

10. INDIAN RELIGIONS AND PHILOSOPHIES

India, the land of spirituality and philosophy considers religion as an integral part of its entire tradition. The worship of various religions and its rituals play a significant role in every aspect of human life in the country.

India is the birth place of two great religions of the world, namely, Hinduism and Buddhism. It is also the birth place of one of the oldest religions of the world, Zoroastrianism and home to an ancient religion, Jainism. Sikhism is another very recognisable religion which began here bringing together the best aspects of Hinduism and Islam. Followers of religions originated in other countries such as Islam, Christianity, Bahaism and Judaism also form a part of the population of secular nation, India.

Hinduism is the dominant faith. According to 2001 Census, 80.5 per cent of the population of the country are designated 'Hindu'. It is one of the ancient religions in the world, which began about 6000 years ago. Besides Hindus, Muslims are the most prominent religious group and are an integral part of Indian society. There are approximately 13.4 per cent Muslims (over 100 million), 2.3 per cent Christians (over 20 million), 1.9 per cent Sikhs (18 million) and others including Buddhists (6 million), Jains, Parsis (Zoroastrians), Jews and Bahais, less than 2 per cent.

Hindus and Muslims are spread throughout the country. Muslims are found mostly in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, West Bengal, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. They represent a majority in Jammu and Kashmir and Lakshadweep. Christian concentrations are found in the north-eastern states like Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya and the southern states of Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Goa. Sikhs are a majority in the state of Punjab whereas Buddhists are found in large numbers in Arunachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Bengal and Sikkim. Though a tiny minority, Jains are found all over India. Majority of Jains live in the states of Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Karnataka and Gujarat.

HINDU RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

Hinduism is found in nearly every corner of the globe. Hindus are estimated at 500,000,000 worldwide.

According to the CIA, the largest concentration of Hindus are in India (81 per cent of population) and Nepal (86 per cent). Countries with the fewest Hindus include Thailand (95 per cent Buddhists), Malaysia, Singapore, Oman, Yemen, Pakistan (mainly Islamic).

A large number of Hindus also reside in South America and the Caribbean, including in the countries of Guyana, Surinam, Trinidad and Tobago. The small island of Mauritius off the coast of South Africa (near Madagascar) has 54 per cent Hindu. Britain and the United States have significant, but relatively small Hindu populations,

What is Special in Hinduism?

1. Hindu Religion is the world's oldest faith. It was followed by the ancient civilisation of the Indus valley, Ganges valley, Deccan and Kaveri delta, as well as other parts of India all over the Indian peninsula and surrounding areas of Asia. Hinduism, is as much a "way of life" as a religion and affects every aspect of life for Hindus from birth throughout their life. It is followed by the devout Hindu in every aspect of life and activity and not just in a prayer only.
2. With Hinduism you can have whatever you want. If you want to live a hedonistic lifestyle Hinduism will show you a way to live it without hurting yourself or others.
3. If you want to dedicate your life to worldly successes Hinduism will show you the way to do so within limitations. If all you want to do is your responsible duty to your neighbours, go ahead and do it. If what you want is liberation you can be shown the way.
4. Hinduism is a very philosophically thought out religion that essentially gives an answer for any question that you might have about your life. With each answer Hinduism gives a reason and a possibility of strengthening your understanding of the answer.
5. Hinduism is guided by the teachings of the Vedas, also believed to be the Revealed words by the Divine Powers. The Vedas are said to be older than the creation of the Universe and were given to the Ancient Sages by God as their intuition during their meditation. The Great Seers and Rishis of ancient times recited these Vedas, obtained by their meditative powers, as the teachings of God. These teachings are very ancient and were memorised and recited by generations of Sages, Teachers and their disciples until they were written down as texts and codified as the Four Vedas by Sage Vyasa. It is further explained by subsequent texts written by Seers and religious leaders based on these Vedas. Hinduism is also guided by these Upa-Vedas, Vedangas, Upanishads, Itihasas and Puranas, which contain the prayers, Philosophy, rituals and mythology, all in one, to suit everyone's cultural and mental development. While the learned person reads about the qualities of the all-powerful Brahman, the illiterate one is taught the same principle by mythological stories and simple forms of prayers to His manifestations.
6. The philosophy of Hinduism, as Divine revelations, is for all times, as old as creation and as modern as tomorrow. The Vedas have given us the rituals in various forms as a ladder to raise our faith and understand-

- ing. The Agamas and Puranas give us the incarnations and manifestations of 'God' in popular forms to condition our thoughts to the faith. It allows and accepts varying forms of worship with a tremendous tolerance of other religious faiths and beliefs. Though one may not agree that the other paths are better or perfect, every one is allowed to follow his own path. Often a devotee is urged to study all the paths and variations to fully understand his own faith,
7. This is the most important and valuable speciality of Hinduism that it has not closed itself inside any contours, but is the realistic representation of the limitlessness of knowledge and experience. It is absolutely open minded. This is the religion that calls "Let the good things come from all the directions of the world" (aa no bhadrah kratavo yantu vishvatah). Thus this religion nurtured the good concepts with a neutral mindset. Hinduism is a dharma (discipline) than a religion. Various religions stand over this dharma. In general this is not the religion of just postulations.
 8. Very naturally this religion does not force even the acceptance of God to the followers. The Hindus are not threatened that they would be punished for not praying/believing the God, whereas the major scriptures advice the followers to hold to the God in order to get liberated from the rough road of pleasures and pains! Even those things undergo a very healthy debate. Nothing is unquestionable. The Hindu scriptures instead of defining the way, in which the Hindus should live, in a better way, act as supporting material for the individual to decide the course of life and stand by that.
 9. Hinduism, unlike most religions, has no founder and no one scripture. Hindus do not have one "Holy Book" like many other religions, but many texts including the four Vedas along with their Upanishads, called the "Sruti", several Dharma Sastras or Smritis.-Itihasas and Puranas including the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The Bhagavad Gita or "Song of God", comes as part of Mahabharata, is an essence of the message of the Upanishads and Hindu Philosophy and is considered to be a guide on how we should live as told by Lord Krishna to Arjuna.
 10. Hindus believe that as all streams and rivers lead to the same ocean, all genuine religious (spiritual) paths lead to the same goal; worship of every form of "GOD" and celestial forces leads to the same good, So we do not try to convert others to our religion. (Another example-path to top of mountain may differ but the view from the top of the mountain will be the same.)
 11. Hindus believe in one God, beyond form, space and time and beyond human comprehension. They believe that God- is Transcendent and Immanent at the same time and will create itself according to everyone's desire and needs to protect the pious, to destroy the evil and establish the Divine Rule of Law and Justice.
 12. Most Hindus, needing a form on which to concentrate, worship that one God in different forms, worshipping one aspect of that One Divine Supreme Truth.-Hindus God in masculine as well as in feminine forms and also like a family. At the same time, they all understand the True nature of the Supreme.
 13. In the masculine forms, Hindus One God as Brahma-the creator, Vishnu-the protector and maintainer and Shiva-Nataraja-the destroyer and recreator,-In the female forms, Hindus that One God as Shakti or Durga - provider of energy and power, as Lakshmi,-provider of prosperity and wealth and as Saraswati,-provider of knowledge and intelligence.
 14. These are the major forms of Hindu "Gods" worshipped, which takes the form as created by the supreme God Paramatma for the benefit of the Human creations to easily comprehend Him as He is. Please understand that many of the sects of Hindus following the various forms of philosophy and worship, visualise this same Paramatma-the Supreme God-as Narayana [Vishnu] or as Paramasiva [Shiva] and Parashakti [Shakti or Durga].
 15. Unlike the other major world religions, Hindus also see the Supreme as Mother, including as Sri Meenakshi, as Visalakshi, as Kamakshi and as many other names of Shakti. He is also seen as Father as in Shiva in various forms in several Hindu Temples-The Temple in which they are worshipped is not just a congregation hall but a palace of the Supreme God.
 16. Hindu Rituals and Worship take into account the capacities and inclinations of different individuals.-Types of worship include Ritualistic worship (temple or home), offering (directly or through the priest) flowers, coconut, fruits, incense, flames of oil lamps and camphor, chanting of prayers in Sanskrit (or their mother tongue), etc.
 17. Also Hindu religion advocates Worship through service of one's fellow man (charity) and by one's activity;-Worship through the service to fellow human and devotion to the Supreme;-Worship through meditation with physical and mental discipline and through understanding first the inner self then the divine that is everywhere.
 18. Hinduism has also defined concept of Yogas. Jnana yoga is for people who are reflective and seek knowledge find their divinity through rationality and spirituality. Bhakti yoga is the path to God through love and devoted service. It insists on God's otherness and teaches love of God through adoration. Karma yoga is the path to God through work. Be productive and strive to work towards high rewards and work unselfishly.

Raja yoga is known as the path to reintegration, a way to God through psychophysical experiments. Self-searching could be one way of describing Raja Yoga. Looking inward to discern the humanness from the Godness and bringing them together. It involves meditation and self-discipline.

These and many more specialities of Hinduism make it a harmonious and worth religion, which is suitable for any time in present or future, for any land or creed.

Some Thoughts Hindus Gave the World

Brahman, the eternal Trimurti or Three-in-One God: Brahma, the Creator; Vishnu, the Preserver; and Shiva, the Destroyer;

Submission to Fate, since man is not outside, but part of Brahman;

The Caste System, determined by the laws of Manu;

The Law of Karma that from good must come good and from evil must come evil;

Reincarnation, as a chain of rebirths in which each soul, through virtuous living, can rise to a higher state.

Nirvana, the final stage reached upon the emancipation of the soul from the chain of rebirths; Yogis, the disciplines which enable the individual to control the body and the emotions; and Dharma, the Law of Moral Order, which each individual must find and follow to reach nirvana.

Vegetarianism (vegan lifestyle);

Ahimsa ("no injury", avoidance of all animal products);

Yoga exercise;

Astrology and horoscopes;

Gurus and swamis (monks and spiritual leaders);

Shanti Path (Prayer for Peace);

Aum daub shanti antarikshagwam,

shanti Prithivi shanti rapah,

shanti roshadaya shaati vanapastayah shantir,

vishwe devah shantih,

brahma shantih'

sarvagwang shantih'

shantireva sama shanti redhi,

Aum Shantih Shantih Shantih/

Meaning:

May there be peace in Heaven

Peace in the Atmosphere

Peace across the waters

May there be peace on Earth

May peace flow from herbs, plants and trees

May all the celestial beings pervade peace

May peace pervade all quarters

May that peace come to me too.

Hindu Philosophy gives a clear understanding to the questions of cycle of life and death, the nature of Soul, the Universe and its creator and reasons for joy and sufferings, happiness and sorrow, health and disease and the ultimate understanding of man's relationship with God. It also explains his duties during this birth as well as about his past and his future. It investigates and inquires the Truth and allows us to think and reason in our search for a solution. Even though the Agamas and Vedas appear to be professing different doctrines, they both are written on the same philosophy but for different population group. The Agamas give us the Theological aspect of our practice with prayers to God in various manifestations. The Vedas give us all the rituals and also 'the philosophy of our religious practice. All of them are based on the principle that the Soul is a part of the Divine spirit and is covered by the sheaths of "Upadhis" as, an effect of one's Karma. It goes through "endless rebirth according to one's Karma to purify itself. Every one should follow his Dharma and perform their duties or Karma without attachment, as an offering to God to receive eternal salvation and liberation as Moksha.

