

Hindu worldview traditions

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Introduction

Our series of subject knowledge essays are written for the teacher to expand and deepen understanding of religion and worldviews. You might like to share extracts with students but these are aimed at teachers and other professionals. Each essay is authored by an expert in the field. They might take a particular position or stance with regards to the worldview in question. You can find out about each author in the biographies given at the start of the essay. We hope you find these essays helpful as you learn more about this fascinating subject.

About the Authors

The authors are Catherine Robinson and Denise Cush.

Professional

Catherine Robinson has a BA (Hons) in Religious Studies from Stirling University and a PhD in Religious Studies from Lancaster University. She taught at Bath Spa University for nearly 30 years where her main interests included issues of gender and sexuality in religions and Indian religions (especially Hinduism and Sikhism) in the modern period. She was also a member of the local SACRE and the regional steering group of Learn, Teach, Lead RE. Together with Denise Cush, she worked on the Living Religion: Facilitating Fieldwork Placements in Theology and Religious Studies project that received the Shap Award for 2013 for its contribution to the field of the study of/education in religions. More recently, they co-authored articles on the relationship between Religious Studies and Religious Education and the role of feminist praxis in both, and a chapter on the applicability of the concept of 'religion' to Dharmic traditions, and the implications for religious education. She has also written an entry on 'Hinduism and Religious Education' for a German online dictionary. Her publications include *Tradition and liberation: the Hindu tradition in the Indian women's movement* (Curzon, 1999), *Interpretations of the Bhagavad-Gita and images of the Hindu tradition: the Song of the Lord* (Routledge, 2006) and co-editorship of *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (Routledge, 2008) along with, for example, articles on the legacy of Edwin Arnold and religion in the Indian Army (*Religions of South Asia*, 2009; 2014; 2015).

Personal

Catherine grew up in a family where religion was debated as much as politics. Educated in both Catholic and non-denominational schools, as an adult she retained no religious belief or commitment. However, her fascination for religions and for Hinduism in particular remained, especially an interest in Gandhi to whose life and career she was introduced by her mother when a young child. While her main academic concerns have been with real-world implications of religious belief and practice, she feels very much 'at home' in Hindu settings and enjoys puja in temples as well as participating in festivals. She has visited India and is familiar with various different Hindu groups and communities in the UK where she has been made welcome. However, she has made particularly strong links with the International Society for Krishna Consciousness based at Bhaktivedanta Manor where devotees became friends over the course of decades bringing students to visit.

Professional

Denise Cush is Emeritus Professor of Religion and Education at Bath Spa University, having retired after 29 years there in 2015. Her roles during this time included leading and teaching Study of Religions and Philosophies and Ethics, teaching within Education Studies, and

teacher training for both primary and secondary RE. Before that she taught Religious Studies (including Hinduism at A/O level) as well as Religious Education for nine years at St. Mary's RC Sixth-form College in Middlesbrough. She has an MA in Theology from Oxford University, a PGCE in RE with Science as second subject from Westminster College, Oxford, an MA in Religious Studies from the University of Lancaster, a PhD in Religious Education from the University of Warwick, and an honorary doctorate from the University of Uppsala. She was a member of the Commission on Religious Education 2017-18, and Deputy Editor of the *British Journal of Religious Education* from 2011-2018. Publications include *Buddhism*, a still much-used textbook (Hodder, 1994), *Celebrating Planet Earth, a Pagan/Christian Conversation* (Moon, 2015) and many others on religious education. She has collaborated with her colleague Catherine Robinson on a number of publications, notably in co-editing *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (Routledge, 2008).

Personal

Denise was brought up within a Roman Catholic family and attended Catholic maintained schools in the North East. She identified as Catholic (of a liberal, post Vatican II, 'preferential option for the poor', 'justice and peace' tendency) for the first 30 years of her life, including teaching in a Catholic Sixth-form college. Since then she has resisted labels, and identifies as non-binary in relation to the religious/non-religious construct, though has sometimes called herself a 'positive pluralist', acknowledging the influence of several religious and non-religious worldviews on her personal worldview. The factors affecting her interpretations of Hinduism include visits to India, Nepal and Sri Lanka, visits to Hindu temples/communities elsewhere such as in Australia and South Africa as well as many visits to Hindu temples and interactions with Hindu communities and individuals in the UK. She first decided to study Hinduism (and Buddhism) at MA level, mainly because of the contrast with the Christianity of her upbringing and Theology degree, and probably also because of the positive image 'Eastern' religions had in 1960s/70s alternative youth culture. Any attempt to summarise the complexity and diversity to which the label Hinduism is applied is bound to be partial and flawed, but, we hope, of some help.

Introduction to Hinduism

Preconceptions

Even if you do not know much about Hinduism, you are bound to have some preconceptions. It is worth stopping to think what these are and from where they have come. Various images may be conjured up: hippies in the 1960s when the Beatles travelled to India to meet the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi; International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) devotees wearing saffron and dancing in the streets, chanting 'Hare Krishna'; the Indian nationalist M.K. Gandhi, known as the Mahatma ('great self/soul'), in his round glasses, wearing a dhoti and striding out with a walking stick for support; the exotic colour and warmth of numerous books and films inspired by India and the British experience of the subcontinent. The presence of a diverse Hindu community in this country and greater opportunities to visit India may have already challenged some of these stereotypes even if the engagement with Hinduism may be selective in favouring a particular region or tradition or superficial as pre-packaged for tourists.

In previous generations, Christian attacks on idolatry, denouncing the numerous statues of deities swathed in incense and bedecked in garlands by their worshippers, and the Romantic notion of the 'Spiritual East', evoking renouncers seated cross-legged in meditation achieving a higher state of consciousness, may have been more influential in shaping

attitudes towards Hinduism though neither has disappeared. Even quality newspapers can be found referring to Hindu 'idols' and the idea that somehow 'Eastern' religions are more 'spiritual' is still quite common.

One of the complicating factors is the difficulty of distinguishing between Hinduism and more general features of Indian, South Asian, or even Oriental, life and culture. To some degree, this can be attributed to the nature of Hinduism as a catch-all category or umbrella term, but also to the dissemination of the Indian worldview throughout Asia where it is not always possible, for example, to make a clear distinction between Hinduism and Buddhism on the ground.

Another factor is the history of colonialism whereby Britain's role as the imperial power has been a distorting lens through which to view India leading, among other things, to the self-interested over-simplified claim that Hindus and Muslims constituted two mutually antagonistic groups or 'nations'.

An additional factor is the legacy of earlier Western scholarship that often subscribed to a Sanskritic textual model of Hinduism, idealising the distant past of the ancient texts at the expense of a supposedly corrupt present. In marginalising contemporary, vernacular, popular and ritual traditions, this approach has been criticised for rendering Hinduism unrecognisable to many Hindus though, of course, this is a far from uncommon experience among members of religious communities encountering an academic version of their religions. However, some Hindus have also put forward accounts of Hinduism that favour particular ways of understanding the tradition which ignore the voice and experience of other Hindus such as women and members of lower castes.

A Note on Languages

Although the national language of India is Hindi, not everyone speaks this and India today has fourteen other official languages as well as minority languages and local dialects, and beyond the current borders of India, Hindus speak other languages such as Nepali. As a result of British colonialism, and later its increasing use as the international language of science, technology and the media, English has also become important in India, including for the spread of Hindu ideas to the English-speaking world. The language of the oldest sacred texts is Sanskrit which, like Latin in Europe, is no longer anyone's first language. However, Sanskrit is still used in India and among Hindus more than Latin is today in the UK, particularly by priests as ritual specialists. Thus, Hindus will be at least familiar with the sounds, and know some of the meanings, in the way that Roman Catholics worldwide would recognise the mass before the Church changed to using vernacular languages in the 1960s.

It tends to be the Sanskrit version of Hindu terms that are used in English, including in RE textbooks. Several of these have passed into general English usage beyond Religious Studies, such as karma, guru or yoga. One thing to note is that there may be different spellings. Some of this is because academic texts use diacritics whereas in less specialised use, including in RE textbooks, anglicised versions are used which avoid having to learn the diacritics. So Kṛṣṇa becomes Krishna, and Dīvālī becomes Divali. To complicate things still further, different anglicised spellings are found because there are variations in transliteration such as whether or not to include a final 'a' (as in Ganesha or Ganesh), the substitution of letters such as 'w' for 'v' (Diwali rather than Divali) or 'oo' for 'u' (for example pooja, not puja) and 'ee' for 'i', (as in Seeta, not Sita). Sometimes double vowels are used to

indicate a long vowel in Sanskrit such as spelling arti as aarti. This essay will use the most common anglicised spellings as found in RE textbooks, in spite of inconsistencies. For example, we use 'brahmin' (priest) rather than the more accurate 'brahman', which would have had the advantage of showing the connection of priests with both 'Brahman' (in the sense of ultimate reality) and 'Brahmanas', the ritual commentary layer of the Vedic texts.

Hindu texts began to be written in vernacular languages rather than classical Sanskrit from as early as the seventh century CE, especially in South Indian languages such as Tamil which are not related to Sanskrit as well as later in North Indian languages such as Hindi or Bengali which are. Resources may also use terms from these languages.

A final language issue is that some of the terms that have been used in English to translate key concepts can be misleading or even offensive. For example 'incarnation' is used for 'avatar', though it does not have quite the same meaning as when used by Christians in relation to Jesus. A worse example is using 'idol' for 'murti' (image). This tends to have very negative associations as it was used by colonialists and some earlier missionaries to portray Hindus as primitive and superstitious, worshipping 'idols' as forbidden in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. To avoid such confusion or offence it is often best to learn the original term where there is no accurate English equivalent.

What is Hinduism? Is it a philosophy, a way of life, a spiritual path, a religion, a worldview? Does it even exist?

Although rather less frequently than in the case of Buddhism, for example, there has been a recent tendency to refer to Hinduism as a 'philosophy'. Certainly, Hinduism has a rich and vibrant intellectual heritage (see *Hindu philosophies*) but it cannot be reduced to this. Conversely, the more common reference to Hinduism as a 'way of life' favours the lived experience and perhaps also lessens the difficulties of definition in the face of extraordinary diversity. However, this emphasis upon Hinduism being a way of life is hardly unique. Hinduism can also be described as a 'spirituality' since this reflects its ascetic and mystic aspects. Yet the concentration on the personal and private at the cost of the social and public, despite the generally positive connotations of spirituality, poses the danger of perpetuating a distorted vision of Hinduism as other-worldly. Some contemporary Hindus use the phrase 'spiritual humanism' to counteract this and emphasise ethical action in the world. Of course, the most obvious answer to the question 'what is Hinduism?' is that it is a religion. Nevertheless, it is a controversial answer as both religion and Hinduism are now viewed in a more critical manner.

Many scholars argue that the concept of 'religion' has undergone a process of reification in the modern West whereby religion has come to be seen as an object or thing. If instead, religion is recognised as a concept, without an independent existence or essence, there is a basis for evaluating whether it is the appropriate category to classify what is labelled Hinduism. Arguably, the idea of a clearly defined, separate belief system does not fit the Hindu tradition.

Frits Staal goes as far as claiming that Eastern 'religions', as we understand them today, were actually *invented* by the colonial imposition of Western norms based on truth claims onto Asian traditions based on ritual. Even the declaration by many contemporary Hindus that it is the 'Sanatana Dharma' ('eternal law' or 'eternal religion') can be seen as having been influenced by the Western concept of 'religion', as it began to be used in colonial times

first to indicate a traditional Hinduism as opposed to the innovations of reformers, then to describe a timeless, universal religion potentially relevant to all humanity. The Hindu tradition differs in many ways from the common understanding of 'a religion', modelled on what is seen in European Protestant Christianity or other Abrahamic traditions - a founder, a prophet, one God, one scripture etc. Some scholars suggest that it is best to see Hinduism not as one religion but many. After all, 'Hinduism' actually has many founders of specific groups and movements, many different lineages of teachers, many G/gods and G/goddesses worshipped, and many authoritative texts cherished by different groups. Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism can thus be treated as separate religions, rather than as branches of Hinduism. Nevertheless, even if it is argued that 'Hinduism' as a single 'religion' did not exist in the past, it can be argued that it does now, as both adherents and outsiders tend to regard Hinduism to all intents and purposes as one religion and may present it, in a somewhat misleading way, using the template of Christianity.

We might refer to the Hindu 'worldview', or possibly more accurately, 'worldviews' plural. In the most general sense, 'worldview' refers to an overall approach to life. But 'worldview', like 'religion,' is a term that means different things to different people. It can have a narrower meaning of the intellectual or cognitive ideas, teachings and beliefs of a tradition, put together in a systematic way by scholars – though as discussed above there are many of these, teaching somewhat different things. It can also mean something much wider, including emotions, experience, ethical and ritual practice, and sense of identity, which are, like teachings, plural and diverse in this tradition. It can be argued however that a more unified sense of a 'Hindu' identity has been created in modern and contemporary times (see below). It can mean an 'institutional' worldview, so would refer to the official versions of teachings, ethical expectations, approved practices, ideas about who belongs (or is eligible to belong) to this community, or views on contemporary issues put forward by accepted authorities within the tradition. There are various organisations that attempt to do this, but none that can really be said to speak for 'all Hindus', and in any case, individuals and smaller groups identifying with a particular institution do not always accept or live by the whole 'package'. Our worldviews are also personal, so we might talk about the worldview of an individual, in which Hindu ideas, values, practices and identity might form a major or *just a contributory part* alongside other influences. 'Worldview' also can be used in a narrow sense to mean just views about the 'world' or cosmos, rather than other aspects of human experience, or to refer to the taken-for-granted assumptions of any particular society or historical period. Thus sometimes it might make more sense to talk of an 'Indian' rather than a 'Hindu' worldview when describing a picture of the universe which includes beings such as deities, demons, heavens and hells, many lives, karma, and an immense stretch of time, which would be shared by other traditions of Indian origin such as Buddhism or Sikhism.

In this essay we continue to use the term 'Hinduism', but only as a convenient shorthand and not implying the existence of a 'thing'.

When did Hinduism begin?

Hinduism is sometimes introduced as the world's oldest religion, at least 5000 years old on the evidence of ancient texts and archaeological remains, but it is also claimed by others to date from the conditions created by either Muslim or British rule, when arguably the resulting engagement with others ways of thinking and/or living prompted a sense of religious unity on the part of those now called Hindus. Another answer would be to say that,

as the Sanatana Dharma (eternal religion), it is timeless and without beginning. However, whether Hinduism as a whole rather than specific expressions can be equated with Sanatana Dharma can be questioned. It could also be argued that as an invented label that does not correspond well with reality, Hinduism does not exist and never did, so cannot be said to have begun.

What is at dispute in determining the origins of Hinduism is not so much the actual word, since there is wide agreement that this was coined by Westerners in the modern era and in general use in the nineteenth century, preceded by references to a Hindu religion (or equivalent) in the eighteenth century. The issue is more whether what Hinduism denotes is also recent in date and Western in derivation. There are broadly three schools of thought. First, the thesis that Hinduism is the ancient religion of India with deep roots in the subcontinent leading to the declaration that Hinduism is the world's oldest religion. It traces Hinduism back to the Veda or other age-old sources as the fountainhead of an organic course of development extending over millennia.

Second, the thesis that Hinduism is the product of India's medieval encounter with Islam and Islamic civilisation that prompted a sense of a shared religious identity. It involves the emergence of Hinduism as distinct from other Indian religions as well as from Islam, drawing upon pre-existing common features and unifying factors.

Third, the thesis that Hinduism is the product of the modern West, shaped by imperial rule, Christian missionary activity and Orientalist scholarship but also by indigenous elites both as consultants and campaigners. It portrays the medieval period in terms of the interaction of Islamic and Indian cultures, postponing the separation of Hinduism from other Indian religions to the modern period.

Such disagreements do arise out of contrasting bodies of evidence though they may be attributed in part to differences over the meaning of Hinduism, its earliest beginnings or its current form, and the importance attached to either continuities or changes through time. They also relate to who were regarded as Hindus and what was intended by this.

Who are Hindus?

In one sense a Hindu is anyone who identifies as such. However, it is somewhat more complicated than that, as they may also need to be accepted as Hindu by others, and in any case the meaning of the word Hindu has changed over time and continues to be fluid. While now the terms Hindu and Indian are most often used to mean something quite different, they both owe their origins to the Sanskrit Sindhu or River Indus. When pronounced by the Persians, Sindhu became Hindu which was subsequently appropriated by the Greeks for whom it became Indos. In both instances, the terms referred to the land beyond the river, the people and their way of life. Hence in the past Hindu and Indian meant much the same and were used as synonyms. Later Hindu came to have a distinctly religious meaning as an adherent of Hinduism, displacing the earlier geographic, ethnic and cultural meaning that was broad enough to encompass members of other religions, such as those now called Jains and Buddhists. The legacy of the older usage persisted into the modern period in Western sources which retained the sense of Hindus as participants in the indigenous civilisation of the subcontinent even if the narrow religious sense was acquiring dominance. Opinions differ as to when and why this change occurred (see *When did Hinduism begin?*).

It is clear that what began as a term used by outsiders in due course was adopted by insiders. It is less clear whether Muslim or Hindu commentators in pre-modern India conceived of Muslims and Hindus as *religious* communities rather than ethnic or cultural groups. Possibly, as William Oddie suggests, regional factors may go some way towards explaining apparently contradictory evidence on Muslim-Hindu relations and the development of Hindu self-identity as membership of a religious community. While this self-identity may predate the modern period, undoubtedly it developed further in British India where, for a variety of reasons, Hindus increasingly prioritised their affiliation with 'Hinduism' over the multitude of traditions and movements with which they were associated. Even so, ethnographic studies query the notion that Hindus and Muslims belonged to exclusive communities and qualify the extent to which Hindus recognised the label Hindu as designating their *religious* identity.

Certainly today those who describe themselves as Hindu in all likelihood will do so to indicate their adherence to Hinduism as a religion, albeit that ambiguity and ambivalence have not been eliminated entirely. Some contemporary Hindu nationalists are reviving the idea that Hindu and Indian are interchangeable (as did Hindu nationalists in the first half of the twentieth century), so counting adherents of Indian-origin traditions such as Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs as Hindu, while rejecting Muslims and Christians as Indians. Some religious groups cross the boundaries between communities for example some Punjabi groups (such as the Valmikis) that challenge the division of Hindus from Sikhs. ISKCON devotees have been divided on how the Society should be positioned, as separate from or part of Hinduism, though many would accept the label Hindu while also emphasising their Vaishnava allegiance. The position of some minority 'tribal' groups in India can also be ambiguous.

In most cases, self-identified Hindus are born and brought up in Hindu families, in India or of Indian descent in diaspora, settled in other countries. Many would maintain that to be a Hindu you have to be born into a Hindu family but there are exceptions or at least qualifications, with Westerners (and others) joining Hindu and Hindu-related movements in addition to participating more generally in Hindu religious life whether or not the label Hindu is applied to or adopted by individuals.

Nevertheless, an antipathy towards conversion as neither karmically appropriate nor ethically acceptable together with the absence of definitive criteria for establishing what is and what is not Hinduism make it more difficult to establish a Hindu religious identity independent of an ethnic basis.

