

India's timeless spiritual culture is a mystery for many. The rituals, the customs and the "many gods" seem inexplicable to the observer and often standard reference works on Hinduism do little to clear the confusion.

Here for the first time is a concise yet comprehensive introduction to Indian culture presented by those who know it best—not the scholars nor the mystics, but the people who practice it as a daily way of life.

The National Council of Hindu Temples (UK) offers you this booklet as the authoritative statement on the tenets of the Hindu religion, confident that you will gain from it a true and clear understanding of the oldest religious tradition in the world.



An Introduction to the World's Oldest Living Religion

Prepared by the

National Council of Hindu Temples (U.K.)

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National Council of Hindu Temples (U.K.)



Dear Brothers & Sisters

Diwali 1983.

Jai Sri Krishna. For many years in our different temples we have received requests from schools, organisation, official bodies and interested individuals, to provide a simple yet informative introduction to our Hindu religion, which for many is bewildering in its breadth and seeming complexity.

This is important, not simply for casual academic interest, but, because Britain is now a nation of many faiths and cultures, there is little likelihood of harmony and integration for an ethnic community unless its culture is understood and, to some degree, appreciated by the host society. We are aware that there are a number of publications available in the market discussing the Hindu way of life, but many of them are written by outside observers, who, although sympathetic, may not have grasped the essence and frankly we know of others which give the reader a distorted view of Indian culture unacceptable to us. We feel particularly concerned when our young generation has to defend their religion against misinformed criticisms.

So, the National Council of Hindu Temples, as the organisation representing 32 of the main Hindu temples in the UK, decided to produce this booklet to present a clear, concise and authoritative insight to the Hindu religion, its theology, practices, temple worship, customs and festivals. Obviously, in a publication of this size we have not been able to make a comprehensive study of all aspects of the religion and we do hope to publish a more complete book in the near future. Nevertheless, we hope that the reader may be stimulated by this introduction to Hinduism, and we recommend that it is purchased and distributed in quantity to schools, and to all workers in the field of community relations.

We would like to thank all the members of the Council who have participated in this project, particularly our sub-committee assigned to produce the text, and special gratitude to the International Society for Krishna Consciousness for executing its production.

With best wishes,

Yours, in the service of the Lord,

Purushottam Bhardwaj

Purushottam Bhardwaj (President)

Ramanbhai Barber
Ramanbhai Barber (Secretary)

Front Cover: Radha-Krishna Altar Deities at Bhaktivedanta Manor, Letchmore Heath, Hertfordshire

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Time Chart

3000 BC *Vedas*
(Earliest record of Hindu teaching)

1250 BC *Torah*
(Earliest record of Judaism)
550 BC Jainism
500 BC Buddhism
30 AD Christianity
622 AD Islam
1520 AD Sikhism

Hinduism The Overall View

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Hinduism is mankind's oldest living religious tradition. One English missionary in India, comparing Hinduism with other world civilisations long since dead, paid tribute to its endurance, "... but Hinduism lives on. Age has not decayed it, rivals have not destroyed it."

A notable feature of Hinduism is that it does not originate from one prophet or teacher. The earliest record of Hindu teaching is found in the *Vedas* (c. 3000 B.C.), but many authorities claim that Hinduism is as old as the universe, being based upon eternal truths which have no mortal source. Other great religions—Jainism, Buddhism, and more recently Sikhism—appeared from the Vedic tradition.

It was the Persians in the Middle Ages who coined the name "Hinduism" to refer to the inhabitants beyond the Indus river, and "Hinduism" became an umbrella description for the multitude of religious ideas contained in the Indian sub-continent. Some of these ideas adhere closely to the original Vedic tradition, while over the years many have incorporated local influences. The proliferation of Hindu denominations fall within three main groups: Vaishnavism, worship of Krishna and His incarnations; Shaivism, worship of Shiva; and the Shaktas who worship Kali. The all-embracing nature of Hinduism often appears confusing for the Western mind, but despite external variety, much philosophy is common for all Hindus.

