

VAN VOORST

WORLD RELIGIONS⁴

INTRODUCTION TO WORLD RELIGIONS



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Encountering Hinduism: Many Paths to Liberation



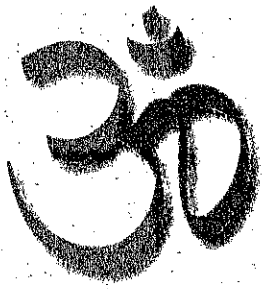
LEARNIT LOVE LOST BUT FOUND AN AMAZING ADVENTURE/GETTY IMAGES
HINDUISM/REUTERS/GETTY IMAGES

LEARNING OUTCOMES

After studying this chapter, you will be able to do the following:

- 3-1 Explain what *Hinduism* means and its strengths and weaknesses as a name.
- 3-2 Explain how the main periods of Hinduism's history have shaped its present, especially its unity and diversity.
- 3-3 Outline the essentials of Hindu teachings in your own words.
- 3-4 Relate Hindu ethics to essential Hindu teachings.
- 3-5 Outline the ways Hindus worship, at home and in temples.
- 3-6 State the main aspects of Hindu life around the world today, especially in North America.

Encountering Hinduism is like a visit to an Indian restaurant. You can't sample everything, but if you choose a variety you'll have a good introduction.



Your Visit to Varanasi, India

Imagine that you're on a visit to the city of Varanasi (vuh-RAH-nuh-see). You know that Varanasi, located on the Ganges

(GAN-jeez) River, is unique among the cities of the world, but nothing can quite prepare you for its sights, sounds, and smells.

Your visit begins with a dawn boat ride on the Ganges. You see Hindu pilgrims on the western shore of the river descending the wide steps—two miles of them at Varanasi—leading down to the water. They wash themselves physically and spiritually, and pray toward the rising sun. After the boat ride, you walk to the Golden Temple, the most sacred of the city's many shrines dedicated to Shiva (SHIH-vuh), the patron deity of Varanasi. There you see Hindus making offerings of flowers to the black stone emblem of Shiva.

As you walk with your group through the narrow, twisting streets down to the river, you notice many small temples and even smaller shrines that seem to be everywhere. You also notice many old, frail people, some in the doorways of hostels and others living on the street, who have come to die and be cremated in Varanasi in the hope of achieving liberation from the cycle of endless rebirth and death. Occasionally, you see human bodies, wrapped and propped up on rickshaws, on their way to the water. As you get close to the Ganges, you notice three men with wild hair, squatting on a stone platform overlooking the river. You can't

tell if they are wearing anything at all, because their bodies are smeared with ash and dried cow dung. On the right is a group of women bathing fully clothed in the water near the steps, and men in Indian loincloths. Both the men and women have come to wash away their sins, and, perhaps, even the necessity of rebirth. The river seems polluted to you, but this means nothing to the thousands of Hindus who worship in it.

As you keep walking up the river, you notice a cluster of large fires and hundreds of large logs stacked up behind them, and you realize, with a bit of a shock, that you've reached Varanasi's open-air cremation area. In a scene that you'll remember, you see the steps of the Hindu funeral: members of the Dom group piling wood into a pyre and laying on it a body that has been dipped into the Ganges, a son lighting a pyre, priests intoning ancient scriptures as a body begins to burn, Doms tending a body for three hours to burn it as fully as possible and then pushing the cremated remains into the river. Your group must stand respectfully at the top of the steps, where you have a better view.

In the evening, you come to the shore of the Ganges to witness the happy Aarti ceremony that is part of the evening religious devotions to Shiva. You enjoy music and dancing, and you see small candles lit on miniature "boats" and put into the river to memorialize the dead.

Varanasi's open-air cremation area

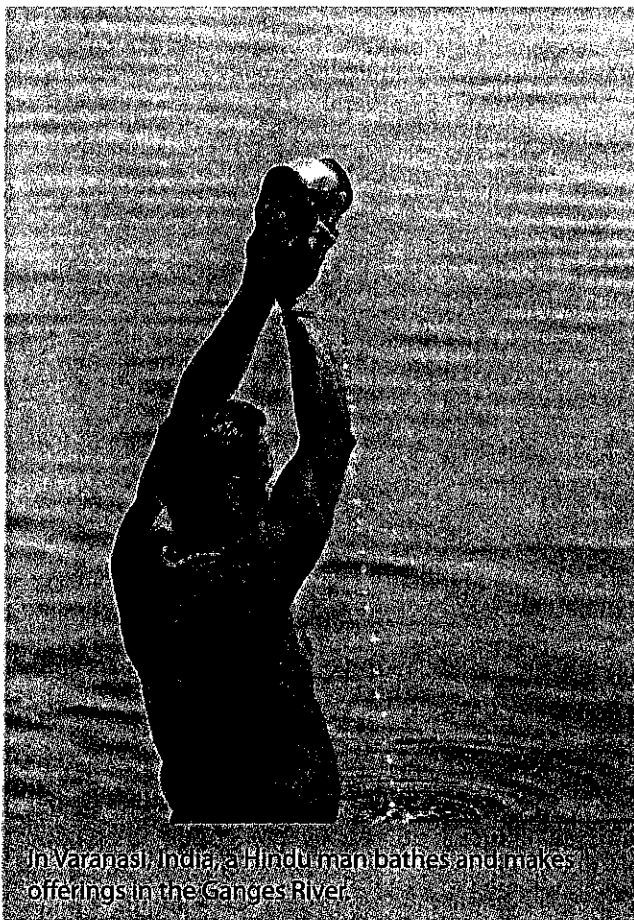


This image in a Varanasi temple of the god Nandi, who represents the god Shiva, has received worship with flower garlands.

REUTERS

If this is your first encounter with the Hindu religion, you may be bewildered by all its varied beliefs and practices. Calling something a religion usually implies a unified system of belief and practice, but Hinduism has little obvious unity. It has no human founder, defined core beliefs, standardized worship practice, or central authority. This diversity has led to what you may consider contradictions. For example:

- Hinduism has literally millions of gods, but many Hindus typically see one god behind them all, and some see only an impersonal Oneness in and beyond the universe.
- Hindus often control their bodies to pursue a hidden spiritual reality behind all physical things, seeking liberation from the endless cycle of rebirth of the soul after death and pursuing the peace that liberation brings here and now. Other Hindus joyously affirm bodily existence with a striking affirmation of sexuality.
- Many Hindus are strict vegetarians for religious reasons, but others eat meat on occasion, and some even sacrifice animals at Hindu temples.



In Varanasi, India, a Hindu man bathes and makes offerings in the Ganges River.

- Hinduism teaches personal duties tied to one's place in a rather rigid social structure, but allows some people to "drop out" of ordinary life completely to pursue individual religious goals.
- Hindus number around 900 million today in India, a number that includes some 220 million Indian "outcastes." The modern Indian state now considers them Hindus, but they are not considered as such by most other Hindus.

In light of all this obvious diversity, is there a hidden unity of Hinduism that binds it together? Scholars have argued about this for more than one hundred years. Some of them say that Hinduism is so diverse we should only speak about different Hinduisms. The most common answer is this: Hindus have a reverence for the ancient Hindu scriptures called the *Vedas*, and they perform their caste duties. But this may seem a bit vague to you, and you should keep the question open as you study this chapter. In sum, encountering Hinduism is a bit like going to an Indian restaurant for the first time. When you see a wide variety of dishes on the menu, or even if you go to an Indian buffet, you realize that you can't taste them all. But at the end of the meal, you know that your experience in the restaurant gave you a good introduction to Indian cuisine.

"Hinduism" is an umbrella term
gradually imposed on Hindus,
and then accepted by them.

3-1 The Name *Hinduism*

Similar to the names of some other world religions, the formal name of *Hinduism* came from outside the faith. *Hindu* first appears around 500 B.C.E. as the ancient Persian word for the Indus River and the inhabitants of its valley. From the 1300s C.E., invading Muslim rulers of northern India used "Hindu" for all non-Muslim Indians, whatever religion they practiced, to distinguish them from Indian converts to Islam. Beginning in the 1500s, European colonizers coming to India used it in its current sense to mean the members of the supposedly single religion to which all Indians, other than groups such as Muslims, Christians, and Zoroastrians, belonged. From about 1800 on, *Hinduism* gradually became accepted by most

Hindus in India as a valid name for their religion, especially to distinguish their religion from others. Thus, *Hinduism* is an umbrella term gradually imposed on Hindus, and then accepted by them.

The approximately 2.3 million Hindus living in North America and the sizeable Hindu communities in other parts of south Asia (especially Bali, Indonesia), a few parts of Africa, and Great Britain also embrace this name. However, upper-class Hindus in India often refer to their religion as the “eternal teaching” or “eternal way of life.” Some scholars of religion also question the adequacy of *Hinduism* as a name, preferring to speak of “Hinduisms.” On the whole, it is fitting that a vague term such as *Hinduism* be used today for a religious tradition that has so much internal diversity. (This diversity is also reflected in the symbols of Hinduism; see “A Closer Look: The Symbols of Hinduism.”)

3-2 The Hindu Present as Shaped by Its Past

Throughout India, yoga became a political matter in 2016. Prime Minister Narendra Modi (MOH-dee) promoted an “International Day of Yoga,” in which 175 countries participated. On the last Sunday in June at 7:00 a.m., millions of Indians did yoga at more than 50,000 locations in that nation. Modi claims that yoga is a secular activity, but not everyone agrees. Some Muslim leaders charged that this celebration was being used to spread Hinduism throughout the nation. Similar controversies about yoga, whether it can or should be done in a non-Hindu way, have broken out in many parts of the world, including the United States.

History is an important tool for those who study today’s religions from a Western academic standpoint. We understand the present of religions by way of their past. Although Hinduism must be understood historically as well, history itself is not an important concept in Hinduism. Hindus don’t usually think of their religion in historical terms, but look to eternal spiritual truths beyond historical events. They often look to cycles of change for individuals (e.g., death and rebirth of the soul) and for the universe itself (repeated creation and dissolution), not to the kind of linear developmental process that the word *history* implies to Westerners.

Hindus don’t usually think of their religion in historical terms, but look to eternal spiritual truths.

Nevertheless, studying Hinduism’s past is valid and helpful, particularly because in Hinduism new developments reinterpret and update past practices rather than end them. In Hinduism today, we can

see important beliefs and practices taken from the entire sweep of Indian history.

3-2a The Vedic Period (1500–600 B.C.E.)

Around 2500 B.C.E., an **Indus Valley civilization** thrived in northwest India, in what is now the nation of Pakistan (see Map 3.1). It centered around two city-states on the Indus River, Harappa (huh-RAHP-uh) and Mohenjo-Daro (moh-HEN-joh-DAHR-oh). The Indus Valley inhabitants were a dark-skinned people whom many scholars connect with today’s Indians called **Dravidians**, but this is a controversial idea. (About 25 percent of Indians today are Dravidians.) This civilization traded internationally and had a high material culture. Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro were carefully planned and even had a sewage system connected to private houses. The religion of the Indus Valley civilization is largely unknown to us. Archaeologists have found many female deity figurines, so it is thought that the Indus Valley people probably worshiped goddesses of fertility in connection with their farming. The cows on their official seals, a variety of stone objects probably used in worship, and sculptures of people in seated meditation may suggest religious practices that influenced Hinduism. But until much more is known about the Indus Valley religion, its effect on Hinduism must remain uncertain.

The Indus Valley civilization was in decline around 1500 B.C.E., when nomadic tribes who called themselves **Aryans**, or “noble ones,” migrated into northwest India from their home between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. These Aryans must be distinguished

Indus Valley civilization Culture of northwest India before the coming of the Aryans

Dravidians [druh-VIH-dee-uhnzh] Dark-skinned peoples who now live mostly in south India, perhaps descended from the Indus Valley civilization

Aryans [AIR-ee-uhnzh] “Noble ones,” Indo-European peoples who migrated into India



A Closer Look

The Symbols of Hinduism

Although Hinduism has no official symbol, the common religious symbol sacred to Hindus is the mystical syllable **Om** (Figure 3.1). Although as a syllable it has no literal meaning, Om symbolizes the fundamental hidden reality of the universe and is the basic spiritual sound the universe makes, particularly the sound of the world soul. Om is often pronounced at the beginning of religious readings or meditation. Many Hindus wear this symbol in jewelry, and it is found in family shrines and in temples. Pronounced in a deep, lengthy way, it can resonate throughout the body so that the sound of Brahman can penetrate to one's center of being.

You may be surprised, even shocked, to encounter the swastika (Figure 3.2) as a common, ancient symbol in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. **Swastika** is an ancient Indian word meaning "sign of good fortune." The



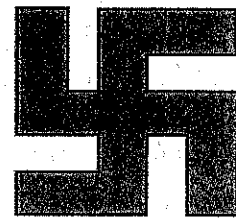
Figure 3.1 Om

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swastika has crooked arms facing in a clockwise or counterclockwise direction (both directions are common in Asia). This feature of the arms extending in all directions suggests to Hindus the universal presence of the world

soul. It is continually rotating like the wheel it resembles, symbolizing the eternal nature of ultimate truth. This symbol is often found on Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist temples, and it is worn on neck pendants as a good-luck charm.

In 1935, the Nazi Party of Germany adopted the swastika as its symbol of the party and the nation with no intent to endorse Hindu teachings. It is still used today by some neo-Nazi groups. So we have an odd situation: For many Asian people, the swastika is a much-loved symbol; for people in the Western world, the swastika is much despised.



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Figure 3.2 The Swastika

from the modern Nazi misuse of this term, which identifies the Nordic-Germanic people as a superior race. Moreover, some Hindus dispute the notion of an Aryan migration/invasion, unattested as it is in Hindu scripture and lore, so they call it the "Aryan Invasion Theory," and note, correctly, that it was developed by Western scholars, not Indians.

Nevertheless, it is widely accepted that the Aryans were light-skinned cattle herders and warriors with horse-drawn chariots. They were a part of the migration from central Asia into both India and Europe; hence the term *Indo-Europeans* is much more common than *Aryans*. They soon took control of the Indus Valley peoples.

