

THE SPIRITUAL HERITAGE OF INDIA

(Power point presentation made by Ambassador (Retd) Alan Nazareth, Chairman, BVB Gandhi Centre for Science & Human Values at NGMA Bangalore on June 28, 2019)

India's spiritual heritage is incredibly diverse and rich. Four of the world's great religions - Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism - have been born in India, four others - Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism, and Bahá'ism came into India over the centuries and taken firm root here. All their sacred literatures in various Indian languages, their hymns, philosophies, theologies, rituals and festivals, their temples, gurudwaras, synagogues, churches and mosques, places of pilgrimage and tombs of their saints in various parts of the country, comprise its glorious heritage.

Hinduism, one of the two oldest living faiths in the world, is unique not only in having one God beyond the many, but also in having no individual founder. It has evolved out of the manifold hymns, incantations and rituals, formulated by anonymous priests and sages of Aryan tribes who came into India about 1500 BC, that are contained in its four sacred books - Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda & Atharvaveda - the Brahmanas (manuals of rituals appended to each of the vedas, the eighteen 'Upanishads' which contain the philosophical essence extracted from the Vedas, the 18 Puranas and its 18 sequels known as the Upapuranas which contained mythological stories, and the two great epics, the 'Ramayana' and the 'Mahabharata'. Separately it has the following "scientific" Vedas closely connected to its religious practices : Siddhanta Shastra (astronomical treatises) ; Horashastra (Astrology) Gandharva Veda (music) ; Natyashastra (dance) ; Yogashastra (yoga); Ayurveda (health & healing) ; Kamasutra (love & physical union) ; Arthashastra (politics and economics); Manusamhita (law and Jurisprudence) ; Sahityashastra (grammar and language) and Dhanurveda (archery).

About the Vedas, the German Indologist Max Muller writes " It is only in the Vedas, what was always presupposed or postulated but was absent everywhere else, is clearly put before us in the hymns of the Rig Veda. It is in this ancient scripture that the process by which homo sapiens moves from simple invocations to formulate complex ideas of a Divine Trinity and an all pervading, indefinable, eternal, creative energy, is revealed in all its evolutionary stages." The Encyclopaedia Britannica concurs " Vedic hymns, dating from the 2nd millennium BC, are the oldest extant record from India of the process by which the human mind makes its Gods, and of the deep psychological processes of mythmaking leading to profound cosmological concepts. The Upanishads(Hindu philosophical treatises)

contain one of the first conceptions of a universal, all pervading spiritual reality leading to a radical monism(absolute non-dualism or the essential unity of matter and spirit)"

The Mahabharata, which is seven times the length of the Iliad and Odyssey combined, has been lauded by William Humboldt as "the most beautiful, perhaps the only philosophical song existing in any known tongue and also the deepest and loftiest thing the world has to show".

Hinduism's evolutionary and assimilative characteristics are seen in the rise and fall of its Divinities and synthesis of Aryan Gods with indigenous ones. The chief Aryan God was INDRA, the God of Rain and War and Weilder of the 'Vajra'(thunderbolt) and was hailed as "The destroyer of Cities" He was the son of Dyaus(Sky) and Prithvi(earth) and rode a golden chariot. His wife Indrani resided in great splendor in Swarga, on Mount Meru.

AGNI, Indra's brother, was God of Fire and provided the vital spark of life to humans, animals, fish, trees and plants.

SURYA, also Indra's brother, was the Sun God, had Golden hair and rode a golden chariot drawn by seven mares.

INDRA, AGNI and SURYA was the first Divine triad of Hinduism.

VARUNA was Guardian of the Cosmic Order;

VAYU was God of Wind.

HANUMAN, VAYU's son, had such great strength he could fly even with mountain tops in his hand. His consort was ANJANA the monkey queen.

VISHNU, helpmate of Indra, was only a minor deity in the Vedic pantheon but later emerged, and still continues in the important role of "Preserver" and the second God of the Divine Triad. SHESHA, King of Serpents (Nagas), provides the coiled raft on which he floats on the cosmic ocean very much like on a spiral galaxy.

The even bigger elevation is that of RUDRA, originally a pre-Aryan indigenous yogic ' Lord of Beasts', who was incorporated in the Aryan pantheon as a minor "Ascetic" diety, later emerged and still reigns as SHIVA, the "Destroyer", third God of the Divine Triad, Lord of Cosmic Dance and the Eternal Mystic but with a vile temper. His female consort is Parvati, also known as Shakti, Durga and Kali, who is the creative energy and has both fearful and benevolent aspects.

GANESHA, son of Shiva and Parvati, is the very popular elephant headed God, Remover of all Obstacles, God of wisdom, and the Celestial Scribe

who was called upon by Sage Vyasa, wrote down the Mahabharata with a bit of his own left tusk.

Born as nature worship and a multiplicity of Gods, the philosophical systems, theology and ethics that Hinduism gestated out of them have stood the test of time and all manner of challenges, including the progress of modern science. India's Gods and Goddesses, unlike the ancient deities of Egypt and Greece which they much resemble, are still very much alive and widely worshipped. Besides, Hinduism has not had the conflicts with philosophy and science which ancient Egyptian and Greek religions as also Judaism, Christianity and Islam have experienced.



Temple carving at [Hoysaleswara temple](#) representing the [Trimurti](#): [Brahma](#), [Shiva](#) and [Vishnu](#).

In his book "A Historians Approach to Religion" Arnold Toynbee points out that "Far from arising outside the orbit of philosophy and subsequently colliding and coming to terms with her, the Mahayana and post Buddhaic Hinduism arose within the bosom of Philosophy....In their metamorphosis from philosophies into religions, Buddhism and Hinduism did trail clouds of philosophy behind them, but the process of transfiguring a philosophy into higher religions seems to have left the resultant Buddhaic religions freer from cramping and warping intellectual trammels than Christianity and Islam were left by the opposite process of translating these two Judaic higher religions into philosophical terms." (The post Buddhaic Hinduism that Durant refers to arose in about the 8th century AD and continues in much the same form until the present day even though some of its religious and social practices have undergone notable changes since the 19th century.)

Similarly Will Durant writes in his 'Story of Civilization' : "Religion being the core of Hindu life, those sciences were cultivated first that contributed to religion: astronomy grew out of the worship of the heavenly bodies and the observation of their movements aimed to fix the calendar of festival and sacrificial days. Grammar and philology developed out of the

insistence that every prayer and formula, though couched in a dead language, should be textually and phonetically correct. As in our middle ages, for better and for worse, the scientists of India were her priests".

