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Hinduism [in the Great Plains]

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Hinduism

Hinduism is the Western name given to a religious tradition developed over thousands of years in India. Because it has no creed or major institutional structure, it is intricately intertwined with societal systems, and some scholars declare that it is impossible to separate Hinduism as a religion from other aspects of Indian society. This means it is virtually impossible to define precisely what constitutes the Hindu religion, especially when transferred into a different cultural setting such as the Great Plains.

Lacking a set of rigid doctrines, Hinduism encompasses a large diversity of religious beliefs and practices. Nevertheless, devotion to a particular deity expressed through worship (*puja*) is important to most Hindus. The ritual of worship usually occurs individually or with other family members in the home and at local shrines and temples. Traditionally, large congregational meetings were rare, but in recent years within North America, group meetings for worship, spiritual messages, and the celebration of religious festivals have become common.

Both the diversity of beliefs and religious practices by Hindus and the inevitable changes that occur whenever a religion is transported to another cultural setting contribute to a wide diversity in the expression of Hinduism in the Great Plains, especially because Asian Indians who have migrated to North America, primarily during the last half century, have not formed large ethnic enclaves, which might have encouraged centers of orthodoxy. Likewise, the non-Asian citizens of Canada and the United States who have adopted various beliefs and rituals associated with Hinduism have followed a variety of gurus, each emphasizing different aspects of this equivocal religion.

The many societies, ashrams, and study groups (more than 100 are identified in the 1996 edition of *Encyclopedia of American Religions for the United States*) tend to be localized and unrelated to one another. Followers may meet informally in homes, community buildings, and interfaith centers. Also, Hindus in the Great Plains may seek individual spiritual guidance from printed materi-

als and from Web sites on the Internet and by making a special journey to an ashram in India or elsewhere in North America.

Hinduism has not had a major impact on the dominant society in the Great Plains: its arrival in this region occurred generally during only the last three decades of the twentieth century; it tends to be nonproselytizing, with private worship; and its adherents are few in number and scattered. Nevertheless, more than thirty temples and numerous other religious structures contribute to the urban landscapes of Calgary and Edmonton, Alberta; Saskatoon and Regina, Saskatchewan; Winnipeg, Manitoba; Denver, Boulder, Aurora, Fort Collins, and Littleton, Colorado; Shawnee, Kansas; Kansas City, Missouri; Omaha, Nebraska; Oklahoma City and Tulsa, Oklahoma; and Irving, Austin, and Dallas, Texas. Less evident visually but functioning as a part of community life in more than three dozen cities are centers of Hindu-related societies such as Ammachi, Art of Living, Chinmaya Mission West, Integral Yoga, Sathya Sai Baba, Science of Spirituality, and the Theosophical Society, as well as the transcendental meditation programs maintained by the Maharishi Vedic Universities. In addition to participating in special events occurring within the Great Plains, many Hindus travel to neighboring places to attend religious festivals (such as Diwali and Holi), special *pujas*, pilgrimages, and summer camps.

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