

# CHAPTER 1

## Hinduism



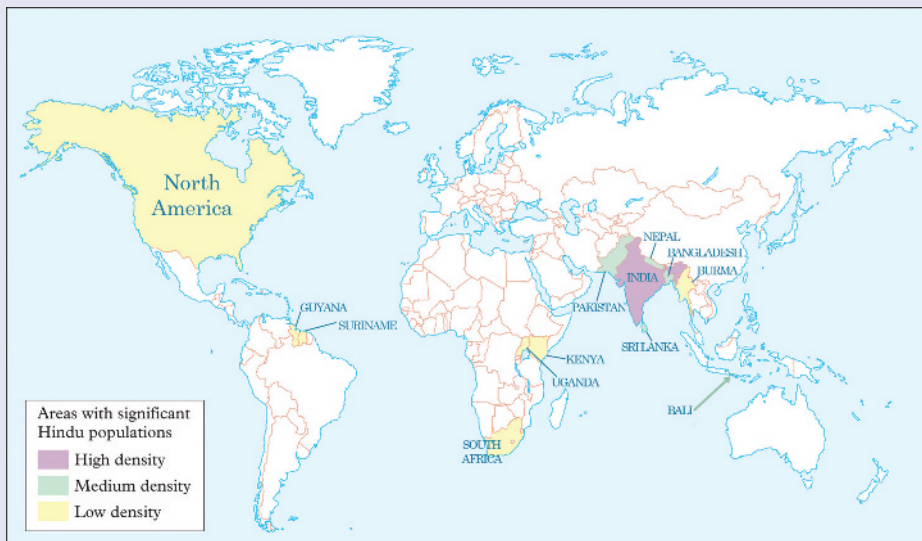
God is in everyone. A *murti* (idol) of the Hindu god Ganesha, elephant-headed son of the great god Shiva and remover of obstacles. Source: Will Deming.

### DID YOU KNOW...

The popular term avatar comes from Hinduism, where it has been used for hundreds of years to describe the ten incarnations of the great god Vishnu. In Hinduism an *avatar* is a form by which this god can cross over from his reality into ours.

## OVERVIEW

Hinduism is the predominant religion of India, the world's second most populous country. More than 80 percent of its population, or about 1 billion people, identify themselves as Hindu. The next largest religion in India is Islam, at about 13 percent of the population, followed by Christianity and Sikhism, at about 2.3 percent and 1.9 percent, respectively. More than 30 million Hindus also live in the countries surrounding India, such as Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan; and large populations can be found in Indonesia, Malaysia, the United States, Mauritius, South Africa, and the United Kingdom.



**Figure 1.1** A map showing the relative Hindu populations in different countries around the world.

Hindus have no single scripture that codifies their core beliefs, nor do they have a governing body that establishes a standard for religious practices. Instead, Hindus recognize an enormous diversity within their religion. In India alone one finds innumerable regional differences, and outside the country this diversity is sometimes even greater. Indonesians, for example, practice forms of Hinduism that incorporate elements from Islamic and folk traditions.

It should come as no surprise, then, to learn that the name “Hinduism,” which manages to gather this diversity neatly—perhaps too neatly—under a single designation, was not created by Hindus themselves. Rather, the ancient Persians used “Hindu” to designate their neighbors to the east, who lived along the banks of the Indus river. But even the Persians did not intend to identify the religion of these people, just their geographical location. Only when India was under British colonial rule in the eighteenth century did “Hinduism” gain currency as an umbrella term for the religion. The British, who thought of religions as theological systems, and who governed India by taking into account the religious affiliation of their subjects, needed terms to distinguish Indians of this religion from Indians who were Sikhs, or Muslims, or something else. In contrast, Hindus had traditionally referred to their religious activities simply as *dharmā* (duty), and distinguished themselves from others in various ways, such as calling themselves *Aryans* (noble people), or followers of *Brahmins* (Hindu priests), or devotees of a particular god in the Hindu pantheon. Today, many Hindus also accept and use the names “Hindu” and “Hinduism” to speak of themselves and their religion, despite its unusual diversity.

In an attempt to envision such a multiform religion, Julius Lipner has likened Hinduism to the famous banyan tree near Kolkata (Calcutta), in West Bengal. The banyan, India’s national tree, can become quite old. It prospers by sending out a profusion of aerial roots which become new trunks that cover large areas and assimilate everything in their path. The Kolkata banyan, which is estimated to be over two centuries old, covers approximately four acres. It has no central trunk or core segment, but is nonetheless a single tree. In a similar way, we can understand Hinduism as a single entity, but one whose diversity almost defies description. (Julius Lipner, “On Hinduism and Hinduisms: The Way of the Banyan,” ch 1, pp. 9–34 in *The Hindu World*, ed. Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby, New York and London: Routledge, 2004).



**Figure 1.2** Like India’s banyan tree, Hinduism can appear to have no center or main trunk. Source: Photo by Murky.

## History

Timeline	
2300 to 2000 BCE	The Indus Valley civilization is at its height.
2000-1500 BCE	The Indus Valley civilization is in decline.
1700-1500 BCE	Aryans migrate into the Indus Valley; the <i>Rig-Veda</i> is composed.
1200-900 BCE	The <i>Collections</i> are brought to completion.
900 BCE	Aryan peoples spread eastward to the Ganges river.
800-600 BCE	The <i>Brahmanas</i> are composed.
500-400 BCE	The first <i>Upanishads</i> are composed; Buddhism begins.
5th–4th century	The caste system begins to take shape.
300 BCE–300 CE	The <i>Mahabharata</i> and the <i>Ramayana</i> are composed; the practice of <i>puja</i> begins.
3rd century BCE	Ashoka becomes king of the Mauryan dynasty.
1st century CE	The <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> is composed.
2nd century CE	The first evidence of Hindu temples.
3rd–4th century CE	Devotional practices ( <i>bhakti</i> ) become popular in south India among Tamils.
350 CE	The first <i>Puranas</i> are composed.
7th century CE	Devotional practices ( <i>bhakti</i> ) are used widely in Hinduism.
1000 CE	Muslims enter the Punjab.
1206-1526 CE	The Delhi Sultanate.
1526 CE–18th century	The Mughal Dynasty.
mid-13th century	Buddhism disappears from most of India.
15th century CE	Sikhism founded.
1600 CE	The East India Company establishes offices in Kolkata.
1757 CE	The beginning of British colonial domination.
18th and 19th centuries	The Hindu Renaissance.

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1869-1948 CE	Mohandas Gandhi.
1872-1950 CE	Aurobindo Ghosh.
1947 CE	End of British rule; millions of Hindus and Muslims are uprooted and resettled during India's Partition, which created the nation of Pakistan.
1950	The Indian Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of caste.
1980s	The resurgence of Hindu Nationalism.

### *The Indus Valley*

Hinduism began in the middle of the second millennium BCE in the Indus valley, a fertile region fed by five tributaries of the Indus river. Today this area is known as the Punjab (five rivers), and is divided between the nations of India and Pakistan. From approximately 2300 to 2000 BCE a complex, urban civilization flourished in the Indus Valley. It had two major cities, Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, a host of other towns and settlements, and a remarkable uniformity of culture in terms of such things as brick sizes and planned cities laid out in grid patterns. In all, the Indus Valley civilization spread out over 400 square miles.

Both the religion and the name of this civilization remain something of a mystery, since no one has been able to decipher what is left of its writing system—if, in fact, it is a writing system. On the basis of its material remains some scholars have postulated connections between the religion of the Indus Valley civilization and the later Hinduism. For example, there remain about 2,000 soapstone seals from the Indus Valley civilization which were used to identify property, and some seem to depict images of what might be incense burners or altars. One of the most celebrated of these seals depicts a figure seated with his legs crossed in a yogic position, surrounded by various wild animals. This, it has been suggested, is an early form of the Hindu god Shiva, who is master of yogic renunciation and sometimes carries the name Lord of the Animals. It has also been proposed that Hinduism's veneration of the Goddess may have roots in the worship of goddesses in the Indus Valley civilization.

### *Newcomers to the Indus Valley*

Whether or not this earlier civilization influenced Hinduism in these ways, most of what constituted the first period of Hinduism came from a nomadic herding people who called themselves Aryans (noble ones). Many scholars in the previous century believed that the Aryans had crossed over the Himalayas from central Asia and

overwhelmed or conquered the Indus Valley's inhabitants. But archeological research has since cast doubt on this theory, leading most scholars to consider possibilities other than invasion as the cause of the Indus Valley civilization's demise, such as flooding, disease, or crop failure. The original homeland of the Aryans is now also debated, some scholars suggesting a location in what is now modern Turkey, or even another part of India.

## A Closer Look

### The Swastika

While westerners generally associate the swastika with the atrocities of Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime, this association is uniquely western and only goes back to the early twentieth century. As a religious symbol in India, the swastika is at least as old as the second millennium BCE—and has been used in Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism for many, many centuries.

The word *swastika* derives from an ancient Sanskrit term for well-being. It later became associated with the pleasures of this life, with spiritual truth, and with endless birth and rebirth in this world. In Hinduism it often denotes the blessings that come from Ganesha, the god of good beginnings. In Buddhism it is sometimes an element in images of the Wheel of Law; and in Jainism it represents the endless process of birth and rebirth (*samsara*), in a diagram that explains the tenets of that religion.



**Figure 1.3** This juxtaposition of swastikas and six-pointed stars on adjacent window grates in India might strike a westerner as jarring, as the former are usually associated with Hitler and latter with Judaism. In Hinduism, however, these symbols are often used together in the worship of the gods Ganesha and Skanda, the two sons of the great god Shiva. Source: Reproduced by permission of H. Richard Rutherford, C.S.C.

Regarding the further identity of the Aryans, it has been established that they belonged to a much larger group of nomadic peoples whom scholars call Indo-Europeans, and that their religious ideas may have appeared in the Indus Valley as early as 2000 BCE, around the time the Indus Valley civilization was in decline. “Indo-European” is actually a linguistic, rather than an ethnic designation, however, referring to the type of language these nomads spoke. Sanskrit, which became the sacred language of Hinduism, as well as Greek and Latin are members of the Indo-European language family, as are most of the local languages of northern India.

### *Aryan scripture and religion*

In contrast to the Indus Valley civilization, we are relatively well informed about the religion of the Aryans. This is because they composed a body of religious literature known as the **Veda**, which is Sanskrit for “knowledge.” The earliest strata of this literature was composed between 1700 and 900 BCE. Called the *Collections (Samhitas)*, it consisted of thousands of hymns divided into four anthologies on the basis of their use in rituals that took place around a sacrificial fire. These anthologies are known as the *Rig-Veda*, the *Sama-Veda*, the *Yajur-Veda*, and *Atharva-Veda*. The oldest and most important of these is the **Rig-Veda**. It contains just over 1000 hymns that were chanted to honor the many gods of the Vedic pantheon. The other parts of the *Collections* contain similar material, some of which was intended to be sung, as well as spells designed to achieve plentiful harvests, romantic success, and protection from curses and illness. Western scholars often refer to the *Collections* as “the four Vedas,” but this is not a universally accepted Hindu usage.

#### A Closer Look

### Indo-European Languages

The discovery of ancient Sanskrit in the 1800s by westerners revolutionized the study of linguistics. One aspect of this discovery that especially fascinated scholars was the large number of cognates, or closely related words, that Sanskrit shared with Greek and Latin (as well as Persian, Hittite, German, Celtic, and others).

Latin	Greek	Sanskrit	English
<i>est</i>	<i>esti</i>	<i>asti</i>	is
<i>mater</i>	<i>mêtêr</i>	<i>matr</i>	mother/maternal
Jupiter	<i>Zeus Patêr</i>	<i>Dyaus Pitar</i>	Zeus the Father
<i>iugo</i>	<i>zugê</i>	<i>yuga</i>	<i>yoke</i>
<i>ignis</i> (fire)	[none]	<i>agni</i>	ignite

## Gods and sacrifices

The gods worshiped by the Aryans were thought to control the forces of order in society, nature, and the cosmos. They are opposed to another class of superhuman beings, the anti-gods (or demons), who promoted chaos. To receive blessings from the deities and protect society and the cosmos from the demons, priests called Brahmins used the Vedic hymns to praise and entertain the various gods and goddesses, while offering them sacrifices (*yajna*). In this way they formed a bond between themselves and the unseen world of the gods. One of these gods was Varuna, who had the task of enforcing the divine order or law (*rita*). He watched over the activities of mortals and punished those who did evil. Another Vedic god was **Indra**, the divine warrior-king. His most important function was to ensure the coming of the monsoon rains by annually killing Vritra, the anti-god who withheld these life-giving waters. The Brahmins often fortified Indra for combat with an intoxicating drink called Soma, which was both the nectar of the gods *and* a deity in his own right. The Brahmins were responsible for preparing and offering the Soma to Indra, which they did by pouring the liquid into a ritual fire; and sometimes they drank some themselves, which gave them insight into the divine world.

The ritual fire was the god **Agni**, who could be envisioned as an open mouth that consumed the Brahmins' offerings. These consisted of grain, clarified butter (*ghee*), Soma, and various animals (especially goats), which were first suffocated to avoid shedding their blood. In this way, Agni played a distinctive role as messenger to the other gods, for it was Agni who brought them the Brahmins' sacrifices by carrying them to heaven (*svarga*) on the updraft of his fire. Agni also served as Indra's weapon, in the form of lightening, when Indra battled Vritra; and he was responsible for the very important task of preparing the souls of the dead for heaven through cremation.

## Sacred Traditions and Scripture

### The Great Deeds of Indra

This is one of many hymns from the *Rig-Veda* that praises the warrior and rain god Indra. It would have been chanted as a way to flatter Indra into attending a sacrifice held in his honor.

I will tell the heroic deeds of Indra, those which the Wielder of the Thunderbolt first accomplished: He slew the dragon and released the waters. He split open the bellies of the mountain. He slew the dragon who lay upon the mountain. ...

Rejoicing in his virility like a bull, he chose the Soma and drank the extract from the three bowls. The Generous One took up the thunderbolt as his weapon and killed the first-born of dragons. O Indra, when you killed

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the first-born of dragons and overcame the deluding lures of the wily, at that very moment you brought forth the sun, heaven, and dawn; since then you have found no overpowering enemy.

