



A Brief Introduction to Hinduism

Many **Indian traditions** are very visible in contemporary Britain – these include ubiquitous yoga classes and meditation courses; the dancing, saffron-robed members of **ISKCON** (popularly called ‘Hare Krishnas’); the devotees of **Sathya Sai Baba** (1926-2011); those who attend annual appearances of **Mata Amritanandamayi** (b.1953) for a ritual hug; the philosophy discussions at **The School of Economic Science** and many more examples.

It may be helpful for those who come into contact with a contemporary form of Hinduism to have some understanding of both the diversity of Indian traditions in general, and the specific background and history with which a particular group, movement or teacher identifies .

Founding

Unlike many of the religions found in Britain, ‘Hinduism’ has no single founder, although many of the Indian traditions described as ‘Hinduism’ do have distinct founders. There is no founding scripture comparable to the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam; no individual or group of persons who can act as a central religious authority. The Indian traditions could be understood as a network of related cultures rather than a formal religion; some Indian traditions may have official beliefs and practices while other may not.

The word ‘Hindu’ was first used with no religious significance by Persian conquerors around 1000 BCE to refer the populations living around and beyond the river Indus in North India. Gradually, the term was accepted by the population of the subcontinent as self-identification in dialogue with other cultures. ‘Hinduism’ as a term was first developed by 19th century European Orientalists interested in

Patrons

The Right Reverend Graham James,
Lord Bishop of Norwich (Church of England)
The Reverend Dr Hugh Osgood (Moderator of the Free Churches Group)
Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia (Greek Orthodox Church)
Bishop Paul Hendricks (Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Southwark)
The Lord Desai of St Clement Danes
The Lord Ahmed of Rotherham
Baroness Sally Greengross of Notting Hill

studying and cataloguing the language, culture and religion of the sub-continent. In the colonial period, the term Hinduism was also taken up by Indian social and religious reformers who have made the term one of self-identification for the majority of the Indian population.

Where are Hindus?

Although statistics for a non-membership religion are difficult to estimate, most authorities would describe the number of 'Hindus' at around 15% of the global population. It is likely that about 80% of India's over one billion citizens are Hindus, and neighbouring Nepal is closer to 90% Hindu. Hindus make a significant minority in many countries worldwide including Mauritius (48%), Fiji (38%), Guyana (35%), Suriname (27%), Zambia (24%), Trinidad and Tobago (23%), Bangladesh (16%), Sri Lanka (7-15%), Malaysia (7%), Qatar (7%), Oman (3-5%) Pakistan (3-5%) and Singapore (4%). In England and Wales, there are about 840,000 self-identified Hindus, amounting to about 1.5% of the population. Immigrants to Britain with Indian ethnicity have often settled near other immigrants of the same background. The largest concentrations of Hindus can be found in Greater London (with large numbers in Brent, Harrow, Hendon, Hounslow and Southall) and in Leicester.

Who is a Hindu?

Personal identification with the term Hindu is not simply a matter of 'belief' in key precepts or participation in certain practices. Identification (or dis-identification) with 'Hindu' as a category might be related to negotiating specific political and social implications, as well as identification with a familial tradition or personal beliefs.

Many Indians conduct specific rituals and hold particular images of the divine close to their hearts and this is often identified with Hinduism, masking a real diversity of practice and belief. Some committed members of a tradition with origins in India would identify as a member of a particular group, for example a **Brahma Kumari** or a **Vedantist**, and many more would identify with the term **dharma** as central to their identity rather than feeling at home with belief-based understandings of religion (see the next section). Many non-ethnic Indians have adopted aspects of Indian traditions, e.g. a specific form of meditation, yoga, or a devotional practice to a guru, but make no self-identification with any religious tradition at all or may even self-identify as Christian, Jewish, or Buddhist.

