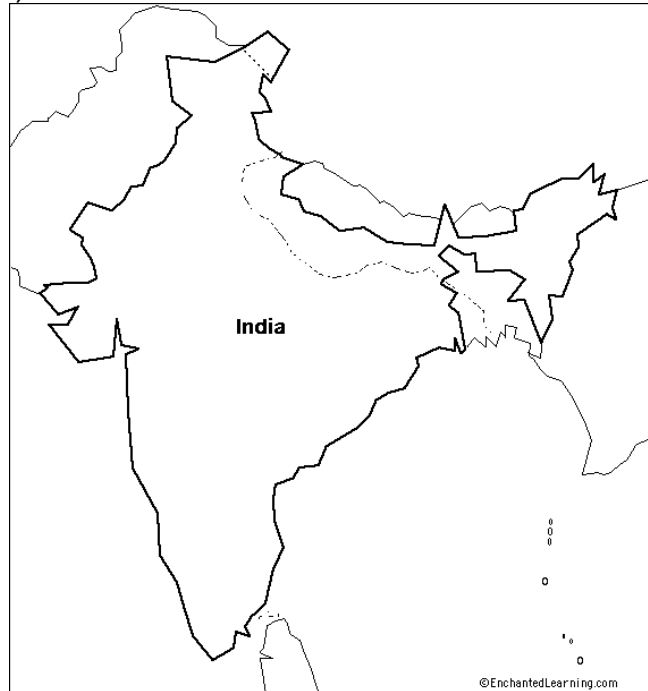


HINDUISM

Hinduism (named after the River Indus) is an umbrella term that embraces all the diverse religions and cultural life of the Indian sub-continent, **there is no such thing as a world-wide or corporate Hindu faith, but a rich and varied amalgamation of many different traditions.** All definitions of “Hindu” and “Hinduism” are therefore arbitrary, and exceptions will be found to even the broadest statements in this booklet!



Hinduism is the most ancient and extensive of the major world religions. **There is no founder for Hinduism.** Hinduism came about at least ten thousands years ago, and at the peak of the ancient Hindu civilisation around 3800BC. This was centred on the Indus Valley which

now lies in Pakistan, and which gave the faith its name. The people of this time were essentially worshippers of Shiva and of many mother goddesses. Religion underwent changes after the arrival of the Aryan people from the north who brought with them fair skinned gods & goddess. Shiva and other Dravidian gods are usually dark skinned. Aryan gods are fair skinned. You will find that Shiva is more popular in the south of India than the north, and this mirrors the way in which the Aryan invaders pushed the native Dravidian peoples to the south of the sub-continent.

Despite the many differences in Hinduism there is a strong sense of **family**, extended family and of **community**. The traditional Hindu family extends to grandparents, aunts, cousins, in-laws. Where possible the family will live together on a shared basis, promising mutual financial, emotional, moral and practical support. Grandparents, in particular, will play a large part in bringing up the younger members of the family in the religion.

In India the village community acts as an extension of the family. It is centred on the Mandir which will also be a focus of social and cultural activities. **Each local Hindu community in India has its own particular traditions and marks particular festivals.** In Britain it is more common to have mandirs which house a number of deities and where festivals from several areas of India will be celebrated; this reflects the geographical origins of the local Hindu community.

Hindus attach importance to the **jati**, or society group, into which they are born. The **jatis** are subdivisions of the four Varnas (often incorrectly called “castes”; the jatis are the caste groups). The jatis are usually linked to a traditional occupation and can affect where someone lives, who they mix with and who they marry.

Hindu Worship – the many faces of God

Most Hindus believe in one Supreme God (described in both personal and impersonal terms) usually called Brahman. Some advocate the existence of many lesser gods, 330,000,000 in total, whilst others would see these as **different faces of the One God**. Many Hindus refer to a “trinity” of gods consisting of Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the Sustainer) and Shiva (the Destroyer). However, the three main divisions within Hinduism actually worship Vishnu, Shiva, and Shakti (the Mother goddess). There is only one major temple to Brahma in the whole of India. **Most Hindus in Britain are worshippers of Vishnu** although they worship him in one of his incarnations (avatars), most popularly Rama or Krishna.

The different gods and goddess and their stories illustrate different truths about God. Prominence is given to female deities, who are often figures of considerable power (Durga, Lakshmi). Each of the main Hindu deities has a female consort.

The many deities of Hinduism are represented by images. Images may be made from metal, stone, wood or plastic. The images found in temples will be more majestic than those found in Hindu homes. The image only becomes a murti, an embodiment of Brahman, through a special act of consecration when it is installed in the temple or home. It then becomes a focal point for worship.

There is a range of views within Hinduism about images of the deities. Most accept that within the context of worship they mediate the presence of Brahman/ the particular deity and help the worshipper to visualize the deity. **The very fact that there are so many images makes the point that each can tell only a very small part of the whole story.**

The representations of the gods are highly symbolic; their form, the artefacts they carry, and the creature they ride all teach something about the quality of God. The most important are:

BRAHMAN, the Supreme Being, is **not** shown in humanlike form, he is beyond the deities and worshipped through them. In the journey towards the divine, the deities give glimpses of the nature of God.

BRAHMA The Creator. His four faces and four arms represent the four quarters of the world, four holy books, four castes and the four points of the compass. Though he represents one of the three main forms of Brahman, he is very much subordinated to Vishnu, who represents the sustaining aspect of Brahman and Shiva who



represents the destructive aspect. In fact, one story tells of Brahma's fifth head being burnt up by Shiva's third eye.

Brahma may be shown holding a vase of water, symbolizing the water from which the universe evolved and from which he came, a rosary for counting the passage of time, a sacrificial spoon (linking him with the Brahmin priests and their traditional role in the offering of sacrifices and the four Vedas, ancient sacred books of the Hindus). He is also at times shown with a disc and an alms bowl, or he could carry, kusa grass (meditation) or a small book (knowledge). He may be depicted on a lotus throne.

He is often bearded, and may wear a black or white garment.

Saraswati



Brahma's partner is **SARASVATI** the goddess of learning, arts and beauty. She sits by the waters of truth and holds symbols of learning (beads and a manuscript or book). As the goddess of wisdom and the arts she is widely revered. She particularly attracts the worship of students.

She is usually depicted as very fair-skinned, beautiful and elegant and dressed in a white garment. Other objects associated with Saraswati are the vina (an Indian stringed musical instrument), and a flute. Sanskrit, the ancient sacred language of Hinduism, is said to have been created by her.

