

- 1- What is Hinduism?
- 2- Is Hinduism a religion or is it a culture?
- 3- Who Founded Hinduism?
- 4- What is the status of Hinduism at the present time?
- 5- To which major world religion do most Indians belong?
- 6- What is the definition of God in Hinduism?
- 7- What are the Hindu scriptures?
- 8- What are the Vedas?
- 9- What are the divisions of the Vedas?
- 10-What are the divisions of the Vedas?
- 11-What do the Vedas symbolize?:
- 12-What is Smriti?
- 13-What is the difference between the Shruti and the Smriti?
- 14-What are the six Shastras/ Darshnas and the Itihasas?
- 15-What are the Puranas?
- 16-How many Puranas are there and what are they?
- 17-What are the Agamas?
- 18-What are the Darsanas?
- 19-What is Puja and why do we do it?
- 20-What is Purna Kumbha or Purna Kalasa ? (The sacred vessel)
- 21-What is the Trinity (Trimurti)?
- 22-Is there an authority in Hindu System to whom all world Hindu temples are accountable?
- 23-What is Sanskrit language?
- 24-What is the meaning of Dharma?
- 25-Who is the Hindu God?
- 26-why do Hindus worship many Gods?
- 27-Why do Hindu Gods have more than one head and more than two arms?
- 28-Why do Hindu Gods have more than one head and more than two arms?
- 29-Which common deities do Hindu pray?
- 30-What is the Mantra,
- 31-Do Hindus have sacraments and rituals like other religions?
- 32-What are the sixteen Sanskaras or Sacraments?
- 33-What is Pitra Pooja or Pitra Yagn, and why should we do it?
- 34-How does Hinduism define soul?
- 35-Do Hindus have moral codes or commandments?
- 36-Is it mandatory for Hindus to be vegetarians?
- 37-What is the status of women in Hinduism?
- 38-What is the status of women in Hinduism?
- 39-How can a non- Hindu become a Hindu?
- 40-Hindu caste system. What is it?
- 41-What are the four Purusharthas or goals of our life and Six internal enemies?
- 42-What is the origin of the soul and What is Karma ?
- 43-What is the Hindu concept of reincarnation and how can it be attained?
- 44-What is Upasana and Sadhana?
- 45-What do we mean by “ Yagya” and “Moksha”?
- 46-Do Hindus believe in Heaven and Hell?
- 47-Hindus believe that world is an illusion. Isn't this absurd?
- 48-Can a Non-Hindu enter a Temple?
- 49-What are the major Hindu festivals?
- 50-What are the major Hindu festivals?
- 51-What is the red dot on the fore head of a Hindu woman?
- 52-What are the 12 Jyotirlingas?
- 53-Why do we light a lamp?
- 54-Why do we have a prayer room?
- 55-Why do we do Namaste?

- 56-Why do we prostrate before parents and elders?
- 57-Why do we wear marks (tilak, pottu and the like) on the forehead?
- 58-Why do we not touch papers, books and people with the feet?
- 59-To touch another with the feet is considered an act of misdemeanor. Why is this so?
- 60-Why do we apply the holy ash?
- 61-Why do we offer food to the Lord before eating it?
- 62-Why do we fast?
- 63-Why do we do pradakshina (circumambulate)?
- 64-Why is pradakshina done only in a clockwise manner?
- 65-Why do we regard trees and plants as sacred?
- 66-Why do we ring the bell in a temple?
- 67-Why do we worship the kalasha?
- 68-Why do we consider the lotus as special?
- 69-Why do we worship tulasi?
- 70-Why do we blow the conch?
- 71-Why do we say shaanti thrice?
- 72-Why do we offer a coconut?
- 73-Why do we chant Om?
- 74-Why do we do aarati?

What is Hinduism?

Hinduism is one of the world's major religions and holds the distinction of being the most ancient of the world's religion. The word Hindu is a combination of the first letter "*Hi*" of Himalayas and the last compound "*ndu*" of the word *Bindu*. It refers to India as Hindusthan, a country lying between the Himalayan Mountains and *Bindu Sarovar* (Cape Commorin Sea). Hinduism was originally known as Dharma. It is also called **Sanatana Dharma**; the word Sanatana means eternal. Hinduism is the means whereby any individual can actually recognise and act in accordance with their divinity and simultaneously live in peace and harmony within the life of materiality in the present.

Is Hinduism a religion or is it a culture?

The truth is - it is both a religion and a way of life. Hinduism is a way of life, a philosophy on life. Hinduism asks each one of us to search for the Divine within us. We are all divine and each one of us has the capacity to realise divinity within us; therefore each one of us is a Hindu by birth. It is through ignorance we do not know our divinity. Under the umbrella of Hinduism, today one finds numerous religious denominations promoting and practicing the Hindu philosophies throughout the world.

Who Founded Hinduism?

Hinduism has no founder. It does not owe its existence to any specific prophet. It is based on divine revelations experienced by a series of sages, called *Rishis*, while they were in intense meditation. The divine knowledge received by the Rishis is contained in four sacred books called *Vedas*. The word Vedas means knowledge, as *Vedas* is the fountainhead of all knowledge. Hinduism is the world's oldest known religion. It predates recorded history. Hinduism is the first religion of humankind.

What is the status of Hinduism at the present time?

There are over one billion Hindus today (2005). Most are in India, but Hindus live all over the world. Sizable Hindu populations live in Nepal, Mauritius, Fiji, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Guyana, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Australia, America, Canada, England, New Zealand and some other countries. Australian census 2000 indicates that with more than 100,000 Hindu families in Australia, Hindu religion is rapidly on the increase in the country.

To which major world religion do most Indians belong?

Approximately 80% of the Indians around the world are Hindus. The modern trend reveals that Hinduism is attracting devotees from many parts of the western world. The Hare Krishna,, Advaita and Vedanta and have significant numbers of non Indian practising members

What is the definition of God in Hinduism?

According to Hindu thought, God is; the infinite Supreme Reality; the Absolute Truth; a divine conscience energy form which energises flow; the sole cause behind everything visible and invisible; the creator of the entire universe. God is omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient and self-evident. God has no beginning and no end. The concept of God in Hinduism is very deep rooted,

but basically it goes like this: The ParBrahm is God,. The ParBrahm firstly manifested himself into two formless essences, the Nirguna Brahman (without attributes) and the Saguna Brahman (with attributes). The Brahman is the supreme personality, but cannot be seen. The first manifestation of the Saguna Brahman is Maha kala (time), and then it manifested itself into the Trimurti.

Hinduism is a panesthetic monosthetic faith, which basically means, the belief that God is one, but resides in all that exists.

What are the Hindu scriptures?

Hindu scriptures can be divided into the following categories:

- The **Shruti** or literature consisting of the Vedas
- The **Smriti** literature consisting of the Dharma shastras or the law books.
- The **Itihasas** comprising of the two epics
- The **Puranas** or **Itihasas** consisting of the ancient lore
- The **Agamas** dealing with the mechanics of ritual worship
- The **Darsanas** dealing with the various schools of philosophical thought.

What are the Vedas?

The Vedas are part of the Shruti literature. Shruti means that which is heard. The Vedas are considered to be divine in origin and not man made. The rules that apply to the universe and its inter-relationships with its parts through time require an appropriately qualified person to understand and then to clearly explain them. Divine intervention also becomes necessary for revelation to occur. For example, Isaac Newton did not create gravity he explained the rules that would help others to benefit and expand on it.

Hence we say no one truly knows how old they are. Some of the Rig Vedic verses were perhaps composed in the early phases of human civilization. For centuries they were passed down from one generation to another through oral tradition. They were probably rendered into written form during the epic period, around 1500 BC. The Vedas are eternal (Nitya) and out of this world (Apauruseya). Hindus believe that God brings the Vedas into this world at the beginning of every cycle of creation for the welfare of the mankind and withdraws them again at the end of it. The Vedas are revealed to the mankind through Rishis (*rsi*) or great seers.

The Rsis were considered to be the mind born children of Brahma, who were created solely for the purpose of introducing the Vedas to the mankind. The word *rsi* means he who had seen (*drs*) the Truth. The word 'veda' means knowledge or wisdom and from the word veda are derived the words vid (to know), vidya (study or education), vidvan (the scholar) and vedavid (the knower of the Vedas).

The 'Vedas' are the primary scriptures of **Sanatan Dharma**. The Vedas shaped ancient Indian society and governed ethics and morality. The Vedas can be identified in terms of their origin into "Shruti" (verbal) and "Smriti"(written). A Sage named Krishna Dvaipayana (*Ved Vyasa*) recorded and documented them as **Rig Veda** which was the original Veda. Due to its voluminous content it was classified into four categories: -

1. **Rig Veda Which is for chanting**
2. **Yajur Veda, Which is for sacrifice**
3. **Sama Veda, Which is in musical form**
4. **Atharva Veda, Which is for modern Science**

VedaVyasa also known as Badarayana or Krishnadvaipayana was the compiler of the Vedas.

