

ESSENTIALS OF HINDUISM

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Lesson 3: Popular Hinduism

Welcome to the continuing lectures in this summary course for the larger full course, "Introduction to Hinduism."

In the last lectures, we have been discussing different ways in which Hinduism finds its expression. As we think, it seems quite clear the Hindu religion is not a monolithic unit. It is not something that can be easily talked about in current categories that all fit very nicely together. We saw even in defining Hinduism that there are major differences in how Hinduism is even spoken of and defined culturally, religiously, socially, etc.

In the same way, Hinduism itself includes a wide range of practices that are all somehow connected together into the kind of fabric of Hinduism. We normally organize Hinduism into three major pathways, or margas. Marga means "pathway." We spent some time in the last summary lecture to kind of give you a little picture for this. We talked about essentially three paths: The way of knowledge, which is philosophical Hinduism; the way of works or actions, which is part of popular Hinduism; and then finally, the way of devotion or bhakti marga, which is also part of popular Hinduism.

I think it is important to recognize how these three vehicles of Hinduism or paths of Hinduism actually operate. We are going to take a little more time at this point in our lectures to expand what we actually meet in regards to Hinduism on the ground, especially in popular bhakti movements in India. We will talk more about Bhaktism as a movement.

I want to talk about the gods and goddesses of India first because I think it is important that a student of Hinduism or a person who is interested in India, to not become overwhelmed by the multiplicity of gods and goddesses in India. What I found after studying many years, working and living in India and teaching in India, is that the iconography or the characteristics of gods and goddesses can be quite easily learned even by a first-time visitor to India. What I have often found with church groups or other groups that are visiting India, is that it is very helpful to actually have pictures of the gods to show them. I found that if someone can identify, particularly nine major deities, they can pretty well move around big blocks of India without a lot of difficulty and be able to identify the various gods and goddesses they see and various shrines and temples in various places around India.

What I want to do is to introduce each of the gods, or goddesses, say a little bit about the god or goddess and more importantly, the distinguishing marks for each of these. I understand that even with the summary lectures, there will be some pictures provided so you can hopefully be seeing visual images of these gods, to help you understand the narrative that I am going to be sharing with you about each of the gods.

VISHNU

First of all, you have to know about the god Vishnu. Vishnu is a very important god because it is one of the two most important gods worshiped in India. Basically, the two most significant gods in India are Shiva and Vishnu. Most Hindus will fall into the category of either worshiping some variation of Shiva or some variation of Vishnu. Those who worship Vishnu or his various incarnations are called "Vishnuvites." Those who worship Shiva and various deities associated with Shiva are called "Shivites."

We need to start right away with recognizing the iconography of Vishnu. The word "iconography" comes from the word "icon" and "graphy" which is from the word "graphe" or marks, the markings of the icon. Whenever an idol or image or icon is made in India, whether it be a two-dimensional picture or a three-dimensional statue, the person who makes that idol has been to school or been to some training program in order to conform the icon or the image to the specifications of that particular deity. With Buddhism, it is much looser and can be very difficult at times to identify a particular figure in Buddhism. But with Hinduism they actually are quite consistent about how they will mark the different gods or goddesses, so that a person who is illiterate and may not have ever read any material, can still see the deity and quickly recognize it because of the stories associated with it and the different markings, to know which god it is. Hindus will regularly go to temples and visit these gods and goddesses and perform what is called "Punjab" which is their word for "worship" in the presence of these idols.

I want to begin by introducing you to each of the nine, beginning with Vishnu. Vishnu is again, the chief god of the Vishnuvites. You will notice right away, if you look at a very classic icon of Vishnu, that there are certain features which are typically present. Let me be clear about this. It does not mean that they are always all present. There are times you have this; but more often you will have at least two or three of the indicators that let you know which god or goddess it is. With Vishnu, you will notice that on the end of his finger there is sometimes found a spinning disc. The spinning disc is something which, even though right now you may not know what it is, you have actually already learned about it in our earlier lectures because the spinning wheel is of course a symbol of the wheel of samsara. Vishnu is turning the wheel of samsara on the end of his finger. Wherever you see the spinning disc, then you know that you are looking at Vishnu. Another example is the conk shell. You can see the conk shell and again you also will remember that we talked about the unstruck sound in Hindu philosophy that believes that there is this sound that resonates throughout the universe through all eternity. The various texts like the Rig Veda, they don't believe were written in time, but they were just simply heard, re-heard at various points when the earth re-emerges; therefore, the text is re-heard over and over again, but it does not have a human origin, it has an eternal origin in this "om" sound. Vishnu has a conk shell in his hand, which of course is what exhibits forth this unstruck sound. He also will be holding a lotus flower, which represents liberation or moksha in the Hindu iconography. He often has also a mace which is a long pole, which is used to represent

