

## Hinduism

Hinduism, the major religion of India, is one of the oldest living religions in the world. Evolving in India where 83% of the population is Hindu. Hinduism in India affects family life, food, dress and architecture. The caste system as applied to Hindus determines their way of life and often even their occupations. With traveling becoming easier as each day passes Hindus have settled throughout the world and have taken their faith with them. Today Hinduism is found in many countries, the Hindu literature and philosophy have influenced people throughout the world.

### Beliefs of Hinduism

The word *Hindu* is of ancient Persian origin, the Persians used the word to describe people who lived beyond the river Indus (called *Sindhu* in the ancient Sanskrit language) and their religion. Many Hindus themselves call their faith *Sanatana Dharma*, meaning the eternal or ancient religion. Hinduism includes the *Varna-ashrama-dharma* this phrase refers to the duties of the four *varnas*, or social divisions and the *ashramas* or stages of life. Unlike other major religions such as Buddhism, Christianity and Islam, Hinduism was not founded on the teachings of one person, it was gradually developed over thousands of years. Many sects (groups) arose within Hinduism and each developed its own philosophy and form of worship. Hinduism has many sacred books divided into *Shruti* (revealed or heard) and *Smriti* (remembered) texts.

Generally speaking most Hindus believe in the authority of the *Vedas*, the oldest Hindu scriptures and the oldest sacred writings of any major religion. A Hindu also accepts the teaching of the Dharm-Shastras or ancient law books, the philosophical writing of the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Most Hindus believe in a supreme spirit called *Brahman* in the reincarnation of a person's *atman*, or soul. Hindus must practice *satya* (truth) and *ahimsa* (noninjury), they must respect other people's property. As well as following the *dharma* (religious and moral duty) of *varna*, *jati* (caste), *kula* (family) and *ashrama* as best they can. Hindus believe in life after death, an individual can follow various paths to achieve *moksha* (release from the cycle of birth and rebirth) and ultimate union with *Brahman* or God.

### Divinities

Early Hinduism was polytheistic that is the Hindus worshipped many gods. Early Hindu gods represented powers in nature, such as the rain and the sun. The Hindu idea of a supreme power or God evolved from ancient writings of the *Rig-Veda* (as early as 1500B.C.) to the early verse stories called the *Puranas* (from the 500's A.D.). The deities of the *Rig-Veda* represents natural forces which include Indra (thunder), Agni (fire), Varuna (waters), Mitra (daylight), Rudra (storms), Ushas (dawn), Prithivi (earth) and the gods called the Adityas (light). Hindu philosophers believed that these gods were different forms of the supreme spirit. The philosophers of the *Upanishads* (begun in the 700's B.C.) named this supreme spirit *Brahman*.

Brahman was everywhere and had no form, or gender. Such as abstract Brahman was beyond the understanding of ordinary people, so symbols or images were created to represent it in worship. Since Brahman is abstract, it can be represented as male or female; human or animal; or a combination of these. Many different images are used in modern Hindu worship but images are only an aid to worship and not themselves objects of worship. They represent different aspects of Brahman, the three most important aspects of Brahman are Brahma, the creator of the universe; Vishnu, the preserver; Shiva the destroyer and regenerator.

These three male deities are represented by a single image called the Trumurti. Their female consorts are respectively Saraswati, goddess of learning and the arts; Lakshmi, goddess of food fortune and Shakti (also known as Parvati), the mother goddess. Shakti in her destructive mood is known as Durga or Kali. Other important deities of modern Hinduism are Ganesha, the elephant-headed god who removes obstacles; Hanuman, the personification of devotion and strength and Kartikeya or Subrahmanya, who is widely worshipped in south India. All these gods are aspects of Brahman.

Hindus believe that Vishnu, the Preserver, came down to earth in a nine *Avataras*, or incarnations to protect humankind, the tenth incarnation is still to come. The popular incarnations of Vishnu are Rama, the hero of the epic story Ramayana and Krishna the philosopher-god of the philosophical work, the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Despite seeming to have many gods, Hindus worship only one supreme spirit in many forms and under different names.

## **Reincarnation**

Hindus believe that the soul does not die with the body, they believe the soul is rehoused in a new body, when the body dies, the soul is reborn. The continuous process of rebirth is called reincarnation. Reincarnation depends on *karma* (a person's actions and their results), every action influences how a person's soul will be born in the next incarnation. The soul goes through many existences in a cycle of birth and rebirths called *samsara*. Eventually the soul can achieve a new level of existence called *moksha*, when the soul is united with or comes as near as possible to the supreme spirit, Brahman. According to his or her capacities and natural inclination a person may follow various paths to this goal.

