

Ten Questions

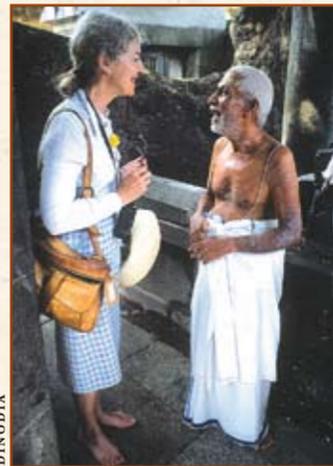
people ask

About Hinduism

...and ten terrific answers!

Humanity's most profound faith is now a global phenomenon. Students, teachers, neighbors and friends are full of questions. Misconceptions prevail. Here are ten thoughtful answers you can use to instill correct understanding and set the record straight.

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN PUT ON the spot with a provocative question about Hinduism, even one that really shouldn't be so hard to answer? If so, you are not alone. It takes some good preparation and a little attitude adjustment to confidently field queries on your faith—be they from friendly co-workers, students, passersby or especially from Christian evangelists. Back in the spring of 1990, a group of teens from the Hindu Temple of Greater Chicago, Lemont, sent a request to HINDUISM TODAY for “official answers” to nine questions they were commonly asked by their peers. These questions had perplexed the Hindu youth themselves; and their parents had no convincing answers. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami took up the challenge and provided the following answers to the nine questions. Perusing the list for this edition of the magazine, we thought it crucial to add a tenth dialog on caste, since that is the most relentless criticism Hinduism faces today.



Above, a visitor to India questions an elder about temple ceremonies and customs. Right, Lord Vishnu stands with the vast ocean of truth behind Him. In the sky above, ten birds—symbolizing persistent misconceptions about Hinduism—take flight as we tackle ten common questions about our faith.

Let's begin with advice on the attitudes to hold when responding. First, ask yourself, “Who is asking the question?” Millions of people are sincerely interested in Hinduism and the many Asian religions. So, when asked about Hinduism, don't be defensive, even if the questioner seems confrontational. Instead, assume that the person really wants to learn. Of course, some only want to harass, badger and turn you to their view. If you sense this is the case, feel free to smile and courteously dismiss yourself without any attempt to answer, lest you simply add fuel to his fires.

With all this in mind, it is still best never to answer a question

about religion too boldly or too immediately. That might lead to confrontation. Offer a prologue first, then come to the question, guiding the inquirer toward understanding. Your poise and deliberateness gives assurance that you know what you are talking about. It also gives you a moment to think and draw on your intuitive knowing. Before going deeply into an answer, always ask the questioner what his religion is. Knowing that, you can address his particular frame of mind and make your answer most relevant. Another key: have confidence in yourself and your ability to give a meaningful and polite response. Even to say “I am sorry. I still have much to learn about my religion and I don't yet know the answer to that” is a meaningful answer. Honesty is always appreciated. Never be afraid to admit what you don't know, for this lends credibility to what you do know.

Here are four prologues that can be used, according to the situation, before you begin to actually answer a question. 1) “I am really pleased that you are interested in my religion. You may not know that one out of every six people in the world is a Hindu.” 2) “Many people have asked me about my tradition. I don't know everything, but I will try to answer your question.” 3) “First, you should know that in Hinduism, it is not only belief and intellectual understanding that is important. Hindus place the greatest value on experiencing each of these truths personally.” 4) The fourth type of prologue is to repeat the question to see if the person has actually stated what he wants to know. Repeat the question in your own words and ask if you have understood his query correctly.



If it's a complicated question, you might begin by saying, “Philosophers have spent lifetimes discussing and pondering questions such as this, but I will do my best to explain.”

Have courage. Speak from your inner mind. Sanatana Dharma is an experiential path, not a dogma, so your experience in answering questions will help your own spiritual unfoldment. You will learn from your answers if you listen to your inner mind speak. This can actually be a lot of fun. The attentive teacher always learns more than the student.

After the prologue, address the question without hesitation. If the person is sincere, you can ask, “Do you have any other questions?” If he wants to know more, then elaborate as best you can. Use easy, everyday examples. Share what enlightened souls and scriptures of Hinduism have said on the subject. Remember, we must not assume that everyone who asks about Hinduism is insincere or is challenging our faith. Many are just being friendly or mak-

ing conversation to get to know you. So don't be on the defensive or take it all too seriously. Smile when you give your response. Be open. If the second or third question is on something you know nothing about, you can say, “I don't know. But if you are really interested, I will find out, mail you some literature or lend you one of my books.” Smile and have confidence as you give these answers. Don't be shy. There is no question that can be put to you in your birth karmas that you cannot rise up to with a fine answer to fully satisfy the seeker. You may make lifelong friends in this way.

Each of the ten answers is organized with a short response that can be committed to memory, a longer answer, and a detailed explanation. Many questioners will be content with the short, simple answer, so start with that first. Use the explanation as background information for yourself, or as a contingency response in case you end up in a deeper philosophical discussion. Additional resources can be found at: www.himalayanacademy.com/basics/.

1

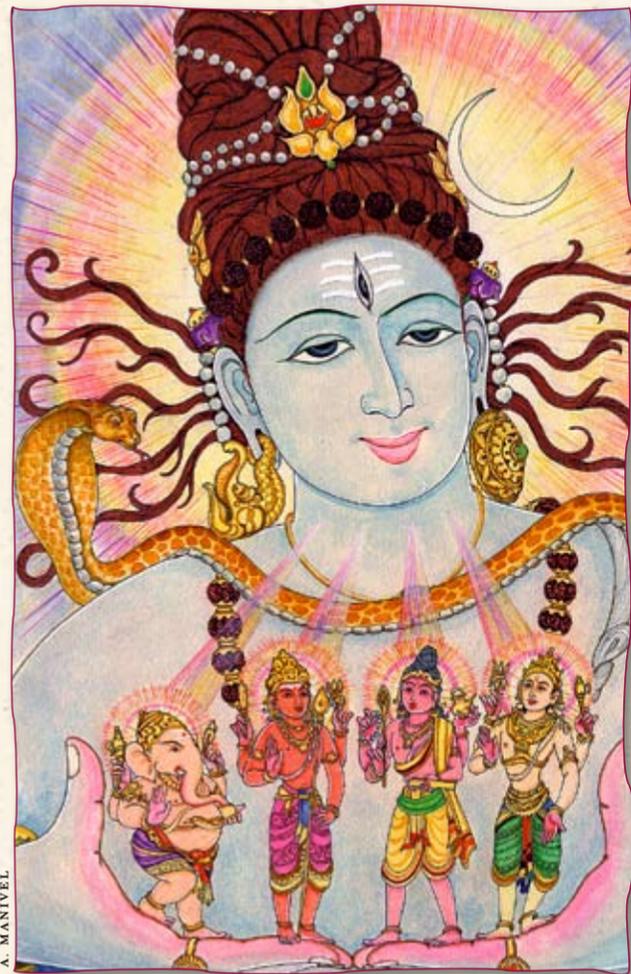
Why does Hinduism have so many Gods?