The Divine Laws that Holds True for Ever: The teachings of Hindu philosophy are given to us in the Upanishads which are the wealth of our knowledge. The ethics and tenets are obtained from them through the Six Darshanas and various later schools of philosophers. The glory of Hindu philosophy is seen in the teachings of Hindu dharma, the theory of karma and rebirth, -the six darshanas and the four yogas or spiritual disciplines. They not only create the questions in our mind to think but also give us the answers to the problems. Dharma means "that which holds" the people of this world and the whole creation. It is the eternal Divine law of God. That which brings well being; to man and supports the world with prosperity is dharma. It is the absolute Truth and laws of righteous living. The four Vedas are the authority of Dharma. The truth about dharma cannot be realised through any other knowledge and one's own reasoning through any analysis alone cannot be that authority.

Ancient sets of Rules that Holds and changes with Time: Purushartha are the four kinds of human aspirations, which are dharma, artha, kaama and moksha. Among these, dharma is the foremost and is the gateway to Moksha or immortality and eternal bliss. Practice of proper Dharma gives an experience of peace, joy, strength and tranquillity within one-self and life becomes thoroughly disciplined. It is classified as [i] Samanya dharma or the general and Universal Dharma and [ii] Vishesha dharma or specific personal dharma. Samanya dharma includes contentment, forgiveness, self-restraint, spiritual knowledge, absence of anger, non-greediness, non-stealing, truthfulness, purity, non-violence, control of senses and desire, discrimination between right and wrong and between real and unreal. Vishesha or specific

dharma includes duties due to one's birth, age and family and duties to society and family, due to, one's career and job and spiritual life. They also include the specific dharmas for the four ashramas and four varnas. These are the regular duties including the rituals and services to the family, community, ancestors and God that every one is expected to perform. We have separate Dharma for each of the four Yugas or time periods.

Varying Rules of Duty for Different Times: The Vedas give different rules of Dharma for people of different age groups, different family traits and different periods of time. The ashrama dharma gives the standards of living for different age groups of individuals. The varna dharma is one that is most misinterpreted and misused. If properly interpreted and understood, it is the most efficient sociological system of the nation. It is indeed a splendid theory with a flawless rule. But, the defect came from somewhere else. Various dharma sashtras or smritis, written by Rishis like Manu, Parasara and Yagnavalkya, have varied for different periods of time according to varying social and emotional surroundings of the Hindu society [Yuga-Dharmaj]. The Hindus often follow the teachings of various Dharma sashtras for the philosophical guidance for daily living.

An Unencompassed Light, Transcendent and Immanent: The Divine is both in us and out of us. God is neither completely transcendent nor completely immanent, He is divine darkness as well as 'unencompassed light.' The philosophers with their passion for unity emphasise the immanent aspect, that there is no barrier dividing man from the real. Those who emphasise the Transcendence of the Supreme to the human insist on the specifically religious consciousness, of communion with a higher than ourselves with whom it is impossible for the individual to get assimilated.

There cannot be a fundamental contradiction between the philosophical idea of God as an all-embracing spirit and the devotional idea of a personal God who arouses in us the specifically religious emotion. The personal conception develops the aspect of spiritual experience in which it may be regarded as fulfilling the human needs. God is represented as possessing the qualities we lack. Justice, love and holiness are the highest qualities we know and we imagine God as possessing them, though these qualities exist in God in a different sense* from their existence in us. The difference between the Supreme as spirit and Supreme as-person, is one of stand point and not of essence, between God as He is and as he seems to us.

Panjchakshara Mantra: While there are plenty of mantras available, there are a few that are chanted with high esteem by the shaivas. Definitely those are highly powerful ones that can lead the chanter on the great path to mukti (liberation), pranava, panjchakshara, gayatri to name a few. For shaivites the Holy Five Syllables (panhichakshara) with or without combined with the pranava is the ultimate mantra.

Holy Five Syllables-Panjchakshara Mantra: Panjchakshara as popularly known is the holy five syllables (literally holy five letters) that is the supreme mantra of all devotees of Lord Shiva. As the name suggests it is made up of five syllables. This great mantra is namah Sivaya. The five syllables in this mantra are na-mah-si-va-ya.

The Core of the Vedas: The Holy Five Syllables namah Sivaya is the heart of vedas. It is the core of the very famous chapter of vedas that stands in the middle of the vedas - the shata rudrayam or rudra suktam. This great mantra of veda samhita while hailing the God as the Lord of everything of the worlds, salutes the God as namah Sivaya cha Sivataraya cha.

Meaning of the Panjchakshara Mantra: The meaning of this matchless mantra is abound. The puranas and the philosophical texts talk in a very detailed and elaborate manner its meaning and significance and hail its ultimateness. Here only a simple meaning is presented to start with.

The word Shiva means auspiciousness and perfection. It refers to the God Who "is-Perfect without any kind of dependency on anything external to make It complete. . Naturally because of this self-perfection, It is completely blissful and ever, auspicious. (All other auspicious things are in one way or the other dependent on the external circumstances, etc.) The prefix namah is the mantra of salutation. The mantra namah Sivaya salutationally invoke the Perfect God Shiva.

Various Panjchaksharas: Panjchakshara has five syllables, so is Lord Shiva with five faces. Depending upon which letter the panjchakshara is starting with, the panjchakshara gets the name of a face of the God. Namah sivaya is the sadyojata panjchakshara and Sivayanamah is the aghora panjchakshara or the aghora mantra. Similarly the other panjchaksharas also get the names,

As the panjchakshara namah Sivaya is at the centre of vedas, - it is referred as Vedic way panjchakshara. Sivayanamah is the panjchakshara is used very much in the Agamic worship of the Lord. So it is referred as the agamic way panjchakshara.

Ways of Chanting the Panjchakshara: While many mantras have restrictions as to when and how it can be chanted, etc. there is no such restriction to the panjchakshara mantra. The great prodigy sambandhar says in thevaram, "When you sleep as well as when you do not sleep, think of the Holy Five Syllables with heartfelt devotion! This is the mantra that terribly kicked out the death when chanted (by markandeya) with sincerity."

Whoever you are, whenever be the time, whatever be the situation, chant the Holy Five Syllables/There are no restrictions of colour, creed, caste, gender or any other restrictions. All it requires is sincerity.

This mantra could be chanted as it is as panjchakshara or could be chanted along with the pranava (Aum) as

shadakshara mantra (om namah sivaya). In fact it is to be noted that pranava itself is panjchakshara mantra (akara, ukara, makara, bindhu, natham).

Benefit of Chanting the Mantra: The thoughts make the poison. The one who has the positive thoughts is happier and the one full of worries is the sad one. The thoughts not only have effect at that moment but they definitely make impression on the personality of the individual, which could have a very long lasting impact. In this background while the good thoughts itself would be making things better, what needs to be said about the super-powered mantras that are rich in meaning as well as energy.

Given the fact that "we tend to become what we keep thinking about", when one chants the sacred panjchakshara that hails the God as Perfection and auspicious, it would take one towards that Blissful Perfection. It takes to the union with the Supreme God. What else can be more rewarding ! Even the worst sinner would get corrected and get to the glorious states if. chants this mantra piously.

Widespread Glory of Panjchaksara in Scriptures: The importance and glory of this mantra is stressed across the shaiva scriptures, as the most important mantra the devotee has to keep like own soul. Listing them would be highly arduous task given the importance this mantra gets in the scriptures.

Learning the various scriptures and chanting thousands of stotras (praise) of God, is all given secondary importance to chanting this great mantra. The authentic scriptures very clearly state that for the one who chants this mantra, even if none of the other scriptures are known or even any other worship of God is undertaken, that person would definitely gets eligible for the immense grace of the Supreme Lord Shiva. For this the chanting of the Holy Five Syllables has been prescribed as a definite requirement for the devotee. While the rudraksha and Holy Ash are the ornament externally for the devotee the internal ornament is the panjchakshara mantra. The supreme mantra very simple to chant and comes with no restrictions attached in order for everybody to chant and get benefited. With no inertia in mind chant and keep chanting as much as possible nartah Sivaya.

Pranava Mantra (AUM) - Simple Explanation: The mantra that is held very sacred by all Hindus is the mantra Om also called pranava mantra. This mantra is part of every worship. This mantra is hailed in scriptures of various languages. Vedas-the holy scripture-is chanted always after chanting this mantra and always concluded with this mantra. Each of the hailing in the archana that is performed for the divine is preceded by this mantra Om.

Pranava is the primal sound that existed before the creation and the sound that stays after the parlay. This is the nnaad-rupa - the Form of sound, of the Supreme Luminance. This mantra Om refer to none other than God. The great

yogis meditate in this mantra as the path to Eternal Bliss of the Formless Nameless God.

The pranava has five parts. They are akara, ukara, makara, bindhu, natham (aum). Consequently this is also , one of the glorious panjchakshara mantra. The scriptures that explain the glory of this pranava mantra are quite many. However the significant one is from the Skandha purana. It is a well known puranic event that skandha described the real meaning of the pranava mantra to God Shiva. In the above mentioned episode of skandha purana the sage vamadeva seeks the boon from Lord Skandha to tell him too that description. Lord Skandha who was pleased with the devotion of sage vamadeva told him that great secret.

Aum: Tirumular says that the one letter. A, represents the universe. The two letters A and U are Shiva and Shakti, the latter being the all-powerful manifest energy of Shiva. The three letters, A, U and M are Shiva, Shakti and Light, the last being Jnana or knowledge. The letter M is also Maya. Tirumular calls AUM as onerSetter mantra, representing Tandava, the Divine Dance of Shiva.-Tandava is derived from Tandu, a dancer and servant of Shiva. Any act performed by Shiva is a dance. The dances are named according to his acts (creation, maintenance, destruction, veiling and Grace), places (Chidambaram, etc.) and competition (Urdhva), 25 Lilas (acts of play). The most celebrated dance is the 'Tandava' in Chidambaram.

Symbols of Hinduism: In Hinduism much importance is given to the symbols than most other religions. The Hindu symbols range from the mark one puts on the forehead to the idols of the deities that are worshipped by the ardent Hindu devotees. Each one has its own significance. Hinduism at its core maintains that there is one God and many see it in different ways (Ekam sad viprah bahuta vadanti). God is formless and is beyond the limitations of the comprehension. This is the basis on which many of the great sages meditate on this Supreme Being that is beyond any contours.

So why are so many forms? The God in its natural form being very difficult to comprehend, leave alone loving that God and worshipping with-devotion, the simple minds would, certainly need a way through which they could worship the boundless God in a fairly simplified manner. But at the same time it should not contradict the basis that the God is beyond forms in any way.

Hinduism maintains that because of the abundant Grace of the God. It revealed itself in the Holy symbols for the humans and other creatures to worship. These symbols are easy to comprehend for the minds of the normal human beings, but at the same time they are not just the symbols but they are the objects themselves, which means that they symbolically indicate the God which is beyond the exploration of knowledge.

Hinduism Symbols are the pranava (Aum) which is held in high esteem by all sects of Hindus and the glorious Shiva

lingam (meaning symbol of Shiva, the God) that is considered the most sacred symbol of worship for the Shaivites. The intention is that the Formless Supreme could be achieved by simpler means of these formless-forms, the symbols.

