

## **Hinduism**

Hinduism is one of the world's largest religion with million followers around the world. It began in India. Presently over two-thirds of its followers live in India. It is believed that Hinduism goes back over five thousand years and is the oldest of all religions.

According to Hindu doctrine, the ideal life consists of four stages:

1. The period of discipline and education
2. The life of the householder and active worker
3. The retreat for the loosening of the bonds
4. The life of the hermit, preparing for death and union with God. In homes where Hinduism is practiced there is generally a room or corner of a room for worship called puja where there are pictures of a statue of a particular God.

Hinduism recognizes thousands of lesser Gods that all come under the umbrella of the one God Brahman. Hinduism also recognizes the divine avatars, God-realized beings living on earth. The two main avatars are Rama and Krishna.

Rama lived over twenty thousand years ago. (How interesting to me that "Rama" is a lot like "Ra" the Egyptian God!). Krishna lived around 5000 BC There have been other avatars but these two are the most well-known and highly revered. Sai Baba, who is now living in India is the most popular avatar since Krishna. Sai Baba, is able to reach more people as transportation and communication is easier than in Krishna's lifetime.

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## **HINDUISM**

- Encyclopedia Britannica

Hinduism - the beliefs, practices, and socio-religious institutions of the Hindus (originally, the inhabitants of the land of the Indus River). Introduced in about 1830 by British writers, the term properly denotes the Indian civilization of approximately the last 2,000 years, which evolved from Vedism, the religion of the Indo-European peoples who settled in India in the last centuries of the 2nd millennium BC.

Because it integrates a variety of elements, Hinduism constitutes a complex but largely continuous whole and has religious, social, economic, literary, and artistic aspects. As a religion, Hinduism is a composite of diverse doctrines, cults, and ways of life.

General nature and characteristic features

The spectrum that ranges from the level of popular Hindu belief to that of elaborate ritual technique and philosophical speculation is very broad and is attended by many stages of transition and varieties of coexistence. Magic rites, animal worship, and belief in demons are often combined with the worship of more or less personal gods or with mysticism,

asceticism, and abstract and profound theological systems or esoteric doctrines. The worship of local deities does not exclude the belief in pan-Indian higher gods or even in a single high God. Such local deities are also frequently looked upon as manifestations of a high God.

In principle, Hinduism incorporates all forms of belief and worship without necessitating the selection or elimination of any. It is axiomatic that no religious idea in India ever dies or is superseded--it is merely combined with the new ideas that arise in response to it. Hindus are inclined to revere the divine in every manifestation, whatever it may be, and are doctrinally tolerant, allowing others--including both Hindus and non-Hindus--whatever beliefs suit them best.

A Hindu may embrace a non-Hindu religion without ceasing to be a Hindu, and because Hindus are disposed to think synthetically and to regard other forms of worship, strange gods, and divergent doctrines as inadequate rather than wrong or objectionable, they tend to believe that the highest divine powers complement one another. Few religious ideas are considered to be irreconcilable. The core of religion does not depend on the existence or nonexistence of God or on whether there is one god or many. Because religious truth is said to transcend all verbal definition, it is not conceived in dogmatic terms. Moreover, the tendency of Hindus to distinguish themselves from others on the basis of practice (orthopraxy) rather than doctrine (orthodoxy) further de-emphasizes doctrinal differences.

Hinduism is both a civilization and a congregation of religions; it has neither a beginning or founder, nor a central authority, hierarchy, or organization. Every attempt at a specific definition of Hinduism has proved unsatisfactory in one way or another, the more so because the finest scholars of Hinduism, including Hindus themselves, have emphasized different aspects of the whole.

#### Common characteristics of Hindu belief

Nevertheless, it is possible to discern among the myriad forms of Hinduism several common characteristics of belief and practice.

#### Authority of the Veda and the Brahman class

Perhaps the defining characteristic of Hindu belief is the recognition of the Veda, the most ancient body of religious literature, as an absolute authority revealing fundamental and unassailable truth. At the same time, however, its content has long been practically unknown to most Hindus, and it is seldom drawn upon for literal information or advice.

