

The Rise of Hinduism

Not many things have endured without major transformation for over 5,000 years. That's one reason Hindu traditions stand out. Hinduism might be the oldest religion on Earth.

To understand how Hinduism has lasted so long, it is important to know the beliefs of Hinduism. Those are closely tied to its historical foundations.

Archaeologists say highly developed civilizations grew throughout the Indus Valley between 4000 and 1500 B.C. Archaeologists have found many items tied to Hinduism in the ruins of the ancient Indus Valley civilization. They include statues of gods and goddesses. They also include temple tanks for bathing and sculptures of people doing yoga.

But for still unknown reasons, the people in the valley appear to have moved suddenly and resettled among new neighbors in northwestern India. These people who were living in northwestern India had actually moved from central Asia and settled in India, and worshiped a religion called Vedism. Thus, it is likely that the Indus Valley tradition and Vedic gods and beliefs combined. When they did, they formed Hinduism.

Hinduism encourages individual needs

Hinduism stands apart from other religions for several reasons. It has no single founder, no single book of law and truth and no central religious organization.

Hinduism is a code of life — a collection of attitudes, personal experiences and religious practices. That code is defined by behaviors rather than beliefs. Hindu teachings say there is one way of being. All religions are simply interpretations of that way of being. Because of this, Hinduism allows and even encourages individuals to choose a religious path that best suits their social and emotional needs.

Various deities outside a Hindu temple in Singapore. Photo from Wikimedia. [\[click to enlarge\]](#)

One Hindu devotee might worship well-known gods such as Vishnu and Shiva in a large, public temple. Another might worship less common deities in a private shrine within his or her own home. Yet they would both be considered good Hindus. But they would have to honor each other's choices.

This tolerance makes Hinduism difficult to define. But it does explain why so many gods, goddesses and rituals are described in Hindu scriptures.

Scriptures of eternal truths

Hindus believe and do different things. But several concepts and traditions bind them together. Many of these beliefs were compiled in a set of scriptures written around 1300 B.C. known as the Vedas. It is believed that the Vedas are the eternal truths that were heard, then written down by holy saints and seers.

The Vedas say time and life are cyclical. After death, one's soul leaves the body and is reborn, or reincarnated, into a new person, animal or even plant. This constant cycle of birth and rebirth is known as samsara. What body the new soul enters is determined by karma. Karma is the accumulated result of one's actions in various lives, and can be good or bad. Righteous and moral conduct, known as dharma, leads to good karma.

Good conduct is defined in many ways. They include marrying within one's caste, revering upper castes and doing good deeds. It also includes refusing to eat meat, particularly that of cows, which are considered sacred. The writings known as the Upanishads appeared 600 to 800 years after the Vedas, and they focus on how to escape the cycle of rebirth. The Upanishads explain how to leave Samsara through moksha, a release from pain and achieving ultimate enlightenment. The appearance of the Upanishads started the beginning of a period known as the Vedantic Age.

The Vedic beliefs carried on

Literally, "Vedantic" means "end of the Vedas." But the Vedic beliefs never disappeared. Gods of the Vedic tradition became less commonly worshiped, but the Vedic philosophies were not forgotten. The principles of karma and dharma were too popular (especially among members of the lower castes) to fade away.

The beginnings of Hindu are often debated. It is clear that during the Vedantic Age (between 800 and 400 B.C.) there was a shift to the worship of the gods Vishnu and Shiva. This happened during the rise of Buddhism and Jainism, two other religions that sought enlightenment. Over time, Hinduism became divided into many groups, or sects. But true to the foundations of Hinduism, the new sects' beliefs and practices were accepted. Because of such tolerance, Hinduism still thrives today.

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1. *Hindus practice their beliefs very differently, but all share similar principles that have been passed down.*

Which sentence from the article provides the BEST support to the statement above?

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- A** One Hindu devotee might worship well-known gods such as Vishnu and Shiva in a large, public temple.
- B** Another might worship less common deities in a private shrine within his or her own home.
- C** It is believed that the Vedas are the eternal truths that were heard, then written down by holy saints and seers.
- D** It is clear that during the Vedantic Age (between 800 and 400 B.C.) there was a shift to the worship of the gods Vishnu and Shiva.

2. Which selection from the article supports the idea that Hinduism has survived for so long because it is tolerant of different interpretations?

A To understand how Hinduism has lasted so long, it is important to know the beliefs of Hinduism. Those are closely tied to its historical foundations.

B Hinduism stands apart from other religions for several reasons. It has no single founder, no single book of law and truth and no central religious organization.

C Because of this, Hinduism allows and even encourages individuals to choose a religious path that best suits their social and emotional needs.

D Over time, Hinduism became divided into many groups, or sects. But true to the foundations of Hinduism, the new sects' beliefs and practices were accepted.