In important aspects of Indian law the term Hindu also includes 'Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains and others' but not Muslims or Christians. Some Indian Hindus believe that Hinduism is tightly bound with ethnicity and it has been known for non-Indian devotees to be turned away at temples. A few Indian traditions, like the **International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)** have a formal way of initiating converts into their faith. However, more commonly, teachers of Indian traditions are not overly concerned with a Christian idea of conversion for their western disciples. Conversion is seen as threatening for many Indians and there have been several attempts at outlawing 'forcible conversion through the use of intimidation, inducement or fraud' usually aimed against Christian missionary activity. This has become a significant issue in India since the 1980s when religious Hindu nationalism (**Hindutva**) became an influential political force in India.

Major Beliefs and Practices

The diversity found within traditional Indian religiosity spans a spectrum from highly devotional, deistic traditions, to traditions that come close to holding atheistic ideas. However, more generally, Indian traditions understand a diversity of divine images as manifestations or aspects of a single entity.

A number of central ideas about how an individual should ethically live unite most Indian traditions. These include the concept of dharma, or behaviours important for preserving a 'natural order' of the universe. **Dharma** includes what is ethical behaviour but also provides guidance on duty, decency, vocation, and religion. In contrast to Judeo-Christian traditions, many Indian traditions emphasize acting in accord with **dharma** over adherence to beliefs. Some Indians would self-describe their religion as **sanātana dharma**, or 'eternal dharma'.

Theologically, most Indian traditions are interested in the concept of **Brahman** and/or **paramatman**, experiential understandings of the ultimate nature of reality. **Brahman** is sometimes considered to be an impersonal essence, at other times as a specific 'God' with a personality, while other traditions emphasize Brahman to be beyond all such descriptions. **Atman** is the principle of individual self and its relation to Brahman is considered from a wide variety of positions within the Indian traditions.

Closely concerned with the idea of an individual's atman is the concept of **karma**, the doctrine that every action has an effect that is usually understood in terms of personal morality and fortune, being a result of past actions. Many, but not all Indian traditions also believe in **reincarnation**, the idea that the 'essence' of an individual is reborn many times in both human and animal bodies. Generally, Indians use the concept of karma to motivate dharmic behaviour in this life in order to secure a more auspicious rebirth in the next life. Many outside India have adopted and adapted the ideas of karma and reincarnation. According to the 2008 British Social Attitudes Survey, 24% of the population report a belief in reincarnation, although how this overlaps with other religious beliefs, such as resurrection of the body is unclear. Some non-Indians may focus more on exploring who they were in past lives rather than concentrating on how behavior in this life might affect potential future lives.

Bhagvan is the non-specific word that comes closest to Judeo-Christian understandings of 'God' and this divinity might be seen and acknowledged as manifesting in various names and forms. The divine as imagined in human-like form is a popular form of **darśan**, a devotional practice involving seeing and being seen by God. Devotional images might take the form of **Vishnu**, **Śiva**, **Kali** (see major division section below) as well as **Ganesha** (who has an elephant head), **Kṛṣṇa**, **Lakshmi**, **Sarswati**, **Hanuman** (who is a monkey), **Murugan** and numerous others. Many Indian traditions believe that the divine can consciously incarnate into human (or part-human form) in order to be accessible to the needs of humans; these incarnations are known as avatars. A number of living and recently deceased 'saints' are widely believed to be avatars, including **Ramakrishna** (1836-1886), **Sai Baba of Sridi** (d. 1918), **Ramana Maharshi** (1879-1950), **Anandamayi Ma** (1896-1982), and more controversial figures such as **Sathya Sai Baba** (1926-2011) are also considered to be avatars by their devotees.

Major Texts

Indian traditions that assert the Vedic texts as the origins of their religion are known as ‘orthodox’ Hinduism. The oldest text in this tradition, the **R̥g Veda**, is believed to have been memorized in their current form at around 1200-900BCE in northwest India. The Vedas are considered **śruti**, that is, ‘heard’ or revealed texts, and not of human origin and consist of a variety of prayers, rituals and spells directed at the particular deities. Other Indian traditions, particularly those in Tamil-speaking south India do not hold the Vedas as the foundation of their traditions. The major **Upanishads** are considered the culmination of the Vedic cannon and the oldest Mukhya Upanishads were composed between 800BCE and 200CE. The Upanishads discuss the concept **moṣka**, the cessation of desire-based attachment. New commentaries on these scriptures, themselves termed Upanishads, continue to be written and new groups might claim the status that their scriptures are **śruti**, or divinely inspired.