Copernicus' and Galileo's refutations of the earth centric solar system and Darwin's theory of evolution caused major conflicts between religion and science in the Christian world, but in India this was not so. Many centuries before the mentioned Western astronomers and scientists Aryabhata had asserted that the "sphere of the stars is stationery, and the earth, by its revolution, produces the daily rising and setting of planets and stars". The "Dashavatar", the ten incarnations of Vishnu (fish, tortoise, wild boar, half lion half man, dwarf, farmer, ideal king, great teacher, the enlightened one and the apocalypse) is a theology of Evolution three thousand years before Darwin, the thought in this case being that the Creator reveals himself to all his creatures at various stages of the evolutionary process.

According to the 8th century AD sage Shankara, whom Will Durant extols as "the greatest of Indian Philosophers, at once the Aquinas and Kant of India", the Creator (Brahman), is impersonal, all pervasive, immanent, non-created, eternal cosmic energy, the "Mahashakti" that inheres in all of creation as its vital essence.



Shankara, the philosopher theologian

In his Brahmasutra Bhasya, he affirms : "The Truth that the Brahman is the self is set forth in the text "That thou art"It is from the realization that the Self is the Brahman, that all miseries are ended and the aspiration of man is achieved". In his Dakshinamurti Stotram, he declares " Just as the

rays of the light hidden in a pot with many holes, emanates from those holes, so the self manifests itself through the eyes and other sense organs giving rise to the notion I know." This in layman's words means that the many little spots of light on the walls and ceiling of a darkened room in which the pot with many holes is kept a little lamp is kept under it, are only a reflection of the unseen light within the pot. When that light is taken away or put out, the little light spots instantly disappear. Shankar's thesis is also validated when the light from a little candle and a ray of sunlight is refracting through a spectroscope. Both will break into the same rainbow spectrum thus establishing they are of the same nature even though their calorific intensities differ trillions of times. The Hindu Trimurthi (Trinity), Brahma (Creator), Vishnu (Preserver) and Shiva (Destroyer), is also best explained in similar terms. Much like the candle flame produces light (creates), gives warmth (preserves) and burns (destroys) the Trimurthi is not three separate Gods but three aspects of the same reality. Thus, what to most is black or white, sunlight or shadow, animate or inanimate, the reality is that there is much ensconced energy, beauty and Divinity within us and in everything around us. Until and unless we comprehend this great truth, detach ourselves from ephemeral things and focus on the Divine Spark within us, we will only be chasing shadows, missing the substance, and be mired in an endless cycle of birth and rebirth, with all its attendant travails. This is the essence of 'Advaita' (non dualism or absolute monism) which the sage Shankara enunciated and is the most reputed of Hinduism's philosophical systems.

In his 'Mysticism and the New Physics', Michael Talbot writes "Since the time of the ancient Greeks, Western Science has tried to understand matter by dividing and re-dividing it in efforts to discover its fundamental building blocks. Einstein brought us closer to figuring out the fundamental building blocks of matter when he discovered that the primordial substance of the universe is not 'matter' but waves, particles and quanta, in other words energy in various minute forms. ...The Hindu concepts of 'Nada' and 'Bindu' are identical to the concept of matter being both a wave and a particle. Translated roughly 'Nada' means movement or vibration; 'Bindu' literally means a point, and according to Hindu belief when the universe finally collapses, it collapses into what is known as the 'Shiva Bindu'. This bears a striking similarity to modern physics. The macrophysical blackhole and the 'Shiva Bindu' are identical.

Closely connected to the doctrine of Brahman being the atman of all living beings are the doctrines of 'samasara' (bondage to rebirth) and Karma (whereby an individuals act's produce corresponding merits or demerits). The Karmic baggage of demerits entraps the soul in a perpetual cycle of rebirths until it is finally broken by spiritual self realization and moksha(liberation) is obtained. Esoteric though this might sound Samsara, Karma and Moksha are not very different from the Christian concept of purgatory, sin and salvation except that in the former case the purification process takes place through various rebirths here on this earth rather than by burning in some underworld furnace. A consoling aspect of the Samsara theology is no one is damned for eternity as the Divine spark within each of us has ultimately to be reunited with the "Mahashakti"

'Ekam Sat vipraha bahuda vadanti' (The Truth is one, it has many names') and "Udara charitanam vasdudaiva Kutumbakam (For the broadminded all of humanity is one family) are fundamental maxims of Hinduism and the basis of its great tolerance, as also of the freedom it provides to all, to follow whichever spiritual path they choose. The majority of Hindus are devotees of Vishnu (the second member of the Trinity who incarnates), particularly his Rama and Krishna incarnations, and are known as Vaishnavites.



Krishna, the eighth incarnation of Vishnu, with his consort [Radha](#). - Rajasthani painting from the 1700s.

Those who are devotees of Shiva are known as Shaivites. They worship him as 'Mahadeva", the supreme God because he and his consort are a

combination of the "destructive" and "Creative" aspects of Divinity. Besides his dance of destruction is also his dance of creation. He is also greatly revered for his stupendous gift of the seven rivers which came down to India flowing of his own hair locks. The Ganges is the most sacred of these.



Lord Shiva with the River Ganga flowing through his hair.

There are also some Hindus who worship Shakti, (Parvati) the consort of Shiva. They are known as Shaktas and their sect as Shaktism. Most Tantric practices have emanated from it.

The one Trimurthi God who is hardly ever worshipped is Brahma (the Creator), but his consort Saraswathi, the Goddess of Learning and the Arts, has many devotees particularly among intellectuals, knowledge workers, musicians and dancers.



Saraswathi, the Goddess of Learning and the Arts

Even more widely worshipped is Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth who is consort of Vishnu (the Preserver).



Lakshmi, Goddess of Wealth

There are some Hindu sects such as Swami Dayananda Saraswati's *Arya Samaj*, which rejects image worship, focuses only on the *Vedas* and Vedic fire sacrifices (*yajña*) which do not come within any of the above categories,. Though some devotees in every sect consider their own denomination as superior to others the majority however consider the others as legitimate as their own. Heresy itself has never really been an issue in Hinduism.

In the *Bhagwat Gita*, which embodies the philosophical essence of Hinduism, and is the most important part of the *Mahabharata* Epic, Lord Krishna indicates that *Moksha* (liberation) can be attained in three different ways: *Jnana Marga* (path of knowledge), *Bhakti Marga* (path of devotion) and *Karma Marga* (path of good works). He emphasizes that in all these paths what is essential is the performance of duties without concern for the fruits thereof and all the paths lead to him.

Traditionally, a Hindu's life is divided into four *Āshramas* (stages). The first is, *Brahmacharya*, which is spent in celibate, disciplined and sober study under the guidance of a *Guru*, *Grihastha* is the householder's stage, in which one marries and satisfies *kāma*, produces children, pursues *artha* (economic security) to support his family and aging parents; [Vānaprastha](#), the

retirement stage, when one gradually detaches from the world and spends time in religious practices and pilgrimages; finally, [Sannyāsa](#), the stage of [asceticism](#), when one renounces all worldly attachments, seeks union with the Divine and achieves [Moksha](#).

