

HRF30-A

4

Hinduism: Origins, Beliefs, and Teachings



Introduction

In Lesson 4, you will begin to study Eastern religious traditions, starting with an introduction to Hinduism, one of the oldest organized religions. This lesson will briefly look at what is known about Hinduism's beginnings. You will also read about the main aspects of Hindu beliefs and teachings.

What You Will Learn

After completing this lesson, you will be able to

- describe the origins of Hinduism
- describe the key historical events and their significance in the history of Hinduism
- identify and explain four key beliefs associated with Hinduism (dharma, karma, samsara, and moksha)
- describe the Hindu concept of reincarnation

The following definitions will help you to understand this lesson.

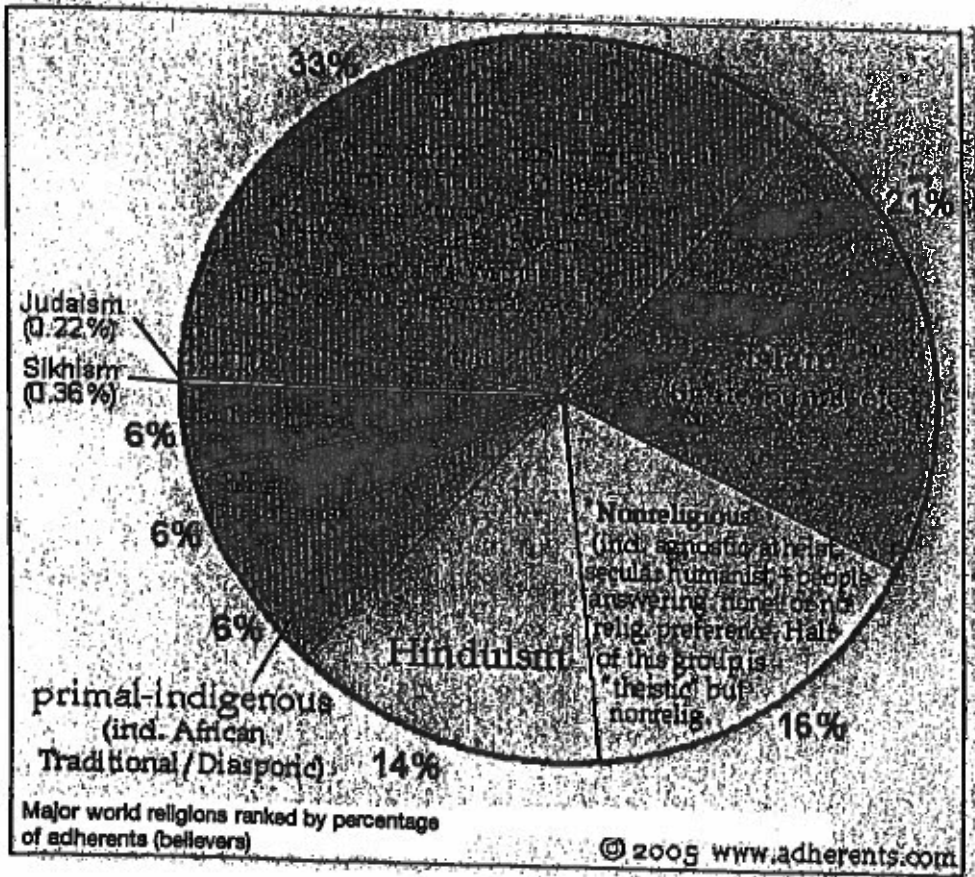
Glossary	
Aboriginal people	the people native to a country; that is, the people who dwelled in a country first, or earliest, before the arrival of later colonists. Note that Lesson 2 dealt with the Aboriginal people of North America, but there are Aboriginal people in many countries of the world.
Aryans	"noble ones"; fair-skinned, migrating peoples from Asia who eventually inhabited the Indus Valley around 1500 BCE
atman	the inner soul and essence of Brahman
Brahma	the Creator god of the Hindu Trinity
Brahman	the Ultimate Reality and source of the Universe; beyond human comprehension
Brahmin	a member of the priestly caste; the highest of the four social classes
caste	social class; either priests, warriors, merchants, or servants. Each class is subdivided, resulting in thousands of categories.
deity	a god
dharma	ethical duty based on one's caste
guru	a Hindu spiritual leader or teacher
karma	"action" or the moral law of cause and effect; determines one's reincarnated state in life
mantras	words or syllables chanted in order to assist in meditation
moksha	liberation from the endless cycle of rebirth
monism	a belief that all reality is a unified whole, grounded in a single being, Brahman
Puranas	"old stories"; a collection of myths about the great Hindu gods
Rig-Veda	one of four major books of the Vedas containing over 1000 hymns
samsara	the endless cycle of rebirths
Shakti	the manifestations of female energy
Shiva	the Destroyer god of the Hindu Trinity
shruti	"what is heard"; oldest sacred texts believed to be orally transmitted by the gods
smriti	"what is remembered"; newer writings that do not hold the same weight as shruti writings, since they are considered to be human-made literature
Upanishads	an example of shruti writings often shared by gurus with their students; concerned with our spiritual relationship with the Ultimate Reality
Vedas	shruti writings; established hymns used in Hindu sacrificial worship
Vishnu	the Preserver god of the Hindu Trinity

Overview

Is it true that Hindus worship cows? Do Hindus really pray to figures of monkeys and elephants, and to gods with several arms? How could a religion have 330 million gods? Hindus have logical answers to these questions. Yet, to better understand the answers, you must take a step back and look at Hinduism in its proper context.

How widespread is Hinduism, and how does it compare with other major world religions? The following pie chart, which is based on approximate estimates, illustrates Hinduism's significance worldwide. As an organized religion it ranks third, after Christianity and Islam. It has been estimated that there are 750–800 million Hindus across the globe, and that Hinduism is the predominant religion in India and Nepal.

Statistics Canada estimates that there are over 297 000 Hindus in Canada. In Toronto alone, there are about 190 000.



Hinduism has often been referred to as an “umbrella religion.” Like a huge umbrella, it covers a vast number of traditional beliefs and practices. Some people have suggested that because of its incredible variety of traditions, Hinduism should not really be called a religion. These critics are partially correct, since Hinduism does not easily fit the structure of many of the religions you will examine throughout this course: there is no known founder, no central authority, no universal agreement on sacred texts, and no widely known creed. There is not even a common belief about which god or gods should be revered. This makes worship a very personal expression of an individual’s beliefs.

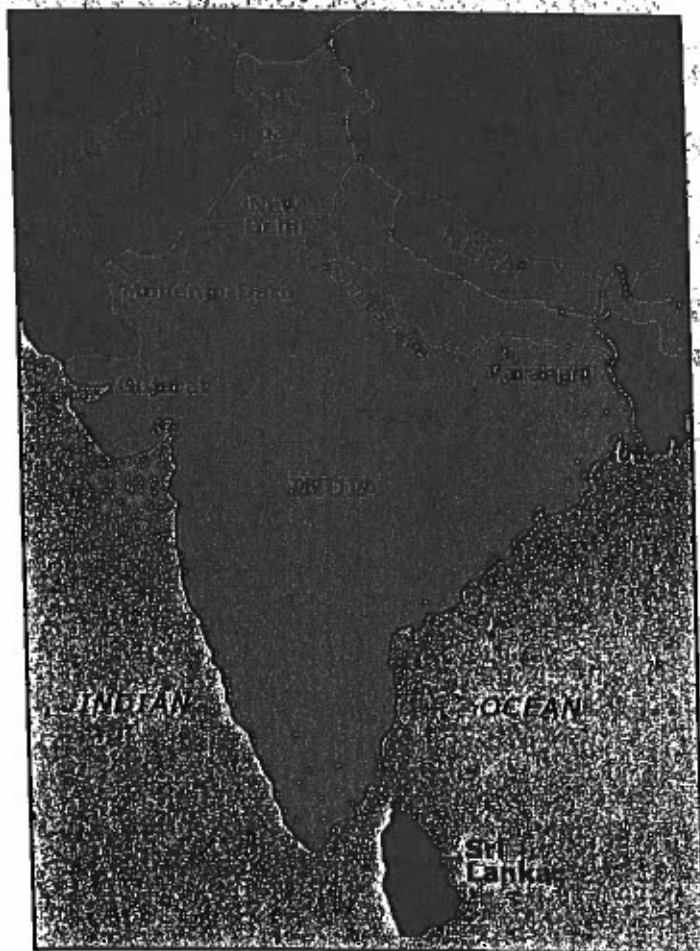
Capturing a single image of Hinduism can be a challenging task. It has been said that searching for the common threads that create the tapestry of Hinduism is like looking at a beautifully woven rug—from behind! One wonders how all the loose ends fit the bigger picture. Perhaps the journeys that individual Hindus take are different, but the destination, as you will see, is the same.

Origins

Earliest Evidence of Religious Belief

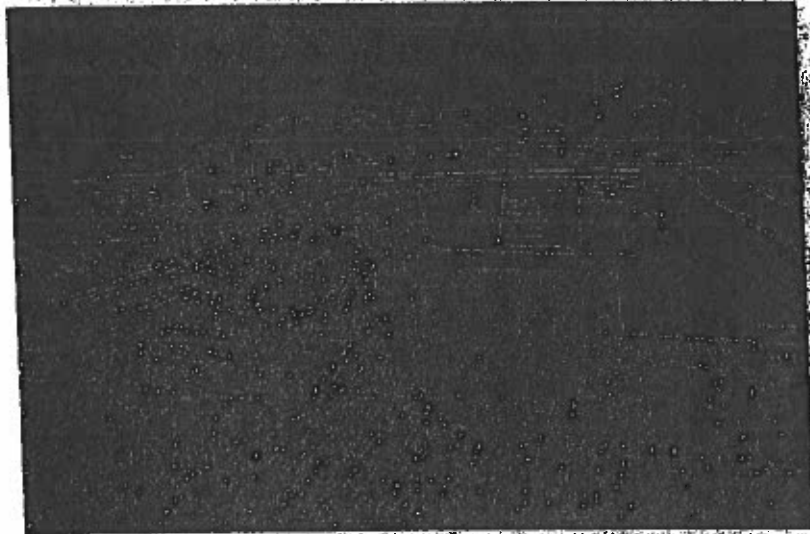
Hinduism dates back so far in history that it is impossible to identify a founder. It is also impossible to make a clear assumption as to when Hinduism first appeared. However, archaeologists have agreed on the location of the earliest evidence of Hindu practices.

The Indus Valley, located in what is now India and Pakistan (see the map that follows) was a naturally fertile area that became a perfect location for residents to farm, fish, and transport goods easily by river. As cities developed along the banks of the major tributaries of the Indus, so, too, did religious expression and belief.



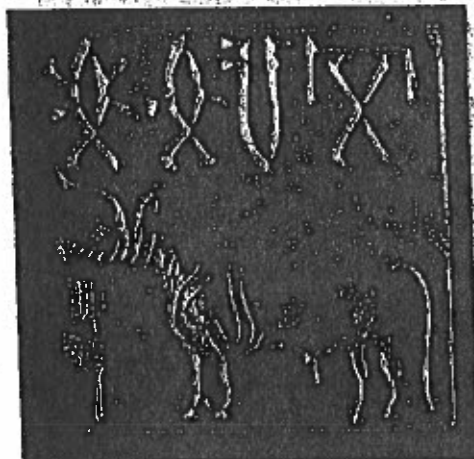
Archaeologists have been able to piece together much of early Indus Valley dwellers' lives through excavations begun in the 1920s. They discovered a fascinating culture dating back to approximately 3000 BCE, or earlier. The people of the *Harappa* culture, as they have come to be known, lived within the vast expanse of the Indus Valley in present-day Pakistan and northwestern India. Excavations of the ancient cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa—both in Pakistan—have revealed evidence of sophisticated cultures with water supplies and plumbing. These cities may have been the centres of religious and administrative functions. Situated along major trade routes, both cities were bustling metropolises.

One of the most well-known structures in Mohenjo-Daro is the Great Bath. It is a large brick-lined, sunken structure that apparently held water. Many archaeologists believe that it may have been used in religious ceremonies or for ritual cleansing.



The Great Bath in Mohenjo-Daro

One of the first discoveries made at Mohenjo-Daro was *stamp seals*. These were blocks or circles of wet clay engraved with various images, such as animals, humans, and gods. Stamp seals appear to have been used for marking bundles of goods that were being traded. The stamp seal would be removed at the arrival point. Some stamp seals were carved from a soft stone called *steatite* and were then baked, to harden the final product. (See the following picture.) Examples of these stamp seals were also found at Harappa.



Unicorn stamp seal

One stamp seal bears an image of a plant emerging from a woman's womb. Archaeologists suggest that this could indicate early worship of a Mother-Goddess, as numerous goddesses worshipped in modern Hinduism today.

Some of the images on pottery dug from archaeological sites also point to a religious awareness. On one, a man with three faces sits in a meditative pose, surrounded by four wild beasts. This is a strikingly similar image to that of the well-known Hindu god or deity, Shiva, whom you will learn more about later in this lesson. Another pottery piece shows a painting of the sacred fig tree, which is still the symbol of holiness in Hinduism today. In life and death matters, current Hindu burial practices have definite links to the ancient Harappa culture. Burial urns with ashes have been unearthed in cities along the Indus Valley. Today, cremation is an accepted death ritual in the Hindu faith.

Connection to Nature

For the Indus Valley people, like the Aboriginal peoples before them, acts of nature were often attributed to supernatural forces. For example, when harvests were plentiful or floods caused death and destruction, people believed that supernatural forces were responsible. Yet, flooding was also a blessing, in a sense. The flood waters would have deposited silt from the riverbeds onto the land, creating rich agricultural earth. The inhabitants learned that the awesome forces of nature and their resulting effects were to be feared and worshipped.

