

## The History and Practices of Hinduism

### Acrostic Poem Project: Hinduism

Compose an acrostic poem for the word **Hinduism**. Follow the guidelines below. This is worth **two quiz grades**. Ms. Jordan & Mr. Barry will provide you with the paper, colored pencils, markers, etc to work on the project in class. The poem **must** be handwritten, so take your time writing the information so it “looks” legible :) There **must** be color! Write the letters/sentences **in different colors!**

1. Include a *minimum of three* sentences for each letter in the word Hinduism.
2. You must use every word listed here in bold and one of these words must be in each letter of the acrostic poem.. All of these words are in the document: ***Dharma, karma, Sanskrit, Brahman(ism), deity, caste system, Vedas, pilgrimage, samsara, cow, atman, water, Holi, aum, lotus***
3. Provide one drawing per letter in the acrostic poem. They must be related to one of the key words listed in the poem. Ensure that it relates to the **letter** of the poem. Must be a color picture or there must be color in the picture! Hindus LOVE LOVE LOVE COLOR!
4. Color Color Color! Hindus believe *very* deeply that color is important to culture and life. Use color! Look at the images we’ve examined over this unit and attempt to match the patterns if you can. **Use different colors for each letter/sentence. Write that sentence in the color you use for the letter!**

#### Rubric:

**Sentences** -- 70 points-- 5 pts per term -- Detailed, well explained, grammatically correct, and easy to comprehend/follow

**Pictures** -- 20 points

**Color & neatness** - 10 points

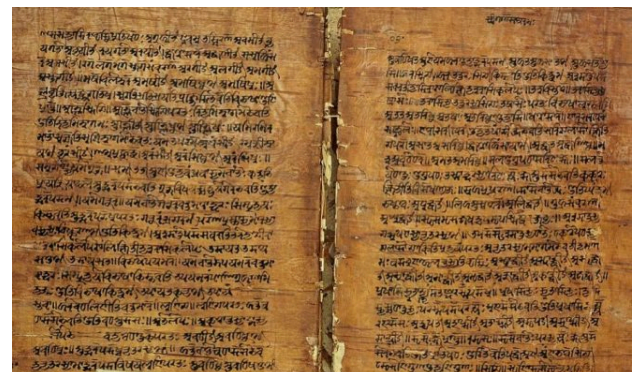


**Hinduism** is one of the oldest religions in the world, with roots that stretch back over 4,000 years. It is a major religion in India and Nepal, but it also has followers all over the world. Hinduism is different from many other religions because it doesn't have a single founder, a single holy book, or a single set of beliefs that everyone must follow.

### The Origins of Hinduism

Hinduism developed in the Indus Valley (now part of Pakistan and India) around 2500 BCE. (Right) This was one of the world's first great civilizations. The early people who lived there had a strong connection to nature, and some of their beliefs and practices laid the groundwork for what would later become Hinduism.

Around 1500 BCE, a group of people called the Aryans moved into the Indus Valley region from Central Asia. The Aryans brought with them their own language, called **Sanskrit**, and their religious ideas, which combined with the beliefs of the local people. This blending of ideas over time helped shape the early forms of Hinduism.





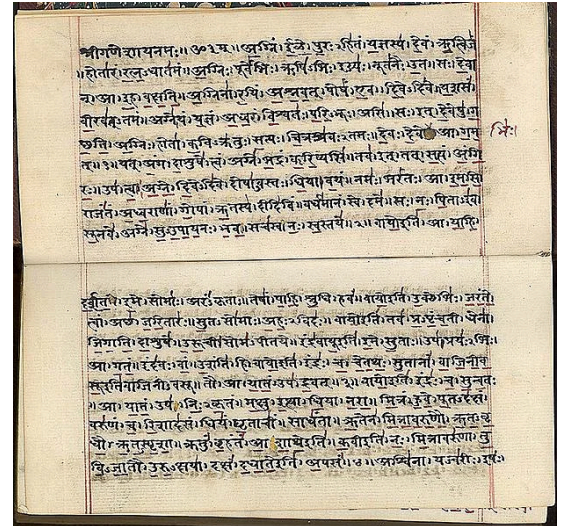
The oldest Hindu texts are called the **Vedas**, which were written in Sanskrit and contain hymns, prayers, and rituals. The Vedas teach about the nature of the universe and the gods, as well as how people should live their lives. The term veda means “knowledge” in that they are thought to contain the fundamental knowledge relating to the underlying cause of, function of, and personal response to existence. They are considered among the oldest, if not the oldest, religious works in the world.

