

I am a Hindu

NAREN PATEL

I was born in a village in Gujarat, India – a few years after India gained independence – just outside the town of Dandi, which is famous for Gandhi's Salt March protest against the British colonial government. I came to England when I was eleven because my father was employed in a car factory in Coventry. Although I had attended school in India from the age of five, I found schooling in England difficult, mainly because I knew little English. However, I quickly learned the new language and settled in.

At sixteen I joined a local engineering company and began an apprenticeship. After five years I successfully concluded it and was encouraged to apply for a place at Sussex University. I was awarded a BSc Honours degree in Mechanical Engineering, returned to the company I had joined after school, and over the years I have worked my way up to become one of their chief engineers, which has led to my travelling to various parts of the world.

As a Hindu, I believe in one God who has many incarnations (*avatars*). I believe in all these gods but, like many Hindus, focus on a particular God who has become special to me, Krishna, a very popular God within Hinduism. I am particularly moved and helped by the many stories about Krishna. My belief in God has encouraged me to be a helpful, contributing member of society. For instance, I assisted in starting a cricket club for young people and I have been its secretary for thirty years. I did this because, as a Hindu, I wanted to put something back into the community from which I have benefited so much. I believe that if I lead a good life, helping others and worshipping God, as a result of reincarnation I will be reborn into a better life.

I do not believe that it is necessary to visit the temple every day in order to keep in touch with God. God is with me every hour of the day. I pray to God in my thoughts wherever I am and I reflect on my beliefs and whether what I am doing is good for me or for other people. I do this, not only because they are good things to do in and of themselves, but also because they will contribute to a good reincarnation. That said, I like to be in the temple whenever I can, serving my community. I find that regular attendance helps my religious life by expanding my thoughts and helping to make me less selfish and see the best in others. This is what faith means to me. It is a faith I learned particularly from my mother, a traditional Hindu. She has been the greatest influence on my religious upbringing.

When we moved to Cheltenham, we were the first Hindu family and there was no temple. We had a shrine in our house but had to return to Coventry for important festivals, celebrating there as we had done in India, if on a smaller scale. Finally, in 1975, the growing Hindu community in Cheltenham established their own temple, an occasion of much rejoicing and celebration.

In 1976 I returned to India, where I met my wife, a traditional Hindu from Gujarat. Already a devout Hindu, shortly after our marriage I became even more involved in

the activities of the temple. I became the secretary and am now the treasurer. Because of my work, I do not participate in worship in the temple every day, but I do attend at least three times a week. When I retire I will certainly attend worship in the temple far more regularly.

In our home, we have a temple-like shrine at which my mother and my wife perform *puja* every day. After bathing in the morning, I also pray there for a short time. I observe fasting on special occasions, but I am not too particular about my diet. My wife and my mother are far more traditionally Hindu in this respect. Actually, my faith is more interior than exterior, in that I am less concerned about outward symbols such as dress than I am about what I think and do. That said, although I do not believe in wearing any specific clothing on a daily basis, I do often wear traditional Indian dress for *puja* and other religious functions.

Again, I do not have time to attend formal scripture study regularly. Once or twice a year I attend scripture reading and exposition in Coventry. I would like to go regularly to a local reading of Hindu sacred texts, but none is available locally. Having said that, scholars from the Hare Krishna temple in Watford are sometimes invited to explain Hindu texts to the local community. I have gone to these sessions quite a few times and have made contacts in the Hare Krishna temple. They are very knowledgeable and I enjoy listening to them.

I visit India most years and whenever I go I make a point of visiting places of pilgrimage or particular temples. My aspiration is to visit and see most of the temples and sacred places in South India. These temples, I believe, are the original Hindu temples. My goal as a Hindu is eventually, when I have retired, to devote my life to seeking inner peace through prayer and meditation.

My wife is a more devout Hindu than I am and observes all the Hindu calendar events. Hence, my family life is firmly based on Hindu religion and culture. My faith has certainly helped to strengthen my relationship with my wife, mother and sisters. Together we observe all the Hindu festivals and religious celebrations, such as *Navaratri* (the 'nine-nights festival' celebrating the sowing of the winter crops) or *Janmashtami*. We also observe key ceremonies (*samskars*) such as cyclical funerary rites (*sraddha*). I took my father's ashes to India to scatter in rivers and on the land, especially the land in our hometown.

As a Hindu community we are very close-knit. We all get to know about the sickness, death, and other problems faced by other Hindu families. The close friendships we have mean that we are always ready to support each other in times of need.