

## The Indian Religions

So far, we have covered the Semitic religions of Judaism, Christianity, & Islam. All three are **monotheistic** in their beliefs, & all 3 originated in the Middle East.

We move now to the Indian religions of **Sikhism, Hinduism, & Buddhism**. They are referred to as Indian religions because all 3 originated in the subcontinent of India, beginning with Hinduism as early as 2000 BCE.

Unlike the shared monotheism of the Semitic faiths, the Indian religions differ in some of their most basic beliefs. Hinduism, for example, is a **polytheistic** religion, meaning that Hindus *may* believe in various forms of god. Buddhists, on the other hand, do not necessarily believe in God at all. Sikhism, youngest of the 3 faiths, is monotheistic & combines influences from Islam & Hinduism.

Look at the map on the next page of the Indian subcontinent. The Indus valley, nurtured by the Indus River, is the birthplace of Hinduism. The Buddha delivered his first sermon at the city of Sarnath near the sacred Hindu city of Banares. To the north is Amritsar, the spiritual center of the Sikh religion. As you can see, this area of the world contains a rich variety of religions. All together, the Indian religions constitute about 900 million people.

### Origins of Hinduism:

#### The Indus Valley Civilization

**Hinduism**, unlike most major religions, does *not* have a central figure upon whom it is founded. Rather, it is a complex faith with roots stemming back 5,000 years to the people of the Indus Valley, now part of Pakistan. When the Aryan tribes of Persia invaded the **Indus Valley** around 1700 BCE, the groups' beliefs merged & Hinduism began to form.

### I. 3 Indian religions

- A. \_\_\_\_\_  
 B. \_\_\_\_\_  
 C. \_\_\_\_\_

### II. originated in/around \_\_\_\_\_

III. Hinduism is a \_\_\_\_\_ religion.

IV. Buddhists do *not* necessarily believe in \_\_\_\_\_ at all



### Recalling past knowledge:

Hindus : **Indus Valley** :: Egyptians : \_\_\_\_\_  
 (Think water...)

Most of what we know of the Indus people (called Dravidians) comes from the archaeological findings. Artifacts & relics dating back as early as 2000 BCE tell the story of a civilization flourishing with craftsmanship, agriculture, & religious life. Many of these early practices & beliefs still shape Hinduism today.

For example, the Indus put great importance on cleanliness or ritual bathing. Mohenjo-Daro, one of the major Indus cities, contained a huge water tank for public bathing. Today, many Hindu temples feature such tanks.

Another lasting legacy of Hinduism is found in the abundance of terra-cotta figurines → unearthed in the Indus Valley. Popular among these small ceramic statuettes were depictions of pregnant women, "mother goddesses." The fertility & strength of the goddess & the rebirth & continuity she provides remain central to the Hindu faith.

Ceramic seals also provided insight into the Indus' religious beliefs. Among the most common design was that of the bull. It represented virility, or sexual force, which is still considered sacred to the Hindus. **Shiva**, among the most revered Hindu gods, is associated with the bull.

The Indus were an agricultural people, growing crops & raising animals. Living on the banks of the Indus River, dependent on its nourishment & renewal, there was deep reverence for water. Water remains sacred to Hindus.

### Origins of Hinduism:

#### The Aryan Invasion & the Vedas

**The Aryan Invasion:** Although there is evidence that the **Indus Valley** civilization may already have been struggling, its collapse began with the invasion of the Aryan tribes around 1700 BCE. The **Aryans**, a powerful race, traveled through Europe & Asia, conquering whomever they encountered.



What do the **female terra-cotta figurines** symbolize?

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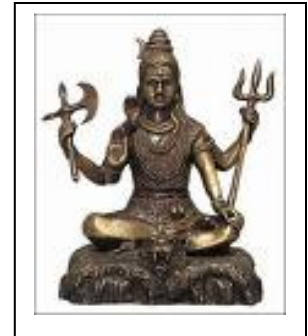


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The \_\_\_\_\_ is **most associated with Shiva**.



**Hinduism** has its roots along the \_\_\_\_\_ **River**; therefore, even today, \_\_\_\_\_ is **still revered!**



When they descended from the Hindu Kush & the Himalayas into the Indus Valley, they brought with them a very different belief system & way of life.

