

## **CONTENTS**

- 1 INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY
- 2 THE GODS
- 3 PLACE OF WORSHIP
- 4 WAY OF LIFE
- 5 HOLY SCRIPTURES
- 6 THE CASTE SYSTEM
- 7 FESTIVALS
- 8 BIRTH
- 9 DEATH
- 10 MARRIAGE

# HINDUISM

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## INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

Unlike most other religions, Hinduism does not have a prophet who set down the rules and mode of behaviour and beliefs to others. Hinduism developed in stages over a long period of time and has no exact date at which it can be said that it started. It can be said that some of the beliefs began to develop about 4,000-5,000 years ago in northern India. The religion in its earliest form was simply a belief in the forces of nature. Examples of this could be the sun, seas and wind.

Over time temples and shrines were built and the religion started to become formalised. In 1750 BC the area of northern India was invaded by Aryans who settled in northern India and brought with them their own beliefs. The earliest written record is contained in the **Veda** and is one of the holy books of Hindus. The Aryans also introduced the **Caste System** which is still a very important part of Hindu life today. The caste system is discussed later in this pack.

Hindus came to believe that there was one supreme being called **Brahman**. Brahman is so big and total that it is impossible for humans to understand. Hindus believe in various Gods, each representing one part or aspect of Brahman. There are three main Gods which Hindus believe in. These are;

**BRAHMA, The Creator,**  
**VISHNU, The Preserver,**  
**SHIVA, The Destroyer.**

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## QUESTIONS

How did Hinduism come to be a formalised religion?

Are there any other religions which do not have a prophet or prophets?

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**THE GODS**

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The God which Hindus recognise is called **Brahman**. He is seen to be omnipotent and eternal and the giver of all life. All living beings want as their ultimate goal for their soul to be united with Brahman. Hindus believe in hundreds of lesser Gods each of which represent different aspects of life. For example, the Goddess of Wealth is Lakshmi. Of all the Gods, Hindus believe in three in particular. These are;

**Brahma, The Creator,**  
**Vishnu, The Preserver,**  
**Shiva, The Destroyer.**

Brahma is often shown as having four heads pointing in all directions. This indicates that Brahma has knowledge of all things on Earth. Vishnu is the God which preserves life and is thought to have appeared on Earth many times in human and animal form to ensure this. Shiva destroys things, but Hindus do not see this as negative. Without destruction there would be no re-birth. Taken together these three Gods represent the main stages of creation, sustenance, and destruction that all things go through.

Sometimes all three Gods are portrayed as one, with three heads, and this is referred to as **Trimurti**.

Some villages in India may have their own special God or a particular God which they see as helping them in a special way. Shrines to these Gods may be found in villages, in houses or are specially built. Many Hindu families in Britain will put aside an area in their house and have a small shrine where they can pray to their God or Gods.

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**QUESTIONS**

How many Gods are there in the Hindu religion?

Do Hindus have to pray to any particular Gods or can they choose which ones to pray to?

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### PLACE OF WORSHIP

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A Hindu temple is called a **Mandir**. Virtually every Village in India has a temple which can be a specially built large structure or could be a small building or a shrine in a house. Some famous temples are built in places where it is thought the Gods came down to Earth. Often a shrine can be found at the side of a road where someone had good fortune or perhaps where someone died or became very ill.

Most temples have a Brahmin priest, (see the page on the Caste System). It is the job of the priest to maintain the shrine and also to lead prayers. The central point of the shrine is where the statue or image of the God is placed. Temples are usually devoted to one main God, with lesser Gods also represented around the main shrine. The statue of the God is treated as if it were living and is often washed clothed and fanned by believers.

The Brahmin acts as an intermediary between worshippers and the Gods. People enter the temple after removing their shoes and offer gifts, flowers, food or other offerings to the Gods. These offerings never include any meat products because Hindus believe that animals should not be killed by people. The foodstuffs which are offered to the Gods are later eaten by the worshippers as food blessed by the Gods, **Prasada**.

There are three main types of worship which takes place in a Mandir. **Havan** is a ceremony in which fire plays a part. A small fire is lit and maintained whilst prayers are offered to the Gods. Purity through fire is one of the main purposes of this act of worship. **Arti** involves lighting candles and offering prayers. The worshippers foreheads are marked with a red dot which means that they have been blessed. **Bhajans** (prayers/hymns) are sung usually in a large congregation.

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### QUESTIONS

Make a plan of how the layout of a Mandir might look.

If you were to dedicate a Mandir to a particular God, which God would you choose?

## WAY OF LIFE

The Brahmins have to live according to the **Five Daily Obligations**:

Even straight forward things like sweeping the floor and making and eating food is affected by the beliefs of Hindus. Hindus do not believe in killing even insects and some sweep the floor before sitting down. In diet, vegetarianism is important. They must live according to the scriptures and respect all life.