divine power. Those are the main ways that you recognize Vishnu: The spinning disc, the conk shell, the lotus flower and the mace, the kingly mace.

You also will occasionally find with Vishnu what you will find with all the gods, they typically have a mount. So in the case of Vishnu, it is a flying bird named "Garuda." If you see a god mounted on this large flying bird, then you again note that you are looking at Vishnu. Also, Vishnu had a very well-known encounter in mythology with a serpent whose name is "Sheshanaga" and this serpent can also be seen often in the presence of Vishnu. You also see Vishnu's wife, "Lakshmi." We will look at Lakshmi later on. It is not unusual to see Lakshmi and Vishnu together. Those are the main distinguishing marks of Vishnu.

RAMA

When it comes to our second deity, we have Rama. We have already introduced Rama because Rama is the chief god of the famous epic of Ramayana. I mentioned as I told the story that the main incarnation of Vishnu is in fact Rama. Because Rama is so important in the popular literature of Hindus, as I said before, children will grow up learning about Rama. Rama is very commonly seen in the various temples. With Rama, you will identify him primarily with bow and arrows because in the Ramayana he is most known for his shooting of an arrow. Therefore, you will find him with a bow and arrow. In fact, once you read the Ramayana epic, many times there will be various kinds of associations with the Ramayana epic that are identified with Rama, particularly the presence of Saraswati, which is the wife that he rescues. Once you learn to recognize Saraswati, you will recognize, Oh, this must be Rama and Saraswati. More often is the presence of Hanuman. Hanuman is the monkey god. We will look at him next; but he is often with Rama; it is not unusual at all to see Rama and Hanuman together. The main way is to recognize the bow and arrows. Almost all the icons of Rama will have somewhere bow and arrows or the presence of Hanuman or Saraswati.

HANUMAN

Now about Hanuman. Hanuman is probably one of the most easily recognized gods in all of India because Hanuman is the monkey god. When you see the monkey face on a human figure, you know that you are in the presence of Hanuman. You often find Hanuman bowing down before Rama, which is why I told you earlier that Rama and Hanuman are often found together. When you see Hanuman, you should begin to look for the bow and arrows and you will finally realize you are looking at Rama and Hanuman. Hanuman is viewed by Hindus as the greatest example of a devotee, a person who is devoted to their teacher or their god. It is not unusual to see Hanuman bowing down before Rama. Another sign of his devotion is found when he is asked if he has really been devoted to Rama and Sita. Hanuman rips open his chest and proves that inside of his heart there is an icon of Rama and Sita. He also says that the word "Ram" is written on all of his bones. You occasionally will see somewhat of a grotesque god with a monkey face, ripping open his chest. You might even see Rama and Saraswati inside of Hanuman. When you see those kind of things, you will know you

are looking at Hanuman. But the most important identifying iconography is a monkey face.

Another popular view of Hanuman that you see a lot is not only the monkey face god bowing down before Hanuman, that would be a classic; another classic would be him opening up his chest and you see Rama and Sita in his heart. A third very common iconography of Hanuman is him flying through the air, holding a mountain, an entire mountain, on the palm of his hand. Again, this is something that everyone recognizes because it is part of the Ramayana epic; but at one point in the epic Rama needs a particular herb that is only grown on a certain mountain. He asks Hanuman – Hanuman is so eager to serve him and honor him – he asks Hanuman to go and bring this herb so that it can be used for medicinal purposes. Hanuman goes to his mountain and he knows that this herb only grows on this particular mountain, but he cannot find the herb. In his devotion to Rama, he tears up the entire mountain and brings the entire mountain with him, all the way to the presence of Rama. So the monkey face god holding the mountain is another common iconography of Hanuman.

