

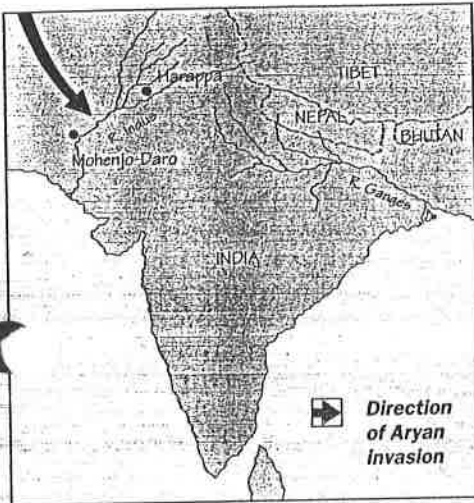
# HINDUISM



Hinduism is the world's oldest living religion, dating back to at least 2000BC. As its name suggests, Hinduism developed and still flourishes mainly in India. There are over 500 million Hindus in the world today.

## How Hinduism began

The beginnings of Hinduism have been traced back to an ancient civilization known as the Indus Valley Civilization, which flourished between 3500 and 1500BC. This civilization came to an end at about the same time as a nomadic people, called Aryans, invaded India. Hinduism developed from the religious ideas of both these peoples.



Hindu temples are often richly decorated with figures of gods and goddesses.

This is a sacred Hindu word: "Om" (see page 17) written in Tamil, a south Indian language.

This is just one of four gateways to a Hindu temple, not in India but in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

This temple was built as recently as 1873, in a similar style to many temples in southern India.

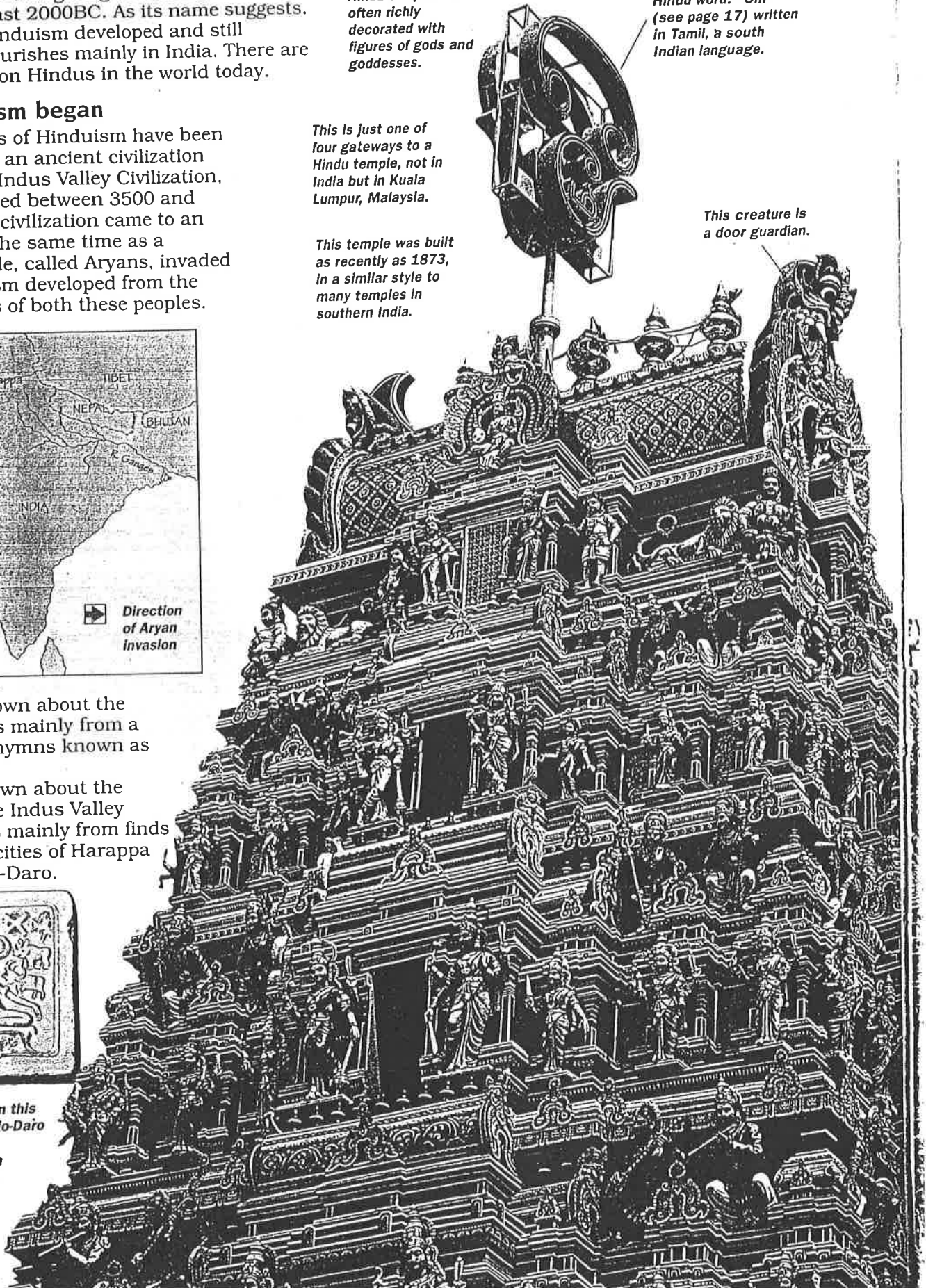
This creature is a door guardian.

