



more short answers to

# Real Questions

ABOUT HINDUISM



## Overview

The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) is an advocacy organization for the Hindu American community. The Foundation educates the public about Hinduism, speaks out about issues affecting Hindus worldwide, and builds bridges with institutions and individuals whose work aligns with HAF's objectives. HAF focuses on human and civil rights, public policy, media, academia, and interfaith relations. Through its advocacy efforts, HAF seeks to cultivate leaders and empower future generations of Hindu Americans.

The Hindu American Foundation is not affiliated with any religious or political organizations or entities. HAF seeks to serve Hindu Americans across all sampradayas (Hindu religious traditions) regardless of race, color, national origin, citizenship, caste, gender, sexual orientation, age, and/or disability.

HAF's vision is to sustain a leading institution of Hindu American advocacy for the promotion of dignity, mutual respect, and pluralism.

*Hindu Americans comprise one of the fastest growing populations in the United States. Of the one billion Hindus worldwide, Hindu Americans number at over two million, but this does not include the estimated 32 million others who derive inspiration from Hindu spirituality and practice Hindu teachings such as yoga and meditation. With growing numbers comes an increasing awareness of a place in American dialogue and the need for a better understanding of Hinduism which is in line with its teachings and practices.*

The Hindu American Foundation presents herein some short answers to frequently asked questions about Hinduism. This resource has been created with the help of noted Hinduism scholars and religious figures. We hope it will serve as a useful primer for those interested in learning about Hinduism.

## I've heard some Hindus use the term *Sanatana Dharma*. What is that?

*Sanatana Dharma* and Hinduism are synonymous. The term *Sanatana Dharma*, loosely translated as “Eternal Law or Way,” is self-referential. The term “Hindu” however, is a 12th century Persian abstraction referring to the Indic civilization they found espousing certain beliefs, practices and a way of life on the banks of the Indus (therefore Hindu) River. Over the centuries, the diverse adherents of *Sanatana Dharma* have adopted the references of Hindu and Hinduism. These adherents include those who accept the scriptural sanctity of the *Vedas* and other Hindu scripture; believe in one all-pervasive Divine (*Brahman*) who has no material form yet is worshiped in an infinite number of forms and from which all of existence emanates; believe in the concepts of karma, dharma, and samsara; and accept the ultimate spiritual goal of enlightenment or liberation (*moksha*). Other terms used to refer to Hinduism include *Vedic*, *Sanskritic*, *Yogic*, *Indic* and Ancient Indian.

## What is the red dot many Hindu women wear on their forehead?

The “red dot” or *bindi*, once primarily a symbol of marriage, has largely become a fashionable accessory for Hindu females of all ages, regardless of their marital status. Traditionally, *bindis* were red or maroon in color, circular in shape, made of vermilion paste (*kumkum*), and applied with the ring finger of the right hand. Today, *bindis* come in all shapes, sizes, and colors and are often self-adhesive for convenience.

The male version of forehead markings is called a *tilakam* and can be made of *kumkum*, sandalwood or sacred ash. It is applied in a variety of shapes including lines, U-shapes, and dots. The *tilakam* can be representative of an individual's deity tradition. The adornment of *tilakams* are not as prevalent as *bindis*. However, the marking of either is amongst the first requisite steps in most rituals and sacred ceremonies.

Both *bindis* and *tilakams* are placed approximately one centimeter above the center of the eyebrows, which is considered to be the sixth chakra, *ajna*, in Kundalini Yoga. The *bindi* is associated with the worship of God as the feminine divine. It is also indicative of the conceptual “third eye of spiritual wisdom,” as Shiva, the greatest of Yogis, is depicted as having. *Bindis* and *tilakams* may also represent interdependence of both the feminine and masculine aspects of the Divine. Lastly, the *bindi* and *tilakam* serve as reminders of a seeker's ultimate goal of enlightenment or liberation (*moksha*).

## Why are so many Hindu Gods depicted blue in color or as animals?

The depiction of some Gods as blue toned is an example of the importance of symbolism in Hinduism. Blue, the color of the sky, represents the limitlessness of the sky and universe. Blue is also the color of water, which is life-sustaining. Swami Chinmayanada, a spiritual leader, explained that the human eye sees that which is infinite as blue so the blue tone serves as a reminder of the Divine's infiniteness.

