

Practices, Rituals, Symbols, and Special Days/Celebrations

Within Hindu devotion there are many practices and rituals. There are both everyday rites as well as rites to mark particularly important life events and passages, such as births, deaths, weddings, and so forth. Hindu practice aims towards the fulfillment of four central goals: *kama* (sensual pleasure, whether physical, psychological, or emotional), *artha* (virtuous material power and wealth), *dharma* (properly aligned conduct), and *moksha* (escape from the cycle of rebirth).

Social Organization and Roles

Hinduism, like many other faith groups, has social and cultural traditions, norms, and practices that have significant influence on the life of practitioners and the society in which they live. Many of these are not unique to Hinduism and some were the cause of social reform. The following are a few of these social practices and traditions.



Figure 18: Seventy-Two Specimens of Castes in India 1837

Caste System

Historically, Indian and Hindu populations have been grouped along vocational lines into a *caste* system. The *caste* system divides Hindus into four main categories: *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Vaishyas*, and *Shudras*. Many believe that these four *castes* originated from Brahma, the Hindu god of creation. The main *castes* were further divided into about 3,000 *castes* and 25,000 *sub-castes*, each based on their specific occupation. Outside of this Hindu *caste* system were the *achhoots*—the *Dalits* or the untouchables.

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Although *castes* were not initially hereditary, they eventually became so. When *castes* became hereditary, marriage across group lines was discouraged. While not entirely absent, the *caste* system does not play as central a role today as it once did. The five *castes*, or *varnas*, are

1. *Brahmin*—the spiritual leaders of the community: Hindu priests and teachers typically came from the *Brahmin caste*.
2. *Kshatriyas*—kings, nobility, warriors, and rulers: Their role was to protect and preserve society.
3. *Vaishyas*—the so-called economic specialists: These included farmers and merchants.
4. *Shudra*—the manual labourers and artisans
5. *Dalit*—the untouchables. Typically, the lot of the *dalit* was the worst—they were responsible for work others were unwilling to do, such as the collection and disposal of waste, the cleaning, and the handling of dead animals. The *dalit* were often segregated from the rest of the population. Mohandas Gandhi was a strong advocate for the *dalit*, calling them *harijan* (children of god).

Each level of the *caste* system was thought to be important and interdependent, though the *Brahmin* was certainly the most respected and the *dalit* were often treated very poorly. The *castes* were a form of professional divisions but people were locked firmly into their *castes* by birth and a rigid structure of social rules that governed interaction between and within them.

Gurus were also important religious figures and leaders within Hindu society. The term *guru* means ‘remover of ignorance’ and generally refers to an enlightened leader who is committed to helping others realize *moksha*. They taught with words, but also by touch and even with a glance. Historically, there has been debate within Hindu communities as to whether *gurus* are essential for reaching enlightenment.

Poverty

Western and contemporary views often perceive the living of a simple, rural life as being one of abject poverty and a sign of a lack of social development. Within Hinduism, traditionally, such lives were considered to be virtuous and it promoted the voluntary acceptance of an uncomplicated life for spiritual purposes. With such different views on wealth, poverty, and success, the Western world tends to dismiss India’s socio-religious practices as being backward and irrelevant.

On the other hand, poverty remains a real problem in much of India and many Hindus struggle for the basic necessities of life. People fleeing rural environments for the cities are often faced with incredible challenges and hardships in the cities.

The difference in life and opportunities available for the rural and urban poor compared to the middle and upper classes are enormous.

Child Marriage

Traditionally Hindu texts recommend marriage at an early age, especially for females in order to protect their chastity. In Hinduism, violation of laws or ethical and moral codes, are considered to be particularly detrimental to spiritual life and many child marriages were actually a form of betrothal and the marriage was not consummated until the wife was of age. Nevertheless, child marriages continue to be an issue and young females are often forced into such marriages and abused.

Practice of *Sati*

The practice of *sati* or *suttee* is an obsolete Hindu funeral custom where a widow offers herself as a sacrifice on her husband's *pyre* or commits suicide in another fashion shortly after her husband's death.

Sati was voluntarily performed on the basis of overwhelming affection for the partner and a desire to follow him into the next life. Hindu texts forbid its performance in *Kali-yuga*, the present age.

The practice can be dated back to the 4th century BCE, although evidence of the practice by widows of kings only appears beginning between the 5th and 9th centuries CE. The practice of *sati* is believed to have originated within the warrior aristocracy on the Indian subcontinent, and gradually grew in popularity from the 10th century CE onwards. It spread to other groups from the 12th century through the 18th century CE. The practice was particularly prevalent among some Hindu communities, was observed in aristocratic Sikh families, and has been reported to be practiced outside South Asia, and in a number of places in Southeast Asia, such as in Indonesia and Champa.