Hindu society too has traditionally been categorized into four classes, called *Varnas* (classes or professions);

- the [Brahmins](#): teachers and priests;
- the [Kshatriyas](#): warriors, nobles, and kings;
- the [Vaishyas](#): farmers, merchants, and businessmen; and
- the [Shudras](#): servants and labourers.

Scholars have long debated whether the caste system is an integral part of Hinduism and sanctioned by the scriptures. The Rigveda (10.90), contains passages that clearly sanction the *Varna* system but it also contains indications that the caste system is not an essential element of vedic religion. The other *Vedas*, have many references to the four fold division of society into *varnas* but permit each individual to choose his own profession as his astrological signs and talents point him to. The following verse from the Rig Veda is notable : "I am a bard, my father is a physician, my mother's job is to grind the corn." (Rig Veda 9.112.3) In the Vedic Era, there was also no prohibition against the *Shudras* listening to the *Vedas* or participating in religious rites, as happened in later times, particularly after *Manu* formulated his code of social ethics.

India's oppressive caste system and the large number of untouchables it has created over the centuries, is a clear contradiction of Shankara's philosophical postulate that all of creation is a manifestation of the Divine and that all mankind is one family. Its persistence is mainly due to Hinduism's great emphasis on liturgical purity and the fact that the untouchables have been performing the most despised social tasks. Many religious and social reformers since the Buddha have attempted to eliminate the caste system but it has endured nonetheless. During the long struggle for independence Gandhi and B.R.Ambedakar made strenuous efforts to end it. Due largely to their efforts, the practice of untouchability has been legally proscribed in India after her independence in August 1947 and many special benefits provided to this class of people in its Constitution. However the complete disappearance of this social evil is likely to take some more decades.

Hinduism is much more than a religion in the ordinary sense. It is also a great philosophical edifice, an all embracing social ethic and way of life and as it is so much concerned with all of creation and the incredible order (Rtam) in it can also be categorized as a Cosmology.

In the epilogue to his book on Hinduism, Nirad Choudhury writes : " In their quest for immortality the Hindus did not create a transcendental world in which human beings could have eternal life. They looked for indestructibility not just for themselves but for the whole cosmos and hit upon the idea that behind all the manifested phenomena which were subject to change and therefore to destruction, there existed consubstantial with them and yet inaccessible to their senses, an unmanifested, attributeless, unchangeable and all pervasive element which was eternal and indestructible. They also formulated the corollary that phenomena were only particular parts of a general and absolute reality. This idea, arrived at so early in the history of human civilization, is akin to that which has been discovered by modern physics. This must be regarded as the highest achievement of the Hindu way of knowledge, so far as it made true knowledge its aim"

BUDDHISM

Buddhism, is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, known as the Buddha, or Enlightened One. He was born in 563BC in Kapilavastu (near the present India-Nepal border), as the son of the ruler of a small kingdom in eastern India. At his birth the court astrologers foretold he would become either the ruler of an empire or a great sage. His father wanting to prevent the latter contingency, reared him in sheltered luxury. However at the age of 29, having seen a funeral procession, he was struck by the emptiness of his life of luxury. He gave up his royal home and family life and embarked on a quest for real happiness. In the first few years he practiced extreme asceticism, then gave it up to adopt the middle path between the extremities of self-denial and indulgence. Sitting under a peepal tree, he meditated continuously for seven years until he finally attained enlightenment. He then began to preach. His first sermon was at the Deer Park in Sanchi. The core of the Buddha's teaching was the **Four Noble Truths**.

- (1) The first noble Truth is that all Life is impermanent (anitya) and permeated with suffering (Dukha) of various types.

- (2) The second noble Truth is that suffering is caused by attachments and craving (Trishna).
- (3) The third noble truth is that attachments and craving result in unhappiness and suffering by enmeshing the individual self in the endless cycle of birth and rebirth (samsara). These can be ended and release obtained from 'samsara' by giving up 'trishna', acknowledging 'anitya', and striving for 'nirvana'(liberation)
- (4) The fourth noble Truth is the eight fold path to 'nirvana' which is : right sight, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right training, right awareness, right effort and right contemplation. When through this noble eightfold path attachments, craving and rebirth are ended 'Nirvana' is achieved.



The Buddha denied the validity of the Vedic scriptures, and the sacrificial cults based on them, as also the authority of the Brahmin priesthood. He rejected the caste system and opened his monastic order he set up to members of all castes as also to women. He gave a dynamic new interpretation to the traditional Hindu concepts of Maya, Karma, and Nirvana and made them the basis of his new teaching which focused on the human condition rather than speculation on the nature and attributes of the Divine.

Buddha held that humans were made up of five elements (skandhas): the material body, feelings, perceptions, karmic tendencies, and

consciousness. An individual is only a temporary combination of these elements, which are subject to continual change. None of these elements, individually or in combination, are permanent. There is no indestructible soul (anatman). The belief that such a soul exists is the prime cause of attachments, craving and suffering. In spite of 'anatman' rebirth takes place because of 'pratityasamutpada' (**dependent origination**). 'Karma' (The demerits of a previous life) creates the combination of elements for the next life, which in turn incline the mind and senses towards further attachments and craving, which in their turn trigger further rebirths. What is posited is a chain of continuous existences rather than a soul that is constantly reborn—in effect rebirth without transmigration. The karmic process (Good deeds earning reward and evil deeds securing punishments) operates through a natural moral law ('Dharmakaya') rather than through a system of Divine Justice. Depending on one's karma one can be reborn as a human, an animal, a hungry ghost, a devil, or even a divine being.

The ultimate goal of the Buddhist path is release from the cycle of births and rebirths. To achieve this goal is to attain nirvana, an enlightened state in which the fires of greed, hatred, and ignorance have been quenched. It is not total annihilation but a state of consciousness beyond definition. After attaining nirvana, the enlightened individual may continue his earthly life, burning off any remnant karma until a state of final nirvana (parinirvana) is attained at the moment of death. In theory, the goal of nirvana is attainable by anyone. However, in early Buddhism it was a goal achievable only for monastic members and an enlightened individual was known as an arhat (a noble one). For those unable to pursue the ultimate goal, the proximate goal of better rebirth through improved karma is an option. In Theravada Buddhism this lesser goal is pursued by lay Buddhists in the hope that it will eventually lead to a life in which they will finally achieve enlightenment as members of the *sangha*. The ethic that leads to better rebirth is centred on fulfilling one's moral duties as member of a family or society. It involves acts of charity, especially support of the *sangha*, as well as observance of the five precepts that constitute the basic moral code of Buddhism, viz strict avoidance of killing, stealing, telling lies, sexual misconduct and use of intoxicants.