The path of knowledge, *jnana*, involves deep study of the *Vedas* and the Upanishads, under the guidance of a learned teacher. Understanding the scriptures frees an individual from attachment to the material world and enables his or her soul to approach the supreme spirit.

The path of *yoga* or discipline, involves the study of philosophy, meditation and physical exercises to achieve bodily control, again with the help of a teacher. Yoga joins the spiritual force of the mind with the material forces of the body to give health, long life and inner peace. Yoga liberates the soul from the cycles of successive lives.

The path to karma or action, involves a person doing his or her religious and social duty with respect to varna, jati, ashrama and family tradition in the spirit of detachment. Karma includes all physical activity, as well as the result of a person's actions. If a person acts in expectation of selfish reward his or her soul cannot progress. Hindus believe that selfless activity is the correct way to use human talent. All action done as duty benefits the individual and society and leads the soul towards God.

### **Devotion and ahimsa**

The path of devotion *bhakti*, is for most individuals the easiest way to experience the supreme spirit. The follower of this path centres his or her devotion on a chosen personal deity (*ishwara*), offers worship to the image of the deity, chants the deity's name constantly and serves others by doing good deeds in the deity's name. The ultimate goal is to let the soul merge into the spirit of God.

*Ahimsa* means noninjury and in Hindu ethics is an important virtue. To practice *ahimsa* ideally, a Hindu must avoid all physical, mental, emotional and moral hurt to any living creature. Because Hindus believe that animals as well as human beings have souls, they have reverence for cows, monkeys and other animals. They have special reverence for cows.

A devout Hindu's life is divided into four ashramas, though in practice women usually share in only the second and third. Ideally each stage brings its own special duties. The ashramas are: *brahmacharya* (student), *grihastha* (householder), *vanaprastha* (retirement) and *sannyas* (renunciation). The fourth *ashrama* is optional and only man can become *sannyasins*, though these days a few women are also claiming the right to take *sannyas*.

From about 500B.C. Hindus have upheld four aims in life. These provide a value system for each individual. Dharma (religious and social duties) is the most important it governs the other three: *artha* (earning a livelihood by honest means), *kama* (enjoying the good things in life in moderation) and *moksha* (leading the soul towards god and achieving release from the cycle of rebirths). Even the burden of *karma* does not bide the soul if actions are performed selflessly and according to dharma.

### **The six schools of philosophy**

Many schools of Hindu thought have developed in India, the six most prominent schools are:

1. nyaya
2. vaisheshika
3. samkhya
4. yoga
5. purva-minamsa
6. Vedanta

Nyaya deals with logic. Vaisheshika concerns the nature of the world. Samkhya examines the origin and evolution of the universe. Yoga is a set of mental and physical exercises designed to free the body so that the soul can unite with Brahman. Both purva-mimamsa and Vedanta interpret *Vedas*.

## **Hinduism in daily life**

### **Social divisions**

India has an ancient system of social divisions called *varna* which may have existed even before the references to it in the *Vedas*. The word *varna* in Hinduism signifies a social category, originally society was divided into three categories: the white varna-Brahmins (priests and scholars), the red (rulers, administrators, soldiers) and the yellow varna-Vaisyas (peasant-farmers and merchants). But these divisions were not rigid. Later a fourth category was added, the black varna, which included *Sudras*. These were skilled artisans such as potters, weavers, basket-makers and servants.

With the evolving of a more complex society, these social divisions became rigid and a fifth category of people emerged, ranking below the *Sudras*. These people did the dirtiest jobs. The upper varnas treated them badly and even avoided touching them. These *panchamas* (fifths) or “untouchables” were the most oppressed people in society. Untouchability was abolished by law in India in 1950, the Indian leader and teacher Mahatma Gandhi named the untouchables *Harijans* (children of God), but they prefer to call themselves *dalit* (depressed).

The countless castes of India probably began as occupational groups, they were gradually placed within the *varna* system and ranked according to the dignity of work done. Originally each caste had specific duties, but today people from the different castes do jobs very different from their traditional occupations. In modern times, the caste system has weakened. Educated Hindus nowadays mix freely with people from different castes, but caste continues to be an influence on Indian life.

### **Food in Hinduism**

In Hinduism the word “pollution” includes both physical and spiritual or ritual impurity. This philosophy affects many aspects of social and religious practice and especially food. In middle-class Hindu families of the three upper varna, the kitchen is the purest part of the home. Food is prepared there and the household shrine is situated there. The person doing the cooking must have a bath and wear clean clothes, only the right hand is used in the preparation of eating food. Different foods are served on separate plates, cooked food which has been touched by a member of a lower caste is considered polluted. Food touched by another person’s lips is considered polluted. Certain foods like meat, poultry, fish and alcoholic drinks also cause ritual pollution.

