

ॐ CHAPTER FIVE

Holy Places

Devout Hindus consider all of India sacred. They look everywhere and see the presence of Brahman, the Supreme Spirit. As you learned in Chapter Two, Hindus believe that this Spirit is a part of everything that exists. For this reason, they make pilgrimages to sites where one of Brahman's manifestations (i.e. Vishnu, Siva) is believed to have lived or performed miracles.

and require great sacrifice on the part of most Hindus to reach them. Some are as far away as a thousand miles. Pilgrims travel for days by train and complete the journey on foot. (Often these are arranged by tour directors.) Their destinations might be popular shrines or mandirs (temples). Or sometimes their pilgrimages are to towns or villages considered sacred. Then there are rivers and mountains that hold special significance to Hindus.

Hindus visit these pilgrimage sites for a variety of reasons. Some want to worship at special temples and give thanks to Brahman. Others hope that by journeying to a holy place they will gain merit, or good karma. Some go to atone for breaking a religious law, such as killing a cow or damaging a murti (image of a deity). Still others want to experience Brahman and purify their minds and bodies. Finally, some go on a pilgrimage to visit a special *guru*, or religious teacher. Whatever the reason, Hindus consider pilgrimages a very important part of their religion.

Section Review:

1. Why do devout Hindus see all of India as sacred?
2. To what kinds of places do Hindus make pilgrimages?
3. For what reasons do Hindus make a pilgrimage?

Important Sites

Pilgrims who can manage it organize their journeys around one deity. In doing so, they try to visit every site where a particular god or goddess is said to be present. Often this poses a



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There are countless holy places in India, many of which are within easy walking distance. For example, an entire village might go on a pilgrimage to a local shrine situated at the top of a nearby hill. Although the climb to the top might take only a few hours, the physical exertion of getting there is considered part of the religious experience.

Other pilgrimage sites are far away

Words to remember:

guru

problem. There are, for example, 108 places where either Shakti (the Mother Goddess) or her power is said to be present. How many Hindus do you think can include that many sites in their pilgrimages?

Although there are many holy places, four are considered the most important. They consist of mandirs located in the four corners of India. One mandir is at *Badrinath* in the north. Another is located at *Rameshvaram* in the south. A third can be found at *Puri* on the east coast, while a fourth stands at *Dwarka* on the west coast. The mandirs at Puri, Badrinath, and Dwarka are dedicated to Vishnu. The mandir at Rameshvaram honors Siva. Hindus make every effort to visit these temples.

Another mandir that attracts many pilgrims is the temple of *Tirumala-Tirupati* in Andhra Pradesh. It is dedicated to *Venkateshwara*, one of the forms of Vishnu. Part of Tirumala-Tirupati's attraction is due to the fact that it is India's richest temple. Because it is also one of the world's wealthiest religious institutions, you should find certain facts about it interesting.

Why is the mandir at Andhra Pradesh so wealthy? Some well-to-do Hindus make offerings of diamonds and gold when they worship there. Others are known to donate cars and trucks to the mandir. Gifts of money offered by ordinary pilgrims amount to millions of dollars annually. The temple uses these funds to finance many projects and endeavors. Monies raised by the temple go to help charities, housing developments, hospitals, educational institutions, and religious publications. In recent years, the temple has also donated money to help solve some of India's environmental problems.

Section Review:

1. Which four sites or places do devout Hindus try to visit? Which gods do these sites honor?—

2. Which mandir is the richest temple in India? How does it acquire its wealth?



Holy Rivers

Hindus consider seven rivers in India to be sacred. They believe that if they bathe in these rivers, all their sins are washed away. They also believe they can wash away the bad karma of previous lives. The seven rivers are the Ganges, Yamuna, Indus, and Sarasvati in the north and the Narmada, Godavari, and Kaveri in the south. Where two rivers meet and come together is a place thought to be especially sacred. This is true of the confluence of the Ganges and the Yamuna at the city of Allahabad.

Of the seven rivers, the *Ganges* is considered the holiest. Hindus call it the "Ganga." They also refer to it as the "River of Heaven" because they believe it flowed to earth from the skies. (Refer back to the section entitled "Siva (Shiva)" in Chapter Three.)

The holiest place along the Ganges is the city of *Varanasi*, or Benares. Hindus

For Hindus, rivers are a symbol of God who gives life. Bathing in one of India's seven holy rivers is believed to wash away sin. The most famous river in India is the Ganges. Hindus believe that drinking even a drop of the Ganges rids one of a lifetime of sin.

Words to remember:

Badrinath
Rameshvaram
Puri
Dwarka
Tirumala-Tirupati
Venkateshwara



believe that the god Siva lived there. At this *tirtha*, or holy bathing place, Hindus of all castes and jatis mingle and bathe together. The preferred time for bathing is at dawn. Bathers descend to the water from *ghats*, special platforms with steps. After bathing, they line up to make offerings in the temple dedicated to Siva.

For some Hindus, the waters of the Ganges serve another purpose. People take the bodies of deceased relatives there to be cremated on one of the ghats. They believe that by scattering the ashes of the dead in the river, the cycle of reincarnation is broken and one's soul attains moksha, or union with Brahman.

Section Review:

1. How many rivers in India are considered holy?
2. Which river is thought to be the most sacred?
3. Why is the Ganges called the "River of Heaven"?
4. Why do Hindus believe in bathing in the Ganges and other holy rivers?
5. Why do Hindus scatter the ashes of the deceased in the Ganges River?

For Further Thought:

1. Unlike Islam, which expects all Muslims to make at least one pilgrimage to Mecca during their lifetime, Hinduism does not require pilgrimages to holy sites. Yet, many Hindus make pilgrimages a part of their religious lives. If you were a Hindu, would you feel an obligation and/or a need to go on a pilgrimage? Why or why not?
2. Hindus believe that bathing in a holy river such as the Ganges washes away sin. How is this practice similar to baptism in Christianity? How is it different?
3. You have learned that the Ganges River plays an important role in the Hindu religion. But the Ganges is important for other reasons too. Look up this river in an encyclopedia or other source and write a one-page report about it.
4. Every religion has its holy sites. If you were given an all-expense-paid trip to make a pilgrimage, where would you choose to go? Why?
5. Look up the word *pilgrim* in a dictionary. Write a paragraph explaining the difference between pilgrims who go on religious journeys and the Pilgrims who settled at Plymouth Rock in Massachusetts in 1620.

Other Holy Places

At the beginning of this chapter you learned that Hindus consider all of India to be sacred. This includes not only certain villages, towns, cities, and rivers, but mountains and caves as well. Hindus look at the Himalayas as the "dwelling place of the gods," and they go on pilgrimages to mountain peaks that are within reach.

The architecture of Hindu mandirs reflects the reverence Indians have for certain mountains and caves. Mandirs in some parts of the country have tall towers called *shikharas*. These towers represent the mountains on which the gods dwell. And the innermost shrine of the mandirs have no windows, making them resemble the caves in which early Hindus worshiped. The influence of the mountains in the construction of these temples is easy to see.

Section Review:

1. Why do Hindus consider the Himalayas sacred?
2. What are shikharas?

Words to remember:

Ganges
Varanasi
tirtha
ghats
shikharas