



Shree
Jalaram
Mandir, Leicester

Guidebook to
Jalaram Mandir
&
An Overview of
Hinduism



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Welcome to
Shree Jalaram Mandir
Leicester

Jai Jalaram

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History of the Mandir



Jalaram Prarthana Mandal (prayer group or congregation) has grown from a small gathering of like minded elderly ladies who held regular weekly prayers at their houses. Ganagaben Patel, Ratanben Mistry, Ramkuverben Gheewala, Jayaben Parmar and Lalitaben Shantilal Thakkar were amongst the first group of ladies who started the regular satsangs (religious gatherings), singing bhajans (devotional songs) of Jalaram Bapa in the late eighties. The ladies were inspired by Bhanuben Kakad, a devotee of Jalaram Bapa, from Rajkot to consider a permanent place of worship of Jalaram Bapa, where regular 'satsangs and sabhas's (discourses) could be held.

The ladies took up this idea and with faith in their hearts set about collecting donations by chanting Bapa's bhajans (hymns or praise) at various temples and at homes of devotees. The ladies managed to collect £1001 towards a deposit for the purchase of a property on Mere Road and the Murtis.



Not being familiar with the rules and regulations of their adopted country, they sought help from Shantibhai Thakkar, (prominent businessman from Kenya), Chhaganbhai Gosai and also from the Gheewala Family. Donations soon started to pour in. The Mandir was constructed and Bapa's Murti was brought by Bhanuben & Tejash Kakad. Shri Krishnashankar Shastri, a renowned Kathakar of Shreemad Bhagvad Katha (only second to Shri Dongre Maharaj) performed the 'Pran Pratishtha' (Pran meaning Life and Pratistha meaning resting).

The Mandir was officially opened on 17th May 1979 in a terraced property at 197 Mere Road.

The Mandir being the first of its kind dedicated to Sant Jalaram Bapa became very popular and visitors and devotees came to pay homage from throughout the UK. A trust committee was formed to manage the advancement of the Mandir.

Soon the Temple space became too small. It had certain restrictions which did not allow for expansion. A larger corner property at 85 Narborough Road, was acquired from the funds raised by the sale of the original temple and generous donations of devotees. In 1982 Shri Harishankar Shastri performed the Pran Pratishtha. With the successful growth of the temple, the committee registered the Mandir as a charity.

The Mandir thrived under the committee's good management and Bapa's Mandir became renowned throughout the world as Bapa's first Mandir in the western world and was popularly known as 'The Virpur of Europe'. With fame came the need to expand the Mandir even more. Over a period of time as the loans had been repaid and a surplus of approximately £200,000 had been collected through donations, a decision had to be taken whether to have the same temple in the corner terraced property and donate the excess funds to other charities or build a purpose built Mandir. An Annual





General Meeting was called and it was unanimously agreed that the existing Mandir should be knocked down and a new Mandir should be built, which was agreed at a public meeting in 1992.

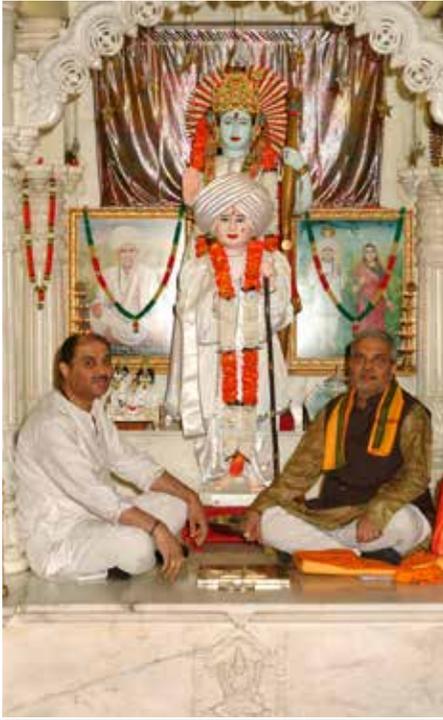
A temporary Mandir was set up at 71 Narborough Road to provide a place of worship for the devotees. On 6th June 1994, Shri Krishnashankar Shastri and Smt Lalitaben Thakkar, (wife of Late Shree Shantilalbhai Thakkar - founder president) performed the Vastu (foundation ceremony) on 85 Narborough Road site.

The mammoth task of overseeing the realisation of the Devotees dream was assigned to Pramodbhai Thakkar and Bhadrashilbhai Trivedi. What followed were months of tireless effort on the part of many dedicated people and eventually the converted house on Narborough Road was transformed into one of the most spectacular examples of spiritual architecture by utilising the specialist skills of painters and craftsman from India, Europe and the UK.

The culmination of all these efforts resulted in the celebration of Jalaram Jayanti (Pujya Bapa's Birth anniversary) on 29th & 30th October 1995, when we were finally happy to bring Bapa's blessing to Leicester.

The entire project took 3½ years from planning to completion at the cost of approximately £1m. The Trustees once again gave personal guarantees for substantial financial loans to complete the construction. The project kept many devoted members away from their families and business activities but Pramodbhai admits that he relished every moment of the process which he believes was spiritually guided by Bapa. In Pramodbhai's words, **"The temple has provided a focus for the community and will continue to provide a fascinating insight into the rich tradition of the Hindu culture."**

Prior to the installation of the murtis, they are traditionally taken on a Rath Yatra (Rath meaning Chariot and Yatra meaning Journey) to introduce them to the neighbourhood. The yatra was accompanied with music and dancers. On the following day the main ceremony of Pran Pratishtha took place. This is the consecration of the murtis, where sacred mantras are chanted, inviting the deity to preside in the murti. From this day forward the murtis are considered to be living presences. During that weekend approximately 15000 people passed through the mandir, and since then regular visitors have visited from all around the world.



Mahendrabhai (Chief Priest) and Rajendrabhai (Priest) have been giving their services since the opening of the new built Mandir in 1995. Their gentle characters, dedication and hard work have added to the charm and attraction of the Mandir.

The Mandir continually supports various charities in the UK and overseas, such as the British Heart Foundation, Cancer Research, and provides equipment to hospitals. In times of disasters around the world, Jalaram Prarthana Mandal actively steps in to provide funds and gives support very generously.

As Hindus we highly respect and honour the cow and in India there are special 'gaushalas' (homes for cows), where cows are looked after and taken great care of. Bapa's Mandir supports such Gaushala's in Jamnagar, India and Nakuru in Kenya.

Pujya Shree Jalaram Bapa

Jalaram was born on the 14th of November 1799 (Vikram Sawant 1856, Kartik Sud 7) in Virpur, Rajkot District, Gujarat. His father, Pradhan Thakkar and mother, Rajbai Thakkar belonged to the Thakkar clan which is a sub group of the Lohana clan.

Jalaram Bapa's father Shree Pradhan worked hard in business and was known for his honesty. His mother Rajbai was a devoted mother to their six children (three boys and three girls) and being deeply religious, spent any free time in providing selfless service to Sadhus (wandering Monks) and Saints. She was once told by Saint Raghuveerdasji, who greatly admired her piety that her second son (Jalaram) would become a famous advocate of devotion, duty and good works.

During his early childhood Jalaram learned the qualities of patience, service, respect and self sacrifice from Rajbai.

During Jalaram's childhood a very significant event took place. An old saint travelling from Ayodhya to Virpur called at the family home and asked Rajbai to bring Jalaram to him. Jalaram came and prostrated at the Sanyasi's feet. The Sanyasi (one who has renounced the world) asked 'do you not recognise me my son?' Jalaram's eyes beamed with recognition as memories of his previous life flooded into his mind. When Jalaram came back to reality the Sanyasi had disappeared from sight. It seemed as if Jalaram had been reminded of his goal in life, and from that day he never stopped chanting the name of Lord Ram. His life began to change direction.



Jalaram initially worked for his father and then later for his uncle Valjibhai. They became concerned about his growing desire to devote himself to God without the ties of family life, business or material possessions and his increasing generosity to Saints and the poor. They both tried to dissuade him from this path saying that he could provide a greater service to many people by following the life of a householder.

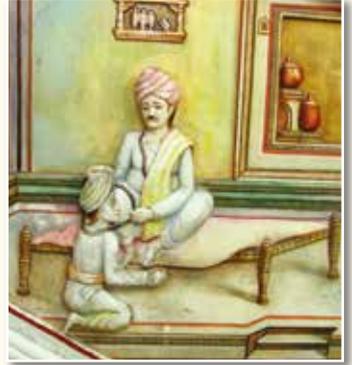
When Jalaram was 14 years old his parents arranged for him to get engaged to Virbai (daughter of Pragjibhai Thakkar). Jalaram did not want to get married but agreed to do so as a sense of duty to his parents. He married at the age of 16 and they had one daughter (Jamnaben). It could not have been known earlier but Virbai was to prove to be a great asset in Jalaram's life and his mission.

Virpur was a place where many Sadhus (wandering monks) would pass through on their pilgrimage to the holy place of Girnar. They would often ask local businesses for food donation. An interesting incident once occurred whilst Jalaram was working in his uncle Valjibhai's shop. It happened that only Valjibhai's shop was open and so all the Sadhus called at the shop. Jalaram was delighted to see so many Sadhus and mendicants asking for charity and he gave away many items of food and even new clothing to

those who appeared in torn clothes. Valjibhai heard of this and went immediately to the shop. He arrived in a furious mood and undertook an inventory of all the goods in the shop. Jalaram felt frightened and started praying to God to save him from his uncle's wrath. Valjibhai found there was no shortage of anything! Thus, instead of taking Jalaram to task his uncle actually complimented him. Jalaram always said that 'God would protect one who was surrendered and who saw God in all beings'.

Jalaram's desire to pursue a life of devotion and service increased. He had a great desire to undertake a pilgrimage to many holy places and obtained the blessing of his parents and uncle to do so. Virbai, was keen to accompany her husband and said 'Jalaram's wishes were her wishes and his work was her work'. The pilgrimage lasted for two years, in which time; Jalaram met many Saints and Sadhus. They returned to Virpur and set up home there.