Under British colonial rule, the practice was initially tolerated in the province of Bengal. Under sustained campaigning against the practice of *sati* by Christians and Hindus such as *Brahmin* Ram Mohan Roy, the provincial government banned the practice of *sati* in 1829. This was followed by similar developments in states in India in the proceeding decades, with a general ban for the whole of India issued by Queen Victoria in 1861. In Nepal, *sati* was banned in 1920. The Indian Sati Prevention Act from 1988 further criminalized any type of aiding, abetting, and glorifying of *sati*.

Polygamy

Historically, polygamy was considered essential for a limited number of responsible and qualified men to redress the gender imbalance in the Hindu society. Hindu society was one in which practically all women were expected to get married and one where significant numbers of men chose to be celibate. Polygamy was made illegal in 1952.

Dowry System

The dowry system is believed to have originally been a way of showing a parent's affection for their daughter(s). In Hindu and Indian tradition, the dowry was to remain the wife's personal property, not that of her husband or his family. However, in reality, the dowry system was often abused by unscrupulous in-laws who terrorized and, in some cases, even murdered brides who in their view failed to provide an adequate dowry.

Symbols

Symbolism is an important aspect of Hinduism. Some believe that no other religion utilizes the art of symbolism as effectively as Hindus. Most popular Hindu symbols have a spiritual meaning based on Hindu philosophies, teachings, gods and goddesses, or related cultural traditions. Generally, Hindu symbols are divided into two categories: *mudras* or hand gestures and the positioning of the body; and *murti* or icons, statues, and drawings. Some of these symbols such as the lotus and the conch are similar to the symbols used in Buddhism, and the trident in Sikhism. *Murtis* (icons) of the various deities are also used during worship.

The exact significance associated with the symbols and icons varies with the region, period, and sect/tradition of the followers. Some of the symbols, for example, the *swastika*, have come to be associated with other religions or cultures. Others such as *aum/om* are considered to be unique to Hinduism.

Some of the more popular Hindu symbols are the *aum/om* (letters), the *swastika* (ancient religious symbol), the *trishula* (trident), the *Shiva Linga* (an abstract representation of Shiva), and the *Nataraja* (dancing Shiva). Most Hindu rituals are performed in the presence of many of these symbols.

Hawan (fire offerings) is an integral component of all Hindu worship. During worship, devotees must be dressed appropriately, and the body is usually adorned with sacred religious symbols such as *chandan* (red vermillion, sandal paste, or ashes, applied to the forehead as a dot or any other symbolic shape).

A table listing and describing some of the more common and significant symbols follows.

Common Hindu Symbols



Namaste Hand Pose

Hand poses, or *mudras*, are an important aspect of Hindu religious practice and symbolism. Hand poses are used in rituals, meditation, *yoga*, art work, and everyday communication. Statues or paintings of the gods and goddesses will often depict them with specific hand poses.

The hand pose to the left is called *namaste* (*Namaskar*/*Namaskaram*). It is a common greeting or salutation in the Indian subcontinent. Usually the hands are held in this pose while saying the word *namaste*.

It is a customary greeting when individuals meet, and a salutation upon their parting.

The literal meaning of the *Sanskrit* term (pronounced “na-ma-stay”) is ‘I bow to you.’ In Hinduism it means “I bow to the divine in you.” It is used while in prayer, with eyes closed, and a slight bow.



Aum (or Om)

Is a symbol made up of three *Sanskrit* letters, A, U, and M. It is the most important symbol in Hinduism as it represents *Brahman* or god and is believed to be the sound heard at the time of the creation of the universe. All of the major *mantras* start with *aum/om*.



Yantra

A *yantra* is a mystical diagram, mainly from the Hindu and Buddhist religions of the Indian Subcontinent. A *yantra* is a geometric figure that may be complex or simple in design. They are used for many purposes such as

- the worship of deities in temples or home
- an aid in meditation, contemplation, and concentration
- spiritual and other benefits
- adornment of temple floors

Some *yantras* are traditionally associated with specific deities. A *yantra* has spiritual significance as there is a specific meaning that pertains to higher levels of consciousness.



Dharmachakra/Dharma Wheel

A *dharmachakra* or *dharma wheel* is a key concept with multiple meanings in several religions with Indian origins, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism.

In Hinduism, *dharma* refers to behaviours that are considered to be in accord with *rta*, the order that makes life and universe possible. Therefore, it represents Hindu *dharma* or law.

A version of the *dharmachakra*, the *ashoka chakra*, appears on the flag of India.

Common Hindu Symbols



Chilocco Indian
School Basketball
Team (1909)



Fernie Women's
Swastikas Hockey
Team (Canada)

The Swastika (or Manji)

It is a common, historical symbol (estimated to be more than 6,000 years old) that has appeared in many cultures and religions throughout the world. It was used in ancient Greece, and by the Phoenicians, and appears in many places including the Christian Catacombs in Rome. It also appears in various synagogues, including the Capernaum synagogue wall in Israel, one of the oldest synagogues in the world, as it was once a common motif.

