

CHAPTER 3

HINDUISM

“With mind absorbed and heart melted in love”

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In the Indian subcontinent there has developed a complex variety of religious paths. Some of these are relatively unified religious systems, such as Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Most of the other Indian religious ways have been categorized together as if they were a single tradition named “Hinduism.” This term is derived from a name applied by foreigners to the people living in the region of the Indus River, and was introduced in the nineteenth century under colonial British rule as a category for census-taking.

This labeling and interpretation of Indian religious traditions by non-Indians is currently a hotly debated issue. Some Indians now assert that Western analysis of Hinduism has been carried on by outsiders who were biased against Indian culture, or who presumed that all religions can be studied according to Western religious categories. Even the Hindi word “*dharma*,” often translated into English simply as “religion,” refers to a broad complex of meanings, encompassing duty, natural law, social welfare, ethics, health, wealth, power, fulfillment of desires, and transcendental realization. Furthermore, Hinduism is not easily separated fully from other dharmic traditions that have arisen in India, including Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, for there has been extensive cross-pollination among them.

The spiritual expressions of Hinduism range from extreme asceticism to extreme sensuality, from the heights of personal devotion to a deity to the heights of abstract philosophy, from metaphysical proclamations of the oneness behind the material world to worship of images representing a multiplicity of deities. According to tradition, there are actually 330 million deities in India. The feeling is that the divine has countless faces.

The extreme variations within Hinduism are reflections of its great age. Few of the myriad religious paths that have arisen over the millennia have been lost. They continue to co-exist in present-day India. Some scholars of religion argue that these ways are so varied that there is no central tradition that can be called Hinduism proper.

In villages, where the majority of Indians live, worship of deities is quite diverse and does not necessarily follow the more reified and philosophical Brahmanic tradition that is typically referred to as “Hinduism.” Since it is not possible here to trace all these diffuse, widely scattered strands in their complex historical development, we will instead explore the main facets of the Brahmanic tradition thematically: its philosophical and metaphysical elements, then its devotional and ritual aspects, and, finally, its features as a way of life. These are not in fact totally separate categories, but we will separate



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them somewhat for clarity. Afterward, we will look at global and political aspects of the contemporary practice of Hinduism.

Philosophical and metaphysical origins

The Brahmanic tradition can be traced back to the Vedic age, thousands of years ago. The metaphysical beliefs in the Vedas were elaborated into various schools of thought by philosophers and sages. These beliefs were brought forth experientially by various methods of spiritual discipline.

Truth is one; sages call it by various names.

Rig Veda

The Indus Valley civilization

Many of the threads of Hinduism may have existed in the religions practiced by the early Dravidian peoples of India. There were also advanced urban centers in the Indus Valley from about 2500 BCE, or even earlier, until 1500 BCE. Major fortified cities with elaborate plumbing and irrigation systems and paved, right-angled streets have been found by archaeologists at Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro, Dholavira, and other sites; the culture they represent is labeled the Indus Valley civilization.

According to theories advanced by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European scholars, the highly organized cultures of the Indus Valley and other parts of the subcontinent were overrun by lighter-skinned nomadic invaders from some homeland to the north, whose peoples also spread westward and developed European civilizations. The theory argued that the Vedas, the religious texts often referred to as the foundations of Hinduism, were the product of the invaders and not of indigenous Indians, or perhaps a combination of both cultures.

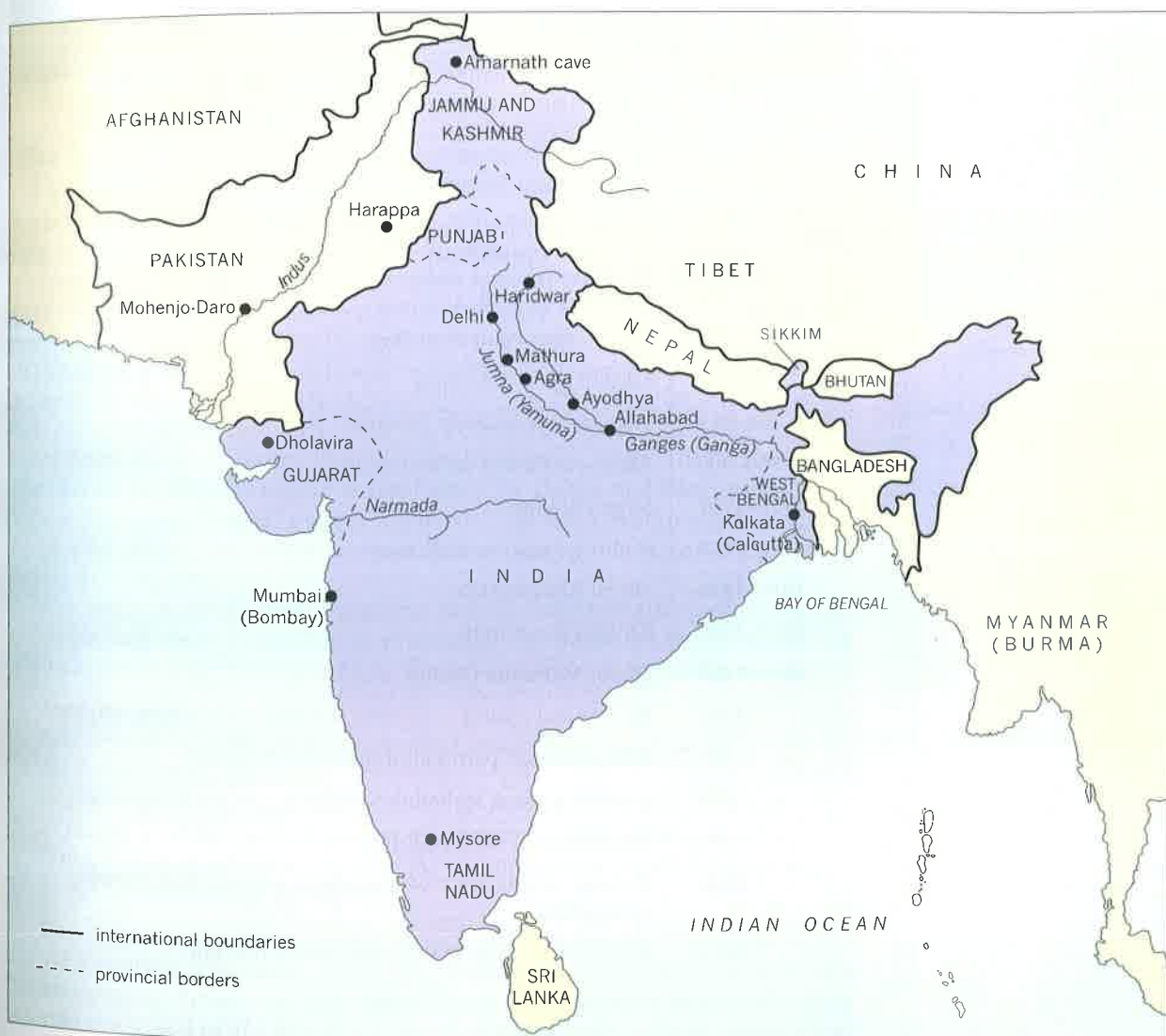
The theory of an invasion of, and religious influence on, the Indus Valley civilization by "Aryans" from the north was based largely on linguistic similarities between classical European languages such as Latin and Greek to Sanskrit, the ancient language in which the Vedas were composed. Similarities were also noted between Vedic religious traditions and those of the ancient Iranian Zoroastrian faith. However, the word "Aryan" is used in the Vedas to mean a noble person who speaks Sanskrit and practices the Vedic rituals. It is not a racial category. Nevertheless, the idea of an invasion of the Indus Valley by "Aryans" persisted until recent times, when it has become the subject of intense research by scholars of historical linguistics, archaeology, anthropology, and textual analysis. There is as yet no confirmed evidence of what actually happened, and the "Aryan Invasion Theory" is strongly contested by many scholars who feel there is no proof to support it.

The relationship of the Vedas to the Indus Valley sites is also unclear. The early Vedas seem to have been written by agropastoral people, whereas the Indus Valley civilization was primarily urban centered. Despite claims by some Indian historians that the Vedas may be of great antiquity, Western Indologists generally continue to think that the early Vedas were compiled when the Indus Valley civilization was in decline, approximately 1500 BCE.

The Indus script has not yet been deciphered, so there is no way of knowing if it is related to the Sanskrit of the Vedas.

There are, however, some similarities between artifacts of the Indus Valley civilization and religious practices associated with Hinduism. Narrative scenes and figures on seals and pottery include representations of trees with what appear to be deity figures, suggesting that worship may have taken place in natural settings under trees considered sacred—such as the peepul tree, which even in contemporary India is thought to be so sacred that it should not be cut down, even when its great trunk threatens walls and buildings. There are male figures apparently seated in meditation, some of them with horns, which have been interpreted as evidence of ancient practice of yogic postures or worship of the deity Shiva. There are also many decorated female figurines, which may indicate worship of a goddess. Researchers find evidence of many levels of religious practice, from local cults to what may have been established state religions of the elite.

The Indian subcontinent includes areas that are now politically separate from India. The Indus Valley, for instance, lies in what is now the Muslim state of Pakistan. Another Muslim state was carved out of the eastern portion of India in 1947, and became the independent state of Bangladesh in 1971.



TIMELINE

Hinduism

BCE c.8000–6000	According to Indian tradition, Vedas heard by rishis, carried orally
c.3102	According to Indian tradition, beginning of Kali Yuga; Vishnu incarnates as Vyasa, who writes down the Vedas
c.2500–1500	Indus Valley civilization
c.1500	Early Vedas first composed
c.900–700	<i>Brahmanas</i> written down
c.600–100	Upanishads compiled
c.400 BCE–200 CE	<i>Ramayana</i> (present form)
c.400 BCE–400 CE	<i>Mahabharata</i> (present form)
by 200	Patanjali systematizes Yoga sutras [Indian tradition: yoga practices are ancient, indigenous]
CE 100–300	Code of Manu compiled
c.300	Tantras written down [Indian tradition: Tantras are as old as the Upanishads]
500–1500	Puranas recorded
c.600–1800	Bhakti movement flourishes
711	Muslim invasions begin
by c.788–829	Shankara reorganizes Vedanta
c.800–900	<i>Bhagavata Purana</i> written down
1556–1707	Mogul Empire
1828	Brahmo Samaj revitalization
1836–1886	Life of Ramakrishna
1857–1947	British rule of India
1869–1948	Life of Mahatma Gandhi
1875	Arya Samaj reform
1947	Independence; partition of India and Pakistan
1948	Assassination of Mahatma Gandhi
1992	Demolition of Babri Mosque
2002	Violence erupts again over attempts to build Ram Temple at Ayodhya
2011	Anna Hazare fasts to force anti-corruption bill



The Vedas include hymns praising the cow, which is still beloved and treated as sacred by Hindus: "The cow is our Mother, for she gives us her milk." Bali has its unique ways of carrying on the belief, including this veneration of the cow in a cremation ceremony.

The Vedas

Although their origins and antiquity are still unknown, the Vedas themselves can be examined. They are a revered collection of ancient sacred hymns. These sacred teachings seem to have been written down by the middle of the first millennium BCE, though we know that they are much older than their earliest written forms. After being revealed to sages, they were transmitted orally from teacher to student and may then have been written down over a period of 800 or 900 years. According to orthodox Hindus, the Vedas are not the work of any humans. They are considered *shruti* texts—those which have been revealed, rather than written by mortals. They are the breath of the eternal, as "heard" by the ancient sages, or rishis, and later compiled by Vyasa. The name "Vyasa" means "Collector." He was traditionally considered to be one person, but some scholars think it likely that many people were acting as compilers.

The Vedas are thought to transcend human time and are thus as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago. The *Gayatrimantra*, a verse in a Vedic hymn, is still chanted daily by the devout as the most sacred of prayers:

Aum [the primordial creative sound],

Bhu Bhuvah Svah [the three worlds: earth, atmosphere, and heaven],

Tat Savitur Varenyum,

Bhargo Devasya Dheemahe [adoration of the glory, splendor, and grace that radiate from the Divine Light that illuminates the three worlds],

Dhiyo Yo Nah Prachodayat [a prayer for liberation through awakening of the light of the universal intelligence].¹

The oldest of the known Vedic scriptures—and among the oldest of the world's existing scriptures—is the *Rig Veda*. This praises and implores the blessings of the *devas*—the controlling forces in the cosmos, deities who consecrate every part of life. The major *devas* included *Indra* (god of thunder and

bringer of welcome rains), **Agni** (god of fire), **Soma** (associated with a sacred drink), and **Ushas** (goddess of dawn). The devas included both opaque earth gods and transparent deities of the sky and celestial realms. But behind all the myriad aspects of divinity, the sages perceived one unseen reality. This reality, beyond human understanding, ceaselessly creates and sustains everything that exists, encompassing all time, space, and causation.

The Rig Veda is the first of four collections of which the Vedas are comprised. The other three also contain hymns and sacred sounds to be recited while making offerings to the deities by means of a sacrificial fire. These sounds are thought to carry great power, for they are based on the sound vibrations by which the cosmos was created and sustained.

Other ancient *shruti* texts include the *Brahmanas* (directions about performances of the ritual sacrifices to the deities), *Aranyakas* ("forest treatises" by sages who went to the forests to meditate as recluses), and **Upanishads** (teachings from highly realized spiritual masters). The principal Upanishads are thought to have developed last, around 600 to 100 BCE. They represent the mystical insights of rishis who sought ultimate reality through their meditations in the forest. Many people consider these philosophical and metaphysical reflections the cream of Indian thought, among the highest spiritual literature ever written. They were not taught to the masses but rather were reserved for advanced seekers of spiritual truth. Emphasis is placed not on outward ritual performances, as in the earlier texts, but on inner experience as the path to realization and immortality.

The rishis, through the discovery of meditative practices leading to higher states of consciousness, experienced the presence of an infinite reality beyond conventional awareness, as experienced through the five senses. As Rajiv Malhotra, author of *Being Different*, which attempts to explain the difference

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Vedic worship with fire is still significant in contemporary rituals. Fire ceremonies may be conducted by Hindu pandits to invoke the blessings of the Unseen.



between the perspective of dharmic traditions and Western monotheistic traditions, explains, "All dharmic schools begin by assuming that ultimately the cosmos is a unified whole in which absolute reality and the relative manifestations are profoundly connected."² The rishis called this unseen but all-pervading reality **Brahman**, the Unknowable: "Him the eye does not see, nor the tongue express, nor the mind grasp."¹

The joyous discovery of the rishis was that they could find Brahman as the subtle self or soul (**atman**) within themselves. One of the rishis explained this relationship thus:

In the beginning there was Existence alone—One only, without a second. He, the One, thought to himself: Let me be many, let me grow forth. Thus out of himself he projected the universe, and having projected out of himself the universe, he entered into every being. All that is has its self in him alone. Of all things he is the subtle essence. He is the truth. He is the Self. And that, ... THAT ART THOU.

Chandogya Upanishad⁴

When one discovers the inner self, **atman**, and thus also its source, **Brahman**, the self merges into its transcendent source, and one experiences unspeakable peace and bliss.

The Upanishads express several doctrines central to all forms of Hinduism. One is **reincarnation**. In answer to the universal question, "What happens after we die?" the rishis taught that the soul leaves the dead body and enters a new one. One takes birth again and again in countless bodies—perhaps as an animal or some other life form—but the self remains the same. Birth as a human being is a precious and rare opportunity for the soul to advance toward its ultimate goal of liberation from rebirth and merging with the Absolute Reality.

