

◀ A Brahmin, or Hindu priest, prays at dawn beside the sacred Ganges River.

## Learning About Hindu Beliefs

### 15.1 Introduction

In Chapter 14, you visited the ruins of Mohenjodaro to learn about the Indus-Sarasvati civilization of ancient India. In this chapter, you will learn about the origins and beliefs of **Hinduism**, India's first major religion.

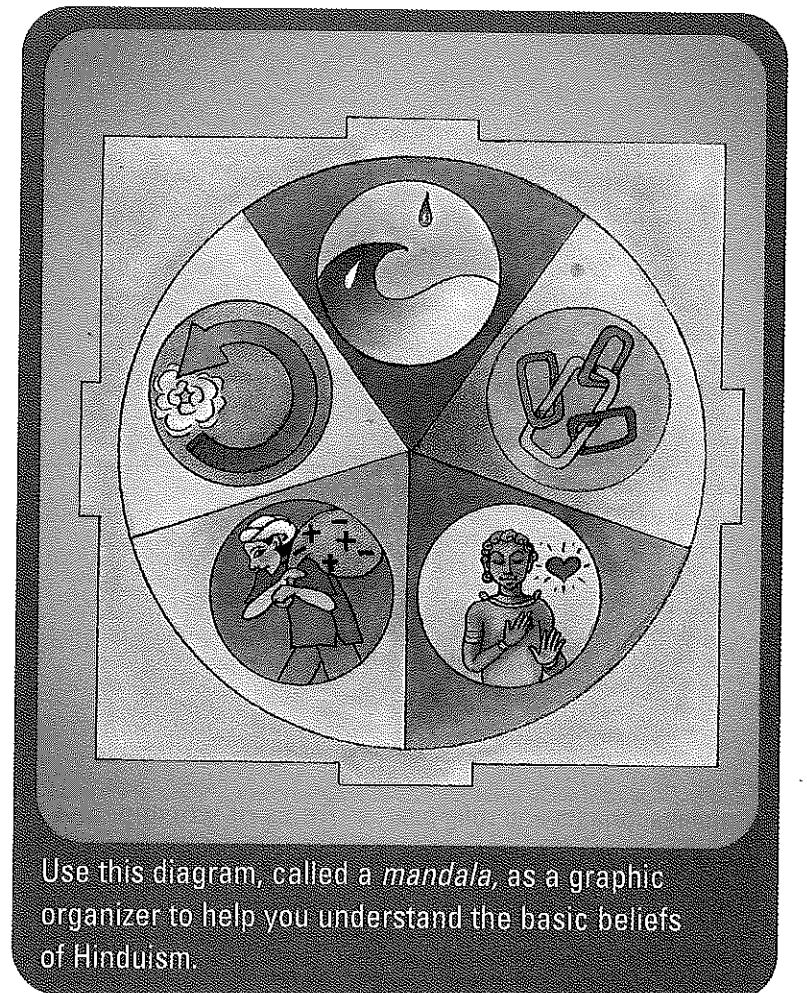
Hinduism has shaped Indian life in countless ways. It has affected how people worship, what jobs they do, and even what they eat. It has inspired great art and literature. And it has helped to determine the status of people in Indian society.

One of the basic beliefs of Hinduism is **dharma**. Dharma stands for law, obligation, and duty. To follow one's dharma means to perform one's duties and so to live as one should.

One of the most famous Hindu sacred texts is the *Ramayana*. The *Ramayana* tells about life in ancient India and offers models in dharma.

The central figure of the *Ramayana*, Rama, lives by the rules of dharma. When Rama is a young boy, he is a loyal son. When he grows up, he is a loving husband and a responsible ruler.

In this chapter, you will explore the origins of Hinduism. Then, you'll learn about dharma and the other basic Hindu beliefs: **Brahman**, **deities**, **karma**, and **samsara**.



## 15.2 The Origins of Hinduism

Hinduism is a very old religion, so old that it began before recorded history. No single person founded it. It developed slowly, over a long period of time.

The sacred Vedas were composed in the ancient language of Sanskrit.

In the second millennium B.C.E., people called Aryans migrated into northern India. Some historians credit the Aryans with bringing elements of what later became Hinduism to India.



Others believe that traces of Hinduism can be found in ancient artifacts left by India's original settlers. These artifacts include items like those found at Mohenjodaro. Pools, hearths, and pictures on stone seals may be early evidence of practices that are features of Hinduism. Such practices include ritual bathing, lighting sacred (holy) fires, and worshiping certain deities.

