

[Hindu History Lesson: Hinduism from Ancient Times](#)

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## Hindu History, Chapter One: 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.

Note to Students, Parents and Teachers:

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 other faiths 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.

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### Section One: Origins of Hinduism

Hinduism Today's Teaching Standards: At the beginning of each of these chapters sections, we present 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.
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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.

The Big Idea: Hinduism developed over thousands of years in India.

Key Terms: Indus and Sarasvati rivers; Vedas; Sanskrit

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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?

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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.

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Understanding Ancient Indian History

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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.

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

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Academic Vocabulary:

continuity: unbroken connection or line of development

hereditary: passed from parents to children

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Timeline: Early Indian History

5000 BCE: Beginning of Indus-Sarasvati cities

2600-2000 BCE: Height of Indus-Sarasvati 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 pan-Indian Maurya Empire. Time of great advancement in science, statecraft, economy, architecture, music and art.

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.

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.

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## 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?

## Section Two: Hindu Beliefs and Scriptures

### Hinduism Today's Teaching Standards:

5. Explain the basic Hindu beliefs regarding God, the Gods and Goddesses, dharma, karma and reincarnation. Describe basic Hindu practices.
  6. Discuss the Hindu principles of nonviolence and religious tolerance.
  7. Describe the Vedas and their Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata (including the Bhagavad Gita) and other important Hindu scriptures.
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### What You Will Learn...

#### Main Ideas

1. Hindus believe in a one Supreme God and also many Gods and Goddesses.
2. Dharma, karma and reincarnation are central Hindu beliefs. There is a special emphasis on nonviolence.

3. Vedas are the primary Hindu scriptures. There are other important scriptures as well.

The Big Idea: Hindus believe every soul will ultimately achieve God Realization.

Key Terms: Sanatana Dharma, Brahman, deva, puja, karma, reincarnation,

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If YOU lived then...

The king has passed a new law increasing the taxes on farmers. The farmers in your village have not had a good year. The harvest is smaller than usual. The new tax may mean people will go hungry. Some in the village want to attack the tax collectors. Others want to lie about the amount of harvest. Still others say a peaceful protest will cause the king to change his mind on the tax increase.

How would you respond to the tax increase? Why?

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Building Background: From its beginnings, Hinduism has been an open-minded religion. It is a basic Hindu belief that there are many ways to approach God. Hinduism does not dictate one way as the only way. Hindus believe "Truth is one, paths are many" and that every person eventually finds spiritual salvation.

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Religion Permeates the Hindu's Daily Life

Hindus base their way of life upon their religion. The Hindu culture comes from Hindu beliefs. The key beliefs are in a one Supreme God, subordinate Gods and Goddesses, heaven worlds, the divinity of the soul, dharma, karma, reincarnation, God Realization and liberation from rebirth. God Realization means the direct and personal experience of the Divine within oneself. The original Sanskrit name for Hinduism is Sanatana Dharma, meaning "eternal religion."

## Belief in God and the Gods and Goddesses

Hindus believe in and worship a one Supreme God. In the scriptures, the Supreme God is called Brahman or Bhagavan, worshiped as both male and female. Brahman is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving and present in all things. God created everything in the universe out of Himself. This creation is not separate from Him. He guides the evolution of everything over vast spans of time. Ultimately, He absorbs the universe back into Himself. This cycle of creation, preservation and absorption repeats without end.

The Supreme God is both transcendent and immanent. These are two key philosophical concepts. As transcendent, God exists beyond the physical universe. As immanent, His divine form pervades all nature and humanity.

In Hinduism, the soul is called atman. God exists within each soul. The Chandogya Upanishad explains it like this: "What you see when you look into another person's eyes, that is atman, immortal, beyond fear; that is God."

Hinduism has different branches with varying beliefs and practices. The four major branches are Saiva, Shakta, Vaishnava and Smarta. Saivas and Shaktas call the Supreme God Siva, though Shaktas worship the female aspect of God. Vaishnavas call Him Vishnu. Smartas may choose one of six Deities to worship as the Supreme. By whichever name or form, He is the same, one Supreme God. The Rig Veda says, "The seers call in many ways that which is One."

Hindus may also worship Gods and Goddesses, called devas, such as Ganesha and Sarasvati. In Sanskrit, deva means "shining one." In some ways, these divine beings

who live in the heaven worlds are like the angels and archangels in Western religions. Some Hindus consider the Gods and Goddesses as alternative forms of the Supreme God, and not as individual divine beings.

