

Learning About World Religions: Hinduism

What are the origins and beliefs of Hinduism?

15.1. Introduction



In this chapter, you will learn about the origins and beliefs of Hinduism. Hinduism is the most influential set of religious beliefs in modern India.

The ancient traditions that gave rise to Hinduism have shaped Indian life in countless ways. This cultural heritage has **affected** how people worship, what jobs they do, and even what they eat. It has inspired great art and literature. And it has helped determine the status of people in Indian society. One of the basic beliefs of Hinduism and some other Indian religions is dharma. Dharma refers to law, duty, and obligation. To follow one's dharma means to dedicate oneself to performing one's duties and to living by **specific** sets of rules.

The *Ramayana*, one of the most famous ancient literary texts, is sacred to many Hindus. It tells about life in ancient India and offers role models in dharma. For example, one of the central figures of the *Ramayana*, Rama, lives by the rules of dharma. When Rama is a young boy, he is a loyal son. When he grows up, he is a loving husband and a responsible ruler. In this chapter, you will explore the origins of Hinduism. Then you will learn about dharma and a number of other Hindu beliefs: Brahman, deities, karma, and samsara.

15.2. The Origins of Hinduism



No single person founded **Hinduism**. It developed slowly, over a long period of time, growing out of centuries of older traditions.

In the second millennium B.C.E., nomadic people speaking Indo-European languages migrated into northern India. These nomads, sometimes called Aryans (AIR-ee-uhnz), brought to India their gods and rituals, some of which eventually became part of Hinduism. Other aspects of Hinduism drew on local traditions, which, over thousands of years, allowed a wide range of practices and beliefs to arise in different parts of India.

The oldest roots of Hinduism are found in Vedic religion, which is named for the earliest Indian texts. The **Vedas** (VAYduhz) are a collection of sacred texts, including verses, hymns, prayers, and teachings composed in **Sanskrit** (SAN-skrit). (Veda is Sanskrit for "knowledge.") The earliest of the Vedas grew out of traditions brought into India by the Aryans. These traditions

expanded over centuries in India, as the teachings of the Vedas were handed down orally from generation to generation, before India had a written form of Sanskrit.

Vedic rituals and sacrifices honored a number of deities (gods and goddesses) associated with nature and social order. Over time, these rituals became more complex. A class of priests and religious scholars, called Brahmins (BRAH-minz), grew increasingly important. They were responsible for correctly [interpreting](#) the Vedas and performing the required rituals. Brahmins eventually became the dominant class in India. Later Vedic religion is often called [Brahmanism](#). The word *Hinduism*, the term for the traditions that grew out of later Vedic religion or Brahmanism, came much later.

Modern-day Hinduism is a very complex religion. Many beliefs, forms of worship, and deities exist side by side, and often differ from place to place. The Vedas, to which Hinduism traces its early roots, remain sacred to many Hindus today. Along with later sacred texts, the Vedas lay out some of the basic beliefs of Hinduism. As you will see, these beliefs have influenced every aspect of life in India.

15.3. Hinduism and the Caste System



Brahmanism was more than a religion in ancient India. It was a way of life. It affected how Indians lived, what they believed, and even the way they organized their society. Many of those ideas live on in modern Hinduism.

Brahmanism taught that a well-organized society was divided into different social classes. Today, we call this practice of social organization, developed in India, the [caste](#) system. The Vedas describe four main social classes, or varnas:

- Brahmins (priests and religious scholars)
- Kshatriyas (KSHA-tree-uhs) (rulers and warriors)
- Vaishyas (VIESH-yuhs) (herders and merchants)
- Shudras (SHOO-druhs) (servants, farmers, and laborers)

According to the Vedas, each class, or varna, had its own duties. For example, Brahmins had a duty to study and teach the

Vedas. Warriors had a duty to become skilled with weapons. But the caste system meant that some people were favored much more than others. Brahmins held the highest place in society, while Shudras held the lowest.

