

Encyclopedia of Hinduism

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The attitudes to nature found in Hinduism are as multifaceted as the tradition itself, and, as in other traditions, the various visions are sometimes in conflict. While India today boasts what is perhaps the world's largest environmental movement (Peritore 1993), we should not expect to find examples of contemporary environmental awareness in pre-modern Hinduism. Traditional attitudes range from reverencing of nature as a manifestation of divinity through dismissal of the world as illusory (*māyā*) and insignificant (*tuccha*) in relation to authentic spiritual existence. What is not found – except perhaps as approximated in certain passages in the courtly literature – is the late modern concern for nature as nature, valued in itself for its beauty and diversity. In thinking about Hindu approaches to nature, caution must be taken to avoid reading contemporary concerns into ancient texts, which often results in romanticisation.

Despite the sometimes violent nature of their sacrificial milieu, the Veda contains

hymns venerating aspects of nature as deities: Earth (*Ṛṥhivī*), Dawn (*Uṣas*), Fire (*Agni*) and others. In the sacred *Gāyatrī* mantra, generations of Hindus have paid homage to the sun and proclaimed their connectedness with 'earth, atmosphere, and heaven' (*Ṛṥhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* 6.3.6). The *Upaniṣads* set forth the notion – important when differentiating the Hindu vision from that of Abrahamic monotheism – of the one ultimate Being that becomes the universe, rather than creating it as an external product. As the *Chāndoyga Upaniṣad* (3.14.1) asserts, 'All this is Brahman'.

In the later theistic, devotional traditions of Hinduism, particularly in the Vaiṣṇavism of *Rāmānuja*, one finds the striking image of the world as the body of God. The earth is divinised as *Bhū Devī* ('Goddess Earth'), and Lord Viṣṇu himself is said to descend as *avatāra* to rescue her from destruction by demonic forces. Thus, devout Vaiṣṇavas ask Earth in their daily prayers to forgive the ill treatment of the touch of their feet. Indeed, pious Hindus regard the land of India itself as a

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goddess – Mother India (Bhārat Mātā). She is criss-crossed by pilgrimage routes connecting holy places, many associated with rivers, mountains and other natural features, giving India a kind of sacred geography. The *Bhagavadgītā* echoes the notion of God embodied in nature and recommends further a frugal lifestyle in which one devotes oneself to 'preserving the world' (loka-saṃgraha) and the 'welfare of all beings' (sarva-bhūta-hita). The theologian Vallabha teaches in his *Siddhāntamuktāvalī* that, just as no one would worship Gaṅgā Devī (Goddess Ganges) as deity only and fail to reverence her embodiment in the holy river, so no one who worships the supreme being, Kṛṣṇa, should devalue the world, which is his cosmic embodiment. Hindu law books (*Dharmaśūtras* and *Dharmaśāstras*) contain numerous edicts that might now be considered as eco-friendly, involving protection of land, trees, rivers and so on, particularly as the duty of kings.

The notion of the sacred river is illustrative of some of the problematics of the Hindu understanding of the sacrality of nature. To take the most famous example, the Ganges is not only a river, she is indeed a goddess and, as such, an object of pious veneration. She is not only inherently pure, but also powerfully purifying. Bathing in the Ganges is spiritually cleansing: it relieves one of karmic and other religious impurities going back lifetimes. Ganges water is a purifying substance, bottled and distributed for ritual use all over India and abroad. Residents of Banaras, who bathe daily in the river's waters, say that since Mother Gaṅgā is purifying she cannot be polluted. Of course, the Ganges is polluted. Hindu awareness of a distinction between ritual purity and physical cleanliness means that something can be ritually pure but physically dirty, and vice versa. The religious perceptions of devout pilgrims and clerics may actually make it more difficult to mobilise action to clean up the Ganges.

The problems caused by divergences between religious, scientific and political conceptions of the river's 'pollution' have been explored by Alley (1998, 2002).

