

# Introducing *The Story of God, With Morgan Freeman*

Morgan Freeman, the actor who played God in the 2003 film *Bruce Almighty*, has undertaken a six-part series on world religions called *The Story of God*. The 78-year-old actor traveled almost 100,000 miles to trace the origins of the great world religions. He visited sacred sites—a Maya temple in Guatemala, the ghats of Varanasi in India, Vatican City in Rome, the pyramids of Egypt, and more. He interviewed monks and Monsignors, imams and rabbis, scientists and scholars. The result is a survey of themes that these religions share. They all ask the same great questions, but may answer those great questions in a variety of ways.

- How did we get here? Who or what created the universe? What do the creation stories of different religions have in common? What does the scientific theory of the Big Bang tell us?
- Is there a God? How has the idea of one or more supreme beings evolved over time? Is there any evidence in our brains that we are predisposed to believe in God?
- What is evil? Where does it come from? How is the need to control evil related to the rise of civilizations?
- Can miracles be real? How can we understand the existence of “impossible” happenings?
- How will the world end? Will there be a fiery apocalypse? What will bring about the end of the world as we know it?
- What happens after we die? How has belief in the afterlife evolved?

Humans have speculated about these questions for eons. Now Morgan Freeman takes the viewer with him as he attempts to learn more about how humans have tried to answer these questions across continents and millennia.

This curriculum guide has been prepared for use in secondary classrooms to help students understand more about the history and belief systems of the five major living religions the viewer encounters in the series: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

# Notes to the Teacher

Teaching about world religions makes some teachers uncomfortable, but it is an important element of social studies classes such as world history, Advanced Placement World History, and Advanced Placement Human Geography. Moreover, it is an important part of any citizen’s education. As the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) said in a position paper:

Public schools can and should do more to take religion seriously in a world where religion—for better and for worse—plays a critical role in shaping events at home and abroad.

The Supreme Court concurred. In *Abington v. Schempp* more than a half century ago, Associate Justice Tom Clark wrote in his opinion:

[I]t might well be said that one’s education is not complete without a study of comparative religions or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization.

The root cause of teacher discomfort is in many cases a misunderstanding of the First Amendment to the Constitution on the part of teachers and administrators. To clarify the issue, the First Amendment Center has published “A Teacher’s Guide to Religion in the Public Schools,” a clear and concise set of guidelines for handling this subject appropriately that was developed by a consortium of diverse religious groups. A copy of this guide can be downloaded from <http://www.religiousfreedomcenter.org/resources/publications/>. (A fuller treatment of the subject, *Finding Common Ground* by Charles C. Haynes, can be downloaded at the same site.) The NCSS has summarized the main principles in “A Teacher’s Guide” as follows:

- The school’s approach to religion is *academic, not devotional*.
- The school strives for student *awareness* of religions, but does not press for student acceptance of any religion.
- The school sponsors study about religion, not the *practice* of religion.
- The school may expose students to a diversity of religious views, but may not *impose* any particular view.
- The school educates about all religions; it does *not promote or denigrate* any religion.
- The school may inform the student about religious beliefs, but should not seek to *conform* him or her to any particular belief.<sup>1</sup>

This curriculum guide from *Journeys in Film* contains five lessons, one on each of the five largest living world religions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Each lesson extends over several days and incorporates information about the history of the religion, its major beliefs, its founder if one is identifiable, and more. Each lesson is free-standing and can be incorporated into your curriculum where appropriate. Each uses clips from episodes of the series *The Story of God, With Morgan Freeman* to illustrate important points. Each conforms to the guidelines outlined above and each is aligned with Common Core standards.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/study\\_about\\_religions](http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/study_about_religions)



# Hinduism

## Enduring Understandings

- Hinduism, the third-largest religion in the world, has many gods and a variety of worship practices.
- Hindus believe that life is cyclical, that one is reborn (reincarnated) in a series of lives until one reaches perfection and is freed from the cycle.
- The great Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, shows values important to Hindus, including honor and loyalty.
- Classical Hindu dance is considered sacred and is performed as an act of worship.

