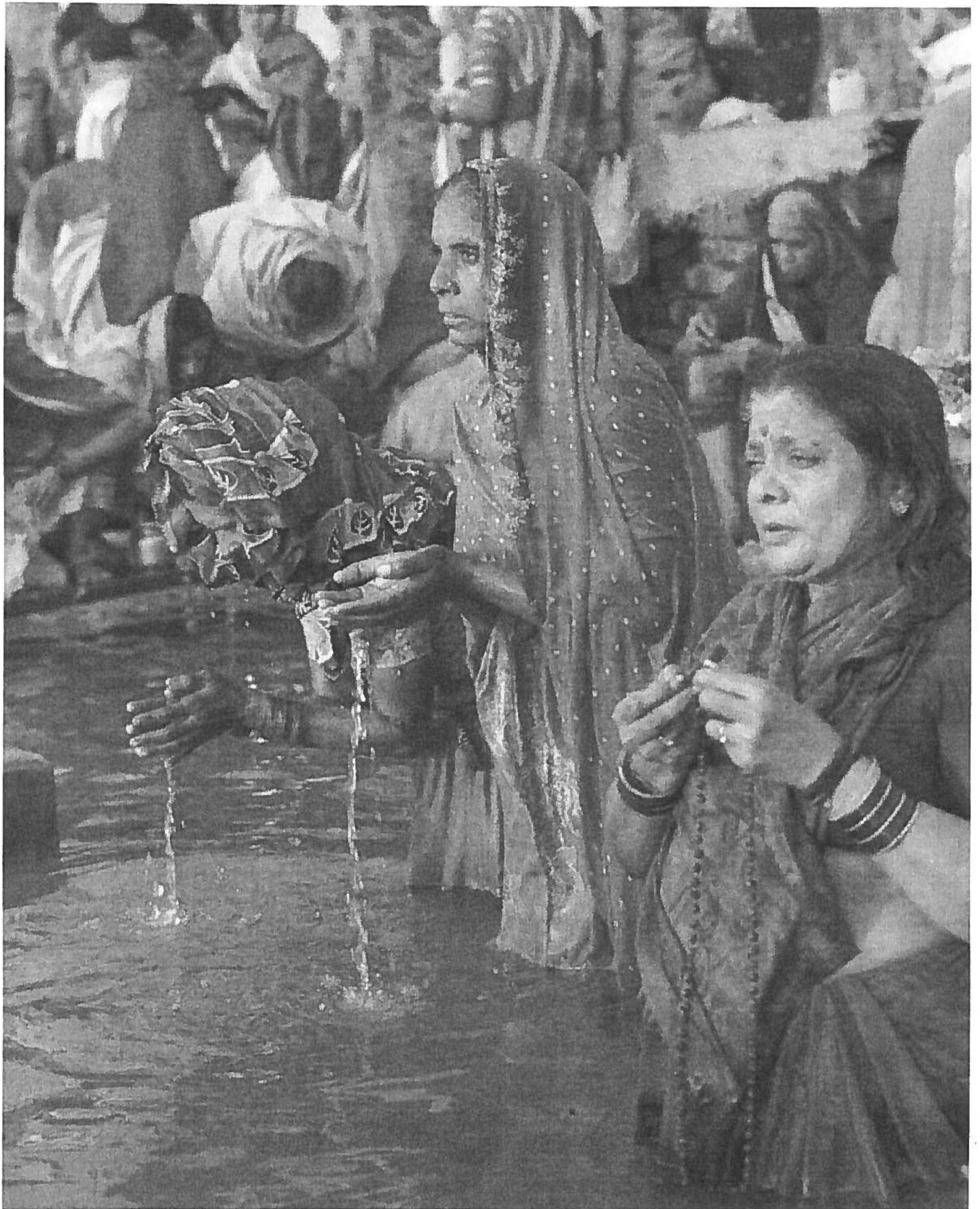
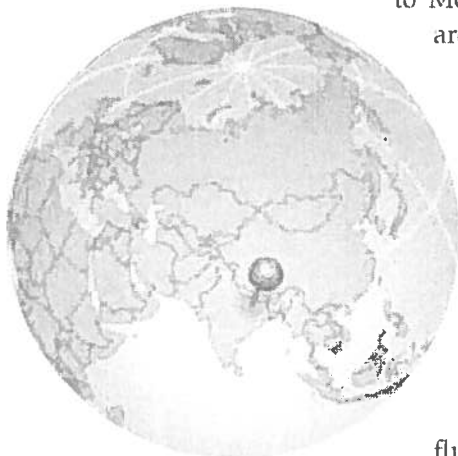


3

The plane that you have taken to Benares circles in preparation for landing at the Varanasi airport. Looking down from your window seat, you can see the blue-white Ganges River, quite wide here. Everything else is a thousand shades of brown. Beyond the coffee-colored city, the beige fields spread out, seemingly forever.

At the small airport, a dignified customs inspector with a turban and a white beard asks, "Why have you come to India?" Before you can think of an appropriate response, he answers his own question. "I know," he says with a smile and a wave of the hand. "You people who come to Benares are all the same." He shakes his head from side to side. "You have come for *spirituality*." After pausing briefly, he adds, "Haven't you!" It sounds more like a statement than a question. It takes you a second to understand his quick pronunciation of that unexpected word—*spirituality*. In a way, he is right. You *have* come for that. You nod in agreement. He smiles again, writes something down on his form, and lets you through.

As you take the small black taxi to your hotel, you realize that you have just accepted—willingly or not—the ancient role that the customs inspector has bestowed upon you. You are now just one more pilgrim who has come to Mother India for her most famous product: religious insight. You are now a Seeker.



After unpacking at your hotel, you walk out into the streets. It is dusk. Pedicab drivers ring their bells to ask if you want a ride, but you want to walk, to see the life of the streets. Little shops sell tea, and others sell vegetarian foods made of potatoes, wheat, beans, and curried vegetables. Children play in front of their parents' stores. Down the street you see a "gent's tailor" shop, as a thin cow wanders past, chewing on what looks like a paper bag. Another shop sells books and notepaper, and others sell saris and bolts of cloth. From somewhere comes a smell like jasmine. As night falls, the stores are lit by dim bulbs and fluorescent lights, and vendors illuminate their stalls with bright Coleman lanterns. Because you will be rising long before dawn the next day to go down to the Ganges, you soon return to your hotel. You fall asleep quickly.

The telephone rings, waking you out of a dream. The man at the front desk notifies you that it is four a.m. Being somewhat groggy, you have to remind yourself that you are in Benares. You get up and dress quickly.

At the front of the hotel you wake a driver sleeping in his pedicab. You negotiate the fare, climb onto the seat, and head off to the main crossing of town, near the river, as the sky begins to lighten. The pedicab drops you near the *ghats* (the stairs that descend to the river), which are already full of people, many going down to the river to bathe at dawn. Some are having sandalwood paste applied to their foreheads as a sign of devotion, and others are carrying brass jugs to collect Ganges water.

As you descend to the river, boat owners call to you. You decide to join the passengers in the boat of a man resembling a Victorian patriarch, with a white handlebar mustache. Off you go, moving slowly upstream. Laughing children jump up and down in the water as men and women wade waist-deep and face the rising sun to pray. Upstream, professional launderers beat clothes on the rocks and lay them out on the stones of the riverbank to dry.

The boat turns back downstream, passing the stairs where you first descended to the river. In the bright morning light you see large umbrellas, under which teachers sit cross-legged, some with disciples around them. Who, you wonder, are these teachers? The area near the shore is crammed with people and boats. On a nearby boat, people shout, *Ganga Ma ki Jai*—"Victory to Mother Ganges!"

The boat continues downstream. On the shore, smoke rises from small pyres, where bodies wrapped in red and white cloth are being cremated. The boatman warns, "No photos here, please." The boat pulls in to shore downstream of the pyres, and everyone gets off. Walking up the stairs, you

see small groups of people quietly watching the cremations. At the pyres, a man tends the fires with a bamboo pole, and a dog wanders nearby.

Later, as you make your way back to the center of town, you notice a pedicab with a covered body tied onto the back. It cycles past women sitting beside the road, selling plastic bracelets and colored powders. The pedicab must be on its way to the pyres, you think. The blend of opposites fills your mind; on the banks of the very same river, laundry is washed and bodies are burned; in the streets, life and death appear side by side—yet no one seems to notice the contrasts. Here, the two are one.

Looking at a map of India (Figure 3.1, p. 76) you can see that this subcontinent, shaped like a diamond, is isolated. Two sides face the sea, while the north is bounded by the steep Himalaya Mountains. There are few mountain passes, and the only easy land entry is via the narrow corridor in the northwest, in the vicinity of the Indus River, where Pakistan now lies. It is the relative isolation of India that has helped create a culture that is rare and fascinating.

India's climate, except in the mountain regions, is generally warm for most of the year, allowing people to live outdoors much of the time. Indeed, some people may even claim that the climate has helped promote religious values that, at least for some, minimize the importance of material goods such as clothing, housing, and wealth.

Although hot and dry in many parts, India has many rivers and streams. Most important is the Ganges, which flows out of the Himalayas and is enlarged by tributaries as it moves east toward the Bay of Bengal. By the time the Ganges has reached the town of Benares (also known as Varanasi and Kashi), the river is enormous; in fact, after the summer monsoons, the river becomes so wide that often one cannot see to the other side. Because the water of the Ganges is regular and dependable, it has enabled civilization to flourish across much of northern India. It has also given Indian culture a sense of security, protection, and even care, which has led to the popular name for the river, *Ganga Ma* ("Mother Ganges").

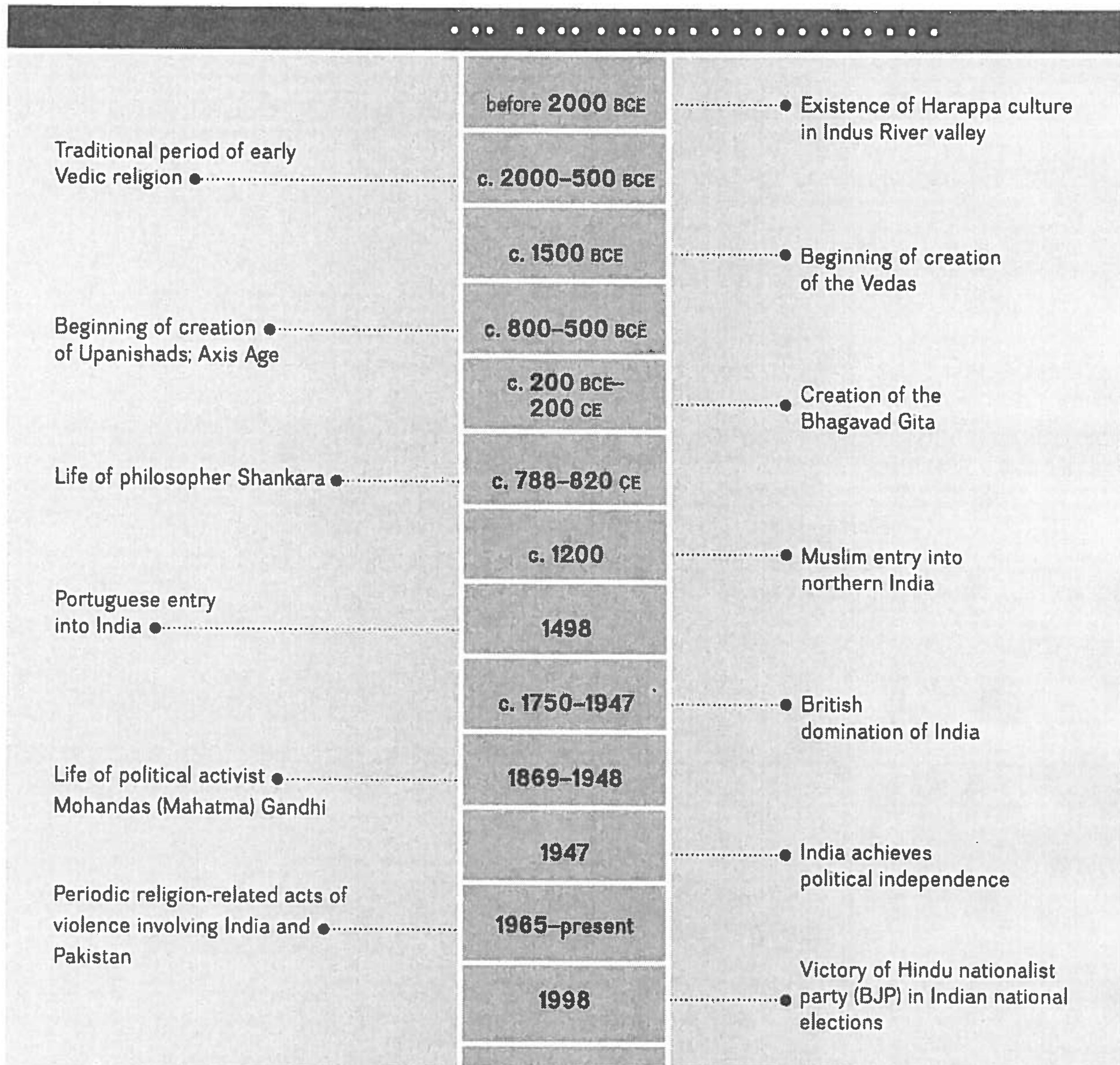
The religious life of India is something like the river Ganges. It has flowed along for thousands of years, swirling from its own power but also from the power of new streams that have added to its force. Hinduism, the major religion of India, has been an important part of this flowing energy. Many influences—early indigenous religion and influences from later immigrants—have added to its inherent momentum. It has no one identifiable founder, no strong organizational structure to defend it and spread its influence, nor any creed to define and stabilize its beliefs; and in a way that seems to defy reason, Hinduism unites the worship of many gods with a belief in a single divine reality. In fact, the name *Hinduism* can be misleading. Hinduism is not a single, unified religion; it is more like a family of beliefs.

But the limitations of Hinduism may also be its strengths. It is like a palace that began as a two-room cottage. Over the centuries, wings have

FIGURE 3.1
India, Bali, and the area of Hindu influence.

been built on to it, and now it has countless rooms, stairs, corridors, statues, fountains, and gardens. There is something here to please and astonish—and dismay—almost everyone. In fact, its beliefs are so rich and profound that Hinduism has greatly influenced the larger world, and its influence continues to grow. In this chapter we will explore the various elements of this religion's foundation and the stages in which additions were made to the sprawling house of Hinduism.

