Hindu Religion and Culture for School Students

Facts about Hindus, their Religion and Culture:

1. Hindus live mostly in the India subcontinent, some in other Asian countries and in small numbers in other countries of the world including America.

2. Their faith is called Hinduism which is one of the most ancient religions of the world. They have certain distinct features culturally which are unique. For example, their language, their food preference, major festivals they celebrate in public, the way they greet each other, how they treat their parents, teachers and seniors are some of the examples.

3. When a person of Hindu origin meets others, they say ‘namaste’ and put two palms together in front of the person instead of a handshake as in other cultures. It means ‘greetings’ or ‘I bow to you’.

4. Hindi is a native language for many Hindus who are from India, but there are other regional languages such as Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, Telegu, Malayalam, Punjabi etc. they may speak as their mother tongue. The classical Indian language in which the scriptures were composed is Sanskrit. English and Urdu are also used by many of them, and the spoken language often uses many English words.

5. As for food preference, a majority from South India are vegetarian. Meat and fish are preferred food for those from north, and east India. Beef eating is a taboo for Hindus. Cows are revered animals, presumably due to its early domestication in Hindu society.

6. Hindu women and men have special dresses mostly in India called Saree, Kurta and Dhoti (men). Hindus living in other countries do not always follow that tradition.

Hindu women in India may have ‘bindi’ or red dot in their forehead. Although married women normally use ‘bindi’, others may use that as a beauty spot.

7. Major festivals for Hindus are ‘Diwali’ (festivals of light), Holi (festival of color), Sankranti (solstices), major worship events for deities such as Ganesh, Shiva, Vishnu on special days, plus others that may vary from region to region in India.

8. Yoga is a familiar term in America and other western countries which involves exercises for physical as well as spiritual wellbeing and has its origin in Hindu religion.

9. Proselytizing a Hindu into other faith is strongly discouraged. On the other hand, anybody can follow a Hindu path if one wishes, without being formally initiated.
Origin of Hinduism:

India is the home of majority of Hindus, as well as Jains, Buddhists, Sikhs, Muslims, and Christians. Hinduism originated in the northwestern part of India at least 5,000 years ago at the bank of the river Saraswathi and Indus (Sindhu). Known as the Vedic civilization, it was a precursor to Hinduism which evolved later. They composed ‘Vedas’ which consist of a vast collection of scriptures dealing with worship, prayer, rituals, and some medicinal and scientific literatures also. Parts of Vedas are known as Upanishads that deal with philosophy. Hindu scriptures are primarily based on Vedas and Upanishads. Later, the Vedic people migrated, due to natural calamities such as earthquakes, fire, famines etc. to other parts of India and abroad.

The name ‘Hindu’ was coined by the Greeks several thousand years ago. They named them Hindus, meaning the people who live on the other side of the river ‘Indus’ or Sindu, as it is known today. Hindus call their religion ‘Sanatana Dharma’ or eternal religion.

Hinduism as a Religion:

There is no founder of Hindu religion (no prophet religion!). Several thousand years ago, the deepest mystery of the Universe was revealed to ancient sages who contemplated in the mountain caves and riverbanks on the nature and meaning of life. That was how the Vedas were revealed in their hearts. With time these ideas evolved and were adopted in the daily lives of people in this region which gave birth to Sanatana Dharma.

Dharma, in contrast to the term ‘religion’ implies faith, practices, and lifestyles of the followers and not just a set of principles or creeds. It also means ‘righteous path’. There may be more than one faith or paths in a dharma tradition, which is more tolerant to diversity and nuances of lifestyles. Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism were also born in this part of the world and have certain ideas in common. That is why they all belong to the ‘dharma’ tradition. Islam and Christianity were brought in from outside India.

To understand the principles of Hinduism, one must be familiar with certain terms such as Brahman, Atman, karma, re-incarnation, moksha or liberation and so on.

Brahman is the Absolute reality as well the Supreme consciousness which has manifested into this Universe and everything else. Brahman is formless, without quality or any attribute. Gods such as Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesa, Durga, Kali , Lakshmi etc. are manifestations of certain attributes of the one and only one Brahman. Brahman is immanent in every heart as ‘Atman’ or soul and at the same time transcendent. That’s why Hindus believe in the divinity of soul. One can reach the divinity by several
paths such as prayer or worship, bhakti or devotion, yoga, and meditation. Greeting a person with the word ‘namaste’ implies, I bow to the divine in you.

Four goals of life: Kama (fulfilment of worldly desires), Artha (enjoyment of the material wealth), Dharma (following one’s moral norms compatible with Hindu way of life) and Moksha (cessation of desires resulting in liberation from suffering and cycles of birth and death).

