

HINDUISM

Description:

A religion that originated and developed in India over the last 3000–3500 years, Hinduism is today practiced by the majority in India. It is the third largest world religion after Christianity and Islam. Because of Indian migration, it is practiced around the world.

Hinduism incorporates a wide variety of religious beliefs and modes of worship. It is notable for its tendency over the thousands of years of its development to adapt to the influences of other religions, to the point that it is now distinguished more by the commonality of the behavior and life patterns of its followers than by standardization of belief and practice.

Hindus worship or respect a wide variety of gods, though many consider the religion monotheistic in the sense that the one God manifests himself–herself in many different forms. A few of these manifestations are worshipped by a majority of Hindus: Shiva, the god of creation and destruction; Kali, the mother–goddess and consort of Shiva (in some personas she is known as the mother–goddess Devi, or simply as the Goddess, and is also seen as a destroyer); Vishnu, the preserver of the universe; and Rama and Krishna, two of the more important human forms taken by Vishnu. For some schools of Hinduism, supreme above all the gods, or above the various forms of God, is Brahma, or Brahman, the spiritual source of the universe. The concept of Brahma ranges from that of Creator and Supreme Entity to whom all souls return to that of a more personal god. In one concept of a triune God, Brahma is the Creator, Vishnu is the Preserver, and Shiva is the Destroyer.

Although Hinduism offers great diversity of doctrine, the most commonly accepted beliefs of Hindus may be summarized as follows:

- The Vedas (Scriptures) are the divine word of the gods.
- There is one Supreme Being above all, the Source and Creator of the universe.
- The universe follows an endless cycle of creation, destruction, and re-creation.
- There is a law of cause and effect, called karma: everyone creates his or her own destiny.
- The soul reincarnates until all of its karmas have been resolved and it returns to unity with the Creator.
- The acts of worship, ritual, and sacrifice create a unity with the gods.
- Individuals must perform their duties to God, parents and family, gurus (teachers), and society.
- No single religion offers the only way to salvation. All are equal as paths to oneness with the Supreme Being.

Religious Elements:

Scriptural and Doctrinal Sources

The Vedas (*veda* means “knowledge”) are considered the authoritative scriptural documents of the Hindu faith. The Vedas are believed to be the word of the gods, given to humanity. Accordingly, they are sacred, and not a word may be changed. Unknown in their detail to most Hindus, they consist of the following:

- Rig-Veda (“Wisdom of the Verses”): composed in the ancient Sanskrit language, most likely dating back to 1300–1200 BCE. It comprises 1,028 hymns to numerous gods.
- Yajur-Veda (“Wisdom of the Sacrificial Formulas”): a textbook about sacrifices.
- Sama-Veda (“Wisdom of the Chants”): a book of hymns.
- Atharva-Veda (“Wisdom of the Atharvan Priests”): a book of magic spells.
- Brahmanas: explaining duties of priests.
- Upanishads: meditations on the meaning of the universe.

The Smriti is a practical compendium of Hindu beliefs and practices. Though handed down over millennia and considered Hindu Scripture, it is believed to be the work of human authors and is subject to change and interpretation. It comprises epics and stories of the gods and of the creation of the universe, though these tales and expositions incorporate thousands of years of wisdom about religion, rituals, law, philosophy, literature and politics:

- Mahabharata: an epic tale of war between the gods.
- Ramayana: the epic story of the god Rama and his quest to recover his wife, Sita, from the demon Ravana.
- Puranas: which expand on the epics; the worship of various gods; the creation, destruction and re-creation of the universe; and philosophy and other subjects.

Sacraments (Samskara)

The *samskara* are personal sacramental rites traditionally part of the everyday life of a Hindu. They are intended to purify individuals so that they may embark on the next stage of life free from sin. In modern practice, they are limited to the major events of life:

- Naming of the child: This ceremony, performed by a priest, may be done 10 or 11 days after birth, though some families defer it.
- *Upanayana*: These rites of initiation, usually celebrated for boys only, observe the beginning of adulthood, usually between the ages of 8 and 12.
- *Vivaha*: Wedding celebrations in Hindu tradition are elaborate events involving considerable preparation. The ceremony and the celebrations may last up to three days. Marriage is a match between families, as well as between bride and groom.
- *Antyes ti*: These are funeral rites, for which cremation is the traditional norm.
- *Tarpan*: In the two-week period preceding the Navarathri festival, men honor their deceased ancestors with offerings of water with sesame seeds.

Moral Code

- Service to God.
- Service to humanity without expectation of return.
- Reverence for elders and teachers.
- Nonviolence, truthfulness, and respect.
- Knowledge of and obedience to the Scriptures.
- Protection of the Earth.
- Purity in diet.
- Moderation and simplicity.
- Universality and peace.
- Transmission of scriptural teaching.
- Patience, firmness, and stability.
- Forgiveness.
- Self-control and contentment.
- Honesty and selflessness.
- Cleanliness and purity.
- Control over senses and sexual energy.
- Material and spiritual knowledge or study.
- Truth.