On returning from pilgrimage Jalaram had a great desire to seek out a Guru. At the age of 18 he approached Bhojalram Bapa to be his Guru and was accepted by him. Bhojalram was a farmer who lived in a village called Fatehpur near Amreli. He was a simple but saintly person who had composed hundreds of bhajans (devotional songs) known popularly in Gujarati as 'Bhoja Bhagat na chabhka'. These bhajans are still sung today. Jalaram's love for his Guru was great and every week he would walk long distances to be with him. He even undertook manual labour to help build a house for him.



Jalaram received his Guru's blessings to set up his Sadavrat (never ending feeding centre) which provided free food to Saints, Sadhus, Fakirs and the needy.

It is believed that even if Jalaram prepared food for a few dozen people, hundreds were fed and no one was turned away. Jalaram strongly believed that this was the Lord's work, and he was carrying out the Lord's wishes.

At around the age of 20 Jalaram acquired great fame due to his saintliness. There are many stories of how his qualities of patience, endurance and love for others were put to the test as well as instances of miracles. He was always steadfast in his thinking and in all circumstances. Everything he did was an offering to God. As his fame spread people would come from far and wide to seek his blessings and guidance. Here are a few stories illustrating Jalaram's qualities.



A tailor from Virpur named Harji had been very ill and



was suffering great pain from some stomach illness. He was unable to work. Harji related his problems to Rudra Patel who suggested that he take a vow in the name of Jala Bhagat (Jalaram). Harji prayed and stated that he would donate five measures of grain if Jala Bhagat would relieve him of his pain. His pain was reduced that very day and within a week the pain had completely gone. Harji fulfilled his vow and gave thanks to Jalaram for curing him. Jalaram said 'No, it is God who cured you, I did nothing. I simply know that we should feed the needy and utter God's name'. This was the first vow made in 'Jala Bhagat's' name and thereafter people referred to him as Jalaram Bapa.

There was a rich Muslim in Virpur called Jamal whose ten year old son was critically ill. Harji (the tailor mentioned in the previous story) suggested to Jamal that he take a vow in the name of Jalaram Bapa. Heeding Harji's advice Jamal said 'Oh Bapa, relieve my son of this illness and I will give forty measures of grain to your Sadavrat'. His son's illness abated that very night. True to his vow Jamal took the cart load of grains to Jalaram and paid him respects declaring 'Jal so Allah' (Jalaram is God). After this Jalaram also became known as 'Jala so Allah'.

On another occasion three Arab Muslims who had been hunting birds passed through Virpur. Jalaram saw them and said 'Please have your meals here'. They said 'but we are Muslims' to which Jalaram replied 'You are welcome here, there is no distinction in caste or religion in the court of God'. The men had their meals but it occurred to them that they were in a Hindu holy place with a bag of dead birds! What should they do? After eating they decided to just leave quietly. Jalaram then approached them and said 'you must be very tired, please stay the night here'. The men felt very embarrassed. Jalaram then touched the bag of dead birds with his staff and said 'Ah, the birds feel suffocated, please free them'. They noticed that birds in their bag (which they had hung on a peg nearby) appeared to be alive. They opened the bag and the birds flew out to a nearby tree. The men were amazed and fell at Jalaram's feet.

There are many such miraculous stories that we could relate, but these few stories illustrate how Jalaram's blessings were freely available to anyone regardless of race, status, caste or creed.

Jalaram and his wife Virbai always sought to earn their own living and did not want to be a burden to anyone. They both laboured very hard in the fields. They would return home each evening carrying a bundle of food grains given as wages. Occasionally a passing bullock cart driver would offer them a lift home but Jalaram would politely say 'why put the dumb animals to such trouble in carrying us, we will walk the distance home'.

Should the grain for the Sadavrat run out, Virbai would



happily sell her gold ornaments (given at the time of marriage) to buy grain so that everyone could be fed.

At one time Jalaram decided to visit two sisters who lived in Rajkot. They were renowned for doing noble work and for serving sadhus. Lala Bhagat from Saila also visited them at the same time. The sisters welcomed both of them warmly and they all sang bhajans (devotional songs) together till late. In the early morning the sisters took their cows to graze in the fields and had intention of grinding the grain when they returned.



Jalaram felt that they would be very tired after the day's work in the fields and so he decided to help the sisters by grinding the cereals himself. As he did the grinding he chanted the name of God. When the sisters returned they found that all the grinding work had been completed. They fell at Jalaram's feet saying that 'only a saint with no trace of pride or ego could do such work'

One day in 1830 CE an old Sadhu visited Jalaram, who then invited him for a meal. The old Sadhu complained that now he was old and infirm he needed someone to look after him. He asked Jalaram to give him his wife to undertake this task. After discussion both Jalaram and Virbai willingly agreed to the Sadhu's request. This was truly a great sacrifice for both Jalaram and Virbai as they had worked so closely together all their married life in selfless service. Virbai left with the old Sadhu.

on his journey. On their journey the two travellers paused for a while and the old Sadhu gave Virbai his stick (dhand) and bag (jholi) to hold. The Sadhu then disappeared! At the same time a voice came to Jalaram in Virpur saying that it was Lord Rama himself who had appeared as the Sadhu to see if Jalaram was as good as people had said he was. Jalaram had proved that he was and so he could now go and fetch his wife! The stick and bag are still on display in the Jalaram Ashram at Virpur.



On 18th November 1878 CE (Vikram Sawant 1935 Kartik Vad 9) Virbai left her body
On 23rd February 1881 CE (Vikram Sawant 1937 Maha Vad 10) Jalaram Bapa left his body

Jalaram left a great legacy of inspiration and selfless service to mankind. There are now many Jalaram Mandirs throughout India and across the world where many people still seek solace and blessings from him. Virpur has become an important pilgrimage centre in India. His Sadavrat still continues to feed people regardless of caste or creed. Inspired by Jalaram's life and teachings, hospitals, schools and other centres have been built in his name to provide service to the people of Virpur.

Murtis in the Mandir

Once the Pran Pratishtha ceremony is completed each Murti is regarded as the living presence of that deity. The Poojari (Priest) cares for Murtis as he would care for a loved one. Every day in the morning he performs the ritual of waking up the Gods by gently ringing the bells, and offering morning prayers. Then he bathes and dresses the Murtis, performs Aarti (offering of light) and then offers prasad (food). Offerings of prasad, flowers and Aarti takes place at various times throughout day.



Jalaram Bapa



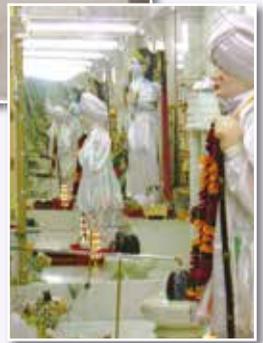
Lord Vishnu reclining on the powerful coiled serpent, Seshanag which represents the sleeping universe, Lord Brahma sits on a lotus, the stem of which is attached to Vishnu's navel, Goddess Lakshmi his consort is seen massaging his feet, and Garuda the vehicle of Lord Vishnu is seen in prayerful attitude.



Lord Ganesh



Lord Hanuman



Jalaram Baba with Lord Rama behind him, and small murties of Radha & Krishna.

Picture on left - Puja Bhojram Bapa, (Jalaram Bapa's Guru)

Picture on right - Jalaram Bapa and his wife Virbai

Shiv Lingam is the formless form of Lord Shiva, with a coiled cobra whose hood protects the Lingam

Nandi the bull, Lord Shiva's vehicle is seen quietly meditating before the ling.

Goddess Parvati, Shiva's consort is seen watching over the Lingam



Goddess Amba

Stories Depicted on the Ceiling



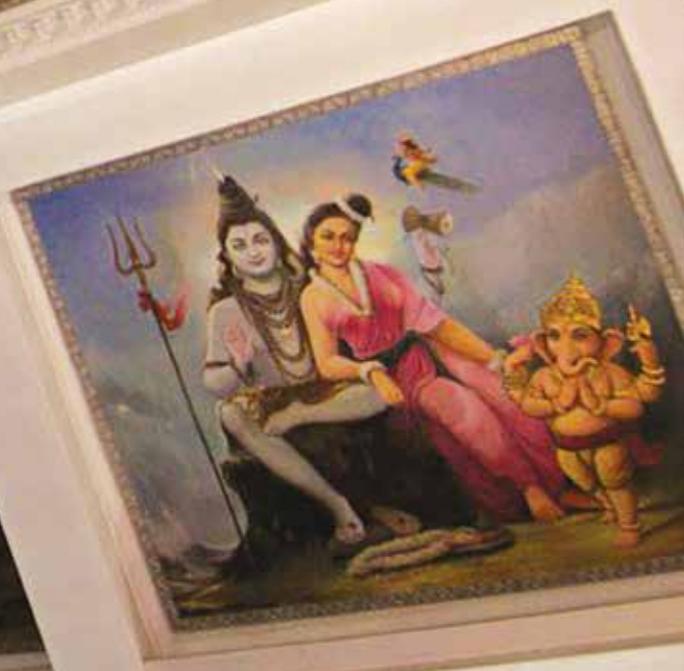
Rama Darbar, (the royal court of King Rama), with Queen Sita, Rama's three brothers, (Bharat, Lakshman, and Shatrugna) and Hanuman his loyal devotee.



Shabri

In the Ramayan there is a story about the faith of a simple tribal woman called Shabri. In the story she gets an inspiration that Rama will come to visit her and so with great excitement she tells everyone. As she grows old she maintains her faith that Rama will come. One day Rama visits her and in her excitement she has a little taste of each fruit she is going to offer him to ensure that they are sweet and not sour. Knowing that she had been waiting for him for so many years Rama willingly accepts the half eaten fruits from her. This story illustrates that when we pray for the darshan (sight) of God, with the great patience and faith that Shabri demonstrated, God will respond.







Lord Krishna and Yashoda

Here Krishna exhibits his playfulness and mischievous nature. Mother Yashoda is seen chasing Krishna (maybe after he has committed some mischief). This illustrates that God allows us to have a loving and playful relationship with Him. Many Hindu mothers find great joy in being able to relate to God in such human terms. One can see a great similarity with how Christians relate to the baby Jesus at Christmas time when celebrating his birth.



