

Thousands in Toronto See Ganesha Miracle

Thousands of Hindus, non-Hindus, believers, non-believers, and sceptics last month flocked to the Vishnu Mandir in Richmond Hill and the Vaisno Devi Mandir in Oakville to witness a miracle.

Carved in marble, Shri Ganesha, Lord [Remover] of all Obstacles, son of Shiva, was 'drinking' milk fed to Him in a spoon...

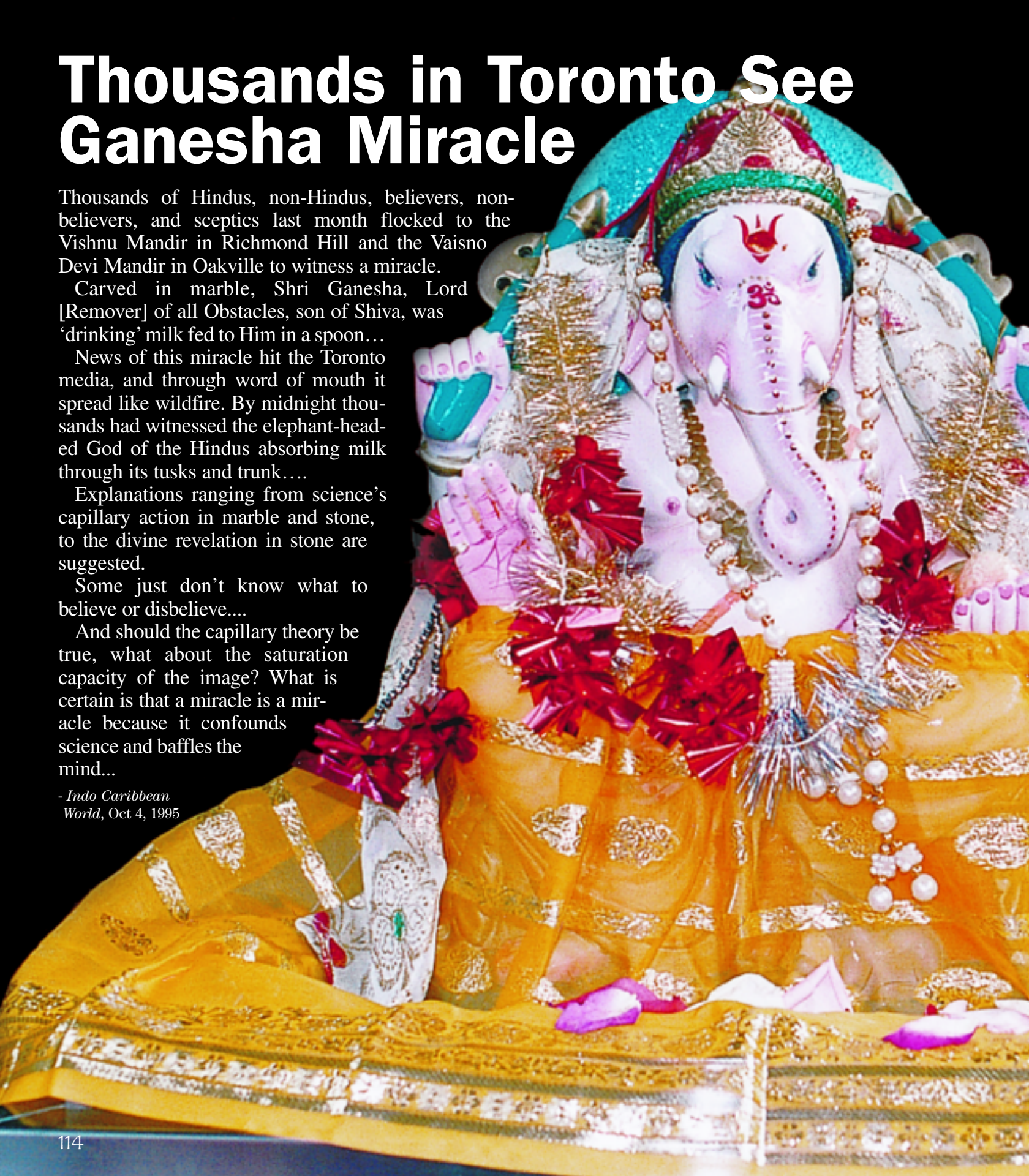
News of this miracle hit the Toronto media, and through word of mouth it spread like wildfire. By midnight thousands had witnessed the elephant-headed God of the Hindus absorbing milk through its tusks and trunk....

Explanations ranging from science's capillary action in marble and stone, to the divine revelation in stone are suggested.

Some just don't know what to believe or disbelieve....

And should the capillary theory be true, what about the saturation capacity of the image? What is certain is that a miracle is a miracle because it confounds science and baffles the mind...

- Indo Caribbean
World, Oct 4, 1995



Chapter Four

Hinduism

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Read the article “Thousands in Toronto See Ganesha Miracle,” and consider the following questions:

1. Describe the “miracle” reported in the article.
2. Identify the possible explanations for the phenomenon proposed by the article.
3. Do you believe in miracles? How would you explain the “miracle” presented in the article?
4. Describe any other miracles that you have witnessed or of which you are aware.

Introduction

Any attempt to define Hinduism through one system or set of beliefs can be a frustrating, if not impossible, task. The name *Hindu* is universally accepted as the word that refers to the indigenous religion of India. *Hindu*, however, is not of Indian, but of Persian, origin. The early Persians used the term *Hindus* to speak of the inhabitants on the other side of the Sindhu River, and today we use the word *Hinduism* to refer to their religion. As the religion of the Hindus spread throughout India, it experienced many modifications but ultimately retained at its core the teachings from which it had originated along the banks of the Sindhu River.

For thousands of years, foreigners who settled in India left their own mark on Hinduism, as the religion assimilated many of their customs and practices. Over the course of time, Hinduism’s resilient nature has enabled it to bend with the course of history, while, at the same time, not become overwhelmed by it. The result has been a multitude of religious sects, each with its own rituals and customs, which share a unity of spirit. Hindus share a common literature, a history of religious thought, and a world view that places spiritual values above earthly concerns.

Many Canadians are quite familiar with some elements of the Hindu faith. Vegetarianism is increasingly popular, especially among young Canadians. Many of us are generally aware of the theory of reincarnation, which suggests that we may live many lives and that our position in the next life is determined by our deeds, or karma, in the present. Meditation and yoga are very popular pastimes among Canadians, and many communities have teachers and practitioners of these activities, which originated in Hindu tradition. Hinduism’s roots run deep and far from Canadian shores, but its modern face is a vibrant part of the current Canadian reality.



Learning Goals

At the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- describe the role of faith in Hinduism
- describe how symbols are used to represent Hindu beliefs
- identify significant sacred writings, for example, Vedas, Ramayana, Bhagavad-Gita, and describe their importance
- identify key passages from a variety of Hindu scriptures and explain their significance
- identify how Hinduism is reflected in art, architecture, music, literature, dance, and cuisine
- analyze the role of women in Hinduism
- describe how Hinduism is reflected in Canada's pluralistic society and identify challenges that Hindus face within this society
- identify the role and responsibility of the Hindu within his or her religion, as well as the stages of his or her development
- describe how Hindu rites of passage reflect Hinduism's central beliefs
- analyze how and why certain rites of passage may have changed over time
- identify how Mahatma Gandhi used religion to oppose prejudice and discrimination
- understand the characteristics and functions of a guru
- evaluate Hinduism's place in the modern age
- identify topics on Hinduism that require quantitative research
- organize, interpret, and evaluate information on Hinduism gathered through research



• **2700–1500 BCE**
Indus Valley civilization

• **1500–1200 BCE**
Aryan settlement

• **1200–900 BCE** (approx.)
Composition of Rig-Veda

• **200 BCE** (approx.)
Composition of Ramayana
in Sanskrit

• **400 BCE–400 CE**
(approx.) Compilation of
Mahabharata

• **1500 CE**
Composition of
Ramayana in Hindi

• **300 CE** (approx.)
Compilation of the code of
Manu





- **1960s CE** Hare Krishna movement founded by Swami Bhaktivedanta in the US; Beatles popularize yoga and meditation in the West

- **1947 CE**

Mahatma Gandhi negotiates India's independence from Britain

- **1948 CE** Mahatma Gandhi assassinated

- **1875 CE** Arya Samaj movement founded by Dayanand Saraswati

- **1858 CE** Britain takes control of India

- **1893 CE** Swami Vivekananda attends the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago

- **1869 CE** Birth of Mahatma Gandhi

- **1838–1917 CE** Hindus taken as labourers to other parts of the world as a result of European colonialism



Timeline

Hinduism

Figure 4.1

Hinduism is the product of the various peoples who have occupied India through time.



ORIGINS

Unlike other religious traditions, for example, Christianity and Buddhism, Hinduism was not founded by a particular individual. Because it was not limited by the influence of any one person, Hinduism absorbed ideas and practices that suited its social and cultural framework as it evolved over thousands of years. This accommodation of new thoughts may account for the generally, inclusive nature of this religion.

Hinduism is the product of the various peoples that have occupied the

region of India through time, which might explain its diverse and complex nature. However, the foundation of Hinduism was probably laid by two groups of people—the Indus Valley civilization and the Aryans.

The Indus Valley Civilization

The earliest evidence of religious thought in India was uncovered during archaeological excavations along the banks of the Indus River (Figures 4.1 and 4.2) in 1926. Archaeologists discovered the remains of a civilization that arose in the Indus Valley between 3000 and 2500 BCE at

Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa (located in present-day Pakistan). This civilization, which extended over the area that is now Pakistan and northwestern India, is referred to as the Indus Valley civilization or the Harappa culture. Evidence shows that the people of this civilization were impressive builders and town planners. They lived in cities that included a central area for civic activities as well as large residential zones. Remarkably, some of the houses in these zones contained a drainage and sewer system that included bathrooms on both the first and second floors.

Some of the buildings in the central and residential areas of Mohenjo-Daro have been identified as worship houses. In these buildings, archaeologists have uncovered stone sculptures that seem to represent a mother goddess and may, in fact, be early depictions of the Hindu goddesses Parvati and Kali (see page 122). Discoveries around the Indus River include many amulets, or charms that protect against evil, and thousands of flat seals. Some of the seals depict a man wearing a head-dress seated in a yoga-like position, surrounded by animals. This male figure may be an early representation of the Hindu god Shiva (see page 122). Other evidence of the religious nature of the Indus Valley civilization includes fire altars and pits lined with bricks, containing ashes and animal bones. These discoveries suggest that this culture participated in religious activities like fire rituals and animal sacrifices.



Figure 4.2

Excavations along the banks of the Indus River have uncovered remains of the ancient Harappa culture. What do we know about this culture?

The Arrival of the Aryans

Around 1500 BCE, thousands of people migrated into India from the northwest, destroying the Indus Valley civilization. It is believed that these people, known as Aryans, hailed from Central Asia and spoke an early form of the ancient language of Sanskrit. The Aryans settled near the river Sindhu and later migrated to the area along the Ganges River.

