

Chapter 1

A Quick Overview of Hinduism

In This Chapter

- ▶ Seeing the broad view of life in Hinduism
 - ▶ Reviewing the core beliefs
 - ▶ Learning about Hindu gods, goddesses, saints, and sacred texts
 - ▶ Appreciating modes of worship and societal structure
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Hinduism, the oldest and perhaps the most complex religion in the world, has its origin in India. It has survived as a faith for thousands of years despite many outside influences, including invasions and occupations of the land. Hinduism has always been interested in — and welcomed — ideas from anywhere. One of its earliest sacred scriptures, known as the Rig Veda, declares “Let noble thoughts come to us from all directions.”

While absorbing into its bosom almost all good ideas from outside, Hinduism has been successful at keeping its own good ideas intact. Its focus has always been (and continues to be) inward; it has little interest in convincing others to embrace its values. Therefore, Hindu religious leaders rarely try to convert others. Hinduism firmly believes in both a supreme being and the idea that other belief systems are as valid as its own. This flexibility may be one factor that has led to the religion’s survival over the millennia.

This chapter provides a very general overview of Hinduism, introducing you to the basic beliefs, ways to worship, and more.

The Hindu Worldview

Unlike Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, Hinduism has no founder. It has no single religious book, such as the Bible or Koran, as its basis. Nor is it an organized religion. Hinduism has no founding date. It has no hierarchy of priests and no organizational structure that relies on a powerful leader (such as a pope) at its head. There are no standard sacraments or rites of initiation accepted and practiced by all those who profess to be Hindus. With no such anchors, or even an expectation that the followers believe the same things, you won’t be surprised to know that scholars have had a field day

trying to assess Hinduism in a Western framework. Not only has that task been nearly impossible, but also it has led to hundreds of interpretations — some of which portray Hinduism as flexible, broad, and secular, and others that treat the religion with ridicule or doubt.

When it comes to ultimate values, Hindu thought has never recognized or accepted any boundaries, be they geographical, racial, or otherwise. According to the Hindu worldview, Truth is unquestionably valid universally. In fact, this belief leads to the universal outlook typical of Hindus.



Hinduism, the oldest of all religions, has a unique perspective on life. It excludes nothing! Hinduism has as its adherents a broad spectrum of people who span from the extremely orthodox immersed in elaborate ritual worship of the Almighty to those who openly declare that they do not believe in any god. In fact, Hinduism's view of the world is epitomized by this declaration from one of its sacred scriptures, the Mahopanishad (Chapter VI, Verse 72): “Vasudhaiva kutumbakam,” which means “The whole world is a family.” This fundamental belief helps Hindus feel connected with the world. The belief that there is but One Supreme Soul from which *everything* — all living entities and inanimate objects — emerged further strengthens the connection with the entire universe.

Devout Hindus worship many gods and goddesses. They worship cows, monkeys, snakes, trees, plants, and even tools. They worship mountains, rivers, and oceans. In the life of a Hindu, every day of the week involves worship of a minor or major god or goddess or the celebration of a festival. Religion is in the air for Hindus no matter where they are. The ideas and practices are at once complex and simple. But fear not. In this book, I help unravel some mysteries and still leave you with a sense of awe!

A broad set of key beliefs

Survey after survey reveals that more than 95 percent of Hindus believe in the existence of God. A broad set of beliefs stem from that most basic of beliefs, and they include the following (which I discuss further in Chapter 3):

- ✓ **Belief in the Supreme Soul:** This being is identified as Brahman, universal spirit. Brahman is the One who reveals himself in the minds of the sages and seers as the Supreme Consciousness. Hindus understand Brahman to be the only thing real in the universe. All else is therefore unreal, false or illusory, and untrue. Brahman sounds like an abstract entity but is entirely real in every sense — the one and only Reality. You can find out about Brahman and the other divine entities in Part II.
- ✓ **Belief that Truth is the goal of life:** The goal of life, according to Hindus, is to reach back to Brahman, the one Reality, by realizing our true nature. That goal is defined as *moksha*: liberation from repeated cycles of births and deaths. The goal is to realize unity, or oneness, with

Brahman. For that reason, the Hindu prays, “Asato ma sat gamaya,” which means “Lead me from the unreal to the real.”

