

Modern religious practices

India is home to a wide range of religious traditions, which is evident in the blend of beliefs held by its people – some of which cross religious lines.

For instance, not only do most Hindus and Jains believe the Ganges River has the power to purify – a belief with roots in Hindu scripture – but substantial minorities of Indian Christians and Muslims believe this as well. And Muslims are just as likely as Hindus (77% each) to believe in the concept of karma, which is not inherent to Islam. Meanwhile, a majority of Hindus, Muslims and Christians all believe in some form of heaven.

At the same time, some beliefs that may seem mainstream for a certain group are not held by most members of that group. Although many people might consider reincarnation a core teaching in several religions native to South Asia, in no religious community does a majority express belief in reincarnation. Just 40% of Hindus, 23% of Jains and 18% of both Buddhists and Sikhs in India say they believe in reincarnation. Similarly, although miracles are central to the story of Jesus in Christian scripture, only about half of India's Christians (48%) say they believe in miracles.

On a variety of religious beliefs measured by the survey, there are consistent patterns. In general, men, younger adults (ages 18 to 34) and those who have a college education are less likely to hold these beliefs. For instance, while a minority of men say they believe in the evil eye – the idea that certain people can cast curses or spells that cause bad things to happen to others – most Indian women believe this (44% vs. 55%). And college-educated Hindus are less likely than other Hindus to believe the Ganges has the power to purify (73% vs. 82%).

In addition, members of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other lower castes are more likely than members of General Category castes to hold a variety of religious beliefs, with a particularly notable gap among Christians And those

who have faced a financial hardship in the previous year – that is, those who did not have enough money to pay for food, medical care or housing – are more often believers than other Indians.

More Hindus say there are multiple ways to interpret Hinduism than say there is only one true way

Most of India's Muslims (63%) say there is only one true way of interpreting Islam, while fewer (28%) feel there are multiple ways of interpreting their religion. Christians also lean toward the view that there is one true way to interpret their faith.

Hindus are the sole religious group in India whose followers are more likely to say there are multiple ways of interpreting their religion (47%) than that there is only one correct interpretation (38%).

At least one-in-ten Indians in all religions do not offer a clear answer to this question. For example, among Sikhs, 44% say there is only one true way to interpret Sikh teachings, 35% say there are multiple ways, and roughly one-in-five do not take either position (21%).

Hindus differ regionally in their views on this theological question. In the South, a majority of Hindus (56%) say there are multiple ways to interpret the teachings of the religion. By comparison, Hindus in the Northern and Central parts of the country are more evenly divided: 44% of Hindus in the North say there is only one true way to interpret the teachings of Hinduism, and a nearly identical share (45%) say there can be multiple understandings of the religion.

Hindu college graduates are somewhat less inclined than other Hindus to say there is only one true interpretation of Hinduism (31% vs. 39%). And Hindus who say religion is very important in their lives are significantly *more* likely than others to express this view (41% vs. 23%). Similarly, Sikhs who say religion is very

important also are more likely to say there is only one true interpretation of Sikh teachings (46% vs. 30%).

Most Hindus, Jains believe in Ganges' power to purify

The Ganges River originates in the Himalayan mountains, crosses the Northern, Central and Eastern parts of India, and has special significance in Hinduism. Indeed, the vast majority of Indian Hindus (81%) say that the Ganges has the power to purify, and most Jains (66%) share this view. This belief is considerably less common among other religious groups in India, but, still, about one-third of Christians (32%) and Sikhs (32%) and roughly a quarter of Muslims (26%) feel that the Ganges has the power to purify.

Large majorities of Hindus across all regions of India believe that the Ganges River can purify. Hindus in the Central region, which includes some of the Ganges' most sacred cities, such as Varanasi, are especially inclined to hold this belief (90%). Rural Hindus also are somewhat more likely than those who live in urban locations to believe the Ganges can purify (83% vs. 76%), while college-educated Hindus are somewhat *less* inclined than other Hindus to believe in the Ganges' purifying properties (73% vs. 82%).

[Reincarnation](#) is a mainstream teaching in Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism. But fewer than half of Indians in each of these groups say they believe in reincarnation

Older Indians are a bit more inclined than younger Indians to believe in reincarnation: 40% of Indians ages 35 and older believe in reincarnation, compared with 35% of those 18 to 34. Conversely, older Buddhists are less likely than younger Buddhists to believe in reincarnation (13% vs. 22%).