

HINDUISM

Hinduism is followed by nearly 85% of the Indian people. The basic ideas of Hinduism were brought into India by the Aryans about 1500 B.C. As an ethnic religion, its actual origin and early development are unclear. Regardless, through the centuries, Hinduism has greatly affected India's history and way of life. It is closely associated with the physical geography of South Asia and 99% of all Hindus live with in either India or the neighboring Himalayan kingdom of Nepal. This clustered distribution is typical of ethnic religions. There are 1.2 billion followers of Hinduism.

Hindu Holy Texts

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

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

Hindu Belief System

Hinduism allows a person to believe in one or many gods. Some worship Brahma, who they believe created the universe and is the ultimate reality. Others worship gods who are interpreted as different forms of Brahma. Although Brahma could be seen as a singular god with multiple manifestations, Hinduism is more often considered polytheistic.

The god, Vishnu, is the preserver of the universe. He has many incarnations, or avatars, through which he has interacted with humankind. These include Krishna, Rama (see above) and even Buddha (more on this later). About 70% of Hindus a form of Vishnu.

The god Shiva is the destroyer of ignorance and evil and is worshipped by 20% of Hindus.



Figure 1: The three principle deities of Hinduism

Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva are the three most important gods, but there are over 33,000 lesser gods who are also worshipped. Some women practice Shaktism which holds that a female goddess is the ultimate reality.

Despite worshipping different gods, Hindus have certain common beliefs. One concerns what happens after death. Hindus believe that when the body dies, a person's soul goes into another living being. The soul can be reborn in another human or an animal. The English word for this is reincarnation. Hindus call it *samsara*. The soul keeps being reborn until it reaches *moksha*, where it becomes united with the ultimate reality. It does not have to go through rebirth again. 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." The concept of *samsara* is often reflected by a wheel.

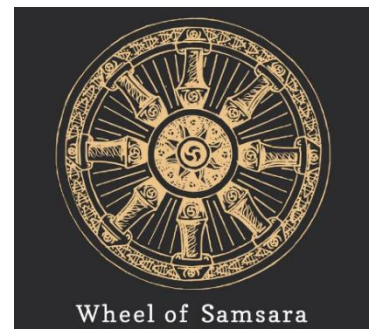


Figure 2: Representing the cycle of reincarnation

The Law Of Samsara - Reincarnation

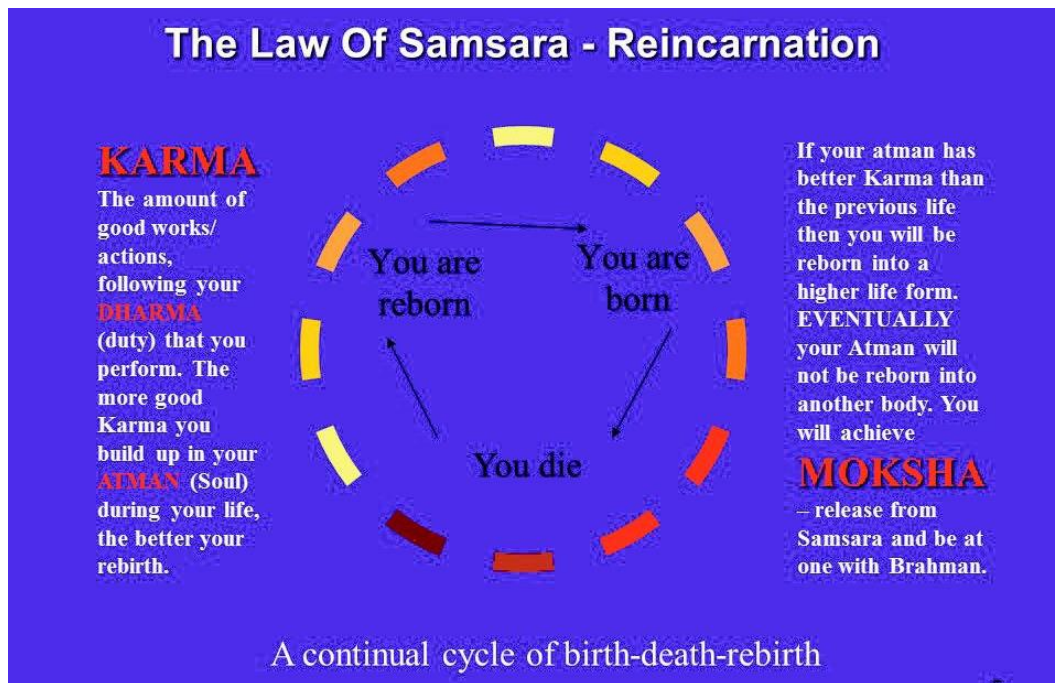


Figure 3: The interaction of karma and dharma, rebirth and moksha

Hindus believe that *karma* determines how their soul will be reborn in the next life. Karma means deeds or actions. If a person does good deeds in this life, their soul will be reborn into a higher form. If a person lives a bad life, they will be reincarnated into a lower form. A person's dharma tells them how to live properly so they have good karma.

Dharma is a set of rules each Hindu must follow to accumulate good karma. If a person experiences poverty and hardship, it is thought that they are getting what they deserve for acquiring bad karma by not following their dharma in a previous life. They must follow their dharma and perhaps be reborn into better conditions.

