

# RELIGION, CUSTOMS, & TRADITION

Until officially secularized in April 2006, Nepal was the only Hindu kingdom in the world, its king held to be a reincarnation of Vishnu. Hinduism has, however, rubbed shoulders over the centuries with the Buddhism of the Tibeto-Burmese peoples, who make up a sizeable minority. Both creeds have incorporated aspects of the other, making religion in Nepal a unique and complex blend of traditions, beliefs, practices, and rituals.

Religious tolerance and mutual respect allow Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and others to live together in peace, although conversions are not officially recognized and proselytization is in fact illegal. According to the census of 2001, 80.6 percent of Nepalis give their religion as Hindu, 10.7 percent as Buddhist, 4.2 percent as Muslim, and 4.5 percent belong to other religions. This chapter will concentrate on Hinduism and Buddhism, the two religions that do most to define the nature of the country and its people.

## HINDUISM

Unlike other world religions, Hinduism cannot be traced back to a particular founder. In the absence of a strict dogma, it has assimilated various currents of thought over millennia, to a certain extent incorporating other creeds rather than suppressing them, without seeming to discard very much on the way. The result is a highly complex philosophical, religious, and social system. For Hindus the religion has a clear underlying structure, focusing as much on actions as on beliefs. Thus people with apparently contradictory beliefs may still consider themselves to be Hindus. Historically, Hinduism developed in three stages.

### The Vedic Era

This period dates from approximately 1500 BCE to 900 BCE, when Aryan invaders swept into the Indian sub-continent from Central Asia to subjugate the native Dravidians. Their Vedic nature gods, such as Surya (sun) and Indra (rain), were immortalized in the four *Vedas* (Books of Wisdom), the earliest Hindu scriptures, thought to have been written between the twelfth and eighth centuries BCE. Four broad caste groups were established at this time: *Brahmins* (priests) (called *Bahun*s in Nepal), *Chhetris* (warriors and rulers), *Vaisyas* (traders and farmers), and *Sudras* (artisans and menial workers).

## The Brahmanist Period

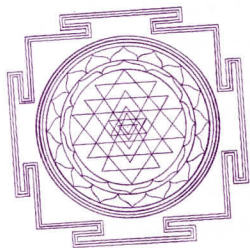
This age (900–500 BCE) was characterized by the increasing importance of ritual and priests. By ensuring that only the highest caste, the *Brahmins*, were responsible for the carrying out of religious ceremonies, the Aryans were able to maintain their hold on power. It is no coincidence that Buddhism developed at this time, finding ways to salvation without dependence on priests.

## Modern Hinduism

The form of Hinduism practiced today developed around 400–200 BCE as a reaction to this ascetic movement and in a return to the original values of the *Vedas*.

## Fundamental Beliefs

Hindus believe in the existence of an impersonal, all-pervading reality, Brahman. He provides a continuous, endless cycle of genesis and demise. Brahman is manifested on Earth as the eternal order of *dharma*, which makes life and the universe possible (see page 41). The entire living world is understood as a single organism with different but related life forms, all subordinate to the principles of creation and destruction. Humankind is high up in the rankings, but not the crown of creation. Our world



is the center of the cosmos. There is also an underworld full of devils and hells, while the gods are to be found in various heavens above the Earth. They too are subject to the cyclical principle.

The soul is also part of the cycle and therefore eternal. As it can move between different forms of life, there is a close relationship between humans and animals, reflected in such gods as Hanuman the monkey god, and Ganesh the elephant-headed god, but also in respect for all forms of life.

The soul of each individual being is like a lost fragment of the soul of the universe. The ultimate goal is to attain *moksha*, or release from the eternal cycle, when the individual soul is reunited with the absolute soul (Brahman). In order to achieve this, it must go through a series of rebirths, known as *sansara*, ideally moving up the social scale with each reincarnation. Where the soul next finds a home depends on how well the living being fulfills its *dharma* in its current existence.

This causal correlation, or *karma*, is one of the most important fundamentals of Hinduism and it is deeply anchored in the caste structure. Each person has a fixed position in the social hierarchy, determined by the extent to which the soul conformed to *dharma* in its previous existence. Thus a low-caste Hindu must accept his or her lot to atone for sins in a previous life. By following *dharma* dutifully a person may hope to achieve a higher status in the next life.

