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Module : **Hinduism**


ज्ञानं विद्यमानं विद्यमानं

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Component-I (B) – Description of module:

Subject Name	Indian Culture
Paper Name	Indian Religion and Philosophy
Module Name/Title	Hinduism
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Objectives	To study the Hinduism as a religion and philosophy and its practices
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E-Text (Quadrant-I):

1. Introduction

Philosophy, in its wide connotation, has sprung from religion and has developed along with religion in India. It has been so much fused with religion that philosophy minus religion becomes unthinkable in our country. Hence we can say that philosophy and religion have always been associated with each other. The reason for this close association is that the objective of the both is same i.e., to make man realize his ultimate end or *mokṣa*. Hinduism is a philosophy, a way of life and also a course of faith and it is often equated with a giant banyan tree in whose shade thousands of faiths bloom. Hindu was principally a geographical term that referred to India or to a region of India, near the Sindhu. The word Hindu is derived from the river Sindhu or Indus. The Persians found the inhabitants of the Sindhu Valley and were well impressed with their civilization and culture. They called them '*Sindus*' taking into consideration their distinct mode of life and it is this word that has metamorphosed into 'Hindu' and Hinduism. It is a religion which has evolved through the experiences of several people and has gone through several transformations. Hence it is called '*sanātana dharmā*'- the ancient and eternal religion.

It is based on the collective wisdom and inspiration of great seers and sages from the very dawn of Indian civilization. Among all the great religions of the world, Hinduism is unique as it had no

single founder or a single book as a source. It grew gradually over a period of several thousand years. It is a product of number of races and cultures as it evolved out of the varying faiths in various groups of the community. It absorbed and assimilated all the diversified social movements and cultural practices of India. Most of the beliefs and practices of Hinduism are based on the teachings of the Vedas, *Āgamas*, *Upaniṣads* and several books written based on these texts. It stands unique in the sense that it is the only non-prophetic religion in the world. We find that Hinduism does not depend upon the historicity of anyone individual or his spiritual experiences or doctrines propounded by any single person on his personal experience. As its name '*Sanātana Dharma*' implies, it is based on certain eternal principles and values of life which hold good for all people for all time, irrespective of personalities involved. Therefore, *Sanātana Dharma* means the religion based on the eternal sustaining values of life.'

In the progress of Indian philosophical thought through the ages *dharma* has acquired all-comprehensive and complex significance. According to S. Radhakrishnan, "the term *dharma* is one of complex significance. It stands for all those ideals and purposes, influences and institutions that shape the character of man, both as an individual and as a member of society. It is the law of right living, the observance of which secures the double object of happiness on earth and salvation. It is ethics and religion combined. The life of a Hindu is regulated in a very detailed manner by the laws of *dharma*. His fasts and feasts, his social and family ties, his personal habits and tastes are all conditioned by it." In short, it is the law of right living, the observance of which secures the double object of happiness in life and liberation from all bondages.

There are two fundamental doctrines which are the cornerstones of Hinduism. They are- the doctrine of karma and the doctrine of Re-incarnation. Both these doctrines are inseparably intertwined. It can be seen that they are the only reasonable and logical explanations of the facts of life, powers, justness and mercy of the supreme cosmic Intelligence which in common parlance is known as 'God.'

2. Hindu Deities

Hinduism is basically monotheistic in the sense that Hindu deities are not 'individual God's but are various representations of particular aspects of one Supreme Being, known as the Brahman. A number of deities of Hinduism, which may be seen as reflecting the various aspects of Brahman, are represented by images. So Hinduism seems to have a vast pantheon of Gods and Goddesses. In fact, the Hindu Trinity that comprises Lord Brahma, Lord Viṣṇu and Lord

Śiva are the three aspects of the Supreme Being (Brahman). They represent creation, preservation and destruction for the process of creation. As per the Hindu mythology it is said that Lord Brahma grew in a lotus out of the navel of Viṣṇu. He has four heads, from which it is believed, the four Vedas spring. He is creator of God. Goddess Saraśwati, the Goddess of knowledge is the consort of Brahma.

