



PART 3

HINDUISM

SUMMARY

The religion today known as Hinduism may be almost as old as Indian civilization itself: archaeological evidence suggests continuities between the religion of the Indus Valley society of 2500–1500 BCE and the Hinduism of today. The Vedic texts, from the period that followed, provide the basis for some of the central themes of Hindu belief, including *samsara*, the doctrine that all creatures are reborn repeatedly unless the cycle can be broken through liberation (*moksha*), and *karma*, the notion that actions in one life are rewarded or punished in the next. The Vedic religion was hierarchical, and centred around sacrificial offerings. In time, sacrifice was largely replaced by *puja*, the personal devotion of an individual to a particular deity.

Hinduism has a vast body of sacred texts, from the early Vedas onward, and generally is divided into the more authoritative *Sruti* – revealed scripture – and the less authoritative *Smriti* – which includes Epics such as the *Mahabharata* (including the *Bhagavad Gita*) and the *Ramayana*. A hierarchy of sorts also exists amongst the many gods of India, with Vishnu and Shiva enjoying a privileged position – although there is no consensus as to whether there are in fact many gods, or whether the many are merely different representations of the one God, *Brahman*.

Today, like so many religions, Hinduism has a following throughout the world, largely because of the many Indian diaspora communities. Despite this, the subcontinent remains hugely important for Hindus, in part because of the value placed on the many sacred sites in the country, such as the River Ganges, and in part because of the strong ties that bind the wider community. Within India itself – now a secular democracy – there exists something of a division between those at ease with recent developments, such as secularization and the changing role of women, and the emergent Hindu nationalists – often deeply hostile to other religions in the region, particularly Islam – who seek a stronger role for religion in public life.

A Historical Overview



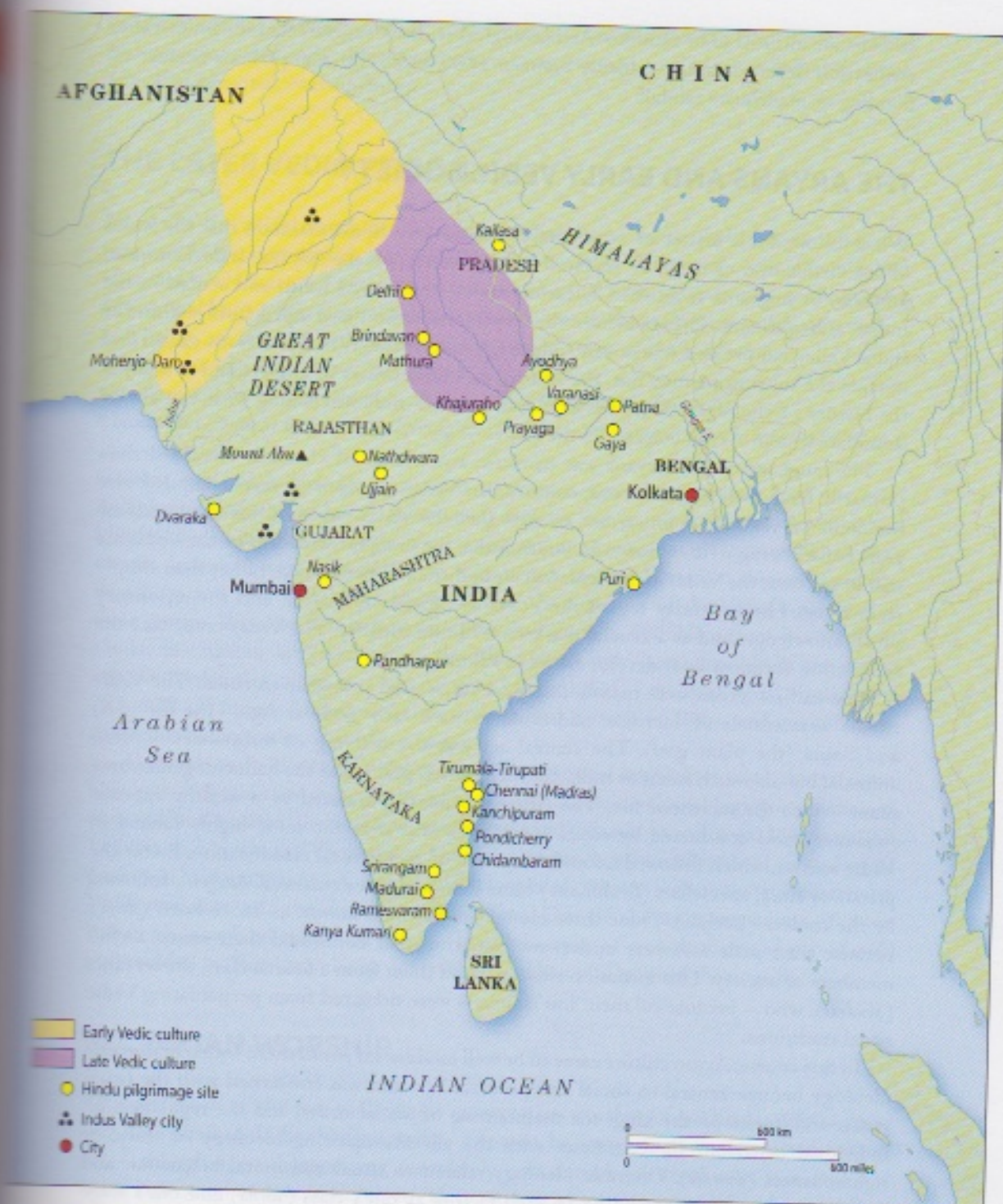
The term 'Hinduism' as we understand it today refers to the majority religion of the Indian subcontinent. The present understanding of Hinduism as a 'world religion' has come about only since the nineteenth century, when Hindu reformers and Western orientalist came to refer to the diverse beliefs and practices characterizing religious life in South Asia as 'Hinduism'. Yet this classification is problematic, as Hinduism possesses many features characteristic of 'indigenous religions': it has no single historical founder, no central revelation, no creed or unified system of belief, no single doctrine of salvation, and no centralized authority. In this sense, it is different from other 'world religions'. Huge diversity and variety of religious movements, systems, beliefs, and practices are all characteristic features of 'Hinduism'. Also, there is no clear division between the 'sacred' and 'profane' – or natural and supernatural: religion and social life are inseparable and intertwined. Nevertheless, most scholars would agree there are unifying strands that run through the diverse traditions that constitute it. Although the term Hinduism is recent, the diverse traditions that it encompasses have very ancient origins that extend back beyond the second millennium BCE.

THE INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION

The earliest traces of Hinduism can be found in the Indus Valley civilization which flourished from 2500 to about 1500 BCE along the banks of the River Indus, which flows through present-day Pakistan. Archaeological excavations in this area have revealed evidence of what appears to be a highly developed urban culture with sophisticated water distribution, drainage and garbage disposal technologies and well-developed systems of farming, grain-storage and pottery. Little is known about the religion of this civilization. The large number of terracotta figurines unearthed through excavations suggest a continuity between the iconographic features of these images and those of such later Hindu deities as Shiva and the mother goddess. Given the lack of systematic evidence for such continuity, however,

Hinduism is a living organism liable to growth and decay and subject to the laws of nature. One and indivisible at the root, it has grown into a vast tree with innumerable branches.

Mahatma Gandhi, *Hindu Dharma*
(New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks,
1987).



- Early Vedic culture
- Late Vedic culture
- Hindu pilgrimage site
- Indus Valley city
- City

Hinduism

scholars are inclined to be cautious. Archaeological evidence suggests that the Indus Valley civilization declined rather suddenly between 1800 and 1700 BCE, perhaps because of flooding or inadequate rainfall.

THE ARYANS AND EARLY VEDIC SOCIETY

What followed is a matter of considerable controversy. Some maintain that the Indus Valley civilization came to be replaced by the culture of the Aryans, Indo-European invaders, or migrants from the Caucasus region, who moved south and settled in the Indian subcontinent. Others believe the Aryan civilization developed from within the Indus Valley culture and was not introduced from outside. Whether Aryans came from outside the subcontinent or not, the history of Hinduism as we understand it today is the history of the next 2000 years of Aryan culture, often interacting with, but always dominating, non-Aryan cultures in the area.

The language of the Aryans was Sanskrit. Knowledge of the early Aryans derives primarily from early Sanskrit compositions, the Vedas, a corpus of texts compiled over hundreds of years. It is important to note that the Vedas were oral for thousands of years before being written down. In South India, the oral performances of the Vedas are still important; the Vedas are articulated, embodied, and performed, rather than simply read. Many Hindus today regard the Vedas as timeless revelation and the repository of all knowledge, and as a crucial marker of Hindu identity. The Vedas constitute the foundation for most later developments in Hinduism.