- ✔ **Belief in the authority of the Vedas:** The Vedas are Hindu sacred books of knowledge, written in Sanskrit, the ancient and liturgical language of India. There are four Vedas: Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Atharva Veda, and Sama Veda. Hindus believe that all four were revealed to Hindu sages. The Vedas contain hymns of praise to various gods, procedures for sacrificial rites and rituals, recommendations of cures for all ills, and musical chants appropriate at rituals. The Vedas are considered so sacred that the very definition of a Hindu is often stated as one who accepts/believes in the authority of the Vedas. Part III is devoted to the Vedas and the other important Hindu sacred texts.
- ✔ **Belief in the idea that time is circular and not linear:** According to this concept of time, there are no beginnings and no endings; time is simply a continuum. Hindus define periods of time as cyclical in nature, with each cycle containing four subperiods known as *yugas*: Krita, Treta, Dwapara, and Kali. Added together, the four *yugas* total about 4.32 million years. At the end of each cycle, gradually declining time spans and human values lead to dissolution. Then another period starts, and the cycle repeats all over again. This view of time has helped in developing the ancient Hindu perspective on life — a perspective that allows for a tolerant view of events and people.
- ✔ **Belief in karma and karmic consequences:** *Karma* is action that relates to service, specifically service to society. Hindus believe that what we are today is the result of our actions in the past. It stands to reason that what we will be in the future depends on what we do now, this moment, and onward for the rest of this life.
- ✔ **Belief in the concept of dharma:** The root word for dharma is *dhr*, which means “to hold” or “to sustain,” specifically within the context of maintaining harmony and balance in nature. Dharma or right conduct is so central to Hindu life that it encompasses everyone, irrespective of age, station in life, or caste. Each being has its own dharma consistent with its nature. A tiger’s dharma, for example, is to kill and eat its prey. Yielding milk to sustain the life of the young is a cow’s dharma. The dharma of humans is to serve.

The word *dharma* appears quite frequently in this book, much like the word *Veda*. That’s because, in some ways, understanding the concepts inherent in these two words is vital to understanding the Hindu faith.

- ✔ **Belief in tolerance as the core value:** Ancient universities and religious centers in India attracted students and visitors from many parts of the settled world. They invited debate and inquiry into religious ideas. With this same spirit, modern Hindus accept all religions to be true and self-contained. A Hindu hymn asserts this view by comparing the various paths to God with hundreds of rivers and streams all mingling finally with the ocean.

These fundamental beliefs have paved the way for Hindus to develop a philosophical outlook on life. This outlook is based firmly on the belief in an intimate connection between the individual soul, called *atman* (or *Jivatman*), and the Supreme Soul, called *Paramatman*. Broadly speaking, these fundamentals comprise a code of behavior that continues to form the contemporary Hindu view of life.

A brief look at Hindu gods and goddesses

Early Hindu thought had a clear focus on the One Supreme Being. The Chandogya Upanishad — one of the sacred texts of Hindus — contains an eloquent phrase: “*ekam eva adviteeyam*.” It means, “There is but One without a second.” Yet Hinduism ended up embracing a large number of gods and goddesses. This one-size-doesn’t-fit-all realization provided an extraordinary variety of choice for individuals to worship. The One without a second doctrine, however, which holds that God and the universe are one and the same, remains fundamental and is still preserved. The simple prayer offered by Hindus at the conclusion of any worship, irrespective of the god or goddess being worshipped, sums it all up:

You alone are our mother and father
You alone are our sibling and friend
You alone are our knowledge and prosperity
You alone are everything to us
My Lord, my Lord

Hindu mythology identifies three gods at the head of a hierarchy of gods. These three are

- ✔ Brahma, whose main function is to create
- ✔ Vishnu, who sustains the created universe
- ✔ Shiva, who is in charge of dissolution prior to the next time cycle of creation in an endless cycle

In simplistic terms, these three are sometimes referred to as Creator, Sustainer, and Destroyer respectively. Each of these major gods has a female consort also playing a major role:

- ✔ Saraswati, consort of Brahma, is the goddess of learning.
- ✔ Lakshmi, consort of Vishnu, is the goddess of wealth and well-being.
- ✔ Devi, Shiva’s consort, represents the creative power known as Shakti.

