

Castes, Rites and Rituals in Hinduism: An Analytical Insight

Abstract

Hinduism is the most ancient and surviving living religion with about 15% of global population. It is basically an amalgamation of various cultures, traditions, and doctrines those are unique to India. The concept of God in *Hinduism* is multifaceted and hinges on each individual, the tradition, and philosophy. Nevertheless, the basic purposes of human life in *Hinduism* are based on four fundamental aspects of life, i.e., *Dharma* (ethics/morals/duties), *Kama* (desires/wishes/passions), *Artha* (prosperity/success/work), and *Moksha* (free from the cycle of birth and death/salvation). The *Hindu* society is classified into four principal categories known as castes; *Brahmins* (priests), *Kshatriyas* (warriors), *Vaishyas* (farmers and traders), and *Shudras* (labourers). The primary cause for obeying to caste duties is to achieve *Moksha*. The subsequent rise of other religions like Islam, Christianity, etc. had their impacts on the caste system of *Hinduism*. The chief scriptures in *Hinduism* are *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Puranas*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Mahabharat* and *Ramayans*. There are many religious rites (*Samskaras*) in *Hinduism* which purify the body, mind and intellect making the individuals fit for the society. In this article sixteen numbers of widely accepted such rites (*Shodasa Samskaras*) are listed with brief description. Some perceive *Hinduism* not as religion, but simply as the way of life which is the aggregation of customs and rituals (called as *Aachaaraas*). The details of them are also discussed here. Besides, the matters like concepts of God in *Hinduism*, its origin and development, religious institutions, dietary customs, festivals, pilgrimages, etc. are covered.

Key words

Hinduism, Caste, Rite, Ritual, Custom, Ceremony, Festival, Pilgrimage

Introduction

Hinduism is the most ancient and the surviving religion of the world. Currently, it is the third major religion (15% of global population) with dominance in Indian subcontinent (Pew Research Foundation, 2012). It is the most common religion in India, Nepal, and Mauritius. *Hinduism* is also a major religion in Bali island of Indonesia; and found in significant numbers in Caribbean and Southeast Asia region. Principally *Hinduism* is an aggregation of various Indian cultures, traditions, and doctrines. It has no founder and varied roots. Some consider *Hinduism* not as a religion, but a *dharma* (right behaviour and social order). It helps to attain four purposes of human life (*Puruṣarthas*), i.e., *Dharma* (ethics/morals/duties), *Kama* (desires/wishes/passions), *Artha* (prosperity/success/ work), and *Moksha* (free from the cycle of birth and death/salvation) (Koller, 1968). Spirit of *Hinduism* is primarily based on *Vedas* and altered from time to time by great saints without changing the elementary teachings. This order of *Hinduism* is believed to have evolved during 500 BCE to 300 CE, which corresponds to the last phase of the Vedic period. *Hinduism* prospered during the medieval

period in India, with the weakening of Buddhism (Larson, 2009). Unlike the other major religions, there is no historical founder of *Hinduism*.

Origins and Development of Hinduism

For *Hinduism*, the Indus Valley Civilization offers a rational starting point. The religion of this civilization comprised the worship of a Great male God, which may be related to a proto-*Shiva*, and possibly a Mother Goddess related to *Shakti*. However, linking above relation to the later-day *Hinduism* is a matter of dispute. The Vedic religion is considered as the religion of Indo-Aryans. As per the record, the Vedic period sustained during 1500 to 500 BCE. The Indo-Aryans were basically semi-nomadic tribe. As Indus Valley Civilization collapsed, they invaded into north-western India. During the early Vedic period (1500–1100 BCE), the Vedic tribes were animal herders and were travelling around north-west India. After 1100 BCE, the abovementioned Vedic tribes migrated to the western side of Gangetic plain and adapted agriculture for livelihood. They also carried with them their religion and language. Therefore, the Vedic religion is the composite product of indo-Aryan and Indus Valley Civilization cultures. In simple way, *Hinduism* can be categorized into four periods, i.e., ancient, classical, medieval, and modern. The chronology of early history of *Hinduism* can be grouped as Pre-Vedic religions (pre-history and Indus Valley Civilisation; until 1500 BCE); Vedic period (1500–500 BCE); Second Urbanisation (500–200 BCE); Pre-classical *Hinduism* (200 BCE–300 CE); Classical *Hinduism*-Golden Age (Gupta Empire) (300–650 CE); Late-classical *Hinduism*-*Puranic Hinduism* (650–1100 CE); *Hinduism* under Islamic rulers/*Bhakti* movement of *Hinduism* (1200–1700 CE); and Modern *Hinduism* (from 1800 CE onwards) (Smith, 1991).

Perception of God in *Hinduism*

In *Hinduism*, the belief system overlapped from monotheism to polytheism and atheism amongst the others. God is referred to in many names like *Bhagavan*, *Ishwara*, *Parameshwara*, *Deva*, *Devi*, etc. *Hinduism* even sometimes is referred to as henotheistic (literally ‘one God’). It means devotion to a single God while accepting the existence of others. However, it is an overgeneralization. *Hindus*, depending upon the sect, worship God as *Vishnu*, *Brahma*, *Shiva*, or *Shakti* (Nath, 2001).

