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# Sacred sites of South Asia

As the birthplace of several world religions, [South Asia](#), also known as the Indian Subcontinent, is home to countless sacred and holy sites. This article is about a few of the most notable sites of the **Buddhist**, **Hindu**, **Islamic**, **Jain**, **Sanamahist/Traditional Meitei** and **Sikh** faiths.

## Buddhist

See [Buddhism](#) for an article on Buddhism from an international point of view.

### Understand

[Buddhism](#) is a religion founded around 400-500 BC by Sakyamuni Buddha. Born in [Lumbini](#) as heir to the throne of the Kingdom of Sakya (in present day [Nepal](#), near the Indian border), Prince Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha's former name) discovered that a life of luxury did not lead to peace of mind, and that the rich, like the poor, still suffer the torments of old age, sickness and death. He therefore renounced his title and abandoned his wealth in order to seek a way that could lead all beings, without discrimination, to freedom from suffering. He spent six years experimenting with the various common methods of the day, but to no avail. Finally, at the age of thirty-five and while meditating under the bodhi tree at [Bodh Gaya](#), he awoke to the insights he had been seeking. The essence of the Buddha's discovery are categorized in his first teaching that was delivered to a group of five ascetics at the Deer Park in [Sarnath](#) and is called the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha finally passed away in a copse of sal trees at [Kushinagar](#). He was believed to be over 80 years old at the time.



The Mahabodhi Temple in [Bodh Gaya](#) ↗

For many centuries, Buddhism was the major religion in [India](#), and was supported by many great kings, with Asoka the Great (273–232 BC) perhaps the most famous. Buddhism's influence in India waxed and waned over the next millennium, and during the 6th and 7th century support was mostly confined to Southern India. However, perhaps the single most significant blow to Buddhism in India occurred in 1193 when Turkic Islamic raiders burnt the great Buddhist center of learning in [Nalanda](#) (in current day [Bihar](#)), and by the end of the 12th century it had all but disappeared from the lowlands, though it continued to thrive in the [Himalayan regions](#).

Buddhism as a philosophy and religion can roughly be divided into two schools: Theravada and Mahayana. The Theravada school which spread to Thailand, Sri Lanka and other South East Asian countries promotes personal liberation from suffering, whereas the Mahayana, which is prevalent in China, Japan, Taiwan, Korea, Bhutan and Tibet, emphasizes the liberation of all beings. The Vajrayana school, which is often called Tibetan Buddhism, is an offshoot of Mahayana and differs from it only in method, not philosophy. A common thread throughout all Buddhist schools is the cultivation of wisdom and compassion as a basis of interacting with the world, and the total rejection of religious conversion. All schools of Buddhism recognize karma (the law of cause and effect) as the creator of our illusory universe, which Buddhists refer to as *samsara*.

## Common images and symbols

- **Buddha Sakyamuni**. Obviously the most common image at Buddhist monasteries, and statues show the Buddha in a various number of postures, though the most common of these depicts the Buddha sitting in lotus posture with the finger tips of his right hand touching the ground.
- **Tara** (only in Vajrayana monasteries). This female deity can be depicted in a variety of colors, though green or white are the most common. Green Tara represents the Buddha's enlightened activity. White Tara represents compassion.
- **Padmasambhava** also known as Guru Rinpoche (only in Vajrayana monasteries, especially those of the Nyingma school). An eighth century sage credited as the founder of Vajrayana Buddhism. The most common images portray him in a sitting posture, wearing an elaborate hat and with his right leg lowered slightly. His eyes are wide open and appear to be gazing into the distance.
- **Prayer wheels** (Tib: *mani*) (only in Vajrayana monasteries). There are several types of prayer wheels, and the following are some of the most common: copper wheels mounted in walls surrounding monasteries and stupas, and large wooden wheels standing alone near the gates of monasteries. In addition, there are small hand-held wheels that are carried by devotees. All prayer wheels are rotated in a clockwise direction and with a sincere motivation to benefit all beings. In this way, they are considered an effective means of developing a generous and pure mind.