Support Questions
(do not send in for evaluation)

32. In what ways does Hinduism *not* fit the picture of an organized religion?

33. How might the geography of the Indus Valley have influenced religious awareness in the Harappa culture?

34. Explain the importance of archeological evidence that points to the religious nature of its earliest inhabitants.

There are Suggested Answers to Support Questions at the end of this unit.

Aryan Influence

Some elements of the earliest Harappa culture still remain something of a mystery, despite the wealth of information gathered during archaeological digs over the decades. The reasons for the decline in the Indus Valley culture also remain a puzzle. Some believe that gradual climate changes made living off the land impossible. Others theorize that continued flooding of the Indus Valley created conditions that became unbearable for the inhabitants. A third explanation suggests that the early Harappas continued to live in the region, and were influenced by groups migrating from central Asia, and

1500 BCE. Among these groups were the **Aryans** or “noble ones.” Because migrations continued for several centuries, the Aryans significantly changed the early Harappas’ culture and religious belief system.

These newcomers had the greatest influence of all other migrants to the Indus Valley. For example, the Aryans brought with them an early version of the Sanskrit language. They also practised a religion that included a complex system of gods. Perhaps more importantly, they established distinct social classes. This meant that they saw particular people as worthy of greater privileges than others in society. The immigrants, in this case the Aryans, viewed themselves as superior. They saw the Aboriginals as their inferiors.

In their sacrificial worship rituals, the Aryans used established hymns and prayers that were sung. In order to preserve the correct observance of these rituals, the Aryans created a class of priests or **Brahmins**. These Brahmins became what could be termed “ritual specialists.” This priestly class or **caste** held much influence in the developing Indian culture. Their equals were the tribal leaders of various communities.

Sacred Writings and Oral Traditions

The sacred hymns, called the **Vedas**, are of particular importance when looking at Hindu religious beliefs. The Vedas come from an oral tradition dating back more than 4000 years. Hindus believe that the gods revealed the Vedas to ancient *sages* or holy people, over the centuries. The word *Veda* means “knowledge.” These Vedic hymns were passed on only to the priests, who would commit every word of them to memory. The priests became the sole reciters of these prayers and still remain so today, wherever Hinduism is practised, including Canada.

Learning the prayers involves hearing and reproducing the sounds or **mantras**. In fact, the power of the Vedas lies in their

sound, rather than in the content of the words being recited. If the ritual sounds are not performed properly, then the ritual is considered to be tainted, and the result can have grim consequences for the worshippers. The tone and delivery becomes essential in proper worship.

As rituals evolved over the centuries, they became more elaborate, requiring individual Brahmins to personally specialize in only certain verses of the Vedas. As you might correctly conclude, the Brahmins developed into a highly regarded caste within Hindu society.

In the third century BCE, the Vedas were eventually written down, yet their power still remains in the sound of their words. This text is considered part of Hindu sacred writings called **shruti**, meaning “what is heard.” The Vedas are considered sacred to all Hindus because they are regarded as having been transmitted by the gods. A number of books holding less weight and written much later are collectively referred to as **smriti**, or “what is remembered.” You will learn more about these books later on.

The Vedas are contained in four major books. One of these, the **Rig-Veda**, is widely known among Hindus. It contains over 1000 hymns, the words of ritual sacrifice, and mythical stories about the gods. The other three books are concerned with the methods of blood and non-blood sacrifice; details of domestic ritual; and an explanation of the deeper meaning behind sacrifice.

The Rig-Veda's stories and hymns explore some very familiar themes, such as the obvious concern with maintaining balance and order in the universe. It is believed that a greater power keeps natural forces in the environment in check, and that this balance is maintained as long as individuals and communities recognize their proper places in the world. People feel that it is necessary for them to continually satisfy the supernatural powers behind the natural forces. Thus, hymns that praise the gods of nature demonstrate both wonder and fear of the created world. Proper ritual performance is another method of preventing chaos and destruction. Particular prayers become associated with certain types of sacrifice.

Yet, Hinduism recognizes that human beings are limited in their abilities to maintain stability in the universe; they require “outside” assistance. It then becomes clearer why individual gods become the focus of personal and community worship. In the next section, you will come to know basic Hindu beliefs regarding Hindus’ understanding of God.

Support Questions
(do not send in for evaluation)

35. Why were the Vedas so important to the early Aryans who inhabited the Indus Valley?

36. List the main contents of the Vedas.

37. Why might different cultures and religions retell stories with similar themes?

Beliefs and Teachings

The Hindu Notion of God

Do Hindus practise monotheism or polytheism—a belief in one god or many? Simply answered, most Hindus believe that the cosmos and everything in it, including God, is essentially one thing. This idea of combining God and the world around us is quite different from the idea held by Western religions, such as Judaism, Islam, or Christianity. These religions teach about a personal God who created this universe and exists independently, yet has a relationship with humanity.

So it appears that Hindus are monotheistic—they believe in the idea of the cosmos being one, and do speak about God. Then why do Hindus worship so many gods and goddesses, as though they were polytheistic? The answer lies in tradition.

God and Scriptures

The spiritual relationship between Hindus and God is described in a collection of writings called the **Upanishads**. These are part of the shruti scriptures ("what is heard"). This form of religious literature began in about the seventh century BCE. **Gurus** or spiritual teachers often shared these stories with their students. The Upanishads speak of the spiritual relationship we have with God. This God or Ultimate Reality is often referred to as Brahman. The Upanishads developed the idea that the individual self, the **atman**, is attempting to reunite with Brahman. This may take several human lifetimes to accomplish, but eventually the atman will return to what it has always been a part of.

One image that helps explain this concept is to think of Brahman as being like the vast ocean. Our physical existence is like the spray that the winds pick up and temporarily suspend in this world. Eventually, like the water droplets returning to the sea, we will return to Brahman, the Essence of Everything. The individual must be aware of this and focus on ways of releasing him or herself from this cycle of rebirths to reunite with Brahman.

The Upanishads explain that even though the atman is seeking release from this physical life in an attempt to reunite with Brahman, we can never truly know Brahman. This is one reason why some people describe Hinduism as a *monistic* religion. **Monism** is a belief that all reality is united in a single being—in this case, Brahman. Yet God still remains unknowable and impersonal. An early story in the Upanishads tells of a father's way of illustrating this concept to his son, Svetaketu:

"[Svetaketu] put this salt in water, and come to me tomorrow morning."

Svetaketu did as he was bidden. The next morning his father asked him to bring the salt which he had put in the water. But he could not, for it had dissolved.

Then said Uddalaka: "Sip the water, and tell me how it tastes."

"It is salty, sir."

"In the same way," continued Uddalaka, "though you do not see Brahman in this body, he is indeed here. That which is the subtle essence—in that has all things their existence. That is the truth. That is the Self. And that, Svetaketu, That Art Thou." (Chandogya Upanishad 6.13: 1–3)

In the ancient Sanskrit language, *tat twam asi* translates as "That Art Thou." It is a frequently quoted phrase that means that every part of this universe shares in Brahman's reality. Brahman and atman are one. The words "Brahman" and "atman" are actually interchangeable.

The Hindu belief in Brahman as encompassing all things speaks of an attitude of respect for all of nature. Nature to the Hindu is less a creation of God than it is a *manifestation* or expression of Brahman. Since all of nature shares in Brahman's divinity, the natural world is to be respected. Treating nature as sacred partially explains why cows, for instance, are not to be harmed in any way, in India. Likewise, portraying God as a monkey or as having an animal's head is a sign of reverence for the Divine.

Since knowing the totality of Brahman or the atman is beyond the senses, humans need to be able to find ways to "touch" the divine. One way in which Hindus experience aspects of the divine is through the worship of deities. These images may have a clear form, such as an animal or a human, or a combination of the two. Conversely, the form may possess neither animal nor human characteristics, such as the stone shaft of the god, Shiva. Regardless of the image, Hindus believe that it embodies the god or goddess being worshipped.

The stories surrounding the deities express divine elements, such as creativity, heroism, or compassion. Traditionally, there are over 330 million gods and goddesses in Hinduism and believers are free to worship any that they wish! However, describing this religion as a polytheistic faith could prove to be inaccurate. The deities are outward expressions of the one Ultimate Reality. For this reason, Hinduism is described as a monotheistic religion.

(Remember that this lesson began by describing Hinduism as an umbrella religion.) Each deity has his or her own personal characteristics, which may appeal to some Hindus, but not others. You will now read about a small selection of some of the better-known deities.

The Three Great Gods

The texts of **Puranas** or "old stories" contain references to a collection of myths about the three great Hindu gods. These newer writings fall under a distinct category, termed *smritis* or "what is remembered." They do not hold the same weight as *shruti* writings since they are considered to be human-made literature. However, they have positively contributed to the religious development of Hinduism. They were composed between the sixth and the sixteenth centuries CE. The numerous Puranas involve the reader in creation stories and legends about royalty, as well as recounting colourful myths about the gods. Three of the more well-known gods are Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. This Hindu Trinity of the gods represents various aspects of the Supreme Being.

Brahma is the Creator God. He is the Indestructible One and the Source of all Knowledge. Brahma is typically presented as sitting cross-legged on a lotus flower. Brahma originally possessed only one head but when he created a female deity, he acquired three more, so that he could see her every movement.



Brahma—Creator God

Thus, each of his faces looks toward one of the cardinal directions (north, south, west, or east). The goddess Saraswati is his consort. A *consort* refers to someone who is a partner, a spouse, or more likely, a companion. In each of Brahma's hands is an object with symbolic meaning: a sacrificial tool, the Vedas, a water pot, and prayer beads. Brahma travels the universe on the wings of a swan or a goose, the symbols of knowledge. To the Hindu worshipper, these animals are simply other forms of the same God.

Vishnu is the second member of the Hindu Trinity. He is viewed as the Preserver God. He rides on Ananta, the cosmic snake. His four arms represent pleasure, righteousness, liberation, and success. In one hand, he holds a large conch shell that presumably spreads a sacred sound, which Hindus refer to as "Om." This sound can be chanted in meditation as a way to help individuals focus on the Divine.



Vishnu—Preserver God

In another hand, Vishnu holds a wheel or discus, reminding followers of the passage of time and the need to lead a good life. In a third hand, he holds a lotus flower, a symbol of life's sacredness. The fourth hand holds a mace or club that reminds believers of the power that Vishnu possesses to punish those who do not fulfill their individual duties.

Vishnu has come to earth in various human and animal forms. His *avatars* (bodily manifestations) include a tortoise, a fish, a bear, a dwarf, a man-lion, and two heroes from the Puranas, Rana and Krishna. Worshippers of this deity associate themselves with Vishnu's particular characteristics. For example, some may relate more to the playful Krishna as a boy, while others may find Vishnu's creative aspects more appealing.

The third member of the Hindu Trinity is **Shiva**. There may have been followers of Shiva, the Destroyer God, from times that pre-date the Vedas. The sacred myths represent Shiva as Lord of wild animals, who shows mercy, but who also threatens the world with destruction.



Shiva—Destroyer God

He is the Lord of the Dance, often shown in pictures or statues dancing within a circle of flames. He celebrates victory over evil and crushes demons underfoot. He also has four arms. One of his hands holds a small drum that beats life's rhythm. In another, he holds fire, as a reminder that the dance of life consists of destruction, as well as creation. His other two hands signal a type of invitation to his followers. These hand signs or *mudras*, call worshippers to join in the dance by saying "come freely," and "do not be afraid." Shiva is a reminder of the divine working within the universe, as much through life as through death, and as much through creation as through destruction. Shiva is the divine masculine power.

Goddess Worship

Goddess worship is another aspect of Hinduism. Many of the earliest religious texts viewed the goddesses as consorts to particular gods, such as Paravati, Shiva's consort, and Lakshmi, Vishnu's consort. A nine-day festival celebrates the power of the goddess Durga. Traditional stories describe her victory over a buffalo demon, after all other gods failed to subdue the beast. Through worship, followers ask her for assistance with their worldly problems.

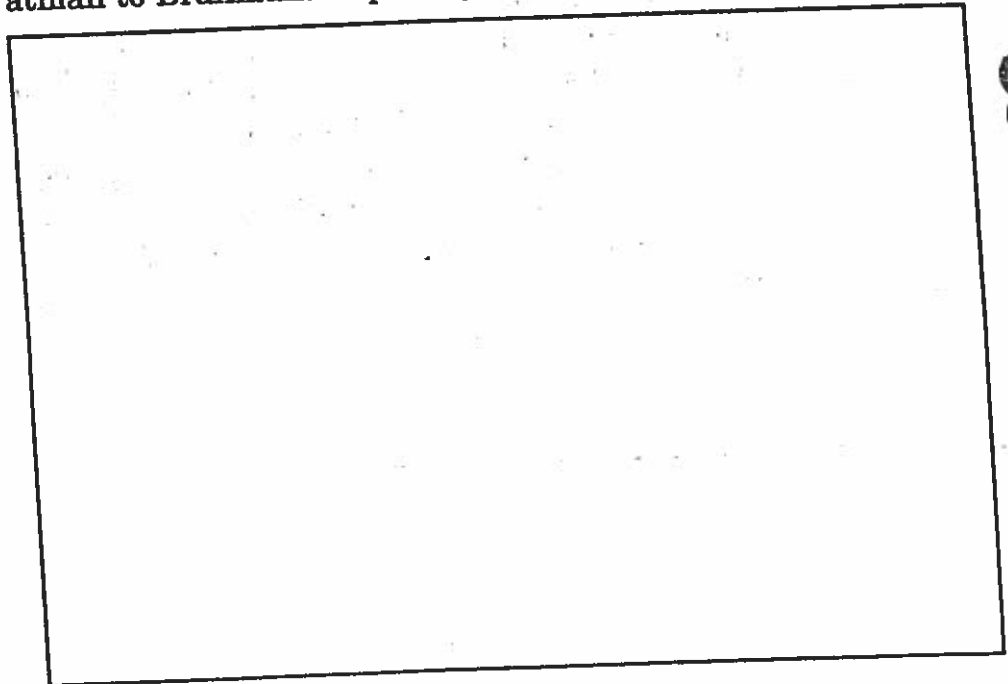
The divine feminine power displayed in these and other goddesses is known as **Shakti**. This energy is considered to be as important as the divine masculine energy. Many believe that the gods receive their strength through their respective female consorts. Often, deities are portrayed as half-male and half-female to illustrate a union of the two energies. Goddess worship is found throughout India and depicts the varied forms of Shakti, ranging from compassion and patience, to the fierce energy required to defeat evil forces. In effect, Shakti maintains a balance in the universe, preventing sheer chaos from taking control of the world.

