

Hinduism

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About 80 percent of India's population regard themselves as Hindus and 30 million more Hindus live outside of India. There are a total of 900 million Hindus worldwide, making **Hinduism** the third largest religion (after Christianity and Islam).

The term "Hinduism" includes numerous traditions, which are closely related and share common themes but do not constitute a unified set of beliefs or practices.

Hinduism is thought to have gotten its name from the Persian word hindu, meaning "river," used by outsiders to describe the people of the Indus River Valley. Hindus themselves refer to their religion as sanatama dharma, "eternal religion," and varnasramadharma, a word emphasizing the fulfillment of duties (dharma) appropriate to one's class (varna) and stage of life (asrama).

Hinduism has no founder or date of origin. The authors and dates of most Hindu sacred texts are unknown. Scholars describe modern Hinduism as the product of religious development in India that spans nearly four thousand years, making it the oldest surviving world religion. Indeed, as seen above, Hindus regard their religion as eternal (sanatama).

Hinduism is not a homogeneous, organized system. Many Hindus are devoted followers of Shiva or Vishnu, whom they regard as the only true God, while others look inward to the divine Self (atman). But most recognize the existence of Brahman, the unifying principle and Supreme Reality behind all that is.

Most Hindus respect the authority of the Vedas (a collection of ancient sacred texts) and the Brahmins (the priestly class), but some reject one or both of

these authorities. Hindu religious life might take the form of devotion to God or gods, the duties of family life, or concentrated meditation. Given all this diversity, it is important to take care when generalizing about "Hinduism" or "Hindu beliefs."

The first sacred writings of Hinduism, which date to about 1200 BCE, were primarily concerned with the ritual sacrifices associated with numerous gods who represented forces of nature. A more philosophical focus began to develop around 700 BCE, with the Upanishads and development of the Vedanta philosophy. Around 500 BCE, several new belief systems sprouted from Hinduism, most significantly Buddhism and Jainism.

In the 20th century, Hinduism began to gain popularity in the West. Its different worldview and its tolerance for diversity in belief made it an attractive alternative to traditional Western religion. Although there are relatively few western converts to Hinduism, Hindu thought has influenced the West indirectly by way of religious movements like Hare Krishna and New Age, and even more so through the incorporation of Indian beliefs and practices (such as the chakra system and yoga) in books and seminars on health and spirituality.

Sources

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Hindu Beliefs

Hinduism embraces a diversity of beliefs, a fact that can be initially confusing to Westerners accustomed to creeds, confessions, and carefully-worded belief statements. One can believe a variety of things about God, the universe and the path to liberation and still be considered a Hindu. Perhaps the most well-known Hindu saying about religion is: "Truth is one; sages call it by different names."

Still, there are some beliefs common to nearly all forms of Hinduism that can be identified, and these basic beliefs are generally regarded as boundaries outside of which lies either heresy or non-Hindu religion. These fundamental Hindu beliefs include: the authority of the Vedas (the oldest Indian sacred texts) and the Brahmins (priests); the existence of an enduring soul that transmigrates from one body to another at death (reincarnation); and the law of karma that determines one's destiny both in this life and the next.

Note that a specific belief about God or gods is not considered one of the essentials in Hinduism, which is a major difference between it and monotheistic religions like Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Sikhism. Most Hindus are devoted followers of one of the principal gods Shiva, Vishnu or Shakti, and often others besides, yet all these are regarded as manifestations of a single Reality.

Hindu Branches, Sects & Schools

What are the sects and denominations in Hinduism?

Modern Hinduism is divided into four major devotional sects: Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism, and Smartism. Vaishnavism and Shaivism are generally regarded as monotheistic sects: each believes in one supreme God, who is identified as Vishnu in Vaishnavism and Shiva in Shaivism.

Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism are the most prevalent Hindu sects; among these, Vaishnavism is the largest. The devotional sects do not generally regard other sects as rivals, and each sect freely borrows beliefs and practices from others.

In addition to the four theistic sects, there are six schools of Vedantic philosophy within Hinduism. These schools tend to emphasize Ultimate Reality as Brahman, the great "Self" who must be realized to attain liberation.

The six Astika (orthodox; accepting the authority of the Vedas) schools of Hindu philosophy are Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Yoga, Purva Mimamsa (also called just 'Mimamsa'), and Uttara Mimamsa (also called 'Vedanta'). Of these six, three continue to be influential in Hinduism: Purva Mimamsa, Yoga, and Vedanta.

Click on the links below for more information on each of these sects and schools of Hinduism.

Four Theistic/Devotional Sects of Hinduism

- Vaishnavism
- Shaivism
- Shaktism
- Smartism

Six Philosophical Schools of Hinduism

- Yoga
- Purva Mimamsa (Mimamsa)
- Uttara Mimamsa (Vedanta)
- Nyaya
- Vaisheshika
- Samkhya

Hindu History

What is the story of the Hindu faith?

The history of Hinduism is unique among the world religions in that it has no founder or date of origin. While most major religions derive from new ideas taught by a charismatic leader, Hinduism is simply the religion of the people of India, which has gradually developed over four thousand years. The origins and authors of its sacred texts are largely unknown.

