

[Hinduism From Ancient Times](#)

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Hinduism From Ancient Times

The largest civilization in the ancient world developed in the Indus Valley of India over 5,000 years ago. In the thousands of years that followed, India produced many great empires under which science, art and philosophy flourished. Out of this rich history developed the Hindu religion, today the third largest in the world.

This Educational Insight is Hinduism Today magazine's response to the controversy in California over the way Hinduism is taught in public-school history books. It is a 16-page lesson on Hindu history, beliefs and practices for sixth graders written from the Hindu point of view. It is historically sound and acceptable in content and tone to the various denominations of the Hindu community.

The problem with every existing textbook for this grade level is that Hinduism is presented negatively, incompletely and inaccurately. This lesson is patterned after a typical chapter on the Jewish faith in these same books. It deliberately does not follow the specific California standards for presenting the Hindu religion because we believe them to be deeply flawed and contrary to the State's own general rule that teaching material must: 1) be historically accurate, 2) "instill in each child a sense of pride in his or her heritage" and 3) avoid "adverse reflection " on a religion. It is our intent that this lesson will serve as a model for US textbooks, providing an authentic depiction of the eminent history and traditions of the faith while giving 10-year-old Hindu students justifiable pride in their religion.

In most states teachers are allowed to supplement the textbooks with additional material. This lesson may be offered as a more accurate basis for the classroom study of the origins and development of Hinduism in ancient India.

Section 1. Origins of Hinduism

If YOU lived then...

Your house is built on a wide, waterless riverbed. Your father tells you it was once the giant Sarasvati River, five kilometers across. There is not enough rain to provide for the family's crops and cattle. Travelers tell of another great river, the Ganga, hundreds of miles away. Your father and other villagers decide they must move.

How would you feel about the long journey?

What You Will Learn...

Main Ideas

1. Many Hindu religious practices are seen in the archeological remains of the Indus-Sarasvati civilization.
2. The sacred texts of Hinduism are in the Sanskrit language and were originally memorized but unwritten.
3. Ancient Indian art and science were highly developed.

Building Background India's known history begins with the Indus-Sarasvati civilization, 5,500 years ago. We know from archeology that this culture shows many features of later Hindu practice.

The Big Idea

Hinduism developed over thousands of years in India.

Understanding Ancient Indian History

The early cities of India developed along the Indus and Sarasvati rivers starting around 3500 bce. They are called the Indus-Sarasvati civilization or, sometimes, the Harappan culture. It was the largest and most advanced civilization in the ancient world. But the mighty Sarasvati River dried up, and what was once a fertile area became a desert. The people of the region moved to other parts of India and beyond. By 2000 bce the civilization had entered a period of decline.

The Religion of the Indus-Sarasvati People

A great many artifacts have been discovered from the Indus-Sarasvati cities. These include pottery, seals, statues, beads, jewelry, tools, games, such as dice, and children's toys, such as miniature carts.

The flat, stone seals have pictures and writing on them. Scholars have not yet agreed on what the mysterious script on the seals means. They show deities, ceremonies, symbols, people, plants and animals. We learn from them that people at that time followed practices identical to those followed by Hindus today. One seal shows a meditating figure that scholars link to Lord Siva, while others show the lotus posture used by today's meditators. The swastika, a sacred symbol of good luck used throughout Hindu history, is common.

There are statues, including a small clay figure with its hands pressed together in the traditional Hindu greeting of "namaste."

A figurine of a married woman shows a red powder called sindur in the part of her hair. Hindu women today follow this same custom as a sign of their married status. The pipal tree and banyan tree are depicted often. These remain sacred to Hindus to this day.

The Vedas

The central holy books of Hinduism are the four Vedas. Hindus regard them as spoken by God. They are in Sanskrit. The Vedas were not written down but memorized. Students might spend twelve years learning these scriptures. Some would memorize one Veda, others all four. Even today there are priests who can chant an entire Veda--as many as 10,500 verses--from memory.

The relationship between the people of the Indus-Sarasvati civilization and those who composed the Vedas is not clearly understood. We know that the Rig Veda describes the Sarasvati as the "most mighty of rivers " flowing from the Himalayan mountains to the ocean. Therefore, the holy texts had to be composed well before 2000 bce--by which time the river had dried up. The Vedas describe a powerful and spiritual people, their clans, kings and emperors. Their society was complex. The economy included agriculture, industry, trade, commerce and cattle raising. The Vedas contain thousands of hymns in praise of God and the Gods. They describe a form of fire worship, yajna, around a specially-built brick fire altar. In several Indus-Sarasvati cities archeologists have unearthed what look like fire altars.

The Aryan Invasion Theory

Many school books present an "Aryan Invasion " of India. It is the theory that Aryan invaders came from central Asia in 1500 bce and conquered the indigenous Indus-Sarasvati civilization. It was these foreigners, the theory states, who wrote the Rig Veda in Sanskrit. The theory was proposed in the 19th century by scholars in Europe, based on language studies. In part, it tried to explain why Sanskrit is so closely related to European languages, including English. Many scholars now dispute this theory because all the evidence for it is questionable. Additionally, modern scientists have found no biological evidence, such as DNA, that people came from outside India in significant numbers since at least 6,000 bce.