Indra killed Vritra [the dragon], the greater enemy, the shoulderless one, with his great and deadly thunderbolt. Like the branches of a tree felled by an axe, the dragon lies prostrate upon the ground. For like a non-warrior muddled by intoxication, Vritra challenged the great hero who had overcome the mighty and who drank Soma to the dregs. ... Without feet or hands he fought against Indra, who struck him upon the back with his thunderbolt. The castrated steer who wished to become the equal of the virile bull, Vritra lay shattered in many places. Over him, as he lay like a broken reed, the swelling waters flowed.

(Wendy Doniger, *Hindu Myths: A Sourcebook Translated from the Sanskrit*. New York, Penguin Books, 1975, pp. 74–75.)

### *The end of the Veda*

The complexity of the Vedic rituals eventually gave rise to the second division of the Veda, the *Brahmanas*. This literature, which was composed between 800 and 600 BCE, offered commentary on the Vedic ritual, including philosophical remarks, glosses on important words and numbers, and folktales illustrating religious principles. The *Brahmanas* were particularly interested in the problem of human mortality (“recurrent death”), and the divine power, or *brahman*, that was thought to be inherent in the Vedic hymns and rituals.

The final two divisions of the Veda were the *Aranyakas* and the *Upanishads*. The *Aranyakas* (*Wilderness Texts*) are a transitional literature, providing commentary on the Vedic rituals, like *Brahmanas*, but also moving toward the metaphysical speculation of the *Upanishads*. The earliest *Upanishads* were probably composed during the fifth century BCE, and many others followed over the next millennium and a half. As a body of literature, the *Upanishads* were called *Vedanta*, or End of the Veda, as they brought the Vedic scriptures to a close. Thereafter, the Veda—consisting of the *Collections*, *Brahmanas*, *Aranyakas*, and *Upanishads*—became Hinduism’s highest level of revelation, or *shruti*, meaning “what is heard” (from the gods). This was opposed to *smriti*, “what is remembered” (by human beings).

The *Upanishads* contain religious dialogues between various teachers, such as sages and fathers, and various students, including both men and women. Somewhat surprisingly, these dialogues take place in private settings without the supervision of the Brahmins, whose authority in religious matters had dominated the Veda until this point. This and other aspects of the *Upanishads* suggest the rise of a non-Brahmanic challenge to the Vedic sacrificial system.

## Talking about Religion

### Brahmin, *brahman*, Brahma, *Brahmanas*

There are several important words in Hinduism that all start with the letters *brahm*. This has been confusing for students, especially since many books distinguish between them using a technical system of accents and dots. In this chapter we will use the following system:

- **Brahmin** is used for the Hindu priest and the priestly class.
- ***brahman*** refers to the sacred, or ultimate reality in Hinduism.
- **Brahma** is the name of a creator god.
- ***Brahmanas*** are early manuals for priests that comment on the meaning of the Vedic fire rituals.

### The soul is *brahman*

A central issue for discussion in the *Upanishads* was the relation between ***atman*** (the soul of the individual), and *brahman*. Beginning with the assumption that the basis for our universe was the *brahman* that the Brahmins experienced in the ritual sacrifice, the *Upanishads* speculated that if the existence of everything, including humans, was rooted in the universe, then everything, including humans, would have *brahman* as its foundation. *Brahman*, in other words, was not the exclusive possession of the gods, accessible only by Brahmins during the sacrifice; instead, it was a world soul (*Atman*), pervading the universe much like salt pervades water into which it has been dissolved. With regard specifically to individual human beings, the *Upanishads* taught that ultimate reality was present in each person as a tiny speck of *brahman* that constituted the person's *atman*. Stated differently: a person's innermost, individual self was, at its truest and most profound level, identical with ultimate reality.

### Reincarnation

In addition to identifying the *atman* with *brahman*, the *Upanishads* articulated the core doctrines of reincarnation. One of the oldest *Upanishads*, the *Brihadaranyaka*, taught that after a person's physical death, his or her *atman* re-entered the life cycle through rebirth in another body. This could be the body of a rain drop, an insect, a human being, or any one of a number of other bodies. Furthermore, the body that a particular *atman* received was determined by a person's morality in his or her previous life. Good people received good bodies, bad people received bad ones.

#### Did you know...

Missiles developed by the Indian military are often named after Hinduism's fire god, Agni. These include two intercontinental ballistic missiles, Agni V and Agni VI.

Reincarnation worked in this way because of something called **karma**. In earlier Vedic literature, *karma* had meant “action,” especially the ritual actions that had produced supernatural consequences. When the Brahmins gave the gods what they wanted, they received gifts and blessings; but if they did the ritual actions improperly, the gods would respond with punishment. The Upanishadic sage Yajnavalkya, however, saw things differently. He contended that *all* actions, not just ritual actions, created superhuman consequences for the doer; and that these consequences would be either beneficial or evil depending on the *moral intent* of the doer, not his or her ritual capability. It was not until a person died, however, that the good and bad karma (actions) of a person’s life would be tallied. At that point, the combined consequences of one’s karma forced his or her *atman* to be reborn in a body that was commensurate with the total good and evil of that person’s life. In short, Yajnavalkya had postulated a law of karma, by which the morality of a person’s life determined the form of his or her rebirth in the next.

While rebirth in a new body, supposing that one had lived a moderately good life, might sound desirable to a non-Hindu—one more go-round at life, if you will—the *Upanishads* saw rebirth as something to be avoided. This was because reincarnation led to re-death, which is the necessary consequence of rebirth. In addition, since the cycle of rebirth was never ending (*not* just one more go-round), chances were good—in fact, certain—that sooner or later a person’s next birth would turn out much worse than the one before.

### Salvation as release

With the creation of the law of karma, the *Upanishads* also promoted a new religious goal: release, or **moksha**, meaning the release of one’s *atman* from the endless cycle of reincarnation, now called **samsara** (flowing around). In practical terms this required circumventing the law of karma by somehow living in a way that prevented the accumulation of any karma, whether bad *or* good. The starting point for such a life was knowing the *Upanishadic* truth that *atman* was *brahman*. Empowered with this knowledge, a person was then instructed to engage in renunciation. This is a practice, found in many religions, by which people deny themselves things in the human world—food, water, sexual intercourse, sleep. The expectation of renunciants (“renouncers”) is that by distancing themselves from the human world they will draw near to the divine world. In the case of the *Upanishads*, the challenge was to distance oneself from the karmic world by renouncing desire, because actions performed without desire were, by definition, not motivated by a good or bad intention, and thus created no karma. When the karma from one’s former life exhausted itself in producing the circumstances of this life, and when no new karma took its place, the renunciant moved beyond an intellectual knowing that *atman* was *brahman*, to experiencing this truth as the reality of his or her existence. With the complete exhaustion of his or her karma, the renunciant died and entered the “worlds of *brahman*,” never to be reborn.

## Sacred Traditions and Scripture

### The Self and the Sacred

In this famous text from the *Chandogya Upanishad*, the sage Uddalaka Aruni leads his son Shvetaketu into the deep truth that the self (*atman*) is identical with the sacred (*brahman*).

“Bring me a piece of fruit from that banyan tree,” said Uddalaka Aruni to his son.

“Here it is, father.”

“Break it apart.”

“It’s broken, father.”

“What do you see?”

“Extremely tiny seeds, father.”

“Break one open.”

“It’s broken, father.”

“Now what do you see?”

“Nothing at all.”

Then the sage said to his son, “What you don’t see is the essence, but on that essence stands the existence of the whole banyan tree. Believe me, my son, all of existence has that essence for its self (*atman*). *That* is Real. *That* is the self (*atman*). *That* is you, Shvetaketu!”

(*Chandogya Upanishad* 6.12.1-3.)

### Many gods or one divine essence

In contrast to earlier Vedic literature, the *Upanishads* understood ultimate reality as **monistic** rather than **theistic**. That is, they approached *brahman* as a single, divine essence or principle that pervaded everything, not as a collection of gods and goddesses who had personalities and temperaments. The Veda, therefore, provided Hinduism with two distinct visions of ultimate reality: the earlier theism of the *Collections*, wherein deities were honored with praise and sacrifice, and the later monism of the *Upanishads*. This monistic perspective resonated profoundly throughout the subsequent history of Hinduism. The popularity of renunciation produced a vast tradition of Hindu ascetics, and the individual’s pursuit of *moksha* became the highest priority for many Hindus. Yet, in its immediate context in the late Vedic period, the individualism of monism generated tensions between Brahmins, who officiated over the sacrificial religion on behalf of Hindu society, and those who, following the *Upanishads*, sought to escape the karmic world of society through renunciation.



## *Class and caste*

Until about 900 BCE the Aryans were largely confined to the Punjab. Over the next 600 years they extended their political control eastward, into the fertile plains of the Ganges river, where they encountered urbanization, political centralization, and expanded economic activity. Collectively these factors moved Hinduism toward a stratified society in which specific groups were identified with specific occupations. Prior to this development, the Brahmins had envisioned society as a hierarchy of four classes. These were, in order of their importance, the Brahmins themselves, who were the religious authorities; the **Nobles** (*kshatriyas*), who protected and governed society; the **Commoners** (*vaishyas*), who were the economic backbone of society—farmers, merchants, and skilled workers; and the **Servants** (*shudras*), whose assignment was to perform unskilled labor. Inherent in this social ranking was also a religious hierarchy, which dictated that the higher one's class, the closer one was to the gods and the more true and purposeful was his or her life.

Sometime during this same period (900-300 BCE), as the theologians of the *Upanishads* were exploring the religious implications of the law of karma and the identification of the *atman* with *brahman*, the Brahmins were investigating the concept of *dharma*. Initially they used this term to refer to the sacrificial “duties” of householders, including those done in public with Brahmins, and those done at home, usually without a Brahmin. Eventually the Brahmins broadened the meaning of *dharma* to include *all* religious duties of *all* Hindus, especially those duties that pertained to what one could eat and with whom one could interact socially. In this way the Brahmins were able to extend their religious authority into the governance of social relations at a time when their animal sacrifices were losing in popularity because of the influence of a new religious ideal called *ahimsa*, the non-destruction of life.

By about 300 BCE, the Brahmins were writing manuals on *dharma* called *dharma sutras*, and as they did they took into account the many occupational groups that had arisen in Hindu towns and cities near the Ganges river. Since a given occupation was usually associated with a particular family or clan, the Brahmins called the occupational groups **jatis** (births) to emphasize their hereditary nature. Side by side with the four classes, therefore, there developed a hierarchical system of “castes”—the word Europeans would use to translate *jati*. Around 100 CE, the Brahmins began writing another type of literature—*dharma shastras*—which provided detailed lists of the karmic consequences for different good and bad actions, one effect of which was to severely limit the life choices of women. The the most popular of these *dharma shastras*, the *Code of Manu*, also developed a system that coordinated the four classes with the castes by assigning each caste to one of the classes.

Over time the Brahmins defined thousands of occupational castes along hereditary lines, giving each a particular *dharma* and a particular value in Hindu society based on the presumed purity or impurity of each occupation. In order to maintain this caste system into future generations, the *dharma* of each caste prohibited marriage outside the caste and restricted social interaction. By enlisting the *Upanishadic* teachings about

karma and rebirth, the Brahmins also taught that any attempt to change one's *dharma* or one's caste resulted in a great deal of bad karma and a worse birth (*jati*) in the next life, possibly in one of several hells. Over time the Brahmins eventually created a relatively inflexible social system in which one's prospects for social, economic, and religious advancement were largely dictated by one's birth.

### *People left out of Hindu society*

Below the four classes and the myriad castes Hindus recognized yet another social group, the **Untouchables**. As the name implies, they were considered so distant from ultimate reality—so impure—that they could not participate in Hindu society. Having no class or caste, they were **outcastes** who were required to live in separate villages, drink from their own wells, and announce their presence in public lest contact with their persons (or even their shadows) pollute the members of society. It is important to realize that in a religious system, words like “impure” and “polluting” do not carry a hygienic meaning, for the ancient world knew nothing of microbes or proper hygiene. Untouchables, therefore, were not leper colonies or people with open wounds and communicable diseases. Rather “impurity,” “pollution,” and “uncleanness” are *religious* statements that designate a person's proximity to ultimate reality. The purer one is, the more closely he or she is oriented to what is real and meaningful in the world; the more *impure* one is, the less meaningful and real is his or her life. As people who were so impure as to be untouchable, Untouchables were thought to live existences largely bereft of meaning.

Like the castes, outcastes were endogamous, meaning they could only marry within their social groupings. Further, outcastes were not allowed to be educated in the Veda, participate in important Hindu rituals, or acquire any wealth. Their function in Hindu society was to handle things considered too impure for the four classes. This often meant taking jobs associated with death, such as handling corpses and working with leather. In short, their *dharma* was to absorb the inevitable pollutions of society on behalf of the others.

### *Hinduism's epic tradition*

In the fourth century BCE Hindus had expanded south beyond the sub-continent, reaching the island country of Sri Lanka; and near the end of that century, the Greek empire of Alexander the Great had reached the borders of India, making its presence felt for a brief period. In the wake of Alexander's expansion and then retreat, a power vacuum was created in the region, giving rise to a new Indian dynasty called the Mauryans. In the mid-third century BCE, its most famous king, Ashoka, brought much of India under his control through savage warfare. Disturbed by his army's acts of carnage, he denounced these methods once his kingdom was secure, and began to promote Buddhism. Through his endowments to monasteries and other forms of royal patronage, he initiated a period of Buddhist expansion, both inside and outside of India. This led to centuries of interaction

and competition between Hinduism and Buddhism as both religions vied for the hearts and minds of the Indian people.

The period of Ashoka's reign also marked the beginning of Hinduism's two epic traditions. The *Mahabharata*, which was the longest of the two poems, was composed some time between 300 BCE and 300 CE; the *Ramayana*, sometime between 200 BCE and 200 CE. As vast repositories of Hindu practices and beliefs (the *Mahabharata* is *fifteen times* the size of the Bible, the *Ramayana* about a third that size), these epics provide a valuable window into this period of the religion's history. On the one hand, the epics describe a Hinduism that continued to develop along the lines set by late Vedic and early post-Vedic innovations. We see Vedic rituals, renunciants, discussions of karma and *moksha*, lengthy speeches on *dharma*, and developments in the caste system. On the other hand, we encounter newer practices, such as pilgrimages to sacred places, a form of worship called *puja*, in which fruit and flowers are offered to the image of a god, the use of temples for the first time, and the formation of religious sects devoted to the worship of a particular god or goddess.