The eight-spoked dharma chakra represents the Noble Eight-fold path taught by the Buddha

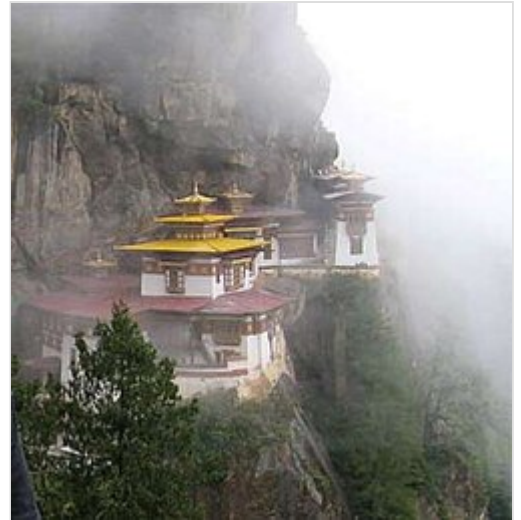
## Respect

- Wear clothing that expresses respect for the sacred nature of the site.
- Go barefoot within the main temple/stupa complex.
- Circumambulate stupas and other sacred objects in a clock-wise direction.
- Turn prayer wheels in a clockwise direction.
- Preserve the peace and tranquillity.
- Do not climb onto statues or other sacred objects.
- Do not sit with the soles of the feet facing a Buddha image (especially important in Theravada temples)

## Notable sites

Below is list of fourteen of the most notable Buddhist sites in the subcontinent:

- **Bodh Gaya**, Bihar, India — the place where the Buddha Sakyamuni attained enlightenment.
- **Boudhanath Stupa**, Boudhanath, Nepal — a large stupa with relics of a past Buddha.
- **Bumthang Valley**, Bhutan — the valley is considered the spiritual heart of Bhutan and contains many sacred sites, including the famous Kurjey Lhakhang in Jakar.
- **Ellora** and **Ajanta**, Maharashtra, India — spectacular rock-cut cave monasteries and temples, holy place for the Buddhists, Jains and Hindus.
- **Kushinagar**, Uttar Pradesh, India — the site where Buddha reached Mahaparinirvana and was cremated
- **Lumbini**, Nepal — the birth place of Sakyamuni Buddha.
- **Pharping**, Kathmandu Valley, one of the most sacred sites associated with Guru Rinpoche
- **Rewalsar (Tsopema)**, Himachal Pradesh, India — a sacred lake associated with the Buddhist sage Padmasambhava. A popular pilgrimage site for Tibetan Buddhists.
- **Sarnath**, Uttar Pradesh — the place where the Buddha first taught the *Dharma*.
- **Sitagarha Hill**, Marwateri Basin, Sitagarha Hill, Jharkhand, India. The site of a major Buddhist shrine and stone carved stupa dating from the Mauryan Period.
- **Taktshang Monastery**, (Tiger's Nest), Paro, Bhutan — a monastery associated with Guru Rinpoche. It is one of Bhutan's most sacred places.
- **The Temple of the Tooth**, Kandy, Sri Lanka — a temple housing a tooth that came from the mouth of Lord Buddha and is considered Sri Lanka's most sacred site.
- **Taxila**, Punjab, Pakistan — a major site with relics of the Buddha, including teeth and bone fragments, and many stupas and monasteries
- **Diamond Triangle, Odisha** — A collection of Buddhist archaeological sites comprising Ratnagiri, Udaygiri and Lalitgiri, along with a few minor sites.



Taktsang Monastery at Paro in Bhutan 

## Itinerary

There are many important sites for Buddhists in the Indian subcontinent. Undoubtedly the most notable are those connected with the four main events in the Buddha's life: his birth, enlightenment, first teaching and death. It is known as the Buddhist Circuit.

