



vegetarianism

Many Hindus eat a vegetarian diet. This is part of the practice of *ahimsa* or non-violence. Both priests and householders may commit to vegetarianism in order to avoid harming other living beings. Even if a Hindu consumes other meat, practicing Hindus do not usually consume beef or veal.



Holy cows

In India, cows are sacred to all Hindus. In Hinduism, the cow is a symbol of wealth, strength, abundance, selfless giving and a full Earthly life. In practical terms, cows supply milk and butter which are staples in the Indian diet. Cow dung is also used in several important applications: it fertilizes crops, provides fuel and deters mosquitoes. The earth-goddess is depicted as a cow and from her flows all types of useful substances. In modern India, cows roam the streets freely. Feeding cows and adorning them with garlands of flowers brings good fortune.

The cow was also venerated by Gandhi. He said: "I worship it and I shall defend its worship against the whole world," and that, "The central fact of Hinduism is cow protection." He regarded her better than the earthly mother, and called her "the mother to millions of Indian mankind."

The Varnas and the Dalits



BRAHMINS:



KSHATRIYAS:



VAISHYAS:



SUDRAS:



DALITS:

Rekha Datta

Caste System

Varna refers to the main division of Hindu society into four social classes or castes. This quadruple division is not to be confused with the much finer division of the contemporary caste system in India into hundreds if not thousands of castes. An Indian Hindu is born into a caste and cannot alter or leave it through work, study, or wealth. Sometimes, a person can change their caste by marrying and—seven generations down the road—their children will be considered members of the newly assumed caste.

The four varnas are:

- the Brahmins: clergy and teachers wielding religious authority;
- the kshatriyas: warriors and administrators, wielding political power;
- the vaishyas: merchants and farmers or cattle-herders with economic prosperity;
- the shudras: servants, laborers or unfree peasants.

The dalit caste, or the untouchables, are below these four varnas in a category of their own. The word ‘dalit’ comes from the ancient Sanskrit for “crushed or ground into pieces”. Dalits are not allowed to participate in religious life. Outside of major cities, discrimination limits their career choices to sewer worker or garbage hauler.

The Indian Constitution of 1950 outlawed discrimination based on caste, but the system is very deeply ingrained into Indian culture and is still very much in practice. Many modern Hindus reject the idea of castes and challenge the scriptural basis for these social biases.



Brahmin boys come of age

These are junior high-aged boys participating in their upanayama ceremony. This marks their coming of age. At this ceremony, they receive a sacred thread—the same length as their height and folded into three loops — that they will wear across their left shoulder for the rest of their life. The thread will remind them to be pure in thought, word and deed.

After the upanayama, the boy will study the Vedas to learn by heart.

There is no religious ceremony for girls, however many Indian families mark a daughter's passage into adulthood. They invite their relatives and neighbors over and formally announce it. The purpose of the ceremony is to provide awareness to the daughter about the changes that will proceed, and also to make them clear about Do's and Don'ts, they should follow. The girls will be made to wear the traditional sari and they are showered with turmeric water, during the occasion.



Offerings at a shrine

Hinduism is practiced daily at home and at temple on special occasions. Most homes have a shrine to one or more gods or goddesses. Each morning, the shrine is cleaned, prayers are chanted and offerings of fruit and flowers are made to adorn the altar. The more beautiful the arrangement of food or flowers, the more worthy it is considered. Rice, butter, fruit and sugar are all appropriate food offerings. It is believed that the gods take the essence of the food. The leftover food is collected at the end of the day and distributed to the poor or the worshippers at the temple.

This food, having been consecrated by the gods, is considered to be a great blessing to those who eat it.



The Ganges

Water is the most sacred of natural elements to Hindus. The holiest body of water in India is the River Ganges. Some Hindus also believe life is incomplete without taking a bath in Ganges at least once in their lives. Many Hindu families keep a vial of water from the Ganges in their house. The river is the embodiment of the goddess Ganga and is worshipped by Hindus. The waters of the river can cleanse and heal believers, as it flows to earth from an origin in Heaven during the time of Creation. Its geographic source is the snowmelt of five peaks high in the Himalayas.



