

BBC Religion Packet: Hinduism

Introduction to Hinduism



Hinduism is the religion of the majority of people in India and Nepal. It also exists among significant populations outside of the sub continent and has over 900 million adherents worldwide. In some ways **Hinduism is the oldest living religion** in the world, or at least elements within it stretch back many thousands of years. Yet Hinduism resists easy definition partly because of the vast array of practices and beliefs found within it. It is also closely associated conceptually and historically with the other Indian religions **Jainism**, **Buddhism** and **Sikhism**.

Unlike most other religions, Hinduism has no single founder, no single scripture, and no commonly agreed set of teachings. Throughout its extensive **history**, there have been many key figures teaching different philosophies and writing numerous holy books. For these reasons, writers often refer to Hinduism as 'a way of life' or 'a family of religions' rather than a single religion.

Defining Hinduism

The term 'Hindu' was derived from the river or river complex of the northwest, the Sindhu. Sindhu is a Sanskrit word used by the inhabitants of the region, the Aryans in the second millennium BCE.

Later migrants and invaders, the Persians in the sixth century BCE, the Greeks from the 4th century BCE, and the Muslims from the 8th century CE, used the name of this river in their own languages for the land and its people.

The term 'Hindu' itself probably does not go back before the 15th and 16th centuries when it was used by people to differentiate themselves from followers of other traditions, especially the Muslims (Yavannas), in Kashmir and Bengal. At that time the term may have simply indicated groups united by certain cultural practices such as cremation of the dead and styles of cuisine. The 'ism' was added to 'Hindu' only in the 19th century in the context of **British colonialism** and missionary activity.

The origins of the term 'hindu' are thus cultural, political and geographical. Now the term is widely accepted although any definition is subject to much debate. In some ways it is true to say that Hinduism is a religion of recent origin yet its roots and formation go back thousands of years.

Some claim that one is 'born a Hindu', but there are now many Hindus of non-Indian descent. Others claim that its core feature is belief in an **impersonal Supreme**, but important strands have long described and worshipped a personal God. Outsiders often criticise Hindus as being polytheistic, but many adherents claim to be monotheists.

Some Hindus define orthodoxy as compliance with the teachings of the **Vedic texts** (the four Vedas and their supplements). However, still others identify their tradition with 'Sanatana Dharma', the eternal order of conduct that transcends any specific body of sacred literature. Scholars sometimes draw attention to the caste system as a defining feature, but many Hindus view such practices as merely a social phenomenon or an aberration of their original teachings. Nor can we define Hinduism according to belief in concepts such as **karma and samsara** (reincarnation) because Jains, Sikhs, and Buddhists (in a qualified form) accept this teaching too.

Although it is not easy to define Hinduism, we can say that it is rooted in India, most Hindus revere a body of texts as sacred scripture known as the **Veda**, and most Hindus draw on a common system of values known as **dharma**.

- Hinduism **originated around the Indus Valley** near the River Indus in modern day Pakistan.
- About 80% of the Indian population regard themselves as Hindu.
- Most Hindus believe in a **Supreme God**, whose qualities and forms are represented by the multitude of deities which emanate from him.
- Hindus believe that existence is a **cycle of birth, death, and rebirth**, governed by **Karma**.
- Hindus believe that the soul passes through a cycle of successive lives and its next incarnation is always dependent on how the previous life was lived.
- The main **Hindu texts** are the Vedas and their supplements (books based on the Vedas). Veda is a Sanskrit word meaning 'knowledge'. These scriptures do not mention the word 'Hindu' but many scriptures discuss dharma, which can be rendered as 'code of conduct', 'law', or 'duty'
- Hindus celebrate many **holy days**, but the Festival of Lights, **Diwali** is the best known.
- The 2001 census recorded 559,000 Hindus in Britain, around 1% of the population.

Atman

Atman means 'eternal self'. The atman refers to the real self beyond ego or false self. It is often referred to as 'spirit' or 'soul' and indicates our true self or essence which underlies our existence.

There are many interesting perspectives on the self in Hinduism ranging from the self as eternal servant of God to the self as being identified with God. The understanding of the self as eternal supports the idea of reincarnation in that the same eternal being can inhabit temporary bodies.

The idea of atman entails the idea of the self as a spiritual rather than material being and thus there is a strong dimension of Hinduism which emphasises detachment from the material world and promotes practices such as asceticism. Thus it could be said that in this world, a spiritual being, the atman, has a human experience rather than a human being having a spiritual experience.

Dharma

Dharma is an important term in Indian religions. In Hinduism it means 'duty', 'virtue', 'morality', even 'religion' and it refers to the power which upholds the universe and society. Hindus generally believe that dharma was revealed in the Vedas although a more common word there for 'universal law' or 'righteousness' is *rita*. Dharma is the power that maintains society, it makes the grass grow, the sun shine, and makes us moral people or rather gives humans the opportunity to act virtuously.