Among the Hindu Gods and Goddess, Lord Viṣṇu embodies goodness and mercy. He is the deity of peace or *śānti* and has four weapons or attributes- the conch, disc, club and lotus. In this world, there is a balance of good and evil force. When this balance is disrupted, Viṣṇu takes a human form to set it right because He is the preserver God. This human form is called avatar. These are fish (*Matsya*), turtle (*Kūrma*), wild boar (*Varāha*), half man and half lion (*Narasimha*), dwarf (*Vāmana*), Parasurāma, Śrī Rāma, Śrī Kriṣṇa and the Buddha. Kalki is the future incarnation which is to come at the end of this present age of *Kaliyuga*. Goddess Lakṣmi is the consort of Vishnu and she is the Goddess of light, beauty, good, fortune and wealth. Among the *trimūrti*, next is Śiva and He is the destroyer or transformer. Śiva is commonly worshipped as the *Śivaliṅga*. In images, he is mostly represented as immersed in deep meditation or dancing the *Tāṇḍava* upon the demon of ignorance in his expression of Natarāja, the Lord of dance. His consort is Pārvati.

The Supreme Being comprises both masculine and feminine traits as per the Hindu religion. The female part is as significant as the male part. It is believed that all Goddesses of the Hindu pantheon are special forms of the divine mother – Śakti. The important goddesses of Hinduism are Durgā, Kāli, Saraśwati, Laṣhmi and Pārvati. The Goddess Durgā represents the power of the Supreme Being that preserves moral order and righteousness in the creation. Durgā the Divine Mother protects mankind from evil and misery by destroying evil forms like selfishness, jealousy, prejudice, hatred, anger and ego. Durgā is described as a warrior aspect of Pārvati Devi with ten arms that rides a lion or tiger and carries weapons and assumes *mudras* or symbolic hand gestures. This form of the Goddess is the embodiment of feminine and creative energy. Kāli is the Hindu goddess related with destruction. Despite her negative connotations, she is the goddess of time and change. She is presented as black and violent and pictured mostly in two forms- the popular four armed form and the ten-armed *Mahāśakti* form.

Saraśwati is the Hindu goddess of knowledge, music and creative arts. Since knowledge is necessary for creation, she symbolizes the creative power of Brahma. She is in general shown to have four arms, which represent the four aspects of human personality in learning: mind,

intellect, alertness and ego. Alternatively, these four arms also represent the four Vedas, the primary sacred books for Hindus. According to Hindu mythology, Lakṣmi is regarded as the Goddess of wealth and prosperity. The word 'Lakṣmi' is derived from the Sāṅskrit word '*Lakṣme*' and this means goal. Therefore, Lakṣmi represents the goal of life which includes worldly as well as spiritual prosperity. She is also called 'Śrī,' the divine spouse of Lord Viṣṇu who provides Him with wealth for the maintenance and preservations of creation.

Pārvati is the consort of Śiva and in her unmarried state she is the Kāli who is known by the names of Māyā, Sati and so on. Sometimes, she is regarded as the supreme Divine Mother and all other goddesses are referred to as her incarnations or expressions. Pārvati symbolizes a number of noble virtues esteemed by the Hindu custom. She along with Siva symbolizes at once both the power of renunciation and asceticism and the blessings of marital felicity. According to Hinduism, God creates the whole world in him and there is nothing that is present without him. God is present in everything at all the times. This is clearly stated by Rajeev Verma when he says that, "Hindu religion is often labeled as a religion of 330 million Gods. This misunderstanding arises when people fail to grasp the symbolism of the Hindu pantheon. As per the Hindu scriptures, living beings are not apart from God, since He lives in each and every one of them in the form of *ātman*. Thus each living being is a unique expression of God. In ancient times, it was believed that there were 330 million living beings. This gave rise to the idea of 330 million deities or Gods. The number 330 million was simply used to give a symbolic expression to the fundamental Hindu doctrine that God lives in the hearts of all the creatures." Basically, the supreme Being or God, the personal form of the ultimate Reality, is conceived by Hindu as having various aspects.