Because Hinduism teaches that all of nature is Divine, Hindus believe that God manifests in the various forms that are found in nature, including animals, rivers, mountains and earth. For example, Ganesha, the Remover of Obstacles, is depicted with an elephant head which symbolizes wisdom, as elephants are recognized to be among the wisest of animals. Hanuman, worshipped as the perfect devotee and depicted as a monkey, symbolizes the individual's ability to quiet the ever-racing human mind through loving devotion to God and selfless service.

## Do Hindus have Commandments?

Hinduism is a family of traditions that emphasizes personal experience and evaluation and thus, offers overarching guidelines rather than absolute lists of do's and don'ts or commandments in regulating individual behavior. For a Hindu, all actions are to be guided by dharma. Hindu ethical values flow from one's understanding of the nature of reality and inform the Hindu understanding of right and wrong.

[See *What is Dharma?*]

Sage Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* provides a very succinct codification of ten principles, which are also found in numerous sources of Hindu scripture and teachings and considered the foundations for dharmic action. Of the ten, five are *yamas*, or guides for social behavior, and five are *niyamas*, or guides for personal behavior. The five *yamas* include non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, sexual responsibility and abstention from greed. The five *niyamas* include cleanliness, contentment, austerity, scriptural study and loving devotion to God.

## How often is a Hindu supposed to pray?

Prayer is integral to Hindu practice. Many Hindus follow set, obligatory guidelines in terms of specificity of prayers as well as timing, frequency and length while others may be more fluid and individualized in their practice. One is not necessarily guaranteed *moksha* upon

the performance of certain types or amounts of prayer nor is anyone condemned for lack of prayer, but progress towards *moksha* is proportional to spiritual effort. Hindus may pray at a personal, home altar which is usually placed in a room or space dedicated for worship; at a temple; or wherever they may be (and without an altar). Prayers may be to a specific deity or set of deities or to no deity in particular. Prayer may also vary in form and include:

- Rituals and offerings conducted by the individual or a priest
- Chanting of a particular deity's name or deity specific mantra (*japa*) using a *mala*. Often a *mala*, a looped thread that holds 108 beads, is used during chanting as an aid for keeping count and the devotee's concentration.
- Chanting of time specific *slokas*, including upon waking, while bathing, while lighting a sacred oil lamp, prior to eating, before studying and prior to retiring for the day
- Chanting of *slokas* for peace and universal well-being (including nature)
- Singing of devotional poems
- Meditating
- Studying scripture

On special occasions, such as the purchase of a new home or start of new stage in life, Hindus may sponsor a prayer ceremony at their local temple or invite a priest to their home to conduct a prescribed ceremony. Rites and rituals may vary amongst various sampradayas. [See *Do Hindus belong to different denominations?*]

## Do Hindus believe in heaven or hell?

Because Hindus believe in karma and reincarnation, the concept of heaven and hell as worlds of eternal glory or damnation do not exist in Hinduism. Hindus also do not ascribe to the concept of Satan, or devil that is in eternal opposition to God.

[See *What is karma?* and *Do Hindus believe in reincarnation?*]

Some Hindus may believe in what is described in Hindu scriptures as two planes of existence that can be likened to heaven and hell. These are respectively *svarga* and *narakha*. Neither *svarga* or *narakha*, however, are permanent or eternal. Both are intermediary planes of existence in which the soul might exhaust a portion of its karmic debt or surplus before taking physical birth once again to strive for *moksha*.

[See *What is moksha?*]



## What is *moksha*?

The ultimate purpose for any religious and spiritual practice for most Hindus is to attain *moksha*. *Moksha* is achieved through Self-realization (*atma-jnana*), or realization of one's true, divine nature. Hindus believe that each individual (anything living) is a divine soul, but that spiritual ignorance leads one to identify the self completely with the body and ego, thereby forgetting the divine nature of not only one's self, but all of existence. *Moksha* is characterized by the overcoming of spiritual ignorance; the complete elimination of material desires and attachments; the perfected ability to live in the present moment and experience absolute peace; and most importantly, the awakening of pure compassion towards all. *Moksha* also translates to liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth (*samsara*). It can also mean union of the soul and God, though the extent of union is understood differently by the major schools of thought. Someone may attain *moksha* during his or her lifetime or upon the death of his or her physical body.

