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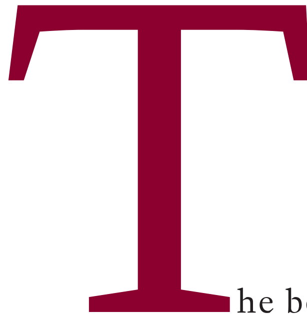
# HINDUISM

he beliefs and practices of Hindus are expressed in a series of characteristic doctrinal, ritual, social, narrative, and poetic forms.

## INTRODUCTION

**The term Hinduism.** The English term *Hinduism* was coined by British writers in the first decades of the 19th century and became familiar as a designator of religious ideas and practices distinctive to India with the publication of such books as Sir Monier-Williams' *Hinduism* (1877). Initially it was an outsiders' word, building on centuries-old usages of the word Hindu. Early travelers to the Indus Valley, beginning with the Greeks, spoke of its inhabitants as "Hindu" (Greek: *'indoi*), and in the 16th century residents of India themselves began very slowly to employ the term to distinguish themselves from the "Turks"—*i.e.,* descendants of people who came to India from Central Asia. Gradually the distinction became primarily religious, as opposed to ethnic, geographic, or cultural.

Since the late 19th century, Hindus have reacted to the term Hinduism in several ways. Some have rejected it in favor of indigenous formulations. Those preferring the terms VEDA or VEDIC RELIGION want to embrace an ancient textual core and the tradition of BRAHMIN learning that preserved and interpreted it. Those preferring the term SANATANA DHARMA ("eternal law," or as Philip Lutgendorf has playfully suggested "old-time religion") emphasize a more catholic tradition of belief and practice (such as worship through images, dietary codes, and the veneration of the cow) not necessarily mediated by Brahmins. Still others, perhaps the majority, have simply accepted the term Hinduism or its analogues in various Indic languages, especially *hindū dharma*.

From the early 20th century onward, textbooks on Hinduism were written by Hindus themselves, often under the rubric of *sanatana dharma*. These efforts at self-explanation were and are intended to set Hinduism parallel with other religious traditions and to teach it systematically to Hindu youths. They add a new layer to an elaborate tradition of ĀGAMAS and *śāstra*s expositing practice and doctrine that dates back well into the 1st millennium CE. The roots of this tradition can be traced back much farther—textually, to the schools of commentary and debate preserved in epic and Vedic writings dating to the 2nd millennium BCE; and visually, through YAKṢAS (luminous spirits associated with specific locales and

*Devotees carrying a statue of the Hindu god Gaṇeśa for immersion in the Arabian Sea, Bombay, India*
Rob Elliott—AFP/Getty Images



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natural phenomena) and NĀGAS (snakelike divinities) worshiped about 400 BCE–400 CE to veneration of goddesses, as seems to be implied by the female terra-cotta figurines found ubiquitously in excavations of INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION (3rd–2nd millennia BCE) sites. In recognition of these ancient sources, present-day Hindus often assert that Hinduism is the world's oldest religion.

**General nature of Hinduism.** More strikingly than any other major religious community, Hindus accept and indeed celebrate the complex, organic, multileveled, and sometimes internally inconsistent nature of their tradition. This expansiveness is made possible by the widely shared Hindu view that truth or reality cannot be encapsulated in any creedal formulation. As many Hindus affirm through the prayer "May good thoughts come to us from all sides," truth is of such a nature that it must be multiply sought, not dogmatically claimed.

Anyone's view of the truth—even that of a GURU regarded as possessing superior authority—is fundamentally conditioned by the specifics of time, age, gender, state of consciousness, social and geographic location, and stage of attainment. These perspectives enhance a broad view of religious truth rather than diminish it; hence there is a strong tendency for contemporary Hindus to affirm that tolerance is the foremost religious virtue. On the other hand, even cosmopolitan Hindus living in a global environment recognize and prize the fact that their religion has developed in the specific geographic, social, historical, and ritual climates of the Indian subcontinent. Religious practices and ideological formulations that emphasize this fact—from benign PILGRIMAGES to the violent edge of Hindu nationalism—affirm a strong connection to the Hindu homeland. Such a tension between universalist and particularist impulses has long animated the Hindu tradition. When Hindus speak of their religious identity as *sanatana dharma,* a formulation made popular late in the 19th century, they emphasize its continuous, seemingly eternal (*sanatana*) existence and the fact that it describes a web of customs, obligations, traditions, and ideals (DHARMA) that far exceeds the recent Christian and Western secularist tendency to think of religion primarily as a system of beliefs. A common way in which English-speaking Hindus often distance themselves from that is to insist that Hinduism is not a religion but a way of life.

**Five tensile strands.** Across the sweep of Indian religious history over the past two millennia, at least five elements have given shape to the Hindu religious tradition: doctrine, practice, society, story, and devotion. None of these is univocal; no Hindu would claim that they correspond to the FIVE PILLARS OF ISLAM. Rather, to adopt a typical Hindu metaphor, they relate to one another as strands in an elaborate braid. Moreover, each strand develops out of a history of conversation, elaboration, and challenge. Hence, in looking for what makes the tradition cohere, it is sometimes better to locate major points of tension than to expect clear agreements on Hindu thought and practice.

*Doctrine.* The first of the five strands that weave together to make Hinduism is doctrine, as enunciated and debated in a vast textual tradition anchored to the Veda ("Knowledge"), the oldest core of Hindu religious utterance, and organized through the centuries primarily by members of the learned Brahmin CASTE. Here several characteristic tensions appear. One concerns the status of the One in relation to the Many—issues of POLYTHEISM, MONOTHEISM, and monism—or of supernal truth in relation to its embodied, phenomenal counterpart. Another tension concerns the disparity between the world-preserving ideal of dharma (proper behavior defined in relation to the gods and society) and that of MOKṢA (release from an inherently flawed world). A third tension exists between one's individual destiny, as shaped by KARMA (action in this and other lives), and any person's deep bond to family, society, and the divinities associated with them.

*Practice.* The second strand in the fabric of Hinduism is practice. Many Hindus, in fact, would place this first. Despite India's enormous diversity, a common grammar of ritual behavior connects various places, strata, and periods of Hindu life. While it is true that various elements of Vedic ritual survive in modern practice, especially in life-cycle rites (*see* SAṂSKĀRA), and serve a unifying function, much more influential commonalities appear in the ritual vocabulary of the worship of God in the form of an ICON, or image (PRATIMĀ, *mūrti,* etc.).

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*Vishnu on the serpent Śeṣa,* c. *500* CE, *Deogarh, Madhya Pradesh, India*
Borromeo—Art Resource

Broadly, this is called PŪJĀ ("praising [the deity]"). It echoes conventions of hospitality that might be performed for an honored guest, and the giving and sharing of food is central. Such food is called PRASĀDA (in Hindi, *prasād*: "grace"), reflecting the recognition that when human beings make offerings to deities, the initiative is not really theirs. They are actually responding to the generosity that bore them into a world fecund with life and auspicious possibility. The divine personality installed as a home or temple image receives *prasāda,* tasting it (Hindus differ as to whether this is a real or symbolic act, gross or subtle) and offering the remains to worshipers. Consuming these leftovers, worshipers accept their creaturely status as beings inferior to and dependent upon the divine. An element of tension arises because the logic of *pūjā* and *prasāda* would seem to accord all humans an equally ancillary status with respect to God, yet exclusionary rules have often been sanctified rather than challenged by *prasāda*-based ritual. Specifically, lower-caste people and those perceived as outsiders or carriers of pollution have historically been forbidden to enter certain Hindu temples, a practice that continues in some instances even today.

*Society.* The third aspect that has served to organize Hindu life is society. Since the scholar al-Bīrūnī traveled to India in the early 11th century, visitors have been struck by an unusually well stratified (if locally variant) system of social relations that has come to be called familiarly the caste system. While it is true that there is a vast slippage between the ancient vision of society as divided into four ideal classifications (VARṆAS) and the thousands of endogamous birth-groups (JĀTIS, literally "births") that constitute Indian society in reality, few would dispute that Indian society is notably plural and hierarchical in its organization. This has to do with an understanding of truth or reality as being similarly plural and multilayered, whether one understands the direction of influence to proceed from social fact to religious doctrine or vice versa. Seeking its own answer to this conundrum, a well-known Vedic hymn (ṚG VEDA 10.90) describes how in the beginning of time a primordial person underwent a process of sacrifice that produced a four-part cosmos and its human counterpart, a four-part social order.



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As in the realms of doctrine and religious practice, so also in this social domain there is a characteristic tension. Ideally, we have the humble, even-handed view that each person or group approaches truth in a way that is necessarily distinct, reflecting its own perspective. Only by allowing each to speak and act in such terms can a society constitute itself as a proper representation of truth or reality. Yet this pluriform, context-sensitive habit of thought can too easily be used to legitimate a social-system that enshrines privilege and prejudice. If it is believed that no standards apply universally, one group can too easily justify its dominance over another. Historically, therefore, certain Hindus have been able to espouse tolerance at the level of doctrine but practice intolerance in the social realm: caste discrimination. Responding to such oppression, especially when justified by allegedly Hindu norms, lower-caste groups have sometimes insisted, "We are not Hindus!" Yet their own communities may enact similar inequalities, and their religious practices and beliefs often continue to tie them to the greater Hindu fold.

*Story.* Another dimension drawing Hindus into a single community of discourse is narrative. For at least two millennia, people in almost all corners of India—and now well beyond—have responded to certain prominent stories of divine play and of interactions between gods and humans. These concern major figures in the Hindu pantheon: KRISHNA and his lover RĀDHĀ, RĀMA and his wife SĪTĀ and brother Lakṣmaṇa, SHIVA and his consort PĀRVATĪ (or, in a different birth, SATĪ), and the Great Goddess DURGĀ, or DEVĪ as a slayer of the buffalo demon Mahiṣāsura. Often such narratives illustrate the interpenetration of the divine and human spheres, with deities such as Krishna and Rāma entering entirely into the human drama. Many tales focus in different degrees on dharmic exemplariness, genealogies of human experience, forms of love, and the struggle between order and chaos or duty and play. In performing and listening to these stories, Hindus have often experienced themselves as members of a single imagined family.

Yet simultaneously these narratives serve as an arena for articulating tensions. Women performers sometimes tell the RĀMĀYAṆA as the story of Sītā's travails at the hands of Rāma rather than as a testament of Rāma's righteous victories. The virtues of Rāma's enemy RĀVAṆA, even supplanting those of Rāma himself, may be emphasized in South Indian performances. And lower-caste musicians of North India present epics such as ĀLHĀ or ḌHOLĀ, enacting their own experience of the world rather than playing out the upper-caste milieu of the MAHĀBHĀRATA, which these epics nonetheless echo. To the broadly known pan-Hindu, male-centered narrative traditions, these variants provide both resonance and challenge.

*Śaivite sadhu*
Earl Scott—Photo Researchers

*Devotion.* Finally, there is a fifth strand that contributes to the complex unity of Hindu experience through time: BHAKTI ("sharing," or "devotion"), a broad tradition of loving God that is especially associated with the lives and words of vernacular poet-saints throughout India. Devotional poems attributed to these figures, who represent both sexes and all social classes, have elaborated a store of images to which access can be had in a score of languages. Individual poems are sometimes strikingly similar from one language or century to another, without there being any trace of mediation through the pan-Indian, distinctly upper-caste language Sanskrit. Often, individual motifs in the lives of *bhakti* poet-saints also bear strong family resemblances. Because *bhakti* verse first appeared in Tamil (*c.* 6th century), in South India, *bhakti* is sometimes attributed to a muse or goddess who spent her youth there, aging and revivifying as she moved northward into other regions with different languages. With its central affirmation that religious enthusiasm is more fundamental than rigidities of practice or doctrine, *bhakti* provides a common challenge to other aspects of Hindu life. At the same time, it contributes to a common Hindu heritage—in part, a common heritage of protest.

## CENTRAL CONCEPTIONS

In the following sections, we will take up various aspects of this complex whole, proceeding in a fashion that allows us to develop a measure of historical perspective on the development of the Hindu tradition. This approach has its costs, for it may seem to give priority to aspects of the tradition that appear in its earliest extant texts. These owe their preservation primarily to the labors of up-



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per-caste men, especially Brahmins, and often tell us far too little about the perspectives of others. Particularly early on, readers must therefore read both with and against the grain, noting silences and imagining rebuttals to skewed visions of the experiences of women, regional communities, and people regarded by Brahmins as being of low status—all of whom nowadays call themselves Hindus or identify with groups that can sensibly be placed within the broad Hindu span.

**Veda, Brahmins, and issues of religious authority.** For members of the upper castes, a principal characteristic of Hinduism has traditionally been a recognition of the Veda, the most ancient body of Indian religious literature, as an absolute authority revealing fundamental and unassailable truth. The Veda is also regarded as the basis of all the later śāstric texts used in Hindu doctrine and practice, including, for example, the medical corpus known as ĀYURVEDA. Parts of the Veda are quoted in essential Hindu rituals (*e.g.,* weddings), and it is the source of many enduring patterns of Hindu thought, yet its contents are practically unknown to most Hindus, and it is seldom drawn upon for literal information or advice. Still, it is venerated from a distance by most Hindus, and groups who reject its authority outright (as in BUDDHISM and JAINISM) are regarded by Hindus as unfaithful to their common tradition.

Another characteristic of much Hindu thought is its special regard for Brahmins as a priestly class possessing spiritual supremacy by birth. As special manifestations of religious power and as bearers and teachers of the Veda, Brahmins have often been considered to represent an ideal of ritual purity and social prestige. Yet this has also been challenged, either because of competing claims to religious authority—especially by kings and rulers—or because Brahminhood is regarded as a status attained by depth of learning, not birth. Evidence of both these challenges can be found in Vedic literature itself, especially the UPANISHADS, and *bhakti* literature is full of vignettes in which the small-mindedness of Brahmins inversely mirrors the true depth of RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE.

