

## Hindu Scriptures

Hinduism consists of an extensive collection of ancient religious writings and oral accounts that expound upon eternal truths, some of which Hindus believe to have been divinely revealed and realized by their ancient sages and enlightened individuals. Hindu scriptures (such as the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Agamas*, and *Puranas*), epics (the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Ramayana*), lawbooks, and other philosophical and denominational texts, have been passed on for generations through an oral and written tradition.

Since spiritual seekers have different levels of understanding, scriptural teachings are presented in a variety of ways to provide guidance to all seekers. Scripture in Hinduism, however, does not have the same place as it does in many other religious traditions. While the *Vedas* and other sacred writings are considered valid sources for knowledge about God, other means of knowledge, such as personal experience of the Divine, are regarded highly as well. Some Hindu philosophers have taught that these other means of knowledge should be seen as secondary to scripture. But other Hindu philosophers have taught that religious experience can be considered equal or even superior to scriptural teachings.



*The Bhagavad Gita is one of the most widely read scriptures in the world.*

Hindu scriptures are classified broadly into two categories: *Shruti* and *Smriti*. The word *Shruti* literally means “heard”, and consists of what Hindus believe to be eternal truths akin to natural law. Hindus believe these truths are contained in the vibrations of the universe. It was the ancient sages, Hindus say, who realized these eternal truths through their meditation, and then transmitted them orally. The term *Shruti* is generally applied to the *Vedas* and includes the *Upanishads*, which constitute the fourth and final part of the *Vedas*. These texts are revered as “revealed” or divine in origin and are believed to contain the foundational truths of Hinduism. Eternal truths are said to be realized by those with open and spiritual minds.

The second category of scripture is *Smriti*, which literally means “memory,” and is distinguished from *Shruti* in terms of its origin. These texts are designed to help Hindus “remember” the teachings of *Shruti*. For many Hindus, all other scriptural texts are loosely classified as *Smriti*. Teachings in *Smriti* texts are meant to be read and interpreted in light of changing circumstances over *kala* (time), *desha* (land), and *guna* (personality). These texts are intended to create structure for society, and must be flexible in response to changing history, geography, and communities.

Although there is variation across Hindu denominations in regard to what is classified *Shruti* or *Smriti*, a discussion of the major Hindu scriptures follows.

### ***Shruti***

**Vedas:** The word *Veda* means “knowledge”. There are four *Vedas*: *Rig*, *Sama*, *Yajur* and *Atharva*, of which the *Rig Veda* is the oldest. It has over 10,000 mantras that deal with a wide range of topics. Some Hindus see the Vedas as texts expounding on rituals and Gods, whereas others see them as teaching metaphysical and spiritual truths about God and the soul. While there is general agreement that the *Vedas* are at least over three thousand years old, there is little agreement on just how old they are. Evidence is scarce and estimates of their age vary widely, from 1200 BCE to thousands of years earlier than that.



*Students learning the Vedas in both the traditional oral tradition and with books.*

**Upanishads:** These texts contain an extensive exploration of the methods of understanding the self, God, and the nature of the world. There are more than a hundred *Upanishads*. The *Upanishads*, along with the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Brahma Sutras*, constitute the primary basis for the practice of *Jnana Yoga*, the path of knowledge.

### ***Smriti***

**Upavedas:** The Upavedas consist of four main texts. The first text deals with ayurveda, the science of health and life, and outlines how to cure disease and prevent it. Dhanurveda is about the science of warfare. Gandharvaveda is the study of aesthetics, and delineates art forms such as singing, dancing, writing poetry, creating sculptures, etc. The Arthashastra deals with public administration, governance, economy, and politics.

**Vedangas:** There are a number of auxiliary texts known collectively as Vedanga- some of them are considered *Shruti*, but they fall under *Smriti* for the most part. They cover a range of topics: oral chanting of scripture (*shiksha*), grammar (*vyakarana*), prosody (*chhandas*), etymology (*nirukta*), astronomy (*gyotisha*), and obligatory rituals (*kalpa*).

**Puranas:** Stories in the Puranas translate the meanings of the ancient *Shruti* scriptures and teach them to the masses by explaining the teachings of the Vedas and Upanishads through stories and parables. There are eighteen major *Puranas* (*Mahapuranas*) and many minor ones (*upapuranas*) that have compiled stories and narratives over many centuries. Each *Purana* tells stories around a principal character- either about a specific form of the Divine (or God) or a sage. They cover a wide range of sacred and secular topics such as the manifestations of God; teachings on dharma, karma, death, and rebirth; the use of mantras and other religious observances; the significance of sacred sites for pilgrimages; the importance of service; genealogies of kings and sages; cosmology; ayurveda; and astrology. Ancient, modern, and contemporary Hindu beliefs and religious practices are derived in large part from the *Puranas*.

