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Learning Objectives

In this unit you will:

- explore and analyse Hindu ideas about the Divine
- investigate the nature of some popular Hindu deities
- reflect on how believers connect to the Divine.

1.2 One Supreme Spirit in Many Forms

Just as each of us is many different things at once, most Hindus believe that the Divine, often called Bhagvan, is also One and Many (see Unit 1.1). Many Hindus also believe that the Divine can take on a human or animal form at times, when the world needs extra guidance (see Unit 4.6). These forms are called incarnations or avatars (meaning ‘in this body’). Most Hindus have a personal or family favourite image of Bhagvan.

Avatar/incarnation The Divine in human (or animal) form (the word avatar has also been used in recent years to mean an online image of a person)
Bhagvan A Hindu word for the Divine
Deity A god or goddess (the Divine)

Useful Words

Case Study

Some young Hindus are asked to share what their favourite image of Bhagvan is and why.

Gaiatri, Neha’s cousin, who is only six, shares that she likes Lord Ganesha, ‘because he is an elephant and I love elephants. He feels like my family.’

Lord Ganesha is also known as Ganapati.

Nisha Patani, who is fourteen, identifies with the Divine in the avatar of Lord Krishna, because ‘he has fun’ and ‘he’s like one of us’. Even though many Hindu deities are portrayed as being ‘strong, powerful and fierce’, many are also thought to have a more ‘human’ side.

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Reflection

Does it matter what form believers imagine the Divine to take?

Neha Dave, who is thirteen, particularly respects Lord Hanuman because ‘every time anyone wants help, he would help them’. For Neha, different religions are just different ways of seeing one God: ‘We have loads [of gods and goddesses], but it doesn’t mean we don’t believe in other ones, like Jesus. There is only one God, really.’

Neha appreciates Lord Hanuman’s loyalty.

How does this image support the idea of ‘One Supreme Spirit in many Forms’? Does the Vishvarupa image help you to understand this concept better, or does it confuse you?

a. This image is called Vishvarupa. It symbolizes the idea of God as ‘One Supreme Spirit in Many Forms’.

Activities

1. Design a symbol or explain in words suitable for a younger student, how ‘one God can also be many’. Compare your outcomes with a partner or in threes. Which ideas work best and why?

2. Imagine that you have five minutes to interview Neha Dave about the issue of ‘One Supreme Spirit in Many Forms’. Create a list of engaging questions to ask her that will help you to learn more about her beliefs and how they affect her life.

3. Think about the statement ‘The Divine cannot be fun’. How might Nisha Patani answer this? Work in pairs to script her likely response.

4. ‘If God comes to earth to help out in times of need, why is there no incarnation right now? It’s proof there is no God!’ Prepare to argue your side in a debate about this issue.

Some young Hindus are asked to share what their favourite image of Bhagvan is and why.
In this unit you will:

- examine links between Hindu lifestyles and beliefs about death
- reflect upon and begin to explain your own views about what death is
- evaluate the spiritual experiences of other people.

For most Hindus, reincarnation means a cycle of birth, existence, death and rebirth. The soul – which is not physical – is believed to live many lives, each one being affected by actions in previous lives. The body is described in Hindu scripture as ‘clothing’ for the soul. When it is damaged or too old, the soul moves on to a new body – just as a person might discard worn out clothes and get new ones. Many Hindus believe that the aim for all souls should be to stop being reborn and to become one with the Supreme Spirit. This is called moksha.

'Just as a person casts off worn-out clothes and puts on new ones, the soul casts off worn-out bodies and enters others that are new.'
Bhagavad Gita 2.22

'For certain is death for the born and certain is birth for the dead.'
Bhagavad Gita 2.27

‘The soul may go to the womb of a mother and thus obtain a new body. It may even go into the trees or plants, according to its previous wisdom and work.’
Katha Upanishad Part 5

a

Some Hindus believe that all living things have a soul.

b

Do you believe death means anything?