Lord Krishna at Gurukul

Krishna studied in Guru Sandipani Rushi's Ashram. He had to fulfil his duties just like any other student and was not treated any differently or in any special way. This illustration from Krishna's life inspires us to be responsible for fulfilling our duties in life.



Kans Vadh

Kans was the evil and demonic king of Mathura who had persecuted his people and killed many innocent children. At the age of 11 Krishna killed Kans in a fight. This story symbolises that even the strongest and most powerful tyrant can be overcome by the Divine.



Raas Lila

Young Krishna plays his flute in the forests of Vrindavan. The Gopis (cowherd girls) dance with him and are intoxicated with love for him. Krishna's flute represents the call of the Divine to human souls and as the souls respond they become enraptured by divine ecstasy. The Gopis represent the souls that are awakened to the call of the Divine.



Mahabharat war and the origin of the Bhagavad Gita

This scene from the Mahabharata takes place on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Krishna is Prince Arjuna's charioteer, and as they survey the scene Krishna expounds his teachings to a very despondent Arjuna. These teachings are recorded in the Bhagavad Gita (Song of God). It is often said that there is a great symbolism in this scene with the battlefield representing the 'field of life', the chariot, the human body, and the horses drawing the chariot representing the 5 senses. Arjuna is seen as the soul within the body. Krishna is God within man freely giving his teachings to the soul when it is challenged by the 'battle of life' and so is ready to listen.



Lord Shiva, his consort Parvati
& their son Lord Ganesh



The Hindu traditions split the primordial divine energies into a male and female, Shiva and Shakti. Nothing can exist without the existence of these two opposing but complementary forces. Here are four most celebrated goddesses in Hinduism.

- Amba Mata - also known as Durga or Shakti, creative feminine energy of the divine,
- Laxmi Mata - Goddess of abundance of spiritual and material wealth,
- Saraswati Mata - Goddess of Wisdom,
- Gayatri Mata - personification of the Gayatri mantra.



Unity of Religions

Hinduism accepts many paths to God or Truth and so recognises that other religions also hold some validity. The circular picture illustrates this concept.

'Let noble thoughts come to us from every direction' (Rig Veda, Book 1, Hymn 89, verse 1)

'To him who knows God simply as One... In Him all deities become the One alone' (Atharva Veda, Book 13, hymn 4, verse 15)

'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' 'The world is one family' (Maha Upanishad)

'Loka Samasha Sukhino Bhavantu' – 'may all beings be happy' (Sanskrit prayer)

Hinduism – An Overview



Some facts:

Hinduism is the third largest religion in the world and there are approximately 1 billion Hindus worldwide. It is the oldest living religion. The term Hindu was first coined by Persian invaders to refer to the people and religious practices of the people of the Indus River. Hinduism is referred to as Sanatana Dharma in ancient texts. Sanatana means 'eternal', the word Dharma defies an exact English translation, nearest could be interpreted as 'values of life that sustain us'. So you can say that Sanatana Dharma is that religion that is based on eternal values of life and has countless ways of representing itself over and over again as it continues to adapt itself to ever changing values.

Hinduism was not founded by one particular historical individual. It has no one definitive holy book although it has many highly revered and sacred texts and sages. Hinduism is and always has been both flexible and pluralistic. It has adherents that encompass a broad range of practices, philosophies and beliefs from the highly orthodox practitioners of complex ritual to the semi naked renunciant yogis in the Himalayas, at the same time it includes all those people and beliefs in between. It could be accurately defined as a family of religions within itself.

Historical Development and Major Texts:

Hinduism is around 5,000 years old although archaeological work may reveal an earlier date. The original tradition was an oral tradition with the earliest writings appearing as the Four Vedas around 1,700 BCE.

The Vedas (knowledge) are the root of what we call Hinduism and are described as 'shruti' (that which is heard) and so is considered divine revelation, heard or intuited by the Rishis (sages). There are Four Vedas namely Rig Ved, Yajur Ved, Sama Ved and Atharva Ved and they variously consist of hymns, prayers and ritual instruction, with a section at the end of each Veda known as **Upanishads** ('something below the surface') By use of stories, intuitive spiritual insight and analytical thinking, ideas of the most lofty status are developed. The Upanishads comprise of the highly intellectual and philosophical content and they serve as the very foundation of Hindu



philosophy. They are renowned for presenting us with the concept of Brahman (not to be confused with Brahma) the One changeless Truth or Reality that cannot be defined or described by the intellect.

Another extensive body of texts referred to as 'smriti' (recollection or remembered) emerged around 500 BCE. Smriti literature is extremely rich and includes **Dharma Shastra** (rules of conduct) the two major epics (called the **Ramayana** and **Mahabharata**), and **Puranas** ('old stories' - of the Gods or various forms of God). They contain thousands of stories that drive home and explain (much more simply than the Upanishads) the basic philosophy, principles and values of Hindu thought. Their influence on the Hindu psyche remains very strong even in the modern world. This group of texts have been referred to as 'the Vedas presented in the terms of the ordinary man'.

Many schools of thought accept the Vedas as the ultimate authority. Some schools of philosophy and sects reject the authority of the Vedas but are still regarded as part of the Hindu fold and have made valuable contributions to the overall development of Hinduism.

It is worth looking at the two epics in a little more detail. The Ramayana and Mahabharata are considered as Itihasas (historical sagas).

The Ramayana

Literally means 'the abode of Rama' and was written by the sage Valmiki. It is the smaller of the two Hindu epics and relates the story of Rama who is an incarnation of God. It comprises of 24,000 stanzas in 9 chapters or books. The books of the epic describe the life of Rama from his childhood through his training to be the future king. Then next part follows his exile in the forest with all its trials and tribulations. Next comes the war with the demonic king Ravana and finally his triumphant return to his kingdom (and subsequent developments).

The many aspects of the stories within the text demonstrate the need to uphold dharma (right living). Rama led an ideal life and fulfilled all his duties without compromise as a son, a brother, a friend, a husband, a warrior and a ruler. The message of the Ramayan is that goodness always triumphs over evil. Rama's story inspires Hindus to live a good and moral life.



The Mahabharata

An epic which is more than eight times the size of Homer's Iliad and Odyssey combined. Written by the sage Veda Vyasa, it comprises of more than 100,000 stanzas in 18 chapters.



Krishna, an incarnation of God, plays a central role in this epic. It is a vast story of politics, jealousy, intrigue and rivalry between royal cousins which ultimately culminates in war. Its underlying theme is 'where there is dharma there is victory'.

Every aspect of man's character both demonic and divine is outlined in the various strands of its plots and sub plots. It has been said that whatever has happened or whatever will happen in the world is described in this epic, and also whatever has not been seen in this text, cannot be seen anywhere! The story is of truly enormous proportions and is used as a vehicle to convey great philosophical truths of the highest order. This epic gives Hindus a great insight into life in general and urges them to aspire to be the best they can possibly be.

The Bhagavad Gita

(or Song of God), is possibly the most famous of Hindu religious texts. It is part of the Mahabharata epic and the setting is just before the start of the great Mahabharata war. The Bhagavad Gita has 18 chapters and consists of Lord Krishna's teachings given to his friend Arjuna whilst surveying the battlefield. This text is much loved and revered in its own right. It covers the nature of man, God and the universe, and gives instruction on the various means by which man can achieve moksha (liberation).



The text is widely considered as the most complete manual for the spiritual life. It has been greatly respected and lauded by many famous western philosophers. The American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson read the Vedas daily and once wrote 'I owe a magnificent day to the Bhagavad Gita'. Henry David Thoreau said 'In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita, in comparison with which, our modern world and its literature seems trivial'. During his life, Gandhi sought inspiration from the text on a regular basis.

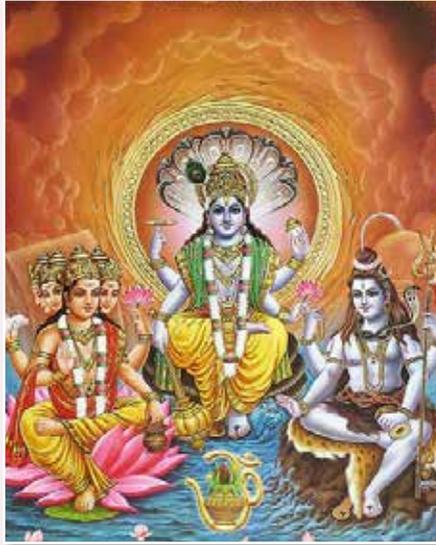
This has only been a very brief look at the historical development of Hinduism and a few of its most important sacred texts. It can only give a flavour of the immensity of Hindu thought as it developed through the ages and continues to develop to this very day. Volumes have already been written and even more volumes will probably be written on the subject!

Gods and Goddesses

On entering a Hindu temple you will see many murtis (deities) or pictures. The representative images often feature the following

- A multitude of colours
- Many arms. Depictions of Hindu Gods typically have 4 arms but the Goddess Durga may be shown with 8, 10 or even 18 arms.
- A variety of weapons or items in their hands
- Different hand gestures (called mudras)
- A variety of animals as conveyance vehicles or companions
- Markings on the face
- Companions or consorts to the deities

All of these elements will be very confusing to non-Hindus but for the Hindu they can identify the form of God instantly via the clues given in the iconography of images. The imagery of the murti will both convey the qualities of that form, and communicate many teachings to the 'viewer' on which they can ponder or meditate and then attempt develop those qualities within themselves. The descriptions that follow are by no means exhaustive but give an insight into the wisdom of Hindu iconography.



Trimurti

Trimurti (Three forms) conveys the concept in which the cosmic function of creation, maintenance and destruction are personified by the forms Brahma (Creator), Vishnu (Perserver) and Shiva (Destroyer).

Lord Brahma:

Brahma symbolises the aspect of God that brings about creation. His consort is Saraswati the goddess of knowledge. The most prominent feature are his 4 faces which represent the 4 Vedas symbolising that he is the source of all the knowledge required for the process of creation.

