

वाराणसीके हिन्दु इतिहास

An Introduction to Hinduism

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Warwick Inter-religious
Roundtable for Dialogue



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Religion vs *dharma* – धर्म

Abrahamic religions

- ❑ Religious progress related to following set of rules defined by scriptures
- ❑ God may be worshipped only in a few specific ways
- ❑ There is no life after death, but assessment on Judgement Day
- ❑ Humans “higher” than animals, so treat differently
- ❑ Idea of religion being the only religion leading to salvation

Hindu Dharma

- ❑ Many different paths to spiritual progress in an experiential process
- ❑ God may be worshipped in many forms and ways
- ❑ Eternal bliss achieved through good *karma* (actions) and renunciation
- ❑ All creatures are infused with the same *paramatma*, and so should be respected
- ❑ *Dharma* as *one* way of life imbibed in society

Principal beliefs

- ❑ All animals are trapped in worldly bodies (*samsaara*), deceived by *maya* (illusion)
- ❑ Ultimate aim is to attain liberation (*moksh*) from cycles of rebirths
- ❑ Acceptance of scriptures such as the *Vedas* and the *Bhagvad-Gita*
- ❑ Living to be of use to others by relinquishing the ego (*ahankara*); compassion (*daya*) to all living things; live in accordance with nature
- ❑ Observance of moral values described in epics such as the *Mahabharat* and *Ramayan*

Three *gunas* or qualities

- *Sattva* – quality characterized by peace, knowledge and cleanliness
- *Rajas* – quality characterized by activity and passion
- *Tamas* – quality characterized by dullness, ignorance and inertia

Four *purusarthas* or goals of life

- *Moksh* – liberation or freedom from cycle of rebirths
- *Dharma* – righteousness, duty, law, virtue, ethics: that which 'upholds' society
- *Artha* – wealth, not only material but also non-tangibles such as knowledge and love
- *Kama* – wish, desire, love: not necessarily sexual desire, but Platonic love

Four types of *yoga*

According to the *Vedas*, there are four ways to attain *moksh*, liberation or self-realisation:

- *Karma Yoga* – selfless actions, detachment from ego, following *dharma*
- *Bhakti Yoga* – path of devotion, prayer and worship, seeing God in all
- *Jnana Yoga* – path of knowledge, study of scriptures such as the *Vedanta*
- *Raja Yoga* – physical and mental control, meditation, yoga as known in the West

Caste vs *varnashrama-dharma*

Hinduism does *not* condone casteism as seen today. The scriptures suggest a system of *varna-ashrama*:

The four *varnas* (classes) are:

- ❑ *Brahmana* – priestly class, teachers and thinkers
- ❑ *Kshatriya* – warrior class, kings and leaders
- ❑ *Vaishya* – merchant class, tradesmen and skilled workers
- ❑ *Sudras* – servants and labourers

Scriptures do not mention untouchables or *dalits*.

Caste vs *varnashrama-dharma* (cont.)

The four *ashramas* (stages in life) are:

- *Brahmacharya* – the student stage, marked by obedience, study, celibacy
- *Grihastha* – the householder sage, focus on pleasures (marriage & family), successes (work) and responsibilities
- *Vanaprastha* – the “forest-dweller” stage, retirement, shift to spiritual lifestyle
- *Sannyasa* – the wandering ascetic stage, renunciation of all attachments

Symbols and mantras

- *Aum* – three sounds represent creation, preservation, dissolution
- *Swastika* – auspicious symbol represents Truth, four ends describes four Vedas
- *Gayatri Mantra* – most well-known Hindu prayer, in Sanskrit like most mantras



Worship and deities

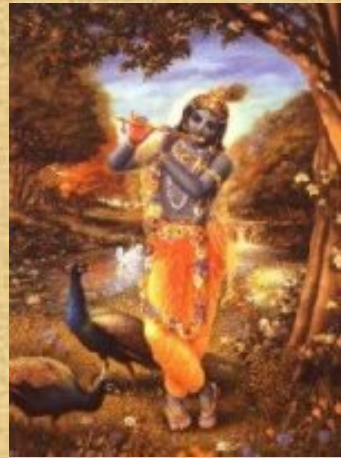
Hindus believe *Brahman*, the spirit which encompasses the whole of creation, can be worshipped in various forms.

