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## Hinduism

The major religion of the Indian subcontinent is Hinduism. One of the oldest of the world's religions, Hinduism dates back more than 3,000 years, though its present forms are of more recent origin. In the early 21st century, more than 90 percent of the world's Hindus lived in India. Significant minorities were found in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and smaller numbers lived in Myanmar, South Africa, Trinidad, Europe, Canada, and the United States.

The term Hinduism is relatively new, having been coined by British writers in the 19th century to refer to religious ideas and practices distinctive to India. Initially it was an outsiders' term, building on centuries-old usages of the word Hindu. The earliest known civilization of the Indian subcontinent was located in the Indus Valley, and early travelers to the region, beginning with the Greeks and Persians, spoke of its inhabitants as "Hindu" (see [Indus Valley civilization](#)). In the 16th century, residents of India themselves began very slowly to employ the term to distinguish themselves from the Turks. Gradually the distinction became primarily religious rather than ethnic, geographic, or cultural. Although today the term Hinduism is commonly used, many Hindus prefer the term Vedic religion or *sanatana dharma* ("eternal law") to describe their tradition.

Hinduism is so unlike any other religion that it is difficult to define with any precision. It has no founder. Its origins are lost in a very distant past. It does not have one holy book but several. There is no single body of doctrine. Instead there is a great diversity of belief and practice. There are many sects, cults, theologies, and schools of philosophy, and all of them find a home within Hinduism without persecuting each other or accusing each other of heresy. Hinduism features a diverse pantheon of divine beings; however, there is also a widely held belief that there is one creative principle in the universe, the *brahman*, which many Hindus conceive of as a personal God.

Another distinctive feature of Hinduism is belief in the transmigration of souls, or reincarnation. Associated with this belief is the conviction that all living things are part of the same essence. Individuals pass through cycles of birth and death. This means that an individual soul may return many times in human, animal, or even vegetable form. What a person does in the present life will affect the next life. This is the doctrine of *karma*, the law of cause and effect. The goal of the individual is to escape this cycle, or wheel of birth and rebirth, so that the individual soul, *atman*, may eventually become part of the absolute soul, or *brahman*.

The caste system of India is another historic characteristic of Hinduism. Very early in its history, Indian society was divided into four classes: priests (or Brahmins), warriors, merchants, and servants. These classes, or castes, have since been subdivided into thousands of subcastes, ranging from the Brahmins at the top to the scheduled castes, or Dalits (the people formerly classified as "untouchables"), at the bottom. These groups

have traditionally been hereditary and have married only among themselves (see [India, "Caste"](#)).

## Origins

The precise origins of Hinduism have so far eluded scholars and other investigators. It is known for certain that there was, from about 2300 to 1500 BC, a highly developed civilization in the Indus Valley and beyond. This civilization, known as Harappan, had its own religion, which may not have been uniform throughout the extensive territory it covered. Around 1500 BC, according to traditional accounts, the Indus Valley was invaded by an Indo-European people once called Aryans but now referred to as Vedic people. It was long held that they almost totally transformed Indian civilization and in so doing imposed new forms of religion. More recent scholarship has challenged this traditional view, which is based on ancient literary sources written by the Vedic people, and has argued for a much less violent merging of the two cultures. In this view, the Vedic people gradually migrated into northern India as Harappan culture began a process of slow decline. Eventually, the Vedic culture came to replace the earlier civilization as the people of India adopted their language and beliefs and adapted them to their own traditions.

The problem in understanding the development of Hinduism is disentangling what may have preceded the movement of the Vedic people into India from the religion that evolved after 1500 BC. It is probable that much of the Indus Valley religion moved away from the population centers of the Vedic people and survived in the countryside. It may have eventually become interwoven with Vedic beliefs and practices to produce historic Hinduism.

The religion of the Vedic people was similar in many respects to that of other Indo-European groups. It was a religion of the household, of veneration for ancestors, and of devotion to the world spirit (*brahman*). It had numerous gods, nearly all of whom were male. But the Vedic people made no images or pictures of their gods as later Hinduism has done.

