



Indian Religions

Belief Study Guide Version 3.1

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Introduction to major religions that originated in modern India. The following religions are organized to fit on the page, and not by order of importance. These religions focus on **samsara** (the cycle of life, death, and rebirth) and how **karma** (positive or negative actions and intent) and **dharma** (the laws and duties that govern a person's life) influence a person's path through samsara. Many terms below are used by more than one of these religions, but are listed with the religion for which they are most often used as a clue.

Hinduism

Beliefs

Moksha is the condition of escaping **samsara**. Gods govern various aspects of human life (see "Stories and Figures" below).

Texts

Mahabharata, which includes the **Bhagavad Gita**; the **Vedas**, including the **Rig Veda**; the **Upanishads**

Rituals and Practices

Puja, a prayer ritual

- **Diwali**, a festival of lights that celebrates the goddess **Lakshmi** and the story of the **Ramayana**
- **Holi**, a festival in which people throw colored powders over each other to celebrate the defeat of the demon **Holika**.

Stories and Figures

The **Trimurti** consists of three Hindu gods: **Brahma** (representing creation), **Vishnu** (preservation), and **Shiva** (destruction and regeneration).

- **Shiva** is often depicted with a blue throat, a result of drinking the **halahala** poison to save the world during the **Churning of the Ocean of Milk**. He has a destructive **third eye**. His primary consort is **Parvati**, and he is the father of the elephant-headed god **Ganesh** (or **Ganesha**). His mount is the bull **Nandi**.
- **Vishnu** has ten **avatars** (earthly incarnations), including the blue-skinned **Krishna** (who serves Arjun as a charioteer in the **Bhagavad Gita**) and **Rama** (the hero of the **Ramayana**). His consort is **Lakshmi**.
- **Brahma** (not to be confused with Brahman or Brahmin) has four heads and four arms. He was born from a lotus that emerged from **Vishnu's** navel. His consort is **Saraswati**, and he rides a swan or goose.

Jainism

Divisions

Digambara ("sky clad"), who do not wear clothes; **Svetambara** ("white clad")

Beliefs

Ahimsa is the practice of extreme non-violence, which can be followed by eating food that is not derived from dead animals or root vegetables (since harvesting the root kills the plant). To avoid harming insects, some sects sweep in front of them as they walk or wear masks.

Stories and Figures

Mahavira is the twenty-fourth Tirthankara (spiritual teacher)

Buddhism

Divisions

Theravada; Mahayana (including Zen, Pure Land, and Tibetan)

Beliefs

Enlightenment brings a person to **Nirvana** (a state without suffering, the end of samsara). A **Buddha** is someone who has achieved enlightenment. **Gautama Buddha's** teachings include the **Four Noble Truths** (including the **Eightfold Path**), and the **Middle Way**. **Bodhisattvas** are enlightened individuals who remain on Earth to help others become enlightened.

Texts

Tripitaka (or "Tipitaka" or "Three Baskets"), the Theravada version of which is the **Pali Canon**. The Tripitaka contains the Sutta Pitaka, a collection of **Sutras** (or "Suttas" or "sayings"). Some notable sutras are nicknamed Lotus, Diamond, and Platform

Rituals and Practices

Meditation, accompanied by the recitation of **mantras** or reflection on **koans**

Stories and Figures

Siddharta Gautama (Gautama Buddha), the first Buddha of the current Buddha cycle, and the recognized founder of Buddhism. At the Buddha's birth, a seer named Asita announced that he would become either a great king or a great religious leader. His father raised him in seclusion in a pleasure palace, away from human suffering, to ensure that he became a king. After he finally learned about **age, poverty, death, and sickness**, he left the palace to live an ascetic life. He later shifted from pure asceticism to the **Middle Way** (a more moderate way to avoid self-indulgence), and achieved enlightenment after meditating under the **Bodhi tree**.

Sikhism

Texts

The **Adi Granth** (respectfully called the **Guru Granth Sahib**), which is the final **guru** (teacher) of Sikhism

Rituals and Practices

The Five Ks are the five signs of Sikh faith that Sikhs must wear. They are:

- **Kirpan**, a symbolic blade. Kirpans vary in size from small daggers to near-sword length.
- **Kesh**, uncut hair, which is often wound under a dastar or other turban.
- **Kanga**, a comb used to maintain one's uncut hair.
- **Kara**, an iron bracelet.
- **Kachera**, a cotton undergarment.

When they are initiated into the **Khalsa**, a community of adult members of the faith, men may take on the name **Singh** as a surname or a middle name; women may take on the name **Kaur**.

Stories and Figures

Sikhism has been led by eleven **gurus** (teachers), including **Guru Nanak** (the first Sikh guru) and **Guru Gobind Singh** (the tenth Sikh guru). The eleventh and permanent guru is the holy text **Adi Granth**, also called the **Guru Granth**.

Holy Sites

Sikh holy buildings are **gurdwaras**, which welcome people of all faiths (or no faith). The **Golden Temple at Amritsar** is the holiest gurdwara.