

H. L. RICHARD

Counting Hinduism

The complexity of Hindu traditions overwhelms all attempts at simple summation. For over two decades now I have been opposing efforts to describe Hinduism as a meaningful category or to summarize various strands of Hindu teaching or practice, favoring a call for completely new paradigms (see Richards 2004:308-315). Yet books and papers continue to attempt a description of Hinduism, often producing more confusion than clarity as the concepts do not match ground realities.

Pragmatism has finally overtaken me and I have developed my own attempt at a simple summation of the multiplicity of Hindu teachings and practices. This is an attempt to present complexity and confusion in a memorable summation, an attempt to highlight holism and undermine reductionistic and simplistic surveys. The schema is counting from one to eleven, highlighting important aspects of Hindu traditions that are based on these numeric values.

One God

Despite the tendency to describe Hinduism as polytheistic, and despite the blatant polytheism of much Hindu practice, there nevertheless is a constant focus from all strands of Hindu teaching that finally God is one. The nature of this one ultimate reality (i.e., whether it should even be called “God”) might be disputed by some elitist philosophical Hindus, and more theistic types (who agree on “God”) present many theologies with much space for mystery. Yet “one God” is a fundamentally important confession that resounds across the vast array of Hindu traditions.

The doctrine of one God is rooted in an oft-referenced Rig Vedic text, 1:164:46.

They call him Indra, Mitra, Varuna,
Agni or the heavenly sunbird Garutmat.
The seers call in many ways that which is One;
They speak of Agni, Yama, Matarisvan. (Panikkar 1983:660)

From this Vedic root of One behind all reality grew both monistic (pantheistic, advaitic) and monotheistic definitions. In later traditions the distinction between monism and theism is not clearly drawn, and that remains the case in much Hindu thought.¹ The one God of Hindu traditions contrasts with the simplicity and clarity of traditional Semitic monotheism, with an emphasis on the mystery of God and his ways which borders on capriciousness, as in the concept of *lilā*, which suggests that our experienced historical reality is nothing but God's sport or play. This sense of mystery, which can perhaps even be called uncertainty, related to God is highlighted in this striking analysis from Nirad C. Chaudhuri.

The One God to which I am referring here is a Hindu form of the Christian and Islamic [God] in a physical form. Actually, no physical form is ever assigned to him, though he is a full anthropomorphic psychic entity. He is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent. He is personified compassion and justice at the same time.

The Hindus always turn to him when they are in trouble, in all their sorrows and suffering, but never when prosperous. They would say to others, God will show you mercy, God will judge your actions, or God will not allow this. No particular, individualized, anthropomorphic god of the old Hindu pantheon ever fulfilled this role with any Hindu. To the other gods of Hinduism, even when thought of as a supreme god, the Hindu looked with some confidence based on his right to ask for divine help, since through worship he was performing his part of the contract and giving the god his *quid pro quo*. But to this God, *Bhagavan*, he appealed when he was wholly without any resource, yet he did so with complete faith in his mercy.

Nevertheless, this *Bhagavan* has never been worshipped, nor has he even become an object of regular prayer. St. Paul said to the Athenians that He whom they worshipped as the Unknown God was being proclaimed to them by him. To the Hindus the Unknown God was fully known, but never worshipped. In the whole religious literature of the Hindus there is no discussion of the nature of this God. Yet in one sense this undiscussed God is the only real God of Hindu faith. (Chaudhuri 1996:149)

That there are many Hindu gods is obvious and indisputable, and that most Hindus are polytheistic in their devotional expressions is likewise clear. But despite these facts, all Hindus affirm that finally there is one Ultimate Reality, one God. In the complexity of Hindu theologies, however, there are multiple claimants for the throne of that one God.

Two Monotheisms

Two distinct monotheistic theological systems developed in India, both with multiple “denominations” which present different definitions of key concepts or developed distinct ritual practices.² Numerically the larger group focused on Vishnu as the Supreme Being, with Shiva being the other monotheistic deity. *Saivism* (Shiva worship) is particularly strong in south India, with *Vaishnavism* (Vishnu worship) also present there and dominant in most of India.

