

BBC Hinduism

Caste System

By BBC Team

The Caste System

One feature of Indian society, despite attempts by some Hindu reformers to outlaw it, is the caste system (jati) which ranks society according to occupation.

Caste comes from a Portuguese word, and it is often applied inaccurately to different systems of separating layers of society.

Varnas are the historical division of society into 4 broad classes.

Jatis form the complex multi-layered present-day system.

Varnas

Traditionally, there were four main varnas, plus one group of outsiders:

- **The Brahmins, or priests:**
 - the highest varna, believed to have emerged from Brahma's mouth.
- **The Kshatriyas:**
 - the warrior or ruling class who were made from Brahma's arms.
- **The Vaishyas:**
 - merchants or artisans who came from Brahma's thighs.
- **The Shudras:**
 - the unskilled labourers and servants who emerged from Brahma's feet. These were the lowest class, or varna.
- **The Untouchables:**
 - those too lowly to be within the varna system.

Jatis

Over many centuries, a complex system of castes, or jatis, developed in India. These were exclusive social groups defined by birth, marriage and occupation.

The higher a person's birth, the greater the blessings.

Background

The caste system grew out of two main strands of thought:

- Hierarchy is natural: The belief that a hierarchical social structure is part of the divine intention for natural order.
- Purity: The need to emphasise the importance of ritual purity and impurity.

Caste Today

Members of the upper castes consider the lowest castes to be ritually unclean. Marrying someone from a different caste, whilst not officially outlawed, is generally not recognised.

Today, caste barriers have largely broken down in the large cities. "Untouchability" has been abolished by law.

However, loyalty to a caste is much harder to eliminate and it still provides a sense of community and belonging, particularly in country areas.

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Articles

- Latest Hinduism News - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/news/include.shtml?hindu>

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- Hinduism in London - http://www.bbc.co.uk/london/content/articles/2005/05/19/hindu_london_feature.shtml
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External Web Links

- Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies - <http://www.ochs.org.uk/>
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- Religions
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Hinduism originated over 3000 years ago. Hinduism claims to have many founders, teachers and prophets who claim first hand experience of God.

When Hindus promote the idea of spirituality as a principle rather than a personality, they call this Brahman.

Features



- **Worship**

Central to Hindu worship is the image, or icon, which can be worshipped either at home or in the temple



- **Weddings**

Hindu sacraments are called 'sanskars' and the sacraments performed at the time of a wedding are called 'Vivah Sanskar'.

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At a Glance

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Introduction

Hinduism is one of the world's **oldest religions**, and has over 900 million adherents worldwide. Hinduism is not a single doctrine, and there is no single founder or teacher.

- Hinduism originated around the Indus Valley near the River Indus in modern day Pakistan
- It is over 3,000 years old
- About 80% of the Indian population regard themselves as Hindu.
- Hindus believe in a universal eternal soul called **Brahman**, who created and is present in everything.
- But they believe worship other deities such as **Ram, Shiva, Lakshmi and Hanuman**, recognising different attributes of Brahman in them.
- Hindus believe that existence is a **cycle of birth, death, and rebirth**, governed by Karma.
- Hindus believe that the soul passes through a cycle of successive lives and its next incarnation is always dependent on how the previous life was lived.
- The **Vedas** are the most ancient religious Hindu text and define the truth.
- Hindus believe that the texts were received by scholars directly from God and passed onto generations by word of mouth.
- Hindus celebrate many **holy days**, but the Festival of Lights, **Diwali** is the most well known.

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Early history

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Traditional view

Hinduism has a long and complex history. It is a blend of ancient legends, beliefs and customs which has adapted, blended with, and spawned numerous creeds and practices.

Please note:

The 'traditional' view of Hindu history, as described in this section, has been challenged by modern scholars.

In particular, various scholars have advanced the following theories:

- Hindu religion pre-dated 3000BCE
- 'Aryan', a Sanskrit word meaning 'noble', does not refer to an invading race at all
- The Aryans did not invade but migrated gradually
- The Aryans were native to the area, or found there long before the alleged invasion
- Hinduism originated solely in India
- There is ongoing controversy over which version of Hindu history is the correct one.

Prehistoric religion:

(3000-1000 BCE)

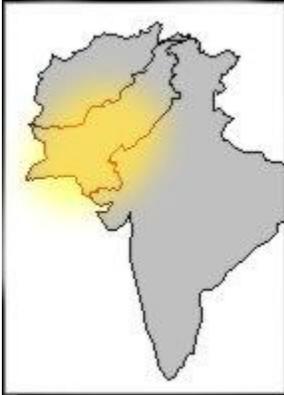
The earliest evidence for elements of the Hindu faith dates back as far as 3000 BCE.

Archaeological excavations in the Punjab and Indus valleys (right) have revealed the existence of urban cultures at Harappa, the prehistoric capital of the Punjab (located in modern Pakistan); and Mohenjodaro on the banks of the River Indus.

Archaeological work continues on other sites at Kalibangan, Lothal and Surkotada.

The excavations have revealed signs of early rituals and worship.

- In Mohenjodaro, for example, a large bath has been found, with side rooms and statues which could be evidence of early purification rites.
- Elsewhere, phallic symbols and a large number statues of goddesses have been discovered which could suggest the practice of early fertility rites.



This early Indian culture is sometimes called the Indus Valley civilisation.

Pre-classical (Vedic)

(2000 BCE - 1000)

Some time in the second millennium BCE the Aryan people arrived in north-west India.

The Aryans (Aryan means noble) were a nomadic people who may have come to India from the areas around southern Russia and the Baltic.

They brought with them their language and their religious traditions. These both influenced and were influenced by the religious practices of the peoples who were already living in India.

Worship

- The Indus valley communities used to gather at rivers for their religious rituals.
- The Aryans gathered around fire for their rituals.
- The Indus valley communities regarded rivers as sacred, and had both male and female gods.
- The Aryan gods represented the forces of nature; the sun, the moon, fire, storm and so on.

Over time, the different religious practices tended to blend together.

Sacrifices were made to gods such as Agni, the God of Fire, and Indra, the God of storms.

Writings

Aspects of the Aryan faith began to be written down around 800 BCE in literature known as the Vedas. These developed from their oral and poetic traditions.

You can see some of the Vedic tradition in Hindu worship today.

The Caste System

The Aryans also introduced the varna system (varna = estates or classes) to India, which may have contributed to the caste system we see today.

Some think that it developed from a simpler two-tier structure consisting of nobles at the top, and everyone else below.

Others say that it was established and practised by the priests who divided society into three parts:

- The priests (or Brahmins).
- The warriors (the Kshatriyas).
- The ordinary people.

Other religious influences

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The rise of Jainism and Buddhism

(800-600 BCE)

Buddhism and Jainism emerged from India around 800-600 BCE, a period of great cultural, intellectual and spiritual development, and both had an enormous influence on Hinduism.

Some of the previously accepted truths of the religion were beginning to be questioned and the religious leaders were being asked to defend their views and teachings.

Furthermore, the old tribal structure of society was diminishing.

The result was an increasing number of breakaway sects, of which Buddhism and Jainism were probably the most successful.

Buddhism

Buddha was born in the sixth century BCE as Gautama Siddhartha. He was a member of the powerful warrior class.

He renounced the pleasures and materialism of this world to search for the truth. Through this quest he developed his basic principles for living.

Buddhism became the state religion of India in the third century BCE.

Buddhism had a great influence on Hinduism, from the way it used parables and stories as a means of religious instruction, to its influence on Indian art, sculpture and education.

Jainism

The founder of the Jains, Mahavira ("the great hero"), was a near contemporary of the Buddha's and he rejected the caste system, along with the Hindu belief in the cycle of births.

Mahavira was the twenty fourth of the Tirthankaras, the "Path-makers", or great teachers of Jainism.

They developed the concept of three ways, or "jewels" - right faith, right knowledge and right conduct.

The Jains were never a numerically large group but their influence was out of all proportion to their size and distribution.

Mahatma Gandhi, whilst himself not a Jain, embraced their doctrine of non-violence to living things.

The End of the Era

During the last centuries of the previous era, the Mauryan empire ruled much of India. The most famous ruler, Asoka, although a Buddhist himself, thought that the Brahman religion was worthy of respect.

Brahmanism revived with the end of Mauryan rule, and at the same time devotion to individual gods, such as Vishnu and Siva, began to grow.

Some of the early Hindu images date from this period.

The Start of the Current Era

The first 400 years CE were a time of upheaval in the Hindu heartland. A variety of invaders ruled the area, bringing injections of their own cultures and beliefs.

Hinduism strengthened, and the cults of individual gods grew stronger. Goddesses, too, began to attract followers.

The Rise of "Hinduism"

The years to 1000 CE saw Hinduism gaining strength at the expense of Buddhism.

Some Hindu rulers took military action to suppress Buddhism. However it was probably developments in Hinduism itself that helped the faith to grow.

Hinduism now included not only the appeal of devotion to a personal god, but had seen the development of its emotional side with the composition and singing of poems and songs. This made Hinduism an intelligible and satisfying road to faith to many ordinary worshippers.

The Arrival of Islam

Islam arrived in the Ganges basin in the 7th century, but its influence was not really felt until the Turks arrived in the 11th and 12th centuries CE.

Islam and Hinduism were in conflict because, although the mystical traditions of both religions had some common ground, Muslim rulers sought to conquer Hindu territories and, from the 17th century, to assert the superiority of Islam.

Islam was established — and flourished — chiefly in areas where Buddhism was in a process of slow decline, that is mainly around modern-day Pakistan, Bangladesh and Kashmir.

Hinduism remained strongest in the south of India.

Personalities

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Western Influence

Hinduism as it is known and recognised today has been greatly affected by the influence of western thought and practices.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, missionaries from Europe attempted to convert Hindus to Christianity with varying degrees of success.

This challenged Hindu leaders to reform many practices and in some cases, revive old practices.

This period has been recognised as a period of Hindu revivalism.

Rammohan Roy

An early leader in this field was Rammohan Roy (1772-1833), a scholar who spoke Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, Greek, Latin and Sanskrit alongside his native Bengali.

He read most of the religious scriptures from around the world and discovered that there was little difference between them.

In 1828, he founded the Brahma Samaj, based on the teachings of the Upanishads.

Whilst he based much of his work on the teachings of the Upanishads, his social outlook was progressive and he was keen to develop education and particularly the establishment of western sciences into Indian culture.

Rammohan Roy died in Bristol of meningitis while on a visit to Europe. There is a statue of him at College Green in Bristol.

Ramakrishna Paramahansa



Ramakrishna Paramahansa ©

Another school of Hinduism developed under the influence of Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-86) who put much greater emphasis on devotion to God.

He combined the trend of popular Hinduism with its many images with a belief in a loveable Almighty God, for he could see God in many forms.

He preached without a complicated theology and without an over-reliance on the scriptures.

It was a pluralist approach to Hinduism which helped it to find its feet in the modern world.

Swami Vivekananda



Swami Vivekananda ©

The work of Ramakrishna Paramahansa was continued and extended by Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) who, after 12 years of ascetic study and discipline, was responsible for promoting the Hindu tradition and thought in the west.