What are the divisions of the Vedas?

Each Veda is divided into four parts, namely the **Mantra, Brahmana, Aranyaka and Upanishad**. The Mantra part contains mantras or hymns addressed to various gods and goddesses, which are chanted during ritualistic prayers or invocations according to a particular rhythm. The **Mantra** part is concerned mostly with the pronunciation of the words and the vibrations they create in

the minds of the invokers and in the physical atmosphere that surround them so as to render the descent of the divine forces easier and swifter. The **Brahmana** part contains information about rites and rituals and serves as a kind of guide book that explains the method and the manner in which the rituals are to be conducted. The **Aranyakas**, or the

forest books deal with the significance and philosophical back ground of various rituals. The fourth part of the Veda is called the Upanishad.

The **Upanishads** are books of deep spiritual knowledge known as Vedanta. There are hundreds of Upanishads ascribed to the four Vedas of which 12 are considered to be the most important.

What do the Vedas symbolize?:

The four parts of the Vedas have significance and relevance to the four stages (ashramas) of human life, namely brahmacharya, grihastashrama, vanaprastha and sanyasashrama respectively. How this is so is explained below.

1. **Brahma-acharya** : Brahmacharya is the phase of studentship. During this phase a student of the Vedas is expected to memorize the mantras completely and recite them with utmost accuracy. At this stage in life for a man, the mantra part of the

Vedas is important.

2. **Grihastha-ashrama**: This is the stage of the householder. During this phase each adult is expected to lead a righteous life and live like Lord Vishnu on earth working for the preservation of his family and society through righteous deeds. For him at this

stage, knowledge of Brahmanas gain importance, because they deal with the techniques of karmakanda.

3. **Vana-prastha**: This is the stage of forest dwelling. During this phase a person leaves his house and properties to the care of

his children and retires into the solitude of the forest with his wife, to lead a spiritual life. The knowledge contained in the

Aranyakas is useful to him during this phase.. (Interested readers may visit our sacred scriptures section and read the Aitareya Aranyaka available there under the heading the Upanishads.)

4. **Sanyasa-ashrama**: This is final stage of renunciation in the life of an individual during which he renounces the worldly life completely and spends the rest of his life in

the contemplation of God and Self. During this stage the knowledge of the Upanishads is very useful to him.

According to another classification the contents of the Vedas are divided into three parts instead of four. These are the first part known as karma-kanda or the procedural part comprising of the Mantras and the Brahmanas, the second part known as upasana-kanda or the contemplative part consisting of the Aranyakas and the third part known as Jnana-kanda or the knowledge part comprising of the Upanishads.

What is Smriti?

In contrast to the Shruti literature, which contains revelations, the Smriti literature is a product of human intellect. It contains the works of various individuals who base their information and interpretations upon the Vedas. Smriti means that which is based upon memory. It is a sacred literature that is intellectual in origin and meant for the purpose of human welfare.

Strictly speaking all scriptures which are not shruti or divine in origin come under this classification. However, standard classification includes only those works that are based upon the knowledge contained in the Vedas. These are the law books known as dharma shastras. They deal with various aspects of human life and social organization. They instruct how an individual should conduct himself or herself in society in the light of the caste to which the individual belongs. They define the rules and roles for various groups of individuals in the society. The topics range from such issues as the status, duties and responsibilities prescribed for the four main castes, remedies against possible transgression of the prescribed laws and also remedies for divine

retribution. Among the available **dharma-shastras** four are considered to be very important: They are the works **Manu, Yagnavalkya, Sankha, and Parasara**. Of these the first one known as **Manusmriti** is the most popular. Known as Manavadharma shastra, or the scripture of human laws, Manusmriti was considered in ancient Hindu society as the ultimate guide book for human conduct and social and religious behavior. It provided guidelines for the Hindus to conduct themselves in line with their social order and religious duties. It is also said that these four works were supposed to provide guidance to people during the four great ages called the Mahayugas: the **Manusmriti** for the first great age called Satyug, the **Yagnavalkya-smriti** for the second great age called Tretayug, the **Sankha-smriti** for the third great epoch called Dvaparyug and the **Parasara-smriti** for the present and the last great epoch called Kaliyug.

What is the difference between the Shruti and the Smriti?

Smritis means written scriptures, which can be read and remembered while Shrutis are heard or from the word of mouth. Smritis are written mostly in Sanskrit language. Sruti means a note of sound. Since the Vedas are received through the act of hearing they are called Srutis.

What are the six Shastras/ Darshnas and the Itihasas?

The Shastras: Shikha, Kalpa, Vyakaran, Nirukta, Chhanda, and Jyotish

The six Darshans : Sankhya, Yoga, Vaisheshik, Nyaya, Mimamsa, and Vedanta

The Itihasas: Itihas means history. Generally the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are included in this category. The Ramayana is the story of Rama and his battle against the evil forces unleashed by Ravana, the arch villain with a mixture of both good and bad qualities arising out of egoism, who abducts Sita, wife of Rama and faces the inevitable. In end Rama kills Ravana and rescues his wife.

The Mahabharata is the story of two brothers, Pandu and Dhritarashtra, their children, namely Pandavas and the Kauravas and the recalcitrant attitude between them for political power which leads to a Great War and mighty destruction of both families, resulting in the victory of the righteous Pandavas. Lord Krishna gives his support to the Pandavas and helps them defeat and destroy the Kauravas and their great army.

The Bhagavad gita is the message of Sri Krishna not just to Arjuna on the battle field but to the entire humanity who have to fight many battles both internally and externally while they live on earth. The book contains great spiritual truths which are relevant even today.

What are the Puranas?

The Puranas describe the religious events that happened in the remote past, sometimes starting with the story of creation itself. They basically deal with the incarnations of God and the deeds of God in various forms. In many ways they resemble the epics in describing events. But there is one basic difference. The epics deal with the history of mankind and the events that happened on the earthly plane in the past, while the Puranas deal with divine characters, and events associated with them on different planes, not just on earth. The Puranas and the Itihasas are jointly referred as the Panchama Veda or the fifth Veda. The Puranas have played a very significant role in the past in keeping the religious fervor of the people high. The sustained practical application of the Vedas is purified and crystallised through the study of the puranas – that which makes it complete or *purna* and using in guiding ones life.

While as books of great antiquity they may not they may not throw much light on the ancient history of Hinduism, it is difficult to ignore their contribution to the gradual evolution of Hinduism into of the most popular religions of the world. Without them and the two great epics, Hinduism would not have attained this status. They instilled faith in the masses and brought them into the fold of Hinduism.

How many Puranas are there and what are they?

There are 18 main (maha) Puranas and 18 secondary (upa) Puranas are accounted. The Mahapuranas are:

(1)Brahmapurana,(2) Padmapurana, (3) Vishnupurana, (4) Sivapurana, (5) Bhagavatapurana, (6) Naradapurana, (7)Markendeyapurana, (8) Agnipurana, (9) Bhavishyapurana, (10) Brahmavaivartapurana, (11) Lingapurana, (12)Varahapurana,(13) Skandapurana, (14) Vamanapurana,(15) Kurmapurana,(16) Matsyapurana, (17)Garudapurana and (18)

Brahmandapurana. Of these the most popular are the Bhagavatapurana, the Sivapurana and Brahmapurana.

What are the Agamas?

In Sanskrit 'agama' means acquisition of knowledge. In terms of religious significance, the Agamas are as important as the Vedas. They are also not derived from the Vedas. The Agamas are manuals of divine worship.They deal with such topics as the codes of temple building, image making, and the modes of worship. Saivism, Vaishnavism and Shaktism have their own respective Agamas.

There are five types of Agamas namely:- Sakta Agamas, Soura Agamas, Ganapatya Agamas, Saiva Agamas and Vaikhanasa Agamas

What are the Darshanas?

The Darshanas deal with the various schools of philosophical thought that prevailed in ancient India. Darsana means vision or perception. There are six darshanas grouped into three pairs based upon their approach to the concept of the existence or non existence of Absolute God. These are :

1. Nyaya and the Vaisheshika 2. The Sankhya and the Yoga 3. The Mimamsa and the Vedanta

These six darsanas actually represent six different streams of philosophical thought that prevailed in ancient India. Each school had its own founder and a principal scripture as its original source. Thus the Nyaya Sutras were written by Gautama, the Vaisheshika Sutras by Kanada, the Sankhya Karika by Iswara Krishna, the Yoga Sutras by Patanjali, Mimamsa Sutras by Jaimini and Vedanta Sutras by Badarayana. In course of time a great deal of literature gathered around these six schools of thought, much of which was in the form of commentaries (bhashyas) of the original six works.

