

1

India

Introductory remarks. India is home to one of the oldest continuous civilizations on Earth and simultaneously to a degree of cultural variability with which few other regions can compare. It is also the birthplace of many inventions and discoveries that have influenced the development of science, philosophy, linguistics, literature, art, architecture, theatre, and religion far beyond its borders. Indian religions have attracted a large following in many Asian countries and Buddhism, in particular, around the whole world. Today, the Republic of India, with a population over 1.3 billion people, is the world's biggest democracy. At present, India has the world's seventh biggest economy, but only ranks third in purchasing power parity. It is projected to bypass the United States in the next decades and rank second only to China on this scale. Besides, when we speak of the 'Indian subcontinent', we do not think only of India as a country, but also of quite a few neighbouring states that have a common cultural history with it and, for some of these, experts project similarly spectacular growth. What takes place in these societies, however, is difficult to understand without a knowledge of the background concepts that inform all spheres of thinking in Indian and related cultures, from the most general views of how the universe is organized to particular processes of decision-making and political preferences.

All of this should be enough to promote interest in Indian thought. Nonetheless, it would be just as worth studying even if India would not have such a growing role in the world of the present. Some Hindu and Buddhist philosophical systems belong to the most profound achievements of human thought. Indian views on language, logic, psychological processes as well as ontological problems have historically influenced Western thought and are able to contribute to philosophical debates also in the present. Many twentieth century landmarks of Western philosophy bear similarities to the positions of Indian thinkers, which put these advances into a much broader perspective. The developments of science, the move from a Newtonian space populated primarily by solid, self-identical objects

to relativity and quantum physics, have lent even more actuality to Indian thought, which historically has developed many categories and conceptualizations that are often better equipped to speak of such phenomena than the language of traditional Western metaphysics.

Periods of cultural history. The highly advanced Harappan civilization, which dominated the north-western part of the Indian subcontinent for the better part of the second millennium BCE, has unfortunately left us only with very short inscriptions, up to now undeciphered. Thus, the documented history of India begins with the advent of the Aryans, a mixed company of nomadic tribes who shared an Indo-European language, which later evolved into Sanskrit. Starting with the arrival of the Aryans, we can divide the historical development of Indian thought into six distinct periods. First, there is the Vedic period (c. 1500–600 BCE), which has received its name after the Vedas, initially orally transmitted Aryan scripture, which allegedly forms the basis of the Hindu worldview to this day. During that time, a worldview usually called **Brahmanism** was developed out of the Indo-European shared corpus of beliefs, possibly influenced by a substratum derived from the Harappan civilization, and reflecting the adaptation to local circumstances that the Aryan society went through during that time. One of these was the emergence of the **caste** system, which placed the priests at the top of the social ladder. A theory of divinely sanctioned kingship helped them to maintain this position even though they did not directly hold any political power after states began to consolidate.

The Vedic period is followed by the period of reform movements (c. 600–200 BCE), sometimes also called the period of ‘second urbanization’. During this time, social processes, notably the transformation of a large number of small-scale settlements into republican states collectively governed by the warrior estate, led to religious innovation, which opposed the simultaneous opposite development of strict social divisions within the Brahmanist tradition. The questioning of the Brahmanist worldview by such reform movements, primarily the Jains and the Buddhists, also triggered a sophisticated response on the traditionalist side that started the development of new practices and religious trends that gradually formed what we now call **Hinduism**.

It is also during this time that the first contacts of the Indian civilization with other cultures were established. The eastern outposts of the Iranian empire of the Achaemenids served to open up both trade and the movement of ideas. Towards the end of the period of reform movements, India was briefly invaded by Alexander the Great (327–325 BCE), which inaugurated a dialogue between Greek and Indian thought, with ideas moving in both directions. Even though Alexander retreated quite soon, Hellenic states continued to exist for some time in the Indian

north-west and, a few centuries afterwards, Greek and Roman traders started a commercial maritime traffic to the extent that trade stations were established in the south of India.