Houses of Worship

- Hindus maintain one or more shrines in their homes as the focus of worship.
- The temple is the centre of the religious, social, and cultural life of Hindus.
- The architecture of temples follows pattern set out in ancient texts, the *shastras*, compiled by Brahmin priests. The form is meant to be an architectural representation of the universe, based on a grid of 64 by 81 squares.
- The principal shrine faces the rising sun. Movement toward the shrine is through a series of increasingly sacred spaces.
- The principal elements of the structure are an entrance, usually with a large porch; one or more attached or detached halls; the *garbagriha*, or inner sanctum; and a tower above the *garbagriha*.
- Men and women worship equally in the temple, but they are usually seated in separate areas.

Devotional Practices and Services

- *Puja*, or worship, can take place daily or at any time and may occur outwardly, in public prayer and devotions, or inwardly, in meditation.
- Hindus offer devotional prayers daily in the morning and evening, sometimes including ritual bathing, meditation, and offerings.
- Hindus make up to five daily offerings or sacrifices: an offering of food, taken from the meal, to the gods; an offering of water, mixed with sesame seeds, to the spirits of ancestors or other deceased; a simple offering, to all beings; an offering of hospitality, to anyone or to all; and a recitation from the Veda.
- Worship in a temple is practiced regularly. Temples may be open for worship daily, though in America regular services are commonly held on Saturdays or Sundays.
- Worship of images, icons, and statues of the gods is a feature of both home and temple devotions. The deity is considered present in the image and is an honored guest.
- Various ritual accessories are used in the daily worship. The principal items are a picture or symbol of the chosen deity, an *asana* (seat), *padya* (water for washing feet), *arghya* (rice, flowers, sandalwood paste, etc), *achamana* (sipping water), *madhuparka* (honey, ghee, milk, curd), *vasana* (clothes), *abharana* (gems), *gandha* (perfume and sandalwood), *pushpa* (flowers), *dhupa* (incense stick), and *dipa* (flame). Hindus who do not live in private homes require a personal place for private worship and meditation.

Clergy, Organization, and Government

- Hindu priests are traditionally members of the Brahmin caste. However, the caste system was outlawed in 1949, and recent court decisions there have confirmed that members of any caste who have received the appropriate training are entitled to be priests.
- The Hindu religion is not based in a single, unified Church structure. It has no head and no leadership hierarchy. Temples manage their own affairs. Priests (pundits) are professional holy men trained and employed by the temples to lead services and rites, including weddings and funerals.
- Priests are trained according to various traditions at Hindu institutions in India.

Propagation of the Faith

- Though Hindus do not proselytize, some aspects of the religion have reached the popular consciousness in the West and some Hindu holy men have achieved a personal popularity and following through their teachings. This has led to the rise of new religions and sects related to Hinduism, all following some aspects of the faith. These include Krishna Consciousness and certain New Age cults and beliefs.

Major Celebrations and Observances:

Dates of Hindu festivals vary according to local practice. The following calendar is a partial, representative list only.

Festival Month

Pongal - January	Raksha Bandham - July or August	Navaratri - September or October
Shivaratri - January or February	Onam Festival - August or September	Dussera/Vijaya Dashami - Sept or October
Sri Maha Shivratri - January or February	Gokula Ashtami and Sri Krishna Jayanthi - August or September	Diwali - November
Holi - February or March		
Sri Rama Navami - March or April	Ganesh Chaturthi - August or September	

Dress Requirements:

- There are no dress rules, though dress is usually modest.
- People must remove their shoes when entering a temple. A head covering is not required.
- Women especially, but some men also, may wear a dot (*Tilak*) of turmeric powder or other colored substance on the forehead as a religious symbol, sometimes it is said to represent a third, introspective eye.

Dietary Requirements:

- Hindus avoid eating beef, as cattle are considered sacred.
- Some Hindus practice vegetarianism. It is not a universal practice. Those who do practice it do not eat meat, fish, eggs, or other products made from these foods. Vegetarian and nonvegetarian foods must not be cooked together. Some vegetarians will eat only uncooked fruit and vegetables.
- Nonvegetarian Hindus normally do not eat beef, pork and, in some cases, eggs or egg products.
- Fasting is commonly practiced on new-moon days and during certain religious festivals.
- Fasting is not a universal practice, but is considered a sign of devotion, a sacrifice and a way to enhance meditation.

Medicine Requirements:

- There are no universal practices. - Autopsies are avoided when possible, to permit immediate cremation.

All information is extracted from the following sources:

Religions in Canada. (2003). Retrieved from <http://www.cmp-cpm.forces.gc.ca/pub/rc/index-eng.asp>

Hinduism. (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.religionfacts.com/hinduism/index.htm>