The main storyline of both epics describes a world whose order is threatened by evil, as well as the actions of the god *Vishnu*, who intervenes to set things right. In the *Ramayana*, the ogre king Ravana has dethroned Indra, the king of the gods. Unable to withstand Ravana's power, the gods call on Vishnu for help, who responds by entering the human world as the man *Rama*. Growing to maturity through several betrayals and other turns of plot, during which he periodically forgets that he is a god, Rama becomes the embodiment of religious and social duty (*dharma*). When Ravana steals Rama's wife, Sita, Rama calls on the help of his half brother Lakshman, and Hanuman, the leader of the monkeys. Together they storm Ravana's stronghold in Lanka, killing the ogre and rescuing Sita. In the end, Rama is crowned king, restores



**Figure 1.4** Hanuman, the leader of monkeys in the *Ramayana*, is a divine example of loyalty and devotion to Vishnu. Source: Will Deming.

order to the world, and governs India in a period of idealized rule. Sita, however, is suspected of having been sexually violated by Ravana, and Rama must force her to undergo various tests to prove her purity, after which she vanishes.

In the *Mahabharata*, the royal throne has again been usurped and the world order threatened, but this time by the Kauravas, the evil cousins of the rightful rulers, the Pandavas. After many betrayals, machinations, and turns of plot (including the marriage of all five Pandava brothers to a single woman), Vishnu turns the tide in favor of the Pandavas. He does this, moreover, not as a king who defeats the enemy in battle, but as the noncombatant **Krishna**, who serves as the rightful king's charioteer.

### The Song of the Lord

The crucial and much celebrated scene of the *Mahabharata* is found in a section known as the *Bhagavad Gita*, or *Song of the Lord*. As it begins, two massive armies, poised for the decisive battle, stare each other down across a broad plain. **Arjuna**, the rightful king and commander of the Pandavas, suddenly has doubts about his course of action. Looking over at his cousins (albeit his *evil* cousins) and their forces, he cringes at the thought of killing so many former teachers, friends, and family members. He also realizes that the massive carnage about to happen (almost everyone in both armies is killed), will burden him with equally massive amounts of bad karma. Desperate for an exit strategy, Arjuna considers abandoning his status as a Noble (whose *dharma* is to fight for what is right) and pursue a life of renunciation in the jungle.

## Sacred Traditions and Scripture

### Arjuna Loses His Nerve before the Great Battle

In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Arjuna expresses his misgivings with the following lines:

“Shall we not, who see the evil of destruction, shall we not refrain from this terrible deed?

The destruction of a family destroys its rituals of righteousness, and when the righteous rituals are no more, unrighteousness overcomes the whole family.

When unrighteous disorder prevails, the women sin and are impure; and when women are not pure, O Krishna, there is disorder of castes, social confusion.

This disorder carries down to hell the family and the destroyers of the family. The spirits of their dead suffer in pain when deprived of the ritual offerings.

Those evil deeds of the destroyers of a family, which cause this social disorder, destroy the righteousness of birth and the ancestral rituals of righteousness.

(continued)



And have we not heard that hell is waiting for those whose familiar rituals  
of righteousness are no more?

O day of darkness! What evil spirit moved our minds when, for the sake  
of an earthly kingdom, we came to this field of battle ready to kill our own  
people?" ...

Thus spoke Arjuna in the field of battle, and letting fall his bow and arrows,  
he sank down in his chariot, his soul overcome by despair and grief.

(*Bhagavad Gita* 1. 39–45, 47)

(Juan Mascaro, trans., *The Bhagavad Gita*, London, Penguin Books, 1962, pp. 46–47.)

With these misgivings, Arjuna brings to a head a theological quandary that goes back to late Vedic times: Should he remain and support the Hindu social order by fulfilling his *dharma*, or should he withdraw from society to pursue his own salvation? At this point, Arjuna begins a dialogue with Krishna, who, as the reader knows, is an incarnation of Vishnu.

At first Krishna admonishes Arjuna to do his duty. He reasons that since the law of karma metes out perfect justice on the basis of a person's own actions, the combatants will only get what they deserve. Furthermore, because everyone's self, or *atman*, is immortal, the destruction brought by war is only an *apparent* evil, while Arjuna, he points out, stands to suffer punishment in many hells if he violates his *dharma* at this crucial moment. But since this is a rather flat-footed, doctrinaire explanation of the law of karma, Arjuna remains unconvinced and Krishna must initiate him into a higher understanding of *dharma*. One must do one's duty, Krishna explains, but in a way that is detached from all motives of gain or loss. In this way a person will avoid both good and bad karma and achieve release from the karmic world altogether.

With this explanation Krishna has combined duty *with* renunciation, offering Arjuna a way forward without having to choose one or the other. Even so, Arjuna is still repulsed by the atrocities of war, and so Krishna must teach him the path of divine knowledge, or *jnana*. Through the experience of *jnana*, which is acquired by discipline, renunciation, and meditation, Arjuna will be able to see beyond the illusion of the karmic world—beyond its apparent goodness and evil. With *jnana*, in other words, he can remain mentally firm and at peace, even in the midst of warfare. Then, as a gift to Arjuna, Krishna reveals a teaching even more profound than this. Instead of performing one's duty to accumulate good karma, Krishna explains, or without regard for karma, or even with divine knowledge, one should perform one's duty out of devotion to God. Through self-surrender, dedication, and service to God, one's actions will result in union with God.

After this revelation, Krishna gives Arjuna divine eyes to see the world as Krishna himself sees it. Krishna reveals himself to be the Great God Vishnu, a terrifying, universal being in whom all aspects of the creation exist. What Arjuna learns is that gods as well

as demons, evil as well as good co-exist in Krishna, and this leads him to the realization that even the evils of war are somehow part of God. Guided by this new insight, he now recognizes that the proper question is not *whether* a person should do his or her *dharma*, but *how* a person should do it. One can do it for personal advancement (good karma), or selflessly, or even with divine insight. But the highest path is to fulfill one's *dharma* out of wholehearted devotion to God. At this point in the epic, the *Song of the Lord* ends and Arjuna takes up his bow and leads his troops into battle.

**The three ways** The *Bhagavad Gita*, which may have appeared as early as the first century CE, was a watershed in the history of Hinduism, for it managed to synthesize the various Vedic and post-Vedic currents within the religion to a much greater degree than any earlier attempt. Instead of having to choose *either* ritual and social duties *or* the renunciation of society, individual Hindus could now select from among several mutually valid ways of achieving salvation. In the years following the writing of the *Gita*, Hindu theologians formulated these mutually valid ways as three religious paths: the path of action (*karma-marga*), which encompassed the duties of caste and ritual; the path of knowledge (*jnana-marga*), which guided one beyond the karmic world through a divine understanding of human existence; and the path of devotion (*bhakti-marga*), which led to eternal union with God. Beyond this, by promoting the path of devotion as the highest practice of religion, the *Bhagavad Gita* became a powerful catalyst for the religious enfranchisement of all segments of Hindu society. As Krishna states explicitly in book nine of the *Gita*, even women and members of the Servant class, whose impurity had barred them from full access to Hinduism—even these could now attain *moksha* through devotion to God.

### *Three great gods*

The *Bhagavad Gita*'s theism, which envisioned ultimate reality as the single god Vishnu, was part of a broader development in Hinduism that identified several gods as all-powerful. Earlier, Hindus had believed that gods, like all other creatures, were under the edicts of the law of karma. These new all-powerful gods, however, stood outside the karmic world and controlled it. Being themselves safe from the endless flow of *samsara*, they saved their devotees from karmic existence by granting them eternal union with themselves, or eternal existence in their heavenly abodes.

In time, three deities emerged as the principal expressions of the all-powerful, Great Gods: Vishnu, **Shiva**, and **Devi**. Vishnu was seen as a kindly overseer of the universe. He safeguarded the order of the world, and entered into human history in bodily form when humanity was threaten by the forces of evil and chaos. Vishnu's chief incarnations, known as *avatars*, were Krishna and Rama, the respective heroes of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Through numerous translations and retellings of the *Ramayana*, Rama in particular quickly developed a pan-Indian following. The list of Vishnu's *avatars* was eventually expanded to ten, and they sometimes included the Buddha. Other

*avatars* identified Vishnu with heroic figures from earlier mythologies, such as the Fish, the Boar, the Tortoise, and the Dwarf. In all these cases Vishnu's role was to come to the aid of human beings and the lesser gods in times of cosmic crisis.

In contrast to Vishnu, Shiva was characterized by violence and power that was both destructive and creative. His worshipers praised him for this, as he used his power on their behalf to combat evil in their lives. The karmic world was a violent place, fed by an endless cycle of creation and destruction, birth, death, rebirth, and re-death. Yet those who approached Shiva with awe and reverence could appeal to this master of the universe, whose divine activities had created their karmic reality. Sometimes Shiva's power was envisioned as male and female sexual energy. In his destructive mode, he renounced all sexual activity, producing death in the world. But Shiva also had an erotic side; and inasmuch as sexual acts can be both violent and procreative, Shiva brought life to the world through erotic adventures.

A third possibility for envisioning an all-powerful deity was Devi. In Sanskrit, *devi* is the generic term for "goddess," and under this name worshipers identified many regional goddesses with the Great Goddess. Sometimes she was seen as the wife or sexual partner of Vishnu or Shiva. As such, Devi took on the characteristics of these gods: kindly and caring, on the one hand, or violent and erotic, on the other. As the Great Goddess in her own right, Devi was often pictured as a bloodthirsty warrior, using her horrific skills in battle to defend her followers; her followers, in turn, sometimes slaughtered animals in her honor and offered her the blood.

### Ancient tales

Hinduism's new theism was vividly developed in a literature known as the **Puranas** (*Ancient Tales*), the earliest of which appeared around 350 CE. Traditionally, there are supposed to be eighteen major *Puranas*, paired with eighteen minor ones, but the actual numbers varied widely. The subject matter of the *Puranas* is vast, including the origin and structure of the universe, royal genealogies, and a cyclical theory of time. They also elaborated, in great detail, the theology, mythology, and rituals of various gods, including both the Great Gods and the lesser ones, the latter now being seen as mere helper gods. The *Puranas* filled out the divine families of the Great Gods; identified their weapons, their clothing, and the divine animals that transported them into our world; and associated each deity with important pilgrimage sites.



**Figure 1.5** Vishnu, as the boar avatar, saves the world from drowning during the primeval flood. Source: Will Deming.



**Figure 1.6** Our earliest example of pages from a Purana (ca. eleventh century CE).

Traditionally, books in India were made from palm leaves, the letters being scratched into the shiny surface of a leaf with a stylus and then wiped with ink. The ink would adhere to the scratches. The holes in the middle of the leaves are for a string that held the book together.

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

### *Devotional Hinduism*

The practice of devoting oneself to a particular god, which Krishna had praised in the *Bhagavad Gita*, had originated around the turn of the millennium among a non-Aryan (Dravidian) people called the Tamils, who lived in the south of India. In the third and fourth centuries CE, two groups of poet-saints, the Nayanmars (also Nayanars) and the Alvars began to express their passion and love for Shiva and Vishnu, respectively, through devotional songs. As they travelled north they converted many Hindus, and by the seventh century CE a devotional movement within Hinduism had developed, which, in the following centuries, spread throughout India.

Devotional worship, which became known in Sanskrit as *bhakti*, encompassed many things, including sharing, service, hospitality, entertainment, and enjoyment. Devotees held festivals in honor of their god, composed poems, songs, and responsive chants, and recited the god's many names and attributes. As the *Puranas* became available, devotees could learn to love their god in detailed and intimate ways by memorizing, for example, the god's manner of dress, his or her mythological adventures, and his or her divine associates. In temples, the starting point of *bhakti* was the assumption that one could interact with a deity as a host might interact with a royal guest. The deity's temple came to be seen as a palace where he or she held audience through an image, usually a consecrated statue. A priest at the temple would act as mediator, tending to the needs of the image on behalf of the worshipers. He would awaken, bathe, and clothe the statue in the course of the day, and present the deity with flowers and food offerings brought by the worshipers. At night and at certain times of the day the priest would restrict visitation, allowing the deity to rest.

### *Islamic dynasties in India*

Islamic incursions into India began in the early eleventh century under Mahmud, a Turko-Afghan ruler from Ghazna in Afghanistan. Although Mahmud added the Punjab



to his empire, his primary goal was not territorial expansion or religious mission. Rather, it was to enrich his treasury by sacking and looting the wealthy Buddhist monasteries and Hindu temples of northern India.

A permanent Islamic state in northern India was first established in the late twelfth century, following the defeat of the Indian king Prithviraj by Muizzuddin Muhammad. By the beginning of the thirteenth century, a general from Muhammad's army had founded the Delhi Sultanate, which lasted from 1206 to 1526. In time, the Turko-Afghan dynasties of the Delhi Sultanate came to dominate the political life of northern India, while several smaller Islamic kingdoms established themselves in central and south India. Hinduism, in turn, began to expand along trade routes into Indonesia, especially Java.

In 1526 the Delhi Sultanate was succeeded by the Mughal Empire, which lasted into the eighteenth century and marked the height of Islamic rule in India. During these centuries of Turko-Afghan expansion into India, Islam functioned on two levels. Politically, Islam's power was predominantly an urban phenomenon. Muslim clerics assisted rulers as they implemented Islamic law from military garrisons in the territories they had conquered. Since Hindus were regarded as polytheists, their religious sites were occasionally defaced or destroyed. This violence was sporadic, however, and varied significantly from ruler to ruler. On a popular level, by contrast, missionaries belonging to Islam's mystical branch, Sufism, became ambassadors of the religion to the population at large. Both Sufi practitioners and their spiritual masters (*shaykhs*) had first come to India in the wake of Turko-Afghan conquests. During the Delhi Sultanate, the Chishti and Suhrawardi Sufi orders established themselves throughout north India, while later, under the Mughal Dynasty, the Naqshbandi and Qadiri orders spread Sufism into south India. As Sufis were acculturated to the Indian worldview, they created new expressions of Islam that combined elements of Hinduism with Muslim practices. Tombs of Sufi saints were patronized by Hindus and Muslims alike, and in the fifteenth century a new religion altogether—Sikhism—arose from Sufi interaction with Hinduism.

