Hinduism
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Hinduism is likened to a giant banyan tree which branches out in all directions, draws from many roots, spreads

Ours is the world's oldest and possibly most diverse religion. In fact, it's not a single faith at all, but a mosaic of ten thousand paths and more, roughly organized in four principal sects. We explore these below. Then in the following two-page poster, we examine the subtle realm of Self Realization, atmajnana, the ultimate spiritual attainment spoken of in the Vedas and by India's sages for untold centuries. This summarizes the path we are on, where we are going and how we are going to get there.

What Are Hinduism's Principal Sects?

The Sanatana Dharma, or "eternal faith," known today as Hinduism, is a family of religions that accept the authority of the Vedas. Its four principal denominations are Saivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism and Smartism. Aum.

The world's billion Hindus, one-sixth of the human family, are organized in four main denominations, each distinguished by its Supreme Deity. For Vaishnavites, Lord Vishnu is God. For Shaivites, God is Siva. For Shaktas, Goddess Shakti is supreme. For Smartas, liberal Hindus, the choice of Deity is left to the devotee. Each has a multitude of guru lineages, religious leaders, priesthoods, sacred literature, monastic communities, schools, pilgrimage centers and tens of thousands of temples. They possess a wealth of art and architecture, philosophy and scholarship. These four sects hold such divergent beliefs that each is a complete and independent religion. Yet, they share a vast heritage of culture and belief-karma, dharma, reincarnation, all-pervasive Divinity, temple worship, sacraments, manifold Deities, the guru-shishya tradition and the Vedas as scriptural authority. While India is home to most Hindus, large communities flourish

worldwide. The Vedas elaborate, "He is Brahma. He is Siva. He is Indra. He is the immutable, the supreme, the self-luminous. He is Vishnu. He is life. He is time. He is the fire, and He is the moon." Aum Namah Sivaya.

What Is the Deeply Mystical Saiva Sect?

Saivism is the world's oldest religion. Worshiping God Siva, the compassionate One, it stresses potent disciplines, high philosophy, the guru's centrality and bhakti-raja- siddha yoga leading to oneness with Siva within. Aum.

Saivism is ancient, truly ageless, for it has no beginning. It is the precursor of the many-faceted religion now termed Hinduism. Scholars trace the roots of Siva worship back more than 8,000 years to the advanced Indus Valley civilization. But sacred writings tell us there never was a time when Saivism did not exist. Modern history records six main schools: Saiva Siddhanta, Pashupatism, Kashmir Saivism, Vira Saivism, Siddha Siddhanta and Siva Advaita. Saivism's grandeur and beauty are found in a practical culture, an enlightened view of man's place in the universe and a profound system of temple mysticism and siddha yoga. It provides knowledge of man's evolution from God and back to God, of the soul's unfoldment and awakening guided by enlightened sages. Like all the sects, its majority are devout families, headed by hundreds of orders of swamis and sadhus who follow the fiery, world-renouncing path to moksha. The Vedas state, "By knowing Siva, the Auspicious One who is hidden in all things, exceedingly fine, like film arising from clarified butter, the One embracer of the universe-by realizing God, one is released from all fetters." Aum Namah Sivaya.

What Is the Magic and Power of Shaktism?

Shaktism reveres the Supreme as the Divine Mother, Shakti or Devi, in Her many forms, both gentle and fierce. Shaktas use mantra, tantra, yantra, yoga and puja to invoke cosmic forces and awaken the kundalini power. Aum.

While worship of the Divine Mother extends beyond the pale of history, Shakta Hinduism arose as an organized sect in India around the fifth century. Today it has

four expressions-devotional, folk-shamanic, yogic and universalist-all invoking the fierce power of Kali or Durga, or the benign grace of Parvati or Ambika. Shakta devotionalists use puja rites, especially to the Shri Chakra yantra, to establish intimacy with the Goddess. Shamanic Shaktism employs magic, trance mediumship, firewalking and animal sacrifice for healing, fertility, prophecy and power. Shakta yogis seek to awaken the sleeping Goddess Kundalini and unite her with Siva in the sahasrara chakra. Shakta universalists follow the reformed Vedantic tradition exemplified by Shri Ramakrishna. "Left-hand" tantric rites transcend traditional ethical codes. Shaktism is chiefly advaitic, defining the soul's destiny as complete identity with the Unmanifest, Siva. Central scriptures are the Vedas, Shakta agamas and Puranas. The Devi Gita extols, "We bow down to the universal soul of all. Above and below and in all four directions, Mother of the universe, we bow." Aum Chandikayai Namah.

What Is the Devotional Vaishnava Sect?

Vaishnavism is an ancient Hindu sect centering on the worship of Lord Vishnu and His incarnations, especially Krishna and Rama. Largely dualistic, profoundly devotional, it is rich in saints, temples and scriptures. Aum.

The worship of Vishnu, meaning "pervader," dates back to Vedic times. The Pancharatra and Bhagavata sects were popular prior to 300 bce. Today's five Vaishnava schools emerged in the middle ages, founded by Ramanuja, Madhva, Nimbarka, Vallabha and Chaitanya. Vaishnavism stresses prapatti, single-pointed surrender to Vishnu, or His ten or more incarnations, called avataras. Japa is a key devotional sadhana, as is ecstatic chanting and dancing, called kirtana. Temple worship and festivals are elaborately observed. Philosophically, Vaishnavism ranges from Madhva's pure dualism to Ramanuja's qualified nondualism to Vallabha's nearly monistic vision. God and soul are everlastingly distinct. The soul's destiny, through God's grace, is to eternally worship and enjoy Him. While generally nonascetic, advocating bhakti as the highest path, Vaishnavism has a strong monastic community. Central scriptures are the Vedas, Vaishnava agamas, Itihasas and Puranas. The Bhagavad Gita states, "On those who meditate on Me and worship with undivided heart, I confer attainment of what they have not, and pre- serve what they have." Aum Namo Narayanaya.

What Is the Universalistic Smarta Sect?

Smartism is an ancient brahminical tradition reformed by Shankara in the ninth century. Worshiping six forms of God, this liberal Hindu path is monistic, nonsectarian, meditative and philosophical. Aum Namah Sivaya.

Smarta means a follower of classical smriti, particularly the Dharma Shastras, Puranas and Itihasas. Smartas revere the Vedas and honor the agamas. Today this faith is synonymous with the teachings of Adi Shankara, the monk-philosopher, known as shanmata sthapanacharya, "founder of the six-sect system." He campaigned India-wide to consolidate the Hindu faiths of his time under the banner of Advaita Vedanta. To unify the worship, he popularized the ancient Smarta five-Deity altar-Ganapati, Surya, Vishnu, Siva and Shakti-and added Kumara. From these, devotees may choose their "preferred Deity," or Ishta Devata. Each God is but a reflection of the one Saguna Brahman. Shankara organized hundreds of monasteries into a ten-order, dashanami system, which now has five pontifical centers. He wrote profuse commentaries on the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras and Bhagavad Gita. Shankara proclaimed, "It is the one Reality which appears to our ignorance as a manifold universe of names and forms and changes. Like the gold of which many ornaments are made, it remains in itself unchanged. Such is Brahman, and That art Thou." Aum Namah Sivaya.