



HINDU
AMERICAN
FOUNDATION

**SHORT
ANSWERS
TO
REAL
QUESTIONS**



ABOUT
HINDUISM

The **Hindu American Foundation** (HAF) is a human rights group whose purpose is to provide a voice for the 2 million strong Hindu American community. HAF interacts with and educates government, media, think tanks, academia and public fora about Hinduism and issues of concern to Hindus locally and globally. Promoting the Hindu and American ideals of understanding, tolerance and pluralism, HAF stands strong against hate, discrimination, defamation and terror.

The Hindu American Foundation is not affiliated with any religious or political organizations or entities. HAF seeks to serve Hindu Americans across all sampradayas (Hindu religious traditions).

SHORT ANSWERS TO **REAL** QUESTIONS ABOUT HINDUISM

Hindu Americans comprise one of the fastest growing populations in the United States. Of the **1 billion** Hindus worldwide, the Hindu American population currently numbers around **2 million**, but this does not include the estimated **32 million** others who derive inspiration from Hindu spirituality and practice Hindu teachings such as yoga and meditation. With growing numbers comes an increasing awareness of a place in American dialogue and the need for the accurate portrayal of the faith in line with its beliefs and practices.

The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) presents herein, some short answers to common questions about Hinduism. This has been created with the help of noted Hinduism scholars and religious leaders. We sincerely hope this will serve as a useful primer for many.



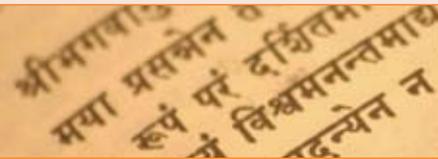
Why does Hinduism have many Gods?

Hindus believe in **one, all-pervasive supreme God**, though He or She may be worshipped in different forms and by different names. As such, Hinduism can be described as both monotheistic and henotheistic; monotheistic in its belief in one God and henotheistic in that any one God can be worshipped without denying the existence of other forms or manifestations of God. This Hindu concept of divinity is best represented by the ancient Sanskrit hymn, Rg Veda I.64.46:

Ekam sat vipraha bahudha vadanti

Truth is one, the wise call it by many names.

And just as Hindus believe that Truth is one, called by many names, so too is God called by many names.



Do Hindus have a "Bible"?

Hinduism is rich in scripture, but does not have a "Bible" in terms of one central, authoritative book. Hindu scripture is an **extensive collection of ancient religious writings** which expound upon eternal Truths that have been revealed by God and realized by the ancient sages and enlightened wise men. These Truths, which were passed on for generations through an extraordinary oral tradition, include the Vedas and Agamas, the Upanishads, the Epics, including the Bhagavad Gita and Ramayana, the Puranas, lawbooks and many other philosophical and sectarian texts.

Scripture in Hinduism, however, does not have the same place as it does in many other faiths. Hinduism is premised on realization, not revelation. To be enlightened, one must have personal experience of the Truths set out in the Vedas and other revealed scriptures. Important to note also is that the words of a living, enlightened teacher are as valid as the words of scripture.



Do Hindus believe in reincarnation?

Hindus believe that the **soul is immortal and evolves** by experiencing varied lives through the process wherein the soul reincarnates into different physical bodies through cycles of birth and death. Guided by the Laws of Karma (see below), the soul continues on its path of spiritual evolution. The ultimate aim of Hindus is for the soul to attain freedom from this continuous cycle of birth and rebirth and discover its divine origin.



What is Karma?

Karma is the **universal law of cause and effect**. The critical and subtler understanding of karma is that each action has a reaction and that this cycle is endless. Thus if one sows goodness, one reaps goodness and conversely, if one sows evil, one will reap evil. To avoid the cycle of karma, Hindus strive to remain unattached to the fruits of their virtuous action in thought, word, and deed. When one can work without expecting rewards, Hindus believe that society as a whole benefits and the individual is freed from the cycle of karma and reincarnation. The Bhagavad Gita, III.19 and III.20 expounds on this:

*Tasm d asakta satatam
K ryam karma sam cara
Asakto hy caran karma*

*Lokasampraham ev 'pi
Sampa yan kartum arhasi
Param pnoti p rusah*

Therefore, without attachment
Perform always the work that has to be done
For man attains to the highest
By doing work without attachment

Likewise you should perform with a view to guide others
And for the sake of benefiting the welfare of the world



What is Dharma?