3. Sources of Hinduism

The scriptural literatures of Hindus are broadly divided into two categories-The Śruti texts and the *smṛtis*. The *Śruti* texts are 'God revealed' and the *smṛtis* as 'Man realized.' The *Śruti* texts deal with eternal principles and *smṛtis* deal with the practical application of those eternal principles according to the changing times. In Hindu religious thought, *Śruti* texts stand for the Vedas and *smṛtis* collectively means secondary scriptures. The most important difference between *Śruti* texts and *smṛtis* is that *Śruti* is the eternal Veda, not the compilation of any mortal being, while *smṛti* is literature composed by various sages on the basis of their spiritual insights. According to some scholars, *smṛtis* consists of (1) *dharma śāstras* or codes of law, (2)

Itihāsas or epics (3) *purāṇās* or legends (4) *āgamas* or manuals of worship (5) *darśana* or schools of philosophy.

3.1. The Vedas

The primary source of Hinduism from which it derives its authority and inspiration is the body of literature known as the Vedas. They are four in number. The Ṛgveda, Sāmaveda, Yajurveda and Atharvaveda. These Vedas discuss life and death and everything that touches man in his journey through life. The Ṛgveda is believed to be the oldest 'book' known to man and it mainly consists of hymns of praise. The Yajur Veda deals with the melodies and contains songs to be chanted at the sacrifices with their correct modulations and intonations. The Atharvaveda mainly deals with the magic formulae and the *tantras* and other forms of esoteric knowledge. Each of these Vedas consists of four sections namely- the *Samhita* or the *Mantra* portion, the *Brāhmaṇas* or the ritualistic portion, the *Āraṇykas* or the contemplative portion and *Upaniṣads* which form the end of the Vedas. Hence it is also called the Vedānta which can either mean the concluding portion of the Vedas or the essence of the Vedas. The *Upaniṣads* contain the essence of the Vedic teachings and they are the foundation on which most of the later philosophies and religions of India rest. The word *Upaniṣad* means 'to sit nearby devotedly'. Since there are four Vedas, one would expect to have just four *Upaniṣads*. But actually we have more than thousand of them because each Veda has several *śākhās* or branches and each *śākhā* perhaps ended with one *Upaniṣad*. So the *Upaniṣads* are 1179 in number 21 in the Ṛg Veda, 108 in the Yajur Veda, 1000 in the Sāma Veda and 50 in the Atharva Veda. Of these eleven are considered to be the principal *Upaniṣads* and Śaṅkarācārya wrote his commentaries on them. The *Upa Vedas* are four in number. Each one is attached to one Veda. They are (1) the *Āyurveda*, the science of health attached to the Ṛgveda (2) the *Dhanur Veda* or military science attached to the Yajurveda (3) the *Gāndharva Veda* or the art and science of music is attached to the Sāmaveda and (4) the *Stapathya śāstra* or the science of mechanics and constructions, attached to the Atharvaveda. The *Vedāṅgas* are six in number. They are *sikṣa* or phonetics, *kalpa* or religious rites, *vyākaraṇa* or grammar, *nirukta* or the Vedic glossary, *chandas* or Prosody and *jyotiṣa* or astronomy and astrology. A thorough study of the six branches of knowledge is considered essential for the understanding and assimilation of the teachings contained in the Vedas. The *Veda upāṅgas* are the six *darśanas*. They are the Nyāya of the sage Gautama, Vaiśeṣika of the sage Kanāda, Sāṃkhya of Kapila, Yoga of Patañjali, Mīmāṃsā of Jaimini and Vedānta of Veda Vyāsa.

The subject matter of the Vedas is broadly classified into three categories- *karma*, *upāsana* and *jñāna*. These three parts are not physically separated in the Vedas but it is scattered throughout the texts. The *karmakāṇḍa* discusses the duties of an individual, particularly of a house holder, the rites and sacrifices that he must perform and how he should perform them. In the *upāsanakāṇḍa*, the theme is divine communion and worship. The *jñānakāṇḍa* is metaphysical disquisition about ultimate reality and the transience of ordinary sensory experience. These discussions into metaphysics occur in the *Upaniṣads*. That is why it is said that the origin of Indian philosophy can be traced in the Vedas.

3.2. *Smṛtis* or the *Dharmaśāstras*

In contrast to *Śruti* or the Vedas, the *smṛtis* are human composition which is remembered and transmitted. They are large collections of rites and regulations for the individual in relation to his family, society, his ancestors, and the Gods- These are more than eighteen in number and are compiled and collated by great sages of the past like Yājñavalkya, Manu and Parāśara. They are also called *dharmaśāstras* because they lay down the rules of conduct for a '*dhārmic* life' to be observed by all covering the entire span of life. The *Dharma Śāstra* of Manu is the most famous and authoritative and the *Manusmṛti* forms the basis of Hindu law. Almost all the daily practices of the Hindus can be traced to these *smṛtis*. These *dharmaśāstras* delineate the Hindu law and the codes of behavior required from all levels of society and are applicable to different periods of time.