- **Lumbini**, Lumbini (zone), Nepal (birth)
- **Bodh Gaya**, Bihar, India — six hours by train from Varanasi to nearby Gaya. (enlightenment)
- **Sarnath**, Uttar Pradesh, India — six hours by train from Gaya to nearby Varanasi. (first teaching)
- **Kushinagar**, Uttar Pradesh, India (demise)

There is no special order that these pilgrimage sites should be visited. Sarnath is the nearest to Delhi, while Bodh Gaya is the closest to Kolkata. However, those who wish to visit Lumbini and return to India should ensure that they have a multi-entry visa. Otherwise, travelers planning to visit Nepal can place Lumbini last on their itinerary, and so eliminate the need to return to India. Likewise, travelers heading to India from Kathmandu should ideally visit Lumbini first. Seven or eight days is sufficient to make a short visit to each site, but travelers who wish to spend longer at each destination, and possibly visit other sites of interest in the area, should allow for two weeks, minimum. Among these sites, Bodh Gaya is considered the most sacred and is the most active, so if time constraints only allow a visit to one or two sites, then the place of the Buddha's enlightenment should definitely be given priority consideration.

For a fictional account of a Tibetan Lama on pilgrimage to these places, see On the trail of Kipling's Kim.

## Festivals

Vajrayana tradition

- **New Year**, first full moon in year (usually in February).
- **Modlam Chenmo**, 8th-15th day after lunar new year.
- **The Buddha's Enlightenment and Passing into Nirvana**, 15th day of 4th lunar month (usually May).
- **Guru Rinpoche's Birthday**, 10th day of the 6th lunar month.
- **Chokhor Duchen**, 4th day of the 6th lunar month (usually July). Celebrates the first sermon given by the Buddha Sakyamuni after enlightenment.

Theravada tradition

- **Vesak**, first full moon in May. Celebrates the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and passing into nirvana.
- **Asalha**, first full moon of 8th lunar month (usually July). Celebrates the first sermon given by the Buddha Sakyamuni after enlightenment.

## Hindu

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### Understand

Hinduism is the largest religion in the subcontinent and is considered among the oldest in the world. Hindus believe in a set of ideas called the *dharma*, or truth. According to Hindu philosophy, all living beings have an *atma* (soul), which is seen as a part of the supreme spirit the Brahman, that is reborn several times, in both human and animal form. The *karma* (actions) of people in one life will decide their fate in the next life.

Hinduism appears to have numerous gods, although many believe them to be different appearances of the supreme spirit, the *Brahman*. The other three most important manifestations are Brahma the creator, *Vishnu* the Preserver and *Shiva* the Destroyer. These gods are worshipped in a temple (known as a *mandir* in Hindi or a *Devalaya* in Sanskrit), most of which are elaborately decorated with carvings and sculptures. Each temple has its own priest(s) who carry out the *puja* (prayers) and rituals.

