Part I

The Religions of Indian Origin

The Hindu cultural region

1

Hinduism

The Spirit of Hinduism

Through prolonged austerities and devotional practices the sage Narada won the grace of the god Vishnu. The god appeared before him in his hermitage and granted him the fulfillment of a wish. "Show me the magic power of your Maya," Narada prayed. The god replied, "I will. Come with me," but with an ambiguous smile on his lips.

From the shade of the hermit grove, Vishnu led Narada across a bare stretch of land which blazed like metal under the scorching sun. The two were soon very thirsty. At some distance, in the glaring light, they perceived the thatched roofs of a tiny village. Vishnu asked, "Will you go over there and fetch me some water?" "Certainly, O Lord," the saint replied, and he made off to the distant group of huts.

When Narada reached the hamlet, he knocked at the first door. A beautiful girl opened to him, and the holy man experienced something of which he had never up to that time dreamed: the enchantment of her eyes. They resembled those of his divine Lord and friend, Vishnu. He stood and gazed, simply forgetting what he had come for. The girl, gentle and candid, bade him welcome. Her voice was a golden noose around his neck. As though moving in a trance, he entered the hut.

The occupants of the house were full of respect for him, and received him honorably, but almost as if he were an old friend whom they had not seen for a long time. Narada was impressed by their cheerful and noble bearing, and felt entirely at home. Nobody asked him what he had come for. He just seemed to belong to the family. After a certain period, he asked the father for permission to marry the girl, which was no more than everyone in the house was expecting. He became a member of the family, sharing with them the age-old burdens and simple delights of a peasant household.

Twelve years passed; he had three children. When his father-in-law died, he became head of the household, inheriting the estate and managing it, tending the cattle and cultivating the fields. The twelfth year, the rainy season was

extraordinarily violent: the streams swelled, torrents poured down from the hills, and the little village was inundated by a sudden flood. In the night the straw huts and the cattle were swept away, and everybody fled.

With one hand supporting his wife, with the other leading two of his children, and bearing the smallest on his shoulder, Narada set forth hastily. Forging ahead through the pitch darkness and lashed by the rain, he waded through the slippery mud, staggering through the swirling waters. The burden was more than he could manage. He stumbled, and the child slipped from his shoulder and disappeared in the roaring night. With a desperate cry, Narada let go the older children to catch at the smallest, but he was too late. Meanwhile the flood carried off the other two, and even before he could realize the disaster, ripped from his side his wife, swept his own feet from under him, and flung him headlong into the torrent. Unconscious, he was stranded eventually on a little cliff. When he returned to consciousness, he opened his eyes and saw only a vast sheet of muddy water. He could only weep.

"Child!" He heard a familiar voice, which nearly stopped his heart. "Where is the water you went to fetch for me? I have been waiting for more than half an hour."

Narada turned round. Instead of the water he beheld the brilliant desert in the midday sun, and the god standing at his shoulder. "Do you comprehend now the secret of my Maya?"

(Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, ed. Joseph Campbell, New York, Harper & Row, 1962)

This story, told by the Bengali saint, Sri Ramakrishna, is based on earlier stories from the classical period of Hinduism.

Questions for discussion

1 What is Maya?

2 Why does Vishnu have an ambiguous smile on his lips? (See p. 25 below, "The Later Upanishads.")

The Hindu View of Life

What we call "Hinduism" is not a unified and single entity, but the sum total of the traditional religious beliefs and practices of the Indian people, a colorful, diverse, and complex set of traditions inherited from a long history, and sometimes only loosely related to one another. Each period of Indian history has left its mark and is embodied in its own distinctive writings. This diversity allows individuals a good deal of liberty in choosing a form of religious life suitable to their needs.

If there is one theme that runs through these different traditions, summing up perhaps what is most typical of Hinduism as a whole, it is a feeling of the

inherent presence of the divine in every being. Everywhere he looks, the devout Hindu sees God. A feeling very much like this has been described by the great English poet, William Wordsworth:

> And I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me with the joy
> Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
> Of something far more deeply interfused,
> Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
> And the round ocean, and the living air,
> And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things.
>
> (*Tintern Abbey*)

Since God is what is most real, the Hindu tends to see all the varied manifestations of the world as essentially one, as merely different aspects of the same fundamental reality. You and I are like waves on the ocean of being. The waves come and go, but the vast ocean of eternal being remains.

Pre-Vedic Religion

The earliest strands of Hinduism that we have knowledge of date back to about the year 2000 BC, to a mysterious civilization which developed in the northwest of India near the Indus river, in what is now Pakistan. Centered on the two cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro (see Map on p. 14), this civilization was in some respects surprisingly advanced. The cities were laid out geometrically, had bathing and sewage systems better than anything India was to see again until modern times, and even the working classes had better accommodations than many in India possess today.

Our knowledge of their religion comes mainly from figurines and some 2,000 engraved seals used for business purposes. Although no one has yet succeeded in deciphering the writing on the seals, we can learn a certain amount from the pictures engraved on them. In these images we can see already elements of the rich mythological life that has since characterized India.

As with many agricultural societies, the religion of the Harappan people focused on fertility, and it did so in ways which we still recognize as typically Indian. The Harappans worshipped a Mother Goddess, familiar to Indians today under the title of Devi. They had various sacred plants and animals, as Indians still have, notably the sacred bull, now known as Nandi, the Joyous. They had statues of nude men reminiscent of the somewhat stiff statues of the saints now honored by the Jains. But perhaps the most surprising figure is that of a god bearing a striking resemblance to the god Shiva, who now plays such a large role in the religious life of India. This deity, depicted on a number of seals, is shown

with buffalo horns rising out of his head, a fierce look on his face, sitting nude in what can only be the posture of a yogi, with a prominent phallus, the symbol of sexual potency, and surrounded by wild animals, including two deer (as in the later representations of the Buddha preaching his first sermon in the Deer Park in Benares). This divinity has been called Proto-Shiva. The Shiva known to later Hinduism, though he plays many roles, is perhaps above all the god of fertility, but at the same time he is the great yogi, the supreme ascetic, and one of his titles is Pasupati, the Lord of Beasts.

