

Hinduism: Stereotypes and Prejudices

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Introduction

Despite Hinduism's being a fundamental part of the cultural history of India, the perception of this religious tradition is often permeated by numerous stereotypes derived from a **classical orientalist view of India**, which influenced historically the way in which Westerners still continue to see non-Western societies. Many orientalist stereotypes have generally described Hinduism as a source of **sexual depravation** and **social injustice**: Hindu gods are generally imagined as bloodthirsty and lustful, like the goddess **Kālī**, which has been seen as an obscure and exotic cult. In other cases, Hindu saints, like the **guru**, have indulged in sexual orgies, or have taken actions against Muslims. One of the most common stereotypes about Hinduism remains in any case the '**Hindu mysticism**', stimulated also by modern **Neo-Hinduism**, which has often fueled Western collective imagination, becoming also a religious inspiration for new forms of spirituality. There are also other **misconceptions** concerning the cultural heritage of Hindu tradition, such as religious literature (for example, the **Bhagavadgītā** is considered a sort of '**Indian Bible**'), the vegetarian diet, the caste system, or the daily religious practices, such as cow worship or the *bindī* symbol used mostly by Hindu women. The consequence is that Hinduism is seen, on the **one hand**, as a **mystical** and polytheistic religion linked to **exotic** cults, on the **other hand** as the reflection of a **poor** and **backward** Asian society afflicted by passive acceptance of social injustice, poverty and caste system. Below, some of the most common stereotypes regarding the Hindu religion will be briefly described and recontextualized.

More information on:

[What does "Hinduism" mean?](#)

(par. "Main doctrinal tenets: Overview" and Source 1)

[The figure of the Master \(Guru\)](#)

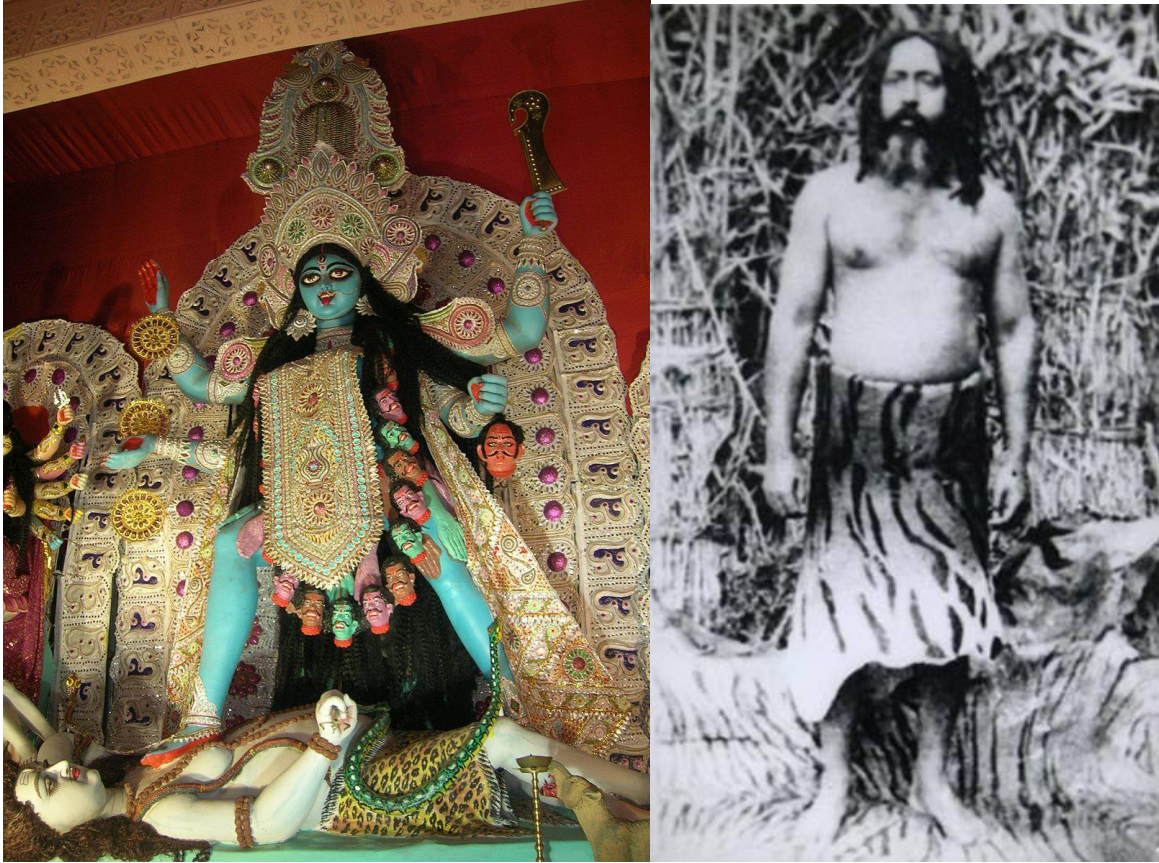
(par. "Main changes in the XX c.: The figure of the Guru today as the trademark of Indian spirituality" and Source 2)