A cycle of birth, existence, death and rebirth

The Hindu term for heaven

The Hindu term for hell

Afterlife

Moksha

Narg

Reincarnation

Swarg

Useful Words

What do you think is meant by the idea that the soul might be attached to a place on Earth?

How far are your beliefs about death shaped by family, friends or media, and how much is ‘gut instinct’ from you?

How might beliefs about death affect what you do in life? Discuss with a partner.

What death involves means different things to different people. Often this is shaped by their faith or cultural background, as well as their education and life experiences. Some firmly believe that death is the absolute end of existence and any form of consciousness. Others believe in some kind of afterlife – perhaps a ‘perfect’ place (such as heaven or paradise) or a terrible place (such as hell).

Hindu beliefs cover a range of views. There are concepts of temporary ‘heaven’ and ‘hell’, known as swarg and narg, and also a belief in returning as a ‘spirit’ or ‘ghost’ if the atman (the eternal part of a person) is too attached to a place or problem on Earth. However the main belief is reincarnation.

‘Do not stand at my grave and weep, I am not there; I do not sleep. I am a thousand winds that blow, I am the diamond glints on snow, Do not stand at my grave and cry, I am not there, I did not die.’
Mary Frye

Starter

Read the poem extract below from ‘Do not stand at my grave and weep’. What does this extract say about death? Do you agree?

Reflection

Can anyone ever know for certain what death means? Do you think that ‘knowing’ matters more than ‘believing’ something is true?

Activities

1. Demonstrate your understanding of at least one of the above quotations about reincarnation by putting it into a different format, e.g. a slogan, symbol, cartoon, or rap.

2. a. What do you believe death means and why?

b. How far are your beliefs about death shaped by family, friends or media, and how much is ‘gut instinct’ from you?

How might beliefs about death affect what you do in life? Discuss with a partner.
Objectives
● Explore and evaluate some key Hindu beliefs about the purpose of life
● Reflect on the meaning of life and justify an argument
● Develop effective presentation skills

Task
Use a range of presentation techniques to share your answers to the questions:
● What is the meaning of life, according to a Hindu?
● Do you agree or disagree with the Hindu view?
You must include reference to some Hindu ideas about the purpose of life, the Divine and atman.

A bit of guidance...
Aim to use a wide range of religious terms, and to give examples to support what you say. Don’t be afraid to share your own views too (in fact, this is a key feature of progress in RE!) but do include reasons why you have those views in order to justify what you say.

Hints and tips
To help you tackle this task, you could:
● use ICT – PowerPoint, video clips, audio clips or sound effects, web links to newspaper accounts, for example
● create a background poster or use props
● have cue cards to support a PowerPoint presentation
● research an area that particularly interests you for further examples and evidence
● explore what some other faiths believe about the issue
● conduct a survey and present the results as a graph, and analyse the results as part of your evaluation.

I can...

Level 3
● use religious vocabulary to describe and evaluate some Hindu beliefs about the purpose of life and death
● explore and explain my own view.

Level 4
● use a range of religious vocabulary to explain and evaluate some Hindu beliefs about the purpose of life and death
● explore and explain my own view and some alternate views.

Level 5
● use a wide range of religious vocabulary to explore and evaluate a range of Hindu beliefs about the purpose of life and death
● justify and evaluate my own view and a range of alternate views.

Level 6
● use religious and philosophical language accurately and with confidence to explore and evaluate a range of Hindu beliefs about the purpose of life and death
● justify and evaluate my own view and a range of alternate views, with reference to how these views may impact individuals and society.

Guidance
What level are you aiming at? Have a look at the grid below to see what you need to do to achieve that level. What would you need to do to improve your work?

Ready for more?
When you have completed this task, you can also work on your skills for Levels 6 and 7, and perhaps even higher. This is an extension task.
In addition to Hindu views, your own reflections, and also some non-religious views (which are explored in the chapter), you could now go on to research, explain and evaluate responses to ‘What is the meaning of life?’ from at least one (ideally two) other faith or belief system. Include analysis of how these views impact on individuals and society. Finally, compare and contrast your findings with some of the Hindu views you have studied.