The worship of the Vedic people was centered around the sacrificial fire at home, while later Hinduism worshiped in temples. The complex ceremony of the Vedic people involved ritual sacrifice of animals and the drinking of an inebriating liquor, known as soma. Hymns were composed for these rituals, and it is in the collections of the hymns, along with incantations and sacrificial formulas, that the nature of the early religion was spelled out. The collections of these are called the Vedas, and it was under their influence that the earliest Hinduism developed. (For the literature of Hinduism, see [Indian Literature, "The Sanskrit Classics."](#))

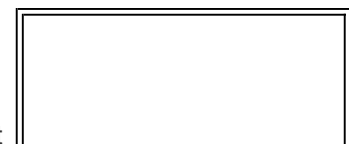
## Vedic Period

Sometime between 1500 and 1200 BC, the first period of conquest and consolidation by the Vedic people, the Rigveda was composed in Sanskrit, one of the classical languages of India. It is the oldest religious scripture in the world. The Rigveda is a collection of 1,028 hymns to the gods—most notably Indra, the sky god, and Agni, the fire god—and is believed to be a product of divine revelation. Three other collections—the Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda—were added later. These Vedas were all composed over a period of several centuries and passed on orally and collected in their present form sometime during the 1st millennium BC.

Between 900 and 700 BC a body of prose writings called the Brahmanas was attached to the Vedas. These contain explanations of the ceremonies mentioned in the Vedas. Even later additions, called the Aranyakas and the Upanishads, presumably written between 1000 and 300 BC, were added to this body of literature. All of these texts, along with some later books, became the sacred scripture of Hinduism as it evolved in the second half of the 1st millennium. Of them the Rigveda is the most revered, though its contents are not much known by most Hindus today.

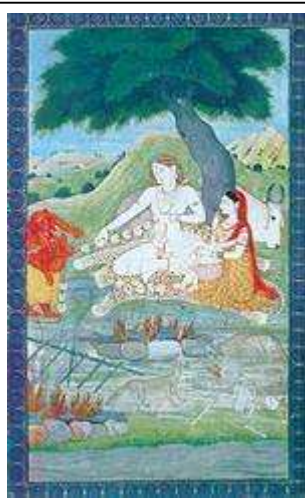
## From 700 BC to AD 800

The writers of the Vedic hymns seem to have believed in a heaven as the dwelling place of the gods as well as of souls that had undergone ritual preparation. The ritually unprepared were believed to descend into a dark, cold underworld. Sometime between 1000 and 600 BC, however, the belief in reincarnation appeared. Although at first confined to small groups of ascetics, it



soon spread rapidly throughout India. The doctrine was first expounded in written form in a body of literature called the Upanishads (traditionally and literally “sitting near a teacher” but more commonly understood as “connection” or “equivalence”). The purpose of these works is the gaining of a mystical form of knowledge that allows the individual to escape the cycle of rebirths. The Upanishads represent the beginnings of philosophy in India. They are the last stage of interpretation of the Vedas. The Upanishads developed the concept of *brahman*, and they investigated the nature of all reality.

By the time the Buddha appeared in the 6th century BC, the belief in reincarnation was firmly established. From that time Hinduism's main concern became release from the cycle of birth and death instead of making offerings to please or pacify the gods. Sacrifice became infrequent because of an unwillingness to destroy living things. This doctrine of reverence for life, called *ahimsa* (literally “noninjury”), became one of the chief teachings in Jainism (see [Jainism](#)).



**An 18th-century Kangra painting depicts Shiva and Ganesa**

An 18th-century Kangra painting depicts Shiva and Ganesa, left, stringing together skulls of the dead while Parvati, right, looks on. Ganesa, the son of Shiva and Parvati, is the god first invoked at the beginning of worship or any new undertaking. Nandi the bull, behind the tree, is one of Shiva's chief attendants. (Credit: Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; photograph A.C. Cooper)

The religious development of this period is reflected in two great literary works, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. The *Mahabharata*, or Great Epic of the Bharata Dynasty, is the world's longest poem. It is a mass of legendary material about the struggles for power between two families. It is also an important spiritual guide that explains the immortality of the soul and impermanence of the body and includes discussion of *dharma*, a moral and religious code of conduct for those seeking release from the birth-death cycle. Within the narrative is one of the most famous literary works in the world, the *Bhagavadgita*, or “The Lord's Song.” The book is written in the form of a dialogue between Prince Arjuna and his charioteer, Krishna—an avatar, or incarnation, of Vishnu. The *Ramayana*, also an epic poem, is about 24,000 couplets long. Its theme is the life of Prince Rama and his adventures.

The Puranas, another collection of sacred texts, began appearing as early as AD 350; the final texts were prepared between 1000 and 1500. They were written almost entirely in narrative verse and although they contain a great variety of legendary material, their main purpose was glorifying the gods Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahma. Of the 18 principal Puranas that survive, the most popular is the *Bhagavata-purana*, which treats the early life of Krishna.