*Doctrine of ātman-Brahman.* Hindus believe in an uncreated, eternal, infinite, transcendent principle that, "comprising in itself being and non-being," is the sole reality, the ultimate cause and foundation, source, and goal of all existence. This ultimate reality may be called BRAHMAN. As the All, Brahman either causes the universe and all beings to emanate from itself, transforms itself into the universe, or assumes the appearance of the universe. Brahman is in all things and is the self (ĀTMAN) of all living beings. Brahman is the creator, preserver, or transformer and reabsorber of everything. Hindus differ, however, as to whether this ultimate reality is best conceived as lacking attributes and qualities—the impersonal Brahman—or as a personal God, especially VISHNU, Shiva, or the Goddess (these being the preferences of adherents called Vaiṣṇavas, Śaivas, and Śāktas, respectively). The conviction of the importance of a search for a One that is the All has been embedded in India's spiritual life for more than 3,000 years.

**The pantheon.** Hindus typically focus their worship of the One on a favorite divinity (*iṣṭadevatā*); they do not, however, insist that there is anything exclusive in that choice. Although a range of deities may be so worshiped, many Hindus worship Vishnu and Shiva. Vishnu is often regarded as a special manifestation of the preservative aspect of Supreme Reality, while Shiva is regarded as the manifestation of the destructive aspect. Another deity, BRAHMĀ, whose name is a masculine inflection of the noun Brahman, is the creator and remains in the background as a DEMIURGE. These three great figures (Brahmā, Vishnu, and Shiva) constitute the so-called Hindu trinity (TRIMŪRTI). This conception was an early attempt to harmonize the conviction that the Supreme Power is singular with the plurality of gods addressed in daily worship. The *trimūrti* is still seen in Hindu theological writing, but it is virtually absent in practice, since Brahmā is rarely worshiped. Much closer to lived religion is another attempt to make sense of the pantheon, in which the Great Goddess (known variously as Devī, Durgā, or ŚAKTI) replaces Brahmā as the third element in a trinity (*see* DEVĪ MĀHĀTMYA; ŚĀKTISM).

**Karma, saṃsāra, and mokṣa.** Hindus generally accept the doctrine of transmigration and rebirth and the complementary belief in karma ("action"), the idea that prior acts condition a being in subsequent forms of life. The whole process of



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rebirths is called SAMSĀRA, a cyclic process with no clear beginning or end that encompasses lives of perpetual, serial attachments. Actions (karma), if generated by desire and an appetite for results, propel the system forward and bind one's spirit (JĪVA) to an endless series of births and deaths unless a person is able to control the root cause of interested action, desire. Desire motivates any social interaction (particularly when involving sex or food), resulting in the mutual exchange of good and bad karma. In one prevalent view, the very meaning of salvation is one's final emancipation (*mokṣa*) from this morass, an escape from the impermanence that is an inescapable feature of mundane existence. In this view the only goal is the one permanent and eternal principle: the One, God, Brahman, which is totally opposite to phenomenal existence. People who have not fully realized that their being is identical with Brahman are thus seen as deluded. Fortunately, the very structure of human experience teaches the ultimate identity between Brahman and the kernel of human personality, the selfhood called *ātman*. One may learn this lesson by different means: by realizing one's essential sameness with all living beings, by responding in love to a personal expression of the divine, or by coming to appreciate that the competing attentions and moods of one's waking consciousness are grounded in a transcendental unity. We have a taste of this unity in our daily experience of deep, dreamless sleep.

**Dharma and the three paths.** Hindus disagree about the best way (MĀRGA) to attain such release and concede that no "one size fits all." Three paths to salvation are presented in an extremely influential religious text, the BHAGAVAD GĪTĀ ("Song of God"; *c.* 100 CE). These three are (1) the *karma-mārga* ("path of duties"), the disinterested discharge of ritual and social obligations, (2) the *jñāna-mārga* ("path of knowledge"), the use of meditative concentration preceded by a long and systematic ethical and contemplative training (YOGA) to gain a supraintellectual insight into one's identity with Brahman, and (3) the *bhakti-mārga* ("path of devotion"), love for a personal God. These ways are regarded as suited to various types of people, but they are interactive and potentially available to all.

Although the pursuit of *mokṣa* is institutionalized in Hindu life through ascetic practice and the ideal of withdrawing from the world at the conclusion of one's life, such practices of withdrawal are explicitly denigrated in the *Bhagavad Gītā* itself. Because action is inescapable, these three disciplines are better thought of as simultaneously achieving the goals of world maintenance (dharma, doing one's duty) and world release (*mokṣa*). Through the suspension of desire and ambition and through a taste for the fruits (*phala*) of one's actions, one is enabled to float free of life while engaging it fully. This matches the goals of most Hindus, these being: to execute properly one's social and ritual duties; to support one's caste, family, and profession; and to do one's part to achieve a broader stability in the cosmos, nature, and society. The designation of Hinduism as *sanatana dharma* emphasizes this goal of maintaining personal and universal equilibrium, while at the same time calling attention to the role played by the performance of traditional (*sanatana*) religious practices in achieving that goal. Such tradition is understood to be inherently pluriform, since no one person can occupy all the social, occupational, and age-defined roles that are requisite to maintaining the health of the life-organism as a whole. Hence universal maxims (*e.g.,* AHIMSĀ, the desire not to harm) are qualified by the more particular dharmas that are appropriate to each of the four major *varṇa*s, or classes of society: Brahmins (priests), KṢATRIYAS (warriors and kings), VAIŚYAS (the common people), and ŚŪDRAS (servants). These four rather abstract categories are further superseded by the more practically applicable dharmas appropriate to each of the thousands of particular castes (*jāti*s). And these, in turn, are cross-referenced to obligations appropriate to one's gender and stage of life (*āśrama*). In principle, then, Hindu ethics are exquisitely context-sensitive, and Hindus expect and celebrate a wide variety of individual behavior.

**Āśramas: the four stages of life.** In the West, the so-called life-negating aspects of Hinduism—rigorous disciplines of Yoga, for example—have often been overemphasized. The polarity of ASCETICISM and sensuality, which assumes the form of a conflict between the aspiration for liberation and the heartfelt desire to have descendants and continue earthly life, manifests itself in Hindu social life as



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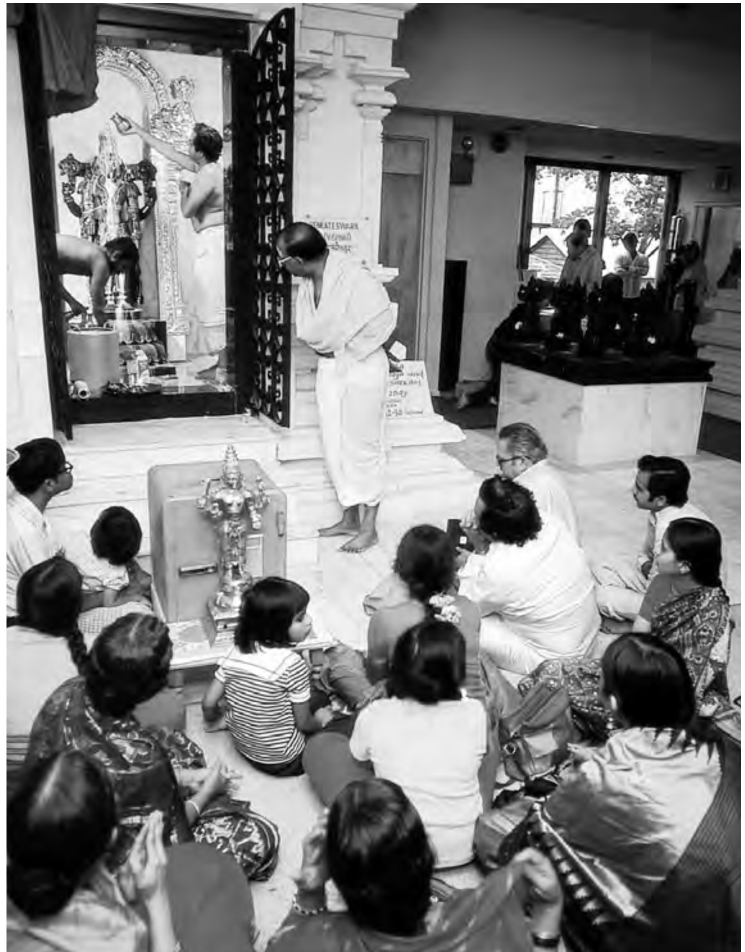
the tension between the different goals and stages of life. For many centuries, the relative value of an active life and the performance of meritorious works (*pravṛtti*) as opposed to the renunciation of all worldly interests and activity (*nivṛtti*) has been a debated issue. While philosophical works such as the Upanishads placed emphasis on renunciation, the dharma texts argued that the householder who maintains his sacred fire, begets children, and performs his ritual duties well also earns religious merit. Nearly 2,000 years ago these texts elaborated the social doctrine of the four *āśrama*s (*see* ASHRAM; stages of life). It held that a male member of the three higher classes should first become a chaste student (*brahmacārī*); then become a married householder (*gṛhastha*), discharging his debts to his ancestors by begetting sons and to the gods by sacrificing; then retire to the forest to devote himself to spiritual contemplation; and finally, but not mandatorily, become a homeless wandering ascetic (SANNYĀSĪ). The situation of the forest dweller was often omitted or rejected in practical life.



*Shrine to Vishnu in a Hindu temple in New York City*
Katrina Thomas—Photo Researchers

Although the status of a householder was often extolled and some authorities, regarding studentship a mere preparation for this next *āśrama,* went so far as to brand all other stages inferior, there were always people who became wandering ascetics immediately after studentship. Theorists were inclined to reconcile the divergent views and practices by allowing the ascetic way of life to those who are, owing to the effects of restrained conduct in former lives, entirely free from worldly desire, even if they had not gone through the prior stages.

The texts describing such life stages were written by men for men; they paid scant attention to paradigms for women. The MANU-SMṚTI (200 BCE–300 CE; "Laws of Manu"), for example, was content to regard marriage as the female equivalent to initiation in the life of a student, thereby effectively denying that the student stage in life is appropriate for girls. Furthermore, in the householder stage a woman's purpose was summarized as service to her husband. What we know of actual practice, however, challenges the idea that these patriarchal norms were ever perfectly enacted or that women entirely accepted them. While some women became ascetics (*sannyāsinī*s), many more focused their religious lives on realizing a state of blessedness (*kalyāṇa*) that is understood to be at once this-worldly and expressive of a larger, cosmic well-being. Women have often directed the cultivation of the auspicious (*śrī*) life-giving force (*śakti*) they possess to the benefit of their husbands and families, but as an ideal it has independent status.

## SACRED TEXTS

**Vedas.** *Importance and components of the Veda.* The Veda ("Knowledge") is a collective term for the sacred SCRIPTURES of the Hindus. Since about the 5th century BCE, the Veda has been considered the creation of neither human nor god; rather, it is regarded as the eternal truth that was in ancient times directly re-



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vealed to or "heard" by gifted and inspired seers (*ṛṣi*s) who uttered it in the most perfect human language, Sanskrit. Although most of the religion of the Vedic texts, which revolves around rituals of fire sacrifice, has been eclipsed by other aspects of Hindu doctrine and practice, parts of the Veda are still memorized and recited as a religious act of great merit.

The Veda is the product of early inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent who referred to themselves as ARYAN (*ārya,* "noble"). It represents the particular interests of the two classes of Aryan society—the priests (Brahmins) and the warrior-kings (Kṣatriyas)—who ruled over the far more numerous peasants (Vaiśyas). Because it is the literature of a ruling class, it probably does not represent all the myths and cults of the early Indo-Aryans, let alone those of non-Aryans.

Vedic literature ranges from the Ṛg Veda (composed *c.* 1200 BCE) to the Upanishads (composed *c.* 700 BCE–100 CE). The most important texts are the four collections (Saṃhitās) known as the Veda or Vedas (*i.e.,* "Book[s] of Knowledge"): the Ṛg Veda ("Wisdom of the Verses"), the YAJUR VEDA ("Wisdom of the Sacrificial Formulas"), the SĀMA VEDA ("Wisdom of the Chants"), and the ATHARVA VEDA ("Wisdom of the Atharvan Priests"). Of these, the Ṛg Veda is the oldest. In the Vedic texts that succeeded these earliest compilations, the BRĀHMAṆAS (discussions of Vedic ritual), *Āraṇyaka*s (books studied in the forest), and Upanishads (secret teachings concerning cosmic correlations), the interest in the early Ṛg Vedic gods wanes, and these gods become little more than accessories to Vedic ritual. Polytheism begins to be replaced by a sacrificial PANTHEISM of PRAJĀPATI ("Lord of Creatures"), who is the All. In the Upanishads Prajāpati merges with the concept of Brahman, the supreme reality and substance of the universe, replacing any specific personification, thus transforming the mythology into abstract philosophy.

*Krishna, from Orissa, India,* c. *1800; ivory with traces of polychrome*
Archive Photos

Together, the components of each of the four Vedas—the Saṃhitās, *Brāhmaṇa*s, *Āraṇyaka*s, and Upanishads—constitute the revealed scripture of Hinduism, or ŚRUTI ("heard"). All other works—in which the actual doctrines and practices of Hindus are encoded—are recognized as having been composed by human authors and are thus classed as *smṛti* ("remembered"). The categorization of Veda, however, is capable of elasticity. First, *śruti* is not exactly closed; Upanishads, for example, have been composed until recent times. Second, the texts categorized as *smṛti* inevitably claim to be in accord with the authoritative *śruti* and, thus, worthy of the same respect and sacredness. In all this, the important thing to grasp is that the category of Veda functions as a symbol of authority and hallowed tradition.

*The Ṛg Veda.* The religion reflected in the Ṛg Veda is a polytheism mainly concerned with the propitiation of divinities associated with the sky and the atmosphere. The old Indo-European sky father Dyaus was little regarded by the time the hymns of the Ṛg Veda were composed. More important were such gods as INDRA, VARUṆA (the guardian of the cosmic order), AGNI (the sacrificial fire), and SŪRYA (the sun).