LAKSHMI

The fourth major god or goddess, in this case goddess, that we need to identify is Lakshmi. Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth and prosperity and so there are certain things that you will see her identified with to clearly let you know that it is Lakshmi. Probably the most important iconographic mark for Lakshmi is to see a female form, a goddess female form. Her hands are slightly outstretched and golden coins are flowing out of the palms of her hands. That is probably, in my experience, the most common iconography of Lakshmi. It is a picture of a goddess with coins flowing from her hands. You also see her frequently standing on a lotus flower. We have already seen how with Vishnu, the lotus flower represents moksha, or deliverance. Therefore, you will see her standing on a lotus flower. You often see her in the presence of elephants. They often draw elephants that are spraying their trunk full of water on her, like a shower. Again, this represents freshness, represents water, which is also worshiped in India. I have always thought it would be really nice to get an elephant shower because you see this on things like Jungle Book and other kinds of movies. It would be really neat to actually experience this. Lakshmi has the opportunity regularly in the iconography to be sprayed by the elephants' water.

All the gods or goddesses have some animal that they are identified with. In the case of Lakshmi, she is often identified with an owl, so you will see sometimes an owl beside Lakshmi. This is just one more indicator. I think again, the coins and lotus flower and the elephants spraying her are the dominant forms. But these other marks are sometimes there as well.

KRISHNA

The fifth god that one should be aware of if you are going to travel in India is of course the well-known Krishna. Krishna is, like all the gods, identified with certain iconography or markings. I will say in passing, though, it fits with Krishna probably more than all of the others. Sometimes people see a statue and wonder, Is this a picture of some kind of religious or political leader, or some guru? How do you know it is a god in the first place, before you begin to categorize according to different icons? One of the ways is that often the skin color of the gods is blue, as opposed to the regular flesh tone that we have. It is not unusual at all to see Krishna as a blue Krishna because this is a very standard way throughout Hindu iconography to talk about gods and goddesses and how you view gods and goddesses, especially gods.

The main way to identify Krishna is not the blue color, because that is something you will find with almost all the gods, but by the flute. Krishna is often seen playing the flute. Whenever you see a god playing a flute, it is almost certainly going to be Krishna. Also, as we will see when we discuss the bhakti movement in more detail, you will find a number of references in the various epics and tales of Hinduism, stories about Krishna dancing with girls who are cow herders. Krishna himself is a cow herder and there are many girls that help in India. They will help pen the cows and take them from field to field and milk them, etc. In the Hindu stories these women are called "gopis." In the stories about Krishna, he is said to be dancing with these gopis or playing playfully with these gopis in various ways. It is not unusual to see a young god, blue color, playing the flute and in the presence of innumerable, maybe thousands of young girls, you are probably looking at Krishna. Even though he has many young girls that he dances with and enjoys being with, there is one that he is especially attracted to and becomes the basis again of a number of well-known stories, especially in a famous 12th century Sanskrit lyrical poem known as the Gita Govinda. This really celebrates the love affair between Radha and Krishna. You often see Krishna with this one other gopi, one particular gopi whose name is Radha.

The other way that Krishna is identified is not so much as the young fellow dancing with gopis, as a young, 20-year-old looking person god; but as a more mature counselor in the famous story of Bhagavad-gita, which we have not yet said much about. In the full lectures, we have a lot of time to actually give a full exposition of the Bhagavad-gita. The importance of Bhagavad-gita is that it involves a very famous conversation between Krishna and a well-known warrior in Indian history and mythology known as Arjuna. In the course of this story Krishna comes down and he has a conversation with Arjuna, who is in the chariot about to go to battle. The basic context of the Bhagavad-gita is a contemplation of whether or not Arjuna should go into battle and fight, even though he knows that some of the people on the opposing battlefield are his own kissing kin. He finds this a bit distressing emotionally, to be involved in the killing of his own kinfolk. He has a reflective discussion about this that raises all kinds of philosophical and theological points that come out in the Bhagavad-gita.