An important related concept is that of **karma**. It means action, and also the consequences of action. Every act we make, and even every thought and every desire we have, shapes our future experiences. Our life is what we have made it. And we ourselves are shaped by what we have done: "As a man acts, so does he become. ... A man becomes pure through pure deeds, impure through impure deeds."³ Not only do we reap in this life the good or evil we have sown; they also follow us after physical death, affecting our next incarnation. Ethically, this is a strong teaching, for our every move has far-reaching consequences.

The ultimate goal, however, is not creation of good lives by good deeds, but a clean escape from the karma-run wheel of birth, death, and rebirth, or **samsara**. To escape from **samsara** is to achieve **moksha**, or liberation from the limitations of space, time, and matter through realization of the immortal Absolute. Many lifetimes of upward-striving incarnations are required to reach this transcendence of earthly miseries. This desire for liberation from earthly existence is one of the underpinnings of classical Hinduism, and of Buddhism as well.

Major philosophical systems

In addition to the Vedas, elaborate philosophical systems were developed long ago in India. Those associated with Brahmanic Hindu tradition all have certain features in common:

- 1 All have deep roots in the Vedas and other scriptures but also in direct personal experiences of the truth through meditation;
- 2 All hold ethics to be central to orderly social life. They attribute suffering to the law of karma, thereby suggesting incentives to more ethical behavior;
- 3 All hold that the ultimate cause of suffering is people's ignorance of the Self, which is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, perfect, and eternal.

Two other major philosophical systems born in India—Jainism and Buddhism—do not acknowledge the authority of the Vedas but nevertheless draw on many of the same currents as Hinduism. Prominent among the philosophical systems that are related to the Vedas are **Samkhya**, **Advaita Vedanta**, and yoga.

Samkhya

The Samkhya system, though undatable, is thought to be the oldest in India. Its founder is said to be the semi-mythical sage Kapila. Its principles appear in Jainism and Buddhism from the sixth century BCE, so the system probably preceded them and may be of pre-Vedic origin.

Samkhya philosophy holds that there are two states of reality. One is the *Purusha*, the Self, which is eternally wise, pure, and free, beyond change, beyond cause. The other is *Prakriti*, the cause of the material universe. All our suffering stems from our false confusion of *Prakriti* with *Purusha*, the eternal Self, pure Consciousness. A dualistic understanding of life is essential, according to this system, if we are to distinguish the ultimate transcendent reality of *Purusha* from the temporal appearances of *Prakriti*, which bring us happiness but also misery and delusion.

The highly analytical Samkhya system holds that *Prakriti* consists of three essential qualities. They are *sattva* (fine, illuminated, balanced), *rajas* (active, passionate), and *tamas* (heavy, inert, coarse). Interaction and tension between the equilibrium of *sattva*, the activity of *rajas*, and the resistance to action of *tamas* govern the development of the world.

Advaita Vedanta

Whereas Samkhya is a dualistic system, Advaita (nondualist) Vedanta is generally monistic, positing a single reality. It is based on the Upanishads: its founder is said to be Vyasa, systematizer of the Vedas. The eminent philosopher Shankara reorganized the teachings many centuries later, probably between the eighth and ninth centuries CE.

Whereas one view of the Upanishads is that the human self (atman) is an emanation of Brahman, Shankara insisted that the atman and Brahman are actually one. According to Shankara, our material life is an illusion. It is like a momentary wave arising from the ocean, which is the only reality. Ignorance consists in thinking that the waves are different from the ocean. The absolute spirit, Brahman, is the essence of everything, and it has no beginning and no end. It is the eternal ocean of bliss within which forms are born and die, giving the false appearance of being real.

That which makes us think the physical universe has its own reality is *maya*, the power by which the Absolute veils itself. *Maya* is the illusion that the world as we perceive it is real. Shankara uses the metaphor of a coil

of rope that, at dusk, is mistaken for a snake. The physical world, like the rope, does actually exist but we superimpose our memories and subjective thoughts upon it. Moreover, he says, only that which never changes is truly real. Everything else is changing, impermanent. In ignorance we think that we exist as individuals, superimposing the notion of a separate ego-self on the underlying absolute reality of pure being, pure consciousness, pure bliss. It is a mistake to identify with the body or the mind, which exist but have no unchanging reality. When a person reaches transcendent consciousness, the oneness of reality is experienced.

Yoga

From ancient times, people of the Indian subcontinent have practiced spiritual disciplines designed to clear the mind and support a state of serene, detached awareness. The practices for developing this desired state of balance, purity, wisdom, and peacefulness of mind are known collectively as **yoga**. It means "yoke" or "union"—referring to union with the true Self, the goal described in the Upanishads.

The sages distinguished four basic types of people and developed yogic practices that are particularly suitable for each type, in order that each can attain the desired union with the Self. For meditative people, there is **raja yoga**, the path of mental concentration. For rational people, there is **jnana yoga**, the path of rational inquiry. For naturally active people, there is **karma yoga**, the path of right action. For emotional people, there is **bhakti yoga**, the path of devotion.

Raja yoga Some believe that the **sadhanas**, or practices of raja yoga, were known as long ago as the Neolithic Age and were practiced in the Indus Valley culture. By 200 BCE, a yogi named Patanjali (or perhaps a series of people taking the same name) had described a system for attaining the highest consciousness through raja yoga—the path of mental concentration. Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* is a book of 196 terse sayings called **sutras**. These include such observations as:

"From contentment comes the attainment of the highest happiness."

"From penance comes destruction of impurities, thence the perfection of the body and the senses."

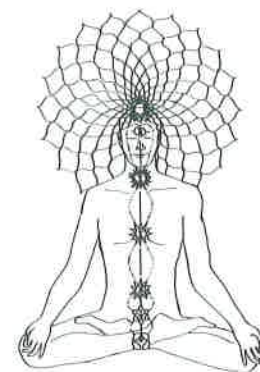
"From study comes communion with the desired deity."

"From the profound meditation upon Isvara [God] comes success in spiritual absorption."

Yogis say that it is easier to calm a wild tiger than it is to quiet the mind, which is like a drunken monkey that has been bitten by a scorpion. The problem is that the mind is our vehicle for knowing the Self. If the mirror of the mind is disturbed, it reflects the disturbance rather than the pure light within. The goal of yogic practices is to make the mind absolutely calm and clear.

Patanjali distinguishes eight "limbs" of the yogic path: moral codes (abstentions and observances), physical conditioning, breath control, sense control, concentration, meditation, and the state of peaceful spiritual absorption (**samadhi**).

The moral and ethical principles that form the first limb of yogic practice are truth, nonviolence, non-stealing, continence, noncovetousness, cleanliness, contentment, burning zeal, self-study, and devotion to God. The second



In kundalini yoga, the body is thought to exist within a field of energy, which is most concentrated at the major chakras—subtle centers along the vertical axis of the body.



Yogic adepts have developed extreme control of their bodies to amplify meditation efforts.

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limb consists of *asanas*—physical postures used to cleanse the body and develop the mind’s ability to concentrate. Regulated breathing exercises are also used to calm the nerves and increase the body’s supply of *prana*, or invisible life energy. Breath is thought to be the key to controlling the flow of this energy within the subtle energy field surrounding and permeating the physical body. Its major pathway is through a series of *chakras*, or subtle energy centers, along the spine. The ideal is to raise the energy from the lowest, least subtle chakra at the base of the spine to the top of the head and open the highest, most subtle chakra there, leading to the bliss of union with the Sublime. This evolved state is depicted as a thousand-petaled lotus, effulgent with light.

In addition to these practices using the body and breath, Indian thought has long embraced the idea that repetition of certain sounds has sacred effects. It is said that some ancient yogic adepts could discern subtle sounds and that *mantras* (sacred formulas) express an aspect of the divine in the form of sound vibration. The sound of the mantras was believed to evoke the reality they named. The language used for these verbal formulas since ancient times was Sanskrit. It was considered a re-creation of the actual sound-forms of objects, actions, and qualities, as heard by ancient sages in deep meditation.

Chanting sacred syllables is thought to still the mind and attune the devotee to the Divine Ground of Existence. Indians liken the mind to the trunk of an elephant, always straying restlessly here and there. If an elephant is given a small stick to hold in its trunk, it will hold it steadily, losing interest in other objects. In the same way, the mantra gives the restless mind something to hold, quieting it by focusing awareness in one place. If chanted with devoted concentration, the mantra may also invoke the presence and blessings of the deity.

Many forms of music have also been developed in India to elevate a person’s attunement and may go on for hours if the musicians are spiritually absorbed.

Another way of steadying and elevating the mind is concentration on some visual form—a candle flame, the picture of a saint or guru, the *OM* symbol, or *yantras*. A yantra is a linear image with complex cosmic symbolism. Large yantras are also created as designs of colorful seeds for ritual invocations of specific deities.

One-pointed concentration ideally leads to a state of meditation. In meditation, all worldly thoughts have dissipated. Instead of ordinary thinking, the clear light of awareness allows insights to arise spontaneously as flashes of illumination.

The ultimate goal of yogic meditation is *samadhi*: a super-conscious state of union with the Absolute. Swami Sivananda attempts to describe it:

Words and language are imperfect to describe this exalted state. ... Mind, intellect and the senses cease functioning. ... It is a state of eternal Bliss and eternal Wisdom. All dualities vanish in toto. ... All visible merge in the invisible or the Unseen. The individual soul becomes that which he contemplates.⁷

Jnana yoga The path of rational inquiry—*jnana yoga*—employs the rational mind rather than trying to transcend it by concentration practices. In this path, ignorance is considered the root of all problems. Our basic ignorance is our idea of our selves as being separate from the Absolute. One method is continually to ask, “Who am I?” The seeker discovers that the one who asks the question is not the body, not the senses, not the pranic body, not the mind, but something eternal beyond all these. The guru Ramana Maharshi explains:

After negating all of the above-mentioned as “not this,” “not this,” that Awareness which alone remains—that I am. ... The thought “Who am I?” will destroy all other thoughts, and, like the stick used for stirring the burning pyre, it will itself in the end get destroyed. Then, there will arise Self-realization.⁸

In the *jnana* path, the seeker must also develop spiritual virtues (calmness, restraint, renunciation, resignation, concentration, and faith) and have an intense longing for liberation. The ultimate wisdom is spiritual rather than intellectual knowledge of the self.

Karma yoga In contrast to these ascetic and contemplative practices, another way is that of helpful action in the world. Karma yoga is service rendered without any interest in its fruits and without any personal sense of giving. The yogi knows that the Absolute performs all actions, and all actions are gifts to the Absolute. This consciousness leads to liberation from the self in the very midst of work.

Bhakti yoga The final type of spiritual path is the one embraced by most Hindus. It is the path of devotion to a personal deity, *bhakti yoga*. For the *bhakta* (devotee), the relationship is that of intense love. *Bhakta Nam Dev* described this deep love in sweet metaphors:

*Thy Name is beautiful, Thy form is beautiful, and very beautiful is Thy love,
Oh my Omnipresent Lord.*



The OM symbol, representing the original sound of creation, is topped by the sun and the moon, harmonized opposites. To chant OM is to commune with this cosmic sound vibration.


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Karma Yoga
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Classical Indian music is based on inner spiritual communion with the divine.

As rain is dear to the earth, as the fragrance of flowers is dear to the black bee, and as the mango is dear to the cuckoo, so is the Lord to my soul.

As the sun is dear to the sheldrake, and the lake of Man Sarowar to the swan, and as the husband is dear to the wife, so is God to my soul.

As milk is dear to the baby and as the torrent of rain to the mouth of the sparrow-hawk who drinks nothing but raindrops, and as water is dear to the fish, so is the Lord to my soul.⁹

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Without Krishna I
Cannot Sleep
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Mirabai, a fifteenth-century princess, was married to a ruler at a young age, but from her childhood she had been utterly devoted to the deity Krishna. Her poetry expresses her single-minded love for her beloved:

*Everything perishes,
sun, moon, earth, sky, water, wind,
everything.
Only the One Indestructible remains.
Others get drunk on distilled wine,
in love's still I distil mine;
day and night I'm drunk on it
in my Lover's love, ever sunk ...
I'll not remain in my mother's home,
I'll stay with Krishna alone;
He's my Husband
and my Lover,
and my mind is
at his feet forever.¹⁰*

When Mirabai continued to spend all her time in devotions to Krishna, an infuriated in-law tried to poison her. It is said that Mirabai drank the poison while laughingly dancing in ecstasy before Krishna; in Krishna's presence the poison seemed like nectar to her and did her no harm. The Beloved One is said to respond and to be a real presence in the fully devoted *bhakta's* life.

The love between Radha and Krishna is a model for bhaktas' devotion to the Supreme Person.



Traditional bhakti narratives are rich in earthly pleasures. The boy Krishna mischievously steals balls of butter from the neighbors and wanders garlanded with flowers through the forest, happily playing his flute. Between episodes of carefree bravery in vanquishing demons that threaten the people, he playfully steals the hearts of the *gopis*, the cowherd girls. His favorite is the lovely Radha, but through his magical ways he multiplies himself so that each girl thinks he dances with her alone. Each is so much in love with Krishna that she feels she is one with him and desires only to serve him. Swami Vivekananda explains the spiritual meaning of the *gopis'* divine love for Krishna, which is:

too holy to be attempted without giving up everything, too sacred to be understood until the soul has become perfectly pure. Even the Gita, the great philosophy itself, does not compare with that madness, for in the Gita the disciple is taught slowly how to walk towards the goal, but here is the madness of enjoyment, the drunkenness of love, where disciples and teachers and teachings and books ... everything has been thrown away. What remains is the madness of love. It is forgetfulness of everything, and the lover sees nothing in the world except that Krishna, and Krishna alone.¹¹

Eventually Krishna is called away on a heroic mission, never returning to the *gopis*. Their grief at his leaving and their intense longing for him serve as models for the bhakti path—the way of extreme devotion. In Hindu thought, the emotional longing of the lover for the beloved is one of the most powerful vehicles for concentration on the Supreme Lord.

In the bhakti path, even though the devotee may not transcend the ego in samadhi, the devotee's whole being is surrendered to the deity in love. The nineteenth-century saint Ramakrishna explained why the bhakti way is more appropriate for most people:

As long as the I-sense lasts, so long are true knowledge and Liberation impossible. ... [But] how very few can obtain this Union [Samadhi] and free themselves from this "I"? It is very rarely possible. Talk as much as you want, isolate yourself continuously, still this "I" will always return to you. Cut down the poplar tree today, and you will find tomorrow it forms new shoots. When you ultimately find that this "I" cannot be destroyed, let it remain as "I" the servant.¹²

Religious foundations and theistic paths

In ancient Vedic times, elaborate fire sacrifice rituals were created, controlled by brahmins (priests). Specified verbal formulas, sacred chants, and sacred actions were to be used by the priests to invoke the breath behind all of existence. This universal breath was later called Brahman, the Absolute, the Supreme Reality.

After a period when Brahmanic ritual and philosophy dominated, the bhakti approach came to prominence around 600 CE. It opened spiritual expression to both *shudras* (a caste of manual laborers and artisans) and women, and has been the primary path of the masses ever since. It may also have been the initial way of the people, as it is difficult to pray to the impersonal Absolute referred to in the Upanishads, for it is formless and is not totally distinct from oneself. More personal worship of a Divine Being can be inferred from the

goddess and Shiva-like low reliefs found in the archaeological sites of ancient India. Worship of major deities probably persisted during the Vedic period and was later given written expression. Eventually **bhakti**—intense devotion to a personal manifestation of Brahman—became the heart of Hinduism as the majority of people now experience it.

