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[We are starting series of articles describing Hinduism [Hindu Dharma] from this issue. We hope they will prove useful to our readers, especially youngsters in understanding important aspects of the Hindu Dharma. - Editor] February 2008

Hindu Dharma: 1 - Basic Foundation

Bhupendra Ratanji Hajratwala, Ph.D. - Pleasanton, California, USA

Our Hindu dharma is one of the oldest surviving and yet a vibrant and a major world religion. If anyone should know the basics of our religion, it has to be those of us who are Hindus.

Like a house which stands on four pillars, the Hindu dharma has four major pillars known as canons. They are: 1. Dharma, 2. Artha, 3. Kaama, and 4. Moksha. In the ancient times, when a student was sent to Ashram (a religious school or retreat) for his formal education, his education over a period of four years would normally follow the following pattern of introducing one major canon at a time.

Dharma: This Sanskrit word has two major meanings – religion and moral duty. Dharma foundation is laid down in our scriptures known as Shastras. All our shastras are written in Sanskrit language. The script used is known as Devnagari – meaning where the gods reside. One of the major languages of India, Hindi uses Devnagari as its script.

Hinduism is also known as polytheistic religion – meaning the one that believes in more than one deity. To understand this properly, it is equally important to learn about our gods and goddesses as well as all the other beings that we worship. To understand gods and other divine beings a brief introduction to Brahman, the cosmic essence is given at this stage. A student is explained and given an understanding of our prayer rituals as to how and why.

At this stage the student is introduced the concept of Dharma as a moral and ethical duty. First there is dharma to oneself and then there is dharma towards others. Just like a drowning man cannot help others, one should first consider dharma to oneself first. After that, the fundamental basis of dharma is based on consideration of others.

Artha: This Sanskrit word has multiple meanings – wealth, purpose, meaning, or goal. All these are in reference to ones social life or as it relates to household or professional duties. A student is asked to develop an understanding of artha in life as it relates to not only our immediate family but also in society that we live in as well as the community at large. An understanding of religious arthas such as vrats, japas, tapas, and yatras is usually made here.

This is where the concept of karma is commonly introduced. A student soon learns to distinguish between good karma and bad karma and slowly the emphasis is placed on doing all karmas as suddha karma (those without any expectation). Here discussion centers on the concept of incarnation and how karmas are responsible for our cycles of birth and death.

Kaama: Kaama means desires. In western literature it is often translated as sex – especially from the word Kamasutra. Since sex is one of the desires – the translation is correct but not completely. In this the Hinduism stands alone, that is desires including sex is incorporated into our religion as one of the cornerstone pillar. To understand this fully, a student is introduced the concept of Shiva linga worship and explained the role the Kaamadev (god of desires) plays in our lives. A student is also taught to look at Kaama as one of the five major obstacles in reaching the fourth cannon – that is Moksha. The five major obstacles are Kaama, Krodha (anger), Lobha (greed), Moha (longings for material things), and Maayaa (cosmic illusion). The often cited sixth obstacle is Ahamkaar or ego.

Moksha: This is the ultimate goal of all Hindus. Moksha means freedom from the eternal cycles of birth and death. A student is generally introduced to six major schools of Hindu philosophies. The three major paths (Maargs) to Moksha – Gyan Maarg (Path of knowledge); Karma Maarg (Path of action); and Bhakti Maarg (Path of devotion) are discussed here. Important to remember here is that a vast majority of Hindus will follow all three paths to a varying degree in the course of daily living.

The student is also introduced to many Hindu saints and seers as well as to various Hindu sects. Sects are those divisions within the religion that believe that the path they have chosen is the only correct one to lead one to Moksha. Although the intent of most sects is to lead the student to a path of moksha, there are many which are misguided. By the time the student has reached his final year of studies (most studies lasted about four years) he would be able to pick a path on his own or be able to identify the false ones.

In coming months, we will look at each of these topics in detail. Any comments or suggestions should be sent to the author via email at hajratwala@naha.us

March 2008

Hindu Dharma: 2 – Our Shastras

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Every major religion has its scriptures. Scriptures are religious books which the followers believe to be morally binding as to their behavior. Some religions have only one major book such as Christianity has Bible and Islam has Koran. Some have a few such as Buddhists and Jains. We have many. They number in thousands. The entire collection of these scriptures is known as Shastras. Our Shastras are all written in Sanskrit. If you read a Hindu Shastra in any other language than it is a translation of the original.

Our Shastras are divided into two major groups. 1. Shruties and 2. Smrities.

Shruties – meaning those that were heard (and then repeated to others) or revealed in this case by God. In the ancient times, the students learnt from their teachers by oral tradition – meaning that the teacher would say something and the students would hear it, repeat it, and remember it. The earliest of our texts include a set of books called Vedas. Vedas belong to the Shruti Shastra. There are four vedas. 1. Rg Veda. The word Rg means a verse or a stanza. 2. Saama Veda. The word Saama comes from Saaman meaning chanting. Thus this Veda was specially meant for routine chanting. 3. Yajur Veda. The word Yajur comes from Yajus – meaning sacrificial formulae. These are the rites and procedures used in various Yagnas. Thus Yajur Veda was mainly a prayer book for various yagnas. 4. Atharva Veda. Atharva comes from the word Atharvan, a type of priests that specialized in performing various fire rituals as it refers to various yagnas. Each Veda consists of many books. Each Veda is subdivided into four major parts. Each part consists of many books.

The rest of Hindu scriptures belong to Smriti Shastra. Smriti means that which was remembered. For example people conduct wedding or Gotra ceremony based on what they remember as to how it was done. There is a very large class of literature in this division all of which are known as auxillary scriptures. Puranas, Sutras, Smrities, Tantras, and Itihaasas belong to this group.

Puranas means ancient. Although it says ancient, they are relatively recent and written after Vedas. There are three major groups – named after three major gods, Brahma, Vishnu, and Mahesh or Shiva. Each set of Puranas extolls the virtues and supremacy of that particular deity, deals with how the universe was created, how to appease a particular deity by various vrats and japas. Puranas also connect the loose ends of major scriptural sagas. There are six books in each set. There are also equal numbers of corresponding minor puranas known as Upapurana. The best known of the purana is Shreemad Bhagavata Purana.

Sutras receive their name from Sutra – a raw cotton thread used in making flower garlands. The Sutras are cryptic shorthand notes on major scriptures. The best known of these is Brahma Sutra. The Sutra themselves are difficult to read or understand – thus they are almost always presented with commentaries by various people. The most widely read and popular commentaries are those by Shree Shankaracharya.

Smrities are a class of literature within the smriti shastras. They are usually related to the rules of conduct within a society. These rules are often far reaching and cover all aspects of daily living – from birth to death. The best known of these is Manu Smriti. Much of the marriage ceremony is conducted even today based on the rules set forth in these smrities.