The earliest Vedas were mainly liturgical texts, used primarily in ritual. The Vedic rituals were rituals of sacrifice, addressed to such early gods as Agni (the fire god) and Soma (the plant god). The central act was the offering of substances – often animals, but also such items as milk, clarified butter, grain, and the hallucinogenic soma plant – into the sacrificial fire. The ritual was usually initiated by a wealthy sponsor (*yajamana*), and conducted by ritual specialists, who were the most highly ranked in Vedic society, which followed a fourfold system of hierarchical classification. Below the priests or ritual specialists (Brahmans) came the warriors or rulers (*Kshatriyas*), followed by the traders (*Vaishyas*). These three classes (*varna*) were known as 'twice-born' (*dvija*), because their male members underwent initiation that confirmed their status as full members of society. This initiation rite separated them from a fourth class, the servants (*Shudras*), who – because of their 'low' status – were debarred from perpetuating Vedic ritual traditions.

In due course, Aryan culture came to be well established in northern India. Brahmanic ideology became central to social and political life, and was concerned with the ritual status and duties of the king, the maintaining of social order, and the regulation of individual behaviour in accordance with the all-encompassing ideology of duty, or righteousness (*dharma*). Dharmic ideology related to ritual and moral behaviour, and defined good conduct according to such factors as one's class (*varna*) and one's stage of life (*ashrama*). It operated simultaneously at several levels: the transcendental, and

therefore eternal (*sanatana dharma*), the everyday (*sadharana dharma*), and the individual and personal (*svadharma*). Neglecting *dharma* was believed to lead to undesirable social, as well as personal, consequences.

THE LATER VEDIC PERIOD

Alongside the performance of Vedic ritual, speculation arose about its meaning and purpose. These speculations were developed in the later Vedic texts – the *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads* – which tended to see the observance of ritual action as secondary to the gaining of spiritual knowledge. Central to this approach was the *karma-samsara-moksha* doctrine:

- all beings are reincarnated into the world (*samsara*) over and over again;
- the results of action (*karma*) are reaped in future lives;
- this process of endless rebirth is characterized by suffering (*dukkha*);
- liberation (*moksha*) from this suffering can be obtained by gaining spiritual knowledge.

Gaining spiritual knowledge thus came to assume central importance, and the self-disciplining and methods of asceticism necessary for gaining it were developed in Hinduism's traditions of yoga and world renunciation. Ascetic groups known as *śramanas* were formed during this period, seeking liberation through austerity. Buddhism and Jainism, both of which rejected the authority of the Vedas, originated in these groups. Whereas monastic institutions developed in Buddhism from its inception, similar institutions appeared within the Hindu pale only later, possibly in the eighth and ninth centuries CE, when – according to Hindu belief – the theologian Shankara (c. 788–820 CE) founded monastic centres in the four corners of India, and instituted the first renunciatory order of the *Dasanamis*.

Alongside early Hinduism's elaboration of systems of ritual, and its teachings about liberation/salvation involving yoga and meditation, there developed highly sophisticated philosophical systems, the *darśhanas*, comprising mainly Samkhya and Yoga, Mimamsa and Vedanta, and Nyaya and Vaisheshika. These in turn generated a multitude of metaphysical positions, and traditions of rigorous philosophical debate, within the parameters of Vedic revelation and the doctrine of liberation. One of the most important of these Indian philosophical traditions today is the philosophy of non-dualism (*advaita vedanta*), propounded by Shankara, the most famous of Indian philosopher-theologians.

SECTARIAN WORSHIP

Through much of the first millennium CE, sectarian worship of particular deities grew and flourished in India. Vedic sacrifice came to be increasingly marginalized, giving way – though never disappearing completely – to devotional worship or *puja*. *Puja* is a ritual expression of love or devotion (*bhakti*) to a deity, often a personal god or goddess, with whom the devotee establishes an intense and intimate relationship. Corresponding to the growth of Hindu theism and devotionism, Sanskrit narrative traditions grew

and flourished, the most important of which were the Hindu epics or *itihāsas* – the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* – the Puranas – devotional texts containing, among other things, mythological stories about the gods and goddesses, and treatises on ritual worship – and devotional poetry in several Indian regional languages, most notably Tamil. One of the most important developments at this time was the composition of the *Bhagavad Gita*, the ‘Song of the Lord’, contained in the *Mahabharata*. This work, perhaps the most famous of the Hindu scriptures, expresses in narrative form the concerns of Hinduism: the importance of *dharma*, responsible action, and the maintenance of social order and stability, combined with the importance of devotion to the transcendent as a personal god.

Temple cities grew and flourished in this period, serving not only as commercial and administrative hubs of kingdoms, but as ritual centres, with the temple located at the heart of the town and, therefore, of the kingdom. Kings sought to derive legitimacy for their rule through their royal patronage of these ritual sites, dedicated to one or the other of the major Puranic deities. Large temple complexes stood testimony to a king’s dharmic rule over his kingdom, which was often modelled on the ideal of divine kingship symbolized by the great god Vishnu. Sectarian devotional groups emerged, dedicated to the worship of Vishnu (*Vaishnavas*), Shiva (*Shaivas*), and the goddess Devi (*Shaktas*).

HINDUISM DURING BRITISH COLONIAL RULE

These theistic traditions continued to flourish, to lesser or greater degrees, through much of the following period, when large sections of the Indian subcontinent were conquered and ruled by Muslim rulers. The rule of the last Muslim emperor in India came to an end in the eighteenth century, and British forces, initially in the form of the East India Company, and later the British crown, stepped in to assume power. By the middle of the eighteenth century, British power was at its peak. Hindu traditions, which had tended to be relatively insular in the intervening period, now responded actively to the British and, more importantly, Christian presence in their midst. Hindu reform movements arose, led by such figures as Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1883), Dayananda Sarasvati (1824–83), and Vivekananda (1863–1902), all seeking to restore the perceived glory of Hinduism’s ancient past. It was at this time that Hinduism came to be defined in the terms by which we understand it today – a world religion, with a distinct identity. These reform movements, often collectively referred to as the Hindu renaissance, absorbed Christianity’s rationalist elements, and paid particular attention to social and ethical concerns. Most of these movements were closely linked with the increasingly vocal Indian nationalist movement, which brought about the end of British colonial rule, and established India as an independent nation state in 1947.

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

Though India defined itself as a secular state on gaining independence, it has experienced a resurgence of religious nationalism, particularly since the 1980s, expressed in *Hindutva* ('Hinduness'), the ideology of Hindu nationalists who call for a state in which civic rights, nationhood, and national culture would be defined by Hinduism. Their politicized, activist religious nationalism has precedents in various movements of organized Hinduism that arose in British India. Today the Sangh Parivar, a 'family' of social and political organizations, works to propagate *Hindutva*, with its political wing, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, 'Indian People's Party'), winning enough support to head a coalition government between 1998 and 2004.

A significant act of religious violence in recent times was the destruction of the Mughal Babri mosque in Ayodhya in 1992, by supporters of *Hindutva* demanding the setting up of a temple dedicated to the Hindu deity Rama at the site, which they believe to be Rama's birthplace. Several violent incidents between Hindus and Muslims have been precipitated by this temple/mosque controversy.

