



Hinduism

The Indian subcontinent is host to many religions. One of those religions is Hinduism. Today, Hinduism is a major world religion. It began in ancient India. Hinduism is different than other major religions because there is no single founder. Hinduism is based on the Vedas, the sacred texts and teachings of the Aryans, the ancient people who settled in India around 1500 BCE.

Hinduism is a religion of many gods. However, all Hindus worship one supreme being who created a bunch of gods to be his helpers. One of the unique beliefs in Hinduism is that God is not up in some remote, far away heaven, but is instead inside each and every soul, waiting to be discovered. Knowing God is always with them gives Hindus great hope and courage. There are Hindu temples all over the world. Each temple has one or more priests. Most Hindu priests today still come from the top caste as they did in ancient times. This caste is called the Brahmin.

Some of the main concepts of Hinduism are called dharma, karma, and reincarnation.

- Dharma is a person's religious and moral duties
- Karma is the Hindu idea that sums up a person's deeds during their lifetime. The phrase "what goes around comes around" comes from a belief in karma.
- Reincarnation is the belief that the individual soul of a person is reborn in a different form after death, based on their karma, or their deeds in their prior life or lives. A belief in reincarnation or rebirth is part of both Buddhism and Hinduism. This is something these two major religions have in common.

Dharma, karma, and reincarnation, which comes first? It's pretty simply. How well you perform your dharma (duty) determines your karma (fate). If you do a good job, you'll earn good karma, and have a good rebirth. If you do a bad job, you'll earn bad karma, and have a bad rebirth. This continues until you get it right. If you have trouble remembering the order, think CAR for karma - a car gets you where you are going next.

If you ever visit the Ganges River area of modern day India, you'll see a great many people bathing in the Ganges River. As in ancient times, many Hindus still believe the waters from the Ganges River will help purify their souls.

The Caste System

The idea of the caste system in ancient India began after the Indus Valley Civilization disappeared and a new people arrived, the Aryans. The Aryans were nomads from the north. They brought with them some new ideas. One of those ideas was Hinduism, which is now a world religion. Another was the idea of a caste system. A caste is a life-long social group into which a Hindu is born.

The Vedas are the Sanskrit writings that are the earliest sacred texts of Hinduism. The Vedas suggest the caste system in India. There were four social classes in the ancient Aryan society. These were the brahmins (priests & scholars); warriors & nobles; artisans & merchants; and on the lowest level, farm workers, laborers, servants

Once the Aryans settled down and began to grow their food instead of being just herdsman, they started developing a caste system. The caste system started with just four castes. In order of importance and power these castes were priests, warriors, traders and farmers, and finally paid workers. The caste system grew progressively more strict until finally you were born into your caste and could not move or marry out of your caste.

The caste system really wasn't part of Hinduism, at first. The caste system began at about the same time as Hinduism. The caste system remained in place in India for thousands of years, long after Aryan rule was replaced by other leaders. But over the years, the caste system became intertwined with Hindu India. When Buddhism began in India, Buddhists did not recognize castes. That made Buddhism very attractive to the lower ranks in India's society. But in spite of the introduction of Buddhism and other religions, most ancient India people remained Hindus, and thus the caste system continued.

Top Caste: The Brahmins: The top caste was made up of scholars, priests, teachers, judges, and landowners. They were known as the Brahmin caste or Brahmins. Many Brahmins lived in temples, removed from society. Others spent a great deal of time in contemplation and meditation. Some were quite social.

The Kshatriya: Kshatriyas were the warriors. Rulers of towns and cities mostly came from the Kshatriya caste. Any decision they made, however, could be overruled by a member of the Brahmin, the caste above them.

The Vaishyas: Vaishyas were skilled farmers, merchants, and craftsmen. Vaishyas could hold office in village government. They might live in very nice houses. Even though they were three down on the social scale, they still had good clothes and ample food. They might not be the top leaders, but they were certainly a respected part of society.

Bottom Caste: The Sudras: The Sudras were the unskilled workers. They might find a job

on a farm or a non-skilled job in a home or business like cleaning. They were the bottom caste.

The people without a caste, the Untouchables: There was one other social rank in ancient India. People who were born into this social rank were called Untouchables. These were the people who were considered the lowest in society in Hindu India, so low that they were not part of the caste system. They had no rights. If they had a job at all, other than begging, it was a degrading job that no one else wanted to do. If your parent was an Untouchable, so were you. Untouchables could not move up or marry out of their social rank.

Since 1950, the Indian Constitution has forbidden discrimination.