The Aryan settlers created poems and, later, texts on rituals and philosophy. Aryan religious thought flourished between 1500 to 500 BCE and was embodied in a collection of hymns, ritual texts, and philosophical works called **Vedas**, which are considered Hinduism's earliest sacred writings (see page 141). To this day, Hindus consider the Vedas to be authoritative scripture. The earliest of these texts is the Rig-Veda, which constitutes the earliest record of sacred knowledge on Hinduism. These

Vedas, written in verse, gave rise to prose interpretations called Brahmanas and mystical texts on human existence known as Upanishads (see page 141).

The Aryans lived in awe of the magnificent, yet destructive, forces of nature and worshipped them in the form of deities, or gods. They also worshipped fire, called **Agni**, and believed that it was a link between gods and humans. Worship and prayer rituals to honour and please these deities formed the core of early Hindu practice. The Upanishads combined this notion of prayer with philosophical inquiry about **atman**—the human soul. Closely related to Vayu, the god of wind or air, the atman was considered to be the “breath” of human life and became one of the fundamental principles of Hindu philosophy.

Check Your Understanding

1. Hinduism has no founder. Explain this statement.
2. What did the Indus Valley and Aryan cultures contribute to Hindu thought?
3. What evidence is there that, from a very early stage, Hinduism was a complex web of religious ideas?

BELIEFS

Hinduism is often described as a non-dogmatic religion where one is free to

worship any set of doctrines or rules as his or her conscience dictates. It does not impose its religious beliefs on others, nor does it believe in conversion. However, Hindus are expected to follow certain rules in their personal conduct and in their performance of daily duties; in fact, there is a vast body of rules and rituals for the Hindu to follow for almost every station and stage of life.

Hinduism is a complex web of diverse beliefs and practices generally held together by considerable mutual tolerance and respect. The Hindu view of an unreal world, varied conceptions of god, and a unique view of reality represent a challenging vision for many Canadians.

The Hindu Concept of God

It may not be easy for non-Hindus to understand the Hindu concept of God. Some describe Hinduism as *polytheistic*, meaning a religion of many gods; others describe it as *monotheistic*, which means believing in only one god; it might also be described as *monistic*, where God is an impersonal and unknowable entity. The unique nature of Hinduism seems to reconcile these three different concepts of God, and this quality is what scholars refer to as Hinduism’s “tolerant characteristic.” The early hymns of the Rig-Veda (1200–900 BCE) praise the spirits of natural forces such as Fire, Thunder, Dawn, Water, Earth, and the Sun. The hymns praised individual deities, but the Vedic sages believed that they represented different manifestations or aspects of the same supreme being.

Brahman

The Upanishads refer to this supreme being as Brahman. **Brahman** is an entity without form and quality. It is the soul of the universe from which all existing things arise and into which they all return. It is everything and everywhere. The essence of Brahman is divine, invisible, unlimited, and indescribable. Although Brahman is an entity without form, Hindus are free to imagine Him or Her in any way that is meaningful to them. Thus, Hindus worship different deities that they consider manifestations, or expressions, of Brahman. Brahman is described in the Upanishads as follows:

*As a spider envelops itself with the threads [of its web],
So does he, the One God, envelop himself with [threads]
Sprung from primal matter out of his own essence.
May he grant us entry into Brahman.
The One God, hidden in all creatures.
Pervading all, the Inner Self of all contingent beings,
The overseer of karma abiding in all creatures...
Eternal among eternal, conscious among conscious beings...*

Svetasvatara Upanishad

Hindu Deities

The most prevalent manifestations of Brahman are the gods Brahma,

Vishnu, and Shiva, who are often depicted together as one concept, called the **Hindu Trinity**. They each have a female counterpart, the most prominent one being Parvati, the consort of Shiva.

Brahma

Brahma is the creator of the universe. He has four faces and is seated on a lotus. He holds a book, a rosary, and a gourd. Although he is an important element of the Hindu Trinity, he is not as widely worshipped as Shiva and Vishnu. His female counterpart is Saraswati.

Saraswati

She is the goddess of learning and the arts, which is why she is depicted holding a book and a musical instrument called a veena (Figure 4.3). Her vehicle is a peacock or a swan. Although she is the consort of Brahma, she is often portrayed alone.



Figure 4.3

A statue of Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of learning and the arts

Vishnu

He is the preserver of the universe and is, therefore, a loving and forgiving figure who brings salvation. **Vishnu** (Figure 4.4) has four arms in which he holds a conch shell, a discus, a lotus, and a mace. His vehicle is a divine eagle. This god has many **avatars**, or incarnations, and appears on earth in the form of an animal or a human in order to conquer evil and establish righteousness. Many Hindus believe that one of his incarnations is that of Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism, which is the subject of the next chapter. In many of his manifestations, Vishnu is accompanied by his companion Lakshmi.

Figure 4.4

This ivory statuette depicts the Hindu god Vishnu, the preserver of the universe.



Lakshmi

She is the goddess of wealth, happiness, and good fortune. Lakshmi blesses her worshippers with wealth and liberation. She is often shown rewarding worshippers with gold.

Shiva

He is the destroyer and restorer of the universe and is associated with creative energy. He is considered a great **yogi**, or spiritually evolved individual, and holds a trident, a rosary, and a gourd in his hands. His vehicle is a bull. **Shiva** is also depicted as Nataraj, the god of dance, and is shown holding a drum, serpent, and sacred fire in his hands while performing the dance of creation. He holds water from the sacred Ganges River in his hair. His wife is the goddess **Parvati**.

Parvati

She is a mother goddess whom Hindus worship as **Shakti**, or female energy. She takes on many forms including that of Durga, the warrior goddess, in which she is portrayed riding a tiger and holding many weapons in her hands. She is also depicted as Kali, the fierce destroyer of evil.

Other Hindu Deities

Other popular gods include Ganesha, Subrahmanya, and Hanuman. Ganesha (featured on pages 114-15) is the son of Shiva and Parvati. He has a human body and an elephant's head with only one short tusk. The other tusk is used as a pen to write the wisdom of the scriptures. Hindus worship him as the remover of all obstacles.

Subrahmanya is the second son of Shiva and Parvati. He is also called Kartikeya and is widely worshipped by the Tamil population in southern India. Hanuman is the monkey god. He is a model of devotion and everyone's protector.

Atman

Atman is the human soul or spirit. It is the part of our innermost self that is identical to Brahman, the universal soul. A Hindu's goal in life is to reunite the atman with the Brahman. The famous Sanskrit phrase *tat twam asi*, meaning "you are that" in English, expresses the idea that the atman and the Brahman are inseparable. In that statement, *you* refers to atman while *that* refers to Brahman. The atman is eternal and immortal; when one dies, the atman lives on, shedding the lifeless body to enter a new one. This immortal nature of the atman is described in Hindu scriptures as follows:

He [atman] is not born, nor does he die at any time; nor, having once come to be will he again come not to be. He is unborn, eternal, permanent, and primeval; he is not slain when the body is slain . . .

Just as a man, having cast off old garments, puts on other, new ones, even so does the embodied one, having cast off old bodies, take on other, new ones.

He is uncleavable, he is unburnable, he is undrenchable, as also undryable. He is eternal, all-pervading, stable, immovable, existing from time immemorial.

Reincarnation

As described in the passage above, Hindus believe that the soul does not die along with the body but enters another body to carry on its existence.

This endless cycle of rebirth, or reincarnation, is called **samsara**. In Hindu thought, the physical world in which we live is temporary, ever-changing, and artificial. This imperfect world is referred to as **maya**, and life in it is considered meaningless. Hindus believe that the universe moves through endless cycles of millions of years, subject to the constant themes of creation and destruction. All life is caught in this cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. The goal of Hindus is to achieve **moksha**, or liberation, from the endless cycle of rebirths into this world, and to unite the atman with the Brahman.

Karma is the totality of one's actions in life, and it determines the form that an individual will take when he or she is reborn. The accumulation of bad karma will result in rebirth at a lower station in life or as a lower form of life, such as an animal. The accumulation of good karma will result in rebirth at a higher station in life, which is closer to attaining salvation. In order to achieve salvation, Hindus must work their way up the ladder of existence; they do so by trying to secure rebirth at a higher level. The traditional levels of Hindu society are dictated by the caste system, which is discussed on page 125 of this chapter.

Paths to Salvation

In Hinduism, there are four paths to salvation. The path a Hindu follows generally depends on his or her nature and inclinations. Each path can lead to salvation if the follower is sincere.

Web Quest

To view more images of Hindu deities, go to <http://www.hindunet.org/god/>

Bhakti Yoga (The Path of Devotion)

Bhakti yoga is one of the simpler paths to salvation and involves devotion and love toward a personal deity, for example, Shiva, Vishnu, or Lakshmi. This is a popular path among Hindus because it provides the opportunity to worship Brahman in a concrete way rather than as an abstract notion. Representations of the chosen deity help followers to focus their devotion through prayer and rituals. Devotees surrender themselves to the deity and delight in hearing and singing praises to him or her.

Karma Yoga (The Path of Action)

The key to this path is good deeds and thoughts, which will lead to the accumulation of good karma. Good deeds are unselfish actions that are done not for a reward but because they are morally right or the duty of an individual.

Jnana Yoga (The Path of Wisdom)

This difficult path calls for the guidance of a **guru**, or teacher. Followers learn about the relationship between the Brahman and atman and about the nature of the universe as explained in the scriptures. By knowing the scriptures, following the guru's teachings, and meditating, followers gain the insight necessary to achieve salvation.

Raja Yoga (The Path of Meditation)

Followers of this path achieve salvation through meditation, or deep contemplation, on Brahman. Intense meditation leads to a trance-like state in which the individual acquires

knowledge of the Truth and becomes one with the Brahman. This is a difficult path because it requires strict physical and spiritual discipline.

Dharma

Hindus refer to their religion as **dharma**, which means code of moral and righteous duty. The concept of dharma pertains to the duties and responsibilities of the individual, and it is considered essential to the welfare of the individual, the family, and society. Essentially, there are two kinds of dharma mentioned in the scriptures: *sanatana dharma* and *varnashrama dharma*. Simply translated, *sanatana dharma* means “eternal religion” and refers to universal values and principles that apply to all people regardless of religion, nationality, age, sex, or profession. *Varnashrama dharma* concerns the specific duties of each individual with respect to age, sex, and status in society.

The Caste System

By the end of the Vedic period, Indian society was organized into categories commonly known as castes. The basic structure of the **caste system** seems to have its roots in Vedic hymns on creation, which divide humanity into four classes, or varnas. The four varnas are as follows (from highest to lowest): **Brahmins**, **Kshatriyas**, **Vaishyas**, and **Sudras**.

As discussed earlier in the chapter, people are born into each varna according to the karma they have accumulated in their previous lives. People of different castes live very different lives and are not allowed to

dine together or marry each other. Figure 4.5 illustrates the occupations, goals, duties, and required characteristics of each varna, according to *The Laws of Manu*, an early Indian law book.