In North America, the *swastika* was once widely used by many Indigenous peoples. It was popular in many southwestern tribes, including the Navajo, although it had different meanings for each. For the Hopi, it represented the wandering Hopi clans. For the Navajo, it represented a whirling log (*tsil no'oli'*), which is a sacred image representing a legend that was used in Navajo healing rituals.

In *Sanskrit*, *swastika* means "well-being". The *swastika* has been used by Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains for thousands of years and is commonly assumed to be an Indian symbol.

In Hinduism, the *swastika* is the second most important symbol and represents good fortune and prosperity. They are commonly drawn or found on many objects and even on devotee's bodies. *Swastikas* are drawn on *kalashes* (ceremonial metal pots) during rituals, used in pendants, drawn on walls of temples, and used in many other ways.

In the early 1900s, in the West, inspired by the *swastika's* positive and ancient associations, it became popular to use it as a good luck symbol. It was used as an architectural motif in advertising and product design. The use of the *swastika* in the west ranged from commercial enterprises such as Coca-Cola, to cultural and community groups, to the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, and to American military units. In Canada, a small community in Northern Ontario, named Swastika, was founded in 1908. It derived its name from the mining company that operated a nearby mine and still exists today.

This ended with the rise of the Nazis in Germany. In the 1800s, German scholars translating old Indian texts noticed similarities between German and *Sanskrit*. Some concluded that Indians and Germans must have had a shared ancestry and envisioned that a race of white god-like warriors they named Aryans lived on the Indian sub-continent.

Common Hindu Symbols

Aryan or *Arya* is a *Sanskrit* term that means noble. It was used by Indo-Iranian people to identify themselves. The word was used by the Indic people of the *Vedic* period in India as an ethnic label for themselves, and to refer to the noble class as well as the geographic region known as Aryavarta, where Indo-Aryan culture was based. The Iranian people, who are closely related, also used the term as an ethnic label for themselves in the *Avesta* scriptures. Furthermore, the word is the source of the name of the modern country Iran.

The Nazi party appropriated the symbol and related it to the myth that an Aryan race had once existed and dominated the Indian sub-continent. This Aryan race was supposed to have been a light-skinned 'super' human people that possessed many wonderful and powerful attributes. The concept of an ideal Aryan race that was pure, strong, and white became part of the Nazi ideology and identity.

From 1920 onward, the symbol was used extensively on the party's flag, badges, arm bands, and more. The black straight-armed *hakenkreuz* (hooked cross) on the distinctive white circle and red background of the Nazi flag would eventually become the most vilified symbol of the 20th Century.



The Tilak

The *tilak* (*Sanskrit tilaka*, "mark") is a mark made on a person, usually on the forehead but sometimes on other parts of the body such as the neck, hand, or chest. *Tilaka* may be worn on a daily basis or for special occasions such as rites of passage or special religious occasions only, depending on regional customs.

It may also refer to the Hindu ritual of marking someone's forehead with a fragrant paste, such as sandalwood or vermilion paste, as a sign of welcome and an expression of honour upon their arrival. A *tilak* is also applied by a priest during a visit to the temple as a sign of the deity's blessing, for both men and women.

On a man, the *tilak* takes the form of a line or lines and usually indicates his sectarian affiliation. On women, a *tilak* usually takes the form of a *bindi* dot, which has its own symbolism

Tilak marks are applied by hand or with a metal stamp.



Bindi

A *bindi* is a small rounded sign, made with a *kumkum*, between the eyebrows on the forehead of a Hindu woman. In Hindu tradition, unmarried girls will wear a black *bindi* and married women will wear a red/maroon *bindi*.

The *bindi* is believed to retain energy and strengthen concentration. It is also believed to protect against demons or bad luck. It also represents the third eye.

Common Hindu Symbols



Lingam

Lingam is a representation of Lord Shiva. It may also be called a *shivling* or *ling*. The meaning of the symbol is disputed with some believing it to symbolize the union of Lord Shiva and Yoni of Shakti, and others believing it to represent the infinite nature of Shiva.



Trishula (Trident)

Trishula is a trident or spear with three points. It is the favourite weapon of Lord Shiva who is usually depicted holding a *trishula*. It is a highly revered symbol in Hinduism.

The *trishula* represents the triple aspects of god: creation, protection, and destruction (the three *gunas*). The three *gunas* are three attributes that have been and continue to be present in all things and beings in the world, from a Hindu perspective. These three *gunas* are: *sattva* (good, constructivity, harmony), *rajas* (passion, activity, confusion), and *tamas* (darkness, destruction, chaos). While these three *gunas* are present in everyone and everything, their proportions vary. The proportions and their interplay within an individual is what defines the character of someone or something and determines the progress of life.