Around 1700 BC the Harappan civilization came to a mysterious end. Its cities were abandoned and its people fled. We do not know why; perhaps because of armed invasion, possibly because of a very prolonged drought. Nor are we certain what happened to the people; perhaps they migrated towards South India, and became merged with what is now the Dravidian population there. During the period which immediately followed, the Vedic period, we see few traces of the Harappan religion, but much of it was evidently preserved, for after the Vedic period ended we find the Harappan divinities mentioned above still alive and well in the religion of the Indian people.

Vedic Religion

The Aryans Around 1500 BC a group of tribes migrated into India from the northwest. They were relatively light-skinned and had tamed the horse, which they used in chariots. They spoke an early version of the Sanskrit language, a member of the Indo-European family of languages which includes Greek, Latin, and English, and called themselves Aryans, a word meaning "noble." Other branches of the same race migrated southwards into Iran and westwards into Europe, eventually making up the bulk of the population there.

The Vedas The priests of these newcomers had developed a highly advanced poetry, in which they composed the hymns to be sung at their sacrifices. Over a thousand of these hymns were handed down very carefully for many centuries by word of mouth, and eventually they were written down and collected into a book, which is called the Rig Veda. The word "Veda," which is related to English words like "vision" and "video," means "knowledge." In addition to the Rig Veda, which is the oldest, there are three other Vedas: the Sama Veda, a compilation of some of the hymns of the Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, containing sacrificial formulas, and the Atharva Veda, which contains mainly magical spells and incantations. Attached to each of these collections are treatises called Brahmanas, which explain the ritual of the sacrifices. These four Vedas, including some later additions to them called the Upanishads, comprise the sacred scriptures of Hinduism. An orthodox Hindu is one who recognizes the authority of the Vedas.

The Vedic gods The religion of the Vedas can be summarized, for the most part, as a buoyant, robust, and self-confident nature-worship. The gods to whom the hymns of the Rig Veda are addressed are chiefly male and embody natural forces, especially forces associated with the sky. The general term for them is *devas*, a word which is related to the English words "divinity" and "deity," and which means the same thing. The highest god is Dyauspitr, the Sky-Father (*dyaus* = sky, *pitr* = father), known to the Romans as Jupiter; like many high gods, however, he receded into the background and was little worshipped in practice.

Although the Aryans worshipped many gods, they frequently prayed to a particular god as if only he existed. This practice, which has been called kathenotheism, can be confusing to the modern reader unless it is recognized.

The god who receives the most attention is Indra. Indra is associated with storm, thunder, and lightning, by which he destroys his enemies. As the chief god of power he is also the god of battles and warriors: it is he who leads his people to victory. Indra slew the evil dragon Vritra, who had held back the waters of the sky, thus bringing rain again to the crops and herds. Like many a warrior, Indra is also somewhat rambunctious, not above getting a little drunk and throwing his weight around.

Several gods are associated with the sun. Surya rides across the sky in a flaming chariot. Vishnu is also connected with the sun and covers the earth in three paces, though in the Vedas he has none of the outstanding importance that he comes to possess later in classical Hinduism. Savitri is another sun-god, distinguished by the fact that a special verse, called the Gayatri, of a hymn to him is considered the most sacred portion of the Rig Veda:

> Let us think on the lovely splendour
> of the god Savitri,
> that he may inspire our minds.

Agni (a word which means simply "fire" and is related to the English word "ignition") is the god of fire, and this leads him to play many roles. Since the sacrifices were offered with fire, Agni is the god of the priestly caste. As each home centers around the hearth, Agni is also the god of the household. He is present in the lightning and in the fire-stick.

Soma was originally a plant from which a narcotic drink was prepared during the sacrifices; it induced vivid hallucinations. From this Soma was elevated to the status of a god, to whom a special collection of hymns in the Rig Veda is dedicated. Since the growth of plants was thought to be associated with the moon, Soma was later identified with that heavenly orb.

Perhaps the most impressive of the Vedic gods is Varuna.* His name is possibly related to that of the Greek heaven-god Uranus. Varuna is the creator of

* The accent is on the first syllable since the "u" is short.

An image of Agni, the god of fire, on a temple at Khajuraho (Ann & Bury Peerless)

the cosmos. Ethically he is the highest of the Vedic gods, and the closest to the Judaeo-Christian conception of God. He is present everywhere and knows all the actions of men. Whereas the other Vedic gods are expressions of the physical forces of nature, essentially cheerful sorts, relatively easy to stay on good terms with by offering the occasional sacrifice, and are not always models of virtue, Varuna is holy and demands holiness from men. He detests sin, such as lying and injustice, and punishes it. When the evil die, he condemns them to the "House of Clay," where they live a depressing, shadowy life, in great contrast to the bright "World of the Fathers," to which the good go. But Varuna forgives those who repent. When the worshipper approaches Varuna, he puts on sackcloth and ashes.

Varuna has created and maintains a cosmic order, called *Rta*, which represents perhaps the highest conception to be found in the Rig Veda. Rta includes the physical order of nature, such as the order of the seasons, but it also includes the moral order. Perhaps the best translation of it might be "the natural law," in both the physical and the moral senses of that term. In the figure of Varuna Indian thought came close to developing the kind of ethical monotheism achieved by the Hebrew people, which would have greatly transformed Indian religion. But instead, as we shall see, it took a different direction.

There are many other Vedic gods: Mitra, the assistant and messenger of Varuna, who is especially concerned with promises and contracts; Yama, the lord of the dead; Tvashtri, the god of the volcano, related to the Greek god Hephaistos; Aryaman, guardian of marriage and other contracts; Vayu, the wind-god, and others. A number of goddesses are also mentioned, though they play no role in the sacrifices. Several beautiful hymns are addressed to Usas, the goddess of the dawn.

Sacrifice The Vedic gods were worshipped by sacrifice (*yajna*), which included animal sacrifice and was the central activity of Vedic religion. The chief purpose was to give pleasure to the gods, and thereby obtain blessings from them. Most of the gods were good-natured, and it was apparently not particularly difficult to stay in their good graces. There is little mention of sacrifice for sin or guilt, as with the ancient Israelites. The sacrifices were paid for by the wealthy and required numerous priests, who alone knew the rituals which had power with the gods.