Further dimensions of this complexity have been explored by Nagarajan (1998) who has studied the ecological implications of South Indian kōlam, ritual designs applied by women on the ground in worship of the goddess Earth. Nagarajan notes that human-nature interactions are embedded in complex cultural webs, so that what may appear 'ecological' to the outsider may not be understood that way from within. She offers the notion of 'intermittent sacrality' to explain how, for example, villagers can begin the day by honoring Earth as a goddess but later throw refuse on the same spot. Awareness of sacrality is not and perhaps cannot be, sustained: the sacrality of a given aspect of nature may wax and wane or the ritual relationship that recognises that sacrality may lapse.

It is clear that, in the Hindu context, to say that an aspect of nature is sacred is not automatically and unambiguously an ecological plus. Indeed, as Alley, Nagarajan and others have noted, to sacralise nature could paradoxically undermine ecological consciousness, particularly if, as is often the case with maternal goddess imagery, it portrays nature as protecting, cleansing and forgiving – powerfully needing no protection from humans in return.

It is often claimed that Hinduism's unitary vision of the world as Brahman involves the sacralisation of the entire cosmos. This is less true than one might suppose. The prestigious Non-dualist or Advaita school of thought, in its classical formulation, achieves its monism not by divinising the world, but by eliminating it, as māyā, from the realm of the real. Dualism is often portrayed as a purely Western affliction, but Advaita and other Hindu theologies in fact involve a hierarchical dualism of God/world, spirit/

matter, soul/body that is not much different. Adherents must practice 'discrimination' (viveka) between these elements, characterised as 'the eternal and the non-eternal'. Although theistic Hindu doctrine, unlike Advaita, recognises the reality of multiplicity, it also displays a tendency to denigrate physical existence in favour of the more highly valued spiritual body (siddha-deha) and supramundane worlds (śuddha-sattva, go-loka, etc.). The ultimate religious goal for most Hindus is of course mokṣa, defined as 'liberation' of the individual from rebirth in the natural world (saṃsāra). This world-transcending aspiration is supported by the classical Hindu idea of declining cosmic ages (yuga), which predicts that the world for thousands of years hence will inevitably slide into increasing levels of moral, social and environmental chaos. Together, these elements further sharpen the spirit/matter dualism and – to whatever extent they are taken seriously – provide potential disincentives to ecological activism.

It may well be ecologically fruitful that Hinduism regards all beings, 'from [the god] Brahmā down to a blade of grass', as having equal spiritual potential, as being equally ensouled by ātman. This is among the considerations underlying the Hindu ethics of nonviolence (ahiṃsā) and vegetarianism. Still, the tradition does not escape a pronounced anthropocentrism. All humans were once, in their long chain of existences, incarnated as animals and even plants. There is a hierarchy of births, however, and human birth is the highest, even superior to birth as a god, because only humans, with rare exceptions, may attain mokṣa. On the other hand, humans who commit evil deeds are threatened by the law books with rebirth in 'lowly wombs', i.e. those of animals or insects.

The ecological problematics identified here are by no means intended to obscure the many affirmations of nature in Hinduism, even less to suggest that con-

temporary Hindus are not free to creatively reconfigure their traditions in the light of urgent needs of the present day. Hindu scholars have, in fact, already begun to do so. For example, Sherma (1998) has suggested that the Tantric traditions of Hinduism, with their doctrine of world and matter as fully real expression of the divine śakti (creative energy), may provide an antidote to the dualistic, world-negating tendency mentioned above.