[Hinduism's view of society](#)

(pars. "Main doctrinal tenets: The Varna division of society and the Indian caste system"; "Fundational myth: The sacrifice of the Purusha" and Sources 1 and 2)

[Modern and contemporary Hinduism](#)

(par. "Neo Hinduism: Modernity and inclusivism" and analysis of Source 1)



Left: a statue representing the goddess Kali, Kolkata Right: Soham Swami, a famous Bengali Guru and Hindu religious figure of India(source:[Wikipedia](#)CC BY-SA 3.0)

Hindu vegetarianism

Similarly to Buddhism and Jainism, Hinduism is often considered a **sort of vegetarian religion**. However, although Hinduism asserts that every animal is a sentient being and therefore Hindus should not eat meat, actually, there are not any particular food restrictions in the Hindu diet. Generally, **only a small percentage** of Hindus (30-35%) follow a vegetarian diet following the principle of *ahimsā* ('not to injure', 'compassion'), which states that all living beings have the spark of the divine spiritual energy. It is also important to consider that most spiritual leaders – such as *swamis*, *sadhus*, and **gurus** –, strictly follow a vegetarian diet while lay Hindus are inclined to include meat in their diet.

More information on:

[The figure of the Master \(Guru\)](#)

(par. "Acknowledged authority: The Guru" and analysis of Source 1)



Vegetarian restaurant, Bangalore, Karnataka, India (source: Flickr CC BY-SA 2.0).

Hinduism and the caste system

One of the main stereotypes about Hinduism is the idea that Hinduism legitimates the Indian discriminatory caste system. Indian society is **highly hierarchical** and the caste system called **Varna** (“color”) is associated with Hinduism, in which hierarchical ordering is present in varying degrees in all communities, influencing the social behavior of all individuals, even within families, including also the non-hindu communities. The Indian social structure is a layered hierarchy of castes (*Brahmins*, priests and teachers, *Kshatriyas*, warriors and rulers, *Vaishyas*, farmers and merchants, and *Shudras*, laborers) in which every Hindu belongs to a specific caste and is guided by **prescribed norms and social sanctions**, thus creating specific patterns of behavior. This means also that every Hindu born into a specific *Varna* should take on, unconditionally, an unalterable social status. For this reason, the *Varna* system must be considered as a **closed social group**.

However, affirming that Hinduism justifies inequalities and social exclusion is misleading: the hierarchical order and the caste system are religiously linked to the principle of **ritual purity** that varies according to the caste. In other words, the caste system envisions a society where each person, in **order to preserve the order of the universe** – a sacred and strongly religiously connotated concept of order -has his/her own collocation, duties and rights well pre-defined. However, it must be noted that this is a **traditional view expressed by official ancient texts**, while the reality of **nowadays India** is much more **complicated**

and changed. The actual system does **not preclude any social mobility.** It must be noted that each varna is divided in multiple *jati* (lit. birth) which is a term used to denote the thousands of local closed social groups. A *jati* can move in the hierarchical scheme of society, and an individual can move to another *jati* through inter-*jati* marriage. Moreover, discrimination based on caste is prohibited in article 15 of the 1950 Indian Constitution; it is still a common custom especially in marriage, however. In fact, **the idea of equality** among human beings, typical of the Enlightenment, is quite **antithetical to the traditional thought** of India.



