

# Hinduism

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**Hinduism** is a religious tradition<sup>[1]</sup> that originated in the Indian subcontinent. Hinduism is often referred to as **Sanātana Dharma** (सनातन धर्म) by its practitioners, a Sanskrit phrase meaning "*the eternal law*".<sup>[2]</sup>

Hinduism is the world's oldest major religion that is still practiced.<sup>[3]</sup> <sup>[4]</sup> Its earliest origins can be traced to the ancient Vedic civilization. <sup>[5]</sup> A conglomerate of diverse beliefs and traditions, Hinduism has no single founder.<sup>[6][7]</sup> It is the world's third largest religion following Christianity and Islam, with approximately a billion adherents, of whom about 905 million live in India and Nepal.<sup>[8]</sup> Other countries with large Hindu populations include Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Mauritius, Fiji, Suriname, Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago.

Hinduism contains a vast body of scriptures. Divided as Śruti (revealed) and Smṛiti (remembered) and developed over millennia, these scriptures expound on theology, philosophy and mythology, and provide spiritual insights and guidance on the practice of dharma (religious living). In the orthodox view, among such texts, the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* are the foremost in authority, importance and antiquity. Other major scriptures include the *Tantras*, the sectarian *Agamas*, the *Purāṇas* and the epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*. The *Bhagavad Gītā*, a treatise excerpted from the *Mahābhārata*, is sometimes called a summary of the spiritual teachings of the *Vedas*.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Contents

- 1 Etymology
- 2 Beliefs
  - 2.1 Concept of God
  - 2.2 Devas and avatars
  - 2.3 Karma and samsara
  - 2.4 The goals of life
  - 2.5 Yoga
- 3 History
- 4 Scriptures and theology
- 5 Practices
- 6 Rituals and ceremonies
- 7 Pilgrimage and festivals
- 8 Society
  - 8.1 Denominations
  - 8.2 Ashramas
  - 8.3 Monasticism
  - 8.4 Varnas and the caste system
  - 8.5 Ahimsa and vegetarianism

Part of a series on  
**Hinduism**



**History · Deities**  
**Denominations · Literature**  
**Beliefs and practices**

Dharma · Artha · Kama · Moksha  
Karma · Samsara · Yoga · Bhakti  
Maya · Puja · Mandir

**Scriptures**

Vedas · Upanishads · Ramayana  
Mahabharata · Bhagavad Gita  
Purana · others

**Related topics**

Hinduism by country  
Gurus and saints · Reforms  
Ayurveda · Calendar · Criticism  
Festivals · Glossary · Jyotisha



- 8.6 Conversion
- 9 See also
- 10 Notes
- 11 References
- 12 Further reading
- 13 External links

## Etymology

The Persian term *Hindū* is derived from *Sindhu*, Sanskrit for the Indus River.<sup>[10]</sup> The Rig Veda mentions the land of the Indo-Aryans as Sapta Sindhu (the land of the seven rivers in northwestern South Asia, one of them being the Indus). This corresponds to *Hapta Həndu* in the *Avesta* (*Vendidad or Videvdad: Fargard* 1.18)—the sacred scripture of Zoroastrianism. The term was used for those who lived in the Indian subcontinent on or beyond the "Sindhu".<sup>[11]</sup>

## Beliefs

Hinduism is an extremely diverse religion. Although some tenets of the faith are accepted by most Hindus, scholars have found it difficult to identify any doctrines with universal acceptance among all denominations.<sup>[12]</sup> Prominent themes in Hindu beliefs include *Dharma* (ethics/duties), *Samsāra* (The continuing cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth), *Karma* (action and subsequent reaction), *Moksha* (liberation from *samsara*), and the various Yogas (paths or practices).



Temple carving at Hoysaleswara temple representing the Trimurti: Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu.

## Concept of God

Hinduism is a diverse system of thought with beliefs spanning monotheism, polytheism,<sup>[13]</sup> panentheism, pantheism, monism and atheism. It is sometimes referred to as henotheistic (devotion to a single God while accepting the existence of other gods), but any such term is an oversimplification of the complexities and variations of belief.<sup>[14]</sup>

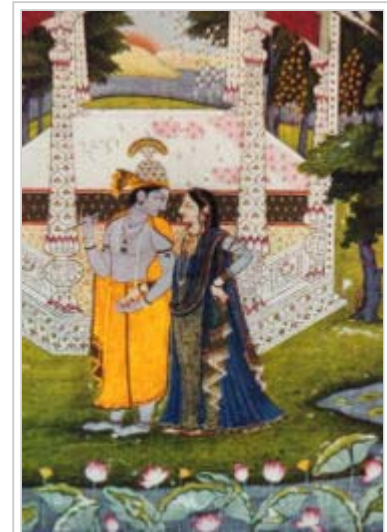
Most Hindus believe that the spirit or soul—the true "self" of every person, called the ātman—is eternal.<sup>[15]</sup> According to the monistic/pantheistic theologies of Hinduism (such as Advaita Vedanta school), this Atman is ultimately indistinct from Brahman, the supreme spirit. Brahman is described as "The One Without a Second;" hence these schools are called "non-dualist."<sup>[16]</sup> The goal of life according to the Advaita school is to realize that one's ātman is identical to Brahman, the supreme soul.<sup>[17]</sup> The Upanishads state that whoever becomes fully aware of the ātman as the innermost core of one's own self, realizes their identity with Brahman and thereby reaches Moksha (liberation or freedom)<sup>[15][18]</sup>