In a way, these Hindu symbols are abstract representation of the God. These are quite closer to the ideal as they form a bridge between the Formless one and the mind that expects a form. The simpler minds benefit better if the God could be correlated with the day to day lives they interact with. The God certainly is Graceful to the upliftment of the creatures, it took various forms in various occasions blessing either in valorous or joyful or yogic postures. There are numerous of these forms that Hindus worship in their temples, which are built in a gigantic manner with the patronage of various emperors that stand as the glorious homes of art and architecture. The maheshvara murthams are good examples of such forms of God.

The Hindus wear various marks on their forehead that also have spiritual significance. For example the ash that the Shaivites wear represents the ash that the Supreme Flame - Lord Shiva has smeared on Him always. The same way the shrichurna and the Tilak have their significance and indications. In essence Hindus achieve the Supreme Things, by simple ways following the symbols.

Pranaya/Aum: Revered by all religions of Hinduism, This is the primeval sound Om. This mystic sound is so important that there is little worship without this. The archanas done at the Hindu temples include this for each of the mantra chanted. The holy vedas also start" with this. This mantra is one of the renowned mantra for meditation. This sound represents the Supreme Divinity.

Lingam: The prime symbol of worship of Shiva (In fact the name itself means symbol). This is broad in the middle and conical towards the top. This is the form of flame. In Shaivites philosophy the God is formless. Due to the Grace on the souls for the easy comprehension of the Divine and liberation the God appeared in the form of a Flame, This flame is what is worshipped as lingam in stone and other forms that make the worship easier. This is considered more sacred than form worship by Shaivites.

Holy AshJBhasmaJVibuti: The three bands one could see on the foreheads of the gods and goddesses. These three bands are worn by the Shaivites and the other religions in that family. This symbol is called tripundra (three bands). As the God appeared as a Supreme Flame (This need not be confused with agni. Agni becomes one of the aspects of God but not the Supreme itself), in the Shaivites religion, naturally Ash becomes the symbol that indicates the association with that Parma jyoti (Supreme flame).

Rudraksha: Rudra + aksha translates to the eye of Iridra. This is a bead from a tree. This is considered to have emanated from the eye of Lord Shiva when He burnt the tripura asuras. This is one of the holy symbols worn by Shaivites

along with Holy Ash. This is 'worn' as a single bead or as garlands of beads.

Tilaka: This is the dot most of the Hindus have at the eye-brow junction. This could be of sandal or red kumkum or a mix of both. This junction is one of the very significant chakra, called in spiritual terms AGYA chakra. This is a very sensitive point. So the tilaka is kept at this point.

Shri Churna: The vertical three lines (or at times single red line) that is worn by the Vaishnavites are called shri churna. The two outer lines will be in the white colour and the middle one in the red. The red line is normally with kirkum or the red sand at the base of the tulsi plant. This custom has been introduced in the later parts of time by Ramanuja as vaishnavite symbolism. Vaishnavas not belonging to Ramanuja sampradaya (for example madhvas) do not follow this custom. '

Nandi: This is the Holy Bull - the vehicle and the disciple of Lord Shiva. So Nandi is the first Guru Shaivites. On the wall of the Shaivites temples, in the flags, in the message headers and many other articles this emblem could be found. The ancientness of this emblem will be very evident from the fact that this emblem has been found in the excavations of Harappa Mohenjodaro (the so-called Indus valley civilisation sites). According to Shaivites scriptures bull represents the dharma (justice).

Trishula: The tri headed spear (trident)-one of the renowned weapon of Lord Shiva. So this is the second important emblem of Shaivites after Nandi. As the Goddess shakti also holds this trident, this is the symbol that is held high by the devotees of shakti as well.

Shanka Chakra: The conch called panchajanya and the disc called sudarshana in the hands of Lord Vishnu are the important symbols of Vaishnavites. These two are printed as emblems in the artifacts associated with Vaishnavas.

Spear: The spear is the renowned weapon of Lord Skanda. So this is a much respected symbol of the devotees of Lord Subramanya.

Oh God, Your Feet is beyond the worlds beneath and Your Crown beyond the universes above!

You are Immeasurable*; Unexplorable and Unimaginable!.

But how simple You have come as a Sivalinga in my hand !!

-Basavanna

HINDU CULTURE

Each of the religions of the world has its own culture, with many customs, traditions and refined qualities. The Hindu culture is a culture of love, respect, honouring others and humbling one's own ego so that the inner nature, which is naturally pure and modest, will shine forth. Here we have described some of the important faith and behaviours of Hindu community.

Respect and Reverence

1. **Respect for Elders:** Respect for elders is a keystone of Hindu culture. This genuine acknowledgement of seniority is demonstrated through endearing customs, such as sitting to the left of elders, bringing gifts on special occasions, not sitting while they are standing, not speaking excessively, not yawning or stretching, not putting one's opinions forward strongly, not contradicting or arguing, seeking their advice and blessings, giving them first choice in all matters, even serving their food first.
2. **Name Protocol:** Younger never uses the proper name of their elders. In the Tamil tradition, a younger brother, for example, refers to his brother as *annan* or *periannan* (older brother), not by name. The elder, however, may use the name of the younger. Children are trained to refer to all adults as auntie or uncle. Only people of the same age will address each other by first name. A Hindu wife never speaks the name of her husband. When referring to him she uses terms such as "my husband," "him" or, for example, "Athan, Mama, etc."
3. **Touching Feet in Respect:** One touches the feet of holy men and women in recognition of their great humility and inner attainment. A dancer or a musician touches the feet of his or her teacher before and after each lesson. Children prostrate and touch the feet of their mother and father at festivals and at special times, such as birthdays and before departing on a journey.
4. **DARSHAN (Darshana):** "Vision, sight." Seeing the Divine. Beholding, with inner or outer vision, a temple image, Deity, holy person or place, with the desire to inwardly contact and receive the grace and blessings of the venerated being or beings.
5. **Dakshina:** It is tradition to provide *dakshina*, a monetary fee or gift to a priest given at the completion of any rite. *Dakshina* is also given to gurus as a token of respect for their spiritual blessings.

Purity: Purity and its opposite, pollution, are vitally important in Hindu culture. Purity is of three forms- purity in mind, speech and body or thought, word and deed. Purity is the pristine and natural state of the soul. Impurity or pollution, is the obscuring of this state by adulterating experience and beclouding conceptions.

In daily life, the Hindu strives to protect this innate purity by wise living, following the codes of *dharma*. This includes harnessing the sexual energies, associating with other virtuous Hindu devotees, never using harsh, angered or indecent language and keeping a clean and healthy physical body. Here are several ways purity is preserved in Hindu culture.

1. **Purity and Food:** Purity is central to food and nutrition, as the nature of one's nourishment deeply affects the entire physical, mental and emotional nature. One

cooking food for others would never taste of the dish from a spoon and then put the spoon back in the pot. If food is to be tasted while cooking, a small portion is placed in the right hand. Similarly, one would not touch the lips to a water vessel that is also used by others. Nor would one offer something to another from which one has taken a bite or a sip.

2. **Flower Offerings:** One does not sniff flowers picked for offering to the Deities; even the smell is for the Gods, not for us. Flowers that fall to the ground should not be offered.
3. **Offerings:** Offerings, such as an *archana* basket, flowers or garlands, are carried with both hands on the right side of the body, so as to not be breathed on. All items are washed in preparation and, if carried more than a short distance, wrapped or covered.
4. **The Left Hand:** In Hindu culture the left hand is considered impure because it is used (with water) in the place of toilet paper for personal hygiene after answering the call of nature. Handing another person anything with the left hand may be considered a subtle insult.
5. **Dakshoes:** Shoes are considered impure. The cultured Hindu never wears shoes or sandals inside a temple or shrine, nor in his home or the homes of other Hindus. Carrying shoes in the hands from one part of the premises to another is also avoided. An ultimate insult is to be struck with a shoe.
6. **Caution with Footwear:** It is very important to apologize immediately if one touches someone with his or her shoe or sandal. This is done by touching the right hand to where the foot touched the other person and then touching one's right hand lightly to his own left eye and then the right. This same remedy applies to inadvertently hitting someone with the hand or foot or bumping into him or her.

Exchange of Prana

1. **Giving and Receiving with Both Hands:** Giving and accepting things from one to another, presenting offerings to the Deity, etc., is most properly done with both hands. The reason for this is that with the gift, *prana* is also given, through both hands, thus endowing more energy to the object. The recipient of the gift receives it with both hands along with the *prana* from the gracious giver. It is known that this exchange of energies is vital for friendship, harmony and the total release of the gift to the recipient. Hindus never accept gifts from strangers or unknown persons.
2. **Hugging and Embracing:** Hugging and embracing is found in Hindu culture; but it is restricted to close relatives, Guru/disciples and associates that too in a private place. In *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* we find this very often. Hugging and Embracing improves *pranic* energy and this practice is not allowed with strangers.

3. **Not Pointing the Finger:** Pointing with the forefinger of the right hand or shaking the forefinger in emphasis while talking is never done. This is because the right hand possesses a powerful, aggressive pranic force and an energy that moves the forces of the world. Pointing the index finger channels that force into a single stream. The harshness of this energy would be severely felt in the nerve system of the recipient. More properly, rather than pointing or shaking the index finger to give direction or emphasise a verbal statement, the entire hand is used as a pointer, with the palm up and the thumb held alongside the forefinger.
4. **Shaking Hands:** The traditional way that Hindu men greet one another is with the anjali mudra, then, with palms still held together, extending their hands to one, another, in a two-handed handshake, in a deliberate transfer of prana. The hands of one man, usually the less senior, are gently clasped between the other's. Each looks smilingly into the other's face while bowing slightly in humility. This handshake is not firm, but relaxed and gentle.
5. **Not Throwing Things:** Throwing any object on another person is considered extremely improper, even if the persons know each other very well. Cultured Hindus consider this crude and even mildly violent, even if done in efficiency or jest.
6. **Care in Sitting:** It is improper to sit with one's legs outstretched toward a temple, shrine or altar or even toward another person. This is a grave insult. Crossing one leg over the knee when sitting in a chair should be avoided, though crossing at the ankles is permitted. One must always try to follow the example of traditional elders. Worshipping, meditating or sitting in the kneeling pose is not acceptable among Hindus.
7. **Doorways:** Conversations are not held inside or through doorways. This is considered inauspicious. Similarly, to exchange or give or lend an object, one steps inside the room first or; the recipient steps out of the room so that both parties are in the same room.

Modesty

1. **Modesty:** Interaction in public between men and women is much more restrained in Hindu culture than in Western culture. In Hindu culture, for the most part, men socialise with men and women with women. Men never touch women in public unless the lady is very elderly or infirm.
2. **Displaying Affection:** Married Hindu couples do not hug, hold hands or kiss in public. Even embracing at airports and train stations is considered not wise. Men, however, frequently walk hand in hand.

The Three Paths to Salvation: Knowing that there is diversity in life and no single way of life as prescribed or ordained by God will be followed by everyone, the wise

thinkers have put forward three different paths (marga) for achieving salvation. The first is the Jnana marga, mostly for the intellectuals who are able to study and comprehend scriptures. The second is the Bhakti marga, wherein meditation on a personal image of God will lead one to realising the Truth. The third involves social service. Work in the field of uplifting humanity and performance of duty without expecting anything in return is called the karma marga. Renunciation of all worldly possessions and pleasures and continuous meditation is the fourth alternative, which perhaps is beyond the scope of most human beings today.

