

Hinduism 101

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Introduction

The **Hindu doctrinology**, first written down in a literature over **5500** years ago in epics and legends, is still alive all over that ancient land, in palace, temple, city and village. The wisdom, adventure and romance instilled in these beliefs are a part of the life and thought of most Indians even today. To understand this unique religion better it is necessary to study in some detail the progression of events from the earliest times when the first seeds of the distinctive **Hindu pantheon** germinated and became evident in the subcontinent to the present times.

Over millennia of turmoil in the Indian subcontinent, the majority Hindus among the Indian populace have had to adapt to different situations but have somehow retained their original identity by adhering to the beliefs incorporated in their religion. The early beliefs have been molded, sometimes even distorted, to reflect new social conditions, to accommodate the beliefs and customs of new rulers, or to fit in with new philosophical schemes.

Over the millennia, invaders with superior military techniques have constantly streamed into the subcontinent, mainly from the northwest, and have been continuously assimilated into, with the exception of the Muslim invaders from the tenth century onwards, and have influenced the more advanced and deep-rooted cultures of the people they have conquered.

Thus, this foreign influence, mostly benign, has multiplied the deities and beliefs making up the Hindu religion till it is a bewildering potpourri of gods, goddesses, sages, humans (the suras), demons (the asuras), even animals and strange beings, some of which are half human and half animal, and customs and practices, some of which are strange, to say the least. To the present day, the popular Hindu assertion is that there are **33 crores** (330 million, 1 crore equivalent to 10 million) deities in their pantheon.

Not one Hindu, not even the most devoted, knows all of them but the Hindu calendar is a day-by-day account of ritualistic worship, to one deity or another and, on some days, to several deities, with a particular period of the 24-hour day assigned to each deity.

Also, over its long history of evolution, Hinduism has been influenced and modified by reformist movements like Buddhism, Jainism and **The Bhakti Movement**, the movements themselves having been generated to moderate certain periodic extremism in the mainstream Hindu doctrines. For example, the Bhakti Movement, which looked upon one supreme being of love to provide salvation to all people, moved Hindu beliefs away from the older practices of worship through ritual sacrifice performed specifically by the priestly class, the Brahmins, towards a more personal devotion whereupon the devotee personally calls upon the supreme being through both thought and deed. This movement also, to some extent, polarized the Hindu pantheon towards a central deity, **Vishnu**, around whom the other deities evolved. This is not unique in that Hindu beliefs have always been enamored with the idea of one supreme creator, sometimes **Brahma**, sometimes **Shiva**, sometimes **Vishnu**, who lent being to all else but the sheer weight of that

wonderful diversity of deities in the pantheon has always created confusion which has, periodically, obscured all previous attempts to impose a central focus of worship. From the earliest times, however, a rough triad of deities, presently Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar (another name for Shiva), has always persisted at the *apex* of worship.

Over the millennia to the present day, what has distilled through as Hinduism, one of the principal religions of the world with over a billion worshippers spread out across the globe, makes pleasant and interesting.

Like all other religions, Hinduism also points out the paths of love and sacrifice as the way to salvation (**moksha**). **Dharma** (religion) is **Karma** (deeds). Through Karma alone can one escape the endless cycle of birth and death. Hinduism preaches transmigration of the soul. The soul is reborn as according to the deeds of a person in a life. Thus, a person who has sinned much may be reborn as a lower animal, a dog, cow, etc. in the next life. Conversely, a cow, dog, or any other animal, through good deeds in life, may be reborn as a human being. Originally castes were also used to determine the deeds of a person in his or her previous birth. We shall see how this initially simple belief, over the millennia, had evolved into a major evil in Hindu society till the caste system was officially banned by the Indian Government after India's independence.

Thus, to explain more, Hinduism preaches karma (deeds) without expectation of rewards. Therein lies moksha – salvation from the cycles of birth and death. This is much like all other religions in the world and maybe this is why Hinduism, even after almost 5500 years of existence, has still maintained its preeminence as a world religion at the beginning of the 21st century.

Hinduism: Origin and Evolution.

Introduction and Origin.

Hinduism cannot be said to be a single religious entity but a patchwork of religious concepts and doctrines that coalesce under one central idea. At the apex is the **Eternal Brahman**, the Universal Spirit, self-existent, without attributes, from whom all being – the entire universe- has existence. Since from Him all beings originate such beings, especially **Jiva** or living beings including Gods, humans, animals, even asuras or demons and others, have a part of Him, the **Atman** or soul within themselves, and Hinduism, perforce, must acknowledge love and respect for all beings.

Thus the most elemental animalistic and naturalistic religious concepts like worship of stones, trees, rivers, mountains and animals like bulls, tigers, lions, etc. find place within Hinduism beside such elevated mystical philosophies like the release of the Atman (soul) from the material world in return to the Absolute, the Eternal Brahman. Whosoever has generated a religious concept and somehow has aligned it with the Brahman in some way has found place within Hinduism as a true Hindu. This catholicity has engendered a bewildering blend of **Monism, Monotheism, Pantheism, Polytheism, Naturalism, Animalism** and even some manners of **Atheism**. That is exactly the reason why Hindu savants define Hinduism as **Sanatan Dharma** or **Universal Religion**. In that sense "sanatan" also means "eternal" because the logic is that as long as there is the Universal Spirit, who is eternal, there is Hinduism, which is thus also eternal. True Hindu precepts urge the devotee to consider all religious paths as legitimate means of achieving the same God.

Hinduism is a religion with no historical founder. There is the myth of Vyasa Dev, the composer of the Vedas for which he was divinely inspired, and the orthodox tenet that only that which is **Vaidika** is Hinduism. The particular term **Vaidika** means all that is inspired by the Vedas. In contrast, anything that is not is **Avaidika** and quite unlikely to be admitted to the broad realm of Hinduism. Yet it is the singularity of Hinduism that no one person is acknowledged as its founder or prophet though many, including Vyasa, are revered for their inspired contributions to the religion.

Also, there is no one central authority that defines or imposes beliefs and practices upon believers. Instead Hinduism is propped up by innumerable organizations, large and small, and individuals who guide and sustain believers under their care. There are some common principles and practices that rather loosely provides a cohesive tendency to the diverse beliefs and practices that make up the religion:

- There must be faith in the infallible authority of the Vedas – what is Vaidika.
- There must be faith in the cyclic creation, preservation and dissolution of the Universe.
- There must be faith in the transmigration of souls according to the Laws of Karma.
- There must be faith in the possibility of final liberation of the soul through reunion with the Universal Spirit – The Eternal Brahman.
- There must be adherence to the Laws of Dharma that govern all stages of a believer's life as well as all major events like birth, marriage and death that occur in it.

Hinduism also professes that true religion or **Dharma** is what governs this universe and maintains its balance. When Dharma becomes weak and ultimately diminishes to a nonentity the universe is destroyed in one of the periodic cataclysms. **Dharma** is maintained by Karma or duty. Thus, devotees of Hinduism are urged to be absolutely good and perform their duty diligently so that their religion, Dharma, is maintained.

The Origins of Hinduism: The early Deities:

The Dravidian people who seem to have pervaded all parts of India and Sri Lanka are a mixture of the indigenous people of the Subcontinent and the Proto-Dravidians who are a people who migrated to India from the north in wave after wave from 4,000 B.C. to 2,500 B.C. They set up a Neolithic village culture which gradually culminated in the Indus Valley Civilization which was a primarily city culture that was spawned around the lower course of the Indus River in the North-Western part of the Subcontinent. This city-oriented culture flourished around 2,150-1,750 B.C. after which, for unknown reasons, it disappeared. The various city sites - Harappa and Mohenjodaro in present-day Pakistan and Kalibangan in India – have thrown up archaeological evidence, mostly in the forms of baked-clay seals and idols, which point towards certain fertility cults. It must be understood that the city culture and the great wonderful

cities were all based on the success of an efficient agricultural system that spawned them. Thus, for a civilization that was based on the productivity of nature, it was very essential to value fertility. This is an entirely Pre-Aryan period.

The two central deities of this cult were male and female. The male deity was found in the form of a man in a yogic sitting posture which we find later manifested in the postures of Shiva. The man had bull's horns on his head (the bull was always a powerful symbol of male potency). Also, later, Shiva's steed is Nandi the bull. The female figure is found often manifested accepting human sacrifice, as the later-day consorts of Shiva, particularly Durga and Kali. Attendant to these two central deities are many animal figures like deer, buffaloes, elephants, birds and others and also votive symbols of serpents. This latter feature, animal worship, may have culminated in the later-day belief of transmigration of souls from humans to animals and vice versa.

Also is found the naturalistic fertility symbols of male and female union like the Mithuna male and female figures united in sexual union found in many later-day temples in India, such temples usually being associated with the Shakti cult which itself has stemmed from Tantric viewpoints. It must be noted here that the inability to decipher the inscriptions on the archaeological artifacts recovered from the Indus Valley sites has largely hampered any conclusive decision on the culture.

The Aryan invasion that began from around 1800 B.C. gradually drove the Dravidian population and culture to the extreme south and, in consequence, the deities of the Vedas were established in the upper part of the Subcontinent. Over the large period of time these deities acquired influence over the whole of India and the Dravidian culture was forgotten but the male and female deities of that culture together with certain symbols remain transpositioned in the later pantheon.

The Vedic Period (1800-900 B.C.):

The Aryans were people who had first migrated from the Urals to the Central Asian Steppes and thence to the Indian Subcontinent. They were a warlike primarily pastoral people who pursued a transitory lifestyle moving from pasture to pasture for their herds of cattle and horses. Initially they pushed the Dravidian people into the villages from their cities and, as successive hordes poured into the Subcontinent, the Dravidians disappeared totally from North India. One primary reason for the success of the Aryans was their successful adoption of iron tools and arms circa 1350-1050 B.C. The Dravidians stuck to their Bronze Age tools and weaponry and lost out.

When the Aryans arrived they brought their religion with them. Since they were not a settled race and pastoral their gods were mostly elemental and had little to do with the earth and fertility. At the time of the writing of the Vedas at around 1200 B.C., however, their religion was not in its pure form anymore and had by then inculcated elements of the local religion. This was around the time the Aryans had settled in the Ganga and Jamuna valleys and were beginning to appreciate the value of agriculture and a settled existence.

At the time of the actual writing of the Vedas – circa 1200 B.C. – the early gods, mostly deified aspects of nature, had already acquired complex mythologies and had been personalized or anthropomorphized. The earlier distinct roles they had been accorded had been blurred by overlapping of qualities and duties. This is why the first three parts of the Vedas – The Samhitas, The Brahmanas and The Aranyakas - are so preoccupied with ritualistic worship. This is to appease all the diverse deities who are all rather uncertain elements who require frequent and fervent propitiation.

Evolution.

The Advent of New Religions(500 B.C.-300 A.D.):

The roots of Hinduism were sown by the important synthesis of the Aryan or Vedic deities and the earlier native Dravidian deities. The caste system had already taken roots in Hinduism at the time this synthesis was taking place and the Brahmins were well-entrenched as the priestly class who acted as intermediaries between humans and gods. Since this synthesis took effect under their guidance and tutelage their position in Hindu society was consolidated and confirmed.

Thus, the performance of sacrifice, as prescribed in the earlier parts of the Vedas, which was recommended as a means of propitiating the gods and keeping the present order of the world intact was a prime prerogative of the Brahmins, automatically making them the most important class in Hindu society. This trend continued without protest up to the end of the Brahmanic Era, which was for the period 900-550 B.C. Within this period though the Brahmins had further consolidated their position by making the caste system a rigid structure from which none could escape, thus keeping themselves permanently at the top of the social structure.

Both Buddhism and Jainism appeared in India at around 500 B.C. and marked the end of the Brahmanic Era. Both new religions were reform movements against the extremes of the Brahmanic traditions in Hinduism. Both advocated ethical systems in which the individual could attain union with a Universal Absolute through personal effort without any other human intermediaries like priests. The educated and powerful in Northern India were much enamored by Buddhism and rulers like **King Ashoka**, who ruled much of North India in the 3rd century B.C. took up the new religion and propagated it not only throughout India but also through neighboring countries.

Yet, even then, the Brahmins managed to maintain their preeminent positions by procuring the loyalty of the primarily Hindu populace towards the Buddhist rulers. Gradually, even Buddhism and Jainism digressed from the absolute doctrines of their founders and acquired mythologies and doctrines that were much like Hinduism. These complexities worked in favor of Hinduism which even went to the extent of declaring Buddhism as a particular sect within the broader spectrum of Hinduism.

The Golden Age of the Guptas (400-600 A.D.):

The Great Hindu revival came in the beginning of the 4th century A.D. with the ascent of the **Gupta Dynasty** to the throne of the ancient city of **Ujjain**, which soon became the center of Hindu learning and study. The Gupta rulers were all staunch devotees of Hinduism and actively promoted their religion not only throughout India but even beyond its shores to other countries in South-East Asia. This is the time when **Balinese Hinduism** and the Hindu culture of ancient Cambodia, the Khmer Republic now, took their roots. Even now, the Brahmins maintained their status by indulging the beliefs of the common people and inducting them into the mainstream of the religion.

Classical Hinduism changed to a great extent as Buddhist influence together with other common beliefs was gradually inducted. The Brahmins helped the rulers in their task of reviving Hinduism by propagating it among the people and won favor for their work. The Gupta period is rightly called the **Golden Age** not only of Hinduism but the whole of India as it remained the primary religion of the people as Buddhism had quite declined by then and Islam had not yet reached the Indian Subcontinent. It lasted from the 4th century to the 6th century A.D., a mere 300 years in the history of a religion nearly 4,000 years old, but it consolidated the religion into such a stable system that it was to survive all attempts by future Muslim entrants to subjugate it. It is also during the Gupta Period that the worship of the **Shakti Goddesses** became firmly established with scriptural backing. The major **Shakta Literature** began to make their appearance in India from the **5th century** onwards.

The Great Acharyas (9th to 16th Century):

By the end of the 6th century A.D. the Gupta Empire had declined and where a large empire had ruled most of India the country had now been broken up into small principalities that were ruled by small kings and lords. There was interminable warfare between these small kingdoms and principalities and this was much to the detriment of Hinduism. Since the rulers were more inclined to their own welfare, which was almost always in jeopardy from within and without,

they had little time for the welfare of their subjects. Society lost the cosmopolitan outlook of the Gupta Era and became fragmented and inward-looking. In these circumstances, orthodoxy set in and Hinduism again began to lose its broad outlook. The Brahmins, set at the top of the social order, were quick to capitalize on the situation, and began to dictate social terms in the absence of strong rulers who could keep them in check. The caste system became more rigid and worship became ritualistic.

While the Gupta rulers had, of course, been staunch Hindus, they had nevertheless set the moral standards of their times and had looked to both the spiritual and physical welfare of their subjects. The Brahmins had been kept in their places and Hinduism had been a very **laissez faire** social system, for Hinduism has always been both a religious as well as a social system, under which even the lower castes, the Hindu underdogs, had prospered. Now, under total Brahminical control, the lower order of Hindu society began to feel the pinch and proceeded to look elsewhere for succor.

It is true that both Buddhism and Jainism were on the decline by the end of the 9th century A.D. primarily because the Islamic invaders, who started making incursions into India from the North from the 9th to 10th century onwards, had destroyed the great Buddhist Universities like **Taxila** in the North and **Nalanda** in the East. These universities had been the centers of Buddhist teachings and, after their demise, Buddhism also began to decline. Yet, the crisis within Hinduism remained.

The Brahministic dogmas and rituals were too complex and confusing for the common people. The simple beliefs of the Vedas, especially the pure monism of the Vedanta, were not available to the common people. They were the private preserve of a few formulating an elitist system that discouraged disclosure to all and sundry. Also, to be absolutely pragmatic, even the educated of the time did not quite comprehend the essence of the Vedas.

It is into this bleak scenario that a series of **Five Great Acharyas** were born - Sankaracharya (9th century), Ramanujacharya (11th century), Nimbarkacharya (11th century), Madhvacharya (13th century) and Vallabhacharya (16th century). They all brought out the essence of the Vedas and put it down in systemized texts. They not only actively professed their simplified philosophy to the common masses, making direct converts, but they also gave to the Hindu scholars of their times systems of thought they could adhere to. Thus, the Acharyas served to make Hinduism easier to understand not only for the common person but also for the scholars. They were the first to begin a tradition that has lasted to the present day.

They were born to find Hinduism facing a crisis both from within and without. So they delved into the Vedic texts and brought out the simplistic essence of Hinduism – the pure monism around which every other detail evolves. In this way they revealed the intrinsic attraction of Hinduism and the religion survived. Since their times to the present day, whenever Hinduism has faced a crisis, either from within or without, highly perceptive men have sought recourse to this simplistic device to rescue the religion.

It is a very accurate philosophical concept that the truth survives all else. The **Pure Monism** of the Vedanta is such a powerful concept that whosoever has used it to combat negative influences has succeeded in rescuing Hinduism.

The Bhakti Preachers (14th to 17th century):

By the end of the 13th century the Muslim invaders had settled down in the upper parts of the subcontinent and some had even made inroads into the southern and eastern parts. Unlike the previous invaders like the Sakas, Kushans and others who had also chosen to settle down in the fertile plains of northern India, these present ones did not integrate with the indigenous culture and religion. The Muslims firmly adhered to the Islamic faith and did not think much of the native system of religious tradition. As such friction soon arose between the two communities. Also, the Islamic invaders were infused with missionary zeal and thought it their duty to convert the stubborn Hindus to their faith. This further aggravated the situation.

The Muslims were mostly in the ruling class while the Hindus were the weaker dominated peoples who had little alternative but to obey their Islamic masters. Thus, naturally, some of the Hindus did allow themselves to be converted to Islam but the majority stuck to their religion and this invited persecution from their hostile rulers. It must nevertheless be mentioned that not all the Muslim rulers of this rigorously proselytizing temperament and generally allowed their Hindu subjects to follow their own customs and traditions without much restraint. Still, the few of the rulers who were of this intolerant bend of mind did enough damage to the social fabric. There remained a constant friction between the Hindus and the Muslims. Both religions were in jeopardy.

At this junction in time a set of very intelligent and devout persons of both communities, both Muslim and Hindu, were born. They understood the nature of the conflict and were pained by the meaninglessness of it. They decided to do something to alleviate the tense situation.

For the Muslims these amelioratory persons were the **Sufi** mystics while for Hindus these were the **Bhakti Saints**. The Bhakti saints had a difficult task to perform. They had to make the pure monistic precepts of Hinduism understood by the common untaught masses. Though the **Great Acharyas** had already infused the Hindu religious thought system with their versions of the monism of the Upanishads the prevailing confusion of the times had overshadowed their efforts and the general populace were again in need of some amount of enlightened guidance. This time the crisis was not among the learned and educated as previously when Buddhism and Jainism had threatened Hinduism with converts. This time the untaught masses were in a crisis of religious allegiance. The Hindu masses desperately needed **reassurance and support**. This was provided by the **Bhakti Reformers** who did not select a path of confrontation with Islam. Instead they cleverly used the monism of the Upanishads to point out that all religions had the same goal though their individual paths were different.

They were amply supported in their efforts at reconciliation between Hinduism and Islam by being met halfway by the **Sufi Reformers** who were also seeking a means to the same reconciliatory process. Thus, both Hinduism and Islam were **preserved** in the subcontinent. A means for co-existence was forged and this has lasted to the present day though much upheaval has been experienced.

I cannot treat the **Sufi Mystics** at any length here but the **Bhakti Saints** and the precepts they preached has been amply elucidated in the **chapter on sects**. As mentioned earlier, the crisis was among the masses this time and the Bhakti reformers were from them. These great men were all of common birth and mostly untaught themselves. Most of them, with the exception of a few like Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, had no formal education of the Hindu scriptures yet they were such astute persons that they went to the crux of the problem with their teachings.

Since they had to spread their message among the untaught masses they used the **local vernacular** of their regions of influence in contrast to the Acharyas who had used the **highly-stylized Sanskrit**, a language of preference by Hindu scholars. Also, The Bhakti Preachers used common mediums of expression like **folk-songs** which the people immediately correlated to in contrast to the Acharyas who had used highly-stylized argumentative instruments like **dialectics** and **semantics** to convince the literati of their times. It must be noted that the substance of the preaching of both the Bhakti reformers and the Acharyas were the same – they both advocated personal worship with minimum rituals and access to such worship to all regardless of caste or creed. The Bhakti reformers were successful in their task of rescuing Hinduism from this medieval crisis.

In the process, Hinduism was much strengthened by the induction at the lowest levels of the basic doctrines of the Upanishads which had previously been the preserve of a few educated persons who were quite reluctant to relinquish the privileged position they held in society because of this highly-prized knowledge. Also, Hinduism became much more open and accessible both on the **inside** by the removal of the rigidity of the **caste system** and the **outside** by promotion of a feeling of tolerance for other religions. Also in the process, much was inducted in the way of mannerisms from the alien customs of the Islamic invaders.

The **mysticism** of the Sufi reformers was also an inherent feature of the folk-songs the Bhakti reformers used. This was not new to Hinduism. The **Sutras** the ancient Sages and Rishis used to illustrate the wisdom of the Vedas is a mystical device that Hindu scholars through the ages have much savored deciphering and arguing over. This time though, the common people were subjected to it through popular mediums that they easily understood and enjoyed and they took to it like fish to water. The mystical songs composed in this period by both Sufis and Bhakti reformers had a **lasting quality** to them that has assured their continued popularity to the present age. These songs in their original versions are still being sung, heard and appreciated all over the subcontinent. What is even more important about them is that they have generated a tradition of **mystical universalism** based on which many talented persons after this period to the present age have composed newer material of the same vein. This has assured a continued tradition of reconciliation between Hinduism and other religions of the subcontinent which has promoted peaceful and interactive coexistence among the multifarious communities. This is of paramount importance to the **peaceful survival** of the countries of the subcontinent.

The principal effects of the Bhakti Movement was the polarization of the Hindu doctrines towards worship of a personal God through simplistic means and a universal tolerance both within and without the religion. Castes and creeds became of lesser importance and the commonality of origin of human beings was emphasized. Another singularity of the religion was the precedence given to the lower strata of society who spearheaded the Hindu resurgence in this period and continued to be of significance thereafter.

The Hindu Renaissance (19th and 20th Century):

It may seem rather strange that Hinduism seems to have evolved across continuous periods of upheaval but it must be noted that periods of relative stability has only encouraged stagnation and subsequent degeneration to the detriment of the religion. This has been the special case with Hinduism. Thus, whatever invigoration that has rejuvenated the religion throughout its long years of prevalence has been induced under pressure from adverse situations fomented from outside or inside the religion.

Hinduism was again confronted with another such adverse situation at the beginning of the 19th century. The power structure of the entire Indian subcontinent had then passed from the control of the Muslim rulers to another foreign race – the **Europeans**. Gradually, from the beginning of the 16th century onwards the Europeans, the **British**, the **Portuguese**, the **French** and the **Dutch** had been making steady inroads into the subcontinent until, ultimately in the first half of the 19th century, the Islamic rulers had been totally sidelined by the superior **firepower** and **Machiavellian** policies of the Europeans. Among these the **English**, with more firepower and Machiavellianism than the rest, acquired a lion's share of the subcontinent while the rest had to be satisfied with tit-bits here and there.

The new rulers had no proselytizing sentiments and were thoroughly involved in their fiduciary exploitation of the subcontinent but they brought in their wake the **Christian Missionaries** who were determined to rescue the hapless natives from the eternal darkness of irreligion. As in previous cases, most Hindus ignored them and went on with their age-old ways but, gradually, a number significant enough to be taken notice of found the new religion of **Christianity** to be attractive and adopted it. Again, the evils of the caste system and the stringent ritualistic practices of the Brahminical system antagonized a large number of adherents who shifted their sympathies to a religion that professed **equality** for all and a **simplistic** system of worship.

The Hindu cognoscenti began to take notice with alarm and decided to stem the digression before it did irreparable damage to their religion. This time, though, in addition to the time-tried technique of bringing out the essence of the Upanishads before the laity these Hindu aficionados also took recourse to the available **Western thought processes** which were progressive and increasingly humanized to implement their purpose.

It must be mentioned that the Indian subcontinent, existing in isolation from the rest of the world during the Muslim period, had stagnated and social norms and customs were still medieval and rather backward in comparison to some of those of the Europeans who had progressed beyond their medievalism and were comparatively humanized. The Hindu reformers, this time, not only narrowed down the religion to a more personal level with minimal complex ritualistic worship but they also took notice of some of the evils that persisted within their religious system beyond the times of the previous reformers. They had two great advantages -

- The entire Indian subcontinent was being ruled by a single powerful entity, the English, who had complete control of all of it and were willing to help the reformers in their task of humanizing their religious system.
- Another great plus point of the British rulers was that some of them were men of progressive instincts and they were sympathetic enough of the native populace to take steps in promoting their welfare.

Some of the evils that the Hindu reformists got rids of with the help of the British rulers are:

- They got the British administration to pass a law promulgating the banning of the practice of **Suttee**. Suttee was an age-old evil practice of forcing a wife to be immolated in the funeral fire of her dead husband. The logic was that a wife should be entirely loyal to her husband and, on his death, should join him on the funeral pyre to die with him. The actual reason was that dishonest relatives forced the poor women to die in this horrible manner so that they could enjoy the dead man's property without resistance.
- Reformers like **Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar** and **Raja Rammohan Roy** persuaded the British Viceroy of their time to promote **widow remarriage**. This was another evil system existent within Hinduism at that time. Even very young widows, sometimes girls barely in their teens, were forced to remain in their bereaved state after their husbands' death all their lives. Widowhood, according to Hindu precepts, requires innumerable hardships to be followed and for a very young girl to have to be subjected to such stringent and unsympathetic rules was heinous.

- The reformers besides promoting Hindu culture and scriptural studies also persuaded the laity to induct within their learning process some of the better European thought systems. Thus, the Hindu laity became quite progressive with these modern ways of living which they practiced in conjunction with their Hindu customs and traditions.

Contact with the Europeans certainly gave the Hindus a taste of modern ways of living elsewhere in the world and they became more knowledgeable of what went on outside their subcontinent. This had good as well as bad effects but, certainly, the modern Indian state owes much of its progressiveness to this positive interaction with Western Culture though it must be said in passing that the Hindus did retain the better of their religious habits and this only went to make both the religion and the practitioners more in rapport with the world in general.

The Hindu reformers of the 19th and 20th century did turn around the religious dissensions and Hinduism bounced back to its preeminent position in the subcontinent. The effort for independence from foreign rule only went to strengthen ties between different sects within the broader religion as collaborated to focus on the task at hand. **Mahatma Gandhi's** innovative usage of old Hindu precepts like **Ahimsa** (Non-violence) and **Satyagraha** (War for truth using non-violence as the principal means) provided impetus to the religion's reformation and Hindus were again able to look up to their religion with pride in their hearts.

It is true that **Independence** did dissect the subcontinent into the primarily Muslim countries of **Pakistan** and **Bangladesh** and the primarily Hindu country of **India** and the division was mainly along religious lines with some amount of discontent fomented among the religious communities but, on the whole, the **secular** policies of politicians like Mahatma Gandhi and other persons on all sides saved the situation and the countries achieved secular legislative administrations within which all religious communities could co-exist in peace and prosperity.

The development of Hinduism after the independence of the subcontinent from foreign rule is discussed in the chapter on **Current Trends**.

As a **special note** to the end of this section I mention that though the brahmins have been much reviled throughout the ages for perpetrating the evil of the caste system and complicating worship within Hinduism it must nevertheless be acknowledged that many numbers of them have, throughout the ages, served the cause of their religion with exemplary zeal and truly fulfilled their duty of being keepers of the faith, no matter how controversial that is.

Some Important Myths within Hinduism.

The Concept of Time:

The Brahmanic Age engendered certain unique beliefs. One of these was that universal time is a never-ending cycle of creation and destruction, each complete cycle being represented by 100 years in Brahma's life. When Brahma is awake all creation exists and when he goes to sleep all is destroyed – Brahma himself, gods, sages, humans, animals, demons and all creation is dissolved in the Great Cataclysm - **The Mahapralaya**. All beings who have not obtained liberation are judged according to their just deserts and some have to await rebirth when Brahma wakes on the new day and the three worlds – heavens, middle and lower regions – are created. The earth is the middle region and **Patala**, where the demons and nagas stay, the nether regions.

Each hundred years of Brahma's life is further subdivided into a number of subunits, the most important of which is the **Kalpa**, equivalent to one day in Brahma's life and 4,320 million earth-years. Each Kalpa is subdivided into one thousand **Mahayugas** and each of these is again subdivided into four Yugas - **Krita, Treta, Dwapara** and **Kali**.

- **The Kritayuga:** This age lasts for about 1,728,000 years and within its duration Dharma, God of justice and duty, walks on four legs. This is the golden age and people are content, happy and virtuous and worship one God who is white.
- **The Tretayuga:** This age lasts for about 1,296,000 years and within its duration Dharma walks on three legs. One-fourth of virtue of the previous age is eroded. Brahmins are still more numerous than evil-doers and people still do their duty though they now sometimes do so from ulterior motives and are quarrelsome. The God worshipped is red in color.
- **The Dwaparayuga:** In this age virtue is only half present and Dharma walks on two legs. It lasts for 864,000 years and the god is yellow. There is discontent, lying and quarrels everywhere though Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas are still careful in performing their duty.
- **The Kaliyuga:** In this age only one-fourth of duty is left and Dharma is almost powerless and walks on only one leg. The age lasts for about 432,000 years, the god is black and the worlds are full of Sudras (the lowest castes). They are wicked, quarrelsome and servile and have no luck because they deserve no luck. They are dominated by their womenfolk who are lascivious and greedy. Gluttony and garrulousness abound and too many children are born. The people are oppressed by their rulers and there are floods, famines and wars. The miseries can only end with the coming of **Kalki**, Vishnu's 10th avatar. We are living in the Kaliyuga.

The four colors of the Gods in each age signifies the four castes – white for Brahmins, red for Kshatriyas, yellow for Vaishyas and black for Sudras.

The Great Cataclysm or Mahapralaya:

The great destruction is preceded by horrible portents. At first, there is a drought lasting 100 years. After that seven suns arise in the sky and suck up all the waters. A great wind arises and fire starts and the wind sweeps the fire across the earth and the underworld and wipes everything out. Next, great clouds, ringed with lightning, burst out and it rains for 12 years and the entire world is submerged. Everywhere there is water. Brahma comes, floating on a lotus, and absorbs all the winds and goes to sleep. All is quiet and the waters rest till the time comes for Brahma to wake and start the good work of creation again. During this interval all beings, including gods and humans, remain absorbed in the cosmic spirit *Brahman*.

Please note that in this particular part of the chapter, the world means the three regions – heavens, earth and the netherworld.

Geographic Features of the World:

In the various Hindu mythologies, for there are many, even when sourced from the Vedas, there are many accounts of what the world is physically like. I have had to make a choice and I have contrived to set down the most popular one.

The Earth is shaped like a circle and is the innermost of seven concentric circles featuring other Proto-earths. The earth is, of course, at the centre of the world. At the center of the earth is **Mount Meru**, 84,000 leagues high, the summit the seat of Brahma's heaven. The heaven is encircled by the holy **Ganga** and surrounded by the heavens of Indra and the other deities. At the foothills live some friendly spirits like the **Gandharvas** while the valleys are dangerous and inhabited by demons. On the plains, on one of the circles, is the human world.

The whole world is supported by the hood of **Shesha**, the cosmic serpent, who himself rests on the back of a giant tortoise. Otherwise, according to another equally popular version, the world is supported by four elephants standing back-to-back. When they move to shift weight, earthquakes occur.

Creation Myths:

Hinduism is full of various creation myths, most of which have a common thread running through them. The most popular one is that, at the beginning of time, there are only the cosmic waters, quiet and lifeless. I have chosen it not only because it is the most popular among Hindus but also because it is surprisingly similar to Christian beliefs. It is from the **Laws of Manu**, which was written down in the 2nd century A.D. It has elements of all the earlier myths as well as a rather new and unique twist.