He taught that the divine is in everything and promoted the Ramakrishna Mission which is well known for its social work as well as being a focus for Hindu religious thought.

International Society for Krishna Consciousness

More often known as the Hare Krishnas, the movement is often recognised as the western face of Hinduism.

Its origins can be traced back to Chaitanya, a fifteenth century devotee of Krishna, who chanted devotional songs to Krishna.

His teachings were promoted in the 20th century by Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati, who had a vision of taking the message of Chaitanya to the west shortly before his death in 1936.

This work was taken up by Prabhupada who took that message to the United States and eventually established bases around the world to promote those teachings.

Aryan Invasion Theory

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Controversial

One of the most controversial ideas about Hindu history is the Aryan invasion theory.

This theory, originally devised by F. Max Muller in 1848, traces the history of Hinduism to the invasion of India's indigenous people by lighter skinned Aryans around 1500 BCE.

The theory was reinforced by other research over the next 120 years, and became the accepted history of Hinduism, not only in the West but in India.

But many people argue that there is now evidence to show that Muller, and those who followed him, were wrong.

Others, however, believe that the case against the Aryan invasion theory is far from conclusive.

The matter remains very controversial and highly politicised. The article below sets out the case made by those who believe that the Aryan invasion theory is seriously flawed.

The case against the Aryan invasion theory

The Aryan invasion theory was based on archaeological, linguistic and ethnological evidence.

Later research, it is argued, has either discredited this evidence, or provided new evidence that combined with the earlier evidence makes other explanations more likely.

Some historians of the area no longer believe that such invasions had such great influence on Indian history. It's now generally accepted that Indian history shows a continuity of progress from the earliest times to today.

The changes brought to India by other cultures are not denied by modern historians, but they are no longer thought to be a major ingredient in the development of Hinduism.

Dangers of the theory

Opponents of the Aryan invasion theory claim that it denies the Indian origin of India's predominant culture, and gives the credit for Indian culture to invaders from elsewhere.

They say that it even teaches that some of the most revered books of Hindu scripture are not actually Indian, and it devalues India's culture by portraying it as less ancient than it actually is.

The theory was not just wrong, some say, but included unacceptably racist ideas:

- it suggested that Indian culture was not a culture in its own right, but a synthesis of elements from other cultures
- it implied that Hinduism was not an authentically Indian religion but the result of cultural imperialism
- it suggested that Indian culture was static, and only changed under outside influences
- it suggested that the dark-skinned Dravidian people of the South of India had got their faith from light-skinned Aryan invaders
- it implied that indigenous people were incapable of creatively developing their faith
- it suggested that indigenous peoples could only acquire new religious and cultural ideas from other races, by invasion or other processes
- it accepted that race was a biologically based concept (rather than, at least in part, a social construct) that provided a sensible way of ranking people in a hierarchy, which provided a partial basis for the caste system
- it provided a basis for racism in the Imperial context by suggesting that the peoples of Northern India were descended from invaders from Europe and so racially closer to the British Raj

- it gave a historical precedent to justify the role and status of the British Raj, who could argue that they were transforming India for the better in the same way that the Aryans had done thousands of years earlier
- it downgraded the intellectual status of India and its people by giving a falsely late date to elements of Indian science and culture

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Brahman

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God or gods?

Contrary to popular understanding, Hindus recognise one God, Brahman, the eternal origin who is the cause and foundation of all existence.

The gods of the Hindu faith represent different expressions of Brahman.

Different Hindu communities may have their own divinities whom they worship, but these are simply different ways of approaching the Ultimate.

Hindus recognise three principal gods:

- Brahma, who creates the universe
- Vishnu, who preserves the universe
- Shiva (right), who destroys the universe.

Brahma

Brahma is the Creator. However, Brahma is not worshipped in the same way as other gods because it is believed that his work - that of creation - has been done.

Hindus worship other expressions of Brahman (not Brahma), which take a variety of forms.

Hindus are often classified into three groups according to which form of Brahman they worship:

- Those who worship Vishnu (the preserver) and Vishnu's important incarnations Rama, Krishna and Narasimha;
- Those who worship Shiva (the destroyer)
- Those who worship the Mother Goddess, Shakti, also called Parvati, Mahalakshmi, Durga or Kali.

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Vishnu, Shiva and other deities

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Vishnu

Vishnu, the preserver is believed to be linked to a very early sun god and is considered by his worshippers to be the greatest among the gods. He is also referred to as Narayana.

Vishnu preserves and protects the universe and has appeared on the earth through his avatars (incarnations) to save humankind from natural disasters or from tyranny.

The most well-known avatars are Rama (see Ramayana), Krishna, who destroyed the wicked and established a new order, Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, and Kalki.

Vishnu is represented in sculpture and painting in human form, often painted blue.

Lakshmi is the consort of Vishnu who has appeared as the wife of each of Vishnu's incarnations: including Sita, wife of Prince Rama, and Rukmini, wife of Krishna.

She is the goddess of wealth and good fortune who is offered special worship during the Diwali festival.



Shiva is the source of both good and evil ©

Shiva

The god Shiva is part of the Hindu Trinity, along with Vishnu and Brahma.

He is considered to be everything by those who worship him: creator, preserver and destroyer. In Shiva, the opposites meet.

Shiva the destroyer is a necessary part of the trinity because, without destruction, there can be no recreation.

His city is Varanasi, and any Hindu who dies there is believed to go straight to heaven.

Shiva is the source of both good and evil who combines many contradictory elements.

In pictures and sculptures, Shiva is represented as Lord of the Dance who controls the movement of the universe. He is also associated with fertility.

Shiva has many consorts, including Kali, often portrayed as wild and violent, Parvati, renowned for her gentleness, and Durga, a powerful goddess created from the combined forces of the anger of several gods.

The Great Goddess (Mahadevi)

The great Goddess appears as a consort of the principal male gods and encompasses the thousands of local goddesses or matas. These can be both beautiful and benign, like Lakshmi, or all-powerful destructive forces like Kali.

Great Goddess shrines are associated with agriculture and fertility and the female energy, or shakti, is important in ancient texts known collectively as the Tantras.

Shakti is contrasted with Shiva, whose masculine consciousness is powerless without the creative female energy.

Other Vedic gods

- Indra, the god of storms.
 - Indra was once the Vedic king of all gods but has, over time, lost some influence.
 - Indra's main function is in leading the warriors (see caste system).
 - Indra fights not only human enemies, but also demons.
- Agni is the Vedic god of fire.
 - He is one of the supreme gods of the Rig Veda.
 - Agni is believed to take the offerings to the other world through fire.
 - Agni is represented by the ram.
- Varuna is the third Vedic god whose influence persists today.
 - Varuna presides over the orderliness of the universe.
 - Varuna rules over the night sky. Varuna is believed to know everything.
 - Varuna is the god of truth and moral judgements. Varuna knows the secrets of all hearts.

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Holy Days

Diwali

Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, is the most popular of all the festivals from South Asia, and is also the occasion for celebrations by Jains and Sikhs as well as Hindus.

Ganesh Chaturthi

On this day Hindus all over the world will celebrate the birthday of Lord Ganesh (Ganesh Chaturthi).

Hanuman Jayanti

This festival marks the birth of Hanuman, the Monkey God.

Holi

The spring festival associated with Krishna when people throw coloured powder and water at each other. Holi also celebrates creation and renewal.

Krishna Jayanti (Janamashtami)

The Janamashtami festival marks the birth of Krishna, the most highly venerated God in the Hindu pantheon

Mahashivratri

Mahashivratri is a Hindu festival dedicated to Shiva, one of the deities of the Hindu Trinity.

Makar Sankranti

Makar Sankranti is first Hindu festival of the solar calendar year

Navaratri (Navratri)

Navaratri (nine nights) is one of the greatest Hindu festivals. It symbolises the triumph of good over evil.

Raksha Bandhan

Raksha Bandhan is the Hindu festival that celebrates brotherhood and love.

Rama Navami

Rama Navami celebrates the birth of Lord Rama, son of King Dasharatha of Ayodhya.

Thaipusam

Colourful, devotional and painful celebrations in Malaysia!

Vaisakhi

What is common to all Hindus is that, at the time of Vaisakhi, people will go to the temple to pay their respect and seek blessings, and gifts and sweets will be exchanged between friends and family members.

Varsha Pratipada

Varsha Pratipada is the Hindu Spring New Year

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Worship

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Puja

Hindu worship, or puja, involves images (murtis), prayers (mantras) and diagrams of the universe (yantras).

Central to Hindu worship is the image, or icon, which can be worshipped either at home or in the temple.

Individual rather than communal

Hindu worship is primarily an individual act rather than a communal one, as it involves making personal offerings to the deity.

Worshippers repeat the names of their favourite gods and goddesses, and repeat mantras. Water, fruit, flowers and incense are offered to god.

Worship at home

The majority of Hindu homes have a shrine where offerings are made and prayers are said.

A shrine can be anything: a room, a small altar or simply pictures or statues of the deity.

Family members often worship together. Rituals should strictly speaking be performed three times a day. Some Hindus, but not all, worship wearing the sacred thread (over the left shoulder and hanging to the right hip). This is cotton for the Brahmin (priest), hemp for the Kshatriya (ruler) and wool for the vaishya (merchants).

Temple worship

At a Hindu temple, different parts of the building have a different spiritual or symbolic meaning.

- The central shrine is the heart of the worshipper
- The tower represents the flight of the spirit to heaven.
- A priest may read, or more usually recite, the Vedas to the assembled worshippers, but any "twice-born" Hindu can perform the reading of prayers and mantras.

Religious rites

Hindu religious rites are classified into three categories:

- Nitya
 - Nitya rituals are performed daily and consist in offerings made at the home shrine or performing puja to the family deities.
- Naimittika

- Naimittika rituals are important but only occur at certain times during the year, such as celebrations of the festivals, thanksgiving and so on.
- Kanya
- Kanya are rituals which are "optional" but highly desirable. Pilgrimage is one such.

Worship and pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is an important aspect of Hinduism. It's an undertaking to see and be seen by the deity.

Popular pilgrimage places are rivers, but temples, mountains, and other sacred sites in India are also destinations for pilgrimages, as sites where the gods may have appeared or become manifest in the world.

Kumbh Mela

Once every 12 years, up to 10 million people share in ritual bathing at the Kumbh Mela festival at Allahabad where the waters of the Ganges and Jumna combine.

Hindus from all walks of life gather there for ritual bathing, believing that their sins will be washed away.

The bathing is followed by spiritual purification and a ceremony which secures the blessings of the deity.

River Ganges

The river Ganges is the holiest river for Hindus.

Varanasi

This city, also known as Benares, is situated on the banks of the Ganges and is one of the most important pilgrimage centres.

It is said to be the home of Lord Shiva where legend has it that his fiery light broke through the earth to reach the heavens.

A Hindu who dies at Varanasi and has their ashes scattered on the Ganges is said to have experienced the best death possible.

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Baby Rites

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Puja

Hindu rituals (sanskars) begin before a child is born.



