

HINDUISM

Stephen Bigger. 1990.

The name "Hindu" The words "Hindu" and "Hinduism" were coined by the west to describe what seemed then a strange and complex faith. "Hindu" came from a variant pronunciation of Sind, a province in north-west India. Names such as Hindu, Hindustani, and India all developed from this.

The worshippers thought (and think) of themselves as following the *sanatana dharma*, the ancient path or teaching. This name reminds us of the fact that Hinduism is one of the oldest of the world faiths today with teaching dating back to 1500 BCE. Sometimes "Sanatana Dharma" can stand for *traditional* Hinduism as opposed to *sectarian* Hinduism.

Hindu points of view Hinduism is a very varied faith. Its origin in the vast Indian sub-continent has given the faith tremendous diversity as a wide range of local customs and traditions, over many centuries, have been incorporated. One visible face of Hinduism lies in the images of deity, each representing an idea about God, found in pictures, statuettes, temples and the dance. Rich use is made of the expressive arts - including pictures, dances, stories and songs.

There is also a long historical tradition of Hindu philosophy - a sober, lucid and very creative search for the explanation of experience and the meaning of life. Scriptures such as the *Upanishads* are good examples and provide something of the flavour of Hindu thought. There are many contemplative traditions - yoga is only one form of meditation. Of myths and stories there is no end, often with many different versions of the same story or myth.

Hindu doctrine does not claim, or try, to be systematic. Life is full of contradictions, so these need create no problems. Meaning, significance and truth are usually complex and elusive. Western forms of philosophy and logic are insufficient tools for understanding experience.

Hinduism, as with most religions is closely related to culture, but is often confused with and mistaken for it. It may be a custom that Indian caste differences make social intercourse difficult or impossible; but that is not the same as saying that caste is a religious ideal, or that its social function stems from religious ideology. Many in the West criticise prematurely, and for inappropriate reasons - you are encouraged throughout this level to become conscious of when you are criticising pre-maturely, and to use this as the opportunity to shed new light onto the issues.

Further reading

Alongside this unit, you are encouraged to read the following:

Scriptures (Penguin)

Rig Veda,

Upanishads,

Bhagavad Gita

R.C. Zaehner, *Hinduism* (OUP)

N. Smart, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, chapter 3

K. Brown (ed.) *The Essential Teachings of Hinduism* (Rider, Arrow)

D. Bowen, *Hinduism in England* (Bradford: Bradford College) 1981

R. Burghart (ed.) *Hinduism in Great Britain: the Perpetuation of Religion in an Alien Cultural Milieu* (London/New York:Tavistock)1987

Nigel Frith, *The Legend of Krishna* (Sheldon)

Elizabeth Seeger, *The Ramayana* (Dent)

History.

The Ancient Aryans invaded India from the north - probably from south Russia - around the 15th century BCE. The movement was a general one, with different groups settling in different areas - the Kassites in Iran; the Mitanni in Asia Minor. Their language is the parent of all Indo-European languages including Greek and Latin, English, French and German. **Sanskrit** from India is the oldest surviving example, although influenced by Dravidian (Indian) languages, which is still the language of Hindu liturgy. It is generally thought that names as geographically distant as Iran and Eirean (Eire) contain an explicit reference to the Aryans. The Aryans brought with them language, mythology, deities, and many doctrines and customs. A number of contemporary Indian languages (e.g. Hindi, Punjabi, Gujarati) are derived from Sanskrit; others, such as those found in the south (Tamil is the best known) owe their origin to the aboriginal(non-Indo-European) Dravidian languages.

Caste The Aryan's arrival gave rise to the idea of *caste*, that is to say that people with different backgrounds and different colours had different responsibilities and rights in society. In Sanskrit, *varna*, the term for caste, means "colour" and originally signified social strata based on skin-colour. As Hinduism developed the highest caste was the Brahman, or priest. The second caste were warriors (*kshatriyas*), followed by the merchants (*vaishyas*) and finally the labourers (*sudras*). Outcastes, *panchamas*, have traditionally been viewed as untouchable, unapproachable and "unlookable", as being polluted by their jobs and living conditions. Mahatma Gandhi renamed them *Harijans*, "people of God". *Sudras* and *panchamas* make up the bulk of the population; the first three castes, the minority, are regarded as "twice born".

The idea of caste has been a fundamental part of Indian society since very early days, but there have been many movements throughout history to minimise the severity of the custom, or to outlaw it altogether. Today, caste is ideally viewed only as *duties* and *responsibilities*, and not as *rights*. For Hindus in this country, caste is becoming less rigid.

God is One and Many Hindus believe in one God, but there is variety in the way worship is conducted and doctrine is expressed. One differentiation is between the worshippers of SHIVA (*Shaivites*) and VISHNU (*Vaishnavites*) - although the two groups do not exclude each other. Another is between devotional Hinduism and philosophical Hinduism. Yoga and meditation also play an important part in the worship of many Hindus.

This variety is not a problem for Hindus since there has traditionally been no great interest in systematizing faith and doctrine. There is more interest in *what a story or a doctrine is trying to express* than in the way that it is expressed, so that contradictions are not regarded as being difficult.

Worship focuses on the Temple which in India might contain images of one deity or many. Images of the deities are a central feature of most British Hindu temples - *mandirs* (shrines) or *mandals* (communities). Most temples here have representations of God in the form of Lord SHIVA and Lord VISHNU. *Incarnations* (Sanskrit *avatars*) of Vishnu - for example RAMA and KRISHNA - are very common. There are also many pictures or statues of Lord GANESH, the elephant-headed Deity representing new beginnings and the overcoming of obstacles. In the temple the images are cleaned, dressed and tended as if God were actually present.

ACTS OF WORSHIP.

In the temple the following acts of worship are common.

ARTI - the offering of light. A lamp with five wicks is most commonly used, waved in front of the images with prayers and singing. A special Arti prayer is generally sung on this occasion.

The Arti Prayer

"Hail to Thee, O Lord of the universe, remover of sorrow and Master of all. We offer greetings and prostrations to You. You banish in a moment the troubles of your worshippers. Whoever sings your praises receives your favour, and their worries vanish. Through Your name they receive happiness and satisfaction, and their bodily pains vanish. O Lord! You are my Mother, my Father, my only refuge. You indwell all beings. You are God - Perfect, Absolute, everywhere, all powerful, knowing my innermost thoughts. You are an Ocean of Compassion, the Protector of all. O Merciful Lord, deliver us from ignorance and temptations. Lord of all life, Only Lord, Formless, you are beyond the perception of the senses, beyond human comprehension. Help me, steeped in ignorance as I am to get a glimpse of you. You support the weak, the One who removes suffering. You are my Saviour. Extend your merciful hand to me. I surrender to You. Relieve me of evil desires; wipe out our sins. Bless me with ever-increasing faith and devotion. We serve You alone: help us in our service".

HAVAN or HOMA - The sacred fire. AGNI, the ancient fire God, is thought of as *purifier*. A fire is therefore lit and a variety of items representing the created world are placed upon it. Thus the world and the worshipper are symbolically purified. The wood-fire is strengthened by means of *ghee*, that is clarified butter. The fruits of the land are offered, sweet products (sugar, honey, dates) and fragrant spices (sandlewood, mace, cardamom, nutmeg).

The order of events is as follows:

- sip water,
- arrange fuel;
- put fire in the *vedi* (fire-hole);
- fan the fire;
- make the five oblations;
- the oblation of Prajapati;
- the eight oblations *ghee* ;
- the presentation of gifts.

PUJA - this is the normal word for an act of worship. A shrine is set up with an image, and a tray is set with dishes of powders, sweets, lamps, bells, water and flower petals. The image is anointed with red powder, and decorated with flowers and rice. Light, incense, water and food are offered to the image. The food becomes *Prasad*, 'blessed', and is distributed.

Hindus in Britain

Reading:

D. Bowen, *Hinduism in England* (Bradford: Bradford College) 1981

R. Burghart (ed.) *Hinduism in Great Britain: The Perpetuation of Religion in an Alien Cultural Milieu* (London/New York: Tavistock) 1987

In early 20th century Britain, it was fashionable to draw inspiration from Indian spirituality. One important group to do this was the Theosophical Society. Members were virtually all white and British. Few Indians lived in Britain until after 1945. There is no evidence that there were Hindu temples in Britain in the early decades of the century. The first Hindu presence was the Ramakrishna Mission, set up by the Bengali Swami Ayyakatananda (1935). The Mission was inspired by the teachings of Vivekananda and had a head-office in Calcutta. The link between the Swami and the mission ended in 1948, after some disquiet was expressed about his Marxist interpretations. He then founded the Vedanta Society in Bath, and was replaced in the Ramakrishna Mission by Swami Ghananand. The Mission was able to open a monastic community in Muswell Hill, north London, in 1949 - the first Hindu centre of public worship in Britain. The new immigrants in the 1950s were mostly Punjabis (Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs). News about new opportunities was spread through the family, so *emigrants* tended to come from specific localities in Punjab and neighbouring areas (such as Gujarat), and *immigrants* tended to settle close together in the same locality in Britain. Southall and Leeds Road, Bradford were reputed to be Punjabi settlements; Harrow and Hendon were Gujarati.

Most of the Ugandan Asians were Gujarati speaking, and they were settled outside the areas which were predominantly Gujarati - Leicester, Bolton, Birmingham, Manchester, Coventry and outer London boroughs. By 1977 there were 307,000 Hindus living in Britain, of whom 70% were of Gujarati origin, 15% Punjabi (Source: Burghart, 1987,8).

They had a profound effect on Hinduism in Britain. The early days belonged to Hindu leaders seeking followers- the latest being the Hare Krishna group and the advocates of Transcendental Meditation which so tempted the pop-stars of the late 1960s. Yet the 1960s and 1970s saw the rise of the lay Hindu - the ordinary people beginning to organise themselves to establish worship in public temples as well as in private homes. This also encouraged communities to invite over a Brahmin (priest) or a monk to assist with worship and devotion. The first Hindu temple established by the lay community was at Leicester in 1969 - followed shortly afterwards by temples in London, Bradford, Coventry and Leeds. There are now well over a hundred Hindu temples.

