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India's strict caste system dates back to about 1500 B.C., when Aryan invaders from central Asia attacked India. Initially instituted by the conquering Aryans to prohibit contact between themselves and the native population, the caste system later became one of the teachings of Hinduism.

exhibiting courage, bravery, cleverness, fearlessness, generosity, and knowledge of how to rule a kingdom.

### Vaishyas

The Vaishyas made up the merchant class. Hindu scriptures stated that they sprang from the thighs or the lap of Brahma. They included storekeepers, traders, and craftsmen. Farmers were originally also part of this caste. The duties of the Vaishyas centered around agriculture, cattle-tending, and trade. As time passed, the responsibility for farming and tending cattle fell to the Sudras, the lowest of the four varnas.

### Sudras

At the bottom of the social order were the Sudras. They were thought to be associated with the feet of Brahma. Therefore, it was their duty to support the other varnas. The word *Sudra* meant "slave," and that is exactly what the upper varnas intended for the Sudras to be. This was the varna created to keep the dark-skinned people conquered by the Aryans "in their place."

### Untouchables

Even lower than the Sudras was a group referred to as the *untouchables*. They were called this because people in the upper varnas believed they would become defiled or polluted if they touched them. Because they did not belong to any caste, *untouchables* were also known as *outcastes*. Some *untouchables* were prisoners of war. Others were criminals. Many people became *untouchables* after they violated a rule and were thrown out of their particular castes.

*Untouchables* performed tasks no one else would do. These tasks included cleaning and tanning animal hides; sweeping the streets, and dealing with corpses. Although they were never physically mistreated, *untouchables* were discriminated against at every turn. They could not draw water from a well used by the higher varnas, enter a temple frequented by Brahmins, or send their children to Hindu schools. Some upper-caste Hindus even believed that the shadow of an *untouchable* would cause them to become unclean.

As you will learn in Chapter Eight of this book, caste discrimination against so-called "untouchables" was eventually outlawed in India. But its practice remained strong well into the 20th century. Historian Will Durant, in *Our Oriental Heritage*, relates an incident that occurred in 1913 that shows how strongly Hindus felt about any contact

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with an untouchable. In that year, the child of a rich Hindu fell into a fountain. No one was around to help the mother except a passing untouchable who offered to dive into the fountain and rescue the child, but the mother refused his help. So strong were her feelings of revulsion toward the untouchable that she let her child drown rather than have his savior defile the water in the fountain.

### A Summary

The Hindu religion upheld the caste system. It taught that people were born into a certain varna, and a jati or caste within that varna, and that they remained in it all their lives. Their jobs, who they married, and even what they ate were determined by their particular caste. Were they condemned to remain in one caste or varna forever? Not necessarily. Hindus, like Buddhists, believe in reincarnation. That is the belief that people are born into a different life form after they die. According to Hindu teachings, if one led a good life while on

earth he or she might be reborn into a higher caste. It all depends on one's karma in his or her present life. Karma has to do with one's actions and behavior while living. You will learn about samsara, or reincarnation, and karma, as well as the Hindu desire to attain moksha, in Chapter Two, "Beliefs and Worship."



### Words to remember:

caste system  
varna  
jatis  
untouchables  
Brahmins  
Kshatriyas  
Vaishyas  
Sudras  
Bhagavad Gita  
Mahabharata  
reincarnation  
karma  
moksha

### Section Review:

1. What led the Aryans to establish the caste system?
2. What is the difference between a *varna* and a *jati*, or caste?
3. What four varnas made up the caste system?
4. What were Sudras forbidden to hear or recite?
5. What was the duty of the Kshatriyas?
6. Why were those who were outside the caste system referred to as "untouchables"?
7. In what way did Hinduism uphold the caste system?

### For Further Thought:

1. What are some similarities between a caste system and a class system? How are the systems different? Does every society have a class system? If so, of which class do you consider yourself a member?
2. Put yourself in the place of the woman who refused the help of a passing untouchable even though her child was drowning in a fountain. Had you been there, do you think you would have done the same? Why or why not?
3. Compare/contrast the Aryan segregation of the dark-skinned peoples of the Indus Valley to the treatment of African-Americans in the South in the years before and after the Civil War. Who would you say suffered the most?
4. In your opinion, what are the underlying causes of prejudice and discrimination? Can either be prevented?
5. Find more information about the ancient Indus Valley cities of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa and write a two-page report describing them. Include a sketch with your report.
6. Pretend you are a young child in an untouchable family of yesteryear. Create a dialogue you might have had with your parents as to why you can't attend the same schools as other Hindus or even draw water from the same fountains. Ask why you must accept and live under such discriminatory laws.

# ॐ CHAPTER TWO

## *Beliefs and Worship*

The word *Hindu* comes from the name of the river where civilization developed in India—the Indus. At first the word was used to refer to the people who lived beyond the Indus. In time, it was used to denote all the people of India, but in a truer sense, it refers to the religion of that country. Hinduism is actually a western term. Hindus themselves refer to their religion as *Sanatan dharma*, which means “the eternal religion” or “eternal law.”

Unlike some other religions, there are no set rules for being a Hindu. Yet, Hindus share certain beliefs and practices. In this chapter, you will learn what these beliefs and practices involve.

### *Brahman and Atman*

All Hindus believe in *Brahman*. Brahman is not a god; it is the Supreme Spirit that is everywhere. Everyone and everything is united spiritually because Brahman is a part of everything that exists. The land, the oceans, and the sky have Brahman in them. So do all living things, be they human, animal, or vegetable.

(You should not confuse Brahman, the Supreme Spirit, with Brahman, or Brahmin, a member of the Hindu priestly caste. Nor should you think “Brahman” and “Brahma” are the same. *Brahma* is a chief Hindu god, one of the many forms

Depicted at right is Brahma, the supreme god of the Brahmin priest caste. He is here shown having four heads and four hands, each head standing for one of the four holy Vedas. He holds in his hands the ritual objects of a priest: a Veda manuscript, a vessel containing holy water, a sacrificial spoon, and a sling.



in which Brahman appears.)

Brahman is neither male or female. It does not have human form, because to have human characteristics would make it imperfect. It therefore cannot be described. Because it has no form, Hindus have created thousands of gods and goddesses which are believed to be *different manifestations of Brahman*. Chief among these are *Brahma*, the Creator, *Siva*, the Destroyer, and *Vishnu*, the Preserver or Renewer. These gods and others are discussed in detail in Chapter Three, "Gods and Goddesses."

Hindus believe that all living things have a spirit, or soul. This soul is *Atman*. *Atman* comes from *Brahman*. Since it represents the spirit of Brahman, *Atman* is found in animals as well as humans. Cows have a soul. Monkeys have a soul. Even worms have souls. This is why Hindus believe it is wrong to hurt or kill any animal. They especially hold the cow to be sacred. The cow throughout history has always been an important part of Indian life and culture. It has served as a means of transportation, has provided nourishing milk, and has pulled the plow that has tilled the soil.

In the next section, you will better see the connection between Brahman and the the *Atman* in humans.

### Section Review:

1. What do Hindus prefer to call their religion?
2. Who or what is Brahman?
3. What is the relationship between Brahman and the Hindu gods Brahma, Siva, and Vishnu?
4. What is *Atman*?
5. Why do Hindus hold cows to be sacred?

### *Dharma, Karma, Samsara, and Moksha*

An understanding of four terms are necessary if one is to grasp the essence of Hinduism. These terms are *dharmā*,

*karmā*, *samsara*, and *moksha*. Each is explained below.

### Dharma

*Dharma* is a word from the Sanskrit language meaning "to sustain." *Dharma* is "truth, righteousness, law, justice, and duty." Above all, it is duty. Hindus believe that life is concerned with a series of duties. These duties call for every Hindu



to be honest and good, to be a good worker, and not to hurt other people and animals. *Dharma* is different for every person. It depends on one's family background, means of livelihood, plus other factors.

Hindus believe life consists of four stages called *ashramas*. The stages are: the student stage, the householder stage, the retirement stage, and the renunciation stage. While it is not possible for every Hindu to progress through each of these stages, they do serve as guidelines for the ideal Hindu life.

In the student stage (*brahmacharya*), Hindus attempt to learn the scriptures and to attain as much education as they can. In the householder stage (*grihastha*), they are expected to take on the roles of married couples and parents,



To show their devotion to God, Hindu worshippers have a marking called a *tilak* mark, which is made of powders and ashes, placed on their foreheads as they enter a temple to pray

### Words to remember:

Sanatan dharma  
Brahman  
Brahma  
Siva  
Vishnu  
Atman



and to become a vital part of community life. These stages are relatively easy to attain. Beginning with the retirement stage (*vanaprastha*), however, what the Hindu scriptures recommend becomes more difficult to meet. At this stage, a person is expected to spend more time at a temple and attend more *satsangs*—meetings often held in Hindu homes where scriptures, stories, and songs are recited.

Few Hindus can fulfill the renunciation stage of life (*sannyasa*). This calls for a person to give up the material things of the world and become a wandering monk. The holy scriptures point out that this gives the person more time to meditate and to attain *moksha*—

**Words to remember:**

- dharma
- karma
- samsara
- moksha
- ashramas
- satsangs
- sadhus
- Karma yoga
- Jnana yoga
- Bhakti yoga
- Raja yoga

actions and behavior. Hindus believe that one's actions in this life determine how he or she will be reborn in the next life. They believe that life is a continuous cycle of death and rebirth. (Buddhists also believe this.) This is called *samsara*, or *reincarnation*. It is also referred to as the *transmigration of the soul*, because Hindus believe that the soul after death moves from one person (or thing) to another.

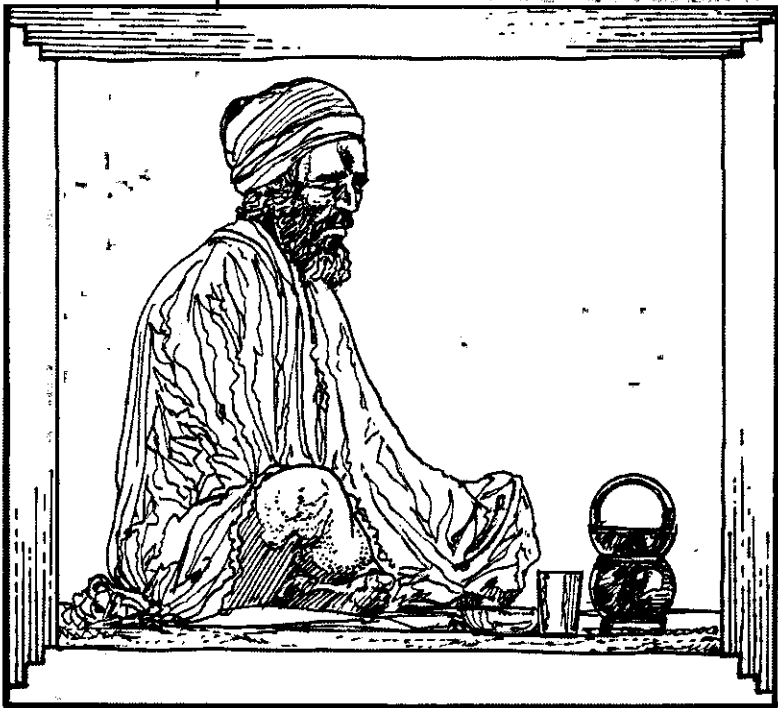
This is how Hindus believe karma works. If a person has led a good life and has not harmed anyone or anything, his or her soul might be reborn into a higher caste. It is even possible to jump to the Brahmin, or priestly caste. If, on the other hand, a person has been evil and thoughtless of others, he or she might be reborn into a lower caste. If they are particularly bad, their soul can be reborn into an animal, even a lowly worm. In such cases, the soul has to attempt to work its way back up the ladder in a series of rebirths.

**Moksha**

The goal of every Hindu is to attain *moksha*. This is similar to *enlightenment* in Buddhism. Moksha is not a place the soul goes to when it has overcome all evil and desire. It is not like heaven. It is when Atman, or the soul or spirit, merges or reunites with Brahman. When this occurs, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth ends. Hindus liken this to a river flowing into a sea. Moksha can only be attained when the soul becomes completely pure and has detached itself from everything on earth.