What is known about the Aryans comes mainly from a collection of hymns known as the Vedas.

What is known about the religion of the Indus Valley People comes mainly from finds made at the cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro.



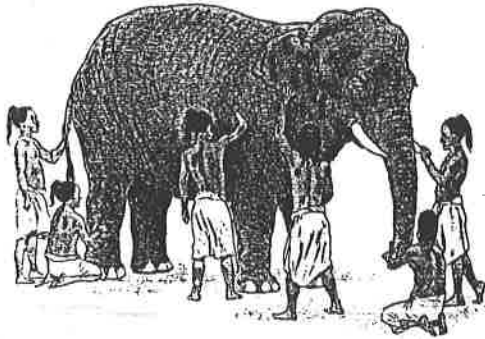
The god shown on this relief from Mohenjo-Daro is thought to be an early form of a Hindu god: Shiva (see page 15).



## A varied religion

Hinduism is a very varied religion because of the way it developed over a long period of time and because it had no individual founder. The story told below gives some idea of its variety.

A mysterious beast appeared in the Land of the Blind. The king sent his courtiers to investigate. They waited until it was asleep and then warily touched it.



"It's like a wall," said the man feeling the elephant's side.

"It's like a spear," said the man touching the tusk.

"... like a fan" (the ear).

"... like a tree" (the leg).

"... like a snake" (the trunk).

"... like a rope" (the tail).

The blind men are, of course, all describing parts of the same thing. In the same way, the different types of Hinduism can sometimes seem so different as to be different things altogether.

For many Hindus, however, beneath all the variety there is one unchanging reality. This is called Brahman.

## Brahman

Brahman is the absolute, unchanging, ultimate reality which many Hindus believe exists beyond the everyday world of appearances. Some Hindus see Brahman as God. Others see Brahman as an impersonal power which is beyond all description.

Legend has it that a wise man taught his son about Brahman by asking him first to put some salt into water and then to take it out again. Of course, the salt dissolved and the son could not take it out. His father then told him that the presence of Brahman in the world is like the salt in the water: invisible but everywhere.

*Learning about Brahman by dissolving salt in water.*



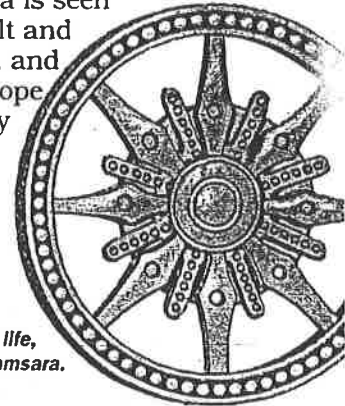
## Atman

Hinduism teaches that each individual has a soul, called Atman. Many Hindus see Atman (self) as part of Brahman (the Absolute). For others, Atman is not part of Brahman; Atman and Brahman are identical: they are one and the same.

## Birth, death and rebirth

According to Hinduism, living things do not have just one life but are all trapped in an endless cycle of life, death and rebirth. This cycle is called samsara. Another word for rebirth is reincarnation.

Samsara is seen as difficult and pointless, and Hindus hope eventually to be freed from it.