## Essential Questions

- Who are the main Hindu gods and how are they worshiped?
- What is reincarnation and how does belief in reincarnation affect the lives of Hindus?
- What is the *Ramayana* and why is it important?
- What is the role of dance in Hindu culture?

## Notes to the Teacher

Hinduism is the oldest active religion in the world. It differs greatly from Judeo-Christian theology in that it does not have a particular founder or systematic organization to its creation or worship. As Morgan Freeman says in *The Story of God*, “The Hindu philosophy is not to dwell on the mystery of our creation, but simply to give thanks that we are here.” There’s a common question surrounding the religion: The Hindu gods created the universe, but who created the Hindu gods?

From as early as 1500 BCE, the tenets of Hinduism have been transmitted through ancient hymns known as the Vedas. Written in the ancient language of Sanskrit, these early texts exist in four main collections: Rig-Veda, Sama-Veda, Yajur-Veda, and Atharva-Veda.

The Hindu relationship to the spirit world is complicated. At its core, Hinduism revolves around three main gods or deities: Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu. These and other minor gods are worshiped in temples. Worshiping is not done by congregations, but rather individually or in small groups. Hindus express their faith through many festivals throughout the year. One of the more popular Hindu celebrations is known as Diwali, or the Festival of Lights, which celebrates the victory of knowledge over ignorance.

The Ganges River plays a central role in Hindu religion. Devotees of Hinduism believe that the Ganges River has mystical qualities. They often bathe in it, hoping that it will purify the soul and wash away their sins. In Hinduism, the Ganges is personified earliest as the river goddess Ganga. The Creator god Brahma sent Ganga flowing down from the heavens. But the god Shiva feared that Ganga would drown the Earth so he caught her in his hair. When Shiva parted a lock of his hair, the Ganges River was created.

This introductory lesson includes multiple activities to engage students with the history and culture of Hinduism. The lesson begins simply, with a K-W-L (*Know, Want to Know, Learned*) chart on **HANDOUT 1** asking students to think about what they know and want to know about Hinduism. If you are not familiar with this tool, see the National Education Association’s explanation at <http://www.nea.org/tools/k-w-l-know-want-to-know-learned.html>.

After brainstorming, students will work in a jigsaw group exercise in order to produce a broader understanding of four important aspects of Hinduism: the Hindu Trinity, the Vedas, Hindu festivals, and Hindu worship. **HANDOUT 2** is based on a Library of Congress country study, so it presents a good opportunity for reading informational text and discerning main ideas, a Common Core requirement. You will need full copies of the handout for each student. Even though students will become “experts” on one topic in class in order to teach others, they will need to read all four sections. As students work, stay especially available to those working on the second topic, which is more abstract and difficult; you may wish to assign your best readers to that page.

Part 3 of the lesson deals further with the idea of reincarnation introduced in the second reading and with the practice of cremation. Students will watch two clips from the series *The Story of God*, in which Morgan Freeman learns about the Ganges River, the concept of reincarnation, and the funeral rites of Hindus. They will define reincarnation and talk about some of the related ideas, including *samsara* (the repeated cycle of birth, life, and death) and *moksha* (the release from *samsara* to become one with the Divine).

The fourth activity deals with the great Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*. **HANDOUT 3** is a simple retelling of the main story of the *Ramayana*, but the actual epic is much more complex, with many additional stories about the main characters. Rama is generally believed to have been a real historical tribal hero who was later deified and celebrated in the Sanskrit epic attributed to the poet Valmiki. Rama was considered an avatar or human form of the god Vishnu, and representations of him in art look similar to pictures of Vishnu. The epic is long, with about 24,000 verses arranged into seven books. There are many versions of the *Ramayana*, and most countries in Southeast Asia have a version of it. For more information about this epic, a good place to start is <https://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/Religions/texts/Ramaya.html>.