Many common explanations about Indian history and culture are based on the Aryan Invasion theory. Those who defend it claim that Sanskrit, the caste system and Hindu ways of worship came from outside India. If you are studying India in school, you may read about this outdated theory.

Hinduism Emerges

As the Indus-Sarasvati culture declined, many of its people migrated to other places. They settled mostly in north and central India, especially along the Ganga River system. They interacted with tribes who had lived in those areas from ancient times. Around 1000 bce, the Tamil-speaking Dravidian people in the South had separately developed a sophisticated language and culture. Because of inadequate archeological research, we do not know a lot about this period. However, by 600 bce, India had developed a common culture from north to south and east to west. By this time the social, religious and philosophical ideas and practices central to Hinduism are fully evident. These are in continuity with the religion of the Indus-Sarasvati culture, the teachings of the Vedas, Dravidian culture and elements of the tribal religions.

Hindu public worship, described in the Vedas, took place in temporary shelters built for that purpose. The earliest mention of permanent temples for the worship of God is in the Grihya Sutras, around 600 bce.

Indian Society

A distinctive feature of India at this time was the varna or class system. Society was classified into groups with specific occupations. These groups tended to become hereditary. There were four broad classes--priests, warriors, merchants and workers (including craftsmen). The system provided order and stability to society. Later on, the varnas divided into hundreds of sub-sections called jatis (castes). Individual jatis developed a strong identity and pride in their occupation. From time to time people would move from one caste to another, or establish new ones. The evolving caste system became unfair to the people at the very bottom of the social order. Though caste is still an important factor in arranging marriages, caste discrimination is illegal in modern India.

Women have always been held in high regard in India. Some of India's foremost religious and political leaders are women. Hinduism is the only major religion in which God is worshiped in female form.

Life in ancient times was hard work for both men and women. The women were responsible for running the household; the men for their craft or farm, as well as security. In general, women had fewer property rights than men, but received lighter punishments for crimes and paid fewer taxes. They participated equally with their husband in religious ceremonies and festival celebrations. Some women were highly educated, and a few even composed several of the holy Vedic hymns.

The period from 1000 bce through the Gupta period up to the mid-6th century ce was a time of great advancement. Hindus discovered the zero and established the counting method, including the decimal system, we use today. Their astronomers knew that the Earth orbits the Sun and calculated the length of a year with great precision. Medicine was so advanced that doctors were performing complex surgery not equaled in Europe until the 18th century. In ancient times India was one of the most advanced and wealthy nations on Earth. Since ancient times, a quarter of the world's people have lived in India.

Key Terms:

Indus and Sarasvati rivers, Vedas, Sanskrit

Hinduism Today's Teaching Standards

This column in each of the three sections presents our outline for Hinduism in 6th grade history books. It is intended to replace existing lists of required topics, such as those found in the California Standards.

1. Explain the similarities between Indus-Sarasvati civilization and later Hindu culture.
2. Discuss why the Aryan Invasion theory has been disputed by many scholars.

3. Discuss the social and political system and advancement of science and culture.

4. Explain the development of religion in India between 1000 bce and 500 ce.

The banyan tree is a symbol of Hinduism because it gives shelter to all who approach

The disputed Aryan Invasion theory is still taught as fact in most books on India

TIMELINE: EARLY INDIAN HISTORY

5000 BCE

The sacred fire altar of the ancient Vedic rites. To this day Hindu weddings and other rites are conducted around fire altars.

2600-2000 BCE

Height of Indus-Sara-svati civilization. The city of Lothal includes large buildings and an enclosed harbor.

2000 BCE

Sarasvati River dries up. People move to North and Central India.

600 BCE

India is a unified culture at this time. Large cities flourish in the Gangetic Plains. Indian physician Sushruta develops complex methods of surgery. Tamil language flourishes in the South. First mention of temple worship appears in the Grihya Sutras.

500 BCE

Magadha Empire in the North and Pandyan Kingdom in the South flourish. Buddhism and Jainism, offshoots of Hinduism, become prominent religions.

321 BCE

Foundation of the panIndian Maurya Empire. Time of great advancement in science, statecraft, economy, architecture, music and art.

320 CE

Gupta Empire reigns over most of India, with Tamil kingdoms in far south. This is the Golden Age of India and Hinduism, with respect and tolerance for all religions.

200 BCE

Tiruvalluvar composes Tirukural, one of India's greatest scriptures on ethics

200 CE

Hindu influence starts to spread into what is now Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. In 1200 ce, the Hindu temple called Angkor Wat is built in Cambodia. It is the world's largest religious structure.

Section 1 Assessment

Reviewing Ideas, Terms and People

1. a. Explain What happened to the Sarasvati River?

b. Analyze What customs from modern Hinduism are depicted in artifacts of the Indus-Sarasvati civilization?

2. Elaborate What are the advantages of a hereditary occupation? What are the disadvantages?

3. a. Summarize How are women regarded in Hindu society?

b. Recall What are some of the great scientific achievements in ancient India?

4. a. Explain How were the Vedas preserved?

b. List What kind of information is in the Vedas?

c. Explain Why is it important that the Rig Veda mentions the Sarasvati River as a "mighty river?"

5. Analyze What does your school history book say about the Aryan Invasion? How does this lesson differ?