How this essay is organised

The headings in this essay are derived from the six 'Big Ideas' (Wintersgill ed. 2017, Wintersgill et al, 2019) and the Commission on RE's *National Entitlement* (CoRE 2018). This introductory section for example links to NE2 – key concepts such as religion and the complexity of worldviews, NE4 - the ways in which worldviews develop in interaction with each other and have some shared beliefs and practices, and that people may draw upon more than one tradition, and Big Idea 1 – continuity, change and diversity and what we mean by religion(s)/worldview(s).

Where to begin?

There are many ways to start talking about Hinduism, and obviously this depends on the age of pupils and any syllabus followed. Some textbooks take an historical approach and begin with the Indus Valley Civilisation, others see more relevance in starting with the life of a Hindu child of an age near to that of the pupils in the UK today. Others start with the concept of dharma or central beliefs about ultimate reality. Symbols such as yantras (including mandalas) as diagrammatic representations of ultimate reality, and even rangoli patterns might capture attention, and fit with the current fashion of colouring-in as a form of mindfulness. Artefacts can create interest such as the arti tray, or images of deities. Ganesh is a particular favourite with small children. Older children might respond to something concerning Hindus in the news, whether controversial such as the laying of the foundation stone of the new temple to Rama in Ayodhya or the worship of Coronadevi, to use two 2020 examples. The simple greeting 'Namaste' can open up a discussion of respecting the divine within all people.

This account will start by stressing diversity before looking at 'matters of central importance' which is where the *National Entitlement* starts, in order to avoid giving the impression of an 'essence' of Hinduism (but the main thing is to start).

Diversity, Change and Continuity (Big Idea 1; NE 2 and 3)

Diversity

Hinduism is diverse at every level, extending beyond the threefold division into Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism (centred on complexes of deities associated with Vishnu, Shiva and Shakti/Mahadevi/the Goddess respectively) to encompass a multitude of sects and cults, ranging from elite perspectives of monastic study and reflection to folk practices of ritual possession, alongside change over time including the profusion of modern and contemporary movements and the worship of innumerable village or guardian deities in specific localities. This leads some commentators to point to Hinduisms in the plural rather than Hinduism in the singular. Certainly, it is very difficult to suggest what unifies Hinduism.

As the standard of orthodoxy, acceptance of the authority of the Veda, the most ancient sacred texts, has been proposed as a defining characteristic but acceptance may be merely nominal and some movements that are obviously Hindu, for example, the Virashaivas, reject it entirely. Another candidate for unifying Hinduism, closely connected to the Veda, is the role of brahmins (priests) as sacred specialists with ritual and textual expertise but there are other sacred specialists such as shamans, who provide necessary services like healing in folk traditions, and Hindu groups, like the reform movement founded by Narayana Guru from a Keralan dalit (outcaste) community, that challenge brahmanic dominance. Others suggest that the concepts of karma (law of action), samsara (round of existence), punarjanma (reincarnation) and moksha (liberation) unite Hindus, but these are also found in other religions of Indian origin and also do not necessarily reflect everyday Hindu experience which may focus upon living this life well rather than seeking moksha.

Membership of castes (individual hereditary social groups called jatis frequently related to the general hierarchical principle of social organisation established by the four great classes or varnas) has been cited as crucial but caste in the sense of jati is observed in some form by non-Hindus too, while Hindus are divided on the subject with some actively opposing it in whole or part and others denying any association between Hinduism and caste at all.

Reverence for India as the sacred motherland has also been suggested as unifying Hinduism but, in addition to the controversial nationalist aspects of the cult of Bharat Mata (Mother India), the growing generations of Hindus living in diaspora can come to understand their relationship with India in different ways and locate the sacred in spaces nearer at hand. These difficulties explain why reference is made more generally to a sense of shared heritage giving rise to a shared identity, though this does not really explain from where this sense originates.

An approach that has been adopted by some scholars, which gets away from the expectation that a common core and clear boundaries are required to define Hinduism, is to apply what is called the 'family resemblance' model. No one feature is shared by all Hindus, but a range of features are connected by a set of overlapping similarities that edge off into other religions. This captures the rich diversity of Hinduism within the broader context of Indian religions, and allows us to continue to use the term as a convenient shorthand while recognising its limitations.

Change and continuity: historical and geographical distribution

Histories of Hinduism used to begin with the Aryans as the custodians of the Vedic texts, conceived as invaders who conquered the indigenous inhabitants of the subcontinent. However, in the 1920s, archaeological excavations revealed the existence of the Indus Valley Civilisation, a sophisticated literate urban culture, predating the postulated arrival of the Aryans to whom its destruction was initially attributed. The discoveries made were then seized upon as possible sources of later Hindu belief and practice such as Goddess worship and ritual purity and pollution that were without obvious Vedic origins. Many aspects of this account are questionable: the Aryan invasion thesis has been criticised as reflecting a colonial outlook (that the sacred texts and practices of Hindu tradition were brought in by invading lighter-skinned outsiders rather than originating with the darker-skinned indigenous people of India); the relationship between the Indus Valley Civilisation and Vedic culture has been redefined in terms of continuity rather than change (that the Indus Valley Civilisation was actually an earlier form of Vedic culture); and the speculative nature of the interpretation of artefacts (figures with exaggerated female characteristics, the Great Bath, etc.) without having deciphered the Indus Valley script has been underlined. Dating has also proved contentious but many scholars believe that the Indus Valley Civilisation was flourishing in the mid third millennium BCE with the Vedic period starting around the mid second millennium BCE.

The dominance of the Veda and its ritual worldview was challenged in the mid first millennium BCE by the shramanas, ascetics who renounced the world in search of spiritual insight and fulfilment. This included criticism of traditional values and practices such as ritual sacrifices and the importance of family life and having children, to be replaced by practices such as ascetic penances, yoga and meditation and following the new ideas of a variety of shramana teachers. Both what are now called Jainism and Buddhism emerged from this background, as did the Upanishads which embodied radical shramanic values in spite of becoming included in the Vedic texts. A concerted effort was required by the orthodox to counter the attraction of new movements and perspectives, for example, by accommodating renunciation as a vocation into traditional patterns rather than as a radical alternative. In the famous scheme of the *Laws of Manu*, renunciation was integrated into a series of life stages conditional on the individual having first performed the duties of a student of the Vedic texts and then the duties of a householder, ensuring that the three

debts owed to the ancestors, sages and gods were discharged by fathering sons, completing Vedic studies and offering sacrifices. This ability to absorb new ideas and practices within existing traditions has enabled Hinduism to weave together change and continuity over the centuries and contain massive diversity within what can still be perceived as related. Another significant development was the rise of the bhakti (devotion) movement in the mid first millennium CE, characterised by the personal relationship between deity and devotee and centred on major Gods and Goddesses of the post-Vedic pantheon such as Vishnu, Shiva and Mahadevi (the Goddess). Some bhakti groups retained a broadly orthodox stance though others were more radical. The Islamic presence on the subcontinent seems to have played some part in the emergence in medieval North India of a distinctive type of bhakti, nirguna bhakti (devotion to the formless divine), also known as the Sant tradition, with adherents from both Hindu and Muslim backgrounds. This type of devotion, rejecting the outer and institutionalised forms of religiosity of Hinduism and Islam alike and focussing upon direct experience of the divine through meditation on Name or Word, has been compared with the teachings of Guru Nanak as the context of early Sikhism.

British rule prompted further developments as numerous societies were formed with agendas of reform and revival such as the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj. Similar societies, concerned to achieve religious and social change and thereby defend the interests of the community, were founded by members of other religions. The interplay of these organisations, including the Singh Sabhas founded by leading Sikhs, contributed towards the process of defining religions and communities as separate, if not also antagonistic, and thus helped to reshape the religious landscape of India. This led to the growing insistence on Sikhism as separate from Hinduism at least at the level of formal or official discourse though the situation remains more fluid and ambiguous on the ground.

Contrasting trends in modern and contemporary Hinduism feature the advocacy of a universalist spirituality represented by the Ramakrishna Math and Mission/Vedanta Societies and the assertion of a Hindu nationalism represented by the Sangh Parivar/Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). Exchange and encounter with the West have been important factors. The Theosophical Society, particularly under the leadership of Annie Besant (1847-1933), did much to promote Hindu beliefs and values in the West while advancing educational, social and political causes in India. ISKCON was established by Swami Bhaktivedanta in New York in 1966 at the height of the counterculture where his preaching of Chaitanya's message of Krishna bhakti won over disaffected young Americans before spreading worldwide, attracting devotees from the Hindu community as well as those from other backgrounds.

The history of Hinduism is thus complex and multifaceted, with beliefs and practices old and new co-existing and interacting in a huge variety of ways, in relation to other religions and in response to changing circumstances. Its geographical spread has also been significant. Within the subcontinent, there are notable regional differences evident in the temple architecture of North (Nagara) and South (Dravida) India, while some tribal communities living in marginal areas have been subject to proselytization by Hindu missionaries. Hindus live in present-day Nepal, proclaimed 'the world's only Hindu state' from 1962 to 2006 (whereas the contemporary Indian state is officially secular). Hindus also live in what is now Pakistan and Bangladesh after the subdivision of British India at Partition in 1947 and Bangladeshi independence from Pakistan in 1971. Hindus have lived in Sri Lanka for thousands of years though their numbers have been swelled by a series of migrations from

South India, including the settlement of Tamils to work on plantations under British imperial rule.

Although, traditionally, leaving the Indian subcontinent ('crossing the black waters') was viewed negatively and meant losing status as a member of a Hindu caste, from ancient times, trade between India and other parts of Asia led to migration across the continent and the spread of Hindu and Buddhist ideas. As Buddhism was taken to other countries, it took with it much of the general Indian worldview, including what would now be labelled Hindu deities, customs and ideas. In the modern era, under British rule, Hindus travelled to other parts of the British Empire including other Asian countries such as Malaysia, Pacific islands such as Fiji, Caribbean islands such as Trinidad, and South and East Africa, often as indentured labourers though also as merchants and professionals. In the post-war and postcolonial period, there has been large-scale migration to the UK, and Hindus have also migrated to Australasia and North America, and in smaller numbers to continental European nations. The process of decolonisation meant that some Hindus have become 'twice migrants' as members of expatriate communities relocating for a second time, notably those who had lived in East Africa but were displaced by Africanisation policies, bringing with them the experience of practising Hinduism in a diasporic setting.

The variety of Hinduism is reproduced in the diaspora. For example, in the UK, the predominantly Shaivite nature of Sri Lankan Hinduism is reflected in the foundation of the Community of the Many Names of God/Skanda Vale, a multi-faith ashram in rural Wales, alongside many other groups such as the Swaminarayan Sampradaya which originated in Gujarat, the region with which the majority of British Hindus are associated. Living as minorities in countries outside India has involved Hindus in innovative solutions, such as Sanatana Dharma temple communities worshipping deities from a range of different Hindu traditions in the same temple (whereas in India temples tend to be dedicated to a particular deity or group of related deities), temples functioning as community centres as well as shrines for worship, and creative interactions with aspects of local non-Hindu culture.

The Big Picture: matters of central importance; reality ultimate and otherwise; Deities, gods, goddesses and God(dess); the cosmos and the natural world; Hindu philosophies; human nature and destiny; Hinduism and science (Big Idea 6; NE 1 and 6).

What is really of central importance?

It might be presumed that matters of central importance in any religious tradition or non-religious worldview would be the teaching about what tend to be thought of in RE as the 'big questions' or 'ultimate questions' (or perhaps 'existential questions' if thought of as how they affect you personally rather than as abstract philosophical debates): questions such as 'Why are you here? What is the meaning of life? How can you attain liberation from a life of suffering? From where did the universe come? What happens when you die? What is the best way of spending your life? Indeed, most worldviews have 'views' on such issues, but the priorities may be different, and 'religions' are not best understood as alternative sets of intellectual answers to an agreed set list of 'ultimate questions'. Many scholars have pointed out that, in common with some other non-Western traditions, the Hindu tradition is less about what you believe about such questions and more about what you do, an 'orthopraxy' rather than an 'orthodoxy', so that ritual and daily life take central stage.

It might also be said that in the Hindu tradition, what is of central importance depends somewhat on who you are. Some may prioritise ritual, some focus on experiential meditative and ascetic practices, others concern themselves with intellectual questions, ethical action or the everyday customs of family life.

Reality, ultimate and otherwise

Hindu reflection upon the nature of reality has been taking place for millennia since the ancient Vedas. The Upanishads, dating from the mid first millennium BCE (see *Sacred texts*) represent a period when the 'big questions' of the nature of reality, and of human existence and purpose, were much debated, particularly by the shramanas or renouncers who left ordinary family life to focus on finding liberation and truth. Since the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment, Western philosophy has tended to separate intellectual, cognitive reasoning from religious or spiritual matters, whereas in Indian thought philosophy is never for its own sake but profoundly tied in with the quest for personal liberation. The ideas in the Upanishads and classical accounts of Hindu philosophy were produced by people actively engaged in practices such as ascetism, yoga, meditation, and sometimes also 'religious' devotion to deity(ies), seeking meaning in life not just in theory but in practice. Thus, Indian philosophy includes much of what might now be labelled 'psychology' or 'religion' using Western categories.

Another fundamental difference when comparing Indian and Western views of truth or reality is that whereas now Western thought tends to the binary - things are either true or false, real or not real - Indian thought has room for levels of truth and reality. Things may not be so much true or false, but true, truer and truest, not so much real or unreal as conventionally real or ultimately real. This is particularly clear in Advaita Vedanta (see *Hindu philosophies*). Seeming contradictions may be all true in different ways, in different contexts and for different people.

When it comes to *ultimate* reality, most Hindu thought would agree that what is present to our senses and everyday experience is not the deepest understanding, which can be known, at least for the few, through direct mystical experience, and for others, to varying extents, through the teachings of gurus, sacred texts, involvement in ritual and devotional practices and living a righteous life.

Ultimate reality in most Hindu thought is divine or spiritual, rather than material, though Samkhya is a notable exception (see *Hindu philosophies*). The material may be viewed as real but of secondary importance, as dependent on the divine, or not ultimately real at all. Ultimate reality may be described in theistic terms as a personal God or Goddess (who may have a personal name such as Vishnu, Krishna, Shiva or Durga), or in more impersonal terms as the infinite, formless, pure life energy or consciousness within all things and all people, Brahman, not *a* being, but Being. These two ideas can be reconciled in a number of ways. They may be seen as two different ways of saying the same thing, sounding contradictory because of the limitations of the human mind and language. Applying the idea of levels of truth, one may be regarded as a lesser level of insight, so that the idea of a personal God may be considered as an easier way for less developed minds to think about Brahman, or the idea of Brahman understood as a step towards realising the supreme truth of God as personal. This attitude can be viewed as a positive way of approaching plurality and diversity, or as rather condescending if your own approach is relegated to the lesser level of truth. Further Hindu perspectives on ultimate reality may be found in the following sections.

on *Deities, gods, goddesses and God(dess), Hindu philosophies, The cosmos and the natural world and Human nature and destiny.*

Deities, gods, goddesses and God(dess)

Not all, but probably most, Hindus are theists though the meaning of theism is different in Hinduism from that found in Abrahamic religions since to believe that ultimate reality is a God or Goddess does not entail a denial of the existence of other gods and goddesses. These secondary deities have some relationship to the supreme deity as assistants responsible for specific areas of activity such as Shri Lakshmi, goddess of fortune and prosperity, whose blessings are sought for financial success, associates such as Krishna's elder brother, Balarama, who is renowned for his strength, and allies such as Hanuman, intermediary between Rama and his kidnapped wife Sita, who exemplifies loyalty and devotion. The statement that God is one and the reference to 330 million gods can thus be combined without contradiction though, of course, God/gods here include female deities as well as male, and both can transcend gender.

This is why the labels of polytheism and monotheism do not seem to apply. Hinduism is often described as polytheistic which it is insofar as there are many deities. However, some Hindus insist that they are monotheists. Part of the problem is that the one becomes the many and the many become the one. Perhaps the best known instance of the one becoming the many is Vishnu and his avatars (descent forms). The now standard list of ten avatars features Matsya (fish), Kurma (tortoise), Varaha (boar), Narasimha (man-lion), Vamana (dwarf), Parashurama (Rama with the axe), Buddha, Rama, Krishna and Kalki (the future avatar). Of these, Krishna, counsellor to the Pandavas and Arjuna's charioteer who in the *Bhagavad-Gita* (4.8) declares the purpose of these manifestations as being to uphold dharma (duty, righteousness), and Rama, the divine king and moral paragon repeatedly hailed in the *Ramayana* as 'the best of upholders of dharma', are the most important and can be identified with Vishnu as full rather than partial manifestations. Indeed, Vishnu can be seen as a form of Krishna rather than the reverse. Another instance is the continuity between female deities as forms of Mahadevi (the Great Goddess). The warrior goddess Durga, created by the gods from their own female energies and bestowed by them with their own weapons in order to defeat the demon Mahisha invulnerable to attacks from males, manifests other yet fiercer goddesses in the heat of battle. Among these goddesses, Kali is the most prominent embodiment of Durga's wrath, fighting with her to defeat demons, famously Raktabija whose ability to reproduce himself from every drop of blood shed renders Durga's efforts counterproductive so that she requires Kali's help to destroy him by sucking him dry of blood.

The one also becomes the many in a variety of ways, for example, in families of deities that unify a number of gods and goddesses, including marital relationships in which the goddess is the shakti (power) of the god. Shiva, despite being an ascetic and renouncer, is married to Parvati who won him as her husband through her own practice of austerities, their closeness represented in the Ardhanarishvara image of a figure that is male (Shiva) on the right and female (Parvati) on the left. The divine couple are the parents of the gods Ganesh, the elephant-headed remover of obstacles to whom prayers are offered before embarking on a new undertaking, and Skanda/Kartikkeya, the god of war who in the South is elevated to supremacy as Murukan/Subramanya. Parvati can be thought of as a consort goddess, Mrs Shiva, just as Shri Lakshmi is Mrs Vishnu and Sarasvati, goddess of learning and the arts, is Mrs Brahma.

The concept of the trimurti (three forms) of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva as creator, preserver and destroyer respectively, often seen either as all three being expressions of the impersonal Brahman or illustrating how Vishnu or Shiva as supreme Deity takes the form of the other gods, may be the most familiar. However, its importance may have been exaggerated for a modern or Western audience by a supposed similarity with the Christian Trinity. Arguably more important is the orthodox category of the pancadevatas (five deities) who are Shiva, Vishnu, Mahadevi, Surya (the sun god of the Vedic pantheon) and Ganesh. In the final analysis, the distinction between the one becoming the many and the many becoming the one dissolves as is evident in the relationship between major all-India deities and local gods and goddesses which can be understood as the major deity taking numerous local forms or alternatively as those local forms coalescing into the major deity.

Possibly, then, whether there are many deities or only one (and whether the divine is best understood in personal or impersonal terms) is a matter of perspective. In ancient Vedic times there was a pantheon of deities, often personifications of natural forces such as sun, moon, wind, storm, fire, dawn, and with names which suggest some connection with other ancient Indo-European pantheons, including Greek and Roman. However, by the time of the Upanishads this was being questioned as being in one sense too many and in another sense too few. Some early scholars of Hinduism used terms such as 'kathenotheism', the worship of one god at a time, or 'henotheism', the worship of one god while not denying the existence of others (and also possibly seeing them as lesser gods, or alternative expressions of the same reality).