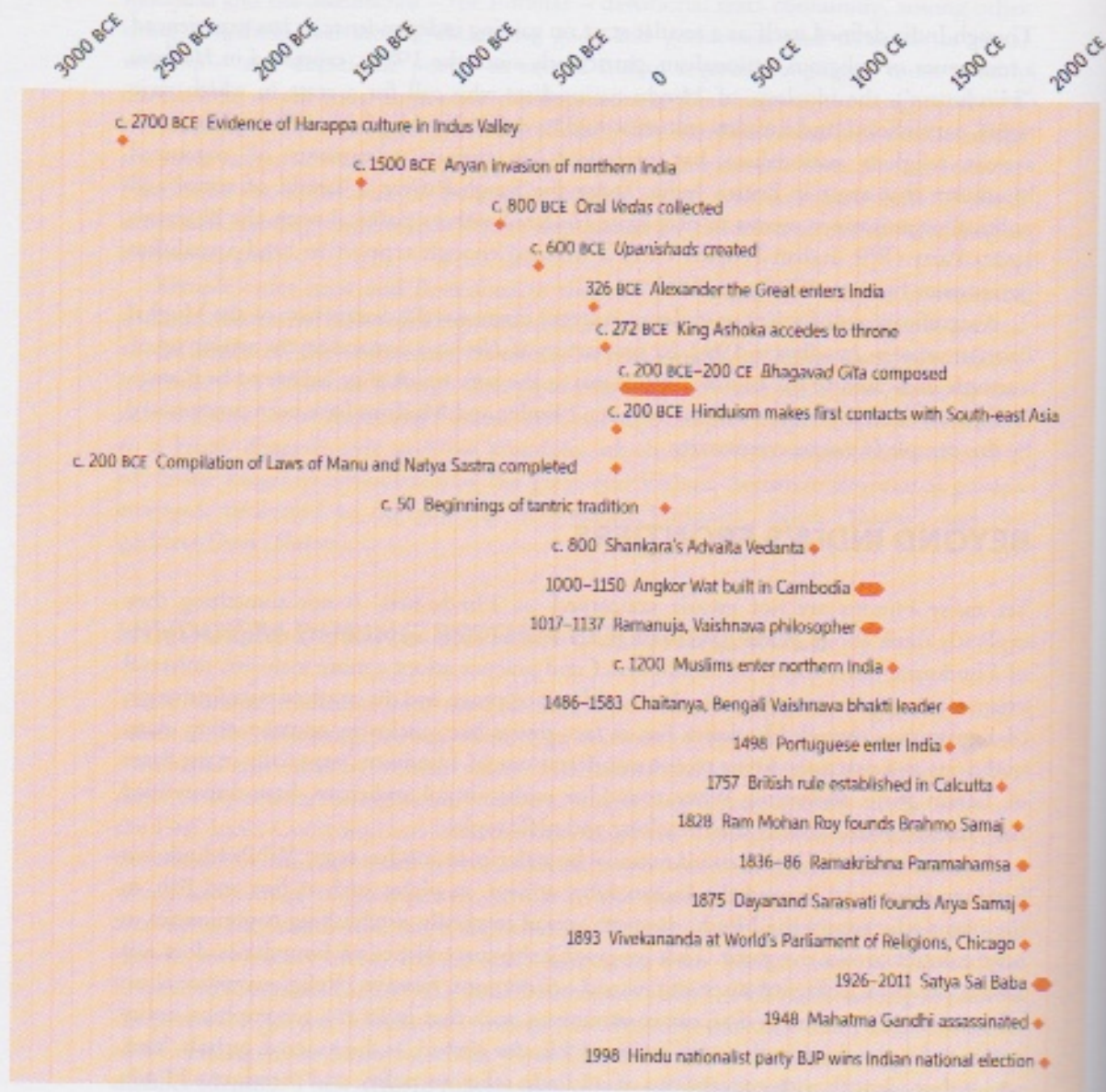
BEYOND INDIA'S FRONTIERS

Yet many Hindus are not greatly concerned, as 'Hindu-ness' is not something they explicitly think about. Running counter to these chauvinist and violently exclusivist forms of Hinduism, other forms of Hindu belief and practice adopt a more inclusive, universal orientation, emphasizing values such as social justice, peace, and the spiritual transformation of humanity – though Hinduism has in fact always been inclusive, encompassing many traditions and practices. Some recent manifestations of Hinduism, especially in the form of Indian gurus addressing Western and/or multicultural audiences, have transcended nationalistic boundaries in their teaching and philosophy.

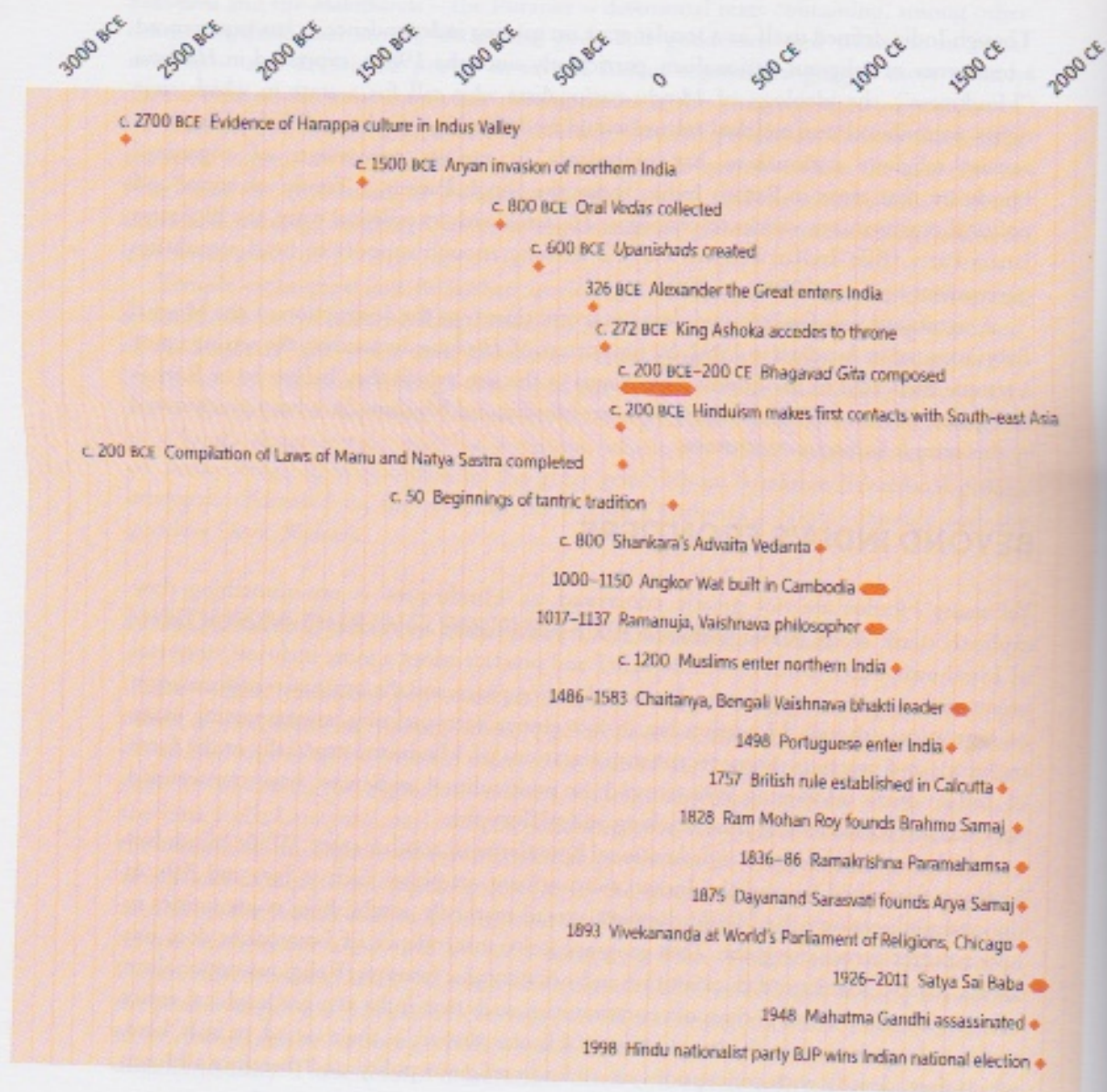
Hinduism has also transcended national boundaries in another sense. While Hinduism has long flourished beyond the Indian subcontinent, in places such as Java and Bali, in the twentieth century the Hindu diaspora spread markedly, establishing communities in host cultures across the globe. This geographical transcendence of boundaries does not always parallel ideological dispositions and orientations, however. Religious nationalism often strikes deep roots in diaspora communities, such that India as a geographical entity comes to be perceived, in the imagination of Hindus abroad, as their sacred, or holy, land, which they identify with conceptions of a Hindu religious polity, and therefore a Hindu nation state.

MAYA WARRIER

HINDUISM TIMELINE



HINDUISM TIMELINE



Sacred Writings

Hindu scriptures comprise a vast corpus of literature, dating from 1300 BCE to modern times. Most of the scriptures are in Sanskrit – a word meaning ‘refined’ – a classical Indian language now used only by scholars and for ritual purposes. There is also a considerable amount of religious literature in regional Indian languages, and variants of the original texts, which emphasize a particular aspect of Hindu belief. For example, the *Adhyatma Ramayana* is a version of the popular epic *Ramayana* that stresses devotion (*bhakti*). What follows does not exhaust the many diverse categories of Hindu sacred writings, but outlines the major elements of a vast array of texts, dealing with various aspects of belief, ritual, and tradition in Hindu society.

Hindus generally divide their scriptures into two categories: heard or revealed (*Śruti*) and remembered (*Smṛiti*). *Śruti* scriptures are believed to be communicated directly by God to ancient Indian sages; *Smṛiti* scriptures are less authoritative, and consist of texts such as the Hindu epics – the *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata*; the *Dharma Sūtras* – books of law, concerned with customs and correct conduct – and *Puranas* – mythology.

THE VEDAS

The Hindu canon is usually termed Veda, from the root *vid*, meaning ‘knowledge’. The Vedas comprise four main types: The Vedic *Sambitas*, *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas*, and *Upanishads*.

1. The Vedic *Sambitas*, classified as the *Rig*, *Sama*, *Yajur* and *Atharva* Vedas, are the earliest known Hindu religious literature (1300–200 BCE), consisting mainly of praises to various deities of ancient Hinduism, led by Indra, king of the gods.
2. The *Brahmanas* stipulate the details of, and explain the significance of, rituals (*yajña* or *yajna*), especially the fire ritual, in which oblations were poured out, or cast into fire, to be conveyed to the gods. The prominence of Agni, the god of fire, and of the Brahman priest in these texts indicates the growing importance and complexity of the fire ritual in early Indian religion.
3. The *Aranyakas* (‘forest books’) provide analysis and interpretation of the fire ritual, whereby a correspondence is drawn between the ritual and the cosmos. The ritual, moreover, is understood to have an intrinsic power, by which the gods are to some extent bypassed. Indeed, the *Aranyakas* also represent a transition from the



ritualistic *Brahmanas* to the far more contemplative and philosophical themes of the *Upanishads*, tending to move away from the polytheism of the *Sambitas* towards a more philosophical, monistic, or pantheistic understanding of reality, in which despite appearances all is one. Hence, the *Ananyukas* and the *Upanishads* mark a growing resistance to the ritualism of the fire sacrifice, and a preference for more contemplative and spiritual forms of worship.