As he lay on his death bed, his disciples' requested him to appoint a successor. He refused and advised them to work out their own salvation with diligence. Since there was no appointed successor, and the Buddha's

teaching existed only in oral traditions, the need accurately state and codify them soon became apparent. A 'Great Council' was therefore held at Rajgir shortly after the Buddha's death. Presided over by a monk named Mahakasyapa, it recalled and agreed upon the Buddha's actual teachings, as also on tenets of monastic discipline. About a century later, a second Great Council was held at Vaisali. Its dealt with questionable monastic practices— use of money, drinking of palm wine etc, which the council declared unacceptable and proscribed.



Emperor Ashoka

A third Great Council was held at Pataliputra (present-day Patna) at the instance of Emperor Ashoka in the 3rd century BC. Chaired by the monk Moggaliputta Tissa, it dealt with the heresies that had sprouted, and the infiltration of fake monks into the monastic order. The heresies were firmly rejected those who held them expelled. The council also recompiled the Buddhist scriptures in three parts (Tripitaka), the doctrine (dhamma), monastic discipline (vinaya), philosophy (abhidharma). Another important outcome of this Great Council was the decision to send Buddhist missionaries to various countries.

The Dhamma, also known as Sutra Pitaka is primarily composed of Buddha's dialogues with his disciples. Among these the Jatakas, stories of Buddha's former lives and the Dhammapada (Moral and mind control utterances) are widely known. The Vinaya Pitaka consists of 225 rules governing the conduct of Buddhist monks and nuns. The Abhidharma Pitaka consists of seven separate works dealing with psychological phenomena and metaphysical analysis. The Tripitaka canon was subsequently translated into foreign languages including Chinese and Tibetan.

A fourth Great Council, was held at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka about AD 100.



Anuradhapura

By now Buddhism has split into two main schools - Theravada and Mahayana. Monks of both schools attended this Council and an attempt was made to unify the two schools. However, the attempt failed and the two schools followed their separate paths even thereafter.

The Theravada School holds that the Tripitaka is the accurate and authentic compilation of the Buddha's teachings. Mahayana Buddhists have not limited themselves only to these teachings. Various scriptures retrospectively attributed to the Buddha have been accepted as authoritative by Mahayana sects. Important among them are the **Saddharmapundarika Sutra** (Lotus of the Great Law Sutra, also known as Lotus Sutra), Vimalakirti Sutra, **Avatamsaka Sutra** (Garland Sutra), Lankavatara Sutra (Lanka incarnation Sutra), and **Prajnaparamita** (Perfection of Wisdom) a compilation of aphorisms attributed to the Buddha.

Another important difference between the Theravada and Mahayana Schools is that whereas the former honours the Buddha as the perfectly enlightened human teacher, the latter consider him an incarnation of the transcendental Buddha who descended on earth for the benefit of humankind. This difference originally appeared within the Theravada School between the conservative Sthaviras (Theravada in Pali) and the Mahasanghikas. The Mahayana School emerged out of the latter.

The formative years of the Mahayana School was 2nd century BC - 1st century AD. The first exponent of the Mahayana doctrine was

Ashwagosha, who lived in the first century AD and is revered as one of the greatest Buddhist philosophers. His treatise entitled 'Awakening of Faith' has come to have the same importance in Mahayana Buddhism as the 'Bhagwat Gita' has in Hinduism. The concept of the historical Buddha being an incarnation of the Eternal Buddha evolved gradually into the doctrine of his threefold nature or "bodies" (trikaya) - the body of essence, the body of communal bliss, and the body of transformation. The first represents the intrinsic nature of the Buddha, formless, unchanging, absolute and referred to as "pure consciousness", "absolute void", or "universal essence". The body of essence manifests itself in its heavenly form as the body of communal bliss, wherein the Buddha sits in splendour, preaching to the divinities in heaven. The third body is Him in human form, which he has taken innumerable times to teach and liberate mankind at various stages of its evolution. This Trikaya concept, absent in Theravada, led to the development of a significant heavenly and devotional strand in Mahayana.

Another important concept in Mahayana is that of the bodhisattva, an enlightenment being, who having attained enlightenment refrains from parinirvana in order to ensure the liberation of others. Mahayana holds the bodhisattva superior to the arhat because the former has concern others while the latter is focussed only his own liberation. Bodhisattvas Maitreya, who represents Buddha's loving-kindness, and Avalokitesvara (Kuan-yin) who represents his compassion, are widely revered by Mahayanists.



A Chinese sculpture of Maitreya

In the 7th century AD, an esoteric new school known as Vajrayana (Diamond vehicle) similar to Hindu Tantrism emerged. It differs from Mahayana in its strong emphasis on ritual, magic, and special forms of meditation. Its initiation ceremonies involve entry into a mandala, a mystic circle or symbolic map of the spiritual universe. Its meditational forms make extensive use of mudras (ritual gestures) and mantras (sacred formula). Vajrayana became the dominant form of Buddhism in Tibet and was transmitted to Japan through China, where it still prevails as the Shingon sect.

In the present day world the two dominant schools of Buddhism are still the Theravada (the Way of the Elders) and **Mahayana**, the Great Vehicle. Mahayanists often refer to Theravada using the derogatory term Hinayana (the Lesser Vehicle). However Theravada Buddhism continues to be dominant in the "southern countries" of Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Burma, and Laos. Mahayana is well established in Tibet, China, Mongolia, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Taiwan, and Nepal. The total number of Buddhists in the world today is difficult to estimate as people can and do practice Buddhism without being formally converted to it. Besides, in countries like China, Tibet, Vietnam and North Korea which have been under Communist

rule, the extent to which Buddhism is still practiced is difficult to assess. However, what is clear is that its influence and the number of its devotees has grown considerably in recent years particularly in the USA, Europe, Australia, Latin America and India. An approximate estimate of fervent Buddhists in the world today is 300 million with an approximately equal number of those nominally so.