For many Hindus, India remains the natural home of Hinduism, which causes some strain in Britain. All Hindus have to adapt their lives to fit into a Western way of life, and their children can only be influenced by the education system in which they find themselves. There is some anxiety about whether the new generation will accept or reject their family religion; and some features subtly change to fit more comfortably into western culture. More adaptation stems from the fact that temples provide a home for the worship of more than one Hindu culture and tradition, causing each to reinterpret their own tradition through their mutual cooperation - as for example the Gujarati and Punjabi Hindus combined in Leeds to found a temple (Kim Knott, in Burghart, 1987, ch.9).

Hindus in Bradford, Yorks

Hindus in Bradford in the 1950s were of Gujarati origin. They first organised themselves in 1957, establishing the Bhartiya Mandal (Indian Association). There were no non-Gujarati members - and there were three signatories from the Gujarati Muslim population who associated themselves with the project for cultural reasons. The association had social and political aims in addition to the religious - that is it sought to provide a support group for Asians in an alien culture. It therefore celebrated festivals and ensured that children were taught Gujarati. It bought premises in 1959. The impetus was *cultural* rather than religious - Hindus base their devotions on the home to such an extent that there is not the burning necessity to open a communal centre of worship. In addition, the Gujarati Hindus, numbering perhaps 2,300 by 1970, lived in family groups in the same neighbourhood, and met together as a family for prayer. There was at least one shrine in a private house - dedicated to the 19th century Gujarati saint Jalaram Bapa - known as the Shri Jalaram Shakti Mandal. There are also regular meetings of Sarhya Sai Baba, with hymns, arti and puja in honour of Sai Baba - the popular and charismatic contemporary saint and teacher said to be a manifestation of God and a reincarnation of the 19th century Sai Baba ("the old Sai"). The group is now based in a house which is often called "the Sai Baba Temple" or "Sai Baba Centre". The Sai Centre attracts a wide range of ethnic Hindus - particularly those from East Africa - and addresses an international and cosmopolitan audience. As a contemporary saint and teacher, Sai Baba attracts many adherents, but also a degree of opposition from traditionalists.

A second Hindu organisation was started in 1966 - the Hindu Swyamsevek Sangh, "the Hindu Self-Help Union". It particularly attracted young males, directing them towards character formation and self discipline through yoga and sport. By 1980 the Sangh had 350 members, and opened headquarters in 1982. The Sangh does not give *the practice or ritual* of religion a high priority.

Caste associations. Groups also formed to provide support for caste groups - such as the Kshatriya Sudharak Mandal - "the Circle for the Uplift of Kshatriyas". There was political force here since the founders were cobblers and leather-workers. Since they worked with prepared hides, these asserted their sense of good status in the face of some who might regard them as outcastes (i.e. confused them with *tanners*). The *Kshatriyas* were the warrior caste, second only in status to Brahmins, the priest caste. The *Patel Samaj*, "Patel Society" supported certain family business interests and are in charge of the Navaratri celebrations - the nine nights festival. The potters, or Prajapati, formed the Shree Prajapati Association in 1975 (the first national group was founded in Coventry in 1974, when a national movement began). There is now a national journal, the Prajapati Sandesh. A centre was opened in Bradford in 1980 with a temple and community centre and actively encouraged Hindus from other castes. In inviting all Hindus, there was a deliberate attempt to cut through possible sectarian developments - worship can accommodate a wide variety of forms in one central group with a common identity and solidarity. The images were originally of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana (from the Ramayana), but now there are also images of Krishna, Radha, Visvakarma, Amba Mata, Shiva, Ganesh and Hanuman. A Brahmin is occasionally invited, but for the most part the rituals are performed by lay members. (There was some opposition to this at first, but people have become used to it).

As Gujarati Hindu numbers in Bradford reached 6,000 by 1981 there was a problem of group cohesion as the number of formal associations multiplied. There were a number of moves to reinforce the common identity of all Bradford Indians (which included Sikhs as well as Hindus. This was linked with unrest about racial harassment, violence and unemployment in the early 1980s. There remains in Bradford a careful balance between segmentation and unity, and a recognition that the message of Hinduism is universal.

Bhakti marga - the devotional path. Maureen Michaelson, in Burghart, 1987, ch.2 examines the Lohana sub-caste in Leicester and London. These regard themselves as followers of the "Sanatan Dharma" that is Hindu in the scriptural sense, adherents of the ancient traditions, as opposed to *sectarian* Hindus (such as the adherents of Sai Baba). They are also followers of the path of *devotion* (*Bhakti*). This means that worship implies selfless devotion and service to God. Although the Lohanas (who are of Gujarati origin and mostly arrived in Britain via East Africa) regard wealth as a sign of God's favour, this wealth should be used in *service* (*seva*) to God and the community. Philanthropy provides respect and is included as an integral part of worship. Bhakti has a long and honorific history in Hinduism, focusing particularly on Lord Krishna and on the *Bhagavad Gita* as their most read scripture. This path invited people from all castes - and out-castes - to mingle together freely. Out-castes often became leaders in their own right. Peak devotional experiences have always included ecstasy and trance.

The home is an important focus for worship having a shrine (*mandir*) - varying in size from a shelf or cupboard to a room. The shrine may contain pictures of deities - especially Krishna, Amba Mata, Ganesh, and the Gujarati saint Jalaram. There may be pictures also of personal or family gurus and other religious souvenirs. Some Lohanas are members of the Pushtimarga sect, although their allegiance is looser here than in India. Their domestic shrines are more elaborate, having implements, clothes and food for Krishna in a cupboard or curtained area, within which Krishna can "play" or "sleep". At any domestic shrine, worship (*puja*) can be regular or occasional, but all women and most men make daily offerings and prayers. Pushtimarga Hindus can spend several hours at puja, for they treat their image of Krishna as a baby, and wash, dress and feed it. Vows, thanksgivings, marriage rites and anniversaries of deaths are all family occasions which require *puja* at home. Scripture readings and life-cycle rites (e.g. the naming) also take place at home. Since homes have shrines, it follows that the home is the seat of these deities, a place of blessing, a temple in its own right. The home is also an important centre of education. The Lohanas are aware that their knowledge about their faith is insufficient and have made great efforts to rectify this through family worship.

Satsangs - devotional singing. These take place informally and often, usually in people's homes. Satsangs for women are particularly important socially. *Sanatan* satsangs take place on the eleventh day of each half-month, attracting large groups of worshippers. *Sectarian* satsangs are energetic and fervent and exclusive to the deity of the sect.

Possession. Most possessions are part of the worship of Amba Mata (the Gujarati form of Durga) at the festival of Navaratri, "Nine Nights". Possessions, which are not uncommon, are marked by bodily shaking movements with characteristic male and female styles. The possessed are thought to have special insight, to predict and to diagnose. After the possession, the possessed is touched by other worshippers so that they can share in the experience.

Hindu Temple Rituals in Britain. Adaptation of temple worship to the British situation was perhaps inevitable. In temples where most or all of the population are from the same area, it has been easier to maintain clearer continuity with customs in India. However, Kim Knott (in Burghart, 1987, ch.9) studied the Leeds temple which brings together Hindus from a geographically wide area, with their consequent differences in custom, belief and ritual. This situation of ethnic mixing within the Hindu tradition is not uncommon in Britain. In India, faith is unselfconscious - the worshipper does not consequently question why things are done as they are - but is being forced to do so in British temples, if only in comparison with the different customs of other Hindus. The temple has become a visible

symbol of Hinduism. Individual Hindus may visit it only sporadically, but it nevertheless has an important function binding people together at festival times, providing advice and support in times of need and being the central agent of religious transformation.

The earliest temple, in 1970, was mainly Punjabi but Gujarati influence grew in the 1970s until it dominated and invited a Gujarati pandit from Leicester to serve the community. Punjabi interest was rekindled around 1980 and soon dominated the elected council. The different communities nevertheless shared the facilities and responsibilities. Each group has its own visible signs of worship in the temple and retains its own ethnic flavour. There has nevertheless been a deal of assimilation between the two in temple worship.

Arti. Arti and havan (the sacred fire) are celebrated as "sanatana dharma" - eternal religious duties, incorporating and uniting all Hindus, the standardized Hinduism which they must project into the western world. It is conscious of its need to explain itself, and of its need to unify the diversity within it. *Arti* is performed twice a day, about 15 minutes morning and evening (8.00 o'clock rather than sunrise and sunset), a devotional worship in which the building, worshippers and deities are consecrated by means of a five-wicked lamp and sprinkled with sacred water (perhaps from the Ganges, or Jamuna). Food blessed during *arti* is called *prasad* and is shared among the worshippers. Although not in itself ancient, *arti* now uses readings from the Upanishads to strengthen the link with traditional Hinduism. *Arti* is now more ritualized than its *Bhakti* origin might suggest.

Havan. Havan is performed on Sundays, taking about one and a half hours, and accompanied by a sacred meal. As a ritual it goes back to the early (Vedic) fire ritual in which sacrifice maintained the order of the universe. *Havan* today brings together many different facets, some originally performed at home in the hearth. It has developed considerably from the pure Vedic form. Three fires, with separate rituals, have become one. Not only are the Vedic deities called upon - Agni, Surya, Prajapati - but later deities. The 19th century revivalist group Arya Samaji revived the fire ritual - and part at least of today's ritual owes much to their doctrines, particularly amongst Punjabis. (The *havan* is not part of the Gujarati religious culture). For many, the *havan* is not essential and the ritual is often sparsely attended. The deities are invoked as the fire is lit, and *ghee* (clarified butter) is poured on as the fire takes hold. Agni, the Vedic fire deity is particularly invoked. Offerings in the fire include fragrant spices (e.g. nutmeg, mace, sandalwood), fruit, herbs, cereals, sugar, honey, grapes.

Festivals

There are many important festivals throughout the year.

