



Hinduism

History and Region

The term 'Hinduism' was invented by scholars in the 19th century to distinguish the vast number of religious groups in India with their diverse beliefs and practices, from Islam, Christianity, Sikhism and Buddhism. In contrast to those faiths, there is no 'founder' of Hinduism, and the tradition is called *sanātana dharma*, 'the timeless truth'.

The word 'hindu' derives from 'sindhu', which is Sanskrit for 'river'. The term was originally used to refer to the people who lived east of the Indus River, which is now in Pakistan.

Hinduism is the world's third largest religion, with over 1 billion followers or 15% of the global population. The majority of Hindus reside in India, Nepal, Mauritius, the Caribbean, and Bali in Indonesia. Because of the wide variety of Hindu traditions, freedom of belief and practices are notable features of Hinduism.

Sacred texts

The most ancient texts are the four *Vedas* (mid 2nd to mid 1st millennium BCE) composed in verse, which contain stories about the gods, the origins of the castes, the beginning of the world etc. They also include hymns and verses that describe elaborate rituals and practices.

Hinduism has a vast literature. The *Upanishads* contain reflections about ultimate realities; the *Puranas* recount legends and myths concerning the very many deities, both male and female. There are also commentaries, treatises on all manner of subjects, *sutras*, *agamas* and *tantras*, etc.

The two epics, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are equally important. They recount the great battles between good and evil, between gods and demons, as well as dealing with many of other subjects on a vast array of topics. One section in the *Mahabharata*, called the *Bhagavad-Gita* - a dialogue between the deity, Lord Krishna, and his devotee, Arjuna - is particularly admired. The *Ramayana*, the story of Rama and his wife Sita, is much loved and re-enacted.

Teachings and Beliefs

Hinduism has no specific creed; the rich array of deities, teachings and texts, traditions and rituals, temples and images, customs and holy men, precludes any definition. Yet, within all this diversity there is a sort of 'family resemblance', so that any particular element will be recognizably 'Hindu'. It is possible to be polytheist, monotheist or even disbelieve in a personal God, and yet be truly Hindu. The Ultimate Reality, however conceived, may become manifest in different forms, and one or other form may become the focus of devotion. Hence, gods like Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Krishna, Rama and Ganesh or goddesses such as Saraswati, Lakshmi or Kali have their devotees, temples, priests, and rituals etc. Only two topics are mentioned specifically here:

Reincarnation – the belief that a living being may be reborn into another earthly existence, not always in human form, the manner of their future life being dependent on the righteousness of their present life or past lives. The supreme goal, however, is to achieve liberation (*moksa*) from the cycle of re-birth.

For most Hindus, religion is concerned with the practicalities of how to live and how to perform the correct religious duties. Generally, then, Hindus order their lives according to the principles and practices that will lead to a higher rebirth or to liberation.

Karma – the law that every action has a consequence, which will affect the individual's present or future life(s). So, good actions will bring positive consequences and evil actions will bring negative results. It is also believed that one's present circumstances are the result of one's past actions.

Rituals and Practices

Hindus seek to base their lives on the rules and duties that are associated with their caste and their 'chosen deity' (*ishta devata*) or that form part of family custom, or that were taught to them by their guru. Many Hindu homes will have a small shrine or altar with a sacred image where a lamp is lit and incense is burned and where prayers, chants and food offerings are made. Many Hindus will take a ritual bath in the early morning. If they live near the Ganges or other sacred rivers or pools they will bathe in these holy waters. After bathing, prayers and offerings of food are made. Many Hindus also meditate and recite or chant from their sacred texts as acts of devotion.

Hindu marriages are often arranged by the two families, and the astrologer will designate the favourable date. The weddings can be lavish affairs: gifts are exchanged between the families and large feasts are held for many guests. Celebrations may last for several days with different rituals being performed each day.

Hindus are normally cremated. The funeral rites constitute part of the process of sending the soul on its way to a new life. The ritual involves rubbing sandalwood or ghee on the body, placing sacred symbols and plants such as *tulsi* (basil) on the body, and dressing it in clean clothes. The body is then carried to a cremation ground, which is usually near a river, and after many offerings and chants and the lighting of a lamp the funeral pyre is lit.

Holy Days and Festivals

Hinduism has a great number of holy days and festivals some of which commemorate the birthdays of deities, some relate to the seasons and some celebrate victorious battles of the gods. Dates are according to the Hindu lunar calendar. Here are just a few of the more important; and only a few details are given:

Diwali (Festival of Lights): One of the most celebrated Hindu festivals, commemorating the victory of good over evil. Diwali means 'row of lamps' and refers to the rows of lamps celebrants place around homes or on top of temples.

Holi (Festival of Colours): Originally, Holi was an agricultural festival celebrating good harvests and fertility of land, and the arrival of Spring. The central ritual of Holi is the throwing and applying of coloured water and bright powders on friends and family, which gives the holiday its common name Festival of Colours.

Shivaratri: The Great Festival of Shiva (Mahashivaratri) is a solemn event notable for its introspective focus, fasting, meditation on Shiva, self-study, social harmony and an all night vigil at Shiva temples. It is celebrated by most Hindus but is especially important to Saivites (devotees of Shiva).

Krishna Janmashtami (Jayanti): - The annual commemoration of the birth of Krishna who is the eighth manifestation of Vishnu. Events in Krishna's life are enacted by dance dramas; there is devotional singing, a night vigil and the sharing of festive food.

Ganesha Chaturthi: The festival commemorates the birthday of Ganesha, the son of Shiva and Parvati, and celebrates him as the god who removes obstacles, grants good beginnings and ensures success.

Navaratri (Durga Puja): A nine-day festival honouring the Divine Mother, commonly referred to as Durga, Devi (goddess) or Shakti (energy or power). Festival includes dancing and partying as people celebrate various aspects of the feminine.

Pongal: One of the most popular harvest festivals of southern India. It takes place in January and marks the auspicious moment when sunrise begins to take place at an increasingly northward point on the horizon.

RamaNavami: Hindu festival celebrating the birth of Lord Rama, hero of the religious epic poem, 'The Ramayana'.