

Religions of India

India is sometimes known as the land of spirituality and philosophy.

It is the birthplace of some religions including Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism.

People in India also follow non-Indian religions such as Islam and Christianity.

Breakdown of religion in India:

Hinduism	80 percent
Islam	12 percent
Christians	2 percent
Sikhism	2 percent
Buddhism	.07 percent
Jainism	.05 percent
Other religions including Judaism	is less than .01 percent.

Here is the breakdown for religions world wide.

Christianity	33 percent
Islam	24 percent
Agnostic or Atheist	16 percent
Hinduism	15 percent
Buddhism	7 percent
Sikhism	.32 percent
Judaism	.20 percent
Jainism	.06 percent

Hinduism

Hinduism is the most widely practiced religion in India. It is also one of the oldest religions in the world originating 5,000 years ago. Hinduism provides the basic belief structure for other religions in Asia such as Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism. This is similar to how Judaism provided the structure for Christianity and Islam.

Unlike most other major religions, Hinduism does not have a single founder or leader like Jesus, Mohammad, or Buddha.

The Vedas are the most ancient of the Hindu holy books. There is other writings that came about 500 to 1000 years after the Vedas. These were written by spiritual leaders and provide insight into how Hindus should live.

Hindus believe in one supreme god called Brahman. Brahman is the creator.

Brahman is found in ALL things including plants, animals, insects, and the air around us.

There are 2 other principal gods that form the trinity of Hinduism.

Vishnu- preserver of life. He protects the universe. Vishnu encourages followers to show kindness to all living things.

Shiva- destroyer of life. This is important to Hindus because without death there can be no new life.

There are millions of gods in the Hindu religion. All of these gods actually represent Brahman in different forms.

Some other well known gods include:

Ganesh- god who gives good luck or good fortune. He is often prayed to when beginning a new life challenge.

Krishna- god of love and compassion. He is one of the most loved gods. An alternate religion called Hare Krishna developed from the worship of this god. They believe that Krishna is the supreme god.

Lakshmi- goddess of wealth and beauty. She represents home life and is a favorite of Indian women.

Parvati- goddess of family and love. She is who Hindus rely on for help with marriage and relationships.

What do Hindus believe?

Reincarnation- Hindus believe that the soul is eternal and lives many times in different bodies. Sometimes the soul is reborn in a human body and other times it is reborn in an animal or plant body.

Karma- This repeated cycle of passing through lives depends on how the previous life was lived. Followers of Hinduism strive to be better people in order to be reincarnated and have a better life.

Heaven and Hell- In Hinduism, heaven and hell are temporary. Souls can go and then they are returned to earth.

Hindu heaven has several worlds. It is a place of beauty and happiness. To get to heaven, a person must have gained high amounts of good karma and engaged in many religious activities. A person's time in heaven is related to their karma. Once their time in heaven has been exhausted, the soul must leave and return to the earthly world.

Hindu hell also consists of several worlds. It is a place of pain. If a person has earned bad karma, they are sent to hell to purify their soul. After the soul is purified, it is sent back to earth.

Moksha- The spiritual goal of a Hindu is to become one with Brahma. This is called Moksha or Nirvana.

Someone who has achieved this state has merged or become one with god.

Moksha is extremely difficult to achieve and may take millions of lifetimes. However, if a person lives multiple virtuous lives and has a great deal of spiritual knowledge, Hindus believe it is possible.

There are 4 ways to achieve Moksha

The path of knowledge- understanding the relationship between the soul and Brahman. Yoga is one way to accomplish this.

The path of meditation- The idea is to concentrate so you can reach your "real self" and become one with Brahman.

The path of devotion- Some Hindus choose a particular god or goddess and worship them throughout life in actions, words, and deeds. (Remember the rat temple)?

The path of good works- Living a correct and good life.

Water is sacred in Hinduism. The Ganges river is Hinduism's most holy river.

They believe that bathing in the Ganges helps to wash away their sin and get them closer to Moksha.

The goddess Ganga is associated with the Ganges River.

There are 3 basic practices of Hinduism-

Worship- offerings are made to the gods.

Cremation- The dead are burned and not buried.

Rules of the caste system- We will learn more about this when we discuss current issues. The caste system is a way of classifying people based on their family heritage. Different castes did not marry, work together, or socialize. The 3 upper castes could participate in Hindu traditions. The bottom were not allowed to do so.