Her vehicle is usually shown as a peacock but she may also be seen with a swan or a goose, the vehicles associated with her consort, Brahma.

VISHNU'S blue skin shows he is like the sky, everywhere. His four arms show he is ruler or sustainer of the universe. He has a distinctive U shaped mark of his forehead which devotees imitate. The four symbols most commonly associated with Vishnu are the conch shell which represents water and the first sound of creation, the lotus which symbolizes the unfolding universe, the mace which is interpreted as the power of knowledge conquering time and finally the discus which is associated with the conquering of evil and ignorance. He often carries symbols of war (conch shell, discus, mace, sword, bow), but, if he does, at

Vishnu



the same time his fourth hand is held in the traditional gesture symbolizing protection.

Vishnu appears with a seven headed snake and this hood of snakes' heads which shelter him represents the endless cycles of creation and reflects one of the central stories of creation in the Hindu tradition. He also rides a bird-man creature Garuda (Garuda is also depicted as a crowned eagle and is a powerful opponent of evil.).

Rama



Vishnu is one of the three main forms or manifestations of Brahman, the Supreme Spirit or Power of the universe and represents the sustaining power of Brahman. It is thought that the name Vishnu means either to 'pervade' or 'to take different forms'. These two ideas are brought together in the doctrine of avatars associated with Vishnu. An avatar is a 'descent' or 'incarnation' of a deity. It is believed that Vishnu pervades the universe by descending to earth in different forms when the forces of evil threaten to overcome the forces of good. He has ten incarnations - the most important avatars or incarnations are Krishna and Rama, both have the distinctive blue skin and U shaped mark. Rama carries a bow and is usually shown with Sita and Hanuman. Krishna carries a flute and appears with milkmaids or a sacred cow.

Krishna



Vishnu may be depicted with two or four arms. When shown with four arms, these represent his power over both the four points of the compass and the four stages of life through which the 'twice born' Hindu man was thought to travel. Images of Vishnu combine compassion and strength.

The ten avatars of Vishnu are:

1. Matsya (fish)
2. Kurma (tortoise)
3. Varaha (boar)
4. Narasima (man-lion)
5. Vamana (dwarf)
6. Parasurama (Rama with the Axe)
7. Rama (hero of the Ramayana)
8. Balarama (Rama with the Plough)
9. Krishna (hero of the Mahabharata)
10. Kalki (a promised future avatara of Vishnu riding a horse).

Vishnu's partner is **LAKSHMI**, one of the forms of the mother goddess and the

Lakshmi



goddess of wealth and property. She stands on a pink (kindness) lotus flower (purity, whole world). She is commonly called Shri (meaning "holy") a title given to many gods and saints but especially to Lakshmi. She is associated with the festival of Diwali as the bringer of blessings for the new year

As goddess of good fortune she is depicted with four arms. Two of her hands hold lotus flowers and a third pours out wealth in the form of gold coins. Her fourth hand is held out in the gesture of blessing. But she is also the goddess of beauty and as such is shown as a young and beautiful goddess decorated with jewels and with only two arms.

She is often depicted seated on a lotus being showered by two elephants who are pouring pots of water over her head. The lotus is a symbol of fertility and purity as it grows with both power and

beauty from the mud. In India with its lack of a constant dependable supply of water, water is a symbol of plenty. Lakshmi's vehicle is a white cow.

As the goddess of wealth and plenty she is very popular with shopkeepers and traders who will often have an image of Lakshmi in their shops.

SHIVA is portrayed as an ascetic, with piled up hair. He may be shown with a crescent moon and the Ganga River in his hair. He carries prayers beads (master of Spiritual sciences), wand and skull (master of the occult). He is often shown as Lord of the Dance, in a circle of flame. If the dance stops, the world ends.

Shiva is one of the three main forms of Brahman, the Supreme Spirit or Power of the universe. In this role Shiva represents the power of destruction. But as the old has to be destroyed to give rise to the new, he is also seen by his followers as the lord of creation. Perhaps the greatest of the Hindu deities, he is given a range of titles which include Maha-deva (great god), Maha-yogi (great ascetic), Nata-raj (lord of the Dance). He is also known as the 'Blue-throated'. This title arises from a story in the Hindu scriptures which recounts how he

Shiva (Shankar - sitting)



drank the poison which would otherwise have destroyed the world. His name means 'auspicious' or 'kindly' and this should be kept in mind in any interpretation of the symbols associated with him.

His most characteristic weapon is the trident, a reminder of his role in the whole process of creation, preservation and destruction. It may also reflect the three qualities of goodness, passion and darkness which are in all things in different proportions. The trident also represents the three gods of creation.

Another typical feature of images of Shiva is his third eye which represents both spiritual insight and the ability to burn up anything which may hinder such insight. This eye is kept closed, but his three eyes look into past, present and future. In imitation, his devotees wear a symbol of three parallel lines on their foreheads. The three horizontal lines on his forehead have been interpreted as representing the three sources of light - fire, sun and moon; or his ability to see the past, present and future. The three lines may also, as with the trident, represent the three qualities of goodness, passion and darkness. His devotees wear the same symbol on their foreheads.

Shiva is also typically depicted with snakes around his neck or across his body. The snake may represent the evolutionary power within the human body, the spiritual power which may be developed through yoga and also Shiva's power to deal with death.

He is frequently depicted sitting on a tiger skin, the symbol of the cruel forces of nature, over which he is lord.

Shiva's vehicle is Nandi a white bull which represents strength and fertility. As the bull is ridden by Shiva, it shows the god's control over these powers.

Shiva's partner **PARVATI** appears in many forms, and these reflect the different aspects of *his* character and qualities. The best known forms are as **DURGA** and **KALI**. As Parvati she is the beautiful Divine Mother. She holds a red and a blue lotus. She has four hands if shown alone, two if she is with Shiva. Parvati, daughter of the Himalayas, represents the gentler qualities of the Mother Goddess. Her docile obedience to her husband, Shiva, is seen as a model of the worshipper's relationship to God. It should be noted, however, that behind Parvati lies the power of the Mother Goddess which is seen by many Hindus to be greater than that of the deities themselves.