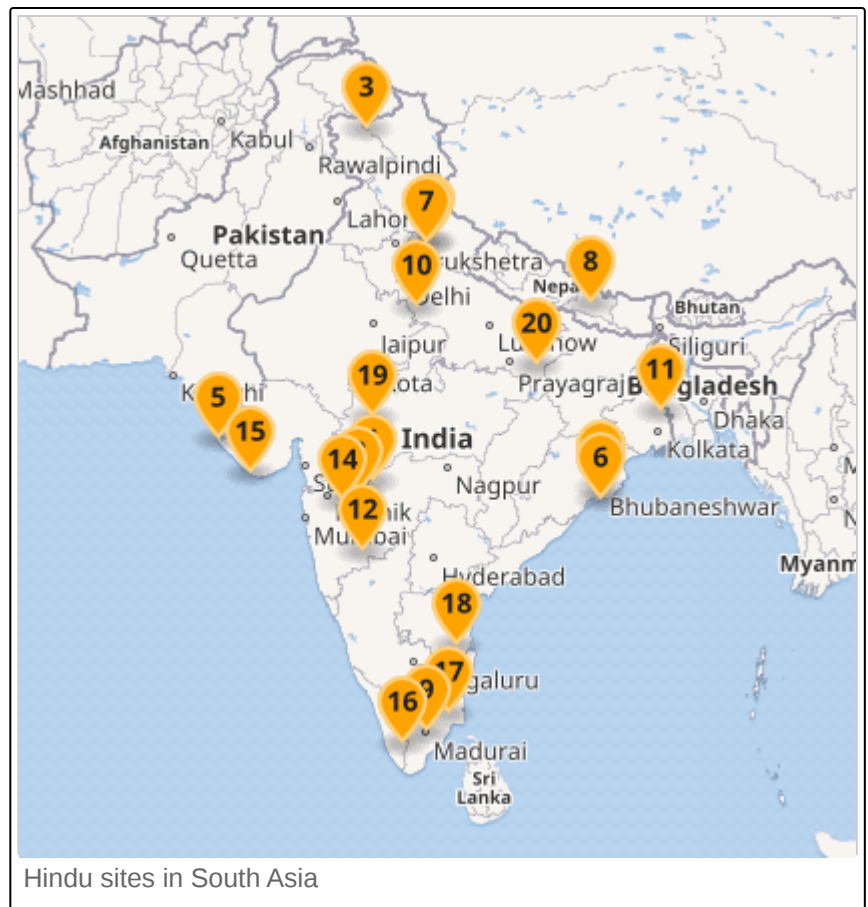


The Ganges river is considered to be holy by most Hindus, who believe that bathing in it will wash away their earthly sins. Millions of pilgrims take a dip in the holy water from the Varanasi ghats (the steps along the river-bank) and take some *Ganga Jal* (holy water) with them back as a blessing. Haridwar is another auspicious place for a dip.

The majority of Hindus live in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. There are small minorities in North America, Europe and the Middle East.

## Common images and symbols

- **Om.** The sacred syllable that represents God. Om refers to the oneness of the Atman (soul) and Brahman (ultimate reality and entirety of the universe). You will commonly hear the word chanted as part of mantras in temples and yoga schools. It is also common to see the Sanskrit inscription of this word.
- **Swastika.** Derived from the Sanskrit term for well-being, the Swastika is an equilateral cross. Each of its arms is bent at right angles in either the left or right direction. It is often decorated with a dot in each quadrant. It does not denote Nazism in India, and rather denotes purity of soul and truth.



Pilgrims bathing on the *ghats*, Varanasi

## Respect

- Do not disrespect or step on anything made of paper. Books are associated with *Saraswati* (the goddess of knowledge).
- If you decide to attend a prayer, remember to accept the flowers with your *right hand*, or with *both hands*.
- Take off your footwear before entering a temple.
- Do not bring non-vegetarian food or alcohol into the premises of a temple. In some cities like Haridwar, Rishikesh and Varanasi, alcohol and meat are banned.
- Some Hindu temples do not allow non-Hindus inside certain parts of the temple complex, others are open to all. Remember that these are places of worship, not tourist attractions.

## Destinations

Below are some of the most notable Hindu sacred sites in South Asia:

- **1 Ajanta** [W](#) and **2 Ellora** have spectacular rock-cut cave monasteries and temples, holy place for the Buddhists, Jains and Hindus.
- **3 Amarnath** (28 km northeast of [Pahalgam](#)), the site of the holy iced stalagmite *Shiva Lingam*
- **4 Bhubaneswar**, a temple town and capital of [Odisha](#), literally means God of Earth and features numerous temples in its old town.
- **Char Dham**, four pilgrimage places in India ([Badrinath](#), [Dwarka](#), [Puri](#), and [Rameswaram](#)) that are widely revered by Hindus. Geographically speaking the Char Dham make a perfect square with Badrinath and Rameswaram falling on same longitude and Dwarka and Puri on same latitude, representing the farthest north east west and south points of India in the 8th century.
  - **5 Dwarka**, the city which Krishna is believed to have founded and ruled for 100 years. Also the site of the western *matha*, established by Adi Shankaracharya in the 8th century.
  - **6 Puri**, temple town with the temple of [Konark](#) nearby.
- **7 Haridwar**, literally meaning the "Gateway to God", located at the banks of the Ganges (Ganga) River.
- **8 Kathmandu**, home to Nepal's holiest Hindu shrine, the Pashupatinath Temple.
- **9 Madurai**, centre of worship of the Goddess Meenakshi, who is regarded as an avatar of Parvati, the consort of Shiva.
- **10 Mathura**, believed to be the birthplace of Krishna.
- **11 Mayapur** is a temple town and the headquarters of ISKCON.
- **12 Pandharpur**, the site of the main temple of Vitthala, also known as Vithoba and Panduranga.
- **13 Rishikesh**, known as the 'Yoga Capital of the World'.
- **14 Shirdi**, Maharashtra, India — the site of the Samadhi of Saibaba.
- **15 Somnath**, Gujarat, India — Somnath temple, one of the twelve Jyotirlingas, is known as 'the Shrine Eternal', as although the temple has been destroyed six times it has been rebuilt every single time.
- **16 Sabarimala**, Kerala — The sacred hill-top shrine of Lord Ayyappan, famous for its pilgrimage recorded as world's second largest after the [Hajj](#).
- **17 Thanjavur** (Tanjore), once the capital of the great Chola Empire, and also home to many magnificent temples dating from that period.
- **18 Tirupati**, home to the Tirumala Venkateshwara Temple, the **most visited place of worship in the world**.
- **19 Ujjain**, one of the "Sapta Puri" (seven holy cities of Hinduism) and four sites where the Kumbha Mela mass gathering takes place every 12 years. Ujjain is also famous for its Mahakaleshwar Jyotirlinga temple, one of 12 most sacred Shiva temples. In ancient Indian astronomy, Ujjain was regarded as the prime meridian.
- **20 Varanasi**, the **holiest city** in the religion, along the banks of the Ganges River, and one of the oldest continuously-occupied cities in the world.