But acting virtuously does not mean precisely the same for everyone; different people have different obligations and duties according to their age, gender, and social position. Dharma is universal but it is also particular and operates within concrete circumstances. Each person therefore has their own dharma known as *sva-dharma*. What is correct for a woman might not be for a man or what is correct for an adult might not be for a child.

The importance of *sva-dharma* is illustrated well by the **Bhagavad Gita**. This text, set before the great battle of the Mahabharata, depicts the hero Arjuna riding in his chariot driven by his charioteer **Krishna** between the great armies. The warrior Arjuna questions Krishna about why he should fight in the battle. Surely, he asks, killing one's relatives and teachers is wrong and so he refuses to fight.

Krishna assures him that this particular battle is righteous and he must fight as his duty or dharma as a warrior. Arjuna's *sva-dharma* was to fight in the battle because he was a warrior, but he must fight with detachment from the results of his actions and within the rules of the warriors' dharma. Indeed, not to act according to one's own dharma is wrong and called *adharma*.

Correct action in accordance with dharma is also understood as service to humanity and to God. The idea of what has become known as sanatana dharma can be traced back to the *puranas* - texts of antiquity. Those who adhere to this idea of one's eternal dharma or constitution, claim that it transcends other mundane dharmas - that it is the *para dharma*, the ultimate dharma of the self. It is often associated with bhakti movements, who link an attitude of eternal service to a personal deity.

Varna

An important idea that developed in classical Hinduism is that dharma refers especially to a person's responsibility regarding class (*varna*) and stage of life (*ashrama*). This is called varnashrama-dharma. In Hindu history the highest class, the Brahmins, adhered to this doctrine. The class system is a model or ideal of social order that first occurs in the oldest Hindu text, the Rig Veda and the present-day caste (*jati*) system may be rooted in this.

The four classes are:

- *Brahmans* or *Brahmins* - the intellectuals and the priestly class who perform religious rituals
- *Kshatriya* (nobles or warriors) - who traditionally had power
- *Vaishyas* (commoners or merchants) - ordinary people who produce, farm, trade and earn a living
- *Shudras* (workers) - who traditionally served the higher classes, including labourers, artists, musicians, and clerks

People in the top three classes are known as 'twice born' because they have been born from the womb and secondly through initiation in which boys receive a sacred thread as a symbol of their high status. Although usually considered an initiation for males it must be noted that there are examples of exceptions to this rule, where females receive this initiation.

The twice born traditionally could go through four stages of life or ashramas. The ashrama system is as follows:

- *Brahmacarya* - 'celibate student' stage in which males learned the Veda
- *grihastha* - 'householder' in which the twice born male can experience the human purposes (*purushartha*) of responsibility, wealth, and pleasure
- *Vanaprastha* - 'hermit' or 'wilderness dweller' in which the twice born male retires from life in the world to take up pilgrimage and religious observances along with his wife
- *Samnyasa* - 'renunciation' in which the twice born gives up the world, takes on a saffron robe or, in some sects, goes naked, with a bowl and a staff to seek *moksha* (liberation) or develop devotion



Correct action in accordance with dharma is also understood as service to humanity and to God. The idea of what has become known as sanatana dharma can be traced back to the puranas. Those who adhere to this idea, addressing one's eternal dharma or constitution, claim that it transcends other mundane dharmas – that it is the para dharma, the ultimate dharma. It is often associated with bhakti movements, who propose that we are all eternal servants of a personal Deity, thus advocating each act, word, and deed to be acts of devotion. In the 19th Century the concept of sanatana dharma was used by some groups to advocate a unified view of Hinduism.

Karma and Samsara

Karma is a Sanskrit word whose literal meaning is 'action'. It refers to the law that every action has an equal reaction either immediately or at some point in the future. Good or virtuous actions, actions in harmony with dharma, will have good reactions or responses and bad actions, actions against dharma, will have the opposite effect.

In Hinduism karma operates not only in this lifetime but across lifetimes: the results of an action might only be experienced after the present life in a new life.

Hindus believe that human beings can create good or bad consequences for their actions and might reap the rewards of action in this life, in a future human rebirth or reap the rewards of action in a heavenly or hell realm in which the self is reborn for a period of time.

This process of reincarnation is called *samsara*, a continuous cycle in which the soul is reborn over and over again according to the law of action and reaction. At death many Hindus believe the soul is carried by a subtle body into a new physical body which can be a human or non-human form (an animal or divine being). The goal of liberation (*moksha*) is to make us free from this cycle of action and reaction, and from rebirth.

Purushartha

Hinduism developed a doctrine that life has different goals according to a person's stage of life and position. These goals became codified in the 'goals of a person' or 'human goals', the purusharthas, especially in sacred texts about dharma called 'dharma shastras' of which the 'Laws of Manu' is the most famous. In these texts three goals of life are expressed, namely virtuous living or dharma, profit or worldly success, and pleasure, especially sexual pleasure as a married householder and more broadly aesthetic pleasure. A fourth goal of liberation (*moksha*) was added at a later date. The purusharthas express an understanding of human nature, that people have different desires and purposes which are all legitimate in their context.