In the early twentieth century, engineers who were building a railroad discovered the ruins of an ancient culture in the Indus River valley. Today, most of the Indus River lies in Pakistan, but it traditionally formed the natural border of northwestern India—in fact, the words *India* and *Hindu* derive from *Indus*. The culture that archeological workers uncovered there flourished



Timeline of significant events in the history of Hinduism.

before 2000 BCE and is named the Harappa culture, after one of its ancient cities (Timeline 3.1).

Archeologists were amazed by the type of civilization they found. The cities contained regular streets and solid brick houses. Pots and coins were discovered, as well as evidence that running water was used for toilets and baths. As one historian remarks, "no other ancient civilization until that of the Romans had so efficient a system of drains"[1]—a genuine sign of technical development. This complex culture had also invented a writing system, which scholars are still working to decipher.

Property owners marked their belongings with seals bearing the images of animals, such as the bull, tiger, and rhinoceros, as well as images of men and women. Three seals show a male, sitting in a yogic meditation posture, with horns on his head.[2] Small pillars that suggest male sexuality were also found. Because many of these same symbols still appear in contemporary Indian culture, we can assume that some current religious practices have survived from the distant past. For example, the male with the horns on his head may be a deity and an early form of the god Shiva, and the pillars resemble the low columns that some contemporary Indians worship in honor of Shiva. It is also quite possible that the present-day worship of the divine Great Mother and of tree spirits goes back to this early time.

The ancient scriptures of India are called the **Vedas.** They give a great deal of information about gods and worship during what is often called the Vedic period, generally thought to cover about 2000 to 500 BCE. The origin of the Vedas and of the religion they describe, however, is uncertain.

In the late eighteenth century, Western scholars recognized that Sanskrit—the ancient language of India and the language of the Vedas—was related to Greek and Latin. They also realized that many of the gods mentioned in the Vedas were the same gods who had been worshiped in Greece and Rome; they discovered, as well, that gods of similar names were mentioned in Iranian sacred literature. Later scholars theorized that a single people, who called themselves Aryans, moved from present-day southern Russia about 2000 BCE in two directions—westward into Europe and eastward into Iran and India. Entering new lands, these people were thought to have carried their language and religion with them. Scholars initially believed that in India the outsiders imposed their social order quickly and violently on the older culture. According to this theory, called the "Aryan invasion theory," the Vedas were believed to be the religious writings of this invading people.

Next, a variant on the older theory arose: instead of speaking of a single invasion, the newer theory held that there were repeated waves of migrations into Pakistan and northern India, and that from these contacts between foreign and indigenous cultures the religion of the Vedas emerged. More recently, however, this second theory, called the "Aryan migration theory," has been questioned. The migration theory is still commonly held, but some scholars view any theory that assumes influence from outside India to be a continued relic of Western cultural imperialism. Archeological, linguistic, and genetic investigations continue to offer more clues, but their interpretation has not resolved the issue.

No matter what its origins, the religion described by the Vedas seems to have consisted of the worship of mostly male gods, who were believed to control the forces of nature. The father of the gods was Dyaüs Pitr,

whose name means "shining father." (He is clearly the same god as the Roman god Jupiter and the Greek god Zeus Pater.) The god Indra, god of storm and war, received great attention because of the strength his worshipers hoped to receive from him. He was possibly the memory of a military ancestor, deified by later generations. The god of fire, Agni (whose name is related to the English word *ignite* and to the Latin word for fire, *ignis*), carried sacrifices up to the world of the gods. Dawn and renewal were the charge of the goddess Ushas, one of the few female deities. The god Rudra brought winds. Varuna was the god of the sky and justice; Vishnu was a god of cosmic order; and Surya was the major sun god. The god Soma was thought to cause altered states of mind and to expand consciousness. He worked through a ritual drink, possibly made from a psychedelic mushroom that had the same name (*soma*) and allowed contact with the realm of the gods. The god Yama ruled the afterlife.

Vishnu is mentioned in the Vedas, Hinduism's ancient scriptures, as a god of cosmic order. This sculpture, at Bangkok's very modern Suvarnabhumi Airport, illustrates the same god Vishnu in a tale that is still told today.

Worship of the gods took place at outdoor fire altars. Priestly specialists set apart a square or rectangular space, purified it with water, and constructed one to three low altars inside the space for sacrifice. The usual offerings were milk, clarified butter (called *ghee*), grains, and sometimes animals. A special horse sacrifice, believed to confer great power on a king, occurred on rare occasions.

Sacred chants, which the priests knew from memory, were an essential part of the ceremonies; and because they believed that the chants had power of their own, the priestly class protected them and handed them down orally from father to son. It is these chants, in written form, that make up the core of the earliest Hindu sacred literature, the Vedas. Although many of the Vedic gods are no longer worshiped, elements of the Aryan religion—such as the use of fire and some of the ancient chants by a priestly class—continue to be of great importance to Hindus today.

The Vedas, which originally were preserved only in oral form but eventually were written down, are the earliest sacred books of Hinduism. The name means "knowledge" or "sacred lore," and related words in English are *vision* and *wisdom*. Although scholars date the earliest versions of the Vedas to about 1500 BCE, Hindus consider them to be far more ancient. They say that the Vedas were revealed to *rishis* (holy men of the distant past), who did not create the Vedas but heard them and transmitted them to later generations.

There are four basic sacred text collections that constitute the Vedas. The Rig Veda[3] ("hymn knowledge") is a collection of more than a thousand chants to the Aryan gods; the Yajur Veda ("ceremonial knowledge") contains matter for recitation during sacrifice; the Sama Veda ("chant knowledge") is a handbook of musical elaborations of Vedic chants; and the Atharva Veda ("knowledge from [the teacher] Atharva") consists of practical prayers and charms, such as prayers to protect against snakes and sickness.

The Rig Veda, the most important of the Vedas, has an account of the origin of the universe. The universe is said to have emerged from a division and cosmic sacrifice of a primeval superperson, Purusha. But the account includes an admission of uncertainty: "Who knows it for certain; who can proclaim it here; namely, out of what it was born and wherefrom his creations issued? The gods appeared only later—after the creation of the world. Who knows, then, out of what it has evolved?"[4]

The term *Vedas* sometimes indicates only these four collections. In its more common use, it also refers to some later material as well. Detailed ceremonial rules, called Brahmanas and Aranyakas, were added by later generations to each of the four Vedic collections. The Brahmanas, named for the priests who would use them, give details about the proper time and place for ceremonies, the preparation of the ground, ritual objects, and purification rites. The Aranyakas ("forest books") allowed the rituals to be understood and practiced in nonliteral, symbolic ways by men who had left society and become ascetics in the forests. The four Vedas end with even later works, called the **Upanishads,** which express philosophical and religious ideas that arose in introspective and meditative traditions.

Around 500 BCE, Indian civilization experienced such widespread and important changes that the period is known as the Axis Age, meaning that everything turned in a new direction at this time. Interestingly, great changes were taking place in other religions and cultures as well: it was the time of the Buddha, Confucius, major Hebrew prophets, and early Greek philosophers.

After many centuries, questioning of Vedic religious beliefs and practices began to emerge with strength. It is possible that earlier religious disciplines reasserted themselves, and there may have been resentment against the priestly class. Some critics questioned the value of the Vedic sacrifices, and we know from the Aranyakas that certain people abandoned social life to live alone in the forests, giving themselves much time for thought and religious experimentation. Thinkers questioned the ancient belief in many gods, seeking instead a single divine reality that might be the source of everything.[5] Some went even further and saw all things as being mystically united. And a few rejected religious ritual altogether.

During this period there seems to have been interest in all sorts of techniques for altering consciousness, such as sitting for long periods in meditation,

breathing deeply, fasting, avoiding sexual activity, practicing long periods of silence, going without sleep, experimenting with psychedelic plants, and living in the darkness of caves. People of any social class—not just priests—could do all of these things. Evidence of this intellectual ferment and the practice of spiritual disciplines is recorded in the Upanishads.

The Upanishads comprise about a hundred written works that record insights into external and internal reality. Although several interpretations of the name *Upanishads* have been proposed, it is commonly thought to derive from words that mean "sitting near."[6] If the term's derivation is correct, it suggests disciples sitting near a master, learning techniques for achieving religious experience. In any case, primary to the Upanishads is the notion that with spiritual discipline and meditation, both priests and nonpriests can experience the spiritual reality that underlies all seemingly separate realities. Unlike much of the earlier Vedic material, which dictates that only hereditary priests can be religious masters, the Upanishads tell us that a person who has the necessary experience can be a spiritual master. The Upanishads thus possibly continue the religious interest of the forest dwellers of the Aranyakas.

The Upanishads are written primarily in dialogue form, appearing both as prose and as poetry. Because they were produced over many hundreds of years, dating them is not easy. It is generally thought that those in prose form (such as the Chandogya, Brihadaranyaka, Taittiriya, and Kena Upanishads) may be earlier works than those in poetic form (such as the Katha and Mandukya Upanishads). About a dozen Upanishads are especially popular.

The most important notions in the Upanishads are *Brahman, Atman, maya, karma, samsara,* and *moksha.*[7] These primary concepts, which would become essential notions in much later Hindu spirituality, continue to be taught today.

Brahman and Atman The term **Brahman** originally stood for the cosmic power present in the Vedic sacrifice and chants, over which the priest had control. (The Sanskrit word *Brahman* is neuter and comes from a stem meaning "to be great.") In the Upanishads the word *Brahman* was expanded to mean a divine reality at the heart of things. One of the most famous dialogues appears in the Chandogya Upanishad. It involves a priestly father and his son in discussion. The young man, Shvetaketu, has been away, studying with a specialist for many years. He has memorized chants and learned priestly rituals. The young man's father questions him about what he has learned, and the son proudly recites the formulas he knows. The father then asks him what he knows about Brahman, the Supreme Spirit; but

Many Hindu concepts are complex, and serious Hindus often seek guidance from a priest as they try to improve their practice and understanding.

the young man knows nothing. Trying to assist the son's understanding, the father asks his son to fill a glass with water, put salt in it, and leave it overnight. The next day he asks his son to find the salt:

> "Bring me the salt you put into the water last night."
> Shvetaketu looked into the water, but could not find it, for it had dissolved.
> His father then said: "Taste the water from this side. How is it?"
> "It is salt [salty]."
> "Taste it from the middle. How is it?"
> "It is salt."
> "Taste it from that side. How is it?"
> "It is salt."
> "Look for the salt again and come again to me."
> The son did so, saying: "I cannot see the salt. I only see water."
> The father then said: "In the same way, O my son, you cannot see the Spirit. But in truth he is here.
> "An invisible and subtle essence is the Spirit of the whole universe. That is Reality. That is Truth. Thou art That."[8]

The Upanishads insist that Brahman is something that can be known—not simply believed in. The Shvetasvatara Upanishad, for example, says "I *know* that Spirit whose infinity is in all, who is ever one beyond time."[9] Brahman, the Divine Spirit, is so real that it may be known directly, and, as the boy Shvetaketu learned, knowledge of it can be as immediate as tasting the flavor of salt.

What is it to know Brahman? The Upanishads insist that it cannot be put fully into words, but they give hints. Brahman is the lived experience that all things are in some way holy because they come from the same sacred source. It is also the experience that all things are in some way ultimately one. This is an experience that seems to defy common sense, since the world appears to be divided into many objects and types of reality. Nevertheless,

when we consider reality more deeply, we recognize many unities: a piece of wood can become a boat or a house or fire or ash; water can turn into a cloud or a plant. So, on closer inspection, all apparent separations and divisions blur. To experience Brahman is to know, firsthand, that every apparently individual reality in the world is actually a wave of the same sacred ocean of energy. Brahman, according to the Upanishads, "is the sun, the moon, and the stars. He is the fire, the waters, and the wind."[10] Brahman is "the God who appears in forms infinite."[11]

Brahman is also referred to by three words that help describe its nature as perceived by the knower: Brahman is *sat*, reality itself; *chit*, pure consciousness; and *ananda*, bliss. And although Brahman can be experienced within our everyday world of time and space, those who speak of their experience say that Brahman is ultimately beyond time and beyond space. Thus the Upanishads often add that experiencing the timelessness of Brahman can bring an end to everyday suffering and to the fear of death.

The notion of **Atman** is related to Brahman and is an equally important term in the Upanishads. Although Atman is sometimes translated as "self" or "soul," the notion of Atman in the Upanishads is different from the notion of an individual soul. Perhaps the term *Atman* would be better translated as "deepest self." In Hindu belief, each person has an individual soul (*jiva*), and the individual soul confers uniqueness and personality. But Hinduism asks this question: At the very deepest level, what really am I? I am clearly not just my body—my height and weight and hair color, all of which are subject to alteration. But am I then my tastes, thoughts, and memories? Or is there more? Is there not in me a reality more fundamental than those changing individual characteristics? According to the Upanishads, at the deepest level of what I am is a divine reality, a divine spirit that everything shares. The Upanishads teach that it is true to say that I am God, because, for the person who understands reality at the deepest level, everything is God. Atman, when experienced fully, is identical with Brahman. Atman, like Brahman, is divine, holy, and timeless. Often the term *Brahman* refers to the experience of the sacred within nature and the external universe, while *Atman* refers to the experience of the sacred within oneself. However, the same divine nature simply has two names, and both terms may be used interchangeably.

Maya The Upanishads speak of the everyday world as **maya,** which is usually translated as "illusion."[12] This translation, though, needs explanation. Its root suggests illusion and mystery (as in "magic"), but it also has a more positive, objective connotation that suggests the original stuff of which something is made (as in "material"). The word *maya* thus contains both meanings: "magic" and "matter." To say that all reality is "maya" is not to say that the world does not exist or that the world is a totally false perception. The world is real, but not in quite the way most people assume. For one thing, human beings view the world as consisting of

individual things and people, all separate. In reality, the world is one basic holy reality that takes on many different forms. The Shvetasvatara Upanishad advises us to "know therefore that nature is Maya, but that God is the ruler of Maya; and that all beings in our universe are parts of his infinite splendour."[13]

People also assume that the world is solid and permanent. In reality, the outside world is more like the inner world of thoughts and dreams—it shifts and changes, just as thoughts and dreams do. People assume that time is real, that it advances at a regular rate, and that past, present, and future are distinct divisions. In reality, time is relative.

The model of reality set forth by the Upanishads is less like a machine made of individual moving parts; it is more like a great consciousness. This view also produces a sense of amazement at the forms and shifts that the universe takes—it is all, ultimately, unexplainable magic.

As I look out at reality from my own individual standpoint, I may see the end of my life as the end of everything. The Upanishads see things differently. First, individuals are not as individual as they suppose. Rather, they are all manifestations of the Divine Spirit, which does not end when the individual dies. They are also the continuation of earlier forms of life that have simply taken new forms. Hinduism, from about 500 BCE, generally adopted the belief that everything living has its own life force and that every life force, when it loses one form, is reborn into another. This process is known as reincarnation.