Vaishnava theology gives a central place to the concept of *avatāra*, the descent of God into this world. The classic ten avatars of Vishnu will be discussed later in this paper. *Saivism* today generally opposes the concept of avatar, seeing Shiva as immutable. The knowledge and grace of Shiva are mediated to humanity through gurus. The idea of competing monotheistic systems seems a bit odd, although Judaism, Islam, and Christianity (not to mention disputes within these larger constructs) illustrate the same reality. With a core belief in one God, it is not surprising that attempts were made to circumvent competing monotheisms in favor of a synthesis, and the *trimurti* doctrine is the best example of that.

The three forms (*trimurti*) of God as classically defined are Brahmā the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer. But in fact there are always four gods in the *trimurti* scheme, as explained by J. N. Farquhar.

Since each sect identified its own god with the supreme Brahman, the *trimurti* has a distinct form in each. To the Vishnuite Vishnu-Brahman is manifested in three gods, Brahmā, a subordinate Vishnu, and Siva, while to the Saiva, Siva-Brahman is manifested in Brahmā, Vishnu, and Bhava. . . . The doctrine has never been a living element in the religion of the Hindu, although it often appears in literature and now and then in sculpture. It may be well to notice how utterly unlike the Christian doctrine of the Trinity this unstable theory is. It always involves four gods, one Supreme and three manifestations. (Farquhar 1984 [1920]:149)³

So the *trimurti* scheme was co-opted by Vaishnavites, who clearly teach that Vishnu is the creator, preserver, and destroyer. Saivites likewise counter that Shiva is the creator, preserver, and destroyer. So there are two genuine monotheistic systems under the umbrella of “Hinduism,” Vaishnavism, and Saivism. This does not override the fact that popular or folk religion in India is overwhelmingly eclectic, acknowledging both Vishnu and Shiva as well as lesser Hindu gods, Muslim saints, Jesus and Mary, living Hindu gurus, etc.

Three Major Deities

Despite the fact of one God and two established monotheistic systems, still it remains true that there are three major deities in Hinduism; Vishnu and Shiva are obviously two, and the third is Devi or the goddess who has various names, particularly Durga or Kali. Tantric traditions by definition mean a focus on the goddess, yet female deities are present in the mythologies of Vaishnavism and Saivism as well. Tantric traditions include esoteric practices that are often sensationalized, but also a more standard type of devotional faith with a focus on the goddess.

The many diverse Christian traditions are perhaps most united on the doctrine of God; one, sovereign, just, loving and triune (acknowledging also small but vigorous Unitarian Christian traditions). The search for a unifying doctrine among Hindu traditions does not lead to a doctrine of God, rather to *karma-samsāra*, the teaching that actions (*karma*) lead to rewards or punishments which finally result in reincarnation (*samsāra*). This is often caricatured as an absolute and fatalistic system, and there are fatalistic tendencies among Hindus that are perhaps not unrelated to types of *karma-samsāra* teaching. But most Hindu traditions see *karma-samsāra* as far from fatalistic since both human freedom and divine grace are also dynamic realities in complex interrelationship with *karma-samsāra*.

There is no single Hindu theology or worldview, yet at the practical level one can assume sufficient understanding of one supreme God in speaking with Hindus. As I have written elsewhere, "In the midst of a practical polytheism, the foundational viewpoint of most Hindus is that there is a single supreme God who interacts with this world in various ways. It is to our advantage in this life to please God, and in God alone final salvation can be found" (Richard 2007:14). In being multi-theological and in incorporating many differing worldviews, Hinduism does not fit the standard paradigm for a "religion." Some have tried to define Hinduism in terms of social structure rather than theology; this is particularly expressed as *varnāshramadharmā*.

Four Castes and Stages of Life

Varnāshramadharmā: *Dharma* based on *varna* and *āshrama*. *Dharma* is your duty, but also identifies/defines your place in the cosmos and in society. *Varna* is one of the two Sanskrit terms for caste; the four *varnas* identify three clean caste groupings (Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya) and one group of unclean castes (Sudra). Untouchable or dalit castes are *āvarna*, without *varna* (the four caste groups listed are *savarna*, with *varna*). This approach to caste is theoretical, not related to ground realities. *Jāti* is caste as endogenous group, the practical lived reality of innumerable caste groups. At the top and bottom of the *jāti* scale people know they are Brahmin or dalit;

in between the extremes, caste status is fluid and contested. Yet everyone is aware of the four caste schema, so it is a vital part of basic knowledge of Hindu traditions.