Of all the deities worshiped by Hindus, there are three major groupings: **Shaktas** who worship a Mother Goddess, **Shaivites** who worship the god Shiva, and **Vaishnavites** who worship the god Vishnu. Each devotee has his or her own “chosen deity,” but will honor others as well.

Ultimately, some Hindus rest their faith in one genderless deity with three basic aspects: creating, preserving, and destroying, in continuing cosmic cycles.

Shaktas

An estimated fifty million Hindus worship some form of the goddess. Some of these Shaktas follow a Vedic path; some are more independent of Vedic tradition. Worship of the feminine aspect of the divine probably dates back to the pre-Vedic ancient peoples of the Indian subcontinent. Her great power is called **shakti**.

The goddess is worshiped in many forms. At the village level, especially in southern India, local deities are most typically worshiped as goddesses. They may not be perceived as taking human-like forms; rather, their presence may be represented by round stones, trees, yantras, or small shrines without images. These local goddesses are intimately concerned with village affairs, unlike the more distant great goddesses of the upper class, access to whose temples was traditionally forbidden to those of low caste.

The great goddesses have been worshiped in the plural and also in the singular, when one goddess is seen as representing the totality of deity—eternal creator, preserver, and destroyer. The general term “Devi” may be used to

Deity images are often worshipped by waving trays of oil lamps before them, as in this homage to the goddess Durga. Statues may also be reverently clothed and garlanded.



refer generically to the goddess in all her forms, understood as the supreme Divine Mother, the totality of all the energy of the cosmos. Sri Swami Sivananda of the Divine Life Society explains that it is quite natural to regard the Divine as Mother:

To the child, in the mother is centered a whole world of tenderness, of love, of nourishment and of care. It is the ideal world from where one draws sustenance, where one runs for comfort, which one clings to for protection and nourishment; and there he gets comfort, protection and care. Therefore, the ideal of love, care and protection is in the conception of the mother.¹¹

Devi is known by many names, and is thought to have many manifestations. Among them are benign, extremely powerful, and even fierce forms. The goddess **Durga** is often represented as a beautiful woman with a gentle face but ten arms holding weapons with which she vanquishes the demons who threaten the dharma; she rides a lion. She is the blazing splendor of God incarnate, in benevolent female form.

Kali is the goddess in her fierce form. She may be portrayed dripping with blood, carrying a sword and a severed head, and wearing a girdle of severed hands and a necklace of skulls symbolizing her aspect as the destroyer of evil. What appears as destruction is actually a means of transformation. With her merciful sword she cuts away all personal impediments to realization of truth for those who sincerely desire to serve the Supreme. At the same time, she opens her arms to those who love her. Some of them worship her with blood offerings from animal sacrifices, but some shakti temples are now doing away with this practice, at the behest of animal lovers.

Another popular great goddess is **Lakshmi**, who embodies wealth, generosity, good fortune, beauty, and charm. She is often depicted as a radiant woman sitting on a waterborne lotus flower. The lotus floats pristine on the water but has its roots in the mud, thus representing the refined spiritual energy that rises above worldly contamination. The goddess **Saraswati** is associated with knowledge, the arts, and music and also with the great river Saraswati which once flowed parallel to the Indus River in the cradle of the Indus Valley civilization. The Saraswati River dried up long ago, probably contributing to the decline of that ancient civilization.

From ancient times, worship of the divine female has been associated with worship of nature, particularly great trees and rivers. The Ganges River is considered an especially sacred female presence, and her waters, flowing down from the Himalayas, are thought to be extraordinarily purifying. Pilgrims bathe in Mother Ganga's waters, facing the sun at sunrise, and corpses or the cremated ashes of the dead are placed in the river so that their sins will be washed away.

Sacred texts called **Tantras** instruct worshipers how to honor the feminine divine according to practices that may have been in existence since before 2500 BCE. Ways of worship include concentration on yantras, meditation with the hands in mudras (positions that reflect and invoke a particular spiritual reality), kundalini practices to raise spiritual energy up the spine, and use of mantras.



Lakshmi is often pictured standing gloriously upon a lotus flower, bestowing coins of prosperity and flanked by elephants signifying her royal power.



A Shaivite sadhu meditates in the Himalayas at the source of the holy Ganges River.

One such text gives a thousand different “names” or attributes of the Divine Mother as mantras for recitation, such as these: “*Sri mata* (She who is the auspicious Mother), *Sri maha rajni* (She who is the Empress of the Universe) ... *Raga svarupa pasadhya* (She who is holding the rope of love in Her hand) ... *Mada nasini* (She who destroys pride), *Niscinta* (She who has no anxiety about anything), *Nir ahankara* (She who is without egoism) ... *Maha virya* (She who is supreme in valor), *Maha bala* (She who is supreme in might), *Maha buddhih* (She who is supreme in intelligence).”¹⁴

In contrast to ascetic forms of Hinduism that denigrate the material world as a lower, impermanent form of reality, Tantra celebrates worldly as well as spiritual aspects of life. The body is appreciated as the vehicle for spiritual realization, and the whole earth is regarded as the sacred manifestation of the Goddess. In the most extreme “left-handed” forms, tantric rites intentionally subvert orthodox Hindu notions of purity and impurity through the use of five things traditionally considered defiling: meat, fish, parched grain, wine, and sexual intercourse in which the woman is worshiped as the goddess. Describing this path, which is only considered appropriate for advanced initiates who have personally experienced the omnipresence of the divine, Professor Rita D. Sherma, Executive Director of the School of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Taksha University, writes:

*The panca-tattva [ritual of the five elements] ritual’s conflation of the sacred and the profane would be highly offensive to the Hindu sensibility and run counter to all normative models of purity and impurity, sanctity and desecration in the Hindu consciousness. It seems that the element of shock inherent in the ritual becomes itself a highly potent catalyst capable of catapulting the mind out of its familiar dualistic thought patterns and into the realm of unity consciousness. By partaking of five defiling things in the setting of the meditative ritual, the aspirant affirms their underlying purity and shatters the cognitive processes of the unenlightened mind that fractionalizes all life into myriad brittle distinctions. No difference remains between the clean and unclean, the sacred and the profane, purity and impurity. All phenomena take on the glow of divine power and presence.*¹⁵

Shakti worship has also been incorporated into worship of the male gods. Each is thought to have a female consort, with whom he is often portrayed in close embrace signifying the eternal unity of male and female principles in the oneness of the divine. Here the female is often conceived as the life-animating force; the transcendent male aspect is inactive until joined with the productive female energy.

Feminist scholars are particularly interested in the significance of reverence for Shakti. Many see this belief cluster as a positive valuation of the feminine that has the potential to empower women, even though the lives of many poor women in India are not free. Others see wider philosophical implications that have not yet been fully explored, in which the fullness of the feminine principle includes *prakriti*—the natural material world of the universe; *shakti*—the creative Power that pervades it; and *maya*—the ever-changing, differentiating, and self-veiling qualities of the omnipresent unity.

Shaivites

Shiva is a personal, many-faceted manifestation of the attributeless supreme deity. In older systems he is one of the three major aspects of deity: Brahma (Creator), Vishnu (Preserver), and Shiva (Destroyer). Shaivites nevertheless worship him as the totality, with many aspects. As Swami Sivasiva Palani, Shaivite editor of *Hinduism Today*, explains: "Shiva is the unmanifest; he is creator, preserver, destroyer, personal Lord, friend, primal Soul," and he is the "all-pervasive underlying energy, the more or less impersonal love and light that flows through all things."¹⁶ Shiva is sometimes depicted dancing above the body of the demon he has killed, reconciling darkness and light, good and evil, creation and destruction, rest and activity in the eternal dance of life.

Shiva is also the god of yogis, for he symbolizes asceticism. He is often shown in austere meditation on Mount Kailas, clad only in a tiger skin, with a snake around his neck. The latter signifies his conquest of the ego. In one prominent story, it is Shiva who swallows the poison that threatens the whole world with darkness, neutralizing the poison by the power of his meditation.

Shiva has various shaktis or feminine consorts. He is often shown with his devoted spouse **Parvati**. Through their union, cosmic energy flows freely, seeding and liberating the universe. Nevertheless, they are seen mystically as eternally chaste. Shiva and his shakti are also expressed as two aspects of a single being. Some sculptors portray Shiva as androgynous, with both masculine and feminine physical traits. Tantric belief incorporates an ideal

Shiva and Parvati's embrace symbolizes the unity of masculine and feminine energies.



Worship of a lingam honoring Shiva as the unmanifest creative force beyond time and space. Water constantly drips on the Shiva lingam to cool it.



of balance of male and female qualities within a person, hopefully leading to enlightenment, bliss, and worldly success as well. This unity of male and female is often expressed abstractly, as a lingam within a yoni, a symbol of the female vulva.

The lingams used in worship of Shiva are naturally occurring or sculpted cylindrical forms honored since antiquity in India (and apparently in other cultures as well, as far away as Hawai'i). Those shaped by nature, such as stones polished by certain rivers, are most highly valued, with rare natural crystal lingams considered especially precious. Tens of thousands of devotees each year undergo dangerous pilgrimages to certain high mountain caves to venerate large lingams naturally formed of ice. While the lingam sometimes resembles an erect phallus, most Shiva-worshippers focus on its symbolic meaning, which is abstract and asexual. They see the lingam as a nearly amorphous, "formless" symbol for the unmanifest, transcendent nature of Shiva—that which is beyond time, space, cause, and form—whereas the yoni represents the manifest aspect.

Shaivism encompasses traditions that have developed outside Vedic-based Brahmanism. These include sects such as the Lingayats, who wear a stone lingam in remembrance of Shiva as the One Undivided Being. Their ancient ways of Shiva worship underwent a strong reform movement in the twelfth century, refusing caste divisions, brahminical authority, and consideration of menstruating women as polluted. They practice strict vegetarianism and regard men and women as equals.

Another branch is represented by the sixty-three great Shaivite saints of Tamil Nadu in southern India, who from the seventh century CE onward expressed great love for Shiva. They experienced him as the Luminous One, present everywhere in subtle form but apparent only to those who love him. For this realization, knowledge of the scriptures and ascetic practices are useless. Only direct personal devotion will do. The Tamil saint Appar sang:



Shiva as Lord of the Dance, trampling the demon of evil and bearing both the flame of destruction and the drum of creation. One of his two free hands gestures "Fear not"; the other points to his upraised foot, denoting bliss.

*Why chant the Vedas, hear the shastras' lore? ...
Release is theirs, and theirs alone,
Whose heart from thinking of its Lord shall never depart.¹⁷*

Shiva and Parvati's son Ganesh, a deity with the head of an elephant, guards the threshold of space and time and is therefore invoked for his blessings at the beginning of any new venture. Ganesh was the subject of an extraordinary event that happened in temples in many parts of India, as well as in Hindu temples in other parts of the world. On 21 September 1995, statues devoted to Ganesh began drinking milk from spoons, cups, and even buckets offered by devotees. Scientists suggested explanations such as mass hysteria or capillary action in the stone, but the phenomenon lasted only one day.

Vaishnavites

Vishnu is beloved as the tender, merciful deity. In one myth, a sage was sent to determine who was the greatest of the gods by trying their tempers. The first two, Brahma and Shiva, he insulted and was soundly abused in return. When he found Vishnu the god was sleeping. Knowing of Vishnu's good-naturedness, the sage increased the insult by kicking him awake. Instead of reacting angrily, Vishnu tenderly massaged the sage's foot, concerned that he might have hurt it. The sage exclaimed, "This god is the mightiest, since he overpowers all by goodness and generosity!"

Vishnu has been worshiped since Vedic times and came to be regarded as the Supreme as a person. In Vaishnavite iconography, the world is continually being reborn on a lotus growing out of Vishnu's navel. Vishnu is often associated with his consort, Lakshmi (whom Shaktas worship as a goddess in her own right). According to ideas appearing by the fourth century CE, Vishnu is considered to have appeared in many earthly incarnations, some of them animal forms. Many deities have been drawn into this complex, in which they are interpreted as incarnations of Vishnu. Most beloved of his purported incarnations have been Rama, subject of the *Ramayana* (see p. 90), and Krishna (see p. 92). However, many people still revere Krishna without reference to Vishnu.

Popular devotion to Krishna takes many forms. If Krishna is regarded as the transcendent Supreme Lord, the worshiper humbly lowers himself or herself. If Krishna is seen as master, the devotee is his servant. If Krishna is loved as a child, the devotee takes the role of loving parent. If Krishna is the divine friend, the devotee is his friend. And if Krishna is the beloved, the devotee is his lover. The latter relationship was popularized by the ecstatic sixteenth-century Bengali saint, scholar, and social reformer Shri Chaitanya, who adored Krishna as the flute-playing lover. Following Shri Chaitanya, the devotee makes himself (if a male) like a loving female in order to experience the bliss of Lord Krishna's presence. It is this form of Hindu devotion that was carried to America in 1965, organized as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and then spread to other countries. Its followers are known as Hare Krishnas.

The epics and Puranas

Personal love for a deity flowered in the spiritual literature that followed the Vedas. Two major classes of scriptures that arose after 500 BCE (according to Western scholarship) were the epics and the Puranas. These long heroic



The auspicious blessings of Ganesh are invoked for all occasions. Here his image has been painted on a wall before a marriage celebration.

narratives and poems popularized spiritual knowledge and devotion through national myths and legends. They were particularly useful in spreading Hindu teachings to the masses at times when Buddhism and Jainism—movements born in India but not recognizing the authority of the Vedas—were winning converts.

In contrast to the rather abstract depictions of the Divine Principle in the Upanishads, the epics and Puranas represent the Supreme as a person, or rather as various human-like deities. As T. M. P. Mahadevan explains:

The Hindu mind is averse to assigning an unalterable or rigidly fixed form or name to the deity. Hence it is that in Hinduism we have innumerable god-forms and countless divine names. And, it is a truth that is recognized by all Hindus that obeisance offered to any of these forms and names reaches the one supreme God.¹⁸

Two great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, present the Supreme usually as Vishnu, who intervenes on earth during critical periods in the cosmic cycles. In the inconceivable vastness of time as reckoned by Hindu thought, each world cycle lasts 4,320,000 years. Two thousand of these world cycles are the equivalent of one day and night in the life of Brahma, the Creator god. Each world cycle is divided into four ages, or *yugas*.

Dharma—moral order in the world—is natural in the first age. The second age is like a cow standing on three legs; people must be taught their proper roles in society. During the darker third age, revealed values are no longer recognized, people lose their altruism and willingness for self-denial, and there are no more saints. The final age, **Kali Yuga**, is as imbalanced as a cow trying to stand on one leg. The world is at its worst, with egotism, ignorance, recklessness, and war rampant. According to Hindu time reckoning, we are now living in a Kali Yuga period that began in 3102 BCE. Such an age is described thus:

When society reaches a stage where property confers rank, wealth becomes the only source of virtue, passion the sole bond of union between husband and wife, falsehood the source of success in life, sex the only means of enjoyment, and when outer trappings are confused with inner religion ...¹⁹

Each of these lengthy cycles witnesses the same turns of events. The balance inexorably shifts from the true dharma to dissolution and then back to the dharma as the gods are again victorious over the anti-gods. The Puranas list the many ways that Vishnu has incarnated in the world when dharma is decaying, to help restore virtue and defeat evil. For instance, Vishnu is said to have incarnated great avatars such as Krishna and Rama to help uplift humanity. It is considered inevitable that Vishnu will continually return in answer to the pleas of suffering humans. It is equally inevitable that he will meet with resistance from “demonic forces,” which are also part of the cosmic cycles.