Vaishnavism is a religious sect within Hinduism that worships *Vishnu* in form of Krishna. Likewise, *Shaivism* is another religious sect that focuses on *Shiva*. *Shaktism* emphasizes worship of *Shakti* or *Devi* as Goddess. *Devi* is depicted as divine mother and worshiped in two principal forms; in gentler form like *Parvati* and in ferocious forms like *Kali* and *Durga*. *Shaktism* is also connected with *Tantra* practices (Flood, 1996).

In Vedanta philosophy of *Hinduism*, *Dvaita* (dualism) and *Advaita* (non-dualism) are two divergent schools (Jeaneane, 2002). It interprets reality and the relationship between Brahman, the Supreme Universal Self (*Paramatma*), and the rest of His manifestation (*Jivatma* or *Atma*). In *Advaita* philosophy, both *paramatma* and *jivatma* are same and inseparable; while in *Dvaita* philosophy they are different. *Madhvacharya* is the propagator of *Dvaita* philosophy while *Adi Shankaracharya* is the propagator of *Advaita* philosophy.

Scriptures in *Hinduism*

The scriptures of *Hinduism* are written in Sanskrit language. These texts can be divided into two categories: *Shruti* (which is heard) and *Smriti* (which is remembered). *Shruti* scriptures primarily refer to the Vedas and believed considered as the early record of the *Hindu* scriptures. Vedas are the eternal truths revealed to the ancient sages (Swami, 1989). There are four types of Vedas in *Hinduism*; namely *Rigveda*, *Samaveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda*. Text-wise, again each Veda is further classified into four major types; *Samhitas* (mantras), *Aranyakas* (text on rituals, ceremonies, sacrifices, etc.), *Brahmanas* (commentaries on rituals, ceremonies, sacrifices, etc.), and *Upanishads* (text on meditation, philosophy, spiritual knowledge, etc.). Subsequently, the first two parts of the Vedas are known as the *Karmakaṇḍa* (ritualistic part), while the last two parts formed the *Jnanakaṇḍa* (knowledge part). *Upanishads* are very significant as they are considered as the foundation of *Hindu* philosophical thoughts. Over the time, the *Upanishads* have deeply influenced diverse traditions. The most distinguished *Smritis* texts are *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Bhagavad Gita*, and *Puranas*.

Castes in *Hinduism*

The caste (*Varna*) system is the division of Hindus into groups based on their work and religion. *Manusmriti* is a book about *Hindu* law justifying the caste system. According to this book, caste system is necessary to maintain order and regularity of the society. The first reference of caste is found in the *Purusha Suktam* verse of the *Rig Veda* (Buhler, 2016). Here the *Purusha* is projected as Primordial Being and is made up of four castes. *Brahmins* denotes the mouth, *Kshatriyas* the arms, *Vaishyas* the thighs, and *Shudras* the feet. During Vedic Period, India did not have social stratum. Rather, people were classified based to their castes. In another order of classification, the society is divided by four castes; i.e., *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas* and *Shudras*. *Brahmins* denote priests, gurus, etc.; *Kshatriyas* denote warriors, kings, administrators, etc.; *Vaishyas* denote farmers, traders, etc.; and *Shudras* denote labourers (James, 1969). People are believed to have prosperity and order through their compliance to the caste system. The discrimination of people based on their caste was envisioned to decongest the responsibilities of one's life (Julius, 1849).

The *Brahmins*

Brahmins caste is regarded as the highest of the all four castes. People of that caste are respected as a manifestation of knowledge and are gifted with the principles. They are not respected simply because of their birth in high caste, but also for their rejection of worldly life and embracing the divine qualities. The nobles like Priests, gurus, rishis, teachers, Vedic scholars, etc. constitute the Brahmin community. They lead the *Brahmacharya* (celibacy) life. Even the married Brahmins are called *Brahmachari* (celibate) by virtue of having sex only for reproduction and remaining aloof from the act. Therefore, Brahmins are the obvious choice as teachers for the new-borns. *Brahmin* women are revered for their chastity and treated with unmatched respect. According to *Manusmriti*, a woman of *Brahmin* caste must marry a Brahmin only. However, she can choose a Brahmin boy of her choice. Under rare circumstances, she can marry a *Kshatriya* or a *Vaishya* boy, but a *Shudra* man is prohibited. The inter-caste marriages are prohibited to avoid the impurity of progeny. Marrying a higher caste woman is always considered inappropriate.

The *Kshatriyas*

Kshatriyas is the second highest of four castes. *Kshatriyas* belong to the warrior clan which includes kings, rulers, administrators, etc. A *Kshatriya* must be skilful in ruling, artillery, warfare, administration, justice and should have moral conduct. *Kshatriyas* are generally sent to the *ashram* of *Brahmin* from an early age until they became expert in above skills. The ultimate duties of *Kshatriyas* are to protect their territories, deliver the justice, and at the same time extend peace and happiness amongst their subjects. They take advice in matters of territorial sovereignty and ethical impasses from *Brahmin* gurus. They are allowed to marry a woman of all castes with mutual consent. Like males, *Kshatriya* women are familiar with warfare. They are generally equipped to discharge duties in the absence of their husband. Further, a *Kshatriya* woman is able to protect her kingdom during distress.