See also: Advaita; Agni; Ahiṃsā; Ātman; Bhagavadgītā; Bhakti Movement; Bhārāt Mātā; Blood Sacrifice; Brahmā; Brahman; Dharmaśāstras; Dharmasūtras; Gaṅgā; Gāyatrī Mantra; Karma (Law of Action); Kṛṣṇa; Māyā; Mokṣa; Pṛthivī; Purity and Pollution; Ritual; Rājā; Rāmānuja; Śakti; Saṃsāra; Tantrism; Tīrthayātra; Upaniṣads; Uṣas; Vaiṣṇavism; Vallabha; Vārāṇasī; Viṣṇu; Yuga

LANCE NELSON

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the subject of all awareness, of all experience of any kind. As the subject of all consciousness it cannot be grasped as an object of consciousness. It is that by which everything else is known or experienced. In this sense it is the inner self (Ātman) of all beings. The essence of all knowers and objects of knowledge, it is yet beyond the distinction between knower, known and process of knowing. Beyond any distinctions, it is completely full, without any gaps. Hence its nature is absolute bliss, infinitely more blissful than the highest human joy (*Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 4.3.33; *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.8). Bliss is the innermost of five layers or sheaths successively identified with brahman after food (anna), breath (prāṇa), mind (manas) and consciousness (vijñāna), from each of which all beings are born, by means of which they live, and into which they pass upon death (*Taittirīya Upaniṣad* 2.5–9; 3.1–6). Although Śaṅkara appears reluctant to accept bliss as an essential property of Brahman because the experience of joy requires faculties of perception and hence depends upon distinctions that do not belong to Brahman, other Advaita Vedāntins defend bliss as simply fullness (Potter 1981: 75–76).

See also: Advaita; Ātman; Brahman; Śaṅkara; Upaniṣads; Vedānta

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SACRED ANIMALS

A great number of animals are significant in Hinduism. Some, like the goat and the buffalo, are sacrificial animals – which is also a kind of sanctity – while for others

their sanctity prohibits their killing (at least by the communities that hold them sacred). Many animals have mythical representatives or ancestors, especially among the 'vehicles' (vāhana) of the deities, whose iconography usually depicts them upon their own special animal, like Garuḍa, the great bird with a human face who carries Viṣṇu, variously described as part man and part eagle or vulture. Another mythical bird is haṃsa, the divine swan or goose, the vehicle of Brahmā, and his consort Sarasvatī, and symbol of the soul and the breath: the divine element within the material body. In the waters, Viṣṇu rests upon the many-headed snake Ananta ('endless') or Śeṣa ('the remainder'), who represents the vast waters of chaos before and after the universe exists. Ananta is king of the nāgas, mythical cobra-like beings whose paradise lies beneath the waters. Shrines to cobras, usually at the foot of a tree, are common in folk religion, where they are propitiated to protect against snakebite; but the primary association of snakes is with water and fertility, and offerings are made to the nāgas by women seeking to become pregnant. Their festival (Nāgapancāmi) occurs during monsoon time in the month of Śrāvan (July–August).

Śiva, too is associated with the cobra, which he wears across his body as his 'sacred thread', or as a garland round his neck. His symbolic liṅga in his shrines is encircled by a snake. It is not only fertility but the ambivalent nature of the snake that he rules over: it is both the life force and the source of poison.

Śiva's vehicle, however, is his faithful white hump-backed bull Nandi. The bull, associated with strength and virility, is appropriate to this deity's dual nature as god of procreation and also of ascetic control of the senses. The bull is a symbol of strength and pre-eminence in the Vedic hymns and important Vedic gods are sometimes compared to it, especially Indra. Though once a sacrificial animal, it

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is no longer killed – unlike the buffalo, which is sacrificed at festivals to the goddess Durgā.

The most sacred of all animals is of course the cow, identified with the nourishing character of Earth as the Great Mother. Its sanctity probably derives from its importance as a sacrificial animal in the Vedas, which in turn was connected to its economic significance as an index of wealth; but at least by the time of the *Dharmaśāstras* the killing of a cow had become a heinous sin. Not only the animal itself but all its products are sacred and health-giving. Thus the 'five products' (pancagava) of the cow – milk, curd, melted butter (ghī), dung and urine – are all highly auspicious. No deity has the cow for a vehicle, but she has natural associations with Lakṣmī, goddess of prosperity, and Kṛṣṇa, who carries the epithet Gopāla ('cowherd') from his rustic life in Vṛndāvana.