Still, it is venerated from a distance by every traditional Hindu, and those Indians who reject its authority (such as Buddhists and Jains) are regarded as unfaithful to their tradition. The Veda is also regarded as the basis of all the later Shastraic texts used in Hindu doctrine and practice. Parts of the Veda are still quoted in essential Hindu rituals, and it is the source of many enduring patterns of Hindu thought.

Also characteristic of Hinduism is the belief in the power of the Brahmins, a priestly class possessing spiritual supremacy by birth. As special manifestations of religious power and as bearers and teachers of the Veda, Brahmins are considered to represent the ideal of ritual purity and social prestige.

#### Doctrine of atman-brahman

Hindus believe in an uncreated, eternal, infinite, transcendent, and all-embracing principle, which, "comprising in itself being and non-being," is the sole reality, the ultimate cause and foundation, source, and goal of all existence. This ultimate reality is called brahman. As the All, brahman causes the universe and all beings to emanate from itself, transforms itself into the universe, or assumes its appearance. Brahman is in all things and is the Self (atman) of all living beings. Brahman is the creator, preserver, or transformer and reabsorber of everything. Although it is Being in itself, without attributes and qualities and hence impersonal, it may also be conceived of as a personal high God, usually as Vishnu (Visnu) or Siva. This fundamental belief in and the essentially religious search for ultimate reality--i.e., the One that is the All--have continued almost unaltered for more than 30 centuries and have been the central focus of India's spiritual life.

#### Ahimsa: non-injury

A further characteristic of Hinduism is the ideal of ahimsa. Ahimsa, "non-injury" or the absence of the desire to harm, is regarded by Indian thinkers as one of the keystones of their ethics. Historically, ahimsa is unrelated to vegetarianism; in ancient India, killing people in war or in capital punishment and killing animals in Vedic sacrifices were acceptable to many people who for other reasons refrained from eating meat. However, the two movements, ahimsa and vegetarianism, reinforced one another through the common concept of the disinclination to kill and eat animals, and together they contributed to the growing importance of the protection and veneration of the cow, which gives food without having to be killed. Neither ahimsa nor vegetarianism ever found full acceptance. Even today, many Hindus eat beef, and nonviolence (as the ideal of ahimsa is often translated) has never been a notable characteristic of Hindu behaviour.

#### Doctrines of transmigration and karma

Hindus generally accept the doctrine of transmigration and rebirth and the complementary belief in karma, or previous acts as the factor that determines the condition into which a being, after a stay in heaven or hell, is reborn in one form or another. The whole process of rebirths is called samsara. Any earthly process is viewed as cyclic, and all worldly existence is subject to the cycle. Samsara has no beginning and, in most cases, no end; it is not a cycle of progress or a process of purification but a matter of perpetual attachment. Karma, acting like a clockwork that, while running down, always winds itself up, binds the atmans (selves) of beings to the world and compels them to go through an endless series of births and deaths. This belief is indissolubly connected with the traditional Indian views of society and earthly life, and any social interaction (particularly those involving sex or food) results in the mutual exchange of

good and bad karma. It has given rise to the belief that any misfortune is the effect of karma, or one's own deeds, and to the conviction that the course of world history is conditioned by collective karma.

Such doctrines encourage the view that mundane life is not true existence and that human endeavour should be directed toward a permanent interruption of the mechanism of karma and transmigration--that is, toward final emancipation (moksha), toward escaping forever from the impermanence that is an inescapable feature of mundane existence. In this view the only goal is the one permanent and eternal principle: the One, God, brahman, which is totally opposite to any phenomenal existence. Anyone who has not fully realized that his being is identical with brahman is thus seen as deluded. The only possible solution consists in the realization that the kernel of human personality (atman) really is brahman and that it is their attachment to worldly objects that prevents people from reaching salvation and eternal peace. (Hindus sometimes use the largely Buddhist term nirvana to describe this state.)