Early Hindu religion is called Vedism, after the **Vedas**. The Vedas are a collection of sacred texts, including verses, hymns, prayers, and teachings composed in **Sanskrit**. (Veda is Sanskrit for "knowledge.") The Vedas were taught orally for hundreds of years before India had a written form of Sanskrit.

Vedic rituals and sacrifices honored a number of deities associated with nature and social order. Over time, these rituals became more and more complex. A class of priests and religious scholars, called Brahmins, grew increasingly important because only they knew how to interpret the Vedas and correctly perform the rituals. Brahmins became the dominant class in India. Later Vedism is often called **Brahmanism**.

Modern-day Hinduism is very complex. Many beliefs, many forms of worship, and many deities exist side by side. But all Hindus share certain beliefs. The Vedas remain sacred to Hindus today. Along with later sacred texts, the Vedas lay out the basic beliefs of Hinduism. As you will see, these beliefs have influenced every part of life in India.

**Vedas** a collection of Hindu sacred writings  
**Sanskrit** an ancient language of India  
**Brahmanism** an ancient Indian religion in which the Brahmins (priests and religious scholars) are the dominant class

## 15.3 Hinduism and the Caste System

Hinduism was not just a religion in ancient India. It was a way of life. It affected how Indians lived, what they believed, and even the way they organized their society.

Brahmanism taught that a well-organized society was divided into social classes. Europeans later called this the **caste** system. The Vedas describe four main social classes:

- **Brahmins** (priests and religious scholars)
- **Kshatriyas** (rulers and warriors)
- **Vaishyas** (herders and merchants)
- **Shudras** (servants)

According to the Vedas, each class, or *varna*, had its own duties. For example, Brahmins had a duty to study and teach the Vedas. Warriors had a duty to become skilled with weapons. But the caste system meant that some people were much more favored than others. Brahmins held the top place, while Shudras held the lowest.

Over the centuries a fifth class developed, called the *untouchables*. These were people whose jobs or ways of life involved activities that Hindus considered lowly or "dirty," such as handling garbage and dead animals. Untouchables often had to live in their own villages or neighborhoods. They could not enter many temples or attend most schools. Other Hindus avoided touching them and, in many cases, even looking at them.

The caste system affected all aspects of people's lives. Indians were born into a certain caste, and they could not change it. In addition, people could only marry within their own caste.

The class system is just one example of how Hinduism affected the fabric of daily life in India. Let's look now at the five basic beliefs of Hinduism and how they helped to shape Indian life and culture.

**caste** a class, or group, in Hindu society



Even today, the highest caste in India is the Brahmins. They are identified by the sacred thread worn over their shoulders.



Modern Hindus can visit portable, or mobile, shrines set up at convenient locations.

## 15.4 Hindu Beliefs About Brahman

*Brahman* is the Hindu name for a supreme power, or a divine force, that is greater than all the other deities. To Hindus, only Brahman exists forever. Everything else in the world changes, from the passing seasons to living things that eventually die.

Hinduism sees time going around in a circle, like a great wheel. The same events return, just as the sun rises each morning and spring follows winter. Hindus believe Brahman is constantly creating, destroying, and re-creating the universe. This cycle never ends.

According to Hindu belief, everything in the world is a part of Brahman, including the human soul. Hindus call the soul *atman*. It is a part of Brahman, just as a drop of water is part of the ocean.

Through their own souls, peo-

ple are connected to Brahman. The other deities in Hinduism also are various forms of Brahman.

To connect with their deities, ancient Hindus began to build great temples in the sixth century C.E. They wrote exact instructions about where and how to build temples. Modern Hindu temples are still built using these ancient directions.

Many Hindu temples are magnificent in size and design. Their doors always face east, toward the rising sun. The buildings are covered with beautiful carvings and sculptures. These works of art usually show deities from Hindu sacred texts. Inside, temples usually contain a tower and a small shrine.

Modern Hindus continue to visit temples to express their love of the deities. Visitors often sit quietly and meditate. At other times they give thanks, make requests, and take part in rituals.

## 15.5 Hindu Beliefs About Deities

There are many deities in Hindu sacred texts and worship. Over time, Hindus came to believe that all the deities were different faces of Brahman. Each of them represented a power or quality of Brahman.

In ancient times, the most popular and powerful deity was Indra. Indra was the deity of thunder. He was fiercely warlike. He used lightning bolts as weapons. The Vedas describe him as driving a blazing gold chariot across the sky and riding a magnificent white elephant.