The *Vaishyas*

Vaishya is the third caste representing the farmers, traders, money lenders, and business communities. *Vaishyas* attend the *ashram* run by *Brahmins* to study the principles of righteous life. Animal rearing is one of the most valued occupations of the *Vaishyas*. They possess high quality breeds of cows, elephants, horses, etc. which in turn impact the quality of life and the wealth of the people. *Vaishyas* work in close harmony with the *Kshatriyas*. *Vaishyas* generally have the tendency to overlook the law. The *Kshatriya* kings resolve the disputes among *Vaishyas*. *Vaishya* women, too, support their husbands in business, cattle rearing, agriculture, etc. They freely choose a spouse of their choice from the four *Varnas*. *Vaishya* women are protected under the law. Remarriage is normal amongst *Vaishyas*. In event of the untimely death of the husband, the *Vaishya* woman has equal rights over family properties.

The *Shudras*

Shudra is the last but not the least caste that signifies the main pillar of a prosperous economy. The *Atharva Veda* permits *Shudras* to hear and learn the *Vedas*. Like the other castes, it is mandatory for *Shudras* to wear the sacred thread. A *Shudra* man is only permitted to marry a *Shudra* woman, but a *Shudra* woman is permitted to marry from any of the four castes. *Shudras* would serve people of all other castes like *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, and *Vaishyas* in their economic activities. The people of higher caste always consider *Shudras* as an important segment of society. *Shudras* believe in attaining *moksha* by embracing their prescribed duties which encourage them to remain loyal. *Shudras* are often allowed to be farmers, traders, and enter the occupations of *Vaishyas*. These deviations of life duties are taken up under special circumstances, like deteriorating economic situations of the society. The *Shudras'* selflessness earns them both regards and respect.

Reasons for withdrawal from caste duties

During the end of the Vedic era, people of all castes began to deflect and disobey their caste-based duties. *Brahmins* became arrogant and exerted their authority on society. Many gurus, citing their influential position to *Kshatriya* kings, became unholy and dishonest (Joshi, 2017). Although *Brahmins* are required only to live on alms and have minimalistic life, using on their higher status, they demanded more wealth for conducting their prescribed duties.

Likewise, *Kshatriyas* challenged other kings. The kings rejected the advice of their *Brahmin guru's* and started taking unprincipled decisions. Kings slowly lost the confidence of *Vaishyas* and *Shudras*. Similarly, *Vaishyas* perceived themselves as powerful owner of land and exercised domination on *Shudras*. They also got involved in different vices like

infighting, treachery, duplicity, etc. *Shudras* disowned their duties and opted unethical activities like stealing, lying, etc.

As a result, people of all castes deviated from their virtuous paths and embraced unrighteous activities. Inter-mixing of castes was also a cause for the declining of caste system. All above changes happened roughly during 1000 BCE to 500 BCE. Further, the complexities emerged in social, political, and economic spaces posing a new challenge for caste distribution.

The large base of caste population became difficult to handle. Many new religions also emerged. The Jainism advocated the ideology of single human caste. Again, many formed sub-castes under each primary caste. As a result, India is currently the home to a repository of hundreds of sub-castes. This makes the original four caste simply umbrella terms and vague (Smith, 1999). The rise of Christianity, Islam, and other religions subsequent left their mark on the caste system in India (Walker, 2007). The converted *Hindu* generations transformed their notion of *Hinduism* in ways that were compatible with local conditions. The rise of *Buddhism* also posed a threat to the caste system's legitimacy. Therefore, the adherence to caste duties ultimately reduced from its peak of Vedic period.

While the above influences were gradual, the quick withdrawal from caste rules was made possible due to wide-spread influence of western notions of freedom and equality. These changes can be seen from 1500 CE onwards. For Western nations, the caste system was alien and it made little sense to approve this. Stopping the Moghul invasion and the end of sovereignty of many *Hindu* rules, the British invasion brought a fresh viewpoint on equality and freedom which was not compatible to the caste system. Wide-spread colonisation and the impact of cultural imperialism brought substantial alterations on caste duties.

The Samskara (Religious Rites and Ceremonies)

Samskaras can be defined as the religious rites and ceremonies which purify the body, mind, and intellect; transforming a person suitable for the society. *Samskaras* mark the important events in the life of a *Hindu* individual. In *Ayurveda*, the word *Samskara* is presented as "*Samskaraohi Gunaantradhyanam*" which means qualitative improvement through incorporation of the specific qualities (i.e., transforming of the qualities). *Samskaras* are the focal points of life and need to be celebrated. They are the time-tested tools in *Hinduism* which help in transformation of a great personality. The *Vedas* emphasise elaborately on *samskaras* right from beginning of life to cremation. As per the *Vedic* vision, all aspects of human life are sacred. When an individual performs the *samskaras* with care and devotion, it brings awareness of God in him/her and a better understanding of the larger role he/she needs to play in the society. There are about 16-40 numbers of *Samskara* as described in different *Hindu* scriptures, of which 16 numbers of *Samskaras* are widely accepted and are commonly referred to as the *Shodasa Samskaras* (Raj et. al., 2013).

