

UNIT 3 - INTRODUCTION TO HINDUISM

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1. Hinduism is one of the oldest World religions. Its history dates back to 1200 BC.

2. The Rishis (saints) are the founders of this religion. The religion believes in the trinity of God: Brahma, the creator, Vishnu the sustainer and Shiv, the destroyer.

3. Gods and Goddesses:

The Hindus worship a number of gods and goddesses. These include:

Brahma, Vishnu and Shiv.

Their consorts:

Saraswati - goddess of knowledge & consort of Brahma,

Laxmi - goddess of wealth & consort of Vishnu, and

Parvati/Uma - consort of Shiv.

Parvati is worshipped in many forms:

Durga - goddess of shakti (power)

Rajarajeshwari or Kamakshi - the great mother

Kali - goddess of Time.

The incarnations of Vishnu:

Ram, Krishana

Others include:

Ganesh - son of Parvati and Shiv

Hanuman - Commander-in-chief of the monkey army which invaded Sri Lanka to liberate Sita, wife of Rama.

4. The Hindus call God Ishwar, Narayan or Brahman, meaning that God is the greatest. Their common salutation is "Namaste".

5. The Holy books:

Vedas, Ramayan and Gita are the holy books of the Hindus.

Vedas: In Sanskrit the word Veda means knowledge. They are believed to be the direct revelations to Rishis (seers) of ancient times. It is also believed that Vedas were written in Punjab in about 1200 BC, when Aryans came and settled there.

Vedas are four in number:

- * **Rig Veda** - This contains 1017 hymns in the praise of the gods of Aryans, this was revealed to Agni Rishi.
- * **Yajur Ved** - This book contains mantras recited at various important occasions, it was revealed to Aditya Rishi.
- * **Sam Ved** - This book contains the knowledge of science & music, it was revealed to Vayu Rishi.
- * **Athar Ved** - This book is a collection of rituals performed at specific occasions, it was revealed to Angira Rishi.

Ramayan is an epic in Sanskrit. It tell the story of Rama. It was written by Rishi Valmiki.

Bhagvad Gita - This took contains the teachings of Krishna to Arjun at the battle ground of Kurukheshtar (erstwhile Punjab). This is part of the story of Mahabharat.

The focal point of all Hindu ceremonies is fire (havan).

6. Incarnations:

A Hindu believes in 24 incarnations of Vishnu. He worships any one of them or all of them. The most popular worship is of Ram and Krishana. Many Hindus also worship Sun, Moon, Water and Plantation (special trees & a plant called Tulsi).

The word Hindu is changed from the word Sindhu - the ancient name of the river Indus. The settlers between the rivers Indus and Ganges were called Sindhus and later Hindus.

7. Hindus see God in the impersonal form which they call Brahman. We all are a part of his impersonal form and eventually will return to Him. He is omnipresent and is like a powerhouse 'lighting up' all the other gods and goddesses. The gods reflect the greatness of God to us. A living creature's soul is a part of Brahman and it will return to him.

Like Sikh Moolmantar, The Hindu Upnashids describe God as: Infinite, unlimited, unborn...not to be conceived.

8. Prayers:

The main Hindu prayer is individual prayer. It is performed alone at home, or on a river bank, or in a temple. There are important festivals when people gather together for congregational prayers.

Every practising Hindu recites prayers when he awakes each day, and many times during the day.

A Hindu sits facing east, sprinkles water round himself and on the image and fixes his thoughts in meditation. He repeats the name of God many times. Prayer beads are used to help in repetition and meditation. A prayer includes offering flowers, scent, incense, candle-lights and special food to the god of the image.

9. Rules, Concepts and Commandments:

The Hindus have a set of rules divided into two parts: The first part, Niyama (things to be done) and the second part, Yamas (abstentions, things not to be done).

Niyamas:

1. Keep yourself clean both outside (body) and inside (thoughts).
2. Practise self discipline, tolerance, patience and calmness.
3. Be contented
4. Educate both the mind and the self
5. Believe in and practise to submit oneself to God.

Yamas:

1. Do not lie.
2. Do not steal.
3. Do not destroy and injure anything.
4. Do not be envious.
5. Do not overeat or overdrink.

10. Castes and Varans:

Hindus believe that they are born into a jati (caste) and a varna (occupational class) and must follow the duties of that group. The four castes are:

1. Brahmins, priestly class, with varun colour of white.
2. Kshatriyas, warrior and ruler class, with varun colour of red.
3. Vaish, farmer & merchant class, with varun colour of yellow, and
4. Sudras, unskilled workers, domestic servants, sweepers etc, with varna colour of black.

11. Hindus believe that they have come into this world to perform certain duties (dharma). If these duties are performed diligently and honesty then life can be lived peacefully and happily. The law of karma is the basis of a Hindu's life. According to this law, one reaps whatever one sows.

