

HINDUISM

People Places Practices Philosophies



Symbol of the Hindu tradition is the Sanskrit letter **OM**, the sound of the sacred.

People

Founder: None. Hinduism is a way of life, a worldview, a philosophy and is a complex system of religions. Sometimes it is called *Sanatana Dharma* — “The Eternal Law” or “The Eternal Way.” It is the ancient “native spirituality” of India.

Local Leader: Priest, Pandit, Swami.

Population: 900 million (15% of world population).

Greeting: Bow with hands together in a prayer posture placed at the level of the heart while saying the word “Namaste” (The divine in me bows to the divine in you) or “Shanti” (Peace).

Places

Place of Origin: Northwest India.

Date of Origin: ca. 3500-3000 BCE. More “modern” Hinduism dates from the Aryan invasion of ca. 1500 BCE.

Significant Holy City or Place: Hinduism has hundreds of holy places, cities, rivers, mountains, etc. Of particular importance are the Ganges and Varanasi (Banares).

Major Population Centre: India.

Place of Worship: Temple or Mandir (Note: Many Hindus also worship at home at household altars which is equally valued as Temple worship).

Protocol:

- Shoes off.
- No head covering required.
- Practitioners generally sit on the floor.
- When sitting, do not point soles of feet towards the deities or the speaker.
- Discard chewing gum and candy before entering the temple.
- If given prasad (blessed fruit or sweets) eat them after you leave the temple, not inside the temple.

Practices

Puja — A religious ritual which most Hindus perform every day that may include:

- Chanting.
- Prostration or bowing in adoration of particular deities.
- Meditation.
- Offering of fruit, sweets, or money.
- Receiving prasad (blessed fruit or sweets) and holy water.

Namaste — A reciprocated gesture of greeting made by bringing the palms of the hands together at the level of the heart.

Hindus are vegetarian and do not eat eggs or products containing eggs.

Philosophies

Divinity: 1 & 330,000,000 (monistic meaning One Reality rather than One Entity). Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Krishna, Rama, Ganesh, Mother Durga, and others are manifestation of the One Reality. Various images represent these manifestations and are not considered "idols." Some Hindus may identify more as polytheists and others as monotheists. Still other branches of Hinduism are non-theists.

Scriptures: Bhagavad Gita, Upanishads, Vedas, and many others.

Quotations from Holy Books:

- "However people approach Me, even so do I welcome them. For the path they take from every side is Mine."
Bhagavad Gita 4.11
- "As the rivers flowing east and west merge in the sea and become one with it, forgetting they were ever separate streams, so do all creatures lose their separateness when they merge at last into pure Being." *Chandogya Upanishad*
- "By hundreds and then by thousands behold my manifold celestial forms of innumerable shapes and colours. See now the whole universe with all things that move and move not, and whatever your soul may yearn to see. See it all as One in me."
Bhagavad Gita 11.5, 11

Golden Rule: "Do not to others what would cause pain if done to you." *The Mahabharata 5.1517*

Reincarnation: Hinduism teaches the transmigration of souls through various lives from birth-death-birth (samsara) that may be human, animal, plant or even mineral. Eventually, through a realization of one's true nature which is an expression of the divine, one may attain moksha or release from the cycles of birth and death. At death one then merges with the pure Being of the One Reality which is beyond the categories of names and forms.

Karma: The cause-and-effect based on past actions that determines one's present and future state.

Beliefs: One's duty is to realize one's true nature is an expression of the divine and thus be released from the cycle of birth and death (samsara) This release (moksha) may be achieved through the practice of various yogas:

Jnana Yoga (Path of Knowledge)

- not encyclopedic knowledge but intuitive, spiritual knowledge and discernment.

Karma Yoga (Path of Duty)

- fulfillment of rites, ceremonies, social obligations and strictly observing all social regulations and dietary laws.
- an action-oriented path with the goal of making all of one's actions into mindful acts of devotion.
- self-less service – renunciation of rewards of actions; "duty for duty's sake."

Bhakti Yoga (Path of Love or Devotion)

- passionate devotion and absolute surrender to a particular deity.
- done not for fear of punishment or for expectation of reward but for love alone.
- not dependent on race, caste, gender.
- the most popular path.

Raja Yoga (Path of Discipline)

- control of senses and mental processes.
- concentration and physical discipline.

Branches: Contemporary Hinduism is traditionally divided into the following major denominations. There are more than listed here.

- Shaivism — devotion to Lord Shiva.
- Shaktism — devotion to the Divine Mother (e.g. Kali, Durga, Laxmi, Saraswati, etc.)
- Vaishnavism — devotion to Lord Vishnu.
- Vedanta — based primarily on the Upanishads, a portion of the Vedic scriptures.
- Newer Denominations — Vedanta Society, Hare Krishna, Arya Samaj, etc.

Individual Hindus may choose which manifestation of Ultimate Reality to worship. This choice, called an ishtadevata (literally "beloved deity"), may change through one's life.

copyright © 2006 **Encounter World Religions Centre: People, Places, Practices, Philosophies**

Not to be copied or reproduced in whole or in part without specific written permission.

www.worldreligions.ca ~ encounter@worldreligions.ca ~ 519.822.0099