Ramayana The epics deal with the eternal play of good and evil, symbolized by battles involving the human incarnations of Vishnu. Along the way, they teach examples of the virtuous life—responsibilities to others as defined by one’s social roles. One is first a daughter, son, sister, brother, wife, husband, mother, father, or friend in relationship to others, and only secondarily an individual.

The *Ramayana*, a long poetic narrative in the Sanskrit language thought to have been compiled between approximately 400 BCE and 200 CE, is attributed to the bard Valmiki. Probably based on old ballads, it is much beloved and



In the northern Indian festival of Dussehra, giant effigies of Ravana are set on fire and burst with firecrackers to celebrate his defeat by Rama.

is acted out with great pageantry throughout India every year. It depicts the duties of relationships, portraying ideal characters, such as the ideal servant, the ideal brother, the ideal wife, the ideal king. In the story, Vishnu incarnates as the virtuous prince Rama in order to kill Ravana, the ten-headed demon king of Sri Lanka. Rama is heir to his father's throne, but the mother of his stepbrother compels the king to banish Rama into the forest for fourteen years. Rama, a model of morality, goes willingly, observing that a son's duty is always to obey his parents implicitly, even when their commands seem wrong. He is accompanied into the ascetic life by his wife Sita, the model of wifely devotion in a patriarchal society, who refuses his offer that she should remain behind in comfort.

Eventually Sita is kidnapped by Ravana, who woos her unsuccessfully in his island kingdom and guards her with all manner of terrible demons. Although Rama is powerful, he and his half brother Lakshman need the help of the monkeys and bears in the battle to get Sita back. Hanuman the monkey becomes the hero of the story. He symbolizes the power of faith and devotion to overcome our human frailties. In his love for the Lord he can do anything. The bloody battle ends in single-handed combat between Ravana and Rama. Rama blesses a sacred arrow with Vedic mantras and sends it straight into Ravana's heart. In what may be a later addition to the poem, when Rama and Sita are reunited he accuses her of infidelity, so to prove her innocence she undergoes an ordeal by fire in which Agni protects her. Another version of the *Ramayana*, perhaps as elaborated by later ballad-singers, has Rama ordering Sita into the forest because his subjects are suspicious of what may have happened while she was in Ravana's captivity. She is abandoned near the ashram of Valmiki. There she takes shelter and gives birth to twin boys. Years later, Valmiki and the sons attend a great ritual conducted by King Rama, and the boys sing the *Ramayana*. There is an emotional reunion of the children with

Rama and Lakshman shoot arrows into the breast of the demon Ravana, with Hanuman and the monkeys in the background. (North India, c.19th century.)



their father. Thereupon Sita, a daughter of the earth, begs the earth to receive her if she has been faithful to Rama. With these words, she becomes a field of radiance and disappears into the ground:

O Lord of my being, I realize you in me and me in you. Our relationship is eternal. Through this body assumed by me, my service to you and your progeny is complete now. I dissolve this body to its original state.

Mother Earth, you gave form to me. I have made use of it as I ought to. In recognition of its purity may you kindly absorb it into your womb.²⁰

Mahabharata The other famous Hindu epic is the *Mahabharata*, a Sanskrit poem of more than 100,000 verses. Perhaps partly historical, it may have been composed between 400 BCE and 400 CE. The plot concerns the struggle between the sons of a royal family for control of a kingdom near what is now Delhi. The story teaches the importance of sons, the duties of kingship, the benefits of ascetic practice and righteous action, and the qualities of the gods. In contrast to the idealized characters in the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* shows all sides of human nature, including greed, lust, intrigue, and the desire for power. It is thought to be relevant for all times and all peoples. A serial dramatization of the *Mahabharata* has drawn huge television audiences in contemporary India. The *Mahabharata* teaches one primary ethic: that the happiness of others is essential to one's own happiness. This consideration of others before oneself is a central dharmic virtue.

The eighteenth book of the *Mahabharata*, which may have originally been an independent mystical poem, is the *Bhagavad-Gita* (Song of the Supreme Exalted One). Krishna, revered as a manifestation of the Supreme, appears as the charioteer of Arjuna, who is preparing to fight on the virtuous side of a battle that will pit brothers against brothers, thus occasioning a treatise about the conflict that may arise between our earthly duties and our spiritual aspirations.

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TEACHING STORY

Hanuman, the Monkey Chief

Hanuman was of divine origin and legendary powers, but he was embodied as a monkey, serving as a chief in the monkey army. When Rama needed to find his wife Sita after Ravana abducted her, he turned to the monkey king for help. The monkey king dispatched Hanuman to search to the south.

When the monkeys reached the sea dividing India from Sri Lanka, they were dismayed because monkeys do not swim. A vulture brought word that Sita was indeed on the other side of the water, a captive of Ravana. What to do? An old monkey reminded Hanuman of the powers he had displayed as an infant and told him that he could easily jump to Lanka and back if only he remembered his power and his divine origin.

Hanuman sat in meditation until he became strong and confident. Then he climbed a mountain, shook himself, and began to grow in size and strength. When at last he felt ready he set off with a roar, hurling himself through the sky with eyes blazing like forest fires.

When Hanuman landed in Lanka he shrunk himself to the size of a cat so that he could explore Ravana's forts. After many dangerous adventures, he gave Sita the message that Rama was preparing to

do battle to win her back, and then he jumped back over the sea to the Indian mainland.

During the subsequent battle of Lanka, Rama and his half brother Lakshman were mortally wounded. Nothing would save them except a certain herb that grew only in the Himalayas. In his devotion to Rama Hanuman flew to the mountains, again skirting danger all the way. But once he got there he could not tell precisely which herb to pick, so he uprooted the whole mountain and carried it back to Lanka. The herb would be effective only before the moon rose. From the air, Hanuman saw the moon about to clear the horizon so he swallowed the moon and reached Lanka in time to heal Rama and Lakshman.

After the victory, Rama rewarded Hanuman with a bracelet of pearls and gold. Hanuman chewed it up and threw it away. When a bear asked why he had rejected the gift from God, Hanuman explained that it was useless to him since it did not have Rama's name on it. The bear said, "Well, if you feel that way, why do you keep your body?" At that, Hanuman ripped open his chest, and there were Rama and Sita seated in his heart, and all his bones and muscles had "Ram, Ram, Ram" written all over them.

Before they plunge into battle, Krishna instructs Arjuna in the arts of self-transcendence and realization of the eternal. The instructions are still central to Hindu spiritual practice. Arjuna is enjoined to withdraw his attention from the impetuous demands of the senses, ignoring all feelings of attraction or aversion. This will give him a steady, peaceful mind. He is instructed to offer devotional service and to perform the prescribed Vedic sacrifices, but for the sake of discipline, duty, and example alone rather than reward—to "abandon all attachment to success or failure ... renouncing the fruits of action in the material world."²¹

Actually, Lord Krishna says those who do everything for love of the Supreme transcend the notion of duty. Everything they do is offered to the Supreme, "without desire for gain and free from egoism and lethargy."²² Thus they feel peace, freedom from earthly entanglements, and unassailable happiness.

This yogic science of transcending the "lower self" by the "higher self" is so ancient that Krishna says it was originally given to the sun god and, through his agents, to humans. But in time it was lost, and Krishna is now renewing his instructions pertaining to "that very ancient science of the relationship with the Supreme."²³ He has taken human form again and again to teach the true religion:

Lord Krishna and Arjuna discuss profound philosophical questions in a battle chariot, as represented in this archway above the sacred Ganges River in Rishikesh.



Whenever and wherever there is a decline in religious practice ... and a predominant rise of irreligion—at that time I descend Myself. To deliver the pious and to annihilate the miscreants, as well as to re-establish the principles of religion, I advent Myself millennium after millennium.²⁴

Krishna says that everything springs from his Being:

There is no truth superior to Me. Everything rests upon Me, as pearls are strung on a thread. ...

I am the taste of water, the light of the sun and the moon, the syllable om in Vedic mantras; I am the sound in ether and ability in man. ...

All states of being—goodness, passion or ignorance—are manifested by My energy. I am, in one sense, everything—but I am independent. I am not under the modes of this material nature.²⁵

This supreme Godhead is not apparent to most mortals. The deity can be known only by those who love him, and for them it is easy, for they remember him at all times: “Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer or give away, and whatever austerities you perform—do that ... as an offering to Me.” Any small act of devotion offered in love becomes a way to him: “If one offers Me with love and devotion a leaf, a flower, fruit, or water, I will accept it.”²⁶

The Puranas The Puranas are an ancient compendium of mythological narratives on the origins of the cosmos, life, deities, and humanity; stories of legendary or canonical heroes; and the actions of divine beings. Theology is often implicit in the puranic stories. The major Puranas are based on theologies of Vishnu, Shiva, and Shakti expressed through complex narratives. They were probably compiled between 500 and 1500 CE. There are a total of eighteen Puranas—six about Vishnu, six about Brahma, and six about Shiva. These narratives popularize the more abstract philosophical teachings found in the Vedas and Upanishads by giving them concrete form. Of the Puranas,

the most well known and loved is the *Bhagavata Purana*, which includes the life story of Krishna. Most Western Indologists think it was written about the ninth or tenth century CE, but according to Indian tradition it was one of the works written down at the beginning of Kali Yuga by Vyasa.

In the *Bhagavata Purana*, the supreme personality of Godhead is portrayed first in its vast dimensions—the Being whose body animates the material universe:

His eyes are the generating centers of all kinds of forms, and they glitter and illuminate. His eyeballs are like the sun and the heavenly planets. His ears hear from all sides and are receptacles for all the Vedas, and His sense of hearing is the generating center of the sky and of all kinds of sound.²⁷

This material universe we know is only one of millions of material universes. Each is like a bubble in the eternal spiritual sky, arising from the pores of the body of Vishnu, and these bubbles are created and destroyed as Vishnu breathes out and in. This cosmic conception is so vast that it is impossible for the mind to grasp it. It is much easier to comprehend and adore Vishnu in his incarnation as Krishna. Whereas he was a wise teacher in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, Krishna of the *Bhagavata Purana* is a much-loved child, raised by cowherds in an area called Vrindavan near Mathura on the Jumna River.

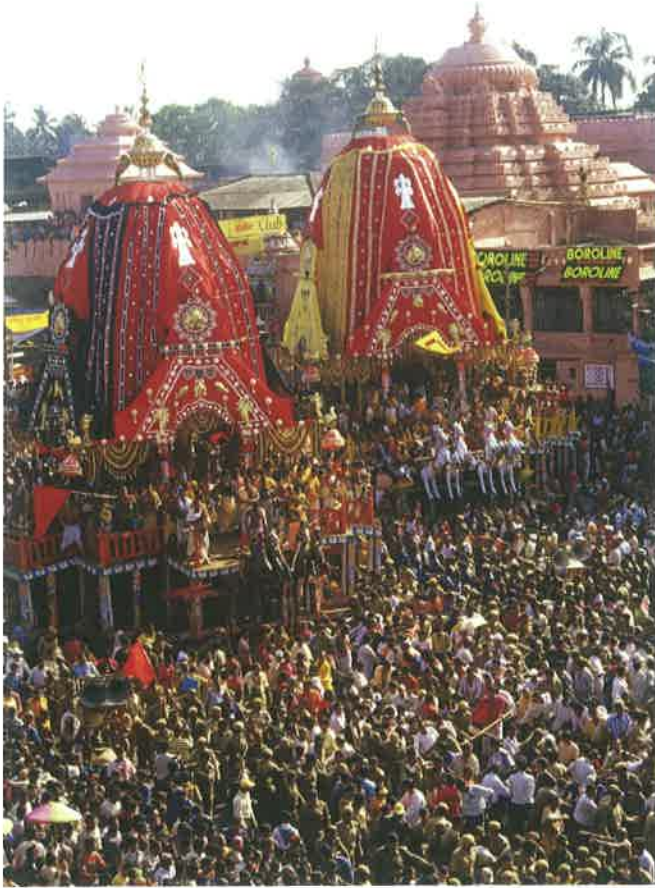
The Hindu way of life

Although there is no single founder, devotional tradition, or philosophy which can be said to define Hinduism, everyday life is so imbued with spiritually meaningful aspects that spirituality is never far from one's mind. Those we will examine here include rituals, castes and social duties, life stages, home puja, homage to the guru, fasting, prayer, auspicious designs, reverence paid to trees and rivers, pilgrimages, and religious festivals.

Rituals

From the cradle to the cremation ground, the Hindu's life is wrapped up in rituals. There are sixteen rites prescribed in the ancient scriptures to purify and sanctify the person in his or her journey through life, including rites at the time of conception, the braiding of the pregnant mother's hair, birth, name-giving, beginning of solid foods, starting education, investing boys with a sacred thread, first leaving the family house, starting studies of Vedas, marriage, and death. The goal is to continually elevate the person above his or her basically animal nature.

Public worship—**puja**—is usually performed by *pujaris*, or brahmin priests, who are trained in Vedic practices and in proper recitation of Sanskrit texts. They conduct worship ceremonies in which the sacred presence is made tangible through devotions employing all the senses. Shiva-lingams may be anointed with precious substances, such as ghee (clarified butter), honey, or sandalwood paste, with offerings of rosewater and flowers. In a temple, devotees may have the great blessing of receiving *darshan* (visual contact with the divine) through the eyes of the images. The cosmos is viewed as a vibrational field, and therefore the chanting of mantras, blowing of a conch shell, and ringing of bells create vibrations thought to have positive effects. Incense and flowers fill the area with uplifting fragrances. *Prasad*, food that



Two of the huge chariots in the annual Rath Yatra in Puri.

has been sanctified by being offered to the deities and/or one's guru, is passed around to be eaten by devotees, who experience it as sacred and spiritually charged.

In temples, the deity image is treated as if it were a living king or queen. Fine-haired whisks may be waved before it, purifying the area for its presence. Aesthetically pleasing meals are presented on the deity's own dishes at appropriate intervals; fruits must be perfect, without any blemishes. During visiting hours the deity holds court, giving audience to devotees. In the morning, the image is ritually bathed and dressed in sumptuous clothes for the day; at night, it may be put to rest in bedclothes. If it is hot, the deity takes a nap in the afternoon, so arrangements are made for its privacy. For festivals, the deity is carefully paraded through the streets. In Puri's Rath Yatra, huge crowds of ecstatic devotees pull and push three massive chariots bearing flower-bedecked deities after their yearly bath with perfumed water. Over a million worshipers seek darshan of the colossal statues as their chariots are pulled along the parade route. The largest of these teak chariots bears Lord Jagannath; it is 45 feet (13.7 meters) high, with sixteen wooden wheels. Its ponderous journey has entered English vocabulary, misspelled as "juggernaut."

Loving service to the divine makes it real and present. The statue is not just a symbol of the deity; the deity may be experienced through the statue, reciprocating the devotee's attentions. According to Swami Sivasiva Palani:

It is thought that the subtle essences of these things given in devotion are actually absorbed by the divine, in an invisible and rather mystical process. It's as though we are feeding our God in an inner kind of way. It's thought that if this is done properly, with the right spirit, the right heartfulness, the right mantras, that we capture the attention of the personal Lord and that he actually communes with us through that process, and we with him. Of course, when I say "us" and "him" I connote a dualism that is meant to be transcended in this process.²⁸

Ritual fire ceremonies around a **havan**, or sacred fire place, are also conducted by brahmin pandits, following ancient Vedic traditions. The Vedic principle of sacrifice was based on the idea that generous offerings to a deity will be rewarded. Fruits, fragrances, mixtures of herbs and grains, and ghee are placed in the fire as offerings to the deities, invoked and praised by chants, with offerings conveyed by Agni, the god of fire. According to Vedic science, fire is a medium of purification and transformation, and havan is expected to purify the environment and the participants. Such havans may be conducted in celebration of a particular deity, or at the behest of a patron for the sake of his health or good fortune.