Although today's Hinduism differs significantly from earlier forms of Indian religion, its roots date back as far as 2000 BC, making it one of the oldest surviving religions. Because of its age, the early history of Hinduism is unclear. The most ancient writings have yet to be deciphered, so for the earliest periods scholars must rely on educated guesses based on archaeology and contemporary texts.

In the last few decades, the history of India's religion has also become a matter of political controversy. The history of any nation (or individual) is an important part of its self-identity, and this is especially true of India, which so recently gained independence after centuries of colonial rule. The controversy over India's history centers on the origin of the Aryan culture, as we shall see in more detail below.

The Hindu religion: past and present

The Indus River Valley Civilization

In 1921, archaeologists uncovered evidence of an ancient civilization along the Indus River, which today runs through northwest India into Pakistan. The so-called Indus Valley civilization (also known as the "Harappan civilization" for one of its chief cities) is thought to have originated as early as 7000 BC

and to have reached its height between 2300 to 2000 BC, at which point it encompassed over 750,000 square miles and traded with Mesopotamia.

Some writings of this period have been discovered, but unfortunately in such small amounts that they have yet to be deciphered. Knowledge of this great civilization's religion must therefore be based on physical evidence alone. Baths have been found that may indicate ritual bathing, a component of modern Hinduism. Some altar-like structures may be evidence of animal sacrifice, and terracotta figures may represent deities. An important seal features a horned figure surrounded by animals, which some conjecture is a prototype of Shiva, but it could be a bull parallel to that found on Mesopotamian seals.

The Controversial Aryans

The Indus Valley culture began to decline around 1800 BC, due possibly to flooding or drought. Until recently, it was held that the Aryans (an Indo-European culture whose name comes from the Sanskrit for "noble") [3] invaded India and Iran at this time. According to this hypothesis, both the Sanskrit language and the Vedic religion foundational to Hinduism is attributable to the Aryans and their descendants. The original inhabitants of the Indus Valley are thought to have had a Dravidian language and culture, which became subordinate to that of the invading peoples.

Proponents of this hypothesis point to similarities between Zoroastrianism (the ancient religion of Iran) and the Vedic religion of ancient India, as well as similar finds in ancient cemeteries in modern-day India and Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In addition, no trace of horses or chariots have been found in the remains of the Indus Valley culture, but were central to Aryan military and ritual life.

Since the 1980s, this "Aryan Invasion" hypothesis has been strongly challenged as a myth propagated by colonial scholars who sought to reinforce

the idea that anything valuable in India must have come from elsewhere. Critics of the hypothesis note that there is lack of evidence of any conquest, among other historical and archaeological problems. One alternative hypothesis is explained by Encyclopædia Britannica as follows:

Between about 2000 and 1500 BCE not an invasion but a continuing spread of Indo-Aryan speakers occurred, carrying them much farther into India, to the east and south, and coinciding with a growing cultural interaction between the native population and the new arrivals. From these processes a new cultural synthesis emerged, giving rise by the end of the 2nd millennium to the conscious expressions of Aryan ethnicity found in the Rigveda, particularly in the later hymns.[4] The 19th-century Aryan Invasion theory has generally been abandoned as inaccurate, but most scholars do not reject the notion of some outside influence on the Indus Valley civilization. For many, it is a political issue as well as a historical one, with the original theory is regarded as racist and offensive. BBC Religion & Ethics summarizes the matter this way:

Many people argue that there is now evidence to show that Muller [original proponent of the hypothesis], and those who followed him, were wrong. Others, however, believe that the case against the Aryan invasion theory is far from conclusive.

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- "Hinduism: History: Aryan Invasion Theory" - BBC Religion & Ethics

Hindu Rituals & Practices

What are the rituals and practices of Hinduism?

The religious life of many Hindus is focused on devotion to God (perceived as Brahman, Shiva, Vishnu, or Shakti) or several gods. This devotion usually takes the form of rituals and practices associated with sculptures and images of gods in home shrines.

More philosophically-minded Hindus ignore the gods altogether and seek Realization of the Self through intense meditation. Still others focus primarily on fulfilling the social and moral duties appropriate to their position in life.

These various approaches are regarded as equally valid, and in fact are formally recognized as three paths (margas) to liberation: bhaktimarga (the path of devotion), jnanamarga (the path of knowledge or philosophy), and karmamarga (the path of works and action).

Hindu religious stages

Hindu religious practices center on the importance of fulfilling the duties associated both with one's social position and one's stage of life. With regard to the latter, traditional Hindus are expected to pass through four stages (ashramas) over the course of their life:

- Brahmacharya, which takes place during the school years, is focused on acquiring knowledge and developing character;
- Grihastha, the middle years, is focused on worldly pursuits and pleasures such

as marriage, family and career;

- Vanaprastha, when one's children reach adulthood, is a time of increased focus on spiritual things; and

- Sannghas, in the last years of life, one may abandon the world entirely for a life of contemplation.

All stages of life for the Hindu, however, involve religious rituals and practices. Some of the major Hindu practices are described in the articles below.