It must be noted that the **pure monism** of the **Vedanta** envisions the Universal Spirit - **The Eternal Brahman** - as **Totally Attribute-less, Non-doing** and **Non-sensing** while witnessing all. Thus, technically, the periodic creation and the destruction of the universe are not processes in which the Brahman has any direct willfulness though the entire universe is a manifestation of Him in attribute form. Thus, the entirety of creation - all beings - are treated as **Maya** - delusion - that detract from the featureless **reality** of the Brahman that is the only truth and the only truth possible. Yet many texts quote the Universal Spirit, in whatever form - Narayana, Brahma and others - as being the direct agent for the creation or destruction of the universe. Hinduism juxtaposes such diverse theories on the same phenomenon with ease. The simple explanation is that the pure monism of the Vedanta is often too difficult to understand for simple devotees and, as such, diverse easier-to-understand elements are propagated by knowledgeable persons for the benefit of the simpler persons who also have a right to worship what they can understand. Manu is a human being, a sage, who has escaped the last destruction and end of the Mahayuga. He lives to play a leading part in the creation of the next age.

The novel twist is imparted by Manu himself. Manu was a sage living in the Brahmanic Age when it was increasingly becoming the trend to ascertain that certain humans, sages mostly, could become as powerful and knowledgeable as the Gods by performing severe austerities for many years and becoming absorbed in the Universal Spirit - The Eternal Brahman. Manu asserts himself as one such sage who took part in the creation brought about from the manifestations of the universal spirit.

First the spirit felt desire - an aspect often personified as **Kama**, the God of desire, who is regarded as the creative force here. The Eternal Brahman wished to create all being out of His own self. So He first created the cosmic waters - Nara. Next He threw a seed into it. From the seed grew an egg, brilliant as the sun. The self-existent spirit, also known as Narayana (usually associated with Vishnu), from the waters where He first resided, began to grow inside the egg till He became Brahma, or Purusha - the male element. After a year's contemplation within the egg Brahma divided Himself into two halves - one half male and the other female. In the female half He implanted **Viraj** (the resident), and Viraj in turn created Manu who then created the world.

It is not clear whether each age has its own Manu.

Manu and the Flood:

Manu had performed 10,000 years of austerities and had become as powerful as Brahma. One day he was meditating besides a stream when a **fish** appeared before him and asked for his protection against another fish which was chasing him. So Manu placed the fish in a jar but it soon become too big for that and asked to be taken to the Ganga. Manu did that but here also the fish outgrew its container and so, at last, Manu took it to the ocean where the fish was content. Here it revealed that it was none other than Brahma Himself. Brahma warned Manu of an impending deluge and told him to build an ark and put in it the seven rishis and the seeds of everything recognized by the Brahmins.

Manu did this and, soon after, it began to rain and this went on for years till everything was submerged. Manu's ark was pulled by the huge fish which had ropes tied to its mouth. With these it hauled the boat to the highest peak of the mountains. Here Manu and everything in the ark was safe and remained there for many years till the waters subsided and the ark was lowered to the valleys.

Manu took up the work of creation. He worshipped the fish and started great austerities. He offered sacrifice of milk, clarified butter and curds and, after a year, a beautiful maiden grew out of these offerings. She told Manu that, with her help, he would be able to create everything. Manu, with her, began the human race and everything else. And so the world was created again.

Heaven, Hell and Metempsychosis:

Metempsychosis or Reincarnation:

The early myths that initially established Hinduism have no mention of the concept of reincarnation. When humans died they went to the abode of their forefathers - **The Pitris**. Later this abode was specified as a place that **Yama**, the God of death, had control over. There are specific directions on which part of the compass the abode lies in.

Even later, a myth developed in which humans, when they died, went to Yama's abode - **Kalichi** where they were judged according to their karmas in their lives and sent either to the abode of the pitris, for the good, or to Yama's hell better known as **Put** where they had to undergo constant torment to purify themselves.

The common Hindu's honest belief, even today, is that if they did good things in this life they would go to **Indra's** heaven - **Swarga**, synonymous with heaven to the common Hindu, which is a very opulent place and would live a life of eternal bliss among singing and dancing apsaras and gandharvas. An evil person would be consigned to hell, **Put**, where constant tortures are the norm. Parts of the popular epics – The Ramayana and the Mahabharata – support this belief though the higher concept of the soul of a liberated person merging with the Universal Spirit is also present.

When the ancient Rishis and Sages delved into the latter parts of the Vedas, **the Vedanta**, they came upon the concept of the Universal Spirit. They popularized it through two main philosophical concepts - **Advaita** and **Dvaita** schools of thought – both of which somehow aligned the individual soul with the Universal Spirit. Thus arose the necessity of explaining material existence.

The two concepts of **Maya** (illusion) and **Karma** (action) were propounded to do this. Maya, through sensory perceptions, enmeshes the individual soul and constricts it to the material body while deluding it from getting a clear vision of the Universal Spirit. Thus the soul cannot achieve liberation from the material world and is trapped in it. Karma, action in life, aids Maya in this if it is not wholly good. Karma cannot be pure and wholly good because of **Avidya**, ignorance, as opposed to **Vidya**, which is true wisdom and which can extricate the soul from the entrapment of the material world through good karmas. .

If a person in one life does not do wholly good Karmas then he or she is enmeshed in Maya and, on death, his or her soul cannot attain Moksha or liberation from the material world so that it can unite with the Universal Spirit. So that person has to be reborn as another being in another life to purge the bad actions of the previous life with good ones in this life. This is **reincarnation** or **metempsychosis**. The soul or **Atman** may have to undergo multiple births and be reborn repeatedly to purge actions in previous lives. This is being entrapped within the endless cycles of **Samsara**, the material world.

According to Hindu theologians the body - **Sarira** is made up of two components – the **Sthula Sarira**, the gross body, and the **Sushkma or Linga Sarira**, the subtle body. The Sthula Sarira is the physical body. The Sushkma Sarira is the intangible body made up of **Buddhi** (intelligence), **Manas** (mind), **Ahamkara** (ego), etc. The subtle body surrounds the soul and acts as an intermediary between it and the gross body. Every action leaves its imprint - **Samskara** on the subtle body and waits as a seed to germinate and bear fruit.

While the gross body disintegrates at death the subtle body remains in contact with the soul and bears imprints of actions of all previous lives. It carries all previous tendencies and merits and demerits of previous births and is reborn with the Atman or soul in the next life if Moksha is not achieved. The subtle body has to be thoroughly purified through good action before the soul can achieve Moksha.

Introduction to Scriptures.

I have included for study in this chapter the most important scriptures in Hinduism – The Vedas, The Upanishads, The Puranas, The Two Great Epics – The Ramayana and The Mahabharata, and The Bhagavad Gita as well as a few other attendant texts like The Agamas, The Brahma Sutras and The Dharma Sastras.

According to Sanskrit authorities Hindu scriptures have four major divisions:

- **Srutis** – Those that were begotten from divine revelation.
- **Smritis** – Those that were begotten from memory, based on revelations in the Srutis.
- **Ithisas** – Historical texts.
- **Darshanas** – Philosophical writings

The Vedas:

The Vedas are the oldest scriptures not only of Hinduism but of the world. They are believed to have been created out of Brahma's four heads, each Veda issuing forth out of each head. They are revelations perceived by **Rishis**. The word "Rishi" means "Seer" as the root word "**Dris**" means "To see". The Rishis were great enlightened persons who had direct intuitive realization of the Brahman, The Eternal and the Ultimate Truth. The Rishis were good persons who built a simple and perfect religious system with this truth.

Thus the Vedas are also commonly referred to as "**Srutis**" or "**Those that were heard or revealed**". It is true that the Hindu claim that almost all other religions seem to have borrowed their religious principles from the Vedas is validated by the fact that these scriptures were written long before any other religious books and there is a lot of similarity of thought between these and other scriptures in other religions. There is much controversy over exactly when the Vedas were put down in writing but the tentative date is probably around **800 B.C.**, the time when the Aryans were consolidating their position in the Northern parts of the Subcontinent.

According to popular legends, the Vedas are supposed to have been written by **Vyasa Dev**, who is also credited with having composed **The Mahabharata**. It is firmly believed by Hindus that Vyasa Dev's incarnation arrives in every Yuga to write down what is revealed by the Universal Spirit so that humankind can easily achieve Moksha and unite with Him.

The Vedas are deemed as eternal. They are the words of the Lord. They cannot be dated or recreated. As such they are revealed scriptures that are absolute in their authority.

There are four Vedas in all:

- **The Rig Veda** - "**Rik**" meaning "**Worship**"
- **The Yajur Veda**
- **The Sama Veda**
- **The Atharva Veda**

The Yajur Veda is divided into two parts:

- **The Sukla Yajur Veda**
- **The Krishna Yajur Veda**

The Sukla Yajur Veda is the later of the two and is a revelation to Rishi Yagnavalkya from the resplendent Sun-god Surya.

The Rig Veda, The Yajur Veda and the Sama Veda comprise “Trayi Vidya” or “Threefold Knowledge”. The Atharva Veda was added later on to complete the series of four.

The Rig Veda is divided into **21** sections, the Yajur into **109** , the Sama into **1,000** and the Atharva into **50**. In all the Vedas are divided into **1,180** sections.

Each Veda consists of four parts:

- **The Samhitas** – Mantras or Hymns
- **The Brahmanas** – Explanations to the hymns and their rituals
- **The Aranyakas** – Philosophical interpretations to the rituals
- **The Upanishads** – Philosophical essence of the Vedas

The four parts of each Veda are meant to be studied by men as they progress through each of the four stages in their lives:

- The **Samhita** mantras are in praise of the Gods and Goddesses so that material prosperity in this world and eternal happiness in the other can be attained. They are meant to be studied by **Brahmacharis** - those up to 25 years of age and celibate. This is the time in a man’s life prescribed for study of the Vedas and worship.
- The **Brahmana** portions help to guide people in their offering of sacrifice or **Yajna**. They explain the Samhita mantras and are meant for the **Grihastha** - those between 25 to 50 years of age and living the lives of householders.
- The **Aranyakas** are philosophical interpretations of the sacrificial rituals. They are literally forest books meant to be studied by the **Vanaprastha** - those between 50 and 75 years of age being readied them to renounce the worldly life and take to **Sanyash** or the life of a hermit in preparation of death and exit from this world.
- The **Upanishads** contain the highest levels of truth in the Vedas. They interpret the individual soul and its relation with the Universal one. They are meant to be studied by the **Sanyasins** - those at the highest stage of understanding in life – those with maximum experience who can renounce life and live like hermits in preparation for death and exit from this world.

Of course, today, it is recommended that the Vedas should be studied all the entirety of one’s life and the knowledge of the Upanishads is available to all those who can partake of it.

The subject matter of the Vedas is divided into three **Khandas** (Sections):

- **Karma** (Action) **Khanda**, comprised of the Samhitas and Brahmanas dealing with various sacrifices and rituals.
- **Upasana** (Worship) **Khanda**, comprised of the Aranyakas dealing with various means of worship and meditation.
- **Jnana** (Knowledge) **Khanda**, comprised of the Upanishads which impart pure knowledge of the **Nirguna** (without attributes) **Brahman**. The **Nirguna Brahman** is the **Ultimate Reality** of the Vedas.

The Rig Veda derives its name from “Rik” which means “Worship”. It contains hymns that are meant mainly for recitation and chanting during worship and other religious functions. Technically, these hymns are eternal not only in their truth but also in their poetic beauty. The Rig Veda hymns are recited by the **Hotri** priest during a sacrifice.

The Yajur Veda derives its name from “Yaj” which also means “Worship”. The hymns in the Yajur Veda are mainly to instruct in the rituals of sacrificial worship and are recited in accompaniment of such rituals by the Athvaryu priest. They are mostly in prose and supplement the hymns of the Rig Veda.

The Sama Veda owes its name to “Saman” which means “Music”. Most of the 1549 hymns of the Sama Veda are derived from the Rig Veda but have musical connotations added on. The hymns are sung in accompaniment to musical instruments at times of religious ceremonies by the **Udgatri** priest.

The fourth Veda, **The Atharva Veda**, which was added on in the later Vedic period, deals with more practical matters of human existence. It contains treatises on social conduct, marital and other relationships, healthy and profitable business practices, agricultural practices, medical treatments and preparation and application of medicines and other practical matters. It also deals in part with many philosophical aspects of human existence. Material from it is also recited by the **Brahma** priest to correct or cleanse mistakes made by the other three sacrificial priests.

The initial parts of the Vedas, especially that of the Rig Veda, contain hymns in praise of several Gods and Goddesses and these are the most ancient of all Hindu scriptures. The purpose of these early hymns was to invoke certain divine powers through premeditated patterns of rituals and prayers to fulfill certain earthly desires and requirements, both of the individual and of the community. In course of time the actual spiritual and symbolic significance of these hymns have been lost and today they are mostly performed by rote and have become fixed rituals that cannot be quite understood but are deemed essential for proper religious invocation.

Upanishads:

The Upanishads are the **end parts** of the Vedas and abound in spiritual knowledge. In Sanskrit, the language of Vedic India, Upanishad means “**Placed under Truth**”. While the former parts of the Vedas dealt with worship and knowledge of the Gods and Goddesses the **Vedanta**, of which the Upanishads are a part, deal with the knowledge of the **True Brahman**, the **Eternal Soul of the Universe**, and its relationship with the individual soul. This is the essence of the Upanishads and the Vedas.

Whosoever in India has been able to realize the truth of the Vedanta and has gathered a following by his teachings has compiled an Upanishad. Probably 350 Upanishad can be counted but only about 14, including the Bhagavad Gita, can be deemed of great value by scholars and sages. The rest have been either underscored or lost because of the obscurity of their compilers. Such great teachers as Adi Sankaracharya, Sri Rangaramanujan and Sri Madhyavacharya have all commented on the Upanishads and the Brahma Sutras and each of their compiled commentaries may be said to comprise a separate Upanishad.

The most important 13 Upanishads besides the Gita are:

- Isa
- Kena
- Katha
- Prasna
- Mundaka
- Mandukya
- Aitareya
- Taittiriya
- Chhandogya
- Brihadaranyaka
- Kaushitaki
- Svetasvatara
- Maitrayani

Each Upanishad is named after the section of the Veda it is a commentary on.

Though some of the Upanishads are a few thousand years old, it is only in the last century, the 20th, that Indian and Western scholars have unearthed them from the confines of ashrams and other esoteric schools of learning in India and revealed their prime universal knowledge to the world. Prior to that it was thought that their knowledge was an esoteric one and should not be revealed to the illiterate and ignorant. It was even thought sacrosanct to do so. So the Upanishads were studied and commented on in the close confines of elitist schools that kept its contents away from the uninitiated and unqualified.

Today, the Upanishads, the more relevant ones, have been translated into many languages and are available to the common people of all lands. It is also true that they contain a philosophy that is so universal and complete that it does not require one to be a Hindu to be able to understand and utilize it.

While the first parts of the Vedas – the Samhita, the Brahmana and the Aranyaka – are period-bound and may have lost their significance and have become part of a ritualistic tradition the Upanishads are so enduring in their philosophy that they are as germane today as they had been when they were written many thousands of years ago.

Today, backed by the wonderful discoveries of science, the practical **monism** of the Upanishads may seem almost inevitable and its fine-tuned morality almost commonplace but, a few thousand years ago when the world was full of strange inexplicable occurrences against which there was no other recourse except certain rituals, it was a few extremely brave and adventurous persons who delved into the nature of things and came up with this pioneering philosophy. It is probably to their indomitable spirits that Hinduism owes much of its durance.

Other Attendant Scriptures to the Vedas:

The Upa-Vedas or Subsidiary Vedas:

There are four Upa-Vedas:

- The **Ayurveda** – It deals with the science of **life and health** and, in recent times, has become a wonderful source of many **novel medical remedies**.
- The **Dhanurveda** – It deals with the science of **war**.
- The **Gandharvaveda** – It deals with the science of **music**.
- The **Arthashastra** – It expounds on the science of **polity**.

The Vedangas or Explanatory Sequels:

There are also six explanatory sequels to the Vedas:

- The **Siksha** of **Maharshi Panini** – It deals with the science of **phonetics** both of the texts of the Vedas and in general.
- The **Vyakarana** of **Maharshi Panini** – It deals with the **Sanskrit grammar**, without which one cannot understand the Vedas. Both this and the previous Vedanga was written by Panini, an authoritative Rishi whose grammar is so enduring that it is still studied unchanged by Sanskrit scholars.
- The **Chhandas** of **Pingalacharya** – It deals with the study of **prosodic metric systems** to facilitate the reading of the Vedic hymns set in meter.
- The **Nirukta** of **Yaska** – It deals with the study of **philosophy** or **etymology**, inherent in the Vedas and elsewhere.
- The **Jyotisha** of **Garga** – It is primarily a study of heavenly bodies and promotes both **astronomy** and **astrology**. The early Hindu astronomers were keen observers who drew very accurate pictures of the night skies.
- The **Kalpas** – These are texts which enumerate steps and methods to be followed or employed to successfully conduct sacrifices. They have been compiled by numerous renowned Rishis.

Introduction, Brahma and Shiva.

Introduction:

In perusing this chapter one must understand that the Hindu deities are not segregated in some sanctified place that is above all humanlike foibles. Instead they are living deities who are as fallible as the human devotees they watch over and, more often than not, colorful myths are wound around these foibles, often to explain natural and cosmic phenomena that were beyond the understanding of humans at the time the myths were created. Such myths continue to be patronized and contribute richly to the Hindu tradition of worship. So there is as much corruption and bribery in Kalichi, the death God Yama's abode, as there is today in New Delhi, the capital of India. Yet the Hindu Gods and Goddesses watch over a **code of conduct** that has stood the test of time for over 5500 years.

It is also controversial that while the **Pure Monism** of the **Upanishads** advocates only one **Universal Spirit - The Nirguna Brahman** Who is the Supreme Creator yet the common **Hindu Pantheon** hosts a bewildering array of Gods and Goddesses. The scriptures have the answer to this strange dualism. According to the Upanishads the Brahman is **Sat - Truth - The Absolute Reality**. All else is **Maya** - illusion - but the Brahman can be realized in His absolute only by those with the highest level of consciousness. Most others are not capable of realizing something that has no attributes. Thus, for them, it is necessary to concentrate on something with attributes - like the Gods and Goddesses of the Hindu Pantheon who are all forms of the Ultimate Reality - The Brahman. so the Hindu gods and Goddesses all have both mental and physical attributes through which devotees can approach them and worship them so that ultimately, through pure devotion, they can pierce the veil and realize the Brahman through the Gods and Goddesses of their choice.

The Hindu Triad:

The idea of a **Triad** is found in the earliest of Indian beliefs and seems to be rooted in the solar cult where the three-bodied sun is creator with his warmth, preserver with his light and destroyer with his burning rays. This was later transformed into the Adityas (Varuna, Mitra and Aryaman) which gave way to Agni, Vayu and Surya until, in the course of time, Vayu gave way to Indra. These deities were always thought of as the three most important Gods or, often, as three aspects of the same omnipotent deity. Agni is the Earth God, Vayu or Indra the God of the atmosphere and Surya the God of the sky. In these early times, Vishnu is closely associated with Agni and Indra as the most important deity, as is mentioned in the Rig Veda.

In later Brahminical times, in the Upanishads, the present triad of **Brahma, Vishnu** and **Shiva** took form upon much borrowing from the previous deities. Both Vishnu and Shiva in the form of Rudra, the God of storms, were prevalent in the early pantheon as minor deities. The only new addition was Brahma, probably to add balance in the role of supreme creator.

This present chapter imparts knowledge on the present form of the triad as they are actively worshipped today. There is ongoing controversy and discourse over how the present triad evolved and who among the three deities is the greatest?.

Brahma:

There is always controversy on who is the superior among the Hindu triad - Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva or Maheshwar - though almost all myths agree on the point that **Brahma** is the **Creator** among the Hindu triad.

Brahma is the equal of the two other Gods in the triad - Vishnu and Shiva. He is the God of wisdom and the four Vedas are said to have sprung out each of His four heads. Brahma's heaven is said to contain in a superior degree all the splendors of the heavens of the other Gods.

Brahma has red skin and wears white clothes. He rides on a goose. He has four arms in each of which He carries the Vedas, His scepter, a water-jug (komondul), and a bow or, variously, a string of beads or a spoon.

Brahma generated a female partner, generally acknowledged to be **Sarasvati**, out of His own substance. She is His daughter as well as His wife. Together with her He gave birth to the human race (earlier myths acknowledge Yama and

his sister Yami to be the creators of the human race). Brahma also generated Daksha, producing him out of His thumb. Daksha became the chief of the Prajapatis, sages associated with Brahma's creative endeavors.

The Vedantas (conclusions to the Vedas) consider Brahma to be the **Creative Aspect** of The Nirguna Brahman.

Shiva:

Shiva is the original unwashed, cannabis-smoking, aimlessly-wandering flower-child of Hindu Mythology. No other God of Hindu Myths has attracted as much controversy as Shiva.

Shiva has retained some of the characteristics of the preVedic fertility God who was also deemed the **Lord of the Beasts**. His power lies in not initiating sacrifice but in performing unimaginable austerities by which He can quell the entire universe including all the Gods. Thus he is called **Mahadeva** or "The Greatest God". His representation as a yogi is a man with a snow-white face dressed in a tiger-skin and with matted hair.

At once Shiva is both the destroyer as well as the creator. His greatest rivalry is not with Vishnu, the preserver, but with Brahma, the creator, whom He often rivals. His supreme creative powers are celebrated in the worship of the **Lingam** or phallus just as His consorts are worshipped through the female genital or **Yoni**, which is the source of female energy and always associated with Him. In this aspect as the Lord of feminine energy – **Shakti** - Shiva utilizes His consorts to slay demons. Shiva's **Unmanifest Masculine Shakti** is what the **Shakta Hindus** seek to achieve through worship of the Shakti Goddesses.

Shiva's boons are always positive and He is said to be the giver of long life and the God of medicine. His help is also indispensable for warriors and other traders of violent craft like robbers, of whom He is the patron God. In a measure, Shiva's boons are sometimes as indiscriminate as Brahma's and cause as much trouble because He is reputed to be so easily pleased that He will satisfy anyone at all who will care to show any empathy towards Him.

Shiva is also the god to whom all the Gods turn to whenever there is something unpleasant to be done. Thus, at the time of the churning of the ocean, when poison welled out of the mouth of Vasuki the snake it was Shiva who saved the universe from its venom by trapping the poison in His throat, which turned **blue** and earned Him the name of **Nilkantha**. It is also He who gifted to the earth the seven rivers that water the land and make life possible there.

Apart from His blue throat, Shiva is represented as a fair man with five heads, four arms and three eyes. The third eye at the center of his forehead is a powerful weapon and He kills with it by turning it upon His enemies and turning them to ashes. It is this eye that He uses to periodically destroy the universe to cleanse it and prepare it for the next age.

As the destroyer Shiva has many weapons: **Pinaki**, His trident, a symbol of lightening characterizing Shiva as the God of storms; a sword; a bow called Ajagava; and a club with a skull at the end, called Khatwanga. Shiva also has snakes twined round His neck and body and, of course, the moon caught in His hair to keep the Moon-God Soma out of mischief.

Shiva is the Lord of dance and rhythm. As the **Lord of Rhythms** Shiva sustains the Universe which requires a certain rhythm to remain existent. The God dances with His associates the ghosts and other creatures of the nether regions, often in cemeteries. Shiva's steed is **Nandi**, the bull, another potent symbol of fertility. Shiva's **tandava dance**, the most famous, often found portrayed in statuary and pictures, is a dance of destruction.

When destroying Shiva's principal aspect is that of **time** and when creating it is that of **light**, which His Lingam is reputed to emanate. The symmetry of the Hindu concept is best manifest through Shiva. What is evil is ultimately **destroyed by time**. What is innately good **survives all time** and is **eternal**. Thus, Shiva is also named **Mahakaleswar** - Lord of Eternal Time. He survives all time and destroys all that is evil either Himself or through His Female Shakti Consorts.

Shiva's aloofness from the world with His smoking cannabis (to aid His Yogic concentration) in contrast to His reputation as a **Supreme Male Procreator** in association with His **Shakti Consorts** makes Him an exemplary male who performs the worldly duty of procreation but withdraws thereafter to keep Himself **pure** from the iniquity of worldly affairs.

Vishnu and His Avatars.

Vishnu:

As the **preserver** Vishnu is the embodiment of the quality of mercy and goodness and is the God most associated with the Brahman, the Universal Spirit. He is the self-existent, all-pervading power that preserves and maintains the universe and the cosmic order, **Dharma**. Vishnu is **Nara**, the cosmic ocean that spread everywhere before the creation of the universe; He is also called **Narayana** – “moving in the waters”. In this aspect He is featured in human form sleeping on the gigantic snake Ananta (eternal) or Shesha while it floats on the waters of the cosmic ocean before the beginning of time. Vishnu, in contrast to Shiva or even Brahma, is a mild God and elicits devotion rather than fear. This love makes Him the most powerful deity in the Hindu pantheon. This affection from devotees is extended to His spouse **Lakshmi**, the Goddess of fortune.

Vishnu is portrayed as a handsome young man with blue skin, dressed in royal robes. He has four hands in each of which He holds a conch (sankha), a discus called Sudarshan, which was Krishna’s principal weapon, a club or mace called Kaunodaki and a lotus or padma. He also has a bow called Saranga and a sword called Nandaka. He is usually seated on a lotus with His wife Lakshmi by His side or riding on His steed Garuda.

Vishnu’s heaven Vaikuntha is on the slopes of Mount Meru. It is made of solid gold and jewels and the Ganga flows through it and cleanses it. His heaven has five pools on which blue, red and white lotuses grow. Vishnu and Lakshmi are usually found among the white lotuses where They sit and radiate like the sun.

The Ten Avatars of Vishnu:

Vishnu’s prime function as the preserver remains linked to the old beliefs and is exercised through His avatars, when He descends to earth as a great hero and saves humankind and the universe in the form of a mortal hero. As such Vishnu guards the righteous, destroys evil-doers, and establishes the **rule of law**, dharma.

Matsyavatar:

Vishnu’s first avatar, **Matsyavatar**, in the form of a **fish**, is borrowed from the earlier myths of Brahma.

I am giving the most popular version of this myth. During one of the universal periods of chaos, while Brahma was sleeping, the Vedas emerged from his mouths and were seized by a demon or asura Hayagriva, who made off with them. To recover the Vedas and hand them over to **Manu**, the first lawgiver (more akin to **Moses** of the bible), Vishnu descended to earth in the form of a fish and killed Hayagriva and restored the Vedas. He also instructed Manu on the true nature of Brahma’s eternal soul – The Brahman - and gave him the doctrine that was inculcated in the Vedas.

Kurmavatar:

The second avatar, **Kurmavatar**, in the form of a **tortoise**, is also borrowed from an earlier myth of Brahma.

During one of the periodic deluges that destroyed the world in the first age, some things of great value were lost. The most important of this was **amrita** (ambrosia) without which the entire universe was at threat from eternal destruction. It was thus decided that both the Gods and demons would churn the oceans to extract the amrita out of it. Vishnu took birth as a huge tortoise on whose humped back Mount Mandara was placed as a fulcrum. The weight of the mountain was such that it could not be placed anywhere else without jeopardizing the place. Then the serpent Vasuki was wound round the mountain to be used as a churning rope. With the Gods taking the head portion and the demons the tail Vasuki was used to churn the ocean and amrita was extracted together with other precious objects and the entire universe was thus saved.

Special Note: It is very essential to know the other special objects that emerged out of the churning of the ocean together with the amrita. They are:

- **Dhanwantari**, the bearer of the Gods’ cup of amrita and their physician

- **Lakshmi** or **Sri**, the goddess of fortune and beauty, whom Vishnu took to wife
- **Sura**, the Goddess of wine
- **Chandra**, the moon, whom Shiva had to entangle in His own matted hair to keep the mischievous Moon-God out of annoying escapades
- **Rambha**, a lovely nymph, who became the first of the celestial apsaras
- **Uchchaisravas**, a beautiful white horse initially given to the demon Bali but later seized by Indra
- **Kaustubha**, a precious jewel, which Vishnu took
- **Parijata**, a wishing tree, which was planted in Indra's heaven and became His consort Indrani's possession
- **Surabhi**, the cow of plenty, which was given to the seven rishis
- **Airavata**, a wonderful white elephant, which Indra took as steed
- **Sankha**, a conch of victory
- **Dhanus**, a mighty bow
- **Visha**, the poison that foamed out of Vasuki's mouth as he was strained to extract the amrita. This last was the only reward Shiva reaped out of the churning. To save the world from the extreme venom of the Visha Shiva took the poison in His mouth and kept it trapped in His throat without actually swallowing it. That is why Shiva's throat is blue in color and He is often called Nilkantha (Nil: Sanskrit for blue and Kantha: Sanskrit for throat.)

Varahavatar:

The third incarnation of Vishnu was in the form of a huge **boar** - **Varaha**. This also is borrowed from an earlier Brahma myth.

Vishnu came down to earth in the form of this avatar to kill Hiranyaksha, an asura (demon) who had become invincible from an inadvertent boon from Brahma. In asking Brahma to grant him invincibility Hiranyaksha cited all the living things on earth and in the universe but forgot to mention the boar and Vishnu took this opportunity to defeat him in this form.

Narasimhavatar:

Vishnu's fourth avatar is in the form of a **man-lion** - Narasimha ("Nara" for "Man" and "Simha" for "Lion") - and He came down to earth in this form to kill Hiranyakasipu, Hiranyaksha's brother, who had also got Brahma to grant him immunity against human, beast and god. He also got Brahma's assurance that he could be killed neither by day nor by night and neither inside nor outside his house. Protected by this boon Hiranyakasipu began to conquer and oppress the entire universe.

One day, while Hiranyakasipu was occupied in his daily favorite ritual of tormenting his own son **Prahlad**, who was an ardent devotee of Vishnu and refused to acknowledge his father's supremacy, Vishnu, to protect His most devoted follower, came out of the door-jamb of the asura's house and killed him. Vishnu was in the form of Narasimha, a man-lion and neither human nor beast nor god, the time was evening, neither day nor night, and the place was the door-jamb, neither inside nor outside Hiranyakasipu's house. Thus the demon was tricked and the universe was saved from his terrible oppression.

It must be noted here that **Prahlad**, son of asura Hiranyakasipu, is one of the greatest devotees of Vishnu for all time. He remains an example to Vaishnavites of all ages.

Vamanavatar:

Vishnu's fifth avatar was a **vamana** a **dwarf**. Prahlad's grandson, **Bali**, was great king and everyone, including the Gods, loved him for his great kindness and generosity but he had one great defect – an overwhelming ambition to rule the entire universe. Eventually he gained great strength and power through sacrifice and conquered the universe and drove the Gods out of Their heavens. So Vishnu came down to earth in the form of the **vamana** and approached Bali. Bali could not resist anyone asking anything from him. The **vamana** asked him to grant him three paces of land. Bali immediately granted it to him. Vishnu changed from a dwarf to such a gigantic form that in two strides He straddled the earth and the heavens.

Then He asked Bali where He would take His third and last pace. Bali was so committed to his grant that he told Vishnu to put his foot on his head, which was the only place left on the universe that was not Vishnu's. Bali was driven deep into the earth to the nether regions (Patala) by the weight of Vishnu's foot. There he still reigns over the demons and dark beings. Every year, at one time, he returns to earth as per an agreement with Vishnu. The people of Malabar celebrate this day every year as they still worship Bali for the great king he was.

Parasuram, the Sixth Avatar:

Parasuram, the sixth avatar, was born on earth to end the **oppressive rule** of the Kshatriyas, who had become dominant and were not only dominating the other castes but were increasingly becoming a threat to the Gods. Vishnu was born as the son of Jamadagni, a pious sage and his virtuous wife.

The myth weaves around Parasuram killing his own mother on the command of his father and ultimately killing all the families of the Kshatriyas with his axe Parasu which was a special gift from Shiva expressly given to him to help him perform his earthly function. Parasuram is more renowned as the **murderer of his own mother** than for the killing of the Kshatriyas.