*The symbol of a wheel, known as the wheel of life, stands for samsara.*

## Karma

The power which keeps the wheel of life spinning is called karma. Karma refers to the actions performed by each individual during a lifetime. A good action takes the person toward a better rebirth. A bad action takes them toward a poorer rebirth.

It is possible for a human being to be reborn as an animal. It will then be much harder for them to gain the knowledge they need to escape from samsara.



## Release

Release from the cycle of rebirth and suffering (see above) is called moksha. Someone can achieve moksha only when they replace their ignorance with wisdom.

What prevents people from doing this is maya. Maya is the tendency to see things the wrong way, as in this story.

A man thought he saw a snake in his room. In his panic, he did not look

at it closely but rushed around trying to escape and warning other people. If he had only examined the "snake", he would have found that it was just a harmless piece of rope.

What people fail to notice when they look at the world is the way it really is beneath the surface.



For many Hindus the only truly real things are Brahman and Atman. The rest is illusion.



## Many gods

Hinduism has many thousands of gods. Hindus believe the gods are all expressions of Brahman. For many Hindus however, worshipping the gods themselves is more important than the abstract idea of Brahman.

Goddesses play a key role, not only as wives of the gods but in their own right. They are often seen as creative power or energy.

## Creation and re-creation

The main Hindu gods are Vishnu and Shiva. They are two of three gods thought to be responsible for the creation, preservation and destruction of the world.

This cycle of change is thought to happen over and over again endlessly.

Vishnu is the preserver and Shiva is the destroyer, also known as the liberator



Brahma has four heads and sees in four directions.

because he makes re-creation possible. The creator and least significant of the three gods is Brahma (not to be confused with Brahman).

## Vishnu

Vishnu has ten incarnations, or avatars. These are the different forms in which he appears in the world, especially when danger threatens. The most important avatars are the seventh and eighth, Rama and Krishna, who are important gods in their own right.

The tenth and last avatar, Kalki, has not yet appeared. It is



The third avatar of Vishnu: Varaha, the boar.



This painting shows Vishnu sleeping on a many-headed serpent in the ocean of eternity, between creations of the world. A lotus flower springs from his navel and Brahma emerges to create the world. With Vishnu is his wife, Lakshmi, goddess of wealth and beauty.

said that Vishnu will appear in this form at the end of the present age to destroy the wicked and re-establish order.

Hindus sometimes look upon leaders of other faiths as avatars of Vishnu. They may call Buddha, Jesus or Muhammad avatars.

## Rama

Rama and his wife, Sita, represent the ideals of male and female behavior.

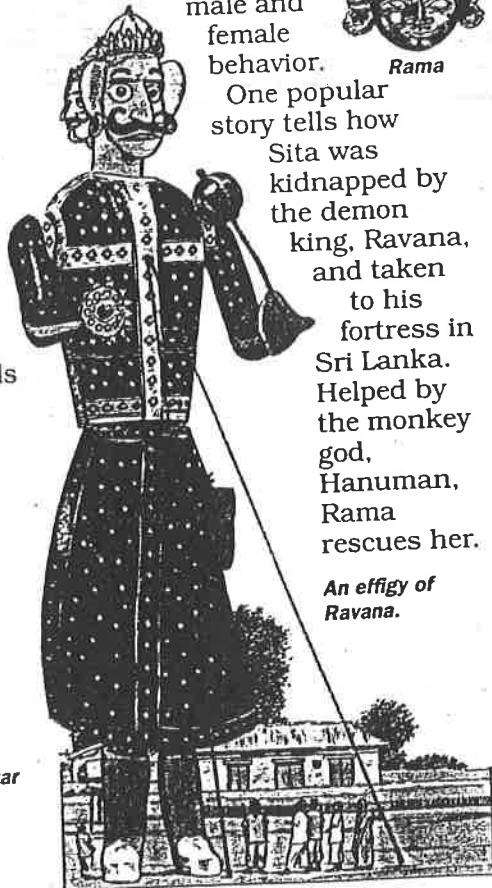


Rama

One popular story tells how

Sita was kidnapped by the demon king, Ravana, and taken to his fortress in Sri Lanka. Helped by the monkey god, Hanuman, Rama rescues her.

An effigy of Ravana.