The great thinkers of the past knew very well that religion has to cater to everyone, each in his or her level of mental and intellectual evolution. So there are books written for the classes as well as the masses. The *Upaniṣads*, *Brahmasūtras*, *Dharma Śāstras* cater to the advanced intellectuals. The *Purāṇas* and the *Itihāsas* are mainly directed to the masses who need more of an emotional satisfaction from religion. According to Swami Nityananda, "They (*Itihāsas* and *Purāṇas*) form harmonious food for the head and heart at the same time and as the seeker progresses he or she finds new and higher meanings in the same text which take them forward in their spiritual pursuits. The *Purāṇas* and the *Itihāsas* fall into this class of spiritual literature. While they prepare the seeker for an efficient, fruitful, ethical and *dhārmic* life here; they show the way and lead them to the *summum bonnum* of human birth and existence." In other words, they help to grow from *bhakti* to *jñāna* and from there to realization.

3.3. *Purāṇas* and *Itihāsas*

The teachings of the Vedas are so subtle and abstract that they are very difficult of being grasped and assimilated by the ordinary people. But the quintessence of the Vedas has to be mastered by the common man to have a thorough knowledge of the highest truth. So our ancient sages have reduced the Vedic ideals into simple and understandable compositions commonly known as the *Purāṇas* and *Itihāsas*. They are in the form of stories and narratives with a historic touch behind them which not only impress the reader but also expound the philosophical truths in such a lucid style that a sincere spiritual aspirant will get spontaneous urges from within to live the ideals in his own life.

3.3.1. *Purāṇas*

Purāṇas have been defined as '*Pura Eva Navam iti Puranam*' i.e., - that which is most ancient and most modern at the same time is *Purāṇa*. They are the richest collection of customal stories and teachings based on the spiritual philosophy of the Vedas and the *Upaniṣads*. These books teach Hinduism in an easy and interesting way. According to Amara Sinha, an ancient Sāṅskrit lexicographer, *Purāṇas* must have five distinguishing topics-(1) creation of universe (2) its destruction and renovation (3) the genealogy of Gods and patriarchs (4) the reigns of Manu called *Manwantras* and (5) the history of the solar and lunar dynasties and their descendents. The major *Purāṇas* are eighteen in number and they are divided into three categories. They are as follows:

The Brahma Purāṇas :

Brahma, Brahmānada, Brahma Vaivarta, Mārkaṇdeya, Bhaviṣya and Vāmana

The Vaiṣṇva Purāṇas :

Viṣṇu, Narādīya, Bhāgavada, Garuḍa, Padma and Varāha

Śaiva Purāṇas :

Matṣya, Kūrma, Liṅga, Vāyu, Skanda and Agni

In addition to these eighteen *Purāṇas*, there are 46 *Upa Purāṇas*, out of which eighteen are considered important.

Here we can see that Puranas mainly tell the stories of Hindu Gods and Goddess and through these stories, they outline the important aspects of a moral life.

3.4. *Itihāsas*

The Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahabharata are the two great epics of the Indian tradition. These two epics have exercised a profound influence upon India. They are very popular among the Hindus as the repository of great ethical and human values. Along with the educated section of people, uneducated groups are also familiar with them. Hence directly and indirectly, they have permeated into the national consciousness from the highest classes to the lowest of the Indians.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* is regarded as the first poetical work or *Ādikāvya*. Its traditional author, Vālmīki is the first Indian poet or *Ādikavi* since he was the first author in Sanskrit who produced *ślokas*. The word 'Ramayana' is a combination of 'Rāma and āyaṇ,' which means 'the travels of Rāma.' It consists of 24,000 verses or ślokas in seven cantos. The seven cantos are *Bālakāṇḍam*, *Ayodhyakāṇḍam*, *Kiṣkiṇḍakāṇḍam*, *Sundarakāṇḍam*, *Yudhakāṇḍam* and *Uttara kāṇḍam*. It has been translated into most of the Indian as well as several foreign languages. The Ramayana instructs humanity how to lead a fruitful life and attain the *Puruṣārthas*, the *summum bonum* of human birth and existence. It inculcates within its body almost all the moral ideals which may be connected with human life in all its personal, domestic, social and political aspects in their fullest perfection. Here ethical perceptions and ideals are not talked of separately but are intertwined within the flow of story itself in all its steps. The *Rāmāyaṇa* is loaded with the highest philosophy that mankind can never conceive of it. It represents the true Hindu spirit of unconditional adherence to the law of righteousness and the performance of one's prescribed duty. Through the characters in it, the *Rāmāyaṇa* teaches how man can fulfill the demands of dharma. We regard it as the heart and soul of India because our age-old culture and universal spiritual values have been truly depicted in it.