Hindus all share a sense of the divine in their lives. Some envision God as having materialized or as having been incarnated in a human or animal form. Many Hindus envision the presence of the divine in the gods or goddesses that they worship in their homes or in the temple. Yet, other Hindus experience the divine presence without form. They believe that the Ultimate Reality rises above this world's physical limitations, and that achieving unity with Brahman can be accomplished through personal meditation. Whether one worships a deity in a temple or at home, or whether one has a formless notion of God matters only to the individual worshipper. What is of importance to all Hindus, however, is the responsibility one has to carefully follow one's duty within the family and within society at large. It is in these social arenas that every Hindu attempts to connect with the Divine.

Support Questions
(do not send in for evaluation)

38. Describe the Hindu understanding of God as revealed in the Upanishads.

39. Sketch your own simple illustration of the relationship of atman to Brahman. Explain your diagram.



40. Using the following chart, outline the idea of the Hindu Trinity by placing each of the following terms into the chart under the god it describes:

- creator
- preserver
- destroyer
- dance
- discus
- Saraswati
- drum
- swan
- Rama

Brahma	Vishnu	Shiva

41. Explain how the concept of Shakti is necessary in the Hindu concept of the universe.

Core Beliefs

Castes

Recall the influence that the Aryans had on the Indus Valley's original inhabitants. They brought a culture unfamiliar to the Aboriginal peoples of the region. As travelling people or *nomads*, they did not occupy the land and build outstanding cities, but they left their mark in other ways.

The Aryans passed on the Sanskrit language, first orally, then later as a written memory of their cultural and religious beliefs. They also brought the wheel, the chariot, bronze weapons, and domesticated horses. One of their most influential contributions was their particular method of structuring society. In order for society to function properly and prosper, everyone had to contribute. Each person belonged to a class that had particular duties associated with it. The individual in each class had a religious duty or **dharma** to "pitch in," to maintain an orderly society. The Brahmins (priests) would make offerings to the gods on everyone's behalf. In turn, the labourers would look after the clergy's needs. Another group, the merchants and farmers, would supply food and clothing to others and in return, the nobles and warriors offered protection and ruled the region.

The holy text, the Rig-Veda, listed and described these four classes, from highest to lowest, in the following manner: *Brahmins* (priests and other educated people); *Kshatriyas* (nobles and warriors); *Vaishyas* (farmers, landlords, and merchants); and *Sudras* (labourers in "non-polluting" jobs).

By the Middle Ages, divisions within these classes became based on occupations or *jati*. The divisions came to be known as *castes*. One was born into a particular caste, and was expected to marry and work within the same caste. A couple's children would then be expected to follow the dharma of this caste.

Some individuals were considered lower than all of the castes and were rejected by society. Over time, they have been referred to as the *untouchables*, *Dalits*, or *Harijans*. They were left with jobs that people did not consider worthy of the other castes;

for example, removing the dead for cremation, working with animal hides, executing criminals, or cleaning the streets. Today, caste plays an important role in India's economic and political structure, despite the Indian government's attempt to outlaw the discriminatory practices associated with it. Understandably, this is a difficult law to enforce. The regulations involving caste have been a part of Hindu society for centuries. Even though a large percentage of the Indian population is included in the lower, poorer castes, the upper castes, who are in powerful positions, make up less than 20% of the population.

In Canada, most Hindus do not take caste into consideration in their day-to-day lives; however, some may take it into account when choosing a spouse. Like many other Canadians, young Indo-Canadians may look for similar values and background when considering a prospective partner. This could include, among other things, religion, caste, or a shared linguistic background.

Four Core Beliefs

The concept of *dharma* is one of Hinduism's four core beliefs. The others include *samsara*, *karma*, and *moksha*. Hindus believe that life is an endless series of births, deaths, and rebirths. To them, life is cyclical, with no beginning and no end. They believe that when we die in this world, we are reborn into another life in another physical form. This could be the form of a human, an animal, or in some cases, a plant. The notion that life is a process of rebirths is called *samsara*.

The point of successive rebirths is to allow the individual to learn, apparently without divine interference, about how one should live, according to their personal *dharma*. How one lives up to this responsibility to society will determine the status of future rebirths. The result of actions performed in this life, called *karma*, will affect the condition of a person's life to come. The individual Hindu must carefully consider the moral consequences of every action. This involves the proper treatment of others, according to the rules that one's station in life has determined.

The responsibility of how a Hindu lives his or her life lies squarely on his or her shoulders. A simple expression summarizing this responsibility is, "A person *is* what she or he has done." Hence, a person's reincarnated life may find him or her "climbing the ladder" to a higher caste. Many Hindus feel that they should accept their life, at whatever stage they find themselves. The idea is to live according to one's dharma, and things will improve in the next life. Some would argue that due to economic circumstances, many are at a disadvantage in this life.

The final goal of reincarnation is to seek final release from any future rebirth. Escape from this endless cycle is termed *moksha*. Much to the relief of believers, Hinduism offers several answers to the question about how to reach the final goal—release.

Traditionally, there are many paths to salvation or release from reincarnation's bonds. One's focus might involve *being active*, *gaining knowledge*, or *experiencing emotional attachment to a deity*. The decision to follow one path or another is personal and depends on the individual's ability and nature. In practice, Hindus typically engage in more than one path. The general term for these spiritual paths to salvation is *yoga*. All yogic paths to salvation include self-discipline, as well as techniques and training designed to lead the entire person—body, soul, and mind—toward liberation.

The following chart highlights the characteristics of three yogic paths.

The Path of Action	The Path of Knowledge	The Path of Devotion
Karma yoga	Jnana yoga	Bhakti yoga
• Selfless service to others • Ongoing involvement with the world	• Involves learning, thinking, and attending to others' needs before one's own • Inward spiritual journey	• Ritual devotion and love for a personal deity of choice • Directs spiritual energy outward
• Particularly concerned with the ethics of following dharma • Do the right thing without seeking personal praise	• Requires a guru's guidance • Involves reflection on the world and their presence in it • Most practical for the Brahmin caste	• Directs worshippers to focus attention on the Divine and away from the physical self • Deep meditation and focusing techniques
Examples of following traditional requirements of dharma with regards to: social requirements; household rituals; marriage restrictions; public ceremonies; dietary laws	• Focuses on the attainment of knowledge over ignorance • Seeks to find the truth about our life and Brahman's existence • Reading the scriptures and meditating essential	• Offering of all actions and the entire self to God, in love • Attempts to reach a oneness with Brahman

Support Questions
(do not send in for evaluation)

42. How might the concept of dharma work to a Hindu believer's advantage or disadvantage?

43. Explain how the following phrase helps explain the concept of karma: "A person is what she or he has done."

44. How might samsara be seen as a type of bondage?

Conclusion

Lesson 4 began with an overview of important aspects associated with one of the oldest Eastern religions. The lesson examined the earliest Indus Valley culture. Through archaeological evidence, we have come to understand that these people practised a set of religious beliefs. You also discovered what influences the Aryans had on this culture, particularly regarding its social structure. The Hindus adopted this structure, which developed into the caste system.

Four key Hindu concepts were explored: dharma, karma, samsara, and moksha. Understanding these ideas will assist you in Lesson 5, where you will discover the rich tradition of Hindu symbolism, religious practices, rituals, and milestones.



Key Question



Save your answers to the Key Questions in your Course Journal or e-Journal.

4. Some people have suggested that because of its incredible variety of traditions, Hinduism should not really be called a religion. Critics are partially correct, since Hinduism does not easily fit the structure of many of the religions you will examine throughout this course. For example, there is no known founder, no central authority, no universal agreement on sacred texts, and no widely known creed.

Write a 150-word essay that explains why Hinduism could be viewed as a religion. Your answer should include an introductory paragraph, body, and concluding paragraph. (18 marks)

Process

- Review the section called "What Religions Share" on pages 13 to 16 of Lesson 1.
- Review *this* lesson (Lesson 4) and identify, in point form, how Hinduism shares some of these characteristics.
- Write your response, using the points you identified.

The following Marking Guide will be used to evaluate your answer.

Marking Guide for Key Question 4 (18 marks)

Evaluation criteria	Marks
When writing your paper, be sure to include	2
• an introduction that clearly presents the thesis or topic	
• a body paragraph that includes	(3 × 1 = 3)
– at least three ways in which Hinduism could be described as a religion	
– support for each way mentioned in the form of accurate and relevant points taken from the lessons	(3 × 3 = 9)
• a conclusion that summarizes the main points and provides closure	2
• accurate spelling and grammar	2

Reference

Pages 13–14 Chandogya Upanishad 6.13: 1–3

Now go on to Lesson 5. Remember, you do not send your journal to the Independent Learning Centre until you have completed Unit 1 (Lessons 1 to 5).

HRF30-A



Hinduism: Symbols, Practices, Rituals, and Milestones



Introduction

Lesson 5 begins by exploring the unique symbols that identify the characteristics of Hindu beliefs. These symbols are utilized in the many religious festivals, practices, and celebrations that will be described. The lesson also examines significant milestones in the life of a Hindu, from naming a child to the rituals performed at someone's death.

What You Will Learn

After completing this lesson, you will be able to

- explain the ritual use of various Hindu symbols
- identify similarities and differences between Hindu private and public forms of worship
- explain the importance of religious festivals in Hindus' lives
- identify the significant Hindu stages of life
- explain the connection between Hindu beliefs and rites of passage
- conduct an interview with a person about their religious practice

The following definitions will help you to understand this lesson.

Glossary	
artha	material wealth and social esteem; one of life's four goals
jati	an occupational group
Om	a sacred symbol; sacred syllable repeated in meditation
prasad	a gift of food from the deities distributed to worshippers
puja	a worship ritual of thanksgiving where food, flowers, and other items are offered to the deities
samskara	life-cycle rituals
swastika	a cross with bent arms; a symbol of good fortune, wisdom, Brahman, or samsara
tilaka	a mark of devotion applied to the forehead of worshippers during prayer, often denoting a particular deity

Signs of the Faith

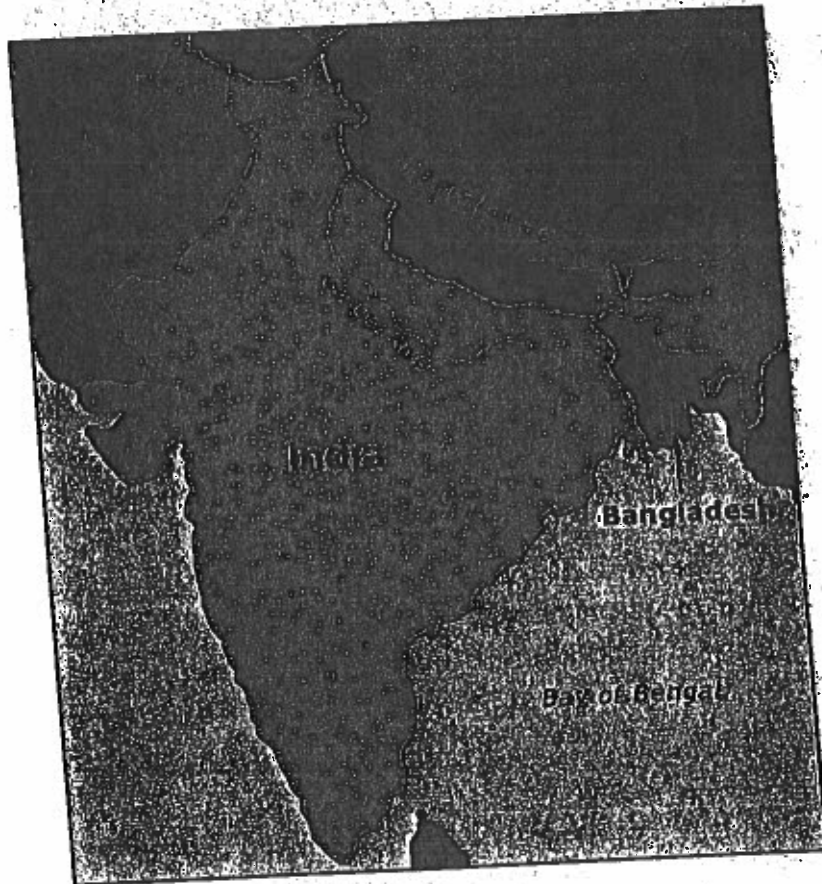
As you have learned, according to Hindu belief, Brahman is the Essence of the Universe, the cosmic force that is the spirit of life in everything. All things come from Brahman and will ultimately return to it. Brahman is neither a being nor a god. You might think of it more as a Life Force. Brahman is incomprehensible—the Unknowable. Understandably, this is a very difficult notion to comprehend. How, then, does a Hindu attempt to capture the essence of Brahman? Where does a Hindu turn to discover deeper understandings of the Divine?

Since there is no divine contribution or involvement of any kind, it is important that the believer take the initiative. This initiative involves a search for signs or symbols of the Ultimate Reality as the believer attempts to fulfill his or her dharma. To Hindus, the various symbols not only point a way to the sacred, but if the symbols are used with sincerity, they also *become* the sacred (Brahman). Some examples of these symbols are now discussed and illustrated.

Water

To a Hindu, arguably the most significant signs of the Divine are found within the elements of the natural world. Water is perhaps the most widely understood living symbol of the presence of Brahman. Water is universal. It is all around us, and is often in motion. Without water, life ceases to exist. Although it is life-giving, it can also take life. Water has the ability to cleanse and the power to wash away. It is used in Christian, as well as in Hindu rituals.