After learning about the *Ramayana*, students are introduced to an art form; sacred Hindu dance. Before the class, prepare a slide show of images of Indian dance based on the *Ramayana* by searching Google Images with the search terms “Hindu – dance – Ramayana.” You will need a world map or map of Asia for this lesson. Also, locate several examples of Balinese dance on YouTube. The music in the background is provided by a traditional gamelan, or gong, orchestra. You should also include the Kecak dance (pronounced KET-jack) in which men imitate the monkeys that composed Hanuman’s army. (Dances based on the *Ramayana* may also be found in the Bharatanatyam and Kathak dance style.) Hindu classical dance, which is always religious, has many styles; the dances of the island of Bali, in Indonesia, demonstrate the far reach of Hindu culture. Note that while Indonesia has the largest Muslim population of any country in the world, Bali has remained Hindu and preserved ancient Hindu rituals, including dance and cremation.

# Lesson 1 (HINDUISM)



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Finally, in a wrap-up exercise, students come back to their original K-W-L charts and fill in the last column with what they have learned.

## Suggested Online Resources

- Heitzman, James, and Robert L. Worden, eds. *India: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995. <http://countrystudies.us/india/>
- The Asia Society, “Religions of South Asia,” at <http://asiasociety.org/religions-south-asia>
- National Geographic blogs on topics in Hinduism at <http://voices.nationalgeographic.com/tag/hinduism/>
- Kiger, Patrick J., “How Hindus Honor the Dead and Usher in the Next Life,” at <http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/the-story-of-god-with-morgan-freeman/articles/how-hindus-honor-the-dead-and-usher-in-the-next-life/>

## COMMON CORE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS » HISTORY/SOCIAL STUDIES » GRADE 11–12

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11–12.2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11–12.7

Integrate and evaluate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, as well as words) in order to address a question or solve a problem

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11–12.9

Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources

## COMMON CORE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS » WRITING » GRADE 11–12

### CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11–12.0

Draw evidence from informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research

## Duration of the Lesson

Two to four class periods

## Assessment

Jigsaw group work

K-W-L charts

Class discussion

Written answer to questions on the *Ramayana* on **HANDOUT 3**

## Materials

Copies of **HANDOUT 1: K-W-L CHART OF HINDUISM**

Copies of **HANDOUT 2: BASIC BELIEFS OF HINDUISM**

Copies of **HANDOUT 3: THE *RAMAYANA***

Computer and projector

## Procedure

### Part 1: Brainstorming Prior Knowledge

1. Tell students that they will be studying world religions in conjunction with watching segments from Morgan Freeman's film series *The Story of God* (or the full series if you prefer). Explain that the oldest religion mentioned in the series is Hinduism.
2. Draw a K-W-L chart on the board and distribute **HANDOUT 1**. As a group, have students brainstorm words or phrases that they associate with Hinduism. Record these in the *K* section of the K-W-L chart and have them do the same on their charts. Ask them to explain these associations and tell where they came from. Next, have them list things that they want to know about Hinduism in the *W* section. Prompt students to think about sacred texts, history, celebrations, and culture; it may help to ask them to think about topics they would include for any religion they are familiar with.
3. When the *K* and *W* columns of the chart are complete, have each of the students share two things from the second column of their K-W-L chart with the class. Fill in the second column of the chart on the board as they do this. Collect the handouts and save them to revisit later in the unit.

## Part 2: Basic Beliefs of Hinduism

1. Divide students into groups of four and distribute **HANDOUT 2**. This is their “home” group for the jigsaw exercise. Each student in the group is responsible for one of the four main aspects of Hinduism: the Hindu Trinity, the Vedas, Hindu festivals, and Hindu Worship. These may be assigned or students may choose, but each element must be represented by a student who will be the “expert” on that element in the group.
2. Have students move into “expert” sections (one group for each topic) and read the assigned text. After they have finished reading, the expert sections should discuss what they have read and decide what the main points of the reading are. They should then take notes and write a summary for their home groups, highlighting key points.
3. Bring students back to their home groups and have each of the students present the information on the aspect of Hindu religion assigned to them. Tell students to take notes on the presentations. Then tell them to read through and annotate the readings on the other aspects of Hinduism from **HANDOUT 2** for homework. Be available to answer questions; the readings are challenging and students may need help with unfamiliar concepts.
4. Show the clip from the episode “Who Is God?” in *The Story of God*, in which Morgan Freeman learns about the multiplicity of Hindu gods. Tell students that there are millions of deities, in fact; there is a shrine at every corner. Hindu gods may take the form of natural forces, animals, and supernatural beings. Some questions for discussion:

