

## HINDUISM

Hinduism is the religion followed by nearly 85% of the Indian people. The basic ideas of Hinduism were brought into India by the Aryans about 1500 B.C. You should remember these people from our discussion of the diffusion of the Indo-European language family. This is how Sanskrit and its successor languages came to be spoken in South Asia. Through the centuries, Hinduism has greatly affected India's history and way of life.

Hinduism does not have one holy book, such as the Bible or Koran. Instead, it has many sacred writings which have contributed to the fundamental beliefs of Hinduism. The holiest writings are the Vedas, a collection of hymns, prayers, and magic spells. Embedded within the Vedas are the Upanishads which contain some of the central philosophical concepts of Hinduism, some of which are shared by Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. The Upanishads are considered by Hindus to contain a revelation concerning the nature of ultimate reality and describing the character of and path to human salvation

Long poems called Epics also contain many Hindu ideas. Most Hindus are more familiar with the Epics than the Vedas. The Epics are stories about famous Aryan heroes. The Epic called the Mahabharata is the longest poem ever written. It tells the story of a warrior named Arjuna. The god Krishna teaches Arjuna about man's duties and how the soul can reach God through good deeds. Another Epic, called the Ramayana, teaches about love and devotion between husbands and wives by telling of the adventures of Prince Rama and his wife Sita.

Hinduism allows a person to believe in one god or in many gods. Some families worship one god called Brahma, who they believe created the universe. Other Hindus worship gods who are different forms of Brahma. The god Vishnu is the preserver of the universe. The god Siva is the destroyer of ignorance and evil. Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva are the three most important gods, but there are over 33,000 lesser gods who are also worshipped.



Although Hindus worship different gods, they do have certain ideas in which they all believe. One idea concerns what happens to the soul after death. Christians and Muslims believe that the soul goes to heaven or hell, depending on how the person lived his life on earth. Hindus believe that when the body dies, a person's soul goes into the body of another living thing. The soul can be reborn in another human being or in an animal. The English word for rebirth of the soul is reincarnation. Hindus call reincarnation *samsara*. The soul keeps being reborn until it reaches *moksha*, where it becomes united with the god Brahma. Once the soul reaches *moksha*, it does not have to go through rebirth again.

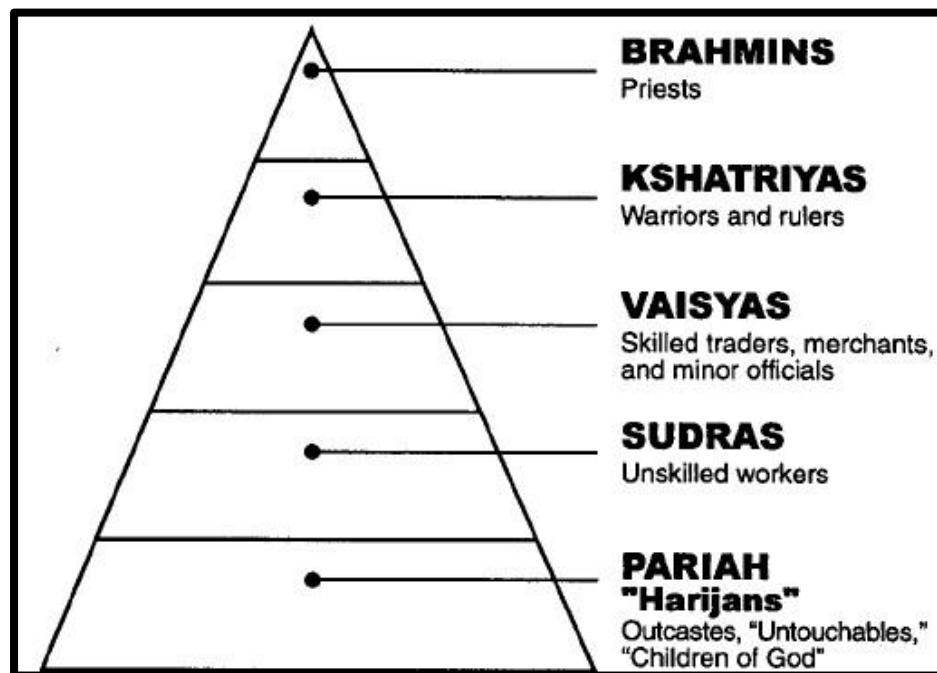
How does one achieve oneness with God? Hindus developed the practice of *yoga*. A method of training designed to achieve *moksha* (in fact, yoga means “union.”) The final goal of yoga was to leave behind the cycle of earthly life into what is seen as kind of a dreamless sleep. As one Hindu writing states, “When all the senses are stilled, when the mind is at rest, that, say the wise, is the highest state.”