- ❑ The Hindu *Trimurti* consists of ***Brahma***, ***Vishnu*** and ***Shiva***, the gods of creation, sustenance and destruction.
 - ❑ The consorts or *Shakti* (strength) of the *Trimurti* are ***Saraswati***, ***Lakshmi*** and ***Parvati***, who are worshipped for wisdom, prosperity and strength respectively.
 - ❑ *Avatars* (incarnations) of *Vishnu* are worshipped in ***Krishna*** (Mahabharat) and ***Ram*** (Ramayan)
 - ❑ ***Ganesh***, son of *Shiva* and *Parvati*, is worshipped as the remover of obstacles.
 - ❑ ***Hanuman*** worshipped as symbol of courage and devotion
- Rituals are used to help focus the mind on a particular aspect of nature or *Brahman*.

Pictures of various deities



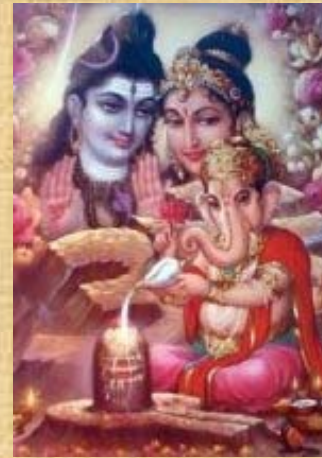
Hanuman



Krishna



Trimurti



Ganesh



Saraswati



Durga



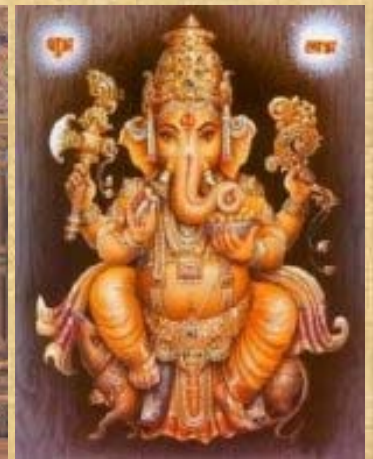
Surya



Lakshmi

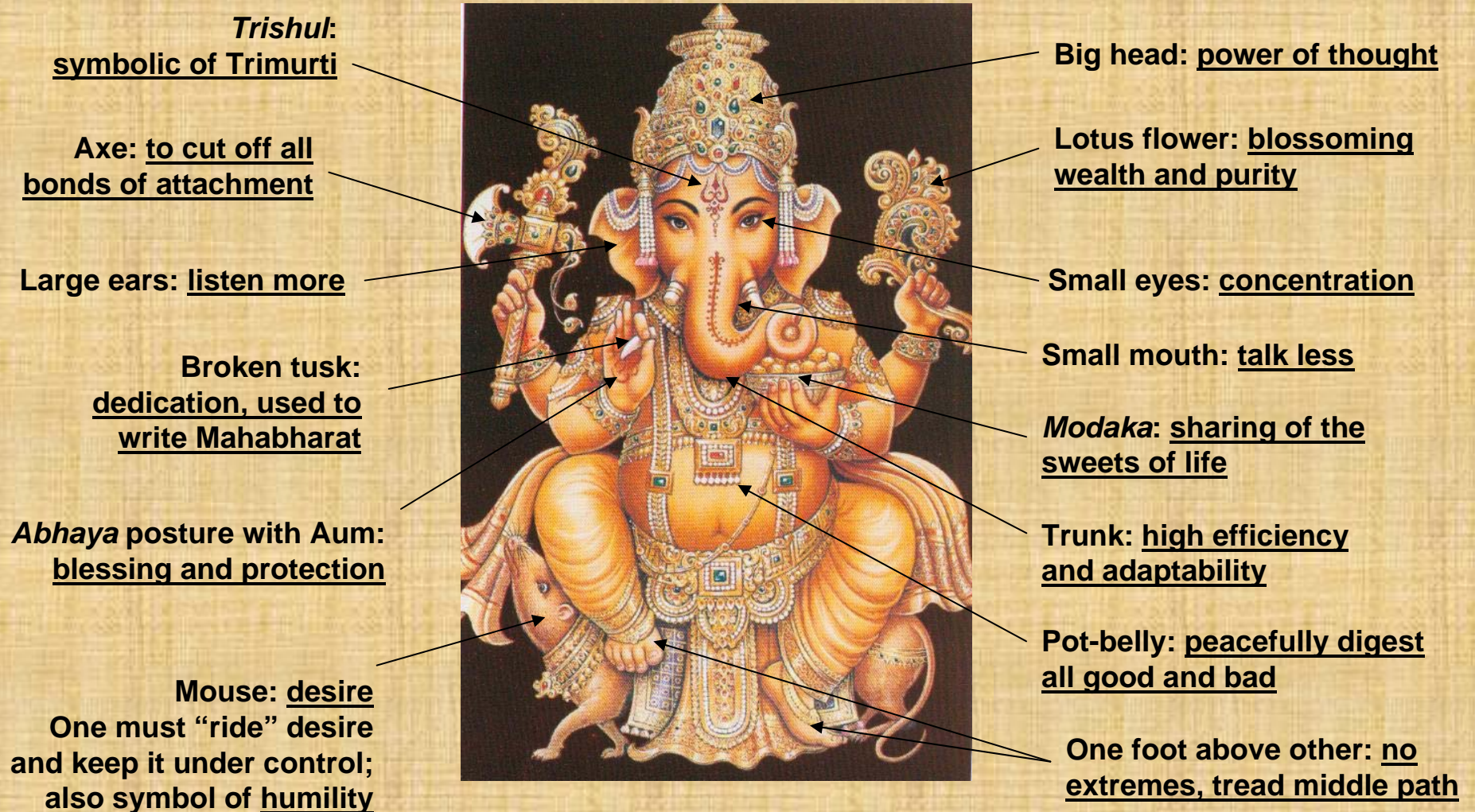


Gayatri



Ganesh

Ganeshji – remover of obstacles



Festivals and their significance

Some major festivals:

- *Diwali* – new year, celebrating *Ram* being anointed King in the Ramayan
- *Navratri* – lit. “nine nights”, worship of the female aspect of *God*
- *Mahashivratri* – festival in honour of *Shiva*, marriage of *Shiva* to *Parvati* on this day
- *Ramnavmi* – marriage of *Ram* to *Sita* on this day
- *Janmasthanmi* – celebration of the birth of Krishna
- *Raksha Bandhan* – symbolic promise given by men to protect their sisters
- *Holi* – annual spring festival of colour, represents triumph of good over evil

Hinduism today: strength in flexibility

- ❑ There are four main ways in which Hinduism is practised: *Vaishnavism*, *Shaivism*, *Shaktism* and *Smartism*
- ❑ Hinduism accepts that there are many ways to the same goal
- ❑ The proper name of Hinduism is *Sanatan Dharma* ("Eternal Truth")
- ❑ Hinduism places as much emphasis on application as on theory and philosophy

Credits

- ❑ I would like to thank *Arti Sodha* for all her advice on topics covered in this talk.
- ❑ Several websites were consulted in producing this presentation, particularly:
sanatansociety.org
sanskrit.org
wikipedia.org

ANY QUESTIONS?



For more information on Hinduism, please visit
www.hindu.uwcs.co.uk

Please also note that the annual NHSF Conference will take place this Saturday in Leicester.

If you are interested, then write your name and email address down on the sheet of paper being passed around.