Below these primary gods are a variety of forms of gods including the avatars of Vishnu (which I explain in Chapter 8). Many temples exist and continue to be built for Shiva, his sons (Ganapati and Murugan), the previous goddesses named, and the various forms of Vishnu. The concept and presence of Brahma is enshrined in the heart of every sanctified Hindu temple (see Chapter 15).

During the early Vedic period, nature gods such as sun, wind, fire, and dawn were objects of Hindu worship. (When was the early Vedic period? Different scholars offer widely differing dates, but probably between 1500 and 1000 BCE.) These Vedic gods are invoked and worshipped in household rituals, weddings, and temple rituals to this day. Except for the sun god, no temples exist for other Vedic gods. However, hymns of praise for these gods fill the revealed sacred scriptures.

The Vedic gods fall into several general categories:

- ✔ Nature gods, especially gods connected with weather and climate
- ✔ Planetary gods who feature in destiny and the composition of horoscopes
- ✔ Gods who rule over household health and wealth and community values

In addition, other gods and goddesses, who are regional and local, preside over small villages and towns; their patronage is sought during natural disasters such as floods, epidemics, and the like.

You can read much more on the subject of gods and goddesses in Chapter 7.

Hindu religious leaders

Hinduism is a more than 5,000-year-old culture, philosophy, and faith, so you can imagine how many religious leaders have contributed to it! The number is very large — perhaps thousands — and covers a broad spectrum of people. Chapter 9 provides details on Hindu religious leaders. For now, I briefly describe what the various Hindu religious titles mean:

- ✔ **Sages:** In Hindu parlance, a *sage* (or *rishi* in Sanskrit) is an extraordinary spiritual person who is totally devoted to seeking Reality and practicing austerities in remote environments such as caves and deep forests. Sages first “heard” the revelations that formed the basis of Hinduism (see Chapter 2).

A long list of such sages exists, and all Hindus who belong to the first three castes (see the upcoming section “Societal Structure”) trace their origins to one of these sages of the ancient past. While performing rituals,

Hindus cite their lineage (called *gotra*) by referring to a set of sages (generally three, but sometimes five or seven) from whom they claim spiritual descent. You occasionally read about the Seven Sages called *Saptarshis* who are represented in the seven stars in the constellation Ursa Major.

Some names of ancient sages often cited in the scriptures are Vasishta, Vishwamitra, Atri, Jamadagni, Bharadwaja, Narada, Agastya, Markandeya, Garga, Kanva, Bhrigu, and Kaushika.

- ✔ **Gurus:** The word *guru* means teacher. Hinduism accords a special place for teachers in general but in particular for religious teachers. Each family has a revered teacher, and more often than not that teacher is also the founder of a particular Hindu sect and referred to as an *acharya*. For example, in the Srivaishnava denomination (more on denominations in Chapter 4), the most revered teacher is Ramanujacharya. Families belonging to this denomination would cite this guru in reverence at the conclusion of rituals and offer their allegiance to him.

A very well-known prayer is addressed to such gurus during daily prayers:

I salute that guru who is Brahma, Vishnu and
Shiva and who is verily the Brahman.

- ✔ **Swamis:** *Swamis* are religious leaders who belong to an order, such as the Ramakrishna Order. When such a leader is ordained, his name is prefixed with the title *Swami* and ends with *ananda* (meaning “bliss”). The ordained name replaces the given and family names. Swami Vivekananda and Swami Satchidananda are examples. Swamis set up missions and accept, train, and ordain disciples in order to continue their particular tradition. I say more about swamis in Chapter 2.
- ✔ **Monks and preachers:** To this general category may belong any and all persons who have a religious interest, talent, and perhaps some following. Monks and preachers may travel around, offer advice, preach, tell stories from the great epics, sing, chant, bless, and be a part of a community in general. Monks may also belong to an ashram as a celibate community, or they may live alone.
- ✔ **Priests:** Priests (also known as *purohits*) conduct worships regularly at temples and when devotees visit. They also go to private homes, upon request, to help families perform rituals and ceremonies. Hindu priests may marry.
- ✔ **Reformers:** Hinduism has had important reformers who have introduced various approaches to salvation over the past several thousand years. The most famous reformers are Shankaracharya (who introduced a philosophy of Nondualism known as *Advaita*), Ramanujacharya (who introduced the philosophy of qualified Nondualism known as *Vishishtadvaita*), and Madhvacharya (who introduced Dualism, known as *Dvaita*). I introduce you to all three — and their philosophies — in Chapter 20.