LIVING HINDUISM

An Interview with Somjit Dasgupta



In Hinduism, many forms of dance, song, and instrumental music have evolved as means of spiritual expression. Somjit Dasgupta is a very accomplished Indian musician whose ragas softly played on the stringed sarod touch a deep place in the soul. His words reflect the importance attached to teacher-pupil lineages in Hindu classical music tradition, and also the reverence that Hindus may feel for their guru:

My Guru was Radhikamohan Maitreya, whose main instrument was the sarod. For music, there has been no distinction between Hindu or Muslim tradition. When the Muslim rulers came here, they preached from the ashrams. Some of the old Hindu musicians were converted and joined the Muslim courts. And some of the Persian musicians who accompanied the sultans learned Indian classical music. By and by, some court instruments were born. But the old instruments were still there, and some of the essence of meditation was carried to the courts.

In our old Sanskrit texts, it is written, "There is no education, no learning beyond music." In the Indian tradition, it is sangeet—collective worship and singing.

Meditation was there in other parts of the world also, but it was very special in this part of the world. Meditation means to sit and see within yourself. Once I asked my Guru, "What did you achieve in your life? You are highly regarded by almost all the big musicians. They touch your feet, but you are sitting here. You did not play in public concerts. We have our Gurubhais [pupils of the same Guru] all over the world, but what I feel is that you are not very famous. What have you achieved?" He said, "Nobody ever asked me that. But this is a little boy [I was only fourteen at the time]. I will answer that later."

After I passed through school and entered college, one day he said "Acha, Somjit, one day you asked me one thing. I was telling you many things regarding the social status of men and women and such things, but I also told you about this soil, which can give the world the things that come from the spiritual light."

Then he told me, "What do you mean by sound? Sound is some cluster of frequencies that you are hearing. In that way, I am Radhikamohan Maitreya: I am a cluster of frequencies. My body is constructed out of that particular frequency. And you are Somjit Dasgupta. Some other set of

frequencies created you. That's why your self and my self are joined in different ways, giving us different personalities. But our aim is to go back to the primordial frequency, through this sadhana, this spiritual practice. Everybody in every sadhana has to go through music. The Ramayana and the Mahabharat were sung; all the saints could sing. With our finger touch, by Guru's grace, our aim is to reach that primordial frequency. And there, there is no myself. No self is there. That is eternity. There is no 'you' and 'other' feeling. This thing my Guru gave me. I cannot say it is an achievement. It is as though you are going back to your father's place. It's a huge joy, joy and joy." I asked, "What is there?" Then he said, "Some day I will tell you. You asked me, and after four years I am saying this to you. I will tell you later what is there."

Then he told me about one song, which says, "The same single Omkar [a name referring to the Ultimate Reality as primordial vibration] is spread throughout the world. It has no form, no dimensions. In the primordial frequency there is nothing, nobody, only Omkar. When I see That personally, I enjoy That personally. I feel That personally, then only can I think about the Almighty."

He also told me about another song from the drupad musical tradition, a song which contains the seed, the essence. It says, "Chaitanya—the primordial sensations, presence, and sensitivity within me—is eternal, and very calm and quiet. Bindu is where you touch to experience that Chaitanya. When you are touching your instrument, that is your touching point. Beyond all these things is that same existence, that same primordial frequency."

He taught me fourteen songs about the Guru, containing the inner essence of dharma. One says, "There is no knowledge beyond the Guru. There is no spiritual practice, no meditation beyond the Guru. All kinds of inner enlightened knowledge finish in eternity: There my Guru stays, with all the blessings."

Our work is not to perform on the stage or anything like that. It is that whatever you get from your Guru, your entire existence is to pass that on, so that this teaching can go on and on and on, and give that essence for the future. Maybe a very worthy person can come who can achieve something much more than me, if I keep this teaching intact. So the main thing is to keep this teaching alive. The rest is up to the Guru, and up to the Almighty."



Even the poorest Hindu families have a special room or place for puja to their favorite deities.

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Duties of the Four Castes
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Death ceremonies are also carried out by fire, as the body is cremated soon after death. Carefully washed, rubbed with fragrant sandalwood paste, and dressed in fresh clothes, it is wrapped in white sheets and carried on a wooden stretcher to a burning ground. Relatives and well-wishers place flowers on the shrouded body and then logs are stacked around it to make a fierce fire. Pandits may chant Vedic verses designed to cleanse it and assist the soul's release from the body and its passage to the spiritual realm. The senior mourner—usually the eldest surviving son—carries a clay pot of water around the body three times, gradually pouring out the water, then dashes the pot to the ground, a dramatic and emotional moment signifying the end of the earthly body. It is also he who then lights the pyre. Alternatively, the shrouded body may be placed in an electric crematorium. Once the burning of the body is complete, survivors take the remaining bits of bone and ash for ritual immersion in the waters of a holy river.

In addition to public puja ceremonies conducted by pandits, home puja is an important aspect of Hindu life. Nearly every Hindu home in India has a shrine with pictures or small statues of various deities, and many have a prayer room set aside for worship. For puja, ritual purity is emphasized; the time for prayer and offerings to the deities is after the morning bath or after one has washed in the evening. Puja is an everyday observance, although among orthodox families menstruating women are considered unclean and are not allowed to approach the shrines. Otherwise, women as well as men carry on puja in their homes. Typically, a small oil lamp and a smoldering stick of incense are reverently waved before the deities' images to please them with light and fragrance. If the devotee or family has a guru, a picture of him or her is usually part of the shrine.

Castes, duties, and life goals

Life in India continues to be shaped to a considerable extent by hierarchies and inequalities derived from Jati (thousands of groups denoted by shared geographical origin, language, food practices, common customs and beliefs, occupations, and endogamy—marriage only within their group) and Varna (a more general traditional four-fold division of labor that ultimately became hereditary). Both aspects of this complex situation are imprecisely referred to by the English word “caste.”

The Varnas seem to date back to the Vedic age. Because the Vedic sacrifices were a reciprocal communion with the gods, priests who performed the public sacrifices had to be carefully trained and maintain high standards of ritual purity. Those so trained—the brahmins—comprised a special occupational group. The orderly working of society included a clear division of labor among four major occupational groups, which later became entrenched as hereditary castes. These occupational categories applied to men; women were automatically associated with their father's or husband's Varna. The brahmins were the priests and philosophers, specialists in the life of the spirit. The next group, later called Kshatriyas, were the nobility of feudal India: kings, warriors, and vassals. Their general function was to guard and preserve the society; they

were expected to be courageous and majestic. *Vaishyas* were the economic specialists: farmers and merchants. The *shudras* were the manual laborers and artisans. Lower than these original four Varnas were those “outcastes” who came to be considered “untouchables.” They carried on work such as removing human waste and corpses, sweeping streets, and working with leather from the skins of dead cows—occupations that made their bodies and clothing abhorrent to others.

Over time, Vedic religion was increasingly controlled by the brahmins, and contact between castes was limited. Varna membership became hereditary. The caste system became a significant aspect of Indian life until its social injustices were attacked in the nineteenth century. One of its opponents was Mahatma Gandhi, who renamed the lowest caste *Harijans*, “the children of God.” Finding this designation condescending, a segment of this population who are pressing for better status and opportunities now refer to themselves as *Dalits* (oppressed).

In 1948 the stigma of “untouchability” was legally abolished, though many caste distinctions still linger in modern India. Marriage across Varna lines, for instance, is still usually disapproved of and families typically try to maintain Jati endogamy when arranging marriages.

Caste distinctions are now being treated as a human rights issue. Since 1935, under British rule, there have been measures to reserve special quotas in government jobs and politics for those of Scheduled Castes (lists of the lowest Jatis subject to discrimination—the former “untouchables”). Many religious groups and social welfare organizations have tried to eliminate discriminatory practices based on caste divisions. Theories of the origins of caste distinctions are being hotly debated by scholars in India and abroad. Numerous Dalit Hindus have converted to Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam—religions that do not recognize caste differences. A highly educated Dalit leader, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) became Chairman of the drafting committee for the Indian Constitution and independent India’s first law minister, and was instrumental in getting anti-discrimination clauses written into the Constitution. He inspired Dalits to get better education, and shortly before his death, he led half a million Untouchable Hindus to convert to Buddhism.

The division of labor represented by the Varnas is part of Hinduism’s strong emphasis on social duties and sacrifice of individual desires for the sake of social order. The Vedas, other scriptures, and historical customs have all conditioned the Indian people to accept their social roles. These were set out in religious–legal texts such as the Code of Manu, compiled 100–300 CE. In it are laws governing all aspects of life, including the proper conduct of rulers, dietary restrictions, marriage laws, daily rituals, purification rites, social laws, and ethical guidance. It prescribed hospitality to guests and the cultivation of such virtues as contemplation, truthfulness, compassion, nonattachment, generosity, pleasant dealings with people, and self-control. It condemned untouchables to living outside villages, eating only from broken dishes. On the other hand, the code proposed charitable giving as the sacred duty of the upper castes, and thus provided a safety net for those at the bottom of this hierarchical system. And common practice did not necessarily follow the religious–legal texts. Whereas the Code of Manu barred *shudras* from owning land, in South India many *shudras* were apparently wealthy and influential landowners. The code prescribed a subservient status to women, but some ancient temples contain stone carvings commemorating women who had endowed them with money in their own names.

RELIGION IN PUBLIC LIFE

Anna Hazare



He lives in a small, bare room annexed to a temple in a rural Indian village and holds no public office, but by his tremendous efforts and the force of his moral authority he has been able to make deep changes at all levels of Indian government. By 2011,

when he undertook a fast unto death for a national bill challenging corruption by government officials, his name was a household word throughout India.

"Anna" is what the people call him; he was born Kisan Baburao Hazare in 1940. One of seven children, he grew up in poverty. He left school in seventh grade to try to earn some money to help the family. He began selling flowers in Mumbai, but fell into bad company and wasted his income on vices. He joined the Indian Army in 1960, but became so depressed by the lonely life of a truck driver that he considered suicide.

In 1965 during the war between India and Pakistan, Hazare's truck was bombed, killing everyone but him. Later when he was serving in insurgent Nagaland, he was the only survivor of an attack by Naga terrorists. He began to think that his life was precious and that God was saving him for a reason. Then while sitting in the New Delhi railway station, he saw a book by Swami Vivekananda, *Call to the Youth for Nation Building*. He began to read Vivekananda's books and also the writings of Mahatma Gandhi and his follower, Acharya Vinoba Bhave. Under these influences, he decided to give his life to improve society. In 1974, he returned to his native village, Ralegan Siddhi in Maharashtra.

At that time, 80 percent of the villagers were barely surviving on only one meal a day. Thefts and fights were commonplace. Perceiving that the most critical immediate need was for water, Anna began motivating the villagers to build canals, check-dams, percolation tanks, contour trenches, drip irrigation, and to plant trees. As the water table was replenished, farmers became self-sufficient in grain production and no longer needed to leave the village in search of work. Related projects in dairy improvement brought farmers a tenfold increase in income. Encouraging the principle of *shramdan* (offering of voluntary labor), Hazare unified the villagers in undertaking various social projects, such as constructing a school and renovating the temple. To attack the scourge of alcoholism, he held a meeting in the temple in which the villagers

decided to close down shops selling liquor and ban drinking in the village. Using the temple as the site for these decisions gave them the stamp of religious commitments. He also encouraged social mixing among all Jatis at community celebrations and helped Dalits to rise economically. Ultimately Hazare extended the Ralegan Siddhi model to seventy-five villages of the area, for which in 1992 he was given one of India's highest civilian awards.

Hazare's program of improving society reached the regional and state level, with the passage of laws such as a Prohibition Act by which if 25 percent or more of the women in an area voted to ban liquor, licenses of liquor sellers would be canceled. He won the right of locally chosen bodies to make decisions for local improvement. Traveling throughout his state of Maharashtra to inform and mobilize the people, he was able to force statewide and ultimately national legislation giving citizens the Right to Information, by which they could challenge lapses and corruption, which exists at all levels of government in India.

Using his own body as a vehicle to force needed changes, Hazare has undertaken many indefinite hunger strikes, refusing to eat until his demands are met. In 2011, he undertook another such fast in the capital, joined by huge crowds and cheered on by millions of citizens throughout India, to force passage of a strong Lok Pal bill, which instituted an independent ombudsman authorized to investigate charges of corruption. Highly respected for his honesty and determination, Hazare shares a simple philosophy:

Educational institutions are not enough to make good citizens. Every home should become an educational centre. Indulgence causes disease whereas sacrifice leads to accomplishment. When the person learns to see beyond his self-interest, he begins to get mental peace. One who performs all worldly functions and still remains detached from worldly things is a true saint. Salvation of the self is part of salvation of the people. It is impossible to change the village without transforming the individual. Similarly, it is impossible to transform the country without changing its villages. If villages are to develop, politics must be kept out.... Some of the crucial junctures of history demand that we live up to our national values and ideals; not living up to those values and ideals is like a living death.³⁰

Hospitality to human guests is a duty for people of all castes. To turn someone away from your door without feeding him or at least offering him a drink of water is a great sin, for every person is the deity incarnate. Ceremonies are often held for making offerings to a deity and feeding the public. The head of the household may, toward the end of his life, engage the services of a number of brahmins to help complete the requisite 24,000,000 repetitions of the *Gayatrimantra* during his lifetime. Beggars take advantage of belief in sacrifice by saying that those who give to them will be blessed. But the most important sacrifices are considered to be inner sacrifices—giving one's entire self over to the Supreme Reality.

Hinduism also holds up four major goals that define the good life. One is *dharma*, or carrying out one's responsibilities and duties, for the sake of social and cosmic order. A second is *artha*, or success in worldly activities, including the pursuit of wealth and advantage. A third is *kama*, which refers to love and sensual pleasures, and also to aesthetic expression. Many other religious paths regard eroticism as an impediment to spiritual progress, but the *Mahabharata* proposes that *dharma* and *artha* both arise from *kama*, because without desire and creativity there is no striving. The fourth and ultimate goal of life is *moksha*, or liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. Its attainment marks the end of all the other goals.

Life stages

The process of attaining spiritual realization or liberation is thought to take at least a lifetime, and probably many lifetimes. Birth as a human being is prized as a chance to advance toward spiritual perfection. In the past, spiritual training was usually available to upper-caste males only; women and *shudras* were excluded. Women have also become *sannyasins*, however, and today an estimated fifteen percent of the ascetics in India are female. Spiritual training for men has historically been preceded by an initiation ceremony in which the boy received the **sacred thread**, a cord of three threads to be worn across the chest from the left shoulder.

A brahmin male's lifespan was ideally divided into four periods of approximately twenty-five years each. For the first twenty-five years he is a chaste student at the feet of a teacher. Next comes the householder stage, during which he is expected to marry, raise a family, and contribute productively to society. After this period, he starts to detach himself from worldly pursuits and to turn to meditation and scriptural study. By the age of seventy-five, he is able to withdraw totally from society and become a *sannyasin*.