Tantras are scriptures as it relates to the divine worship of Lord Shiva and his consort Parvati. They are also known as Agamaas. They are written with the idea of saving the mankind by spreading their message. Because tantric worship is often controversial with respect to its format, its spread has been very limited and usage is often confined.

Itihaasas are histories. To this class belongs the epic literature of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Ramayana is the story of Lord Rama as the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Mahabharata is the story of the great king Bharat (after whom India is named) and his descendents – most notable are the warring cousins Pandavaas and Kauravaas. They are histories because kings called Rama and Krishna and so on did exist. As to what extent the rest of the story is true is based on faith and not on archeological evidence. Included here is also Shreemad Bhagavad Geeta which is 100th chapter of the great epic Mahabharata.

Next month, we will look at Vedas in detail. Any comments or suggestions should be sent to the author via email at hajratwala@naha.us

April 2008

Hindu Dharma: 3 – The Vedas

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There are four vedas.

1. Rg Veda. The word Rg means a verse or a stanza.
2. Saama Veda. The word Saama comes from Saaman meaning chanting. Thus this Veda was specially meant for routine chanting.
3. Yajur Veda. The word Yajur comes from Yajus – meaning sacrificial formulae. These are the rites and procedures used in various Yagnas. Thus Yajur Veda was mainly a prayer book for various yagnas. The Yajur Veda is further divided into two: the Shukla Yajur Veda and the Krishna Yajur Veda. The rebellious disciple Yaajanavalkavya was ordered by his guru to unlearn all that he had been taught, and what he spat out became known as the Krishna (lit: black, or unclean) Yajur Veda. Later he was taught by Soorya, the sun god, and what he learned became the Shukla (lit: white) Yajur Veda.
4. Atharva Veda. Atharva comes from the word Atharvan, a type of priests that specialized in performing various fire rituals as it refers to various yagnas.

Each Veda consists of many books. Each Veda is subdivided into four major parts. Each part consists of many books.

All four Vedas are written by Rishi Vyas. Vyas was a common name in those days. To distinguish him from others he is commonly referred to as Veda Vyas. He wrote the vedas at the divine inspiration of Lord Brahma, the creator. Thus these are considered to be the words of God – and thus not subject to challenge. The authority of Vedas is not based on anything external, so they themselves are the authority. In reality, different Vedic books were written by many different seers who attached their names to their books. The words Aastik (those who believe) and Naastik (those who do not believe) refer to belief in Vedas being the word of God. Since Jainism and Buddhism do not believe in Vedas they are referred to as Naastik Dharmas.

The first division of each Veda is known as **Samhita** – which are a collection of mantras to various Vedic deities mainly Agni, Indra, Vayu (natural elements). Vedas are written as poems in the form of mantras. The great Gayatri mantra, which is actually a mantra for Lord Surya, comes from Rg Veda Samhita. There are no slokas in Vedas. Sloka is a form of mantra in a specified format of poetry. The sloka format is attributed to great Rishi Valmiki who authored Ramayana. When ordinary people say that they have studied vedas, usually they refer to reading any one of the samhita of that Veda. The first mantra and last mantra in Hinduism refers to the first and last mantra of the Rg Veda Samhita.

The second major division of Veda is **Brahmanas**. Each Veda has several brahmanas. They are a collection of mantras giving details of various yagna with specific duties and rules of conduct. The word Brahman in Sanskrit means a class of a priest or the universal essence which governs everything. The Brahmanas usually detail the significance of rituals cited in Samhitas.

The third major division of Veda is **Aranyakas**. Aranya means forest. In ancient times, the students went to study at their guru's residence. These gurus, mostly rishis or seers lived in the forest – in a place called ashrams or retreats. A student will be taught these secrets of yagna rituals after he has mastered the Samhitas and Brahmanas. By then he is residing in the forest. Thus, the knowledge acquired while he is in Aranya is said to be Aranyakas. The Aranyakas detail the significance of rituals cited in Brahmanas.

Because the first three divisions deal with the rituals related to various yagnas, collectively they are known as *Karma Kaanda*, dealing with karmas or deeds.

The last and important division of Veda is **Upanishads**. The fourth and final division of each Veda consists of excerpts from the previous three. This division is known as *jnana kaanda*, dealing with jnana, or spiritual knowledge, most of them dealing with the meaning of Om and relationship between Atman and Brahman. The Upanishads thus contain the theosophical aspects of religion. They are also called the Vedantas, literally the end of the Vedas, because traditionally they are taught to disciples towards the end of their Vedic studies.

The word Upanishad means 'to sit by the side of'. It is said that to understand Upanishads one needs to sit by the side of the guru and learn. Thus the great importance of guru was established. Various Vedas refer to 1180 Upanishads, though most of these have been lost with time. At present 108 Upanishads are generally accepted as extant, with ten of them considered major Upanishads. These ten are the ones commented upon by Shree Shankaracharya: Eeshaa, Kenaa, Kathaa, Prashna, Mundaka, Maandukya, Taittireeya, Aitareya, Chhandogya, and Brihadaraanyaka. The size of each Upanishad varies a great deal the smallest one being only a few mantras long to the largest one being several hundred pages.

Shreemad Bhagavad Geeta is often cited as the fifth Veda and is said to be an essence of all upanishadic literature. This is oversimplification at best. Geeta is not the fifth Veda.

When any mantra from Vedic literature is cited it is written with three numbers – the first number refers to a section or division; the second number refers to a chapter within that section and the third number refers to a mantra within that chapter.

Next month, we will discuss Upanishads. Any comments or suggestions should be sent to the author via email at hajratwala@naha.us

May 2008

Hindu Dharma: 4 – The Upanishads

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The last and most important division of Veda is Upanishads. The fourth and final division of each Veda consists of excerpts from the previous three divisions, namely Samhita, Brahmana, and Aranyaka. This last division is known as *jnana kaanda*, dealing with jnana, or spiritual knowledge, most of them dealing with the meaning of Om and the relationship between Atman and Brahman. The Upanishads thus contain the theosophical aspects of religion. They are also called the Vedantas, literally the end of the Vedas, because traditionally they are taught to disciples towards the end of their Vedic studies.

The word Upanishad means ‘to sit by the side of’. It is said that to understand the Upanishads, one needs to sit by the side of the guru and learn. Thus the great importance of guru was established. Various scriptures refer to 1180 Upanishads, though most of these have been lost with time. At present 108 Upanishads are generally accepted as extant, with ten of them considered major Upanishads. Upanishads are difficult to read and even harder to understand, thus most of these are written with an explanation of some great saint. The most valued of these explanations known as commentaries are those by Shree Adi Shankaracharya. Because he wrote commentaries on the ten Upanishads, they are generally considered the major Upanishads. Following is the brief notation on the ten major Upanishads showing the branch of Veda they belong to in bracket.