## Festivals

- **Diwali**, October/November. The festival of lights. Celebrated with *diyas*, candles, colourful lights, sweets and plenty of fireworks.

- **Dussehra**, October/November. Held on the last day of *Navratri* or *Durga Puja*. Celebrates the victory of good over evil. Huge effigies of the mythological characters *Ravana*, *Kumbhakarna* and *Meghnad* are stuffed with fireworks and burned.
- **Ganesh Chaturthi**, August/September. According to legend, Lord Ganesha was born on this day. It is at its most elaborate in Maharashtra.
- **Holi**, March. The festival of colours, Holi celebrates the coming of spring. A huge bonfire is held in the evening prior to the festival. In some places, people throw either powdered or liquid paints at each other on the streets, and many wear cheap white clothing for the occasion so good clothes will not get stained. People can get quite exuberant about this and some delight in painting any foreigners who may be about.
- **Janmashtami**, August/September. Celebrates the birth of Lord Krishna. Marked by devotional songs and dances.
- **Kumbh Mela**, dates vary. This Hindu festival occurs every 3 years and alternates between Prayagraj (Allahabad), Haridwar, Ujjain and Nashik. None of the events are small, but the *Maha Kumbh Mela* (held every 12 years in Prayagraj) is the largest gathering on Earth, attended by millions of bathers and observers.
- **Mahashivaratri**, March. Dedicated to Lord Shiva. At night, leaves are offered to the idol.
- **Rathyatra**, around July. Known As the "Car Festival" and dedicated to Sri Krishna. It is celebrated all over India, though the main activities are held in Puri, where a gigantic chariot is drawn through the town by thousands of devotees.



Diwali - the festival of lights

## Islamic

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Islam became well-established in the subcontinent under the Mughal Empire; today Muslims are a majority in Pakistan and Bangladesh, and a large minority in India.

### Understand

Founded by the Prophet Muhammad in the 6th century CE, Islam literally means *submitting to the will of God*. Muslims believe that when the Prophet was meditating in a cave on Mount Hira, near Mecca, the archangel Gabriel came to him and told him that there is one God but Allah and that Muhammad should become the messenger to carry out God's will and convey God's ideas to people. When Muhammad first began to preach he had difficulty in attracting followers, and the rulers of the city attempted to silence him, as they feared his preaching contradicted and threatened their profitable kaaba-based religion. In AD 622, the Prophet with his followers fled to the town of Yathrib (later renamed Medina). This flight, called the *Hijra*, marks the start of the Islamic calendar.

At Medina, Muhammad declared that people should peacefully live together, rather than fighting between tribes. The words of Allah, which Muhammad passed down to the people, were compiled in a holy book called the Koran (or the *Qur'an*).

To Muslims, Islam is a way of life supported by five pillars:

- There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His messenger
- A prayer to Allah is to be made five times a day
- Alms should be given to the poor at least once a year.

