

Hindu Worldview Traditions Core Knowledge Essay



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Introduction

Hinduism, often called Sanatan Dharma or Hindu Dharma (the eternal teaching), is one of the world's oldest living traditions, with its root in the Indus Valley civilisation. Hindu traditions developed in ancient India, with roots in the Vedas, the oldest sacred texts. Later, writings such as the Upanishads, the epic stories of the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and the Bhagavad Gita deepened Hindu philosophy and practice. The term Hinduism describes many different traditions that have developed over centuries; however, the term itself was coined by Westerners in the nineteenth century when colonising India, used as a way of categorising and interpreting the different practices they encountered. In this core knowledge essay, we will use the term Hindu Dharma. Hinduism is often seen as a reductive western construct and Hindus see their tradition as more than just a 'religion' in the Western sense of the word. Hindu Dharma is preferred by many as it emphasises the spiritual, philosophical and ethical dimensions of the tradition.

A follower is called a Hindu. Most Hindus believe in Brahman, the ultimate reality, who can be worshipped in many forms. Hindu Dharma is not a single system but a diverse family of traditions, stories, practices, and philosophies. It is a way of life as much as a set of beliefs, shaping family, community, and identity for millions across the world.

History and origins

Hindu Dharma has no single founder. There is no single source of authority. It grew over thousands of years, shaped by the teachings of gurus (spiritual teachers) and rishis (wise people). Hindus describe it as eternal — Sanatan Dharma — without beginning or end.

Core beliefs

Central Hindu beliefs include:

- Brahman: the ultimate reality, beyond form.
- Atman: the eternal self or soul, a spark of Brahman in every being.
- Samsara: the cycle of birth, death, and reincarnation.
- Karma: actions have consequences, shaping current and future lives.
- Moksha: liberation from samsara, when the atman is reunited with Brahman.
- Dharma: duty and righteousness; living in line with one's role and stage of life. Conversely the idea of adharma is going against one's dharma.
- Ahimsa: non-violence and respect for life.

Hindus also speak of four aims of life: dharma (duty), artha (success), kama (enjoyment), and moksha (liberation). Human life is often described through the four ashramas or stages: student, householder, retired life and renunciate.

Practices and rituals

Hindu worship is called puja, and for many Hindus takes place daily at home. Worship can also take place in a mandir, also sometimes known as a temple. Worship happens daily in the mandir, often with older community members attending, but for key events and festivals the mandirs are full of young people and older alike. Mandirs in this country will usually have a variety of shrines focused on different deities. In India, it is more common to have each mandir dedicated to just a single deity. Whether at home or in the mandir, worshippers offer flowers, food, light, and prayers before a murti at a shrine. Arti, the offering of light, is often part of puja.

Sacred sounds are important. Om or A U M is the sound of creation and is used in prayer and meditation. Mantras, repeated phrases that are thought to carry spiritual power, are recited.

Daily practice also includes acts of generosity (dana) and selfless service (sewa).

Some Hindus indicate their devotion with a tilak mark on their forehead. Marking their body with a tilak is an acknowledgement of the body as a temple as God resides in the heart.

Life rituals, called samskaras, mark key points such as baby naming, first haircut (mundan), and the sacred thread ceremony.

Practices and rituals

Hindu Dharma embraces many forms of belief and worship. Some Hindus focus on Vishnu and his avatars, such as Krishna and Rama (Vaishnavism). Others focus on Shiva (Shaivism) or on the Goddess (Shaktism). Each group sees its chosen deity as a way of knowing Brahman.

There are holy people such as wandering sadhus and sadhvis, as well as respected teachers called gurus. Communities may follow different customs, texts, and deities, but all are part of the wider Hindu tradition.

Key deities and places

Hindu Dharma includes many important deities; a small selection are listed below:

- The Trimurti: Brahma the creator, Vishnu the preserver, Shiva the destroyer.
- Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and prosperity; Saraswati, goddess of learning and arts.
- Ganesh (Ganesha), remover of obstacles and bringer of good fortune, often depicted with an elephant-head and human body.
- Rama, avatar of Vishnu, and Sita, heroes of the Ramayana.
- Durga, a female deity who opposes evil.
- Krishna, avatar of Vishnu, giver of wisdom in the Bhagavad Gita.

Sacred places include rivers such as the Ganges, where ghats (stone steps) lead to the water for prayer and cremation.

Festivals and special days

Hindu festivals are colourful and joyful. Some of the most widely celebrated include:

- Diwali: where good triumphs over evil, the festival of lights, marking Rama and Sita's return home and welcoming back. Lakshmi is also significant, as families light diya lamps to welcome her, hoping she will bring them good fortune and prosperity. Businesses also bring their accounts for blessing. Families make rangoli patterns.
- Holi: the spring festival of colours, where powders are thrown in celebration. The story of Prahlad and his victory over the demon Holika is Stories of Krishna and his love for Radha are also remembered.
- Navratri: nine nights honouring female deities, particularly Durga ending with Dusshera when effigies of Ravana are burned.
- Raksha Bandhan: celebrating the love and protection between siblings, many sisters tie a rakhi bracelet on their brother to show this love.
- Janmashtami: a celebration marking the birth of Krishna.
- Kumbh Mela: the great pilgrimage, held every 12 years at the confluence of sacred rivers, attracting millions of Hindus.

Sacred text

Shruti, 'that which is heard'. These are texts that are believed to be revealed to holy men and women directly from the divine. Examples of these, are the four Veda and the Upanishads.

Hindu beliefs are rooted in sacred texts which come in two types:

Smriti, 'that which is remembered'. These are based on human recollections of messages from the divine. This is where many of the stories, sometimes written as poems, can be found, such as the Ramayana. Examples of these include the Mahabharata, the Bhagavad Gita, the Ramayana and the Puranas.

Contemporary expressions

Hindu Dharma continues to shape life today. There are vibrant Hindu communities in India, Nepal, and across the world, including the UK. Mandirs serve as places of worship, culture, and support. Practices like yoga and meditation have also spread widely beyond Hindu communities.

Hindu values such as ahimsa, inspire global movements for peace and justice, especially through figures like twentieth century peace activist, Mahatma Gandhi. Other charities

inspired by less well-known figures but based on Hindu values also exist, such as Go Dharmic.

Statistics in Britain

In the 2021 Census for England and Wales, there were 1,032,775 Hindus, making up 1.7% of the population, an increase from 1.5% in 2011. In England, Hindus make up 1.8% of the population, with the largest numbers in London (5.1%) and significant communities in Leicester (6%).

In the 2022 Census for Scotland, there were 29,929 Hindus, making up 0.6% of the Scottish population, a rise from 16,300 (0.3%) in 2011 and 5,600 (0.1%) in 2001. This shows the steady growth of Hindu communities in Scotland over the last two decades.

Key takeaways

- Hindu Dharma is one of the world's oldest and most diverse traditions.
- It teaches about Brahman, atman, karma, and dharma, concepts, which teach how to attain liberation.
- Samsara, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth, and moksha, the aim to step off this cycle, are significant in the lives and practices of many Hindus.
- Worship includes puja, arti, mantras, prayers and devotion to deities.
- Stories of deities such as Rama, Sita, Krishna, Shiva, and Ganesha are central.
- Festivals such as Diwali, Holi, Navratri, Raksha Bandhan, and Kumbh Mela celebrate light, love, community and remembrance of the divine.
- Hindu Dharma is expressed in many ways worldwide, with over a million Hindus in England and Wales (2021 Census) and nearly 30,000 in Scotland (2022 Census).