Because the story of the gita is so well known in India, it is not unusual to find iconographies of Krishna that are part of this. If you see, for example, a god talking to a young warrior male, in this case it is Arjuna, in a chariot, the sign of a chariot is almost a certain sign that you are looking at Krishna. If you see a god in the chariot, blowing a conk shell – we already mentioned that a conk shell is also identified with Vishnu – but Krishna is again, one of the incarnations of Vishnu. You have this present with Rama and Krishna as well. You have these manifestations of this occasional connection between Vishnu and the gods that he incarnates himself as. If you see him blowing a conk shell in a chariot, it is certainly going to be Krishna.

Those are the main ways: the blue color, playing the flute and the presence of gopis, especially Radha, and him in a chariot or blowing the conk shell. There are also other identifications or qualities: the cow herder, if you see Krishna or see a god pictured with a cow or a number of cows, it is very likely going to be Krishna. If you see the presence of Radha or Arjuna, that is going to identify him if you learn that it is Radha or Arjuna; then you will know that person with them, if it is a god, is almost certainly Krishna.

I would say Krishna is a young man, dancing with the gopis. Krishna is a mature revelation to Arjuna in the chariot; and the Bhagavad-gita are probably the two most identifiable Krishna kinds of pictures. The flute of course, is always there, so you need to keep an eye out for the flute.

There is also one other I think sub-theme that you should be aware of. Again, one of the supplements to the Mahabharata, this great epic of India, is a document known as the Harivamsa (23:18.5). “Hari” is the word for lord in Sanskrit and it is a supplement to Mahabharata. It talks about many of the childish pranks of Krishna as a young child, or even as a baby. It is not unusual to see icons that reflect some of these childish pranks. The most common one is the story about when Krishna when as a very young child, he got his hand in his mother’s butter dish. You will see a young, little child sitting next to a butter dish with his hand stuck in the butter dish, or sometimes with butter smeared all over his face quite playfully. If you see that, you know that is also an iconography of Krishna.

SHIVA

Let’s move now to Shiva because Shiva, I mentioned, is the other great god, mainly in north India, but is certainly worshiped all over India and is part of the Shivite tradition. I would say that of all the gods and goddesses, for that matter as well, there is no god that is more easily recognizable than Shiva. Because Shiva has very, very pronounced iconographic markings and they are just carried forward with so much consistency in the art work and in the idol making and the image making, that it is almost impossible to miss it once you recognize the marks of Shiva. These are marks that are both visual things that you see that are identified with Shiva in his own right and also more importantly, various things identified based on the stories that are told about Shiva. As you might imagine, Hindus grow up learning and knowing these stories.

The first and most important icon that identifies Shiva is the Trishula (25:25.3). The Trishula is what is called in the western world a trident, a three-pronged spear. They hold the shank in their hand and it breaks into three pieces, you see three points. This is often called in the West a trident, but in India it is a Trishula. Shiva is almost invariably holding this in his various iconographies. You also find various animals identified with Shiva that are often part of the iconography. One is a cobra around his neck, the word is “nag” in Hindi and Sanskrit. You will see him very frequently with a cobra wrapped around his neck. You see a god, often in a blue color, holding a trident or Trishula in his hand. Around his neck is a cobra. These are two classic marks. Another classic marking of a Shiva is his hair. This is what is called a “jata” (26:34.6), what we would call in the West a dreadlock, dreadlock hair like a Jamaican kind of hairstyle that is quite dominant in the early iconographies of Indian gods. It has become very much identified with Shiva, so you will see that.

Shiva also often carries a tiny little drum. You often see it in his hand. When you first see it, you realize it is a little drum shaped like an hourglass. It goes down into a very narrow place, so that you can grab it with your hand and yet it comes out larger on the end and there is a little swinging baton that hits the end of the drum and makes a noise. It is a very well-known tiny drum in India, it is called a “damaru.” Shiva invariably will have this damaru in his hand. You also will see he has a third eye on his forehead. You are all I’m sure, quite familiar with the vermilion spot that you will see on the forehead of an Indian woman. If you have wondered what that represents, here we have it. This ultimately represents the third eye of Shiva. Because with Shiva, one of the ways you manifest that your god was for example, all powerful, is by giving the god multiple arms. You will see with all of these gods, many times they will have, rather than just two arms, four arms or six arms. If you want to show that they are omniscient and they be-all and know-all, then you will see that they will carry on their forehead the third eye; it is a way of identifying their knowledge.