- Muslims should fast between dawn and dusk during the month of *Ramadan*; see Travelling during Ramadan.
- Muslims should make a pilgrimage to Mecca (known as the Hajj) at least once in their lifetime



Jama Masjid, Delhi

Muslims worship in mosques (*masjid* in Arabic/Urdu) and are called to prayer five times a day by the *muezzin*, at times set by the Koran. A Muslim religious leader is called an *Imam*. During prayers in the mosque, worshippers stand in a straight row behind him. Women usually pray in a separate area at the back of the mosque or just outside. Friday is the holy day for Muslims, when they gather in a mosque to offer *namaz* (morning prayers) and listen to a talk by the *Imam*. This occasion gives Muslims a chance to know each other, particularly in areas where Muslims are a minority.

India ranks second behind Indonesia with over 150 million Muslims. There are several Islamic sites in India, many are highly sacred. Most of the Indian Muslims are within the Sunni sect with believers adhering to two main schools, the liberal Shafi'i school mainly having its base in Kerala and South Indian states as well as conservative Hanfi found in other parts of India and a sizeable Shia sect mostly in Lucknow and Uttar Pradesh.

The Mughal Empire ruled large parts of the subcontinent for over 200 years starting in the 1520s, and were largely responsible for the spread of Islam in the region. They were great builders, creating many of the most important examples of Islamic architecture in the region or indeed in the world; the most famous of these is the Taj Mahal.

## Respect

- Wear clothes that cover your body well; avoid shorts or sleeveless tops.
- Non-Muslims are generally permitted to visit mosques in the Indian subcontinent, but should avoid entering at prayer times, especially during the main weekly prayer on Fridays.
- Remove footwear before entering a mosque.
- Do not disrespect *Imams* and other religious leaders.



Intricate calligraphy at Qutb Minar, Delhi

## Notable sites

Below is a list of a few of the most notable Islamic sites in the subcontinent:

- **Badshahi Masjid** in Lahore, Pakistan – built by the emperor Aurangzeb, in the same Mughal style as the Jama Masjid in Delhi which was built by his father
- **Cherman Palli** in Kochi, Kerala – built during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad by his messenger Malik-Dinar, this is the world's second mosque to be constructed after Medina Mosque and first mosque in South Asia.
- **Dargah of Moinuddin Chisti** in Ajmer, India – this tomb of a Sufi saint is hugely popular, not just among Muslims, but also Hindus and Christians. It's one of the largest dargahs on



the subcontinent, and people travel from all over to pay homage.

- **Dargah of Nizamuddin Auliya** in Delhi, India – one of the most famous Sufi saints of the subcontinent, he was a disciple of Moinuddin Chisti and his shrine is also revered among non-Muslims and very popular
- **Faisal Masjid** in Islamabad, Pakistan – One of the largest mosques in the world, the mosque and surrounding gardens can hold around 300,000 people
- **Dargah of Salim Chisti** in Fatehpur Sikri near Agra, India
- **Jama Masjid** in Delhi, India – the most famous and largest mosque in India, commissioned by Shah Jahan
- **Mecca Masjid** in Hyderabad, India - the second largest mosque in India, built by Quli Qutub Shah

## Festivals

- **Eid ul-Fitr**, 1st of *Shawwal*. Celebrates the end of the month of Ramadan when Muslims fast from dawn till dusk. Dates are usually used to break the fast. By far the most important date in the Islamic calendar.
- **Eid ul-Adha**, 10th of *Dhu al-Hijjah*. This date coincides with the pilgrimage to Mecca. Commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice all that he cherished, including his own son Ismael, for Allah's sake.
- **Muharram (Ashura)**, 10th of *Muharram*. The day when Muslims remember and mourn the death of Hussain at Karbala. Devout Shias beat themselves with canes and sticks to feel Hussain's pain.