It is controversial that Parasuram is immortal while all the other avatars of Vishnu have died human deaths to free the God to return to His heaven.

Ramachandra:

Ramachandra is Vishnu's seventh avatar. His purpose was to extirpate the most potential demon-king of all – **Ravana**, the **ten-headed** monster of Lanka (Sri Lanka). Like Hiranyakasipu and Hiranyaksha before him, Ravana, through the practice of stringent austerities, had managed to get Brahma to grant him immunity from gods, demons and gandharvas and, with the blessings of Shiva, whom also he propitiated, he began to maul both Gods and humans alike. The Gods sat down in consultation and it was decided that one of them would have to be born on earth in human form to vanquish the rakshasa (demon). Ravana was so proud of his strength that he had not asked Brahma to grant him immunity from humans, thinking them too inferior to attract notice.

Vishnu was accordingly born to a certain king Dasaratha of Ayodha as his eldest son. Dasaratha was blessed with four sons. Rama acquired **a half of Vishnu's character**. He was conceived of Dasaratha's first wife Kausalya. Dasaratha's second son Bharata, who acquired **a quarter of Vishnu's character**, was conceived of the king's second wife Kaikeyi while the third and fourth sons respectively Lakshmana and Satrugna were born of Sumitra, the youngest wife and acquired **a quarter each of Vishnu's character**. Thus, the seventh incarnation actually comprised of **four mortals**.

Rama and Lakshmana were particularly close and their **fraternal love** is still upheld as an ideal among Hindus today. They did most of the fighting assisted in their efforts by **Hanuman**, the monkey hero, and an assorted army of animals like monkeys and bears. Also involved in the fray was Rama's beloved wife **Sita**, who is still upheld as an epitome of wifely devotion by Hindu women today. Ultimately the demon-king Ravana was defeated and killed. Before dying he acknowledged his errors and was pardoned and gained entry into heaven.

Since Ravana was a Brahmin and brahminicide is absolutely unpardonable Rama and his brothers had to die. There are also other reasons cited in the Ramayana, the epic story of this struggle to vanquish Ravana, for their demise.

Ramachandra and his brothers and wife are still revered in India by Hindus and the place where **Ayodhya** once stood is regarded as holy ground.

Krishnavatar:

Vishnu's eight avatar attracted to Himself an even greater body of myth than His seventh one Rama though Krishna's purpose in being born was simple: to kill the demon king **Kansa** who was conducting a tyrannical rule from his capital in Mathura. Krishna's role in this aspect as the slayer of the demon Kansa is not the reason why He is so revered even today and worshipped as a Supreme God in His own right! It is for His role as the principal protagonist in the **epic battle of the Mahabharata** in which His commentaries on the subjects of **Dharma** (religion) and **Bhakti** (devotion) to **Arjuna**, all of which is well-documented in the **Bhagavad Gita**, one of the major religious texts of the Hindus.

Krishna's life can be divided into four parts: childhood, when He performed feats of great strength including slaying the demon Kansa who, incidentally, was His own maternal uncle; youth, when He dallied with the cowgirls and acquired for Himself a reputation as a **lover** that not even the current top stars of Bollywood can yet rival; manhood when He took up the **Kingship of Dwarka** and showed His mettle in statesmanship and middle age when He joined the fray in the battle of the Mahabharata and gave His famous speech of advice to the warrior Arjuna.

Krishna took no active part in the epic battles but only gave advice and let the mortal warriors fight it out. The most important advice He gave was to Arjuna and it was that all is illusion (**Maya**), including battle and death in arms, and that it is not the prerogative of human beings to question their duty, they only have to perform it and leave the greater perspective to the Gods. This is contained in the Bhagavad Gita.

Ultimately Krishna dies, tragically, for the death and sorrow He brought to millions leaving for us the message that not even the Gods can deflect that which is preordained and that every action has a reaction and the causes are inextricably interwoven with their effects. That is, one receives as one does and, thus, **Karma** (duty) is **Dharma** (religion).

Buddha:

The **Buddha** himself is the surprise ninth avatar of Vishnu. This is observed in some quarters as an attempt to subvert Buddhism into becoming a sect within Hinduism, which it definitely is not.

Hinduism in some way distorts the Buddha's teachings as a sort of hedonistic view of the universe in which the Buddha observes that there is no actual Hindu triad but the trio of Gods are merely human, the greater idea of samsara (the world) and humans following their duty according to their castes as dharma have no real value as death is only a sleep and an annihilation, that heaven is only pleasures on earth and hell the mundane sufferings, that sacrifices are of no value because the only salvation humans are capable of achieving is release from ignorance and that, since the body crumbles back to earth after death, the only pleasure possible on earth is mostly sensual.

Hinduism thus uses the Buddha as a foil against whose faulty preaching the original religion prospers as misbelievers are led astray and, in disarray, return to Hinduism for their salvation. In a sense Buddhism has done just that but never at the cost of relinquishing the Buddha as the **supreme teacher**.

On the ground level, most Hindus regard the Buddha as a revered incarnation of Vishnu and he is loved for his gentle teachings which ultimately further preservation, Vishnu's prime function. Hindus untaught in the scriptures regard the Buddha as an extension of the triad and refuse to be fuddled by the notion that Hinduism and Buddhism are two entirely separate religions.

On its part Buddhism has, since its inception, acquired a number of elements of Hinduism that has ultimately drawn it closer to the older religion its founder, the Buddha, had initially sought to reform.

Kalki Avatar:

Vishnu's tenth and last incarnation is yet to come and will usher in the end of this present age, the **Kaliyuga**, while bringing in the next age, the **Mayayuga**. Social and spiritual life will have degenerated to the level where, ultimately, humans will begin living like animals in the forest and men and women will wear only the barks of trees as clothes and fight and quarrel among each other as the beasts. To bring on the ultimate decline the rulers will be power-hungry immoral personages whose only desire will be to gain power and wealth, even at the expense of their subjects. Even the Brahmins will have nothing of worth except the outward show of their sacred threads. The wealth of materialists will be the only show as all real worth will have departed from everything.

Truth and love will have disappeared from the earth and the only currency will be dishonesty and the only bond among humans and man and wife will be sensuality. The land of the Hindus will lose all its sacred associations and the earth will be worshipped only as a reservoir of mineral wealth. The sacred rites will disappear, mere washing will be deemed as purification, mutual assent will replace the marriage ceremonies and bluff will replace real learning. No man or woman shall live longer than twenty-three years.

At this point of degeneration, Vishnu will ride in on a white horse, **Kalki**, his tenth avatar, and exterminate all the immoral and establish virtue as the prime human objective, as before, and the mighty Mayayuga, the next set of **four Yugas**, will set in.

The Other Gods.

The Other Gods:

Agni:

Agni is the **Fire-God** and is the **Lord of the Pitris** (forefathers).

Agni is now worshipped less as fire than as a **Purifier of Sacrificial Offerings**. He has the foremost honor to preside over all major Hindu ceremonies, including marriage and death. Agni has seven tongues and He uses all of these ceaselessly to lick up sacrificial offerings. Just as Indra has an insatiable appetite for soma, Agni is insatiable in His devouring of sacrificial oblations and, like Indra, His powers are diminished as He indulges in His greed.

Agni is mainly considered to be an atmospheric God and often likened to a star. In addition to His being the Lord of the Pitris and the principal benefactor of sacrificers. Agni is also considered to be a sage and, in this human aspect, He is represented as a man with four arms, clothed in black, with smoke as His standard and headgear. He carries a flaming javelin and rides in a chariot of seven wheels, each of which represents one of the seven winds, drawn by red horses.

Indra:

Indra is **King of the Celestials** without having any power or influence over the triad. He lives in His splendid heaven **Swarga**, the heaven all meritorious souls go to after death according to popular belief. Swarga is on Mount Meru and its capital is a wondrous city called Amravati. There Indra resides with His wife Indrani and His constant attendants the apsaras and the other spirits who sing and dance to entertain everyone there. This is when Indra is not driven out by some asura or other who has achieved universal power through an inadvertent boon from Brahma. The other Gods, especially Vishnu, have to constantly come to Indra's rescue as He and Swarga seem to be the favorite target for every unscrupulous asura that has achieved universal power. To the common Hindu, Swarga is **synonymous** with heaven.

As God of storms Indra remains a fearful figure carrying weapons in His four hands. He hurls thunder and lightning about and uses the rainbow as a bow. He is the regent of the atmosphere and the keeper of the eastern quarter. He rides on His massive white elephant **Airavata**.

Indra is a sensuous God with much love for soma and singing and dancing. Probably that is why Hindus are so careful not to sin in this life so that they can die and gain admittance to Swarga and participate in Indra's wild parties.

Soma

In the early stages, when the Hindu ideology as well as the pantheon was being consolidated, **soma** was the name of an **intoxicating drink** distilled out of certain plants. It was a potent drink and was drunk by humans and Gods alike. In humans its usage was mainly for religious purposes. The Gods like Indra and Agni were reputed to gain a large part of their strength from imbibing the drink in large quantities. It was associated with amrita, the Hindu equivalent of ambrosia. It was reputed to make the drinker immortal. For all these reasons soma gradually became personified as the God Soma.

Soma, also known as **Chandra the Moon-God**, is married to the twenty-seven daughters of the sage Daksha. He is such a mischievous God and such a debauch that Shiva has to keep Him entangled in His matted locks to keep Him out of trouble. For His misdeeds His father-in-law cursed Him to be afflicted with consumption for 15 days in a month. That is why we cannot see the moon for half the month.

Soma is represented as a copper-colored man riding through the atmosphere in a three-wheeled chariot drawn either by a pied antelope or ten white horses. A red pennant trails behind him as he proceeds on his way to the next mischief.

Surya:

The Hindu **Surya**, the Sun-God, is a combination of the three Vedic deities - Surya Himself, Vivasvat (the rising sun) and Savitri. He is the son of Aditi and Kasyapa, the grandson of Brahma. He is a dark red man, with three eyes and four arms riding in a golden chariot drawn by seven horses, each horse representing a day of the week. Sometimes the god himself drives the chariot and at other times He has a legless charioteer Arun (dawn), a brother of Garuda.

Surya is considered to be a **benefactor** of humans. His symbol, the **swastika**, is a sign of His munificence and is used by Hindus in all their religious ceremonies. The Sun-God is a renowned slayer of demons and a great hero.

Once Vishwakarma had to put Surya on the lathe to pare down His brilliance. Out of the parts that fell of the Sun-God as a result of this Vishwakarma fashioned Vishnu's discus (Sudarshan), Shiva's trident, Karttikeya's lance and the weapons of the other Gods. This in some way demonstrates Surya's strength and beneficence.

Varuna:

Varuna, the **God of the Oceans**, is a deity who was assigned total suzerainty over the seas of heaven. In later Hindu times however He was consigned to the more obscure position of being a mere atmospheric God with Overlordship of the terrestrial oceans and seas. He now lives in a palace on the mountain **Puspagiri**, the flower mountain, under the oceans and keeps careful watch over the undersea demons. He is also Lord of the western quarter of the compass.

Varuna carries a noose, like Yama, to hunt down demons that interfere with the rains. He has always over His head a cobra's hood in order to keep dry. He rides His steed **Makara**, Kama's emblem, a giant fish like a whale. Makara has a deer's head and the legs of an antelope. Varuna is followed everywhere by His retinue of rivers, snakes and demons and He is often surrounded by a troop of thousand white horses.

A visitation from Varuna can be very wet and is welcome in summer and dreaded after the rains.

Vayu:

Vayu is the capricious **Wind God**. In Vedic times He formed the Hindu triad together with Agni and Surya. In later Hindu times He was degraded to become an atmospheric God with the north-west quarter of the compass allocated as His domain. He is the King of the Gandharvas, spirits who inhabit Indra's heaven and sing and dance there to entertain the Gods. One of Vayu's many exploits include breaking off the head of Mount Meru, a mythical mountain, and creating the **Island of Lanka**, now Sri Lanka, when the broken-off piece fell into the ocean, part of it sticking out of the waters to create the sea-locked landmass.

Vayu is a destructive god with intemperate desires and a violent temper. Some sects regard Vayu in a more respectful vein and call Him the "**Bearer of Perfumes**" and mitigates some of His violence by pointing out that He is a constant companion of Vishnu and His wife Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth and beauty.

Yama:

In the early stages of Hinduism, in the Vedic times, **Yama** and His sister **Yami**, the offspring of Vivasvat, the rising sun, and Saranyu, the daughter of a prominent sage, founded the human race. After having found the road to heaven, Yama was the first man to die and became the King of the dead.

In later Hindu times, Yama presides over the eternal darkness of hell and lives in His gloomy palace **Kalichi** with His gloomier attendants. He is the much-feared **God of Death**, from whom none can escape. The palace is in the lower regions at the southern quarter of the compass, a region of which Yama is the regent. He sits on His throne in His palace and watches the procession of souls of the dead as they come up for judgment before Him. His attendant **Chitragupta** reads out of a great book the deeds of each soul and Yama then passes judgement. Accordingly the soul is either banished to Naraka (hell) or elevated to Swarga (heaven) or sent back to earth for another try at salvation.

Yama also keeps the **Great Book of Destiny** in which each living person's allotted time of life on earth is recorded. When a person's lifetime is over Yama sends His attendants to fetch that person down to Him. Sometimes, when He is too bored of His humdrum life in His dreary heaven, He Himself comes up to take down the dead.

Yama is depicted with a dark green skin wearing deep red robes. He has a grisly face out of which His coppery-red eyes stare out. He rides a buffalo and carries a heavy mace and noose. He strikes down His victims with the mace and nooses them expertly to drag them down to His abode.

The only way to evade Yama, as every sinful Hindu knows, is to constantly repeat the name of one of the Hindu triads – Brahma, Vishnu or Shiva. The name of one of Vishnu's more potent avatars like Rama may also occasionally do. Hindus die only because it is impossible to keep naming names all one's lifetime.

Kama:

In the Vedas **Kama** is said to have emanated out of the navel of the Supreme Creator, **Purusha** or **Prajapati**, when that individual was reclining on the cosmic waters at the beginning of time. This individual changes from Brahma to Vishnu to Shiva, as the positions of the triad of Hindu Gods interchange. The Vedas identify Kama as self-created and self-evident and with the power to create desire and fulfill it. In this creative aspect Kama is equated with the creative powers of Agni of the Vedic times. The Vedas also acknowledge Kama's force as a moral power and, in this aspect, He is considered the **Son of Dharma**.

Later, when Hinduism had set into its present form, Kama was assigned a more frivolous role and now He is the **God of Passion and Sexual Desire**. In this aspect He is considered the son of Vishnu and Lakshmi.

Kama is the most handsome of all the Gods and He is mostly depicted as an ever-youthful man riding a parrot. He carries a bow made of sugar-cane stalk and strung with a line of humming bees. He can shoot up to five shafts at once and the shafts are all headed with particular flowers. For each type of person with a particular type of desire, Kama chooses and shoots a shaft headed with the specific flower that will prove most potent for that particular person. Kama, in this role, can be likened to Cupid of Greek Mythology and He proves to be just as indiscriminate an archer as His diminutive Greek counterpart.

Kama is married to **Rati** (passion) and has for His friend **Vasanta** (spring) and the threesome never separate. Vasanta chooses the flowered shafts for Kama's victims. Kama is also depicted as always surrounded by the Apsaras, beautiful maidens well-versed in the arts, and one of them carries for Him His red banner with the sign of the giant fish Makara, Varuna's steed.

Karttikeya:

Karttikeya is the first son of Shiva and Parvati. He was conceived under rather unusual circumstances, to free the universe from the depredations of the asura Taraka. Taraka, through rigorous penance, had fooled Brahma into granting him invincibility but Brahma had managed to set in the condition that the asura would be immune to everyone except a son of Shiva. When the asura began his rampages the Gods got together and married Shiva off to Parvati with the help of the Love-God Kama. Karttikeya was soon conceived and, when born, He ultimately grew up and killed the asura and saved the universe.

Karttikeya is much revered in Southern India and is affectionately called Subramanya there. He is the Hindu **God of War** and the **Chieftain of the Gods' Army**. He is so single minded in His martial endeavors that He does not even take time off to associate with women though at one time He is said to have wooed Buddhi and Sidhi who, however, were won over as wives by His younger brother Ganesha.

Karttikeya is represented as riding His peacock Paravani and carrying a bow and quiver full of arrows. He has six heads on one body and six pairs of arms and legs though the image and clay idols normally worshipped by Hindus represent Him with only one pair of arms and legs and one head. In Bengal, a clay idol of Karttikeya is left outside the door of married but issue-less couples in a sort of satirical censure. In conservative Hindu society, marriage is expected to produce children as soon as possible. The couple is forced to offer worship to the God and suffer ridicule.

Women afflicted with sterility or who, for some reason, do not have children worship Karttikeya for His blessings by which they hope to bear offspring.

Kubera:

In earlier Vedic times Kubera was the chief of all evil creatures living in abodes of darkness but in the later Hindu time it is found that he has been elevated to the ranks of the gods and is appointed one of the eight guardians of the universe.

One version of how this promotion occurred is that Kubera had once gone to rob a temple of Shiva, who Himself is the **King of Robbers**, and the dwarf's lighted taper had been blown out by the wind. After ten very strenuous attempts Kubera ultimately lit his taper and, since this illuminated Shiva's earthly abode, Shiva was so pleased by Kubera's diligence that he was reborn as the **God of Wealth**. It should be noted though that the conventional **Goddess of Wealth is Lakshmi** and Kubera is taken more as the **keeper of the treasures of the world** rather than the God of that treasure.

Though Kubera is always covered by precious jewels and metals his body is ugly and deformed. His stunted body is pale and white; he has three legs and only eight teeth. As he was a dwarf Brahma ordered Vishwakarma to build him a magic chariot which he could use to transport himself. So the architect god built him **Pushpaka**, a magic chariot that is so large that there is a whole city contained in it. As Kubera flies through the air on it he showers the earth with precious things which the poor collect to alleviate their misery.

Vishwakarma:

In the initial phases of Hinduism in the Vedic era **Vishwakarma**, which literally means "omnificent", was the attribute of any strong God like Indra or even Varuna who was credited with being the divine artificer or creator of the universe. In later times, the Hindu era, this role was definitively attributed to one God of that name Vishwakarma. This God acquired some of the attributes of the Vedic god Tvashti, who was a mere artificer of the Gods making for them such wonderful things as Indra's thunderbolt Vajra (literally thunderbolt) and the magical bowl out of which Indra and the other Gods drank soma and which automatically filled with the celestial drink and was supposed to be the secret of the supreme strength of the Vedic Gods.

Vishwakarma taught architecture to humans and, in the present time, He is widely worshipped as the **Patron of all things mechanical**. His day of worship in the year falls on 17th September and, on this day, His flamboyantly embellished image is worshipped in each and every factory, big, small and minuscule, with Hindu affiliation all over India.

Ganesha:

Ganesha is the revered younger son of Shiva and Parvati and the **Initiator of all ceremonies and ventures**. At every temple to a God or Goddess in India, a small idol of this elephant-headed pot-bellied short God is always snugly ensconced in an arched nook set into the gate of the temple. This is so not only for temples but truly devout Hindus also have His idol or picture set above the doorways of their homes and offices so that they can do obeisance to Him before they enter.

How Ganesha got His elephant's head is an intriguing story one can read in books on Indian Mythology. Ganesha has two wives, **Siddhi** (enlightenment) and **Buddhi** (intelligence). He vied with His brother Kartikeya for their hands in marriage and won by dint of His greater learning and wisdom. Ganesha is the **God of wisdom and prudence**. He is such a good scribe that Vyasa, the sage who composed the Mahabharata, utilized Him. That is why, the learned say, that there is no mistake to be found in that great epic. Ganesha is also the leader of Shiva's ganadevatas.

Ganesha is represented as a short pot-bellied man with yellow skin and four arms and an elephant's head with only one tusk. In each of His hands He holds a shell, a discus, a club or goad and a water-lily. He either rides a rat or has one by Him. He is extremely partial to food offerings, especially fruits.

He is one of the most popular Hindu deities. As He is said to remove obstacles, He is propitiated at the beginning of any venture – building a house or factory, opening a bank account, starting out on a journey, be it long or short, writing a book or, for that matter, developing a course for Suite101 and anything else one can think of. The pot-bellied God is the initiator of everything worthwhile in India.

Garuda:

Garuda is the **steed of Vishnu**. He is the **King of the birds** and he can rival the wind with the speed of his wings. He is a relentless hater of all evil and pursues evil-doers with merciless determination. For this, and for his association with Vishnu, one of the triads – the preserver, he is much venerated by Hindus.

Garuda is the son of Kasyapa, a great sage, and Vinata, one of Dakshya's daughters. He was born out of an egg Vinata laid. Since his mother Vinata has a feud with her counterpart Kadru, the other wife of Kasyapa and the mother of the Nagas (serpents), Garuda hates serpents and kills any that comes his way. Since Hindus, with primitive instinct, hate snakes for their venomousness they regard Garuda with special affection for this.

Garuda has the head, wings, talon and beak of an eagle and the body and limbs of a man. His body is golden while his face is white. He has splendid red wings that stretch wide and strong and help him fly speedily across all manners of terrain, as is so often narrated in his myths. When Garuda was born he was so brilliantly resplendent that he was mistaken for Agni and worshipped. Later his brilliance diminished but his strength and his unwavering morality gained him entry into the realms of the Hindu Gods.

Once, due to a quarrel with the Gods, Garuda stole the moon and ran away with it. The Gods were desperate to get back that genial heavenly God but could neither force nor persuade Garuda to return Him until they promised him that he would thereafter be deemed on a par with Vishnu and become immortal. Thus, Garuda is Vishnu's steed but his emblem graces the standard of that Supreme God as it flies atop the shade on His chariot when He goes to battle.

Hanuman:

Hanuman is the **monkey deity**. He is the inseparable **companion** and **aid** of Ramachandra (popularly called Rama), the seventh avatar (incarnation) of Vishnu made manifest on earth to relieve people from the oppression of the rakshasa (demon) Ravana. Hanuman is renowned for his intelligence and learning, his speed and agility and his **unswerving faithfulness** to Rama. His ability to change size at will and his great strength and power is well-recorded in the Hindu epic "Ramayana" (the story of Ramachandra).

Hanuman is the **son of Vayu**, the wind god, and Anjana, an apsara (nymph) who was changed to a monkey by a curse. His parentage afforded Hanuman the ability to fly through the air at will. He used this ability extensively to help Rama defeat and kill Ravana.

Hanuman has the physique of a monkey with glowing golden skin. He has a radiant red face and an enormous black-tipped tail that he uses to strangle his enemies with. Hanuman is immortal by virtue of his invaluable assistance to Rama. After defeating and killing Ravana, Rama wanted to reward Hanuman for his service and told him that he could ask for anything he wished of Rama and the avatar would grant it. Hanuman asked to live for as long as people remembered the deeds of Rama. Indirectly, Hanuman became immortal as the deeds of Rama would never be forgotten by the people of the earth.

To the Hindu, Hanuman is the **epitome of service** and for that he is especially loved and revered. Hanuman is often worshipped as a deity who can avert any type of ill-fortune and in this aspect he is regarded as very auspicious.

The Hindu Pantheon - Part Two.

This chapter, in part, deals with the important goddesses in the pantheon. It must be noted that the goddesses are few in comparison to the number of gods but almost all the relevant ones have been included. Also in this chapter the minor deities as well as a few other important mythological entities have been dealt with. Comprehensive knowledge is not necessary.

The Triad of Goddesses.

Introduction:

At the apex of the Goddesses in the Hindu Pantheon is a sketchy triad of Goddesses who represent the Mother Figure that protects and preserves. The **Mother Goddess** is definitely **Devi** whose daughters the other two Goddesses in the Triad - **Sarasvati** and **Lakshmi** - are.

The Triad of Goddesses:

The **Triad of Goddesses** are - **Sarasvati** – for *learning and the creative arts*, **Lakshmi** – for *wealth and beauty* and **Devi** – for *feminine shakti or energy*, particularly in the manifestation of fertility.

Devi is mainly in the nature of the Mother Goddess and it is singular that the other two of the Triad are portrayed as **Her daughters**.

Sarasvati:

Sarasvati is the Goddess of all the **creative arts** especially of poetry and music, learning and science. She, in present times, is intimately associated with books. At Her worship day in January children lay their school text and exercise books at Her feet for propitiation.

Earlier myths recount of Sarasvati being created by Brahma from a part of His body. As such She is regarded as His daughter though He later married Her overcome by Her beauty, much to the annoyance of Shiva who accused Him of incest and struck off His fifth head. That is why we only have four Vedas, which sprouted out of each of Brahma's four remaining heads.

A later myth, and a more popular one, accounts for Sarasvati as the **younger daughter** of the union of Shiva and Parvati, sister to Lakshmi, Kartikeya and Ganesha.

Sarasvati is represented as a beautiful woman with white skin, sitting on a swan or a lotus flower and holding a **Bina** (an Indian musical instrument) in Her hands.

Sarasvati is a haughty and disputatious Goddess and much is made of Her **constant rivalry** with Her sister Lakshmi, the Goddess of fortune. The two seldom get on well with each other. This accounts for the fact that a learned person is seldom wealthy and vice versa.

However the myths go it is nevertheless an accepted notion that Sarasvati is wedded to Brahma.

Lakshmi:

Lakshmi was one of the fourteen precious things that churning of the ocean delivered and She was claimed by Vishnu as His wife. Another more popular myth accounts for Her as the **elder daughter** of Shiva and Parvati, sister to Sarasvati, Kartikeya and Ganesha. Nevertheless, in this myth as well, **Lakshmi is the wife of Vishnu**.

As Vishnu's constant companion She was born to be His wife every time He descended to earth as an avatar. She was born from the waters, floating on a lotus, when He was born as the Vamana avatar. She was called Padma (lotus) or

Kamala. When Vishnu was Parasuram, she was Dharani, the earth. When He was Rama, She was Sita, born of the earth. When He was Krishna, She was present in both stages of His life as Radha, the cow-girl and His unrequited love, and Rukmini, His lawful wife.

Thus, as Vishnu's constant companion, Lakshmi is regarded as a **Goddess of plenty, of fortune and wealth**. She is regarded as fickle in this context, as fortunes come and go. Nevertheless, as Vishnu's wife, She is exemplary in Her faithfulness to Him, especially as Sita, who is regarded as the epitome of a loyal wife in India and an example of feminine comeliness.

Lakshmi is represented as a golden woman, sitting or standing on a lotus, Her symbol. Myths give Her four hands but Her commonly-worshipped idols represent Her with only two so as to make Her more humanlike and endearingly, probably closer for comfort.

In a Hindu household, Lakshmi is constant feature and She is regularly worshipped, especially on Thursdays, which is regarded as Her day and, thus, a very auspicious one. A good Hindu wife is expected to be like Lakshmi, virtuous yet presentable and conserving of the household resources.

Devi:

Devi is the embodiment in a single deity of all the diverse elements of Shiva's Shakti Brigade. She mirrors in Her person all the diverse aspects of Her husband's personality. For each of these aspects She has a different name – **Sati, Parvati, Durga, Kali**). The aspects may be divided roughly into **mild** and **fierce** ones. This duality can be traced back to pre-Aryan times and Devi may be said to be the remnant of the **Supreme Mother Goddess** of the earliest times of human civilization in India. Like Vishnu's avatars each of these deities were born at a particular time to perform a particular function associated with Shiva in His role of wielder of the female energy (**Shakti**), represented by the **Yoni** or female genital organ. The worshippers of Shakti – the **Shaktas** - hope to achieve the **Unmanifest Masculine Power** behind the Goddess they worship. This masculine energy is usually that of Shiva, as entirely in the case of the Shakti Goddesses.

Sati is a **mild form** of Devi and was a daughter of Daksha who married Shiva at Her own insistence against Her father's advice. Later, getting unwillingly involved in Her disputatious husband's innumerable controversies, She committed **suicide**. The grief-stricken Shiva went into a trance and, taking up Her dead body, started to dance the **tandava**, His dance of destruction. Fearing for the survival of the universe Vishnu cut off Sati's dead body into fifty-two pieces and stopped Shiva. The fifty-two places in India and other parts of the subcontinent where the pieces of Sati's body fell are major tantric pilgrimage spots - **The Shaktipeeths** - regularly visited by Hindus.

Sati is the embodiment of feminine devotion to masculine supremacy and She is regarded, like Sita of the Ramayana, as an epitome of wifely faithfulness.

Sati was reborn as **Parvati**, the daughter of Himavan, lord of the Himalayas, and Mena. She is also called Menakshi, after Her mother. She also represents a **milder aspect** of Shiva's character and She achieved Her position of wife through great austerities. In the process She acquired a golden skin and so is also called **Uma** (light or beauty). She is the mother of Shiva's four children – Karttikeya, Lakshmi, Ganesha and Sarasvati.

There are two **fierce** avatars of Devi – Durga and Kali.

Durga is a beautiful golden woman with ten arms riding a lion. She was created from flames issuing out of the mouths of the major Gods including Shiva to kill the buffalo demon Mahisha. Each of Her ten hands were armed with one of the special weapons of the Gods – Vishnu's discus, Shiva's trident, Varuna's conch shell, Agni's flaming dart, Vayu's bow, Surya's quiver and arrows, Yama's iron rod, Indra's thunderbolt, Kubera's club, a garland of snakes from Shesha and a lion or tiger from the Himalayas. She is particularly revered in Bengal and is regarded there not only as a slayer of demons but also as a fertility Goddess.

Kali is an even more **fearsome aspect** of Shiva than Durga. She was created to kill Chunda and Munda, two asuras, and their army of demons. She has black skin, a hideous tusked face and a third eye. She has four arms, two of them bearing a weapon and a blood-dripping truncated head of an asura and the other two raised to bless. She is naked except for Her ornaments of cut-off body parts of asuras, especially a waist mantle of cut-off hands which signifies

karma. Kali is in Shiva's **time aspect** and She destroys all Karma (deeds) that are not good. Only the absolutely good prevails against the ravages of time.

Shiva had to lie down in Her path as She was driven out of control by bloodlust in the process of extirpating asuras and started killing innocent beings after all the asuras were decimated. When She stepped onto Her husband's supine body realization came to Her and, in shame, She stuck out Her tongue and ceased Her massacre of the innocents. This is the most popular form, with Her tongue stuck out, that She is worshipped by Hindus.

Kali required constant **blood sacrifices**, including **humans** in the near past, but today Hindus realize the significance of **universal coexistence** and instead of sacrificing animals substitute them with gourds.

All of Shiva's female manifestations are linked with **fertility**, the primary form of feminine beneficence. Except for Sati, who died too early to bear children and Kali who is too fierce and is barren, all the many forms of Devi – Parvati, Uma, Gauri, Jagadgauri, Menakshi, Durga – are **fruitful mothers** bearing Shiva the same four children – Kartikeya, Ganesha, Lakshmi and Sarasvati. As **fruitful mothers** they all depict Shiva's positive male power - His **light aspect**.

The Other Goddesses.

The Other Goddesses:

There are also a number of Female figures in the Hindu Pantheon who are worshipped for the **varied influence** they have on **human existence**.

Aditi:

Aditi is the mother of the Vedic Adityas and, on that basis, the Hindus of a later age still continue to regard Her as the **Mother of all the Gods**, not only of the Adityas. She was twice featured as the mother of two of Vishnu' avatars – Vamanavatar and Krishnavatar. She was the wife of Kasyapa as the mother of Vamanavatar and Devaki, wife of Basudev, as the mother of Krishnavatar.

Indra, at one time as an Aditya Himself, gifted Her the famous earrings that was begotten by the churning of the oceans with Vasuki, the snake.

Aditi is thus revered as a **Mother Goddess** who gave birth to all the celestial beings.

Saranyu:

Saranyu is the daughter of Vishwakarma and the twin sister of Trisiras. She is married to Surya, the Sun God. She initially bore Him a pair of twins, Yama and Yami, but later became tired of His brilliance and fled into the forest, leaving behind a replica, Chhaya (shade), who fooled Surya into begetting a child of her. The child was Manu, the law-giver, and a famous personage in his own right.