## Do Hindus belong to different denominations? If so, can they intermarry?

Hinduism is not divided by denomination, but by other categories, including deity traditions, *sampradaya*, *parampara* and *darsana*. Most Hindus belong to one of four major deity traditions—*Shaiva*, *Shakta*, *Vaishnava*, and *Smarta*. While all traditions share many beliefs and practices, the central deity worshipped as well as certain philosophical tenets differ. *Shaivas* primarily worship different forms of Lord Shiva; *Shaktas* worship *Shakti*, or the Divine Mother in Her various forms; *Vaishnavas* worship forms of Lord Vishnu; and *Smartas* worship different forms of six major deities, including Lord Shiva, Shakti, Lord Vishnu, Lord Ganesha, Lord Subramanya and Lord Surya, holding them all to be forms of Brahman, the eternal, infinite, unchanging principle that is the substratum of the universe and is both immanent and transcendent.

Each deity tradition may also further branch into *sampradayas*. Adherents of a *sampradaya* have familial connections and/or strong faith in the heightened spirituality, divine experiences, and philosophical knowledge of the founder and/or current guru



or *swami* (spiritual head) of the *sampradaya*. Hindus may also freely choose between different *sampradayas* based on their liking and understanding. A *sampradaya* following a particular lineage or succession of *swamis* is said to be of a particular *parampara*. Hindus of different deity traditions, *sampradaya* and *parampara* can intermarry although many choose to marry within these branches for a variety of reasons. [See *What are the six major schools of thought in Hinduism?*]

## What are the six major schools of thought in Hinduism?

Over the ages, various schools of theology developed in Hinduism through a dynamic tradition of philosophical inquiry and debate. From timeless and universal questions, such as the purpose of life to the relationship between humans and the Divine, emerged many schools of thoughts, or *darshanas*. *Darshana* literally means “seeing.” In Hindu teachings, *darshana* relates to the different ways of “seeing” the Divine and attaining *moksha*, or liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth. Six *darshanas* are recognized as the most influential include *Sankhya*, *Vaisheshika*, *Nyaya*, *Mimamsa*, *Yoga* and *Vedanta*. While each school is comprehensive and complex, they are succinctly summarized below:

- *Vaisheshika*: considered one of the most ancient atomic theories. Founded by Sage Kanada, who held that all matter is made up of atoms and these atoms are activated through Divine intervention. *Vaisheshika* and *Nyaya* eventually merged.
- *Nyaya*: a system of logic proving the existence of the Divine as well as other core Hindu concepts such as karma. *Nyaya* insists that nothing is acceptable unless it is in accordance with reason and experience. The thoroughness of *Nyaya* logic and epistemology greatly influenced succeeding orthodox and unorthodox schools of thought.
- *Sankhya*: considered one of the oldest schools of thought. *Sankhya* divides all of existence into two categories—*Purusha* (divine consciousness) and *prakriti* (matter). Very little *Sankhya* literature survives today, and there is some controversy over whether or not the system is dualistic because it propounds the existence of these two categories.
- *Mimamsa* or *Purva Mimamsa*: interprets the rules of Vedic ritual, proffering perfection in ritual as a path towards *moksha*.
- *Yoga*: more aptly *Raja Yoga* focuses on quieting the mind through an eight limb system (*Ashtanga yoga*) as later codified in Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* for a balanced life and ultimately *moksha*.

- *Vedanta*: arguably the most influential on modern Hinduism and relies primarily on transcending one's identification with the physical body for liberation. The means by which an individual can transcend one's self-identity is through right knowledge, meditation, devotion, selfless service, good works amongst other religious and spiritual disciplines. Major subschools of *Vedanta* include *Advaita*, *Dvaita*, and *Visishtadvaita*.

