

# What is Hinduism?

Hindu	Part of a	series on			
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A Hindu (Devanagari: १? (M&A)), as per modern definition, is an adherent of the philosophies and scriptures of Hinduism, the religious, philosophical and cultural system that originated in the Indian subcontinent.

There are approximately 1 billion Hindus, making Hinduism the third largest religion in the world after Christianity and Islam, of whom approximately 890 million live in India.[1] Other countries with large Hindu populations include Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Malaysia, South Africa, Mauritius, Fiji, Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname and Guyana.[2] Hinduism is believed to be the oldest living religious tradition in the world.[3]

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Due to the wide diversity in the beliefs, practices and traditions encompassed by Hinduism, there is no universally accepted answer to the question, "Who is a Hindu?", or even agreement on whether Hinduism represents is a religious, cultural or socio-political entity. In 1995, Chief Justice P. B. Gajendragadkar was quoted in an Indian Supreme Court ruling:[4]

When we think of the Hindu religion, we find it difficult, if not impossible, to define Hindu religion or even adequately describe it. Unlike other religions in the world, the Hindu religion does not claim any one prophet; it does not worship any one God; it does not subscribe to any one dogma; it does not believe in any one philosophic concept; it does not follow any one set of religious rites or performances; in fact, it does not appear to satisfy the narrow traditional features of any religion of creed. It may broadly be described as a way of life and nothing more.

Thus some scholars argue that the Hinduism is not a religion per se but rather a reification of a diverse set of traditions and practices by scholars who constituted a unified system and arbitrarily labeled it Hinduism.[5] The usage may also have been necessitated by the desire to distinguish between "Hindus" and followers of other religions during the periodic census undertaken by the colonial British government in India. Other scholars, while seeing Hinduism as a 19th century construct, view Hinduism as a response to British colonialism by Indian nationalists who forged a unified tradition centered on oral and written Sanskrit texts adopted as scriptures.[6]

A commonly held view, though, is that while Hinduism contains both "uniting and dispersing tendencies", it has a common central thread of philosophical concepts (including dharma, moksha and samsara), practices (puja, bhakti etc) and cultural traditions.[7] These common elements originating (or being codified within) the Vedic, Upanishad and Puranic scriptures and epics. Thus a Hindu could :

- follow any of the Hindu schools of philosophy, such as Advaita (non-dualism), Dvaita (dualism), Dvaitadvaita (dualism with non-dualism), etc.[8][9]
- follow a tradition centered on any particular form of the Divine, such as Shaivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism, etc.[10]
- practice bhakti (devotion) or any of the other yoga systems in order to achieve moksha.

In 1995, while considering the question "who are Hindus and what are the broad features of Hindu religion", the Supreme Court of India highlighted Bal Gangadhar Tilak's formulation of Hinduism's defining features:[4]

Acceptance of the Vedas with reverence; recognition of the fact that the means or ways to salvation are diverse; and

the realization of the truth that the number of gods to be worshipped is large, that indeed is the distinguishing feature of Hindu religion.

Some thinkers have attempted to distinguish between the concept of Hinduism as a religion, and a Hindu as a member of a nationalist or socio-political class. Veer Savarkar in his influential pamphlet *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?* considered geographical unity, common culture and common race to be the defining qualities of Hindus; thus a Hindu was a person who saw India "as his Fatherland as well as his Holy land, that is, the cradle land of his religion".[11] This conceptualization of Hinduism, has led to establishment of *Hindutva* as the dominant force in political Hinduism over the last century.[12]

Origins of the word Hindu See also: Etymology of the names of India

Hindu is derived from the Persian pronunciation of the Sanskrit word *Sindhu* (Sanskrit: ४(M'A, the name for the Indus River), located in what is now Pakistan.[13] The Persians, using the word "Hindu" for "Sindhu", referred to the people who lived near or across the *Sindhu* River as "Hindu", and their religion later became known as "Hinduism." The religion had previously been known as *San tana dharma* (the eternal law), *Vaidika dharma* (law of the Vedas), *Arya dharma* (the noble religion), or *M nava dharma* (the religion of mankind). Eventually the word "Hindu" came into common use among Hindus themselves,[2] and was adopted into Greek as *Indos* and *Indikos* ("Indian"), into Latin as *Indianus*. [14] and into Sanskrit, as *Hindu*, appearing in some early medieval texts (e.g. *Bhavicya Pur Ga*, *K lik Pur Ga*, *R mako[a*, *Hemantakaviko[a* and *Adbhutarkpako[a]*)[15]