The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (3.9.1-9) records a dialogue in which the sage Yajnavalkya gives different answers to the question 'how many gods are there?'. These range from 3306 to one, each of which is explained with, for example, 3306 related to the powers of the gods whereas 'one' is identified with Prana (Breath) and Brahman (ultimate reality). Other answers given, for instance, that there are 33, six or three gods reflect the membership of the Vedic pantheon and the Vedic cosmology that preceded those of classical Hinduism. Among the 33 gods, Yajnavalkya mentions Indra and Prajapati, the king of the gods associated with storms and the lord of creatures associated with sacrifice respectively, thereby highlighting two major themes which are the deification of natural forces and the significance of Vedic ritual. The six gods Yajnavalkya lists are features of nature and the universe, including Agni (Fire) and Prithivi (Earth), the former also closely connected to sacrifice as the priest who conveys offerings upwards to the gods and blessing downwards in return. The three gods are identified by Yajnavalkya as the three worlds of earth, sky or atmosphere and heaven, on the grounds that all the gods exist in them, notionally 11 aligned with each of the three worlds.

The gods of the ancient Vedic pantheon have not disappeared altogether but still feature in myths and stories told today, though their roles and importance have changed over time. For example, whereas Indra the god of thunder was originally king of the gods, one story from the Puranas demonstrates that Krishna is more powerful by telling how Krishna used a mountain as an umbrella to protect people from a rainstorm sent by Indra, angry at their worshipping Krishna instead of him.

Deities feature in the lives of Hindus in different capacities. Some deities are associated with the ancestors (kuladevatas) and some with a locality (gramadevatas) while an individual can choose their own deity (ishtadevata) to be the main focus of their worship. New deities may

emerge in response to new situations, often new manifestations of existing ones. A popular goddess who features in the Puranas is Shitala, traditionally the smallpox goddess, who is also able to help with other infectious diseases, especially since the eradication of smallpox. In 2020, there are reports of people praying to the goddess Coronadevi, said to be a creation of Shitala, for protection from the Covid-19 virus. In any case, deities are only some of the supernatural beings that are believed to exist in a universe pervaded by the divine where the sacred is also revealed in animals, plants and other features of the natural world. Further, the human and the divine are located on a continuum that allows exceptional characters, be they teachers, saints or others who excel in qualities like wisdom and devotion, to acquire divine status. Accordingly, Shankara who was the most influential exponent of Advaita Vedanta (see *Hindu Philosophies*) has also been regarded as a form of Shiva, and Chaitanya who preached a message of devotion to Krishna has also been revered as a form of Krishna. This claim is less shocking than it might seem to a monotheist from an Abrahamic tradition when made against a background where the divine is honoured as dwelling in all people and all things – just more obviously in some than others.

If the complexity of deities is confusing, one simple way of making sense of how Hindus can simultaneously worship many gods and one God, often heard on school visits to Hindu temples, is to compare God to a diamond with many facets – each deity represents an aspect of God. Whereas this is something of an oversimplification in emphasising the one rather than the many, and is maybe aimed at audiences presumed to come from Abrahamic faiths, it does have the advantage of leaving open whether the one is best understood as personal or impersonal. Another analogy is that of many lamps but one light. A less fixed and more fluid (!) analogy might be that of water which can be contained in many different pots. These and other such may or may not help, but perhaps provide a place to start.

Hindu deities are also found beyond ‘Hinduism’, particularly in Buddhism and the countries to which Buddhism spread. For example, the Pali Canon tells us that after the Buddha’s enlightenment, the god Brahma persuaded the Buddha that it was worth trying to teach others, in spite of the difficulties of communicating his experience. The devaraja (god-king) cult was established in Cambodia forming part of a Hindu legacy in the royal courts of Southeast Asia. More generally, the story of Rama has been transmitted across Asia in various forms such as dance dramas and shadow puppet plays. As far away from India as Japan, the goddess Sarasvati has become Benzaiten, the goddess associated with rivers, music and knowledge.

Hindu philosophies

The most common formulation of Hindu philosophy is the Shaddarshana or ‘six schools’ (or six visions, views or perspectives) which are Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Yoga, Mimamsa and Vedanta, considered as ‘orthodox’ (unlike Buddhist or Jain approaches) in that they acknowledge the authority of the Veda. However, as the indologist Wilhelm Halbfass demonstrates, there were many other schools and this list of six became fixed only comparatively recently. Notwithstanding the convention of six schools, there were debates and disagreements within them, with the school of Vedanta covering several different philosophies often treated as schools in their own right. Moreover, only two of the schools (Mimamsa and Vedanta) actually involved the interpretation of Vedic texts.

The schools are often presented in complementary pairs: Nyaya and Vaisheshika, Samkhya and Yoga and Mimamsa and Vedanta. Nyaya focuses on logic and the valid sources of

knowledge, said to be perception, inference, comparison, and testimony. This complements Vaisheshika's specialism in metaphysics and ontology which analyses reality into six or seven categories (substance, quality, action, generality, particularity, inherence and sometimes non-being). Samkhya distinguishes between active unconscious nature (Prakriti) and inactive conscious selves (Purusha), understanding the spiritual goal (Kaivalya or 'isolation') to be freeing the self from material nature. Yoga sets forth an eight-limbed spiritual discipline (Ashtanga Yoga) to achieve such liberation, encompassing positive and negative moral precepts, physical postures, breathing techniques, sense withdrawal, concentration, meditation and transcendence. Mimamsa and Vedanta share a stress on Vedic exegesis according to which Mimamsa is styled Purva Mimamsa, meaning Prior Investigation and referring to the earlier part of the Veda, the Samhitas and Brahmanas, and Vedanta is styled Uttara Mimamsa, meaning Final Investigation and referring to the later part of the Veda, the Upanishads or Vedanta (Veda + anta or end). Mimamsa seeks to uphold the performance of ritual and Vedanta to promote insight into truth or ultimate reality (Brahman).

Of all these philosophies, it is Vedanta, or to be more precise Advaita Vedanta in its recent neo-Vedantic form, that is probably most familiar. Advaita Vedanta, associated with the eighth/ninth-century thinker Shankara, gave a non-dual account of Vedanta, identifying the Self (Atman) with ultimate reality (Brahman) at the higher level of truth and relegating the plurality of selves and physical objects to the lower level of truth. In the modern era, Advaita Vedanta was reworked by Vivekananda (1863-1902) and popularised by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975), typically, involving an emphasis upon the empirical reality of the world and an appeal to the oneness of humanity that accorded greater significance to ethical action in the world rather than renunciation, monasticism and spiritual liberation. Neo-Vedanta promoted a positive image of Hinduism as tolerant and inclusive, defending it against allegations of confusion and incoherence arising out of the variety of its forms. This was accomplished by appeal to the principle of hierarchy as allowing Hinduism to accommodate a range of different beliefs and practices as a unity in diversity. For such reasons, Neo-Vedanta has proved hugely influential in modern Hinduism, endorsed by leading nationalists and reformers, and contributing towards the postcolonial project of forging a new Indian identity. It has also been attractive to Westerners who have been persuaded that Vedanta in this sense is central to Hinduism (if not also India).

However, other Vedanta schools are also very important and reveal major differences between Vedantic thinkers. Vishishtadvaita (non-dualism with distinctions), of which the twelfth-century thinker Ramanuja is the most famous exponent and Dvaita (dualism), following the teaching of the thirteenth-century Madhva, are theistic in contrast to Advaita's relegation of a personal deity/deities to the lower level of truth. Similarly, Vishishtadvaita and Dvaita are realist about the material world in contrast to Advaita's idealism that regards the world as ultimately illusory. Vishishtadvaita and Dvaita have been very influential in Hindu devotional traditions that prioritise the relationship of the devotee with a personal God. It was the need to reconcile Vedanta with Vaishnava bhakti (devotion) to a personal God that inspired Ramanuja to present an alternative to Advaita's impersonal absolute, by retaining some distinction between God and individual souls, while Madhva taught a dualistic vision in which God and individual souls are separate entities. His teaching is followed by ISKCON today.

Is philosophy the best label for the Saddarshanas? Some Western philosophers, drawing upon the distinction made between theology and philosophy in the European

Enlightenment, might query whether the Shaddarshana qualify as philosophy, if philosophy is understood as the independent exercise of reason without deference to external authority such as that represented by religious traditions. However, the label 'theology' can also be queried. Although Nyaya proposes arguments for the existence of God that invite comparisons with the cosmological and teleological arguments of Christian philosophy of religion, Samkhya does not need a divine creator to explain the origin of the universe. Even where a deity or deities are featured, they may not correspond to the theistic idea of a Supreme God. Perhaps these schools could be seen as 'psychology', as the cultivation of mental discipline is central, not only in Yoga but more widely. Yet this also seems inadequate given the subjects addressed by the schools, some being neither religious nor psychological in scope or purpose, such as Vaisheshika's proto-scientific investigations of the physical world. It is important to note that not all of the Saddarshana were originally primarily concerned with liberation, and that there is space for atheist and realist thinking within the huge scope of Hindu tradition. Even Mimamsa, arguably the most orthodox of the Saddarshana in its concern for interpretation of the Vedic texts and correct ritual, could be described in these terms.

Attempting to understand the Shaddarshana in terms of 'philosophy', 'theology', or 'psychology' illustrates the issues that arise when applying Western academic categories and classificatory systems to non-Western cultures. It may be worthwhile imagining what would happen if India determined global cultural and cognitive paradigms and these were applied to the Western history of ideas.

The cosmos and the natural world

Prescientific Indian ideas about the cosmos were much more complex than prescientific ideas in the West. Hinduism has not just one creation story but a number of creation stories and even of creators. Moreover, the universe is not created only once, but over and over again. One creator is Brahma who is often portrayed as seated on a lotus flower growing from Vishnu's navel as Vishnu rests on Shesha, the king of the Nagas (mythological snake-like beings) between acts of creation. There is also 'the One' who is described as the sole existent 'breathing breathless', though this account in the *Rig-Veda* (10.129) is speculative and hedged about with doubt and uncertainty - no one really knows how everything began, maybe not even the One. Among the creation stories is the Sacrifice of Primal Man, also in the *Rig-Veda* (10.90), whose dismemberment by the gods produces, among other things, the three Vedas and the three worlds (earth, sky and atmosphere and heaven) as well as human beings of the four varnas (classes). Another creation story is the Churning of the Ocean of Milk found in the *Mahabharata* and in both the *Bhagavata* and *Vishnu Puranas*, in which the gods and their rivals cooperate to retrieve the elixir of immortality (amrit) from the depths of the ocean, using Mount Mandana pivoted on Kurma, Vishnu's tortoise avatar (descent form) with the Naga Vasuki as a rope to churn the ocean. This process yields goddesses such as Shri Lakshmi, sacred animals such as Kamadhenu, the wish-fulfilling cow, and treasures such as Parijata, the ever-blossoming tree, before Dhanvantari, the divine physician, appears cradling the elixir in his hands. The gods tricked the demons and kept the elixir of immortality for themselves.

Creation is generally regarded not as creation out of nothing but as a specific shaping and structuring of the components of the universe. For example, in Samkhya, Prakriti (Nature) as cause is regarded as containing all effects in a potential state with three constituents, the gunas (qualities) of sattva (purity, goodness), rajas (passion, activity) and tamas (dullness,

inactivity), that in different proportions manifest in the objects of the world, including people. Similarly, in Vaishesika, material substances are composed of atoms (in the ancient Greek sense of the smallest unit, not the modern scientific sense) that in varying combinations produce physical objects. While the building-blocks of the universe endure, the universe itself does not. An analogy here might be toy bricks that can be used to construct different things, first a car and then a rocket for instance, where the bricks remain but their configuration as vehicles differs. The concept of the four yugas (ages) of decline and degeneration from a state of perfection to one of chaos emphasises the cyclic pattern of periodic dissolution and recreation.

The Puranic (see *Sacred texts*) picture of the cosmos (e.g. *Vishnu Purana* 2.4) is complex with numerous realms contained within the shell of Brahmananda (World Egg). Horizontally, there are lands separated by oceans arranged in concentric circles, the innermost land being Jambudvipa (the land of the Roseapple Tree) of which India constitutes one-twelfth and the best part, centred on Mount Meru. Vertically, there are many worlds including heavens and hells with Bhurloka (Earth) in the middle as the region where work produces merit. The World Egg is situated within a still vaster universe of water enclosed by fire, enclosed by air, enclosed by ether, enclosed by the gross elements, enclosed by the first principle, enclosed by the limitless cause of all World Eggs. In spite of this complexity, as the Vedic concept of rita (law, truth) and its later counterpart dharma (duty, righteousness) indicate, the cosmos is ordered and harmonious.

Although the impression is sometimes given that all Hindus believe the world to be unreal, this is the analysis of Advaita Vedanta which considers it to be maya (illusory) and in general many Hindus, not least those who follow other versions of Vedanta, consider the world to be real, if not independently so. Theistic forms of Hinduism value the natural world as the glory and wonder of the divine nature is to be found in all things, on the other hand the physical world can be viewed as a product of divine playfulness (lila) rather than profound purpose. Although it can be argued that the world lacks ultimate importance because the highest goal, moksha (release, liberation), lies beyond it, it is also the object of divine care and protection as illustrated by the story of Varaha (the boar, an avatar of Vishnu) who rescues earth from the depths of the cosmic ocean where she had been cast by the demon Hiranyaksha.

Human nature and destiny

The best-known account of human nature and destiny in Hinduism refers to the self (atman) as the eternal essence of the individual, distinguished from the body, that experiences reincarnation (punarjanma) within the round of existence (samsara) in accordance with the law of action (karma) unless or until it attains liberation (moksha). In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, where Krishna instructs Arjuna on such subjects, three paths to liberation have been identified. These are: jnana-yoga, the path of knowledge, often interpreted as insight into the distinction between the self and the body which is expressed in terms of the difference between Purusha (Person) and Prakriti (Nature) (13.23) and explained by comparing the relationship of the self with the body to that of the embodied self with clothes (2.22); bhakti-yoga, the path of devotion, in this context love and service of Krishna who declares that he will accept the simplest of offerings if made in that spirit (9.26) and hence a form of practice open to all irrespective of social status or gender or even religion (9.23,32); and karma-yoga, the path of action, the performance of duty in a selfless spirit, which unlike ordinary actions (whether bad or good) does not entail karmic consequences and so can

lead to liberation from reincarnation. In Arjuna's case, action means the warrior's duty to fight (2.30).

There have been different views on which, if any, path is the most important. Traditionally, many commentators opted for either knowledge or devotion though modern figures such as Gandhi (1869-1948) have advocated action, for him non-violent, in order to satisfy the standard of selflessness, whereas Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920), his fellow nationalist who also prioritised action, adopted an innovative approach towards duty by extending the duty of the warrior to fight in a just war to the Indian people as a whole to fight colonial oppression. There has also been a marked tendency to see the paths as interdependent and therefore impossible to disentangle or as equally valid and therefore suited to different temperaments.

However, there are multiple perspectives on human nature and destiny and consequently the religious discipline to be adopted. For example, while many schools of thought and forms of Hinduism maintain that there are many selves, Advaita Vedanta appeals to levels of truth to establish that these many selves only exist at the lower level of empirical or consensus reality whereas at the higher level there is only one Self which is equated with ultimate reality understood as an impersonal absolute (Brahman-Atman). So the ultimate goal is to realise your essential unity with Brahman and the main path is study and meditation. The illusion of reincarnation will then not reoccur. In Dvaita Vedanta thought, the individual self is distinct from both God and other selves, so the goal is to free the true self within in order to devote oneself to God in this life and eventually reach God's presence after death rather than being reincarnated. Vishishtadvaita Vedanta has an understanding between complete unity with God and complete separateness, in that selves are completely dependent on God, but the unity is one of relationship with a personal God. The goal is to dwell in this eternal relationship rather than be reincarnated. Both Dvaita and Vishishtadvaita Vedanta tend to prioritise the path of bhakti or loving devotion to God as the way to reach God.

Samkhya refers to the self as Purusha (Person) and Prakriti (Nature) as two ultimate or eternal realities. There are many eternal selves that confuse their true nature as conscious subjects with the products of nature, not just the physical body but also intellect, individuality, the mind and the senses, in a relationship likened to that of a spectator (Purusha) watching a dancer (Prakriti) and becoming so caught up in the dance that it forgets it is just watching rather than dancing. The goal is kaivalya (isolation) in which each self is free of its association with nature though in fact the self and nature were really always distinct. Thus the ultimate goal is to set yourself free from the false sense of entanglement/identification with the material world, and the main path is renunciation and meditation. It should be noted that there is no necessity here for the concept of God, so Samkhya is to all intents and purposes atheistic. Where Samkhya thought has been combined with the philosophy of Yoga, the deity can be looked to as an example of a purusha who has never been trapped in the material world.

In Shakta Tantra the human being is an incarnation of the male (Shiva) and female (Shakti) principles with a mystical physiology of nadis (channels) and centres (chakras) as a microcosm of the universe. The practitioner seeks to raise Shakti in the form of Kundalini (the coiled serpent power) up the central channel through successive centres until it reaches the thousand-petalled lotus above the head. In order to achieve this unification of

Shiva and Shakti and thereby transcend all oppositions, the practitioner employs different bodily postures and physical and mental exercises (see *Meditation and yoga*). Rather than seeking to free yourself from the material body, this esoteric form of Hindu practice makes use of the physical body to realise the divine female-male unity within this life here and now.

Nevertheless, many Hindus may be more concerned, at least immediately, with this-worldly matters such as health, happiness and prosperity and also with acquiring merit in order to achieve a favourable incarnation in the next life rather than focusing on any ultimate eternal destiny. These aims are associated with other practices, among them vows (*vrats*) for personal well-being, marital harmony and family success and doing good deeds of various kinds including acts of generosity and hospitality. Living an ethical life, doing your duty and being kind to all are the priorities in this context.

Hinduism and science

Most contemporary Hindus find no conflict between Hindu teachings and modern science, and indeed may claim that many of the findings of recent science can be found in ancient Hindu texts, philosophies and traditions, from submarines and space rockets to quantum physics. It is true that the immense timescales, universe, and sun-centred planetary system of Hindu tradition fit better with modern science than some other traditional cosmologies. Some of the accounts of creation in Hindu sacred texts seem to describe a gradual evolution of life from simplicity to complexity, and the Hindu idea of recurrent creation and destruction of the universe can be compared to theories of 'big bangs' and 'big crunches'. The concept of atoms in Vaisheshika philosophy can be seen as a forerunner of modern atomic theory. India has indeed made great contributions to science and mathematics since ancient times, such as the concepts of zero and infinity. However, it has to be said that concepts that sound similar do not have quite the same meaning nor were arrived at by scientific methods in the sense used today. Some contemporary scientists might query the empirical evidence for the existence of deities, eternal selves, reincarnation, karma, moksha and other basic elements of the Hindu tradition, but the rich diversity of the tradition provides much scope for flexible interpretations that can reconcile the claims of science and religion.

Words and Beyond: texts, stories, iconography, symbols and creative arts, which form and communicate belief, values, identities and commitments (Big Idea 2; NE 5).

Sacred texts

Scholars tend to prefer to talk of 'sacred texts' rather than 'Hindu scriptures' as the term 'scripture' is misleading. 'Scripture' is a term best known in a Protestant Christian context and may carry with it certain connotations: that there is one fixed holy book, that it is all divine revelation, and that individuals read it in their own language on a regular basis to guide their lives. It also implies that the text is written, whereas in Hindu tradition there is a stress upon sound as divine energy and the most ancient Hindu texts, the Veda, originally transmitted orally, are recited (in Sanskrit) rather than read for religious purposes.