## Krishna

Krishna is perhaps the most popular of all the gods. Many stories about him emphasize his mischievous nature when young, especially when he was acting as a cowherd.

Krishna's favorite cowgirl was called Radha. The story of their love for each other is a model of how followers should devote themselves to their god.

This painting shows Krishna with some cows. Krishna is often shown playing a flute.



Cows are considered sacred in Hinduism and are not killed for beef. One reason for this may be that cows are great providers, for example of milk, butter and dung (used for fuel).

## Shiva

Shiva, the destroyer or liberator, is often shown in statues as Lord of the Dance (Nataraja). Shiva combines both male and female qualities.

*Shiva's four arms indicate both his power and the idea that a god cannot be put into ordinary human form.*

*His upper right hand holds a drum on which he beats out the rhythm of his dance: the dance of liberation and re-creation.*

*His upper left hand holds a naked flame. This represents his power and also the discipline with which he manages it.*

*Shiva has a third eye in the middle of his forehead. This represents wisdom. It looks inwardly, not outwardly.*

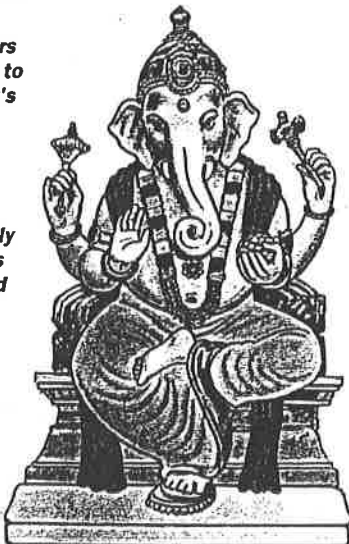
## Ganesha

Ganesha is an important minor god of Hinduism. The son of Shiva and his wife, Parvati, he is often worshiped at the start of any new undertaking, such as going on a journey, because he is thought to remove obstacles.

*Ganesha was beheaded by his father. According to one story, this was to punish his mother for showing off his beauty as a baby. Later, Shiva gave him an elephant's head instead.*

*His big ears can listen to everybody's prayers.*

*His potbelly represents wealth and success.*



## Parvati, Durga, Kali

Three goddesses are associated with Shiva. Parvati is a beautiful and gentle wife, complementing the compassionate side of Shiva's nature.

Durga and especially Kali are fierce and powerful: a match for Shiva's more destructive side. Durga, the Inaccessible, slays demons with a sword. Kali is known as a destroyer of evil.



Parvati



Kali



*Shiva dances inside a hoop of flames. This represents the energy of the universe and its creatures.*

*Shiva is dancing on the defeated figure of a demon. The demon represents ignorance.*

## Duty

Hindus try to live according to their dharma, which is the code of behavior or duty which governs a person's life. An individual's duty is determined by their position in society and by the stage of life they have reached.

## Place in society

Four main social groupings, known as varnas, are described in Hindu scriptures. These are,

first: priests and teachers, who are called brahmins; second: rulers and the military; third: merchants; and fourth: manual workers. Each group has its own code of behavior.

In the past, there has been some

confusion between the religious idea of varnas and the political idea of the caste system. According to the caste system, people were divided up into thousands of different groups and people of certain groups were discriminated against. This is illegal in present-day India.

## Four stages of life

The stages of life described in the scriptures are the student, the family man, the recluse and, finally, the wandering holy man who cuts free of all family ties, owns nothing and simply lives

A Hindu holy man.



by begging. The goal of this final stage is singlemindedly to seek union with Brahman.

The four stages are a model of how people ought to live but they are very much an ideal.

## Yoga

There are four main types of yoga in Hinduism. Individuals can choose whichever type best suits their stage of life and temperament.

Karma yoga is the discipline of action. It involves a person working hard to fulfill their dharma.

Bhakti yoga is the discipline of devotion. It means offering wholehearted love and prayer to a personal god.

Jnana yoga is the discipline of knowledge, and involves study.

Raja yoga is the discipline of the mind. It involves practicing techniques of mental self-control, including meditation.

All types of yoga can include physical exercises for self-discipline.



## Temples

Although there are many temples in India, Hindus only attend at set times on holy days and at festivals. Otherwise, they go to temple rituals as they please.

For Hindus who live in western countries, temples have become more important as places to meet and worship together.

Hindu temple in London.



