiva, Durga, Surya, Ganesha or any other, and this is viewed in Smarta Tradition as an interim step towards realizing the nirguna Brahman and its equivalence to one's own Atman.

Panchayatana Puja

The Smartas evolved a kind of worship which is known as [Panchayatana puja](#). In this Puja, one or more of the five Hindu Deities ([Surya](#), [Shiva](#), [Vishnu](#), [Ganesha](#) and [Devi](#) or Shakti) are the objects of veneration. The five symbols of the major Gods are placed on a round open metal dish called Panchayatana, the symbol of the deity preferred by the worshiper being in the center. A similar arrangement is also seen in the medieval temples, in which the central shrine housing the principal Deity is surrounded by four smaller shrines containing the figures of the other deities. Some of the Smartas of South India add a sixth god [Kartikeya \(Shanmata\)](#). According to [Basham](#), "upper-class Hindus still prefer the way of the Smartas to Saiva and Vaisnava forms of worship.

Panchayatana puja (IAST Pañcāyatana pūjā) consists of the worship of five deities set in a quincunx pattern, the five deities being Shiva, Vishnu, Devi or Durga, Surya and an Ishta Devata such as Ganesha or Skanda or any personal god of devotee's preference. Sometimes the Ishta Devata is the sixth deity in the mandala.

Panchayatana puja has been attributed to Adi Shankara, the 8th century CE Hindu philosopher. It is a practice that became popular in medieval India. However, archaeological evidence suggests that this practice long predates the birth of Adi Shankara. Many Panchayatana mandalas and temples have been uncovered that are from the Gupta Empire period, and one Panchayatana set from the village of Nand (about 24 kilometers from Ajmer) has been dated to belong to the Kushan Empire era (pre-300 CE). The Kushan period set includes Shiva, Vishnu, Surya, Brahma and one deity whose identity is unclear. According to historians, major Hindu temples from 1st millennium CE embed the pancayatana architecture very commonly, from Odisha to Karnataka to Kashmir; and the temples containing fusion deities such as Harihara (half Shiva, half Vishnu) are set in Panchayatana worship style.

Philosophically, the Smarta tradition emphasizes that all idols (murtis) are icons of saguna Brahman, a means to realizing the abstract Ultimate Reality called nirguna Brahman. The five or six icons are seen by Smartas as multiple representations of the one Saguna Brahman (i.e., a personal God with form), rather than as distinct beings. The ultimate goal in this practice is to transition past the use of icons, then follow a philosophical and meditative path to understanding the oneness of Atman (soul, self) and Brahman – as "That art Thou".

Depending on the tradition followed by Smarta households, one of these deities is kept in the center and the other four corners of a square surrounding it. Either an iconic idol(s) or aniconic representation(s) or a combination for each deity is used. The five may be represented as simply as five kinds of stones called a Pancayatana puja set, or just five marks drawn on the floor. Panchayatana puja has predominantly been a tradition within Hinduism. However, the Udasis – a tradition that reveres the Guru Granth Sahib of Sikhism, also worship the five panchayatana deities

C. Adi Shankararchya

The Smarta tradition is aligned with Advaita Vedanta, and regards Adi Shankara as its founder or reformer. Shankara championed the ultimate reality is impersonal and Nirguna (attributeless) and any symbolic god serves the same equivalent purpose. Inspired by this belief, the Smarta tradition followers, along with the five Hindu gods include a sixth impersonal god in their practice.

Traditionally, Sri Adi Shankaracharya (8th century) is regarded as the greatest teacher and reformer of the Smarta. Adi Shankara Acharya established the nondualist interpretation of the Upanishads as the touchstone of a revived Smarta tradition:

Practically, Adi Shankara Acharya fostered a rapprochement between Advaita and Smarta orthodoxy, which by his time had not only continued to defend the varnasramadharma theory as defining the path of karman, but had developed the practice of pancayatanapuja ("five-shrine worship") as a solution to varied and conflicting devotional practices.

D. Texts

Smartas follow the Hindu scriptures. Like all traditions within Hinduism, they accept as an epistemic premise that Śruti (Vedic literature) is a reliable source of knowledge. The Śruti includes the four Vedas including its four layers of embedded texts - the Samhitas, the Brahmanas, the Aranyakas and the early Upanishads. Of these, the Upanishads are the most referred to texts.

The identity of Atman and Brahman, and their unchanging, eternal nature, are the basic truths in this tradition. The emphasis in Vedic texts here is the jnana-kanda (knowledge, philosophical speculations) in the Upanishadic part of the Vedas, not its karma-kanda (ritual injunctions). Along with the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita and Brahma Sutras are the central texts of the Advaita Vedanta tradition, providing the truths about the identity of Atman and Brahman and their changeless nature.

The Brahmasutra is considered as the Nyaya Prasthanas (canonical base for reasoning). The Bhagavad Gita is considered as the Smriti Prasthanas. The text relies on other Smritis, such as the Vedangas, Itihasa, Dharmasastras, Puranas and others. Some of this smriti literature incorporated shramanic and Buddhist influences of the period from about 200 BC to about AD 300 and the emerging bhakti tradition into the Brahmanical fold.

E. Monastries

Adi Shankara is one of the leading scholars of the Smarta Tradition, and he founded some of the most famous monasteries in Hinduism. These have hosted the Daśanāmi Sampradāya under four Maṭhas, with the headquarters at Dwarka in the West, Jagannatha Puri in the East, Sringeri in the South and Badrinath in the North. Each math was headed by one of his disciples, called Shankaracharya, who each independently continued the Advaita Vedanta Sampradaya. The ten Shankara-linked Advaita monastic orders are distributed as follows: Bharati, Puri and Saraswati at Sringeri, Aranya and Vana at Puri, Tirtha and Ashrama at Dwarka, and Giri, Parvata and Sagara at Badrinath. The mathas which Shankara built exist until today, and continue the teachings and influence of Shankara.