Over the centuries there has been discussion about which goal was most important. Towards the end of the Mahabharata (Shantiparvan 12.167) there is a discussion about the relative importance of the three goals of dharma, profit and pleasure between the Pandava brothers and the wise sage Vidura. Vidura claims that dharma is most important because through it the sages enter the absolute reality, on dharma the universe rests, and through dharma wealth is acquired. One of the brothers, Arjuna, disagrees, claiming that dharma and pleasure rest on profit. Another brother, Bhima, argues for pleasure or desire being the most important goal, as only through desire have the sages attained liberation. This discussion recognises the complexity and varied nature of human purposes and meanings in life.

Brahman

Brahman is a Sanskrit word which refers to a transcendent power beyond the universe. As such, it is sometimes translated as 'God' although the two concepts are not identical. Brahman is the power which upholds and supports everything. According to some Hindus this power is identified with the self (*atman*) while others regard it as distinct from the self. Most Hindus agree that Brahman pervades everything although they do not worship Brahman. Some Hindus regard a particular deity or deities as manifestations of Brahman.

God

Most Hindus believe in God but what this means varies in different traditions. The Sanskrit words *Bhagavan* and *Ishvaramean* 'Lord' or 'God' and indicate an absolute reality who creates, sustains and destroys the universe over and over again. It is too simplistic to define Hinduism as belief in many gods or 'polytheism'. Most Hindus believe in a Supreme God, whose qualities and forms are represented by the multitude of deities which emanate from him. God, being unlimited, can have unlimited forms and expressions.

God can be approached in a number of ways and a devoted person can relate to God as a majestic king, as a parent figure, as a friend, as a child, as a beautiful woman, or even as a ferocious Goddess. Each person can relate to God in a particular form, the *ishta devata* or desired form of God. Thus, one person might be drawn towards Shiva, another towards Krishna, and another towards Kali. Many Hindus believe that all the different deities are aspects of a single, transcendent power.

In the history of Hinduism, God is conceptualised in different ways, as an all knowing and all pervading spirit, as the creator and force within all beings, their 'inner controller' (*antaryamin*) and as wholly transcendent. There are two main ideas about Bhagavan or Ishvara:

1. Bhagavan is an impersonal energy. Ultimately God is beyond language and anything that can be said about God cannot capture the reality. Followers of the Advaita Vedanta tradition (based on the teachings of Adi Shankara) maintain that the

soul and God are ultimately identical and liberation is achieved once this has been realised. This teaching is called non-dualism or advaita because it claims there is no distinction between the soul and the ultimate reality.

2. Bhagavan is a person. God can be understood as a supreme person with qualities of love and compassion towards creatures. On this theistic view the soul remains distinct from the Lord even in liberation. The supreme Lord expresses himself through the many gods and goddesses. The theologian Ramanuja (also in the wider Vedanta tradition as Shankara) makes a distinction between the essence of God and his energies. We can know the energies of God but not his essence. Devotion (*bhakti*) is the best way to understand God in this teaching.

For convenience Hindus are often classified into the three most popular Hindu denominations, called *paramparas* in Sanskrit. These paramparas are defined by their attraction to a particular form of God (called *ishta* or *devata*):

- Vaishnavas focus on **Vishnu** and his incarnations (*avatara*, avatars). The Vaishnavas believe that God incarnates into the world in different forms such as Krishna and Rama in order to restore dharma. This is considered to be the most popular Hindu denomination.
- Shaivas focus on **Shiva**, particularly in his form of the linga although other forms such as the dancing Shiva are also worshipped. The Shaiva Siddhanta tradition believes that Shiva performs five acts of creation, maintenance, destruction, concealing himself, revealing himself through grace.
- Shaktas focus on the Goddess in her gentle forms such as **Lakshmi**, Parvati, and Sarasvati, or in her ferocious forms such as Durga and Kali.

Guru

The terms *guru* and *acharya* refer to a teacher or master of a tradition. The basic meaning is of a teacher who teaches through example and conveys knowledge and wisdom to his disciples. The disciple in turn might become a teacher and so the lineage continues through the generations. One story that captures the spirit of the teacher is that a mother asks the teacher to stop her son eating sugar for he eats too much of it. The master tells her to come back in a week. She returns and he tells the child to do as his mother says and the child obeys. Asked by the mother why he delayed for a week, he replied 'a week ago I had not stopped eating sugar!'

Gurus are generally very highly revered and can become the focus of devotion (*bhakti*) in some traditions. A fundamentally important teaching is that spiritual understanding is conveyed from teacher to disciple through a lineage and when one guru passes away he or she is usually replaced by a successor. One guru could have more than one successor which leads to a multiplication of traditions.

Who is Brahma?