Brahman The Rig Veda mentions frequently a mysterious power called *Brahman*, which gives the sacrifice its efficacy. The reason why the ritual, performed in one place at one time, is capable of influencing what happens at another place and time, is that there is a power which pervades the cosmos, linking everything that is, and by tapping into it human beings can come into communication with the divine.

At its height the religion of the Aryans, like that of the ancient Greeks, Romans, and Germans, took a positive view of nature and of human existence. It is filled with vigor, courage, and optimism. In this it contrasts markedly with what was to come.

The last hymns to be included in the Vedas already sound a different note, of questioning and doubt. How do we know that things really are as they are portrayed in the ancient hymns? Where did the universe really come from? Is there perhaps only one God rather than many? Does even he have all the answers? Who knows?

The Vedic period lasted for about a thousand years, from about 1500 BC to about 600 BC. Since that time, although the Vedas remain the sacred scripture of Hinduism and the test of orthodoxy, and although their hymns are still recited in rituals, the Vedic gods have departed from the religious life of the Indian people. What is prized in the Vedas today is the religion of a set of later additions included in the Vedas, known as the Upanishads.

The Worldview of the Upanishads

The term Upanishad means literally "a session," sitting at the feet of a master who teaches secret doctrines. Altogether the Upanishads comprise about 200 documents, some long, some short, written from about the seventh century BC

and subsequently appended to the Vedas. About a dozen are considered classical. They recount the beliefs which developed among the Aryan peoples as they spread further east and south into Indian territory, interacting more and more with the indigenous peoples who preceded them. By the seventh century BC there emerged an important body of religious practitioners, the hermits or *munis*, who lived in the forest and practiced asceticism and meditation. These hermits, who in time came to play as important a role as the priests in the spiritual life of the people, developed elaborate techniques for inducing mystical ecstasy, and at the same time complex philosophical systems to interpret their mystical experiences. Initially their purpose was mainly to obtain magical powers, for it was believed that the mortification of the body created a store of physical power in the individual, rather like electricity, which could be put to practical uses such as disposing of one's enemies. With some hermits, however, this self-centered utilitarianism was overcome in a genuine spirituality, and the religious viewpoint which they achieved is widely considered, not only by Hindus, as one of the great spiritual accomplishments of the human race.

The central focus in this new vision is the concept of Brahman. In the hymns of the Rig Veda, as indicated above, this word means the magic power of the sacrifice, which can move the gods and the universe to grant what the worshipper desires. In the early Upanishads it undergoes a great extension. It comes to mean a supreme, infinite, impersonal Reality which is present throughout the universe, in all the objects of ordinary experience, and which constitutes the true identity of every being. Brahman is Pure Being, Pure Consciousness, Pure Bliss. Brahman is Absolute Reality.

The true Brahman, according to this view, is *nirguna* Brahman, Brahman "without attributes or predicates." Although for the sake of convenience we may speak of Brahman in terms of certain concepts, such as being, consciousness, or personhood, in truth Brahman transcends all our concepts and all our understanding. In attempting to refer to Brahman all language fails. Brahman is "not this, not that." We identify individual beings by their name and form, but Brahman is above all name and form. Every category of human thought is a restriction, and Brahman surpasses all restrictions. For religious purposes we may think of Brahman as if It were a person, for example, but in actuality the concept of personhood is inadequate and misleading as an expression of the reality of Brahman (this is reinforced by the grammatical fact that the word "Brahman" is neuter). The Brahman we can understand is not the true Brahman.

> The Self is not this, not that (neti, neti). It is incomprehensible, for it is not comprehended. It is indestructible, for it is never destroyed. It is unattached, for it does not attach itself. It is unfettered. It does not suffer. It is not injured.
>
> (Brihadaranyaka 3.9.26, trans. Hopkins)

What is the relation, then, between Brahman and the gods? Brahman is not a god, but is above all the gods. The gods no doubt exist, but they derive their being and their power from Brahman.

At the same time the sages of the Upanishads are concerned to discover the true identity of man. They ask, what is our real self? Is it our body? That is our external self, but we also have an inner self. To refer to this inner self they employ the ordinary Sanskrit reflexive pronoun, *atman*, "self."

The answer at which they eventually arrive is that the inner self, the Atman, is nothing less than Brahman. This is the outstanding thesis of the Upanishads. The true identity of each person and thing in the universe is the Eternal Power, the Absolute Reality, Brahman itself.

This leads the Upanishads to make a distinction between the True Self of beings and their merely apparent self. The apparent self is what can be observed by the senses, what we encounter in ordinary experience. Our apparent self is what we normally think of as ourselves: not only our body, with its sensations, but also our mind and will, our feelings and desires, our thoughts and intentions, everything that we usually and ordinarily experience of ourselves. This apparent self is subject to time and change, to suffering and sorrow, to decay and death. "What is other than the Self suffers" (Brihadaranyaka 3.5). Our True Self, by contrast, that is, our Atman, being nothing less than Brahman, is infinite and eternal; it does not grow old, it does not suffer pain or sorrow, it does not die.

> He is the unseen seer, the unheard hearer, the unthought thinker, the ununderstood understander. No other Seer than He is there, no other hearer than He, no other thinker than He, no other understander than He. He is the Self within you, the Inner Controller, the Immortal. What is other than He suffers.
>
> (Brihadaranyaka 3.7.23, trans. Zaehner)

My Self is not something distinct from your Self, and your Self is not something distinct from my Self. Although to all appearances you and I are separate beings, this separation is only an appearance. In our inner selves we are one. It is not just that we are similar, that our natures are alike, but that there is only the one being, the one existent reality. This reality takes on one appearance and becomes what we call "you," and it takes on another appearance and becomes what we call "me." In our innermost self you and I are one identical being. The same applies to all beings in the universe. The religion of the Upanishads is a form of monism. "Brahman alone is, nothing else is." The person who grasps this truth will see and love nothing but Brahman.

> It is not for love of a husband that a husband is dearly loved.
> Rather it is for the love of the Self that a husband is dearly loved.
> It is not for the love of a wife that a wife is dearly loved.
> Rather it is for the love of the Self that a wife is dearly loved.
> It is not for the love of sons that sons are dearly loved.
> Rather it is for love of the Self that sons are dearly loved.
> It is not for love of contingent beings that contingent beings are dearly loved.
> Rather it is for the love of the Self that contingent beings are dearly loved.
>
> (Brihadaranyaka 2.4.5, trans. Zaehner)

The effect of this view is to bring profound peace of mind. There can be no true grounds for conflict with others, since they are ultimately identical with myself, nor for dissatisfaction with life.