Today, the most important Hindu deities are Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Each deity controls one aspect of the universe. Brahma creates it, Vishnu preserves it, and Shiva destroys it. The deity Devi is also important. She embodies the female powers of the universe. Hindu deities are often quite fantastic in appearance. For example, Vishnu is sometimes pictured as having blue skin and six arms. The deity's "extra" arms are a symbol of strength. Shiva has been pictured as having three eyes. This symbolizes being able to see events from a distance.

Ancient Hindu sacred texts often described heroic deities battling evil. One of the most famous stories is the *Ramayana*. It tells of Rama's fierce battle with Ravana, a demon (evil spirit). This sacred text also presents some of Hinduism's basic beliefs in an entertaining way. Many Hindu children have learned about their religion by listening to the *Ramayana*.

Sacred texts like the *Ramayana* have inspired many Hindu holidays and festivals. The Hindu New Year is celebrated during the Divali festival. Divali means "row of lamps." The lamps are symbols of good (light) winning over evil (darkness). They represent Rama's triumph over the evil Ravana, and the beginning of the Hindu New Year.

Hindu families light candles and sparklers to celebrate Divali, the festival of lights.





A Hindu wedding ceremony in Malaysia. Marriage is one form of dharma.

### 15.6 Hindu Beliefs About Dharma

Dharma is a very important idea in Hinduism. Dharma stands for law, obligation, and duty. To follow one's dharma means to perform one's duties and so to live as one should.

As you have already read, in the Vedas each social class, or varna, had its own duties. These duties usually involved a certain type of work, such as serving as a warrior or herding animals. Each class, then, had its own dharma. In fact, Hindus called their system of social classes *varna dharma*. This means "the way of one's kind." Hindus believed that when everyone followed the dharma of their varna, society would be in harmony.

Brahmins, for example, were society's priests and religious scholars. Their duties included performing rituals and teaching the Vedas. This was quite an accomplishment, since the Vedas were not written down for over 1,000 years. To recite them orally, the Brahmins had to memorize more than 100,000 verses!

In addition to the dharma of their varna, Hindus are expected to follow a common dharma, or set of values. For example, Hinduism values marriage, sharing food with others, and caring for one's soul.

Another basic value is nonviolence. Hindus believe that all life forms have a soul, so Hindus respect all forms of life and avoid doing them harm. This reverence for life came to be symbolized by the cow. Perhaps this was because cows were especially important in Indian life. Cows gave people milk and butter. After they died, their skins could be turned into clothing. People were taught not to kill them.

### 15.7 Hindu Beliefs About Karma

The belief of dharma expresses much of what Hindus believe about the right way to live. Another belief, *karma*, explains the importance of living according to dharma.