Karma The general Hindu notion of rebirth assumes that human beings have at one or another time existed as a "lower" form, such as animal, insect, and possibly even plant. Hinduism also recognizes grades of human life, from limited and painful to exceptionally pleasant and free. Human beings are also capable of achieving "higher" forms of life, such as superhuman beings and demigods. Rebirth can move in either direction, and the human stage is a dangerous one because each human being must make dramatic choices about how to live. If a human being does not live properly, he or she may be reborn into a very poor or cruel human family—or possibly in a form of life that may be even more limited and difficult, such as a dog, a pig, or an ant. A human being can also make a spectacular leap upward beyond the human level to a superhuman existence or even beyond, to complete freedom.

What determines the direction of one's rebirth is **karma.** The word comes from a root that means "to do" and implies the notion of moral consequences that are carried along with every act. Karma is the moral law of cause and effect, and belief in karma is a belief that every action has an automatic moral consequence. One well-known saying expresses nicely the nature of karma: What goes around comes around. Karma does not work because it is the will of God or Brahman, but simply because karma is an essential part of the nature of things. It is the way things work. Good karma brings "higher" rebirth; bad karma brings rebirth in "lower," more painful forms. In a certain way, this belief allows for upward mobility, since human beings, by their

actions, have influence over their future births. Ultimate freedom comes when karma ceases to operate; rebirth, whether upward or downward on the scale, has entirely ended.

Some teachers say that karma is intrinsically neither good nor bad but only seems so to the person who experiences it. In this conception, karma is like gravity—it works like a force of nature. It is like rain, which can cause a plant to grow just as it can bring a picnic to its end. Karma helps explain why some people are born with great gifts and others are born with no advantages at all.

Samsara The term **samsara** refers to the wheel of life, the circle of constant rebirth, and it suggests strongly that the everyday world is full of change as well as struggle and suffering. The Hindu view of human life, because of its belief in reincarnation, is rather different from that commonly held in the West. Think of how often you hear someone say, You only live once. This view of life is not shared by Hindus, who believe an individual is constantly being reborn, having come from different earlier forms and going on to emerge in new forms in the future. Because our present human life is so short, we may think that we would like several lives in the future as well. But how many would each of us really like? Ten might sound reasonable, but a hundred? a thousand? ten thousand? a million? It's tiring just to think about all those lifetimes! And many of those forms would inevitably be unhappy ones. Sooner or later most of us would want to jump off the merry-go-round of life. We would want escape, release, liberation. This leads us to the next important concept of the Upanishads.

Moksha The term **moksha** means "freedom" or "liberation" and comes from a root that means "to be released." In the Upanishads, moksha is the ultimate human goal. It has various connotations. Moksha certainly includes the notion of getting beyond egotistic responses, such as resentment and anger, which limit the individual. Furthermore, unlike the modern ideal of seeking complete freedom to satisfy one's individual desires, moksha implies liberation even from the limitations of being an individual—from being born a particular person at a specific time to a unique pair of parents—a person with distinct physical characteristics, emotions, desires, and memories. One can take action to overcome these restrictions (for example, by leaving home), which is sometimes a means of attaining moksha, but one can also accept the limitations even while living with them, thereby gaining inner peace and mental freedom.

As one becomes freer, one looks at life less from a selfish and egotistic point of view and more from a perspective that embraces the whole. The unity and sacredness that everything shares become a part of everyday experience. Kindness to all—to animals as well as to people—is one natural result of this insight, and kind actions also generate helpful karma. Detaching oneself from pleasure or pain is another practice that leads to freedom from egotism.

Ultimately, with enough insight and ascetic practice, the individual can go entirely beyond the limited self to know the sacred reality that everything shares. When insight and kindness are perfect, at last the pain of rebirth ends; the limitations of individuality are gone, and only Brahman remains. The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad explains complete freedom: "when all has become Spirit, one's own Self, how and whom could one see?"[14]

The Upanishads, though sometimes obscure, are devoted to promoting an insight into ultimate oneness. But the Upanishads do not give detailed instructions for achieving that kind of insight or for living spiritually in the everyday world. Such guidance would have to be developed by later Hindu commentators and practitioners.

The Hinduism that guides people's lives today is a practical mixture of elements. Some of these came from the early stages of religious practice, which we've already discussed, and others developed later. For the ordinary layperson, Hindu practice usually involves devotion to at least one deity. It recommends finding one's proper work and then doing it unselfishly. Hindu practice may also include the study of religious texts, meditation, and other specifically religious disciplines. The following section will deal with the elements of this practical synthesis, much of which can be found in the short classic, the Bhagavad Gita.

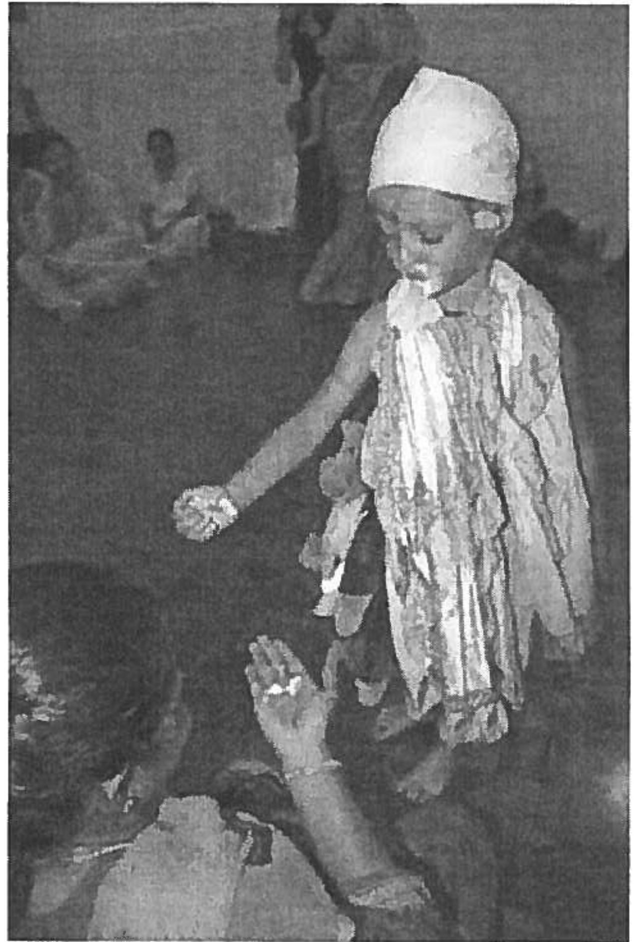
The **Bhagavad Gita** ("divine song" or "song of the Divine One") is part of a very long epic poem called the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata, written some time between 400 BCE and 400 CE, tells how the sons of Pandu (Pandavas) conquered their cousins, the Kauravas, with the help of the god Krishna. The Bhagavad Gita was inserted at some time into this poem but has its own identity and is often printed separately from the Mahabharata. The Bhagavad Gita, shaped by the priestly class between 200 BCE and 200 CE, has become a spiritual classic. It recalls themes from the Upanishads, but it also tries to strike a balance between mysticism and the practical needs of everyday life. Action and adherence to duty are approved and can even be thought of as a spiritual path. As the Bhagavad Gita says, "the wise see knowledge and action as one."[15]

The Bhagavad Gita, like the Upanishads, is written in dialogue form. It occurs almost entirely between two figures: a prince, Arjuna, and his charioteer and advisor, Krishna. Arjuna's royal power is threatened by his hundred cousins, called Kauravas, and he must decide whether to fight with his brothers against them to restore his throne or to accept their rule. He is torn. On the one hand, he knows that his rule is correct, but on the other, he wants to avoid violence. That his enemies are close family members makes the

matter even harder. Depressed, Arjuna "[throws] aside his arrows and his bow in the midst of the battlefield. He [sits] down on the seat of the chariot, and his heart [is] overcome with sorrow."[16] In response, Krishna, who later reveals that he is a form of the god Vishnu, explains the need for action. "Now you shall hear how a man may become perfect, if he devotes himself to the work which is natural to him. A man shall reach perfection if he does his duty as an act of worship to the Lord."[17] This means that Arjuna must follow not merely his own desires—neither his fears nor his hope for reward—but he must simply do what is right.

Contrary to the teaching of nonviolence, which was at the time of this epic's creation growing strong in India in such religious traditions as Buddhism and Jainism, Krishna advises Arjuna to fight to protect his throne and the structure of society—to fight is his duty. At a moment of great revelation, Krishna shows Arjuna that a divine reality is at work within everything in the universe—in living and also in dying. Krishna even says that for the warrior "there is nothing nobler than a righteous war.[18]

The recommendation that Arjuna should fight has posed a moral problem for some followers of Hinduism. Mohandas Gandhi is typical of those who have solved this problem by saying that the Bhagavad Gita is religious allegory. Gandhi held that the call to arms is not about real war but rather a call to fight against dangerous moral and psychological forces, such as ignorance, selfishness, and anger. This interpretation, though it seems to go against the literal intent of the text, has been influential.



Krishna has long been one of Hinduism's most venerated divinities. Here, a temple's celebration of Krishna's birthday includes a child dressed as Krishna, sharing fresh butter that he has taken from milkmaids.

When Krishna urges Arjuna to do what his position as a warrior demands, he is reinforcing the **caste** system (a division of society into social classes that are created by birth or occupation). The caste system, the prevalent social system of Hinduism, had already been mentioned in the Rig Veda: "When they divided Purusha [the first person, a superbeing], in how many different portions did they arrange him? What became of his mouth, what of his two arms? What were his two thighs and his two feet called? His mouth became the brahman [priest]; his two arms were made into the rajanya [warrior-noble]; his two thighs the vaishyas [merchants]; from his two feet the shudra [peasant] was born."[19]

The caste system receives further religious approval in the Bhagavad Gita, which recognizes that there are different types of people and that their ways to perfection will differ, depending on their personality types and roles in society.[20] For example, active people will perfect themselves through the unselfishness of their work, and intellectual people will perfect themselves through teaching and study.

Traditionally, the caste system was based on more than one's type of work, and in modern times it does not always indicate the type of work a person does. Castes (as the term is commonly used) are really social classes (*varna*), which are subdivided into hundreds of subcastes.[21] The caste system dissuades members of different castes, and often subcastes, from intermarrying. It remains strongest in the countryside and in more conservative southern India, but it is weakening in the cities, where people regularly eat together in restaurants and travel together on buses and trains. Although an individual cannot change the caste into which she or he is born, it is believed that a good life in one's present caste will guarantee rebirth in a higher caste or better circumstances. Thus, from the perspective of Hinduism, upward social mobility is possible—even if it takes more than one lifetime to accomplish!

Members of society are divided into five main social classes:

1. The priest **(brahmin)**[22] traditionally performs Vedic rituals and acts as a counselor.
2. The warrior-noble (*kshatriya*) has the role of protecting society. This is the traditional caste of the aristocracy.
3. The merchant (*vaishya*) class includes landowners, moneylenders, and sometimes artisans. Males of the three upper castes (brahmin, kshatriya, and vaishya) receive a sacred cord during a ceremony in their youth and afterward are called "twice-born."
4. The peasant (*shudra*) does manual labor and is expected to serve the higher castes. The origin of this caste probably goes back to the Aryan subjection of native people, who were forced to do the work of servants. The peasant is called "once-born."
5. The untouchable (*dalit*) traditionally does the dirtiest work—cleaning toilets, sweeping streets, collecting animal carcasses, and tanning animal hides. This caste's low status prompted the Indian reformer Mohandas Gandhi to promote another name for the class—*Harijan* ("children of God")—and he urged their inclusion in regular society.[23] Present-day India has laws and rules to help overcome discrimination against untouchables.

Just as the individual's path to "correct action" is suggested by caste and subcaste, traditional Hinduism holds that each stage of life also has its proper way of being lived. Every culture recognizes specific life stages through which each individual passes. In modern secular life the stages seem to be childhood, adolescence, the career years, and retirement (these stages are strongly colored

by employment—or the lack of it). But in India the notion of life stages is more religious. The conception was shaped by the ancient ideal of the development of the upper-caste male, particularly of the priestly caste:

1. Student (*brahmacharin*): This first stage is spent laying a religious foundation for life. The young person, between the ages of 8 and 20, studies religious works. Celibacy is a necessary part of the training.
2. Householder (*grihastha*): Marriage (traditionally, arranged by the parents) occurs at about age 20, and the person fulfills the demands of society by raising children.
3. Retiree (*vanaprastha*): When grandchildren arrive, the individual may retire somewhat from ordinary life to spend time once again on religious matters. The ancient ideal was to go into the forest to live, possibly with one's wife, away from society. In reality, retirees often continue to live with their children and with other relatives in an extended-family setting, but they may eat separately from the rest of the family and spend time on religious pursuits with friends.

Hindus see life in stages. Here a priest, as part of a wedding ceremony, blesses the groom to help him successfully enter a new stage: starting and sustaining a new family. A statue of Ganesha is in the foreground.

4. Renunciate **(sannyasin):** To enter this last stage is considered to be appropriate only after retirement. It is not expected of everyone but is simply an option. If one wishes to live entirely free from society, one is permitted to leave home. For such a person, the entire world is now his home. A man may leave his wife, although he must ensure that she will be supported. Celibacy is expected, and the sign of this devout, celibate state is an orange robe. The sannyasin, considered to be outside the caste system, is free to wander, begging his food along the way, and many temples have endowments to feed such pilgrims. The sannyasin may remain a constant traveler, making pilgrimage to the sacred sites of India, or he may settle in an **ashram** (religious community) or even live in a cave. The purpose of this kind of life is to hasten mystical insight, to free oneself of all attachments, to end rebirth, and to attain moksha.

Although the Hindu spiritual ideal—such as the lifestyle of the sannyasin—is generally world-denying, Hinduism also exhibits a respect for more worldly goals. In order of increasing value these goals are pleasure (*kama*), economic security and power (*artha*), and social and religious duty (*dharma*). These life goals, which may be pursued simultaneously, are acceptable and even virtuous, as long as they are tempered by moderation and social regulation. Considered highest of the goals, however, is moksha—complete freedom.

Although the Bhagavad Gita endorses quiet contemplation, it also recommends active spiritual paths. It endorses not only meditation but also the work demanded by one's caste and individual place in society. The various types of **yoga** are methods that can be used to help people live spiritually. The word *yoga* means "union" and is related to the English words *join* and *yoke.* A yoga is a way for people to perfect their union with the divine, and because the yogas suggest roads to perfection, they are also called *margas* ("paths"). There is a tolerant recognition in Hinduism that different sorts of people need different spiritual paths, and an individual's caste and personality type will help determine the appropriate yoga to practice.