The image to the left is of a statue of Lord Shiva holding a *trishula* (trident).

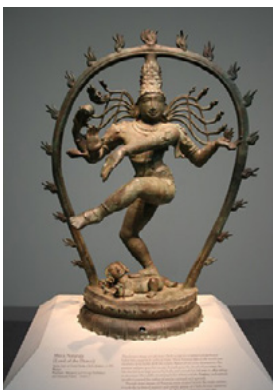


Kalashas (Vase)

Hindus believe that, in the beginning, the universe was all water. The Earth emerged from this primeval water. Brahma, the creator-god, carries this primeval water in his *kalasha* (vase)

As a result, ceremonial *kalashas* or vases with water are an important aspect of many Hindu rituals.

Common Hindu Symbols



Nataraja (Dancing Shiva)

Nataraja is a wonderful Hindu symbol. It combines, in a single image, Shiva's diverse roles as creator, preserver, and destroyer of the universe and conveys the Indian concept of the never-ending cycle of time.

Shiva's dance is set within a flaming halo. The god holds in his upper right hand the *damaru* (hand drum that made the first sounds of creation). His upper left hand holds *agni* (the fire that will destroy the universe). With his lower right hand, he makes *abhayamudra* (the gesture of fearlessness). The small human figure being trampled by his right foot represents *apasmara purusha* (illusion, which leads mankind astray). Shiva's front left hand, pointing to his raised left foot, signifies refuge for the troubled soul. The energy of his dance makes his hair fly to the sides. The symbols imply that, through belief in Shiva, his devotees can achieve salvation.



Lotus Blossom

The lotus flower, *padma*, is an important symbol in Hinduism. It symbolizes water and creation. Lotuses often appear in the hands of Hindu deities such as Lord Ganesha and many goddesses.

The *padma* also appears as a pedestal on which gods and goddesses sit or stand. In such instances it is a symbol of divinity.

The lotus also symbolizes detachment, a quality that is needed on the path to *moksha*. Grown in muddy waters, the lotus rises above the water to blossom and share its fragrance while allowing any droplets to roll off its leaves and petals.



Shankha (Conch Shell)

A *shankha* (conch shell) is the special symbol of Vishnu. The sound of the *shankha* symbolizes the sacred *om* sound. Vishnu holding the conch represents him as the god of sound. To this day, it is still used as a trumpet in Hindu rituals and, in the past, it was also used as a war trumpet.

Shankha may be used as both a symbol or a musical instrument in some Hindu rituals. *Shankha* sea shells are kept inside Hindu alters.

They also represent longevity and prosperity.

Common Hindu Symbols



Fire (*Agni*)

Fire (*agni*) is used as a weapon for war and for making offerings. Shiva frequently is depicted holding a lamp or a fire in one hand.

Lamps are commonly found near a Hindu altar or in temples. Lamps should always be lit near Hindu deities. Many cultural and social functions begin in India with the lighting of a lamp. The lamp symbolizes the light and is therefore sacred.

An *aarti* is where a small lamp is lit in honour of a particular god.

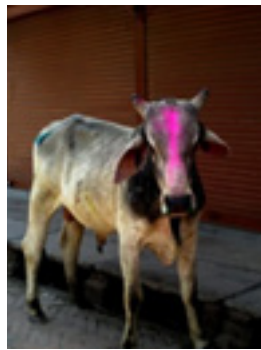


Peacock

Peacocks and their feathers are important elements and symbols in Hinduism. Peacock feathers are believed to bring good luck and prosperity. It is also the national bird of India.

Hindus believe that the *mayura* (peacock) was created from one of the feathers of Garuda (a mythical bird and the mount or carrier of Lord Vishnu).

Peacocks and their feathers are associated with other gods and goddesses. Lord Krishna wears a peacock feather in his crown. A flute with a peacock feather may also be used as a symbol of Lord Krishna. Lord Vishnu and Karthikeya ride on a peacock. The peacock is also associated with Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth.



Cow

The cow is the most sacred of animals for most Hindus. It symbolizes good nature, purity, motherhood, and prosperity. The cow is a symbol of the divine bounty of Earth.

Lord Krishna is often depicted playing his flute amongst cows and dancing *gopis* (milkmaids). He grew up as a cow herder. Krishna also goes by the names Govinda and Gopala, which literally mean "friend and protector of cows." For many Hindus, to feed a cow before eating one's breakfast is a sign of reverence and piety.

The cow to the left has been coloured by Holi celebrants.



Shri or *Sri*

Shri or *Sri* is another important symbol. It is one of the names of Ganesha, the Hindu god of prosperity.

Shri is also used as a title for some Hindu deities such as Rama, Krishna, Saraswati, Radha, and sometimes Durga.