What is Puja and why do we do it?

In Hinduism, Puja is essentially a ritual suggestive of symbolic offering of our lives and activities to God and enjoying whatever that comes out of it as a gift from Him. In Hinduism Puja is the most popular form of divine worship. Hindus can worship at home or at Mandir (Hindu Temple), commonly Hindus worship at a shrine by praying or performing Puja or Aarti (forms of worship), Hindus also worship the gods with music (Bhajans) or offerings (Prasad).

The way a Puja is conducted in Hindu households is akin to the way a guest is invited into the house and treated with utmost respect. The Hindu tradition equates a guest with God with this simple expression, "Athidi devobhava", which means a guest is verily God Himself.

The word "puja" consists of two letters, "pa" and "ja". "Pa" means "parayana" or continuous repetition of the names of God and "ja" means "japa" or continuous mental recitation of the names of God. So according to this interpretation "puja" is essentially a kind of worship in which both parayanam and japam are practised by the devotees. Devotees and priests worship using mantras, slokas, sathaka, suttees, bhajans and kirtans.

What is Purna Kumbha or Purna Kalasa ? (The sacred vessel):

It is generally placed as the chief deity or by the side of the chief deity before starting the Puja. Symbolically it stands for mother goddess in general or goddess Lakshmi in particular. It consists of an earthen or a metal pot with either water or rice in it, with leaves (of generally five specific species) in its mouth and a bowl of rice, flowers and coconut at its top. The pot represents mother earth, the flowers represent the ornamentation, the rice in the bowl represents either the material wealth or the powers of the goddess or both and the coconut represents the divine consciousness. Water represents Sagar or oceans, mango leaves represent wealth, Lakshmi and prosperity. Kalasa is placed on astha dal kamal, which is designed and decorated eight-petal lotus flower with ornamental rice or wheat. Priests chant mantras to invoke the Trimurti i.e. Bramha, Vishnu and Mahesh. All the four Vedas are also commissioned at these auspicious occasions.

What is the Trinity (Trimurti)?

The Hindu trinity is as follows:

Brahma – The creator (manifestation of) god – Brahma creates new things - Brahma has four heads to show his mind thinks of all things.

Vishnu – The preserver (manifestation of) god – Vishnu preserves things and keeps the word going.

Shiva – The destructive (manifestation of) god – Shiva destroys worn out things in order to make space for new creations.

Is there an authority in Hindu System to whom all world Hindu temples are accountable?

Every Hindu religious organisation is accountable to God and every **Samapradya** has head of the organisation who is known as Acharya or Jagat Gurus.

Hindu temples are independent and community based. They are built with public donations and are run by democratically elected management bodies. However there is central Hindu religious bodies in most Hindu practicing countries where religious issues are clarified and discussed with its head of the organisation or Acharya.

What is Sanskrit language?

This is also known as **Dev Bhasha**, (*the language of gods*). This is world's original, oldest and most profound language. This language was created by sounds and vibrations of Lord Shiva's damru, which was later, translated into alphabets by Lord Ganesha. Sanskrit language has 52 alphabets. The grammarian *Panini Rishi* later codified this language and is referred to 'classic Sanskrit' and is now used in most parts of the world today. The language used in the Vedas is normally called 'Vedic Sanskrit' Hindi language is a daughter of Sanskrit language.

What is the meaning of Dharma?

Dharma comes from the Sanskrit word “*Dhr*” which literally means to hold or to sustain. Virtues, beliefs, moral obligations, ethical laws, codes of behaviour, traditions and righteous actions that sustain human life in peace and harmony are all called aspects of Dharma. Although it is translated as religion in English language, there is no single word which describes the true and complete meaning of Dharma. The frame of reference is ‘how am I live in a sustainable way and in harmony’.

Who is the Hindu God?

Supreme Brahman is responsible for the existence of the universe. Hindus call the ONE God by countless male and female names, for example Ishwar, Parmatama, Bhagwan, Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh, Prabhu, Parmeshwar and Shakti. Hindus also believe that people from other cultures and languages understand this one God in their own way, each religion has its own path to this one God. Hindus consider Rama and Krishna as Avatars (the reincarnations of God) who destroyed wickedness, and re-established righteousness by exemplifying ideal human behaviour. Hinduism pre-existed Rama and Krishna.

Why do Hindus worship many Gods?

God has endless attributes and aspects. Although God is formless, to make worshiping more tangible and focused for ordinary Hindus, many forms and names were given to each of God's major attributes and aspects. For example God creates, sustains and dissolves this world. Each of these three aspects is represented in a beautiful image as Brahma (generator) Vishnu (preserver) and Shiva (destroyer or regenerator). The Bhagwatam (school of thought) teaches that there are different divine beings or demigods who live in unseen worlds and serve God. Hindus have male and female names and images for these demigods whose worship is recommended for specific benedictions. Other major religions have emulated this belief and call these demigods as *The Guiding Angels*. For those who know chemistry will write H₂O (water molecule). Is this moisture, water, ice, hailstone or snow? One who knows will say off course that's H₂O. Others will argue that all these are different. So too with God and the multiple forms.

Why do Hindu Gods have more than one head and more than two arms?

People will generally question how Hindus can believe in the existence of something with more than one head or more than two arms. Generally Hindus believe these deities had no physical existence but were visualized in different forms and shapes by our great sages and rishis. The number of arms and heads symbolizes the powers the deities possess. For example by having four hands **Saraswati** can perform four different activities at once. **Brahma** can see in all four directions at the same time because he has four heads. Hindus believe that God can appear in any shape or form, at any time and at any place according to the needs.

Which common deities do Hindus pray?

There are many deities in the Hindu tradition, millions in fact. Individuals pray their favourite deities. Some of the most commonly noticed ones are: (for further information please refer to page no...)

Brahma – The creator God – Brahma creates (new) things.

Vishnu – The preserver God – Vishnu preserves things and keeps the world going. There are many avatars of Vishnu. (Of the ten universally recognized avatars, nine have already manifested whereas the tenth is yet to appear).

Shiva/Mahesh – The God of destruction – Shiva destroys worn out things in order to make space for new creations.

Ganesh – The remover of obstacles, his wives are Riddhi and Siddhi.

Radha and Krishna – The consort of Krishna and the God of love - A human avatar of Lord Vishnu

Rama – An incarnation of Vishnu.

Sita – The consort of Rama.

Laxman – The brother of Rama.

Lakshmi – Goddess of beauty and wealth - The consort of Vishnu.

Agni – The God of fire.

Indra – The God of weather.

Hanuman - The monkey God of service, also looked up to as the ideal devotee, as he was a devotee to Rama.

Saraswati - The goddess of knowledge - Also the consort of Brahma.

Parvati - The consort of Shiva.

Durga and Kali - The goddess which was created by the anger of the trinity Gods, also the token of shakti (energy), she is a form of Parvati. The black goddess of destruction, a form of Durga.

Gayatri - Goddess Gayatri has five heads, each one representing the four Vedas and the fifth representing God, she is also another consort of Brahma.

Datta/Dattatreya - Lord Datta is the three trinity deities merged into one form (Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu).

Narasimha - Half man, half lion incarnation of Vishnu.

Murugan/Kartikeya/Skanda - Son of Shiva and Parvati, brother of Ganesh, sometimes seen with six heads, he is the master of creations, he has two wives: Valli (who is sometimes green) and Devasena, he practised lifelong celibacy.

What is the Mantra,

Mantra is a medium of concentration which protects us and controls our senses. By chanting mantras divine vibes are produced which ultimately leads us towards God . The Ekashara mantra is known as AUM – The Pranava and they have presiding deities such as Savita Devi – the creative power of Sun God is presiding deity of Gayatri mantra.

Do Hindus have sacraments and rituals like other religions?

Yes, of course they do. Hindus call them *Sanskaras*, which means *actions that purify, refine or reform*. Sanskaras help Hindus in their spiritual evolution. Like traffic signs, they give directions to human beings at every crucial stage of development. Sixteen ceremonies are prescribed for Hindus starting at conception and ending at death.

What are the sixteen Sanskaras or Sacraments?

