

# WHAT IS HINDUISM?

## You will find out

- The origins of Hinduism.
- Four important beliefs of Hinduism.

## In the glossary

Ashrama

Avatar

Bhagavad-Gita

Brahman

Jesus

Krishna

Moksha

Muhammad

Vishnu

It is not easy to pinpoint exactly how, when or where the religion of Hinduism began. Unlike the other major world religions, the teachings of Hinduism cannot be traced back to a single teacher or founder, such as **Jesus** in Christianity or **Muhammad** in Islam. Instead, the teachings of Hinduism come from many different ancient religious thinkers who lived at different times in history. Their teachings have been gathered together in many holy books.

## THE ORIGINS OF HINDUISM

The roots of Hinduism are found in the Indus Valley civilisation which grew up around the banks of the River Indus in India in about 2000 BCE. This civilisation was very advanced, with people living in large houses and towns and producing a highly glazed form of pottery.

The prosperity of this group, however, began to decline in around 500 BCE as a group of people called the Aryans moved into India. They built great cities along the River Ganges and intermarried with the Indus people. Their religions also intermingled and it was out of this mixture that Hinduism grew. The Aryans provided Hindus with some of their most important holy books [unit 18].

An avatar is when God visits the Earth in human form. Krishna, an avatar of the god **Vishnu**, is the most popular of all Hindu avatars.



## UNDERSTANDING HINDUISM

- 1 The ultimate aim of every Hindu is to reach **moksha** [liberation] through becoming united with God [**Brahman**]. To reach this stage, each person must pass through a cycle of many births and deaths [unit 10]. The words in extract A, from the **Bhagavad-Gita**, are recited at every Hindu cremation.  
  
**A** *“Worn-out garments are shed by the body; Worn-out bodies are shed by the dweller; Within the body new bodies are donned by the dweller like garments.”*  
Bhagavad-Gita 2.22
- 2 To control the way that a person lives, Hinduism provides certain ‘disciplines’. A life-span is divided into four **ashramas** or stages [unit 4]:
  - the time of training or education
  - the time of the householder
  - the time of retirement
  - the time of the holy man
- 3 To reach moksha, a person must live a righteous life, work hard, prosper and enjoy the good things in life. All of these should be reached by the end of the second ashrama. Time can then be set aside especially to reach moksha.
- 4 Each person has ‘a spark of God’ in them but it shines more brightly in some than others. Those who possess the brightest spark are the **avatars**. The avatars are sent by Brahman to restore righteousness on Earth:

### CHECK IT OUT

#### Avatars might be...

Gods in human form. The most popular of the Hindu avatars is **Krishna** [unit 6].

Prophets and leaders from other religions such as Muhammad and Jesus.

Hindu holy men or women.

### TAKE TIME TO THINK

The ultimate aim of every Hindu is to obtain spiritual liberation. What would you say is your ultimate aim in life?

## OVER TO YOU ▶▶▶

- 1 Imagine that you are trying to explain to a friend one way in which Hinduism is different to the other major world religions. What would you say to them?
- 2 How do scholars think that the religion of Hinduism began?
- 3 You are introduced here to some very important Hindu words. Explain in a single sentence or two the meaning of:
  - a) Brahman
  - b) Moksha
  - c) Ashrama
  - d) Avatar
  - e) Krishna



# THE CASTE SYSTEM

## You will find out

- About the jati.
- About the varnas.
- About the Caste System and the Dalits.

## In the glossary

Brahmin

Caste System

Dalit

Jati

Kshatriyas

Rig-Veda

Shudras

Untouchables

Vaishyas

Varna



In traditional Indian society, the **Brahmins**, or priests, are at the top of the Caste System.

To understand the **Caste System** in India, it is very important that you understand three ideas:

## THE JATI

Hindus everywhere attach great importance to the group in society, called the **jati**, into which they have been born. Originally, each jati was linked to an occupation and members of the jati all followed the same occupation. They would belong, for example, to the 'shoemakers' jati' or the 'leather workers' jati'.