The main ritual activity referred to in the Ṛg Veda is the SOMA sacrifice. Scholars disagree as to whether the *soma* beverage was a hallucinogen derived from the fly agaric mushroom native to mountain climates or (perhaps more likely) a stimulant squeezed from ephedra, a desert shrub. The Ṛg Veda contains a few clear references to animal sacrifice, which probably became more widespread later. There is doubt whether the priests formed a separate class at the beginning of the Ṛg Vedic period. If they did, the prevailing loose class boundaries made it possible for a man of nonpriestly parentage to become a priest. By the end of the period, however, they had become a separate class of specialists, the Brahmins (*brāhmaṇa*s), who claimed superiority over all the other social classes, including the Rājanyas (later Kṣatriyas), the warrior-kings.

*The Upanishads.* The phase of Indian religious life roughly between 700 and 500 BCE was the period of the beginnings of philosophy



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and mysticism marked by the early Upanishads ("Connection," or "Correspondence"). With the Upanishads, the earlier emphasis on ritual was challenged by a new emphasis on knowledge alone—primarily, knowledge of the interconnectedness and ultimate identity of all phenomena, which merely appear to be separate. Historically, the most important of the Upanishads are the two oldest, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* ("Great Forest Text") and the *Chāndogya* (pertaining to the Chandogas, a class of priests who intone hymns at sacrifices), both of which are compilations that record the traditions of sages of the period, notably YĀJÑAVALKYA.

A primary motive of the Upanishads is a desire for mystical knowledge that would ensure freedom from *punarmṛtyu* ("re-death"). Throughout the later Vedic period, the idea that the world of heaven was not the end—and that even in heaven death was inevitable—had been growing. For Vedic thinkers, apprehension about the impermanence of religious merit and its loss in the hereafter, as well as the anticipation of the transience of any form of existence after death, culminating in the much-feared prospect of repeated death, assumed the character of an obsession. The *Brāhmaṇa*s laid out a largely ritual program for escaping and conquering death and achieving a full, integrated life. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka,* however, placed more emphasis on the knowledge of the cosmic connection that formed the underpinnings of ritual. When the doctrine of the identity of *ātman* (the self) and Brahman was established in the Upanishads, the true knowledge of the self and the realization of this identity were (by those sages who were inclined to meditative thought) set above the ritual method.

In the following centuries the main theories connected with the divine essence underlying the world were harmonized and combined, and the tendency was to extol one god as the supreme Lord and Originator (ĪŚVARA), who is at the same time Puruṣa, Prajāpati, Brahman, and the inner self (*ātman*) of all beings. For those who worshiped him, he became the goal of identificatory meditation, which leads to complete cessation of phenomenal existence and becomes the refuge of those who seek eternal peace. The philosopher ŚAṂKARA (*c.* 800 CE) exercised enormous influence on subsequent Hindu thinking through his elegant synthesis of the nontheistic and theistic aspects of Upanishadic teaching. In his commentaries on several of the Upanishads, he distinguished between NIRGUṆA (without attributes) and SAGUṆA (with attributes) aspects of Brahman, that ultimate reality whose relation to the phenomenal world can best be described as nondual (ADVAITA). This "nonrelationship" states the world's deepest truth.

The origin and the development of the belief in the transmigration of souls are very obscure. A few passages suggest that this doctrine was known even in the days of the Ṛg Veda, but it was first clearly propounded in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*. There it is stated that normally the soul returns to earth and is reborn in human or animal form. This doctrine of *saṃsāra* (REINCARNATION) is attributed to the sage Uddālaka Āruṇi, who is said to have learned it from a Kṣatriya chief. In the same text, the doctrine of karma (actions), according to which the soul achieves a happy or unhappy rebirth according to its works in the previous life, also occurs for the first time, attributed to the teacher and sage Yājñavalkya. Both doctrines appear to have been new and strange ones, circulating among small groups of ascetics who were disinclined to make them public, but they must have spread rapidly, for in the later Upanishads and in the earliest Buddhist and Jain scriptures they are common knowledge.

**Sūtras, śāstras, and smṛtis.** Among the texts inspired by the Veda are the DHARMA SUTRAS, or manuals on dharma, which contain rules of conduct and rites as they were practiced in a number of branches of the Vedic schools. Their principal contents address duties at various stages of life, or *āśrama*s (studenthood, householdership, retirement, and asceticism); dietary regulations; offenses and expiations; and the rights and duties of kings. They also discuss purification rites, funerary ceremonies, forms of hospitality, and daily oblations. Finally, they mention juridical matters. The more important of these texts are the *sūtra*s of the BUDDHA GOTAMA, Baudhāyana, and Āpastamba. Although the relationship is not clear, the contents of these works were further elaborated in the more systematic DHARMA ŚĀSTRAS, which in turn became the basis of Hindu law.



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*Hanumān, chief among monkeys, goes to Laṅkā, episode in the* Bhāgavata Purāṇa, *17th-century Indian miniature from Malwa*
Borromeo—Art Resource

First among them stands the *Dharma Śāstra* of Manu, also known as the MANU-SMṚTI ("Tradition [or Laws] of Manu"), with 2,694 stanzas divided into 12 chapters. It deals with various topics such as COSMOGONY, definition of dharma, the SACRAMENTS, initiation and Vedic study, the 8 forms of marriage, hospitality and funerary rites, dietary laws, pollution and purification, rules for women and wives, royal law, 18 categories of juridical matters, and religious matters, including donations, rites of reparation, the doctrine of karma, the soul, and punishment in hell. Law in the juridical sense is thus completely embedded in religious practice. The framework is provided by the model of the four-*varṇa* society. The influence of the *Dharma Śāstra* of Manu as a statement of ideal norms has been very great, but there is no evidence that it was ever employed as a working legal code in ancient India. Second only to Manu is the *Dharma Śāstra* of Yājñavalkya; its 1,013 stanzas are distributed under the three headings of good conduct, law, and expiation.

The *śāstra*s are a part of the SMṚTI ("remembered," or traditional) literature, which, like the *sūtra* literature that preceded it, stresses the religious merit of gifts to Brahmins. Because kings often transferred the revenues of villages or groups of villages to Brahmins, either singly or in corporate groups, the status and wealth of the priestly class rose steadily. In *agrahāra*s, as the settlements of Brahmins were called, Brahmins were encouraged to devote themselves to the study of the Vedas and to the subsidiary studies associated with them; but many Brahmins also developed the sciences of the period, such as mathematics, astronomy, and medicine, while others cultivated literature.

**Epics and Purāṇas.** During the centuries immediately preceding and following the beginning of the Christian Era, the recension of the two great Sanskrit epics, the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa,* took shape out of existing material, such as heroic epic stories, mythology, philosophy, and above all the discussion of the problem of dharma. Much of the material of which the epics were composed dates back into the Vedic period; the rest continued to be added until well after 1000 CE. The actual composition of the Sanskrit texts, however, dates to the period from 500 BCE to 400 CE for the *Mahābhārata* and to the period from 200 BCE to 200 CE for the *Rāmāyaṇa.*

*The Mahābhārata.* The *Mahābhārata* ("Great Epic of the Bhārata Dynasty"), a text of some 100,000 verses attributed to the sage Vyāsa, was preserved both orally and in manuscript form for centuries. The central plot concerns a great bat-



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tle between the five sons of Pāṇḍu (called the PĀṆḌAVAS) and the sons of Pāṇḍu's brother Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Pāṇḍu had been placed under a curse: to have intercourse with any of his wives would cause his death. One wife, however, Kuntī, had a boon that permitted her to conceive through use of a MANTRA. Thus, Kuntī invoked the gods to allow her to conceive the Pāṇḍavas: the five brothers are ARJUNA, conceived of Indra; Yudhiṣṭhira, conceived of Dharma; Bhīma, conceived of Vāyu; and the twins, Nakula and Sahadeva, conceived of the Aśvins. The battle eventually leads to the destruction of the entire race, save one survivor who continues the dynasty. The epic is deeply infused with religious implications, and the battle itself is sometimes understood as a great sacrifice. There are, moreover, many passages in which dharma is systematically treated, so that Hindus regard the *Mahābhārata* as one of the *Dharma Śāstra*s. Religious practice takes the form of Vedic ritual (on official occasions), pilgrimage, and, to some extent, adoration of gods. Apart from the *Bhagavad Gītā* (part of book 6 of the *Mahābhārata*) much of the didactic material is found in the Book of the Forest (book 3), in which sages teach the exiled heroes, and in the Book of Peace (book 12), in which the wise Bhīṣma expounds on religious and moral matters.

In the *Mahābhārata* the Vedic gods have lessened in importance, surviving principally as figures of FOLKLORE. Prajāpati of the Upanishads is popularly personified as the god Brahmā, who creates all classes of beings and dispenses boons. Of far greater importance in the *Mahābhārata* is Krishna. In the epic he is primarily a hero, a leader of his people, and an active helper of his friends, yet at a grander, subtler level it is he who superintends the battle-sacrifice as a whole. Krishna's biography appears primarily elsewhere—in the *Harivaṃśa* (1st–3rd centuries CE?) and various PURĀṆAS—and there his divinity shows through more obviously than in the epic. Although he is occasionally identified with Vishnu in the *Mahābhārata,* he is mostly a chieftain, a counsellor, and an ally of the Pāṇḍavas, the heroes of the epic. He helps the Pāṇḍava brothers to settle in their kingdom and, when the kingdom is taken from them, to regain it. In the process he emerges as a great teacher who reveals the *Bhagavad Gītā,* arguably the most important religious text in Hinduism today. In the further development of Krishna worship, this dharmic aspect somewhat recedes, making way for the idyllic story of Krishna's boyhood, when he played with and loved young cowherd women (*gopī*s) in the village while hiding from an uncle who threatened to kill him. The influence of this theme on art has been profound. But even in the *Mahābhārata,* where it is often said that Krishna becomes incarnate in order to sustain dharma when it wanes and in order to combat *adharma* (forces contrary to dharma), he commits a number of deeds in direct violation of the warrior ethic and is indirectly responsible for the destruction of his entire family. This adharmic shadow is also cast in the Purāṇic idyll because the *gopī*s he woos are the wives of other men. In both cases, Krishna's actions illuminate levels of truth that go deeper than any conventional dharma—either a subtle dharma inscrutable to players immersed in the *Mahābhārata*'s epic battle or a quality of divine playfulness that characterizes the deepest rhythms of the cosmos itself.

Far remoter than Krishna in the *Mahābhārata* is Shiva, who also is hailed as the supreme god in several myths recounted of him, notably the Story of the Five Indras, Arjuna's battle with Shiva, and Shiva's destruction of the sacrifice of Dakṣa. The epic is rich in information about sacred places, and it is clear that making pilgrimages and bathing in sacred rivers constituted an important part of religious life. Occasionally these sacred places are associated with sanctuaries of gods. More frequent are accounts of mythical events concerning a particular place and enriching its sanctity. Numerous descriptions of pilgrimages (*tīrthayātrā*s) give the authors opportunities to detail local myths and legends. In addition to these, countless edifying stories shed light on the religious and moral concerns of the age. Almost divine are the towering ascetics capable of fantastic feats, whose benevolence is sought and whose curses are feared.

*The Rāmāyaṇa.* The classical narrative of Rāma is recounted in the Sanskrit epic *Rāmāyaṇa,* whose authorship is attributed to the sage Vālmīki. Rāma is deprived of the kingdom to which he is heir and is exiled to the forest; his wife Sītā

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and his brother Lakṣmaṇa accompany him. While there, Sītā is abducted by Rāvaṇa, the demon king of Laṅkā. In their search for Sītā, the brothers ally themselves with Sugrīva, a monkey king whose chief, HANUMĀN (an important deity in modern Hinduism), finds Sītā in Laṅkā. In a cosmic battle, Rāvaṇa is defeated and Sītā rescued. When Rāma is restored to his kingdom, the populace casts doubt on Sītā's chastity during her captivity. Rāma banishes Sītā to a hermitage, where she bears him two sons and eventually dies by reentering the earth from which she had been born. Rāma's reign becomes the prototype of the harmonious and just kingdom to which all kings should aspire; Rāma and Sītā set the ideal of conjugal love; Rāma's relationship to his father is the ideal of filial love; and Rāma and Lakṣmaṇa represent perfect fraternal love. Everything in the myth is designed to show harmony, which after being disrupted is at last regained—or so, at least, Vālmīki would have it. This accords with the fact that in all but its oldest form (before *c.* 1st century CE), the *Rāmāyaṇa* identifies Rāma with Vishnu.

*Vishnu sleeping between two periods of cosmic evolution—i.e., between the destruction of this world and the creation of the new universe;* c. *17th century, from Rajasthan, India*

Werner Forman—Art Resource

Yet there are deep fissures: Rāma's killing of Vālī in violation of all rules of combat and his banishment of the innocent Sītā are troublesome to subsequent tradition. The problems of the "subtlety" of dharma and the inevitability of its violation, central themes in both the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata,* have remained the locus of argument throughout Indian history, both at the level of abstract philosophy and in local performance traditions. In Kerala, for instance, men of the low-ranked artisan caste worship Vālī through rites of dance-possession that implicitly protest their ancestors' deaths as soldiers conscripted by high-caste leaders such as Rāma. And throughout India women performers have shifted the thrust of various episodes, emphasizing Sītā's story—her foundling infancy, her abduction by Rāvaṇa, her trial by fire, her childbirth in exile—thereby openly challenging Rāma. In the words of a Bengali women's song translated by Nabaneeta Dev Sen, "Five months pregnant, Sītā was in the royal palace, and a heartless Rāma sent her off to the forest!"

The *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* have also made an impact in Southeast Asia, where their stories have been continually retold in vernacular, oral, and visual versions. As for India, even today the epic stories and tales are part of the early education of almost all Hindus; a continuous reading of the *Rāmāyaṇa*—whether in Sanskrit or in a vernacular version such as that of TULSĪDĀS (16th century)—is an act of great merit, and the enacting of Tulsīdās' version of the *Rāmāyaṇa,* called the RĀMCARITMĀNAS, is an annual event across the northern part of the subcontinent. The *Rāmāyaṇa*'s influence is expressed in a dazzling variety of local and regional performance traditions—story, dance, drama, art—and extends to the spawning of explicit "counter epics," such as those published by the Tamil separatist E.V. Ramasami beginning in 1930.