4. The *Upanishads* (*upa* = alongside, *nishad* = set) are commentaries and elaborations of the ideas encountered in the Vedic *Sambitas* and *Brahmanas*. Four major themes can be identified: internal sacrifice, the idea of the *atman* (similar to 'soul' or 'self'), *Brahman* (non-personal divine being), and monistic theology, which equates the *atman*, and indeed the whole cosmos, with *Brahman* – everything is *Brahman*. The previous emphasis on the importance and intricacy of the fire ritual is overshadowed by an emphasis on personal spiritual development. In religious terminology, *tupas* or *pranagnihotra* – sometimes described as the oblation of one's body in the fire of one's breath – is shown as much more efficacious and powerful than the external *yajna*. The *atman-Brahman* identification has tremendous implications for the Hindu's understanding of the nature of God, the cosmos, and the liberation – or 'salvation' – of the individual.

Then was not non-existence nor existence: there was no realm of air, no sky beyond it. What stirred, and where? What gave shelter? Was water there, unfathomed depth of water?

Death was not then, nor was there anything immortal: no sign was there of the day's and night's divider. That One, breathless, breathed by its own nature: apart from it was nothing whatsoever.

Darkness there was: at first concealed in darkness this. All was indiscriminate chaos. All that existed then was void and formless: by the great power of heat was born that One.

Thereafter rose Desire in the beginning, Desire, the primal seed and germ of Spirit. Sages who searched with their heart's thought discovered the bond of existence in the non-existent . . .

Who truly knows and who can here declare it, whence it was born and whence comes this creation? The gods came later than this world's creation. Who knows then whence it first came into being?

He, the first origin of this creation, whether he formed it all or did not form it, Whose eye controls this world in highest heaven, he verily knows it, or perhaps he knows not.

The Creation Hymn, *Rig Veda* 10.128,
transl. Ralph T. H. Griffith, 1896, adapted

DHARMA SUTRAS

Of the *Dharma Sutras* (literally, aphorisms relating to duties), the most important is the compendium of law known as *Manava Dharma Shashtra* (The laws of Manu), which stipulate the duties, laws, and regulations binding on all categories of Hindus, whatever their caste (*varna*), stage of life (*ashrama*), or gender. Because ideas of salvation in Hinduism

involve adherence to these laws, regulations, and duties, it is vital for Hindus to know and understand them. In other words, devout Hindus seeking release from *samsara* – the cycle of lives, deaths, and reincarnations – need to obey the *Dharma Sutras*.

THE EPICS

Perusal of the two epics of Hinduism, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, is deemed a sacred duty, and helpful in progressing towards liberation/salvation (*moksha*) from the cycle of worldly life. These epics, allegedly written by the ancient sages Valmiki and Vyasa, are deemed by scholars to be compilations of folk-tales, songs sung by minstrels, and heroic stories composed in honour of kings. However, the editing of these scriptures was highly skilful and, despite their complexity and bewildering multiplicity of themes, they seem to point to a central theme of salvation of the world, and the continual war between good and evil in the universe. The stories are threaded into a central theme of a world slowly, but inexorably, declining to an age of destruction. The Battle of Kurukshetra is a climactic event in the *Mahabharata*, for instance, marking the beginning of the age of evil (*Kaliyuga*), and witnessing the gradual decline of honour, compassion, and chivalry during its denouement. In the *Ramayana*, the war between Rama and Ravana symbolizes the confrontation between the forces of good and evil in the world. In both, the principal characters are either gods or demi-gods and demons. Although the gods ultimately win, they have to compromise, and often resort to devious stratagems to achieve their victory. The end result is a tainted world, in which even the gods are not entirely free from unethical actions.

Both epics have common features: a righteous prince excluded from kingship and exiled; a climactic battle between forces of good and evil; the intervention of God on behalf of the good; in spite of many reverses, the ultimate triumph of good over evil. The epics present many ideals and heroic role models to Hindus, and are generally Vaishnavite, extolling the god Vishnu.

THE BHAGAVAD GITA

The *Bhagavad Gita* ('song of the Lord') is a small part of the epic *Mahabharata*. Nevertheless, it is a highly influential scripture within Hinduism, and has acquired almost an independent standing of its own. It is a discourse between Krishna, the incarnation (*avatar*) of the god Vishnu, and his devotee Prince Arjuna, the greatest warrior in the *Mahabharata*. The discussion is obviously an insertion into the epic, and many scholars consider it to be an *Upanishad*.

Above all, the *Bhagavad Gita* is an irenic scripture, which seeks to unite the major theological strands of Hinduism. It says that all ways to salvation are equally valid: the way of enlightenment (*jnana marga*), the way of altruistic righteous action and progression through the caste hierarchy (*niskama karma marga*), the way of meditation (*yoga marga*), and

the way of devotion (*bhakti marga*). However, it argues that the way of devotion (*bhakti*) is the highest of all paths and – for the first time in Hinduism – it reveals that the devotee is greatly loved by a gracious God. Consequently, it also proposes a radical rethinking of traditional Hindu concepts of salvation (*moksha*), in that it argues that it is open to all castes, and to men and women.

THE PURANAS

The *Puranas* – ‘ancient stories’ – are, again, a vast body of literature. Traditionally, there are eighteen *Puranas* which have been classified as associated with the gods Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva, as well as many associated with minor deities and with holy places, such as particular temples or sacred sites. The contents are wide-ranging, including, for example, genealogies, law codes, descriptions of rituals, and pilgrimages to holy places. They are not merely a collection of old tales, as the name *Purana* seems to suggest, but narratives that highlight a theistic stance and vision.

THEODORE GABRIEL

CHAPTER 15

Beliefs

What we now know as Hinduism has developed into a rich, pluralist religious culture, with a great variety of customs, forms of worship, gods and goddesses, theologies, philosophies, stories, art, and music. Many Hindus believe its essential teachings remain the same down the centuries; however, diversity within Hinduism has led some scholars to talk of Hindu religions rather than a single Hindu religion, 'Hinduisms' rather than 'Hinduism', and even to abandon the term 'Hinduism' altogether. Moreover, many different Hindu voices and traditions compete globally to define the essential beliefs of Hinduism.

Hindus generally accept that they share common beliefs, principles, and structures. For many, however, Hinduism is not so much a system of beliefs as a way of life, a religious culture, a spiritual and intellectual quest, and an intense identification with the myriad ways in which the sacred is present in India. If asked about their beliefs, they often begin by talking about ethical teachings: kindness and truth; hospitality to the guest; respect for the family – and particularly for elders and parents. They may go on to consider beliefs in particular gods or goddesses, the authority of important sacred texts, the merit of pilgrimage, or the doctrine of *karma*. Some – not all – may accept the social hierarchy of the four *varnas* (caste system) and certain principles of purity and pollution. Any study of popular Hindu beliefs begins with the gods and goddesses of Hinduism.

GOD, GODS, AND GODDESSES

Hindus may be polytheistic, monotheistic, or monistic – believing that all reality is actually one. There are even orthodox Hindus who are atheistic. Many Hindus believe there is one God (*Brahman*) who can be worshipped in many forms. God can, for example, appear as a baby, a friend, a king, a mother, or a lover. God can manifest as male or female, or in non-human form; be worshipped as without form (*nirguna Brahman*) or with form (*saguna Brahman*); appear through icons and images (*murti*), or in human shape as a living saint or *guru*. Some Hindu gurus, such as Vivekananda (1863–1902), have even taught that God is embodied in the form of the universe, and in all sentient beings: hence, in serving others we are – quite literally – serving God.





Statue of Ganesha, the elephant-headed god.

God is sometimes understood in a threefold way, as *Trimurti*. The *Trimurti* consists of Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the sustainer), and Shiva (the destroyer). However, not only is Brahma seldom worshipped, but nowadays the *Trimurti* is often replaced by a group of five gods: Vishnu, Shiva, Devi, Surya, and Ganesha.

The two pre-eminent gods, worshipped by Hindus everywhere, are Shiva and Vishnu. Vishnu is principally associated with the preservation of the cosmos and its proper order. He is, therefore, linked to kingship, and to the maintenance of *dharma* – law, order, righteousness. He is probably most frequently worshipped in his incarnations (*avatar*) as Rama and Krishna.