## Hindu Obligations

Hindus have certain obligations or debts. One is to the gods, and should be met through daily acts of worship, the following of rituals, and the offering of sacrifices. Second, their debt to “the sages” is to be met by studying the *Vedas* and adhering to the rules and regulations of the caste system; and the third is an obligation to their ancestors to marry within their caste to produce a male heir who will carry on the family line and, most importantly, perform the cremation rites necessary for ascension into the next life. These obligations are not universal, but particular to each individual in his or her personal situation. A *Bahun* priest must not therefore eat meat or take life, as this would destroy the purity he needs in order to be able to worship on behalf of his community. The *Chhetri* or warrior caste, on the other hand, must protect others; thus, it is not inconceivable that they may take life.

### THE HOLY COW

The veneration of the cow is an important tenet of Hinduism. The cow is regarded as a symbol of motherhood and fertility, and the killing of a cow, even by accident, is considered to be one of the most serious of religious transgressions.

## The Hindu Gods of Nepal

Hinduism is both monotheistic and polytheistic. It incorporates a vast pantheon of gods and goddesses with different attributes, and yet these are merely the expression of different aspects of a single, supreme absolute, Brahman. The basic Hindu *Trimurti* (“trinity” of gods) symbolizes the three aspects of the omnipresent Brahman: Brahma is the creator of the universe; Vishnu its preserver; and Shiva its destroyer.

While most Hindus recognize the existence and significance of many gods, no one is under any obligation to worship any particular god.

The most popular are Vishnu, Shiva, and the Mother Goddess, Devi. All have both positive and negative characteristics, and multiple forms. Their essentially human strengths and failings make them easy to identify with, and individuals generally have a favorite. Temples tend to be devoted to a single deity.

Brahma is rarely worshipped directly (creation being largely finished with). Vishnu sometimes appears as Narayan, the “sleeping Vishnu,” recumbent on the cosmic ocean. He is also worshipped in the form of ten incarnations,



including Krishna, the popular cowherd hero of the great Hindu epic the *Mahabharata*, Rama, hero of the *Ramayana*, and the Buddha: this last represents an attempt on the part of Hinduism to incorporate aspects of Buddhism.

Shiva is both creator and destroyer. He is often symbolized by a phallic lingam for his creative role, and has many different manifestations. In a good mood he appears as the peaceful Pashupati, lord of the beasts and one of the most popular gods in Nepal.



Pashupatinath in Kathmandu is the most important Hindu temple in Nepal, drawing pilgrims from all over Nepal and India. Shiva is also known as Nataraja, the cosmic dancer who created the world and was

believed to smoke hashish. Shiva in a filthy mood is Bhairab, often featured with multiple arms and weapons, standing over a corpse, and wearing a necklace or belt made of skulls.

A certain iconography associated with each god can help with identification. Each god has a “vehicle” (an animal) and a *shakti* (consort or female counterpart) with certain attributes and abilities. Each god is often also depicted holding certain typical objects or symbols—e.g., a conch or lotus flower for Vishnu, a trident for Shiva.

*Shaktis* are the creative or reproductive energies of the gods, without which they are neither

complete nor effective. *Shaktis* also have different manifestations. If Shiva is the god of both creation and destruction, it is often his *shakti*, Parvati, manifesting as the goddesses Durga or Kali, who actually does the destroying. Kali demands blood sacrifices and wears a garland of skulls. The second-most important Hindu temple in Nepal, at Dakshinkali just outside Kathmandu, is dedicated to Kali. Animal sacrifices take place here regularly throughout the year.

Shaktism is a mystical form of both Buddhism and Hinduism, in which believers seek salvation in certain rituals and magic practices, including the sexual rites of the Tantra cult and worship of the *Kumari*, or Living Goddess (see pages 73–4).

### How Nepalese Hindus Worship

Religion is an integral part of daily routine for most Nepalese. The day often starts with an act of worship. If you stay near a temple, you can expect to be woken early by the bells, the ringing of which brings the worshiper closer to the gods. Many Nepalese have a small shrine at home, where *puja* (offerings) of rice or fruit and colored powder are made each day to the favorite deity of the household. It is generally the wife who makes these offerings. The powder is then used to administer a *tikka* (red mark) to the forehead of each member of the family as a sign of daily communion with the gods. This takes place

after washing and before eating. Guests are also likely to receive a *tikka*.

