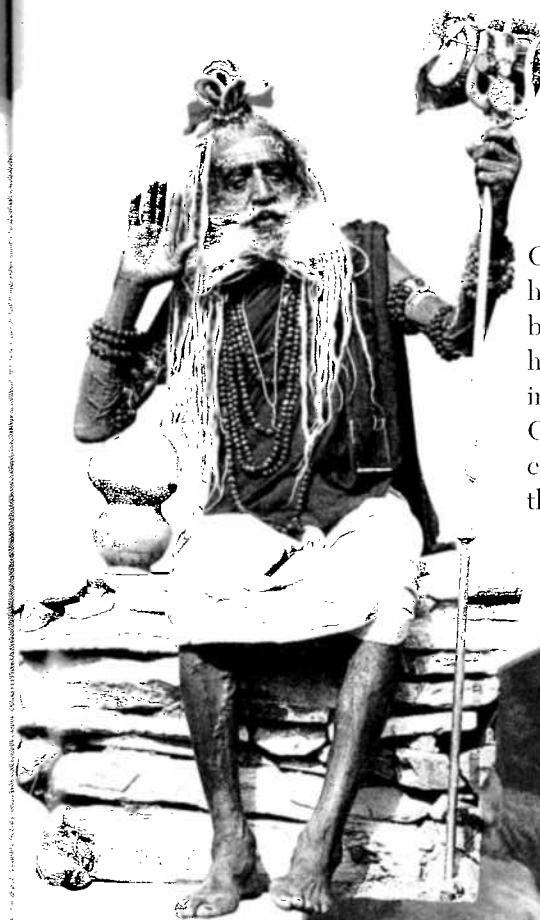
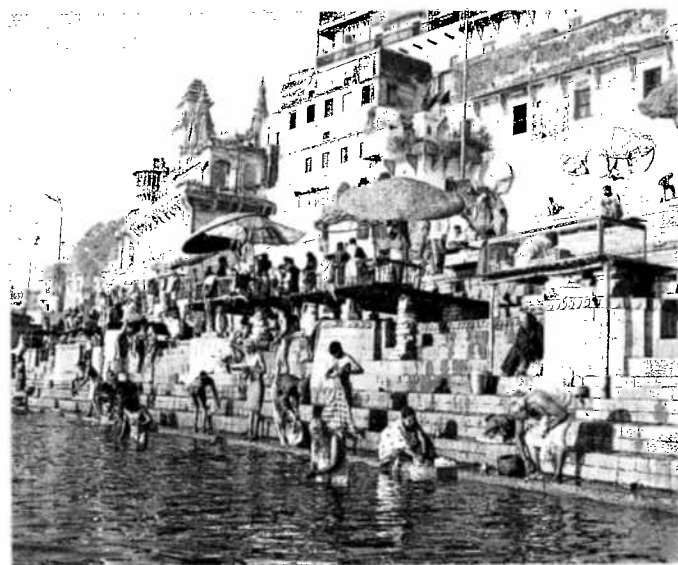


# Hinduism

Hinduism, probably the world's oldest religion, is the major religion of India. It also has followers in Indonesia, as well as in parts of Africa, Europe, and the Western Hemisphere. Hinduism is a collection of religious beliefs that developed over thousands of years. Hindus worship several gods, which represent different forms of Brahman. Hinduism, like Buddhism, stresses that persons reach true enlightenment and happiness only after they free themselves from their earthly desires. Followers of Hinduism achieve this goal through worship, the attainment of knowledge, and a lifetime of virtuous acts.

The beliefs of Hinduism are contained in several different scriptures, including the *Vedas* and the *Bhagavad-Gita*. In the scriptures, the interconnectedness of all life is a basic concept. *Atman* is the word used for each living soul. Uniting all atmans is Brahman, the universal soul. When a person understands the relationship between atman and Brahman, that person achieves perfect understanding (*moksha*) and a release from life in this world.

However, this understanding does not usually come in one lifetime. By the process of reincarnation, an individual soul or spirit is born again and again until *moksha* is achieved. A soul's karma—good or bad deeds—follows from one reincarnation to another.



Gurus, or spiritual teachers, like the one shown here, play a major role in spreading Hindu beliefs. These holy men are believed to have had the gods' words revealed to them. They interpret and provide insight into the religion. Gurus also travel to villages throughout the country and teach the ways of Hinduism to those villagers who cannot read.

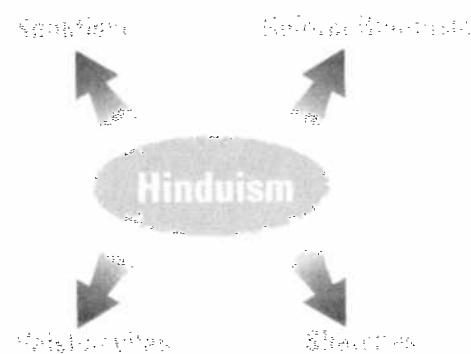


## Celebration

Each spring, Hindus in India celebrate the festival of Holi. This festival is a tribute to Shiva, one of the leading gods of Hinduism. Shiva is considered to be beyond good and evil. Hindus call him the Destroyer because he occasionally destroys the world in order to recreate it. The Holi festival honors Shiva with loud and colorful parades in some parts of India. In one of the more dramatic rituals, shown here, a throng gathers in a sacred temple in the village of Nandgaon. There, they are showered with colored powder and dyed water.



## Major Hindu Sects



Each year, thousands of Hindus make a pilgrimage to India's Ganges River. The Ganges is considered a sacred site in the Hindu religion. Most Hindus come to bathe in the water, an act they believe will cleanse and purify them. The sick and disabled come in the belief that the holy water might cure their ailments. After most Hindus die, they are cremated. Some then have their ashes cast into the Ganges. According to traditional belief, this assures them an entry into Paradise.

## ICONS, TEXTS & SYMBOLS



### The Sacred Om

The sound *OM*, or *AUM*, represented here, is the most sacred syllable for Hindus. It often is used in prayers.

### The Vedas

The Vedas are the oldest Hindu scriptures—and are older than the sacred writings of any other major religion. They contain prayers and hymns, as well as works of philosophy.

### Brahma

This statue represents Brahma, creator of the universe. Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are the three main gods of Hinduism. Vishnu is the preserver of the universe, while Shiva is its destroyer.