Ultimately Surya discovered His wife's deception and dismissed Chhaya and went after Saranyu in the forest. There He found her in the embodiment of a mare and, so, He changed form to a stallion and they mated and begot the Aswins (horsemen), again twin boys, who are also reputed as physicians to the Gods.

Later Surya and Saranyu changed back to human forms and, in compromise to His wife's difficulty, Surya agreed to let Vishwakarma shear off some of His brilliance. Saranyu then helped her father make the Gods' weapons out of the glowing pieces sheared off her husband.

Saranyu's is the first case of a woman getting trauma from being married to a star.

Prithivi:

Prithivi is literally the earth, the **Mother Earth**, wedded to **Dyaus**, the **Sky Father**, bearing and engendering not only all life on the planet but also such gods as Indra and Agni. All the earlier myths treat her in the same way and the common belief among Hindus today favors that early belief. She is always the **caring mother** though parts of the myths reveal her as a female who is also **capricious** and often uncaring of those who depend on her. Thus, the earth succors with crops and other produce and also destroys when she is willful and will not yield – as at times of drought and flood.

Yet later myths have her wedded to a king named Prithu who asks her on their bridal day to reveal to him all the treasures she had been hiding. Prithivi refuses and flees from her husband who pursues with bow and arrows to catch her and force her to give up all her hidden treasures for the benefit of all life on earth. Somehow Prithivi escapes from her husband and goes to Brahma for shelter. Brahma refuses to grant her sanctum and tells her to return to her lawfully-wed husband. Prithivi has no other recourse and returns to him. Prithu is vengeful and beats her and forces her to reveal all her treasures to him which he then distributes among all life on earth.

In this myth is the connotation that farmers and others mistreat the earth and force her to yield what they want and she bears all, patient cow that she is.

Prithivi's myths portray her often as a willful creature but, all that notwithstanding, the common Hindu reveres her and loves her for being the mother of all life on earth.

Other stylized creation myths portray Yama and Yami, the twins born of Saranyu and Surya, as the creators of the human race. Some myths even mention Brahma and Sarasvati as the original creators of the race but Prithivi and Dyaus are the common man's or woman's favorite.

Rati:

Rati is the daughter of the sage Daksha and the wife of the **Love God Kama**. She is the Goddess of **sexual pleasure** and a constant companion of Kama as He roams about shooting indiscriminately His arrows. Like her husband she is also a frivolous deity and she is often called **Mayavati** (deceiver).

Her faithfulness, however, to Kama is unstinting and for this reason she is often cited as an example wives should emulate. When Kama was burned to ashes by Shiva's third eye in the incident of Karttikeya's birth, when Kama sought to break Shiva's vow of abstinence by shooting an arrow at Him and making Him feel desire for Parvati, it was Rati who, with the help of Parvati, persuaded Shiva to forgive her husband and allow Him to be reborn as **Pradyumna**, son of Krishna and Rukmini.

Ultimately, after a long sojourn as human beings living in the kingdom of Dwarka, Krishna's seat, Kama and Rati were able to return to their divine roots and reign again as the deities of love and passion.

Manasa:

Manasa is the daughter of the sage Kasyapa and Kadru, the mother of all serpents. She is the **sister** of the serpent-king Shesha or Ananta, on whom Vishnu sleeps after the end of each epoch. Her worship is most prevalent in **Bengal**. Manasa is invoked as **curer of snake bites** and **protector against diseases**, especially infectious ones, and as bringer of wealth. Since snakes become most evident at the onset of the rainy season Manasa's worship also peaks at this time.

As a deity of almost pre-Aryan origin, Manasa is closely associated with fertility cults and, also as snakes are seen as symbols of the cycle of life, Manasa is a powerful deity with much capacity for damage and much feared as such. She is also closely associated with **cats**, especially the one She usually rides.

Manasa is particularly ugly to look at with only **one eye** operational and is featured in red robes riding a cat, usually a tiger, the most common wild cat in India.

Sitala:

Sitala's origins are shrouded in time and not much is known of how and when she became popular. Sitala, like Manasa, is a deity quite recently added to the pantheon. She has influence mostly in **Bengal** and is not at all known in other parts of India. She is taken to be an aspect of Shiva's Shakti, the feminine energy, and she is also the Goddess of **small pox** and other **infectious diseases** like venereal ones. As such she is much revered by **prostitutes and other sex workers** and her temple is sure to be found in places where these people reside.

Sitala wears red robes and rides an ass as she ambles around the countryside looking for victims. She carries seeds that, when thrown upon a victim, gives him or her diseases. Since, when it was much prevalent, small pox and other such diseases except the venereal ones, become manifest in India just after the winter and at the beginning of summer, Sitala's worship peaks at this time.

Sitala is also the patron Goddess of **childbirth** and has great affection for children. So she is also worshipped as a **Patron Deity of children**.

Sitala is also associated with **cats** and rides one when she is not on prowl for victims. Her idol prepared for worship usually has her sitting on a tiger.

Ganga:

Ganga is one of **major rivers** flowing through the northern plains of India. The canny Indians, mostly Hindus, who made their settlements on her banks revered her and ultimately deified her. She is the unique purifier and bathing in her waters washes away all sins. It goes without mentioning that she is regarded as a **mother** whose waters bring life to millions. There are innumerable myths on her but the one I shall deal with here is the one that concerns her descent to earth.

At first Ganga, eldest daughter of Himavan and Mena, was a holy river that entwined itself three times around the holy city of Brahma on Mount Meru. At that time there was a king named Sagara. He ruled Ayodhya, which was later to become the kingdom of Ramachandra, Vishnu's seventh avatar. King Sagara had sixty thousand sons. They were all wild and went about tormenting the common people including the sages and rishis. Ultimately it got so that the holy men could neither meditate nor worship in peace.

They complained to the Gods. So Vishnu, with His third eye, which every major God has, burned all of Sagara's sixty thousand sons to ashes for their misdeeds. Sagara died soon after but one of his descendents learned from the sage Kapila that the sixty thousand members of his family could be brought back to life if the sacred river Ganga could be made to descend to Patala (the nether regions) to wash over their ashes. Hereafter all of Sagara's descendents tried their best to persuade the sacred river to come down from Brahma's heaven but she was reluctant and declined.

At last, one descendent Bhagiratha, through severe austerities, propitiated Brahma and persuaded Him to order Ganga to come down. Now the Gods warned that Ganga was very annoyed at Brahma's command and would fall so heavily to earth that she would do maximum damage. So Bhagiratha again performed austerities and asked for Shiva's help. Shiva agreed to cushion Ganga's fall with His matted locks.

In this way Ganga descended via Shiva's locks onto earth and to Patala through the **ocean**, which is "sagara" in the Indian languages. Sagara's sons were saved and attained salvation while the people of earth were gifted with the holy waters of the river they revere most.

Through this myth the origins of the river high up in the mountains and her disappearance into the sea is explained.

Almost all Hindu rites from marriages to death ceremonies to worship of other Gods and Goddesses require the **water** of the Ganga. If one is not fortunate enough to live on her banks then a nearby river is signified as Ganga and its waters are used but millions of Hindus strive to bathe at least once in a lifetime in her holy waters, especially at propitious times like the Kumbha Mela and Ganga Sagara. These religious ceremonies are dealt with in the chapter on religious places.

It is also a powerful belief that if a Hindu's body is cremated on the Ganga's banks and her waters used to wash the dead person's ashes he or she will gain direct admittance to heaven. So many old people near death leave their hometowns to go and dwell on her banks so that their last rites can be performed on her banks and they can gain entry into Swarga (heaven).

Other Mythological Figures.

The Gandharvas:

The Gandharvas are important spirits of Indian Mythology. They are **half-man** and **half-bird** and are **friendly** towards human beings. There is controversy over their origin. Some texts advocate that they are directly descended from Brahma while others say that they are the children of the sage Kasyapa.

The first Gandharva had knowledge of divine truths and was appointed by the Gods to prepare and be guardian of the celestial soma juice. This initial ancestor may have symbolized the fire of the sun. His descendants are the guardians of amrita (ambrosia). They are also famed for their prowess as healers and are proficient in medicine. Gandharvas are supposed to have splendid cities of their own somewhere in the universe but they are usually found in Indra's heaven **Vaikunth**. There, together with the Apsaras (celestial nymphs), they sing and dance and play their musical instruments entertaining everyone.

The Gandharvas are known to haunt the air, forests and mountains of the earth. They are mischievous and often fool people with their illusions which they work at the time of twilight. Very occasionally they have been known to fight humans but only in cases where the humans were evil.

The Gandharvas have serious rivalry with the Nagas (serpents) whose netherworld kingdom they conquered and plundered. On that occasion the Nagas sought the help of Vishnu who descended to Patala (the nether region kingdom of the Nagas) in the form of the river Narmada and swept away the Gandharva army thus driving them out. The Gandharvas are partial to women and are famed for their powers over them.

The Apsaras:

The **Apsaras** are **nymphs** who inhabit Indra's heaven Vaikunth. They are said to be the **daughters of pleasure**. There are innumerable stories of their love affairs with the Gandharvas whom they partner in song and dance as they team up to entertain the Gods in Indra's palace. Initially, the Apsaras have been mentioned in older texts as water nymphs and, in this role, later texts still maintain that when these celestial beings descend to earth they are to be found in holy pools and rivers.

The origin of the Apsaras is as spicy as they themselves are. They are said to have been produced during the churning of the milk ocean by the Gods and asuras (demons). Though they were beautiful women neither the Gods nor the asuras wanted them as wives and so it was decided that they would become nymphs who would serve everyone.

The Gandharvas and Apsaras also frequent Indra's heaven **Swarga**, where good Hindus go to after they die.

The Yakshas and the Kinnaras:

Kubera is the acknowledged **King of the Yakshas** who attend on him and help him guard the treasures of the worlds. Like their lord the Yakshas are friendly towards human unless they are evil. They also turn hostile when people try to gain riches in any unethical manner.

The Kinnaras are also **attendant spirits** of Kubera and have human bodies with horses' heads. They are said to be born at the same time as the Yakshas and are friendly towards humans. They are the entertainers in Kubera's heaven and they sing, dance and make music.

The Nagas:

The Nagas are the race of serpents that have descended from Kadru, the principal wife of sage Kasyapa. They live in the nether regions and are mostly considered to be evil though some of them, like their king **Shesha** or **Ananta**, have gained the favor of the Gods through austerities and are immortal and revered. Shesha is Vishnu's constant companion and becomes the raft on which the God sleeps when the cosmic waters engulf all at the end of an epoch. In his Ananta aspect Shesha has connotations of **eternity** especially with his tail held in his mouth. This is why Hindus regard serpents to signify the **cycle of life** and revere them.

The Nagas guard the best jewels in the three realms and some of them wear these jewels that are so bright that they light up the darkness of the nether regions. Some of the serpents have five or even six hoods and resplendent skins.

Vasuki, whom the Gods used as a churning rope to extract amrita out of the oceans, became pure when he vomited the poison within him at the time of the churning. He is a revered personage and Shiva keeps him girdled around His waist.

Jambavan:

Jambavan was the **King of the Bears** and led the bear army that aided Rama in His battle against Ravana. He was the issue of Vishnu and, in return for his help, Rama granted him the boon of invincibility against everyone except his father Vishnu Himself.

Much later, Jambavan was killed by Vishnu's avatar Krishna in a forest where he was guarding a magic jewel, Syamantaka, which Krishna wanted.

Sugriva:

Sugriva was a son of Surya and a **Monkey-King**. He was ousted from the throne by his stronger half-brother Bali. Later he enlisted the help of Rama through Hanuman. Rama helped Sugriva defeat and kill his half-brother and the seat of the monkey kingdom was restored to him.

In gratitude he helped Rama in his war against Ravana with his army of monkeys.

The Evil Ones.

There are **two** principal sets of evil beings in the Hindu world - **The Asuras**, who are **extraterrestrial**, and **The Rakshasas**, who are an **Earth-bound** evil. As in Christian demonology, the Hindu evil beings were also created by the Gods but they ran out of control because of their innate evil nature. Since then the Gods and the Evil Ones have been involved in a continuous **cosmic struggle** for dominion of the universe. There is a running concept of human beings committing sins while under the influence of evil beings - mostly **ghostly impure souls** that reside in the intermediate regions between heaven and earth - but, today, this is widely regarded as **superstition**. Such superstitious beliefs are mostly prevalent in remote rural regions because of misinformation and ignorance - **Avidya**. There are still reports of **shamanistic followers of Goddess Kali - Tantriks and others** practicing witchcraft being called upon to **exorcise** people but the Indian Government takes **stern measures** to discourage such practices.

The principal concept of **karma** in Hinduism precludes humans committing sins under outside influence. Both good and bad are due to personal action - **karma** - and no-one can be **blamed** or **credited**.

The Asuras

At first, as the myth goes, the **Asuras** were considered **at par** with the Gods (Devas). They took part in all sacrifices and considered themselves to be the equal of the Gods. In fact the word "asura" means nondrinkers. Gradually though, because of their greed and foolishness, the asuras fell in stature and became inferior to the Gods. This story is much akin to that of **Lucifer** in Christian Mythology.

At the time of the churning of the milk ocean for the extraction of amrita, the asuras' help was enlisted by the Gods for greater force but later, the Gods feared that allowing the asuras to drink amrita would make them **immortal** and a threat to the divine dominion. So they were tricked by the Gods, especially Vishnu in the form of a beautiful maiden **Mohini**, and deprived of the celestial drink. Thereafter the asuras weakened and were banished to the nether regions - **Patala**.

Nevertheless, once in a while, an asura will acquire great virtue through sacrifices and austerities and will persuade a God, mostly Brahma who is the kindest of them all, to grant them a boon of invincibility and, with the help of that strength, will threaten all existence till he is somehow vanquished by the Gods.

The common belief is that the asuras are **beings of evil** and Hindus take great pleasure in watching dramas based on ancient texts in which a God or Goddess slays an asura with great pomp and fanfare.

Some of the asuras are called Daityas and Danavas and they are reputed to be born of the sage Kasyapa by his wives Diti and Danu. The asuras, together with the more terrestrial Rakshasas, are the principal forces of evil in the Hindu universe and they are involved in a constant cosmic struggle with the Gods for dominion of the universe.

Brahma's Creation Myth also says that Brahma first created the Asuras but they were so **evil** that they went out of His control and started to attack Him. The other Gods saved Brahma but the harm was done and the Asuras were let loose upon the universe to threaten it from time to time.

The Rakshasas:

The **Rakshasas**, unlike the asuras, are **terrestrially-bound** and are the principal forces of evil in the **human world** though Ravana, the Rakshasa king of Lanka, gained enough power through penance to threaten even the Gods and the universe before he was executed by Rama and His three brothers in the avatar of Ramachandra.

Most of the Rakshasas are reputed to be grotesque creatures with ugly deformed bodies and atrocious habits though, once in a while, like Supranaka, the sister of Ravana, the female ones may acquire beautiful woman-like forms to entice and fool humans, especially men. Most of the Rakshasas use disguise to fool humans and it is their favorite ploy to inflict unpleasant surprises on humans.

Rakshasas are reputed to be **human-eaters** and prefer young children, as every little Hindu boy or girl knows. Savoring stories of Rakshasas being killed by heroes is a favorite pastime for children as well as adults.

The Rakshasas are also descended from the sage Kasyapa by his wife Khasa who herself is a daughter of Daksha.

Conclusion

In conclusion to the two pantheon chapters I must mention that the common Hindu saying is that there are **330 million Deities** in their pantheon. Not even the most ardent worshipper can pay homage to all of them. It is the normal practice to offer worship and sacrifice to the deity or deities one empathizes most with and maintain an ambience of respectful silence for all the others.

Thus, it has not in any measure been possible to include all the deities and other entities in the pantheon and mythology but I have certainly contrived to include all the major entities that Hinduism currently offer worship to most frequently and regularly.

As footnote I add that though the **Male Triad** is regarded as being at the apex of worship yet actual worship is mostly willy-nilly and an entirely personal matter with no universal guidelines on which deity is the greater and thus more powerful and worthy of worship. A deity's popularity is usually generated by **important individuals** like sages, rishis and other holy men and other sources of popular appeal like films, as in recent times, and sects and cults are formed around that particular deity. Otherwise, generally, each deity oversees a particular sphere of influence on human existence and if an individual Hindu faces some difficulties in that sphere the patron deity is propitiated through ritual worship. Advice on worship is sought from priests, elders and other knowledgeable persons and the rituals are usually performed either by a priest or any other knowledgeable person including the person affected and seeking worship.

Thus, I have presented a flat structure of the pantheon without emphasizing on any particular deity. Worship, with the Hindus, is largely a matter of **personal choice**.

Chapter 5: The Yoga Suite.

This chapter introduces the four principal spiritual yoga systems. Please note that the spiritual oga systems best manifest the concepts within Hinduism and so they are discussed at some length.

Introduction.

Yoga to most people today, even to those being Hindus, is a set of physical exercises and meditative practices that ensures bodily and mental well-being. This is not entirely true. The prime objective of Yoga, like all other Hindu precepts, is to achieve Moksha by uniting the individual spirit within with the Universal Spirit. This primary precept is emphasized throughout this chapter. Nevertheless, at the very onset of the chapter, it is necessary to note that the Hindu Sages and Rishis who developed the concept were certainly not otherworldly monomaniacs without any heed for essential facts of life on earth.

The four types of Yoga treated here - **Raja Yoga, Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga and Jnana Yoga** - are primarily spiritual Yoga systems with very little in the way of physical exercises. The spirituality inherent within them is a wholesome morality that not only enhances the life quality of the Yoga practitioner himself or herself but also of those who come into contact with him or her. Thus, these Yogic systems are meant to enhance the quality of life of not only individuals but the whole of society. The philosophy and psychology inherent within the different systems are crude by today's standards but it must be noted that very little moral value is added to modern systems of human mind and its relationships with the outside world. Modern philosophical and psychological systems are dry, precise treatises that are materially very true but spiritually bereft of almost all values.

Yes! There's the law to enforce conformation to a certain morality but this is conformation **enforced** from **outside!** Thus, morality imposed by legal systems is less desirable. In contrast, all religious systems strive to inculcate within the individual a confirmative attitude to a morality that comes wholly from the **inside**. Religious morality, in the present world in the absence of any other alternative system, is, thus, much more desirable because the individual accedes **voluntarily** to it. If one steals there is the police to restrain one but if one does not give to charity though one has more than enough there's simply no-one to take one to task.

Legality is the manifestation of the **collective will** while religious spirituality encourages the manifestation of the **individual will**.

The crux of the matter is that morality must come from the inside and not from the outside. Legal and atheistic systems nowadays do advocate a certain wider morality but this is still not enough to suffice for complete well-being of communities as a whole. So, even if one approaches religion with an atheistic and even skeptical attitude one must acknowledge that there is much within religious systems that can be of utility to humans today and, possibly, much longer into the future.

The Hindu Yoga systems may seem to have rather old-fashioned and even outdated thought processes yet it can be amply determined that the morality inherent within the systems are intrinsically acceptable in an eternal sense if humankind is to survive as whole communities of **mutually-compatible** individuals.

The four Yoga systems treated in this chapter provide spiritual guidance but that does not mean that Yoga is entirely concerned with spiritual aspects. **Hatha Yoga** systems advocate physical means by which the body can be contained enough to allow the spirit within to blossom forth towards the Universal Spirit. In the process, Hatha Yoga builds up the human body into a much healthier system because, primarily, continence is often a very efficient means of keeping the human body healthy. In the same manner, the four spiritual Yoga systems discussed here utilizes continence to build up a healthier mental system. Thus, both **physical** and **spiritual** Yoga systems are necessary to build up an all-round healthy individual.

My reason for including only the spiritual Yoga systems in this chapter is that these systems teach much in the way of basic tenets of the religion Hinduism which the physical systems do not to that degree. **Important Precepts:**

Yoga is a very ancient precept in Hinduism. Like the other scriptural doctrines, Yoga also is said to have been **revealed** by **Brahma** Himself in the process of revelation of the other scriptures. Thus it is part of the **Sruti** doctrines. It is

Patanjali Maharishi who has elucidated and systemized the elaborate concepts of Yoga in **Sutras** found in a compilation called **Ashtanga Yoga**. It is due to him that Yoga is a definite philosophical system which is included within the **Shad Darshanas** or six schools of classical philosophy in Hinduism.

In conjunction with the **Sankhya**, another of the six classical philosophical system, Yoga postulates certain very strategic concepts.

- There is the **Nirguna Brahman** above all, self-existent creator of all, without any attributes, eternal.
- There is an inert **Prakriti**, which includes all material things that have no life.
- There is the **Purusha**, the male element, a consciousness that is of the Brahman, and that bequeaths life to material.
- When the Purusha comes in contact with Prakriti the latter evolves into various life-forms.
- In conjunction with Prakriti, the Purusha begins to loose connection with the Universal Spirit and begins to feel that it is an individual in identification with Prakriti. This effect is because of **Aviveka**, inability to discriminate.

It must be noted here that the first concept, that of the Nirguna Brahman, the Universal Spirit, better-known as **Ishvara**, God, in Yoga, is an entirely Yoga concept. The rest of the concepts are in conjunction with the Sankhya branch of Hindu philosophy.

Applications:

Yoga is a **practical system** of rescuing the Purusha from the complications with Prakriti and freeing it so that is entirely independent of Prakriti and its evolutes. Yoga is not mere cerebral excursions into the philosophical implications of the conjunction of Purusha and Prakriti but, rather, an entirely hands-on system of achieving **Kevala Moksha**, only salvation. Yoga sanctions the 25 **Tattvas**, precepts, of the philosophical branch of **Sankhya** and it adds one more - **Ishvara**, God. Thus, Yoga is a philosophy - **Sa-Ishvara Sankhya**, a philosophy with the inclusion of the concept of Ishvara or God - but it is a practical philosophical system through which a certain end is sought to be achieved.

Befuddled by the mists of Aviveka, indiscrimination, Purusha imagines that he is imperfect and incomplete unless he is conjoined with Prakriti which is the only means of fulfillment he can be aware of. Due to **Prakriti-Samyoga**, conjunction with Prakriti, as Purusha continues to perceive Prakriti with all his senses and his consciousness, Prakriti evolves into a multitude of seemingly desirable forms that Purusha begins to desire and ultimately seeks to grasp at. He seeks to fulfill his desires with Prakriti's many forms. Thus, he passes into **bondage** to Prakriti. He becomes dependent on Prakriti for satisfaction. He begins to gather the misconception that he cannot survive without Prakriti. This becomes his **Karma** and it becomes a vicious circle from which Purusha cannot escape. This ultimately leads to reincarnation as unfulfilled desires in one life cannot allow Moksha to be achieved and are transferred from one life into the next one by the **Sushkma Sarira**, the subtle body. Purusha can be relieved of this trap by **Yogic Sadhana**, Yogic effort.

Deep within everyone there is abiding faith in a **Supreme Being** to whom the **Sadhaka**, the one who wants to make an effort, can look up to for guidance and inspiration. Unfortunately, according to Yogic precepts, the **ego** does not allow the Purusha within to look to the Supreme Being for help. It suits the ego to remain entwined with Prakriti in its many forms. Thus, the ego must be estranged from the Purusha to allow it to escape the snares of Prakriti. According to Yogic precepts this can be done by offering the ego in **sacrifice** at the altar of the Supreme Being. This is known as **Ishvarapranidhana**. It cannot be done subjectively altogether. The **Sadhana-Marga**, the road of effort, prescribed by Yogic precepts helps the aspirant achieve it in various ways.

< Yoga >

Though this chapter treats four major types of Yoga - **Raja Yoga**, **Jnana Yoga**, **Bhakti Yoga** and **Karma Yoga** - the first, Raja Yoga, stems directly from the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. The systematic approach of the three other Yoga systems are more or less derived from Patanjali's original treatise on Yoga. Thus, it is essential to know a little of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras.

Patanjali's Yoga system is written in Sutras, terse sayings pregnant with hidden significance. Only a Yogi well-advanced in the science of Yoga can fully explain them. Just as a flower-garland or a pearl necklace is made of

different types and colors of flowers or pearls of various hues and sizes so is the entire treatise of Yoga made up of these short but extremely meaningful sayings – the sutras. The Yoga Sutras are strategically placed in four chapters:

- The first chapter: **Samadhi Pada:** **Samadhi** is the trance-like state the Yogi enters when fully immersed in the rites of the particular Yoga he or she is practicing. A fully-advanced Yogi can realize Brahman in this state. This first chapter is made up of 51 sutras that deal with the kinds of Samadhi achievable. There are also details of obstacles to meditation, the **Vrittis** or **natures**, and means of controlling them. Five kinds of Vrittis are mentioned. Also mentioned are three kinds of **Vairagya** - dispassion. The nature of **Ishvara**, God, is discussed through the terse sutras as well as various methods of achieving Samadhi. There is also mention made of various ways of acquiring virtues to ultimately gain peace of mind.
- The second chapter: **Sadhana Pada:** **Sadhana** is the effort that the Yogi makes to achieve Samadhi. This chapter consists of 55 Sutras. These treat **Kriya Yoga - Tapas** or meditation, study of scriptures to acquire the right knowledge or **Vidya** and self-surrender of the ego to the God-head. The five **Kleshas** or afflictions that come in the way of achieving Samadhi and ways and means of getting rid of them is also mentioned. The **Niyamas**, good habits, and **Yamas**, vows, are mentioned together with the benefits of observing the Niyamas and maintaining the Yamas. The benefits of **Ashanas**, Yogic postures capable of inducing Samadhi, are also mentioned. Lastly is mentioned the practice of **Pratyahara**, sacrifices, to gain benefits for both body and mind.
- The third chapter: **Vibhuti Pada:** - Vibhuti is manifestation of the Lord in any possible form. There are 56 Sutras in the chapter. They treat **Dharana** - the nature of things - **Dhyana** - meditation – and **Samyama** - perspective – on external objects. It also treats the nature of the mind and the **charkas** - circles – of the mind. These are treated to investigate ways in which various **Siddhis** - enlightenments – can be achieved.
- The fourth chapter: **Kaivalya Pada:** **Kaivalya** is independence of Prakriti. This chapter consists of 34 Sutras. This chapter treats of the complete independence of a fully-advanced Yogi who can absolutely distinguish between Prakriti and Purusha and who is also free of the three **Gunas**, characteristics, which will be discussed later. The mind and its states are also discussed in this chapter

Raja Yoga.

Patanjali's **Ashtanga Yoga** - Yoga of the eight limbs – is also popularly known as Raja Yoga. Raja Yoga is the highest form of Yoga and concerns freeing Purusha from Prakriti entirely through efforts of the mind. Though Raja Yoga is dualistic in that it acknowledges Purusha and Prakriti yet it strives to realize the **Advaitic** - monistic – aim of uniting the Purusha with the Universal Spirit – the **Nirguna Brahman**. The basic principles of Raja Yoga are stipulated below.

States of the Mind:

Raja Yoga is mainly concerned with mental conditions, their modifications and control. It acknowledges five states of the Mind:

- **Kshipta:** This is the agitated mind, running in various directions, full of unrest.
- **Mudha:** In this state the mind is forgetful and full of foolishness.
- **Vikshipta:** This is the distracted state of mind, unable to concentrate on anything in particular.
- **Ekagra:** This is the focused state of the mind, built up with arduous practice in concentration.
- **Niruddha:** This is the ultimate state of mind in which it is ready to realize the Brahman. It is now fully under control and will merge with the Universal Spirit, the Purusha or Brahman, in a phenomenon known as the **Asamprajnata Samadhi**.

Raja Yoga also stipulates four virtues which, if acquired will ensure **absolute peace of mind**:

- **Maitri:** Friendliness towards equals.
- **Karuna:** Compassion for those in distress.
- **Mudita:** Complacency towards superiors. This will destroy jealousy.
- **Upeksha:** Indifference or contempt towards wickedness.

Afflictions of the Mind:

Raja Yoga defines five main afflictions that plague the mind and does not allow Purusha to realize the Universal Spirit:

- **Avidya** or ignorance.
- **Asmita** or egoism.
- **Raga** or attraction.
- **Dvesha** or aversion.
- **Abhinivesha** or yearning for mundane life.

Of these five the combination of Raga and Dvesha have five states or **Avashtas**:

- **Udara Avashta** or fully manifest state. In this state both Raga and Dvesha have full play and are unhampered by any effort. This is the state in which people who are wholly immersed in worldly life are in.
- **Vicchinna Avashta** or hidden state. In this state both attractions and aversions are hidden underneath the surface by some other more dominant emotions. They can emerge again as soon as the dominant emotions diminish in fervency.
- **Tanu Avashta** or thinned out or diminished state. People who regularly worship Gods are in this state of mind. In them Raga and Dvesha are in a diminished state.
- **Prasupta Avashta** or dormant state. In this state, probably due to unsuitable conditions, Raga and Dvesha both lie dormant but they foment just underneath the surface ready to emerge as soon as there is opportunity to do so.
- **Dagdha Avashta** or burnt-out state. This is a state that can be achieved through proper practice of ashana or Yogic practices in which both Raga and Dvesha are absolutely quenched and the Yogi can achieve Samadhi.

According to Raja Yoga precepts Raga and Dvesha constitute the **Samsara**, Universe of the being. Thus, they constitute the mind, which is a force that is much superior to **Prana** or that which sustains the living physical body. Thus, it is superior to matter but it nevertheless deludes the **Jivas**, living beings, who cannot determine its source of sustenance. Even above these two – Raga and Dvesha – is **Atma Vichara**, the ability to identify oneself. This ability reveals the **true nature** of the Yogi. The Raja Yogi thus makes efforts to destroy both Raga and Dvesha through concentration and meditation because once these two are destroyed the mind too loses its ability to reach outwards into the world and the Yogi can then enter into Samadhi with his or her true nature which is the Purusha within.

Obstacles to Meditation:

Patanjali say that – “*Disease, dullness, doubt, carelessness, laziness, worldly-mindedness, illusion, missing the point, instability – these are obstacles to Yoga.*” These obstacles are much enhanced by grief, melancholy, bodily fevers and even inhalations and exhalations.

The best ways to remove such obstacles are **Abvashya**, good habits, and **Vairagya**, aloofness. Vairagya is not exactly running away from the world. Rather, it is defined as a state of mind which does not allow one to get too involved in materialistic affairs. Raja Yoga prescribes that the Yogi should be able to master his or her cravings. The Yogi should first scrutinize and analyze his or her mind to determine what he or she likes most. Then he or she should practice giving up such cravings. Once the desires are in control the Yogi may utilize whatever he or she requires to live well. In this manner he or she will not be a **slave** to desires yet may utilize whatever he or she requires to live.

Also, a true Vairagi, one who practices Vairagya, is one who is entirely selfless and dedicates his or her life to the service of humankind.

The Types of Aspirants:

Raja Yoga asserts that three types of aspirants approach its Yogic precepts to achieve freedom from misery in this life itself. When the Purusha realizes its own distinction from Prakriti then it finds itself free from misery which is spread by desires that constantly embroils the Purusha within the close confines of Prakriti.

The three types of aspirants are:

- **Uttama Adhikari** - First-class Aspirant. For this type of aspirant Raja Yoga prescribes **Abvashya**, good habits, sustained by **Vairagya**, indifference to materialistic cravings. The aspirant, as a Raja Yogi, should practice meditation on the self to purify the mind through suppression of the afflictions of the mind. To these types of aspirants Samadhi is relatively easy.
- **Madhyama Adhikari** - Second-class Aspirant. For this type of aspirant Raja Yoga prescribes **Kriya Yoga** which consists of - **Tapas, Sadhana** and **Ishvarapranidhana**. Tapas is **austerity**. It can be practiced through disciplinary actions like fasting, etc. though the greatest forms of Tapas are **humility** and **continence** and **egoless selfless service**. Sadhana is study of the scriptural literature. It is supplemented by **Japa**, recitation, of the personal **Ishta Mantra**. Ishvarapranidhana is self-surrender to the Lord. All actions should be taken as **Ishvaraprana** – as offerings to the Lord.
- **Adhama Adhikari** - Lowest-class Aspirant. To the lowest-class aspirant Raja Yoga prescribes **Ashtanga Yoga - The Eightfold Sadhana**. This shall be discussed just hereafter.