The *Hindu* religion has numerous rituals (*samskara*) attached to it. These *Samskaras* mould humans spiritually, physically, and mentally. Human beings are considered to be different from the rest of the creation in the Universe. Therefore, human beings alone have the ability to make a choice before performing a *Karma* (action or deeds) (Doniger, 2000). Human beings obviously have the choice of performing a *dharmic* (good) or an *adharmaic* (bad) action. *Hindu* scriptures classify the *karmas* into three categories: *nitya-karma* (performed daily), *naimittika-karma* (performed occasionally), *kamya-karma* (performed to gain some desired results) (Smith, 1991). There are other ways of dividing *karma*. Some *karmas* like

Srauta-karma are performed for the benefit of the world, while *grhya-karma* are performed for the benefit of a family or an individual.

Table 1: List of *Shodasa Samskaras* in *Hinduism* according to different stages of life

Stages of life	Name of the <i>Samskaras</i>	Purpose and Brief Description
Garbhavastha (in pregnancy)	1. <i>Garbhadana</i> (Sacrament of Impregnation)	Literal meaning of <i>Garbhadhana</i> is putting the seed in mother's womb. The basic purpose of this <i>Samskara</i> is to get high quality offspring. In this <i>Samskara</i> , <i>mantras</i> (prayers) are offered to God to help the lady conceive a good baby. This ceremony shapes the mentality of the man to plant his seed in the wife's womb in such a way that a child having devotion to God is born.
	2. <i>Pumsavana</i> (Engendering a male issue)	<i>Pumsavana</i> means 'male procreation'. It is adopted for achieving the offspring of desired sex. The day is scheduled on the basis of lunar calendar; normally, when all the male stars like <i>Punarvasu</i> , <i>Pushya</i> , <i>Anuradha</i> , <i>Moola</i> , <i>Shravana</i> and <i>Mrigashira</i> stars rise.
	3. <i>Simantonayana</i> (Hair-parting)	<i>Simant</i> means line of parting of hair and <i>Unnayan</i> means combing hair from the sides to the top. Hence, <i>Simantonayana</i> means parting the wife's scalp hair and drawing the hair from the sides, upwards. The logic behind this is that, the pleasant frequencies enter her body and facilitate the proper growth of the foetus. This is the last <i>Samskara</i> during pregnancy period.
Balyavastha (in childhood)	4. <i>Jatakarma</i> (Birth ritual)	It is considered as the first <i>Samskara</i> after child birth. Mantras chosen from different <i>Vedas</i> according to the <i>Jati</i> , <i>Kula</i> and <i>Varna</i> of the child are recited. Thereafter, the breast feeding of child is started.
	5. <i>Namakarana</i> (Naming ceremony)	Literal meaning of <i>Namakarana</i> is naming ceremony. In this ceremony, appropriate name is given to the new-born child. The name of the child is kept upon worshipping the <i>Kula Devata</i> (Guardian God). As first 10 days of new-born life is in risky phase, only after that <i>Namakarana</i> is performed.
	6. <i>Nishkramana</i> (Outing ceremony)	This ceremony refers to the taking the baby out of the <i>Kumaragara</i> (baby's house). This allows the baby to adjust with external environment. Usually, the child is taken to a temple with chanting of <i>Vedic mantras</i> . At fourth month age, child is able to reach out for objects with both hands, able to rolls over the bed, recognizes the mother, and responds to her voice. This clearly shows the interest of the baby in surrounding environment.
	7. <i>Annaprashana</i> (Food feeding ceremony)	<i>Annaprashan Samskara</i> (food feeding ceremony) is the ceremony for introduction of the solid food material (rice) to the baby. This is generally done when the teeth of the child have begun to appear. The ceremony is organized in even months for boys and in odd months for girls. The day of <i>Annaprashan</i> is fixed by the priest.
	8. <i>Chudakarana</i>	<i>Chudakarana</i> / <i>Mundana Samskara</i> is the ceremony when