Brahma is the first god in the Hindu triumvirate, or trimurti. The triumvirate consists of three gods who are responsible for the creation, upkeep and destruction of the world.

The other two gods are **Vishnu** and **Shiva**.

Vishnu is the preserver of the universe, while Shiva's role is to destroy it in order to re-create.

Brahma's job was creation of the world and all creatures. His name should not be confused with **Brahman**, who is the supreme God force present within all things.

Brahma is the least worshipped god in Hinduism today. There are only two temples in the whole of India devoted to him, compared with the many thousands devoted to the other two.

What does Brahma look like?

Brahma has four heads and it is believed that from these heads came the four **Vedas** (the most ancient religious texts for Hindus). Some also believe that the **caste system**, or four varnas, came from different part of Brahma's body.

He has four arms and is usually depicted with a beard.

Brahma's consort is Saraswati, goddess of knowledge.

Why is Brahma not worshipped so much?

There are a number of stories in the Hindu mythology which point to why he is rarely worshipped. These are two of them. The first view is that Brahma created a woman in order to aid him with his job of creation. She was called Shatarupa. She was so beautiful that Brahma became infatuated with her, and gazed at her wherever she went. This caused her extreme embarrassment and Shatarupa tried to turn from his gaze.

But in every direction she moved, Brahma sprouted a head until he had developed four. Finally, Shatarupa grew so frustrated that she jumped to try to avoid his gaze. Brahma, in his obsession, sprouted a fifth head on top of all.

It is also said in some sources that Shatarupa kept changing her form. She became every creature on earth to avoid Brahma. He however, changed his form to the male version of whatever she was and thus every animal community in the world was created.



Lord Shiva admonished Brahma for demonstrating behaviour of an incestuous nature and chopped off his fifth head for 'unholy' behaviour. Since Brahma had distracted his mind from the soul and towards the cravings of the flesh, Shiva's curse was that people should not worship Brahma.

As a form of repentance, it is said that Brahma has been continually reciting the four Vedas since this time, one from each of his four heads.

A second view of why Brahma is not worshipped, and a more sympathetic one, is that Brahma's role as the creator is over. It is left to Vishnu to preserve the world and Shiva to continue its path of cosmic reincarnation.

Who is Shiva?

Shiva is the third god in the Hindu triumvirate. The triumvirate consists of three gods who are responsible for the creation, upkeep and destruction of the world. The other two gods are **Brahma** and **Vishnu**.

Brahma is the creator of the universe while Vishnu is the preserver of it. Shiva's role is to destroy the universe in order to re-create it.

Hindus believe his powers of destruction and recreation are used even now to destroy the illusions and imperfections of this world, paving the way for beneficial change. According to Hindu belief, this destruction is not arbitrary, but constructive. Shiva is therefore seen as the source of both good and evil and is regarded as the one who combines many contradictory elements.

Shiva is known to have untamed passion, which leads him to extremes in behaviour. Sometimes he is an ascetic, abstaining from all worldly pleasures. At others he is a hedonist.

It is Shiva's relationship with his wife, Parvati which brings him balance. Their union allows him to be an ascetic and a lover, but within the bounds of marriage.

Hindus who worship Shiva as their primary god are members of the Shaivism sect.

What does Shiva look like?

In his representations as a man, Shiva always has a blue face and throat. Strictly speaking his body is white, but images often show him with a blue body too.

Shiva is represented with the following features:

- A third eye
 - The extra eye represents the wisdom and insight that Shiva has. It is also believed to be the source of his untamed energy. On one occasion, when Shiva was distracted in the midst of worship by the love god, Kama, Shiva opened his third eye in anger. Kama was consumed by the fire that poured forth, and only returned to life when Parvati intervened.
- A cobra necklace
 - This signifies Shiva's power over the most dangerous creatures in the world. Some traditions also say that the snake represents Shiva's power of destruction and recreation. The snake sheds its skin to make way for new, smooth skin.
- The vibhuti
 - The vibhuti are three lines drawn horizontally across the forehead in white ash. They represent Shiva's all-pervading nature, his superhuman power and wealth. Also, they cover up his powerful third eye. Members of Shaivism often draw vibhuti lines across their forehead.
- The trident
 - The three-pronged trident represents the three functions of the Hindu triumvirate.



While other gods are depicted in lavish surroundings, Shiva is dressed in simple animal skin and in austere settings, usually in a yogic position. Parvati, whenever she is present, is always at the side of Shiva. Their relationship is one of equality. Even though Shiva is the destroyer, he is usually represented as smiling and tranquil.

Who is he linked with?

Shiva's consort is Devi, the Mother-goddess. Devi has taken on many forms in the past, including Kali, the goddess of death, and Sati, the goddess of marital felicity. Her best known incarnation is Parvati, Shiva's eternal wife.

Hindus believe Shiva and Parvati live in the Kailash mountains in the Himalayas.

Lord of the dance

Dance is an important art form in India, and Shiva is believed to be the master of it. He is often called the Lord of Dance.