Eeshaa: (Shukla Yajur Veda) This short Upanishad of 18 verses is generally listed first by all Hindu writers. It is so named because it is considered to be ‘by the Lord – Eesha’. Its first line about pious living was made famous by Mahatma Gandhi. This Upanishad is known for its four mantras which are recited even today at every funeral rite as a prayer by the departing Atman to the Lord.

Kenaa: (Samaveda) It is so known because it begins with a question Kenaa – meaning by whom. This entire Upanishad is devoted to the knowledge of Brahman.

Kathaa: (Krishna Yajur Veda) This narrates a story (Kathaa) of a young boy named Nichiketa. The god of death, Yama, explains to the young boy about death and dying. Thus, portions of this Upanishad are often read aloud during funeral services.

Prashna: (Atharvaveda) It is so known because it contains six questions (Prashnas) by six students to a great sage named Pippalaada about Om, Atman, and Brahman.

Mundaka: (Atharvaveda) Mundaka means shaven head. In ancient times, when students went to an ashram for religious studies, they would shave their heads when they reached a certain stage in their studies. It is at this stage that they were generally taught this Upanishad which deals with more specialized knowledge of Brahman.

Maandukya: (Atharvaveda) It is the shortest of major Upanishads consisting of only 12 mantras. Maandukya is the jump that a frog makes from one lily pad to another. This is one of the most difficult Upanishads to understand and thus it is never written without a commentary. The most prized commentary known as Karika is by the Gaudapada who is Shree Adi Shankaracharya's guru's guru.

Taittiriya: (Krishna Yajur Veda) It is so known because when a young student named Yajnavalkya was asked to leave the ashram and leave all that he had learnt behind, he vomited all he had learnt on the ground. The distraught fellow students took the form of tittir birds and picked up all the knowledge that was spat out. Taittiriya Upanishad is a part of that knowledge. It is also known for its famous prayer used by teachers and students everyday throughout India before the beginning of any study.

Aitareya: (Rig Veda) This Upanishad is so known because the relationship between Atman and Brahman is explained by the great Rishi Aitareya.

Chhandogya: (Samaveda) This is one of the largest Upanishads. It explains the Om, Brahman, and Atman in a series of stories.

Brihadaraanyaka: (Shukla Yajur Veda) This is the largest of the major Upanishads. It is known for its several popular mantras (e.g. Lead me from darkness...) used even today routinely by devotees.

Of the two most valuable lessons in the Upanishads, **the first one** is about the meaning of the word Om. Although many different meanings of Om are given, the generally accepted one is that it consists of three letters a, u, and m, each in turn representing the Lord Brahma, Lord Vishnu, and Lord Shiva. Thus, by uttering the word Om, we are invoking all three gods at the same time or Brahman itself.

The second lesson is about the relationship between Atman and Brahman. The two differing points of view are: First, that Atman and Brahman are the same. People who follow this doctrine are known as Advaitas. The second is that Atman and Brahman are different. People who follow this doctrine are known as Dvaitas. There are four divisions in between, making a total of six different major philosophies in Hinduism.

Most people consider all of them to be correct – with an analogy of six blind men describing what an elephant looks like by touching the elephant at different places. Although all of them are correct in what they describe, none is able to totally present the entire picture of an elephant. Thus lies the strength of Hinduism where even seemingly diverse opinions can coexist without conflict.

Next month, we will discuss Puranas. Any comments or suggestions should be sent to the author via email at hajratwala@naha.us .

June 2008

Hindu Dharma: 5 – The Puranas

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The Puranas are important Hindu scriptures. Purana means ancient however these scriptures are not very old. All are written after Vedas and many are written after Ramayana and Mahabharata. All of them are attributed to Maharshi Vedavyasa. Their primary purpose is to explain and popularize the difficult to understand aspects of Vedas and Upanishads using short stories of divine avatars, rishis, kings, and devotees. Puranas have been responsible for the moral and ethical values of Hindus for centuries.

There are **eighteen major Puranas** known as Mahapuranas. They are divided into six each of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva Puranas. They are so divided because Purana belonging to each section extols the virtues and supremacy of that deity. The divisions are somewhat arbitrary since many of the Puranas can easily be classified differently. There are equal numbers of corresponding minor Puranas called Upapuranas. All Mahapuranas must contain five topics: 1. Creation, 2. Destruction and recreation, 3. History of various kings all of whom were called Manu, 4. Geneology of various gods and rishis, and 5. Dynasties of legendary kings.

Besides these all of them contain miscellaneous information on a variety of topics from rituals related to various festivals to descriptions of heavens and hells. Often many become well known for some of the minor information presented in them. It is not unusual to find contradictory information in Puranas. For example, Linga Purana mentions Markandeya as a Shiva devotee where as Narada Purana mentions him as a Vishnu devotee. Their size varies from 9,000 to more than 80,000 slokas. They became popular because they reconciled abstract knowledge and advocated devotion (Bhakti).

Following is the brief notation on the 18 major Puranas, listed as six each of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva respectively. The numbers in the brackets refer to approximate number of slokas in thousands.

1. Brahma (24) - usually the first Purana listed and also known as Adi Mahapurana. The original text is considered lost.
2. Brahmanda (12) - usually listed last in Mahapuranas. Originally it contained entire Adhyatma Ramayana. The current version contains portions of it. It is best known for Lalita Sahasranama - a text containing 1000 names of the goddess Lalita (Parvati avatar).
3. Brahmavivarta (18) - best known for its story of Tulsi and other goddesses.
4. Markandeya (9) - contains Devi Mahatmayam, also known as Chandi Paath or Durga Saptashatee, an extremely popular text of 700 verses which sings praises of Shree Devi - a

composite deity of all three Shakti goddesses Saraswati, Laxmi, and Parvati. Devi Mahatmayam is not to be confused with Devi Bhagavatam which is an Upapurana.