Other dualistic schools (see Dvaita and Bhakti) understand Brahman as a Supreme Being who possesses personality and worship Him or Her thus, as Vishnu, Brahma, Shiva or Shakti depending on the sect. The ātman is dependent on God while Moksha depends on love towards God and on God's grace.<sup>[19]</sup> When God is viewed as the supreme personal being (rather than as the infinite principle) God is called *Ishvara* ("The Lord"<sup>[20]</sup>), *Bhagavan* ("The Auspicious One"<sup>[20]</sup>), or *Parameshwara* ("The Supreme Lord"<sup>[20]</sup>).<sup>[16]</sup> However, interpretations of *Ishvara* vary—ranging from non-belief such as followers of Mimamsakas, in *Ishvara* to identifying *Brahman* and *Ishvara* as

one as in Advaita.<sup>[16][21]</sup> There are also schools like the Samkhya which have atheistic leanings.<sup>[22]</sup>

## Devas and avatars

The Hindu scriptures refer to celestial entities, called *Devas* (or *devī* in feminine form; *devatā* used synonymously for Deva in Hindi), "the shining ones", which may be translated into English as "gods" or "heavenly beings".<sup>[23]</sup> The *devas* are an integral part of Hindu culture and are depicted in art, architecture and through icons, and mythological stories about them are related in the scriptures, particularly in the Indian epic poetry and Puranas. They are however often distinguished from Ishvara, a supreme personal God, with many Hindus worshiping Ishvara in a particular form as their *iṣṭa devatā*, or chosen ideal.<sup>[24][25]</sup> the choice being based upon their individual preference,<sup>[26]</sup> and regional and family traditions.<sup>[26]</sup>



Krishna (left), the eighth incarnation (avatar) of Vishnu, with his consort Radha

Hindu epics and the Puranas relate several episodes of the descent of God to Earth in corporeal form, in order to restore *dharma* in society and guide humans to *moksha* (liberation from the cycle of rebirth). Such an incarnation is called an *avatar*. The most prominent avatars are of Vishnu, and include Rama (protagonist in Ramayana) and Krishna (a central figure in the epic Mahabharata).

## Karma and samsara

*Karma* translates literally as action, work or deed<sup>[27]</sup> and can be described as the "moral law of cause and effect".<sup>[28]</sup> According to the Upanishads, an individual, known as the *jiva-atma*, develops samskaras (impressions) from actions, whether physical or mental. The "linga sharira", a body more subtle than the physical one, but less subtle than the soul, retains impressions, carrying them over into the next life, establishing a unique trajectory for the individual.<sup>[29]</sup> Thus, the concept of a universal, neutral and never-failing karma intrinsically relates to reincarnation as well as one's personality, characteristics and family. Karma threads together the notions of free will and destiny.

This cycle of *action, reaction, birth, death, and rebirth* is a continuum called samsara. The notion of reincarnation and karma is a strong premise in Hindu thought. The Bhagavad Gita states that:

“ As a person puts on new clothes and discards old and torn clothes, similarly an embodied soul enters new material bodies, leaving the old bodies.(B.G. 2:22)<sup>[30]</sup> ”

Samsara provides ephemeral pleasures, which lead people to desire rebirth to enjoy the pleasures of a perishable body. However, escaping the world of samsara through moksha (liberation) is believed to ensure lasting happiness and peace.<sup>[31][32]</sup> It is thought that after several reincarnations, an *atman* eventually seeks unity with the cosmic spirit (Brahman/Paramatman).

The ultimate goal of life, referred to as *moksha*, *nirvana* or *samadhi*, is understood in several different ways: as the realization of one's union with God; as realization of one's eternal relationship with God; realization of the unity of all existence; perfect unselfishness and knowledge of the Self; attainment of perfect mental peace; or as detachment from worldly desires. Such a realization

liberates one from *samsara* and ends the cycle of rebirth.<sup>[33][34]</sup> The exact conceptualization of moksha differs among the various Hindu schools of thought. For example, Advaita Vedanta holds that after attaining moksha an atman no longer identifies itself with an individual but as identical with Brahman in all respects. The followers of Dvaita (dualistic) schools identify themselves as part of Brahman and after attaining moksha expect to spend eternity in a loka (heaven),<sup>[35]</sup> in the company of their chosen form of *Ishvara*. Thus, it is said, the followers of *dvaita* wish to "taste sugar," while the followers of Advaita wish to "become sugar."<sup>[36]</sup>

## The goals of life

Classical Hindu thought accepts two main life-long dharmas: Grihastha Dharma and Sannyasin Dharma.

The Grihastha Dharma recognize four goals known as the *puruṣhārthas*. They are:

1. *kāma*: Sensual pleasure and enjoyment
2. *Artha*: Material prosperity and success
3. *Dharma*: Correct action, in accordance with one's particular duty and scriptural laws
4. *Moksha*: Liberation from the cycle of samsara<sup>[37][38]</sup>

Among these, dharma and moksha play a special role.<sup>[38]</sup> dharma must dominate an individual's pursuit of kama and artha while seeing moksha, at the horizon.

The Sannyasin Dharma recognizes, but renounces Kama, Artha and Dharma, focusing entirely on Moksha. As described below, the Grihastha Dharma eventually enters this stage. However, some enter this stage immediately from whichever stage they may be in.

