

## What Is Hinduism?

Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world. It has more than 520 million followers. More than two-thirds of all Hindus live in India. In the United States, there are about 75,000 Hindus.

Historians believe that Hinduism began almost 4,000 years ago in India. Hinduism did not have a founder. It grew out of the religious beliefs of many people. Over the centuries, priests and philosophers handed down sacred books which became the foundations of Hinduism. One of these books is the *Rig Veda*. The *Rig Veda* was written in 1,000 BC. It contains many stories and prayers that are still used today. Another important Hindu book is the *Upanishads*. The *Upanishads* were written in about 600 BC. They explain the gods and explore some of the mysteries of life and death.

Modern Hinduism has many sects or groups. These groups have different ideas and practices, but they share some basic beliefs. All Hindus believe in one supreme god called *Brahma*. *Brahma* is similar to a spirit. It has no shape, form, or gender. Hindus believe in hundreds of other gods and goddesses too. These gods are male or female. They were created by *Brahma* and are part of *Brahma*. Two other important but lesser gods are *Vishnu* and *Shiva*. Many Hindus become followers of *Shiva* or *Vishnu* and have statues of these gods in their homes.

Hindus believe everyone has an eternal soul. Although a person's body may die, the person's soul lives on. After death, the soul is reborn in another human body or in an animal's body. This belief is called *reincarnation*. Reincarnation is ruled by the law of *karma*. If a person has been good, he or she has good *karma*. Bad people have bad *karma*. A person with very bad *karma* might be reborn as an animal. A poor man with very good *karma* might be reborn as a rich man.

Many Hindus believe that society is divided into four levels. These levels are called *castes*. The highest caste consists of intellectuals and priests. The lowest caste consists of unskilled workers. Hindus believe that people are born into castes. If your *karma* is



The three most important Hindu gods are *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, and *Shiva*. Many Hindus call *Vishnu* the god of love. They believe *Vishnu* has come to Earth several times to save humanity from harm.

good, your soul may be born into a higher caste in your next reincarnation. If your *karma* is bad, your soul may be born into a lower caste.