	(Shaving of head)	the child receives first head shaving. It generally takes place near a temple at the end of first year to third year. <i>Vedic mantras</i> and prayers are recited on this occasion. The hair from birth is considered as undesirable traits from past lives. Hence, the <i>Chudakarana</i> represents freedom from the past deeds.
	9. <i>Karnavedhana</i> (Piercing of earlobes)	<i>Karnavedhana Samskara</i> (ear piercing ceremony) pertains to piercing of the earlobes. It is typically performed from first to fifth years of the child. This can be performed in later years also. It is envisioned to open the inner ears for receiving sacred sounds. Hearing of sacred sounds is worthy as it cleanses the mind as well as nurtures the spirit. Especially the Brahmins studying the <i>vedas</i> , undergo <i>karnavedh</i> .
	10. <i>Upanayana</i> (Sacred thread initiation)	<i>Upanayana</i> means the act of leading to the eyesight or vision. This <i>Samskara</i> signifies a spiritual rebirth for the child and it correlates with pre-school age (3-6 years). It is considered as the first step in the journey of life towards self-realization. It is a ceremony in which a teacher accepts a child to impart knowledge or education. In the ceremony, a sacred thread (<i>yagyopavita</i> or <i>janeu</i>) is offered to the boy who wears it across his chest.
Yuvavastha (in adulthood)	11. <i>Vedharambha</i> (Beginning of Vedic study)	<i>Vedharambha Samskara</i> pertains to starting of formal education. It is also called as <i>Vidyarambha</i> , <i>Akshararambha</i> , <i>Aksharasvikarana</i> and <i>Akshara lekhana</i> . It signifies the child's commitment to learning. This relates with the school-going age (i.e., 6-8 years age). In the ceremony, the child is made to write alphabets and to utter each one when it is written.
	12. <i>Samavarthana</i> (End of studentship)	<i>Samavartana Samskara</i> marks the end of the <i>Brahmacharya</i> . It signifies the graduation of the student from the <i>Gurukul</i> . It denotes a person's readiness to enter married life (<i>grihastashrama</i>).
	13. <i>Vivaha</i> (Marriage Ceremony)	<i>Vivaha</i> (marriage) <i>samskara</i> is the lifelong commitment of the couples (i.e., concept of one wife and one husband). In <i>Hinduism</i> , marriage is considered to be designed by the heaven and witnessed by fire itself. The exact date and time of the wedding are decided by the parents of the bride and bridegroom in consultation with astrologers. <i>Hindu</i> marriage is an elaborate affair. The level of celebration depends upon the social and economic status. The common marriage ceremony is comprised of a set of rituals; such as <i>mandap</i> -inviting bridegroom to the stage, <i>kanyadan</i> - offering daughter as a gift to the groom, <i>mangalsutra</i> - tying a knot, <i>panigrahan</i> - holding bride's hands and accepting her, and <i>saptapadi</i> - circling seven times together around the fire altar and taking the seven sacred vows.
	14. <i>Vanaprastha</i> (Renouncing the house holder's life)	<i>Vanaprastha</i> is a Sanskrit word derived from <i>vana</i> means forest and <i>prastha</i> means going to. Hence, <i>Vanaprastha</i> literally means "retiring to forest". This stage of life is considered as changeover from household setting to

		spiritual setting. In household life, the importance is on <i>Artha</i> and <i>Kama</i> while in spiritual life, the importance is on <i>Moksha</i> .
	15. <i>Sanyasa</i> (Leading the life of a monk)	<i>Sanyasa</i> is composite Sanskrit word of <i>saṃ</i> means together, <i>ni</i> means down and <i>āsa</i> means from the root. The literal translation of <i>Sannyasa</i> is thus "to put down everything, all of it". The <i>Hindu</i> philosophy has four age-based life stages, i.e. which are <i>Brahmacharya</i> , <i>Grihastha</i> , <i>Vanaprastha</i> and <i>Sanyasa</i> . <i>Sannyasa</i> is the life stage marked by renunciation of material desires (disinterest and detachment from material life) and spending simple spiritual life.
	16. <i>Antyesti</i> (Death cremation)	<i>Antyesti</i> is a Sanskrit word derived from <i>antya</i> and <i>iṣṭi</i> , which mean last and sacrifice respectively. It is also called as <i>Antima Sanskar</i> . It basically refers to the funeral rites for the dead. The human body and the universe basically consist of five elements, i.e., air, fire, earth, water, and space. The <i>Antyeshthi Sanskar</i> returns the body to its origins, the above five elements.

The Aachaaraas (customs and rituals)

The way of life (*Dharma*) is the sum total of all *aachaaraas* (customs and rituals). The science and spirituality are intermingled in *Hindu* religion (Julius, 2009). Therefore, in each and every *aachaaraa*, there will be an element of spirituality. Out of total four quarters, a person can get first quarter of knowledge from the teacher, second quarter by analyzing the self, third quarter by discussing with others, and the fourth quarter by living through *aachaaraas*. Different such *aachaaraas* are described below with purpose and logic behind them.

Table 2: Purpose and Brief Description of Aachaaraas (custom & rituals)

Name of Aachaaraas (custom & rituals)	Purpose and Brief Description
To light a lamp	In Hinduism, the light symbolizes knowledge, while darkness represents ignorance. The Lord is considered as the source of all knowledge (<i>Chaitanya</i>). Hence, light is worshiped as the Lord himself. The ghee or oil used in the lamp symbolizes our <i>vaasanas</i> (the negative tendencies) and the wick denotes the ego. In other words, when life is lighted by spiritual knowledge, the <i>vaasanas</i> get exhausted and same for the ego. As the flame of the lamp burns upwards, we should acquire such knowledge that can take us to higher ethics.
To have a <i>puja</i> room	In Hinduism it is believed that Lord is all pervading and Lord resides in home with us. Hence, every house should have well-decorated <i>puja</i> (prayer) room. A lamp is lit and the Lord worshipped daily. Other spiritual practices like <i>japa</i> , <i>paaraayana</i> , etc. are often performed in <i>puja</i> room. It is basically a place of worship for the members of the household. By offering prayer, one is spiritually elevated.
To do <i>namaste</i>	In <i>Hinduism</i> , it is customary to greet each other with <i>namaste</i> posture. <i>Namaste</i> is performed with folded hands where two palms are placed together on the chest and the head is bowed down whilst saying the word <i>namaste</i> . <i>Namaste</i> has different connotation. It could be a casual or formal

