

HINDUISM

SUPPORT MATERIALS - GMGY - BELIEFS & RELIGIONS



People adhere to religious traditions in different ways. Not all Hindus will adhere to all of the practices mentioned in this material. If there is a child in your class that follows this religious tradition it is important that the child's parents or guardians are the primary source of information about that child's beliefs and practices.

INTRODUCTION TO HINDUISM

Hinduism is the name given in the 19th century to the combination of traditions that existed in India. Unlike most other religions, Hinduism has no single founder, no single scripture, and no commonly-agreed set of teachings. Throughout its history, there have been many key figures teaching different philosophies and writing numerous holy books. For these reasons, writers often refer to Hinduism as 'a way of life' or 'a family of traditions'.

Although it is not easy to define the beginnings of Hinduism, it originated around the Indus valley, in modern-day Pakistan. Most Hindus revere a body of texts as sacred scripture known as the Vedas, and most Hindus draw on a common system of values known as dharma. About 80% of the Indian population regard themselves as Hindu.



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THE BELIEFS OF HINDUISM

Most people consider Hinduism to be a polytheistic religion. However, Hindus do actually believe in one supreme God, Brahman. All of the many other gods in Hinduism are just different manifestations of this ultimate reality, Brahman. Brahman is actually a Trinity or *Trimurti* consisting of three aspects; Brahma, the creator, Vishnu, the preserver and Shiva, the destroyer or transformer.

For many Hindus, religion is a matter of practice rather than a set of beliefs. It is embedded in Indian culture. Brahman takes on many forms that some Hindus worship as gods or goddesses in their own right. Hindus believe that there is a part of Brahman in everyone and this is called the *Atman* or soul.

Hindus believe in Reincarnation, known as Samsara. The soul is eternal and lives many lifetimes, in one body after another, until it attains perfection and can be united with the Brahman. The soul is sometimes born in a human body, sometimes in an animal body and sometimes in a plant body. Hindus believe that all forms of life contain a soul, and all souls have the chance to experience life in different forms. Karma governs what you come back as in your next lifetime.

Similar to Buddhist beliefs, Karma is the cause of our particular destiny. Misfortunes in our present life are the result of acts that we have committed in the past. In the same way, our actions in our present lives will determine our fate in the lives that follow. Hindus therefore aim to

live in a way that will cause each of their lives to be better than the life before.

SACRED TEXTS

The main Hindu texts are the Vedas and their supplements (books based on the Vedas). Veda is a Sanskrit word meaning 'knowledge'. These scriptures do not mention the word 'Hindu' but many scriptures discuss dharma, which can be understood as a 'code of conduct', 'law', or 'duty'.

GODS AND GODDESSES

The triumvirate or Hindu trinity consists of three gods who are responsible for the creation, upkeep and destruction of the world.

Brahma

Brahma's job was creation of the world and all creatures. His name should not be confused with Brahman, who is the supreme God force present within all things. Brahma is the least worshipped god in Hinduism today. There are only two temples in the whole of India devoted to him, compared with the many thousands devoted to the other two.

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Vishnu

Vishnu is the preserver and protector of the universe. His role is to return to the earth in troubled times and restore the balance of good and evil. So far, he has been incarnated nine times, but Hindus believe that he will be reincarnated one last time close to the end of this world.

Lord Shiva

Shiva's role is to destroy the universe in order to re-create it. Hindus believe his powers of destruction and recreation are used even now to destroy the illusions and imperfections of this world, paving the way for beneficial change. According to Hindu belief, this destruction is not arbitrary, but constructive and transformative. Shiva is therefore seen as the source of both good and evil and is regarded as the one who combines many contradictory elements. He is the god of regeneration.

Lord Ganesha

Ganesha is the well-known elephant god. He is understood as the remover of all obstacles in life. Before every undertaking, be it laying the foundation of a house, or beginning a new business, Hindus call on Lord Ganesha, invoking his blessings on their venture. He is a much-loved god in Hinduism.



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THE CASTE SYSTEM

The Hindu social order significantly affects people's identity, lifestyle and ethical duty or dharma. Traditionally, Hindu society was divided into four main classes or castes. What caste you are born into depended on the karma of past lives, and the caste determines the dharma or ethics that govern your actions and roles in this lifetime.

