

The last set of four in the Laws of Manu is the Four Stages of Life. These are presented not only from a male perspective, but from an upper-class male perspective. The first stage is that of Student, a time when young men are expected to pursue their studies full-time and not work. They are also expected to be celibate. The second stage is the Householder. Here the man marries and raises a family. Most people in traditional Indian culture have not gone beyond these two stages.

The third stage of life, that of the Forest Dweller, occurs at about the age when people retire today. Here the man turns over most of the duties of running the household to someone younger and spends more time in contemplative activities. The fourth stage involves a complete break with what has gone before. It is that of the **sannyasi**, or Renunciant. The man stops all work, gives away his possessions, and holds a funeral for the man he was. He moves to a retreat to pursue meditation and enlightenment full time.

Hinduism Today

In describing classical Hinduism, we have switched between the past tense and the present tense, mentioning events from two thousand years ago and then commenting on the beliefs and practices of Hindus today. That is because most of the basic ideas and practices found in the 7th century have continued to be represented in Hinduism in the present, in one form or another. Philosophers after this created various schools of Hindu thought, and reformers changed some practices, but most of the ideas and practices of classical Hinduism are alive and well somewhere in India today.

Rituals

A good way to get a feel for contemporary Hinduism is to look at its rituals. The general term for a Hindu ritual is **puja**, the act of showing reverence to a deity through prayers, songs, and offerings. Pujas are conducted both in the home and at temples.

Many homes have a room or part of a room set aside for worship, with pictures or statues of the family's special deity or deities. Worshipers welcome the deity as an honored guest, anoint it with ghee (clarified butter), and offer him or her flowers and food. They may also light oil lamps and burn incense.

Worship is also conducted in temples. An ideal temple is located near a body of water. At the center of the temple is a womb-house, where the god or goddess is enshrined. There are not as many organized group prayers in a Hindu temple as in a synagogue, a mosque, or a church. Instead most people come to the temple to see the god or goddess, and to be seen by them. This is called **darshana**.

When a Brahmin priest does conduct a formal ritual, he offers food or flowers to the deity and then gives some back to the people as a gift from the deity. Worshipers may even go to the temple kitchen to buy food that has been offered to the deity and is now a token of the deity's grace. This consecrated food is called **prasada**.

Temples are supported financially by donors. The most visited temple in India, Tirupati Balaji, draws thousands of visitors a day.



FIGURE 7.11 Students celebrating Holi. © Jayanta Shaw/Reuters/Corbis.

Besides rituals in the home and in temples, Hinduism has many seasonal festivals. **Holi**, for example, is a spring festival celebrated with bonfires and with people splashing colored powder and water on each other.

The birthdays of Krishna, Rama, and **Ganesha** are also celebrated.

As in other religions, too, there are rituals to mark important events in individuals' lives. After a child is born, there is a ceremony in which the father prays for the health and happiness of the child. There are also rituals for naming the child, for feeding the child its first solid food, and for the first cutting of its hair. Among the most important is a "rite of passage." At about age eight, a young brahmin boy is initiated into the study of the Vedas. The ceremony involves the chanting of a short **mantra** (sound or word or words that are considered effective in transforming reality, like a prayer in the monotheisms) and a day of begging. Then he is given a sacred thread to wear over his left shoulder, marking him as a brahmin.

Some groups have ceremonies to mark a girl's beginning of menstruation. She wears new clothing with flowers in her hair and is given special foods.

Weddings are major community events. There are many variations in the ceremonies, which can last from half an hour to five days. Traditionally, marriages are arranged by Hindu families. Parents try to match their offspring's mates in social class, age, and looks. When suitable possibilities are found, parents compare their horoscopes, to get compatible personality types and also to see that their horoscopes do not predict that they will have hardships at the same time in life. Today it is common for families to advertise their sons and daughters as eligible in newspapers and online. (To see what the process looks like, try <http://www.bharatmatrimony.com>.) All these rituals and precautions are good examples of how people's traditions provide rites of passage to mark the milestones in life, as