5. Vamana (10) - deals with Vamana Avatar of Lord Vishnu.
6. Bhavishya (14) - details the prophecies for the future and contains portions from Manu Smriti.
7. Vishnu (23) - This is also called Purana Ratna (Gem of Purana). It presents many of Vishnu Avatars. It is a dialogue between the Parashara and his student Maitreya.
8. Garuda (19) - This is a dialogue between Lord Vishnu and his carrier bird Garuda. The second half deals with life after death. It is a common practice to read it during mourning period.
9. Narada (25) - a dialogue between the Maharshi Narad and Rishi Sanat Kumar, best known for its description of various places of pilgrimage.
10. Bhagavata (18) - one of the most popular Purana describes various avatars of Lord Vishnu. Its tenth chapter is the longest singing praises of Lord Krishna.
11. Padma (55) - second largest Purana's first section is a dialogue between Bhishma and Pulatsya. It is better known for its final section which is a dialogue between Shiva and Parvati.
12. Varaha (10) - details how Lord Vishnu rescues Prithvi (earth) from the demons as Varaha (a male boar).
13. Shiva (24) - There are many versions of this Purana, the most commonly accepted is the one containing 6 sections. It is in the form of a teaching by Vedavyasa's disciple Romaharshana (or Lomaharshana).
14. Linga (11) - is also in the form of a teaching by Romaharshana and some parts as teachings by Lord Shiva and is best known for the rituals related to Linga worship. Both Shiva and Linga Puranas mention Shiva Sahasranama but differently.
15. Matsya (14) - the avatar of Lord Vishnu as Matsya (fish) is described here.
16. Kurma (17) - details the avatar of Lord Vishnu as Kurma (tortoise). The divine Kurma supports the mountain used by gods and demons for churning the celestial ocean to obtain Amrita, the nectar of immortality. This Purana contains Ishwar geeta known for its yoga techniques.
17. Agni (15) - recited by Lord Agni to Sage Vasishtha and is the only Purana without any major sections and has the most number of chapters - 380. Most are short chapters dealing with rituals related to various worships.
18. Skanda (81) - the largest of all Puranas has many versions. It narrates the stories of Lord Skanda who is Kartikeya, the first son of Lord Shiva and Parvati. It is best known for its descriptions of Jyotirlingas and Satyanarayan Katha.

Next month, we will discuss two major history books used as scriptures - namely Ramayana and Mahabharata. Any comments or suggestions should be sent to the author via email at hajratwala@naha.us .

July 2008

Hindu Dharma: 6 – Ramayana & Mahabharata

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These histories are considered scriptures because they are considered written upon divine inspiration, Ramayana by Maharshi Valmiki and Mahabharata by Maharshi Veda Vyas. There are only a handful of verifiable historical facts such as an existence of kings named Rama, Krishna, Bharata, etc. The rest of history is taken on faith thus they need to be read as Shastras and not as historical texts. These are stories with underlying moral lessons. It is not the intent to write these epics in such a short article, instead it is hoped that the reader will be presented with other important information regarding them besides the actual story.

Ramayana: This is the story of Rama, the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu. There are two main versions of Ramayana, available as a translation in almost all the languages. 1. The original written in Sanskrit by Maharshi Valmiki. There are 24,000 slokas. The first letter of every 1000 slokas spells the entire Gayatri Mantra. This set of 24 slokas is known as Gayatri Ramayana. 2. That written by Tulsidas, known as Rama Charitramanas written in Avadhi (similar to Hindi spoken near Ayodhya in 16th century).

Ramayana is a story that teaches us morals and ethics for daily living. Below is a brief summary presented as one of the four major canon of Hinduism: (moral teaching), and selected individual episodes.

Dharma: (Think and act) Dasarath thinking he is shooting a deer sight unseen ends up shooting Shruvan, a sole supporter of blind parents.

Karma: (Only you are responsible for your own karma) How Valmiki becomes Maharishi, (not to make promises for the future) Dasarath's promise to Kaikaiyee.

Artha: (Stay within limits) Sita crossing Lakshman Rekha, (Money alone will not solve problems and Illegal wealth leads to destruction) How Sita, Laxmi avatar could not free herself and also becomes the cause of Lanka's destruction.

Kaama: (Kaama will blind one so much that one cannot see their own impending destruction) How Ravana could not understand, (kaama that is not controlled can render one useless as a stone) story of Ahalya.

Moksha: (Lord can be pleased with love alone) story of Sabari.

Hanuman Chalisa: This is a song of 40 stanzas written by Tulsidas and is a part of Sunderkand of Rama Charitramanas. It sings praises of Hanuman and it is attributed with many miracles.

Mahabharata: This is the story of king Bharata and his descendents more notably cousins Pandavas and Kauravas. This epic story is written in 18 volumes with many sub stories and plots. It is considered the longest poem in the world with more than 90,000 slokas. This too is meant for the moral and ethical behaviour for daily living. The fight between the warring cousins is meant to illustrate the fight between the good and the bad that goes on within us on daily basis. It takes five good characters (5 Pandavas being Udhhishtir- stability in fight, Bhim- strength to fight, Arjun- staying focused, Nikul- consideration of family, and Sahadeva- congeniality) to fight one hundred bad characters (100 Kauravas, two principal ones being - Duryodhan, desire for wealth or fight and Dushshaashan, desire for position or power).

Like Ramayana, below is a brief summary presented as one of the four major canon of Hinduism: (moral teaching), and selected individual episodes.

Dharma: (Think & act) Bhism's vow, Duryodhan's insult by Draupadi, Hastinapur rule by Dhritarastra.

Artha: (Parent's duty to bless the choice of mate by their children) Marriages of Gandhari to Dhritarashtra, Hindamba to Bhim, and Rukmini to Krishna.

Kaama: (Uncontrolled kaama leads to problems) Santaanu's proposal to Satyawati, Pandu's death, birth of Karna.

Moksha: (Love for the Lord is enough) Krishna favoring dinner at Vidur's home over Duryodhana's palace.

Besides these select individual episodes, there are other unparallel gems within Mahabharata.

Bhagawat Geeta: It is a set of chapters (25 to 42) of 700 slokas in the sixth book (Bhisma Parva). This is same in size as Chandipath. As the two armies face each other and the war is about to begin, Arjuna hesitates to fight. Lord Krishna as his charioteer delivers a sermon. In essence, only when our Atman (Arjuna) surrenders his chariot (daily life) drawn by four horses (dharma, artha, kaama, and moksha) and let Krishna (the Lord) be the guide that He will show the three principal ways to achieve moksha - Gyan Marg, Karma Marg and Bhakti Marg. The war lasts 18 days. There are 18 chapters of Geeta. It ends with Pandavas being victorious.

Vishnu Sahasranama: meaning thousand names of Lord Vishnu is given in Chapter 149th of 13th book of Mahabharata (Anushaasana Parva). Bhisma replies to Yudhishtira in response to his six questions. This is one of the most memorized and recited Hindu scripture.

Hari Vamsha: This is a text detailing the lineage of Lord Vishnu and details life of Krishna in latter chapters. It is given as a long appendix of more than 16,000 slokas.

The other important stories from Mahabharata are those of Nala and Damayanti, Yaksha Prasana - a set of questions asked by Yaksha and answers given by Yudhisthira and Vidur Needhi - a dialogue between Dhritarastra and Vidur.

Next month, we will discuss all the remaining classes of books used as scriptures. Any comments or suggestions should be sent to the author via email at hajratwala@naha.us .