## What are the major Hindu holidays?

Holidays and ways of celebrating those holidays are as richly diverse as the family of traditions called Hinduism. However, there are certain holidays that have come to be widely celebrated throughout the Hindu diaspora. Generally, Hindu holidays may commemorate a particular deity, season or event in history. Often times the same holiday may celebrate several different events or attributes of a variety of manifestations of the Divine (God). Hindu holidays don't necessarily fall on a specific day each year, as the Hindu calendar is lunar.

### Deity Celebrations

- *Shivaratri* (February/March): pays homage to Lord Shiva, the divine manifestation of transformation and regeneration.
- *Ramanavami* (March/April): celebrates the birth of Lord Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu and embodiment of *dharma* (righteousness).
- *Krishna Janmashtami* (August/September): celebrates the birth and life of Lord Krishna, one of the most endeared incarnations of Vishnu and deliverer of the Bhagavad Gita.
- *Ganesha* or *Vinayaka Chaturti* (August/September): pays homage to Lord Ganesha or Lord Vinayaka, the son of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati, and divine manifestation of wisdom, prosperity and good fortune.
- *Navaratri* (March/April, June/July, September/October, December/January, January/February) - A nine night celebration of the feminine divine that occurs five times a year (the spring and fall celebrations being amongst the more widely celebrated). The most popularly worshiped manifestations of the feminine divine include Goddess Durga representing the Mother Goddess and *Shakti* (Divine Energy), Goddess Saraswati representing knowledge, speech and the arts, and Goddess Lakshmi representing good health, wealth and prosperity. Many fasts and rituals associated with *Navaratri* are exclusive to women.

All of these celebrations may include fasting, temple visits, special rituals, chanting of mantras, singing of devotional prayers, dancing and all-night vigils.

### Seasonal Celebrations

- *Makara Sankranti, Uttarayana or Pongal* (January 14): one of the few solar holidays that marks the transition of the Sun into Capricorn or *Makara rashi* on its celestial path and the northward journey of the sun. It also broadly coincides with the winter harvest in many parts of India. Hindus thank God for the bountiful harvest and may pay homage to Goddess Saraswati on this day as well as to ancestors. *Pongal* is widely celebrated in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka.
- *Holi* (February/March): Welcomes arrival of spring and the harvests it brings. It also celebrates triumph over divisiveness and negativity. A visually stunning event with people tossing colored powders in the air and using dyed water in an atmosphere where culture, camaraderie and oneness are honored. In the evening, the community lights bonfires and eats festive foods. One of the largest festivals in the world, Holi is celebrated by Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists.

### Other Celebrations

- *Guru Purnima* (July/August): Gurus, or spiritual teachers, hold a sacred place for many Hindus as guides or mentors in one's spiritual progress and are many times, equated as a direct link to or physical manifestation of God. On *Guru Purnima*, special thanks are given to one's gurus, be they living, deceased or symbolic, through meditation, chanting, special rituals, prayer and scriptural study.
- *Raksha Bandhan / Veda Upakarma* (August/September): A holiday which celebrates the bond between brothers and sisters. Sisters tie a decorative sacred thread or amulet on the right wrist of her brothers (often including distant cousins and friends considered honorary brothers) with her prayers for his protection and well-being while sweets are exchanged. In return, brothers give their sisters small tokens or gifts of appreciation.

One of the widely cited stories of origin for the holiday is that of Lord Indra. It is said that after losing a battle against the demon Vritra, Lord Indra's wife tied a thread on his wrist, bestowing upon him divine powers which lead to his eventual victory against the demon.

On this day, those having gone through the sacred thread rite, or *upanayan*, renew their vows of meditation and change the sacred thread worn daily over their right shoulder. Many will repeatedly chant sacred *slokas* (prayers), namely the *Gayatri Mantra*, up to 1008 times.

- *Diwali* or *Deepavali* (October/November): One of the most celebrated Hindu festivals, commemorates the victory of good over evil. The word refers to rows of earthen lamps celebrants place around their homes. The light from these lamps symbolizes the illumination within the individual that can overwhelm ignorance, represented by darkness.

Many Hindus in the North recognize Diwali as a celebration of the return of Lord Rama (an incarnation of Lord Vishnu), His wife Sita and brother Lakshman to the capitol city of Ayodhya, after 14 years of exile. The residents of Ayodhya, overjoyed at the return of their beloved King, lit lamps in His honor, brightening the entire city with rows of light. In South India, the day is celebrated in honor of the slaying of the demon Narakasura by Lord Krishna and his consort Satyabhama.