Om [OHM] Spoken syllable symbolizing the fundamental hidden reality of the universe

swastika [SWAHS-tee-kuh] Indian symbol of good luck

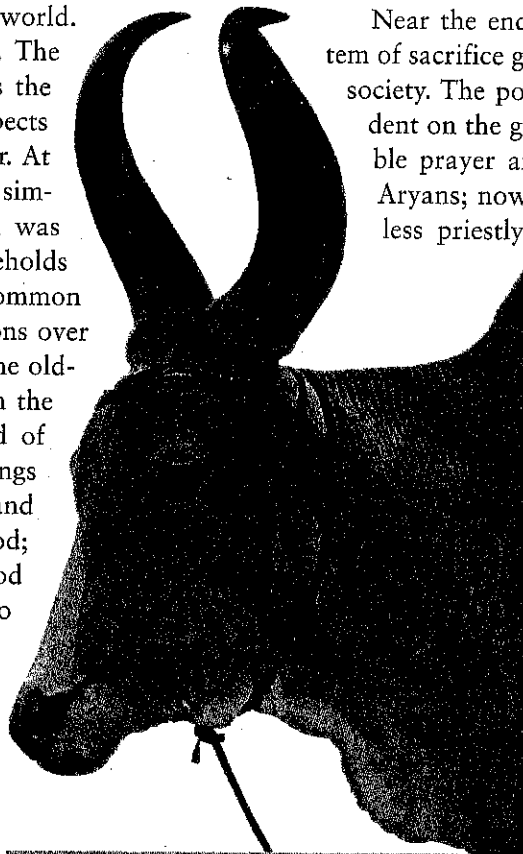
Vedas [VAY-duhs] Hindu "books of knowledge" consisting of *Rig*, *Yajur*, *Sama*, and *Atharva Vedas*

These Indo-Europeans spoke Sanskrit, a language related to most European languages. They had oral collections called the **Vedas**, which form the foundation of Hinduism. The *Vedas* represent a diversified and continuous oral tradition from around 1200 to 800 B.C.E.; they were written down much later. The earliest *Vedas*, four in number, were "books of knowledge" consisting of hymns to deities (the *Rig Veda*), instructions for sacrifice (the *Yajur Veda*), songs for sacrifice (the *Sama Veda*), and spells to bring blessings and avert evil (the *Atharva Veda*).

The heart of Vedic religion was sacrifice by means of fire, accompanied by sung praises and requests to the gods. Vedic gods living in the skies or in heaven play a role in human life as forces of nature, forces that can be influenced by sacrifice. In general, Vedic sacrificial rituals aim at aiding and strengthening deities, who then strengthen the world, so that those who offer sacrifice may prosper. In this worldview the gods and humans are partners in a "circle of life" that maintains the

ongoing creative processes of the world. Both need each other to thrive. The Vedic stage of Hinduism affirms the world, accepting the physical aspects of the world as good and proper. At the daily and domestic level, the simple **Agnihotra** ritual to the sun was performed by the heads of households three times each day and is still common in India. Even given its adaptations over time, the Agnihotra is arguably the oldest continually practiced ritual in the world. Agni (AHG-nee), the god of fire, carried the sacrificial offerings to Indra, the king of the gods and both a war god and a thunder god; to Varuna (VUH-roo-nuh), the god guaranteeing moral order; and to Brahma (BRAH-muh), the god of creation. Many other Vedic deities, mostly male and some female, are also associated with the physical and spiritual forces of nature.

A key person of Vedic times was the **rishi**, or “seer” of the divine, a priest who was able to commune directly with the gods. The rishis achieved an altered state of consciousness in which they could see and hear the gods. To reach this state, they drank a hallucinogenic drug called soma, pressed out perhaps from a mushroom. When the rishi drank soma as a part of Vedic sacrifice, he took a trip to the realm of the deities and experienced their hidden truth. He then composed hymns in their praise, hymns that came into the *Rig Veda*. Soma even became a god, so powerful were its effects. This quest for a direct individual encounter with ultimate, hidden truth has persisted in the Hindu tradition to this day, although the encounter itself has changed. No longer is it an encounter with all the gods, but a discovery of an ultimate reality hidden in one’s soul or an ecstatic devotion to one’s chosen god. The means of achieving it have also changed (now with intense meditation rather than with a drug), as have those who can achieve it (no longer limited to soma drinkers, but now open to all).



The Indus Valley people's official seals featured the cows still venerated today in Hinduism.

“The sun would not rise if the priests did not sacrifice.”

—Famous saying at the end of Vedic times

Near the end of the Vedic period, the Vedic system of sacrifice grew into a dominant power in Aryan society. The power of sacrifice ceased to be dependent on the gods’ favor as influenced by the humble prayer and household sacrifices of ordinary Aryans; now what was important was the faultless priestly performance of increasingly more elaborate sacrificial rituals. At least sixteen priests, and many more assistants, were needed for the regular sacrifices. Sacrifice became a requirement for the maintenance of the world itself rather than just a means of attaining blessings for things such as children, long life, and prosperity. A famous saying of the time claimed that “the sun would not rise if the priest did not sacrifice” (*Satapatha Brahmana* 1.3.1). Religious and social power was consolidated in the hands of one type of priest among the many, those who called themselves Brahmins. The books detailing sacrifice and its power are called the *Brahmanas*, “Brahmin books.” This concentration of power in the hands of the Brahmin priesthood, perhaps combined with other factors, such as the influence of surviving indigenous Indus Valley religious practices, would spark change for Hinduism in its next period of history. Furthermore, this change would catalyze the birth

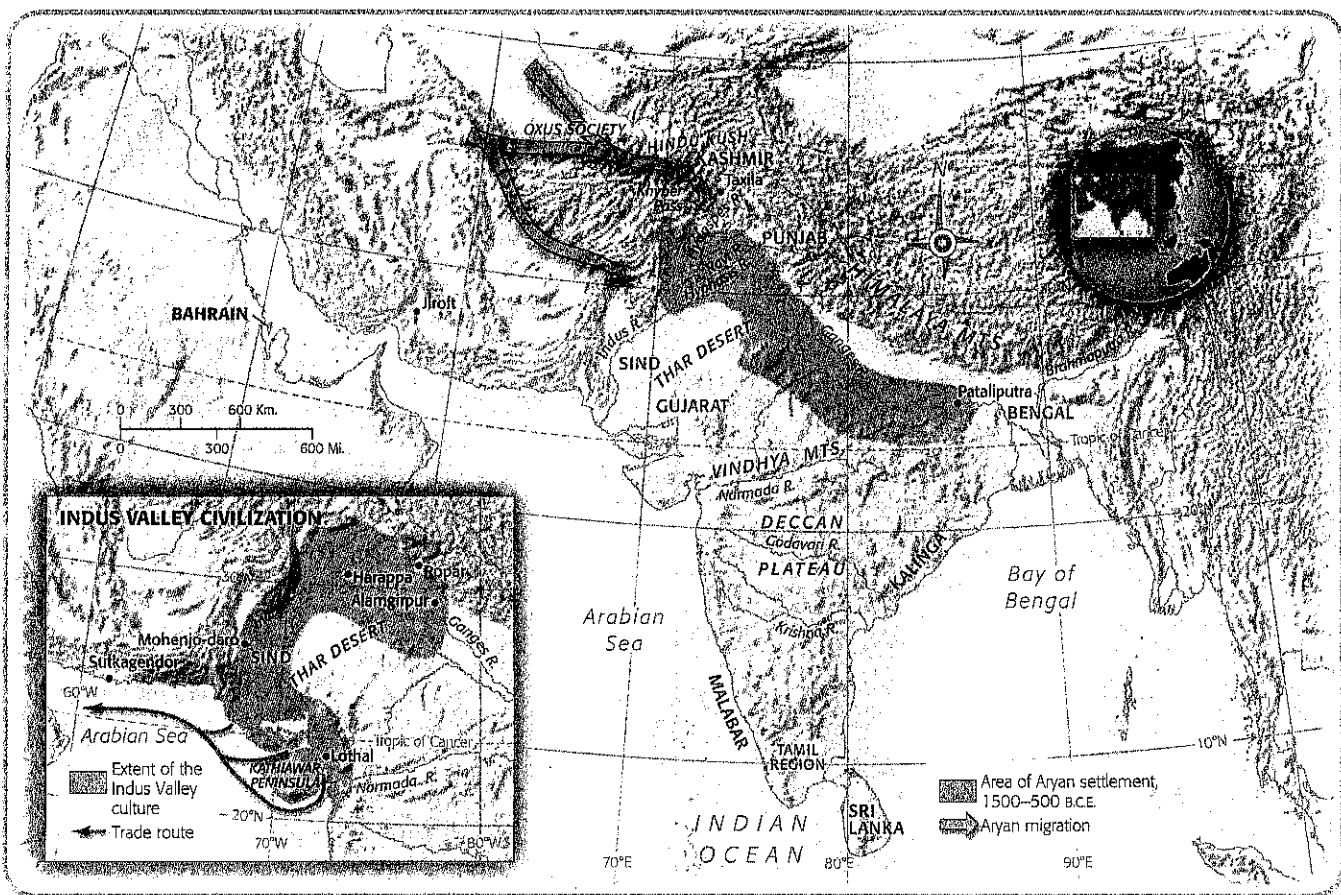
of a new religion, Buddhism, which would change religion in virtually all of ancient Asia and, in modern times, the world.

3-2b The Upanishadic Period (600–400 B.C.E.)

In the first millennium B.C.E., Hindus added another dimension that has endured to this day. This is the quest for knowledge so deep and sacred that to know it is to bring eternal freedom from this world

Agnihotra [AHG-nee-HOH-tra] Ancient Hindu prayer to the sun

rishi [REE-shee] “Seer” of the divine and writer of the *Vedas*



Map 3.1

Indus Valley Civilization and Aryan Migrations

The Indus Valley culture emerged in the city-states of the Indus River basin. It was in decline when the Aryan (Indo-European) peoples began migrating into India around 1500 B.C.E.

of appearances and constant change. The *Upanishads*, philosophical Hindu scriptures from this period, are primarily dialogues between teachers and young students who seek this sacred knowledge through a withdrawal from ordinary life. These teachers and students renounced the Vedic value put on ordinary life and pursued extraordinary truths. They criticized the Vedic rituals as unnecessary, and they rejected the rising social

and economic power of the Brahmin priesthood. Their criticism of Vedic sacrifice was so effective that its main remnants surviving today are the relatively simple ones often incorporated into newer rites, especially weddings, funerals, other traditional rites of passage, and basic daily sacrifices. (This criticism of sacrifice

continues today, for example, when in 2014 a judge in northern India controversially banned all animal sacrifice in Hindu temples. This ruling was overturned in 2015 by the Indian Supreme Court in a judgment that said that the judiciary could not stop centuries-old traditions of sacrificing animals by different religions.) The *Upanishads* urge physical and mental rigors that became increasingly important for Hindu practice. Buddhism and Jainism, which will be considered in later chapters, arose at this time in India to teach a single way to enlightenment, but each one denied key Hindu teachings and practices. Most Hindus gradually rejected these new movements in favor of Hinduism's inclusive approach.

The *Upanishads* teach that underlying reality is a spiritual essence called **Brahman**, a single "world soul" that is the foundation of all physical matter, energy, time, space, and being itself—in short, of everything in and beyond this universe. (This term should not be confused with the Vedic creator god Brahma or the Brahmin priests.) Although it is

Upanishads [oo-PAHN-ih-shahds] Philosophical scriptures at the end of the Vedic period

Brahman [BRAH-muhn] "World soul," the foundation of all physical matter, energy, time, space, and being itself

cosmic, Brahman is present in all people in the form of the **atman**, a person's innermost self or soul. In other words, each person's atman is the one world soul. For most (but not all) Hindus, Brahman is not a personal being, as "world soul" might imply; it is spiritual, but it is not a spirit. The religious quest in the *Upanishads* involves understanding that Brahman and one's atman are one and the same. The realization of this truth, which is the deepest form of self-understanding, brings freedom from ignorance and misery, and liberation from the endless cycle of **reincarnation** of one's atman. Unlike the Vedic hymns, the *Upanishads* do not affirm the physical world as real and good, but rather aim at transcending it.

This goal of liberating one's soul by perfect knowledge of it, and the use of physical and meditational techniques to achieve this knowledge, became important aspects of Hinduism that endure through today. These techniques gradually coalesced into a system called **yoga**, Sanskrit for "yoke." Yoga is an ancient practice that yokes the body and mind for religious deliverance. (You may know it as an exercise and meditation system, but it is much more than that for most Hindus.) Yoga aims at removing humans from the overwhelming mental flow of the material world, if only momentarily, in order to recapture their original spiritual purity.

3-2c The Classical Period (400 B.C.E.–600 C.E.)

A growing number of conversions to Buddhism and Jainism was a threat to Hinduism. The Mauryan (MOHR-yuhn) dynasty that governed north India was pro-Buddhist, and its famous king, Ashoka (ah-SHOH-kuh), extended Aryan rule and Buddhist influence into all of India. Hindus dealt with this threat in a way that has become typical of Hinduism even today, by integrating foreign elements into the broader Hindu tradition. The new teachings of the *Upanishads* were seen as compatible with the earlier *Vedas* and accepted into the Vedic body of scripture.

In addition, Hindus incorporated a variety of religious practices of lower, non-Aryan populations that were converting to new religions such as Buddhism. To put it another way, the Sanskrit tradition of the *Vedas*—for the educated upper classes and the "high" gods—took in and controlled the tradition of the non-Aryan lower classes and the "low gods" of local village and tribal deities. As a result, local deities became a part of the village shrines and temples. The local deities were identified with the older gods, or regarded as their incarnations, or became one of their "family members." Non-Aryan people were taken into this system, some into the lower castes and others into the "outcastes." This development solidified Brahmin power and religious teachings, and eventually stemmed the conversions of non-Aryans to other religions.

However, conversions to Buddhism and Christianity in particular are still a difficult issue when they occur today among lower classes in India.

