Origins of Hinduism: The Indus Valley Civilization

Hinduism, unlike most major religions, does not have a central figure upon whom it is founded. Rather, it is a complex faith with roots stemming back five thousand years to the people of the Indus Valley, now part of Pakistan. When the Aryan tribes of Persia invaded the Indus Valley around 1700 BCE, the groups’ beliefs merged and Hinduism began to form.

Most of what we know of the Indus people (also called Dravidians) comes from archaeological findings. Artifacts and relics dating back as early as 2000 BCE tell the story of a civilization flourishing with craftsmanship, agriculture, and religious life. As we will see, many of these early practices and beliefs still shape Hinduism.

For example, the Indus put great importance on cleanliness or ritual bathing. MohenjoDaro, one of the major Indus cities, contained a huge water tank for public bathing. Today, many Hindu temples feature such tanks.

Another lasting legacy of Hinduism is found in the abundance of terra-cotta figurines unearthed in the Indus Valley. Popular among these small ceramic statuettes were depictions of pregnant women, “mother goddesses.” The fertility and strength of the goddess and the rebirth and continuity she provides remain central to the Hindu faith.

Ceramic seals also provide insight into the Indus’ religious beliefs. Among the most common design was that of the bull. It represented virility, or sexual force, which is still considered sacred to the Hindus. Shiva, among the most revered Hindu gods, is associated with the bull.

The Indus were an agricultural people, growing crops and raising animals. Living on the banks of the Indus River, dependent on its nourishment and renewal, there was deep reverence for water. Water still remains sacred to Hindus.

Questions:
1. How did researchers discover most of the information about the Indus people?

2. List three findings and briefly explain their links to Hinduism.

3. How did the Indus people survive? How does it relate to their religious worship?
Directions: on the map below, label the following features or cities. (Note that the dots are locations of cities)

- Hindu Kush
- Himalayan Mountains
- Indus River
- Ganges River
- Mohenjo Daro
- Harappa
- Kalibangan
Origins of Hinduism: The Aryan Invasion and the Vedas

The Aryan Invasion

Although there is evidence that the Indus Valley civilization may already have been struggling, its collapse began with the invasion of the Aryan tribes around 1700 BCE. The Aryans, a powerful race, traveled through Europe and Asia, conquering whomever they encountered. When they descended from the Hindu Kush and the Himalayas into the Indus Valley, they brought with them a very different belief system and way of life.

To begin with, the Aryans were not agricultural people. Rather than fertility symbols, they crafted beautiful bronze weaponry. Another major contrast was their religious focus. The Aryans were patriarchal, worshipping only male gods. Their central god was a “sky father,” probably an influence of the Greek and Roman gods, Zeus and Jupiter. Their principal deities, such as Agni and Indra, were associated with the sun. Aryan priests composed verses to these gods which were recited during fire sacrifices.

The Aryans settled the lush Indus Valley and maintained their rituals. However, much of the Indus’ religious culture remained alive in villages and was adopted by the Aryans. From this mixture of beliefs and practices, Hinduism was born.

The Vedas

With the Aryans arrived the bedrock of the Hindu thought system, the Vedas. Considered the world’s oldest writings, these scriptures originated before the Aryans migrated to the Indus Valley, later evolving into four scriptures: the Rig-Veda, the Yajur Veda, the Sama-Veda, and the Atharva-Veda. The oldest and most popular of these is the Rig Veda, a collection of hymns which may date back as early as 5000 BCE. It is important to note, however, that the historical sweep of Vedic writing reflects deep shifts in spiritual interest and ways of worship.

Interestingly, for centuries the Vedas were only transmitted orally, through memorization and recital. Eventually, however, they were transcribed into Sanskrit, the sacred Hindu language developed by the Aryans of the Indus Valley.

The Rig-Veda tells of thirty-three gods, all of whom are born of one creator, Brahman. Complementing Brahman are Vishnu and Shiva. These three gods form the Hindu trinity. The principal goddesses, Lakshmi, Sarasvati, and Kali are also part of the Rig-Veda. This variety of deities—many of whom take on different personalities and names—are very much alive in everyday Hindu life.

Response:
Describe three major differences between the Aryan and Indus people.
Origins of Hinduism: The Ascetics and The Upanishads

The Ascetic

By the 7th century BCE, Aryans, along with people of the Indus Valley, had migrated across India to the Ganges Valley, settling among the native population. Wherever they lived, the Aryans represented the elite of society, and the most elite were the Brahmins, priests. These priests determined a class order, or caste system, which they included as a Vedic hymn. To this day, the caste system helps shape Hindu society. (See page 155.)

Although the Brahmins were revered in the early Hindu periods, slowly their role began to be questioned. The Brahmins assumed spiritual authority, overseeing the writings of the Vedas and demanding complicated rituals. These rituals centered around the Brahmins and excluded those from lower classes. As disillusionment rose, a more individualized way of religious life was born, the life of the ascetic.

The ascetic was a person dedicated to a life of spiritual austerity and self-discipline. Untouched by the social system, ascetics often chose a hermitage in the forest or gathered with others to live lives of intense devotion and meditation. By example, these individuals inspired people away from dependence on priests, creating a revolution of spiritual thought and practice.

The Upanishads

From this revolution were born The Upanishads, authored by ascetics between 700-500 BCE. As the final part of the Vedas, The Upanishads contain almost exclusively dialogues of a guru, spiritual master. In fact, “Upanishad” literally means “sitting beside” a guru. These texts differ from earlier Vedic writings in that they are intended to inspire and welcome anyone, regardless of status or caste. Although The Upanishads, like much of the Vedic writings, are difficult to absorb, what matters is the seeker’s depth of sincerity and character.