- February: *Saraswati-puja*. A special day of devotion to Saraswati Goddess of wisdom and learning. Education is particularly remembered.
- March: *Shivatri* - the great fast of Lord Shiva. Commemorates his marriage and his saving the world from poison.
- March: *Holi*. A festival of colourful frolics and mischief. Stories include Krishna and the milkmaids (or *gopis*, who symbolize devotion to God through their love for Krishna): and of Prahlad escaping the fire (a symbol of uprightness and loyalty). There are bonfires and feasts.
- April: Rama's birthday - *Ram-Navami*.
Hanuman's birthday - patron of physical exercise.
- August: Krishna's birthday - *Krishna Janamashtami*. Born at midnight - so there is a vigil and a crib. Small gifts are distributed.
- September: Ganesh Festival - patron of new ventures, remover of obstacles, giver of success.
- October: *Navarati/Durga Puja* - festival of the Goddess *Durga*. Nine nights involving fasting and dancing. Procession of Durga image - which is eventually deposited in the river.
Dussehra - tenth day. Burning the effigy of Ravana, fireworks - marking the climax of the Rama and Sita story (see below).
- November: *Divali* - see below.

DIVALI

This is the most important festival of the Hindu year, normally lasting five days. Historically, it was the new year for the *vaisyas* or merchants, but it also commemorates the coronation of Rama and Sita (see below). It reminds worshippers to take stock of their lives and work, and to venture forth with new projects, new resolutions, and new beginnings. The Goddess LAKSHMI is said to preside over the festivities as a symbol of 'prosperity' and success - the result of taking stock and being prepared and efficient. As Goddess of wealth, she is more concerned with *treasure in heaven* than *treasure on earth*, although people who are hard-working and efficient are likely to also share in material wealth.

Day 1. A single lamp is lit and pointed southwards, as an offering to Yama God of Death. Other lamps used for other purposes are carefully aligned to the north or east. For the rest of the year, a single lamp should not face south.

Day 2. The story celebrated on this day is of Lord Krishna defeating the demon king Narakasura, king of Pragjyotisha (? Assam). He had a reputation for carrying off young women (16,000 in all) but one day carried off the daughter of Vishwa-Karma, the divine architect. The women of heaven and earth appealed to Vishnu to protect them, and Krishna was given the task of sorting the problem out. Narakasura, a pious demon, before he was struck down by Krishna's sword, was granted a boon as a reward for his former good deeds. He asked that people should, throughout the ages, celebrate this day. Narakasura's good deeds had not been forgotten or cancelled out; and the story reminds us that even evil demons are a mixture of good and bad. After Narakasura's death, the 16,000 women were released and considered themselves to be wives of Krishna. On this day, Hindus rise early, anoint themselves with perfumes, bath, put on clean clothes, breakfast with their families and friends, feast at mid-day, let off firecrackers, and light oil lamps in the evening.

Day 3. This is the last day of the month of Ashwin. Lakshmi is worshipped, symbolised by a gold ornament or a silver coin. In some places, a female cat takes the place of Lakshmi and is treated as the goddess herself. Doors and windows are left open for her to enter. *Rangoli* patterns are drawn on the floor near the front door - particularly a representation of the lotus-blossom, the favorite seat of Lakshmi. The feasting is illuminated by oil lamps, a welcoming party for Lakshmi's arrival. On this day, the merchants finalize their accounts and end the financial year offering worship to Lakshmi.

Day 4. This is the first day of the month of Kartik. The story is told of the generosity of King Bali, and married women receive a special gift - normally of gold - from her husband. Presents are exchanged generally, and the day is devoted to feasting and celebrating. The most auspicious day of the year, this is the beginning of the financial year and an excellent time to initiate new undertakings.

Day 5. This is "sister's day". Men visit their sisters and are welcomed with sugar. He is ceremonially bathed and anointed, after which his sister puts a dot of red powder on his forehead and waves a lamp in front of him to ward off evil. He then presents her with a gift. There is a story behind this custom in which Yama, the first to die and the "Lord of Death", dined with his sister Yamuna. He found this so agreeable that he established the event as an annual occurrence.

In some areas (such as the Punjab and Rajasthan) Divali is linked with the story from the conclusion of the Ramayana of the coronation of Rama and Sita.

HINDU DEITIES

In Hinduism, we have to distinguish between God, the One, the formless and eternal Brahman, and images of God called "*deities*". Images are, in a sense, traditional pictures which help worshippers reflect of particular characteristics of God. Hindus may have their favorites, deities they find particularly helpful; and deities which have a particular point to make at certain times in the year. Ganesh, for example, proves helpful to many when starting new projects: he epitomises the inner strength which helps us remove obstacles and solve problems. Lakshmi is particularly remembered at Divali, the new year for store-keepers: she epitomises the thorough preparation, diligence, honesty and orderly organisation which can ensure that next year will be profitable. She also causes us to pause and reflect: what do we really mean by "profitable"? or success? should we really measure "successful" people by the material wealth they have accumulated? or by the people they have helped?

Notice the focus on inner strength: "give us today our daily bread" has become "give us the inner strength and quality to ensure that we can earn enough for ourselves, and enough to give away to help others".

What is the ultimate source of this strength? Brahman, the One, the Universal Spirit (or Atman) which not so much resides in us but **is part of us**, the essence of our spirituality, the ground of our being. What we mean by God/Brahman/Atman (Spirit) is the great unsolved mystery. Yet without this universal something, our explanations of life, conception, birth, growth and death fall somehow flat. The formation of new life remains a miracle, a natural wonder beyond human wit to manufacture.

People brought up in the Judaeo-Islamic traditions (and some Christian denominations) may find it difficult to appreciate the teaching involved in an image. Picturing the following may help: God the father, holding the world in his hand, tending his flock by the still waters. If this were a painting or a

statue, it would carry a distinct theological message about God as creator and sustainer of the universe and of humankind. In Hinduism, a similar message may be expressed by a father figure (Brahma, Vishnu or Shiva or all three) or a mother (Durga, Amba). The symbols in their hands, and elsewhere in the picture, will be distinctively Indian.

Hindus address God as both father and mother: a metaphor has its strengths, but ultimately is only a metaphor. It is better to have a number of superficially contradictory metaphors than to risk anyone taking them on face value. The mother metaphor is a strong and direct means of reminding worshippers of creation, sustenance, love and nurture. Durga, the Great Mother who represents the earth and life itself, is one of the most important focuses of worship, particularly worshipped at the Durga Puja festival. Goddesses are also linked with male deities - Parvati with Shiva, Lakshmi with Vishnu, Saraswati with Brahma, Radha with Krishna, Sita with Rama. This in no way implies any inferiority on the part of women: in fact, the female "energy" or *shakti* is seen as the moving force in the universe, contrasting with the male persona which represents the "principle". Each is complementary - the female persona is vitally important, and by no means down-rated.

Laksmi (or Sri) and Vishnu.

Laksmi, sometimes known as Sri, is one of the most popular deities. She has been traditionally associated with Vishnu, her "husband", and in myth often plays the role of the ideal wife. She embodies "wifely" qualities; or expressed the other way round, when wifely qualities are present, Laksmi is also present. In early texts, Sri represents fortune and as asked to banish her sister Alaksmi, "misfortune". She is even at this early stage linked with the red lotus - standing on one, dressed like one, holding lotus flowers, wearing a garland, and often named Padma and Kamala, "lotus". An elephant is closely associated with her.

Symbols such as these have a complex range of meanings. The lotus emerges, a thing of beauty, from the rotting mud, just as quality and fortune emerges out of an unpromising environment. The lotus draws life of of the water and represents the mystery and wonder of fertility, and the hope of good things to come. It represents *blossoming* - as the flowers blossoms, so can our lives, and so can our universe if we allow it. As the lotus flower expands and bursts open, so our world can burst with vigour and explode into beauty. Laksmi is the mysterious power which lies behind all these processes - the life force, the essence of beauty, the wonder of our world, and the inner qualities our our nature and character. The lotus thus represents spiritual purity, uncontaminated by the mire - the world - from which it emerges. Beauty and perfection transcends the physical world, and helps us also spiritually to escape from its limitations.

Laksmi is showered by two elephants in some images. Elephants are royal "vehicles" possessing enormous power and vigour; and in myth, elephants can represent the rainclouds bringing life-saving rain. Some of these "flying elephants", through a curse, became the land-based creatures we know today.

Laksmi is associated in later myth with royal authority - but in an interesting way. She comes to rulers, and leaves them again. When she is present, their kingdoms run smoothly, justice reigns, truth and concern are clearly apparent. When she leaves them, chaos raises its head, wars impend, and kings become tyrants. Laksmi is the quality that makes a good kingdom good - including fairness, justice, social concern, and virtue. Such a kingdom will prosper, as a kingdom at war against itself will not. Indra, the king of the gods, is described as receiving the boon of Laksmi's presence (ruling wisely), losing it (sinking into civil conflict) and having her presence restored (resolving the conflict and re-establishing order and justice). Many rulers blossom under Laksmi's influence, but fall into disorder

when she retreats. Lakshmi clearly represents the positive qualities of order and good management that leads to success and prosperity.

In myth, Lakshmi is represented as consort of many gods, representing the inconstancy of good intentions and good fortune. Since the period of the Epics (ca. 400CE) however, she became linked with Vishnu only and became the model of faithfulness and loyalty. Vishnu represents *order* - and the combination shows how order can be achieved, with Lakshmi as the active force by which order can be achieved.

There is a myth which relates how the milk ocean was churned to find *amrta*, nectar of immortality, the essence of life. In some versions of the myth, Lakshmi was born out of this event. The churning is an act of creation (in which order emerges from chaos) instilling from the chaotic primeval waters the essence of life and giving it substance (just as churning milk produces butter). Lakshmi's birth is the birth of order, the first event of creation - a benign and auspicious event, in line with Lakshmi's character. As life is created, so the potential for good is introduced into that life cycle; in as much as that potential is realised, the life force will prosper; in as much as the potential is rejected, life will annihilate itself in a wave of destructive self-centredness. In some versions of the myth, Lakshmi retreats from the world as she is rejected, and generosity ceases: the world withers as its energies wane, until her return when order returns, and a sense of purpose is restored.