**Ramayana:** This popular epic tells the life story the noble prince named Rama, whom Hindus believe to be an incarnation of the Divine. Prince Rama suffers year of exile and many hardships while destroying powerful demons before returning to rule his kingdom. This epic portrays several characters who embody ideal qualities and conduct. Among them are Rama himself as the ideal man; Sita as the ideal woman and emblem of strength; Hanuman as the ideal devotee of Rama; and

Lakshmana and Bharata as devoted brothers. There are numerous versions of the Ramayana, of which the most well-known are those by the original author Sage Valmiki and the poet-saint Tulsidas. These texts are recited by devoted Hindus at the home and in devotional gatherings, and are also the basis for popular children's stories, dances, and dramatic performances. Additionally, many consult the scripture for guidance on everyday life. Homages to the Ramayana can be seen all around Southeast Asia through architecture and dramatic renderings of the epic.

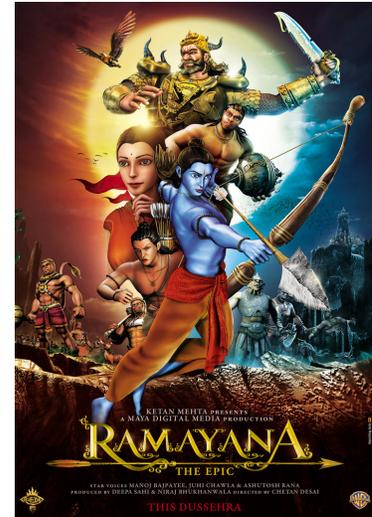
**Mahabharata:** With over 100,000 verses, the Mahabharata is a historical epic, and is the longest poem the world has known. It is seven times the combined length of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. Based on an extended conflict between two branches of the Kaurava family, the *Mahabharata* is a trove of stories and discourses on the practice of *Dharma*. As a scripture, its primary messages are the importance of truth, justice, self sacrifice, and the upholding of *Dharma*, the need for complete devotion to God, and the ultimate futility of war. Embedded in the *Mahabharata* is a text of special scriptural significance -- the *Bhagavad Gita*.

**Bhagavad Gita:** The *Bhagavad Gita* is a primary scripture for Hindus. Although it is a tiny part of the *Mahabharata* and technically classed as a *Smriti* text, it is traditionally accorded the rank of an *Upanishad*. The Bhagavad Gita is believed to divulge a number of truths and life lessons by Krishna, who Hindus believe to be an incarnation of the Divine. Krishna is speaking to Arjun, a warrior prince, who is in the middle of a battlefield trying to decide whether it is dharmic or not to fight in a war with his family members, friends, and teachers. Krishna describes to Arjun why it is dharmic for him to pick up arms in this situation, and fight the force that is disrupting peace for citizens all over India. Though fighting goes against the idea of ahimsa, or non-violence, Arjun's dharma as a prince is to use his skills to fight injustice to make his kingdom a safe and peaceful place for all his citizens. The Bhagavad Gita is meant to help one understand that upholding dharma can be challenging, especially in situations where there is not a clear right or wrong. In modern times, many people, including non-Hindus, have read the Gita.

**Dharma Shastras:** This class of texts that explains how Dharma is maintained in daily life. The texts deal with a wide range of topics: the responsibilities of each *ashrama* (stage of life), civil and criminal law, dietary rules, festivals, pilgrimages, charity, etc. Since these texts are part of *Smriti*, not *Shruti*, their teachings are subject to re-interpretation to suit differences in time and place. There are numerous texts composed by various authors over many centuries.

**Darshana Shastras:** These are six philosophical texts that are the basis for the six major schools of Hindu philosophy. Two of the most widely studied are the *Brahma Sutras* by Sage Vyasa and the *Yoga Sutras* by Sage Patanjali.

**Agama Shastras:** Ancient and numerous, including many that have been lost over the centuries, these texts deal with practical aspects of devotion and worship, including personal and temple rituals and practices.



*Many Hindu Epics have been animated or made into TV series as a contemporary means of telling the stories and teaching values in an engaging and entertaining fashion.*

**Bhakti Texts:** From ancient to contemporary times the teachings, poems, and songs composed by saints in regional languages have been a major source of inspiration. They convey simple messages of devotion, dharma, and spiritual practice through the language of the local people throughout all parts of India and beyond



*Mirabai was a Rajasthani princess in the 16th century, who became one of the most prolific and well known bhakti saints of that time.*

The plethora of scriptures is not as bewildering as might appear at first sight. Most Hindus receive their religious education from family traditions and discourses by spiritual leaders. Individual Hindus follow the prayers and teachings of the sect to which they belong and possibly the more specific teachings of a *guru* (spiritual teacher). Few directly access the Vedas and *Upanishads* that provide the foundation for all other scriptures in Hinduism, many read commentaries about these scriptures instead. The stories from the *Puranas* and epics and songs composed by saints are the most common vehicles of religious education.

### Key Takeaways

- The *Vedas* are the foundational texts of Hinduism
- Hindu scriptures are numerous and diverse and are meant to provide a guide to each individual on their unique path