It follows, then, that the fire rituals so common among Vedic priests were replaced by the deep internal searching of the ascetics. To the students of The Upanishads, the fire of understanding burns within. The fire rituals are metaphors for an inner revelation.

Central to Upanishadic belief is that of the atman, higher self. The atman is a person’s soul which must return to Brahman, the universal soul. Through meditation and self-sacrifice, an individual may come to realize fully that he is not separate from the universal soul, he is not a body or an isolated identity.

Response:

Briefly explain the importance of the ascetics in Hindu life.
Reading from the Rig-Veda

The following passage is from the creation hymn, “The Unknown God, the Golden Embryo.” The word *oblation* means “an offering to a god.”

1 In the beginning the Golden Embryo arose. Once he was born, he was the one lord of creation. He held in place the earth and this sky. Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?

2 He who gives life, who gives strength, whose command all the gods, his own, obey; his shadow is immortality—and death. Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?

3 He who by his greatness became as one king of the world that breathes and blinks, who rules over his two-footed and four-footed creatures—who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?

4 He who through his power owns these snowy mountains, and the ocean together with the river Rasa, they say; who has the quarters of the sky as his two arms—who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation? (Rig-Veda 10.121 1,2,3,4)

The next passage is from the hymn, “The Killing of Vrita.” It tells of Indra’s slaying of the dragon, Vrita. Indra is king of the gods. Soma is a nectar of the gods.

1 Let me now sing the heroic deeds of Indra, the first that the thunderbolt-wielder performed. He killed the dragon and pierced an opening for the waters; he split open the bellies of the mountains.

2 He killed the dragon who lay upon the mountain; Tvastr fashioned the roaring thunderbolt for him. Like lowing cows, the flowing waters rushed straight down to the sea.

3 Wildly excited like a bull, he took the Soma for himself and drank the extract from the three bowls in the three-day Soma ceremony. Indra the Generous seized his thunderbolt to hurl it as a weapon; he killed the first-born of the dragons. (Rig-Veda 1.32 1,2,3)

This is a section of the hymn, “In Praise of Generosity.”

1 The gods surely did not ordain hunger alone for slaughter; various deaths reach the man who is well-fed. The riches of the man who gives fully do not run out, but the miser finds no one with sympathy.

2 The man with food who hardens his heart against the poor man who comes to him suffering and searching for nourishment—though in the past he has made use of him—he surely finds no one with sympathy.

3 The man who is truly generous gives to the beggar who approaches him and in search of food. He puts himself at the service of the man who calls to him from the road, and makes him a friend for times to come.

4 That man is no friend who does not give of his own nourishment to his friend, the companion at his side. Let the friend turn away from him; this is not his dwelling-place. Let him find another man who gives freely, even if he be a stranger. (Rig-Veda 10.117 1,2,3,4)
Reading from The Upanishads

The following excerpt is from “Isha,” chapter two of The Upanishads.

The Self is one. Unmoving, it moves swifter than thought. The senses do not overtake it, for always it goes before. Remaining still, it outstrips all that run. Without the Self, there is no life.

To the ignorant the Self appears to move—yet it moves not. From the ignorant it is far distant—yet it is near. It is within all, and it is without all.

He who sees all beings in the Self, and the Self in all beings, hates none.

To the illumined soul, the Self is all. For him who sees everywhere oneness, how can there be delusion or grief?

The Self is everywhere. Bright is he, bodiless, without scar of imperfection, without bone, without flesh, pure, untouched by evil. The Seer, the Thinker, the One who is above all, the Self-Existent—he it is that has established perfect order among objects and beings from beginningless time.

To darkness are they doomed who devote themselves only to live in the world, and to a greater darkness they who devote themselves only to meditation.

Life in the world alone leads to one result, meditation alone leads to another. So have we heard from the wise.

They who devote themselves both to life in the world and to meditation, by life in the world overcome death, and by meditation achieve immortality.

This next passage is from chapter 9, “Chandogya.”

One day the boy Satyakama came to his mother and said: “Mother, I want to be a religious student. What is my family name?”

“My son,” replied his mother, “I do not know who was your father. I am Jabala, and you are Satyakama. Call yourself Satyakama Jabala.”

Thereupon the boy went to Guatama and asked to be accepted as a student. “Of what family are you, my lad?” inquired the sage.

Satyakama replied: “I asked my mother what my family name was, and she answered: ‘I do not know. In my youth I was a servant and worked in many places. I do not know who was your father. I am Jabala, and you are Satyakama. Call yourself Satyakama Jabala!’ I am therefore Satyakama Jabala, sir.”

Then said the sage: “None but a true Brahmin would have spoken thus. Go and fetch fuel, for I will teach you. You have not swerved from the truth.”
Questions: The Vedas and The Upanishads

1. Compare the Vedic creation hymn, “The Unknown God, the Golden Embryo,” to “Isha” from The Upanishads. In what ways is their focus the same and in what ways different?

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2. Describe the tone of the Vedic hymn, “The Killing of Vrita.” To whom is the hymn in honor? List a few other stories which contain dragons.

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3. What is the message of the hymn, “In Praise of Generosity”? Does it echo any other religious material you have studied? Explain.

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4. How does the passage from “Chandogya” illustrate the difference between the Vedas and The Upanishads?

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