Death in a family puts blood relatives of the deceased person in a state of ritual pollution. Food touched or cooked by them passes on their ritual pollution to other.

Hindus use water for personal purification both physical and ritual. Running water is “pure”, but stagnant water touched by someone from a lower caste is considered polluted.

Food cooked in water is *kacha* and becomes easily “polluted”, such cooked food is not accepted from a member of a lower caste. Food well fried in ghee (clarified butter) is *pukka* food. A Brahmin can accept such food from another person of a close caste but not for example from Sudra.

## **Fasting**

Fasting to a Hindu does not always mean going without food. Food prepared from wheat, rice, millet or pulses (beans) cannot be eaten during fasting and “fasting food” is less tasty than normal vegetarian diet. Special dishes are associated with some Hindu festival and food offerings are important in worship.

## **Village Hinduism**

The practice of Hinduism differs widely throughout India. Middle-class Hindus living in towns behave differently from Hindus living in villages. In India more Hindus live in villages than in towns and cities. Villages differ, yet some common features distinguish village Hinduism from urban Hinduism in India.

A village population in India is usually made up of one or two Brahmin families and some service castes such as a barber, washer man, potter and leather worker. The majority of villagers though are farmers or land-owning castes. The village has a temple dedicated to the local guardian deity.

Village deities are minor gods, but they are less remote than the major deities. The guardian deity is often female and villagers call her Mata, Ma, Amba, Amma or some other name meaning mother. Villagers believe that local deities can answer prayers and solve problems and referring to Brahman as “Bhagwan”.

## **Hindu worship**

Hindus offer daily worship to family deities at the household shrine, they celebrate annual festivals dedicated to different deities and they go on pilgrimages to distant shrines dedicated to Vishnu, Shiva or the goddess Shakti. Broadly speaking Hindus can be divided into three groups, those who worship Vishnu in his various incarnations, those who worship Shiva and those who worship Shakti. Hinduism has many sects or groups and each has its own form of worship. In some sects a human *guru* or spiritual teacher is revered with the same fervour as a deity.

Hindu worship take different forms, ways of worshipping include offering water to the rising sun or a river deity, sitting cross-legged in front of a image in a temple and saying the name of the deity, walking around the shrine of a deity in a clockwise direction or singing hymns in a temple. The most common form of worship is called *puja*. People make offerings of red kum-kum and yellow turmeric powders, rice grains, sandalwood paste, flowers, fruit, incense and light to an image, either at the home shrine or at a temple. Puja is offered to the family deities each morning after bathing, a more elaborate puja is performed at times of festivals. Food and fruit are offered to the deity at puja and receive back after they are blessed, this blessed offering is called *prasad*.

Daily puja in a Hindu temple is conducted by the chief priest and his helpers. After the morning and evening puja, the sacred light called the *arati* is brought into the hall of the temple. Worshippers receive the light and place offerings of money in the arati tray.

### **Pilgrimages**

Hindus go on pilgrimages to distant temples to view the image of God and to offer worship, or to fulfill a vow. There are many centers of pilgrimage thought out India dedicated to Vishnu, Shiva or the mother goddess. Important places of pilgrimage for Hindus are Badrinath in the Himalaya, Mathura on the river Jumna, Varanasi on the river Ganges, Puri in Orissa, Tirupathi, Kanchipuram near Chennai (formally Madras), Madurai in Tamil Nadu, Rameshwaram and Kanya Kumari at the southern tip of India.

### **Festivals**

Hindu festivals are colourful, joyous occasions. They are celebrated either as private worship at a household shrine or as public neighbourhood festivals. Every one in the neighbourhood takes part in the public festival, but the celebrations at home are restricted to each family member and close friends. Some festivals such as Raksha-Bandhan, Diwali, Navaratri, Dusserah and Holi attract large crowds all over India. Other festivals such as Durga-Puja, Naga-Panchami and Ganesha are more regional in their popularity. Every large temple celebrates the annual festival of the deity to which it is dedicated. At this time a replica of the main image is taken in a chariot procession called *ratha-yatra* through the town. The processions at Jagannath Puri and Udipi are famous for their colourful pageantry.