It may be added before the names of Hindu males as a polite form of address.

Common Hindu Symbols



Banyan Tree

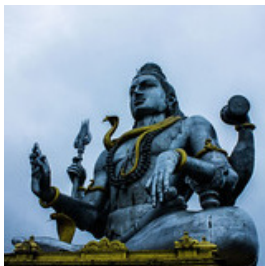
The *banyan* (*vat* or *bargad*) tree is one of the venerated trees in India and is also the national tree of India. It is able to survive and grow for centuries. It is a Hindu symbol of longevity and it is often compared to the shelter given by god to his devotees. In Hindu mythology, it is called *Kalpavriksha*, the tree that fulfills wishes and other material gains.



Sun

The sun is considered to be a deity by Hindus and is also a symbol of light and truth. Hindus will often offer the sun water in the morning.

The image to the left is of a fresco at Juna Mahal in Dungapur, India. The Mewar dynasty of Rajasthan believe that they are descendents of the Hindu sun god, Surya.



Snakes

A snake is a symbol of rebirth as it sheds its skin after a time. Lord Shiva wears a cobra around his neck (image on the left) and Lord Vishnu rests on a snake named Sheshnaga.

Prayer and Worship

Pujas

Puja (or *Pooja*) is an act of demonstrating reverence to a god, a spirit, or another aspect of the divine through invocations, prayers, songs, and rituals. For the Hindu devotee, an essential aspect of *puja* is making a spiritual connection with the divine. Usually, such contact is facilitated through an object, an element of nature, a sculpture, a vessel, a painting, or a print.



Figure 19: Aarti (arati) Ceremony, Hindu Puja, India

During *puja*, an image or other symbolic representation of the god serves as a means of gaining access to the divine. This icon is not thought to be the deity itself; rather, it is believed to be filled with the deity's cosmic energy. It serves as a focal point for honouring and communicating with the deity.

For the devout Hindu, the icon's artistic merit is important, but is secondary to its spiritual content. The objects are created as receptacles for spiritual energy that allow the devotee to experience direct communication with his or her gods.

Sacrifices/Offerings

One of the most fundamental of all rituals in Hinduism is sacrifices or offerings. During the *Vedic* period, sacrifice was the primary religious activity. Since then, the concept of sacrifice has undergone dramatic transformation as Hinduism has developed over the past few thousand years. Nonetheless, it remains a

foundation of the tradition and *Vedic* sacrifices continue to be performed throughout the Hindu world.

Vedic sacrifice is a highly structured affair. Strict rules govern the purifying preparations for the *Brahmin* priests, the construction of the altar, the preparation of the offering—in the contemporary world, various vegetable and grain offerings, particularly *ghee* (clarified butter)—and the performance of the ritual itself. All of this is to satisfy the gods and thereby maintain order, or *dharma*.



Figure 20: Kumbh Mela Haridwar

Kumbh Mela or *Kumbha Mela* is a mass Hindu pilgrimage in which devotees gather to bathe in a sacred or holy river. Traditionally, four fairs are widely recognized as the *Kumbh Melas*: the Haridwar Kumbh Mela, the Allahabad Kumbh Mela, the Nashik-Trimbakeshwar Simhastha, and the Ujjain Simhastha. The main festival site is located on the banks of a river. Bathing in these rivers is thought to cleanse a person of all sins.

Hawan (fire offerings) is an integral component of most Hindu worship. During worship, devotees should be dressed appropriately, and the body is usually adorned with sacred religious symbols such as *chandan* (red vermillion, sandal paste, or ashes applied to the forehead as a dot or any other symbolic shape).

Daily prayer and devotions are an important daily practice for many Hindus. These may take place in temples, but more often occur in shrines within family homes. Devout Hindu students pay homage to Saraswati Devi (Deity of Knowledge and Learning) prior to starting their day.

This is usually done in the early morning before classes. The space used for worship is considered sacred and should be conducive to spiritual growth and development.

Mantras or sacred chants are an important part of ritual practice. They consist of words, phrases, or sounds repeated aloud or internally as an aid to focus the mind and meditate. *Mantras* are sometimes thought to echo the underlying rhythms and evocations of *Brahman*.

Ahimsa, or non-violence, is the practice of avoiding violent conduct, physical and psychological, in dealing with self and other living entities. For some Hindus this naturally implies vegetarianism or veganism.

Asanas (*Sanskrit* word for seat) are often used in conjunction with other ritual practices. An *asana* is a sustained physical pose or posture intended to develop discipline and focus.

There are various forms or schools of *yoga* which incorporate active physical practice. *Yoga* is a discipline or practice used to unite with the divine. *Yoga* comes from the *Sanskrit* word *yuj* which means union or to join. *Yoga* can be understood, in part, as being methods for achieving or following a properly ordered life. The four paths or forms are *Jnana/Gyan Yoga* (The Path of Knowledge), *Bhakti Yoga* (The Path of Loving Devotion), *Karma Yoga* (The Path of Selfless and Righteous Action), and *Ashtanga/Raja Yoga* (The Path of Physical Exercise and Meditation).