August 2008

Hindu Dharma: 7 – Miscellaneous Scriptures

Bhupendra Ratanji Hajratwala, Ph.D. - California, USA

Smrities: The rules related to the daily living in smrities were generally responsible for the development of social and moral structure within Hinduism. There are 18 smriti (named for 18 rishis: Manu, Parashara, Yajnavalkya, Gautama, Harita, Yama, Vishnu, Shankha, Likhita, Brahaspati, Daksha, Angira, Prachetas, Samvarta, Achanas, Atri, Apastamba, and Shatatapa) and 18 minor smirities (Jabali, Nachiketas, Skanda, Laugakshi, Kashyapa, Vyasa, Sanatkumara, Shantanu, Janaka, Vyaghra, Katyayana, Jatukarnya, Kapinjala, Baudhayana, Kanada, Vishvamitra, Paithinasa, and Gobhila) known as Upasmirities. The famous Manu Smriti has rules from birth to death. Many samskara ceremonies such as Simant, Vivah, and Antim are based on these smrities.

Sutras: In ancient times, writing of large texts was not practical, thus a type of extreme shorthand was developed known as Sutra. Sutra means a raw cotton thread. Just as sutra it self does not have much value, but it is invaluable when making a garland; the scripture Sutra itself is extremely difficult to understand to the point of being of no value. However, it is the most valuable literature when explained. The three best known and most popular sutras are Brahma Sutra with a commentary by Shree Adi Shankaracharya; Yoga Sutra of Patanjali, and Kama Sutra of Vatsyana. Jain and Buddhist Sutras are not related to Hindu Sutras.

Tantras & Agamas: These Shaivite scriptures are grouped as 92 Shiva and 108 Vishnu and 77 Shakti (called Shaakta) Shastras. They are all called Tantras or Agamas but some believe that only Shaakta shastras are called either Tantras or Agamas. All of these are in the form of questions by Shakti and answers given by Shiva. When it is reversed, they are called Nigamas. However, often all are called Agamas. Thus, Shaivites consider them equal to Vedas.

Tantra means weavings as in a mat or a spider's web. The web may look very weak; however it is very strong since it can support not only the spider but its prey as well. Agama means 'that which came down' (from person to person). All contain rituals of worship, Yantra (worship of geometrical shapes), yoga, and temple construction. Some, especially Shakta Tantras, contain offering of meat and alcoholic drinks to deity. From 5th to 13th century use of sex as one of the worship components was common and thus tantric worship fell into disfavor.

The Buddhist Agamas (Sutras in Pali) and Jain Agamas (teachings of Mahavir in Prakrit) are not related to Hindu Sutras or Agamas. Some elements of tantric worship are still common in Hinduism. The Kuldevi worship during Gotrej ceremony is a part of Tantric worship.

Alavar scriptures: Alavar in Tamil means ‘He who is immersed’ as in water – in this case in bhakti devotion to Vishnu. There were 12 saints (one woman) known as Alavar in South India from 7th to 12th century. The devotional collection of poems, Divya Prabandha that they wrote in Tamil, besides being most popular and most recited is often considered equivalent to Vedas. There is likewise lesser known similar literature known as The Tevaram by Shaivite saints of South India.

Stotras: Stotras are hymns or songs of praise, taken from primary scriptures. They are sung aloud and often in a rhythmic tone, for example Vishnu Sahasranama. There are stotras for almost all deities.

Ashtakams: (Ashta in Sanskrit means eight) They are like stotras, often but not always taken from primary scriptures, and are limited to eight verses. Often, the ninth verse is added to identify the author. There are ashtakams for almost all deities. They are usually sung during the course of worship. The most famous and most often recited is Madhuraashtakam, a song of praise for Lord Krishna by Saint Vallabhacharya.

Shataks: (Shata in Sanskrit means six) These are similar to Ashtakams but are limited to six verses. The most famous and most often recited is Atmashatak, a song of praise for Atman by Adi Shankaracharya.

Following, though they **are not scriptures**, they are often included into worship rituals, and thus mentioned here. None of them are in Sanskrit or in primary scriptures. These were introduced during the Bhakti movement around 12th century and composed thereafter in local languages.

Aaratis: Aaratis are songs of praise to a particular deity, sung at the end of the worship ritual. There is an Aarati for almost every known deity. The last line of the Aarati usually specifies the name of the author who composed it.

Bhajanavalis: These are collections of various Bhajan (devotional songs) usually composed by various saints. There are numerous Bhajanavalis often as a mixture of several languages.

Chalisanas: Chalisanas are songs of praise and can be found for almost all deities. Only Hanuman Chalisa is considered a scripture because it is a part of Ramayana composed by Tulsidas.

Stutis: Stutis are same as Stotras but they take more of a form of pleadings.

Next month, we will discuss about the ways of scriptures. Any comments or suggestions should be sent to the author via email at hajratwala@naha.us .

September 2008

Hindu Dharma: 8 – The ways of Scriptures

Bhupendra Ratanji Hajratwala, Ph.D. - California, USA

Scriptures, as we now know, are many and they are complex. Reading some scriptures are a little bit like reading an advanced college science textbook. We may know the language that it is written in but that does not mean we can understand it. The basic questions related to scriptures for most of us are why, what, when, where, and how.

Why: We read or listen to scriptures mainly for two reasons. First: to learn about our religion, deity, or a specific topic such as a Vrat. Second: as a part of a religious ceremony or ritual such as Satyanarayana Katha.

What: For the first reason, the book we select is related to our interest or question - for example if we wish to know about Ekaadashi vrat, we would read about it in Uttar Khand of Padma Purana. For the second reason, it is usually dictated by the ceremony involved e.g. Bhagavat Katha discourse will include Bhagavat Purana. Many mistakenly believe that reading a specific chapter or a paragraph every day or so often would bring them good luck. Contrary belief is that if they missed a day or so of reading or made error in reading, the deity involved would be angered and bad things will happen to them. Reading anything - scripture or not repeatedly without understanding is of no benefit, no matter how long it is done. Gods do not get angry because you make mistakes in reading or you skipped reading for a day or a week. Gods are not vindictive meaning they do not seek revenge for the mistakes made - if so then they are not called gods - they would be demons.

When: There is no specific time to read a scripture especially if it is read as a book. However if it is read as part of a ceremony, then the time may be specified or some auspicious time may be selected. Advent of internet and email has also brought on new myths as well as old myths spreading at a faster pace. One of the common one is that one must make 10 or 15 copies of some religious letter, deity photograph, bhajan, or aarati and send it to others within a specified time such as in the next 8 hours or 24 hours. Failing to do this would bring problems in life and compliance will bring rich rewards. As before, gods do no such thing. You can safely ignore such requests.

Where: If a scripture is read as a book, then it can be read anywhere. However if it is read as part of a ceremony, then it may be read before a deity for example Vishnu Sahasranama. Question often arises as to where to keep the scriptures in the house. Majority keep them in or near the home temple. This is all right if you need that as a part of daily recitation or worship such as Bhagavad Geeta.

If not, one can keep them anywhere with other valuable books. Often, many mistakenly believe that to keep a copy of a certain scripture would cause similar bad things mentioned in the book to happen to them. For example if you keep a copy of Mahabharata in the house, you will have a family fight just like the Pandavas and Kauravas had. People fight because of their own bad nature and bad karma; it has nothing to do with the scripture. If anything, reading it and following it would most likely prevent such a fight.

