

## **Annotated Lecture: The Ethos of Indian Religion**

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This post is my annotated lecture on the Ethos of Indian Religion. In this lecture I discuss the context in which the Hindu and Buddhist traditions arose. We begin from the earliest traces of Indian civilization, touch on the impact of the Aryans' arrival into the subcontinent, and discuss the shifting spiritual landscape that led to the rise of Indian religion.

To follow my notes, download the following slides or view them online below.

### **Slides 1 to 2: Image of Diwali and excerpt from the Upanishads**

It is fitting that we begin this lecture with an image of Diwali, the 5-day Festival of Lights, symbolizing the triumph of light over darkness, of good over evil. This excerpt you read from the Upanishads is among the most important incantations in the Hindu religion. And in many ways, this serves a metaphor for all of us studying Indian history for the first time.

Of all the river-valley civilizations, the Indus River Valley civilization is the most mysterious. It is the only one whose script remains undeciphered to this day — unlike the hieroglyphics in Egypt, cuneiform in Mesopotamia, and the oracle bone script in Shang China. Indeed, by delving into Indian history, we will be bringing ourselves from the unreal to the real, from the darkness to the light.

### **Slide 3 to 7: Images of Hindu deities**

There is another way for us to take that last line — from the darkness to the light.

Indian religion is perhaps the most colorful in the world. So many colors, so many textures. It's really fascinating to behold. We have the likes of Shakti, the goddess of power and the womb of all creation. We have the Hindu trinity — the creator Brahma, the preserver Vishnu, and the destroyer Shiva. Then there is the playful Krishna, and the lovable elephant god, Ganesha — these are the two most popular gods in India. And lastly we have the mystical Shiva in his two modes — the ascetic and the cosmic dancer. But what does this all mean? Why so many gods?

The Vedas go, "The truth is one, but the sages know it by many names."

Hindus speak of the universal reality, Brahman, which is beyond sense and description. Philosophers even caution us in equating Brahman with God, because God — in the Abrahamic sense — is a limiting concept. Brahman is not an old man who created the world and sent his only son to save it. Brahman transcends human categories and human stories. He is at once the cause and effect of all things. Mind blowing? Pretty much. That's why the Hindus reflect their understanding of Brahman through the multitude of Hindu deities. Think of them then as beams of light that refracted from one, the one being Brahman.

(Philosophically speaking though, the concept of Brahman has a lot of similarities to the Daoist concept of the Dao. Think about it.)

### **Slide 8: The Indian Subcontinent**

Now we take a look at the stage where all this takes place, the Indian subcontinent. The map I chose to put in this presentation shows off the geographic features very well. We have the Indo-Gangetic plain to the north, the Deccan to the south, and the coastal regions on both sides. Unlike China though, India is relatively exposed to other civilizations, particularly to Mesopotamia on the west. And the northwest of India offers a window for outsiders to enter.

### **Slide 9 to 16: Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro**

For a more thorough discussion, consult pages 50 to 53 of our main textbook. The main insights I'd like us to draw on are on slide 16.

### **Slide 17 to 20: The Aryan people**

For a more thorough discussion, consult pages 53 to 57 of our main textbook. These slides largely reinforce the points raised in these pages.

### **Slide 21 to 24: The Ethos of Indian Religion**

The Aryans were a pastoral-nomadic people. It is in their settling down in the Indus River Valley at around 1500BCE that we have the first accounts of them as urban dwellers. A lot has been said about their 'war-like' nature, but deep within the Aryan were a deeply spiritual people with a high regard for ritual. An entire class of people emerged just to lead the tribe in worship of deities such as Indra (war) or Agni (fire). To further highlight the importance of priests, the raja (king) had to surround himself with a circle of ritualists as if to lend legitimacy to his rule.

This only intensified. As the Indo-Aryan population expanded, they moved further eastwards into the rest of the plain. In the small cities and towns that emerged, the priests gained even more power. And soon enough, they found themselves at the top of social hierarchy. This is seen in the institution of the Indian caste system (slides 22 to 23) where the Brahmin are seated at the top.

But do note that the caste system is a spiritual hierarchy. It is not a political one (or at least, not supposed to be). Yet imagine a society where only the three upper classes are part of religious and social life. Imagine what it would be like in our country if only the upper 10% can only go to heaven and the rest have to languish in a pathetic existence on Earth. (Come to think of it, that was pretty much the situation in Hispanic Philippines with the friars around, wasn't it?)

If you think about it, their problem was the complete opposite of China's. If Confucius' diagnosis about the ills of society is that mankind has lost the Way and is no longer performing the rituals, in Indian society there are too many rituals! And yet the Brahmins completely miss the point.

Hence, Brahmanic society (1000-500BCE) was increasingly fixated on rituals, and most of these rituals meant nothing to majority of the population. The Brahmin abused their position, held on to enormous political power and influence, and literally held the keys to salvation. Thus, the majority of Indians needed a more practical way to understand their situation in life and an accessible way to go beyond it. It was in this ethos that the Upanishads would emerge to speak about focusing on the internal struggles of man rather than on external rituals. It was in this ethos that Siddhartha Gautama developed his theory of why mankind suffers and how we can go beyond it.

Hence, in such dark times, the word 'enlightenment' is fitting. *Tamaso Ma Jyotir Gamaya*. Lead us from the darkness to the light.

### **TASK BEFORE THE NEXT CLASS**

When I return, I will discuss the Hindu worldview according to the Upanishads. The ethos of Indian religion will be my starting point. Expect a quiz on the terms used in Hinduism and Buddhism. For a taste of what kind of questions to expect, review the questions on pages 57 and 82.