Hindu sacred texts are divided into two categories: *shruti* ('that which is heard'; revelation) and *smriti* ('that which is remembered'; tradition). *Shruti* refers to the Vedic texts which are believed to be eternal and to have been 'heard by' (or 'revealed to') *rishis* (sages) and

passed on orally from teacher to pupil, whereas smriti texts are believed to have historical origins and human authors. The need for smriti can be explained by the Hindu tradition of the four ages – we are now living in the Kali Yuga or age of decline when the Veda is no longer observed or understood, and its meaning must be conveyed in simpler ways. In addition, traditionally only men from the three higher classes who had been initiated had access to the Veda, whereas smriti is available to members of both genders and all classes. So, although shruti is technically the more sacred and important, in practice smriti are better known by more people.

The term 'Veda' (knowledge), normally refers to four collections of texts the *Rig, Sama, Yajur* and *Atharva Vedas* though there are some references to three Vedic collections excluding the *Atharva Veda* and the title of 'fifth Veda' is sometimes applied to other prestigious texts such as the *Mahabharata*. These collections were built up in layers. The most ancient layer, dating back maybe as much as three and a half or four thousand years, is that of the Veda Samhitas (or somewhat confusingly just 'Vedas' for short), which are usually described as hymns or poems and contain mantras or ritual utterances. When people refer to, for example, the '*Rig Veda*', they usually mean these ancient texts rather than the later additions. Each of the four Veda Samhitas were originally passed down through and recited by different categories of priests with different roles in the context of ritual, which included fire sacrifices. To each of these were added Brahmanas, ritual commentaries that explain why and how rituals should be performed while introducing other topics. The next layer, the Aranyakas or forest treatises, a name hinting at renunciation of everyday life, are still to some extent about ritual but start to focus more on knowledge than Brahmanas. The composition of the final layer, the Upanishads, around 600 BCE, was contemporaneous with the shramanas, not long before the time of the Buddha, and a thousand years later than the earliest Vedic texts. The Upanishads are esoteric works that concentrate upon knowledge as in knowledge of the self and the universe, and reflect the world of the ascetic renouncers more than that of ritual priests.

These different types of literature can be regarded as variations on a ritual theme beginning with the Samhitas where sacrifice is performed to obtain favours from the gods, through to the Brahmanas where the sacrifice takes on a cosmic significance as the means of sustaining the universe, and ending with the Aranyakas and the Upanishads where sacrifice is interpreted symbolically as a self-offering thereby locating the power of the ritual within the individual. While sacrifice is a thread running through the Vedic texts, there are major differences in outlook when comparing the Samhitas and the Upanishads. The Samhitas are concerned with this-worldly benefits such as the birth of heirs, the acquisition of wealth and the enjoyment of a long life before entering the realm of the ancestors. In contrast, the Upanishads are concerned with an other-worldly goal of liberation from the cycle of repeated births and deaths. Both are important since the Samhitas still feature in life-cycle rituals and the Upanishads in philosophical debate.

Although in fact what counts as Vedic is not as clear as it seems at first, the boundaries of smriti are even more questionable than those of shruti. Included in the rather ill-defined category of smriti texts are the epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the Puranas, also the Samhitas (in a non-Vedic sense), the Agamas and the Tantras, and the Dharmashastras. The *Ramayana* relates the adventures of Prince Rama, most famously the defeat of the demon king Ravana who had abducted his wife, Sita, while the couple were in exile in the forest. The main narrative of the *Mahabharata* chronicles a dispute between

royal cousins, the Pandavas and Kauravas, over the succession to the throne of the Kurus that leads to a great battle in which the Pandavas triumphed but at appalling cost in human life. It contains the *Bhagavad-Gita*, a text that claims to be an Upanishad and which has become probably the most popular of all Hindu texts, in which Krishna instructs Arjuna, the third of the Pandava brothers, when the great warrior experiences a crisis of conscience on the eve of the battle. The Puranas are compendia of mythological material, frequently dedicated to the worship of one particular deity in the context of the existence of the many other deities. The Samhitas, Agamas and Tantras have a more sectarian character, lacking the wider currency of the Puranas. The Samhitas tend to be Vaishnavite in orientation, the Agamas Shaivite and the Tantras Shakta. The Dharmashastras address the area of dharma or duty, developing from moral guides for human conduct into legal tracts.

Although lacking the prestige of shruti, smriti is influential nonetheless. The Ramayana has inspired later literary compositions such as Tulsidas' *Ramcaritmanas* and been performed in the popular folk drama, the *Ramlila*; both the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* have been serialised on Indian television to mass audiences and turned into stage and film/television productions for international audiences beyond India; the *Bhagavad-Gita* has become a publishing phenomenon, not just in India and for Hindus, but globally for a diverse readership; the myths found in the Puranas feature in various forms of devotional art and are the staples of Hindu festivals while the Samhitas, Agamas and Tantras continue to underwrite the distinctive beliefs and practices of particular traditions; the Dharmashastras were declared by the British colonial rulers to be the basis of Hindu personal law, giving the *Laws of Manu* more importance and a wider application than they had previously. Further texts may also be regarded as sacred, even if they are not usually considered to be what elsewhere would be labelled scripture. Among them are vrat kathas, the narratives that explain why a vow should be taken involving a particular form of practice to achieve a desired object. Vrats are often performed by women. One example became popular as the result of a 1975 film, which told the story of a woman, Satyavati, who prayed to a goddess called Santoshi Ma (the Mother of Satisfaction) and was granted a happy reunion with her husband. Women make simple offerings and fast on Fridays in the hope that wishes will be granted by Santoshi Ma.

Stories from sacred texts, myths, morality tales and stories of exemplary people.

Given the vast extent, varying genres and fluid boundaries of what can be counted as sacred texts in Hinduism, very few people will be familiar with all of this material. The majority of people, especially children, will be more likely to know certain well-known sections, often shortened and simplified versions, as told by parents, grandparents, priests and teachers, usually in story form. There are also many newer stories of later saints and exemplary people, or stories created to teach traditional topics to new generations. Well-known stories have many purposes. They may explain why certain customs, practices, rituals and festivals take place. They may exemplify moral behaviour, show good winning over evil, or illustrate and explain ideas and teachings. They may be enjoyed at face value or interpreted as symbolic of profound spiritual truths. Many of these stories are retold in graphic, comic book form, or inspire films and television programmes. There is a vast and rich resource of Hindu stories from the main narratives, many subplots and incidental tales of the great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, stories retold from the Puranas or Upanishads, many stories over the centuries of saints and founders of particular strands of Hindu practice, and more recent stories such as the vrat katha mentioned above, and ones created by contemporary writers of books for children and adults.

Among the very well-known stories that may be heard in temples, illustrated in Hindu art, found in books for Hindu children, or in RE textbooks are the following: the story of Rama and Sita; many stories connected with Krishna such as eating the butter or hiding the cowgirls' clothes; stories of other avatars of Vishnu such as Narasimha, half-human half-lion, who destroyed the seemingly indestructible demon Hiranyakashipu; and many stories of goddesses (or THE Goddess) destroying evil demons. Stories about Ganesh are attractive to younger children, such as how he lost his tusk, or obtained an elephant's head. The story in the *Chandogya Upanishad* of the teacher Uddalaka Aruni getting his son Shvetaketu to dissolve salt in water to illustrate how the divine can be everywhere and in everything yet invisible is a favourite. Other stories can explain how things came to be as they are, such as how the goddess Ganga became the river Ganges. Stories of saints throughout the centuries include that of the princess Mirabai devoted to Krishna, or Ramakrishna, a favourite of the followers of neo-Vedanta, who experienced visions of the divine that crossed religious boundaries. Perhaps more generally Indian than Hindu (but it is hard to make this distinction) is the collection of tales called the *Pancatantra*, (see list of websites) which includes many tales with morals consistent with Hindu ethics.

Images and image worship

Images (murti) play an important part in Hindu worship both in homes and temples. Although Vedic ritual did not involve image worship, it is the mainstay of devotional Hinduism. The image is understood to be one of many forms in which the formless divine manifests in order to allow the devotee to demonstrate their devotion and receive darshan (auspicious vision – note that this is the same word - darshana - as used for the six schools of philosophy). The worshipper does not regard the image in itself as divine, rather as a means of experiencing the divine presence. Hindus obviously know that images are made by human hands, as is demonstrated in the way that temporary festival images such as the famous images of Durga that occupy shrines during Durga Puja are created for the celebrations and then destroyed, usually by immersion in water. Iconic or formal images are created following strict guidelines; even so they must be ritually consecrated to make them fit for the divine presence to occupy, in a ceremony which involves completing the eyes of the image.

As well as icons of gods and goddesses, other objects can function as images such as decorated rocks and natural forms of the divine such as ammonites identified with Vishnu or the Amarnath stalagmite (ice lingam or phallic pillar) identified with Shiva, as well as sacred plants, for example, Tulsi (basil) who is revered as a goddess. There are also images of sacred animals associated with deities, including the 'vehicles' on which each deity rides, such as Shiva's bull Nandi, the lion or tiger for the Goddess Durga, the swan for Brahma and Saraswati, a mouse for Ganesh, and Garuda, a mythological winged creature, on whom Vishnu rides.

Images are located in temples, though some are processional images that are paraded during festivals as in the Rathayatra (procession of chariots) celebrating Krishna as Jagannath (Lord of the Universe) together with his brother Balarama and sister Subhadra. Images feature in domestic and wayside shrines, and can be found almost anywhere from Ganesh in a school exercise book to Shiva dangling from a bus' rear view mirror. Probably one of the most famous images is that of Shiva as Nataraja (Lord of the Dance). Within a circle of flame representing samsara (round of existence), Shiva is depicted as a four-armed dancer crushing the demon of ignorance beneath one of his feet, holding a drum to


symbolise creation and a platter of fire to symbolise dissolution while the positioning of his other hands promise protection and indicate how the devotee can be released from the bonds of samsara. Caught in motion with one leg raised in blessing, Shiva's face is calm with an expression of repose.

When Christian missionaries first came across Hindu images and image worship, many interpreted it as idolatry, worshipping an object instead of the divine, as forbidden in the Bible and Qur'an. In response, some modern Hindus such as the neo-Vedantin Vivekananda (1863-1902) argued that images were not idols but should be understood as symbolic of the deities they represented and a focus for contemplation. However, Dayananda Saraswati (1824-83) recommended doing away with image worship and returning to the practice of Vedic times when images were not used. This did not catch on, and for most Hindus, while the image may be used in meditation as suggested by Vivekananda, image worship is usually a devotional activity of love and service to the chosen deity, and a means of experiencing the presence of the divine.

The accusation of idolatry is not just historical. As late as the 1990s, the American television evangelists, Pat and Gordon Robertson, stirred up the issue by condemning Hindu idolatry which was identified as the most pressing of India's problems and blamed as the cause of poverty, prompting a storm of protest from Hindus across the diaspora who made effective use of electronic media to campaign against the resulting portrayal of Hinduism as demonic.

Symbols

As the divine permeates all things, almost anything can serve the purpose of pointing us towards it. There are many symbols used in Hindu art and ritual, which are often given multiple meanings. The images of deities are often recognisable from the symbols they carry, stand upon, or are surrounded by. For example, Vishnu holds in his four arms a lotus flower (purity among other meanings, see below), a discus (either a weapon symbolising power or the disc of the sun), a club (again a weapon against evil symbolising justice and righteousness), and a conch shell (used as a trumpet in the fight against evil, or in worship).

Deities can be represented in symbolic forms such as the ammonite for Vishnu or the lingam (pillar) for Shiva (see *Images and image worship*). Probably the best-known symbol is  'Om' or 'A U M', the primordial sound, the sound of the universe, also used in prayers, hymns, chants and meditation (see *Mantra and the power of sound*).

Other commonly encountered symbols include the svastika/swastika, an ancient symbol whose meaning is not to be confused with its later adoption by the Nazis in the twentieth century. This can cause concern when first encountered in a Hindu context – it does not mean that Hindus are anti-semitic! In the Hindu tradition the swastika means good fortune, possibly originally representing the rays of the sun. The four arms can also be interpreted as the four directions (North, South, East, West), the four corners of the world, the four seasons and/or indeed anything in the tradition which comes in fours such as the four Vedic collections, and some use it as a symbol for world peace. Yantras, geometric diagrams, also called mandalas if they take a circular form, are used in tantric ritual and meditation. The best known yantra is the Shriyantra that represents the cosmic form of the supreme deity Tripurasundari (the Goddess who is beautiful in the three worlds).

The lotus flower, often carried by or used as the throne of some deities, symbolises purity, detachment, or liberation. Flowers, fruit, sweets, lights, incense and implements used in worship are given multiple symbolic meanings. For example, the conch shell used as a trumpet can be seen as calling the attention of God, a call to righteousness, the sound of the origin of the universe or a symbol of the feminine.

Tilaks, marks made on the forehead, can be symbolic. A mark made in the middle of the forehead can represent the 'third eye' or spiritual vision. Three horizontal lines denotes a worshipper of Shiva, and U shape with a dot in the middle a worshipper of Vishnu and/or Krishna.

Creative and performing arts

The creative and performing arts also play an important part in Hindu worship. Their origin is traced to Brahma, the creator god, who is said to have taken different aspects of the arts from each of the four Vedas to create a fifth 'Natyaveda', which then formed the basis of a classical text called the *Natyashastra* which treats dance, drama and music as topics. Deities are sometimes portrayed as dancing. Examples include Shiva as Lord of the Dance, Vishnu who in his Mohini form used dance to defeat a demon and Krishna whose dance with Radha and the gopis (cowherd women) demonstrates the love between deity and devotee. Dance troupes re-enact the *Raslila* (play of love) between Krishna and Radha. Classical dance forms such as Bharatanatyam originate in temple dances performed by the devadasis (servants of God) and are still often religious in content and character.

Drama often makes use of Hindu mythology, most famously the Ramnagar staging of the *Ramlila* (play of Rama) in Varanasi every year, which claims to be the oldest, having taken place for two hundred years. Indeed, 'the mythological' became the dominant genre of early Indian cinema starting with the first feature film *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), the story of a legendary king who appears in several of the Puranas and other sacred texts, celebrated for his dedication to truthfulness and for giving away his kingdom and family to keep a promise. Other early films by the same producer (D.G. Phalke) were based on well-known stories from the Epics and Puranas such as *Mohini Bhaskarasur* (1913), about Vishnu in female form, *Satyavan Savitri* (1914), about the exemplary love of Savitri and Satyavan, *Lanka Dahan* (1917) the burning of Lanka as told in the Ramayana, and *Shri Krishna Janma* (1918) about Krishna's birth and childhood.

Music too is vital, echoing the significance of sound as ultimate reality which means that mantras, including the sacred syllable Om or AUM possess an intrinsic energy and efficiency. Members of ISKCON recite the Hare Krishna Mahamantra as their main form of devotional service, singing it in congregational worship and when preaching the message on the streets. Other types of music include chanting the Veda and singing bhajans (hymns) composed by saints.

Temple architecture

The mandir (temple) is the most obvious form of Hindu architecture. At its most elaborate, the temple contains a shrine dedicated to the main deity worshipped there, located in a complex of shrines dedicated to subsidiary deities, within an enclosed compound. Of course, many temples are much simpler in plan and far more modest in scale, some just a recess with one murti (image). There are two principal styles, Nagara associated with northern India and Dravida associated with southern India. These styles can be distinguished by

various features, notably the towers or spires (shikara in Nagara; vimana in Dravida) which in Nagara temples are curved and in Dravida temples resemble stepped pyramids. Further, while in Nagara temples there can be many towers or spires, in Dravida temples there is only one. Other differences include construction of the temple on a raised platform with less emphasis on external boundaries in Nagara style whereas in Dravida style there are temple tanks and walled courtyards with gates.

In the diaspora, it has not always been possible to build a traditional temple. Initially, Hindus had to manage in rented or temporary accommodation and, when they have been in a position to acquire their own premises, have often needed to convert pre-existing buildings such as schools or deconsecrated churches. The process of conversion can leave the external appearance of buildings largely unaltered but generally involves extensive internal modifications. Increasingly, though, Hindus in the diaspora have been able to build traditional temples such as the Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Neasden, North West London, and the Shri Venkateshwara Temple in the West Midlands constructed in the Nagara and Dravida styles respectively. However, in diasporic settings, as well as the necessity of construction satisfying local planning and building standards, some architectural changes have been required to allow the temple to perform its spiritual and other roles for the community, for example, sufficient space for congregational worship and rooms for educational classes, cultural events and the provision of support services.

A Good Life: how to be a good person and live a good life, lifestyles, moral and social issues (Big Idea 3; NE 7).

The importance of ethics

Even if in many Hindu philosophies the ultimate goal of life is moksha (release, liberation), for many people that goal is something to be achieved in a future life, or perhaps to be addressed later on in this one. Meanwhile, especially for those who are adults with responsibilities of work and family, the other purusharthas (goals of human life) are more immediate: artha (wealth, power) needed in order to look after the family and others, kama (pleasure, aesthetics), the appreciation of the many good things about embodied existence, creativity and the beauty of nature, and dharma (duty, righteousness). Although ethical action by itself will only result in a better reincarnation, the path of selfless action (karma-yoga), is distinguished by the *motive* for acting ethically (see *Human nature and destiny*). Accordingly, it may be seen as a way, or a necessary part of the way, towards the ultimate aim of moksha. So it is often understood that artha, kama, dharma and moksha, pursued together, constitute the good life in balancing this-worldly and other-worldly concerns.

Dharma

Dharma is a term which is very difficult to translate in one or two words but is so fundamental to Hinduism that 'Hindu Dharma' is often preferred over 'Hinduism' as a term for the tradition as a whole. The basic meaning of Dharma is 'that which supports or upholds', and it has both a descriptive and prescriptive sense in describing what is and prescribing what should be. It denotes the order and harmony of the cosmos, the natural world and human society. In the moral realm, it denotes duty or righteousness as the principle with which conduct should conform. It encompasses general moral obligations incumbent on everyone (sadharanadharmā, common to all, or samanyadharmā, the same for all) as well as obligations specific to particular groups.

Hindu ethics are rarely absolutist, as the right thing to do often depends on context and your personal duty depends on who and where you are. The lists of general moral obligations differ in various sources but usually include such things as not lying, not stealing, not harming others, self-control, patience, and generosity as found in most religious and non-religious worldviews, uncontroversial in theory but open to interpretation in practice.

Varnashramadharmā

In addition to the general obligations everyone has their own duties (svadharma), depending on who they are. A famous instantiation of this is varnashrama dharma. The varnas are the four great classes of brahmins (priests), kshatriyas (warriors or rulers), vaishyas (merchants and farmers), and shudras (servants) whose creation from the dismemberment of Primal Man is related in the *Rig Veda* (10.90.11-12). This ancient hierarchical model accords the priests a privileged position as performers of Vedic sacrifices and custodians of Vedic knowledge. A distinction is made between the three higher classes, designated 'twice-born' on the basis of their eligibility for initiation into Vedic learning and investiture with the sacred thread, and the fourth class who are excluded from these. There were other considered to be outside the varna system. How this theoretical scheme of the four varnas relates to the thousands of jatis ('castes') is disputed (see *Caste, class, varna and jati*). Many contemporary Hindus suggest that the varnas should not be interpreted as classes to which one belongs by birth, but in terms of diverse aptitudes and abilities, and that careful reading of the ancient texts reveals that the idea of fixed categories only developed later.