Vishnu makes the churning possible by incarnating as Vasuki, the cosmic serpent (the churning rope) and the cosmic tortoise on which the churning stick rests. He represents cosmic order, and acts perennially to maintain and sustain that order against the encroachments of chaos. He *needs* the direction that Lakshmi offers - her selfless generosity shaping order into goodness. Vishnu oversees cosmic order; Lakshmi empowers people to achieve it. The *Vishnu-purana* stresses the interdependence of the two - Vishnu is speech, Lakshmi meaning; he is understanding, she intellect; he is love, she is pleasure.

Vishnu and Lakshmi therefore function as partners: marriage provides the metaphor. As Vishnu incarnates in various forms (*avatars*), Lakshmi accompanies him into incarnation (e.g. as Sita, Radha). Stories about her provide models for how wives ought to behave and order their affairs. Iconography depicts the two in affectionate poses. Some texts stereotype the sort of wifely behaviour they expect in line with the social circumstances of the day, and some make Lakshmi subservient, but the ideal is a partnership of equals. In texts like the *Pancaratra* Lakshmi is supreme, and has taken over all the functions not only of Vishnu, but of Shiva and Brahma also. She is the sap of creation, and the sap of consciousness, the full embodiment of God within. For the Sri-Vaisnava school, Lakshmi is the mediator between Vishnu and the devotee, an embodiment of divine compassion.

Lakshmi is widely worshiped today through festivals (especially Diwali [Divali, Dipavali]) and in vows. She is closely associated with the fecundity of the land and animals, and is very closely linked with Ganesh, perhaps reflecting the ancient combination of Lakshmi with elephants. A festival in summer marks the time Vishnu falls asleep for several months: marital harmony and security is a major theme at this time and becomes the object of prayers. There are special images of the sleeping Vishnu which become local pilgrimage centres.

Parvati and Shiva.

Parvati first emerged as an important deity in the period of the Epics (ca. 400CE), but she is often closely identified with (or viewed as an incarnation of) Sati, Shiva's wife who committed suicide when her husband was insulted. In myth, Parvati lured Shiva into marriage from his isolated mountain

hermitage: she therefore is responsible for enabling Shiva's power and energy to be at work in the world rather than out of it, and more specifically in the *home*. As the embodiment of Shiva's power, Parvati functions very similarly to Lakshmi. Early references describe Shiva and Parvati living in the Himalayas and playing dice - linking the grandeur of nature (which produce rivers like the Ganges), spiritual retreat, and divine playfulness, and perhaps seeing a divine role in chance or fate.

Myths of Shiva and Sati show Sati as winning Shiva's affection through her austerities. He offers her a boon, and she asks to marry Shiva with due ceremony. Her father Daksa disliked Shiva because of his off appearance, and deliberately planned a great sacrifice at which Shiva and Sati alone were uninvited. Sati killed herself. Shiva destroyed the sacrifice and the devotees, before reviving them and reconstituting the sacrifice which he himself attended. The story may suggest that Shiva was an aboriginal deity who was rejected by the Aryan incomers, but was gradually accepted as assimilation took place. Stories describe Shiva carrying her body around the world sobbing, disrupting nature; and finding her *yoni* (vagina) on earth, assuming the form of a *lingam* (phallus), plunging himself into her so that they are eternally joined. Sati's role was to involve Shiva in the world, to bring him down to earth. Their myths are full of contradictions - Shiva is ascetic yet erotic, destructive yet creative. Shiva/Sati shows that God is paradoxical, transcendent yet immanent, responsible for good, and yet accountable for disaster. Brought to earth, Shiva is represented and made available to all through the *lingam*, the symbolic image of loving and creative union, and of the selfless acts which result from this. The spirit of Shiva in men is eternally attracted to the spirit of Sati in women, which assures the continuation of humanity.

"Parvati" means "she who lives in the mountains" and is clearly associated with the Himalayas. Although representing the active energy of Shiva and sometimes described as transcending Shiva, she exists in mythology only through her relationship to Shiva: she is, and takes her being from being, Shiva's wife. She is important in the story only because Shiva needs a child to save the world: it was for this purpose that Parvati was born to Himavat and Mena. She is dark by complexion, and sometimes called "Kali" ("the dark one"). In the seduction that followed, Kama god of passion is burnt to death by Shiva's middle eye - but after falling in love Shiva restored Kama to life. Their passion shakes the universe, until even the gods were afraid of the child who might be born. Their lovemaking interrupted, Shiva's semen is spilled and incubates to produce Kartikeya, who later rescues the world. Ganesh is the second child, created by Parvati herself without Shiva's assistance, and set to guard Parvati from unwelcome intrusions. When Ganesh refused entry to Shiva, he was decapitated. Restored to life to please Parvati, he was given the head of the first creature Shiva then met, the elephant.

Apart from these stories, the married life of this divine couple is harmonious, although they do argue. Some accounts present Shiva as irresponsible, ne'er do well, Parvati the longsuffering wife. When angered, a darker side of Parvati emerges: a black goddess Kali emerges to cover the battlefield in blood.

How should the theology here be unpacked? Their relationship represents the paradox between the ascetic ideal - the view that spiritual goals should replace earthly ones - and the need for spirituality to be expressed in a domestic situation. Shiva's disinterest in sex, procreation and the family would spell disaster for humanity. It may be an ideal, but for ordinary people, faith must be more down to earth, totally involved in the family until the task of procreation and upbringing is completed. Parvati brings Shiva into the family orbit. His lovemaking is not half-hearted: involvement in the family and household should be whole-hearted, as long as it is necessary. Nevertheless, the route to it is spiritual rather than carnal: Parvati won Shiva's love through meditation and austerities and not through seduction and titivation; marital love is a spiritual duty, not a falling into temptation. In life, a creative interaction between discipline and pleasure offers most.

Shiva, throughout many myths, has uncontrolled creative power. Parvati controls and harnesses this power. She creates order out of Shiva's orgy of creation and, in a sense, domesticates even creation. The life principle, which Shiva represents, has immeasurable potential which could overwhelm the world that we know and need. In fact, the world is not overwhelmed; new species do not proliferate at random; there is a sense of orderliness about the creation we experience moment by moment. For this order and control we have to thank Parvati, who channels the creativity to the world in a way the world can make best use of it. In the great *lingam* symbol, Parvati contains Shiva with her *yonis*, attracting him to her, and keeping him firmly linked with the earth. Parvati's role is even here crucial: Shiva's creativity set free would destroy the earth in uncontrolled and unreasoning explosive expansion, but it is restrained and kept in bounds in the *lingam*, from whence it is poured out on the earth.

The bi-sexual (*Ardhanarisvara*) form of Shiva is also of interest. The right side is male, Shiva; the left side is female, Parvati. The two are fully complementary. In one myth, Brahma cannot complete his creation as his creatures do not procreate. He summoned Shiva in this bi-sexual form, from which Parvati separated and endowed creation with female procreative energy. Only then was creation functional.

"God is both male and female, both father and mother, both aloof and active, both fearsome and gentle, both destructive and constructive, and so on." (Kinsley, 1988,50).

Ganesha.

Ganesha, son of Parvati, is worshipped for help provided in overcoming obstacles and solving problems. According to the myth, Ganesha had been set to guard the door whilst Parvati bathed. He had instructions to keep out any possible intruder. Unfortunately, when Shiva came, Ganesha tried to keep him out also and Shiva, in anger, cut off his head. Parvati was understandably distraught, so Shiva promised to find the boy a new head. The first creature he passed was an elephant, so he took its head for his son. Domestic bickering was not new to their relationship! Finding a creative balance is not easy. Ganesha achieved the status of remover of obstacles by *being* an obstacle. His very existence is a compromise - Shiva removed his obstacle (Ganesha) violently, to Parvati's disapproval. Ganesha's solutions are likely therefore to be subtle, achieved only if there is a balance between what Shiva and what Parvati represents.

Ganesha's image is that of a boy with an elephant head, with a mouse or rat as his vehicle showing that solutions may require strength or subtlety. One of his tusks is broken, suggesting the need for self sacrifice: one story tells how he was writing down the great Epic poem, the Mahabharata when his pen wore out. He quickly broke off his tusk to get the important job finished. He also carries an elephant goad, suggesting the need for effort in finding a solution to our problems.

Shiva and Kali.

Shiva is also linked with the goddess Kali, who is the object of great devotion across India. Kali's mythology and iconography are blood-curdlingly vivid - she roams naked around cremation grounds and battle-fields, covered in blood, with skulls around her neck as a necklace. The most common image of her shows her dancing frenetically, threatening the universe with threats of dissolution, on the corpse-like body of her consort Shiva, seeking desperately to neutralise her energy: checked by the sudden realisation of who she is dancing on, her eyes bulge and her tongue sticks out in astonishment. Shiva, the life essence, approaches Kali passively, without resistance. In other myths, he approaches her as an infant, whom she suckles. Existence remains in balance, viable, but only just: the worshipper must approach reality as though dead to their old self-centred lives, as helpless, open and trusting as infants.

There are two kinds of worshipper of Kali - the Tantric adept, who seeks persistently for the secrets locked up in Kali's nature, and questions her aggressively to reveal them; and the simple devotee, who regards her as mother [albeit a merciless mother], and responds as a child in arms to her. Animal sacrifice is a regular feature of her worship, the animals cleanly beheaded. [They are then, of course, used for food.] Kali worship and iconography has long been met with incredulous horror by Westerners, who find it hard to understand why devotion to Kali is so widespread. One answer lies in the devotees' facing up to their own mortality, and the understanding of death that results. Reality, *personified* in Hindu theology, is hostile to life. Life proves to be fragile, easily terminated. Where children die young in large numbers, and disease ravages adult populations, death has to be taken very seriously indeed. Human nature is self-centred, grasping and aggressive. Conflict makes a nonsense of owning property (which can easily be taken away by force) and ends in violence and death. Thus, theology has to take death very seriously indeed. The Kali worshipper lives in the face of death. They organise their understanding of life around the sure face of their own mortality. The devotee comes trusting as a child, accepting how things are and seeking to come to terms in life with mortality. Anything else is illusion. The Tantric adept vigorously reconstructs their theology and understanding of life from the standpoint of their certain death: given that we must die, what does this mean for the rest of our lives? Our lives are sustained by the death of other life forms. Contemplation of this produces a fearless resolve which de-mystifies death, and reveals completely fresh perspectives on existence. The human desire for order, seen in the theologies associated with other deities, must remember that life is *disorderly*; ruled by change and decay. Rather than feebly trying to change the superstructure of existence, it is more helpful to look disorder in the eye, and seek to come to terms with it on a human level.