- How do Hindus decide which gods to honor? (Often it is a family deity that is passed on through generations. Or if a person has a particular problem, he or she may seek a deity’s help and promise to worship that deity in return.)
- How do Hindus honor the gods? (Prayers; chanting; the offering of food, water, flowers, and other articles)
- What is the purpose of the puja ceremony that Morgan witnesses? (To honor the Supreme Mother Goddess, Lalitha)
- What does Morgan Freeman mean when he says Hindu belief is like a “spiritual fingerprint,” unique to each person? (Each person may choose which gods to honor.)

## Part 3: Reincarnation and Cremation

1. Ask students to define reincarnation. (They will probably say being born over and over.)
2. Show the following clips from *The Story of God* and ask them to pay particular attention to information about reincarnation and cremation. Show the second clip twice, if necessary.
  - The episode “Creation,” when Morgan Freeman visits Varanasi and learns about the Ganges River
  - The episode “Beyond Death,” when he learns about reincarnation

3. Ask students to write down in their notebooks a more thorough definition of reincarnation, based on the video clips; then call on a few students to read their definitions.
  4. Tell students that both Hindus and Buddhists believe that life is cyclical; the repetition of birth, life, and death is called *samsara*. The way you live in this life will determine how you will be reborn in the next life (*karma*).
  5. Ask students what the goal of reincarnation is. (To become virtuous so that one can end the cycle of rebirths.) What is meant by the term *moksha*? (The union of the individual human soul with the Divine. Point out that this is similar to the idea of *nirvana* in Buddhism.) Why is cremation at the Marnikanika ghat (cremation place) in Varanasi considered so important? (Cremation at this very holy site releases the soul from the cycle of rebirths and the soul attains *moksha*.)
2. Ask students what the word “avatar” means. (Most will suggest an online persona, an icon that represents a player in a video game.) Point out that the avatar lets the player enter the world of the video game. The word “avatar” comes from Sanskrit and means the descent of a god into a physical or human form. Review the three main gods from the previous part of the lesson and explain that the gods have avatars. Rama is the seventh avatar of Vishnu.
  3. Distribute **HANDOUT 3: THE RAMAYANA** and tell students that *Ramayana* simply means “Rama’s journey.” Read aloud or have them read silently the story. Then have small groups discuss their answers to the questions that follow the story.

Suggested answers:

1. The responsibilities of a prince:
  - He must show courage and strength (Rama battles and defeats demons).
  - He must put loyalty to his family above his own ambition (Rama goes into exile without resisting; Bharata refuses to take the throne his mother has inveigled to get for him).

The role of women:

- A virtuous and beautiful woman is a prize to be won (Rama wins Sita’s hand with his prowess with the bow).
- A wife should be unfailingly loyal to her husband. (Sita loves her husband and voluntarily follows him into exile; she puts his honor above even her own safety.)
- A husband must always see that his wife is safe. (Rama leaves Lakshmana to guard Sita when he leaves; he rescues her from Ravana.)

#### Part 4: The *Ramayana*

1. Write the word “epic” on the board and explain to students that an epic is a long narrative poem that tells a story, usually about a great national hero. Give examples, such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* (Greek), *The Aeneid* (Roman), *Beowulf* (Anglo-Saxon), and even the modern American epic about the Civil War, *John Brown’s Body*. Tell them that in India there is a Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*, written in Sanskrit and attributed to the poet Valmiki, a sort of Indian Homer. Explain that Sanskrit is one of the oldest languages and is the language of Hindu sacred texts.