## Worship

Worship takes place mainly in the home and tends to bring the whole family together. It is focused on a shrine, like the one in the picture below.

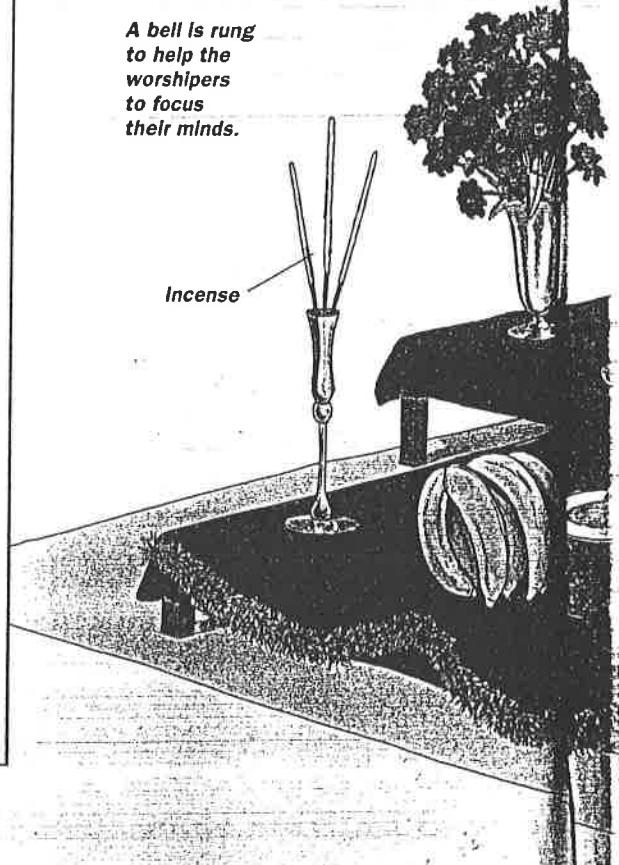
Which god or gods are important to someone will depend partly on family background and the region where they grew up, as well as individual preference. For some Hindus, the images of the gods are used to help focus the mind beyond the individuality of the gods and onto Brahman. The shrine contains objects which match the five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. The aim of this is to involve the whole person in the worship.

A picture or statuette of a god or goddess is kept on a small table. The statue here is of the god Krishna, with his flute. The painting shows the goddess, Lakshmi.

Offerings of incense, food and flowers have been placed in front of the images. The food will later be shared between the worshippers.

A bell is rung to help the worshippers to focus their minds.

