

Hinduism

Hinduism had its origins in the religious beliefs of the Aryan peoples who settled in India after 1500 B.C. Evidence about the religious beliefs of the Aryan peoples comes from the Vedas, collections of hymns and religious ceremonies that were passed down orally through the centuries by Aryan priests and then eventually written down.

Early Hindus believed in the existence of a single force in the universe, a form of ultimate reality or God, called *Brahman*. It was the duty of the individual self—called the *atman*—to seek to know this ultimate reality. By doing so, the self would merge with *Brahman* after death.

By the sixth century B.C., the idea of reincarnation had appeared in Hinduism. **Reincarnation** is the belief that the individual soul is reborn in a different form after death. As one of the Vedas says, “Worn-out garments are shed by the dweller [the soul].” After a number of existences in the earthly world, the soul reaches its final goal in a union with *Brahman*. According to Hinduism, all living beings seek to achieve this goal.

Important to this process is the idea of **karma**, the force generated by a person’s actions that determines how the person will be reborn in the next life. According to this idea, what people do in their current lives determines what they will be in their next lives. In the same way, a person’s current status is not simply an accident. It is a result of the person’s actions in a past existence.

The concept of karma is ruled by the **dharma**, or the divine law. The law requires all people to do their duty. However, people’s duties vary, depending on their status in society. More is expected of those high on the social scale, such as the Brahmins, than of the lower castes.

The system of reincarnation provided a

religious basis for the rigid class divisions in Indian society. It justified the privileges of those on the higher end of the scale. After all, they would not have these privileges if they were not deserving. At the same time, the concept of reincarnation gave hope to those lower on the ladder of life. The poor, for example, could hope that if they behaved properly in this life, they would improve their condition in the next.

How does one achieve oneness with God? Hindus developed the practice of **yoga**, a method of training designed to lead to such union. (In fact, *yoga* means “union.”) The final goal of yoga was to leave behind the cycle of earthly life and achieve union with *Brahman*, seen as a kind of dreamless sleep. As one Hindu writing states, “When all the senses are stilled, when the mind is at rest, that, say the wise, is the highest state.”

Most ordinary Indians, however, could not easily relate to this ideal and needed a more concrete form of heavenly salvation. It was probably for this reason that the Hindu religion came to have a number of human-like gods and goddesses.

There are hundreds of deities in the Hindu religion, including three chief ones: *Brahma* the Creator, *Vishnu* the Preserver, and *Siva* (SIH•vuh) the Destroyer. Many Hindus regard the multitude of gods as simply different expressions of the one ultimate reality, *Brahman*. However, the various gods and goddesses give ordinary Indians a way to express their religious feelings. Through devotion at a Hindu temple, they seek not only salvation but also a means of gaining the ordinary things they need in life. Today, Hinduism is still the religion of the vast majority of the Indian people.



Picturing History

Siva is the god of destruction, transformation, and change. Siva creates with the right hand and destroys with the left hand. Compassion and healing are offered with the lower hands. **How does this bronze statue illustrate Siva’s role in Hinduism?**

Reading Check

Comparing How do karma, dharma, and yoga relate to reincarnation?

Picturing History

Answer: The upper right hand creates the universe, while the upper left hand destroys it by fire. Eternal blessing is offered with the two lower hands.

Reading Check

Answer: Karma is the force that determines how a person will be reborn in the next life, dharma is the divine law that tells how a person should do his or her duty, and yoga is the way through which a person achieves union with *Brahman* and leaves the earthly life. All these things lead to rebirth after death.



CURRICULUM CONNECTION

Religion Probably the world’s oldest religion, Hinduism is not identified with the teachings of a single individual, as is the case with Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam. It has evolved over many centuries, and today has about 800 million followers most of whom live in India.

Enrich

Ask students how the Hindu concept of time differs from the Western idea of time. (*The Hindu concept of time, introduced by India’s Aryan invaders, sees time as a revolving, endless circle. To Hindus, everything that happens today has happened before and will happen again. Westerners view time as a linear progression.*) **L2**

CRITICAL THINKING ACTIVITY

Analyzing Assign students to write essays in which they describe and analyze the specific roles of women, children, and families in Indian culture, which are discussed in this section. Then in their essays, students should also describe the political, economic, and cultural influences of women in Indian culture. Ask volunteers to read their essays in class and discuss the information presented.