By and large, however, Hinduism changed little through its contact with Islam. If anything, it retrenched itself more securely in its own traditions. Buddhism, by contrast, fared poorly in India under Muslim rule, although it is not entirely clear why. Many causes seem to have been involved, including economic and social factors, and most scholars see no simple correspondence between the spread of Islam in India and the decline of Buddhism there. By the mid-thirteenth century, Buddhism had all but vanished from the land of its origin, leaving behind only architectural remains in the form of reliquary shrines and temples, and centuries of influence on Hinduism as the two religions had developed side-by-side.

### *British colonialism*

The East India Company, chartered by British traders and established in Kolkata in 1600, would eventually supplant the Mughals as the main power on the subcontinent. The

Mughal Empire nominally continued into the mid-1800s, but military losses in 1757 marked a decisive setback in its ability to rule. From that point onward, the East India Company and the British government were the real overlords of India until its independence in 1947.

The British colonial presence in India challenged the religion and worldview of Hindus to an unprecedented degree. For educated Hindus, the greatest provocation actually came from those Company officials who studied the history and languages of Hinduism. On the one hand, these officials tended to glorify Hinduism's ancient past to the detriment of its present, giving the impression that the Hinduism of their day was a shallow vestige of former times. On the other hand, they regarded Indian society and culture as inferior to their own. An example of this prejudice can be seen in James Mill's *History of British India*, written in the 1820s. In particular, Mill singled out Hinduism as the source of India's ostensible fall from greatness. The irrational, other-worldliness of this religion, he claimed, had created a population unable to govern itself in the modern world (thereby justifying British rule). For decades a copy of Mill's work was distributed to Company officials departing for India to prepare them for their task and reinforce their sense of superiority over the native populations. Yet Mill, a Company employee who lived in London, never once visited India!

### *The Hindu Renaissance and Indian independence*

Colonial challenges like these engendered vigorous responses from Hindu leaders, resulting in what has been called the Hindu Renaissance. Somewhat ironically, however, several early Hindu activists based their demands for religious reform on a romanticized Hinduism that the British had created to make the religion more palatable. For example, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who founded the Society of God (Brahmo Samaj) in 1828, praised the *Upanishads* for their preservation of a pristine form of Hinduism, devoid of fanciful myths and image worship, and whose monism compared favorably with Christianity's monotheism. Similarly, Swami Dayanand Sarasvati, who founded the Society of Noble Ones (Arya Samaj) in 1875, insisted that the *Rig-Veda*, which some English scholars had valorized as the religious masterpiece of a noble people, contained infallible, eternal truth. On this basis, he insisted that all modern forms of Hinduism be measured against it, and that his followers call themselves Aryans rather than Hindus.

Yet Company officials and the British Crown Government, to whom direct rule of India passed officially in 1858, also contributed in positive ways to the Hindu Renaissance. While they were reluctant to involve themselves directly in religious affairs, they did intervene in social practices rooted in Hindu culture. Because of this, Hindu reformers were able to use the British legal system to give women the right to study the Veda, encourage widows to remarry, and outlaw *suttee*, the practice whereby a widow mounted the funeral pyre of her late husband so as to accompany him into the afterlife.

## A Closer Look

### The Plight of Widows in Modern Hinduism

Despite the rights that British law accorded Hindu widows in the nineteenth century, many still have no place or worth in the religion. According to tradition, women are “never independent of a man”: girls are dependent on their fathers, wives on their husbands, and widows on their sons. Consequently, widows without dutiful sons, or those with no sons at all, often take refuge in temples where they live on charity. The women in this picture must join with the temple priests in chanting the sacred names of Vishnu before they can line up for the daily meal.



**Figure 1.7** Disowned by their relatives and bereft of any other support, widows at a Vaishnava temple in northern India chant praise and thanksgiving to Vishnu in return for food and shelter. Source: © Stuart Freedman / In Pictures / Corbis.

As the focus shifted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to Indian independence, reformers continued to rework elements of the Hindu tradition, but now towards political ends. Aurobindo Ghosh (1872–1950), who began his public career as a fiery political leader advocating militant nationalism, later turned to Hinduism, valorizing it as the eternal religion (*sanatana dharma*). This encouraged his followers to insist that the Veda was a trustworthy guide to modern social and political reform.

The most famous reformer of this period was Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948), who became known as Mahatma, the “great-souled one.” Trained in law in England, he practiced first in South Africa, where he fought against racial prejudices aimed at the

Hindu community there. (Many Hindus had moved to South Africa as indentured servants after the British Empire had outlawed slavery.) This is where Gandhi developed his principle of “holding on to truth,” or *satyagraha*. Believing that God was truth, he encouraged others to address the forces of oppression with passive resistance, thereby exposing to one’s oppressors the truth of their evil actions. After 17 years of practice in South Africa, Gandhi returned to India to work for social and political change there. While he supported the caste system (he himself was a Commoner), he regarded all occupations as being of equal value to society, believing that everyone was an integral part of the greater whole. He even extended a version of this perspective to other religions, claiming that each spoke truth to its own adherents. Gandhi also worked for the elimination of Untouchability, arguing that the institution had no place in true religion. To avoid using the name, he referred to Untouchables as the Lord’s people (*harijans*).

In 1920 Gandhi became the head of the Indian National Congress and promoted *satyagraha* and passive resistance in India’s fight for independence from England. As the call for national independence increased, political groups formed around the interests of India’s multi-religious mosaic, which also included large numbers of Muslims. The end result was the Partition, a division of the subcontinent in 1947 into a Hindu state and a Muslim state—India and Pakistan, respectively. The goal was to allow Hindus and Muslims to carve out their own political destinies. Tragically, the Partition, which resettled 10–12 million people, also brought about the death of some 500,000 persons. One year after independence had been achieved, Gandhi was killed by a Hindu nationalist extremist.

### *From the Partition to the present*

The constitution of modern India became the law of the land in 1950. One of its primary authors was an Untouchable named Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar. Although he converted to Buddhism to avoid discrimination (taking some five million Hindu followers with him), he left an important legacy to Hinduism in Part III of the Constitution, *Fundamental Rights*, which outlawed discrimination on the basis of caste. Since that time, the Indian government has adopted a number of reform measures, somewhat akin to affirmative action policies in the United States. The name **dalit** (oppressed people) has replaced Untouchable, which is prohibited by law; and dalits can legally enter temples and schools, and marry persons from the four social classes. The official, government designation for dalits is the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, as they legally have access to employment and education, but only on the basis of a predetermined schedule designed to integrate them into Hindu society gradually.

Despite these changes, the caste system is still very much alive in India, especially in rural areas, where most of the population lives. Hindus are still able to distinguish between hundreds, if not thousands of castes, and while other religious communities, such as Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs, are avowedly anti-caste, the pervasiveness of this ancient institution has even divided some groups within these communities along caste

lines. Not surprisingly, dalits continue to convert to Buddhism to escape the stigma and limitations of their social status.

Hindu nationalism, which played an important role in calling for the 1947 Partition, also continues in modern India, for even after the Partition India retained a significant minority population of Muslims (currently estimated at 13 percent). As Muslims continue to assert their religious rights in India's democracy, Hindu nationalists receive increasing support. A good example of nationalism's popularity can be seen in the activities of the BJP (Indian People's Party). This group enjoyed a meteoric rise to prominence in the 1980s through a campaign that utilized core Hindu religious symbols. Many of these were associated with India's two epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, and were presented as part of an ideology that appealed to "an essential Hindu identity," or *Hindutva*—an expression that had been used by Hindu nationalists in the 1920s. In 2009 the BJP mobilized to block a proposal to dredge an area off the coast of Tamilnadu, in southern India, to improve the shipping capacity of the region. In conducting feasibility studies, the Archeological Survey of India had discovered an underwater sandbar off the coast, which they described as a natural formation that had regulated the local tidal waters for the past several centuries. The BJP, however, identified the sandbar as the causeway that Rama and Hanuman had built in the *Ramayana* to attack Ravana's island fortress, and contended that it should be preserved as part of Hinduism's sacred past. The controversy then escalated, threatening to divide India's ruling political coalition and destabilize the government. Even after six years the case remains unresolved, although at present it is under arbitration in India's supreme court.

## Contemporary Beliefs and Practices

As we remarked at the beginning of this chapter, Hinduism embraces multiple theologies, rituals, and visions of ultimate reality. It is a striking example of religious pluralism within a single religion. One factor that has contributed to its diversity is Hinduism's *cumulative* nature, whereby older elements are easily joined with more recent ones, and little is ever completely discarded. Thus, Brahmins still chant Vedic hymns and conduct fire rituals; monism competes with theism; karma, *dharma*, and *moksha* rank among Hinduism's core beliefs; caste identity and renunciant traditions exist side-by-side, and the legends of the epics and the *Puranas* continue to inspire modern audiences.

Even in the face of such diversity, however, an overview of Hinduism's current beliefs and practices can nonetheless proceed on the basis of two observations. First, most Hindus believe that salvation, the final goal of religion, is to be freed from the effects of karma, and that this freedom comes either by entering a heaven that is immune to karma, or by unifying the *atman* with *brahman*. Second, the beliefs and practices of Hinduism, which are the means by which Hindus gain their freedom from karma, function largely according to one of three patterns or logics. Some beliefs and practices depend



mostly on the logic of karma, others on the logic of devotion, and still others on the logic pertaining to divine knowledge. In what follows we will examine each of these patterns, keeping in mind that they are not exclusive of one another, nor even separate categories in the minds of most Hindus.

### Did you know...

Even though leather is seen as polluting, most Hindus wear leather sandals or shoes. They consider the feet to be one of the most impure parts of the human body, and they avoid touching sandals and shoes with their hands. Some very strict Hindus wear wooden sandals.

## *Salvation according to the logic of karma*

Most Hindus believe that they possess an immortal soul, or *atman*, which has already experienced countless previous lives through reincarnation. Moreover, the karma of those previous lives has determined everyone's present life; and everyone's *atman* is, to a greater or lesser extent, burdened with impurities due to evil actions and contact with pollutants: a member of a lower caste, urine, menstrual blood, and corpses, to name just a few. In the normal course of life, the proper performance of religious duties (*dharma*) produces merit (*punya*), which cleanses the *atman* from these impurities. This is the most basic understanding of the law of karma, and the most basic motivation for Hindus to perform their *dharma*. Since the time of the *Bhagavad Gita*, however, it has also been popular to see the performance of *dharma* from another perspective. It is believed that when a person faithfully performs his or her *dharma* without any concern for personal gain, then liberation from rebirth, rather than merit, can result. On this view, pollution and sin (*papa*) result from greed, lust, and self-centeredness. Given these two perspectives on *dharma*, one can speak of both short and long range goals for Hindus who live according to the logic of karma: the accumulation of merit in preparation for rebirth, and release from the world of karma altogether.

### Sources of *dharma*

The *dharma* of a particular individual is a combination of several factors. First, there is **class-and-life-stage *dharma*** (*varna-ashrama-dharma*), which a person must perform based on caste, gender, and time of life. Then there is **general *dharma*** (*samanya-dharma*) or "*dharma* applicable to all" (*sadharana-dharma*), which encompasses religious actions expected of all Hindus. Finally, there is one's **own *dharma*** (*sva-dharma*), which gives each person some flexibility. It can reflect a person's emotional temperament, talents, personality, and physical make-up. One's own *dharma* can vary so greatly from person to person, however, it will not be included in our discussion.

**Class-and-life-stage *dharma*** As an example of class-and-life-stage *dharma* we may consider the duties of a Brahmin man. These include prohibitions against eating meat and drinking alcohol, and on a typical day a Brahmin man will also be expected to purify himself with water, recite a Vedic prayer to the Sun (usually several times), make offerings to various gods and forces of nature, read passages from the Veda out loud, and meditate. If he is a priest (not all members of the Brahmin class are priests), he will have additional duties as well.

A second example of class-and-life-stage *dharma* is the performance of rituals designed to enhance a person's degree of purity as he or she grows older. These are known as *samskaras* (impressions). Traditionally there were sixteen *samskaras*, but today numbers one, three, and six (marked below in italics) are largely defunct. In the chronological order in which they are administered or undertaken, they are:

- (1) *impregnation*
- (2) ensuring male offspring
- (3) *parting of the mother's hair to ensure good luck for her and her infant*
- (4) birthing rituals
- (5) name-giving
- (6) *the infant's first outing*
- (7) the first eating of solid food
- (8) first hair cutting (head shaving) for male babies
- (9) ear piercing
- (10) starting one's secular education
- (11) investiture with the sacred thread
- (12) beginning of Vedic study
- (13) first shaving of facial hair for males
- (14) formal end to the celibate, student stage of life
- (15) marriage
- (16) funerary rites.

**Investiture with the sacred thread** Of the thirteen *samskaras* still in regular use, three in particular are considered central to the proper conduct of life: investiture with the sacred thread (11), marriage (15), and funerary rites (16). In most cases an astrologer will be called on to establish the most auspicious day, and sometimes hour, for these three. The investiture ritual (*upanayan*) is open only to male members of the highest three classes—Brahmins, Nobles, and Commoners—although today it is practiced mostly by Brahmins. It marks the beginning of a boy's obligation to fulfill all of his adult social and religious duties. In a formal ceremony, the boy is given a cord consisting of three intertwined, single strands. This cord is placed on his left shoulder and falls across his chest and back, being tied on the right side near his lower abdomen. By putting on this "sacred thread" he undergoes a spiritual rebirth, receiving the designation "twice-born" (*dvija*). The boy is also given a special chant, called the Gayatri *mantra*, which he will recite daily for the rest of his life.

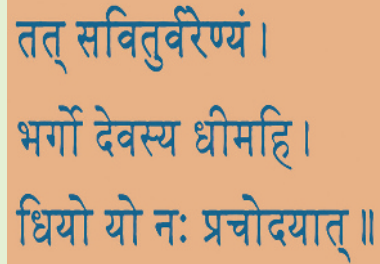
## A Closer Look

## The Daily Prayer of the Twice-born

**Gayatri Mantra**

When spoken, the Gayatri *mantra* is always preceded by “Om,” and the “great utterance”:

Om. Earth, sky, heaven:  
May we attain to the surpassing glory  
of Savitar, the Sun,  
that he may inspire our prayers.