Pilgrimages, often to sacred places which may be difficult to travel to (like mountain ridges or caves) or celebrated locales (like the holy River Ma Ganga), may be important events in the life of a Hindu man or woman.

Samskaras: Rites of Passage

Samskaras are Hindu rites of passage intended to purify the soul/spirit at critical points in one's life journey. The rites of passage were considered essential for preserving the purity of the individual and of the social system.

The number and nature of the rites vary by tradition. Some identify ten rites of passage and others up to sixteen, or even more. However, only four are currently popular and practiced widely. These are

- *Jatakarma*—birth ceremonies (plus others in childhood)
- *Upanayana*—initiation (the sacred-thread ceremony)
- *Vivaha*—marriage
- *Antyeshti*—funeral rites (cremation)

Almost all rites of passage involve a specific ceremony and rituals

Jatakarma—Birth Ceremonies

The birth ceremony begins before a baby is born, as rituals and prayers recited to protect the fetus from illness or harm. In some traditions, the father performs a ceremony immediately after the birth. He writes the sacred *Sanskrit* symbol, *om*, onto the infant's tongue using honey. The symbol is written in hope that the child will be honest and speak only the truth.

One week or so after the birth, the baby's name is formally given in the *Naamkaran Sanskar*. It is usually the name of a favourite god or goddess and it is whispered into the child's ear.

In the first few years of her life, a Hindu girl will have an ear-piercing ceremony. As well, both boys and girls will have their first haircut in the *Mundan Sanskar*, symbolizing renewal and the shedding of wrongdoings that may have been committed in past lives.

Upanayana—Initiation (The Sacred-Thread Ceremony)

The Ceremony of the Sacred Thread is an ancient rite of passage into adolescence usually reserved for male members of the three upper *castes*, the *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, and *Vaishyas*. Similar to the Jewish bar mitzvah, it symbolizes the rebirth or initiation of the individual into the religious community.

Traditionally, this rite of passage was intended to introduce the devotee into religious life. In the presence of a *guru*, or holy teacher, the young person shaves their head and puts on a saffron robe. Then, taking up a simple walking stick, the person renounces all material possessions and receives the sacred thread. The unadorned sacred thread symbolizes the interconnectedness of all things. It has seven strands, each representing a different virtue or quality, as follows:

- Power of speech
- Memory
- Intelligence
- Forgiveness
- Steadfastness
- Prosperity
- Good reputation

The person being initiated promises to endeavour to reflect these qualities throughout their life and wears the sacred thread as a symbol of this commitment and initiation.

Typically, the ceremony concludes with a fire sacrifice (*havan/yagna*), the most common form of ritual in Hinduism. In the past, the initiate would then dedicate their life for a period of time to the study of scriptures and to leading a life of spiritual practice and austerity with their *guru*/teacher in an isolated dwelling or school. Later, the initiate would re-enter society, marry, and raise a family. Today, only young persons wishing to become priests or ascetics live with a *guru*.

Vivaha—Marriage

Traditionally, most Hindu marriages are arranged by the parents, although the children must also consent to the chosen partner. As well, in the past, Hindus largely married within the same *caste*. Today intercaste marriages are much more common and frequent.

A Hindu wedding is one of the most important ceremonies in all of Hinduism. Though customs vary significantly by region and culture, marriages are always joyous, momentous occasions featuring lush decorations and an abundance of food. In some communities, weddings last as long as three days.

The wedding ceremony is centered around a sacred fire, which is considered a manifestation of the god, Agni. Family and friends surround the couple as a *pundit* (Hindu priest) chants *Sanskrit* verses. The couple is then led four times around the sacred fire. During this part of the ceremony, bells are played, and many offerings are made to the fire, including clarified butter, grains, and flowers.

Finally, the couple takes seven steps around the flames. These seven steps are the most critical action in a Hindu wedding as they signify that they are bonded for life and their union sanctified.

Antyeshti—Cremation and Rites for the Dead

Historically, Hindus have cremated their dead. As with the marriage ceremony, this rite of passage also centers around a sacred fire.

The funeral begins with the wrapping of the body in cloth. The body is then transported to the place of cremation. In India, this would be the outdoor cremation grounds. The family would gather at the cremation and recite prayers to the chosen deity of the deceased. Traditionally, the eldest son is given the responsibility of lighting the wood of the funeral *pyre* with a flame lit in a nearby temple. While the body is being cremated, prayers and offerings are made in keeping with the belief that the deceased is experiencing a process of rebirth/reincarnation. The fire cleanses the soul in preparation for a new life. The fire ritual is also intended to protect relatives from evil spirits.