Navaratri is the Nine Nights festival dedicated to the goddess Shakti. On the eighth night, Durga-Puja is celebrated as a public festival in Bengal. On the day after Navaratri is Dusseraah, the climax of the Ruma-Leela festival in north India. It commemorates the exploits of Prince Rama as described in the epic *Ramayana*. Twenty days after Dusserah, usually in October or November comes the festival of Diwali, dedicated to Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi. On the Raksha-Bandhan day in August women tie a silk thread round the wrists of their brothers to renew ties of affection. Holi is celebrated towards the end of the Hindu calendar year with a bonfire and merry-making. People worship Saraswati in a public festival in Bengal. During August in western India Hindus in rural areas worship live snakes on the day Naga-Panchami.

## Hindu life-rituals

Hindus perform rituals at important stages of development in life, Hindus believe these rituals purify the body and ennoble the personality. The ancient Sanskrit word for such a ritual is *samshara*, meaning sacrament. There are 16 samskaras recommended in the *Dharam-Shastras*, or ancient law books, but only a few people undergo all of them. Most well-to-do Hindu families perform some of these rituals, but only boys experience the sacred thread ceremony. Three samsharas are performed during pregnancy, after birth of the baby come six childhood sacraments to mark the birth, the naming of the child, its first outing, first solid food, first hair cut (also experienced by girls in south India) and earlobe piercing. The 10<sup>th</sup> and initiation sacrament is called the *upanayana*, when boys of the three upper castes are invested with a sacred thread before they begin their study of the scriptures and start formal education. The next two sacraments are included symbolically in the tread ceremony. The 13<sup>th</sup> samskara is *vivaha* or marriage. The 14<sup>th</sup> is the householder's stage, and the 15<sup>th</sup> is the so-called forest-dwelling stage when a special puja is performed after a person retires from regular employment on the 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. The 16<sup>th</sup> and final sacrament is cremation of the dead.

The *upanayana* sacrament is important as the "second-birth" of a boy. After this ritual, he can represent his family in religious rituals. Worship and prayers are offered to *Agni* (sacred fire) to endow the boy with strength and understanding. Worship is also offered to the Sun so that the boy may have intelligence to study the scriptures. (a mantra is a sacred utterance, often a single syllable.)

Fifteen different rituals are performed in a Hindu marriage ceremony. The most important one is the *sapta-padi*, or seven-steps, which the couple take near the sacred fire at the time of their marriage vows.

Hindus cremate their dead, the funeral pyre is lit either by the eldest or the youngest son of the deceased person. The son also has a religious duty to perform *shraddha*, a ritual in annual remembrance of the deceased parents or grandparents.

## Literature

Hinduism has no single book that serves as the source of its doctrines, but Hinduism has many sacred writings all of which have contributed to its fundamental beliefs. The most important of these writings include the *Vedas*, the *Puranas*, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and the *Bhagavad-Gita*.

The teachings of the Vedas existed for centuries before they were finally written down. There are four Vedas: the *Rig-Vedas*, the *Sama-Vedas*, the *Yajur-Vedas* and the *Atharva-Veda*. Each has four parts: the *Samhitas* contains prayers and hymns and are the most important part. The *Brahmanas* deal with ritual and theology and include explanation of the *Samhitas*. The *Aranyakas* deal with the philosophy of devotion for hermits and saints. The *Upanishads* are works of philosophy written by dialogues.

The Puranas are long verse stories that contain many important Hindu myths about Hindu gods and goddesses and the lives of great Hindu heroes. They also describe the Hindu beliefs about how the world began and how it periodically end and is reborn. There are 18 important *Puranans*, the *Bhagavata Purana* is the most widely read text for the worshippers of Vishnu.

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata are long epics, the *Ramayana* tells the story of Prince Rama and his attempts to rescue Sita his wife, who has been kidnapped by the demon king Ravana. The *Mahabharata* describes a battle between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, two families who are cousins.

The Bhagavad-Gita a philosophical work, forms part of the Mahabharata. In it the god Krishna and the Pandava warrior Arjuna discuss the meaning and nature of existence.

The *Dharma-Shastras* are books on Hindu law and customs, the important ones are those written by Manu, Yajnavalka, Parashara and Narada.

*Vedanta* philosophy and the *Bhagavad-Gita* define atman as the divine energy in every creature. Atman, the soul continues to exist when the body dies, when it is rehoused in a new body. Each Atman, because of its karma experiences many lives until it achieves moksha. The philosopher Shankara held that Atman and Brahman were identical, Ramaanuja maintained that Atman dose not merge with Brahnam when it achieves liberation. Madhava stated that Atman and Brahmn were quite separate. Hindu philosophers teach that three qualities, *prakriti* (the matter necessary for all creation), *gunas* (the attributes built into the character of every object) and *maya* (which makes this impermanent world appear merely as an illusion) bind Atman to the material world, it is trapped in the cycle of successive lives.