The four stages of life (*āshramas*) are also widely recognized even though they are rarely practiced in the modern world. The stages are *brahmacharya* or student stage, *grihasthya* or householder stage, *vānaprasthya* or recluse stage, and *sannyāsa*, the final stage of complete renunciation. The four *āshramas* were always an idealistic construct not lived out in practice by most Hindus. It really only applied to the three clean caste groups, and even among them there was always a competing system where renunciation could be embraced at any stage of life, rather than as the fourth stage of life (most renunciants today are *not* in the fourth stage of life).

Varnāshramadharma is thus a noble ideal, but it is not a valid definition for the complexity of ideas and practices that have been grouped under "Hinduism." Yet the four castes and four stages of life are concepts all Hindus understand and represent ideals that many emulate. *Jāti*, caste as endogamous group, is still of crucial importance in Hindu life, much more than *varna*. *Dharma* is one of the most important concepts in Hindu worldviews, despite the problems of defining it adequately in English. To neglect *varnāshramadharma* is to fail to grasp Hindu realities.

Note that Christians tend to emphasize an absolute ethical standard, particularly the Ten Commandments. Hindus tend to emphasize varying situational duties. No one is allowed to murder, yet also the duty of a boy is quite different from that of a married man or a retired man; also a doctor has different duties than a farmer. *Varna* and *āshrama* impact just what *dharma* means for each individual, and this "situational ethic" allies usefully with traditional biblical teaching.

Five Daily Duties

Klaus Klostermaier in his survey of Hinduism outlines the classical position on five daily sacrifices or duties. According to an Upanishadic teaching (Chandogya Upanishad 5:3-10), humanity owes its existence to the "five fire sacrifices," and the great classical Sastras circumscribe, with the term *pañca mahāyajña*, five great sacrifices, the routine of daily duties of the Brahmin. When the Brahmin had no other obligations, the execution of these occupied all of his time; under the pressure of changing circumstances, the five sacrifices were reduced to mere symbolic gestures.

Thus, *deva-yajña*, the sacrifice to the gods, could be performed by throwing a stick of wood into the fire; *pitr-yajña*, the sacrifice to the ancestors, could be fulfilled by pouring a glass of water onto the floor; *bhuta-yajña*, sacrifice to all creatures, can be reduced to throwing out a small ball of rice; *manusya-yajña*, the sacrifice to men or hospitality in the widest

sense, is fulfilled by giving a mouthful of rice to a Brahmin; *brahma-yajña*, the mantra sacrifice or study of the veda, may consist in the recitation of one single line of scripture. Those, however, who can afford the time, frequently perform the elaborate ceremonies detailed in the Sastras and fill their days with holy ritual and sacred chant. The ideal routine of the Brahmin as outlined in the law books may be followed in its entirety by very few people in India today. But, surprisingly, many practice part of it quite regularly (Klostermaier 1990:151-152).

The five daily duties have been updated with a distinctly modern flavor in this definition:

1. Deva-Yajña: This is regular worship of God in any way a person likes. This can be done in an elaborate manner like Vedic Yajñas, homams, agnihotra, aupasana, etc. The simple form can be chanting a few prayers, offering flowers to the deities and doing namaskaras. This practice makes one God-conscious in daily activities.

2. Pithru-Yajña: It consists of *Tarpana* or oblations to departed souls and Shraddha or annual religious rites performed for departed souls. . . . Respecting and taking care of living parents and unconditional reverence while they are alive, come under this yajna. Hence the concept of old age homes does not fit in our culture at all! One must contemplate on the teachings of the sages, holy men, and our forefathers. This practice is intended to serve as a reminder to preserve, enrich, and continue our rich cultural heritage and family values.