Soon after Alexander, India was united into a short-lived empire by the Maurya dynasty (c. 322–180 BCE), which inaugurated the period of classical Indian culture (c. 200 BCE–1200 CE), during which kingdoms were the norm of government, even though only one of them, the empire of the Guptas (c. 240–590 CE), gained control of most of the subcontinent for a longer period of time. The culture of the classical period is characterized by a highly sophisticated urban lifestyle, a tremendous amount of literature in a variety of genres as well as theatre, music, and science. During that time Buddhism and Hinduism existed side by side in India and influenced each other, and both of them also spread to neighbouring countries. The Hindu religion became dominant in both continental and maritime South East Asia, while Buddhism spread to the south and south-east, on the one hand, and to the north and north-east (China and Tibet), on the other.

But this was not to last. The start of a new era was predicted by waves of immigration of Parsis (Persians), the followers of the ancient Iranian religion of Zoroastrianism, fleeing from Muslims who were taking over their country. The period of Islamic conquests (c. 1200–1800) led the Indian subcontinent to be dominated by Muslim rulers, dynasties of various origins replacing each other until the Mughals finally established themselves as the rulers of the country. The Muslims introduced Islam to India, but the greatest rulers of the Mughal empire, such as Akbar (1542–1605), were tolerant leaders interested in interfaith dialogue rather than the subjugation of all other religions. This led to attempts at the synthesis of Muslim beliefs with the Hindu heritage – from one such effort, the creed of the Sikhs emerged – and fierce struggles for domination. Buddhism, however, having already lost much of its royal patronage before the Muslim invasion, now suffered a final blow from which it never fully recovered in India.

The discovery of the sea route around Africa to India by Vasco da Gama (1498) soon led to an era of colonial wars, during which the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British vied for control of the Indian subcontinent. The British finally emerged victorious over their competitors as well as the Mughal empire and its descendant states. Modern Indian thought (approximately from 1850 onwards), started to emerge already under the British colonial regime and provided the discourses for a cultural and political independence movement. Contemporary Indian thought, from after the end of the colonial rule and the partition of the subcontinent (1947), presents us with multiple efforts at synthesis of concepts inherited from the past and imported from the West, and this dialogue is still ongoing. However, this has also been the period when various nationalist and fundamentalist ideologies have tried to gain control of the public space.

Linguistic diversity. It should be noted that cultural and linguistic diversity has been one of the characteristic features of the Indian subcontinent for many centuries, and attempts to create discourses for living together have constantly competed with conservative strivings to separate different ethnic and religious groups from each other. The Aryan tribes that invaded India spoke Indo-European dialects that were related to English and many other European languages, while many indigenous people (possibly including the creators of the Harappan civilization) spoke Dravidian dialects, the forefathers of modern Tamil, Telugu, and other languages.

The classical Indian civilization was based on the single, shared, and strictly normed literary language of Sanskrit. However, Sanskrit was a learned skill for all its users, who spoke a variety of Indo-European and Dravidian languages as their mother tongues – a situation quite similar to medieval Europe, where Latin was used for official and scholarly purposes, while local vernacular languages were used in daily communication. After Sanskrit lost its position due to the Islamic conquest, new Indian languages (Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi, and so on) have gradually developed into full-fledged vehicles of cultural self-expression and modern Dravidian languages have similarly been able to establish themselves. This has created a cultural and linguistic diversity comparable perhaps only to Europe, which also functions as a political and supranational entity with a shared cultural base.