Around 400 B.C.E., as the wandering Aryans finally settled into towns and cities, they built permanent homes for themselves and temples for their gods. Before that, all sacrifice was done outdoors, with sacrifice as nomadic as the Aryan tribes themselves. During the Classical period the two great Hindu epics still popular today were written: the *Mahabharata* (MAH-huh-BAH-rah-tuh) and the *Ramayana* (rah-MAH-yah-nuh). (To give an indication of the size of these epics, a recent poetic translation of the *Mahabharata* by Carole Satyamurti runs to 888 pages!) Both relate royal rivalries, perhaps reflecting political turmoil during this period as different Aryan clans struggled for territorial power in the areas where they settled. They feature a tension between the aim of upholding the world



Statue in Bangalore, India, of the god Shiva meditating in the lotus yoga position

atman [AHT-muhn]
Person's innermost self or soul

reincarnation Cycle of rebirth of one's atman after death

yoga [YOH-guh] Ancient practice that yokes the body and mind for religious deliverance

found in the *Vedas* and that of isolating a person from society in order to achieve individual liberation found in the newer Upanishadic tradition. Both epics emphasize that social and moral obligation must be maintained, and that rulers acting in the Hindu tradition have a key role in maintaining it. However, many characters in these epics have renounced the world, live alone in forests or in small settlements, and are said to possess extraordinary powers to bless or to curse. The epics' heroes almost always treat these world renouncers, or **sadhus**—of whom we will speak more in the following section—with respect and learn much from them.

Another solution to this tension is found in the part of the *Mahabharata* known by the separate title of **Bhagavad Gita**, “Song of Heaven” or “Song of the Lord.” In the *Gita*, the god Krishna appears to the warrior-class leader Arjuna (AR-joo-nuh), to convince him to do his caste duty of fighting, but in a way in which he understands and controls its effect on him. The *Gita*’s solution is a masterful blend of world-affirming action and world-denying detachment from the results of one’s actions. True renunciation does not involve giving up socially responsible actions. Rather, it involves cutting off a desire for the results of actions even as one fulfills one’s social duty. For example, this means for Arjuna that he must fight well but not care about whether he wins or

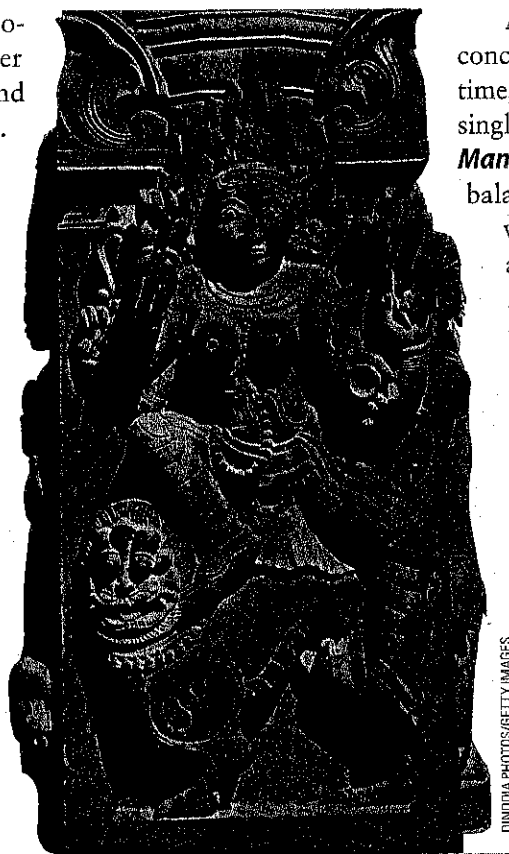
loses. Selfless action without desire for reward is true renunciation for the *Gita*. The *Gita* recognizes that this is difficult and that people must use yoga and other disciplines to accomplish it. This ingenious approach has contributed to the *Bhagavad Gita*’s status as the best-loved of Hindu scriptures today.

sadhus [SAH-dooz]

Renunciants, also known as “holy men”

Bhagavad Gita [BAH-guh-vahd GEE-tuh] “Song of the Lord”; a poem on duty in the *Mahabharata*

Laws of Manu [MAH-new] Main Hindu law code



Goddess sculpture at a temple in Mathura, northern India

DINDIA PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES

A different genre of literature also concerned with society arose at this time, the law codes—particularly the single most important code, the **Laws of Manu**. What epics do in a literary way to balance social responsibility and individual liberation, the law codes do in a formally legal way. They carefully restrict renunciation of the world to older males. One must earn the right to renounce the world by first being in the world as a good student, then as a husband and father. Opting out of ordinary life can only be done after one has successfully engaged in it. Underlying the *Laws of Manu* is the strong Hindu affirmation that doing one’s duty for an orderly, stable society is necessary for this world and after one’s death leads to better reincarnation. This social order involves the proper functioning of the main social-religious classes that arose in Vedic times, as well as the proper observance of interaction within and among these classes. Women belong to the various classes even though

their social roles are not as determined by their class as their husbands’ roles are. We will consider these classes more fully in Section 3-4a.

True renunciation does not
involve giving up socially
responsible action.

3-2d The Devotional Period (600 C.E.–Present)

The next period in Hinduism is characterized by three developments: the rise of devotional movements, especially those devoted to Shiva, Vishnu (VISH-new), and the Goddess; Tantrism; and the rise of Hindu reform movements. Of these developments, the first is so influential that it has given its name to the entire period.



FPHOTOS/SHUTTERSTOCK

Devotion to one's chosen god is a main way of being Hindu. Devotion, or **bhakti**, enters the Hindu tradition as early as the *Bhagavad Gita*, where devotion to Krishna brings a cognitive mental discipline to guide action in the world. Around the sixth century C.E. in southern India, advocates of bhakti praised Shiva and Vishnu in emotional poetry and song. This devotional experience involves often-uncontrollable joy in one's god, sometimes with fainting, frenzy, weeping, and ecstatic speech. By the seventeenth century, bhakti had spread into most Hindu traditions, where it remains. The devotional movement gradually coalesced into three movements, one each for Shiva, Vishnu, and Shakti (SHAHK-tee), the Goddess.

Devotion is typically described in its poetry and song as deep love for one's god. Devotees will sacrifice anything to revel with their god in divine happiness. A well-known example is the followers of the cowherd Krishna: women who abandon their husbands to frolic in the forest with Krishna. Women have played an important role in the rise of devotional movements. Two famous women devotees, Mahadeviyakka (MAH-huh-DEH-vee-YAHK-uh) and Mirabai (MEER-uh-bigh), were both unhappy in traditional marriages and eventually left their husbands to devote themselves entirely to a god. Despite this practice, Hinduism finds a way to balance devotion to a god and renunciation of the world.

The **Tantras**, the basis of the second major development of this period, are hundreds of writings based on practices that arose outside the elite Brahmin tradition. Many Westerners today associate Tantrism with exotic sexual practices, but it is much broader than that. The **Tantras** often criticize the religious "establishment," especially the Brahmins. However, the **Tantras** can also affirm traditional Hindu teachings. For example, an individual is a microcosm of the universe, and by knowing the sacred "geography" and life forces of one's body one may, using yoga, reach liberation from reincarnation. The **Tantras** speak of a right-handed path that all Hindus can take, one that employs **mantras** (short sacred words or sounds used widely in prayer or meditation, not just in Tantrism), sacred diagrams called *mandalas*, and ritual techniques based on body geography. The left-handed path, appropriate for those

with an especially adventurous, fearless temperament, centers on ritual actions strictly forbidden in mainstream Hinduism, gaining liberation by transcending the tension between good and evil. For instance, by having emotionally detached sexual intercourse with a forbidden woman, a man may seek to overcome lust. Left-handed Tantrism is highly controversial among many Hindus, but right-handed Tantrism is commonly approved.

We turn now to the next topic in the Devotional period: Hindu reform or revisionism. Hinduism was not, on the whole, so affected by Islam during Muslim rule in India that it had to make adaptive changes. However, with the arrival of European colonizers and Christian missionaries in the nineteenth century, their interaction with Hindus led to Hindu movements for change. Attempts were made to change Hinduism spiritually and socially, ending practices that the majority of Hindu reformers found objectionable: the harshest features of the caste system, "superstitions" such as Vedic

bhakti [BAHK-tee]

Devotion, particularly in a devotional movement or group

Tantras [TAHN-truh]

Writings in the Tantric movement of Hinduism

mantra [MAHN-truh]

Short sacred formula used in prayer or meditation

astrology, popular blessings and curses, the worship of images, and the like. Here are the most important reform movements:

- Rammohan (RAHM-moh-hahn) Roy (1774–1833), perhaps the world's first scholar of comparative religion, had watched in shock as his sister burned to death on the funeral pyre of her husband (a practice we will discuss in Section 3-4d). He was dismayed at what he saw as the harmful effects of caste divisions. He founded the Society of Brahmanism in 1828. Roy claimed that the *Upanishads* reveal the one God of all people. The One was to be worshiped through meditation, quiet worship, and a moral life, not by the emotions of devotional Hinduism.
- Dayananda Sarasvati (DAH-yuh-NAN-duh SAH-rahhs-VAH-tee) founded the “Noble Society” in 1875. Dayananda found the pure, original essence of Hinduism in the *Vedas* as centering on monotheism and a reasoned morality. He opposed much of devotional Hinduism and also rejected Islam and Christianity. His movement, along with Ram Roy's, gained little steady acceptance from Hindus.
- Ramakrishna (RAH-muh-KRISH-nah), who lived from 1836 to 1886, taught traditional Hindu beliefs and spiritual techniques. He was a devoted temple priest of the goddess Kali, but he worshiped other Hindu deities as well—even the God of Christians and Muslims. He incorporated selected Western ideas and religions into a Hindu context and did not attempt to change Hinduism by making it conform to Western ideas of religion or rationalism. This program was widely effective and led to Ramakrishna's lasting fame in Hinduism.

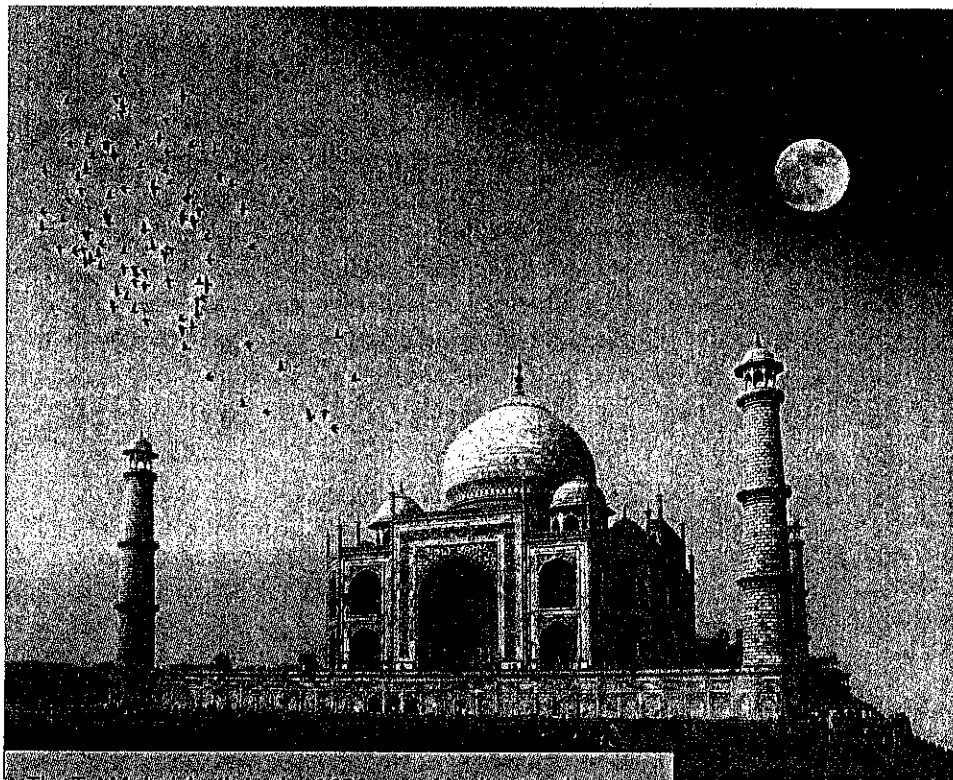
The twentieth-century Indian movement for religious reform and independence from the British Empire—particularly its religious and political leader, Mohandas K. Gandhi (moh-HAHN-dahs GAHN-dee; 1869–1948)—shows again the persistence and adaptability of Hinduism. Gandhi is widely known by his honorific name, Mahatma (“great soul”), and he certainly was one of the great figures of the twentieth century. The civil rights movement in the United States and South Africa is heavily indebted to him for nonviolent resistance as a religious–political program. Although Gandhi drew on different religious

traditions, especially nonviolence in Jainism (*ahimsa*, found to a lesser extent in Hinduism) and Christianity (the teaching of Jesus on forgiving one's enemies while refusing to cooperate with them in evil), he was thoroughly Hindu. He emphasized Hindu teachings and practices that the masses could appreciate—such as devotion, prayer, and trust in divine grace—and combined this with strong moral reasoning and action. His favorite book was the *Bhagavad Gita*, which provided the religious foundation for his system of “persisting in the truth.” This approach involves expressing the truth in every action, no matter what the result and regardless of possible rewards. Gandhi read the *Gita* as a text urging nonviolence, not war. He forbade violence as a tool in his political campaigns; instead, he urged self-control, negotiation and tactical compromises, and even self-sacrifice.

Gandhi's lifestyle drew on the renouncer tradition in Hinduism. At middle age he practiced strict poverty and later in life took a vow of celibacy. He wore little clothing and lived on a bare minimum of food, becoming very thin. Gandhi believed that this austere lifestyle built spiritual strength in him for his task of liberating Hindus from caste hatred, colonialism, and widespread poverty. The nonviolent movement Gandhi led secured independence from Great Britain in 1947, but to his sorrow this independence resulted in not one nation but two: India and the officially Muslim nation of Pakistan, to which many Indian Muslims migrated. He was assassinated by a Hindu in 1948, after rising complaints that he was too much of a pluralist and too accommodating to Muslims. Some Hindus had even mocked him as “Mohammed Gandhi.” Unfortunately, his murder



Gandhi's image is known to most Indians today through their currency—ironic in view of Gandhi's self-imposed poverty.



The Taj Mahal, built in the 1600s as a Muslim tomb, has become the architectural symbol of India and is widely considered one of the most beautiful buildings in the world.

increased the tension between Hindus and Muslims—something that challenges the whole Indian subcontinent even today—but his positive legacy continues in India and throughout the world.