"For the soul, there is never birth nor death. Nor having once been, does he ever cease to be. He is unborn, ever-existing, undying and primeval. He is not slain when the body is slain."
—*Bhagavad-gita* Ch. 2 Text 20.

All Hindus understand that the living principle is the spirit soul (*atma*), distinct from the material body. It is the energy of the soul which activates the body and fills it with consciousness. At death the soul leaves the body and then transmigrates into another body to experience a new life. Our present actions determine the type and circumstances of our next body, in keeping with the law of *karma*, a universal principle which rules that all activities reap certain reactions—good, bad or mixed—according to how those activities benefit or harm others. The continuous cycle of birth and death can be terminated when the soul becomes perfect in his devotion and love for God.

"One can understand the Supreme Personality as He is only by devotional service. And when one is in full consciousness of the Supreme Lord by such devotion, he can enter into the kingdom of God."

—*Bhagavad-gita* Ch. 18 Text 55.

Note: The quotations from *Bhagavad-gita* in this booklet are taken from the English translation, *Bhagavad-gita As It Is*, by His Divine Grace A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada.

MOORE COLLEGE LIBRARY

Hinduism— a Philosophy to live by.

The Sanskrit word "*dharma*" is usually translated as "religion," but it has deeper significance. "*Dharma*" refers to our essential nature. As the *dharma* for fire is to burn, so the *Vedas* teach that the *dharma* of all beings is to serve others. For instance, the *dharma* of a parent is to serve the children; of a doctor, to serve his patients; of a soldier, to serve his country, etc. Even the king or president must serve his people, and we are all serving the needs of the body. The Hindu or Vedic culture teaches everyone the duties and responsibilities we must uphold according to our status and occupation in life. For someone to claim to be a parent, teacher, doctor, businessman, king or *guru*, he must follow the *dharma* inherent with that position.

Thus Hinduism is a wonderful synthesis of mystic philosophy and practical application in everyday life. In the *Gita* Lord Krishna describes the perfect attitude to life as follows:

"One who is not envious but who is a kind friend to all living beings, who does not think himself a proprietor, who is free from false ego and equal both in happiness and distress, who is always satisfied and engaged in devotional service with determination and whose mind and intelligence are in agreement with Me—he is very dear to Me." —*Bhagavad-gita* Ch. 12 Texts 13-14

For Hindus, ultimately there is only one God, the creator and father of all beings. Just as the one sun passing over the sky is known by different names, so God, having revealed Himself to all people, is known by His innumerable names. The *Vedas* teach a non-sectarian appreciation of any religious path which raises the worshipper to pure love of God.

The characteristics of Vedic culture are tolerance of race and religion, *ahimsa*, or non-violence, detachment from the fever of material acquisition and self-satisfaction through inner devotion to God. Understanding the principles of *dharma* gives one a strong sense of duty, as evidenced in the close ties in the Hindu extended family, but beyond the *dharma* of one's material situation which is temporary, there is the eternal *dharma* of the spirit soul, *sanatan-dharma*, which is to render service to God with love. *Sanatan-dharma* is the intrinsic nature of the soul and is universal for all beings, for all time, place and circumstances, although when covered by *maya*, illusion, we may not be aware of this most important duty to serve God.

OM

The syllable "om" is a transcendental sound vibration representing the aspect of the all-pervading energy of the Absolute Truth.



"Not just a Religion, More a Way of Life."

Hindus tend to consider religious practices as part of their daily routine rather than a once-a-week observance. Indeed, the Vedic culture is structured to give every person ample opportunity to deepen his relationship with God while fulfilling all the family needs. Spiritual life is not just to be practised by the *sadhu* or holy man, who shuns society by living in the mountains, but by all—men and women, old and young, rich and poor.