Over the centuries, the caste system in India grew very complex. By medieval times, there were thousands of castes. The people in the lowest caste were known as Untouchables. Their descendants today often call themselves *Dalits*, from a word meaning “suppressed” or “crushed.” This group had jobs or ways of life that involved activities that high-caste Indians considered lowly or “dirty,” such as handling garbage and dead animals. Untouchables often had to live in their own villages or neighborhoods. They could not enter many temples or attend most schools. Other Hindus avoided touching, and in many cases, even looking at this group of people. Some of these rules separating the lowest caste remain today.

The caste system affected all aspects of people’s lives. Indians were born into a certain caste, and they could not change it. They could only marry within their own caste. Today, caste discrimination is outlawed in India. But despite the laws, caste status continues to affect many parts of Indian life.

This way of organizing society is just one example of how ancient religion affected daily life in India. Let’s look now at other aspects of Hinduism and how they helped shape Indian life and culture.

15.4. Hindu Beliefs About Brahman

Brahman is the name of a supreme power, or a [divine](#) force, that some Hindus believe is greater than all other deities. To these Hindus, only Brahman exists forever. Everything else in the world changes, from the passing seasons to all living things that eventually die.

In many Indian traditions, including Hinduism, time moves forward in a circle, like a great wheel. The same events return, just as the sun rises each morning, and spring follows winter. Some Hindus see this [cycle](#) as the work of Brahman, who is constantly creating, destroying, and re-creating the universe. The cycle never ends.

According to Hindus following these traditions, everything in the world is a part of Brahman, including the human soul. Ancient Hindus called the soul *atman*. In certain traditions, Hindus view the soul as part of Brahman, just as a drop of water is part of the ocean. Through their souls, people are therefore connected to Brahman. In these traditions, the other deities worshipped in Hinduism are simply different forms of Brahman. Other Hindus have different beliefs about Hindu gods, such as Vishnu (VISH-noo) and Shiva (SHIH-vuh).

To communicate with their deities, followers of the ancient Vedic religion and Brahmanism held their elaborate rites and sacrifices outdoors. In later Hindu times, as Indian civilization developed and cities grew, people began to build massive temples for worship. Today, many modern Hindu temples are modeled after the ancient principles used to design those early temples.

Many Hindu temples are magnificent in size and design. Their doors often face east, toward the rising sun. The buildings are covered with beautiful carvings and sculptures. These works of art usually show deities from Hindu sacred texts. The temple interiors usually contain a tower and a small shrine.



15.5. Hindu Beliefs About Deities



There are many deities in Hindu sacred texts and worship rituals. Over time, as we learned earlier, some Hindus came to believe that all the deities were different faces of a supreme force, Brahman. For these Hindus, each god represented a power or quality of Brahman.

Today, in some Hindu traditions, there are three important deities. They are Brahma (BRAH-mah) (not Brahman), Vishnu, and Shiva. Each deity controls one aspect of the universe. Brahma creates it, Vishnu preserves it, and Shiva destroys it. In other Indian traditions, another goddess named Devi (DAY-vee) embodies the female powers of the universe.

Ancient Hindu sacred texts often describe heroic deities battling evil. One famous story is found in the *Ramayana*. It tells of Rama's fierce battle with Ravana, a demon (evil spirit). Such tales present in an entertaining way some of what later became Hindu

beliefs. Many Hindu children have learned about their religion by listening to readings of the *Ramayana*, or in recent years, by seeing the stories dramatized on television.

Ancient literary texts like the *Ramayana*, which some Hindus view as sacred, have inspired many Hindu holidays and festivals. The Hindu New Year is celebrated at the Divali (dih-VAH-lee) festival. *Divali* means “row of lamps.” The lamps are symbols of good (light) winning over evil (darkness). They are often said to represent Rama's triumph over the evil Ravana, and the start of the Hindu New Year.