The cremation ceremony concludes with the ashes being dispersed in a river. Many Hindus wish their ashes to be left in the River Ganga, believing that its holy waters will help purify their souls.

In the diaspora, Hindu funeral ceremonies have been adapted to fit Canadian conditions and legal requirements. In India, temple priests do not perform funerals, nor the subsequent *sraddha* ceremonies nine days and one year later. Usually, separate *caste* of priests perform these functions. In the West, many temples have all their priests learn the rites and perform cremation.

The cremation of the deceased may present a challenge. The family must find a crematorium that will allow Hindu rites. The ceremonial lighting of the fire is replaced by the eldest son, a relative, or a *pundit* pressing the button that ignites the gas for the cremation. Similarly, the ashes will be deposited in a locally designated area of a lake or river.

Symbols, Art, and Aesthetics

Hindu art and aesthetics mirror the diversity found within Hindu beliefs and practices. Epic poems, stories, and songs, such as the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Ramayan*, demonstrate a strong literary culture. Statues and sculptures are found throughout Hindu temples and institutions. *Yantras* are linear drawings intended to enable meditative practice.

Indian music, while not always strictly religious in nature, is characterized by both complicated, shifting rhythms and distinctive instruments such as the *sitar* and *tabla*. Dance is often incorporated into musical performances and is common at Hindu festivals.

Hindu Dress

Saris are the traditional dress for Hindu women in India. These are popular throughout the Indian subcontinent and are not just worn by Hindus. There are various styles, patterns, and ways of draping *saris* representing the different regions and states of India. More than 80 different ways to wear a *sari* have been recorded. The *Nivi* style, which originated in the south east and west of India, is a popular newer style. A *sari* is a piece of brightly coloured material that is wound and pleated around the waist to cover the legs. An underskirt is worn beneath it. A short blouse (*choli*) is also worn, and the end of the *sari* is draped over the shoulder on top of this. This leaves the midriff bare.



Figure 21: Indian Dancers

Ladies also wear the *kurta* pajama which is a long dress or tunic top over loose or tight fitting pants with a long shawl or scarf called a *dupatta*, a *chuni*, or an *orhnee* over the shoulders. *Lengas* are also popular for weddings and formal events. They consist of a long, colourful skirt with a short, tight-fitting blouse (*choli*) and a half *sari* which drapes over either shoulder. When made with simple material—mainly cotton—this skirt, *choli*, and half *sari* are called a *gopi* dress.

Many younger Hindu women today, especially in urban areas, will wear western style clothing. Some will wear traditional long trousers and tunic tops which were commonly used by Hindu women long before pants became common among western women as a compromise between the *sari* and western style clothing.

For Hindu men, the traditional attire is a jacket with buttons down the front worn over a tunic top with a *nehru* collar, and trousers which are generally quite loose. Today, most young Hindu men generally wear western style clothing, but some may compromise by wearing trousers and a long tunic top over them. The men, in the south mostly, continue to wear *lungi* which is a piece of material draped around their waist. Priests, and some men, may wear a *dhoti* and *kurta* at religious functions. The *dhoti* is six yards of cotton material tied in different styles to look like pants.

Some Hindus cover their heads: males with a *pagree* (turban) and females with an *ornhnee* (scarf). These may be permanently worn head covers or they may be worn only during special days of significance.

Hindus generally do not wear footwear inside temples or homes.

Makeup/Body Art

Hindu women wear a coloured spot on their forehead. It is often, but not always, worn as a sign of their marital status. It may also be a sacred dot of spirituality or the third eye *chakra*; however, a red *sindoor* or mark in the part of the hair of a woman is always a sign of marriage.

The mark is called a *bindi* (also called a *kumkum* after the name of the red powder that is used to make it). Widows and some unmarried women may wear a black *bindi*. Young and unmarried women usually wear a *bindi* that matches the colour of their outfit.

Men sometimes use sectarian marks (known as *tilaka*) on their forehead in a similar way to a *bindi*, as a symbol of their *caste* (*jati*), class (*varna*), or religious sect.



Figure 22: Mehndi

Hindus also practice *mehndi* (*mehendi*, *henna*) body art for special occasions. Although the origins of *mehndi* or *henna* are ancient, it remains a popular form of body art among women of various faiths of the Indian subcontinent, Africa, and the Middle East. The intricate designs are traced onto their hands, arms, and feet using a *mehndi* paste and fine brushes or feathers. Once the *henna* is

washed off, the design remains as a tracery of fine ochre lines on the skin and is there to ward off evil spirits and bad luck, and attract good fortune. *Mehndi* also serves to calm the nerves and reduce stress

Nose rings, earrings, toe rings, *mangal sutra*, and *bangals* also all have meanings in Hindu tradition. Furthermore, men traditionally wore earrings.