On the surface Hinduism certainly looks like a confused, directionless religion to an outsider. -But the inclusiveness of Hinduism with its doctrine of tolerance makes it universally appealing. It is not an organised religion and the method of practice is entirely left to the individual, who will take full responsibility of his or her conduct. Superficially, it is a hodgepodge of beliefs and practices, but its core belief of ONE GOD, universal, omniscient and omnipotent has stood the test of time.

Jagdish Hare: In simple words 'Aarti' means Prayer. Aarti is the most important ritual performed by the masses of India. This prayer is said to have been penned by Pandit Shradha Ram Phillauri in 1888. The entire prayer is an attempt to praise the glory of the inexpressible God and surrendering oneself to Him. The Aarti can be a very soothing experience. Each person, however, will realise for oneself by listening, singing and contemplating upon this simple but divine prayer.

HINDU ETHICS

Three documents, namely the Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita and Brahma Sutra form the basis of Vedanta (called Prasthanatraya). From these scriptures are drawn Hindu ethics that help in guiding the Hindu through his daily as well as spiritual journey. Though Vedanta currently is the favourite of English-speaking Hindu intellectuals; it was from the wisdom of the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita that the ancient Hindus set forth their ethics in a practical way, expected to be followed by all Hindus. The Laws of Manu (Dharmashastra or Manu Smriti) gave details of societal rules and Arthashastra of Kautilya detailed the politics and economics.

Ethics of Upanishads: Upanishad means 'to sit down near' because they were explained to the students, who sat at the feet of their teachers. In general Upanishads proclaim salvation by knowledge and realisation, rather than by faith and works. Selfish desires are obstacles to the seekers of Truth (the Higher-Self, also called as Brahman). A seeker of true Divinity will attain salvation when he realises the Truth, the all-pervasive Brahman.

The universe came into existence because of a primeval desire of Brahman. Now it is the duty of the humans to restore it to the state of things before creation.

This can be done by sacrifice, benevolence, study and even ascetism, which in turn will permit the seeker of truth to attain bliss. Honesty is especially extolled. He who has not denounced evil will never obtain Brahman. The worldly perceptions of smell, taste, touch, hearing and sight makes one separate from the True Self. When one can transcend these perceptions there is no consciousness of anything other than Self. This is immortality.

There are six great sayings (Mahavakyas) from the Upanishads that give the basic insight into its philosophy. They are as follows with a brief analysis of each:

Aham Brahmasmi: "I am Brahman". Vedic knowledge teaches that our own "Self is the true Divinity. The Truth is within us-, in our own heart. This states the identity of the inner most consciousness of the individual with the supreme Divine.

Ayam Atma Brahma: "The Self is Brahman". This states that not only individual soul is Divine but all beings are identified with the Absolute Truth.

Tat Tvam Asi: "That art thou". Whatever we see or think about, we are That. We are the ultimate Thou and I in all.

Prajnanam Brahma: "Knowledge is Brahman". Supreme intelligence is present inherently within us and is capable of returning us to the Divine. Our understanding of the truth is the truth itself.

Sarvam Kalvidam Brahma: "The whole universe is Brahman". Not only the consciousness in you and I but also the 'principle of being' are all Divine. The entire universe is Divine, which includes ourself.

So Ham,; "Here am I". This identifies the Divinity in ourself in something that happens naturally like breathing. "So" is inhalation and "Ham" is the natural sound of exhalation.

These are the six statements of the identity of individual consciousness with the Divine reality. They all merge into and derive from the word "Om (Aum)" or the Divine word "I Am All". All of these statements point to the fact that whatever or however we worship, be it an image, book, an idea or even a God, it is the knowledge that the Truth is within ourselves that will ultimately lead to self-realisation. Self is the true Divinity. This is the essence of Upanishads.

Ethics of Gita: Gita is the highest expression of philosophical Hinduism. It is a chapter of the immense Indian epic, the Mahabharata, the saga of the war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Arjuna, hero of the Pandavas, is about to confront the army of the Kauravas on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Among the opposing army are his friends and relatives. Convinced that it would be wrong to kill his own kinsmen, Arjuna is overcome by despair. He lays down his bow and declares that he will not fight. God Vishnu, incarnated as the charioteer Krishna, explains that Arjuna should do his duty (Dharma) and do battle.

The human soul, which is part of the universal soul, is immortal-therefore no one is actually 'slain. If people perform the duties appropriate to their station, without attachment to success or failure, then they cannot be stained by action. The rest of the poem provides the full philosophy underlying this insight. The essence of karma yoga and of self-abnegation through yoga of renunciation as well as yoga of meditation, mysticism and devotion are discussed in eighteen chapters as conversation between Arjuna and Krishna. Detached action along with the fruits of this action is consecrated to God and this forms the basis of karma yoga.

Bhagavad-Gita teaches the causation and the effects of karma and how to deal with its manifestations. It also teaches that the human being has a free will that permits him to make intelligent choices, which in turn may alter the manifestation of the karma. The ultimate goal of every Hindu is to reduce the bad karma that he may have to carry with him into his next cycle of birth.

The Gita is variously dated between the third century B.C.E. (Before the Common Era) and the fourth century C.E. (Common Era). The reason for uncertainty is that the Gita is not always consistent and may be the work of several hands. A follower of the philosophy expressed in the Upanishads probably wrote one strand, in which Brahman is the highest unity underlying reality. A devotee of the supreme god Vishnu may have added another strand, focused on a more personal deity. The Gita may originally have been written as a separate document and later incorporated into the Mahabharata.

God is in all things and all things are in God. But the visible universe springs from only a fraction of Vishnu's glory. There is also a hidden part of God, which extends beyond the universe.

Nevertheless, the Gita contains probably the most powerful and thoroughgoing expression of pantheism in world scripture. The one God is the pinnacle of all things- the radiant sun of lights, the thought organ of sense organs; the intellect of beings, the ocean of waters, the Himalayas of mountain ranges, the Ganges of rivers. He is also the inherent essence of everything-including evil. He is the gambling of fogues, the courage of the courageous, the rod of disciplinarians and the statecraft of politicians, the knowledge of the knowing.

Hindu Ethics and Conduct: Elaboration of the social code is found in the Mahabharata. There are four great aims of human life (purusharthas), namely dharma or righteousness, artha or wealth, kama or enjoyment and moksha or spiritual liberation; the four stages of life, the student or brahmacharya, the householder or grahasthya, the forest-dweller or vanaprastha and the wandering ascetic or sanyasa and the four castes, the priest-teacher or Brahman, the warrior or Kshatriya, the trader or Vaishya and the worker or Sudra.

The Manushastra (codes of Manu) gives details of social rules and practices. Kautilya's Arthashastra discusses economics and politics. A Hindu finds the ethics of Hinduism in the poems of Bhagavad-Gita. These were written at a time when there was attack on the establishment by reformers in order to maintain the order of the society. Gita teaches that by fulfilling his class function to the best of his ability, with devotion to God and without personal ambition, a man can find salvation, whatever his class. The teachings of the Bhagavad Gita are summed up in the maxim "your business is with deed and not with the result".

Other texts that give insight into Hindu ethics also shaped the life of a Hindu. There is the Manasollasa written by 12th Century Deccan king Someshvara III Chalukya that illustrates Hindu morals. Hospitality, charity and honesty are extolled. Piety, performance of religious worship and pilgrimage are also important. Eight virtues of the soul were mentioned in the law book of Gautama, namely compassion, patience, contentedness, purity, earnest endeavour, pure thoughts, freedom from greed and freedom from envy. Tamil texts of Tiukkural and Naladiyar also stress on the moral codes. Earnest kindness and tolerance to all human relations along with non-violence had real effect on Hindu life. Desire for the well being of all beings and benevolence in the form of almsgiving were encouraged especially when done with no expectation of rewards at least in this life. .

The duties also changed according to the ages and classes of people. The ascetic should set his mind on unworldly things but a layman was encouraged to strike a harmony between religion, profession and material pleasures. Similarly students, householders, elderly and the aged had different functions and duties to fulfil. Especially the orthodox classes also followed taboos like not coming in contact with an untouchable, eating forbidden meat as well as left over food. However, the more intelligent teachers realised that mere outward observance was not meritorious as inner goodness. Rules were not rigid and there was always a way to circumvent the most stringent of the rules.

A Hindu is advised to contain and restrain all the emotions that may lead to a sinful existence. Thus he is asked to control such emotions as Kama (lust), Krodha (anger), Mada (ego, pride) "and Matsara (jealousy). The moral codes of Various texts repeatedly emphasise the importance of being aware of these ordinary but strong human emotions that lead to the disruptions of a harmonious society. There are nine basic requirements that a Hindu should be aware of and follow. Personal discipline, good conduct, self-inquiry and meditation are important. Here briefly are the nine beliefs of Hinduism:

1. Belief in the divinity of Vedas.
2. The Supreme Being is both immanent and transcendent, thus both a Creator and Un-manifest Reality.
3. The universe is in an endless cycle of creation, preservation and dissolution.

4. One creates his own destiny by his thoughts, deeds and words. This law of cause and effect . is called the Karma.
5. Every soul evolves through a series of births and deaths (janma and punar-janma) until all karmas have been resolved. The cycle of many births (samsara) is the opportunity to shed the, effects of karma in order to attain liberation (moksha) from the eternal cycle. Not a single soul is deprived of this destiny,
6. Belief in the existence of divine beings in unseen worlds. Temple worship, rituals, sacraments as well as personal devotions create a communion with the devas and God,
7. A master or a guru is essential to follow the right path to know the Transcendent Absolute.
8. All forms of life are sacred and are to be loved and revered. All must follow the practice of 'non-injury' or ahimsa.
9. No one particular religion teaches the 'only pathway' to salvation. All genuine religious paths are-facets of God's Light and Love, deserving tolerance and understanding.

BAUDH RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

Stages in the History of Buddhism: The history of Buddhism in India, which lasted about 1500 years, can be divided into 500-year periods, during which distinctive forms of Buddhism emerged. This is an idealised and schematic picture, but, it is convenient and -it can be matched up with where Buddhism spread during these periods and what forms of Buddhism became dominant there.

Buddhist doctrine and practice in the earliest period were agreed upon in a series of Councils, sometimes reckoned, to be three or four:

1. The First Council was held shortly after the Buddha's death, at Rajagriha. Issues about the, conduct of the Sangha, the monastic community, in the absence of the Buddha appear to have been settled.
2. The Second Council was held about a century after the Buddha's death, at Vaisali. Sometimes this is considered the First Council or is confused with the previous one. It began to agree on the content of the Buddhist Canon and on the monastic discipline, .the vinaya.
3. The Third Council was called by the Emperor Ashoka and held at Pataliputra. The content of the Pali Tripitaka, "Three Baskets," is supposed to have been settled at this Council or thereabouts in this period, consisting of the Sutra-pitaka [Sutta in Pali], the sermons of the Buddha, the Vinaya-pitaka, the monastic discipline and the Abhidharma-pitaka [dharma is dhamma in Pali], the philosophical development of Buddhist doctrine. Buddhism was introduced into Sri Lanka (Ceylon) as the result of Ashoka's own efforts and the Canon in Pali was preserved there.

