Hindu Pilgrimages

Like the hajj of Islam, religious pilgrimage plays an important role in Hinduism. There are many holy sites in India, each dedicated to a certain god, a group of gods, or a famous happening. At these centers of worship, the devotee is energized by history, by the meeting of the spiritual and the earthly.

Within India there are four principal places of pilgrimage resting on the four compass points. Hindus visit these sacred spots in a popular all-country route. The pilgrimage normally lasts ten weeks.

Look on the map on the next page. Beginning at Rameshravaram at the southern tip of India, the pilgrims proceed in clockwise order until they encircle the country. If you recall from *The Ramayana*, this is where Rama and Hanuman’s troops built a bridge to Sri Lanka in order to rescue Sita. The principal deities worshipped here are Vishnu and Shiva.

Next, the devout journey to Dwarkadheesh in western India where Vishnu is deified. From there, they pilgrim travels to Badrinath in the far north. There, high in the Himalayas, rests another shrine to Lord Vishnu where for centuries Hindus have worshipped. The faithful are then likely to visit the source of the sacred River Ganges at Gangotri. (You will read a myth about the Ganges later in this chapter.)

From the thin air of Badrinath, the sojourners follow the Ganges southward to the populated city of Calcutta, and then they proceed onward to Puri. Thousands of Hindus gather here annually in July for a great temple festival worshipping Krishna as “Lord of the Universe.” Joyous crowds follow as a forty-six foot (13.8 m) image of Lord Krishna aboard a massive chariot is paraded through the streets.

Completing this pilgrimage is a difficult task requiring self-discipline and spiritual austerity. Hindus, therefore, place great emphasis on such journeys, whether they include all of India or not. Since Hindus regard life as a pilgrimage toward enlightenment, each holy destination fosters the religious connectedness needed to advance spiritually.

Other Pilgrimage Sites

Beside the four locations mentioned above, India is rich with pilgrimage sites. One such place is Harwar, meaning “Lord’s Gate.” On the banks of the Ganges, Hindus commit the ashes of the dead into the holy water.

Below is a list of other important places of pilgrimage. Do some research to find out the significance of each area. What took place there? Who is the principal god or form of worship? Respond below and on the back of this paper.

1. Vrindavan
2. Ayodya
3. Ujjain
4. Benares
5. Kanchipuram
6. Gaya
The Sacred River Ganges

The people of the Indus Valley considered water sacred, a reverence which seeped its way into their Aryan conquerors. To Hindus, water is both literally and symbolically a source of life, renewal, and hope.

The river Ganges, born in the Himalayas and nourishing the holy city of Varanasi, is the most venerated river in all of India. Countless people visit its banks every year, washing themselves or committing the ashes of a loved one into its waters. In either case, there is the belief that contact with sacred rivers helps balance a person’s karma.

There are many stories surrounding the origin of the Ganges. One of the most famous myths tells the story of Ganga, a goddess with the power to purify anything that touched her.

The story tells of the royal family of King Sagara, and his queens, Keshini and Sumati. Sumati alone has 60,000 sons, all regal and enthusiastic. So when the sacred sacrificial horse is stolen from the palace, the princes eagerly quest for its return. They search the entire surface of the earth without luck. Finally, in their haste, they dig into the netherworld. This disturbs the planet’s balance, causing a tremendous earthquake.

Oblivious to the harm they have done, the boys discover the sacrificial horse in the presence of the sage, Kapila. They accuse Kapila of stealing the horse, and they prepare to attack him. But the powerful sage, enraged by their accusation, utters one syllable and engulfs the 60,000 in flames, reducing them to ashes.

Later, Amsuman, the nephew of the brothers, meets with Kapila. The sage explains that there is only one way the thoughtless princes can escape suffering in hell forever: Ganga, in all her purity, must descend from heaven and touch the ashes of the cursed uncles.

But neither Amsuman nor his son, Dilipa, is able to bring Ganga to Earth. But when Dilipa’s son, Bhagiratha, refuses to take the throne until Ganga descends, Lord Brahma is impressed. The god offers Bhagiratha a boon, and the prince asks that Ganga descend. But Brahma cannot grant the boon. The earth, he explains, would be destroyed by the force of Ganga’s current. Only Shiva could withstand it.

So Bhagiratha performs penances until Shiva agrees to receive Ganga’s mighty force. But when the goddess tries to sweep Shiva into the netherworld, she is imprisoned in the matted locks of his hair. Again, Bhagiratha worships Shiva, begging for pity. Shiva, moved by the prince’s sincerity, releases Ganga, who has been purified by contact with Shiva’s hair. Soon, many people rush to Ganga to be cleansed.