The texts which make up the Four Vedas are:

- **Rig Veda**
- **Sama Veda**
- **Yajur Veda**
- **Atharva Veda**

Each of these is further divided into types of text included within them:

- **Aranyakas** - rituals, observances
- **Brahmanas** - commentaries on rituals
- **Samhitas** - benedictions, prayers, mantras
- **Upanishads** – philosophical narratives and dialogues



## Core Beliefs of Hinduism

Hinduism is unique because it doesn't have a single central belief system. However, there are several ideas that most Hindus share. Many Hindus argue that their faith is timeless and has always existed. Unlike other religions, Hinduism has no one founder but is instead a fusion of various beliefs. Hinduism embraces many religious ideas. For this reason, it's sometimes referred to as a “way of life” or a “family of religions,” as opposed to a single, organized religion. Hindus worship many gods and goddesses in addition to Brahman, who is believed to be the supreme God force present in all things.

### Some of the most prominent deities include:

**Brahma:** The god responsible for the creation of the world and all living things. Hindus believe that there is a supreme, unchanging reality called Brahman.

Brahman is the source of everything in the universe, and everything that exists is part of Brahman. Some Hindus describe Brahman as a formless, infinite presence, while others think of Brahman as personal gods.

**Vishnu:** The god that preserves and protects the universe

**Shiva:** The god that destroys the universe in order to recreate it

**Devi:** The goddess that fights to restore dharma

**Krishna:** The god of compassion, tenderness and love

**Lakshmi:** The goddess of wealth and purity

**Saraswati:** The goddess of learning



**Atman** – Hindus believe that every person has a soul, called the Atman. The Atman is part of Brahman and is eternal. When a person's body dies, the Atman is reborn in a new body, which is called reincarnation.

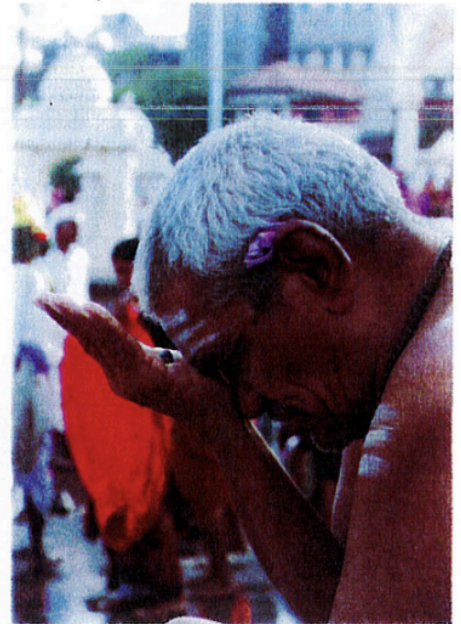
**Reincarnation and Karma** – Hinduism teaches that after death, the soul (Atman) is reborn in a new body. This cycle of birth, death, and rebirth is called **samsara**. What happens to a person in their next life depends on their actions in their current life. This is called karma. Good actions lead to good karma, and bad actions lead to bad karma. Over many lifetimes, a person works to improve their karma and eventually achieves moksha, which is the liberation from the cycle of reincarnation and the reunion of the soul with Brahman.

**Dharma** – Dharma refers to the moral law and duties that a person should follow. It's about living a good life, doing the right things, and following the path of truth. Dharma can mean different things for different people depending on their age, job, or social position.

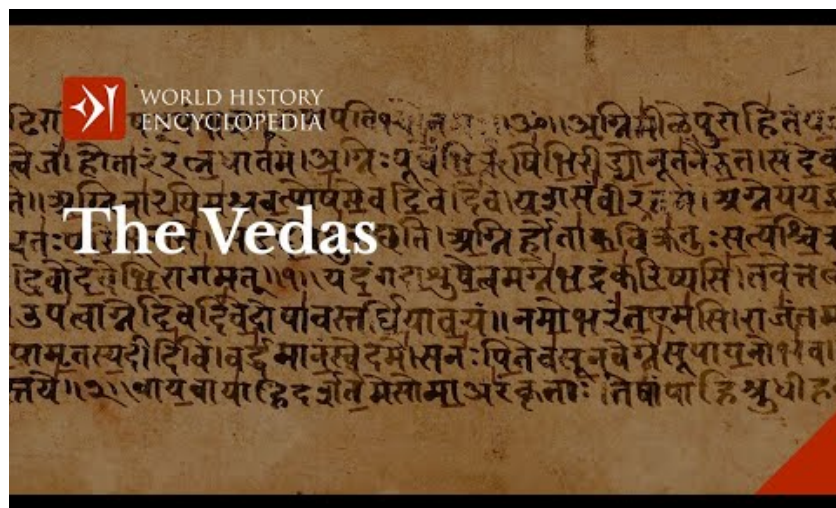
Brahmins, for example, were ancient Hindu society's priests and religious scholars. Their duties included performing rituals and teaching the Vedas. This was quite an accomplishment, since ancient scholars had passed down this knowledge through word of mouth. To recite the Vedas orally, Brahmins had to memorize tens of thousands of verses!

