

Introduction to Hinduism



- Hinduism is the religion of the majority of people in India and Nepal. It also exists among significant populations outside of the subcontinent and has over 900 million adherents worldwide.

- Unlike most other religions, Hinduism has no single founder, no single scripture, and no commonly agreed set of teachings.

- Although it is not easy to define Hinduism, we can say that it is rooted in India, most Hindus revere a body of texts as sacred scripture known as **Veda**, and most Hindus draw on a common system of values known as **dharma**.

- Hinduism originated around the **Indus Valley** near the River Indus in modern day Pakistan.

- About 80% of the Indian population regard themselves as Hindu.
- Hindus believe that existence is a **cycle of birth, death, and rebirth**, governed by **Karma**.
- Hindus believe that the soul passes through a cycle of successive lives and its next incarnation is always dependent on how the previous life was lived.
- The main Hindu texts are the Vedas and their supplements (books based on the Vedas). Veda is a Sanskrit word meaning “knowledge”. These scriptures do not mention the word “Hindu” but many scriptures discuss dharma, which can be rendered as “code of conduct”, “law” or “duty”.

Dharma

- Dharma is an important term in Indian religions. In Hinduism it means “duty”, “virtue”, “morality”; and it refers to the power which upholds the universe and society.
- Each person has their own dharma known as *sva-dharma*. What is correct for a woman might not be for a man or what is correct for an adult might not be for a child.
- Correct action in accordance with dharma is also understood as service to humanity and to God.



Varna

- An important idea that developed in classical Hinduism is that dharma refers especially to a person's responsibility regarding class (varna). The four classes are:
 - Brahmins or Brahmins: the intellectuals and the priestly class who perform religious rituals
 - Kshatriya (nobles or warriors): who traditionally had social power
 - Vaishyas (commoners or merchants): ordinary people who produce, farm, trade, or otherwise earn a living
 - Shudras (workers): who traditionally served the higher classes including laborers, artist, musicians, and clerks
- People in the top three classes are known as "Twice born" because they have been born from the women and secondly through initiation - in which boys receive a sacred thread as a symbol of their high status. Although usually considered an initiation for males it must be noted that there are examples of exceptions to this rule, where females have received this initiation

Karma and Samsara

- Karma is Sanskrit word whose literal meaning is "action".
 - It refers to the law that every action has an equal reaction, either immediately or at some point in the future.
 - Good or virtuous actions - actions that are in harmony with dharma - will have good reactions or responses and bad actions - those actions against dharma - will have the opposite effect.
- In Hinduism karma operates not only in this lifetime but across lifetimes. The results of an action might only be experienced after the present life in a new life.
- Hindus believe that human beings can create good or bad consequences for their actions and might reap the rewards of action in this life, or in a future human rebirth
- This process of reincarnation is **samsara**, a continuous cycle in which the soul is reborn over and over again according to the law of action and reaction. At death many Hindus believe the soul is carried by a subtle body into a new physical body which can be a human or non-human form (animal or divine being). The goal of liberation is to make us free from this cycle of action and reaction, and from rebirth.

