Hinduism is the religion of the majority of people in India and Nepal. It also exists among significant populations outside of the sub continent and has over 900 million adherents worldwide. In some ways [**Hinduism is the oldest living religion**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/history/) in the world, or at least elements within it stretch back many thousands of years. Yet Hinduism resists easy definition partly because of the vast array of practices and beliefs found within it. It is also closely associated conceptually and historically with the other Indian religions [**Jainism**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/jainism), [**Buddhism**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/buddhism) and [**Sikhism**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/sikhism).

Unlike most other religions, Hinduism has no single founder, no single scripture, and no commonly agreed set of teachings. Throughout its extensive [**history**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/history/history_1.shtml), there have been many key figures teaching different philosophies and writing numerous holy books. For these reasons, writers often refer to Hinduism as 'a way of life' or 'a family of religions' rather than a single religion.

**Defining Hinduism**

The term 'Hindu' was derived from the river or river complex of the northwest, the Sindhu. Sindhu is a Sanskrit word used by the inhabitants of the region, the Aryans in the second millennium BCE. Later migrants and invaders, the Persians in the sixth century BCE, the Greeks from the 4th century BCE, and the Muslims from the 8th century CE, used the name of this river in their own languages for the land and its people. The term 'Hindu' itself probably does not go back before the 15th and 16th centuries when it was used by people to differentiate themselves from followers of other traditions, especially the Muslims (Yavannas), in Kashmir and Bengal. At that time the term may have simply indicated groups united by certain cultural practices such as cremation of the dead and styles of cuisine. The 'ism' was added to 'Hindu' only in the 19th century in the context of [**British colonialism**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/history/history_7.shtml) and missionary activity.

The origins of the term 'hindu' are thus cultural, political and geographical. Now the term is widely accepted although any definition is subject to much debate. In some ways it is true to say that Hinduism is a religion of recent origin yet its roots and formation go back thousands of years.

Some claim that one is 'born a Hindu', but there are now many Hindus of non-Indian descent. Others claim that its core feature is belief in an [**impersonal Supreme**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/concepts/concepts_6.shtml), but important strands have long described and worshipped a personal God. Outsiders often criticise Hindus as being polytheistic, but many adherents claim to be monotheists.

Some Hindus define orthodoxy as compliance with the teachings of the [**Vedic texts**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/texts/texts.shtml) (the four Vedas and their supplements). However, still others identify their tradition with 'Sanatana Dharma', the eternal order of conduct that transcends any specific body of sacred literature. Scholars sometimes draw attention to the caste system as a defining feature, but many Hindus view such practices as merely a social phenomenon or an aberration of their original teachings. Nor can we define Hinduism according to belief in concepts such as [**karma and samsara**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/concepts/concepts_4.shtml) (reincarnation) because Jains, Sikhs, and Buddhists (in a qualified form) accept this teaching too.

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 the [**Veda**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/texts/texts.shtml), and most Hindus draw on a common system of values known as [**dharma**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/concepts/concepts_2.shtml).

* Hinduism [**originated around the Indus Valley**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/history/history_1.shtml) near the River Indus in modern day Pakistan.
* About 80% of the Indian population regard themselves as Hindu.
* Most Hindus believe in a [**Supreme God**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/concepts/concepts_6.shtml), whose qualities and forms are represented by the multitude of deities which emanate from him.
* Hindus believe that existence is a [**cycle of birth, death, and rebirth**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/concepts/concepts_1.shtml), governed by [**Karma**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/concepts/concepts_4.shtml).
* 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**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/texts/texts.shtml) 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'
* Hindus celebrate many [**holy days**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/holydays/), but the Festival of Lights, [**Diwali**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/holydays/diwali.shtml) is the best known.
* The 2001 census recorded 559,000 Hindus in Britain, around 1% of the population.

Hinduism's early history is the subject of much debate for a number of reasons.

Firstly, in a strict sense there was no 'Hinduism' before modern times, although the sources of Hindu traditions are very ancient. Secondly, Hinduism is not a single religion but embraces many traditions.

