

What do Hindu traditions teach about God?

Lauren: Hello and welcome to the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast. I'm Lauren Layfield. I'm a TV and radio presenter, and your host for this series on Hinduism.

We'll be exploring some of the key beliefs and practices you may come across in your GCSE studies, and in this episode, we're exploring how God, or the Ultimate Reality, is understood in Hinduism. Joining me to do so is my brilliant co-host, Vallisa Chauhan. Hi Vallisa!

Vallisa: Hi Lauren. I'm so excited to be here!

Lauren: Can you tell us a little bit more about yourself?

Vallisa: Yes, I am a broadcaster, presenting on radio stations like BBC Asian Network. And I have been raised in the Hindu faith. Growing up, my great grandma had a large temple in her house where people would come to seek blessings. So, my faith has been around me for my whole life and I'm looking forward to telling you more about it.

Lauren: Sounds amazing, and before we get into those details, make sure you grab a pen, some paper, or your notes app, because throughout the episode, we'll highlight some key ideas that you might want to jot down.

Vallisa: And keep listening until the end, because there'll be a quick quiz!

Lauren: So Vallisa, Hinduism is one of the world's major religions, isn't it?

Vallisa: That's right. It's actually one of the oldest of the major religions, with its roots going back thousands of years. There are over a billion Hindus worldwide, and India has the largest population of Hindus.

Lauren: That is really helpful, and are there different branches of Hinduism?

Vallisa: Yes Lauren. Hinduism is very diverse. There are different branches, such as Vaishnavism and Shaivism, the key difference being the Hindu deity they focus on during worship. But there are some fundamental ideas that most Hindus follow when it comes to worship.

For example, Hinduism teaches us to worship one, single ultimate divine reality, called Brahman. This idea of worshipping one divine reality is called 'monotheism' - mono meaning one. In Hinduism, Brahman is often described as a divine consciousness or supreme reality, responsible for all existence.

Lauren: And are there different ways to think about this belief in Brahman?

Vallisa: Yes, there are different ways Hindus understand Brahman. I'm going to talk about two key interpretations; Nirguna Brahman, and Saguna Brahman.

Lauren: Ok let's start with Nirguna Brahman. What is that belief?

Vallisa: Nirguna Brahman is the belief that Brahman, the ultimate reality, has no physical form and is beyond human understanding. Nirguna Brahman teaches that Brahman cannot be described in human terms and is eternal and unchanging. Hindus who follow Nirguna Brahman focus on experiencing this formless reality, often through meditation rather than through images or physical representation.

Lauren: And what about the Saguna Brahman belief?

Vallisa: Another way that Brahman can be understood is Saguna Brahman. Saguna teaches that Brahman does have a physical, personal form. Many believe that Brahman has lots of different aspects and characteristics. Hindus who follow Saguna

may use deities, like Vishnu and Shiva, to help understand these many parts of Brahman's nature. We'll talk more about deities in this next section.

Lauren: Okay thanks for explaining that, Vallisa. And for more information on the many interpretations of Brahman and other Hindu beliefs, head to the Bitesize website. Just search for 'Bitesize GCSE Hinduism'.

(Sound of Hindu prayer)

Lauren: Valissa, you mentioned deities just now. Could you tell me more about the role of deities for some Hindu worship?

Vallisa: Of course I can! For many Hindus who understand Brahman in the physical form (Saguna Brahman) deities are divine entities that they may worship. Some might describe deities as gods or goddesses, but throughout this series we'll refer to them as deities. Deities in Hinduism include entities such as Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahma who symbolise aspects of Brahman.

Lauren: Okay got it. So, what is the connection between deities and Brahman in Hinduism?

Vallisa: Well, many Hindus worship one or more deities as a way of understanding and connecting with Brahman. This idea of worshipping many deities is called 'polytheism' - poly meaning 'many'. Although Hindus may worship different deities, the deities are understood as expressions of the one ultimate reality, Brahman. In this way, Hindus can believe in both monotheism and polytheism.

Lauren: Ok so could you give some examples of some of the deities Hindus might worship?

Vallisa: Of course! In Hinduism, when worship involves a deity, it's called 'puja'. There are lots and lots of deities that Hindus may worship during puja, but the most commonly worshiped ones are referred to as the Trimurti, or the three forms. These three male deities represent the three most significant parts of Brahman. They are; Brahma (The Creator), Vishnu (The Preserver), and Shiva (The Destroyer).

Lauren: Can you tell me more about these three deities?

Vallisa: Yes, I can. Brahma, The Creator is the part of Brahman responsible for bringing all living beings into existence. Brahma is usually depicted with four heads and four arms. He's often holding sacred texts in his hand.

Lauren: And what about Vishnu?

Vallisa: Vishnu is the preserver and protector. He is responsible for creating and maintaining balance in the world. Vishnu is often depicted with a human body and often has blue skin and four arms.

Lauren: And Shiva, the Destroyer?

Vallisa: Shiva is associated with destruction, but in Hinduism that isn't negative. Destruction is about transformation and renewal. Shiva removes obstacles and allows new things to emerge. In images, Shiva often has three eyes, the third eye giving him an inward vision. He'll often have a snake around his neck and have his weapon, a three-pronged spear or trident, nearby.