Hindus all believe in one Supreme God who created the universe. He is all-pervasive. He created many Gods, highly advanced spiritual beings, to be His helpers.

Contrary to prevailing misconceptions, Hindus all worship a one Supreme Being, though by different names. This is because the peoples of India with different languages and cultures have understood the one God in their own distinct way. Through history there arose four principal Hindu denominations—Saivism, Shaktism, Vaishnavism and Smartism. For Saivites, God is Siva. For Shaktas, Goddess Shakti is supreme. For Vaishnavites, Lord Vishnu is God. For Smartas—who see all Deities as reflections of the One God—the choice of Deity is left to the devotee. This liberal Smarta perspective is well known, but it is not the prevailing Hindu view. Due to this diversity, Hindus are profoundly tolerant of other religions, respecting the fact that each has its own pathway to the one God.

One of the unique understandings in Hinduism is that God is not far away, living in a remote heaven, but is inside each and every soul, in the heart and consciousness, waiting to be discovered. This knowing that God is always with us gives us hope and courage. Knowing the One Great God in this intimate and experiential way is the goal of Hindu spirituality.

Elaboration: Hinduism is both monotheistic and henotheistic. Hindus were never polytheistic, in the sense that there are many equal Gods. Henotheism (literally “one God”) better defines the Hindu view. It means the worship of one God without denying the existence of other Gods. We Hindus believe in the one all-pervasive God who energizes the entire universe. We can see Him in the life shining out of the eyes of humans and all creatures. This view of God as existing in and giving life to all things is called panentheism. It is different from pantheism, which is the belief that God



Hindus all worship the One Supreme God, called by various names, depending on their denomination, and they revere a multitude of angelic beings, which they call Gods. Above, the central figure is Lord Siva, worshiped as the Supreme Being by Saivites and many other Hindus. Cradled in His hands are other great beings, known as Gods, including Lord Ganesha.

is the natural universe and nothing more. It is also different from strict theism which says God is only above the world, apart and transcendent. Panentheism is an all-encompassing concept. It says that God is both in the world and beyond it, both immanent and transcendent. That is the highest Hindu view.

Hindus also believe in many Gods who perform various functions, like executives in a large corporation. These should not be confused with the Supreme God. These Divinities are highly advanced beings who have specific duties and powers—not unlike the heavenly spirits, overlords or archangels revered in other faiths. Each denomination worships the Supreme God and its own pantheon of divine beings.

What is sometimes confusing to non-Hindus is that Hindus of various sects may call the one God by many different names, according to their denomination or regional tradition. Truth for the Hindu has many names, but that does not make for many truths. Hinduism gives us the freedom to approach God in our own way, encouraging a multiplicity of paths, not asking for conformity to just one.

There is much confusion about this subject, even among Hindus. Learn the right terms and the subtle differences in them, and you can explain the profound ways Hindus look at Divinity. Others will be delighted with the richness of the Indian concepts of God. You may wish to mention that some Hindus believe only in the formless Absolute Reality as God; others believe in God as personal Lord and Creator. This freedom makes the understanding of God in Hinduism, the oldest living religion, the richest in all of Earth's existing faiths.

2

Do Hindus believe in reincarnation?

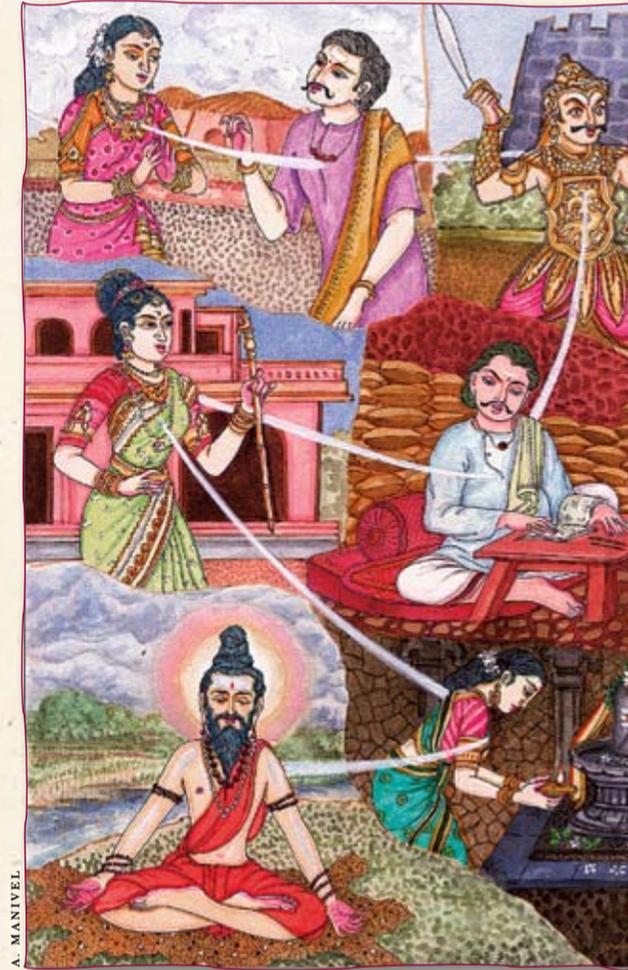
Yes, we believe the soul is immortal and takes birth time and time again. Through this process, we have experiences, learn lessons and evolve spiritually. Finally we graduate from physical birth.

Reincarnate means “of flesh,” and reincarnate means to “reenter the flesh.” Yes, Hindus believe in reincarnation. To us, it explains the natural way the soul evolves from immaturity to spiritual illumination. Life and death are realities for all of us. Hinduism believes that the soul is immortal, that it never dies, but inhabits one body after another on the Earth during its evolutionary journey. Like the caterpillar's transformation into a butterfly, physical death is a most natural transition for the soul, which survives and, guided by karma, continues its long pilgrimage until it is one with God.

I myself have had many lives before this one and expect to have more. Finally, when I have it all worked out and all the lessons have been learned, I will attain enlightenment and moksha, liberation. This means I will still exist, but will no longer be pulled back to be born in a physical body.