Untouchables

There is a fifth group outside the traditional four castes. The people of this group are called “untouchables” because they engage in what are considered “unclean” occupations, such as tanning leather, removing dead animals, or washing toilets. Degraded by the nature of their work, they have lived separately from those in the other castes.

Mahatma Gandhi, India’s most influential political, spiritual, and social leader, fought to have these people included in the mainstream of Indian society.

The Caste System Today

Today, India’s Charter of Rights bans discrimination on the basis of gender, caste, race, or religion. The Indian government has introduced a number of social welfare programs and economic initiatives to improve the living conditions of those who have suffered as a result of the caste system. The president of India, K. R. Narayanan, is

Varna (Caste)	Occupations	Goals	Duties	Required Characteristics
Brahmin	priests, religious teachers	knowledge, education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • performance of rituals and sacrifices • pursuit of arts, sciences, ethics, philosophy, and religious study • research and teaching 	highly developed intellect, discipline
Kshatriya	warriors, rulers	political power, diplomacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • government • maintenance of law and order • protection from foreign invaders 	physical strength and courage, governing skills
Vaishya	merchants, farmers	wealth, commerce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • management of wealth • trade with other societies 	management and entrepreneurial skills
Sudra	servants, labourers	manual skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • service to other castes 	ability to acquire particular skills

Figure 4.5 The caste system. What determines a person’s placement in one of the above castes?

a member of this fifth caste, which is popularly known today as the *dalits*. The late Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who is the principal author of modern-day India's constitution, also hailed from this oppressed group.

Figure 4.6

The Hindu stages of life. How do your responsibilities as a student compare to those outlined in the first stage of this chart?

Stage	Responsibilities
Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • discipline mind and body • gain knowledge • learn rules and rituals of Hinduism • show respect toward elders
Householder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • marry and have a family • provide for the family • give to charity • care for family elders • practise social and religious traditions
Forest Dweller	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • retire and transmit household duties to wife or son • read and study • participate in religious pilgrimages
Ascetic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • give up worldly life • wander • meditate • attain salvation

The Four Stages of Life

The caste system and the Four Stages of Life, outlined in Figure 4.6, represent the social aspect of karma since they define the actions for which people are responsible in society. Women normally do not enter the last two stages, and very few men enter the stage of ascetic.

Four Aims or Goals of Life

The Four Goals of Life outlined in this section constitute for a Hindu a personal value system that incorporates his or her material desires and spiritual needs. These goals are as follows:

Dharma: conducting one's duties with compassion toward all beings, forbearance, absence of jealousy, purity, tranquility, goodness, absence of cruelty, and absence of greed

Artha: earning money by honest means to provide for the family; acquiring wealth and power

Kama: pursuing love and physical pleasures to balance life and to sanctify marriage

Moksha: leading the soul toward salvation through honest and moral actions

Profile!

Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948)

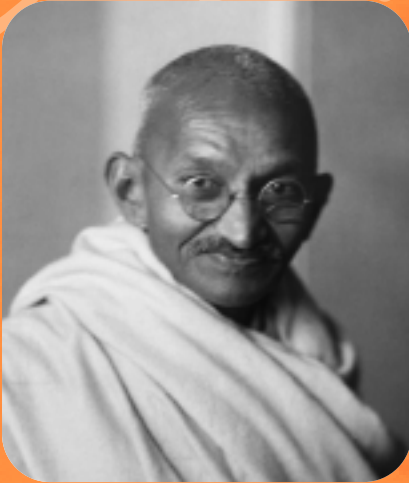


Figure 4.7

Mahatma Gandhi is, perhaps, the best-known Hindu in the world and is considered the father of his country. He has been called one of the most influential figures of the twentieth century and has had a profound impact on the religious conscience of humankind. Born in India in 1869, he married when he was fifteen and his wife was thirteen. He studied law in England and practised law in South Africa between 1893 and 1914, where he fought against colonial laws that discriminated against the Indians who settled there. Guided by the teachings of the Bhagavad-Gita (see page 144) and the New Testament, he showed great admiration and tolerance for all religions. He gained solace and inspiration from the teachings of the Bhagavad-Gita and based his religious ideals on the concepts of dharma (duty), **satya** (truth), **ahimsa** (non-violence), and moksha (spiritual liberation).

When he returned to India in 1915, he immediately embarked on a non-violent mission to end British rule. He entered politics in 1919 and became the leader of the Indian National Congress. He used his theory of satyagraha, or insistence on truth, as a political weapon and insisted that his followers be guided by the following four religious principles: truth, non-violence, self-control, and penance. By practising spiritual values, Gandhi was trying to change the governance of India as well as

peoples' lives. He negotiated the independence of India in 1947. Gandhi spent most of his life opposing social injustice in Hindu society and working to improve the condition of minority groups in India, such as Muslims, women, and the "untouchables" of the Indian caste system. Gandhi accepted the caste system on a spiritual level, but did not accept its social implications because he opposed the privileges of the high-caste Hindus. He fought passionately for the rights of the "untouchables," and, as a result of his efforts, discrimination against this group was eventually outlawed. He demonstrated the principle of ahimsa by respecting all living things, and he was prepared to die for a righteous cause. In 1948, he was assassinated by a fanatic Hindu.

Quotes by Gandhi

Real education consists in drawing the best out of yourself. What better book can there be than the book of humanity?

An eye for an eye only ends up making the world blind.

I know of no greater sin than to oppress the innocent in the name of God.

QUESTIONS

1. How did Mahatma Gandhi use religion to oppose prejudice and discrimination?
2. Which quotation by Gandhi appeals to you the most? Why?

Women in Hinduism

The Hindu law book, *The Laws of Manu*, which was written at the beginning of the Common Era, provides contradictory views on the status and duties of Hindu women. The two following passages illustrate these opposing views:

Women must be honoured and adorned by their fathers, husbands, and brothers, and brothers-in-laws who desire welfare/Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased, but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields reward.

The Laws of Manu, 3.56.

By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be independent.

The Laws of Manu, 5.147–148

The first passage suggests that women hold a place of honour in the home, and that it is the sacred duty of men to honour and provide for them. The second passage portrays women as subordinate to and dependent on the men in their life. The latter passage seems to reflect the reality of most Hindu women, especially those in the lower levels of society, who are deprived of an education.

Divorce is not encouraged but it is allowed in today's Hindu world. As more women work outside the home, gender roles are changing, but women still carry the bulk of household duties. Government and other educational and religious institutions are now providing better opportunities for women to develop literacy skills and participate in the work force.

Conversely, Hindu women from the privileged classes have been working and excelling in their fields for some time. They are doctors, professors, authors, lawyers, parliamentarians, officers in the armed forces, ambassadors, etc. One of the first three women prime ministers in the world was a Hindu woman named Indira Gandhi (Figure 4.8). She was the prime minister of India from 1966 to 1977 and again from 1980 until her death in 1984. Her aunt, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, became the first woman president of the United Nations in 1953.

Figure 4.8

Indira Gandhi was prime minister of India from 1966 to 1977 and 1980 to 1984.



Check Your Understanding

1. Explain the difference between the following terms:

- Brahman, atman
- dharma, karma
- *samsara*, moksha

2. Indicate the significance of the Hindu deities listed below.

How are they portrayed and why?

- Saraswati
- Lakshmi
- Shiva
- Ganesha

3. Review the material on the caste system, and, working with a partner, create a list of the positive and negative aspects of

caste. Summarize your view of the caste system in a written paragraph.

4. Summarize the responsibilities of a Hindu at each stage of his or her life. Each of these stages roughly corresponds to twenty-five years. How are your responsibilities at each of these stages similar? How are they different?

5. Write a letter to a female Hindu goddess such as Lakshmi or Parvati, and outline your views and concerns about the role of women in Hinduism.

PRACTICES, RITUALS, SYMBOLS, AND FESTIVALS

Practices and Rituals

The Hindu lives his or her religion through worship rituals that have been transmitted from one generation to another. Hindus worship in many different ways, and there is no standard form. Daily worship takes place mainly at home; going to the temple for prayer is not absolutely necessary. A Hindu child learns about the religion and its festivals by observation and by taking part in rituals at home. Many Hindus begin their day with some kind of religious ritual, for example, greeting the sun; others per-

form their rituals in the evenings or on weekends. Most Hindus purify themselves with water before participating in a religious ritual, usually by taking a bath.

The syllable **om** (see page 133), which represents the supremacy of Brahman, is chanted at the beginning and end of all Hindu prayers and readings of scripture. In a practice called *japa*, worshippers chant the names of deities repeatedly as well as sacred phrases called **mantras**. The following mantra, which Hindus chant to greet the sun, is considered one of the most important: “I meditate on the brilliance of the sun; may it illumine my intellect.”

Worship at Home

A peek in a Hindu home reveals an elaborately decorated shrine that serves as an altar for worship. The shrine is adorned by images of deities, which are usually in the form of framed pictures or copper and marble statues. These images serve as points of focus to help the mind concentrate on the abstract ideals that the deities represent.

The most common form of home worship is called **puja**, a form of thanksgiving in which offerings are made to the deities. Devotees place all of the offerings on a tray near the shrine and present them to the deities at certain points in the worship. Offerings include flowers, fruits, incense sticks, water, milk, clarified

butter, and a lamp. A traditional puja follows sixteen steps, and it is usually performed by worshippers on festival days and special occasions. All pujas conclude with the waving of a lamp, called *arati*, around the altar while worshippers sing hymns and verses of praise. After the final prayers are recited, some of the food that has been offered to the deities—and is now considered blessed—is redistributed to those present at the ceremony as a gift from the deities; this gift is called **prasad**. **Homa** is a ritual that involves the burning of offerings in a fire that has been blessed by a priest. At special pujas, families invite a priest, who is from the Brahmin caste in most cases, to perform the ceremony.

Figure 4.9

A Hindu family performs a puja, with the help of a priest. What kinds of offerings are shown in the picture?



Worship in Temples

Worship in a Hindu temple is not a requirement, nor is it a necessity. Hindus usually visit temples during festivals or for special functions. Worship in a temple is conducted by a priest and his helpers. The priest leads the devotions each day. In the morning, he rings the temple bells, prepares the deities, and offers fresh flowers, incense, and food on behalf of devotees. In the evening, devotees sing sacred hymns and share in *arati* and *prasad*. Images of deities in temples are treated like royalty. The deities are given ritual baths, adorned, and taken on procession on special occasions. Worshippers revere and bow to them in prayer.

On festival days and on other special occasions when the reading of the scriptures takes place over several nights, many families join in worship. Hindus in the West also go to the temple to learn more about their religion. Many temples offer classes that teach children Hindu prayers and hymns, called *bhajans*.

The Significance of the Cow

Most Hindus refrain from eating beef since they consider the cow sacred to their culture and beliefs.

“Holy cow” is a familiar expression that refers to Hinduism’s reverence of cows. Hindus adore the cow as a manifestation of all that is good and precious. They attribute its docility to its vegetarian nature, and aspire to a vegetarian lifestyle.