Jnana Yoga ("Knowledge Yoga") This type of yoga brings insight into one's divine nature by studying the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita and by learning from teachers who have attained insight. **Jnana yoga** is particularly appropriate for priests and intellectuals.

This yoga was highly refined by a school of philosophy that is still quite vital, the school of Vedanta ("Veda end").[24] The term refers to the

Upanishads—which come at the end of the Vedas—and to the fact that the Vedanta school has used the ideas of the Upanishads as its primary inspiration.

The greatest teacher of Vedanta, Shankara (c. 788–820), argued that everything is ultimately one—all is Brahman.[25] According to Shankara, although our ordinary experience leads us to see things as being separate and different, this perception is mistaken. To show that sense perception can be wrong, Shankara used the example of a person who at dusk is frightened by a coil of rope—the observer mistakenly perceives the rope to be a snake. In the same way, Shankara would say, a person who perceives things as being ultimately separate and different from Brahman is mistaken. In the *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*, attributed to Shankara, the author likens Brahman to gold, which can take many shapes. Brahman "is that one Reality which appears to our ignorance as a manifold universe of names and forms and changes. Like the gold of which many ornaments are made, it remains in itself unchanged. Such is Brahman, and 'That art Thou.' Meditate upon this truth."[26] Similarly, the waves of the ocean and the drops of water in the waves may be considered separate entities; but the larger truth is that they are all just the same ocean in varied, changing forms.

Shankara thought that spiritual liberation was achieved when the individual personally came to understand the unity of all things. Shankara so emphasized **monism**—the oneness of everything—that his branch of the Vedanta school is called *Advaita*, which, literally translated, means "not-two-ness" (*a-dvai-ta*). The significance of the term is very subtle. If I say that all reality is "one," some "other" reality could also exist—something in contrast to the one. But the term *not-two* makes clear that ultimately there is no other reality.

For Shankara, therefore, any devotion to a god or goddess who is thought to be different from the worshiper is also mistaken. This rejection of devotion, however, posed a great problem for those types of Hinduism that emphasized it. As a result, later thinkers of the Vedanta school, such as Ramanuja (d. 1137) and Madhva (active 1240), qualified or denied ultimate monism. They emphasized passages in the Upanishads that seem to speak of Brahman as being separate in some way from the world. They could thereby create systems that made room for religious devotion.

Karma Yoga ("Action Yoga") This type of yoga proposes that all useful work, if done unselfishly, can be a way to perfection. (The word *karma* here is used in its basic sense of "activity.") Much of what we ordinarily do is motivated by money or pleasure or praise, but deeds performed without a desire for reward are the heart of **karma yoga**. As the Bhagavad Gita says, "Desire for the fruits of work must never be your motive in working."[27]

Over the past three decades, meditation has become popular in the Western world. From students in elementary schools to executives in corporate offices, all kinds of people take time out to sit quietly, empty the mind, and let stress float away.

Meditation in Eastern religious traditions, however, is more complex, at least theoretically. The Yoga Sutras, often attributed to the grammarian Patanjali,[28] list eight steps necessary for perfection of meditation:

- Self-control (*yama*) is the fundamental reorientation of the personality away from selfishness. It involves practicing **ahimsa** (not hurting living beings), exhibiting sexual restraint, shunning greed, refusing to steal, and embracing truthfulness.
- Observance (*niyama*) is the regular practice of the five preceding virtuous pursuits.
- Posture (*asana*) is an integral aspect of meditation, particularly the "lotus posture" (*padmasana*), in which the person meditating is seated with the legs crossed, each foot touching the opposite leg.
- Breath control (*pranayama*) involves deep, regular breathing, holding the breath, and breathing in various rhythms.
- Restraint (*pratyahara*) helps the meditator tune out external distractions.
- Steadying of the mind (*dharana*) teaches the meditator to focus on only one object in order to empty the mind of everything else.
- Meditation (**dhyana**) occurs when the mind is focused only on the object of concentration.
- **Samadhi** is the mental state achieved by deep meditation, in which the individual loses the sense of being separate from the rest of the universe.[29]

Bhakti Yoga ("Devotion Yoga") Most of us have at one time or another fallen in love, and we know that there is something purifying about the experience, because it forces us to look outward, beyond ourselves, to another object of affection. Religions utilize this purifying power when they promote devotion to a god or saint—who is often made visible in a painting or statue. Hinduism, because of its belief in multiple gods, offers rich possibilities for devotion. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna tells Arjuna, "Regard me as your dearest loved one. Know me to be your only refuge."[30]

Bhakti yoga can involve various expressions of devotion—most commonly chants, songs, food offerings, and the anointing of statues. Bhakti yoga can extend also to acts of devotion shown to one's **guru** (spiritual teacher), to one's parents, and to one's spouse. The gods worshiped in bhakti yoga will be described later.

Raja Yoga ("Royal Yoga") This type of yoga promotes meditation. The term **raja yoga** does not appear in the Bhagavad Gita but was introduced later to refer to the steps of meditation described in the box "Hindu Meditation: More Than Emptying the Mind." Nonetheless, chapter 6 of the Bhagavad Gita describes basic meditation—sitting quietly, turning inward, and calming the mind. Done for short periods of time on a regular basis, meditation lowers stress and brings a sense of peace; done for longer periods of time, it can induce new states of consciousness.

There are many types of meditation. Some involve emptying the mind of thought; others involve focusing on some physical or mental object.

Meditation can be done with one's eyes closed or open or focused on a point a short distance in front of the face. A word or brief phrase, called a **mantra,** is often recited with each breath to help clear the mind of thought. (The short mantra *Om*—which is sometimes called the sound of creation—is frequently used.) Meditation can be done in silence or to gentle music; it can also be done while gazing at a candle, at the moon, or at moving water. Some advanced types of meditation involve techniques taken from additional yogas. They may have the meditator create symbolic mental images (frequently of a deity), contemplate a sacred diagram (called a *yantra*), or repeat complicated sacred phrases. The many techniques of meditation are called *sadhanas* ("practices").

In recent years, hatha yoga has become a part of daily life for millions of people across the planet.

Hatha Yoga ("Force Yoga") When most of us in the West think of yoga, we think of the physical exercises of **hatha yoga.** These exercises, which were originally developed to help make long periods of meditation easier, mostly involve stretching and balancing. Breathing exercises are usually considered a part of hatha yoga.

There are many schools of hatha yoga, often named after their founders. Several have gained great popularity. Among them, Iyengar yoga focuses on correct technique and sequence in doing a large number of traditional breathing exercises and yoga postures. Bikram yoga involves a series of twenty-six hatha yoga exercises and two breathing exercises in a heated room (the heat is meant to make the muscles limber and to assist circulation). Ashtanga yoga, named after teachings of the Yoga Sutras, is a demanding series of six sequences of highly athletic yogic postures.

Kundalini Yoga Combining elements of both raja yoga and hatha yoga, **Kundalini yoga** teaches that there are seven psychic centers, called *chakras* ("wheels"), that exist along the spinal column, one above the other. Meditation and physical exercises (as described below) help the meditator lift spiritual energy—called *kundalini* and envisioned as a coiled serpent—from one center to the next. (Literally *kundalini* means "she who lies coiled.") Each chakra is like a gateway through which the kundalini passes, bringing increased insight and joy. When the kundalini reaches the topmost and seventh center of energy at the crown of the head, the practitioner experiences profound bliss. The topmost center of energy (*sahasrara*) appears in imagery as a lotus flower, and reaching it is compared to the opening of a lotus.

The chakras are centers through which energy rises from the base of the spine to the crown of the head.

In addition to these six yogas are others. In fact, any systematic set of techniques that leads to greater spirituality can be considered a yoga.

Indians have been primarily a rural, agricultural people. This is changing, but even today most of the population still lives outside cities. They live, as they have for centuries, in more than a half million villages. Men in the villages spend most of their waking hours working as merchants, craftsmen, and farmers, while women marry when young and spend most of their time preparing food, running their households, and caring for their children. The duties of everyday life leave little time to pursue more philosophical paths.

For the majority of Hindus, then, some of the spiritual disciplines just mentioned—study, meditation, and special physical exercises—have had limited appeal. Instead, the great majority of Hindus have followed the path of devotion **(bhakti)** to a god or gods. Hindus worship their gods in village temples and at home altars. Most worship daily, and there are special days dedicated to individual gods. **Puja,** devotional ritual commonly performed at an altar, involves the offering of flowers, food, fire, and incense to images of a god or gods, as well as the occasional singing of hymns.

The earliest layer of devotional Hinduism, probably traceable to the Harappa culture, seems to have involved the anointing of phallic stones, devotion to female divinities of fertility, and the worship of nature spirits. This type of religious devotion continues in India today.

The Vedic religion introduced its own gods as additional objects of worship. Some of these, such as Indra and Agni, were once highly popular, while others, such as Dyaüs Pitr, lost devotees and moved to the background quite early. In this devotional pattern we can see that a certain fluctuation of interest is natural; throughout history, in all religious devotion, interest in some gods rises and interest in others fades away.

Certain gods and goddesses seem to have emerged separately, not as a part of the Vedic pantheon—of these Krishna is one of the best known. Some animal forms became deified, and all deities were eventually incorporated loosely into what is today a fairly large pantheon.

Although Hinduism is often described as a religion that promotes a belief in many gods, in reality individuals tend to focus their devotion on only one of the gods. Sometimes that god is considered to be the greatest of all divine manifestations. There are also strong tendencies in Hinduism toward both monotheism and even monism, because all gods—and everything else as well—are considered, ultimately, to be expressions of a single divine reality. Devotion to an individual god or goddess is often justified by saying that although the divine is ultimately formless, human beings must worship the divine through its physical manifestations. This belief gives rise to much painting, sculpture, music, and ceremony in honor of many gods, who are described in the following sections (Table 3.1).

This Hindu temple roofline includes just a few of the many deities in the Hindu pantheon.

Three gods have been particularly important in the devotional and artistic life of Hinduism. Although of differing origins, they have sometimes been linked together—particularly in philosophy and art, where they represent the three forces of creation, preservation, and destruction. The three gods are Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. When linked together, they are often called the **Trimurti,** which means "triple form."

Brahma represents the creative force that made the universe. He is considered the personal aspect of Brahman and has been thought of as the special patron of the priestly class, the brahmins. Brahma is commonly

TABLE 3.1

Brahma	god of creation
Vishnu	god of preservation
Shiva	god of destruction and re-creation
Devi	goddess, Divine Mother
Durga	goddess of perseverance
Lakshmi	goddess of success
Kali	goddess of destruction and re-creation
Saraswati	goddess of music and culture
Krishna	loving manifestation of Vishnu
Rama	royal manifestation of Vishnu
Ganesha	elephant-headed son of Shiva, prayed to for success

depicted as an ancient, thoughtful king sitting on a throne. He has four faces, each looking in one of the four directions, and eight arms, each holding symbols of power. His companion animal is a white goose.

In India, worship of Brahma as a separate deity has declined over the past two hundred years, although he is still frequently represented in art, where he is pictured beside Vishnu or Shiva. Perhaps this decline in interest resulted from the popular view of Brahma in India as grandfatherly, distant, and less powerful than either Vishnu or Shiva. (Ironically, however, devotion to Brahma remains quite alive in Thailand, where local Buddhist practice shows many influences from Hinduism. Statues of Brahma appear frequently in outdoor "spirit houses," where food and flowers—and sometimes dance—are offered to him for good luck and protection.)

Vishnu represents the force of preservation in the universe. In the Vedas he is a god associated with the sun, although his role there appears to be small. Thought of as light and warmth that destroys darkness, Vishnu grew in stature until finally becoming a major god of Hinduism. Today Vishnu (in various forms) is the most important object of devotion in India, and about three quarters of all Hindus in India worship him or his manifestations. His followers are called Vaishnavites (or Vaishnavas).

In painting and sculpture, Vishnu is shown in many forms, though usually with a tall crown and a regal manner. Almost always he has four arms, which hold symbols of power. His companion animal is a great eaglelike bird, Garuda, on whom he flies through the universe.

Because Vishnu is associated with loving-kindness, it is believed that he can appear on earth at different times and in various physical forms to help those in need. Ten major incarnations (or **avatars**) of Vishnu are commonly listed, of which one is still to appear. Some previous incarnations were in animal form: a fish, a boar, and a tortoise. Another was Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha—an intriguing inclusion, which helped Hinduism partially reabsorb Indian Buddhism (see Chapter 4). The incarnation yet to come will be a savior figure on horseback who will judge the human race. Two incarnations of Vishnu are wildly popular—Rama and Krishna.

Rama may have been a historical figure who later took on mythic proportions. He appears in the great epic the Ramayana, whose stories have inspired dance as well as art. Rama and his wife, Sita, who are thought of as the ideal couple, are often portrayed together. One of the most commonly told stories concerns the abduction of Sita by Ravan (or Ravana), the demon king of Sri Lanka. Rama, a king, gains the help of Hanuman, leader of the monkeys. Hanuman helps Rama in killing Ravan and in locating and returning Sita. Perhaps because of his image as a helper, Hanuman is today an immensely popular god in his own right. In northern India, Rama is so revered that the term *Ram*, or *Rama*, is really a synonym for "God."

Krishna, another incarnation of Vishnu, may have begun as an object of fertility worship. He is depicted in several forms, which might indicate that he is a coalescence of traditions. In the long epic the Mahabharata, Krishna

appears as a mature and solemn god. In later devotional works, the Puranas ("legends"), he is younger; there he is friends with *gopis* (milkmaids who look after herds of cows), and he steals butter and plays the flute, expressing the playful aspect of the divine. In depictions of Krishna, his face and skin are often blue, the color of the sky and of heaven, indicating his true otherworldly nature. His closest milkmaid companion is Radha, with whom he is romantically linked in the Hindu mind.

The power of Shiva is often symbolized by the lingam and yoni, ancient forms that represent fertility.

Shiva, the third of the Trimurti and the god linked with destruction, is the most complicated of the gods, both in origin and in conception. Sitting in yogic meditation posture, the horned figure that is found on seals from the Harappa period may be an early form of Shiva, meaning that some aspects of the present-day god may extend back to pre-Vedic India. Another early form is apparently the Vedic god Rudra, a dangerous god of mountains and winds, whom worshipers probably began to call *shiva* ("lucky") in order to neutralize the fear he inspired. In later times, however, his link with destructiveness is often shown in pictures of Shiva appearing at cremation grounds above a human body that is dissolving in flames.