Hindus believe that it is the responsibility of each individual to continue the Hindu race. ©

Hindus believe that it is the responsibility of each individual to continue the Hindu race and therefore soon after a couple are married, a prayer called Garbhadana (conception) is recited for fulfillment of one's parental obligations.

During the third month of pregnancy the ceremony of Punsavana (foetus protection) is performed. This is done for the strong physical growth of the foetus.

The *Simantonyana* is performed during the seventh month. This is the equivalent of a baby shower and means 'satisfying the craving of the pregnant mother'. Prayers are offered for the mother and child with emphasis on healthy mental development of the unborn child. Hindus believe that mental state of a pregnant woman affects the unborn child.

Once the child enters the world, Jatakarma is performed to welcome the child into the family, by putting some honey in the child's mouth and whispering the name of God in the child's ear.

Other rituals include a naming ceremony (Namakarna), the Nishkarmana (the child's first trip out) and the Annaprasana, (the child's first taste of solid food).

The ear-piercing ceremony (Karnavedha) and first haircut (Mundan) ceremonies are also considered highly significant. These sacraments are performed on both the sexes. Hindus believe that the piercing of a hole in the lower lobes of the ear have benefits of acupuncture.

Head shaving is connected to the removal of impurities.

When the child reaches school-going age, the Upanayana (sacred thread) ceremony is performed. The three strands of the sacred thread represent the three vows (to respect the knowledge, the parents and the society) taken before the start of formal education.

Although Hindu scriptures explain the rituals, it is possible that Hindu rituals and rites will differ according to particular castes and regions.

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Reflections on meditation

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Meditation

Hindu rituals (sanskars) begin before a child is born.



Alan Spence ©

Alan Spence is a writer and poet, born in Glasgow and currently writer-in-residence at Aberdeen University. He writes novels, short stories, plays and poetry. His first collection of short stories *It's Colours They are Fine* was published in 1977 and his most recent novel is *Seasons of the Heart*. He runs the Hindu-inspired Chinmoy Meditation Centre in Edinburgh.

Meditation is silence, energising and fulfilling

The nice thing about being up early in the morning is the stillness, the silence. The hustle of the day hasn't really started, and it's a good time to just sit, quiet and meditate.

My spiritual teacher Sri Chinmoy – a man I've known for over 30 years – expresses it beautifully:

Meditation is silence, energising and fulfilling. Silence is the eloquent expression of the inexpressible. The key word here is energising. That quiet place inside us is a source of tremendous strength.



Sri Chinmoy ©

When we meditate what we actually do is enter into the deeper part of our being. Meditation is like going to the bottom of the sea, where everything is calm and tranquil. On the surface, there may be a multitude of waves, but the sea is not affected below. In its deepest depths it is all silence.

To enter into that place, now, first thing, is to tap that strength inside us, let it sustain us through the day.

When the waves come from the outside world, we are not affected. Fear, doubt, worry and all the earthly turmoils will just wash away.

Just take a moment, to breathe. Breathe slowly and evenly. Use your imagination, feel you're breathing out all the rubbish you want to let go of. Feel you're breathing in pure energy.

Meditation is silence, energising and fulfilling.

Silence liberates!

Sri Chinmoy tells a story about a pious man who studies the scriptures devotedly, and likes to discuss philosophy with a scholar who comes to visit him. They earnestly discuss the path to spiritual liberation, but deep in his heart, the man knows this endless talk is not bringing him any closer to attaining his goal. Now, it happens that the man has a little caged bird in his room, and he likes to hear it sing. But one morning he notices the bird is not singing at all, it has fallen completely silent. He speaks to the bird, tries to coax it, but it makes not a sound. Eventually the man opens the cage door and the bird, in an instant, escapes, flies out of the cage, through the open window of the room, and soars into the infinite freedom of the sky.

The bird taught his master an important spiritual lesson. Silence liberates!

We can talk endlessly, argue, discuss, debate. But the real truth of things, we discover in silence. Eventually we have to hush the mind and its chatter, discover that vastness in our hearts and soar into it.

That image of the bird in flight, going beyond the mundane, is at the heart of one of Sri Chinmoy's devotional songs:

Bird of my heart,
Fly on, fly on.
Look not behind.
What the world offers
Is meaningless, useless
And utterly false.

Bird of my heart,
Fly on.

And it recurs in one of his simple, beautiful, mantric poems:

My Lord, a tiny bird
Claims the vast sky.
Similarly the finite in me
Longs to claim
Your Infinite Absolute.
Silence liberates.

Meditation speaks

Some years ago I edited a little collection of writings on meditation by my teacher, Sri Chinmoy. I called it *The Silent Teaching*. I wrote in the introduction that the title might seem strange, even paradoxical. To the mind accustomed to regard teaching as instruction, or practical demonstration, the notion that such a process can be silent, wordless, might be difficult.

But in discussing meditation, we are moving in a realm where, traditionally, truth is communicated directly, in silence, by a look, a gesture, a touch.

One of the best-known examples is Buddha's Flower Sermon. The Buddha came to address a large gathering and his lecture consisted of holding up a flower! One of his followers, Maha Kashapa, responded by smiling, and Buddha said in that moment the disciple had received everything. The teaching is not conveyed in words, he said, but in silence.

Sri Chinmoy's background is Hindu, but he expressed the same truth: *All real spiritual teachers teach in silence.*

But beyond that again, he realises our own 'real teacher' is deep within.

Your mind has a flood of questions. There is but one teacher who can answer them. Who is the teacher?
Your silence-loving heart.

This 'silence-loving heart' is receptivity itself. It is our capacity to be still, be open, and simply listen. The mind has all the questions. The heart has, and is, the answer.

Meditation speaks. It speaks in silence. It reveals that our life is Eternity itself.

The blossoming of our indomitable inner will

I've been talking a lot about silence. (And that's a typical paradox in itself – talking about silence!) But clearly there are different levels and qualities of silence.

There's an Indian story about four monks who decide, as a form of spiritual discipline, to maintain a day of silence. That way they can be more focussed and concentrated, not waste their energy on smalltalk or get into useless arguments.

Well, everything goes well throughout the day. They go about their tasks feeling very virtuous and showing each other great respect. Then towards evening, it starts to get dark, and one of the monks, who is busy preparing food, says "Somebody should light the lamp". The second monk turns to him and says, "You spoke!" The third monk says, "Will you two shut up!" And the fourth monk says, "Now I'm the only one who hasn't broken the vow of silence!"

Maintaining even an outer silence – keeping our mouths shut – is more difficult than we might imagine. Much more difficult is maintaining an inner silence – the absence of thought. (Just try not thinking about anything for a minute!)

Yet, as my teacher Sri Chinmoy says, there are deeper levels again. He talks about the outer silence and the inner silence, then about the inmost silence.

He writes:

This silence is not just the absence of sound. It is not even the absence of thought. It is the blossoming of our indomitable inner will.

It is that dynamic quality which characterises true meditation:

Beyond speech and mind,
Into the river of ever-effulgent Light
My heart dives.
Today thousands of doors
Closed for millennia
Are opened wide.

Meditation is not an escape exercise

Recently I went to a performance by American artist Laurie Anderson. In the middle of the show she made a point about silence. She stood quite still, centre-stage, held total silence for a couple of minutes. The silence was fairly comfortable – this was a sophisticated audience, we knew our minimalism, our John Cage – this was one of those silences, right? Then she made the point that when that happened on radio, or even worse, on TV, it was cause for panic. Dead air! The void had to be filled!

Socially too – round a dinner table say – if a silence falls there's a nervousness, a clearing of throats, before someone kicks in with 'Say... I, uh... saw this show on TV...' In such situations, there's a fear of silence, an embarrassment, a sense of feeling exposed.

And it's true, I think, at a deeper level, that silence is something we fear. Dead air. Fill the space. Switch on the TV. Plug in the headphones. Shout down the mobile phone. Anything rather than face the emptiness, for that would mean facing ourselves.

Meditation is that very act of facing ourselves, accepting the silence.

Sri Chinmoy writes:

Meditation is not an escape exercise... The seeker who meditates is a divine warrior who faces suffering, ignorance and darkness and tries to establish the kingdom of wisdom-light.

And with perseverance, we reach the depths of our being, our true self.

When we meditate, what we actually do is enter into a vacant, calm, still, silent mind. We go deep within and approach our true existence, which is our soul.

The eternal Now is the only reality

At the start, I quoted from my teacher Sri Chinmoy, talking about meditation as a diving deep within. Here is another passage where he expands on that idea:

How do we meditate silently? Just by not talking, just by not using words, we are not doing silent meditation. Silent meditation is totally different. When we start meditating in silence, we feel the bottom of a sea within us and without. The life of activity, movement and restlessness is on the surface, but deep below, underneath our human life, there is poise and silence. We imagine this sea of silence within us, or we feel that we are nothing but a sea of poise itself.

And the ideal is to carry this poise into everyday life. The spiritual life is one of balance – silence at the heart of action, but also dynamism at the heart of silent meditation.

Sri Chinmoy once described the difference between prayer and meditation as follows: 'When I pray, I talk and God listens. When I meditate, God talks and I listen'.

Meditation is that listening, attentively and in silence, to the voice of the Absolute within us.

There is a special way to listen to the Voice of God, and that is to meditate in silence. Then there is no tomorrow, there is no such thing even as today. It is all now. The eternal Now is the only reality.

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Weddings

Printable Version

Sanskars

Auspicious days (2:22 mins)

Vedic astrologer Sneha Joshi explains to Sarah Montague why 27, 28 and 29 November 2003 were particularly auspicious days for Hindus to marry



Hindu Wedding Ceremony

Hindu sacraments are called 'sanskars' and the sacraments performed at the time of a wedding are called 'Vivah Sanskar'.

This sanskar marks the start of the second and the most important stage of life called the 'Grihstha Ashrama' which involves setting up of a new family unit.

Two individuals who are considered to be compatible form a lifelong partnership at this ceremony in which the responsibilities and duties of a householder are explained.

The precise details and rituals performed in a wedding ceremony vary from region to region and often take several hours to complete.

The main stages of a Hindu wedding are:

- **Jayamaala**
 - Firstly, the bride's parents welcome the bridegroom and his family at the boundary of the house where the wedding is taking place. A red kum-kum (kind of powder) mark is applied to their forehead. Members from both families are formally introduced, marking the start of relationship between two families. The bride and the bridegroom then exchange garlands (jayamaala) and declare: "Let all the learned persons present here know, we are accepting each other willingly, voluntarily and pleasantly. Our hearts are concordant and united like waters."
- **Madhu-Parka**
 - The bridegroom is brought to a specially decorated altar called 'mandap' and offered a seat and a welcoming drink - a mixture of milk, ghee, yoghurt, honey and sugar.
- **Gau Daan and Kanya Pratigrahan**
 - 'Gau' means cow and 'Daan' means donation. Nowadays, the symbolic exchange of gifts, particularly clothes and ornaments takes place. The groom's mother gives an auspicious necklace (mangala sootra) to the bride. Mangla sootra is the emblem of marital status for a Hindu woman. 'Kanya' means the daughter and 'Pratigrahan' is an exchange with responsiveness on both sides. The bride's father declares that their daughter has accepted the bridegroom and requests them to accept her.

