

Why are worship and rituals significant in Hinduism?

Lauren: Hello and welcome to the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast. I'm your host, Lauren Layfield. I'm a TV and Radio presenter, and this series is all about Hinduism.

We're exploring the key beliefs and practices you may come across, and in this episode, we're looking at how the Hindu faith is expressed through worship and rituals. And we're very lucky. We're joined by Vallisa Chauhan who is going to help us explore some of these topics.

Vallisa: Hi Lauren! As a broadcaster, you might hear me on the radio. And a big part of my life is my faith. I've been raised Hindu and I remember spending afternoons at my grandma's house worshipping and learning about Hindu rituals, so I am excited to share my experiences with you.

Lauren: And we're excited to hear them. But before we get into any of the details, make sure you grab a pen, some paper, or just your notes app, because throughout the episode, we'll highlight key ideas you might want to jot down.

Vallisa: And stay tuned until the end of the episode, because we'll be doing a quick quiz to test what you've learnt!

Lauren: Vallisa, can you tell us about worship in Hinduism?

Vallisa: Of course I can! During worship, Hindus show respect and devotion to Brahman, the ultimate divine being. Worship can take place at home with smaller, more personal rituals, or in temples, surrounded by community. One form of worship I take part in daily is puja.

Lauren: Puja. Now I remember we touched on this in our episode on Hindu understandings of God. And remember you can listen to that episode, and all the others in this series, over on the BBC Sounds app. You just need to search for Bitesize GCSE Hinduism. So, can you tell me more about puja please, Vallisa?

Vallisa: Puja is a form of worship where Hindus show devotion to one or more deities, or divine entities. For many Hindus, the deities represent different aspects of Brahman.

Lauren: And where might puja worship take place?

Vallisa: Puja is commonly done in the home, and it's a part of daily life for many Hindus. We may worship in front of a shrine, in a clean and dedicated space, to show respect to our chosen deity. Having this at home also means families can participate in worship together.

Lauren: So, what does puja mean for your family?

Vallisa: Well, my great-grandmother and my nan were both deeply devoted, and they spent a considerable amount of time worshipping at home, especially on Sundays. Their dedication shaped the spiritual rhythm of our home. Puja became an important part of daily life, bringing a sense of routine and reflection. More than that, it brought the whole family together, particularly on major religious occasions creating memorable moments of unity, devotion, and shared tradition that have stayed with me.

(Sound of puja worship)

Lauren: Now Valissa, I understand that it can be common to engage all 5 senses during puja. So that's sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch.

Vallisa: Yes Lauren, that's right. Engaging in all the senses can help deepen focus and create a more immersive experience of worship. Let's go through some examples from the five senses.

- Sight: Some Hindus worship in front of an image or statue of a deity, known as a 'murti', which helps focus their devotion. Common deities to focus on during puja are the Trimurti; Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva.
- Touch: A red powder called kumkum may be placed on the head of the worshipper, and of the murti. It's a sign of respect.
- Sound: A bell may be rung at the start of worship to mark the beginning of puja and help focus the mind on the divine.
- Smell: Incense can often be burned to create a peaceful atmosphere and to support concentration during worship.
- And taste: Food, such as fruit, may be offered to the deity. This offering is later shared and eaten. This is called 'prasad' or blessed food.

Lauren: It sounds like a feast for the senses! If you would like more information on puja, or anything else we discuss in this series, there are lots more resources on the Bitesize website. All you need to do is search for Bitesize GCSE Hinduism.

(Sounds of mantra)

Lauren: Are there any other key Hindu practices you can tell me about Vallisa?

Vallisa: There's also bhajan - that's singing devotional songs or hymns. And japa - that's repetition of mantras.

Lauren: OK can you talk more about mantras?

Vallisa: Mantras are sacred words or sounds that are repeated lots of times. In Hinduism, a mantra can go from a singular syllable like "om", to a full phrase like the Gayatri Mantra which goes like this, "Om Bhur Bhuvaḥ Suvaha Tat-savitur Vareṇyaṃ Bhargo Devasya Dheemahi Dhiyo Yonaḥ Prachodayāt"

The Gayatri Mantra is a prayer focusing on wisdom and devotion. Typically, you will hear mantras chanted or sung, rather than just spoken.

Lauren: And why are they so significant in Hinduism?

Vallisa: Well chanting or singing mantras can be a form of meditation. It helps to calm our minds and focus on our faith. Repeating a mantra helps me to focus on Brahman and worship. For me, I usually chant mantras at home when I need time to take a moment and forget the outside world.