Every Hindu knows that the most sacred water begins as meltwater at the foothills of the Himalayan Mountains. Small streams converge to form the surging waters of the sacred Ganges River. Look at the following map to see where the Himalayas and the Ganges River are situated.



The path of the Ganges River

The Ganges travels southeast over 2400 kilometres through areas of Bangladesh and India. Hindus envision its journey to the Bay of Bengal as a physical symbol of life without end. This holy river has come to be known as *Ganga Ma* or *Mother Ganges*. To believers, it is a goddess that claims the power of spiritual healing. Devoted Hindus travel to the banks of the Ganges from throughout India and beyond, where they participate in ritual bathing. Many Hindus believe that their sins will be washed away in this holy river, and that ritual cleansing will leave them with positive karma and an opportunity to seek a quicker release from successive rebirths. More will be written about the rituals performed along the shores of the Ganges later on in this lesson.



Bathers at the Ganges River

Om

Another key Hindu symbol is the sacred syllable **Om** or *Aum*. The worshipper attempts to reach another level of consciousness by repeatedly uttering the Om in meditation. Through meditation, the individual searches for a deeper awareness and connection to the sacred by practising this focusing technique. As the Om is chanted, a vibration is created within the body that places the individual in closer harmony with the pulsations of the rest of the universe. If chanted correctly, the sound eventually brings the individual nearer to the Ultimate Reality and within proximity of the essence of true knowledge. The symbol depicting this sacred syllable, the Om, is evident on both prayer tables in Hindu homes and on the exterior walls of temples.



The sacred Om symbol

Swastika

The swastika has been a notorious symbol of evil in the Western world. Hitler used a tilted and reversed swastika on the flag of the National Socialist Party in Nazi Germany during the 1930s and 1940s. Many people are understandably confused when they see a swastika exhibited on the outside of Hindu places of worship. Rest assured, the swastika used in Hindu festivals and celebrations, and seen adorning Hindu temples, has no affiliation with Nazism. Hindus have revered the swastika as a religious symbol for centuries. The Hindu swastika is in the shape of a cross with branches bent at right angles, facing in a clockwise direction. A swastika is shown on the side of an earthen pot or pitcher, in the following diagram.



The Purnakumbha with swastika

The term *swastika* may have been a blending of two Sanskrit words: *su* (good) and *asati* (to exist). When the two words are combined, they mean "May good succeed." Some historians believe that the swastika could be the representation of an ancient fortress used to protect its inhabitants. Hindus today see the swastika as a symbol of good fortune, wisdom, Brahman, or samsara.

The *Purnakumbha*, showing the swastika (in the previous diagram), is a pot or pitcher filled with water. The water contains fresh leaves plucked from the mango tree. A coconut is seen perched on the top. The *Purnakumbha* is used in a great number of public and private religious rituals. Each element of the pitcher has a specific meaning. The leaves represent all life forms; the water is the divine presence; the coconut is the divine consciousness; and the pitcher symbolizes the earth. The pot also represents Lakshmi, the goddess of spiritual and material wealth and beauty.

Colour

Colour has customarily played an important role in most religions. Depending on religious beliefs, red may represent blood or sacrifice; green could symbolize rebirth; and white, spiritual purity. The colour saffron is of particular significance to a number of Eastern religious traditions. Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains each regard the golden-brown hues of saffron as sacred. While Sikhs identify the colour as a representation of their strong reaction to injustice, Hindus associate it with Brahman. It is the colour of fire, the colour of the Ultimate Reality.



Hindu fire-worship evolved over thousands of years. It became the custom that the wise ones of India or *sages*, would travel over land with sticks of fire (a symbol of Brahman), instructing believers. As the practice of carrying fire over great distances became cumbersome, the fire was replaced with saffron-coloured flags. Today, the triangular or forked saffron flags are seen fluttering on top of Hindu and Sikh places of worship. Hindu holy men may wear saffron robes, visibly expressing their rejection of material goods. Saffron paste is often smeared on the statues of deities during worship rituals. The paste is also applied to the forehead of worshippers during prayer as a mark or *tilaka*, indicating the specific deity worshipped.

↑
Saffron

Any discussion of Hindu symbols would not be complete without mentioning the significance of puja items. **Puja** includes any Hindu worship ritual involving offerings. Puja may be conducted in private homes or temples. All items used in the puja are considered sacred. Everything present, including the food, plants, water, containers, incense, and statues become concrete symbols that guide the worshipper to a deeper spiritual consciousness. You will investigate examples of puja in the next section of this lesson.

Support Question

(do not send in for evaluation)

45. In the following chart, describe the Hindu symbols listed and indicate their symbolic meaning. Two sections have already been completed for you.

Hindu symbol	Description	Symbolic meaning
Ganges River	• 2200 km river from Himalayan foothills to Bay of Bengal • Transverses Bangladesh and India • Holy river to Hindus • Goddess, <i>Ganga Ma</i>	• Life without end • Power of spiritual healing • Sacred waters wash away sins • Left with positive karma after ritual bathing
Om	-a sacred symbol	-
swastika		
Purnakumbha		
saffron		
tilaka		
puja items		

There are Suggested Answers to Support Questions at the end of this unit.

Practices and Rituals

Practice of Dharma in Indian Society

One has only to look at a devout Hindu's behaviour and actions to notice the influence that dharma has had on that individual, his family, and the society in which he lives. The prescribed expectations of dharma provide him with a rigid structure within which to live. His responsibilities extend to every part of his life, from personal hygiene and eating habits to family relations and marriage practices. His personal "rules" for proper behaviour are likely similar, but not identical to those of his neighbour. They may belong to the same caste, but to a different **jati** (occupation group), with some variances in duty.

These differences may seem minor to an outsider, particularly one from the West. However, in India, caste and jati determine how one's life functions. Some people in India believe that caste discrimination has been somewhat loosened. They point to the occurrence of inter-caste marriages, and to the fact that people of all castes are free to socially interact. However, it is difficult to completely eliminate the hold that caste has on Indian society.

Close to one-quarter of all Indians belong to a downtrodden class called the *Dalits* or "unborn." This includes 250 million men, women, and children who are "outcast," as they do not belong to any of the four castes. They are the poorest group in India, and are refused access to medical and educational facilities. Only 2-3% of Dalit women are able to read. Some are sold into prostitution. Dalits are not allowed to use public parks or drinking wells, and ruling classes have forbidden them from attending Hindu temples. On November 4, 2001, a huge rally was held in New Delhi, India, where Dalits from across the country declared that they were leaving Hinduism for other religions that would treat them with greater respect.

Many Hindus still believe that to act in a way that is contrary to custom and habit could place one outside of the family and

community. This *shunning* or rejection could prove devastating to an individual and his or her family, as it effectively cuts them off from the social connections to which they have become accustomed. In addition, such actions would be viewed as stepping outside the boundaries established by one's dharma. This would be frowned upon and seen as *taboo* (forbidden) within Canadian Hindu society today.

Hindu society reinforces the duty one has to others within the same caste. A good Hindu is one who is obligated to those within the same caste (but not to those from any other caste). This maintains the "purity" of the castes. It is understood that if all social groups were to follow these practices, then society should remain stable and harmonious. You may wish to imagine some of the many consequences of these beliefs and practices. However, note that the caste system is not unique in the world. Although still in practice in India, there are many other examples of discrimination based on class. Afro-Americans in the United States and Canadian Native people continue to experience exclusion from many parts of mainstream society.

The main goal of life, according to Hindu texts, is spiritual liberation (*moksha*) and reunification with Brahman. Think of this as Hinduism's long-term aim. The ancient texts also recognize the human desire to have "short-term" goals, which are much like stepping stones to *moksha*. For example, proper and regulated living (*dharma*) enables one to acquire wealth or *artha*. With prosperity, one is then able to enjoy sensual pleasures (*kama*—not to be confused with *karma*). It is only after one realizes that *artha* and *kama* offer temporary gratification, that an individual will seek *moksha*. Ultimately, the Hindu texts offer a word of warning, in case people become focused only on *artha* or *kama*: according to a Hindu sacred text, the Ghagabat Purana, all performance of *dharma* is meant for ultimate liberation (*moksha*). It should not be performed for material gain. Furthermore, one who is engaged in the ultimate occupational service (*dharma*) should not use material gain (*artha*) simply for sense gratification (*kama*).

The sacred text's advice is very clear: aim for a balanced life, with an eye on the Ultimate goal. Yet, Hinduism recognizes that within a person's life, dharma may change. This is dependent on the life stage that the person finds him or herself in. The chart outlines each of the four life stages and corresponding responsibilities. Consider the duties that would be expected of you, if you were a Hindu.

Stage of life	Responsibilities
Student From adolescence to 20 years of age	• Become familiar with the scriptures • Learn to discipline mind for studies • Learn respect for elders and teachers • Discover the values of celibacy, respect, patience, and concentration
Householder Married adult life	• Care for family, elders, and guests • Involve oneself diligently in work • Demonstrate concern for the welfare of those in the community, thus fulfilling dharma • Acquire wealth (artha) and pursue justifiable desires (kama) • Understand that this is a key stage that supports the other three stages (economically) • Teach others (for example, children) the value of righteous living
Forest dweller Retirement age—"when the skin wrinkles" (according to the scriptures)	• Withdraw from family duties and pass them on to younger members • Act as adviser to the family • Focus on spiritual matters instead of material wants • Spend time reading, studying, and contemplating, and meditate on the meaning of life • Participate in pilgrimages
Ascetic	• Begins at any time in life when one wishes to seek closer communion with the Ultimate Reality • Deny self the necessities of life (food, clothing, shelter) • Accept material goods if given or found • Reject the confines of social norms • Search for moksha • Wander as hermits • Lose class attachment

The final two stages are typically only accessible to men. The final stage—the ascetic—is apparently so severe, that very few men choose to enter it.

Gender Roles

Indian society particularly recognizes the changes and stages related to men's lives. Dharma (duty) and samskaras (life-cycle rituals) are directed more toward men. Women, on the other hand, have been traditionally respected for their roles within a family context. It is a man's duty to protect his female relatives. The Laws of Manu, Hindu writings from the second century BCE, explain the position of women and the reason for respecting them:

Women must be honored and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law who desire great good fortune.

Where women are honored there the gods rejoice; where, however, they are not honored, there all sacred rites prove fruitless. (The Laws of Manu 3: 55–56)

Traditionally, married women were honoured by their in-laws, who desired good luck and family fortune. The “fruits” of this good fortune were observed in a woman's ability to bear male children, as she blessed the family by ensuring the continuation of the family line.

Hindu women had to stay focused on their childbearing and domestic roles. It was believed that they possessed a strong, yet dangerous power called *Shakti* that had to be channelled in positive ways within the home setting. This entitled the woman to considerable respect and power within the confines of her own family. She was to sustain her family, in addition to maintaining the religious rituals of puja (ritual thanksgiving). This involved preparing food, adorning deities with flowers, and saying prayers.

A woman was suitable for marriage if she was able to respect the domestic role set out for her within her husband's family. Arranged marriages are based upon such understandings. These marriages bring together potential husbands and wives from families who have decided together that their children should marry. Those in agreement with arranged marriages argue that it is easier to learn to love someone you are married to in an arranged marriage, than it is to make a marriage with someone you love. To support this view, they would also point to the failure of many marriages in the West. Young Hindus in Canada and India have a lot to say about the prospect of arranged marriages. Some do not agree with their relatives playing such an important role in choosing their marriage partner. This has created a growing social problem within the Hindu community. What are your views on arranged marriages? Do you believe that there can be positive aspects to arranged marriages?

Another factor contributing to social tension within Hindu society is the economic value of women's work. Many women attempt to balance domestic duties with paid work. A Hindu woman in rural India may be a skilled potter, selling her wares in order to invest in her children's education. Likewise, a Canadian Hindu woman might be employed in a large company in downtown Toronto. Through their "outside" work, both women are making changes to women's status in modern Hinduism. However, as long as a structure exists that treats women as subordinate to men, or that limits the possibilities of women having their own identities, social tensions will remain.

Support Questions

(do not send in for evaluation)

46. Reread the section on "Practice of Dharma in Indian Society" on pages 10–13. Then, in the following chart, match the letter beside the terms in Column A with the appropriate definitions in Column B.

Column A: Terms	Column B: Definitions
a) jati	Coming together with Brahman _____
b) reunification	One's duty _____
c) moksha	Enjoyment of sensual pleasures _____
d) dharma	Liberation _____
e) artha	Occupational group within a caste _____
f) kama	Acquiring wealth _____

47. Examine the chart on page 12 that highlights a Hindu's responsibilities at four stages of life. In a paragraph, compare and contrast the duties and values expected of you at your stage in life with those of the corresponding Hindu life stage.

Worship

As you have learned, there is no one universally accepted method of ritual worship. Prayer (called *prarthana*) to a deity and chanting of mantras, however, are two common and central elements of proper Hindu worship. Generally speaking, the image of a chosen god or goddess becomes central to the worship ritual, providing a focus and direction for prayer.

Hindu worship tends to be a very personal activity and involves the offering of gifts to the deity. Along with foods, such as clarified butter and milk, offerings can include flowers, incense, and lights. These gifts are placed at the foot of the god or goddess while the deity's name and selected mantras are chanted. The images are treated like gods; they are bathed, clothed, and adorned with flowers. Worshippers also sing hymns and verses from their holy scriptures. The words express gratitude and praise for the deity being honoured. This worship ritual of thanksgiving is known as *puja*. As the final prayers are said, the food is redistributed to all who are present. The food is recognized as *prasad*, a gift from the deity.

Puja is the most common form of home worship. Hindus have a prayer room or shrine in their homes. It can be quite elaborate or simple in design. It always contains images of the deities, whether they are statues or framed pictures. The intent is to lead the believer to concentrate on the deity's positive qualities.