Nowadays, people have more educational opportunities than in the past and it is common to move to find work. Now members of a jati can get jobs which are quite different to the traditional occupation of members of their group. This is especially true for Indians living in Western countries and in the larger cities of India.

In the villages of India, however, there has been far less change. A person's jati can still affect where they are able to live, who they can marry and who they can mix with. It is still usual for Hindus – even those living in a Western country – to marry someone from their own group or jati.

## OVER TO YOU ▶▶▶

- 1 When a Hindu says that they belong to a 'jati', what are they talking about?
- 2 Why are the 'jatis' of most Hindus less important now than they used to be?
- 3 Describe the four varnas.

## TAKE TIME TO THINK

Why do you think that modern Hindus in India are finding it very difficult to do away with varnas altogether?

## VARNAS

The dividing of Indian society into groups goes back to ancient times. The **Rig-Veda**, the very important and earliest of the Hindu holy books, describes four **varnas** or 'colours':

- 1 **The Brahmins [priests].** These are men in the community who are given the responsibility of keeping alive the traditions and teachings of Hinduism. They are expected to understand, and pass on, the religious teachings of Hinduism. They must set a good example to others by remaining pure in word and deed.
- 2 **The Kshatriyas.** These are people given the responsibility of leading and ruling others. They must make the decisions in their community and protect the poor and weak. In the past, they have been the rulers and the fighters.
- 3 **The Vaishyas.** The goods for sale and the wealth in society come from members of this group. They are the business people and the shop-owners.
- 4 **The Shudras.** These people are those who carry out the manual and physical work which every community needs. They serve the needs of the other castes. They are craft-workers and servants.

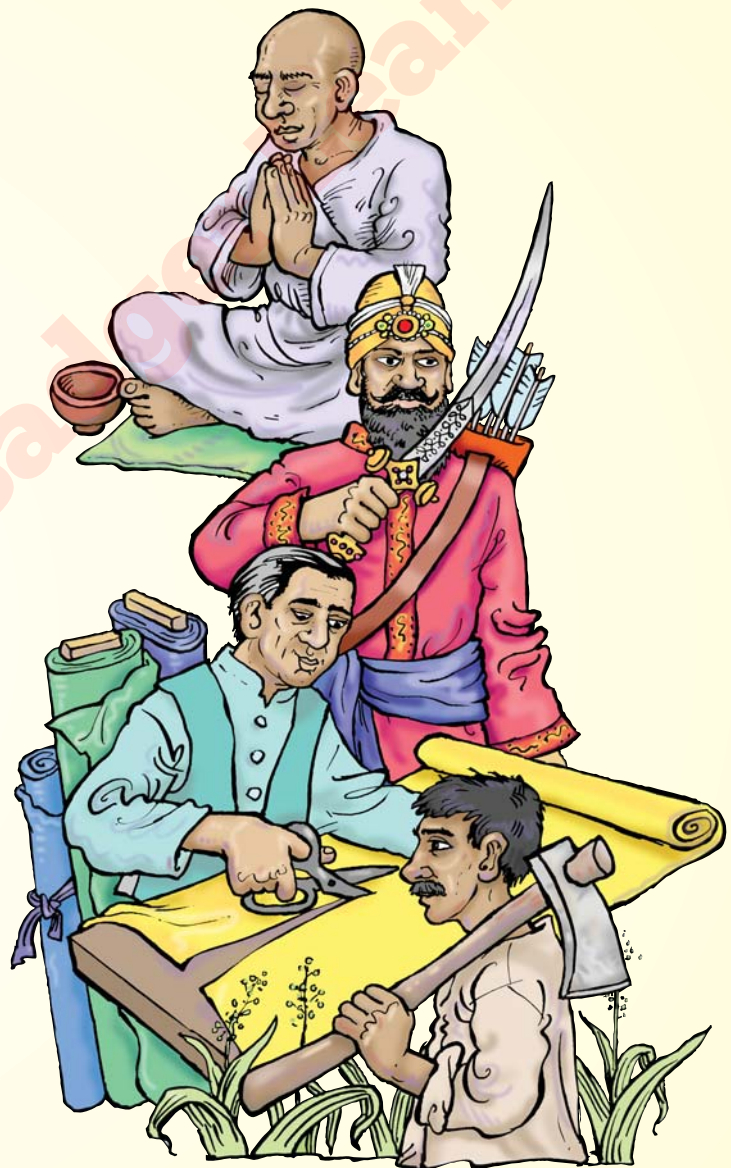
There is another group of people who do not belong to any caste. Until about 50 years ago, they were called the **Untouchables**, but they are now called the **Dalits**. They are not even a varna and they are treated very badly.