Parvati



Durga



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Durga carries weapons, rides a lion or tiger and may be shown destroying a demon. The name 'Durga' means 'Inaccessible' and this may reflect something of the mystery at the heart of this deity. Though loving and kind to those who worship her, as the consort of Shiva in her warrior form, she symbolises the violent and destructive qualities of the Mother Goddess (Shakti). These qualities are explained by a story from the Hindu tradition according to which she was born fully grown from flames which issued from the mouths of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and other lesser deities who created her for the purpose of destroying the buffalo demon, symbol of death.

The weapons which she holds which may include Shiva's trident, Vishnu's discus, a bow and arrow, a sword and shield, and a javelin are for the destruction of evil and the protection of good. The eight arms with which she is at times shown have been interpreted as representing health, education, wealth, organisation, unity, fame, courage and truth. Other images show Durga with ten arms. Her vehicle is a lion or tiger which further emphasises her violent and aggressive qualities.

Kali, which means black, represents the terrifying aspect of the Mother Goddess, whose kindly or benign aspect is reflected in the goddess Lakshmi. She is usually depicted naked or wearing a tiger skin, with disheveled hair and eyes rolling with intoxication. She has fang-like teeth, and her lolling tongue dripping with blood hangs from her mouth. Around her neck is a necklace of skulls.

She is usually shown with four arms, two of which hold severed heads while the other two hold a dagger and a sword. A strangling noose also features in some of the images. She dances on the body of her consort Shiva.

Though her hands are blood stained, one is often raised in a gesture of protection or assurance in the midst of destruction. Kali reflects the Indian tradition of bringing together seemingly contradictory aspects of life and some see a link with the ancient

Kali



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worship of the Great Goddess as an Earth Mother whose power was shown both in the fertility of the earth and in the receiving of the bodies of dead.

Kali represents the realities of life and death. Kali, the devourer of time (kala) stands for the frightening, painful side of life which all who desire to progress spiritually must face and overcome.

Shiva and Pavati are the parents of **GANESH** who is the god of good fortune and remover of obstacles. The image of Ganesha is one of the most distinctive ones within Hinduism. The image has an elephant's head and a large human body usually coloured pink or yellow. The elephant's head symbolises the gaining of knowledge through listening (ears) and reflection (large head). The two tusks, one whole and the other broken, reflect the existence of perfection and imperfection in the physical world. There is a wealth of symbolism associated with his 'pot belly'. It has been interpreted as reflecting an ability to digest whatever experiences life brings. Or, to draw on another motif to be found in Hinduism, that in some sense the whole universe is contained inside him. It may also be seen as a sign of well-being and of his role as a provider of earthly riches. Ganesha is shown with one leg on the ground and the other one folded as if he were meditating. This reflects a balance between the practical and spiritual life, a theme which is repeated in the symbolism of some of the objects associated with him.

In his hands he holds such objects as a rope or noose, to trap the things which attract the mind to the world, and a goad or iron hook, to represent the need to control desires. But he is also typically shown with a bowl of sweetmeats representing earthly prosperity and well-being. He may also be shown with an axe or trident, both of which link him with Shiva. Other symbolic objects which may be associated with Ganesha are a shell, water lily, mace and discus.

He is pictured with four arms symbolising such aspects of Hinduism as the four Vedas (ancient sacred books), the four aims of Hinduism and the four stages of life.

His vehicle is a rat or a mouse as these creatures are known for their ability to gnaw through barriers. The combination of the elephant and the rat or mouse ensures that all obstacles, of whatever size, are removed. The fact that a rat/mouse and food are often shown around or under his feet has also been interpreted as reflecting the idea that desires and wealth are both under his control.

Ganesha is worshipped as the deity who removes barriers and bestows wisdom and good fortune. Many Hindus have an image of Ganesha on their shrines and pray to him before they begin their worship of other deities. He is also worshipped at the beginning of any new venture such as a wedding or the building of a new

Ganesha

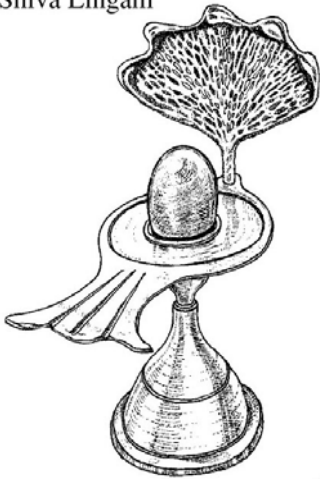


house. Ganesha is often shown with an open hand, palms upturned, sometimes holding a gift to show him granting favours to his devotees.

As god of wisdom he is invoked at the beginning of books and may be shown holding a tusk as a pen since he is regarded as the writer of the scriptures and hence the patron of schools and of the written word.

The custom of placing an image of Ganesha at doorways recalls the story of his courage in defending his mother Parvati. The stories about the loss of his head all tend to agree that it was cut off by Shiva (who did not realise Ganesha was his son) and replaced by that of the first living animal that came along, which was an elephant.

Shiva Lingam



Not all images of Hindu gods are human like, in fact the representations of Hindu Gods take three main forms: a) human like, although possibly with fantastic features such as multiple arms; b) part human, part animal (Ganesh, Hanuman); c) rocks, smooth stone (Shiva

Shiva (Natraja) - dancing)



linga) and natural objects. Sacred images should be beautiful so that the deities may be persuaded to inhabit them. You will see that they have similar form (e.g. males have broad chests, slim waists and resemble sixteen year olds). Facial expressions are detached, calm and inward looking signifying the inwardly held breath (prana) which is the essence of life. The gestures of the hands are significant (mudras) and express aspects of the god's characters, e.g. uplifted outward palm means blessing. It is usually impossible to

distinguish one deity from another by their physical appearance; this is normally done by recognising the emblems they hold (see the information on the preceding pages) Images should be “read” as visual theological statements, as in a four armed dancing Shiva or Shiva Natraja shown here: Shiva dances in a flaming circle of creation/destruction, birth/death. He holds the drum of creation and the fire of destruction, but his other hands display the “fear not” mudra to the worshipper and point to his foot as the place where the worshipper may take refuge. Underfoot he crushes a demon. He has overcome the ancient serpent and wears it as an ornament, in his hair is the River Ganga.

When Hindus go to a mandir it is commonly for **darshan** or “seeing” of the deity. Beholding the image, and being seen by the deity, is a great blessing. God is imminent in all things and omnipotent, but it is accepted that once an image of the deity is consecrated it is the place where God is present to accept the devotion of his worshippers

Because of its many diverse forms you will find worship may be focused on many different objects, not just The Supreme God and a variety of deities, but also on gurus (teachers), family elders, the cow, sacred rivers (Ganga and Yamura), the land of India. These are all representatives of God.