Hindu scriptures point out that there are four paths or ways that lead to moksha. These are the paths of good works, knowledge, devotion, and meditation. Some Hindus choose to follow more than one path in their efforts to unite with Brahman.

The path of good works is called *Karma yoga*. It centers around people doing their dharma, or duty, as their

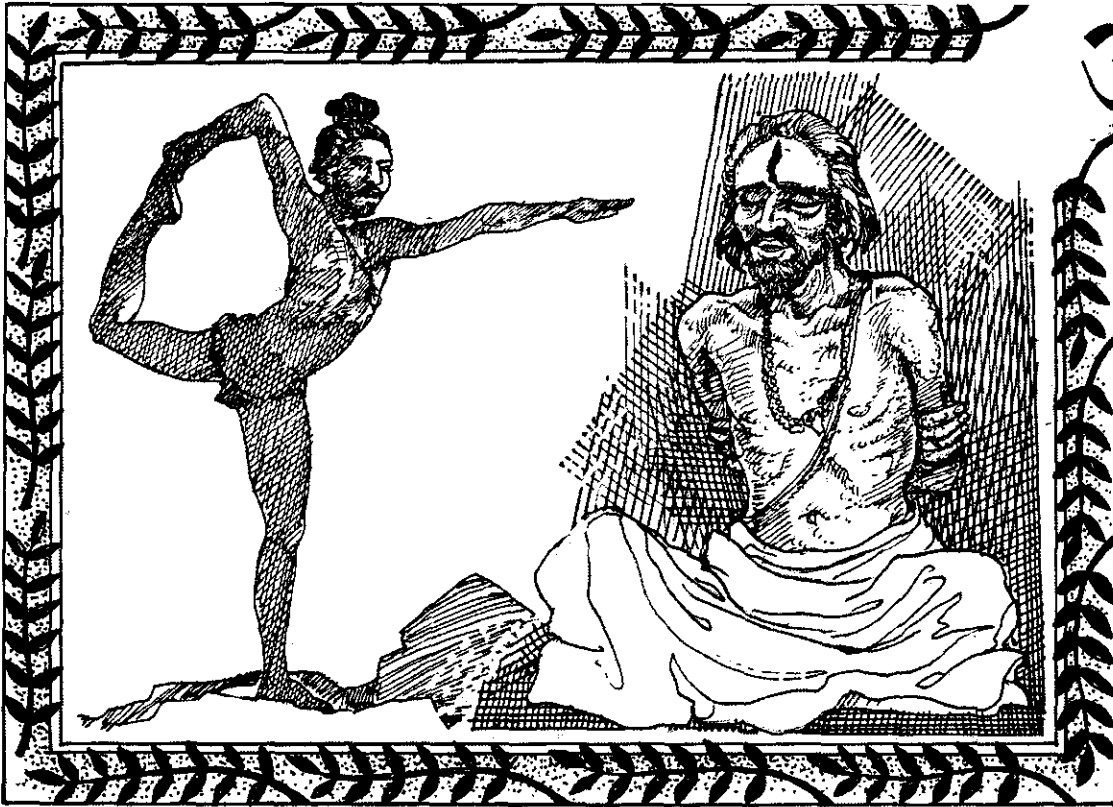


Few Hindus can fulfill *sannyasa* or the renunciation stage of life, which calls for the giving up of material things and a devotion to meditation.

release from the cycle of rebirth. Those who do and are able to give up their homes and possessions become holy men known as *sadhus*. They are supported by other Hindus who give them food and money.

**Karma and Samsara**

If Hindus fulfill their dharma to the best of their abilities, this will result in good *karma*. Karma has to do with



The path of meditation is called *Raja yoga*. It involves postures and breathing exercises designed to rid the mind of all thoughts except the attainment of *moksha*.

particular social group calls for it. The path of knowledge is known as *Jnana yoga*. It has to do with people attaining as much spiritual knowledge as they can. The path of devotion is *Bhakti yoga*. Hindus who follow this path choose a particular deity and worship him or her during their entire lifetime. The path of meditation is called *Raja yoga*. This is the path that people outside of Hinduism see as simply *yoga*. It involves positions and breathing exercises designed to rid the mind of all thoughts except the attainment of *moksha*.

#### Section Review:

1. What does each Hindu's *dharma* depend on?
2. What are *ashramas*?
3. Explain the renunciation stage of a Hindu's duty.
4. What is *karma*?
5. What is *samsara*? When does *samsara* come to an end?
6. How is *moksha* attained?
7. What is *Raja yoga*?

#### Hindu Worship: The Mandir

When Hindus worship in public, they go to a temple called a *mandir*. Like the places of worship of other religions, *mandirs* come in all shapes and sizes. Those in villages are small and quite simple. Those in towns and cities may be large and brightly decorated on the exterior.

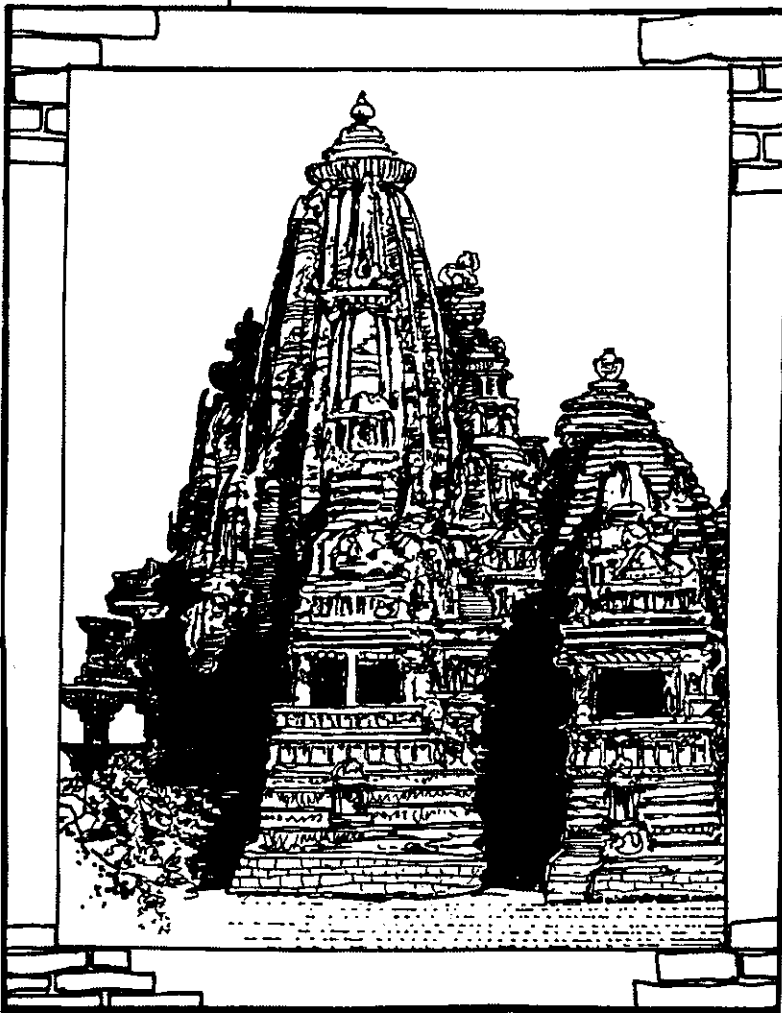
Hindus believe that certain gods and goddesses live in *mandirs*. Each *mandir* is dedicated to either Vishnu, Siva, or Shakti, the Mother Goddess. There is a *murti* (image or statue) of one of these deities in the main shrine room of the *mandir*. Some temples have *murtis* of all three. In addition, there may be *murtis* of the gods Ganesha and Hanuman. Though you don't realize it, you may be familiar with Ganesha. He is the god who is depicted with the body of a man and the head of an elephant. The elephant's head represents his power to remove obstacles. As with other deities, Ganesha is discussed further in Chapter Three.

#### Words to remember:

**mandir**  
**murti**  
**pujari**  
**tilak**  
**arti lamp**  
**prasad**  
**pandit**



Many larger mandirs are built near rivers or some other source of water. This is so worshippers can bathe before entering the temple. This is not



“worship”) has prepared the murti or image for worship. He does this in several steps. First he washes and dries the murti. Then he applies a paste of sandalwood to it. (Sandalwood comes from the heartwood of an Asian tree.) He also makes a *tilak* mark on the head of the murti, similar to the one on his own forehead. Finally, he dresses the murti in red and gold clothes and decorates it with flowers.

Before the worshippers see the murti, the pujari lights a lamp called an *arti lamp*. The lamp contains five flames, one for each of the five senses. A curtain that had concealed the murti from view is then drawn open. The light from the arti enables worshippers to see and “be seen” by the god. The arti is waved in front of the murti, and then it is passed around among the people in the mandir. The people hold their hands over the flame and then rub their hands over their foreheads and hair. They believe that by doing this they receive power and a blessing from the god.

There are no set days for Hindus to worship in a mandir. Some go everyday; others visit a mandir only at festival times. But in towns and cities with large temples, people may go there for other reasons. In the west, large mandirs often double as community centers. There are also halls for weddings and classrooms for children. In this respect, the mandir provides services similar to those of Christian churches and Jewish synagogues.

Hindus who worship in a mandir make the tilak mark on their heads. The mark is made from a mixture of powders and ashes. The mark indicates that they have been to worship. (Don't confuse the mark with the red dot that Hindu women wear in the middle of their foreheads to show they are married.) Upon leaving the mandir, people receive *prasad* from a *pandit*, or priest. *Prasad* is blessed food that has been offered to the god of the mandir. It may be fruit, nuts, or sweets.

When Hindus worship in public, they go to a temple called a *mandir*. Mandirs come in all shapes and sizes. Those in villages are small and simple. Those in towns and cities may be large with brightly decorated exteriors.

because they are considered dirty; it is to purify themselves before making offerings to the gods. When they arrive at the temple, they take off their shoes and leave them outside. This is to show respect for the murtis in the temple. As they enter the temple, worshippers ring a bell. This is like knocking on a door. It tells those inside the temple that someone has come to worship.

Once inside the mandir, people make offerings to the god to whom the temple is dedicated. These offerings consist of fruit, nuts, flowers, and sometimes coins. Long before this happens, however, a religious official called a *pujari* (from the Hindu word *puja*, which means



### Section Review:

1. What is a Hindu temple called?
2. What is a *murti*?
3. Why do worshippers remove their shoes before entering a mandir?
4. How does a *pujari* prepare a murti for worship?
5. What is the significance of the *arti lamp*?
6. What is *prasad*?

### Worship at Home

Hindu worship at home is similar to that in a mandir. Every home has a shrine where an image or statue (*murti*) of a god or goddess is kept. The shrine may be a simple shelf in a room. In a large home, the shrine might be a separate room set aside for worship.

Before home worship begins, the murti is washed, dried and daubed with a special powder or paste. It is then surrounded by flowers and perfume. The family makes offerings to the murti while reciting *mantras*, verses from the Hindu

holy book. To show respect for the particular god or goddess, family members remove their shoes and sit cross-legged in front of it. They might also kneel and touch the floor in front of the murti with their forehead.

Do you remember the ritual involving the *arti lamp* that takes place in the mandir? The same is true of worship in the home. The lamp is lit, and family members hold their hands over the flames. Then they wipe their hands on their head. In so doing, they receive the blessings of the god or goddess they are worshiping.

In addition to worshiping in the mandir and at home, Hindus sometimes worship at roadside shrines. Because they believe that Brahman is everywhere and is part of everything, where they worship is of little importance.

### Section Review:

1. How do shrines in Hindu homes vary?
2. What are mantras?



### Words to remember:

**mantras**



Every Hindu home has a shrine where an image or statue of a god or goddess is kept. The shrine may be as simple as a shelf in a room. In a large home, it may be a whole room set aside for worship.



## Symbols

Our study of worship would not be complete without looking at Hindu symbols. One of these symbols you are familiar with, but for different reasons. That symbol is the *swastika*. The swastika is an ancient symbol that resembles a cross with bent arms. To the Hindus it is a sign of peace and good luck. Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany, however, took the swastika as their emblem and turned it into a symbol of evil. So don't be confused when you look through a book about Hinduism and see such a sign. It has nothing to do with the Nazis.