JAINISM

Jainism is the third great classical religion of India after **Hinduism** and **Buddhism**. Like the latter it was a protest against Vedic ritual, Brahmin orthodoxy, animal sacrifices and the caste system. **Mahavira** (599-527 BC), though generally considered the founder of Jainism is actually held in orthodox belief to be the 24th, and the most recent in a series of tirthankaras ("fordmakers") going back through Parshva (the 23rd) to Rishabha, the originator of human culture. Other Tirthankars will come hereafter but the next one will arrive only after 81,500 years. The other epithet for them is *jina* ("spiritual conqueror") and it is from this that Jainism derives its name,



MAHAVIRA

Jainism maintains that all sentient beings, however minute, have (*jiva*) souls. Inanimate matter is classified as *ajiva*. Consciousness is the Jiva's defining characteristic but this is clouded by the dross of **karma**. Any *himsa* (injury) done to other *jiva*, increases this karma and the likelihood that the *jiva* will be reborn in a worse situation than the present one. Hence for the Jains the prime maxim is "Ahimsa paramo Dharma" (Non-violence is the highest duty)

There are many worlds, earthly and demon, into which a jiva can be reborn. This cycle of rebirth will continue until all the accumulated karma is removed. Thereafter the jiva is liberated and remains for eternity in a state of blissful omniscience like the jinas.

Because of the belief that all sentient beings have jive and any injury to them has karma consequences all Jains are strictly vegetarian, so strict in fact that they will not even eat any vegetables that grow under the earth as extracting them would injure earthworms, beetles etc that are found there. Vegetarianism in India began with the advent of Jainism.

Fasting plays a key role in among Jains and one of the recommended ways of achieving "moksha", both for ascetics and people is *sallekhana* (death by fasting) which is often undertaken towards the end of their lives.

Jain ascetics are required to travel on foot, remaining for no more than a few nights in any one place. They wander in small groups under the direction of senior monks, relying on lay people to provide them with food and water. In return, these ascetics instruct them in Jain doctrine and austerities.

There are two major Jain sects, the Shvetambara (the white-clad) and the Digambara (the sky-clad). Their names indicate the main doctrinal difference between them. Whether the rule of non attachment and renunciation for monks includes clothes or not. The Digambara monks insist that it does and therefore go naked; the Shvetambara monks maintain it does not but wear only white robes.

The question of nudity affected temple worship as well, as tirthankara images in Shvetambara temples were robed, thus preventing Digambaras, monks and lay people, to worship there.

An easy way in which prosperous Jains can gain spiritual merit is to build temples and install images therein. Because of this many Jain temples have been built in various parts of India and some of them, like those at Mount Abu in Rajasthan and Mount Shatrunjaya in Gujarat, are among the most beautiful of all its places of worship. The colossal rock-hewn statue of Bahubali (the son of the first tirthankara) at Shravana Belgola in Karnataka is probably the single best-known Jaina monument anywhere in the world. It is also the object of an impressive head-anointing ceremony,

held every 12th year, which attracts thousands of Jain devotees from both sects.



DILWARA JAIN TEMPLE AT MOUNT ABU

Apart from their architectural and sculptural heritage, the Jains have also produced considerable of literature, both spiritual and secular richly illustrated manuscripts on palm leaves, paper and cloth and paper. Much of this is preserved in their temple libraries (*bhandara*) but some of it is also in national museums and private collections.



BIRTH OF MAHAVIRA



GOMATESHWARA AT SHRAVANABELGOLA

Jain values and knowledge about their art and culture are being disseminated today through a wide variety of institutions, from animal and insect hospitals to publishing houses, universities and research institutions.

Although the Jain community is small compared to most other religious communities in India it is highly influential in business and economic spheres. The number of Jains in India today is only about four million. And they are mainly in the states of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Karnataka and the big cities of Calcutta, Ahmedabad and Bombay. Most of them are merchants, jewellers or businessmen but some are also in the professions and even agriculture. Though the Jains had a **caste** structure broadly akin to Hinduism in the past, today it is economic strength and wealth which mainly determines social status among them.

The second half of the 20th century has seen the first detectable migration of Jains from the Indian subcontinent. They have now established small but flourishing communities throughout the world, and the first Jain temple in Europe with consecrated images was opened in Leicester in 1988.

Sikhism

Sikhism, the youngest of India's religions, is strictly [monotheistic](#) and based on the teachings of [Guru Nanak](#) and nine successive Sikh Gurus (Teachers) who lived between the years 1469 - 1708. It derives its name from the Sanskrit word "seekh" which means to learn. It was actually born in 1499, when Guru Nanak first preached his Gospel of *Vāhigurū*, the non-anthropomorphic Universal God and the path to union with Him through dedication to Truth, recitation of his name and submission to His Will. According to Nanak: "Realisation of Truth is higher than all else. Higher still is truthful living". He averred that God is omnipresent ([sarav viāpak](#)) and visible everywhere to the spiritually awakened who are able to see with "the inward eye".

Sikhism's distinctive feature is its great reverence for the *Gurū Granth Sāhib*, the sacred book containing the writings and hymns of its ten Gurus as also the hymns of numerous Hindu and Muslim saints such as Kabir, Namdev, Ravidas and [Sheikh Farid](#). The Sikhs believe the spirit of [Nanak](#) has passed from one guru to the next, " just as the light of one lamp, which lights another and does not diminish ".

The Granth begins with the [Mūl Mantra](#), an iconic verse created by Nanak, which in English translation reads "One Universal Creator God, The Name Is Truth, Creative Being Personified, No Fear, No Hatred, Image Of The Timeless One, Beyond Birth, Self Existent, By Guru's Grace "

All text within the Granth is known as [gurbānī](#). Gurbānī, according to Nanak, was revealed by God directly, and the authors wrote it down for the followers. The language used in the Granth is known as [Sant Bhānā](#), an admixture of Punjabi and [Hindi](#) which was used extensively across medieval northern India by mystic saints. The Granth contains over 5000 [śabads](#), or hymns, which can be set to any musical rhythm or beat for easy popular rendition.

Worship in a gurdwara consists mainly of singing of passages from the Guru Granth. Devotees will enter the temple, touch the ground with their foreheads, and make an offering. The recitation of the eighteenth century [ardās](#) which recalls past sufferings and glories of the community and invoking divine blessings for all humanity is also customary.



A rare late 19th century Tanjore painting depicting the ten Sikh Gurus



Gurū Granth Sāhib folio with Mūl Mantra.

It was the fifth guru Arjan Dev, who ascended the sacred throne in 1581 who built the [Harimandir Sahib](#) (th "Golden Temple"). In 1606, for refusing to make changes to the Granth and supporting an unsuccessful contender to the Moghul throne, he was tortured and killed by Emperor Jahangir.



[Harimandir Sahib](#), (Golden Temple) is the most sacred Sikh shrine.

Sikhism rejects asceticism as a means to attain salvation and focuses instead on the duties of the householder. It holds that [ego](#), [anger](#), [greed](#),

[attachment](#) and [lust](#)— the *Five Evils*— are the prime causes for separation from God and must be safeguarded against through intensive and relentless self discipline and constant recitation of his name, which is Truth.