## I read that yoga can't be claimed by any religion. Isn't yoga a Hindu practice?

Yoga refers to spiritual disciplines that are essential to the understanding and practice of Hinduism. The term covers a wide array of practices, embodied in eight "limbs," which range from ethical and moral guidelines to meditation on the Ultimate Reality. Yoga is a way of life that combines both physical and spiritual exercises, entails mastery over the body, mind and emotional self, and transcendence of desire. The ultimate goal is *moksha*. [See *What is moksha?*]

In the West, Yoga has largely become an asana-based (posture) physical practice, allowing practitioners to delink it from its Hindu philosophical and spiritual roots. But a perusal of the best known Yoga texts will demonstrate the contrary. Patanjali allots less than 25% of his revered *Yoga Sutra* to asana. The remainder focuses on what is essentially Hindu philosophy.

Yet, even when Yoga is practiced solely in the form of an exercise, its Hindu roots cannot be avoided. As the legendary Yoga guru B.K.S Iyengar points out in his famous *Light on Yoga*, "Some *asanas* are also called after Gods of the Hindu pantheon..." It is disappointing that many yogis regularly practicing *Hanumanasana* or *Natarajasana* continue to deny the Hindu roots of their Yoga practice.

In effect, the delinking of Yoga from its Hindu roots disenfranchises Hindus of recognition and appreciation for one of their ancestors' beneficial contributions to civilization and inhibits their ability to promote an accurate and deeper understanding of Hinduism.

Hinduism, as a non-proselytizing religion, never compels practitioners of yoga to profess allegiance to the faith or convert. Yoga is a means of spiritual attainment for any and all seekers. Thus, while one does not have to profess faith in Hinduism in order to practice

Yoga or asana, Yoga is still an essential part of Hindu philosophy and the two cannot be delinked despite efforts to do so.

## Is Hinduism compatible with science?

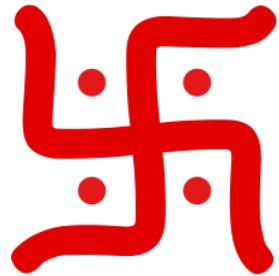
Contrary to popular perceptions that Hinduism is a mystical religion exclusively concerned with transcendental concepts of spiritual practice, Hinduism has been a wellspring of scientific thought and contributed immensely to the global civilization spanning more than five millennia. As a religious practice aspiring to understand the eternal mysteries of existence, Hinduism has never been a regressive or closed dogma satisfied with historicentric interpretations of one holy book. Hindu scriptures describe the concept of planets in the solar system circling the sun and the earth as round and rotating on its axis. Ancient Hindus also made epochal strides in astronomy, chemistry, mathematics, metallurgy, medicine (ayurveda) and surgery, including many findings upon which modern science, medicine and technology are based.

Revered Hindu sages, such as Swami Vivekanada and Paramahansa Yogananda, spent time working with and learning from scientists and saw compatibility with Hindu teachings. The French Nobel laureate Romain Rolland said, “Religious faith in the case of the Hindus has never been allowed to run counter to scientific laws,” while Carl Sagan once called Hinduism the only religion whose time-scale for the universe matches the billions of years documented by modern science.

## What is the meaning of the Swastika?

Contrary to the hateful and violent meaning the Swastika has come to take on for many since its misappropriation by the Nazis, the original Swastika (as pictured below) is an ancient and holy Hindu symbol of auspiciousness and good fortune. It is still commonly used at the entrance of Hindu homes, in temples, and on invitations to special occasions such as weddings and other rites of passage.

In Sanskrit, the word is a combination of “Su,” meaning “good,” and “Asti,” meaning “to exist.” The four limbs of the Hindu Swastika have diverse symbolic meanings: the four Vedas (Rig, Yajur, Sama, Atharva), the four stages of life (Brahmacharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha, Sanyasa), the four goals of life (Dharma, Artha, Kama, *Moksha*), the four Yugas (Satya, Treta, Dvapara, Kali), the four seasons, and the four directions. The Swastika is also a sacred symbol for Buddhist, Jains and Sikhs.



