

An Introduction to Hinduism

Each year YFU families welcome Hindu students. Outlined here are some basics about the Hindu faith to understand and prepare for this facet of your student's life.

Things to Keep in Mind to support your Hindu YFU student:

- As an extension of *ahimsa*, many Hindus choose to be vegetarian. This often means they avoid meat, eggs, and seafood. Some Hindus who are non-vegetarian may still avoid these foods on certain days of the week or on holy days. It is important to clarify this with them before offering food.
- For many Hindus, cows are considered sacred due to their role in agriculture and their ability to provide milk. Consequently, many Hindus, including non-vegetarians, do not consume beef or other cow-related products.



The Hindu symbol, "Om" which represents the Hindu god Brahman who is believed to be the ultimate reality.

- Some Hindus may prefer to practice *yoga* or meditation occasionally. A few Hindus may also want to visit temples, especially on important Hindu dates. Helping your student visit a temple is appreciated but not required as access to a local temple is not possible in all host communities.

- **Hindu** refers to a follower of the religion. **Hindi** is a language; one of many in India.

- Hinduism is not a centralized, organized religion such as Christianity. There is a great deal of variability of Hindu beliefs and some Hindus believe in some deities and practices while others do not. But in general, most Hindus tend to be secular and are open to other influences due to the diversity in the religion.

Important Dates for 2019 – 2020:

Below are some of the more significant days in Hinduism and their dates. Due to the diversity of beliefs, there may be other dates that are important to some Hindus that are not included here. Also, keep in mind that Hindus may have differing beliefs over the background and history of these days.

- August 22, 2021:** **Raksha Bandhan** – This day celebrates the bond between brothers and sisters (and can extend to cousins). The sister ties a *rakhi* (sacred thread) on her brother's wrist to symbolize her love for him and his vows to protect her.
- August 15, 2021:** **Indian Independence Day** – Since most Hindus are Indian (and vice-versa), they may observe this day. Usually, this involves eating sweets and wishing each other in celebration.
- October 15, 2021:** **Dussehra** – The celebration of good triumphing over evil. In the *Ramayana*, the hero, *Rama*, defeats the demon, *Ravana*, on this day. Usually celebrated by burning effigies of *Ravana*.
- November 4, 2021:** **Diwali** – The celebration of light triumphing over darkness. In the *Ramayana*, *Rama* returns to the city of *Ayodhya* after 14 years of exile on this day. Usually celebrated with the lighting of *diyas* (oil lamps) and fireworks. It is considered the biggest festival in Hinduism. Other names for the holiday include Deepavali and the Festival of Lights.



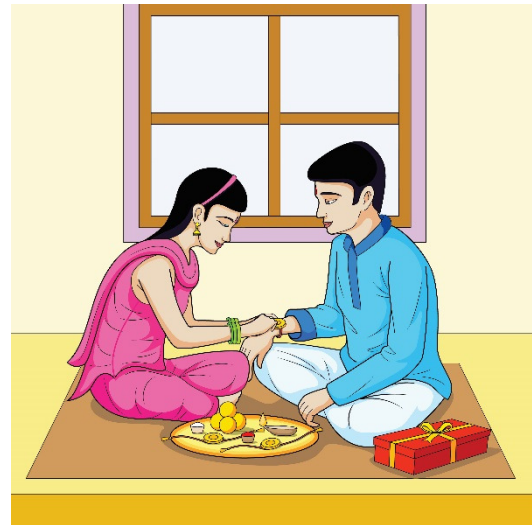
March 19, 2022:

Holi – It is considered the second biggest festival in Hinduism and is also referred to as the Festival of Colors. Usually celebrated by chasing each other and throwing or applying colored powder and colored water.

Background:

Hinduism is the oldest surviving and third largest religion in the world with almost 1 billion followers. It is most prevalent in India, where it makes up about 80% of the population. Other countries with large Hindu populations include: Nepal, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, United States, Malaysia, Myanmar, and the United Kingdom.

Hinduism is a polytheistic religion, meaning that people generally believe in multiple gods or deities and equates gods with the universe. Unlike other religions, it does not have one founder or one set of teachings and its history is often debated. Instead, there are many, diverse beliefs that vary depending on the region the person is from, his or her personal values and interpretations, and his or her particular understanding of the history. Most Hindus believe in certain deities and not others. They partake in different rituals and traditions and may have differing ideas as to the history and background of each practice. Also, some Hindus may be monotheist (believing in one god) or atheist (believing in no god), though most are polytheist.



The celebrating of *Raksha Bandhan*

History:

Hinduism's history is long, complicated, and disputed. The term *Hinduism* itself was created during the colonial era when Britain ruled India (from 1757-1947). In order to organize the population, the British grouped all the different belief systems, rituals, traditions, and deities into one category. They used the

Persian word for Indian, *Hindu*, as the identifier. Prior to this time, Hinduism was not one, consolidated religion. Some Hindus, however, may dispute this fact.



The deity *Rama* defeating *Ravana*, the multi-headed demon king of Lanka, in the *Ramayana*.

Hinduism has no one, specific starting point. It incorporates elements dating as far back as from the Indus Valley Civilization (around 3300-1700 BC) and possibly even farther. Since then, Hinduism has been strongly influenced by the rise and fall of empires in India, outside or foreign forces, and the rise of other religions in the region (like Islam and Buddhism).

Many Hindus today believe in certain concepts that have been incorporated into the religion over time. These include *dharma*

(ethics and duties), *samsara* (rebirth), *karma* (action; referring to the belief of cause and effect), and



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moksha (also called nirvana). Together, they dictate how to live one's life. Other concepts, like *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and honesty, are also very significant for Hindus.



Some of the many deities in Hinduism.

There are two prominent scriptures: *Shruti* (that which is heard) and *Smriti* (memory). *Shruti* includes the *Vedas*, which are the oldest recorded Hindu texts. *Smriti* contains the well-known epics, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Within the *Mahabharata*, there is the *Bhagavad Gita*, one of the most popular Hindu texts.

Hinduism also created, over time, the practices of *yoga* and *Ayurveda*, among many others.

There are thousands or even millions of gods in Hinduism. Some of the more significant deities include: *Brahma*, who some believe is the sole god; *Vishnu*, who many claim played a role in the epics mentioned earlier; *Shiva*, also considered one of the sole deities; and *Durga*, mostly worshipped in the eastern Indian region of Bengal. Some Hindus also worship animals, plants, and even planets.

Other Resources:

More information on Hinduism: <http://gbalajiworl.tripod.com/id2.html>

Hindu (and other) calendars: <http://www.drikpanchang.com/calendars/indian/indiancalendar.htm>

Statistics on Hindus: <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-hindu/>

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