Sikhism also rejects all caste, creed and gender discrimination and emphasizes equality of all humans. Their temples (Gurdwaras) are open to everyone. In 1555, the third guru Amar Das prohibited purdah and sati (self immolation of a wife on the death of her husband) and had 52 women trained as preachers to propagate the religion. The practice of "Langar" (the common meal at the gurdwaras) was also initiated and made obligatory by him for everyone who came to meet him. Even [Emperor Akbar](#), in 1567, sat with common people and had the Langar before meeting the Guru.

Another distinctive injunction of Sikhism is 'kirat karō' , the balancing of work, worship, and charity, and defence of fellow human beings. A good example of the heroic observance of this is the 9th Guru [Tegh Bahadur](#) who defended the Kashmiri Pandits who were being forced to convert to Islam by Emperor Aurangzeb and was executed for it. Because of the continuing persecution of the Sikh and Hindu communities by Aurangzeb Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, founded the Khalsa in 1699. It combined religious objectives and practices with defensive and military duties. Because of this Aurangzeb first had four of his sons executed and then Guru Gobind Singh himself in October 1708.

Orthodox [Sikhs](#), even today, will always have the [Five Ks](#) (known as *pañj kakkē*) which the tenth guru, Gobind Singh had ordained. The 5 items are: [kēs](#) (uncut hair), [kanghā](#) (small comb), [kadā](#) (circular iron bracelet), [kirpān](#) (ceremonial short sword), and [kacchā](#) (special undergarment). These Five Ks are the outward manifestations of their distinctive spiritual and physical persona.



A kadā, kanghā and kirpān.

There are about 30 million Sikhs today, making them the fourth largest religious community in the world. About 75% are in the Punjab, 20% in the rest of India and neighbouring countries, and about 2 million in sizable communities in Canada, USA, and United Kingdom and smaller ones in Western Europe, East Africa, West & South East Asia, Australia, New Zealand and Fiji. Notwithstanding the many far flung countries in which they live most of them still maintain their religious and cultural traditions and social cohesion.

The five foreign religions that came into India and blossomed here were Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Zoroastrianism and Bahá'ism.

Judaism

The oldest of the four Jewish groups that came to India is said to have arrived in 562 BC after emancipation from their Babylonian captivity by Cyrus the Great. The next group is said to have come in 70 AD after the Romans destroyed their Temple in Jerusalem. The third group came after their expulsion from Spain in 1492 AD and became of the core of the long established Jewish community of Cochin. The synagogue they built there and subsequently rebuilt more than once is the oldest synagogue in India and a protected national heritage site.



The [Paradesi Synagogue](#) in [Kochi](#)

The most recent arrivals were the "Baghdadi Jews", who though referred to by that name were not all from Baghdad but also from Syria, Yemen and Iran. They came in the late 18th century after the European Countries set up trading posts in India. Most of those in the three earlier groups intermarried with the locals and got assimilated. However the fourth group prospered sufficiently to leave a permanent mark by setting up the Knesset Eliyahu synagogue and contributing to the building of Bombay's Sasoon docks and Sasoon Public Library, both of which are named after David Sasoon.



Knesset Eliyahu the 150 year old Jewish Synagogue in Mumbai

Besides Mumbai, these Jews settled in other parts of India particularly Calcutta where they became prominent in the jute and tea trades. After India's independence some of them also rose to high positions in the army

and National Governance. Lt-Gen J. F. R. Jacob PVSM was first appointed as Governor of Goa and then subsequently of Punjab.

However, the majority of Indian Jews "made aliyah" (migrated) to Israel after its creation in 1948. A total of 75,000 Indian Jews now live in that country. Of these 8000 are from Cochin where those remaining now are only 53 and most of them are old.

Christianity in India

According to hallowed Indian Christian tradition Saint Thomas, one of the twelve Apostles of Christ landed at Kodungalloor (Muziris), now known as Kochi, in 52 A.D. His inspired preaching resulted in setting up of Christian communities Kodungalloor, Niranam, Kollam, Chayal, Kottakkavu, Kokkamangalam and Palayoor. The churches at these places still claim to have been set up by him. It is believed that he subsequently moved to the area which is now Chennai and was martyred at Mylapur in 72 A.D. ST. Thomas Mount, on Chennai's outskirts, is revered as the site of his martyrdom and tomb.



Indian postal stamp depicting Saint Thomas

The early Christian churches had links with Chaldean and Antiochan churches. Because of this some Kerala Christian churches still follow the Syrian Othodox rite. Despite this, they have remained consistently Indian in their life styles and cultural traditions.

[French](#) missionary [Jordanus Catalani](#) arrived in [Surat](#) in 1320. After preaching in [Gujarat](#) he came to [Quilon](#) in 1323 and strove to revitalize the ancient Christianity there. He also converted others to Christianity. Subsequently a Bishop was sent to Quilon, entrusted with the spiritual welfare of Christians in [Calicut](#) , [Mangalore](#), [Thane](#) and [Broach](#). He brought a message of goodwill from the Pope to local rulers.

A few years after Vasco Da Gama arrived in India in 1498 Portugese missionaries came Cochin and subsequently to Goa. Since the St Thomas Christians were linked to the Antioch Patriarch and followed the Syriac rite, they sought to change this. The Papal bull *Romanus Pontifex* had entrusted the propagation of the Christian faith in Asia to them. In 1534 the first Padroado diocese was established in Goa. In 1557 Cochin was made a suffragan diocese of it. In 1585, the Goan inquisition (initiated in 1560) was extended to the Archdiocese of Angamaly and it was decreed that thereafter no Bishop could be appointed there by the Antioch Patriarch. Subsequently Portugese seminaries were set up in Kodungalloor, Vaippincotta and Kaduthuruthy and the *malpanate* system of learning (gurukula system) was terminated. A new dress code and study of Latin instead of Syriac were introduced. In 1598 many of the cultural practices of Saint Thomas Christians were proscribed.

The Saint Thomas Christians revolted against this cultural aggression and took the Coonan Cross Oath in 1653, whereby they swore that neither they nor their children would have any relations with the of Rome Catholic church. This was the first revolt by an Indian group against colonialists in India.

The Dutch ouster of the Portugese from Cochin in 1663 brought welcome relief to the Saint Thomas Christians. Portugese missionaries were expelled and links re-established with the Antioch Patriarch. The Dutch were only interested in trade and in building churches for their own people in India and did not attempt to bring about any changes in the religious practices of the St. Thomas Christians.

In [Goa](#) however, the Portugese effort to establish Latin rite Catholicism was carried on with vigour and was fully supported by the colonial adminstration with various adminstrative incentives and penalties. Francis Xavier's powerful preaching also helped substantially. Within a few decades most Goans had either become catholics or had fled from it. Even

some catholics, threatened with the inquisition for retaining their Indian culture, fled Goa for Karwar, Bhatkal and Mangalore.