3. Rishi-Yajña or Brahma-Yajña: This includes the worship and study of Vedas and scriptures. The best form is chanting and propagating them. . . . We must learn them and give to the next generation. This practice refreshes our mind with sacred knowledge and helps to preserve and enrich such knowledge. Promotion of scriptural study falls under this yajña.

4. Manushya-Yajña: This is service to fellow human beings. All kinds of social services come under this. *Adhithi devo bhava* [a guest is like a god]—guests should always be welcome. They must be served with love, respect and reverence. This is the backbone of traditional Hindu hospitality. Service to humanity is service to God.

5. Bhutha-Yajña: This is service to all living beings like animals, birds, insects, trees, forests, etc. We must remember they are also serving us. . . . In many pujas, offerings are thrown outside the house with the chanting of the mantras. The latter are meant for various creatures of the earth. . . . Environmental protection and ecological protection come under this yajña. This practice is intended to create the awareness, to share with all other living beings on earth. (Daily Duties of a Hindu 2006)

Note how the teaching on five daily duties has adjusted historically

depending on varying circumstances, and is adapted and interpreted in various ways. Hindu traditions are evolving still, and recognition of the ongoing evolution and diversity of Hindu traditions is essential to any adequate understanding of “Hinduism.”

Six Schools of Hindu Philosophy

Textbook teaching on Hinduism will usually mention the six schools of Hindu philosophy, but this is an elitist rubric that is of little practical relevance. Richard King points out that it is also a disputed construct without ancient authority. “The notion that there are six basic systems of thought gained considerable authority during this period [5th to 10th centuries A.D.], but authors continued to provide radically different accounts of what constituted those six, some including Saiva philosophy as a school and also constructing categories such as ‘the *nāstika* [unbelieving] school’ to accommodate ‘a multitude of sins’” (King 1999:44).

The six schools as currently formulated are Nyāya (logic), Vaisesika (atomism), Sāmkhya (dualistic discrimination), Yoga, Mīmāṃsā (Vedic exegesis), and Vedānta. But at the practical level Indian philosophy is all about Vedānta. There are multiple schools of Vedanta, including the traditional monistic and theistic schools, and modern reinterpretations (Neo-Vedanta). An understanding of Vedānta is important for interaction with traditional Hindu thought or with educated modern Hindus, but the other schools are not read or studied in any depth except by scholars.

Seven Steps

Seven steps is worthy of mention in exposition of Hindu traditions because it points to the centrality of marriage. There are various lists of Hindu sacraments (*samskāras*), many accepting sixteen but few of these in practice. Birth, marriage, and death rites are the essentials. There is a long-standing debate about the most important of the four stages of life, with some opting for *sannyāsa* as this is most directly related to seeking salvation. But most authorities see the householder stage as most important, as all of life depends on productive homes and families.

Julius Lipner gives a good summary description of a Hindu marriage and the centrality of the seven steps.

During the wedding ceremony, which may take several hours, there are various rites, some supported by Vedic utterances, which are meant to symbolize and bring about fertility, bonding, fidelity, long life, steadfastness and other features of a happy marital union. These rites include the knotting together of a garment of the bride and of the groom, the exchange of wedding garlands, the *pāṇi-grahana* or

grasping of the bride's hand by the groom, a circling of the fire during which the groom traditionally leads the bride (though today this rite is sometimes done in more egalitarian fashion, with both partners walking side by side), various fire rituals, and perhaps most important, the *sapta-padi* or seven steps made by the bride and groom, each step symbolizing some aspect of fertility, bonding or prosperity (according to some authorities, this rite seals the marriage bond). (Lipner 2009:299)

Nothing is more important in "Hinduism" than marriage and family life. In Hindu weddings the bride dresses in red; in Christian weddings, including in India, the bride usually wears white. There is no reason why white must be worn by all brides who are devoted followers of Jesus Christ. A bride who loves and follows Christ but who wears red during her wedding is legitimately Hindu; "Hindu" does not define a theology or worldview (as noted above, there are many theologies and worldviews) but encompasses much broader realities as well.