## Jain

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### Understand

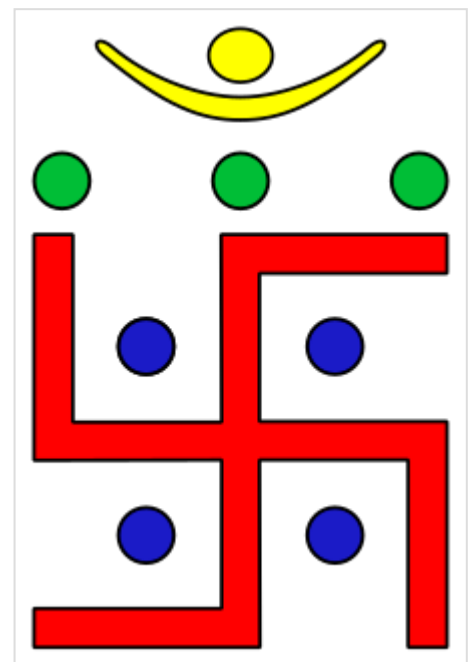
### Common images and symbols

### Respect

### Notable sites

Below is a list of a few of the most notable Jain sites in India:

- **Ellora** and **Ajanta**, Maharashtra, India — spectacular rock-cut cave monasteries and temples, holy place for the Buddhists, Jains and Hindus.
- **Gwalior**, Madhya Pradesh, India — home to dozens of Jain rock-cut sculptures.
- **Mount Abu**, Rajasthan, India — home to the complex of white marble Dilwada Temples.
- **Shikharji**, Jharkhand, India — Parshvanath Hill is about 4481 feet high, and twenty pilgrims are said to have attained Nirvana here.



Fylfot, a modified version of the swastika, is the symbol of the Jains. It is often laid out with rice grains outside the temple altar.

- **Shravanabelagola**, Karnataka, India — one of the most sacred places for Digambar Jains.
- **Palitana temples** or **Shatrunjay**, Gujarat; the largest temple cluster on the hill having more than 800 temples and shrines, the major pilgrimage place of Shvetambar Jains.

## Festivals

- **Mahavira Jayanti**, March/April. Celebrates the birth of Mahavira. Jain temples are decorated with flags. The most important date on the Jain calendar.
- **Kali Chaudash**, the day before Diwali. Jains avoid eating potatoes, onion or garlic on this day.
- **Mahamasthakabhisheka** is an important Jain festival held once every twelve years in the town of Shravanabelagola in Karnataka state, India. The festival is held in veneration of an immense 18 meter high statue of the Bhagwan (or Saint) Gomateshwara Bahubali. The anointing last took place in February 2006, and the next ceremony will occur in 2018.

## Sanamahist/Traditional Meitei

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See Sanamahism for an article on Sanamahism from a general point of view.

### Understand

Sanamahism or traditional Meitei religion (also known as *Lainingthouism*, *Lainingthou religion*, *Meiteism*, *Kangleism* or *Kanglei religion*) originated from Ancient Kangleipak (AKA Antique Manipur). Sanamahism is an animistic, polytheistic, shamanic, spiritualistic and totemic faith. It is an ethnic religion of the Meitei people (popularly known as Manipuri people), the largest community of Manipur.



Temple of Meitei God Pakhangba of Sanamahism inside the Kangla in Imphal

Among the population of Hindu Meiteis, Christian Meiteis and Buddhist Meiteis, the population of Sanamahism/Traditional Meitei religion followers accounts for 8% of the total population of Manipur, according to 2011 census.

### Common images and symbols

### Respect

Sanamahism allows people of any faith in entering the Sanamahist/traditional Meitei religious shrines or temples or any other holy sites.

- Visitors must remove their shoes, slippers and socks before entering into the sacred sites.
- Usually, either near the gate or near the entrance door of most traditional Meitei holy shrines, leaves of Tairen plant (*Toona ciliata*) are kept immersed in a clean water vessel. Every visitors are supposed to hold the leaves and sprinkle a little of the water on their heads or upper body parts to spiritually cleanse or purify the bodies of the visitors.

- In some places, such sprinkling of water with leaves are done by maibas (Meitei priests) or maibis (Meitei priestesses) in service of the temples. If a maiba or a maibi isn't present, you can sprinkle the water by yourself.