## Yoga

In whatever way a Hindu defines the goal of life, there are several methods (yogas) that sages have taught for reaching that goal. A practitioner of yoga is called a *yogi*. Texts dedicated to Yoga include the Bhagavad Gita, the Yoga Sutras, the Hatha Yoga Pradipika and, as their philosophical and historical basis, the Upanishads. Paths one can follow to achieve the spiritual goal of life (moksha, samadhi, or nirvana) include:

- Bhakti Yoga (the path of love and devotion),
- Karma Yoga (the path of right action),
- Rāja Yoga (the path of meditation) and
- Jñāna Yoga (the path of wisdom).<sup>[39]</sup>

An individual may prefer one or some yogas over others according to his or her inclination and understanding. For instance some devotional schools teach that bhakti is the only practical path to achieve spiritual perfection for most people, based on their belief that the world is currently in the age of Kali yuga (one of four epochs part of the Yuga cycle).<sup>[40]</sup> Practice of one yoga does not exclude others. Many schools believe that the different yogas naturally blend into and aid other yogas. For example, the practice of *jnana yoga*, is thought to inevitably lead to pure love (the goal of *bhakti yoga*), and vice versa.<sup>[41]</sup> Someone practicing deep meditation (such as in *raja yoga*) must



Swami Vivekananda, shown here practicing meditation, was a Hindu *guru* (teacher) recognized for his inspiring lectures on topics such as yoga.

embody the core principles of *karma yoga*, *jnana yoga* and *bhakti yoga*, whether directly or indirectly.<sup>[39][42]</sup>

## History

The earliest evidence for elements of Hinduism date back to the late Neolithic to the early Harappan period (5500–2600BCE).<sup>[43][44][45]</sup><sup>[46]</sup> The beliefs and practices of the pre-classical era (1500–500BCE) are called the "historical Vedic religion". Modern Hinduism grew out of the Vedas, the oldest of which is the Rigveda, dated to 1700–1100BCE.<sup>[47]</sup> The Vedas center on worship of deities such as *Indra*, *Varuna* and *Agni*, and on the *Soma* ritual. They performed fire-sacrifices, called *yajña* and chanted Vedic mantras but did not build temples or icons. The oldest Vedic traditions exhibit strong similarities to Zoroastrianism and with other Indo-European religions.<sup>[48]</sup> During the Epic and Puranic periods, the earliest versions of the epic poems *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were written roughly from 500–100BCE,<sup>[49]</sup> although these were orally transmitted for centuries prior to this period.<sup>[50]</sup> The epics contain mythological stories about the rulers and wars of ancient India, and are interspersed with religious and philosophical treatises. The later Puranas recount tales about devas and devis, their interactions with humans and their battles against demons.



Sacred Mount Kailash in Tibet is regarded as the spiritual abode of Shiva.

Three major movements underpinned the naisance of a new epoch of Hindu thought: the advents and spread of Upanishadic, Jaina, and Buddhist philosophico-religious thought throughout the broader Indian landmass.<sup>[51]</sup> The Upanishads, Mahavira(founder of Jainism) and Buddha(founder of Buddhism) taught that to achieve moksha or nirvana, one did not have to accept the authority of the Vedas or the caste system. Buddha went a step further and claimed that the existence of a Self/soul or God was unnecessary.<sup>[52]</sup> Buddhism and Jainism adapted elements of Hinduism into their beliefs. Buddhism (or at least Buddhistic Hinduism) peaked during the reign of Asoka the Great of the Mauryan Empire, who unified the Indian subcontinent in the 3rd century BCE. After 200CE, several schools of thought were formally codified in Indian philosophy, including Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Purva-Mimamsa and Vedanta.<sup>[53]</sup> Charvaka, the founder of an atheistic materialist school, came to the fore in North India in the sixth century BCE.<sup>[54]</sup> Between 400BCE and 1000CE, Hinduism expanded at the expense of Buddhism.<sup>[55]</sup>

Though Islam came to India in the early 7th century with the advent of Arab traders and the conquest of Sindh, it started to become a major religion during the later Muslim conquest in the Indian subcontinent.<sup>[54]</sup> During this period Buddhism declined rapidly and many Hindus converted to Islam. Some Muslim rulers such as Aurangzeb destroyed Hindu temples and persecuted non-Muslims, while others, such as Akbar, were more tolerant. Hinduism underwent profound changes in large part due to the influence of the prominent teachers Ramanuja, Madhva, and Chaitanya.<sup>[54]</sup> Followers of the Bhakti movement moved away from the abstract concept of Brahman, which the philosopher Adi Shankara consolidated a few centuries before, with emotional, passionate devotion towards the more accessible avatars, especially Krishna and Rama.<sup>[56]</sup>



Akshardham Temple in New Delhi.

Indology as an academic discipline of studying Indian culture from a European perspective was established in the 19th century, led by scholars such as Max Müller and John Woodroffe. They

brought Vedic, Puranic and Tantric literature and philosophy to Europe and the United States. At the same time, societies such as the Brahma Samaj and the Theosophical Society attempted to reconcile and fuse Abrahamic and Dharmic philosophies, endeavouring to institute societal reform. This period saw the emergence of movements which, while highly innovative, were rooted in indigenous tradition. They were based on the personalities and teachings of individuals, as with Shri Ramakrishna and Ramana Maharshi. Prominent Hindu philosophers, including Sri Aurobindo and Swami Prabhupada (founder of ISKCON), translated, reformulated and presented Hinduism's foundational texts for contemporary audiences in new iterations, attracting followers and attention in India and abroad. Others such as Swami Vivekananda, Paramahansa Yogananda, B.K.S. Iyengar and Swami Rama have also been instrumental in raising the profiles of Yoga and Vedanta in the West.

## Scriptures and theology

Hinduism is based on "the accumulated treasury of spiritual laws discovered by different persons in different times."<sup>[57]</sup><sup>[58]</sup> The scriptures were transmitted orally in verse form to aid memorization, for many centuries before they were written down.<sup>[59]</sup><sup>[43]</sup> Over many centuries, sages refined the teachings and expanded the canon. In post-Vedic and current Hindu belief, most Hindu scriptures are not typically interpreted literally. More importance is attached to the ethics and metaphorical meanings derived from them.<sup>[43]</sup> Most sacred texts are in Sanskrit. The texts are classified into two classes: *Shruti* and *Smriti*.