तत् सवितुर्वरेण्यं ।  
भर्गो देवस्य धीमहि ।  
धियो यो नः प्रचोदयात् ॥

Figure 1.8

**Marriage and children** Unlike the investiture ceremony, the *samskara* of marriage is open to all classes (as well as both genders, of course). The *Rig-Veda* places great importance on this rite, since husbands and wives are seen as “partners in *dharma*,” performing many rituals as a team. Marriage also sanctifies the bearing of legitimate children, allowing for the continuation of the family’s religious lineage; and many Hindus understand having children as the payment of a debt that a husband and wife owe to their parents and ancestors. A male child in particular is sought, not only because most Hindu groups trace their ancestry through the male line, but also because the oldest son plays a key role in his father’s funeral rites. While the marriage ceremony consists of many activities, one of the most important is the groom leading his wife around the sacred fire (Agni) in seven steps while they recite verses from the *Rig-Veda*. This action, more than any other, aligns the new union with the divine world. As one of the most important of all Hindu *samskaras*, marriage is celebrated as lavishly as possible, often placing enormous financial burdens on poorer members of Hindu society.

**Funeral rites** The funeral rites, the final *samskara* an individual undergoes, cleanse a family from the pollution caused by death and ensures that the deceased will be properly reincarnated in the next life. Other than those professionals who assist with the rites, only immediate relatives are permitted to participate. If something in the ritual were to go wrong, the soul of the deceased might become a troublesome, wandering ghost.

With the exception of young children, persons who have died from certain illnesses, and renunciators who have forsaken society (*sannyasins*), the dead are always cremated, usually while hymns from the *Rig-Veda* are chanted. This is done to eliminate the pollution of the corpse by means of Agni, and to call upon Agni to transport the deceased to the next world on the updraft of the funeral pyre. When the cremation is over, the



**Figure 1.9** Hindu cremation in Nepal. After the soul is purified through cremation and put into the care of Agni (the fire god), the ashes are deposited into the river, which is thought to be a goddess. Source: Reproduced by permission of Sue Ellen Christensen.

deceased's skull is shattered to release his or her soul. Any remaining bone fragments are gathered into a jar. They will eventually be immersed in a sacred river, or brought to a pilgrimage site or plot of ancestral land.

### General duties

In contrast to the class-and-life-stage *dharma*, general *dharma* pertains equally to all Hindus. An especially common example of a general duty is the expectation that people will honor divinity (*brahman*) as it is found in the world around them. This includes honoring certain animals, such as cows, elephants, and particular species of birds and snakes. It also includes giving proper respect to holy persons, such as Brahmins, renunciants, and spiritual teachers (gurus). Beyond this, *brahman* manifests itself in shrines and temples, and in the home.

**Shrines and temples** Local shrines and temples allow more frequent access to the divine world than pilgrimage sites. A typical Hindu village will have several shrines to local divinities (*devata*) and guardian spirits, many of whom are fearsome goddesses bearing the title “mother” (*mata*). These shrines are frequented by lower caste Hindus, who bring small offerings and make pledges or oaths to the divinities in exchange for blessings. Sometimes village shrines are overseen by local, non-Brahmin priests, such as exorcists and shamans.

Towns and larger villages will also have a temple, and cities will have several temples. The Hindu temple is the residence of a deity and his or her divine entourage. The innermost sanctum, a small temple itself, contains an image of this god or goddess. Usually a sculpture, this image is consecrated with an installation ceremony in which the deity's animating spirit (*prana*, breath) descends into the image. The image is also "given eyes," either by painting them on or by inserting ceramic eyeballs into the image's eye sockets. At this point the image can see, and it becomes a *murti*: a place of interaction between the divine and human worlds. At most temples *murtis* of supporting deities, semi-divine beings, and auspicious persons are also consecrated in interior and exterior alcoves. Temple services are conducted by Brahmin priests, who act as ritual specialists mediating between the divine world and the worshipers. They ensure that ritual purity is maintained, that interaction with the deities is done correctly, and that the proper *dharmic* protocol is observed by all castes of worshipers.

**Domestic worship** Hindus are not required to visit temples on a regular basis, and most religious practices actually take place in and around the home using domestic shrines. In the home of a poor family this may be as simple as a recess in the wall in which an icon, lithograph, or simple drawing of the deity is placed. In wealthier homes the shrine may take up an entire room and can include elegant images as well as photographs of ancestors and spiritual teachers.

The performance of general *dharma* in domestic worship is overseen by the householders themselves. Occasionally a priest will be called in for his expertise or to give recitations of Vedic texts (*katha*), but usually it is the senior woman and the other women of the household who assume the primary religious roles, for domestic rituals typically bear on issues of special importance to women. For example, in marriages arranged according to Hindu tradition, the bride often leaves her birth family to join the family of her husband. Here domestic rituals that support a good marriage and the raising of healthy children are vital to a woman's status in Hindu society. The wife also has a particular responsibility for the ritual purity of her home, especially in matters involving food.

**Pilgrimage to holy sites** Honoring holy divinity at sites while on pilgrimage is also part of general *dharma*. These sites are places where gods or other manifestations of *brahman* have crossed over into our reality to make themselves accessible to humans. Holy sites, which are legion in India, are marked variously with elaborate structures, modest shrines, or a splash of red pigment on a rock—or even a small piece of cloth tied to a tree. Likewise, practices at these sites vary considerably, depending on localized traditions; and sites can offer healing, purification, material prosperity, religious merit, opportunities to appease various gods and spirits, and salvation itself. By far the most popular Hindu pilgrimage is the Kumbh Mela (Pitcher Gathering), which takes place about every three years in one of four locations, drawing tens of millions of people. The mythological basis for the pilgrimage is recounted in the *Mahabharata*. In a battle between the gods and the demons over a pitcher of divine nectar (*amrit*), four drops



spilled and fell to earth. The places where these drops landed are the four sites of the pilgrimage. Allahabad, in north central India, is regarded as the most powerful of the four, and it hosts a forty-two day Great Kumbh Mela every twelfth year.

### *Salvation according to the logic of devotion*

In most forms of devotional Hinduism, or *bhakti*, Hindus establish a personal relationship with one of the Great Gods: Vishnu, Shiva, or Devi. Since each of these gods has distinctive traditions, emotions, and powers, and since Hindus vary with respect to *dharma* and their accumulated karma, choosing one of these gods over the others often reflects one's spiritual needs and inclinations. The chosen god then becomes a person's *ishtha-deva*, or cherished deity, but rarely does that lead to exclusive or monotheistic devotion to the god. The followers of Vishnu, Shiva, and Devi typically believe that their god encompasses all the others, implying that these gods, too, deserve worship. As a popular Hindu saying states, "God is one."

After choosing a god, a devotee becomes involved in the rituals and festivals associated with that god, learning to honor and love the way the deity dresses, the animals and lesser gods most closely associated with the deity, and the stories that recount the deity's adventures. Each deity has special scriptures containing this information, as well as information on proper temple construction, favorite offerings, important doctrines, and meditational techniques. For Vishnu and Shiva these scriptures are often called *Agamas*, while for Devi they are called either *Agamas* or *Tantras*.

### **Bhakti in the worship of images**

Of the many ways to express devotion to Vishnu, Shiva, or Devi, one of the most popular is through the worship of their images. At a private shrine in one's home, or at a temple dedicated to the deity, the god's *murti* will be treated as an honored guest or visiting royalty. It will be entertained with music and dance, offered incense and special food and drink, and generally afforded every consideration of hospitality and respect.

Hindus prepare themselves for devotional worship at a temple by ritual washing or bathing. They may also strike a large bell hanging at the entrance to the sanctum that houses the temple's primary *murti*. Its ring helps worshipers establish their spiritual focus and announces their presence to the deity. In a typical temple service, a priest will begin by chanting praises to the deity, portions of which may also be chanted by the onlookers. Next the priest will make a variety of offerings to the deity. Common offerings are fruits, flowers (usually in the form of garlands), coconuts, rice, milk, yoghurt, clarified butter (*ghee*), honey, sandalwood paste, confections, candles, and incense. On rarer occasions worshipers will have the priest offer an item of great value, perhaps in fulfillment of a vow. At the height of the ceremony the priest may shield the deity from the view of those attending by placing a curtain or other partition in front of the image. This is also the time when the priest will utter *mantras* (sacred formulas) to render the ritual as a whole efficacious.



**Figure 1.10** Merchants outside a temple in India selling various offerings to worshippers.  
Source: Reproduced by permission of Jean-François Mayer.

Following the recitation of *mantras*, the priest will perform a ritual called *arati* by waving a lamp in a clockwise motion in front of the god. The lamp is then circulated among the worshippers, who cup their hands and wave the flame toward themselves, so as to receive the deity's blessing and share in the merit generated by the ceremony. Next, worshippers receive *prasad*, a gift of something tangible from the deity. *Prasad* takes numerous forms, including ash or red powder that is applied by the priest to the area between one's eyebrows (*tilak*). It can also include some of the fruit that was offered to the deity, or water that has been sanctified by contact with the image. In the case of the fruit, it is assumed that the deity, who is present and alive in the *murti*, has already taken from it the nourishment he or she needed. Most often the participant will ingest these gifts in order to receive the deity's full blessing, although some of the water may be sprinkled over the participant's head. Once *prasad* has been received, it is common for those attending the ceremony to walk clockwise around the deity's sanctum and pay their respects to the temple's subsidiary deities. During this ritual, worshippers hope to receive *darshan* ("sight") from the deities. This refers to a visual exchange that takes place between a *murti* and the worshiper, for not only does the worshiper gaze reverently at the image, but the image may return the honor by looking back at the worshiper.

## Spiritual exercises

*Bhakti* is also practiced in a more disciplined manner under the guidance of a guru. Often called “father” or “mother,” a guru will oversee a devotee’s progress as the latter develops an ever deepening love for the deity. Early exercises will have the devotee chant a special name for the deity, which the guru chooses especially for him or her. Devotees may also be encouraged to attend presentations and discussions about the deity; to imitate the deity’s lifestyle by playing a flute or practicing austerities; to sing devotional songs for the deity; and to undertake remembering exercises that keep the deity in mind throughout the day.

As devotees grow in their devotion to a deity, they enter into a close relationship with the god or goddess. They can become the deity’s son or daughter, his or her companion, or even a paramour. As is natural in relationships, they will also begin to experience profound emotions, such as rapture and ecstasy, or a sense of complete unworthiness and the desire to give oneself over to the deity as a slave.

## Vishnu

Of the Great Gods, Vishnu is the most popular, followed by Shiva and then Devi. Vishnu is typically depicted as the “dark god,” his skin being either blue or black. He has four arms, indicating great power, and often stands in front of his giant cobra whose menacing hood is fully extended. In each of his four hands Vishnu holds a distinct object: a mace, a discus, a conch, and a lotus. The mace and the discus are the weapons with which he fights ignorance, sometimes depicted as demons, sometimes as the devotee’s own ego. The conch is Vishnu’s tool for creation. When he blows the conch, sound waves go forth to form the illusion (*maya*) that is our world. The lotus is symbolic of the salvation Vishnu grants: it is a plant that emerges from the mud, but opens into a pure and beautiful flower.

Vishnu’s followers, called **Vaishnavas**, often identify themselves by painting his mark (*tilak*) on their foreheads: three vertical lines connected at the bottom by a shorter line, which is said to be his footprint. They envision Vishnu as the Great God who supports the order of the world and protects and sustains all life. They also see him as the Supreme Soul, a cosmic being who suffuses all existence, overseeing everything from the lives of insects to the destruction and creation of the world. The expansive, cyclical eras of Hindu time are but the alternating periods of Vishnu’s activity and rest. At the dissolution of the world, Vishnu alone remains, sleeping at the bottom of the sea in the coils of his giant cobra. Then, awakened by the vibrations of the Vedic *mantra* “Om,” Vishnu causes a lotus to sprout from his navel. In the flower of this lotus the Creator god Brahma appears, whom Vishnu commands to begin his work.

Vishnu’s consort is Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and domestic prosperity, and like Vishnu, she has four arms. She is often depicted standing on a lotus flower, richly dressed, flanked by royal elephants, and bestowing gold coins on her worshipers. She is thought to embody Vishnu’s creative power (*maya*), and for this reason, Vishnu sometimes has an emblem of her, the endless knot, painted on his chest, and wears a precious jewel there, in which she is said to reside. Both Vishnu and Lakshmi have animals that carry them to the human world. Lakshmi’s mount is often an owl. Vishnu’s is the brilliant

sun bird Garuda, a divine eagle who once brought Soma down from heaven to be used by Brahmins in the Vedic sacrifices.

Vaishnavas can approach Vishnu directly, or through their praise and worship of Lakshmi, Garuda, or Lakshmi's owl. More commonly, however, Vishnu's followers approach him through one of his *avatars*. The stories associated with these *avatars* credit Vishnu with momentous deeds, such as slaughtering a band of Nobles who attempted to overthrow the Brahmins, and helping the gods create Soma and keep it safe from the demons. For example, as the Dwarf *avatar*, Vamana, Vishnu once came to the rescue of the gods after they had been bested in battle by the demons. In their arrogance, the demons had decided that the gods should forever live in an area defined by one of the gods taking three steps. Through his illusory power (*maya*), Vishnu appeared as a dwarf and caused the demons to choose him. He then expanded into a being of cosmic proportions and took three strides, creating the earth, the sky, and the heaven. Finally, and for good measure, Vishnu ends his last step by crushing the leader of the demons. Vishnu is said to have ten *avatars*, the last of which has not yet appeared but is expected at the end of time. This is Kalki, a warrior on a white horse (or sometimes the white horse itself), who will arrive just before the dissolution of the world to defeat barbarian rulers in India and restore moral order one last time.

The most popular *avatars* of Vishnu are Rama, the hero of the *Ramayana*, and Krishna, who counsels Arjuna in the *Gita*. Especially in northern India, Hindus celebrate Rama's victory over the ogre king Ravana in annual festivals called Ram-Lila (Rama-Play), and reenact the wedding between Rama and Sita (an incarnation of Lakshmi) using small devotional statues. The retelling of the *Ramayana* in Hindi, the main language of the region, has even been called the Bible of northern India; and when the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* were serialized for Indian television, the country nearly came to a standstill every Sunday morning when the episodes were first broadcast (1987–90).