Hindu worship is also conducted in the temple. It may not be an obligation, but many Hindus choose to celebrate festivals in the temple, with the assistance of a priest. He and his assistants also lead devotions from the temple on a daily basis. The priest's responsibilities include waking the deities with bells and preparing the deities for *puja*, as well as singing hymns. They read from the scriptures and ensure that the proper protocol is used during daily *puja* and seasonal festivals. Priests can be regarded as ritual specialists.



Hindu temple worship

Any practice that is dutiful, symbolic, and ritualistic is meant to appeal to the forces of the Divine. If the proper form is followed, puja is meant to assist humans in their pursuit of spiritual and material progress. Engaging the mind, body, and spirit leads the worshipper into a deeper connection with the Divine.

Support Question
(do not send in for evaluation)

48. Explain what is done to engage the Hindu worshipper's body, mind, and spirit during puja.

Pilgrimages

Pilgrimages are physical and spiritual journeys to places considered sacred to a religion. These locations include natural and human-made destinations. The holiest of all Hindu pilgrimage destinations is the city of Varanasi on the western shores of the Ganges River in northern India. It is one of the oldest cities in the world, steeped in mythology and tradition. Hindus believe that the river fell from the heavens here, creating life on earth. While visiting the city, also known as *Kashi* or *Benares*, pilgrims immerse themselves in the Ganges' sacred waters. It is believed that this ritual bathing cleanses them of their sins. Stone steps or *ghats* descend the riverbanks, allowing worshippers free access to the Ganges.

Several other holy sites dot the Indian landscape. Many cities and temples are worthy of pilgrimage because of their association with a historical event or a connection with the life of a god or goddess. The city of Mathura is the birthplace of Krishna. The city of Barsana was once the home of Krishna's beloved, Radha. A number of temples dedicated to the couple can be found perched on the hills surrounding Barsana. This city is also known for its unique celebrations of an annual

festival called *Holi*. The glorious Himalayan Mountains are also a destination for pilgrims, since they mark the sources of two holy rivers, the Ganges and the Yamuna. The mountains are referred to as the Dey Bhoomi or "land of the Gods." Shrines are dedicated to several deities, including Shiva and Vishnu of the Hindu Trinity.

Support Question

(do not send in for evaluation)

49. Imagine that you are a travel agent specializing in tour packages to important Hindu religious sites. You are asked by your employer to submit a written piece, inviting potential Hindu customers to visit a specific pilgrimage site. It will be featured as part of your company's newest travel brochure. Referring to the readings in this lesson, in one or two paragraphs, describe your chosen destination and the pilgrimage site's attractions.

Festivals

Before you learn about the nature of Hindu festivals, it may be worthwhile remembering the celebrations that you have experienced. Try to recall a specific celebration that you recently attended, such as marking an anniversary or a milestone in someone's life. Would you refer to it as a religious celebration? Why or why not? How important were ritual and symbol? Who presided over the occasion? What emotions emanated from the event?

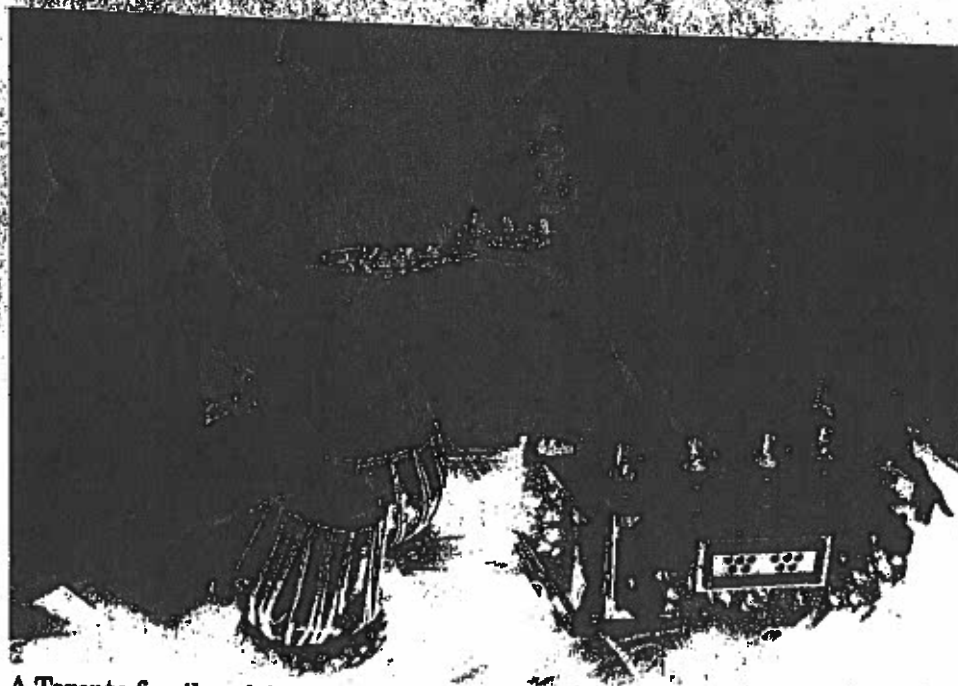
Festivals are usually times of remembrance or celebration. They might also provide an occasion for participants to reflect more frequently on spiritual matters and less on material concerns. Festivals tend to invoke a healthy sense of belonging and can inspire individuals along their spiritual journeys.

Hinduism generally acknowledges three main types of festivals. These may include the celebration of an important event in the life of a deity, for example, a significant event in the life of a spiritual leader; or they may include seasonal celebrations and customs. Regardless of their purpose, Hindu festivals are happy and colourful events of important social and religious significance. Three of the more important festivals are Diwali, Holi, and Maha Shivaratri.

Diwali

Translated, the word *Diwali* means "rows of lighted lamps." It is popularly known as the "festival of lights," celebrated at the end of October or in early November. Diwali is the Hindu new year. During this five-day festival, windows are cleaned and opened in anticipation of the arrival of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. Lamps and candles are customarily lit to welcome her into the home. The house is decorated, new clothes are worn, gifts and sweets are exchanged, and festive meals are prepared. On other festival days, Kali, the goddess of strength, is worshipped and

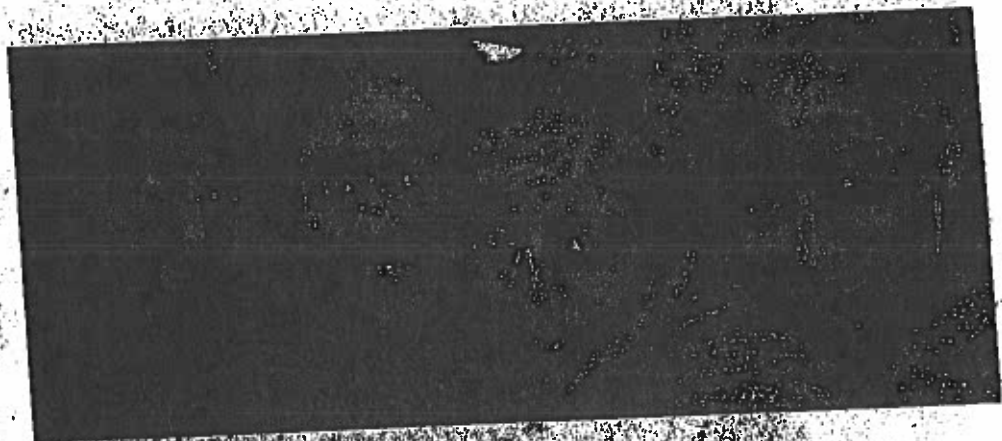
business accounts are settled. Attempts are made to see the good in all people.



A Toronto family celebrates the start of Diwali

Holi

The story of Holi can be found written in the sacred scriptures and drawn on old temple walls. There are several versions of the Holi story. One account is based on the courtship of Krishna and Radha. Krishna is concerned with his dark skin and Radha's light-coloured skin. In response, he playfully throws coloured powder on her. Depictions of this event appear on murals and pictures in some places of worship. The festival is usually celebrated in March. People lose their inhibitions and ignore caste distinctions by dousing others with coloured water and powder. Public bonfires bring people together for an evening of merriment. It is perhaps one of the least religious of all the Hindu festivals. Instead, in many parts of the world, it has become a secular celebration, marking the onset of spring with its blossoming of colour.



Four youngsters from Richmond Hill celebrate Holi

Maha Shivaratri

This festival falls in the month of February or March, depending on the Hindu lunar calendar. Although it is celebrated by most Hindus, it holds a special place for devotees of the god, Shiva. It is a day that is devoted to the worship of Shiva, Lord of the Dance. Recall that Shiva dances tirelessly, as a reminder of the endless cycle of creation and destruction. Worshippers pray, fast, and keep a vigil at home or inside the temple beside Shiva's image. They tend to the image by pouring water on it. Some sit by a sacred fire and throw offerings of grains into the flames, while chanting and singing hymns to Shiva.

Support Question (do not send in for evaluation)

50. Read each of the following statements. Decide which of the three festivals is being described. Place one of the following letters beside the appropriate statement: (D)iwali, (H)oli, or (M)aha Shivaratri.
- a) ___ the least religious festival
 - b) ___ exchange of gifts and sweets
 - c) ___ Kali worship
 - d) ___ Krishna's story
 - e) ___ especially important to worshippers of Shiva

- f) ___ festival of lights
- g) ___ celebrated in October or November
- h) ___ celebrated in February or March
- i) ___ caste distinctions are ignored
- j) ___ coloured water and powder
- k) ___ public bonfires
- l) ___ reminder of the endless cycle of creation

Milestones

Hindus recognize the sacredness of time. They believe that time signals a number of spiritual truths about the Ultimate Reality, and that one need only observe the seasonal weather changes to experience the power of this Presence in the world. Time is segmented into light and darkness, drought and rain, and growth and decay. These important events point to the energy of the Divine and to the cyclical nature of the cosmos. Likewise, there are central events that occur in human beings' lives. To Hindus, then, personal time must also be ritually commemorated.

The life cycle is marked through rituals or sacraments called **samskaras**. These serve the purpose of purifying the soul in preparation for moksha. Hindus recognize as many as 16 **samskaras**. Examples of **samskaras** include a pre-birth ritual; a child's first feeding; the piercing of an infant's ear; a child's first reciting of the alphabet; commitment to a teacher; and the end of formal education. The four most commonly observed **samskaras** are those that ritualize birth, initiation into adulthood, marriage, and death.

The Vedic writings give the **samskaras** their structure and meaning. An outline of these four major events follows. Keep in mind, as you read, that the general purpose of the **samskaras** is

to celebrate the ritual advancement of the individual on his or her journey to liberation.

Naming a Child

This rite usually takes place between three and six weeks after an infant is born. The ritual welcomes the infant into the Hindu community. The chosen name is usually of a god or goddess, or it may signify divine qualities. It is believed that by using the name repeatedly, one is reminded of the Divine.

The religious ceremony begins by consulting the child's horoscope. The mother and child are then given a ritual bath. After the bath, the infant is wrapped in a new piece of cloth. The mother places a thick black ointment called *kajal* beneath the child's eyes to ward off evil spirits. Another black dot is placed on the child's forehead to mar his or her beauty, again to ward off evil. The baby is placed in the arms of her father, and the priest says blessings as a means of protecting the child from harm. Traditionally, those in attendance dip their fingers in honey and touch the baby's lips. It is seen as a good sign if the child smacks her lips.

Thread Initiation Ceremony

The thread initiation or *Upanayana* ceremony marks a young boy's transition into the world of adult religious responsibilities. Boys ranging in ages from 8 to 12, and from the three upper castes, participate in the sacred ceremony. During the ceremony, boys are given a thread to wear over their left shoulder. The thread actually consists of three threads interwoven to represent Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu. It also denotes that a believer should live a devout life in thought, word, and deed. There is also a knot in the middle of the threads, which reminds the wearer of the Ultimate Reality.

Marriage

Marriage is a sacred transition into the householder stage of life. The marriage ceremony ritually acknowledges the couple's vows of love for one another and their social responsibilities.

Prior to any wedding, the couples and their families are scrutinized by the in-laws to be. This insures that the families are compatible socially, culturally, and economically. In various parts of India, it is not unusual that the couples have had their potential mates chosen for them. In Western countries, however, arranged marriages are not the norm. Before the actual wedding, there are usually several different pre-marriage celebrations at which families can socialize and get to know one another better.

The wedding ceremony usually lasts several hours. The ceremony may be quite elaborate or can be shortened, depending on the desires of the families involved. A good part of the ceremony will take place under a canopy called a *mandap*. Beneath the mandap, there is a fire that symbolizes the enlightenment of the mind, happiness, and knowledge. The sacred fire is also seen as a clean, pure witness to the celebration taking place.

The wedding ceremony is rich with symbolic actions that appeal to the senses: the priest gives blessings; the couple clasps hands; the couple marks one another with red powder, signifying good luck; and the couple throws rice into the fire. A variety of items, such as flowers, fire, and rice all add to the event's sacred nature. Perhaps one of the most important steps in the religious ceremony occurs when the couple circles the fire four times, representing the four basic human goals of dharma, artha, kama, and moksha. They then take seven steps together around the fire, exchanging vows. As the ceremony ends, the groom blesses the bride, and gives her a sacred necklace to signify their sacred union.

Death

The final samskara involves the ritual disposal of an individual's body. This sacrament is a reminder to those who are still alive that death is simply another transition on the lengthy journey to eventual liberation. The *atman* (soul) continues the journey while the body is refined, either through cremation or burial.

Variations to rituals depend on local custom. Generally, the death ritual begins by preparing the body for burial or cremation. The body is brought by procession to the cemetery or place of cremation. In the West, the cremation would be done at a modern crematorium. However, in India, a funeral pyre would be constructed. The funeral pyre would be lit or the body would be laid to rest in a grave. At this time, usually the eldest son would circle the grave or fire. A large ceramic pot of water would then be broken over the grave or fire. Prayers are recited from the sacred scriptures to console the deceased's family members. Later, if cremation occurred, the ashes and bones would then be dispersed over water. As you have learned, one of the most widely recognized holy sites in Hinduism is the city of Varanasi (Benares). It is believed that a person who dies here will automatically skip successive lives and be liberated. In this ancient city, along the shores of the Ganges River, hundreds of funeral pyres can be seen. It is easy to understand why Varanasi has become a pilgrimage destination for millions of Hindus.