In Sanskrit, the *swastika* means "bringing health." The arms represent paths to Brahman. They are bent because the way to Brahman is difficult. The arms come from a central point to show that everything in the universe comes from a single source. The swastika also represents the sun.

Another Hindu symbol is the sacred syllable *om* (sometimes spelled *oum* or *aum*). *Om* represents the sound of Brahman. Hindus utter the syllable when

they begin and end prayer. They also recite it when hymns are sung and mantras (holy verses) are chanted. *Om* is the symbol most used to stand for Hinduism. Just as the cross represents Christianity, the menorah Judaism, and the Eight Spoked Wheel Buddhism, *om* is the symbol of the Hindu religion.

A third symbol is the conch shell. Just as a ram's horn called a shofar is blown when a Jewish service begins, the blowing of a conch shell announces the start of worship in a Hindu mandir.

The bell is another symbol in Hinduism. As you read in the section entitled "Hindu Worship: The Mandir," people ring a bell when they enter the temple.

### Section Review:

1. What is a *swastika*? What does it represent to Hindus?
2. How did Nazi Germany pervert the use of the swastika?
3. What is the origin of the sacred syllable *om*?
4. What role does *om* play in Hindu worship?

### Words to remember:

swastika  
om

### For Further Thought:

1. How is the concept of Brahman similar to the God envisioned by Jews, Christians, and Muslims? How is it different?
2. Tell why you agree or disagree with the concept of reincarnation.
3. Write a one-page report in response to the statement "Religions are more alike than they are different." Give reasons why you agree or disagree with this statement.
4. How is worship in a mandir different from that in your place of worship? How is it similar? Write a brief report pointing out such differences and similarities.
5. Explain in several paragraphs how *moksha* differs from the heaven of Christians and others.
6. Pretend you are of the Hindu faith. (If you are, this should be an easy assignment.) Write a letter to a friend of another faith explaining the basic beliefs of your religion.
7. Devout Hindus are vegetarians. Are there advantages to following a vegetarian diet? Are there drawbacks? How do you feel about vegetarianism in general?

# CHAPTER THREE

## *Gods and Goddesses*



Hindus recognize and worship many gods and goddesses. Some sources put the number of deities worshiped in the thousands. Others limit the number to the hundreds. Regardless, to someone trying to understand Hinduism, sifting through the Hindu family of gods and goddesses can be both confusing and mind-boggling. But as was mentioned in the Overview, the picture becomes much clearer if one remembers that Hindu deities are nothing more than representations of the many aspects or sides of Brahman, the Supreme Being described in Chapter Two. Each god or goddess provides Hindus with a different way of worshiping Brahman.

### *The Trimurti*

The most important of the Hindu gods who represent some aspect of Brahman are *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, and *Siva* (or *Shiva*). Again, Brahma is the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Siva the Destroyer. (The labels "Preserver" and "Destroyer" are explained later.) They form what is called the *Trimurti*. The prefix *tri*, of course, refers to "three," and you learned previously that *murti* is an image or statue representing a particular deity.

Of the three who make up the Trimurti, Hindus consider Vishnu and Siva the most important. They rarely worship Brahma. This is because they believe that after Brahma created the world he had little to do with what happened on earth. Still, Hindus are aware of his presence. In pictures and images, he is portrayed as having four faces and four arms. The four faces show that he sees everything that is happening. The four arms represent the



four points of the compass, again pointing to the belief that he sees everything and is everywhere.

Because Vishnu and Siva are worshiped more than any of the other deities, each is covered in a separate section.

### *Section Review:*

1. What is the *Trimurti*?
2. Why is Brahma not as important to Hindus as Vishnu and Siva?
3. Why is Brahma shown having four faces?

There are thousands of gods and goddesses in Hinduism, but the three most important—called the *trimurti*—are (at left) Brahma, the Creator, Vishnu (center), the Preserver, and Shiva (at right), the Destroyer.

### **Words to remember:**

**Trimurti**



## Vishnu

### Words to remember:

avatars  
chakra  
Rama  
Krishna  
Ramayana

Vishnu is believed to have appeared in at least ten different bodies including a fish, a tortoise, and a boar.

Vishnu is worshiped more than any other god. He is called "the Preserver" because Hindus believe he has come to earth a number of times to protect it from danger. They believe he has appeared in at least ten different bodies, some of which are animal. (The forms in which Vishnu has appeared are called *avatars*.) In addition to various human forms, Vishnu is believed to have appeared as a fish, a tortoise, a boar, and a creature who is half-lion and half-man.

Vishnu is often shown as having four arms. In one hand he holds a lotus, in a second a conch shell, in a third a mace,

and in a fourth a chakra, a wheel that symbolizes time, creation, and death. Each of these objects holds a special meaning. The lotus is a symbol of purity. The conch shell reminds worshippers to destroy ignorance and evil in their lives. A mace, of course, is a club Vishnu uses against his enemies. And the chakra serves the same purpose; it returns to Vishnu's hand after it has struck an enemy.

Although Vishnu is believed to have returned to earth in many forms, the two most important are *Rama* and *Krishna*. Rama's story is told in the *Ramayana*, one of several Hindu scriptures that appeared sometime between 600 B.C. and A.D. 200. (More about this in Chapter Six, "Sacred Writings.") Centering around Rama's rescue of his wife, *Sita*, from *Ravana*, the ten-headed demon, the story teaches how good overcomes evil.

Krishna is the hero of the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is part of a poem called the *Mahabharata*. (This too is discussed further in Chapter Six.) In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna explains to his friend *Arjuna* that the seemingly endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth can be broken through devotion to him. This is the basis of *bhakti yoga*, which you read about in Chapter Two. Remember that *bhakti* means "devotion."

Krishna is usually depicted with sky-blue skin. This is because, like the sky, he is everywhere and eternal. He is also seen playing a flute for the benefit of cows and *gopis*. (*Gopis* were women who cared for cows.) Krishna is looked upon as a god of love. He is said to have healed the deaf and the blind, helped lepers and the poor, and raised people from the grave. Hindus believe that Krishna will make one last appearance when the world ends. This time he will be called *Kalki*. They believe he will come as a rider on a white horse and that he will judge all people according to their deeds.



### Section Review:

1. Why is Vishnu called "the Preserver"?
2. What are *avatars*?
3. What message is conveyed by Rama's story in the *Ramāyana*?
4. How did Krishna say one could end the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth?
5. Why is Krishna shown as having blue skin?
6. What do Hindus believe Krishna will do when he returns as Kalki?

### Sivā (Shiva)

Siva is an interesting god. He is at the same time both frightening and kind. He is called "the Destroyer" because he destroys (and recreates) the world, as well as such bad things as wars and diseases. But he is also a creator in that he paves the way for new things to replace the old that he has destroyed. He is worshiped as the god of reproduction. While he may be associated with evil spirits, ghosts, goblins, and vampires, he is at the same time thought to be kind and easy to please. This contradictory aspect of Siva is true of other Hindu deities as well.

Siva has been known by more than a thousand names. He is usually shown as *Natraja*, the Lord of the Dance. As such, his dance provides the energy that keeps the universe moving. *Natraja* has four arms and is often shown dancing on a demon or monster that represents ignorance. He is encircled by flames that are symbolic of the destruction and recreation of the world. Siva is also known as the Lord of Time and has three eyes so he can look at the past, the present, and the future.

Some images of Siva show him with a river flowing through his hair. This is the Ganges River, the holiest of rivers to Hindus. The Ganges is said to have flowed from heaven through Siva's hair to India. Other images show Siva as a householder with his wife, the goddess *Parvati*.

Siva is said to live on *Mount Kailasa* in the Himalaya Mountains. Unlike Vishnu, Hindus do not believe he has returned to earth in the form of various *avatars*.



### Section Review:

1. Why is Siva called "the Destroyer"?
2. What does the circle of flames around *Natraja*'s head represent?
3. What is represented by the demon on which *Natraja* is dancing?
4. What is the significance of images that show a river flowing through Siva's hair?
5. Who is *Parvati*?

### Other Gods and Goddesses

As you have learned, Hindu gods and goddesses number in the hundreds, perhaps thousands. Below are a few who rank below Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva in importance.

Siva represents both destruction and creation and is most often shown as *Natraja*, the Lord of the Dance. His dancing provides the energy that keeps the universe moving.

### Words to remember:

Sita  
Ravana  
Arjuna  
gopis  
Kalki  
Natraja  
Parvati  
Mount Kailasa



## Ganesha (or Ganesh)

In the Hindu family of gods, Ganesha is the elephant-headed son of Siva and his goddess wife, Parvati. Ganesha is worshiped as the god of wisdom and strength who prevents things from going wrong. He is also called *Vigneshwara*, which means "he who overcomes all obstacles." Hindus pray to him before they start anything new, be it a task, a project, or a journey.

Images of Ganesha show him with a pink body to go with his elephant head. He also has a pot belly, which symbolizes the universe. Even though he is quite large, he is very gentle. His gentleness is represented by a mouse at his feet. The mouse, though tiny, shows no fear.

Ganesha is perhaps the most likeable of gods.

With his pink body, elephant head, and pot belly (which symbolizes the universe), he is as gentle and wise as he is large and strong.



You may be interested in the legend about how Ganesha got his elephant head. The story states that Parvati one day made the figure of a boy and breathed life into him. Shortly afterwards, she decided to go for a swim, and she told the boy to guard the house. Siva, who was gone at the time, returned home to find an unknown boy refusing to let him enter. In anger, Siva drew his sword and cut off the boy's head. Upon her return from her swim, Parvati was distraught to see the boy dead. She told Siva that she considered him her own son. At this, Siva promised to replace the head. He sent his servants out with instructions to cut off the head of anyone found sleeping with his head facing north. The servants found an elephant sleeping in such a position, and cut off its head and brought it to Siva. Siva attached the head to the body of the boy and brought him back to life.

## Hanuman

Hanuman is the Hindu monkey god. He is pictured with the head and long tail of a monkey. Legend has it that his mother, Anjana, was married to a monkey named Kesari. In the Hindu *pantheon*, or family of gods, Hanuman represents intelligence.

Hanuman is noted for his great strength. He is also famous for his heroic efforts in helping Rama free his wife Sita from the evil ten-headed demon king named Ravana. (Look back in the section entitled "Vishnu.") But before Sita was rescued, Hanuman had an opportunity to show just how strong he was. During the battle with Ravana, Rama's brother and other warriors were wounded. Their wounds could only be treated with medicinal herbs found on a faraway mountain called *Gandamadana*. Hanuman was sent to Gandamadana to gather the herbs, but when he got there, he discovered he couldn't tell one herb from another. So what did he do? He lifted the entire mountain and took it to

the battlefield. When the necessary herbs were provided to the attending physician, Hanuman carried the mountain back to its proper place.

### Shakti, the Mother Goddess

The most important Hindu female deity is *Shakti*. Sometimes she is referred to as the *Mother Goddess*, or simply the *Goddess*. She was worshiped by the early inhabitants of the Indus Valley and then adopted by the invading Aryans.

Shakti is the wife of Siva. As such, she is also known as Parvati. (Refer back to the section entitled "Siva.") Like most Hindu gods and goddesses, she appears in various forms and under different names. Sometimes she is simply *Devi*, the Sanskrit word for "goddess." At other times she appears as *Durga*, the warrior goddess who rides a lion and who goes about slaying demons. Then she is sometimes *Kali*, who is shown having six or eight arms and wearing a necklace of human skulls. Regardless of what she is called, Hindus see Shakti as the "mother" of the world. She is a symbol of the earth's fertility.

### Lakshmi

*Lakshmi* is worshiped as the goddess of wealth and prosperity. She is thought to bring good fortune to those who worship her. She is one of the daughters

of Siva and Parvati. (The other is *Saraswati*, who is worshiped as the goddess of wisdom.) She is also the wife of Vishnu, as well as the wife of his avatars, or different forms. When Vishnu became Rama, Lakshmi became *Sita*. When he appeared as Krishna, Lakshmi was *Rukmini*.

Lakshmi is often shown standing in a lotus throne and holding lotus buds in her hands. Householders hoping for good health and welfare for their families pray to her. So do business people praying that their business endeavors will be successful.

As you have seen, a study of Hindu gods and goddesses can be confusing. But keep in mind what was mentioned at the beginning of the chapter: all gods and goddesses represent in some way manifestations or aspects of Brahman, the Supreme Being or spirit that is everywhere and is a part of everything.