To begin with, the Aryans were not agricultural people. Rather than fertility symbols, they crafted beautiful bronze weaponry. Another major contrast was their religious focus. The Aryans were **patriarchal**, worshipping only male gods. Their central god was a "sky father," probably an influence of the Greek & Roman gods, Zeus & Jupiter. Their principal **deities**, such as Agni & Indra, were associated with the sun. Aryan priests composed verses to these gods which were recited during fire sacrifices.

The Aryans settled the lush Indus Valley & maintained their rituals. However, much of the Indus' religious culture remained alive in villages was adopted by the Aryans. From this mixture of beliefs & practices, Hinduism was born.

**The Vedas:** With the Aryans arrived the bedrock of the Hindu thought system, the Vedas. Considered the world's oldest writings, these scriptures originated before the Aryans migrated to the Indus Valley, later evolving into 4 scriptures: the Rig-Veda, the Yajur-Veda, the Sama-Veda & the Atharva-Veda. The oldest & most popular of these is the Rig-Veda, a collection of hymns which may date back as early as 5000 BCE. It is important to note, however, that the historical sweep of Vedic writing reflects deep shifts in spiritual interest & ways of worship.

Interestingly, for centuries the *Vedas* were only transmitted orally through memorization & recital. Eventually, however, they were copied into Sanskrit, the sacred Hindu language developed by the Aryans of the Indus Valley.

The Rig-Veda tells of 33 gods, all of whom are born of one creator, Brahman. Complementing Brahman are Vishnu & Shiva. These 3 gods form the Hindu trinity. The principal goddesses ~ Lakshmi, Sarasvati, & Kali ~ are also part of the Rig-Veda. This variety of deities ~ many of

Summarizing: With the Aryans, came new ideas of:

- 1) \_\_\_\_\_ weaponry
- 2) \_\_\_\_\_ (male) worship
- 3) *sacrifices* by \_\_\_\_\_

Applying past knowledge: Think back to the great civilizations of Egypt, Greece & Rome... **deities** is another word for \_\_\_\_\_.



Applying past knowledge: What do we call "tales that were shared orally, passed down from generation to generation"? \_\_\_\_\_

(Clue: Think Greek presentations...)

whom take on different personalities & names ~ are very much alive in everyday Hindu life.

**Origins of Hinduism: The Hindu Trinity**

Hinduism is a polytheistic religion. However, worshippers commonly devote themselves to one god, their *personal* deity. Household shrines feature pictures & statues of the chosen gods. Individuals may choose this god for its special qualities. For example, **Ganesh**, the god with the head of an elephant → is known for overcoming obstacles & bringing success.

Some of these gods appear in the famous Hindu epics, the Ramayana & the Mahabharata. These poems originated from the storytelling & parables of the Brahmins & ascetics. In present-day India, these stories are beloved & more popular than the Veda & Upanishads. Accessible & entertaining, rich with heroes & villains, they simultaneously provide moral & spiritual instruction.

The Rig-Veda introduced the foremost of the Hindu gods: **Brahman, Vishnu & Shiva**. Although each of these deities possess special attributes (characteristics,) many Hindus believe they represent three properties of one god. Together they form the Hindu Trinity. This trinity will be explored next.

**Brahma: The Creator**

**Brahma** is considered the mystical creator, the supreme presence, or God. Many Hindus believe that all other gods originate from Brahma →. His 4 faces stand for the 4 corners of the universe. He holds a sacrificial ladle, the 4 Vedas, a jar of holy water from the **Ganges River**, & a necklace of prayer beads. Like all Hindu gods, he sits upon a lotus throne.

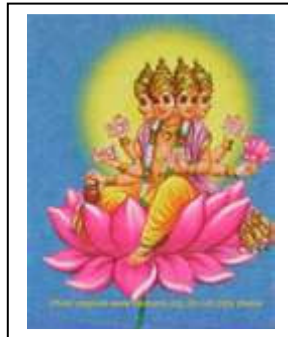
**Vishnu: The Preserver**

"Whenever the Sacred Law fails, & evil raises its head, I (Vishnu) take embodied birth. To

Hinduism is a (monotheistic / polytheistic ← circle 1) religion; however, **most** Hindus dedicate themselves to \_\_\_\_ (#) god(s).