### Concepts of istadevata and Trimurti

Although those Hindus who particularly worship either Vishnu or Siva generally consider one or the other as their "favourite god" (istadevata) and as the Lord (Isana) and Brahman in its personal aspect, Vishnu is often regarded as a special manifestation of the preservative aspect of the Supreme and Siva as that of the destructive function. Another deity, Brahma, the creator, remains in the background as a demiurge. These three great figures (Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva) constitute the so-called Hindu Trinity (Trimurti, "the One or Whole with Three Forms"). This conception attempts to synthesize and harmonize the conviction that the Supreme Power is singular with the plurality of gods in daily religious worship. Although the concept of the Trimurti assigns a position of special importance to some great gods, it never has become a living element in the religion of the people. Moreover, Brahma has had no major cult since ancient times, and many Hindus worship neither Siva nor Vishnu but one or more of the innumerable other Hindu gods.

### Ashramas: the four stages of life

In the West, the so-called life-negating aspects of Hinduism have often been overemphasized. The polarity of asceticism and sensuality, which assumed the form of a conflict between the aspiration to liberation and the heartfelt desire to have descendants and continue earthly life, manifested itself in Hindu social life as the tension between the different goals and stages of life.

The relative value of an active life and the performance of meritorious works (pravrtti) as opposed to the renunciation of all worldly interests and activity (nivrtti) was a much-debated issue. While one-sided religious and philosophical works, such as the Upanishads, placed emphasis on renunciation, the dharma texts argued that the householder who maintains his sacred fire, procreates children, and performs his ritual duties well also earns religious merit.

Nearly 2,000 years ago, these dharma texts elaborated the social doctrine of the four ashramas (stages of life). This concept is an attempt at harmonizing the conflicting tendencies of Hinduism into one system. It held that a member of the three higher classes should first become a chaste student (brahmachari); then become a married householder (grihastha), discharging his debts to his ancestors by begetting sons and to the gods by sacrificing; then retire (as a vanaprastha), with or without his wife, to the forest to devote himself to spiritual contemplation; and finally, but not mandatorily, become a homeless wandering ascetic (sannyasin). The situation of the forest dweller was always a delicate compromise that remained problematic on the mythological level and was often omitted or rejected in practical life.

Although the status of a householder was often extolled, and some authorities, regarding studentship as a mere preparation, went so far as to brand the other stages as inferior, there were always people who became wandering ascetics immediately after studentship. Theorists were inclined to reconcile the divergent views and practices by allowing the ascetic way of life to those who are, owing to the effects of restrained conduct in former lives, entirely free from worldly desire, even if they had not gone through the traditional prior stages.

### Three margas: paths to salvation

Hindus disagree about the way (marga) to final emancipation (moksha). Three paths to salvation (variously valued but nonexclusive) are presented in an extremely influential religious text, the Bhagavadgita ("Song of the Lord"; c. 200 BC), according to which it is not acts themselves but the desire for their results that produces karma and thus attachment. These three ways to salvation are (1) the karma-marga ("the path of duties"), the disinterested discharge of ritual and social obligations; (2) the jnana-marga ("the path of knowledge"), the use of meditative concentration preceded by a long and systematic ethical and contemplative training, yoga, to gain a supra-intellectual insight into one's identity with brahman; and (3) the bhakti-marga ("the path of devotion"), the devotion to a personal God. These ways are regarded as suited to various types of people.

Although the search for moksha has never been the goal of more than a small minority of Hindus, liberation was a religious ideal that affected all lives. Moksha determined not only the hierarchical values of Indian social institutions and religious doctrines and practices but also the function of Indian philosophy, which is to discuss what one must do to find true fulfillment and what one has to realize, by direct experience, in order to escape from samsara (bondage) and obtain spiritual freedom. While those who have not been reached by formal Indian philosophy have only vague ideas about the doctrines of karma and moksha, in semipopular milieus these doctrines gave rise to much speculation.