In his 4 hands he carries items or poses a gesture (mudra)

- Veda (Book) - illustrates that knowledge is important for any kind of creative work.
- Padma (Lotus) – representing purity
- Kamandalu (Water pot) – symbolises the cosmic energy used to bring the cosmos into existence
- Abhaya Mudra (Hand gesture) – palm facing outward meaning 'fear not' and which bestows grace.

Brahma uses a swan as his vehicle (vahana) which represents the power of discrimination. In Hindu mythology the swan is said to be able to filter milk from water. Brahma is often depicted standing or sitting on a lotus which symbolises purity.



Lord Vishnu

Vishnu symbolises the aspect of God that preserves or maintains the universe after its creation. His name means 'all pervading'. The colour of his body is blue reflecting the clear endless sky and therefore symbolises God's infinity and omnipresence. His consort is Laxmi the goddess of wealth and abundance. It is said that if you were to keep Vishnu in your heart, Laxmi will always be close by Vishnu incarnates on earth when evil forces predominate, both to protect mankind and restore goodness. These incarnations (avatars) have occurred in the past and are predicted to occur in the future. Generally 10 incarnations are described but some texts describe many more. The most well known incarnations of Vishnu are Rama and Krishna.

Vishnu is often shown reclining on a coiled serpent (Shesha) on the ocean of milk which was the only thing in existence prior to creation, so again the imagery represents infinity. The coiled serpent symbolises the sleeping universe which still exists in this dormant stage after dissolution and prior to creation (cyclic events which are repeated continuously). When Vishnu is depicted in this way you will see Brahma (the creator) is shown emerging from his navel. This shows us that the potential for a new beginning (creation) is present within the 'sleeping' universe.

In his 4 hands he carries items or poses a gesture (mudra)

- Conch shell (sankha) – indicating divine sound or the mantra OM
- Discus (chakra) – a reminder of the wheel of time and also a weapon to destroy evil.
- Hand gesture (abhaya mudra) – palm facing outward meaning 'fear not' and which bestows grace.
- Mace (gada) – indicating the power to punish evil doing



His vehicle is the bird Garuda which soars high in the sky giving a 'universal' vision of life.

Lord Shiva:

Shiva symbolises the aspect of God responsible for the dissolution of the universe in readiness for its re-creation where unenlightened souls get another chance to find liberation in the next cycle of creation. Shiva means 'auspicious'. His consort is Paravati the goddess of fertility, love and devotion.

Known as the Lord of Yoga, Shiva is generally depicted as a semi-clad yogi. The 3rd eye on his forehead symbolises knowledge and power through which evil is destroyed. His matted locks indicate he is the Lord of Yoga, with the crescent moon adorning his hair (which waxes and wanes) symbolising that he is beyond time. On his head he carries the Goddess Ganga (river). According to legend, when the river Ganga descended to earth, no one was prepared to face the ferocity of its impact, Shiva opened his hair and absorbed the impact. His grey, ash covered, body indicates that he transcends physical phenomena and the tiger skin he wears (and may also be shown sitting on) indicates his transcendence of the lower nature. He wears snakes symbolising that he possesses full yogic powers.

Shiva is often depicted with the following items:

- Trident (trishul) – the three prongs of the trident symbolise his three fundamental powers of will, action and knowledge
- Drum (damaru) – indicating the cosmic sound Aum heard in deep meditation.
- Hand gesture - the positions of the fingers may vary in different representations but generally another hand is resting on his knee in a pose yogis use in meditation.



Shiva's vehicle is Nandi (the bull) which symbolises both ignorance and knowledge (the 4 legs representing the Vedas). Shiva's use of the bull as a vehicle indicates that God removes ignorance and bestows the power of wisdom.

Shiva Lingam

Representing Lord Shiva, the Lingam is a form that you will see in many Hindu temples. It has been referred to as 'the formless form of God' as it has no human characteristics as such. The lingam is a very ancient symbol. It is an elongated oval shape set in a circular base known as the yoni. It has been much debated as to whether this form originated as the representation of a phallus, with which some Hindus are happy to accept this viewpoint and some are not.

Lord Ganesh

Ganesh is the elephant headed deity. He represents the power that removes obstacles, brings wisdom and ensures success. He is prayed to before any undertaking.

The Purana's say that unbeknown to Shiva, Parvati created Ganesh and asked him to guard the door. When Shiva came home Ganesh would not allow him to enter, Shiva became angry, and cut off Ganesh's head, Parvati was furious and demanded Ganesh to be brought back to life. Shiva restored Ganesh's head with that of the first animal he encountered which was an elephant. Shiva also granted him boon that he would always be worshipped before any of the gods.



His large head symbolises a discriminating intellect that leads to wisdom. His large ears signify that the perfect person is one who possesses the ability to listen to others and assimilate ideas. The small piercing eyes symbolise the ability to focus one pointedly. The trunk, that can uproot a tree or lift the smallest item shows that we must be strong enough to face life's ups and downs but be subtle enough to explore the 'inner world'. The two tusks (with the left tusk broken) denotes that life presents us with both perfection and imperfection and the large tummy shows that we need to be 'big enough' to calmly digest the full range of experiences that life brings to us. Ganesh is often shown sitting with one foot dangling over the other denoting that we should keep one foot on the ground whilst also aspiring to a higher truth.

In his four hands he carries items or poses a gesture (mudra)

- Tray of sweets (a popular snack known as laddus) – denotes that God bestows the sweetness of success in all endeavours a true devotee undertakes.
- Axe – shows us that God has the ability to cut through all obstacles and that we should cut away attachments and temptations.
- Lotus – just as a lotus remains in water but is unaffected by it we can live in the world without being affected by any temptation or negativity.
- Hand gesture - (abhaya mudra) – palm facing towards you meaning 'fear not' and signifies that Ganesh always blesses his devotees

Ganesh has a mouse for his vehicle.



Goddess Amba

Goddess Amba symbolises protection and the preservation of moral order in creation. She is also well known as Durga. In Sanskrit Durga means a 'fort' or 'a place that is protected and is thus difficult to reach'. She is often called Jagatmata (world mother).

She is depicted wearing red clothes which symbolises action. One of her other names is Shakti which means power.

In the Purana's there is the story of a great demon called Mahishasura who was threatening to destroy the whole universe. In response to this threat, all the gods, goddess and the divine beings combined their energies together to create the goddess "Shakti" and also the weapons to destroy evil. The weapons such as the mace, sword, trident, discus and arrow conveys the idea that just one weapon cannot be used to destroy different kinds of enemies. Different weapons must be used to fight enemies depending on the circumstances. For example, selfishness can be destroyed by being detached, jealousy by being desireless, prejudice by self knowledge and ego by discrimination.

Durga's vehicle is a tiger (or sometimes a lion) which again signifies she has unlimited power at her disposal and to illustrate that she is fully in control of this power.

Regardless of all the power she wields she has a beautiful, kind and loving face and is therefore approached by devotees as the Supreme in the form of a loving mother.

As a religion, Hinduism is unambiguous in declaring the Goddess as the Supreme therefore has equal status with the male representation of God. This is illustrated by Goddess Amba.

Laxmi:

Goddess Laxmi symbolises wealth and prosperity, both material and spiritual. Lakshme means 'goal' in Sanskrit. In Hindu texts she is also often referred to as Shri and is the spouse of Vishnu. She is often depicted standing or sitting on a lotus which signifies that whilst living in the world we should enjoy its wealth but not be obsessed with it just as the lotus grows in water but is not made wet by it. In many depictions she is flanked by two elephants which represent name and fame so we are reminded that earning wealth just for the sake of name and fame is not an end in itself, it should be shared in order to bring happiness to others.

Laxmi provides wealth and prosperity to Vishnu to sustain the universe.

In general, Laxmi's four hands represent the four ends of human life: dharma (right action), kama (genuine desires), artha (wealth), and moksha (liberation from birth and death). The front hands represent the activity in the physical world and the back hands indicate the spiritual activities that lead to spiritual perfection.

In her four hands she carries items or poses gestures (mudras)

- Lotus (held in 2 rear hands) – signifies that just as a lotus remains in water but is unaffected by it we should enjoy wealth but not be attached to it
- Coins – the downward pointing hands has coins falling from it indicating that she bestows prosperity to devotees (sometimes she is depicted holding a pot from which coins are falling)



Laxmi is especially honoured with pujas and colourful ceremonies at Diwali. It is said that Laxmi is happiest at the feet of God and so to attract Laxmi one should keep God in their hearts at all times.

Like Vishnu her vehicle is the eagle Garuda which soars high in the sky giving a 'universal' vision of life.

Saraswati

Saraswati is the Goddess of learning, knowledge, wisdom and the arts. The Sanskrit word 'sara' means essence and 'swa' means self, so Saraswati means the essence of the self. She is the consort of Brahma. Because knowledge is essential in creation she is seen as the creative power of Brahma. She is generally worshipped by teachers, students, scholars, scientists and musicians.

She is depicted as wearing a white sari and seated or standing on a white lotus. The white sari denotes purity and that she is the embodiment of pure knowledge. The white lotus denotes that she is rooted in the supreme reality. This suggests that the devotee should also adopt these qualities.



As you may expect Saraswati's form conveys direct teachings. Saraswati can be depicted with 2 hands but is more generally depicted with 4. In her four hands she carries items

- Book – signifies that knowledge, when acquired, should be used with love and kindness to help mankind.
- Rosary – signifies that one should adopt concentration and meditation which leads to the gentle melting of the ego and bondage to the material world in order to achieve moksha.
- Veena (Lute) – She plays the veena with two hands. Her two hands denote the mind and intellect which, when in perfect harmony, enables the human being to live in perfect harmony and to apply any knowledge gained for the welfare on all beings.

Like Brahma the swan is her vehicle which represents the power of discrimination whereas the peacock denotes ego. She rejects the peacock for the swan as her preferred vehicle.



Gayatri

Goddess Gayatri is popularly known as Vedamata, (Mother of the Vedas) as she provided Lord Brahma with the four Vedas and the principles for the creation of the world.