Dharma is the **mode of conduct** for an individual that is most **conducive to spiritual advancement**. There are several categories of dharma, including Sanatana Dharma or Eternal Law, which encompasses the inherent laws of nature and the Divine, and samanya dharma and vishesha dharma.

Samanya dharma includes general laws that govern all forms and functions, including one's duty to strive towards and achieve contentment; forgiveness; self-restraint; non-stealing; purity; control of senses; discrimination between right and wrong; spiritual knowledge; truthfulness; and absence of anger.

Vishesha dharma, or special duties, expound upon social law or the laws defining an individual's responsibilities within the nation, society, community and family; law according to life stage or the laws governing age-appropriate duties related to the natural process of maturing from childhood to old age; and personal law or the individualized application of dharma according to an individual's sum of past karma, intelligence, aptitudes, tendencies, physical characteristics and community.



Why are many Hindus vegetarian?

In India, more than 20% of all Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs are vegetarian because of the **fundamental belief in non-violence**, or in Sanskrit, ahimsa. The Vedas propound that all beings, from the smallest organism to man, are considered manifestations of God and members of a universal family. With this worldview, violence in thought, word or deed against a living being is contrary to the natural balance of the universe. Many Hindus, therefore, refrain from killing animals for food when a plethora of vegetarian alternatives are available.



What is the caste system and untouchability?

Caste was the division of the ancient Indic civilization based on **four general occupational groupings**, which included workers, business people, law enforcers and lawmakers and priests. Within these four groups were thousands of sub-groups. Over the millennia, what was to be a skills and aptitude based guild system was rigidified into a hereditary hierarchy. This distortion was a result of certain social practices and taboos gaining acceptance over time and countless invasions by foreign civilizations. The “lowest” class, deemed untouchables, was marginalized, facing widespread prejudice. It should be emphasized that there is **no** basis for a discriminatory caste system in revealed Hindu scripture. Vedic and non-Vedic scripture advance the concept **equality of all** mankind as demonstrated in the ancient hymn:

Ajyesthaso akanishthaso ete sambhrataro vahaduhu saubhagaya

No one is superior, none inferior.
All are brothers marching forward to prosperity.

Lacking an authoritative scriptural basis, it is unfortunate that the Hindu religion has been conflated with the reprehensible practice of social discrimination that has manifested as racism, religious persecution and slavery in other cultures throughout the world.

Despite immense societal discrimination and prejudices, however, there have been countless saints and sages from the “lower” castes who have profoundly impacted Hindu philosophy and devotional practice. To cite only a few: Sant Raidas, a chamar or cobbler who was the guru of Mirabai, the most famous of the women devotional poets of northern India; Sant Ramdev, a prominent devotional poet from central India important to both Hindu and Sikh traditions; and Sant Tiruvalluvar of southern India who wrote the *Tirukkural*, an

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influential scripture of sacred wisdom. Modern-day saints, with millions of followers worldwide include Mata Amritanandamayi or Ammachi who was born into a fishermen community, and Satya Sai Baba who was born into an agrarian community.

Jurisprudence in modern India outlaws caste discrimination and contemporary Hindu spiritual leaders and organizations, including but certainly not limited to Raja Ram Mohan Roy; Mahatma Gandhi; Narayan Guru; Sri Shivamurthy Murugharajendra; Arya Samaj; Sahayoga Foundation have been engaged in eradicating this system from society.



What is the status of women in the practice of Hinduism?

One of the most profound attributes of Hinduism is the recognition and worship of the God as feminine. In fact, Hinduism is the only major religion, which has always worshipped **God in female form** and continues to do so today. Hindus revere God's energy, or Shakti, through its personification in a Goddess. The Vedas are replete with hymns extolling the equality of men and women in the spiritual, social and educational realms. It is unfortunate, however, that the gender equality of the Vedic period and that of the Hindu view of the Divine has been corrupted by the realities of social practice and taboo. Yet, Hinduism remains one of a few major religions in which women have occupied and continue to occupy some of the most respected positions in the spiritual leadership including, Sharda Devi, The Mother, Anandamayi, Amritanandmayi Devi or Ammachi, Shree Maa, Anandi Ma, Gurumayi Chidvilasananda and Ma Yoga Shakti.



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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

HAF remains available to actively assist in obtaining information pertaining to Hinduism, offering Hindu perspectives on contemporary issues and providing access to a vast network of well-respected Hindu spiritual leaders and academics.

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