*Shruti* (lit. that which is heard) refers to the *Vedas* which form the earliest record of the Hindu scriptures. While many Hindus revere the Vedas as eternal truths revealed to ancient sages (*Rṣis*),<sup>[58]</sup><sup>[60]</sup> some devotees do not associate the creation of the Vedas with a God or person. They are thought of as the laws of the spiritual world, which would still exist even if they were not revealed to the sages.<sup>[61]</sup><sup>[57]</sup><sup>[62]</sup> Hindus believe that because the spiritual truths of the Vedas are eternal, they continue to be expressed in new ways.<sup>[63]</sup>

There are four *Vedas* (called *Rg-*, *Sāma-* *Yajus-* and *Atharva-*). The *Rigveda* is the first and most important Veda.<sup>[64]</sup> Each Veda is divided into four parts: the primary one, the *Veda proper*, being the *Saṃhitā*, which contains sacred *mantras*. The other three parts form a three-tier ensemble of commentaries, usually in prose and are believed to be slightly later in age than the *Saṃhitā*. These are: the *Brāhmaṇas*, *Āraṇyakas*, and the *Upanishads*. The first two parts were subsequently called the *Karmakāṇḍa* (ritualistic portion), while the last two form the *Jñānakāṇḍa* (knowledge portion).<sup>[65]</sup><sup>[66]</sup><sup>[67]</sup> While the *Vedas* focus on rituals, the *Upanishads* focus on spiritual insight and philosophical teachings, and discuss Brahman and reincarnation.<sup>[43]</sup><sup>[68]</sup><sup>[69]</sup>

Hindu texts other than the *Shrutis* are collectively called the *Smritis* (memory).<sup>[70]</sup> The most notable of the smritis are the epics, which consist of the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The *Bhagavad Gītā* is an integral part of the *Mahabharata* and one of the most popular sacred texts of Hinduism. It contains philosophical teachings from *Krishna*, an incarnation of *Vishnu*, told to the prince Arjuna on the eve of a great war. The *Bhagavad Gītā* is described as the essence of the *Vedas*.<sup>[71]</sup> The Smritis also include the *Purāṇas*, which illustrate Hindu ideas through vivid narratives. There are texts with a sectarian nature such as *Devī Mahātmya*, the *Tantras*, the *Yoga*



The *Rig Veda* is one of the oldest religious texts. This Rig Veda manuscript is in Devanagari



The *Naradeya Purana* describes the mechanics of the cosmos. Depicted here are Vishnu with his consort Lakshmi resting on Shesha Nag. Narada and Brahma are

*Sutras*, *Tirumantiram*, *Shiva Sutras* and the *Hindu Āgamas*. A more controversial text, the *Manusmriti*, is a prescriptive lawbook which epitomizes the societal codes of the caste system.

also pictured.

## Practices

Hindu practices generally involve seeking awareness of God and sometimes also seeking blessings from Devas. Therefore, Hinduism has developed numerous practices meant to help one think of divinity in the midst of everyday life. Hindus can engage in *pūjā* (worship or veneration),<sup>[20]</sup> either at home or at a temple. At home, Hindus often create a shrine with icons dedicated to the individual's chosen form(s) of God. Temples are usually dedicated to a primary deity along with associated subordinate deities though some commemorate multiple deities. Visiting temples is not obligatory.<sup>[72]</sup> In fact, many visit temples only during religious festivals. Hindus perform their worship through icons (*murtis*). The icon serves as a tangible link between the worshiper and God.<sup>[73]</sup> The image is often considered a manifestation of God, since God is immanent. The *Padma Purana* states that the *mūrti* is not to be thought of as mere stone or wood but as a manifest form of the Divinity.<sup>[74]</sup> A few Hindu sects, such as the *Ārya Samāj*, do not believe in worshiping God through icons.



A large Ganesha murti from a Ganesh Chaturthi festival in Mumbai

Hinduism has a developed system of symbolism and iconography to represent the sacred in art, architecture, literature and worship. These symbols gain their meaning from the scriptures, mythology, or cultural traditions. The syllable *Om* (which represents the *Parabrahman*) and the Swastika sign (which symbolizes auspiciousness) have grown to represent Hinduism itself, while other markings such as *tilaka* identify a follower of the faith. Hinduism associates many symbols, which include the lotus, *chakra* and *veena*, with particular deities.

Mantras are invocations, praise and prayers that through their meaning, sound, and chanting style help a devotee focus the mind on holy thoughts or express devotion to God/the deities. Many devotees perform morning ablutions at the bank of a sacred river while chanting the *Gayatri Mantra* or *Mahamrityunjaya* mantras. The epic *Mahabharata* extolls *Japa* (ritualistic chanting) as the greatest duty in the *Kali Yuga* (what Hindus believe to be the current age). Many adopt *Japa* as their primary spiritual practice.

## Rituals and ceremonies

The vast majority of Hindus engage in religious rituals on a daily basis.<sup>[75]</sup> Most Hindus observe religious rituals at home.<sup>[76]</sup> However, observation of rituals greatly vary among regions, villages, and individuals. Devout Hindus perform daily chores such as worshiping at the dawn after bathing (usually at a family shrine, and typically includes lighting a lamp and offering foodstuffs before the images of deities), recitation from religious scripts, singing devotional hymns, meditation, chanting mantras, reciting scriptures etc.<sup>[76]</sup> A notable feature in religious ritual is the division between purity and pollution. Religious acts presuppose some degree of impurity or defilement for the practitioner, which must be



Diwali, the festival of lights, is a prime festival of Hinduism. Shown here are traditional *Diyas* that are often lit during

overcome or neutralised before or during ritual procedures.