Living as a renunciate, the *sannyasin* is a contemplative who cuts himself off from wife and family, declaring, "No one belongs to me and I belong to no one." Some *sannyasins* take up residence in comfortable temples. Others wander alone with only a water jar, a walking staff, and a begging bowl as possessions; some of them wear no clothes. In silence, the *sannyasin* is supposed to concentrate on practices that will finally release him from *samsara* into cosmic consciousness.

The majority of contemporary Hindu males do not follow this path to its *sannyasin* conclusion in old age, but many Hindus still become *sannyasins*. Some of them have renounced the world at a younger age and joined a monastic order, living in an *ashram*, a retreat community that has developed around a teacher.

Sacred Thread Ceremony

When a boy from an upper-caste Hindu family reaches a certain age he may be formally initiated into Vedic rites and invested with a sacred thread. Although, according to Hindu canonical texts, the sacred thread is meant to be worn by all three upper castes, today the ceremony is associated only with the brahmin community.

The rites involved are lengthy and detailed, for the boy must be taught many ancient Vedic rituals. He is initiated in the presence of his relatives, with his father and several pandits playing the major roles in his training, and his mother and other female relatives playing minor roles. Traditionally, this began the *brahmacharya* (student) stage of life, after which he would enter an ashram to study at the feet of his guru until the next stage of his life, during which he would marry and become a householder. Nowadays it is more likely that he will live at home with his parents, but he will at times be involved in sacred rituals, and will always be aware of his special caste status because beneath his outer clothes he will be wearing his sacred thread.

The ceremony may last four to five hours. Once the sacred thread is placed over the boy's left shoulder by his father and the pandits, his training in Vedic rites begins. For instance, he is taught how to pray using Vedic mantras, how to hold his fingers while eating or doing *pranayama* (the yoga of breathing), and how to carry on *havan* (*homa*) fire rituals. His hair is shaved above his forehead to reveal the shining of his inner third eye. He is bathed and dressed in a new dhoti, and then carried to the place of the sacred fire by his maternal uncle, while his aunts wave a tray of red-dyed water before him as an auspicious omen. Three white stripes are painted on his forehead and arms, vertical if he is a

devotee of Vishnu or horizontal to identify him as a devotee of Shiva. He washes his father's feet to show his reverence and affection, and then daubs colored powders on them to seek his father's blessings. After formally requesting his father to give him the ancient Gyatri mantra, he, his father and mother, and the pandit huddle under a cloth so that he can receive the mantra in secret. When they emerge, his relatives throw flowers and rice grains, symbolizing longevity and prosperity, over him.

The boy is then given a branch from a *palaasa* tree, which symbolizes the trees under which the ancient rishis used to sit. A *tilak* of vermilion is rubbed on his forehead and he is wrapped in a turmeric-dyed cloth, symbolizing purity. He is taken outside to learn how to look at the sun without having his retinas burned, by interlacing his fingers before his eyes.

After prostrating before the sacred fire, he prostrates before his mother, who blesses him. Then he goes to each of his female relatives with a tray, symbolically begging them for alms, for if he had entered an ashram he would have been begging daily for his food. The net result of his initiation is a strengthening of his identity and confidence as a member of what has traditionally been considered the highest spiritual caste in India, pledged to uphold dharma in everything he does.

Left: Ram (Vijay Krishna Ramaswamy), age eight, receives his sacred thread in the ancient math established by Shankara in the ninth century CE: Sharada Peetam in Karnataka. Center: Carried by his uncle, Ram is painted with horizontal stripes identifying him as a devotee of Shiva. Right: Ram washes his father's feet with water poured by his mother.



The guru

Nearly every practicing Hindu seeks to place himself or herself at the feet of a spiritual teacher, or guru. The title "guru" is applied to venerable spiritual guides. Gurus do not declare themselves as teachers; people are drawn to them because they have achieved spiritual status to which the seekers aspire. Gurus are often regarded as enlightened or "fully realized" individuals. A guru does not provide academic instruction. Rather, he or she gives advice, example, and encouragement to those seeking enlightenment or realization.

Anyone and everyone cannot be a guru. A huge timber floats on the water and can carry animals as well. But a piece of worthless wood sinks, if a man sits on it, and drowns him.

Ramakrishna¹¹

The Siddha tradition of southern India specializes in "teaching" by *shaktipat*—the power of a glance, word, touch, or thought. A disciple of the late Swami Muktananda describes the effect, referring to him as "Baba" (Father):

*When a seeker receives shaktipat, he experiences an overflowing of bliss within and becomes ecstatic. In Baba's presence, all doubts and misgivings vanish, and one experiences inner contentment and a sense of fulfillment.*¹²

When seekers find their guru, they love and honor him or her as their spiritual parent. The guru does not always behave as a loving parent; often disciples are treated harshly, to test their faith and devotion or to strip away the ego. True devotees are nevertheless grateful for opportunities to serve their guru, out of love. They often bend to touch his or her feet, partly out of humility and partly because great power is thought to emanate from a guru's feet. Humbling oneself before the guru is considered necessary in order to receive the teaching. A metaphor commonly used is that of a cup and a pitcher of water. If the cup (the disciple, or chela) is already full, no water (spiritual wisdom) can be poured into it from the pitcher (the guru). Likewise, if the cup is on the same level as the pitcher, there can be no pouring. What is necessary is for the cup to be empty and below the pitcher; then the water can be freely poured into the cup.

Women's position

At the level of spiritual ideals, the female is highly venerated in Hinduism, compared to many other religions. Women are thought to make major contributions to the good earthly life, which includes dharma (order in society), marital wealth (by bearing sons in a patriarchal society), and the aesthetics of sensual pleasure. Women are auspicious beings, mythologically associated with wealth, beauty, splendor, and grace. As sexual partners to men, they help to activate the spiritualizing life force. No ceremonial sacrifice is complete unless the wife participates as well as the husband.

In the ideal marriage, husband and wife are spiritual partners. Marriage is a vehicle for spiritual discipline, service, and advancement toward a spiritual goal. Men and women are thought to complement each other, although the ideal of liberation has traditionally been intended largely for the male.



Many gurus migrated to the West to spread Hindu teachings there. Paramahansa Yogananda's book Autobiography of a Yogi continues to attract Western followers to Indian religious traditions.



Akka Mahadevi, a saint who lived alone and naked in the mountains.

Women were not traditionally encouraged to seek liberation through their own spiritual practices. A woman's role is usually linked to that of her husband, who takes the position of her god and teacher. For many centuries, there was even the hope that a widow would choose to be cremated alive with her dead husband in order to remain united with him after death.

In early Vedic times, women were relatively free and honored members of Indian society, participating equally in important spiritual rituals. But because of social changes, by the nineteenth century wives had become like servants of the husband's family. With expectations that a girl will take a large dowry to a boy's family in a marriage arrangement, girls are such an economic burden that female babies may be intentionally aborted or killed at birth. There are also cases today of women being beaten or killed by the husband's family after their dowry has been handed over—an atrocity that occurs in various Indian communities, not only among Hindus.

Nevertheless, many women in contemporary India have been well educated, and many have attained high political positions. As in the past, women are also considered essential to the spiritual protection of their families, for they are thought to have special connections with the deities.

Married women carry on daily worship of the deities in their homes, and also fasts and rituals designed to bring good health, prosperity, and long life for their family members.

There have also been many women who have left their prescribed family duties and achieved such high levels of spiritual realization that they have been revered as saints and gurus. The bhakti approach to the divine produced many such women. For example, Andal (725–755 CE) was a South Indian Alvar—a group known for its poet mystics. Andal was so overcome with love for Vishnu that she refused to marry anyone else. Her hagiography (idealized biography of the life of a saint) maintains that she merged into the deity after being mystically married to Him. Many Vaishnavite temples thus have an image of Andal next to that of Vishnu.

Akka Mahadevi was a thirteenth-century bhakti poet saint in the radical South Indian Virashivite movement, which rejected brahmin patriarchy and casteism. Its founder, Basava, had renounced his brahmin identity and taught that women—because of their creative and nurturing powers—and people of lower castes—because they are not constrained by wealth or worldly power—are closer to God than brahmin males. This movement gave rise to many great women saints. Akka Mahadevi was so devoted to Shiva that she refused marriage to any man:

*I have fallen in love, O mother, with the Beautiful One,
Who knows no death, knows no decay, and has no form. . . .
Fling into the fire the husbands who are subject to death and decay.”*

After escaping from a forced marriage, the beautiful Akka Mahadevi lived alone as an ascetic amid the streams and mountains of a holy area linked with Shiva. Her rejection of the life of a traditional wife was so total that she lived

naked. She was an early advocate of the equality of women and of women's right to spiritual and social liberation.

A more recent renowned female saint in the bhakti tradition was Mirabai (see p. 82). Like many women saints, she was at first considered mad as well as socially deviant as she danced on the streets in ecstasy, describing herself as "defiant of worldly censure or family shame," behavior considered totally unfitting for her status as a Rajasthani princess. But her songs, like those of Andal and Akka Mahadevi, continue to be widely sung in rural India.

The tantric traditions and texts suggest that there have been many women adepts who have transmitted tantric doctrines. There are references, for instance, to yoginis who are either solitary ascetics known for their enlightened wisdom or consorts of male tantric masters, worthy of the same respect as the male gurus. In tantric literature, worshipers are encouraged to identify with the inner shakti, as the Universal Goddess. This is considered easier and more natural for those who are already in women's bodies. Some of the most remarkable Hindu teachers today are women who understand themselves as embodiments of the Goddess and see all people as their children.

Hinduism has thus given rise to many renowned female spiritual teachers over the millennia. Among the most famous of recent times was Sri Anandamayi Ma (1896–1982, "Blissful Mother"), a guru from Bengal who was born in a very poor orthodox brahmin family. Often seen sitting in samadhi as a child, but nonetheless scrupulously carrying out all her domestic chores, she was married at a young age to a kind young man. Their marriage was never consummated for when he tried to approach her, he received a powerful electric shock. When she was twenty years old, she began spontaneously adopting advanced yogic postures and reciting ancient Sanskrit texts and mantras that she had never learned from any human teacher. She was suspected of being possessed, and exorcists were called, but they were unsuccessful in stopping her spiritual expressions; one exorcist even experienced severe pain until Ma healed him. An inner voice told her that the power manifesting in her was "Your Shakti. You are everything." Ma later explained, "I realized that the Universe was all my own manifestation."³⁴ When she was twenty-two, she was guided to give herself mantra initiation, thus adopting the roles of both guru and disciple. People began flocking to her for darshan, healing, and spiritual counseling. Detached from worldly concerns and thoughts, she ate very little and ultimately stopped feeding herself, so her devotees tried to hand-feed her. Following only the inner guidance, in total disregard for cultural and religious mores—especially restrictions on women—she sometimes gave brilliant teachings in Vedanta philosophy (even though she was nearly illiterate), traveled unpredictably, attracted stray animals by her aura of love, and reportedly manifested siddhis (spiritual powers) such as appearing at several places at the same time, changing her size, helping people at distant locations, multiplying food, and transforming people by her joyous and peaceful presence. Ultimately millions of people became her followers, regarding her as the Goddess in human form, but she reportedly did not consider herself a guru, nor did she recognize anyone as her disciples—she saw only Herself everywhere.

Similarly, Mataji Nirmala Devi (1923–2011) was regarded by her devotees as an incarnation of the primal Shakti. She is now venerated as divine by her followers in over 200 countries. And as we will see later, Amritanandamayi ("Amma") is one of the world's most famous contemporary saints, with millions of followers and extensive charitable activities to take care of her "children."



An Indian woman prepares a protective rice-flour pattern on the earth outside her home, honoring the ancient tradition by which her female ancestors created intuitive designs to bring spiritual protection for their families.

Fasts, prayers, and auspicious designs

Orthodox brahmins and also common people observe many days of fasting and prayer, corresponding to auspicious points in the lunar and solar cycles or times of danger, such as the months of the monsoon season. The ancient practice of astrology is so highly regarded that some couples are choosing birth by Caesarean section for the purpose of selecting the most auspicious moment for their child's birth.

Many expressions of Indian spirituality, particularly in rural areas, are not encapsulated within Brahmanic traditions but rather have a timeless existence of their own. Such, for instance, are the homemade designs daily laid out before homes at dawn. They are created by women to protect their household by inviting a deity such as the goddess Lakshmi. Typically made of edible substances, such as rice flour, the designs are soon dismantled by insects and birds, but this is of no concern for they help to fulfill the dharmic requirement that one should feed 1,000 souls every day.

Reverence of trees and rivers

Practices such as worship under large trees stretch back into prehistory and are apparent in archaeological evidence from the Indus Valley civilization. Such worship continues at countless small shrines today. In some rural areas, trees are thought to have great capacity for absorbing suffering, so sometimes people are first "married" to trees in order to improve the fortunes of their families who are facing difficulties. There is a strong taboo against cutting certain sacred tree species, such as the peepul tree, which sprouts wherever it can gain the slightest foothold, often in stone or brick walls, even on the sides of buildings. Whole tracts of virgin forest are kept intact by villagers in some parts of India. There they reverently protect both animal and plant life with the understanding that the area is the home of a deity. These sacred groves are now viewed by environmentalists as important islands of biological diversity.

Not only forests but also hilltops, mountains, and river sources are often viewed as sacred and their natural environment is thus protected to a certain extent. The Narmada River, one of India's most sacred, is regarded by millions of people as a goddess (as are most Indian rivers). Its banks are lined with thousands of temples devoted to Mother Narmada and Lord Shiva. Pilgrims reverently circumambulate the entire 815-mile (1311.5-kilometer) length of the river, from its source in central India to its mouth in the Gulf of Khambhat, and back again. However, the river and its huge watershed are the subjects of the world's largest water development scheme. The highest of the dams is under construction, creating a reservoir with a final proposed height of 448 feet (136.5 meters). When the reservoir is filled, some 245 villages will be submerged, temples and all. The idea is to capture the water and divert it to drought-ridden areas to benefit people there. However, the inhabitants of the watershed that will be inundated are closely linked to their local sacred landscape. One of them explains, "Our gods cannot move from this place. How can we move without them?"³⁵ Fierce conflicts have been raging since 1990 between environmentalists and social activists who are fighting the high dams, claiming they will adversely affect at least one million people in

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the watershed for the sake of vested interests elsewhere, and modernists who regard such high dams, as Nehru said, as "the secular temples of modern India."³⁶

High dams are not the only threat to sacred rivers. Construction and waste dumping have polluted rivers even up to the headwaters of the sacred Ganges high in the Himalayas. Religious practices themselves may lead to high levels of water pollution. Mass bathing on auspicious occasions is accompanied by wastes, such as butter oil, flowers, and human excreta (contrary to scriptural injunctions about proper behavior in sacred rivers). The remains of dead bodies reverently immersed in the sacred rivers may be incompletely cremated. Immersion of images of Ganesh or Durga on holy days as a symbol of purification has become a major source of water pollution. In one year alone, ritual immersion of idols in Calcutta added to the Hoogli River an estimated seventeen tons of varnish and thirty-two tons of paints, which contained manganese, lead, mercury, and chromium.³⁷

Pilgrimages

Pilgrimages to holy places and sacred rivers are thought to be special opportunities for personal purification and spiritual elevation. Millions of pilgrims yearly undertake strenuous climbs to remote mountain sites that are thought to be blessed by the divine. One of the major pilgrimage sites is Amarnath Cave. At an altitude of 11,090 feet (3,380 meters) in the Himalayas of Kashmir, ice has formed a giant stalagmite, which is highly revered as a Shiva lingam. Pilgrims may have been trekking to this holy place in the high Himalayas for up to 3,000 years. The 14,800-foot (45-kilometer) footpath over a glacier is so dangerous that 250 people were killed by freak storms and landslides in 1996, but in subsequent



A devotee prays before taking a holy bath in the sacred Ganges River.