Incense







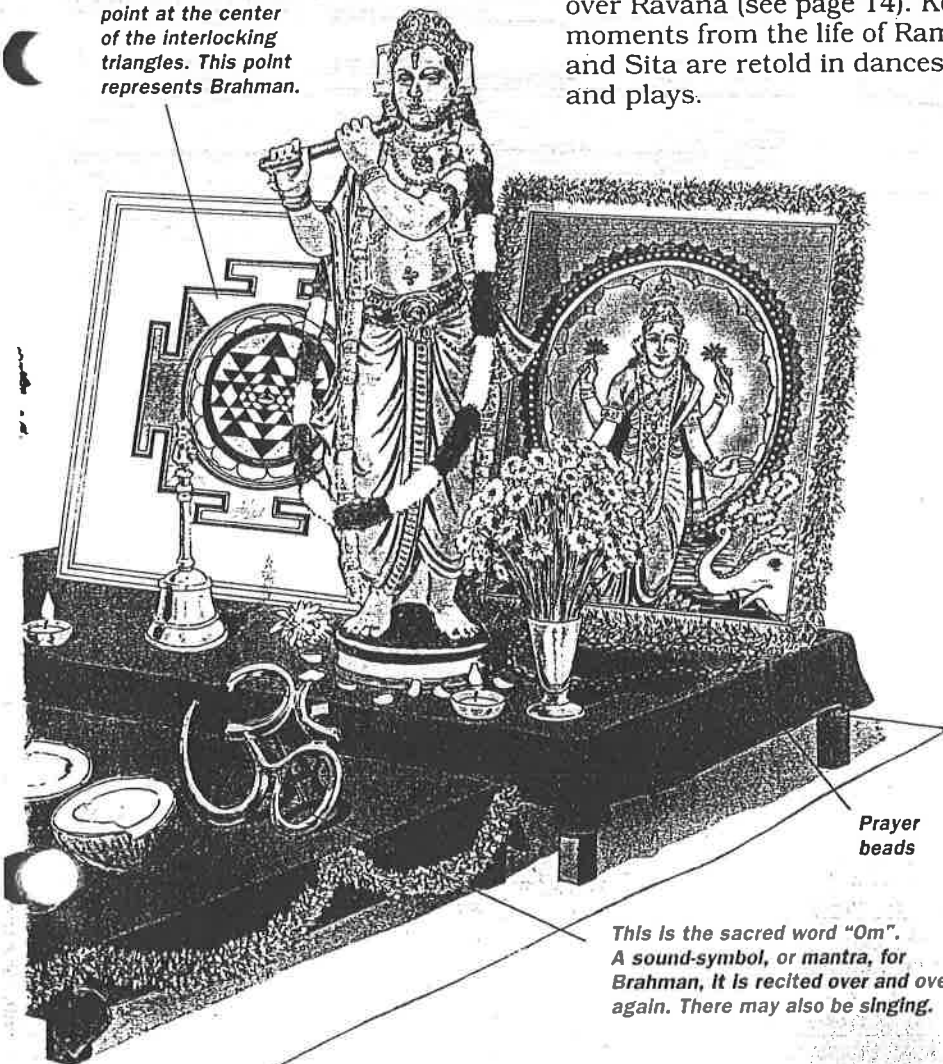
## Ganges River

The Ganges, along with many other rivers in India, is considered sacred. People often have their ashes scattered in the river after cremation. It is an important place of pilgrimage.



Pilgrims bathing in the Ganges to purify themselves.

Focusing on a yantra, or mandala, like the one below, the meditator's concentration is drawn toward the invisible point at the center of the interlocking triangles. This point represents Brahman.



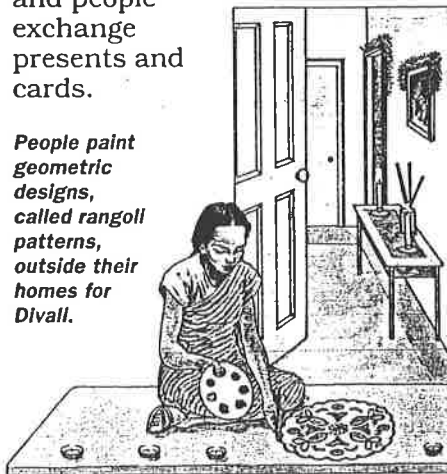
Prayer beads

This is the sacred word "Om". A sound-symbol, or mantra, for Brahman, it is recited over and over again. There may also be singing.

## Festivals

Diwali is associated with the goddess, Lakshmi, and is held at the Hindu New Year, which falls in November. Diwali means the festival of lights. Light represents knowledge. Numerous lamps and candles are lit everywhere and people exchange presents and cards.

People paint geometric designs, called rangoli patterns, outside their homes for Diwali.



The yearly festival of Dassehra commemorates Rama's victory over Ravana (see page 14). Key moments from the life of Rama and Sita are retold in dances and plays.

The spring festival of Holi celebrates the tricks Krishna, as cowherd, used to play on the cowgirls. There are processions, bonfires and dancing, and people scatter and squirt colored powder and water over each other.

## Sacred writings

All the sacred books mentioned below were written in Sanskrit, the language of ancient India. Nobody knows exactly when they were compiled, as it was so long ago. All were written before the start of the Common Era, some over a period of several centuries.

The Vedas were passed on by word of mouth for centuries before being written down. The oldest and most sacred of the four Vedas is the Rig Veda, containing over a thousand hymns.

The Upanishads consist of philosophical teachings about Brahman and the struggle to achieve moksha.

The adventures of Rama and Sita are described in the Ramayana, which means the life story of Rama.

The Mahabharata is probably the longest poem in the world, with over 100,000 verses. It tells of the struggle between two related, ruling families. The best known and most popular part of this epic tale is the Bhagavad Gita.

In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna appears on the battlefield as charioteer to the hero, Arjuna. He advises Arjuna about the different ways of seeking moksha, and identifies the different types of yoga.



तत्त्वं  
असि

"Thou art that" in Sanskrit, a phrase repeated in the Upanishads. It identifies Atman with Brahman.