The government of modern India has tolerated all religions and has brought some significant improvement to the lives of the lower classes and the outcasts. This has provoked a religious-political reaction widely but controversially referred to as “Hindu fundamentalism.” For the members of Hindu fundamentalist groups, Hinduism is just as much a symbol of national political identity as a religion. The main group of this type is the Indian People’s Party, often known by its Hindi-language initials, BJP. The principal concern of members is the perceived danger to the Hindu majority by conversions among untouchables and other Hindus, which they see as a threat to what they call the “Hindu-ness,” **Hindutva**, of India. They have enacted laws restricting efforts at conversion by Muslims and Christians, and sometimes they have looked the other way when Hindus commit violence against Muslims. In 1992, a Muslim mosque in the city of Ayodhya was destroyed by a mob of militant Hindus, and then

rioting by Muslims and Hindus killed more than a thousand people.

From 1998 to 2004, the BJP was in control of the Indian government, with a leader of the BJP as prime minister. During this time India openly deployed nuclear weapons, prompting Pakistan to do the same. In 2014 they regained leadership in the national government, led by the powerful Hindu politician Narendra Modi. Modi has moderated his pro-Hindu policies somewhat, but many of his followers still promote Hindutva. For example, they have urged the Indian Parliament to adopt the *Bhagavad Gita* as the official scripture of India, a move the Parliament has so far rejected. Hindus

typically see Hindu fundamentalism as contrary to the generally inclusive, tolerant spirit of Hinduism. Moreover, many progressive Indians view continued caste structures as hindering social and economic reforms.

3-3 Essential Hindu Teachings

In central India, a woman offers prayer and a sacrifice of food in a temple dedicated to Santoshi Ma (san-TOH-shee mah), or “Mother of Satisfaction.” Santoshi Ma is a goddess of prosperity—especially the wife’s prosperity, including modern appliances in her home—and the woman in the temple is asking for a more bearable load of housework. Santoshi Ma was unknown until a few devout Hindus discerned her existence in the 1960s. A few temples were then built in her honor, and in 1975 she was featured in a blockbuster Hindi-language film, *Hail Santoshi Ma*. The film presented a mythology for Santoshi Ma’s divine birth and growth as the daughter of Ganesha, and featured a simple devotional ritual to gain her blessing. Santoshi Ma became an important, much-loved goddess practically overnight, the first time that modern mass media have influenced the rise of a deity. Because the establishment of new deities has a strong precedent in Hinduism, Santoshi

Hindutva [hihn-DOO-tvuh] “Hindu-ness” of India as promoted by the BJP

Ma is now well integrated into the pantheon of Hindu deities, and her many devotees see her as one with all the other goddesses.

In this section, we will discuss the main beliefs of Hindus about the world, human society, and the individual. We begin with a treatment of the main deities in the three devotional movements we encountered in the previous section.

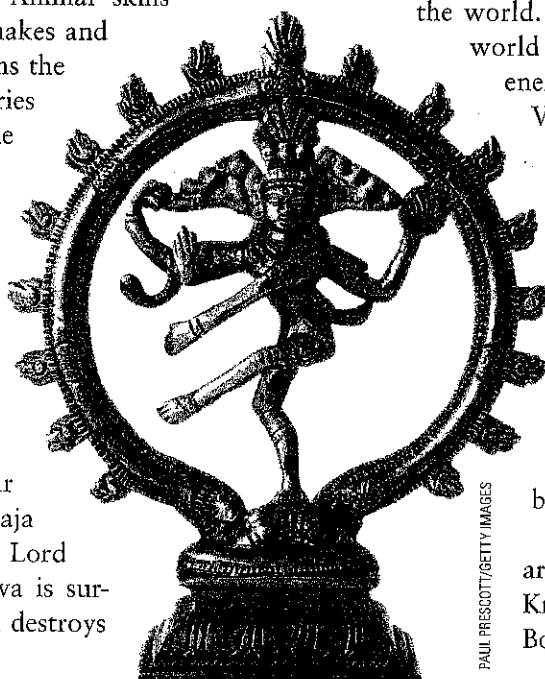
3-3a Main Deities in the Three Devotional Movements

Shiva. Shiva is the god who meditates in his home in the Himalayas. He is a fearsome deity with tangled hair and an ash-covered body. Animal skins are his clothing, and he carries snakes and human skulls. He repeatedly burns the god of love to ashes when she tries to distract him. In the cosmic cycle of creation, destruction, and re-creation, Shiva guides and empowers destruction. However, Shiva devotees today view this destruction positively, as a symbol of the removal of obstacles to salvation; destruction is a necessary part of re-creation. The destructive side of Shiva is depicted in the popular bronze statue called Shiva Nataraja (NAH-tuh-RAHJ-uh), “Shiva the Lord of the Dance.” In this statue Shiva is surrounded by a circle of fire, which destroys in order to purify. He embodies the world-renouncing side of Hinduism and provides a model for this aspect of the tradition.

The sons and consorts of Shiva are particularly appealing. Much of Shiva’s mythology tells of his marriage to the goddess Parvati (PAHR-vah-tee), stories in which a feminine, life-affirming side of Shiva emerges. His other consorts are Durga, the goddess of death, and Kali, the frightening destroyer of evil. His son Ganesha (or simply Ganesha), the elephant-headed

lingam [LING-gahm] Symbol in Shiva’s shrines probably of erect phallus

god who clears away obstacles to success, is one of the best-loved Hindu divinities. Ganesha’s image



Shiva is often portrayed as the Lord of the Dance.

is found in nearly every Hindu shop, restaurant, and office around the world. Shiva’s special image in his temples is the **lingam** (“sign”). The meaning of the lingam is disputed; it may depict the erect phallus, which celebrates Shiva’s power, but for Hindus this meaning is not important. Shaivites often worship Shiva by pouring milk over the lingam. Another main symbol of Shiva is the bull Nandi, whose statue is often found, and venerated, outside his temples (see the photo of Nandi in the opening of this chapter). Shiva is also represented by the trident, and his followers often wear horizontal stripes painted on their forehead and display a trident.

Vishnu. Vishnu is a cosmic king who supervises universal order and prosperity, protecting and preserving the world. When needed, he descends to the world in various incarnations to defeat enemies—both humans and deities.

Vishnu is a gracious god, revered by his devotees with loving loyalty. His female counterpart is Lakshmi (LAHK-shmee), the much-loved goddess of fortune and wealth. Vishnu is often depicted with blue skin, because he once killed a five-headed snake; the snake’s venom that he took into himself turned his skin blue. To his followers, this blue color is a symbol of his power.

Vishnu’s familiar incarnations are Rama, hero of the *Ramayana*, and Krishna, hero of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Both Rama and Krishna are today among the best-loved Hindu gods. This has ironically led to Vishnu himself being seen as too remote to intervene

directly on behalf of an individual in trouble. Devotees of Vishnu who have renounced the world typically wear two vertical markings on the forehead that come together on the bridge of the nose.

Shakti as the Goddess. The worship of Shakti as the feminine side of the divine originates in the *Vedas*. The *Rig Veda* portrays Shakti as the powerful upholder of the universe. She is the sister of Krishna and is also Shiva’s wife. Shakti is worshiped as Devi (DEH-vee), “the Goddess,” who is one with Brahman. The literature of Shaktism is found in the *Tantras*; they sometimes, but not uniformly, have a high view



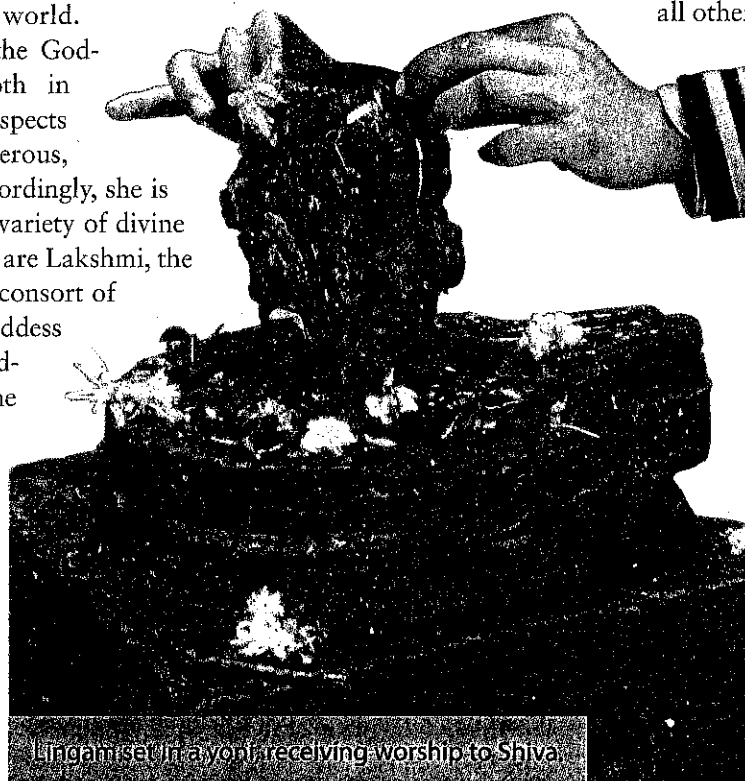
Shakti (standing) and Shiva in a mural in a temple in Hyderabad, India.

of women and oppose ways in which the caste system holds down women. In some regions of India, the Great Goddess (*Mahadevi*) is revered as the supreme divinity. Female power in the Goddess alone is seen as the ultimate cause of the creation, preservation, and end of the world.

Similar to Shiva, the Goddess is venerated both in her gentle, motherly aspects and in her cruel, dangerous, and erotic aspects. Accordingly, she is honored under a wide variety of divine forms. The best known are Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and consort of Vishnu; the black goddess Kali ("dark one"), riding on a lion; and the demon-slaying Durga, the goddess of death. The **yon**i, probably a stone representation of the human female genitalia, is a symbol of the feminine power of the cosmos. The lingam is often set within the yoni to suggest that the

universe is powered by a combination of the male and the female. With Hinduism's millions of deities—traditionally put at 330 million!—and even with these three more focused devotional movements, how do Hindus put it all together in a way that makes everyday sense for them? Whether a Hindu honors Vishnu, Shiva, or Shakti, that particular deity is for her or him the sole and the highest god, whereas other Hindu gods are lower forms. Thus, one god is thought to appear at various levels. At the "top" is a nonpersonal absolute, Brahman, the world soul that cannot be described. Brahman is so comprehensive that some Hindu scriptures describe it as encompassing everything that exists. Brahman manifests itself in various personal high divinities that create the world (Brahma), maintain it (Vishnu), and destroy it again (Shiva). In practice, however, followers of one deity will attribute all three functions to him or her, as our previous treatment suggests. They see all other gods as standing under their

god or as further manifestations of that deity. Although the teaching of the ultimate world soul plays little or no role in the religious everyday life—it's hard to pray, sacrifice, or express emotion to something that is unknowable—it leads to most Hindus seeing no problem in acknowledging other Hindu traditions, and sometimes even other religions, as authentic paths to the divine.



Lingam set in a yoni receiving worship to Shiva.

yoni [YOH-nee]

Symbol probably of the human female genitalia representing the feminine power of the cosmos

3-3b Hindu Doctrinal Concepts

Dharma is the foundational concept in Hinduism, a wide-ranging term for righteousness, law, duty, moral teachings, religion itself, or the order in the universe. Dharma is also the god who embodies and promotes right order and living. The ancient *Vedas* emphasize the order of the cosmos, and dharma builds on it by emphasizing the correct ordering of human life. Dharma is more than a set of cosmic-order ideas applying in the same way to all Hindus. It's specific to one's place in the world: one's social position, caste membership, stage of life, and gender. The dharma of a member of the warrior class is distinct from that of a laborer; the dharma of a youth differs from that of the father of a family, and a husband's dharma differs from his wife's.

A Hindu must conform primarily to his or her class and caste dharma. Hindu scripture teaches this, and it is a particular theme in the *Bhagavad Gita*. Following the social and religious rules of one's caste leads to better reincarnation; neglecting it leads to a lesser reincarnation. For a man to leave his caste for a higher one is unthinkable. Opposing the caste system itself leads to a bad reincarnation. One could find oneself an outcaste, a lower animal, or an insect in one's next life. This has led to a remarkably conservative social structure and explains why, even today, traditional Hindu values often frustrate attempts at social change for women, the lower castes, and outcastes. Hinduism divides life into four stages, each with its own particular dharma—what is seen as right for each stage. These four stages will be dealt with in more detail in Section 3-4b.

Samsara is the cycle of reincarnation, endured as a hardship by the spiritual essence of all living things. The **jiva** (individual soul) is subject to reincarnation, because it is only the jiva that earns reward or punishment in

the next reincarnation (see the upcoming discussion of karma). One's atman, the deeper soul identical with Brahman, is not subject to karma, but it goes along with the jiva. It travels with the jiva in samsara but is beyond it. Because actions in life involve choices, at every moment an individual is capable of making the choices to ensure a good situation in the next life. The *Brihadaranyaka* (BREE-hahd-uh-RUN-yah-kuh)

dharma [DAHR-muh]

Righteousness, law, duty, moral teaching, order in the universe

samsara [sahm-SAH-ruh]

Cycle of reincarnation

jiva [JEE-vuh]

Individual, personal soul that collects karma and is subject to reincarnation

karma [KAHR-muh]

Deeds or acts that influence reincarnation



A soul, symbolized by a ray of light, travels to enlightenment through seven different lives.

DINODIA / THE IMAGE WORKS

"Just as a caterpillar gets its front feet firmly on the next leaf before it leaves the one it is on, a soul creates its next life before it departs the present one."

—Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

Upanishad 4.4.3 describes this liberation from samsara well: "Just as a caterpillar gets its front feet firmly on the next leaf before it leaves the one it is on, a soul creates its next life before it departs the present one." This leads us to a fuller consideration of karma.