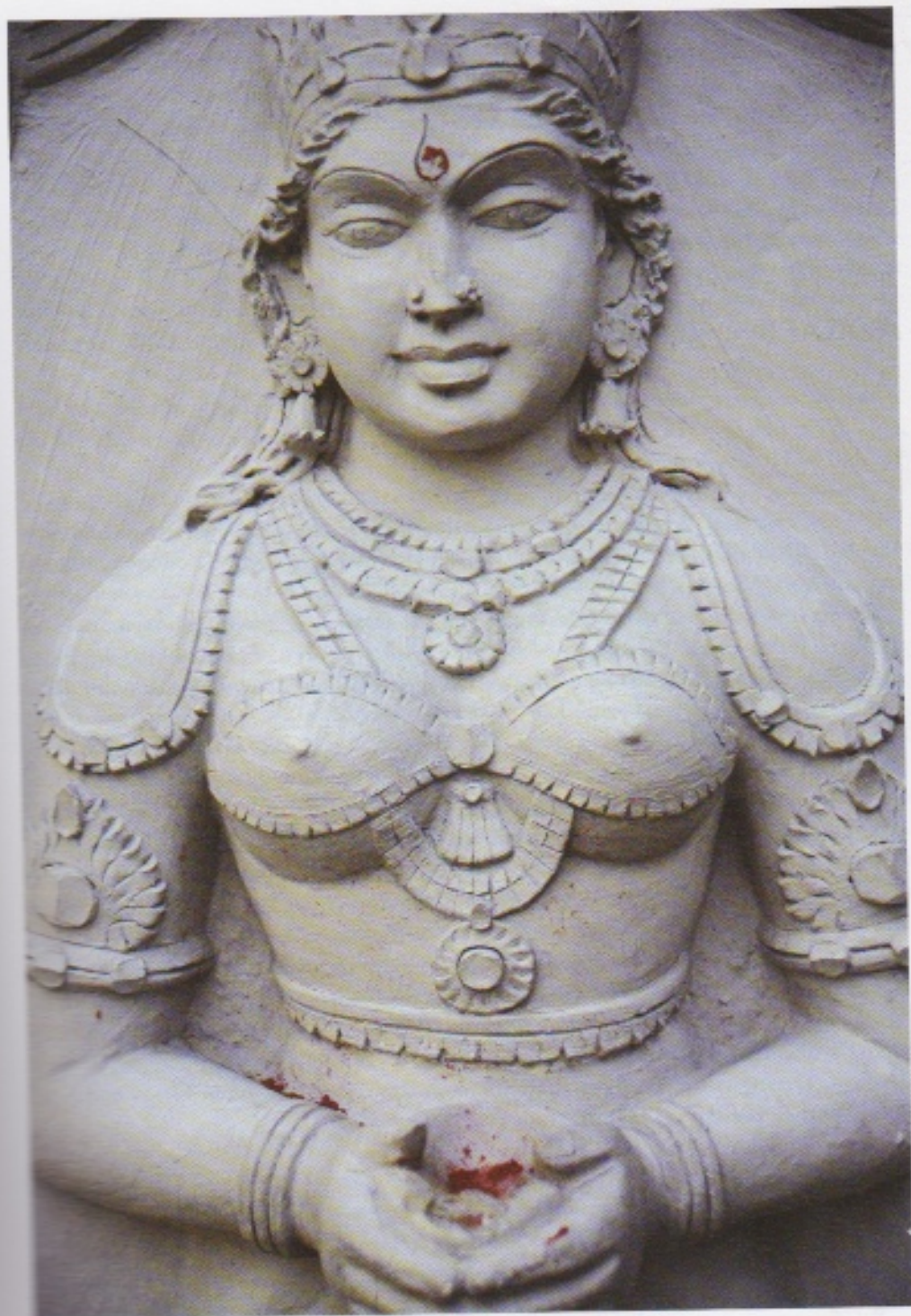
Shiva, 'the auspicious', is both the lord of *yogis* (ascetics) – depicted with matted hair, a body smeared with ashes, and meditating in a cremation ground – and also the divine lover. He is worshipped most commonly in the form of the phallus (*linga*). He has two sons: Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, and Skanda, or Murugan. Shiva reveals the ultimate

nature of reality, the polarities of life and death, creation and destruction, the ascetic and the erotic, on whose interrelationship the whole of life depends.

Vaishnavism (devotion to Vishnu), Shaivism (devotion to Shiva), and Shaktism (devotion to the Goddess, or Devi) are the best-known traditions within Hinduism. However, Hindus often have a chosen deity (*ishtadev*) who, for the devotee, can take on the aspects of the ultimate god. Such gods and goddesses are worshipped both as distinct beings with their own stories and iconography, and as forms of the one ultimate reality (*Brahman*). Hindus may worship many gods, but they also believe all gods are one.

GODDESS WORSHIP

Goddess worship is one of the most distinctive traditions of Hinduism, going back to prehistoric times. *Shakti* (power, strength, force) is a term used to refer to the power of any deity, and is also the activating energy incarnated in goddesses. All goddesses can be seen as distinct deities, or as diverse forms of (Maha)devi, the (Great) Goddess. The Goddess (*Adyasakti*) is worshipped as the Supreme Being, but also as the consort of a male god.



Detail of a statue of Shiva, displaying the dynamic feminine aspect of the supreme Divine, Shakti.

The consorts of the three great gods are Lakshmi, Sarasvati, and Parvati.

Sometimes scholars draw a distinction between independent goddesses, who are dangerous and 'hot', and wifely goddesses, who are restrained and 'cool'. For many Hindu women Sita, the wife of Rama, is the model Hindu wife, whose resolute integrity and courage are today emphasized by the Indian women's movement.

The land of India itself is worshipped as 'Divine Mother' (*Bharat Mata*), and is further sanctified by *Shaktipithas* (centres of Goddess worship), and by great rivers like the Ganges, which are worshipped as bestowers of prosperity and liberation.

AVATARS

Avatars are manifestations (literally 'descents') of God. They periodically intervene to fight evil, and ensure that the universe functions in accordance with *dharma*. The best loved are Krishna and Rama (*avatars* of Vishnu).

Krishna is worshipped as a child, as the god of erotic mystical love, and as the hero of the epic *Mahabharata*. While the youthful Krishna with his flute entrances the world with his play (*Krishna-lila*), in the *Bhagavad Gita* Krishna reveals himself as the great teacher and supreme god (Vishnu).

Rama is worshipped as the ideal ruler and the restorer of *dharma*. Always popular in northern India, Rama, has latterly become the principal god of Hindu nationalism. His reign (*Ram Rajya*) is invoked as a golden period of justice, harmony, and prosperity.

IMAGE WORSHIP

While many Hindus acknowledge that *Brahman* is the ultimate reality, the vast majority also worship divine beings and images. Many believe that the power (*shakti*) of a deity is actually present in that deity's image (*murti*). Therefore, in worshipping before an image, worship is offered to the deity whose power is in the image, and also to the deity as an image. When an image is consecrated, the ceremony transforms images of stone, metal, and wood into embodiments of God. Hindus go to the temple for *darshana*, the 'sight' or 'vision' of the deities. It is believed that *darshana* brings good fortune, grace, and spiritual merit. It also makes possible an intimate, loving relationship between deities and their devotees. During ritual worship (*pooja*), the gods are served and cared for as honoured guests by the offerings made to their images.

DHARMA

Hindus today often refer to Hindu beliefs and practices as *sanatana dharma* (eternal religion), or Vedic *dharma* (Vedic religion). *Dharma* may mean the social order, or the cosmic order, but equally it can refer to personal behaviour and attitudes. At the simplest

level, it means the individual's religious and social duties, according to status and stage of life. The *Bhagavad Gita*, for example, teaches that it is better to do one's own duty imperfectly than that of another well.

SAMSARA

Many Hindus, particularly those in the higher castes, believe in the endless cycle of rebirth (*samsara*). Efforts to bring the cycle to an end are at the core of many Hindu religious practices. The picture of a world as a place where the eternal soul is perpetually reincarnated has dominated the Indian imagination for over three millennia.

KARMA

Central to the teaching about reincarnation, *karma* is the taken-for-granted belief that one's actions determine one's condition in this life and rebirth in the next. Every action has its inevitable fruit or consequence. *Karma* is thus inseparable from *dharma* and *samsara*. To summarize the belief: good deeds result in good *karma*, which produces good fortune in this life and a good birth in the next life; bad deeds result in bad *karma*, which may lead to much less desirable rebirths in the next life, as a human lower down the social hierarchy, as an animal, or even as an unfortunate soul suffering the torments of one of the many hells.

There are ways in which *karma* may be overridden. Devotion to a deity is perhaps the most potent, whilst religious rituals and meritorious action may also cancel past sins. Some Hindus withdraw from the world and practise non-engagement. However, the *Bhagavad Gita* teaches that adherence to one's duty, combined with internal renunciation of attachment to, or desire for, the results of one's actions, can lead to liberation (*moksha*) from the cycle of *samsara*.

Karma can lead to either fatalism or ethical activism. It can be seen as an uncontrollable, impersonal determinant of the human condition; or can encourage people to feel responsible for their own fate, and promote a dynamic view of action in the world.

THE THREE PATHS

The three paths – *margas* or *yogas* – to spiritual fulfilment are: *jnana* (knowledge, insight, wisdom), *karma* (action) and *bhakti* (ecstatic devotion). Some Hindus consider each of the three paths requires exclusive concentration, and is sufficient for liberation. However, many modern teachers and gurus teach a *yoga* of synthesis, arguing that the three paths are linked, and liberating knowledge may be obtained through all.

