

Hinduism

and the Welcoming Workplace

A guide for inclusive relationships

Hinduism is the oldest of the major world religions and easily one of the most diverse. This guide is a short overview designed to help foster welcoming and respectful relationships. Please remember that Hindus are diverse, varying by sect, culture, level of adherence, and personal interpretation. If you are curious about whether this information applies to your Hindu colleague, neighbour or classmate, we invite you to start a conversation.



Encounter World Religions can help you learn more about religious literacy and how to create a welcoming workplace.



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Hinduism - The Basics

Very Diverse: With no single founder or starting point, Hinduism grew organically in thousands of villages and cities over time. It is incredibly diverse, spanning huge areas and many language groups. Some commonalities include views on karma, reincarnation and reverence for key texts called the Vedas.

Religion or Culture? Unlike Western culture which often sees religion as a special separate area of life, Hinduism shapes all aspects of life and culture including dance, art, festivals, food, family, social interactions, and even medicine (called Ayurvedic medicine). The Western world's separate categories won't always apply here.



Diverse Notions of Divinity: Hindus may be polytheists, monotheists or monists (meaning God is one and pervades everything). Hindus believe divinity is ultimately beyond our grasp and differences in how people perceive divinity are not morally condemned. Morality hinges more on doing one's duty.

Reincarnation: Hinduism teaches that every living being has an "atman" or self that is reincarnated after death. One's karma determines the kind of rebirth and may include being born as a different species. Attaining enlightenment frees one of this cycle.



Dharma: Hindus' chief obligation is to do one's "dharma" or duty. The religion is even called Sanatana (eternal) Dharma, meaning the way to live. English has no single word for dharma but it includes the rules, rituals, ethics, customs, etc. that uphold the social order and cultivate virtue.

Om is a chant representing oneness and is the symbol for Hinduism

Greetings and Holidays

There are many Hindu holidays and they can vary by region. Below are just a few.



Diwali (late October, early November)

The five-day festival of lights is Hinduism's most celebrated event. The stories connected to Diwali vary in different parts of India but, in all cases, Diwali celebrates light over darkness, knowledge over ignorance, and good over evil. Devotees clean their homes and decorate them with colourful powders, sand, rice and flowers (and of course, lamps). It is a time for getting together, feasting and gift-giving.

Mahashivrati (February/March): This festival celebrates the wedding of Shiva and Parvati. Some adherents will fast and maintain a vigil throughout the night, only eating once morning arrives. Prayers are said while devotees make offerings of milk, water, and honey to the Shiva lingam, a cylindrical stone representing the god.



Holi (usually in March): One of humanity's most colourful festivals, Holi is celebrated with bonfires, dancing and, most notably, throwing water and coloured powder on one another. This celebratory day marks winter's end and the arrival of spring.

Krishna Jayanti (August/September):

Celebrates the birth of Krishna with song, fasting, a night vigil and a festival that includes feasting and dance-drama performances re-enacting stories from Krishna's life.

Cultural Awareness



Food

Many Hindus are vegetarian for both spiritual and ethical reasons. Even Hindus who eat meat may abstain from beef as the cow is a sacred animal. Some eat eggs, some do not, most consume dairy but not all, and others refrain from eating onions or garlic. Some also avoid alcohol. **In short, it is best to ask.**

Dress

Many Hindu women wear a **bindi dot** on the forehead. It traditionally indicated that one was married but is today often worn by all women. Men and women may also mark the forehead when visiting the temple.



Varied Practices

There are many ways to be Hindu. Some have home altars and attend temple rituals involving many deities and images. Others focus on the one divinity behind all and may not use images. Others practice self-denial and forego normal family life. These differences do not cause division however as Hinduism is a wide expansive tradition that **embraces diversity** of spiritual expression.