Krishna's popularity as an *avatar* is spread throughout India, partly because of the inclusive nature of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, making it attractive to Vaishnavas and non-Vaishnavas alike, and partly because Krishna's mythology has been extended far beyond his role in the *Gita*. An extensive literature recounts this *avatar's* birth, childhood, and teenage years, making him attractive to a variety of worshipers. As a child, Krishna is depicted as sweet, clever, and mischievous. He steals the family's supply of clarified butter (*ghee*), and defies his mother by eating mud. Yet his human mother is charmed by this naughtiness, and it gives her sudden, astonishing glimpses of his true identity. A popular annual event is the celebration of Krishna's birthday.

As a teenager, Krishna is depicted as a cowherd (*gopala*) who plays his flute, runs carefree with his teenage companions, and teases the milkmaids, or *gopis*. Even though most of these milkmaids are married, Krishna's teasing usually takes an erotic turn. In one famous episode Krishna sneaks up on the *gopis* while they are bathing in the river, and steals their clothes. As he sits perched on a tree limb looking down at them, he commands them to hold their arms above their heads in adoration of him in order to get their clothes back. Through his miraculous powers, Krishna also creates as many likenesses of himself as are necessary to lead each of these women to believe that she alone is

with him. They dance, in pairs and collectively, and steal away later to engage in the arts of love throughout the night. Krishna's love for the *gopis*, and their love for him, is not literal, however. Rather, it is a model for the longing that is shared between the devotee and Vishnu. In the actions of these milkmaids, one senses the soul's desire for union with the Great God, regardless of the personal cost. One *gopi* in particular is the focus of Krishna's amorous adventures. This is Radha, who is seen both as the ideal devotee and as an incarnation of Lakshmi.

## Sacred Traditions and Scripture

### Krishna's Love for Radha

Love poetry filled with sensual language and erotic images has been used for centuries by devotees of Krishna to express the love between Krishna and Radha, seen as a model for the love between a devotee and God. Here is an example from the fifteenth century CE poet Vidyapati:

How beautiful the deliberate, sensuous union of the two; the girl Radha playing the active role this time, riding her Krishna's outstretched body in delight.

Her smiling lips shine with drops of sweat: the god of love offering pearls to the moon.

She of beautiful face hotly kisses the mouth of her beloved: the moon, with face bent down, drinks of the lotus.

The garland hanging on her heavy breasts seems like a stream of milk from golden jars,

The tinkling bells which decorate her hips sound the triumphal music of the god of love.

Through the *avatar* Krishna, devotees orient themselves to Vishnu in a variety of ways, depending on their personal inclinations. They can approach him as a child, and love him as a mother would love her own little boy. Or their relationship to Krishna can be envisioned as that of a loyal teenage companion or an adoring girlfriend. Finally, one can worship Krishna as Lord Vishnu, as he reveals himself to Arjuna in the *Gita*. Like Vishnu, Krishna is depicted as blue or dark-skinned, and many Vaishnavas simply identify Krishna directly with Vishnu. For this reason, meditating on the playful and heroic deeds (*lila*) of Krishna's life or chanting his many divine names can lead to sudden visions of Vishnu.

## Shiva

Hindus devoted to Shiva call themselves **Shaivas**. They number between 200 and 300 million, or about half the size of the Vaishnava movement, and are especially strong in southern India. In stark contrast to the kindly Vishnu, Shiva is envisioned as a





**Figure 1.11** Enwrapped in the joy of dancing his cosmic dance, Shiva effortlessly creates the universe and crushes demonic forces. Source: Wikimedia Commons. Photo by Kenneth Lu.

fierce deity who destroys and creates through violent acts. He is a god who sometimes haunts cremation grounds, smeared with the ashes of the dead, which give him a ghastly pallor. His hair is a mass of dark, coiled and matted locks; his throat is blue from having swallowed poison; he wears a snake around his neck and he girds his loins with a lion skin. His many names include the Howler and the Skull-Bearer, and sometimes he appears in his terrible form as Bairava, a demonic-looking Untouchable accompanied by a dog (an impure creature).

As ultimate reality, or *brahman*, Shiva is a paradox beyond human comprehension. He is both life and death, loving and terrifying, approachable and fearsome, male and female, playful and destructive, erotic and ascetic. He is the fusion of

opposites that cannot be unified in our world. Sometimes he is depicted as an androgyne, a man-woman whose left side is female and right side is male. Around his neck Shiva often wears a necklace made from the heads of past creator gods whom he decapitated. At other times he is the Lord of Animals, who both shepherds those under his care and slaughters them by the thousands. Another popular image of Shiva depicts him as the Lord of the Dance, enjoying himself as he crushes evil, quite nonchalantly, under his moving feet. As he sways and turns, he plays a toy drum whose sound waves create the insubstantial existence (*maya*) that is our world.

At Shaiva temples, the most popular image of this god is the *lingam-yoni*, usually a black pillar (the *lingam*) set in a shallow dish with a spout on one side (the *yoni*). This is Shiva's creative and destructive energy envisioned as Shiva-Shakti, cosmic male and female sexual powers in eternal union with one another. Shaiva priests treat this image as they would a *murti*. In a daily liturgy it is fed, bathed (hence the spout on the *yoni*), adorned in rich clothing, and entertained with music and dance. Sometimes the *lingam* will have four faces carved near the top, indicating the Shiva's omniscience. More often, however, the pillar will be smooth and uncarved, allowing devotees to experience

Shiva's creative potential in its undifferentiated, un-manifest form. For this reason "self-originating" *lingams*, such as those fashioned by nature from ice or rock, are considered especially powerful, drawing hundreds of thousands of pilgrims to their locations.

The *lingam*, as the Universal Pillar, also figures in a popular Shaiva myth in which Shiva, rather than Vishnu or Brahma, is proclaimed to be the creator and basis of the cosmos. According to this story, Vishnu and Brahma, who are regarded as creator gods by *their* devotees, meet while the world is still in a state of dissolution. As they argue over who is the actual creator god, the enormous Universal Pillar appears in a flash of blinding light before them, extending upward and downward beyond their field of vision. Filled with awe, they decide to discover the extent of this mighty pillar. Brahma ascends as a swan in search of its upper limit, while Vishnu descends as a boar in search of its lower limit. They return unsuccessful, however, for Shiva's *lingam* is infinite in height and depth. At this point Shiva emerges from his *lingam* as the true creator god, and Vishnu and Brahma are forced to concede his superiority and do obeisance to him.

Shiva also has a rich mythology as a god who rules the universe with his divine consort. Together they become the Shiva-Shakti, the male and female energies that underlie the destruction and creation of our karmic world. The goddess has many names, depending on her role in a particular myth. Sometimes she is Parvati, a beautiful, serene goddess who rides either a goose or a mountain lion and keeps house with Shiva. They each have a son, Skanda (or the god Karthikeya in some traditions) and Ganesha. The former is Shiva's son, depicted with six heads and as many arms, being the consummate warrior god. His birth came about when the erotic activities of his parents were interrupted by the other gods, who feared that the violent sexual intercourse of Shiva and Parvati would rend the universe. As a result, Shiva spilled his semen. It became a drop of fire that none of the gods could contain and was eventually deposited in the Ganges river, from which emerged the infant Skanda. Ganesha, by contrast, is a pot-bellied, elephant-headed boy. According to one popular tradition, he was born from the filth of his mother during a bath. Shiva, becoming enraged that Ganesha would not allow him to barge in on Parvati as she continued to bathe, cut off his head, only to replace it later with the head of an elephant.

When Shiva is not at home being a family man, he becomes



**Figure 1.12** The very popular *lingam-yoni* image. Shiva's *lingam* is set in a *yoni*, uniting the cosmic opposites of male (Shiva) and female (Shakti) divine powers. The jewelry on the *lingam* is Shiva's "mark" (*tilak*)—the three horizontal lines—with his third eye (the ruby) in the center. Worshipers have left money as an offering to Shiva. Source: Will Deming.

the great ascetic, renouncing all sexual activity. Roaming the world as a ominous drifter, he frequents cremation grounds and other lonely places, armed with a trident. If Parvati accompanies him, she does so as the ascetic goddess Uma. In this mode, Shiva is often depicted as seated beside his consort, deep in meditation, with a third eye set vertically in his forehead. This extra eye, which gives him inner vision and mystical insight, also enables him to destroy his enemies with a single, fiery glance.

Shiva's devotees accept the jarring paradox of his divine nature, believing that it forms the basis for the "stuff" of our world. This stuff, which they call *maya* (illusion) is seen by some as matter and by others as pure consciousness. Human beings, because of their ignorance and past karma, are caught in this *maya*, being born and reborn in the endless cycle of *samsara*. By devoting themselves to Shiva, however, they can move beyond the complexity and confusion of the world, and experience the non-duality of the self (*atman*). They come to understand that Shiva's constant destruction and recreation of all things is intended to reveal the true, unified nature of existence. With this insight, they achieve release through union with Shiva, whose fierceness ultimately gives way to grace and love.

As with the devotees of Vishnu, Shaivas have a number of options for approaching their god. They can worship him directly through devotional songs filled with longing and abandon, or through dancing so passionate that it gives no thought to the safety of

one's own person. They can also honor Shiva through imitation. Using the ashes from a cremation to mark their foreheads with three horizontal stripes (Shiva's *tilka*), many emulate Shiva's austerities. Taking in hand the trident, the snake, and the toy drum, they practice yogic techniques and meditation by the roadside, live in cremation grounds, or go on long pilgrimages to his many holy sites. Others imitate Shiva more simply by performing ritual bathing as an act of destruction, and using meditation and constant repetition of *mantras* as an act of creation. Finally, one can also approach Shiva by honoring the bull Nandin, his loyal mount; or by worshiping his consort in her many forms; or by praising his sons Skanda and Ganesha and their mounts (the peacock and the bandicoot—a six pound rat). Skanda, who is believed never to have married, has become a divine model for sexual chastity, while Ganesha is much beloved as the god who removes obstacles and grants success in new undertakings, especially the undertakings of scholars and authors.



**Figure 1.13** With a snake around his neck, a trident, a drum, and three horizontal lines on his forehead, this *sadhu* (holy man) identifies himself with Shiva as he imitates the great god's ascetic practices. Source: Reproduced by permission of Nick Grier.



## Devi

Visions of the divine as *female*, both as goddesses and as a cosmic principle, suffuse Hinduism. As we have seen, there are many mother goddesses, and most of the prominent gods of the Hindu pantheon are paired with a sexual consort or wife. Vishnu has his Lakshmi, Shiva has his Parvati, and the once great Brahma is now all but overshadowed by his wife Sarasvati, goddess of knowledge and the arts. These goddesses are thought to be the divine counterparts or complements to their gods, providing a devotee with access to divine attributes such as wealth, creative power, or knowledge and wisdom. One of the most important goddesses in India is the River Ganges. Descending to earth through the Himalayas, she is said to be the celestial Milky Way, her fall being softened by the mass of dreadlocks that cover Shiva's head. Through subterranean channels her cleansing powers are dispersed into all of India's rivers, which are, themselves, looked upon as the Ganges. Finally, because of its many sacred rivers, ponds, and lakes, and innumerable other holy sites, India itself is considered a goddess. As Kathleen Erndl observed, "Of all the world's religions, Hinduism has the most elaborate *living* goddess traditions." (Kathleen M. Erndl in *The Hindu World*, edited by Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby, New York: Routledge, 2004, p. 159, her emphasis.)

Devotees who choose the goddess Devi rather than Vishnu or Shiva call themselves **Shaktas**. Numbering around 50 million, they envision Devi as the creative power, or *shakti*, of the universe. She is seen as encompassing all the other goddesses, who express her many aspects. These partial manifestations of Devi include the consorts of Vishnu and Shiva as well as several horrific forms such as Chamunda, Bhairavi, Candi, and Kali. For example, Chamunda, the goddess of famine, is the most prominent "mother" in a group known as the Seven Mothers. An emaciated hag, she abducts and eats infants and drinks blood from her begging bowl. Likewise, Kali ("dark one") wears a necklace of skulls and wields four savage weapons with her four arms to butcher her enemies before eating their flesh and drinking their blood on the field of battle.

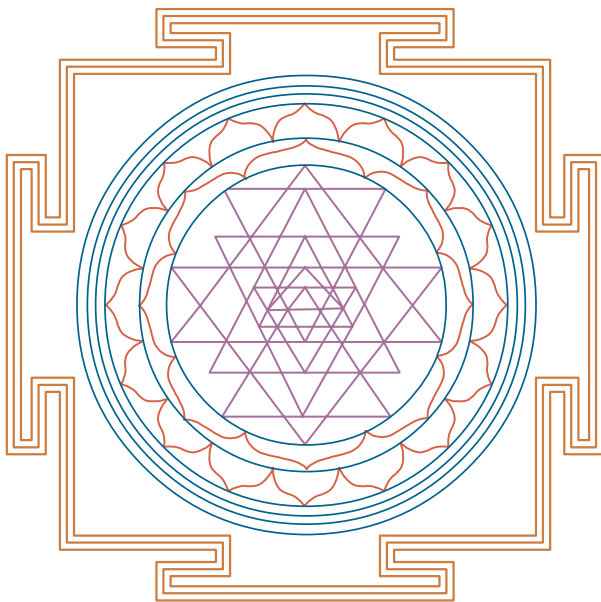
The most popular manifestation of Devi, however, is the goddess Durga. A beautiful, richly clad goddess with ten arms, she moves about the world astride a lion. Her most famous myth, told throughout India, begins with the familiar defeat of the gods at the hands of the demons, and the Buffalo Demon's rise to supreme power in the cosmos. Helpless in the face of this new ruler, Vishnu and Shiva become enraged, their combined anger producing the goddess Durga, a power far greater than either. After a prolonged battle in which the Buffalo Demon changes form many times, Durga beheads him and restores order to the universe. In late September and early October her great victory is celebrated in the Durga-Puja, a nine-day festival in which almost all the inhabitants of Bengal take part. At the end of the festival, goats and buffalos are slaughtered in her honor, and the many temporary devotional images that her followers have used to worship her during the Puja—thousands upon thousands—are thrown into the Ganges after Durga's presence leaves them.