For an extensive list of definitions for common Hindu terms, please refer the Religion Newswriters Association's (RNA) *Religion Stylebook* at <http://www.religionwriters.com/tools-resources/religionstylebook>. The Hindu American Foundation worked with the RNA on Hindu terminology.

Along with the above questions, we include the original *Original Short Answers to Real Questions About Hinduism* to serve as a convenient resource to some of the more commonly asked questions regarding Hindu teachings and practice.

## Previously Asked Questions

### Why does Hinduism have many Gods?

Most Hindus believe in one, all-pervasive Divine Reality, that is formless (*Brahman*) or manifests and is worshiped in different forms (*Shvara* or God/Goddess). This belief in the existence of one Divine Reality with diverse manifestations can best be described as monism. Hindu monism is the foundation for understandings of God that range from non-dualistic—that existence and the Divine are not separate, but one and the same—to dualistic—that existence and the Divine, while sharing divine qualities, are separate. Hinduism also encompasses theologies of pantheism, that all of existence is Divine, to panentheism, that all of existence is within the Divine, to a theology of the Divine being external to all of existence. The Sanskrit hymn, *Rig Veda I.64.46*, states:

*Ekam sat vipraha bahudha vadanti*

Truth is one, the wise call It by many names.

And just as Hindus believe that Truth is one, called by many names, so too is God called by many names.

### Do Hindus have a Bible?

Hinduism is rich in scripture, but does not have a “Bible” in terms of one central, authoritative book. Hindu scripture is an extensive collection of ancient religious writings which expound upon eternal Truths that have been divinely revealed and realized by the ancient sages and enlightened wise men. These Truths, which were passed on for generations through an extraordinary oral tradition, include the *Vedas* and *Agamas*, the *Upanishads*, the *Epics*, including the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Ramayana*, the *Puranas*, lawbooks and many other philosophical and sectarian texts. Scripture in Hinduism, however, does not have the same place as it does in many other faiths. Hinduism is premised on realization, not revelation. To be enlightened, one must have personal experience of the Truths set out in the *Vedas* and other revealed scriptures. Important to note also is that the words of a living, enlightened teacher are as valid as the words of scripture.

## Do Hindus believe in reincarnation?

Hindus believe that the soul is immortal and evolves by experiencing varied lives through the process wherein the soul reincarnates into different physical bodies through cycles of birth and death. Guided by the Laws of *Karma* (see below), the soul continues on its path of spiritual evolution. The ultimate aim of Hindus is for the soul to attain freedom from this continuous cycle of birth and rebirth and discover its divine origin.

## What is karma?

*Karma* is the universal law of cause and effect. The critical and subtler understanding of karma is that each action has a reaction and that this cycle is endless. Thus if one sows goodness, one reaps goodness and conversely, if one sows evil, one will reap evil. To avoid the cycle of *karma*, Hindus strive to remain unattached to the fruits of their virtuous action in thought, word and deed. When one can work without expecting rewards, Hindus believe that society as a whole benefits and the individual is freed from the cycle of karma and reincarnation. The *Bhagavad Gita*, III.19 and III.20 expound on this:

*Tasmad asaktah satatam  
Karyam karma samacara  
Asakto hy-acaran karma  
Param apnoti purusah  
...Loka-sangraham evapi  
Sampasyan kartum arhasi*

Therefore, without attachment  
Perform always the work that has to be done  
For man attains to the highest  
By doing work without attachment

Likewise you should perform with a view to guide others  
And for the sake of benefiting the welfare of the world

## What is dharma?

*Dharma* is the mode of conduct for an individual that is most conducive to spiritual advancement. There are several categories of *dharma*, including *Sanatana Dharma*, or Eternal Law, which encompasses the inherent laws of nature and the Divine, and *samanya dharma* and *vishesh dharma*.

*Samanya dharma* includes general laws that govern all forms and functions, including one's duty to strive towards and achieve contentment; forgiveness; self-restraint; non-

stealing; purity; control of senses; discrimination between right and wrong; spiritual knowledge; truthfulness; and absence of anger.

