

## Hinduism

### Intellectual Output 2, Unit III



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## Hinduism in context

Originating in the Indian subcontinent, so-called Hinduism is one of the world's most ancient religious traditions. The **term Hinduism has a Persian origin** and it was used towards the end of the 19th century by the British colonizers of India, but is nowadays generally accepted as an **umbrella-term** which covers different local religions, philosophical doctrines, and social and ritual practices which **stem from a few common sources**.

### More information on:

#### [What does "Hinduism" mean?](#)

(esp. par. "Scientific denomination")

## Origins and historical developments

Over the centuries Hinduism has undergone significant changes, concerning ideas of salvation, destiny after death, ritual practices and devotion to deities. The foundations of Hinduism probably date back to the **second millennium BC**, when **Indo-Aryan** tribes from central Asia **settled in the north of India**, expelling the **former** Indo valley inhabitants. It is assumed that these tribes laid the **foundations of the Hindu philosophical and religious system**. The historical development of Hinduism, before the arrival of Muslims, is generally divided in **several phases**: the **Vedic period** (c. 1500–500 BCE), based on the oldest texts called **Vedas** and characterized by the elaboration of a **rich pantheon** and **ritual sacrifices**; the so-called **"Second Urbanisation"** (c. 500–200 BCE), a period in which pivotal ideas such as **reincarnation** and **liberation** enriched the Indian worldview; the **Classical Hinduism** (c. 200 BCE–1100 CE), an important period characterized by the appearance of epic narratives (**Mahābhārata** and **Bhagavad Gita**), legal tractates, and devotional practices focused on the **Supreme Being (Ishvara)**, **Vishnu**, **Shiva** and the **Goddess**, thanks also to texts known as Purana.

### More information on the Vedic period:

#### [Origins of Indian religions: The Vedic revelations and the Brahmins](#)

### More information on "Second Urbanisation":

#### [The Upanishad and the Hindu shared worldview](#)

### More information on classical Hinduism:

- [Vishnu, "Bhakti" devotion and the concept of Avatara.](#)  
(esp. pars. "Deities, holy beings: Vishnu, Krishna"; "Main doctrinal tenets: The concept of Supreme God (Ishvara)"; "Main doctrinal traditions: Bhakti devotion; Vishnuism")
- [Shiva, the deity of Yoga](#)  
(esp. the pars. "Deities, holy beings: Shiva"; "Main doctrinal traditions: Shaivism"; "Sacred texts and other main texts: Puranas")
- [The Goddess and Tantrism](#)  
(esp. pars. "Deities, holy being: the Goddess"; "Main doctrinal traditions: Shaktism or Devi worship traditions")



Figure 1. Vishnu and his Avatars, 11th century. Black schist. Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Dr. David R. Nalin, 1991. Source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vishnu\\_and\\_his\\_Avatars.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vishnu_and_his_Avatars.jpg)

## Textual foundations

The **fundamental texts** of Hinduism are the **Vedas**, composed between 1500–1000 BCE but put in written form around the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE. They are traditionally considered divine revealed truth. Other important works are the **Upanishad** (500 BCE), which offer **metaphysical speculation** concerning ultimate reality and human salvation that forged the classic Indian worldview. Other important texts are the **epic narratives** like the **Mahābhārata**, a sacred text composed between 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE and 4<sup>th</sup> c. CE, that synthesizes **important concepts** like **Dharma**, **Avatara**, and **Bhakti** (in particular, in the famous chapters called the **Bhagavad Gita**). The **Puranas** (composed between 250-1000 CE) are instead texts **for those who can't access the Vedas** and include divine narratives, synopses of Hindu cosmology and philosophy, focusing also on the worship of deities such as **Vishnu** and **Shiva**.





An illustration from the Mahābhārata, one of the major Sanskrit Indian epics. Source:  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:An\\_illustration\\_from\\_the\\_Mahabharata\\_1-large.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:An_illustration_from_the_Mahabharata_1-large.jpg)

#### More information on:

- [Origins of Indian religions: the Vedic revelations and the Brahmins](#)  
(par. "Sacred texts and other main texts: The Vedic revelations" and Sources 1 and 2)
- [The Upanishad and the Hindu shared worldview](#)  
(par. "Sacred texts and other main texts: The Upanishad" and Sources 1 and 2)
- [Vishnu, "Bhakti" devotion and the concept of Avatara](#)  
(pars. "Main doctrinal traditions: Bakthi devotion"; "Sacred texts and other main texts: The Bhagavad Gita" and Sources 2 and 3)
- [Shiva, the deity of Yoga](#)  
(par. "Sacred texts and other main texts: Puranas")

#### Main doctrinal tenets

Hindu religious doctrines are generally focused on the belief of an **Absolute principle**, called **Brahman**, which is behind a world of **Samsara**, a cyclical flux of **endless reincarnation** of living beings regulated by the **Karman**, the universal **law of cause and effect**. The Brahman principle has its equivalent in the **Atman**, the eternal **essence of the individual**, and is often equated to a personal deity (like **Vishnu** or **Shiva**), which can manifest (**Avatara**) through the incalculable numbers of major and minor deities of the Hindu pantheon. Recognition,

through various practices of the Brahman-Atman equivalence, is supposed to lead to **Moksha, liberation** from Samsara.