How: This is perhaps the most important aspect of scriptures. If the scripture is read simply as a book, then it has no specific pattern of reading. It can be read as any other book. Even then, it is well worth an effort to try to understand the underlying moral that is presented. This is perhaps easier said than done. With time and practice, one learns to comprehend the morals presented.

When the scripture is read as a part of a certain ceremony or as a part of discourse, then the pattern is very specific and distinct. It is also dependent upon the scripture selected. For example Hanuman Chalisa, Vishnu Sahasranama etc. are read with a particular pattern. Millions of people memorize these and recite on a regular basis. Besides regular recitation, it is more important to learn to understand what it is that we are saying. Mechanical recitation of any scripture is meaningless. When these scriptures are read very quickly as a part of ceremony - as in the case of Akhand Ramayana or Vishnu Sahasranama, either because the host is telling the priest to hurry up and finish reading or the priest has a poor understanding of worship - is same as insulting the gods. It is better not to read than to read in a hurry.

Nowadays translations of popular scriptures are available in a many languages. Although there are good translations and bad ones, initially any will do. As one reads more and understands more, it is relatively easy to tell a good one from the bad one.

It is the earnest wish of the author that this series of articles on scriptures has sparked a tiny interest and that at least some readers will be interested in understanding when they read and listen about Hinduism.

Next month, we will begin discussing many deities that we worship. Any comments or suggestions should be sent to the author via email at hajratwala@naha.us

October 2008

Hindu Dharma: 9 – About Brahman

Bhupendra Ratanji Hajratwala, Ph.D. - California, USA

The most common puzzle about the Hinduism is that we have many gods and goddesses. To understand our many gods or goddesses, we first need to know about Brahman.

Brahman: Brahman is that essence which cannot be seen, felt, or even imagined. Our ability to understand and comprehend is limited by our senses. There are many things far simpler than Brahman that we cannot imagine such as how animals talk to each other, how our body reacts to different things such as chemicals and so on. In simplest of human terms, we can say that Brahman is the supreme most god and none higher, bigger, or greater than that. It is neither male nor female; it is present everywhere and in everything. It controls everything and everyone. The knowledge of Brahman (Brahmagyan) is considered so difficult to get that the rishis cannot obtain even after spending thousands of years of life time in meditation. When Parvati asked Shiva to grant her the Brahmagyan, Shiva refused to grant her. Nothing is considered higher in goals than to comprehend Brahmagyan. Our scriptures present Brahman in two distinct forms.

Parabrahman: This is the Brahman that has no physical shape; it is everlasting and ever present. It presents itself to us as a combination of three things we are familiar with. 1. Sat - meaning the truth. The truth is that only Brahman is real and everything else is unreal. 2. Chit - meaning the thought or the mind (in a very broad sense), ability to think and thus control and 3. Ananad - meaning bliss. Note that this is different from happiness (Sukha). Whereas Sukha is attached to Dukha (suffering), the Ananad has no opposite. The combination of these three is known as Satchidanand or Chidanand.

Kaaryabrahman: The concept of Satchidanand is too abstract for most people. For our convenience, the Brahman manifests (changes himself into) into Kaaryabrahman meaning into a shape that can do karma. The Kaaryabrahman is present as three major forms. Each one is distinct and with different responsibilities yet is completely aware and connected with the other two. They are Brahma, the creator; Vishnu, the sustainer, and Shiva, the destroyer. All three are equally important yet various followers and their related scriptures consider their deity supreme. Symbolically the trinity of gods is represented by the sound and symbol Om. Kaaryabrahman is also known as Prakriti meaning nature. Nature consists of all natural elements such as fire and wind. In order to create, the prakriti needs energy known as Shakti. So Brahman first created Shakti. Since Prakriti is represented as a male, the Shakti is represented as a female. Even though Brahman (through Brahma) is the creator of everything, the prakriti itself is unable to create. This is contradiction in logic. How a creator cannot create anything without the help of another is explained by an analogy of an artist.

An artist is unable to create a painting without the help of a brush. So he must first create a brush. The brush itself is also unable to create a painting. Thus, the trinity of gods each created a form of Shakti. The first to be created by Brahma (the creator) is Saraswati - the goddess of knowledge. To create anything knowledge is required. Vishnu, the sustainer, created Lakshmi - the goddess of wealth. Wealth is needed to support and sustain. Finally Shiva, the destroyer created Parvati - the goddess of power and strength. Strength is necessary for destruction. Because Saraswati was created first by Brahma, she is his daughter. Because he married her, she is his wife. This moral dilemma of marrying your own daughter is likewise faced by Vishnu and Shiva. Having learned their lesson from Brahma's mistake, they had these Shaktis born elsewhere and then married them. Thus, Lakshmi was born of the great celestial ocean and Parvati was born of the great Himalaya Mountain.

Shree Devi: Any of the three Shaktis by themselves are not effective especially when fighting with unjust and evil beings. They are most effective when all three are combined. The combined form of all three Shaktis is known as Shree Devi. It is the Shree Devi that has the most number of incarnations.

Countless Gods and Goddesses: Every aspect of Prakriti and Shakti is personified and worshipped as a representative of Brahman. Thus every emotion (e.g. anger, lust, and greed), every natural aspect (e.g. mountains, rivers, and trees), every aspect of energy (e.g. books, money, and weapons) and countless other combinations with or without trinity are represented as a god or a goddess. Imagine it as a little bit like a government. The entire country has only one government. However it has many employees that make one government. Since we cannot feel, see, or touch the government, we deal with individuals within the government such as ministers, secretaries, and clerks.

Next month, we will discuss first of the Hindu trinity god Brahma. Previous articles in both English and Gujarati can be found at www.naha.us/publications. Any comments or suggestions should be sent to the author via email at hajratwala@naha.us

November 2008

Hindu Dharma: 10 – About Brahma

Bhupendra Ratanji Hajratwala, Ph.D. - California, USA

Brahma is one of the trinity Hindu god. He is the god of creation and is the only one of the trinity with a finite life (because He was born) of one hundred Brahma years. One Brahma day in human years is equal to 4.32 billion years or 1000 Mahayugas. At the end of the day, Brahma sleeps when all his creations undergo Pralaya, meaning total dissolution. When he wakes up, the creation begins again. This goes on for 100 years of his life. Then, another Brahma is born. Brahma is the only one of the trinity that has no avatars. He resides in Brahmaloaka, the highest of the heavens.

Form & Function: Brahma is typically shown with 4 heads (representing 4 vedas) facing 4 directions (representing entire universe) and 4 arms (representing mind, intellect, ego, and self confidence). Originally there were 5 heads. The fifth head, looking upwards sprung as Brahma, enamoured with Satrupa's beauty kept following her everywhere. This infuriated Shiva who removed his fifth head.