	greeting, a cultural tradition, or an act of worship. <i>Namaste</i> is a derivative of Sanskrit work (<i>namah + te</i>) which means "I bow to you". Literally, <i>na ma</i> means "not mine".
To prostrate before parents and elders	In <i>Hinduism</i> , the blessings and good wishes from the elders are valued very much. Therefore, amongst <i>Hindus</i> , there is a custom to face down before the parents, teachers, and elders by touching their feet. In turn, the elders bless the juniors by placing hand over juniors' head. This is done daily in many households, and in some households it is done on important occasions. Logically, a person stands on feet. Hence, touching the feet in prostration is a sign of respect for the age, maturity, nobility, divinity, etc. that the elderly people personify. It further symbolizes the recognition of selfless love of elders for young ones and to recognise the sacrifices made by the elders for youngsters.
To wear religious marks (<i>tilak, pottu</i> , etc.) on the forehead	The wearing of <i>tilak</i> on the forehead invokes a sense of holiness. In <i>Hinduism</i> , it is considered sacred. However, the form and colour of <i>tilak</i> vary according to one's affiliation to a particular sect, caste, or Lord. The <i>brahmins</i> apply white <i>chandana</i> (paste of sandalwood) mark representing purity and cleanliness. The <i>kshatriyas</i> apply red <i>kumkum</i> which indicates valour and heroism. Likewise, <i>vaishyas</i> wear yellow <i>kesar</i> (saffron) or turmeric mark which signifies prosperity and wealth. The <i>sudras</i> apply black <i>bhasma</i> (charcoal) which denotes service rendered to other three castes. Logic behind this is that the entire body, especially the forehead emits energy in the form of electromagnetic waves. The <i>tilak</i> is applied with the prayer in that spot which is considered as the seat of memory and thinking. The prayer is "May I remember the Lord. May this pious feeling pervade all my activities. May I be righteous in my deeds."
Not to touch papers, books, educational tools, people, etc. with the feet	In <i>Hinduism</i> , knowledge is sacred and divine. So, all living and non-living objects associated with knowledge are given respect. Therefore, it is customary not to touch papers, books, educational tools, people, etc. with the feet at all times. This practice is the constant reminder of the high position accorded to knowledge in <i>Hinduism</i> . From an early age, this wisdom promotes deep respect for books and education tools.
To touch another with the feet is considered an act of misbehaviour	In <i>Hinduism</i> , it is believed that Lord is within every man and woman. Therefore, touching another with the feet is like disrespecting the divinity within him/her. By mistake if it happens, this calls for an immediate apology, which is offered with respect and humbleness.
To apply the holy ash (<i>Bhasma / Vibhuti</i>)	<i>Bhasma</i> means holy ash. <i>Bha+asma</i> is a composite Sanskrit word. <i>Bha</i> implies <i>bhartsanam</i> (to destroy) and <i>sma</i> implies <i>maranam</i> (to remember). <i>Bhasma</i> is the ash produced through <i>homa</i> (sacrificial fire) as offering to the God. Special wood along with ghee and other herbs are burnt. <i>Homa</i> also signifies surrendering of the ego and selfish desires into the flame of knowledge and for the unselfish cause. <i>Bhasma</i> is also called <i>Vibhuti</i> which means glory. It brings glory to the wearer and protects from ill health and evil.
To offer food first to the Lord (<i>naivedyam</i>) and then eating same as <i>prasaada</i>	In <i>Hinduism</i> , the food offered to God is known as <i>naivedyam</i> . After offering, same food is eaten as <i>prasaada</i> (blessed food). Before eating meals, <i>Hindus</i> first sprinkle water around the food plate to purify. Five portions of the meal are kept on the side of the plate for the five Divine forces; <i>Devta</i> -divinity, <i>pitru</i> - ancestors, <i>rishi</i> - the sages, <i>manushya</i> - fellow beings, and <i>bhuta</i> -other living beings) for serving selflessly. After that, the <i>Hindus</i> eat their meals.
To do fasting (<i>upavaasa</i>)	The literal meaning of <i>upavaasa</i> is Fasting (<i>Upa</i> means near + <i>vaasa</i>