Vivaha-homa

A sacred fire is lit and the Purohit (Priest) recites the sacred mantras in Sanskrit. Oblations are offered to the fire whilst saying the prayers. The words "Id na mama" meaning "it is not for me" are repeated after the offerings. This teaches the virtue of selflessness required to run a family.

Paanigrahan



A sacred fire is lit and the Purohit (Priest) recites the sacred mantras in Sanskrit.

This is the ceremony of vows. The husband, holding his wife's hand, says "I hold your hand in the spirit of Dharma, we are both husband and wife".

Shilarohan and Laaja Homa

Shilarohan is climbing over a stone/rock by the bride which symbolises her willingness and strength to overcome difficulties in pursuit of her duties. Both gently walk around the sacred fire four times. The bride leading three times and the fourth time the groom leads. He is reminded of his responsibilities. The couple join their hands into which the bride's brothers pour some barley which is offered to the fire symbolising that they all will jointly work for the welfare of the society. The husband marks the parting in his wife's hair with red kumkum powder for the first time. This is called 'sindoor' and is a distinctive mark of a married Hindu woman.

Sapta-Padi

This is the main and the legal part of the ceremony. The couple walk seven steps reciting a prayer at each step. These are the seven vows which are exchanged. The first for food, the second for strength, the third for prosperity, the fourth for wisdom, the fifth for progeny, the sixth for health and the seventh for friendship. In some regions, in stead of walking the seven steps, the bride touches seven stones or nuts with her right toe. A symbolic matrimonial knot is tied after this ceremony.



A symbolic matrimonial knot is tied after this ceremony

Surya Darshan and Dhruva Darshan

The couple look at the Sun in order to be blessed with creative life. They look in the direction of the Dhruva (Polar star) and resolve to remain unshaken and steadfast like the Polar star.

Ashirvada (Blessings)

The couple are blessed by the elders and the priest for a long and prosperous married life.

It is important to clarify two misconceptions about Hindu marriages: arranged marriages and child marriages.



The couple are blessed by the elders and the priest for a long and prosperous married life

Hindu scriptures prohibit use of force or coercion in marriages.

Arranged marriages are based on agreement from both the bride and the groom, and should not be confused with forced marriages.

In the Vedic period, child marriages were strictly prohibited. Later, due to political and economical changes, some new social traditions started which deviated from the Vedic teachings.

Child marriages and the associated tradition of dowry were some of the deviations which reformist movements in modern times have attempted to correct. Child marriages are now extinct. Hindus accept the minimum age of marriage set by the law of the country they live in.

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Mohandas 'Mahatma' Gandhi

Printable Version

Father of India



Mahatma Gandhi has come to be known as the Father of India ©

Mahatma Gandhi has come to be known as the Father of India and a beacon of light in the last decades of British colonial rule, promoting non-violence, justice and harmony between people of all faiths.

Born in 1869 in Porbandar on the Western coast of India and raised by Hindu parents, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi found many opportunities in his youth to meet people of all faiths. He had many Christian and Muslim friends, as well as being heavily influenced by Jainism in his youth. Gandhi probably took the religious principle of 'Ahimsa' (doing no harm) from his Jain neighbours, and from it

developed his own famous principle of Satyagraha (truth force) later on in his life. Gandhi hoped to win people over by changing their hearts and minds, and advocated non violence in all things. He himself remained a committed Hindu throughout his life, but was critical of all faiths and what he saw as the hypocrisy of organised religion.

Even as a young child his morals were tested when an inspector of schools came to visit during a spelling test. Noticing an incorrect spelling, his teacher motioned for him to copy his neighbour's spelling but he stoutly refused to do so. And after being told that the power to the British colonial rule was their meat eating diet, Gandhi secretly began to eat meat. He soon gave up however, as he felt ashamed of deceiving his strictly vegetarian family.

At 19 years old, after barely passing his matriculation exam, he eagerly took the opportunity to travel to Britain to become a barrister. In Britain, he met with Theosophical Society members, who encouraged him to look more closely at Hindu texts and especially the Bhagavad Gita, which he later described as a comfort to him. In doing so, he developed a greater appreciation for Hinduism, and also began to look more closely at other religions, being particularly influenced by the Sermon on the Mount, and later on by Leo Tolstoy.

After passing his bar, he returned to India to practise law. He found he was unable to speak at his first court case, however, and when presented with the opportunity to go to South Africa, left India again.

When he arrived there, however, he became disgusted with the treatment Indians faced by the white settlers. He exhorted his countrymen to observe truthfulness in business and reminded them that their responsibility was the greater since their conduct would be seen as a reflection of their country. He asked them to forget about religious and caste differences and to give up their unsanitary habits. He wanted his country men to demonstrate their suitability for citizenship by showing they deserved it. He spent twenty years in South Africa fighting for, and finally gaining Indian citizenship rights.

His experience in South Africa was not spent in merely the political, however. He had been interested in religion since he was a child, but in South Africa he began to study religion systematically. In his first year there, he read over 80 books on religion.

When he returned to India, his immediate problem was to settle his small band of relatives and associates in an ashram, which was a "group life lived in a religious spirit". His ashram was a small model of the whole moral and religious ideal. It did not enforce on its inmates any theology or ritual, but only a few simple rules of personal conduct. More like a large family than a monastery, it was filled with children and senior citizens, the uneducated and American and European scholars, devout followers and thinly disguised sceptics - a melting pots of different and sometimes opposing ideas, living peacefully and usefully with each other. He was the moral father of the ashram, and would fast as penance when any wrong was committed within its walls. Everyone was bound to him by love and a fear of hurting him.

His increasing influence over the Indian masses with 'satyagraha', which he first coined in his South Africa campaigns, was no less different. Gandhi's involvement with politics in the region meant that he had to tread carefully around the sometimes conflicting ideals of the Hindus and Muslims in the Indian National Congress. Although he initially believed that the British colonial influence was a good one, he was increasingly aware that to be truly equal, the Indians would need independence from British rule.

When he and other members of the Congress were arrested on 9 August 1942 for promoting this idea, a wave of violent disobedience swept the country. Dismayed by the violent turn of events, he entered into a long correspondence with the Government, but civil unrest continued during and after the war period. It was only the deep love that he had inspired in the Indians, both Hindu and Muslim, for him, that enabled him to control the violence when he threatened to fast until death.

Just when the Indians had attained victory, and the British had formally left, he was shot at by a young Hindu fanatic, angry at a man for promoting peace and tolerance for people of all faiths.

Conversations

Printable Version

Introduction

When the young Millie Downs travelled from London to South Africa at the very end of 1905 she thought she was going out simply to marry her fiancé; Henry Polak. But he had already become Gandhi's right-hand man, and Millie was to find that she was also marrying into the great Gandhian experiment, one that began with his domestic arrangements.

Millie and Henry lived in the same Johannesburg house with Gandhi, his wife, and their three sons; they started each day together grinding corn for the household's bread, and they ended each day with a communal vegetarian meal.

Within months the whole extended family moved to Gandhi's first large-scale communal experiment, the Phoenix Settlement outside Durban, which was to be the base for his political campaign and where his paper *Indian Opinion* was produced.

As Gandhi's campaign of non-violent resistance developed, he found in Millie Polak a constantly challenging conversational sparring-partner. She questioned him about the treatment of women in Indian culture, about his renunciation of sex, about his ever changing food-fads, and about the nature of his religious beliefs.

To her, he was not yet the 'Mahatma': he was a difficult, witty and contradictory man; and perhaps nothing reveals more about the young Gandhi than the conversations Millie Polak recorded. She places them in the context of communal life at Phoenix, where the dogs were expected to be vegetarian and there was endless heart-searching over whether green mambas could be killed.

Conversations with Gandhi

From a programme broadcast 7th May 2004

Millie (speaking in a BBC archive interview):

I think one might mention here the change that took place in his dress as an indication of his inward change. When I first met him he would dress as an average middle class man of the professional classes would dress ... and later on, when he gave up the law, then he dressed very much as a peasant ...

When the BBC decided in 1954 to record a series of interviews with people who'd known Mahatma Gandhi well, one person they turned to was a then quite elderly Englishwoman by the name of Millie Polak.

Millie (archive, continued):

... And one of the things I used to question with him so often was: why did he always want to choose the most unpleasant way of doing anything?

Millie Polak probably knew Gandhi as well as any European woman ever did, and this is the only known recording of her voice. It was with her pen that she revealed far more about the privileged and somewhat prickly friendship she had with him. She'd first met Gandhi in South Africa at the very end of 1905.

It is with great pleasure that we announce the marriage of Mr H.S.L. Polak and Miss M.G. Downs, who recently arrived from London, at Johannesburg on Saturday. We offer our heartiest best wishes to the pair.

The Indian Opinion

So ran a small notice under the headline 'Congratulations' in the Durban weekly *Indian Opinion* on January 5th, 1906. Over the previous two years the paper had established itself as the mouthpiece of Gandhi's campaign for the rights of South Africa's Indians: and the following week it gave its readers a more detailed description of the newlyweds.

Mr Polak is the Transvaal representative of *Indian Opinion*. The lady whom he has married was born in London, and at the age of 18 she began work in connection with the Christian Socialistic movement. She is in thorough sympathy with the cause of Indians in South Africa. An informal reception for the couple was held last week at the home of Mr M.K. Gandhi, which was attended by a large number of friends and well-

wishers.

The Indian Opinion

And the suburban Johannesburg home of Mr M.K. Gandhi was also, the young Millie Downs soon found out, to be the home in which she was to begin her married life. As she later wrote, it had been clear from the moment of her arrival in South Africa that in marrying Henry Polak she was also marrying Gandhi's cause.

Millie:

At six o'clock in the morning of December 30th, 1905, I arrived at Jeppe Station, Johannesburg, and I found Mr Gandhi and Mr Polak waiting on the platform for me. My first impression of Mr Gandhi was of a medium-sized man, rather slenderly built. His voice was soft, rather musical, and almost boyishly fresh. I particularly noticed this as we chatted of the little things of my journey and proceeded to his home. The household, I learned, consisted of Mr Gandhi, his wife and three sons, aged eleven, nine and six, a young Englishman engaged in the telegraph service, a young Indian ward of Mr Gandhi's, and Mr Polak. My addition to the family completed its possibilities of accommodation.

And Millie soon discovered that the middle class comforts of London, to which, no doubt, she'd been accustomed, had no place in the Gandhi household.

Millie:

Within a few days, we seemed to have settled into our new life. At 6.30 every morning the household assembled for the grinding of the wheat for the day - all bread being made at home. This piece of work was looked upon as a pleasant, if somewhat arduous morning exercise. Other exercise took the form of skipping, at which Mr Gandhi was adept.

Over the next nine years, until his final departure for India in 1914, the Polaks - both in Johannesburg and later in Durban - were to be part of an extended family that was at the very heart of Gandhi's experiments with how best to live. As he himself put it in the autobiography he published in the late '20s.

Gandhi:

Just as I had Indians living with me as members of my family, so I had English friends living with me as members of my family. I hold that believers who have to see the same God in others that they see in themselves, must be able to live amongst all with sufficient detachment. Not that all who lived with me liked it. But I persisted in having them.