For the ordinary Hindu, the main aim of worldly life lies in conforming to social and ritual duties, to the traditional rules of conduct for one's caste, family, and profession. Such requirements constitute an individual's dharma (law and duties), one's own part of the broader stability, law, order, and fundamental equilibrium in the cosmos, nature, and

society. Sanatana (traditional) dharma--a term used by Hindus to denote their own religion--is a close approximation to "religious practices" in the West.

This traditional dharma applies theoretically to all Hindus, but it is superseded by the more particular dharmas that are appropriate to each of the four major varnas, or classes of society: Brahmans (priests), Ksatriyas (warrior kings), Vaisyas (the common people), and Sudras (servants). These four rather abstract categories are further superseded by the more practically applicable dharmas appropriate to each of the thousands of particular castes (jatis). Thus, religion for Hindus is mainly a tradition and a heritage, a way of life and a mode of thought. In practice, it is the right application of methods for securing both welfare in this life and a good condition in the hereafter.

### The history of Hinduism

The history of Hinduism began in India about 1500 BC. Although its literature can be traced only to before 1000 BC, evidence of Hinduism's earlier antecedents is derived from archaeology, comparative philology, and comparative religion.

### Sources of Hinduism

#### Indo-European sources

The earliest literary source for the history of Hinduism is the Rigveda (Rgveda), the hymns of which were chiefly composed during the last two or three centuries of the 2nd millennium BC. The religious life reflected in this text is not that of Hinduism but of an earlier sacrificial religious system, generally known as Brahmanism or Vedism, which developed in India among Aryan invaders. This branch of a related group of nomadic and seminomadic tribal peoples originally inhabiting the steppe country of southern Russia and Central Asia brought with them the horse and chariot and the Sanskrit language. Other branches of these peoples penetrated into Europe, bringing with them Indo-European languages that developed into the chief language groups now spoken there.

Before they entered the Indian subcontinent (c. 1500 BC), the Aryans were in close contact with the ancestors of the Iranians, as evidenced by similarities between Sanskrit and the earliest surviving Iranian languages. Thus, the religion of the Rigveda contains elements from three evolutionary strata: an early element common to most of the Indo-European tribes; a later element held in common with the early Iranians; and an element acquired in the Indian subcontinent itself, after the main Aryan migrations. Hinduism arose from the continued accretion of further elements derived from the original non-Aryan inhabitants, from outside sources, and from the geniuses of individual reformers at all periods.

Hinduism has a few direct survivals from its Indo-European heritage. Some of the rituals of the Hindu wedding ceremony, notably the circumambulation of the sacred fire and the cult of the domestic fire itself, have their roots in the remote Indo-European past. The same is probably true of the custom of cremation and some aspects of the ancestor cult.

The Rigveda contains many other Indo-European elements, such as the worship of male sky gods with sacrifices and the existence of the old sky god Dyaus, whose name is cognate with those of the classical Zeus of Greece and Jupiter of Rome ("Father Jove"). The Vedic heaven, the "world of the fathers," resembled the Germanic Valhalla and seems also to be an Indo-European inheritance.

#### Indo-Iranian sources

The Indo-Iranian element in later Hinduism is chiefly found in the initiatory ceremony (upanayana) performed by boys of the three upper classes, a rite both in Hinduism and in Zoroastrianism that involves the tying of a sacred cord. The Vedic god Varuna, now an unimportant sea god, appears in the Rigveda as sharing many features of the Zoroastrian Ahura Mazda ("Wise Lord"); the hallucinogenic sacred drink soma corresponds to the sacred haoma of Zoroastrianism. (See Zoroastrianism.)

#### Indigenous sources

Even in the earlier parts of the Rigveda the religion had already acquired numerous specifically Indian features. Some of the chief gods, for example, have no clear Indo-European or Indo-Iranian counterparts. Although some of the new features may have evolved entirely within the Aryan framework, it is generally presumed that many of them stem from the influence of the indigenous inhabitants. The Vedic Aryans may never have been in direct contact with the civilization of the Indus Valley in its prime, but the religion of the valley's culture undoubtedly influenced them.

