**“Introduction to Hinduism Reading**



Brahma, Tanjore

Practiced primarily in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Nepal, Hinduism is considered the world's oldest religion, with traditions originating in and before the Neolithic era, around 8,000 years ago. Hinduism may have had its beginnings in the [Indus River Valley](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/3.html) in modern Pakistan, and the word *hindu* comes from the Persian name for that river.

A heterogeneous philosophy, Hinduism has no one founder and includes many sacred texts, the most ancient being the [*Vedas.*](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/10.html#vedas) Among the variety of genres included in the Vedic texts, composed 1500 – 1100 BCE, are hymns to gods, descriptions of rituals and philosophical writings. Commentaries on the Vedic books, written between 800 and 100 BCE, discuss the transcendent principal of Brahman, the source of the universe. Also influential are the great epics of the [*Mahabharata*](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/10.html#mahabharata) and [*Ramayana*](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/10.html#ramayana) written between 500 BCE and 200 CE. Among these epics, the *Bhagavad Gita* describes the central idea of moksha, or liberation of the soul from the cycle of perpetual death and rebirth. The primary principle of karma determines the character of the soul in this cycle.

*Ganges River*



Ganges River at Varanasi

India's most revered river, the Ganges, or Ganga, is formed by the merging of two mountain streams, the Bhagirathi, which is fed by the melting of the Gangotri glacier, and the Alaknanda, at the village of Deoprayag in the foothills of the Himalayas. The Ganges flows parallel to, but several hundred miles south of, the Himalayas as it crosses northern India on its route east to the Bay of Bengal. Its tributaries bring down sediment-filled water from the mountains, which help create a wide, fertile plain that provides food and sustenance for nearly a billion people.

The river has played a vital role in the growth of the civilizations that developed along its shores, not only in terms of [agriculture](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/7.html) but commerce as well, and been worshipped by [Hindus](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/14.html#hinduism) since ancient times. According to Hindu mythology, the Ganges is a goddess, Ganga, who dwelled in the heavens until a human king, Bhagiratha, prayed to the god [Brahma](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/13.html#brahma) to have her descend to Earth. Bhagiratha made this request in order to help cleanse and release the souls of his ancestors who had been burnt to death and condemned to wander in the nether-world. Although Brahma granted Bhagiratha's wish, Ganga was displeased and threatened to descend with such force that it would destroy the Earth. Bhagiratha then prayed to the god [Shiva](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/14.html#shiva), who caught Ganga in his hair and released her in small streams to the Earth.

*Varanasi*

The holiest of India's sacred cities, Varanasi's mythical status within [Hinduism](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/9.html#hinduism) has attracted religious seekers and pilgrims since antiquity. Previously known as Benares and Kashi ("city of light"), the abode of the Hindu god [Shiva](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/9.html#shiva), Varanasi is referenced in the [*Vedas*](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/9.html#vedas) and the [*Mahabharata*](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/9.html#mahabharata)*.* Hindus believe that dying in the city will liberate them from the cycle of death and rebirth. Its present name derives from the two rivers, Varuna and Asi, that join the [Ganges River](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/9.html#ganges) here and the city is the most celebrated [pilgrimage,](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/9.html#pilgrimage) destination in India.

Varanasi's waterfront, with its miles of [ghats](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/9.html#ghats), is the spiritual heart of the city that is home to hundreds of shrines, temples, and palaces. Its famous sites include the Vishvanath Temple, dedicated to Shiva; the Durga Temple, with its throngs of resident monkeys; the Sankat Mochan, a shrine to the monkey god Hanuman; and the Gyanvapi Mosque built by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb on the site of an earlier Shiva temple. Several miles north of Varanasi is [Sarnath](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/9.html#sarnath), where the [Buddha](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/9.html#buddha) preached his first sermon. Apart from its religious significance, Varanasi has been a center of learning—notably Sanskrit studies—and [trade](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/8.html), and is known for its silk saris decorated with elaborately brocaded borders.

*Magh Mela*



Pilgrims bathing in Ganges River

The annual festival held in Allahabad, formerly called Prayag, where three sacred rivers meet: the physical [Ganges](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/4.html#ganges) and Yamuna rivers are said to be joined here by the invisible, heavenly Saraswati River. This confluence is known as the Triveni Sangam and it is where, according to Hindu legend, Lord [Brahma](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/13.html#brahma) (the God of creation) performed the first fire sacrifice.

The location is considered especially auspicious during the [Hindu](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/14.html#hinduism) month of Magha (January to February) on the day of the full moon and the new moon. Each year during this time, thousands of [pilgrims](http://www.pbs.org/thestoryofindia/gallery/photos/9.html#pilgrimage) travel to the city to take a ritual bath in the confluence to wash away their sins and increase their chances for salvation. In addition, they perform pujas (religious rituals), meditate, and mingle and listen to the addresses of Hindu holy men. A temporary tent city emerges on the river's banks to accommodate the faithful.

*HIGHLIGHT ALL LINES THAT YOU FEEL ARE ESSENTAIL COMPONENTS OF HINDUISM.*