Every action that we willfully perform is called ‘karma’ and carries an outcome or ‘result’. Morally good karma has rewards and immoral actions result in suffering in this life or in the next life. When a man dies, it is the body which is destroyed, but the Atman is born again with a new body as a human or an animal. The karmic results are carried in the next life or future lives. So, a person is responsible for his or her happiness or suffering earned due to past actions. As one reincarnates, the Atman moves from one body to another and has a chance to pursue perfection, after one or many births, until the results of actions are depleted. When that happens, one reaches ‘moksha’ or liberation after which there is no birth, and the Atman merges with Brahman. One can also achieve moksha in one’s life rather than after many rebirths.

Hindu deities: Hinduism offers many choices for its followers. Some believe in formless Brahman; some believe in a tangible form of Brahman as deities. Many Hindus worship deities which have forms embodying some aspects of Brahman. They are symbols/images made in clay, stone or other materials depicting the favorite theme and love of devotees. Vishnu sustains the whole creation; Shiva dissolves the creation at the end of time cycle for a new beginning. Shakti or creative power of Brahman is imagined in the feminine form of Kali or Durga. Lakshmi is the giver of wealth and prosperity. Saraswathi is the embodiment of knowledge and learning, etc. There are also ‘Avatars’ who are human births of the Supreme divinity for some purpose. They came to earth in different ages to help the world get rid of evils and establish justice. Lord Krishna and Lord Rama are such examples and are known as Avatars and their stories are described in two Hindu epics called ‘Ramayana’ and Mahabharata. These epics along with ‘Bhagavat Gita’ are the three most sacred books for all Hindus. Bhagavat Gita narrates the advice of Lord Krishna to the warrior king Arjuna about life, death, duties of a man and so on, in a historical battlefield named a ‘Kuruṣkṣetra’.

Early Hindu Society: It was recognized early that all men do not have the same inclination or physical and mental faculties to perform various tasks of the society. Based on natural inclination, called ‘Gunas’, four categories of people were identified and called ‘varnas’. Brahmans were assigned the task of performing religious rituals; Kshatriya were assigned duties of defending against foreign enemies as well as administrators; Vaisya were engaged in businesses; and Shudras were given the task of feeding the society by working on the fields and performing other services. Although at an early stage of society, the special traits of people determined their varna, slowly it deteriorated into birthrights, which were transformed into what is known as ‘castes’. Castes implied hierarchy and became a tool for social oppression. Foreign rulers also contributed to reinforcing the system for their own advantage and to the
detriment of the society. After India became independent from foreign rule in 1947, several reforms were implemented to address that issue. Mahatma Gandhi, the political leader, played a very important role in the early twentieth century in uplifting oppressed castes.

**Hindu festivals** : Hindu festivals such as Diwali, Holi, Ganesh Chaturthi, Navaratri, and ‘Sankranti’ are celebrated by most Hindus. Diwali is a festival of lights. Holi is a celebration of colors signifying the arrival of spring. Ganesh Chaturthi is a celebration of the birth of Ganesh, son of Shiva. Navaratri signifies nine nights during Durga Puja festival.

Favorite idols are the centerpieces of public celebration on special occasions called ‘puja’. Although deities are referred a Gods, the idols are not Gods; they are symbols only. Devotees and non-devotees all can participate in these festivals which are celebrated mostly in the winter season and some in spring. Examples of Durga, Kali and Saraswati idols (respectively) are below:

A common misconception of non-Hindus is to consider idols as Gods. They are not Gods but just the symbols which invoke God’s devotion in mind. Examples of symbols in daily life is abundant.

**Hinduism in America:**

There are more than two million Hindus in America now. But before 1965 there were very few due to the immigration laws. Hinduism was mostly an unknown religion in America until Swami Vivekananda, a religious leader and a monk, arrived in the year 1893 in Chicago to participate in the First World Parliament of Religions. His presentation on ‘Hinduism and other religions of the world’ electrified the audience in Chicago and got attention and instant recognition all over the world. Following that event several religious leaders from India visited United States in the nineteen sixties and seventies, and they had thousands of followers. Yoga became more and more popular in America.

Second and even third generation of Indians and Hindus play an important role in American society now. Traditional way of practicing Hinduism is to attend Hindu temples, which have multiplied during last twenty or thirty years. But attending temples is not a must for practicing Hinduism. One can perform spiritual worship practices at home. New generation of children are not generally temple goers unless their strong family traditions lead them into that direction. They adopt to the American way by their dresses, food and language, which is natural. At the same time, there are others who voluntarily learn about their parents’ tradition and follow the practices. Educating second and third generation Hindus in their mother culture and religion has been lacking overall, although some Hindu communities in America are doing better job in that direction now.
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