The ashramas are the four lifestyles of celibate student, householder, hermit and renouncer. These can be seen as alternatives (as probably they were originally) so that a man could choose to be a renouncer for life rather than getting married and forming a household, or as later developed, seen as four stages in the same life. This system only applies to men in the three highest varnas eligible for initiation into Vedic knowledge. It excludes not only men from the lowest varna (shudras) and from groups outside of the varna system, but also all women whose traditional place in this scheme is only secondary, though significant, as the wives of householders who shared their husbands' ritual and familial responsibilities. Women's duty or stridharma centres on being a wife and is associated with the pativrata ('husband-vowed') ideal of a wife who is devoted to her husband and who consecrates her life to his service, which is exemplified by heroines such as Sita, the wife of Rama (see *Gender and the role and status of women*).

Contemporary Moral Issues

There is no one 'Hindu' view on any moral issue, any more than one 'Christian' or 'Humanist' view. There is only space here to indicate some Hindu perspectives on some controversial moral issues.

Issues of Social Justice

Human rights

Traditionally Hinduism has emphasised duties over rights and this, together with different moral duties for different categories of people and a focus on the collective rather than the individual, has been cited as a reason why human rights are incompatible with Hinduism. However, the corollary of duties is rights, so that one person's duty implies another person's rights. Similarly, while dharma does apply differently to the classes (varnas) and ashramas (modes of life), there are also universal virtues that apply to everyone. While there is an obligation to family, caste and society in general, there are also opportunities for the

exercise of individual autonomy including the decision to renounce the world. The law of karma also implies individual autonomy and responsibility. Consequently, commentators have identified a basis for human rights in Hinduism and certainly the concept of human rights enjoys wide support among Hindus today, particular those involved in struggles against perceived social injustices.

Equality

Most Hindus today would argue that Hindus support equality, whether in terms of class/caste, gender or race. Hindu philosophies hold that the true self or atman is not to be identified with the particular physical body or social self of a current incarnation. Whether the atman is individual, or all one in Brahman, the divine dwells in all, and thus everyone is at least spiritually and ultimately equal, and should be treated as such. On the other hand, even spiritually, people are at different stages on their journey through many lives, and so saints, gurus and swamis who have achieved liberation or realised their oneness with the divine are honoured as superior beings.

Socially, in contrast with the modern concept of equality, where people are viewed mainly as individuals, many traditional societies often thought more about the harmonious functioning of the community as a whole, which required people to play the part given to them, and all would work for the good of the whole. This had its advantages, in that everyone had a useful role and a job, and groups were not in direct competition with each other, but disadvantages if an individual found their talents and interests were not suited to the role assigned them by birth, class or gender, and where the roles of some groups were obviously more valued and brought more material compensations than others. In common with other traditional societies, Hindu society developed hierarchical systems of organising society, which were not static throughout the millennia, and are still in processes of change today.

Caste, class, varna and jati

Many Hindus today argue that varna and jati have been much misunderstood by non-Hindus, as indicated by the very word 'casta' being coined by Portuguese traders in the sixteenth century and then incorporated into English as 'caste' and used by British colonialists. Indeed, in English usage 'caste' is often used to designate both varna and jati and thus the general hierarchical principle of Hindu, and to some extent Indian, society, though it may be used more technically to designate jati specifically.

Some insist that 'caste' (the concept as well as the name) is a British invention in the sense that the social groupings relating to the terms varna and jati that were a traditional part of Hindu social identity were reified and codified on the basis of the classical texts and as a result accorded a primary importance that they did not previously possess. This had the effect of making existing disadvantages of some groups more prominent.

In addition, whatever might have been true or not in the past, today it is argued that the 'caste system' with discrimination on grounds of caste no longer exists, and caste discrimination has been illegal in India since soon after Independence. Not all would agree that this ideal has yet been reached, especially those from groups traditionally viewed as the bottom end of the system, though there is evidence that both in India and diaspora, caste is becoming less important for contemporary Hindus as seen in areas such as

socialising and marriage. Some Hindus argue that the whole topic is a social and economic one that has nothing to do with Hinduism as a religion.

In relation to varnas, contemporary Hindus may also distinguish between specific roles and responsibilities and the notion of superiority and inferiority attaching to the division of labour, or advocate the application of the meritocratic instead of the hereditary principle in which an individual's abilities, not their birth, determines their place in society. There is evidence that the four varnas were perhaps more fluid in ancient times than they later became.

There are also thousands of jatis (usually translated as 'castes' in the narrower sense) and subgroups thereof. These are groups into which members are born, traditionally contracting marriages and sharing food with members of the same group, many of which were, and still to some extent are, associated with specific occupations. How these relate to the idea of varnas is disputed. In an effort to align the social reality of thousands of jatis with a textual model of four varnas, jatis have been often assigned to varnas. Various sacred texts have attempted to explain how the multitude of jatis arose, suggesting intermarriage between members of different varnas. In contrast, many scholars regard varna and jati as two separate systems though they have been associated with one another as jatis have been aligned with varnas as points of reference and, on occasion, as means of claiming enhanced status.

Certainly the history of the jati system is complex and disputed, has varied in different regions, and has changed and developed over time. Some blame colonial rule for making things more rigid and fixed than they were before. On the positive side, jatis have provided people with security, employment and welfare, and allowed different groups to continue with diverse customs (from food eaten to religious rituals) without forcing uniformity on everyone. On the other hand, some groups were viewed less favourably and suffered real material hardship and social discrimination. Particularly those jatis considered to be outside the varna system, below even the servants, sometimes labelled 'outcastes' (that is, outside of the system) or 'untouchables' because of the attitude of some groups at the top of the system, who feared that their purity would be compromised by contact with such people, have been subject to many forms of discrimination, even exclusion from places of worship. Examples of such jatis are those whose traditional jobs are considered to be polluting (cleaners of toilets, dealing with dead bodies, processing leather).

The treatment of such jatis has been the most controversial aspect of the varna/jati system and was the subject of campaigning by, among others, Gandhi, who often denounced 'untouchability' to be an abuse of the system, and coined the term 'harijans' ('people/children of God') as an alternative label. In contrast, Ambedkar (1891-1956) maintained that the whole system was wrong, and such an intrinsic part of Hindu tradition that he turned to Buddhism. In response to such campaigns, Indian law made such discrimination illegal, and there have been various initiatives to improve conditions and opportunities for underprivileged 'scheduled' groups. Sometimes these have led to a backlash from other groups who considered that such 'affirmative action' discriminated against them, for example, in respect of education and employment. Contemporary activists from 'ex-untouchable' jatis often prefer to use the name 'dalit' (broken or oppressed) in order to draw attention to the still continuing suffering experienced by many.

Gender and the role and status of women

As with class, caste and race, the importance of gender is relativised by the concept of reincarnation, as it applies only to current embodied form and not the essential self or atman (even though the concept of karma might lead to acceptance of any disadvantages of a current gendered incarnation). Moreover, it is possible to draw upon Hindu beliefs that uphold equality such as the divine indwelling all selves and the ultimate unity of the selves as one, so at least spiritually all are equal. Gender diversity and fluidity beyond a male/female divide can also be found within the Hindu tradition (see *Sex, gender and sexuality* below).

Nevertheless, it is not surprising that in such an ancient, diverse and dynamic tradition one can find both negative and positive views of women, and it is anachronistic to expect ancient texts and traditions not to be sexist by contemporary standards, even if capable of different interpretations. On the negative side, women, like the servant class and those outside the varna system, were excluded from Vedic learning according to the varnashramadharma system (if perhaps less so in earlier times) and their role was mainly seen as in the domestic sphere of wife and mother. The ashrama pattern of student, householder, forest dwelling hermit and renouncer did not apply to women, though they were vital to the second stage as wives and mothers and might accompany their husbands in the third of these stages as part of their domestic duty or stridharma (women's dharma). There has certainly been an historic preference for sons, even instances of female infanticide or foeticide (see *Abortion* below) as well as less favourable treatment of female children, and some examples of historic abuses such as mistreatment of widows and child marriage (see *Sex, gender and sexuality*).

On the other hand, many Hindus argue that some of the more negative aspects were later developments and point to the favourable position of women in ancient India as a measure of true Hindu norms and values. Not only are mothers traditionally respected, but when some Hindus have campaigned against, for instance, child marriage, the exclusion of women from education and their inability to participate in public life, they have done so by appealing to a positive reconstruction of the ideals of the distant past. Examination of the Vedic texts suggests that women had more agency and involvement in matters beyond the domestic, for instance (from the Upanishads) Gargi, a participant in philosophical debate with the sage Yajnavalkya, and Maitreyi, Yajnavalkya's spiritually inclined wife who requested her husband's instruction. Some suggest that many of the restrictions on women were only introduced as necessary protective measures under Muslim rule or that a divide in experience between men and women was exacerbated by the British Raj.

The modern Indian women's movement has reinterpreted female figures presented as ideal wives in sacred texts to highlight qualities other than deference and obedience, for instance, courage and initiative as seen in Draupadi, Savitri, and even Sita. Historical figures that offer women a variety of roles and role models include women saints from the bhakti (devotion) traditions who challenged expectations of the nature and purpose of women's lives. These include Andal (eighth century) devoted to Vishnu, the Shaivite ascetic Mahadevyakka/Akka Mahadevi (twelfth century) who is revered as a pioneer of women's equality, and the princess Mirabai (sixteenth century) who considered herself married to Krishna. There are warriors, politicians and activists such as Rani (Queen) Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi (d.1858) who fought against the British, Sarojini Naidu (d.1949) who was a leading political activist in the Congress movement during and after the struggle for Indian Independence, a campaigner

for women and a poet, and Jayaben Desai (d.2010) who led the strike at the Grunwick factory in England for better conditions for a mainly female South Asian workforce in 1976-78. There are also modern, recent and contemporary female saints, ascetics and gurus, such as Sister Nivedita (d.1911), Sarada Devi (d.1920), Anandamayi Ma (d.1982), Mataji Nirmala Devi (d.2011) and Mother Meera (born 1960).

The fact that the divine can be represented in female form, the Goddess and the many goddesses, and their association with power or shakti, especially figures such as the fierce goddess Kali, can be viewed as empowering for women. Many have pointed out that some of the issues that caused suffering for women such as the treatment of widows and the divorced only applied to higher class groups and women from lower classes were often free of such restrictions at least until the colonial era. There are examples of women-only rituals, at first menstruation, before marriage, and during pregnancy, and such gatherings might be occasions for sharing less-than-flattering views of men, as found also in folk songs.

The practice of vrats (vows), which involve actions such as fasting and prayers, traditionally engaged in for the welfare of the husband and the family, may be performed by women for their own purposes too. The Indian women's movement in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, before and after Independence, were thus able to draw upon Hindu tradition to argue for equality for women, as do contemporary Hindu feminists today.

Racism and colourism

Given the Hindu belief that the self (atman) is successively re-embodied, the body including race or ethnicity is unimportant. The idea that the divine dwells within all beings also leads Hindus to see discrimination based on outward differences like skin colour or ethnicity as wrong, and any exploitation of one race by another, for example in slavery, as unacceptable. Nevertheless, accounts of the Aryan 'invasion' tend to portray the Aryans as light-skinned and the indigenous inhabitants of the subcontinent as dark-skinned though, of course, this account of the early development of Hinduism has been disputed (see *Change and continuity: historical and geographical distribution*) and Hindus themselves were subjected to racism under the British Raj and are still today in the diaspora. Gandhi is often seen as a heroic antiracist campaigner in apartheid South Africa, although others have claimed he had racist attitudes towards black Africans and was only concerned about the racism of white rulers against Indians. The two perspectives can be reconciled by suggesting that Gandhi's attitudes developed over time and that his personal experience of anti-Indian racism gradually gave him insight into racism against all groups.

In common with other Indian communities and communities of Indian descent, the issue of colourism has also been highlighted, that is, discrimination based on skin colour that occurs within these communities to the advantage of lighter-complexioned and disadvantage of darker complexioned individuals. This has been analysed as an internalising of the historical experience of foreign rule and the negative legacy of colonial attitudes but Hinduism does provide resources to challenge such prejudice such as the dark-skinned goddess Parvati as an image of beauty diametrically opposed to the use of skin-lightening creams.

Wealth and poverty

The acquisition of wealth (artha) is a legitimate goal of human life (purushartha) though the means of its acquisition and how it is spent are also importantly and generally seen to be governed by dharma (duty, righteousness). Consequently, the significance of the

householder reflects the obligation to maintain one's dependents and generate the wealth required to contribute towards the flourishing of society as a whole including donations to religious and charitable causes. There is no romanticising of poverty in ordinary life even if an individual may choose to embrace poverty for spiritual reasons when renouncing the world and subsequently rely on the generosity of others for food and to satisfy any few remaining needs. There are many examples of Hindu charities to address poverty such as food banks organised by local temple communities in the UK and ISKCON's international Food for Life programme which provides vegetarian meals to those in need as a practical expression of equality as well as a revival of the ancient tradition of hospitality.

Work

The concept of dharma in the sense of duty means that everyone should do their job to the best of their ability. The varna (and also jati) system (see *Varnashramadharmā*) understood in an idealised way means that everyone has an important part to play in the overall running of society, from monarch or president to cleaner, and if everyone plays their part the whole of society will benefit. In this sense, everyone is a key worker. However, the traditional division of labour was hierarchical, so that those at the lower end of the system might not experience it in such a positive way as those at the top, especially those whose jobs are considered to be polluting (cleaners of toilets, dealing with dead bodies, processing leather) which meant that they were considered even beneath the servant class. This has led some contemporary Hindus to interpret the varna system as a matter of different people having different skills and aptitudes to contribute rather than anything to do with the group you are born into or difference in status.

The ashrama system came to mean that different work is expected at different stages of (at least males from the top three varnas) lives. A student should dedicate themselves to study, a householder to providing for their family and helping a wider range of others. The following two ashramas somewhat relativise the importance of work viewed as paid employment, running a business or even subsistence farming. Not only those who 'work' contribute to society. The third stage of retirement represents a stage when the many responsibilities of a full-time job, business, land and family can be gradually left to younger people, while still being able to contribute advice and the wisdom of experience, as well as living a simpler life with space for spiritual practices. Originally this stage involved leaving home and moving into the forest to live a simple hermit life, but still as a married couple if this was the husband's wish. In this form, it has fallen into disuse. The final stage of renunciation frees you completely from the need to be involved with worldly concerns and marks a complete break from any remaining ties to family and household. Renunciation can also be a lifelong alternative to the world of work, reflecting earlier ideas of the ashramas as different modes of life that might be pursued in their own right rather than in combination over a lifetime, and the many kinds of monks, swamis and ascetics who rely completely on others for their sustenance are admired as dedicating themselves to the most important aims of life.

Sex, gender and sexuality

Marriage

Kama, including sexual pleasure, is one of the goals of human life (purusharthas) and sex is seen as natural and even sacred, for pleasure and expressing love as well as reproduction. However, devout Hindus would stress that sexual intercourse belongs only in marriage. In the past, although monogamy seems to have been the ideal and perhaps also the norm,

husbands could take a second wife if the first did not have children. Stories in sacred texts may suggest that sometimes women in ancient times could have more than one husband, the famous example being Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*. This is quite a complicated topic as from ancient times up to the present there were many different formal and informal marriage arrangements, and different expectations for different classes. British colonial attempts to regulate 'personal law' on matters like marriage, divorce and widowhood were complicated by a mixture of a stated intention to respect the customs of different religious groups, and assumptions arising from the interplay of Western preconceptions and the interpretations of indigenous advisers, leading for example to the idea that what was customary in higher class groups applied to all Hindus. Post-independence the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 enforced monogamy for Hindus.

Divorce and remarriage

Ideally and traditionally marriage is for life. However separation or divorce was allowed in various circumstances in the past and divorce was made legal for Hindus in 1955. Reasons for divorce include things like adultery or desertion. Hindus might also decide to separate or divorce in order to join an ascetic religious order. For higher class Hindus, divorced wives were traditionally not allowed to remarry and their maintenance was still the responsibility of the husband.

Widowhood

Again this is complicated by diversity of custom and tradition, and things have changed over time. In pre-modern Hinduism, outliving a husband was considered a failure on the part of the wife (see also *Suicide and sati*), and widows were viewed negatively, not allowed to remarry and expected to live out their lives penitentially, wearing a simple white sari, and often on a minimal level of support. There were various exceptions (some married a husband's younger brother), and remarriage of widows and divorcees was common in lower classes. Reforms aimed at improving the position of widows as defined by higher caste norms were proposed, and a campaign to enable widows to remarry led to the 1856 Hindu Widows Remarriage Act. However, some negative attitudes linger on, complicated by family economics, and various charities and government projects provide homes and welfare for widows in need.

Contraception

Traditionally having many children was seen as a blessing, particularly sons, who have significant ritual and other responsibilities towards their parents. At some earlier times and for some groups, the need for girls to marry early was associated with the imperative to maximise the opportunities for conception and hence consummation of marriage once girls attained puberty. In today's changed circumstances, the legal age for marriage in India is 18 for women and 21 for men, and Hindus may consider it more responsible to limit their families, whether by abstinence or by using forms of contraception. Some have a preference for methods seen as 'natural' and against methods which could be viewed as an early form of abortion, but there is no general 'religious' objection to any of the common means available.

Celibacy

Celibacy is admired and expected of the unmarried and the ascetic. Sexual activity is generally viewed as a tie to the round of existence (samsara) for the one seeking moksha, and thus renounced by the ascetic, whether lifelong or in the final stage of a man's life.

There are however other perspectives which offer a more positive portrayal of sexuality for those seeking moksha, notably Shakta Tantra in which sexual intercourse, literally or symbolically, is part of the spiritual discipline.

Female sexuality

As in many other traditions female sexuality has been regarded as problematic, with a double standard in respect of expectations of men and women's conduct. Unlike men whose nature (svabhava) is consistent with their duty (svadharma), a traditional view has been that women's nature is wanton and lustful and thus wholly at odds with their duty to be faithful wives (pativrata), hence the need for strict oversight by the family both before and after marriage. The ideal of the ascetic renouncer, predominantly associated with men, tends to cast women as temptresses. However, those women who have challenged convention and also renounced the world have similarly refused or abandoned marriage and with it ties to family and household in favour of devotion to the divine.

Debates about same-sex relationships

Same-sex attraction and relationships have been much debated in modern India where diametrically opposed opinions have been expressed about the past. Some have insisted that homosexuality is a foreign introduction and the result of Muslim rule and/or the British Raj. For example, the Hindu nationalist politician, Subramanian Swamy, declared that it is 'against Hindutva'. Others have been equally insistent that it is the intolerant attitude towards homosexuality that is foreign. For example, the famous Indian author, Vikram Seth, commented that it is 'homophobia that came into India and not homosexuality'. Scholars and activists have debated whether historically homosexuality was condemned, condoned or even celebrated, citing evidence such as penalties in the *Laws of Manu* and erotic sculptures on Khajuraho temple friezes as contrasting evidence.