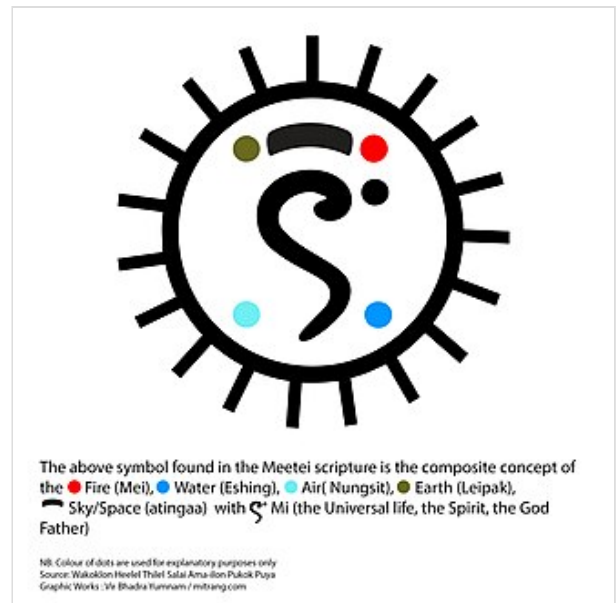
## Notable sites

1. **Kangla Pakhangba Temple** — It is dedicated to Meitei God Pakhangba. It is situated in the heart of the historic Kangla, in Imphal West district of Manipur.

2. **Lainingthou Sanamahi Kiyong Hongba Temple** — It is dedicated to Meitei God Lainingthou Sanamahi and is situated on the hilltop of the Selloi Langmai Ching Hills, in Imphal East district of Manipur.

3. **Ibudhou Marjing Temple, Heingang** — It is dedicated to Meitei God Marjing, the only deity of polo sports in the world. It is situated on the foothills of the Heingang Ching Hills of the Kontha Khabam region in Imphal East district of Manipur.

4. **Sanamahi Temple, Haying Khongban Uphong Yumpham** — It is dedicated to Meitei God Lainingthou Sanamahi and his foster mother Goddess Leimarel Sidabi. It is situated in the Sanakhwa Yaima Kollup, in Imphal West district of Manipur.



The Symbol of Sanamahism

## Sikh

### Understand

Sikhism originated in the Punjab. Sikhism began in 16th century Northern India with the teachings of Guru Nanak and nine successive Gurus. The Sikh system of philosophy is heavily based on the teachings of the Gurus, and is hence known as *Gurmat*. Guru Nanak, the first Sikh Guru, was born as a Hindu in the year 1469. He believed that ceremonies and rituals divided people of different religions and that it was the beliefs and actions of the people that really mattered. The teachings of the Gurus are compiled in the Sikh holy book, the *Guru Granth Sahib*. According to Sikh philosophy, there is one God who created the Universe. A Sikh place of worship is known as a *Gurudwara*. It is derived from the Sanskrit words *Guru* and *Dwaara* and literally means *the gateway to the Guru*. Sikhism is unique in that there are no priests. Readers, called *Granthi*, conduct services and read out passages from the *Guru Granth Sahib*. However, any member of the congregation may speak during a service.



Golden Temple, Amritsar

Worldwide, Sikhs number more than 23 million, but more than 90% of Sikhs live in the Indian state of Punjab, where they form close to 65% of the population. Large communities of Sikhs are also found in the neighboring states and across India, though they comprise only about 2% of the Indian population. Migration beginning from the nineteenth century led to the creation of significant communities in Canada (Brampton, Ontario; Surrey, British Columbia), the United Kingdom, the Middle East, East Africa, Southeast Asia and more recently, the United States, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

## Common images and symbols

### Respect

- Remember to remove your shoes and cover your head at all times when inside a gurdwara.
- Do not smoke or drink, and do not come intoxicated,
- Non-Sikhs are welcome inside any gurudwara in the world.

### Notable sites

Below is a list of some of the most notable Sikh sites in India:

- Amritsar, Punjab, India — Sikh holy city, home to The Golden Temple.

### Festivals

- **Diwali**, October/November. Sikhs celebrate Diwali to commemorate the laying of the foundation stone for the Golden Temple in 1577. Earthen lamps are used to illuminate houses and gurudwaras.
- **Baisakhi**, 13 April. Marks the Punjabi New Year and the beginning of the harvest season.

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