The temple is not only a place of worship. It is also a cultural center and meeting place. Although the inner courtyards of certain temples (at Pashupatinath in Kathmandu, for example)

are off-limits to non-Hindus, visitors are generally welcome and may even be invited to participate. Shoes should be removed before entering any temple building. Especially at temples dedicated to female deities, goats or chickens are sacrificed on special occasions.

The obligatory Hindu veneration of priests includes the offering of hospitality to priests and *sadhus* or *gurus* (teachers and spiritual guides). These are individual, male ascetics who have embarked upon a spiritual search and live from alms. They go from door to door, dressed in little more than a loincloth, and with few possessions apart from the small cooking pot in which they collect small handfuls of rice. They are respected figures, not beggars, and perform spiritual ceremonies if required.

Some of the most fundamental ceremonies for every Hindu are those associated with rites of



passage. These start at birth with a blessing and naming ceremony, and continue the first time a baby is fed solid food (rice). Relatives and friends bring money and gifts and the baby is expected to receive a spoonful of rice from each guest. Later there are ceremonies to mark the first time a boy has his hair cut, and purification after a girl first menstruates. Other significant ceremonies are marriage, blessings upon a pregnancy, and finally, cremation, including the sprinkling of ashes in a holy river, and annual offerings to deceased ancestors. If possible, these last should be made by the eldest son, so that the soul of his father can pass from a state of limbo to rebirth. Newar girls also celebrate *Ihi*, their symbolic marriage to the god Vishnu between the ages of seven and eleven, which is to protect them from the stigma of widowhood. As they are married to an immortal god, they cannot become widows.

## BUDDHISM

As a form of teaching that aims to show the way to salvation, Buddhism in fact follows the same goal as Hinduism. It also adheres to the basic principles of *karma* and reincarnation. Buddhism dispenses with the mediating role of priests and the caste system, however.

The religion's founder, Siddhārtha Gautama Buddha (c. 563–483 BCE), gave up worldly goods

and pleasures to become an ascetic in his search for enlightenment. When this failed to work, he developed his “Middle Way” of meditation. He recognized “Four Noble Truths,” teaching that life means suffering because of our sensual desires and the illusion that they are important. We can only

escape this suffering by renouncing the pleasures of the world and by following the “Eightfold Path” of right understanding, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right thought, and right contemplation to selflessness and liberation from suffering. Salvation of the soul is achieved when the soul enters *nirvana* (literally “drifting/fading away”), a state

in which all earthly desires are extinguished and the cycle of reincarnation is broken. To achieve *nirvana* it is necessary to go through a series of rebirths, but this is not simply fate, because what people do in one life will influence what role they play in the next. In contrast to Hinduism, the individual soul is not eternal and unchangeable, but formed according to the laws of *karma* when a person dies.

The Buddha himself never wrote down his teachings, and two main forms of Buddhism



developed after his death. The first, the Hinayana, held that it was the role of the individual to attain *nirvana*. Later, in the first century BCE, the Mahayana, or “large vehicle” school of Buddhism, emerged, pleading for the collective attainment of *nirvana*. The most important change they made was in introducing the *Bodhisattva*: someone who has achieved enlightenment but who elects not to enter *nirvana*, but to show others the way to salvation. The most revered of these is Avalokiteshvara, representing compassion. Over time, Mahayana Buddhism incorporated not only the *Bodhisattvas*, but also various Hindu gods. Their physical representations in temples and shrines in combination with rituals and a rich mythology made them more accessible to people than the abstract philosophy of “the enlightened one.”

Vajrayana (thunderbolt, or diamond vehicle) or tantric Buddhism began to be practiced in Nepal from around the eighth century CE. This is an esoteric school in which mystical forces, rituals, and sexual practices play an important role. Tantric rituals have also had great influence on some forms of Hinduism. Tantrism is based on the interwovenness of all things. Devotees are led to salvation through reading scriptures, reciting holy *mantras* (sacred words used as an object of concentration), contemplating *mandalas* (holy pictures of gods or their symbols), and carrying out ritual movements (*mudra*).

### OM MANI PADME HUM

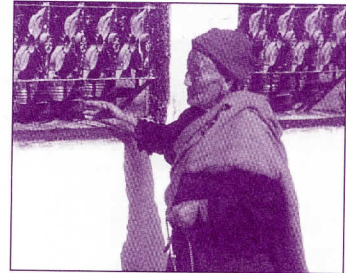
All visitors to Nepal are likely to become familiar with the most famous, most used *mantra*, the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara's "*Om Mani Padme Hum*," to be heard at any of the main Buddhist sites in Kathmandu, but also emanating from any shop selling Nepali music to tourists. Literally it means "Oh you jewel in the lotus flower." For Buddhists, however, it is symbolic of universal godly power, all-embracing love, and the universe in its physical and psychic infinity.

