

# Origins of Hinduism

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# Indian Society Divides

- Aryan society was divided into social classes.
- There were four main groups, called *varnas*.
  - The Brahmins (BRAH-muhns) were priests and were the highest ranking varna.
  - The Kshatriyas (KSHA-tree-uhs) were rulers or warriors.
  - The Vaisyas (VYSH-yuhs) were commoners, including farmers, craftspeople, and traders.
  - The Sudras (SOO-drahs) were laborers and servants.

# The Varnas



## **Brahmins**

Brahmins were India's priests and were seen as the highest *varna*.



## **Kshatriyas**

Kshatriyas were rulers and warriors.



## **Vaisyas**

Vaisyas were farmers, craftspeople, and traders.



## **Sudras**

Sudras were workers and servants.

# The Caste System

- This **caste system** became more complex, dividing Indian society into groups based on rank, wealth or occupation.
- Castes were family based. If you were born into a caste, you would probably stay in it for your whole life.
- Life for the lower castes was difficult, but those who had no caste, called untouchables, were ostracized.

# Brahmanism

- The religion practiced by the Brahmins became known as Brahmanism.
- Brahmanism was perhaps the most important part of ancient Indian life, as shown by the high status of the priest caste.
- The religion was based on the four Vedas, writings that contained ancient sacred hymns and poems.

# Hindu Deities and Beliefs

Hindus believe in many deities, but they believe that all the deities are aspects of a single universal spirit called Brahman. Three aspects of Brahman are particularly important in Hinduism—Brahma, Siva, and Vishnu.



The deity Brahma represents the creator aspect of Brahman. His four faces symbolize the four Vedas.



Siva, the destroyer aspect of Brahman, is usually shown with four arms and three eyes. Here he is shown dancing on the back of a demon he has defeated.



Vishnu is the preserver aspect of Brahman. In his four arms, he carries a conch shell, a mace, and a discus, symbols of his power and greatness.

# The Vedas

- Over time, Aryan Brahmins and scholars wrote their thoughts about the Vedas. These thoughts were compiled into Vedic texts.
- The texts described rituals, explained how to perform sacrifices, and offered reflections from religious scholars.

# Hinduism Develops

- **Hinduism** is India's largest religion today. It developed from Brahmanism and other influences.
- Hindus believe that there are many gods, but all gods are part of a universal spirit called Brahmin.
- Hindus believe everyone has a soul, or atman, and the soul longs to join with Brahmin. This happens when the soul recognizes that the world we live in is an illusion.

# Major Beliefs of Hinduism

- A universal spirit called Brahman created the universe and everything in it. Everything in the world is just a part of Brahman.
- Every person has a soul or atman that will eventually join the Brahman.
- People's souls are reincarnated many times before they can join with Brahman.
- A person's karma affects how he or she will be reincarnated.

# Belief System

- Hindus believe this understanding takes several lifetimes, so **reincarnation**, or rebirth, is necessary.
  - How you are reborn depends upon your **karma**, or your actions in life. In the caste system, those who have good karma are born to higher castes.
  - Those with bad karma are born into lower castes or maybe even an animal.
- The religion of **Jainism** developed in reaction to Hinduism. Jainism is based upon the principle of **nonviolence**, or ahimsa.