*The Bhagavad Gītā.* The *Bhagavad Gītā* ("Song of God") is perhaps the most influential of any single Indian religious text, although it is not strictly classed as *śruti,* or revelation. It is a brief text, 700 verses divided into 18 chapters, in quasi-dialogue form. When the opposing parties in the *Mahābhārata* war stand ready to begin battle, Arjuna, the hero of the favored party, despairs at the thought of hav-



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ing to kill his kinsmen and lays down his arms. Krishna, his charioteer, friend, and adviser, thereupon argues against Arjuna's failure to do his duty as a noble. The argument soon becomes elevated into a general discourse on religious and philosophical matters, at the climax of which Krishna reveals his infinite, supernal form as Time itself. The text is typical of Hinduism in that it is able to reconcile different viewpoints, however incompatible they seem to be, and yet emerge with an undeniable character of its own. In its way, it does constitute ŚRUTI ("what is heard"), since Arjuna receives its teachings from the divine Krishna.

*The Purāṇas.* The Gupta Period (*c.* 320–540) saw the first of the series (traditionally 18) of often-voluminous texts that treat in encyclopedic manner the myths, legends, and genealogies of gods, heroes, and saints. Along with the epics, to which they are closely linked in origin, the *Purāṇa*s became the scriptures of the common people; they were available to everybody, including women and members of the lowest order of society (Śūdras), and were not, like the Vedas, supposedly restricted to initiated men of the three higher orders. The origin of much of their contents may be non-Brahminical, but they were also accepted by Brahmins, who thus brought new elements into Vedic religion. For example, goddesses are rarely discussed in the Veda, yet they rose steadily in recognition in Purāṇic mythology. The *Devī Māhātmya* ("Glorification of the Goddess"), which belongs to the genre, dates to the 5th or 6th century CE, and the DEVĪ BHĀGAVATA PURĀṆA is sometimes regarded as being almost as old.

In other *Purāṇa*s Vishnu and Shiva establish their primacy. Both are known in the Vedas, though they play only minor roles: Vishnu is the god who, with his three strides, established the three worlds (heaven, atmosphere, and earth) and thus is present in all three orders; and Rudra-Shiva is a mysterious god who must be propitiated. Purāṇic literature reveals various stages in which these two gods progressively attract to themselves the identities of other popular gods and heroes: Vishnu assumes the powers of gods who protect the world and its order, Shiva the powers that are outside and beyond Vishnu's range. To these two is often added Brahmā; although still a cosmic figure, Brahmā appears in the *Purāṇa*s primarily to appease over-powerful sages and demons by granting them boons.

*Myths of time and eternity.* Purāṇic myths develop around the notion of YUGA (world age). The four *yuga*s, Kṛta, Tretā, Dvāpara, and Kali—they are named after the four throws, from best to worst, in a dice game—constitute a *mahāyuga* ("large *yuga*") and are periods of increasing deterioration. Time itself deteriorates, for the ages are successively shorter. Each *yuga* is preceded by an intermediate "dawn" and "dusk." The Kṛta *yuga* lasts 4,000 god-years, with a dawn and dusk of 400 god-years each, or a total of 4,800 god-years; Tretā a total of 3,600 god-years; Dvāpara 2,400 god-years; and Kali (the current *yuga*) 1,200 god-years. A *mahāyuga* thus lasts 12,000 god-years and observes the usual coefficient of 12, derived from the 12-month year, the unit of creation. Since each god-year lasts 360 human years, a *mahāyuga* is 4,320,000 years long in human time. Two thousand *mahāyuga*s form one *kalpa* (eon), which is itself but one day in the life of Brahmā, whose full life lasts 100 years; the present is the midpoint of his life. Each *kalpa* is followed by an equally long period of abeyance (*pralaya*), in which the universe is asleep. Seemingly the universe will come to an end at the end of Brahmā's life, but Brahmās too are innumerable, and a new universe is reborn with each new Brahmā.

## MAJOR TRADITIONS OF AFFILIATION

**Vaiṣṇavism.** VAIṢṆAVISM is the worship of Vishnu and his various incarnations. During a long and complex development from Vedic times, there arose many Vaiṣṇava groups with differing beliefs and aims. Some of the major Vaiṣṇava groups include the Śrī Vaiṣṇavas and Dvaitins ("[Theological] Dualists") of South India, the followers of the teachings of the philosopher VALLABHA in western India, and several Vaiṣṇava groups in Bengal in eastern India, who follow teachings derived from those of the saint CAITANYA. The majority of Vaiṣṇava believers, however, take what they like from the various traditions and blend it with various local practices.

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In the Veda, Vishnu is the god who penetrates and traverses the triple spaces of the universe to make their existence possible. All beings are said to dwell in his three strides or footsteps (*tri-vikrama*); his highest step, or abode, is beyond mortal ken in the realm of heaven. Vishnu is the god who serves as the pillar of the universe and is identified with sacrifice, which attempts by ritual means to open channels between the several levels of the universe. Vishnu imparts his all-pervading power to the sacrificer, who imitates his strides and so identifies himself with the god, thus conquering the universe and attaining "the goal, the safe foundation, the highest light" (*Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*).

In the centuries preceding the beginning of the Common Era, Vishnu became the Īśvara (immanent deity) of his special worshipers, fusing with the Puruṣa-Prajāpati figure; with Nārāyaṇa, whose cult discloses a prominent influence of ascetics; with Krishna, who in the *Bhagavad Gītā* revealed a form of dharma-affirming devotional religion, in principle accessible to everyone; and with VĀSUDEVA, adored by a group known as the PĀÑCARĀTRAS.

The extensive mythology attached to Vishnu consists largely of his incarnations (AVATARS, literally "descents" into this world). Although the notion of incarnation is found elsewhere in Hinduism, it is basic to Vaiṣṇavism. The concept is particularly geared to the social role of Vishnu; whenever dharma is in danger, Vishnu departs from his heaven, Vaikuṇṭha, and incarnates himself in an earthly form to restore the proper order. Each incarnation has a particular mythology. The classical number of these incarnations is 10, ascending from theriomorphic (animal form) to fully anthropomorphic manifestations. In their most familiar version, these are fish (Matsya), tortoise (Kūrma), boar (VARĀHA), man-lion (NARASIṂHA), dwarf (VĀ-MANA), Rāma with the ax (PARAŚURĀMA), King Rāma, Krishna, the Buddha Gotama, and the future incarnation, KALKĪ.

*Umā-Maheśvara Mūrti—Shiva with Pārvatī,* c. *10th–11th century, Rajasthan, India*
Archive Photos

A god thus active for the good of society and the individual inspires love. Vishnu has indeed been the object of devotional religion (*bhakti*) to a marked degree, but he is especially worshiped in his incarnations as Krishna and Rāma. The god rewards devotion with his grace, through which the votary may be lifted from transmigration to release or, more crucially, into Vishnu's intimate presence. Like most other gods, Vishnu has his especial entourage: his wife is LAKṢMĪ, or Śrī, the lotus goddess, granter of beauty, wealth, and good luck. She came forth from the primordial MILK-OCEAN when gods and demons churned it to recover from its depths the ambrosia or elixir of immortality, *amṛta.* At DĪVĀLĪ, or Dīpāvalī, the festival many Hindus regard as beginning the commercial year, special worship is paid to her for success in personal affairs. Vishnu's mount is the bird GARUḌA, archenemy of snakes, and his emblems—which he carries in his four hands—are the lotus, club, discus (as a weapon), and conch shell.

Whatever justification the different Vaiṣṇava groups offer for their philosophical position, all Vaiṣṇavas believe in God as a person with distinctively high qualities and worship him through his manifestations and representations. Vaiṣṇava faith is essentially monotheistic, whether the object of adoration be Vishnu-Nārāyaṇa or one of his avatars, such as Rāma or Krishna. Preference for any one of these manifestations is largely a matter of tradition. Thus,

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most South Indian Śrī Vaiṣṇavas prefer Vishnu or Śrī; North Indian groups tend to worship Krishna and his consort Rādhā or Rāma and his consort Sītā. While most Hindus would acknowledge the overarching avatar framework as a way of organizing the Vaiṣṇava side of the pantheon, more encompassing commitments to Rāma or Krishna are also possible, as in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*'s frequently quoted dictum "Krishna himself is God."

A pronounced feature of Vaiṣṇavism is the strong tendency to devotion (*bhakti*), a passionate love and adoration of God, a complete surrender. The widespread *bhakti* movement seems a natural corollary of the Vaiṣṇava ideal of a loving personal God and aversion to a conception of salvation that puts an end to all consciousness or individuality. The belief expressed in the *Bhagavad Gītā*—that those who seek refuge in God with all their being will, by his benevolence and grace (*prasāda*), win peace supreme, the eternal abode—was generally accepted: *bhakti* will result in divine intercession with regard to the consequences of one's deeds. A more radical position was embraced by certain followers of the 11th–12th-century theologian RĀMĀNUJA. They held that the efficaciousness of human action is limited to self-surrender (PRAPATTI); all the rest is Vishnu's grace. Equally radical—even paradoxical—forms of *bhakti* thrive in Śaiva and Śākta soil.

**Śaivism.** The character and position of the Vedic god Rudra—called Shiva, "the Mild or Auspicious One," when the gentler side of his ambivalent nature is emphasized—remain clearly perceptible in some of the important features of the great god Shiva, who together with Vishnu and the Great Goddess (Devī, Durgā, or Śakti) came to dominate Hinduism. During a development from ancient, possibly pre-Vedic times, many different groups within ŚAIVISM arose. Major groups such as the Kashmir Śaivas and the Śaiva Siddhāntins and VĪRAŚAIVAS of southern India contributed the theological principles of Śaivism, and Śaiva worship became an amalgam of pan-Indian Śaiva philosophy and local forms of worship.

In the minds of ancient Indians, Shiva seems to have been especially associated with the uncultivated, dangerous, and much-to-be-feared aspects of nature. Shiva's character lent itself to being split into partial manifestations—each said to represent only one aspect of him—as well as to assimilating divine or demoniac powers of a similar nature from other deities. Already in the Ṛg Veda, appeals to him for help in case of disaster—of which he might be the originator—were combined with the confirmation of his great power. In the course of the Vedic period, Shiva—originally a ritual and conceptual outsider yet a mighty god whose benevolent aspects were emphasized—gradually gained access to the circle of respectable gods who preside over various spheres of human interest. Many characteristics of the Vedic Prajāpati (the creator), of Indra with his sexual potency, and of Agni (the great Vedic god of fire) have been integrated into the figure of Shiva.

In those circles that produced the Śvetāśvatara Upanishad (*c.* 200 BCE), Shiva rose to the highest rank. In its description of Shiva, he is the ultimate foundation of all existence and the source and ruler of all life, who, while emanating and withdrawing the universe, is the goal of that identificatory meditation that leads to a state of complete separation from phenomenal existence. While Vishnu came to be seen as an ally and advocate of humankind, Rudra-Shiva developed into an ambivalent and many-sided lord and master. As Paśupati ("Lord of Cattle"), he took over the fetters of the Vedic Varuṇa; as Aghora ("To Whom Nothing Is Horrible"), he showed the uncanny traits of his nature (evil, death, punishment) and also their opposites. Shiva might be the sole principle above change and variation, yet he did not sever his connections with innumerable local deities, some of them quite fearsome. Whereas Vishnu champions the cause of the gods, Shiva sometimes sides with the demons.

Shiva exemplifies the idea that the Highest Being encompasses semantically opposite though complementary aspects: the terrible and the mild, creation and reabsorption, eternal rest and ceaseless activity. These seeming contradictions make Shiva a paradoxical figure, transcending humanity and assuming a mysterious sublimity of his own. Although Brahmin philosophers like to emphasize his ascetic aspects and TANTRIC HINDUS his sexuality, the seemingly opposite strands of his nature are generally accepted as two sides of one character.



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Shiva interrupts his austerity and asceticism (TAPAS), which is sometimes described as continuous, to marry Pārvatī—he is even said to perform ascetic acts in order to win her love—and he combines the roles of lover and ascetic to such a degree that his wife must be an ascetic (Yogi) when he devotes himself to austerities and a lustful mistress when he is in his erotic mode. Various Śaiva myths show that both chastity and the loss of chastity are necessary for fertility and the intermittent process of regeneration in nature, and ascetics who act erotically are a familiar feature of Hindu lore. By their very chastity, ascetics accumulate (sexual) power that can be discharged suddenly and completely so as to produce remarkable results, such as the fecundation of the soil. Krishna's irrepressible sexuality often has a certain idyllic cast, as represented through the metaphor of love beyond the bonds of marriage, whereas Shiva's complex sexuality plays itself out within the various facets of his marriage to Pārvatī. That marriage becomes a model of conjugal love, sanctifying the forces that carry on the human race.

Many of Shiva's poses express positive aspects of his nature: as a dancer, he is the originator of the eternal rhythm of the universe; he catches the waters of the heavenly GAṄGĀ (Ganges) River, which destroy all sin; and he wears in his headdress the crescent moon, which drips the nectar of everlasting life. Yet he is unpredictable. He is the hunter who slays and skins his prey and dances a wild dance while covered with the bloody hide. Far from society and the ordered world, he sits on the inaccessible Himalayan plateau of Mount Kailāsa, an austere ascetic averse to love who burns KĀMA, the god of love, to ashes with a glance from the third eye—the eye of insight beyond duality—in the middle of his forehead. Snakes seek his company and twine themselves around his body. He wears a necklace of skulls. He sits in meditation, with his hair braided like a hermit's, his body smeared white with ashes. These ashes recall the burning pyres on which the *sannyāsī*s (renouncers) take leave of the social order of the world and set out on a lonely course toward release, carrying with them a human skull. And, at the end of the eon, he will dance the universe to destruction. Nevertheless, he is invoked as Shiva, Śambhu, Śaṃkara ("the Auspicious One," or "the Peaceful One"), for the god that can strike down can also spare.