Shiva's connection with destruction may be hard for many non-Hindus to appreciate. In some religions, destruction is associated with divine punishment for wrongdoing. In Hinduism, however, destruction is considered to be simply another part of the divine energy at work in the world. Destruction is a type of recycling, the necessary loss of form, which occurs so that new forms may appear; and death is always thought of as leading to new life. We know that the seed disappears when the tree grows, and the flower must die to make the fruit. Thus Shiva is also associated with re-creation.

The destructive side of Shiva is portrayed in the bronze statues called *Shiva Nataraja* ("ruler of the dance"). As he dances, Shiva is surrounded by a ring of fire, which shows his ability to destroy and transform. His long yogi's hair flies in the air. He has four arms, which signify his many powers. In his upper right arm is a drum, symbolizing creation and the beginning of time; and in the upper left arm is a flame, symbolizing destruction. His lower left arm is pointing to his upraised foot, suggesting that everyone should join him in his dance and be as free as he is. His lower right arm is extended in blessing, which in a symbolic way says, Don't be afraid. He dances on a dwarf-demon, representing the ignorance

The elephant-headed god Ganesha, son of Shiva, is believed to help devotees overcome obstacles. People often pause before depictions of Ganesha to ask for success.

of all those who do not understand that death is part of the divine process. The art historian Heinrich Zimmer explains that "conquest of this demon lies in the attainment of true wisdom. Therein is release from the bondages of the world."[31]

The aspect of Shiva that brings re-creation is represented by sexually suggestive forms. (We should note here that in nonindustrial societies the bearing of children is crucial—both for the economic survival of the family and for the care of the parents in their old age. Parents pray to have many healthy children.) A frequent representation of Shiva is a columnar *lingam*—

often black, which adds to its mystery. It usually rests on a *yoni*—a circular base that is the female complement to the lingam. The lingam may be a large, natural stone worshiped outdoors; a metal object small enough to be worn around the neck; or a wooden piece of an appropriate size for worship in the home. Shaivites (devotees of Shiva) may pour various liquids, such as milk and rosewater, over the lingam in an act of devotion.

Those who have riches build temples for Thee; what shall I build? I am poor. My legs are the pillars; this body of mine is the temple.

—Basavaraja, in praise of Shiva[32]

Fertility is further emphasized by Shiva's companion animal Nandi, the bull, and by Ganesha, the elephant-headed son of Shiva, who has become a symbol of strength and abundance. Both are frequently found in temples dedicated to Shiva. Worship of Shiva is most common in Kashmir and southern India. We should note, too, that Shiva is closely linked with destruction only when he is viewed as part of the Trimurti. Among Shaivites, he is the sole God and is not exclusively related to destruction.

The three gods of the Trimurti are usually portrayed as masculine. But of all the great world religions, Hinduism, perhaps most strongly, recognizes the female aspects of divinity. This may come from a practical interest in fertility. Worship of female divinities, too, seems to have been a part of pre-Vedic religion, and elements of that early worship have lived on.

The Great Mother, also called **Devi** ("goddess"), is worshiped throughout India, but particularly in the northeast. She is portrayed in many forms and can be both loving and cruel. She is especially harsh to those who show themselves unworthy of her love. Devi is frequently worshiped with extreme human feeling. The worshiper may take on the emotions and even the clothing of a child or spouse of the Great Mother. The mystic Ramakrishna (1836–1886), priest at a temple near Kolkata (Calcutta), spoke of his special devotion to her. "I practised austerities for a long time. . . . My longing for the Divine Mother was so great that I would not eat or sleep. I would lie on the bare ground, placing my head on a lump of earth, and cry out loudly: 'Mother, Mother, why dost thou not come to me?' I did not know how the days and nights passed away. . . . When I reached the state of continuous ecstasy, I gave up all external forms of worship; I could no longer perform them. Then I prayed to my Divine Mother: 'Mother, who will now take care of me? I have no power to take care of myself.'"[33]

The Divine Feminine appears as several goddesses, of which the most popular are Durga and Kali. The goddess **Durga** ("awe-inspiring," "distant") is frequently represented with eight arms, full of implements used to destroy evil. Her face is serene, surrounded by a halo, and she wears a crown. She rides a tiger, which helps her conquer all dangerous obstacles.

Kali ("dark") is more fearsome still. She is often shown wearing a necklace of human skulls, and her fanged teeth drip with blood. Her many arms are full of weapons, which are thought to be dangerous to enemies but protective of her children. Kolkata ("Kali's stairs") is named after her temple in this city.

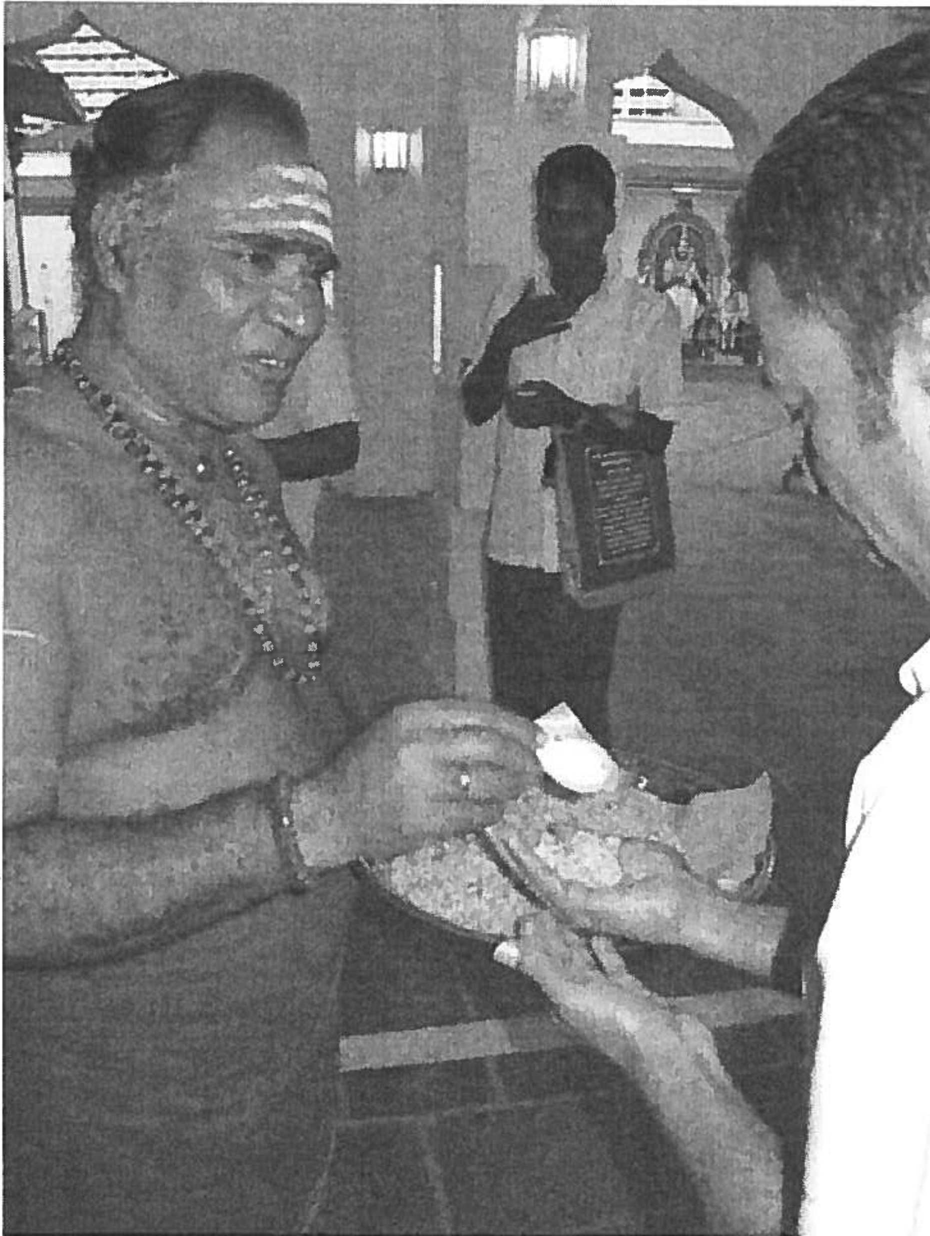
The goddess Durga overcomes the forces of evil.

The important role of the Divine Feminine is also seen in the female consorts who accompany many male deities. They are so much a part of the male god that the god cannot be active without them, and thus they are called *shaktis* ("energies"), because they allow the male gods to be effective in the human world.

The goddess Saraswati is the consort of Brahma and is far more popular than he. She is the patron of music, the arts, and culture and is often portrayed with a musical instrument in her hand. The shakti of Vishnu is the goddess Lakshmi, who is commonly dressed as a queen and sits on a lotus. As the consort of Vishnu, she dispenses good luck and protection. Shiva is portrayed with a variety of shaktis, the best known being Parvati and Uma. Sometimes Shiva is himself portrayed as androgynous: half of his body is masculine, while the other side shows a female breast. This androgyny represents the unity that underlies all the apparent opposites of reality—a unity also spoken of in the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita.

Divinities of nature are frequently female. The goddess Ganga, who animates the Ganges River, is a good example. Tree spirits, too, are considered female, and frequently it is women who offer them worship.

What we see, from all these deities, is that the female element is an important part of Hindu spirituality. Many deities are female, and women frequently worship a female deity. Women are not priests, but they actually orchestrate much of the religious ritual of the home. Women may also be gurus—spiritual advisors.



At the end of some temple services, worshipers may receive blessed food.

> As a man may be blindfolded, and led away, and left in a strange place; and as, having been so dealt with, he turns in every direction and cries out for someone to remove his bandages and show him the way home; and as one thus entreated may loose his bandages and give him comfort; and as thereupon he walks from village to village, asking his way as he goes; and as he arrives home at last—just so does a man who meets with an illumined teacher obtain true knowledge.
>
> —Chandogya Upanishad[34]

Because Hinduism is not organized in a hierarchical fashion, devotion to a guru (spiritual teacher) is a large and ancient component of Hindu spirituality. The etymology of the word *guru* is expressive: "the one who removes darkness." Anyone who seeks spiritual growth—no matter what his or her caste or station in life—may seek a guru, whom the individual can visit regularly to seek advice. Even gurus who have taken vows of silence can offer advice and insight to their disciples by writing on tablets or simply by looking at them with love.

Although the majority of gurus are men, female gurus are not uncommon. The guru need only be recognized as a person of holiness. Because a guru expects to be surrounded by students and devotees, he or she will frequently set up an ashram. Usually an ashram is a commune of people living in a single compound, separate from ordinary society, but it may also be located in a town and consist of various buildings owned and used by the devotees. Most gurus stay within their communities, but some travel, even outside India, to set up additional ashrams elsewhere. Frequently an aging guru will designate a successor from among his or her closest disciples and those specially trained.

It is common to touch and even kiss the feet of a guru—an act of reverence that is also performed at times for parents and grandparents. To an outsider, such an act may seem excessive. However, many Hindus believe that the guru is both a saint and a living embodiment of the divine. Behind this conception is the recognition that although divine reality exists within all human beings, most people manifest their divine nature inadequately, because their ignorance and self-centeredness restrict its expression. Such people are compared to glass windows that are so dusty that only a little light shines through. However, some people, over many lifetimes of effort, have reached a stage of such achievement that their ego has disappeared and their charity has grown immense. In these rare people the innate divine light shines brilliantly. This view explains why Hindus believe that simply being in the presence of the guru allows the disciple to benefit—like a plant in the sunshine—from the guru's spirituality.

This belief also explains the intriguing practice of *darshan* ("presence"). Because people of spiritual accomplishment are thought to radiate their divine nature, disciples find opportunities to be in their presence. Sometimes a holy person will sit or stand silently, allowing devotees to come forward, one by one, to look into the teacher's eyes and to experience the divine energy that shines out.[35]

Hinduism is distinctive among world religions for its kindness to animals. A devout Hindu does not kill or eat animals. Cows often wander along Indian streets, and cars and taxis take care to drive around them. Visitors to some Hindu temples may find monkeys and even mice well fed and

A renunciate carries water from the Ganges as part of his long pilgrimage. A sacred cow follows, perhaps hoping for food.

running free. Several extremely popular gods, such as Ganesha and Hanuman, have animal features; and gods such as Shiva and Vishnu are regularly portrayed in the company of their animal companions. A Shiva temple would often be considered incomplete without a statue of Nandi, the bull who is Shiva's vehicle.

This devotion to animals in Hinduism has several possible origins: an ancient deification of powerful animals, such as the elephant and tiger; the desire to neutralize dangerous or mischievous animals, such as the snake, rat, and monkey; and even a sense that human beings and animals have the same origin (a belief also common in native religions). Belief in reincarnation has undoubtedly also played a role. When they see animals and insects, many Hindus see prehuman beings who, in their spiritual evolution, will eventually become human themselves. This brings a feeling of closeness to nonhuman forms of animal life.

Among the animals, cows receive special veneration. This tradition may stem from pre-Vedic worship in the Indus River valley of the bull or cow, a symbol of fertility and economic value. In rural India, to have a cow is to have milk and butter, fuel (dried dung), and the warmth and comfort associated with household pets. With a cow, one is never utterly destitute. Affection for

Religious festivals are frequent and usually joyous. Some are clearly associated with the seasons, such as a springtime fertility festival and a post-monsoon festival. Others are related to events in a god's life, such as the site of his birth or places he traveled to. Some festivals are regional, and some are national.

Although India is hot during most of the year, winters can be cold, especially in the north. The spring is therefore welcomed with the celebration *Holi*. It is traditional for boys and girls to playfully throw colored water on each other (nowadays some even use squirt guns), thus evoking images of Krishna's exploits with the milkmaids.

After the monsoons of the summer months, the land is green, the air is cool, and there is a sense of peacefulness. The season has the feeling of a second spring and a new beginning. People often spend time repairing any damages the rains may have caused. Holidays at this time reenact the power of goodness to conquer evil forces. For example, *Divali*, recalling the return of Rama and Sita, is a time when people clean their houses and illuminate them outside with candles and lights. Ganesha and Lakshmi, who are both associated with good fortune, are particularly honored at this time.

Durga Puja, held in December and particularly popular in northeast India, celebrates the goddess Durga's ability to overcome dangerous powers. People dance in front of her statues in the street, and in Kolkata the festival ends with the immersion of her statues in the river.

Every twelve years Hindus celebrate the complete *Kumbh Mela* festival. It recalls a story of Vishnu and other deities churning nectar from a primeval ocean of milk. Celebrated by dance, plays, and joyous bathing in the Ganges, it draws millions of people and is considered the largest religious gathering in the world.

the cow may also arise from the strong thread of ancient devotion to the Divine Feminine—hinted at by the commonly used term *gau mata* ("mother cow").