These are all classic ways of identifying Shiva. As with all of the gods, Shiva will have certain sacred gestures with his hand that he will show. In the full lectures, we actually will look at some of the very famous hand gestures that are found with the gods, but we will not do that in these summary lectures.

That is one form of Shiva and that is kind of the standard visual image of Shiva. Shiva also appears in another form and actually most of the same iconography is present there. Shiva has another form known as the “Nataraja,” which means “the dancing form of Shiva.” The Nataraja form is a very, very classic form of Shiva and it usually shows a god dancing on a small dwarf; I guess it is a dwarf that has to be small. He is dancing on a dwarf. He has the damaru in his hand and he usually has a flame in the other hand. He has long, wild dreadlock hair and he is dancing. Usually he is dancing inside a circle which is filled with the flame. This is known as the dancing form of Shiva, “Nataraja.”

The main thing is, don’t be fooled by the very different view of your kind of traditional Shiva lore where Shiva is there in the lotus position, meditating with a tiny drum and

Trishula trident in his hand and this kind of wild dancing figure in the middle of the circle of flames. If you look carefully, you see the same things there. You see the hair flying, the dreadlock hair, you see the damaru. Those are classic signs of Shiva. Upon reflection, you will be able to realize, of course it is Shiva. It does deserve special mention because it is a completely different form and visual imagery of Shiva. The dwarf again, is part of the stories and mythology of Shiva where he has victory over this particular deity that was in dwarf form. Because of that, he dances on it. Shiva is believed to be the creator of the world and therefore it is not unusual at all to see the flame in his hand because the flame represents the creative power of Shiva as well as the dancing form. So, you will see that and know what it means.

Therefore, you have what I am calling the traditional Shiva, which is a human figure that is clearly sitting in the meditative form or something with all of the iconographies. He is a dancing form, which is a little looser and more imaginative form of Shiva. Then you have another, third form, which is extremely dominant all over India. Especially in north India it is known as the Shiva Lingam. Lingam is the word for the human male phallus, so it is a sexual organ. The male sexual organ is identified with Shiva. The female sexual organ is known as "the yoni." It just means "womb"; but it is a picture that you find all over India as the erect Lingam coming forth out of the yoni, or the female sexual organ. It is a symbol of fertility. It is a symbol of vitality and creative power of Shiva. It is found in homes all across India. They are sold by the thousands during the Shiva festivals. It is very, very, very popular. You cannot go into a temple in many parts of India without seeing somewhere what is called a "Shiva Lingam." This is the male sexual organ of Shiva. In fact, it is quite normal to see in temples. It is the central part of the temple, a very large Shiva Lingam, coming forth from the yoni. Women especially you will see lined up there. Maybe they are praying for a child, praying for fertility. They will offer sacrifices to Shiva. As I mentioned earlier, this is called "puja". We will say more about puja later. This is often done with coconuts and flowers and milk; and this is offered to the gods.

DURGA

The seventh of our nine gods which we need to identify in order to be able to reasonably feel confident walking around India and seeing temples and various depictions, is the goddess "Durga" As we saw with Lakshmi, she has very distinguishing marks that make her Durga. This is particularly present in northeast India. You will find that one of the main ways you recognize Durga is that she has many, many arms. It is not unusual to see a god with perhaps four arms; but in the case of Durga, she often has a dozen or more arms, so that is something you will notice quite readily. You will also notice she has a spear in her hand because she is famous for killing a buffalo demon. You will see her standing on this buffalo demon, thrusting her spear into the side of the buffalo god or buffalo demon. This is a classic iconography of Durga.

