

#4 Hinduism is not a unified, coherent religion, but rather a collection of many related religious beliefs and practices that are accepted within the framework of Hindu society. Having evolved for more than 3,000 years and with more than 750 million followers, Hinduism embraces an extraordinarily complex system of rituals, cults, institutions, practices, and doctrines. A Hindu may be a monotheist, polytheist, or atheist. Hindus may attend temple, follow strict standards of conduct, or practice religious rituals, but none are requirements. Hinduism's wide religious umbrella includes everything from animal worship to mysticism to profound theological doctrines.

There is no single scripture as in Christianity's Bible, but rather thousands of collections of writings and teachings. Although most Hindus believe in gods, there is no single explanation for who or what the gods are. In fact, there are believed to be more than a million gods in Hinduism. Hindu is a catch-all term that includes most of the thousands of different religious groups that have evolved in India since 1500 B.C. More than 98% of Hindus live in India, and the vast majority of other Hindus are Indian immigrants, or descendants of Indians, in other parts of the world.

The word Hindu comes from the Persian word "Hind," the term used to describe the region around the Indus River in northern India. Civilization flourished in that region starting in about 2500 B.C. Around 1500 B.C., migrating groups of people from central Asia passed through the Himalayas and settled in India. Known as Aryans, they were fair-skinned and came to dominate the Indian subcontinent for the next thousand years through a network of village communities. They developed a form of social organization known as caste and used the Sanskrit language. With little or no opposition, Hinduism developed its basic patterns, including spiritual practices, forms of worship, and religious concepts. In addition, many of the Hindu texts were written during this period. Because there was no central authority, however, Hinduism developed a mix of beliefs and practices. Many communities came to believe in their own gods and followed very localized beliefs, a trait that continues to this day.

Contact with outside societies led to the spread of Hinduism beyond local limits and the widespread influence of the religion. Several sects had followings throughout India, including the Vaishnavites, Shaivites, and Shaktites. The Brahman caste's status rose significantly during this era as well. Hinduism spread even farther during the Gupta Empire (fourth to sixth century) to southeastern Asia and Indonesia (the people of Bali still follow a distinctive form of Hinduism).

Hinduism continued to evolve in India for the next several centuries, unchallenged by outside influences and gaining further dominance over Buddhism. That dominance came to an end in 1021, when the Muslim Mahmud al-Ghazni invaded northwestern India and introduced the powerful influence of Islam to the subcontinent. Islamic rulers established a single administrative center for northern and central India in Delhi. The Mughals eventually conquered all of India. Muslim leaders took different approaches to Hinduism. While some tolerated the local religions, others persecuted Hindus and destroyed Hindu temples.

Muslim control, however, did not arrest the development of Hinduism. In many cases, attempts were made to merge elements of the two religions into new faiths, like Sikhism. The emperor Akbar attempted in the late 16th century to create a single all-embracing religion for India. Efforts to fuse the two religions ended with the hegemony of the British Empire in the 19th century.

Christian ideas also influenced many Hindu leaders, including Mohandas Gandhi, who advocated passive resistance to British rule, or *satyagraha*. Perhaps the most familiar fusion of Hindu-Christian beliefs in the United States is the Hare Krishna movement, founded in 1965 by Swami Prabhupada. Its goal is to spread Hindu beliefs to the Western world.

Two categories of Hindu scriptures are *sruti* and *smrti*. *Sruti* literally means "hearing." It is the term used for texts that describe eternal knowledge as revealed to Hindu seers (*rishis*). Those revelations have been passed down through the generations by Brahman priests. The most important *sruti* texts include the Vedas, the Brahmanas, the Upanishads, and the Aranyakas. *Smrti* refers to traditional, or "remembered," knowledge. Those texts include the Epics, the Code of Manu, and the Puranas.

Hindus believe in a process of reincarnation known as *samsara*. *Samsara* is a perpetual series of rebirths in which a soul takes on any form of life (vegetable, animal, or human) in each birth. The process has no beginning and for most individuals, no end. Karma determines the form in which an individual is reborn. A person's karma is determined by his or her conduct in life; every action and thought in a present life dictates what form that person will take in his or her next life. Thus, Hindus believe that a person's fate is determined not by good or bad luck, but rather by the good or bad deeds of past lives. That concept helps justify the Hindu caste system, which grants each person a status according to his or her birth.

The Hindu caste system is the religion's most distinctive quality. This social stratification of society based on birth is called *varna*, which literally means "color." The system is very complicated, but in its most general form consists of four major social categories: Brahman, kshatriya, vaishya, and shudra. Another class, the "untouchables," fall outside the system. In the

traditional system, Brahmins are the highest rank and act as the priests and spiritual and intellectual leaders of Hindu society. Next are the kshatriyas, the rulers and warriors who protect and promote the material well-being of society. The farmers, merchants, and others who contribute to the economy are the vaishyas, while the shudras are the workers and servants who supply the menial labor for the upper three ranks. The fifth category, the untouchables, emerged over time. They were excluded from all rituals and in some parts of India, were banned from public. Moreover, they often had to identify themselves as untouchables so those of higher rank could avoid being near them. Modern sensibilities have to some extent lessened the stigma of being an untouchable. Nevertheless, the rigorous adherence to the caste system meant that each class established its own rules and customs, many of which persist in modern life.