Worship – Puja

Puja is the Sanskrit word for worship. Puja is the act of showing reverence to a god through invocations, prayers, songs and rituals. An essential part of puja for a Hindu devotee is making a spiritual connection with a deity. God is not accessible to our eyes, ears, nose, touch and is even beyond the realm of the intellect, but from the beginning Hindus have used murtis, as this helps fallible human beings to focus on God. Offering puja is not just about actions and words, but about offering one’s heart and thoughts to God.

Most Hindu homes contain a shrine of some type – it may be a shelf, a cupboard or a whole room. Frequently the shrine is in the kitchen, as this is seen as an area of special purity. The shrine will contain images of the deity or deities. The deities chosen will depend on many factors: some could be linked to the family trade, others may be the most popular deity in the home locality,

Puja Tray



some are seen as linked to the family in a special way – and so a new wife may incorporate images of her birth family's deities into her new family's shrine.

Puja is the name given to worship practised daily in both the home and the mandir. It refers to the process of deity worship where the image is bathed, dressed, offered food etc on a daily basis. Worship can be relatively short, but may last up to two hours.

The items offered during puja are usually put on a tray near the household shrine and include:

- Pot of holy water. To sprinkle on the image, using a spoon. After worship the remaining water is drunk to share the blessing. Water symbolises purity. Milk can also be given to the deities with the spoon.
- A bell. Rung to announce the presence of the worshipper to the deity and the beginning of puja, perhaps also rung to conclude worship.
- A diva. A wick burnt in ghee (clarified butter) or an arti lamp. The offering of the fire or flame of the arti lamp is another ancient symbol within the Hindu tradition.
- An offering of food (rice, nuts, sweets, fruit, etc) which will later be shared with the family as prashad (blessed food).
- Incense sticks. To purify the air for puja and to offer the sweet smell of incense, a traditional Hindu offering, to the deity
- Kum-kum paste. Red powder (or yellow turmeric or sandalwood paste), used to mark the forehead of the worshippers during puja and as a sign of the deity's presence and blessing. The paste is also used to anoint the image of the deity

The tray itself is made of stainless steel which symbolises purity..

A simple puja may take the following form:

- The worshipper washes to purify himself, and applies a tilak mark to his forehead (the shape of the mark depending on the deity worshipped).
- . He takes off his shoes as a sign of the holy presence of the deities.
- The images are bathed first with water, then with a mix of milk, yoghurt, sugar, honey and butter
- The images are anointed with kum-kum and sandalwood pastes
- The candles and incense sticks are lit to purify the air and as a symbol of understanding.
- The worshipper meditates
- Prayers are offered first to Ganesha
- Passages are read from the Holy Books or mantras chanted to enhance understanding
- The diva or arti lamp is lit and waved in front of the murtis to ward off evil.
- Prayers are said and the bell rung. This is the request for guidance from Brahman.
- A blessing is taken by passing the hands over the flame of the diva and drawing them up over the head.
- The bell is rung and offerings are made (e.g. rice, fruit, nuts, sweets).

- Prashad (food which has been blessed by being offered to the gods) is shared amongst those present.

In some families puja may be as simple as lighting an incense stick and praying. Worship can be as simple or as complex as the worshipper chooses.

Puja is traditionally performed three times a day in an orthodox Hindu home - in the morning before dawn, at noon and in the evening.

In the Bhagavad-Gita, Krishna says: "Whoever offers me, with devotion and a pure heart, a leaf, a flower, a fruit or a little water, with love in his heart, that offering is dear to me."

The blessing of the worshippers with a light is known as **Aarti**. The aarti lamp usually has five flames, symbolic of the five elements (air, water, matter (earth), fire, ether). The light is offered in circling movements to the deities whilst the priest or worship leader rings a small bell in his left hand. Aarti is a customary method of greeting an honoured guest. Other articles may be offered, such as conch shells filled with water.

Worshippers also chant mantras. A **mantra** is a phrase or prayer which is constantly repeated. The most famous is the universal Vedic prayer known as the **Gayatri Mantra**. Mantras should have the effect of purifying the worshipper and bringing peace and strength. Simply repeating the mantra parrot-like without any devotion of the heart is useless.

The Gayatri Mantra

Oh God! Thou art the Giver of Life,
Remover of pain and sorrow,
The Bestower of happiness,
Oh! Creator of the Universe,
May we receive thy supreme sin-destroying light,
May Thou guide our intellect in the right direction.

The last prayer used in puja is usually the Hymn of Peace or Shanti Path:

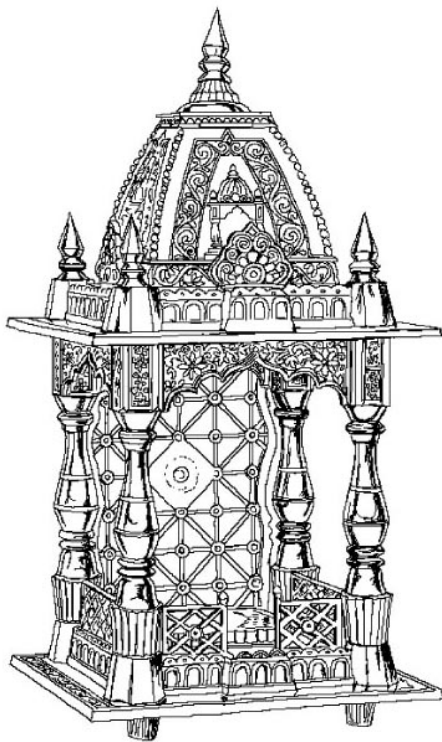
Shanti Path

There is peace in the heavenly region; there is peace in the atmosphere; peace reigns on earth; there is coolness in the water; the medicinal herbs are healing; the plants are peace giving; there is harmony in the celestial objects; there is perfection in eternal knowledge; everything in the universe is peaceful; peace pervades everywhere. May that peace come to me!

Puja and mantras are not the only way of worshipping God, and there is much individual choice – some people may go on constant pilgrimage or devote themselves to the teaching of a particular leader or guru, others practise yoga or meditation.