But on their way to the netherworld, Ganga disturbs the meditations of sage Jahnu, who consumes her in one swallow. Devastated, Bhagiratha again must beg for release. Finally, Jahnu frees the captured goddess, who is even more pure after her contact with the sage.

At last, Bhagiratha and Ganga flow over the Earth, the ocean, and into the netherworld. The sons of Sagara are redeemed, and Brahma promises that Ganga will continue to flow, offering purification to all the faithful.
Hindu Rites of Passage

**Birth**

Even before a baby is born, Hindus perform rituals and recite prayers to protect the fetus from illness or harmful spirits. The mother eats only healthy foods to ensure the newborn’s well-being.

In some families, the father performs a ceremony immediately after the birth. He dips a gold pen into a jar of honey and writes the sacred Sankrit symbol, Om, onto the infant’s tongue. The symbol, which stands for truth, is written in hope that the child will be honest and speak only the truth, which is sweet as honey. The symbol looks like this:

After a little more than a week, the baby’s name is formally given. Usually the name of a favorite god or goddess is chosen and whispered into the child’s ear.

Within the first few years of her life, a Hindu girl has an ear-piercing ceremony. Both boys and girls have their hair cut, symbolic of renewal and the shedding of wrongdoing in past lives.

**The Ceremony of the Sacred Thread**

The Ceremony of the Sacred Thread is an ancient rite of passage into adolescence reserved for male members of the three upper castes, the Brahmins, Shatriyas, and Vaishyas. Like the Jewish bar mitzvah, it represents a rebirth or initiation into the religious community.

Traditionally, this rite of passage served to introduce the devotee into religious life. In the presence of a guru, or holy teacher, the young man shaves his head and dons a saffron robe. Taking up a simple walking stick, he renounces all material possessions and then receives the sacred thread. The unadorned Thread is symbolic of the interconnectedness of all things. It consists of seven strands, each of which represents a different virtue or quality. They are as follows:

1. Power of speech
2. Memory
3. Intelligence
4. Forgiveness
5. Steadfastness
6. Prosperity
7. Good reputation

The boy promises to embody these qualities, and for the rest of his life he wears the sacred thread as a symbol of his coming-of-age.

The ceremony concludes with a fire sacrifice, the most common form of ritual in Hinduism. In early times, the initiate would follow his teacher into a faraway dwelling to study scriptures and to lead a life of spiritual practice and austerity. Afterwards, he would reenter society, marry, and raise a family. Nowadays, only young men seeking to become priests or ascetics live with a guru.
Hindu Rites of Passage (cont.)

Marriage

Most Hindu marriages are arranged by the parents, although the children must also be happy with their chosen partner. Hindus almost always marry within the same caste, although in modern times there are increasing exceptions.

A wedding is one of the most colorful and important ceremonies in all of Hinduism. Although customs vary greatly in different regions, marriages are always joyous, momentous occasions, rich with decorations and food. In fact, some Hindu weddings last as long as three days!

The ceremony centers around a sacred fire, a manifestation of the god, Agni. Family and friends surround the couple as a priest chants Sanskrit verses. Next, he leads the bride and groom around the flames which burn in a brick firepit. Bells are sounded, and many offerings are made to the fire, including clarified butter, grains, and flowers. Each time the couple completes their circuit, the bride stands on one of the bricks. This act affirms her strength and loyalty.

Finally, the bride and groom take seven steps around the flames. These steps are the most significant action in a Hindu wedding. Now the couple is bonded for life, their union sanctified.

Death

Since ancient times, cremation, or the burning of corpses, has been a Hindu custom. Like the marriage ceremony, the rite of passage into death centers around the sacred fire.

The funeral begins when the body is wrapped in cloth and carried away on a stretcher. As family and friends leave their village for the cremation grounds, they recite prayers to the chosen deity of the deceased. Traditionally, the eldest son lights the wood of the funeral pyre with a flame lit in a nearby temple. Prayers and offerings are made in the belief that the deceased is going through a process of rebirth, cleansed by the fire into new life. The ritual also protects the relatives from evil spirits.

The ceremony concludes when the ashes are thrown into a river. Many Hindus want their remains to be left in the River Ganges, believing that its waters will help purify their souls.

Response:
Choose one of the previous four rites of passage. On the lines below, freewrite your response to the customs of the rite.

____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
____________________________________________________________________________________
Hindu Holidays

Divali

_Divali_, which means “a row of lights,” celebrates the Hindu New Year. Because Hindus follow a lunar calendar, this holiday can fall in either October or November. Also known as the “Festival of Lights,” people decorate their streets and doorways with small clay lamps called _divas_ (or _idpas_). All this is done in anticipation of the coming of Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity and good fortune. Colored lights and fireworks add to the festive atmosphere, for only if Lakshmi is greeted with light will she offer her blessings of wealth and abundance.

