

Origins of Hinduism and Ancient India (pre-1000 BCE)

Hinduism's diversity owes greatly to its development over thousands of years and reflects the various philosophies, practices, developments, and evolutions that shaped or became part of the religion. Though Hinduism doesn't have a single founder, the ideas and practices that later became part of it emerged in the ancient Indian subcontinent, spreading over time to places such as Southeast Asia, and much later, to the Caribbean, Africa, and the West. Because the origins of Hinduism are not known, the primary focus of its early development has been tied to the rise of ancient Indian civilization (located across present day India and parts of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal).

The Harappan Age

The origins of ancient South Asian and Hindu civilization are not entirely known, but the Harappan era and the Vedic period profoundly shaped what became known as Hinduism. Much of what was known in the 19th century about ancient South Asia was based on the theoretical proposition that all people speaking the same language must belong to a single race, as noted in the relationship between European languages and Sanskrit. Linguist Max Muller was one of the earlier champions of this theory. Then,



in 1924, British archeologists found evidence of great ancient cities in Indus Valley (located in modern-day Pakistan). These cities, Mohenjo Daro and Harappa, revealed a community of about 30,000 people that enjoyed a municipal sewer system complete with drains and manhole covers, indoor plumbing, a standardized system of trade, and many other signs of an advanced society. These findings would later be called Indus Valley, Indus-Saraswati, Sindhu-Saraswati, and Harappan civilization. Artifacts - such as seals and a ritual bathing site - were consistent with what would become part of Hindu culture centuries later. The origin of these cities and of the Indus Valley civilization, as well as its decline, are not known. Some scholars attribute the decline to a major drought around the Saraswati River, an ancient dried up waterway that is mentioned in Hinduism's ancient sacred texts, the Vedas. Both the Indus Valley and Vedic civilizations are chronologically contemporary and located in the same geographical region formed by the plains of the river Indus and its tributaries.

Contested Origins of the Vedic Age

The origins of Vedic civilization are still unknown and contested. Even though the terms Aryan and Dravidian are loosely constructed epithets denoting groups of people and never clearly

indicated different races, 19th century readings of Muller, and many scholars after him, championed the idea known as the Aryan Invasion Theory. This theory was premised upon the claim that a nomadic race called the Aryans supplanted a native population referred to commonly as Dravidians, and through a combination of force, co-option, and intermingling, created what became Indian civilization and Hinduism. In addition to the linguistic evidence, much of Aryan Invasion Theory in the 19th century was based upon the European Christian idea that the earth was 4,000 years old. After archaeological evidence debunked the theory about invasions, a more contemporary theory called Aryan Migrations emerged, based upon a similar idea that waves of migrating central Asian peoples settled in the Indus Valley starting around 1800 BCE, some time after the cities of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa were established. These people were later called Aryans, based off the Sanskrit word *Arya* (noble).

Aryan Migration

The theory was premised upon several key ideas:

- Aryans used iron and horses, which were not considered native to India
- Similarities between ancient Persian and Indian culture, suggesting similar spreads across Central and South Asia
- Interpretations of the Vedas that refer to *Arya* and *Dasa*, which had been presumed to mean two separate races

But the argument has been fiercely disputed along these lines:

- The fact that DNA evidence pointed to much more genetic consistency within the Indian subcontinent over a longer period than the Aryan migrations would suggest
- The questionable premise of language being a marker of race
- Archaeological evidence suggests historical continuity and a more fluid transition from the Harappan Age to the Vedic Period
- Even some of the previous assumptions - such as the use of horses and iron - were disputed, since trade and migration patterns within the Subcontinent would have brought both to the region

Out of India



A competing theory that has grown in popularity states that the Vedic people (Aryans) were indigenous to the Indus-Saraswati region and built the Indus Valley cities. Vedic literature refers to the Saptasindhu (Indus river and its tributaries) as the primary land of residence. Archaeologists and historians began to embrace what was known originally as the Out of India theory because evidence suggested that a collection of groups lived along the major waterways of the Indian subcontinent.

The evidence includes:

- DNA analysis tracing thousands of years suggesting more similarities among the people of the Subcontinent
- Archaeological findings, including satellite imagery of the dried up Saraswati River (much of which flowed through modern Rajasthan), which was believed to have dried up around 2700 BCE. The river's presence corresponds to numerous references in the Vedas.
- Archaeologists have noted that mingling among different populations across the subcontinent would have yielded the type of development over many centuries seen in ancient India.

Arguments against the theory include:

- No definitive evidence that the river found in satellite imagery is the Saraswati River mentioned in the Vedas.
- Not enough clear evidence suggesting a stable evolution from the Harappan (early Vedic) to later Vedic periods.

However, while the scripts in the Harappan civilization remain undeciphered, many historians and archaeologists believe the likelihood of an indigenous mixing of groups resulted in the development of Vedic civilization.

Whether they comprised two populations or one, the beliefs of the people inhabiting the ancient Indus region formed the basis of Hinduism. These beliefs included: an emphasis on sacrificial rituals (yajna), and a reverence for deities personifying virtues, concepts, and natural forces. Some of those deities include Indra, God of Thunder; Varuna, God of the Water; Surya, the Sun God; and Agni, the God of Fire. Early concepts like Dharma and Brahman/Atman underwent development in this period, and cremation became common. All of these ideas are contained in the four Vedas, the primary scriptures composed during this period. Perhaps the most influential philosophical idea from this period was encapsulated in the Rig Veda verse: *Ekam Sat, Viprah Bahudha Vadanti* (The Truth is One; The Wise Call It Many Names).

Key Takeaways:

- The origins of Hinduism are unknown, the primary focus of its early development is tied to the rise of ancient Indian civilization
- Whether two populations or one, beliefs of the people in the ancient Indus region formed the basis of Hinduism
- The three main theories are based on archaeological, scriptural and cultural evidence