Yoga and Meditation

To Hindus, yoga and meditation are spiritual disciplines. **Yoga**, in the strict Hindu sense, means “yoke,” that is, the atman in union with the Brahman. To achieve this union with God, **meditation** is necessary. The practice of meditation requires a sitting posture, which meditators can comfortably maintain for long periods of time.

Meditators try to control their breathing so that it is regular and will not break their concentration. They then concentrate on a single object, sound, or idea until they are in a deep meditative state and are experiencing the divine presence. Undoubtedly, the real experts are the **swamis**, or holy men of India, who have dedicated their lives to meditation. Many of them travel from India on a regular basis to lecture and teach in Canada.

Pilgrimages

Pilgrimages, or journeys to holy places as acts of devotion, are an important element of Hinduism. One holy place that all Hindus strive to visit, at least once in a lifetime, is the holy city of Varanasi (formerly known as Benares), which is located along the west bank of the holy Ganges River. It is believed that the Ganges River fell from heaven to earth, giving life to people and watering the plains that produce much-needed food. Bathing in the river is the first thing pilgrims do when they arrive, and it is a daily rite for local residents. Hindus believe that bathing in the Ganges cleanses them of their sins.

Holy Places

The City of Varanasi

Benares [Varanasi] is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together.

—Mark Twain

Varanasi (formerly called Benares) is India's holiest city and one of the oldest cities in the world. It is situated on the west bank of the holy Ganges River, and is also known to Hindus as Kashi, the City of Lights. Varanasi is the home of God Shiva. Of the 1500 temples in the city, the Vishvanatha Temple (Figure 4.10), which is dedicated to Shiva, is perhaps the most revered. What is most significant about Varanasi is the belief that virtually every step of the city is marked by a *linga*, a symbol that represents the creative energy of Shiva. According to Hindu mythology, the entire sacred zone of Varanasi is one great *linga* of light that once burst through the earth and pierced the heavens in the presence of Brahma and Vishnu—the other deities in the Hindu Trinity. Pilgrims walk around this great *linga*, which is about 40 km long. It usually takes five days to complete this holy rite.

Today, Varanasi is home to many *ashrams*, or Hindu learning centres, that have housed famous poets, mystics, and itinerant holy men. The city continues the tradition of education through the Benares Hindu University, founded in 1905.

Hinduism is not the only religion that considers Varanasi a holy place. Varanasi is the birthplace of Tirthankara Parsvanatha, a spiritual teacher of Jainism, who was born there during the eighth century BCE. Three hundred years later, the Buddha gave his first sermon in the groves of Sarnath, in Varanasi, and so started the Buddhist sangha, or community of monks. Today, it is an important pilgrimage destination for Buddhists from around the world.



Figure 4.10

QUESTIONS

1. Why is Varanasi an important pilgrimage destination for Hindus?
2. Assume that you are a Canadian Hindu who has just visited the holy city of Varanasi. Write a half- to one-page journal entry describing the experience.

Symbols and Icons

There are many symbols in Hinduism, and they are all considered sacred. These symbols are concrete representations of abstract religious thought. Some of the most important Hindu symbols are presented in this section. In Hinduism, symbols that represent an aspect of Brahman serve as personal aids and reminders of this divine spirit. By focusing on these symbols, Hindus try to gain an awareness of this all-mighty entity and its universal presence.

Swastika

This Hindu good luck symbol represents “well-being.” The Hindu

swastika is usually illustrated in red and is used on wedding invitations, decorative drawings, textiles, and in rituals to bring good luck and protect against evil. Unfortunately, a modified version of this symbol (with the arms bent in a clockwise direction) was adopted by the Nazi regime of Adolf Hitler and has negative connotations in the non-Hindu world.

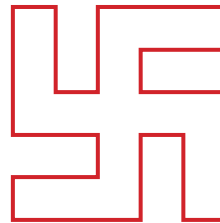


Figure 4.11

Symbols and Icons

Om

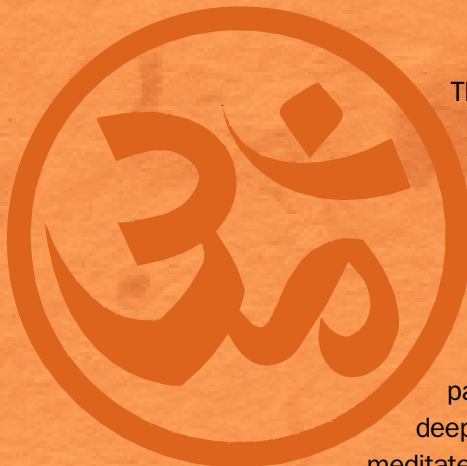


Figure 4.12

This important Hindu symbol represents the sacred syllable om. This syllable is made up of three sounds: *a-u-m*. When *a* and *u* come together, they make the sound *o*. The sound of the syllable begins deep within the body and ends at the lips. Hindus use this syllable as a mantra to evoke the supreme essence of Brahman. Om is believed to contain the secrets of the universe and is chanted at the beginning of prayers, blessings, and meditation. It is considered the first and most sacred sound and is believed to contain the essence of true knowledge. Om symbolizes the first three Vedas—the present, past, and future—and the three states of consciousness—waking, dreaming, and deep sleep. The symbol and the sound that it represents are not worshipped but meditated on as a means to gain enlightenment.

QUESTIONS

1. What does om represent to Hindus?
2. Make the room quiet, and try gently chanting “om” for a few minutes. Describe what happens.

Nataraj



Figure 4.13

The image representing Shiva as Nataraj, the Lord of Dance, is a prevalent Hindu icon (Figure 4.13). It shows the four-handed Shiva whirling and playing the drum with his upper right hand. The drum symbolizes sound, speech, and the divine truth heard through revelation. His dance symbolizes energy and the endless cycle of creation and destruction.

Forehead Marks



Figure 4.14

Some Hindu men and women mark a symbol, called a *tilak*, on their foreheads to indicate the deity that they worship. Devotees of Vishnu (Figure 4.14) use sandalwood paste, those of Shiva use ashes, and those of the goddess Parvati use red powder. The signs are worn on the forehead, between the eyebrows, to symbolize the third eye of wisdom.

Many married Hindu women mark their foreheads with a red dot called *bindi*. It signifies that a woman is married and should be respected as such. It is applied daily after a bath and puja, as well as on special occasions.

Festivals

There are many Hindu festivals, and they are joyous, colourful occasions. Among other things, these special events celebrate the birthdays of important deities and seasonal changes. The occurrence of Hindu festivals is based on the lunar calendar.

Diwali

This festival of lights is Hinduism's most popular celebration. In India, it is normally celebrated over five days at the end of October or the beginning of November. In most other countries, like Canada, **Diwali** is observed on only one evening, but is preceded and followed by days of festivities (Figure 4.15). During this festival, Hindus set off fireworks, decorate their houses with lights, give gifts, and wear new clothes to celebrate the triumph of good and knowledge over the dark forces of evil and ignorance. Lavish vegetarian dinners are prepared, and a traditional puja is performed at dusk before the feast begins. Diwali hon-

ours Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and good fortune, and Vishnu, who defeated the demon Naraka. This festival also commemorates Rama's return to his kingdom after defeating Ravana, the evil king who had abducted his wife, Sita, in the Ramayana.

Holi

Holi is a spring festival that Hindus usually celebrate sometime in March, on the full-moon day of the last month in the Hindu calendar. The night before, worshippers light a bonfire that signifies the burning of evil. According to Hindu legend, the young Prahalad was resented by his wicked father for being pious and God-fearing. His evil aunt took Prahalad away and tried to burn him in a fire. Instead, she was burned to ashes. To mark this festival, Hindus of all ages join in the merriment of squirting coloured water on friends and family members. They distribute and eat sweets and other foods.

Mahashivaratri

This event takes place on the day before the new moon, during the month of February. Strictly speaking, Mahashivaratri is not a festival nor a feast. It is a special event dedicated to the devotion of Shiva. Devotees worship him, keep vigil, and fast for twenty-four hours; those who are unable to fast eat light vegetarian meals. Between midnight and sunrise, devotees worship him by repeating his name and placing flowers and grains on his image. Water is poured in a steady stream from a copper vessel suspended over the image.

Navaratri

This "Nine Nights" festival is held in the spring and autumn. On the first three nights of Navaratri, Hindus worship the goddess Durga, a manifestation of Parvati, who washes away laziness and evil thoughts. The next three nights, with a mind better prepared for spiritual guidance, they offer puja



Figure 4.15

Canadian Hindus celebrate Diwali with a parade. What is the origin of this festival?

to Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and good fortune. The final three nights are dedicated to Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge and learning. On the tenth day, worshippers observe Vijayadasami, or the Day of Victory.

Check Your Understanding

1. Describe the following Hindu practices and indicate their significance:

- puja
- yoga and meditation
- the distribution of prasad

2. How does the practice of vegetarianism reflect Hindu beliefs and principles? Are you or any of your friends vegetarian? Why or why not?

3. Briefly identify and describe any two Hindu symbols.

4. Identify the significance of the Hindu festivals listed below, and describe how Hindus celebrate them.

- Diwali
- Holi
- Navaratri

5. Assume that you are a reporter for the local community paper or, perhaps, your school newspaper. Write a feature article introducing your readers to the central elements of Hindu worship.

MILESTONES

Life is a series of events and steps from birth to death or, as the Hindu would say, “from conception to crema-

tion.” In Hinduism, each step, or rite of passage, is called a *samskara*. There are forty such rites, which illustrates the importance of these rituals to the development of the individual within Hindu society. Of the approximately forty rituals, sixteen are central to the religion. However, in actual practice, few people observe them all. Some of the most important rites are presented below. Priests officiate at all these rites, which are attended by relatives and friends.

Naming a Child

Traditionally, in Hinduism a child is named by a priest ten days after birth. While orthodox Hindu families continue this tradition today, for most Hindus, this ceremony has become a symbolic gesture. Many parents choose a name even before their baby is born. Nevertheless, because a baby is considered a blessing and an occasion for celebration, most Hindu parents continue to hold some sort of informal naming ceremony performed by a priest.

A Child's First Outing

The purpose of the first formal excursion outside the home is to expose the child to the environment and the neighbours. The occurrence of this event depends on the health of the baby as well as the climate and weather conditions of his or her surroundings. The parents and child take a bath and wear new clothes. The parents apply a dab of soot to the baby's forehead for protection from the evil eye. With the infant in their arms, the mother and father offer a simple prayer to the deities and

then take the baby out for a short walk. Special care is taken to avoid overexposure to the sun or other weather-related conditions.

First Solid Food

This ritual takes place about seven to eight months after the birth of the child, depending on his or her health. On the day of the ceremony, parents recite a special prayer asking the deities to bring good health and long life to the child. The father then begins the feeding by giving the child a small portion of boiled rice mixed with ghee (clarified butter) and honey.

First Haircut

Between the ages of six to eight months, the hair of a baby boy is cut by the local barber. The barber completely shaves the head, except for a small tuft of hair at the front. In southern India, some girls are given a haircut as well.