There are thousands of different Hindu sects. The majority of those sects are folk versions of Hinduism. The lower castes often restrict their religious practices to deities that exist in trees, water, and other natural elements. They frequently turn to astrology and occult practices. Ritual purification, charms, and traditional local customs play a far more significant role in their lives than doctrine. Black magic, exorcism, the worship of snakes, and ritual nudity are all elements of the many different brands of folk Hinduism that can be found throughout India (particularly in rural India). Journeys to such sacred places as temples, Harwar in the Himalayas, the Bay of Bengal, and the Ganges, the most holy of rivers, also play a major role in folk Hinduism. Though not limited to folk Hinduism, the worship of cows is another significant part of a Hindu's life.

In their array of gods, three stand out for millions of Hindus. Collectively, they are known as the *trimurti*, the three deities who represent Absolute Reality. Shiva is known as the Destroyer and has a complex, seemingly paradoxical character. Shiva is the god of death and destruction but also the god of reproduction and dance. His dichotomous character, which is also described as ceaselessly active and eternally restful, is considered to represent two aspects of one nature. The followers of Shiva are known as Shaivites. They call their deity Mahadeva, meaning "Great God." The second of those gods is Vishnu, the Preserver. He is a humane god of benevolence and love. Vishnu has appeared on earth nine times to help preserve and restore humanity. Followers believe he will appear one last time to bring the world to an end. His previous appearances have included embodiments of Krishna and the Buddha. Adherents to Vishnu are generally monotheistic. The third god, which is the oldest and least popular of the three, is Brahma, the Creator, from which both society and nature were derived.

Hinduism places emphasis on ritual observance. All the knowledge in the world and the practice of good deeds do no good without proper observance of Hindu ceremonies. The list of practices, like the number of different sects, is almost limitless. Nevertheless, some broad generalizations can be made.

For instance, ritual purification plays a major role in Hindu life. Only those who cleanse themselves are eligible to achieve Absolute Knowledge. There are two kinds of physical purity, internal and external. They can be achieved through washing, bathing, and the natural functions of the body. Yoga exercises, certain formulas, and purification acts can all contribute to a person's internal purity. Devotional services are supposed to be observed every day for gods, ancestors, seers, animals, and the poor.

There are many different ways to carry out those rituals, including tending to a sacred household fire, reciting mantras, meditating, performing yoga exercises, and reciting texts. In modern times, however, many people (particularly city dwellers) have not been able to fulfill those requirements on a daily basis. As a result, they tend to fulfill them on a once-a-week basis at local temples.

In addition, hundreds of festivals are held to observe sacred occasions, including births, deaths, victories, and other significant events of Hindu heroes and gods. Many festivals are seasonal and may be observed through worship, the offering of gifts, drinking, games, fairs, chants, bathing, gambling, the lighting of lamps, and many other acts. One of the more significant religious festivals is the Divali (Cluster of Lights), a four- or five-day event celebrated in October or November to commemorate the actions of several gods, including Shiva and Vishnu. This festival consists of the lighting of lamps, gambling, worship, fasting, and finally a visit by Hindu males to a female relative to receive dinner and offer gifts. Another Hindu festival is the Holi, a carnival-like celebration held in February or March when bonfires are lit to burn evil demons.

The cross-cultural influences of recent times have placed pressures on many traditional aspects of Hinduism in India. The election of a woman, Indira Gandhi, as prime minister helped accelerate improved conditions for women and lifted constraints on women to pursue careers. Moreover, the rigid caste system began to erode as important Hindu leaders, including Gandhi, criticized its exclusion of untouchables from basic rights and freedoms. Thus, while thousands of tribal Hindu villages still perform rituals that have remained unchanged since ancient times, other Hindu communities adopt new beliefs and practices. That constant change, however, is itself something of a tradition for Hinduism.

Hinduism Questions:

1. What is Hinduism?
2. How is Hinduism different from Christianity?
3. More than 98% of Hindus live where?
4. What is “samsara”, or reincarnation?
5. How does karma influence samsara?
6. What are the four social categories?
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
 - 4.
7. Define “untouchables”.
8. What animal is sacred to Hindus?
9. What are the three most important Hindu gods?
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.

10. What is one of the most significant religious festivals?
11. How many years did Hinduism evolve for?
12. Hinduism flourished until who came in and introduced Islam?
13. Who was that Hindu leader that embraced passive resistance?
14. What are two categories of Hindu scripture?
 - 1.
 - 2.
15. What does "mahadeva" mean?
16. What is a major role in folk Hinduism?
17. How can a person cleanse their internal purity?
18. What is the Holi festival?
19. Why did the caste system fail?
20. How is Hinduism different now from past times?