Lauren: And you can see images of the deities we've talked about on the Bitesize website. All you need to do is search for 'Bitesize GCSE Hinduism deities'.

(Sound of puja chanting)

Lauren: So Vallisa, can you tell us how Hindus decide which deity to worship?

Vallisa: Great question Lauren. Hindus often worship different deities at different times. It might be a particular festival. For example, during Diwali, Hindus often worship Lakshmi, the deity of wealth and prosperity. Or some Hindus may be praying for something specific.

For example, if they're starting a new job and want a smooth first day, they might worship the deity Ganesha, who like Shiva is also a mover of obstacles. In my own

home, I pray to Ganesha first, at the beginning of all rituals, so that I can remove obstacles before anything else begins.

Lauren: OK so do some groups of Hindus worship certain deities more than others?

Vallisa: Yes! Some groups, or branches, of Hinduism do have a particular focus on certain deities. The two largest branches of Hinduism are Shaivism and Vaishnavism. The followers of Shaivism view the deity Shiva as their Supreme Lord. Remember Shiva is the Destroyer. And followers of Vaishnavism see the deity Vishnu as their Supreme Lord. Vishnu as in the Preserver.

Lauren: OK so how might puja be different for followers of Shaivism and Vaishnavism?

Vallisa: Well, it's mostly about where the focus of the worship goes. In Shaivism, the focus is on Shiva, and in Vaishnavism, it's on Vishnu, though all deities are still respected.

Lauren: And could you talk a bit about why puja worship is significant for Hindus?

Vallisa: Yes definitely. Worshipping deities through puja can help Hindus feel connected to Brahman. We can reflect on different aspects of Brahman by focusing on a particular deity. Puja allows us to put aside any ego, and to think only about Brahman the supreme being, and our connection to the deities. It also brings together our community as some Hindus practice puja together, especially during festival times.

Lauren: And we'll talk more about puja and what it might entail in our episode on worship and rituals. You can listen to that, and all episodes in this series, by searching 'Bitesize Hinduism' on BBC Sounds. Vallisa, are there any other key Hindu beliefs about Brahman?

Vallisa: Yes, another key belief in Hinduism is that each person has a soul or inner self. We call that Atman. The Atman is separate to the physical part of a person. Hinduism teaches that the Atman, or soul, is connected to Brahman, the ultimate divine reality.

This idea appears in the Hindu scripture the Bhagavad Gita, chapter 10, verse 20. It says, “I am the soul, which dwells in the heart of all beings.” This reflects the belief that Brahman is present within everyone.

Lauren: Ok and can you tell me more about the Atman, Vallisa?

Vallisa: In Hinduism we believe in the samsara cycle. That’s the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Hinduism teaches that after you die, your soul, or the Atman, is reborn into another physical being. It might be another person or an animal, for example. This is called reincarnation.

So, the Atman is the part of us that continues after we die. This cycle of birth, death, and rebirth continues until you can break free of the cycle. That’s the ultimate goal for many Hindus.

Lauren: Ok so the aim is to leave the cycle of samsara?

Vallisa: Yes. The goal is to exit the cycle of samsara so you will no longer go through the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. Breaking free from the cycle is called ‘moksha’. I know I’m introducing quite a few terms here but stick with me. I’ll explain. Hinduism teaches that when moksha happens, the individual soul, or the Atman, becomes one with Brahman, the ultimate divine reality.

Lauren: So how can you reach moksha and gain freedom from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth?

Vallisa: Hinduism teaches that once you’ve overcome your own selfish desires, have lived a moral life and fulfilled all your duties, you can achieve moksha and your Atman will be one with Brahman. But it is vital for those who practise not to desire moksha, otherwise it cannot be achieved!

Lauren: You can read more on the cycle of life, death, and rebirth within Hinduism on the Bitesize website. Just search for Bitesize GCSE Hinduism.

Vallisa: Ok Lauren, can I put you to the test with this quick quiz?

Lauren: Yes please, I am ready! Grab a pen and some paper or just your notes app and write down your answers with me right now!

Vallisa: And you can always pause this episode if you need more time to think. Right, first question. What do Hindus call the divine consciousness or ultimate divine being they worship?

Lauren: I know this one! And that would be Brahman.

Vallisa: That is correct, well done! Right next question. What is a deity within Hinduism?

Lauren: Yes, so a deity is a divine entity that represents a part of Brahman. And many Hindus use deities during worship to focus prayer.

Vallisa: Another correct answer, well done Lauren! And the final question. Can you explain what the Atman is in Hinduism?

Lauren: Yes, in Hinduism the Atman is a person's inner soul or spirit.

Vallisa: That's it! The Atman is connected to Brahman.

Lauren: Thank you so much for listening to this episode of the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast.

Vallisa: In the next one, we'll be looking at how the Hindu faith is expressed through worship and rituals.

Lauren: Yes, that's right, and remember it's not just Religious Studies podcasts that you can listen to. There are other subjects like English, Science, and History for you. Just search GCSE Bitesize on BBC Sounds.

Vallisa: See you next time!