> Therefore one who knows this, becoming pacified, controlled, at peace, patient, full of faith, should see the Self in the Self alone. He looks upon everyone as it. Everyone comes to be his Self; he becomes the Self of everyone. He passes over all evil; evil does not pass over him. He subdues all evil; evil does not subdue him. He is free from evil, free from age, free from hunger, free from thirst, a Brahman, whoever possesses this knowledge.
>
> (Brihadaranyaka 4.4.28, trans. Hopkins)

The path to salvation from sorrow and suffering lies in obtaining sacred knowledge, that is, the knowledge of Brahman, the knowledge that our True Self is nothing less than Brahman.

The authors of the Upanishads came to accept a further doctrine, of uncertain origin, reincarnation. At death the body dies, but the soul, the *jiva* or *jivatman*, which is part of the apparent self, is born again into a new body. This belief may have been suggested by the cycle of growth in crops, with the emergence of agriculture: "Like corn a man ripens and falls to the ground; like corn he springs up again in his season" (Katha Upanishad).

The new body may again be that of a human being, but it may also be that of a higher form of existence, such as a god, or a lower one, such as that of an animal (according to some, even a plant). This reincarnation takes place as a verdict on the individual's conduct, to reward the good and punish the wicked. It takes place automatically, in virtue of the "Law of Karma," a law which is part of the fabric of the universe, a judgement without a judge.

Instead of a straightforward if mysterious existence in the "House of Clay" or the "World of the Fathers," as described in the Vedic hymns, the individual was now faced with the prospect of an endless cycle of births, deaths, and rebirths: the wheel of Samsara. As this doctrine took hold, the religious mood changed, from one of buoyancy and optimism to one of world-weariness and pessimism. It was not enough to achieve entrance into Heaven, for even the gods were subject to death and reincarnation. One Indra would be replaced by another Indra, and he by another, in an endless round. It was necessary to find some way to get off the wheel altogether.

The doctrine of the identity of the Atman with Brahman provided the solution to this problem. The wheel of Samsara belongs to the world of *maya*. When the veil of maya is pierced, and Brahman is revealed as the sole existent Reality, release will be obtained from the wheel of Samsara. This is moksha, or liberation; after it there will be no more rebirth. Later it was also called nirvana, "extinction," meaning "of craving and suffering."

How does it come about that we are separated from Brahman? Why is it that the world appears to us to be a genuine reality? The answer given by the Upanishads is that we are deceived because of our self-centeredness, our egocentricity. We are in a state of ignorance, an ignorance created by selfish

desire. If we could once divest ourselves of ourselves, if we could rid ourselves of self-centered desire, if we could attain to a point of view which was completely impersonal and universal, and no longer wrapped up in the isolation of our ego, then the illusion would fall away, our merely apparent self would be shed, as a growing snake sheds its skin, and Brahman alone would reign. The "sacred knowledge" then, the knowledge of Brahman, is not merely a theoretical knowledge, but depends on our becoming detached from our individual selves.

The hermits who wrote the early Upanishads proclaimed that it is indeed possible to obtain that sacred knowledge, by practicing meditation and the discipline of asceticism. Through meditation one learns to focus one's attention on Brahman, on the Eternal and the One, and to leave behind the transitory world of the individual self.

Asceticism means deliberate self-mortification, self-deprivation. The ascetic abandons all worldly possessions and all desire for them. He practices depriving himself of bodily comfort, for example, sleeping on a hard floor. He practices fasting, eating and drinking only what is necessary to sustain life, without being concerned about the taste of food or drink. He does not marry, for the experience of sexual intercourse is a pleasure. He does not wish to have children, for children are a possession. "There is no difference between a desire for sons and a desire for riches; and there is no difference between a desire for riches and a desire for states of being: all of them are nothing more than desire." He deprives himself of the company of others and lives in silence. Thus he becomes detached from his individual self.

> From the unreal lead me to the real,
> From darkness lead me to light,
> From death lead me to immortality.
> (Brihadaranyaka)

The Later Upanishads

In the later Upanishads these views undergo some modification and further development. One far-reaching alteration takes place in the understanding of Brahman. In the early Upanishads, as we have seen, Brahman was thought of as nirguna, "without attributes," above "name and form," "not this, not that." In the later Upanishads, however, the conception of Brahman becomes more personal. Brahman is now no longer "It," but "He," "the Lord." This conception is sometimes called "*saguna* Brahman," Brahman with attributes or qualities, or Ishvara. This is a very significant change, for with this it becomes possible to pray to Brahman in human terms and to hope for an answer from him to one's prayers. In the Svetasvatara Upanishad, for example, Brahman is identified with the god Rudra or Shiva. Shiva is now no longer just one god among many, but is Brahman himself, creator and ruler of the universe. Salvation consists in knowledge of the Lord.

A further development takes place in the understanding of the universe of ordinary experience. The universe as we experience it is fundamentally deceptive, for it conceals its true nature from us. In truth the world is Brahman, the One, the Lord. Yet it presents itself to us as multiple and limited. This deceptive character of the world is expressed by saying that the world is maya, which means a conjuror's trick, a work of misleading magic. (The word "maya" may possibly be related etymologically to the word "magic.") Salvation consists in piercing through the veil of maya, and reaching the truth and reality of the Godhead concealed within it. When salvation is achieved, the illusory world of maya will fall away, and Brahman or Divinity alone will be seen to exist.

A third development took place in the later Upanishads in regard to the method of attaining salvation. In the early Upanishads, as we have seen, this is attained through sacred knowledge, the living awareness of one's identity with Brahman. In the later Upanishads this is developed by means of the concept of *yoga*. This word, which is etymologically related to the English word "yoke," means "a setting to work" or "the pursuit of a goal," and can perhaps be translated as a "path" or "discipline." Yoga in general means the pathway which leads to spiritual liberation, the breakup and dissolution of the individual ego. The yoga described in the later Upanishads consists in certain exercises designed to establish control over the body and mind. They begin with control of the breath and the bodily posture, which is meant to lead to quietness and control of the senses, and by this means one could eventually hope to gain control of the mind. By practicing ever greater discipline of the mind it would be possible to focus it to such a pitch of concentration that the distinction between the mind and its object of thought would be eliminated, and there would remain only pure unitary consciousness, which would be Brahman or the Lord himself.

