

Frequently Asked Questions about Hinduism

These FAQ's are meant to provide the reader with a brief introduction to the religion of Hinduism. FAQ's on Buddhism, Judaism and Islam are also available. They are provided as a service of Peak Communication Performance, a consultancy firm specializing in cross-cultural management and communication issues. Contact: info@peakcp.com

Where does the word "Hindu" come from?

Hindu is a name given to people living east of the river Indus in India. Thus "Hinduism" became the term used to describe the religion practiced by these people. Those who practice Hinduism usually refer to the religion as "sanatana dharma" (eternal truth).

Who is the founder of Hinduism?

There is no single founder of Hinduism in the way that Jews can trace the beginnings of their religion to Abraham and Muslims can trace the historical beginnings of Islam to Mohammed.

What country has the most followers?

India has the most followers, with an estimated 700 million Hindus out of the total population of 1 billion. Nepal, although having a population of only 25 million, is the only official Hindu state in the world. Approximately 13 per cent of the world's population is Hindu.

What is the holy text of Hinduism?

The basic texts are collectively known as the Vedas and were compiled in Sanskrit. They are:
Rig Veda—hymns and chants of praise
Yajur Veda—liturgical prose
Sam Veda—readings for chanting
Atharva Veda—chants and songs for correct living

Hindus believe that the Vedas have no authorship and have been eter-

nally existent. Hence they are called apaurusheya—not authored or made by anyone. The Vedas do not owe their authority to anybody, they are themselves the authority, being eternal—the knowledge of God. This knowledge is what is meant by 'the Vedas' ('Vid'—to know).

Other epic texts are also central to understanding Hinduism. These include the Mahabharatha (which deals with the life of Lord Krishna) and the Ramayana (which deals with the life of Lord Rama).

Are there different sects of Hinduism?

Hindu philosophy is contained in the end portion of the vedas and is called the Gnana Kaanda or Knowledge portion or Vedaanta. This has been interpreted differently and many schools of thought emerged but Advaita, Visishtadvaita and Dvaita are the most well known schools of thought on Hindu philosophy. According to Advaita the creator and the created are the same. The created is a part of the creator according to Visishtadvaita and as per Dvaita the creator is different from the created. The practice of Hinduism and worship of particular gods varies tremendously both within India and in other parts of the world.

What do Hindus believe?

The spiritual goal of all Hindus is to overcome the cycle of birth and death and become one with the Paramathma. All Hindus believe that there is a soul (atman) within every living thing and that this soul is part of the Universal Soul (Paraman), which is formless but can nevertheless manifest itself in any form it desires. Thus, the aim of the atman is to seek reunion with the paraman, and thereby get out of the cycle of births and rebirths (samsara). This is also called Moksha. The quality of one's past

deeds is known as karma. When one's karma is of sufficient quality, he or she will escape the cycle of birth and rebirth and rejoin the Universal Soul.

Hindus believe in ahimsa (not doing harm to other living things), and since this includes not killing living things, a staunch Hindu is generally a vegetarian.

Although they believe in the Supreme Being, Hindus generally pray to a pantheon of Gods in various forms and which are both male and female. Central to this pantheon is the trinity of gods

Brahma (Creator)

Vishnu (Preserver)

Siva (Destroyer)

Hindus pray to a multiplicity of Gods and Goddesses depending on their aspirations and goals. For example, to avoid obstacles they pray to Ganesha. For wealth they pray to Lakshmi and for learning they pray to Saraswathi. Hindus also believe in the reincarnation of the Supreme Being as avatars (the descent and incarnation of a deity). Two of the most well-known reincarnations Rama and Krishna.

What are the holy places of Hinduism?

They are found all over India, from Kashi and Varanasi and Banares in the North to Cape Comorin and the various temples for Lord Muruga (son of Lord Siva), known collectively as the Aru Padai Veedu (Six Incarnations temples). As for Lord Ganesh, the elder son of Lord Siva, temples of worship housing his statue are found in almost every nook and corner of India and other countries where Hinduism is practiced. These places of worship are associated with the different gods who were deemed to have come down and lived with the people, and they are therefore the sacred original abodes of these

gods.