Monkeys and apes are traditionally believed to be of semi-divine origin, with male deities as their ancestors. The former are specially revered in Vaiṣṇavism, because under their king, Sugriva, they aided Rāma in his battle with the demon king of Sri Lanka. Folk shrines to Hanumān the monkey-deity are a very common sight in India. Divine messenger of the monkey army, he is the devoted disciple of Rāma. Son of Vāyu the wind-god, he has the immense strength of the storm. Far from being 'cute', these divine monkeys are awe-inspiring creatures.

Lions and tigers – not always distinguished in iconography – are vehicles of the Goddess, most famously Durgā. The lion is also connected to Viṣṇu in his incarnation as Narasiṃha, the man-lion, who was born to kill the demon Hiraṇyakaśipu. Lions were symbols of royalty and empire from ancient times, as evidenced by the pillars set up by the Mauryan emperor Aśoka. Tiger-deities occur in folk religion, sometimes as the form taken by deceased local heroes – or villains.

Also associated with royalty is the elephant, whose ancestor is Airāvata, the milky-white elephant of Indra, king of the gods. In the Vedic hymns it is told how the elephants once were clouds, who lost their wings and were confined to earth – hence their connection with rains and fertility. Elephants were the traditional animals for royal processions, and are still used to pull the moveable temple images of the gods on certain festivals.

Another royal animal from Vedic times is the horse, seven of whom draw the chariot of Sūrya, the sun-god, while the vedic horse-sacrifice (aśvamedha) was the greatest yajña performed by a conquering king. Consequently the horse became a symbol of the cakravartin, the 'wheel-turning' emperor who conquers in all the directions.

Smaller, more humble, animals also have their sacred aspects. The mouse or rat (musika) is honoured as the vehicle of elephant-headed Gaṇeśa. The reason for this surprising association has caused much speculation but perhaps is best understood to derive from them both being overcomers of obstacles, one on a large scale, the other on a small scale. Rats were traditionally regarded as sources of trouble (vighna) and therefore propitiated; but the mouse is also symbol of the inner self or ātman, who is hidden within all beings.

The frog, as an aquatic creature, is associated with water and fertility, along with the snake and the more mighty elephant. Frogs are worshipped in the month of October with offerings of rice and ghī and sprinkled with water.

The goat is the prime sacrificial animal. The word aja, meaning a female goat, also means 'unborn' and so it becomes the symbol of unmanifested nature (prakṛti) in philosophy. In the Vedic hymns, a goat draws the chariot of the deity Puṣān, who has an agricultural connection.

These are a few among a great number of animals that have symbolic significance

through being associated with the deities or for their own innate qualities. With some, worship is apotropaic, to ward off the troubles they bring; for others the desire is to acquire their attributes, such as strength or fertility; but underlying all is the power of mythic association that bestows on the animal a rich variety of meanings.

See also: *Airāvata*; *Brahmā*; *Deities*; *Durgā*; *Gaṇeśa*; *Garuḍa*; *Hanumān*; *Hiranyakaśipu*; *Indra*; *Kṛṣṇa*; *Lakṣmī*, *Śrī*; *Nāgapañcamī*; *Nāgas*; *Nandī*; *Prakṛti*; *Rāma*; *Samhitā*; *Sarasvatī*; *Śeṣa*; *Śiva*; *Sūrya*; *Vaiṣṇavism*; *Viṣṇu*

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SACRED BOOKS OF THE EAST (1879–1910)

Series conceived by the editor F. Max Müller as a scholarly replacement for popular anthologies of sacred texts and intended to serve as the basis for a new 'science' of the comparative study of religions. Alongside other massive late-Victorian publishing ventures, such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the revised translation of the Bible, the series helped establish the prestige of Oxford University Press. Of the fifty volumes (including an index) of the series, twenty-one provide translations of Hindu texts, including selections from the *Samhitās*, the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, the *Upaniṣads*, several *Dharmasūtras*, *Vedāntasūtras* (*Brahmasūtras*), *Gṛhyasūtras* and the *Bhagavadgītā*. Both the emphasis on textual sources and the selection of texts chosen have been seen as evidence of a specifically Protestant bias in the study of Hinduism but the series nevertheless undoubtedly served to advance and to disseminate knowledge of Hinduism.

