

Who Is a Hindu?

Insights from Saints and Scholars on What Makes One a Hindu



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FEW PEOPLE TODAY PONDER THE SIGNIFICANCE of belief. Nevertheless, convictions constitute the foundation for every action. Webster's defines belief as a "confidence in the truth or existence of something not immediately susceptible to rigorous proof." But ask a Hindu what his all-important beliefs are, and the answer may well elude him. He is not accustomed to thinking of his religion as a clearly defined system, distinct and different from others, for it encompasses all of life.

Hinduism is so vast, so generously tolerant of conflicting concepts that to condense a brief list of basic beliefs might seem a vain enterprise. Some would assert that Hinduism could never be limited by such an ideological inventory—and they would be right. Still, an answer is required. Inside India, a clear answer prevents the erosion of "Hindu" into a mere geographical concept no different from "Indian," elsewhere, it provides the necessary demarcation from other faiths in a pluralistic setting. The need for a precise list arises with the cognition that beliefs forge our attitudes, which determine our overall state of mind and the feelings we are predisposed to, and that these, in turn, directly determine our actions. Strong religious beliefs induce actions that weave uplifting patterns of daily conduct, furthering our unfoldment. In India, the

definition of who is a Hindu is critical in legal deliberations, and belief is the keystone of such determinations. Therefore, it is meaningful to catalog the convictions that all Hindus hold in common.

In 1926, Dr. S. Radhakrishnan eloquently elaborated the nature of Hindu belief in a series of lectures in Oxford, later published as *The Hindu View of Life*. "Hinduism is more a way of life than a form of thought. While it gives absolute liberty in the world of thought, it enjoins a strict code of practice. While fixed intellectual beliefs mark off one religion from another, Hinduism sets itself no such limits. Intellect is subordinated to intuition, dogma to experience, outer expression to inward realization. Religion is not the acceptance of academic abstractions or the celebration of ceremonies, but a kind of life or experience of reality." By emphasizing conduct, Radhakrishnan did not deny belief. In fact, he provided one of the best extensive lists. His emphasis is on the absolute freedom of belief allowed within Hinduism—where the questioning mind is known as the seeking mind, rather than the errant mind.

The following definitions of Hinduism's shared central beliefs were garnered from prominent Hindu organizations and individuals of the 20th century—evidence that the imperative to formalize conviction is a recent phenomenon. Overall, the lists and descriptions are surprisingly similar, echoing certain key concepts—generally, that it is conduct, based upon belief in dharma, karma and reincarnation, which makes one a Hindu. Some of the beliefs listed are not shared by all Hindus—most prominently the concept of *avatar*, divine incarnation, which is a distinctive Vaishnava belief. We shall now cite what has been collected from distinguished scholars and saints.

Bal Ghangadhar Tilak, scholar, mathematician, philosopher and

Indian nationalist, named "the father of the Indian Revolution" by Jawaharlal Nehru, summarized Hindu beliefs in his *Gitarahasya*: "Acceptance of the *Vedas* with reverence; recognition of the fact that the means or ways to salvation are diverse; and realization of the truth that the number of Gods to be worshiped is large, that indeed is the distinguishing feature of the Hindu religion." This oft-quoted statement, so compellingly concise, is considered authoritative by Bharat's courts of law.

Sri K. Navaratnam, esteemed Sri Lankan religious scholar, enumerated a more extensive set of basic beliefs in his book, *Studies in Hinduism*, reflecting the Southern Saiva Agamic tradition. 1) A belief in the existence of God. 2) A belief in the existence of a soul separate from the body. 3) A belief in the existence of the finitizing principle known as *avidya* or *mala*. 4) A belief in the principle of matter—*prakriti* or *maya*. 5) A belief in the theory of karma and reincarnation. 6) A belief in the indispensable guidance of a guru to guide the spiritual aspirant towards God Realization. 7) A belief in moksha, or liberation, as the goal of human existence. 8) A belief in the indispensable necessity of temple worship in religious life. 9) A belief in graded forms of religious practices, both internal and external, until one realizes God. 10) A belief in ahimsa as the greatest dharma or virtue. 11) A belief in mental and physical purity as indispensable factors for spiritual progress.

Mahatma Mohandas K. Gandhi: "I call myself a Sanatani Hindu because I believe in the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Puranas* and all that goes by the name of Hindu scriptures, and therefore in avatars and rebirth. Above all, I call myself a Sanatani Hindu, so long as the Hindu society in general accepts me as such. In a concrete manner he is a Hindu who believes in God, immortality of the soul, transmigration, the law of karma and moksha, and who tries to practice truth and ahimsa in daily life, and therefore practices cow protection in its widest sense and understands and tries to act according to the law of *varnashrama*."