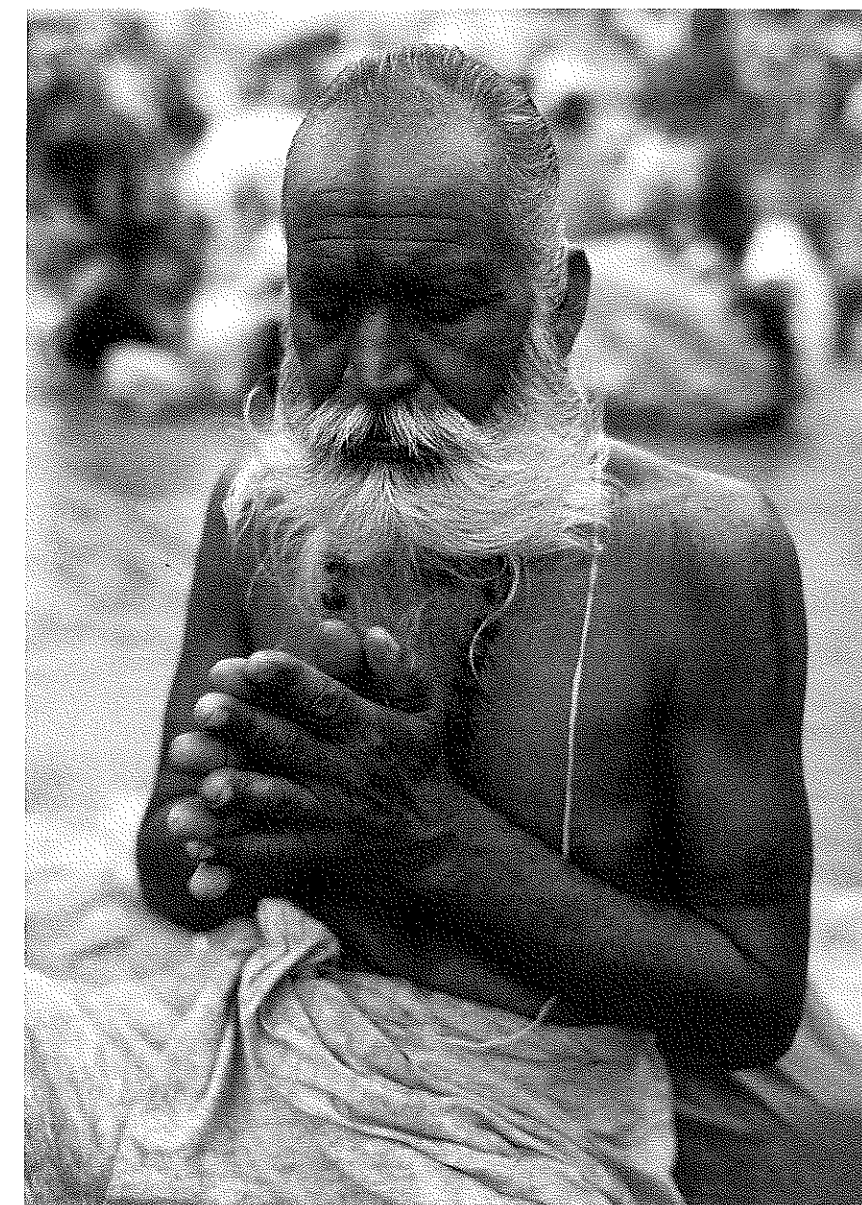
In Hindu belief, the law of karma governs what happens to people's souls after death. From ancient times, Hindus believed that souls had many lives. When a person died, his or her soul was reborn in a new body. But what type of body would the reborn soul get? The answer depended on the soul's karma.

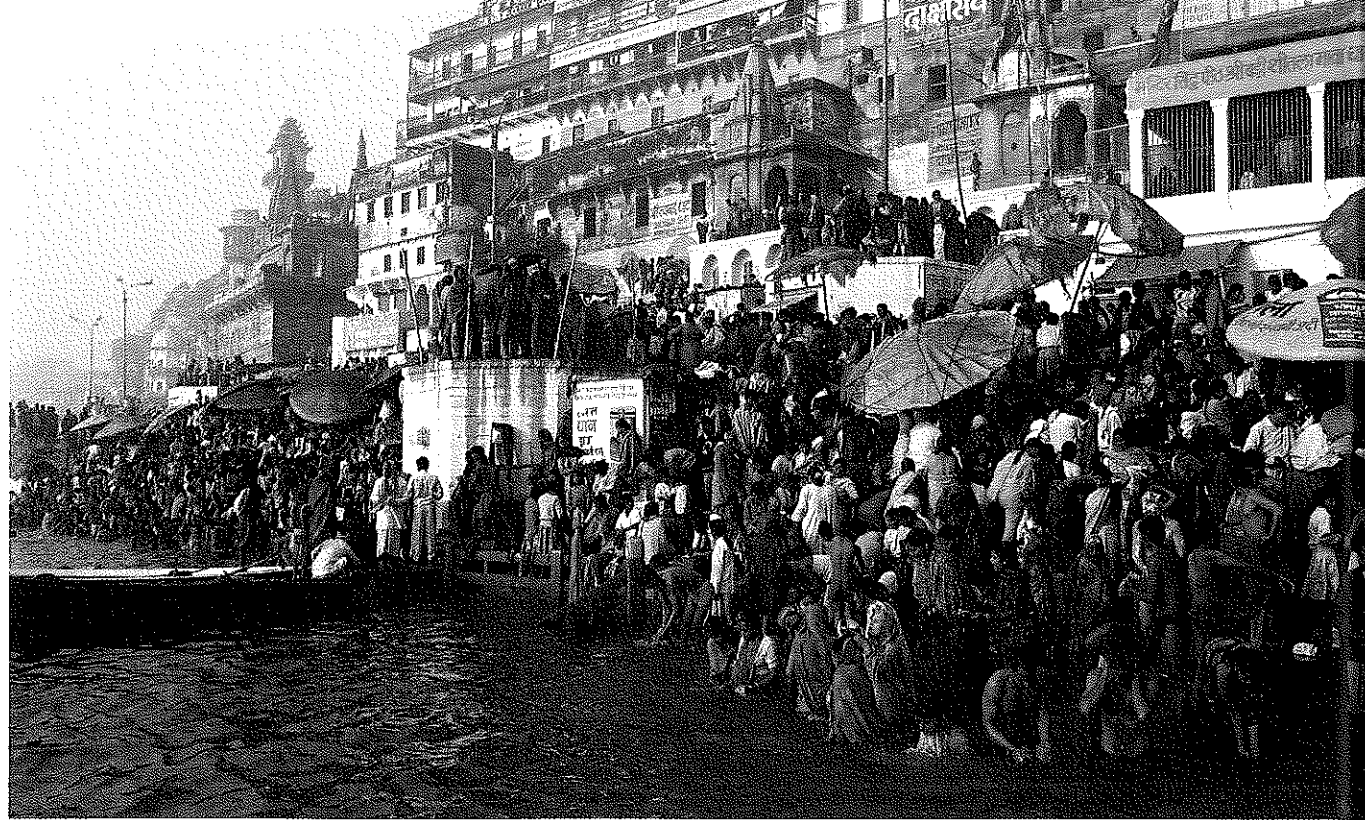
Karma was made up of all the good and evil that a person had done in past lives. If people lived well, they might be born into a higher class in their next life. If they lived badly, they could expect to be reborn into a lower class. They might even be reborn as animals.