In addition to following the dharma of their own varna, Hindus are expected to follow a common dharma, or set of values. This is often said to include the importance of marriage, sharing food with others, and caring for one's soul.

Another basic value is nonviolence. Many Hindus, as well as followers of other Indian traditions, have a respect for life that stems from their belief that all life forms have a soul. In Hindu traditions, reverence for life is symbolized by the cow. Hindus were taught not to kill them, perhaps because cows provided people with things they needed, such as milk and butter. Even in death, cows provided hides that could be made into clothing.



This Hindu man sits in prayer, or meditation.





Asia | Counting cattle

## The Hindu right's pro-cow policies are terrible for India's cows

A Hindu nationalist cow census is an effort to solve a problem after making it worse



PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

← Yes...An article from The Economist about India's cow problem.

There are simply too many cows in India...Across India, farmers are becoming their own night security guards—patrolling their harvest and checking on fences or trenches surrounding their land. But their enemies aren't robbers. They're stray cattle—and there are more than five million of them. Oh, but there aren't just five million cattle in India. Those are the *stray* cattle. India is home to more than 308 million cattle...more than any other nation in the world.

*"A herd can destroy the whole crop in just one hour,"* says Anjani Dixit, district head of Rashtriya Kisan Mazdoor Sangathan, a farmer association in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh. Cattle can also become aggressive when threatened:

Dixit says the horned animals fatally gored two men in his village.

Stray livestock, which gather at garbage dumps and weave through traffic, lead to thousands of road accidents each year; between 2018 and 2022, they caused more than 900 human deaths in the northern state of Haryana. In some states, authorities even paste glow-in-the-dark stickers on the animals to warn drivers at night.



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## Practices of Hinduism

Hinduism is not just about what you believe—it also involves practices that help people connect with the divine and live a righteous life. Here are some of the most important practices:

**Worship (Puja)** – Hindus worship their gods and goddesses in temples or at home. This worship is called puja. It can involve offering flowers, food, incense, and prayers to the gods. Many Hindus also chant mantras, which are sacred words or phrases believed to have spiritual power.

**Meditation and Yoga** – Meditation is an important part of Hinduism because it helps people focus their minds and connect with the divine. Yoga, which includes physical exercises, breathing techniques, and meditation, is also an ancient practice in Hinduism. It is meant to help a person become more aware of their soul (Atman) and find peace and unity with the universe.



## Religious commitment

Some Hindus show their dedication to God by becoming devotees of Krishna. This involves taking part in an initiation ceremony, where they make four lifelong vows. Devotees of Krishna promise that they will:

- abstain from eating meat, fish, or eggs;
- avoid all artificial stimulants and intoxicants (including tea, coffee, and tobacco);
- abstain from all forms of gambling;
- only have sexual intercourse for the purpose of having children within marriage.

Devotees also undertake to perform japa meditation. This form of meditation involves chanting the Hare Krishna **mantra** while counting on a **mala**. Once around the mala beads is called a "round." Devotees usually chant sixteen "rounds" per day.

Devotees of Krishna who live at one of ISKCON's spiritual communities usually begin their day with morning worship at 4:30 A.M. The service usually lasts for several hours, after which they perform various tasks within the community and meet for evening worship at 7:00 P.M.



Brahmanism was more than a religion in ancient India. It was a way of life. It affected how Indians lived, what they believed, and even the way they organized their society. Many of those ideas live on in modern Hinduism.

Brahmanism taught that a well-organized society was divided into different social classes. Today, we call this practice of social organization, developed in India, the **caste** system. The Vedas describe four main social classes, or varnas:

- Brahmins (priests and religious scholars)
- Kshatriyas (KSHA-tree-uhs) (rulers and warriors)
- Vaishyas (VIESH-yuhs) (herders and merchants)
- Shudras (SHOO-druhs) (servants, farmers, and laborers)

According to the Vedas, each class, or varna, had its own duties. For example, Brahmins had a duty to study and teach the Vedas. Warriors had a duty to become skilled with weapons. But the caste system meant that some people were favored much more than others. Brahmins held the highest place in society, while Shudras held the lowest.

Over the centuries, the caste system in India grew very complex. By medieval times, there were thousands of castes. The people in the lowest caste were known as Untouchables. Their descendants today often call themselves *Dalits*, from a word meaning “suppressed” or “crushed.” This group had jobs or ways of life that involved activities that high-caste Indians considered lowly or “dirty,” such as handling garbage and dead animals. Untouchables often had to live in their own villages or neighborhoods. They could not enter many temples or attend most schools. Other Hindus avoided touching, and in many cases, even looking at this group of people. Some of these rules separating the lowest caste remain today.