## History

Excavations in the Indus Valley in the 1920's revealed the existence of an ancient civilization which flourished between 3000 and 2000 B.C. at Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, now in Pakistan. The ancient Indus Valley people probably worshipped a Mother Goddess and a male deity, the forerunner of Shiva in later Hinduism. When tribes speaking an Aryan language settled in northwest India in about 1500 B.C. the Indus cities were probably in decline. The new settlers probably adopted some religious ideas from the earlier inhabitants and incorporated them into their rituals.

The Aryan speaker worshipped spirits of nature, what is known of their religion comes from the hymns of the *Rig-Veda*, composed in stages from around 1500 B.C. which praise the spirits controlling natural forces. The Vedic deities were mostly male and Mother Goddess concept may have been taken from the Indus Valley people. Among the Vedic deities, Indra, Mitra and Varuna were important along with the Adityas , Rudra and Prajapati. In time the first tree gods were forgotten but the other gave rise to the Trimurti of modern Hinduism. Prajapati became Brahma, Ruda became Shiva and one of the Adityas became Vishnu, these gods came to be represented as a single image.

The *Upanishads* are the earliest books in Hindu philosophy and were begun over 2700 years ago. During the next 2000 years important compositions like the ancient law books, the epic *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* as well as the *Puranas* firmly established the Hindu tradition in India. Each of these texts was compiled over hundreds of years.

## **Hindu Reform Movements**

After 1498 when the Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama sailed to India from Portugal, Indians came into contact with western seamanship, science, European (particularly English) literature and European Christian missionaries. The British eventually became the dominant European power in India. From the 1700's the British East India Company employed Indians in large numbers as clerks, minor revenue officials and common soldiers. Contact with very different and challenging cultural patterns gave rise to new ideas in India, which resulted in important Hindu reform movements in the 1800's.

Ram Mohan Roy (1772 – 1833) was born into a Brahmin family in Bengal and experienced the orthodox practice of Hinduism in his youth. He studied the Quran, Buddhism and the New Testament. He disliked the image worship and hated the practice of suttee ever since the time he saw his brother's widow burned alive on her husband's funeral pyre. He fought to abolish polytheism, image worship, the caste system, child marriage, animal sacrifice and suttee.

In 1828 he founded the Brahmo Samaj (society of Brahma [God]) in an attempt to reform Hindu religious practice. The hall of worship of the Samaj had no images, statues or practice. Only prayers and hymns affirming one god were selected, members offered worship as a group. This congregational form of worship was new to Hinduism, the form of worship adopted by the Brahmo Samaj was based on the Christian way of worship, since the founder was inspired by western ideas.

The Samaj inspired progressive developments in Hindu society, religion and politics. The various important laws passed between 1829 and 1950 concerning suttee, caste disabilities, Hindu widows remarriage, child marriage, women's property and untouchability were indirect results of the reform movement of Ram Mohan Roy.

Dayananda (1824 – 1883) founded the Arya Samaj in 1875. Dayananda was born in Gujarat into a rich Brahmin family who worshipped Shiva. He was invested with the sacred thread at the age of eight. Three years later, when he was keeping vigil in a Shiva temple at night, he saw that rats appeared from the holds in the walls and began to eat the food offered to Shiva. He began to doubt the deity's power and formed a dislike for image worship. When his parents arranged his marriage he left home. From the age of 20 he traveled widely to meet holy men to widen his knowledge of religion and philosophy. He studied the Vedas for three years at Mathura until 1863. When his studies were completed his teacher charged him with the duty of spreading the Vedic faith.

In 1875 Dayananda founded the Arya Samaj (society of Aryans) he claimed the Vedas to be eternal, infallible and complete revelation of god. He accepted the doctrines of karm and rebirth, but opposed image worship, polytheism, animal sacrifice, caste based on birth, untouchability, pilgrimages and ritual bathing. He condemned child marriage and the segregation of women, but apposed the remarriage of widows. He introduced “purification rites” to reconvert those Hindus who had been converted to Christianity or Islam. Arya Samaj followers worship on Sundays, they make offerings to Agni (fire) while reciting the Gayatri Hymn from the *Rig-Veda* and read, preach and teach the Vedas. There is no image worship, the Samaj is a democratic organization without regular priests. Every member is required to practice austerity, truth and devotion to God.

Modern Hinduism is developing in many ways, there are several modern examples of sectarian worship such as the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (the Hare-Krishna Movement), the Swaminarayan Religion and the Sathya Sai Baba Movement. These forms of Hinduism lay great emphasis on worship through *bhakti* (devotion).