Yoga means “yoke” or “union”. **It is a way of offering the whole of one’s being to God in worship.** It is a system of spiritual disciplines and techniques handed down over many centuries evolved to make the human body capable of maintaining one position for many hours whilst meditating on spiritual teachings. Yoga includes: adopting a calm state of mind; adopting particular postures; controlling one’s breathing; controlling the senses and meditation. **Meditation** takes the mind and expands it until the student is at one with the object of his meditation and no longer aware of the existence of anything else. (Yoga has become very popular in the West as a form of physical and mental exercise without the spiritual commitment of the Hindu faith. Although simple stilling exercise may be used in the classroom, teachers are advised not to imitate the Hindu practices.)

Mandir Shrine



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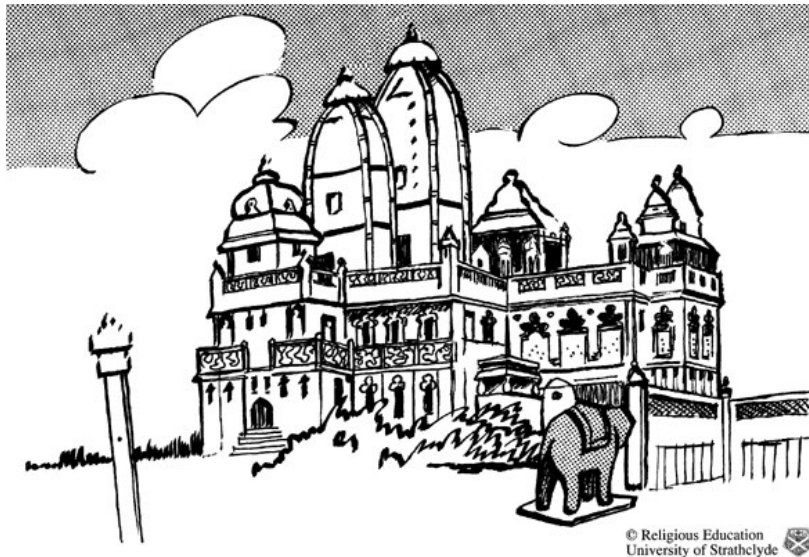
At the Mandir

The **mandir** is the community home of the deity or deities. Each mandir contains a shrine with a **murti** (image) of the deity to whom the temple is dedicated with surrounding shrines to other deities. It can be said that the purpose of a mandir is to generate faith, acting as the place where man can meet with God. Mandirs will be beautifully decorated with sculptures and the images will be beautiful and attractively dressed in order to draw a person’s mind on towards God. A temple is regarded as a house of God, though Hindus believe that they can encounter God anywhere. The images of God will be covered by some sort of canopy, often the roof of the building. The building often has a tall dome representing the sky and pinnacles representing the worshippers' spiritual aspirations.

Worshippers generally come to the mandir at a time convenient to themselves, sounding the bell to let God know of their intention to worship. They will bring offerings of food etc, but may also make gifts of money for the upkeep of the mandir. Most mandirs will have a resident priest who performs aarti in front of the deities and after offering aarti to God the lamp is brought around to the worshippers present who take a blessing from the light. As the flames have been offered to God the worshippers are, in a sense, sharing his glory. As the worshippers leave they will be given small bags of prashad – blessed food – to take home. The prashad is made up from the food brought to the mandir as offerings and which has been offered before the deities.

Mandirs act not only as a place of worship but also as cultural and community centres. Mandirs often have halls for public meetings, kitchen facilities and accommodation for pilgrims. In Britain mandirs will run language classes in Gujarati or Hindi or perhaps run dance and music classes to help young people join in traditional worship. Some mandirs have hospitals or schools attached. Mandirs are normally supported entirely from donations from patrons and the local Hindu community.

Complex symbolism surrounds the building and contents of mandirs (e.g. beginning with the ceremony of “planting the germ in the womb” – the burial of a small pot directly below the space reserved for the image). This may not always be apparent in Britain where mandirs are often converted churches or halls. The temple is constructed according to the Agama Sastras (temple manuals) and it is built in the image of the human body. The two sides of the temple represent the hands, and the top of the temple represents the head. The presiding deity rests in the inner most recess called the Garbhagraha (the holy of holies). Hindu devotees believe that, once the murti (image) is installed, the divine power has manifested itself in the Murti.



In the mandirs the Agamic rules require the temple priest to serve and act as an intermediary between the worshipper and God. The temple priests come from families where priesthood is their traditional occupation. They are trained in the skills of priesthood from a young age (usually about 13 years old). They also have to live a very spiritual and disciplined life. All daily

and weekly rituals are performed by these priests.

A Hindu devotee follows certain minimal rules regarding the maintenance of purity on the sacred ground of the mandir. Hindus will enter a temple only after a bath. Physical purity is symbolic of the mental state of the Hindu devotee while entering the house of God.

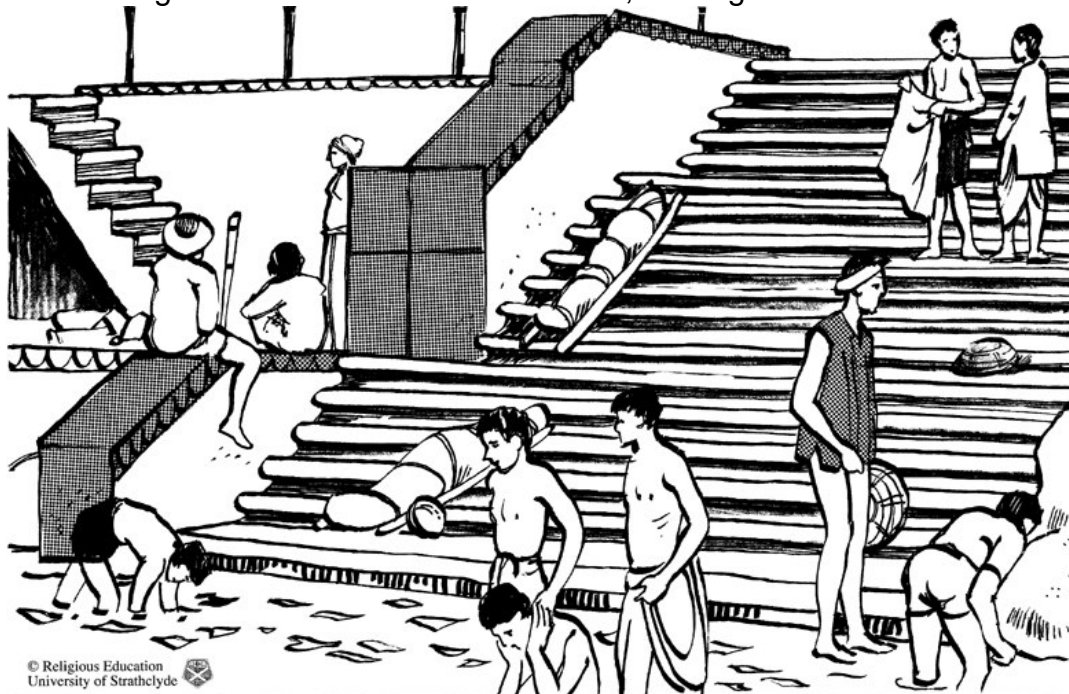
Also all devotees and visitors are required to remove their footwear before entering the temple.

