

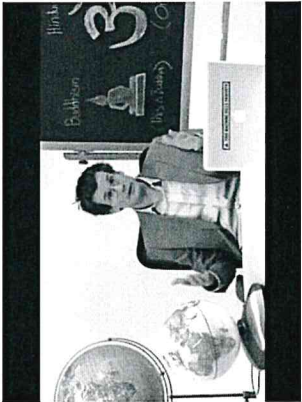
### QUESTIONS TO GUIDE INQUIRY

1. What are the various beliefs of the five major world religions?
2. How does geography play a role in the development and spread of religion?
3. What effect does religion have on economic, political, and social institutions?
4. What effect does religion have on art, language, and literature?

### TERMS, PLACES, PEOPLE

- Hinduism
- Reincarnation
- Karma
- Dharma
- Caste System

### Interactive 5.7 Crash Course - Hinduism



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahatma\\_Gandhi#/media/File:Portrait\\_Gandhi.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahatma_Gandhi#/media/File:Portrait_Gandhi.jpg)

“Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony.” Mahatma Gandhi

Who was Mahatma Gandhi? What influenced this person so much that he was able to change the path of history for one country and arguably the world? Gandhi was the leader of the independence movement from British rule in India. He lived from 1858-1947 CE. Gandhi led a spiritual life focused on nonviolence, morality, and simplicity. His major spiritual influence would come from the many texts of Hinduism.

**Hinduism**, the world's third largest religion (following Christianity and Islam), is a polytheistic religion. As noted earlier, polytheistic religions believe in more than one god. In Hinduism, the belief about God or gods is not considered essential, so this separates it from the monotheistic beliefs. Hinduism includes

numerous traditions; however, these do not create a unified set of beliefs or practices. The extensive texts and the long rich history of the religion shape what we see today.

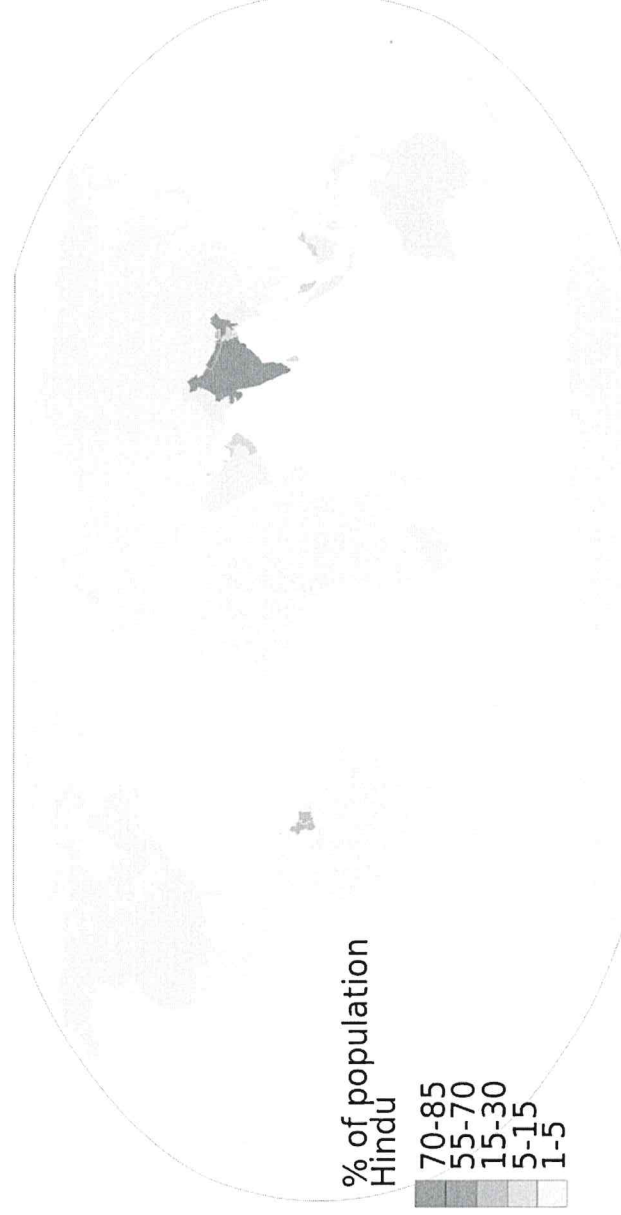
Hinduism is considered the oldest living religion in the world. Elements that lie within the religion stretch back thousands of years. Even with all this rich history and wide array of information, the religion cannot be easily defined as it also is closely associated with concepts and histories of the Indian religions of Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. To complicate things further, Hinduism has no founder or date of origin. Most of the sacred texts, authors, and dates are unknown. Many scholars describe

Hinduism as a religion that has developed in India for nearly four thousand years. With all this in mind, what is Hinduism?

Hinduism is the religion of the majority of the people living in India and Nepal. There are also significant populations living in many countries all over the world, estimated to be over 900 million followers worldwide. The term "Hinduism" is relatively new when naming the religion. The term itself has only been used since the early part of the 20th century within the context of British colonialism. The goal here was to distinguish between the Muslims in portions of British controlled India and the followers of other traditions. Those followers would be called Hindus. During this period of time, Hinduism was a cultural, political, and geographical term. Today, the term is widely accepted, although the broad definition is still a subject of debate.