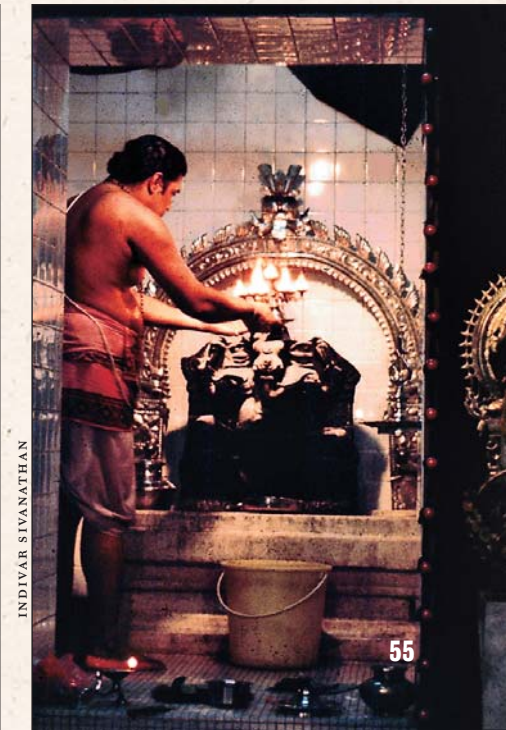
Sri Pramukh Swami Maharaj of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Sanstha (Swaminarayan Faith) propounds: 1) *Parabrahman*, one supreme all-powerful God: He is the Creator, has

a divine form, is immanent, transcendent and the giver of moksha. 2) *Avataravad*, manifestation of God on Earth: God Himself incarnates on Earth in various forms to revive dharma and grant liberation. 3) *Karmavad*, law of action: the soul reaps fruits, good or bad, according to its past and present actions, which are experienced either in this life or future lives. 4) *Punarjanma*, reincarnation: the mortal soul is continuously born and reborn in one of the 8,400,000 species until it attains liberation. 5) Moksha, ultimate liberation: the goal of human life. It is the liberation of the soul from the cycle of births and deaths to remain eternally in the service of God. 6) *Guru-shishya sambandh*, master-disciple relationship: guidance and grace of a spiritually perfect master, revered as the embodiment of God, is essential for an aspirant seeking liberation. 7) Dharma, that which sustains the universe: an all-encompassing term representing divine law, law of being, path of righteousness, religion, duty, responsibility, virtue, justice, goodness and truth. 8) *Ved pramana*, scriptural authority of the *Vedas*: all Hindu faiths are based on the teachings of the *Vedas*. 9) *Murti-puja*, sacred image worship: consecrated images represent the presence of God which is worshipped. The sacred image is a medium to help devotees offer their devotion to God.

Sri Swami Vivekananda, speaking in America, said: "All Vedantists believe in God. Vedantists also believe the *Vedas* to be the revealed word of God—an expression of the knowledge of God—and as God is eternal, so are the *Vedas* eternal. Another common ground of belief is that of creation in cycles, that the whole of creation appears and disappears. They postulate the existence of a material, which they call akasha, which is something like the ether of the scientists, and a power which they call prana."

Sri Jayendra Saraswati: 69th Shankaracharya of the Kamakoti Peetham, Kanchipuram, defines in his writings the basic features of Hinduism as follows. 1) The concept of idol worship and the worship of God in His *nirguna* as well as *saguna* form. 2) The

Left to right: Honoring ancestors on the Ganga; students of Vishva-Bharati University celebrate Holi; Vaishnava Sadhu immersed in japa yoga; puja at the Siddhi Vinayagar temple in Malaysia



wearing of sacred marks on the forehead. 3) Belief in the theory of past and future births in accordance with the theory of karma. 4) Cremation of ordinary men and burial of great men.

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, renowned philosopher and president of India from 1962 to 1967, states in *The Hindu View of Life*: "The Hindu recognizes one Supreme Spirit, though different names are given to it. God is in the world, though not as the world. He does not merely intervene to create life or consciousness, but is working continuously. There is no dualism of the natural and the supernatural. Evil, error and ugliness are not ultimate. No view is so utterly erroneous, no man is so absolutely evil as to deserve complete castigation. There is no Hell, for that means there is a place where God is not, and there are sins which exceed His love. The law of karma tells us that the individual life is not a term, but