Shiva.

An ambiguous picture of Shiva has emerged, energizing the cosmos in a way that Parvati has to harness; and yet providing creative stability behind the process of change. This knife-edge balance is achieved (mythologically speaking) through sexual balance and harmony, in which each sex can take both active and passive roles. The answer to a balanced life is not ascetic withdrawal from life but a creative interrelationship between the real world of the householder and meditation. These balances are expressed by the ubiquitous *lingam* images.

Pictures of Shiva may represent him as blue-throated, from the myth in which the waters were poisoned, threatening the existence of all living things, and Shiva saved the world by drinking the water, retaining the poison in his throat. Thus, symbolically, Shiva is seen as the mysterious process which keeps the world habitable. From Shiva's top-knot comes the water of the Ganges (Ganga): according to myth, the water comes from heaven and falls on Shiva's head - so that the earth is not split apart by its force.

Shiva is sometimes depicted as destroyer, but as we have seen, has important roles in creation and sustenance also. Destruction may be a side product of creation, if creation means the destruction of the preceding world order. He channels the creative waters of the Ganges; and linked with Kali, he restrains death for a brief while. His then is a creative destruction: when faced with the impending dissolution of the world we know, the question is raised over whether the new world which will emerge has a useful potential. The struggle to realise that potential may be hard, but there is optimism in the drive to recreate the future.

SHIVA AND GANGA (THE GANGES).

THE SACRED RIVER GANGA (GANGES)

Importance of water

In India, rivers are held to be sacred. For Hindus, the Indian landscape is holy from the Himalayas (the home of the Gods) in the north to Cape Comorin (or Kanya Kumari, where the Goddess lives) at the southernmost tip. In a hot dry land, water gushing out of the ground, bringing fecundity to an otherwise barren land, is a source of great wonder and thankfulness. Springs, streams and rivers have a special significance: people can focus their thankfulness for life on the water which gives them life.

Where great rivers join is a specially potent reminder; crossing places or fords bring people into especial close contact with the river, their need for water being balanced by their need to get across it. A "crossing place" (*tirtha*) became a powerful symbol of spiritual crossing, from life to liberation (*moksha*). A *tirtha* then was a place where heaven and earth are thought to be specially close, a doorway charged with spiritual power. Here the divine can be easily reached; here the Gods made themselves manifest to the human world. A special mantra (the Taraka Mantra, or "Crossing Mantra", said to have been revealed by Shiva) helped worshippers to make the transition.

Rapids and floods remind us of water's perils. The Ganga, for example, is just one of the rivers which feed into the vast delta flowing into the Bay of Bengal near Calcutta. The people of Bangla Desh who live in the delta know only too well, and too regularly, the loss of life, livelihood and property the floods can bring.

The ocean provides a picture of the great infinity of reality towards which many Hindus deeply aspire. The seashore becomes a potent reminder of Reality, living at the brink of infinity. The casting of one's cremated ashes into the ocean, by placing them in rivers like the Ganges to wash downriver and out to sea, expresses the hope that the eternal soul will itself become absorbed into Reality.

Springs, rivers and the sea have become places for pilgrimage in India. Of rivers, the Ganga, springing up at Gangotri in the Himalayas, is the holiest. Hindus journey to its source, over rock, ice and snow. A river that brings life to the whole of northern India can only be a gift of God! So, Hindus feel that they encounter God when they come into contact with its waters. One myth describes Ganga as a fertile mother deity. Another depicts the Ganga as a manifestation of Lord Vishnu the preserver and creator, who became liquid in order to bestow a great benefit onto mankind. In a sense, therefore, the "source" of the Ganga is in heaven, not earth.

Hardwar

At Hardwar, "the gate of the Lord (Vishnu)" (also called Gangadvara "the Gate of the Ganges"), the Ganges leaves the hills. Hardwar has become a centre of religious learning, and of pilgrimage. People come to consult priests, to have rituals performed on their behalf, or to sprinkle the ashes of their dead over the water, to be carried eventually to the sea.

Prayaga

Three hundred miles down-river the Ganga meets the mighty River Yamuna (flowing seawards via Delhi) and the mysterious, perhaps mythical underground river Sarasvati. The point of confluence is called Triveni, "Where three rivers meet". Bathing at this spot is especially beneficial, notably for the wiping out of sins. A city has sprung up here - Prayaga, renamed Allahabad ("City of Allah") under

Mughal (Muslim) rule. Prayaga has long been one of India's most important pilgrimage centres, referred to as the "King of Tirtha crossing places". Once, sacrifices were used as symbolic rituals to atone for sins. Pilgrimage to Prayaga effectively took their place, so pilgrims pour in, especially during the month of Magha (Jan/Feb). The symbolic nature of the atonement becomes apparent when we realize that "Prayaga" can be visited elsewhere: the Prayaga and Panchaganga ghats in Varanasi (Benares) are both adequate substitutes.

Varanasi (Benares)

Fifty more miles down-river lies the holiest spot of all, where the small rivers Varana and Asi meet the Ganga. The ancient city which lies between these tributaries was called Varanasi, which the British corrupted in pronunciation to Banaras or Benares. The whole city and hinterland has, since ancient sources, been known as Kashi, "the bright, shining one", the city of light - because "that light, which is the inexpressible Shiva, shines (kashate) here" (Kashi Kandra, in Eck 1983 p 26). It is commonly said, "The very stones of Kashi are Shiva". Kashi/Varanasi IS Shiva. Lord Shiva is present everywhere, and in everyone, but at Kashi this presence is more apparent and more intense. People become aware of Lord Shiva around them and within them and they find the experience exquisitely rewarding. Whatever touches Kashi becomes part of her. Pilgrims take on the form of divine Reality (or in other words they become one with Shiva). To die in Kashi (already, in life, part of Shiva) means immediate absorption into the ultimate Reality represented by Shiva. To die here means liberation (*moksha*) from the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) fated to everyone until *moksha* comes.

Shiva

Shiva is pictured as a mountain ascetic, and Lord of creatures. He is the epitome of contradiction, a celibate married to Parvati daughter of the Himalayas. Searching for a home, He lighted upon Kashi: some say He had

withdrawn from Kashi to allow Divodasa to re-establish law and order, some that He had to recapture the city by guile, some that Kashi was the original spot from which He created the rest of the world. Lord Shiva is an enigma - the ideal ascetic, and yet the ideal eroticist and husband. His many facets are often depicted by giving His image many faces or gestures. Five are common:

1. The face of creation (*srishiti*) - a creative dance to a beating drum; the linga symbolising procreation;
2. The face of preservation (*sthiti*) - order, restoring balance and equilibrium;
3. The face of destruction (*samhara*) - destruction, decomposition, disease are as natural as creation;
4. The face of concealment (*tirobhava*) - the power of delusion, of masking the truth, allowing only glimpses;
5. The face of revelation/salvation (*anugraha*) - bestows grace and mercy. This is ALWAYS the motive underlying his first four activities.

Linga

Shiva temples predominate in Varanasi. The commonest Shiva emblem is the *linga*, a vertical shaft of stone on a circular base or seat, containing a duct or channel which allows drainage when the emblem is washed. The seat signifies Shakti, "female energy", the shaft "male energy". Shiva combines both energies: one of His contradictions lies in His sexual identity, showing that the world needs a balance between male and female energies. Although a symbol of sexuality and procreation, the linga is far more to Hindus, pointing to balance and wholeness in all creation.

"Everything in the world is in the linga at all times, and not outside it. We too are in the linga and not separated from it" (Eck 1983 p 106).

Our universe needing wholeness is part of the eternal *linga* : myth describes the sky as the shaft, the earth as the seat. Everything is part of this Shiva-Shakti equilibrium. Myths of the first appearance of the *linga* describe it as a fiery shaft of light, piercing existence with its brilliance. This pictures Shiva

as the Transcendent One, the God beyond human comprehension. The earth was pierced at Kashi: Lords Brahma and Vishnu searched to find its top and base, but failed. Lord Shiva materialised from the light: Vishnu immediately paid homage to him, but conceited Brahma refused, responding arrogantly. In anger Lord Shiva cut off one of Brahma's heads (i.e. reduced his authority). The sin of "killing" Brahma, the archetypal Brahmin, had to atoned so Shiva came on pilgrimage to Kashi/Varanasi, where all sins fall away. Brahma's head, which had stuck to Shiva's hand (symbolising guilt) fell off at Kapalamochana, "Where the Skull fell". This spot thus epitomizes the power to remove or forgive sins. The *linga* would in future become small so it could serve as a sacred symbol of Shiva, a *tirtha* crossing place where union with Shiva could be sought. Lingas can be movable (*chala linga*) or immovable (*achala linga*). Thus they can be worshipped in a temple, at home, or hung around the neck. They are nothing more than the focal point of inner worship, imbued with sacred "power" only insofar as inner worship is being undertaken. Many immovable lingas are said to have appeared miraculously; others have been deliberately made, set in place, and consecrated. Just as water reflects the sun, so lingas reflect Shiva.

Shiva and Ganga

Pictures of Lord Shiva often show the River Ganga flowing from his head: the river has a divine source, and is a gift from God. Yet in a sense the river IS God. Lord Vishnu liquified himself in heaven and poured down onto the Himalayas. This would have split the earth apart had not Lord Shiva preserved equilibrium by allowing the waters to pour onto his head. He then, as a life-giving act of creation, channeled the waters down to the plain and thence to the sea at Ganga Sagara.