Thread Initiation Ceremony (Upanayana)

Upanayana is a sacred initiation ceremony performed by boys of the Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya castes between the ages of eight to twelve. It marks the boy's transition into the student stage of life, where he is expected to begin his studies of the sacred texts. During this ceremony, which takes place over two days, the boy wears a sacred thread over his left shoulder and chants a mantra.

Marriage

Marriage is a sacred milestone that marks the bride and groom's entry

into the householder stage of life, described on page 126 of the chapter. This stage of life, called *grihasta*, sanctifies the bond between the bride and groom and the future fulfillment of their social responsibilities.

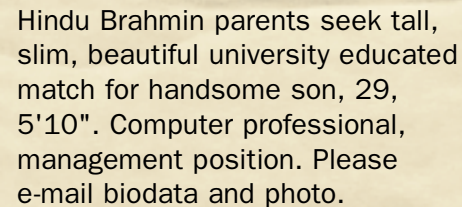
In India, arranged marriages are a common practice. Among Hindus born in the West, love matches are more common. Whatever the route to marriage, parents scrutinize the other family to make sure that the bride and groom are socially, culturally, and financially compatible. When the parents agree on a marriage, they arrange an engagement, where the father of the groom formally asks for the woman's hand in marriage to his son. Most of the family elders are present at this ceremony because a marriage is not only a union of two people but also of two families. After the engagement, an auspicious, or favourable, date is set for the wedding.

The wedding ceremony lasts for approximately three hours. It is performed by a priest, who is usually assisted by another priest. A traditional Hindu wedding (Figure 4.17) can be an elaborate affair consisting of about fifteen rituals. In today's busy world, these rituals are shortened. Some of the most important include the giving away of the bride by the father, the giving of auspiciousness to the bride by the groom's family, the clasping of hands by the couple, and the couple taking seven steps around a sacred fire. During the giving of auspiciousness, the groom's family gives the bride a necklace or string that she wears around her neck for the rest of her married life.

Exploring Issues:

The majority of Hindu marriages in India are arranged. This custom is not strictly followed by Hindus living outside of India. In Canada, traditional Hindu families are caught in the social battle of arranged marriages. For many Hindu girls, it is not a matter of choice, but a matter of honour or shame. Families feel disgraced and devastated if a girl does not marry or if her marriage fails. To Hindu families who place importance on status, caste, colour, and creed, resistance to arranged marriages is becoming a growing social problem.

AT ISSUE: Are arranged marriages a good idea?



Hindu Brahmin parents seek tall, slim, beautiful university educated match for handsome son, 29, 5'10". Computer professional, management position. Please e-mail biodata and photo.

Figure 4.16 Advertisements like this one for suitable marriage partners are common in South Asian magazines and newspapers.

The following article “First Comes Marriage, Then Comes Love” was written by Ira Mathur, an Indian-born journalist living in Trinidad, who writes for the *Trinidad Guardian*, the island’s leading daily newspaper.

First Comes Marriage, Then Comes Love

by Ira Mathur

A suitable boy is first spotted by Bharati Narvani’s uncle at a wedding in New Delhi, India. Bharati then lived in Trinidad where her parents migrated some 25 years ago from the Gujarat region of India. The 21-year-old university graduate was brought up with the customs and values of India. The boy, Manoj Solanki, 29, a civil engineer, is also of Gujarati parentage. Born in Liberia and educated in England, he went to India with his parents to find a bride.

Soon after that New Delhi wedding, Bharati accompanies her parents to India on one of their regular visits. She knows that her parents are making this trip with the hope of finding a groom for her. She is amenable to the idea. Bharati was never allowed to date, or mingle freely with boys her age. She didn’t rebel, unlike some of her peers in Trinidad’s Indian community.

Her friend, Sujata, the daughter of a well-known surgeon, reluctantly agreed to marry the son of a family friend in India. Before the wedding, she committed suicide by drinking gramoxone, a poisonous pesticide. Sujata was in love with a young man in Trinidad, and was too afraid to tell her parents. There is speculation that she might have been pregnant, and saw no other way out.

That will not be Bharati’s fate. She will follow the ancient script of courtship and marriage that still prevails widely throughout India.

Once the Narvanis arrive in New Delhi, the uncle—the closest senior male relative in India—arranges a meeting of the two families. Manoj is accompanied by his mother and aunt, Bharati by her mother and uncle. A discreet discussion takes place among the elders: Is Manoj able to support a wife? Can Bharati adapt to a foreign country? . . .

Arranged Marriages

Finally the couple are given a chance to talk alone in another room. Manoj, being more confident, breaks the awkward silence with a joke. In between light bantering, the two manage to ask and answer serious questions about one another. Asking whether Bharati likes Indian movies, for instance, tells him how strong her cultural ties are. She wants to know whether Manoj expects her to be a housewife or will he be happy with her working? Will she live with her in-laws? His answers reassure her that they will live alone, that she is free to work, and that she can visit her parents whenever possible.

The attraction between the couple is immediate...

A month later, there is an elaborate engagement ceremony. Soon after, the wedding takes place in the couple's ancestral home of Baroda, Gujarat...

Earlier this year, the newlyweds visited Trinidad with their infant son for a huge reception given by the Narvani family. Bharati is radiant in her traditional bridal outfit. Manu, as she affectionately calls her husband, looks smugly satisfied. Those of us who knew Bharati before she was married have to admit she has gained confidence, matured and looks very happy.

Bharati's mother, Manju, misses her daughter tremendously, but is satisfied that the arranged marriage was the best she could have done for her.

It can also go horribly wrong. Meena, a 20-year-old high school graduate from Hyderabad in India, ended up—through an arranged marriage—with a computer analyst ten years her senior. Sharing their home in Los Angeles, California, was her husband's American girlfriend.

Indian society is quick to reject divorced, separated or abandoned women. If Meena went home, her parents' status in society would be shattered. Their pride and honour—on which the highest premium is placed—would make them societal rejects. She had no choice but to accept her husband's mistress and live as a semi-servant in his house.

Many Indians contend that arranged marriages are more successful than marriages in the West, particularly given the latter's staggering divorce rates. Romantic love does not necessarily lead to a good marriage, and often fails once the passion dissipates, they argue. Real love flows from a properly arranged union between two individuals...

QUESTIONS

- 1. Make a list of arguments supporting and opposing arranged marriages. Do you think arranged marriages are a good idea? Present your opinion in a letter to the author of this article.**
- 2. What advice would you give to a devout Hindu friend who respects his or her parents but does not want to be involved in an arranged marriage?**

A Hindu wedding ceremony is followed by a grand feast. Festivities can be quite extravagant and may include singing, dancing, drumming, fireworks, and, even, riding on a white horse.



Figure 4.17

This traditional Hindu wedding is taking place in Southern India. How would you describe a traditional Hindu wedding?

Death and Cremation

When a Hindu dies, a solemn ceremony, which includes cremation by fire, is performed. Under the direction of a priest, family members bathe and dress the body in new, but traditional, clothing, leaving the face uncovered. Light and flowers are offered to the spirit of the deceased before the procession to the crematorium takes place. The name of Lord Rama is chanted, and hymns, or holy songs, are sung.

The priest recites passages from the holy scriptures to sanctify the fire. Then the oldest son, or a male member of the family, lights the pyre or, in a modern crematorium, pushes the button to begin the cremation. The family collects the ashes in an urn and scatters them in the holy rivers of India or any other body of water. On the tenth and thirteenth days after the funeral, relatives, friends, and neighbours gather for a special prayer and a feast.

Death Anniversary (Shraddha)

This ceremony marks the anniversary of a death. The priest performs religious rites, and family members, friends, and other guests are invited to witness the ceremony and enjoy a meal.

Check Your Understanding

- Identify five Hindu milestones.
 - What is the significance of the thread and the marriage ceremonies?
- How have the rites below changed over time? How would you explain these changes?
 - naming a child
 - marriage ceremony
 - cremation ceremony
- In your view, which of the rites of passage presented in this section is the most significant? Why?

SACRED WRITINGS

Unlike many other religious traditions, which have a single source of scripture, for example, the Bible, Hinduism has a number of sources, or books, that it considers sacred texts. Hindu scriptures consist of over 200 books that were composed from about 1500 BCE until about 1500 CE. Hindu scriptures are classified as being *shruti* or *smriti*. *Shruti* is knowledge that is revealed or “discovered” by the rishis, or seers of Hinduism. This wisdom is contained in the Vedas. *Smriti* is “human-made” literature, or knowledge that is “remembered.”

The Vedas

The four **Vedas**, composed around 1500 BCE, are considered the oldest and most authoritative Hindu scriptures. They are a collection of writings on subjects ranging from the divine spirit to medicine and the sciences. Before 1500 BCE, these compositions were memorized and transmitted orally from teacher to student.

The four Vedas include the Rig-Veda, which comprises 1028 hymns (contained in ten books) that praise the ancient deities; the Yajur-Veda, a priest’s “handbook” for the performance of fire sacrifices; the Sama-Veda, which consists of melodies, chants, and tunes for the singing of hymns; and the Atharva-Veda, which contains magical formulas, chants, spells, and charms. Each Veda contains the following types of compositions:

- **Mantras:** psalms of praise that constitute the main body of Vedas
- **Brahmanas:** prose manual for priests on prayer and ritual
- **Aranyakas:** “forest books” for saints and hermits
- **Upanishads:** philosophical commentaries that appear at the end of each Veda

The Upanishads

These concluding sections of the Vedas, which are collectively called Vedanta and form the basis of Hindu philosophy, have dominated Indian life and thought for 3000 years. There are over 200 Upanishads; of these, sixteen are considered to be the most important. Some of these include Isa, Katha, Prasna, Kena, and Mandukya. The Upanishads discuss topics such as the mind, the senses, worship, meditation, and the various means of liberation. They also discuss concepts that represent Hinduism’s most central beliefs, including Brahman, atman, karma, samsara, moksha, and maya.

The Ramayana and the Mahabharata

India’s two great epics, the **Ramayana** and the **Mahabharata**, are popular vehicles for spreading Hindu ideals of moral conduct. These *smriti* texts have such a grip on the Hindu imagination and such wide appeal that they

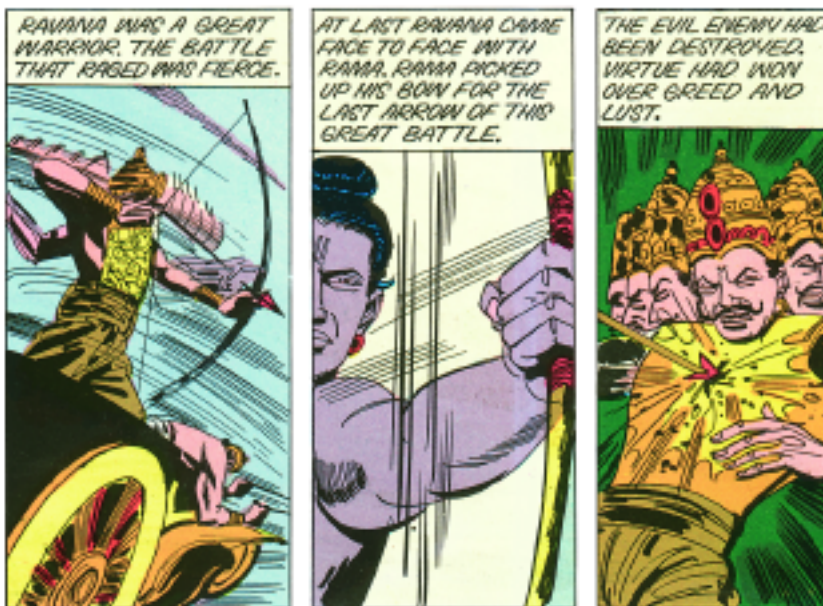
have both been produced for television in over 100 episodes. The Ramayana even appears in comic-strip format in magazines and on the Internet (Figure 4.18). The Ramayana was written in Sanskrit around 200 BCE, about 200 years after the Mahabharata. However, the Ramayana deals with incidents that took place before the events of the Mahabharata.