Under British colonial rule, homosexual activity was made illegal in 1860. Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code read 'intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life and shall also be liable to fine.' After a long and complex process (with decriminalisation in 2009 followed by recriminalisation in 2013) homosexuality was finally decriminalised in India in 2018. Debates still continue among Hindus as to the moral status of same-sex relationships with some arguing that they are 'unnatural' and against the divine purpose for sexuality and others that sexual diversity is both natural and part of God's creation. There are activist and support groups for those identifying as both queer and Hindu. The deity image Harihara (half Shiva half Vishnu, or alternatively their son) is sometimes seen as celebrating gay relationships.

Sex and gender diversity

India has long recognised a third sex/gender (tritiya prakriti; lit. 'third nature'), challenging familiar Western categories of identification of sex, gender and sexuality. Among this third sex/gender are the hijras, understood to be neither men nor women. Traditionally they are people assigned male gender at birth who do not identify as men and often choose castration later in life, hence now considered to be examples of transgendered people. The term may also be used for those born with an intersex condition.

Becoming a hijra generally entails a rite of passage in which castration is accompanied by aspects that symbolise marriage and childbirth, and which invests the initiate with the

power of the fertility goddess, Bahuchara Mata. Consequently, blessings given by hijras can be part of ceremonies celebrating birth and marriage. Hijras are also associated with Shiva whose mythology features both erotic and ascetic elements. Hijras usually choose to or have to leave their families and live with other hijras in communities with the senior leader known as a guru, earning a living as entertainers and sometimes sex workers. In 2014 India's Supreme Court extended legal recognition to the third sex/gender and hence to hijras though there remain many obstacles to overcome before equality is achieved.

Killing and harming

Concepts such as the divine dwelling in all beings, or ahimsa (non-violence) imply that killing and harming are wrong in principle, but there are debates about how to apply this in practice.

War and Peace

Peace (shanti) is highly prized as is non-violence (ahimsa). However, the art of warfare (Dhanurveda) is one of the supplements to the Veda, the Vedic pantheon features Indra as king and warrior and the ruling warrior (rajanya/kshatriya) class have a duty to protect society, by violence if necessary, indicating the existence and legitimacy of warfare. In the fourth century BCE, the emperor Chandragupta Maurya invaded other Indian states in the formation of his empire, as did his famous grandson Ashoka before he renounced violence and turned to Buddhism, and there are historical examples of later Indian rulers campaigning beyond India in what is now Indonesia or Sri Lanka. However, the prevailing Hindu view is that war is only acceptable in defence or to prevent greater evil. In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, for instance, Krishna urges Arjuna to fight on the grounds that there is no greater good for a warrior than a righteous war with the prospect of heaven and, conversely, to fail to fight would be a dereliction of duty and dishonour worse than death. Even so, Gandhi was insistent that the text should be interpreted as an allegory of an internal conflict where the battle field is the human heart, the combatants are good and bad tendencies and Krishna is 'the Dweller within'. Notwithstanding Gandhi's influence on independent India, India as a Hindu-majority state has armed forces and has fought wars. Latterly, it has acquired nuclear weapons with a testing programme called Operation Shakti and missiles called Prithvi and Agni after Hindu deities.

Death penalty

Hindus differ in their views on the death penalty. There are references in sacred texts which support its use to deter the worst of crimes, but also many teachers who state that such violence is wrong in all cases. Contemporary India retains the death penalty, but in recent decades it has been used very rarely and only for particularly shocking crimes such as the 2020 execution of those guilty of a gang-rape and murder.

Suicide and sati

Suicide is generally considered wrong, as life is sacred, and with belief in karma and rebirth, does not achieve any desire to escape unbearable suffering. There are occasional historical examples of heroic warriors preferring death to capture or captured women preferring death to dishonour.

A controversial issue is that of sati (perfect woman), sometimes spelt suttee, where a widow would choose to die either on her husband's funeral pyre or at a later date rather than live on. Sati can be viewed as an admirable act of a perfect faithful wife, or a crime against

women equivalent to murder, rather than suicide, as pressures may be put on women to comply. After campaigning by Hindu reformers and Christian evangelists, the British imperial rulers made sati illegal in 1829 and it remained illegal in independent India. Nevertheless, there are shrines to women who chose to become sati in previous times viewed as goddesses (satimatas) who can provide help. Although illegal, there are occasional recent cases, such as Roop Kanwar in 1987, which led to a new law, the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, also making it an offence to glorify the practice (see Sources of authority within the Hindu tradition). Some contemporary Hindus criticise the emphasis put on sati by Westerners, viewing this as part of creating a negative image of Hindus, when it was never widespread and the act has been illegal for nearly 200 years.

Abortion.

On the one hand, all life is sacred and should not be harmed. Life is considered to start at conception, and may be viewed as a result of karma, even if the circumstances are difficult. Several ancient texts condemn any causing of a miscarriage/killing of an unborn child. However, one exception in some texts seems to have been to save the mother's life, and Hindus may argue for other circumstances where abortion is the most compassionate action. Abortion was made legal in India in 1971. When medical technology (post 1980s) made it possible to tell the sex of a child before birth, there was evidence of selective female foeticide, leading to a legal ban on prenatal sex screening and female foeticide in India in 1994. Although most Hindus would condemn the practice, it is linked to a cultural preference for sons (hardly unknown in other cultures), in part going back to the ancient Vedic requirement for a son to ensure that the correct rituals were performed after death, and in part economic in a society where a son contributed to the family income whereas a daughter incurred costs such as a dowry.

Euthanasia

The sacredness of life and the requirement to accept suffering as karma which would only have to be undergone in a future life if not in this one, combine to make euthanasia generally unacceptable. However, the practice of fasting and the idea of samnyasa (renunciation) at the final stage of life mean that an elderly and ill person who considered they had done all they could in this life, might give up eating and drinking and thus pass away somewhat earlier. The Community of the Many Names of God's Skanda Vale Hospice is one example of a Hindu initiative to support those with life-limiting conditions as a form of selfless service that provides for the spiritual and other needs of the dying.

Killing and harming animals and vegetarianism

The Hindu belief in reincarnation, as well as in the sacredness of all life, leads to many Hindus having a vegetarian diet. Even those Hindus who do eat meat avoid beef in recognition of the sacredness of the cow. This aspect of Hinduism is so well-known that 'sacred cow' has become a metaphor in English. Several reasons are given for the special nature of the cow, including its vital importance to the rural economy, selfless provision of milk for others, dung for fuel, plaster and fertiliser, and bulls for transport. The cow also represents mother earth on whom all humans depend. The milk provided by the well cared for cows at ISKCON's UK headquarters, Bhaktivedanta Manor, has won prizes for its quality. Protecting cows has also become symbolic of commitment to the whole Hindu way of life and identity, and so harming a cow has meaning beyond the fate of one animal. One example is the controversy in 2007 when there were international protests and legal challenges as the Welsh government sought to slaughter the bull Shambo at the Community

of the Many Names of God, because of testing positive for bovine TB during an outbreak. The campaign eventually failed to save Shambo. Some animal sacrifices are offered to goddesses though most offerings are now vegetarian (fruit, flowers, dairy products such as milk and ghee) despite the prominence of animal sacrifice in ancient Vedic ritual.

Drugs and alcohol

There is a variety of attitudes to the consumption of alcohol and other drugs. For many Hindus all intoxicants should be avoided as they both cloud the mind and impair moral judgment. A few states in India are 'dry,' forbidding the sale of alcohol. Others may take the view that moderate consumption is acceptable. The god Shiva is sometimes associated with smoking cannabis, some groups of ascetics use it as an aid to meditation, and alcohol may feature in offerings to some local deities and in tantric rituals. Other Hindus will criticise this, and even argue that the mysterious 'soma' of ancient times (see *Vedic ritual*) was not an intoxicant.

Environmentalism

Many aspects of Hindu tradition would support concern for the natural environment. The idea that the divine dwells in all things, the admiration of a simple life of self-control, respect for the cow and all living things, widespread vegetarianism, the earth as a goddess, the general principle of ahimsa or non-harming, and the fundamental concept of dharma, the order and harmony of the cosmos, natural world and human society would all support an ecological consciousness. Quotations can be found in Vedic texts advising against cutting down trees or polluting rivers. In addition to the cow, other animals such as monkeys, snakes, elephants and tigers can be seen as sacred. Many plants are sacred, such as tulsi (a form of basil) associated with Vishnu. There are sacred trees and sacred landscapes such as the area around Vrindavan connected with Krishna. Belief in karma and reincarnation means that issues such as disastrous climate change or running out of resources will not just affect your descendants, but your future self. The possibility of reincarnation in animal form also makes the divide between human and animal less sharp, and the animal or part-animal avatars of Vishnu, Ganesh's elephant head, and the animal 'vehicles' associated with each deity have the same effect on the divide between animals and deities.

However, like contemporary feminism or gay rights, environmentalism *as we know it today*, the threats of human-caused climate change, pollution caused by plastics, transport and other effects of modern industrialisation, was not an 'issue' in Vedic times or for much of human history. Humans just did not make such a negative impact until recent centuries, although there are historical examples: one theory for the decline of the Indus Valley Civilisation is deforestation causing drought conditions. There are aspects of Hindu teaching that may suggest that environmental action is not the most important thing on which to be working. The ultimate goal in many Hindu philosophies is liberation from the material world, which is only of secondary importance or reality. It is accepted that we are in the decay phase (Kali Yuga) of this particular universe which will inevitably come to an end, but there will be other universes. This perhaps could take some of the urgency out of saving the planet. Nevertheless, the resources are there in the Hindu tradition for creating a contemporary Hindu environmentalism which views concern for the planet and all beings who dwell upon her as an important part of the spiritual quest rather than a distraction from it. Moreover, in practice there are many Hindu-inspired environmental activists and projects such as the Chipko movement against deforestation started in the 1970s, or the Bhumi project (started in the UK and USA) more recently. One specific UK example is the

seven million cans collected for recycling as part of the fundraising efforts for building the Swaminarayan mandir in Neasden.

Role models and moral exemplars

Hindus may look to characters in their sacred texts or saints from their history as role models along with the founders, leaders and teachers of particular traditions. Several examples, both male and female, can be found in other sections of this essay. These include deities, avatars of Vishnu such as Rama, founders of philosophical traditions such as Shankara, founders of sampradayas such as Chaitanya, saints from the modern period such as Ramakrishna, and the many female role models from Gargi in the Upanishads through Sita and Savitri in the Epics to ascetics, gurus and activists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries listed in *Gender and the role and status of women*. Hindus may also admire and seek to emulate members of their own community and others with outstanding qualities.

Many Hindus find in Mahatma Gandhi a role model whose moral example has been a source of inspiration in their lives. One of his closest disciples and colleagues, Vinoba Bhave (1895-1982), has become a role model in his own right, having taken up Gandhi's commitment to sarvodaya (universal welfare) and applied it in the form of Bhoodan Yajna (Land Gift Movement) in which he set about persuading landowners to donate land to landless labourers. Gandhi's influence extends beyond Hindus and he has also been a role model for Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela who were impressed by his belief in ahimsa (non-violence) and his advocacy of Satyagraha (Truth Force) as a practical method of non-violent action.

Making Sense of Life's Experiences: experience as a source of knowledge, religious experience, meditation and yoga, mantras, ritual, worship, festivals, pilgrimage, lifecycle ceremonies (Big Idea 4; NE 6 and 5)

The focus of this section is on the experiential and emotional side of Hindu practice, emphasising the importance of experiencing the divine, and religion as something one does, and feels rather than a list of propositions to which one assents. Religions are not (or not only or most importantly) sets of intellectual ideas, particularly non-Western traditions such as Hinduism.

Religious experience and knowledge of the divine

Hindu tradition has long held that the divine or the truth is known experientially. The oldest Vedic texts are held to have been 'heard' directly by rishis (sages/seers). The Upanishads contain the teaching of those who not only debated intellectual ideas about the divine but spent time in meditative and ascetic practices, and are thus considered to have gained direct insight into reality and intuitive awareness of the divine. Likewise, the philosopher Shankara (eighth/ninth century) was also a renouncer practising forms of meditation and based his teaching on direct experiential insight as well as reason and sacred texts. He founded mathas (monasteries) to continue both practice and teaching. Founders of particular sects often had deep personal experiences such as Chaitanya (fifteenth/sixteenth century), founder of Gaudiya Vaishnavism (of which ISKCON is a development), who frequently experienced states of devotional ecstasy. Ramakrishna (nineteenth century) is famous for teaching that all religions are paths to the same goal as a result of his mystical experiences which were mainly of the Goddess, but also incorporated elements of

Christianity and Islam such as visions of Jesus. Those who have direct experience and insight are then able to share their understanding with others, as happened in the Ramakrishna Math and Mission founded by Vivekananda. There is thus a tradition of authoritative personal religious experience from the ancient rishis to modern mystics.

Meditation and yoga

Many Hindus engage in meditation as part of their spiritual practice (sadhana), and forms of devotional worship can be seen as meditation in focusing the mind on the divine. However, meditation is perhaps most closely associated with various forms of Yoga. The word Yoga is an umbrella term for different methods to attain spiritual insight and eventually liberation. In the Ashtanga Yoga of classical Yoga, the eight 'limbs' combine the moral and the physical with the mental in a process of progressive withdrawal from the external world and ever deeper inward focus culminating in a higher state of consciousness where the Purusha (Person) is no longer confused with Prakriti (material nature, including the ordinary intellect). For more on Purusha and Prakriti see *Hindu philosophies* and *Human nature and destiny*. In the Kundalini Yoga of Shakta Tantra (see *Human nature and destiny*), the discipline involves visualisation of the chakras (centres) in the mystical physiology of the subtle body, together with the chanting of corresponding mantras (ritual utterances) and the employment of pranayama (breathing techniques to control the vital energies) to raise the Kundalini (coiled serpent power) through the Sushumna (central channel), piercing each chakra in turn until Shiva and Shakti (male and female divine principles) are united.


Forms of Yoga, labelled 'Modern Yoga' to represent the mixture of Western with Indian ideas and influences made possible and/or necessary by modernity, have proliferated over the last 150 years or so though with greater or lesser emphasis on physical and mental aspects. Examples include Iyengar Yoga which focuses upon asana (posture) and Transcendental Meditation which features twice-daily mantra-based sessions. Both in India and globally, meditation, including many forms of Yoga, has proven popular, often now presented to a wider public as a way to manage stress and enhance well-being, and the ability to draw upon what (apparently) are age-old techniques such as those taught in Hinduism only increase its appeal for many.

Mantra and the power of sound

Mantras (ritual utterances) are identified with Shabda ('Sound' or 'Word'), consisting in speech acts - syllables, words, phrases, sentences - believed to be imbued with power and to derive from the divine. Mantras feature in different forms of Yoga and in many other types of Hinduism from the most ancient to the most recent. There are Vedic mantras among which the Gayatri Mantra from the *Rig-Veda*, invoking the sun god Savitar as the source of enlightenment, has been hailed as the most important. It is still recited regularly today by many Hindus, and sometimes seen as the basic Hindu recitation (ability to recite it was used by a violent mob as a way of telling Hindu from Muslim in the recent BBC adaptation of *A Suitable Boy*). Although the literal translation of the Gayatri Mantra makes specific reference to a particular Vedic sun god (in Dermot Killingley's translation 'Let us meditate upon the excellent splendour of [the sun god] Savitar, may he stir our thoughts'; and in Marr and Taylor's 'Let us meditate upon that longed for splendour of the god Savitar who when pondered upon will urge us onwards'), contemporary translations tend to refer to the divine more generally as in 'Om. Let us meditate on the radiance of the divine, may it inspire and illuminate our intellects' or 'May the eternal light of the universe enlighten our minds and hearts'. It might be worth comparing translations in different textbooks and

‘pondering’ upon the implications of different phrasing - perhaps to support a monotheistic interpretation or wording that would be acceptable to a wide range of people from different religious/spiritual backgrounds. The Gayatri Mantra usually takes the place of the ancient requirement of learning the Vedic texts in the upanayana (initiation) ceremony, as a suitable start to the ‘student’ stage of life. The Gayatri Mantra is sometimes personified as a minor goddess, Gayatri, whose image may be seen in some UK temples.

There are also mantras in modern and contemporary movements, notably ISKCON’s ‘Mahamantra’ (Great Mantra): Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, Hare, Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama, Rama, Hare, Hare. The chanting of the Mahamantra is prescribed as the main spiritual practice, described by the Society’s founder, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, as producing a ‘transcendental vibration’ that revives devotees’ Krishna consciousness.

Probably the best known mantra is the sacred syllable ‘OM’ or ‘A U M’  which is deemed to be the seed (bija) of all mantras. It is often an integral part of other mantras such as ‘Om nama Shivaya’ ‘homage to Shiva’ or ‘Om Shakti’, ‘homage to the Goddess’ and is pronounced at the commencement and conclusion of both worship and meditation. As original or primordial sound, it is attuned to ultimate reality (or the divine or the whole universe in the form of sound) and its constituents ‘a’, ‘u’ and ‘m’ can be related, for example, to the members of the trimurti (three forms), the gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, and, with the addition of the diacritic mark under the ‘m’, to four states of awareness, waking, dreaming, dreamless sleep and the experience of moksha (release, liberation) (see also section on *Symbols*).

Ritual and ceremony

The rituals and ceremonies of traditions are often difficult to teach, in part because they are often merely described without much attention to the meaning for participants, and partly because of a somewhat negative attitude to ritual present in those parts of Western culture influenced by the protestant Reformation rather than Catholic tradition. It was noted above (in the section on *What is Hinduism?*) that some scholars reject the term ‘religion’ for ‘Eastern’ or ‘Dharmic’ traditions because they tend to put more emphasis on ritual practice than truth claims and so are unlike Western, especially protestant, understandings of ‘religion’. The scholar S.N. Balagangadhara calls ritual ‘performative or practical knowledge’, which is central in Hinduism in the way that doctrinal knowledge is in Abrahamic traditions. Indeed, Hinduism is often described as more orthoprax than orthodox, that is, more concerned with right practice than right belief.

Rituals serve many purposes. They can be seen as powerful ways of experiencing the divine beyond anything achievable by intellectual ideas. A book written for teachers by Rasamandala Das from ISKCON Educational Services (see bibliography) quotes a devotee describing the ‘sweet and peaceful experience’ of worship. Rituals can make abstract philosophy accessible at the level of emotion, as when ritual surrounding death can help with grieving. The routines of ritual can be a useful reminder of what one holds to be most important in life. Rituals are also an important way of expressing allegiance and identity, especially where, as in the Hindu tradition, one may be using words and actions that have been passed down from ancient ancestors for thousands of years. As well as connecting with the past, rituals also connect one to the present community. Thus ritual could feature in the sections on ‘words and beyond’ as a form of expression or ‘identity and community’

as a means of enhancing the sense of belonging, but we chose to emphasise the experiential to counteract the idea of 'meaningless ritual' and to underline the centrality of ritual in Hinduism.

Vedic ritual

Early Vedic ritual was centred upon sacrifice (yajna) performed on plots of land temporarily consecrated for the purpose (vedi), not the worship of images (murti) in permanent temples (mandirs). The purpose of sacrifice seems to have been to ensure that the gods and the natural phenomena associated with them such as rain (Indra) or the sun (Surya) would benefit the persons making the sacrifice in this life, as well as ensuring a happy afterlife, which in ancient times seems to have been envisaged as the world of the ancestors rather than reincarnation and liberation. The importance of sacrifice is reflected in the role accorded to it in Vedic creation myth where the gods perform the primordial and prototypical act of sacrifice when they dismember Primal Man from whom both the physical universe and human society originate (see *The cosmos and the natural world*).