	means to stay). Therefore, <i>Upavaasa</i> denotes staying near the God. Most devoted <i>Hindus</i> fast regularly or on special occasions to get the blessings of Lord. The nature of fasting varies from occasion to occasion. On fasting days, people either do not eat or eat only fruits or eat very simple food.
To do <i>pradakshina</i> (circumambulate) in a clockwise manner	According to <i>Hindu</i> philosophy, God is the central source of energy and thus the core essence of life. As to draw a circle one needs a centre point, <i>Hindus</i> go about doing daily chores recognizing God as the focal point in life. This concept signifies <i>pradakshina</i> (circumambulate) around the God. It is customary to do <i>pradakshina</i> around the deity in clockwise direction so that the God remains on the right-hand side which implies life of righteousness. In other words, by doing so, the devotee vows to lead an auspicious life.
To regard trees and plants as sacred	According to <i>Hindu</i> philosophy, the God is the life and pervades all living beings; human, animals, plants alike. Further, to sustain human life on the earth, we need trees. They give us food, clothing, shelter, medicines, oxygen, etc. Hence, trees are regarded as sacred in <i>Hinduism</i> .
To ring the bell in the temple	The ringing sound of bell is considered as auspicious in temple. It basically produces sound <i>Om</i> which is very divine. <i>Om</i> sound is often blown with the sounds of the conch. The admixture of different sounds produced by various divine musical instruments drive out the inauspicious or inappropriate noises that might disturb the concentration and inner peace of the worshippers in temple.
To worship the <i>kalasha</i> (pot)	<i>Kalasha</i> has great relevance in <i>Hinduism</i> . <i>Kalasha</i> is a pot/vessel made up of clay, brass, or copper, and filled with water. A twig of Mango leave is kept on the top of the pot and a green coconut is positioned over it. According to <i>Rig Veda</i> , the <i>Purna Kalasha</i> (the filled-in vessel) represents abundance and life source.
To consider the lotus flower as special	The lotus flower represents the birth or creation from the cosmic waters. It symbolises <i>satyam</i> , <i>shivam</i> , <i>sundaram</i> which means the truth, auspiciousness, and the beauty. As lotus remains untainted despite slushy surroundings, similarly one should try to remain pure and unaffected in adverse situations.
To worship <i>Tulasi</i> (basil) as holy leaf	For <i>Hindus</i> , <i>Tulasi</i> (basil) is the sacred plant. It is self-purifying in nature and hence can be washed and reused for worship. <i>Tulasi</i> is also the devoted wife of <i>Shankhachuda</i> . Krishna deceived her to become immoral. Knowing this, <i>Tulasi</i> cursed the Lord to become a stone (<i>shaaligraama</i>). Pleased with the devotion, the Lord blessed <i>Tulasi</i> to turn into a divine plant and adorn His head.
To blow the <i>Shankha</i> (conch) during worship	<i>Shankha</i> (conch shell) has religious importance in <i>Hinduism</i> . It is considered as a sacred emblem of Lord <i>Vishnu</i> . As the <i>Shankha</i> is blown, the divine <i>Om</i> sound originates. It is believed that from <i>Om</i> sound the <i>Vedas</i> have arisen. <i>Shankha</i> is considered as a giver of fame, longevity, prosperity, and the cleanser of sin.
To say <i>shaanti</i> thrice	The peace (<i>shaanti</i>) prevails until unless the noise is created deliberately. Hence, where there is <i>Shaanti</i> , there is happiness. To invite peace and end disturbances, it is customary to chant <i>Shaanti</i> three times. Generally the obstacles and problems originate from three sources; <i>Aadhidaivika</i> (relates to the act of God like earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions etc.), <i>Aadhibhautika</i> (pertaining to the <i>bhuta</i> or act of living beings such as accidents, pollution, crime etc.) and <i>Aadhyaatmika</i> (pertaining to the <i>atma</i> or the body and the mind). <i>Shaanti</i> is chanted thrice (aloud first time, softer second time, and softest third time) to remove above three types of

	obstructions.
To offer a coconut	In Hindu temples, generally the coconut is broken and placed before the Lord as offering. Coconut is broken on many auspicious occasions. When coconut is broken, it represents ego breaking. Later on, the same coconut is distributed as <i>prasaada</i> . It is also extensively used in <i>ayurvedic</i> medicines.
To chant auspicious sound <i>Om</i>	<i>Om</i> is considered as auspicious sound in <i>Hinduism</i> . It has enormous impact on the body and mind. Phonetically <i>Om</i> is made up of the three alphabets (A, U, and M) which symbolize three states (waking, dream and sleep), three Vedas (<i>Rig</i> , <i>Yajur</i> and <i>Sama</i>), three primary Lords (<i>Brhama</i> , <i>Vishnu</i> and <i>Maheswar</i>) and three words of <i>Gayatri Mantra</i> (<i>Bhuh</i> -embodiment of spiritual energy, <i>Bhuvah</i> -destroyer of sufferings, and <i>Swaha</i> -embodiment of happiness).
To do <i>aarati</i>	<i>Aarati</i> is derived from the Sanskrit word <i>ārātrika</i> which means something that removes <i>rātrī</i> (i.e., darkness). It refers to the songs sung (by holding lighted lamp) in praise of the God, while. At the end of every <i>pooja</i> or to welcome an honoured guest or saint.

Religious Institutions in *Hinduism*

Temple (*mandir*) is the most common institution which is the house of Hindu God (Kramrisch, 1976). It is the spiritual destination for many *Hindus* (not all). The temples are constructed in many forms and in different locations (Kane, 1953). Two prominent styles of *Hindu* temples are generally observed; the *Nagara* style and the *Gopuram* style. The first style is found in the temples of north India, while the second style is found in the temples of south India. Some other types of temples are found in cave, forest, and mountain.

Hindu monastery (*matha*) is another religious institution used by monks (*sanyasis/ gurus*). In *maths*, the disciples lead spiritual life in pursuit of *moksha*. The *Mathas* proliferated over time, and the *Matha* started by *Adi Shankara* is still existing. The other influential *mathas* belong to various schools of *Hindu* philosophy are *Vaishnavism* and *Shaivism*. *Mathas* are led by *Acharyas* and they host the students and *sannyasis* alike (Radhakrishnan, 1923).

Ashram in *Hinduism* resembles like a spiritual hermitage, where one strives to achieve a divine goal in a controlled manner (Richard, 1999). In modern days, many *ashrams* serve as *gurukulas* (residential schools) under the *guru-shishya* tradition.