The form in which Shiva is most frequently worshiped is the among the sturdiest, plainest imaginable: an upright rounded post called a LIṄGA ("sign"), usually made of stone. Commentators often observe that its erect male sexuality is counterbalanced by the horizontal plane (YONI)—bespeaking female sexuality—in which it is often set. Yet the sexual dimension is not primary for most devotees, for whom the *liṅga*'s aniconic form simply marks Shiva's inscrutable stability.

**Śāktism.** The term ŚĀKTISM stands alongside Vaiṣṇavism or Śaivism as a way of designating a third aspect of Hindu religion that is indisputably ancient and influential: the worship of goddesses, especially when they are understood as expressions or aspects of a single Goddess (Devī) or Great Goddess (Mahādevī). This Goddess personifies a power, or energy (Śakti), present throughout the universe and challenges any notion of the feminine as passive or quiescent. She can be related to a widely dispersed tradition that associates forceful female deities, many inhabiting particular locales, with the offering of animal sacrifices. Such deities are summarized in the legendry of the *śākta pīṭhā*s ("seats of power") that are said to have been established when various parts of the dismembered goddess Satī, consort of Shiva, fell there. The texts often consider that there are 108 of these PĪṬHAS, extending throughout all of India and commemorated by a network of temples.

The power and variousness of the Great Goddess is expressed in her primary myth of origin, as recorded in the *Devī Māhātmya*. The text explains that the gods found themselves powerless in the face of opposing forces, especially a primordial buffalo demon (Mahiṣāsura), and pooled their angry energies to create a force capable of triumphing over such unruly, evil powers. The Great Goddess, summarizing and concentrating their various energies, emitted a menacing laugh, drank wine, refused the buffalo's overtures of marriage, and vanquished him utterly from atop her lion mount, piercing his chest with her trident and decapitating him with her discus. Devī's victory is memorialized in a series of sculptures

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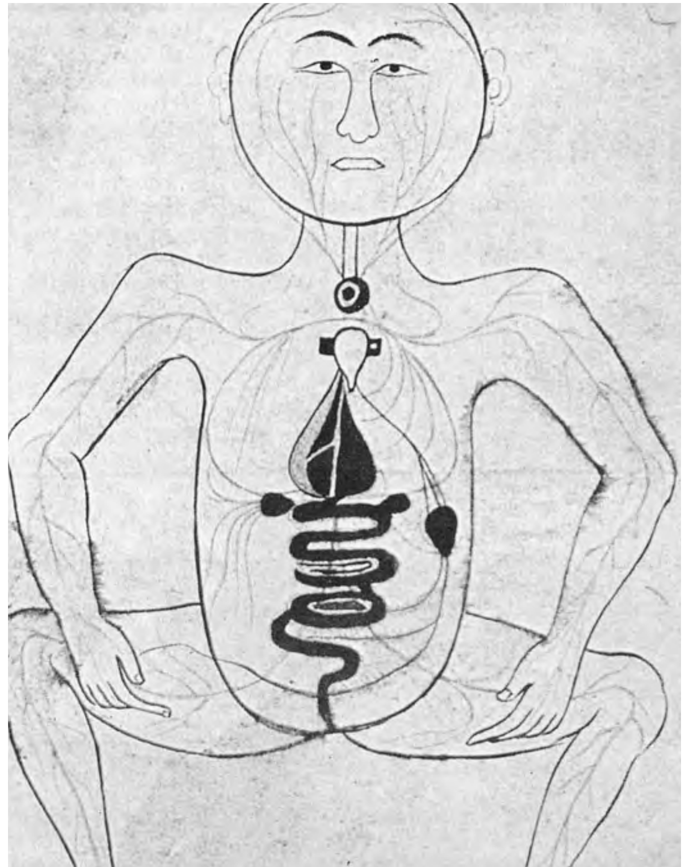
that began to appear in the Gupta and Pallava periods (4th–8th centuries), contemporary with the *Devī Māhātmya*.

In a fashion loosely comparable to the process of gathering disparate divine energies that is so prominent in Devī's myth of origins, regional and local goddesses from all over South Asia have for centuries been found to exemplify the person and mythology of an overarching Goddess who offers maternal nurturance to the earth (one of her personas) and her devotees but is death to threatening outsiders. Yet these goddesses retain their local power as mothers guarding particular places and lineages. A key concept in enunciating the nature of this connection is *śakti*—power personified as female. *Śakti* may be associated with males, as in Devī's origination myth or in the depiction of goddesses as consorts, but in its essence it eludes the categories constructed by men. Thought to possess both natural and ritual force and to be embodied in human women, *śakti* as a description of divinity expresses (among other things) a recognition that women are far more powerful than their social position usually indicates. Hence texts such as the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa* effectively feminize the older, all-male *trimūrti* by placing the Goddess, not Brahmā, alongside and indeed above Vishnu and Shiva.



*A yoga chart showing the* kuṇḍalinī *serpent coiled asleep in the human body, Indian drawing,* c. *18th–19th century*
The Granger Collection

Like any category that attempts to name broad traditions of belief and practice, Śāktism (like Vaiṣṇavism and Śaivism) is imprecise. With Śāktism, however, this is especially so, since the ancient āgamic traditions of ritual and theological practice solidified primarily around male deities—Vishnu and Shiva. Nonetheless, several motifs are particularly salient in contributing to a Śākta religious orientation. One is the close parallel between Purāṇic tales of the Great Goddess eagerly shedding and drinking blood and the ritual motif of blood sacrifice, an exchange of Śakti that has apparently been a singular feature of goddess worship throughout India from earliest times. Another is the enduring association between various forms of the Goddess and pots, especially those seen to be overflowing with vegetation, and the great tendency of widely disparate goddesses to express themselves by possessing their devotees. All of these display the organic energy of *śakti*. Yet the roles Śakti assumes as the enabling power of all beings remain various, and especially in early texts, are depicted as both horrific and benign.

The Great Goddess's role is different in the various systems. She may be seen as the central figure in a philosophically established doctrine, the dynamic aspect of Brahman, producing the universe through her MĀYĀ, or mysterious power of illusion; a capricious demoniac ruler of nature in its destructive aspects; a benign mother goddess; or the queen of a celestial court. There is a comprehensive Śāktism that identifies the goddess (usually Durgā) with Brahman and worships her as the ruler of the universe by virtue of whom even Shiva exists. As Mahāyoginī ("Great Mistress of Yoga"), she produces, maintains, and reabsorbs the world. In Bengal's devotion to the goddess KĀLĪ, she demands bloody sacrifices from her worshipers lest her creative potency fail her. Kālī worshipers believe that birth and death are inseparable, that joy and grief spring from the same source, and that the frightening manifestations of the divine should be faced calmly.



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The Great Goddess also manifests herself as the divine consort. As ARDHANĀRĪŚVARA ("the Lord Who Is Half Female"), Shiva shares ultimate reality with her and presides over procreation. Accordingly, Śāktas—often closely associated with Śaivism—hold that creation is the result of the eternal lust of the divine couple. Thus a man who is blissfully embraced by a beloved woman who is Pārvatī's counterpart assumes Shiva's personality and, liberated, participates in the joy of Shiva's amorous sport. Similarly, in all his incarnations Vishnu is united with his consort, Lakṣmī. The sacred tales of his relations with her manifestations cause his worshipers to view human devotion as parallel to the divine love and hence as universal, eternal, and sanctified. In his supreme state, Vishnu and his *śakti* are indissolubly associated with one another, forming a dual divinity called Lakṣmī-Nārāyaṇa. Thus in art Lakṣmī often rests on Vishnu's bosom.

## MODES OF RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

**Tantrism.** There is a close connection between Śākta persuasions and Tantrism, but they are not the same thing. Tantrism is the search for spiritual power and ultimate release by means of the repetition of sacred syllables and phrases (mantras), symbolic drawings (MANDALAS), and other secret rites elaborated in the texts known as TANTRAS ("looms"). Based especially on convictions about divine creative energy (*śakti*) as experienced in the body, Tantrism is a method of conquering transcendent powers and realizing oneness with the divine by yogic and ritual means. It appears in both Buddhism and Hinduism from the 5th century CE onward, coloring many religious trends and movements.

Tantrics take for granted that all factors in both the macrocosm and the microcosm are closely connected. The adept (*sādhaka*) is almost always understood as a man, who performs the relevant rites on his own body, transforming its normally chaotic state into a "cosmos." The macrocosm is conceived as a complex system of powers that by means of ritual-psychological techniques can be activated and organized within the individual body of the adept.

According to Tantrism, concentration is intended to evoke an internal image of the deity and to resuscitate the powers inherent in it so that the symbol changes into mental experience. This "symbolic ambiguity" is also much in evidence in the esoteric interpretation of ritual acts performed in connection with images, flowers, and other cult objects and is intended to bring about a transfiguration in the mind of the adept. Mantras (sacred utterances, such as *hūṃ, hrīṃ,* and *klaṃ*) are also an indispensable means of entering into contact with the power they bear and of transcending normal mundane existence. Most potent are the monosyllabic, fundamental, so-called *bīja* ("seed") mantras, which constitute the main element of longer formulas and embody the essence of divine power as the eternal, indestructible prototypes from which everything phenomenal derives its existence. The cosmos itself owes its very structure and harmony to them. Also important is the introduction of spiritual qualities or divine power into the body by placing a finger on the spot relevant to each (accompanied by a mantra).

Tantrics are often classified as being of two types: "right handed" or "left handed." The former confine to the sphere of metaphor and visualization what the latter enact literally. Tantrics who follow the right-hand path value Yoga and *bhakti* and aspire to union with the Supreme by emotional-dynamic means, their Yoga being a self-abnegation in order to reach a state of ecstatic bliss in which the passive soul is lifted up by divine grace. They also adopt a Tantric Mantra Yoga, as described above, and a HAṬHA YOGA ("Discipline of Force"). Haṭha Yoga incorporates normal yogic practices—abstinences, observances, bodily postures, breath control that requires intensive training, withdrawal of the mind from external objects, and concentration, contemplation, and identification that are technically helped by MUDRĀS (*i.e.,* ritual intertwining of fingers, or gestures expressing the metaphysical aspects of ceremonies or of the transformation effected by mantras). Haṭha Yoga goes on to involve vigorous muscular contractions, internal purifications (*e.g.,* washing out stomach and bowels), shaking the abdomen, and certain forms of strict self-discipline. The whole process is intended to control the "gross body" in order to free the "subtle body."



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The left-hand Tantric practice (*vāmācāra*) consciously violates all the TABOOS of conventional Hinduism, both for the purpose of helping the adepts to understand their provisional nature and to work from the base of strength provided by the sensory capabilities inherent in bodily existence. For the traditional five elements (*tattva*s) of the Hindu cosmos, these Tantrics substitute the five "m"s: *māṃsa* (flesh, meat), *matsya* (fish), *madya* (fermented grapes, wine), *mudrā* (frumentum, cereal, parched grain, or gestures), and *maithuna* (fornication). This latter element is made particularly antinomian through the involvement of forbidden women, such as one's sister, mother, the wife of another man, or a low-caste woman, who is identified with the Goddess. Menstrual blood, strictly taboo in conventional Hinduism, is also used at times. Such rituals, which are described in Tantric texts and in tracts against Tantrics, have made *tantra* notorious among many Hindus. It is likely, however, that such rituals have never been regularly performed except by a relatively small group of highly trained adepts; the usual (right-handed) Tantric ceremony is purely symbolic and even more fastidious than the *pūjā*s in Hindu temples.

All forms of *tantra* seek to realize the unity of flesh and spirit, the interconnection of the human and the divine, and the experience of transcending time and space. The goal of surpassing the phenomenal duality of spirit and matter and recovering the primeval unity is often conceived as the realization of the identity of God and his Śakti—the core mystery of Śāktism. Ritual practice is varied. Extreme Śākta communities perform the secret nocturnal rites of the *śrīcakra* ("wheel of radiance"; described in the *Kulārṇava Tantra*), in which they avail themselves of the natural and esoteric symbolic properties of colors, sounds, and perfumes to intensify their sexual experiences. Or, in experiencing "the delectation of the deity," the male adept worships the mighty power of the Divine Mother by making a human woman the object of sexual worship, invoking the Goddess into her and cohabiting with her until his mind is free from impurity. The texts reiterate how dangerous these rites are for those who are not initiated, and most Śākta Tantrics probably do not exemplify this left-handed type.

As if to make this point clear, Tantric practice in general has sometimes been described as comprising not two contrasting types—left and right—but three. According to this taxonomy a Tantric may be either *paśu* (bestial), *vīra* (heroic), or *divya* (divine). Of these, only the *vīra* type is left-handed, consuming the five substances as literally enjoined in the texts. *Paśu*s, by contrast, use physical substitutes—*e.g.,* they imbibe coconut milk rather than wine and surrender to the feet of the Goddess (or another deity) rather than submitting to ritual intercourse. Sometimes they are classed in the right-handed group, but sometimes their *bhakti* approach is felt to exempt them from the left/right dichotomy altogether. Finally, there are the *divya* adepts, right-handed Tantrics who use not physical but mental substitutes. Instead of drinking wine, they taste the nectar that flows down from the body's uppermost "center," the *sahasrāra cakra,* when its snakelike physical energy (KUṆḌALINĪ) has risen from its anal base to its cranial apex, in the process being refined into a subtle, spiritual form. This then is interpreted as the true love-juice from the play of Shiva and Śakti in union, which *divya* adepts experience not through ritualized intercourse but through meditation.

As in most religious communities, such oscillations between visible expression and inner meaning form a major dimension of Hindu life. The Tantric tradition exploits this dynamic exquisitely, yet few would doubt that it is exceptional. Publicly enacted rituals such as temple ceremonies, processions, pilgrimage, and home worship—each, admittedly, with possibilities for interpretation that are all its own—form the backbone of Hindu practice. To these we now turn, beginning with a set of rituals that many Hindus regard as the most important of all.