Thirdly, Hinduism has no definite starting point. The traditions which flow into Hinduism may go back several thousand years and some practitioners claim that the Hindu revelation is eternal.

Although there is an emphasis on personal spirituality, Hinduism's history is closely linked with social and political developments, such as the rise and fall of different kingdoms and empires. The early history of Hinduism is difficult to date and Hindus themselves tend to be more concerned with the substance of a story or text rather than its date.

**Hindu notions of time**

Hindus in general believe that time is cyclical, much like the four seasons, and eternal rather than linear and bounded. Texts refer to successive ages (yuga), designated respectively as golden, silver, copper and iron. During the golden age people were pious and adhered to dharma (law, duty, truth) but its power diminishes over time until it has to be reinvigorated through divine intervention. With each successive age, good qualities diminish, until we reach the current iron or dark age (kali yuga) marked by cruelty, hypocrisy, materialism and so on. Such ideas challenge the widespread, linear view that humans are inevitably progressing.

**Main historical periods**

Although the early history of Hinduism is difficult to date with certainty, the following list presents a rough chronology.

•Before 2000 BCE: The Indus Valley Civilization

•1500–500 BCE: The Vedic Period

•500 BCE–500 CE: The Epic, Puranic and Classical Age

•500 CE–1500 CE: Medieval Period

•1500–1757 CE: Pre-Modern Period

•1757–1947 CE: British Period

•1947 CE–the present: Independent India

**Deities**

* [**Brahma**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/deities/brahma.shtml)
* [**Lakshmi**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/deities/lakshmi.shtml)
* [**Shiva**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/deities/shiva.shtml)
* [**Vishnu**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/deities/vishnu.shtml)

Brahma is the first god in the Hindu triumvirate, or trimurti. The triumvirate consists of three gods who are responsible for the creation, upkeep and destruction of the world. The other two gods are Vishnu and Shiva. Vishnu is the preserver of the universe, while Shiva's role is to destroy it in order to re-create.

Brahma's job was creation of the world and all creatures. His name should not be confused with [**Brahman**](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/concepts/concepts_6.shtml), who is the supreme God force present within all things. Brahma is the least worshipped god in Hinduism today. There are only two temples in the whole of India devoted to him, compared with the many thousands devoted to the other two.

**Puja**

Hindu worship, or puja, involves images (murtis), prayers (mantras) and diagrams of the universe (yantras).

Central to Hindu worship is the image, or icon, which can be worshipped either at home or in the temple.

**Individual rather than communal**

Hindu worship is primarily an individual act rather than a communal one, as it involves making personal offerings to the deity. Worshippers repeat the names of their favourite gods and goddesses, and repeat mantras. Water, fruit, flowers and incense are offered to god.

**Worship at home**

The majority of Hindu homes have a shrine where offerings are made and prayers are said.

A shrine can be anything: a room, a small altar or simply pictures or statues of the deity.

Family members often worship together. Rituals should strictly speaking be performed three times a day. Some Hindus, but not all, worship wearing the sacred thread (over the left shoulder and hanging to the right hip). This is cotton for the Brahmin (priest), hemp for the Kshatriya (ruler) and wool for the vaishya (merchants).

**At the temple for a festival**

**Temple worship**

At a Hindu temple, different parts of the building have a different spiritual or symbolic meaning.

* The central shrine is the heart of the worshipper
* The tower represents the flight of the spirit to heaven
* A priest may read, or more usually recite, the Vedas to the assembled worshippers, but any "twice-born" Hindu can perform the reading of prayers and mantras

Pilgrimage is an important aspect of Hinduism. It's an undertaking to see and be seen by the deity.

Indian women worshipping Shiva on the Ganges. Popular pilgrimage places are rivers, but temples, mountains, and other sacred sites in India are also destinations for pilgrimages, as sites where the gods may have appeared or become manifest in the world.

**Kumbh Mela**

Once every 12 years, up to 10 million people share in ritual bathing at the Kumbh Mela festival at Allahabad where the waters of the Ganges and Jumna combine. Hindus from all walks of life gather there for ritual bathing, believing that their sins will be washed away. The bathing is followed by spiritual purification and a ceremony which secures the blessings of the deity.