Practice. Before moving on to the discussion of the views expressed in Indian thought systems, it should be pointed out that none of these were conceived for mere intellectual beauty or out of the need to learn the truth for its own sake. They were meant to elucidate and give a conceptually sound foundation to the various methods to achieve, or at least proceed towards, a fulfilment of one's purpose in life. For most of these systems, this goal was synonymous with 'liberation' or 'emancipation' from the circle of rebirths. Knowledge about the architecture of the universe and its internal dynamism was only necessary in order to understand why and how the practice one had undertaken would lead to this goal. Not all forms of practice needed such a justification – for some, the intellectualism of the Hindu philosophical systems might even appear as a hindrance rather than help in their religious advancement. However, for most Hindus, practice pervades their life in any case: to be alive is tantamount to engendering new karma, and being careful about it is not necessarily a distinct activity or sphere of life, but just a commonsensical attitude to things like, for example, being mindful of what one eats or drinks or remembering to have one's documents in order before a journey. Ritualist practice is thus also a way to maximize the positive karma-producing potential of one's position in the world. Just as medieval Europeans, Indians did not have a distinct word for *religion*, which was just another natural aspect of their life.

All in all, there are three distinct directions of practice that most Indian worldviews could take: ritualist, ascetic, or devotionalist. All three can be traced back to the scriptures. *Ritualist* practice derives from the assumption that transcendent agency responds to ritualist action and can therefore be manipulated by priests who are, through the scriptures, privy to secret knowledge of how this is done. By performing certain lower-level rituals laypeople may similarly assure themselves of a certain degree of goodwill of the gods and contribute to the upholding of the cosmic order. This is in accordance with the view that the logical order of the universe is manifested in the social hierarchy. Therefore the kind of involvement in ritual practice expected from people with different social standing and in different stages of life varies accordingly.

Ascetic practices are grounded in the belief that by controlling the body one can increase and manipulate the energy of life and put it to unexpected uses. In particular, the epics abound with stories how ascetics, by accumulating spiritual power, can perform supernatural acts. On a more realistic level, asceticism of varying degrees has been advocated by some Hindu and Jain traditions as a method for calming the emotions and clearing the mind to such a level that one can perceive the truth and attain liberation. Ascetic practices are normally combined with psychotechnical exercises, including various forms of meditation, which are meant to emancipate the mind from the confines of daily routines and to control its activity. The historical Buddha has warned against ascetic practices as an excess and advocated a 'middle path' between extreme approaches to the body, but also advocates meditation as the way to spiritual progress. This is in accordance with the Buddhist rejection of all attachments: when someone starts to engage in ascetic mortification of the flesh, it may quickly turn into a sport practised for its own sake to commit increasingly further feats of corporal austerity. However, such an attitude is not conducive to mental liberation at all.

The last variety of practice is *devotionalism*, which is an attitude first met in some Vedic hymns that credit a particular deity with maximum power and positive attributes that can just as well be attributed to some other deity in some other hymn. Constantly ongoing activities of worship and veneration, dedicated to particular deities, have later become the main form of practice of some sectarian movements that have gathered a strong following. In particular, the *bhakti* movement, which arose in south India in the seventh century, has been influential in supporting the split of Hinduism into branches of devotees of different gods, primarily Vishnu and Shiva. The word *bhakti* means 'devotion, love, attachment', but a primarily spiritual one, even if sex and erotic connotations often also have a significant role in Hindu beliefs.

The Brahmanist Worldview

Background. The worldview that developed from the beliefs of the Indo-Aryan tribes who moved into India between 1500 and 1300 BCE is designated by two terms, Brahmanism and Hinduism. Hinduism normally refers to the newer (including present) forms of it, because the term ‘Hindu’ started to gain general currency only after the Muslim invasion as a term for people who were not Muslims. However, their forms of worship started to evolve already during the classical period. Sometimes the term ‘Hindu’ is also used for the much earlier forms of this religion, especially in popular literature.

During the Vedic period, Indian society went through a series of changes. Initially, it was a fairly egalitarian association of householders, who were responsible for both the economic well-being of their dependents and the performance of necessary rituals, that is, sacrifices to the gods. Soon enough, the society evolved into a much more strictly organized hierarchical system, with an institutionalized division of labour. This fostered the appearance of small states and the development of urban culture. Dealing with the divine became a profession and the knowledge associated with it a closely guarded form of cultural capital, which was used by the priests to guarantee themselves the leading position in the social system.