Ashtanga Yoga - Yoga of the Eight Limbs:

Patanjali's Yoga system is popularly known as Ashtanga Yoga. It is the principal system derived from the Vedas through which the great Maharshi developed Yoga into a science. All other Yoga forms – Karma, Bhakti, Jnana, Hatha, Tantra, Kundalini and others -, though inherent within the Vedas in the Upanishad parts, have been subsequently developed by great men based on the scientific approach of Maharshi Patanjali.

The eight limbs of Ashtanga Yoga are:

- **Yama** - Vows – The Yogi should vow to observe five principal tenets: **Ahimsa** (Non-violence), **Satya** (Truthfulness), **Asteya** (Honesty – Vow never to steal), **Brahmacharya** (Sexual continence) and **Aparigraha** (Vow never to be greedy).

- **Niyama** - Rules or Observances – There are also five observances that the Yogi must adhere to. The ten Yamas and Niyamas, if observed dutifully and regularly by the Yogi, can break down the influence of **Samsara** - worldliness – and free the Yogi's mind from externalization. The five Niyamas are: **Saucha** (Cleanliness or Purity), **Santosh** (Contentment), **Tapas** (Austerities), **Svadhyaya** (Study, of scriptures) and **Ishvarapranidhana** (Self-surrender to God).
- **Asana** - Meditative postures – All Yoga instructors prescribe meditative postures to facilitate concentration which ultimately may induce Samadhi.
- **Pranayama** - This is a process by which the Yogi can realize the root cause of the mind. He or she realizes that it is desire that externalizes the mind. If the Yogi can suppress desire through observing Yamas and Niyamas and doing Asanas, then the Vrittis (natures) are also rooted out. This destroys the mind, which is the subtlest form of Prakriti that binds the Purusha to material forms. The Yogi is now ready to do Pratyahara.
- **Pratyahara** - Withdrawal – This withdrawal allows the Yogi to focus internally on his or her mind and find its true nature. When the Yogi realizes the true nature of his or her mind it is now under control.
- **Dharana** - Estimation – This is estimation of the Yogi's mind by himself or herself. Now he or she can get even better control of the mind.
- **Dhyana** - Concentration – Once the mind is totally under control it is possible for the Yogi to concentrate on the nature of Purusha within.
- **Samadhi** - Super-conscious state or Trance – If the Yogi can properly concentrate on the Dhyana then he or she enters into Samadhi and realizes the Brahman within. This is the aim of all Yogic systems.

As assistance through this course to aspirants of Yoga systems great proponents of Yoga advise that the first four stages of the Yoga should be practiced simultaneously so that the Yogi uses a balanced and time-efficient system to achieve mental and physical well-being.

The Kinds of Samadhi:

Though all Yogic systems aim to achieve union with the Lord, not all aspirants are successful in this. Many are not even capable of achieving a true Samadhi. Nevertheless, it is important to try and in the process of trying the aspirant can achieve a lot in the well-being of both mind and body that may not have been possible without Yoga.

Ashtanga Yoga professes to achieve the following kinds of Samadhi:

- **Nirvikalpa Samadhi** - When the Purusha within realizes that it was only His consciousness of it that gave Prakriti its power to influence Him and thus, when He withdraws from Prakriti and achieves His own nature and basks in the bliss of this knowledge He loses all capacity of thought. This is Nirvikalpa Samadhi.
- **Nirbija Samadhi** - When all desire is also gone with all thoughts this is Nirbija Samadhi.
- **Asamprajnata Samadhi** - When the Purusha loses all external consciousness and all estimation of duality and multiplicity He even loses the idea of the self - **Asmita**. This is Asamprajnata Samadhi. This is the **Supreme State** and the Purusha is now a **Seer** and has reached His own **Swarup** - Own Likeness.

Karma Yoga

What is Karma?

Karma in Sanskrit is action or deed. It is both physical and mental action. Past karma is represented by actions both in this life as well as in all past lives. Karma is also the summation of direct **effects** as well as all other related **consequences** of an action.

The Raga-Dvesha combination of Raja Yoga also constitutes Karma. Simple daily actions like breathing, eating, drinking, seeing, hearing, thinking, etc. are all Karmas.

Lord Krishna in the **Bhagavad Gita** advises Arjuna to perform good Karmas without expecting the **fruits** thereof. Actually, this is the **essence** of Karma Yoga.

Why does Karma Exist?

Human nature is threefold, made up of:

- **Iccha** or desire.
- **Jnana** or knowledge.
- **Kriya** or willfulness.

These three fashion human Karma. Desire for objects breeds desire to gain knowledge of how to acquire the object which in turn breeds the willingness to do whatever it takes to get the object.

Desire and **thought** sustain **action**. These three – desire, thought and action – are entwined together to make up the thread of Karma.

Karma brings either **pleasure** or **pain** and keeps the cycle of **Samsara**, universe, rotating. As the **Law of Karma** is – “*As you sow, so you reap*” the unrealized fruits of past Karmas causes the effect of metempsychosis – transmigration of souls.

Kinds of Karma:

There are three kinds of Karma:

- **Sanchita** - the accumulated Karmas of the past, both of this life and the past ones. The fruits of Sanchita Karmas in part determine a person's tendencies, aptitudes, capacities, desires and inclinations.
- **Prarabdha** - the fructifying Karma. The fruits of Prarabdha Karma are reaped in the present and can only be experienced till it is totally exhausted.
- **Kriyamana** - the current Karma. The fruits of Kriyamana Karma will be reaped in the future. This is the Karma that is being done in the present.

Above this distinction, there are three kinds of Karma – good, mixed and bad. Good Karmas may bring **Moksha** – **salvation**. Mixed Karmas ensure **human births**. Bad Karmas lead to **rebirth in wombs of lower creatures**.

The Law of Karma:

The **Law of Karma** is an integral part of the Vedanta. It is not only a fundamental doctrine of Hinduism but also such related religions like Buddhism which has borrowed from Hinduism as the years have passed.

As mentioned earlier, the Law of Karma simply is – “*As you sow so you reap*.” Unfortunately, in this world, most Karmas are a mixture of good and evil What seems good for one person may be bad for another. This salient fact is

acknowledged in Hinduism which declares that doing entirely good Karmas is very difficult. Yet, the devotee is encouraged at all times to do such Karmas which have for the *most part* goodness and for the *least part* evil.

The Law of Karma projects the riddle of the universe and, thus, of this world. How can a person who wants to be good be successful when what seems to be the simple **act of living** may be **harmful** to another creature? The riddle is partly solved by the words of **Lord Krishna** to Arjuna in the **Bhagavad Gita** in which He urges Arjuna to do his duty – Karma – and leave the consequences to the Gods.

Karma Yoga seeks a solution to this riddle by emphasizing ways and means in which a person can do good Karmas and keep his or her conscience - **Vivek** - clear as well as attain salvation - **Moksha**.

The Kriyas or Efforts:

What can one do? To simply breathe is to involve oneself in the good and evil of Samsara – the universe – to involve the pure spirit within in the complicity of Karma – both good and bad. No matter how careful one is the complicity of bad Karmas distances the Purusha within from the Brahman – the Universal Spirit.

Karma Yoga prescribes a solution - *Consecrate all action – Karma – to the Lord*. Do not expect fruits from what is done. Do all for humankind and other beings. Become a complete servant of the Lord. What binds a person to phenomenal existence is the expectation of fruits from Karma. Relinquish this expectation and the Purusha is free of all worldly bonds.

Karma Yoga must come before **Jnana Yoga**. Its precepts help one to realize the Brahman within, which is what Jnana Yoga precepts teach to attain. First, the action – the Karma – must be right. Next come knowledge and realization.

The Practice:

To become a Karma Yogi one need not be wealthy. It is enough to serve the Lord with mind and body. Only then can the Yogi realize that the Lord is working through his or her medium. He or she shall then feel no burden in doing all work. There shall be constant relief from all troubles because the Yogi shall always feel that the Lord is on his or her side and all that he or she does is good and for the benefit of all.

Qualifications of a Karma Yogi:

A Karma Yogi should be absolutely free from lust, greed, anger and egoism. He or she should also be free of all hatred, jealousy, cruelty, etc. The Yogi should never expect any fruits even in the form of fame or approbation. The Yogi should have a large heart and should not discriminate between caste, creed or any other discriminatory factors. All, before the Yogi, are equal as beings created by the Lord. The Yogi should have a balanced temperament such that he or she can bear all obstacles to his or her work and overcome them in the end. The Yogi should be able to savor the good of others.

Lord Krishna says in the Gita – *“Restraining and subduing the senses, regarding everything equally, rejoicing in the welfare of all, these alone come to Me.”*

The Benefits of Karma Yoga:

Nishkamya Karma - selfless service – cleanses the Yogi and prepares him or her to realize the Brahman within – to achieve the ultimate knowledge of all knowledge. In the process life in the world is also so much more meaningful and complete. It prepares the Yogi to attain Moksha after death and release from the cycle of births and deaths in the Samsara.

Bhakti Yoga.

What is Bhakti?

Bhakti has the root Sanskrit word **Bhaj** which means **To be attached to God**. Bhajan, Bhakti, Anurag, Prem and Priti are all synonymous terms used to define the **selfless love** of the devotee towards his or her **Ishta Devata** - Personal God.

First there is **faith**. Then there is **attraction** and, later, **adoration**. Adoration suppresses all mundane desires and focuses the devotee's entire capacity to love towards the Chosen Devata. This **single-mindedness** ultimately draws the devotee to union with the God. This is the chief aim of Bhakti and Bhakti Yoga.

Bhakti also teaches love for all beings as how can one love God without loving those who are also a part of Him.

Kinds of Bhakti:

Taking into account **wants**, Bhakti is of two kinds:

- **Sakamya Bhakti** - Devotion with desire for material gains. This is of the lesser kind. It does not guarantee Moksha.
- **Nishkamya Bhakti** - Devotion that is selfless. This is the most superior type of Bhakti and it ensures Moksha. The Yogi is satisfied with what he or she has. The Yogi worships the Lord only because The Lord deserves worship. Such devotion drives the devotee towards the supreme **Jnana** - realization of the Lord.

Taking into account **methods of worship**, Bhakti, again, is of two kinds:

- **Apara Bhakti** - This is the devotion recommended to all beginners to Bhakti Yoga. The Yogi seeks his or her God through image worship. His or her devotion is limited to the structure of the image within which he or she can find the immanence of the Ishta Devata and can propitiate Him through ritualistic worship. The beginner cannot at first acknowledge God in any other form. Focused devotion in this form brings the Yogi to the higher form.
- **Para Bhakti** - This is the higher form of Bhakti in which the devotee can find God in any form. The advanced Yogi can accept God in all religions and in all forms as well as without attributes. The Yogi begins to see the Lord everywhere and see everything as His manifestations. This Bhakti – Para Bhakti – is the ultimate knowledge - **Jnana** - the realization of the Brahman.

The enemies of true Bhakti are egoism and desire. They must be rooted out to allow true Bhakti to abide within the heart.

How to cultivate Bhakti:

According to **Sri Ramanujacharya** the ways to cultivate Bhakti are:

- **Abvshaya** - Practice on thinking of the Lord at all times.
- **Viveka** - Have a conscience that can acutely discern between good and bad. Choose the good always.
- **Vimoka** - This is freedom from desire of everything else except a longing for the Lord.
- **Satyam** - Be truthful at all times.
- **Arjavam** - Be straightforward all the time.
- **Kriya** - Do good to others at all times.
- **Kalyana** - Wish everyone well at all times.
- **Daya** - Have compassion for all beings.
- **Ahimsa** - Always abjure from inflicting injury on other beings.
- **Dana** - Show charity towards all.

- **Anavasada** – Always be cheerful and optimistic.

Renunciation of earthly materials, austerities and vows, charity and the practice of Ahimsa, Satya and Brahmacharya (celibacy) all help to develop Bhakti.

The Bhavas in Bhakti:

When the devotee has advanced to a certain stage he or she becomes forgetful of self and becomes totally immersed in the Lord. This is **Bhava**. It unites the devotee to the Lord. Bhava gradually develops into **Maha Bhava**. This is true union of the devotee with the Lord. This is also called **Param Prem** - Supreme Love – consumption of the devotee's self within the Being of the Lord.

There are five kinds of Bhavas in Bhakti:

- **Shanta** - The **Bhakta** - devotee – is peaceful. He or she is filled with joy and love for the Lord and, thus, for all beings.
- **Dasya** - The Bhakta is eager to do service to the Lord. In that lies his or her principal joy and happiness.
- **Sakhya** - The Lord and the Bhakta are on equal terms and they are intimate friends.
- **Vatsalya** - The Bhakta looks upon the Lord as his or her child.
- **Madhurya or Kanta** - This is the highest form of Bhava. The Bhakta looks upon the Lord as his or her lover. Please be cautious that this love is entirely spiritual. The Lord and the Bhakta are **One**.

The Ways to Pure Bhakti:

True Bhakti cannot reside in a heart that does not follow perfect **moral laws**. Such laws can only be perfectly followed if the Bhakta can practice absolute renunciation - **Vairagya**. To bring on this ability of renunciation there are nine different ways prescribed by Bhakti Yoga:

- **Sravana** - This is hearing of everything about the Lord in stories, tales, songs and other means of propagation. Sravana Bhakti cannot be attained by self alone. The guidance of a Guru or some other competent person is necessary.
- **Kirtan** - This is singing of the Lord's glories. Through enough practice the Bhakta can achieve divine ecstasy through Kirtan.
- **Smarana** - This is remembrance of the Lord at all times. Eventually the devotee only knows the Lord and nothing else.
- **Padasevana** - This is serving at the feet of the Lord. Actually, sages say, this is possible only for those Goddesses who are the wives of the Lords like **Parvati** for **Shiva** and **Lakshmi** for **Vishnu**. For ordinary humans service to the world is true service to the Lord. The entire universe is **Virat Swarup** - the great manifestation of the Lord.
- **Archana** - This is worship of the Lord either through images or in the mind, whichever the devotee is capable of. The purpose of this is to relinquish the ego and achieve complete love of the Lord and, consequently, of all beings.
- **Vandana** – This is prayer and prostration before the Lord. This teaches humility.
- **Dasya** - This is service to the Lord. Actually this and the Sakhya types of Bhakti are available only to those who are directly in physical presence of the Lord – like Hanuman in the presence of Ramachandra for Dasya Bhakti and Arjuna in the presence of Krishna for Sakhya Bhakti. These are not available to ordinary human beings.
- **Sakhya** - This is true friendship with the Lord. Arjuna, as friend to Krishna, was capable of this.
- **Atma Nivedana** – This complete self-surrender to the Lord. This is possible by only a perfect devotee who can achieve complete knowledge or Jnana of the Brahman within and is totally conscious of this all the time. He or she is then a puppet who does what the Lord wants.

Bhakti teaches **progressive realization** of the Lord. The nine ways are thus progressively set out and the Bhakti Yogi should progress along them as they are set out.

The Benefits of Bhakti:

The principal fruit of Bhakti is **Jnana** - the ultimate knowledge – the realization of the Brahman within.

Nevertheless, Bhakti also enhances the quality of life in the world. Bhakti softens the heart and removes all adverse emotions like hatred, lust, anger, greed, etc. It infuses into the heart a love of all beings. This generates a peace of mind that even great persons like Sankaracharya, even after realizing the Lord, covet.

True Bhakti is ultimate surrender to the Lord so that ego is extinguished and there abides in the heart a complete love for all beings.

Jnana Yoga.

In Sanskrit **Jnana** is knowledge. The ultimate knowledge of the Upanishads is the realization of the **Nirguna Brahman** as the **self** - the undefinable, non-doing, non-sensing, pristine, all-pervading, all-witnessing self. This is the Jnana being talked of here. This Jnana is the ultimate aim of Jnana Yoga.

Ignorance is **Ajnana**. In this context ignorance is complicating the self with materialistic attributes – sensual, mental, and physical. To think that one is the doer, enjoyer, even griever. To think that one is a Brahmin, the highest caste, to think that one is successful, that one has a son, that one is rich, these are the traits of **Ajnana**.

The **Nirguna Brahman** is entirely without attributes. The Supreme Being is neither the doer of actions, nor the enjoyer of the fruits of actions. The creation, preservation and destruction of the universe are not due to him. They are all a result of **Maya** - the manifestation of the Lord within the universal process.

When self-realization occurs through intuitive processes and the Supreme self and the Jiva (the individual self) are perceived as one only then does freedom arise from the trappings of materialism. Release is through the saying of the Upanishad – “*Tat Tvam Asi*” – “That Thou Art”. This dispels all ignorance and true knowledge comes. The heart must be absolutely pure to allow this knowledge to arise. That is why **Karma Yoga** and **Bhakti Yoga** are taught before **Jnana Yoga**, which is the most difficult of all Yogas since it is the ultimate Yoga and the **goal** of all other Yoga disciplines.

The Concept of Maya:

The only Truth - **Sat** that existed before the universe was the **Nirguna Brahman**. He is eternal and infinite – unaffected by time, space and causation. Out of His infinity He created the finite universe.

Hinduism believes that the universe is an illusion – **Maya** – that which cannot be defined because there is neither cause nor reason for its existence. It is only that which deludes with its many complexities from the conception of the Brahman. Since the initial truth was Brahman the existing truth after the creation of the universe is also Brahman. The existent universe is only that which is an interlude between the only reality that was the Brahman and the existing reality that is also the Brahman. Since the ultimate future reality is also destined to be the Brahman the universe is also destined to be a delusion detracting from a clear realization of the Brahman, the **eternal reality**.

Put in a nutshell, the **pure monism** of the Vedanta professes that since the Brahman is the only reality while the phenomenal universe is only an impermanent interlude which deludes from the realization of the Brahman it is best *not to be worldly while remaining in the world*. In this manner, there is no scope for delusion.

The Practice of Jnana Yoga:

The practice of Jnana Yoga is to achieve **Brahma Vidya** - knowledge of the self. This cannot be achieved through mere intellectual study, reasoning, discussions or arguments. It can only be achieved through the difficult **Path of Truth - The Sadhana Chatushtaya**. The Sadhana Chatushtaya is the **Four Means of Salvation**.

The four means of salvation are:

- **Viveka** - The nearest English translation for Viveka is **conscience**. A Yogi with wakened conscience can accurately discriminate between the real and the unreal, the Maya. The ideal Yogi dedicates his or her life to selfless service to the world as an unquestioning instrument of the Lord. Hinduism believes that this Samsara – the universe – has **six waves** that sweep Jiva into involvement with worldly affairs. These are - **Birth and Death**, which belong to the **physical body**; **Hunger and Thirst**, which belong to **Prana, the life-force**; and **Exhilaration and Grief**, which belong to the **mind**. If the Yogi can separate himself or herself from these six waves the conscience gradually develops.
- **Vairagya** - This is dispassion for all worldly things. Please note that to the Hindu world signifies Earth, Heaven and Hell. Vairagya should be such that not even the attractions of heaven should be indulged in. The logic is that once the good karma that leads one to heaven after death is exhausted the person is again reborn into the world. Thus, true Viveka creates a Vairagya that is enamored not even by the lure of heaven. A

- Vairagi Yogi should know that this does not mean that one should ignore the worldly duties. These should be performed diligently but with total selflessness.
- **Shad Sampad** - The six-fold virtues. These six virtues are calculated to bring mental control and discipline which, in turn aids concentration in meditation. **Sama** or tranquility is the first virtue. It is brought about by extinguishing desires. **Dama** or rational control of the senses. **Uparati** or satisfaction comes naturally when the Yogi is already progressed along the road of Viveka, Vairagya, Sama and Dama. It is the control of sensual desires which, in turn, guarantees satisfaction within easy means. **Titiksha** is the power of endurance. Aspirants should learn to tolerate extremes like heat and cold, pleasure and pain, etc. without allowing such conditions to influence the spirit within. **Sraddha** is unflinching faith in the **Guru**, the **scriptures** and, above all, the **self**. Such faith should not be blind but acquired through thorough reasoning and discrimination. **Samadhana** is focusing on the Brahman within. The Yogi who can master even a part of the six virtues is free from all anxiety even in the midst of trouble and acquires great inner strength through which he or she can conquer anything on earth.
 - **Mumukshutva** is intense desire for liberation from this cycle of birth and death within Samsara where evils such as **old age, disease, delusion** and **sorrow** plague beings.

While mastering these six virtues the Yogi should also practice:

- **Sravana** or deep study of the scriptures.
- **Manana** or think and reflect on what has been read.
- **Nidhidhyasana** or meditate deeply on what has been learned from the scriptures upon proper reflection and thought.
- **Atma Sakshatkara** or direct realization of the self is now possible.

The Seven Stages of Jnana:

There are seven stage of Jnana or knowledge and these are known as **Jnana Bhumikas**:

- **Subheccha** - This is goodwill. This can be acquired through deep study of those scriptures that deal with personal realization. After this stage the mind is open to queries both from within and without.
- **Vichara** - This is discrimination. Through this an enquiry into the state of the self within can be undertaken.
- **Tanumanasi** - This is indifference to sensual objects that breed desires. This stage is also known as **Ashanga Bhavana**. This actually means that the mind is not afraid to be alone, not only from living objects but also from non-living ones. Thus, this state prepares the mind to be aloof so that the manifestations of the self can be analysed. The Yogi can now be called a **Jnani** - a knower. If the Yogi dies in this stage he or she will go to heaven and, later, after the good karma has been exhausted, will be reborn as a Jnani on earth. The first three stages are included within the broader **Jagrat** - awakened – State.
- **Sattvapatti** - This stage included within the broader **Svapana** - dreamlike or trance – State. In this stage the Yogi loses all Vasanas – desires – and views the world as a dream, Maya.
- **Asamshakti** - Yogis in this stage are thoroughly unattached to objects in the world. There is no waking or sleeping experience in this stage as the Yogi is **Jivanmukta** - totally free of the life-force and experiences **Ananda Svaroop** - the eternal bliss of the Brahman within. The knowledge level is spotlessly supreme.
- **Padartha Bhavana** - The truth, the **Sat** of the Upanishads, is realized.
- **Turiya** - This is the superconscious stage. All attributes disappear and Moksha is achieved. The Yogi becomes **Videhamukta** - disembodied.

Jnana Yoga is the most difficult of all the Yoga systems and it is recommended by competent authorities that the aspirant come to it eventually after practicing some of the other Yoga systems like Karma Yoga and Bhakti Yoga.

Chapter 6: Important Sects and Revered Personages.

This chapter introduces the great religious figures in Hinduism from the ancient times to the current one. Not all such personages have been included but a fair number has been treated. Also has been treated the various major sects within Hinduism.

The Ancient Sages and Acharyas.

The Ancient Sages:

Innumerable **Munis** (Sages) and **Rishis** (Seers) of ancient India have, through the ages, compiled the scriptures that are today the binding force within Hinduism. Unfortunately, most of the lives of these great men are clouded by the mists of time and very little is known of them and their times. There are a few legends and myths that are based on the lives of a few of these great men but I have chosen not to include them here. Instead, I have only included the lives of those great religious figures that have definite historical records. In this section on Sages I have only included the name of one sage - **Ved Vyasa** who, though legendary, must be mentioned because of his paramount importance.

Ved Vyasa

Vyasa Dev is a legendary figure in Hinduism. He is the great sage who has written down the Vedas as they were revealed to him by the Gods. Thus, he is the initiator of the **sruti literature** on which all of Hinduism is based. In fact, Hindu scholars hold, that which is derived from the Vedas - **The Vaidika** - is what constitutes **True Hinduism**. Whatever else that has some other source is **Avaidika** and not Hinduism.

Vyasa is popularly known as **Ved Vyasa** as he has written down the Vedas. He is also credited with composition of the Mahabharata. Some scholars even go to the length of asserting that it is he who has written down the Puranas and many other ancient texts.

The main legend says that Vyasa Dev is born at the beginning of every **Yuga** to write down what is revealed by the Gods for the religion of the people of that Yuga. In this present **Kaliyuga** Vyasa Dev was born as **Krishna Dvaipayana**.

The Five Great Acharyas:

Shankaracharya is the first of the five great acharyas who reformed Hinduism by delivering the essence of the sacred texts to the common people. It should be noted that "**Acharya**" means "**Great Teacher**". Before Shankaracharya the Vedic texts, the srutis, were orally studied and transmitted by and within a particular class of people, especially the Brahmins. They were written in a very esoteric language which was quite beyond the scope of the common people. The true catholicity of Hinduism was interpreted and revealed by **Shankaracharya (Circa 788-820 A.D.)**, **Ramanujacharya (11th century A.D.)**, **Nimbarkacharya (11th century A.D.)**, **Madhvacharya (13th century A.D.)** and **Vallabhacharya (1479-1531 A.D.)** and it is to their credit that Hinduism is still such a respected religion in the world with numerous adherents. Present-day Hindu thought and philosophy, being studied the world over today, owes much to these five great men.

All these five great saints are believed to be **Avatars** sent down to earth to perform a definite mission – to deliver Humankind from the clutches of evil., a task they all performed impeccably well.

The Hindu scriptures list four types of avatars:

- **Purna** (Full) – Lord Krishna, Lord Rama, etc.
- **Kala** (Not full) – Matsya, Varaha, etc.
- **Amsa** (Part) – Nara Narayan, etc.
- **Amsamsa** (Part of the Part) – Sri Sankara, Sri Ramanuja, Sri Nimbarka, etc.

They all preached different forms of the same basic philosophy and it is discouraged to treat one as being greater than the other. That they propounded different schools of philosophy is not thought to be a disadvantage within Hinduism. Instead they established different paths to the same goal – the Godhead. People from different levels of spiritual development can find succor and be benefited. Thus, their diversity serves diverse peoples. They all gave rise to different schools of **Vaishnavism**. The Schools of Philosophy they founded are:

- **Shankaracharya – Kevala Advaita (Absolute Monism)** .
- **Ramanujacharya – Vishishtadvaita (Qualified Nondualism)**.
- **Madhvacharya – Dvaita (Dualism)**.
- **Nimbarkacharya – Dvaitadvaita (Dualistic Dualism)** .
- **Vallabhacharya – Suddhadvaita (Pure Monism)**.

Basically, the Hinduism of the **Great Acharyas** prescribes two main broad streams of philosophy -:

- **Advaita** - This philosophy implies that God, **The Nirguna Brahman - The One Without Attributes**, and the individual souls are the same. The Brahman manifests Himself in the material world created by Him as **The Saguna Brahman - The One with Attributes**, and takes all forms for the better understanding of the Jivas. The Jivas, living beings, go through cycles of birth and death till they can attain salvation through complete purification and are liberated from the material world to unite with the Brahman. **Gaudapada** first propounded this philosophy in the 8th century A.D. and his disciple **Govinda** taught it to **Sankaracharya** who popularized it.
- **Dvaita** - This philosophy implies that God and the individual souls are separate entities. Jivas escape from the cycle of births and deaths through purification and liberation to reach their **God's Abode** to live there in eternal bliss. The greatest proponent of this philosophy was **Madhvacharya** in the 13th century A.D.

Shankaracharya (Circa 788-820 A.D.):

Shankaracharya was born of poor but pious Nambudiri Brahmin parents in what is the state of Kerala today. From an early age he was inclined towards the ways of God. His father died when he was still a very young boy. He was an only child and, when he decided to renounce the worldly life in favor of a holy one, his mother resisted piteously. He somehow persuaded her to allow him the life of an ascetic though she managed to extract a promise from him to visit her death-bed and see to her funeral. A pious Hindu cannot die and go to heaven unless his or her son performs the funeral rites.

At that very early age Shankaracharya set out to find a teacher and found an ideal one in **Govinda Bhagavadpada**, a disciple of another great guru **Gaudapadacharya** who had advocated monism or **Advaita**. The philosophy taught him by his guru suited Shankaracharya perfectly. He was a very intelligent man. At that time Hinduism had degenerated into a mess of dogmas and rituals which all seemed meaningless to the common people but were perpetrated by the Brahmins, the priestly class, in whose interest it was to control the reigns of society by dictating the will of the Gods.

There was such diversity of complex and expensive rituals that it seemed beyond the means of common people to achieve the grace of the Gods. In this bleak scenario more tolerant religions like Buddhism and Jainism, which themselves were reformist reactions against the evils of Hinduism, and which advocated simple personal devotion as a means of gaining salvation had gained much popularity to the detriment of Hinduism. Sankaracharya understood the common people's problems in adhering to Hinduism in its complex state and set out to reform the religion onto a much more personal level.

Shankaracharya was a brilliant and convincing orator. In those days in India dialectics, logic and semantics were considered the only signs of great scholarship and the only way to win over others to one's point of view was to argue at scholarly debates and win the arguments. Shankaracharya studied the succinct aphorisms of **Badarayana** in his **Brahma Sutras** and wrote a brilliant commentary on them which was accepted all over India. He also wrote commentaries on the **Bhagavad Gita**, the **Upanishads** and other religious philosophical works.

In his work Shankaracharya declared that the essence of the Vedas was that there was **One God**, who was without attributes, whose manifestation all else was. To make his doctrine available to everyone in India he traveled all over India with missionary zeal. He established four maths (monasteries) – at **Kashmir** in the North, **Dwarka** in the West, **Puri** in the East and **Shringeri** in the South. These institutions are still thriving today and millions of devotees flock to them to acquire knowledge of this great man and his way to God. This had been Shankaracharya's main aim and he

achieved it in a very short time. He lived for only 32 years but within that period he managed to place Hinduism on a sound footing not only in India but also in other neighboring countries. In the present age he is much appreciated all over the world and his **Absolute Monism - Kevala Advaita**, though very difficult to adhere to, is still a great source of inspiration not only to Hindus all over the world but also to theologians in general.

It must be said in conclusion to this great sage's short biography that, in the end, he did not fail to keep his promise to his own mother. When it was time for her to die he was there by her side and, when she subsequently died, he, though an ascetic who had given up all contact with the outside world, arranged for her funeral.

Ramanujacharya:

In the year 1017 A.D. Ramanuja was born in the village of Perumbudur, in the state of Tamil Nadu. His father was Keshava Somaji and his mother was Kantimathi, a very pious and virtuous lady. Ramanuja's Tamil name was **Ilaya Perumal**. At a very early age he lost his father. He persuaded his mother to let him set out of their village so that he could travel to one of the religious centers nearby and study under a Guru. He subsequently set out for Kanchipuram and started studying **Advaita** philosophy. His guru's interpretation of the Vedas was not quite to his liking and, after a rather colorful round of argument and insults, he left his guru for a better one in **Kanchipurna**, a Sudra who was much revered in the **Vishishtadvaita** community of Tamil Nadu.

The Vishishtadvaita philosophy is **Qualified Nondualism**. Ramanuja quickly found the philosophy to his liking and soon adopted it for his own. According to interpretations of works left by him his Brahman is **Sa-Visesha Brahman** or **Brahman with attributes**. According to Ramanuja's preachings **Lord Narayana** is **Bhagwan** or **Supreme Being**. The individual soul is **Chit** and all matter is **Achit**. The attributes are **real and permanent** but subject to the control of the Brahman. The attributes are called **Prakaras** or modes. Lord Narayana is the Ruler and Lord of the universe. All living things - **Jivas** are His servants and must worship Him and surrender to His will completely. The attributes are also called **Shaktis** and they are the manifest part of the Lord. He called his path of worship **Bhakti**. His followers are a particular sect among the main sect of the **Vaishnavites**.

Ramanuja, after thoroughly immersing himself in formulating his philosophy of God and the Causes of Creation set out of Kanchipuram to visit all the Vaishnavite Shrines in South India. He went about spreading his words and was widely accepted and revered wherever he went. Finally he reached **Srirangam** and settled there permanently. He lived a long and colorful life of 120 years full of holiness and religious zeal. He had several maths built and temples to his Lord established there. He formulated rules of worship and religious etiquette. He strove for the rest of his life to rid society of the evils that had crept into it subsequent to the degradation of Hinduism.