The existence of evil:

- Sometimes evil exists in ordinary humans, sometimes in demons with magical powers. (Bharata’s mother tries to cheat Rama of his inheritance; Rama battles demons at the beginning of the story and then kills Ravana at the end.)
- Evil can be defeated by honor and courage. (Bharata saves the throne for his brother; Rama wins his battles against the demons.)

The importance of friendship:

- Friendship can and should be absolute. (Lakshmana goes into exile with Rama; Hanuman risks his life to help Rama.)
2. It shows that reputation is very important, especially for a prince. He must have a sense of honor and act to defend it.
  4. Explain to students that the real *Ramayana* is much more complex than the summary on the handout. Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, and Hanuman have many more adventures. Encourage them to read more of the epic or to see one of the live action or animated films based on the *Ramayana* from India.

## Part 5: Hindu Dance

1. Show students a world map and locate Indonesia. Tell them that, although Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the world, the population on one small island—Bali—has retained belief in Hinduism, and point out the island of Bali (due south of the southernmost tip of Borneo). Tell them that Bali is well known for its traditional dances, several of which are based on the *Ramayana*.
2. Show students the video of the *Ramayana* ballet and ask them to record their impressions of it as they watch. (They will probably have comments about the costumes, the hand gestures, and the music.) Explain that these are all traditional. Give students 10–15 minutes to write about their observations in list form. Explain that throughout the Hindu world, classical dance is sacred and is considered an offering to the gods.
3. Show your slides of other scenes from other Hindu classical dances. Give students the opportunity to discuss and to add to their lists of observations.
4. Show them the video of the Kecak dance, without additional explanation. Ask if anyone can guess what the “chak” sound is supposed to be. (Imitation of the sound of monkeys.) Tell students that in Bali the monkey is considered a sacred animal, in part because of the heroism and loyalty of Hanuman, and that a preserve with three temples is located there. Visitors can feed the monkeys, and the monkeys may even steal food from a visitor’s pocket.

## Conclusion

Redistribute the K-W-L charts from the beginning of the unit (**HANDOUT 1**). Prompt students to reflect on what they have learned about the history and culture of Hinduism, writing their responses in the *L* column of the K-W-L. Then have students discuss their entries with the entire class.

**Lesson 1** (HINDUISM)



**Handout 1**

# K-W-L Chart on Hinduism

**NAME** \_\_\_\_\_

Follow your teacher's directions on filling in sections of this chart.

WHAT DO YOU <u>K</u> NOW?	WHAT DO YOU <u>W</u> ANT TO KNOW?	WHAT HAVE YOU <u>L</u> EARNED?

## Handout 2 ▶ P. 1

## Basic Beliefs of Hinduism

Section 1: The Hindu Trinity<sup>1</sup>

It is often said that the Hindu religion has three gods at its head: Brahma, the creator of the universe; Vishnu, the preserver of life; and Shiva, the destroyer of ignorance.

**Brahma** is a representation of the impersonal *Brahman* [the ultimate reality underlying all things] in a human form, usually with four faces facing the cardinal directions and four arms. In reality, Brahma receives little devotion from worshipers, who may mention him in passing while giving their attention to the other main gods. There are few temples in India



dedicated to him; instead, his image may stand in niches on the walls of temples built for other deities. Religious stories usually place Brahma as an intermediate authority who cannot handle a problem and passes it on to either Vishnu or Shiva. The concept of the **trinity** (*trimurti*), expressed in beautiful art works or invoked even by believers, is in practice a philosophical construct that unites all deistic traditions within Hinduism into one overarching symbol.