Classical Hinduism

The period of the Upanishads was followed by the rise and predominance of Buddhism, which sprang from similar sources and lasted for several hundred years. Eventually, however, the religious synthesis which may properly be called Hinduism emerged and grew in strength till it won over the allegiance of the Indian people. Buddhism gradually disappeared as a separate religion, many of its ideas being assimilated into Hinduism.

The religion of the Vedas and Upanishads was centered in the Aryan north of India. Classical Hinduism, however, developed largely out of influences from the Dravidian south. The trend towards a personal conception of the Godhead, begun in the later Upanishads, intensified dramatically. Religion became fervently, even ecstatically, devotional.

Classical Hinduism is enshrined especially in two sets of books, the Epics and the Puranas. The Epics in question are two long poems, the *Mahabharata*, which describes a feud between two ancient clans, and the *Ramayana*, which

Shiva Nataraja, Lord of the Dance: his dance preserves but also destroys the world (Circa Photo Library)

narrates the story of Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu. The Puranas are extensive collections of stories about the gods and their incarnations.

Vishnu and Shiva The conception of the one, ultimate Godhead as a person to be worshipped by the intense devotion of the heart was embodied especially in two divine figures: Vishnu and Shiva. (A third, Brahma – not to be confused with Brahman – was originally also important, but is no longer much worshipped.)

Vishnu had received a passing mention in the Vedas, but no more. Now he became the most popular of the gods. To his devotee (termed a Vaishnavite), Vishnu is the ultimate reality, the source of the universe. He sleeps in the primeval ocean, on a thousand-headed snake. While he sleeps a lotus grows out of his navel, and in the lotus is born the god Brahma, who creates the world. When the world has been created Vishnu awakes and takes his place as its ruler

A cave shrine to Shiva (Circa Photo Library)

on high. He is usually shown in images as a dark-blue man wearing a crown and possessing four arms, each of which holds an object specially associated with him: a conch shell, a discus, a mace, and a lotus. Vishnu is deeply concerned for the welfare of mankind.

In order to help men Vishnu is believed to have become incarnate in various forms, several of which are animals, and about which many stories are told. His two chief incarnations (*avataras*), however, are as men: Rama and Krishna. Rama, often shown carrying a bow and arrow, is the embodiment of ideal manhood: a brave leader, a just king, and a gentle and faithful husband to his wife Sita, who is herself the ideal of womanhood. The story of Rama and Sita is told especially in the ancient epic poem, the *Ramayana*.

The principal incarnation of Vishnu is Krishna ("black" or "dark"). In the stories told about him Krishna plays a great variety of roles: in some he is a child, playing childish pranks; in others he is a warrior, in yet others he is a youth who seduces the wives and daughters of his cowherds, his favorite being the beautiful Radha. These latter stories are clearly erotic, but are interpreted by his devotees in the sense of a religious allegory of the love between God and the soul.

An image of Durga carried during a festival in her honor (Ann & Bury Peerless)

Shiva bears a marked resemblance to the paradoxical deity of fertility and asceticism we have already encountered in pre-Vedic religion (see above, pp. 17–18). Unlike Vishnu, Shiva has a ruthless, intolerant, and ferocious aspect. He is "the Destroyer." This is now usually explained by his devotees as meaning that he destroys moral evil, but originally perhaps he signified the awesome destructive power of nature. He wears a necklace of skulls, inhabits burning-grounds and battlefields, and is accompanied by ghosts and demons. He is the god of death and of time, which destroy all things.

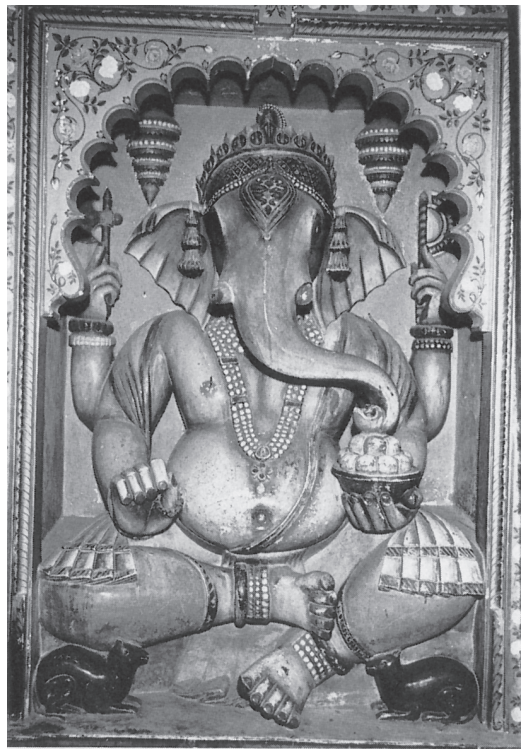
By the same token he is the great ascetic and yogi, that is, he is the symbol of the great creative power of nature, and the patron of ascetics and yogis. He sits on a tiger's skin, sunk in meditation, high on the Himalayan mountains, and by his meditation he preserves the world. He is depicted with a third eye in his forehead, as a sign of his wisdom. He is the lord of snakes, which cover his limbs. His body is covered with ashes, in token of detachment. He is the Lord of the Dance (*Nataraja*), and his eternal dance animates the universe – or destroys it.

Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth (Circa Photo Library)

Shiva is usually depicted with four arms, with each hand holding an emblem: a trident, an antelope, a noose for binding his enemies, and a drum. He wears a tiger's skin around his loins. The special symbol of Shiva, often taking the place of his image in temples, is the lingam, a stylized phallic-shaped object, usually of stone. A devotee of Shiva is termed a "Shaivite."

The goddess: shakti As we have seen, the Mother Goddess was worshipped in India from prehistoric times. With the emergence of the Hindu gods, each god was assigned a goddess as wife. This divine spouse is referred to as the god's *shakti*, a term which means "power," the theory being that the god was transcendent and inactive, above human concerns, but his divine wife (who was ultimately identical with him) projected his power into the world and acted on his behalf. Although many of these goddesses have little actual significance, three are important in the devotional life of Hinduism.