15.6. Hindu Beliefs About Dharma



Dharma is an important belief in Hinduism and other Indian traditions. Dharma stands for law, obligation, and duty. To follow one's dharma means to perform one's duties and to live in an honorable way.

As you have already read, according to the Vedas, each social class, or varna, had its own duties. These duties usually involved a certain type of work. Duties might include studying religious texts, herding animals, trading goods, or serving as a warrior. Therefore, each class was seen as having its own dharma. In fact, early Hindus called their system of social classes varna dharma, or “the way of one's kind.” Early Hindus believed that when everyone followed the dharma of their varna, society would be in

harmony.

Brahmins, for example, were ancient Hindu society's priests and religious scholars. Their duties included performing rituals and teaching the Vedas. This was quite an accomplishment, since ancient scholars had passed down this knowledge through word of mouth. To recite the Vedas orally, Brahmins had to memorize tens of thousands of verses!

In addition to following the dharma of their own varna, Hindus are expected to follow a common dharma, or set of values. This is often said to include the importance of marriage, sharing food with others, and caring for one's soul.

Another basic value is nonviolence. Many Hindus, as well as followers of other Indian traditions, have a respect for life that stems from their belief that all life forms have a soul. In Hindu traditions, reverence for life is symbolized by the cow. Hindus were taught not to kill them, perhaps because cows provided people with things they needed, such as milk and butter. Even in death, cows provided hides that could be made into clothing.

15.7. Hindu Beliefs About Karma

The belief in dharma expresses much of what Hindus believe about the right way to live. **Karma** is another belief Hindus share with other Indian traditions. It explains the importance of living according to dharma.

In Hindu belief, the law of karma governs what happens to people's souls after death. From ancient times, many Indians believed that souls had many lives. When a person died, his or her soul was reborn in a new body. The type of body the reborn soul received depended on the soul's karma.

Karma was made up of all the good and evil that a person had done in past lives. If people lived good lives, they might be born into a higher social class in their next life. If they lived badly, they could expect to be reborn into a lower class. They might even be reborn as animals.

For Hindus, the law of karma meant that the universe was just, or fair. Souls were rewarded or punished for the good and evil they had done. Karma was also used to explain why people had a certain status in society. You may recall that in the caste system, people could not escape the social class of their birth. According to karma, this judgment was fair, because it was thought that people's social class reflected what they had done in their past lives.

Over the centuries, many Indian scholars disapproved of the caste system. They thought that all people, including the Untouchables, should be treated equally. In the 20th century, the chief architect of India's first constitution, B. R. Ambedkar, sharply criticized the caste system. He, himself, came from the Untouchable caste. Today, Indian law makes caste discrimination illegal, but caste ideas continue to affect daily life. Other ancient ideas, like karma and rebirth, which are tied to views of caste, also remain central to Indian beliefs.



15.8. Hindu Beliefs About Samsara

As you have learned, Hindus and many other Indians believe in a continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. They call this cycle samsara. As long as people are part of samsara, they will know pain and death. Samsara ends when the soul escapes from the cycle of rebirth, the time when some Hindus believe that they are united with Brahman, the supreme force in the



universe.

It takes many lifetimes before a person can be released from samsara. People escape the cycle of rebirth, or [reincarnation](#), by following their dharma. They behave correctly and perform their social duties. They worship faithfully according to prescribed rules. In these ways, they balance their karma with good actions.

The Indians of ancient times went on holy journeys called [pilgrimages](#). People would travel to sacred places like the Ganges River. Such pilgrims believed that the difficulty of the journey would cleanse them of their sins.

Faithful Hindus still make pilgrimages today. Pilgrims travel for days over difficult land, including mountains. At each holy site and temple they encounter, they often lie facedown in worship. The Ganges River is still one of the most holy places in India. Like the ancient Indians, modern Hindus bathe in its waters as an act of devotion and purification.