The *Mahābhārata* is one of the longest epic poems in the world with around one lakh *ślokas*. It is the work of great sage Veda Vyāsa who is also called Bādarāyaṇa. It is divided into eighteen sections or *parvas*. Through this great epic, Vyāsa brought religion and value system more closely to common people. The central theme of the work is '*Yato dharma Stato Jaya*' which means where there is *dharma*, there is victory. The ultimate triumph of good over evil is the underlying theme of the epic and the story in it is only a vehicle to convey eternal philosophical truths of the highest Veda. The *Gītā* which forms an important part of it can be considered as a treatise on ethics itself. The ethical ideals in the *Gītā* give us a clear picture about the development of Indian moral thought from its crude and rudimentary form in the Vedas to a very

fine and elevated position as in the *Gītā*. It synthesized both social and individual interests and arranges for and organizes the proper development of all aspects of man. Thus we see that while the Vedas are very sophisticated, prosaic and abstract, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata* form a popular 'Veda' and provide the simplest and most graphic introduction to Hindu thought, culture and philosophy.

4. The Paths of Yoga

According to Hinduism, there are four different paths on the spiritual journey. They are *jñānayoga*, *bhaktiyoga*, *karmayoga* and *rājayoga*. *jñānayoga* is the way of knowledge and is based on the realization that bondage is due to ignorance. The lack of discrimination is ignorance and therefore, knowledge has to be discriminatory, it must have an awareness of the distinction between the real and the unreal. This will lead to realization of oneness and perfection. This is *jñānayoga*.

Bhaktiyoga is the way of knowing God through intensity of feeling. The *bhaktimārga* is the way of pure love in which the object of love or devotion is not the finite or the limited, but the supreme. External worship, prayer, repeating of God's name, meditation are the stages of *bhakti* through which the devotee attains a realization in feeling of the essential oneness of everything. This is the most convenient and the most popular of all *yogas*.

Karmayoga is a way of action or work. A continuous doing of selfless work or constant practice of non-attachment in all actions of life enables a man to rise above his self and to have a feeling of oneness with everything.

Rājayoga is the way to realization by controlling the mind and body. It is the way of physical and mental discipline and is based on the presupposition that bondage is due to the distracting activities of body and the mind. *Rājayoga* enables *yogi* to acquire certain excellence and powers and finally leading to the realization of unity with the divine.

These are four different ways but they will lead to the same goal. If one follows any one of these paths with sincerity and earnestness he will be able to reach the goal. The followers of all the four paths have a common goal of merging with the supreme Reality. This leads to liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth and attainment of the highest spiritual state called *mokṣa*. *Mokṣa* is a final release from one's worldly conception of the self, the loosening of the shackles of experiential duality and re-establishment in one's own fundamental nature. The spiritual ways of all religions is only a preparation to arrive at this stage. Hinduism puts it in plain, simple and

unambiguous term. To what religion we belong is immaterial so long as we strive to reach this goal.

5. Summary

Among all the surviving customs, Hinduism is the longest surviving philosophical and religious custom in India. Hindu philosophy is an organized doctrine based on the mystical experiences of the sages and seers. The teachings of the Hindu philosophy are provided in the Vedas and *Upaniṣads*. Its glory is seen in the teachings of the Hindu *dharma*, the theory of *karma* and rebirth, the six *darśanas* and the four *yogas*. Hinduism which is a symbol of India's spiritual vision is based on the intuition of the oneness and wholeness of the supreme Spirit.

