

Theme 1A Religious figures and sacred texts (Part 1): Sources of authority - the origins of Hinduism

Key concepts

- The search for the origins of Hinduism has interested scholars for many years leading to much debate but little in terms of agreement. One reason is that the origin of the term Hinduism is very difficult to determine and raises many issues.
- Another problem in the search for the origins of Hinduism is that Hinduism has no founder; it also claims to have no beginning and to be timeless.
- The two main competing discourses on the origins of Hinduism are between those who favour the Indus Valley civilisation and those who say Hinduism was brought by the Aryans from central Asia.
- The Indus Valley civilisation was a Bronze Age culture dating from 2500 – 1500 BCE. A highly advanced urban culture with a society that had a wealthy middle class and a centralized government, it was centred around towns and cities with large populations.
- Very little is known about the way people actually lived within the Indus Valley civilisation, because the Indus Valley script cannot be understood or translated. Very little is known about Indus religious beliefs although there is some evidence to suggest a belief in life after death.
- The Aryans originally came from Central Asia. They first settled in the Punjab before gradually spreading southward and dominating northern India. They called themselves Arya, meaning noble ones, to differentiate themselves from the inhabitants of the Indus Valley. Although they brought the Iron Age to India, scholars believe they were illiterate, so their scriptures, the Vedas, were passed orally in the Sanskrit language from one generation to another.
- The central practice of the Vedic religion was Yajna, the fire sacrifice which was based upon making offerings to the devas (gods) by placing them in a fire. The origin of Vedic society can be traced to the Purusha Sukta in the Rig Veda which describes the creation of the universe by the devas by sacrificing the giant purusha or cosmic man. This is also the origin of the varna system.
- Both theories have their strengths and weaknesses, their supporters and doubters. The main problem with the Indus Valley theory is that the script remains undeciphered which means there is a lot of conjecture based on the archaeological evidence. There are also problems with the Aryan invasion theory. Many scholars refute that an invasion took place because there is an absence of archaeological evidence to support this view.

Key quotes

'Although there is an emphasis on personal spirituality, Hinduism's history is closely linked with social and political developments such as the rise and fall of different kingdoms and empires.' (Gavin Flood)

'There may be continuities between the Indus Valley civilisation and later Hinduism as suggested by the apparent emphasis on ritual bathing, sacrifice, and goddess worship, but ritual purity, sacrifice and an emphasis on fertility are common to other ancient religions.' (Gavin Flood)

'The upper castes are more similar to Europeans than to Asians; and upper castes are significantly more similar to Europeans than are lower castes.' (Michael Bamshad)

Key words

Aryans	urban	Indus Valley	Vedas	Devas
Hinduism	Sanskrit	Rig Veda	Yajna	varna
Purusha Sukta				

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

Some would argue that the origins of Hinduism can be found in the Indus Valley Civilisation.

Others would argue for the Aryan Invasion Theory.

However, some would argue that there is not enough conclusive evidence to support one theory over the other and that both traditions could have contributed to modern Hinduism.

Key questions

What are the origins of Hinduism?

What is the relationship between modern Hinduism and Indus Valley and Aryan traditions?

To what extent are the beliefs and practices of the Indus Valley rightly seen as the origins of Hinduism?