The most prominent is the wife of Shiva, who has many characters and is known by many names. As Parvati she is young, beautiful, and kind, the goddess of beauty; as Durga or Kali she is a hag, with fangs and a blood-red tongue protruding from her mouth. The special symbol of Shiva's shakti is the *yoni*, a stylized form of the female sexual organ, usually found together with the *lingam* of Shiva. (Hindus often have difficulty in accepting the suggestion of scholars that the lingam and yoni represent sexual organs.)



Ganesha (Ann & Bury Peerless)

Lakshmi ("Fortune") or Sri, the wife of Vishnu, is the goddess of wealth and prosperity. She is usually shown sitting on a lotus and is a popular divinity.

Sarasvati is the wife of Brahma and the patroness of art, music, speech, and literature. She rides on a peacock and carries a musical instrument, the vina, and a book. She is said to have invented the Sanskrit language and is worshipped especially by students, writers, and musicians.

A god especially beloved by all Hindus is Ganesha, or Ganapati, the second son of Shiva and Parvati. A cheerful and benevolent deity, he has the head of an elephant, with one tusk broken, and a prominent belly, and was probably originally a non-Aryan elephant god. He is the "Lord of Obstacles" and is worshipped at the beginning of all enterprises, such as journeys or business ventures, to overcome difficulties.

Classical Hinduism is a polytheistic religion. Hindus do not necessarily assume, however, that polytheism is incompatible with monotheism. Some versions of Hinduism (which we do not have the space to treat here) are explicitly monotheistic. Even apart from them, it is widely accepted that the individual divinities are expressions or representations of a single ultimate Godhead. (Something similar was true of the ancient Greeks and Romans.) The Gita explains that for

many people it is easier to focus the mind and heart on the image of a particular deity who is thought of as possessing human-like features than on the impassive and abstract conception of Brahman.

Puja Whereas the Vedic gods were venerated by sacrifice (yajna), the Hindu gods are venerated by worship (*puja*). This is directed to an image of the god, which is sanctified by a special ritual, so that the god is considered to inhabit it as his home. The purpose of puja is not so much to ask for favors as to offer the deity homage and entertainment. For the purposes of the ritual the image is treated as if it were the god himself. He is offered flowers, and water to wash his feet. In the morning he is awakened by music and the ringing of bells. He is washed, dried, and dressed. He is fed with rice and fruit. In the temple he is fanned by the attendants and may even be entertained by dancing girls. The god presents himself to his devotees for ritual viewing, called *darshana*, sometimes being carried through the streets for that purpose, and the devotee brings the god food, termed *prasada*.

The four classes (Varnas)

Religious duties are not the same for everyone. From the time of the Aryan migrations Indian society has been divided into four great classes according to the main occupations of the people: Brahmins, the priestly class; Kshatriyas, the warriors; Vaishyas, the peasants, merchants, and craftsmen; and Shudras, the laborers. Each class has its own duties. The Brahmin must always maintain ritual purity and therefore must not eat meat or drink alcohol, for example, since these are ritually unclean, while the Shudra may do both. The Brahmin may study the scriptures while the Shudra may not, being typically in a state of ritual impurity. The *Bhagavad-Gita* teaches that it is better to carry out the duties of one's own class badly rather than those of another class well.

These duties are described in detail in various writings of classical Hinduism, especially the Laws of Manu. The chief duty of the Brahmin is to study and teach, to sacrifice, and to give and receive gifts. The duty of the Kshatriya is to protect the people. The duty of the Vaishya is to breed cattle and till the earth, to pursue trade and to lend money. The duty of the Shudra is to serve the other three. A provision of the Laws of Manu states that the class system exists only for the good of the people, and that if it should lose the support of the people, it may be abolished.

At about the age of eight a Brahmin boy undergoes the ancient ceremony of initiation (*upanayana*), when, clothed as an ascetic and carrying a staff in his hand, he is invested with a sacred cord, hung over his left shoulder and under his right arm, which he must wear constantly for the rest of his life, on pain of severe penance. He is now formally an Aryan, and is described as "twice-born" (*dvija*). Theoretically this applies to all three of the upper classes, but in practice the Kshatriyas and Vaishyas largely neglect it. The Shudra is excluded from this rite and does not become a full Aryan.

Beneath the four classes are the Outcastes or Untouchables. These are groups who are judged, usually because of their typical patterns of behavior, to be altogether outside the pale of so-called proper Hindu society: for example, because they hunt and eat meat.

Children, ascetics, and widows fall outside the class system.

The castes (Jatis)

As their names imply, the four Varnas are function or activity groupings, and do not necessarily rule out intermarriage; in earlier times intermarriage was not uncommon. The Varnas are subdivided, however, into several thousand smaller divisions properly called castes or *Jatis*, which typically rule out intermarriage. The castes originated in different ways – some were based on occupation, others on geographic region, while yet others derived from the incorporation of aboriginal tribes or other ethnic or religious groups into Hinduism – and as a result there is a great deal of diversity between them. Membership is by birth ("jati" means birth). The castes are related hierarchically to one another: each is either superior or inferior to its neighbors, and they are often further divided into subcastes.

Each caste or subcaste lays down detailed rules for its own members regarding food, marriage, and occupation. Often members of a higher caste may not accept food cooked by members of a lower caste, for example. In economic life, each caste is recognized as possessing a monopoly of its own occupation, other castes not being allowed to compete against it.

This caste and class system forms an integral part of traditional Hinduism, which considers it sacred, a part of the cosmic order. The person who lives a good life will be reborn into a higher caste, while one who has lived an evil life will return in a lower caste. Although officially the caste system was banned by the constitution when India attained independence in 1947, it still remains an important factor in the national life. It has been argued that in its time it was essentially a humane system, simply a realistic recognition of the differences that existed between the members of the society, and that it has kept an immensely diverse people, with the potential for serious conflict, stable and at peace over several thousand years.