The rhythm of dance is a metaphor for the balance in the universe which Shiva is believed to hold so masterfully.

His most important dance is the Tandav. This is the cosmic dance of death, which he performs at the end of an age, to destroy the universe.

According to one Hindu legend, Shiva almost signalled the end of this universe by performing this dangerous dance before its time. This is the story.

One day, the father of the goddess Sati decided to hold a prayer ceremony. At this prayer ceremony, all the gods would be invited and offerings would be made to them.

But Shiva had married Sati against the wishes of her father and he was not invited. Sati was deeply offended on behalf of her husband.

In anger, Sati prayed intensely and jumped into the sacred fire that was burning on the day of the ceremony.

During this time, Shiva had been in the midst of deep meditation. But when Sati jumped into the fire, he awoke in great anger, realising what his wife had done.

The story becomes less certain at this point, but it is believed that Shiva started the cosmic dance of death. The whole universe was about to be destroyed before it was time.

The gods who were present at the prayer ceremony were very concerned. In order to pacify him, they scattered the ashes of Sati over him. This did the trick. He calmed down and did not complete the dance. But he went into meditation for many years, deeply upset over the death of his wife, ignoring all his godly duties.

It was not until Sati was reborn as Parvati that Shiva finally came out of meditation. Through her love and patience, she taught him about family life and the importance of moderation.

Shiva and Parvati are held up as the perfect example of marital bliss by many Hindus, and one is rarely depicted without the other.

Lakshmi

Lakshmi is the consort of the god **Vishnu**. She is one of the most popular goddesses of Hindu mythology and is known as the goddess of wealth and purity.

What does Lakshmi look like?

Lakshmi is commonly portrayed as a beautiful woman with four arms, standing on a lotus flower. There is usually one, or sometimes two elephants behind her, anointing her with water. She is often depicted sitting beneath Vishnu, massaging his feet.

The rebirth of Lakshmi

One of the most compelling stories in Hindu mythology is that of the Churning of the Milky Ocean. It is the story of the gods versus the demons and their fight to gain immortality. It also tells of the rebirth of Lakshmi.

Indra, the warrior god, was given the responsibility of protecting the world against the demons. He had protected it successfully for many years, and the goddess Lakshmi's presence had made him sure of success.

One day, a wise sage offered Indra a garland of sacred flowers. In his arrogance, Indra threw the flowers to the floor. According to Hindu belief, this display of arrogance upset Lakshmi, who left the world of the gods and entered into the Milky Ocean.

Without her, the gods were no longer blessed with success or fortune.

The world became darker, people became greedy, and no offerings were made to the gods. The gods began to lose their power and the asuras (demons) took control.

Indra asked Vishnu what should be done. He told Indra that the gods would need to

churn the Milky Ocean to regain

Lakshmi and her blessings. He then told them the Ocean held other treasures which would also help them. This included the elixir of life, a potion bestowing immortality, which would enable them to defeat the demons.

The story of the Churning of the Ocean tells of how the gods worked together to churn the ocean. They churned for many years, but it was 1,000 years before anything rose to the surface.

Finally, the treasures began to rise to the surface. Among them, a beautiful woman standing on a lotus flower. This was Lakshmi, who had returned to the world. With her presence, the gods eventually defeated the demons and chased them out of the world.

This story highlights the good fortune and success that Lakshmi bestows upon those who work hard and seek help sincerely. It also demonstrates that during times of success, one must never become complacent or

arrogant, as success has a way of getting away from people.

Worshipping Lakshmi

Hindus believe that anybody who worships Lakshmi sincerely, and not in greed, will be blessed with fortune and success. It is said that Lakshmi resides in places of hard work, virtue and bravery, but leaves whenever these qualities are not apparent any more.



Lakshmi is particularly worshipped during the festival of **Diwali**. This festival commemorates the epic story, Ramayana.

Ramayana is the legend of Lord Rama's battle with the demon Ravana, in which Lakshmi features.

In the story of Ramayana, Sita is married to Lord Rama. Hindus believe Sita is an incarnation of Lakshmi. The story tells us that Rama had been cast out of his rightful kingdom, and had gone to live in a forest with his wife and brother.

The battle between Rama and the demon Ravana begins when Ravana abducts Sita from the forest. The epic follows the story of Rama defeating the demon, and his eventual return to his kingdom.

As the three heroes, Rama, his brother Lakshman and Sita, returned home, people lit candles to guide their way in the dark. In honour of this, on the second day of Diwali people light candles in their homes to guide Lakshmi, in the hope that she will bestow good fortune on their home for the coming year.

After worshipping Lakshmi on Diwali, many Hindus gamble and spend profusely, believing that Lakshmi has bestowed good fortune upon them.

In addition to this, two days before Diwali, a festival called Dhantares is celebrated to seek more blessings from her. During this time Hindus buy gold and silver and start new business ventures.