4. The Fourth Council was called under the Emperor Kanishka I and held at Jalandhara. This is not attested in Pali sources and so one often hears that there were only three Councils. The Council is supposed to have supervised the translation of the Triptaka into Sanskrit. The Canon apparently had not only existed in Pali, but in other Prakrits, which were all consulted for a standard Sanskrit version. It appears to be the Sanskrit texts that were subsequently spread to China. The sutras of the Mahayana may have existed only in Sanskrit from the beginning.

Theravada (the Way of the Elders) is the oldest surviving Buddhist school and for many centuries has been the predominant religion of Sri Lanka (about 70% of the population) and most of continental Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand). Theravada has begun to take root in the West and in the Buddhist revival in India.

The Theravada school is ultimately derived from the Vibhajjavada grouping which emerged amongst the older Sthavira group at the time of the Third Buddhist Council (circa 250 BCE), during the reign of Emperor Ashoka in India. After the Third Council, the Vibhajjavadins gradually evolve into four groups: the Mahisāsaka, Kāśyāpiya, Dharmaguptaka and the Tamraparniya. Theravada is descended from the Tamraparniya, which means 'the Sri Lankan lineage'.

1. Distinctive doctrines:
2. The Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama, Shakyamuni) is gone and individual practitioners must work out their salvation on their own.
3. The Buddha was unique and individual practitioners cannot become Buddhas, only arhats (saints). There will be a future Buddha, Maitreya, but not for thousands of years.
4. Nirvana (liberation) and samsara (the place of death and rebirth) are definitely different. Samsara is a place of suffering to be left behind. Nirvana is a liberation that is free of death and rebirth but is beyond description and rational understanding.

Mahayana (Great Vehicle): It is a classification of Buddhism used in several different senses:

1. The commonest, found in English dictionaries, is as one of two major branches of Buddhism existing today, the other being Theravada.
2. However, the normal usage in the Mahayana in sense 1' is to refer to a level of spiritual motivation and practice, namely the Bodhisattvayana, the Bodhisattva's vehicle.
3. The term Mahayana is also often used in a sense exclusive of the Vajrayana, which is itself used in a variety of senses.

The source of the name Mahayana is polemical, having its origin in a debate about what were the real teachings of the Buddha. Although the Mahayana movement claims that it was founded by the Buddha himself, the consensus of the evidence indicates that it originated in South India in the first century CE. It was propagated through China by Kushan Lokaksema, the first translator of a Mahayana sutra into Chinese.

The earliest mention of "Mahayana" occurs in the Lotus Sutra between the first century BCE and the first century CE. Mahayana scriptures are based on the belief that Buddha is still teaching and announced in the Lotus Sutra, that a Buddha is immortal. The earliest Mahayana scriptures probably originated during the first century CE in the Indian subcontinent and spread to China during the second century CE. Only in the fifth century CE did Mahayana become an influential school in India. In the course of its history, Mahayana spread throughout East Asia. The main countries in which it is practiced today are China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea and Vietnam.

From the point of view of Tantric Buddhism, Mahayana is part of what the Tantricists deem to be exoteric Buddhism. From Mahayana developed the esoteric Vajrayana found mainly in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and Mongolia, but also in adjacent areas of China, India and Russia. The Vajrayana school claims to encompass all previous schools.

The most complete Mahayana canon today exists in the Chinese language, mostly in translation from Sanskrit originals. In East Asia, Mahayana scriptures and terminology are traditionally written in Classical Chinese. Two mainstream subsets of Mahayana Buddhism today are Amidism or Pure Land and Zen Buddhism.

- o **Places where Mahayana spread:** Mahayana Buddhism is presently practiced in China, Korea, Vietnam and Japan. Buddhism was propagated in China by missionaries from India, like Kumarajiva : (344-413), who arrived in China in 401 and Buddhahadra (359-429), who arrived in 408 and by Chinese pilgrims who travelled to India, like Fa-Hsien (Faxian), who travelled to India between 399 and 414 and Hsuan-tsang (Xuanzang, 600-664), who went to India between 629 and 645. These were difficult journeys, either by sea around Malaya, where many ships were attacked by pirates or sunk by storms or by land through Central Asia, on the "Silk Road" caravan route, through deserts and over some of the highest mountains in the world. The highest peaks of the Pamirs and related mountain chains, called Barh-e Donya in Persian, "the Roof of the World," are all over 24,000 feet [note]. One story of a Buddhist missionary crossing the Pamirs, Kumarayana, father of Kumarajiva, is that he carried a Buddha image during the day and the Buddha image carried him during the night! Kumarajiva, Fa-Hsien and Hsuan-tsang all brought Buddhist texts from India to China and translated them.

Vajrayana ("Thunderbolt Vehicle") Buddhism: In India, 6th to 11th century

- o **Distinctive Doctrines:** Vajrayana Buddhism is Tantric Buddhism, often called "esoteric" Buddhism. Although it is sometimes also translated as "diamond" (i.e. "hard"), the vajra (kongo in Japanese) was originally the thunderbolt of Indra; and in Vajrayana it symbolises the magical power of tantra. Tantric magic could be worked through mandalas, sacred diagrams, mantras, sacred formulas for recitation (the most famous one being, "Om, mane padme hum") and mudras, sacred gestures. This Tantric magic could be merely thaumaturgical ("wonder working") or could be regarded as means of achieving liberation in addition to or apart from meditative or meritorious practices. Just as Hindu tantra expresses its magical power through goddesses, like Kali, Vajrayana emphasises female figures. Vajrayana comes to balance male Bodhisattvas with female Bodhisattvas as attendants of the various Buddhas. And while Buddhas tend to be regarded as male in all branches of Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism supplies female figures corresponding to each Buddha, like the "savioresses" Green Tara, White Tara and Mamaki, who actually vow to always be reborn as women in the process of leading all beings to salvation. Vajrayana symbolism "always balances" male and female: the Vajra Mandala (or the "jewel" above) corresponds to the World (or Matrix) Mandala (the lotus). The extent to which Vajrayana practiced real sexual union, been the physical male "vajra" and the physical female womb, as part of its Tantrism is unclear and disputed. Often "right-handed".

Tantrism is distinguished from "left-handed" Tantrism, in which the former practiced the union of male and female, in symbolic, iconographic form, while the latter practiced it literally. While the "right-handed" forms are mainly what remain in Tibet and in Japanese Shingon today, there is little doubt that real "left-handed" practices existed in the past and survive to an extent in the present and Tibetan art sometimes still portrays the more violent and disturbing aspects of Tantric practice—rape, bestiality; etc.

- o **Places Where Vajrayana Spread:** Vajrayana Buddhism most importantly spread to Tibet and then Mongolia. In Tibet it assumed distinctive forms that are usually called Lamaism, since the monks are called Lamas. The present Dalai Lama, who was the priestly ruler of Tibet until he fled the Communist Chinese in 1959, is from a line that is reputed to be successive incarnations of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.

Vajrayana -Buddhism also entered China, Japan, etc. as special "esoteric" schools, like the Japanese Shingon school. The great temple at Borobudur, outside Jakarta on the island of Java, dates from this period (c. 800) and embodies Vajrayana mandala forms; but in Indonesia Buddhism soon thereafter gave way to Islam.

The End of Buddhism in India: Buddhism may have died out in India in the 11th century because:

1. It had become almost indistinguishable from the Tantric forms, of Hinduism. Sophisticated Buddhist doctrine did not appeal to most people and the actual practices and iconography of Vajrayana could easily be assimilated into Hinduism and
2. Islam arrived in earnest in India with the Afghan prince Mahmud of Ghazni, who defeated a coalition of Hindu princes in 1008 and soon annexed the Punjab. As Buddhism was persecuted, conversions to Islam increased and Buddhism declined. By the time the British arrived, about 25% of India was Moslem. That ultimately led to the partition of the country into India and Pakistan. The Gautama Buddha himself has ended up being regarded as the 9th-Incarnation (Avatar) of the great Hindu God Vishnu, although the unflattering take on it is that he deliberately taught a false doctrine (i.e. Buddhism) in order to deceive and destroy demons.

History of Philosophy

Buddhist philosophy is the branch of Eastern philosophy based on the teachings of Gautama Buddha, also known as Siddhartha Gautama (c. 563 BCE-c. 483 BCE). Buddhist philosophy deals extensively with problems in metaphysics, phenomenology, ethics and epistemology.

From its inception, Buddhism has had a strong philosophical component. Buddhism is founded on the rejection of certain orthodox philosophical concepts, in which the Buddha had been instructed by various teachers. Buddhism rejects atheism, theism, monism and dualism alike. The Buddha criticised all concepts of metaphysical being and non-being and this critique is inextricable from the founding of Buddhism.

Particular points of Buddhist philosophising have often been the subject of disputes between different schools of Buddhism. Metaphysical questions such as, "Is there a god?" and "Does the soul (Atman) really exist?" have divided the Buddha's followers even during his own lifetime and epistemological debates over the proper modes of evidence have always been lively in Buddhism. Readers should note that, theory for its own sake is not valued in Buddhism, but theory pursued in the interest of enlightenment for oneself or others is fully consistent with Buddhist values and ethics. J

Buddhism as Philosophy

Some have asserted that Buddhism as a whole is a philosophy rather than a religion. Proponents of such a view may argue that (a) Buddhism is non-theistic (i.e., it has no "special use for the existence or nonexistence of a, god or gods) or atheistic and (b) religions necessarily, involve some form of theism. Others might contest either part of such an argument. Other arguments for Buddhism "as" philosophy may claim that Buddhism does not have doctrines in the

same sense as other religions; the Buddha himself taught that a person should accept a teaching only if one's own experience verifies it and it is praised by the wise.

Arguments against Buddhism as a philosophy might call attention to the way Buddhism's pervasive inclusion of supernatural entities (not "gods" in the sense of Western monotheism, of course), to what most scholars identify as worship practices (ceremonial reverence of saints, etc.), to Buddhism's thoroughly developed hierarchies of clergy (not usually characteristic of a "philosophy") and its overall religious organisation.

A third perspective might take the position that Buddhism can be practiced either as a religion or as a philosophy. A similar distinction is often made with reference to Taoism. Lama Anagorika Govinda expressed it as follows in the book 'A Living Buddhism for the West':

"Thus we could say that the Buddha's Dharma is, as experience and as a way to practical realisation, a religion; as the intellectual formulation of this experience, a philosophy; and as a result of self-observation and analysis, a psychology. Whoever treads this path acquires a norm of behaviour that is not dictated from without, but is the result of an inner process of maturation and that we regarding it from without-can call morality."

It should also be noted that in the South and East Asian cultures in which Buddhism achieved most of its development, the distinction between philosophy and religion is somewhat unclear and possibly quite spurious, so this may be a semantic problem arising in the West alone.

JAIN RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

According to Jain beliefs, the universe was never born, nor will it ever cease to exist. Time is divided into Utsurpinis (Progressive Time Cycle) and Avsarpinis (Regressive Time Cycle). An Utsurpini and a Avsarpini constitute one Time Cycle (Kalchakra). Every Utsurpini and Avsarpini is divided into six unequal periods known as Aras. During the Utsurpini half cycle, ethics, progress, happiness, strength, age, body, religion, etc. go from the worst conditions to the best. During the- Avsapini half-cycle, these notions deteriorate from the best to the worst. Jains believe we are currently in the fifth Era of the Avsarpini phase, with approximately 19,000 years until the next Ara. After this Avsarpini phase, the Utsurpini phase will begin, continuing the infinite repetition of the Kalchakra.