Within India, the population is more familiar with the sacred epics of the **Mahābhārata** and the **Rāmāyaṇa**. These stories of divine and human interaction have been popularized in television dramas and echoed in soap-opera narratives; the stories form a part of the national and individual understandings. The **Mahābhārata** has been dated as being collated between 400BCE and 400CE (although the story may have begun taking shape around 400 years prior to that). It is an epic work of verse that is roughly ten times the length of the Iliad and Odyssey combined. It contains a number of distinct story lines, including the narrative of the Kurukshetra War and the fates of the **Kauravas** and **Pandava** princes (this section is the most frequently read and includes the Bhagavad Gita), the story of the princess **Damayanti**, an abbreviated version of the story of **Rāma** who rescues his faithful wife **Sita** from the demon **Rāvaṇa** known as the **Rāmāyaṇa** (the full story is considered a second major epic of the Indian tradition), the story of the deer-horned boy **R̥ṣyaśṛṅga**, as well as more abstract discussions about the purpose of life.

Although the influence of the Vedas and the epic texts is substantial across Indian traditions, the narratives, deities and concepts that frame an individual Indian’s worldview are likely to be based on more local, lived traditions and not necessarily closely tied to one of the ‘standard’ texts mentioned above.

Major Divisions

Most attempts to explore the diversity of the Indian traditions make three major divisions based on devotional focus: **Shaivates**, **Vaishnavites**, and **Shakti**. Each of these divisions has numerous traditions and ways of thinking within their boundaries. Additionally India has a rich religious tradition that is not focused upon devotion to a particular deistic conception of the divine, the most popular being **Vedantic** thought.

Vaishnavism focuses upon the worship of **Vishnu/Narayana** and his **avatars** (incarnations) as the most comprehensive description of the divine. Many, but not all, Vaishnavite traditions emphasize receiving initiation (**dīkṣā**) and spiritual instruction from a **guru** (teacher) qualified within the tradition; at this point an individual is given instruction in a particular mantra and its repetition (**japa**). When reading scriptures, Vaishnavites tend to emphasise literal over symbolic readings.



A devotional image portraying mythical and historical figures that some devotees believe to be **avatars** (incarnations) the god **Vishnu**.

Many Vaishnavite traditions focus on the incarnation of **Krishna** as the focus of their bhakti. The most widely known of these outside of India is the **International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)** which was a revival within the tradition of **Gaudiya Vaishnava** which developed in 16th century Bangladesh/Bengal area under the inspiration of **Sri Chaitanya** (1486-1534), whom devotees believe to be an avatar of Krishna. There a number of loosely related movements from this background including the **Gaudiya Math**, the **Sri Krishna Chaitanya Mission**, and the **ISKCON Revival Movement**, among others. Inform has a separate leaflet with more information on ISKCON specifically.

Shaivate traditions are significantly represented in the Hindu populations of Nepal, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. **Shaivites** focus on the figure of **Shiva** as the creator, destroyer, and maintainer of all life. Understanding of the nature of the world can be dual (there is a fundamental difference between the divine and the material), non-dual or a combination of the two perspectives. There are significant regional variations and traditions within Saivism; it is associated with worship of the **lingam/yoni** (a symbol of cosmic energy) and ash. Some Shaivites take initiation (**dīkṣa**) into a specific tradition in order to obtain liberation in this life (**mukti**) and/or obtaining more direct benefits in this lifetime (**bhukti**). A form of Shaivism that has been promoted to international converts is that of **Siddha Yoga** founded by **Swami Muktananda** (1908–1982).