And Gandhi acknowledges that Millie Polak's arrival in January 1906 was a significant, and potentially fraught, moment for the household - especially, he seems to recognise, for his wife, Kusturba.

Gandhi:

Up to now the Europeans living with us had been more or less known to me before. But now an English lady who was an utter stranger to us entered the family. I do not remember our ever having a difference with the newly married couple, but even if Mrs Polak and my wife had had some unpleasant experiences, they would have been no more than what can happen in the best-regulated homogeneous families. And mine was an essentially heterogeneous family, where people of all kinds and temperaments were freely admitted.

Gandhi was to call his autobiography 'Experiments with Truth', and to Judith Brown - Professor of Commonwealth History at Oxford and Britain's leading authority on Gandhi's life and thought - his family life was his first great experiment, breaking with strict Hindu domestic traditions that he and his wife would have lived by ever since their arranged marriage when they'd both been thirteen years old.

Judith Brown:

I think the earliest experiments are private and religious, and he doesn't become a prominent public experimenter until the end of the first decade of the twentieth century. The result is that he does get used to living with Europeans on terms of complete equality, breaking down old barriers of racism on the European side, but on the Indian side breaking down barriers of caste and ideas of purity and pollution. He would never in his childhood have had a European staying in the house, it would have been unheard of.

This household [was certainly not] easy for his wife... She worried deeply about having to share her house with people who are in Hindu terms untouchable, whether they happen to be Indian Christians or foreigners.

And it can only have been difficult for Kusturba Gandhi, who was still at this time illiterate, to experience her husband's close intellectual relationship with such untouchables - both male and female. From what she wrote later, Millie Polak seemed well aware of the delicacy of the situation.

Millie:

As Mrs Gandhi did not speak much English, she did not take part in our deliberations. Almost immediately, however, we were thrown together, Mr Gandhi and my husband going to the office, and we soon managed to enjoy some kind of intercourse. In a very short time her English improved, so that later on, when she had lost some of her reserve with me and we went out to visit our few European friends, she would take part in the conversation.

Gandhi himself and Millie Polak conversed frequently, about every subject under the African sun, and in the evenings she would jot down what they had said to each other in her notebook. Nearly three decades later, in 1931, she published a small volume of reminiscences about her time as part of the Gandhi household in South Africa. Her book, which has never been reprinted, is called simply *Mr Gandhi, the Man*.

Not yet canonised as the Mahatma, the 'great soul'; not yet the leader of a major political movement; Gandhi is portrayed as Millie Polak found him - an exasperating, witty and contradictory man, struggling to shape daily life into what he thought it could and should be.

Millie herself, well-educated, curious, and usually self-confident, evidently felt able to challenge Gandhi about even the most sensitive things - like how he treated his wife around the house. One evening Gandhi says that he thinks women have a higher place in Eastern than in Western cultures: and Millie strongly disagrees:

Millie: I don't see that. The East has made her the subject of man. She seems to possess no individual life.

Gandhi: You're mistaken; the East has given her a position of worship. Have you not heard the story of Satyavan and Savitri, and how, when Satyavan died, Savitri wrestled with the God of Death for the return of her beloved?

Millie: But that seems to me just the point. In your mythology, woman is made to serve man, even to wrestling with the God of Death for him.

Gandhi: And do you think that it is giving to woman a lower or subordinate place in life when it is she who is depicted as the greatest of conquerors, when she is worshipped as the preserver?

Millie: That's beautiful in theory, I admit, but I don't find her worshipped. I find her always waiting on the pleasure of some man.

Gandhi: Isn't that because you have not yet understood? In the great things of life she is man's equal or superior. In the lesser things she may serve him, but is it not a privilege of the great to serve the least?

Millie: But do men think like that? Does a man really think that his wife is at least his equal when custom requires her to stand behind his chair while he sits and eats?

Gandhi: Do not mistake appearance for reality. Men have not reached the ideal yet, yet nearly all know it in their hearts.

And Gandhi was finally to reach one particular private ideal not long after this conversation took place - total celibacy, something he had privately agonised over for years. There can only have been a strange tension in the household over the question of sex. On the one hand were the newly married Polaks, keen to have children as soon as possible, and on the other Gandhi, who seemingly felt able, having conquered sexual desire himself, to lecture others on how spiritually debilitating it was.

One day, it seems, Millie couldn't take it any more, and challenged Gandhi on whether he had the right to talk about something he no longer practised.

Millie: I often think it's more difficult for the man or woman, cut off from vital experience, to be able to advise concerning it.

Gandhi: He can concentrate on the perfect.

Millie: But concentrating on the perfect won't help him to understand the mere human difficulties. The priest or teacher who has never known the horror of seeing someone he loves and is responsible for, starving for food, cannot understand the temptation of such a person stealing.

Gandhi: It is just because he can stand outside of the temptation that he is able to help. You do not go to the sick to help the sick, but to the strong and well.

Millie: I admit that, but I think I do not like your implied suggestion that it is wrong to produce children.

Gandhi: I didn't say it was wrong.

Millie: No, you didn't say so. But you did say something to the effect that it was a pandering to the flesh.

Gandhi: And is it not?

Millie: No; that reduces the production of children to a weakness, if not an evil. If it's wrong, God himself must be wrong, for it seems to be the only way he has of creating his children, and without it human life would cease on this planet.

Gandhi: Would that be so terrible?

Millie: I am not at all sure it would be right, until mankind has attained the perfection we believe it has to grow to.

Gandhi: But, you do believe that people who have a great mission or work to do should not spend their energy and time in caring for a little family, when they are called to a bigger field of work?

Millie: Yes, I believe that.

Gandhi: Then what are you quarrelling with me about?

Millie: Only that you are still making me feel that you think it to be a higher condition of life to be celibate than to be a parent.

Gandhi had come to think that sex was for procreation, not for pleasure. This is what he had to say on the subject in his autobiography:

I think it is the height of ignorance to believe that the sexual act is an independent function necessary like sleeping or eating. Seeing, therefore, that I did not desire more children I began to strive after self-control. There was endless difficulty in the task. We began to sleep in separate beds. I decided to retire to bed only after a day's work had left me completely exhausted.

His wife, though, it seems, was left in the dark as to what these stratagems were all about.

Gandhi:

I took the vow of celibacy in 1906. I had not shared my thoughts with my wife until then, but only consulted her at the time of making the vow. She had no objection.

We'll have to take his word for it. If Millie Polak did try to talk to Kusturba Gandhi about sex, or the lack of it, she's far too discreet to say so. But, according to Judith Brown, celibacy for Gandhi was only superficially about the renunciation of sex: it was one building block, among others, in the construction of a life-style that would make what he called the pursuit of truth possible.

Judith Brown:

It's very much embedded in Hindu tradition this, that your physical state interacts with your spiritual state, so experimentation with celibacy and sexual control is one aspect of that; but also experimentation with different kinds of food, and different foods generate desire or spirituality, so Gandhi is within a long spiritual tradition that sets great store by issues to do with food and daily living.

Getting rid of desire, getting rid of extraneous links with things that would hold you back from the path of truth: so by cutting natural links with his family he's broadening his vision of what the family and the community are. By simplifying life he's getting rid of the things that people would want to keep hold of rather than experimenting with truth.

And while her sexual life was obviously something that Millie Polak could keep secret from Gandhi, her dietary one wasn't. As far as possible the extended family ate together in the evenings and, from what she says, dining *chez* Gandhi was a constant laboratory of denial.

Millie:

Our dietary experiments were many and various. For some time, upon Mr Gandhi's advice, his wife and I cooked without refined sugar. Cooked fruits, puddings or cakes were sweetened with raw cane syrup. When this phase ended we had a salt-less table. Salt, Mr Gandhi contended, was bad not only for health but also for the character. Then he came to the conclusion that onions were bad for the passions, so onions were cut out. Milk too, Mr Gandhi said, affected the 'passion' side of human life and thereafter milk was abjured likewise. I did not mind the raw onions going, but I questioned the denial of milk...

Millie: Why is it, if milk stimulates the passions, that it is the best food for babies and young children?

Gandhi: The mother's milk is the correct food for babies, but it's not meant for adults.

Millie: I don't mind that, but I cannot see that the same argument can be used against it as a stimulant of the passions. If that were correct, a milk-fed child would be the most unnatural little brute. Think of a little child obsessed with sex because it had had a diet of milk. It's not reasonable.

Millie:

... We talk about food probably quite as much as gourmards do. I'm sure we talk about food more than most people: we seem to be always thinking of the things we either may or may not eat. Sometimes I think it would be better if we just ate anything and didn't think about it at all.

Gandhi: Even flesh?

Millie: A man shall be judged by what comes out of his mouth, not by what he puts into it.

But Gandhi judged even the family pet by the latter criterion.

Millie:

I had a nice healthy dog given to me, and, in accordance with the household tradition, tried to bring him up a vegetarian. He had a very great liking for grapes. We talked to all our friends of the splendid behaviour of our vegetarian dog, and Mr Gandhi was proud of him. But one evening a member of the household, falling over something at the back door, called out for assistance.

Investigation ensued, and we discovered a huge joint of uncooked venison. I then found out that for months our dog had been stealing chickens and anything else he could find and eating them raw. Some of our theories were thus found to have, if nothing worse, at least weak spots.

And Gandhi, Millie Polak soon had to accept, wanted a broader canvas on which to work out his theories. Only four months after she'd arrived in South Africa, she was told the household was moving, to become part of a larger social experiment at a place called Phoenix just outside Durban.

The Phoenix settlement was destroyed in ethnic violence during the 1980s. Today there's still a wonderful mixture of exotic vegetation in Phoenix: the camel-foot, the people tree, mangoes, the Indian temple tree and Indian mynah birds, brought across because they could talk so well.

That anything other than its exotic vegetation remains of Gandhi's communal settlement at Phoenix is largely the work of Durban-based architect Rodney Harber. Gandhi's own house, called Sarvadoya, and all the other original buildings were razed to the ground in a frenzy of anti-Indian violence in 1985 during the dark years at the tail-end of apartheid. It was important for his home city, Rodney Harber felt, that Phoenix lived up to its name and rose again.

Rodney Harber:

I came here a few days after that and went to Sarvadoya, I was shocked to see it like that, and found a smouldering book at the back. It was Tolstoy's book, it had "To my dear friend Karamchand, from Leo", and I took it to the local history museum. It just shows the sort of stuff that may have been lost in the process of the turmoil. All that remained was the floor slab and the chimney; every piece apart from that was just taken and dragged away to build shacks out of. In fact I understand there's a *shabeen*, which is the local word for an illegal pub here, with the original roof of Gandhi's house. I haven't found it, no-one wants to show me, but the owner boasts that he's got Gandhi's house as his shabeen. I thought a resource like this couldn't just be cast away.

Though it took fourteen years of patient negotiation with the people who'd occupied the site, Rodney Harber was finally able to re-build Gandhi's house.