Hindu funeral rites

In Hinduism, the dead body is considered impure, so minimal physical contact is maintained. Most often the body is bathed with purified water, and then dressed in new clothes (men and widows in white clothes, women and girls in red or yellow). Sacred ash or sandalwood paste is applied to the forehead. A few drops of holy Ganges water may be put in the mouth of the deceased to benefit the soul, and a few leaves of the holy basil are placed on the right side of the dead body. The body may be adorned with jewels, placed on a stretcher, with the head pointing towards the south and adorned with different flowers including roses, jasmine, and marigolds, and the body is almost covered with the flowers.

The cremation ground is traditionally located near a river, if not on the river bank itself. There, a pyre is prepared, on which the corpse is laid with its feet facing southwards, so that the dead person can walk in the direction of the dead. The jewels, if any, are removed. Thereafter, the chief mourner (generally the eldest son) walks around the pyre three times keeping the body to his left. While walking he sprinkles water and sometimes ghee onto the pyre from a vessel. He then sets the pyre alight with a torch of flame. The mourning period lasts until the 13th day after death. When the fire consumes the body, which may take a few hours, the mourners return home. Immediately after the cremation the entire family is expected to have a bath. One or two days after the funeral, the chief mourner returns to the cremation ground to collect the mortal remains and put them in an urn. These remains are then immersed in a river.



The trimurti

- These “trimurti” gods have similarities: face, arms, mehendi on right hand. That’s because they’re actually three manifestations of the same power (like a trinity).
- Brahma (on the left) the Creator
 - Creator of the world and speaker of the Four Vedas—the holy scriptures of Hinduism
 - In his hands he holds the four things:
 - Vedas written on paper,
 - a bowl of the water of Creation,
 - a lotus flower representing the expansive unfolding of Creation
 - prayer beads to remind Hindus to pray
- Vishnu (in the middle) the Protector
 - Protector of all life, he has four arms that can reach the four corners of the Universe
 - His skin is always deep blue like the infinite sky and the deep ocean, both within his realm
 - He’s always depicted showing these four things in art:
 - A conch shell that when blown makes the “OM” sound that began the universe
 - A *chakra*—a razor sharp discus weapon that can cut through anything—symbolizing the disciplined mind
 - A *gada*—a scepter-like mace representing his supreme reign over all present spiritual and physical worlds
 - A crown, in this case made of the hundred heads of the naga, one of the first beings created—each head is a planet
- Shiva (on the right) the Destroyer
 - Destroyer of all things, he has a third eye that burns away all desire and his weapon is the trident.
 - His skin is grey because he rubs it with the ashes of all the things he destroys
 - The Ganges river flows from his matted hair
 - Shiva is often depicted wearing a tiger skin, a live serpent and the crescent moon in his hair.



reincarnation

The idea that the soul (of any living being with a consciousness) reincarnates is intricately linked to karma, a concept first recorded in the Upanishads. Karma (literally: action) is the sum of one's actions and the force that determines one's next reincarnation. The cycle of death and rebirth, governed by karma, is referred to as samsara.

Hinduism teaches that the soul goes on repeatedly being passed from body to body through the physical cycle of death and birth. One is reborn on account of desire: a person desires to be born because he or she wants to enjoy worldly pleasures, which can be enjoyed only through a body. Hinduism does not teach that all worldly pleasures are sinful, but it teaches that they can never bring deep, lasting happiness or peace (*ānanda*). According to the Hindu sage Adi Shankaracharya, the world - as we ordinarily understand it - is like a dream: fleeting and illusory. To be trapped in samsara is a result of ignorance of the true nature of our existence.

After many births, every person eventually becomes dissatisfied with the limited happiness that worldly pleasures can bring. At this point, a person begins to seek higher forms of happiness, which can be attained only through spiritual experience. When, after much spiritual practice (*sādhanā*), a person finally realizes his or her own divine nature—i.e., realizes that the true "self" is the immortal soul rather than the body or the ego—all desires for the pleasures of the world will vanish, since they will seem insipid compared to spiritual *ānanda*. When all desire has vanished, the person will not be reborn anymore.

When the cycle of rebirth thus comes to an end, a person is said to have attained moksha, or salvation from samsara