Making connections: What "**trinity**" do you find in Christianity? the \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_



Making analogies: \_\_\_\_\_: Greeks :: **Brahma** : Hindus

guard the righteous, to root out sinners & to establish Sacred Law, I am born from age to age." (Bhagavad Gita IV. 6-8)

Followers of Vishnu worship him as the preserver of the gods. His role is to maintain balance between good & evil powers in the universe. In order to do this, Vishnu returns to earth in different forms, both animal & human. Tradition holds that there are ten avatars, incarnations, linked to Vishnu. However, only Rama & Krishna remain the focus of worship among Hindus. Here are the 10 incarnations of Vishnu & the task each performed:

**Matsya** (Fish): As a **giant fish**, Vishnu warned the word of a great flood, rescuing both a famous sage & the Veda from the flood.

**Kurma** (Tortoise): After the flood, Vishnu, in the form of a huge **tortoise**, retrieved the gods' elixir of immortality, which was lost in the depths of the ocean.

**Varah** (Boar): After the demon Hiranyakasipu plunged the earth **into the ocean**, Vishnu, in the form of a boar, hoisted the world above water.

**Narasimha** (Man-Lion): In order to destroy another demon, Vishnu became **half-man/half-lion**. This was because the demon, Hiranyakasipu, could be killed by neither animal nor man alone.

**Vamana** (Dwarf): When Vishnu first came as a human avatar, he did so to outwit the ruling demon-king, Bali. As a **dwarf**, he convinced Bali to give him as much land as he could cover in 3 steps. Immediately, Vishnu transformed himself into a giant, striding across the universe.

**Parashurama** (Rama with an axe): Vishnu returned as Rama **with an axe** to defeat the ruling warrior class & restore the Brahmins to power.

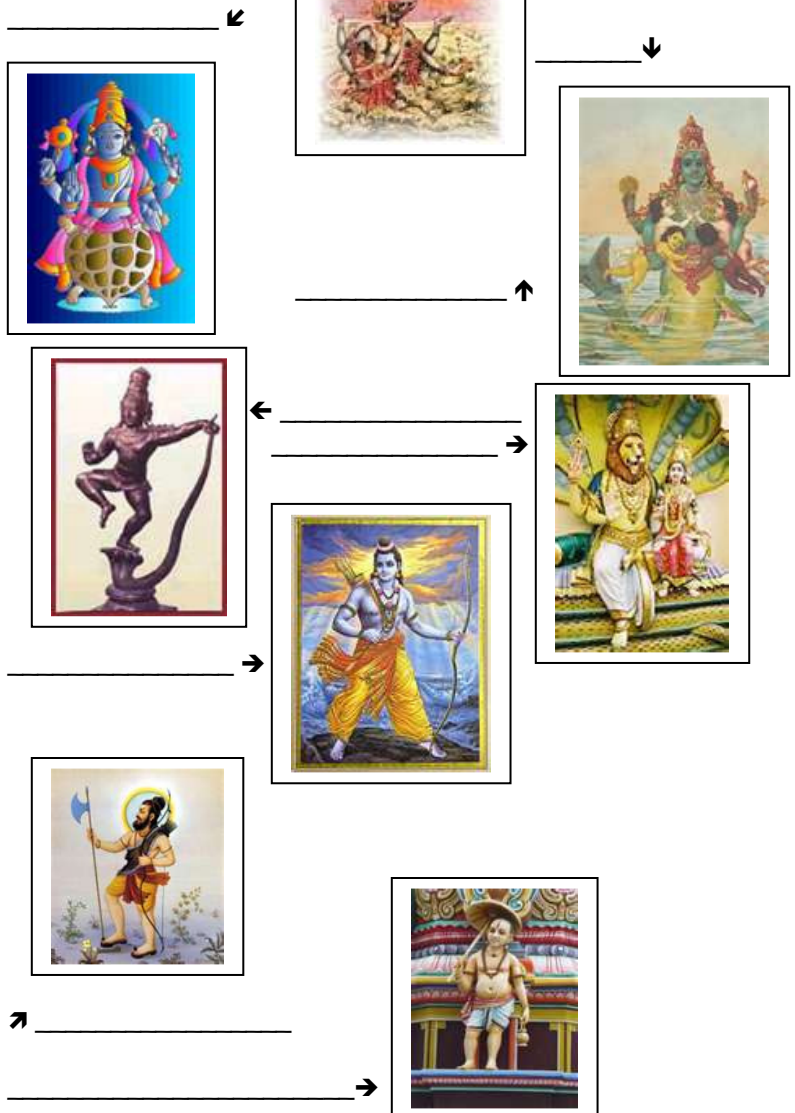
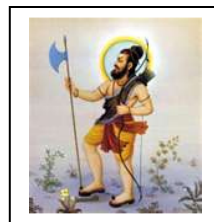
**Rama** (Prince): As prince of Ayodya, Rama is the hero of the epic poem, The Ramayana.