Garbhaabhaan - Prayer for conceiving baby.
Punsawan - Prayer once conceived
Seemantonnayan - End of the pregnancy period
Jaatkaram - Prayer immediately after baby born
Naamakaram - Name giving ceremony
Nishkraman - First long journey of the baby from home
Annapraashan - Rice feeding ceremony
Choodaakaran - Shaving the head for the first time after birth
Karnavedh, - Ear Piercing ceremony
Yagnopaveet - Taking holy thread
Vedaarambh - Begin study of holy Granthas and Scriptures
Samaavartan - Graduation in Scriptures
Vivaah - Wedding ceremony
Vaanprasth - Taking up the path of devotion and retire from worldly desires
Sanyaas - Totally detached from worldly desires and renouncing oneself to God
Anteshthi -Funeral ceremony with the final rituals and rites

What is Pitra Pooja or Pitra Yagn, and why should we do it?

(Prayer for ancestors /family heritage)

In this pooja three generations from the paternal and maternal family is worshiped. While we are grateful to them for bringing us to life, we are indeed grateful to them for who we are and what we are through their hard work, efforts and sacrifice. This is a very powerful pooja to seek blessings from their spirits to guide us ahead so that we can breed healthy and strong future generations. Pitra Pooja is observed and performed every year in the month of Ashween, Krishna Pakch. This is a great opportunity for us to offer gratitude to our ancestors. However, those families who do not perform yearly Pitra Pooja, perform it a day before wedding ceremonies of their children. Pitra Pooja is called Nandi Mukh Shraad (also known as Mantri pooja) where we commission all the deities including Pitra Devta to seek blessing and to ensure that wedding is successful and obstacle free.

How does Hinduism define soul?

The soul is the innermost essence, the true existence and identity of a being. Hindus call this subtle, conscious, invisible life force *Aatma*. The soul is not to be confused with body or mind. Life starts when a soul enters the body. The human body perishes but the soul is immortal.

Do Hindus have moral codes or commandments?

The word **Dharma** itself includes moral obligation and righteous behaviour. The basic virtues Hindus are prescribed to cultivate and practise are:

1-Patience, 2-forgiveness, 3-not indulging in irreligious matters, 4-abandonment of theft, 5-internal and external cleanliness, 6-keep the perception on the track religious parameters, 7-mental enhancement, 8-true knowledge, 9-truthfulness, 10-control over the anger—these are 10 characteristics of religion.

Manusmriti 6/92

Is it mandatory for Hindus to be vegetarians?

The concept of **Ahimsa**, non-violence encourages Hindus to refrain from eating meat. It is believed that you are what you eat and the type of food you eat shapes the quality of your character. While some Hindus eat meat, there are considerable vegetarians among Hindus compared to some other religious groups. Hindus never eat Beef.

What is the status of women in Hinduism?

Hindu scripture accord women a place of equality, honour and dignity. Hindus conceive God in both male and female deities. No Hindu ceremony or sacrament is complete unless a wife and husband perform it together. A wife is regarded as the *Lakshmi* of the house.

How can a non- Hindu become a Hindu?

Any person who voluntarily accepts Hindu beliefs and philosophy of life can consider himself or herself a Hindu. There is no mandatory initiation or baptism in Hinduism because it is believed that everyone is a born Hindu. You do not have to adopt a Hindu name or become a member of a Hindu temple.

Hindu caste system. What is it?

When the Western world was in the primary stage of socio-economic development, the Hindus in Indian sub-continent had evolved into a highly civilized society. In order to ensure social order, the ancient scientists (Rishis) classified humans into four occupational groups; those who were intellectuals and imparted knowledge and perused religious and intellectual work were **Brahmans**, rulers, administrators and soldiers were called **Kshatriyas**, merchants, farmers and industrialists were called **Vaishyas** and labours and non skilled were called **Shudras**. This social framework is called *Varan Vyavastha*. God describes his body form in the following way: Bhrahmins as the brain, Kshatriyas as hands, Vaishyas as lower part of body and Shudras as legs. As such, in this complete body, every part has important function and role and is equally respected. According to Hindu scriptures, all four **Varans** are equal and must work in unison for the welfare of the whole society.

What are the four Purusharthas or goals of our life and Six internal enemies?

Dharma - Religious activities and moral obligations

Artha - Earning wealth righteously for economic activities

Kama - Fulfilment of worldly desires

Moksha - Salvation or liberation from the cycle of birth and death

The six internal enemies or Shad ripus are :- **Kama** – Lust **Krodha** – Anger **Lobha** – Greed **Moha** – Attachment **Mada**- Arrogance **Matsarya** – Envy

What is the origin of the soul and What is Karma ?

God is also called the Supreme Soul, is the source and origin of the soul. If the soul is the energy that runs the body, God is the total sum of that energy. If God is fire, an individual soul is its tiny spark. Since the soul is a fraction of God, all living beings are His manifestations. That is why Hindus see divinity in every living thing and person.

In Hinduism, Karma refers to God's cosmic law of *cause and effect*; every action has its opposite and equal reaction. Any deed or any thought that causes an effect is called Karma. According to the Law of Karma, every individual is responsible and accountable for his/her own actions.

What is the Hindu concept of reincarnation and how can it be attained?

The word reincarnation means *transmigration of souls*. Hindus believe the soul is immortal and when a person dies, his/her soul re-enters a new body according to its good or bad deeds or Karma.

When a soul is released from the cycle of rebirth, and merges back into its original source, the Supreme Soul, it is called Moksha or Mukti or Nirvana. Hindus call it the state of liberation. The four paths to Moksha according to Hinduism are: Karma (Path of action), Dhyana, (Path of meditation) Gnyana yoga (Path of spiritual Insight) and Bhakti Yoga (Path of Devotion)

What is Upasana and Sadhana?

Hinduism seems to be primarily concerned with God, the soul, the next life and liberation. What about the life on this earth? To say that Hinduism is concerned only with life hereafter is a fallacy. Hinduism is a religion for worldly people. It has plenty to say about life in this world; that is why **Hinduism is called a way of life**. One can pursue the ultimate goal of **Moksha** while living a normal life. To achieve Moksha, one has to follow three other goals as a necessary process: **Dharma** (Religious and moral activities), **Artha** (Economic activities), **Kama** (Worldly desires). While participating in economic activities and satisfying human desires, one must be virtuous, live righteously and discharge all moral obligations.

What do we mean by “Yagya” and “Moksha”?

Yagna –means regular attachment with God through sacrifice mostly performed which involves mind by reciting Mantras and via Havan offering natural ingredients involving action.

Moksha – Moha means attachment with worldly desires and Kshaya is full detachment from worldly desires and considerations.

Do Hindus believe in Heaven and Hell?

Yes, they do. The concept of heaven and hell is entirely different from the Judeo-Christian belief.

According to Hinduism, there are two concepts of heaven which is a physical place where a person goes after death to enjoy pleasures as a reward for living a virtuous life on earth or it may not be.

Heaven is called **Swarga**; it is a super consciousness blessedness and bliss that exists within the human body. It can be experienced by a spiritually matured person during the heightened intensity of meditation.

Heaven is also an invisible to normal senses, subtle world where a soul rests and learns between births. The soul acquires a different body and not the physical earthly body to enjoy or rest in heaven. A soul that has attained Moksha merges with its source of origin, the Supreme Soul. A number of heavens are described where, depending on the evolution of the soul, the soul gains an appropriate body to enjoy the rewards.

In Hinduism, hell is a place where a sinner's acquires an appropriate body to cleanse its sins through punishment often described as torture and burned by the eternal fire. In the end this body is discarded and the soul continues the path of evolution and eventually joining God.

Also Hindus believe hell is called **Narak**, is an unhappy, tormented and distressful state of mind experienced during physical existence on earth. This state of consciousness can also be experienced by a soul after death and before taking next birth. Hindus consider hell a temporary condition of one's own creation. One can reverse this situation by following a spiritual path and attaining good Karma and paying for past bad deeds.

Hindus believe that world is an illusion. Isn't this absurd?

It is not an absurd idea. One should understand the correct meaning of the Sanskrit word **Maya**, which means **illusion**. The confusion in comprehending the Hindu's doctrine of Maya stems from thinking illusion means the same thing as hallucination or delusion. Hindus use the word illusion in the same sense as defined in any dictionary: a mistaken perception of reality. When Hindus speak of this material world being an illusion, they are not saying that this world does not exist. Instead, they refer to the mistaken perception of the world, that is, thinking the material world is separate from God.

Can a Non-Hindu enter a Temple?

Yes. A Non-Hindu may enter a Hindu temple. Hindu temples are open to people of all religions. However, devotees and guests are required to follow and abide by the rules of the temple.

What are the major Hindu festivals?