When this cycle reaches its lowest level (in the current half-cycle: the sixth Ara), Jainism, as well as all religions will be lost in their entirety. During this time, all humans will be sinners; with short life spans, ugly appearances and no sense of ethics. Due to this, all individuals during this time will be born in Hell. The world will be a rotting wasteland with little food or water. Then; on the next upswing (start of the Utsurpini half-cycle), the Jain religion will be revived and reintroduced by new [Tirthankar] and (literally

"Crossing Makers" or "Ford Finders"), will be lost again at the end of the next downswing.

In our era, the twenty-third Tirthankar was an ascetic teacher, Parshva, whose traditional dates are 877-777 BC, i.e. 250 years before the liberation of the last Tirthankar. Lord Mahavir, in 527 BC. Jains regard all Tirthankars.. as reformers who called for a return to beliefs and practices in accord with the eternal universal philosophy upon which the faith is based, The title, Bhagavan ("Lord"), applied to Mahavir and .all other Tirthankars, means Venerable.

Bhaktamara Stotra: A Tirthankara is a shelter from ocean of rebirths.

The twenty-fourth and final Tirthankar of this Avsarpini is called, Mahavir, the Great Hero (599-527 BC). A wandering ascetic teacher, he recalled Jains to the rigorous practice of their ancient faith*.

Jains believe that reality consists of two eternal principles, jiva and ajiva. Jiva consists of infinite identical spiritual units (life); while ajiva (non-jiva) is matter in any form or condition: time, space and movement.

Both jiva and ajiva are eternal; they are never born or created for the first time and wjll never cease to exist. The whole world is made up of jivas trapped in ajiva; there are jivas in rocks, plants, insects, animals, human beings, spirits, etc.

Any contact between jiva and ajiva causes the former to suffer and Jains understand that worldly existence inevitably means some suffering. Neither social nor individualre form can totally stop suffering. Every human has jiva which suffers because of its contact with ajiva. To avoid suffering, jiva must leave the four gads (stages) of Human Life, Heavenly Bodies, Plants/Animals/Insects/ Fish Life and Hell, while remembering the ultimate aim of liberation.

Karma and transmigration keep jiva locked in ajiva. Liberation from the human condition is difficult. Jiva suffers during its infinite reincarnations. Jains believe that every action, good or evil, opens up sense channels (sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell), through which [karma] adheres to the jiva within, weighing it down and determining the conditions of its next reincarnation.

The consequence of evil actions (Pap) is negative karma, which weighs the jiva down, forcing it to continue reincarnating at low levels. Good deeds (Punya) lead to positive karma, allowing jiva to rise higher in its next life, with less suffering. However, good deeds alone can never lead to liberation.

The swastika is among the holiest of Jain symbols. Worshipers use rice grains to create swastika around the temple altar."

The way to moksha (release or liberation) is withdrawal from the world. Karma means cause-and-effect and hence every action has inescapable consequences. All Karmas,

good or bad, must be shed to attain moksha, since all Karma, good or bad, has consequences and keeps jiva chained in endless reincarnations which lead to suffering to a greater or lesser extent. Liberation warrants prevention and eradication of new karma.

At the end of his life, a liberated soul (in the Jain belief, a Siddha), with no karma to weigh it; will rise free of ajiva, free of the human condition, free of all future embodiments. It will rise to the highest state in the universe, Siddhashila, where jiva, identical with all other pure jivas, will experience its own true nature in eternal stillness, aloneness, liberation and eternal happiness. The way to discard karma is to withdraw from worldly, involvement and close the senses and the mind to prevent karma. Such eternal liberation by freeing Jiva from Pudgala (ajiva), so no new reincarnation occurs, is Moksha. Ignorance (ajnana) causes attachment, while true knowledge (keval jnan) leads to liberation. Jains believe that moksha is possible for humans in the fourth Ara of each Utsarpini and Avsarpini.

Nine Tattvas: The backbone of the Jain philosophy, the Nine Tattvas show how to attain salvation. Without knowing them, one cannot progress towards liberation. Jainism explains that Karma theory is intertwined with these nine principles.

Beliefs and Practices: The hand with a wheel on the palm symbolises the Jain Vow of Ahimsa, meaning nonviolence. The word in the middle is "ahimsa." The wheel represents the dharma-chakra, to halt the cycle of reincarnation through relentless pursuit of truth,

Jain monks practise strict 'asceticism and strive to make this or one of the coming births, their last. The laity, who pursue less rigorous practices, strive to attain rational faith and to do as much good as possible now. Following strict ethics, the laity choose professions that revere and protect life and totally avoid violent livelihoods.

Jains believe that Devas (angels or celestial beings) cannot help jiva to obtain liberation. This must be achieved by individuals through their own efforts. In fact, devas themselves cannot achieve liberation until they reincarnate as humans and undertake the difficult act of removing karma. Their efforts to attain the exalted state of Siddha, the permanent liberation of jiva from all involvement in worldly existence, must be their own.

The Jain ethical code is taken very seriously. Five vows are followed by both laity and monks/nuns. These are:

1. Nonviolence (ahimsa or ahinsa)
2. Truth (satya)
3. Non-stealing (asteya)
4. Chastity (brahma-charya)
5. Non-possession or Non-possessiveness (aparigrah)

For laypersons, 'chastity' means confining sexual experiences to marriage. For monks/nuns, it means complete

celibacy. Nonviolence involves being vegetarian and some choose to be vegan. Jains are expected to be non-violent in thought, word and deed, towards humans and every living creature. Human life is deemed the highest and it is vital to never harm or upset another. While performing holy deeds, Svetambara Jains wear cloths over their mouths and noses to avoid spittle falling on texts or revered images.

Along with the Five Vows, Jains avoid harbouring ill will towards others and practise forgiveness. They believe that Atma (Soul) can lead one to becoming Parmatma (liberated soul) and this must come from one's inner seli. No jiva gives another salvation but can only show the way. Jains refrain from all violence (Ahimsa) and have named 18 activities, that should be eradicated:

1. Violence
2. Untruth
3. Theft
4. Unchaste behaviour
5. Possessiveness
6. Anger
7. Arrogance
8. Greed
9. Deceit
10. Attachment
11. Hatred
12. Arguing
13. Accusation
14. Gossip
15. Criticism
16. Prejudice and Dislikes
17. Malice
18. Wrong belief

Jain Symbols: The holiest symbol is a simple swastika or svastik. Another incorporates a wheel on the palm of a hand.

Major Jain symbols include:

- o 24 Lanchhanas for Tirthankaras
- o The Ashtamangals
- o cm
- o Triratna and Shrivatsa symbols
- o A Tirthankar's mother dreams
- o Dharma-chakra and Siddha-chakra

MUSLIM RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

Islam: Islam is an Arabic word meaning both 'Submission to God' and 'Peace'. The followers of Islam who are called Muslims are found all over the world. There are over 100 crores (over one billion-1,147,494,000 Source: The World Almanac, 1999) of Muslims all over the world and out of this around one-eighth live in India alone.

Islam is not only a religion but also a particular way of life. The followers of Islam are governed by their religious teachings. Muhammad, the prophet of Islam, was born in Mecca in about 570 AD. In about 610 AD, God sent his first message to Muhammad. Messages came to him from God till his death in 632 AD. These messages were recorded by the companions of Muhammad. The collection containing these messages is called the 'Quran', the holy book of Muslims. The sayings of Muhammad which were distinguished from the words of God were collected and are known as 'Hadis', the second most important source of Islam.

The Arabs called Muhammad, 'Al-Amen' or 'The trustworthy man' and respected him greatly. But when God sent through him the first message of Islam, there was stiff opposition against Muhammad from all sides.

The opposition kept mounting, so Muhammad was forced to leave Mecca in 622 AD. It is from this year that the Muslim calendar starts. Muhammad arrived in Medina where people listened to Muhammad and accepted him as a true prophet. The people in other towns challenged those who had already become Muslims and war became inevitable. However, when Muhammad died in 632 AD, not only the whole of Arabia had embraced Islam but also his religion called the Perfect Religion was fast spreading in many lands.

The death of the prophet of Islam posed the problem of succession. One group of Muslims wanted a person from the family of the prophet to be his successor. This group was known as the 'Shia'. The other group, the 'Sunnis', wanted the successor to be chosen by majority opinion. The majority went in favour of Abu Bakr, who was chosen as Caliph. The Sunnis won, but this brought about two broad divisions of Muslims. After Abu Bakr, two more caliphs 'Omar and Othman'--were chosen. Then Ali, the son-in-law of prophet Muhammad and a candidate chosen by the Shia from the very beginning became the fourth Caliph of Islam. These four Caliphs are known in Islamic history as the Pious Caliphs.

Islam was revealed by God, to the prophet of Islam at a time when Arabia was witnessing a period of ignorance and tribal wars. A common cause of wars was the dispute over which God was superior to the others. Each Arab tribe had its own God. Islam substituted one God in place of so many and brought the Arab tribes together under the supreme Islamic belief that there is only one God. From the belief in the unity of God, Islam went on to preach the unity of mankind.

The great force with which the message of the 'Quran' spread from Arabia to the whole of Mid-Asia and other far-off lands, gives proof that it had an easy appeal for the human beings. It was the Arabs who went for trade with various countries, carried the message of Islam forward along

with their merchandise. The great increase in knowledge in all fields that followed the birth of Islam was a result of the great emphasis laid by the 'Quran' and by the prophet, on the acquisition of knowledge from whatever source, was available.

The 'Quran' states clearly the importance of people who seek knowledge when it asks: 'Say, shall those who have knowledge and those who do not have it be considered equal?' The great contribution of Muslims to literature is to be seen in books like the 'Arabian Nights' and their contribution to art and architecture in many thousands of buildings, from the giant and majestic palace of Al-Hamra in Spain to the Taj Mahal in India.

The mystics of Islam, known as 'Sufis', played an important part in spreading the message of universal love and tending down the aggressive trends in Islam. Islam's spirit of brotherhood helped in loosening the rigidity of the caste system. It will be observed that the cultures of the Muslims in various parts of the world have remained unchanged. This proves that Islam never attempted to uproot people from their own cultures. On the other hand, it has allowed them to nurture their culture within the broad framework of the basic beliefs and practices.

SIKH RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY

Over twenty million Sikhs follow a revealed, distinct and unique religion born five centuries ago in the Punjab region of northern India. Between 1469 and 1708, ten Gurus preached a simple message of truth, devotion to God and universal equality. Often mistaken as a combination of Hinduism and Islam, the Sikh religion can be characterised as a completely independent faith:

Sikhism rejects idolatry, the caste system, ritualism and asceticism. It recognises the equality between both genders and all religions, prohibits the intake of any intoxicants and encourages an honest, truthful living. Sikhs have their own holy scripture, Guru Granth Sahib. Written, composed and compiled by the Sikh Gurus themselves, the Guru Granth Sahib serves as the ultimate source of spiritual guidance for Sikhs. While the Sikhs hold their Gurus in high reverence, they are not to be worshipped; Sikhs may only worship God.