In the early part of this era, the Hindus generally worshiped without the aids of statues or other images of the gods. By AD 300–650, however, the worship of images in stone temples was firmly established. The worship of female divinities had also become common. The Mother Goddess, most commonly called Shakti, was worshiped in various forms and under differing names. She was the subject of another body of literature called the Tantras. Some animal and human sacrifices were revived by the end of this era, as was the practice of suttee, the burning of a widow on the funeral pyre of her dead husband.

In the period immediately after 550 BC, Buddhism and Jainism emerged, religions centered on the monastic life (see [monks and monasticism](#)). A strong emphasis on the ascetic life in these religions had a profound influence on Hinduism. Asceticism was unknown to the religion of the Vedas, and the priestly class of Brahmins rejected it. However, more and more young men

became ascetic and gave up the worldly life to become wandering hermits and beggars. Asceticism grew rapidly and has remained a prominent feature of Hinduism.



**A 19th century painting from Jaipur shows Vishnu**

A 19th century painting from Jaipur shows Vishnu and his 10 incarnations: fish, tortoise, boar, man-lion, dwarf, Rama-with-the axe, Rama as king, Krishna, Buddha, and Kalkin. (Credit: Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

## From AD 800 to 1800

This 1,000-year era was noted for the division of Hinduism into sects and schools of philosophy, the writing of devotional hymns to the gods, and the influence of Islam in India. By this time the creative vitality of Hinduism had moved to southern India, home of several of the devotional movements collectively called *bhakti*.

Six schools of philosophy emerged during this time. The two most significant were based on the teachings of Sankara and Ramanuja. Sankara was the chief exponent of the Vedanta school of philosophy, from which most of the main currents of modern Hinduism derive. The several schools of Vedanta all believe in the transmigration of souls, the authority of the Vedas, Brahman as the creator of the world, and the responsibility of the individual for his actions.

Sankara taught a doctrine called monism, which means that all things—God, the world, and the individual soul—are basically one in spite of appearances. Ramanuja, the single most influential thinker for devotional Hinduism, was also of the Vedanta school. His teaching differed, however, from Sankara. He believed that God, the soul, and matter are three separate realities. The goal of the soul is to serve God, just as the body is meant to serve the soul. The goal of meditation is the contemplation of God.

An unusual school was founded in the 12th century by Basava. Known as Virasaiva, or heroic Saivism, it was devoted exclusively to the worship of Shiva and may have been influenced by Jainism. It rejected all forms of image worship, the Vedas, and all caste distinctions.

A similar doctrine was taught by Kabir in the 15th century. He denied image worship, the castes, asceticism, sacred texts, and pilgrimages. He accepted the doctrine of reincarnation. His God was called Rama, though he accepted the minor gods of Hinduism as having some reality. He was also a hymn writer.

Hindu devotional literature and hymns honoring Vishnu and Shiva were first written in the Tamil language, another classical Indian language. Collections appeared as early as the 7th century. The composition of similar hymns in northern languages did not begin for several centuries. By the end of the 17th century, the writing of hymns had ceased, and there were no advances in Hindu thought during the next century. By the time Europeans arrived in large numbers in India, they found a conservative religion steeped in tradition. The chief aim was preserving a rigid social order by means of complex rituals and regulations.

## Modern Hinduism

British colonialism and the arrival of Christian missionaries were the primary influences on Hinduism from the early 19th century. Because of both, Hinduism underwent a revival. By the 20th century it had become so intertwined with the movement for independence that Hinduism and Indian nationalism became virtually synonymous.

While rejecting the doctrines of Christianity, Hinduism was strongly influenced by its social consciousness. A number of influential men launched reform movements that took what was beneficial from the West without compromising basic Hinduism. Rammohan Ray promoted education patterned after that of England, and he called for the prohibition of widow-burning. Dayananda Sarasvati rejected idol worship and the caste system and urged India to adopt Western technology. Ramakrishna stressed the unity of all religions, and his disciple, Narendranath Datta, under the name Vivekananda, founded the Ramakrishna Mission to send out monks to do good works and to promote scholarship. He also carried the message of Hinduism around the world. In the 20th century the major figure in Hindu nationalism was Mahatma Gandhi, who strove successfully to end British colonialism (see [Gandhi, Mahatma](#)).

## Gods of Modern Hinduism

Although many divinities may be worshiped, modern Hindus are generally divided into followers of Vishnu, Shiva, or Shakti. Nearly all Hindus look upon one of these as an expression of the ultimate being, the one in charge of the destiny of the universe.