This affection is hard for people outside India to understand. But when one sees an Indian cow, with its gentle face, ambling peacefully along a bustling Indian street, then one experiences clearly why the cow is a powerful symbol in India of all motherliness.

Indian thought loves multiplicity. "As many as the sands of the Ganges" is a description applied to a variety of subjects. One example of multiplicity is the Hindu recognition of immense numbers of gods. Realizing that each god or goddess may have several forms and may be accompanied by divine consorts and animal companions, we gain a dizzying sense of the limitlessness of devotional possibilities. In everyday life, every person is expected to have a religious practice involving at least one of these deities, but the exact form generally is not dictated, and virtually no form of devotion is rejected.

Pilgrimage is a common form of religious expression in Hinduism, as it is in many religions. India is dotted with sites that are held to be sacred to the most popular gods and goddesses, and devotees of a particular deity will often try to visit all the important sites associated with that deity. Pilgrimages can also involve listening to a famous guru's sermons and meditating with the guru's followers.

Colleagues from the University moved into a house on my street not long ago. Meera and Vijay are both from India and have two daughters. I invited them all over to my house to welcome them to the neighborhood. A little later I received an invitation from them for a weekend dinner party. I accepted happily.

I planned on taking some food and a beverage to the party, but I didn't know who the other guests would be or what their food preferences or restrictions might be. Would they be vegetarian Hindus, or would they be Muslims who didn't drink alcohol? Nonetheless, I decided to take over a bottle of wine, along with some appetizers (which, here, we call *pupus*). Let the guests decide.

The house is at a bend in the road. I walked down the street and then climbed the stairs to their red front door. The house was already full of guests. The men were mainly dressed in long-sleeved shirts and long pants. Most of the women wore saris. I could see that I was something of an interloper. But soon I was talking animatedly with a woman originally from Kolkata (Calcutta). The woman, Sobharani, was a university professor.

"I came eight years ago," she said, "and I love it here. But I miss my family, and I try to go back every two years. In Kolkata most of my family—including aunts, uncles, and cousins—lives in a large compound. It's very close and friendly. My father used to live there, too, but he moved down south to stay with my eldest brother."

"Does your father like it down south?" I asked.

When Sobharani started to answer, she began to cry.

"Well, I don't know," she said. "We all thought that he liked it there. But one noon he went out. He said that he was just going to buy lunch. But he didn't return in the afternoon. That evening he still hadn't returned, and my brother called the police. They looked for my father for several weeks but were unable to find him."

"Could he be in Benares?" I asked, sounding hopeful. "Should you look there? Maybe he decided to live the last stage of his life like a recluse, praying and meditating. Perhaps he didn't tell anyone because he didn't want to bother you, and he was afraid you'd object."

"Yes," she answered, "sometimes I've thought the same. In fact, I've already gotten my plane reservation for India. I want to go back and start looking."

"Where will you search in Benares?" I asked.

"I'll look in all those old hospices beside the river. Then I'll start looking outside, along the ghats. I'll go to the police, too. But my father might have gone to the mountains alone, or he might be staying at an ashram far away. In that case, I don't know what I'll do. I'll ask and leave messages, but I might just have to accept my fate. I still don't understand. My father and I were so close. I miss him terribly. Why didn't he tell me?"

Given Hinduism's tendency toward multiplicity, it is not surprising that Hindu temples, particularly in southern India, are often covered with statues, many with multiple faces and arms. The concept of multiplicity has a purpose. To appreciate this, think of a wheel that begins to turn. At first, each spoke of the wheel is visible, but as the wheel turns more quickly, the spokes disappear and dissolve into a unity. The profusion of images in Hindu art can be similarly hypnotic, with the experience of multiplicity frequently leading to an overarching sense of unity. Profusion thus fits in well with the mystical orientation common in Hinduism.

Another characteristic of Hindu artistic sensibility is symbolism. One of the clearest examples is the depiction in painting and sculpture of figures with multiple arms and faces, which are symbolic representations of power and wisdom. Specific symbols are associated with individual deities and allow them to be identified. Krishna, for example, is recognized by his flute.

Hindu painting can sometimes be disappointing, such as the rather garish devotional art sold at temple gates. Many fine paintings of the past have undoubtedly vanished because of the fragility of the paper and cloth on which they were done. The murals that remain, however, demonstrate the heights that Hindu devotional painting has sometimes attained; and some yantras—geometrical paintings used in meditation—are unforgettable.

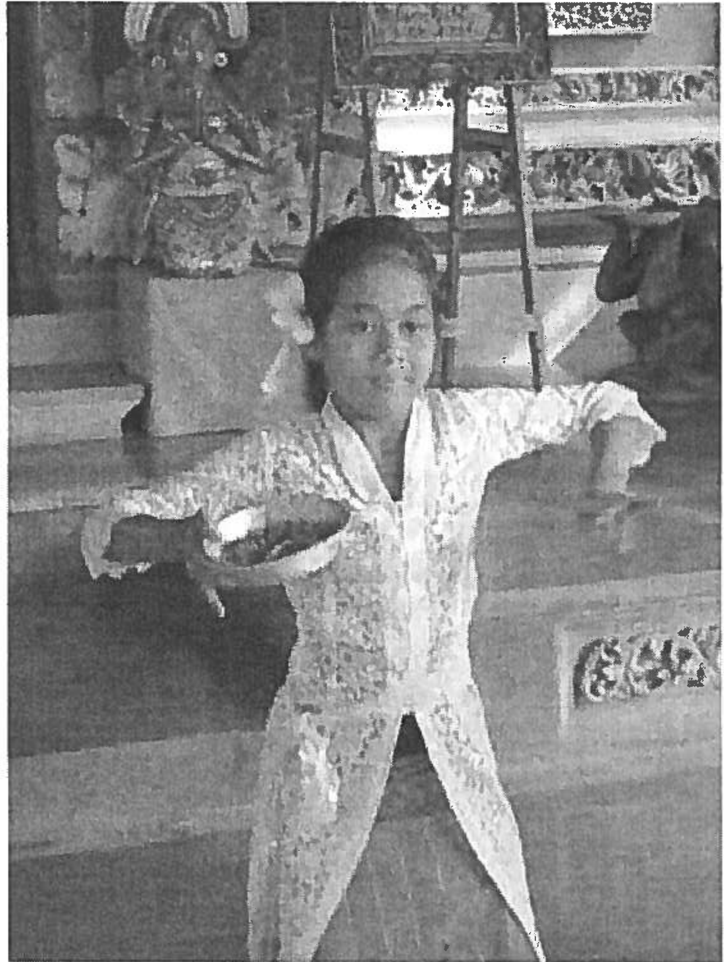
Hindu sculpture, however, far outshines Hindu painting. Fine pieces of sturdy stone and metal are on display in India and in museums around the world. Metal sculpture advanced quite early. The finest generic example of Hindu sculpture is Shiva in his guise as "ruler of the dance" (Nataraja)—an image that was introduced in southern India more than a thousand years ago but which is still produced today. For many, this sculpture represents the perfection of Hindu art, combining visual beauty with a symbolic meaning that intensifies the visual power.

The power of stone sculpture is often quite sensuous. Given the world-denying aspect of some Hindu thought, one might expect that the great stone sculpture of Hinduism would be ascetic—perhaps elongated and otherworldly. The opposite is true, however. Some of the best-known examples of stone sculpture are the figures of sensuous men and women, enjoying life and each other, on the temples of Khajuraho in central India. This sort of sculpture was influenced by Tantrism, the antipuritanical movement that teaches that everything in the world, including sex, can be used to attain higher states of consciousness.

Popular Hinduism has made use of hymns to many gods as expressions of bhakti yoga. Their regular rhythm and repetition help produce a state of altered consciousness in the worshiper, bringing a sense of selflessness and union with the divine. Instrumental music—especially involving drums and the harmonium, a hand-pumped reed organ—has also been an integral part of religious celebrations for centuries.

Classical Indian instrumental music is less obviously religious, yet much of it has an undeniable mystical quality. It makes use of *ragas*, elements of Indian music that blend features of both scales and melodies. Frequently these ragas are played and musically developed over deep tones that are played as a drone. (The *sitar*, the best-known Indian stringed instrument, has drone strings on its side.) The drone suggests the underlying timeless world of Brahman, against which changing melodies—suggestions of the world of time—move. Musical pieces often begin quite tentatively, then gradually speed up to a very quick pace, and suddenly stop, bringing to the listener and players an experience of release and peace.

Indian classical dance is more obviously tied to religion. It interprets stories derived from the tales of the gods, such as Krishna and Rama. Much of it also originated as a part of religious ceremony, performed at religious festivals and in or near temples. Dance is meant to produce delicate states of feeling, some of which are thought to assist contact with particular gods.



Hindu worship often includes dance. Here we see a dancer in front of a small Hindu temple in Bali.

India, as we have seen, is isolated from other lands by mountains and ocean. This has meant that its rural culture and ancient polytheism could develop undisturbed for centuries. But invasions did occur, inevitably bringing new beliefs and values. Many of these new elements were adopted, but others were fought.

One early invasion was only partially successful. Alexander the Great (d. 323 BCE) brought his army from Greece and reached the Indus River, where he talked with sannyasins about religion and philosophy. He had hoped to conquer India and then reach China, too; but his men, sick and discouraged, forced him to turn back, and he died in Babylon on the way home. Had Alexander been able to fulfill his plans, his influence in India would have been immense. Despite his failed plans for conquest, forms of Greek government and art, brought by the Greek invaders, profoundly influenced northwest India for centuries.

In the past millennium, two additional waves of influence washed across India: Islam and the British. Islam first came into India from Afghanistan, and a sultanate was set up in Delhi in 1206. After invasions from Turkmenistan, the sultanate was supplanted by the Mughal dynasty, beginning in 1398. The Mughal dynasty continued on into the eighteenth century, even as the British were consolidating their control over much of India.

There could hardly be two more dissimilar religions than monotheistic Islam and polytheistic Hinduism. The contrast has produced intense conflict, which continues today. The more than five centuries of Islamic rule that began in 1206 were marked by a spectrum of attitudes toward Hinduism, moving back and forth between cruel oppression and complete tolerance. The attitude of the state depended on the opinions of the ruler of the time. For example, Akbar (d. 1605) was so tolerant that he invited members of many other religions to speak at court, and he became convinced that India needed a new religion that would blend the best of all older religions. His great-grandson, Aurangzeb (d. 1707), however, was notoriously harsh in his zeal, destroying Hindu temples and sometimes demanding conversion or death.

Of course, not all conversions to Islam were forced. Islam was very attractive to many people who appreciated its monotheistic simplicity, its architecture, its literature, and its way of life. (The Mughals created many beautiful buildings; Aurangzeb's father, for example, built the Taj Mahal.) Islam was also appealing because it was the religion of the aristocratic ruling classes; and it was greatly attractive to lower-caste Hindus, who felt oppressed by the Hindu caste system. Consequently, by the end of the Mughal period, Islam was the religion of millions in north India. But this fact would later create great problems, particularly when India became an independent state, and it would remain as a major source of religious friction and violence.

European values have also, gradually, posed a major challenge to traditional Hinduism. This process began after 1500 CE, when European powers took control of parts of India. Goa, on the west coast, became a center of Portuguese culture that lasted until 1961, when Goa was taken over by Indian army forces. Similarly, Pondicherry, on the southeast coast, was at one time a center of French culture. The most significant European influence on India, however, was English. Great Britain controlled most of the subcontinent for about two centuries. Although India became independent of Britain in 1947, British influence is evident in modern India's law, education, architecture, rail transportation, and military life.

Throughout India today one can find former British churches, mostly shuttered and closed, which only hint at both the positive and negative impact of British Christianity on India. The British were not successful in making many converts, but through their schools and colleges, British Christian missionaries helped challenge and change some traditional Hindu beliefs and practices. Among those elements that were questioned were untouchability, child marriage, prohibition of remarriage for widows, polytheism, the content of education, and the role of women.

One of the earliest British-inspired Indian reformers was Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833). He was typical of the many reformers who grew up in Calcutta (now Kolkata), which was for a long time the capital of British India and the center of westernizing thought. While remaining a Hindu and even writing articles in defense of Hinduism, his thinking was influenced by both rationalism and Christianity.[36] He began a movement, the Brahmo Samaj, that adopted Christian-inspired elements: the belief in one God, congregational worship, and an ethical urgency that sought to better the lot of the oppressed. The Brahmo Samaj later split into three branches—all of which are still active.

Possibly as a result of contact with European values, one practice that was made illegal in the early nineteenth century was that of *sati* (or *suttee*, named after the first wife of Shiva). While there is no evidence to suggest that this practice was common, in sati a woman whose husband had died could volunteer, as a sign of her wifely devotion, to be burnt alive on her husband's funeral pyre. Although the British found the notion of sati horrible, they were unwilling to intervene at first. Reform-minded Indians, however, worked with the British to make the practice illegal. Instances of sati still happen today, but they are rare.

Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948) was born in the seaside town of Porbandar in northwestern India, north of Mumbai (Bombay). At that time Britain controlled the country, and many Indians advocated violence as a response to British domination. This historic turning point became a defining time in Gandhi's life.

As a young man, Gandhi learned basic ideas of nonviolence from Hinduism and Jainism (see Chapter 5). He was a vegetarian because of his religious upbringing; yet in his day, young Indian boys believed that the British were strong because they ate meat. Young Gandhi tested this theory by eating meat for a year, but he had a dream of a goat crying in his stomach and was compelled to give up his experiment.[37] His family arranged his marriage, at the age of 13, to a girl named Kasturbai, also 13.

During his late teen years, family members recommended that Gandhi study law in London. Because his pious Hindu mother feared the bad influences he would be exposed to there, he agreed to take a vow that he would not eat meat, drink wine, or touch a woman while abroad. A Jain monk administered the vow, and Gandhi left for London in the fall of 1888 at the age of 19. Kasturbai and their young son, Harilal, remained with Gandhi's parents.

Feeling rebellious at the time, Gandhi enthusiastically adopted English clothes and manners and even took dancing lessons; but in London he also began serious study. Becoming familiar with the Christian Bible, he was particularly moved by Jesus' call to forgiveness and nonviolence, which he found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7) in the New Testament. It is fascinating to see the role that the New Testament played in influencing Gandhi's insistence on the importance of nonviolence.

