



# SOCIOLOGY OF BRAHMANISM

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Religion in India has always been very complex owing to two contradictory conditions—first, many religions working well in harmony with each other on one hand and second a few of them having a hostile relationship to each other on the other. While this meant a relatively peaceful existence for those practicing those religions, it means that understanding the history of each religion is quite difficult for those of us who wish to understand them thousands of years later.

Perhaps nowhere is this truer than when we try to reach as far back into Indian history as possible to understand one of its oldest religions, Brahmanism that has grown into the brahmanical social system. Brahmanism gets its name due to its reverence for the overwhelming power of Lord Brahman and also from the class of priests who commune with Brahman. Predating Hinduism by centuries, Brahmanism, nonetheless, is eerily similar to Hinduism. From its earliest days in the earliest cities of the Indus River Valley, many of the major beliefs of Brahmanism still hold true today.

But it's not just the words and chants of a few Brahman priests that shed light on Brahmanism. Remember, only the members of the Brahman caste, the highest caste of Indian society, are allowed to be priests. So, what about everyone else? Much like Hinduism and other religions in the subcontinent, Brahmanism believed in **reincarnation**, or that the soul would be reborn again. In fact, we've found many of the same artefacts that point to the belief in reincarnation in the Indus River Valley as we have found in later Hindu sites.

However, Brahmanism itself was also heavily influenced by the Aryan invasion, as the transition from Brahmanism to Hinduism was not as simple as a mere invasion. In fact, the Aryan Vedas, the poems and hymns that much of Hinduism is based upon, themselves feature many of the stories of traditional North Indian rivalries against those societies in the South. In fact, Brahmanism, as we understand it, would be very limited without the addition of the Aryans, as they provided through the earliest Vedas an important link in understanding the practices of the Brahmins.

Far from being a uniform system of worship, Hinduism, in this large sense, comprises, besides orthodox Brahminism, the numerous sectarian developments of cult in honour of Vishnu, Siva, and their associates, in which for centuries the great mass of the people have

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found satisfaction for their religious cravings. In Hinduism, as distinguished from the heretical sects of India, it is of minor importance what sort of worship is adopted, provided one recognizes the supremacy of the Brahmins and the sacredness of Brahmin customs and traditions. In the pantheistic all-god Brahma, the whole world of deities, spirits, and other objects of worship is contained, so that Hinduism adapts itself to every form of religion, from the lofty monotheism of the cultivated Brahmin to the degraded nature-worship of the ignorant, half savage peasant. Hinduism, to quote Monier Williams, "has something to offer which is suited to all minds. Its very strength lies in its infinite adaptability to the infinite diversity of human characters and human tendencies. It has its highly spiritual and abstract side suited to the metaphysical philosopher and its practical and concrete side suited to the man of affairs and the man of the world-its esthetical and ceremonial side suited to the man of poetic feeling and imagination-its quiescent and contemplative side suited to the man of peace and lover of seclusion. Nay, it holds out the right hand of brotherhood to nature-worshippers, demon-worshippers, animal-worshippers, tree-worshippers, fetish-worshippers. It does not scruple to permit the most grotesque forms of idolatry, and the most degrading varieties of superstition. And it is to this latter fact that yet another remarkable peculiarity of Hinduism is mainly due-namely, that in no other system in the world is the chasm more vast which separates the religion of the higher, cultured, and thoughtful classes from that of the lower, uncultured, and unthinking masses. Hinduism is thus a national, not a world religion, it has

never made any serious effort to proselytize in countries outside of India. The occasional visits of Brahmins to countries of Europe and America, and their lectures on religious metaphysics are not to be mistaken for genuine missionary enterprises. Not to speak of its grosser phases, Hinduism, even in its highest form known as Brahminism, could not take root and flourish in countries where the caste system and the intricate network of social and domestic customs it implies do not prevail. Nor has Hinduism exercised any notable influence on European thought and culture. The pessimism of Schopenhauer and his school is indeed very like the pessimism of Buddhism and of the Vedanta system of philosophy, and seems to have been derived from one of these sources. But apart from this unimportant line of modern speculation, and from the abortive theosophical movement of more recent times, one finds no trace of Hindu influence on Western civilization. We have nothing to learn from India that makes for higher culture. On the other hand, India has much of value to learn from Christian civilization.

Intimately bound up in the religious teaching of Brahminism was the division of society into rigidly defined castes. In the earlier, Vedic period there had been class distinctions according to which the warrior class (*Kshatriyas*, or *Rajanas*) stood first in dignity and importance, next the priestly class (*Brahmins*), then the farmer class (*Vaisyas*), and last of all, the servile class of conquered natives (*Sudras*). With the development of Brahminism, these four divisions of society became stereotyped into exclusive castes, the highest place of dignity being usurped by the Brahmins. As teachers of the sacred

Vedas, and as priests of the all-important sacrifices, they professed to be the very representatives of the gods and the peerage of the human race. No honour was too great for them, and to lay hands on them was a sacrilege. One of their chief sources of power and influence lay in their exclusive privilege to teach the youth of the three upper castes, for education then consisted largely in the acquisition of Vedic lore, which only priests could teach. Thus the three upper castes alone had the right to know the Vedas and to take part in the sacrifices, and Brahminism, far from being a religion open to

all, was exclusively a privilege of birth, from which the despised caste of Sudras was excluded.

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