

- Epics were stories that illustrated the teachings of the Upanishads. Two of the most important were the Mahabharata and the Ramayana.

- Epics were originally told orally so that those who could not read still had access to the Hindu religion.

- The Indo-Aryans created works of religious literature called the Vedas. The most important of the Vedas is the Rig Veda.

- For centuries, the Vedas were memorized and retold from parent to child. Only when the Indo-Aryans developed a written form of their language, Sanskrit, did they write the Vedas down.

- The period of India's history from about 1500 B.C. to 1000 B.C. is known as the Vedic Age. Thus, early forms of the Hindu religion are sometimes referred to as the Vedic religion.

- Around 700 B.C., several Indian thinkers began writing down their teachings about the Vedas. Their collected explanations of the Vedic religion are called the Upanishads.

- The caste system developed in India over the course of 2000 years, from 1500 B.C. to 500 A.D.

- The caste system is a form of social organization in which each member of society performs a specific function in the social hierarchy.

- The Indian social structure is divided into four main classes, or varnas. Each varna is divided into many sub-classes, or jati, based primarily on occupation. In all, there are over 3000 different jati.

- A person was born into the jati of his or her parents and could only marry someone who was a member of that same subgroup. Thus, the caste system was hereditary.

- The highest varna was composed of Brahmins – priests and scholars.

- The second varna was composed of Kshatriyas – rulers and warriors.

- The third varna was composed of Vaishyas – merchants, landowners, and farmers.

- The fourth varna was composed of Shudras – landless peasants, servants, and slaves.

- One group, the Pariahs, had their own varna, but were considered outside of the caste system. Pariahs were social outcasts who could not touch or speak to members of other varnas. These “untouchables” performed jobs that members of other social classes deemed unclean.

- Hindus developed yoga, a combination of mental and physical exercises designed to bring the body and soul closer together.

- Hindus celebrate many festivals throughout the year, which combine religious ceremonies, rituals, and social interaction. Festivals are typically related to the seasonal course of nature.

- Many Hindus consider certain animals to be sacred. Cows are particularly distinguished due to their important role in providing power for plows and supplying milk and dairy products.

- In Hindu worship, or puja, a personal relationship, often a very affectionate one, is formed between an individual and the Hindu deity.

- Hindu rituals are performed both publicly with Brahmins (priests) and privately by individuals and small groups of family and friends.

- The Hindu religion is monistic, meaning that all things in the universe are of the same essence as God.

- A divine essence called Brahman fills everything in the world. There also exists an individual essence, called Self or Atman.

- According to Hindu teaching, the visible world is an illusion called maya. In order for one's soul (Atman) to reunite with God (Brahman), one must learn to recognize and reject maya.

- Souls must be reborn into new bodies (human or animal) until the soul recognizes and rejects maya. This cycle of rebirth is called reincarnation.

- Karma is the good or bad force created by a person's actions.

- Dharma is a person's moral duty based on their position within the Indian social hierarchy.

- If a person fulfills their dharma during their life, s/he will receive good karma and be reborn into a higher social group. Conversely, failure to fulfill one's dharma results in bad karma and reincarnation into a lower social group, including animals.

- The Hindu God, Brahma, is a part of the divine essence Brahman. Hindus worship many different forms of Brahma, including Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Siva the Destroyer. To outsiders, Hinduism seems polytheistic, though Hindus point out that each of their "gods" represents a different aspect creation.