Members of the Sikh community are mainly concentrated in their homeland, Punjab; however, substantial Sikh populations exist throughout the rest of India and the world. Punjabi, a variant of the Hindi language with some Persian influence, is the spoken and written language of the Sikh people. Male members of the Sikh religion use the name, Singh (lion), as their middle or last name, while, females use the name, Kaur (princess). Sikhs tend to be industrious and pioneering; this accounts for their general success wherever they live and settle. The hard-working nature of the Sikhs is derived from their religion, which can be best characterised as a faith of unlimited optimism.

Basics of Sikhism

1. Sikhism is the youngest of the world religions. Its history dates back to 1469.
2. Its founder Guru Nanak Dev was born in a village called Talwandi, now known as Nankana Sahib in Pakistan, in 1469.
3. The Sikhs have ten Gurus. It is believed that they all had same soul though they had different bodies, and that it was Guru Nanak Dev's spirit which passed on into his nine successors.
4. The; Sikhs call God as 'Waheguru', meaning that God is great. Their common salutation is Sat Siri Akal (God is supreme and is immortal).

"Waheguru Ji Ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji Ki Parch"

It has a two-fold meaning. It denotes a special relationship between God and those who dedicate their lives to His love and service. Also it is the expression of a devotee's faith in the ultimate triumph of Truth over Falsehood. This Sikh salutation means "Khalsa belongs to God and to God alone belongs the Victory". .

5. Guru Granth Sahib is the holy book of the Sikhs. It is believed that the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh bestowed upon the Granth the title of the Guru,
6. The Sikhs worship only one Almighty God in his abstract form. They are not allowed to worship any idols, images or photographs.
7. According to the Sikh belief, God is the eternal truth; he is beyond fear, enmity and death. He is unborn and is self illuminated. He himself is the creator, preserver and destroyer.
8. The Sikhs believe that all existence is controlled by one omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient Lord called by different names; Ishwar, Jehovah, Allah and Waheguru.

Who is a Sikh: A Sikh is any person whose faith consists of belief in One God, the ten Sikh Gurus, the Guru Granth Sahib and other scriptures and teachings of the Sikh Gurus. Additionally, he or she must believe in the necessity and importance of 'Amrit', the Sikh baptism.

God and the Sikhs: According to the Sikh belief, God is all omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. The sun, moon, wind, fire, water, vegetation and all other things which exist are His witnesses. A Sikh must worship only the abstract form of God. The worship of images or any other object is strictly forbidden.

God is both the creator and the destroyer. He is beyond birth and death. He is both merciful and compassionate. He is beyond fear and enmity. He is self illuminated. He is the Master of all the treasures. All our possessions are a result of His grace. The Sikhs call God as Waheguru, meaning the most wonderful Master. The belief of the Sikhs in Waheguru is similar to that of Judaism, Christianity and Islam i.e. God is the greatest power, He is supreme, He is the

king of kings, He pervades everywhere, He knows the inner thoughts of everyone, He is the giver, He existed before the start of the time, He existed when the time was started, He exists now and He will exist forever.

Relationship with God: The Sikh Gurus called Waheguru as Master and themselves as his servants. In some hymns they called Him as Father, Mother, Friend and Brother as well. Like Jesus Christ. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru of the Sikhs, in one of his hymns, called himself as God's son.

Universality: Sikhism does not believe in asceticism, celibacy or living alone at mountains or in caves or in forests in the search of Truth and God. It also rejects the orders of monasteries. For a Sikh the true life is the life of a householder. Living in a family environment and by serving the community both Truth and God can be realised. Thus it rejects the order of monks (Buddhism and Jainism) and nuns (Christianity).

The Sikh teachings are based on the principles of Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of humankind. Sikhism rejects the concept of chosen people (as in Judaism) and caste system (as in Hinduism); it also rejects the concept of entering 'Nirvana' without the blessings of God (as in Buddhism and Jainism).

In a Sikh temple people of all the faiths are welcome. The Sikh holy book, Guru Granth Sahib also has in it the hymns composed by both Hindu and Muslim saints of various denominations. The first five baptised Sikhs, called the beloved ones, were also from both lower, and upper Hindu castes. They were the first Khalsa, the pure ones:

Bhai Daya Singh, aged 30, a Khatri from Lahore (Punjab)

Bhai Dharam Singh, aged 33, a Jat from Delhi

Bhai Mohkam Singh, aged 36, a washerman from Dwarka (Gujarat)

Bhai Sahib Singh, aged 37, a barber from Bidar (Karnataka)

Bhai Himmat Singh, aged 39, a water carrier from Puri (Orissa)

Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth guru of the Sikhs, urged his followers to drop caste symbols after their names and instead write a common surname: Singh, meaning lion, for men and Kaur, meaning princess for women.

The Khalsa

A baptised Sikh is called Khalsa, who must observe and follow strict code of conduct:

1. worship only one Almighty God,
2. recite five prescribed banis (hymns) everyday
3. learn Punjabi language and read Guru Granth-Sahib,
4. wear and observe" the significance of five Ks: kesh - uncut hair, kanga - a small comb, kara - a stainless steel bracelet, kirpan - a sword and kuchcha - an underwear.

- live a truthful life and treat all humans as equal

He must not:

- cut body hair
- eat, kosher meat,
- smoke, take drugs or intoxicants,
- have faith in black magic, superstitions, charms and rituals

Rules, Concepts and Commandments: A Sikh lives by the rules made for him by the ten Gurus. The fundamental rules, concepts and the commandments are as follows:

Worship of God

- Worship only God and no one else.
- Make worship and prayer a part of your daily life.
- Do not make images of God, worship him in his abstract form.

Fatherhood of God and Brotherhood of Man

- Believe that everyone is the child of God.
- Believe that all human-beings are equal.

The Ntinem (Daily prayers): The banis which must be recited everyday are:

The bani	The author	Where is it recorded
Japji Sahib	Guru Nanak Dev	pages 1-8 Guru Granth Sahib
Jap Sahib	Guru Gobind Singh	pages 1-10 Dasam Granth
Swayas	Guru Gobind Singh	pages 13-15 Dasam Granth
Rehras	Guru Nanak	pages 8-12 Guru Granth Sahib
	Guru Amardas	
	Guru Amardas	
	Guru Arjan	
Kirtan .Sohila	Guru Nanak	pages 12-13 Guru Granth Sahib
	Guru Rarhdas	
	Guru Arjan	

The Sikh prayers and their timings: The prayers are classified as: Individual and Collective prayers. The Individual prayers are Morning prayers: Jap ji, Jap Sahib and Sudha Swayas; Evening prayer: Rehras Sahib; Night' time prayer: Kirtan Sohila

The Congregational prayer is: Morning prayer: Asa di var (composed by Guru Nanak Dev)

' In addition to the above prayers a Sikh normally reads the following: At the end of every service or prayer: Anand Sahib (composed by Guru Amardas) At any special occasion or. otherwise: Sukhmani Sahib (composed by Guru Arjan) At the time of marriage: Lavan (composed by Guru Ramdas) At the time of cremation: Kirtan Sohila

The important Sikh festival calendar is as follows:

Month	Gurpurb	Other festivals
Jan-Feb	Birthday Guru Har Rai	Maghi, Basant
Feb-March	xxxxxxx	Hola Mohalla

- Do not discriminate on the basis of colour, religion, caste and creed.

Rituals and Superstitions

- Do not believe in any rituals and superstitions.
- Do not believe in the worship of images, tombs and graves,

Social and Family Guidelines

- Do not take alcohol, tobacco and drugs,
- Do not eat halal meat.
- Do not eat any food which inflames the passions.
- Be true to your parents and children.
- Do not steal.
- Do not gamble.
- Love and respect your guests.

The belief

- Believe in the oneness of the ten Gurus.
- Believe in the sovereignty of Guru Granth Sahib
- Believe in the spiritual authority of the five takhats.

The main sources of Sikh material to understand the religion in depth are:

- Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy book
- Dasm Granth, the holy book of the Tenth Guru Gobind Singh
- Janam Sakhis, the life stories of the Sikh Gurus
- Hukamnama, the letter written by the Sikh Gurus
- Varan Bhai Gurdas, the hymns composed by Bhai Gurdas I & II, contemporaries of Guru Arjan and Guru Gobind Singh Ji respectively.

The Sikh Festivals: The Sikhs celebrate both religious and social festivals. The religious festivals are however called Gurbpurbs.

March-April	Birthday Guru Angad	Baisakhi
April-May	Birthday Guru Arjan	
	Birthday Guru Tegh Bahadur	
May-June	Birthday Guru Amardas	
	Martyrdom day of Guru Arjan	
June-July	Birthday Guru Hargobind	
July-August	Birthday Guru Harkishan	
August-September	xxxxxxaxxxx	Rakhsha Bandan
September-October	Birthday Guru Ramdas	
	Installation Guru Granth Sahib	
October-November	Birthday Guru Nanak	Diwali
November-December	Martyrdom day of Guru Tegh Bahadur	
December-January	Birthday Guru Gobind Singh	Lohir

The Sikh Shrine: Gurudwara:

1. A Sikh shrine is called a Gurudwara, meaning the doorway to the house of God.
2. The first Gurudwara was built by Guru Nanak Dev at Kartarpur.
3. The Sikh Gurdwaras must have a religious flag, called Nishan Sahib in the front of the Gurudwara.
4. Guru Granth is placed on the far side centre of the hall.
5. There should be no photographs of the Gurus or others in the hall where Guru Granth Sahib is installed.
6. Guradwaras normally have two halls/rooms. The main hall where Guru Granth Sahib is placed and the second hall where the community kitchen is served.
7. All entrants must take off their shoes, wash their feet and cover their heads before entering the main hall.
8. All Sikh services end with the distribution of parshad (sweet pudding) and langar (dinner/ lunch).

Five historical Sikh gurdwaras have been declared as the Sikh Takhts (thrones). These gurdwaras are vested with the power and authority to regulate the religious life of, the Sikh nation. The head priests of these shrines constitute a Sikh parliament and they are empowered with executive, legislative and judicial powers regarding the Sikh religious issues. All Sikhs are under the authority of the five takhts: The takhts are as follows:

The Ten Gurus

1. Sri Guru Nanak Dev: 1469 AD-1538 AD.
2. Sri Guru Angad Dev: 1538 AD-1552 AD,
3. Guru Amar Das : 1552 AD-1574 AD.
4. Sri Guru Ram Das Sahib : 1574 AD-1581 AD.
5. Sri Guru Arjan Dev : 1581 AD-1606 AD.
6. Sri Guru Har Gobind Sahib : 1606 AD-1645 AD.
7. Sri Guru Har Rai Sahib: 1645 AD-1661 AD.

8; Sri Guru Harkishan Sahib : 1661 AD - 1664 AD.

9. Sri Guru Tegh Bahadur Sahib: 1664 AD-1675 AD.

10. Sri Guru Qobind Singh: 1675 AD-1708 AD.

PARSI RELIGION AND CULTURE

A Parsi. is a member of the close-knit Zoroastrian community based in the Indian subcontinent. Parsis are descended from Persian Zoroastrians who emigrated to the Indian subcontinent over 1000 years ago to escape religious persecution after the Islamic conquest.

