India’s Ancient Religion

Written by Sean McCollum

India's Hindu religion is inseparable from its society, culture, and history.

To millions of Hindus in India, the Ganges is more than just a river. It is a holy river, where thousands of pilgrims come each year to cleanse and purify themselves. Some Hindus come to die in the Ganges, believing it will transport them to heaven.

Hinduism, India's major religion, is a way of life for more than 80 percent of India's 1 billion people. More than 1.28 million people in the U.S. also are Hindus.

Unlike other major world religions, Hinduism was not started by a central figure, such as Jesus in Christianity, Muhammad in Islam, or Buddha in Buddhism. It has no central god, no pope or church hierarchy, and no rules. You can be a Hindu just because you think you are and because you do the right things.

Beginnings

Hinduism began 3,000 years ago when nomadic cattle-herding tribes from Central Asia moved into northern India. These invaders called themselves Aryans---"the noble ones." They brought with them religious teachings, known as Vedas, which people memorized and repeated generation after generation. These teachings blended with the religious beliefs of early Indian villagers and were eventually written down. They are the foundation of Hindusim.

Although Hindus believe in Brahman--the one great spirit--they do not worship a single, all-powerful god. Instead, Hindusim has hundreds of deities, and many ways of worshipping and living.

But like most religions, Hinduism has basic beliefs, including:

\* Kharma: What a person says and does in life affects his or her fate.

\* Dharma. Each person is bound to perform certain duties. These duties vary, depending upon the person's social standing and caste (see sidebar).

\* Reincarnation. After dying, each living thing is reborn into another life.

Many Deities

Of all the deities in Hinduism, the most important are Brahman, the creator of the universe, Vishnu, its preserver, and Shiva, its destroyer.

But Krishna is perhaps the most popular of all the Hindu gods. In paintings, he is shown with blue skin, a sign of his divinity.

Khrisna is a very human form of god. He is worshipped as an adorable but naughty child, an adventurous teenager, and an adult who vanquishes a monstrous snake.

India's Castes

India's caste system, increasingly a thing of the past, had close ties to Hinduism. Each person was born into a caste, a closed social group from which he or she could not hope to escape. A person's caste once determined his occupation, who he could marry, and how he lived.

Originally, there were four castes. The highest were the Brahmans, or priests. Next came Kshatriyas, the warriors, then the Vaisyas, farmers and traders, and the Sudras, laborers and servants.

Completely outside this social order fell the Untouchables--the lowest of the low, with whom the other groups were supposed to have no contact.

Officially, it is now illegal to discriminate based on caste in India. And, for the first time in India's history, its president, Kocheril Raman Narayanan, is a Dalit (Untouchable). But many people still mix with only those of their own caste.

*Source: Adapted from “India’s Ancient Religion” in Junior Scholastic March 12, 2001.*