In his arms he carries a rosary (progress of creation or time); book (knowledge); water pot (celestial or causal waters). The fourth hand is usually shown in a gesture (mudra) of giving blessing (varadan) to his devotees or carrying one of the yagna implement such as kusa grass, ladle, or a spoon. He is either seated or standing on a lotus (symbol of all creations) or riding a swan (symbol of knowledge). Sometimes he is shown riding a chariot drawn by 7 swans - representing 7 lokas. He carries no weapons. The crown on the head represents his supreme authority and the beard (white or black) represents wisdom. His principal function is that of creation.

Carrier: Brahma's carrier is a white swan, named Hamsa. Hamsa has a discriminating power known as Neer-Ksheer Vivek (ability to sort out milk from water).

Names: For a major god, Brahma has few names. Though he created vedas, vedas do not mention Brahma by name. He is mentioned as Hiranyagarbha (one born from the golden embryo) and Prajapati (the Lord of Progeny). Other major names are Swayambhu (self-born); Vidhata (the one who makes destiny); Nabhija (the one born from the navel); and Vishvakarma (the one who created the universe).

Family: Brahma's consort is Saraswati. Later, he also married Gayatri (Saraswati avataar). There are many children.

The principal sons are: 1. The four - Sanak, Sanatan, Sanandan, and Sanatkumar were born together and thus always remain together. They refused to grow up and thus remained as 5 year olds. Brahma thought about having children and therefore they were born, hence they are called his mind-sons. 2. The 10 other mind sons are Kratu, Pulaha, Pulatsya, Atri, Angira, Vashistha, Bhragu, Prachetas, Marichi, and Narad. The first nine are known as Brahmarishis (those with the complete knowledge of Brahman). Of these the first seven are known as Saptarishis. The Saptarshis were given the task of procreation. All gotras (lineage) begins with one of the Saptarshis. 3. The 10 born out of various parts of his body are Daksha, Dharma, Kama, Krodha, Lobha, Moha, Maya, Anand, Mrityu, and Bharat. Daksha, was born from Brahma's right thumb. He had 50 daughters. The sons of his daughter diti are known as Daitya (demons); of daughter Danu are known as Danav (giants); of daughter Aditi are known as Deva (gods). Daughter Sati married Shiva.

His principal daughters are: 1. Shatrupa (the one with 100 beauties), also known as Saraswati - whom he married and 2. Ahalya (married to Gautama Rishi who turned her into a stone for flirting with Indra)

Worship: Brahma is not worshipped because of a curse. At least 3 versions are more popular being curse of a Shiva, Rishi Bhrigu, and Saraswati. In each case Brahma's behavior angers the person enough to curse that He shall no longer be worshipped. Thus, no one is exempt from results of Karma. Brahma is prayed and offerings are made but the temples are not built for him nor is he worshipped in the temples. The exception to this is a temple at Pushkar (near Ajmer, Rajasthan) in India which is considered a pilgrimage site. There are isolated temples elsewhere but are not considered pilgrimage sites. Outside of India, there is an active worship of Brahma (known as Phra Phrom) in Thailand. He is also worshipped to a lesser extent in Cambodia and other Southeast Asian countries. He is relatively easily pleased. The evil beings take advantage of this and only pray to Brahma. His sacred mantra is 'Om Brahmanyei Namah'.

Holy Pilgrim Sites: The only holy pilgrim site for Brahma is the temple at Pushkar. A grand festival is held on Kartika Purnima in Brahma's honor. Hajratwala, Hindu Dharma: 10 – Brahma, page 5

Next month, we will talk about the second Hindu trinity god Vishnu. Previous articles in both English and Gujarati can be found at www.naha.us/publications. Any comments or suggestions should be sent to the author via email at hajratwala@naha.us

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Hindu Dharma: 11 – About Vishnu

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Vishnu is one of the trinity Hindu god. He is the preserver or sustainer. He is without birth and therefore without death. He resides in Vaikunth, a division within swargaloka, one of the heavens.

Form & Function: Vishnu is typically shown with four arms. Scriptures mention that if one saw this form even in one's dream it would be very auspicious. In his arms he carries a discus named Sudarshan Chakra with 6 spokes (representing 6 seasons), a mace (gadaa) called Kaumodaki (represents power or knowledge), a conch (Shankha) named panchajanya (represents 5 elements), and a lotus (represents piety and purity) or in a blessing gesture. As a Narayan, he is usually shown with either 2 or 4 arms and reclining on a coiled celestial serpent named Mahaashesh, with Laxmi seated by his side and Brahma seated a top a lotus sprouted from his navel. His principal function is that of sustaining and maintaining universal creations. When all other gods fail to overcome an obstacle, they come to Vishnu for help and guidance.

Carrier: Vishnu's carrier is an eagle like (but much larger) bird named Garuda, son of Maharshi Kashyap (mother: Vinata). There are no garuda birds on earth. He likes serpents as his food. He is divine and has super powers. He is usually shown as a bird with a human face with a beak or a human with wings. He has golden body, white face, and red wings. He is sometimes shown wearing a crown.

Names: Vishnu and his avatars are known by thousands of names. Vishnu Sahasranama (a list of thousand names) is recited by millions everyday and is included in many rituals. Selected few names are: Vishnu (he who pervades everything), Narayana (he who lives or sleeps on the water), Bhagwan (he who possesses the future or fortune), Eeshwar (the supreme and powerful god), Hari (the one who removes - meaning obstacles and troubles) and Prabhu (the ruler).

Avatars: Vishnu has many avatars however his ten avatars are better known. 1. Matsya (as a fish, He saves the world from the great deluge) 2. Kurma (as a tortoise, He helps both demons and gods churn the celestial ocean to obtain Amrita, the nectar of immortality) 3. Varaha (as a boar He rescues the earth from demon Hiranyaksha) 4. Narshimha (as a half man and half lion, He comes to the rescue of his devotee Prahlad and kills demon Hiranyakashyapu) 5. Vamana (as a dwarf Brahmin, He rescues all beings from the terror of demon Bali) 6. Parasurama (as a warring Brahmin with an axe, He destroys the arrogant Kshatriya clans 21 times)

7. Rama (as a Kshatriya prince, He rescues his wife, Sita from demon Ravan and destroys him and as a king He established an ideal state) 8. Krishna (as a Kshatriya prince, He destroys many demons and helps Pandavas win the war. He delivers to Pandava prince Arjuna a sermon known as Bhagavad Geeta, one of the most popular and esteemed scripture) 9. Buddha (as a Kshatriya prince, He preaches a doctrine of dharma for the masses) and 10. Kalki (as a rescuer of dharma - yet to come at the end of Kaliyuga).

Family: Vishnu's consort is Laxmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. The only noteworthy sons are Lava and Kush (during his 7th incarnation as Rama).