Prevalent in parts of northern Nepal and the Kathmandu valley is Tibetan Buddhism, under the spiritual leadership of the Dalai Lama. It draws on aspects of the ancient "Bon" religion of Tibet, the religious practices of the Himalayan peoples (shamanism, animism, nature religions, etc.), and the "vehicles" of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism.

### How Buddhists Worship

In a spiritual practice called circumambulation, it is usual to walk clockwise around all Buddhist temples, because this follows the sun's course: Buddha is the sun of enlightenment in people's hearts. Prayer wheels are a feature of all Buddhist temples. These often elaborately carved metal cylinders contain rolls

of paper wrapped round an axis, on which holy *mantras* are written many times. The wheels are often mounted in rows near the entrance to stupas, to be turned by people during circumambulation as a means of spreading spiritual blessings and well-being. The prayer wheels, flags, *thangkas* (religious paintings), and murals in monasteries are all seen as aids to meditation, bringing the devout closer to the godly.



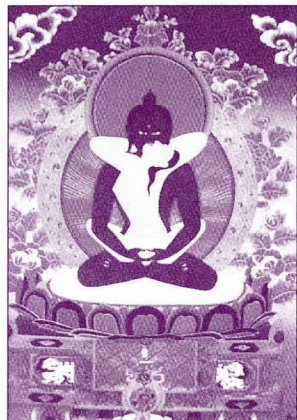
### SYNCRETISM

If religious tolerance is a feature in Nepal, so too is syncretism. Hinduism and Buddhism have intermingled in Nepal to such a degree over the centuries that if you ask a Nepali if he is Hindu or Buddhist, you may well get the answer "Yes!"

Hindus and Buddhists in Nepal share temples, gods, symbols, and festivals. Hindu gods may be depicted in Buddhist temples, and Buddhist stupas may be found in Hindu temples. In Pashupatinath, the Shiva lingam is covered once a year with a mask of the Buddha. At the important Buddhist stupa of Swayambhunath, Hindus worship the god of Swayambhunath as "Sambu" (Shiva). For Buddhists, Swayambhu is the Buddha. Buddhists

see an aspect of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara in Lokeshvara, “the lord of the world,” whereas Hindus see him as a manifestation of Shiva in the form of a Buddhist god.

The goddesses Kali and Durga also often merge with the Buddhist goddess Tara, the most



important female Bodhisattva. Female goddesses are often perceived to be variants of the Divine Mother, particularly in tantrism. The erotic carvings on the roof beams of many temples are also common to both religions and stem from Hindu tantrism, which was adapted by Buddhism.

Nowhere is the syncretism between the two religions clearer than among the Newar people of the Kathmandu valley. Newars may be Hindus or Buddhists. In practice the issue of “which religion” does not seem relevant to many Newars. They worship a plethora of hybrid gods that may or may not be recognized by purists of one religion or the other! Marriage between Hindus and Buddhists of the same caste is not a problem. Newar Hindus may feel closer to Newar Buddhists than to other Nepalese Hindus, simply because they speak the same language and share their cultural heritage.

### THE CULT OF THE LIVING GODDESS

A further example of the hybrid nature of the Newar religion is the cult of the Living Goddess, or *Kumari*—one of the most fascinating aspects of religion in Nepal. The most important *Kumari* is the *Kumari Devi*, or “Royal *Kumari*,” who lives in a house known as the *Kumari Ghar* on the edge of Kathmandu’s Durbar Square.

The *Kumari* is believed to be the bodily incarnation of the goddess Taleju, a manifestation of Durga. Although Taleju is a Hindu goddess, the *Kumari* is always selected from the Newar Buddhist *Sakhya* caste of goldsmiths and silversmiths. For Buddhists she is the tantric goddess Vajradevi.

The *Kumari* is selected in early childhood from a group of candidates who take part in a secret ritual conducted by priests, which includes being left in a room full of severed water buffalo heads, the theory being that if she is really a reincarnation of the bloodthirsty goddess Durga, she will not mind!