Brahmins- priests and teachers.

Kshatriyas- warriors or protectors

Vaisyas- merchants and farmers

Shudras- servants- not allowed to participate in Hindu chants and rituals.

Chandalas- Untouchables- lived on the outside of society.

Over time, this caste system has evolved into a more political and social structure

Buddhism

Buddhism also originated in India. It emerged around 500 BCE.

Buddhism kept some Hindu ideas such as karma but offered some new ideas as well.

The new ideas were primarily concerned with how to discover the meaning of life.

Early Buddhists were followers of a man who came to be known as the Buddha which means the “enlightened one.” (Read story of Buddha).

When Buddha became enlightened, he realized 4 fundamental truths. These are known as **the 4 Noble Truths**.

First, life is filled with suffering.

Second, suffering comes from cravings of greed and the need to control things. It can take many forms like fear, anger, and jealousy.

Third, these problems can be overcome if we learn to live each day at a time and not worry about the past or the future. We then have more time and energy to help others.

Finally, suffering can be overcome through following the Noble 8-fold Path.

The Noble 8-fold Path has to do with developing wisdom, morality, and meditation.

Wisdom (*panna*)

Right View (understanding)

Right Thought

Morality (*sila*)

Right Speech

Right Action

Right Livelihood

Meditation (*samadhi*)

Right Effort

Right Mindfulness

Right Contemplation (concentration)

There are 5 precepts or rules in Buddhism:

- Do not take the life of anything living. (Do not kill)
- Do not take anything not freely given. (Do not steal)
- Abstain from sexual misconduct.
- Refrain from untrue speech, (Do not lie)
- Do not consume alcohol or other drugs. The main concern here is to avoid anything that can cloud the mind.

Buddha also taught that nothing is perfect, the world is always changing, and there is no soul. Karma is what transfers from this life into the next.

Buddhists also believe in reincarnation and have similar views of heaven and hell. These worlds are not permanent and are just a place that karma stops until it is reincarnated again.

Islam

Islam did not originate in India. Instead it began in Saudi Arabia.

Muslims (followers of Islam) believe that Islam began when a man named Muhammad was meditating and the angel Gabriel came to him and gave him the Islamic holy book known as the Quran.

Muhammad was born in Mecca which is now a holy city for the people of Islam.

Muhammad is thought to be the last prophet. Other prophets include Adam, Moses, Noah, John the Baptist, and Jesus.

The name of Muhammad is so holy that Muslims say “peace be upon him” every time they say his name.

Islam is an Abrahamic religion which means its forefather is Abraham.

Other Abrahamic religions include Christianity and Judaism.

How is Islam a “sister” religion to Christianity and Judaism?

The Bible and Torah both tell of the story of Abraham and Sarah. God came to Sarah when she was very old and said that she would have a son named Isaac. Abraham also has a son named Ishmael from a servant named Hagar. The Bible and Torah both say that Abraham’s descendents will be greater than the stars in the sky.

The beliefs of Judaism and Christianity stem from the ancestors of Isaac while Ishmael is seen as the fulfillment of God’s promise and that Muhammad is his descendent.

What do Muslims believe?

Muslims have 6 main beliefs

1. Belief in Allah as the one and only God.
2. Belief in angels.
3. Belief in the holy books. (Quran
4. Belief in the Prophets (special messengers).
5. Belief in the Day of Judgement...

The day when the life of every human being will be assessed to decide whether they go to heaven or hell.

6. Belief in Predestination...

That Allah has already decided what will happen.

Muslims believe that this doesn't stop human beings making free choices

The 5 Pillars of Islam. These are duties that Muslims are required to do. These help Muslims put their faith into action.

- **Shahadah:** declaration of faith
"I bear witness that there is no god, but God; I bear witness that Muhammad is the prophet of God." By reciting this, one enters Islamic faith.
- **Salah:** prayer
Muslims are required to pray five times a day, washing themselves before prayer and facing in the direction of Mecca while praying.
- **Zakat:** giving a fixed proportion to charity
Muslims are required to give away a percentage of their earnings to those less fortunate, regardless of their religion.
- **Saum:** fasting during the month of [Ramadan](#)
Muslims fast during daylight hours for one lunar month each year, a period called Ramadan. During this time, Muslims reflect on their behavior and strive to purify their thoughts.
- **Hajj:** pilgrimage to Mecca
If it is financially possible, Muslims are required to travel to Mecca once in their lifetime.