It was in London, too, that he first read the Bhagavad Gita, discovering outside India the wisdom in Hinduism. He took to heart its ideal of the active but selfless human being. Such a person, Gandhi later wrote, is a person who is "without egotism, who is selfless, who treats alike cold and heat, happiness and misery, who is ever forgiving, who is always contented, whose resolutions are firm, who has dedicated mind and soul to God, who causes no dread, who is not afraid of others."[38]

After obtaining his law degree in 1891, Gandhi returned to India; but soon he decided to accept an offer to practice law in South Africa, where there was a large Indian population. There he experienced the inequalities of racial segregation and legal codes that favored Europeans over non-Europeans, and he began to perfect the ideologies that he would later spread in India. His thinking was influenced by writings that advocated simplicity and nonviolence, such as the essay "On Civil Disobedience," by the American author Henry David Thoreau, and the book *The Kingdom of God Is Within You*, by the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy. A farm that Gandhi bought became something of an ashram, while his law office in Johannesburg became a center for nonviolent political action. He began to employ strikes and marches to publicize his goals and to wear Indian clothing (specifically the *dhoti*, a type of loincloth) as a way of identifying with the Indian cause.

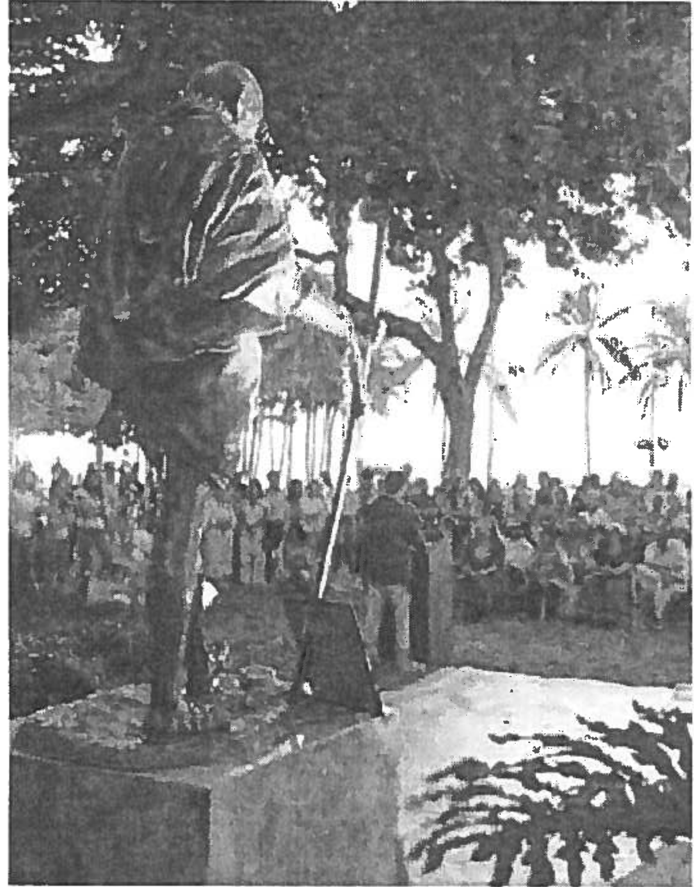
Gandhi returned to India in 1915 and dedicated his life to seeking Indian independence from Britain. Although he was repeatedly imprisoned, Gandhi insisted that all his followers remain nonviolent. For him, ahimsa (nonviolence) was fundamental. Gandhi not only believed in nonviolence for its own sake, but he felt that it gave a great moral power to its adherents and that it could sway those who were cruel, thoughtless, and violent. He called this power *satyagraha* ("reality force," or "holding onto truth"). Gandhi made use of every possible nonviolent technique: marches, hunger strikes, talks, demonstrations, and, of course, publicity. He argued that violence only begets further violence and brutalizes those who are violent, whereas nonviolence begets admiration, spiritual greatness, and ultimate freedom.[39]

One brilliant example of Gandhi's nonviolent techniques was the Salt March of 1930. At that time the British taxed all salt eaten in India and made it illegal to possess salt not bought from the government monopoly. Gandhi cleverly led a three-week march on foot from his ashram to the ocean, nearly 250 miles away. Fewer than a hundred people began the march with him, but thousands joined along the way. Reaching the sea, Gandhi collected the natural salt left on the beach by the waves—thus breaking the law. In seashore communities all around India, people came to do the same, and thousands were put into jail, along with Gandhi. This march was the turning point. Weakened both by the Indian independence movement and by World War II, the British forces at last agreed to leave India in 1947. Perceiving Gandhi's greatness following the Salt March, the writer Rabindranath Tagore had called him *Mahatma* ("great spirit"). This became his title.

Gandhi believed so much in loving tolerance that he hoped it could keep a newly independent India free of religious battles. Muslim leaders, however,

fearful that the Hindu majority would oppress Muslims, worked to create the new separate Muslim state of Pakistan. Some Hindu militants wanted revenge for what they perceived as wrongs done by Muslims to Hindus in the new Pakistan, and one of these Hindu militants assassinated Gandhi early in 1948. Gandhi's last words were *Ram, Ram* ("God, God").

Gandhi's example was so powerful that the idea of satyagraha spread to other countries and was adopted in the 1960s by the Baptist minister Martin Luther King Jr. to help protest racial segregation in the United States. King insisted that activists march peacefully and sit in restaurants quietly, without responding to threats or cruelty. Their gentle persistence, magnified by publicity, brought success.



The birthday of Mohandas Gandhi, who led India to independence, is celebrated worldwide. Here we see a celebration in Waikiki.

The issues that moderate Hinduism faces, as it is evolving today, come from three sources: the conservative social teachings of traditional Hinduism, the centuries-old conflict with Islam, and the challenges of the contemporary world.

Some Hindus find religious justification for preserving the rules of untouchability, keeping strictly the divisions of the caste system, and limiting women to traditional roles. The injustices of untouchability have long been recognized, but legal assistance for untouchables came only in the twentieth century. Untouchables, now legally allowed to enter all temples in India, have made great strides toward some social equality and opportunity. For example, there is a quota system for untouchables to ensure their inclusion in government positions and their admission to universities. The reality, however, is that in the villages untouchables still must live separately from others. They do not feel free to use wells and other water sources that are used by higher-caste persons, and they feel threatened by violence should they attempt to go beyond their traditional limits.

The caste system is weakening in large cities, but a glance at a big-city Sunday newspaper reveals its continuing hold on contemporary life. It is common, for example, for Indian parents to place ads seeking a spouse for their child, and these ads frequently detail the son's or daughter's caste, educational background, and sometimes even complexion.

The role of women has expanded in modern India, but it remains a focus of heated debate. In India's distant, pre-Vedic past, it is possible that women

Hinduism teaches that all lives have had previous forms—thousands of them. Because of reincarnation, people were once animals and, according to many, animals were once plants. Thus there is a very strong sense of interconnection with nature in Hinduism. Gods and goddesses are shown both with guardian animals and with their favorite plants. For example, Shiva is often shown with his companion bull, and Lakshmi appears with an elephant and holds a lotus.

This connection with nature is the religious background for a conservation movement that began in earnest in India in the 1970s, when a sporting goods company announced its plans to log land in the hills of the lower Himalayas. Village women at the village of Reni saw the dangers: deforestation, inability to gather firewood, soil erosion, and flooding. They went out and surrounded the trees, literally hugging them, to protect them. Attracting a great deal of attention, the villagers were successful. They saved their trees, and out of this one act emerged hundreds of similar acts of environmental concern. The movement that arose is called the Chipko Andolan (Hindi: "sticking-together movement"). It is the Indian version of tree hugging.

The Chipko movement has had much additional influence. It has not only encouraged the protection of forests but also the planting of trees, the review of proposed dam projects, the more careful awarding of government contracts, and the growth of local decision making.

The Chipko movement began with Hindu women working to preserve trees, a form of life that deserves respect rather than exploitation.

played an important public role. The importance of female deities and the fact that there have been many female gurus may be a continuation of this early tradition. But the dominant Vedic culture was thoroughly patriarchal. Just as male domination has been canonized in other religions, so it was canonized in India by the law code of Manu (second century BCE). This code made the female subservient to the male and the wife subservient to her husband. A good wife was expected to treat her husband as a god, no matter what his character or treatment of her. Women were not trained to read and write, as this was thought to detract from their principal roles as wives and mothers.

Nowadays, Hindu women commonly learn to read and write, and many go on to higher education and important public roles. Critics, however, point out that women's education is often only basic and that women are largely limited to a few career areas—teaching, secretarial work, nursing, and medicine.

Critics also point out that in villages women are sometimes confined to traditional domestic roles under threat of violence from their husbands. A related problem involves the dowry payments made by a bride's family to the bridegroom's family. In instances when the dowry is deemed insufficient, the wives are threatened and sometimes even killed by the husband's family members, thereby freeing the husband to marry again. In recent decades a women's movement has been growing in India. It insists on the equality of women, not merely in law and theory but also in everyday life. It is working on several fronts. The first targets education; it tries to keep girls in school and thus raise the literacy rate and social capability of women. The second concentrates on the improvement of women's health through greater self-awareness and more frequent medical testing. (Testing for breast cancer is a current focus.) A third front addresses issues relating to marriage. It tries to gain acceptance for intercaste marriage and for marriages that are arranged by the couple, rather than simply by the parents. It also tries to stop child marriages and promotes the enforcement of laws regulating proper marriage age. And it opposes the persecution of wives who, even after the marriage, are considered unsuitable. A fourth emphasis is the opposition to gender testing of fetuses; male children are valued more highly than female children, and the ratio of male children to female children is unbalanced.

A second issue confronting Hinduism today is interreligious disharmony. Conflict between Hindus and Muslims has been ongoing, particularly since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. Gandhi had hoped that India would not have to split into parts along religious lines, but Muslim leaders insisted on separation. Ironically, the partition did not bring peace. Disagreement about the border between India and Pakistan, particularly in Kashmir, has never been resolved. Two wars have already been fought, and a third is a constant threat. Since both countries possess atomic weapons, the potential horrors of such a war are especially great.

Conflicts between the Hindus and Muslims within India itself have also continually flared up. Old wounds were reopened in 1992, when Hindu activists destroyed a mosque at Ayodhya in northern India. They argued that it was the birthplace of Rama and the site of a Hindu temple that had been destroyed by the Muslim ruler Babur and replaced with a mosque. Atrocities on each side have been the result. While India claims to be a secular state, Hindus comprise 85 percent of the population, and thus their causes carry undeniable weight; Muslims argue that the government has not adequately protected them. Similar conflicts have occurred in Kashmir at the site of a Hindu shrine to Shiva. Just as fundamentalism has risen in several other religions, it is now influential in Hinduism.

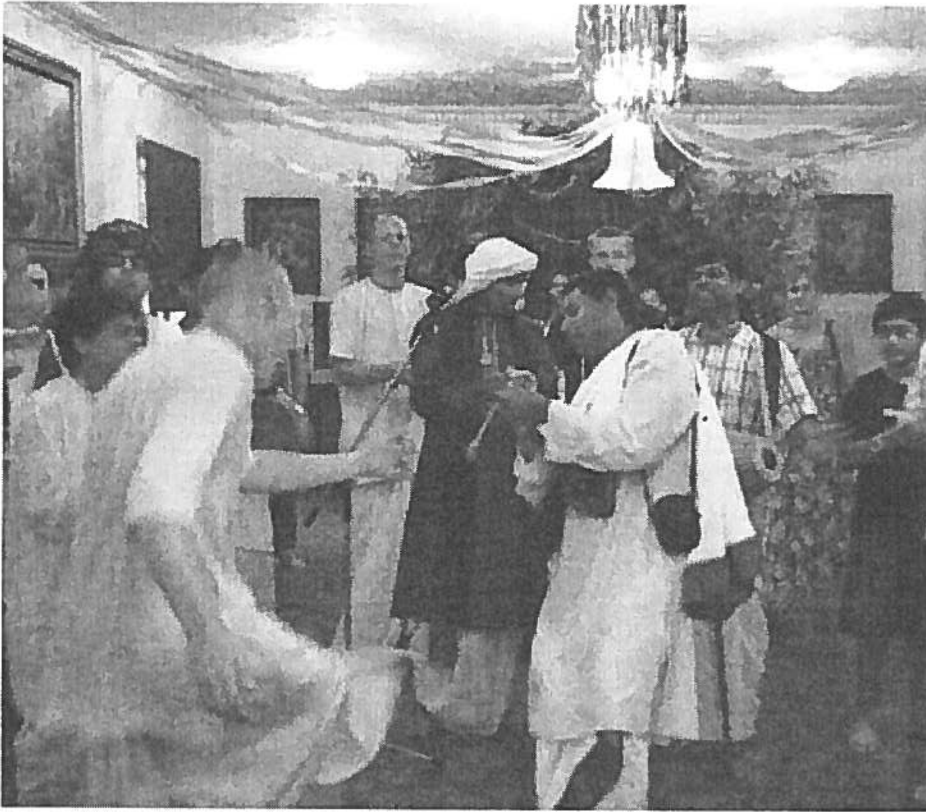
The third concern facing modern-day Hinduism is the intrusion of contemporary values, particularly individualism, women's rights, sexual freedom, modern fashion, and consumerism. Globalization has made instant some of the conflicts that once arose more slowly. There is now quick communication through e-mail and cell phones, and television is an irresistible conduit of new values. The international world of banking and finance has moved some of

Behind this Hindu temple roofline in Benares stands the minaret of a mosque. Peaceful coexistence with other religions, especially Islam, is a major challenge for Hinduism today.

its operations to India, where English-speaking graduates are plentiful and the costs of employment are favorable. American consumers making routine calls for technical help with their computers are often connected with computer specialists in Mumbai or Delhi. These jobs provide greater economic opportunities for women as well as men, inevitably raising the potential for conflict between traditional values and new freedoms.

Over the centuries, Hinduism has spread to countries near India and afar, often by way of traders and immigrants. In a few places it has remained strong, whereas in others it has surrendered to other religions. Hinduism is the dominant religion of Nepal, where about 80 percent of the population is Hindu. Hinduism was once widespread in Southeast Asia, but today only traces of it remain. In Cambodia is the great ruin Angkor Wat, originally a Hindu complex. In Thailand, vestiges of a Brahmanical priesthood are particularly active in court ceremony, and images of Brahma, Vishnu, and Ganesha are common. Some forms of ritualistic Buddhism in northern and eastern Asia have kept alive a few Hindu gods, such as Indra, in art and ceremony. Hinduism, of course, continues wherever Indians have migrated.