The caste system is divided as follows:

- Brahmin caste: The highest caste to be born into which entitles you to be a Hindu priest who performs religious services.
- Kshatriya caste: Warriors and rulers of India.
- Vaisya caste: Farmers and business people.
- Sudra caste: The workers, labourers.
- Dalits caste: those who are considered to be outsiders in society and commonly known as the 'Untouchables'. To be born into a family in the untouchable caste is to believe that you are enduring the results of karma and something bad you did in past lives. Likewise, for the Brahmins, they believe that due to their good karma in previous lives, they deserve their privileged position in society.

The caste system is not as prevalent in urban India as it used to be in the past. Although the Dalits have been given legal rights thanks to the tireless work of Mahatma Gandhi and others, they still remain the most oppressed of the castes in Hindu society. He renamed the 'untouchable' Dalits, *Harijan*, meaning 'God's children'.

SALVATION

All Hindus essentially seek Moksha: liberation and release from reincarnation. It is similar to the Buddhist understanding of Nirvana. The soul is finally reunited in bliss with Brahman and the cycle of re-birth ceases.

Hinduism embraces three great paths to moksha. Hindus usually devote themselves to one of the paths but they are not mutually exclusive. The three paths are:

- the path of Karma: the way of action
- the path of Jnana: the way of knowledge
- the path of Bhakti: the way of devotion.

The path of action

This path seeks liberation from re-birth by focusing on right action and good deeds in their daily lives. This involves creating good karma and seeking to live by the ethical code or dharma of your caste. Each caste governs certain duties and roles that people within that caste must live by. This path requires an on-going concern for the world and Mahatma Gandhi is a good example of someone who was devoted to this path. The challenge of this path is to act unselfishly and not think of the rewards of karma.

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The path of knowledge

This is the shortest but steepest path to liberation. It requires the follower to devote themselves to learning and meditation and is usually practiced by those who are able for it in the Brahmin caste. Whereas the path of action emphasises the doing of right action, the path of knowledge seeks the attainment of knowledge over ignorance - knowledge of the true nature of things. This is an enormous challenge and seekers on the path usually require a guru or spiritual teacher for guidance.

There are various approaches to this knowledge. One approach is through the practice of yoga. The objective of the yogi, or yoga practitioner, is to free the self from the limitations of the ego and the body so as to achieve spiritual union with Brahmin.

The path of devotion

This path is through devotion to a particular Hindu god of your choice. In contrast to the inward journey of the path of knowledge, this path directs the spirituality of the seeker outwards, in worship of the deity. The devotee believes that the god looks favourably upon them and they regularly engage in practicing puja (ritual practice) and chanting Sanskrit prayers.

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VEGETARIANISM

Mahatma Gandhi referred to the protection of cows as the 'central fact of Hinduism'. For Hindus, the cow represents life and they venerate cows, worshipping them like deities. If you visit India, you will see cows wandering the streets freely. In the past, the killing of a cow was sometimes a capital offence.

Many Hindus choose vegetarianism due to the principle of non-violence in Hinduism. They believe all living things have a soul so usually abstain from meat.

BINDI

The bindi is a colourful dot that is placed on the forehead of both men and women in many Asian countries. Traditionally a woman always wore a red bindi to signify that she was married and as a symbol of love and prosperity. If a woman wore a black bindi it was a sign that she was a widow. The bindi is also a spiritual symbol. A mark is also made on the forehead during Hindu worship. The area between the eyebrows, where the bindi is placed, is believed to be the location of the sixth chakra, the energetic part of the body which represents wisdom and spirituality. In this case, the bindi represents the eye that looks within.

WORSHIP

Worship in Hinduism is known as puja. It can range from brief daily rites in the home at a personal shrine to an elaborate temple ritual. A typical puja offers the image of a deity the honours accorded to a royal guest, offering food and clothing to the god. Rituals may also include burning things in a sacred fire, offering food, smashing coconuts or ringing bells, a sacrifice and oblation to the sacred fire. Some pujas are performed by the worshipper alone; others require a ritually-pure person. A puja may be performed for a specific purpose, a special intention or simply as an act of devotion.