Rodney Harber:

Certainly this middle part [of the house] is original, the raised floor; there was a veranda on the front in some of the photographs, maybe where that cement floor is now, we don't know. But in the process of reconstructing it we had to work with what we knew was true for sure. So it was like this in 1927, which of course was already fourteen years after Gandhi had gone. We reconstructed it to what it was in the photographs we could find. It was fascinating forensic architecture, that's the only way to describe it, scratching looking for paint colours, finding old photographs, blowing them up digitally, producing working drawings for plasterers, finding where the framework was by looking for the drive screws on the outside of the sheeting, it was great from that point of view. This was the living room ... there was a little work-bench there ... but the most important part is going out with the kitchen on the one side and this wonderful study which had a lot of really valuable books.

Gandhi had acquired the land at Phoenix because in 1904 he'd spent a sleepless night on a train from Johannesburg to Durban reading a book that Henry Polak had given him. The book was John Ruskin's moral and aesthetic critique of industrial capitalism *Unto This Last*, and it convinced Gandhi that the

trappings of western materialism were indeed traps. He brought his extended family here to experiment with living as simply as possible. But Millie Polak, for one, didn't much like what she saw.

Millie:

My first view of Phoenix disappointed and depressed me. Mrs Gandhi, too, did not feel happy at being transplanted from the town, with its domestic and human amenities, to the more primitive conditions which prevailed at the settlement. She and I shared a little room the first night we arrived, and lay awake talking and grumbling for hours.

It's now densely built over with small houses as far as one can see, but a hundred years ago this was virgin territory. The original settlers here lived under canvas while they constructed simple corrugated iron shacks, and each household was given a small plot for growing vegetables. Phoenix was described at the time as "a hundred acres of fruit trees and snakes", and what to do with the resident mambas was a constant problem for a community in which all life was held to be sacred.

Millie:

One day, suspended from an overhanging bough of a tree at the spot where water was fetched daily, was observed a big green mamba, one of the deadliest snakes found in South Africa. The colonist who first saw it did not know what to do. Non-killing was a fundamental principle at Phoenix; but no one could argue or reason with a snake, and the snake seemed absolutely disinclined to go away. Eventually an Indian colonist, Mr S., settled the problem. He was an old hand at the gun, which he fetched and then shot the snake. He was the father of two little girls and believed that the safety and life of the children were of greater importance than those of a snake.

Which was not a position the community could have any confidence Gandhi himself would share.

Millie:

I do not think Mr Gandhi complained to Mr S. of his action, and nor did anyone else. But all of us thought about it, and some of us secretly believed Mr S. to be quite right and wanted to thank him for having taken prompt and effective action. The incident, however, was not allowed to be used as a precedent.

But Phoenix wasn't just about a group of like-minded people experimenting with living together as simply as possible. They also had a political job to do: and everyone in the community, male and female, adults and children, were expected to pull their weight to bring out the weekly edition of the newspaper *Indian Opinion*.

Millie:

The printing press had no mechanical means at its disposal, for the oil-engine had broken down, and at first animal power was utilised, two donkeys being used to turn the handle of the machine. But Mr Gandhi, ever a believer in man doing his own work, soon altered this, and four hefty Zulu girls were procured for a few hours on printing day. These took the work in turns, two at a time, while the other two rested: but every able-bodied settler, Mr Gandhi included, took their turn at the handle, and thus the copies of the paper were ground out.

Gandhi himself wrote a large part of each issue of the paper, and its columns show perhaps more clearly than anything else the particular mix of the personal, the religious and the political that became his unique public stance. The focus, naturally, was on the struggle against anti-Indian discrimination in both Natal and the Transvaal, and on how it was being viewed in Britain and in India.

But public wrongs, Gandhi had come to argue, could only be effectively resisted by those who lived rightly: so amidst the political detail readers would find admonishing editorials about such things as tobacco:

The habit of smoking among boys is undoubtedly harmful. It undermines their constitution and weakens their mental capacity.

The Indian Opinion

Or alcohol:

It is sham Europeanism that Indians have to be warned against, and every son of India who falls into the sin of intemperance is a traitor to the race from which he springs.

The Indian Opinion

The paper instructed its readers on 'the importance of the admission of fresh air into bedrooms'; and, more worryingly from a public-health point of view, on how to deal with cholera and typhoid:

Cholera germs are killed in fifteen minutes by lemon-juice or apple-juice, and typhoid fever germs in half an hour by these acids, even when considerably diluted. Instead of telling a man to have his stomach washed out, we can now tell him to drink orange juice.

The Indian Opinion

If western scientific medicine was one thing Gandhi railed against, another was religious intolerance: and he used the pages of *Indian Opinion* to enlighten his readers about faiths other than their own.

Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Theosophists were all given space. And for Millie Polak, as the political situation impinged more and more on the life of the community, what we would now call inter-faith gatherings in the Gandhis' living-room at Phoenix became ever more important:

Millie:

Here, every Sunday evening, in that little lamp-lit corrugated-iron room, all the members gathered for a kind of religious service. Mr Gandhi usually opened the proceedings with a reading from the 'Bhagavad Gita' and would also read passages from the New Testament. Then there would be English hymns, and some Gujarati sacred music. Mr Gandhi thoroughly enjoyed the hymn-singing. He had two great favourites of which, through all the years I knew him, he never wearied. The first was the hymn of consecration, 'Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee'. The other was one that he often quoted when he felt himself surrounded by difficulties, 'Lead Kindly Light'.

And one of the very first things Millie Polak had asked Gandhi about after her arrival in South Africa was why he kept a picture of Jesus on the wall above his desk.

Gandhi: I did once seriously think of embracing the Christian faith. The gentle figure of Christ, so full of forgiveness that he taught his followers not to retaliate when abused or struck, but to turn the other cheek - I thought it was a beautiful example of the perfect man.

Millie: But you did not embrace Christianity did you?

Gandhi: No. I studied your scriptures for some time and thought earnestly about them. I was tremendously attracted to Christianity; but eventually I came to the conclusion that there was nothing really in your scriptures that we had not got in ours, and that to be a good Hindu also meant I would be a good Christian.

Millie: Tell me, do you believe in conversion, in changing from one form of faith to another?

Gandhi: What do you yourself feel?

Millie: It doesn't please me, somehow. I couldn't do it.

Gandhi: I think that's right. If a man reaches the heart of his own religion, he has reached the heart of the others too. There is only one God, and there are many paths to him. What do you think is the essential lesson for man in the teaching of Christianity?

Millie: I could think of two or three; but the one that stands out strongest in my mind at the moment is love.

Gandhi: Yes, and Hinduism teaches the same great truth, and Mohamedanism and Zoroastrianism, too.

Millie: But I've heard all about the caste system in India. Do you think Hinduism does teach 'all men are brothers' as Christianity does?

Gandhi: Do not take men's imperfect interpretation, as you see it, for the real teaching of any great faith. You would not suggest to me that the Christian world lives as brothers, would you? Think of its wars, its hatreds, its poverty and its crime. If we realised our ideals, they would cease to be ideals. We should have nothing to strive for.

Gandhi, of course, was to work tirelessly to expose and undermine the Hindu caste system. But while in South Africa he had to accept that Millie Polak wasn't going to keep quiet about those aspects of Indian culture she found offensive. Towards the end of their time together at Phoenix a middle-aged follower of Gandhi returned to the settlement from a trip to India bringing with him a newly-acquired child bride.

Millie: It's disgraceful that such a marriage should have been permitted in any country. She is only a child.

Gandhi: It is, indeed, disgraceful.

Millie: But will they live in wedlock?

Gandhi: I am afraid so.

Millie: The man should be whipped. It's an outrage to take a child of that age in marriage.

Gandhi: I know how you feel about it. Your heart is sad for the child. My heart aches too.

Millie: And Indian law permits it!

Gandhi: The laws relating to marriage in most countries permit a man to marry a young girl.

Millie: Yes, I know the laws do, but custom is against it.

Gandhi: You are right to be angry. But do you not think that women have a share in the blame, too?

Millie: No, no. I cannot believe that a mother would willingly give her little daughter of twelve or so to be the wife of a robust man of over forty. It is not natural.

Gandhi: But she does do so. She has done so. This marriage was probably arranged by the women of the family. Certainly it was accepted by them, and it is women who must exert themselves to alter these things.

Millie: How can they? What freedom have they to alter these dreadful customs that priests and laws have forced upon them?

Gandhi: Yet they must. They must rouse themselves to do their share in the work of reform. It is for them to set the standard of life. It is their privilege and their duty.

Millie: But what can they do? What power have they in India?

Gandhi: A great deal more than you think! If nothing else, they can refuse to have anything to do with these horrible things, and in refusing to be a partner in a man's shame, the conduct of life must be raised, for men will have to listen when women refuse to obey.

Millie: But would not force be brought to bear upon them then? They would be broken, as they have been before in the world's history.

Gandhi: Perhaps.

Millie: And what then?

Gandhi: They can die. And what man can prevail against a dead woman?

And Millie Polak couldn't resist a particularly difficult request Gandhi made of her just before he finally left South Africa to return to India in 1914. She was anxious, after more than eight years away, to get back to England with her husband and the two young sons they now had.

But Gandhi needed people he could trust to stay and continue his work at Phoenix; and when he asked the Polaks, they agreed. So it would have been with a heavy heart that Millie travelled down to the Cape to say goodbye to the brilliantly strange Indian man with whom she had shared so much over the previous years.

Millie:

Mr Gandhi's arrangements for leaving were hastily made and soon the day of his departure came. I accompanied the party, with my husband, to Capetown, and we were there paraded in carriages round the town preceded by a brass band which played a melody that I knew as 'We won't go home till morning', but which probably the musicians believed to be something quite different and most suitable to the occasion.

Mr Gandhi sat patiently through it all, seeming neither pleased nor sorry at anything that was happening or had happened. As I watched the boat steam out I felt an intolerable sense of blankness come into my life.

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Scripture

Printable Version

The Vedas

These are the most ancient religious texts which define truth for Hindus.

They got their present form between 1200-200 BCE and were introduced to India by the Aryans.

Hindus believe that the texts were received by scholars direct from God and passed on to the next generations by word of mouth.

Vedic texts are sometimes called shruti, which means hearing and for hundreds, maybe even thousands of years, the texts were passed on orally.

Contents of the Vedas

The Vedas are made up of four compositions, and each veda in turn has four parts which are arranged chronologically.

- **The Samhitas** are the most ancient part of the Vedas, consisting of hymns of praise to God.
- **The Brahmanas** are rituals and prayers to guide the priests in their duties.
- **The Aranyakas** concern worship and meditation.
- **The Upanishads** consist of the mystical and philosophical teachings of Hinduism.

The Samhitas

- **Rig-Veda Samhita** (c. 1200 BCE) is the oldest of the four vedas and consists of 1028 hymns praising the ancient gods.
- **Yajur-Veda Samhita** is used as a handbook by priests performing the vedic sacrifices.
- **Sama-Veda Samhita** consists of chants and tunes for singing at the sacrifices.
- **Atharva-Veda Samhita** (c. 900 BCE) preserves many traditions which pre-date the Aryan influence and consists of spells, charms and magical formulae.

The Upanishads

The Upanishads were so called because they were taught to those who sat down beside their teachers. (upa=near, ni=down, shad=sit).