The Ramayana

There are about twenty-six different versions of the Ramayana, but the most popular one was written around 1500 CE by Tulsidas, a contemporary of Shakespeare. It was the first scripture to be translated into Hindi from Sanskrit. This epic contains 24 000 verses. It is the story of Prince **Rama**, who is worshipped throughout the Hindu world as the seventh avatar, or

incarnation, of God Vishnu. He was exiled to the forest for fourteen years so that his half-brother Bharata could become king. Sita, Rama's wife, and his other half-brother Lakshmana followed the prince in exile. Unprotected in the forest dwelling, Sita was abducted by the wicked Ravana, who was disguised as a beggar. A battle ensued where Rama, assisted by Hanuman (king of the monkeys), defeated Ravana, rescued his wife, and returned triumphantly to his kingdom. Taken as a whole, the epic represents the constant struggle between good and evil, where good eventually prevails. The following is an excerpt from the Ramayana:

Figure 4.18
The Ramayana appears in comic-strip format in magazines and on the Internet. Is this a good way to present an epic?



Forcing his way past Lakshmana, Raavana [Ravana] precipitated himself against Raama [Rama] with all the pent-up fury of hatred and revenge and strove to overwhelm him with a spate of arrows.

Raama easily baffled these arrows with his own and struck Raavana repeatedly, without however being able to penetrate his Armour. Thus they fought, these supreme bowmen, each bent on slaying the other and using increasingly potent missiles of secret power, while the gods in heaven looked on in marvel and admiration. Neither hero had met such another opponent before and on both sides admiration was mingled with wrath. . . .

The Mahabharata

This monumental work, which is the longest poem in the world and comprises about 100 000 verses, appears to be the work of many authors. It was probably compiled between 400 BCE and 400 CE. The Mahabharata is the story of two forces: the Pandavas, who represent good, and the Kauravas, who represent evil. There is a war between the Kuru princes and the five Pandu princes, and after many intrigues and adventures, the evil forces of the Kauravas are defeated by the Pandavas, who rule for many years.

The Puranas (Myths)

The word *Purana* means “old narrative.” They are *smritis* that form a distinct category of Sanskrit religious literature. This literature describes the exploits of the deities in thirty-six volumes, eighteen of which are widely used. Each Purana usually begins with the name of the god or incarnation it glorifies, for example, Vishnu Purana, Bramha Purana, and Shiva Purana. These legends are mostly used by temple priests and were composed between the sixth and sixteenth centuries CE.

Manusmriti (The Laws of Manu)

This Hindu law book affirms the Hindu concepts of dharma, caste, and the four aims of life. It deals with reli-

gious practice, law, customs, and politics. Brahmins accept this book as authoritative, but it is rejected by other castes. The present text, compiled around 300 CE, contains 2600 verses. In India, Hindus refer to this text for guidance on matters such as family property, inheritance, marriage, adoption, and guardianship. All other legal matters are subject to Indian secular law.

Check Your Understanding

1. a) What is the difference between shruti and smriti scriptures?
b) Identify five sacred texts of the Hindu tradition and classify them as shruti or smriti.
c) Describe the importance of each text.
2. Provide at least one example that illustrates the influence of Hinduism’s ancient sacred writings on modern Hindu society.
3. Why are the Ramayana and Mahabharata so popular in your opinion?
4. Which of the Hindu scriptures mentioned would you most like to read? Explain your choice.

Sacred Text

One very important component of the Mahabharata is the Bhagavad-Gita, which is the one text that can claim to be the Hindu bible. This text, commonly called the Gita, is set in the Mahabharata war. Its 700 verses, contained in eighteen chapters, discuss the central beliefs of Hinduism and include teachings on dharma, reincarnation, and paths to salvation.

The text of the Gita is in the form of a dialogue. **Krishna**, the eighth incarnation of Vishnu, is explaining to his confused friend, Arjuna, the importance of performing one's duty in this world. Arjuna, who is a Pandu army leader, is reluctant to fight because he believes it is wrong to wage war against his own relatives and citizens, who are fighting for the opposing side. Krishna patiently and logically reasons with Arjuna about his role in life as a defender of human rights. These verses, spoken by Krishna, illustrate the fundamental importance of devotion to God.

Bhagavad-Gita

Chapter 9, verses 3–8

- 3. Whosoever offers to Me with devotion a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water—that offering of love, of the pure of heart, I accept.*
- 4. Whatever thou doest, whatever thou eatest, whatever thou offerest, whatever thou givest away, whatever austerities thou practise—do that, O son of Kunti [Arjuna], as an offering to Me.*
- 5. Thus shall thou be freed from the good and evil results, which are the bonds of action. With this mind firmly set on the way of renunciation, thou shall become free and attain to Me.*
- 6. I am the same to all beings, none is hateful or dear to Me. But those who worship Me with devotion—they are in Me and I also in them.*
- 7. Even if a man of the most vile conduct worships me with undistracted devotion, he must be reckoned as righteous for he has rightly resolved.*
- 8. Swiftly does he become a soul of righteousness and obtain lasting peace. O son of Kunti [Arjuna], know thou for certain that My devotee perishes never.*

QUESTIONS

1. Why is Krishna using the first person to talk about God in the quotation?
2. What is Krishna's message to Arjuna? Do you agree or disagree with this message? Explain.
3. How does this passage illustrate the importance of faith in the Hindu tradition?

GROUPS AND INSTITUTIONS

The overwhelming majority of Hindus fall into three main groups: those who worship Vishnu and his incarnations, for example, Rama and Krishna; worshippers of Shiva; and devotees of Parvati, the consort of Shiva, who is identified as the Mother Goddess. The deity that a Hindu worships depends on family tradition, however, these classifications are not rigid and exclusive. Devotees of a particular deity also worship other deities and install images of many deities in home shrines and temples.

Shaivism

The worshippers of Shiva, in his various forms, are called Shivites, and the sect is known as **Shaivism**. Shivism is predominantly practised by Hindus in southern India and among the Tamils in Sri Lanka. This sect is more closely identified with the strict disciplines of fasting and meditation. Many adherents cover their bodies with ashes, and others make three horizontal marks across their foreheads to indicate their devotion to Shiva. However, all devotees of Shiva worship him as the great yogi, sitting in meditation on the snow-covered Himalayan Mountains. Followers revere him as the destroyer and creator of the universe. His creative power is symbolized by the *linga* (a cylindrical shaft).

There are many scriptures that are especially significant to Shivites. Among the Upanishads, the Svetasvatara is the most important.

The Shiva Puranas include the myths of Shiva and his consort, Parvati. They also contain ritual and ethical instructions on the performance of pujas and penances in order to gain salvation.

Shakti

Hindus recognize the feminine aspect of energy, known as *shakti*, as equally



Figure 4.19

The goddess Parvati (shown seated beside Shiva) is a manifestation of *shakti*.

important, and they believe that a male deity's strength comes from his female consort. Thus, Shiva is incomplete without Parvati (Figure 4.19). In fact, Shiva is often depicted as *Ardhanari*, a manifestation whose right half of the body is male and whose left half is female.

Shakti is the generic name for all manifestations of female energy, which may be represented in various forms ranging from very gentle to fierce. The various manifestations of

Web Quest

To read about current issues that are of interest to Hindus all over the world, go to *Hinduism Today Magazine* online at <http://www.hinduismtoday.com>

Shakti include Sati, Parvati (Figure 4.19), Durga, and Kali. An affectionate name used collectively for all the manifestations of female energy is Devi, or Great Goddess. Sati and Parvati are deities that represent mild forms of energy, including patience, obedience, and compassion. Durga and Kali are deities that represent fierce energy and are depicted with many arms, bloodshot eyes, and destructive weapons. Durga and Kali use their destructive power to defeat evil forces and negative tendencies.

Vaishnavism

The followers of Vishnu are called Vaishnavites. This sect of Hinduism, which is more prevalent in northern India, is known as **Vaishnavism**. As preserver of the universe, Vishnu sometimes appears in human form to restore order and righteousness in the world. There are ten avatars, or incarnations, of Vishnu; nine are believed to have taken place, and the tenth is yet to come. The seventh and eighth avatars, Rama and Krishna, are the most revered throughout the Hindu world.

The primary sacred text for devotees of Rama is the Ramayana. Guided by the virtues of Hindu dharma, Rama defeats the evil forces of nature and restores peace in a troubled world.

Devotees of Krishna are greatly influenced by the Mahabharata—the other Hindu epic, in which Krishna, also called Hari, is the great warrior. However, the most famous account of Krishna's teachings appears in the Bhagavad-Gita. The doctrine central

to all Vaishnavites is *bhakti*, or intense devotion to a particular, personal god.

The Arya Samaj Movement

Unlike the three mainstream sects of Hinduism mentioned above, the followers of this movement are non-ritualistic and do not worship any deities. The **Arya Samaj** movement was founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in North India in 1875. He preached a reformed version of Hinduism that rejected the worship of images as symbols of the Supreme God.

The central teachings of the Arya Samaj movement are based on the Vedas, and the most important form of worship for followers of this sect is a fire ceremony known as *havan*.

Smaller Movements Within the Hindu Mainstream

Within the mainstream of Hinduism, there exist many sects and institutions that follow particular gurus, or teachers. The following are some of the movements that have active groups operating in Canada.

Hare Krishna Movement

The International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) was first started in the U.S. during the early 1960s by Swami Bhaktivedanta, a Hindu guru from India who based his teachings on the earlier tradition of Vaishnavism (the worship of Vishnu). The followers of this movement (Figure 4.20) must follow a strict code of belief and practice. They are vegetarians and do not use tobacco, drugs, or alcohol.

Satya Sai Baba Movement

The disciples of this movement seek guidance from their living guru, Satya Sai Baba. Satya Sai Baba lives in South India and proclaims that he is a person who serves all religions. He believes that all religions are valid paths to God. His disciples follow five principles—*satya* (truth), *dharma* (righteous conduct), *shanti* (peace), *prema* (love), and *ahimsa* (non-violence).