As one of the most important gods in the Hindu pantheon, **Vishnu** is surrounded by a number of extremely popular and well-known stories and is the focus of a number of sects devoted entirely to his worship. Vishnu contains a number of personalities, often represented as 10 major descents (avatars) in which the god has taken on physical forms in order to save earthly creatures from destruction. In one story,



the Earth was drowning in a huge flood, so to save it Vishnu took on the body of a giant turtle and lifted the Earth out of the waters on his back. A tale found in the Vedas describes a demon who could not be conquered. Responding to the pleas of the gods, Vishnu appeared before the demon as a dwarf. The demon, in a classic instance of pride, underestimated this dwarf and granted him as much of the world as he could tread in three steps. Vishnu then assumed his universal form and in three strides spanned the entire universe and beyond, crushing the demon in the process. The incarnation of Vishnu known to almost everyone in India is his life as Ram (Rama in Sanskrit), a prince from the ancient north Indian kingdom of Ayodhya, in the cycle of stories known as the *Ramayana* (The Travels of Ram).

<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from: Heitzman, James, and Robert L. Worden, eds. *India: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995. <http://countrystudies.us/india/>

Handout 2 ▶ P.2      Basic Beliefs of Hinduism

The god **Shiva** is the other great figure in the modern pantheon. In contrast to the regal attributes of Vishnu, Shiva is a figure of renunciation. A favorite image portrays him as an ascetic, performing meditation alone in the fastness of the Himalaya. There he sits on a tiger skin, clad only in a loincloth, covered with sacred ash that gives his skin a gray color. His trident is stuck into the ground next to him. Around his neck is a snake. From his matted hair, tied in a topknot, the river Ganga (Ganges) descends to the Earth.... Shiva often appears in this image as an antisocial being, who once burned up Kama, the god of love, with a glance. But behind this image is the cosmic lord who, through the very power of his meditating consciousness, expands the entire universe and all beings in it. Although he appears to be hard to attain, in reality Shiva is a loving deity who saves those devotees who are wholeheartedly dedicated to him.



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

## Basic Beliefs of Hinduism

### Section Two: The Vedas<sup>2</sup>

Hinduism in India traces its source to the **Vedas**, ancient hymns composed and recited in Punjab as early as 1500 BCE. Three main collections of the Vedas—the **Rig**, **Sama**, and **Yajur**—consist of chants that were originally recited by priests while offering plant and animal sacrifices in sacred fires. A fourth collection, the **Atharva** Veda, contains a number of formulas for requirements as varied as medical cures and love magic. The majority of modern Hindus revere these hymns as sacred sounds passed down to humanity from the greatest antiquity and as the source of Hindu tradition.

The vast majority of Vedic hymns are addressed to a pantheon of deities who are attracted, generated, and nourished by the offerings into the sacred flames and the precisely chanted **mantras** (mystical formulas of invocation) based on the hymns....

The **Upanishads**, originating as commentaries on the Vedas between about 800 and 200 BCE., contain speculations on the meaning of existence that have greatly influenced Indian religious traditions. Most important is the concept of *atman* (the human soul), which is an individual manifestation of *brahman*. *Atman* is of the same nature as *brahman*, characterized either as an impersonal force or as God, and has as its goal the recognition of identity with *brahman*. This fusion is not possible, however, as long as the individual remains bound to the world of the flesh and desires. In fact, the deathless *atman* that is so bound will not join with *brahman* after the death of the body but will experience continuous rebirth.

This fundamental concept of the transmigration of *atman*, or reincarnation after death, lies at the heart of the religions emerging from India.

Indian religious tradition sees **karma** as the source of the problem of transmigration. While associated with physical form, for example, in a human body, beings experience the universe through their senses and their minds and attach themselves to the people and things around them and constantly lose sight of their true existence as *atman*, which is of the same nature as *brahman*. As the time comes for the dropping of the body, the fruits of good and evil actions in the past remain with *atman*, clinging to it. Good deeds in this life may lead to a happy rebirth in a better life, and evil deeds may lead to a lower existence, but eventually the consequences of past deeds will be worked out, and the individual will seek more experiences in a physical world. In this manner, the bound or ignorant *atman* wanders from life to life, in heavens and hells and in many different bodies. The universe may expand and be destroyed numerous times, but the bound *atman* will not achieve release.