He converted thousands of common people to his faith, including many of the outcastes of the time whom he lovingly welcomed to his community. He demolished barriers of caste and creed and welcomed all wholeheartedly. His religious precepts were easy to follow and keep. He advocated **personal worship** or **Bhakti** through which anyone could attain God. This was the principle attractions of the branch of Hinduism he founded and thousands of people hungry for pointers to the right direction flocked to his maths to be converted. In this salient quiet and singularly orderly manner he set about reforming Hinduism into a much more acceptable set of tenets that have stood the ups and downs of the many years that have passed since.

Ramanuja was an excellent **controversialist** and wrote commentaries on many ancient texts. His commentary on **Badarayana's Brahma Sutras** is known as **Sri Bhashya**. The Vishishtadvaita system was a very old one even at that time and Ramanuja followed the way of **Bodhyana** in this. Bodhyana had expounded this unique philosophy in his book **Vritti** written in 400 B.C. Ramanuja followed Bodhyana in his commentary on the Brahma Sutras. Ramanuja also wrote three other books - **Vedanta Sara** (Essence of the Vedanta), **Vedanta Sangraha** (Resume of the Vedanta) and **Vedanta Deepa** (Light of the Vedanta).

Ramanujacharya's particular sect of Vaishnavites is called **Sri Sampradaya** and it still has an immense following today, especially in South India, the birthland of this great sage.

Madhvacharya:

Madhvacharya was born in around 1199 A.D. at a small village called **Velali** near **Udipi** in South Kanara district in South India. He was of Tula Brahmin birth born to Madhya Geha and Vedavati, a virtuous woman. His father named him Vasudeva.

Madhvacharya had an excellent physique and he could wrestle, run, jump and swim. People used to call him **Bhima** after the second Pandava brother in the Mahabharata. Madhva took up the study of the Vedas and the Vedangas early in his life and soon became well-versed in them. In his 25th year he took up **Sanyash** (Monkhood) and renounced the world. **Achutaprakashacharya**, a great guru at that time in Udipi, initiated him and thereafter he began to be known as **Purna Prajna**.

Achutaprakashacharya was so impressed by Madhva's command over the scriptures, especially of the components of the Vedanta, that he soon made him head of his Math. Madhva now received the name **Ananda Tirtha**. He set out on a tour of Southern and Northern India. He preached to all and made many converts to his faith. He visited Badrinath, the Northern Dham, and, thereafter, returned to Udipi. Reinforced by both his studies and his travel experience he started to write his commentaries on the **Bhagavad Gita** and the **Vedanta**. He built several temples in Udipi to his Lord and acquired innumerable disciples. **Udipi** is still the center of the **Madhva Sect** and most orthodox Madhvas strive to visit Udipi at least once in a lifetime.

Madhva preached **Advaita Philosophy**. His sect is known as **Sad Vaishnavism** to distinguish it from the **Sri Vaishnavism** of Ramanujacharya. Madhva held that **Vishnu** or **Narayana** was the Supreme Being. This is the same as the doctrines of Ramanuja but Madhva's philosophy has certain distinctions.

Madhva stipulated that all his followers heed the **Pancha Bheda** - five real and eternal distinctions -

- The distinctions between the Supreme Being and the individual soul.
- Between what is spiritual and material.
- Between Jiva (living beings) and matter.
- Between one Jiva and another.
- Between one piece of matter and another.

Madhva preached that the worship of Vishnu consists in the following observances:

- **Ankana**, marking the body with His symbols.
- **Namakarana**, giving the names of the Lord to children.
- **Bhajana**, singing of His glories.

Madhva laid much stress on **Smarana** - remembering the Lord at all times. He said – **“Form a strong habit of remembering God. Then only will it be easy for you to remember Him at the moment of death.”**

Madhva's **dualistic** school of philosophy advocated that -

- Renunciation, devotion and direct cognition of the Lord through meditation lead to salvation.
- Those wanting salvation should study the Vedas, control the senses, have complete dispassion and practice perfect self-surrender to gain a vision of the Lord.

Madhva performed many miracles before he died. He is still remembered for the gentle faith he preached to all. His emphasis on personal devotion, as of the other great teachers, drew in many to Hinduism while it made it easy for those who were already Hindus to understand their religion better.

Nimbarkacharya:

In the 11th century A.D., at Vaiduryapattam on the banks of the River Godavari, in the state of Andhra Pradesh in Southern India, there was born a boy-child to a great ascetic Aruna Muni and his pious wife Jayanti Devi. The learned Brahmins around named him **Niyamanandacharya**. He also became known as **Aruna Rishi** and **Haripriyacharya**.

Niyamananda was sent to Rishikul to study the Vedas, Vedangas, Darshanas and other holy books. He mastered the scriptures in a short time. He was in his teens then and people were astonished at his knowledge and came to see and listen to him from miles around.

It is said that Niyamananda was visited by **Brahma** himself in the guise of a sanyasin and, pleased with his hospitality, given him the name **Nimbarka** - "Nim" – from the "Neem" tree, and "Arka" from the "Sun" or "Surya". From then his disciples and others began calling him **Nimbarkacharya**.

Sri Nimbarkacharya is believed to be an avatar of Vishnu's **Chakra Sudarshan** or discus.

Sri Nimbarkacharya was a person of great erudition and he composed a number of very important books:

- **Vedanta Parijat Saurabh** – A commentary on the Brahma Sutras.
- **Sadachar Prakash** – A commentary on the Bhagavad Gita.
- **Prata Smarana Stotram** – A treatise on Seeking Refuge with the Supreme.
- **Savishesh Nirvishesh Sri Krishna Stavam** – Hymns on Lord Krishna.

Besides these he also composed some more hymns and explanations to certain important mantras.

Sri Nimbarkacharya was an exponent of the **Dvaitadvaita School of Philosophy**. His followers worship **Lord Krishna** and His cowgirl lover **Radha**. To them the **Bhagavad Gita** is the most important scripture.

Sri Nimbarkacharya held that **Jiva**, living being, and the material world are both separate from yet identical to the **Supreme Being, Brahman**.

The sect he founded thrives prosperously at **Mathura** and **Brindavan**, principal centers of **Radha-Krishna** worship.

Vallabhacharya:

Vallabhacharya was born to **Lakshmana Bhatta** and **Illama**, pious Telugu Brahmins, at Champaranya in the present-day state of Madhya Pradesh in 1479 A.D. He lost his father when he was only 11 years old but, the very next year, he completed his studies of the Vedas, the 6 Darshanas and the 18 Puranas at Varanasi, where he had been sent to study. He started for Brindavan and from there he set out on a **Parikrama** (Tour) of holy places in India.

He returned to Varanasi and married **Mahalakshmi** and had two sons by her.

Vallabhacharya composed many works in both **Sanskrit** and **Brij Bhasha**, a local vernacular. His Sanskrit compositions are:

- Vyasa Sutra Bhashya.
- Jamini Sutra Bhashya.
- Bhagavata Tika Subhodhini.
- Pushti Pravala Maryada.
- Siddhanta Rahasya.

Sri Vallabhacharya is said to be an avatar of **Agni**, the God of Fire.

This great saint was an exponent of **Pure Monism** or **Suddhadvaita**. **Lord Krishna** is the **Highest Brahman**. He is called **Purushottama, The Supreme Male**. His body is **Satchidananda**.

Sri Vallabhacharya's sect is still thriving in the states of Rajasthan and Gujarat. His followers worship **Bala Krishna**, Lord Krishna as a boy. Vallabhacharya laid great stress on **Pushti**, divine grace, and **Bhakti**, devotion. Those who can achieve **Maha Pushti**, the highest grace, or **Anuraga**, attain the Godhead. All things are emanated from the **Satchidananda** or **Akshara** like sparks from fire.

Sri Vallabhacharya died in 1531 A.D. at Varanasi. He was a contemporary of **Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mahaprabhu**.

The Bhakti Saints.

The Bhakti Saints:

At the beginning of the 14th century and onwards a certain crisis arose in the Hindu heartlands in Northern India. The Islamic invaders who had moved down from Central Asia and conquered large parts of the country and established their rule over it did not prove to be like previous invaders from the North. These people did settle down in India but did not integrate with the cultures and religions of the subcontinent as the previous invaders had done. Instead, they brought with them their own culture and religion and sought to impose them on the local populace. Since these people were mostly of the ruling class the power at their disposal was immense and many Hindus succumbed to pressures and converted to Islam and its attendant culture.

Those who did not do so and adamantly stuck to their own religion and culture were often persecuted. This generated bad feelings between the two communities – **Islam** and **Hindu**. To somewhat dispel this religiously-based dissension some very intelligent and pious men, both from the **Muslim** and **Hindu** communities, started a continuous campaign of religious integration. For the Muslims this was the **Sufi Movement**, a mystical form of Islam that was entirely generated and sustained within the confines of the subcontinent. A long series of Sufi saints and mystics preached tolerance and universal love through songs, dances and other popular forms of expression. Such saints and mystics, past and present, are still revered in the countries of the subcontinent – India, Pakistan and Bangladesh – where Islam is adhered to.

Within Hinduism the integration effort was called the **Bhakti Movement**. The term **Bhakti** (devotion) is an old one and its precepts of achieving God through personal devotion and universal love is also an ancient Hindu perception but the Bhakti Saints from the 14th century onwards popularized the concept through popular forms of expression that the masses could easily understand and appreciate. Both the Sufi and Bhakti Saints and preachers taught religious tolerance and universal love and these two movements rescued both religions – Hinduism and Islam – from interminable confrontation and reconciled them into stronger and more permanent entities in the subcontinent. Also, another major feature of these movements is that they not only promoted inter-religious harmony but also the intra-religious one. Sufism promoted tolerance among the various sects within Islam in the subcontinent while Bhakti teachers preached equity among the Hindus without distinction of caste.

The Bhakti teachers all preached in the **popular vernacular** of their principal region of operation instead of **Sanskrit**, which few of the common people knew and understood. In more ancient times, when Hinduism had faced a crisis of identity from rival religions like Buddhism and Jainism, the crisis had been among the ruling and educated classes. So the reformers, in the form of the **Great Acharyas** and others, had used vast erudition to make manifest the essential catholicity and symmetry of Hinduism. They had to convince educated people that Hinduism was worthy and, subsequently, they had used high thoughts and philosophy through the mediums of books and dialectical debates to do so. The language they had used to communicate their thoughts had been Sanskrit, the chosen language of the Hindu scholars. Also, it is much to the credit of the **Great Acharyas** that they had elucidated the essence of the Vedas and set it down in systemized texts. This made it easier for the Bhakti Saints to derive material for their popular teachings. In the case of the Bhakti Movement the crisis was among the uneducated masses and the teachers this time had to use local vernaculars in popular modes of expression to simplify the high philosophy of the essence of Hinduism to enable the uneducated masses to understand the catholicity and beauty within Hinduism.

I cannot treat Sufism at any length here but I have included in nutshells the lives and teachings of a few of the principal **Bhakti Teachers**.

Ramananda (1400-1470 A.D.):

Ramananda founded the popular **Ramanandi** sect of primarily North India. He was a follower of Madhvacharya's **Sri Sampradaya** and a proponent of the **Vishisht-Advaita** philosophy. As with the other Bhakti Saints he used popular mediums of expression to teach his precepts. He preached from the ancient city of **Varanasi**, which is today the principal center for this sect. Ramananda accepted women and men of all castes and education levels as his disciples. Ramananda upheld the **love** between **Rama**, Vishnu's 7th avatar, and **Sita**, his wife, as the **epitome of the human situation**.

Kabir:

Kabir was born of Muslim parents but grew up to take initiation from **Ramananda** himself. Though, at first, Ramananda refused to initiate a Muslim he ultimately succumbed to Kabir's persistence. Though initiated Kabir never left worldly life and was married and had children.

Kabir had no scholarly knowledge but he could compose poems that were extraordinary in their beauty. These poems blended Islam and Hinduism and sang of a **universal love** that transcended all barriers and entered the heart of anyone who could understand it. His poems are still read and sang and much appreciated all over North India. The Indian Nobel Prize Laureate **Rabindranath Tagore**, drawn to Kabir's poems by their intrinsic beauty, translated many of them into English. These poems tell of the presence of God in the midst of everyday life through the sensations of love and joy.

Kabir's followers are called **Kabirpanthis**.

Kabir sang – "**I have stilled my restless mind, and my heart is radiant, for in Thatness I have seen beyond Thatness**".

Indians, both Hindus and Muslims, effectively savor **mysticism** like that present in the above lines. Kabir was one of the first untaught poets to use such mysticism and many others since have effectively used it to spread messages of love and goodwill among the many diverse communities that reside side by side in India and other countries of the subcontinent.

Tukaram (Circa 1600 A.D.):

Tukaram is another Bhakti personality who was neither educated nor of high caste. He was an illiterate farmer from the present-day state of Maharashtra who could compose wonderful verses eulogizing the **Love of Lord Krishna**. His simple philosophy – "**Sit silently and repeat the name of the Lord. That alone is enough for realization.**" He professed that the ethics and orthodox religious precepts set down in the Vedas were mere formalities and the real use of religion lay in the realization of the divine through love for all.

Tuka's untaught philosophy was quite extensive and elaborate as can be demonstrated through this verse – "How merciful He is! In those who are helpless He feels His chief delight. He bears their burden on His head, He undertakes the care of acquiring and keeping for them. He endures them not to stray from the path, He takes them by the hand and leads them. Tuka says – This is the reward if you follow Him with absolute devotion. Thought the idea of a second is dispelled, yet Hari remains undiminished: we need not search for His seat outside ourselves. If you desire to know so much, know it by the mind within the mind, know it as the expert hunter knows the signs where gems may be found. First, is the body a reality? Are the correlatives of the body facts? It is a mere scarecrow. It is something the thief takes for sentinel. Tuka wakens you and cries – "Do not be idly frightened! Open the inner eye and you will find you are in Himself!"

Ramprasad(1718-1775 A.D.):

Ramprasad was a major Bhakti influence in the east of India. He was well-educated in medicine and the languages but he left all the trappings of material life to pursue a life of constant devotion to the **Goddess Kali**. Though he married and held a job as an accountant he gave up his job to go and live in a remote place and compose **songs** praising Goddess Kali. He was a brilliant poet and his compositions are still major Bhakti songs sung in Hindu Bengal today. Though he is regarded as an accomplished exponent of Bengali literature he used very simple language and philosophy that could be understood by even the most illiterate person. That is probably why he is still so popular today and his devotion to the Goddess so popularized and imitated.

Needless to say, as an exponent of Bhakti, albeit to a Goddess, Ramprasad professed personal devotion and love as a means of achieving his Goddess.

The Later-Day Saints.

The Later-Day Saints:

These great religious personalities came after the Bhakti saints except for **Lord Gauranga** who is accepted as a major Bhakti influence. He has been placed with the later saints as his influence has been sustained even at the international level to the present day. Some of the latter-day personalities were awakened by the need to combat the onslaught of Christianity on Hinduism after the British occupation of India. Since Christianity preached universal love and acknowledged no such barriers as castes and creed and had minimal ritualistic worship a large number of Hindus were being enticed away from their original religion to Christianity by its simplicity. Hinduism was on the decline, especially among the lower castes, who found the new religion more attractive. The **Latter-Day Saints** did what the Hindu Saints had been doing for centuries to combat threats from other religions – they rescued the true essential catholicity and simplicity of Hinduism from the ambiguity of the scriptures and elucidated it for the common people thereby re-establishing the preeminence of Hinduism as the majority religion in the Subcontinent.

Lord Gauranga (Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mahaprabhu):

Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mahaprabhu was born to **Pandit Jagannath Misra** and **Sachi Devi** at a village called Nawadip in what is the present-day state of West Bengal. He was named **Viswambar**. He was the tenth child of his parents, who had not been happy in their previous children. Eight had been daughters who had died early. The ninth had been a son – **Viswarup** – who had left home to become an ascetic when he was being forced to marry by his parents. So the simple village folk named Viswambar **Nemai** - after the bitter neem tree – to ward off evil. Nemai was such a beautiful child that everyone also called him **Gaur-Hari** or **Gauranga** - “Gaur” for “Fair” and “Anga” for “Body”. He was also called Gaur-Hari because, as a child, nothing could quieten him save the name of **Hari** - another name for **Krishna**, Vishnu’s 8th avatar.

Gauranga, as he was most popularly known, began to study all branches of Sanskrit knowledge and mastered all of them – grammar, logic, literature, philosophy, theology and rhetoric. He became such a scholar in all of these disciplines that he opened a **Tol** (school in Bengal of that time). He was only sixteen at that time. People were constantly amazed by his great erudition at that early age and a constant flood of scholars came to debate with him. He won all the debates. Some of the defeated scholars were jealous of him while the more pious ones began to revere him. In those days being a master of such knowledge was akin to being a **man of god** since all texts were supposed to have emanated from the Supreme Being. This is still true for all scriptural knowledge in Hinduism. That the only true **Vidya** or knowledge or erudition was devotion to the Lord, Krishna in Gauranga’s case, is made manifest by one of Gauranga’s own preserved sayings – “**Oh Lord, I ask not for wealth or followers, or for poetic genius. May my motiveless devotion to Thee continue in me whenever I take birth like the moonbeam upon the white lily of spiritual well-being, which is the elixir of life of the bride Vidya, which makes the ocean of bliss swell, which gives the chanter the fullest enjoyment of that divine love at the utterance of each word, and which bathes the mind and the senses in divine bliss.**”

On the humanity side, Gauranga was a kind and compassionate person who was always willing to help the poor and needy. Though his father was a poor Pandit who made a meager living out of teaching students who were themselves so poor that they could hardly pay him for tuition Gauranga would share his meager possessions with anyone who was needful of them.

His father died soon after and his mother, bereft of all near and dear ones except Gauranga, decided to marry him off. Though he was extremely reluctant he was finally married to a very pious girl **Vishnupriya**. The name seemed especially appropriate for a wife of someone who is widely believed to be an avatar of Vishnu since “Priya” means “Female lover” and the whole of the name “Vishnupriya” means “**The female lover of Vishnu**”. Vishnupriya loved her husband dearly but, though he respected her enough, she never got full satisfaction of him since he was always immersed in the love of Krishna and mostly ignored her.

In 1509 A.D. Gauranga went on a pilgrimage to **Gaya** where he met **Ishvar Puri**, a proponent of Madhvacharya’s philosophy. He took him as guru and, thereafter, there was a marked change in his life. He became a devotee of **Lord Krishna**, the 8th avatar of Vishnu. His pride of learning entirely vanished. He found himself totally immersed in the love of Krishna. He visited many other pilgrimage places before finally returning home to Nawadip. In his sojourns he had teamed up with another Krishna enthusiast **Nityananda**, who was to remain his lifelong companion thereafter.

Back at home Gauranga found that nothing could interest him as much as the divine love of Krishna. He decided to take sanyash (ascetism) and renounce worldly life. His mother and wife wept bitterly at this decision and tried to persuade him to give it up but to no avail. Gauranga, by then, was too overwhelmed by divine love to heed anybody. At age 24 years, Gauranga got himself initiated to sanyash by **Swami Keshava Bharati** of Nawadip and took the name **Krishna Chaitanya**, usually lovingly shortened to simply **Chaitanya - The Awakened One**. He is the beloved **Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mahaprabhu**, Lord of the **International Society of Krishna Consciousness** which preaches and practices Hinduism all over the world according to his tenets.

Krishna Chaitanya is a person much akin to **Jesus** of Christianity. Both were prophets deeply steeped in scriptures yet neither ever wrote anything down formally in the manner of books. Both used the common medium of simple uncomplicated speech to convey their innate wisdom to the general masses. There is ample testimony of both performing innumerable miracles. Above all – both preached absolute love for all beings. They professed that true worship consisted of selfless service to humanity. For this last, both were much persecuted by the priestly classes of their times. Both, in the end, as truth wins, remain ingrained for all time in the memory of the world as great teachers who sacrificed their lives for the salvation of humankind.

Lord Gauranga passed away on 14th June, 1533, leaving Hinduism in a much refreshed and revived state. The various indiscretions that had crept into it previous to his birth were removed and the common people were again inspired to return to its soothing fold for succor. At that time, the threat from **Islam**, which was being promoted by the Muslim rulers of that period, and the increasingly stringent strictures being imposed by the Brahmins, the priestly class, were causes for disillusionment with the religion among the common people but after **Sri Chaitanya's worldly sojourn** people were again fortified by the simple and deeply inspiring tenets of this great teacher and Hinduism again survived the perils it was fraught with from within and without.

Ramakrishna Paramhansadev (1836-1886 A.D.):

Ramakrishna came upon the Indian spiritual scene in the first half of the 19th century. The latter part of his name - **Paramhansadev** has great significance. "Param" means "Supreme" and "Hansa" means "Swan". The significance is that as the swan drinks a mixture of milk and water and takes in the milk while filtering out the water so Ramakrishna could be subjected to all manner of things yet always retain only the good in them. At the time of his advent India had already been colonized by the British and the natives were just beginning to learn the advantages of western civilization.

They were beginning to become more and more materialistic in their outlook and were ignoring the simple dictates of their own religion which they felt was too old-fashioned and conservative. Also, Christianity, with its classless attitudes and promise of universal love, was proving to be a great attraction to the Hindu lower castes who were underprivileged and oppressed. At this juncture Ramakrishna arrived and, from his small room in a corner of the **Dakshineswar Kali Temple** near Calcutta in the state of West Bengal, began to preach his simple faith.

Ramakrishna, so near to our times, was a silent spiritual force who could appeal to people of all religions. He reached a level of spiritual consciousness that still transcends time and place. Even the common people realized that he was intoxicated with the Graces of God. True to the pure tenets of Hinduism he regarded all religions as different paths that all led to the same destination – God.

He declared – "As many faiths, so many paths". This is such a famous and well-known saying in India and, maybe, worldwide that it still inspires millions of people to regard themselves as a part of a larger humanity where religion is diverse but not disparate. The present Indian social fabric made of a multitude of religions stays intact because of great men like him who have delved into the depths of Hinduism and come up with and made manifest the catholicity and universal tolerance inherent in the religion. Hindus learn to tolerate and respect other religions besides their own. This is of supreme importance in a country like India where a diverse number of religious communities co-exist in very close circumstances.

By professing that consciousness of God consisted of consciousness of humanity Ramakrishna not only promoted inter-religious harmony but also removed intra-religious stratifications that so existed, and still exists to a certain degree, in Hinduism in the form of the rigid and intolerant caste system. It is because of great sages like him that the illogic and unfairness of an inhumane institution like the caste system became evident to people who had previously adhered to its dictates without much thought or resistance.

Ramakrishna remains the people's saint and his pithy and meaningful sayings can be heard in the most unlikely quarters in India. He also left behind a great disciple in **Swami Vivekananda**, a religious figure we shall discuss next.

Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902):

Swami Vivekananda was born in to a well-to-do Bengali Hindu family. As a boy he had strong moral character. As he grew up, though his sense of morality did not diminish, it increasingly became apparent that he was an atheist. He constantly declared that he would not believe in the concept of God unless someone could convince him that God really existed. Since he was of an inquiring nature he went about from person to person in the quest of an answer. None could satisfy his need of conviction until he came to Dakshineswar Kali Temple and to **Ramakrishna**.

That holy man, in his down-to-earth manner, proceeded to prove to **Narendra**, as the swami was known as a young man, that God really existed. Only one had to look inside for proof, not outside. Ultimately Narendra was so convinced by Ramakrishna's arguments that he decided to reform and become a theist. He had already started studying the ancient Hindu scriptures and he took initiation from Ramakrishna and became an ascetic. He would not do things by halves. He gave up family life and started on a road of **service to humankind**, which he was convinced was the only way to gain God.

Swami Vivekananda strove throughout his life to waken the dormant **Indian National Consciousness**. As such he is regarded today as the saint who helped India achieve independence – both physical and spiritual freedom. He preached Hinduism as a religion that was built on a strong sense of ethics and maintained that its true precepts helped form **moral character**. Finding the Hindus involved in innumerable rites and rituals he asserted that the true basis of Hinduism was service to human-hood. Only along that path could one achieve the Godhead.

The Swami also looked beyond the boundaries of India and strove to promote international peace and establish a world-wide society with humane objectives. He constantly contemplated on the **Vedantic Oneness of Existence** when he was not involved in uplifting the lives of the helpless.

In the course of a short life – 31 years (1863-1902 A.D.) - he accomplished many of his own objectives. He left behind four very learned compositions - **Jnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Karma Yoga and Raja Yoga**. They are all exceptionally intuitive interpretations of the ancient Hindu scriptures. Besides these he also delivered innumerable quite exceptional lectures, wrote beautiful letters and acted as personal spiritual guide to those who came to him in want of direction. He also organized the **Ramakrishna Order of Monks**, a singular organization that today prevails in many countries of the world and not only spreads Hindu goodwill but also actively acts as a catalyst for human betterment.

The Swamiji, so near to our times, was such an inspiring personage that he is indelibly marked across the Indian Spiritual landscape as a luminary who took Hinduism to the world and revealed its catholic appeal.

Sects within Hinduism.

Introduction:

The Rig Veda declares – “**Ekam Sat Vipra Bahudha Vadanti**” or “The truth is one but sages call it by various names’. This is the essential tolerance of Hinduism. It has room for beings residing at all levels of consciousness. It welcomes all and provides spiritual nourishment for their diverse evolution and growth towards **The One**, the **Ultimate Truth**. The Upanishads declare that all paths lead to the same goal just as cows of variegated colors all yield white milk. Lord Krishna says in the Gita – “Howsoever men approach Me, even so do I welcome them, for the path men take from every side is Mine”. This essential principle has spawned a bewildering variety of schools of thought and their consequent sects.

Each great thinker who has been able to unravel the truth of the Vedanta and subsequently commented on it has gathered hordes of followers. This has been going on for centuries. Some of these sects have eroded away into oblivion while others are thriving. Cognizant Hindus are proud of the diversity of their religion and happily embrace all sects that wish to align themselves with their religion. Thus, often, with exuberant enthusiasm, Hinduism has enumerated all religions – Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism – that have originated in the Subcontinent as mere sects within the broad religious spectrum of Hinduism. Whatever the truth may be in this the number of sects that consciously elect to reside under this benevolent umbrella are many and mentioning all of them here is quite beyond the scope of this course. Thus, for easier understanding, only the four sects that have the widest following have been mentioned here. They are:

- **Vaishnavism**, followers of **Lord Vishnu**.
- **Shaivism**, followers of **Lord Shiva**.
- **Saktism**, followers of **Devi** as the **Universal Mother**.
- **Smartism**, a sect with conglomerate allegiances to a number of diverse Gods and Goddesses.

Vaishnavism:

Vaishnavism is the largest sect within Hinduism. **Vaishnavs**, as the followers are called, worship Vishnu and his avatars, especially Rama and Krishna, in an intense devotional manner seeking salvation. There are a number of major subjects within Vaishnavism. Since these **subjects** make up the Vaishnava community they are discussed:

- **Sri Sampradaya** founded by **Ramanujacharya** in the 11th century A.D. follows the **Vishishtadvaita** philosophy for worship. The followers worship Vishnu and his wife Lakshmi and their numerous avatars. They are called **Ramanujas**, **Sri Sampradayas** or simply **Sri Vaishnavas**. The teachers or Gurus are all Brahmins though disciples can be from any caste. They chant the **Ashtakshara Mantra** - “**Om Namō Narayana**” and mark their foreheads with two white and one red lines. There are a number of subjects within this subject itself. Each such subject has its own **preferred scripture**.
- **The Ramanandis** are a major Vaishnava subject in the North of India. They are a branch of the Ramanuja sect. They worship **Rama**, His wife **Sita**, His brother **Lakshmana** and **Hanuman** as Supreme Gods. Their favorite scripture is the **Bhakti Mala**. As Ramananda himself was a follower of Ramanujacharya in the 15th century Varanasi the Ramanandis have a lot in common with that sect. There is special ascetic order within this subject called **Vairagis**. They are famous all over India and are synonymous with asceticism. .
- The Rudra Sampradayas are the sect founded by **Vallabhacharya** in the 15th century. This sect is an important religious order in the West of India as a large number of people prefer to follow its doctrines. This sect worships **Krishna’s childhood personality** in the form of **Bala Gopala**. They revere the words of the **Srimad Bhagavad Gita** and visit **Nathdvara**, a pilgrimage place in the state of Rajasthan, at least once in a lifetime. The **Gosains** or teachers or Gurus are all family men.
- **The Chaitanyas** are followers of **Lord Chaitanya Mahaprabhu**. The internationally famous **International Society for Krishna Consciousness** is a part of this sect. Lord Sri Chaitanya is said to be an avatar of Lord Krishna. The local branch of this sect, the **The Gaudiya**, is most prominent in the east of India. The Chaitanyas worship **Sri Krishna** as the **Supreme Being**. All castes are admissible within this sect. Though the sect members treat the “**Charitamrita**” a chronicle of Sri Chaitanya’s life and the doctrines he preached, as a scripture they believe that **Kirtan**, worshipping the Lord by repeating His name again and again in song and dance is more effective. This is as was taught by Sri Chaitanya himself.
- The Nimbarkas are followers of **Nimbarkacharya**, the 11th century saint from South India. The Nimbarkas worship **Krishna** and his consort **Radha** as the **Supreme Beings**. They consider the **Srimad Bhagavad**

- Purana** as the chief scripture. They are prevalent most in and around the towns of **Mathura** and **Brindavan**, Krishna's birthland. Some are also found in Bengal where the sect has some hold.
- **The Brahma Sampradayas** are the sect founded by **Madhvacharya** in the 12th century A.D. The Gurus or teachers are usually Brahmins and ascetics. They mainly follow the tenets set down by their Acharya. There are two branches of this sect which is found mainly in and around **Udipi** in the state of Karnataka, where Madhvacharya was born and attained the Supreme Knowledge.
 - Besides these sects there are innumerable other Vaishnava Sects that consider either Vishnu or any one or many of His avatars as the Supreme Being.

Shaivism

This is the oldest sect within Hinduism and it precedes the Vedic Period. Though the actual number of subsects is many the six principal ones are:

- **Shaiva Shiddhanta.**
- **Pasupatism.**
- **Kashmir Shaivism** or **Trika.**
- **Vira Shaivism** or **Lingayats.**
- **Siddha Shaivism.**
- **Shiva Advaitism.**

The principal precepts of the sect are worship of **Lord Shiva** as the **Supreme Being**. The sect is mainly temple-based with a lot of mysticism involved as the aura of Shiva is as the eccentric **Lord of the Yogis**. The **Siddha Yoga** is the ultimate achievement for a disciple where he or she achieves an enlightened state in the universe and realizes his or her identity with that of the Lord and merges with Him in undiluted Monism or Advaita.

The Shaivites, as the followers are called, have to stride through four stages in life - **Charya, Kriya, Yoga** and **Jnana**. Salvation may take several birth cycles and culminate through **Karma** and **Reincarnation** into a realization of the **Virtuous** and **Moral** life boosted by regular visits to temples and other holy places and personal devotion through **Yoga** and **Meditation** until **Jnana** or **Wisdom** is achieved. This is the soul's ultimate mature state and it is now ready to go to Lord Shiva after death.

As Shiva is the most physical of the Hindu Triad the devotees are encouraged to do penances, fasting and other physical austerities to achieve Moksha though the common person eschews most of this with rigorous worship at temples, at home and other holy places of the Lord. In contrast the Lord is said to be so benign that He can be easily pleased by the devotees' efforts, as innumerable myths tell. Of course, the path can be smoothed through hefty alms-giving and other kindnesses.

Saktism

Devotees worship **Devi** as the **Universal Mother** in both Her fierce and gentle forms. Worship is Pre-Vedic and contemporary with worship of Shiva. However, regular scriptures were written from the 5th century onwards when the sect became popular during the resurgence of Hinduism under the Hindu rulers of most parts of India when the Brahminical traditions were emphasized. There are four forms of expression in this form of worship:

- Devotional – Devotees invoke Shakti through **Sri Chakra Yantra**.
- Shamanic – Devotees may use mediums to invoke Shakti through **magic** and other **Tantric** practices such as **fire-walking** and **animal sacrifice**. Powerful shamanistic principles like **Tantriks** may be consulted for purposes of healing diseases, granting fertility and for other politic purposes like inducing magical power against enemies.
- Yogic – Devotees invoke Shakti through **Sahasra Chakra**. (Sahasra means a thousand.)
- Universalist – Devotees follow reformed Vedantic teachings and are the most prevalent of the four classes.