Some of the major Hindu social and religious festivals are::

Diwali,– The festival of lights. This festival leads us into truth and light and teaches us to abolish ignorance, Lakshmi is usually worshipped on this day

Holi – On this day people throw coloured powder at each other called gulal. On this day the triumph of good over evil is celebrated.

Mahashivarati – On this day people fast to show their devotion and thanks to Lord Shiva.

Ram Naumi – Lord Rama's birth celebration.

Krishna Janmastami – Lord Krishna's birth celebration.

Raksha Bandhan – a celebration when sisters tie a holy thread on their brother's wrists.

Ganesh Chaturthi – Ganesh's birthday which falls on the fourth day of the lunar month.

Dussehra- a celebration of victory over evil by divine powers of God.

What is the red dot on the fore head of a Hindu woman?

The 'dot' on the head is not a tattoo like many think, it is made out of a powder, generally kum-kum. It is worn between the eyebrows (on the brow chakra) and represents God in oneself. Bindi can be worn by man or women. A Hindu lady will usually wear a bindi as a sign of marriage, the main way to tell married women from unmarried is putting kum-kum in the parting of the hair. Forehead markings for men are called Tilak. These are applied on auspicious occasions. Forehead markings are usually applied using the middle finger on the right hand as this is considered auspicious.

What are the 12 Jyotirlingas?

They are:- (1) Vishwanaath , (2) Vaidhnaath , (3) Rameshwar , (4) Malikarjun , (5) Grishneshwar , (6) Bhimshankar , (7) Triambkeshwar , (8) Onkareshwar , (9) Mahakaaleshwar , (10) Somnath , (11) Kedarnaath , (12) Ghushmeshwar.

Why do we light a lamp?

In almost every Indian home a lamp is lit daily before the altar of the Lord. In some houses it is lit at dawn, in some, twice a day – at dawn and dusk – and in a few it is maintained continuously (Akhand Deepa). All auspicious functions commence with the lighting of the lamp, which is often maintained right through the occasion. Light symbolizes knowledge, and darkness, ignorance. The Lord is the "Knowledge Principle" (Chaitanya) who is the source, the enlivener and the illuminator of all knowledge. Hence light is worshiped as the Lord himself. Knowledge removes ignorance just as light removes darkness. Also knowledge is a lasting inner wealth by which all outer achievement can be accomplished. Hence we light the lamp to bow down to knowledge as the greatest of all forms of wealth.

Why not light a bulb or tube light? That too would remove darkness. But the traditional oil lamp has a further spiritual significance. The oil or ghee in the lamp symbolizes our *vaasanas* or negative tendencies and the wick, the ego. When lit by spiritual knowledge, the *vaasanas* get slowly exhausted and the ego too finally perishes. The flame of a lamp always burns upwards. Similarly we should acquire such knowledge as to take us towards higher ideals.

Whilst lighting the lamp we thus pray:

Deepajyothi parabrahma, Deepena saadhyate saram

Sandhyaa deepo namostute, Deepa sarva tamopahaha

I prostrate to the dawn/dusk lamp; whose light is the Knowledge Principle (the Supreme Lord), which removes the darkness of ignorance and by which all can be achieved in life.

Why do we have a prayer room?

Most Indian homes have a prayer room or altar. A lamp is lit and the Lord worshipped each day. Other spiritual practices like japa (repetition of the Lord's name), meditation, *paraayana* (reading of the scriptures), prayers, and devotional singing etc is also done here. Special worship is done on auspicious occasions like birthdays, anniversaries, festivals and the like. Each member of the family - young or old - communes with and worships the Divine here.

The Lord is the entire creation. He is therefore the true owner of the house we live in too. The prayer room is the Master room of the house. We are the earthly occupants of His property. This notion rids us of false pride and possessiveness. The ideal attitude to take is to regard the Lord as the true owner of our homes and us as caretakers of His home. But if that is rather difficult, we could at least think of Him as a very welcome guest. Just as we would house an important guest in the best comfort, so too we felicitate the Lord's presence in our homes by having a prayer room or altar, which is, at all times, kept clean and well-decorated.

Also the Lord is all pervading. To remind us that He resides in our homes with us, we have prayer rooms. Without the grace of the Lord, no task can be successfully or easily accomplished. We invoke His grace by communing with Him in the prayer room each day and on special occasions.

Each room in a house is dedicated to a specific function like the bedroom for resting, the drawing room to receive guests, the kitchen for cooking etc. The furniture, decor and the atmosphere of each room are made conducive to the

purpose it serves. So too for the purpose of meditation, worship and prayer, we should have a conducive atmosphere - hence the need for a prayer room.

Sacred thoughts and sound vibrations pervade the place and influence the minds of those who spend time there. Spiritual thoughts and vibrations accumulated through regular meditation, worship and chanting done there pervade the prayer room. Even when we are tired or agitated, by just sitting in the prayer room for a while, we feel calm, rejuvenated and spiritually uplifted.

Why do we do Namaste?

Indians greet each other with namaste. The two palms are placed together in front of the chest and the head bows whilst saying the word namaste. This greeting is for all - people younger than us, of our own age, those older than friends, even strangers and us.

There are five forms of formal traditional greeting enjoined in the shastras of which namaskaram is one. This is understood as prostration but it actually refers to paying homage as we do today when we greet each other with a namaste. Namaste could be just a casual or formal greeting, a cultural convention or an act of worship. However there is much more to it than meets the eye.

In Sanskrit namah + te = namaste. It means - I bow to you - my greetings, salutations or prostration to you. Namaha can also be literally interpreted as "na ma" (not mine). It has a spiritual significance of negating or reducing one's ego in the presence of another. The real meeting between people is the meeting of their minds. When we greet another, we do so with namaste, which means, "may our minds meet," indicated by the folded palms placed before the chest. The bowing down of the head is a gracious form of extending friendship in love and humility.

The spiritual meaning is even deeper. The life force, the divinity, the Self or the Lord in me is the same in all. Recognizing this oneness with the meeting of the palms, we salute with head bowed the Divinity in the person we meet. That is why sometimes, we close our eyes as we do namaste to a revered person or the Lord – as if to look within.

The gesture is often accompanied by words like "Ram Ram", "Jai Shri Krishna", "Namo Narayana", "Jai Siya Ram", "Om Shanti" etc - indicating the recognition of this divinity. When we know this significance, our greeting does not remain just a superficial gesture or word but paves the way for a deeper communion with another in an atmosphere of love and respect.

Why do we prostrate before parents and elders?

Indians prostrate before their parents, elders, teachers and noble souls by touching their feet. The elder in turn blesses us by placing his or her hand on or over our heads. Prostration is done daily, when we meet elders and particularly on important occasions like the beginning of a new task, birthdays, festivals etc. In certain traditional circles, prostration is accompanied by abhivaadana, which serves to introduce one-self, announce one's family and social stature.

Man stands on his feet. Touching the feet in prostration is a sign of respect for the age, maturity, nobility and divinity that our elders personify. It symbolizes our recognition of their selfless love for us and the sacrifices they have done for our welfare. It is a way of humbly acknowledging the greatness of another. This tradition reflects the strong family ties, which has been one of India's enduring strengths.

The good wishes (Sankalpa) and blessings (aashirvaada) of elders are highly valued in India. We prostrate to seek them. Good thoughts create positive vibrations. Good wishes springing from a heart full of love, divinity and nobility have a tremendous strength. When we prostrate with humility and respect, we invoke the good wishes and blessings of elders, which flow in the form of positive energy to envelop us. This is why the posture assumed whether it is in the standing or prone position, enables the entire body to receive the energy thus received.

The different forms of showing respect are :

Pratuthana - rising to welcome a person.

Namaskaara - paying homage in the form of namaste

Upasangrahan - touching the feet of elders or teachers.

Shaashtaanga - prostrating fully with the feet, knees, stomach, chest, forehead and arms touching the ground in front of the elder.

Pratyabivaadana - returning a greeting.

Rules are prescribed in our scriptures as to who should prostrate to whom. Wealth, family name, age, moral strength and spiritual knowledge in ascending order of importance qualified men to receive respect. This is why a king though the ruler of the land, would prostrate before a spiritual master. Epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata have many stories highlighting this aspect.

Why do we wear marks (tilak, pottu and the like) on the forehead?

The tilak or pottu invokes a feeling of sanctity in the wearer and others. It is recognized as a religious mark. Its form and colour vary according to one's caste, religious sect or the form of the Lord worshipped.