Purification, usually with water, is thus a typical feature of most

religious action.<sup>[76]</sup> Other characteristics include a belief in the efficacy of sacrifice and concept of merit, gained through the performance of charity or good works, that will accumulate over time and reduce sufferings in the next world.<sup>[76]</sup> Vedic rites of fire-oblation (*yajna*) are now only occasional practices although they are highly revered in theory. In Hindu wedding and burial ceremonies, however, the *yajña* and chanting of Vedic mantras are still the norm.<sup>[77]</sup>

Diwali

Occasions like birth, marriage, and death involve what are often elaborate sets of religious customs. In Hinduism, life-cycle rituals include Annaprashan (a baby's first intake of solid food), Upanayanam ("sacred thread ceremony" undergone by upper-caste children at their initiation into formal education.), Shraadh (ritual of treating people to feasts in the name of the deceased).<sup>[78]</sup><sup>[79]</sup> For most people in India, the betrothal of the young couple and the exact date and time of the wedding are matters decided by the parents in consultation with astrologers.<sup>[78]</sup> On death, cremation is considered obligatory for all except sanyasis, hijra, and children under five. Cremation is typically performed by wrapping the corpse in cloth and burning it on a pyre.

## Pilgrimage and festivals

Pilgrimage is not mandatory in Hinduism though many adherents undertake them. Hindus recognise several Indian holy cities, including Allahabad, Haridwar, Varanasi, and Vrindavan. Notable temple cities include Puri, which hosts a major Vaishnava Jagannath temple and Rath Yatra celebration; Tirumala - Tirupati, home to the Tirumala Venkateswara Temple; and Katra, home to the Vaishno Devi temple. The four holy sites Puri, Rameswaram, Dwarka, and Badrinath (or alternatively the Himalayan towns of Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri, and Yamunotri) compose the *Char Dham* (*four abodes*) pilgrimage circuit. The Kumbh Mela (the "pitcher festival") is one of the holiest of Hindu pilgrimages that is held every four years; the location is rotated among Allahabad, Haridwar, Nashik, and Ujjain. Another important set of pilgrimages are the Shakti Peethas, where the Mother Goddess is worshipped, the two principal ones being Kalighat and Kamakhya.



The largest religious gathering on Earth. Around 70 million Hindus participated in the Kumbh Mela at Prayag, India.

Hinduism has many festivals throughout the year. The Hindu calendar usually prescribe their dates. The festivals typically celebrate events from Hindu mythology, often coinciding with seasonal changes. There are festivals which are primarily celebrated by specific sects or in certain regions of the Indian subcontinent. Some widely observed Hindu festivals are Maha Shivaratri, Holi, Ram Navami, Krishna Janmastami, Ganesh Chaturthi, Dussera or Durga Puja, Diwali (the festival of lights).

## Society

### Denominations

Hinduism has no central doctrinal authority and many practising Hindus do not claim to belong to any particular denomination.<sup>[80]</sup>

However, academics categorize contemporary Hinduism into four major denominations:

Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Shaktism and Smartism. The denominations differ primarily in the God worshipped as the Supreme One and in the traditions that accompany worship of that God.

Vaishnavas worship *Vishnu* as the supreme God; Shaivites worship *Shiva* as the supreme; Shaktas worship *Shakti* (power) personified through a female divinity or Mother Goddess, *Devi*; while Smartists believe in the essential oneness of five deities Shanmata as personifications of the Supreme.

Other denominations like Ganapatya (the cult of *Ganesha*) and Saura (Sun worship) are not so widespread.

There are movements that are not easily placed in any of the above categories, such as Swami Dayananda Saraswati's *Arya Samaj*, which rejects image worship and veneration of multiple deities. It focuses on the *Vedas* and the Vedic fire sacrifices (*yajña*). The Tantric traditions have various sects, as Banerji observes:



Shiva as Nataraja, Freer Gallery, Washington D.C

“ Tantras are ... also divided as *āstika* or Vedic and *nāstika* or non-Vedic. In accordance with the predominance of the deity the *āstika* works are again divided as Śākta (Shakta), Śaiva (Shaiva), Saura, Gāṇapatya and Vaiṣṇava (Vaishnava).<sup>[81]</sup> ”

As in every religion, some view their own denomination as superior to others. However, many Hindus consider other denominations to be legitimate alternatives to their own. Heresy is therefore generally not an issue for Hindus.<sup>[82]</sup>

## Ashramas

Traditionally the life of a Hindu is divided into four *Āshramas* (phases or stages; unrelated meanings include monastery).

The first part of one's life, *Brahmacharya*, the stage as a student, is spent in celibate, controlled, sober and pure contemplation under the guidance of a Guru, building up the mind for spiritual knowledge. *Grihastha* is the householder's stage, in which one marries and satisfies *kāma* and *artha* in one's married and professional life respectively (see the goals of life). The moral obligations of a Hindu householder include supporting one's parents, children, guests and holy figures. *Vānaprastha*, the retirement stage, is gradual detachment from the material world. This may involve giving over duties to one's children, spending more time in religious practices and embarking on holy pilgrimages. Finally, in *Sannyāsa*, the stage of asceticism, one renounces all worldly attachments to secludedly find the Divine through detachment from worldly life and peacefully shed the body for Moksha.<sup>[83]</sup>

## Monasticism

Some Hindus choose to live a monastic life (Sannyāsa) in pursuit of liberation or another form of spiritual perfection. Monastics commit themselves to a life of simplicity, celibacy, detachment from worldly pursuits, and the contemplation of God.<sup>[84]</sup> A Hindu monk is called a *sanyāsī*, *sādhu*, or *swāmi*.<sup>[85]</sup> A female renunciate is called a *sanyāsini*. Renunciates receive high respect in Hindu society because their outward renunciation of selfishness and worldliness serves as an inspiration to

householders who strive for *mental* renunciation. Some monastics live in monasteries, while others wander from place to place, trusting in God alone to provide for their needs.<sup>[86]</sup> It is considered a highly meritorious act for a householder to provide *sādhus* with food or other necessities. *Sādhus* strive to treat all with respect and compassion, whether a person may be poor or rich, good or wicked, and to be indifferent to praise, blame, pleasure, and pain.<sup>[84]</sup>

## Varnas and the caste system

Hindu society has traditionally been categorized into four classes, called *Varnas* (*Sanskrit*: "colour, form, appearance");<sup>[20]</sup>

- the *Brahmins*: teachers and priests;
- the *Kshatriyas*: warriors, nobles, and kings;
- the *Vaishyas*: farmers, merchants, and businessmen; and
- the *Shudras*: servants and labourers.