- Book – signifies that knowledge, when acquired, should be used with love and kindness to help mankind.
- Kamandalu (Water pot) – symbolises the purity of the water contained in the pot, signifying that we should be pure within to accept pure knowledge.

Gayatri is also the name of one of the most well known Vedic mantras,

Om Bhur Bhuvah Swah,
Tatsavitur Varenayum
Bhargo Devasya Dhimahi
Dhiyo Yo Nah Prachodyat

meaning

we meditate on that glorious light of the divine Surya (Sun)
may he, the Lord of light, illuminate our minds

Lord Rama

Lord Rama is the 7th incarnation of Vishnu. Rama is much loved and his worship is very prominent amongst all Hindus. Rama is usually depicted with his faithful wife Sita, his brother Lakshman and his beloved devotee Hanuman. Rama is depicted carrying a bow and arrow which conveys that he is always ready to destroy evil and protect righteousness. He is viewed as the very embodiment of Dharma and inspires (Hindus) man to always aspire to become the best.

The epic Ramayana depicts Rama's life story and the purpose of his incarnation on earth which was to defeat the evil demon king Ravana and restore goodness and balance to the world. A study of the Ramayana reveals the following:-



- Rama represents the ideal man and a just king. He is shown to be the perfect son, devoted brother, true husband, trusted brother, a noble adversary and a noble king.
- Sita symbolises perfection in all her roles as an ideal daughter, wife and queen. She represents all that is great and noble. She is often revered as an incarnation of Laxmi.
- Lakshman symbolises the ideal brother. He leaves his young wife behind in the palace and chooses to accompany his brother Rama into exile in the forest. He sacrifices the luxury of his personal life to serve his elder brother and do what is 'right'.
- Hanuman is the great monkey hero who symbolises absolute devotion to God, by using amazing qualities, knowledge, truthfulness, sincerity, selflessness, humility, loyalty, physical and mental strength.

Krishna



Lord Krishna is the 8th and possibly the most popular incarnation of Vishnu. It was predicted that Krishna would be born to the sister of the demonic King Kansa and would be his downfall. Due to fears for baby Krishna's life his parents took him to live in the safety of a small village. In his childhood Krishna was brought up in a cowherd family. His childhood playmates were gopas (cowherd boys) and gopis (cowherd girls). They loved him and were all greatly devoted to him. Of all the gopis, Radha loved him the most.

Radha's love for Krishna symbolises the eternal bond between an individual soul and God. His flute symbolises the call of God to the human soul.

Of all the incarnations, Krishna is revered as a Purna Avatar (full and complete incarnation of God). He commands Love, respect and adoration from all Hindus in all walks of life. Krishna's life is told in the Srimad Bhagavatam, He is the central figure of the Mahabharata and his teachings are given in the Bhagavad Gita.



Hindu Festivals

There are a huge number of festivals in Hinduism. Here are a few of the main ones you may be aware of in the UK. We will discuss the origins of each.....

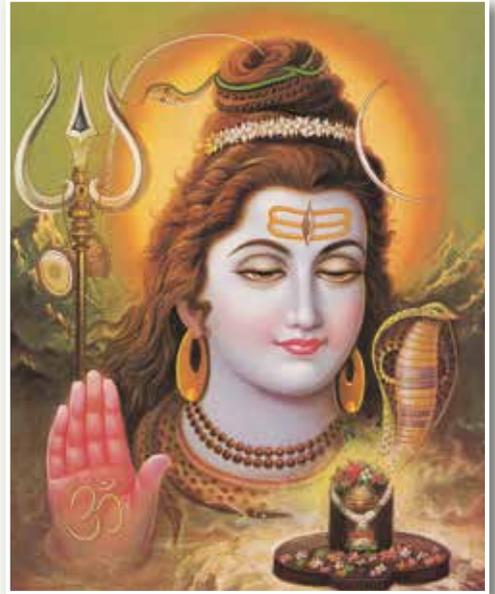
Times of festivals are defined by the lunar calendar so are not on the same day each year. The dates of the festivals for each year are readily available from Hindu mandirs or from the internet. The dates of when they occur in the Hindu calendar are included where possible.

Maha Shivaratri

(the Great Night of Shiva) Feb/March. Dedicated to Lord Shiva. The eve of each new moon is a special night for Shiva known as Shivaratri (Night of Shiva) but the new moon in the Hindu month of Magha is known as Maha Shivaratri (Great Night of Shiva). Maha Shivaratri is a 'quiet' festival celebrated right across India. Some devotees spend the night chanting Shiva's name or singing his praises. Special celebrations are held in the most prominent Shiva temples such as those in Benares.

The story associated with this festival is as follows. At nightfall, a hunter finds himself hungry, alone and far away from home. For his safety and shelter he climbs a tree. He begins to weep whilst thinking about his wife and children going to bed hungry as they will have no food. His tears fall on a Lingam hidden beneath the branches of the tree. Shiva accepts the hunter's tears as an offering and his 'fasting' from food as authentic worship. Shiva rewards the hunter with a future rebirth as a great king

Many Gujarati communities in the UK celebrate the festival by preforming Abhishek of the Linga. Worshippers pour milk over the Lingam whilst offering prayers. After this, the aarti (offering of light with prayer) ceremony follows.



Holi

('Spring') Feb/March. Holi is a festival that is celebrated in a variety of ways. The date of the festival is the full moon of Phalgun which is around the time of the spring harvest. In some areas of India this is a time when people play pranks on each other and the usual 'social norms' become somewhat relaxed. It is an exuberant festival where coloured powders or liquids are thrown at one and all. The building of bonfires is also commonly practised.



The story associated with Holi is one about the demon king Hiranyakashipu who had a son called Prahlada. Prahlada worshipped Vishnu instead of his father. The king pleaded with his son to stop this but Prahlada refused. Finally Hiranyakashipu asked his sister, the demoness Holika for assistance. Holika had been granted the boon by Agni (the fire god) that she would be able to survive the fiercest flames. Holika lured Prahlada onto an unlit funeral pyre which subsequently burst into flames; Prahlada called out to Vishnu for help and survived whilst Holika was consumed by the flames. The story illustrates that goodness triumphs over evil.

It is thought that the custom of throwing coloured water or powders over each other is in remembrance of Krishna's similar sport (lila) with his friends in Vrindavana.

There is a custom that babies who were born since the previous year's Holi are brought to the mandir and then taken to the front of the mandir during the aarti ceremony, which precedes the lighting of the bonfire and celebrations.

Ramnavami

(Birth of Lord Rama). March/April. The birth of Lord Rama is said to have occurred at exactly 12 noon on the 9th day of the month Chaitra. To celebrate this festival many temples adorn the images of Rama and his family in festive regalia. In some cases their images are carried through the street. In most mandirs a beautifully decorated cradle is set up which contains an image or picture of baby Rama. Members of the congregation queue to take turns in rocking the cradle as bhajans (devotional songs) are sung.



The food (prasad) offered at this festival consists of items associated with the birth of a child in India; in this case, a mixture of soft brown sugar and ground coriander seeds, and then a few drops of sweetened milk mixed with yoghurt.

During the month of Chaitra the complete text of the Ramayana is chanted.

Raksha Bandhan

(Bond/band of protection) July/August. This festival is also known simply as Rakhi. It ritually celebrates the love and duty between brothers and their sisters. It falls on the full moon day in the month of Shraavan. On Raksha Bandhan, sisters tie a rakhi (thread) on their brother's wrist. This symbolizes the sister's love and prayers for her brother's well-being, and the brother's lifelong vow to protect her. Gifts are often given by the brother to the sister.

Rakhis can be a very simple red/orange thread or of a very elaborate design. The festival is also popularly used to celebrate any brother-sister type relationship between men and women who are relatives or even biologically unrelated.



There are many stories related to the origin of this festival, here is one of them. According to the Bhavishya Purana, during the war between Gods and demons, the god Indra was disgraced by the powerful demon King Bali. Indra's wife Sachi consulted Vishnu, who gave her a bracelet made of cotton thread, calling it holy. Sachi tied the thread around Indra's wrist and blessed it with her prayers for his well being and success. Indra then successfully defeated the evil king. The story suggests that the Raksha Bandhan threads of ancient India were like amulets, used by women (with prayers) to guard men as they went off to war.

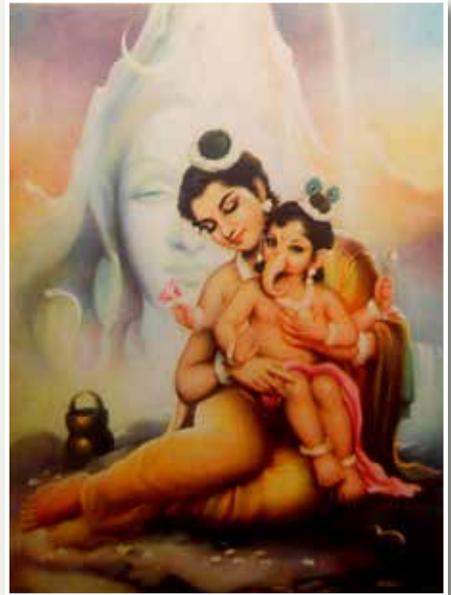
Krishna Janamashtami

(Birth of Lord Krishna) Aug/September. Lord Krishna is said to have been born at midnight on the 8th night of the month Shravan. Many Hindus stay up until midnight in order to welcome Krishna with singing and dancing. Some devotees will fast up to midnight until they have had darshan (sight) of Krishna. The festival is celebrated with great enthusiasm at centres in India associated with Krishna's life such as Mathura and Vrindavan. Night long prayers are held and bhajans sung in temples. As with the birth of Lord Rama temples install a beautifully decorated cradle which contains an image or picture of baby Krishna and the congregation queue to take turns in rocking the cradle whilst bhajans (devotional songs) are sung.