Hallmarks of the Hindu Society

Ethnic and cultural fabric

The Ganga is considered as one of the two most sacred river by Hindus, the other being the *Sindhu*  
See also: Indo-Aryans, Aryan Invasion Theory, Demographics of India, History of India, and Out of India Theory

Hinduism has one of the most ethnically diverse body of adherents in the world. For some, it is hard to classify Hinduism as a religion, as the framework, symbols, leaders and books of reference that make up a typical religion are not uniquely identified in the case of Hinduism. However, it is the world's oldest religion which inspired others and is seen as the mother of all religions just as India is seen as the father of all civilizations. Most commonly it can be seen as a "way of life" which gives rise to many civilized forms of religions. Hinduism, its religious doctrines, traditions and observances are very typical and inextricably linked to the culture and demographics of India.

Large tribes and communities of indigenous origins, are also closely linked to the earliest synthesis and formation of Hindu civilization. Peoples of East Asian roots living in the states of north eastern India and Nepal were also a part of the earliest Hindu civilization. Immigration and settlement of peoples from Central Asia and peoples of Indo-Greek heritage have brought their own influence on Hindu society. Some of the staunchest defenders of Hindu India against Muslim invaders were the Rajputs of modern Rajasthan.

The deities of the Indus Valley Civilization bear resemblances to Hindu Gods such as Shiva. The Indus Valley Civilization is often taken to represent the historical continuum of Hinduism. The roots of Hinduism in southern India, and amongst tribal and indigenous communities is just as ancient and fundamentally contributive to the foundations of the religious and philosophical system.

Ancient Hindu kingdoms arose and spread the religion and traditions across South East Asia, particularly Thailand, Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia, Cambodia and what is now central Vietnam. A form of Hinduism particularly different from Indian roots and traditions is practised in Bali, Indonesia, where Hindus form 90% of the population. Indian migrants have taken Hinduism and Hindu culture to South Africa, Fiji, Mauritius and other countries in and around the Indian Ocean, and in the nations of the West Indies and the Caribbean.

Many Many New Age Movements have adopted variants of Hindu practices.

Linguistics of Hinduism

from the Mahabharata. See also: Sanskrit

Although the Vedas, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana have been written in the ancient language of Sanskrit, Hinduism has several important religious and philosophical works written in other ancient languages like Tamil, Pali, Prakrit, and modern languages like Hindi, Punjabi, Malayalam, Telugu, Gujarati, Marathi, Oriya and Bengali.

Many of modern discourses, essays and analysis of Hindu religion and society, and re-telling of its greatest epics, are

published in the English language.

## Ceremonies, observances and pilgrimage

Hinduism is also very diverse in the religious ceremonies performed by its adherents for different periods and events in life, and for death. Principal Festivity of the Hindus also vary from region to region which include Diwali, Durgapuja, Holi, etc.

### Initiation Main article: Initiation in Hinduism

Many Hindus, may perform initiation ceremonies like Upanayana or Janoy or 'Bratabandha'. These ceremonies have variants depending on the caste, the culture and the region.

In a ceremony administered by a priest, a coir string, known as Janoy or Poonal, is hung from around a young boy's left shoulder to his right waist line for Brahmins and from right shoulders to left waistline by Kshatriyas. The ceremony varies from region to community, and includes reading from the Vedas and special Mantras and Slokas.

Young females (prepubescent until married) do not have similar ritual passage as young males. However, some young Hindu females, especially those from southern India, may follow annual Monsoon Austerity Ritual of Purification by not eating cooked food for one or two weeks, depending on age of child. This is known as "Goryo" or "Goriyo".

Generally speaking, Hindus are free to join an order or inner circle, and once they have joined it they must submit to its rites and way of living. But this type of joining is voluntary and has the possibility of leaving the order at any time without serious objection from fellow followers as long as one says and does things without associating them with the order which he or she has left. It is a social form of co-option of life style. It is said in Sanskrit that, "dharmo hi hato hanti, dharmo rakshati rakshitah", which translates to "Dharma, when destroyed, destroys; dharma protects when [it is]protected", meaning the path of righteousness will protect one as long as one upholds and follows it. The initiation (diksha), a sort of purification or consecration involving a transformation of the aspirant's personality, is regarded as a complement to, or even a substitute for, the previous initiation ceremony rite of consecration that preceded the Vedic sacrifice in ancient India; in later and modern Hinduism, the initiation of a layman by his guru (spiritual guide) into a religious sect. In the soma sacrifices of the Vedic period, the lay sacrificer, after bathing, kept a day-long (in some cases up to a yearlong) silent vigil inside a special hut in front of a fire.