The [Sé Cathedral of Santa Catarina](#) in [Old Goa](#)

Modern-day Goa has a substantial [Roman Catholic](#) population. The undecayed body of Saint Francis Xavier, enclosed in a glass coffin, at the [Basilica of Bom Jesus](#) in [Goa](#).

Mangalore is the other west coast city with a large Christian community. It traces its Christianity back to the French Dominican friar Jordanus Catalani but most of its present day Catholics are actually descendants of Catholics who fled Goa for fear of the inquisition. The St. Aloysius Chapel in Mangalore resembles the Sistine Chapel in Rome and is one of the most beautiful churches in India.



The [St Aloysius Chapel](#) in [Mangalore](#)

With the acquisition of Indian territories by the East India Company in 1757 and thereafter, Protestant missionaries began to arrive in India. In 1793, William Carey, an English Baptist Minister set up Serampore College and worked there until his death in 1834. He translated the Bible into Bengali.

Ahmednagar district in Maharashtra has more Protestant Christians than Catholics. They are referred to as [Marathi](#) Christians.

Several American Baptist missionaries went to India's Northeastern area in the late 19th century. Dr. E. W. Clark first went to live in a Naga village in 1876; Rev. and Mrs. A.F. Merrill went there in 1928, and Rev. and Mrs. M.J. Chance did so in 1950. Today, the heaviest concentrations of Christians in India are in the Northeast rather than in Goa or Mangalore. The total number of Christians in India as per Census in 2001 was 24,080,016 or 2.34% of the population. The majority of them are Roman Catholics with 17.3 million, including 408,725 of the Syro-Malankara Church and 3,674,115 of the Syro-Malabar Church.

The largest Protestant denomination in the country is the Church of South India, a union since 1947 of Presbyterian, Reformed, Congregational, Methodist, and Anglican congregations with approximately 3.8 million members. A similar Church of North India had 1.25 million members. The Malankara Jacobite Syrian Church has 1.2 million members.

The Christian contribution to India is mainly through their educational and social services institutions. Mother Theresa's extensive network of homes for the destitute, mentally retarded, alcoholics and AIDS patients, within India and over 100 countries abroad, is internationally renowned.

ISLAM IN INDIA

There are many devout Indian Muslims who believe that it was Malik Ibn Dinar and 20 of his companions, who were among the first disciples of Prophet Muhammad, who brought Islam to India. They are said to have landed in [Kodungallur](#) in [Kerala](#) and established the first mosque there in 629 AD. This would make it the first mosque after the sacred mosque in Medina. 10 other mosques are said to have been subsequently built at Kollam, Chaliyam, Pantalayini Kollam, Quilandi, Madayi, Dharmadam, Kasaragode and Thengapattanam. There are others who think that India's first contact with

Islam was established in the early 8th century through Arab traders who lived in some port cities of Kerala. The [Mappilas](#), who were married to these Arab traders could have been the first Indian converts to Islam.

Once this early contact was established between Islam and India important Indian books began to be translated into Arabic particularly after the Caliphate came to Baghdad in 750AD. In his book 'Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance' George Saliba writes "some major Sanskrit texts began to be translated during the reign of the second [Abbasid caliph](#) al-Mansur [754-775], if not before; some texts on logic even before that, and it has been generally accepted that Persian and Sanskrit texts were indeed the first to be translated." Among the books subsequently translated into Arabic and Persian were some of India's spiritual classics like the Bhagwat Gita, Ramayana and Mahabharata

[Sufis](#) (Islamic mystics) played an important role in Islam's spread in India. [Sufism](#) is a mystical path ([tarika](#)) as distinct from the legalistic path of the [sharia](#). A Sufi attains a direct oneness with God and can thus become a Pir (living saint) who may take on disciples ([murids](#)) and set up a spiritual lineage that can last for generations. Orders of Sufis became important in India from the thirteenth century onwards following the arrival of Moinuddin Chishti at the end of the 12th century, from Afghanistan. He settled in Ajmer, Rajasthan, and attracted large numbers of converts to Islam because of his great saintliness and spirituality. His Chishtiyya order became the most influential Sufi lineage in India which subsequently produced the great Pir of the Mughal period. Sheik Salim Chisti, one of whose devotees was the Moghul Emperor Akbar. Other renowned Sufi Pirs of India are Shaikh Farid-ud-Din Ganj-i-Shakar (Baba Farid), Nizam-ud-din Auliya, Amir Khusro, and Sarkar Sabir Pak. Sufi Islam thus spread to various parts of India and created a much spiritual literature in regional languages. this embedded Islamic thought deep into Indian South Asian traditions and also spread South East Asian countries including Indonesia. Among the many who were attracted to Sufi Islam were lowly artisans and untouchables. One of these was Kabir, a lowly weaver, who became one of India's most renowned mystic poets. Two stanzas of his poetry are given hereunder :

"There is nothing but water at the holy bathing places;
I know they are useless for I have bathed in them.

The idols are all lifeless, they cannot speak;
 I know for I have cried aloud to them.
 The Purana and the Koran are mere words;
 Lifting up the curtain I have seen.
 Kabir gives utterance to the words of experience;
 and he knows very well that all other things are untrue.

I laugh when I hear that the fish in the water is thirsty,
 You do not see that the real is in your home,
 and you wander from forest to forest listlessly.
 Here is the Truth! Go where you will, to Benares or to Mathura;
 If you do not find your soul, the world is unreal to you."

Sufism achieved its greatest influence in India during Emperor Akbar's reign. It is said he first learnt of Moinuddin Chisti from a qawwali sung in praise of him at his Agra court. He thereafter performed a pilgrimage to this saint's tomb in 1562 after which he had a road built from Agra to Ajmer. In 1579 he rebuilt the main shrine at Ajmer with a gilded dome. By then he had become a great devotee of Salim Chisti, (a direct descendant of Moinuddin Chisti) as, after receiving his blessing, his wife produced a son. He named Salim in honour of the Sufi saint. (He succeeded Akbar in 1604 as Emperor Jahangir) When Salim Chisti died Akbar built a white marble masaleum for him in at Fatehpur Sikri. It still stands and is now an important tourist attraction. All of Akbar's successors, including Aurangzeb had great reverence for the Sufi saints particularly Moinuddin Chisti.

It was from India that Sufi Islam spread to Indonesia and other countries of South East Asia. This accounts for the tolerant and non violent character of Islam in these countries.

The great contribution of Sufism to India and of its very tolerant and enlightened version of Islam is very well presented in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's address to the 2016 World Sufi Conference in New Delhi. Its concluding paras are as under :

"Sufism became the face of Islam in India, even as it remained deeply rooted in the Holy Quran, and Hadis.