Jain, Buddhist and Sikh pilgrimages

Other religions also use Varanasi as a pilgrimage centre. Jains remember two of their leaders - *jinas* or "victorious ones" - born in Varanasi - Suparshva from pre-historic times, the seventh jina; and Parshvanatha, the 23rd jina from the eighth century BCE.

Lord Buddha preached his first sermon here, expounding the four Noble Truths and Noble Eightfold Path, in a Deer Park called Rishipatana ("place of sages") Mriqadaya ("Gift to the Deer") and now Sarnath. A Vihara was established there, and later a stupa temple.

Sikhs also remember visits which their first guru, Guru Nanak made to Varanasi.

Saraswati and Brahma.

Saraswati was from early days a river deity (the river Saraswati, said to have originated in heaven) and one of the few Vedic deities whose influence continued into more recent periods. She has come to express ideas of wisdom, with a focus particularly on *sound*. She is *coherent intelligibility* (Kinsley, 1988,55). Through her influence, meaning might be expressed in speech, words, story, music or prayers: thus a book, musical instrument (*vina* or lute) and rosary (and sometimes a waterpot, representing ritual) can be found on her image. She has become the patron deity of education, and will be found in most Indian homes. The river provides a further level of imagery: crossing the great river is a picture of crossing from ignorance to understanding, enlightenment and freedom on the far shore. The crossing of this river in symbol is an act of purification. The real river is still viewed as a partial manifestation of the great goddess, in giving the earth her boon of life and wisdom.

Various myths describe Saraswati's origin - when Brahma divided into male and female individuals, mated with the female (Saraswati) to produce Manu, the world's creator; when the cosmic Krishna similarly divided to produce five female *shaktis*; or from Vishnu, where she is co-wife with Lakshmi. She appears on the tongues, or in the mouths of the deities, suggesting her main function of intelligible

speech. The entire process of creation and wisdom is held to be contained in the sacred syllable *om*, and mantras are generally a powerful form of expression.

Images depict Saraswati as white (for purity) calm and peaceful. Transcendent, she is set apart from the imperfect impure physical world. Her lotus is rooted in the mud, but rises above it. Her vehicle is a swan, depicting transcendence and perfection - wisdom is able to rise above our flawed material world.

Brahma is included in the *trimurti* (trinity) as creator but his influence as a deity in his own right is limited. He is often pictured with four heads or faces.

Durga.

Durga features in the central annual festival of Durga-puja (October), a nine day celebration also called Navaratra. Special Durga images are made from clay to be paraded around the streets. At the end of the festival, the huge image is taken to the river and pushed in: the clay returns to mud and returns to the raw materials from which the image was made.

According to myth, Durga was born to defeat the buffalo demon Mahisa, who could only be defeated by a woman. The male deities poured out their qualities to form her, and armed her with their weapons - a trident (Shiva) discus (Vishnu) etc. The god Himalaya gave her a lion as a vehicle. She is not normally associated with a male consort (although sometimes she is linked with Shiva and becomes an alternative form of Parvati). An independent warrior in her own right, she breaks all stereotypes of what Indian women were expected to be like, and seeks no male assistance. She is particularly linked with mountains and remote places, and so is particularly favoured by the marginalized in society. She has a role in maintaining the stability of the cosmos, represented by her defeating demons who seek to usurp the gods. Like Vishnu, she creates, sustains and destroys and intervenes when things begin to go wrong. As the feminine *shakti*, she is the essential energy of reality. She can embody herself in many forms, and often deludes her enemies (*maya*). She is the inherent rhythms and energy of the natural world (*prakrti*), the world's life-energy, and thus provides fecundity to the land.

SCRIPTURES

The Vedas. The most important work of "revealed scripture" are the collection known as *The Vedas* of which the *Rig Veda* is the most accessible. This is a collection of hymns from the very earliest phase of Hindu development (15th - 10th centuries BCE). There were four collections of Vedas - the Rig Veda, Sama-veda, Yajur-veda and Artharva-veda. This final collection comprises of spells and incantations. Commentaries and exegesis of the Rig-veda known as Brahmanas and Aranyakas are contained in the Sama-veda and Yajur-veda.

Deities are often linked to the forces of nature - Gayatri, the sun; Agni, fire; Soma, sacred intoxicating juice. Some can be traced to Aryan texts outside India (e.g. to Iran, Turkey) - Varuna, Mitra and Indra. Rudra had the attributes later associated with Shiva who, with Vishnu, emerged later as supreme in importance. The teaching of the vedas is held together by a belief in the interconnectedness of all matter and being. Our human lives are influenced by our world to such an extent that a dialogue between us and the world is not only possible but of fundamental importance. The relationship of nature to us is part of causality - what we do influences the world we inhabit and can bring good or ill upon us.

Read further: *Rig Veda* (Penguin edition).

The Upanishads. A process of producing commentaries on Vedic texts produced the *Upanishads* which are philosophical treatises and dialogues - pre-dating for the most part philosophical works in ancient Greece. The word "*upanishad*" means "sit beneath", referring to the relationship between a pupil and teacher. The Upanishads enshrine centuries of spiritual reflection on the essential meaning of Hinduism, and of life. About 112 Upanishads have been preserved (some as late as the 15th century CE) of which 18 are widely used, from the earliest "classic" period (800-400 BCE). The longest and oldest are the Brihad-aranyaka and Chandogya Upanishads, each about a hundred pages. Isa Upanishad, an important text, has only 18 verses.

Look out for significant terms and ideas, such as:

- OM [AUM] - the sacred syllable, the hum of existence, the meditation chant.
- Brahman - the supreme absolute reality.
- Atman - Spirit, Soul, the divine within as well as the divine outside.
- Karma - the law of cause and effect, recognising that what we are and what we have done effects and causes our present and our future.
- Samsara - the cycle of rebirth, in which we will, in future lives work out the chain of causality (karma) we have caused in our lifetime (since every cause must have a consequence or effect).
- Moksha - liberation from samsara, which can only be achieved if we die with all causality eliminated - when we have caused nothing that requires future consequences. There are many paths to moksha - and none are easy. The liberated soul is united again with Brahman.

Read further: *Upanishads* (Penguin edition);
R.C. Zaehner, *Hinduism* (Oxford UP) chapters 1-2.

The Epics

Two "Epics" provide the most widely read scriptures, containing the story of Krishna (the Mahabharata, which contains that most powerful devotional text the *Bhagavad Gita*) and the story of Rama and Sita (the *Ramayana*). *Bhakti* means "devotion": devotional Hinduism, focusing particularly on the worship of Krishna (centring especially on the Bhagavad-gita) has dominated Hindu worship for the past two millennia.

The Mahabharata.

The period of the epics (ca. 400 BCE - 400 CE) produced two major works which are read and loved today, and are regarded as having scriptural authority - the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The Ramayana is the story of Rama and Sita; the Mahabharata, the longest poem in the world at one hundred thousand couplets, focuses on Krishna, and a brutal war between two rival royal groups, the Pandavas and the Kuravas. In general feel, the former represents good, the latter evil. There were two brothers, princes, Pandu and Dhritarashtra who was blind, in a kingdom about fifty miles NE of Delhi. Pandu took the throne when the father died. He had five sons, Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva, who shared the same wife, Draupadi. Pandu died and his blind brother Dhritarashtra took over, bringing up the five sons of Pandu ("Pandavas") as his own sons. Dhritarashtra had a hundred sons, the oldest of whom was the evil Duryodhana. Yudhishtira was designated heir apparent, which caused great tensions in the palace.

A central and tense narrative concerns a game of dice played between Duryodhana and Yudhishtira. Although losing heavily, Yudhishtira seemed not to be able to stop. He lost all his possessions, and finally put up his brothers and even their joint wife, Draupadi. All was lost, the brothers humiliated and Draupadi abused. That set up a chain of vengeance which were ultimately worked out in a savage war. In one final throw, Yudhishtira risked exile to win back everything he had lost. He lost again. The brothers and Draupadi went into exile for twelve years. In the thirteenth year, their exile had to be incognito - they had to prevent Duryodhana's men from finding them. If they succeeded, the kingdom would be Yudhishtira's again. They succeeded in this, but had to fight for the kingdom.

Krishna's help was asked by both sides. Arjuna, given an option, chose Krishna's personal advice without military intervention; the alternative, taken up by the Kuravas, was the military assistance of Krishna's army. Krishna thus became Arjuna's charioteer. The story reveals the complex interrelationships among the combatants. Not only had they been brought up as brothers, but Karna was actually their physical brother, the illegitimate firstborn of their mother Kunti. A major section of advice, covering 18 chapters, took place on the battlefield in personal conversations between Krishna and Arjuna. This section is often published as a self-complete text, the Bhagavad-Gita.

Krishna's advice opened up the glaring contradictions - the savage war, in which artificial rules of combat were scrupulously kept. Thus, at a time when a well-aimed arrow would have killed Bhishma, the military brains behind the Kuravas and saved many people, Arjuna could not kill him because he was unarmed. Krishna's advice on occasions seems unethical: there might be a focus on the achievement of the greater good of two evil acts. He often recommends battle in place of family duty. He notes how, in the constant stream of existence, death is ultimately unimportant. The individual will be reborn shortly afterwards.

Yet two things are important. It *does* matter how people behave, because their future depends on it. It may not matter ultimately if we kill, but we have to act as though it does. What kind of people we are is important in the overall scheme of existence. *Karma* means that the things we cause have to be worked through. Our actions provoke consequences which we have to accept. Secondly, we must not be carried away by illusion. We must not jump to conclusion. Krishna is accused of giving bad advice. The events the reader has lived through are recounted. Krishna retorts: in all these matters you are entirely mistaken. We, the reader, must look again. Yudhishtira is granted a vision - he thinks it is real - at the end, of the Kuravas in paradise and the Pandavas in hell. He decides to join neither - and he reaches *moksha*, liberation. This was the final illusion he had to come through.

Thus, nothing in the Mahabharata should be taken on face value. Their sheer ambiguity has made them a sourcebook of spiritual renewal in India for many centuries.

The Bhagavad Gita.