Hindus and scholars debate whether the caste system is an integral part of Hinduism sanctioned by the scriptures or an outdated social custom.<sup>[87][88]</sup> Although the scriptures, since the Rigveda (10.90), contain passages that clearly sanction the *Varna* system, they contain indications that the caste system is not an essential part of the religion. Both sides in the debate can find scriptural support for their views. The oldest scriptures, the *Vedas*, strongly sustain the division of society into four classes (*varna*) but place little emphasis on the caste system, showing that each individual should find his strengths through different ways such as his astrological signs, actions, personality, and appearance, and do his job for the good of that individual as well as society. Being casted into a class because of what parents he was born from was a political problem and not from the actual science of the religion. A verse from the Rig Veda indicates that a person's occupation was not necessarily determined by that of his family:

“ I am a bard, my father is a physician, my mother's job is to grind the corn." (Rig Veda 9.112.3)<sup>[89]</sup> ”

In the Vedic Era, there was no prohibition against the *Shudras* listening to the Vedas or participating in any religious rite, as was the case in the later times.<sup>[90]</sup> Some mobility and flexibility within the *varnas* challenge allegations of social discrimination in the caste system, as has been pointed out by several sociologists.<sup>[91][92]</sup>

Many social reformers, including Mahatma Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar, criticized caste discrimination.<sup>[93]</sup> The religious teacher Sri Ramakrishna (1836-1886) taught that

“ Lovers of God do not belong to any caste . . . . A brahmin without this love is no longer a brahmin. And a pariah with the love of God is no longer a pariah. Through bhakti (devotion to God) an untouchable becomes pure and elevated."<sup>[94]</sup> ”

## Ahimsa and vegetarianism

Hindus advocate the practice of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) and respect for all life because divinity is believed to permeate all beings, including plants and non-human animals.<sup>[95]</sup> The term *ahiṃsā* appears in the Upanishads,<sup>[96]</sup> the epic Mahabharata<sup>[97]</sup> and *Ahiṃsā* is the first of the five *Yamas* (vows of self-restraint) in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras.<sup>[98]</sup>

In accordance with *ahimsā*, many Hindus embrace vegetarianism to respect higher forms of life. While vegetarianism is not a requirement, it is recommended for a *satvic* (purifying) lifestyle. Estimates of the number of lacto vegetarians in India (includes inhabitants of all religions) vary between 20% and 42%.<sup>[99]</sup> The food habits vary with the community and region, for example some castes having fewer vegetarians and coastal populations relying on seafood.<sup>[100][101]</sup> Some Hindus avoid onion and garlic, which are regarded as *rajasic* foods.<sup>[102]</sup> Some avoid meat on specific holy days.

Observant Hindus who do eat meat almost always abstain from beef. The largely pastoral Vedic people and subsequent generations relied heavily on the cow for protein-rich milk and dairy products, tilling of fields and as a provider of fuel and fertilizer. Thus, it was identified as a caretaker and a maternal figure. Hindu society honors the cow as a symbol of unselfish giving. Cow-slaughter is legally banned in almost all states of India.<sup>[103]</sup>

## Conversion

*See also: List of converts to Hinduism*

The self-definition of the word *Hindu* is gradually expanding to include people who were not born Hindu, but now follow Hindu beliefs and practices.<sup>[104]</sup> Some Hindu sects and affiliates such as Vedanta Society, Arya Samaj, International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and the Self-Realization Fellowship accept non Hindus who have a desire to follow Hinduism. However, many Hindus are opposed to the idea of conversion from one religion to another.<sup>[105]</sup>

Reconversion among people who were formerly Hindus or whose ancestors were formerly Hindus has picked up pace with the growth of Hindu revivalist movements.<sup>[106]</sup> National organizations such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (India) and Parisada Hindu Dharma (Indonesia) actively facilitate such reconversions. Reconversions, in general, are well accepted within Hindu society since conversion out of Hinduism is not considered valid in the first place.

Conversion through marriage is well accepted within Hinduism and often expected in order to enable the non-Hindu partner to fully participate in their spiritual, religious, and cultural roles within the larger Hindu family and society.

A ritual called *dīkshā* ("initiation") may mark the beginning of Hindu life after conversion; while as, a ritual called *shuddhi*("purification") may mark the reentry into Hinduism after reconversion.

Conversions into Hinduism have historically been through intermixing and assimilation of migrating cultures and inclusion of external gods and deities into the Hindu pantheon. Such conversions, as in the case of current day Chitpavan and Gujjar communities, happened through a process that lasted over several generations. Also, DNA analysis shows that Hinduism spread in Bali almost 2000 years ago largely driven by marriages between Balinese people and Hindu traders.<sup>[107]</sup>

Concepts of conversion, evangelization, and proselyzation are absent from Hindu literature and in practice have never played more than an insignificant role, though acceptance of willing converts is becoming more common. The absence of these concepts and practices can generally be attributed to the fact that Hinduism considers all sincerely followed paths to god as equal. Hindu view of religious freedom is not based on the freedom to proselytize, but the right to retain one's religion and not be subject to proselyzation.<sup>[108]</sup> Hindu leaders are advocating for changing the existing formulation of the freedom of religion clause in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights since it favors religions which proselytize.<sup>[109]</sup>