Why dates and other details in Hindu history may not be specific

The history of the Hindu religion can get a bit hazy simply because it's so very old. Here are some factors that make it difficult to pin down exact dates and other details about the religion's history:

- ✔ **The oral tradition:** The Hindu religion began with revelations “heard” by several sages over several centuries and then preserved through oral tradition — that is, a system of memorization. Much later, again at unknown dates, these revelations were compiled and put in writing. Does it surprise you that controversy exists about who did what and when?
- ✔ **Uncertain dates:** Scholars cannot agree about the period in which certain significant events in Hindu history took place — especially when the focus is events occurring more than several thousand years ago. For example, there is still no agreement on the period in which the most sacred scriptures of Hindus, the Vedas, were compiled.

Here's another example: Hindus believe that the end of the era known as Dwapara Yuga occurred when the Kurukshetra battle (which almost wiped out a whole royal race that ruled ancient India) ended. Some scholars claim that the sole surviving prince (known as Parikshit) ascended the throne at Hastinavati (present-day Delhi) around 3500 BCE. Other scholars place the

date of the battle as anywhere between 500 BCE and 200 AD. The discrepancy here isn't a squabble about 100 or 200 years; we're talking about disagreements in the order of *thousands* of years.

- ✔ **Lack of hard evidence:** Some scholars have made extraordinary efforts to carefully note events recorded in Hindu epic histories and correlate them with the corresponding astronomical events mentioned, such as the position and phase of the moon, alignment of planets, and the like. But some of these astronomical events recur each century or two, so the scholars' conclusions may still be in some doubt.
- ✔ **Identical names and alternate names:** I'm not talking about identity theft here, but sometimes the name of a sage is taken by another sage centuries later. When that happens, it raises the question of which sage is being referred to. In addition, some sages are referred to by alternate names. For example, a well-recognized sage known as Veda Vyasa (whom I call “the Homer of India”) is claimed, by some scholars, to be the same as sage Badarayana. Other scholars deny that identity entirely.

Keep these factors in mind as you read about the extraordinary saints, sages, scholars, and leaders whose contributions have molded the lives of billions of Hindus over the millennia.

Hinduism's sacred texts

Hinduism is not a faith that is based on one book. Very many sacred texts serve as the basis for the philosophy, rituals, and practices of Hinduism. These texts are mainly written in Sanskrit, but several major contributions are also to be found in other vernacular languages. The following sections provide a brief overview of these texts, and I provide much more detailed information in Part III.



Revealed texts: The Vedas

A basic Hindu belief is that the Vedas were inspired by what is known as *shruti*, meaning they were directly revealed by God and heard by sages performing intense penance. Accumulated over millennia, the Vedas form the basis of Hindu faith. The Sanskrit word *Veda* has its root in *vid* (to know), so the Vedas are the sacred knowledge of the ancient Hindus. They are recognized as *apaurusheya*, meaning that their origin is not traced to any individual and is, therefore, divine.

There are four Vedas, or Vedic traditions: Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda, and Atharva Veda. Each Veda is divided into three or four major sections, referred to as Samhitas, Brahmanas, and Upanishads. The word *Upanishads* literally means “something below the surface”; the Upanishads comprise the intellectual content of the Vedas and serve as the very foundation of Hindu philosophy.