For Hindus, the law of karma meant that the universe was just, or fair. Souls were rewarded or punished for the good and evil they had done. Karma also explained why people had a certain status in society. Recall that in the caste system, people could not escape the social class of their birth. According to karma, this was fair, because people's social class reflected what they had done in their past lives.

Over the centuries, many Hindu teachers criticized the caste system. They taught that all people, including the untouchables, should be treated equally. In the 20th century, the Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi called the untouchables "children of God." Today, Indian law protects the rights of all people, and the caste system is much less strict. But the ideas of karma and rebirth remain a central part of Hinduism.

This Hindu man sits in prayer, or meditation.





Hindus from all over the world travel to the Ganges River to bathe in its waters.

**reincarnation** the belief that a person's soul is reborn into a new body after death  
**pilgrimage** a journey to a holy place

### 15.8 Hindu Beliefs About Samsara

As you have learned, Hindus believe in a continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. They call this cycle *samsara*. As long as people are part of *samsara*, they will know pain and death. *Samsara* ends when the soul escapes from the cycle of rebirth and is united with Brahman, the supreme force in the universe.

It takes many lifetimes before a person can be released from *samsara*. People escape the cycle of rebirth, or **reincarnation**, by following the basic beliefs of Hinduism. They balance their karma with good actions. They follow their dharma by behaving correctly and performing their social duties. They worship Brahman, including the deities that represent different aspects of Brahman, faithfully. They also strive for direct, personal connections with Brahman.

The Indians of ancient times connected with Brahman by going on holy journeys called **pilgrimages**. People would travel to sacred places like the Ganges and Sarasvati Rivers. Such pilgrims believed that the difficulty of the journey would cleanse them of their sins.

Faithful Hindus still make pilgrimages today. Pilgrims travel for days over difficult land, including mountains. They often lie facedown in worship at each holy site and temple they encounter. The Ganges River is still one of the most holy places in India. Like the ancient Indians, modern Hindus bathe in its waters as an act of devotion and purification.

Hindu monks, known as *sannyasins*, devote their entire lives to attaining divine enlightenment. There have been *sannyasins* since ancient times. They use a number of techniques to focus on Brahman. They meditate, perform breathing exercises, recite prayers, and sing sacred songs. They also practice the ancient art of yoga. Yoga is a type of meditation. It combines special body positions with deep, slow breathing.

### 15.9 Chapter Summary

In this chapter you learned about Hinduism, India's first major religion. You studied the five basic beliefs of Hinduism. They are belief in Brahman, deities, dharma, karma, and *samsara*. As you have learned, these beliefs helped to shape ancient Indian society. They inspired Indian art, sacred texts, and temple architecture. They were reflected in the caste system and in the treatment of people and animals.

Hinduism is an important link between ancient and modern India. Hindu beliefs continue to affect daily life in India. Hindus still worship in temples, make pilgrimages, and celebrate religious festivals. They practice meditation and other ways of connecting with Brahman. In addition, reverence for life and nonviolence remain important ideals in India. Many modern Hindus avoid eating meat because they believe in not doing harm to animals.

India's second great religion, Buddhism, grew out of Hinduism. You will learn about Buddhism in the next chapter.

Fire sacrifice accompanied by reading from the Vedas.