She lives in seclusion, away from her family, in the service of religion. She leaves her house very rarely, traditionally to perform religious duties such as legitimizing the rule of the king by administering a *tikka* to his forehead as a symbol



of the Third Eye of Wisdom, on the occasion of the Indra Jatra festival. She is believed to have great power and is widely worshipped by both Hindus and Buddhists, who will wait under her windows hoping for a glimpse of her. As soon as she begins menstruating or loses blood by injury, she returns to her family and is replaced.



### ISLAM AND OTHER RELIGIONS

The first Muslims to arrive in Nepal were traders from Kashmir and India, who came between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. The descendants of these early Muslim settlers speak Nepali and are not easy to distinguish from high-caste Hindus. After the Indian Mutiny of 1857, many more came north to escape the violence and settled in the Terai. They maintain close links to communities across the border in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. Unlike in India, in Nepal they have coexisted in peace with their Hindu neighbors.

There are a small number of practicing Christians in Nepal, who tend to meet in private

houses. In rural areas, aspects of shamanistic or animalist religions continue to be practiced.

### RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS AND RITES OF PASSAGE

Religion is such an important aspect of life in Nepal that it is sometimes said that “every other building is a temple, and every other day is a festival.” There are hundreds of religious festivals throughout the year. Most are related to Hindu or Buddhist gods or tradition, but some honor personal relatives or ancestors, while others mark the passing of the seasons or agricultural cycles. They may be celebrated at temples or other religious sites (such as rivers), or at home. Some are celebrated countrywide, others are regional. Many involve ritual bathing and most culminate in feasting within the family. They are part of the common heritage, and bring people together whatever their creed or ethnic or cultural background.

Be sure to join in! Nepalese hospitality, inclusiveness, and a genuine eagerness to share their culture mean that you are likely to be invited to participate in proceedings. This can be an enlightening experience, and it is always enjoyable.

Businesspeople or those operating to a tight schedule should be aware that the country may come to a complete standstill for days at a time during festivals. This can be a problem especially

during Dasain and Tihar, celebrated in September and late October/early November, when it is traditional for people to return to their ancestral home or visit family. Some of the most important festivals are given below.

### THE NEPALESE CALENDAR

Officially Nepal follows the Vikram Sambat solar calendar, which is fifty-seven years ahead of the Gregorian calendar. The Nepalese year begins in mid-April and consists of twelve months that are out of step with the Western ones. Thus the Nepali year 2064 began in April 2007. Most religious festivals, however, are calculated by astrologers according to a lunar calendar, so dates can vary. Things are further complicated by the fact that Newars follow their own calendar, celebrating their new year in November, and the Tibetan peoples of the mountains follow a different calendar again.

### January/February

**Basant Panchami** marks the beginning of spring and is devoted to Saraswati, the goddess of learning. Schoolchildren make offerings at her shrines to bring success in learning.

**Losar**, the Tibetan New Year, is observed by Tibeto-Burmese people with folk songs and dancing

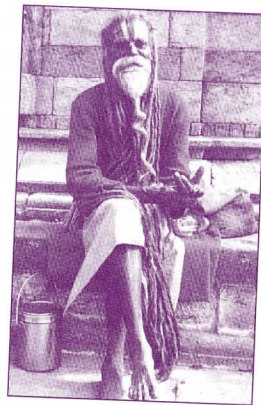
at the new moon in February. Hundreds of lamas and traditionally-dressed Tibetans circumambulate the stupa at Bodhnath in Kathmandu.

### February/March

**Shivaratri** brings thousands of *sadhus* and other pilgrims from all over Nepal and India to Pashupatinath. People bathe in the Bagmati. At night, hundreds of oil lamps are lit and an all-night vigil is held.

Also known as the Festival of Colors, **Holi** heralds the beginning of spring and looks forward to the coming harvest. People roam the streets throwing colored powder and water at each other. Foreigners are likely to be special targets. It is all very good-natured, but be prepared to throw your clothes away afterward, or don't go out.

At the festival of **Rato Machhendranath**, the image of this god is transported around Patan on a tall, precarious-looking wooden chariot that dwarfs the men heaving it along on its solid wooden wheels. This god is believed to have great influence over the monsoon. For Buddhists Machhendranath is Lokeshvara, lord of the world. The festival is thus celebrated by both Hindus and Buddhists, and was traditionally attended by the king, and the *Kumari Devi*, who gave the king her blessing.



