

Rituals and Beliefs of Hinduism

Origin of Hinduism

The largest single religion in India is Hinduism. About 550 million Indians call themselves Hindus today. To these people, Hinduism is more than a religion; it is a way of life. It provides a rule for everything they do or may do from the moment of birth to the moment of death. It tells them when to wash and how to wash, what to eat and how to eat it, what clothes to wear and when to wear them, how to greet people and how to say goodbye.

Hinduism is also a social system. Its many castes and sub-castes divide people into groups according to birth and occupation. With these divisions come rules and regulations concerning social relations between members of the same caste, and between the different castes.

Hinduism is a philosophy. It explains the moral obligations of man and his duties in his various roles of husband, father, family provider, and ruler. Unlike other great religions, Hinduism has no one founder (like Christ or Mohammed), no central authority (like the Pope), no organization (like the Catholic Church), and no main religious book (like the Bible or Koran).

Hindu's have a variety of beliefs and practices. Some believe that God is everywhere—in every rock, every tree, and every particle of matter—and because people are different they need different ways of approaching God. They believe in a supreme being called Brahma. Brahma takes many forms and serves many functions. This has led to the worship of various deities, many of whom are local or village gods. In addition to Brahma, the creator, other important gods are Vishnu, the preserver, and Siva, the destroyer (of ignorance and evil). This makes it a polytheistic religion, and because Hinduism accepts other beliefs and adds new beliefs to the ancient ones, it is hard for any other religion to gain a foothold in India.

1. What are the origins of Hinduism?
2. What are some qualities that make Hinduism different from other major religions?

Sources of Hinduism

Hinduism is one of the oldest faiths among the great religions in the world. Its basic ideas were brought into northwest India by Aryan invaders in 1500 BCE, and it was written in Sanskrit. The scriptures venerated by all Hindus are the *Vedas*, or collection of sacred psalms, prayers, magic charms, and chants. The *Vedas* tell of nature worship. There were gods of the sun, the wind and the rain, among others. The most famous *Veda* was the *Rig-Veda*, the oldest religious document in history (800 BCE).

In the *Rig-Veda* is found a “Hymn of Creation” in which a universal spirit is mentioned. Another source of information about Hinduism is the *Brahmanas*. These are a collection of rituals and ceremonies, composed in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE. The *Upanishads* are commentaries on the individual soul and the origin of the universe. They were written about 600 BCE. Then there is the *Law Book of Manu* (250 BCE) which regulates social and daily life in terms of religion. They also had great epic masterpieces that tell us about Hinduism. The two most important are the *Mahabharata*, which is the longest poem ever written containing 74,000 verses and the *Ramayana*, another epic poem.

1. List the important Hindu writings.
2. What is the main focus of these writings?

The Chief Religious Ideas of Hinduism

There are many religious ideas that are part of the Hindu faith. First is reincarnation. The Hindu religion teaches that a person's soul never dies; only his body does. Upon death, the soul moves into the body of another living thing—a person or an animal. This belief in the transmigration of souls is called *samsara*. A soul will go through the cycle of death and rebirth in an attempt to reach *moksha*. Moksha is the final state of salvation and frees a soul from the cycle of rebirth.

Karma is another major belief in the Hindu faith. This is the beliefs that one's actions in life determine his future state in his next rebirth. Good behavior will bring a man to the next level in society; bad behavior will bring them down to a lower caste or even an insect. Every person has a set of rules to follow if they expect to be promoted in rebirth, this is called *dharma*. A person's *dharma* includes his obligations and duties within the family and the society. The Hindu, therefore, is offered hope that he may determine his future in the next life by his actions in his present life.

Along with the Hindu beliefs, they also have many specific religious practices. Hindus spend months making pilgrimages to holy cities, and they wash their hands and feet in pools before praying in the temples. They bathe in sacred rivers to wash away sin and evil. When a person dies, their body is cremated the same day. The Hindus consider the cow to be sacred, and it may not be slaughtered. Because of their feelings toward cows, most Hindus are vegetarians.

1. Explain dharma, karma and reincarnation.
2. What other religious practices do Hindus have?

The Caste System

The caste system has been closely related to Indian life for the past 3000 years that it is difficult to consider it as separate from religious life. The caste system was introduced by the Aryan tribes who invaded India around 1500 BCE. These conquering Aryans forced the conquered Dravidians to become their servants and perform the work they needed to maintain society. Thus, the caste system originated as social and economic distinctions.

The caste system divided people according to birth and hereditary occupation. There were five main castes and over 3000 sub-castes. The main castes were:

- a) The Brahmins: priests, cultured elite
- b) The Kshatriyas: warrior class and ruling aristocracy
- c) The Vaisyas: farmers, professionals and artisans
- d) The Shudras: Menial or servant class
- e) The Untouchables: lowest class, or outcasts

A man born into his caste remained in that caste for the rest of his life. Born a street cleaner's son, he must be a street cleaner; born a merchant's son, he must be a merchant. Perhaps later in life, if he followed his *dharma* conscientiously and well, he might become something better in the next life. A person could only marry within his own caste, and he could have social relation with only members from his caste. Each caste had its own code of behavior, duties and responsibilities. This code influenced the education, occupation, diet, marriage and social privileges of every member in the caste.

The Untouchables are the lowest class in Hindu society. They are unfit to worship at Hindu temples, were prohibited from using public roads, and could not socialize with any other caste. They were limited to the lowest jobs such as street cleaners or tanners, people that clean and tan hides of animals.

1. What is the caste system? How is this system divided up?

2. What are some regulations in the caste system?

3. Who are the Untouchables?

Weakening Caste Lines

Today the caste system is still practiced in India, although the origin of the practice is hidden in antiquity. Custom and tradition change slowly although many factors are weakening the system. These include:

- a. Increase in educational opportunities for more Indians regardless of status, and the improvement of the availability of jobs.
- b. The increasing movement of people from villages to cities, which forces castes to socialize with one another.
- c. The constitutional changes favoring the Untouchables, and the universal suffrage law given to all people, equal right to vote.
- d. Leadership of men like Gandhi who fought discrimination
- e. The growth of industry, with increasing need for jobs that cut across caste lines

The caste system has not, however, completely disappeared from India. It will take many, many years before all traces of it vanish. Caste is still very strong in villages, and most of the people of India live in villages. There, change is very slow. The influences of education and industrialization have only begun to be felt in villages.

1. How was the caste system weakened?

2. How and where does the caste system exist today?