Eight Limbs of Yoga

Vaman Shivram Apte in his Sanskrit-English dictionary lists thirty-two meanings for the word yoga. Many of these are obscure and antiquated, but this illustrates the point that yoga is not a simple subject. Klaus Klostermaier suggests that "yoga is one of the most popular and most ambiguous words in Indian literature" (1990:358). Numbers twenty-three and twenty-four in Apte's list of meanings define what we think of when we hear of yoga:

23. Deep and abstract meditation, concentration of the mind, contemplation of the Supreme Spirit. . . .

24. The system of philosophy established by Patanjali, which is considered to be the second division of the Samkhya philosophy, but is practically reckoned as a separate system. (The chief aim of the Yoga philosophy is to teach the means by which the human soul may be completely united with the Supreme Soul and thus secure absolution; and deep abstract meditation is laid down as the chief means of securing this end, elaborate rules being given for the proper practice of such Yoga or concentration of the mind). (Apte 1970 [1890]:459-460)

Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* outlined what is today often called Raja Yoga (Hatha Yoga is mainly about the physical aspect of yoga). The eight "limbs" of Raja Yoga are:

1. *Yama*, i.e., restraining one's thought and behavior by the practice of

certain virtues such as abstaining from injury to living beings, from lying, theft, etc.

2. *Niyama*, that is, practicing such observances as cleanliness, contentment with one's lot, and mindfulness of the Lord (*isvara*) as Exemplar of the practice.

3. *Āsana*, or physical posture(s) conducive to concentration.

4. *Prāṇayama*, i.e., 'breath control' to focus concentration.

5. *Pratyāhāra*, or sense withdrawal, both physically (so that the senses are not excited by their usual stimuli), and mentally (to the point of being detached from sense gratification).

6. *Dhāraṇa* or holding the concentration steady.

7. *Dhyāna* or mentally targeting the object of concentration in unwavering fashion.

8. *Samādhi*, focusing on the object of concentration to the point of perfect mind control, and subordinating the mind to the purposes of spirit or *purusa* within (Lipner 2009:340).

In practice among Hindus yoga is rather elitist, but related to its popularity in the West it is becoming fashionable among urbanized Hindus. There is currently a reaction against Western yoga traditions which are perceived as being insensitive to the "Hindu" roots of yoga. Yet academia has recognized that modern yoga is rooted in a resurgence during the colonial era, and much of so-called classical yoga has no ancient roots at all (Singleton 2010).

Nine Planets

Dayanand Bharati points out that "from birth to death nothing is more dominant among Hindus than astrology" (2005:93). A recognition of the nine "planets" (*graha*) of Indian astrology is thus far from just filler in this count to eleven; it raises a point that cannot be missed for a true understanding of Hindu traditions.

The nine planets are not really planets in the astronomical sense; as a *Wikipedia* article explains. "This includes the planets: Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn, the sun, the moon, as well as positions in the sky, Rahu (north or ascending lunar node) and Ketu (south or descending lunar node)" (*Wikipedia*, s.v. "Navagraha"). *Wikipedia* also gives a helpful description of Rahu and Ketu.

Astronomically (as per Hindu astrology), Rahu and Ketu denote the two points of intersection of the paths of the sun and the moon as they move around the celestial sphere. Therefore, Rahu and Ketu are respectively called the north and the south lunar nodes. The fact that eclipses occur when sun and moon are at one of these points gives rise to the myth of the swallowing of the sun. (*Wikipedia*, s.v. "Rahu")

All major life events (even political campaigns) are associated with astrological assessments, including special ceremonies when deaths occur at inauspicious times. Numerous classical Hindu writings are highly critical of astrology, as Bharati points out in his exposition (2005:93-96), and massive fraud is perpetuated on simple people in the lucrative business of astrology.

Ten Avatars of Vishnu

This counting of important numbers of concepts and practices in Hinduism started with the complexity of the conception of God and that comes to the fore here again. The ten avatars of Vishnu is a well-known construct and is valid to a significant extent. Note, however, that the Bhagavad Gita affirms innumerable avatars, as does the Bhagavata Purana.