### Section Review:

1. Why do Hindus worship Ganesha?
2. How did Ganesha come to have an elephant's head?
3. Describe Hanuman's appearance.
4. What does Hanuman represent in the Hindu family of gods?
5. Who is Shakti?
6. Why do Hindus worship the goddess Lakshmi?

### For Further Thought:

1. Why do you think the early Hindus, like all ancient peoples, invented so many gods and goddesses to worship?
2. Do you see any similarities between the Hindu Trimurti and the Christian Trinity? Write a short paper telling why you think the two are either similar or different.
3. Which Hindu god or goddess discussed in this chapter did you find the most interesting? Explain.
4. Hindus do not try to convert others to their beliefs and religious practices. What does this tell you about their religion?



### Words to remember:

Ganesha  
Vigneshwara  
Hanuman  
pantheon  
Gandamadana  
Shakti  
Devi  
Durga  
Kali  
Lakshmi  
Saraswati  
Rukmini

# ॐ CHAPTER FOUR

## *Festivals and Holidays*

Hindus observe a number of religious festivals and holidays throughout the year. As with Buddhism, a religion that sprang from Hinduism, these festivals do not always fall on a specific day of a certain month. This is because Hindus follow a lunar calendar which is based on the moon and not the sun.

In India, the year is divided into twelve lunar months. The new year falls in the month of Vaishakha, which corresponds to parts of April and May in the western calendar. The other eleven months are Jaistha, Asadha, Sravana, Bhadra, Aswin, Kartik, Agrahayana, Paus, Magh, Phalgun, and Chaitra. Exactly when these months occur is explained as each festival is discussed.

### *Dasera*

One of the most popular Hindu festivals is *Dasera*. (Also spelled Dassehra, Dussehra, and Dasara.) It is celebrated all over India, as well as in other parts of the world. It takes place during the month of *Aswin*. *Aswin* corresponds to September-October in our calendar.

*Dasera* is held in honor of the Mother Goddess. If you remember from Chapter Three, the Mother Goddess takes different forms. Sometimes she is Shakti, who is kind and loving. At other times, she is Durga, a warrior goddess who rides a lion and is angry and frightening.

*Dasera* is known by different names in different parts of India. In the north, it is called *Dasera*. In western India, it is known as *Navratri*. In the east, it is called *Durgapuja*. As you can tell by the latter name, Hindus in the eastern part of India observe the festival in honor of the Durga form of the Mother Goddess.

Regardless of the name, *Dasera* lasts

for nine nights. It is a happy festival for which people decorate their homes and shrines with flowers. They also give each other gifts. *Dasera* is a time to patch up old quarrels and renew friendships. It is also considered a lucky time for people to buy a house or start a new business.

In some parts of India, the story of Rama is included in the celebration of *Dasera*. You have already read about Rama rescuing his wife Sita by killing the ten-headed demon, Ravana. Before embarking on his mission, Rama prayed to Durga for help. Hindus celebrate the occasion by making giant puppets of Rama, Ravana, and other characters involved in the story. On the last night of the festival, the puppet of Ravana is burned on a huge bonfire. His burning signifies the triumph of good over evil.

Hindus believe that by taking part in *Dasera*, the energy and power of the Mother Goddess is transferred to them. They believe this helps them overcome the evil that they face in their daily lives.

### *Section Review:*

1. During which Hindu month is *Dasera* observed?
2. Which god or goddess is honored during the festival of *Dasera*?
3. In what ways is *Dasera* a happy festival?

### *Diwali*

*Diwali* is the most important Hindu festival. It is held during the Hindu month of *Kartik*. This means it falls in October-November by the western calendar.

*Diwali* means a "group or row of lights." During the five-day festival, people

#### Words to remember:

**Dasera**  
**Aswin**



decorate their homes, mandirs, and buildings with rows of candles and lamps. They also hang garlands of flowers and paper chains. Some Hindus throw away their old lamps and buy new ones for the occasion. The idea behind the row of lights is the belief that darkness (evil) can be driven away by light. Many people also leave doors and windows open for Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and good fortune. More than anything else, Diwali is observed to honor Lakshmi, and Hindus believe that by leaving their doors and windows open, she will enter and bless their houses.

Several different stories are remembered during Diwali. One is the same story honored during the festival Dasera—the story in which Rama, one of the forms of the god Vishnu, kills the demon Ravana and rescues his wife Sita. Another story deals with Vishnu himself and how he defeated a wicked giant named *Naraka* (sometimes Narakasura).

Since Diwali comes at the end of the financial year in India, business people and shop owners make sure their account books are balanced and their bills are paid. If everything is in order, they believe that Lakshmi will help their businesses grow and prosper.

Diwali is also a family festival. Like Dasera, it is a happy time. People give each other presents, and families invite friends to dine with them. The sending of cards is also becoming popular. In addition, there is music, dancing, bonfires, and fireworks.

#### Section Review:

1. Why do people decorate their houses and other buildings with rows of lights during Diwali?
2. Which goddess is honored during this festival?
3. What do business people and shop owners strive to do during Diwali?
4. In what ways is Diwali a family festival?

## Holi

*Holi* is a spring festival that lasts for five days. It takes place sometime in February and March, which is the month



of *Phalgun* in the Hindu calendar. Holi is also known as the Festival of Color, as it welcomes the changing colors of the season.

People have a good time during Holi. One reason is that they are allowed to throw colored powders and water over everyone in the streets. This custom goes back to stories about Krishna playing practical jokes on people when he was young. Up through the ages, even the upper classes have enjoyed such pranks. One old painting in particular shows a prince and his court throwing red powder at each other.

The name *Holi* comes from a princess named *Holika*. A story relates that many years ago Holika tried to kill her brother, *Prahlad*. She did so at the insistence of her father, *King Hiranyakashipu*. *Hiranyakashipu* wanted to be worshiped as a god, but one person stood in his way. That person was his son, *Prahlad*. *Prahlad* absolutely refused

*Holi* is sometimes called the *Festival of Color*. Celebrated in spring, it coincides with the wheat harvest. Part of the fun of Holi is the participants' throwing of red powder and colored waters on one another.

#### Words to remember:

**Diwali**  
**Kartik**  
**Naraka**



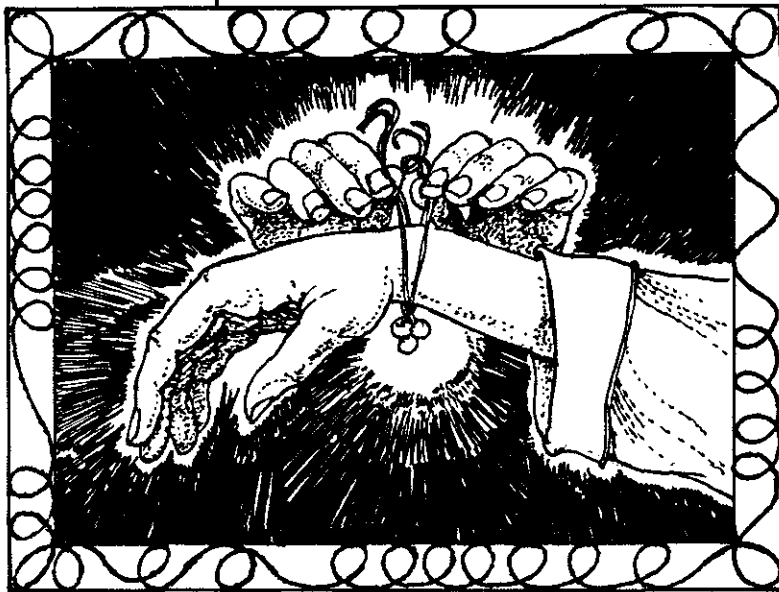
to recognize his father as a god. Instead, he worshiped Vishnu.

Furious, Hiranyakashipu ordered Holika to sit inside a bonfire and hold Prahlad on her lap. The king believed that Holika was indestructible and would not be harmed by the fire. But the king's scheme backfired. Instead of Prahlad being burned to death, it was Holika who perished. Legend says that he remained unharmed because he chanted prayers to Vishnu. The importance of the story is that it reminds Hindus to trust God (Brahman).

**Words to remember:**

Holi  
Phalgun  
Holika  
Prahlad

King  
Hiranyakashipu



During Raksha Bandhan, people tie silk thread with a bauble on the wrists of friends and relatives to protect them from danger and harm during the coming year.

Because Holi also celebrates the death of Holika, the highlight of the festivities is the bonfire, which is always lit at dusk. Walking around the bonfire is considered sacred. When the bonfire goes out, the ashes of the fire are smeared on people's foreheads. This is done to bring them good luck.

**Section Review:**

1. What is the origin of the name "Holi"?
2. Why is Holi also known as the Festival of Color?
3. What do people douse each other with during Holi?
4. What is the origin of the bonfire at Holi?

**Other Festivals**

Dasera, Diwali, and Holi are three festivals celebrated throughout the year. Still others are discussed below.

**Raksha Bandhan**

*Raksha Bandhan* is a festival that traces its origins back to *Indra*, the early Aryan Lord of the Sky. (Look back in Chapter One in the section entitled "Enter the Aryans.") A story relates that Indra was once attacked by an evil demon but that he was saved by his wife having tied a magic string around his wrist. *Raksha* means "protection," while *Bandhan* means "to tie." During Raksha Bandhan, people tie silk thread with a bauble on the wrists of friends and relatives. This act is to protect them from danger and harm.

Raksha Bandhan is held during the Hindu month of *Sravan*. This corresponds to July-August on the western calendar. Some families celebrate the festival as *Sisters' Day*. On this day, a girl ties a colored silk or cotton bracelet around her brother's wrist. This is to protect him and wish him well. At the same time, he gives her a present and vows to protect her. There is also a *Brothers' Day* observed after Diwali in the month of Kartik. At this time, girls rub a special powder on their brothers' foreheads to wish them good luck in the coming year.

**Janmashtami**

Janmashtami, or *Krishnajanmashtami*, is a festival that remembers the birthday of the god Krishna. It is celebrated in the month of *Sravan*. You may remember from Chapter Three that Krishna is one of the forms of the god Vishnu. You may also remember that his story is told in the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is part of the long scripture called the *Mahabharata*.

For eight days and nights before

Krishna's birthday, the Bhagavad Gita is read non-stop. Since it takes only three hours to read the entire story, people take turns reading until midnight of the day the birthday is celebrated. The reading is timed to end exactly at that time.

Many Hindus spend all night in the mandir (temple) on this special day. They fast until midnight, but after that hour they eat special desserts prepared for the occasion. They also sing and dance, and the arti ceremony is performed. By placing their hands over the flames of the arti lamp and then rubbing their hands on their heads, Hindus believe they receive power from Krishna as well as his blessings.

### The Chariot Festival

The Chariot Festival, or *Ratha Jatra*, is observed mostly in eastern India. It is a festival dedicated to *Jagannath*, the Lord of the Universe. It falls in the month of *Asadha*, which occurs sometime either in June or July by our calendar.

Hindus celebrate *Ratha Jatra* by pulling a monstrous chariot or cart containing a huge statue of *Jagannath* through the streets. The chariot might be as much as 50 feet high and contain 16 or 18 enormous

wheels. With cymbals and conch shells providing music, the chariot is pulled along by thousands of people. *Jagannath* is worshiped as one form of Vishnu, and it is not unusual for fanatic followers of the god to throw themselves beneath one of the massive wheels. Our English word *juggernaut* is derived from the name *Jagannath*.

There are still other Hindu festivals. *Ramnavani* honors the birthday of Rama, another form of Vishnu. *Mahasivratri* is dedicated to the god Siva, while *Pongal* is a popular harvest festival in some parts of India. You can read more about these festivals in books that deal with Hinduism and India.

### Section Review:

1. What is the significance of the silk bracelet Hindus tie around the wrists of friends and relatives during *Raksha Bandhan*?
2. Which scripture or story is read non-stop for eight days and nights before the celebration of Krishna's birthday?
3. What do people pull through the streets during the festival honoring *Jagannath*, the Lord of the Universe?