Hindus **worship** Lakshmi at home as well as in the temple. Friday is believed to be the most auspicious day for her worship.

Who is Vishnu?

Vishnu is the second god in the Hindu triumvirate (or *Trimurti*). The triumvirate consists of three gods who are responsible for the creation, upkeep and destruction of the world. The other two gods are **Brahma** and **Shiva**.

Brahma is the creator of the universe and Shiva is the destroyer. Vishnu is the preserver and protector of the universe.

His role is to return to the earth in troubled times and restore the balance of good and evil. So far, he has been incarnated nine times, but Hindus believe that he will be reincarnated one last time close to the end of this world.

What do the ancient texts say about Vishnu?

In the Rig Veda, which is the holiest of the four **Vedas**, Vishnu is mentioned numerous times alongside other gods, such as Indra.

He is particularly associated with light and especially with the Sun. In early texts, Vishnu is not included as one of the original seven solar gods (*Adityas*), but in later texts he is mentioned as leading them.

From this time, Vishnu appears to have gained more prominence, and by the time of the Brahmanas (commentaries of the Vedas), he is regarded as the most important of all gods.

Two of Vishnu's incarnations, Rama and Krishna, are also the subject of the epic stories Ramayana and Mahabharata, respectively.

What does Vishnu look like?

Vishnu is represented with a human body, often with blue coloured skin and with four arms. His hands always carry four objects in them, representing the things he is responsible for. The objects symbolise many more meanings than are presented here:

- The conch: the sound this produces 'Om', represents the primeval sound of creation
- The chakra, or discus: symbolises the mind
- The lotus flower: an example of glorious existence and liberation
- The mace: represents mental and physical strength

Vishnu is usually represented in two positions.

- Standing upright on a lotus flower with **Lakshmi**, his consort, close by him
- Reclining on the coils of a serpent, with Lakshmi massaging his feet. They are surrounded by the Milky Ocean.

What are Vishnu's incarnations?

Vishnu has appeared in various incarnations nine times on this earth, with the tenth predicted.

1. Matsya (fish)
 - Some Hindus believe that this is similar to the biblical representation of Noah
2. Kurma (turtle)
 - Churning of the Ocean
3. Varaha (pig/boar)
 - In this avatar, Vishnu recovered the stolen Vedas
4. Narasimha (half lion, half man)
 - Vishnu managed to vanquish a demon who had gained immunity from attacks from man, beast or god
5. Vamana (dwarf sage with the ability to grow)
 - In this story, the evil demon Bali had taken over the earth and had pushed all of the gods from the heavens as well. Vishnu took the form of a dwarf, who tricked Bali into giving him as much of Bali's



empire as he could cover in three steps. Vishnu as Vamana grew so large that with one step he had covered the earth, with the second the heavens, thus returning the ownership to the gods.

6. Parasurama (fierce man/hunter)
 - Vishnu rids the earth of irreligious and sinful monarchs
7. Rama (greatest warrior/ideal man)
 - As Rama, he kills the demon King Ravana, who abducted his wife Sita
8. Krishna (mentally advanced man)
 - Krishna is the hero of the Mahabharata, an epic poem. He also delivered his famous message, known as the Baghavad Gita.
9. **Buddha** (the all knowing one)
 - who appeared in the 5th century BCE. In some traditions, Balarama replaces Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu.
10. Kalki
 - Expected towards the end of this present age of decline, as a person on earth, seated on a white horse.

Diwali

Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, is the most popular of all the festivals from South Asia. It is also an occasion for celebration by **Jains** and **Sikhs**.

The festival of Diwali extends over five days. Because of the lights, fireworks and sweets involved, it's a great favourite with children.

The festival celebrates the victory of good over evil, light over darkness and knowledge over ignorance, although the actual legends that go with the festival are different in different parts of India.

Mahashivratri

Mahashivratri (also known as Shivaratri) is a Hindu festival dedicated to **Shiva**, who destroys the universe, one of the deities of the Hindu Trinity.

Night and day

While most Hindu festivals are celebrated during the day, Mahashivratri is celebrated during the night and day that come just before the new moon. Each new moon is dedicated to Shiva, but Mahashivratri is especially important because it is the night when he danced the 'Tandav', his cosmic dance.

It also celebrates the wedding of Shiva and Sati, the mother divine. Night represents evil, injustice, ignorance, sin, violence, and misfortune.

Tradition says that Shiva, like his symbol the new moon, appeared in order to save the world from darkness and ignorance, before the world entered complete darkness.

Holi

Holi was originally a spring festival of fertility and harvest. Now it also marks some Hindu legends, which provide some of the ingredients for the celebrations.

Holi is an ancient festival which is referred to in the 7th century Sanskrit drama, *Ratnavali*.

“Witness the beauty of the great cupid festival which excites curiosity as the townsfolk are dancing at the touch of brownish water thrown from squirt-guns.