Muslims do believe in a heaven and hell.

They believe that death is like sleeping. People who have lived a good life will sleep in peace. Those who have not will sleep in suffering.

However, on the Last Day (also known as Day of Judgment), Allah will bring back everyone who has died.

At this point, they will be judged and sent to either Paradise or Hell for eternity.

Those who died believing in the one true God and that Muhammad is the messenger will be guaranteed a beautiful place in Paradise. Those who have not lived a good life will go to Hell.

Sikhism

Sikhism originated in India and is one of the youngest religions. It was formed about 500 years ago.

Guru (teacher) Nanak is the founder of the religion. Nanak was born into a Hindu family and was very spiritual. The story says that one day he went to the river for his bath. He did not surface and was missing for 3 days. It is believed that he was in holy communion with God. Three days later he re-appeared in the same spot that he went missing. He began to travel the area spreading his message.

Sikhism Beliefs

Core Beliefs include

There is only one God

All are equal- Men and women have the same rights/ responsibilities.

Meditation is practiced- Sikhs should always remember God.

Live Honestly- Sikhs should work hard and always tell the truth.

Five Articles of Faith- These are how Sikh's visibly display their commitment to their faith.

Kesh (uncut hair)- Sikh's never cut their hair. Men will always wear a turban while women will wear a turban or a scarf.

Kangha (comb)- This is a small comb that is tucked neatly in the hair of the Sikh. Just as a comb removes tangles and cleans the hair, the kangha is a reminder to get rid of sinful thoughts.

Kara (steel bracelet)- The circle of the bracelet reminds the Sikh that God is the creator and never ends.

Kirpan (sword)- This small sword is hung near the waist and is a reminder that Sikh's should protect the weak.

Kaccha - Kachhera (soldier's shorts)- This is a loose white undergarment that is worn to remind the Sikh to control their passions and desires.

There are no ordained clergy in Sikhism.

Anyone may lead religious services.

A Sikh temple is called a Gurdwara. It always offers food and has 4 doors to show that it is welcoming to all. No matter what your religion, if you step into a Gurdwara you are provided with shelter, food, and comfort.

The Sikh holy book is called the Guru Granth Sahib and contains writings from Guru Nanak as well as Hindu and Muslim writers. This is unique. Sikh gurus believe that there are many different ways of developing a connection with God and the Sikh way is just one of them.

Sikhs do not believe in heaven or hell. Heaven is experienced on earth by being in tune with God. Suffering and pain is seen as hell on earth. Sikhs believe that when a person dies, they simply become part of the universe....much like a drop of water becomes one with the ocean.

Jainism

This is a religion that began in India 100 years before the Buddha was preaching. An Indian prince named Vardhamana Mahavira established this religion.

He said that EVERY living thing has a soul. It is, therefore, sinful to kill any living thing. Jain's believe that all living things are trapped in a cycle of birth and re-birth.

Karma is important in Jainism.

Jainism's most important idea is that people should never be violent in their actions or thoughts.

Jain's are vegetarians and are known to gently sweep aside a bug or insect that is in their path. Most Jains do not include mushrooms, honey, or root vegetables in their diet. They prefer to eat foods like apples because it doesn't harm the tree.

Jainism does not believe in any gods. The earth has simply always been in existence.

People who follow Jain teachings have very little possessions.

What we now know of as the Nazi swastika is actually a sacred symbol in Jainism. It represents the 4 types of beings that one can be born into which include heavenly beings, hellish (bad) beings, human, or animal.

It has also been used in Hinduism to represent eternity, in Buddhism to represent the footprint of Buddha, and also in Christianity as a stylized cross.

Unfortunately, the Nazi's took it and turned it into a symbol of hate.

Christianity

Christianity likely came to India around 52 C.E. by Saint Thomas (a disciple of Jesus).

Hindus began to embrace the ideas of Christianity. They could relate to the idea of baptism since it is similar to the idea of the Ganges river cleansing the soul.

Most Christians in India follow the Roman Catholic tradition.

The current government of India is a rather extreme Hindu government. The Prime Minister has spoken of his desire to see Christianity be eliminated in India.

While the government does not physically persecute Christians, the negative remarks that the government uses in discussing Christians provides militant Hindus with reason to attack Christians.