Hindus are not expected to visit the mandir daily, but they *will* perform daily worship at home. .

Other Sacred Places

For a devout Hindu the whole of the land of India is seen as sacred. God is seen as having four special dwelling places (dhams) in the sacred land; Badrinath (north), Puri (east) Rameshvaran (south) and Dwarka (west). The seven sacred cities of India are: Hardwar, Mathura, Ayodhya, Varanasi, Ujjain, Dwarka and Kanchipuram. The other major holy sites are rivers (particularly the Ganga and Jumna) and mountains – the Himalayas are called “the dwelling place of the gods.”

Pilgrimage is an important religious observance for many Hindus. They may take journeys to visit their gurus, as a religious discipline, or as a means of gaining merit (good karma). There are also several major pilgrim festivals, the most famous of which is probably the **Kumbhamela** held every twelve years at Allahabad (Prayag) where the rivers Ganga and Jumna meet. Many of the holy sites are on the **Ganga** which is regarded as the holiest river in India, bathing in the river cleanses one from



the bad karma of previous lives. Many devout Hindus go to Varanasi to die (or will have their ashes scattered there) as it is seen as the crossing place between earth and heaven. **Varanasi** (Benares) is thus a key pilgrimage centre with over two thousand temples. Other well known pilgrim centres include Mathura (birthplace of Krishna), Orissa (the Jagannath temple), and Rameshvaram (mainland site from which Rama attacked Ravana on Sri Lanka).

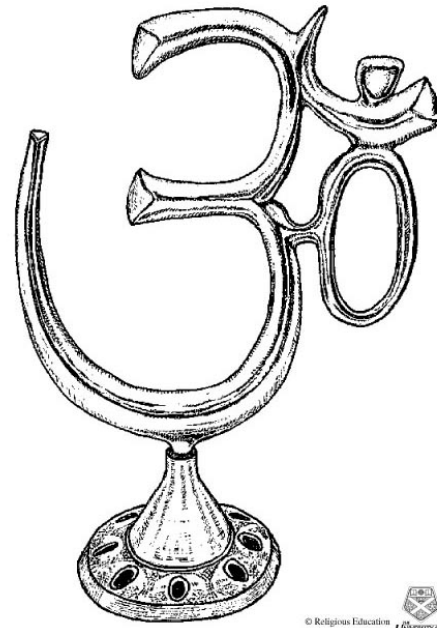
Hindu Symbols:

Aum (pronounce “Awoom”) Aum is the key symbol and most sacred sound of Hinduism, it is the divine sound, the first sound of creation from which life itself emerged.

Chanting Aum generates a divine energy in the believer. The three sounds which make up the word Aum also represent Brahma, Shiva and Vishnu and the three aspects of creation: a) past, present, future, eternity; b) masculine, feminine, neuter and creation; c) birth life and death. The symbol in Sanskrit script will be found as a decorative motif in numerous places. It is recited at the beginning and end of prayers and may be found at the beginning of books or at the top of papers. It may be uttered before prayers and is recited as an aid to worship and meditation. It is also used during certain ceremonies, e.g. when a baby is born the

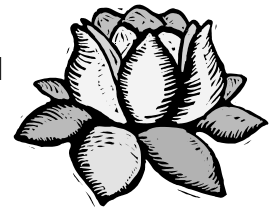
Aum syllable is drawn in honey on the baby's tongue.. It may also be pronounced AOUM and as such may represent such four-fold divisions in Hinduism as the four aspects of time - past, present, future, eternity - or the four aspects of life - birth, life, death and moksha, escape from the cycle of life

Aum Symbol



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The **Lotus Flower** is a symbol particularly associated with several goddesses and Ganesha and Vishnu. It normally stands as a symbol of the whole created world or for qualities of purity and peace.



The **Swastika** is a sacred symbol for Hindus, and is thought to bring good fortune. It will be found on temple buildings, wedding cards etc. It may be painted on the floor outside a building as a sign of welcome, or made out of rice and grains on a temple floor for birds to eat. The arms of the swastika may rotate in either direction. NOTE: It is in no way related to the Nazi symbol.

The Wheel of Life represents the concept of reincarnation, in which the soul moves from body to body in a circle of lives which is determined by one's actions and lifestyle. The ultimate goal of Hindus is liberation from the cycle by merging into the spirit of Brahman.

Hindu Festivals

To many Hindus all days are holy as each day will be associated with a particular deity. Every Indian village will also have its own exclusive deity and individuals will choose which of the great pantheon of Hindu deities they worship. However, there are some Hindu festivals which are common to most of India – although they may be celebrated in different ways and at different times! The most popular festivals are; Holi (Kamadahana), Navaratri (Dussera), Divali (Deepavali), Ram Navami, Ganesh Chaturthi, and Shivaratri. The Hindu calendar is a lunar one and so festival dates appears to “move” against the Gregorian calendar.

DIVALI (October-November) The New Year and the festival of Lights. Festivities may last from two to five days. The main story celebrated at this time is the Ramayana; the lights of the festival mark Rama’s triumphant return to his kingdom of Ayodhya after defeating the demon Ravana. Also remembered are when Vishnu rescued Goddess Lakshmi from king Bali, and Krishna’s victory over the dreaded demon, Naraksura. . The key theme of the celebrations is that light triumphs over darkness, goodness over evil. The celebrations of lord Rama’s return to Ayodhya, when citizens lit his way with earthen oil lamps(diyas), are re-created by lighting rows of diyas and candles, illuminating buildings, swastika and Rangoli patterns are painted in the fore court of residences as a sign of welcome and revelry. Children light fireworks to light up the sky in an array of designs. The lighting of houses is said to attract Goddess Lakshmi, who brings prosperity to her devotees and who makes her annual visit to each home at this time. The Hindu calendar ends with Diwali, the next day is the Hindu new year, which begins with prayer. Relatives and friends get together to celebrate the new year. They visit their cows and decorate them in a variety of colours, and feed them boiled grains. Bhaibij is the day after the new year when sisters feed their brothers. Five days after Diwali, is Pancham, an auspicious day to commence business.