Hindus believe that a person’s *karma* determines how his soul will be reborn in the next life. Karma means deeds or actions. If a person does good deeds in this life, his soul will be reborn into a higher or better form. If a person lives a bad life, he will be reincarnated into a lower form, maybe into the body of an insect. A person’s *dharma* tells him how to live properly so he has good karma.

*Dharma* is a set of rules each Hindu must follow in order to be promoted in the next life. If a person experiences poverty and hardship, it is thought that he is getting what he deserves for having had bad karma in his previous life. He must make the best of this life, and perhaps in the next life his soul will be reborn into better conditions.

So the belief in reincarnation provided a religious basis for the rigid class divisions inherent in the caste system which characterizes Hindu society. When a person is born into a certain caste, or social class, it determines what kind of job he will have. It also has an effect on what a person can eat, who he will marry, and who his friends will be. In effect, your caste determines your duty (*dharma*) and therefore Hindu beliefs actually limit social mobility (or the ability to move up within the social hierarchy). The caste system justified the privilege of those at the higher end of the scale. After all, they would not have these privileges if they hadn’t followed their *dharma* and were deserving of them.

There are four main castes, each with its own rules and regulations: (1) the Brahmins, or priests (2) the Kshatriyas, the warriors and rulers (3) the Vaishyas, consisting of professionals, merchants, and landowning farmers, and (4) the Shudras, or servants. Each of these four castes has hundreds of subcastes that have their own rules of behavior.



There was a group of unfortunate people in India who for centuries did not belong to any caste. These people were called Untouchables, or Outcastes. They ranked below the lowest caste. They had to do the jobs that caste Hindus would not do, like handling the bodies of dead animals and sweeping the streets. Untouchables could not worship in Hindu temples or use public roads and wells. Mohandas Gandhi, who helped India gain its independence from Great Britain, tried to help the Untouchables. Finally, in 1950, the Indian Constitution did away with Untouchability. It outlawed discrimination against a person because of their religion, caste, race, or sex. Today, former Untouchables can attend schools and universities, and become lawyers, teachers, and even government officials.

In recent years, the caste system has weakened. As more and more people have become educated, caste prejudice has decreased. New jobs created by industrialization have cut across caste lines. As more and more people move to the cities, caste differences are less noticeable. The caste system, however, may never completely disappear because it is such an important part of the religious beliefs of Hinduism.

Hindus do not have a place like the Christian church or Jewish synagogue where they worship on a certain day of the week. Instead, Hindus usually worship in their homes whenever they wish. Some wealthy people set aside a special room to practice their religion. Many important religious ceremonies, including weddings, take place at home.



India does have beautiful temples dedicated to particular gods. But Hindus worship as individuals rather than as congregations. People make pilgrimages to temples in such holy cities as Varanasi (also known as Benares) along the Ganges River. At least once in a lifetime, very religious Hindus try to visit the Ganges because they believe its waters are holy and can wash away sins. Many Hindus also think that if they bathe in the Ganges, they will be cured of sickness and disease. Hindus believe that animals have souls, and therefore cannot be killed for meat. The cow is especially sacred. Cattle roam freely through the streets unharmed even though millions of Indians do not have enough to eat. To Hindus, eating the flesh of the cow is a form of cannibalism because the cow might contain the soul of a dead friend or relative.