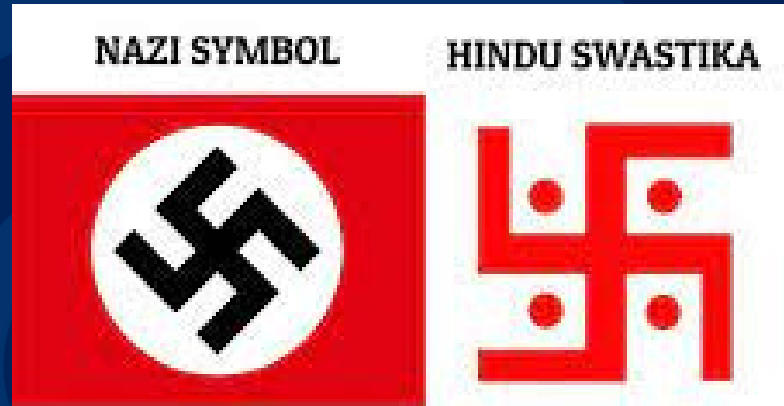
Hindu home altar

5 Interesting Facts



Hinduism is **not just in India**. Long-standing Hindu communities exist in surrounding nations and throughout southeast Asia, while recent centuries have seen communities arise in the West, throughout the Americas and elsewhere.

Hindus have swastikas: The swastika has been used in India for 5000 years, predating the Nazis and even the German language. The symbol indicates **blessing and prosperity**. The Nazis co-opted it, erroneously believing it belonged to a racial group. Note too that swastikas appear in the imagery of other Indian religions such as Buddhism and Jainism.



The Nazi swastika has a quarter turn and set colour pattern.



The cow is sacred: Cows can ensure survival for those living on society's margins. Its milk provides valuable protein while cow dung is rich manure and even works as fuel. If the divine is in everything, the cow seems an especially life-giving source of the divine, akin to a mother.

Hindus generally practice **cremation**. The deceased's ashes are ideally put into **flowing water** within a day or two of passing. For many, the most desirable location to disperse ashes is India's Ganges river. The Ganges is considered sacred since its water gives life to millions.



Hinduism is **syncretic**: Syncretism means blending. Hinduism readily incorporates new practices or teachings without jettisoning the old. Many Hindus would accept Jesus' divinity, attend a Sikh gurdwara (temple), and listen to Qur'anic recitation. This is not true for every devotee but Hinduism has generally been quite open to finding value in multiple paths.

Discovering Our Misconceptions

Sometimes what we think we know isn't accurate. We're all susceptible to misconceptions and it is good practice to check our assumptions.

Hinduism is just in India. There are long-standing Hindu communities in surrounding nations throughout southeast Asia (e.g. Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore) as well as in the West, the Americas and elsewhere (e.g. South Africa, the U.A.E.).

Misconception: Hinduism is about caste discrimination

Like class in Western society, caste has been an organizing force in India for millennia. As with any social hierarchy, it can foster oppression. Hindus have drawn on religious teachings to both uphold caste and **to call for its reform.**

Misconceptions: Hindus are idol worshippers

Most Hindus believe deities can take physical form transforming the object into a **murti** (a physical object where divinity is present). Where Western concepts often separate the physical and the spiritual, in other traditions the physical and spiritual can be more entwined. Other Hindus do not rely on physical objects at all.

Misconception: Karma is a reward or punishment from God

If you leap off a building and break a leg, that is an example of cause and effect and of Karma. Similarly, your behaviour can lead others to care for you or not, not due to divine intervention but as cause and effect. Karma works like this - all moral deeds rebound upon us, not due to a reward or punishment but as the natural **law of the universe**, akin to gravity.

Misconception: All Hindus are vegetarians

About **30% of Hindus are vegetarian** which means India (which is mostly Hindu) has more vegetarians both percentage wise and numerically than any other country, However, most Hindus do consume meat.

Want to learn more?



For more than 20 years Encounter World Religions has provided educational **religious literacy and inclusion programs** as well as consulting services to help businesses, organizations and communities create inclusive and welcoming spaces.

We offer engaging programs for high school, college and university students, and professional development for educators.

We also love speaking with Lifelong Learning groups, community groups, congregations, organizations and businesses about world religions, diversity, and inclusion. Our **Discovering Identities** series invites deeper, focused exploration of the world's major religions. This guide is a small taste of what our Hinduism talk covers.

Our **Discovery Week**, held in Toronto each summer, is an entertaining and enlightening tour of 11 religions and more than 20 site visits.

It's perfect for educators, police officers, professionals, and the genuinely curious who want to understand more about world religions and the people who practice them. It's like traveling the world in a week.

Join us on this amazing adventure!



Encounter's programs are taught from a non-sectarian perspective and are welcoming to all.

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