See also: *Bhagavadgītā*; *Brahmasūtras*; *Dharmasāstras*; *Dharmasūtras*; *Gṛhyasūtras*; *Hinduism*, history of scholarship; Müller, Friedrich Max; *Samhitā*; *Upaniṣads*
WILL SWEETMAN

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SACRED GEOGRAPHY

Hindu cosmology maintains that the earth, Jambudvīpa, is the innermost of the seven ring-like continents separated one from the next by seas. The earth is divided into various regions; the one to its extreme south is Bhārata, or India. Bhārata-varṣa, or Bhārata khaṇḍa, is one of the early names of India, derived from the great patriarch Bhārata. Bhārata-varṣa embraces the whole of the subcontinent, north of the Vindhya range. Although the name refers to Bhārata, the most important notion, on which sacred geography is grounded, is the reverence for the divine feminine and the sacrality of the land itself, identified with the goddess Pṛthivī. A number of hymns dedicated to her, as the epitome of stability and provider of fertility and inexhaustible abundance, are to be found in the *Rgveda Samhitā*. Later, the *Devī-bhāgavata-Purāṇa* (7.33.21–41) speaks of the mountains as Devī's bones, the rivers as her veins, the trees and forests as her hair. The notion of the earth as a personified goddess continues and plays a pivotal role in later Hindu mythology. Bhudevi, 'the goddess who is the earth', becomes an integral part of Vaiṣṇava mythology and iconography. However, the idea of the Indian subcontinent being a goddess, is vividly expressed in the myth

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is the Manasarovara lake, where the wild geese migrate in the breeding season and at the beginning of the monsoon. It is said that the right hand of Satī has fallen there. The most important among the mythical mountains are the golden Meru or Sumeru, the pivot of the universe, located in the Himālayas and believed to be the abode of the gods. The celestial Gaṅgā descends from the heaven upon its summit before flowing to earth in four streams, each directed to the four cardinal points. Yet another mountain of mythical relevance is the Mandara, which served as a churning stick at the time of the Churning of the Ocean and which was supported by Viṣṇu as Kūrma.

Apart from mountains and ranges which are of pan-Indian importance, there are a large number of mountains and individual hills whose sanctity is celebrated in local *Sthālapurāṇas*. Among these is Sivagiri in the Palani Hills, near Dindigul (Tamil Nadu), sacred to Subrahmanya in his form as Daṇḍapāni, 'bearer of the staff'. It is said that a number of siddhas, conversant in medicine and alchemy and endowed with supernatural powers, used to live in the caves and forests of the Palani Hills. Perhaps one of the most famous hills of peninsular India is Tirumalai, near Tirupati in Chittoor district (Andhra Pradesh), sacred to Veṅkateśvara, known in north India as Bālājī. This impressive mountain, rising dramatically 700 metres above Tirupati, is part of a small range of seven hills which in the popular imagination represent the seven hoods of the cosmic serpent Śeṣa. Nestled among them is the temple, which is visited by an average of 10,000 pilgrims a day. On a smaller scale, in the extreme south of India, between Nagercoil and Kanyakumari, is Agastyamalai, the mountain of Agastya, where the sage is believed to dwell.