**caste** a class, or group, in Hindu society



**Festivals** – Hinduism has many festivals throughout the year. Some of the most famous ones include:



**Diwali** – The festival of lights, which celebrates the victory of good over evil and light over darkness.

**Holi** – The festival of colors, which celebrates the arrival of spring and the love between the gods Radha and Krishna.

**Navaratri** – A festival that honors the goddess Durga and celebrates the power of femininity.

**Rituals and Life Events** – Hindus celebrate important life events with specific rituals. For example, there are rituals for birth, coming-of-age ceremonies, marriages, and death. These rituals help people mark the stages of life and remain connected to their religion.



**Pilgrimages** – Many Hindus go on pilgrimages to sacred sites, such as the river Ganges, which is considered holy. Bathing in the Ganges is believed to purify the soul and remove sins.

Today, Hinduism is practiced by millions of people around the world, mostly in India and Nepal, but also in countries like Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and the United States. While many Hindus follow traditional practices, others have adapted their beliefs and practices to modern life.

Hinduism teaches respect for all living things, and many Hindus follow a vegetarian diet to avoid harming animals. Hindus also value nonviolence, or ahimsa, which is why Mahatma Gandhi, the famous leader of India's independence movement, was a Hindu who promoted peace and nonviolence.

## Water

Water is an important symbol in **Hinduism**. It is seen as a source of life because all living things need water to survive. A jar of water is sometimes placed on a pile of corn outside the houses of newlywed couples to symbolize fertility, in the hope that they will be blessed with children.

Water is also used for cleansing and purification. Hindus wash or bathe before worship, and at death the body is washed prior to cremation. Holy water is sometimes sprinkled on the ground to remove evil from a particular place.

In India, there are seven **sacred** rivers. The most sacred of these is the **Ganga** (or Ganges). The Ganga is the subject of numerous legends and is believed to have amazing properties. One feature is that the water from the Ganga does not appear to go stale even after being kept in a jar for several months. According to Hindu scriptures, anywhere the Ganga flows becomes sacred. Millions of **devotees** bathe in the river whenever they get the opportunity. They also take home water from the river in sealed jars, which they place in their household **shrines**.



In this section you will:

- learn about some more symbols used by Hindus;
- read about the different kinds of markings, or tilakas, used by Hindus to show which deities they worship.

## Ash

Body markings are another way in which Hindus symbolize their beliefs. Some Hindus place ash on their foreheads or body to represent their belief that everything except the **atman** is **maya** (illusory) and will ultimately perish. Ash also signifies **cremation**. This reminds Hindus that life is short and that their **dharma** is to live life in a way that shows love and respect for all living things.

## Sindoor

The sindoor is a red mark placed in the parting of the hair of Hindu women who are married. It represents the power of the Mother Goddess, Shakti, the feminine aspect of God. Hindu women wear it in the hope that the Mother Goddess will protect their husbands and grant them long life.

## Bindi

Traditionally, the bindi is a red dot worn by married women between their eyebrows. It is a symbol of Parvati, the consort of Shiva, who is considered by Hindus to be the ideal wife. The bindi signifies the **Shakti** energy of Shiva in the female form, and represents his third eye. Traditionally it is put on during worship and is worn as a symbol of protection and blessing for women and their husbands. Today, bindis are often worn for decoration alone and have no religious significance for those who wear them.





Hinduism is a rich and diverse religion that teaches people about the universe, the nature of life, and how to live a good and meaningful life.

With its many gods, sacred texts, and practices, Hinduism offers a way for people to understand their place in the world and their connection to the divine.

Whether through worship, meditation, or following the teachings of sacred texts, Hindus believe that the goal of life is to realize the oneness of all things and to live a life that brings peace and harmony.



The **Lotus** flower is very important in Hinduism because it symbolizes purity, beauty, and spiritual growth. In muddy water, a Lotus grows tall and strong, representing how a person can rise above challenges and stay pure in the face of difficulties. The flower is also linked to several gods and goddesses. For example, the goddess Lakshmi, who represents wealth and prosperity, is often shown sitting on a Lotus. This symbolizes how spiritual and material success come from purity and grace.

The Lotus also represents the heart and the mind. Just like a Lotus opens up to the sunlight, it's said that humans can open their minds and hearts to knowledge and spiritual wisdom. In Hinduism, the Lotus is a reminder to stay grounded, but also to reach for higher spiritual understanding, no matter how tough life may get. It teaches the idea of inner beauty and growth even in difficult circumstances.

