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Hinduism and Holy People

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highest levels of spiritual realization, and to have the power to guide others toward that realization. They are thus treated with respect and reverence. A person can be transformed merely by being in their presence through the experience of *darshan* (both seeing and being seen by a holy person), even as a person can be transformed by being in the presence of deity. Such holy people may be seen to have accrued spiritual power through the practice of meditation, moral purity, devotion, and/or asceticism. They may even be considered incarnations of the Transcendent, conceived in personal terms, or of some earlier holy person who has again taken birth. There is no central authority in Hinduism that would validate the status of such holy people; rather, they are deemed holy by the consensus of communities and individuals who encounter them and experience them as such.

The Diversity of Hinduism

The diversity in types of holy people reflects the diversity of forms of religiosity that fall under the umbrella of Hinduism. The term “Hindu” originally referred simply to the people on the other side of the Indus River, and hence to all those who lived in the geographic region of the Indian subcontinent, and only secondarily to their religious practices. The Hindu religion as it has grown up does not have a single founding figure, as many other religious traditions do, nor does it have a text at its center, as might be said of Judaism and Islam, for example. Even the image of a single tree with multiple branches cannot encompass this diversity, and instead Hinduism has been likened to a banyan tree with multiple trunks, each distinct but part of the larger whole (Lipner 2000). The paths to religious realization are multiple and differ considerably in Hinduism, and correspondingly so do the types of holy people who guide others on those paths. These holy people range from teachers of meditation to renouncers to great lovers of God and ecstatic saints, tantric practitioners, and moral exemplars.

Holiness in Hinduism can be said to be principally grounded in a Hindu understanding of reality, which takes full form in the Upanishads. According to this Hindu worldview, a oneness, or unity, underlies all manifest existence, and it is this Oneness, called *Brahman*, which is ultimately real. Yet all that we see and experience in this world—and many other worlds as well—is a manifestation of this One. These manifestations may be viewed as *maya*, or illusion, particularly when we assume that they, and not Brahman, are ultimately real, but they can also be viewed as myriad aspects of the One, which in its abundance takes form. The manifest world is then understood as the *lila*, or play of the One, both as drama and as an expression of playfulness. This One can be experienced through particular manifestations, and the gods and goddesses of Hinduism are understood to be such particular manifestations.

Hinduism and Holy People

In Hinduism, there are both a relatively large number and a wide array of types of people considered holy. Such people are deemed to be spiritually advanced, having reached the



Hindu swami in Jaipur, Rajasthan, India. (Corel Corp)

This Oneness is sometimes characterized as being fundamentally constituted of *sat-chit-ananda* (being, consciousness, and bliss), and whether it is finally personal (that is, relational and akin to monotheistic conceptions of God in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), or is finally impersonal, is debated within Hinduism. Ramanuja (1017–1137) and followers of *bhakti* (devotional Hinduism) argue the former, and Shankara (seventh and eighth centuries) and nondualist followers of Advaita Vedanta argue the latter. In the former view, human beings, though manifest, have a separate existence, making relationship with and love of the one God possible, while in the latter, the distinction between the human and the One is only finally appearance, with unity and dissolution in the One the goal. In either case, all persons share in this fundamental Oneness, and a relationship of loving devotion with, a transparency to, and/or an ability to lead others to realization of the real is the wellspring of holiness.

Holiness as Part of Human Life

The notion of the holy person is built into the Hindu understanding of the stages of human life. There are four life

stages for a man (traditionally excluding men of the fourth and lowest caste level, the *shudras*), including a final stage of renunciation in which one may choose to become a holy man, or *sadhu*. In the first of the four stages, a boy becomes a student, traditionally going to study with a guru, or teacher, and living a life of celibacy dedicated to education in both his social responsibilities and duties (his *dharma*) and spiritual liberation. The next stage of life is that of the householder. Initiated by marriage, this period in a man's life is the appropriate time for love and family, the pursuit of wealth, and service to the community. This stage is to be followed by the forest-dweller stage, during which a man gradually withdraws from involvement in the world to focus on spiritual concerns.

The fourth and final stage, not taken by many but held up as a social ideal, entails complete renunciation of one's previous life to become a *sannyasi* (renouncer) or *sadhu*. In doing so, a man ritually carries out his own funeral and dies to all that he was in the past to pursue a life of nonattachment devoted entirely to spiritual pursuit, and sometimes also to selfless service. In this way, holiness is a potentiality in all men (and arguably all people), though many may not choose to enter this final stage. Sannyasis or *sadhus* are highly respected members of society and supported by those in other stages of life, their holiness elevating the community at large. Men and (to a lesser extent) women may also become renouncers—*sadhus* or *sadhvi*, respectively—before reaching this last life stage, taking the much more radical step of renouncing the householder life for a life of religious dedication, generally as a member of a community of other renouncers under the guidance of a guru. These people, too, are considered holy and highly respected, though there is also sometimes an attendant social critique, particularly of young women who choose to take this step.