## See also

### Hinduism

- Hindu
- World Hinduism
- Hinduism by country
- Hindu deities
- List of Hindu temples
- Hindu calendar
- Hindu denominations
- Hindu reform movements
- List of notable Hindus
- Criticism of Hinduism
- List of related articles

### Related systems and religions

- Hinduism and other religions
- Eastern philosophy
- Indian religions
- Hellenism and Hinduism
- Jainism
- Taoism
- Buddhism and Hinduism
- Sikhism
- Hinduism and Sikh Panth
- Ayyavazhi and Hinduism
- Islam and Hinduism
- Zoroastrianism
- Confucianism
- Hinduism and Confucianism
- Proto-Indo-Iranian religion
- Proto-Indo-European religion

## Notes

1. ^ Hinduism is variously defined as a "religion", "set of religious beliefs and practices", "religious tradition" etc. For a discussion on the topic, see: "Establishing the boundaries" in Gavin Flood (2003), pp. 1-17.
2. ^ The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions. Ed. John Bowker. Oxford University Press, 2000; The term can be traced to late 19th century Hindu reform movements (J. Zavos, *Defending Hindu Tradition: Sanatana Dharma as a Symbol of Orthodoxy in Colonial India*, Religion (Academic Press), Volume 31, Number 2, April 2001, pp. 109-123; see also R. D. Baird, "Swami Bhaktivedanta and the Encounter with Religions," *Modern Indian Responses to Religious Pluralism*, edited by Harold Coward, State University of New York Press, 1987).
3. ^ Frawley 2001
4. ^ Religion: Hinduism. *MapMachine Student Edition*. National Geographic Society. Retrieved on 2007-04-10.
5. ^ Kenoyer 1998, pp. 180–183
6. ^ Osborne 2005, p. 9
7. ^ Klostermaier 1994, p. 1
8. ^ Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents. Adherents.com. Retrieved on 2007-07-10.
9. ^ The *Gita Dhyanam* is a traditional short poem sometimes found as a prefatory to editions of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Verse 4 refers to all the Upanishads as the cows, and the Gita as the milk drawn from them. (Chidbhavananda 1997, pp. 67–74)
10. ^ Lipner 1998, pp. 7–8
11. ^ See Indo-European sound laws for a discussion of the transition from "Sindhu" to "Hindu"
12. ^ Weightman 1998, pp. 262–263
13. ^ Polytheism. *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica Online (2007). Retrieved on 2007-07-05.
14. ^ See Michaels 2004, p. xiv and Gill, N.S. "Henotheism". About, Inc. Retrieved on 2007-07-05.
15. ^ *a b* Monier-Williams 1974, pp. 20–37
16. ^ *a b c* & Bhaskarananda 1994
17. ^ Vivekananda 1987

18. ^ Werner 1994, p. p37
19. ^ Werner 1994, p. 7
20. ^ *a b c d e* Monier-Williams 2001
21. ^ Sinha 1993
22. ^ Sen Gupta 1986, p. viii
23. ^ For translation of *deva* in singular noun form as "a deity, god", and in plural form as "the gods" or "the heavenly or shining ones" see: Monier-Williams 2001, p. 492. In ISKCON the word is translated as "demigods". See: Vedic cosmology. *Vedic Knowledge Online*. VEDA - Bhaktivedanta Book Trust. Retrieved on 2007-06-25.. For translation of *devatā* as "godhead, divinity", see: Monier-Williams 2001, p. 495.
24. ^ Werner 1994, p. 80
25. ^ Renou 1961, p. 55
26. ^ *a b* Harman 2004, pp. 104–106
27. ^ Apte 1997
28. ^ Smith 1991, p. 64
29. ^ Radhakrishnan 1996, p. 254
30. ^ Bhagavad Gita 2.22
31. ^ See Bhagavad Gita XVI.8-20
32. ^ See Swami Vivekananda, *Jnana Yoga* 301-02 (8th Printing 1993)
33. ^ Rinehart 2004, pp. 19–21
34. ^ Bhaskarananda 1994, pp. 79–86
35. ^ The concepts of Heaven and Hell do not translate directly into Hinduism. Spiritual realms such as Vaikunta (the abode of Vishnu) or *loka* are the closest analogues to an eternal Kingdom of God.
36. ^ Nikhilananda 1992
37. ^ Werner 1994
38. ^ *a b* Bhaskarananda 1994, p. 7
39. ^ *a b* Bhaskarananda 1994
40. ^ For example, see the following translation of B-Gita 11.54: "My dear Arjuna, only by undivided devotional service can I be understood as I am, standing before you, and can thus be seen directly. Only in this way can you enter into the mysteries of My understanding." (Bhaktivedanta 1997, ch. 11.54)
41. ^ "One who knows that the position reached by means of analytical study can also be attained by devotional service, and who therefore sees analytical study and devotional service to be on the same level, sees things as they are." (Bhaktivedanta 1997, ch. 5.5)
42. ^ Monier-Williams 1974, p. 116
43. ^ *a b c d* Nikhilananda 1990, pp. 3–8
44. ^ Coulson 1992
45. ^ Rigveda. *The Hindu Universe*. HinduNet Inc. Retrieved on 2007-06-25.
46. ^ "Hindu History" The BBC names a bath and phallic symbols of the Harappan civilization as features of the "Prehistoric religion (3000-1000BCE)".
47. ^ T. Oberlies (*Die Religion des Rgveda*, Vienna 1998. p. 158) based on 'cumulative evidence' sets wide range of 1700–1100.
48. ^ The *R̥gvedic* deity *Dyaus*, regarded as the father of the other deities, is linguistically cognate with Zeus—the king of the gods in Greek mythology, Iovis (*gen. of* Jupiter) —the king of the gods in Roman mythology, and Tiu/Ziu in Germanic mythology[1], cf. English 'Tues-day'. Other Vedic deities also have cognates with those found in other Indo-European speaking peoples' mythologies; see Proto-Indo-European religion.
49. ^ Goldman 2007, p. 23.
50. ^ Rinehart 2004, p. 28.
51. ^ Olivelle, Patrick, "*The renouncer tradition*", in Flood 2003, pp. 273–274
52. ^ Eliot 2003
53. ^ Radhakrishnan & Moore 1967, p. xviii–xxi.
54. ^ *a b c* Basham 1999
55. ^ The rise of Jainism and Buddhism. *Religion and Ethics—Hinduism: Other religious influences*. BBC (26 July 2004). Retrieved on 2007-04-21.
56. ^ J.T.F. Jordens, "Medieval Hindu Devotionalism" in & Basham 1999
57. ^ *a b* Vivekananda 1987, pp. 6–7 Vol I
58. ^ *a b* Vivekananda 1987, pp. 118–120 Vol III
59. ^ Sargeant & Chapple 1984, p. 3
60. ^ Hindu Wisdom - Women in Hinduism. Retrieved on 2006-01-02.