Even modern science is discovering reincarnation. There have been many cases of individuals' remembering their past lives. These have been researched by scientists, psychiatrists and parapsychologists during the past decades and documented in good books and videos. Young children speak of vivid past-life memories, which fade as they grow older, as the veils of individuality shroud the soul's intuitive understanding. Great mystics speak of their past lives as well. So do our ancient scriptures, the Vedas, reveal the reality of reincarnation.

Reincarnation is believed in by the Jains and the Sikhs, by the Indians of the Americas, and by the Buddhists, certain Jewish sects, the Pagans and the many indigenous faiths. Even Christianity originally taught reincarnation, but formally renounced it in the twelfth century. It is, in fact, one of the widest held articles of



Each soul evolves by experiencing many varied lives through reincarnation, called punarjanma in Sanskrit, the process wherein the soul repeatedly takes on a physical body through being born on Earth. Here, a soul, represented by the ray of light, is shown in seven successive lives. Reincarnation is a purposeful maturing process governed by the law of karma.

faith on planet Earth.

Elaboration: At death the soul leaves the physical body. But the soul does not die. It lives on in a subtle body called the astral body. The astral body exists in the nonphysical dimension called the astral plane, which is also the world we are in during our dreams at night when we sleep. Here we continue to have experiences until we are reborn again in another physical body as a baby. Each reincarnating soul chooses a home and a family which can best fulfill its next step of learning and maturation.

After many lifetimes of following dharma, the soul is fully matured in love, wisdom and knowledge of God. There is no longer a need for physical birth, for all lessons have been learned, all karmas fulfilled. That soul is then liberated, freed from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Evolution then continues in the more refined spiritual worlds. Similarly, after we graduate from elementary school we never have to go back to the fifth grade. We have gone beyond that level in understanding.

Thus, life's ultimate goal is not money, not clothes, not sex, not power, not food or any other of the instinctive needs. These are natural pursuits, but our real purpose on this Earth is to know, to love and to serve God and the Gods. That leads to the rare and priceless objects of life: enlightenment and liberation. This Hindu view of the soul's evolution answers many otherwise bewildering questions, removing the fear of death while giving assurance that each soul is evolving toward the same spiritual destiny, for the Hindu believes that karma and reincarnation are leading every single soul to God Realization.

3

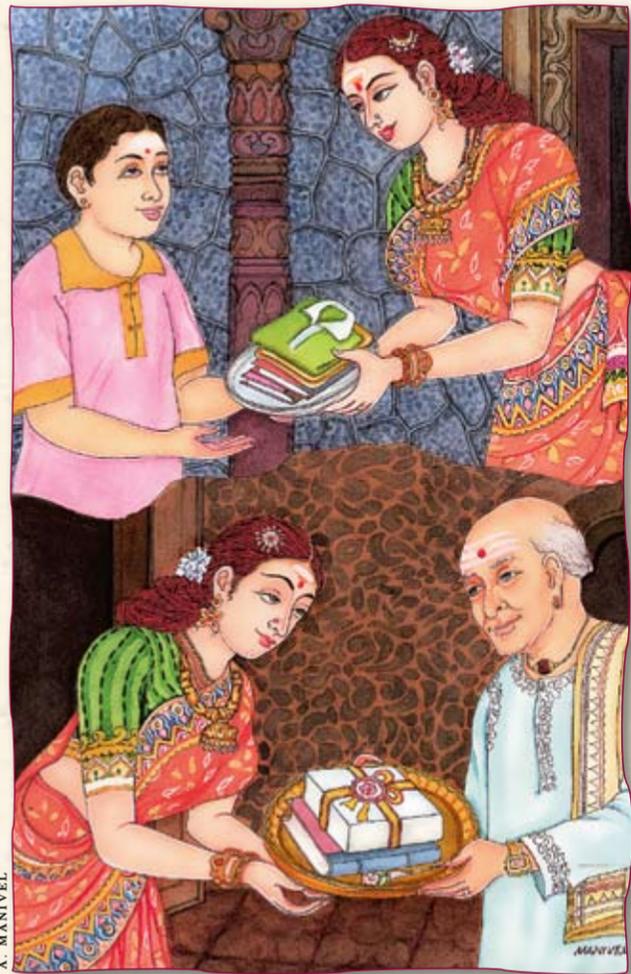
What is karma?

Karma is the universal principle of cause and effect. Our actions, both good and bad, come back to us in the future, helping us to learn from life's lessons and become better people.

Karma is one of the natural laws of the mind, just as gravity is a law of matter. Just as God created gravity to bring order to the physical world, He created karma as a divine system of justice that is self-governing and infinitely fair. It automatically creates the appropriate future experience in response to the current action. *Karma* simply means "action" or "cause and effect." When something happens to us that is apparently unfortunate or unjust, it is not God punishing us. It is the result of our own past actions. The *Vedas*, Hinduism's revealed scripture, tell us if we sow goodness, we will reap goodness; if we sow evil, we will reap evil. Thus we create our own destiny through thought and action. And the divine law is: whatever karma we are experiencing in our life is just what we need at the moment, and nothing can happen but that we have the strength to meet it. Even harsh karma, when faced in wisdom, can be the greatest catalyst for spiritual growth. Understanding the way karma works, we seek to live a good and virtuous life through right thought, right speech and right action. This is called dharma.

Elaboration: Karma is basically energy. I throw energy out through thoughts, words and deeds, and it comes back to me, in time, through other people. Karma is our best teacher, for we must always face the consequences of our actions and thus improve and refine our behavior, or suffer if we do not. We Hindus look at time as a circle, as things cycle around again.

Professor Einstein came to the same conclusion. He saw time as a curve, and space as well. This would eventually make a circle. Karma is a very just law which, like gravity, treats everyone the same. Because we Hindus understand karma, we do not hate or re-



One of the best examples of karma is that you can't give anything away but that generosity will return to you, with interest. In the upper scene, a lady gives clothing to a youth. Below, she receives an unexpected gift from a neighbor as the karma of her good deed brings its natural reward. By wisely heeding karma's ways, we tread the path of dharma.

positive task even if he desired to do so. This is karma, a natural law of the mind. We must also be very careful about our thoughts, because thought creates, and thoughts make karmas—good, bad and mixed.

sent people who do us harm. We understand they are giving back the effects of the causes we set in motion at an earlier time. The law of karma puts man at the center of responsibility for everything he does and everything that is done to him.

Karma is a word we hear quite often on television. "This is my karma," or "It must have been something I did in a past life to bring such good karma to me." We hear karma simply defined as "What goes around, comes around." In some schools of Hinduism, karma is looked upon as something bad—perhaps because we are most aware of this law when we are facing difficult karma, and not so aware of it when life is going smoothly. Even some Hindus equate karma with sin, and this is what evangelical Christians preach that it means. Many people believe that karma means "fate," a preordained destiny over which one has no control, which is also untrue.