In earlier times, the four castes (based on varna or colour) - Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Sudra - applied marks differently. The brahmin applied a white chandan mark signifying purity, as his profession was of a priestly or academic nature. The kshatriya applied a red kumkum mark signifying valour as he belonged to warrior races. The vaishya wore a yellow kesar or turmeric mark signifying prosperity as he was a businessman or trader devoted to creation of wealth. The sudra applied a black bhasma, kasturi or charcoal mark signifying service as he supported the work of the other three divisions. Also Vishnu worshippers apply a chandan tilak of the shape of "U", Shiva worshippers a tripundra of bhasma, Devi worshippers a red dot of kumkum and so on).

The tilak cover the spot between the eyebrows, which is the seat of memory and thinking. It is known as the Ajna Chakra in the language of Yoga. The tilak is applied with the prayer - "May I remember the Lord. May this pious feeling pervade all my activities. May I be righteous in my deeds." Even when we temporarily forget this prayerful attitude the mark on another reminds us of our resolve. The tilak is thus a blessing of the Lord and a protection against wrong tendencies and forces.

The entire body emanates energy in the form of electromagnetic waves - the forehead and the subtle spot between the eyebrows especially so. That is why worry generates heat and causes a headache. The tilak and pottu cools the forehead, protects us and prevents energy loss. Sometimes the entire forehead is covered with chandan or bhasma. Using plastic reusable "stick bindis" is not very beneficial, even though it serves the purpose of decoration.

Why do we not touch papers, books and people with the feet?

To Indians, knowledge is sacred and divine. So it must be given respect at all times. Nowadays we separate subjects as sacred and secular. But in ancient India every subject - academic or spiritual - was considered divine and taught by the guru in the gurukula. The custom of not stepping on educational tools is a frequent reminder of the high position accorded to knowledge in Indian culture. From an early age, this wisdom fosters in us a deep reverence for books and education. This is also the reason why we worship books, vehicles and instruments once a year on Saraswathi Pooja or Ayudha Pooja day, dedicated to the Goddess of Learning. In fact, each day before starting our studies, we pray:

Saraswati namasthubhyam, Varade kaama roopini

Vidyaarambham karishyaami, Sidhirbhavatu me sadaa

O Goddess Saraswati, the giver of Boons and fulfiller of wishes, I prostrate to You before starting my studies. May you always fulfill me?

To touch another with the feet is considered an act of misdemeanor. Why is this so?

Man is regarded as the most beautiful, living breathing temple of the Lord! Therefore touching another with the feet is akin to disrespecting the divinity within him or her. This calls for an immediate apology, which is offered with reverence and humility.

Why do we apply the holy ash?

The ash of any burnt object is not regarded as holy ash. Bhasma (the holy ash) is the ash from the homa (sacrificial fire) where special wood along with ghee and other herbs is offered as worship of the Lord. Or the deity is worshipped by pouring ash as abhisheka and is then distributed as bhasma. Bhasma is generally applied on the forehead. Some apply it on certain parts of the body like the upper arms, chest etc. Some ascetics rub it all over the body. Many consume a pinch of it each time they receive it.

The word bhasma means, "that by which our sins are destroyed and the Lord is remembered". Bha implied bhartsanam ("to destroy") and sma implies smaranam ("to remember"). The application of bhasma therefore signifies destruction of the evil and remembrance of the divine. Bhasma is called vibhuti (which means "glory") as it gives glory

to one who applies it and raksha (which means a source of protection) as it protects the wearer from ill health and evil, by purifying him or her.

Homa (offering of oblations into the fire with sacred chants) signifies the offering or surrender of the ego and egocentric desires into the flame of knowledge or a noble and selfless cause. The consequent ash signifies the purity of the mind, which results from such actions. Also the fire of knowledge burns the oblation and wood signifying ignorance and inertia respectively. The ash we apply indicates that we should burn false identification with the body and become free of the limitations of birth and death. This is not to be misconstrued as a morose reminder of death but as a powerful pointer towards the fact that time and tide wait for none.

Bhasma is specially associated with Lord Shiva who applies it all over His body. Shiva devotes apply bhasma as a tripundra. When applied with a red spot at the center, the mark symbolizes Shiva-Shakti (the unity of energy and matter that creates the entire seen and unseen universe). Bhasma has medicinal value and is used in many ayurvedic medicines. It absorbs excess moisture from the body and prevents colds and headaches. The Upanishads say that the famous Mrityunjaya mantra should be chanted whilst applying ash on the forehead.

Tryambakam yajamahe, Sugandhim pushtivardhanam

Urvaa rukamiva bhandhanaan, Mrytyor muksheeyamaa amrutaat

We worship the three-eyed Lord Shiva who nourishes and spread fragrance in our lives. May He free us from the shackles of sorrow, change and death – effortlessly, like the fall of a rip brinjal from its stem.

Why do offer food to the Lord before eating it?

Indians make an offering of food to the Lord and later partake of it as prasaada - a holy gift from the Lord. In our daily ritualistic worship (pooja) too we offer naivedyam (food) to the Lord. The Lord is omnipotent and omniscient. Man is a part, while the Lord is the totality. All that we do is by His strength and knowledge alone. Hence what we receive in life as a result of our actions is really His alone. We acknowledge this through the act of offering food to Him. This is exemplified by the Hindi words "tera tujko arpan" – I offer what is Yours to You. Thereafter it is akin to His gift to us, graced by His divine touch.

Knowing this, our entire attitude to food and the act of eating changes. The food offered will naturally be pure and the best. We share what we get with others before consuming it. We do not demand, complain or criticise the quality of the food we get. We eat it with cheerful acceptance (prasaada buddhi).

Before we partake of our daily meals we first sprinkle water around the plate as an act of purification. Five morsels of food are placed on the side of the plate acknowledging the debt owed by us to the Divine forces (devta runa) for their benign grace and protection, our ancestors (pitru runa) for giving us their lineage and a family culture, the sages (rishi runa) as our religion and culture have been "realised", attained and handed down to us by them, our fellow beings (manushya runa) who constitute society without the support of which we could not live as we do and other living beings (bhuta runa) for serving us selflessly.

Thereafter the Lord, the life force, who is also within us as the five life-giving physiological functions, is offered the food. This is done with the chant

praanaaya swaahaa, apaanaaya swaahaa

vyanaaya swaahaa, udaanaaya swaahaa

samaanaaya swaahaa, brahmane swaahaa

After offering the food thus, it is eaten as prasaada - blessed food.

Why do we fast?

Most devout Indians fast regularly or on special occasions like festivals. On such days they do not eat at all, eat once or make do with fruits or a special diet of simple food.

Fasting in Sanskrit is called upavaasa. Upa means "near" + vaasa means "to stay". Upavaasa therefore means staying near (the Lord), meaning the attainment of close mental proximity with the Lord. Then what has upavaasa to do with food?

A lot of our time and energy is spent in procuring food items, preparing, cooking, eating and digesting food. Certain food types make our minds dull and agitated. Hence on certain days man decides to save time and conserve his energy by eating either simple, light food or totally abstaining from eating so that his mind becomes alert and pure. The mind, otherwise pre-occupied by the thought of food, now entertains noble thoughts and stays with the Lord. Since it is a self-imposed form of discipline it is usually adhered to with joy.

Also every system needs a break and an overhaul to work at its best. Rest and a change of diet during fasting is very good for the digestive system and the entire body. The more you indulge the senses, the more they make their demands. Fasting helps us to cultivate control over our senses, sublimate our desires and guide our minds to be poised and at peace.

Fasting should not make us weak, irritable or create an urge to indulge later. This happens when there is no noble goal behind fasting. The Bhagavad-Gita urges us to eat appropriately - neither too less nor too much - yukta-aahaara and to eat simple, pure and healthy food (a saatvik diet) even when not fasting.

Why do we do pradakshina (circumambulate)?

We cannot draw a circle without a center point. The Lord is the center, source and essence of our lives. Recognizing Him as the focal point in our lives, we go about doing our daily chores. This is the significance of pradakshina. Also every point on the circumference of a circle is equidistant from the center. This means that wherever or whoever we may be, we are equally close to the Lord. His grace flows towards us without partiality.

Why is pradakshina done only in a clockwise manner?

The reason is not, as a person said, to avoid a traffic jam! As we do pradakshina, the Lord is always on our right. In India the right side symbolizes auspiciousness. So as we circumambulate the sanctum sanctorum we remind ourselves to lead an auspicious life of righteousness, with the Lord who is the indispensable source of help and strength, as our guide - the "right hand". Indian scriptures enjoin -

matrudevo bhava,

pitrudevo bhava,

acharyadevo bhava

May you consider your parents and teachers as you would the Lord. With this in mind we also do pradakshina around our parents and divine personages. After the completion of traditional worship (pooja), we customarily do pradakshina around ourselves. In this way we recognize and remember the supreme divinity within us, which alone is idolized in the form of the Lord that we worship outside.