Swami Narayan Movement

This sect of Hinduism was founded by Sahajananda Swami in the early nineteenth century in Gujarat, India. His followers declared him Swami Narayan, another name for Vishnu, and believed that salvation could also be granted through him. This movement, which emphasizes clean living, prayer, and good works, has grown in Canada. Followers in Toronto are presently building the largest Hindu temple in Canada.

Vedanta Society

This group, as the name implies, bases its teachings on the philosophy of the Vedas. It was founded by Swami Vivekananda, who attended the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, where he made a great impact. On his second visit to America, he established the Vedanta Society of San Francisco. This movement grew across India, the U.S., and Canada. The Vedanta Society of Toronto began in 1968 and has regular lectures on the Upanishads, the Bhagavad-Gita, and the teachings of Swami Vivekananda. The value of interfaith dialogues is a cornerstone of this group's philosophy.



Figure 4.20

Followers of the Hare Krishna movement celebrate a summer festival.

Check Your Understanding

1. Identify and describe the three main Hindu sects.
2. What is the Arya Samaj movement, and how does it differ from mainstream Hindu sects?
3. a) What is a guru?
b) Identify the significance of the following Hindu gurus, and describe the movements that they have founded:
 - Sahajananda Swami
 - Swami Bhaktivedanta
 - Swami Vivekananda
4. Which of the streams of Hinduism described in this section most appeals to you? Why?

Community Study

The Swaminarayan Organization Toronto, Ontario



Figure 4.21

In 1975, ten Hindu families who had recently emigrated from East Africa met in Toronto to form the Shree Swaminarayan group. Many had fled the racial reprisals waged against South Asians in eastern African countries, especially Uganda, and Canada opened its doors to them. By 1988, this religious group had grown to include approximately 100 families from Africa, India, and England. They eventually purchased four industrial units in the west end of Toronto, which today function as a temple. They meet at the temple every day for pujas, but the largest congregations take place on Sundays. A resident priest conducts all the religious ceremonies from pujas to birth and death sacraments.

Charitable work is a key component of this organization. In 1997, it donated over \$100 000 to the flood disaster in Los Angeles. In India, it has adopted five villages and provides medicine, eyeglasses, and financial assistance. In Canada, the group also assists other Hindu groups during major festivals and fundraising drives.

Inspired by their spiritual leader, his Holiness Pramukh Swami Maharaj (Figure 4.21), members have embarked on a grand millennium project—to build a Hindu temple and cultural centre that will change the skyline of Toronto. The complex will be the largest Hindu structure in Canada, standing on 2 ha of land. The site is at Highway 427 and Finch Avenue in Toronto. In addition to an enormous temple, the complex will include a large permanent museum devoted to Hinduism that will exhibit ancient artifacts and the holy scriptures. It will also feature a community centre that will accommodate the numerous charitable and cultural activities in which the organization is involved. These include regular blood donor clinics, food drives, health and financial management seminars, family counselling, classical music and dance, yoga, meditation, drug and alcohol awareness, career planning, and language instruction.

QUESTIONS

1. What is the history of the Swaminarayan Organization?
2. How is this group contributing to the Hindu community in Canada and abroad?

CULTURAL IMPACT

During the European colonization of India in the nineteenth century, the British, French, and Dutch imperial powers shipped Indian people overseas to work in plantations that were once worked by African slaves. Most of these Indians were Hindus, and so Hinduism was transplanted in places like Fiji, Mauritius, Trinidad, Guyana, Suriname, and other territories.

Large pockets of Hindus can be found in most cosmopolitan centres of the Western world, such as London, Birmingham, Amsterdam, New York, Sydney, Toronto, and Vancouver. In these major centres, there are well over one million Hindus.

One of the most influential aspects of Hinduism on modern Western culture is the discipline of yoga. The impact of yoga and meditation can be judged by the multitude of classes and courses offered everywhere, and mainly by non-Hindu teachers.

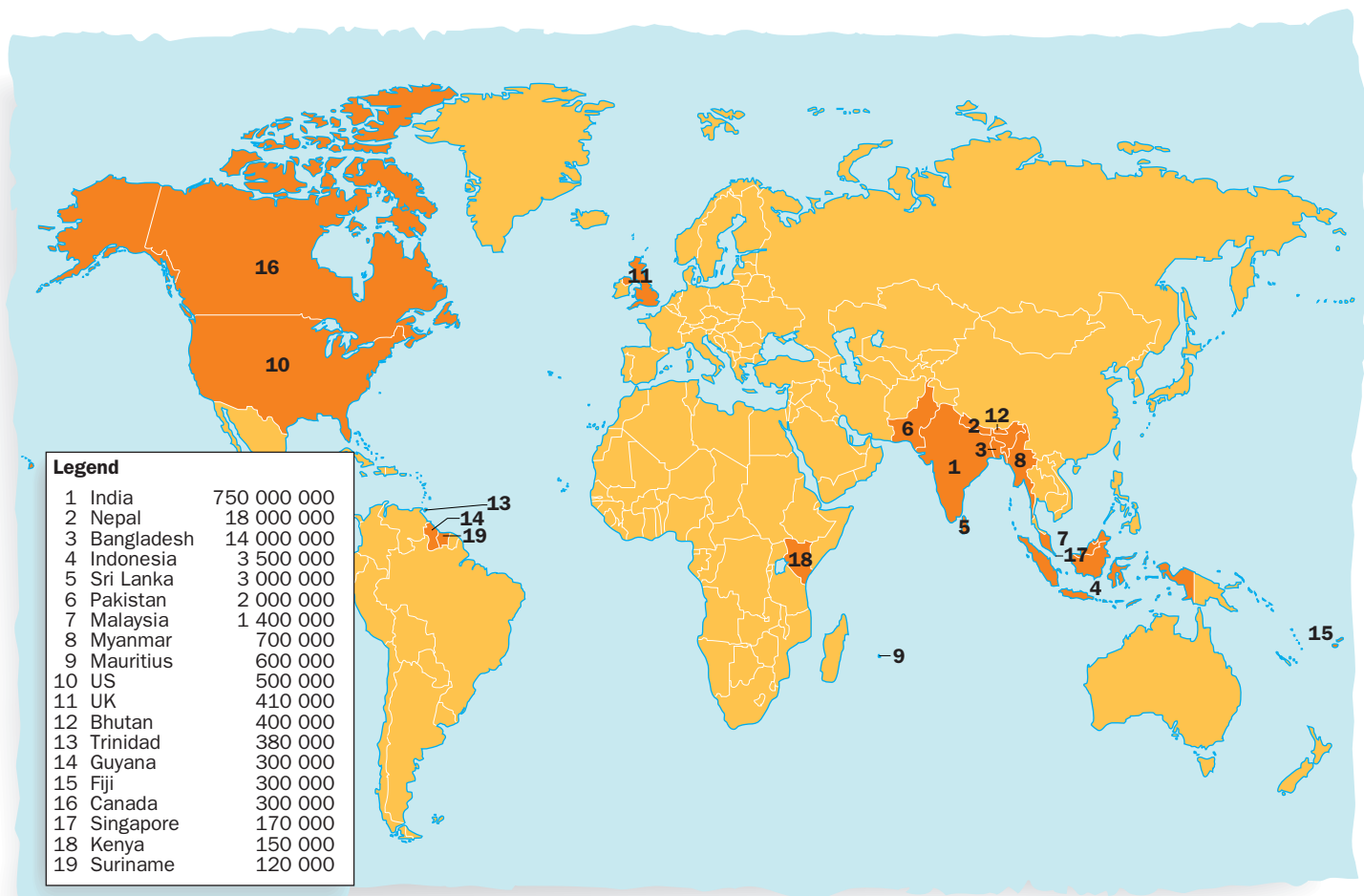


Figure 4.22

This map shows the world population of Hindus (approximately 800 million). Where has Hinduism taken root beyond the borders of India?

Living My Religion

Chaaya Raghunanan

Chaaya Raghunanan was born of Hindu parents in a predominantly Hindu village in Trinidad in 1970. She immigrated to Canada with her parents when she was



Figure 4.23

four years old and has since lived in Toronto. She attended the University of Toronto where she graduated with a degree in sociology. Today, she is employed as an executive assistant with an organization involved in industrial and workers' safety. She has recently completed a diploma course in human resources and

labour relations at the University of Toronto. As part of her personal development, Chaaya is a student of Indian classical dancing. She pursues this interest under the guidance of her guru.

Chaaya writes the following regarding her religion:

I follow much of my Hindu tradition in my daily life. On many evenings, I pray at my home shrine and light a lamp. On weekends, I do my prayers on mornings and offer flowers to the deities. I have learned these rituals from my parents who are not really religious

but like to offer puja to the gods and goddesses as a form of thanksgiving. We sometimes attend temples, not any one in particular, and we honour all the divine images. During festivals like Diwali, we fast as a family, that is, we do not eat any meat, fish, or poultry for several days and do our puja to the particular deity we are honouring. We sing bhajans and perform the havan, or fire ceremony.

During elementary school, I did not particularly enjoy hot dog and pizza days. You see, at home, we do not eat beef and pork. Most Hindus do not eat beef, so my mother prepared chicken dogs for me. This saved me from being singled out. At Christmas time, my parents allowed me to take part in activities relating to Jesus and Christianity. In fact, Christmas is a great time for my family. We have Christmas dinners, exchange gifts, and put up lights as we do for Diwali, the Hindu "festival of lights."

I would not call myself a religious person, but I ardently follow my Hindu practices. The strength it has given me in difficult times illustrates that Hinduism has useful and practical things to offer me in life. I find great solace in listening to Hindu hymns that are emotionally and spiritually satisfying. Beyond rituals, Hindu philosophy forces me to look with reason and faith at and within myself, as well as at others and the world around me. Lighting a simple lamp and offering a small flower make me feel like a child of God.

QUESTIONS

1. What elements of Hinduism are important to this Canadian woman?
2. What evidence is there that Chaaya has adopted other religious traditions while living in Canada?
3. a) What aspect of growing up Hindu in Canadian society did Chaaya find somewhat challenging?
b) Why was it challenging, and how did she deal with it?

Hinduism in Canada

In Canada, the Hindu population exceeds 300 000. The majority of Hindu Canadians live in the Greater Toronto Area. Vancouver has the second largest concentration, and smaller populations are scattered among the larger cities of the eastern and western provinces.

Today, the Hindu community in Canada is very diverse, with origins in India, Sri Lanka, Guyana, Trinidad, England, and many east African countries. They have all brought with them different values and customs native to their countries, and they embrace different deities.

Their differences are also evident in the way they perform ceremonies, rituals, and sacraments. Sermons, lectures, and other discourses are delivered in the language particular to each linguistic group.

Southern Ontario is unique in Canada with regard to the Hindu population. Over 200 000 Hindus, representing about 70 per cent of the Hindu population in Canada, reside in this corridor, which stretches from Oshawa in the east to Niagara Falls in the west. In Markham and neighbouring

Richmond Hill alone, there are four Hindu temples that reflect different styles and cultures (Figure 4.24). In addition to providing a place of worship, these temples are the cultural hub of Canada's Hindu communities, as well as learning centres where interested members are tutored in traditional vocal and instrumental music and dance.