Lauren: OK so we've covered certain types of worship in Hinduism. Vallisa, can we now move on to places of worship. Can you tell me about the Hindu temples?

Vallisa: Yes, I can. A Hindu temple is called a 'mandir'. They're a sacred place where Hindus can show devotion to Brahman outside of their home. It is not mandatory to attend the temple but for many, the temple is a sacred space and can really help to focus worship. Many Hindus like to experience the spiritual atmosphere here.

Lauren: And what do Hindu temples look like?

Vallisa: They're absolutely beautiful and you would love them. Temples vary, but they're traditionally palace-like structures, often elaborately designed, sometimes with carvings that tell religious stories. Although many deities may be represented in a temple, it will often be dedicated to one deity in particular.

Lauren: Oh yes so certain branches of Hinduism have temples dedicated to different deities, don't they?

Vallisa: Yes Lauren! It may not be the only deity they worship, but certain branches may have a deity they primarily worship. Followers of Shaivism see the deity Shiva as their Supreme Lord and therefore their temple will be dedicated to Shiva. And followers of Vaishnavism primarily worship Vishnu as their Supreme Lord and may attend a temple dedicated to Vishnu.

Lauren: And what are the rituals like in a Hindu temple then?

Vallisa: In a temple, rituals might include things like; removing shoes before you enter the place of worship, ringing the temple bell next to the shrine, walking clockwise around the shrine of the deity before prayer, and displaying sacred symbols with powerful meanings in Hinduism. One example is the lotus flower.

Lauren: I would love to know more about the lotus flower as a symbol.

Vallisa: The lotus is a flower that grows from muddy water but rises to the top and when it blooms it is clean and beautiful. Because of this, it's often seen as a sacred symbol representing purity, and spiritual growth. The lotus is commonly associated with deities like Vishnu and Lakshmi, who are sometimes shown seated or standing on a lotus, representing divine beauty and purity.

Lauren: It does sound like symbols are really important within your faith.

Vallisa: Definitely. There's a quote from the Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 9 Verse 27, which says, "Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer, do it as an offering to me." This quote emphasises the importance of turning daily activities into spiritual offerings to Brahman. Everyday things, like eating and praying, are a way for us to show devotion to Brahman, and act selflessly.

Lauren: And there are more examples of symbols within Hinduism on the Bitesize website - just search 'Bitesize GCSE Hinduism'. So, we've spoken about worship at home, and in temples. Are there any other ways that Hindus show devotion to Brahman?

Vallisa: Yes, there's also pilgrimage. A pilgrimage is a journey to a place with a religious or spiritual connection. Often it will be a place connected to a sacred story or a deity, like a place they once lived or spent time in. Some Hindus may also make journeys to important mandirs, or in the UK to festival celebrations, as acts of devotion. Other common destinations for pilgrimage are rivers.

Lauren: Can you tell us why rivers are significant in Hinduism?

Vallisa: Well rivers are mentioned throughout sacred Hindu texts like the Rig Veda, where they are presented as givers of life. So, some pilgrimages involve visiting rivers like the River Ganges, one of the holiest rivers in India. It's believed by many to flow directly to earth from Lord Shiva's hair to purify human beings. In some scriptures it's referred to as the Mother Ganges. Tens of millions of people come to

the Ganges each year with the hope of purifying themselves and working towards moksha - that's freedom from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth.

Lauren: I think it's really inspiring to think of so many people going to one place for the same purpose.

Vallisa: It really is, and during events like Kumbh Mela, which is a big Hindu festival, people from all different backgrounds come to the water for ritual bathing and spiritual purification.

Lauren: Ok Vallisa, I think it's time you put me to the test with a quick quiz.

Vallisa: Let's do it. Grab a pen and paper or your notes app and write your answers down too. And pause this episode if you need time to think. So, the first question. What do we call the key Hindu ritual of worship which can involve awakening the five senses?

Lauren: Ok I know this. It is Puja!

Vallisa: Correct, well done! Puja can be done at home, or in the temple. Next question. What do we call the words or phrases that might be repeated during Hindu worship?

Lauren: Those would be mantras.

Vallisa: Perfect! And the final question. What do we call the journey that some Hindus may take to a place with a religious or spiritual connection?

Lauren: That's a pilgrimage, and an example would be the journey lots of Hindus take to the River Ganges.

Vallisa: Exactly, top marks Lauren!

Lauren: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast.

Vallisa: In the next episode, we'll be talking about festivals and their significance within Hinduism. I can't wait for that.

Lauren: Me too and remember we have series on other faiths that you might be studying, so check those out too. Just search for Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies over on BBC Sounds.

Vallisa: See you next time!

Lauren: We'll see you next time!