**Krishna** (Young hero & lover): Krishna is considered by many Hindus to be the most important avatar. Fleeing the King (his evil uncle,) he was raised in a forest where he slayed many demons. Eventually, he killed his uncle & restored his kingdom. When he

Which of the great **past civilizations** actually **worshipped gods** who were depicted as **both/part animals & human**?

- a. Egypt
- b. Greece
- c. Rome
- d. Middle Ages

Label these Hindu gods:



returned to the forest to battle demons, he was accidentally slain by the arrow of his followers. Krishna's charm & power are the subject of many stories in Hindu mythology. Here he is in one of his famous poses, **dancing upon the head of a tamed snake**.

**The Buddha:** The story of **Prince Siddhartha**, the Buddha, is told in upcoming pages.

**Kalki:** Yet to come, some Hindus believe Kalki will appear **upon a white horse**, yielding a flaming sword, at the end of time.

### Shiva: The Destroyer

**Shiva** is worshipped as the destroyer or purifier. Like Vishnu, Shiva appears in many different forms throughout Hindu legends. However, the most widely known is that of Shiva Nataraja, the **Lord of the Dance**.

Shiva dances in halo of fire, representing the cycle of birth & death. As he dances, he crushes the dwarf, the demon of ignorance. In his right hand, he keeps rhythm beating a drum, while in his left hand he holds the flame of destruction, purification, & renewal. His other hands are in a position of blessing or refuge.

Around his arms & neck he wears deadly snakes ~ those that symbolize Shiva's power over evil forces. Its ability to shed its skin makes it a symbol of fertility as well.

Finally, Shiva Nataraja is symbol of sexual power & union. This is demonstrated by the female earring on his left ear & the male one on his right.

### Hindu Beliefs

In order to understand Hinduism, we must learn about a few basic beliefs which form the foundation of the religion. These beliefs are rooted in both *The Vedas* & *The Upanishads*. Some of these ideas may be new to you, although some have become quite popular,



Artistically, known as *Lord of the Dance*, **describe Shiva:**

- 1) his dance represents **cycle of** \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) **crushes** the **demon of** \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) holds **flame of** \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, & \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) holds hand in position of \_\_\_\_\_ or **refuge**



- 5) wears \_\_\_\_\_ around neck to symbolize **power over** \_\_\_\_\_
- 6) **sheds** \_\_\_\_\_ as a **symbol of fertility**

such as the idea of reincarnation. Besides defining a belief system, these ideas also carry into Hindu law & rites of passage.

**Dharma:** Dharma stands for the ultimate moral balance of all things. Dharma belongs to the universe & to the individual as well. So, just as there is a divine order of the natural & cosmic realms, there is the same order within a personal life. However, each one has the responsibility to balance his or her own dharma.

A Hindu's dharma is played out in all areas of life: religious, social & familial. If a person makes a promise, the promise must be kept at all costs.

Likewise, the faithful maintain their religious rituals while attending to their family needs. But what if an individual goes astray? This leads to the next major Hindu belief, karma.

**Karma:** Have you ever heard someone say, "What goes around, comes around"? What about, "You reap what you sow"? Both of these sayings mirror the Hindu concept of karma.

Basically, karma stands for the belief that a person experiences the effects of his/her actions! That every act or thought carries with it consequences. Living in a balanced universe, if an individual disturbs this order, s/he will suffer equally.