### Origins/History

It is difficult to track the history of Hinduism for a number of reasons. First, Hinduism doesn't recognize a single founder. Second, Hinduism is not a single religion, but it embraces many traditions. Thirdly, the religion has no definite starting point. The traditions which flow into the religion date back thousands of years, with some



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism#/media/File:Hinduism\\_percent\\_population\\_in\\_each\\_nation\\_World\\_Map\\_Hindu\\_data\\_by\\_Pew\\_Research.svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism#/media/File:Hinduism_percent_population_in_each_nation_World_Map_Hindu_data_by_Pew_Research.svg)

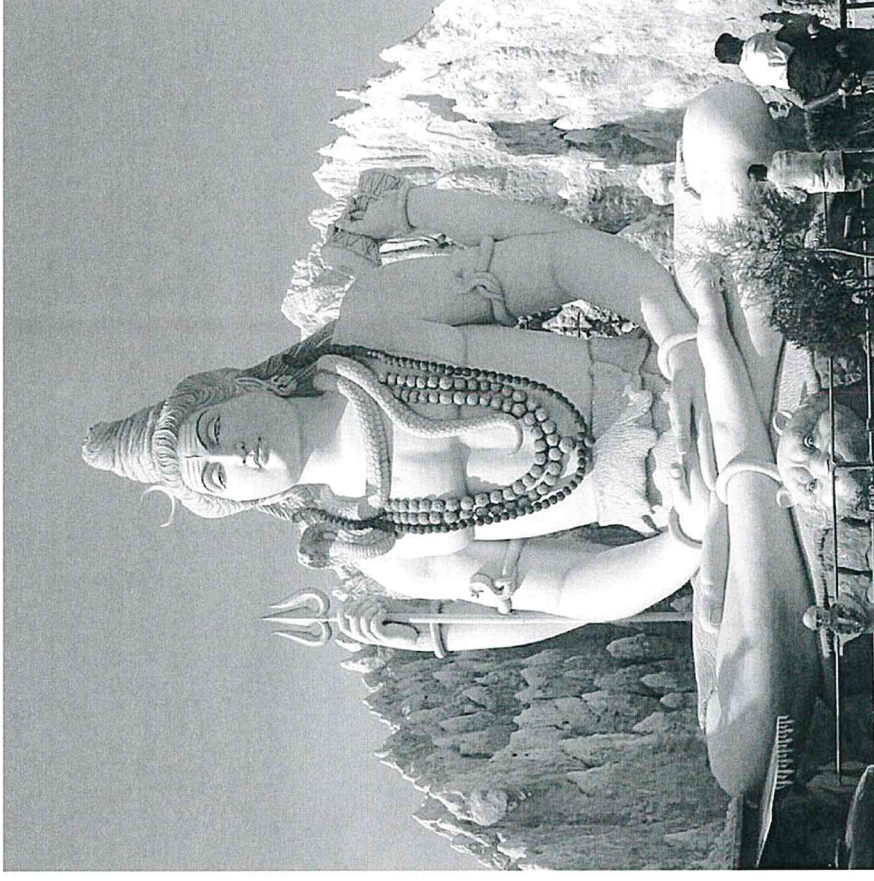
claiming that the Hindu revelation is eternal.

With the early history difficult to track, a rough chronology can be followed:

- Before 2000 BCE: The Indus Valley Civilization
- 1500–500 BCE: The Vedic Period
- 500 BCE–500 CE: The Epic, Puranic, and Classical Age
- 500 CE–1500 CE: Medieval Period
- 1500–1757 CE: Pre-Modern Period
- 1757–1947 CE: British Period
- 1947 CE–the present: Independent India

### Central Teachings

With so many traditions and a rich history, how can one define the beliefs of Hinduism? There are some primary beliefs and traditions held by the majority of Hindu believers. The fundamental Hindu beliefs include the recognition that the Vedas are the authoritative text; the existence of supreme spirit (Brahman); the existence of an enduring soul that can move from one body to another at death (**reincarnation**); and the law of



[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism#/media/File:Shiva\\_Bangalore.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hinduism#/media/File:Shiva_Bangalore.jpg)

**karma**, which determines one's destiny in both this life and the next.

Many Hindus are devoted to following the gods Shiva or Vishnu, while others look toward an inward divine Self referred to with the word Atman. Most also recognize the existence of a supreme reality or unifying principle, Brahman, that is a one supreme spirit. Hindus believe that God is in all things in the world and that all

make up Brahman. Brahman does not just exist; it IS existence. With this in mind, all other “gods”, such as Vishnu and Shiva, are Brahman in different forms.