Karma is derived from the Sanskrit for "deeds" and is related to one's behavior in preceding lives. After a person's death, her or his spiritual essence is reborn in another life if any karma is attached to it. Whether one



A Closer Look

Popular Misunderstandings of Karma, Mantra, Guru, and Avatar

Karma is not fate, as we often hear today in North America and Europe. Fate is a random, uncontrollable power that determines human actions and events. Karma is the *opposite* of what fate means in the Western world. In karma, each person generates her or his own reward or punishment, which comes in one's condition after reincarnation. Also, one hears muddled talk about group karma—for example, Hollywood actress Sharon Stone's suggestion that the 2008 earthquake in China that killed seventy thousand ordinary people was some sort of karmic retribution for the Chinese government's violent crackdown on dissent in Tibet. Stone said, "And then all this earthquake and all this stuff happened, and I thought, is that karma—when you're not nice that bad things happen to you?"

is rich or poor, healthy or sick, male or female, intelligent or not, talented or untalented, a member of a high or low caste, a Hindu or not, and endowed with many other life-defining traits depends on the karma inherited from the lives that have gone before. Karma explains all human inequalities. Although the conditions of an individual's current life are determined in advance by her or his deeds in previous lives, individuals must assume personal responsibility for their present actions and the associated consequences. (See "A Closer Look: Popular Misunderstandings of Karma, Mantra, Guru, and Avatar.")

Moksha means the "liberation" from rebirth that comes with the entry of the individual soul (atman) into the highest reality (Brahman). The idea of reincarnating endlessly is abhorrent to Hindus. The ultimate goal is to merge one's atman with Brahman, like a drop of water enters the Indian Ocean. To achieve moksha, one must be rid not only of bad karma, but also of good karma; any karma at all causes rebirth after death. Although actions take place, if the self that does them is not egoistic, karmic results cannot attach to them. Paradoxically, one must even give up the desire to achieve liberation

A mantra is not a slogan or "words to live by," such as "Her mantra is to enjoy life to the fullest" or "The candidate's mantra of change was very powerful." Rather, a mantra is a short mystical utterance of great sacred power, as illustrated by the greatest of all mantras, Om.

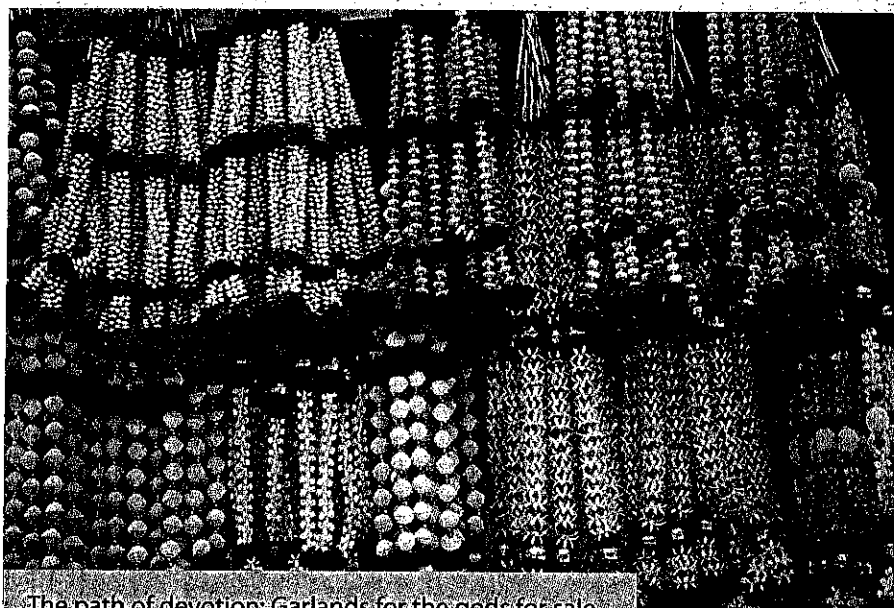
A guru is not anyone who acquires followers in any sort of movement, or a person who has wide authority because of his or her secular knowledge or skills. On the contrary, a guru is a private teacher of transcendent religious truth; a guru leads the student to full knowledge and release.

An avatar is not only a computer user's self-representation in a three-dimensional model for computer games or a two-dimensional icon for Internet communities. In Hinduism, an avatar is an incarnation (different, human form) of a god, as, for example, Krishna is an avatar of Vishnu. This understanding of avatar was adapted by film director James Cameron in his 2009 blockbuster film by that name, in which a human mind is projected into the body of a human-like being.

in order to reach it. (To illustrate this from everyday life, if you've ever had trouble falling asleep at night, you may have found that to fall asleep you must give up trying to fall asleep or must even try to stay awake.) Many Hindus, however, find that moksha is difficult to achieve, especially in a time when many Hindus believe that their religion is in decline. They are content to collect good karma and be reincarnated to a better life.

Three main paths lead to moksha, whether one finds it or not. There is a tendency among Hindus to see one chosen path as the best, but the paths are often combined as well. The way of active, obedient life—called the *path of deeds* (karma)—is doing ritual actions of worship and meditation, as well as carrying out daily conduct according to one's own dharma, but without a selfish intent that causes bad karma. Second, those on the *path of knowledge* see the central problem with human beings as their inability to realize that they are living in an unreal world and that the only thing real is the spirit. The path of knowledge brings personal merging with the ultimate

moksha [MOHK-shuh]
Liberation from rebirth
and samsara



The path of devotion: Garlands for the gods for sale outside a Hindu temple.

unity behind the visible things of the world, particularly knowledge of the unity of the individual soul and the world soul through yoga and meditation. Third, the *path of devotion* is a loving surrender and service to one's main deity. Some who follow this path see their deity as a manifestation of the impersonal Brahman, but others see their god or goddess as the Supreme Being, with no Brahman above him or her.

3-4 Hindu Ethics and Ways of Life

Krishnan, a thirty-year-old computer engineer in Illinois, logs onto shaadi.com to begin the process of finding a wife. This Indian website bills itself as the "world's largest matrimonial service." Some of Krishnan's friends have used it and have urged him to try it, because his parents' efforts at matchmaking haven't succeeded. He enters the search terms "Hindu" for his religion, "Brahmin" for his social-religious class, and also his birthday (for a "Vedic astrology horoscope" used

in traditional Hindu matchmaking). In his personal statement for the website, he writes that he is looking for a traditional Hindu-young woman who can grow to love him after they are married. His parents will always come first in his life, he says, then his wife, and then his brothers and other relatives.

Hindus often say that Hinduism is more a way of life than a religion. For observant Hindus today, everyday life and religious life are not separated, because Hindu ethics traditionally plays a leading role in everyday life: caste and class, marriage and children, career and retirement.

3-4a The Caste System

You've probably heard about the Hindu **caste** system, which divides people in society into economic and social groups, giving all people their occupations, level of income, and particular pattern of religious duties. The foundation of the caste system was laid in Vedic times, but it grew into its present form in classical times, especially with the writing of the *Laws of Manu*. India today has more than six thousand castes and subcastes, and scholars have long debated the roles of color, economics, and power in the caste system. Hinduism has produced some opposition to the caste system—and there are many activists working to change it today—but for the most part it has endured as one of the main features of Hinduism. Two words are used in Hindu society to refer to this social system: *varna* and *jati*.

Varna means "color" (it is related to our word *varnish*). Varna is a system dating back to Vedic times that groups Hindu society into four classes (see Figure 3.3). Some scholars have theorized that social classes are based on varna, with the lightest at the top and the darkest on the bottom. This is probably an oversimplification, and it is controversial in Hinduism, but even today in India there is a general cultural preference (e.g.,

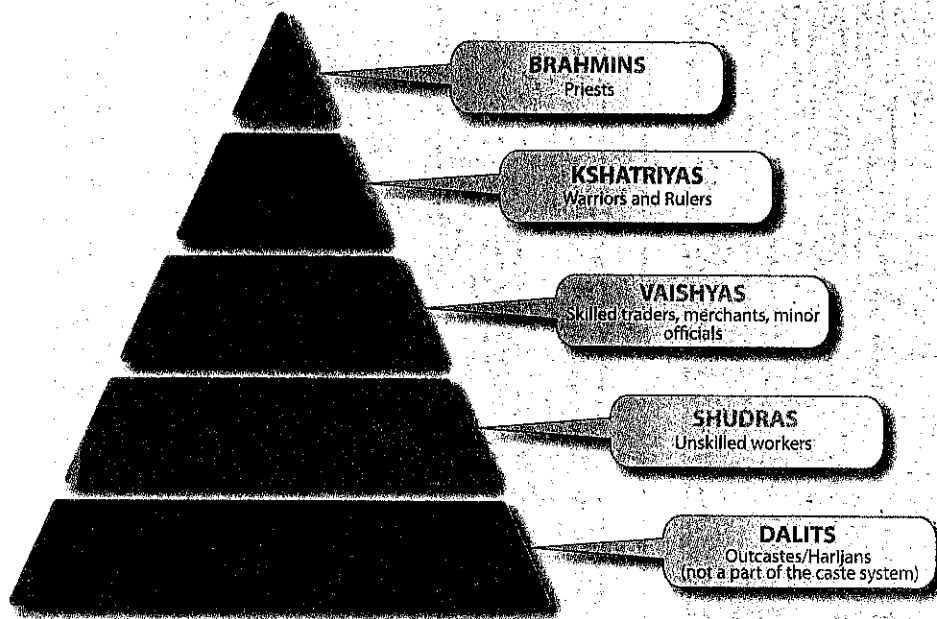
in films) for the lighter skin tones found in the upper varnas. (Skin-lightening creams are often best-selling items in Indian drugstores.) Also, class is generally related to economic standing: The lower one's class, the lower one's income. But there are many exceptions to this;

caste [kast] System of social organization

varna [VAHR-nuh] "Color," a system of classification of people into four main classes

Hindus often say that Hinduism is more a way of life than a religion.

Figure 3.3 The Hindu Varna System and the Dalits



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some upper-caste Brahmins are of modest means, and one can find members of the common-people Vaishya class who are wealthy merchants.

A well-known hymn in the *Rig Veda* (10.90) tells of how the four main classes arose from the sacrifice of Purusha (POOR-oo-shuh), a man as large as the universe. "The Brahmin was made from his mouth; his arms were made into the Prince; his thighs became the common people; and from his feet the servants were born." The **Brahmin** priests spring from Purusha's mouth so that they can chant the songs for sacrifice. When the Aryans came into India, their ritual lore was controlled by the Brahmins, who claimed to be the only class able to learn and enact them with ritual correctness. Correctness was needed to perform effective ceremonies that mediated between humans and the gods, bringing blessing to both.

This hymn also relates that the arms of Purusha were made into the "Prince." This is the class of **Kshatriyas**, who are kings and government officials. Because being a ruler entails defending and enlarging one's kingdom, the Kshatriyas are also warriors who lead in battle. The strong arms of Purusha lead to action, so the hymn says that it is the dharma of this class to defend others. Brahmins or Vaishyas cannot be rulers or warriors, because they would not have the right parts of Purusha to be Kshatriyas. (However, Brahmins have often been advisors to rulers.)

of the top three varnas, are thought not to have the personal qualities to be twice-born Hindus. But Shudras can do well economically, and women (not men) are allowed to marry a person one social step above them. If Shudras follow their dharma well, they can be reincarnated into a higher social class.

Below and outside the class system are the **outcastes**, a term not legally accepted in India today. (Note that outcastes means "those outside of the caste system," not "those cast out.") The Indian government calls them "scheduled classes," but others call them Harijans (HAHR-ee-jahns), "Children of God," a term popularized by Mohandas Gandhi with an unfortunate negative connotation in that "Harijans" is also an Indian euphemism for illegitimate children. They reject these terms, and prefer to call themselves **Dalits**, "oppressed ones."

The thighs of Purusha form the large varna of the common people, the **Vaishyas**, who provide the necessary semiskilled labor for society. Vaishyas are merchants, small farmers, and artisans. Finally, the **Shudras** are servants or peasants born from the feet of Purusha. The task of the Shudras, people in the fourth varna, is to support the higher castes by lowly service. Only men in the top three varna are "twice-born," receiving the sacred thread to wear on their body when they are ritually initiated into the formal stages of Hindu life. Shudra men and women, and women

Brahmin [BRAH-minz] The top priestly class in the varna system

Kshatriyas [kshuh-TRIE-yuhz] The warrior and princely varna class

Vaishyas [VIGH-shuhs] Third varna class, the "common people"

Shudras [SHOO-druhs] Fourth varna class, "servants"

outcastes Members of the lowest social class, outside the caste system, also called "Dalits"

Dalits [DAHL-its] "Oppressed ones," the outcastes below the four Hindu castes



A member of the Brahmin caste

Their sheer numbers—an estimated 160,000,000—mean that they can wield considerable political power in elections. Some rise to political fame, and a number of cabinet ministers and even one prime minister have come from the Dalit class. Despite affirmative action programs for Dalits that provide a higher education and well-paid government jobs for some, strong discrimination against Dalits persists. In June of 2007, a group of Shudra shepherds petitioned to be downgraded into the Dalit class, hoping to gain access to preferential treatment afforded

jati [JAH-tee] Caste into which one is born

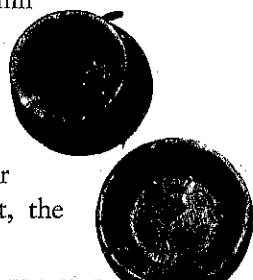
by the government; their attempt was met with rioting by other Hindus. The vast majority of Dalits are still confined to menial, ritually polluting jobs such as street cleaning, manual scavenging, and handling bodies of dead animals or humans. They cannot drink from the same water pumps as the twice-born castes or eat in restaurants with them. In some villages, occasional violence is used to keep Dalits “in their place.” Hindus of the four main classes do not consider them to be Hindus, and their rights and political status have been problematic in modern India. They are today the poorest of Indians, existing on the equivalent of only a few dollars a day.