Some Hindus will give offerings to their gods by placing rice or flowers in a bowl above the stove every morning before they eat, and behind this bowl maybe a picture of one of their gods. Along with giving offerings they might also pray to the god they gave an offering to.

### Hindu New Year

Hindu New Year is celebrated at different times of the year by people of different states. Many regions have different calendars with some starting in March while others begin at the time of Diwali, the festival of lights in autumn. Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra states celebrate New Year on the same day, but Tamil Nadu and coastal Karnataka celebrate the New Year at different time (April 14). The names of the new year vary also. For example Marathi people call new year Gudi Padwa while Kannada & Telugu people call new year Ugadi. Tamil people call their new year as Varusha Pirapu. People from coastal Karnataka and Kerala call it Vishu. People from other northern states celebrate Holi as their New Year day which is first day of first month Chaitra according to Hindu calendar. The Hindu new year is also celebrated in Nepal in the month of April, usually falling on the 14th of the month. Nepal is the only Hindu country where the Hindu calendar, known as Bikrama Sambat, is the official calendar. 14th April in 2007 will herald the beginning of the year 2064 BS.

### Fasting

Fasting is very common among most Hindus. They Fast on certain days of the week based on their belief and to appease certain deities. Some fast on Mondays to appease Shiva, where as some fast on Saturdays to appease Shani similarly some fast on Fridays to penance in the name of Goddess Laxmi or Santoshi. Most fasting Hindus abstain from eating meat and only live on fruits and milk. Some people refrain from using edible salts in the preparation of the meal and have it only one time on the day. There is a month called Shravan or Savan when Hindus fast for the whole month and abstain from eating any form of meat. Also they fast during the holy days like Ganesh Chaturthi (Chauth), Shivratri, Ram Navami and Navaratri. Fasting is seen as a form of penance (tapasya) or alternatively as a mean to develop a close bond with the Supreme Being.

### Marriage Main article: Marriage in Hinduism

Wedding ceremonies and rituals vary in Hinduism. Most Hindu parents look for a prospective match for their children from their own community or caste. The ritual of matching the prospective's jathakam or janampatri with the help of a

holy priest is also widely practiced by many Hindus. Modern day couples usually approve each other before getting the elders of the family approve their 'arranged' marriage. The important difference between a Hindu marriage and other types of marriage is that, Hindu marriage is a 3-party contract, as much as it is a 2-party contract in the western civilization. The third party that needs to approve the marriage is essentially the elders of the family representing the interest of the clan. In today's India, with the social evolution, the approvals of elders and family are slowly becoming a formality, Also, the marriages between different community and castes are becoming quite common and frequent.

Hindu marriage ceremonies are very colorful and elaborate. Families of the bride and the groom hold numerous festivities to celebrate the wedding. Marriage without a Brahmin priest was traditionally not regarded as a "religiously accepted marriage" in Hindu society. In contemporary times, lower caste priests such as the "Pandaram" order have performed marriage ceremonies that are acceptable in society.[16][17]Saptapadi is an important ritual performed during the wedding in which the bride and the groom circumambulate a sacred fire, known as agni, seven times. As the inheritance of the family wealth was by the males only, girls who would move out to live with another family after marriage, were given a fair share of the family wealth as dowry. But with the modernization of Hindu society, some eligible bachelors started to see this as a demandable contribution from the bride's father. The practice of demanding a dowry is still prevalent in some parts of India and sometimes the bride's family or the bride gets harassed by the groom's family for this. Dowry formed an integral part of Hindu marriage until it was rendered unlawful by the Indian government in 1961. Dowry is legal if it represents "stri-dhana" i.e. a girl's share of the parents' wealth, given voluntarily by the parents. In some parts of Indian society, the dowry system is getting phased out and regarded as a disgraceful act. Education programs, women's outreach groups and media-based awareness have contributed to the reduction of dowry related issues, making the practice of mandatory dowries in marriages less significant in contemporary Hindu society.

### Pilgrimage

The largest religious gathering on Earth. [1][2] Around 70 million Hindus from around the world participated in Kumbh Mela at one of the Hindu Holy city Prayaga (India).