Why do we regard trees and plants as sacred?

The Lord, the life in us, pervades all living beings, be they plants or animals. Hence, they are all regarded as sacred. Human life on earth depends on plants and trees. They give us the vital factors that make life possible on earth: food, oxygen, clothing, shelter, medicines etc. Hence, in India, we are taught to regard trees and plants as sacred. Indians scriptures tell us to plant ten trees if, for any reason, we have to cut one. We are advised to use parts of trees and plants only as much as is needed for food, fuel, shelter etc. we are also urged to apologies to a plant or tree before cutting it to avoid incurring a specific sin named soona.

Certain trees and plants like tulasi, peepal etc., which have tremendous beneficial qualities, are worshipped till today. It is believed that divine beings manifest as trees and plants, and many people worship them to fulfill their desires or to please the Lord.

Why do we ring the bell in a temple?

Is it to wake up the Lord? But the Lord never sleeps. Is it to let the Lord know we have come? He does not need to be told, as He is all knowing. Is it a form of seeking permission to enter His precinct? It is a homecoming and therefore entry needs no permission. The Lord welcomes us at all times. Then why do we ring the bell?

The ringing of the bell produces what is regarded as an auspicious sound. It produces the sound Om, the universal name of the Lord. There should be auspiciousness within and without, to gain the vision of the Lord who is all-auspiciousness. Even while doing the ritualistic aarati, we ring the bell. It is sometimes accompanied by the auspicious sounds of the conch and other musical instruments.

An added significance of ringing the bell, conch and other instruments is that they help drown any inauspicious or irrelevant noises and comments that might disturb or distract the worshippers in their devotional ardour, concentration and inner peace.

As we start the daily ritualistic worship (pooja) we ring the bell, chanting:

Aagamarthamtu devaanaam, gamanarthamtu rakshasaam

Kurve ghantaaravam tatra, devataahvaahna lakshanam

I ring this bell indicating the invocation of divinity, So that virtuous and noble forces enter (my home and heart); and the demonic and evil forces from within and without, depart.

Why do we worship the kalasha?

First of all what is a kalasha? A brass, mud or copper pot is filled with water. Mango leaves are placed in the mouth of the pot and a coconut is placed over it. A red or white thread is tied around its neck or sometimes all around it in a intricate diamondshaped pattern. The pot may be decorated with designs. Such a pot is known as a kalasha.

When the pot is filled with water or rice, it is known as purnakumbha representing the inert body which when filled with the divine life force gains the power to do all the wonderful things that makes life what it is. A kalasha is placed with due rituals on all-important occasions like the traditional house warming (grihapravesa), wedding, daily worship etc. It is placed near the entrance as a sign of welcome. It is also used in a traditional manner while receiving holy personages.

Why do we worship the kalasha? Before the creation came into being, Lord Vishnu was reclining on His snake-bed in the milky ocean. From His navel emerged a lotus from which appeared Lord Brahma, the creator, who thereafter created this world.

The water in the kalasha symbolizes the primordial water from which the entire creation emerged. It is the giver of life to all and has the potential of creating innumerable names and forms, the inert objects and the sentient beings and all that is auspicious in the world from the energy behind the universe. The leaves and coconut represent creation. The thread represents the love that "binds" all in creation. The kalasha is therefore considered auspicious and worshipped. The waters from all the holy rivers, the knowledge of all the Vedas and the blessings of all the deities are invoked in the kalasha and its water is thereafter used for all the rituals, including the abhisheka.

The consecration (kumbhaabhisheka) of a temple is done in a grand manner with elaborate rituals including the pouring of one or more kalashas of holy water on the top of the temple. When the asuras and devas churned the milky ocean, the Lord appeared bearing the pot of nectar, which blessed one with everlasting life.

Thus the kalasha also symbolizes immortality. Men of wisdom are full and complete as they identify with the infinite Truth (poornatvam). They brim with joy and love and respect all that is auspicious. We greet them with a purnakumbha ("full pot") acknowledging their greatness and as a sign of respectful and reverential welcome, with a "full heart".

Why do we consider the lotus as special?

The lotus is the symbol of truth, auspiciousness and beauty (satyam, shivam, sundaram). The Lord is also that nature and therefore, His various aspects are compared to a lotus (i.e. lotus-eyes, lotus feet, lotus hands, the lotus of the heart etc.). The lotus blooms with the rising sun and close at night. Similarly, our minds open up and expand with the light of knowledge. The lotus grows even in slushy areas. It remains beautiful and untainted despite its surroundings, reminding us that we too can and should strive to remain pure and beautiful within, under all circumstances.

The lotus leaf never gets wet even though it is always in water. It symbolizes the man of wisdom (gyaani) who remains ever joyous, unaffected by the world of sorrow and change. This is revealed in a shloka from the Bhagwad-Geeta:

Brahmanyaadhaaya karmaani, Sangam tyaktvaa karoti yaha

Lipyate na sa paapena, Padma patram ivaambhasaa

He who does actions, offering them to Brahman (the Supreme), abandoning attachment, is not tainted by sin, just as a lotus leaf remains unaffected by the water on it.

From this, we learn that what is natural to the man of wisdom becomes a discipline to be practiced by all saadhakas or spiritual seekers and devotees. Our bodies have certain energy centers described in the Yoga Shaastras as chakras. Each one is associated with lotus that has a certain number of petals. For example, a lotus with a thousand petals represents the Sahasra chakra at the top of the head, which opens when the yogi attains Godhood or Realisation. Also, the lotus posture (padmaasana) is recommended when one sits for meditation. A lotus emerged from the navel of Lord Vishnu. Lord Brahma originated from it to create the world.

Hence, the lotus symbolizes the link between the creator and the supreme Cause. It also symbolizes Brahmaloaka, the abode of Lord Brahma. The auspicious sign of the swastika is said to have evolved from the lotus.

Why do we worship tulasi?

In Sanskrit, tulanaa naasti athaiva tulasi - that which is incomparable (in its qualities) is the tulasi. For Indians it is one of the most sacred plants. In fact it is known to be the only thing used in worship, which, once used, can be washed and reused in pooja - as it is regarded so self-purifying.

As one story goes, Tulasi was the devoted wife of Shankhachuda, a celestial being. She believed that Lord Krishna tricked her into sinning. So she cursed Him to become a stone (shaaligraama). Seeing her devotion and adhered to righteousness, the Lord blessed her saying that she would become the worshipped plant, tulasi that would adorn His head. Also that all offerings would be incomplete without the tulasi leaf - hence the worship of tulasi.

She also symbolises Goddess Lakshmi, the consort of Lord Vishnu. Those who wish to be righteous and have a happy family life worship the tulasi. Tulasi is married to the Lord with all pomp and show as in any wedding. This is because according to another legend, the Lord blessed her to be His consort. Satyabhama once weighed Lord Krishna against all her legendary wealth. The scales did not balance till a single tulasi leaf was placed along with the wealth on the scale by Rukmini with devotion.

Thus the tulasi played the vital role of demonstrating to the world that even a small object offered with devotion means more to the Lord than all the wealth in the world. The tulasi leaf has great medicinal value and is used to cure various ailments, including the common cold.

Yanmule sarvatirhaani, Yannagre sarvadevataa

Yanmadhye sarvavedaascha, Tulasi taam namaamyaham

I bow down to the tulasi, At whose base are all the holy places, At whose top reside all the deities and In whose middle are all the Vedas.

Why do we blow the conch?

When the conch is blown, the primordial sound of Om emanates. Om is an auspicious sound that was chanted by the Lord before creating the world. It represents the world and the Truth behind it.

As the story goes, the demon Shankhaasura defeated devas, the Vedas and went to the bottom of the ocean. The devas appealed to Lord Vishnu for help. He incarnated as Matsya Avataara - the "fish incarnation" and killed Shankhaasura. The Lord blew the conch-shaped bone of his ear and head. The Om sound emanated, from which emerged the Vedas.

All knowledge enshrined in the Vedas is an elaboration of Om. The conch therefore is known as shankha after Shankaasura. The conch blown by the Lord is called Paanchajanya. He carries it at all times in one of His four hands. It represents dharma or righteousness that is one of the four goals (purusharthas) of life. The sound of the conch is thus also the victory call of good over evil.

Another well-known purpose of blowing the conch and the instruments, known traditionally to produce auspicious sounds is to drown or mask negative comments or noises that may disturb or upset the atmosphere or the minds of worshippers.

Ancient India lived in her villages. Each village was presided over by a primary temple and several small ones. During the aarati performed after all-important poojas and on sacred occasions, the conch used to be blown. Since villages were generally small, the sound of the conch would be heard all over the village. People who could not make it to the temple were reminded to stop whatever they were doing, at least for a few seconds, and mentally bow to the Lord. The conch sound served to briefly elevate people's minds to a prayerful attitude even in the middle of their busy daily routine.