The *Vedas* recommend that we rise early, bathe and take full advantage of the peaceful morning hours by engaging in devotional activities—prayer, meditation, chanting the holy names of God and study of the sacred scriptures. In every Hindu home there is a small altar with pictures or deities. Morning and evening, the family joins together for worship. A ghee lamp (*diva*) is lit, and a simple *arati* ceremony performed.

Lord Krishna requests in the *Gita*:

"All that you do, all that you eat, all that you offer and give away, as well as all austerities that you may perform, should be done as an offering unto Me."

—*Bhagavad-gita* Ch. 9 Text 27.

Each daily activity can be done in a spirit of service to God. For instance, we all require to eat, but in Hinduism the family cooks for the pleasure of God and offers the food on the altar with suitable prayers. Only then will the meal be served to the family. The principles of non-violence and offering all food to God are the philosophical basis of the vegetarian diet. Hindus will not touch any meat, fish or eggs. However, India can perhaps claim the most extensive culinary tradition in the world. The *Vedas* describe thousands of delicious and nutritious preparations, combining a wide variety of vegetables, grains, lentils, fruits, nuts, milk products and carefully blended spices.

To understand spiritual science, the mind must be clear and Hindus therefore do not partake of any form of intoxication, including alcohol and cigarettes. Many will not take even tea or coffee. Gambling is also forbidden as it distracts a man from his real duty in life.

In Hinduism the institution of marriage is sacred; there should never be divorce. To ensure the proper development of love and respect between husband and wife, which is the basis of their close relationship, neither pre-marital nor extra-marital sex is allowed.

Through a simple lifestyle incorporating these practices one purifies his mind, one's heart feels peace and one can tangibly experience a fuller, deeper realisation of God guiding one in life.

The Hindu Temple— Its Purpose and Function

Although every Hindu home contains its own altar, a place for personal worship, the temple holds a special place in the life of the people. In different religious traditions, the church, the mosque or the synagogue is considered to be the “house of God,” but in Hinduism the temple is the “home of God.”

Hindus believe that God is omniscient and all-pervading, yet He is personally present in the temple in His Deity manifestation to provide His devotee the opportunity of rendering direct service to Him. The Lord is our father and it is our duty to go before Him and submit our account to Him, to request forgiveness for our wrongdoings and beg strength to live in constant remembrance of His will.

Worship in the temple is considered more beneficial than worship at home, because the association of so many other devotees and the spiritual atmosphere free from domestic distractions nourishes faith and devotion.

The rituals while visiting the temple evoke the appreciation of the Lord's personal presence. At the entrance to the temple building, everyone removes their shoes out of respect for the sacred area. The worshipper then rings a bell as he enters the hall where the Deity is resident. Going before the Deity to take “*darshan*” of the Lord, he offers respect, *pranams*, either by folding his hands or perhaps by bowing down and laying prostrate. In this simple act of devotion one can feel close communion with God.

It is customary for every visitor to the temple to bring an offering of some kind—foodstuffs, gifts for the Deity or donations of money. No offering is too great or too small.

As Lord Krishna says:

“If one offers Me with love and devotion a leaf, a flower, fruit or water, I will accept it.”
—*Bhagavad-gita* Ch. 9 Text 26.

At the end of the hall is the main altar where the predominant Deities of the temple stand. There may be other side altars as well. Only the priest enters the Deities' room, while everyone observes from outside. The Deities should be gorgeously dressed in the finest fabrics and decorated with ornaments, jewellery and garlands of flowers. The Vedic tradition teaches that when much time, effort and opulence is afforded in decorating the Deity, then everyone can come and enjoy the extraordinary beauty of the temple and be inspired with a mood of sacrifice and selflessness. Without centring their service



Radha-Krishna Deities

Although God is all-pervading, He mercifully manifests as the temple Deities. Worship of the Deities evokes a service attitude in the sincere devotee in which he is continually aware of his relationship with God.

on the Deity, the tendency of the people will be to expend their efforts on individual improvement of material standards, by which they develop an attitude of selfishness, greed and separatism.