Jati means “birth,” and this birth caste is more important than *varna* for Hindus because it affects so many aspects of daily life. (Modern scholars disagree about how to translate *varna* and *jati*. Here we render *varna* as “class” and *jati* as “caste.” Together, they comprise the caste system.) Although there are only four *varnas* in Hinduism, there are thousands of *jatis*. Caste is not a religious institution as the *varna* system is, but is economic and geographical in origin, now combined with *varna* into an overall religious system. Hindus today refer to *jati* when they talk of caste, and it is one’s *jati* that really dictates the life of the average Hindu. Each *jati* has its own rules about food, jobs, marriage, contact with other *jatis*, and the like. From each caste come a number of subcastes, making the whole system even more complicated. Castes may often be occupational, but this does not preclude a member of one caste working at the occupation of another, for example, in agriculture—an added complexity. The Brahmin class is subdivided into many castes, just as there are many castes in the Kshatriya, Vaisya, and Shudra classes, and even among Dalits. Just

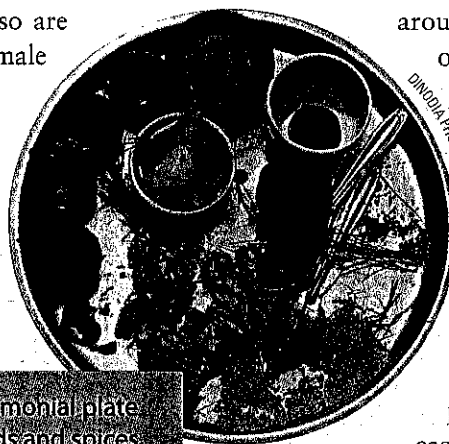
Dalits in northern India protesting the caste system, 2009



as the four varnas are hierarchically organized, so are the various castes within a particular varna. A male is obligated to marry within his jati. Expulsion from the family and caste as a whole is likely to result should this obligation be broken, but if this and other caste obligations are kept, the individual is provided a strong network of support and protection.



Indian wedding ceremonial plate with a variety of foods and spices



around twenty-three at the time of marriage, a young woman around eighteen. Hindus have always placed a high value on raising a family, and even poor Hindu couples will keep having children until a boy or two are born. During the householder stage a man works at a trade or profession appropriate to his caste, primarily for his family, but also for his community. He also engages in public and private religious duties derived from his caste.

3-4b The Four Stages of a Man's Life

The life of a Hindu male is traditionally divided into four stages of time. In modern India, fewer people observe the system completely and formally than in previous centuries, but even today it is an influential pattern for a man's life. However, Shudras, Dalits, and women of all four classes rarely follow these stages. Most Hindu males do not go through the four stages; many never advance beyond the second. Hindus who do complete all four stages sustain this world and pursue ultimate liberation from it.

The first period of life is the **student stage**. A male is taught by his family's elders from childhood, sometimes by a guru as well. His education will not only fit him for a future profession appropriate to his caste, but will also equip him for family, social, and religious life in a way appropriate to his varna and jati. In older times, this period could last for twenty years or more, but today the student stage has shrunk to between twelve and fifteen years, except for those few who obtain higher education in a university.

The second period is the **householder stage**, in which the Hindu male must marry and raise a family. Marriages are often arranged by parents while their children are still young—marriage is much too important to family and society to leave it up to young people! Since about 2010, both parents and young people increasingly use Internet matrimonial sites for Hindus, leading to marriages often called “semi-arranged.” In villages child marriages often occur, but after the marriage, the child bride and child groom are separated until puberty sets in. On average, a young man is

{ On average, a young man is around twenty-three at the time of marriage, a young woman around eighteen. }

The third stage of life is that of *retirement*, traditionally called the **forest-dweller stage**. When a man's children have grown up, when he sees signs of aging such as

gray hair and wrinkles, his duty as a householder can end. In this forest-dweller stage—if he lives to see it, which in much of Hindu history isn't a given—the man is expected to retire not only from his job, but

also from family and social life and much (but not all) of his wealth and possessions. Sometimes a man in this stage retreats to the forest to live a more spiritual life, either alone or in a small group of retirees, but this is rarer today than in the past. He gives up pleasures and comforts. His life is that of a celibate recluse. In view of the hardships that this partial renunciation brings, it's easy to see why this stage has become obsolete for all but a few.

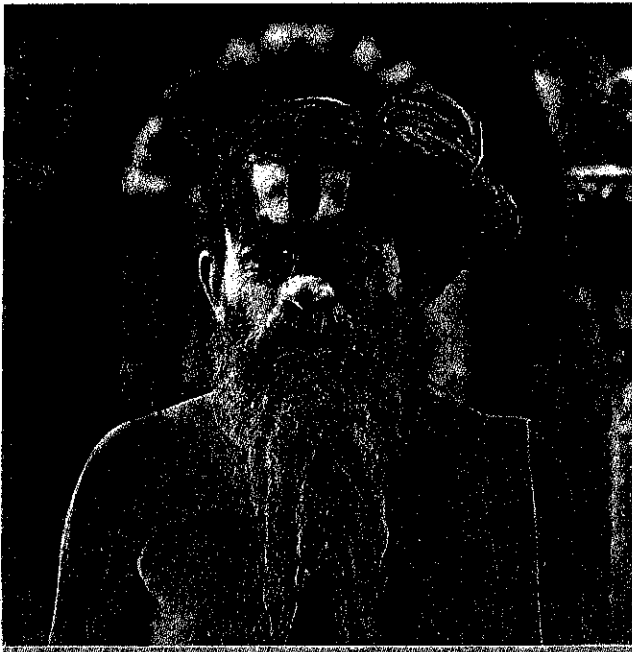
The fourth stage is that of the “renouncer” or **sannyasin**, when a Hindu renounces the world and his previous life completely. This stage traditionally does not necessarily follow retirement; a man can become a sannyasin directly from the householder stage. All cares

student stage First period of life, in which a Hindu male gains knowledge for caste duties

householder stage Second period of life, in which a Hindu man marries and raises a family

forest-dweller stage Third period of life, in which a Hindu man retires

sannyasin [sahn-YAH-sin] **stage** Fourth period of life, in which a Hindu man becomes a renunciant



A renouncer in Nepal with typical sadhu appearance: gathered-up hair, devotional face paint, untrimmed beard, and dried cow dung powder on his torso.

and pleasures of life are abandoned, and his concentration is devoted to achieving moksha before he dies. The sannyasin engages in intense study and meditation, typically with yoga and rigors such as solitude and a sparse diet. He is treated with the greatest respect in Hindu lands. But this respect is mingled with a certain degree of fear and skepticism, because some holy men can be hostile, even ferocious, in their words, and a few can be frauds. Upon taking up the life of

the sannyasin, he will often burn an effigy of his body to show that he has died to the world. When a renouncer who has achieved moksha dies, his fellow renouncers tie stones onto his body and throw it in a river. He needs no funeral with cremation, for the soul has already been released from the dreaded cycle of reincarnation.

artha [AHR-thuh] Material prosperity, the second goal of life in Hinduism

kama [KAH-muh] Spiritual, mental, and physical pleasure, the third goal of Hindu life

{ The Kama Sutra, or Scripture on Pleasure, is often seen as a sex manual, but both kama and the Kama Sutra are much more than that. }

3-4c The Four Goals of Life

Hindus hold to four main goals in life and connect them roughly with the

stages of life. The first goal of life, dharma, a term we saw previously, is a comprehensive concept that governs all stages of life. A good Hindu must know the dharma of Hinduism, particularly the truth that relates to his or her caste status, and practice it. This practice includes both social morality and ritual duties. Without this first goal, the others cannot be met, and spiritual practices such as yoga will fail.

The second goal of life is **artha**, material success and prosperity. This is pursued for the sake of one's family and the wider good of society. A householder is expected to become as prosperous as possible, while observing the bounds of proper dharma. Artha ties into the world-affirming side of Hindu tradition, and it makes Hinduism one of the few religions in the world to make financial prosperity an important religious goal. It also helps to explain the entrepreneurial drive and economic success of many Indians in modern times. One's dress reflects, among other things, the level of prosperity one has achieved (see "A Closer Look: Hindu Dress").

The third goal of life is **kama**, aesthetic pleasure both of the mind and the body, obviously also world-affirming. This goal is restricted to the householder stage. *Kama* is a comprehensive term for all types of pleasures: spiritual, intellectual, artistic, and physical. The *Kama Sutra* (SOO-trah), or *Scripture on Pleasure*,

is often seen as a sex manual, but both kama and the *Kama Sutra* are much more than that. Hinduism is unique in teaching that the pursuit of pleasure is a valid and important religious goal.

The fourth goal of life is moksha, which we defined previously. It means

"release" from life, particularly from the continuous cycle of death and rebirth. This goal is best practiced in the retirement and renouncer stages of life, although moksha can be sought in all the stages, particularly in the two paths of deeds and devotion that are thought to lead to release.

3-4d The Lives of Hindu Women

The vast majority of young Hindu women get married. The Hindu wife bears children, raises them, and runs the home. Motherhood is so important that a woman is considered a failure if she is without children, especially a son; this is true even of modern Hindu women who



A Closer Look

Hindu Dress

Hinduism requires no particular type of clothing, as you might expect, and regional styles in India vary considerably. The traditional dress for most Indian women (Figure 3.4) is the sari, a piece of cloth five or six meters long that is



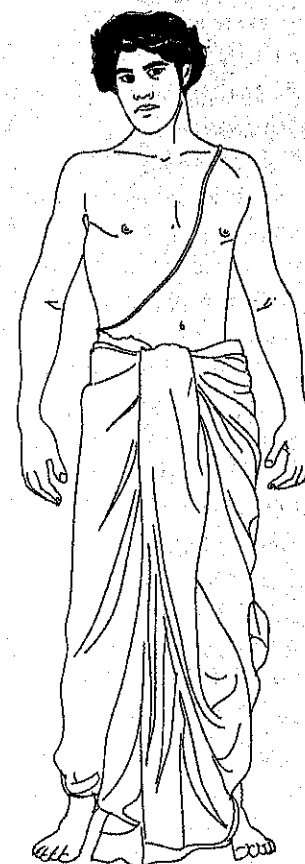
BONNIE VAN VOORST © CENGAGE LEARNING

Figure 3.4 Woman in sari, with bindi on her forehead

Indian women of all classes typically love jewelry. Long earlobes are an ancient Indian sign of nobility, so women use heavy earrings to stretch their earlobes. The distinctive decorative mark of a married woman is the **bindi** ("little drop") on her forehead. The bindi may be a circle of colored paste, or of felt with an adhesive backing, which can more easily be put on and decorated with sequins. Unmarried women and young girls often have a small black spot on their forehead; it is not a bindi, but rather a protection against the "evil eye."

wrapped and pleated around the waist and then drawn around over the shoulder so that the free end is loose. Underneath the sari are a short blouse and a long skirt, often leaving the midriff bare. In northern India, women prefer light, baggy trousers called "pyjamas" (from which we get our term) and a long, loose-fitting shirt. In mixed company outside the home or when worshiping in the home or temple, women usually cover their hair with the free end of their saris. This is a sign of respect to the gods and to other people, women as well as men.

Although Hindu women often dress in traditional Indian ways, Hindu men very often wear Western clothing, especially in cities. Men in Indian villages traditionally dress in the *dhoti* (Figure 3.5). This single, large piece of fabric is wrapped around the waist and tucked up around the thighs. The *kurta* (called a "panjabi" in the United Kingdom and Canada) is a long, loose shirt coat falling to the knees and is worn by both men and women. It can be worn with a dhoti or with pants, and is both casual and formal. Turbans are usually connected with observant Sikh men (see Chapter 6), but in India some Hindu men also wear one. The most important item worn is the sacred thread, a thin cotton cord worn on the body by men of the upper three classes, symbolizing full Hindu status. It is given in a special ceremony near the age of ten. The traditional garb of Hindu men, long disdained by the Indian upper classes in favor of more-Western-style clothing, is now making a strong comeback in some social circles and in fashion design.



BONNIE VAN VOORST © CENGAGE LEARNING

Figure 3.5 Man in dhoti and sacred thread

Holy men have a distinctive but not uniform look. (See the photo in Section 3-4b.) Their hair is often wildly matted, and they sometimes cover their body in light-colored dust or powdered cow dung, giving them the look of death. Some go around only in a thong or at times nude, to symbolize their full control of the senses and bodily desire. They can sometimes be seen with their sacred thread, but not wearing one shows that they have left the distinctions of once-born and twice-born behind.

bindi [BIHN-dee]
Forehead mark of a married Hindu woman

may work outside the home. On the other hand, being a mother of sons brings great pride and auspiciousness. The wife performs worship in the home at the household shrine, often leading worship there. However, no woman who is menstruating is traditionally allowed at the shrine or in the kitchen. She is considered ritually unclean, and her husband will not touch her during this time. After ritual bathing at the end of her menstrual period, a woman resumes normal life in the home.

Despite the value placed on motherhood, abortion is legal and frequent in India, even among Hindus. Prenatal testing by ultrasound is now used widely to ascertain the sex of a fetus in the womb, even though this has been outlawed in India since 1994; if it is a female, it is often aborted. Some parents think it better to abort a female than to support a second or third daughter and pay for her expensive dowry. The Indian government encourages contraception, but having sons is necessary for economic support in one's old age because India has no national pension system. One also needs a son to perform one's funeral rites. The use of selective abortion to obtain sons has led, in some parts of India, to an ominous imbalance between the proportion of males and females. As a result, in 2007 the Indian government and private agencies launched a "Save the Girl Child" campaign which is still in full operation.

Divorce is difficult for a woman to obtain, especially for women of the higher classes, despite the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 that ostensibly made it possible for any woman to get a divorce. Although divorce and remarriage are quite common among the lower castes, there is still a general feeling in villages that a wife is to blame if divorce occurs or even if the husband dies before she does. Family and friends are liable to regard a divorced or widowed woman as "unlucky," so life can be difficult for her. Widows rarely remarry and are often socially

suttee [suh-TEE] Burning of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband

puja [POO-juh] Devotional actions of worshiping a god or venerating a human

ostracized. The suicide rate for widows is high, even if **suttee**, "widow burning," is now illegal and almost unheard of. In suttee, widows would climb onto their dead husband's funeral pyre to go to heaven with him, an act of great merit.



In 2007 the Indian government and private agencies launched a "Save the Girl Child" campaign.

In urban areas women do have more status today; for example, they can now own property, keep their own salary, and open bank accounts in their own name. Many young Hindu women go to college, get a job, and delay marriage. Even unmarried young women from villages go to the big cities to find jobs in industries that are actively recruiting them. Yet marriage is still important, and a woman's self-esteem and social standing still have much to do with her husband. By serving him faithfully, just as she serves a god, good karma will come to her.

3-5 Hindu Ritual and Meditation

The Hindu temple in Omaha, Nebraska reflects the diversity of Hinduism. Temples in India are dedicated to one god, but this temple has twelve separate holy areas with altars, each with a statue

of a different deity. All Hindus, no matter what god they worship, can feel comfortable in the Omaha temple. This temple was built as a center of worship, teaching, and Indian cultural life for people from India who live in Nebraska and Iowa. It is open for Hindu festivals, for a main weekly service on Sunday morning—an adaptation to American religion—and for traditional ceremonies marking the life stages of Hindus, from birth to death.