Devotees worship the manifest forms of Shakti like **Durga, Kali, Parvati, Ambika, Chandi**, even the **Yoni** or female genitals, to attain the **Unmanifest Masculine Power**, mostly Shiva, though nothing in particular is mentioned in this respect. Most Shaktas strive to attain Moksha through **Kundalini Yoga**.

Smartism

Smartism is an ancient Brahmanical tradition that **Adi Sankaracharya** took and reformed into a more streamlined structure. This is the erudite belief among Hindu scholars. The Smartas follow the **Smriti Literature - Dharma Shastras, Puranas and Itihases**. They also revere the **Vedas** and the **Agamas**. They have a system called **Panchayatana** in which they worship five forms of God - **Shiva, Vishnu, Ganesha, Shakti and Surya**. After Sankaracharya the sect adopted his purely monistic philosophy. <KARTIKEYA< b>in the name of **Kumara** was added to the pantheon.

Smartas determine a personal God from among the five chosen deities. The Guru initiates the individual to his or her preferred personal God, Who is the **Ishta Devata** or **Personal God**.

Smartas believe that they can attain Moksha through **Jnana Yoga** which has three stages - **Sravana** (scriptural studies), **Manana** (reflection) and **Dhyana** (sustained meditation).

Smartas are the most liberal of all the Hindu sects though, today, orthodoxy among all sects is on the decline. Smartas progress through life under the guidance of a personal Guru who determines each important step in the disciple's life. The prime objectives in life are to maintain constant devotion to the Ishta Devata, accrue good **Karma** and purify the mind. Some Smarta Gurus also instruct devotees through <>, **Karma Yoga** and **Raja Yoga** to help achieve enlightenment.

Note on the Sects:

The concept of the **Ishta Devata**, personal God, is true, in some respect, for all the sects and almost all of Hinduism. The common individual, whether a Vaishnav, Shaivite, Shakta or Smarta prefers to be guided by a Guru on the tenets of Hinduism and the Guru usually initiates the individual to the religion by intimating to the person the secret rites of his or her preferred Ishta Devata. These rites are **secret** and **preferential** and vary from Guru to Guru.

Conclusion:

In the Hindu world, for ages, there have always been a large number of holy persons, both men and women, who have not been as famous as those mentioned in the sections in this chapter but who nevertheless, in their small way, have contributed to the continuance of the emblematic aura of Hinduism so that the religion has always had a preeminent position in the Subcontinent. Such men and women have also helped much in spreading the religion beyond the boundaries of the Subcontinent across the greater world not only in the present era but in the past as well. Hinduism in parts of **South-East Asia**, as in **Bali** and **The Khmer Republic**, was originally initiated by the zeal of the **Hindu Missionaries** sent out there in ships by the **Gupta Kings** of the 5th and 6th century A.D. In recent years a large number of holy persons, some sham and others genuine, some for financial gains while others for genuine religious zeal, have been spreading the goodwill inherent in Hinduism to the world at general. It is because of the efforts of the genuine persons that Hinduism today is a much respected religion worldwide.

Chapter 7: Important Pilgrimage Spots.

This chapter discusses the importance of pilgrimage to the average Hindu and also includes a number of important pilgrimage centers that Hindus regularly visit.

To the Hindu pilgrimage is gaining **Darshan** (view or look) of a god or goddess or even a holy person or saint who may be dead or still living. Just as with devotees from other religions, pilgrimage has a special significance for Hindus. Just as it is the aim of every Muslim to visit Mecca at least once in a lifetime so does the Hindu have to travel to certain pilgrimage places in order to gain **Moksha** – salvation. Since Hinduism allows personal inclinations to rule worship such pilgrimage places may vary with individuals yet it is certain that pilgrimage is as important and essential to Hinduism as to other religions.

In Hinduism it is not only the pilgrim who is acquiring heavenly merits but those who help the pilgrim in his or her aims also gain credit. Thus, from ancient times, when pilgrimage through the uninhabited wild parts of the country could be a risky affair, pilgrims have always been held in high esteem by others. Kings and rich people built special rest-houses along highways for pilgrims and, at the pilgrimage places, there were special lodging houses called **Dharamshalas** (religious shelters) where pilgrims could stay as well as eat without paying anything at all or maybe a pittance. Such dharamshalas were provided for by either kings or rich persons with an eye to earning heavenly merits. What is very exciting is that this custom has not ceased in recent times. Dharamshalas are still being built and maintained at prominent pilgrimage places by the rich and wealthy to aid pilgrims in their high-minded purpose.

Yet the scriptural knowledge is more subtle than all this overt expression of faith. In the Mahabharata, Yudhishthir, the eldest Pandava brother, asks his Guru (teacher) what **Tirtha** is? (The word “Tirtha” is synonymous with pilgrimage to the common Hindu but the Mahabharata explains it as “Sacred water”). Bhishma, the Guru, replies very subtly that all Tirthas are with merit and the sacred waters cleanse men with wisdom but one should bathe in the waters of the Lake Manash (This is a high-altitude lake in what is now Chinese-administered Tibet) which is unfathomable and which has **Truth** for its waters and **Understanding** for its container. This singular piece of advice means, in interpretation, that the soul must be pure and absolute in truth and have depth for its understanding so that one can bathe in the depths of a pure soul to achieve **Moksha**. Thus, scripture-wise, no Hindu is ever recommended to any particular earthly pilgrimage place.

Yet this chapter in the scriptures may be a little difficult to adhere to by common people leading ordinary lives. Such persons may feel the need for more overt expressions of their faith and so pilgrimage occupies a prominent place in Hinduism where the concept – Dharma is Karma or Religion is Morally-correct Action – incorporates pilgrimage which is seen as an action which is essential and morally-correct.

Thus, a sinner seeking purification will be advised to go on arduous pilgrimages to acquit his or her soul from earthly errors and gain Moksha or salvation. Hinduism preaches humility and the common Hindu humbly acknowledges that his or her soul is not worthy to be called a Tirtha and subsequently he or she undertakes arduous journeys to places where such pure souls reside. Also, like many other religions, Hinduism is esoteric and impracticably high-minded in its pure principles and requires symbolisms to sustain simple devotees who either cannot understand its purity or cannot adhere to it in its pristine state.

In Hinduism there are single pilgrimage places as well as sets of pilgrimage places like the **12 Jyotirlingas**, the **4 Dhams**, the **52 Shaktipeeths** and others. It is often not essential to visit all the places in a set and, also, the importance of the different sets vary from person to person as Hinduism favors personal beliefs. Still, probably of all the sets, the pilgrimage to the 4 Dhams is considered the most important and all the Dhams have to be visited within a lifetime to gain Moksha.

I have not tried to include almost all the important pilgrimage places in Hinduism as this is a gargantuan task and beyond the scope of this course.

Temple Architecture:

Since the focus of Tirthas is usually temples it is necessary to know a little about such architectural monuments. India is a large country and, over the centuries, many styles of architecture have developed in different parts of the country. Nevertheless, there are certain features in temple architecture related to worship of the deities within that is common to

temples all over India. In fact, these commonalities are universal and all Hindu temples all over the world, whether in Bali or Cambodia or any other place, have these incorporated into the architecture.

These commonalities are:

- Before the temple is actually built a special ceremony to bless the temple-ground takes place. It's called **Garba Dhana**, literally impregnating the womb. Special ceremonial objects are buried in the ground underneath where the main chamber of the temple would be.
- Above the spot where the Garba Dhana ceremonial objects have been buried the **Vimana**, basic sanctuary of the temple, is built. The Vimana contains the **Garba Griha**, the womb house. This is the holiest part of the temple as the deity resides within it. Pilgrims do **Parikrama**, circumnavigation, around the Garba Griha. They walk seven times around the holy sanctum to signify the seven worlds of which the universe is made up. Hindu laity is not allowed inside the Garba Griha which is the exclusive domain of the priests.
- Above the Vimana is the **Shikara**, a tall tapering tower usually built of stone. More architecturally-advanced temples in India and elsewhere have very tall Shikaras carved out of a single rock. Above the Shikara may be placed a **Dwaz**, a flagstaff from which a flag particularly signifying the presence of the deity inside flies.
- Attached to the Vimana, or often inside it as in later styles of temple architecture, is the **Mandapa**, a pillared hall in which pilgrims congregate to view the deity. In cases where the Mandapa is placed outside the Vimana a special structure called **Antarala**, vestibule, is built to connect the Mandapa to the Vimana.
- Almost all temples have intricate carvings on both the outside and inside except the inner sanctum – the Garba Griha. Other than this there is a very significant type of architectural feature found in many Hindu temples. This is the **Mithuna** sculpture - men, women, gods, goddesses and other mythical creatures passionately entwined in a bewildering range of sexual postures. There are several theories on why something so frivolous is placed in a place as holy as a temple. One of them is that the Mithunas protect the temple from lightning strikes by appeasing **Indra**, the God of storms. Another is that the Mithunas signify sensual complicity which indulges **Maya** which enmeshes the soul within the material world. Thus, the Mithunas serve the practical purpose of deterring common householders overcome by the spiritual ambience of the temple from relinquishing the worldly life for that of an ascetic by accepting **Sanyash**, asceticism. In this manner the continuance of the human race is assured, for if all persons became ascetics there would be no-one to breed and raise children within a family.

The 12 Jyotirlingas.

These are twelve ancient pilgrimage places mentioned in the **Shiva Purana**. In each of these places **Lord Shiva** revealed himself to his devotees in the form of **Jyoti** or Light. Even today devotees say that they have been fortunate to see the Lord in His light or jyoti form. Most of the resident idols are **Lingas** or black rocks shaped like phalluses, as usually Shiva is worshipped to pay homage to his role as the supreme male creator. The twelve Jyotirlingas, where temples have long stood, are numbered below.

Kedarnath:

This town is situated on the west side of the **Kedar Mountain** in the Himalayas. Shiva, as lord of the mountain, is called **Kedarnath** ("Nath" means "Lord") here and the erected temple is much frequented by devotees coming from all over India and, at present, from all over the world. It is part of a twin pilgrimage with **Badrinath**, the Northern Dham.

Vishwanath:

Varanasi in the state of Uttar Pradesh is a city as old as time. It has been existent for as long as there has been written records in India and the temple of Shiva has been there for the same period. Here Shiva is called **Vishwanath** (Lord of the Universe) and the temple is one of the most powerful pilgrimage spots in the Hindu world.

Not only Hindus but, at one time, even the flower-children of the west used to tuck in to take in a few puffs of cannabis with the resident sadhus before both the Indian and the Western governments cracked down on them.

Varanasi also has other significances for the Hindu. There are innumerable temples here as well as the serene **Ganga** flowing along the south of the city. It is deemed especially auspicious to bathe in the waters here and dead bodies cremated on the many burning ghats ensure immediate entry into **Swarga**, heaven, for the dead persons. Especially in the past, it has been the custom of old people to come to the city and await death while pondering over the values of existence and the meaning of creation, specifically by the burning ghats under the mellow glow of the burning bodies.

Somnath:

The town of **Veraval** in the western parts of the state of Gujarat is another Jyotirlinga spot. Shiva is called **Somnath** here and the temple is an imposing ancient rock structure that, by itself, induces reverence. Somnath is another very powerful pilgrimage spot for Hindus and they flock in large numbers to get Darshan (a view) of Shiva here.

Mahakaleswar:

The city of **Ujjain** is very old and once it had been the seat of the powerful and impressive **Gupta Empire**. Though today it is a small district headquarters with little to attract notice and is tucked away in the western corner of the state of Madhya Pradesh yet, every year, thousand of pilgrims trickle in to worship the **Mahakaleswar Linga** in an old temple by the Shipra River. **Mahakaleswar** means "**God of Eternal Time**". **Mahakal** is eternal time that ultimately obliterates everything, reminiscent of Shiva's role as sustainer of the universe against the depredations of time. This idol is again a very powerful draw for devotees who come to offer homage to Shiva and ask for his blessings.

Omkareswar:

The temple containing the **Omkareswar Linga** is situated on an island in midstream of the **Narmada River** in the eastern parts of Madhya Pradesh. Again, it is an old temple and Shiva here signifies in His role of **Lord of Rhythms**. It is said that the entire universe exists to a certain rhythm and that rhythm is maintained by Shiva. "**Om**" signifies that rhythm and Shiva is the God of it. "**Iswar**" means "God".

Rameshwaram:

Please refer to Rameshwaram under the four Dhams.

Mallikarjuna:

The temple of **Lord Mallikarjuna** is in the state of Andhra Pradesh near the east coast in a town called **Srisailem** set within a picturesque setting of river and hills. The **River Krishna** winds among the low green hills, one of which is the **Srisailem Mountain**, popularly regarded as the **Kailash** of the south. Those on the east coast who find the journeys to other revered Shiva temples in the north too far and strenuous make for Mallikarjuna. Thus it is one of the most important shrines to Shiva in the south-eastern parts of India.

Trayambakeshwar:

Trayambakeshwar is another picturesque locale on the west coast of India very near **Mumbai** or Bombay. The temple to the Lord is built near a spring that is the source of the **Godavari River**, a vital vein of water succoring a large portion of the otherwise arid Central Indian Plateau region. The Godavari is deemed to be a gift of the Lord and the spring is also one of the sacred spots in this town. The nearby town of Nashik is made the base for visits. Pilgrims come from all over India.

Bhimashankar:

This is another very panoramic temple to the Lord near the city of Pune on the west coast of India. The fairly old temple has now fallen within the ambits of a forest reserve but that does not deter pilgrims from thronging to it every day in sizable numbers. As a temple housing a Jyotirlinga it is the focus of pilgrims not only from the west coast but also from all over India. As is the Hindu custom it is thought necessary to do pilgrimage to all the Jyotirlingas through intermittent journeys strategically timed throughout one's lifetime.

Grishneshwar:

This is another Jyotirlinga temple that nestles within the picturesque hollows of the low green hills of the Western Ghats, a low chain of hills that stretch all along the west coast of India. It's strategically situated near the **Ellora Caves**, a top tourist spot near Mumbai. Of course, canny pilgrims kill two birds with one stone – combining pilgrimage with sight-seeing. Three of the Jyotirlingas are in **Maharashtra**, a state inhabited by the **Marathas** who are all almost fanatically devoted to Lord Shiva.

Nageshwar:

Nageshwar temple is located in the state of Gujarat on the west coast. It is very near to the western Dham **Dwarka** and the faithful acquire merits on both counts – countenancing **Lord Dwarkanath** (Vishnu as Krishnavatar) and **Lord Nageshwar**. :”Nageshwar” means “Lord of the Snakes”. Since Shiva is the **Lord of Time** and snakes, in the Hindu doctrines, are associated with the **Cycles of Time** it is especially significant that Shiva is the Lord of snakes and there snakes always twined around the God's body and head.

Bajjnath:

The temple of Lord Bajjnath is an old one. It nestles in a green locale among the rust-red hills of the Chotanagpur Plateau at a town called **Deogarh** (Abode of the Lord) in a remote corner of the state of Bihar. It is the only Jyotirlinga spot in Eastern India and is specially favored by people living there. The temple can be approached quite easily from Calcutta and people of that bustling metropolis, jaded with city life, retire here to both earn heavenly merits and to relax among the easy-going rusticity.

The Four Dhams.

The Four Dhams:

“**Dham**” means “**Abode**” There are four Dhams of the Lords. At three of the Dhams **Lord Vishnu** and **His Avatar Lord Krishna** are worshipped while at one Dham, **Rameshwaram**, **Lord Shiva** is the resident deity. The four Dhams are at the four points of the compass encapsulating the subcontinent of India in a cozy cocoon of security. To the Hindu the land of his or her forefathers is benignly watched over at all times by the gracious protector of all – Lord Vishnu – preserver and extenuator - and Lord Shiva - the forgetful benefactor - lost in fumes of cannabis but benign as ever. As with Muslims, who aspire to visit the holy city of Mecca at least once in a lifetime, the Hindu aspires to visit all four Dhams at least once in a lifetime. This is the most blessed of all pilgrimages assuring freedom from sins and ensuring Moksha – salvation from the miserable cycle of life and death. Practically, it is not necessary that all the four Dhams have to be visited on one single trip. It is possible to take them one at a time – visiting one this year while going to the others eventually – conveniently spread out over a lifetime. There is also no particular order of visitation – one goes to the one first that is nearest to home.

To the north is **Badrinath**, to the west **Dwarka**, to the south **Rameshwaram** and to the east lies **Puri**. These are the names of the places where the Dham temples are situated. I shall now acquaint you more elaborately with the Dhams and their Deities.

Badrinath:

Badrinath is at a height of 10,400 feet above sea-level in the Garhwal Mountains, a part of the larger Himalayas. From the very beginning, the mountains have had a special significance for the Hindu and it is deemed to be the abode of all the gods. Thus, this high-altitude pilgrimage spot is especially favored by pilgrims who are easily awed by the lofty peaks around, most of which have some religious connotations.

Approach to Badrinath from the plains is an arduous journey though pilgrims are amply rewarded by plethora of religious shrines and places all along the way. Badrinath not only houses the Deity **Badrinarayan** but also a host of deities including **Lakshmi**.

The innumerable rock-pools and mountain peaks, though seemingly natural, all have religious significances that, even if the pilgrim is not aware of, a conveniently-available priest will elucidate at length for only a pittance. Some of these landmarks are intimately associated with the Pandava brothers of the Mahabharata.

The snow-clad peaks, the blue rock pools, the tangy coniferous scent in the air and the clean atmosphere is very conducive to contemplation, an old Hindu scriptural recommendation. Pilgrims come, seeking succor, and go back feeling refreshed and fulfilled.

Dwarka:

Dwarka is as old as the history of India. It was the seat of **Sri Krishna** after He quit Mathura, His maternal home, to come and reign here. Since it has been held as holy for a long time it has gradually accumulated, over the years, a large number of religious monuments and institutions that today make it one of the most revered spots in Hinduism.

The main Dham temple houses **Ranchhodji**, another name for Lord Krishna who time and often fled from the battlefield under unfavorable circumstances to return again another day and win. “Ran” means “War” while “Chod” means “Running away”. There is also a temple to Lord Krishna’s wife **Rukmini**, who is believed to be an incarnation of Lakshmi.

Also resident near Dwarka is the Jyotirlinga temple of Nageshwar.

Adi Shankaracharya, one of the most learned and sanctified personalities in Hinduism, built one of his four mathas here. It is still an institution where Hindu scriptures are studied and their inherent meanings deciphered.

Dwarka is so entwined with legends and myths that the pilgrim is overcome with religious fervor upon setting foot on its sacred soil.

Rameshwaram:

Rameshwaram is the only one of the four Dhams where the resident Deity is **Lord Shiva**. The other three have either Vishnu in one form or one of His avatars in residence. The temple is built on an island in the Gulf of Mannar at the tip of the peninsula that projects out of the Indian Subcontinent towards Sri Lanka. It is built on the site where **Lord Rama**, Vishnu's seventh avatar, worshipped Shiva prior to His attack on Lankapuri, the capital city of the Rakshasas to rescue His beloved wife **Sita** who had been abducted by **Ravana**, king of the Rakshasas.

The temple has additional significance because it is, firstly, a Jyotirlinga, and secondly, it is said in the scriptures that a pilgrimage to Varanasi to pay homage to Lord Vishwanath is incomplete without also paying homage to **Lord Ranganatha** at Rameshwaram. The Dham is also singular in that it is an important pilgrimage place for both **Vaishnavites** as well as **Shaivites**. Rameshwaram is called the "Varanasi of the South".

Pilgrims familiar with the "Ramayana", written almost 3,000 years ago, find significance in many landmarks about the place. One of the most significant of these is the **Gandhamardhan Parvat** (a hill) on top of which Rama's footprint is still found embedded in a rock at the topmost portion of the mountain. There are also other places of interest to the devout pilgrim and this is a favorite spot to cleanse one's soul if one is a Hindu.

Puri:

Puri is a small coastal town in the Indian state of Orissa. Besides harboring the Dham temple it also has a number of other attendant religious places that are of interest to the pilgrim.

The resident Deity at the main temple is **Lord Jagannath** (Lord of the Universe). He is present together with His elder brother **Balaram**, who is believed to be an avatar of **Shesha**, the snake on whom Vishnu usually rests, and His younger sister **Subhadra**, who may be an incarnation of **Lakshmi**. Lord Jagannath is unmarried here and is closely associated with **Krishna**, Vishnu's eighth avatar.

The temple, dating back to the tenth century, was built by an Oriya king **Chodagangadeva** but legend has it that it has been there since time immemorial. The temple is a huge tall structure and dominates the seaside town. Over 6,000 priests serve at the temple constantly and every little thing done there is ritual-bound and extremely stylized, requiring such a large number of servitors. It is also the custom to feed, each day, thousand of beggars and other needy people with the Lord's **Bhog** (sacrificial offerings). The temple kitchens are extensive and the cooking arrangements meticulously elaborate.

The singularity of the idols of the temple is that all the Deities are handless. Legend has it that **Vishwakarma** Himself carved the idols out of wood. Long ago, a certain king of Orissa had been visited by the Lord in a dream and was commanded to erect a temple to His name. The Lord promised that He would send Vishwakarma to do the job if the king complied. The king was overjoyed and he awaited Vishwakarma who soon appeared in the form of a very old man. Gradually, with the king's co-operation and the architect God's expertise the temple grew up, splendid and awe-inspiring. When the time came to make the idols Vishwakarma ordered special wood and went into the temple. He stipulated that He would close the doors of the temple and would remain inside till the idols were ready. Before that time no-one was to enter the temple.

Unfortunately, instigated by the impatience of his queen, the king had the doors opened before Vishwakarma came out. When they went in they found that the God had carved all the idols up to their elbows. He was about to put on the hands but this was not to be as Vishwakarma angrily went away from there and was never seen again! So the unfinished idols had to be set in the temple and worshipped. No-one could dare to duplicate the God's handiwork and finish the idols by putting on the hands. So! To this day Jagannath, Balaram and Subhadra are handless. The idols are newly carved out of wood from specially-grown **Neem** trees every 12 to 19 years according to the lunar calendar. The handlessness is probably a commentary of the helplessness of the Lord before the evil of the world.

Another unique feature of the Puri Jagannath Temple is the **Ratha Yatra**. A ratha is a chariot and these chariots are really big. Hence the term – "**Juggernaut**" from "**Jagannath**" - in English meaning something huge and unstoppable. These rathas or chariots are used to transport the three Deities to their aunt's house at **Gundicha Temple** nearby on a

particularly auspicious day in Ashadha (June/July). The three Deities are loaded onto the chariots and hauled by hemp ropes by millions of devotees who gather in Puri at this time to participate in the hauling as this is one of the holiest rituals in Hinduism.

The Puri temple is one of the holiest shrines in India and it is regularly visited by millions of devotees every year.

River-Related Pilgrimage Spots.

Hindus, right from the beginning of the religion and probably under influence from the older animalistic religions of the subcontinent, have always held rivers to be sacred, probably because they found that they were totally dependant on the water to drink and irrigate their crops. The monsoons in India, the season of the rains, have always been of short duration and there is a prolonged dry season when only the rivers make life possible.

Thus, India is amply interspersed by river-related pilgrimage spots and it is not possible to list all of them. Also, the allusion to sacred water in "**Tirtha**" which can purify one of sins is taken literally more often than not and all pilgrimage places have its patch of water but this section includes those places where the river itself is the cynosure of pilgrimage.

Gangotri:

Gangotri is the source of the **River Ganga** and is located high up in the Himalayas at 3048 meters above sea-level. The glacier of the same name begins to melt here. The water comes out a rock formation shaped like a **cow's mouth** and this has great religious significance as the cow is held sacred by Hindus. Also, in the water just below the cow's mouth fountain, there is submerged in the ice-cold water a stone shaped like a **Linga**. This is held even more auspicious as the mythical story of Shiva cushioning the Ganga's fall as it descends to earth is borne out by this singular natural formation.

Gangotri is not only a pilgrimage spot but it is also much favored by hardy mountaineers who use it as a base for more adventurous ascents on the towering peaks nearby. The pristine mountains and ample vegetation is savored by pilgrims and adventurers alike.

The Temple to **Ganga**, reputedly built by **King Bhagirath** himself, is also another focus of worship.

Jamunotri:

Jamunotri is the glacial source of the **River Jamuna**, another holy river much associated with Krishna who was born in Mathura on its banks. There are many holy places around this high altitude (3293 meters) religious spot. Most of them are holy lakes, rock formations and river sources that have mythical connotations. The ascent to this place is tough and only those pilgrims who are physically fit can make it up to here.

This pilgrimage spot is also favored alike by pilgrims and adventurers. The **Jamunotri Temple** is dedicated to the River Goddess and is the main focus of worship.

Allahabad:

Allahabad is another old city that is much revered for its mythical connotations. It is also called "**Prayag**" because Brahma once performed a sacrifice here. The main reason why this place has acquired such religious merit is because it is the confluence of three rivers – **Ganga, Jamuna** and **Sarasvati**. This is a very old Hindu tradition. Wherever in India two or three rivers come to meet that place has been declared holy and temples and other religious institutions have been built. Pilgrims flock to these places to bathe at the confluences and purify themselves of all previous sins. Of these Allahabad is the most revered and important especially because two rivers here – Ganga and Jamuna – are both worshipped as Goddesses and are themselves much revered.

Allahabad is also the place where the most important **Kumbh Mela** takes place. It is also dotted with temples and other religious institutions. It is an old center of Hindu learning and still continues with the grand old tradition.

Ganga Sagar:

This is not an inhabited place but the shifting deltaic estuary where the main distributary of the **River Ganga** falls into the Bay of Bengal a few miles to the south of the city of Calcutta in the state of West Bengal. Every year, in the middle of January, on **Makar Sankranti**, an auspicious day, millions of Hindus from all over the country gather at this desolate spot to offer worship to the Ganga. A fair-like atmosphere prevails and sadhus and ordinary pilgrims

intermingle in single-minded devotion to bathe at auspicious times, usually early at dawn. The purpose, of course, is to wash away one's sins.

The West Bengal government has to pitch in with provisions of everything from transportation, which mostly includes boats and launches, to makeshift shelters and toilets, food and safe drinking water. As at the Kumbh Mela, many **Sadhus** who normally stay up in the mountains and forests come out of their retreats to acquire heavenly merits.

The 52 Shaktipeeths.

The 52 Shaktipeeths:

There are 52 Shaktipeeths spread out not only all over the territory of the Republic of India but also of the neighboring countries of Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal. These are major centers of **Shakti** worship. Legend has it that these are the places the 52 parts of **Sati's** body fell when **Vishnu** cut it into pieces to save the universe from **Shiva's Tandava Dance** with her dead body. There is intense controversy over how many parts there actually were – according to some scholars it is 50, while others postulate 51 and I have stated 52 after consulting with the best sources.

All these places rate high in the itinerary of the Hindu pilgrim but it is impossible to mention all of them with complete details. That will be beyond the scope of this course. I have, instead, mentioned three of them – **Haridwar** in the North and **Kalighat** and **Kamakhya** in the East – to give a fair sampling of the Shaktipeeths.

At one time it was thought mandatory to offer bloody sacrifices to the goddess at these places as they were associated with tantric worship rituals and the shakti aspect of Devi but today, often, enlightened pilgrims substitute animal sacrifice with the harmless gourd which does as well to mollify the fierce goddess enough to bestow her blessings on the sacrificer.

Haridwar:

Haridwar is at the foot of the Himalayas in the north of India. It is an open city with a lot of religious connotations. Here the Ganga flows onto the plains of central India. The city has not only been a major religious center for ages but it has also been a major center of Hindu learning. Even today, students learn theology and other traditional subjects in the old Hindu way – the **Gurukul**, where a **Guru** instructs them.

Haridwar is a major Shaktipeeth and it is written that the **heart and navel of Sati** fell here. The Peeth Temple is to **Maya Devi** and it is very old. There are other Shakti deities here – those of **Chandi Devi** and **Manasa Devi**. Both deities are ensconced in temples built on hilltops and the journey to them via ropeway is exciting and affords pilgrims panoramic views.

Haridwar is also a Kumbh Mela spot and the clean pollution-free waters of the Ganga are much appreciated by pilgrims who bathe at famous bathing spots like **Har Ki Pauri** all year round.

Haridwar literally means the **Doors of Shiva** and since the mountains are that God's abode the city is accepted as a gateway to Shiva's heaven.

Kamakhya:

Kamakhya Devi Temple is located on the top of the **Kamagiri Hill** in the state of Assam. In ancient times Assam was known as **Kamrup**, associated with **Kam** or **Kama**, that is, desire both sexual and otherwise, and the Shakti Goddess here is appropriately called **Kamakhya** – the fulfiller of all desires. Her temple is a very old **Tantric** and **Shakti** worship place and mention is made of it in many old texts associated with the east of India. **Sati's Yoni** or genital is said to have fallen here and this makes the temple and the deity a very potent Shakti worship place as the Shakti concept is based mainly on feminine reproductive power or, simply, fertility.

The nearby **Kaziranga Game Sanctuary**, where more than half the world's population of one-horned rhinos lives, has made this pilgrimage spot even more attractive to adventurous devotees who love to kill two birds with one stone.

Kalighat:

Kalighat is the temple at **Calcutta** in the state of West Bengal where the **Toes of Sati's Right Foot** fell. The Goddess resident is called **Kali** and Her splendid idol with a very large tongue made out of solid gold commands great reverence.

Since Kalighat is conveniently located in a large metropolis of India it is visited every year by a large number of devotees who come not only to offer worship to the Goddess but also to get a feel of big city life.

The local merchants regard the Deity as a **Giver of wealth and good fortune** and on the first day of the **Bengali New Year**, which is somewhere in the middle of April, all of them descend down to the temple with their account books to get themselves and their accounts blessed. Also, Kalighat's strategic location en route to **Ganga Sagar** means devotees to the annual mela can pay homage to the Lady of the shrine as well and double their blessings.

General Pilgrimage Sites:

These pilgrimage sites do not fall within any single set of religious places yet they stand alone in their significance to Hindu pilgrims as all of them contain some of the holiest shrines in Hinduism.

Amarnath:

The pilgrimage site of **Amarnath** is actually a large cave, 150 feet high and 90 feet long, found at an elevation of 4,175 meters in the mountains 145 Km east of Srinagar in the state of Kashmir. Inside the cave are some **ice formations** that look like various gods in the Hindu pantheon. The largest of this is a **Shiva Linga** which is **Lord Amarnath** (the **Lord of the Immortal**). Other ice formations are said to look like **Ganesha**, **Parvati** and **Bhairava**, an aspect of Shiva, and all are respectfully worshipped. The main Linga grows and diminishes in size with the seasons and even with the waxing and waning of the moon.

Every year, on full moon day in July/August (the Hindu month of Sravana), the great Linga is at its largest and thousands of pilgrims journey arduously through thick snow and often blizzards to come to the cave to worship the lord on this auspicious day.

Hindus believe that the more laborious the pilgrimage the more the chance of salvation. By this standard Amarnath is deemed a particularly venerable site because the way to it is possibly the most difficult of almost all the pilgrimage places in India.

The Linga is reputed to have been found in the mountains by a poor shepherd grazing his herd high in the mountains. That the shepherd was a Muslim makes the story more poignant.

This mysteriously holy manifestation in ice lasts for only a few days in this period after which the ice melts or forms solid unrecognizable shapes.

Kumbha Mela:

After the churning of the oceans by the Gods and the Asuras the Amrita that was spewed up became a contentious issue. Both the Gods and the Asuras equally wanted to drink it but the Gods feared that if the Asuras drank it and became immortal creation would be in jeopardy. So Vishnu transformed himself into a beautiful maiden **Mohini** and lured the Asuras away from the amrita so that Indra's son **Jayant** could transform himself into a bird and fly away with it. On the way to the mountains from the seas four drops of amrita fell at four places – **Allahabad**, **Haridwar**, **Ujjain** and **Trambakeswar** – and at these places, every **12 years**, a **Kumbha Mela** takes place.