The centrality of sacrifice in ancient times is demonstrated by the membership of the Vedic pantheon in which important gods such as Agni (Fire), the goddess Vac (Speech) and Soma (an intoxicant) were divine forms of parts of the sacrifice. Soma, for example, was an intoxicant extracted from a plant source, apparently used in ancient Zoroastrian as well as Vedic rituals. It was both drunk and offered to the gods during some sacrifices. Exactly which plant or mixture of plants it was and what its effects were are debated, some arguing that it was hallucinogenic and suggesting psilocybin or other mushrooms, others that it was more like amphetamine in effects, and suggesting the plant ephedra, others a mixture of extracts of poppy, cannabis and an ephedra-like plant, still others suggesting various other plants, perhaps something with similar effects to the South American ayahuasca. Why its use was discontinued is not known. It may be that the plant or plants became hard to find or the knowledge of the process lost. Some Hindus argue that it was not a drug but a metaphor for intoxication with divine love.

Some sacrifices were fairly simple such as the Agnihotra (Oblation to Agni), which was an obligation for the twice-born (dvija) householder who should make twice daily offerings of milk and water into the household ritual fires while reverencing the gods, the ancestors, and the seven rishis (sages/seers). Other sacrifices required the expertise of specialist priests, and could involve animal offerings as well as offerings of grains, fruit, ghee (clarified butter) and milk. Among the most elaborate and expensive sacrifices was the Ashvamedha (horse sacrifice), a ritual of sovereignty limited to royalty. Although not widespread today, some animal sacrifice continues to be a feature of Hinduism in parts of India and Nepal, especially in worship of the Goddess such as the goat offerings to Kali in her Kolkata temple and animal sacrifices to other goddesses such as Shitala the goddess of smallpox and other infectious diseases.

As the Vedic period developed, the sacrifice gained in importance so that the performance of the sacrifice in itself was believed to be essential to the maintenance of the cosmos. The pantheon was also changing with deities of a more abstract or universal character (though often maintaining links with creation and the sacrifice) such as Hiranyagabha (the cause of the universe), Brihaspati (the divine priest) and Prajapati (the source of creation and the power of sacrifice). Indeed, by the close of the Vedic period, ideas about sacrifice differed significantly from earlier Vedic ones both in respect of nature and purpose. The power of

ritual came to be understood as a mental process internal to the individual rather than occurring literally and externally. Hence, in the *Shvetasvatara Upanishad*, the sacrifice becomes a metaphor in which the sacrificial kindling of fire is reinterpreted in terms of the body, mantra and meditation. Likewise, the sacrifice was seen in terms of the predominantly otherworldly goals associated with the stress upon moksha (release, liberation) and the growing importance of renunciation in comparison to the more material concerns of the householder. This is evident in the *Chandogya Upanishad* where sacrifice is identified with brahmacharya (the celibate state of traditional Vedic studentship) as the means to self-realisation.

Elements of Vedic ritual continue to this day, especially the importance of fire and fire offerings in lifecycle ceremonies such as marriage. Versions of the Agnihotra continue to be performed to ensure the welfare of the household and to contribute towards order and harmony on a broader natural and social basis. Vedic deities and stories connected with them (such as Indra the storm god) still feature in Hindu tradition, but in general much Vedic ritual as well as some of the mythology and deities with which it was associated has declined in importance and been replaced over the millennia by other deities becoming more important and by devotional practices such as image worship. However, Vedic ritual focused on the sacred fire has been revived in the modern era, in part because of the campaigns of the nineteenth century Arya Samaj which reintroduced Agnihotra and other fire-based rituals to replace image worship.

Worship at home and in the temple

Puja (worship) which includes arti (light offering) is a core part of Hindu worship in both home and temple. Puja at home is performed by the individual worshipper or family group, usually daily, whereas in temples priests tend to officiate. In a domestic setting it can be very simple with modest offerings made at a small shrine whereas ceremonies conducted in temples will be more complex especially during the celebration of festivals. Murtis (images) are bathed, dressed in fresh outfits, anointed and garlanded before offerings are made to them in a multi-sensory ritual. At their most basic, these offerings are water, incense, food (possibly a piece of fruit or sweets) as well as light and prayers. Arti is the culmination and conclusion of puja in which a tray bearing (normally) a lamp with five lights symbolising the five elements (earth, water, fire, air, ether) is circled in the auspicious clockwise direction before each murti in turn. During this process, mantras are chanted and prayers recited. A popular hymn that is sung in many British temples is 'Om Jai Jagdish Hare', to the accompaniment of a bell being rung and/or the blowing of a conch. Once the deities have been offered the light, worshippers pass their hands over the flames on the arti tray, bringing their hands towards their heads so as to share in the blessings bestowed by the deities. Following this, worshippers may also receive a tilak (mark) of coloured paste on their foreheads between their eyebrows and/or prashad (grace) in the form of a small portion of the offerings made to and now sanctified by the deities. Visitors to temples, including student groups, may be invited to pass their hands over the arti tray to share in the blessing, and given prashad.

Festivals (utsavas)

There are hundreds of festivals connected with the diverse Hindu tradition, some well-known throughout India (though with many regional and local variations) and the wider world, others local or regional. The difficulty of separating out the 'religious' and the 'cultural' means that what might be classed as 'Hindu' festivals could be classed as local

cultural events. It is possible that many such events in the UK, such as Bonfire Night or the Somerset carnivals, would be classed as ‘religious’ by observers if they happened in India.

Even the calendar is plural and diverse in India. Several calendars are currently in use including the ancient (partly lunar, partly solar) ones used to calculate the dates of festivals, which are different in North and South India. As for when the year starts, there are several New Year festivals. These can be in the spring, or late summer, or autumn (Divali is seen as a New Year festival in Gujarat), and even, in earlier times, midwinter. It is a complex task to work out the corresponding dates in the Western Gregorian calendar for any festival in any particular year.

Divali (October/November) is one of the most widely celebrated Hindu festivals and has become well-known in the UK, fitting in well with an autumn term theme of ‘festivals of lights’. Cities with a substantial Hindu population may put up municipal lights for Divali and leave them up for Christmas. Associations with Divali include the triumphant return of Rama and Sita to Ayodhya, the defeat of a demon by the dwarf avatar of Vishnu, the annual visit of the Goddess Shri Lakshmi, and the meal shared by the god and goddess Yama and Yamuna. Customs include the lighting of diva (lamps), the blessing of business accounts and offerings to Lakshmi, goddess of good fortune. It can last 2-5 days. Divali is also celebrated, with similar customs but different associations, by Sikhs and Jains.

Other festivals popular in RE include Holi and Navaratri/Durga Puja. Holi is a spring festival of fun and misrule, where the normal rules of behaviour are temporarily relaxed, and the custom of throwing coloured powders at everyone has recently been adopted by some young Westerners for events unconnected with Holi. Durga Puja celebrates the victory of good over evil, personified as the buffalo demon, and in West Bengal huge images of Durga and scenes of her victory are created and processed before being immersed in a river or the sea. At the time of writing, October 2020, some creative artists have portrayed the demon as ‘Coronasura’, the Coronavirus demon, in the hope that Durga will defeat this evil too. Another has pictured Durga herself in the form of one of the many migrant women workers who have been displaced by the pandemic, suffering terribly but keeping strong. Of course, Covid 19 measures have meant that the festival has not been able to be celebrated with the normal crowds. Unfortunately for teachers some festivals which might appeal to children such as Krishna’s birthday, Ganesh’s birthday and Raksha Bandhan often fall in the summer holidays. Sarasvati Puja, celebrating the goddess of learning, is particularly relevant for students.

Better-known festivals include the following, with indications of the time of year and (some) associations and customs, with thanks to Jackson (1998) and the Shap Calendar.

Month(s)	Festival	Associations/customs
January	Makar Sankranti/Lohri Pongal (Tamil)	Midwinter, Surya the sun god, bonfires In South India: rice harvest
Jan/Feb	Sarasvati Puja/Vasanta Panchami	Beginning of Spring; celebration of Sarasvati, goddess of learning, music, education
February	Mahashivratri	‘Great Shiva night’, Shiva’s cosmic dance, night-long devotional singing

Feb/March	Holi	Spring harvest in North India; bonfires; fun throwing paint/coloured powder, relaxation of normal rules, story of Pralada and the demon king Hiranyakashipu and stories of Krishna and Radha
April	Vaisakhi	Spring new year, with extra meaning for Sikhs
March/April	Rama Navami	Birthday of Rama in Ayodhya
March/April	Hanuman Jayanti	Birthday of Hanuman
July/August	Teej	N.India, start of monsoon, swings, fertility, goddess Parvati's austerities to win Shiva. In Nepal and some areas of India it is a women's festival – married women fast and pray to Shiva for their husbands, while unmarried women pray for a husband
July/August	Raksha Bandhan	Celebrates sisters and brothers, tying of amulets on wrists
August/September	Ganesh Chaturthi	Birthday of Ganesh, stories such as how he got his elephant's head, in some places eg Mumbai, clay images processed and eventually immersed in sea or river
August/September	Onam	In Kerala. Vishnu (as Vamana) gains the earth from the demon Mahabali with his 'three steps'. Boat races
August/September	Janamashtami/ Krishna Jayanti	Krishna's birthday. Images of baby Krishna in cradle or swing made. How evil king Kamsa killed his sister's babies but Krishna was saved
Sept/October	Navaratri/Durga Puja/Dassehra/ Dussehra/Dashain	Nine Nights. Durga slays the buffalo demon. Images of Durga processed and eventually immersed in sea or river. And/or, Rama defeats demon Ravana, effigies set on fire. Stick dances. Dashain is an important festival in Nepal (including for Gurkhas) though the traditional sacrifice of a buffalo or other animals to Durga is controversial and now banned for the regiment
Oct/November	Divali	'Row of lights'. Shri Lakshmi, goddess of good fortune and wealth, business accounts, return of Rama and Sita, Vishnu defeats Mahabali, Yama and Yamuna, diva lamps, one of several new years
Oct/November	Skanda Shasti	S. Indian Tamil festival. Birth and marriage (to his two goddess wives) of Murukan (= Skanda/Subramanya/Kartikeya/Kataragama)

Some important festivals in particular places:

Varies	Kumbha Mela	Story of Churning of the Ocean to gain the nectar of immortality. Every 12 years on four sites. Huge pilgrim festival, many ascetic orders such as the much-photographed ash-covered Shaivites
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April/May	Chittrai	In Madurai, the wedding of Shiva and the Goddess (local names Sundareshvara and Minakshi), and a journey of Vishnu (local name Algar)
June/July	Ratha-yatra/Jagannatha	Procession of Krishna on a huge chariot in Puri. Also performed throughout the world, including many UK cities, by ISKCON
Nov/Dec	Vivaha Panchami	Celebrates the marriage of Rama and Sita in Janakpur, Nepal

There are also annual commemorations of more recent famous Hindus such as the birthdays of Gandhi (October), Vivekananda (January) and Ramakrishna (February). Sampradayas ('sects') have commemorations for the founders and saints of their particular tradition.

Pilgrimage

The Hindu terms for pilgrimage is tirthayatra (journey to a ford). Indeed, many places of pilgrimage are near rivers though the meaning is more profound than fording a river as it connotes crossing from the shore of birth and death to the shore of immortality. Varanasi, one of the seven sacred cities, situated on the banks of the sacred River Ganges, is probably the foremost pilgrimage destination. Many Hindus aspire to visit at least once, and it is considered a blessed place to die. Even if that is not possible, bereaved relatives bring the ashes of their deceased loved ones to the city to immerse them in the river which is revered as a goddess renowned for her powers to purify. The Kumbh Mela festival, observed every three years at one of four sites in a 12-year cycle, attracts millions of pilgrims. Its founding myth concerns Vishnu bearing away the pot containing the elixir of immortality produced by churning the Ocean of Milk but spilling four drops hence the four sites where the festival is celebrated. This festival is particularly notable for the attendance of ascetics and renouncers alongside ordinary pilgrims who follow in their wake when the mass bathing commences. Despite the practise of austerities by pilgrims, in these instances the distinction drawn between pilgrimage and tourism can become blurred and, while great rewards are promised to the pilgrim in this life and in terms of release from samsara (round of existence), the sincere motivation of the pilgrim is vital. Other perspectives on pilgrimage regard it as a meditative process internal to the body as a microcosm of the universe or consider any external ritual performance as pointless since only inner qualities matter.

Traditionally, pilgrimage reflects the sacred geography of the subcontinent; its cardinal points in the North, South, East and West, its mountains as well as its rivers and numerous centres sanctified by their mythological association with specific deities such as Ayodhya as Rama's capital, Vrindavan where Krishna spent his youth, the locations of Shiva's 12 Jyotirlingas (lingas of light) and of the 51 Shakta Pithas (seats of the Goddess). However, new pilgrimage routes have created in the diaspora including in the UK where coach trips have been arranged to convey visitors to favourite temples and, of course, Hindus in diaspora may join tours to important Indian pilgrimage centres. Also, it should be noted that Hindus have gone on pilgrimage to sites with a non-Hindu religious heritage and cross-community appeal, a practice that continues today. A popular example is the tomb of the Sufi saint Salim Chishti at Fatehpur Sikri built by the Mughal Emperor Akbar in gratitude to the saint for the birth of an heir where Hindus, Muslims and others go in the hope of having a family.

Lifecycle ceremonies (samskaras)

Hindu lifecycle ceremonies, samskaras (sacraments), sanctify the individual's life course from before birth to after death and effect the transformations necessary to the individual's transition from one stage and status to the next. These ceremonies include rituals dating back thousands of years. The number of these varies in different texts, but the most commonly given number is sixteen. The first nine of these relate to babies, from before conception, through pregnancy and into early childhood, reflecting the worries surrounding this period in ancient times, not completely removed by modern medicine. These include such events as the naming ceremony, weaning onto solid food, head shaving, and ear piercing.

Foremost of the educational rites is the rite of initiation (upanayana), including investiture with the sacred thread, which traditionally inaugurated a period of Vedic study that prepared the initiate to participate fully in Vedic religion and culture. In ancient times the boy/young man would spend time living with and serving his teacher (guru) and observing a vow of celibacy (brahmacharya). This practice, and the knowledge of the sacred Vedic texts and associated rituals, was traditionally only available to twice-born (dvija) men, in other words, those in the top three varnas (classes). Despite its importance, this rite is now largely restricted to brahmins and the period of studentship retained in only simplified and shortened form. A few contemporary Hindu groups have introduced equivalent ceremonies for girls, and there is some textual evidence that occasionally in ancient times both girls and boys from other social groups were initiated. More commonly, marriage has been viewed as the equivalent of initiation for women.

The rite of marriage (vivaha) which marks the beginning of life as a householder is often celebrated in elaborate and lengthy ceremonies. Among the important traditions are the welcoming of the groom and his family, the giving of the bride to the groom, and the exchange of gifts including a necklace (mangala sutra) for the bride from the groom's mother. The couple circumambulate a sacred fire, taking seven steps together with seven prayers for the success of their partnership and casting an offering of grain into the fire. Marriage retains its central significance though there has been a move away from 'arranged' marriage towards both 'assisted' marriage where the future partners take the initiative but still involve their families and 'love matches'.

The last of the samskaras is the funerary rite (antyeshti) which normally features cremation of the body, disposal of the ashes and offerings of rice balls to enable the deceased to join the ranks of the ancestors, succeeded by memorial rites (shraddha) at regular intervals. Renouncers, in contrast, tend to be buried and they may have undergone funerary rites before renouncing the world to symbolise the death of their old way of life.

Influence and Power – sources of authority, identity and community, politics, culture and cultural diversity, institutional diversity and inter-religious encounter (Big Idea 5; NE 8).

This section looks at Hinduism as a social phenomenon, rather than a set of ideas about life, an individual spiritual path, an ethical way of life, or a number of diverse literary and artistic traditions. Hindus both in India and in diaspora interact with wider society and culture, both influencing and influenced by the world in which they find themselves. It looks at issues of

authority within the tradition and the influence such authorities may have on wider society, the sense of identity and community, the connections between Hinduism and politics, the relationship with culture and cultural diversity, institutional diversity and the encounter with other religions.

Sources of authority within the Hindu tradition, and their impact on wider society

There is no one central authority that can speak to or for all Hindus, either within the tradition or on behalf of the tradition to the wider world. However, various kinds and levels of authority are possessed by sacred texts - for details see *Sacred texts*.

There are also a number of categories of people who have authority within the tradition. The rishis (seers/sages) who 'saw' the Vedas are an ancient example. Brahmins (priests) traditionally situated at the apex of the varna (class) hierarchy, held religious authority from ancient times, and remain those who have expertise in both rituals and the relevant sacred texts. They also historically had a major responsibility for upholding dharma (duty, righteousness), including social relationships such as the proper conduct of the classes and the proper relationship between the priests as religious specialists and the warriors as rulers. This association with dharma still remains though centuries of social and political change have affected their status and role. Pandits (scholars), usually also a role of the Brahmin class, have the authority of expertise in sacred texts and traditional learning. The role of the guru, or teacher, was in Vedic times the person who passed on orally the sacred knowledge to young men of the top three classes. Now gurus are important in sampradayas (strands or 'sects' of Hinduism) where authority is passed through lineages of teachers starting with the person who founded the particular group. Gurus are often also swamis, someone who is considered to have reached direct experience of the divine, and therefore have authority to teach others, examples being Swami Vivekananda or Swami Narayan. Gurus are likely to be – but are not always - samnyasis or renouncers, and there are female as well as male gurus in some groups. Some renouncers live in monastic communities or ashrams, others live alone.

Shankaracharyas, leaders of the four orders of monastics founded by Shankara, are today often thought of as able to speak on behalf of orthodoxy, in so far as anyone can, and may speak out on controversial social and political issues. One example is the Roop Kanwar case in 1987 on which the Shankaracarya of Puri commented. Roop Kanwar became sati (technically an act of self-immolation illegal since 1829) and her death provoked a storm of protest from women's groups alleging murder and equally forthright defences of a loving wife's final act of faithfulness. The Shankaracharya was among those religious leaders who insisted that the act was sanctioned by sacred texts and was thus accused by his critics of glorifying sati which had become a criminal offence in the wake of Roop Kanwar's death.

Acharya is another word meaning teacher, and it is often synonymous with 'guru', but tends to emphasise the subject expertise of the teacher rather than the relationship between student and teacher. Other religious specialists who are consulted regularly on various matters are jyotishis (astrologers) who are asked to prepare horoscopes for new-born children or people considering marriage and advise on the most propitious occasions for launching a new business or important initiative.

Identity and community

Even in those traditions which actively seek to spread their teachings (such as Buddhism, Christianity and Islam), the majority of adherents identify as such because they were born into a particular family and community. The traditional view in Hinduism is that one has to be born a Hindu, although it is possible to join some Hindu or Hindu-related movements such as ISKCON which actively seeks Western (and other) converts, and other people may incorporate Hindu ideas, practices and values into their own personal worldview without necessarily using the label. The issue of Hindu identity is discussed in detail in the section '*Who is a Hindu?*', including viewing it predominantly as a 'religious' identity, separable from other 'religious' identities, influenced by the Western notion of 'religion'.