### Words to remember:

**Raksha Bandhan**  
**Shravan**  
**Sisters' Day**  
**Brothers' Day**  
**Janmashtami**  
**Rathajatra**  
**Jagannath**  
**Asadha**  
**juggernaut**

### For Further Thought:

1. Which Hindu festival did you find the most interesting? Explain.
2. Pretend you are a tourist and that you have witnessed the Hindu festival of Holi. Write a letter to a friend back home describing the events.
3. Research and write a report on one of these Hindu festivals that was mentioned at the end of the chapter: *Ramnavani*, *Mahasivratri*, or *Pongal*.
4. You read that during the Chariot Festival, some devotees of Vishnu throw themselves beneath the enormous wheels of the chariot that is pulled through the streets. Can you think of a reason why they would do this?
5. If you were a small child, which Hindu festival would you look forward to the most? Why?
6. Think of ways in which Hindu festivals resemble those celebrated by other religions.
7. What does celebrating a *Sisters' Day* and a *Brothers' Day* seem to indicate about Hindu family life?

# 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



Hindus consider pilgrimages a very important part of their religion.

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

# CHAPTER SIX

## Sacred Writings



Hindu scriptures are made up of a number of *shastras*, or holy books. Some date back to the time of the Aryans. They fall into two groups. One group is referred to as the *shruti* texts. The other is the *smriti*. Each is described below.

### *Sbruti* Texts

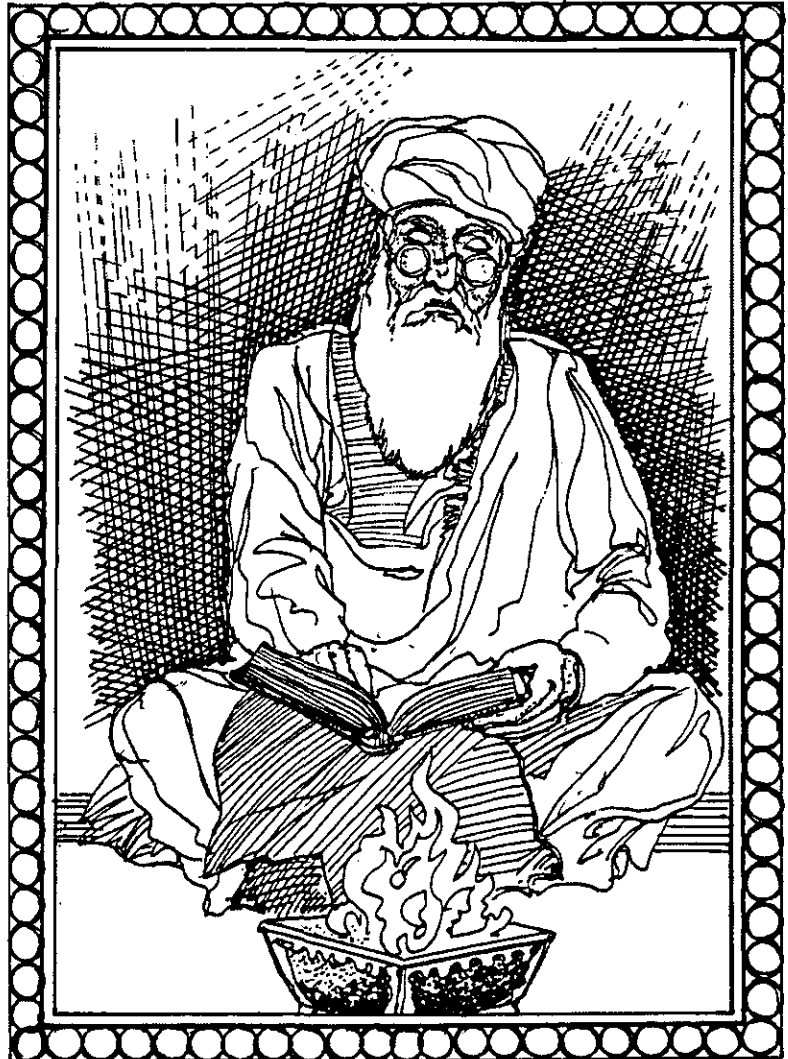
*Sbruti* means "revealed." Hindu tradition holds that the earliest holy books were revealed in ancient times to wise men called *rishis*. The *rishis* are thought to have heard Brahman's words directly and passed them on to their disciples. The words of these texts were never written down. People believed they would have been made impure or unholy had they been recorded.

### The Vedas

The oldest Hindu texts are the *Vedas*. (*Veda* is a word that means "knowledge" or "wisdom.") There are four. The first and most important is called the *Rig-Veda*. It consists of hymns and poems praising the 33 Aryan gods and goddesses. There are exactly 1,028 poems arranged in verses called *mantras*.

The other three vedas are the *Yajur-Veda*, the *Sama-Veda*, and the *Atharva-Veda*. The *Yajur-Veda* contains prayers and instructions to priests. The *Sama-Veda* is similar to a hymn book, consisting of melodies and chants. The *Atharva-Veda* is a book of spells, charms, and magic formulas.

The Vedas were compiled between 1200 and 1000 B.C. They were not written down until about A. D. 1400. This means that they were remembered and passed on, by word of mouth for some 2,500 years.



### The Upanishads

The *Upanishads* are often referred to as separate scriptures, but they are actually the last part of each Veda. They were compiled sometime between 800 and 600 B.C. *Upanishads* can be translated to mean "near-sit-down," or "sitting near the teacher." They refer to students and others sitting around wise men (*gurus*) and listening to teachings in the form of stories and parables.

There are 108 Upanishads. Of these,

The ancient Indian language, Sanskrit, is the language of most Indian scriptures. Reading scripture is an important part of Hindu worship. Public readings from the holy books are given during festivals.



15 are considered the most important. They contain the basic ideas of Hinduism. As you learned in Chapter Two, some of these ideas are:

**Words to remember:**

- shruti
- smriti
- rishis
- Veda
- Rig-Veda
- Yajur-Veda
- Sama-Veda
- Atharva-Veda
- Upanishads

- Brahman is in everything and is eternal and without form.

- The goal of every Hindu is for his or her *atman*, or soul, to merge or unite with Brahman. This state is referred to as *moksha*.

- On the way to *moksha*, the soul passes through a series of births, deaths, and rebirths. This is called *reincarnation*.

- The form a person is reborn into depends on his or her *karma*, or actions on earth. Good *karma* results in rebirth into a higher life-form.

Some Upanishads are very brief, but their messages are clear. One that is often read before a deceased person is cremated is:

*From the unreal  
lead me to the real*

*From the darkness  
lead me to light  
From death  
lead me to immortality*

**Section Review:**

1. What distinguished shruti texts from other Hindu scriptures?
2. What does the word *veda* mean?
3. Which of the four Vedas is considered the most important? What does it contain?
4. When did the Vedas come into existence?
5. What is the origin of the term *Upanishads*?
6. Who are *gurus*?

**Smriti Texts**

The word *smriti* means "remembered." Smriti texts differ from the shruti in that Hindus believe they were not revealed by or received directly from Brahman. They were composed by wise

There are 108 Upanishads. Of these, 15 are considered the most important. One of the Upanishads (please see quotation beginning in the left-hand column) is often read before a deceased person is cremated.





men and passed along by memory for centuries.

There are two important smriti texts. They are the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Both deal with forms that the god Vishnu took on earth. The *Mahabharata* is about Krishna. The *Ramayana* focuses on Rama.

### The Mahabharata

The *Mahabharata*, or the "Great Epic of India," is the longest poem in the world. It contains 100,000 verses. It relates many stories, but the story that is most often read and is the most popular is the *Bhagavad Gita*. *Bhagavad Gita* means the "Song of the Lord" or the "Song of the Blessed One." It explains in simpler terms what is discussed in the Upanishads. Basically, as you read under the section entitled "Vishnu" in Chapter Three, the story has Krishna explaining to his friend and cousin Arjuna that moksha, or union with Brahman, can best be obtained through devotion to him, Krishna.

Like most religious epics, the *Bhagavad Gita* uses an interesting story to get a point across. Much of the tale centers around a war for power between two related families, the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas*. Arjuna is a Pandava prince, but he is reluctant to go to war. He tells Krishna (who is serving as his charioteer) that he doesn't want to fight against his cousins, uncles, and respected elders. He even lays down his bow on the battlefield. But Krishna explains that people must do their duty, regardless of how unpleasant it might be. He reminds Arjuna that the *Kauravas* have tried to cheat the *Pandavas* out of what is rightfully theirs. Arjuna listens to his advice and carries on the fight.

The *Bhagavad Gita* makes other points as well. Here is one that might remind you a little of one of the teachings of Christianity:

*Whoever offers me a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water with devotion, that*

*offer of devotion I will accept from the pure of heart.*

Krishna, of course is saying that the size of a gift or offering is not important. What is important is the love in the giver's heart. He concludes by saying:

*Give me your mind and give me your heart ... and making me your supreme goal, you will in truth come to me.*



As has already been mentioned, the *Bhagavad Gita* is one of the most popular of the Hindu scriptures. Even so, devout Hindus accept it and other smriti texts only if they do not conflict with the older shruti texts. The older texts are considered the final word because Hindus believe they came directly from God (Brahman).

### The Ramayana

*Ramayana* means "Rama's Story." It was written about the year A. D. 200 by a man named *Valmiki*. It is an epic consisting of 24,000 verses. As was

Depicted above is an illustration of Krishna and the reluctant warrior, Arjuna, going into battle. The story of Krishna and Arjuna is from the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is the most popular story from the *Mahabharata* Epic.



mentioned briefly in Chapter Three, it deals with Rama rescuing his wife Sita from the evil demon, Ravana.

Below is a scene from the Ramayana Epic in which Rama (who is one of the forms of Vishnu) enlists the help of the monkey god, Hanuman, in the rescue of his beautiful wife, Sita, from Ravana, the prince of the demons. The rescue attempt fails when Ravana sets Hanuman's tail on fire and he flees into the forest.

Rama is one of the forms of Vishnu. In the Ramayana, he is the son of *Dasaratha*, the king of Ayodhya. When the time comes for Dasaratha to pass his throne on to Rama, he meets with opposition from his youngest wife, *Kaikeyi*. Kaikeyi has another son named *Bharata*, whom she wants to become king. She convinces Dasaratha to banish Rama to the forest for fourteen years.

Honoring the wishes of his father, Rama gives up claim to the throne and goes into exile. He is accompanied by his

wife, Sita, and his brother, *Lakshmana*. While in the forest, a terrible thing happens. Sita is kidnapped by Ravana, who rules the island of Lanka (Sri Lanka). Ravana has heard of Sita's beauty and is determined that he must have her for his own. He disguises himself as a wandering holy man and, while Rama and Lakshmana are distracted, whisks her off to his island kingdom.

Rama enlists the help of Hanuman in rescuing his wife. Hanuman is the monkey god who commands an army of monkey soldiers. Hanuman, who can make himself enormous, does so and takes one giant step to the island of Lanka. He finds Sita and tells her that he has come to rescue her. But Ravana sets his tail on fire, and he retreats to the forest.

The story of Rama concludes when Hanuman and his monkey army build a bridge to Lanka. Rama then approaches Ravana and kills him. Afterwards, he returns to Ayodhya and claims his throne. So, you might be thinking, what is the point of the story? What is it telling Hindus? The answer is that the Ramayana stresses faithfulness and truth, and it shows how good overcomes evil.

You may remember from Chapter Four, "Festivals," that on the last day of the Dasera festival, a giant puppet of Ravana is burned. The story of Rama is performed (through dance and theatre) throughout India. It is so popular that when it was portrayed on Indian television in sixty weekly episodes, it drew the highest rating in the history of television in that country.

### The Puranas

The *Puranas* are another of the smriti texts. They were written down sometime after A. D. 500. *Purana* means "olden or ancient times." The Puranas contain myths and stories about the gods and goddesses, primarily Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, and Shakti. They also explain how the universe was created.



## The Manu-Smriti, or the Laws of Manu

The *Laws of Manu* are as much a code of laws as a religious text. They were compiled by a lawgiver named Manu. No one knows when Manu really lived, or even if he was a real person. His laws started to be written down about A. D. 200 or A. D. 300. They explain how Hindus should live their lives. They also point out the duties of each caste and list punishments for various crimes.

