



Introduction to Hinduism



Hinduism is the religion of the majority of people in India and Nepal. It also exists among significant populations outside of the sub-continent and has over 900 million followers worldwide.

In some ways **Hinduism is the oldest living religion** in the world, or at least elements within it stretch back many thousands of years. Yet Hinduism resists easy definition partly because of the vast array of practices and beliefs found within it.

Unlike most other religions, **Hinduism has no single founder, no single scripture, and no commonly agreed set of teachings.** Throughout its extensive history, there have been many key figures teaching different philosophies and writing numerous holy books. For these reasons, writers often refer to Hinduism as 'a way of life' or 'a family of religions' rather than a single religion.

Defining Hinduism

The term 'Hindu' was derived from the river or river complex of the northwest, the Indus or Sindhu River. Sindhu is a Sanskrit word used by the inhabitants of the region, the Aryans in the second millennium BCE.



The term 'Hindu' itself probably does not go back before the 15th and 16th centuries when it was **used by people to differentiate themselves from followers of other traditions**, especially the Muslims (Yavannas), in Kashmir and Bengal. The 'ism' was added to 'Hindu' only in the 19th century in the context of **British colonialism** and missionary activity.

Some claim that Hinduism's core feature is belief in an **impersonal Supreme**, but important strands have long described and worshipped a personal God.

Although **it is not easy to define Hinduism**, we can say that it is rooted in India, most Hindus revere a body of texts as sacred scripture known as the **Veda**, and most Hindus draw on a common system of values known as **dharma**.

- Hinduism **originated around the Indus Valley** near the River Indus in modern day Pakistan.
- About 80% of the Indian population regard themselves as Hindu.
- Most Hindus believe in a **Supreme God**, whose various qualities and forms are represented by a multitude of deities.

- Hindus believe that existence is a **cycle of birth, death, and rebirth**, governed by **Karma**.
- Hindus believe that the soul passes through a cycle of successive lives and its **next incarnation is always dependent on how the previous life was lived**.
- The main **Hindu texts** are **the Vedas** and their supplements (books based on the Vedas). Veda is a Sanskrit word meaning 'knowledge'.
- Hindus celebrate many **holy days**, but the Festival of Lights, **Diwali** is the best known.

Map source: <https://sp.yimg.com/ib/th?id=HN.608043579728068624&pid=15.1&H=126&W=160>

Hindu Worship

Puja

Hindu worship, or puja, involves images (murtis), prayers (mantras) and diagrams of the universe (yantras).

Central to Hindu worship is the image, or icon, which can be worshipped either at home or in the temple.



Individual rather than communal

Hindu worship is **primarily an individual act** rather than a communal one, as it involves making **personal offerings to the deity**. Worshippers repeat the names of their favourite gods and goddesses, and repeat mantras. Water, fruit, flowers and incense are offered to god.

Worship at home

The majority of Hindu homes have a shrine where offerings are made and prayers are said. A shrine can be anything: a room, a small altar or simply pictures or statues of the deity. Family members often worship together. Rituals should strictly speaking be performed three times a day.



Temple worship

At a Hindu temple, group worship takes place. A priest may read, or more usually recite, **the Vedas** to the assembled worshippers, but any "twice-born" Hindu (one from the top three castes) can perform the reading of prayers and mantras

Ganesha photo: <https://sp.yimg.com/ib/th?id=HN.608010757586225928&pid=15.1&H=206&W=160>

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