While it might seem that most of Devi's manifestations are fierce goddesses, her followers nonetheless see her as their loving mother. Her violence and great power are the attributes of a protective mother who cherishes and disciplines her children, while annihilating any who would threaten them. From a metaphysical perspective,

moreover, Devi is understood as using her powers of annihilation to dispel the popular but false notion that the spirit (*purusha*) is superior to matter (*prakriti*), and that salvation is a process of liberating oneself from the material world through austerities and renunciation. Unlike the followers of Shiva, who identify their god with spirit and honor him as the great renouncer, Shaktas see Devi as the creative force of the universe and honor her as the basis for its physicality—its substance or matter. For Shaktas, therefore, the physical body is good, not evil, and the true path to salvation must unify the spirit with the body by actually *subjecting* the spirit to the body. In a striking reversal of the male-dominated relationship between Shiva and his consort that is envisioned by the Shaivas, a popular Shakta image depicts Devi, as Kali, dancing wildly on Shiva's pale, lifeless body. In subordinating Shiva's passive, austere energy to her active, creative energy, Devi is able to lead her devotees to salvation by joining physical enjoyment (*bhukti*) with release.

The devotional practices of Shaktas take two forms, often called exoteric, or public, and esoteric, or secretive. The former largely resemble the *bhakti* practices of Vaishnavas and Shaivas, but with Devi's *murti* as the object of devotion. The secretive practices, by contrast, include visualization techniques that use *yantras*, which are abstract images of the goddess; a form of Tantric discipline known as Kundalini Yoga; and the cultivation of magical powers called *siddhis*.

A *yantra* is a two-dimensional, geometric design. It typically consists of a square perimeter containing concentric circles, triangles (half of which are inverted), and arcs resembling the petals of a lotus flower. The upright triangles are spirit (*purusha*), the inverted ones are matter (*prakriti*). The interior of the square is made accessible through entrances on the square's four sides,



**Figure 1.14** The Sri Chakra, a popular *yantra* design, with upward and downward-pointing triangles.

which are aligned to the cardinal points of the compass. These different features of the *yantra*, as well as the additional shapes formed by the intersection of the circles, triangles, and arcs, correspond to different aspects of the Goddess. At the very center of the *yantra* is a small area that gives access to the essence of the Goddess. The devotee's goal is to reach this point by transmuting his or her being into the Goddess herself. By metaphysically advancing through one of the entrances, the devotee crosses over into Devi's sacred world. He or she then chants *mantras* and uses hand movements (*mudras*) to draw on Devi's creative energy. Since this process is thought to involve the manipulation of tremendous power, the *yantra* is thought of as the essential tool for controlling a person's progress and for steering him or her in the desired direction. While using the *yantra*, the devotee

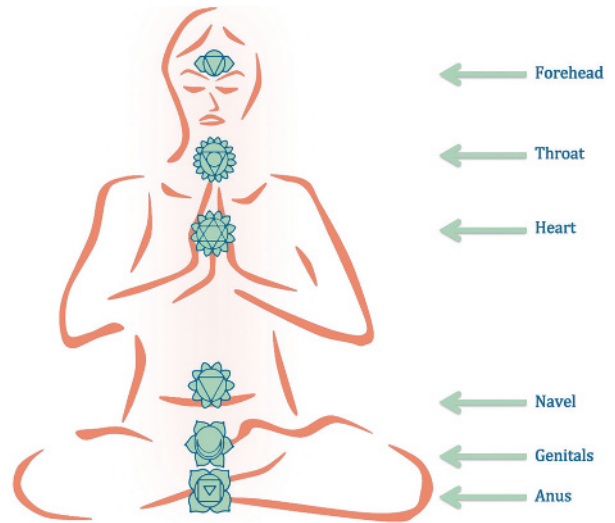


will also ingest certain substances, understood as divine aspects of the Goddess entering into his or her own body.

In Kundalini Yoga, *shakti*, Devi's creative power, is envisioned as a snake sleeping in a coil at the base of the human spine. Through the use of *mantras*, techniques of visualizing the deities and their attributes, and other yogic procedures such as breath control, the practitioner attempts to awaken this snake and guide it through six power centers in the human body. These are called *chakras* (discs), and are located along the spinal column and in the head. As *shakti* moves up through the *chakras*, the deities associated with each power center are activated and join the Goddess, such that she becomes all the deities, or *brahman*. Since the *chakras* in the body correspond to different parts of the *yantra* diagram, *yantric* techniques and Kundalini-Yoga often go hand-in-hand. If successful, a practitioner will guide Kundalini from the *chakra* near the anus through *chakras* located in the sexual organs, the navel, the heart, and the throat, to the point at the top of the nose between the eyebrows. This last *chakra* is the "thousand-petalled lotus," where *shakti* (as matter) joins Shiva (spirit). When this occurs, the practitioner experiences the eternal union and divine bliss of Shiva-Shakti in his or her own body.

Ritually and socially, esoteric Shaktism exists on the margins of Hinduism because it requires devotees to manipulate deities in order to gain *siddhis* (supernatural powers), which outsiders often suspect are used for nefarious purposes. These suspicions are reinforced by the movement's protocols of secrecy, for its doctrines and practices are transmitted only to devotees, only in private interactions with spiritual mentors (*gurus*), and only after devotees have undergone a rigorous testing and purification process. Finally, the movement also endorses certain ritual practices known as left-handed Tantra which violate conventional Hindu notions of purity.

Among these left-handed practices, those that are particularly disturbing to outsiders are ones that involve self-immolation, the Five Ms, and (it is rumored) human sacrifice. The Five Ms are five things whose name in Sanskrit begins with the letter "m": fish (*matsya*), parched grain (*mudra*), meat (*mans*), alcohol (*madhu*), and illicit sexual intercourse (*maithun*). These work according to a reversal of Hindu norms, which Tantric practitioners argue is necessary in this final, corrupt age of the world (the Kali Yuga). Most Hindus consider the Five Ms to be powerful sources of impurity and bad karma. In Tantra, however, practitioners attempt to master and manipulate their dangerous power, and use it in their quest to become gods. By ingesting one or more of the first four Ms in carefully planned rituals, they internalize and absorb this power. And in those branches



**Figure 1.15** A diagram of the human body, showing the location of the six chakras.



**Figure 1.16** Topped with a red canopy, a cart for parading images of Krishna is pulled along by his devotees. Since these carts, which are sometimes as large as a medium sized, three story house, are dedicated to Krishna in his form as Jagannath, or Lord of the Universe, Europeans who first saw them called them “juggernauts.” Source: Photo by Erik Fitzpatrick.

of the tradition that practice illicit intercourse, the male seeks to absorb the *shakti* of the female, who is envisioned as the Great Goddess herself.

### Hindu festivals

The practice of *bhakti* often cultivates a passionate, complex, and abiding relationship between the devotee and the deity, the intensity of which is most openly expressed in Hinduism’s countless religious festivals. All Hindu temples have annual festivals, during which the *murti* of its main deity is brought out and paraded through the town or city. These festivals attract thousands of worshippers, many of whom arrive days beforehand to claim a place along the processional route. Local gurus and renunciants will make an appearance, yogic practitioners will display their feats of body control, and those with serious illnesses and disabilities—the lame, the blind, the lepers—will come in hope of healing. The deity’s image (which can be quite heavy) is carried on a wagon or chariot, the largest of which can be 20–30 feet tall and require hundreds of worshippers to pull them. Throughout the festival, those present will chant the names of the deity, sing devotional songs, and pray for absolution from sins and for final release. Festivals also provide the occasion for “unbroken

readings” of epic and *Puranic* texts as well as reenactments of a deity’s mythology. Dramatic stagings of the *Ramayana*, for example, are performed annually throughout India, with month-long presentations taking place in and around the city of Ramnagar along the upper Ganges river. Puppet shows of episodes from the epics are also very popular.

The number of religious festivals in Hinduism, including local and regional celebrations, has been estimated at over one thousand. What follows is a description of six of the most popular pan-Indian festivals, four of which are national holidays in India. They individually engage hundreds of millions of participants, and while each is associated with one of the principal three deities of *bhakti*, devotees of all the gods join in.

**Maha-shiva-ratri** Maha-shiva-ratri, or the Grand Night of Shiva, is a twenty-four hour festival whose center point is a moonless night in February or March. Early on the morning of the first day, devotees begin a fast of fruit and liquids, undergo a ritual bath, apply ashes to their foreheads, and put on new clothes. They then collect leaves from the *bilva* tree, a plant sacred to Shiva, and go to a temple to offer them and perform other acts of *puja*. At the temple, the ritual bathing of Shiva's *lingam* by a priest takes place throughout the day and night, every three hours or so. On the morning of the second day, participants break their fast by accepting *prasad* from the deity.

While the festival is considered a special time for unmarried women to pray for a husband like Shiva, and for wives to pray for their husbands and sons, its fuller purpose is explained variously. Some see it as a celebration of Shiva's heroic drinking of the poison at creation to save the other deities. Others say that it commemorates the performance of Shiva's cosmic dance, or his marriage to Parvati. And still others claim that the Maha-shiva-ratri celebrates Shiva's appearance to Vishnu and Brahma as the Universal Pillar.

**Holi** Holi also takes place in late February or early March and, depending on regional practices, can last 3 to 16 days. It is an end-of-winter festival that celebrates both the coming of spring and the divine love shared between Krishna and his favorite milkmaid, Radha. Leading up to the main day, devotees sing love ballads and recite stories of the romance between Krishna and Radha. On the evening before the main day, they light bonfires. In one account, this is to commemorate Vishnu's protection of a devoted follower named Prahlad, whose father, the powerful demon Hiranyakashipu, attempted to burn his son alive because of the latter's love of Vishnu (which is heresy for a demon). In another account, the bonfire recreates the deadly wrath of Shiva when he destroyed Kama, the god of love, with the fire of his third eye, after Kama had interrupted Shiva's meditation. On the main day of Holi, participants throw paint or colored powder on each other just as Krishna is said to have done to Radha to make her skin as dark as his.

Holi is a time to revel in Krishna's playful and mischievous spirit. On the evening of the main day, and for an evening or two thereafter, risqué dance performances and poetry recitals are held. Caste rankings and other regulators of the social order are set aside, and hierarchies are turned topsy-turvy. The women of a household will playfully beat the male members, reversing the gender dominance that typically prevails; and members of the lower castes mock and ridicule Brahmins and Nobles for their ritual concerns and pompous ways. When the play of Holi is finished, however, people make the rounds of family and friends to express unbridled affection for those close to them. This is done to restore social order and to put an end to lingering grudges from the past year.

**Janmastami** Janmastami is a two-day celebration of Krishna's birth, taking place sometime between mid-August and mid-September. On the first day participants fast and women create small designs from rice powder resembling Krishna's baby feet,

to lead him into their homes. At midnight, when this *avatar* of Vishnu is believed to have been born, an image of the baby Krishna is bathed in various precious substances and rocked in a cradle. A vigil of prayer and worship then continues until morning. Many devotees break their fast at midnight with *prasad*; others keep it until dawn of the next day; and a few refuse to drink even a drop of liquid during the entire fast.



**Figure 1.17** Several worshipers immerse a clay statue of Ganesha at the conclusion of a Ganesh Chaturti festival. Source: © PUNIT PARANJPE / X01659 / Reuters / Corbis.

**Ganesh Chaturti** Ganesh Chaturti, or Ganesha's Fourth, is celebrated on the fourth day of the moon's waxing phase in late August or early September. Ganesha, the elephant-headed son of Parvati who removes obstacles and gives success to those engaged in new undertakings, is arguably the most popular Hindu deity. Weeks before the festival begins, local artisans fashion clay images of Ganesha for sale. Smaller ones are purchased for domestic use during the festival, while larger ones are commissioned by various Hindu organizations and

installed in public venues. The public images are sometimes flanked by clay images of Shiva and Parvati, whereas the household images are surrounded by small stones that are sanctified and treated as his mother Parvati. Once the clay images are in place and the breath of the deities has entered into them, *puja* is performed: the images are bathed and anointed; food, drink, and flowers are presented; the deities are entertained with song and chant; and the fire blessing (*arati*) is waved before them. At the conclusion of the festival, all the clay images are taken to a pond, a river, or the sea to undergo the final immersion ceremony used for such temporary images. Expressing great emotional verve and sentiments of loss, participants bid the deities farewell and ask them to come again for next year's festival.

### Did you know...

Although there are many theories, it is unknown why Hindus chose the cow to be a holy animal deserving reverence, and not to be eaten.



**Dussehra** Dussehra, which comes in late September and early October, is practiced with considerable regional variation in north and west India, Bengal, and south India, respectively. In all of these locations Dussehra is preceded by the Navaratri (Nine Nights) festival, which accords three days each to the three principal manifestations of Devi, namely Durga, goddess of creative power, Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, and Sarasvati, goddess of learning and the arts. These, in turn, are each worshiped in three manifestations under three further names. On the eighth day of Navaratri a Vedic ritual is performed, and on the ninth day, nine young girls are presented and worshiped as manifestations of the Great Goddess. Their feet are washed and they are given new outfits to wear.

After the Nine Nights, Hindus in north and west India celebrate Dussehra with the Ram-Lila, or Rama Play. Here actors perform important scenes from the *Ramayana*: Rama is reunited with his brother Bharat (who wrongly came to power in his place); his forces defeat the ogre Ravana and rescue Rama's wife Sita; and Rama takes his rightful place as king in the city of Ayodhya. Near the end of the Ram-Lila, huge effigies of Ravana and his evil allies are set ablaze. In south India, by contrast, women celebrate Dussehra by setting out small statues and dolls on miniature stages or steps. During the festival they will feed these statues and dolls with a special dish made from chickpeas, and use them, rather than actors, to reenact scenes from the *Ramayana*. Finally, Bengali Hindus observe Dussehra by participating in the Durga-Puja, which, as we saw earlier, recounts and celebrates Durga's famous victory over the Buffalo Demon.

**Diwali** Diwali (also called Deepavali) is the Festival of Lights, held in October and November. The core of the festival extends over three days, during which Hindus light small clay lamps filled with clarified butter (*ghee*) or mustard seed oil, placing them along the walls and windowsills of their homes and in the surrounding pathways. These lamps serve two purposes: they welcome the goddess Lakshmi, and they celebrate an individual's victory over evil. The first day of Diwali is said to commemorate either Krishna's triumph over the demon Narak (whose name refers to hell or the nether-world), or Rama's return to the capital city of Ayodhya after his many years of exile.