Each God and Goddess has particular powers and areas of responsibility. For example, Ganesha is the Lord of Obstacles. Before beginning a new project, a Hindu may pray to Ganesha to remove any obstacles blocking his way.

In the Vaishnava tradition, Lord Vishnu appears on Earth as a divine personality, or avatar, from time to time to restore morally right living. Of Vishnu's ten avatars, Lord Rama and Lord Krishna are the most important. Rama and Krishna are not separate Gods. They are two forms of the one Supreme God.

In temples and shrines, the Supreme God and the Gods and Goddesses are worshiped in a ritual called puja. Puja is a ceremony in which the ringing of bells, passing of flames, chanting and presenting of flowers, incense and other offerings invoke the Divine beings, who then come to bless and help the devotees. During the puja, through holy chants, gestures and sacred ritual, highly trained priests guide the worship. The priests treat the Deity with utmost care, attending to Him as the King of kings. The purpose of the puja is to create a high religious vibration and communicate with God or a deva through the murti, or consecrated statue, that is the focus of worship. Deity is the proper English word for murti. The word idol is often used, but it is incorrect.

Hindus also practice internal worship of God. Sitting quietly, they may repeat the name of God while counting on beads. Others may chant, sing or meditate upon God. In Hinduism, there are many ways to worship the Divine.

## Dharma, Karma and Reincarnation

Dharma means righteousness, divine law, ethics, religion, duty, justice and truth. Dharma means the proper way one should live one's life. To follow dharma, one should be religious, truthful, kind, honest and generous. Dharma includes the practice of nonviolence, called ahimsa in Sanskrit. It is the ideal of not injuring

others in thought, word or action.

Karma, a central Hindu belief, is the law of cause and effect. It means that anything you do will eventually return to you in this or future lives. If we do something selfish or hateful, we will in time experience the same pain and suffering we caused to others. If our acts are good and kind, we will receive goodness and kindness.

Reincarnation means literally to "re-enter the flesh." It is the belief that the soul, atman, is reborn in a new body, experiencing many lifetimes. The purpose of rebirth is to progressively achieve spiritual maturity and God Realization. Eventually each soul learns to live by religious principles and avoid creating negative karma. The process of reincarnation continues through many lives until the soul achieves liberation.

## Hinduism's Sacred Scriptures

The four Vedas are the holiest scriptures for all Hindus. The Upanishads, an important part of the Vedas, explain the Hindu philosophy. The next most important scriptures, also in Sanskrit, are the Agamas. There are specific Agamas for each major tradition in Hinduism--Saiva, Shakta and Vaishnava. The Agamas explain philosophy, personal conduct, worship and temple construction. There are hundreds of other scriptural texts dealing with religious and secular law, government, social order, economics, ecology, health, architecture, science, music, astronomy and many other subjects. The Puranas are encyclopedic accounts of the forms and avatars of God, the many subordinate Gods and divine beings, creation, spiritual teachings, historical traditions, geography and culture. The Tirukural is a Tamil masterpiece on ethics and moral living. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali explore yoga and meditation.

The Ramayana and Mahabharata are two sacred epic histories of India. The Ramayana is the story of Lord Rama, who is the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu, and his divine wife Sita. This 24,000-verse poem describes Prince Rama's birth, His banishment to a forest for 14 years, the abduction of Sita by the demon Ravana and Rama's victory over Ravana. The Ramayana remains immensely popular to this day in India and Southeast Asia.

The Mahabharata, "Great India," is a 78,000-verse story of a massive war that took place in ancient times between the Pandavas and their cousins, the Kauravas, for the throne of a great kingdom. It also describes the nature of self and the world, karma, important family lineages of India, human loyalties, saints and sages, devotion to God and the ideals of dharma. Lord Krishna, the eighth incarnation of Lord Vishnu, is a key figure in the epic. A central episode called the Bhagavad Gita narrates Krishna's dialogue with the Pandava archer, Arjuna, on the day of the battle. It is one of the most popular and revered among Vaishnava and Smarta scriptures. Hindu sacred music, dance, drama and the arts draw heavily on the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the many Puranas.