The belief in reincarnation provided a religious basis for the rigid class divisions inherent in the caste system which characterizes traditional Hindu society. When one is born into a certain caste, or social class, it determines what kind of job they will have, what a person can eat, who they will marry, and who their friends will be. In effect, your caste determines your duty (dharma) and limits 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. In order to move into a higher caste a person should strictly follow the dharma for their current caste

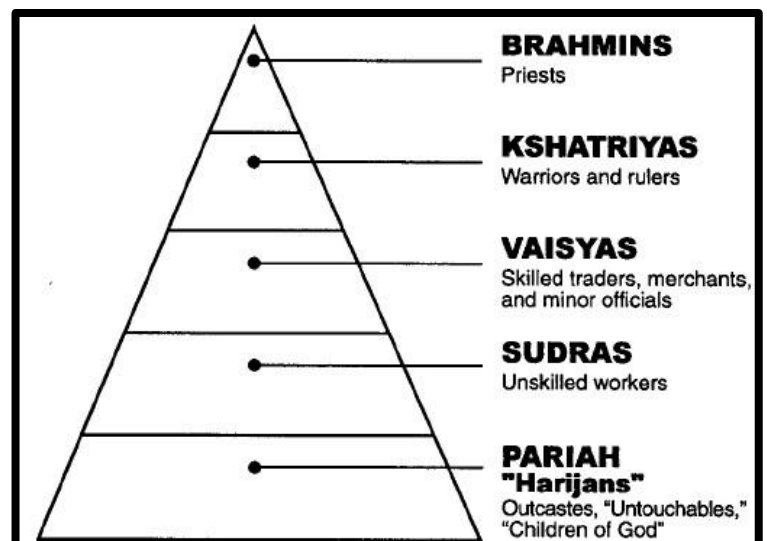


Figure 4: Hindu castes and the Untouchables

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 is a group of unfortunate people in India who do not belong to a caste. They are called the “Untouchables”, or “Outcastes”. They did jobs that caste Hindus found impure and would not do, like handling the bodies of dead animals and sweeping streets. Untouchables could not worship in Hindu temples or use public roads and wells. Gandhi, who helped India gain its independence from Britain, tried to help. In 1950, the new Indian Constitution outlawed Untouchability. It banned discrimination against people because of their religion, caste, race, or sex. Today, former Untouchables can attend schools and universities, and become lawyers, teachers, and even government officials.



Figure 5: Untouchables do jobs other Hindus find impure.

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

The Effect of Hinduism on the Cultural Landscape

Hindus do not have a place like the Christian church, Jewish synagogue or Islamic Mosque where they worship on a certain day of the week. Instead, Hindus usually worship in their homes whenever they wish. This corresponds with non-standardized nature of Hindu worship. Some wealthy people set aside a special space to make devotions to their particular god of choice. Many important religious ceremonies, including weddings, also take place at home.

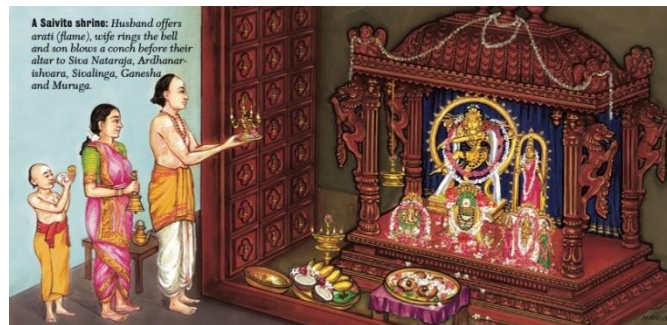


Figure 6: Most Hindus worship in their homes.

India does have beautiful temples dedicated to particular gods. But Hindus worship as individuals rather than congregations. So there are seldom open interior spaces for mass meetings. And temples have a lot of idolatry. People make pilgrimages to holy cities such as Varanasi on the Ganges River. At least once in a lifetime, religious Hindus try to visit the Ganges because they believe its waters can wash away sins. Many Hindus think if they bathe in the Ganges, they will be cured of sickness. Hindus believe that animals have souls, and therefore can't be killed for meat. The cow is especially sacred. Cattle roam freely through the streets unharmed even as millions of Indians go hungry. 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.

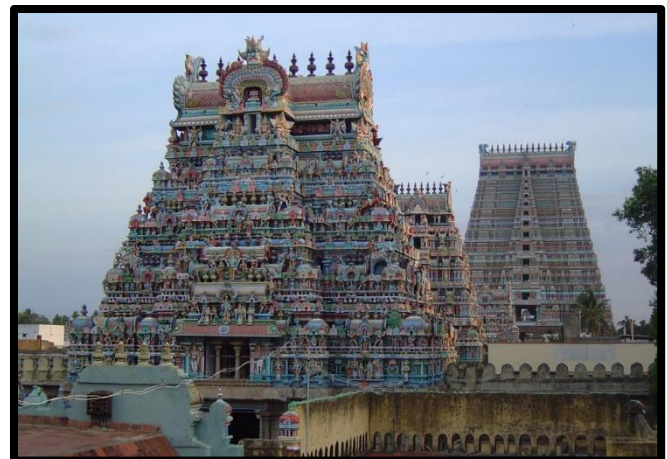


Figure 7: Hindu temples are ornate and covered in idols.



Figure 8: Hindu pilgrimage to the Ganges River at Varanasi

Hindu practices can have a profound effect on the cultural landscape and the environment. Much like the hajj to Mecca by Muslims, Hindus making a pilgrimage to Varanasi on the Ganges necessitates the construction of support services. Hotels and restaurants have been built to accommodate wealthier Hindu visitors and other emergency supplies of food, water and shelter must be provided for poorer Indians who make the visit.

Since bathing in the Ganges is believed to wash away sins and cure sickness, many unwell Hindus wade into the waters increasing the chance of disease transmission and polluting the waters.

Furthermore, the primary method of disposing of the dead in Hinduism is through cremation. Cremation frees up the use of arable land that may otherwise be used for burial but contributes to air pollution and has strained India's wood supply because it takes a lot of wood to burn a body. Funeral pyres are often set adrift on the Ganges and that practice also contributes to polluting the river.