Hindu religious practices

Ayurveda

Ayurveda is an ancient Hindu system of medicine and healing that has found new popularity in the west today.

Hatha Yoga

Outside of Hindu culture, the word "yoga" is usually understood to refer to the practice of meditative movement, or Hatha Yoga. However, Hatha Yoga is only one part of the Hindu traditions of Yoga and Tantra. It is one of the paths leading to the ultimate goal of Raja Yoga, or contemplation of the One Reality.

Kundalini Yoga

Kundalini yoga is a tantric form of yoga focused on awakening the kundalini, the latent psychic energy that lies at the base of the spine, and making it rise through the seven chakras to the top of the spine.

Namaste Greeting

The gesture (or mudra) of namaste is a simple act made by bringing together both palms of the hands before the heart, and lightly bowing the head. In the simplest of terms it is accepted as a humble greeting straight from the heart and reciprocated accordingly.

Puja (Pooja)

Puja is a religious ritual which some Hindus perform every morning after bathing and dressing but prior to taking any food or drink. Puja is seen as a way of relating humans to the domain and actions of the divine, and can be performed for anything considered divine, from Vishnu to a holy tree.

The Sadhu (Holy Man)

Some Hindus choose to leave their homes and dedicate their lives to spiritual disciplines. They renounce their possessions and devote themselves to a particular god and/or meditation, yoga and spiritual discussion. These are called sadhus, or holy men.

Hindu Sacred Texts

What is Hinduism's Scripture?

The sacred texts of Hinduism fall into one of two categories: sruti ("heard") or smriti ("remembered"). Sruti scriptures are considered divinely inspired and fully authoritative for belief and practice, while smriti are recognized as the products of the minds of the great sages.

However, smriti texts often carry almost as much authority as sruti, and the religion of the older sruti texts bears little resemblance to modern Hinduism and is largely unknown to the average Hindu.

Nevertheless, the sruti are still held in very high regard and portions are still memorized for religious merit. The only texts regarded as sruti are the Vedas, which include both ancient sacrificial formulas and the more philosophical Upanishads.

Smṛti texts help explain śruti scriptures and make them meaningful to the general population. Despite their lesser authority, they are generally the most recent, the most beloved by the Hindu population, and the most representative of actual Hindu beliefs and practices.

Smṛti texts include the Itihāsas (History or Epics), Purānas (Mythology), Dharma Śāstras (Law Codes), Āgamas and Tantras (Sectarian Scriptures), and Darśhanas (Manuals of Philosophy).

Vedas

Samhitas | Brahmanas | Aranyakas | Aranyakas | Upanishads

Itihāsas

Mahabharata | Ramayana | Puranas

Hindu Holidays & Festivals

It has been said that Hindus have a holiday for every day of the year, but even that may be an understatement! Exactly how many Hindu festivals are celebrated is not known, but one scholar of Hinduism has listed more than a thousand different Hindu festivals. {1}

As in most ancient religions, many of the Hindu holidays are based on the cycle of nature. They mark the change of seasons, celebrate the harvest, and encourage fertility of the land. Others are dedicated to a particular deity, such as Shiva or Ganesh.

Still other popular holidays commemorate events in the lives of Rama or Krishna. In addition to the major Hindu festivals that are celebrated throughout India, many regional festivals are also held in honor of various deities.

The sacred days of Hinduism

In general, Hindu festivals "are intended to purify, avert malicious influences, renew society, bridge over critical moments, and stimulate or resuscitate the vital powers of nature." They include a wide variety of rituals, including worship, prayer, processions, magical acts, music, dancing, lovemaking, eating, drinking, and feeding the poor. {2}

Major festivals likely to be observed by most Hindus are:

Holi

Holi (also called Holaka or Phagwa) is an annual festival celebrated on the day after the full moon in the Hindu month of Phalguna (early March). It celebrates spring, commemorates various events in Hindu mythology and is time of disregarding social norms and indulging in general merrymaking. Holi is probably the least religious of Hindu holidays.

Diwali

Diwali, from the Sanskrit word Dīpāvali, meaning "row of lights" is a Hindu festival of lights lasting five days. For many Hindus, Diwali is also New Year's Eve. Diwali is held on the final day of the Vikram calendar, a type of Hindu calendar followed by North Indians.

Mahashivaratri (Shiva Ratri)

Mahashivaratri (also called Shiva Ratri) is the Great Festival of Shiva. It is held on the 14th day of the dark half of the lunar month of Phalguna. Mahashivaratri is especially important to Saivites (devotees of Shiva), but it is celebrated by most Hindus. Other sacred days:

- Rama Navami - birthday of Lord Rama (April)
- Krishna Jayanti - birthday of Lord Krishna (July-August)
- Raksābandhana - renewing bonds between brothers and sisters (July-August)

- Kumbh Mela - pilgrimage every 12 years to four cities in India (July-August; last one 2003)
- Ganesha-Chaturthi (Ganesha Utsava) - festival of Ganesh (August-September)
- Dassera - victory of Rama over demon king Ravana (September-October)
- Navaratri - festival of Shakti (in Bengal) or Rama's victory over Ravana (South India) (September-October)

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