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## Nonviolence

The Hindu principle of ahimsa, or nonviolence, is important today. Mahatma Gandhi, a devout Hindu, said, "Nonviolence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man." By nonviolent means Gandhi largely won India's independence, using peaceful protests, boycotts, strikes and speeches. In the 1950s, Martin Luther King, Jr. studied Gandhi's methods and went to India to meet his followers. He learned how India's nonviolent movement worked and applied the same methods to fight for and win civil rights for America's black minority. Aung San Suu Kyi, a devout Buddhist, has campaigned without violence for years to win democracy for the people of her native Myanmar (Burma). In 1991 she won the Nobel Peace Prize for her peaceful struggle against the country's military dictatorship. Another example is Cesar Chavez, who won rights for California farm workers using nonviolent methods.

Analysis Skill: What are the advantages of nonviolence over violence in bringing about social change?

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## Academic Vocabulary

subordinate: lower in rank, less important

pervade: to be present throughout

encompass: to surround and hold within

consecrated: made sacred through ceremony

invoke: summon a Deity; appeal to

secular: activities or things not related to religion

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## Section 2 Assessment

### Reviewing Ideas, Terms and People

1. a. Define: What is Sanatana Dharma?

b. Explain: What is a deva?

c. Elaborate: What are the two key terms used by Hindus to describe the Supreme God?



2. Categorize: What are the four main branches of Hinduism?

3. a. Recall: Why do Hindus pray first to Lord Ganesha?

b. Identify: What are the two most popular incarnations of Lord Vishnu?

c. Explain: What is the purpose of the Hindu puja?

4. a. Explain: What is karma?

b. Illustrate: What are some examples of following dharma?

c. Explain: What is the purpose of reincarnation?

5. Summarize: Make a list of Hindu scriptures, starting with the Vedas.

6. Evaluate: Why do Hindus believe that there are many ways to approach the Supreme God?

7. Understanding nonviolence:

Write a paragraph explaining your way to deal with the tax increase example given on page six. Do you think a nonviolent approach would succeed?

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## Sacred Texts: An Excerpt from the Upanishads

Translated by Swami Prabhavananda  
and Frederick Manchester

The Upanishads are the part of the Vedas that teach philosophy. The word upanishad means "sitting by devotedly," as a student sits near his guru to learn. This excerpt is taken from the Kena Upanishad. It explains the nature of the Supreme God, called Brahman in Sanskrit.

Try to sum up the meaning of each sentence in your own words.

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Once the Gods won a victory over the demons, and though they had done so only through the power of Brahman, they were exceedingly vain. They thought to themselves, "It was we who beat our enemies, and the glory is ours."

Brahman saw their vanity and appeared before them as a nature spirit. But they did not recognize Him.

Then the other Gods said to the God of fire, "Fire, find out for us who this mysterious nature spirit is."

"Yes," said the God of fire, and approached the spirit. The spirit said to him: "Who are you?"

"I am the God of fire. As a matter of fact, I am very widely known."

"And what power do you wield?"

"I can burn anything on Earth."

"Burn this," said the spirit, placing a straw before him. The God of fire fell upon it with all his might, but could not consume it. So he ran back to the other Gods and said, "I cannot discover who this mysterious spirit is."

Then said the other Gods to the God of wind: "Wind, can you find out for us who he is?"

"Yes," said the God of wind, and approached the spirit. The spirit said to him: "Who are you?"

"I am the God of wind. As a matter of fact, I am very widely known. I fly swiftly through the heavens."

"And what power do you wield?"

"I can blow away anything on Earth."

"Blow this away," said the spirit, placing a straw before him. The God of wind fell upon it with all his might, but was unable to move it. So he ran back to the other Gods and said, "I cannot discover who this mysterious spirit is."

Then said the other Gods to Indra, greatest of them all, "O respected one, find out for us, we pray you, who he is."

"Yes," said Indra and humbly approached the spirit. But the spirit vanished, and in his place stood Goddess Uma, well adorned and of exceeding beauty. Beholding her, Indra asked:

"Who was the spirit that appeared to us?"

"That," answered Uma, "was Brahman. Through Him it was, not of yourselves, that you attained your victory and your glory."

Thus did Indra, and the God of fire, and the God of wind, come to recognize Brahman, the Supreme God.