Dietary Customs in *Hinduism*

Diet in *Hinduism* signifies the diverse food traditions found across the India. The basic diet in *Hinduism* includes the diets that brings about a balance at all levels; physical, mental, emotional, and intellectual. The foods for Hindus can be *Tamasic* or *Rajasic* or *Sattvic* or combination of them (Steven, 2011). The *Tamasic* foods have narcotic effects on the mind and body. These foods can create mental dullness and physical numbness. However, in special circumstances like during the times of pain, such foods help to alleviate the suffering. The examples of *Tamasic* foods are: meat of an animal, fish, fertilized egg, onion, garlic, mushroom, alcoholic beverages, opium, etc.

The *Rajasic* foods have stimulating effects on the mind and body. They are neither helpful nor harmful to the mind and body. The examples of *Rajasic* foods are: Examples: caffeinated

drinks (such as coffee, tea, cola drinks, and energy drinks), chocolate, overly spicy food, salty food, etc.

The *Sattvic* foods have calming effects of mind and physical health. It can be advised to consume *Sattvic* foods regularly. *Sattvic* foods are obtained without harming any life. These foods are fit for offerings to Gods. The *Sattvic* foods include water, cereal, legumes, vegetables, fruits, milk, ghee, curd, honey, etc.

Hinduism practices non-violence (*ahimsa*) and respects all forms of life (Swami, 1994). Following the principles of *ahimsa*, many *Hindus* pursue vegetarianism and respect the higher forms of life. It is estimated that about 40% population of India are vegetarian. *Hindus* who eat meat, prefer animal slaughtering method *Jhatka* as quick death reduces the suffering to the animal. However, the meat-eating *Hindus* don't eat beef as respect to cow.

Festivals in *Hinduism*

Hindu festivals (*Utsava*, literal meaning is 'to lift higher') are the religious celebrations. *Hindus* follow the lunisolar calendar, i.e., some festivals follow lunar phase while other follow solar phase (Hiltebeitel, 2002). Some festivals are celebrated across the India, while the rest are celebrated regionally or locally. Generally, festivals are celebrated on the basis of specific spiritual themes. Few festivals also celebrate human relationships, like sister-brother bond. The method of celebration of a festival varies from one region to other as regional themes, local arts, *location-specific* rituals, etc. are incorporated. The major *Hindu* festivals are *Vasant Panchami*, *Makar Sankranti*, *Pongal*, *Maha Shivaratri*, *Holi*, *Ram Navami*, *GudiPadwa*, *Ugadi*, *Janmastami*, *Ganesh Chaturthi*, *Onam*, *Raksha Bandhan*, *Navaratri*, *Dussera*, *Durga Pooja*, *Diwali*, *Rath Yatra*, *Bihu*, *Chhath*, *Bonalu*, etc.

Pilgrimage in *Hinduism*

Pilgrimage (*Tirtha* or *Tirtha-yatra*) is an integral component of *Hinduism*. The pilgrimage sites exist in varied geographical landscapes like mountains, beaches, rivers, forests, water bodies, etc. These sites are called as *Tirtha Kshetra* and the journey is named as *Tirtha-yatra*. In *Hinduism*, it is believed that the pilgrimage saves the soul from sin and its consequences. In some cases, pilgrimages are undertaken as a part of a vow (*Vrata*) made for specific reasons. Pilgrimage also helps to revitalize or achieve spiritual blessings. The holy text *Skanda Purana* refers to three kinds of pilgrimage: *Jangam Tirtha* (to a movable place of a *sadhu*, a *rishi*, etc.); *Sthawar Tirtha* (to an immovable place, like *Kailash*, *Kashi*, *Haridwar*, etc.); and *Manas Tirtha* (to a place of truth mind, charity, etc.) (Bhardwaj, 1983). Hindu texts describe many sacred sites like *Varanasi*, *Rameshwaram*, *Kanchipuram*, *Dwarka*, *Puri*, *Haridwar*, *Mayapur*, twelve *Jyotirlinga*, fifty-one *Shakti Peetha*, etc.

Conclusion

Hinduism is the foundation of Indian civilisation and a priceless gift to the world. Holistically speaking, *Hinduism* is not a religion, but a universal spirituality that recognizes God manifesting at various times in different names. At present, nine-in-ten of the world's *Hindus* live in India. But, ironically in the land where *Hindus* are in majority, in the same land their traditions and customs are getting eroded and often made fun off. Therefore, it is high time that all-out efforts are made to maintain the sanctity of *Hindu* religion. Like every cloud has a silver lining, some persuasive *Hindus* of modern era like Raja Rammohan Roy, Vivekananda, Aurobindo, Prabhupada (founder of ISKCON), Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and others who have translated and presented Hindu texts to the contemporary world are attracting followers. **They**

are able to legitimise Hindu traditions by spreading the principle of Vedanta and Indian spiritualism across the globe. The works of these spiritual leaders have contributed immensely to socio-religious reform in India. Hinduism is not just a religion but an experiential spiritual approach embracing systems of healing for body (*Ayurveda*), astrology (*Jyotish*), architecture (*Vastu*), music, dance, literature, and even a language (Sanskrit). Hindu practices like *Yoga*, *Ayurveda*, sexuality through *Kama Sutra* are getting world-wide acceptance and several non-Hindus are now following them. Like in past, in coming generations, Hindus should integrate and adapt new knowledge as this old faith keeps shining.

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