Ganesh Chaturthi

(Birth of Lord Ganesha) Aug/September. Celebrations are traditionally held on the 4th day of the first fortnight in the month of Bhaadrapada. The festival generally lasts for ten days, ending on the fourteenth day of the fortnight (Anant Chaturdashi). In the state of Maharashtra, particularly in and around Mumbai, the festival is celebrated enthusiastically. Clay images are taken out in procession through the streets accompanied by the sound of drums and cymbals. The images, which can be much as 8 metres high, are eventually immersed in a lake, river or the sea.





Navratri

(Nine nights of the Goddess) Sept/October. Navaratri is divided into sets of three days to adore different aspects of the supreme goddess.

On the first three days, the Mother is invoked as powerful force called Durga in order to destroy all our impurities, vices and defects.

The next three days, the Mother is adored as a giver of spiritual wealth, Lakshmi, who is considered to have the power of bestowing on her devotees the inexhaustible wealth.

The final set of three days is spent in worshipping the mother as the goddess of wisdom, Saraswati.

In order to have all-round success in life, we need the blessings of all three aspects of the divine mother; hence, the worship for nine nights

This festival is particularly important in Gujarat and the celebrations provide an opportunity to express devotion and celebrate particularly through the medium of dance. The dances have been preserved by the Gujarati community in the UK. The festival is very popular and festivities attract a large number of participants. Celebrations go on for 9 consecutive nights.

The day after the 9th night is called Dasshera (which means 10th). Dasshera celebrates Rama's victory over Ravana. There are public celebrations and the dramatisation of the Ramayana epic. Huge and beautifully crafted paper or wooden effigies of Ravana are filled with fireworks and then burnt, creating quite a spectacle.

Diwali or Deepawali

(Festival of lights) Oct/November.
The terms Diwali or Deepawali both mean "a row or garland of lights. Traditionally the festival lasts for 5 days and like Dasshera it combines several festivals into one. This is possibly the most celebrated of all Hindu festivals.

It is difficult to generalise about the practices and customs around Diwali as they vary widely across India and there are many stories, myths and characters associated with Diwali.



The two most important stories are that of Laxmi, Goddess of wealth and the story of Rama's rescue of Sita from the clutches of the demonic king Ravana. It is said that Laxmi roams about during this time and visits everyone's house so many people clean their houses from top to bottom and lights are placed throughout the house to welcome her. Many women draw rangoli (geometrical patterns) with coloured powders on the floor near to their doorways. Diwali proper takes place on the fourth day and small earthenware bowls, filled with ghee (clarified butter) or oil and then supplied with cotton wicks. These are then placed in extended rows inside or outside houses and are lit in the evening. The lighting of the lamps is associated with the return of Rama and Sita to their capital Ayodhya when the whole city was lit up to welcome them home after 14 years in exile.

This is the time for businesses to start their new financial year, open new account books and place them in the temple for blessings.

Hinduism in Practice

Do Hindus Believe in Many Gods?

It is often very confusing for people of another religion to see Hindu homes and (temples) adorned with a myriad of statues and pictures of Gods, Goddesses, Incarnations of God, Saints and Gurus and yet say that 'God is one!' It could be said that Hindus basically fall into one of two camps: monotheistic and monistic. The monotheistic, believes in one God who manifests as different powers in different forms and where God and man are eternal but separate entities.

The monistic concept is that God alone is all there is, and so all of creation is but a manifestation of this One Reality. Either way, Hindus will happily see God in many forms or in no form at all. In addition, Hinduism generally regards all other religions as valid approaches to Truth. In common with Christianity, Hindus also believe that God comes to earth to help or teach mankind at any time when there is a great need. This is the concept of the Avatar (descent of God to earth).

What is the Hindu idea about the universe?

Hindus noticed that everything in the universe (including mankind) has a beginning, a middle and an end. This process is represented in the forms of Brahma (the creator) Vishnu (the preserver) and Shiva (the destroyer). Hindus view the universe as having a life span of billions of years before it ceases to exist. After this the whole cycle begins again and does so ad infinitum. There is also the concept that there are many levels of existence throughout the universe where both higher and lower forms of life exist on higher or lower planes.

Why do Hindus worship statues?

Humans live in a world of forms so for Hindus the idea of giving a form or forms to God enables them to relate to an otherwise abstract concept much more easily. As God is seen in everything it is also possible to conceive that He or She is present within a murti (deity) or other representation. Most Hindus generally adopt a 'chosen form' (Ishta Devata) to focus on. The iconography that Hinduism has developed is highly symbolic, very defined and recognisable so it is able to convey a vast array of concepts without the need for words. In the Mandir (temple) murtis are installed during complex ritual called Pran Pratishtha (life giving ceremony). After this the murtis are treated as a 'living presence' of God and so are offered items just as one would you would to respected or beloved guest. The murtis are subsequently bathed, given new clothes and offered food, flowers, incense and even light by the pandit (priest) and congregation. Besides the daily offerings here are also various ceremonies performed on special days related to each murti. This worship is referred to as murti pooja (worship). Most temples have a main murti but also can have other murtis of the various forms of God, along with murtis of Avatars (incarnations of God) and Saints. Pooja enables people to establish a relationship with, and to express emotions, such as love and devotion, to God.





How often do Hindus have to go to the Mandir (Temple)?

Hindus are not obliged to attend the Mandir and will often install murtis or pictures in a special place at home and perform puja (worship) there. Aside from specific celebrations or festival days, Hindus will go to a temple for darshan (sight) of God or a saint.

Hinduism seems very 'other worldly' - what about daily life?

Hinduism celebrates and recognises all aspects of human life. The Vedic literature gives four goals for human life called purushartas which are:-

- **Dharma:** right action
- **Artha:** acquisition of wealth and the "good things" in life
- **Kama:** enjoyment and fulfilment of desire
- **Moksha:** liberation from the cycle of life and death

Dharma is considered as the first purusharta as artha and kama are pursued via the methods and tenets of dharma. Moksha is regarded as the highest and ultimate goal of life.

Do Hindus believe in eternal life?

Yes, all philosophies within the Hindu family postulate that man is actually both perfect and eternal in his/her essential nature. This is also applicable to all forms of life from plants to animals. The expression of the perfection of man is considered to be 'covered', limited or overlaid by karmas (actions) and vasanas (qualities) acquired during various incarnations. It is worth noting that karma covers our actions, words and thoughts.

What is Reincarnation/Moksha?

Hindus believe that reincarnation is the journey through many lives to reach God and our own perfection. This journey can take man through higher or lower forms of life and occur in better or worse places than just on the planet earth. Moksha (liberation from the cycle of rebirth) is achieved when we exhaust the results of our actions and the accompanying qualities. Good actions and qualities are therefore cultivated as they are regarded as promoting our 'evolution' toward that perfect state. One description likens man's journey to achieve moksha to the gradual action of cleaning a dirty mirror so that it can eventually reflect reality perfectly. This aspect of Hinduism is also broadly shared by Buddhism, Sikhism and Jainism.

How do Hindus reach God?

There are many ways to reach God. In the Bhagavad Gita Krishna outlines varying approaches very succinctly which he describes as forms of yoga (union)

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- **Bhakti** (devotion): Devotion is a common factor in many religions. It encompasses love for God, mankind and even all other species or expressions of life. Bhakti covers all the aspects of worship and seeks a personal relationship with God. Much of what is commonly observed as Hinduism is the expression of bhakti. This path is often considered and described as the easiest of approaches and has given rise to great artistic expressions of faith as well as many tools and techniques to approach God.
 - **Karma** (action): This is the path of doing 'good work' for the benefit of the world. It encompasses selfless service toward and for other beings (including non-human), including 'mother earth' and is expressed in many forms. Again, we can see that bhakti is expressed in many other religions. In Hinduism performing good actions is perceived as contributing to the development and evolution of the performer of those actions.
 - **Gyana** (knowledge): This is often described as the difficult path. It encompasses the pursuit of knowledge of the nature of God and the universe. Its goal is to pursue the Truth by philosophical and even scientific enquiry. Meditation is often a large part of this path.

The above broad categories of yoga have formed the root of many other yogas and the development of practices and techniques. They have spawned whole schools of thought and approaches to God or Truth. People will take what is useful to them from the varying pathways use them in a combination that they feel aids them on their journey. For example a highly philosophical person may well also do some aspect of selfless service and also take benefit from having a chosen form of God to love and worship.

What do Hindus think about other religions?

As we have seen, Hinduism implicitly sanctions many and varied approaches to find God or the Truth. One of the most ancient Hindu texts, the Rig Veda states that 'the Truth is one but the wise approach it differently'. Krishna also states in the Bhagavad Gita (chapter 4 verse 11) that 'As men approach me, in that same way they find my love'. Hinduism extends this acceptance that there are many paths to God to other religions and so generally accepts all religions as valid ways to reach God. Throughout its history Hinduism has produced many saints and sages that have had devotees from different faiths such as Jalaram who had Muslim followers and Shirdi Sai Baba who had both Christian and Muslim followers. Guru Nanak, born a Hindu, became the first Guru of the Sikh tradition also had Muslim and Hindu followers.

Sacred Symbols



Anjali is the gesture of two palms pressed together and held near the heart. It means to honour or celebrate. It is a Hindu greeting usually accompanied by the greeting Namaste (I honour the divine in you). It is also symbolic of bringing matter and spirit together.



Gaja is the elephant, the king of beasts. It is a sign of royalty, dominion and power and is the god Indra's mount. In large Hindu temples, and during pageantry, there is always a noble elephant.



Swastika is the symbol of good fortune literally meaning 'it is well'. This is an ancient sun sign.



Pranava or **AUM** is the root of all mantras which comes forth at creation. Its 3 syllables A U M signify Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. It is sounded at the start and end of every sacred verse and ceremony.



Padma is the lotus which symbolises perfection and purity. It is associated with the deities and the practice of yoga. Just as a lotus remains in mud water but is unaffected by them, we can live in the world without being affected by any temptation or negativity.



Ghanta the bell is used in ritual. It summons the presence of God and engages the senses and stimulates the ear to remind us that, like sound, the world can be perceived but not possessed.



Nandi means joyful and is the white bull that serves as Lord Shiva's mount. Nandi is seen in temples gazing patiently in the direction of the Shiva Lingam. This symbolises the ideal devotee, full of strength and focused.