Definition and Identity

As an Ethnic Community: Although the Parsis of India originally emigrated from Persia, they no longer have social or familial ties to Persians and do not share language or recent history with them. Over the centuries since the first Zoroastrians arrived in India, the Parsis have integrated themselves into Indian society while simultaneously maintaining their own distinct customs and traditions (and thus ethnic identity). This in turn has given the Parsi community a rather peculiar standing -they are Indians in terms of national affiliation, language and history, but not typically Indian (constituting only 0.006% of the total population) in terms of consanguinity or cultural, behavioural and religious practices,.

Genealogical DNA tests to determine purity of lineage has brought mixed results. One study supports the Parsi contention that they have maintained their Persian roots by avoiding intermarriage with local populations. In the 2002 study of the Y-chromosome (patrilineal) DNA of the Parsis of Pakistan, it was determined that Parsis are, genetically closer to Iranians than to their neighbours. However, a 2004 study in which Parsi mitochondrial DNA (matrilineal) was compared with that of the Iranians and Gujaratis determined that Parsis are genetically closer to Gujaratis than to Iranians. Taking the 2002 study into account, the authors of the 2004 study suggested "a male-mediated migration of the ancestors of the present-day Parsi population, where they

admixed with local females leading ultimately to the loss of mtDNA of Iranian origin".

The Rivayat epistles suggest that at some point between the 15th and 17th centuries; non-Zoroastrians were accepted into the fold.

Self-perceptions : The definition of who is (and who is not) a Parsi is a matter of great contention within the Zoroastrian community in India. Generally accepted, a Parsi is a person who (a) is directly descended from the original Persian refugees; and (b) has been formally admitted into the Zoroastrian religion. In this sense, Parsi is an ethno-religious designator. Some members of the community additionally contend that a child must have a Parsi father to be eligible for introduction into the faith, but this assertion is considered by most to be a violation of the Zoroastrian tenets of gender equality and may be a remnant of an old legal definition of Parsi. Nonetheless, many Parsi Zoroastrian priests perform the Navjote ceremony i.e. the rites of admission into the religion - for children from mixed-marriages.

An often quoted legal definition of Parsi is based on a 1909 ruling (since then nullified) that not only stipulated that a person could not become a Parsi by converting to the Zoroastrian faith (which was the case in question), but also noted that "the Parsi community consists of: (a) Parsis who are descended from the original Persian emigrants and who are born of both Zoroastrian parents and who profess the Zoroastrian religion; (b) Iranis from Persia professing the Zoroastrian religion; (c) the children of Parsi fathers by alien mothers who have been duly and properly admitted into the religion."

This definition has since been overturned several times. The equality principles of the Indian Constitution void the patrilineal restrictions expressed in the third clause. The second clause was contested and overturned in 1948. On appeal in 1950, the 1948 ruling was upheld and the entire 1909 definition was deemed an obiter dictum, that is, a collateral opinion and not legally binding (re-affirmed in 1966).

Nonetheless, the opinion that the 1909 ruling is legally binding continues to persist, even among the better-read and moderate Parsis. In the February 21, 2006 editorial of the Parsiana, the fortnightly of the Parsi Zoroastrian community, the editor noted that several adult children born of a Parsi mother and non-Parsi father had been inducted into the faith and that their choice "to embrace their mother's faith speaks volumes for their commitment to the religion." In recalling the ruling, the editor noted that although "they are legally and religiously full-fledged Zoroastrians, they are not considered Parsi Zoroastrians in the eyes of the law" and hence "legally they, may not avail of (fire temples) specified for Parsi Zoroastrians".

Demographic Statistics

Indian census data (2001) records 69,601 Parsis in India, with a concentration in and around the city of, Mumbai. There are approximately 5,000 Parsis elsewhere on the sub-continent, with an estimated 2500 Parsis in the city of Karachi and approximately 50 Parsi families in Sri Lanka. The number of Parsis worldwide is estimated to be fewer than 100,000.

Indian census data also established that:

- o The number of Parsis has been steadily declining for several decades: the highest census count of the Parsis was of 114,890 individuals in 1940-41, which includes the crown colony populations of present-day India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Post-independence censuses are only available for India (1951: 111,791) and reveal a decline in population of approximately 9% per decade. They do not however take immigration into account. As of 2001, Parsis constitute 0.0069% of the total population of India.

According to the National Commission-for Minorities, there are a "variety of causes that are responsible for this steady decline in the population of the community", the most significant of which were childlessness and migration. Demographic trends project that by the year 2020 the Parsis will number only 23,000 or 0.0002% of the total population of India, which-with 1200 million inhabitants- "will have achieved dubious distinction of being the most populated country on earth." The Parsis will then cease to be called a community and will be labelled a 'tribe'.

CRISTIANITY IN INDIA

According to the 3rd century Acts of Thomas, the first Christians in India were converted by St. Thomas the Apostle, who arrived at Kodungallur on the Malabar Coast of India in 52 AD. It is also important to note that the first Christian baptisms in India were performed by the saint.

The Syrian Malabar Nasrani people are an ethnic community in Kerala, South India. Their tradition goes back to the very beginnings of first century Christian thought and the seven churches that were established by St. Thomas the Apostle among the natives and the Jewish diaspora in Kerala. They follow a unique Hebrew-Syriac Christian tradition which includes several Jewish elements along with some Hindu customs. Their heritage is Syriac-Keralite, their culture South Indian, their faith St. Thomas Christian and their language Malayalam. According to the Acts of Thomas, the first converts made by Thomas in India were Malabari Jews, who had settled in Kerala since the time of King Solomon of Israel.

There is a general agreement among the historians that St. Thomas, a Jew himself by birth, visited India in search of Jews settled here.

The Syrian Malabar Nasrani community was further

strengthened by various Persian immigrant settlers. The trade routes brought with them not only riches but also stateless nations and nascent worldviews. The community was strengthened by Christian-Jewish Knariaya colonies of third century, Manichaeism followers and the Babylonian Christians settlers of 4th Century, the 7th Century Syrian settlement of Mar Sabor Easo and Proth and the immigrant Persian Christians from successive centuries. The Kerala Syrian Church was in communion with Syrian Church and was under the jurisdiction of Patriarch of Babylonian till the Portuguese arrival in the 17th century. Bishops came from Syria.

They seem to have maintained their identity for a long time in the first few centuries and later amalgamated into one patronized community known differently as Nasrani, Malankara Christians, Syrian Christians.

The archeological excavations at Pattanam show that the ancient port town of Muziris was in modern Kerala. The *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* calls it of "leading importance" describing it: Muziris, of the same kingdom, abounds in ships sent there with cargoes from Arabia and by the Greeks; it is located on a river, distant from Tyndis by river and sea five hundred stadia and up the river from the shore twenty stadia.

The South Indian epic of *Manimekalai* (written between 2nd and 3rd century AD.) mentions the Nasrani people by the name *Essanis* referring to one of the early Christian-Jewish sect within the Nasranis called *Essenes*. The embassy of Alfred in 833 AD. described the Nestorian Syrian Christians as being prosperous and enjoying high status in the Malabar coast. Marco Polo also mentioned the Nasranis and their ancient church in the Malabar coast in his writings *Il Milione*.

Portuguese missionaries, who reached the Malabar Coast in the late 15th century, made contact with the St. Thomas Christians in Kerala and sought to introduce among them the Latin Rite of the Roman Catholic Church. Throughout this period, foreign missionaries also made many new converts to Christianity. They are a separate community and are called Latin-Catholics in Kerala. Early Roman Catholic missionaries, particularly the Portuguese, led by the Jesuit St Francis Xavier (1506-52), expanded from their bases on the west coast making many converts. Portuguese missionaries sought to convert the entire Hindu population of Goa. St. Francis Xavier, in a 1545 letter to John III of Portugal, requested an Inquisition be installed in Goa. However, it was not installed until eight years after Francis Xavier's death. During the Goa Inquisition under the Portuguese, Hindus were forced to convert and thousands of Hindus in Goa who refused or were suspected of practicing heresy were burnt alive in public. Modern-day Goa is overwhelmingly Roman Catholic. The undecayed body of Saint Francis Xavier is still on public view in a glass coffin at the Basilica of Bom Jesus in Goa.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, Protestant missionaries began to work throughout India, leading to the growth of different Christian communities. In 1793 William Carey, an English Baptist Minister came to India as a Missionary. He worked in Serampore, Calcutta and other places as a missionary. He started the Serampore College. He translated the Bible into Bengali and Sanskrit and worked to abolish practices such as widow-burning (*Sati Pratha*).

Anthony Morris Groves, Plymouth Brethren missionary came to India in 1833. He worked in the Godavari delta area. He worked in India until his death in 1852. Mormon missionaries, including Hugh Findlay, arrived in Bombay and Pune in the early 1850s, but did not meet with success.

The total number of Christians in India according to the 2001 census was 24.08 million (2.40 crores) or 2.3 percent of the population. About 70% of Indian Christians in 1991 were Roman Catholics, including 300,000 members of the Syro-Malankara Church. The remainder of Roman Catholics were under the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India. In January 1993, after centuries of self-government, the 3.5 million (35 lakh)-strong Eastern-rite Syro-Malabar Church was raised to archiepiscopate status as part of the Roman Catholic Church. In total, there were nineteen archbishops, 103 bishops and about 15,000 priests in India in 1995.

Most Protestant denominations are represented in India, the result of missionary activities throughout the country. The largest Protestant denomination in the country is the Church of South India, since 1947 a union of Presbyterian, Reformed, Congregational, Methodist and Anglican congregations with approximately 2.2 million (22 - lakh) members as of 1995. A similar Church of North India had 1 million (10 lakh) members. (These churches are in full communion with the Anglican Communion.) There were about 1.3 million (13 lakh) Lutherans, 473,000 Methodists and 425,000 Baptists as of 1995, Oriental Orthodox churches of the Malankara and Malabar rites totaled 2 million (20 lakh) and 700,000 members, respectively. Pentecostalism, another denomination of Protestantism, is also a rapidly growing religion in India.

It is spreading greatly in northern India and the south west; area, such as Kerala. The largest indigenous Pentecostal church in India is the India Pentecostal Church of God (IPC). Another prominent group is the Brethrens. They are known in different names Plymouth Brethren, Indian Brethren, Kerala brethren etc.

During the twentieth century, the fastest growing Christian communities have been located in the northeast, among the Khasis, Mizos, Nagas and other hill tribes. Today, Christians are most prevalent in the northeast (secessionist movements in a few states such as Nagaland are demanding an independent Christian-majority entity) and in the southwestern states of Kerala and Goa. Indian Christians have contributed significantly to and are well represented in various spheres of national life.

(Christianity at glance)

Christianity is the most popular religion in the world with over 2 billion adherents. 42 million Britons see themselves as nominally Christian and there are 6 million who are actively practising.

- o Christians believe that Jesus was the Messiah promised in the Old Testament.
- o Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of :God.
- o Christians believe that God sent his Son to earth to save humanity from the consequences of its sins.,
- o One of the most important concepts in Christianity is that of Jesus giving his life on the Cross (the Crucifixion) and rising from the dead after the third day (the Resurrection),
- o Christians believe that there is only one God, but that there are three elements to this one 'God:
- o God the Father
- o God the Son
- o The Holy Spirit
- o Christians worship in churches.
- o Their spiritual- leaders are called priests or ministers.
- o The Christian holy book is the Bible and consists of the Old and New Testaments.
- o Christian holy days such as Easter and Christmas are important milestones in the Western secular calendar.