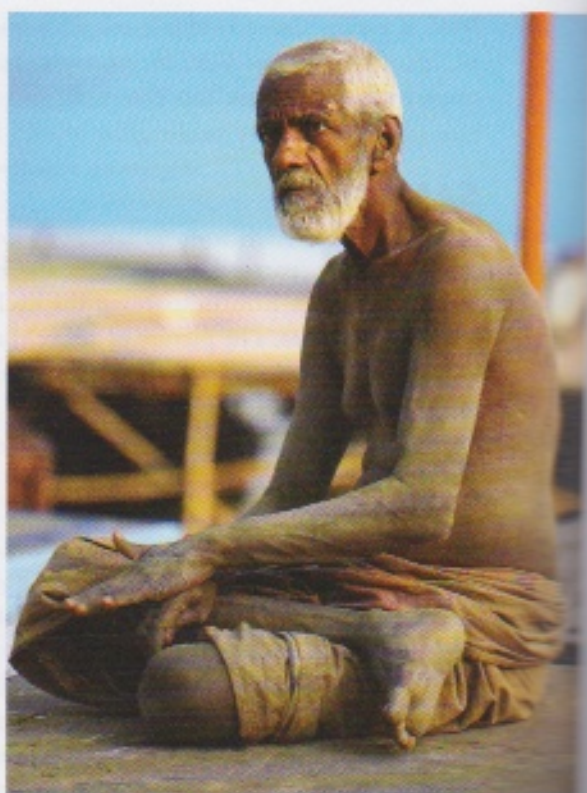
*To see the universal and
all-pervading Spirit of
Truth face to face one
must be able to love the
meanest of creation as
oneself.*

Mahatma Gandhi, *An
Autobiography* (Harmondsworth:
Penguin, 1982).

Jñānyoga – the path of wisdom/knowledge – liberates from *karma* and rebirth, and indeed from sickness, old age, and death. It leads to the overcoming of ignorance and the realization of *Brabman*. The pursuit of wisdom implies religious practice, meditation, self-purification, and above all study of the scriptures. The Vedas, and particularly the *Upanishads*, provide knowledge of *Brabman*, and of our true condition. Indeed, the famous teaching of the *Upanishads* is that in soul (*atman*) humans are identical with *Brabman*. According to some Hindu schools, if humans realize this truth, they can be liberated-in-life (*jivan-mukta*).

Karmayoga – the path of work – enables ordinary people everywhere to give spiritual meaning to their everyday lives. It is associated for many with the *Bhagavad Gita*'s teaching that action can be a positive means of personal transformation, if people perform their duty selflessly, and act without the desire for status or reward. Gandhi reinterpreted *karmayoga*, by equating it with social commitment and struggle, and found in the *Gita* authority for his philosophy of non-violence and peaceful resistance to British rule.

Bhaktiyoga – the path of loving devotion – is characterized by an intense personal relationship between the deity and devotee. Selfless love of God consumes past *karma*, and results in a state of intimate, blissful, and loving communion with the deity. Vaishnavas often speak of *prapatti* – complete self-surrender in love – to Vishnu. God-intoxicated saints are depicted as immersed in blissful devotion. Today many busy Hindus follow the path of *bhakti*; their spiritual discipline (*sadbhava*) may vary, but is broadly characterized by selfless service and loving devotion to God.



A Hindu pilgrim sits beside the River Ganges, Varanasi, India.

THE FOUR GOALS

Hinduism offers four legitimate goals (*purusartha*) for human beings which, taken together, are believed to ensure spiritual and social harmony:

1. *Artha* – worldly wealth and success – is a proper goal, if pursued without desire, anger, and greed. Kautilya's *Artha Shashtra*, written in the third to fourth century BCE, argues that prosperity is the basis of a well-ordered state, and people need *artha* if

they are to practise religion. Thus pursuing an occupation, accumulating wealth, governing and so on are justified if they do not violate *dharma*.

2. *Kama* – pleasure, desire – is also a legitimate goal, if it accords with *dharma*. This is the pursuit of pleasurable activities, including sexuality, play, recreation, the arts, and literature. The *Kama Sutra*, written in the third or fourth centuries CE, deals at length with erotic techniques, the arts of pleasure, and seduction.
3. *Dharma* – virtue, morality – has two levels: it is both one's own particular set of duties (*svadharma*) and the absolute morality, valid universally. When profit and pleasure are pursued for themselves, outside of *dharma*, they lead to social chaos.
4. *Moksha* – spiritual liberation – is the ultimate Hindu quest: release from the bondage of suffering and rebirth (*samsara*).

Some Hindus believe these goals are interconnected and that no goal is primary. Others believe they form an ascending hierarchy, with *moksha* transcending – even opposing – the other three. Whatever one's understanding, this system of the four goals implicitly recognizes the complexity of human drives and aspirations.

Just as a person casts off worn-out garments and puts on others that are new, even so the embodied soul casts off worn-out bodies and takes on others that are new. Weapons do not cleave the Self, fire does not burn the Self, waters do not drench the Self, winds do not parch the Self. The Self is the same forever: unmanifest, unthinkable, still.

Bhagavad Gita II, 22–25

DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE

Hindu beliefs about the afterlife are complex. Most Hindus believe they will be reborn into another body, according to their *karma*. However, *moksha* – salvation or ultimate spiritual fulfilment – may be understood in different ways: as final union with *Brahman*; as a perfectly blissful state; as communion with God; or as liberation in some heavenly realm or paradise. Many Hindus may find the concept of salvation, or liberation after death, a very distant ideal.

Moreover, ancient understandings of the afterlife persist, and Vedic views are implied in the death ritual. Funerary rites of passage, and memorial rituals for the dead, indicate a belief in the continued existence of ancestors (*pitṛ*), who are benefited and pleased by offerings made by their descendants. There are also popular beliefs about the journey of the soul after death; the multiplicity of heavens and hells, and the role of the god of death (Yama or Dharmaraj) as judge; and restless or malicious ghosts (*pret*, *bhuta*) who may possess or disturb the living.

TIME

Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain beliefs about the vastness of time, and the age of the universe, in some senses coincide with modern scientific understanding. The classical Hindu view is of gradually deteriorating conditions, until finally the world is destroyed by fire and

To conquer the subtle passions seems to me harder far than the physical conquest of the world by force of arms.

Mahatma Gandhi, *An Autobiography*

returns to chaos. The world itself perpetually undergoes cycles of evolution, from a state of non-differentiation, through a series of ages, to its dissolution (*pralaya*) back into the unevolved state, from which the cycle starts again. This process of evolution and dissolution is a 'day of Brahma': each day of Brahma divides into the fourteen 'periods of the Manu'; each of the fourteen periods of Manu divides into four great ages; each of the four great ages divides into four *yugas*. The passing of the *yugas* is marked by progressive moral and physical deterioration. We are now in the middle of the last, and worst, age: the *Kaliyuga*. Hence, that there

is apparent moral decline, suffering, famine, and war is no surprise to Hindus; indeed, the orthodox view is that life will get worse as we progress through the *yuga*.

GURUS

The *guru* – spiritual teacher – is a figure of the greatest importance in Hinduism, the object of *darshan* and worship, and comes in all shapes and sizes, traditions and orders. Some may assert their status by virtue of their charisma, others are initiated into a long-established lineage (*sampradaya*). Many have carried their spiritual message to the West, helping to extend the bounds of Hinduism. One of the best known gurus was Sathya Sai Baba, worshipped as an *avatara* of Sirdi Sai Baba, and of Shiva and Shakti. There have also been women gurus, such as Sarada Devi (1853–1920), widow of Ramakrishna, Mira Alfassa (1878–1973), Mother of the Aurobindo organization, Ananda Mayi Ma (1896–1982), and Mata Amritanandamayi (b. 1953).

ANNA S. KING

THE FOUR GOALS

Worship and Festivals

YAJNA

In early Vedic times, worship usually took the form of a sacrificial ritual (*yajna*), addressed to nature gods such as the sun god, Surya; the rain god, Indra; the god of fire, Agni; or the Soma god, believed to reside in a probably hallucinogenic plant of the same name. These rituals involved the sacrifice of animals such as goats and cows, or the pouring of oblations of such items as clarified butter, honey, and milk into a sacrificial fire, accompanied by the chanting of Vedic hymns and prayers. The early Vedas are liturgical texts, which set out in great detail the method of ritual observance. These rituals were intended to please the gods through worship, and to ensure the well-being of the sponsor or patron of the sacrifice – the *yajamana* – and his family.



PUJA

Yajnas are something of a rarity in the contemporary Hindu world; far more commonly observed is *puja*, a ritual of devotional worship regularly conducted at temples, usually by Brahman priests, and often observed privately at household shrines. *Puja* may be addressed to any of the manifold gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon, important among whom are the great gods Vishnu and Shiva, and the goddess Shakti, all of whom appear in myriad forms and aspects in Hindu mythology, and across the contemporary Hindu sacred landscape.