Food

Hinduism places great emphasis on the role of food in religious and everyday life. Hindu religious or public functions often include the distribution of food, and rituals will often include the offering of food to god.

Within Hinduism there are many rules regarding the consumption and preparation of food.

Hindu Diet



Figure 23: Indian Food

It is a fact that there are more vegetarians in India than in the rest of the world combined. It is commonly believed by many that such a high level of vegetarianism is likely due to the impact of Hinduism on India. However, although many Hindus are vegetarians, it would be wrong to believe that this is because Hinduism forbids the eating of meat or fish.

From a Hindu perspective, all living things contain an aspect of the divine spirit and, as such, all life is considered sacred. Consequently, if you take the

life of any living creature, it is as if you were harming part of *Brahman*. As a result, most devoted Hindus, especially *Brahmins*, aspire to be lacto-vegetarians; the only animal food that they will eat is dairy. They will not eat eggs as they are the beginning of life.

Since vegetarianism is considered the most desired diet, Hindu non-vegetarians will eat vegetarian meals on special or religious occasions. Avoiding meats and fish is thought to contribute to inner self-improvement and physical well-being. For some Hindus, even certain vegetables are to be avoided. These individuals abstain from eating vegetables such as onions, garlic, turnips, and mushrooms.



Figure 24: Offerings

As well, Hindus that do eat meat or fish will eat them in small amounts, accompanied by starches such as rice or bread. Traditionally, the main meats consumed by Hindu non-vegetarians are goat or lamb. Chicken and pork are sometimes avoided since some believe that they are unclean as they are scavengers. Hindus in certain areas will eat fish.

Sacred Cow

Generally, all Hindus avoid eating beef since cows are considered sacred in Hinduism. While all animals are considered sacred, the cow has a special status in Hinduism because it

- Gives years of faithful service and helps humans till the soil and pull carts
- Provides humans with dairy products
- Provides humans with fuel (in the form of cow dung) which may be used to heat homes and cook food
- Was, according to Hindu mythology, created by *Brahman* on the same day as the *Brahmins* thus it is an animal venerated above all others
- Symbolizes motherhood

Food, Health, and Well-Being

Hindus believe that there is a connection between the foods we eat and our temperament, longevity, and mental and physical well-being. Within Hinduism, foods are grouped into one of three major categories based on beliefs about how each affects the body.

Sattvic foods are easily digestible and believed to contribute to making a person serene, enlightened, and healthy; and to enhancing longevity. *Sattvic* foods include rice, wheat, and *ghee*, most legumes, some other vegetables, milk, and milk products (except cheeses made from rennet, which is derived from the stomach of animals).

Rajasic foods are believed to contribute to, as well as stimulate and activate, the various functions of the body, energizing almost all the systems, especially the nervous system. It denotes activity, decision-making, and energy that is required for tasks and mental robustness. When taken in excess, *rajasic* foods can make a person become aggressive, greedy, passionate, and power-driven. *Rajasic* foods are some meats, eggs, and foods that are very bitter, sour, salty, rich, or spicy.

Tamasic foods, especially when eaten for pleasure or in excess, are believed to cause lust, malice, confusion, laziness, and dullness. Such foods include garlic; pickled, preserved, stale, or rotten foods; as well as alcohol and drugs.

Prasad (Food Offerings)

Food plays an important role in Hindu worship and rituals. The offering of food to the deities (*prasad*) is thought to give the person offering the food religious and personal benefits such as purifying body, mind, and spirit. Temple cooks are usually *brahmanas* and follow strict standards of personal cleanliness. There is widespread belief that the consciousness of the cook enters the food and influences the mind of the eater. Taking *prasada* that has been cooked and offered with devotion inclines the mind towards spirituality.

The *prasad* that has been on the altar is especially sacred and it is distributed to worshippers, either by the priest at the shrine or as worshippers leave the *mandir* (temple). *Prasad* is also served in the form of a full meal, especially on festival days. Many Hindus have an altar at home and offer their food before eating.

Fasting

Fasting is an important and integral part of Hinduism. However, the rules and beliefs that guide fasting vary based on personal beliefs and local customs. For example,

- Some Hindus fast on certain days of the month (full moon or *Ekadashi*, the 11th day of each lunar cycle—the bright and dark side of the moon)
- Certain days of the week are also set aside for fasting depending on personal belief and favourite deity. For example, devotees of Shiva tend to fast on Mondays, while devotees of Vishnu tend to fast on Thursdays, and devotees of Ayyappa tend to fast on Saturdays.

Fasting during religious festivals is also very common. Some examples are

- Maha Shivaratri (February/March)
- The nine days of Navratri, which occur during the spring and autumn (observant Hindus will not eat or drink during the day)
- Vijayadashami, the day after Navratri (usually around September/October as per the Hindu calendar)
- Divali (October/November)

Notes