Mohandas Gandhi (d. 1948) on God, Truth, and Politics

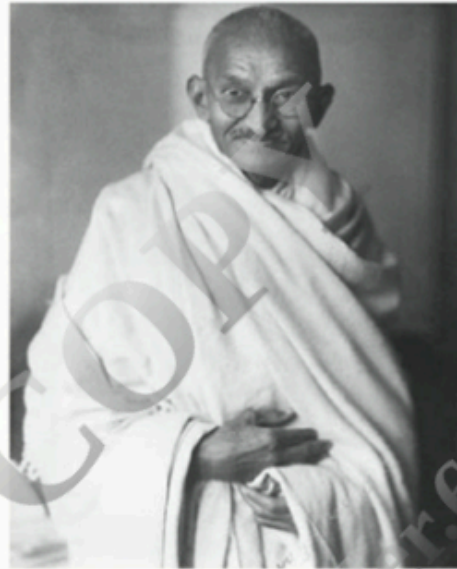


FIGURE 7.12 Mohandas Gandhi.
Dinodia Photos/Getty Images.

Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi was the spiritual and political leader of India in its drive for political independence from Britain in the first half of the 20th century. The country officially calls him Father of the Nation, and he is also known simply as Bapu, Father. Gandhi's birthday, October 2, is a national holiday in India. He advocated non-violent civil disobedience to liberate India, an approach that inspired many other leaders, such as Martin Luther King Jr. in the U.S. Trained as a lawyer, Gandhi left many memorable writings and speeches.

What I want to achieve, – what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years, – is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain Moksha [freedom from birth and death].... All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field, are directed to this same end.... The experiments I am about to relate are... spiritual, or rather moral; for the essence of religion is morality.

...I have given the chapters I propose to write the title of *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. These will of course include experiments with non-violence, celibacy and other principles of conduct believed to be distinct from truth. But for me, truth is the sovereign principle, which includes numerous other principles. This truth is not only truthfulness in word, but truthfulness in thought also, and not only the relative truth of our

conception, but the Absolute Truth, the Eternal Principle, that is God. There are innumerable definitions of God, because His manifestations are innumerable. They overwhelm me with wonder and awe and for a moment stun me. But I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found Him, but I am seeking after Him.... Often in my progress I have had faint glimpses of the Absolute Truth, God, and daily the conviction is growing upon me that He alone is real and all else is unreal.... The instruments for the quest of truth are as simple as they are difficult.... The seeker after truth should be humbler than the dust. The world crushes the dust under its feet, but the seeker after truth should so humble himself that even the dust could crush him.

Gandhi 1957, Introduction

anthropologists such as Geertz have noted. They also show how they make sense of life by giving people ways to make their future more predictable and so controllable.

Funerals are, of course, the final rite of passage. After the death of a family member, the relatives prepare the body for cremation with ritual cleansing and dressing. Burning the corpse is seen as the ideal way to release the soul (sometimes called the "astral body"). Many believe that the soul will linger as long as the body is visible, so quick cremation is best. The body is carried to the cremation site as prayers are chanted to Yama, the god of death. At the site, the chief mourner, usually the eldest son, takes twigs of holy kusha grass from an ever-burning fire to the funeral pyre, the pile of wood on which the corpse rests. He walks around the pyre counterclockwise – because everything is backwards at the time of death – and then lights the fire. The dead person is now an offering to Agni, the fire. As in the most ancient Vedic times, the fire is seen as an offering to heaven.

When the corpse is almost completely burned, the chief mourner performs the "rite of the skull," using a bamboo stick to crack the skull, thus releasing the soul. After the cremation, the ashes are thrown into a river, ideally the Ganges, and the mourners walk away without looking back. Because corpses are impure, everyone takes a purifying bath after the funeral. The immediate family remains in a state of pollution for a set number of days (10, 11, or 13 in most places), after which close relatives gather for a ceremonial meal. During memorial services, *pindas* (rice balls) are offered to the spirit of the dead person. Some say that the *pindas* provide the dead with a symbolic transitional body.

Buddhism

In much the same way that Islam began as a reform movement within the monotheistic tradition, and Protestantism was a movement to reform Roman Catholicism, Buddhism grew out of Hinduism as a movement that rejected certain features of Vedic religion. Buddhism accepted three important Hindu beliefs: karma, the natural justice of the universe; *samsara*, the cycle of rebirth; and the goal of *moksha*, to escape from this cycle.