Whilst Brahmins have quite elaborate ways of worship, most ordinary Hindus worship through **Puja**. This is praying to a particular God, making offerings, and chanting. This Puja can take place at various times throughout the day

**Yoga** and meditation is another way to improve oneself because meditation makes the mind more disciplined. Through meditation Hindus believe that they can get closer to Brahman and be better people. Hindus believe that there is a little bit of Brahman in all of us and we must try to discover it through thought and meditation.

They must worship Brahman through **Puja**



They should read the **Veda** and give reverence to saints



They should show proper respect for elders and parents



They should give shelter and support the poor and holy men



They should look after animals because they are also God's creatures

## QUESTIONS

How can Hindus reconcile their faith with living in Britain? Are some jobs and activities difficult for Hindus to participate in?

Is it possible to live according to scriptures written so long ago?

How relevant is Hinduism to modern day thinking?

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### HOLY SCRIPTURES

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Hinduism has several holy books. The oldest is the **Veda**, and another important book is called the **Laws of Manu**. Many of the other books are presented in verse as poetry.

The **Veda** was written between 1200 and 600 BC and is the oldest religious text in existence. As with many other older religions the stories were passed down from generation to generation in oral story form. The Veda was not written up properly until the 15th century. The book is divided up into three main sections.

The contents of the first book are mainly hymns dedicated to 33 Gods. It is called the **Rig-Veda** which means Veda of Praise. There are over 1000 hymns in this book.

The second book is called **Brahmanas** and describes various religious ceremonies and explains their meaning.

The third book is called the **Upanishads** and discusses the various aspects of faith including re-incarnation and Karma.

There are some great epic poems and stories which tell the stories of the Gods. One famous one which has been shown on British television is the **Mahabarata** and another is **Ramayana**. The Mahabarata is the longest poem in the world with over 100,000 verses. The most famous part of it is the **Bhagavad-Gita** which discusses the relationship between people and God. You can readily obtain both of these works as they have been widely published in Britain. Most of the prayers in services come from the Veda and some popular hymns are taken from the Upanishads.

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### QUESTIONS

Has your school got copies of any of the books mentioned above?

Visit your local library and see if any are stocked there.

Hindus have several books which tell them about their religion. Is this better or worse than those religions which have everything in one volume?

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## THE CASTE SYSTEM

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The caste system was introduced originally by the Aryans in northern India. Today it is very strong in India despite repeated attempts by successive governments to end it. Basically the caste system divides people into classes. Some classes are considered higher than others and someone in a lower caste can **never** rise to a higher caste. So if someone was born into a low caste it is certain that their ancestors were members of that caste and that all children born in the future will also be of the same caste. In this way members of each caste are bound to certain jobs and a certain station in life forever.

The Hindus made four distinctions of caste originally. These were;

**BRAHMINS who are the highest caste, (only Brahmins can become Priests)**

**SHASTRIAS who are mainly warriors**

**VAISYAS who are skilled tradespeople**

**SHUDRAS who are unskilled workers and servants**

Today there are many more sub-castes in India. In simple terms the caste system distinguishes between pure and impure people. Brahmins would never eat with a member of a lower caste or marry into another caste or do work which is designed for another caste.

Some occupations are considered as being unclean. These include butchers, hairdressers, and cleaners. The caste system is seen as being very unfair by those at the bottom because they know that if they are servants, then their children will also be servants when they grow up, and so on.

The Brahmins consider themselves to be purer and therefore closer to Brahman and more likely to have good Karma. This aspect of Hinduism often confuses the observer because although Hinduism teaches charity and care for people, the caste system seems to damn some people and their descendents to a hopeless life. However, it was not so long ago that people 'knew their place' in Britain, with sons following their fathers 'down the pit' or 'on the farm'.

The caste system is loosening with many more people working in cities and the demand for a

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## QUESTIONS

Is it possible to live in the 1990s and still support a caste system?

Can a religion which places many people in a life of drudgery without hope of a better life be legitimate?

Is the caste system fair? What advantages does the caste system offer?

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## FESTIVALS

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There are many Hindu festivals. Below are just some of the more popular ones.

**Diwali** celebrates the new year (old calendar) in India and is held in late October or early November depending on the new moon. It celebrates the return of Rama and Sita (see Navarati) to their kingdom. The story appears in the Ramayana book. Often in Britain people celebrate it on Bonfire Night (November 5th) to coincide with British celebrations.

**Holi** is the festival of colours. people celebrate **Kama**, the god of love, and cover each other in powdered paint or throw coloured water over each other. Holi also celebrates Krishna's love of playing practical jokes when he was younger. people do not wear their best clothes on Holi because they are likely to be ruined!

**Navarati**, (nine nights) is a festival which is devoted to the Goddess Durga, symbol of motherhood. It lasts for nine days and recalls ancient Hindu stories about Rama and Sita. Rama lost his kingdom and his wife was taken by Ravana. Rama prayed for seven nights to the goddess Durga. On the eighth night he killed Ravana and on the ninth made offerings to the goddess. Lots of fireworks are set off after the ninth night.