**Domestic rites.** The fire rituals that served as the core of Vedic religion have long since been supplanted in most Hindu practice by image worship, whether in home or temple settings, and by various forms of devotionalism. Yet in the arena of domestic (*gṛhya*) ritual one can still see formulas and sequences that survive from the Vedic period. The domestic rituals include five obligatory daily offerings: (1) offerings to the gods (food taken from the meal), (2) a cursory offering

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(*bali*) made to "all beings," (3) a libation of water and sesame, offered to the spirits of the deceased, (4) hospitality, and (5) recitation of the Veda. Although some traditions prescribe a definite ritual in which these five "sacrifices" are performed, in most cases the five daily offerings are merely a way of speaking about one's religious obligations in general.

The morning and evening adorations (*sandhyā*), a very important duty of the traditional householder, are mainly Vedic in character, but they have, by the addition of Purāṇic and Tantric elements, become lengthy rituals. If not shortened, the morning ceremonies consist of self-purification, bathing, prayers, and recitation of mantras, especially the *gāyatrī mantra* (Ṛg Veda 3.62.10), a prayer for spiritual stimulation addressed to the sun. The accompanying ritual comprises (1) the application of marks (TILAKS) on the forehead, characterizing the adherents of a particular religious community, (2) the presentation of offerings (water and flowers) to the Sun, and (3) meditative concentration. There are Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava variants, and some elements are optional. The observance of the daily obligations, including the care of bodily purity and professional duties, leads to mundane reward and helps to preserve the state of sanctity required to enter into contact with the divine.

A second major aspect of domestic rites comprises life-cycle rituals. These sacraments (*saṃskāra*) of refinement and transition are intended to make a person fit for a certain purpose or for the next stage in life by removing taints (sins) or by generating fresh qualities. In antiquity there was a great divergence of opinion about the number of RITES OF PASSAGE, but in later times 16 came to be regarded as the most important. Many of the traditional *saṃskāra*s cluster in childhood, extending even before birth to conception itself. The impregnation rite, consecrating the supposed time of conception, consists of a ritual meal of pounded rice (mixed "with various other things according to whether the married man desires a fair, brown, or dark son; a learned son; or a learned daughter"), an offering of rice boiled in milk, the sprinkling of the woman, and intercourse; all acts are also accompanied by mantras. In the third month of pregnancy, the rite called *puṃsavana* (begetting of a son) follows. The birth is itself the subject of elaborate ceremonies, the main features of which are an oblation of *ghī* (clarified butter) cast into the fire; the introduction of a pellet of honey and *ghī* into the newborn child's mouth, which according to many authorities is an act intended to produce mental and bodily strength; the murmuring of mantras for the sake of a long life; and rites to counteract inauspicious influences. Opinions vary as to when the name-giving ceremony should take place; in addition to the personal name, there is often another one that should be kept secret for fear of sinister designs against the child. However that may be, the defining moment comes when the father utters the child's name into its ear.

A hallmark of these childhood *saṃskāra*s, as one can see, is a general male bias and the conscripting of natural processes into a person evoked by cultural means and defined primarily by male actors. In the birth ritual (*jātakarma*) the manuals direct the father to breathe upon his child's head, in a transparent ritual co-opting of the role that biology gives the mother. In practice, however, the mother may join in this breathing ritual, thereby complicating the simple nature-to-culture logic laid out in the texts.

Going still further against the patriarchal grain, there exists an array of life-cycle rites that focus specifically upon the lives of girls and women. In South India, for instance, one finds an initiation rite (*viḷakkiṭu kalyāṇam*) that corresponds roughly to the male initiation called *upanayana,* and that gives girls the authority to light oil lamps and thereby become full participants in proper domestic worship. There are also rites celebrating first MENSTRUATION and marking various moments surrounding childbirth. Typically women themselves act as officiants.

In modern times many of the textually mandated *saṃskāra*s (with the exceptions of impregnation, initiation, and marriage) have fallen into disuse or are performed in an abridged or simplified form without Vedic mantras or a priest. For example, the important *upanayana* initiation should by rights be held when an upper-caste boy is between the ages of 8 and 12, to mark his entry into the ritual

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community defined by access to Vedic learning. In this rite he becomes a "twice-born one," or DVIJA, and is invested with the sacred thread (*upavīta; see* UPANAYANA). Traditionally, this was the beginning of a long period of Vedic study and education in the house and under the guidance of a teacher (guru). In modern practice, however, the haircutting ceremony—formerly performed in a boy's third year—and the initiation are often performed on the same day, and the homecoming ceremony at the end of the period of Vedic study often becomes little more than a formality, if it is observed at all. More extreme still, the *upanayana* might also be ignored until it is inserted as a prelude to marriage.

Wedding ceremonies, the most important of all *saṃskāra*s, have not only remained elaborate (and often very expensive) but have also incorporated various elements—among others, propitiations and expiations—that are not indicated in the oldest sources. In ancient times there already existed great divergences in accordance with local customs or family or caste traditions. However, the following practices are usually considered essential. The date is fixed after careful astrological calculation; the bridegroom is conducted to the home of his future parents-in-law, who receive him as an honored guest; there are offerings of roasted grain into the fire; the bridegroom has to take hold of the bride's hand; he conducts her around the sacrificial fire; seven steps are taken by bride and bridegroom to solemnize the irrevocability of the unity; both are, in procession, conducted to their new home, which the bride enters without touching the threshold.

Of eight forms of marriage recognized by the ancient authorities, two have remained in vogue: the simple gift of a girl and the legalization of the alliance by means of a marriage gift paid to the bride's family. Yet it is noteworthy that the payment of a dowry—often very large—to the groom has become far more typical. In the Vedic period, girls do not seem to have married before they reached maturity, but that too changed over time. By the 19th century child marriage and customary upper-caste bars to the remarriage of widows (often a pressing issue if young girls were married to much older men) had become urgent social concerns in certain parts of India. These practices have abated since the mid-19th century, but laws against child marriage have been required, and they are sometimes flouted even today.

The traditional funeral method is CREMATION (which involves the active participation of members of the family of the deceased), but burial or immersion is more appropriate for those who have not been so tainted by life in this world that they require the purifying fire (*i.e.,* children) and those who no longer need the ritual fire to be conveyed to the hereafter, such as ascetics who have renounced all earthly concerns. An important and meritorious complement of the funeral offices is the *śrāddha* ceremony, in which food is offered to Brahmins for the benefit of the deceased. Many people are solicitous to perform this rite at least once a year even when they no longer engage in any of the five obligatory daily offerings.

*Hindu wedding ceremony in Suriname*
Porterfield/Chickering—Photo Researchers

**Temple worship.** Image worship takes place both in small household shrines and in the temple. Many Hindu authorities claim that regular temple worship to one of the deities of the devotional cults procures the same results for the worshiper as did the performance of



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the great Vedic sacrifices, and one who provides the patronage for the construction of a temple is called a "sacrificer" (*yajamāna*). More to the point, once they have been enlivened by a mantric process of ritual inauguration, the images (*mūrti*) installed in temples, shrines, and homes are regarded as participating in the actual substance of the deities they represent. Some are even said to be self-manifest (*svayambhū*). Hence to encounter them with the proper sentiment (*bhāva*) is to make actual contact with the divine. This happens through paradigmatic acts such as *darśan,* the reciprocal act of both "seeing" and being seen by the deity; ĀRATĪ, the illumination of the image and the receiving of that light by worshipers; and *prasāda,* food offerings which, after being partially or symbolically consumed by the deity, return to the worshipers as blessings from the divine repast.

The erection of a temple is a meritorious deed recommended to anyone desirous of heavenly reward. The choice of a site, which should be serene and lovely, is determined by ASTROLOGY and DIVINATION as well as by its location with respect to human dwellings; for example, a SANCTUARY of a benevolent deity should face the village. Temples vary greatly in size and artistic value, ranging from small village shrines with simple statuettes to the great temple-cities of South India whose boundary walls, pierced by monumental gates (*gopura*), enclose various buildings, courtyards, pools for ceremonial bathing, and sometimes even schools, hospitals, and monasteries. From the point of view of construction, there is no striking difference between Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava sanctuaries, but they are easily distinguishable by their central objects of worship (*e.g., mūrti, liṅga*), the images on their walls, the symbol fixed on their finials (crowning ornaments), and the presence of Shiva's bull, NANDĪ, or Vishnu's bird, Garuḍa (the theriomorphic duplicate manifestations of each god's nature), in front of the entrance.

Worship in Hindu temples takes place on a spectrum that runs from ceremonies characterized by fully orchestrated congregational participation to rituals focused almost entirely on the priests who act as the deities' ritual servants to episodic acts of prayer and offering initiated by families or individual worshipers. Sometimes worshipers assemble to meditate, to take part in singing and chanting, or to listen to an exposition of doctrine. The *pūjā* (worship) performed in public "for the well-being of the world" is, though sometimes more elaborate, largely identical with that executed for personal interest. It consists essentially of an invocation, a reception, and the entertainment of God as a royal guest. Paradigmatically, it involves 16 "attendances" (*upacāra*s): an invocation by which the omnipresent God is invited to direct his/her attention to the particular worship; the offering of a seat, water (for washing the feet and hands and for rinsing the mouth), a bath, a garment, a sacred thread, perfumes, flowers, incense, a lamp, food, homage, and a circumambulation of the image and dismissal by the deity. *Darśan, āratī,* and *prasāda* emerge as significant features of these "attendances," whether experienced at specific times of day (such as the eight "watches" that are observed in many Krishna temples) or according to a freer, perhaps sparser schedule. In front of certain temples, ritual possession sometimes also occurs.

**Sacred times and places.** *Festivals.* Hindu festivals are combinations of religious ceremonies, semiritual spectacles, worship, prayer, lustrations, processions (to set something sacred in motion and to extend its power throughout a certain region), music, dances, eating, drinking, lovemaking, licentiousness, feeding the poor, and other activities of a religious or traditional character. The functions of these activities are clear from both literary sources and anthropological observation: they are intended to purify, avert malicious influences, renew society, bridge over critical moments, and stimulate, celebrate, and resuscitate the vital powers of nature (and hence the term *utsava,* which means both the generation of power and a festival).

Calendrical festivals refresh the mood of the participants, further the consciousness of the participants' power, help to compensate for any sensations of fear or inferiority in relation to the great forces of nature, and generally enable participants as individuals and communities to align their own hopes with the rhythms of the cosmos. Hindu festivals are anchored in a lunar calendar that is brought into conformity with the solar calendar every three years by the addition

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of an intercalary month, the anomalous status of which renders it a particular focus of ritual attention. There are also innumerable festivities in honor of specific gods, celebrated by individual temples, villages, and religious communities.

Hindu festival calendars are so varied from region to region that it is difficult to describe them briefly. Merely as example, we introduce two festivals that function roughly as New Year's rites throughout much of northern and central India. The first is HOLĪ, a saturnalia connected with the spring equinox and, in western India, with the wheat harvest. The mythical tradition of the festival describes how young Prahlāda, in spite of his demonic father's opposition, persisted in worshiping Vishnu and was carried into the fire by the female demon Holikā, who believed herself to be immune to the ravages of fire. Through Vishnu's intervention, however, Prahlāda emerged unharmed, while Holikā was burned to ashes. The bonfires are intended to commemorate this event or rather to reiterate the triumph of virtue and religion over evil and sacrilege. This explains why objects representing the sickness and impurities of the past year (many people calculate the new year as beginning immediately after Holī) are thrown into the bonfire, and it is considered inauspicious not to look at it. Moreover, people pay or forgive debts, and try to rid themselves of the evils, conflicts, and impurities that have accumulated during the prior months, translating the conception of the festival into a justification for dealing anew with continuing situations in their lives. Various enactments of chaos (*e.g.*, the throwing of colored water), reversal (a ritualized battle in which women wield clubs and men defend themselves with shields), and extremity (FIRE WALKING through the Holī bonfire) constitute the "body" of Holī. These contrast vividly with the decorous reaffirmations of social relations that ensue when they are done: people bathe, don clean clothing, and visit family and gurus. There are local variants on Holī; for example, among the MARĀṬHĀS, heroes who died on the battlefield are "danced" by their descendants, sword in hand, until the descendants become possessed by the spirits of the heroes. In Bengal and Braj, swings are made for Krishna.

An even more widely celebrated New Year festival called DĪVĀLĪ, or Dīpāvalī, occurs on the

*Temple dedicated to the sun god Sūrya, showing a wheel of his sky-chariot,* c. *1238–58, Konārak, Orissa, India*
George Holton—Photo Researchers

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*Temple dedicated to Shiva and Pārvatī,* c. *1200, Halebīd, Karnataka, India*
Porterfield/Chickering—Photo Researchers

new moon of the month of Kārttika in mid-autumn. It involves ceremonial lights welcoming Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth and good fortune; fireworks said to chase away the spirits of wandering ghosts; and gambling, an old ritual custom intended to secure luck for the coming year. Like Holī, it concludes with an affirmation of ritual, social, and calendrical order; special attention is given to honoring cattle and to celebrating and sampling the fall harvest.

*Pilgrimages.* Like processions, pilgrimages (*tīrthayātrā*) to holy rivers, mountains, forests, and cities were already known in Vedic and epic times and remain today one of the most remarkable aspects of Indian religious life. It is often said that pilgrimage is a layperson's renunciation (*sannyāsa*): it is physically difficult, it means leaving behind the array of duties and pleasures associated with home and family, and it has for centuries been a major aspect of the lives of many ascetics. Various sections of the *Purāṇa*s eulogize temples and the sacredness of places situated in beautiful scenery or wild solitude (especially the HIMALAYAS). The whole of India is considered holy ground that offers everyone the opportunity to attain religious fulfillment, but certain sites have for many centuries been regarded as possessing exceptional holiness. The Sanskrit *Purāṇa*s often mention Ayodhya, Mathura, Hardwar, VARANASI (Banaras), Kanchipuram, Ujjain, and Dvaraka, but at the same time strong regional traditions create very different lists. The reason for the sanctity of such places derives from their location on the bank of a holy river (especially the Gaṅgā), from their connection with figures of antiquity who are said to have lived there, or from the local legend of a manifestation of a god. Many places are sacred to a specific divinity; the district of Mathura, for example, encompasses many places of pilgrimage connected with Krishna, especially VRINDĀBAD (Vṛndāvana) and Mount Govardhan. Pilgrimages to Gaya, Hardwar, and Varanasi are often undertaken for the sake of the welfare of deceased ancestors. In most cases, however, devotees hope for increased well-being for themselves and their families in this life (often in response to the fulfillment of a vow),



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for deliverance from sin or pollution, or for emancipation from the world altogether (*mokṣa*). The last prospect is held out to those who, when death is near, travel to Varanasi to die near the Gaṅgā.