These texts developed from the Vedic tradition, but largely reshaped Hinduism by providing believers with philosophical knowledge.

The major Upanishads were largely composed between 800-200 BCE and are partly prose, partly verse.

Later Upanishads continued to be composed right down to the 16th century. Originally they were in oral form.

The early Upanishads are concerned with understanding the sacrificial rites

Central to the Upanishads is the concept of brahman; the sacred power which informs reality.

Whilst the priests (brahmins) had previously been the ones who, through ritual and sacrifice, had restricted access to the divine, now the knowledge of the universe was open to those of the high and middle castes willing to learn from a teacher.

Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita, or "Song of the Lord" is part of the sixth book of the Mahabharata, the world's longest poem.

Composed between 500 BCE and 100 CE, the Mahabharata is an account of the wars of the house of Bharata.

It is one of the most popular Hindu texts and is known as a smriti text (the remembered tradition). This is considered by some to be of less importance than shruti (the heard text, such as the Vedas). It has, nevertheless, an important place within the Hindu tradition.

The Bhagavad Gita takes the form of a dialogue between prince Arjuna and Krishna, his charioteer, an incarnation of the supreme God, Vishnu.

Arjuna is a warrior, about to join his brothers in a war between two branches of a royal family which would involve killing many of his friends and relatives.

He wants to withdraw from the battle but Krishna teaches him that he, Arjuna, must do his duty in accordance with his class and he argues that death does not destroy the soul.

Krishna points out that knowledge, work and devotion are all paths to salvation and that the central value in life is that of loyalty to God.

The Ramayana

Composed in the same period, the Ramayana is one of India's best known tales.

It tells the story of Prince Rama who was sent into exile in the forest with his wife, Sita, and his brother, Lakshmana.

Sita was abducted by the evil demon Ravana but ultimately rescued by Prince Rama with the help of the Monkey God, Hanuman.

The story is written in 24,000 couplets.

The symbolism of the story has been widely interpreted but basically is the story of good overcoming evil. Many people have said that it is a story about dharma or duty.

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Ethics

Abortion

When considering abortion, the Hindu way is to choose the action that will do least harm to all involved: the mother and father, the foetus and society.

Animal Ethics

Because Hinduism is a term that includes many different although related religious ideas, there is no clear single Hindu view on the right way to treat animals

Capital Punishment

There is no official Hindu line on capital punishment. However, Hinduism opposes killing, violence and revenge, in line with the principle of ahimsa (non-violence).

Contraception

There is no ban on birth control in Hinduism.

Euthanasia and Suicide

There are several Hindu points of view on euthanasia and suicide. Most would say that assisting death brings bad karma because it violates the nonviolence principle. But there are accepted Hindu ways to bring about death.

Organ Donation

No religious law prohibits Hindus from donating their organs and tissues.

War

Like most religions Hinduism includes both teachings that condemn violence and war, and teachings that promote it as a moral duty.

Traditional views

Printable Version

The way of least harm

Hindu medical ethics stem from the principle of ahimsa - of non-violence.

When considering abortion, the Hindu way is to choose the action that will do least harm to all involved: the mother and father, the foetus and society.

Hinduism is therefore generally opposed to abortion except where it is necessary to save the mother's life.

Classical Hindu texts are strongly opposed to abortion:

- one text compares abortion to the killing of a priest
- another text considers abortion a worse sin than killing one's parents
- another text says that a woman who aborts her child will lose her caste.

Traditional Hinduism and many modern Hindus also see abortion as a breach of the duty to produce children in order to continue the family and produce new members of society.

Many Hindus regard the production of offspring as a 'public duty', not simply an 'individual expression of personal choice' (see Lipner, *"The classical Hindu view on abortion and the moral status of the unborn"* 1989).

In practice, however, abortion is practiced in Hindu culture in India, because the religious ban on abortion is sometimes overruled by the cultural preference for sons. This can lead to abortion to prevent the birth of girl babies, which is called 'female foeticide'.

The status of the foetus in Hinduism

The soul and the matter which form the foetus are considered by many Hindus to be joined together from conception.

According to the doctrine of reincarnation a foetus is not developing into a person, but is a person from a very early stage. It contains a reborn soul and should be treated appropriately.

By the ninth month the foetus has achieved very substantial awareness.

According to the Garbha Upanishad, the soul remembers its past lives during the last month the foetus spends in the womb (these memories are destroyed during the trauma of birth).

The Mahabharata refers to a child learning from its father while in the womb.

Abortion and reincarnation

The doctrine of reincarnation, which sees life as a repeating cycle of birth, death and rebirth, is basic to Hindu thinking.

The doctrine of reincarnation can be used to make a strong case against abortion:

If a foetus is aborted, the soul within it suffers a major karmic setback. It is deprived of the opportunities its potential human existence would have given it to earn good karma, and is returned immediately to the cycle of birth, death and rebirth. Thus abortion hinders a soul's spiritual progress.

Reincarnation can also be used to make a case that abortion should be permitted. Under the doctrine of reincarnation, abortion only deprives the soul of one of many births that it will have.

The consequences of abortion in the framework of reincarnation are therefore not as bad as they are in those religions where a soul gets only one chance to be born and where abortion deprives the soul of all possibility of life.

Abortion and non-violence

Ahimsa - non-violence - teaches that it is wrong not only to kill living beings, but to also to kill embryos.

"Hindus believe that all life is sacred, to be loved and revered, and therefore practice ahimsa or non-violence. All life is sacred because all creatures are manifestations of the Supreme Being."

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Animal Ethics

Printable Version

Animal Ethics

Because Hinduism is a term that includes many different although related religious ideas, there is no clear single Hindu view on the right way to treat animals, so what follows are generalisations to which there are exceptions.

The doctrine of ahimsa leads Hindus to treat animals well



Sacred cows are allowed to wander wherever they like, even through busy traffic ©

- Most Hindus are vegetarian
 - No Hindu will eat beef
- Butchery and related jobs are restricted to people of low caste
- Most Hindus believe that non-human animals are inferior to human beings
- Cows are sacred to Hindus
- Some Hindu temples keep sacred animals
- Some Hindu gods have animal characteristics
 - Ganesh has the head of an elephant
 - Hanuman takes the form of a monkey

Animal sacrifice

Hinduism permits animal sacrifice.

Cows

The cow is greatly revered by Hindus and is regarded as sacred. Killing cows is banned in India and no Hindu would eat any cow product.

Hinduism and capital punishment

"An eye for an eye ends up making the whole world blind" *Gandhi*

There is no official Hindu line on capital punishment. However, Hinduism opposes killing, violence and revenge, in line with the principle of ahimsa (non-violence).

India still retains the death penalty, and the reasons for this are likely to be similar to be those suggested in the Buddhist section.

The debate on capital punishment in India was revived in 2004 by the case of Dhananjay Chatterjee who had been sentenced for rape and murder.

At present more than 100 people are on death row in India, although the number of executions in that country is actually very low and the Indian Supreme Court has ruled that the death penalty should only be used in the rarest of rare cases.

Contraception

Printable Version

Birth control

There is no ban on birth control in Hinduism.

Some Hindu scriptures include advice on what a couple should do to promote conception - thus providing contraceptive advice to those who want it.

However most Hindus accept that there is a duty to have a family during the householder stage of life, and so are unlikely to use contraception to avoid having children altogether.

Because India has such a high level of population, much of the discussion of birth control has focussed on the environmental issue of overpopulation rather than more personal ethics, and birth control is not a major ethical issue.

Euthanasia and Suicide

Printable Version

Euthanasia and suicide

There are several Hindu points of view on euthanasia.

Most Hindus would say that a doctor should not accept a patient's request for euthanasia since this will cause the soul and body to be separated at an unnatural time. The result will damage the karma of both doctor and patient.

Other Hindus believe that euthanasia cannot be allowed because it breaches the teaching of ahimsa (doing no harm).

However, some Hindus say that by helping to end a painful life a person is performing a good deed and so fulfilling their moral obligations.

Background

Hinduism is less interested than western philosophers in abstract ideas of right or wrong. Rather it focuses on the consequences of our actions.

For Hindus, culture and faith are inextricable. So although many moral decisions taken by Hindus seem more influenced by their particular culture than by the ideas of their faith, this distinction may not be as clear as it seems.

Karma: Hindus believe in the reincarnation of the soul (or atman) through many lives - not necessarily all human. The ultimate aim of life is to achieve moksha, liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth.

A soul's next life is decided by karma, as the consequence of its own good or bad actions in previous lives. You could regard a soul's karma as somehow representing the net worth of its good and bad actions.

A soul cannot achieve moksha without good karma.

Non-violence: Another important principle is ahimsa, not being violent or causing harm to other beings.

Dharma: Hindus live their lives according to their dharma - their moral duties and responsibilities.

The dharma requires a Hindu to take care of the older members of their community.

Killing

Killing (euthanasia, murder, suicide) interferes with the killed soul's progress towards liberation. It also brings bad karma to the killer, because of the violation of the principle of non-violence.

When the soul is reincarnated in another physical body it will suffer as it did before because the same karma is still present.

Death: The doctrine of karma means that a Hindu tries to get their life in a good state before they die, making sure that there is no unfinished business, or unhappinesses. They try to enter the state of a *sannyasin* - one who has renounced everything.

The ideal death is a conscious death, and this means that palliative treatments will be a problem if they reduce mental alertness.

The state of mind that leads a person to choose euthanasia may affect the process of reincarnation, since one's final thoughts are relevant to the process.

Euthanasia

There are two Hindu views on euthanasia:

- By helping to end a painful life a person is performing a good deed and so fulfilling their moral obligations
- By helping to end a life, even one filled with suffering, a person is disturbing the timing of the cycle of death and rebirth. This is a bad thing to do, and those involved in the euthanasia will take on the remaining karma of the patient.
- The same argument suggests that keeping a person artificially alive on a life-support machines would also be a bad thing to do
- However the use of a life-support machine as part of a temporary attempt at healing would not be a bad thing

Suicide

Prayopavesa, or fasting to death, is an acceptable way for a Hindu to end their life in certain circumstances.

Prayopavesa is very different from what most people mean by suicide:

- it's non-violent and uses natural means;
- it's only used when it's the right time for this life to end - when this body has served its purpose and become a burden;
- unlike the suddenness of suicide, prayopavesa is a gradual process, giving ample time for the patient to prepare himself and those around him for his death;
- while suicide is often associated with feelings of frustration, depression, or anger, prayopavesa is associated with feelings of serenity

Prayopavesa is only for people who are fulfilled, who have no desire or ambition left, and no responsibilities remaining in this life. It is really only suitable for elderly ascetics.

Hindu law lays down conditions for prayopavesa:

- inability to perform normal bodily purification
- death appears imminent or the condition is so bad that life's pleasures are nil
- the decision is publicly declared
- the action must be done under community regulation

An example of prayopavesa:

Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, a Hindu leader born in California, took his own life by prayopavesa in November 2001.

After finding that he had untreatable intestinal cancer the Satguru meditated for several days and then announced that he would accept pain-killing treatment only and would undertake prayopavesa - taking water, but no food.