Support Questions (do not send in for evaluation)

51. Describe the ritual and the symbolism of the thread initiation ceremony.

52. List the typical practices that occur before and during a traditional Hindu wedding.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

53. What is your opinion about the following statement regarding arranged marriages?

"It is far easier to *learn* to love someone you are married to in an arranged marriage than it is to make a marriage with someone you love."

Attempt to look at both sides of the issue in your answer.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with ten horizontal blue lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

54. What is unique about traditional Hindu death rites that may not be a part of typical North American death rituals?

55. Why does the holy city of Varanasi play an important role in the death ritual?

Preparing to Interview a Person of Faith



What Will I Ask?

One of the ways in which you learn about other religions is by speaking with others. In this lesson, you will have the opportunity to interview a person who has taken the time to consider what their faith means to them. The purpose of the interview is to gain insights into what it means to live a life of faith.

For this lesson's Unit Key Question later on, you will need to find someone to interview, design the questions you will ask them, and conduct the interview. Here are some guidelines for preparing and conducting interviews.

Guide to Interviewing

This guide consists of three parts: designing the questions, preparing for the interview, and conducting the interview. Now more read about these steps.

Primary and Secondary Research

An interview is one example of original or **primary research**. Primary research involves first-hand evidence. For example, someone who is present at an event may record, tape, or photograph the occasion. All are examples of first-hand evidence and also of primary research.

The process of conducting **secondary research** involves finding and examining information that someone else has collected. It involves consulting resources developed by others, such as books, professional journals, newspapers, or videos.

You are most familiar with this method. When you write an essay for school, read a newspaper, or research which car to purchase, you are conducting secondary research. You are relying on information already recorded by another person or organization.

Part A: Designing the Questions

1. **Avoid biases.** "I've heard that all Hindus ...". You are not necessarily expected to know about the religion, but it is better to ask questions than to attempt to show what you know (or don't know!)
2. **Keep the questions short and concise.** Break up big or complex questions into smaller questions.
3. **Ask various kinds of questions.** You can ask factual questions about the individual's religion (for example, the number of followers) or questions that require more personal responses (for example, their thoughts about the afterlife).
4. **Respect privacy.** You may be a stranger to this individual. People value their privacy, so don't dig too deep.
5. **Review your questions with someone you know.** They may be able to help you clarify your questions.
6. **Ask yourself the questions.** This is a good exercise, because it will indicate how long the interview could take.

Part B: Preparing for the Interview

1. **Ask a family member or friend for recommendations or contact a place of worship.** Ask if they are aware of someone who is knowledgeable about the religion and might be willing to speak with you.
2. **Explain the purpose of the interview.** Identify yourself as an ILC student who is studying world religions. Explain the purpose of the assignment and indicate how long the interview will take (about 20 to 30 minutes). If you are conducting the interview with someone you have not met, be sure to inquire about
 - the appropriate way to address the person to be interviewed (for example, "Rabbi," "Sister," and so on)
 - the appropriate dress to wear (for example, a head covering if you are visiting a place of worship)

3. **Consider asking for a brief tour, if the interview is to occur at a place of worship.** This will not only be a learning opportunity for you, but it will likely help you both to relax before the interview.

Part C: Conducting the Interview

1. **Be prepared.** Arrange your questions in a logical order and be sure that you can easily read them. Bring writing tools with you. Also consider bringing a tape recorder, if you have cleared this with the individual prior to the interview; if you don't have to take notes, you can concentrate more easily on the person's responses, and be ready for the next question.
2. **Be courteous and feel free to act naturally.**
3. **Ask one question at a time.** Be sure not to overwhelm the person being interviewed with too many questions at once.
4. **Begin with more impersonal questions.** Judge when your interview lends itself to more personal questions (for example, "How does your faith affect the way you live in the world?")
5. **Move from one topic to another gradually.** (For example, "We've been talking about how you came to this mosque and now I'd like to move on to what it is like being a Muslim in Canada.")

Support Question
(do not send in for evaluation)

56. What questions would you ask a Hindu about their religion? Write out any five questions that you believe would be appropriate to ask. Your questions might relate to any of the themes already covered in the course. Would you like to know about their beliefs, teachings, symbols, practices and rituals, milestones, writings, or groups?

Conclusion

In Lesson 5, you discovered the rich traditions of Hindu symbolism, religious practices, rituals, and milestones. You have learned why the Hindu belief in samsara leads a believer to seek out the Divine in their daily lives. In Lesson 6, you will complete your study of Hinduism by examining influential Hindu groups and institutions. In addition, you will learn about the significant impact of Hinduism on the Canadian cultural landscape.

 Key Question

Save your answers to the Key Questions in your Course Journal or e-Journal.

5. *"Symbols are essential to any Hindu ritual or celebration."*

Defend this statement by choosing any three Hindu symbols and discussing their importance in Hindu ritual or celebration. Your answer should be 100–150 words in length and must include an introductory paragraph, body, and concluding paragraph. (15 marks)

The following Marking Guide will be used to evaluate your answer.

Marking Guide for Key Question 5 (15 marks)

Evaluation criteria	Marks
When writing your paper, be sure to include • an introduction that clearly presents the thesis or topic • a body paragraph that includes accurate identification of three Hindu symbols and their relevance to rituals or celebrations • a conclusion that summarizes the main points and provides closure • accurate spelling and grammar	2 (3 × 3 = 9) 2 2

Unit 1 Key Question

Interview an individual who has put his or her religious beliefs into practice. This should be an adult who can explain why they believe what they do about their religion. Use the "Guide to Interviewing" section on pages 29–31 to help you. (28 marks)

You must complete and submit the following:

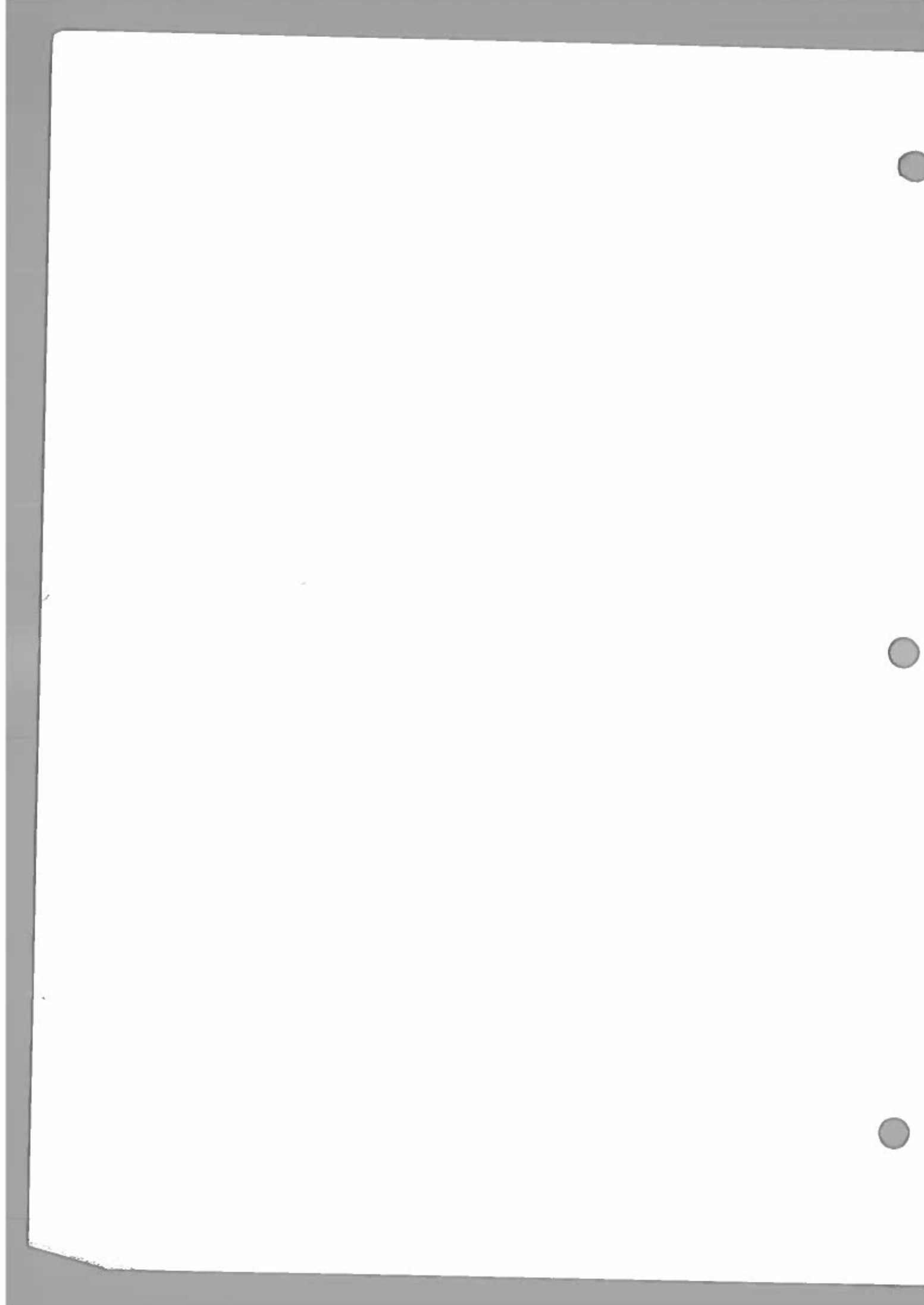
- a) List 10–15 questions that will allow the individual to express how they understand and practise their religion. These themes will include questions about
 - God
 - prayer
 - how they are to live their lives (ethics)
 - milestones
 - rituals, symbols, and festivals celebrated
 - sacred writings
 - the impact this religion has had on their life
- b) Under each question, include a summary of your guest's responses, in point form.

The following Marking Guide will be used to evaluate your work.

HRF30-A



Hinduism: Sacred Writings, Groups and Institutions, and Cultural Impact



Introduction

Lesson 6 begins by exploring Hindu sacred writings more thoroughly. These scriptures contain the unique myths, religious beliefs, and traditions of this ancient religion. The lesson continues by discussing how beliefs differ within the Hindu community, and ends by exploring the spread and influence of Hindu thought, as well as Hindus' experiences in Canadian society.

What You Will Learn

After completing this lesson, you will be able to

- interpret the importance of selected passages from Hindu sacred texts and oral teachings
- explain differences in interpretation of Hindu belief within religious communities
- explain how and where Hinduism has spread throughout the world

The following definitions will help you to understand this lesson.

Glossary	
ahimsa	the practice of non-violence
avatar	the personification of a god, in earthly form. For example, Krishna is an avatar of Vishnu.
Bhagavad-Gita	a later addition to the Mahabharata, composed around the first century BCE. This beloved text is known worldwide for its epic heroes, particularly the deity, Krishna. It is one of the smriti texts.
boycott	to cease or refuse to deal with someone or something
devotee	the followers of a deity or a particular religious tradition
fast	abstinence from food and/or water, often for religious reasons
Mahabharata	an enormous written collection of oral stories comprising nearly 100 000 words. It is considered a part of the smriti texts.
Ramayana	the story of the noble king, Rama, who is another avatar of the deity, Vishnu. It is considered a part of the smriti texts.
rishis	religious prophets or wise men, familiar with Hinduism's sacred texts
sect	a branch or division of the larger religious tradition, for example, Shaivism is a sect of Hinduism
seer	a prophet or soothsayer, able to look into the future
shruti	sacred texts that the ancient rishis "heard"
smriti	"remembered" texts, written after the shruti texts
Upanishads	a form of religious literature that examined the individual's relationship with the Divine. It is considered a part of the shruti texts.
Vedanta	a term given to the Upanishads, meaning the "end of the Vedas"
Vedas	the earliest scriptures (1200 BCE–900 BCE). They are considered a part of the shruti texts.

Sacred Writings

Hinduism's rich traditions and colourful history are revealed in its sacred stories. These stories involve epic battles between good and evil, the search for love, tales of heroism, and intriguing accounts of the gods. The words of these sacred texts have inspired Hindu art, music, literature, and dance. These are not viewed as stories of the past, but rather as a means to reflect on an individual's connection to the world and the presence of an Ultimate Reality. While Hindus worship different gods, the sacred texts of this tradition are shared by all.

It seems only fitting that Hinduism would recognize not one, but several authoritative holy books. In fact, there are over 200 texts that Hindus consider sacred. These scriptures have helped shape Hindu beliefs and given direction to Hindu practices and rituals for over 3000 years.