Most Hindu temples are open every day of the year from morning to night, except for a short period in the afternoon, but visitors like to come at the times of the *arati* ceremonies which are performed several times daily. During *arati* the priest offers different articles of worship to the Deity. These include: incense, ghee lamps, water for bathing, a small napkin for drying, flowers and peacock and yak-tail fans. A conch is blown at the beginning and end of the *arati*, and throughout the ceremony the priest rings a small bell to attract the attention of the Deity and the audience to the worship.

During *arati* the devotees sing a special hymn, and then *kirtan*. *Kirtan* is sung in a responsive manner using *mantras* (short verses composed of the names of God) such as the *maha-mantra*:

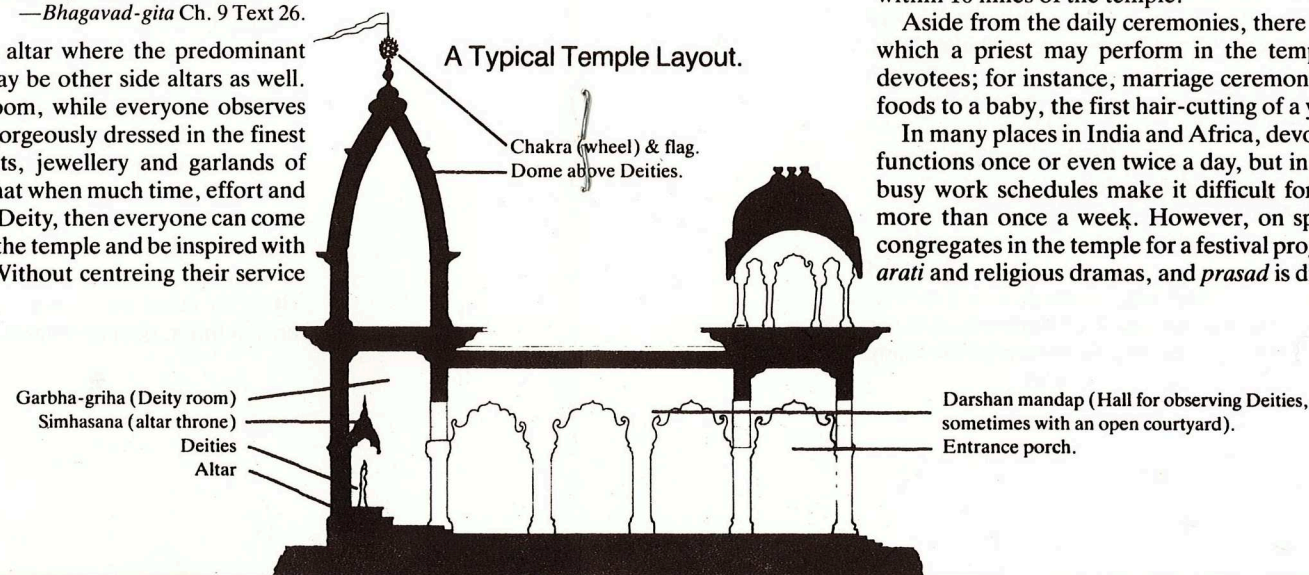
*Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare
Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare*

One may also see in the main hall one or more decorated thrones. These are called *vyasanas*, the seat for those teachers who are presenting the Vedic philosophy. *Satsang*, or association with a spiritually advanced soul, and attendance at his lectures are important practices in the development of God consciousness.

It is customary that before a visitor leaves the temple, he should receive *prasad*, foodstuffs, which have been offered to the Deity, even if only in token amount. *Prasad* is highly honoured as the “mercy of the Lord.” In India the distribution of *prasad* is a serious welfare activity, the principle being that no one should go hungry within 10 miles of the temple.