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## Word Help

philosophy: a theory or attitude that guides behavior

vain: excessively proud

mysterious: unknown

consume: to destroy completely, as by fire

adorned: beautifully dressed

beholding: looking at something remarkable

attained: won; achieved

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### Understanding Sacred Texts

1. Analyzing: Hindus believe that the Supreme God is immanent. That means He exists everywhere in the universe, in everyone and everything. How does this belief appear in the story?
  2. Comparing: What is the difference between Brahman, the Supreme God, and the other Gods introduced here--Indra, the God of fire and the God of wind?
  3. One verse says that the Gods were vain. What test did the Supreme God put them through?
  4. Indra took a different approach to finding out who the spirit was. Why did he succeed when the others failed?
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### Section Three: Hinduism in Practice

#### Hinduism Today's Teaching Standards

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8. Describe the spread of Hinduism outside of India in ancient and modern times.
  
9. Describe the daily observances of Hindus, home and temple worship, religious teachers and the major festivals.
  
10. Explain how Hinduism has survived over the last 5,000 years.

What You Will Learn...

Main Ideas

1. Hinduism has spread outside of India several times.
  
2. Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world.
  
3. Hindus practice religion at home and in temples and through the many festivals.

The Big Idea: Hinduism is the oldest world religion flourishing today.

Key Terms: samskara, bindi, puja, swami, Kumbha Mela

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If YOU lived then...

You are born in Fiji in 1910. Your parents were brought from India by the British to work in the sugarcane fields as indentured laborers. Now they are free of debt and own farmland. The public school is OK, but your parents want you to go to the best private school. The principal there says you must leave Hinduism and convert to his religion before you can enroll.

What do you think your parents would do?

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Building Background: Hinduism is the only major religion from the distant past that is still vibrant today. It survived because of its tradition of home-centered worship, because of its rich teachings and many religious leaders, and because it is not merely tolerant of other religions but respects the validity of all spiritual paths.

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## Traditions and Holy Days

Hinduism is the oldest living religion in the world. There are today nearly a billion Hindus worldwide, 95 percent of whom live on the Indian subcontinent. Hinduism continues to thrive for many reasons. Its followers find answers to their deepest questions about the mysteries of life. With personal religious practices, pilgrimage to sacred shrines, temple- and home-centered worship, Hindus strive for God Realization. And through celebration of the yearly cycle of vibrant and colorful festivals, they experience great blessings and joy.

## Basic Practices

There are five basic practices, pancha nitya karmas, often observed by Hindus.

They are to: 1) worship daily, 2) follow dharma, 3) observe the samskaras (rites of passage), 4) celebrate the holy days and 5) go on pilgrimage to sacred places. Other practices include meditation, chanting of mantras, study of scripture, hatha yoga and other yoga techniques, and simple austerities, such as fasting. There are many samskaras, including a child's name-giving ceremony, the first feeding of solid food, the beginning of formal education and marriage. It is a common practice for Hindu women to wear a bindi, a red dot on the forehead. A similar mark, called tilaka, is worn by men at the temple or on ceremonial occasions. This forehead mark symbolizes many things, especially spiritual vision.

## Worship in the Home

Every Hindu home has a place of worship. It may be as simple as a shelf with pictures of God or an entire room dedicated to worship. Many families have a spiritual guide or guru whose picture is displayed in the shrine. There, the family may light a lamp, ring a bell and pray daily. The most devout hold a formal morning worship ritual. They offer flowers, incense, lights and food to God while chanting sacred verses. Individual members will often go to the shrine for blessings before leaving for school or work. At other times one may sit alone in the shrine, pray and chant the names of God, read from scripture, meditate silently or sing devotional songs.

## Temple Worship

Hindus prefer to live within a day's journey of a temple. The temple is a special building, revered as the home of God. The main Deity is enshrined in the temple's central sanctum. In India, there are hundreds of thousands of temples, most quite ancient. Temples in India can be enormous, covering many acres, having vast pillared hallways that can accommodate 500,000 devotees during a festival. Often one or more families of priests oversee the temple and conduct the worship over many generations. When Hindus migrate outside India, they build a temple as soon as possible. At first, community leaders themselves conduct the daily rituals. Later, professional priests are hired. There are now hundreds of Hindu temples in America. The largest are in New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Texas and California.

The temple worship ceremony, or puja, is usually performed by a priest from India.



During the ceremony, he worships God by chanting Sanskrit verses from the scriptures and performing arati. Arati is the waving of an oil lamp in front of the Deity while bells are rung. The priest also offers flowers, sweets and fruit. These offerings are then distributed to the devotees as a blessing from God. Hindus may visit the temple throughout the day to worship and meditate.