He died on the 32nd day of his self-imposed fast.

Organ Donation

Printable Version

Individual choice

No religious law prohibits Hindus from donating their organs and tissues.

Life after death is a strong belief of Hindus and is an ongoing process of rebirth. This could be seen as reflecting positively on the concept of organ donation and transplantation.



Decisions about organ donation and transplantation are left to individuals to make, but there are many references that support the concept of organ donation in Hindu scriptures.

In the list of ten Niyamas (or virtuous acts) in the Hindu scriptures, Daan (or selfless giving) is third, and is held as being very significant within the Hindu faith.

That which sustains is accepted and promoted as Dharma (righteous living). This could also be seen as supporting the idea of organ donation.

But, the only constraint on the idea of organ donation is imposed by the very nature of Dharma.

Every act or intention of anyone should be dharmik. Therefore, it is right to donate organs, only if the act of donating an organ has beneficial results.

In Hindu mythology there are also traditions which support the use of body parts to benefit others.

Scientific papers also form an important part of the Vedas. Sage Sushruta looks at features of organ and limb transplants, and Sage Charaka deals with internal medicine.

War

Printable Version

War

Hinduism is a label that covers a wide range of Indian religious groups. While there are many differences between the various traditions they have a great deal in common.

Like most religions Hinduism includes both teachings that condemn violence and war, and teachings that promote it as a moral duty.

The teachings that condemn violence are contained in the doctrine of ahimsa, while those that permit it centre around the Kshatriyas - the warrior caste.

Self-defence

Hindus believe that it is right to use force in self-defence:

May your weapons be strong to drive away the attackers,
may your arms be powerful enough to check the foes,
let your army be glorious, not the evil-doer. *Rig Veda 1-39:2*

The conduct of war

The Rig Veda sets down the rules of war at 6-75:15, and says that a warrior will go to hell if he breaks any of them.

- do not poison the tip of your arrow
- do not attack the sick or old
- do not attack a child or a woman
- do not attack from behind

Arjuna

A key teaching is contained in the story of Arjuna. Arjuna was about to go into battle when he discovered many of his relatives and friends were on the opposing side. Arjuna didn't want to kill people he loved, but was persuaded to do so by Krishna.

Krishna tells Arjuna that he should fight, for the following reasons:

- it is his duty - his dharma - to fight because he was born a warrior
- he was born a member of a warrior caste and his duty to his caste and the divine structure of society are more important than his personal feelings
- violence only affects the body and cannot harm the soul, so killing is not a fault and there is no reason for Arjuna not to kill people, nor should he be sorry for those he has killed
- behind this lies the Eastern idea that life and death are part of an illusion, and that the spiritual is what matters

Ahimsa

Ahimsa is one of the ideals of Hinduism. It means that one should avoid harming any living thing, and also avoid the desire to harm any living thing.

Ahimsa is not just non-violence - it means avoiding any harm, whether physical, mental or emotional.

In modern times the strongest proponent of ahimsa was the Indian leader Gandhi, who believed that ahimsa was the highest duty of a human being.

Ahimsa, non-violence, comes from strength, and the strength is from God, not man. Ahimsa always comes from within. *Gandhi*

Gandhi did not equate ahimsa with non-killing - he accepted that killing because it was a person's duty, and doing so in a detached way without anger or selfish motives, would be compatible with ahimsa.

Karma

Underlying Hindu opposition to killing or violence is the concept of Karma, by which any violence or unkindness a person carries out will return to them at some time in the future by the natural law of the universe.

When Hindus are violent (other than as a matter of duty), philosophers argue that this is because those who do harm do so because they have yet to evolve to a level where they understand and seek peaceful conduct.

Postscript

Hinduism contains some of the earliest writings about peace, as this quote from the Rig Veda shows.

Come together, talk together,
Let our minds be in harmony.
Common be our prayer,
Common be our end,
Common be our purpose,
Common be our deliberations,
Common be our desires,
United be our hearts,
United be our intentions,
Perfect be the union among us.
Rig Veda 10 - 191:2

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Caste System

Printable Version

The Caste System

One feature of Indian society, despite attempts by some Hindu reformers to outlaw it, is the caste system (jati) which ranks society according to occupation.

Caste comes from a Portuguese word, and it is often applied inaccurately to different systems of separating layers of society.

Varnas are the historical division of society into 4 broad classes.

Jatis form the complex multi-layered present-day system.

Varnas

Traditionally, there were four main varnas, plus one group of outsiders:

- **The Brahmins, or priests:**
 - the highest varna, believed to have emerged from Brahma's mouth.
- **The Kshatriyas:**
 - the warrior or ruling class who were made from Brahma's arms.
- **The Vaishyas:**
 - merchants or artisans who came from Brahma's thighs.
- **The Shudras:**
 - the unskilled labourers and servants who emerged from Brahma's feet. These were the lowest class, or varna.
- **The Untouchables:**
 - those too lowly to be within the varna system.

Jatis

Over many centuries, a complex system of castes, or jatis, developed in India. These were exclusive social groups defined by birth, marriage and occupation.

The higher a person's birth, the greater the blessings.

Background

The caste system grew out of two main strands of thought:

- Hierarchy is natural: The belief that a hierarchical social structure is part of the divine intention for natural order.
- Purity: The need to emphasise the importance of ritual purity and impurity.

Caste Today

Members of the upper castes consider the lowest castes to be ritually unclean. Marrying someone from a different caste, whilst not officially outlawed, is generally not recognised.

Today, caste barriers have largely broken down in the large cities. "Untouchability" has been abolished by law.

However, loyalty to a caste is much harder to eliminate and it still provides a sense of community and belonging, particularly in country areas.

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Internet Matchmaking

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Hindus log on in the search for true love



Hindus are moving away from traditional arranged marriages, hailing the internet as the modern way to find a partner.

Increasingly Hindus in the UK are searching online for the person of their dreams through specialist matchmaking sites with a global market.

Manish Solanki, 29, met his wife, Mona, 26, through rishtaa.com, a matrimonial site where Hindus from countries worldwide look for potential partners.

The couple started to email each other after Manish discovered Mona's online profile in July 2001. At the time Manish was studying for a PhD at Brunel University, west London and Mona was based in India.

"After six or seven emails, we realised it wouldn't be possible to meet up," recalls Manish. "I was doing research and it wasn't easy for me to abandon it and go out to India to see her."

Out of sight but not out of mind

The couple decided to stay friends and kept in touch by email. But their friendship deepened and they soon became more involved after sending each other instant messages on the internet.

"I was still not in a position to go to India before finishing my PhD," reveals Manish. "It took another two years before I could get there. We were very honest with each other and realised we had a lot in common and felt we could live together and be happy."

Mona was not actively searching for a husband when she received Manish's first email. She had inadvertently filled in an online survey not realising her details would be posted on to a matrimonial site.

Manish was the first person to respond to her 'advert'. "I didn't set out to marry him," she explains. "We got on really well so I wanted to keep in touch. We became good friends and I began to see that we were meant to be together."

Before encountering Manish, she had been introduced to three men in India through her family. But neither she nor her parents thought them suitable.

"My parents are broad-minded so it wasn't too difficult to convince them to meet Manish," she says. "But I was more afraid of his family's reaction to having met me on the internet."

Absence makes the heart grow fonder

Manish finally went to India in January 2004 to meet Mona and her family. Mona was so nervous that she hid in her room.

"It was a shock when I finally saw him," she recalls. "I'd been waiting for him for a long time and he looked a bit different to how I imagined him."

Manish adds: "I was so happy when I saw her for the first time. I knew she was the sort of person I wanted to marry. Seeing her was confirmation of what I'd believed and hoped for."

He proposed to Mona immediately and she accepted. "My parents were anxious at first," she recalls. "They wanted to be sure he had a house and a job. They were keen to get all the necessary details. I'd chatted to Manish online for many years so I had a good gut feeling and I trusted him."

The couple married in India 13 days later. Manish returned to England two months later and Mona followed him in September 2004 when her passport was ready.

Overcoming doubts about meeting online

Although their marriage was eventually approved by both sets of parents, it was not an arranged marriage. Neither do the couple belong to the same caste.

Manish explains: "In an arranged marriage, parents tend to know people from the same caste so marrying someone from the same caste can be important. There are different rules for different castes so there is flexibility."

Manish's parents were wary initially about the idea of him finding a wife on the internet. But their fears turned to happiness when they met Mona for the first time.

Like many young Hindus, the couple believe the internet is the way forward in helping other men and women to find a partner who shares their religious beliefs, values, language and culture.

Mona is now helping her sister to find a partner online.

Searching for a dream partner

In the UK, other young Hindus are logging on in the hope of finding a potential spouse.

Sandeep, 23, was introduced to the online agency Hindu Faces by a friend at the end of 2005. It is not the first time he has looked online for a partner.

"I met someone online a few years ago and I was seeing this person for a while," he recalls. "The fact you get to know the person before meeting them is helpful. If I go to a bar, I'm more like to be physically attracted to someone but I won't know the person."

He is convinced that the internet is an avenue worth exploring particularly for people looking to meet a like-minded person from a similar background.

"People's lives are getting busier so they have less time," he says. "My parents are open-minded but they'd prefer me to meet someone from an Indian culture. It's not that I'm closed to meeting someone from another culture but it would be easier to meet someone from a similar background. In an Indian household, for example, divorce isn't common."

Like most young people searching for a marriage partner, Sandeep is keen to meet someone who shares the same interests as well as values.

He explains: "I'd like to meet someone who shares the same hobbies. I enjoy going out shopping, dancing, to pubs, clubs and the cinema. I also like sport and going to gym. There needs to be common ground."

Moving on with someone special

Bijal, 30, is a single mum with a two-year-old daughter from a previous relationship. Having married outside her own culture the first time round, she is keen to make a match with a man from a similar background.

She has turned to Hindu Faces in the hope of meeting a new partner.

"It would be easier for me to meet a Hindu, someone who's on the same wavelength and would be accepted by my parents," she says. "It would also need to be someone who will accept that I've got a daughter."

Before her first marriage, Bijal was introduced to Hindu men through her parents but she didn't feel drawn to any of them. As a divorcee and a single parent, Bijal acknowledges that her search for the right man may be difficult.

She says: "I believe strongly that there's someone out there who'll understand I met someone, fell in love, got married and then split. There are lots of ways to look for someone but the internet is one way that wasn't open to the previous generation."

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Ethical issues

Abortion

The rights and wrongs of deliberately ending a pregnancy before childbirth.

Animal ethics

Do animals need rights? And should all animals have rights?

Contraception

The arguments for and against artificially preventing pregnancy.

Euthanasia

What would you do if someone you loved asked you to help them die?

Female circumcision

The issues involved in female circumcision or genital cutting.

Forced marriage

Marriages conducted without the consent of both parties.

Honour crimes

Crimes of 'honour' are tribal customs whose victims are usually women.

Male circumcision

Male genital cutting, a primarily religious or cultural practice.

Same-sex marriage

Should same-sex couples in a stable relationship be allowed to marry?

Sporting ethics

Can the use of performance- enhancing drugs ever be acceptable?

War

Is it ever right to go to war