<sup>2</sup> Excerpted from: Heitzman, James, and Robert L. Worden, eds. *India: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995. <http://countrystudies.us/india/>

## Basic Beliefs of Hinduism

### Section Three: Hindu Worship<sup>3</sup>

The basic form of the temple in India is a square cell, oriented to the four cardinal directions, containing a platform with an image of the deity in the center, a flat roof overhead, and a doorway on the east side. In front of the doorway is a porch or platform, shaded by a roof supported by pillars, where worshipers gather before and after approaching the god. At the founding of the temple, priests establish a sanctified area in the center of the shrine and, while praying and performing rituals, set up the image of the god. The deity is then said to be one with the image, which contains or manifests the power of the god on Earth. Every Hindu temple in India, then, exists as the center of the universe, where the god overlooks his or her domain and aids devotees.

Worship at **the temple** is not congregational. Instead, individuals or small groups of devotees approach the sanctum in order to obtain a vision (*darshana*) of the god, say prayers, and perform devotional worship. Because the god exists in totality in the shrine, any objects that touch the image or even enter the sanctum are filled with power and, when returned to their givers, confer the grace of the divine on the human world. Only persons of requisite purity who have been specially trained are able to handle the power of the deity, and most temple sanctums are operated by priests who take the offerings from worshipers, present them directly to the image of the deity, and then return most of the gifts to the devotees for use or consumption later at home.

**The home** is the place where most Hindus conduct their worship and religious rituals. The most important times of day for performance of household rituals are dawn and dusk, although especially devout families may engage in devotion more often. For many households, the day begins when the women in the house draw auspicious geometric designs in chalk or rice flour on the floor or the doorstep. For orthodox Hindus, dawn and dusk are greeted with recitation from the Rig Veda of the Gayatri Mantra for the sun—for many people, the only Sanskrit prayer they know. After a bath, there is personal worship of the gods at a family shrine, which typically includes lighting a lamp and offering foodstuffs before the images, while prayers in Sanskrit or a regional language are recited. In the evenings, especially in rural areas, mostly female devotees may gather together for long sessions of singing hymns in praise of one or more of the gods.

<sup>3</sup> Excerpted from: Heitzman, James, and Robert L. Worden, eds. *India: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995. <http://countrystudies.us/india/>

## Basic Beliefs of Hinduism

### Section Four: Hindu Holidays and Festivals<sup>4</sup>

A vast number of local Hindu festivals revolve around the worship of gods at the neighborhood, village, or caste level. All over India, at least once a year the images of the gods are taken from their shrines to travel in processions around their domains. The images are carried on palanquins that require human bearers or on human-drawn, large-wheeled carts. The images may be intricately made up in order for the stone or wooden statues to appear lifelike. They may wear costly vestments, and flower garlands may surround their necks or entire shrines. The gods move down village or city streets in parades that may include multiple palanquins and, at sites of major temples, even elephants decked out in traditional vestments. As the parade passes, throngs of worshipers pray and make vows to the gods while the community as a whole looks on and participates in the spectacle. In many locations, these public parades go on for a number of days and include special events where the gods engage in “play” (*lila*) that may include mock battles and the defeat of demons. The ceremonial bathing of the images and displays of the gods in all their finery in public halls also occur. In the south, where temples stand at the geographic and psychological heart of village and town, some “chariots” of the gods stand many stories tall and require the concerted effort of dozens of men to pull them through the streets.

There are a number of Hindu religious festivals that are officially recognized by the government as “closed holidays,” on which work stops throughout the country. The biggest of these occur within two blocks of time after the end of the southwest monsoon. The first comes at the end of the 10-day festival of **Dussehra**, late in the month of Asvina (September–October) according to the Shaka calendar, India’s official calendar). This festival commemorates Ram’s victory over Ravana and the rescue of his wife Sita. On the ninth day of Dusshera, people bless with sandalwood paste the “weapons” of their business life, including everything from plows to computers. On the final day of Dussehra, in North India celebrating crowds set fire to huge paper effigies of Ravana. Several weeks later comes Dipavali (**Diwali**), or the Festival of Lights, in the month of Kartika (October–November). This is officially a one-day holiday, but in reality it becomes a weeklong event when many people take vacations. One tradition links this festival to the victory of Krishna over the demon Naraka, but for most devotees the holiday is a recreation of Ram’s triumphant return with Sita, his wife, from his adventures. People light rows of lamps and place them on sills around their houses, set off gigantic amounts of fireworks, pray for wealth and good fortune, distribute sweets, and send greeting cards to friends and business associates.