A quick look at some of Manu's laws is interesting. This is especially true in his laws regarding women. Three of these that show it was definitely a "man's world" are summarized below.

*In childhood, a female must be subject to her father; in youth to her husband; when her lord is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be independent.*

*She must always be cheerful, clever in the management of her household affairs ... and economical in expenditure.*

*By violating her duty toward her husband, a wife is disgraced in this*

*world; after death she enters the womb of a jackal, and is tormented by diseases, the punishment of her sin.*



Regarding punishment, Manu states:

*The whole world is kept in order by punishment, for a guiltless man is hard to find. Through fear of punishment the whole world yields the enjoyments (which it owes).*

The above are just a few of the quotes from the *Laws of Manu*. All told, there are 2,685 verses in the books that make up the laws.

### Section Review:

1. What text is the Bhagavad Gita a part of?
2. Which god is the central figure in the Bhagavad Gita?
3. What are several teachings or lessons presented in the Bhagavad Gita?
4. What story is told in the Ramayana?
5. Who is Ravana? Hanuman?
6. What message is presented in the Ramayana?
7. What do the Puranas contain?
8. What do the Laws of Manu contain?

### Words to remember:

Kauravas  
Pandavas  
Valmiki  
Dasaratha  
Kaikeyi  
Bharata  
Lakshmana  
Puranas  
Laws of Manu

### For Further Thought:

1. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna explains to Arjuna how to attain moksha, or union with Brahman. Moksha is in some ways similar to the Buddhist concept of nirvana. Look up nirvana in an encyclopedia or other source. Then write several paragraphs comparing/contrasting it with moksha.
2. Some messages contained in the the Bhagavad Gita and the Ramayana bear resemblance to the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament. If there are indeed similarities, what does this seem to say about humankind and religion?
3. Compare/contrast Hindu scriptures with those of other religions.
4. Which of the smriti texts—the *Mababbarata* or the *Ramayana*—do you think you would enjoy reading the most? Why?
5. What is your opinion of Manu's laws regarding women? Have other religions throughout history placed women in the same inferior position? How do you think women feel about this lowly status?
6. Tell why you agree or disagree with Manu's statement that "the whole world is kept in order by punishment."

# ॐ CHAPTER SEVEN

## *Everyday Life*

Everyday life among Hindus centers on sixteen steps the scriptures point out as being necessary to attain moksha. These steps are called *samskars*. They are discussed in the first section of this chapter.

Several of the sixteen steps are covered in greater depth in sections of their own. These are marriage and funeral rites. There is also a section dealing with other aspects of everyday life. This section covers such topics as foods, recreation, and the status of women.

### *Special Ceremonies: Childhood*

Samskars are special ceremonies performed during a person's lifetime. Three of these take place before birth.

During the mother's pregnancy, people pray for her health and for the health of the unborn child. They might also pray that the child be a boy.

Although there are sixteen samskars, only devout Hindus of the Brahmin caste experience each one. Most boys usually go through ten, while girls experience about six. Some Hindus experience only three during their lifetime.

The thirteen special ceremonies that take place after the birth of a child can be divided into childhood sacraments and adult rites. Below are those that take place during childhood.

### **Birth ceremony**

A special ceremony is performed on the day of a child's birth. The father dips a gold ring in ghee and honey and applies it to the baby's lips. This is to wish the child a life as "precious as gold." Then the father or a priest whispers into the baby's ear, "May God (Brahman), the creator of all things, grant you wisdom."

### **Naming the baby**

This is the second childhood sacrament or ritual. The choosing of a name for the baby is very important. The right name can mean good luck throughout the child's life. The family asks a priest to consult an almanac and come up with an appropriate name.

In ancient times, boys might be given such names as Mahendravarma or Devagupta. Even today, names connected to the names of gods are popular. These might include Jagdish, Mahesh, and Niranjan. Girls were usually named after certain stars, rivers, or birds. Popular names included Ganga, Yamuna, and

Hindu rituals to promote *moksha*—the release from the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth—begin even before a baby is born. Below, an expectant mother recites prayers to ensure the health of her baby.



Maina. Today, common names include those linked to certain goddesses. These names are Ansuya, Parvati, and Savits.

Many Hindus today, however, do not follow such customs. Likely as not, they might name their children after movie or literary heroes. Regardless, the name for a child is often chosen by the eldest woman in the house. Then the father whispers into the child's ears, "Your name is . . ." Afterwards, songs are sung and refreshments served. Those in attendance dine on cooked chick-peas and a special dessert made of fruits, nuts, and sugar.

### First outing

The baby is confined to the home for the first five weeks of life. In ancient times, this was to ensure that the child was protected from extreme weather conditions and all infectious diseases. After five weeks, the child is taken to a mandir (temple) to be blessed. It is interesting to note that part of this ritual consists of a dab of soot being applied to the baby's forehead and cheek. This is done to prevent women who have no children from looking at the child with envious eyes.

### First solid food

Even the baby eating its first solid food is considered a sacrament or a ritual. This takes place seven or eight months after birth. What the child is given depends on the wealth and status of the parents. In well-to-do Hindu families, a child's first solid food might consist of baby food purchased at a store. In poorer families, the child has to get by with a little boiled rice and milk.

### A boy's first haircut

Sometimes a baby girl's hair is cut, but this ceremony is usually reserved for boys. A boy's hair is cut when he is about one year old. The entire head is shaved. Removing all hair is symbolic of erasing the bad karma (actions) from the previous life.

### The sacred thread ceremony

The tenth *samskar*, the sacred thread ceremony, is one of the most important for boys. (Until modern times, there was a ninth ceremony in which Brahmin boys had the upper part of their right ear pierced to enable them to wear an ornament. This ceremony has been discontinued.)

The sacred thread ceremony involves



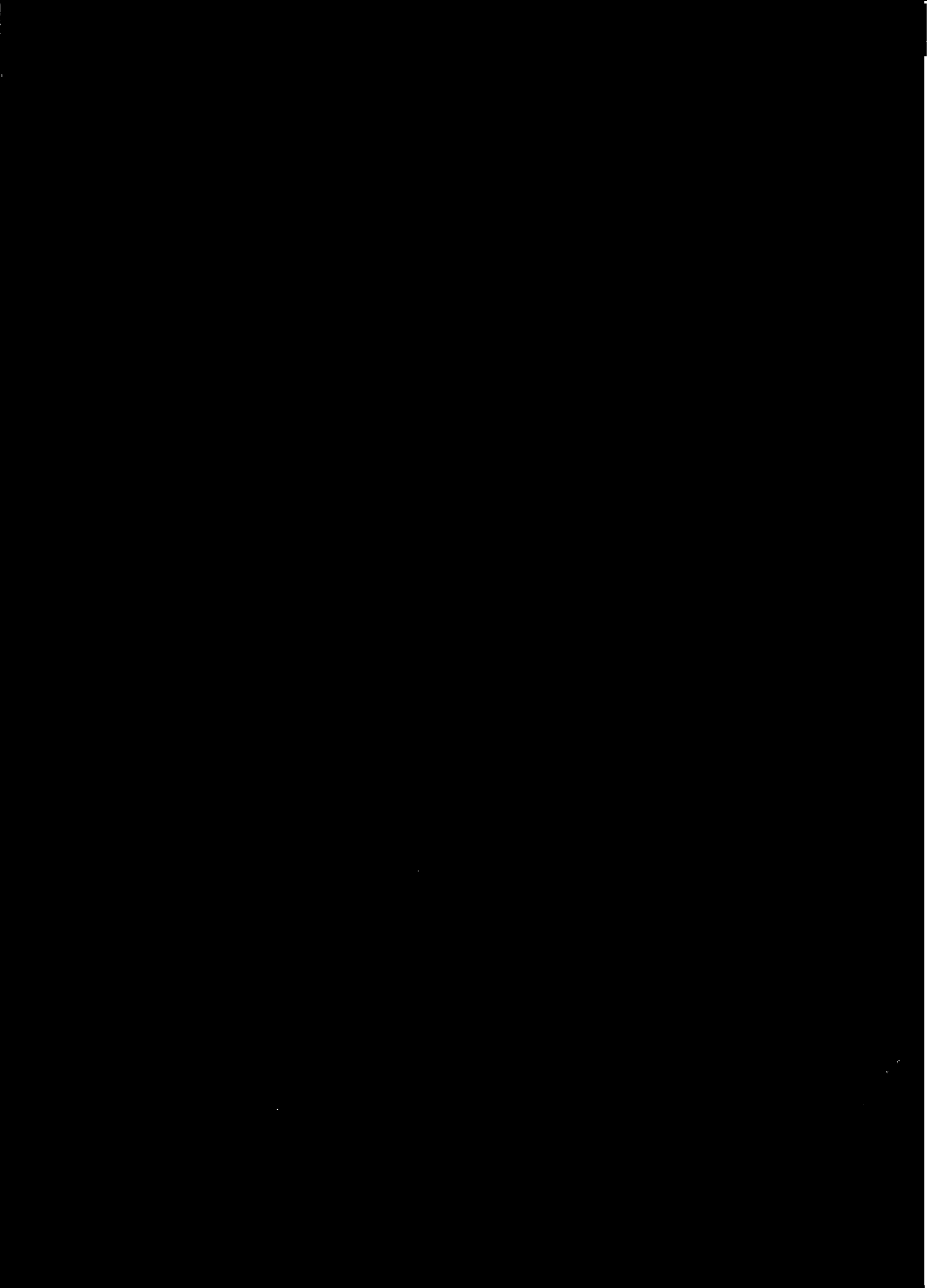
boys of the higher three varnas, or castes. (Look back in Chapter One for a quick review of castes.) It takes place at the age of eight for boys in the Brahmin varna. Boys in the Kshatriya varna go through the ceremony at age eleven, while those who are Vaishyas receive their sacred thread when they are twelve. Neither boys in the lower varna or girls participate in this ritual.

The sacred thread ceremony involves a priest placing a loop of cotton over the left shoulder of a boy. The loop hangs diagonally across his chest and down his right hip. He wears the loop for life. The ceremony is a coming-of-age rite. Afterwards, a boy is considered a man, and

The first haircut is 8th in the 16 steps to moksha. The ceremony is performed between the ages of 1 and 5 prior to which the hair is allowed to grow. Typically performed on boys, the ceremony is not unheard of for girls.

### Words to remember:

**samskars**





his formal religious education begins.

### Section Review:

1. What are *samskars*?
2. Who often chooses the name for a newborn child in a Hindu household?
3. Why were Hindu babies originally confined to the home for the first five weeks of their lives?
4. Why is a young boy's head shaved when he is about one year old?
5. What is the significance of the sacred thread ceremony?

### Marriage

Four events of an adult's life are considered *samskars*—marriage, the “householder” stage, the retirement stage, and cremation. This section takes a look at how marriages are arranged in Hindu society. It is followed by another section that describes a typical Hindu wedding.

Until recent times, all Hindu marriages were arranged affairs. Partners were chosen by the parents, and the couple never saw one another until the day of the wedding. Sometimes the couple were mere children. Fortunately, the practice of child marriages was outlawed in 1929.

Today, young people are more involved in choosing their own mates. Sometimes they even advertise in the matrimonial columns of newspapers. Even young women, or the parents of young women, place ads in leading newspapers hoping to attract a suitable husband. Some ads state that the prospective bride or bridegroom must be of a certain varna (caste) and complexion. Others point out that varna and complexion do not matter. (Complexion refers to the lightness or darkness of the skin. Some Indian Hindus are light-complected. Others have dark skin.)

Although fictitious, the newspaper ad below is much like those that appear in

some Indian newspapers today.

### Bride Wanted

*A government official of the Ksbatriya varna, age 28, with good job and comfortable apartment, desires bride from a high caste Hindu family. Must be well-educated, with a light complexion. Send photo to Box CD431, c/o The Times of India, Bombay.*

Foreigners who work in India also advertise in Indian newspapers for wives. Here is one that might be typical.

### Bride Wanted

*French importer, age 30, seeks attractive, well-educated Hindu girl as bride. Caste and complexion not important. Send photo to Box FG568, c/o The Hindu, Madras.*

In Hindu families where marriages are still arranged, the search for an acceptable partner may go on for months, even years. Parents seeking a husband for their daughter spread the word of her availability among families of similar varna and interests. Details of the girl's age, education, height, weight, complexion, and other factors are given to prospective bridegrooms. If the family of an eligible male shows an interest, the two families agree to meet. If the young man and young woman like each other, the services of a priest are sought. The priest looks at the horoscopes of both partners to be sure they are compatible. Then he decides on the best time to have the wedding.