#### Non-Indo-European sources

##### The Dravidian hypothesis

Features of Hinduism that cannot be traced to the Rigveda are sometimes ascribed to the influence of the original inhabitants, who are often vaguely and incorrectly referred to as "Dravidians." The ruling classes of the Harappa culture (c. 2500-1700 BC), or the Indus civilization, may have spoken a Dravidian language, but as long as their script remains undeciphered this cannot be proved. Moreover, the presence of Dravidian speakers throughout the whole subcontinent at any time in history is not attested.

The Mediterranean racial type, to which most modern higher-caste Dravidian speakers belong, is widespread throughout India; but it cannot be proved that all people of this type originally spoke Dravidian languages or that all followed the same culture. Equally or more widely spread in South and Southeast Asia is the Proto-Australoid racial type, the purest members of which in India are the tribal peoples of the centre and the south, many of whom speak languages of the Austric family. Thus, although many aspects of Hinduism are traceable to non-Aryan influence, not all of these aspects are borrowed from "Dravidians." In the 20th century the term Dravidian generally refers to a family of languages and not to an ethnic group.

## Other sources

The Central Asian nomads who entered India in the two centuries before and after the beginning of the Christian Era might have influenced the growth of devotional Hinduism out of Vedic religion. The classical Western world directly affected Hindu religious art, and several features of Hinduism can be traced to Zoroastrianism. The influence of later Chinese Taoism on Tantric Hinduism (an esoteric system of rituals for spiritual power) has been suggested, though not proved. In more recent centuries, the influence of Islam and Christianity on Hinduism can be seen.

## The process of "Sanskritization"

The development of Hinduism can be interpreted as a constant interaction between the religion of the upper social groups, represented by the Brahmins (priests and teachers), and the religion of other groups. From the time of the Aryan invasion (c. 1500 BC) the indigenous inhabitants of the subcontinent have tended to adapt their religious and social life to Brahminic norms. This has developed from the desire of lower-class groups to rise on the social ladder by adopting the ways and beliefs of the higher castes.

This process, sometimes called "Sanskritization," began in Vedic times when non-Aryan chieftains accepted the ministrations of Brahmins and thus achieved social status for themselves and their subjects. It was probably the principal method by which Hinduism spread through the subcontinent and into Southeast Asia. Sanskritization still continues in the form of the conversion of tribal groups, and it is reflected by the persistent tendency of low-caste Hindus to try to raise their status by adopting high-caste customs, such as wearing the sacred cord and becoming vegetarians.

If Sanskritization has been the main means of spreading Hinduism throughout the subcontinent, its converse process, which has no convenient label, has been one of the means whereby Hinduism has changed and developed over the centuries. The Aryan conquerors lived side by side with the indigenous inhabitants of the subcontinent, and many features of Hinduism, as distinct from Vedic religion, may have been adapted from the religions of the non-Aryan peoples of India.

The phallic emblem of the god Siva arose from a combination of the phallic aspects of the Vedic god Indra and a non-Vedic icon of early popular fertility cults. Many features of Hindu mythology and several of the lesser gods--such as Ganesha, an elephant-headed god, and Hanuman, the monkey god--were incorporated into Hinduism and assimilated into the appropriate Vedic gods by this means. Similarly, the worship of many goddesses who are now regarded as the consorts of the great male Hindu gods, as well as the worship of the one great goddess herself, may have originally incorporated the worship of non-Aryan local goddesses. Unorthodox circles on the fringes of Brahminic culture (probably in southern India) were one of the important sources of the system of ecstatic devotional religion known as bhakti.

Thus, the history of Hinduism can be interpreted as the imposition of orthodox custom upon wider and wider ranges of people and, complementarily, as the survival of features of non-Aryan religions that gained strength steadily until they were adapted by the Brahmans.