**Dharma** is another concept linked to Hinduism: the word means "law" but it should be understood as the **cosmic order** which sustains the whole universe. This word also refers to behaviors, rituals, rules, ethics that govern both society and the individual, and doesn't **differentiate religious** elements from **political** or **social** ones.

#### More information on:

- [What does "Hinduism" mean?](#)  
(par. "Main doctrinal tenets: Overview" and Source 1)
- [The Upanishad and the Hindu shared worldview](#)  
(par. "Main doctrinal tenets: Common doctrine of Hinduism from Upanishad" and Sources 1 and 2)
- [Time and space in Hinduism](#)  
(par. "Deities, holy beings: The Trimurti." Trimurti is a well-known Hindu concept which symbolizes the cyclic creation, preservation and destruction/assimilation of the cosmos)
- [Vishnu, "Bhakti" devotion and the concept of Avatara.](#)  
(par. "Main doctrinal tenets: The concept of descent of God on Earth (Avatara)")
- [The Hinduism's View of Society](#)  
(par. "Main doctrinal tenets: the concept of Dharma")

#### Social context and ritual practices

Hinduism is generally understood as an **orthopraxis** (i.e. correct behaviour, instead of *orthodoxy*, i.e. correct belief), in which the religious life of Hindus is marked by **social stages**, correct attitude and **ritualism**. Another important feature of Hinduism is the **hierarchical nature** of the relationships between Hindus, who have configured themselves in a **caste system** according to an ideal model of basic functions (the four **varna**: *brahmana*, priests, *kshatriya*, warriors, *vaishya*, farmers/traders/ craftsmen and *shudras*, servants). Hinduism is also strictly encoded in four **stages of life** called **Ashramas**: the **student** (*Brahmacari*) marked by chastity, devotion, and obedience, the **householder** (*Grihastha*) requiring marriage, work and offspring, the **hermit** (*Vanaprastha*) who carries out ascetic and yogic practices, and the **wandering renunciant** (*Samnyasin*), who leaves the hermitage begging for food.

The **rites of passage** also play a very important function to mark the entry to a particular Ashrama. Some of the most important rites are, for example, the *Jatakarma* ceremony to **welcome a newborn baby**, the *Upanayana* ceremony to mark the passage from **childhood to adolescence**, the *Vivaha*, **marriage**, or the **funeral** rite called *Antyeshti*. Concerning the devotional practices, **Puja** is the **main worship ritual** performed at home or inside a temple to worship one or more deities. Other religious practices include **pilgrimages** to sacred sites



which are deemed to grant benefits. Another important part of Hindu religious life are the colorful **festivals**, which mark seasonal changes and/or honor specific gods.

A final characteristic of Hinduism is that this religious tradition has no central organization as in Catholicism. The main authorities in Hinduism are instead represented by the lineage of **Gurus** ("masters"), under whom followers often train in **yoga** and **tantric** practices.



Hindus bathing in the Brahmaputra river on the occasion of Ashokastami at Dibrugarh. Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ashokastami.jpg>

#### More information on:

- [The Hindu way of life: the four stages of life, rites of passage and everyday cult](#)
- [Hinduism's view of society](#)  
(pars. "Main doctrinal tenets: The Varna division of society and the Indian caste system"; "Fundational myth: The sacrifice of the Purusha" and Sources 1 and 2)
- [Temples, pilgrimages and festivals](#)
- [The figure of the Master \(Guru\)](#)  
(par. "Acknowledged authority: the Guru" and Source 1)
- [Shiva, the deity of Yoga](#)  
(par. "Main rites: Yoga")
- [The Goddess and Tantrism](#)  
(par. "Main doctrinal traditions & main rites: Tantrism")



Hindu pilgrims in Maharashtra, India. Source:  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hindu\\_pilgrims\\_in\\_Maharashtra.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hindu_pilgrims_in_Maharashtra.jpg)

### Modern developments and current distribution among world population

From the 19th century onward India was **colonialized** by the British with a huge impact on Indian society and Hindu religions. During the 19th century **modern** and **inclusivistic movements**, called **Neo-Hinduism**, wanted to challenge the Western bias of cultural inferiority. This prompted also the diffusion and appreciation of **Hinduism in the West**. During the 20th century, **other movements** stressed the unique and exclusivist character of "**Hindu-ness**", often with **hostility towards Muslims**. After Christianity and Islam, Hinduism is one of the most widespread religions in the world: over a billion adepts live in southern Asia (India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia) and there are also Hindu communities in Africa, Latin America, the Fiji Islands, the United States, and various European countries.

#### More information on:

- [The figure of the Master \(Guru\)](#)  
(par. "Main changes in the XX c.: The figure of the Guru today as the trademark of the Indian spirituality" and Source 2)
- [Modern and contemporary Hinduism](#)