Left: *Dalit* or Untouchable woman of Bombay (Mumbai), 1942, source: <http://www.oldindianphotos.in/search/label/Women>; right: *Portrait of a Kshatriya* from *The Hindoos* (1835).

More information on:

[Hinduism's view of society](#)

(pars. "Main doctrinal tenets: The Varna division of society and the Indian caste system"; "Fundational myth: the sacrifice of the Purusha" and Sources 1 and 2)

Hindu idolatry and polytheism

Hinduism is often described as a polytheistic religion based on idolatry. It is true that Hinduism is commonly thought to be a polytheistic religion since **Hindus worship thousands of gods and goddesses.** However, Hindus consider the worship of many gods and goddesses according to the **principle 'the divine in everything'**: there are various representations of divine beings, according to religious rituals and devotees, and each representation (*deva*) is in itself a divine manifestation. In brief, Hindus believe that the **one supreme divine being** (*Ishvara*) cannot be fully understood, so that it is necessary to worship **different earthly representations**, which are merely symbolic of a supreme divine being. One of the core concepts of Hinduism is the *murthi puja* (image worship), which refers to the belief that all creation is a form of the supreme divine being. According to this religious vision of supreme divine being, Hindus do not consider this kind of worshiping as idolatry, but a direct worship of a supreme divine being who manifests himself in everything.

More information on:

[Vishnu, "Bhakti" devotion and the concept of Avatara](#)

(par. "Main doctrinal tenets: The concept of Supreme God, Ishvara")

[Shiva, the deity of Yoga](#)

(esp: analysis of Source 3)

[The Goddess and Tantrism](#)

(par. "Deities, holy beings: The Goddess" and analysis of Source 1)

[The Hindu way of life: the four stages of life, rites of passage and everyday cult](#)

(par. "Main rites: The Puja" and analysis of Source 3)

Worship of cows

Another stereotype concerning Hinduism is that 'all Indian people worship cows'. This common misconception is due to the manner in which Hindus treat cows, which symbolically **represent the sustenance of life**. According to Hinduism, honoring the **cow inspires** in people the **virtues of gentleness**, and these animals are honored, garlanded and given special feedings at festivals all over India. The **reasons** why the cow is considered sacred in Hinduism are **religious and economic**. From an economic point of view, cows produce milk, cream, yogurt, cheese, butter, and fertilizer for agricultural uses. For its peaceful nature, the cow is worshipped as a symbol of *avihimsā* (non-violence) and it is seen as a maternal caretaker. From a religious point of view, the cow is a form of the **earthly incarnation of goddess Kamadhenu**, whose veneration is directly linked to the cow that symbolically represents her 'living temple'.



Krishna (a manifestation of Vishnu) statue at the Sri Mariamman Temple (Singapore), Source: [Wikipedia](#) CC BY-SA 3.0



Kamadhenu, the Wish-Granting Cow, Rajasthan, India, Rajasthan, Jodhpur or Nathadwara, 1825-55 ca, source: [Wikipedia](#), Public Domain

'Red dot means married woman'

One of the main symbols that characterizes but also stereotypes the Hindu culture is the *bindi*, the red dot on the forehead worn by Hindu women and young girls. Such symbols have a spiritual role though their symbolic power has declined in modern times. According to Hinduism, a woman will wear a red *bindi* made with vermilion powder above and between her eyes to signify marriage and denoting prosperity, while the position of the *bindi* symbolizes the "third eye," where one loses their *ahamkara* ("ego"). However, this practice has **nowadays** lost its religious meaning and Hindu **women can wear whatever color *bindi* they choose**. Such practice of wearing a *bindi* is not restricted only to Hindu women, also men can wear a type of *bindi* called *tilak*, which is a series of lines on the forehead. Moreover, various colors of *bindi* signify different castes, but this is mostly a cultural practice that only a small group of Hindus still follow nowadays.