*We belong to the 'mochi' [shoemakers]. My grandfather was a shoemaker in Mumbai, or Bombay as it was then, but he felt that education was very important. My father is now a doctor in London. We meet with other members of our jati in Brixham, in a hall that we have paid for, and built, ourselves. I feel that I have a very close bond with them.*

Hassan, 16

## THE CASTE SYSTEM

Later, varnas became incorrectly mixed with castes and this caused problems. Castes or 'jatis' were smaller groups, often linked to occupations. In modern India, the traditions of caste are less strictly observed, but they still exist and they still affect the lives of millions of people, especially those from the lower varnas, today.



This is the traditional Caste System which has operated in India for centuries.



## UNIT 5

# ONE GOD IN MANY FORMS

### You will find out

- About Brahman.
- The Hindu Trimurti.

### In the glossary

Atman  
Avatar  
Brahma  
Brahman  
Krishna  
Pantheism  
Reincarnation  
Shiva  
Vedas  
Vishnu



Shiva, one of the Hindu Trimurti, is often shown with four hands.

Hindus seem to worship many gods. There are statues of many gods and goddesses in their shrines and places of worship. There are many stories about the different gods in their holy books. Yet Hinduism is quite clear in its teaching – there is only one God.



## BRAHMAN

Hindus believe that there is only one world spirit, or God, eternal and found everywhere. This is Brahman, who takes no human form. Hindus, however, are free to imagine Brahman in any form that they find helpful.

The images that are such a feature of Hindu worship are simply showing different aspects of the whole personality of Brahman. The **atman**, or the human soul, is part of Brahman and will be reabsorbed back into God after many **reincarnations**.

A *“There is one Ruler, the Spirit that is in all things, who transforms the one form into many... the eternal among things that pass away... whose radiance illumines all creation.”*

Katha Upanishad 5

The belief that God is to be found in all things is called **pantheism**.

## THE TRIMURTI

Brahman takes three main forms:

- **Brahma – the Creator.** In the old stories, or myths, Brahma is shown as a royal figure with four heads and riding on a goose while reading the holy book of the **Vedas**. Brahma is not a popular Hindu god.
- **Vishnu – the Preserver of life.** On nine occasions Vishnu has visited Earth as an avatar, with one more to come. The most popular of the nine avatars was Krishna.
- **Shiva – the god of life, death and rebirth.** Shiva is always shown with at least four hands to show that he has power over life, death, good and evil.

### TAKE TIME TO THINK

Hindus believe that everyone has an atman, a soul. Do you think that they are right? Try to explain your answer.

## A STORY

There is a well-known Hindu story about a child talking to his grandmother:

“How many gods are there?”

“3,000 gods.”

The child repeated the question.

“300 gods.”

Again, the young child asked,

“How many gods are there?”

“3 gods.”

For the last time, the child asked his grandmother,

“How many gods are there?”

“Just one.”

When you go to India, as I have done, you find that there are not many people who worship Brahma or Vishnu. Shiva, however, is different. I wear a bracelet with Shiva on it. We all have unkind or bad thoughts but Shiva helps me to banish them from my mind and that is very helpful.

Sourav, 16

## OVER TO YOU ►►►

- 1 Read through the story of the grandmother and her grandchild carefully. Sum up, in your own words, the point that you think the story is making.
- 2 “Hindus are not like the followers of the other great world religions. They believe in many gods.” Do you think this quotation is true? Explain your answer.
- 3 Give two pieces of information about Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu.