

## Hinduism Information

### Worship

While worship at the temple is important for many Hindus, the real focus of worship is in the home.

Most Hindu homes have a shrine. Worship is an expression of devotion to their chosen deity. Worshippers usually bathe, put on clean clothes (no shoes), ring the bell to wake the gods, light incense sticks and wipe the pictures of the gods and the murtis (statues) with water. The foreheads of each god is marked with kum kum powder and sweets, fruit, water and possibly leaves and flowers are offered to the gods. Then arti is performed. This involves lighting the diva and moving the hands above the flame before moving them over the forehead to show that the blessing of god is being received.

On the **puja tray** there is

- a **bell** (to wake the god),
- a **water pot** (an offering to the god and to wash the statue- symbol of purity),
- a **diva lamp** (to symbolise enlightenment),
- **incense stick holder** (to make pleasant smell that soothes and cools) ,
- **kum kum powder** (to put red marks on the foreheads of the god and people to symbolise good health)
- and a **spoon** (used to offer milk or water to the god and people).

### Festivals

#### Diwali

Based on lots of events, including the return of Rama and Sita. Cards are sent to family and friends wishing them Happy Diwali. Light and good over evil are important aspects of this religion. Often used as a new beginning- to make a fresh start.

Diwali is the Hindu festival welcoming Rama and Sita out of the forest and celebrating the Hindu new year.

Deepvali is the sanskrit word meaning rows of lights.

Some people light decorated candles, some decorated clay diva lamps, and other decorative lights and put them in their windows for the festival.

Diwali is a huge family festival starting with worship followed by a celebration breakfast. Families dress in new clothes and jewels and go visiting others. They exchange gifts and sweets. It is a time to forget quarrels and make up with people that are no longer friends. At night every building is lit with little lamps in hopes that Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth will bless them.

The celebration of Diwali lasts for five days.

## **Holi**

Holi is celebrated by Hindu people to welcome the spring harvest. A big part of the festival is involved in watching or taking part in Hindu dances. In India, the home of Hinduism story telling is very often done through dance. Many people and especially children will dress in costume and mask to tell the story of Prahlad or Krishna. Schools and various community groups prepare plays and dances to show to the local Hindu families. In the evening they go to the temple for the puja. The priest lights arti or diva lamps, the flames remind them that God is present. They pass their hand over the flame, then pass it over their heads to feel closer to God.

## **Food**

Many Hindus are vegetarians. They do not eat the flesh of any animal but do eat products from animals which have not caused its death (milk, yoghurt, cheese, butter). Some do not eat eggs.

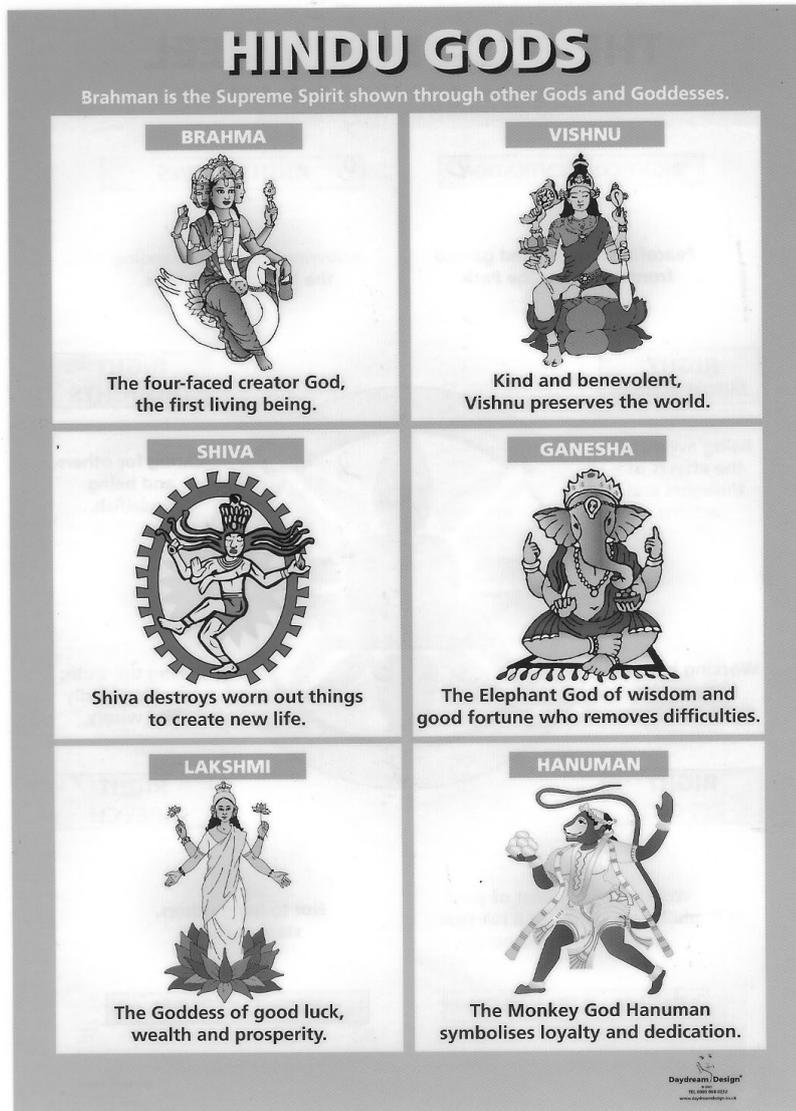
Hindus believe that life is sacred and it is wrong to kill animals for food.

Some Hindus are not vegetarian but do not eat beef. The cow is special and looked upon as a symbol of the earth itself. The milk and products of a cow are an important part of the Hindu diet.

Fasting is an important aspect of Hinduism. Many Hindus fast for the whole or part of the day, or the time of a particular festival, during pilgrimage. Some fast once a week.

## Gods

Hindus believe that there is one supreme God called Brahman who is present in all things and gives all living things life. They also believe that there are many aspects of that God. The various deities represent aspects of him.



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In many Hindu traditions the goddess is thought of as the strength and protector of mothers and children. The more heads a God(dess) has the cleverer they are; the more arms the stronger.

**Shiva** is the destroyer and destroys all of the old or useless so that new can be created. He is part of the on-going circle of life and one of the three main gods. He is also known as Lord of the Dance and is most often

portrayed as the image here: the dancer in red. Shiva was married to Parvati and together they created another of the most well known Hindu gods: *Ganesh*. Note the third (red) eye in the middle of his forehead. A coconut is often an offering to Shiva because it too has three eyes.

**Brahma** is the creator god. At his own command Brahma can divide himself into any sort of life and so can populate the world after Shiva has destroyed it ready for new creation.

**Vishnu** seems the most powerful of the three main gods. He is the sustainer and preserver of creation. At the beginning of each birth of the universe there is nothing but a huge empty ocean. Vishnu appears with a lotus flower growing from his navel. Brahma is born from the lotus flower and so life is enabled.

Here is one version of how **Ganesh** got his elephant head. When his father, the great god Shiva went away to meditate, his wife Parvati created a model of a beautiful boy and breathed life into him. She told the child that he was her son *Ganesh*, and he must protect her while she bathed.

When Shiva returned after a long absence he found a strange lad guarding his wife's rooms. He was so angry that he cut off the boy's head.

Parvati heard the noise and rushed out of her rooms to see her beloved son lying dead.

When Shiva realized that the boy was her son he was overcome with remorse and sent the servants out to fetch the head of the first living creature they found who was sleeping with its head facing North. That turned out to be an elephant. Shiva put the elephant head on to the boy's shoulders. Shiva then breathed life into the boy. As both had given life to the boy he really became their son. Parvati was still distressed to see their poor ugly son.

Shiva could not bear to see his wife unhappy so he made her a promise that *Ganesh* would have the power to answer prayer. Parvati knew that nothing could be a success unless her son was present, and because of this he is one of the most popular gods and always present at Hindu weddings.

## **Mandir**

Hindu temples are homes of particular deities rather than centres for congregational worship. The most holy part is the shrine room. As worshippers enter the Mandir they may ring a bell to alert the deity that they are about to worship. They leave offerings of food, flowers and money at the shrine, moving around the temple in a clockwise direction.

The entrance has an important function- it helps worshippers leave behind everyday concerns and to focus on worship.