

Hinduism

Hinduism is often referred to as Sanātana Dharma, a Sanskrit phrase meaning "**the eternal law**". Hinduism is the world's **third most popular religion**, with around **750 million followers**. The religion of Hinduism originated in **Northern India**, near the river Indus, about **4000 years ago** and is the **world's oldest existing religion**. Hinduism is practiced by more than **80% of India's population**.

Who is the founder of Hinduism?

Hinduism has **no founder**, it developed out of Brahmanism. Hinduism is the oldest religion; it may date to prehistoric times.

What is the symbol of Hinduism?

Aum is the main symbol of Hinduism. It is the sound heard in deepest meditation and is said to be the name most suited for God.

Where does the name Hindu come from?

The word "Hindu" comes from the name of the river Indus, which flows 1800 miles from Tibet through Kashmir and Pakistan to the sea.

How is Hinduism different from other faiths?

Hinduism has neither founder, single teacher nor any prophets. **Hinduism is not a Single Religion**. Hinduism is the practices of a variety of different religious groups which come out of India.

What do Hindus believe?

For many Hindus, religion is a **matter of practice rather than of beliefs**. It's more what you do, than what you believe. Hindus believe in a **universal soul or God called Brahman**. Brahman takes on **many forms** that some Hindus worship as gods or goddesses in their own right. Hindus believe that there is a part of Brahman in everyone and this is called the Atman.

Hindus believe in **reincarnation** - a belief that the soul is eternal and lives many lifetimes, in one body after another. The soul is sometimes born in a human body, sometimes in an animal body and sometimes in a plant body etc. Hindus believe that **all forms of life contain a soul**, and all souls have the chance to experience life in different forms. **Samsara** means going through the cycle of repeated births and deaths (reincarnation). Hindus believe that existence of this cycle is governed by Karma.

What is Karma?

Hindus believe that the soul passes through a cycle of successive lives and its next incarnation is always **dependent on how the previous life was lived** (similar to Buddhist beliefs). Karma is the cause of our particular destiny. Misfortunes in our present life are the result of acts that we have committed in the past. In the same way, our actions in our present lives will determine our fate in the lives that follow. Hindus therefore aim to live in a way that will cause each of their lives to be better than the life before.

What is Moksha?

The spiritual goal of a Hindu is to **become one with Brahma**. This freedom is referred to as **moksha**. Until moksha is achieved, a Hindu believes that he/she will be repeatedly reincarnated in order that he/she may work towards self-realization of the truth (**the truth being that only Brahman exists, nothing else**).

What is the Hindu way of life?

For many Hindus there are four goals in human life (purusharthas);

1. **Moksha - the release of the soul (Atman) from the cycle of rebirth.** The individual soul (Atman) unites with Brahman the universal soul. There are different ways to Moksha including the path of meditation, the path of devotion, and the path of good works, among others. The path of meditation involves concentrating so you can reach the real self within you and become one with Brahman. In the path of devotion one chooses a particular god or goddess and worships them throughout life in actions, words and deeds. Finally the path of good works (called Karma-yoga) involves living a moral life and being helpful, respectful and kind. How a person is reincarnated is determined by karma.
2. **Dharma** - the code for leading one's life. Respect for elders is considered important and many consider marriage as a son's religious **duty**.
3. Artha - the pursuit of material gain by lawful means.
4. **Karma**- through pure acts, knowledge and devotion, you can reincarnate to a higher level. The opposite achieves the contrary result.

Why are there so many Hindu Gods?

Hindus actually only believe in one God, Brahman, the universal soul, which is found in everything. The gods of the Hindu faith represent **different forms of Brahman**. These gods are sent to help people find the universal God (Brahman). Most Hindus have a personal god or goddess such as Shiva, Krishna or Lakshmi to whom they pray regularly.

The three most important Hindu gods (forms of Brahman) are:

1. Lakshmi - Goddess of Wealth - Wife of Lord Vishnu. Lakshmi is the goddess of light, beauty, good fortune and wealth.
2. Parvati - regarded as a representation of Shakti. Parvati is the wife of Lord Shiva and the Goddess of household and motherhood.
3. Ganesh - Son of Shiva and Parvati, he is the Lord of Obstacles, both of a material and spiritual order. He is popularly worshipped as a remover of obstacles, though traditionally he also places obstacles in the path of those who need to be checked.

What is the Hindu place of Worship?

Most Hindus **worship (puja) every day at home and have a shrine there**. A shrine can be anything from a room, a small altar or simply pictures or statues. Family members often worship together. At the shrine, Hindus **make offerings to a murti**. A murti is a sacred statue of God, or a god or goddess.

The Hindu **building** for communal worship is called **Mandir (Hindu Temple)**. The temples are dedicated to different gods and are the focus of religious life. Outside India, people mainly gather at the mandir on weekends.

Worshippers repeat the names of their favorite gods, goddesses, and the mantras. Water, fruit, flowers and incense are offered to the gods.

What is Hinduism's Holy book?

Hinduism does not just have one sacred book but **several scriptures**. The **most ancient sacred texts** of the Hindu religion are written in Sanskrit and called the **Vedas**. The Vedas scriptures guide Hindus in their daily life. They also help to preserve the religious dimensions of family and society. Hindus have developed their system of worship and beliefs from the scriptures.

The **Vedas are the oldest religious texts in Hinduism**. The word **Veda means knowledge**. It is believed that the Vedas were orally revealed by Brahma to certain sages, who heard them and passed them down in an oral tradition. They were not written down; in fact this was prohibited. Because of this earliest oral tradition continuing even now when the Vedas are available in the written form, the Vedas are still known to be shruti - 'that which is heard'.

The Vedas are mainly comprised of hymns or mantras written in the Sanskrit language. They cover various subjects, from nature to everyday life and behavior, and form the basis of all other religious writings. The books are so special that they are often kept in glass cases.

What are the practices of Hindus?

The **practice of Hinduism consists of rites and ceremonies** centering on birth, marriage, and death. There are three basic practices:

1. **Worship (called Puja)** - This is an integral part of the faith. Offerings (puja) are usually made to representations of the gods.
2. **Cremation** - The dead are burnt not buried
3. **Compliance with the rules of the caste system** -- The caste system was 'a division of society to preserve society' similar to the society in ancient Egyptian times. Each group had rules of conduct to be obeyed. The caste system divided people by occupation i.e. teachers and philosophers were Brahmins; fighters were kshatriya; shopkeepers, moneylenders and tradespeople were vaishya; and servants and cleaners were shudra. No caste was higher or more important (superior) to another. All were equal and acknowledged as essential to the society.

Do Hindus do pilgrimages?

Pilgrimage is important to Hindus. Popular pilgrimage places are rivers, temples, mountains, and other sacred sites in India. As these are sites where the gods may have appeared or become manifest in the world.