Where do Hindus worship?

Hindus generally worship either at their homes, where some of them build elaborate altars, or in temples big and small, simple as well as elaborate.

How does a Hindu worship?

Worship is called **puja**. One can worship either in Sanskrit or in the other Indian languages, by reciting ancient mantras and/or chanting the names of the deities. Much worship takes place in the home at a shrine or altar dedicated for such a purpose. Generally, there is an invocation, followed by addressing the specific god and presentations of offerings (usually flowers, fruit and delicacies) at the altar. Elaborate rituals are associated with the different Gods and Goddesses.

Are there any special dietary practices?

A staunch Hindu is a vegetarian and will also abstain from alcohol. Other Hindus may include milk and milk products (butter, cheese, ghee), as the cow is considered sacred and dairy products are admissible as permitted food. Because the cow is considered sacred, Hindus may not eat beef.

What are some Hindu rituals?

Birth Birth is a special event, whereby the astrologer is immediately summoned and commissioned to chart the child's horoscope. After 11 days, the priest and astrologer are part of those invited for the official child naming ceremony. After 30 days, there is a bigger event, involving family members and friends, to put the child in the cradle. At the end of 1 year, the child's head is shaved and prayers offered at a temple, usually for Lord Muruga.

Weddings For weddings there are also elaborate rites, starting from the matching of the bride's and groom's horoscopes by astrologers. Once, there is a match, an auspicious

date for the wedding is fixed that is in harmony with the stars of the couple. The wedding may last as long as three days, with numerous rituals conducted by the priest and community elders. On the wedding day proper, the bride and groom take seven steps (saphathathi) around the sacred fire (agnihotra) while the priest chants Sanskrit mantras from the Vedas. Finally, the groom ties a sacred thread with the thali (symbol of marriage) around the groom's neck. After this, the couple is blessed by elders and friends. This is usually followed by vegetarian lunch/dinner.

Death. Death ceremonies are also elaborate. The priest lights the sacred fire (agnihotra) and chants Sanskrit mantras. The eldest son/brother or other male then uses a tinder from the fire to light up the heart of the dead person's body, and the body is then cremated. (Since only the soul is needed for reincarnation, cremation is the standard practice among Hindus.) On the 13th day, friends and relatives gather for a cleansing/thanksgiving ceremony, inclusive of food. Subsequently, the death anniversary is remembered through prayers at a temple dedicated to Lord Siva.

How are Hindus organized?

There is no strict organization or hierarchy as one would see for example in the Catholic church. There are Hindu Sangams, either as voluntary bodies or as statutory bodies which oversee the administration of the temples and make rulings on some issues, but they are not binding and are usually restricted to the geographical area in which the temple/sangam is located. Many sects have their own organization and rules. In the Sangams, the leaders are called Swamis, while in the temples, the priests are called acharya (North India) or pandaram (South India). Rituals are usually performed by the priest caste known as Brahmins.

What are the special days or times of the year?

Hindu New Year is the most widely celebrated. It falls on the first day of the month of chithirai, and goes according to the Hindu (lunar) calendar. Another popular festival in both north and south India is Deepavali or Diwali, which is the festival lights that commemorates the triumph of good over evil. In South India, Malaysia and Singapore, the popular festival is Thaipusam, a festival to make offerings (and penance) to Lord Muruga. Penance takes the form of carrying kavadis and piercing parts of the body with skewers. Another popular festival is firewalking, which is carried out in temples that worship Goddess Mariamman.

What happens after death?

On the fall of the physical body the athma merges with the Paramathma if the karma has been completely extinguished. Otherwise there is travel for the Subtle and Causal body bundle till it finds a suitable womb to lodge itself for the next birth and the type of womb depends on its karma palan which it has to go through.

Is Hinduism similar to other religions?

Siddhartha was a Hindu, who attained enlightenment and became Buddha. He was also one of the ten avatars of Vishnu. Mahaaveera, also a Hindu, was the founding saint of Jainism, an important religion in India.

Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism are sometimes called the **Vedic Religions**.