The prehistoric period (3rd and 2nd millennia BC)

Indigenous prehistoric religion

The prehistoric culture of the Indus Valley arose in the latter centuries of the 3rd millennium BC from the metal-using village cultures of the region. There is considerable evidence of the religious life of the Indus people, but until their writing is deciphered its interpretation is speculative. Enough evidence exists, however, to show that several features of later Hinduism had prehistoric origins.

In most of the village cultures, small terra-cotta figurines of women, found in large quantities, have been interpreted as icons of a fertility deity whose cult was widespread in the Mediterranean area and in western Asia from Neolithic times onward. This hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that the goddess was apparently associated with the bull--a feature also found in the ancient religions farther west.

Religion in the Indus Valley civilization

The Harappa culture (often called the Indus Valley civilization), located in modern Pakistan, has produced much evidence of the cult of the goddess and the bull. Figurines of both occur, with the goddess being more common than the bull. The bull, however, appears more frequently on the many steatite seals. A horned deity, possibly with three faces, occurs on a few seals, and on one seal he is surrounded by animals. A few male figurines in hieratic (sacerdotal) poses and one apparently in a dancing posture may represent deities.

No building has been discovered at any Harappan site that can be positively identified as a temple, but the Great Bath at Mohenjo-daro was almost certainly used for ritual purposes, as were the ghats (bathing steps on riverbanks) attached to later Hindu temples. The presence of bathrooms in most of the houses and the remarkable system of covered drains indicate a strong concern for cleanliness that may have been related to concepts of ritual purity as well as to ideas of hygiene.

Many seals show religious and legendary themes that cannot be interpreted with certainty. There is clear evidence, however, of the worship of sacred trees or of the divinities believed to reside in them. The bull is often depicted standing before a sort of altar, and the horned god has been interpreted, perhaps overconfidently, as a prototype of the Hindu god Siva. Small conical objects appear to be phallic emblems that are also connected with Siva in later Hinduism, although they may have been pieces used in board games.

Other interpretations of the remains of the Harappa culture are more speculative and, if accepted, would indicate that many features of later Hinduism were already in existence 4,000 years ago. The fact that Harappans buried their dead with grave deposits, a practice not followed by the later Hindus, suggests that they had some belief in an afterlife.

#### Survival of archaic religious practices

Some elements of the religious life of current and past folk religions--notably sacred animals, sacred trees, especially the pipal (*Ficus religiosa*), and the use of small figurines for cult purposes--are found in all parts of India and may have been borrowed from pre-Aryan civilizations. On the other hand, these figures are also commonly encountered outside of India, and therefore they may have originated independently in Hinduism as well.

#### The Vedic period (2nd millennium-7th century BC)

The Aryans of the early Vedic period left few material remains, but they left a very important literary record called the Rigveda. Its 1,028 hymns are distributed throughout 10 books, of which the first and the last are the most recent. A hymn usually consists of three sections: it begins with an exhortation that is followed in the main part by praise of the deity, prayers, and imploration, with frequent references to the deity's mythology, and finishes with a specific request.

The Rigveda ("Wisdom of the Verses") is not a unitary work, and its composition may have taken several centuries. In its form at the time of its final edition it reflects a well-developed religious system. The date commonly given for the final recension of the Rigveda is 1000 BC. During the next two or three centuries the Rigveda was supplemented by three other Vedas and, still later, by Vedic texts called the Brahmanas and the Upanishads

#### Challenges to Brahmanism (7th-2nd century BC)

The century from about 550 BC onward was a period of great change in the religious life of India. This century saw the rise of breakaway sects of ascetics who denied the authority of the Vedas and of the Brahmins and who followed founders claiming to have discovered the secret of obtaining release from transmigration.

By far the most important of these were Siddhartha Gautama, called the Buddha, and Vardhamana, called Mahavira ("Great Hero"), the great teacher of Jainism (see also Buddha; Jainism). There were many other heterodox teachers who organized bands of ascetic followers, and each group followed a specific code of conduct. They gained considerable support from ruling families and merchants. The latter were growing in wealth and influence, and many of them were searching for alternative forms of religious activity that would give them a more significant role than did orthodox Brahmanism or that would be less expensive to support.