The second day, which is usually a new moon day, is dedicated to Rama's wife Lakshmi and Parvati's son Ganesha. In preparation for Lakshmi's visit, a kind of spring cleaning takes place, since Lakshmi will only come to homes that have been thoroughly cleansed. This day is especially dear to businessmen, who consider it the beginning of their fiscal year. In the evening, worshipers don new clothes and visit friends and neighbors. Religious texts liken these guests to deities and recommend the sharing of food. It is also common for all adult members of a household to gamble, for one's luck at gambling will indicate good or bad financial fortune in the coming year. The third day of Diwali marks Vishnu's defeat of Bali, a demon king who had gained great power and was planning to magnify this power still further by conducting one of the longest and most complex of all



the Vedic rituals, the horse sacrifice (*ashvamedha*). According to the Veda, this is when Vishnu appeared as the Dwarf *avatar*.

Diwali is preceded and followed by a host of other activities, all carried out in a highly festive spirit. Two days before the festival, in an event known as Dhanteras, Hindus commonly worship Lakshmi and purchase new cooking utensils, along with jewelry and coins made of precious metals. In the city of Varanasi, however, which is sacred to Shiva, Dhanteras is said to celebrate Shiva's return to the city after deposing the evil king Divodas through a clever ruse. Here the goddess Annapurn, patron of household bounty, is also worshiped, her devotees placing a seed of grain in their food supplies so that they might never run empty. On the morning before Diwali, residents of Varanasi take a ritual bath in the Ganges river, and in the evening they bring floating lamps to the river to guide wandering spirits, especially deceased ancestors, to the next world.

The day after Diwali many Hindus pause for rest. The festivities start to wind down and shopkeepers often close their stores for the day. On this day or the next it is common for women to pray for good marriages and to create good luck designs in rice flour paste in the entryways to their homes. Geometric designs made of cow dung are also spread in the area outside the home, and offerings are made. This is called Govardhan *puja*, and celebrates the boy Krishna's triumph over the storm god Indra. Following the Govardhan *puja*, women feed confections to their brothers, wave the sacred flame (*arati*) before them, and apply an auspicious mark (*tilak*), made from red *kumkum* powder, to their foreheads. These ceremonies honor the bonds between siblings and promote their brothers' well-being.

### *Salvation according to the logic of jnana*

Hindus explain the pursuit of *jnana* (divine knowledge) in many ways. It is a method to see beyond the illusion (*maya*) of our unsaved world, or a means to escape the consequences of karma. It unites and consolidates the spiritual energies (*pranas*) in one's body, or frees the spirit, *purusha*, from the world of matter, *prakriti*. Likewise, its goal, *moksha*, which is said to be experienced in this life, is also described with a range of images. It is a stillness of mind that is one step beyond dreamless sleep, or the discovery of the real person (*atman*) as a radically free psychic faculty. It is eternal union with *brahman*, or the World Soul, or the supreme deity. It is the loss of all individual awareness and personal identity, as when a drop of water falls into the ocean; and it is the attainment of a boundless, universal consciousness, aware of everything but distracted and disturbed by nothing whatsoever. This variety arises, in part, from the conviction that those seeking *jnana* need to be guided by a guru, with the result that there are almost as many approaches to *jnana* as there are famous gurus. Two of these approaches that have come to North America are the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), and Transcendental Meditation (TM), which counted the Beatles among its early adherents. Still other variations are promoted by a loose international network of gurus called Satsang.

The practices of *jnana* Hinduism, by contrast, are more uniform, due to their roots in the *Yoga-Sutras*, a treatise written by Patanjali around 150 BCE. Defining his approach as an alternative to the logic of karma, Patanjali outlined what he called **yoga**, a method of salvation in eight “limbs,” or disciplined courses of action, designed to bring the mind and body under one’s control. In time, Patanjali’s “limbs” became the core practices of many forms of yoga, including Hatha-Yoga (Force or Power Yoga), which emphasizes the importance of the physical body as a tool for attaining *moksha*; Mantra-Yoga, which relies especially on the repetition of sounds and sacred formulas (*mantras*); Tantric systems, such as the Kundalini Yoga that we discussed earlier; and Raja-Yoga (Royal Yoga), the form that most faithfully follows Patanjali’s description. The pursuit of *jnana* is also one of these yogas, and is sometimes called **Jnana-Yoga**.

## A Closer Look

### The Eight Limbs of Yoga

1. Abstention from violence, lying, sexuality, greed (*yama*, “death”)
2. Observance of purity, contentment, rigor, study, and love of god (*niyama*)
3. Body postures—lying, sitting, and standing positions (*asana*)
4. Measured breathing (*pranayama*)
5. Withdrawal from the use of sense organs (*pratyahara*)
6. Concentration developed by focusing on a single object (*dharana*)
7. Meditation (*dhyana*)
8. Union with *brahman* (*samadhi*)

In the broadest of strokes, a person begins Jnana-Yoga by choosing a spiritual guide—a guru, a renunciant, or a holy person (*sant*)—who gives his or her new student several rules for conduct. These will include prohibitions against deceit, theft, and the destruction of life, and obligations to practice good study habits, cleanliness, and mild austerities such as fasting and night vigils. On one level, these rules constitute a code of ethics. But on a deeper level, they are the entry into a structured way of life designed to detach a person from the world of karmic causality. A beginner interacts with the outside world based on mistaken inclinations and urgings of the mind and body, which are the product of ignorance, desire, and past karma, and only produce more karma. By training the body and mind to engage the world in an enlightened and disinterested fashion, the student can still act in the world, but without accumulating any karma. It is especially important for a beginner to avoid the evils of greed, lust, and anger, which are understood to be the root causes of rebirth.

A spiritual guide will also assign practices that westerners associate with yoga classes, namely, sitting and standing postures and regulating one’s breathing. While westerners generally see these as ways to reduce stress and promote physical well-being, Hindu

practitioners rely on them to gain further detachment from *samsara*. The postures are intended to allow one's life forces, which are identified as breaths (*pranas*), to flow freely through the various ducts and veins in the body, while the breathing exercises reduce the activities of the body to a single, primary action: breathing. In this way, one's life forces are consolidated and focused inward, toward the *atman*, rather than dispersed outward into the karmic world.

As a student progresses, he or she will engage in activities designed to withdraw the senses—sight, smell, hearing, touch, taste—from the surrounding world. When this happens, the practitioner takes less notice of the karmic world, eventually becoming indifferent to it. One very popular exercise is the repetition of *mantras*, including sacred formulas, names of deities, and the sound “Om.” These are considered tools for orienting the mind to *brahman* because by chanting them as part of a yogic regime, one begins to hear and think *brahman*.

The chanting of *mantras* can be combined with practices that develop mental focus. Often a practitioner will be instructed to concentrate on a single point or image, thereby learning to steady his or her mind and avoid worldly distractions. After concentration is mastered, meditation proper (*dhyana*) begins. When meditation is done correctly, the point or image that was the *object* of the previous exercise now fills the whole universe, leaving no room for the *subject*, the individual ego. Shortly after this, the practitioner slips into a state of reality called *samadhi* and, completely oblivious to any distinctions between object and subject, achieves *moksha*. The practitioner has now become a *jivan-mukta*, someone who is released (*mukta*) while still living (*jivan*) in this world. The life he or she now lives is simply a product of unspent karma from this and previous lives; it will produce no new karma. When the old karma has had its inevitable effect (*samsara*), the person will die, never to be reborn.

Even under the direction of a guru, it can take many years to attain *moksha* through Jnana-Yoga. Some schools of Jnana-Yoga, moreover, teach that nothing is guaranteed in the last stages of the journey, since it is only through the practitioner's determination and



**Figure 1.18** “Om,” the primal sound heard at the beginning of the creation of the cosmos.

self-effort that passage out of *samsara* becomes possible. Others, following the *Yoga Sutras*, posit that the practitioner is helped by Ishvara (the Lord), an eternally pure spirit whose reality suddenly vanishes at the point of achieving *moksha*. And still others teach that the grace of one of the Great Gods is necessary, which can be manifested in one's guru or through the deity directly. It is by adopting this last position that many Hindus find common ground between the logic of *jnana* and the logic of *bhakti*. Shaivas, as we have seen, honor Shiva as the foremost of renunciants, and thus can imitate him through yogic practices of self-mortification and meditation, while Shaktas often pursue salvation through Kundalini Yoga.

## CONCLUSION

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We began this chapter by reflecting on the bewildering complexity within Hinduism. We are now in a position to understand that this complexity can have two sides. While it frequently perplexes outsiders in their efforts to gain even a general understanding of Hinduism, for Hindus themselves, the complex nature of their religion is one of its strengths. This is because Hindus believe that everyone has his or her own karma to work through in this life, and so no single path to *brahman* can accommodate everyone. Some will practice yoga, others will be drawn to *puja*, and still others will find salvation in a life of devotion to Vishnu—or Shiva, or Devi. And if one cannot approach Shiva directly, one can still worship Shiva through devotion to his consort Parvati, or one of their sons, Ganesha and Skanda, or their animal mounts. Likewise, if a person is drawn to the worship of Vishnu, he or she can choose from the *avatars* Rama and Krishna. The *avatar* Krishna, in turn, offers options suited to many combinations of caste, gender, age, and personal inclinations. This might be Krishna the beautiful, vivacious baby; or Krishna the mischievous child; or Krishna the fun-loving teenager, exploring his adolescent sexuality; or Krishna, the Lord of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Nor is there any necessity to choose just one. According to some texts, Hindus have 330 million gods, meaning that they have an infinite number of options open to them. As a popular Bengali saying goes, “We are all Vaishnavas in public, Shaivas at home, and Shaktas in secret.”

### *For review*

1. How are *atman*, *samsara*, and *moksha* related to one another in Hindu theology?
2. Describe the Hindu notion of *dharma*. How is it related to rebirth and karma?
3. What role does the caste system play in Hinduism? How has this changed over time?
4. How are the gods of Hinduism related to *brahman*?
5. Who are the three great Gods of Hinduism and what is the nature of their respective festivals?
6. How are images of gods (*murti*) used in Hinduism?
7. What is *puja* and how is it performed in a Hindu temple? How is this different than *bhakti*?
8. How is Patanjali related to Jnana-Yoga?

### *For discussion*

1. How does sexual imagery and goddess worship figure into Hinduism’s vision of ultimate reality?
2. How does Hinduism account for people of other religions—e.g., Christians, Buddhists, Muslims?

### *Key Terms*

Agni	The fire god.
<i>arati</i>	A blessing received from a ritual flame.
Arjuna	The righteous king to whom Krishna reveals his divinity in the <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> .

Aryans	Authors of the <i>Rig-Veda</i> ; literally “Noble People.”
<i>atman</i>	The eternal self or soul.
<i>avatar</i>	One of ten forms that Vishnu assumes in this world.
<i>Bhagavad Gita</i>	“Song of the Lord”; a poem from the <i>Mahabharata</i> proclaiming the greatness of Krishna.
<i>bhakti</i>	“Devotion”; acts of devotion to images of deities, or <i>murtis</i> .
<i>brahman</i>	Ultimate reality.
Brahmins	Hindu priests; the highest class in traditional Hindu society.
<i>chakras</i>	Discs along the spine and in the head where divine power resides.
class-and-life-stage	
<i>dharma</i>	One of three sources of <i>dharma</i> ; duties as determined by birth and stage in life.
Commoners	The third ranking class in traditional Hindu society.
<i>dalit</i>	The current name used for outcaste.
<i>darshan</i>	A visual exchange between a <i>murti</i> and a worshiper.
Devi	One of the three great deities of Hinduism.
<i>dharma</i>	Religious duty; religion.
general <i>dharma</i>	Religious duties incumbent upon all.
Indra	The king of the gods in the <i>Collections</i> .
<i>ishta-devi</i>	The deity chosen as the focus of one’s religious devotion.
<i>jati</i>	“Birth”; the word translated into English as “caste.”
<i>jnana</i>	Divine knowledge.
Jnana-Yoga	A spiritual discipline for attaining divine knowledge ( <i>jnana</i> ).
karma	The good and bad consequences of one’s actions.
Krishna	A popular <i>avatar</i> of the Vishnu.
<i>lingam-yoni</i>	A popular <i>murti</i> of Shiva.
<i>Mahabharata</i>	The longest of India’s two epic poems.
<i>mantras</i>	Sacred formulas chanted at rituals.
<i>moksha</i>	Release from the karmic world.
monism	The vision of ultimate reality as a single principle that pervades everything.
<i>murti</i>	A consecrated image used by the gods to interact with worshipers.
Nobles	The second ranking class in traditional Hindu society.
outcaste	An older term for <i>dalit</i> ; impure persons excluded from traditional Hindu society.
own <i>dharma</i>	Religious duties proper to an individual.
<i>prasad</i>	A gift received from a <i>murti</i> .
<i>puja</i>	Worship in which such things as fruit and flowers are offered to a <i>murti</i> .
<i>Puranas</i>	A literature that appeared ca. 350 CE; used as devotional texts for worshipping Hinduism’s three great deities.



Rama	A popular <i>avatar</i> of Vishnu; hero of the <i>Ramayana</i> .
Ramayana	One of India's two epic poems; composed 200 BCE-200 CE.
<i>Rig-Veda</i>	The earliest and most authoritative part of the Veda.
<i>samsara</i>	The cycle of birth and rebirth controlled by karma.
<i>samskaras</i>	Rituals performed at different stages of one's life.
Servants	The lowest ranking class in traditional Hindu society.
Shaivas	Devotees of Shiva.
Shaktas	Devotees of Devi.
<i>shakti</i>	The creative power of the universe.
Shiva	One of three great deities in Hinduism.
theism	Ultimate reality envisioned as a god or gods.
Untouchable	An older term for <i>dalit</i> .
<i>Upanishads</i>	Late texts of the Veda that contain ideas about karma, rebirth, and renunciation.
Vaishnavas	Devotees of Vishnu.
Veda	The most authoritative collection of Hindu scripture, comprising the <i>Collections</i> , the <i>Brahmanas</i> , the <i>Aryanakas</i> , and the <i>Upanishads</i> .
Vedanta	Literally, "end of the Veda." A name for the <i>Upanishads</i> , the last scriptures to be added to the Vedic canon.
Vishnu	One of the three great deities of Hinduism.
<i>yantra</i>	A two-dimensional geometrical design used as an image of Devi.
<i>yoga</i>	A spiritual discipline using breath control and body posturing.

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