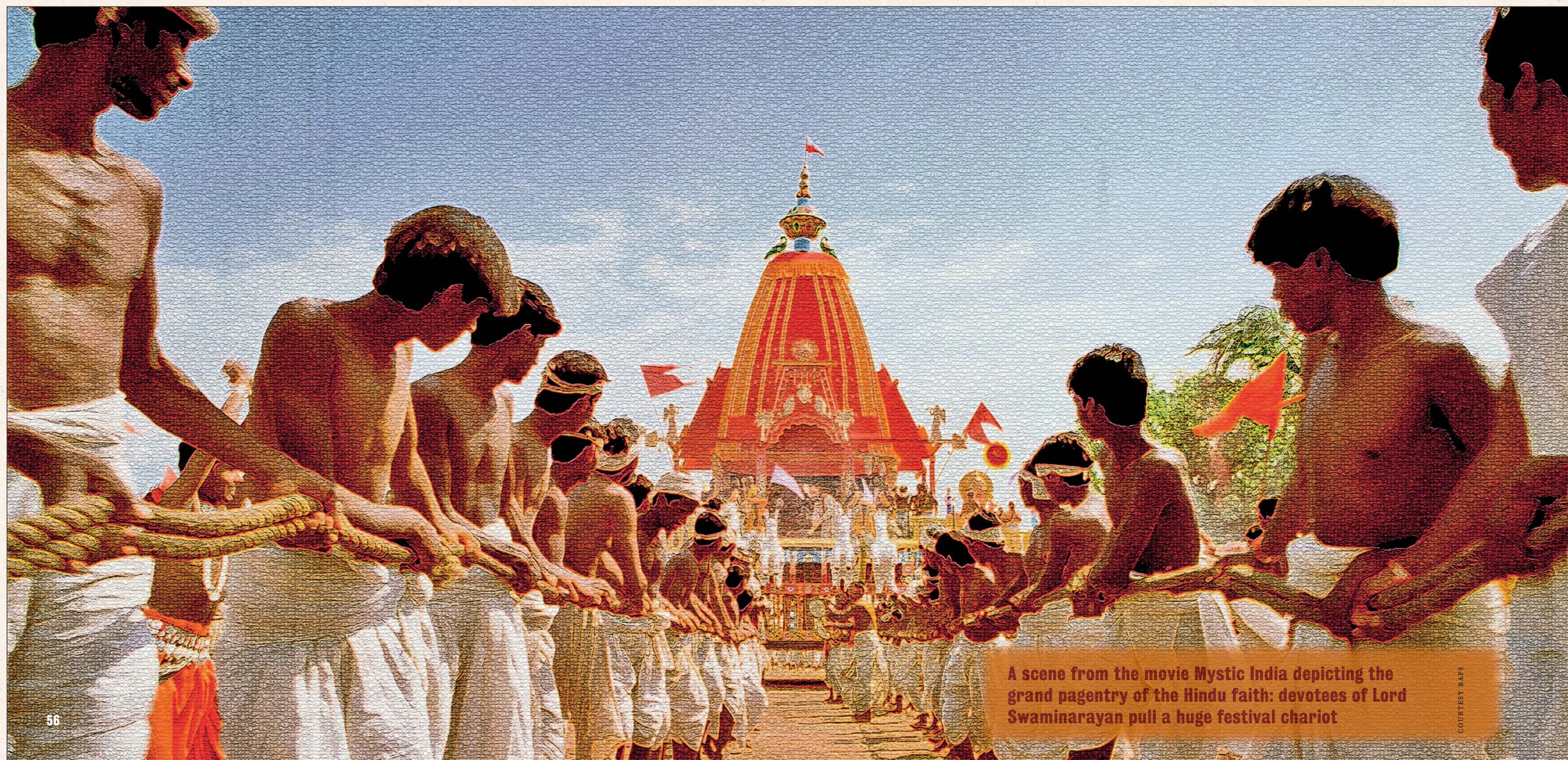
a series. Heaven and Hell are higher and lower stages in one continuous movement. Every type has its own nature which should be followed. We should do our duty in that state of life to which we happen to be called. Hinduism affirms that the theological expressions of religious experience are bound to be varied, accepts all forms of belief and guides each along his path to the common goal. These are some of the central principles of Hinduism. If Hinduism lives today, it is due to them."

The Vishva Hindu Parishad declared its definition in a 1966 *Memorandum of Association, Rules and Regulations*: "Hindu means a person believing in, following or respecting the eternal values of life, ethical and spiritual, which have sprung up in Bharatkhand [India] and includes any person calling himself a Hindu."

The Indian Supreme Court, in 1966, formalized a judicial definition of Hindu beliefs to legally distinguish Hindu denominations from other religions in India. This list was affirmed by the Court as recently as 1995 in judging cases regarding religious identity. 1) Acceptance of the *Vedas* with reverence as the highest authority in religious and philosophic matters and acceptance with reverence of *Vedas* by Hindu thinkers and philosophers as the sole foundation of Hindu philosophy. 2) Spirit of tolerance and willingness to understand and appreciate the opponent's point of view based on the realization that truth is many-sided. 3) Acceptance of great world rhythm—vast periods of creation, maintenance and dissolution follow each other in endless succession—by all six systems of Hindu philosophy. 4) Acceptance by all systems of Hindu philosophy of the belief in rebirth and pre-existence. 5) Recognition of the

fact that the means or ways to salvation are many. 6) Realization of the truth that numbers of Gods to be worshiped may be large, yet there being Hindus who do not believe in the worshiping of idols. 7) Unlike other religions, or religious creeds, Hindu religion's not being tied down to any definite set of philosophic concepts, as such.

The historic intermingling of myriad races, cultures and religions has exposed us to a kaleidoscopic array of beliefs and practices; yet threads of sameness and agreement bind them together. Taken as a whole, the definitions above, emphasizing the *Vedas*, dharma, karma and rebirth, can help us gain clarity and insight into our inmost convictions, offering the opportunity to freely and ably choose the same as our progenitors—or not. That "or not" may be the greatest freedom a seeker ever had or could ever hope for.



A scene from the movie *Mystic India* depicting the grand pagentry of the Hindu faith: devotees of Lord Swaminarayan pull a huge festival chariot