Millions of Hindus undertake difficult pilgrimages to worship at mountain shrines each year.

years tens of thousands of devotees have continued to undertake the pilgrimage. Similarly, Shaktas trek to *shaktipithas*; these fifty-one pilgrimage spots on the Indian subcontinent are thought to mark abodes of the goddess or places where parts of her body now rest.

The places where great saints and teachers have lived also automatically become places of pilgrimage, during their lives and after they pass on. It is felt that their powerful vibrations still permeate and bless these sites. One such place is the holy mountain of Arunachala in southern India. The great saint Ramana Maharshi (1879–1951) lived there so absorbed in Ultimate Consciousness that he neither talked nor ate and had to be force-fed by another holy man. But the needs of those who gathered around him drew out his compassion and wisdom, and he spontaneously counseled them on their spiritual needs.

Festivals

Hinduism honors the divine in so many forms that almost every day a religious celebration is being held in some part of India. Sixteen religious holidays are honored by the central government so that everyone can leave work to join in the throngs of worshipers. The holidays are calculated partially on a lunar calendar, so dates vary from year to year. Most Hindu festivals express spirituality in its happiest aspects. Group energy attracts the gods to overcome evils, and humorous abandon helps merrymakers to forget their fears.

Holi is the riotously joyful celebration of the death of winter and the return of colorful spring. Its many attributed meanings illustrate the great diversity within Hinduism (see Box, p. 110).

In August or September, Vaishnavites celebrate Krishna's birthday (Janmashtami). Devotees fast and keep vigil until midnight, retelling stories of Krishna's life or reading his enlightened wisdom from the *Bhagavad-Gita*. In some places Krishna's image is placed in a cradle and lovingly rocked. Elsewhere, pots of milk, curds, and butter are strung high above the ground to be seized by young men who form human pyramids to get to them. They romp about with the pots, drinking and spilling their contents like Krishna, playful stealer of the milk products he loved.

At the end of summer, Ganesh is honored, especially in western and southern India, during Ganesh Chaturti. Special potters make elaborate clay images of the jovial elephant-headed remover of obstacles, son of Parvati who formed him from her body's dirt and sweat, and set him to stand guard while she bathed. When he wouldn't let Shiva in, her angry spouse smashed the boy's head into a thousand pieces. Parvati demanded that the boy be restored to life with a new head, but the first one found was that of a baby elephant. To soothe Parvati's distress at the peculiarity of the transplant, Shiva granted Ganesh the power of removing obstacles. The elephant-headed god is now the first to be invoked in all rituals. After days of being sung to and offered sweets, the Ganesh images are carried to a body of water and bidden farewell, with prayers for an easy year.

Janmashtami is often celebrated by placing an image of baby Krishna in a decorated swing. Everyone takes turns to pull the cord and lovingly rock Krishna.



In different parts of India the first nine or ten days of Asvina, the lunar month corresponding to September or October, are dedicated either to the Durga Puja (in which elaborate images of the many-armed goddess celebrate her powers to vanquish the demonic forces) or to Dussehra (which marks Rama's nine nights of worshipping Durga before killing Ravana on the tenth day). The theme of both Durga Puja and Dussehra is the triumph of good over evil.

Diwali, the happy four-day festival of lights, is twenty days later, on the night of the new moon. Various explanations are given for the return of Rama after his exile, the puja of Lakshmi (goddess of wealth, who visits only clean homes), and the New Year of those following one of the Indian calendars, it is a time for tidying business establishments and bringing financial records up to date, cleaning houses and illuminating them with oil lamps, wearing new clothes, gambling, feasting, honoring clay images of Lakshmi and Ganesh, and setting off fireworks, often to the point of severe air pollution.

Initially more solemn is Mahashivaratri, a day of fasting and a night of keeping vigil to earn merit with Shiva. During the ascetic part of the observance, many pilgrims go to sacred rivers or special tanks of water for ritual bathing. Shiva lingams and statues are venerated, and the faithful stay awake throughout the night, chanting and telling stories of their Lord.

Every few years, millions of Hindus of all persuasions gather for Kumbha Mela. It is held alternately at four sacred spots where drops of the holy nectar of immortality are said to have fallen. On one day in 2001, in what has been recorded as the largest ever gathering of human beings for a single purpose, over twenty-five million people amassed at the point near Allahabad where the Jumna River meets the sacred Ganges and the invisible Saraswati, the sacred river that dried up long ago but is still considered invisibly present. There they took a purifying bath in icy waters on the most auspicious date,



At the end of the Durga Puja, images of the ten-armed vanquisher of evil are carried to the river and consigned to the deep, so that she may return to her mate Shiva, who awaits her in the Himalayas.



In the villages of India, all-night singing of sacred songs often marks special holidays. Women have their own repertoire and improvisations.

RELIGION IN PRACTICE

Holi



The jolliest of all Hindu festivals is Holi, celebrated at the time of winter's death and the advent of spring. It falls on the first full moon of the lunar month Phagun (late February or early March in the solar calendar). The major activity is throwing colored powder or squirting water paint with wild abandon. This may not seem spiritual when measured by the standards of more staid religions, and people may not even be sure exactly what is being celebrated. Indeed, the same wild flinging of paint is given different meanings in different parts of India, illustrating the great variety of ways that are collectively referred to as "Hinduism."

Apparently Holi has been celebrated since prehistoric times. The earliest colors were made from natural plants that are also used in traditional Ayurvedic medicine to ward off viral fevers and colds, such as yellow-dyeing turmeric powder. Psychologically, Holi's effect is rejuvenating and harmonizing, as social taboos are transcended and people from all levels rub or throw paint on each other. This is a major, albeit temporary, change from the usual taboos according to which males and females, high and low castes, do not touch each other. Women have free license on this day to beat men with sticks and throw buckets of mud on them—a role reversal they adopt with great hilarity.

Vaishnava devotees relate Holi to the story of Prahlad, a young follower of Vishnu. His father was Hiranyakashipu, king of demons. Hiranyakashipu became so proud that he attacked heaven and earth and demanded that everyone worship him instead of the gods. However, his own son Prahlad persisted in worshipping Vishnu. Hiranyakashipu tried

to get him killed by poison, by elephants, and by snakes, but Prahlad survived all the attacks. Then Hiranyakashipu enlisted the help of his sister Holika, who had a magic shawl that protected its wearer from fire. He ordered Prahlad to sit on his aunt's lap in a fire, expecting his son to burn to death while Holika in her shawl would be unharmed. Instead, the shawl flew off Holika and onto Prahlad, who had prayed to Vishnu for safety. Thus many Vaishnavites begin their Holi celebration by building big fires to rejoice over the burning of the demoness Holika, for whom the festival is named.

Krishna worshipers associate Holi with the love of Radha for Krishna, especially in spring, the season of love. It is thought that Krishna played Holi mischievously with the *gopis*, and when he criticized Radha because her skin was not as dark as his, his mother put Holi colors on her face to darken it.

Yet another Krishna legend has been linked with Holi. According to this, at the time of Krishna's birth his uncle Kans, king of winter, ordered that all babies be murdered to avoid Krishna's future threat to his power. A demoness was sent to suckle Krishna to death, but Krishna, recognizing her, instead sucked out all her lifeblood, whereupon she died. Some Krishna worshipers therefore burn the demoness in effigy as well as spraying colors, singing, and dancing to celebrate Holi at the onset of spring.

To Shiva worshipers, Holi commemorates a story about Shiva. According to this, Kamadeva, god of love, was implored by Parvati to help her get Shiva's attention. Shiva was deep in meditation when Kamadeva shot his weapon at him. At this, Shiva opened his third eye (the all-seeing eye in the center of the forehead), whose gaze was so powerful that Kamadeva was burned to ashes. He was later restored to life at Parvati's request, and Shiva and Parvati were married. In this story, winter is the time of meditation, and the coming of spring signals fertile new life and fulfillment.

Backed by a variety of legends, Holi is celebrated with such vigor that some revelers take it as an excuse for drunken and destructive behavior. Furthermore, environmental groups are now pointing out that the industrial dyes used for Holi powder can be quite toxic. However, like those who are trying to educate the public not to shoot off fireworks on Divali to avoid extreme air pollution, these groups have had little effect on people's exuberant, carefree ways of celebrating the Hindu holidays.



as determined by astrologers. Among the Kumbha Mela pilgrims are huge processions of ascetic *sadhus* from various orders, many of whom leave their retreats only for this festival. They gather to discuss religious matters and also social problems, which sometimes leads to revisions of Hindu codes of conduct. Many of the lay pilgrims are poor people who undergo great hardships to reach the site. The Kumbha Mela is a prime example of what Rajiv Malhotra describes as the self-organizing nature of Hindu celebrations, which look like chaos to Westerners:

India's Kumbha Mela amply demonstrates that diversity can be self-organized and not anarchic, even on a very large scale. Held every twelve years, this is the world's largest gathering of people, attracting tens of millions of individuals from all corners of India, from all strata of society, and from all kinds of traditions, ethnicities and languages. Yet there is no central organizing body, no "event manager" to send out invitations or draw up a schedule, nobody in charge to promote it, no centralized registration system to get admitted. Nobody has official authority or ownership of the event, which is spontaneous and "belongs" to the public domain.³⁸

Bridges are constructed over the Ganges River at Haridwar to help accommodate huge crowds during the Kumbha Mela.

Hinduism in the modern world

Hinduism did not develop in India in isolation. Christianity may have put down roots in India as long ago as 70 CE. Muslims began taking over certain areas beginning in the eighth century CE; during the sixteenth and seventeenth



Ramakrishna, the great 19th-century mystic, recognized the divine as being both formless and manifested in many forms, and also as transcending both form and formlessness.

centuries a large area was ruled by the Muslim Mogul emperors. Islam and Hinduism generally co-existed, despite periods of intolerance, along with Buddhism and Jainism, which had also grown up within India. Indian traders carried some aspects of Hinduism to Java and Bali, where it survives today with a unique Balinese flavor.

When the Mogul Empire collapsed, European colonialists gradually moved in. Ultimately the British dominated, and in 1857 India was officially placed under direct British rule. Christian missionaries set about correcting abuses they perceived in certain Hindu practices, such as widow-burning and the caste system. But they also taught those who were being educated in their schools that Hinduism was “intellectually incoherent and ethically unsound.”³⁹ Some Indians believed them and drifted away from their ancient tradition.

Modern movements

To counteract Western influences, Mahatma (Great Soul) Gandhi (1869–1948) encouraged grassroots nationalism, emphasizing that the people’s strength lay in awareness of spiritual truth and in nonviolent resistance to military or industrial oppression. He claimed that these qualities were the essence of all religions, including Hinduism, which he considered the universal religion.

In addition to being made a focus for political unity, Hinduism itself was revitalized by a number of spiritual leaders. One of these was Ramakrishna (1836–1886), who was a devotee of the Divine Mother in the form of Kali. Eschewing ritual, he communicated with her through intense love. He practiced tantric disciplines and the *bhavanas* (types of loving relationships). These brought him spiritual powers, spiritual insight, and reportedly a visible brilliance, but he longed only to be a vehicle for pure devotion:

I seek not, good Mother, the pleasures of the senses! I seek not fame! Nor do I long for those powers which enable one to do miracles! What I pray for, O good Mother, is pure love for Thee—love for Thee untainted by desires, love without alloy, love that seeketh not the things of the world, love for Thee that welleteth up unbidden out of the depths of the immortal soul!⁴⁰

Ramakrishna worshiped the divine through many Hindu paths, as well as Islam and Christianity, and found the same One in them all. Intoxicated with the One, he had continual visions of the Divine Mother and ecstatically worshiped her in unorthodox, uninhibited ways. For instance, once he fed a cat some food that was supposed to be a temple offering for the Divine Mother, for she revealed herself to him in everything, including the cat. He also placed his spiritual bride, Sarada Devi, in the chair reserved for the deity, honoring her as the Great Goddess.

Do not care for doctrines, do not care for dogmas, or sects, or churches, or temples; they count for little compared with the essence of existence in each [person], which is spirituality. ... Earn that first, acquire that, and criticize no one, for all doctrines and creeds have some good in them.

Ramakrishna⁴¹

The pure devotion and universal spiritual wisdom Ramakrishna embodied inspired what is now known as the Ramakrishna Movement, or the Vedanta

Society. A famous disciple, named Vivekananda (1863–1902), carried the message of Hinduism to the world beyond India and excited so much interest in the West that Hinduism became a global religion. He also reintroduced Indians to the profundities of their great traditions. He taught detachment from material perspectives, in favor of evolved spiritual understanding:

What we want is neither happiness nor misery. Both make us forget our true nature; both are chains, one iron, one gold; behind both is the Atman, who knows neither happiness nor misery. These are states, and states must ever change; but the nature of the soul is bliss, peace, unchanging.⁴²

Within India Hinduism has also been influenced by reform movements such as Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj. The former defended Hindu mysticism and bhakti devotion to an immanent deity. The latter advocated a return to what it saw as the purity of the Vedas, rejecting image worship, devotion to a multiplicity of deities, priestly privileges, and popular rituals.

In addition to religious reform movements, Hindu tradition is currently being challenged by social reform movements facing issues of gender, caste, poverty, pollution, and corruption. Feminists are criticizing the traditional ideal that all women should marry and dedicate themselves to serving and obeying their husbands. Ecofeminists are encouraging recognition of the sacredness and interdependence of all life, as found in tantric and goddess traditions, rather than exclusionary brahmanic philosophies of purity and superiority that are blamed for exploitation of women, marginalized people, animals, and the earth. Dalit activists are attacking old caste distinctions that tend to keep them marginalized and poor. And the Indian government is challenging huge depositories of money, gold, silver, and jewels found in the treasuries of certain extremely wealthy temples and gurus.

Global Hinduism

Hinduism is also experiencing vibrant growth beyond the Indian subcontinent, partly among expatriates and partly among converts from other faiths. During the British Empire, Hindus along with other Indians were sent as slaves to other parts of the Empire. After India achieved its independence in 1947, in the post–World War II period waves of Indian laborers and professionals left India to work abroad, rebuilding war-torn areas, developing stunning modern communities on the former sands of the Gulf States, and providing skilled services such as medicine and information technology. Hindus now live in more than 150 countries. When Hindus have gathered abroad, they have often tended to develop a heightened awareness of their Hindu identity, as they find themselves in the minority. Many have pooled their resources to build temples in order to preserve their traditions and their identity. But since Hinduism is so multifaceted, there have been disagreements over which deities should be worshiped in the temples. There has thus been a trend toward a less sectarian, generalized version of Hinduism, as well as some adjustments in traditions to the new geographic and cultural environments into which Hindus have moved.

Hindus in the diaspora, along with other people of Asian heritage, have sometimes experienced discrimination, disenfranchisement, violence, temple destruction, and forced conversions by members of majority communities. Even within Asia, such problems have occurred in areas where Hindus are in the minority, including Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia. In the



Vivekananda was a brilliant spiritual teacher who brought Hinduism to the attention of the West when he spoke at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893. When he returned to India, he founded a mission to spread the teachings of his teacher, Ramakrishna.