For the protection of the good,
For the destruction of evildoers,
For the setting up of righteousness,
I come into being, age after age.
(Bhagavad Gita 4:8, in Zaehner 1966:267)

Just as thousands of streams flow from an inexhaustible lake,
So from the storehouse of the pure being (*sattva*) flow innumerable manifestations (*avatāra*) of Hari. (Bhagavata Purana 1:3:26, in Sheridan 1986:61)

So the fundamental theology is that God comes into terrestrial life on a regular basis. The Bhagavata Purana contains a list of twenty-two avatars, but the more common list consists of just ten. Those ten are: (1) *mat-sya* (fish), (2) *kurma* (tortoise), (3) *varaha* (boar), (4) *narasimha* (half man, half lion), (5) *vamana* (dwarf), (6) *parashurama* (sage with an ax), (7) Rama, (8) Krishna, (9) Buddha, and (10) *kalki* (still to come).

The Bhagavata Purana in 1:3:24 suggests that Buddha was an avatar of delusion, leading people away from truth so they could be punished. This interpretation is hardly heard today, illustrating again the dynamism and complexity of Hindu traditions. Currently the Buddha avatar (and Buddhism) are interpreted in an entirely positive light.

Most Hindus are Vaishnavas, and worship Vishnu primarily in his avatars as Ram or Krishna. Devotion (*bhakti*) is the central reality, far surpassing the cognitive concerns of theology and philosophy. Biblical faith deeply resonates with the centrality of devotion, yet current Christian terminology centers on the equally vital biblical topic of faith, which misses

what is central to Hindu thought and life. To speak the language of devotion (rather than faith) is to communicate with Hindus; self-identification as a devotee of Jesus (Yeshu *bhakta*) puts a focus on central concerns of both biblical identity and effective communication.

Eleventh

Hinduism without festivals is unimaginable, and most Hindus fast on a regular basis. To introduce these vital aspects of Hindu practice to this survey the importance of *ekādashi* is being highlighted. *Ekādashi* means eleventh; on the eleventh day of both halves of every lunar month there is a fasting day, particularly for Vaishnava Hindus (thus 24 *ekādashi* fasting days every year).

Vaikunta dvar is a festival celebrated along with fasting during the *Shukla Paksha Ekādasi* in the month of *Margazhi* (December/January). On this day the door (*dvar*) to Vishnu's heaven (*Vaikunta*) is opened. This is just one of hundreds of festivals celebrated by Hindus. Some, like Divali, are celebrated nationwide (Divali is internationally recognized, and is explained and interpreted in a number of different ways in different regions and among different "denominations" of Hindus). Numerous others festivals are localized to a single temple or tradition. Modernity is impacting Hindu festivals, with diasporic Hindus often violating astrological calculations and celebrating at convenient rather than traditional times; many celebrations are becoming shorter or are even neglected. Yet there is a rich profusion of new festivals also, and modern media are making some formerly rather minor events into significant socio-religious occasions. Interaction with Hindus must inevitably involve the sharing of festivals.

Conclusion

This one to eleven count of important Hindu concepts has established the variety and complexity of Hindu traditions. The category of "Hinduism" as "a religion" is dubious and impractical; any real grasp of Hindu traditions will involve the embrace of diversity and complexity. The same can really be said of all the "major world religions," none of which contain singular beliefs and practices. Yet in the areas of diversity and complexity, none compare with the depth and profundity of the Hindu traditions.

Notes

¹Note Daniel Sheridan's important study of *The Advaitic Theism of the Bhagavata Purana*. Advaita (non-dualism, monism) and theism are juxtaposed in the great Krishna text, *Srimad Bhagavatam* (Bhagavata Purana).

²Vocabulary in cross-cultural communication is complex and often leads to distortions, thus the quotation marks around “denominations” in this sentence. Yet every word could well be in quotation marks, which would be a self-defeating procedure. It must be noted, however, that monotheism is not an ancient term and is of disputable utility. As applied to Hindu traditions it carries different connotations than it would in Islamic traditions, for example.

³Brahman is the universal spirit, conceived of as God by theistic Hindus and as impersonal by advaitins. Brahmā is an anthropomorphic god who plays little role in popular Hindu devotion.

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H. L. Richard is an independent research scholar presently focusing on issues in South Asian culture and religion.