Remembered texts: The Shastras, the epics, and the puranas

An equally voluminous literature known as *smṛti*, which means “remembered” (as opposed to revealed), emerged, undoubtedly inspired by the rich *shruti* literature. The dates of these scriptures are equally uncertain. The remembered texts include Dharma Shastras (rules of right conduct), the two major Hindu epics (the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*), and puranas (stories of gods); they consist of thousands of exciting tales to drive home the basic principles and values of Hindu thought. Their influence on the psyche of Hindus remains intact to this day.

The Hindu value system is embedded in the epics, puranas, and many other stories. In these texts, you find emperors, empresses, kings, queens, gods, goddesses, demons, festivities, holy rivers and mountains, prayers, devotional songs, weddings, births and deaths, successes and failures, the heights to which humans can rise, and the depths to which they could sink — all summed up in one word: life!

The Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita (“Song of the Lord”), or simply *the Gita*, is considered very sacred by all Hindus and many Western scholars and devotees of Hinduism. The Gita is, in some sense, a Hindu manual for a spiritual life. Its story occurs just before the great Mahabharata War is about to commence, when the hero Arjuna decides to quit the battlefield. He suddenly realizes that a battle that pits brothers against brothers, students against teachers, and the young against the old makes no sense. He throws down his powerful bow and becomes silent and dejected. In a timeless moment, the Lord teaches Arjuna the meaning of duty and charges him that he has no choice but to fulfill his duty as a warrior to restore dharma.

The 18 chapters of the Gita have inspired millions of Hindus over the centuries. Not a day goes by in India when some aspect of the Gita is not evoked

among the Hindu populace in the form of recitation, discussions, or enactment. This scripture is the subject of Chapter 13.

Key components of Hindu worship

Hindus worship in myriad ways, from simply closing their eyes and offering a short prayer to conducting elaborate ceremonies at home or in temples that last the whole day. I touch upon components of worship briefly here, and you can find the details in Chapters 14 and 15.

Devotions

For most Hindus, prayer is a daily event. Home altars are common in devout Hindu households. The orthodox may pray at least three times a day, first in the morning after *ablutions* (ritual washings), at midday before a meal, and in the late evening around sunset before supper. These prayers are known as *sandhya vandanam* and are a prescribed daily routine for young men who have been initiated into *brahmacharya* (meaning they are students of the Vedas) and their elders. I cite a few prayers here and offer more details about devotions in Chapters 14, 15, and 23.

Upon waking up, this prayer is addressed to Bhudevi (earth goddess):

I salute you, whose bosom is represented by a range of mountains and whose clothing is the cosmic ocean, and beg your forgiveness for stepping on you.

Immediately after, looking at open palms, this prayer is recited:

At the tip of my fingers resides Lakshmi
At the center of the palms is Saraswati
At the base of the palms is Govinda (Vishnu)
So we should look at the palms in the morning

During bathing, this prayer invokes the sacred rivers:

O Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati
Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri,
May you manifest yourselves here and now.

To wish for a good day, Hindus say this prayer:

May Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva along with the planets
Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, Saturn,
Rahu and Ketu grant this day to be a good day for me.

Before undertaking an important task during the day or before any religious function, this prayer is offered to Ganapati — an elephant-headed god who is Hinduism’s lord of obstacles:

O Lord of the curved tusk, immense being, blazing with the brilliance of a million suns, please help remove all obstacles to this undertaking.

One of the most well-known prayers to Vishnu declares that a mere remembrance of the almighty is enough to absolve one of all the shackles of life. So mere remembrance it is, and off we go! Thus prayers can be very brief.

Festivals: 365 days of Thanksgiving!

Festivals for Hindus are like a 365-day Thanksgiving! Pick up a Hindu calendar and pick a day, any day — you’re bound to find a reason for a celebration somewhere in the Hindu world. Some festivals are celebrated at home, and some are out in the community. Some may be low-key and serious, and some may be grand and lively. But most involve community gatherings in the open or at temples, and all involve prayers, special foods, excitement, and fun.

