

## What Makes Up Hindu Religion?

Hinduism is not a religion in the normal sense, but it is a set of traditions and beliefs evolved over a long period of time. There are different sects of Hinduism, but they all admire the ancient scriptures called Vedas.

One of the oldest living religions in the world, Hinduism is unique among the world religions in that it had no single founder but grew over a period of 4,000 years in syncretism with the religious and cultural movements of the Indian subcontinent.

## Central Themes for Hindu Religion

The fundamental concept of Hinduism is the belief in the ultimate reality called Brahman (universal soul) and its identification with the Aatman (individual soul). All creatures go through a cycle of birth and re-birth. The status of the being in each birth is determined by the principle of Karma.

Post-Vedic Hinduism in all its forms accepts the doctrine of karma, according to which the individual reaps the results of his good and bad actions through a series of lifetimes.

The post-Vedic *Puranas* deal with these themes. They also elaborate myths of the popular gods. They describe the universe as undergoing an eternally repeated cycle of creation, preservation, and dissolution, represented by the trinity of Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, and Shiva the destroyer as aspects of the Supreme.

## Gods of Hindu Religion

The ultimate God is supposed to be Brahman, the absolute reality, which is formless and infinite. For the sake of worshipping the infinite reality with the limited human minds, Gods had been personified and associated with different attributes. The most worshipped Hindu deities are Shiva, Vishnu and Shakti (Devi)

## Medieval and Modern Developments

The most popular deities include Vishnu and his incarnations Rama and Krishna, Shiva, the elephant-headed god Ganesha, and the Mother-Goddess or Devi, who appears as Kali or Durga but also as Sarasvati, the goddess of music and learning, and as Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. All the gods and goddesses, each of which has numerous aspects, are regarded as different forms of the one Supreme Being. Modern Hindu leaders such as Swami Vivekananda, Mohandas Gandhi, and Aurobindo Ghose, have given voice to a movement away from the traditional ideal of world-renunciation and asceticism and have asserted the necessity of uniting spiritual life with social concerns.

## Responses to Buddhism and Jainism

In the middle of the first millennium B.C., an ossified Brahmanism was challenged by heterodox, i.e., non-Vedic systems, notably Buddhism and Jainism. The priestly elite responded by creating a synthesis that accepted yogic practices and their goals, recognized the gods and image worship of popular devotional movements, and adopted greater concern for the daily life of the people. There was an increase in writings, such as the Laws of Manu, dealing with dharma, or duty, not only as applied to the sacrifice but to every aspect of life. The four stages of life are *brahmacharya* or celibate student life (originally for study of the Veda), *grihastha* or householdership, *vanaprastha* or forest hermitage, and *sannyasa*, complete renunciation of all ties with society and pursuit of spiritual liberation. (In practical terms, these stages were not strictly adhered to. The two main alternatives have continued to be

householdership and the ascetic life.) The entire system was conceived as ideally ensuring both the proper function of society as an integrated whole and the fulfillment of the individual's need through his lifetime.

### **Mythology for Hindus**

The roots of the Hindu mythology lie in the Vedic civilization. But the major sources of Hindu mythology are epics like Mahabharata, Ramayana and Puranas.

### **Hindu Vegetarianism**

A large section of Hindus are advocates of vegetarianism, even though it is not made compulsory in Hindu tradition. The Cow is considered to be a holy animal.

**Om** is the sacred symbol, which represents the absolute reality, Brahman. This can be seen in all mantras and prayers. It represents God in its three aspects-Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.

### **Practices of Hindu Religion**

Hindu religious practices generally include seeking an awareness of God as well as looking for blessings from different Gods. Hinduism has developed several practices that can help one to relate himself with divinity.

There is one more thing that most of the pious Hindus utter during worshipping, that is Sanskrit "Mantra". "Mantra" is actually an invocation to God including prayer, praise, devotion and dedication and through its sound and chanting style, it takes one's mind to the holy and divine thoughts.