When the date for the wedding is set, the bride's family pays for the use of a hall or mandir. (Some Hindu marriages, however, are still held in the home of the bride.) They also pay for the feast that follows the wedding. The practice of the bride's family providing a dowry is no longer legal in India. Yet families might make some kind of financial

arrangements before the wedding takes place.

### Section Review:

1. How are Hindu betrothals (engagements) different today than in past years?
2. Why does a priest check the horoscope of a prospective bride and groom?

### A Hindu Wedding

Most Hindu weddings in India take place between the months of December and July. This is because India's *monsoon* (rainy) season and major festivals occur during the months from August through November.

In addition to renting a large hall or mandir for the wedding, the bride's parents pay for the printing of invitations. Don't be puzzled if you look through a book about Hinduism and see a picture of a wedding invitation that has swastikas printed at the top. If you remember from Chapter Two, the swastika is a sign of good luck among Hindus. Also printed on a typical invitation are pictures of the elephant-headed god Ganesha and a water vessel with a coconut on it and a lamp beside it. These are also symbols of good luck.

For her wedding, the bride wears a new red and gold sari and gold jewelry. The wedding may last from one to six hours, depending on the wishes of the parents. A very important part of the ceremony is a sacred fire called *homa*. The fire is lit in a metal or brick container. As it burns, the groom drops ghee (liquid butter) and grains into the flames. This act on his part symbolizes fertility.

The most important part of the wedding ceremony are the Seven Steps. Together, the bride and groom take seven steps toward the sacred fire. At each step they stop and make promises to each other. As they do so, a piece of cloth hangs loosely around the groom's neck

and is tied to the bride's sari. This symbolizes their being joined together as man and wife.

At the first step toward the sacred fire, the bridegroom stops and asks his bride to take the step for a plentiful supply of food. He also asks her to support him in his endeavors. She replies that she will. Then they take the other six steps. At each of these, the groom says to the bride:

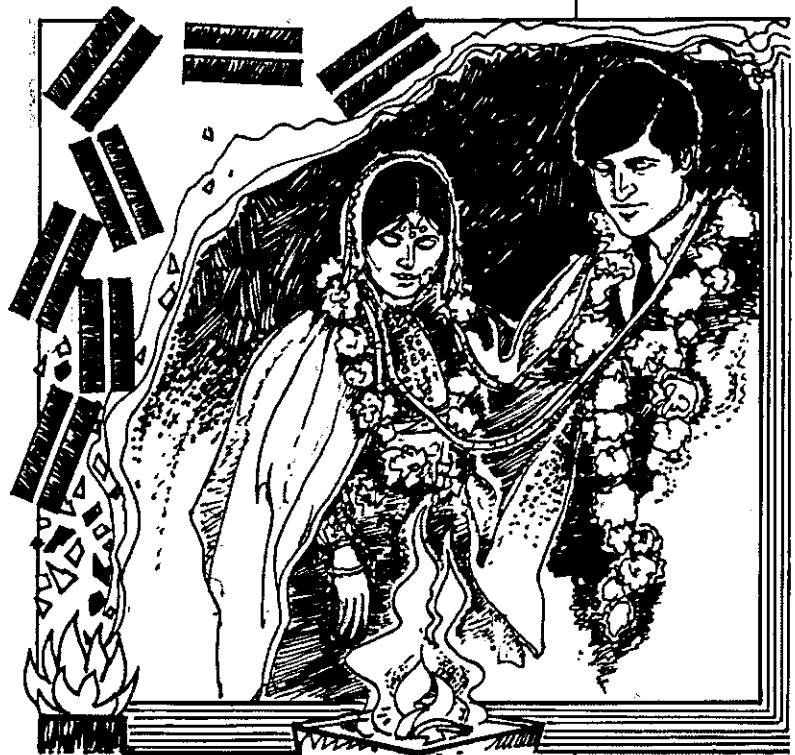
*Take the second step for strength.*

*Take the third step for prosperity.*

*Take the fourth step for happiness.*

*Take the fifth step for children. May we be blessed with many sons, and may they live to a ripe old age.*

*Take the sixth step for the enjoyment*



*of seasonal pleasures.*

*Take the seventh step for lifelong friendship.*

After the completion of the Seven Steps, the couple stands before the fire and prays to Agni, the Aryan God of Fire. They ask Agni for such qualities as success, understanding, wisdom, riches,



### Words to remember:

monsoon  
sari  
homa  
Seven Steps

The most important part of a Hindu wedding is the ritual of the Seven Steps. Together, the bride and groom take seven steps toward the sacred fire. At each step they stop and make promises to each other.





power, good health, and a long life. The priest then sprinkles them with special water and wishes them "peace, prosperity, and contentment."

### Section Review:

1. Why do most Hindu weddings take place between December and July?
2. Why are swastikas printed on some Hindu wedding invitations?
3. What is the *homa*?
4. Why does the groom drop ghee and grains into the *homa* fire?
5. What is the significance of the Seven Steps?

### Funeral Customs

As with marriage, Hindu practices regarding death and funerals have changed with modern times. For centuries the custom of *suttee* was followed in India.

*Suttee* requires that a widow throw herself on her husband's funeral *pyre*. The *pyre* was any material that burned easily. It consisted of various kinds of wood, with perhaps ghee (again, liquid butter) poured onto the fire to fan the flames.

The word *suttee* comes from an old Sanskrit word meaning "faithful wife." No one knows for sure how the custom started. At first, it only required that the wife of the deceased lie next to her husband on the *pyre* for a few minutes. But at some point, grieved widows began to purposely burn themselves alongside their husbands. This was especially true with the many wives of kings and other rulers.

*Suttee* continued in India until 1829. At that time, Indian reformers convinced the ruling British government to outlaw it.

Cremation is still the method of burial for most Hindus. In western countries, cremation takes place at a *crematorium*. There is no funeral *pyre*. The same may hold true in India's largest cities. But in Indian villages, the deceased continue to be cremated on a *pyre*. The *pyre*, if possible, is constructed next to a stream or river. This is because Hindus believe

that the casting of ashes into water reduces the chance of the deceased being born into a new life. You must remember that although the person who dies will be missed, Hindus hope that his or her death is final. They pray that the person attains *moksha* and that the cycle of rebirth is broken.

A Hindu family prepares the deceased for cremation by wrapping the body in a shroud. A *shroud* is a garment in which a dead person is buried or cremated. If the deceased is a woman, she will be clothed in a sari. A garland of flowers is also placed on the body. After a certificate of death is obtained from local authorities, the body is ready to be cremated.

The eldest son is often in charge of the cremation. He walks around the body three times with a lighted torch before setting it afire. After the cremation, a relative helps the son collect the ashes and scatter them over the water.

The relatives of Hindus who die in other countries often arrange for the ashes to be flown back to India to be scattered in the Ganges River. As mentioned earlier, Hindus consider the Ganges the holiest of Indian rivers.

About two weeks after a person dies, his or her family has a feast. This feast is referred to as the *shraddha ceremony*. Rice and milk are made into balls called *pindas*. The serving of the *pindas* is believed to help the dead person's soul acquire a new body for its next life. The *shraddha ceremony* is held each year to honor the deceased.

### Section Review:

1. What is *suttee*? Why was it discontinued?
2. Why are funeral *pyres* often built near a river or stream?
3. Why do relatives of Hindus who die in other countries arrange for their ashes to be flown back to India?
4. What is the *shraddha ceremony*?

### Words to remember:

pyre  
crematorium  
shroud  
shraddha  
ceremony  
pindas

## Other Aspects of Daily Life

As you have seen, religion dominates the daily lives of Hindus. But there are other aspects of Hindu life that are worthy of note. These deal with the status of women, with diet, and with entertainment.

### Women in Hindu society

The progress made by women in India is not unlike that of women in other societies, even the United States. There was a time in America when women could neither vote nor hold jobs. They could not own or inherit property. They were expected to stay home and perform what men considered their "wifely" duties. Even today, women in the western world have not achieved complete equality with men. They still suffer from job discrimination and other forms of inequality.

The same holds true for Hindu women in India and other places. They have made progress and achieved many rights, but they still have a long way to go. But their status is so much better than it was in centuries past. In ancient times, women had very little freedom. When a woman married, she became her husband's property to do with as he saw fit. A woman could neither leave nor divorce her husband. She could not even leave the house without her husband's permission. The husband, of course, had many rights and privileges, and was free to do as he pleased.

In 1955, the Indian parliament passed the Hindu Marriage Act. At long last, the rights of women were addressed. A Hindu wife could file for a divorce on such grounds as cruelty and adultery. She also gained the right to seek alimony, or payments of support from her husband.

Today, many Hindu women have jobs, separate bank accounts, and own land and property. In many households, they hold a position comparable to their husbands. This represents quite a change from the lives their predecessors led for centuries.

## Food

Many people think that all Hindus are vegetarians. This is not true. There are Hindus who eat every kind of meat except beef. This, of course, is because of their reverence for the cow. Hindus are so careful in avoiding beef that those who travel by airplane always order a vegetarian plate for fear that the airline's entrée might be beef.



Vegetarianism seems to be associated with caste. Those in the higher castes, especially Brahmins, are more likely to shun meat than those beneath them. They cite many verses from the ancient scriptures to support their beliefs. A few of these are listed below.

*He who desires to augment his own flesh by eating the flesh of other creatures lives in misery in whatever species he may take his birth.*  
*Mahabharata 18.115.8*

While not all Hindus are vegetarians, even meat-eating Hindus avoid the eating of cows. While the reasons for this are not clear, in the agricultural society of ancient India, the cow was an invaluable source of labor, fresh milk, and fuel in the form of dung. This may account for the cow's divine status.



*And when a man sees that the God in himself is the same God in all that is, he hurts himself by hurting others. Bbhagavad Gita 13.27-28*

*What is the good way? It is the path that reflects on how it may avoid killing any creature. Tirukural 324*

#### Words to remember:

#### Hindu Marriage Act

Orthodox, or strict, Hindus, also avoid such things as alcohol, spicy foods, garlic, onions, and mushrooms. Furthermore, they might not partake of foods that are red in color and remind one of blood. These foods include beets, carrots, and watermelon.

#### Recreation

Such events as festivals and village fairs provide entertainment for Hindus of all ages in India and elsewhere. People who can afford it also enjoy such activities as tennis and polo. In cities, towns, and villages, spectator sports include the likes of acrobatics, cricket, and wrestling matches.

Children, especially those of parents who are not wealthy, rely on more traditional games to keep themselves

entertained. Although they play games that are unique among Hindu children, they also engage in activities that are similar to children's games in America. Blind man's bluff, hopscotch, and hide-and-seek are popular, as are marbles and skipping rope. Boys enjoy wrestling and tug-of-war, while girls play a game with dried berries that is similar in some ways to jacks.

#### Section Review:

1. Briefly describe the status of Hindu women in ancient times.
2. What rights did women in India gain under the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955?
3. Why do Hindus not eat beef?
4. Why do devout Hindus not eat such foods as beets and watermelon?
5. What are some popular spectator sports in India and other places where Hindus live?
6. Name several games Hindu children play that are similar to games played by children in America.

