

## RESOURCE 7.1

## Hindus and pilgrimage: knowledge file

## Background information

Pilgrimage – journeying to places of special spiritual significance – has been a feature of Hindu traditions for thousands of years. Hindus continue to regard pilgrimage as important. Although it is not compulsory, many Hindus will try to go on a pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime, believing that it will bring them *punya* (religious merit). Pilgrimages may also be made as penances to atone for bad thoughts or actions. This is called *prayaschitta*.

*Yatra* is a Sanskrit word which translates as ‘journey’ or ‘procession’. It is found many times in the ancient writings of dharmic traditions, including Hindu scriptures. A *yatra* is not just any journey. It is a long and arduous journey, one which is a test of physical, mental and spiritual strength and endurance, undertaken to reach, and return from, a place of pilgrimage, a destination of special spiritual significance.

*Tirtha* is the Sanskrit (and Hindi) word used for a place of pilgrimage. It translates more literally as ‘bridge’, ‘river ford’ or ‘place of crossing’. Not only does this show the importance of rivers as sacred places in Hindu traditions, it also indicates that for many Hindus *tirthas* may be understood as portals connecting the mundane material world to the spiritual, allowing people to share the same space with, and experience feelings of closeness to, the Divine.

Often, a *tirtha* will be a place (natural or built) connected with a specific deity or several deities. Some *tirthas* do not have a direct connection with the deities at all; they may be places of great natural beauty that inspire awe; very often they are rivers, but also the word ‘*tirtha*’ is used in relation to other geographical sites like hills, mountains or forests, believed to have special qualities that can nourish and purify the mind, body and soul. This aligns with the Hindu belief that the natural world is not just divinely created, but is in itself divine.

So, *yatra* is the process of pilgrimage, the physical journey to and from a *tirtha*, the place of pilgrimage. A *yatra* is not a journey undertaken for leisure or recreation, but one requiring personal sacrifice, discomfort and sometimes even pain. A *yatra* is not only a physical journey, but a spiritual one as well, most often made in pursuit of a higher truth.

For Hindus, pilgrimage is not merely religious tourism. To be a true pilgrim (as opposed to a mere tourist) a person must undertake their pilgrimage with a deep desire to connect to the Divine, and have genuine respect for the *tirtha*. In addition, some Hindus would also say that their *yatra* must involve intense physical, mental and spiritual rigour, as well as self-sacrifice.

## Pilgrimage in Hindu scripture

The Rig Veda, thought to be the oldest Hindu scripture (c.1500 BCE), praises the ‘wanderer’. It identifies seven sacred rivers flowing through India: Ganga (Ganges), Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu and Kaveri (Rig Veda 7.49.2), and extols the powers and benefits of bathing in sacred rivers (e.g. Rig Veda 10:75)

Later Hindu sacred texts, such as the epic Mahabharata (c. 300 BCE–300 CE) and several *puranas* (c. 300–750 CE) contain teachings about pilgrimage. They teach that visiting certain sacred sites can protect health and heal disease, bring wealth and prosperity, and enable more favourable rebirths, perhaps even bring devotees to the brink of *moksha*. Within the *puranas* there are many tales where deities subject themselves to hardship and suffering for the wellbeing of their devotees. These devotees, overwhelmed by this love and grace, undertake arduous journeys to perform acts that relieve the suffering of the deity/deities, and demonstrating their gratitude and reciprocating their love and compassion.