

The History of Hinduism

Hinduism is the oldest and most complex of all religions. Providing a simple history for the development of Hinduism is difficult, since it originated in the religious practices of Aryan tribes who invaded India from central Asia more than three thousand years ago. The **Aryans** attacked the native **Harappan** people who lived in India and Pakistan around 1500 BC. Eventually the religions of the two groups merged into Hinduism, founded on the polytheism of the Aryans and the worship of fertility of the Harappans.

The Aryan controlled society developed the **caste system**, which ranked people in society according to class. The caste system is as follows:

Brahmins priests

Kshatriyas soldiers, king-warrior class

Vaishyas merchants, farmers, Sutras laborers, craftspeople

Harijahns "untouchables"- those thought to be descended from the Harappan aboriginal people-extremely poor and discriminated against.

The higher a person's caste, the more that person is blessed with the benefits and luxuries life has to offer. Although the caste system was outlawed in 1948, it is still important to the Hindu people of India and is still recognized as the proper way to structure society. As a part of their religion, some Hindus believe that you are reborn to a higher caste if you live a righteous life.

Since the early days of Hinduism, this religion has branched and now includes a wide variety of religious beliefs and religious organizations. Not only is it the primary religion of the region around India, but portions of Hindu beliefs have found their way across oceans to other countries and have been influential in the foundations of other religions, such as Buddhism and some say even Christianity and Islam.

Basic Beliefs of Hinduism

Hinduism is based on the concept that human and animal spirits reincarnate, or come back to earth to live many times in different forms. Today, a Hindu can be **polytheistic** (more than one god), **monotheistic** (one god), **henotheistic** (one main god and lesser gods) pantheistic (god and the universe are one), **agnostic** (unsure if god exists), or **atheistic** (no god) and still claim to be Hindu. There are many different ideas about what Hinduism means. However, these universal ideas should be mentioned.

Central to Hinduism are the concepts of **reincarnation**, where you are born again, possibly as a lower caste or animal according to how you lived your life, the caste system, merging with Brahman (or the ultimate reality), finding morality, and reaching Moksha (the peaceful escape from the cycle of reincarnation).

Religious documents include **Sruti**, (what is heard) and **Smriti**, (what is remembered). The Sruti include deeply religious things communicated to a seer and recorded. The **Vedas**, the religious writings, is an important religious text and includes many hymns, rituals, myths and songs.

The Hindu paths to salvation include the way of works (rituals), the way of knowledge (realization of reality and self-reflection), and the way of devotion (devotion to the god that you choose to follow). If the practitioner follows the paths of these ways, salvation can be achieved.