#### For Further Thought:

1. You read that names given to Hindu children in the past always had a religious connection. The same was true of the names parents gave to children in early America. Make a list of children's names that were once popular in America—names that came directly from the Bible.
2. What childhood ceremonies are important in other religious cultures?
3. Pretend that you lived in India when childhood marriages were the rule. Make a diary entry in which you express your thoughts and feelings about marrying someone you have never seen—and at such an early age.
4. Would you advertise in the newspaper or subscribe to a dating service in order to meet a mate? Explain.
5. What are your feelings about cremation?
6. Write a report expressing your views on vegetarianism.
7. Tell why you believe women in America have or have not achieved equal rights with men.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## *Hinduism Since Ancient Times*



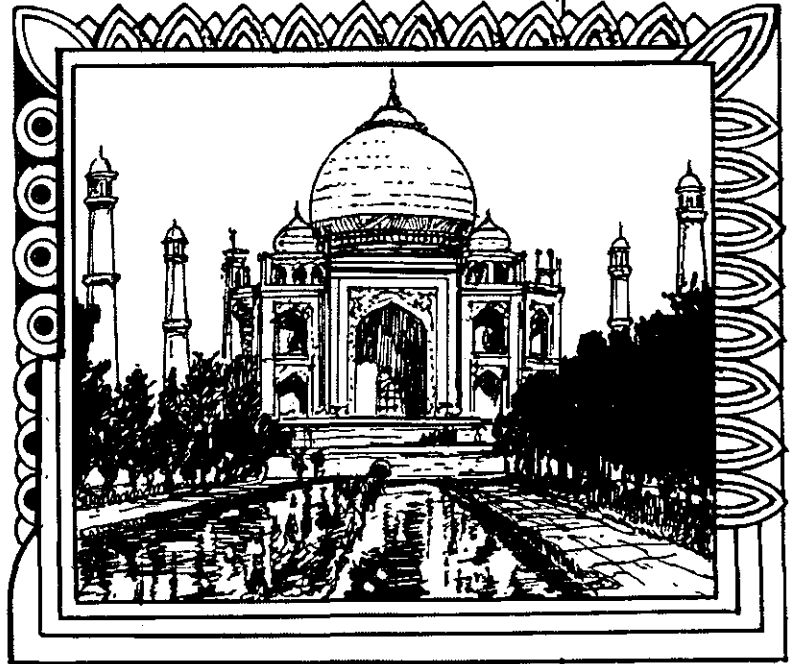
The history of Hinduism is inextricably linked to the history of India. Therefore, to understand how it developed and spread, it is necessary to look briefly at Indian history.

### *A Long Period of Invasions*

India and Hinduism changed little for hundreds of years. Then beginning in the 6th century B.C., a series of invaders made their mark on the country. First came the Persians under *King Darius I* in 522 B.C. Then came the great Macedonian Greek ruler known as *Alexander the Great*. Alexander conquered the northwest part of India in 326 B.C. and made it a part of the world's first great empire.

A few short years after Alexander and his army left, India came under the control of *Chandragupta Maurya*. Chandragupta Maurya was a prince from the northeast part of India. He established what was called the Maurya Empire, an empire that included all of India except its southern tip. Chandragupta Maurya's grandson, *Asoka*, became king in about 272 B.C. India soon changed under his rule. About 250 B.C., Asoka converted to Buddhism, and most of India then became Buddhist. Only by simplifying Hindu doctrine by printing the Vedas and other holy scriptures did Hinduism become popular again.

The Maurya Empire fell apart after Asoka's death. Other invasions followed. The *Huns* came, followed by *Muslim Arabs* about A. D. 700. The Muslims attempted to stamp out Hinduism by burning Hindu temples and persecuting the Indian people. But Hinduism survived. The *Mongols*, who became known as *Moguls* in India, invaded in the 16th century A.D. and ruled until the British



influence became dominant in the middle of the 18th century. The Moguls were also Muslims. One Mogul ruler, *Shah Jahan*, built the famous *Taj Mahal* at Agra, India, in 1654. The Taj Mahal, a tomb constructed for Jahan's wife, is the most famous example of Muslim architecture in India.

Built in 1654, the Taj Mahal is the most famous example of Muslim architecture in India.

### *Section Review:*

1. Which conqueror made India part of the world's first great empire?
2. Which king was responsible for most of India becoming Buddhist?
3. What view did the Muslims who invaded India about A. D. 700 take toward Hinduism?
4. Who built the famous Taj Mahal?

### *British Rule*

Beginning in the 15th century A.D., European nations established trading posts along India's west coast. The Portuguese were the first to arrive.

### **Words to remember:**

**King Darius I**

**Alexander the Great**

**Chandragupta Maurya**

**Asoka**

**Huns**

**Muslim Arabs**

**Moguls**

**Shah Jahan**

**Taj Mahal**

**38**



They were followed by the Dutch, the French, and the English. In time the English, represented by a trading company known as the *British East India Company*, seized control of most of the Indian subcontinent in the 1750s. This was made possible by the weakness of the Mogul ruler and the feuds between rival Indian princes.

The British East India Company ruled India until 1858, when the British Crown took over. In many ways, India thrived under English rule. Roads, bridges, railroads, and schools were built. Agricultural methods were improved and law and order prevailed. The English also did away with such ancient Hindu customs as suttee. (Refer back to the section entitled "Funeral Customs" in Chapter Seven.)

In spite of such progress, Indians were not happy under English rule. A movement demanding self-government emerged in the 1920s and 1930s. It was led by a spiritual and political leader, named *Mobandas Karamchand Gandhi*. Gandhi came to be called *Mahatma*,

meaning "Great Soul." He encouraged non-violence as a means of obtaining Indian independence. His methods also included fasting and *boycotting* (refusing to buy) English goods. He was arrested and thrown into jail many times. But after years of struggle, his efforts paid off. In 1947, Great Britain granted India its independence.

Independence did not end India's problems. In the years leading up to it, bloody fighting between Hindus and Muslims in India's largest cities had taken place. Massacre followed massacre, and millions of people were killed. One solution to the violence was to partition (divide) India into two separate countries. Most of the subcontinent remained Hindu, but the new nation of Pakistan was established for the benefit of the Muslims.

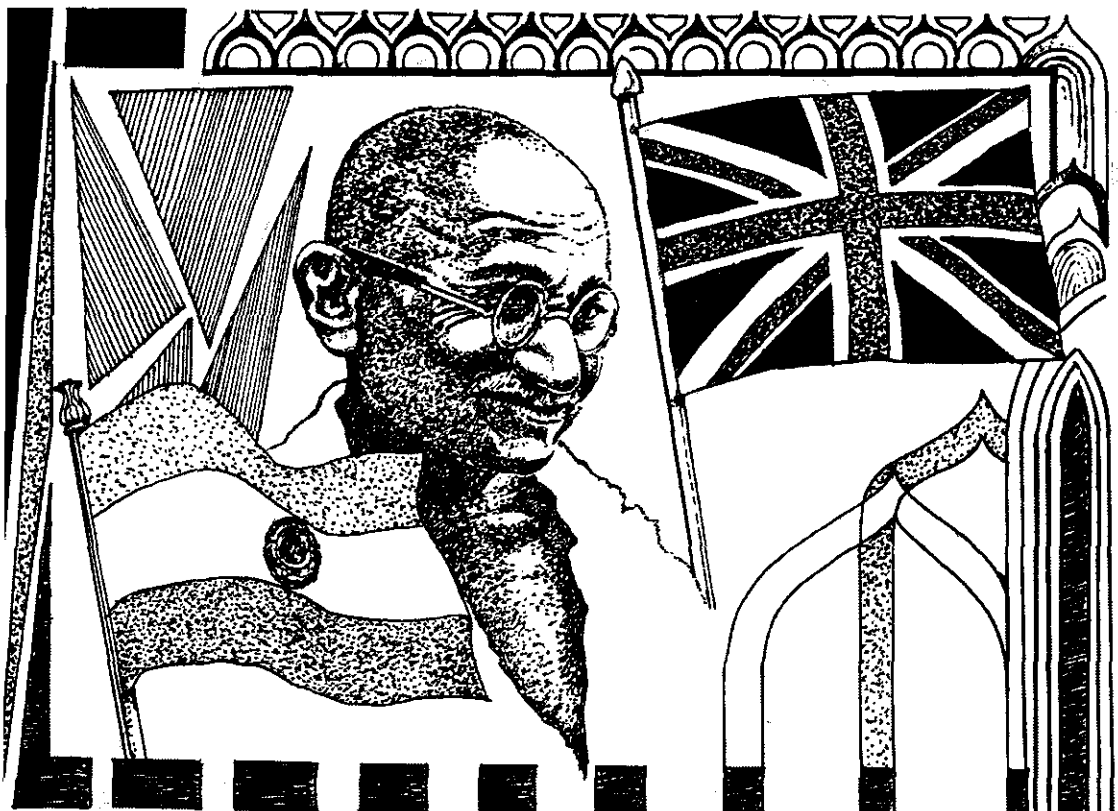
Until 1972, Pakistan was separated into East Pakistan and West Pakistan. In that year, East Pakistan became the nation of Bangladesh.

**Words to remember:**

**British East India Company**

**Gandhi Mahatma boycotting**

In 1919, Mahatma Gandhi emerged as a leader of the Indian independence movement. He promoted non-violent resistance as a means of bringing about political change.



### Section Review:

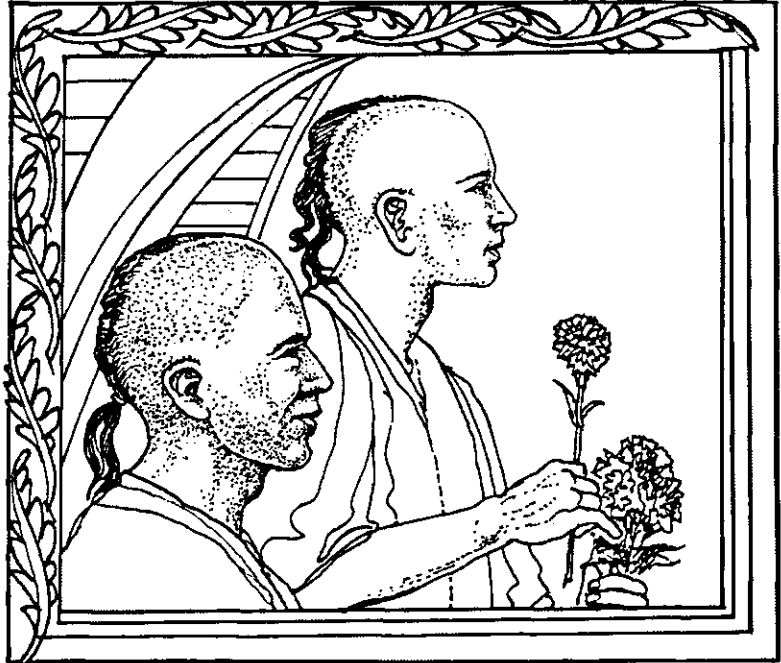
1. Which European nation was the first to establish trading posts in India?
2. Which trading country had gained control of most of India by the 1750s?
3. What methods were used by Mohandas Gandhi to attain Indian independence from Great Britain?
4. In what way was India partitioned in 1947?
5. What was East Pakistan called after 1972?

### Hinduism Elsewhere

As was pointed out in the Overview, there are more than 700 million Hindus in the world. Most are in India, but there are also large numbers elsewhere. Many Hindus have migrated to eastern Africa and to such countries as Nepal, Malaysia, and Sri Lanka. There are also Hindus in Guyana and Surinam in Latin America, and Bali and Fiji in Indonesia. A few have moved to Europe, Canada, Australia, and the United States.

In America, many Hindus belong to a sect called the *Hare Krishna* movement. *Hare* means "God who forgives your wrongdoings." Members of this sect worship Krishna, one of the forms of the god Rama. The full name of the group is

the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. It was founded in 1966 by *Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada*. At first the Hare Krishnas



were looked upon as nothing more than a hippie cult. In time, however, it was grudgingly accepted as a form of Hinduism by more orthodox Hindus.

### Section Review:

1. Name several countries to which Hinduism has spread.
2. Who are the Hare Krishnas?

Most Hindus live in India. In America, a Hindu sect that has not been readily accepted by orthodox Hindus is the International Society for Krishna Consciousness commonly known as "the Hare Krishnas."

### For Further Thought:

1. Research and write a two-page report on the life of Mohandas Gandhi.
2. How were the methods used by Dr. Martin Luther King during the American civil rights movement of the 1960s similar to those preached by Gandhi?
3. Read about the Hare Krishnas in an encyclopedia or some other source. Why do you think people at first saw them more as a hippie group rather than as a religious movement?
4. Make a time line of Indian history from the invasion of the Persians in ancient times up through the period of British rule.
5. In this chapter, you read about the violence that took place between Hindus and Muslims before and after India was granted independence by Great Britain. In your opinion, are wars and massacres committed in the name of religion ever justified? Why or why not?

### Words to remember:

**Hare Krishna**  
**Bhaktivedanta**  
**Swami Prabhupada**