Many Hindus make pilgrimages to the holy shrines (known as Tirthas). Hindu holy shrines include the abode of Shiva, Mount Kailash in Tibet, Shiva's lingam in Amarnath, Anantnag, Rameshwaram, and Kedarnath; the holy cities of Haridwar, Dwarka, Puri, Prayaga, Mathura, Tirumala, Tirupati, Varanasi, and Ayodhya. Goddess Durga's holy shrine in Vaishno Devi attracts thousands of devotees every year. Hundreds of millions of Hindus annually visit holy rivers such as the Ganges ("Ganga" in Sanskrit) and temples near them, wash and bathe themselves to purify their sins, make sacrifices and win pious credits.

The Kumbha Mela (the Great Fair) is a gathering of between 10 to 20 million Hindus upon the banks of the holy rivers at Allahabad (Prayag), as periodically ordained in different parts of India by Hinduism's priestly leadership. The most famous is at the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna in Uttar Pradesh which is known as "Sangam". It is regarded as the largest gathering of humanity on Earth. After this, Hindus go on pilgrimages to cities, and on the way stop at as many holy sights as possible.

### Death

Upon the death of a Hindu person, his or her body is ceremonially bathed and wrapped in clean, mostly white khadi cloth. The families often dress their departed relative in very simple clothes and maintain an emphasis on less color.

At the ceremony of cremation all mourners must wear only white clothes. In India, especially northern India, white is the color of mourning. In modern times, dull colored clothes, shirts and pants are deemed acceptable.

An attending priest conducts the ceremony, purifying the body and pyre by sprinkling holy water and continuously singing or chanting religious hymns or songs. The body is to be set alight only by the eldest male child of the deceased, or the closest male relative. However, in modern society women are asserting their right as children and/or closest relative of the deceased to cremate their loved ones. In many cases, this is increasingly being accepted.

Hindus in India are cremated upon open grounds upon wooden pyres, though the use of cremation chambers is increasing in popularity owing to the scarcity of wood and lack of exposure. The ashes of the person's remains are gathered and placed in a pot, which may be ritually immersed in any of Hinduism's holy rivers by the family with an attending priest. However, if one is unable to reach a Hindu holy river, it is best to find a river or body of water that flows into the ocean. If Ganga water (or water from any holy river) is available in sealed copper pots, water is either poured into the mouth of the deceased, or mixed with the ashes following cremation, if it is not available, holy water prepared by priests is poured into the mouths of the deceased. It is accepted that the ashes of the deceased will be immersed within 3 days. If it is not done within this time frame, additional rituals must be carried out. However these procedures are not concrete, and may vary from region to region.

The practice of cremation is not universal among Hindus. Hindus of various regions and castes may bury their dead as

well, as per their families' tradition. However, many prefer cremation in comparison to burial, even if burial is the common practice of the family.

### Religion for the common Hindu

Murtis or deities and their worship (puja) play a crucial role in Hinduism. Shown here is the popular figure of Ganesha. See also: Yoga, Vedic astrology, Bhagavad Gita, and Ramayana

To many Hindus, the Vedas, large corpus of texts originated in Ancient India, are the main source of religious social and religious practices in Hindu society. By tradition, the distinction between "believer" and "unbeliever" (Nastika) was simply whether the person, in principle, accepted the authority of the Vedas. Such acceptance was in many cases a matter of common terminology and wildly different belief systems coexist (including atheistic, polytheistic, monotheistic, among others) within the community of "believers." Consequently, for the common Hindu, the connection to the Vedas is mostly through certain chants that are performed at various ceremonies, and not through an emotional/spiritual connection to the content of the Vedas.

The Puranas are a wide collection of religious treatises, biographies and stories on the historical, mythological and religious characters in Hindu folklore, classic literature and sacred scriptures. There are often the source of popular Hindu folk tales and religious lessons and thus play a much bigger role in the emotional/spiritual dimension of the common Hindu's life.

Yoga is an important connection to a Hindu to his religious and historical heritage. The art of spiritual and physical exercises are a distinguished native tradition pursued by millions of Hindus worldwide.

Indian Vedic astrology is important to the conduct of any of life's important events such as marriage, applying for a post or admission, buying a house or starting a new business. To millions of Hindus, the kundali is an invaluable possession that charts the course of life for a man or a woman from the time of his birth, all ascertained by Vedic mathematics and astrology.

Perhaps the most popular Hindu scripture is the Mahabharata, depicting a civil war within a family that takes on dimensions of the struggle between dharma and adharma. Krishna's discourse to the warrior prince Arjuna, known as the Bhagavad Gita and contained in the Mahabharata is the guide book on life for the common Hindu. For many Hindus the Bhagavad Gita is considered a source of divine guidance and inspiration. Devotional readers apply Krishna's teachings to the personal and worldly contexts of their life. It is often considered as the main source of religious teaching for Hindu practitioners.