Temples dedicated to the different Hindu gods and goddesses usually contain a sanctified image of the deity, and to this image the ritual of *puja* is addressed. During *puja*, the priest ritually purifies himself and the shrine, invokes the presence of the deity in the image, and then worships the image by ritually bathing and adorning it, feeding it symbolically, and waving a flaming lamp in a circle around it in a ritual of light. This is usually accompanied by the chanting of Sanskrit mantras, the blowing of conches, and the ringing of bells. In Hindu households, the family usually observes an abbreviated form of this ritual.

Whatever you do, or eat, or give, or offer in adoration, let it be an offering to me; and whatever you suffer, suffer it for me.

Bhagavad Gita 9.26



The relationship between the image and the divine presence is, in the Hindu world, often a complex one. For most Hindus, the image is symbolic of the divine presence; but for many, it is also the divine presence, manifesting itself in tangible form.

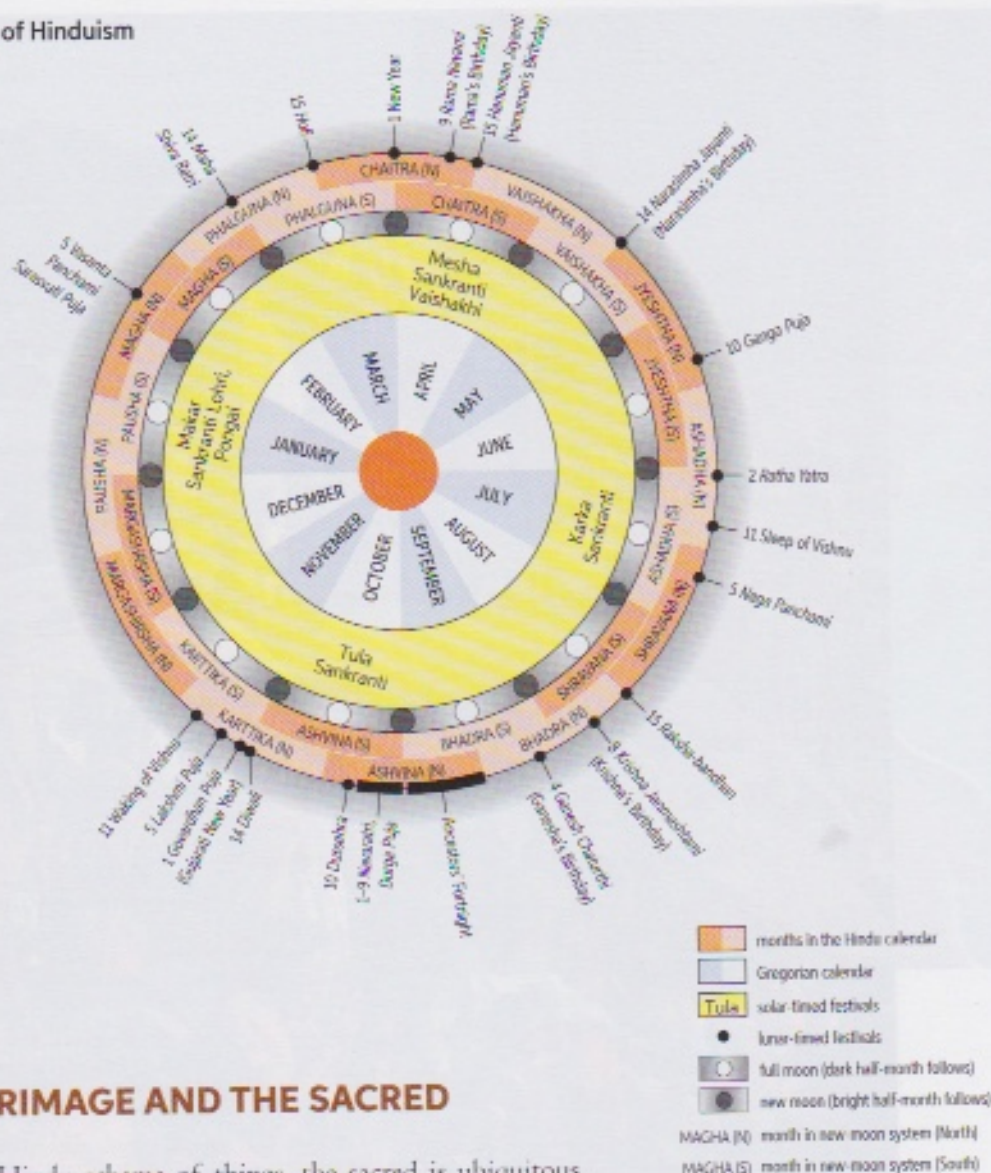
Moreover, Hindus seldom agree on the importance of *puja*. While some see it as an act of great religious significance, others see it as a largely unnecessary, outward expression of religious piety, and prefer instead a more inward-oriented mode of spiritual development. Besides *puja*, other modes of worship commonly practised in Hindu society include *bhajana* – the singing of hymns – and the recitation of the *sahasranama*, the thousand names of the gods and goddesses.

Part of the huge Hindu temple complex at Angkor Wat, Cambodia – the world's largest religious monument – built by the Tamil king Suryavarman II in the twelfth century CE.

*I am the same to all
beings, and my love is
ever the same; but those
who worship me with
devotion, they are in me
and I am in them.*

Bhagavad Gita 9.29

Festivals of Hinduism



PILGRIMAGE AND THE SACRED

In the Hindu scheme of things, the sacred is ubiquitous, contained not only in temples and sacred images, but also in nature – in stones, trees, mountains, and rivers. Every once in a while the sacred ‘manifests’ itself in the form of a mysterious rock, stream, or spring, and the site of such manifestation becomes a place of worship. Pilgrims flock to such places during auspicious months of the Hindu calendar, and mythological stories grow about the miraculous nature of the pilgrimage site. Particularly important in the Hindu cosmology are sacred rivers, and holy towns and cities situated along their banks, which are seen as places of crossing (*tirtha*) between the mundane and the sacred, and between the worlds of the living and the dead. The water of the Ganges in North

India is believed to be especially potent in this respect, and a single dip in the river is believed to earn for the worshipper untold spiritual merit.

The sacred often manifests itself in living things too. The cow, the monkey, and – in some parts of India – even the snake and the rat are believed to be sacred and therefore worshipped. Yet more common is the worship of men and women believed to be holy, and therefore capable of performing miracles that can transform the lives of devotees, and ensure their well-being. Many such holy figures attract an extensive following, and head vast spiritual empires extending across regional and national boundaries.

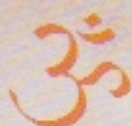
FESTIVALS

The Hindu (lunar) calendar year is punctuated by a series of religious festivals. Temple festivals are usually marked by processions, when worshippers carry the deity's image through the temple town or village, offering devotees a chance to glimpse it in all its glory. Other festivals – which celebrate landmark events in Hindu mythology – include:

- *Janmashtami* (July–August): the celebration of the birthday of the popular Hindu god, Krishna.
- *Ganesh Chaturthi* (August–September): a festival dedicated to the elephant-headed god, Ganesh, the remover of obstacles.
- *Dussehra* (September–October, towards the end of the monsoon): marking the victory of Rama and his monkey army over the demon-king Ravana. It encompasses *Navaratri* – also known as 'the festival of nine nights' – which in Bengal culminates in a grand celebration dedicated to the worship of the goddess Durga.
- *Diwali* (October–November): the festival of lights, following shortly after *Dussehra*. Hindus throughout the world illuminate their homes with lamps and exchange gifts.



Image of Durga, a popular fierce form of the Hindu goddess, depicted with up to eighteen arms.



I AM A HINDU

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

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

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

I do not believe it is necessary to visit the temple every day to keep in touch with God. God is with me every hour of the day. I pray to God in my thoughts wherever I am, and reflect on my beliefs, and

whether what I'm doing is good for me or for other people. I do this, not only because they are good things to do, but also because they will contribute to a good reincarnation. That said, I like to be in the temple whenever I can, serving my community. I find that regular attendance helps my religious life, by expanding my thoughts, and helping to make me less selfish and to see the best in others. This is what faith means to me. It is a faith I learned particularly from my mother, a traditional Hindu; she has been the greatest influence on my religious upbringing.

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

In 1976 I returned to India, where I met my wife, a traditional Hindu from Gujarat. Already a devout Hindu, after our marriage I became more involved in the activities of the temple, as its secretary and now its treasurer. Because of my work, I do not participate in worship in the temple every day, but attend at least three times a week. When I retire, I will attend worship in the temple far more regularly.

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

I do not have time to attend scripture study

regularly. Once or twice a year I attend scripture reading and exposition in Coventry. I would like to go regularly to a local reading of Hindu sacred texts, but none is available, although scholars from the Hare Krishna temple in Watford are sometimes invited to explain Hindu texts locally.

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

My wife is more devout than I am, and observes all the Hindu calendar events, and my family life is firmly based on Hindu religion and culture. My faith has helped strengthen my relationship with my wife, mother, and sisters. Together we observe all the Hindu festivals and celebrations, such as *Navaratri* and *Janmashtami*, and key ceremonies (*samskars*) such as typical funerary rites (*sraddha*). I took my father's ashes to India to scatter in rivers and on the land, especially in our hometown.

