

Hinduism Information Sheet

Text from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/ata glance/glance.shtml> (with punctuation editing for clarification).

Hinduism is the religion of the majority of people in India and Nepal. It also exists among significant populations outside of the subcontinent and has over 900 million adherents worldwide.

In some ways, Hinduism is the oldest living religion in the world, or at least elements within it stretch back many thousands of years. Yet Hinduism resists easy definition, partly because of the vast array of practices and beliefs found within it.

Although it is not easy to define Hinduism, we can say that it is rooted in India, most Hindus revere a body of texts as sacred scripture known as the *Veda*, and most Hindus draw on a common system of values known as *dharma*.

- Hinduism originated around the Indus Valley near the River Indus in modern day Pakistan.
- About 80% of the Indian population regard themselves as Hindu.
- Most Hindus believe in a Supreme God, whose qualities and forms are represented by the multitude of deities which emanate from him.
- Hindus believe that existence is a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, governed by *karma*.
- Hindus believe that the soul passes through a cycle of successive lives and its next incarnation is always dependent on how the previous life was lived.
- The main Hindu texts are the Vedas and their supplements (books based on the Vedas). *Veda* is a Sanskrit word meaning 'knowledge'. These scriptures do not mention the word 'Hindu' but many scriptures discuss *dharma*, which can be rendered as 'code of conduct,' 'law,' or 'duty.'
- Hindus celebrate many holy days, but the Festival of Lights, Diwali, is the best known.

Karma and Samsara

Karma is a Sanskrit word whose literal meaning is 'action.' It refers to the law that every action has an equal reaction either immediately or at some point in the future. Good or virtuous actions, actions in harmony with dharma, will have good reactions or responses and bad actions, actions against dharma, will have the opposite effect.

In Hinduism, karma operates not only in this lifetime but across lifetimes: the results of an action might only be experienced after the present life in a new life.

This process of reincarnation is called *samsara*, a continuous cycle in which the soul is reborn over and over again according to the law of action and reaction. At death, many Hindus believe the soul is carried by a subtle body into a new physical body, which can be a human or non-human form (an animal or divine being). The goal of liberation (*moksha*) is to make us free from this cycle of action and reaction and from rebirth.