Swaminarayan (1781-1830) was a north-Indian religious reformer who is believed by his followers to be an incarnation of **Lord Narayana**. There are a number of different groups holding Swaminarayan as their inspiration, the most influential being the **Bocāsanvāsī Akshar Purushottam Swāminārāyan Sansthā (BAPS)** and the **Swaminarayan Gadi**. Swaminarayan beliefs are **Vaishnavite**, but also promote the worship of **Harihara**, a united Vishnu-Siva deity; Swaminarayan's teachings are also considered part of the **Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta** philosophy, i.e. a belief that Brahman alone exists, but that Brahman is characterized by attributes and multiplicity. There are an estimated 5-20 million individuals associated with the Swaminarayan faith and it is particularly associated with Gujarati communities. It also has a significant presence in Britain with many large temples and it attracts visitors from the wider Indian diaspora who may not be specifically affiliated with specific Swaminarayan groups.

Shaktism focuses worship on a female image of the divine, **Shakti/Devi**. Shiva is usually considered to represent a masculine divine energy, but attention to him is peripheral to these traditions. Some forms of Shaktism are very intellectual while others are primarily devotional. The image of the goddess can take many different forms based on family tradition or personal attraction; for example in south India the focus is on **Lalita-Tripurasundari/Mahadevi** and in Bengal and Bangladesh the focus is more upon **Kali/Durga**. Contemporary female gurus such as **Mata Amritanandamayi** (1953-) and **Mother Meera** (1960-) are often considered to be a manifestation of Devi although they might not otherwise have a background in a Shakti tradition.

For those of a non-Indian background, **Vedanta** is perhaps the most influential Indian tradition. This tradition focuses on the philosophy of the Upanishads and believes that self-realization, or the individual understanding the true nature of reality, is the primary aim of human life and leads to **mokṣa** (liberation). There are traditionally six different 'schools' related to Vedanta philosophy, the most influential being **Advaita Vedanta** founded by **Adi Shankara** (c. 789CE), **Vishishtadvaita** founded by **Rāmaṇuja** (1017-1137CE) and **Dvaita** founded by **Madhvācārya** (1238–1317 CE). Descriptions of the 'ultimate nature of reality' vary between Vedantic traditions: Dvaita philosophy is dualistic in nature (consciousness is fundamentally distinct from matter) while Advaita Vedanta is non-dualist in nature (there is ultimately no separation from the divine and the mundane) while Vishishtadvaita conceptualizes both souls and matter as the body of the divine. Yoga and Saṃkhya are also classically presented as two distinct philosophical and practical soteriologies (doctrines of salvation). Vedanta was the first form of Indian religiosity to be actively promoted to Westerners by **Swami Vivekananda** (1863-1902). But perhaps the most widely popularized form of Vedanta outside of India stems from an Advaita Vedanta background of the **Maharishi Mahesh Yogi** (1918-2008), the founder of **Transcendental Meditation** and a number of Western-born guru figures.

Tantra began to be articulated in around 600CE and, it could be argued, has influenced all Indian traditions in some way, although it is most frequently associated with particular orders of Shavite and Shakti traditions (as well as parts of Jainism and Buddhism). As with all traditions, there is a great variety of forms of practice, but this path is usually concerned with an active practice (**sādhana**) which involves **dīkṣā** (initiation) and specific rituals. Tantric traditions typically focus on the practitioner's personal spiritual advancement, perhaps through the manipulation of **kuṇḍalinī**, a subtle energy believed to run in channels through the body, meditation to still the mind, and visualizations of the self as merging with the divine. Tantric traditions often subvert traditional social orders such as caste and gender pollution taboos. A focus on enjoyable sexual activity as a spiritual path is better termed **Neo-Tantra**, which has developed as an integration of Western esoteric magic and ritual, with selected readings of Indian texts.

A number of contemporary gurus are able to attract followings based on their charisma and may or may not be associated with a particular teaching lineage (**samprada**).