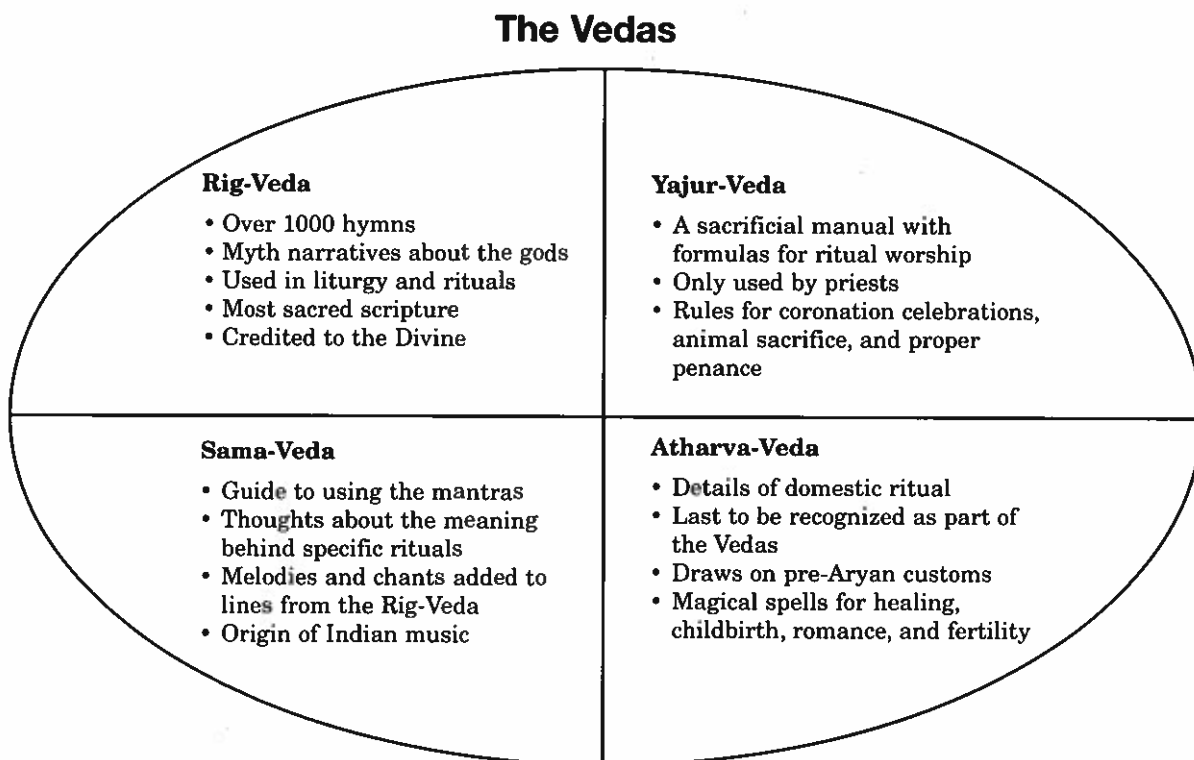
In earlier lessons, you learned that there are two broad characteristics of Hindu scriptures, shruti and smriti. **Shruti** refers to the texts that the ancient **rishis** "heard." These religious prophets or **seers** transmitted the words orally throughout the early centuries of Hinduism. The shruti texts are generally valued more than the smriti writings, which were composed later on. The **smriti** are "remembered" texts.

Shruti: Primary Scriptures

The Vedas

The **Vedas** were the earliest scriptures (1200 BCE–900 BCE). They date back to the time of the Aryans. In this era, the fire sacrifice was the main form of worship. During this ritual, the priests chanted hymns and followed particular religious rituals to influence the gods. Only the priests had committed the words of these prayers, and the sounds of these hymns, to memory. It became their collective responsibility to preserve the sacred tradition of the Vedas and then teach them to the next generation of priests. In fact, the name of the recited prayers and the title given to these priests is the same word, *Brahmin*.

The Vedas are divided into four distinct collections. The particular focus of each collection is illustrated in the following diagram.



One of the collections of sacred writings that the Brahmins read and sang from was the Rig-Veda. Traditional belief has it that the Rig-Veda were inspired by the natural elements of fire, air, and sun. These sacred writings begin by praising the entire created world. The theme is a very familiar one—the recognition of a great form responsible for the gift of creation. All religions express a belief in a *transcendent* (magnificent or heavenly) Being. The world that early Hindus experienced moved them to wonder and awe. Early people could not ignore the direct influence that the earth's elements had on their lives. The created world could sustain them and destroy them. By reading the following words of the Rig-Veda, you are able to “hear” their questions about life and their beliefs about creation.

The non-existent was not; the existent was not at that time. The atmosphere was not nor the heavens which are beyond. What was concealed? Where? In whose protection? Was it water? An unfathomable abyss?

There was neither death nor immortality then. There was not distinction of day or night. That alone breathed windless by its own power. Other than that there was not anything else.

Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning. All this was an indistinguishable sea. That which becomes that which was enveloped by the void, which alone was born through the power of heat.

The authors are clearly painting a picture of the cosmos devoid of everything. The power of an Ultimate Reality created everything out of nothing.

Generally, the Rig-Veda's hymns praised the gods. They asked the gods for material benefits, such as wealth, victory in battle, long life, protection from the enemy, and good health. One of the major deities honoured was a heavenly god named Agni. Agni was the god of fire, and is still offered wood and melted butter during ritual worship, to this day. The *Lord of the House*, as Agni is sometimes called, is a welcome guest at the temple and in the home. In fact, as the god of fire, Agni is present in everyone's

hearth. He is the fire that consumes offerings to the gods, and is seen as the spark of life.

The Rig-Veda has this to say about Agni's power:

This is that Agni, he by whose protection, favors, and help the singer is successful;
who with the noblest flames of glowing fuel comes forth encompassed with far-spreading luster

Agni, the Holy One, the everlasting, who shines far beaming with celestial splendors;
He who hath come unto his friends with friendship, like a fleet steed who never trips or stumbles.

He who is Lord of all divine oblation, shared by all living men at break of morning.

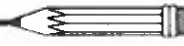
Role of Priests

Most people could not understand the religion without the assistance of priests, who had an important role to play in supervising the rituals. In fact, as rituals became more complex and more numerous, more priests were needed to oversee them. These writings, composed over centuries, began to affect all aspects of a worshipper's life, from birth to death, before battle and after victory, during the coronations of kings, and at annual festivals. The Brahmins had assured themselves a relevant position in the caste system. If favourable results depended on the correct performance of rituals, then priests were indispensable. Yet, how could other Hindus find ways to relate to the Divine if rituals had become enormously ornate, and seemed almost removed from the average person's experiences? To answer this question, you must take a look at another essential collection of writings.

The Upanishads

The **Upanishads** include hundreds of religious discussions about the nature of human awareness and the spiritual relationship between Brahman and the atman (self or soul). They were composed over several centuries, beginning in around 900 BCE. These dialogues philosophically examine the sacrificial

world view found in the earlier Vedic scriptures. Whereas the Vedas stress the importance of proper ritual and sacrifice, the Upanishads emphasize the process of transforming the mind. According to the Upanishads, it is through insight and knowledge that one can eventually be released from *samsara* (rebirth). This shift in focus has led Hindus to refer to the Upanishads as **Vedanta**, “the end of the Vedas.” This term does not mean to decrease the importance of the Vedas, but rather recognizes the fact that the Upanishads have something new to offer.



Support Questions



(do not send in for evaluation)

1. How did the Brahmins maintain their importance in Hindu society?

2. What makes Agni an important Hindu deity?

3. In what way do the Upanishads go beyond the Vedas' emphasis on ritual?

There are Suggested Answers to Support Questions at the end of this unit.

Smriti: Later Scriptures

A new kind of religious literature developed over a 1000-year period, from the fifth century BCE to the fifth century CE. This particular type of literature is called *smriti*, "what is remembered." Even though it did not have the same authority as the Vedas, it has become the basis for modern-day Hinduism.

The most recognizable collections of *smriti* are two great epics: the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. These epics are larger-than-life literary narratives that deal with the struggle between the forces of good and evil. The stories are a very effective means of imparting Hindu principles about how individuals ought to live morally. Dramatic stories have captured the imagination of Hindus for centuries. Each has been translated numerous times from the original Sanskrit language into the local languages of practising Hindus.

The Mahabharata

The **Mahabharata** is an enormous written collection of oral stories comprising nearly 100 000 verses. It relates the story of a war between two families. In reality, it is a lengthy interpretative story, both of India and of humanity, which examines the struggle between the forces of good and evil. The heroes in this story try to maintain their dharma, even at great personal cost. The Mahabharata's stories and characters are unforgettable. The narratives chronicle the adventures, romance, and intrigue of a number of deities who are still worshipped by Hindus. When we read these colourful stories and learn about their heroic characters, it becomes apparent how they originated as an assortment of oral accounts. The themes and circumstances speak directly to listeners, as they reflect the same moral dilemmas that people face in their own lives today. In the 1990s, Indian television broadcast more than 90 episodes of the Mahabharata, which were received with great interest and enthusiasm.

Some of these stories are mythical accounts of, for example, a prince who courageously enters a forest and changes into a princess; a dead child who is revived and begins to speak with the wisdom of the sages; a king whose 48-day **fast** saves his subjects from suffering; God who transforms into a female form to destroy demons; and a criminal saved from hell after uttering the name of God.

The Bhagavad-Gita

A later addition to the Mahabharata was the **Bhagavad-Gita**, composed around the first century BCE. This beloved text is known worldwide for its epic heroes, particularly the deity, Krishna. Krishna plays the role of counsellor to these heroes. He is the personification or **avatar** of Vishnu. If you recall from an earlier lesson, Vishnu is the essential preserver of the universe who demonstrates the love and forgiveness of salvation. Vishnu is admired as a compassionate and forgiving deity who has the ability to lead all believers to salvation through following their personal dharma (duty).

In a critical scene from the Bhagavad-Gita, Prince Arjuna is faced with a terrible dilemma: just prior to a battle, he must signal his men to fight, but he notices that some of his family and teachers are fighting for the other side. At first, he is reluctant to give the command, as he is frightened by the thought of what karma might befall him in a future life, if he gives his men the order to do battle with his family and friends. Krishna advises him to give the signal, however, because it is his social duty as a warrior (dharma). Arjuna must immerse himself in the world's actions; it is not good enough if he abandons all social responsibility (as an ascetic does).

Instead, Arjuna is told to surrender himself and all that he does to Krishna. In this way, Arjuna would give up any earthly desires for the reward of salvation. This is the major path to Brahman. The words of Krishna explain the process of seeking the Ultimate Reality through loving devotion to him (Krishna):

Because you are My very dear friend, I am speaking to you My supreme instruction, the most confidential knowledge of all. Hear this from Me, for it is for your benefit.

Always think of Me, become My devotee, worship Me and offer your homage unto Me. Thus you will come to Me without fail. I promise you this because you are My very dear friend.

Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender unto Me. I shall deliver you from all sinful reactions. Do not fear.

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This confidential knowledge may never be explained to those who are not austere, or devoted, or engaged in devotional service, nor to one who is envious of Me.



Krishna advising Prince Arjuna

The external battle with warring armies is of secondary importance. This is primarily the tale of one's inner struggles—between what an individual might desire and what will ultimately bring him or her salvation.

The Ramayana

The second epic, the **Ramayana**, is considerably shorter. It is the story of the noble king, Rama, who is another avatar of the deity, Vishnu. Rama is banished to the forest for many years, allowing his half-brother, Bharata, to rule. When Rama's wife, Sita, follows her husband into the forest, the fiendish Ravana abducts her. Ravana is an evil, mythical ten-headed demon who has maintained a centuries-old battle against Brahman, the Creator. At every opportunity, Ravana finds ways to challenge the power and authority of Brahman. As the story continues, a lengthy battle follows to free Sita from Ravana's clutches. With the assistance of the monkey-god, Hanuman, Rama is able to rescue his wife, and return triumphantly as king. The victory is remembered and celebrated during the Hindu festival of lights, *Diwali*. Tradition claims that the empire's citizens celebrated their king's return with a procession of *deepas* (lamps).

Rama's story demonstrates the power of good over evil. The story's three heroes—Rama, Sita, and Hanuman—represent positive social values that should be imitated through goodness, loyalty, and respect for the elders' wisdom.

Support Questions

(do not send in for evaluation)

4. How are the stories of the Mahabharata well-suited to oral retelling?

5. What does Prince Arjuna learn about salvation from Krishna?

6. What values are embraced by many of the Southeast Asian cultures, as a result of reading the Ramayana?

7. Why do the Mahabharata and the Ramayana still appeal to Hindus today?

Groups and Institutions

Devotional Groups

As you learned earlier, Hindus worship many deities. Nevertheless, most Hindus fit into three broad devotional groups or **sects**. The first group includes worshippers of Vishnu and his incarnations; most notably, Krishna and Rama. The second group comprises the followers of Shiva; and the third group consists of the followers of Parvati, the Mother Goddess.

Keep in mind that **devotees** (followers) of one of these deities may also worship any number of other gods. The following chart outlines the key characteristics of each of the main groups.

Deities worshipped	Sect name/ Followers	Characteristics
Vishnu (preserver of the universe)	Vaishnavism/ Vaishnavites	• Adherents mostly from Northern India • Rama and Krishna are incarnations of Vishnu (along with eight other deities) • The Mahabharata are especially important, as they tell stories of the power of good over evil.
Shiva (destroyer and creator of the universe)	Shaivism/Shivites	• Followers in Southern India and Sri Lanka • Fasting and meditation • Three horizontal stripes on forehead • Creative power symbolized by <i>linga</i> (a cylindrical shaft) • The Upanishads are important scriptures • Pujas and doing good are ways to salvation
Deities emanating from female energy or <i>Shakti</i> , such as the goddesses Parvati, Kali, or Sati	Devotees of Shakti	• Female strength responsible for male deity's power • Without female consort, male is incomplete • Deities display extremities of power, for example, compassion and destruction

Although family tradition may play a role in the deity chosen, there may be any number of reasons behind the choice. Can you think of other reasons why a particular god is worshipped?