Holy People in the Development of Hinduism

In the development of Hinduism, holy people have played a key role in the earliest layers of the tradition. The first and most venerated of the texts of Hinduism, the Vedas, it is said, were revealed by holy men or seers, called *rishis*, some 3,500 years ago. These men were said to have been so spiritually advanced that they were able to know, to hear, the sacred sound of these texts revealing the nature and structure of reality. Indeed, this early literature is referred to as *shruti*, "that which is heard," while later religious texts outside the extended Vedic corpus, such as the epics of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, are said to be only *smriti*, or "remembered." The hymns of the Rig Veda also include references to other types of holy persons—long-haired ascetics and hermits. Those who carried out the ritual sacrifices of Brahmanic Hinduism, referred to in these early texts and still carried out today, were also considered in some sense

more holy than others. This hereditary class of priests, or brahmins, maintained the practices designed to preserve physical purity.

In the texts of the Upanishads (the final texts within the Vedic corpus, which date from the middle of the first millennium B.C.E.), a new type of holy person appears. Here renowned and respected teachers, such as Yajñavalkya (eighth century B.C.E.), expound on the nature of reality and on the nature of the *atman*, or the self, which in its true form is one with the souls of all and with the One Reality, Brahman. These Upanishadic teachers, too, are considered holy people, having reached true realization through meditative practice and renunciation and being able to teach others to do the same. Within the Upanishads, wise women, such as Gargi, are also mentioned, and it is clear that realization and the attendant holiness were not the province of one gender alone, particularly in light of rebirth across multiple lifetimes.

The time in which these Upanishadic teachers were active is also that of the Buddha (c. fifth century B.C.E.) and of Mahavira (trad. 599–527 B.C.E.), the last of the twenty-four *tirthankaras* (ford-makers) of the Jain tradition. This period is marked by a preponderance of ascetics (*shramanas*), studying with a wide array of teachers. What these teachers taught came not simply from intellectual understanding but rather from their own transformative realization during meditative practices, and within the Upanishads the need for the guidance of a guru is stressed—the guidance of a holy person who has already reached this state of realization is essential to achieving liberation from ignorance and the endless cycle of rebirth. The meditative practices that might lead to such realization must also be coupled with practices designed to cultivate moral and physical purity, and Patanjali (third century C.E.) detailed the elements for such a yoga, or path to realization and holiness, in his *Yogasutras*.

The epics of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* as well as the Upanishads refer frequently to sages inhabiting the forests, carrying out rituals, and working to achieve liberation. Such sages and others who dedicate their lives to the pursuit of spiritual liberation are said to acquire *tapas*, or heat, through their meditative and ascetic practices. This *tapas* may manifest itself as magical powers, or *siddhas*. The person may have psychic knowledge of others' thoughts and feelings or foreknowledge of events, or he may be able to affect the physical world or have power over the minds of others. *Nath* holy men (belonging to a sect arising around the twelfth century and associated with the god Shiva, who is himself identified with asceticism and yogic practice) are particularly known for having such magical powers and are said even to be able to achieve physical immortality through a combination of hatha yoga and tantric and alchemical practices.

But it is not only the Nathos who are said to have such powers arising out of their advanced spiritual state. Prescience is often attributed to ecstatic saintly devotees and gurus, as is the ability to transform physical substances. For example, a number of saintly people are reported to have picked up a handful of dirt in their ecstasy and offered it before a deity. When it was then distributed to worshippers as *prasada*, imbued with the presence and grace of the divine, what they tasted was the sweet confection normally offered. Others are said to appear in distant places while in meditation elsewhere and to spontaneously give off a perfume of sandalwood when emerging from meditative trance, or *samadhi*. The power to heal is also sometimes associated with holy persons. Such powers suggest a continuity between the physical and the spiritual and an understanding of holiness as a force that can profoundly affect the physical world.

The Bhagavad Gita (composed in the centuries surrounding the turn of the Common Era) is set in the midst of the epic *Mahabharata* and records a conversation between the warrior Arjuna and his charioteer, who happens to be Krishna (incarnation of Vishnu). Here Krishna lays out three major paths toward religious realization marking Hindu traditions. The path of knowledge, or *jnana yoga*, detailed in the Upanishads, is clearly one—a path of meditation and ensuing realization—yet there are also two others: the path of action, or *karma yoga*, and the path of devotion, or *bhakti yoga*. Those exemplary of the path of knowledge include the Upanishadic teachers and Shankara but also gurus such as Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Holy people of the path of action might include Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) and Vinobe Bhave (1895–1982), who lived lives of complete dedication to nonviolence and to actualizing truth, justice, and compassion in the world. Gandhi's movement of nonviolent resistance against British rule is well known. Vinobe Bhave worked to redistribute land to the landless by walking across India and inviting landowners to offer up a portion of their land. Both men acted out of explicitly religious motivations and lived very disciplined lives of self-sacrifice. They and others like them, who are able to work for a more just and compassionate society and to do so simply because it is the right thing to do, without personal egoistic attachment to the success or failure of their enterprise, embody a selflessness and power that also arises out of spiritual discipleship, and this spiritual depth is also recognized and revered within Hinduism.

