

TEACHER'S NOTES

RELIGION

FAST FACTS

HINDUISM

PEOPLE

The term 'Hinduism' is really a term used by travellers to India in the 18th and 19th centuries to describe the different but related religious ideas, cultures and philosophies which they found there. It has been suggested that it is more accurate to speak of "Hinduisms" rather than a single tradition. Hindu religious leaders prefer to use the term Sanatana Dharma (the universal law of order – unity in diversity) instead of Hinduism. (The word 'Hindu' stems from the Sanskrit term to describe India – Sapta Sindhu [pronounced Hapta Hindu] – the land of seven great rivers: Ganges, Yamuna, Sarasvati, Godavari, Indus, Narmada, and Cauvery.)

The Hindu traditions are believed to have come to India through the arrival in India of the Aryans. They came from the west around 1700-1500 BCE, though some dispute this and point to earlier traditions native to the Indus Valley. The oldest of the Hindu scriptures, the **Vedas**, were written in the period between 1500 and 500 BCE, known as the Vedic Period.

The origins of the **Om** (sometimes given as Aum) symbol are obscure but the sound is believed to be an aspect of the creation of the cosmos.

Another significant Hindu symbol is the **swastika**, which is found all over Hindu temples, signs, altars, pictures and iconography in India and Nepal. It is seen as pointing in all four directions (North, East, South and West) and thus signifies stability and groundedness. The swastika is considered extremely holy and auspicious by all Hindus and is regularly used to decorate all sorts of items to do with Hindu culture. (The symbol is found widely in the ancient world but was taken over by the Nazis in the 1920s as a symbol of white supremacy.)

BELIEFS

The concept of **Brahman**, the impersonal supreme universal being, is sometimes confused with **Brahma** – the creator God. The two words are almost the same, but Brahma is regarded as a personal being. The other closely related word is **Brahmin** – the priest or priestly caste.

Hindus believe that the supreme reality – Brahman – is not limited and therefore can be known in many forms (avatars), both male and female. These include *Vishnu* (incarnated as *Lord Krishna* or *Lord Rama*), *Lakshmi* (Vishnu's wife), *Shiva* (the Lord of the Dance), *Ganesha* (the elephant-headed god) and *Hanuman* (the monkey god). *Krishna* is the most popular of these manifestations of God for many Hindus. His name means "the most attractive person". Many stories and legends are told about the various deities, and statues (*murtis*) and images of the gods are displayed in Hindu temples and homes. The images in a Hindu shrine are often painted blue, as a symbol of holiness.

Hindus believe that when a person dies the soul (*atman*) moves on to another being – which may be a person, an animal or a plant. The actions which affect this process of rebirth are known as **karma**. A good karma in this life will mean a good life next time; a bad karma in this life will mean a hard life the next time.

Because of their belief that all living beings are spiritual by nature most Hindus do not eat meat or fish and lead a non-violent lifestyle.

COMMUNITIES

Since the 1830s many Hindus have migrated from India to other parts of the world – often to work on plantations in the Caribbean, eastern and southern Africa and also to parts of the Pacific. Since the Second World War (and following Indian independence) many have also migrated to Britain, Ireland and North America, where there are now substantial Hindu communities.

The Caste system (*jati*) has been a traditional feature of Indian culture and is therefore closely tied in with religious practice, although modern Indian governments have attempted to outlaw it. It relates to social status at birth and stems from the exclusivity of certain occupations, attempting to keep different castes and sub-castes separate from each other.

Caste relates to **dharma** – the social and religious duty of a person according to his or her status in life. Some groups of people are believed to be good at certain things and thus it is their dharma to live according to their group (*varna*). There are four main varnas:

- Brahmins – priests
- Kshatriyas – soldiers
- Vaishyas – shopkeepers and farmers
- Shudras – servants.

Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948), the great Indian social and political reformer, highlighted the abuse and ill-treatment of those of no caste or untouchables (*dalits*) whom he termed *Harijan* – children of God. In some sections of Indian society these divisions still run deep.

PLACES OF WORSHIP

Hindu temples range from the small and simple to the very grand and elaborately decorated, outside as well as inside. Each temple has at least one priest who looks after the images of the gods and leads the prayers. People may come to worship individually or in groups. Group worship normally involves the singing of hymns from the Vedas, saying prayers and lighting a small fire, and waving a live flame over the images of the gods. A dot or stripe of coloured powder on the forehead is a sign that a person has been to worship. This is called **tilak**.

Hindu homes will always have a shrine, normally small and simple, though well-off families may use a whole room. The shrine always includes an image or picture of one or more of the gods surrounded by flowers, decorations and perfume or incense. At least once a day a Hindu will spend time at the shrine – making *puja* – and reciting from the scriptures. They begin with the word *aum* – a way of expressing their oneness with the eternal spirit of the universe. They may meditate in order to focus their thoughts only on God. A devout Hindu may believe that everything they do, including everyday household tasks, can be counted as worship.

Outside India temples have often been converted from other buildings, including houses or even disused schools or churches.

FESTIVALS

The popular festival of Diwali, which is also celebrated by Sikhs, marks the start of the New Year (in October or November) for many Hindus.

It is said that Hindus have a festival for every day of the year – and more! Some are very widely celebrated while others relate only to certain communities.

The Hindu year varies from region to region in India, so Indians celebrate New Year (*Annakuth*) for instance at different times. Most Hindu calendars are lunar, each month beginning with the New Moon.

Because of the wide range of Hindu festivals everyone has their favourite which depends on where they live, their caste, their chosen god, etc.. *Diwali* and *Holi* are the best-known festivals outside India, but other popular festivals are:

- o *Ramanavami* – Rama's birthday – around March/April
- o *Krishnajanmashtami* – Krishna's birthday – July/August
- o *Rakshabandhan* – full moon during the month of Krishna's birthday
- o *Navratri* – Nine Nights – September/October (also called *Durgapuja*)
- o *Dassehra* – the day after the end of Navaratri
- o *Mahashivatri* – the appearance of Shiva – January/February

SCRIPTURES

The Hindu Vedas existed for a long time in oral tradition before eventually being written down. There are four Vedas, each one containing

- hymns of praise
- instructions for fire rituals
- prayers for worship and meditation
- discussions between teachers and pupils.

The **Gayatri Mantra** from the Rig Veda (which altogether contains over one thousand poems) is used by many Hindus in morning worship:

*"We meditate on the most excellent splendour of the Creator.
May we be guided and inspired by his wisdom."*

The **Upanishads** (meaning 'sit down near' or 'lessons') are the last part of each Veda. They were written around 600 BCE and introduced the idea of reincarnation. People used to sit down near wise teachers and learn from them.

The **Sutras** (meaning 'threads') are short sayings and verses based on the Vedas and were written between 500 and 100 BCE.

There are also several famous epic spiritual poems, best known of which are the Ramayana which tells the story of Prince Rama (written around 100 BCE and 100 CE) and the *Bhagavad-gita* (the Song of God) written around 250 CE. The narrative stories from the Ramayana or the Puranas are much loved by children and are very familiar, often being represented in comic strips or videos.