**Rama-Navami** is a celebration of Rama's birthday and takes place in March or April. Many Hindus fast on this day.

**Janmashtami** is the celebration of Krishna's birthday. it is said that Krishna was the human re-incarnation of the God Vishnu. Krishna was born at midnight and so the celebrations usually take place then.

**Shivarati** celebrates the god Shiva. People often fast for 24 or 36 hours. This is followed by a feast.

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## QUESTIONS

Find out more about one of these festivals.

How do these festivals compare to festivals in other religions?

Why are festivals important?



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## BIRTH

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Hindus like Buddhists believe that when a child is born, it has lived before many times. The child is being re-born either into a better life than before, because in its previous life it did great good, or into a worse life because of evil deeds committed before. The child has been born according to the Karma of the person's previous life. In this life the child has three options:

Much of what the child will achieve depends on its circumstances. An example of this might be the moral and religious attitudes of its parents, or the relative greed for material goods. There is undoubtedly a link between Karma of other people and the way in which the Karma of the child will develop.

Hindu parents go through various ceremonies even before the child is born in order to ensure that the child will be healthy and have a good life. The baby is named shortly after birth. There is no great ceremony in the naming itself but the family will spend quite a lot of time choosing an auspicious name. This may be the name of someone who appears in Hindu holy books or a name which indicates bravery or heroism. Vijay, for instance, which is a popular Hindu name means 'Victory'. Girls are often named after qualities like beauty.

Hindu boys go through several ceremonies in the early years including a **Thread** ceremony in which the boy being old enough, can start to learn the Veda and other holy books. Religious families will take this opportunity to familiarise their son with the main tenets of Hinduism and the child may start to learn in more detail from a teacher or elder of the community.

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## QUESTIONS

Find out what differences there are between the ceremonies girls and boys go through in childhood.

Can you find out which Gods are especially important for children?

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## DEATH

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Death is a very sad time for Hindus as it is in all societies. Hindus cremate their dead rather than burying them. It is felt that when someone dies their **Atma**, (soul or spirit), is freed and the body is left behind as the vehicle which was occupied by the soul or spirit. Hindus believe in life after life and therefore know that the soul will be re-born at some time in the future either into an animal or another human being.

In Indian villages cremation has changed very little since olden times. The priest will sing hymns and read from the holy books, then the body will be wrapped in a cloth and taken to the cremation area which is usually situated just outside the village. The villagers will have built a funeral pyre and the body is cremated.

Relatives remain until the fire goes out in order to collect the ashes and bone remains. Hindus scatter the ashes in rivers. often in India people will travel to scatter the ashes in the **River Ganges** which has great significance for Hindus.

Although Hindus believe in life after life, death is still a very sad time. If the person has lived a very pure and good life then the soul may go and join Brahman. If the person was bad or cruel in life then the soul will certainly be re-born as an animal or other small creature. Being human means that we have reached a high level in the re-birth process and have an opportunity of joining with God after death. People who die with bad Karma will possibly need several lives of goodness before they can be re-born as a human.

### Definition of Karma.

**Karma** is the belief that all that a person does in life is kept as a record. If a person commits great evil then that person will be re-born as a lower creature, and if a person has done good he or she will be re-born as a better person. But only the person who commits no evil can break the cycle of re-birth and free their spirit.

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## QUESTIONS

How does a person know if he or she has good or bad Karma?

What happens to the spirit if the person dies without having committed any sins?

Do you think you have good or bad Karma?

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**MARRIAGE**

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Most Hindu marriages are arranged in line with tradition. In one sense all Hindu marriages are arranged to a great extent if a person is going to live in accordance with the religion. People of one particular caste will marry into the same caste which means that the field is necessarily narrowed in terms of who a person can marry. Families will look for similarities in caste, attitude, wealth, religious belief and disposition when searching for a partner for their son or daughter.

The engagement involves procedures carried out by the priest followed by food which has been specially prepared for the occasion

The marriage ceremony itself is clearly established. The bridegroom and his wedding party travel to the bride's house or Mandir where the ceremony is to take place. The priest burns a small fire. Spices and rice are added to the fire and represent fertility. Both bride and bridegroom wear garlands of flowers. The bridegroom leads the bride around the fire seven times whilst the priest reads from holy scriptures. After the ceremony the bride goes to live at the bridegroom's house as part of his family. Hindus do not believe in dowry, (the giving of money by the bride's family which can be a very heavy burden), but this practice is widespread.

There are various procedures which the new wife goes through including visits to the temple to pray for children and certain ceremonies during pregnancy. it is very important that the couple have children and especially in India it is still considered important to have male children.

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**QUESTIONS**

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How does the Hindu marriage ceremony differ from the marriage ceremonies of other religions?

What is Dowry? Do social conventions affect the way in which marriages are conducted among Hindus?

Topics In World Religions