The process of action and reaction on all levels—physical, mental and spiritual—is karma. Here is an example. I say kind words to you, and you feel peaceful and happy. I say harsh words to you, and you become ruffled and upset. The kindness and the harshness will return to me, through others, at a later time. This is karma. An architect thinks creative, productive thoughts while drawing plans for a new building. But were he to think destructive, unproductive thoughts, he would soon not be able to accomplish any kind of

4

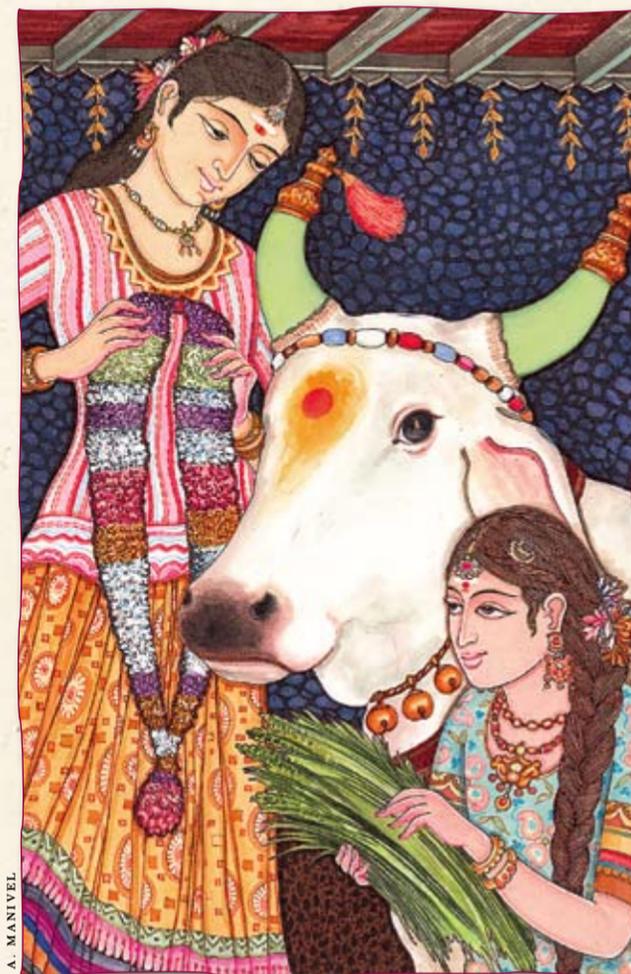
Why do Hindus worship the cow?

Hindus don't worship cows. We respect, honor and adore the cow. By honoring this gentle animal, who gives more than she takes, we honor all creatures.

Hindus regard all living creatures as sacred—mammals, fishes, birds and more. We acknowledge this reverence for life in our special affection for the cow. At festivals we decorate and honor her, but we do not worship her in the sense that we worship the Deity.

To the Hindu, the cow symbolizes all other creatures. The cow is a symbol of the Earth, the nourisher, the ever-giving, undemanding provider. The cow represents life and the sustenance of life. The cow is so generous, taking nothing but water, grass and grain. It gives and gives and gives of its milk, as does the liberated soul give of his spiritual knowledge. The cow is so vital to life, the virtual sustainer of life, for many humans. The cow is a symbol of grace and abundance. Veneration of the cow instills in Hindus the virtues of gentleness, receptivity and connectedness with nature.

Elaboration: Who is the greatest giver on planet Earth today? Who do we see on every table in every country of the world—breakfast, lunch and dinner? It is the cow. McDonald's cow-vending golden arches and their rivals have made fortunes on the humble cow. The generous cow gives milk and cream, yogurt and cheese, butter and ice cream, ghee and buttermilk. It gives entirely of itself through sirloin, ribs, rump, porterhouse and beef stew. Its bones are the base for soup broths and glues. It gives the world leather belts, leather seats, leather coats and shoes, beef jerky, cowboy hats—you name it. The only cow-question for Hindus is, "Why don't more people respect and protect this remarkable creature?" Mahatma Gandhi once said, "One can measure the greatness of a nation and its moral progress by the way it treats its animals.



Hindus do not worship cows, but they do revere them as the perfect example of Divinity in all forms of life. Here a girl garlands a cow whose horns are painted and adorned with tassels and brass tips. Her sister offers fresh grass. In India, the cow is honored and protected as a symbol of wealth, strength, abundance, selfless giving and a full Earthly life.

stay! May they bring forth calves for us, many-colored, giving milk for Indra each day. You make, O cows, the thin man sleek; to the unlovely you bring beauty. Rejoice our homestead with pleasant lowing. In our assemblies we laud your vigor."

Cow protection to me is not mere protection of the cow. It means protection of all that lives and is helpless and weak in the world. The cow means the entire subhuman world."

In the Hindu tradition, the cow is honored, garlanded and given special feedings at festivals all over India, most importantly the annual Gopashtama festival. Demonstrating how dearly Hindus love their cows, colorful cow jewelry and clothing is sold at fairs all over the Indian countryside. From a young age, Hindu children are taught to decorate the cow with garlands, paint and ornaments. Her nature is epitomized in Kamadhenu, the divine, wish-fulfilling cow. The cow and her sacred gifts—milk and ghee in particular—are essential elements in Hindu worship, penance and rites of passage. In India, more than 3,000 institutions called Gaushalas, maintained by charitable trusts, care for old and infirm cows. And while many Hindus are not vegetarians, most respect the still widely held code of abstaining from eating beef.

By her docile, tolerant nature, the cow exemplifies the cardinal virtue of Hinduism, noninjury, known as ahimsa. The cow also symbolizes dignity, strength, endurance, maternity and selfless service.