Much of the sheer diversity of Hindu tradition is replicated in diaspora settings such as the UK. Though Hindus may primarily identify with a particular strand of Hinduism, perhaps following the teaching of a particular guru, or following the customs of the part of India where their family originates, the situation of being a minority group in a different cultural environment has led to formation of a number of organisations which seek to represent all Hindus to the wider community, for example in dealings with government, or the organisation of religious education in schools. Examples of such organisations are the Hindu Council UK, the Hindu Forum of Britain and the National Council of Hindu Temples UK. On a more practical level, many Hindu temples in diaspora have to cater for Hindus from different backgrounds and groups, thus contributing to a sense of belonging to one 'Hindu community'. The practical requirement for people to become spokespersons for a Hindu community perceived as unitary can lead to some glossing over the diversity of actual belief and practice, and particular portrayals may be emphasised, such as a monotheistic Hinduism that promotes equality and is not implicated in the notion of caste.

Hinduism and politics

The somewhat romantic notion of Hinduism as a path which turns its back on the material world in a spiritual quest for realisation of one's true self, God or ultimate truth would suggest a tradition 'above' such worldly concerns as politics. However, this is indeed a stereotype (see *Preconceptions*). The concept of Dharma, the eternal law (for more on Dharma see section on *A Good Life*), refers not only to the ultimate truth underpinning the universe (what is) but also to the order and harmony that ought to reflect this reality in the realm of human morality and society (what should be). Thus it is not a contradiction that Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan, the philosopher whom as an Advaitin upheld the one ultimate reality of Brahman, could also stress the need for ethical action in the relative reality of the social and political world and become the first Vice-President (1952-62) and Second President (1962-67) of India instead of (say) an ascetic renouncer. He also thought that being a teacher was one of the most important roles anyone could have because education was the key to India's problems, and asked for his birthday (September 5th) to be celebrated instead as Teachers' Day in India.

In earlier times, the role of kings, and the kshatriya varna (class of rulers and warriors) more generally, was vital since only they could ensure the security of the people and establish order in society, and thereby uphold dharma. Sacred texts may have a social and political resonance, such as the moral teaching of the Dharmashastra that, in the *Laws of Manu*, includes a section on rajadharma (the duty of the king). The king is counselled to cultivate virtue and avoid vice and reminded that to protect the people is the calling of the kshatriya. He is informed that in military matters some methods are unacceptable such as the use of

concealed or poisoned weapons and that enemies should not be attacked if injured or disarmed. Memorably, he is urged to plan with the patience of a heron and fight like a lion and a wolf (if necessary, retreating with the speed of a hare).

The most famous ancient Indian treatise on statecraft, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, dating from the centuries immediately before and after the start of the Common Era, is addressed to the king and offers advice and guidance on a range of subjects such as the appointment and roles of ministers and officials, law and justice, economics and trade, foreign policy and military strategy. Asserting the primacy of artha (wealth, power) as necessary to the performance of dharma and the acquisition of kama (pleasure, aesthetics), opinions are sharply divided on the moral quality of the work and it is perhaps best understood as realist or pragmatic in approach. While the political landscape of the text has long ceased to exist, not least under Mughal rule, its very existence can be taken as evidence that India did not lack for political theory as was sometimes claimed in defence of British imperialism.

Religion has been an important factor in more recent Indian politics. The British as India's imperial rulers saw religion as the foundation of Indian society and religious affiliation as a basic variable in the government and administration of the subcontinent. This had the effect of creating greater emphasis on 'Hindus', 'Muslims' and 'Sikhs' as separate exclusive 'religious communities' with potentially competing interests (see *What is Hinduism?* and *When did Hinduism begin?* for the argument that colonialism created the very concept of Indian 'religions' in the Western sense). The sense of socially exclusive groups with strong external boundaries, essentialised characteristics and competing interests led to the formation of religion-based political parties such as the Hindu Mahasabha, the (All India) Muslim League and, for Sikhs, the Shiromani Akali Dal. Political parties with distinct religious constituencies and programmes have continued to feature in independent India with a resurgence in the Hindu radical right in recent decades.

There was also a renewed stress upon activism in the modern era as different groups and organisations pursued the social and political implications of their religious values. Movements of reform and revival in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries campaigned for change in respect of the caste system and the position of women but were countered by other movements seeking to defend orthodoxy. Similarly, Hindus involved themselves in the Indian nationalist cause seeking independence from Britain and later with party politics in independent India, sometimes with an overtly Hindu agenda.

Certainly, campaigns for Indian independence from Britain were influenced by different senses of religious and national identity. Among many factions and approaches was that of Gandhi (1869-1948) who attempted to promote Hindu-Muslim unity, as well as non-violent resistance as the way to persuade the British to leave India. His use of Hindu symbols and ideals, adopting the appearance of a traditional Hindu holy man and invoking Ramrajya (Rama's rule) as a state of perfection inaugurated by Rama's divine kingship, won much popular support among Hindus. This, however, differentiated him from colleagues like Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), later the first Prime Minister of independent India, whose socialist principles made him uncomfortable with Gandhi's overtly religious appeal to the masses despite the close personal relationship of the two men. Other nationalists like Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856-1920) took a different approach. His appeal to Hindu practice and history, promotion of the Ganapati festival dedicated to Ganesh for political purposes and championing of Shivaji (a seventeenth-century Maratha ruler and hero of anti-Muslim

resistance) as a role model, was intended to unite Hindus at the cost of community relations with Muslims and did not exclude violence in the service of Swaraj (self-rule).

Political struggles over independence led in the end to Gandhi failing to prevent Partition (the division of British India into two countries, India and Pakistan) which involved extreme communal violence, though Gandhi was to meet his death at the hands of Nathuram Godse, a Hindu who, like other Hindu nationalists, believed that Gandhi had made too many concessions to Pakistan.

That independent India is a secular state was made clear in the 1976 Forty-Second Amendment to the Constitution, something that was implicit in the original 1950 Constitution's commitment to freedom of religion, equality, non-discrimination and protection of minorities. What was meant was not a non-religious or anti-religious position but a version of secularism that accepts all religions as valid that in fact owes much to the Hindu philosophy of neo-Vedanta.

However, Hindu nationalism (the aim for a Hindu state) has become more influential in recent decades. V.D. Savarkar (1883-1966), a major ideologue of Hindu nationalism, put forward the hugely influential concept of Hindutva (Hinduness) in the 1920s. Hindutva, in his view, was cultural, not religious, in character, being based on a connection to India and common ethnicity. Accordingly, his vision of a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu state) drew a distinction between Hindus (in the religious sense), together with Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists (members of traditions indigenous to India) as its citizens, and Christians and Muslims (associated with traditions of foreign origin) whose status as citizens was marginal at best. This ideology has informed the aims and activities of the Hindu radical right, spearheaded by the Sangh Parivar, including its political arm, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in power in India since 2014, having previously led a coalition government 1998-2004. In spite of the cultural emphasis of Hindutva, it does not exclude espousing causes with a strong Hindu religious rather than more broadly cultural nature. Notably, successive leaders of the BJP have taken up the cause of Ayodhya as Rama's capital city and supported the building of a temple to mark his birthplace on a bitterly contested sacred site occupied by a mosque until 1992 when it was destroyed by Hindu activists chanting 'Victory to Rama'. In August 2020, Narendra Modi, BJP Prime Minister of India, performed a bhumi puja (ritual to propitiate Mother Earth preparatory to construction), laying a silver foundation stone for a new Hindu temple on the site, scheduled for completion in the next three or four years.

Culture and cultural diversity

There is no clear division between religion and culture in India, certainly not from the perspective of many Hindus who, however diverse, constitute the majority community. Throughout this essay the difficulty of separating 'Hindu' from 'Indian' in various contexts has been noted. Indian culture from food to philosophy has proved remarkably vital and resilient over the millennia, having had important influences on both occupying empires and the majority communities of countries to which Indians have moved. A background 'Indian culture' is shared not only by religions with origins in India, such as Jainism, Sikhism and Buddhism, but also by South Asian Muslims, Christians, Zoroastrians and those who identify as non-religious. 'Indian culture' is, of course, not unitary and there are many regional, linguistic, urban/rural and other differences within such a large and populous subcontinent and globally. Since the first encounters between 'East' and 'West' thousands of years ago, ideas, artefacts and customs have moved both ways, and in the contemporary globalised

context both Indian culture and more specifically Hindu ideas, literature, creative arts, ritual, moral exemplars and meditational practices have influenced wider society. Similarly, as Hindus have settled around the world beyond India, they have made creative adaptations to the cultures in which they find themselves.

Institutional Diversity

As noted throughout this essay (see especially *Diversity, Change and Continuity*), Hinduism is massively diverse, containing many different sects, movements and local variations, though these do not constitute 'denominations' in quite the sense found in Christianity. Nevertheless, there are numerous organisations, such as those that follow a particular guru or seek to promote a particular interpretation of the Hindu tradition, both in India and in diaspora. Among those that have been important in the modern and contemporary periods, and that teachers may encounter in either their reading or first-hand encounters in the UK, are a number of movements such as the Swaminarayan Sampradaya, Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, the Brahmakumaris, Transcendental Meditation, ISKCON, Sathya Sai, and Sahaja Yoga. All of these groups have their own specific teachings, practices and perspectives. There are also organisations that claim to unite and represent all Hindus, such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Council of Hindus) formed in India in the 1960s, which employs the nationalist concept of Hindutva (see *Hinduism and politics*) and includes adherents of other religions of Indian origin as Hindus. Another organisation that seeks to give a 'single combined voice' to Hindus globally is the Himalayan Academy, based in Hawaii, particularly through its publication *Hinduism Today* started in 1979. Although produced by a particular Shaivite sampradaya, whose recent leaders have been Western 'converts', *Hinduism Today* is widely respected worldwide by Hindus and non-Hindus alike, as providing a comprehensive and inclusive 'Hindu perspective' on a wide range of religious and cultural topics in a way which attempts to reflect diversity and avoid bias.

Life in diaspora, where Hindus face the challenge of being members of a minority in a different cultural environment with different social norms and political structures requires mobilisation to defend the community's interests, for example, the Hindu Council UK ('For a United Hindu Voice') that aims to liaise with the government about policy on behalf of British Hindus. Other groups that seek to represent all Hindus (and sometimes all Indians) in the UK are the National Council of Hindu Temples, the Hindu Forum of Britain, and the UK branches of both the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (the diasporic counterpart of the Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in India). A recent addition is Insight UK ('Social movement of British Hindus and Indians'). However, such groups also have particular perspectives and this can lead to a specific version of Hinduism being promoted both within the community and in representing the community within its new setting.

Insight UK has initiated a campaign (supported by the other five organisations already mentioned) to improve the availability, content and quality of the teaching of Hinduism in UK RE. However, although it is easy to agree that Hinduism ought to be included, and that teaching and textbooks should be informed and reliable, given the diversity of the tradition and academic debates, it will be hard to satisfy everyone, whether adherent or educationalist or both. Education has previously been a flashpoint, especially the portrayal of Hinduism in school textbooks, in the USA as well as the UK, where some Hindus have confronted academics and educationalists about what they regard as negative and

inaccurate coverage. Academics and educationalists have also criticised resources from some Hindu groups as reflecting that group's religious convictions and advancing their political agendas rather than giving a more rounded account of Hindu belief and practice which reflects diverse voices within the community. This has led to mutual allegations of bias.

Encounter with other religions, debate and dialogue

The presence in Hindu temples of images representing other religions such as Guru Nanak and Jesus are often explained to visitors as recognition that all religions are true and share an underlying unity. This modern liberal ideology has neo-Vedantic roots, extending the account of tolerance and inclusivity beyond acceptance of a variety of Hindu beliefs and practices to respect for all religions. For example, speaking at the first Parliament of the World's Religions in 1893 in support of this perspective of many paths but one goal, Swami Vivekananda characterised this innovative interfaith event as fulfilling Krishna's words in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, quoting Krishna's declaration that he would receive anyone who came to him by whatever means (4.11). Whether or not inspired by this ideology of the truth and unity of religions, Hindus have been actively involved in other interfaith organisations and initiatives including the Interfaith Network in the UK.

Vivekananda's neo-Vedantic portrayal of Hinduism was received very favourably and widely admired. However, it does have implications for other religions. If all religions are true, it can be argued that there is no reason to convert from one religion to another. If all religions share an underlying unity, there are no grounds to claim a unique revelation. This has the effect of relativising all religious paths, while asserting a subtle form of superiority for Vedanta or a Vedantic interpretation of Hinduism in that it alone has understood the truth and unity of religions. This view is present in the writings of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, another neo-Vedantin with an interest in interfaith relations, who went as far as contrasting Hinduism with the Abrahamic religions, such as Christianity, which he viewed as narrow and dogmatic, threatening unbelievers with damnation and professing exclusive possession of truth.

Just as Christian attitudes to Hinduism have varied markedly, ranging from condemnation to subordination to admiration, Hindu attitudes to Christianity have varied. Rammohan Roy (1772-1883) wrote *The Precepts of Jesus - The Guide to Peace and Happiness*, an account of Jesus' teaching that reproduced extracts from the Gospels while excluding miraculous elements, thereby appalling missionaries who were alarmed by its rationalist tenor. Gandhi was similarly positive about Jesus both as a moral exemplar and as a pioneer of non-violence though he often coupled this with observations on the failings of Christians and a rejection of the uniqueness of the incarnation. Complicating Christian-Hindu relations have been the perceived complicity of Christianity with the colonial project and its non-Indian origins (in spite of its long presence in parts of India) as well as the emphasis on conversion that has been regarded as a threat.

There have been many Hindu responses to religious diversity. For example, the Arya Samaj (founded in 1875) launched shuddhi (purification) campaigns to reconvert those who had converted to other religions, notably Islam, a ritual process that also drove a wedge between Hindus and Sikhs that contributed towards increasing differentiation of Sikhism from Hinduism. Or again, appeal has been made to the *Ramayana* and the conflict between the divine king Rama and his demonic adversary, Ravana, as a model for Hindu-Muslim

relations, whereby especially from the mid 1980s onwards Rama's capital city Ayodhya has been the focus of disputes over the alleged demolition of a temple commemorating Rama's birth for the construction of a mosque dedicated to the first Mughal emperor Babur. Hindu attitudes towards Buddhism are also interesting as Hindus claim the Buddha to be one of Vishnu's avatars (descent forms), his purpose variously described as being to teach false doctrines as a test for the faithful (thus criticising aspects of Buddhist teaching) or to reform aspects of Hindu practice such as animal sacrifice (thus claiming the Buddha as Hindu really, and denying that he intended to found a separate religion). Such attitudes can be perceived as either examples of tolerant inclusivism or religious appropriation that is insulting to Buddhists. However, centuries after Buddhism died out in India, it saw a revival when Ambedkar led a large-scale conversion of dalit communities on the basis of his view that Hinduism was inextricably connected with caste as an oppressive institution whereas Buddhism's progressive principles (as he saw them) held out the promise of liberty and equality for all.

A note on scholarship and representation, and studying and teaching Hinduism

Historically studies of Hinduism available in English have tended to reflect the values and preoccupations of Western commentators, be it their Christian backgrounds leading to speculations about the prospects for conversion, their classical education giving rise to research on the relationship between ancient India and Europe in cultural, linguistic and religious terms, or their imperial interests conducing towards a back projection of foreign invasion and rule to the Aryan 'conquest' of the subcontinent. Increasingly, Hindus have challenged the accuracy and authenticity of Western accounts, questioning the dominance of Christian or Western categories of analysis, the preoccupation with a distant past remote from contemporary experience and the legacy of colonial attitudes about 'race'. Moreover, Hindus have come to play a leading part in the study of their own religion in academia worldwide as over time approaches from sociology and anthropology have come to the fore and more attention has been paid to aspects of diversity including vernacular texts, Goddess worship and folk traditions alongside emerging issues such as ecology and the environment and gender and sexuality. Nevertheless, there remain sensitivities about the representation of Hinduism, especially any possible negative implications of the selection and interpretation of material. This is perhaps even more acute in the case of religious education where members of the Hindu community may have certain expectations of the subject and the place of Hinduism within the curriculum.

This essay has only been able to outline some features and aspects of what might be labelled Hinduism. When seeking to learn more, it is important to use a variety of sources – academic texts, texts by those who identify as Hindus, and actually meeting Hindu adherents in person. Academic texts may arise from different disciplines – some may focus on ancient sacred texts, or historical periods, and others on sociological and ethnographic study of contemporary people. It is important to ask – particularly of random internet sources, but the same applies to books whether by academics or adherents, and to this essay – who wrote this and why, and whether they are likely to be reliable. They may, for example, be reliable about one Hindu group, but unrepresentative of others. You will gradually build up your own provisional picture of Hinduism.

In teaching Hinduism, it is also important to be clear about why you are doing it and what you wish to achieve. There are now many resources to help, appropriate to different ages of

pupils, but the same questions need to be asked about the reliability and representative nature of resources for children and young people as are asked about resources for adults. For example, does the book present the Hindu tradition using the model of Christianity (as monotheistic really, with the *Bhagavad-Gita* as the Hindu Bible)? Does it presume that all Hindus subscribe to the neo-Vedantic view that all religions lead to the same goal in the end – which would make it hard to understand items in the news about tensions between Hindus and Muslims over the sites of mosques and temples? Does it suggest that Hindus consider Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs to be Hindus too, despite the offence this may cause to some?

Websites

<https://www.hinduismtoday.com/>

Magazine produced by Himalayan Academy, based in Hawaii, which exists to foster Hindu solidarity worldwide and inform and inspire Hindus and those interested in Hinduism. Widely respected for providing non-sectarian, comprehensive and inclusive news on a wide range of religious and cultural topics from a Hindu perspective.

<https://hindu-academy.com/>

Hinduism as 'spiritual humanism' with links to many resources for schools and talks by Jay Lakhani.

[www.iskconeducational services.org](http://www.iskconeducationalservices.org)

Many resources on Hinduism reflecting pluralism and diversity as well as ISKCON perspectives.

<https://hinduismeducationalservices.co.uk/>

Many resources on Hinduism, school and university visits, founded by the previous director of ISKCON Educational Services.

<http://www.ochs.org.uk>

Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies. Downloadable lectures and other information.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/topics/c2rndjjldzyt/hinduism>

Items on Hinduism in the news.

BBC Radio 4 also has/had several series with relevant topics:

Beyond Belief

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006s6p6>

Includes programmes on 'Ayodhya', 'Karma', 'Women in Hinduism' and 'Yoga'

In Our Time

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qykl>

Includes programmes on 'The Bhagavad Gita', 'Hindu Ideas of Creation' 'Lakshmi' and 'The Upanishads'.

Incarnations: India in 50 Lives

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b05rptbv>

Includes programmes on 'Gandhi: In the Palm of Our Hands', 'Kautilya: The Circle of Power', 'Mirabai: I Go the Other Way', 'Rammohan Roy: Humanity in General', 'Shankaracarya: A God Without Qualities', 'Shivaji: Dreaming Big', 'Vivekananda: Bring All Together'.

For **philosophy**, the following are useful:

<https://iep.utm.edu/> *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

<https://plato.stanford.edu/> *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

For **sacred texts**

<https://www.sacred-texts.com/> *Internet Sacred Text Archive*.

Traditional Indian stories for children:

<http://www.talesofpanchatantra.com/short-stories-for-kids>

For **festival dates** consult the Festivals Calendar (provided by the [Shap Working Party](#)):

<https://www.reonline.org.uk/festival-calendar/>

Many of the entries on Hindu topics on Wikipedia are reliable and very good, but use with the usual care.

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