The Gita, the teaching of Krishna to Arjuna before the battle, is the best loved and most used book of Hindu theology/philosophy. It seeks to describe reality (as opposed to illusion), and the interrelated paths of wisdom and action. There is no dilemma if the war is righteous, and if the warrior also is righteous. First, the path of wisdom (*Jnana Yoga*)

Prepare for war with peace in thy soul. Be in peace in pleasure and pain, in gain and in loss, in victory or in the loss of a battle. In this peace there is no sin. (2.38)

There is a job to be done, and there is evil to be defeated. The warrior has to be single minded. There is no room for selfish desires.

The follower of this path has one thought, and this is the End of his determination. But many branched and endless are the thoughts of the man who lacks determination..

Some have no vision, yet say a lot and follow the Vedas. They are full of desire, and desire heaven itself. They pray for pleasures and power.

Those who love pleasure and power hear and follow their words: they have not the determination ever to be one with the One. . . Set thy heart upon thy work, but never on its reward. Work not for a reward: but never cease to do thy work. (2.44,47)

Even the scriptures themselves can puzzle with their contradictions, and it is no help to get oneself lost in problems and debates.

When thy mind leaves behind its dark forest of delusion, thou shalt go beyond the scriptures of times past and still to come. . . When a man surrenders all desires that come to the heart and by the grace of God finds the joy of God, then his soul has indeed found peace. He whose mind is untroubled by sorrows, and for pleasures he has no longings, beyond passion, and fear, and anger, he is the sage of the unwavering mind. Who everywhere is free from all ties, who neither rejoices nor sorrows if fortune is good or ill, his is a serene wisdom. The restless violence of the senses impetuously carries away the mind of even a wise man striving towards perfection. . . But the soul that moves in the world of the senses and yet keeps the senses in harmony, free from attraction and aversion, finds rest in quietness . . . when the heart has found quietness, wisdom has also found peace. . . For the man who forsakes all desires and abandons all pride of possession and of self reaches the goal of peace supreme . This is the Eternal in man, O Arjuna. Reaching him all delusion is gone. Even in the last hour of his life upon earth, man can reacher the Nirvana of Brahman - man can find peace in the peace of his God. (2.52, 55-7, 60, 64-5, 71-2)

The path of action (*Karma Yoga*) also has its blind alleys. One cannot attain perfection by renunciation of action. We are all deeply involved in action, and if not doing anything, we are thinking about it.

But great is the man who, free from attachments, and with a mind ruling its powers in harmony, works on the path of Karma Yoga, the path of consecrated action. Action is greater than inaction: perform therefore thy task in life. Even the life of the body could not be if there were no action. . . Let thy actions then be pure, free from the bonds of desire. (3.7-9)

Even as the unwise work selfishly in the bondage of selfish works, let the wise man work unselfishly for the good of all the world. . . Offer to me all thy works and rest thy mind on the

Supreme. Be free from vain hopes and selfish thoughts, and with inner peace fight thou thy fight.
(3.25,30)

Karma, action, is an important but misunderstood concept in Hinduism. By acting, we set up chains of cause and effect. Our actions have effects which must work themselves out, even if we, or others, seek to minimize the worst possible effects of our actions. Our actions are based on what sort of people we are, and help to constitute what sort of people we are. There is no point feeling bitter about something which we have provoked through some thoughtless or deliberate action. What we sow, so shall we reap. The consequences of our actions are long-term as well as short term. At the point in which a decision is made, there are two or more possible futures. We select one and have to live with the consequences of our decision. Had we chose the opposite, the whole world might be different. By sparing a homicidal tyrant, we condemn many more to death. Our karma, the consequences of all our actions past, present and future, is accordingly hard to escape from. We hope therefore to ensure that the results of future actions have good consequences (can we be ever sure?) and seek to avoid decisions made out of self-interest, making our decision in the light of the greater good. A decision made to satisfy a craving or sensual passion will establish for us a *karma*, a sequence of effects, which will not be liberating and are unlikely to benefit others. And we have to live with those effects.

If we die, the consequences live on. Our responsibility is not absolved. We have not attained freedom or liberation (*moksha*). It follows then that we must play our *karma* on some other stage. Our life must go on, somewhere, somehow, until we are able to act without consequences, and create no effects with our actions. This point is *moksha*, liberation. Few reach it: works like the Gita examine possible directions we might explore.

This leads to the belief that our future lives depend on what sort of person we are when we die (that is, what kind of karma we have). Future lives enable us to work out the consequences of our past, and hopefully help us to make some progress. What sort of person we *are* depends on what sort of person we *were*; and what kind of person we *will be* will depend on our choices *now*. This is *samsara*, the chain of lives that constitutes our process of reincarnation.

The Ramayana

The *Ramayana* was written in India over two or three thousand years ago. Tradition names its author as Valmiki, although we have no information about when he lived. In some stories, Valmiki is described as a bandit who tried to rob a sage named Narada. Narada asked if his friends and wife shared his sins as well as his plunder. Taken aback, he discovered that they were happy to share his stolen goods, but denied responsibility with him for his actions. He felt the sin resting heavily on him, and returned to Narada for help. The help required Valmiki to pray to God (in the name and form of Rama): but Valmiki was an "untouchable" and could not therefore pronounce any of God's names. ("Untouchables" were people reckoned to be outside Indian society, and therefore belonging to no "caste" [or social grouping]).

Narada told Valmiki to say Rama backwards - *amar* over and over. *amar amar amar amar amar amar amar amar*. Thus the sound "rama" was pronounced even though the name Rama was not spoken. Valmiki meditated on the sound "rama" for many years and was accounted forgiven and enlightened when Narada returned. Narada, says the tradition, told Valmiki the story of Rama, and Valmiki wrote it down for future generations.

Rama and Sita: the Ramayana Story

Long ago, on the island of [Sri] Lanka, lived king Ravana, feared with his army as evil demons. Through meditation, he had won divine protection against divine or human attack. With these gifts, Ravana became increasingly dangerous: he enjoyed the power without recognising his responsibilities.

Dasaratha was King of Kosala, living in the palace at Ayodhya, three thousand or more years ago. Great and powerful, his only disappointment was his lack of sons and therefore heirs. His prayers were answered by the gift of a divine bowl, the contents of which he was to give to his three wives. He gave half to his senior wife, Kausalya, and half to his youngest wife Kaikeyi. Each wife gave half to the middle wife Sumitra. Kausalya bore Rama; Kaikeyi produced Bharata; and Sumitra had twins-Lakshmana and Satrugna. The boys received the best of royal education and athletic training, and it was reckoned that there were few more skilful in the land. Of the four, Rama excelled. Everyone reckoned that he would be the next king.

One day a powerful holy man, Viswamitra, came to visit with a request that the 16 year old Rama should accompany him to rid the world of an evil monster. Dasaratha eventually agreed, knowing that Rama could learn much from Viswamitra. With them went Lakshmana, always inseparable from his brother Rama. Their mission was totally successful. The monster had destroyed much. Life and hope were restored. Rama's second task was to prevent demons polluting Viswamitra's sacrifice by throwing human flesh in the fire. Rama's arrows found their mark and sacrifice continued safely.

Meanwhile, princess Sita was to be married. Her foster-father Janaka, Maharaja of Mithila, was seeking a suitable husband. Sita had been brought up in the royal palace after a local farmer had found her abandoned in a pot - as the royal couple had been childless. Sita was very beautiful, and only one man would be found worthy. The test lay in a bow so immense and heavy that no-one had yet even lifted it! Sita's future husband would have to lift and string the bow. The bow had belonged to Lord Shiva himself. Many came from all over India, but no-one could even lift it!

Sita despaired that she would ever marry - but then one day Ravana appeared. He had superhuman strength and was quite confident that he would succeed. He boasted throughout the land that he would soon have Sita - and even brought with him his wedding party. Sita looked with horror. The day came for the stringing of the bow. Everyone held their breath - half believing that he would succeed, and half hoping that he would not. After all, if he could not, who else could lift the bow and marry Sita? Full of confidence, Ravana strode forth and lifted the bow a little - but it slipped out of his hand and almost broke his foot. He limped home humiliated.

One day Viswamitra, Rama and Lakshmana came to Mithila. The town was full of kings, princes and ministers. Not a good time to visit, Rama thought, with the Maharaja so busy. However, word soon went around that so great a holy man was in town. Janaka invited Viswamitra to help him with the rituals. Rama and Lakshmana were introduced. Sita, looking down from her courtyard window, felt something she had not felt before. She had usually despised her suitors - and feared Ravana - but these princes, especially the taller one of the two, she watched with quickening interest.

"I have two young princes with me" Viswamitra said with a twinkle, "who would love to see Shiva's bow". Janaka immediately understood and sent for the iron box which contained the bow. It arrived on a carriage, the lid open. Rama examined the bow and picked it up to look at the underside. Everyone burst into applause. He placed the end on the floor and gathered the cord in his hand and gradually began to press the bow downwards. The cord wouldn't quite go on, so he summoned up his reserve of

energy, concentrating his mind as Viswamitra had taught him to do - and pushed. There was a resounding crack, like thunder. The bow, now strung, was broken in two.

Sita, with tears of relief as much as joy, prepared for the wedding as Dasaratha's court travelled over from Ayodhya. Lakshmana married, on the same day, a daughter of Janaka - Urmila; and Bharata and Satrugna married neices, Mandari and Sritakirti. The next twelve years were happy and contented, with Rama and Sita deeply in love; but then something happened which upset all their plans.

Everyone assumed that Rama would be the next king, and Dasaratha, sensing that arrangements would need soon to be made, appointed him crown prince. Rama's three brothers were happy with this decision. But, a bitter woman named Manthera reminded Keikeya (Bharata's mother) of a promise Dasaratha had once made that her son should be king.

"You silly woman. Don't you know that as soon as Rama becomes king he will take the first opportunity to banish Bharata, or worse still, put him to death! Go to your husband and remind him of his promise! Make sure that Bharata becomes king! Make sure Rama is sent far away into the forest so he cannot win the throne by force!"