The Bhagavad Gita also speaks of the path of devotion to the One, conceived of in very personal terms as God, such that one offers up all of one's actions in loving devotion, acting for God rather than self. Beginning in the sixth century of the Common Era, a broader devotional form of Hinduism emerged, first in South India and then sweeping up across

the subcontinent. This devotional path is characterized by a personal and loving relationship to the One Lord, experienced in particular forms ("with form," or *saguna*) such as Vishnu or Shiva, and later as Vishnu's incarnations, Krishna and Rama, as Devi or Goddess, or as the Lord who is beyond form ("without form," *nirguna*). Religious authority within the emerging devotional religious movements was based on religious experience rather than heredity, and consequently women and men of all levels of caste were recognized as leaders.

Within these communities, particular individuals emerged who composed songs of overwhelming devotion and who could lead others into an ever-deepening relationship with the Lord. They were sometimes called simply *bhaktas*, or "devotees"—a term also used more widely for all who followed the path of bhakti, or devotion—and sometimes called *sants* (those who know the truth)—a term used more often for devotees of the *nirgun* Lord but also more widely for all those who belong to the community of truth, or *satsang*, of which all devotees are members. Like the saints of Christian tradition, elaborate hagiographic texts developed recording their inspirational life stories, and the term "saint" has been used to describe them, though miracles are not necessarily associated with them, nor are they awarded sainthood by an external authority as is the case in Christianity. Such saints often appear very human in their life struggles and their longing for God, and later devotees come to love and identify with them. Institutionalized religious groups sometimes arise around these figures. The founder of the Sikh tradition, Nanak (1469–1539), was among the fifteenth-century saints devoted to the *nirgun* Lord in North India. These saints use the language of human love—of parents for children, children for parents, friends, and lovers—to speak of the intimate relationship between human and divine, and particular styles of devotion are associated with each saint. Later devotees have continued to compose songs in their names and have sometimes experienced saints of the past as present, such that these saints continue to serve as gurus.

These figures are considered holy because of their supreme devotion to God and their ability to lead others into similar devotion, and some among their number have even been considered incarnations of the divine. The fifteenth-century saints Chaitanya, whose followers formed the Gaudiya *sampraday*, or tradition, and Vallabhacharya, whose followers formed the Pushtimarg (the two major strands of Krishna devotion), were both considered incarnations of Krishna. Others, too, have received similar appellations. Today the internationally renowned guru Anandamayi Ma is considered an incarnation of the Goddess by her followers. Holiness can also then reflect divine incarnation or a transparency to the divine so that those who encounter such individuals experience the divine directly.

One final category of holy people within Hinduism are transgressive in their behavior, exhibiting a kind of "madness" that also speaks of holiness and divinity. The Bauls of Bengal are an ideal example of this type of holy person, reflecting the indwelling divine by acting outside of the boundaries of social and religious normative behavior. Individual saints such as Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Yogeshvari Devi were known for being overtaken by madness in the overwhelming experience of the divine. Tantric adepts may also fall within this range of transgressive holiness, transcending notions of purity and impurity in striving to overcome duality through the ritual partaking of impure substances and engaging in ritualized sexual intercourse, transmuting desire into spiritual bliss and power. Tantric practices are a part of the devotional path of the Bauls and the Sahajiyā Vaishnava devotees of Krishna, and were undertaken by Naths and Buddhists as well as devotees of the Goddess. Seemingly mad ecstatic saints and tantric adepts, too, are recognized holy persons within the Hindu fold, offering a vision of the holiness of all reality and the wild playfulness of the divine.

Holy people in Hinduism thus take myriad forms, with all people potentially holy, though not all achieving this status. Indeed, holiness is as boundless as the One that underlies all that is, and as diverse as the paths to realization of that One.

—Nancy M. Martin

See also: Aesthetics and Holy People; Ascetics as Holy People; Attributes of Holy People; Aurobindo Ghose; Authority of Holy People; Bauls; Bhakti Saints; Bhave, Vinoba; Chaitanya, Krishna; Child Prodigies; Death; Demons and Monsters; Devotion; Gandhi, Mohandas K.; Gargi; Gender and Holy People; Gods on Earth; Hagiography; Hermits; Insanity; Krishna; Legendary Holy People; Meditation and Holy People; Miracles; Models; Monasticism and Holy People; Morality and Holy People; Mysticism and Holy People; Naths; Patanjali; Patriotism and Holy People; Purity and Pollution; Ramakrishna Paramahansa; Ramanuja; Recognition; Reform and Reaction; Reincarnation; Rishis; Ritual; Rulers as Holy People; Sadhus; Sages; Scholars as Holy People; Sexuality and Holy People; Shankara; Shramanas; Suffering and Holy People; Tapas; Teachers as Holy People; Tolerance and Intolerance; Veneration of Holy People; Violence and Nonviolence; Virashaivas; Vivekananda; War, Peace, and Holy People; Wealth and Poverty

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