

POPULATION IN THE WORLD:

~900 million

POPULATION IN CANADA:

~498,000 or ~1.5% of Canadians

HISTORY:

Hinduism is considered to be the oldest continuing religion in the world. Hinduism is often described as a pluralistic faith because of its rich history encompassing many key figures, many sources of inspiration and many philosophies. The majority of people in India and Nepal identify themselves as being “Hindu.” This identification is complex due in part to a long history of integration.

Since the Bronze Age, ancient communities in South Asia lived on the plains of the Indus River Valley, in addition to vast settlements along other major river systems in India. From the remains of these cities, archaeologists and historians have uncovered evidence of an intricate ritual life, inclusive of such elements as ritual bathing, fire sacrifices, yoga and other practices still prevalent in the Hindu tradition.

Recent scholarship from several prominent archaeologists has suggested that the cultural life of these Bronze Age settlements continued indigenously within the Indian subcontinent, and that the key elements of Hindu language, literary works and ritual practices were present in the region since at least the second millennium BCE. Such research further suggests that these components did not develop externally, contrary to established views that major elements of Hindu culture were imported from Central Asia. Continued archaeological research and excavations have increasingly supported the notion of a strong, unbroken continuity between the early Bronze Age culture of India and later periods in which Hinduism flourished in the sub-continent.

FORMAL PLACE OF WORSHIP:

Mandir or Temple, which can be either public or personal (many Hindus have household shrines).

SACRED SCRIPTURE(S):

Vedas

- The Vedas are a collection of ancient prayers, rituals, hymns and philosophical texts, made up of four compositions: the Samhitas, Brahmanas, Aranyakas and Upanishads. These works contain the basis for Hindu theology, cosmology and philosophical structures.
- The Vedas are known as *shruti*—“heard”—because they were historically shared orally.

- Veda, meaning “wisdom” or “knowledge,” can also be used to refer to the general wisdom and authority of the whole Hindu tradition.
- Several other prominent Hindu scriptures are attributed with spiritual wisdom and authority. The *Puranas* and *Itihasa* are narratives of ancient and divine histories. Some of Hinduism’s most beloved accounts of incarnations of God are detailed within these works, including the Ramayana and Srimad Bhagavad Purana. Other texts such as the highly venerated *Bhagavad Gita* address philosophical concerns.

SOME BASIC PRINCIPLES:

- Many adherents to the Hindu tradition believe that divinity permeates the universe and is present in all things. In Hinduism, the unifying force behind the universe and all of its components is God, known by many names, including Parabrahman, Paramatman and Bhagavan. The presence of God is also manifest in the *atmas*, or souls, of all living beings.
- Hindu scriptures assert that there are many gods and goddesses, such as Vishnu, Shiva and Devi. These higher beings manage various aspects of the universe; however, they are all understood in relation to God’s oneness. Though the Divine can be perceived through an infinite number of forms and names, the multitude of gods and goddesses in Hinduism are ultimately governed by the supreme will of Parabrahman, as revealed in several key philosophical sources including the Upanishads.
- *Dharma* can be defined in many ways, including duty, ritual, ethics, law, order, morality and religion. *Dharma* refers to the force that upholds the universe. Ritual action and social order are part of *dharma*. Guidance on dharma originates from the Vedas and is discussed in several important works, including the great Hindu epic poem *Mahabharata*.
- *Jnana* or *gnan* can be understood as deep insight, wisdom or knowledge. To acquire this insight, one needs guidance from a *guru* or spiritual teacher.
- *Karma* means “action.” Through action, human beings engage with the issues and concerns of the world. *Karma* refers to one’s own actions and their consequences. The Hindu teachings surrounding karma suggest detached action—individuals are taught to not covet the fruits of their actions as this can reinforce false egotism and selfish desires. Instead, Hinduism teaches that actions performed with selflessness in devotion to God can lead to spiritual release, or *moksha*, from the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth, known as the cycle of *samsara*. *Karma* is also a concept in the religions of Buddhism and Jainism, although it is understood differently in these traditions.
- *Bhakti* means devotion in a spiritual sense. In Hinduism, devotion to God can be both personal and communal, and it is expressed in many ways, including hymns, or *bhajans*, temple worship, plays and dances. *Bhakti* is a central aspect in many traditions of Hinduism and is highlighted as a fundamental path to spiritual liberation in several scriptural works, including the revered *Bhagavad Gita*.

OTHER IMPORTANT TRANSLATIONS:

- *Veda* is a Sanskrit word meaning “wisdom” or “knowledge.”
- *Bhagavad Gita* is Sanskrit for “Song of Bhagavan [God].”

REFERENCES:

- BBC Religions – Hinduism: bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism
- Harvard’s The Pluralism Project – Hinduism: pluralism.org/religion/hinduism
- Statistics Canada – National Household Survey: statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/130508/dq130508b-eng.htm