Institutional Places of Worship

Many Indians go to temples, called **mandirs**, where priests live and maintain carefully crafted images of the deities (**murtis**) that have been ritually empowered with a divine essence. There are particular traditional rules and rituals for temple construction and very few temples have been purpose-built in Britain; the **Swaminaryan Mandir in Neasden**, northwest London is the largest example. However, existing structures can also be adapted to create functioning temples. Some devout Hindus might visit

a temple daily to make personal devotions, while many others might only attend on days of festivals, or when they feel a need to connect with the divine. There are typically a number of people employed to perform mandir rituals; these individuals are known as **pujari** or **archaka**, those who perform public puja and care for the temple statues. Mandirs also serve as community centres and venues for dance and music performances, group singing of devotional songs (**bhajans**) and are often the preferred venues for rites-of-passage rituals, including marriage and initiation (**dīkṣā**), initiation to a mantra practice or tradition of teaching.

Ashrams or **mathas** are places of residences for **sannyasa**, those who have taken vows to forsake the traditional expectations of family life in order to pursue spiritual understanding. Ashrams are affiliated with a particular **samprada** (spiritual lineage) and/or a specific guru. Many have also served as **gurukulas**, residential schools for children, and some also have charitable outreach programmes. Some contemporary Indian ashrams are attached to complexes that also provide medical facilities and other secular educational training. Many also offer seasonal 'camps' which accommodate a large number of affiliated householders for a period of retreat and chance to concentrate on spiritual development, perhaps providing opportunities for meditation and study of scriptures.

A number of Indian ashrams offer temporary accommodation (Guest Houses) for travellers and some may even offer educational courses geared towards western devotees in yoga, meditation, and scripture. Sometimes residents are expected to join a set schedule; other venues only request that the residents abide by certain house rules, e.g. no drinking alcohol. Inform would suggest that those interested in staying at an ashram might acquire an understanding of the organization's beliefs and practices and as well as researching the local area.

Personal Places of Worship

A central location for a Hindu to worship is within the home. Indian homes typically have a household shrine where the individual communicates directly with the divine. A small area might be set aside with chosen **murtis** (images which represent the Divine) of gods and gurus (respected teachers) with which the family particularly identifies. Different members of the family may have different shrines or have chosen particular figures to place within a central shrine. In an affluent home a shrine might be an entire room; alternatively devotion might be directed towards images on posters taped to the wall. Traditionally one member of the family, usually a woman, performs daily **puja** (worship directed towards a deity) and care of the shrine by washing any statues, reciting mantras and making small offerings like incense or fruit to the deities. **Bhakti**, generating feelings of devotion and love for a particular image of the divine, is a central practice for many. This may involve **japa**, the recitation of verses in honour of the deity known as, devotional songs or mantras.

Many westerners influenced by Indian traditions may adopt aspects of the home shrine, placing images of deities and guru figures in a special place in their home and using the shrine as a focus for meditation practices or prayer. Additionally, non-Indians might adopt personal practices of yoga (most often meaning a physical practice of holding various postures or asana) and forms of seated meditation which have origins in the Indian traditions. In India one can also find many shrines and sacred places in public spaces where there are images of deities and those passing might offer prayers and their respect.

Rites of Passage

The rituals followed by an individual Hindu may vary according to their social and geographical position as well as their personal beliefs. In orthodox (Vedic) Hinduism, there is a priestly caste, traditionally a hereditary place in the social order, which is trained specifically to perform rights and rituals for the rest of the population. There are sixteen orthodox **saṃskāra** (pronounced in Hindi **sanskār**), or 'making perfect' rituals performed at life stages, priests are usually paid to perform these services for individuals. Ten are focused on the period between conception in the mother's womb to the age of three years. Others would include taking marriage vows, funeral rites, renouncing the world (becoming a **sanyāsa**) and becoming a monastic. The rituals are believed to bring beneficial karma and good luck. Most involve the creation of a sacred space, the chanting of Vedic verses (mantra) by a qualified priest, offerings of various substances into a fire, and the presences and blessings of elders. The services of a priest might also be employed to bless the ground for a new building or business venture, to provide a blessing for a special occasion or to remove obstacles to success. These traditional aspects of the Indian traditions are most closely associated with ethnic Indians. Some traditions accept **sanyāsans** of any ethnic background while others do not. For non-Indians interested in a guru-focused tradition, receiving a **dīkṣa** (initiation), specific spiritual practices and personal guidance from a guru can be personally and symbolically important.