Mudras are hand gestures. Many different hand gestures are used in Hindu iconography and dance to convey meanings. They are used extensively in yoga meditation practices which are said to charge the body/mind with specific energies.



Trishula is Shiva's trident and its three prongs of the trident symbolise his three fundamental powers of will, action and knowledge as well as past, present and future.



Chakra means wheel. It is the symbol of perfect creation and the cycles of existence. The 8 spokes mark the directions, each of which is ruled by a deity with its own unique quality.



Mahakal or 'Great Time' presides over creation's golden arch and devours everything. It has a ferocious face. He is time itself that reminds us that life is transitory and that suffering will pass.



Kuttuvilaku, the standing oil lamp in the temple or shrine room symbolises the dispelling of ignorance and the awakening of divine light within. Its soft glow keeps the atmosphere warm and clean.



Mayura is the peacock and Lord Murugan's vehicle, swift and beautiful like Murugan himself. The proud display of the peacock symbolises Sanatana Dharma in its full glory.



Shikhara is the massive stone tower-like structure above the inner sanctuaries of temples in North India. It symbolises Mount Meru at the centre of the universe where the deities reside.



Vata is the banyan tree which symbolises Sanatana Dharma with branches in all directions. It draws strength from its many roots and provides safety and a cooling shade for all beings. Shiva in his form as the Great Yogi, is often depicted meditating beneath the tree.



Havankund is the fire altar of ancient Vedic rites. It is by fire (which denotes the Divine) that we make offerings to God. Hindu sacraments are solemnised before the havan fire.



Shiva Lingam is considered the formless form representing Lord Shiva.



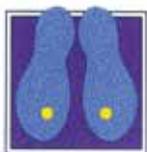
Dhvaja is the flag which is orange or red in colour. It flies over Hindu temples and is used in processions and at festivals. It symbolises victory and that Sanatana Dharma prevails. Its bold colour represents the life giving sun.



Nataraja is Lord Shiva as 'Lord of the Dance'. His dance (Ananda Tandava) is a ballet of bliss which both brings the cosmos into being and ends its existence with the fiery arc of flame representing consciousness.



Naga is the cobra and is a symbol of the slumbering Kundalini power within man. As man evolves it awakens and travels up the spine to join Lord Shiva at the crown of the head. It symbolises the union of man and God.



Sri Padukas are the sacred sandals worn by saints, sages and Satgurus. They symbolise the preceptor's feet which are the source of grace. When we prostrate before him we humbly touch his feet for release from worldliness.



Rudraksha seeds are the symbol of Lord Shiva's tears which are shed out of compassion for mankind's suffering. Shaivites wear a mala of 108 beads as a symbol of Shiva's love which they also use to count the number of times they chant 'Om Namah Shivaya'.



Mankolam is the well known paisley design. Its design is modelled on the mango and is associated with Lord Ganesh. The mango is the sweetest of fruits and symbolises auspiciousness and the fulfilment of legitimate desires.



Shankha is the conch shell. It symbolises the origin of existence with its spiralling spheres. In ancient times it was blown in battle to announce victory. In Lord Vishnu's hands it symbolises protection and the sound of AUM.



Kalash is a pot containing a husked coconut circled by 5 mango leaves. It is used in worship and ceremonies to represent God and especially Ganesh. Breaking a coconut before his shrine symbolises the shattering of the ego to reveal the sweetness inside.

Cow: Hindus revere the cow, the root of this attitude are based on the symbolism of divine bounty of the earth, and therefore the cow is an alternative symbol of the earth, as a "mother" (Gaumata - mother cow). The mother-goddess Aditi is called "the cow, the sinless" in the Rig Veda

The cow symbolizes all other creatures, the nourisher, the ever-giving, undemanding provider. The cow is so generous, taking nothing but water, grass and grain. It gives of its milk, as the liberated soul gives of his spiritual knowledge. The cow is so vital to life, the virtual sustainer of life, for many humans. The cow is a symbol of grace and abundance. Veneration of the cow instils in Hindus the virtues of gentleness, receptivity and connectedness with nature.



Glossary

Agni – The Hindu fire God from the Vedas. As the sacrificial fire, Agni mediates between God and mankind.

Acharya - Is a preceptor or instructor in religious matters; founder, or leader of a sect; or a highly learned man. It can also be used as a title affixed to the names of learned men.

Ahimsa – The virtue of non-violence. Ideally it refers to thought, speech and action and is practised toward all living beings, hence the widespread application of vegetarianism. The ideal is shared with Buddhism and Jainism. Ahimsa was central to Gandhi's philosophy.

Ananda – means 'bliss' or 'joy'. It is seen as a quality of, or as the very nature of God. It is attained by man when Moksha (liberation) is achieved.

Aarti - is a religious ritual of worship, a part of pooja, in which light from wicks soaked in ghee (purified butter) or camphor is offered to one or more deities in the mandir or at home. Aarti also refer to the song sung in praise of the deity, when lamps are being offered.

Arya Samaj – A movement that promotes values and practices based on the infallibility of the Vedas. The sect was founded by Swami Dayananda Saraswati in 1875. It rejects the use of murtis (forms) representing God.

Ashram -A place devoted to spiritual practice and study. Most ashrams have a Guru who oversees the spiritual well being of his adherents.

Ashramas – The 4 ashramas are age-

based life stages defined in the ancient Hindu texts. They are: Brahmacharya (student), Grihastha (householder), Vanaprastha (retired)and Sannyasa (renunciation).The Ashramas system is just one facet of the Dharma concept in Hinduism. It is a component of the ethical theories in Hindu philosophy, where it is combined with four goals of human life (see Purusarthas), for fulfillment, happiness and spiritual liberation

Ashoka - An emperor who lived 270 – 232 BCE. He inherited an empire in northern India. He converted from Hinduism to Buddhism.

Atman – The individual eternal soul or self. In the monist philosophy of Shankara it is considered identical to and one with Brahman (God). In the dualist philosophies of Ramanuja and Madhava it is considered eternally separate from God.

AUM – Probably the most sacred sound in Hinduism. It is considered as the 'primordial' sound of creation. It is referred to as the Pranava and is considered the root of all mantras. Its 3 syllables A U M signify Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. It is sounded at the start and end of every sacred verse and ceremony. It is also transliterated into English as OM. The Chandogya Upanishad states 'One should meditate on this Syllable' 'It is the quintessence of the essences, the Supreme, the highest', 'Speech [vak] and breath [prana] are joined together in the Syllable', 'It is meditated upon by joining its repetition to the breath, and that is why it is called the Pranava, the Breath Word'.





Avatar – means ‘One who descends’ and refers to the incarnation of God on earth. The tradition of Vaishnavism is the main proponent of this philosophy and generally lists 10 incarnations of Vishnu with Rama and Krishna being the most famous ones. Most other schools in Hinduism accept the doctrine.

Benares – possibly the most holy city of Hinduism situated in north India on the river Ganges. It is also referred to as Kashi and Varanasi. It attracts millions of pilgrims a year. Buddha preached his first sermon here. It has been a cultural centre for several thousand years.

Bhagavad Gita – means ‘Song of the Divine’ is possibly the most famous of Hindu religious texts. It is part of the Mahabharata epic and takes place just before the start of the great Mahabharata war. The Bhagavad Gita has 18 chapters and consists of Lord Krishna’s teachings to Arjuna, It is one of the most highly regarded texts in Hinduism.

Bhajan – is a devotional song in praise of God.

Bhakti – means ‘devotion’ to God. It is also used to refer to a particular branch of yoga which emphasises the development of a personal relationship with God as a means of attaining union.

Brahma – the aspect of God responsible for creation. Not to be confused with Brahman.

Brahman - connotes the highest Universal Principle, the Ultimate Reality in the universe. In major schools of Hindu philosophy it is the cause of all that

exists. It is the pervasive, genderless, infinite, eternal truth and bliss which does not change, yet is the cause of all changes. The Upanishads (texts) develop the concept of Brahman extensively as the single binding unity behind the diversity in all that exists in the universe.

Brahma Samaj – A reform movement founded by Ram Mohan Roy in the 1830’s influenced by Christian theism and modes of worship.

Buddha – Founder of Buddhism who lived 480 to 400 BCE. He is considered by Hindu Vaishnavite sects as the 9th incarnation of Vishnu.

Chakras – The word derives from the Sanskrit word meaning ‘wheel’, as well as ‘circle’ and ‘cycle’. It is the weapon that Vishnu is shown carrying in Hindu iconography. In yoga it refers to energy centres situated at various points of the spine which are ‘awakened’ as the yogi develops spiritually.

Darshan - means ‘sight’ or ‘to see’. It is the auspicious sight of a murti or a holy person which is said to confer blessings. People go to the mandir for the darshan of God.

Darshanas – (not to be confused with the word darshan,) this term refers to the 6 systems of Hindu philosophy – in brief they are; Nyaya (school of logic), Vaisheshika (atom based school of physical reality), Samkhya (school of matter and spirit), Mimamsa (Veda based and referring to ritual), Yoga (training of mind, body and soul), Vedanta (nature of reality and of God and man).

Dharma – Law of life and right action. It can also be interpreted to mean ‘duty’ in the context that each person has his/her own dharma to fulfil. (See also Sanatana Dharma)

Havan - Is the fire sacrifice of ancient Vedic rites. Fire (which denotes the Divine) is one of the ways Hindus make offerings to God. Many Hindu sacraments are solemnised before the havan fire.

Ishwara – is a word meaning ‘God’ and is mostly used in reference to a personal God.

Itihasas – refers to texts which are considered ‘histories’ such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana.

Jagat – means the world.

Jain – Literally means ‘one who has conquered’ and refers to the practitioners of Jainism.

Jainism - A religion founded by Mahavira which emerged in India around the time of Buddha. It rejects the authority of the Vedas and is a non-theistic philosophy. There are approximately 2 million Jains in India. It has much in common with Hinduism. Hindus and Jains share many common beliefs, festivals and practices.

Jiva – Is the word used to describe the individual soul.