## Hinduism's Saints, Teachers and Swamis

Hinduism has a rich history of saints and sages, both men and women. Their lives are educational and inspiring. They come from all castes. Some saints, such as Adi Shankara, have written detailed explanations of the Vedas and other scriptures. Other saints, such as Mirabai, Tukaram and Sambandar, taught through devotional songs. Recent saints include Sri Ramakrishna and Anandamayi Ma. Their deeply religious lives have uplifted millions of Hindus and others worldwide.

There are hundreds of thousands of religious scholars and teachers, both men and women, known as pundits. Some give spellbinding discourses on sacred scriptures, including Ramayana and Mahabharata. Tens of thousands may attend such gatherings, which include storytelling, preaching, devotional singing and drama. These events often go on for days or even a month.

Hinduism has millions of swamis and other holy persons. Swamis are unmarried men (and some women) who have taken up spiritual life full time. Swami means "he who knows himself." Some live in monasteries; others wander as homeless mendicants. Swamis are the religious ministers of Hinduism. Many swamis teach, others run large institutions that perform social service for their communities, and still others live alone and meditate long hours each day in their pursuit of divine enlightenment. Special among these are the holy gurus. Gu means darkness and ru means remover. So guru literally means "the one who removes darkness." These men and women are great religious teachers, some with millions of followers. Several gurus have popularized the Hindu practice of yoga by establishing training centers all over the world. No one person or institution is in charge of Hinduism. Instead, there are thousands of independent spiritual traditions, monastic orders and religious institutions.

## The Yearly Festival Cycle

There are many religious festivals celebrated by Hindus each year. They are observed at home, in temples and public places. Most Hindu festivals are observed according to an ancient solar-lunar calendar. Several festivals honor the avatars of Lord Vishnu. For example, Ram Navami celebrates the birth of Lord Rama in March/April. Krishna Janmashtami, in July/August, celebrates the birth of Lord Krishna.

Mahasivaratri takes place in February/March, when devotees fast and worship the transcendent Lord Siva all night in the temple. Diwali, or Dipavali, is the biggest festival of the year. It is dedicated to Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, and takes place in October/November. Navaratri is the second largest festival. It lasts nine days and takes place in September/October. It is dedicated to the worship of the Goddess, Shakti, in her three forms: Durga, the Goddess of Protection; Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, and Sarasvati, the Goddess of Knowledge.

Holi, in March/April, is a highly spirited festival where everyone sprinkles each other with colored water and powders. It signifies the triumph of good over evil and marks the beginning of the winter crop harvest. Vaikasi Visakham (May/June) is sacred to Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs. Guru Purnima is a special festival to honor one's spiritual teacher, or guru. It takes place on the full moon day in July. There are also many social festivals in India, such as Pongal. It is held in January and celebrates the incoming harvest.

One special festival, the Kumbha Mela, takes place in a twelve-year cycle. Hindu saints and millions of devotees travel to certain sacred rivers at an auspicious time for worship. The 2001 Kumbha Mela was held at Prayag (modern Allahabad) in North India. It was attended by 70 million people, including 30 million on January 24 alone. This was the largest religious gathering ever held on the Earth.

## Summary

Hinduism is the oldest world religion. It accepts that there are many ways to worship God. It has endured for so long because the religion and culture have instilled in each Hindu a unique and strong sense of identity and community. The

Rig Veda concludes, "Let there be everlasting unity and peace among all human beings."

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Hindu Migration Through the Centuries: Hinduism has spread outside of India in several waves. First it was adopted by cultures throughout Southeast Asia through the 12th century ce. Second, in the 19th century many Hindus moved to the various European colonies, such as South Africa, the Caribbean and Fiji. And most recently, Hindus migrated to more than 150 countries in the 20th century.

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## Festivals

The biggest Hindu festival of the year is Diwali, or Dipavali, the Festival of Lights, celebrating the victory of good over evil, light over darkness. It takes place for five days around the new moon in October/November. It also honors the return of Lord Rama to Ayodhya after 14 years in exile. Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth is invoked for prosperity, and Her presence is felt in every home. Hindus thoroughly clean the house, take a special bath and put on new clothes. Thousands of small lamps, including traditional clay oil lamps (pictured at right), are placed everywhere and fireworks signal hope for mankind. It is a national holiday in India and in many countries with large Hindu populations. Some Hindu festivals take place mostly at home, such as Raksha Bandhan, which is on the full moon in July/August. Sisters tie a rakhi, or colored thread, around the wrist of their brothers. In return, the brother gives his sister a present and promises to protect her. The rakhi can also be given to anyone chosen as an "adopted brother."