They are seized by pretty women while all along the roads the air is filled with singing and drum-beating. Everything is coloured yellowish red and rendered dusty by the heaps of scented powder blown all over.”

Ratnavali, 7th century drama

The Legend of Prahalad and Holika

This is the main Holi legend. Holika was a female demon, and the sister of Hiranyakashyap, the demon king. Hiranyakashyap considered himself ruler of the Universe, and higher than all the gods.

Prahalad was the king's son. His father hated him because Prahalad was a faithful devotee of the god **Vishnu**.

One day the king asked him "Who is the greatest, God or I?"

"God is," said the son, "you are only a king."

The king was furious and decided to murder his son.

But the king's attempts at murder didn't work too well. Prahalad survived being thrown over a cliff, being trampled by elephants, bitten by snakes, and attacked by soldiers.



So the king asked his sister, Holika, to kill the boy.

Holika seized Prahalad and sat in the middle of a fire with the boy on her lap.

Holika had been given a magic power by the gods that made her immune to fire, so she thought this was a pretty good plan, and Prahalad would burn to death while she remained cool.

But it's never wise to take gods' gifts for granted! Because Holika was using her gift to do something evil, her power vanished and she was burned to ashes. Prahalad stayed true to his God, Vishnu, and sat praying in the lap of his demon aunt. Vishnu protected him, and Prahalad survived.

Shortly afterwards, Vishnu killed King Hiranyakashyap and Prahalad ruled as a wise king in his father's place.

The moral of the story is that good always wins over evil, and those who seek to torment the faithful will be destroyed.

To celebrate the story, large bonfires are burned during Holi. In many parts of India, a dummy of Holika is burned on the fire.

A colourful celebration

Holi is the Hindu festival that welcomes the Spring and celebrates the new life and energy of the season. Although Holi has religious roots, not much religious activity is involved in its celebration.



Holi is the most energetic Indian festival, filled with fun and good humour; even the strict rules of separation between castes are abandoned.

Holi is also called 'The Festival of Colours', and people celebrate the festival by smearing each other with paint, and throwing coloured powder and dye around in an atmosphere of great good humour.

Holi in Brief

- A spring festival, usually celebrated in March
- Holi also celebrates **Krishna**, and the legend of Holika and Prahalad
- Holi is particularly celebrated in North India
- Although Holi has religious roots there are few religious things to do
- Distinctions of caste, class, age, and gender are suspended during Holi
- A very exuberant festival, with dancing, singing, and throwing of paint
- Holi features gender rivalry, with contests between men and women, and public flirting

- Bonfires are lit during Holi, and food offerings are roasted
- The festival is officially celebrated on the day after full moon during the month of Phalunga, which falls in February-March

During the evening of the full moon, bonfires are lit in the streets.

These bonfires not only purify the air of evil spirits, but mark the story of Holika and Prahalad.

The next day, people of all ages go into the streets for jollifications and paint-throwing.

Hindu scripture

The Vedas

These are the most ancient religious texts which define truth for Hindus.

They got their present form between 1200-200 BCE and were introduced to India by the Aryans.

Hindus believe that the texts were received by scholars direct from God and passed on to the next generations by word of mouth.

Vedic texts are sometimes called *shruti*, which means hearing. For hundreds, maybe even thousands of years, the texts were passed on orally.

Contents of the Vedas

The Vedas are made up of four compositions, and each veda in turn has four parts which are arranged chronologically.

- **The Samhitas** are the most ancient part of the Vedas, consisting of hymns of praise to God.
- **The Brahmanas** are rituals and prayers to guide the priests in their duties.
- **The Aranyakas** concern worship and meditation.
- **The Upanishads** consist of the mystical and philosophical teachings of Hinduism.

The Samhitas

- **Rig-Veda Samhita** (c. 1200 BCE) is the oldest of the four vedas and consists of 1028 hymns praising the ancient gods.
- **Yajur-Veda Samhita** is used as a handbook by priests performing the vedic sacrifices.
- **Sama-Veda Samhita** consists of chants and tunes for singing at the sacrifices.

- **Atharva-Veda** Samhita (c. 900 BCE) preserves many traditions which pre-date the Aryan influence and consists of spells, charms and magical formulae.

The Upanishads

The Upanishads were so called because they were taught to those who sat down beside their teachers. (upa=near, ni=down, shad=sit).

These texts developed from the Vedic tradition, but largely reshaped Hinduism by providing believers with philosophical knowledge.

The major Upanishads were largely composed between 800-200 BCE and are partly prose, partly verse.

Later Upanishads continued to be composed right down to the 16th century. Originally they were in oral form.

The early Upanishads are concerned with understanding the sacrificial rites.

Central to the Upanishads is the concept of brahman; the sacred power which informs reality.

Whilst the priests (brahmins) had previously been the ones who, through ritual and sacrifice, had restricted access to the divine, now the knowledge of the universe was open to those of the high and middle castes willing to learn from a teacher.

Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita, or "Song of the Lord" is part of the sixth book of the Mahabharata, the world's longest poem.

Composed between 500 BCE and 100 CE, the Mahabharata is an account of the wars of the house of Bharata.

It is one of the most popular Hindu texts and is known as a smriti text (the remembered tradition). This is considered by some to be of less importance than shruti (the heard text, such as the Vedas). It has, nevertheless, an important place within the Hindu tradition.

The Bhagavad Gita takes the form of a dialogue between prince Arjuna and **Krishna**, his charioteer.

Arjuna is a warrior, about to join his brothers in a war between two branches of a royal family which would involve killing many of his friends and relatives.

He wants to withdraw from the battle but Krishna teaches him that he, Arjuna,

must do his duty in accordance with his class and he argues that death does not destroy the soul.

Krishna points out that knowledge, work and devotion are all paths to salvation and that the central value in life is that of loyalty to God.

The Ramayana

Composed in the same period, the Ramayana is one of India's best known tales.

It tells the story of Prince **Rama** who was sent into exile in the forest with his wife, **Sita**, and his brother, Lakshmana.

Sita was abducted by the evil demon Ravana but ultimately rescued by Prince Rama with the help of the Monkey God, Hanuman.

The story is written in 24,000 couplets.

The symbolism of the story has been widely interpreted but basically is the story of good overcoming evil. Many people have said that it is a story about **dharma** or duty.

Worship

Puja

Hindu worship, or puja, involves images (murtis), prayers (mantras) and diagrams of the universe (yantras).

Central to Hindu worship is the image, or icon, which can be worshipped either at home or in the temple.

Individual rather than communal

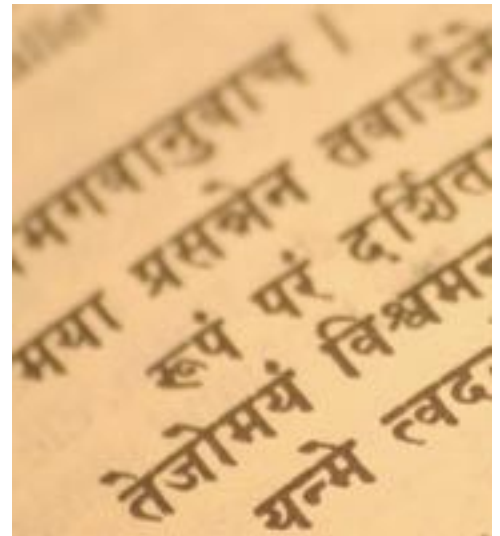
Hindu worship is primarily an individual act rather than a communal one, as it involves making personal offerings to the deity.

Worshippers repeat the names of their favourite gods and goddesses, and repeat mantras. Water, fruit, flowers and incense are offered to god.

Worship at home

The majority of Hindu homes have a shrine where offerings are made and prayers are said.

A shrine can be anything: a room, a small altar or simply pictures or statues of the deity.



Family members often worship together. Rituals should strictly speaking be performed three times a day. Some Hindus, but not all, worship wearing the sacred thread (over the left shoulder and hanging to the right hip). This is cotton for the Brahmin (priest), hemp for the Kshatriya (ruler) and wool for the vaishya (merchants).

Temple worship



At a Hindu temple, different parts of the building have a different spiritual or symbolic meaning.

- The central shrine is the heart of the worshipper
- The tower represents the flight of the spirit to heaven
- A priest may read, or more usually recite, the Vedas to the assembled worshippers, but any "twice-born" Hindu can perform the reading of prayers and mantras

Religious rites

Hindu religious rites are classified into three categories:

- Nitya
 - Nitya rituals are performed daily and consist in offerings made at the home shrine or performing puja to the family deities.
- Naimittika
 - Naimittika rituals are important but only occur at certain times during the year, such as celebrations of the festivals, thanksgiving and so on.
- Kamya
 - Kamya are rituals which are "optional" but highly desirable. Pilgrimage is one such.

Worship and pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is an important aspect of Hinduism. It's an undertaking to see and be seen by the deity.

Popular pilgrimage places are rivers, but temples, mountains, and other sacred sites in India are also destinations for pilgrimages, as sites where the gods may have appeared or become manifest in the world.

Kumbh Mela

Once every 12 years, up to 10 million people share in ritual bathing at the Kumbh Mela festival at Allahabad where the waters of the Ganges and Jumna combine. Hindus from all walks of life gather there for ritual bathing, believing that their sins will be washed away.

The bathing is followed by spiritual purification and a ceremony which secures the blessings of the deity.

River Ganges

The river Ganges is the holiest river for Hindus.

Varanasi

This city, also known as Benares, is situated on the banks of the Ganges and is one of the most important pilgrimage centres.

It is said to be the home of Lord Shiva where legend has it that his fiery light broke through the earth to reach the heavens. A Hindu who dies at Varanasi and has their ashes scattered on the Ganges is said to have experienced the best death possible.