As you might expect, worship and meditation in Hinduism are diverse. Worship is a daily event for observant Hindus, whether performed at home, at a temple, at an outdoor shrine, or on a pilgrimage. Worship is called **puja**, a word for "honor" and "veneration." Ritual is important to Hindus, and much of it is ancient, although with regional and devotional-group variations. We will look now at several aspects of Hindu puja and meditation.

3-5a Images

Hinduism has many gods, all of them represented by images. Westerners, especially Protestant Christians who look upon images of the divine as objects that encourage false worship, often use the term *idol*, but *image* is more appropriate. *Idol* suggests that it is the statue or picture alone that is worshiped, and it is generally a pejorative term, although one will hear Hindus



A clay statue of a Hindu female god awaits painting in an art studio.

3-5b Worship in the Temple and the Home

Temples large and small are found all over India, from great pilgrimage centers to humble side streets. At some of these temples more than one god is venerated in words and deeds. Usually the deity and the temple belong to one of three strands within the Hindu pantheon—Shaivite, Vaishnavite, and Shakta, including all their avatars and family members.

The deity, represented by a statue, picture, or other symbol, is the central part of the temple. The god is considered to be an honored guest and

using it happily. *Image* suggests something beyond the visible form that receives the worship offered to the visible form. Hindus use the term **murti** for the image of a deity, whether three-dimensional (as in a statue) or two-dimensional (as in a picture or poster). A murti is a representation of the deity, rather like a photograph represents a person. It draws the mind of the devotee to the gods themselves. However, an image can be more than just a symbol. The power or essence of the deity is believed to be in the murti, either temporarily, as for some festivals, or permanently, as in the case of some temple images that are treated as the deities themselves, with the god thought to reside inside the statue.

Shiva can be seen in a human-like form in an image as well as in the powerful symbols of the lingam and the trident (see the images in Sections 3-2b and 3-3a). The female side of the divine, the Goddess, is represented by the yoni, the symbol of creative female power that is the counterpart to the lingam. Hindus of the lower castes and those Hindus outside caste do not worship the “high” gods of Hinduism, but rather the “low gods,” especially village and city deities. The high gods such as Vishnu and Shiva are generally considered to be uninterested in the daily events of the ordinary man or woman; their avatars and related lower deities do that duty for them.

is treated with adoration, attention, and even amusements. Purification is essential before doing puja, and one usually bathes in running water and sips a little water three times. Washing the murti is essential but often symbolic—a flower or a small piece of cotton is used to touch the deity. Dressing the deity is also important, and the clothes chosen are bright and beautiful. Ornaments are placed on the murti, as well as flower garlands, perfumes, and oils. Because the deity remains at a temple, it is both woken up in the morning and put to rest at night. At many temples, sculptures help to teach about the gods and their stories, and they both shape and direct devotion. Larger temples will have priests who act as teachers.

The offering of food is also important—usually cooked rice, fruit and vegetables, liquefied butter, and sugar. The deity receives the essence of the food, and the “leftovers,” called *prasad* (PRAH-sahd), are given back to those who brought them. Whatever the edible offering, both the gods and the worshipers eat the food and benefit from its richness. Fragrance and light are also offered the deity—fragrance in the form of incense sticks and light in the form of a burning lamp usually made from a burning wick placed in clarified butter,

murti [MUHR-tee] image of a deity

which is waved before the deity. By applying a *tilak* (TEE-lahk)—a mark made with crushed flowers sometimes mixed with another substance—to the forehead between the eyebrows of the deity, the worshiper indicates awareness of the spiritual purity and power of the god. This in turn is passed to the worshiper. The worshiper may also entertain the deity with hymns that offer praise and of course increase the

devotion of the worshipers. Groups of men can be seen singing hymns informally on the temple verandas in the evening. Sometimes women also sing near the temples, but they sit apart from the men.

Bowing is the traditional way of showing respect to someone in India. The more respect one wishes to show, the lower one bows. In the case of a god or a royal person, lying flat on one's face is in order. Bringing the palms together and raising them to the forehead are actions normally used in greeting in India, and they are used to greet the gods as well. The Hindi word *namaste* (NAHM-ahs-tay) or its equivalent in other Indian languages, "I bow to you," is spoken as this is done. Because famous gurus are also honored with puja, people might touch the guru's feet in respect or remove by hand the dust from his feet before touching their own head, indicating that the dusty feet of the guru are holier than the head of the one paying respect.

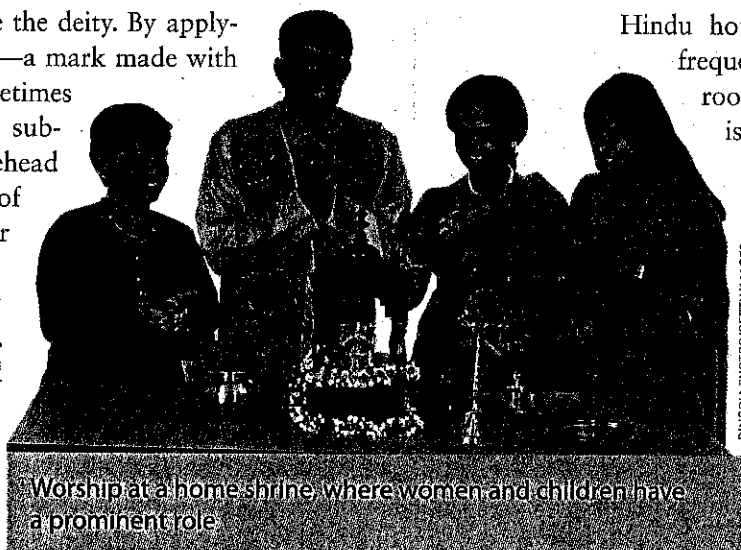
Worship in the home has long been an important part of Hinduism. Nearly every

Hindu household has a home shrine, frequently in a special devotional room or in the kitchen, which is considered ritually pure. In this shrine, the family god—as well as the gods and goddesses honored by individual family members—have center stage, in the form of images done in brass; often, photographs of a guru or saint and the family ancestors are also in the shrine. To begin daily worship in the home, the believer purifies himself or herself by bath-

ing. Then, with the help of mantras, the place of ritual is purified, and any evil spirits lurking to interfere with the puja are driven away. A small bell is rung to honor the deities and get their attention as the ritual begins. On occasion the gods are washed, clothed, fed, and given gifts, but worshipers always stand reverently with palms joined. At the climax of the ritual, a small lamp is swung before the shrine; the divinity resides in the fire, and the faithful receive it within themselves by holding the palms of their hands over the flames for an instant and then touching their eyes.

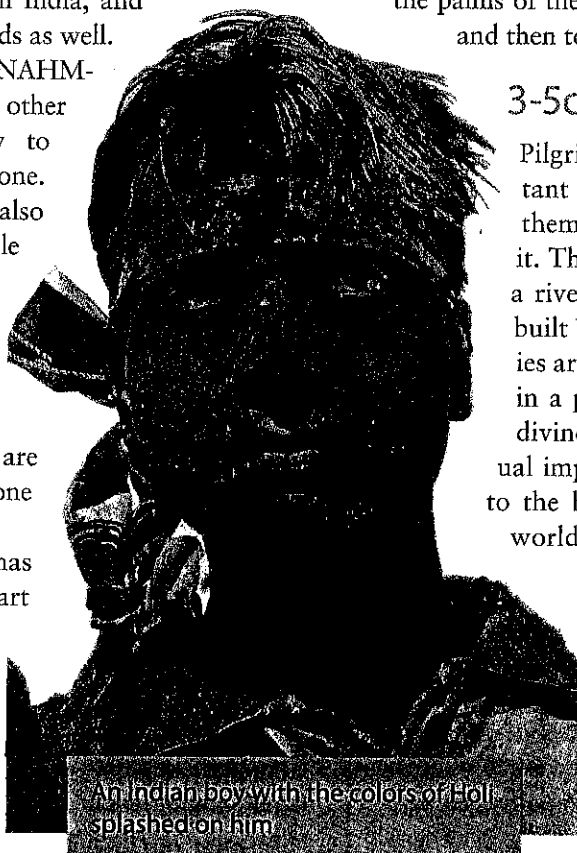
3-5c Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is an aspect of ritual life important for many Hindus, although few of them have the time or money to engage in it. The destination of a pilgrimage is often a river, the ocean, or a spring. But temples built on sacred mountains or in sacred cities are also places of pilgrimage. Doing puja in a place with a strong connection to the divine brings purification from sin and ritual impurity, gains merit, fulfills vows, leads to the betterment of one's next lives in this world, and even brings deliverance from the cycle of rebirth. Millions of pilgrims go to Varanasi on the Ganges River every year to wash their sins away in the water. The largest pilgrimage event in the world is the **Kumbh Mela**, a festival held once every twelve years in Allahabad (the most recent held in 2015), when tens



Worship at a home shrine, where women and children have a prominent role

DINODIA PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES



An Indian boy with the colors of Holī splashed on him

© INTELLISTUDIES/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

Kumbh Mela [KOOM-buh MEHL-uh] Festival held every twelve years in Allahabad, India

of millions of pilgrims gather where the two sacred rivers—the Ganges and the Yamuna—merge. As it is with all religions of the world, pilgrimage in Hinduism is “big business” in the cities that host it.

3-5d Festivals and Holidays

With the size and diversity of Hinduism, you would expect that its festivals and holidays would be diverse as well—and you would be correct. Estimates range from roughly one holiday per day to thousands per year, especially when regional festivals are considered. Hindu holidays tend to be based on the cycle of nature. They indicate the change of seasons, celebrate harvests, and promote fertility of animals and crops. Others are dedicated to a god or goddess and celebrate their deeds. Still other popular holidays mark events in the Indian epics, such as the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Festivals observed by most Hindus, and sometimes by other Indians, include the following, in chronological order:

- *Shiva Ratri* Festival for Shiva (February or March)
- *Holi* Festival of colors, which are applied to the body, marking the coming of spring (February or March)
- *Rama Navami* Birthday of the god Rama (April)
- *Krishna Jayanti* Birthday of Krishna (July or August)
- *Raksabandhana* Festival to renew family bonds (July or August)
- *Ganesha Chaturthi* Festival for Ganesh (August or September)
- *Dassera* Rama's victory over Ravana, the king of evil (September or October)
- *Diwali* Festival of lights, celebrated by most Indians, whatever their religion (October or November)

3-5e Funerals

Despite all the emphasis in Hinduism on karma and reincarnation, its death rites still emphasize the deceased happily joining dead ancestors rather than achieving a good reincarnation or release from all moksha. (A period of refreshment in heaven is often thought of as a prelude to being reincarnated.) Death is considered so ritually polluting and inauspicious that the images of deities in the home shrine are removed while the body is in the house. Unlike Western funerals, no one partakes of food or drink in any part of a Hindu funeral ritual.

The body of the deceased is washed soon after death, wrapped in a new cloth—white for men and red for women—and carried on a stretcher from the home to the cremation ground in a procession led by the eldest son. (Of course, funerals are held all over India, not just at the cities on the Ganges River, such as Varanasi.) Cremation on a wood fire is the traditional Indian method of disposing of human remains. Cremation is thought to separate the immortal soul from the body in a good way, resembling a fire sacrifice. At the funeral ground, Dalits of the Dom caste handle the body and incur the ritual pollution of burning it. Fresh, flowing water is usually near the cremation grounds, and the body is dipped in it for ritual purification. The body is then placed on the wood, with the feet facing south toward the home of the god who rules the dead. It is covered with a layer of wood followed by clarified butter, and scriptures are chanted over the body by a priest as the family circles the deceased. The eldest son then lights the funeral pyre, which will burn for two to three hours. After cremation begins, the youngest son leads the procession home.

The Doms tend the fire for several hours to keep it burning hot, occasionally turning the body with long poles to ensure that it is consumed more fully. The ashes and remaining bones (the larger and denser bones of the human body cannot be disposed of by a natural cremation alone) are finally put by the Doms into flowing water and left there, for a cooling and purifying effect. When the period of death rites is over, a Dalit is given all the household linen to wash. On the twelfth day, four balls of rice are offered to the gods to symbolize the happy union of the deceased with his or her forebears, which is the point of the funeral rites. Only when the house has been thoroughly cleaned can the household deities be returned.

Although cremation is the desired method of disposal of the dead, whole-body burial is not uncommon. The poorer classes usually practice burial because it is cheaper. Children of most castes who die young are buried, or sometimes put into a flowing river, rather than cremated. In the cities of India, cremation in modern crematoriums is now the norm, with ashes scattered later in sacred rivers.

3-5f Yoga

Yoga, with its emphasis on joining the body and mind, has become a main tool for achieving liberation, or at least the mental discipline that can lead to liberation. Buddhists, Christians, and people of no formal faith have adapted yogic methods to help them on their

own paths to peace and freedom, or just to physical fitness. As explained previously, *yoga* means “yoke.” This refers to the path of union with, or yoking to, a god or Brahman. The most popular type of yoga in India and the West is *hatha yoga*, which emphasizes breathing and physical posture as a way to ultimate knowledge of Brahman in one’s *atman*; *karma yoga* is the path of active service that breathing and postures assist; *jnana yoga* is reflective, philosophical yoga; and *bhakti yoga* is the path of devotion to a god. Bhakti yoga is the simplest form, using repeated chanting of a mantra in a fixed posture to focus on a deity and offer one’s life to a god.

{ The most popular type of yoga in India and the West is *hatha yoga*. }

Yogic practices draw, at least in significant measure, on the following eight steps:

1. Following five guidelines on behavior toward others: avoiding violence, untruthfulness, stealing, lust, and covetousness.
2. Following guidelines on behavior toward oneself: cleanliness of body and mind, contentment, sustained practice, self-knowledge, study, and surrender to God.
3. Learning and using formal yoga postures.
4. Performing breathing exercises, coordinated with physical postures.
5. Withdrawal of the senses, so that the exterior world is no longer a distraction from discovering the world within oneself, particularly the *atman*.
6. Concentration, so that one can focus on a single thing without distractions.