Worship: There are many mantras dedicated exclusively to Vishnu. The most popular ones are Om Namoh Vishnave and Om Namoh Narayanah.

Holy Pilgrim Sites: There are 108 Vishnu's holy sites known as Divya Dasams. Of these four are known as Dhaams (place where he lives). Different shastras list different sites but most agree on the four, one in each direction in India. They are: 1. In North at Badrinath, Utterkhand, Narayan temple built by Shree Adi Shankaracharya in the 9th century; 2. In East at Puri, Orissa, Jagannath temple built by Raja Ananta Varman Dev in the 12th century; 3. In South at Rameshwaram, Tamil Nadu. Lord Rama prayed to Lord Shiva before attacking Lanka. The present temple was built by Parakrama Bahu of Sri Lanka in the 12th century, and 4. In West at Dwarka, Gujarat, Lord Krishna temple. Lord Krishna left Mathura to escape the attack by the demon king Jarasandh and settled his clan at the newly built golden city of Dwarka. Because Krishna left and did not fight (to prevent the innocent from getting killed) he came to be known as Ranchhod (the one who left) Rai (king). The present temple idols are from 12th to 15th century period.

Next month, we will talk about the third Hindu trinity god Shiva. Previous articles in both English and Gujarati can be found at www.naha.us/publications. Any comments or suggestions should be sent to the author via email at hajratwala@naha.us

January 2009

Hindu Dharma: 12 – About Shiva

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Shiva is one of the trinity Hindu gods. Shiva is time personified hence he too is unborn and thus never dies. His abode is Mount Kailash - part of Tibetan Himalayan range.

Form & Function: Shiva is typically shown with 2 or 4 arms. In his arms he carries a trident (symbol of victory over three attributes of piousness (sattvic); regalness (rajsic); and demonic behavior (tamsic)), an hour glass shaped drum (damru) (symbol of control of all sounds) and a rudraksh mala - a rosary made of special dried berries symbolic of Shiva's eyes. The fourth arm is usually shown giving a blessing. He is often shown with a third vertical eye on the forehead (symbolic of awesome power of destruction), a crescent shaped moon in his matted hair (from Puranic stories), a blue throat (due to swallowing of universal poison), river Ganges (symbol of purity) flowing from his matted hair, and serpents coiled around him (all symbolic of unlimited power to withstand any obstacle). Shiva's principal function is that of destruction - since time destroys everything. He is often depicted in the dancing form as Nataraja, symbolic of creation (Lasya) as well as destruction of the universe (Tandava).

Carrier: Shiva's carrier animal is a bull named Nandi. As a guardian, he is usually shown seated facing Lord Shiva at the entrance of Shiva temple. When shown personified, he is shown with his horns.

Names: Like Vishnu, Shiva is also known by thousands of names. Shiva Sahasranama (a list of thousand names) is recited at many rituals. There are at least 8 different versions however the one in Mahabharata is commonly used. Selected few names are: Mahadeva or Mahesh (the great god), Rudra (fearsome), Shambhu (one who causes hapiness), Shankar (one who grants hapiness), Pashupati (Lord of Animals), Nataraja (Lord of dance), and Rudra (the fierce one).

Avatars: Shiva does not have avatars comparable to Vishnu's. When Shiva appears to destroy evil beings, he leaves behind Jyotirlinga - a symbolic stone that can be worshipped in lieu of. Shiva has appeared 12 times and thus there are 12 jyotirlinga holy sites. Stories related to jyotirlinga can be found in Shiva Mahapurana. Many deities (Skanda, Hanuman), humans (Shri Adi Shankaracharya), and celestial bodies (Saturn) are considered to be Shiva's avatars.

Family: Shiva's first wife is Sati, who immolated herself. His second wife is Parvati, goddess of power. Shiva cannot have children (due to Saraswati's curse) yet two are technically considered his sons. Lord Kartikeya (Skanda or Kumara is also known as Murugan or Subramanya in South India) and Lord Ganesh.

Worship: Shiva is typically worshipped in the form of Linga because of a blessing of Gayatri to counter Saraswati's curse. Siva's famous 5 letter (according to Devnagari alphabets) mantra 'Namah Shivaya' is typically recited with Om before it. Every month, 14th day of waning moon is known as the Night of Shiva (Shivaratri). Shivaratri in the month of Phalgun (of moon calendar) is considered the most auspicious and is known as Mahashivaratri, the Great Night of Shiva.

Holy Pilgrimage Sites: The 12 jyotirlinga (the order in which they are listed varies) holy sites (all in India) are:

1. Prabhas Patan, Somanath, Saurashtra, Gujarat. This is where Chandra (Soma) was freed from Daksha's curse of decreasing in size.
2. Mallikarjuna, Srisailam, Andhra Pradesh. Parvati (Mallika) and Shiva (Arjuna) come here every full moon and new moon looking for their son Kartikeya. Adi Shankaracharya composed the famous Shivananda Lahiri here.
3. Mahakaleshwar, Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh. Here Shiva destroyed demon king Dushan.
4. Mamleshwar or Omkareshwar, Shivapuri, Madhya Pradesh. Shiva appeared in the form of Om to empower gods in their fight against demons.
5. Kedarnath, Uttarkhand. This is one of most physically difficult pilgrimage. It is open only six months in a year from Vaishakh to Aaso. This linga appeared on the hind part of water buffalo when Bhima pulled his tail.
6. Bhimashankar, Bhorgiri (near Pune), Maharashtra. Here Shiva killed a demon king named Bhima who was Ravan's brother Kumbhkarna's son.
7. Kashi Vishwanath, Varanasi, U.P. Shiva established the city that would be free from the destruction at the end of Brahma's day.
8. Tryambakeshwar, Nasik, Maharashtra. Shiva appeared to absolve Rishi Gautama of his sins.
9. Vaidhyanath, Deoghar, Jharkhand. Vishnu helped the gods by hiding Amrita in the Shivalinga. Thus, He is Vaidya. Mountains are full of medicinal herbs in this area.
10. Nageshwar, Dwarka, Gujarat. Bhima discovered this linga during their exile in the forest. Nagas (Cobras) are often seen guarding the Linga here.
11. Rameshwar, Tamil Nadu. Rama worshipped Shiva here before attacking Ravana.
12. Grishneshwar, Aurangabad, Maharashtra. Parvati created this linga by rubbing (grishna) kumkum in water.

There are numerous other Shiva temples throughout India and other countries. The most famous amongst these are at Amarnath, near Shrinagar in Kashmir and Pashupatinath temple in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Next month, we will present aspects of the first Hindu trinity goddess Saraswati. Previous articles in both English and Gujarati can be found at www.naha.us/publications. Any comments or suggestions should be sent to the author via email at hajratwala@naha.us or by mail: 847 East Angela St, Pleasanton, CA 94566 USA.