Each group of followers holds the Vedas in high regard, but each also has its own scriptures. In the *Bhagavadgita*, for example, Vishnu is honored in his incarnation Krishna. Another incarnation, Rama, is the hero of the Ramayana. Vishnu is the protector and preserver of the world, and he is worshiped by many cults in various forms besides Krishna and Rama. The worship of the god is called Vaisnavism. The beginnings of



this cult were about the 7th century BC. (See also [Hare Krishna](#).)

Shiva, a Sanskrit word meaning “auspicious one,” is a more remote god than Vishnu. His worship is called Shivaism. Shiva is a more difficult god to understand than is Vishnu. He is regarded as both destroyer and restorer. Doctrines about Shiva may have merged roles that were once assigned to various earlier gods.

Shiva has a female consort who goes under several names. He is occasionally paired with Shakti, the mother goddess. They and their sons Skanda and Ganesa live on top of Mount Kailasa in the Himalayas. He is depicted in a number of forms—such as a wandering beggar, half man and half female, or a dancer.

Shakti is the mother goddess. Like Shiva, she can be either beneficial or fierce, depending on her form. As Parvati she is depicted as a beautiful woman in middle age. As Kali she is a giantess with black skin, a blood-red tongue, and large tusks.

Kali carries an assortment of weapons and wears a garland of human skulls around her neck. The mother goddess thus stands for all aspects of nature from birth to death.

In addition to the three primary deities, there are several others who are still worshiped. Ganesa, the elephant-headed son of Shiva and Shakti, is prayed to before all undertakings. Lakshmi, the wife of Vishnu, is patroness of wealth. Sarasvati is the goddess of learning and the arts. Hanuman is the monkey-god associated with the adventures of Rama. He appears as the personification of the power of God on Earth. Manasa, the goddess of snakes, is worshiped by peasants in some areas.

Many animals and plants are also regarded as sacred. Most notable is the cow. All cattle are protected, and even among castes that are not vegetarian, beef is not eaten. Monkeys, tree squirrels, and some snakes are also considered holy. Among sacred trees are the banyan and the tulsi. All rivers are considered somewhat holy, but the Ganges in the north of India is the holiest of rivers because it supposedly flows from the head of Shiva. It is the focus of pilgrimage for millions.

People are also sacred according to their station in life. Thus parents are holy to their children and teachers to their students.

## Festivals and Pilgrimages

Temples of any significance hold a festival at least once a year. Festivals are combinations of religious ceremonies, processions of the locally favored god, music, dances, and other forms of celebration. Most festivals are related to the cycles of nature. The New Year celebration, Diwali, takes place with exchanges of gifts, lighting of ceremonial lamps, gambling (a ritual designed to gain luck for the coming year), and fireworks to frighten away spirits of the dead.

Pilgrimages to holy places began during the Vedic period and continue to be an important aspect of modern Hinduism. Certain places are considered sacred because of a specific historical event, connection with a legendary figure, the appearance of a god, or location on the bank of a holy river.

Visits to sacred places are supposed to confer some benefit upon the pilgrim—frequently the healing of a dread disease. People who travel to Varanasi (Benares) when death is near hope to be released from the birth-death cycle by dying near the Ganges River. Many shrines organize annual gatherings that are partly religious and partly local fairs.

## Temple Worship

Temples range in size from small village shrines with crude statues to huge complexes—almost small cities—with walls and monumental gates enclosing courtyards, pools for ceremonial bathing, schools, hospitals, and monasteries. Services are not carried out at fixed times as they are in Western religions.

The worship itself is an act of calling forth the god's presence and entertaining the deity as a royal guest. The first act is opening the temple door. For worshipers of Vishnu this symbolizes opening the gates of heaven.

For Shiva worshipers it secures the building's protection. Temple visitors may take part in chanting or listening to doctrinal expositions. Images of the gods are honored with gifts of flowers, fruit, or perfumes, and visiting worshipers are given small portions of consecrated food.

In addition to temple worship, there are daily household rites, including an offering of food, often fruit, or flowers to the gods and recitation of the Vedas. Household worship focuses on the transitions in a person's life, such as the rite of passage from childhood to adult responsibility, marriage, or childbirth. Wedding ceremonies are the major household rites, and they have remained quite elaborate, lasting usually up to three days. The traditional funeral method is cremation. Part of the funeral rite is a gift of food to the Brahmins (the priestly class) for the benefit of the deceased.

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