7. Meditation that moves beyond concentration, so that one’s awareness is all-encompassing.
8. Finally, achieving *samadhi*, or “bliss.” The self transcends itself through meditation and discovery of the *atman*, which brings one to Brahman.

Although yoga has been an important part of Hinduism for thousands of years, its use in the West has grown increasingly, and increasingly controversial in the past twenty years or so. Some Hindus have charged that yoga has been co-opted, even corrupted, for non-religious and profit-making purposes. Yoga is big business; it was estimated to be at \$10 billion in 2016 in the United States alone. In her 2014 book, *Selling Yoga*, Andrea Jain shows the reasons for this controversy. Until recently, Hindus used yoga for a variety of aims, all of them religious: to turn inward in quest of one’s true self and deliverance, to turn outward to devotional union with the divine, or to create and channel energy for sexual pleasure (*kama*, as we saw previously, is an important part of Hinduism). In contrast, today, yoga is widely used in North America, and increasingly in India, as a method for physical and spiritual fitness. This popularization of yoga is shaped, Jain writes, by modern ideas of human nature and health. She argues that this popularized yoga should not be dismissed as a distortion, because it has a variety of valid religious meanings and functions, even if they are shaped by non-Hindu ideas.¹



Yoga classes in the West tend to emphasize the physical and emotional benefits of yoga over the religious benefits, and appeal to a wide variety of cultures. Here, women practice the cobra pose.

ANTONIO DIAZ/SHUTTERSTOCK

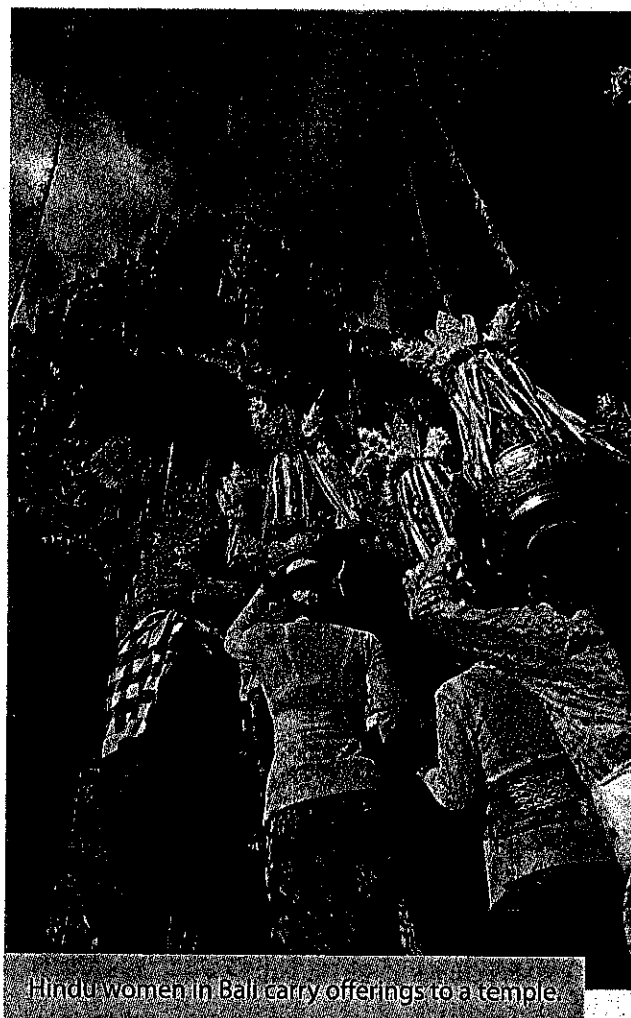
3-6 Hinduism around the World Today

Shortly before the 2008 release of the Hollywood film *The Love Guru*, written by and starring Mike Myers, self-styled North American Hindu leader Rajan Zed complained about it to mass-media outlets. Zed charged that its portrayal of Hinduism is inaccurate and insulting. The potential for damage to Hindus is great, Zed argued, because Hinduism is not widely understood outside of India. Despite Zed's efforts, the consensus among Hindus in the West seems to be that they feel comfortable laughing at themselves and even laugh at stereotypes such as Apu the convenience-store merchant on television's *The Simpsons*. However, some portrayals of Hinduism in the mass media—such as in the 1984 film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, with its false, brutal depiction of worship of the Hindu goddess Kali—have caused concern to many Hindus. Any disquiet over *The Love Guru*, however, fades rapidly as it was harshly reviewed in the press and failed miserably at the box office.

In this final section, we will consider briefly the current spread of Hinduism in the world, with a particular focus on North America.

3-6a Hinduism in South Asia and Africa

Sometimes Indian military conquests brought along with them the main aspects of Hindu culture and belief. This is how Hinduism came to Nepal and Sri Lanka. Although Hinduism moved beyond its own borders before the modern period, this was primarily a result of Indian emigration to other countries, and the resulting expansion of Hindu culture in such places as Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bali. In the 1800s, the heyday of the British Empire, Indians moved freely to many parts of the world controlled by Great Britain, especially to south Asia and Africa. Hindus in these areas engaged in trade and other businesses, and practiced their religion; they were predominantly of the Vaishya class. Today there are almost 2 million Hindus in sub-Saharan Africa. In general, Hinduism has been the religion of only the Indian people, and formally converting other peoples has not been undertaken. This is true both in India and in the Hindu dispersion, and is one reason why Hindus are so remarkably concentrated—less than 1 percent of all Hindus live outside South Asia and the South Pacific. However, in the past two centuries various Hindus have indeed sought to spread Hinduism outside of India, particularly in North America.



Hindu women in Bali carry offerings to a temple.

KLAUS HOLITZER/GETTY IMAGES

Distinctive ritual practices developed in Hinduism as it spread through Asia. For example, the Hindu women of Bali, Indonesia, make elaborate pyramids of food that they carry to the temple on their head as a sacrificial offering to the deity. The wealthier the family is, the higher the pyramids. A cooked chicken may be put in the pyramid, surrounded by rice dishes and many kinds of fruit. (See also "A Closer Look: Hindu Faith and Indian Food.")

3-6b Hinduism in the West

Hinduism has been viewed in widely differing ways in the West during the past two centuries. Customs such as widow burning (rarely done these days) and a caste system that resists reform have made many North Americans resistant to Hinduism until more recently. However, some Westerners were attracted by Hindu ideas of physical and spiritual life in harmony with nature. Vegetarianism and Hindu philosophy, particularly Vedanta, have also attracted Westerners



A Closer Look

Hindu Faith and Indian Food

India has considerable regional variations in food, many of which have gone into the wide Hindu diaspora, but the important aspect is a preference for vegetarianism. Because all animals are sacred to Hindus due to a general reverence for life, and particularly for the souls incarnated in animals, it is considered wrong to kill animals for food. Vegetarianism is believed to benefit the body, the mind, and the soul. Even so, many Hindus are not strict vegetarians, and those who can afford it will eat meat occasionally. The sacrifice and subsequent eating of animals, the goat in particular, is common enough in India and Nepal. Brahmin priests are rarely involved in such sacrifices, which are performed by lower-caste priests and mainly in the smaller village temples.

The cow is the most sacred of all animals to Hindus, and no observant Hindu would ever eat beef. (You should never look for a beef dish at any self-respecting Indian restaurant!) Although meat from a cow is forbidden, cow's milk and the products made from it are considered very healthy. To put it in modern Western terms, vegetarianism is common, but a vegan diet that excludes all animal products would be unthinkable to observant Hindus.

Foods high in protein are important in a vegetarian diet, and *dal*, a lentil dish, is popular throughout the world wherever Indian cuisine is found. The *Bhagavad Gita* (17:8–10) teaches that healthy foods are “tasty, soothing, and nourishing.” It describes unhealthy food as things that



Indian food is widely regarded as one of the most colorful and tasty cuisines in the world.

are “acidic, sour, and excessively hot.” (The spices in Indian food often make Westerners’ eyes water, but of course what makes food excessively hot is a matter of acculturation. The *Gita* means foods that will give an Indian indigestion.) The particular balance of having both hot and cool foods in a meal is also important for bodily and spiritual health.

The males of the family traditionally eat first and separately from the women, and then the females eat what remains. Because all food in Hindu sacrifice is first offered to the deities and then received back by the worshiper, the practice of eating the males’ leftovers as a sort of sacrificial food enables the wife to pay honor to her husband. This custom is still maintained in traditional India today, though it is not so common among Hindus living in the Western world.

to Hinduism, especially in the more intellectual echelons of North America. Hinduism came to Great Britain in the 1800s with Indian migration there. Around 817,000 people in the United Kingdom called themselves Hindus in the 2011 census, but other estimates have put the figure as high as 1.5 million. Most Hindus in the United Kingdom live in England, with half living in London alone. However, Hindus in Great Britain did not have a traditional, stand-alone temple until 1981. In all of Europe today, about 1.3 million Hindus can be found.

Hindu customs are slightly different in the West. In funeral practice, for example, the body will be washed and dressed in new clothes, placed in a coffin, and surrounded by flowers. Cremation cannot be immediate as in India, but has to take place a day or two after death because of the necessary legal arrangements. At the crematorium the priest will talk about the life of the person, and prayers are said for the departed soul in front of the sacred fire or household shrine upon returning to the home after cremation has begun. The ashes of the deceased would preferably be sent to a relative in India

to be scattered in the Ganges, sent to one of the businesses recently set up for that purpose, or, if that is not possible, cast into a fast-flowing river nearby.

In the past century or so, varied expressions of Hinduism have found their way to the West in movements led by Hindu gurus. Vivekananda (VIH-veh-kah-NAHN-duh; 1863–1902) was the first successful Hindu missionary to the West. In 1893, he addressed the first World Parliament of Religions at Chicago; he was enthusiastically received there and in his other travels throughout the United States. Vivekananda established the first Hindu temple in North America in San Francisco. He returned to India as a national hero. The Hinduism of Vivekananda was much less devotional than Ramakrishna's own piety and stressed the philosophical teachings of the *Upanishads*. He was one of the world's first advocates of religious pluralism.

The Self-Realization Fellowship of North America was founded by Paramahansa Yogananda (PAR-uh-mah-HAN-suh yo-guh-NAN-duh) in 1920 and was based in Los Angeles, where it still has its headquarters. It teaches a form of yoga to enable members to realize "the god within." The Self-Realization Fellowship has more than one hundred local meeting places in the United States and Canada today, and one hundred more in Europe.

One recent guru who gained wide popularity in North America was Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (MAH-ha-REE-shee MAH-hesh YOH-gee; 1911–2008), founder of the Spiritual Regeneration Movement better known as **Transcendental Meditation (TM)**. TM is based on Vedanta, which emphasizes each person's inner divine essence and the liberating powers that may be harnessed when one knows one's true identity. Yogic meditation, practiced in the morning and evening, is the way to tap into the transcendent and its calming, directing power. When the English musical group, the Beatles, took continued instruction in Great Britain and in India from the Maharishi in the late 1960s, TM became even more popular. The popularity of yogic meditation today in North America, severed from its deep religious connections, is due in large part to the TM movement. (For more on TM as a New Religious Movement, see Chapter 13, Section 13-3b.)

3-6c Hindu Migration and Life in North America

In the past few decades, especially since the liberalization of immigration laws in the 1960s, an increasing number of Indians who practice Hinduism have moved to the United States and Canada. This Hindu **diaspora**, a "spreading" from its native land, has brought hundreds of thousands of Hindus to North American cities, especially on the East and West Coasts. Some of these more

{ Some Hindu parents send their children to a summer camp that provides teaching and experience in Hindu life. }

recent immigrants are merchants, but many of them are highly skilled professionals who are eager to integrate into North American civic life. A 2016 Pew Research Center study found that diaspora Hindus in North America are "highly educated," with ten more years of formal schooling than Hindus in India. They tend to have more schooling than other religious groups in North America.² They also want to preserve basic Hindu beliefs and behaviors in an environment not conducive to them. Every home of observant Hindus has a shrine to the god(s) the family serves, and worship is conducted at the shrine a few times a day. In 2001, the American Museum of Natural History in New York City opened an exhibit, *Meeting God*, that documented the home and business shrines of several Hindus in the New York area.

Many Hindus join cultural organizations to keep traditions, such as music and cuisine, alive. Some Hindu parents send their children to summer camp that provides teaching and experience in Hindu life. North American Hindus also build temples in which Hindus worship, and sometimes, workers come from India to build them in an authentic way. Finding Brahmin priests from India to staff these temples is difficult, so activities, such as singing devotional songs that can be practiced by all Hindus, become even more important than in India. The 2014 survey of Hindu life in the United States by the Institute of

Transcendental Meditation (TM)

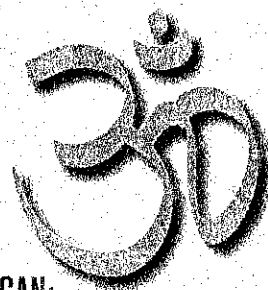
Meditational system, popularized by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, emphasizing knowing one's divine identity.

diaspora [dee-ASS-pohr-uh] "Spreading," in this case of Hinduism outside of India.

American Religion found 1,600 temples and centers with an estimated 600,000 practicing Hindus affiliated with them. If all those who self-identify as Hindus are included, the number rises to an estimated 1.2 million.

Hindus typically view marriage within one's caste as a necessity. Because marriages are often still arranged to some extent, Hindu parents may network for suitable spouses living in North America or even in India. As with other immigrant groups in North America, intergenerational tension often springs up as young second- and third-generation Hindu people take on the values and practices of their non-Hindu peers. Dating and mating are often difficult for Hindu young people with Western ways; this is the theme of several films, such as Mira Nair's excellent *Monsoon Wedding*, *The Namesake*, and the more recent *Meet the Patels* directed by and starring Geeta and Ravi Patel. Over time, Hindus, similar to other religious groups, will probably reach a workable, if sometimes uneasy, compromise between their religion and their life in North America.

STUDY TOOLS 3



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- ☐ Learn about the religious conversions of Dalits in India in a short video.
- ☐ Explore primary sources, images, and audio recordings.
- ☐ Interact with figures from the text to check your understanding.
- ☐ Prepare for tests with quizzes.
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Hinduism Timeline: 3000 B.C.E.–Present