The Four Ends of Man

Human pursuits can be guided by four different kinds of motive or purpose. We can do something because it is right, it is our duty, it is what we ought to do. This is the First End of Man: Duty, *Dharma*. Or we can do it for the sake of securing some material gain, such as money or power. This is the Second End of Man: *Artha*. Or we can do it in order to obtain pleasure, which is the Third End of Man: *Kama*. Finally, we can do it in order to achieve spiritual liberation, release from the everlasting cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. This is the Fourth End of Man: *Moksha*.

Duty is the first because it is the most fundamental, the most indispensable. We must fulfill our obligations. To be motivated by a sense of duty means not only to fulfill our general moral obligations towards others, but also to observe the duties especially associated with one's class, as a Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, or Shudra, with one's caste and subcaste, and with one's stage in life.

In the Hindu view there is nothing wrong with the Second End, the search for material gain. It is a necessary part of life. But it must be guided and regulated by the requirements of duty. If there should be a conflict between duty on the one hand and the desire for power or possessions on the other, duty must always win out.

Similarly there is nothing objectionable about the Third End, the pursuit of pleasure. Pleasures are of very different kinds: some are refined and noble, such as the pleasure aroused by beautiful music, art, or literature. But again, the quest for pleasure must be controlled by the demands of duty. If conflict should arise between the requirements of duty and the quest for pleasure, we must follow the path that duty dictates.

The fourth goal, liberation, Moksha, is the highest. It is the goal towards which the wise man ultimately directs all his actions.

The four stages of life (Ashramas)

Just as religious duties are different for each class, so also are they different for each stage of life. Classical Hinduism recognized four stages, each with its own responsibilities.

On being invested with the sacred cord, the Brahmin boy enters the first stage, that of the *Brahmacarin*, the celibate student, when his chief duty is to study the Vedas, living in the house of his teacher.

When his education is finished he returns home, marries, and becomes a *Grihastha*, a householder. His principal duty during this time is to care for the welfare of his family.

When his hair turns white and he sees his sons' sons, according to the Sacred Law he should retire into the forest and live the life of a hermit, a *Vanaprastha*, either leaving his children to the care of his wife or taking his wife with him, and spending his days in meditation and devotion.

Beyond this there is a further and final stage, that of the *Sannyasin*. This is a homeless wanderer, who cuts off all ties to his family, even changing his name, and gives up all possessions except a staff, a begging bowl, and a few pieces of clothing. The Sannyasin is beyond all the religious duties laid down in the Sacred Law. Even today it is not unusual for elderly men to follow this path.

The Sannyasin is not the only figure in Hindu society to practice asceticism. In addition, there is a recognized class of wandering ascetics, called Sadhus or holy men, who may be of any age or class.

The Song of God: the Bhagavad-Gita

This poem, a portion of the *Mahabharata* mentioned above, is the great document of classical Hinduism. In the eyes of many it is India's supreme contribution to the literature of the spirit. Whereas the Upanishads had confined the pathway of spiritual liberation to those few who gave up life and action in the world, who lived the arduous life of the ascetic, practicing full-time the physical and mental exercises designed to give control over the mind and senses, the Gita opens it up to all, to men and women, to rich and poor, to high caste and low caste. The message of the Gita is that it is not necessary to give up the life of action in the world: there is another road. This new road is the path of selfless action (*karma*), achieved through devotion (*bhakti*) to the Divine Person.

Selfless action means doing what needs to be done, but doing it without attachment to its success or failure. "Do the work for the sake of the work, not for the sake of the fruits of the work." On every person duties are incumbent by reason of the place he occupies in society. (See pp. 32–3 above on the four classes.) He must carry these duties out, not abandon them; but he must perform them in a spirit of personal detachment, not allowing himself to be carried away by good fortune or cast down by adversity.

> A man should not hate any living creature. Let him be friendly and compassionate to all. He must free himself from the delusion of "I" and "mine." He must accept pleasure and pain with equal tranquillity. He must be forgiving, ever-contented, self-controlled . . .
>
> He neither molests his fellow men, nor allows himself to become disturbed by the world. He is no longer swayed by joy and envy, anxiety and fear . . .
>
> He does not desire or rejoice in what is pleasant. He does not dread what is unpleasant, or grieve over it. He remains unmoved by good or evil fortune.
>
> His attitude is the same toward friend and foe. He is indifferent to honor and insult, heat and cold, pleasure and pain.
>
> A man's own natural duty, even if it seems imperfectly done, is better than work not naturally his own, even if this is well performed.

How is this spiritual self-possession to be attained? By attachment to the Supreme Person. "Perform every action with your heart fixed on the Supreme Lord." The Supreme Person in the form of the god Vishnu is depicted as saying: "Mentally resign all your action to me. Regard me as your dearest loved one. Know me to be your only refuge. Be united always in heart and consciousness with me. United with me, you shall overcome all difficulties by my grace."

Although the doctrine of the *Bhagavad-Gita* is framed in terms of devotion to the god Vishnu, it has been understood by Hindus as applicable to all the gods, understood as images or manifestations of the One Supreme Reality, Brahman.

Hindu festivals

The Hindu calendar has many festivals, varying from place to place, and only a few of the chief ones can be mentioned here.

Makar Sakranti, celebrated usually around the middle of January, marks the entrance of the sun into the sign of Capricorn or Makar, considered astrologically auspicious.

Vasant Panchami, held not long after Makar Sakranti, is a festival in honor of spring, when students lay books and writing materials at the feet of the goddess of learning, Sarasvati.

Shivarat, the night of Shiva, is celebrated around the middle or end of February, when Shiva is worshipped with flowers during the whole night.

Holi is a carnival, held in February or March, and a very popular occasion. Bonfires are lit the preceding night, to celebrate the destruction of evil, and on the day of the festival crowds fill the streets, throwing red or yellow powder or colored water over passers-by.

Janam Ashtami, in July or August, celebrates the birth of Krishna.

Ganesh Chaturthi is a festival in honour of Ganesha, held around the end of August.

Dassehra is a ten-day festival celebrated in September or October, symbolizing the triumph of good over evil, and dedicated largely to the goddess Durga.

Divali is the Festival of Lights, celebrated in October or November. Oil lamps made of clay (or often electric lights now) are placed in the windows of houses or set afloat on rivers or the sea to welcome Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity.

Kumbha Maha Mela is a great religious gathering held once every twelve years at a number of sacred places.