“**Kumbha**” means “**Pot**” while “**Mela**” means “**Fair**”. So Kumbha Mela literally means the **Pot Fair**. The pot gains allusion from the original pot of amrita.

Though the fairs in the three places - Haridwar, Ujjain and Trambakeswar – are significantly large events with over a million people taking part the one at Allahabad at the **Prayag** (confluence of the three rivers **Ganga**, **Jamuna** and **Sarasvati**) is a mega-event with over **15 million people** in attendance. A few days before this mela a small makeshift city grows up around the confluence of the three rivers. Millions of Hindus from around the country and the world assemble there, some living in tents and others, if possible, in hotels and temporary rented places. It is a regular assemblage of sadhus, priests and ordinary pilgrims. It is said that the sight of the sadhus, like the **Naga Sadhus** who worship Shiva and wear nothing, smear ashes all over their naked bodies and have dreadlocks, is a rare and spectacular sight as most of these holy men seldom come down from the remote caves and forest retreats in the Himalayas where they normally live.

There are a few auspicious days for bathing but the most auspicious one is on new-moon day (Amavasya) in that period. There are also smaller **Ardaya** (half) **Kumbhas** every 6 years and also another yearly mela but these are smaller events with not as numerous an attendance and also not as auspicious.

The significance of bathing in the waters of the river, whichever it may be, is that the bather is permanently washed off of all sins he or she had committed till then.

Predictably, after the bathing is over and the mela grounds dismantled it takes the authorities many days to clean up.

Kanchipuram:

Kanchipuram is one of the most sacred cities in India. It is situated in the southern state of Tamil Nadu and is a thriving center of Tamil learning. It was built in the 6th century AD by the Pallava Kings. It has a unique temple architecture that is breathtaking and of interest not only to the Hindu pilgrim but also to general tourists who come to stare at and admire the towering stone structures intricately carved from foot to spire.

Kanchipuram is a major Shakti worship spot together with its neighboring city **Madurai**, also in Tamil Nadu and also with spectacular temples. The Shakti deity at Kanchipuram is **Kamakshi** while the one at Madurai is **Meenakshi**. These two Deities, together with **Lady Vishalakshmi** of Kashi, make up a sort of trinity of Shakti Deities in Southern India.

As a Shakti worship spot, the attendant Shiva temples are also quite spectacular and are the **Kailashnath Temple** and the **Ekambareswar Temple**. Also resident in the city is a Vishnu temple – **Varadaraja Temple**.

Kanchipuram is also the place where **Adi Shankaracharya**, one of the greatest and holiest teachers of Hindu doctrine, set up his main math or teaching center.

Kanyakumari:

Kanyakumari is at the very tip of the Indian Subcontinent as it projects into the sea in the utmost south. It is actually a cape where the waters of the Indian Ocean, The Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea meet. It is a picturesque tourism spot and that it has a plethora of temples makes it an ideal place to savor the best of both worlds – the lower and the upper.

The **Kumari** (Maiden) Temple, of the deity from whom the place got its name, is situated at a strategic place where the three waters meet. Legend has it that when Shiva was unmarried Devi resolved to get His hand through extreme penance but was unsuccessful and decided to remain a virgin (Kumari) all her life. The matter was resolved later but, here, in this particular place, Devi is eternally a Kumari. The other significant Shakti deity here is **Devi Bhagavati**. Her temple is located at an even more picturesque spot near the Kumari temple.

Also at Kanyakumari is the unique **Suchindram Temple** where the Linga is a symbol of the triad of Hinduism – Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. The Linga is called **Sthanumalaya** – the top is **Sthanu** (Shiva), the middle **Mal** (Vishnu) and the bottom **Ayan** or Brahma. This is one of the few places in India where the triad is worshipped at one place in one temple.

A recent relatively addition to Kanyakumari's religious spectrum has been the **Vivekananda Shrine** daringly built on an outcrop of rock in the middle of the waters.

Pushkar:

Pushkar is a major pilgrimage town in Rajasthan in the West of India. It is famous for the three **Brahma Temples** there. These are some of the few temples erected to that elusive God whose worship is restricted to only one day in the year at His only set of temples in Pushkar because of a curse pronounced on Him by His wife. It is said that Brahma threw a lotus, a **flower** which is "**Pushpa**", with His "hand", which is "**Kar**", and the conjunction of the two native words gave the town its name Pushkar. Actually Brahma threw three flowers in three separate places within six kilometers radius and pools sprang up in each place. These pools around which the temples are erected are holy.

Pushkar also has other attractions for the devotee. There are numerous other temples erected to gods like **Varahavatar**, **Savitri** and **Gayatri** (Gayatri is the local maid Brahma, impatiently needing a female partner to perform a sacrifice, married hastily while Savitri, his wife, was away. This impatience caused Savitri to pronounce that particular curse on her impatient husband). The Pushkar camel fair is the largest in India and also enhances the attractiveness of the town.

In the main Brahma temple in the town the floor is embedded with coins by devotees from all over India to commemorate the births and deaths of loved ones.

The most auspicious day to worship here is on the fifth day of the month of Sravana (July/August).

Please note that, in Pushkar, Brahma's wife is said to be Savitri while many religious texts mention the names of Sarasvati, Satarupa, Vach and Brahmani including Savitri and Gayatri as his wife. The only fact that all these sources collaborate on is that this girl was created by Brahma Himself and later, overcome by desire for her, He married her and created the human race and all other beings. Thus, the scriptures regularly accuse Him of incest.

Tirupati:

Tirupati is a temple town in the south of India located about 130 Km away from Chennai in the district of Chittoor in the state of Andhra Pradesh. The temple is one of the richest in India and the God, **Venkateswara** (a name for Vishnu in the south), one of the most revered in the country. "**Tiru**" in Tamil means "**Sri**", another name for **Lakshmi**, and "**Pati**" means "**Lord**". Thus, as Vishnu is Sri's husband Tirupati is Vishnu or Venkateswara.

According to the Puranas the **Tirumala Hills**, amid which the temple is built, represent the body of **Shesha**, the snake on which Vishnu sleeps while floating on the cosmic waters between epochs. The seven hills ringed around the temple represent Shesha's **seven hoods**.

Pilgrims from all over the country and abroad come to pay homage to Lord Tirupati. Some devotees have such belief in the God's powers that they visit time and again. Rich gifts like diamond necklaces and other expensive jewelry at the shrine in homage to the God is not uncommon and this makes the temple coffers, which has been accumulating treasure for centuries, one of the wealthiest not only in India but in the world.

Conclusion:

Every city, town and village in India has a resident deity who is regarded as the holiest by those who live there. Also, since Hinduism is a religion that indulges personal inclinations, there is always controversy over which deity in which place is the holiest and the most worthy of a visit. Thus it is impossible to include all the major pilgrimage sites in India as the very importance of the deities is in controversy. So I have included only those deities who are universally, in the Hindu world, regarded as the most worthy of veneration in this chapter on Hindu pilgrimage sites.

Hinduism, being a very susceptible religion, also accepts the purity of the doctrine that Dharma is Karma – Religion is Good Action – that is, the way to salvation lies not through ritualistic worship but only through good deeds. Thus, **Ganesha** wins the race of circumventing the world sitting and studying the appropriate scriptures while his elder brother **Karttikeya** loses to him when he tries to do so by actually traveling around it. Thus, though each pilgrimage place or Tirtha has its small patch of sacred water, be it a river, lake or even a well, a Hindu may not have to travel anywhere at all but stay at home and be good and do good deeds to be able to gain **Moksha**.

Chapter 8: Current Status.

International Hinduism.

Hinduism is a faith that is over a billion strong. It is the **third largest religion** in the world after Christianity and Islam. Though most of the Hindus are concentrated in India there are substantial numbers present in Nepal and Indonesia, two of the countries discussed here., and other countries.

Hindus in Nepal:

Nepal is the only constitutionally-declared Hindu state in the world. About **87%** of the population is Hindu with the rest being comprised of Buddhists, Muslims and other religious communities like Christians. Nepalese Hinduism follows the patterns of the religion as practiced all over Northern India.

As the percentage of the population is predominantly Hindu most regions of the country are Hindu and the people who are mostly so are the **Magar, Sanwar** and the **Rai**. Nepal has some very important Hindu pilgrimage places like the **Pasupati Temple** in the capital city **Kathmandu**. The temple is a principal locus of attraction for pilgrims from the lowlands of India and it is a major foreign exchange earner. It is dedicated to **Lord Pasupati**, an aspect of Lord Shiva. "Pasu" means "animal" and "pati" means "Lord". Lord Shiva is worshipped here as the patron God of all animals. This is another evidence of the importance of all living beings to Hinduism.

Nepalese Hinduism is a sort of compromise between the tenets of Buddhism and Hinduism. Many Hindus worship at Buddhist shrines while there are many Buddhists who reciprocate. Nepal is the Land of **The Buddha** as he was born to the King of **Kapilavastu**, an ancient city in the country, as his loved son. In Nepal, Buddhism and Hinduism are considered to be very close religions and allegiance to one does not necessarily mean abstention from the other. Thus, it is also very difficult to estimate exactly how many Nepalese actually adhere strictly to Hinduism. Nevertheless, this should not matter as Hindus in India also regard Buddhism as a particular sect or branch of Hinduism. The Buddha is firmly regarded as the ninth avatar of Lord Vishnu and, as such, Hindus, especially those living in India and Nepal, behold Him with much love and reverence and worship Him alongside their own Hindu Gods.

Hinduism in Indonesia:

Hinduism in Indonesia is also known as **Agama Hindu Dharma** and it is principally guided by a broad religious society called **Parisada Hindu Dharma Indonesia**. The latest figures on the percentage of population of Indonesia that follow the religion is nearly **30%**. The Hindus living on the Island of **Bali** comprise about 93% of the population there. Other Islands with significant Hindu populations are Java (The **Tenggerese** people of the East), Sumatra and Kalimantan.

In recent years the Hindu population of Indonesia increased significantly because of **President Suharto's** legislation that all Indonesians register themselves as one of five acknowledged religious communities - **Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Protestant** and **Catholic**. The glorious **Javanese Hindu** past inspired many people of that island to convert to Hinduism under this law. Also, the native religions of **Aluk To Dolo** and **Kaharingan** were classified by the Ministry of Religion as variants of Hinduism. This increased the share of the devotees of the religion within the total population of Indonesia. There was also much enthusiastic missionary work by Balinese and Indians living in the island of **Medan** who managed to convert the **Karo** people of North Sumatra. All this conversion and classification increased the Indonesian Hindu population to its present proportion of 30%.

Some Basic Tenets:

Indonesian Hinduism is better known as **Agama Hindu Dharma** and certain salient features to it:

- Belief in a Supreme Being called variously **Ida Sangyang Widi Wasa, Sang Hyang Tunggal** or **Sang Hyang Cintya**.
- Belief that the other Gods in the pantheon are all manifestations of this Supreme Being.

- Belief in a Triad of Gods comprised of **Brahma, the creator, Vishnu or Vishnu, the preserver and Ciwa or Shiva, the destroyer.**
- Belief in other Gods and Goddesses. The deities are known as **Dewa.**

Only two of the Vedas of Indian Hinduism reached Bali and they form the basis of Indonesian Hinduism. The other religious texts are the **Puranas** and the **Itihases**. The Itihases are the epics **Ramayana** and **Mahabharata**. These last two are extremely popular on the island and form the inspiration for many artistic activities and compositions.

Hinduism was greatly adapted from its original form to fit Indonesian society. One of its main concerns is to maintain ritual purity. This is primarily done by dividing society according to occupation. The divisions are known as **Varna**, literally color in Sanskrit. It must be remembered that these divisions were initially made to distinguish different segments of the population of the Indian subcontinent, especially the conquering **Aryan** who were fair and the indigenous **Dravidians** who were dark. The Indonesian Varnas are based on the original Indian ones and are - **Brahmanas** or priests, **Satriyas** or rulers and warriors, **Waisyas** or farmers and merchants and **Sudras** or commoners and servants. This distinction of people in Indonesia was never rigidly applied as in the subcontinent and never created a problem.

Much of the famous Balinese puppet theatre - **Wayang** - and dance performances are based on the Hindu epics Ramayana and Mahabharata. In recent years the great pride Indonesian nationalists have shown in the ancient Hindu **Majapahit Empire** has attracted many Indonesians to the religion and induced them to convert their allegiance to it.

Hinduism in Indonesia was brought by emissaries from the **Gupta Rulers** of the Indian city of **Ujjain** during the period 400-600 A.D.

Yoga and Meditation in the International Context:

The recent increase in the awareness of Hinduism as a religion in the Western Hemisphere can be directly attributed to the widespread popularity of **yoga and meditation**. Though both Jainism and Buddhism incorporate both these techniques within their devotional systems the most pervasive forms are derived from Hinduism.

The cannabis-smoking flower-children of the sixties and seventies looked to the East for a solution to the problems of endemic mechanization and whether they found that or not they did take back to their homelands in North America and Europe the ancient Hindu systems of yoga and meditation. They were good judges of peaceful means to existence and they were certainly not far out when they chose these ancient techniques as a means to combat the denaturalization of excessive industrialization.

The main form of yoga practiced in countries like the US is **Hatha Yoga**, primarily a yoga system based on physical exercises that eminently suits persons with sedentary jobs wanting to tone up their bodies. The gurus, both pure Hindus of Indian origin and westerners who have learned the trade from someone, seldom acquaint their pupils with the true purpose of the Hindu yoga systems and only allow them as much knowledge as is necessary to do the **asanas** or physical exercises. Meditative techniques taught and practiced in the west are also slightly distanced from their original purpose in Hinduism and are also utilized to enhance physical well-being.

I have utilized an entire chapter - **The Yoga Suite** - to expostulate the ancient principles behind the four main spiritual yoga systems in Hinduism - **Raja Yoga, Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga** and **Jnana Yoga**. **Hatha Yoga**, the principal yoga system now being practiced in the west, also has the same ultimate purpose of helping the practitioner achieve the **Brahman** within, the part of the **Universal Spirit** within an individual. This shall in no way detract from the western purpose of enhancing physical wellbeing. The additional spiritual awareness imparted by my chapters on the Yoga systems will only achieve a more rounded physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing if they do aim to utilize, now or later, yoga and meditation to enhance their quality of life on Earth. I also maintain that yoga and meditation not only adds to personal life quality but also adds to the **ambience** of the entire social atmosphere the practicing individual lives in.

I have not included any physical yoga systems in this course but I do recommend a book on **Hatha Yoga**, the most popular yoga system used across the world, including India.

The **Hatha Yoga Pradipika** is a Sanskrit classic written by **Swami Swatamarama** in the 15th century A.D. It is the oldest surviving text on Hatha Yoga and is derived from older texts as well as the good Swami's own yogic experiences. Many modern English translations of the book are available.

The Caste System and other facts.

The very word “Caste” is derived from the Portuguese word “*Casta*” meaning lineage, breed or race. Used in the Indian context it means the set of social groupings existing in Hindu society from the Vedic period.

The Rig Veda defines such groupings as **Varna**, literally color, signifying grouping of Hindu society according to profession. This division initially was not rigid and certainly not based on birth but later, probably due to vested interests, it rigidified into a set system within which each Hindu had a predetermined caste according to birth and could do nothing in life to change it. Even the person’s forebears would be born into the same caste no matter how mismatched the offspring’s capabilities would be to the profession determined by the caste.

Initially **Manu’s Laws** in the Rig Veda mentioned four varnas or castes – **The Brahmins**, who were the priests and intellectual and spiritual leaders of society, **The Kshatriyas**, who were the rulers and warriors, **The Vaishyas**, who were the craftsmen, merchants and farmers and **The Sudras** who were those who did the most menial of jobs and were servants to the other castes. Much later after the Vedas were written a fifth class, called the **untouchables** or **achutas**, were introduced to probably include the conquered indigenous races by the Aryans.

A hymn in the Rig Veda compares caste to the body of a man: “*The Brahmana was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya (Kshatriya) made. His thighs became the Vaishya, from his feet the Sudra was produced.*”

Birth within a certain caste is determined by **Karma** in previous lives. The better the Karma the higher the caste.

The Hindu caste system first came in contact with the European world with the advent of colonial rule in the subcontinent. Instead of enlightenment from the modern thought processes of the western races the pernicious system was further aggravated in collusion with the **racist systems** of the colonial rulers. It was utilized by the white rulers to keep the natives in their places and to enhance their own superiority. Hindus of higher castes were utilized by the rulers to further their own aims of governance and this gave indulgence to an already highly discriminatory system under which the lower castes and the untouchables, those outside the pale of society, were much oppressed.

Though the Vedas mention only four castes, through the long years of evolution, Hinduism has accrued a large number of other castes and sub-castes that are all meticulously documented by the Indian government to facilitate **positive discrimination** in favor of the lower underprivileged castes. There are severe laws in India forbidding damaging and insulting discrimination according to castes and the government actively follows a policy of positive discrimination for the **socio-economic upliftment** of the erstwhile lower castes. Some of these policies for the notified lower castes and underprivileged classes of people are:

- Provision for **free education** up to graduation
- A **fixed quota reservation** in higher educational institutions
- A hefty **50% quota** in government jobs with provision for **faster promotion**

Caste-based identities are so ingrained within Hindu society that the government strictures are regularly ignored in activities of daily life such as marriage. Such blatant flaunting of the prevailing laws is most common in economically-backward and isolated areas.

There are also conflicting opinions on the reservation system of the government for the erstwhile lower castes. Both positive and negative opinions are:

- Some allege that the reservation system only goes to firmly ingrain the caste system within the present Indian psyche.
- Others allege that the reservation system sidelines the meritorious as it has no set deadline and seems to be in perpetuity.
- Those for reservation assert that the system must continue as long as there are previously-suppressed people living below poverty lines until all such people have achieved equality with the majority.
- Others assert that the reservation system must be based on other financial criteria like annual income and so on and not upon any previous caste criteria.

The debate goes on but the government has the reservation system firmly in place against much opposition from vested groups.

Dalits:

After the discussion on the caste system in India some special mention must be made of the Dalits, who were formerly placed on the lowest rung of Hindu society and for whom so many great Indian personages like Mahatma Gandhi have strived to restore their individual birthrights. At the bottom of the social scale of Hindu society are the **untouchables** or **achutas**. They were beyond the pale of society and had no official place in it. They lived beyond village or city limits and did mostly those jobs that were considered the most unclean by Hindu precepts such as working with leather, cremating dead bodies, butchering, cleaning latrines, etc.

They were called untouchables literally because they were considered to be so. Such a person could not be come into physical contact with without fear of losing one's caste. Even stepping on an untouchable's shadow was considered a risk of losing one's caste. The other four castes, especially the Brahmins, considered these people as **pariahs** or **outcasts** and even animals like cattle, horses and dogs were considered on a higher level than they. It is no wonder that many of them, through the ages, have converted to whatever alternate religion that was available at that time. All these religions – Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Christianity – had no class distinction and as such were always attractive alternates to Hinduism for these people.

In the 20th century Mahatma Gandhi set out a program for the **National Congress Party**, the primary organization fighting for independence of the subcontinent from the British, that persuaded the British to pass laws abolishing **untouchability**. Gandhiji fondly called these people **Harijans** after the Hindu belief that all beings are of the Supreme Being. "Harijan" means "Child of Hari". Hari is another name for Krishna, eight avatar of Vishnu. The untouchables, after Mahatma Gandhi's death, prefer to call themselves **Dalits** or "**The Oppressed Ones**". About **16%** of the population of modern India is comprised of these people. The Government actively promotes their cause and there are reserved seats in the national and state level legislative bodies to ensure that they get a fair representation in the government.

Even then the habit of centuries persists in many places, especially in remote towns and villages where these people are still oppressed and treated as of old. Thus, though untouchability is officially abolished in India, it is practiced in small pockets here and there within the country. Also, uncaring legislators, both Dalits and ordinary Indians, refuse to acknowledge the still-sad plight of these people and neglect their concerns.

Even in the present enlightened atmosphere there are still instances of Dalits converting to other religions and this is a source of great concern for Hindu aficionados who would like to clean up the Hindu act so that these people continue to remain within the Hindu fold.

Mahatma Gandhi in the International Context:

One of the most internationally-acknowledged Hindu leaders of the 20th century was Mahatma Gandhi. "Mahatma" means "Great Soul" and was respectfully and lovingly attributed to him by the Indian people. His full name was **Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi** and he was born into a family of small merchants in the Indian state of Gujarat in 1869. He was sent to England to study law and he successfully completed his education and came back to India. Subsequently he went over to **South Africa** to further his career and came upon the unjust system of **Apartheid**. Since he was most in contact with the Indian community there and suffered at the hands of the South African authorities as a **colored person** he was much annoyed by the unfair discriminatory rules and regulations and registered protests both individually and collectively in association with other colored persons.

Mahatma Gandhi used one of the most innovative techniques of protesting against unfair authority in the history of the world. He was a firm believer in **Ahimsa**, roughly translated as "Non-violence". The concept of Ahimsa is incorporated within both Hindu and Buddhist doctrinology and Mahatma Gandhi took it up and began to use it in the modern context. He firmly believed that the concept was not merely a spiritual tool to aid good behavior but a pervasive one that should govern all aspects of life. Throughout his life he constantly strove to live life with Ahimsa – never indulging in any sort of violence. He was a strict vegetarian and he abstained from all activities that would cause unjust pain to others.

In his campaigns against Apartheid in South Africa Mahatma Gandhi used a movement which he termed **passive resistance**, a term which he later disassociated himself from. Nevertheless this was the forerunner of his more famous

Satyagraha Movement. Passive resistance meant that if there was an unfair rule or regulation in force that the resistor wanted to protest against then the following steps would be taken:

- Declare that the law or regulation was unjust and should be put out of force.
- The next move would be to break the law or regulation.
- The third and last step was to suffer the consequence of breaking the law with dignity.

Gandhi had already studied the other means available at that time of setting up protest movements but he found that speeches, petitions, letters and meetings with officials did nothing to make a dent in the implacable racism of the government. So he proposed that the dignified suffering of the protestors through passive resistance would open the eyes of the oppressors and they would begin to take note of the just demand of the protestors.

He had previously determined that violent movements against unfair regimes was not only morally degrading but also sometimes without much effectiveness as the regimes were often more powerful than the protestors and the ultimate result of the movement would be unaccountable levels of bloodshed. Gandhi believed that violence against oppression was not only wrong but it also inflamed the fear and prejudice that fed the oppression. Thus it only aggravated the situation without providing any remedy.

This passive resistance movement later developed into Gandhi's famous **Satyagraha Movement**. "Satyagraha" means roughly "Holding to the Truth" and the movement aimed at forcing the oppressors to acknowledge the truth of the resistors and their own unjust oppression. For Gandhi, unjust means could never produce just results. He always maintained that – *"The means may be likened to a seed, the end to a tree and there is just the same inviolable connection between the means and the end as there is between the seed and the tree We reap exactly as we sow."* When Gandhi started using his Satyagraha movement to oust the British from India he understood that he was now getting involved in a very large nationwide issue that required supreme effort from his followers.

He understood that no follower, however staunch in support of non-violence he or she may be, could indefinitely sacrifice the self in efforts that bore no fruits. He also understood the strength of the British whom he was resisting. Thus, he planned his campaigns with military precision. He strategically used non-violent movements in efforts to inflict the maximum damage on the British administration. Though he never threatened the British physically he did almost incapacitate their administrative functions in India with his innovative non-co-operation movements with which he ensured that most of the British laws in force were violated. The British, on their part, could hardly imprison the entire nation as so many Indians joined the movement and finally the hapless administrators had to take notice of the Indian demands. The British were in India not only to augment the prestige of their imperial ambitions but also to exploit their dominion economically.

Thus, Gandhi also formulated plans to damage the British economic ventures in India. He began to advise Indian to wear **Khadi**, Indian handlooms, and to boycott textiles made in England and sold by the British in India at huge profits. He also undertook the **Salt March** to protest against British ploys to sell salt made in England in India maintaining that there was enough salt being produced in India at that time by indigenous efforts. These movements crippled the economic efforts of the Europeans. Ultimately, these Satyagraha movements organized by Gandhi forced the British out of India.

Gandhi's novel methods of fighting against oppression did not go unnoticed elsewhere in the world. His non-violence found support almost in every country. Leaders like **Nelson Mandela** of South Africa, where Gandhi himself had started his political career, and **Martin Luther King Jr.** of the USA used his political ploys to fight injustice in their own lands. There are also innumerable Gandhi aficionados all over the world though some of them may not be very prominent figures.

Mahatma Gandhi himself did not live to savor for long the independence of the land he so faithfully and intelligently fought for because an assassin's bullet ended his life in 1948, just a year after the British had left India. Nevertheless, the legacy he left is always there for all Indians and for all the world people. His wise perception of Hindu doctrines has given the world a very humane way of bringing those who stray from the path of justice back to its safe fold.

The Ram Janmabhoomi Issue:

This is one of the most contentious issues in relations between the **majority** Hindus and **minority** Muslims of India. **Ram Janmabhoomi** means the “Birthplace of Rama”.

Ramachandra, the seventh avatar of Vishnu, reigned in the Kingdom of Ayodhya, a place still distinguishable within the State of Uttar Pradesh in modern India. Within the small area that is signified as the avatar’s kingdom there is a special spot of land on which a very old Hindu temple stood. The temple was supposed to have been built on the very spot where Ramachandra was born. Unfortunately, in the 16th century **Babar**, who was the founder of the Great Mughal Empire, with proselytizing zeal, by his own accounts, had destroyed the temple and had a mosque built in its place.

Much later, after the fall of the Mughal Empire with the advent of the British in India, the Hindus began to consider possibilities of displacing the mosque and having their temple back on place in honor of their avatar and beloved Ramachandra. Negotiations did start with the Muslims in charge of the mosque and certain concerned Hindu groups but they failed to materialize any solution.

Nevertheless, the status quo was maintained for many years with the Hindus wanting their temple back and the Muslims half-heartedly willing to give way. India gained independence and time wore on and nothing much came of the discontent. It was a local issue tucked away in a corner of a large country like India. After the independence of India and Pakistan, with the mutual migration of Hindus from Pakistani areas to India and Muslims from Indian areas to Pakistan, certain Hindus placed idols and other religious artifacts near the mosque and started worshipping there.

Ultimately, in the late 1980’s, the late Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, under intense pressure from Hindu groups associated with **Hindutva**, allowed worship within the mosque area.

There had always been pressure from Hindu extremist groups for breaking down the mosque forcibly. This terrible conception eventually materialized with rampant Hindu mobs tearing down the entire mosque in **1992**. Even the foundations were not spared. The act flared off a series of communal riots across the country, especially in the city of Bombay (now Mumbai). Innumerable **innocent lives**, both Hindu and Muslim, were lost. The situation was brought under control by the Indian authorities with extreme difficulty and the site of the mosque was placed under control of the **Supreme Court of India**, the highest legal authority in India.

The Court set up a commission to explore possibilities of finding a solution to resolve the impasse between the two communities whereby both sides would be placated. It was proved by the Archaeological Survey of India, though controversially, that a Hindu temple had stood at the site of the mosque but this was mere academic fact for the Muslims wanted their mosque back while the Hindus wanted their temple in the same place. The Hindu side is led by the **Vishwa Hindu Parishad** while the Muslims are represented by the **Babri Masjid Action Committee**. The mosque was known as the **Babri Masjid** after Babar, its builder.

The situation fomented for many years till, in 2002, it flared up again when some volunteers of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, who had been to Ayodhya to help in work on building the temple, were burnt to death in the train carriage in which they were returning to their home town in the State of **Gujarat**. Riots broke out again in parts of the state and many Hindus and Muslims, who were larger in number among the dead because of their minority, died horrible deaths. Again the Indian authorities somehow stemmed the riots and brought the situation under control but the issue still fulminates beneath the surface of the national consciousness.

The Ram Janmabhoomi Issue has been the direct cause of over **10,000 deaths**, most of them innocent and quite uninvolved in the issue, and it has become the top priority in India to resolve the issue competently so that the viability of India as a land of many religions is sustained. Rationalists from both sides, the Hindu and the Muslim, suggest that both a **mosque** and a **temple** be built side by side on the spot so that both communities are appeased. Such a solution has precedence most notably in **Mathura**, the birthplace of Lord Krishna, the eight avatar of Vishnu.

Hindutva:

Hindutva is a relatively new term coined in the 20th century by **Vinayak Damodar Savarkar** to define movements advocating **Hindu Nationalism**. It's a **right-wing** movement that has recently attracted a lot of followers, including from the Hindu cognoscenti who had till then remained moderate. This attraction for the movement has been generated by what most followers believe is a slight to Hinduism in the form of the desecration of the **Ram Janmabhoomi** site and the supposedly unusual favor shown to minority religious communities in preference to the majority Hindus by the government in recent years.

In a recent judgment the Indian Supreme Court asserted that “no precise meaning can be ascribed to the terms “Hindu”, “Hindutva” and “Hinduism”” without taking into account the conglomeration of **Indian culture and heritage**. This is perfectly in rapport with this course which has throughout asserted that Hinduism is not only a religion but a way of life for its devotees.

Legal Definition of Hinduism:

In a 1966 ruling the Supreme Court of India defined Hinduism as a faith for legal purposes. The following points have been copied in toto from an article at the **Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia** for maintaining the exact legalese.

- Acceptance of the Vedas with reverence as the highest authority in religious and philosophic matters and acceptance with reverence of Vedas by Hindu thinkers and philosophers as the sole foundation of Hindu philosophy.
- Spirit of tolerance and willingness to understand and appreciate the opponent's point of view based on the realization that truth is many-sided.
- Acceptance of great world rhythm — vast periods of creation, maintenance and dissolution follow each other in endless succession — by all six systems of Hindu philosophy.
- Acceptance by all systems of Hindu philosophy of the belief in rebirth and pre-existence.
- Recognition of the fact that the means or ways to salvation are many.
- Realization of the truth that numbers of Gods to be worshiped may be large, yet there are Hindus who do not believe in the worshiping of idols.
- Unlike other religions, or religious creeds, Hindu religion's not being tied down to any definite set of philosophic concepts, as such.

Hindutva Central Beliefs:

The Hindutva Movement has some essential beliefs which the followers adhere to for promoting their purpose of futhering the Hindu Nationalist Movement. These are:

- They define the **homeland** of the Hindus as the entire Indian Subcontinent comprised of the countries of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and, sometimes, even Afghanistan.
- All religions originating from the subcontinent – Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism are parts of the same religion, namely, Hinduism. All followers of these faiths are in essence Hindus.
- An assertion that Hinduism originated entirely from the subcontinent. They discount the theory that the Aryans brought Hinduism from Central and Asia and propose that, instead, Hinduism traveled from the subcontinent to the Central Asian countries from which it was brought back by the Aryans. They propose that Hinduism was developed by the indigenous Indus Valley Civilization.
- The followers assert that Hindus have always been oppressed in their own land by foreign invaders like the Muslims and Christians.
- They also assert that the Hindu philosophy has been progressively weakened by **British Colonial** and **Communist** thinking.
- They work towards a setting up of a **Hindu State** throughout the entire subcontinent to bring about a grand Hindu revival.

Hindutva Dissensions:

The followers of Hindutva maintain that the Indian legislation protecting the rights of minority groups like the Muslims and Christians and others are weighed heavily against the Hindus. They call the secularism of the Indian Republic **Pseudo-secularism**. They are in favor of a **Uniform Civil Code** under which there will be no discriminations based on religion.

Conclusion:

Hinduism has survived the turmoils of time for over 5500 years. It is still pre-eminent as the third most popular religion with over a billion followers. Its 5000 year old precepts are still being followed in this present 21st century when humankind is at the peak of civilized development. This is entirely because this unique religion has within its basic precepts a lasting quality which is undeniably true and, thus, imperishable. Whatever the momentary dissensions that run rifts within the religion Hinduism bounces back as is evidenced from its long historical vicissitudes.