On special occasions, be they auspicious or, like a solar eclipse, inauspicious, the devout crowds increase enormously. The most impressive of these is the KUMBH MELA, the world's most massive religious gathering (10 million pilgrims at Hardwar in 1998). The Kumbh Mela is largest when held at the confluence of the Gaṅgā and JAMUNĀ rivers at Prayāg (Allahabad) every 12 years. These and other pilgrimages have contributed much to the spread of religious ideas and the cultural unification of India.

The geography of Hindu pilgrimage is in a process of constant evolution. The mountain deities Vaiṣṇo Devī (in the Himalayas) and Aiyappan (in the Nilgiri Hills) attracted vastly increased numbers of pilgrims toward the end of the 20th century, as did gurus such as SATHYA SAI BABA at his centers in Andhra state and near Bangalore. Yet traditional Vaiṣṇava shrines such as Puri and TIRUPATI and Śaiva sites such as Amarnāth have kept pace. Given their typically fluid sense of the boundaries between Hinduism and other faiths, Hindus also flock to Muslim, Jain, and Christian places of pilgrimage; sacred and secular tourism (to destinations such as the Taj Mahal) are often combined.

## REGIONAL EXPRESSIONS OF HINDUISM

Many of the most important magnets for Hindu pilgrimage are regional in focus—*e.g.,* Śrīrangam for Tamil Nadu, PANDHARPUR for Maharashtra, or Gaṅgāsāgar for Bengal. Similarly, Hindu life is expressed in a variety of "mother tongue" languages that contrast vividly to pan-Indian Sanskrit. The localized sacred literatures are related in complex ways to Sanskrit texts and, crucially, each other.

Of the four primary Dravidian literatures—Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam—the oldest and best known is Tamil. The earliest preserved Tamil literature, the so-called *Caṅkam,* or *Saṅgam,* poetry anthologies, dates from the 1st century BCE. These poems are classified by theme into *akam* ("interior," primarily love poetry) and *puṟam* ("exterior," primarily about war, the poverty of poets, and the deaths of kings). The *bhakti* movement has been traced to Tamil poetry, beginning with the poems of the devotees of Shiva (Nāyaṉārs) and the devotees of Vishnu (Āḻvārs). The Nāyaṉārs, who date from about 500–750 CE, composed hymns addressed to the local manifestations of Shiva in which they "dance, weep, worship him, sing his feet." The most famous Nāyaṉār lyricists are Appar (whose words were just quoted, from Indira Peterson's translation), Campantar, and Cuntarar; their hymns are collected in the *Tevāram* (*c.* 11th century).

More or less contemporary were their Vaiṣṇava counterparts, the Āḻvārs, including the poetess ĀṆṬĀḶ, the untouchable-caste poet TIRUPPAN, and the farmer-caste Nammāḻvār, who is held to be the greatest. Whether Śaiva or Vaiṣṇava, their devotion exemplifies the *bhakti* movement, which values direct contact between human beings and God (especially as expressed in song), challenges rigidities of caste and ritual, and celebrates the experience of divine grace. These saints became the inspiration for major theological systems: the Śaivas for the Śaiva Siddhānta, the Vaiṣṇavas for VIŚIṢṬĀDVAITA. In Kannada the same movement was exemplified by poet-saints such as BASAVA and MAHĀDEVĪ, whose utterances achieved great popularity. Their religion, Vīraśaivism, was perhaps the most "protestant" version of *bhakti* religion.

New Dravidian genres continued to evolve into the 17th and 18th centuries, when the Tamil Cittars (from the Sanskrit SIDDHA, "perfected one"), who were eclectic mystics, composed poems noted for the power of their naturalistic diction. The Tamil sense and style of these poems belied the Sanskrit-derived title of their authors, a phenomenon that could stand as a symbol of the complex relationship between Dravidian and Sanskrit religious texts.

From middle India northward one encounters Indo-Aryan vernaculars related to Sanskrit, including Bengali, Hindi (the most important literary dialects of which are Brajbhāṣā and Avadhī and which bleeds into Urdu, with its increased Perso-Arabic content), Punjabi, Gujarati, Marathi, Oriya, Kashmiri, Sindhi, Assamese,

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Nepali, Rajasthani, and Sinhalese. Most of these languages began to develop literary traditions around 1000 CE.

Marathi was the first to develop a substantial corpus of *bhakti* poetry and HAGIOGRAPHY, starting with the 13th–14th-century Vaiṣṇava saints JÑĀNEŚVAR and NĀMDEV, both of whom especially praised the deity Viṭṭhal (Viṭhobā) of Pandharpur, as did Jñāneśvar's sister Muktābāī and the untouchable saint COKHĀMELĀ (14th century). TUKĀRĀM (17th century), with his searchingly autobiographical poems, was to become the most famous of these Vārkarī (literally, "Pilgrim") poets.

Religious poetry of enduring significance in Hindi starts with a collection of antinomian, Haṭha Yoga *bānī* (utterances) attributed to GORAKHNĀTH in perhaps the 14th century and continues with the interior-oriented, iconoclastic poet-saint Kabīr (15th century). The earliest dated manuscripts for Hindi *bhakti* emerge toward the end of the 16th century, placing Kabīr alongside NĀNAK (the founder of SIKHISM) in one collection and alongside SŪRDĀS (16th-century Krishna lyricist) in another. The earliest hagiographies (*c.* 1600), written by Anantadās and Nābhādās, tend to firm up this distinction between *sant*s like Nānak or Kabīr and Vaiṣṇavas like Sūrdās or MĪRĀBĀĪ, though not absolutely. Sūrdās with his *Sūrsāgar* ("Sūr's Ocean") and Tulsīdās (16th–17th century) with his *Rāmcaritmānas* ("Sacred Lake of the Acts of Rāma") vie for the honor of being Hindi's greatest poets. Mīrābāī is equally well known, though the corpus of romantic Krishna poetry attributed to her is almost completely unattested before the 19th century and shows evidence of complex patterns of oral transmission in Gujarati, Rajasthani, and Brajbhāṣā. Hindi poets such as Sūrdās and the low-caste leatherworker Ravidās mention the Marathi poet Nāmdev, showing the importance of cross-regional affiliations, and Nāmdev has an independent corpus of poetry in Hindi and Punjabi.

Although the earliest Hindu text in Bengali is a mid-15th-century poem about Rādhā and Krishna, medieval texts in praise of gods and goddesses, known as MAṄGAL-KĀVYAS, must have existed in oral versions long before that. In later Bengal Vaiṣṇavism, the emphasis shifts from service and surrender to mutual attachment and attraction between God (*i.e.,* Krishna) and humankind: God is said to yearn for the worshiper's identification with himself, which is his gift to the wholly purified devotee. Thus, the highest fruition of *bhakti* is admission to the eternal sport of Krishna and his beloved Rādhā, which is sometimes glossed as the mutual love of God and the human soul. The best-known poets in this vein are the Bengali Caṇḍīdās (*c.* 1400) and the Maithili poet Vidyāpati (*c.* 1400). The greatest single influence was Caitanya, who in the 16th century renewed Krishnaism with his emphasis on community chanting and celebration (*saṃkīrtan*) and his dedication to what he saw as the renaissance of Vaiṣṇava culture in Braj, where Krishna is thought to have spent his youth. Caitanya left next to no writings of his own, but he inspired many hagiographies, among the more important of which is the *Caitanya Caritāmṛta* ("Nectar of Caitanya's Life") by Krishna Dās (born 1517). Almost equally influential, in a very different way, were the songs of RĀMPRASĀD SEN (1718–75), which honor Śakti as mother of the universe and are still in wide devotional use. The Śākta heritage was continued in the poetry of Kamalākānta Bhaṭṭācārya (*c.* 1769–1821) and eventually culminated in the ecstatic RAMAKRISHNA PARAMAHAMSA (1836–86), whose inspiration caused VIVEKANANDA to establish the Rāmakrishna Maṭh in India and the VEDĀNTA Society in the West.

Numerous important works of Hindu literature are omitted from this brief survey, not only in the five regional languages we have mentioned but even more so in Gujarati, Telugu, Maliyalam, and a host of others. We have focused primarily on *bhakti* lyrics, but these are complemented by a range of vernacular epics, such as the Tamil, Telugu, and Bengali *Rāmāyaṇa*s of Kampan, Buddharāja, and Kṛttibāsa (11th–14th centuries), respectively, and the highly individual *Mahābhārata* of the 16th-century Kannada poet Gadugu. The Tamils composed their own epics, notably Iḷaṅkō Aṭikaḷ's CILAPPATIKĀRAM ("The Lay of the Anklet") and its sequel, *Maṇimekhalai* ("The Jeweled Girdle"). In Telugu there is the great Palnāḍu Epic; Rajasthani has an entire epic cycle about the hero Pabuji; and Hindi has its *Ālhā* and *Ḍholā,* the latter with a lower-caste base and focusing on the goddess Śakti.

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This only begins to scratch the surface of a massive "literature" of oral performance that includes dance and theatre. Almost all of it is ritually circumscribed in some way, and some is actually performed in temple contexts, but that is not to underestimate the importance of a poem of Sūrdās or Kabīr that gets sung by a blind singer moving from car to car on a local train on the vast plains of North India. Nor is it meant to understate the influence of cassette recordings of devotional songs in a host of regional languages or the evident power of nationally televised Hindi versions of the *Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa,* and *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*. Rāmānand Sāgar's *Rāmāyaṇa* (1987–88), which claimed a heritage including versions of the epic in a dozen languages but drew mainly from Tulsīdās' *Rāmcaritmānas,* was easily the most-watched program ever aired on Indian television. The vast majority of India's population is reported to have seen at least one weekly episode, and many people were loath to miss a single one.

## SOCIAL CORRELATES OF RELIGION

**Caste.** The origin of the so-called caste system is not known with certainty. Hindus attribute the proliferation of the castes (*jāti*s) to the subdivision of the four classes, or *varṇa*s, due to intermarriage (which is prohibited in Hindu works on dharma). Modern theorists, however, tend to assume that castes arose from differences in family ritual practices, racial distinctions, and occupational differentiation and specialization. Many modern scholars doubt whether the simple *varṇa* system was ever more than a theoretical socioreligious ideal and have emphasized that the highly complex division of Hindu society into nearly 3,000 castes and subcastes was probably in place even in ancient times.

In general, a caste is an endogamous hereditary group of families bearing a common name, often claiming a common descent, as a rule professing to follow the same hereditary calling, and maintaining the same customs. Moreover, tribes, guilds, or religious communities characterized by particular customs—for example, the Vīraśaivas—could easily be regarded as castes. The status of castes varies in different localities, and especially in urban settings social mobility is possible.

Traditional Hindus are inclined to emphasize that the ritual impurity and "untouchability" inherent in these groups does not essentially differ from that temporarily proper for mourners or menstruating women. This, and the fact that some exterior group or other might rise in estimation and become an interior one or that individual outcastes might be well-to-do, does not alter the fact that the spirit of exclusiveness was in the course of time carried to extremes. The lower, or scheduled, castes were subjected to various socioreligious disabilities before mitigating tendencies helped bring about reform. After India's independence, social discrimination was prohibited, the practice of untouchability was made a punishable offense, and various programs of social amelioration were instituted, including the reservation of a certain percentage of places in educational institutions and government jobs for lower-caste applicants. Before that time, however, scheduled castes were often openly barred from the use of temples and other religious institutions and from public schools, and these groups faced many oppressive restrictions in their relations with individuals of higher caste. Hindu texts such as the *Manu-smṛti* were seen to justify low social status, explaining it as the inevitable result of sins in a former life.

**Social protest.** For many centuries India has known religious communities dedicated in whole or in part to the elimination of caste discrimination. Many have been guided by *bhakti* sentiments, including the Vīraśaivas, Sikhs, Kabīr Panthīs, Satnāmīs, and Rāmnāmīs, all of whom bear

*Sadā Shiva with Nandī and the flowing Gaṅgā, Bikaner school, mid-17th century; Guimet Museum, Paris*
Giraudon—Art Resource

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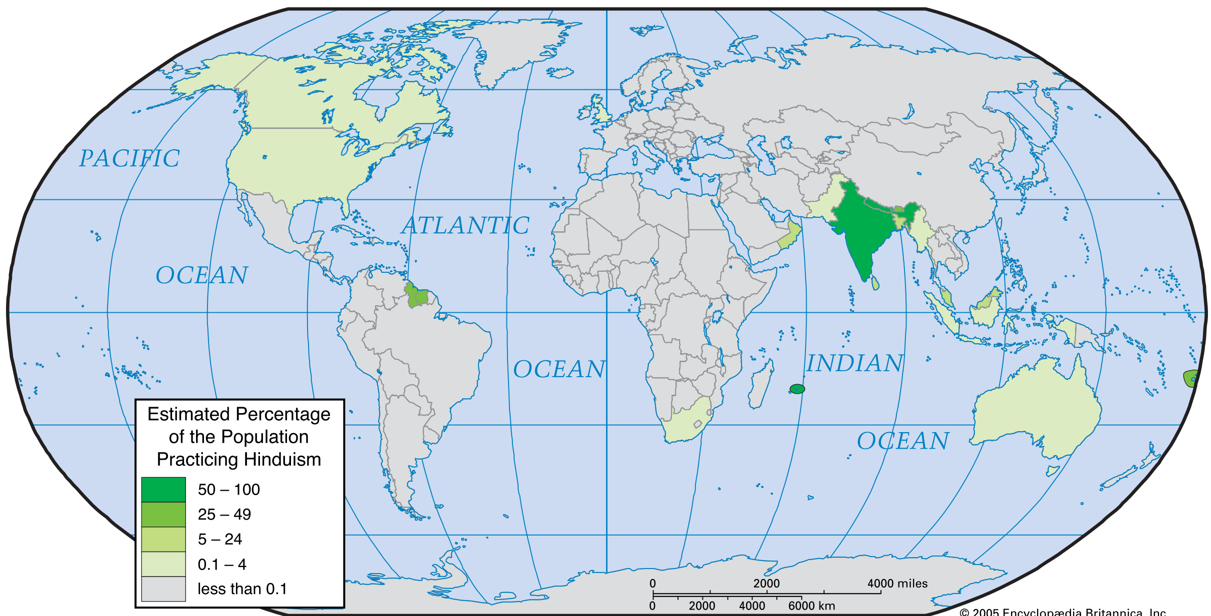
a complicated relation to the greater Hindu fold. A major theme in *bhakti* poetry throughout India has been the ridicule of caste and the etiquette of ritual purity that relates to it, although this element is stronger on the *nirguṇa* side of the *bhakti* spectrum than the *saguṇa*.