Life Stages/Ashramas

Indian traditions may adopt an interpretation of four (male) life-stages found in the Vedas, known as ashramas. These consist of 1) **brahmacharya**, being a student, 2) **grihastha**, being a 'householder' with family responsibilities, 3) **vanaprastha**, often described as 'retirement' but living like a hermit, and 4) **sanyāsa** taking vows to dedicate their lives to spiritual development and depending on alms for all needs. Traditionally, men (and in rare cases women), usually over the age of fifty, might take **sanyāsa** and either live with other renunciates in an ashram or math (see next section), or become a wandering ascetics. These itinerant **Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada** (1896-1977), is often held up as a model who left a successful life as a householder before becoming a **sanyāsa** in 1959. Over time, ISKCON converts have merged with the diasporic Hindu population in Britain and it is more common for members to be 'householders' with regular jobs and family lives, rather than taking **sanyāsa** vows. More recently it has also become acceptable for ISKCON members to live as celibate monastics (called **brahmachari** within the movement) as young adults before later accepting the responsibilities of the householder and starting a family. The followers of **Bhagvan Rajneesh/Osho** (1931-1990) may take new names and robes and describe themselves as **sannyasin**, but they do not commit to absenting from sex or business as traditional; therefore these individuals are sometimes described by those outside the movement as **neo-sannyasins**.

Lifestyle habits

Orthodox Indian traditions have a focus on maintaining ritual purity. This traditionally includes an emphasis on food and drink and appropriate contact between individuals. Some traditions focus on dietary purity throughout the year while other traditions involve rituals and fasting appropriate to certain phases of life or celebrations. For these reasons many, but not all, Indians avoid certain kinds of food and drink, most typically meat, poultry, fish, eggs, onion, garlic, and alcohol. Cows are generally considered sacred animals by Hindus, and are often protected by law in Hindu-majority states. The cultural focus on purity ranges from whom one might accept food to sexual intercourse. Extramarital relations, homosexuality and illegitimate children might be considered impure as well as immoral. For some communities, women may be considered impure during menstruation and

expected to avoid physical labour, cooking and performing puja during this time. Adherence to these purity norms is typically enforced by the family and community and can vary between the diverse communities within India. However, for the more educated and affluent, these traditions can become more a matter of personal choice.

Caste

Caste is a complex and contested concept for Indian society. Like most societies, in India the life choices and opportunities of a child are depended upon the social and economic position of the parents.

Caste is a word taken from Portuguese that was first applied to India in the sixteenth century by Europeans. The roots of the caste system are generally assumed to be based on the concept of **varṇas** or the four aspects of the 'cosmic body' in the later **Ṛg Veda**. Here the social group of **brahmans** (whose duty is to learn and enact Vedic rituals) emerged from the head, the **kṣatriya** (warriors and rulers) from the arms, the **vaiśya** (merchants, agricultural workers, etc) from the thighs and the **śūdra** (servants whose duty is to serve all above) from the feet. Varnas might be associated with personality temperaments and astrological indications; members of the same family might be considered to have different dominant varnas. Over time, this scripture has become conflated with **jāti**, a more fluid identity associated with communities and sub-communities defined on the basis of trade, language and/or religious belief creating over 1,000 recognized castes in contemporary India.

Historians and anthropologists disagree on the extent to which the caste was a fixed or immobile description at any period of time and there is evidence of śūdra dynasties. Many Indian religious figures have been critical of the caste system from Advaita Vedanta founder **Adi Shankara** (c. 789 CE) who did not admit any reality to the classifications, to more modern popular religious leaders like **Swami Prabhupada** (1896-1977) who founded ISKCON, which unequivocally opposes any birth-based caste system and **Sri Sri Ravi Shankar** (b. 1956) of the Art of Living Foundation who explicitly rejects caste divisions. Other orthodox religious figures continue to uphold a link between caste and purity and may bar contact between castes or encourage rituals for rectifying caste pollution.