The conch is placed at the altar in temples and homes next to the Lord as a symbol of Naada Brahma (Truth), the Vedas, Om, dharma, victory and auspiciousness.

It is often used to offer devotees thirtha (sanctified water) to raise their minds to the highest Truth. It is worshipped with the following verse.

Twam puraa saagarot pannaha, Vishnunaa vidhrutahakare

Devaischa poojitha sarvahi, Panchjanya namostu te

Salutations to Panchajanya the conch born of the ocean Held in the hand of Lord Vishnu and worshipped by all devaas

Why do we say shaanti thrice?

Shaanti, meaning "peace", is a natural state of being. Disturbances are created either by others or us. For example, peace already exists in a place until someone makes noise. Therefore, peace underlies all our agitations. When agitations end, peace is naturally experienced since it was already there. Where there is peace, there is happiness. Therefore, every one without exception desires peace in his/her life.

However, peace within or without seems very hard to attain because it is covered by our own agitations. A rare few manage to remain peaceful within even in the midst of external agitation and troubles. To invoke peace, we chant prayers. By chanting prayers, troubles end and peace is experienced internally, irrespective of the external disturbances.

All such prayers end by chanting shaanti thrice. It is believed that trivaram satyam - that which is said thrice comes true. For emphasizing a point we repeat a thing thrice. In the court of law also, one who takes the witness stands says, "I shall speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth".

We chant shaanti thrice to emphasise our intense desire for peace. All obstacles, problems and sorrows originate from three sources.

Aadhidaivika : The unseen divine forces over which we have little or no control like earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions etc.

Aadhibhautika: The known factors around us like accidents, human contacts, pollution, crime etc.

Aadhyaatmika : We sincerely pray to the Lord that at least while we undertake special tasks or even in our daily lives, there are no problems or that, problems are minimised from the three sources written about above.

May peace alone prevail. Hence shaanti is chanted thrice.

It is chanted aloud the first time, addressing the unseen forces. It is chanted softer the second time, directed to our immediate surroundings and those around, and softest the last time as it is addressed to oneself.

Why do we offer a coconut?

In India one of the most common offerings in a temple is a coconut. It is also offered on occasions like weddings, festivals, the use of a new vehicle, bridge, house etc. It is offered in the sacrificial fire whilst performing homa. The coconut is broken and placed before the Lord. It is later distributed as prasaada.

The fibre covering of the dried coconut is removed except for a tuft on the top. The marks on the coconut make it look like the head of a human being. The coconut is broken, symbolising the breaking of the ego. The juice within, representing the inner tendencies (vaasanas) is offered along with the white kernel - the mind, to the Lord. A mind thus purified by the touch of the Lord is used as prasaada (a holy gift).

In the traditional abhishekha ritual done in all temples and many homes, several materials are poured over the deity like milk, curd, honey, tender coconut water, sandal paste, holy ash etc. Each material has a specific significance of bestowing certain benefits on worshippers. Tender coconut water is used in abhisheka rituals since it is believed to bestow spiritual growth on the seeker.

The coconut also symbolises selfless service. Every part of the tree -the trunk, leaves, fruit, coir etc. Is used in innumerable ways like thatches, mats, tasty dishes, oil, soap etc. It takes in even salty water from the earth and

converts it into sweet nutritive water that is especially beneficial to sick people. It is used in the preparation of many ayurvedic medicines and in other alternative medicinal systems.

The marks on the coconut are even thought to represent the three-eyed Lord Shiva and therefore it is considered to be a means to fulfill our desires.

Why do we chant Om?

Om is one of the most chanted sound symbols in India. It has a profound effect on the body and mind of the one who chants and also on the surroundings. Most mantras and vedic prayers start with Om. All auspicious actions begin with Om. It is even used as a greeting - Om, Hari Om etc. It is repeated as a mantra or meditated upon. Its form is worshipped, contemplated upon or used as an auspicious sign.

Om is the universal name of the Lord. It is made up of the letters A (phonetically as in "around"), U (phonetically as in "put") and M (phonetically as in "mum"). The sound emerging from the vocal chords starts from the base of the throat as "A". With the coming together of the lips, "U" is formed and when the lips are closed, all sounds end in "M".

The three letters symbolize the three states (waking, dream and deep sleep), the three deities (Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva), the three Vedas (Rig, Yajur and Sama) the three worlds (Bhuh, Bhuvah, Suvah) etc. The Lord is all these and beyond.

The formless, attributeless Lord (Brahman) is represented by the silence between two Om Chants. Om is also called pranava that means, "that (symbol or sound) by which the Lord is praised". The entire essence of the Vedas is enshrined in the word Om. It is said that the Lord started creating the world after chanting Om and aha. Hence its sound is considered to create an auspicious beginning for any task that we undertake. The Om chant should have the resounding sound of a bell (aaooooommm).

Om is written in different ways in different places. The most common form symbolizes Lord Ganesha's. The upper curve is the head; the lower large one, the stomach; the side one, the trunk; and the semi-circular mark with the dot, the sweetmeat ball (modaka) in Lord Ganesha's hand. Thus Om symbolizes everything - the means and the goal of life, the world and the Truth behind it, the material and the Sacred, all form and the Formless.

Why do we do Aarati?

Towards the end of every ritualistic worship (pooja or bhajan) of the Lord or to welcome an honored guest or saint, we perform the aarati. This is always accompanied by the ringing of the bell and sometimes by singing, playing of musical instruments and clapping.

It is one of the sixteen steps (shodasha upachaara) of the pooja ritual. It is referred to as the lighted lamp in the right hand, which we wave in a clockwise circling movement to light the entire form of the Lord. Each part is revealed individually and also the entire form of the Lord. As the light is waved we either do mental or loud chanting of prayers or simply behold the beautiful form of the Lord, illumined by the lamp. At the end of the aarati we place our hands over the flame and then gently touch our eyes and the top of the head. We have seen and participated in this ritual from our childhood. Let us find out why we do the aarati?

Having worshipped the Lord of love - performing abhisheka, decorating the image and offering fruits and delicacies, we see the beauty of the Lord in all His glory. Our minds are focused on each limb of the Lord as the lamp lights it up. It is akin to silent open-eyed meditation on His beauty. The singing, clapping, ringing of the bell etc. denote the joy and auspiciousness, which accompanies the vision of the Lord.

Aarati is often performed with camphor. This holds a telling spiritual significance. Camphor when lit, burns itself out completely without leaving a trace of it. It represents our inherent tendencies (vaasanas). When lit by the fire of knowledge which illumines the Lord (Truth), our vaasanas thereafter burn themselves out completely, not leaving a trace of ego which creates in us a sense of individuality that keeps us separate from the Lord.

Also while camphor burns to reveal the glory of Lord, it emits a pleasant perfume even while it sacrifices itself. In our spiritual progress, even as we serve the guru and society, we should willingly sacrifice ourselves and all we have, to spread the "perfume" of love to all. We often wait a long while to see the illumined Lord but when the aarati is actually performed, our eyes close automatically as if to look within. This is to signify that each of us is a temple of the Lord.

Just as the priest reveals the form of the Lord clearly with the aarati flame, so too the guru reveals to us the divinity within each of us with the help of the "flame" of knowledge (or the light of spiritual knowledge). At the end of the aarati,

we place our hands over the flame and then touch our eyes and the top of the head. It means - may the light that illuminated the Lord light up my vision; may my vision be divine and my thoughts noble and beautiful.

The philosophical meaning of aarati extends further. The sun, moon, stars, lightning and fire are the natural sources of light. The Lord is the source of this wonderful phenomenon of the universe. It is due to Him alone that all else exist and shine. As we light up the Lord with the flame of the aarati, we turn our attention to the very source of all light, which symbolizes knowledge and life. Also the sun is the presiding deity of the intellect, the moon, that of the mind, and fire, that of speech. The Lord is the supreme consciousness that illuminates all of them.

Without Him, the intellect cannot think, nor can the mind feel nor the tongue speaks. The Lord is beyond the mind, intellect and speech. How can this finite equipment illuminate the Lord? Therefore, as we perform the aarati we chant;

***Na tatra suryo bhaati na chandra taarakam, Nema vidyuto bhaanti kutoyamagnib
Tameva bhaantam anubhaati sarvam, Tasya bhasa sarvam idam vibhaati***

He is there where the sun does not shine, Nor the moon, stars and lightning. then what to talk of this small flame (in my hand), Everything (in the universe) shines only after the Lord.