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

Naren Patel

- *Shivaratri* (January–February): a festival during which Shiva is worshipped.
- *Holi* (February–March): a spring festival, during which people drench one another in water and coloured powder.

Besides these, there are several localized festivals observed in different parts of the Hindu world. The *Kumbh Mela*, perhaps the most popular of these, attracts pilgrims in vast numbers to its four sites in North India – Harwar, Nasik, Ujjain, and Allahabad – where it is celebrated on a rotational basis once every three years. The *Purna Kumbha Mela* takes place once every twelve years in the holy town of Allahabad. Billed as the 'biggest gathering on earth', in 2001 more than 40 million people gathered on its busiest days.

MAYA WARRIER

Hinduism in the Modern World



Hinduism, the most ancient world religion, has been subject to many changes in the course of its long history. The rise and fall in prominence of some ancient gods, such as Indra, King of gods, and Varuna, god of the sea; the decline in importance of the fire sacrifice; the rise in popularity of the *bhakti* (devotional) tradition in the sixth century CE are all instances of this. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Hindu reformers such as Vivekananda (1863–1902), Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833), Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi (1869–1948), and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975) advocated an ethical form of Hinduism, which campaigned against social practices such as *sati* – the self-immolation of widows on their husbands’ funeral pyres – and child marriage, and displayed the influence of Western values. In modern times, Hinduism has moved away from this puritanical type of religion, which decried many ancient beliefs as superstitious, and has returned with full vigour to traditional Hinduism.

ASTROLOGERS AND GURUS

A large number of Hindus now defend traditional Hindu mores and practices. Contemporary Hindus are not worried about being labelled ‘superstitious’, and openly consult astrologers and gurus. The increased veneration of gurus has given rise to the cult phenomenon in modern Hinduism. Some prominent gurus, such as Swami Prabhupada, Bhagavan Rajneesh, and Satya Sai Baba, established popular new religious movements that have spread beyond India, attracting a considerable following from Westerners, although, technically, conversion into Hinduism is impossible, because Hindus are – as a result of their *karma* – those born into Hindu families and into a particular caste. Non-Hindus do not have a caste identity; hence, traditionally Hindu missionary activity was aimed at recovering Hindus who had lapsed into Christianity or Islam, and required a purification ritual, or *shuddhi*. However, in the modern world, new cults and movements have emulated Christians, by engaging in mission to non-Hindus. Many of these new Hindu movements have been successful in recruiting Westerners.

POLITICIZATION

One of the most striking modern developments has been the politicization of Hinduism, and the rising militancy among some factions, perhaps a natural consequence of the emergence of Hindu nationalism in a country so long under the yoke of Muslim and Christian powers. Independence for India in August 1947 ended around 400 years of such rule and, although the Indian leaders opted for a secular, or religiously neutral, nation, the vast majority of the population is Hindu. With the passing of time, the secular ideals of Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) – first Prime Minister of India – and Gandhi have become less valued, and today many view India as a Hindu, rather than a secular, multi-religious, nation.

This shift toward Hindu nationalism should be seen in the context of the rise of Muslim nationalism in the subcontinent, and the perennial dispute over Kashmir, the Muslim-majority state located between India and Pakistan. Hindu nationalistic parties such as the RSS (Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh/National Self-Service Association), the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad/World Hindu Organization) and BJP (Bharatiya Janatha Party/Indian People's Party) promote India as a Hindu state, and believe Hindu religion, ideology, and values should predominate. This has increased pressure on the religious minorities and created division. The actions and claims of more militant sections of Hindu nationalist organizations, such as the Bajrang Dal, have been denounced by Hindu intellectuals as uncharacteristic of Hindu religion and culture, with its image of tolerance, and willingness to absorb beliefs and practices from other religions and philosophies. The militants have an ideology based on *Hindutva* ('Hindu-ness'), which raises problems for the religious minorities, and raises the possibility of a Hindu theocratic state, alienating the millions of non-Hindus in the nation.

The Birla Mandir, or Laxmi Narayan, Hindu Temple, Delhi, India, built between 1933 and 1939.



The appeal of the Hindu nationalistic ideology is more evident among the less literate and rural sections of the Hindu community, who constitute the majority of the Indian populace. This combination of political power and militant religious nationalism has led to tension in some areas of India where several faith communities live alongside each other. The massacre of Muslims in Gujarat in 2002 was allegedly condoned, and even abetted, by the Hindu nationalist state government. Hindu nationalists seek the Hinduization of Indian polity, culture, and education. This trend, often termed 'saffronization' – saffron being a colour associated with Hinduism – is growing stronger, although opposed by the Indian intelligentsia, who argue against the politicization of religion, its identification with the nation and growing hostility to other faiths.

THE HINDU DIASPORA

A significant development in Hinduism has resulted from the migration of many Hindus to the West. Because these diaspora communities are minorities, a defensive, more fervent type of Hinduism has emerged. For example, in southern states of the USA, where there is a strong conservative Christian culture, Hindus have challenged what they see as the misrepresentation of Hindu concepts and practices in school textbooks.

Westernized Hindu ideas, when imported back to India, have been responsible for an increased awareness of mystical traditions, sacred sites, and some esoteric forms of Hindu spirituality. There has been a burgeoning interest in pilgrimage to sacred shrines, such as the Sabarimala Temple in Kerala, and great festivals, such as the *Kumbh Mela*. There has also been an increase in pilgrims visiting gurus in search of miracles.

THE CASTE SYSTEM

Modern Hinduism has also seen a strengthening of the caste system. At the turn of the twentieth century, a campaign by Hindu reformers such as Dayananda Sarasvati (1824–83), Vivekananda, and Gandhi sought to reform what they saw as the chauvinism and discrimination of the caste system. Caste did not disappear, but it was felt to be out of date and incompatible with modern egalitarian ideals. For some, the conversion of 'untouchables' to Christianity, Islam, or Buddhism seemed to threaten the predominance of Hinduism in the subcontinent. Under Gandhi's influence, the Indian constitution and laws guaranteed privileges to the untouchables in education and employment. In recent years this has faced opposition by 'forward communities', who claim positive discrimination policies have undermined the economic status of their own communities. In some areas there have been caste wars between the *savarnas* – those belonging to the *varna* or caste system – and the *avarnas* – the untouchables. Both the untouchables and the *savarnas* have now organized into vote banks to achieve political influence.

Revisionist thinking now emphasizes the positive side of the caste system. Even practices such as *sati* have been praised by fundamentalists, despite a growing feminist movement within

Hinduism. On the other hand, there is a phenomenon termed 'sanskritization', which has seen untouchables and tribal peoples of India attempting to Hinduize their religious practices. Some untouchable and tribal groups are beginning to abandon their traditional deities and practices to build temples and worship Hindu deities, such as Vishnu and Shiva, possibly in an attempt to enter the Hindu fold, or gain higher status for their community. The Indian constitution has made the restriction of entry of untouchables to Hindu temples illegal, and some untouchables have undertaken Hindu theological training and demanded entry to the priesthood, even at *savarna* temples.

Meanwhile, other untouchable and tribal groups have retained their traditional pantheon and ritual praxis, but attempted to identify their deities and practices with Hindu gods and worship, by reinterpreting their mythology and ritual proceedings. The leaders of the Muthappan cult of northern Kerala, for example, have reinterpreted the Muthappan deities as Vishnu and Shiva, although originally tribal gods of the forest dwellers of the region.

WOMEN IN MODERN HINDUISM

Nineteenth-century and twentieth-century social reformers spearheaded efforts to achieve the liberation of women, at considerable risk. Ram Mohan Roy's campaign resulted in the banning of *sati*. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar married a widow, to set an example of improving the lot of people treated as virtually dead – widows lived in seclusion, were not allowed to remarry, had to forgo all adornments, and were looked on as inauspicious. Gandhi, for the first time in modern India, brought Indian women into the public arena, in his campaign for independence. Women took part in public demonstrations and in the civil disobedience movement. The momentum gained has not been lost: the traditional image of the Hindu woman – domesticated and subservient to father and husband – is changing rapidly. Women are well represented in the employment sector and in government, and there has been a move to set quotas for women members of the *Lok Sabha* (parliament).

Traditionally, the role of the woman was in the home, serving her husband and nurturing her children. Hindu mythology often emphasized this image. Female figures such as Sita, the virtuous and long suffering wife of Rama, and Savithri, who pleaded successfully to Yama, the god of death, for the life of her husband, were held up as paradigms of womanly behaviour. Modern Hindu women do not adhere to these norms; they are out in public, competing against men in all fields, even in occupations traditionally viewed as exclusively male, such as law, engineering, and the police and armed forces. Feminist groups such as the Working Woman's Forum are active in trying to achieve equality. Film directors such as Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta have made films highlighting the aspirations of Indian women and the problems they face, such as *Fire* (1996) and *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), provoking controversy among right-wing Hindu groups.

THEODORE GABRIEL