In the *Vedas*, cows represent wealth and joyous Earthly life. From the *Rig Veda* (4.28.1;6) we read, "The cows have come and have brought us good fortune. In our stalls, contented, may they

5

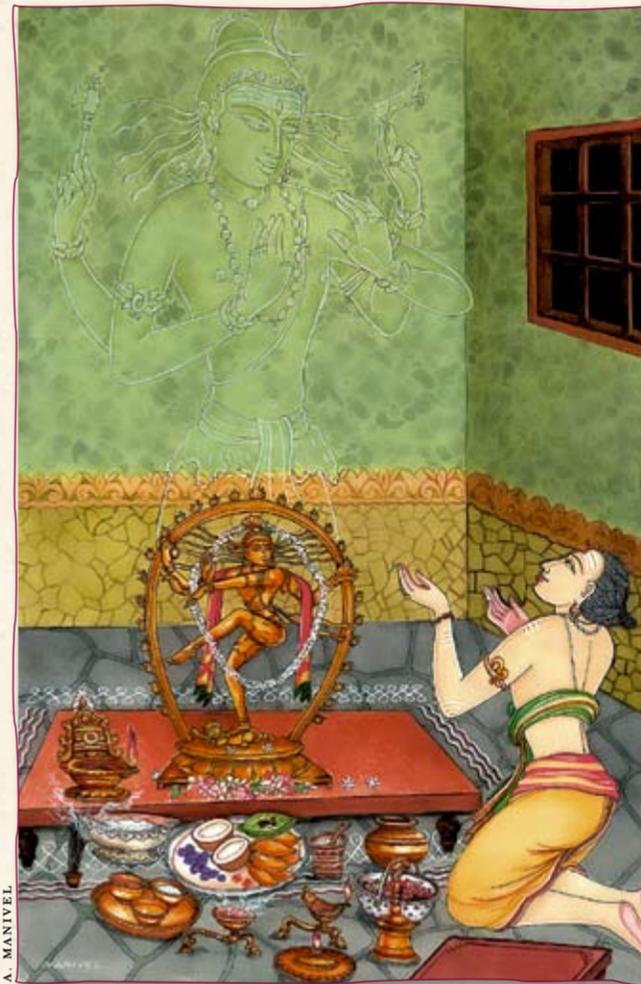
Are Hindus idol worshippers?

Hindus do not worship a stone or metal “idol” as God. We worship God through the image. We invoke the presence of God from the higher, unseen worlds, into the image so that we can commune with Him and receive His blessings.

The stone or metal Deity images in Hindu temples and shrines are not mere symbols of the Gods. They are the form through which their love, power and blessings flood forth into this world. We may liken this mystery to our ability to communicate with others through the telephone. We do not talk to the telephone; rather we use it as a means of communication with another person. Without the telephone, we could not converse across long distances; and without the sanctified icon in the temple, we cannot easily commune with the Deity. Divinity can also be invoked and felt in a sacred fire, or in a tree, or in the enlightened person of a *satguru*. In our temples, God is invoked in the sanctum by highly trained priests. Through the practice of yoga, or meditation, we invoke God inside ourself. *Yoga* means to yoke oneself to God within. The image or icon of worship is a focus for our prayers and devotions.

Another way to explain icon worship is to acknowledge that Hindus believe God is everywhere, in all things, whether stone, wood, creatures or people. So, it is not surprising that they feel comfortable worshipping the Divine in His material manifestation. The Hindu can see God in stone and water, fire, air and ether, and inside his own soul. Indeed, there are Hindu temples which have in the sanctum sanctorum no image at all but a *yantra*, a symbolic or mystic diagram. However, the sight of the image enhances the devotee’s worship.

Elaboration: In Hinduism one of the ultimate attainments is when the seeker transcends the need of all form and symbol. This is the yogi’s goal. In this way Hinduism is the least idol-oriented of all the religions of the world. There is no religion that is more aware of the transcendent, timeless, formless,



A devotee looks within and beyond the bronze dancing Siva to behold God in His spiritual body of light. Dressed in traditional Hindu garb, the man is performing his daily puja in his home shrine—chanting Sanskrit mantras, offering fruit, water, flowers, incense and light—worshipping devoutly, beseeching God to send blessings through the enshrined image.

causeless Truth. Nor is there any religion which uses more symbols to represent Truth in preparation for that realization.

Humorously speaking, Hindus are not idle worshippers. I have never seen a Hindu worship in a lazy or idle way. They worship with great vigor and devotion, with unstinting regularity and constancy. There’s nothing idle about our ways of worship! (A little humor never hurts.)

But, of course, the question is about “graven images.” All religions have their symbols of holiness through which the sacred flows into the mundane. To name a few: the Christian cross, or statues of Mother Mary and Saint Theresa, the holy Kaaba in Mecca, the Sikh *Adi Granth* enshrined in the Golden Temple in Amritsar, the Arc and Torah of the Jews, the image of a meditating Buddha, the totems of indigenous and Pagan faiths, and the artifacts of the holy men and women of all religions. Such icons, or graven images, are held in awe by the followers of the respective faiths. The question is, does this make all such religionists idol worshippers? The answer is, yes and no. From our perspective, idol worship is an intelligent, mystical practice shared by all of the world’s great faiths.

The human mind releases itself from suffering through the use of forms and symbols that awaken reverence, evoke sanctity and spiritual wisdom. Even a fundamentalist Christian who rejects all forms of idol worship,

including those of the Catholic and Episcopal churches, would resent someone who showed disrespect for his Bible. This is because he considers it sacred. His book and the Hindu’s icon are much alike in this way.

6

Are Hindus forbidden to eat meat?

Hindus teach vegetarianism as a way to live with a minimum of hurt to other beings. But in today’s world not all Hindus are vegetarians.

Our religion does not lay down rigid “do’s and don’ts.” There are no commandments. Hinduism gives us the wisdom to make up our own mind on what we put in our body, for it is the only one we have—in this life, at least. Vegetarians are more numerous in the South of India than in the North. This is because of the North’s cooler climactic conditions and past Islamic influence.

Priests and religious leaders are definitely vegetarian, so as to maintain a high level of purity and spiritual consciousness to fulfill their responsibilities, and to awaken the refined areas of their nature. Soldiers and law-enforcement officers are generally not vegetarians, because they have to keep alive their aggressive forces in order to perform their work. To practice yoga and be successful in meditation, it is mandatory to be vegetarian. It is a matter of wisdom—the application of knowledge at any given moment. Today, about twenty percent of all Hindus are vegetarians.

Elaboration: This can be a touchy subject. There are several ways to respond, depending on who is asking and the background in which he was raised. But the overlying principle that defines the Hindu answer to this query is *ahimsa*—refraining from injuring, physically, mentally or emotionally, anyone or any living creature. The Hindu who wishes to strictly follow the path of noninjury naturally adopts a vegetarian diet. It’s a matter of conscience more than anything else.

When we eat meat, fish, fowl and eggs, we absorb the vibration of the instinctive creatures into our nerve system. This chemically alters our consciousness and amplifies our lower nature, which is prone to fear, anger, jealousy, confusion, resentment and the



Vendors at a market are selling fruits, vegetables, grains, spices and sweets—a potpourri of foods that great cooks creatively combine in one of the world’s most sumptuous cuisines. Hindus understand the sound reasons against eating meat, and many abstain entirely. With such a savory and healthy diet, there is no need to consume flesh.

like. Many Hindu swamis advise followers to be well-established vegetarians prior to initiation into mantra, and to remain vegetarian thereafter. But most do not insist upon vegetarianism for those not seeking initiation. Swamis have learned that families who are vegetarian have fewer problems than those who are not.