Eventually, the political system started to change and the privileged status of the priests came to be questioned by new religious movements that did not recognize their authority. These reform movements, two of which (the Jain religion and Buddhism) have survived to this day, forced Brahmanism to reinterpret some of its own basic tenets and started a philosophical dialogue which provided Indian thought with a broadly accepted conceptual foundation for centuries to come.

Vedic scripture. The word *veda* means ‘knowledge’. Technically, the term refers to four groups of texts, each of which is headed by a collection (*samhita*) of hymns and formulas used during the sacrifice ritual. However, the titles of these collections all contain the word ‘veda’, so quite often the term is used to refer to these alone, without the other texts in the group. Collectively, the Vedic scriptures are also called *shruti*, ‘what is heard’, because they were initially transmitted in oral form, and opposed to authored treatises as well as the epic poems that describe, in wildly mythicized form, the history of ancient Aryan India. Older sources credit the vedas to ancient sages, who have given shape to this authorless wisdom, but in some texts we find them also attributed to the creator-god Brahṁā. The orthodox tradition considers the Vedas to be uncreated eternal truth.

The oldest and most important *samhita* is called ***Rigveda***. It is divided into 10 books and contains the hymns and invocations (1017 in number) used for summoning gods to participate in the ritual. Other collections contain formulas to be used during the ritual and after the ritual, checking its efficacy. There is a

great deal of overlap between the five collections. While the *Rigveda* has been partially (and sometimes also in full) translated into several Western languages, including English, and is widely studied by scholars of comparative religion and mythology as well as philosophy, most of the others are of interest mainly for specialists in early India.

The secondary texts in each group are divided into three further categories and present early comments on Vedic knowledge. Of these, the last category of the ***upanishads*** is the most important. This group of texts originates from the very end of the Vedic age and the period of reform movements, reflecting the changes towards a more philosophically grounded worldview that Brahmanism was undergoing at the time.

veda ('knowledge') the scriptural tradition of Brahmanism/Hinduism, collections of ancient, initially orally transmitted hymns and comments to them

Vedic gods. Most Vedic hymns are dedicated to a particular deity, although there are some that evoke them collectively or tell the story of creation. The gods of the Vedas are called *devas* and *asuras*. While deva remained the standard designation of a divine being, asuras were later described as demons. The early Vedic texts still talk about them in a positive key and sometimes even the same deity can be categorized in both groups. The difference, however, must have been developing from earlier on, as it had been one of the causes to split the Aryan tribes into Indians and Iranians – for Iranians, it was the asuras who were the good deities and devas were considered evil.

Many of these deities are originally of shared Indo-European stock, with possibly a few additions from the Harappan civilization. Thus, for example, we find in some hymns of the *Rigveda* invocations to Dyaus pitar (Father Heaven), who is recognizably the same figure as the Greek Zeus pater or the Roman Jupiter. In the Vedas, Dyaus pitar is usually mentioned together with Prithivi, or Mother Earth. In contrast, we know almost nothing about the Harappan gods. There is a figure, depicted on many seals, sitting in a lotus posture with horned headgear and an erect penis, has sometimes been identified as a predecessor of the god Shiva, even though Shiva (bearing the name Rudra) only plays a minor part in the Vedas. Most of the Vedic gods are male, but there are a few goddesses as well.

Characteristically, many Vedic deities are personalized natural phenomena, so Agni (Fire, important for his central role in rituals), Vāyu (Wind), Sūrya (Sun), Vāk (Speech), and Soma (a certain hallucinogenic drug) are glorified by names that are the usual Sanskrit words referring to these things. Similarly, the river Sarasvati also appears as a deity.