Figure 4.24

The architecture of the Vishnu Mandir temple, located in Richmond Hill, Ontario, reflects both modern and traditional northern Indian influences.



Check Your Understanding

1. How has Hinduism influenced Western culture?
2. Hinduism in Canada is as diverse as Canada's religious landscape. Explain.
3. Where is most of Canada's Hindu population located? Why do you think this is the case?
4. What elements of Hindu belief and practice do you personally find attractive or interesting? Why?

Web Quest

For a list of Hindu temples in Canada, go to <http://mandirnet.org/canada/area>

Skill Path Quantitative Research

Quantitative research emphasizes experiments, numbers, and measurement and relies on the use of numerical scores and relationships to summarize data.

A quantitative research study is always designed to answer a specific question.

Characteristics of Quantitative Research

Hypothesis

Quantitative research begins with a hypothesis—an unproven statement that forms the basis for the investigation. The data collected by a researcher may or may not support the hypothesis.

Role of the researcher

Quantitative researchers decide what problem or topic to investigate, but once the investigation begins, his or her personal opinion does not play a role in the process.

Numerical Data

The quantitative researcher always expresses numerically the data collected from interviews, tests, questionnaires, or experiments. He or she may summarize the quantitative data using a variety of graphs such as the pie chart, bar graph, or scattergraph.

Topics That Lend Themselves to Quantitative Research

In general, quantitative research topics or problems

- are easily summarized using numerical results, graphs or charts;
- can be observed in artificial settings such as a laboratory;
- involve the investigation of groups over a very short period of time;
- involve the use of statistics and hard data.

Steps in Quantitative Research

The steps involved in quantitative research are outlined below. The topic of Hindu priests in Canada is used as an example.

1. Identify the topic or problem to be investigated.

Quantitative researchers begin their investigation with a statement (in declarative or question form) identifying the topic or problem and/or the subjects or group(s) of people involved.

Sample Topic: What is the country of origin of most Hindu priests living in Canada?

2. Identify the hypothesis.

The statement identifying the problem is always followed by a hypothesis that includes definitions of the variables, or important factors. The purpose of the hypothesis is to give direction to the research. In the example below, the variables include the two locations, Canada and Guyana.

Sample Hypothesis: Most Hindu priests living in Canada are originally from Guyana.

3. Design all elements of the investigation.

Before quantitative researchers collect any data, they outline all elements of their proposed study. The researcher provides a detailed description of the procedures for testing the hypothesis. The choice of appropriate

technique or method is important. For example, a questionnaire might be an appropriate method to determine the origin of Hindu priests.

4. Select the participants in the study.

As in all research, identifying the participants is an important step in the process. A sampling of those who represent the whole population must be selected. To locate Hindu priests, one might contact Hindu temples.

5. Collect data.

• Experiments

Experiments may be conducted in a laboratory, allowing the researcher total control over the conditions of the experiment.

Experimental research is often used for comparison: If two situations or groups are essentially equal except for one variable, that one variable is added or deleted from the appropriate situation and the researcher observes the consequences.

• Surveys

In collecting data for a survey, the researcher can use a number of methods, including the interview, the questionnaire, and the use of measuring tools such as tests.

a) The Interview: For more information on Interviews, see Chapter 7.

b) The Questionnaire: The written questionnaire is a popular method in survey research because it can be distributed to a large number of people. A good questionnaire

- is brief, well-worded, clear, and concise;
- asks questions that elicit answers which are not easily accessed elsewhere;
- seeks facts, not opinions or impressions;
- takes a minimum amount of time to complete;
- includes clear instructions.

c) Tests: Tests are valuable measuring tools in survey research. In order to elicit facts, tests should be designed to avoid elements that lend themselves to a subjective evaluation.

6. Analyze data and draw conclusions.

In quantitative research, conclusions are drawn at the end of the study. The researcher organizes and displays the collected information using graphs, which transform the data into a “readable” form.

PRACTISE IT!

1. Conduct a quantitative research study into the national origins of Hindus living in your community and/or attending your school. Make sure to do the following:
 - Formulate a hypothesis, e.g., The country of origin of most Hindu Canadians in my school is India.
 - Design the elements of your investigation; you may wish to use a questionnaire or survey to collect the data for this particular study.
 - Select the participants of your study.
 - Collect your data.
 - Display your results in a graph, and analyze your findings. Be prepared to support your analysis.

Activities

Check Your Understanding

1. Briefly describe what you consider to be three of Hinduism's most important beliefs.
2. It is interesting to note that many Hindu beliefs and practices are presented in fours. Describe at least two beliefs and practices that are based on the number four.
3. Yoga is very much a part of our society. How does the general practice of yoga in North America differ from yoga as understood by Hindus?
4. Symbols play an important role in Hindu ceremonies and rituals. Show how this statement is true by using fire worship and the *om* symbol as examples. Why are these symbols important in Hinduism?

Think and Communicate

5. You are probably familiar with the sayings below. Choose one of these phrases and discuss it with a partner. Do you accept the statement? How does the statement reflect Hindu teachings?
 - “What goes around comes around.”
 - “As you sow, so shall you reap.”
 - “I have a sense of déjà vu.”
 - “Life is a merry-go-round.”
6. Create a word web with the term *faith* at the centre. Add five spokes emanating from the centre. For each spoke, identify a way in which Hindus express, or show, their faith.
7. Dharma (duty) is a very important concept in Hinduism. In your opinion, what is the essential dharma of each of the following: teacher, parent, friend, police officer, politician, soldier, yourself. Record your answers in your notebook.
8. Assume that you have reached the last Hindu stage of life. Write a diary entry of at least half a page stating what you have learned about the world.
9. Working individually or with a partner, create a colourful poster of a Hindu deity. Be sure that the characteristics associated with your particular deity are clearly represented.
10. Hinduism is an ancient religion facing the challenges of the modern, scientific age. Working with a partner, try to determine which aspects of Hinduism will likely help it thrive in the contemporary world and which aspects might challenge its survival.

Apply Your Learning

11. Ahimsa is a significant concept to Hindus. Working in small groups, create media ads that promote this concept in our somewhat violent society. Use words, images, music, film, etc., to best promote this ideal.

12. Hinduism suggests that you are a result of your past actions. Describe at least five past actions that have had an important effect on the person that you have become.

13. Review the last ten years of your life, and note how you have changed under the following headings: Physically, Emotionally, Skills and Knowledge, Interests, Behaviour. In what ways have you remained the same?

14. Vegetarianism is increasingly popular among Canadian youth. Visit the school or community library for more information on the subject. You might also consult the Internet, visit health food stores, or chat with a friend who is vegetarian. Complete and present a brief report on the topic. Why is vegetarianism growing in popularity? What are the positive and negative aspects of a vegetarian diet?

15. Using the information and techniques presented in this chapter's Skill Path, complete a quantitative analysis of the Hindu population in your community.

Glossary

Agni [UGH nee]. The god of fire; the link between gods and humans.

ahimsa [a HIM sa]. The doctrine of non-violence toward all living creatures.

Arya Samaj movement [AR ee ya suh MODGE]. A reformed version of Hinduism that rejects the worship of images and the caste system; founded in 1875 by Swami Dayanand Saraswati.

atman [OT man]. The human soul; part of our innermost self that is identical to Brahman, the universal soul.

avatar [AVVA tar]. An incarnation, or manifestation, of a deity in earthly form.

bhakti [BOCK tee]. Intense devotion to a particular deity; often expressed through music.

Brahma [BROMMA]. A deity who is considered the creator of the universe; part of the Hindu Trinity.

Brahman [BRA mun]. The universal soul and sup-reme being; the eternal spirit from which all things originate and to which they return.

Brahmin [BRA min]. A member of the highest Hindu caste.

caste system. The organization of Hindu society into four groups, each with its own duties and expectations.

dharma [DARR muh]. Religious or moral duty.

Diwali [dee WOLLY]. The Hindu festival of lights that takes place at the end of October or beginning of November; celebrates the triumph of good over evil.

guru. A spiritual teacher or guide who can help one achieve moksha, or salvation.

Hindu Trinity. A concept that unites the gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva into one entity.

homa [hoe MA]. A ritual that involves the burning of offerings in a fire that has been blessed by a priest.

karma [KUR ma]. The totality of one's actions; the accumulation of good or bad karma determines one's birth in his or her next life.

Krishna. The eighth incarnation of the god Vishnu.

kshatriya [ka SHAW tree ya]. A member of the military caste.

Mahabharata [maha BARRA tuh]. A Hindu epic poem comprising about 100 000 verses, probably compiled between 400 BCE and 400 CE. It tells the story of the struggle between two forces—the Pandavas and the Kauravas.

mantra. A sacred word or phrase that is chanted during worship or meditation.

maya [MY uh]. A word used to refer to the temporary and imperfect nature of the physical world.

meditation. Deep contemplation that leads to a trance-like state in which the individual tries to become one with the Brahman.

moksha. Liberation of the soul from the endless cycle of rebirths; attained by uniting the atman with the Brahman. It is the ultimate goal of Hindus.

om [OME]. A sacred syllable that invokes the essence of Brahman when chanted. It is believed to be the sound of all reality.

Parvati [PARVA tee]. A mother goddess who represents female energy.

prasad [PRA sad]. A practice that involves redistributing to devotees food that has been offered to the deities.

puja [POO juh]. A common thanksgiving ritual that involves offerings of flowers, food, and other articles to the deities.

Rama [RAMMA]. The seventh incarnation of God Vishnu; the hero in the Hindu epic the Ramayana.

Ramayana [RA MY anna]. A Hindu epic of about 24 000 verses, composed around 200 BCE.

samsara [sam SARA]. The endless cycle of rebirths.

Shakti [SHUCK tee]. The generic name for all manifestations of female energy, which may be represented as gentle or fierce.

Shiva [SHIVVA]. A deity who is considered the destroyer and restorer of the universe; part of the Hindu Trinity.

Shivism [SHY vism]. A sect of Hinduism whose followers worship the god Shiva. It is practised predominantly in southern India.

shruti [SHROOTY]. Knowledge that is revealed to, or “discovered” by, the wise men of Hinduism, e.g., the content of the Vedas.

smriti [SMEERTY]. human-made literature, or knowledge that is “remembered,” e.g., the content of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana.

Sudra [SOO dra]. A member of the lowest Hindu caste.

swami [SWOMMY]. The holy men of Hinduism.

Vaishnavism [VIE ish na vism]. A sect of Hinduism whose followers worship the god Vishnu. It is practised predominantly in northern India.

Vedas [VAY duh]. Hinduism’s earliest sacred writings, composed around 1500 BCE.

Vishnu [VISH NOO]. A deity who is considered the preserver of the universe; part of the Hindu Trinity.

yoga. A practice or discipline combining philosophy with physical exercises and meditation; union with God.

yogi. A spiritually evolved individual who practises meditation.