The Indian government has made caste-based discrimination illegal and offers some forms of affirmative action (reserved school places and government employment to quotas) to the lowest castes, which contributes to both resentment and social mobility. Although most closely associated with Hinduism, caste politics and prejudice can affect people of any religion in India. The lowest castes call themselves **dalits** and tribal peoples rather than untouchables. In many cases they still have generally poor economic and educational resources and continue to experience discrimination, prejudice, and violence. Some consider that caste labels as enshrined in Indian law have contributed to inequality rather than helping to alleviate it.

The majority of marriages in India continue to be negotiated by the entire family of those involved, with the intended bride and groom usually having the option to accept or decline proposed partners. Parents usually want to match their children within the same caste, although it is more acceptable for women to marry into higher castes than men. Breaking with familial expectations of appropriate marriage partners can cause tensions, although 'love matches' are also increasingly common and accepted in much of Indian society. In some communities, those who transgress caste-appropriate relationships can be subject to violence and even murder.

In May 2013, caste was introduced into UK law with a bill preventing discrimination based on caste. However, the legislation was not preceded by any in-depth research consultation with the Hindu community, caste was not defined, nor was any system of implementation discussed as part of the legislation. Many members of the UK Hindu community were upset because they feel it will further entrench rather than alleviate any caste-based distinction that may exist (see www.mycasteishindu.org). However, discrimination based on caste has been reported in UK, particularly in some parts of Punjabi communities and particularly in relation to Valmiki and Ravidassia groups, which are closely associated with both distinct belief systems and a particular caste background. Any social importance of caste is losing its importance for those of second and third-generation Indian ancestry.

Festivals and Pilgrimages

Because there is such diversity in devotional forms of God within the Indian traditions, there are a huge number of potential festival days and pilgrimage sites; many receive local rather than national or international attention. The festival calendar is lunar rather than solar and most festivals are associated with particular deities. The most popular festival is perhaps Diwali, a five-day festival celebrating the triumph of light over darkness and associated with Lakshmi, Rāma and Sita. For some Indian communities Diwali marks the beginning of a new year and is associated with gift exchanges and decorating homes with light.

Other significant festivals are the focus for those who practice bhakti towards particular deities, such as **Janmashtami** (celebrating the birth of Krishna), **Ganesha Chaturthi** (a festival for **Gaṇeśa**), **Dussehra** (celebrating Rama's victory over Ravana) and **Navarati** (for Bengalis, associated with the goddess Durga), **Śivaratri** (associated with Śiva), and **Holi** (commemorates the death of Holika who plotted to kill a devotee of Vishnu).

There is no obligation to make pilgrimages in the Indian traditions, however the practice is still popular. There are many sacred sites in India and Indian families might make pilgrimages to significant temples, or natural features (such as a cave or river) associated with the divine, depending on their resources. **Sadus** might make a practice of visiting various holy places while begging for food. There are four holy cities on each side of India (Badrinath, Dwarka, Jagannath Puri, and Rameshwaram) known collectively as the **Char Dham** which particularly devout Hindus might try to visit once in a lifetime. Particular holy places are also associated with festivals, leading to some of the largest gatherings of people in the world in celebration, for example the **Kumbh Mela**, a festival held every four years in either Allahabad, Haridwar, Nashik, or Ujjain; the last two festivals have been estimated to be amongst the largest crowds ever gathered. For non-Indians interested in Indian spirituality, pilgrimage to the ashram of a chosen guru might be supplemented by an exploration of some of the popular holy cities of Rishikesh and Varanasi. Merely going to India is considered a spiritual pilgrimage or rite-of-passage by some non-Indians who have an association to an Indian tradition.

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