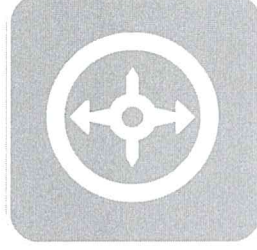
What is Hinduism’s scripture? The sacred text of Hinduism are a collection of works developed over the life of the religion. The Vedas are the fundamental collection of these

texts. They came to be in their present form between 1200-200 BCE and were brought to India by the Aryans, a group of migrants which came to the Indian subcontinent from areas to the north and west. Hindus believe that the texts were spoken to scholars directly from God. For hundreds of years, the Vedas were never written down- they were only spoken or sang. Eventually the Vedas would be brought together and written down. The Upanishads are another collection of holy writings. These were written 500-1000 years after the Vedas and contain ideas about Hinduism and how to practice the religion.

### Basic Beliefs/Concepts

A major difference between Hinduism and the monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is the view on life and death. Most Hindus believe in reincarnation. This is the belief in the rebirth of the soul, when the body dies the spirit is

### Interactive 5.8 Hindu Gods and Goddesses



*Learn more here!*

reincarnated or reborn into a new form. The soul is not limited to being reborn in one way. It can be reborn in many forms such as another human, an insect or animal. In that sense, Hindus believe that all life contains a soul.

Karma is a Sanskrit (the primary sacred language of Hinduism) word that literally means “action”. In Hindu beliefs, this term refers to the idea that every action has an equal reaction, either now or at some point in the future. Good actions will have a good reactions or responses and bad actions will have the opposite effect. In Hinduism, karma has an effect not only in this lifetime but across lifetimes, therefore it affects reincarnation.



[https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hindu\\_gods#/media/File:Gods\\_AS.jpg](https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hindu_gods#/media/File:Gods_AS.jpg)

Hindus believe this process of reincarnation is called samsara, a continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Hindus believe that when one dies the soul is then reborn into a new body. The ultimate goal (moksha) is to break free from this cycle. Moksha is “oneness” with god. Once a Hindu is reborn as a Brahman and they live a life of perfection, they will end their cycle of birth, death and rebirth, becoming part of the spirit of Brahman. Moksha is also sometimes referred to as, Nirvana. That term will have a similar meaning in the other polytheistic religion we will examine, Buddhism, later in this chapter.

A very important part of the Hindu belief, Dharma is “duty”, “virtue”, or “morality” of a Hindu believer. Dharma is the power that keeps society together; it makes us moral people. This idea is not the same for everyone; different people have different duties according to their age, gender, or social position.

An important aspect of Dharma is the **caste system** that exists in India. The caste system is a model of social order in society. A person’s place in the caste system is dependant on the level where they were born. The four classes in the caste system are:

- Brahmins or Brahmins - the intellectuals and the priestly class who perform religious rituals
- Kshatriya (nobles or warriors) - who traditionally had power

- Vaishyas (commoners or merchants) - ordinary people who produce, farm, trade, and earn a living

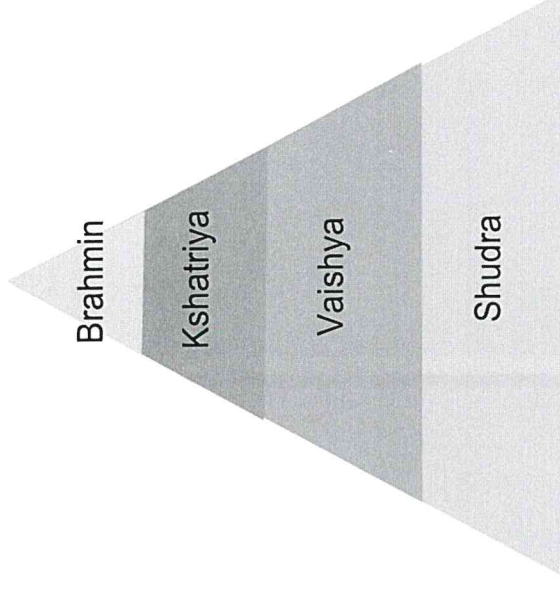
- Shudras (workers) - who traditionally served the higher classes, including labourers, artists, musicians, and clerks

As you can see, castes

are normally linked to a certain job. Another group has existed at the bottom of the system, the Dalits or “untouchables”. This group is looked at as being so low they are outside the caste system. Hindus believe if their karma was good they will move up in the caste system when they were reincarnated. They also believe that bad karma would be punished by people being reborn in lower castes or as an untouchable.

### Religion Today

Today the Hindu religion has become well established throughout the world socially, economically, and academically. Even with



[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pyramid\\_of\\_Caste\\_system\\_in\\_India.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Pyramid_of_Caste_system_in_India.png)

many spread throughout many countries, about 95% of believers live in India. Today Hinduism has faced change brought on by youth who look for a rational basis for the practices that have been passed down by family custom. There are changes being made to many of the traditional views of the caste system (now illegal in India), societal views on women, and intermarriage between social levels.

### **Holidays and Festivals**

It has been said that the Hindus could have a holiday for every day of the year. It has also been noted that this could be an understatement. It is not known for sure exactly how many festivals are celebrated, but in general most festivals are intended to purify, advert malicious influences, and renew society. Holi and Diwali are two of the more famous festivals. Holi is an annual festival celebrated in early March. It celebrates spring, offering followers to disregard many social norms and indulge in general “merrymaking”. Diwali is the festival of lights, which last for five days. This celebration is also New Year for many Hindus.