Aside from the daily ceremonies, there are many particular rituals which a priest may perform in the temple for the benefit of the devotees; for instance, marriage ceremonies, the giving of first solid foods to a baby, the first hair-cutting of a young child, etc.

In many places in India and Africa, devotees will attend the temple functions once or even twice a day, but in Britain long distances and busy work schedules make it difficult for many to visit the temple more than once a week. However, on special holy days, everyone congregates in the temple for a festival programme of *kirtan*, lectures, *arati* and religious dramas, and *prasad* is distributed to all.



The Deity Form of God

The soul is spirit and the body is matter. When the soul leaves the body we are unable to see it depart because our material eyes cannot perceive spirit. How then can we see God, the supreme spiritual Person?

To help us overcome this inability, the *Vedas* explain that God, out of His sweet mercy, manifests before the devotee as the Deity form. Although appearing in wood, stone or metal which are visible to our eyes, the Deity is not material, but pure spiritual energy. This seems inconceivable until we appreciate that God, being the source of all spirit and matter, can transform one to the other by His own will.

Considering the theology, it is not proper to refer to the Deity as a "statue" or "idol." The correct Sanskrit phrase is "*archa-vigraha*," meaning "the worshipful form of the Lord." The word "*murti*" which means simply "form" is often used, though less preferable to "*archa-vigraha*."

The Deity neither represents God nor is God in the Deity. The Deity is understood to be God Himself standing before us so that we can now see the supremely beautiful form of the Lord and can serve Him directly. Of course, not just any form can be concocted or worshipped. The Deity must be carved to the exact specifications of the *Vedas*. Service to the Deity, such as offering footstuffs and *arati*, bathing, dressing and decorating with ornaments is direct service to the spiritual body of God.

Seeing the many forms of Deities and photographs in a temple, it is often said that "Hinduism is a religion of many Gods," but the *Vedas* state that although there is only one Supreme Personality of Godhead, He may take innumerable forms to reciprocate the loving sentiments of His devotees. The Vedic literatures reveal to us a record of the Lord's appearance at different times. Some of these forms are manifested as the temple Deities. Not all the pictures within a Hindu temple are of the Lord's incarnations. Some of the pictures of saints and others may be of the *devas*, empowered cosmic representatives of the Lord.

Most temples have Deities of Radha-Krishna or Sita-Rama. Krishna and Rama are the same Supreme Personality of Godhead, and Radha and Sita are Their respective eternal consorts, the personification of the Lord's devotional energy.

There is often an altar for Shiv-linga, a special deity form of Lord Shiva, and for goddess Durga or Amba, who is considered the mother of the universe, the Lord's material energy. Unfortunately, it is not possible to attempt a full description and explanation of the many deity forms within the limitation of this small booklet.



Lord Krishna instructs
Arjuna in the knowl-
edge of *Bhagavad-gita*.

The Vedic Scriptures— Oldest Religious Texts in the World

The Vedic scriptures describe that prior to 3000 BC knowledge was passed down by word of mouth, but fearing the frailty of mental powers during the present age of quarrel, Kali-yuga, the great sage Vyasadeva compiled a series of literatures in Sanskrit, which is accepted as the source of all Indo-European languages. Vyasadeva collected the original revealed knowledge or *Veda* into four divisions called the *Rig*, *Yajur*, *Atharva* and *Sama Vedas*. These describe ritual processes of worship, sacrifices and hymns.

Many *Upa-vedas* and *Angas*, or corollaries to the *Vedas*, were prepared by different writers giving a wealth of scientific information on all aspects of living: agriculture, astronomy, medicine, nutrition, architecture, chemistry, even aeronautics and nuclear physics.