In the north, near Mathurā, is the Govardhana hill, which Kṛṣṇa lifted on the small finger of his hand to protect the

herdsmen from the deluge unleashed by Indra. In the Aravalli range of western Rajasthan, particularly important is the Arbuda, popularly known as Abu. The sage Vasiṣṭha is believed to have lived here, and according to tradition this is the place where the Rajputs emerged from the fire pit. Abu is considered a sacred place by the Jains, and the eleventh-century Solanki rulers built the famous Dilvara temples. At a short distance from Dilvara is Acalgadh, site of many temples, one of which is said to contain a toe of Śiva. Apart from Abu, other mountains are connected to Jainism: Girnar in Junagadh, associated with Neminatha, the twenty-second tīrthankara, and Shatrunjaya, near Palitana in Kathiawad, associated with Ṛṣabhanatha, the first tīrthankara. In the south, both the hills at Sravana Belgola, in Karnataka, are connected with Bhadrabāhu, the head of the Digambara Jains, who migrated there with a group of followers in the third century BCE.

Along with the mountains, rivers play a pivotal role in Indian sacred geography. Although officially there are only seven sacred rivers, practically all expanses of water receive homage as the givers of life and fertility. First of all there are the Gaṅgā, the Jumna or Yamunā and the Sarasvatī, the most sacred three among the seven, at whose confluence is situated Prayaga, followed by the Godavari, Narmada, Indus and Kaveri. As expected, the names on this list vary: according to some traditions the Indus and the Kaveri are substituted with the Tapti and the Krishna. Occasionally, in the southern states of the subcontinent the Tungabhadra finds a place among the holy seven. There is no doubt that according to Hindu tradition the Gaṅgā is the most sacred river on earth, originating from the sky and flowing to earth through the penance of Bhagīratha and the grace of Śiva. Furthermore, she is the sister of Pārvatī and the second wife of Śiva and

he is his cooling 'liquid Śakti'. Although not as sacred as the Gaṅgā, because there is some uncertainty about her wedded state, the Yamunā is reputed to be the daughter of the sage Kalinda and was once dragged her from bed by Balarāma. On her banks lie Indraprastha, Delhi, the holy sites connected with Kṛṣṇa's childhood and youth, Vṛndāvana and Mathurā, Agra and, at the confluence with the Gaṅgā, Prayaga. The Sarasvatī, often mentioned in Vedic literature, has its sources in the Himālaya, but at a certain point of its course she disappears in the sands of the desert, and is believed to rise up from her subterranean course at Prayaga and join her waters with those of the Gaṅgā and the Yamunā. Many legends have been woven around her disappearance. The Godavarī, also called Goda, 'cow-giver', because reputedly the sage Gautama revived with its water a cow he had accidentally killed, is known as the Gaṅgā of the Deccan. It has its source at Tryambaka, near Nasik, the site of one of the twelve jyotirlingas; it flows through the Deccan plateau and fans out in a huge delta in the Bay of Bengal. It is said that originally the river divided into seven branches before it met the sea. Of these only four still remain and it is recommended that whoever desires offspring should bathe in them in succession. The Narmada starts from the Amarakantaka hill in the eastern Vindhya, a place renowned for religious suicide. Those who drown themselves or fast to death there are said to obtain liberation. The water of the Narmada is so sacred that it is believed that one's sins are obliterated at the mere sight of it. The Kaveri, the Gaṅgā of the south, has been an inexhaustible source of inspiration in Tamil poetry. There are a number of myths related to the origin of the Kaveri. The most popular story, narrated at Talakaveri at the source of the river, in the Kodagu mountains, tells how Agastya married the Kaveri and placed her in his

kamaṇḍalu (water jar). One day, accidentally, a crow tipped over the pot and the Kaveri flowed out of it. The story is also popular in Tamil Nadu, and because of the connection with Agastya, an important figure in Tamil culture, the Kaveri became the symbol of Tamil language, literature and culture. Along its course are a number of holy sites; the most renowned is the sacred island of Srirangam, on which is the Raṅganātha temple. The Tapti is personified as the daughter of Sūrya and Chaya. The *Mahābhārata* narrates the love of Samvarṇa, a descendant of Bhārata for Taptī, and the birth of their child, Kuru, after whom the Kauravas were named (*Adi Parva* 7.89.40). The Krishna or Kistna has its source in mount Sahya on the Mahabalesvar plateau and reputedly was originated by the sweat of Śiva. Its chief tributary is the Bhima, on whose banks are Alandi, associated with the Maratha saint Jñānadeva (1275-96), and Pandharpur, with its celebrated temple dedicated to Viṭṭhoba.

