

The History of Hinduism

By Colleen Messina



¹ Hinduism is so old that no one knows exactly how it began. Most scholars think that it began about 3,000 years ago near the Indus River of northwestern India. It spread across India and then to the rest of Asia. Even though some Asian countries later made Islam or Buddhism their state religion, Hinduism is still the major religion of the people of India. Colorful roadside shrines and the tinkling of temple bells in Asia are constant reminders of Hinduism.



² Hinduism has no original founder and no single holy text. The first Hindu teachers were called Brahmins. They passed down the teachings of Hinduism through oral stories at first. Later, the stories became the Rig-Veda, which was written down in 1,500 B.C. These teachings may have come from a people called the Aryans whose language may have been the predecessor of Sanskrit.

³ The Aryans were nomadic warriors who dominated northern India between 3,000 and 1,500 B.C. Later, they moved down into southern India where they met powerful local tribes. We don't know a lot about the Aryans because they left no cities behind for archaeologists to study. These nomads finally settled near the Ganges River around 400 B.C.

⁴ In the centuries before the birth of Christ, a mysterious author/authors (or authoress/authoresses) wrote two important Hindu scriptures, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Both of these epic poems tell stories involving kings and conflicts. They convey many truths in an entrancing, poetic form. During these centuries, India was divided into kingdoms that were ruled by rich princes.

⁵ A certain order of society in India was firmly established. This became known as the caste system, and it was based on another ancient Hindu text called the Bhagavad-Gita. The legend said that out of the mouth of a god came the scholars and priests. Rulers and warriors came from the god's arms. From the god's thighs came the merchants and farmers. The servants and laborers came from the god's feet. A last group, called the "untouchables," performed some of the most menial labor in society, such as cleaning bathrooms and sweeping the streets.

⁶ The caste system dominated Indian society for centuries. Hindus thought that if they earned good karma, they would be born into a higher caste in their next life. Some Hindus believed that this system helped their society run well for hundreds of years. They believed that it made things easier because everyone had certain duties to perform. If you were born into the laborer caste, you were

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expected to work with your hands. Those who opposed this system said that it was wrong because people's abilities were not always inherited. The caste system still influences Indian society today.

⁷ In addition to the caste system, Hindus lived by a code of ethics written down by an Indian sage named Patanjali. He lived in about 200 B.C., and he wrote a list of five things that people should do and five ways in which people should exercise restraint. The things people should do are called *niyamas*, and include being pure in body, mind, and speech. The *yamas* are what people should not do, and include lying and stealing. His ideas became important elements of daily life, but no one forced Hindus to follow these rules.

⁸ Hinduism is not a religion of force. It was not spread through conquest or aggression. By its very nature, Hinduism is fluid and tolerant of many types of spiritual paths. Hinduism advocates achieving one's spiritual potential, but recognizes that there is more than one way to accomplish this goal. Instead, it focuses on the spirit rather than rigid rules or ceremonies. Its history does not have dramatic battle scenes or massive conversions, and Hinduism reached its height around 350 A.D. in what was called its Golden Age.

⁹ Hinduism's recognition of the spirit behind all things is evident in the wistful words of the Bhagavad-Gita:

*"Never the spirit was born,
The spirit shall cease to be never.
Changeless the spirit remains,
Birthless and deathless forever."*

¹⁰ Hindus have faced domination by other peoples during their long history. Two excellent examples of this were the Muslim invasion of India in the 8th century, and the control of India by the British until the early 20th century. During the 8th century, Hinduism faced severe challenges. Islamic invaders destroyed many temples and villages in northern India and tried to introduce Islam. In spite of these invasions, most Hindus still clung to their religion rather than convert. Unfortunately, many Hindus suffered under the Muslim conquerors through excessive taxation and persecution.

¹¹ Hinduism survived because it was not just a belief system. It was a way of life for the Indians. Hinduism survived under different Mogul emperors partly of the idea of *bhakti*, or devotion and surrender to a particular god. This attitude enabled the Hindus to endure their persecution. In spite of many hardships, some elements of Islam and Hinduism intertwined in a positive way. Islamic art and architecture became common in India, and many Muslims also adopted Hindu art

and culture.

¹² Another example of external domination of the Hindus occurred during the British control of India from the 17th to the early 20th century. The word "Hinduism" was first used in the early 1800s. Christian missionaries came to India to convert the Hindus to Christianity. While the missionaries were sincere in their efforts, they were not sensitive to the ancient Indian culture, and their message was not received well. During this time, other reformers advocated positive change and growth in some elements of Hinduism. Two important reformers were Ramakrishna, a 19th century teacher, and Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of the independence movement of India in the early 20th century. Gandhi used many ideas from the Bhagavad-Gita in his life's work.

¹³ India became independent in 1947 and became a secular country. Hinduism is still practiced by 80% of the Indian population and has about 800 million followers worldwide. Nepal is the only official Hindu state, but the influence of Hinduism is seen everywhere in Southeast Asia. Some ideas from Hinduism, such as karma and reincarnation, show up in movies and late-night television. As one comedian says, "Don't worry! If you don't believe in reincarnation this time around, you'll get another chance!"

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<p>1. Which ancient people were the possible originators of Hinduism?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> A The Shivans</p> <p><input type="radio"/> B The Sumerians</p> <p><input type="radio"/> C The Asians</p> <p><input type="radio"/> D The Aryans</p>	<p>2. What is the name of the social structure of India in the past?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> A The pecking order</p> <p><input type="radio"/> B The hierarchy</p> <p><input type="radio"/> C The caste system</p> <p><input type="radio"/> D The social ladder</p>
<p>3. Which of the following are true statements about Hinduism? Check all that apply.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> A We know exactly when Hinduism began.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> B Hinduism has more than one sacred text.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> C Hinduism is an aggressive religion.</p> <p><input type="radio"/> D The Rig-Veda was an ancient Hindu prophet.</p>	<p>4. Who wrote down the Hindu code of ethics?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> A Gandhi</p> <p><input type="radio"/> B Patanjali</p> <p><input type="radio"/> C Buddha</p> <p><input type="radio"/> D King Indra</p>
<p>5. Which country controlled India in the 19th century?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> A The United States</p> <p><input type="radio"/> B China</p> <p><input type="radio"/> C Britain</p> <p><input type="radio"/> D Russia</p>	<p>6. What is the antonym of the word, "secular?"</p> <p><input type="radio"/> A Worldly</p> <p><input type="radio"/> B Cultural</p> <p><input type="radio"/> C Religious</p> <p><input type="radio"/> D Political</p>
<p>7. What is the official religion of the country of India today?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> A Hinduism</p> <p><input type="radio"/> B Buddhism</p> <p><input type="radio"/> C Islam</p> <p><input type="radio"/> D It is a secular state.</p>	<p>8. Who was the leader of the independence movement in India?</p> <p><input type="radio"/> A Ramakrishna</p> <p><input type="radio"/> B Gandhi</p> <p><input type="radio"/> C Paul Revere</p> <p><input type="radio"/> D Patanjali</p>