Other religions have provided members of low-ranked castes with a further hope for escaping social hierarchies associated with Hindu practice. Sikhism has already been mentioned. ISLAM played this role in Kerala from the 8th century onward and elsewhere in India since the 12th century, although certain convert groups have retained their original caste organization even after embracing Islam. CHRISTIANITY has exercised a similar force, serving for centuries as a magnet for disadvantaged Hindus. And in 1956 B.R. Ambedkar, the principal framer of the Indian constitution and a member of the scheduled MAHAR caste, abandoned Hinduism for Buddhism, eventually to be followed by millions of his lower-caste followers. Yet many Ambedkarite DALITS ("the Oppressed") continue to venerate saints such as Kabīr, Cokhāmelā, and Ravidās who figure in the general lore of Hindu *bhakti*. Other Dalits, especially members of the CAMĀR caste (traditionally leatherworkers), have gone further, identifying themselves explicitly as Ravidāsīs, creating a scripture that features his poetry, and building temples that house his image. Still other Dalit communities have claimed since the early 20th century that they represent India's original religion (*ādi dharma*), rejecting caste-coded Vedic beliefs and practices as perversions introduced by Aryan invaders in the 2nd millennium BCE.

**Renunciants and the rejection of social order.** Another means of rejecting the social order that forms the background for significant portions of Hindu belief and practice is the institution of renunciation. The rituals of *sannyāsa,* which serve archetypally as gateway to a life of religious discipline, often mimic death rituals, signifying the renouncer's understanding that she or, more typically, he no longer occupies a place in family or society. Other rituals serve a complementary function, inducting the initiate into a new family—the alternative family provided by a celibate religious order, usually focused on a guru. In principle this family should not be structured along the lines of caste, and the initiate should pledge to renounce commensal dietary restrictions. In practice, however, some dietary restrictions remain in India's most influential renunciant communities (though not in all), and certain renunciant orders are closely paired with specific communities




*World distribution of Hinduism*



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of householders. This crystallizes a pattern that is loosely present everywhere. Householders and renouncers offer each other mutual benefits, with the former dispensing material substance to the theoretically propertyless renunciants while the latter dispense religious merit and spiritual guidance in return. Such an enactment of the values of dharma and *mokṣa* is symbiotic, to be sure, but that does not serve to domesticate renunciants entirely. Their existence questions the ultimacy of anything tied to caste, hierarchy, and bodily well-being.

## HINDUISM AND THE WORLD BEYOND

**Hinduism and religions of Indian origin.** Hinduism, Buddhism, and JAINISM originated out of the same milieu: the circles of world renouncers of the 6th century BCE. Although all share certain non-Vedic practices (such as renunciation itself and various yogic meditational techniques) and doctrines (such as the belief in rebirth and the goal of liberation from perpetual transmigration), Buddhists and Jains do not accept the authority of the Vedic tradition and therefore are regarded as less than orthodox by Hindus. Especially in the 6th–11th centuries there was strong and sometimes bloody competition for royal patronage among the three communities—with Brahmins representing Hindu values—as well as between Vaiṣṇavas and Śaivas. In general the Brahmin groups prevailed. In a typically absorptive gesture, Hindus in time recognized the Buddha as an incarnation of Vishnu—usually the ninth—but this was often qualified by the caveat that Vishnu assumed this form to mislead and destroy the enemies of the Veda. Hence, the Buddha avatar is rarely worshiped by Hindus, though often highly respected. At an institutional level, certain Buddhist shrines, such as the one marking the Buddha's Enlightenment at BODH GAYĀ, have remained partly under the supervision of Hindu ascetics and are visited by Hindu pilgrims.

After the rise of Buddhological studies in the West combined with the archaeological discoveries and restorations that began at the end of the 19th century, thus clarifying the ecumenical achievements of the Buddhist emperor AŚOKA, the Republic of India adopted the lion capital of the pillar found at Sarnath, which marked the place of the Buddha's first teaching, as its national emblem. Hinduism has so much in common with Jainism, which until recently remained an Indian religion, especially in social institutions and ritual life, that nowadays many Hindus tend to consider it a Hindu sect. The points of difference—*e.g.,* a stricter practice of *ahiṃsā* and the absence of sacrifices for the deceased in Jainism—do not give offense to orthodox Hindus. Moreover, many Jain laypeople worship images as Hindus do, though with a different rationale. There are even places outside India where Hindus and Jains have joined to build a single temple, sharing the worship space.

**Hinduism and Islam.** Hindu relations with Islam and Christianity are in some ways quite different from the ties and tensions that bind together religions of Indian origin. Hindus live with a legacy of domination by Muslim and Christian rulers that stretches back many centuries—in North India, to the Delhi Sultanate established at the beginning of the 13th century. It is hardly the case that Muslim rule was generally loathsome to Hindus. Direct and indirect patronage from the Mughal emperors AKBAR (1542–1605) and Jahāngīr (1569–1627), whose chief generals were Hindu Rājpūts, laid the basis for the great burst of Krishnaite temple and institution building that transformed the Braj region beginning in the 16th century. Yet there were periods when the political ambitions of Islamic rulers took strength from iconoclastic aspects of Muslim teaching and led to the devastation of many major Hindu temple complexes, from Mathura and Varanasi in the north to Chidambaram and MADURAI in the far south; other temples were converted to mosques. Episodically, since the 14th century, this history has provided rhetorical fuel for Hindu warriors eager to assert themselves against Muslim rivals. The bloody partition of the South Asian subcontinent into India and Pakistan in 1947 added a new dimension. Mobilizing Hindu sensibilities about the sacredness of the land as a whole, extremists have sometimes depicted the creation of Pakistan as a rape of the body of India, in the process demonizing Muslims who remain within the political boundaries of India.



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These strands converged at the end of the 20th century in a campaign to destroy the mosque built in 1528 by a lieutenant of the Mughal emperor Bābar in Ayodhya, a city that has since the 2nd century been identified with the place so named in the *Rāmāyaṇa,* where Rāma was born and ruled. In 1992 Hindu militants from all over India, who had been organized by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP: "World Hindu Council"), the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS: "National Volunteer Alliance"), and the BHARATIYA JANATA PARTY (BJP: "Indian People's Party"), destroyed the mosque in an effort to "liberate" Rāma and establish a huge "Rāma's Birthplace Temple" on the spot. In the aftermath, several thousand people—mostly Muslims—were killed in riots that spread across North India.

The conflict in Ayodhya illustrated some of the complexities of Hindu-Hindu and Hindu-Muslim relations. The local police force, having been largely purged of its Muslim members shortly after partition and independence, was largely inactive. Certain leaders from Ayodhya's several communities of Hindu ascetics joined the militants, while others regarded the militants' actions as an outsiders' takeover that was injurious to their own standing and integrity. Local Muslims, who had for centuries lived at peace with Hindu neighbors, reflected bitterly on the fact that Hindu mobs also attacked an outlying shrine to a Muslim *pīr* (holy man) whose annual festival (*'urs*) typically attracted even more Hindu worshipers than Muslims. A Delhi-based artists' collective, echoing a lament that was voiced by millions of Hindus, mounted an exhibition called "We Are All Ayodhya," which documented the city's vividly multireligious history and traveled both in India and abroad.

**Hinduism and Christianity.** Relations between Hinduism and Christianity have also been shaped by unequal balances of political power and cultural influence. Although communities of Christians have lived in South India since the middle of the 1st millennium, the great expansion of Indian Christianity followed the efforts of missionaries working under the protection of British colonial rule. Their denigration of selected features of Hindu practice—most notably, image worship, *satī,* and child marriage (the first two had also been criticized by Muslims)—was shared by certain Hindus. Beginning in the 19th century and continuing to the present, a movement that might be called neo-Vedānta has emphasized the monism of certain Upanishads, decried "popular" Hindu "degenerations" such as the worship of idols, acted as an agent of social reform, and championed dialogue between other religious communities.

Relations between Hindus and Christians are complicated. Many Hindus are ready to accept the ethical teachings of the Gospels, particularly the SERMON ON THE MOUNT (whose influence on GANDHI is well-known), but reject the theological superstructure. They are apt to regard Christian conceptions about love and its social consequences as a kind of *bhakti* and to venerate Jesus as a saint, yet many resent the organization and the exclusiveness of Islam and Christianity, considering these as obstacles to harmonious cooperation. They subscribe to Gandhi's opinion that missionaries should confine their activities to humanitarian service and look askance at conversion, finding also in Hinduism what might be attractive in Christianity. Such sentiments took an unusually extreme form at the end of the 20th century when Hindu activists attacked Dalit Christians and their churches in various parts of India, especially Orissa and Gujarat. A far more typical sentiment is expressed in the eagerness of Hindus of all social stations, especially the middle class, to send their children to high-quality (often English-language) schools established and maintained by Christian organizations.

**Diasporic Hinduism.** Since the appearance of Swami Vivekananda at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and the subsequent establishment of the Vedānta Society in various American and British cities, Hinduism has had a growing missionary profile outside the Indian subcontinent. Conversion as understood by Christians or Muslims is usually not the aim. As seen in the Vedānta Society, Hindu perspectives are held to be sufficiently capacious that they do not require new adherents to abandon traditions of worship with which they are familiar, merely to see them as part of a greater whole. The Vedic formula "Truth is one, but scholars speak of it in many ways" (*ekam sat vipra bahudhā*

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*vadanti*) is much quoted. Many transnational Hindu communities, including Radhasoami, TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION, Siddha Yoga, the SELF-REALIZATION FELLOWSHIP, the Sathya Sai Baba Satsang, and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON, popularly called Hare Krishna), have tended to focus on specific gurus, particularly in their stages of most rapid growth. They frequently emphasize techniques of spiritual discipline more than doctrine. Of the groups just mentioned, only ISKCON has a deeply exclusivist cast—which makes it, in fact, generally more doctrinaire than the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava lineages out of which its founding guru, A.C. Bhaktivedanta, emerged.

At least as important as these guru-centered communities in the increasingly international texture of Hindu life are communities of Hindus who have emigrated from South Asia to other parts of the world. Their character differs markedly according to region, class, and the time at which emigration occurred. Tamils in Malaysia celebrate a festival to the god Murukan (Thaipusam) that accommodates body-piercing vows long outlawed in India itself. Formerly indentured laborers who settled in the Caribbean island Trinidad in the mid-19th century have tended to consolidate doctrine and practice from various locales in Gangetic India, with the result that Rāma and Sītā have a heightened profile. Many migrants from rural western India, especially Gujarat, became urbanized in East Africa in the late 19th century and have now resettled in Britain. Like those Gujaratis who came directly to the United States from India since the liberalization of U.S. immigration laws in 1965, once abroad they are more apt to embrace the reformist guru-centered SWĀMĪNĀRĀYAṆ faith than they would be in their native Gujarat, though this is by no means universal.

Professional-class emigrants from South India have spearheaded the construction of a series of impressive Śrī Vaiṣṇava-style temples throughout the United States, sometimes taking advantage of financial and technical assistance from the great Vaiṣṇava temple institutions at Tirupati. The siting of some of these temples, such as the Penn Hills temple near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, reveals an explicit desire to bring forth resonances of Tirupati's natural environment on American soil. Similarly, Telugu-speaking priests from the Tirupati region have been imported to serve at temples such as the historically important GAṆEŚA temple, constructed from a preexisting church in Queens, New York City, in 1975–77. Yet the population who worship at these temples tends to be far more mixed than one would find in India. This produces sectarian and regional eclecticism on the one hand—images and shrines that appeal to a wide variety of devotional tastes—and on the other hand a vigorous attempt to establish doctrinal common ground. As Vasudha Narayanan has observed, educational materials produced at such temples typically hold that Hinduism is not a religion but a way of life, that it insists in principle on religious tolerance, that its Godhead is functionally trinitarian (the male *trimūrti* of Brahmā, Vishnu, and Shiva is meant, although temple worship is often very active at goddesses' shrines), and that Hindu rituals have inner meanings consonant with scientific principles and conducive to good health.

Pacific and ecumenical as this sounds, members of such temples are also important contributors to the VHP, whose efforts since 1964 to find common ground among disparate Hindu groups have sometimes also contributed to displays of Hindu nationalism such as were seen at Ayodhya in 1992. As the 21st century opens, there is a vivid struggle between "left" and "right" within the Hindu fold, with diasporic groups playing a more important role than ever before. Because of their wealth and education, because globalizing processes lend them prestige and enable them to communicate constantly with Hindus living in South Asia, and because their experience as minorities tends to set them apart from their families in India itself, their contribution to the evolution of Hinduism is sure to be a very interesting one. As we have seen, "Hinduism" was originally an outsider's word, and it designates a multitude of realities defined by period, time, sect, class, and caste. Yet the veins and bones that hold this complex organism together are not just chimeras of external perception. Hindus themselves—particularly diasporic Hindus—affirm them, accelerating a process of self-definition that has been going on for millennia.

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