Analysis Skill: How do festivals help remind people to be more kind and generous to one another?

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The Impact Today: There are Hindu temples in nearly every country of the world

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### Academic Vocabulary:

indentured: under contract to work for a certain number of years

austerity: a difficult practice of self-denial and discipline

meditate: think deeply about, go within yourself or seek God within

mendicant: a holy person who lives by begging

auspicious: a favorable time--for the Mela, as determined by the Hindu calendar

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### Section 3 Assessment

#### Reviewing Ideas, Terms and People

1. a. List: What are the five basic practices of Hinduism?
  
- b. Define: What does the bindi, red dot, signify?

c. Explain: How do Hindus use their home shrine room?

2. List: What are the various kinds of priests and holy men and women in Hinduism?

3. a. Explain: What is the year's biggest Hindu festival?

b. Define: What is the meaning of the rakhi bracelet?

c. Recall: What is special about the Kumbha Mela?

d. Elaborate: Why has Hinduism lasted so long?

4. List: Make a list of three columns. In the first column write the name of a major Hindu festival. In the second, put the time of year it occurs. In the third list what it celebrates.

5. Understanding Hindu practices: Why do you think Hindus want to live near a temple?

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## Chapter One Standards Assessment

Directions: Read each question and circle the letter of the best response

1. Evidence for what form of worship in the Vedas was found by archaeologists in the ruins of the Indus-Sarasvati civilization?

- A. Temple worship
- B. Worship at fire altars
- C. Devotional singing
- D. Sacred dancing

2. The Indus-Sarasvati civilization ended because:

- A. Aryans conquered it
- B. The Sarasvati River dried up
- C. There was a great famine
- D. The people died of plague

3. The Aryan Invasion theory was based upon:

- A. Biological evidence, such as DNA
- B. Archeological discoveries
- C. Language study
- D. Ancient histories

4. Which discovery was not made in ancient India?

- A. The concept of zero
- B. Surgery
- C. That the Earth orbits the Sun
- D. The moons of Jupiter

5. Evidence of Hindu temple worship can be as early as:

- A. 1200 bce
- B. 600 bce
- C. 300 ce
- D. 900 ce

6. Which of these descriptions does not apply to women in ancient India?

- A. Had fewer property rights than men
- B. Were never educated
- C. Wrote parts of the Vedas
- D. Paid fewer taxes

7. Which of these words does not describe the Hindu concept of the Supreme God?

- A. Creator of the universe
- B. Transcendent
- C. Immanent
- D. Jealous of other Gods

8. Hindus believe that the devas, such as Lord Ganesha or Goddess Lakshmi, are like:

- A. Archangels
- B. Nature spirits
- C. Mythical heroes
- D. Imaginary people

9. Which of the following is not used in nonviolent protests?

- A. Peaceful rallies
- B. Boycotts
- C. Strikes
- D. Vandalism

10. The Hindu scriptures include:

- A. The Vedas, Upanishads and Bible
- B. The Vedas, Ramayana and Qur'an
- C. The Vedas, Upanishads, Ramayana and Mahabharata
- D. The Mahabharata and the Iliad

11. Hindus believe that every other religion:

- A. Is an acceptable way to approach God
- B. Is wrong
- C. Is useful, but only Hindus go to heaven
- D. Is not as good because Hinduism is older

12. How many countries do Hindus live in today?

- A. 20
- B. 50
- C. 100
- D. More than 150

13. The saints of Hinduism are:

- A. Primarily high-caste men
- B. Only people who lived a long time ago
- C. Men and women of all castes
- D. Mostly great scholars

14. The biggest religious event in the world is:

- A. The Kumbha Mela



- B. Easter Sunday in Rome
- C. The annual pilgrimage to Mecca
- D. Christmas in New York City

Internet Resources: Go to <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/education/> for a PDF version of this lesson with clickable links to resources. Also at the same url are additional teaching resources and letters of endorsement from academics and community leaders. To order additional copies of this educational insight, go to <http://www.minimela.com/booklets/>.