3. Read the following selection from the section "Hinduism encourages individual needs."

One Hindu devotee might worship well-known gods such as Vishnu and Shiva in a large, public temple. Another might worship less common deities in a private shrine within his or her own home. Yet they would both be considered good Hindus. But they would have to honor each other's choices.

How does this selection contribute to the entire article?

A It describes the problem of having too many different beliefs and traditions and offers a solution for how Hindus could be more united.

B It compares and contrasts different modern sects of Hinduism to show the reader how the uniqueness of the Hindu religion has created many different groups within Hinduism.

C It provides specific examples of how Hindu practices have changed over time to show how its ability to change has helped Hinduism last a long time.

D It provides specific examples that compare and contrast different ways of practicing Hinduism to highlight both the many differences and core similarities in Hindu practices.

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

4. Read the section "The Vedic beliefs carried on." What does this section explain that other sections do not?

A Why the Vedas are important to the Hindu religion

B Why there is debate around the mysterious origins of Hinduism

C How changes in Hinduism may have been caused by other new religions

D How to practice the principles of karma and dharma

Writing Prompt:

Cause & Effect: What was the main event described in the article? What were the causes of this event? Describe each cause by citing specific details from the article and explaining how it contributed to the main event.

The Rise of Hinduism *

Hinduism has been around for over 5,000 years. It is probably the oldest religion on Earth. It is important to understand Hindu history and beliefs. Archaeologists say a group of people in the Indus Valley grew between 4000 and 1500 B.C. Archaeologists found many items tied to Hinduism in the ruins there. They include statues of gods and goddesses. They also include temple tanks for bathing and sculptures of people doing yoga.

Then the people in the valley moved suddenly. Nobody knows why. They moved to live among people in northwestern India. The people there believed in a religion called Vedism. Historians think the beliefs of these two peoples combined. When they did, they started Hinduism.

Hindus choose their own paths

Hinduism stands out for many reasons. It wasn't started by one person, like Christianity. Also, there isn't just one Hindu book, like the Bible. Hinduism is more about behaviors rather than beliefs. It asks people to choose their own path.

Various deities outside a Hindu temple in Singapore. Photo from Wikimedia. [click to enlarge]

One Hindu might pray to famous gods such as Vishnu and Shiva. Another might pray to other gods. Both would be good Hindus. But they would have to honor each other's choices.

Good karma

Hindu beliefs were written down around 1300 B.C. They are in a book known as the Vedas. Hindus believe the Vedas are eternal truths. They believe those truths were written by holy men.

The Vedas say time and life move in a cycle, almost like in a circle. After death, a person's soul leaves the body. It is reborn, or reincarnated. The soul returns to earth and enters a new body. It could be in another person, an animal or even a plant. This constant cycle of birth and rebirth is known as samsara. Each new birth is measured by karma. Good acts give a person good karma.

Hinduism divided into sects

Good conduct can include marrying within one's caste. A caste is a social group. Good conduct can also mean doing good deeds. That might include not eating meat. Eating meat from cows is looked down on. Cows are believed to be sacred. One Hindu goddess is even usually shown in the form of a cow.

There are writings called the Upanishads. They explain how to escape the cycle of rebirth. Over time, Hinduism divided into many groups, called sects. These are smaller groups of believers within a religion. But the new sects' beliefs were accepted. Because of such tolerance, Hinduism still thrives.

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

1. Read the section "Hindus choose their own paths."

Select the sentence from the section that explains what is MOST important in Hinduism.

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- A** Hinduism stands out for many reasons.
- B** It wasn't started by one person, like Christianity.
- C** Hinduism is more about behaviors rather than beliefs.
- D** One Hindu might pray to famous gods such as Vishnu and Shiva.

2. Read the paragraph from the introduction [paragraphs 1-2].

Then the people in the valley moved suddenly. Nobody knows why. They moved to live among people in northwestern India. The people there believed in a religion called Vedism. Historians think the beliefs of these two peoples combined. When they did, they started Hinduism.

Which question is answered in this paragraph?

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- A** Why did the people in the valley move?
- B** How was Hinduism started?
- C** What year was Hinduism started?
- D** How many people practice Hinduism?

3. Which section of the article gives information about what happens to Hindus after they die?

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- A** Introduction [paragraphs 1-2]
- B** "Hindus choose their own paths"
- C** "Good karma"
- D** "Hinduism divided into sects"
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Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

4. What information will the reader find in the section "Hinduism divided into sects"?

A What Hindus consider to be good actions

B What the cycle of rebirth is called

C Why Hinduism is tolerant

D Why Hinduism has divided into different sects

Writing Prompt:

Cause & Effect: What was the main event described in the article? What were the causes of this event? Describe each cause by citing specific details from the article and explaining how it contributed to the main event.