12. The Paths of life:

The goal of a Hindu life is to attain Moksha (salvation), and it can be achieved by following one the following four paths:

@. Path of knowledge: to explore your soul. The followers of this path divide life into four sections:

0. Brahmachari (age 8-20) - In this period of life one will stay away from sex and will learn the rules of personal purification.
- i. Grihastha - (20-50 yrs of age) - In this period of life, one will earn his living, marry and have a family.

- ii. Vana Prashta (begins at the birth of first grand child or between 50 -60 years of age). This is the period of retirement from the worldly affairs. In this period of life one becomes a hermit to search for the truth.
- iii. Sanyasis - (after 60 years of age) In this period of life one becomes wanderer sadhu, possessing only a loin cloth, a food bowl and a water pot, freed of worries and duties.

- a. **Path of devotion:** This is the path of love. In this path you use your emotions and feeling rather than brain and knowledge.
- b. **Path of Karmas:** This is the path of actions. One must work for love to God rather than for gain and profits. Manu, the Hindu law giver, has laid down rules for diet, social and family functions, ritual on occasions like birth, marriage death , and so on. These laws must be strictly observed.

- c. **Path of Raj Yoga:** This path involves eight steps

- 0. Self control (abstaining from harming others)
- i. Observance of rules (refer section 9)
- ii. Yogic postures: it suggests 86 body positions for meditation.
- iii. Controlled breathing
- iv. Being alone: withdrawing mind from things around you
- v. Concentration on divine image.
- vi. Meditation: allowing your mind an unbroken flow of thoughts towards the object of your concentration.
- vii. Samadhi: becoming absorbed in atman (inner self)

13. The main sources of material to understand Hinduism are:

The Hindu scriptures are of two types:

- @. **Sruti** - The revealed books are called srutis. Vedas fall under this category.
- a. **Smiritis** - The books of recollection of experience are know as smiritis. Ramayan, Mahabharat Bhagvad Gita and Upnashids (commentary on Vedas) are smiritis.

14. **The Hindu prayers (mantras):**

The most important Hindu prayer is called **Gayatri Mantra**. It reads:

"Om Bhur bhuvah swah, tatsavitur varenyam bhargo devasya dhimahi dhiyo yo nah prachodayat."
(O God, the giver of life, remover of pains and sorrows, bestower of happiness and creator of the universe. You are most luminous, pure and adorable. We meditate on you. May you guide and inspire our intellect in the right direction.)

It further reads:

We meditate upon the glory of the omnipresent God,
who is blissful source of peace.
The omnipotent God, who knows everything that happens,
in this world and beyond.
God, who pervades the deepest ocean and is present in the pond.
God, who is the killer of misery, sin, ignorance and grief.
The creator of the world is beyond description.
May God inspire our actions, and give us wisdom.

Everyday prayer mantra:

"Om vishwani deva savitur duritani parasuv yad bhadram tanna asiuva." (O God, the creator of the universe, remove all form of vice and sorrow from us. Give us those qualities that are noble and virtous.)

16. **Times of prayer:**

A Hindu normally prays two times a day: morning and evening. The prayers include recitation of the word Om, mantras from Vedas, Gayatri mantar and song of Aarti.

17. The Hindu festivals:

Date	Festival Name
1. December-Jan	Lohri
2. Jan-Feb	Basant
3. Feb-March	Holi, Maha Shivratri ¹
4. March-April	Navratre ²
5. April-May	Ramnaumi ³
6. July-August	Janam Ashtmai ⁴
7. August-September	Rakhsha Bandhan
8. September-October	Shraad ⁵ , Navratre ⁶ , Karva Chauth ⁷
9. October-November	Dushera ⁸ , Diwali ⁹

In addition there are a number of regional festivals like, Rath Yatra in Jagannath Puri and Ganesh Puja in Maharashtra.

18. The Hindu Temple:

A Hindu temple is known as a '**Mandir**'. It is normally built to face the rising sun. The focal point of a mandir is the image (statue) of the god around. The famous images in the north of India are of those: Shiv, Ram and Sita, Krishan and Radha and Durga¹⁰

A congregational Hindu worship consists of **Havan** (offering of fire), prayers for purity, aarti (worship of light) and singing of bhajans

The Hindus use both singing and dancing as forms of their congregational worship.

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1. Birthday of Shiv
 2. The worship of goddess Durga for nine nights
 3. Birthday of lord Rama
 4. Birthday of lord Krishna
 5. Ancestors' day
 6. Nine nights worship of goddess Durga
 7. Fast by wives for the well being of their husbands.
 8. Festival to celebrate the victory of Ram over Ravan, the king of Sri Lanka
 9. Festival of lights - the return of Ram and Sita to Ayudya.
 10. It is interesting to note that though there are thousands of temples dedicated to Ram, Krishen, Shiv and Vishnu but there is hardly any temple of Brahma. (It is recorded that there is one such temple in M.P.)