## 10 How is Hinduism Observed?

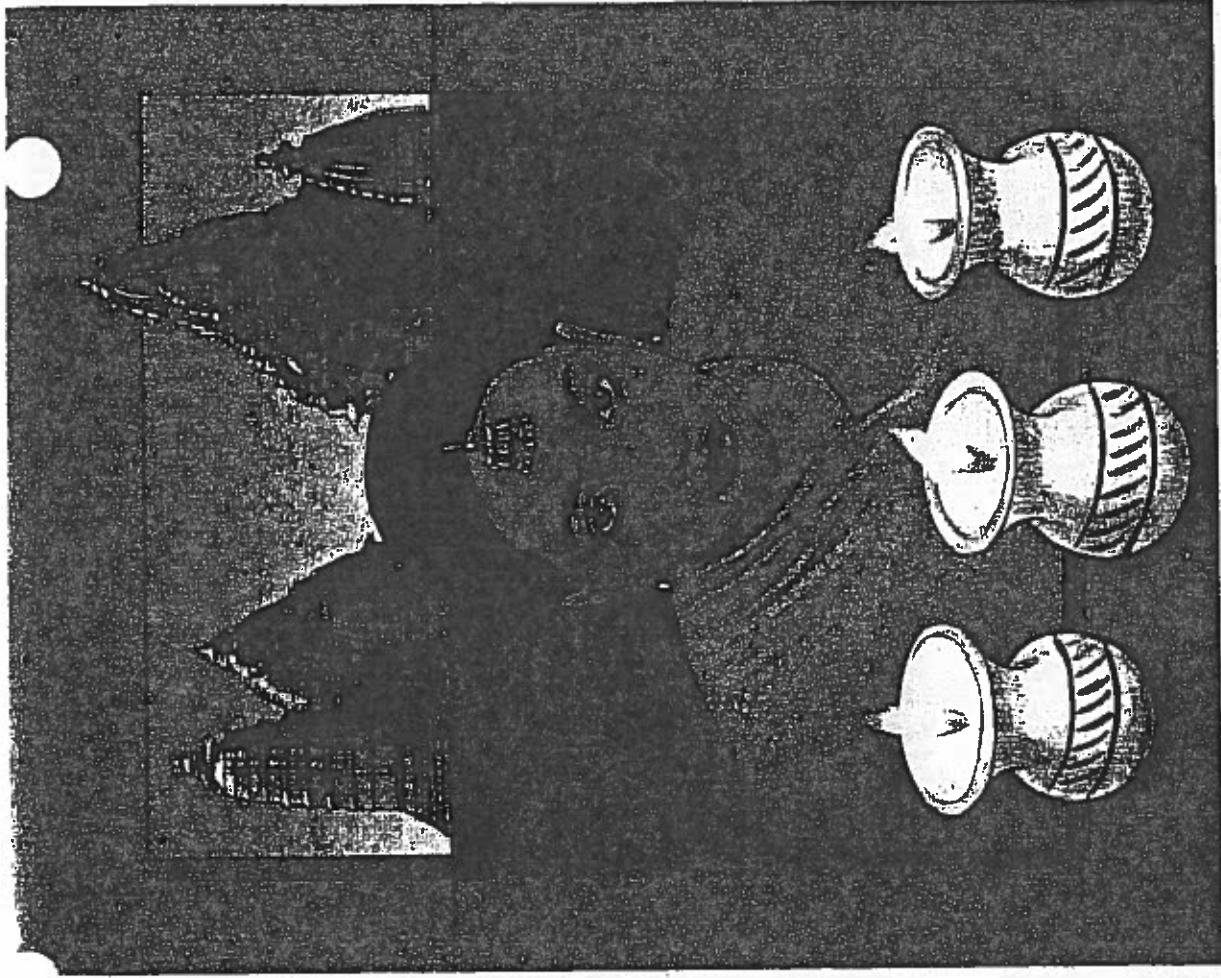
Hindus do most of their worshipping at home. Every Hindu family has its own shrine or altar. Usually the altar contains statues or pictures of the family's favorite gods. Devoted Hindus have three daily prayer sessions in their homes. Most Hindus recite a portion of the *Rig Veda* or other sacred book when they pray. Once or twice a day they also place a simple gift on the altar. This gift is usually a piece of fruit or a flower and is intended for the gods. Poor Hindus, who cannot afford a gift, are allowed to name a gift in their minds.

Hindus also have temples for worship. Hindus are not required to go to temple, but they often do. Temples contain statues of gods and goddesses. There are no formal services. Worshippers may come whenever they like to pray and make offerings to the gods. Hindu temples usually have priests who wash the statues with sacred water and devote themselves to Brahma. Priests are also in charge of many traditional ceremonies like weddings and baby namings.

Like other major religions, Hinduism has a code of conduct. It is called the *Laws of Manu*. This code has rules for almost every aspect of life. Among other things, it tells Hindus to respect older people, to be self-reliant, and to be truthful. It also teaches Hindus to respect all forms of life.

Hindus believe that Brahma is in every living thing. Hindus are taught that, "He who cannot make life, cannot slay." In other words, people do not have the right to kill. For this reason, the most observant Hindus do not eat meat. To them, even the tiniest animal is sacred. All Hindus show a great respect for animals. In India, the cow is considered sacred and is allowed to wander freely throughout the land. Hindus consider it a serious religious crime if someone harms a cow.

Hinduism has many colorful holidays. One of the most popular Hindu holidays is called *Dewali*, or the Festival of Lights. In most parts of India, Dewali falls at the beginning of the new year. On Dewali, people light oil lamps and leave them burning all night. Hindus believe that these lamps bring good luck in the new year. In



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some parts of India, young girls place their lamps on small rafts and float them on a river. Tradition says that the longer a lamp burns, the luckier its owner will be. Dewali is also a time to buy or make new clothes, exchange gifts, and visit friends. Many people end old quarrels and forgive their enemies on Dewali.