Dharmic Principles: The Swadhyaya Movement

Today there are said to be twenty million people in 100,000 villages in India who are beneficiaries of a silent social revolution based on the principles of the ancient Hindu scriptures, especially the *Bhagavad-Gita*. The movement is called Swadhyaya. The term means "self-study," using traditional scriptural teachings to critically analyze oneself in order to improve.

The work began in the 1950s, as scriptural scholar Pandurang Shastri Athavale, known by his followers as "Dada" (elder brother), determined that the *Gita* was "capable of resolving the dilemmas of modern man and solving the problems of material life, individual and social."⁴³ He founded a school near Mumbai, refusing until today to accept any financial help from the government or outside funding agency, insisting that "those institutions which depend upon others' favors are never able to achieve anything worthwhile or carry out divine work."⁴⁴ He named the buildings for the ancient sages who have inspired people to live according to Vedic principles. It was they who recognized that within each person is a divine spark whose realization gives them the energy and guidance with which to uplift themselves. As Dada once observed, the sage who wrote the *Ramayana* is:

*virtually urging us to take Ram—the awareness that the Lord is with us and within us all the time—to every home and every heart, as this alone will provide the confidence and the strength to the weakest of the weak and will bring joy and fragrance into the life of every human being.*⁴⁵

Realization of the divine within themselves also leads to realization of the divine within others, which is the beginning of social harmony and cooperation.

The principle upon which Dada's social development work is centered is bhakti, or selfless devotion. He inspired his students to pay devotional visits to towns and villages in Gujarat state. They carried their own food and asked for nothing from the people. They simply met the inhabitants one to one and spoke of the divine love which made them reach out to distant places. After years of regular visits and assurance that gratefulness to God and brotherly love was developing among the villagers, they allowed them to build simple hut temples of local materials, devotional places for people of all castes and creeds.

In gratitude toward the in-dwelling God for being present when they go to their farms, giving

them energy to work, *swadhyayees* feel that God is entitled to a share in the produce. They therefore bring a portion of their income to the hut temples to be distributed among the most needy, as the benevolence of God.

Believing in work as worship, the villagers were also inspired to set aside a portion of land to be farmed in common, as "God's farm." All give a certain number of days of volunteer service on the farm, in grateful service to God. The harvests are treated as "impersonal wealth." One-third of the money is distributed directly to the needy; two-thirds are put into a community trust for long-term needs to help people stand on their own feet.

The movement spreads from village to village, as missionaries who have seen the positive results of the program voluntarily go to other areas to tell the people there about it. When Swadhyaya volunteers first appeared in fishing villages on India's west coast, they found the people were spending what income they had on gambling and liquor. Now, the same people place a portion of their earnings from fishing and navigation at the feet of God, as it were. They have created such a surplus that they have been able to purchase community fishing boats. These are manned by volunteers on a rotation basis, with everyone eager to take a turn, and the income is distributed impersonally as God's graceful beneficence to those in need.

In addition, *swadhyayees* have created "tree temples," in which trees are planted in formerly barren lands, and have developed cultural programs, sports clubs, family stores, dairy produce centers, children's centers, centers for domestic skills, and discussion centers for intellectuals and professionals. Through water-harvesting by recharging over 90,000 wells and constructing over 500 percolation tanks, *swadhyayees* by their own skill and labor are generating additional annual farm produce worth some 300 million US dollars for small and medium-sized farmers. They have also introduced soakpit systems for disposal of household drainwater and refuse, thus improving village hygiene and health.

Throughout the growing network of *swadhyayees*, there is no hierarchy and no paid staff. Those whose lives have been improved by inner study and devotional service become enthusiastic volunteers and living demonstrations that people are happiest when dharmic principles are placed ahead of self-interest.

West, people of Abrahamic religions have historically had difficulty in understanding the complexities of Hindu traditions which are different from their own, and have sometimes decried them as "evil" and "demonic." In 2011, there was an attempt to ban the *Bhagavad-Gita* in Russia, where it was alleged that the scripture promotes social discord and hatred of non-Hindus. There have also been instances of deep insults to Hindu sensitivities by Western companies, with the manufacture of products such as footwear or toilet seats featuring pictures of Hindu deities.

Nevertheless, Hindu philosophy and practices have left indelible imprints on other cultures. To cite a few examples in the United States, the nineteenth-century Transcendental poets Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman were deeply influenced by "Hindoo" texts. Swami Vivekananda had a major impact when he addressed the 1893 Parliament of World Religions in Chicago. After the band the Beatles encountered Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in Rishikesh in the 1960s, many Hindu references began to make their way into Western popular culture. Teachers of yoga and meditation have spread those practices widely, often as self-help and physical-culture techniques divorced from their spiritual roots.

Hinduism has also been spread globally by gurus who have exported its teachings. For the past hundred years, many self-proclaimed gurus have left India to develop followings in other countries. Some were discovered to be fraudulent, with scandalous private behavior or motives of wealth and power. Despite increased Western wariness of gurus, some of the exported movements have continued to grow.

Many non-Indians discovered Hinduism by reading *Autobiography of a Yogi*, by Paramahansa Yogananda (1893–1952). The book describes his intriguing spiritual experiences with Indian gurus and also explains principles of Hinduism in loving fashion. Yogananda traveled to the United States and began a movement, the California-based Self-Realization Fellowship, which has survived his death and is still growing, with centers, temples, and living communities in forty-six countries. Their first goal, as set forth by Paramahansa Yogananda, is to "disseminate among the nations a knowledge of definite scientific techniques for attaining direct personal experience of God."¹⁶

Another still-flourishing example of an exported movement is the Netherlands-based Transcendental Meditation (TM) movement, begun by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (d. 2008) in the 1960s. For a fee of thousands of dollars, his disciples teach people secret mantras and assert that repeating the mantra for twenty minutes twice each day will bring great personal benefits. These range from enhanced athletic prowess to increased satisfaction with life. By paying more, advanced practitioners can also learn how to "fly"—that is, how to take short hops into the air while sitting cross-legged. The organization claims a success rate of sixty-five percent in ending drug and alcohol addiction and asserts that groups of yogic "fliers" temporarily lowered crime rates in Washington, D.C., and conflicts in West Asia, claims that have not been independently verified. TM is now a vast global organization, complete with luxurious health spas in Europe, a Vedic "theme park" near Niagara Falls in Canada, Vedic-based development projects in Africa, colleges, universities, and Maharishi Schools of Management in many countries, an ashram for 10,000 people in India, and ongoing plans to build large "peace palaces" near cities around the world where people could receive training in TM and thus help to bring peace in the collective unconscious of the world, through the "Maharishi effect."

Devotees of Lord Krishna ecstatically sing his praises in Western settings—here, in London.



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Mata Amritanandamayi comforts a man after he has been operated on for a brain tumor and also embraces his father with her left arm.



Another success story is ISKCON, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness. In 1965, the Indian guru A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada arrived in the United States, carrying the asceticism and bhakti devotion of Shri Chaitanya's tradition of Krishna worship from India to the heart of Western materialistic culture. Adopting the dress and diet of Hindu monks and nuns, his initiates lived in temple communities. Their days began at 4 a.m. with meditation, worship, chanting of the names of Krishna and Ram, and scriptural study, with the aim of turning from a material life of sense gratification to one of transcendent spiritual happiness. During the day, they chanted and danced in the streets to introduce others to the bliss of Krishna, distributed literature (especially Swami Prabhupada's translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita*), attracted new devotees, and raised funds. Despite schisms and scandals, the movement has continued since Swami Prabhupada's death in 1977, and

is growing in strength in various countries, particularly in India and eastern Europe. In England, followers have turned a great mansion into a huge ISKCON temple, which also serves Indian immigrants as a place to celebrate major festivals.

Some contemporary gurus are also enjoying great global popularity. One of the most famous at present is Mata Amritanandamayi, a seemingly tireless, motherly saint from South India who takes people from all walks of life into her arms. In large-scale gatherings around the world, the "hugging saint" may embrace up to 70,000 people at a stretch, through the night and into the next day. She encourages her "children" to find personal solace and compassion for others

through worship of the divine in any form. Many of her followers regard "Amma" herself as the personification of the Divine Mother.

Hindu identity

As Hinduism is reaching around the world, some Hindu academics and organizations in the diaspora—especially DANAM (Dharma Academy of North America, which is initiating a new field known as Dharma Studies)—are defining their identity in broad terms, as being part of a process of inter-related development among the dharma traditions that arose on the Indian subcontinent. At the same time, some Hindu groups within India are narrowing their identity and giving Hinduism a nationalistic thrust. In particular, the RSS—Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh—arose early in the twentieth century, espousing Hindu cultural renewal in order to combat the ills of modernity and return to an idealized past referred to as "Ram Rajya," the legendary kingdom of Lord Ram, when Hindu virtues were maintained by a perfect ruler. This movement gave organized expression to the ideals of V. D. Savarkar, who wrote of an ancient Hindu nation and *Hindutva* (Hinduness), excluding Muslims and Christians as aliens in India, in contrast to historical evidence that what is called Hinduism is a noncentralized, evolving composite of variegated ways of worship.

Secularism is officially established by India's constitution, which recognizes the multicultural, multireligious fabric of the country and does not confer favored political status on any religion. But according to what could be called Hindu "fundamentalists," in the name of secularism people are being robbed of their religious values and identity, which the RSS, the religious organization Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP), and political parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) say they are trying to restore.

The RSS maintains tens of thousands of branches in Indian villages and cities where Hindu men and boys meet for group games, songs, lectures, and prayers to the Hindu nation, conceived as the Divine Mother. The leader of the RSS has publicly urged throwing all Christian missionaries out of India and has asserted that all Indians are actually Hindus. There are estimated to be 12,000 RSS schools in India in which children are educated according to the *Hindutva* agenda.

A major focus of these activities has been the small town of Ayodhya, which according to Hindu mythology is the birthplace of Lord Ram. According to *Hindutva* belief, Babur, the Muslim Mogul ruler, had the main temple commemorating Ram's birthplace torn down and the Babri Mosque built on its ruins. Firm believers attempted to take matters into their own hands and redress this perceived insult to their holy place. In 1992, some 200,000 Hindus managed to enter Ayodhya and tear down the Babri Mosque. This act was followed by a spate of Hindu-Muslim violence throughout India. In 2010, a high court ruling divided the disputed land into three parts, two for Hindu groups and one for the Sunni board managing mosques, a decision that brought temporary peace in the area but may be contested.

Political affiliates of the RSS—particularly the BJP—have become very powerful in Indian politics. It was the leading party in the central government in power in 2002 when one coach of a train carrying volunteers who were seeking to illegally construct a new temple in Ayodhya caught fire in the state of Gujarat and was surrounded by a presumably Muslim mob. Inside the coach, fifty-nine Hindus burned to death, a horror that was followed by



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terrible inter-religious violence. Perhaps 2,000 people, most of them Muslims, were killed by mobs while local officials did little to stop them.

Some Hindu groups are also trying to woo Christian converts back to Hinduism and are actively opposing Christianity in India, where Christians have offered social services for the poor such as schools and hospitals. An estimated fifty percent of all Christians in India were formerly of low-caste origin. Opposition to Christian conversion has sometimes turned quite violent, as it did in 2008, when the homes of thousands of Indian Christians in the state of Orissa were burned, apparently by Hindu extremists. Tensions also continue to run high between Hindus and Muslims in Kashmir, where efforts to bring Kashmiri independence from India often pit Hindus and Muslims against each other.

Such conflicts are not in keeping with the Hindu ideal of tolerance for many ways to the divine. Although tensions between religions exist in many regions of India, what predominates is the spirit of accommodation with which the various communities have lived side by side for hundreds of years.

The Indian Supreme Court has formally defined Hindu beliefs in a way that affirms universality rather than exclusiveness. According to the court's definition, to be a Hindu means:

- 1 Acceptance and reverence for the Vedas as the foundation of Hindu philosophy;
- 2 A spirit of tolerance, and willingness to understand and appreciate others' points of view, recognizing that truth has many sides;
- 3 Acceptance of the belief that vast cosmic periods of creation, maintenance, and dissolution continuously recur;
- 4 Acceptance of belief in reincarnation;
- 5 Recognition that paths to truth and salvation are many;
- 6 Recognition that there may be numerous gods and goddesses to worship, without necessarily believing in worship through idols;
- 7 Unlike other religions, absence of belief in a specific set of philosophic concepts.⁴⁷

Mahatma Gandhi, the father of independent India, asserted that Hinduism's special identity lies in its inclusiveness, dynamism, and continuing search for truth:

Hinduism is a living organism liable to growth and decay, and subject to the laws of Nature. It is and is not based on scriptures. It does not derive its authority from one book. It takes a provincial form in every province, but the inner substance is retained everywhere. The Vedas, the Upanishads, the Smritis [authoritative but nonrevealed scriptures], the Puranas, and the Itihasas [historical epics] did not arise at one and the same time. Each grew out of the necessities of particular periods. Hinduism abhors stagnation. Every day we add to our knowledge of the power of Atman, and we shall keep on doing so.⁴⁸



Study and Review on **myreligionlab**

Key terms

asana Yogic posture.

ashram A usually ascetic spiritual community of followers gathered around their guru.

- atman** The individual soul.
- avatar** An incarnation of a deity.
- bhakti** Intense devotion to a personal manifestation of Supreme Reality.
- Brahman** The Supreme Reality.
- brahmin** Priest or member of the priestly caste.
- caste** An occupational category.
- chakra** A subtle energy center in the body.
- darshan** Visual contact with the divine.
- deva** A deity.
- dharma** Moral order, righteousness, religion.
- guru** Spiritual teacher.
- Kali Yuga** The present degraded era.
- karma** Our actions and their effects on this life and lives to come.
- mantra** A sound or phrase chanted to evoke sound vibration of one aspect of creation or to praise a deity.
- moksha** Liberation.
- prana** The invisible life force.
- puja** Ritual worship.
- reincarnation** After death, rebirth in a new life.
- rishi** A sage.
- Shaivite** Worshiper of Shiva.
- Shakta** Worshiper of the divine in female form.
- samsara** The worldly cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.
- sannyasin** Renunciate spiritual seeker.
- Sanskrit** The ancient language of the Vedas.
- secularism** The constitutional principle of not giving favored status to any religion.
- sutra** Terse spiritual teaching.
- Tantra** A sacred esoteric text with spiritual practices honoring the divine in female form.
- Upanishads** The philosophical part of the Vedas.
- Vaishnavite** Worshiper of Vishnu or one of his manifestations, such as Krishna.
- Vedas** Revered ancient scriptures.
- yoga** Practices for union with the true Self.

Review questions

1. What is known about the Indus Valley civilization, the Aryans, and their contributions to the early development of Brahmanic traditions?
2. Describe these major philosophical themes of Hinduism: atman, karma, samsara, moksha, Brahman, and yoga.
3. Describe the deities and practices associated with each of the three major groupings of Hinduism's theistic path.
4. Describe the Hindu ritual practices of puja, darshan, *prasad*, and important festivals and pilgrimages.
5. Describe Hindu views regarding social roles and duties with respect to caste, gender, and life stage, and note some of the challenges leaders such as Gandhi have made to these traditional roles.

Discussion questions

1. Consider the multiple components of the term dharma in Hinduism and how they might complicate traditional definitions of the term "religion."
2. Compare and contrast the philosophical positions and practices of Samkhya, varieties of yoga, and Advaita Vedanta.
3. How do the epics and Puranas of Hinduism represent the Supreme?
4. Compare the secular and fundamentalist understandings of Hinduism. Are you aware of similar dynamics in other religions?