KALI

The eighth is another goddess form, this is “Kali.” Kali and Durga are both different forms. They have the same mother goddess of India. You have a number of iconography details that are associated with Kali. First of all, it is a goddess form rather than a god form, so there is some female iconography. You will often see Kali with extremely dark, indeed even black, color. Kali is the word for “black” and Kali is identified with extremely black skin. You will also notice, Kali often has her tongue sticking way out, a protruding tongue. You will often see that tongue dripping with blood. This again is part of the iconography because of various stories told in India about the gods, for example, in the case of Kali. Without going into a lot of detail, Kali was going to fight this famous demon in their mythology and this demon had gotten the boon, or the promise, from the gods that if any of his blood was shed in this fight with Kali, for every drop of blood that was shed in the fight, every demon blood drop would become another demon. The demon went into the fight with Kali with great confidence because either he would straight-out defeat Kali; or if Kali began to defeat him, it would result in multiple demons coming up out of the ground. In a sense reproduced himself. He went in very confident, but Kali knew this and so Kali outsmarted him because Kali grabbed him and tore him open. But before any blood could touch the ground, Kali sucked all of the blood out of his body. The blood then dripped from Kali, but it doesn’t count anymore on behalf of the demon because the demon had already had his blood taken out. Because of that, you see Kali with dripping blood. You also see her with a necklace or a garland made of human skulls. You see her with disheveled hair. This is a very shocking image, quite frankly, very difficult to miss once you have made note of the iconographic markings.

GANESH

The ninth and last one that we will look at in the scaled-down summary lectures is that of Ganesh. Again, Ganesh, I think along with Hanuman, is one of the most easily recognizable gods in India because Ganesh is a young boy with the head of an elephant. If you see any elephant-headed god, you know immediately that you are looking at Ganesh. Again, this is borne of stories because Shiva is married to the goddess Parvati. The story of Shiva and Parvati: Ganesh was created and Ganesh was guarding the place where Parvati took her bath. He was told not to let anyone by. Shiva came home, he sees this person standing there, he does not know who it is because she created this child, not from normal sexual intercourse. There are various stories behind this, but one is that he came through the sandal, her shoe. There is a fight involved and the god Shiva chopped off the head of his own son. When he came in and found out he had killed his own son, he immediately rushed into the forest. He grabbed the first thing he could find that was alive and of course being in India, it was an elephant. He took the head of the elephant and he placed it onto the body of his child and the child lived. You see a human body and an elephant head, and that is Ganesh. You see the human body with the elephant head, you see his four arms and you see a snake on his neck, just like we saw earlier with Shiva.

Many times, Ganesh is shown with a very fat belly. He often wears the sacred red, something which the high caste Brahmins wear with the thread, that you wear over your shoulder and down to your waist. You will see Ganesh with that. You will see Ganesh in the presence of a mouse. You saw how Vishnu identified with a flying bird, Garuda and the serpent. We saw how Lakshmi is identified with the owl and Krishna with a cow, etc. In the case of Ganesh, as you know he is a big, fat, elephant-headed god. He rides a mouse around, so you will see him on a mouse.

SARASWATI

Those are the main nine gods and goddesses that you need to know. If you are in certain areas - if you happen to visit schools, for example - you may not be encountering the same as tramping around India. If you go there for educational purposes, you may need to know about, for example, Saraswati. Saraswati is the goddess of knowledge, so naturally she is portrayed in many universities. She is often seen with a musical instrument in her hand. It is a large, stringed instrument she has with her. She is also seen with a swan.

There are others. Sometimes also in the universities or colleges you will see the goddess of the Vedas. That goddess is known as Gayatri, identified because you will see that she has five heads, named after the four Vedas – the Rig Veda, Sama Veda Yajur Veda and Atharva Veda. Then there is a famous “lost Veda” that is the fifth Veda which they often talk about, that we have not discussed in this class. The five-headed goddess, the Gayatri you see this goddess holding a musical instrument, a stringed instrument on a swan, you know it is Saraswati.

I should note there are other gods, not limited only to the nine; but the nine are the most important. I think if you know those nine, then you will be in pretty good stead to be clear when you see various gods and goddesses in the various temples in India.

We will bring this lecture to a close at this point. Then we will come back and discuss popular bhakti movements in India and give you a little more feel for the way popular Hinduism actually works in India.