The festivals are seasonal. Tied in with a lunar calendar, they land on different days but in essentially the same month of the common calendar each year. In the month of January, Hindus celebrate Makara Sankranti, which is devoted to the sun god. In February is a night of Shiva called Shivaratri. Spring festivals include Rama Navami: celebrations over a nine-day period of Lord Rama’s birth and life. Krishna Janmashtami is a worldwide celebration of the birthday of Lord Krishna in August. Ganesha Chaturthi honors Lord Ganapati in September. In the fall, Hindus worship goddesses Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Durga with festivals including grand processions, musical performances, and feasting. The well-known festival of lights (Diwali) celebrated all over India and the rest of the Hindu world in late fall is a celebration of the triumph of good over evil.

In addition, colorful festivals are conducted regionally that exploit regional legends and flora and fauna. I cover a wide variety of festivals in Chapter 16.

Worship in temples and shrines

Any excuse will do for Hindus to show up at a temple to have *darshan*, which is “seeing” God. A new baby, a new job, a promotion, an approaching examination at school or college, or visiting family . . . you name it. Hindu families offer a plate of fruits and coconut and light incense sticks, and the priest goes through some rituals. Then the family prostrates in front of the deity, the priest blesses the family, and all is well.

In addition to the millions of such visits that take place every day, devout Hindus also observe the days and nights of special worship when the family must find its way to a nearby temple. The intent is the same (to “see” God), the routine is the same, and the effect is the same: a feeling of satisfaction

and gratitude. The experience is at once complex and simple. I sort out this experience for you in Chapter 15.

Rituals to mark the stages of life

Hindu scriptures have prescribed rituals and ceremonies to mark 16 defined stages of life. These 16 cradle-to-cremation rituals are known as *samskaras*. They begin with conception and continue with rituals performed before the baby is born. After the birth, the childhood rituals continue, marking the naming of the child, the first feeding, the first haircut, and the piercing of the ears. The childhood rituals are followed by ceremonies that initiate the young into adulthood, followed by householder-related rituals that include the wedding. The final stages of life bring rituals that prepare the individual for retirement, followed by the rituals to bury or cremate the dead. You can find information about all these ceremonies in Chapter 17.

Societal Structure

Hindu society of the distant past was organized on the basis of societal functions that included

- ✓ Providing for the society's intellectual and spiritual interests
- ✓ Protecting the land against domestic and foreign enemies
- ✓ Conducting trade and commerce
- ✓ Tilling the land and performing manual labor

Creating a systematic way to provide for all these needs and functions — at both the individual and community level — makes logical sense. The fact that this system went awry with the stigma of caste and hereditary ownership is an unfortunate matter of history that Hinduism is stuck with.

Following are the four major castes as they are understood and practiced. Note the word “major” carefully. Many, many minor castes and subcastes exist:

- ✓ **Brahmin:** Spiritual and intellectual services
- ✓ **Kshatriya:** Defense-related services
- ✓ **Vaishya:** Trade and commerce-related services
- ✓ **Shudra:** Manual labor services

A lower caste, known as *untouchables*, also exists and includes people who undertake to do society's dirty work such as cleaning latrines, tanning leather, and so on. The existence of this lowest caste — the poverty, ill treatment, and

prejudice against it — infuriated Mahatma Gandhi (the political and social leader who led the Indian independence movement and is considered the father of the nation) to the extent that he named the very lowest level *Harijans*, or “God’s people.”

In general, the sharp divisions among castes no longer exist in practice in India and the rest of the Hindu world. Except that sometimes they *do* still exist, especially in respecting family traditions!

Is the caste system still alive? The proper answer is a resounding *yes* — and *no!* Today, the system exists from one extreme (where the idea and practice are condemned with obvious disgust) to the other (strict observation, within reason — that is, not violating state and federal laws) and a whole lot in between. Hindus of all castes now sit together side by side in classrooms, buses, restaurants, and workplaces, and they can live in the same neighborhoods thanks largely to modern education and the laws of the land.

The caste situation gets complex when simultaneous loyalties are observed. For example, a person who is single may, in some situations, openly proclaim freedom from the caste requirements and in other situations (such as mate selection and marriage) declare obvious preferences. Internet sites that advertise available grooms and brides stating their preferences run the whole gamut. Be patient, and you will see a full treatment of this subject in Chapter 5.