*Vishesh dharma*, or special duties, expound upon social law or the laws defining an individual's responsibilities within the nation, society, community and family; law according to life stage or the laws governing age-appropriate duties related to the natural process of maturing from childhood to old age; and personal law or the individualized application of dharma according to an individual's sum of past *karma*, intelligence, aptitudes, tendencies, physical characteristics and community.

## What is the caste system and untouchability?

Caste was the division of the ancient Indic civilization based on four general occupational groupings, which included workers, business people, law enforcers and lawmakers, and priests. Within these four groups were thousands of sub-groups. Over the millennia, what was to be a skills and aptitude based guild system was rigidified into a hereditary hierarchy. This distortion was a result of certain social practices and taboos gaining acceptance over time and countless invasions by foreign civilizations. The “lowest” class, deemed untouchables, was marginalized, facing widespread prejudice. It should be emphasized that there is no basis for a discriminatory caste system in revealed Hindu scripture. Vedic and non-Vedic scripture advance the concept equality of all mankind as demonstrated in the ancient hymn:

### *Ajyesthaso akanishthaso ete sambhrataro vahaduhu saubhagaya*

No one is superior, none inferior. All are brothers marching forward to prosperity.

Lacking an authoritative scriptural basis, it is unfortunate that the Hindu religion has been conflated with the reprehensible practice of social discrimination that has manifested as racism, religious persecution and slavery in other cultures throughout the world.

Despite immense societal discrimination and prejudices, however, there have been countless saints and sages from the “lower” castes who have profoundly impacted Hindu philosophy and devotional practice. To cite only a few: Sant Raidas, a *chamar*, or cobbler, was the *guru* of Mirabai, the most famous of the women devotional poets of northern India; Sant Ramdev, a prominent devotional poet from central India important to both Hindu and Sikh traditions; and Sant Tiruvalluvar of southern India, who wrote the *Tirukkural*, an influential scripture of sacred wisdom. Modern-day saints, with millions of followers worldwide include Mata Amritanandamayi, or Ammachi, who was born into a fishermen community, and Satya Sai Baba, who was born into an agrarian community.

Jurisprudence in modern India outlaws caste discrimination and contemporary Hindu spiritual leaders and organizations, including but certainly not limited to Raja Ram Mohan

Roy; Mahatma Gandhi; Narayan Guru; Sri Shivamurthy Murugharajendra; Arya Samaj; Sahayoga Foundation have been engaged in eradicating this system from society.

For more on this topic, please read HAF's detailed report, *Hinduism: Not Cast in Caste— Seeking an End to Caste-based Discrimination.*, available online at [www.hafsite.org](http://www.hafsite.org).

## Why are many Hindus vegetarian?

In India, more than 20% of all Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs are vegetarian because of the fundamental belief in non-violence, or in Sanskrit, *ahimsa*. The *Vedas* propound that all beings, from the smallest organism to man, are considered manifestations of God and members of a universal family. With this worldview, violence in thought, word or deed against a living being is contrary to the natural balance of the universe. Many Hindus, therefore, refrain from killing animals for food when a plethora of vegetarian alternatives are available.

## What is the status of women in the practice of Hinduism?

One of the most profound attributes of Hinduism is the recognition and worship of the God as feminine. In fact, Hinduism is the only major religion, which has always worshipped God in female form and continues to do so today. Hindus revere God's energy, or *Shakti*, through its personification in a Goddess. The *Vedas* are replete with hymns extolling the equality of men and women in the spiritual, social and educational realms. It is unfortunate, however, that the gender equality of the Vedic period and that of the Hindu view of the Divine has been corrupted by the realities of social practice and taboo. Yet, Hinduism remains one of a few major religions in which women have occupied and continue to occupy some of the most respected positions in the spiritual leadership including Sharda Devi, The Mother, Anandamayi, Amritanandmayi Devi or Ammachi, Shree Maa, Anandi Ma, Gurumayi Chidvilasananda and Ma Yoga Shakti.



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HAF remains available to actively assist in obtaining information pertaining to Hinduism, offering Hindu perspectives on contemporary issues and providing access to a vast network of well-respected Hindu spiritual leaders and academics.

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