Poignant scriptural citations counsel against eating meat. The *Yajur Veda* (36.18) calls for kindness toward all creatures living on the Earth, in the air and in the water. The *Tirukural*, a 2,200-year-old masterpiece of ethics, states, “When a man realizes that meat is the butchered flesh of another creature, he will abstain from eating it” (257). The *Manu Dharma Shastras* state, “Having well considered the origin of flesh and the cruelty of fettering and slaying corporeal beings, let one entirely abstain from eating flesh,” and “When the diet is pure, the mind and heart are pure.”

For guidance in this and all matters, Hindus also rely on their own guru, community elders, their own conscience and their knowledge of the benefits of abstaining from meat and enjoying a wholesome vegetarian diet. Of course, there are good Hindus who eat meat, and there are not-so-good Hindus who are vegetarians.

Today in America and Europe millions of people are vegetarians because they want to live a long time and be healthy. Many feel a moral obligation to shun the mentality of violence to which meat-eating gives rise. There are good books on vegetarianism, such as *Diet for a New America*, by John Robbins. There is also a fine magazine called *Vegetarian Times*. Mr. Robbins’ insightful “How to Win an Argument with a Meat-Eater” is included in chapter 43 of this book



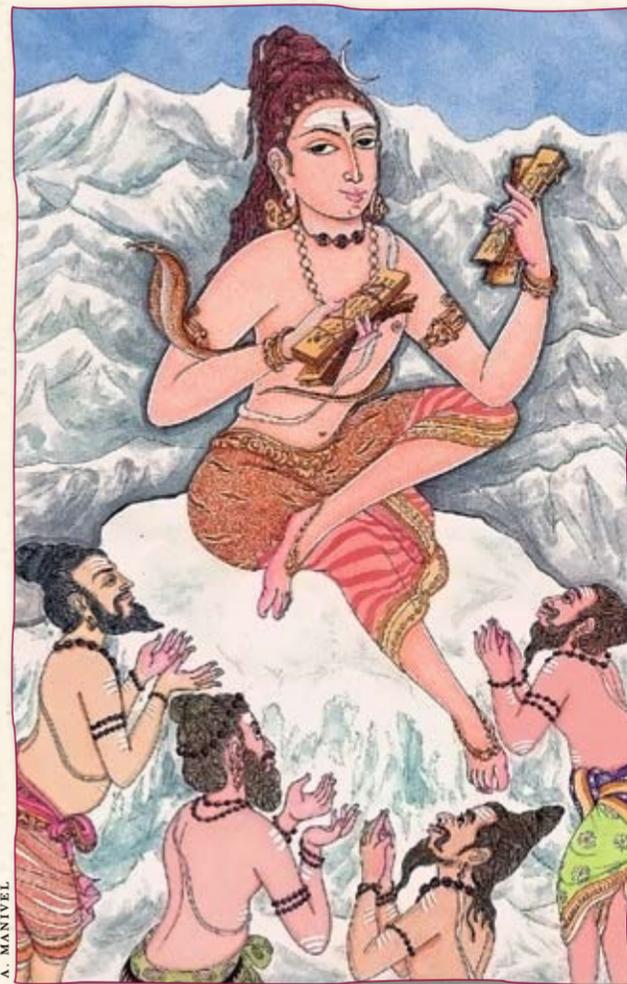
Do Hindus have a Bible?

Our “Bible” is called the *Veda*. The *Veda*, which means “wisdom,” is comprised of four ancient and holy scriptures which all Hindus revere as the revealed word of God.

Like the taoist *Tao te Ching*, the Buddhist *Dhammapada*, the Sikh *Adi Granth*, the Jewish *Torah*, the Christian *Bible* and the Muslim *Koran*—the *Veda* is the Hindu holy book. The four books of the *Vedas*—*Rig*, *Yajur*, *Sama* and *Atharva*—include over 100,000 verses. The knowledge imparted by the *Vedas* ranges from earthy devotion to high philosophy. Their words and wisdom permeate Hindu thought, ritual and meditation. The *Vedas* are the ultimate scriptural authority for Hindus. Their oldest portions are said by some to date back as far as 6,000 BCE, orally transmitted for most of history and written down in Sanskrit in the last few millennia, making them the world’s longest and most ancient scripture. The *Vedas* open a rare window into ancient Indian society, proclaiming life’s sacredness and the way to oneness with God.

Elaboration: For untold centuries unto today, the *Vedas* have remained the sustaining force and authoritative doctrine, guiding followers in ways of worship, duty and enlightenment. The *Vedas* are the meditative and philosophical focus for millions of monks and a billion seekers. Their stanzas are chanted from memory by priests and laymen daily as liturgy in temple worship and domestic ritual. All Hindus wholeheartedly accept the *Vedas*, yet each draws selectively, interprets freely and amplifies abundantly. Over time, this tolerant allegiance has woven the varied tapestry of Indian Hindu Dharma.

Each of the four *Vedas* has four sections: *Samhitas* (hymn collections), *Brahmanas* (priestly manuals), *Aranyakas* (forest treatises) and *Upanishads* (enlightened discourses). The *Samhitas* and *Brahmanas* affirm that God is immanent and transcendent and pre-



The *Vedas* are revealed scripture, meaning they were issued forth by God through enlightened sages, or rishis. This divine transmission is depicted here as Lord Siva bestows the four books of the *Veda* to four rishis. The sacred knowledge, passed orally for most of history, was finally scribed in Sanskrit on palm leaves to share and preserve it.

“Taking as a bow the great weapon of the *Upanishad*, one should put upon it an arrow sharpened by meditation. Stretching it with a thought directed to the essence of That, penetrate that Imperishable as the mark, my friend” (*Mundaka Upanishad* 2.2.3).

scribe ritual worship, mantra and devotional hymns to establish communication with the spiritual worlds. The hymns are invocations to the One Divine and to the Divinities of nature, such as the Sun, the Rain, the Wind, the Fire and the Dawn—as well as prayers for matrimony, progeny, prosperity, concord, protection, domestic rites and more.

The *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads* outline the soul’s evolutionary journey, provide yogic philosophical training and propound realization of man’s oneness with God as the destiny of all souls. Today, the *Vedas* are published in Sanskrit, English, French, German and other languages. But it is the popular, metaphysical *Upanishads* that have been most amply and ably translated.