<sup>4</sup> Excerpted from: Heitzman, James, and Robert L. Worden, eds. *India: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1995. <http://countrystudies.us/india/>

## Handout 3 ▶ P. 1

# The Ramayana

**Directions:**

*The passage below is a simple retelling of the most important story in the Ramayana, the great Hindu epic poem. Read it carefully and answer the questions that follow.*

The king Dasharatha of Ayodhya had four sons, born to his three wives; the boys' names were Rama, Bharata, Lakshmana, and Shatrughna. When Rama was about 16, a wise man came to the court, asking for help against demons; he chose Rama to help him, and Rama's half-brother Lakshmana came along to help. The boys received weapons and advice from the sage and they managed to destroy the demons. The sage then brought the boys to Mithila, where the king had a contest— whoever could handle his very heavy bow would win the right to marry Sita, a beautiful and virtuous girl. Rama won the contest and he and Sita were married in a great ceremony.

They returned to Ayodhya and lived happily for 12 years. Then, as the elderly king prepared to crown Rama as his successor, Bharata's mother tried to claim the crown for her son. She reminded her husband that he had promised her a boon, and she claimed it—that Rama should be exiled into the forest for 14 years. The king kept his promise, Rama went into the forest out of respect for his father, and the grief-stricken old king soon died. In spite of the hardships they would face, the devoted Sita and loyal Lakshmana joined Rama in his exile.

In the 13th year of the exile, an evil demon, Ravana, had one of his henchmen assume the form of a golden deer; it captivated Sita and she begged Rama to capture it for her. He went off, leaving his brother Lakshmana to protect his wife. Sita was deceived into thinking that Rama was calling for help, and she sent the reluctant Lakshmana to aid him.

Ravana, posing as an ascetic, then tricked Sita into leaving the safety of her cottage and carried her away to his island kingdom of Lanka.

In seeking Sita, Rama and Lakshmana met Hanuman, a great monkey hero. Hanuman made a huge leap across the ocean to Lanka, where he spied on Ravana and found the weeping Sita. He offered to rescue her, but she refused to go with him, saying that it is important to Rama's honor that he rescue her himself. Hanuman then gave Sita Rama's ring as a token and assured her that Rama would come himself to save her. Hanuman was captured, but he lectured Ravana on the need to release Sita; in return, Ravana punished Hanuman by setting his tail on fire. Hanuman escaped, in turn setting Ravana's citadel on fire with his burning tail. He returned to Rama and told him what he had learned.

Rama and Lakshmana then enlisted the aid of the monkeys to help them rescue Sita. The monkeys built a floating bridge so that Rama and his soldiers could cross the ocean to Lanka. A great battle ensued, Rama killed Ravana, and Sita was overjoyed to be reunited with her husband.

When Rama returned to his kingdom after the allotted time of exile, he found that his brother Bharata had refused the crown. Instead, although he ruled the kingdom in his brother's absence, Bharata kept a pair of Rama's sandals on the throne to remind the people that Rama was the rightful king. Rama was crowned king and reigned over his people for many years of peace and prosperity.



Handout 3 ▶ P.2

# The *Ramayana*

1. What does the *Ramayana* say about each of these subjects?  
Give evidence from the story to support your ideas.  
The responsibilities of a prince
2. Hanuman does not rescue Sita himself because Sita says Rama must do it himself to preserve his honor. What values does Sita's statement reflect?

The role of women

The existence of evil

The importance of friendship