Rangoli patterns (also known as kolams) are floor designs customarily made in honour of Lakshmi at Divali time. They are normally made with coloured rice paste but may also be made with coloured chalk or watercolour paints. Designs vary between regions but will frequently include a lotus flower (Lakshmi’s traditional seat) or a path and footprints showing



the goddess the way into the believer's home. Lakshmi traditionally brings blessings and good fortune at Diwali time. The patterns will also be used as a typical way of welcoming honoured guests into a home.

RAKSHA BANDAN (August). This is celebrated chiefly in the home and is when sisters tie a rakhi to the arms of their brothers as a reminder that they are under his protection. The rakhi is also thought of as a protection from the forces of evil. The custom continues even after girls are married. The girls will receive a gift in return. Should someone not have a brother they will give the rakhi to their nearest male relative, or even a male friend of the family. Rakhis may vary in shape and size, but are bracelets made of multi-coloured silken threads and possibly also beads and tinfoil rosettes.

The story connected with this festival is of Vishnu giving Sachi, the consort of Indra, the deposed king of heaven, an amulet to protect him from the demon king Bali who had usurped his kingdom. She tied the amulet to his arm, and when he went into battle his great faith in it's power enabled him to recover his kingdom.

RAMA NAVAMI (April). This is the birthday of Rama, considered to be an incarnation of Vishnu. Celebrations include making cradles in which baby Ramas are rocked.

JANAMASTAMI (August-September). The festival celebrates the birthday of Krishna. Cradles will be made for the baby. Everyone fasts until midnight, sings devotional songs and hears the stories of Krishna.

DASSHERA (October). This festival also celebrates part of the Ramayana epic. Huge effigies of the ten-headed demon Ravana are burnt in memory of Lord Rama's battle.

HOLI (March-April). Holi is almost totally a public festival and as such there are hardly any Holi celebrations inside private homes. This is when Krishna is remembered as a young man, it is a time of fun when coloured water is thrown around and everyone ends up covered in coloured powder. The story of Prahlad is told whose evil aunt Holika tried to kill him, but who was saved by Vishnu. Holi is also a harvest celebration marking the climax of spring. Bonfires are lit, marking both the end of winter and the death of evil, and proceeds from the seasonal harvest- grains, coconuts etc- offered to the flames. Except when the ceremony is taking place in a temple, gesticulation, howling, catcalls and trading of abuses is a part of Holi. Very few religious rites are associated with Holi



GANESH CHAUTRI is a festival in Ganesha's honour and is celebrated in the states of Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Preparations begin months in advance when images of Ganesha are installed within homes as well as in places of assembly. Elaborate arrangements are made

for lighting and decoration and Ganesha is fervently worshipped for about 7-10 days. On the day of the Chaturthi, i.e. the last day of the festival, thousands of processions converge on beaches to immerse the holy idols in the sea. This immersion is accompanied by drum beats, devotional songs and dancing.

Rites of Passage

The Hindu scriptures recommend sixteen **samskaras** (sacraments or life cycle rituals) which a person should undertake during their lifetime to gain good merits and success and finally obtain **moksha** (release from the cycle of rebirth) in union with God. Although technically there are sixteen samskaras really only four are currently popular: Jatakarma –the birth and childhood ceremonies; Upanayana – the sacred thread ceremony; Vivaha – marriage; Antyeshti – funeral rites.

The first three samskaras are performed before a baby is born to ensure a healthy child. At the child's **birth** it is given ghee and honey to imbue it with intelligence, prayers are whispered in its ear to give it long life. Family members bless the baby. This private birth ceremony is followed twelve days later with a public **naming** ceremony. Traditionally the child is given four names: for the constellation under which he is born; for the deity associated with the month of birth; for the family deity; the fourth name is the one generally used and will depend on caste, culture and taste. A priest will be consulted to suggest the most propitious names.

The eighth samskara is the **hair cutting** ceremony (usually only carried out on boys) which will take place between the ages of one and five. It is seen as a symbolic way of washing away the impurities of a child's birth and previous lives and giving them a fresh start.

The fifteenth samskara is **marriage** which is seen as the most important by many Hindus. Marriage is seen as an alliance between two families, so the choosing of partners was frequently **arranged**, although more recently partners have been given greater choice. Social structures, caste and financial security are all important factors. Horoscopes are cast to affirm the match and to set a propitious date for the ceremony. Marriage ceremonies vary according to locality, but most contain certain common features:

- The presence of the sacred fire (homa)
- The dropping of ghee and grains, coconuts and rice (symbols of fertility) as an offering into the sacred fire.
- The tying together of the clothing of bride and groom by a piece of consecrated linen – they may also be linked by a cord around their necks.
- The bride mounts a stone to imbue her with its qualities of firmness and strength
- The marriage is sealed by the rite of the seven steps around the fire: "Take thou one step for the acquirement of force; take thou two steps for strength; take thou three steps for the increase of wealth; take thou four steps for well-being; take thou five steps for offspring; take thou six steps for seasons; take thou seven steps for a friend."

The sixteenth samskara is the **funeral**; the ceremonies connected with death are very important because the nature of life after death depends on the correct

performance of funerary rites. As death approaches the dying person undertakes purification ceremonies (if possible, bathing in the Ganga). Disposal of the dead body is by cremation, because this too is seen as purificatory and helping the soul to reach the next world. Funeral pyres are made of wood, saffron, musk, sandalwood and camphor. The pyre will be lit by the nearest male relative, usually a son. Several days later the ashes and bones will be collected and cast onto a river, preferably the Ganga. In the West the ceremonies will take place in a crematorium and the ashes are often sent back to India.

Ashramas are the four stages of life:

- i. Brahmacharya – the student, acquiring an education
- ii. Grihasthya – the householder, responsible for providing for his family
- iii. Vanaprasthya – hermit or forest dweller, living a life of detachment from material things and devoting oneself more to spiritual matters.
- iv. Sannyasa – the wandering ascetic, renouncing everything to become united with the Divine.