### April/May

**Bisket Jatra** marks the Nepali New Year, which starts at the beginning of the Nepali month Baisakh, more or less in the middle of April. This is an official public holiday. In Bhaktapur the fierce, angry god Bhairab is taken for a ride around the town on another cumbersome chariot. A huge lingam is erected on the riverbank, only to be pulled down again the next day in a tug-of-war.

**Mani Rimdu** is a three-day Sherpa festival at the full moon in May and celebrates the vanquishing of the ancient Tibetan Bon religion by Buddhism.

**Buddha Jayanti** is celebrated by both Hindus and Buddhists to mark the birth, enlightenment, and death of Buddha (a reincarnation of Vishnu for Hindus).

### July/August

At the festival of **Janai Purnima**, *Bahun* and *Chhetri* men change the *janai* (sacred thread) that they wear from left shoulder to right hip to symbolize purity. Everyone is given a thread to be tied around their wrist on this day as a protective talisman for the rest of the year.

**Gai Jatra** venerates the cow. The Newar people believe that cows will lead them to the next world after death. Those who have lost relatives during the previous year join a procession of people

leading cows through the streets of Kathmandu in order to facilitate their deceased relatives' passage into the next world. Later, people wear cow masks, and the tradition is to exchange silly jokes!

### August/September

**Teej** is a special, three-day festival for women, involving feasting, fasting, ritual bathing to wash away sin, and dancing. They pray for the longevity of their husbands and the success of their marriages. After bathing, they traditionally don all the red and gold finery of their wedding day. Western women are welcome spectators and may well be invited to join in.



**Indra Jatra** marks the end of the monsoon and is celebrated enthusiastically by both Hindus and Buddhists. A procession of three golden chariots is taken around the city, carrying the *Kumari* and her attendants—two boys dressed up as Ganesh and Bhairab. Traditionally the king pays homage to her during this time and is rewarded with her blessing for a further year.

### September–December

**Dasain** is the most important festival in Nepal. The country virtually shuts down and traffic conditions are chaotic beforehand as everyone makes the effort to get home. People celebrate by eating good food and buying new clothes. It takes place after the

monsoon, in late September or early October. It is also known as Durga Puja, as it celebrates the slaying of the buffalo demon Mahisasura by this goddess.

Certain days of Dasain are more significant than others. On the first day the devout bathe and plant barley in sand and water taken from the river. On the seventh day, *Fulpati* (“sacred flowers”), flowers are brought from the old palace of Prithvi Narayan Shah at Gorkha to the king at Hanuman Dhoka in Kathmandu. The eighth day is *Kala Ratri* (“black night”), when eight buffaloes and a hundred-and-eight goats are decapitated in Durbar Square, Kathmandu, ideally with one chop of the knife.

This is one festival in which it is impossible to

avoid guts and gore, so if you are at all squeamish, don't go out! Temples are awash in sacrificial blood on the ninth day, when literally thousands of goats meet their end—thirty-five to forty thousand goats are slaughtered on that day in the town of Pokhara alone. The tools of a person's trade (guns for a soldier, a saw for a carpenter) are then sprinkled with sacrificial blood in the hope that Durga will bless their

usefulness and accuracy. Blood is also sprinkled on all vehicles (including the aircraft of Nepal



Airlines) to safeguard against accidents, and if you take a closer look at the clear, plastic-covered “padlock chains” draped around parked motorcycles and bicycles, you'll find they are actually the cleaned out intestines of a goat!

Not many Nepalis eat a lot of meat but at Dasain, most people will have goat for dinner. Family visits are made on the tenth day and parents put *tikkas* on their children's foreheads and shoots of the barley planted on the first day in their hair.

**Tihar**, also known as the Festival of Lights, lasts five days and is celebrated toward the end of October or early November. On the first day, crows (messengers of the god of death) are honored. On the second day, dogs, though kicked out of the way throughout the rest of the year, are honored for their role in guiding the deceased across the river of the dead. Cows are garlanded on the third day, bullocks on the fourth, and the fifth day is called *Bhai Tikka* (Brothers' Day), when sisters honor their brothers with *tikkas* and blessings, and gifts are exchanged. On the third, most important day, also known as *Lakshmi Puja*, people light up their homes with candles and wick lamps in order to usher in Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. As with many festivals, Tihar ends with a family feast.

**Sita Bibaha Panchami** recalls the marriage of Rama and Sita and is celebrated mainly in Janakpur, birthplace of Sita, in late November or early December.