The ideas of the *Vedas* were expanded in the 108 *Upanisads*, in which Vyasadeva begins instruction about the eternal soul and his relationship with the material world. The *Vedanta-sutra* is a book of highly condensed texts describing the entire Vedic philosophy. Appreciating the difficulty of people in understanding the *Vedas* and *Upanisads*, Vyasadeva compiled the 18 *Puranas*, which are a set of histories describing events of previous epochs and in different parts of the universe which reveal the super-human pastimes of the Lord as He appeared in His many incarnations. Of all the *Puranas*, the *Bhagavad-Purana* or *Srimad-Bhagavatam* is the most popular because it relates in detail the appearance and activities of Lord Krishna.

The *Ramayan*, written by Valmiki, narrates the pastimes of the Lord's incarnation as Lord Rama and its beautiful story has inspired drama, art and dance for millenia. The *Mahabharat* describes the history of India 5000 years ago and its 100,000 verses make it the longest poem ever written. At that time Lord Krishna was present on the earth, and one chapter of *Mahabharat*, known as the *Bhagavad-gita* or "the Song of God," contains His instructions to His disciple and friend, Arjuna. The *Gita* is accepted by all Hindus as the highest expression of Vedic religious understanding and has been revered by great thinkers the world over.

It is stressed that the complex and profound wisdom of the *Vedas* cannot be fully appreciated without the help of a genuine spiritual master, one who has no selfish motives and who is fixed in service to God.

"Just try to learn the truth by approaching a spiritual master. Inquire from him submissively and render service unto Him. The self-realised soul can impart knowledge unto you because He has seen the truth."

—*Bhagavad-gita* Ch. 4 Text 34

The Colourful Festivals of Hinduism

Spiritual life is not sombre; it should be a continuous celebration, and certainly Hinduism is full of colour and festivities. Throughout the Hindu year there are a large number of festivals and sacred holidays, each of which has its own unique character to be observed in a particular way and mood. In Hinduism, religious festivals are vital to the spiritual development of the people and are considered to be "the mother of devotion."

The most important festivals commemorate the pastimes of the Supreme Lord, for it is stated in the *Gita*:

"One who knows the transcendental nature of My appearance and activities does not, upon leaving the body, take his birth again in this material world, but attains My eternal abode." *Bhagavad-gita* Ch. 4 Text 9

Janmashtami, in August/September, celebrates Lord Krishna's appearance 5000 years ago. Ramanavami, the appearance of Lord Rama is observed in the spring time, and Diwali in October/November commemorates Rama's return to His kingdom of Ayodhya after killing the evil Ravana. Rama's victory is celebrated on Dussehra by burning a huge effigy of Ravana. On the day after Diwali, the Hindu new year known as Annakuta, huge quantities of sweets and other foodstuffs are brought to the temple to be offered to the Deities. To honour Lord Shiva, all-night worship is performed at the temples on Shiv-ratri.

The nine nights before Dussehra are known as Nav-ratri and are popular for the Indian folk dances of Ras and Garba. During the Holi celebration in March, coloured dyes and water are sprinkled on all participants—even bystanders. Rathayatra is the cart procession of the Deity, Jagannath, and has been observed in Orissa, India, for thousands of years. Now the same festival is being held in the streets of many cities in Britain, Europe and USA.

Besides the festivals, there are other days for fasting and personal devotion such as Ekadasi, which occurs twice a month.

The Hindu wedding ceremony is also a very colourful event and in India may last several days. The couple take their vows in front of the Deity, the priest and the sacred fire into which oblations of grains and ghee are offered.

At each stage of life there are *samskars* or purificatory rites to be performed, starting before birth, through one's childhood, marriage and finally the cremation rites after death.

The whole objective of every aspect of the Vedic culture is to fulfill the purpose of human life—to reestablish our loving relationship with God, that we may return to His service in the spiritual world.

"Always think of Me and become My devotee. Worship Me and offer your homage unto Me. Thus you will come to Me without fail. I promise you this because you are My very dear friend." —*Bhagavad-gita* Ch. 18 Text 65.



The Festival of Janmashtami celebrates the appearance of Lord Krishna 5000 years ago.



The pastimes of Lord Rama are commemorated on Ramnavami, Dussehra & Diwali.

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