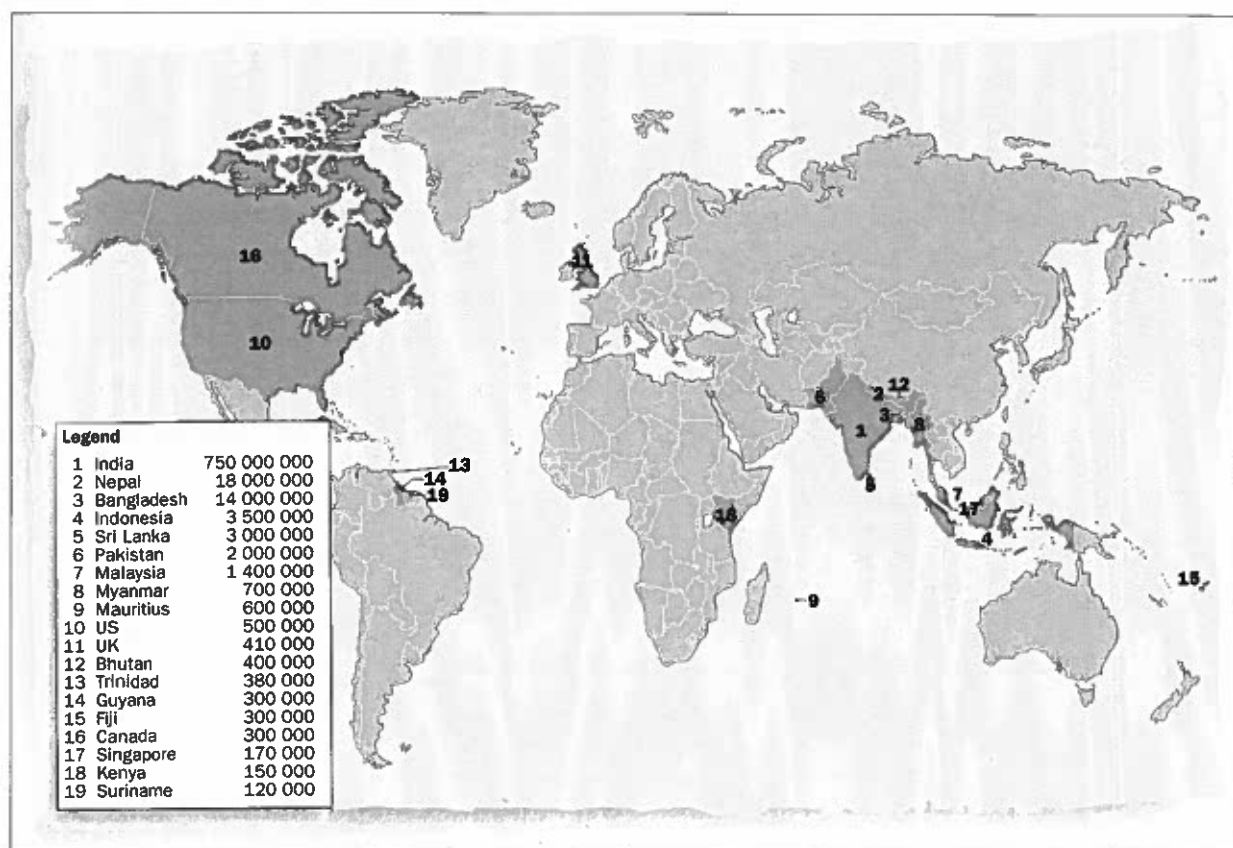
Cultural Impact

Spread of Hindu Thought

Hindu thought and practice was in existence well before Greek and Roman civilizations began. Over 2500 years ago, most of the Indian subcontinent was inhabited by a prosperous and advanced people involved in international trade, the arts, medicine, math, and astronomy.

In these ancient times before the influences of Athens and Rome, Hindu philosophy had already migrated to distant lands in Southeast Asia. Nepal, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Indonesia are a few of the many countries that can attest to the impact of Hinduism on their cultural and religious histories. Today, 80% of the populations of India and Nepal practise Hinduism.

More recently, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Hinduism has taken root in South Africa and the countries of Central Africa, on the islands of the West Indies, and in the Middle East. Additionally, Hindu emigration to Britain, the United States, and Canada has been steady over the last few decades. Hindus make up close to one billion adherents from around the world, or one-sixth of the world's population. The following map shows the spread of Hinduism across the globe. Why do you believe that Hinduism has spread?



The world population of Hindus (approximately 800 million)

Over the last two centuries, there have been several notable Hindu leaders who have promoted a modern perspective of Hinduism. They have provided spiritual guidance to Hindus and non-Hindus alike. Their ideas and practices tend to enrich our images of this ancient religion. While Brahmins tend to preserve ancient rituals, these *gurus* (enlightened teachers) teach the wisdom of the sacred scriptures for a modern world. Both the traditional and the modern are aspects of this constantly evolving religion.

Swami Vivekananda

Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) is recognized as being largely responsible for the spread of Hindu thought in the Western world. In Chicago in 1893, it was he who explained the practice and teachings of Vedanta—the underlying philosophy of Hinduism—to an international audience of representatives from Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. For many people in North America, this was their first exposure to Hinduism. Shortly afterward, Vivekananda founded the Ramakrishna

Mission, which is still in existence today and was the first of many other Hindu missions established in North America.

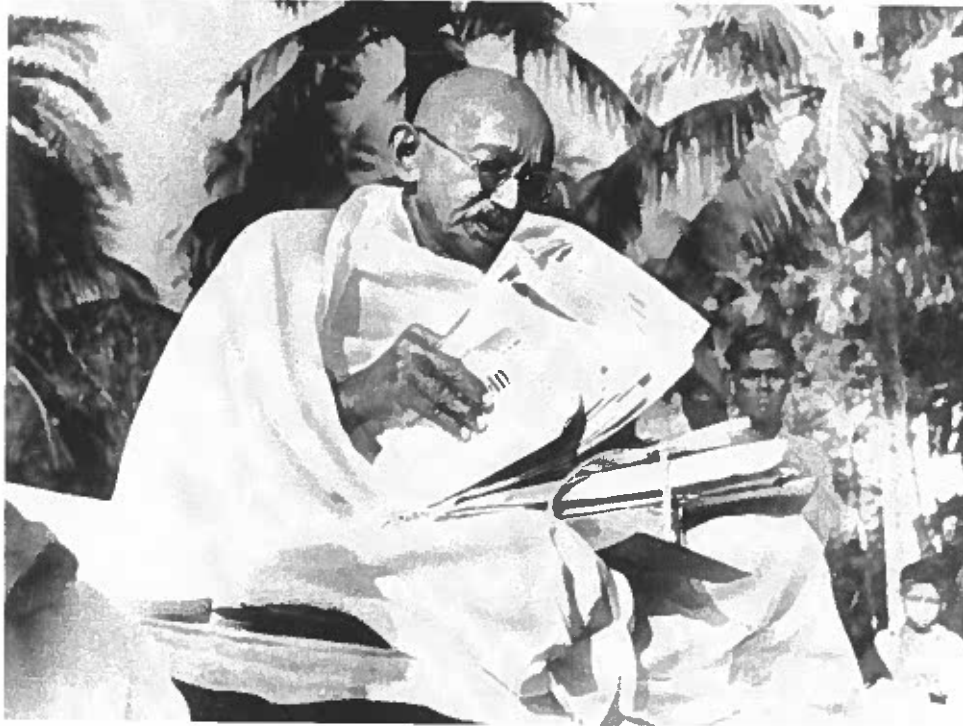
Vivekananda's message dealt largely with the Hindu pursuit of truth and honesty, in an attempt to find eternal salvation. He has been quoted as saying, "A man [or a woman] does not proceed from falsehood to truth, but he [or she] moves from lower truth to higher truth." Vivekananda stressed the notion of seeking Brahman through meditation and intellectual pursuits. His missionary activity was also a response to the materialism of Western society. He based his philosophy on the teachings in the Upanishads. His goal was to bring the wisdom of these sacred texts to the West. He taught that Hinduism was a system of social service that could provide guidance for satisfying some of the world's greatest needs. He might have been referring to the experiences of poverty and discrimination, as well as to the dissatisfaction that many people experience, despite being wealthy. His ideas challenged contemporary Western thought.

Mohandas K. Gandhi

Another influential Hindu presence in the mid-twentieth century was Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869–1948), also known as *Mahatma*, from the Sanskrit, meaning "Great Soul." Gandhi used the Bhagavad-Gita's teachings as the foundation for a non-violent struggle for Indian independence from British rule. Gandhi preached and practised non-violence or **ahimsa**. He and his millions of followers used this idea as a basis for their **boycotts** and their non-violent opposition to years of British rule in India. He also used the principles of ahimsa when he attempted to stop riots between Muslims and Hindus in Pakistan and India by holding "great fasts." These fasts proved successful in quelling violence, even if only for a short period.

Gandhi inspired others around the world who were fighting against injustice. Among them was Martin Luther King Jr., a minister and leader of the civil rights movement in the United States in the 1960s. King admired Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence and applied it in his own fight to win freedom, justice, and equality for black people in America. According to King, it took more courage to fight peacefully against evil than to hit

back when struck. Like Gandhi, he believed that violence only brings about more hate and more violence.



Mahatma Gandhi

Gandhi believed that the caste system was unjust, especially toward the Dalits or “poorest of the poor.” He frequently referred to them as the *Harijans* or “children of God.” Gandhi used simple logic and stories to make his point. When he spoke of respect and concern for the poor, he said:

When you are in doubt or when the self becomes too much with you, try the following: Recall the face of the poorest and most helpless man you have ever seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate will be of any use to him...Then you will find your doubts and your self melting away.

What do you believe Gandhi meant by the last line? Is this another way of describing compassion? Even after his death at the hands of a Hindu radical in 1948, his memory and spirit continue to live on. Many Hindus and non-Hindus view Gandhi as a holy person. Albert Einstein was quoted as saying:

Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.

Hare Krishna

Several years after Gandhi, evidence of Hindu values and thought resurfaced in North America in the 1960s. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness, or the *Hare Krishna* movement, became a recognizable presence in major cities across this continent. The society particularly attracted younger adults who responded to the alternative lifestyle that the movement offered. The movement's devotional nature appealed to those seeking a more peaceful existence.



Hare Krishna devotees

Distinctive saffron-coloured robes and shaved heads worn by Hare Krishna adherents could be seen at college campuses, at airports, and on street corners, particularly during the 1960s and 1970s. At about the same time, the practices of the Transcendental Meditation (or *TM*) movement attracted a lot of attention in the West. TM incorporated ideas of Hinduism in an attempt to seek inner harmony and peace for the individual.

Hindu Concepts and Practices Today

It is understandable why most people have at least a basic understanding of Hinduism. Many Hindu concepts have become a part of mainstream consciousness, and people know about the notion of reincarnation. Additionally, most people are aware of the prevalence of yoga and meditation classes offered at local community centres and by private organizations. These groups are likely not directly related to the Hindu religious community, but they have probably left communities with positive impressions of Hinduism.

Hindus in Canada

There are over 300 000 Hindu Canadians. Southern Ontario alone is home to over two-thirds of the Hindus in this country. Vancouver is the second-largest urban centre for Hindus.

The first Hindu migrants to set foot in Canada arrived in the early twentieth century. They arrived in Vancouver, and were joined by Sikhs. By the year 1908, there were approximately 5000 Hindus living in Canada. Over the next 40 years, Canadian immigration laws made it extremely difficult for Indians to immigrate to this country. Throughout these years, their reception in Canada was marred by violence and racial discrimination.

An example of how slowly people from India were accepted into this country is the fact that Indo-Canadians were not allowed to vote until 1947! This is in stark contrast to the frequent participation of Hindus in the political process today. For example, Hindus are making their presence felt in Canadian politics as Members of Parliament, both at the federal and provincial levels of government. Hindu Canadians are likely familiar with so many elements of the Canadian system of government because India is the largest parliamentary democracy in the world.

As the population of Hindu Canadians increases, so, too, does the proliferation of places of worship. Many Hindus find great

comfort in being connected to their local temple. It is here that they worship with their Hindu brothers and sisters, learn about their faith, and listen to religious hymns. If they wish, they can also be taught the ancient traditions of Hindu dance, or vocal and instrumental music. Through their participation and the guidance of fellow Hindus, the temple has become an essential religious and cultural focal point.

Hinduism in Canada and throughout the world is changing, even though its basic principles remain the same. Despite the fact that its ancient wisdom, traditions, and practices hold a special place for Hindus, individuals living in modern communities have generated new and relevant ways of “being Hindu.” A contemporary author, Jeffrey Brodd, has this to say about traditional and modern Hinduism in the new millennium:

And so these many rivers—ancient and modern, rural and urban—continue to flow toward the distant ocean of salvation, finally merging the millions of Hindus in the harmony that unites their religion.

Support Questions

(do not send in for evaluation)

8. If Mahatma Gandhi were alive today, which world areas would demand his attention because of the presence of discrimination and prejudice? Choose one of these areas and explain how Gandhi would address the problem.

9. Why might individuals choose to belong to one of the three main sects (devotional groups)?

Conclusion

In Lesson 6, you were presented with an opportunity to examine selected Hindu sacred writings. The lesson also provided information about the different groups and institutions within Hinduism and concluded with a commentary on the cultural impact of Hinduism on Canada and the world. In Lesson 7, you will be introduced to the origins, beliefs, and teachings of Buddhism, an Eastern religion that grew out of the Hindu belief system.

Key Questions

Save your answers to the Key Questions in your Course Journal or e-Journal.

6. There are two broad categories of Hindu sacred texts: the shruti and the smriti. Your task is to write a paragraph about each one, including the information outlined in the following Marking Guide, which will be used to evaluate your answer. **(14 marks)**

Marking Guide for Key Question 6 (14 marks)

Evaluation criteria	Marks
• What it is (including origin and components)	(3 × 2 = 6)
• How it has been transmitted	(2 × 2 = 4)
• Its spiritual importance	(2 × 2 = 4)

7. In one or two paragraphs, identify two ways in which Hinduism has provided spiritual guidance to the West. (10 marks)

The following Marking Guide will be used to evaluate your answer.

Marking Guide for Key Question 7 (10 marks)

Evaluation criteria	Marks
• Describes two accurate, specific, and relevant examples of how Hinduism has provided spiritual guidance to the West	(4 × 2 = 8)
• Accurate spelling and grammar	2

References

Page 17 Mohandas Gandhi, "The Class of Nonviolence," developed by Colman McCarthy of the Center for Teaching Peace, Washington.

Page 17 Albert Einstein. Web site:
<http://pmindia.nic.in/speech/content.asp?id=104>

Now go on to Lesson 7. Remember, you do not send your journal to the Independent Learning Centre until you have completed Unit 2 (Lessons 6 to 10).