But an ethical & moral life, with undisturbed dharma, will lead to happiness. How, then, can a Hindu hope to find **redemption** from wrongdoing? If the person does not lead a pure & stainless life, what hope is there for happiness? The answer lies in samsara.

**Samsara:** In the Western world, **samsara** is commonly known as reincarnation. Samsara represents the cycle of life, death, & rebirth in which a person carries his/her own karma. Each life cycle presents an opportunity for balance.

Therefore, an individual may experience effects from past lives, although the circumstances may be totally different. In

**Dharma** can be thought of as the *ethical* \_\_\_\_\_ of all things in the world.

**REMEMBER:** **Dharma** = Duty

Also, **REMEMBER:** **Karma** = consequences

**Summarizing:** Summarize the Hindu belief in **karma**:

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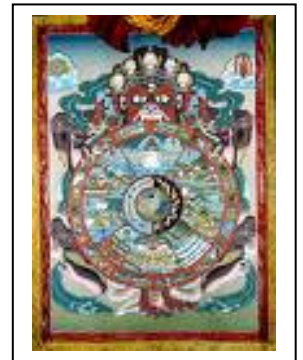
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A synonym for **redemption** might be \_\_\_\_\_ . The wheel of Samsara ↓

**Reincarnation**, also known as \_\_\_\_\_ represents the **cycle of** \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_; **carrying your own** \_\_\_\_\_, each life cycle **provides an opportunity for** \_\_\_\_\_ in your life.



fact, many Hindus believe that a person's worldly status depends upon actions in a *past* life. Likewise, good thoughts & actions can liberate a person. Some Hindus believe that certain people meet in more than one life in order to achieve karmic balance. Thus, every relationship & situation becomes meaningful.

What happens, then, when a person becomes purified? Is reincarnation an eternal process, or is there another realm? The answer lies in moksha.

**Moksha**: Like heaven for the Christian, Hindus strive to reach **moksha**, or a state of changeless bliss. Moksha is achieved by living a life of religious devotion & moral integrity without any interest in worldly things. However, it may be many lifetimes within the wheel of life before moksha is achieved. The ultimate reward is release from samsara & union with God.

### **Varna: The Hindu Caste System**

The Hindu class system, **varna**, is rooted in the traditions of the Aryan people. The Brahmins, or high priests, determined a class order using vedic hymns as testimony. Take, for example, this excerpt from the famous verse, "The Hymn of Man":

When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they apportion him? What do they call his mouth, his two arms & thighs & feet?

His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the Warrior, his thighs the People, & from his feet the Servants were born." (Rig-Veda, 10.90 11, 12)

Using the human body as a metaphor, this hymn divides society into 4 distinct classes, or castes, based on occupation. The mouth is the Brahmin, priest. The arms are the Shatriyas, warriors & rulers. The thighs are the Vaishyas, skilled workers & farmers. The feet are the Shudras, servants.

Although people are expected to marry within their own caste, they have not always done so. Because of inter-caste marriages, **jatis**,

Hindu class system is called



subdivisions of castes, were established. If a couple within the 3 higher strata are mixed, their children represent a new caste below the Vaishyas, but above the Shudras. But if an individual from one of the 3 upper classes should wed a Shudra or a non-Hindu, the descendants become **Pariahs**, or untouchables. Lowest on the social scale, the untouchables are considered outcasts of society.

The system of jatis is complex & varied, depending greatly on region & history. Once a new jati is established, its members are again encouraged to marry within its ranks.

It is important to remember that rank in the caste system is linked to dharma. By performing familial & social duties honestly, a Hindu strives to be born into a higher caste in his/her next incarnation. But the opposite is also true. If a member of an upper class is without virtue, s/he may be born a Shudra or Pariah.

Presently, the constitution of India does not recognize the ancient caste system, prohibiting its social distinctions. Many Hindus believe the varna is unjust, separating the wealthy from the poor while providing no opportunity for betterment. Still, many of the system's jatis still exist, especially in India's countless villages.

Considered the outcasts of Hindu society, \_\_\_\_\_ are considered untouchable by Hindus.

- |              |            |
|--------------|------------|
| a. Shudra    | c. Pariahs |
| b. non-Hindu | d. jatis   |

Presently, the Caste system in India is (legal / illegal ← circle 1).