



Significant Texts and Writings

Language

Hinduism is traditionally considered to have and use two liturgical (religious) languages, Sanskrit and Tamil, although Sanskrit may be the more dominant language. Most of the Hindu scriptures, prayers, and *mantras* were written in Sanskrit. It is also the language used for most Hindu rituals around the world.

Nonetheless, Tamil is the language of some devotional hymns, especially those which were sung in almost every Shiva and Vishnu temple in Southern India (then Tamil majority) and even in some Northern Indian temples. As well, some Tamil texts are considered to be the basis for the *Bhakti* movement.

One of the ancient stories says that Sanskrit and Tamil emerged from either side of Lord Shiva's divine drum of creation as he danced the dance of creation as *nataraja* or the sound of cosmic force.

Nonetheless, as the religion progressed, time passed, and other languages evolved, many scriptures and prayers were composed in other regional languages. As Hinduism was traditionally concentrated in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and a few additional countries, these texts and prayers used the languages common to those regions.

It is, therefore, correct to say that Hindus pray in Sanskrit as well as languages such as Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, Malyalam, Indonesian, Singhali, Bengali, Nepali, and Gujarati, among other Indian languages.

However, Sanskrit remains the language used for most of the prayers, hymns, ceremonies, *pujas*, and other rituals that take place in the home or in the temples. In many temples, in order to facilitate the participation of youth and other Hindus not familiar with Sanskrit or Indian languages, participants in temple events, rituals, and prayers use texts that are translated and transliterated (English phonetic spelling) so that they can understand what is taking place.

The following are examples of three Sanskrit terms, their transliteration, and their meanings in English.

Sanskrit Terms		
Sanskrit Term	Transliteration	English Translation
शान्ति	<i>Shanti</i>	Peace
कमल	<i>Kamala</i>	Lotus
नमस्ते	<i>Namaste</i>	I bow to the divine in you

Key Writings/Scriptures

There are countless Hindu texts and literary works, many of which are available in a multitude of languages. At the end of this section, a graphic overview of the major Hindu religious scriptures and their relationships follows. While it is impossible to do justice to this plurality in this profile of Hinduism, it is possible to note several especially important scriptures or key writings.

The *Vedas* form the foundation of Hindu scripture. They are comprised of four parts, from earliest to latest: the *Samhitas* (collection of hymns and *mantras*), the *Brahmanas* (manuals of rituals and prayers to guide priests), the *Aranyakas* (formal philosophical books for saints), and the *Upanishads* (book of philosophy dealing with divine revelation and spiritual thought). Initially, the *Vedas* were transmitted as part of an oral culture. They are known as *shruti* texts—which indicates that the sages who transcribed them heard the narratives directly from the Divine. While the *Vedas* were eventually recorded by human hands by *smriti* (from memory), they are considered to be of divine origin.

Though each of the *Vedas* is connected, one may also understand each as having a particular focus. The *Samhitas* is itself divided into four parts or *mantras*: *Rig-Veda*, *Sama-Veda*, *Yajur-Veda*, and *Atharva-Veda*. Collectively, they are concerned with knowledge of hymns and chants (*Rig-Veda*), sacrificial chants (*Yajur-Veda*), musical interpretations or accompaniments to chants (*Sama Veda*), and pragmatic prayers and incantations for health and to ward off sickness (*Atharva-Veda*). In some understandings, the *Vedas* consist only of the *Samhitas*. Others classifications include the *Brahmanas*, the *Aranyakas*, the *Upanishads*, and part of the *Samhitas*.

The *Upanishads* are often considered the most sophisticated of the *Vedas*. Collectively, they are an assortment of some hundred written works. Initially, they were reserved for only the political and cultural elite. Their focus tends more towards the internal world rather than the external. Many key ideas and beliefs in Hinduism are explored in the *Upanishads*, including *samsara*, *moksha*, *dharma*, and *karma*. The *Upanishads* are largely recorded in the form of a poetic dialogue.

A second group of Hindu religious texts are the *Smriti* which are a body of texts usually attributed to a specific author, traditionally written down but constantly revised. In contrast, the *Shruti* are considered authorless, and were passed on orally across the generations and fixed. *Smritis* are derivative secondary works based on the *Shruti*. They are key scriptures in the *Mimamsa* school of Hindu philosophy.

An important and popular part of the *Smriti* is two epic stories, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*—originally recorded in Sanskrit. Both of these recount why and how god Vishnu incarnated. The first, the *Ramayana* (arrival of Vishnu as Ram), centers around the Ram avatar (seventh incarnation of the God Vishnu) and battles between good and evil. In it, one can find lessons focused on conduct and virtuous life, relationships and responsibilities, social roles, and family values. Each year, parts of the *Ramayana* are acted out in India and abroad.



Figure 9: *Bhagavad Gita*, a 19th century manuscript, from North India

The *Mahabharata* (meaning great *Bharat*) is massively long, nearing two million words. In contrast to the *Ramayana*, it contains a realistic portrayal of human fallibility and weakness. The *Mahabharata* is divided into 18 parvas (books). The work is centered upon the story of a struggle for the throne by different parts of the family. It includes lessons on war and justice, family, the connection between one's happiness and that of others, and spiritual devotion. The *Mahabharata* recounts the role of Krishna (the 8th incarnation of Vishnu) leading up to and during the Kurukshetra war.

The *Mahabharata* contains the *Bhagavad Gita* (*Bhagavad* means god and *Gita* means song, thus the divine song of the Lord) as a structured dialogue, between a prince named Arjuna and his advisor Krishna, about self-realization and how human beings can establish their eternal relationship with god. The *Bhagavad Gita* may also be referred to as the *Gita*. Some interpretations of the *Bhagavad Gita* consider it an exploration of the concept of a just war; others (such as Mahatma Mohandas Gandhi) claim that it was a metaphor for the struggle against the internal and external moral dangers within each person.

Lastly, the Code of *Manu*, also part of the *Smritis*, was written around 500 CE, and contains a wide-ranging assortment of laws governing domestic, social, and religious life in India. Many of these either were incorporated into or influenced India's laws. These include food and dietary conventions, as well as marriage and social norms, and other ethical situations. Women are instructed to be dependent upon men, while men are reminded to treat women with reverential respect.

Overview and Relationships of Hindu Scriptures