The greatest of all Vedic gods, however, is **Indra**, whose name has no other meaning. He is depicted as a warrior, and the most important story about him is the slaying of the dragon or serpent Vritra, the personification of drought. Later on, Indra becomes the god of thunder and the smashing weapon he uses is transformed into a thunderbolt. He is also often depicted consuming large amounts of the hallucinogenic soma, which gives him power to combat his enemies. One of his companions is Vishnu, who later eclipses him as one of the central figures of the pantheon.

The Vedic gods can be grouped into categories, but they are not organized into a clearly hierarchical system, where one of them would have the power to command others. Hymns dedicated to each of them mostly extol the virtues of that particular god as the supreme figure, and they often credit their addressee with the creation of the universe, while another hymn may ascribe that feat to some other deity.

He has a form corresponding to every form; this form of his is for display.

Indra keeps going about in many forms through his magical powers, for ten hundred fallow bays are yoked for him.

(*Rigveda* VI 47: 18, trans. S. Jamison and J. Brereton)

Similarly, to Greek gods, Vedic gods, especially Indra, can adopt different shapes. This eventually led to the appearance of another well-known characteristic feature of Indian deities: they have certain more stable forms in which they can appear among the humans of the Earth and perform certain tasks. These forms came to be called *avatars*. The word means ‘descent’, that is, the descent from heavens of a deity to assume an earthly shape. The word does not yet appear in Vedic texts, although the idea is already there, but it is met in some Brahmanist texts written during the period of reform movements. The concept is most often associated with the god Vishnu, but some others are known to engage in such appearances as well.

avatar the form a deity takes to appear and act on Earth

Towards the end of the Vedic period, we see a new figure appearing on the scene who soon displaces Indra as the greatest god. This is Brahmā, more powerful than any other deity, the creator of the universe, before whom all other deities are just as powerless as humans. The appearance of Brahmā signalizes the transition from a mythological pantheon to a philosophically conceptualized view of divinity, as

elaborated in the last layer of Vedic texts, the *upanishads*, where **Brahmā**, a personalized creator god (a masculine noun) gradually approaches *Brahman* (a neuter noun signifying ‘foundation’), the absolute, ubiquitous world-spirit.

Upanishads. The *upanishads* are only loosely associated with the *samhitas* and even though they claim to uphold their authority, they present a worldview that is already quite different from what can be deduced from earlier Vedic scriptures. They present a philosophical response – or an array of related responses – to the changes in the society and the challenges to the Brahmanist worldview posed by the reform movements.

A later tradition identifies the *upanishads* as the final and deepest teaching that a knowledgeable person has to grasp in life. During the first centuries of the common era, the followers of the Brahmanist tradition started to divide the ideal human life into four stages (student, householder, forest ascetic, recluse), but some scholars think that such a division was already being invented at the time when the principal *upanishads* were written. In any case, it conveniently corresponds to the fourfold division of Vedic scripture and credits the *upanishads* with the ultimate wisdom of the sage. The precise original meaning of the word *upanishad* is unclear, and the classical explanation of it as ‘secret teachings’, meant only for the most advanced followers, is unfounded. Recent scholarship has suggested that the word indicates a ‘juxtaposition’, that is, a doctrine establishing an equivalence between the external and the internal, or the macrocosm and the microcosm.

There are altogether more than 200 *upanishads* of varying length and importance. The more important ones have been composed during the eighth to fourth centuries BCE. The two best-known texts of this category are the *Bṛihadāranyaka* and the *Chāndogya upanishads*, which both date from before the advent of Buddhism and thus represent the internal development of Brahmanist thought.

Concepts and doctrines. As any student of Asian worldviews quickly discovers, the very terms Indian thought uses to speak about the world differ considerably from the vocabulary Westerners usually take for granted. However, even though there is considerable variation between Indian worldviews as well, most of them share a common conceptual vocabulary that has been developed by and inherited from Brahmanism and is thus shared also by those religions and philosophical schools that have challenged it and do not recognize the authority of the Vedas.

