

Indian Spiritual Traditions

Any spiritual tradition that has originated on the Indian subcontinent is Indian. The ancient name of India as a political entity is *Bharata-varsha* (भारतवर्ष), and the ancient name of the Indian subcontinent is *Bharata-khanda* (भरतखण्ड).

The word Hindu is not Indian; it is a word of Persian origin. Also, there is no Indian word corresponding to the word *religion*. The word *dharma* (धर्म), meaning “the adopted principle,” refers to any principle which an individual or group of individuals adopt to follow as part of their conduct. Famously, Buddha adopted *ahimsa* (अहिंसा), “no cruelty,” as his topmost dharma. When it comes to people connecting with God, India has *sampradaya* (सम्प्रदाय), “traditions.”

All the traditions of India are inspired by the Vedas. The Vedas are the earliest extant writings of the human mind; the oldest scriptures in the world. A tradition which directly relies on the Vedas is called a Vedic tradition, or *vaidika-sampradaya* (वैदिकसम्प्रदाय). The most eminent spiritual leaders, or *acharya* (आचार्य), meaning “path-makers,” of the Vedic traditions in modern times have been *Sankara* (शङ्कर), in the 6th century C.E., *Ramanuja* (रामानुज), born in 1027 C.E., and *Madhva* (मध्व), born in 1199 C.E.

Among the traditions which do not directly rely on the Vedas, the Jaina traditions rely on the life and teachings of *Rishabhadeva* (ऋषभदेव), as evidenced in the 1st century B.C.E., and twenty-three other Jaina spiritual leaders, called *tirthankara* (तीर्थङ्कर), “step-makers,” or makers of a flight of steps, culminating in *Vardhamana Mahavira Jina* (वर्धमान महावीर जिन), born in 599 B.C.E. The followers of *Siddhartha Gautama Buddha* (सिद्धार्थ गौतम बुद्ध), born circa 567 B.C.E., base their traditions on the life and teachings of the Buddha. In recent times, the Sikh traditions have relied on the life and teachings of Guru Nanak Dev, 1469 C.E. -1539 C.E., and the nine other gurus who followed him.

Some Jews are believed to have settled down in India after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem. Apostle Thomas is believed to have lived and died in India. The followers of Zarathustra resettled in India after the Arabs invaded their native Persia in 610 C.E. and forced the Persians to become Muslims. Islam was forced upon Indians by the Mughal invaders (1526 C.E. - 1707 C.E.). Numerous Indians were proselytized to Christianity during the British presence in India between 1600 C.E. and 1947 C.E. The followers of these religions in India have also been noticeably influenced by the spiritual traditions of India.

All traditions in India believe in one God. The Indian word for God is *Narayana* (नारायण). It is a spiritual name in Sanskrit signifying the creation of the cosmos. God is referred to variously as *Paramatma* (परमात्मा), “the ultimate soul,” *Parameshvara* (परमेश्वर), “the ultimate lord,” and so forth. All creation is created by and from the ultimate source described as *parama-tattva* (परमतत्त्व), “the ultimate that-ness.” That entity is pure spirit, *cit* (चित्), “consciousness.” It is called *brahma* (ब्रह्म), meaning “the creative principle.” As responsible for the “creation” of the universe, *sarga* (सर्ग), God is referred to as *Brahma* (ब्रह्मा), “the Creator.” As responsible for the phenomenon of “stability” in the created state, *sthiti* (स्थिति), God is referred to as *Vishnu* (विष्णु), meaning the “all-pervasive” God. As responsible for the phenomenon of “change” or transformation in the created state, *laya* (लय), God is referred to as *Shiva* (शिव), meaning God “in whom everything ‘sleeps’ (or lies dormant or inactive).”

In India, every individual has enjoyed the freedom to worship God in his or her own way. Any aspect of God can be worshipped as a deity, *devata* (देवता). A deity in the male form is called *deva* (देव), and a deity in the female form is called *devi* (देवी). One God is worshipped in as many ways. Freedom of choice has been the cornerstone of Indian traditions.

The place where God is worshipped is called *deva-sthanam* (देवस्थानम्), “God’s place,” or the house of God. It is also called *mandiram* (मन्दिरम्), or mandir, meaning “the place where God is praised.” The main deity in the mandir in Wappingers Falls, NY, is called *Srinivasa* (श्रीनिवास), God in whom *Sri* (श्री), or “glory,” resides. This deity is originally worshipped in Tirupati, India, and is famously called *Venkateswara* (वेङ्कटेश्वर), the lord of the Venkata [hills]. God can be worshipped as any deity in a Hindu Temple. When the main deity is installed in the “womb,” or *garbha* (गर्भ), which is housed in the *garbha-griha* (गर्भगृह), the “womb-house,” sometime in 2001, three other deities will also be installed in separate *garbha-grihas* side by side. A priest at a mandir is called *archaka* (अर्चक), meaning one who performs *archana* (अर्चना). An *archana* is the “ritual,” or *vidhi* (विधि), of “worship,” or *puja* (पूजा), to the deity.

The author of this exposition is Vishwanath Kadaba Yajaman Narasimha Ayengar, a disciple of the Parakala Mutt (परकालमठ) in Mysore, India. He is grateful to Ken Koehler and David Monto for their help in the electronic media, and to the Omkarananda Ashram Himalayas, Rishikesh, India, for their Devanagari font. Any alteration of this text is strictly prohibited. You may share this exposition freely.

Copyright ©2001 Vishwanath K.N. Ayengar

www.vish-ayengar.com