Hindu Ethics

Perhaps the feature of traditional Hindu ethics which the Western observer is most likely to find striking is its acceptance of, and even emphasis on, human inequality rather than equality. Ethics tends traditionally to be understood in Hinduism to a large extent as the fulfillment of class and caste duties, which differ from person to person and from one stage of life to another, as explained above. The classes and castes are not merely different from one another but deeply unequal in their moral dignity; some being morally superior to others and others morally inferior. For the effect of the doctrine of reincarnation is to assert not merely that justice will be done in a future life, but that the present life, with all its inequalities as reflected in one's class and caste, represents a just judgement on one's previous life.

At the same time, however, the Hindu tradition also recognizes that there are duties common to all human beings (*samanya* or *sadharana dharma*). The ideal of *ahimsa*, non-injury to men and animals, though primarily a Buddhist and Jain

doctrine, has played a significant role in Hindu thinking ever since the time of the emperor Ashoka (*c.*270 BC). This ideal inculcates respect for all forms of conscious life, since reincarnation is possible under any such life-form. It finds special expression in the universal veneration of the cow, which must everywhere be allowed free passage. Ahimsa is widely taken to imply vegetarianism.

Interestingly, however, ahimsa has never been understood to exclude war. Unlike the West, India never developed a doctrine of the just war or the concept of an unjust war. Indian thinkers, like those in most non-Western societies, have almost universally accepted war as simply something that rulers and governments do. The dharma or class duty of the Kshatriya class is to engage in warfare. On the other hand, given that wars take place, rules were developed for their just conduct.

The renowned scholar of things Indian, A. L. Basham, has written that in ancient India "inequality of birth was given religious sanction, and the lot of the humble was generally hard. Yet our overall impression is that in no other part of the ancient world were the relations of man and man, and of man and the state, so fair and humane. In no other early civilization were slaves so few in number, and in no other ancient lawbook are their rights so well protected as in the *Arthasastra* . . . To us the most striking feature of ancient Indian civilization is its humanity . . . India was a cheerful land, whose people, each finding a niche in a complex and slowly evolving social system, reached a higher level of kindliness and gentleness in their mutual relationships than any other nation of antiquity" (*The Wonder that was India*, pp. 8–9).

Modern Developments

The story of the Hindu religion over the last hundred years has been dominated above all by the figure of Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948). Gandhi elevated the traditional moral doctrine of *ahimsa*, non-violence, into a political weapon of great power by organizing peaceful demonstrations of civil disobedience against the laws and policies of the British government of India in a quest, ultimately successful, to achieve political independence for India. It should be conceded that this outcome was possible only because he was dealing with a government that allowed a large role to conscience. The subsequent division of the subcontinent into the two countries of India, intended to be a secular state, and Pakistan, a state specifically for Muslims, however, led to enormous loss of life and continuing belligerency between them.

In a reflection of modern Western values, Gandhi also championed the cause of the Untouchables, whom he called *harijans*, or children of God, with the consequence that although discrimination based on class and caste has been an all-pervasive feature of Hindu life for millenniums, it was declared illegal in 1950 by the new Indian Constitution. In practice, however, caste remains a powerful force in Hindu life. In a sense it has even been given a new lease of life by the fact that it is now accepted in law as a basis of political and legal identity

or entitlement. It remains a factor in questions of marriage and occupation, though without the unquestioning acceptance it once enjoyed. For over 50 years now India has been a functioning democracy, and this has strengthened the sense of human equality among Hindus.

On the other hand Gandhi also turned the moral weight of religion against modern capitalism and the industrial economy. The Hindu religion has not traditionally been opposed to commerce. On the contrary, the doctrine of the Four Ends of Man explicitly recognizes the acquisition of material wealth as legitimate, and Indian communities outside of India have typically prospered. But Gandhi preached a doctrine of a return to the simple life, and of individual and national self-sufficiency, which had the effect of greatly retarding economic development in India. Recent years, however, have seen a reaction against this and a return to a more positive view of capitalism.

Also in recent years there has been a marked resurgence of militant Hindu nationalism (*Hindutva*). This is a movement to reassert the rights of Hindus and the values of the Hindu tradition against what it views as encroachments from Islam and the West. In particular, militant Hindu nationalism is a protest against the special privileges given to Muslims in Indian law and society. For example, the Indian Constitution gives Muslim but not Hindu men the right of non-judicial divorce (see below, pp. 278–9). It has its own political party, the Bharatiya Janata (Indian People's) party, which has become a formidable force on the Indian political scene, and at the time of writing controls the federal government. Some Hindu nationalists have perpetrated acts of great violence, especially against Muslims, but also against Christians, Sikhs, and other minorities.

Summary of Hinduism

1 Pre-Vedic religion worshipped a Proto-Shiva and the Mother Goddess.

2 Vedic religion was a form of nature worship, in which the powers of nature, especially of the sky, were personified in divinities, worshipped by animal sacrifices.

3 The Upanishads teach that there is a supreme or absolute Reality, Brahman, which constitutes the true identity, the Atman, of every being. Spiritual liberation or moksha, bringing release from the endless cycles of birth, death, and rebirth, Samsara, is attained through the realization of this identity.

4 In Classical Hinduism the concept of Brahman becomes more personal. He is worshipped in the forms of the gods, especially Vishnu and Shiva, and their Shaktis. Moksha may be attained by following the path of selfless action through devotion.

Questions for discussion

1 What considerations might lead you to believe that the worldview of the Upanishads is valid?

2 What considerations might lead you to reject it as mistaken?

3 To what extent would it be possible to abandon the class and caste system, yet retain the essential beliefs and values of Hinduism?

4 Would you expect the doctrines of the Upanishads or of classical Hinduism to have any consequences for the political life of India? How could they affect its economic life?

Test questions

1 Identify: Indra, Agni, Varuna, Rta.

2 Explain what is meant by the following terms: Brahman, Atman, maya, moksha, Samsara, yoga.

3 Outline the worldview of the Upanishads.

4 Identify: Vishnu, Shiva, Sarasvati, Kali.

5 What is the principal message of the *Bhagavad-Gita*?

6 What are the Four Ends of Man?

7 What are the four stages of life?

8 What are the four Varnas?

Additional reading

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