The *Vedas* advise: “Let there be no neglect of Truth. Let there be no neglect of dharma. Let there be no neglect of welfare. Let there be no neglect of prosperity. Let there be no neglect of study and teaching. Let there be no neglect of the duties to the Gods and the ancestors” (*Taittiriya Upanishad* 1.11.1). “United your resolve, united your hearts, may your spirits be one, that you may long together dwell in unity and concord!” (*Rig Veda* 10.191.4). “There, where there is no darkness, nor night, nor day, nor being, nor nonbeing, there is the Auspicious One, alone, absolute and eternal. There is the glorious splendor of that Light from whom in the beginning sprang ancient wisdom” (*Shvetashvatara Upanishad* 4.18).



Why do many Hindus wear a dot near the middle of their forehead?

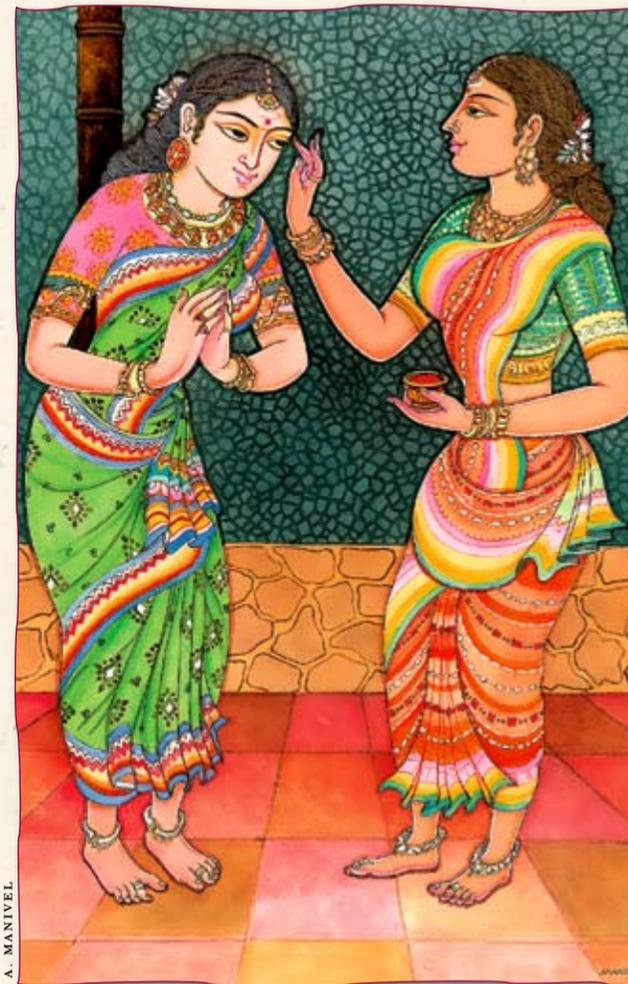
The dot worn on the forehead is a religious symbol. It represents divine sight and shows that one is a Hindu. For women, it is also a beauty mark.

The dot worn between the eyes or in the middle of the forehead is a sign that one is a Hindu. It is called the *bindi* in the Hindi language, *bindu* in Sanskrit and *pottu* in Tamil. In olden days, all Hindu men and women wore these marks, and they both also wore earrings. Today it is the women who are most faithful in wearing the *bindi*.

The dot has a mystical meaning. It represents the third eye of spiritual sight, which sees things the physical eyes cannot see. Hindus seek to awaken their inner sight through yoga. The forehead dot is a reminder to use and cultivate this spiritual vision to perceive and better understand life’s inner workings—to see things not just physically, but with the “mind’s eye” as well. The *bindi* is made of red powder called *sindur*, traditionally made from powdered turmeric and fresh lime juice, or from sandalpaste or cosmetics.

In addition to the simple dot, there are many types of forehead marks, known as *tilaka* in Sanskrit. Each mark represents a particular sect or denomination of our vast religion. We have four major sects: Saivism, Vaishnavism, Shaktism and Smartism. Vaishnava Hindus, for example, wear a v-shaped *tilaka* made of white clay. Elaborate *tilakas* are worn by Hindus mainly at religious events, though many wear the simple *bindi*, indicating they are Hindu, even in the general public. By these marks we know what a person believes, and therefore know how to begin conversations.

For Hindu women, the forehead dot is also a beauty mark, not unlike the black mark European and American women once wore on the cheek. The red *bindi* is generally a sign of marriage. A black *bindi* is often worn before marriage to ward off the evil eye.



Decorating the face and body with colorful paints is a universal human practice, often a cultural rite expressing one’s tribe, beliefs and identity. The forehead dot shows that one is proud to be a Hindu and bespeaks mystical seeing beyond the five senses. Here, in a simple, daily act, a woman obligingly applies a red *bindi* to her sister’s forehead.

As an exotic fashion statement, the dot’s color complements the color of a lady’s sari. Ornate *bindis* are even worn by actresses in popular American TV shows.

Elaboration: Men and women of a particular religion wishing to identify themselves to one another often do so by wearing distinctive religious symbols. Often these are blessed in their temples, churches or synagogues. Christians wear a cross on a necklace. Jewish boys wear small leather cases that hold scriptural passages, and the round cap called *yarmulka*. Sikh men wear their hair in a turban. In many countries, Muslim women cover their head with a scarf, called *hajib*.

Do not be ashamed to wear the *bindi* on your forehead in the United States, Canada, Europe or any country of the world. Wear it proudly. The forehead dot will distinguish you from all other people as a very special person, a Hindu, a knower of eternal truths. You will never be mistaken as belonging to another nationality or religion. The sacred forehead dot is an easy way of distinguishing Hindus from Muslims. And don’t be intimidated when people ask you what the dot means. Now you have lots of information to give a good answer, which will probably lead to more questions about your venerable religion.

For both boys and girls, men and women, the dot can be small or large depending on the circumstance, but should always be there when appropriate. Naturally, we don’t want to flaunt our religion in the face of others. We observe that many Christian men and women take off or conceal their crosses in the corporate business world. Some communities and institutions disallow wearing religious symbols entirely.



Are the Gods of Hinduism really married?

It is true that God is often depicted with a spouse in our traditional stories. However, on a deeper, philosophical level, the Supreme Being and the Gods are neither male nor female and are therefore not married.

In popular, village Hinduism God is represented as male, and God's energy, or Shakti, is personified as His spouse—for example, Vishnu and Lakshmi. In Hindu temples, art and mythology, God is everywhere seen as the beloved, divine couple. Philosophically, however, the caution is always made that God and God's energy are One, and the metaphor of the inseparable divine couple serves only to illustrate this Oneness.