Similarly, the Ramayana, depicting the life of the prince and king Rama, also plays a big role through its many different versions. To hundreds of millions of Hindus, Rama is more than just an incarnation of the Supreme, or simply a just king of Ayodhya. He is the still living, thriving soul and identity of real Hinduism. Rama is the image of Hinduism, the Perfect Man, its conscience and undying hope of deliverance.

The doctrines of moksha by the diligent discharge of personal, social and religious duty is the corner stone of the Hindu society. By following one's duty (Swa-Dharma) one gains merit and when the process is completed; a union with the Godhead and cessation of the cycle of birth and death. Dereliction of duty will result in all sorts of misfortunes, including birth in a lower level in the social hierarchy. This is a strong motivation to stick to the right path of human nature. Commonly this swa-dharma or varna is misunderstood as caste, the class identity in Hindu society. Varna is by a soul's karma while Jat or caste is simply by birth and not necessarily in a person's nature. So it is important to follow a person's nature towards and seek out their duty.

Many Hindus identify the transcendent principle of Brahman itself as Vishnu and believe that Vishnu Himself represents the Trinity and are known as Vaishnava; many others believe the Supreme Being is Shiva or Shankara and that He Himself represents the Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva Himself and are known as Shaiva; while yet others believe in the female Principle Shakti as the Supreme Energy or Force for life (birth and preservation) and destruction unified, and are called Shakta. In Vaishnavism and Shaivism, Shakti is God's Unified Energy (Power) personified. So all these groups choose their Deity and classify Him/Her as God Almighty while all other Gods are but a form of the One. The fourth major group, the Smarta, are non-sectarian Hindus that call the Trinity and Shakti the Supreme One Brahman, which manifests into personal forms of God, such as Brahma, Vishnu or Shiva (also known as Mahesh). However, no barrier or distinction or rivalry of any nature exists between any of these - historically, Hinduism is known for its religious tolerance and there is no friction whatsoever between these groups, who respect each other's practices. Each naturally respects all incarnations of the God, only choosing to see the Supreme in one particular form. Many follow a blend of all three beliefs and this is by far the most common form of religion for Hindus, with a mix of Shaivism, Shaktism and Vaishnavism as well as other reform movements. In most Hindu temples one will find Shiva lingam together with vaishnava aspects of worship.

Because the foundation of Hinduism, the Rig Veda says that there are many paths to the Lord, any God may be

worshipped for the achievement of a union with the Supreme, Moksha. In certain sections, contradictions appear such as depicting Vishnu and the Lord, while other sections maintain that another spirit is God. The contradictions are believed to come from the same truth because, for Hindus as well as others such as Zoroastrians or Parsis, God is beyond conception, beyond imagination. For example, the Rigveda(10.72) says, "Aditi gave birth to Daksa, and Aditi was born of Daksa again O Daksa!"[18] Furthermore, God (Brahman) is believed to be both impersonal (without qualities and a body) and yet transcendent (with qualities and a body) by Hindus.

### The many names of Hinduism

The Sanatana Dharma is also known by many names as it expands to many peoples. A popular name, usually used by Hindu reformers is Arya Dharma. Another popular name is Vaidik Dharma because it is founded by the Vedas and focuses on the Vedic way of life. It is called Sat Dharma by a few, meaning "true religion." In the Mahabharata there is a chapter called the Mokshdharma. Because Hinduism is believed by its disciples to lead to Moksha, it is called by the name. It is also known to a few as Atma Dharma meaning that it focuses on the salvation of the soul. It is also called Jaiva Dharma meaning the same. A few times Hindus even mix the existing names with other existing names such as Vedic Arya Dharma, Satya Sanatan Dharma, Adi Sanatan Devatas Dharma. However, in most scriptures the word Dharma alone is used to describe Hinduism.

See also

#### Hindu people

- India
- World Hinduism
- Survey of Hindu organisations
- Hindu joint family
- Madhvacharya
- Mandir (Hindu Temple)

#### Hinduism

- Hinduism
- Ramayana
- Mahabharat
- Vedas
- Upanishad
- Vaishnavism
- Shaivism
- Jai Jagdish Hare

#### Other Dharmic religions

- Buddhism
- Buddhism and Hinduism
- Jainism
- Sikhism
- Hinduism and Sikh Panth

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- ^ From Aditi to Durga

#### External links

- A Tribute to Hinduism
- About the name "Hindu"; By Stephen Knapp

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