CELEBRATIONS

Diwali

Diwali is perhaps the most well-known of the Hindu festivals. The word Diwali means 'rows of lighted lamps'. Diwali is known as the 'festival of lights' because houses, shops and public places are decorated with small earthenware oil lamps called diyas.

For many Indians this five day festival honours Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. People start the new business year at Diwali, and some Hindus will say prayers to the goddess for a successful year.

Lamps are lit to help Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, find her way into

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people's homes. They also celebrate one of the Diwali legends, which tells of the return of Rama and Sita to Rama's kingdom after fourteen years of exile.

In Ireland, as in India, the festival is a time for:

- spring-cleaning the home
- wearing new clothes
- exchanging gifts (often sweets and dried fruits) and preparing festive meals
- decorating buildings with fancy lights
- huge firework displays.

In India, Hindus will leave the windows and doors of their houses open so that Lakshmi can come in. Rangoli are drawn on the floors. Rangoli are patterns often created with coloured rice, flour or sand. The most popular image is usually the lotus flower.

The festival celebrates the victory of good over evil, light over darkness and knowledge over ignorance, although the actual legends that go with the festival are different in different parts of India.

In northern India and elsewhere, Diwali celebrates Rama's return from fourteen years of exile to Ayodhya after the defeat of Ravana and his subsequent coronation as king.

In Gujarat, the festival honours Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. In Nepal Diwali commemorates the victory of Lord Krishna over the demon king

Narakaasura. In Bengal, it is associated with the goddess Kali.

Holi

Holi is a festival which originated in north India. It marks the coming of spring, usually in March. Some families hold religious ceremonies, but for many Holi is more a time for fun than religious observance.

Holi is a colourful festival, with dancing, singing, and throwing of powder paint and coloured water. Bonfires are lit and roasting grains, popcorn, coconut and chickpeas are thrown on the fire.

The next day, people of all ages go into the streets for fun and paint-throwing. Everyone gets involved - with no distinctions between caste, class, age or gender.

Hindus have fun by smearing each other with paint and throwing coloured water at each other, all done in a spirit of celebration.

CREMATION

Most rivers are regarded as sacred in Hinduism. The most famous and revered river is the River Ganges in India. Believed to have fallen from its heavenly source at Vishnu's feet onto Shiva's head and out from his hair, the waters of the Ganges are deemed sacred enough to purify the sins of seven lifetimes. It is the desire of every Hindu to visit the sacred shores of the Ganges in Varanasi in north-east India. Here, pilgrims partake in ritual baths

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and spiritual cleansing. It is also the most auspicious place for Hindus to be cremated and have their ashes sprinkled. They believe that if their ashes are sprinkled here, they have a greater chance of liberation from re-birth.

THE RIVER GANGES

Hindus cremate their dead. Cremation is a ritual designed to do much more than dispose of the body; it is intended to release the soul from its earthly existence. Hindus believe that cremation is spiritually beneficial to the departed soul. This is based on the belief that the spirit or soul of the person will linger as long as the physical body remains visible. The chief mourner, usually the eldest son, lights the pyre during cremation. Interestingly, it is considered unclean by Hindus to handle a dead body so this role is assigned strictly to the 'untouchable caste'; who tend the funeral pyre and handle the dead.

AUM

Aum or Om is of paramount importance in Hinduism. This symbol is a sacred sound representing Brahman, the supreme reality. Brahman, in itself, is incomprehensible; so this symbol and sound helps us to try to understand. The three syllables, when chanted, are



believed to be the sound of the universe, of the supreme reality of God. Each syllable captures the three aspects of Brahman, Vishnu and Shiva.

AT A GLANCE...

Sacred text: Veda

Special places: River Ganges/Temple/Varanasi

Deity: Trinity of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva

Symbol: Aum/Om

Practices: The path of action/the path of knowledge/the path of devotion

Beliefs: One supreme God, Brahman. All of the many other gods in Hinduism are just different manifestations of this ultimate reality/ reincarnation, known as Samsara/Karma.