The feeling that Rama might turn against his brothers grew into an obsession with her. She reminded Dasaratha of his promise and asked for Rama to be banished. She was not evil, but had become frightened and insecure about her future.

Rama accepted banishment quietly and, with a smile, said 'Of course father! I understand perfectly. I will go away immediately. None of this is your fault.' Bharata protested that he did not wish to take Rama's throne and would keep it in trust for his brother; Lakshmana declared that if Rama was to be forced into exile, he would not go alone. Rama did not wish Sita to have to endure the period of danger in exile and tried to persuade her to stay in the comfort of the palace. He severely misjudged his wife; she wished to be with her husband wherever he was, however unpleasant the surroundings and announced her intention to join Rama in exile:

"I do not mind a little discomfort. I am coming to the forest with you,. Don't you dare leave me behind. What you have to suffer, I will suffer too. Besides, look on the bright side! It will make a change from being stuck here in the palace."

So the three of them set off together, wearing rough forest tunics, proudly made for them by Keikeya, glad to see them go! They set off at night to save upsetting the grieving people of Ayodhya, and travelled along the bank of the great river Ganges, crossed it, and struck off into the forest until they reached a hillside. There they camped and settled down.

When the old king died, Bharata refused to accept the crown. He and a royal retinue visited the forest encampment to ask Rama to return. When Rama refused (he had sworn an oath to his father) Bharata agreed to hold the throne until Rama's return. He would, he said, place Rama's sandals on the throne as a reminder to the people of their rightful king. He travelled back to Ayodhya, the sandals on his head. The three went deeper into the forest and settled down for a long stay, with Lakshmana their loyal support and companion, and Rama and Sita ever devoted to each other and jealous of each other's safety.

Ravana had a demon sister called Surpanakha who had magic powers. Seeing Rama as she roamed about the forest, she took a fancy to him and was determined to win him for herself. In physical appearance she more resembled a pig than a woman, but she magically transformed herself into a

beautiful woman. She could not change her personality, however. She demanded that Rama marry her. When Rama replied that he was already married and intended to remain married to Sita, she retorted,

"I am an important princess! Everyone is afraid of me. Why do you love this midget? I will make you a much better mate!"

Evil desire can take any form and might well have separated Rama from Sita; but Rama would have nothing to do with her. When she tried to kill Sita, the two brothers drove her away with their swords, realizing that she was no natural woman. Surpanakha's nose and ears were cut off in the struggle so, angry and humiliated, she swore to get revenge. She persuaded her brother, Khara, demon king of the region to send his army to dispose of the three. Rama's powerful bow and impenetrable armour (both magical secrets given to him by Viswamitra) soon won the day. Soon only the mighty Khara remained; but Rama's arrows and magic spells neutralised his weapons and finally pierced his heart. Unseen, Surpanakha slipped away to Ravana, demanding vengeance and cunningly reminding him of the beauty of Sita, the princess he had desired and lost all those years ago.

However Ravana was cautious. Rama was a dangerous foe. Sheer force would not succeed: devious cunning would be required. Desire for Sita was never far out of his mind, and so the plan he hatched combined his two interests - he would kidnap Sita. The plot hinged on an old colleague, Mareecha, taking the form of a deer and luring Rama and Lakshmana away from the camp. Poor Mareecha was given no option: do it or die!

One day, a golden deer ran past the camp: Sita begged Rama to catch it alive. The brothers were cautious - their energies should be devoted to survival in so perilous a forest. But it was the first favour Sita had asked, and it was Rama's heart, not head, which responded. Lakshmana remained to protect Sita as Rama pursued the animal. It drew Rama further and further away from the camp, just evading capture. Rama realised that capture would take too long and shot the animal for food instead - but as it died, it resumed its demon form and shouted for assistance - in Rama's voice.

In the camp, Sita and Lakshmana heard Rama calling and Sita became distraught at the danger her husband seemed to be in. Lakshmana, suspecting a demon plot, was not convinced that the voice was Rama's - and he had been instructed under no circumstances to leave Sita. But Sita was persistent. She accused Lakshmana of trying to kill Rama; and she threatened to kill herself. This was too much for Lakshmana who sped off in search of Rama.

As Sita sat in front of their hut - some say she was in a magic circle to protect her - an old holy-man arrived and asked for food. The pious always respond to such requests, and a meal was quickly provided. However, the conversation became very personal and Sita realised that something was wrong. The holy man identified himself as Ravana, resuming his normal form, asking Sita to leave Rama and become his queen in his palace in Lanka. Sita, very fearful, was outwardly very calm, advising Ravana to leave before Rama returned. Ravana, realizing that Sita would not be seduced easily, pulled her by the hair into his flying chariot hidden nearby.

Rama, hearing the deer calling in his voice, sped back towards the camp, hoping that Lakshmana had not responded to the cry for help. Crashing through the undergrowth, he met Lakshmana speeding towards him - and together they desperately made for camp. There were signs of a struggle but no sign of Sita.

One creature which heard Sita's cries for help was Jatayu, an elderly eagle. Recognizing Sita, he realised what had happened and pursued the flying chariot. He warned Ravana to give up his mad plan -

but Ravana ignored him. He attacked Ravana, goring his face and knocking his crown from his head - which fell to earth. The struggle ended as the eagle brought Ravana down to earth, the chariot smashed. Ravana's sword lopped off Jatayu's wings and legs. Flying now without his chariot, Sita over his shoulder, Ravana continued towards Lanka. Sita managed to drop her jewellery, wrapped in part of her sari, towards a crowd she could see on earth, hoping that the clue would be discovered by Rama.

When they landed, Ravana showed her his wealth. She coolly replied that her father had more, and Rama had more still. Moreover, she went on, Rama's true wealth is in his character - he is strong but compassionate, rich yet generous. Deception, lies and violence could not provide a secure foundation for love! Sita was determined and defiant - she knew what she wanted, and she knew what was right. She had no intention of giving way. Ravana changed strategy - if she didn't change her mind in one year he would chop her up and eat her! Fear might work where self-interest did not.

Rama, filled with anxiety and guilt, rushed around, trying to find clues to Sita's whereabouts and fate. The brothers were led by a herd of deer until they spotted a withered flower, like the one Sita had in her hair that morning. Further on, they found the remains of a chariot. Further still were some feathers. Then they found Jatayu who told them, with his dying breath, that Ravana had taken Sita to Lanka. They paused to build a pyre to give Jatayu a proper funeral.

Rama could not win Sita back without help. They met up in Kishkindha with a band of Vanaras or Monkeys. They had discovered the sari-package containing Sita's jewels, dropped from a demon flying towards Lanka. Rama could not expect help without giving help. It took him several months to help the monkeys to victory. The final battle was not without irony, for Rama killed a leader, Vali, who could have saved him a great deal of trouble in the future - certainly he was an easy match for Ravana. Still, Rama met one who was to become his life-long friend and ally - Hanuman, the general and wise counsellor. A son of Vayu, God of the Wind, he was able to achieve superhuman exploits. Filling his lungs he grew to a gigantic size and jumped, returning to his natural size when landing. He soon found Ravana's palace, and gained easy access by reducing himself to the size of a tiny monkey and mingling with the other wild monkeys there. He walked around the huge city without hinderance. The place was heavenly, but its occupants were angry, surly and most unpleasant-looking. He found Ravana's room and his harem when he noticed a walled enclosure. Climbing the wall and into a tree, he saw Sita in conversation with Ravana - clearly trying still to persuade her to become his wife. Ravana stamped his foot in anger, as if any further evidence was needed of Sita's determination. When all was quiet and the guards asleep, Hanuman talked with Sita and received from her a token to give to Rama. Before he left, he rampaged around the palace. When finally captured, his tail was set alight to remind him of his humiliation - but he grew to an enormous size and set fire to all the buildings of the city!

Rama's army moved towards Lanka. They built a huge causeway across the sea to the island. As the monkeys and bears carried boulders, Rama noticed a small squirrel making countless journeys over the causeway. He noticed that it dipped its tail in the sea, covered it with sand, and ran across until all the sand dropped off - not much but it was doing what it could. Finally, the troops poured across. The scene was set for a great battle, the forces of good under Rama, and the forces of evil, with demons and giants, under Ravana, who gave himself ten-fold strength by assuming ten heads and twenty arms. The demons would not negotiate. The battle raged fiercely until, at the point of defeat, Ravana took to the battle-field himself. After a fierce struggle, Lakshmana was injured and Rama used his great bow, the bow of Lord Vishnu himself. The arrows destroyed Ravana's chariot, disarmed him, and smashed his crown. Rama showed mercy, having achieved his effect with minimum force. One result of this was to bring Kumbhakarna into the fray - a giant who had just awoken from a long sleep imposed upon him. Here was the most powerful enemy yet, and it took three of Rama's magic arrows to finish him. Only Ravana remained, the attractive face of evil. In the central dual between Rama and Ravana, each called

upon their full magic powers, countering the magic of the other until Rama called upon Lord Brahma and unleashed the Brahmastra, the weapon which can never fail, which penetrated all Ravana's defences. Thus all evil was destroyed in this battle. It was not without cost, but many were revived by healing herbs.

Sita was rescued by Rama. This should have been a happy event, but it was clouded by Rama's jealousy. A gnawing doubt had overcome him that she had in fact submitted to Ravana during the long months of imprisonment. He met the full force of her anger as she vindicated herself - he had protected her, but now he learned to trust her.

They made their way homewards. In Ayodhya, a festival was proclaimed, as the city went into readiness for the return of Rama and Sita. Bharata met them as they arrived at the gates, and the crowds lit *divas*, small lamps. Rama, with Sita beside him, took the throne and ruled Kosala for many years.

Afterword.

Hinduism is the ancient traditional religion of India and has therefore accumulated a vast amount of story, myth, philosophy, devotional texts and practice. The above is a snapshot but please bear in mind that different areas will have different emphases and even different names for deities. This detail is symbolic, so for example the different deity images celebrate different aspects of deity which can be decoded. Worshippers have different views of literal or symbolic truth, different involvement with philosophy, and different assumptions about the divine. It is therefore a rich and interesting faith for study.