61. ^ Note: Nyaya-Vaisheshika believe that the Vedas were created by God, not eternal.
62. ^ Harshananda 1989
63. ^ Vivekananda 1987, p. 374 Vol II
64. ^ Rigveda is not only the oldest among the vedas, but is one of the earliest Indo-European texts.
65. ^ Hinduwebsite.com explaining the yajnas. Retrieved on 2007-06-25.
66. ^ Swami Shivananda's mission. Retrieved on 2007-06-25.
67. ^ What is Veda?, Vedah.com
68. ^ Werner 1994, p. 166
69. ^ Monier-Williams 1974, pp. 25–41
70. ^ "The Smritis" by Swami Sivananda
71. ^ *Sarvopaniṣado gāvo*, etc. (*Gītā Māhātmya* 6). *Gītā Dhyānam*, cited in Introduction to Bhagavad-gītā As It Is.
72. ^ Bhaskarananda 1994, p. 157
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76. ^ *a b c d* Domestic Worship. *Country Studies*. The Library of Congress (September 1995). Retrieved on 2007-04-19.
77. ^ Hindu Marriage Act, 1955. Retrieved on 2007-06-25.
78. ^ *a b* Life-Cycle Rituals. *Country Studies: India*. The Library of Congress (September 1995). Retrieved on 2007-04-19.
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80. ^ Werner 1994, p. 73
81. ^ Banerji 1992, p. 2
82. ^ India and Hinduism. *Religion of World*. ThinkQuest Library. Retrieved on 2007-07-17.
83. ^ S.S. Rama Rao Pappu, "Hindu Ethics", in Rinehart 2004, pp. 165–168
84. ^ *a b* Bhaskarananda 1994, p. 112
85. ^ McGregor 1999
86. ^ Michaels 2004, p. 316
87. ^ Michaels 2004, pp. 188–197
88. ^ The Caste System. Hindu Wisdom (August 15, 2006). Retrieved on 2007-07-17.
89. ^ Later scriptures however, such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* (4.13) state that the four *varṇa* divisions are created by God, and the *Manusmṛiti* categorizes the different castes. Manu Smriti Laws of Manu 1.87-1.91 However, at the same time, the *Gītā* says that one's *varṇa* is to be understood from one's personal qualities and one's work, not one's birth. This view is supported by records of sages who became Brahmins. For example, the sage *Vishvāmitra* was a king of the *Kṣatriya* caste, and only later became recognized as a great Brahmin sage, indicating that his caste was not determined by birth. Similarly, *Vālmiki*, once a low-caste robber, *became* a sage. *Veda Vyāsa*, another sage, was the son of a fisherwoman (Sabhlok, Prem. "Glimpses of Vedic Metaphysics". Page 21).
90. ^ White Yajurveda 26.2
91. ^ Silverberg 1969, pp. 442–443
92. ^ Smelser & Lipset 2005
93. ^ Elenanor Zelliott, "Caste in Contemporary India," in Rinehart 2004
94. ^ Nikhilananda 1992, p. 155
95. ^ Monier-Williams, *Religious Thought and Life in India* (New Delhi, 1974 edition)
96. ^ Radhakrishnan, S (1929). *Indian Philosophy, Volume 1*, 2nd edition, Muirhead library of philosophy, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 148.
97. ^ For *ahiṃsā* as one of the "emerging ethical and religious issues" in the Mahābhārata see: Brockington, John, "The Sanskrit Epics", in Flood (2003), p. 125.
98. ^ For text of Y.S. 2.29 and translation of *yama* as "vow of self-restraint", see: Taimni, p. 206.
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103. ^ Krishnakumar, R.. "Beef without borders", *Frontline*, Narasimhan Ram, August 30-September 12, 2003. Retrieved on 2006-10-07.
104. ^ [2][3][4].
105. ^ [5].
106. ^ [6].
107. ^ [7][8].
108. ^ [9].
109. ^ [10].

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- Guenon, R., *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta*, Sophia Perennis, ISBN 0-900-588-62-4
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- Supreme Court of India, *"Brahmachari Siddheshwar Shai v. State of West Bengal"*.

## External links

- Resources for Scholars and Students
- Dharma Central's facts about Hinduism
- All About Hinduism by Swami Sivananda (pdf)
- Heart of Hinduism: An overview of Hindu traditions
- Information on Hinduism or Santana dharma



### Audio

- Paper on Hinduism by Swami Vivekananda - Presented at *World Parliament of Religion* in 1893 (Text + Audio Version)
- Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies Lectures and seminars in MP3 audio format by the OCHS as reference material for scholars and students.

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