Hinduism was once widespread in Indonesia, where it was introduced by Indian traders. During the Muslim invasions, however, the Hindu court culture was forced to retreat from the main island of Java and settled to



Hindus around the world celebrate Krishna's birthday. Here an American temple congregation celebrates Krishna with dance.

the east on the small island of Bali, where a fascinating example of Hindu culture thrives. Here, Hinduism lives on in a complicated, beautiful form that is mixed with folk religion and Buddhism. Each village has Hindu temples, where dances based on Indian tales (especially about Rama) are performed. Shadow-puppet plays tell Hindu stories, and Balinese wood carvings reproduce images of Hindu gods, goddesses, and heroes. The central temple of Bali, a complex of buildings on the volcanic Mount Agung, is dedicated to the Trimurti. Although the rest of Indonesia is primarily Muslim, some Hindu elements remain in Indonesian dance and puppet plays.

Hinduism has had some influence on the West since the nineteenth century. The earliest impact was intellectual, when translations of the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita became available in Latin, French, German, and English. The translations generated great interest among philosophers, scholars, and poets. In the United States, the New England movement called Transcendentalism owes a good deal to its literary contact with Hinduism. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), and Walt Whitman (1819–1892) all spoke in their writings of the sacredness of nature and the ultimate unity of all things, and they sometimes even used terms demonstrating Indian influence, such as *Brahma* and *Oversoul* (another name for Brahman). This literary

In the heart of Bangkok is the popular Erawan shrine, with an image of the Hindu god Brahma at its center. In much of Southeast Asia, Hinduism is alive within, or alongside of, Buddhism.

trend was expressed in another form in England, where composers such as Gustav Holst (1874–1934) and Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) put selections from the Rig Veda and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* to music.

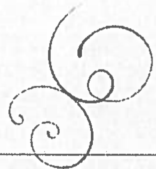
The next wave of influence occurred when Indian gurus began to travel to the West. The first of these gurus was Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), who represented Hinduism at the first World Parliament of Religions, held in Chicago in 1893. He was the successor to Ramakrishna (mentioned earlier), the noted mystic and devotee of the Great Mother. Vivekananda began the Ramakrishna Mission and set up Vedanta societies and Ramakrishna centers across Europe, India, and the United States. A Vedantist center has existed in Hollywood since the 1930s, and British writers such as Christopher Isherwood (1904–1986), Aldous Huxley (1894–1963), and Gerald Heard (1889–1971) all practiced meditation there. Isherwood, under the influence of his guru, Swami Prabhavananda, became a Vedantist and translated the Bhagavad Gita into English.

The third wave of Hindu influence in the West occurred in the late 1960s. The American counterculture embraced India as the fount of wisdom. Commercial air travel made it possible for Indian teachers to come to the West and for westerners to travel to India. Some westerners, such as the Beatles, studied in India with the guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and became enamored of Hinduism. (George Harrison's song "My Sweet Lord" was written to honor Krishna.) The Maharishi eventually came to the United States and established the Transcendental Meditation movement, which promotes regular daily meditation to achieve health and happiness. (The North American center of the movement is at Maharishi Vedic City, near Fairfield, Iowa.) Some westerners who went to India became disciples of Indian gurus. Some took Hindu names. Western visitors to India adopted forms of yoga, Hindu

vegetarian cuisine, Indian clothing, and Indian music and then took them back to Europe, Canada, and the United States, where they entered the Western mainstream.

The movement called the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) was founded in New York in 1967 by Swami Bhaktivedanta Prabhupada (1896–1977) to spread a form of devotional practice among westerners. Commonly known as the Hare Krishna movement, ISKCON has succeeded in attracting westerners to live a traditional form of Hindu religious life. Its practitioners worship Krishna as the highest incarnation of the divine, chant daily, eat a vegetarian diet, and, if celibate, wear the traditional orange robe. The impact of this movement in the West has been particularly strong in the area of cuisine, prompting the opening of vegetarian restaurants across Europe, the United States, and Canada.

What we have just discussed—the impact of Hinduism on Western thinkers, musicians, and poets—was in large measure achieved by non-Hindus inspired by Hindu culture. Now Hindus themselves, in and out of India, are producing internationally acclaimed works, especially novels and films. Their particular points of view result from experiences accumulated across centuries in one of the world's richest cultures. Those experiences will in time help global citizens, whatever their origins, to see themselves with an understanding that has been enriched by the Hindu worldview.



An old and hallowed commentary, the Crest-Jewel of Discrimination, teaches about one's true nature, which is beyond time and is full of joy.

Calm your mind utterly and attain Samadhi. Then you will have open vision, seeing clearly the truth of the Atman. From the lips of your teacher you have learned of the truth of Brahman as it is revealed in the scriptures. Now you must realize that truth directly and immediately. Then only will your heart be free from any doubt.

How are you to know for certain that you are liberated from the bondage of ignorance and have realized the Atman, which is absolute existence, pure consciousness and abiding bliss? The words of the scriptures, your own power of reasoning and the teaching of your master should all help to convince you—but the only absolute proof is direct and immediate experience, within your own soul.

Bondage and liberation, satisfaction and anxiety, sickness and renewed health, hunger and so forth—these are matters of personal experience. You know yourself. Others can only guess at your condition.

Teachers and scriptures can stimulate spiritual awareness. But the wise disciple crosses the ocean of his ignorance by direct illumination, through the grace of God.

Gain experience directly. Realize God for yourself. Know the Atman as the one indivisible Being, and become perfect. Free your mind from all distractions and dwell in the consciousness of the Atman.

This is the final declaration of Vedanta: Brahman is all—this universe and every creature. To be liberated is to live in Brahman, the undivided reality. Brahman is one without a second, as the scriptures bear witness.[40]

1. The culture that flourished in the Indus River valley before 2000 BCE is named the ______________ culture.
   a. Vedas
   b. Harappa
   c. Aryan
   d. Indian
2. The ancient scriptures of India are called the ______________. There are four basic text collections: the Rig, the Yajur, the Sama, and the Atharva.
   a. Harappas
   b. Sanskrits
   c. Vedas
   d. "Shining Fathers"
3. Around 500 BCE, Indian civilization experienced such widespread and important changes that the period is called the ______________ Age.
   a. Philosopher
   b. Prophet
   c. Axis
   d. Ascetic
4. In the Upanishads, the term ______________ refers to the experience of the sacred within nature and the external universe, while ______________ refers to the experience of the sacred within oneself. Both terms may be used interchangeably.
   a. karma; moksha
   b. Brahman; Atman
   c. samsara; moksha
   d. brahmins; samsara
5. The ______________ is part of a very long epic poem called the Mahabharata; it recalls themes from the Upanishads.
   a. Maya
   b. Bhagavad Gita
   c. Pandavas
   d. Jainism
6. Hinduism has a(n) ______________ system with five main social classes: *brahmin* (priest), *kshatriya* (warrior-noble), *vaishya* (merchant), *shudra* (peasant), and *dalit* (untouchable).
   a. work
   b. education
   c. ritual
   d. caste
7. The word *yoga* means "______________."
   a. contemplation
   b. enlightenment
   c. practice
   d. union
8. Shankara's belief that spiritual liberation was achieved when the individual personally came to understand the unity of all things is called ______________.
   a. devotion
   b. Jnana
   c. monism
   d. meditation
9. When linked together, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are often called the ______________.
   a. Trimurti
   b. Shiva
   c. Hindu
   d. sacred text
10. Mohandas Gandhi's use of ______________ techniques, including marches, hunger strikes, talks, demonstrations, and publicity, was adopted by Martin Luther King Jr. to help protest racial segregation in the United States.
    a. traditional
    b. nonviolent
    c. disruptive
    d. Mahatma
11. Imagine on an exam you are asked to express the most important ideas of the Upanishads in only two sentences. What would you write for your two sentences? How do these sentences capture what is most important in the Upanishads?
12. Choose one of the contemporary challenges facing Hinduism discussed in this chapter. According to Hindu belief, which of the following deities do you think would be especially equipped to assist Hindus in overcoming this challenge: Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, or Devi? Why?

Books

Bhagavad-Gita: The Song of God. Trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood. New York: Signet, 2002. A justly famous translation, with a valuable introduction by Aldous Huxley.

Chapple, Christopher Key, and Mary Evelyn Tucker, eds. *Hinduism and Ecology.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press/Center for the Study of World Religions, 2000. Essays on environmental concerns in Hindu literature, ritual, and culture.

Eck, Diana. *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India.* 3rd. ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998. A description of Hindu temple worship and its effect.

Erndl, Kathleen. *Victory to the Mother.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. A study of devotion to the Mother, a female deity especially popular in northern India.

Gandhi, Mohandas. *The Bhagavad Gita According to Gandhi.* Edited by John Strohmeier. Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Hills Books, 2000. The first book to include Gandhi's *Gita* text and his commentary in their entirety.

———. *The Essential Gandhi.* Edited by Louis Fischer. New York: Vintage, 2002. Gandhi's writings on politics, nonviolence, spirituality, and his own life.

Hawley, John S., and Mark Juergensmeyer. *Songs of the Saints of India.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. Poetry of north-Indian saints with commentary.

Kinsley, David R. *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988. A comprehensive survey of Hindu goddesses and the role of the divine feminine within Hinduism.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies.* New York: Mariner Books, 1999. An award-winning collection of short stories that chronicle the dislocation experienced by Indian migrants to the United States.

The Upanishads. Trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester. New York: Signet, 2002. A readable translation of twelve basic Upanishads.

Film/TV

Aparajito (Director Satyajit Ray; Merchant-Ivory/Sony.) A depiction of a man's life in Benares and the portayal of the struggles of his father, a poor brahmin priest.

Gandhi. (Director Richard Attenborough; Columbia Tristar.) An epic rendering of the life of Mahatma Gandhi, which won several Academy Awards.

Ganges: River to Heaven. (Director Gayle Ferraro; Aerial Productions.) A documentary on a hospice in Benares, where aging Hindus come to die in the hope that death at this site will improve their karma in the next life.

Hinduism: Faith, Festivals, and Rituals. (Films Media Group.) An examination of devotional ceremonies in the southern Indian state of Kerala.

Mahabharata. (Director Peter Brook; Parabola Video.) A modern, English-language production of the great Hindu epic.

Mystic India. (Giant Screen Films.) An epic account of the late-eighteenth-century spiritual awakening of Neelkanth, an 11-year-old yogi who journeys by foot throughout India for seven years and more than seven thousand miles, seeking enlightenment.

Short Cut to Nirvana: Kumbh Mela. (Mela Films LLC.) A documentary exploring the Kumbh Mela festival.

Music/Audio

The Bhagavad Gita. (Multimedia and Culture.) An unabridged audiobook of the famed discourse between Krishna and Arjuna (translated into English by Juan Mascaró).

Darshana: Vedic Chanting for Daily Practice. (Mother Om Sounds.) A compilation of Vedic chants for daily practice, as performed by Maya Tiwari (Mother Maya).

Hymns from the Vedas and Upanishads, Vedic Chants. (Delos Records.) Traditional hymns and chants from classic religious sources.

Religious Music of Asia. (Smithsonian Folkways.) A recording of Hindu devotional music.

Sounds of India. (Columbia.) Classical devotional music of India, performed by Ravi Shankar.

World Hindu Chants. (Times Music.) A variety of religious songs.

Internet

HinduNet: http://www.hindunet.org/. A gateway site that allows users to learn about Hindu faith and ritual, visit Hindu temples online, listen to Hindu scriptures, and participate in discussion forums.

Sanatan Society: http://www.sanatansociety.org/. A useful resource for information on Hindu gods, yoga and meditation, Vedic astrology, vegetarianism, and other related topics.

Virtual Religion Index: http://virtualreligion.net/vri/hindu.html. Individual sections devoted to the Vedas, the Upanishads, the epics, theology and devotion, schools and teachers, and yoga.

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ahimsa (uh-him'-sa): "Nonharm," "nonviolence."

ashram (ash'-ram): A spiritual community.

Atman (at'-mun): The spiritual essence of all individual human beings.

avatar (ah'-va-tar): An earthly embodiment of a deity.

Bhagavad Gita (bhuh'-guh-vud gee'-ta): A religious literary work about Krishna.

bhakti (bhuk'-ti): Devotion to a deity or guru.

bhakti yoga: The spiritual discipline of devotion to a deity or guru.

Brahma (bruh'-mah): God of creation.

Brahman (bruh'-mun): The spiritual essence of the universe.

brahmin (bruh'-min): Member of the priestly caste.

caste (kaast): A major social class sanctioned by Hinduism.

Devi (deh'-vee): "Goddess"; the Divine Feminine, also called the Great Mother.

dhyana (dyah'-nah): Meditation.

Durga: "Awe-inspiring," "distant"; a mother-goddess; a form of Devi.

guru (goo'-roo): A spiritual teacher.

hatha yoga (hah'-tha yoh'-ga): The spiritual discipline of postures and bodily exercises.

jnana yoga (gyah'-nuh yoh'-ga; juh-nah'-nah yoh'-ga): The spiritual discipline of knowledge and insight.

Kali (kah'-lee): "Dark," a form of Devi; a goddess associated with destruction and rebirth.

karma: The moral law of cause and effect that determines the direction of rebirth.

karma yoga: The spiritual discipline of selfless action.

Krishna: A god associated with divine playfulness; a form of Vishnu.

kundalini yoga (koon-duh-lee'-nee yoh'-ga): A form of raja yoga that envisions the individual's energy as a force that is capable of being raised from the center of the body to the head, producing a state of joy.

mantra: A short sacred phrase, often chanted or used in meditation.

maya: "Illusion"; what keeps us from seeing reality correctly; the world, viewed inadequately.

moksha (mohk'-shah): "Liberation" from personal limitation, egotism, and rebirth.

monism: The philosophical position that all apparently separate realities are ultimately one; the belief that God and the universe are the same, that the universe is divine.

puja (poo'-jah): Offerings and ritual in honor of a deity.

raja yoga: The "royal" discipline of meditation.

Rama: A god and mythical king; a form of Vishnu.

samadhi (suh-mah'-dhee): A state of complete inner peace resulting from meditation.

samsara (suhm-sah'-rah): The everyday world of change and suffering leading to rebirth.

sannyasin (san-nyas'-in): A wandering holy man.

Shiva (shee'-vah): A god associated with destruction and rebirth.

Trimurti (tree-mur'-tee): "Three forms" of the divine—the three gods Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva.

Upanishads (oo-pahn'-i-shads): Written meditations on the spiritual essence of the universe and the self.

Vedas (vay'-duhs): Four collections of ancient prayers and rituals.

Vishnu: A god associated with preservation and love.

yoga: A spiritual discipline; a method for perfecting one's union with the divine.

Visit the Online Learning Center at www.mhhe.com/molloy6e for additional exercises and features, including "Religion beyond the Classroom" and "For Fuller Understanding."