These ashramas traditionally apply to men of the higher castes who may be seen as those closest to reaching Unity with the Divine. Each stage of life has its own specific duties (dharma) to perform. Traditionally the **student life** starts with the investiture of the **sacred thread** made of three groups of nine strands of cotton, hemp or wool. Initiation (**Upanayana**) usually takes place between the ages of 8 and 12, although it may be delayed until just before marriage. In the first stage of life the boy is encouraged to learn the scriptures and be educated to earn a living. **In the second stage they marry**, have children, look after family members and contribute to charity. The third stage begins about fifty when family duties should have been fulfilled and a person has **more time to devote to spiritual matters**. Finally a person is supposed to give up all attachments and concentrate on achieving **moksha** (final release from the cycle of rebirth). These four stages define the goals a Hindu should achieve during that lifetime but will not always be followed rigidly, especially in the West where becoming a forest dwelling ascetic is more difficult! The cycle of repeated birth and death is called **samsara**. Everyone has an eternal indestructible soul (**atma**) which moves from body to body according to the way in which a person lives their life. Those who die after a good life will reach liberation from the cycle by merging with Brahman, but all others will return to earth (possibly in an animal form if they have been particularly bad) in order to continue to purify themselves through suffering, over many lifetimes.

Karma and Reincarnation

Karma is the cosmic law of action and reaction. Under its control we souls in the material world reap good or bad results according to each act we perform.

Karmic reactions include not only things that happen to us, but such things as our health, wealth, intelligence, physical appearance, and social status, as well as our personalities and inclinations. While we have some freedom to choose our current acts, our choices are influenced by our natures, or personalities, which have developed from our previous actions. For example, good choices tend to make us good persons who make further good choices.

The law of karma locks us into an endless cycle. Each action begets a reaction that begets another action, and so on. Whether the reactions are good or bad, we must repeatedly accept new bodies in order for the reactions to play out. And each lifetime in a material body means unavoidable miseries, such as disease, old age, and death. The Vedic literature tells us that we souls can inhabit any of millions of forms of life, including aquatics, plants, insects, reptiles, birds, animals, and human beings. At the time of death, we leave one body and enter a new one in an act of reincarnation. Our previous actions have produced our present body, and our current actions will determine our next body.

The Vedas state that the only truly beneficial course of action is to perform spiritual acts that can gain us freedom from the bonds of karma.

Hindus would say the concept of reincarnation is not as foreign as it might seem. We can observe that we change from one body to another in our own lifetime. Your body at birth is completely different from your adult body. Yet throughout these changes, you—the conscious self—remain the same. Similarly, the conscious self remains the same from one body to the next in the cycle of reincarnation.

This means that, according to the Vedic literature, the psychophysical entity with which we now identify ourselves is not our true self. The true self is neither the body nor the mind, nor a combination of both. The Vedic sages tell us that the body and mind are but gross and subtle coverings of the self.

Underlying these temporary coverings, the real self is a spark of spiritual consciousness, eternal and unchanging but temporarily misidentifying itself with matter in the form of the body and mind. And this real self, the Vedic sages tell us, survives the death of the body and lives on.

Living a Hindu Life

Ahimsa is the principle of respect for all life. Hindus believe that God is present in all that exists; it therefore follows that they respect all life and care for the environment. In practical terms, this means that many Hindus are vegetarian, although they will eat products such as yoghurt or cheese which have not caused the animal's death.

Bhakti is the expression of loving devotion to a particular god. This devotion is expressed in worship through prayers, mantras, meditations and offerings. It is just one path through which Hindus seek union with God.

Dharma has three different meanings:

- 1) **“The Hindu Dharma” simply means “the Hindu Religion” ;**
- 2) **“things as they are” e.g. the Dharma of water is to flow;**
- 3) **one’s personal moral and social duty.**

The dharma of a human being (in the second sense) is to act in accordance with the Spirit of God with them, in order to live out their faith they follow their dharma (in the third sense) i.e. they perform the right duties for their particular stage of life (ashrama – see above) and place in the social system.

Dharma includes a commitment to universal principles such as truth, right action, peace, love and non-violence. There will also be one's personal dharma; these duties depend on one's place in the social system, stage of life, family and community commitments etc.

Hindu Scriptures

Hinduism does not have one holy book but a collection of scriptures:

- a) **Vedas**, (including the **Upanishads**) written 2000 – 600 BCE. Gives details of hymns, chants, sacrificial formulae, rituals, regulations, how to attain ultimate union with Brahman.
- b) **The Great Epics** 400 BCE – 50 CE. The Mahabharata (Which includes the Bhagavad Gita) and the Ramyana. Also Law Codes.
- c) **The Puranas** 300 – 650 CE. Lives of avatars, saints, sages and devotees
- d) **The Tantras** 650 – 1000 CE. Spiritual practices, disciplines and rituals.

At the primary school level it is advisable to work chiefly with stories from the Great Epics and the Puranas, many of which have been published in a form suitable for children.

Hindu texts are divided into two categories. The revealed (literally “heard”) writings (the **Shruti**) are the four Vedas. The Vedas are believed to be eternal, having been “heard” directly from the Supreme Consciousness by holy men in deep meditation. They have been passed down a chain of unbroken oral tradition for almost four thousand years. Each Vedas has four parts: hymns; manuals of ritual and prayers for the guidance of priests; philosophical discussions about worship ritual and meditation; and Upanishad treatises on mystical philosophy.



The orthodox Hindu reveres the four Vedas as the Supreme scriptural truth and Vedic hymns and rituals are performed at major events e.g. weddings and cremations.

The “remembered” writings (the **Smriti**) include the popular epics and stories of the gods. The most famous of these are probably the **Bhagavad Gita** (the 18th chapter of the Mahabharata) with its dialogue between Krishna and Prince Arjuna and the **Ramayana**. Smriti stories are often popularly explained through dance and drama, especially at festival times. Many are retold through TV and radio.

Many Hindus accepted the canonical shruti, but opinions on the status of the smriti vary. Some Hindus feel the Smriti are more important in the current era because they make Vedic wisdom more readily accessible to everyone. Scriptures are used for: personal study and enrichment; for sermons; for public recitation (especially stories); as a source of mantras and prayers for rituals; as a source of stories for song, dance and drama. Scriptures are always treated with great respect. They will not be placed on the floor, nor touched with the feet or dirty hands. Prayers are usually read before reading or reciting from them.