Four Stages of the Hindu Life Cycle

In traditional Hindu society, for example, four stages of life are described in the Vedic scriptures. These stages reflect the circumstances of pre-industrial Hindu society hundreds of years ago, and the Hindu beliefs of duty and rebirth. These stages and the rites associated with them are respected traditions, but are not observed strictly by Hindus in the 21st century.

- The first stage is *brahmacharya*, preparation, which begins at about age 10 and lasts for about 15 years. Before then, they believe, a Hindu child is not fully formed. During this first stage, the primary expectations of the individual are to remain celibate and to become educated, particularly in religious matters.

- The second stage, called *grhastha*, production, is marked by marriage. During this stage, Hindu men and women raise and care for their family and do what is economically necessary to ensure that their children prosper.

- Once the children have become established, marked by reaching the second stage themselves, Hindu parents enter the third stage of life, *swastha*, meaning service. In this stage, they focus more on religious beliefs and rituals and begin to separate themselves from their families. They might gradually give away their material wealth and worldly possessions to prepare for the next stage.

- During *sannyasa*, retirement, the fourth and final stage of life, some Hindus live as religious *sadhus* (holy men) and *sadhvis* (holy women), dependent on the charity of others in the community and without any personal attachment to family or friends (Turnbull, 1985).

Hindu belief describes a life cycle in which individuals mature, marry, and raise their children. The cycle repeats for their children generation after generation. This reflects Eastern beliefs in rebirth in the cycle of life. Western beliefs describe the importance of living one life well, with a beginning and an end. Therefore, the *life-course approach* that focuses on the growth and development of an individual from infancy to old age is useful in the investigation of the transition to adulthood in Canada.

**Figure 4-3** This Hindu couple has traveled to India on a tour of Hindu spiritual sites. At what stage of the life course might this activity place them? How does this reflect growth and change in their lives?

**Let's Discuss**

*How is the Hindu life cycle similar to or different from the life stages that are experienced in your individual cultures? Are the stages given specific names?*