Hinduism is taught on many levels to many different people, and to uneducated people who are not able to understand high philosophy, Hinduism is taught in story form. Because the temple is the center of every Hindu community, and everyone is focused on the temple and the Gods within it, the Gods are the major players in these stories. Hindus who understand the higher philosophy seek to find God on the inside while also worshiping God in the temples. Simple folk strive to be like a God, or like a Goddess. These tales, called *Puranas*, have long been the basis of dance, plays and storytelling around the fire in the homes to children as they are growing up. The stories illustrate how a family should live, how they should raise their children, and much more. Before the printing press, there were few books, and Hinduism was conveyed orally through stories and parables. While these often violent children's tales should not be perpetuated, there remains much of value in the extensive writings of the *Puranas*.

Elaboration: Those who learn the higher Hindu philosophies know that Gods are neither male nor female. In fact, attaining to that Godly level of being is one of the mystical goals of yoga. This is accomplished by blending the feminine and masculine



Through history Hindus have depicted God as Ardhanarishvara, which literally means "half-female Lord"—Siva as male on the right and female on the left. This vision of the Divine as our Mother-Father God supersedes the popular, mythological notion of marriage of a God and Goddess, declaring that God and His energy are one.

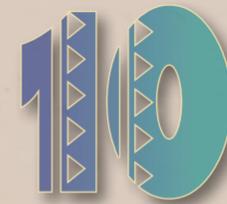
reasonable, that can be understood and accepted even by a child, that are coherent, sensible and strictly in accord with scripture and tradition. This is necessary in the technological age, necessary in order that Hinduism will be a religion of the future, not of the past.

currents, *ida* and *pingala*, into the spiritual current, *sushumna*, in the center of the spine within each individual.

Hindus know that the Gods do not marry, that they are complete within themselves. This unity is depicted in the traditional icon of Ardhanarishvara, Siva as half man and half woman, and in the teaching that Siva and Shakti are one, that Shakti is Siva's energy. Siva is dearly loved as our Father-Mother God. Yet, sexual gender and matrimonial relations are of the physical and emotional realms, whereas the Gods exist in a stratum that far supersedes these levels of life. For that matter, the soul itself is neither male nor female.

Some modern swamis now urge devotees not to pay any attention to Puranic stories about the Gods, saying that they have no relationship with the world today—that they are misleading and confusing and should no longer be taught to the children. Instead, they encourage followers to deepen themselves with the higher philosophies of the Vedic *Upanishads* and the realizations of Hindu seers.

Other faiths sometimes criticize the Hindu religion as a sort of comic-book religion, and we should not be part of perpetuating that image by passing on such misconceptions as the marriage of the Gods. Other religions move and adjust with the times. Hinduism must also do so. It must offer answers to the questions about God, soul and world—answers that are



What about caste and untouchability?

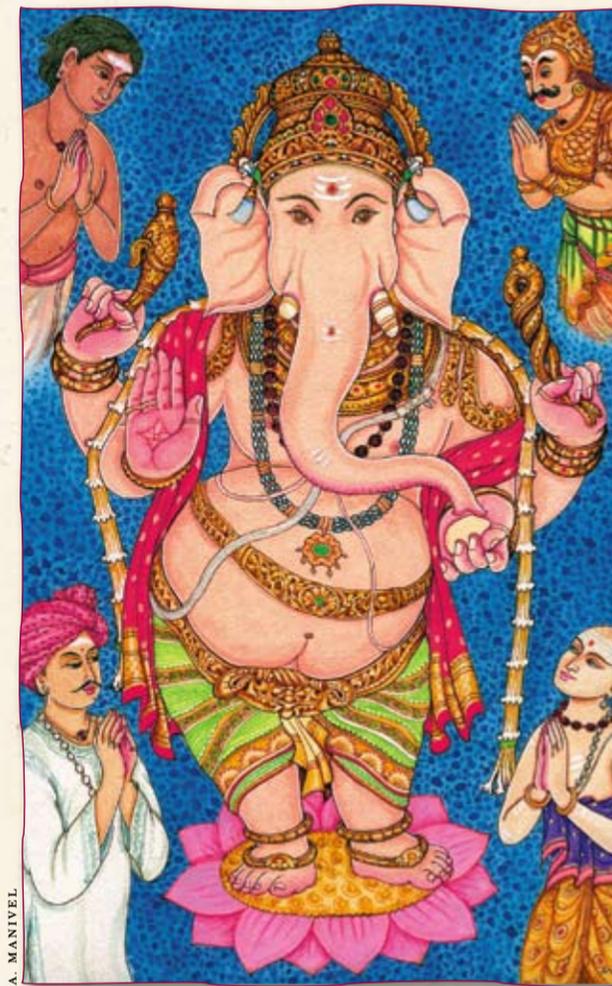
Caste is the hereditary division of Indian society based on occupation. The lowest class, deemed untouchables, suffer from discrimination and mistreatment. It is illegal in India to discriminate against, abuse or insult anyone on the basis of caste.

Caste, from the Portuguese *casta*, meaning "clan" or "lineage," refers to two systems within Hindu society. The first is *varna*, the division of society into four groups: workers, business people, lawmakers/law enforcers and priests. The second is *jati*, the thousands of occupational guilds whose members follow a single profession. *Jati* members usually marry within their own *jati* and follow traditions associated with their *jati*. In urban areas they often enter other occupations, but still usually arrange marriages within the *jati*.

Wealth, especially in urban areas, often trumps caste. Industrialization and education have greatly altered India's *jati* system by eliminating or changing the professions upon which it was originally based, and opening new employment options. The *jat*is are evolving to function today less like guilds and more like large clans of related families. At the bottom are the so-called untouchables, who perform the dirtiest jobs and have suffered much like the black people of America, who were freed from slavery just 138 years ago. Strong laws have been passed in India to end caste-based discrimination. Modern Hindus rightly deplore caste abuse and are working to set matters right. Just as in the US, it is a difficult task that will take decades, especially in the villages.

Elaboration: Caste is, no doubt, the biggest stick that Hindus get beaten with. It is taught as the defining attribute, or fatal flaw, of Hinduism in Western schools. Untouchability as a formal system shocks Westerners. One response we can make is to separate social stratification from the issue of racial/class discrimination.

First issue: social stratification. India is one of the world's oldest



Representatives of the four castes, or varnas, are shown here surrounding Lord Ganesha. They are: worker, businessman, general and priest. These are natural divisions which appear in all nations and societies as shown by the universal existence, in some form, of labor unions, businessmen's associations, armies and police forces, and religious ministers.

variations. This kind of response—we can call it the "You're one, too" defense—doesn't mean Hindus should not work much harder to end caste discrimination. But it reminds others that no country in the world is yet free from racial discrimination.