Sufism blossomed in India's openness and pluralism. It engaged with her spiritual tradition, and evolved its own Indian ethos. And, it helped shape a distinct Islamic heritage of India.

We see this heritage in the fields of art, architecture and culture that is part of the fabric of our nation and our collective daily lives. We see it in the spiritual and intellectual tradition of India.

It helped strengthen the inclusive culture that is our great nation's immense contribution to the cultural tapestry of this world."

With approximately 150 million Muslims (13.4% of its population) India has the third largest Muslim population in the world. Over two-thirds of them belong to the Sunni Barelwi School of Islam which incorporates many local cultural features like dargah visits, Sufi and folk music, poetry and mysticism. Manzar-e-Islam Bareilly and [Al Jamiatul Ashrafia](#) are most famous Seminaries of Barelwi Muslims. Darul-Uloom Deoband is the most influential Deobandi seminary in India.



DARUL ULOOM SEMINARY AT DEOBAND

Islam's greatest contribution to India is in the field of art and architecture. In both it brought about a harmonic blend of Indian and Islamic traditions. In Moghul miniature painting Krishna and Radha were often portrayed.



In the field of architecture, innumerable mosques, Dargahs, tombs, madrasas, seminaries are found all over India. Almost all of them have verses from the Holy Quran inscribed in them in semi precious stones or in marble and stone carving on walls, ceilings, pillars and domes.



English: [Salim Chishti's Tomb](#) at [Fatehpur Sikri](#), near [Agra](#)



The Jama Masjid in New Delhi



The Jama Masjid in Lucknow.

ZORASTRIANISM IN INDIA

Zoroastrianism, also known as Mazdaism as its name for God was Ahura Mazda, is a strictly monotheistic religion. Ahura Mazda is held to be the beginning and the end, the creator of everything which can and cannot be seen, the Eternal, the Pure and the only Truth. His moral code is succinctly summed up as "Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds" (Pendar-e Nik, Gofar-e Nik, Kerdar-e Nik in the present day Persian)

The origin of this religion is ascribed to the prophet Zarathushtra, who is known in the West as Zoroaster. It is believed it was he who composed the Gathas (poetic verses in Gathic Avestan) which form the content of the sacred books. Many of these books were lost when Alexander destroyed Persepolis in 330 BC.

Zoroastrianism was the state religion of Sassanid Persia as it was of the preceding Median, Achaemenid and Parthian eras.

When the the Sassanid dynasty was overthrown and Iran conquered by Muslim Arabs in 651AD, many Zoroastrian shrines were destroyed and practice of this religion was prohibited, Many Zoroastrians their fled their country and sought refuge in India. Jadav Rana, the Hindu king of Sanjan (the modern-day state of Gujarat) permitted them to settle in his kingdom provided "like sugar sweetens milk without curdling it" they lived peacefully and harmoniously with the rest of his subjects. As most of these people had come from Paras in Iran they came to be known as Parsees. The Parsi Zoroastrians of India, most of whom are now in Mumbai and other big cities, still speak Gujarati, even though they are more fluent in English .

Though small in number (only 69,000 in 2008) they have contributed greatly to India in the fields of scientific research, aviation, power generation, hotels and a host of industries. Zubin Mehta, a staunch Zoroastrian, is the internationally renowned.



PARSI FIRE TEMPLE IN MUMBAI



SACRED FIRE IN A PARSI TEMPLE

BAHAISM IN INDIA

The Bahai Faith originated in Iran when Bahauallah revealed himself as the "Promised One" in 1863. He dispatched one of his favourite disciples Jamal Effendi to India in 1875, to spread his teachings. The estimated number of Bahai's in India today are 2.5 million Bahais.

Bahais believe that throughout history the Creator has educated humanity through a series of Divine Manifestations. These Manifestations include: Krishna, Buddha, Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Jesus and Muhammad. They believe that in the present age, God has revealed Himself through Bahauallah, whose name means 'The Glory of God'. He is revered as a Prophet.

The three cardinal moral principles for Bahais are : oneness of mankind, oneness of God and oneness of religion. They strive for removal of caste, creed, religion, sex, colour, race and language divisions, as also superstitions and rituals of all kinds. They advocate universal education and the inculcation of a scientific outlook among people.

It is obligatory for Bahais to pray and meditate on the Words of God every day. There are prayers for all occasions and these can be offered individually or collectively. The Bahais pray to the one true God, the Creator of the universe. The act of praying is held to be '*a conversation with God*'.

The Bahai House of Worship at New Delhi, one of only seven such in the world, is popularly known as the Lotus Temple and has become an iconic landmark of Delhi. It was designed by the young Canadian architect of Iranian descent, Mr. Fariburz Sabha and seeks to resemble a lotus in bloom in the center of a pond. Like all Bahai Houses of Worship, it has nine entrances leading to a central point to indicate that all religions of the world lead to the same Divine destination. It has no clergy, no idols, no pictures, no sermons, no rituals. It is essentially a place for communication between man and his Creator.



THE BAHAI TEMPLE IN NEW DELHI

As India has always been a country where various religions, philosophies and ways of living have come together, co-existed and sought to harmonize the universal truths each of them embodies, Bahaim, the most recent of the

religions to come India, is a very welcome addition to its rich spiritual heritage and in its fundamentals a good epitome of it.

I shall conclude by quoting the concluding paras of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's above mentioned address to the 2016 World Sufi Conference at New Delhi :

"Let us be inspired by the message of Hazrat Moinuddin Chishti, With your spiritual light, dissolve the clouds of discord and war and spread goodwill, peace, and harmony among the people.

Let us remember the infinite humanism in Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi's words, "Contain all human faces in your own, without any judgment of them."

Let us also reaffirm the enduring message of Ahimsa of Lord Buddha and Mahavira.

Let us also live the sermon of Bible that calls us to do good, seek peace and pursue it.

And, oneness in Kabir's observation that a river and its waves are one. And, Guru Nanak Devji's prayer that Lord, may everyone in the world prosper and be in peace.

Let us be inspired by Swami Vivekananda's appeal against divisions and for all religions to hold the banner of harmony, not of dispute.

And, from this forum, in this land of Gandhi, And, of timeless prayers that always end with invocation of Om Shanti; Shanti; Shanti: Peace, Peace, Peace,; Peace within and in the world.

Let us, send a message to the world:

- A melody of harmony and humanity
- The embrace of diversity, the spirit of oneness
- Of service with compassion and generosity,
- A resolve against terrorism, a rejection of extremism
- And, a determination to advance peace

Let us challenge the forces of violence with the kindness of our love and universal human values and restore the light of hope and turn this world into a garden of peace."

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