Karma – Literally means action. This is applied to actions of the body, speech and mind which can be good or bad and which produce reactions that are good or bad and so affect current and future lives. It is also used to refer to a particular branch of yoga which

promotes the idea of doing ‘good works’ to attain union with God or moksha.

Madhava - (1197 – 1280 CE) Founder of a dualist school of Vedanta which proposes that man, the natural world and God are all eternally separate and distinct entities. There is focus on devotion to a personal God.

Mahabharata - One of the two great epics of the Hindu scriptures in which the avatar Krishna plays a central role.

Mahatma - A Sanskrit word meaning ‘Great Soul’ which is a title given to people who are considered to be highly evolved spiritually.

Mahavira – The founder of the Jain religion who lived 599 – 527 BCE.

Mantra – A sacred sound, name of divinity or phrase which is repeated to concentrate the mind in concentration or meditation. Mantras are sung, spoken or repeated silently. It is thought that mantras possess their own unique power. It is thought that originally the term only referred to a small number of verses in the Vedas. A Guru often gives a mantra to a disciple during initiation which is also known as ‘Guru vani’.

Mandir – name for a Hindu temple

Maya – means ‘illusion’. In Hindu thought Maya is said to veil the perception of the Truth of the universe as it really is. Part of an aspirant’s journey to Truth is to remove this veil of illusion. It is worth noting that the concept of illusion itself varies in the different Hindu school of thought.

Moksha – means liberation from the cycle of birth and death which is impelled by the law of karma. Other terms used may also be liberation or attainment of yoga (union).

Murti – is a statue of a deity which is seen in Hindu mandirs or homes representing an aspect of God or a holy person

Nanak (Guru) – The first Guru and founder of the Sikh faith who lived 1469 – 1539 CE2

Padma - Means “lotus” in Sanskrit. In Hindu iconography it represents purity due to the fact that it grows in mud and remains in water but is unaffected by either. The name Padma is used in Hindu texts to refer to several characters, including the hero Rama and the goddess Lakshmi.

Pandit – is a practising priest or a Hindu scholar learned in Sanskrit and Hindu philosophy and religion.

Patanjali - Was the author of the ‘Yoga Sutras’ an important collection of aphorisms on yoga practice. He is considered as the sage who formalised yoga as a distinct philosophy. The dates proposed for his birth and life vary by a millennium. Some authorities suggest that he lived in the 4th century BCE, whilst others insist that he lived in the 6th century CE.

Pooja – Means ‘reverence’ and refers to the performance of rites and ritual in mandirs and at home. There are specific poojas to honour aspects of God and poojas to achieve particular aims.

Purusharthas - are the four Vedic goals for human life which are Dharma: (right action), Artha: (acquisition of wealth and the ‘good things’ in life), Kama: (enjoyment and fulfilment of desire), Moksha: liberation from the cycle of life and death

Puranas – literally means ‘old stories’. They are devotional texts about the Gods or various forms of God. They contain thousands of stories that drive home and explain (much more simply than the Vedas or Upanishads) the basic philosophy, principles and values of Hindu thought. Their influence on the Hindu psyche remains very strong even in the modern world. The texts are especially revered by the Hindu Bhakti schools of thought.

Ramanuja – (1017 - 1137 CE) Founder of a dualistic school of Vedanta proposing that man and God are one in their essential nature but eternally separate. There is focus on devotion to a personal God.

Reincarnation - The belief that the individual soul is eternal and is reborn to live again through a series of lives. Reincarnation is impelled by the results of karma (actions performed by the individual) until Moksha is achieved. Although universally accepted by Hindus there are variations in the varying traditions where some believe that rebirth only takes place in human form once it has been achieved, others believing that the soul ‘transmigrates’ through other forms of life such as animals and plants. Reincarnation can take place in higher or lower planes

of existence and not just on the earth. Also rebirth can take the form of higher 'celestial' beings than mankind.

Rishis – are great saints or holy men who have realised the Truth. Many of them lived in forests in seclusion whilst others lived family lives. Sacred texts such as the Vedas and Upanishads (and many more) are attributed to various Rishis.

Rta – The 'cosmic order' as described in the Vedas.

Samadhi – is used to describe a meditative state of absorption or a super conscious state of mind, attained by the practice of meditation. In samadhi the mind becomes still. It is a state of being totally aware of the present moment; a one-pointedness of mind. When someone dies in India, especially a holy person, it is not uncommon to say, that person has gone into 'samadhi'. The tomb of a holy person is also referred to as a place of 'samadhi'

Sansara – is the 'Stream of existence' and refers to the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. It is applied to all beings and includes the universe itself.

Sanskars - are the Hindu 'rites of passage' in a human being's life as described in ancient Sanskrit texts. There are 16 essential sanskars that are performed throughout the life of a human being. The word samskar also relates to the acquired characteristics and traits of a person

Sanatana Dharma – A term for Hinduism. Ancient texts refer to what we refer to as Hinduism as Sanatana Dharma. Sanatana means 'eternal';

Dharma defies an exact English translation but could be interpreted as 'values of life that sustain us'. So you could say that Sanatana Dharma is that religion that is based on eternal values.

Sannyasi – means 'one who renounces'. It refers to people who withdraw from daily life to pursue the realisation of God or Truth. This can be in an ashram or as a solitary wandering mendicant.

Sanskrit – the ancient language used in Hindu texts. It is said to be of Divine origin rather than man-made.

Shaivism – Denotes the devotees of Lord Shiva who see Shiva as the Supreme form of God.

Shakti – Literally means 'power' or 'energy'. Hinduism is unambiguous in ascribing power to the feminine force. Shakti is one of the personal names of Shiva's wife Durga but is also used in more general terms to refer to the female consorts of all the forms of God (Vishnu, Brahma etc). In yoga, the term Shakti also refers to the energy latent within all humans known as Kundalini.

Shaktism – Shakta denotes the devotees of Shakti, or the Mother, who consider Her as the Supreme form of God.

Shankara – (788 – 820 BCE) Founder of the monistic school of Vedanta proposing that man and God are ONE and not separate beings. It is summed up by the phrase 'Brahman alone is'. The notion of a personal God is not considered as an absolute truth.

Soma - It is frequently mentioned in the





Rig Veda, which contains 114 hymns, many praising its energizing qualities. It is described as being prepared by extracting juice from a certain plant, the identity of which is now unknown and greatly debated among scholars. The name of the drink and the plant are the same, and also personified as a divinity.

Sutra - means 'string, thread'. In Indian literary traditions, it refers to an aphorism or a collection of aphorisms in the form of a manual or, more broadly, a condensed manual or text. Sutras are a genre of ancient and medieval Indian texts. Being 'pithy' they are often elaborated on verbally or in text form to convey extensive teachings, texts and even schools of thought (as with Patanjali's Yoga Sutras).

Swami - is a general term for a Hindu holy man or member of a religious order.

Tat Tvam Asi – a famous phrase from the Upanishads meaning 'Thou art That' implying Brahman and Atman are one.

Tilak – is a mark created by the application of powder or paste on the forehead. The Vaishnava tilak consists of a long vertical marking starting from just below the hairline to almost the end of one's nose tip in the form of a letter U and is traditionally made with sandalwood paste. The other major tilak, often worn by the followers of Shiva, consists of three horizontal bands across the forehead, (often with a single vertical band or circle in the middle). This is traditionally done with sacred ash from fire sacrifices. Many worshippers of Shakti will wear a rectangular mark of

kumkum (a red powder) on the forehead. Other than style, the material used varies between different Hindu traditions. Shaiva tradition uses sacred ash, for example, while Vaishnava tradition uses sandalwood paste, clay or vermilion.

Upanishads – Texts which form the final part of the Vedas and are highly philosophical in content. They develop the theme that Brahman is the underlying truth of the universe. They include speculation on how the soul can achieve oneness with Brahman through contemplative techniques.

Vahana – means 'vehicle' and refers to the vehicle that, in Hindu iconography, is used by a particular deity. They mostly consist of animals and have highly symbolic meanings.

Vaishnavism - Denotes the devotees of Lord Vishnu who see Vishnu as the Supreme form of God

Varna - The division of society into groups reflecting and defining the division of labour. Ancient Hindu literature classified all humankind in principle into four varnas: Brahmins:(priests, teachers); Kshatriyas: (kings, governors, warriors and soldiers), Vaishyas: (agriculturists, artisans and merchants), Shudras:(laborers and service providers). This quadruple division is an ancient description of society and is not to be confused with 'caste'.

Vedanta – Literally meaning the 'end of the Vedas'. It is used in reference to the philosophical parts of the Vedas such as the Upanishads. It also denotes one of the systems of Indian philosophy.



Vedas – Veda literally means ‘knowledge’. It is used to refer to the four Vedas which are described as ‘shruti’ (what is heard) and so considered ‘divine revelations’, heard or intuited by the Rishis. The Four Vedas are named Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva and variously consist of hymns, prayers, ritual instruction and deep philosophy.

Vedic – Pertaining to the Vedas for example one may live a ‘Vedic lifestyle’ which would mean that it was based on the principles laid out in the Vedas.

Yoga – literally means ‘yoke’ or ‘union’ it primarily describes the union of man with God (personal or impersonal). In another context the term yoga is also used to describe one of the systems of Indian philosophy and its core text is the Yoga Sutras written by Patanjali. Nowadays, it is often considered as a form of exercise by use of postures known as Hatha

Yoga. Patanjali originally referred to Yoga as ‘the cessation of thought’ and describes a more meditative system of techniques. Many systems of Yoga have developed over the centuries to achieve the ‘union’ described by Patanjali using many methods of meditation, breathing, physical movement and posture. The Bhagavad Gita describes three yogas as paths to moksha; Bhakti (path of devotion), Karma (path of action) and Gynana (path of knowledge). In practice these paths are often combined, for example a person may do voluntary service (karma) whilst worshipping God (bhakti) and studying philosophy and practising meditation (Gyana).

Yogi - describes both one who practices yoga and also to refer to one who has achieved enlightenment. Many saints are referred to as ‘Great Yogis’.





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