Divali lasts for five days. The faithful carefully clean their homes and businesses, while decorating their floors with colorful floor paintings made of rice flour. Everyone wears his or her finest clothes and jewelry and, in the spirit of generosity, offers sweets and gifts to friends and neighbors.

For some Hindus, Divali also commemorates the homecoming of Rama and Sita after their long years in exile. When the royal couple returned, their city was alight with lamps.

Holi

_Holi_ is the Hindu spring festival, celebrating the equinox and the coming of Lord Krishna, who played with the colors of life. In northern India, Holi is also the time to gather the winter harvest.

A favorite among children, the holiday begins in the evening when bonfires are lit. These fires are meant to empower the sun as it moves into the warmer and longer hours of spring. All night the faithful sing and dance and pray around the bonfires. When dawn arrives, the fires are extinguished with water.

Now, instead of fire, water becomes the center of the festival. Colored with special dyes, people throw the water at each other in a playful spirit. These antics last for three days, during which people spend leisure time together, eating special holiday foods and sweets.
The Hindu Calendar

Like the Jewish and Islamic calendars, Hindus follow a lunar year. This means that each month begins with the appearance of the new moon, causing festivals and holidays to appear at a different date each year. The fortnight, or first two weeks, of the waxing moon is called *Shukla Paksha*. The fortnight of the waning moon is called *Krishna Paksha*.

Here are the months of the Hindu calendar along with their Gregorian equivalent. Below, you will also find a list of major festivals and the months on which they fall.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Magha</th>
<th>Phalguna</th>
<th>Chaitra</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(January/February)</td>
<td>(February/March)</td>
<td>(March/April)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaiskha</td>
<td>Jyestha</td>
<td>Ashadha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(April/May)</td>
<td>(May/June)</td>
<td>(June/July)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sravana</td>
<td>Bhadrapada</td>
<td>Asvina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(July/August)</td>
<td>(August/September)</td>
<td>(September/October)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karttaika</td>
<td>Margasirsha</td>
<td>Pausa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(October/November)</td>
<td>(November/December)</td>
<td>(December/January)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Some Significant Festivals and Holidays**

**Magha:** *Maker Sankranti Lohri*, winter solstice festival

**Phalguna:** dedication to Saraswati, goddess of poetry and wisdom

**Chaitra:** *Holi*, spring festival

**Vaisakha:** *Ram Navami*, Rama’s birthday celebration

**Ashadha:** *Ratha Yatra*, celebration of Krishna

**Bhadrapada:** *Raksha Bandhan*, holiday celebrating siblings; *Janamashtami*, celebration of Krishna’s birth

**Kartttika:** new year festival; *Divali*, festival of lights

**Extension:**
Research a holiday from this list and write a short essay on its history and festivities.
Like a church, synagogue, and mosque, the Hindu mandir, or temple, is a holy place of gathering and worship. Although mandirs vary in grandeur, they all share some specific features.

To begin with, each temple is dedicated to a particular god, although representations of other gods are allowed. In fact, mandir actually means “dwelling.” At the heart of the temple rests a shrine to the chosen deity. These shrines contain an image—usually a statue or painting—of the god. Each morning the priest adorns the shrine, surrounding the image with fresh flowers, fruit, incense, candles, lamps, and other decorations.

Hindus believe that although an image cannot contain God, deeper understanding can be achieved by meditating on a representation of Krishna, Vishnu, Brahma, or other deities. It is in this spirit that Hindus perform puja, daily worship. Temple pujas are performed at dawn, noon, dusk, and midnight. Participants take an active role in their worship, beginning with darshan, which simply means “to focus upon a deity.” Next, the devotee makes a food offering. The priest blesses the prasad, or food, which is then consumed by the worshipper. It is also common for the priest to burn some of the gift and smear the consecrated ashes on the giver’s forehead. Finally, some temples have room for followers to circle the shrine in a clockwise motion, another popular form of worship.

Traditionally, the outside walls of a mandir are decorated with sculptured representations of an array of mythic and worldly happenings. In fact, some older temples are literally carved out of rocks and caves. Some of these sculptures are magnificent, intricate works of art. Other temples are simple, unadorned buildings. Some rise into spires, or towers, symbolizing the meeting of the celestial and earthly. The entrance, usually facing east, welcomes the guest into a pillared hallway, an assembly hall, or both. These lead to the shrine room, the heart of the structure. Many temples also contain bathing tanks where devotees cleanse themselves.

Unlike the members of many other religions, Hindus may maintain their spiritual devotion without visiting their house of worship. As you will see, many worship their chosen deity at their family shrine. Still, the mandir serves an essential role in the spiritual life of a Hindu. It is a place where the world is left behind for awhile, a place of ritual, devotion, and cleansing.

Extension:
On the next page, study the sketch of the essential parts of a mandir. Follow up by finding some photos of a Hindu temple and locating these features.
Mandir means “abiding place” or “dwelling.” It is the home of the god worshipped there. The main services at a mandir are at sunrise and sunset.
A Hindu Family Shrine

Almost all Hindus keep a shrine in their home, regardless of their caste or economic status. These shrines, dedicated to a particular god, vary in size. Some families can afford to leave aside an entire room while others can devote only a corner of the bedroom. In either case, the sacred space, like the shrine of a temple, is tended to religiously. Here, family members worship collectively or individually.

On the following page, notice the common features of a family shrine. On a table or shelf rests a photograph of the chosen god. The fragrance of fresh flowers and fruit mixes with incense and perfumes in the air. A bell, which is rung for prayer, stands nearby. An oil lamp, lit during worship, sits beside the scripture from which prayers are read. Other symbols, gods, and gurus may also appear in the shrine.

Daily Duties

Beside daily worship, most Hindus attend to four other religious duties. Here is a list explaining all five daily duties:

1. **Worshipping God:** Hindus must devote part of their day to worship. This ensures spiritual contact.
2. **Reciting scripture:** By reciting from a sacred text, the faithful learn the lessons of worldly and religious life.
3. **Honoring to parents and elders:** Hindus are very loyal family members. Parents and elders are honored for their wisdom and self-sacrifice.
4. **Helping the poor:** Even the less fortunate try to obey this commandment. Guests, in particular, are given special attention in a Hindu home.
5. **Feeding animals:** Because Hindus consider all life a sacred part of one God, animals are respected and cared for.

Making Your Own Shrine

Set aside part of your room for a personal shrine. The shrine can focus on your religious tradition or it can just be a place to put special things. For example, you may want to decorate your area with a favorite souvenir or a letter from a dear friend. Take a picture of your shrine and bring it to class to share.

Be sure to look after the shrine area. Keep it decorated and clean.
A Hindu Family Shrine (cont.)
Om or Aum

The symbol *Om*, or *Aum*, is the principal symbol of Hinduism. It is both a visual and an oral representation of Brahmin, or God. This mark has another name, *Pravana*, which means “that by which God is effectively praised,” and “that which is ever new.” Hindus repeat the word Om in order to transcend their individual thoughts and merge with God.

Actually, Om is comprised of three independent letters, “a,” “u,” and “m.” The letter “a” represents beginning, “u” means progress and “m” stands for dissolution. Thus, Om reflects the power responsible for the creation, development, and destruction of the universe.

This symbol is the most widely used in all Indian religions, appearing in both Buddhism and Sikhism.

Sri Yantra

The geometrical pattern, *Sri Yantra*, is commonly used as a visual focal point for meditation. It originated with the Sakti cult, the votaries or worshippers of the Divine Mother. The design itself represents the form of the goddess. The Sri Yantra consists of nine triangles which intersect to form forty-three triangles in all. Three concentric circles surround the triangles. The shape is framed by a square.

This symbol represents spiritual evolution. The triangles stand for the many aspects of God, which, when focused upon, merge into one. When this occurs, consciousness of unity appears in the circles. Finally, the entire symbol is seen as a single unit mirroring the Absolute, or God.
Hindu Symbols (cont.)

The Swastika

The swastika is an ancient symbol of auspiciousness, good fortune, and protection. The root, “swasti,” literally means “auspicious.” Besides being used as a symbol for Vishnu, it also represents the eternal wheel of life which rotates upon an unchanging center, God. In India, it is not uncommon to find swastikas marked on buildings and animals. Some Hindus believe it protects them from evil spirits and natural disasters.

It is important to understand that the Hindu swastika predates the swastika of Nazi Germany by centuries. In fact, the Nazi symbol is actually drawn in the reverse of the Hindu one.

The Lotus

The lotus bud, which is born in water and unfolds itself into a beautiful flower, symbolizes the birth of the universe, manifesting itself in all its glory. It is also a symbol of the sun, which rises in the navel of Vishnu. The lotus is the seat of Brahma as well. In fact, many deities are depicted sitting atop the sacred lotus flower.

The Cow

For ages, the cow has been held sacred by Hindus. The cow is the offspring of the celestial cow, which was created by Lord Krishna from his own body. Another Hindu myth says the cow was born of the churning of the ocean. Also, the Earth often approaches God in the form of a cow.

For many Hindus the cow is a sacred animal, providing milk and butter. Both these products are used in rituals of atonement.