Sacred geography is not only defined by mountains and rivers, but by other manifestations of the deities, such as the 108 Śakti pīthas and the twelve jyotirlingas, scattered throughout the subcontinent. It should be noted, however, that the location of some is not consistently identified. Among the most popular jyotirlingas are: the Kedareśa, a shapeless formation at Kedarnath in the Himālayas, the Mahākāleśvara (Mahākāla) at Ujjainī, the Mallikāṛjuna at Srisailam (Kurnool dst.), Omkareśvara on an island in the Narmada. In addition to the twelve jyotirlingas are the five elemental liṅgas in South India: the earth liṅga at Kāñcīpuram, the water liṅga at Jambukesvaram on Srirangam island, the fire liṅga at Arunachalam (Tiruvannamalai), the air liṅga at Kalahasti, and finally the ether liṅga at Cidambaram.

These holy places, in turn, are connected with other sites: deities are carried

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in procession from one temple to another according to the ritual calendar, thus strengthening the spatial and religious links between holy sites. Some places are connected to the career of a single deity, such as, for instance, the six tīrthas sacred to Murugaṇ, scattered through Tamil Nadu. Nine temples, known collectively as Nava Tirupati, in the Tambraparni basin are associated with various aspects of Viṣṇu and the career of some of the Aḷvārs. Another group of nine temples around Kumbakonam is dedicated each to one of the nine planets (Navagrahas).

In the last twenty-five years or so there has been a surge in affluence and in the numbers of pilgrims touring India. What was once an arduous journey is now made easier by the availability of trains, buses and aeroplanes. With the increased presence of visitors there is a standardisation of the 'services' offered at the various tīrthas, which, in the long run, might destroy the tīrtha's individuality. Among the visitors are the NRI (non resident Indians), for whom India is still a sacred space, with temples revered for generations by members of their own families. Although some 9 million Indians live outside India, and some of them have been severed from the subcontinent for the past 150 years, there is still a deep respect, if not reverence, for the land of their ancestors. Temples, religious and cultural institutions abroad, generally served by Indian swamis flown in for this purpose, and the strong ties between the motherland and those abroad demonstrate that diaspora Indians still look to India as the source of spiritual authority and inspiration.

See also: Agastya; Aḷvārs; Avatārā; Ayodhyā; Ayyappaṇ; Bhārat Mātā; Brāhmaṇas; Chatterjee, Bankim Chandra; Cidambaram; Diaspora; Dvārakā; Gaṅgā; Haridvāra; Himālayas; Image worship; Indra; Itihāsa; Jagannātha; Jainism, relationship with Hinduism; Kāñcīpura; Kauravas;

Kṛṣṇa; Languages; Madurai; Mahābhārata; Mahādevī; Meru, Mount; Murugaṇ; Navagrahas (Planets); Pārvaṭi; Pṛthivī; Purāṇas; Rāma; Rāmeśvara; Rāvaṇa; Ṛṣi; Śaivism; Śakti; Saṃhitā; Sati; Śesa; Siddha; Śiva; Subramanya; Sūrya; Svāmi; Tagore, Rabinandrat; Tīrthayātrā; Ujjainī; Vārāṇasī; Vaiṣṇavism; Varuṇa; Vasiṣṭha; Veda; Viṣṇu; Vṛndāvana; Yamunā

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SACRED TEXTS

Hinduism (if Hinduism can be characterised at all as a single entity) is characterised by the importance of texts of all kinds: prose and verse, written and oral, spoken and sung (whether by a single specialist or by a crowd), archaic and vernacular, stable and fluid. This entry discusses the place of texts in Hinduism, explains some categories of texts and gives references to those described elsewhere in this encyclopedia.