In Greece, one of the foundational moments of philosophy was the trial of Socrates, accused of disrespect for gods. The early impulses inspiring the Brahmanist philosophical tradition, however, stem from the opposing need to uphold the worldview expounded in the scriptures. That said, the concept of divinity in Indian and Greek thought is quite different, even though both systems are polytheist. While Greek gods are organized in a hierarchy, on the one

hand, and myths report their (very human) struggles, on the other hand, Indian gods form a curious polycentric system of various layers. The scriptures contain several conflicting accounts of creation and texts dedicated to particular gods often place their particular object of veneration above all others. Perhaps this could be interpreted as excessive politeness – after all, the goal of the hymns was to incline the gods to grant what was asked of them during rituals of sacrifice. This resulted in an interesting view: knowledgeable humans started to see themselves on par with the gods they were addressing, because their activities were able to manipulate them. Professionals well-versed in techniques of interaction with the divine did not think they were at the mercy of their gods any longer. On the contrary, it was them who controlled the rituals on which the gods were dependent. The knowledge of the general order which the gods also had to obey became the real target of learning. This supported the emergence of a strictly hierarchical society in which the priests, or Brāhmans, were at the top, the warriors-rulers (*kshatriya*) ranked second, the self-employed (*vaishya*, or agriculturalists, merchants, and owners of handicraft businesses) ranked third, and hired labour (*shūdra*) ranked fourth. The upper three castes were called ‘twice-born’, because their male members had to go through an initiation ritual that qualified them for instruction in some scriptural wisdom, while hired labour was not supposed to do that. At the bottom of this society were the casteless, or untouchables, contact with whom was considered polluting. These included many indigenous ethnic groups as well as such professions that were not considered pure enough by the dominant culture. A legitimation of this division is to be found in one of the scriptural hymns, which describes the emergence of the universe from the symbolically sacrificed body of a primary Man.

When they apportioned the Man, into how many parts did they arrange him?
What was his mouth? What his two arms? What are said to be his two thighs,
his two feet?

The brahmin was his mouth. The ruler was made his two arms. As to his thighs – that is what the freeman was. From his two feet the servant was born.

The moon was born from his mind. From his eye the sun was born. From his mouth Indra and Agni, from his breath Vāyu was born.

From his navel was the midspace. From his head the heaven developed. From his two feet the earth, and the directions from his ear. Thus they arranged the worlds.

(*Rigveda* X 90: 11–14, trans. S. Jamison and J. Brereton)

This view came to have a strong bearing on the concept of social and cosmic order, and consequently on the morality based on it. In particular, it inspired the theory that the actions of all persons had to correspond to their station in life and not to universal rules. Soon enough this view found its way into political and legal treatises and was later elaborated further by Hindu (particularly Mīmāṃsā) thinkers. Combined with the emergent doctrine of reincarnation, this produced a workable ethical system, according to which the task of individual people was thus not to perform well on a universal scale, but to live out their particular destinies. These were dependent on the circumstances of their birth, which, in turn, were not random, but determined by their previous actions. The idea of reincarnation is not yet articulated in early Vedic texts, but appears in later layers and emerges as orthodoxy in the *upaniṣads*.

karma the consequences of one's actions which influence one's destiny in future existences

samsāra the cycle of rebirths, the conditions of which are determined by one's karma and liberation from which is considered to be the target of one's earthly striving

The mechanics of reincarnation theory is very simple: each action an individual performs creates a trace, karma, which influences that individual's future. No actions (apart from breathing and involuntary bodily movements) are ethically neutral, all of them are either in accordance with the individual's duty or not. Those that correspond to one's duty contribute to the future good of that individual, those that are not will have negative consequences. After an individual dies, their core self (*ātman*) moves to another body. Thus all individuals transmigrate through a cycle of rebirths (*samsāra*), through different bodies and different spheres of existence, depending on how well they have performed their duties in each life. However, even though everyone can ensure themselves comfortable future lives by behaving properly, this in itself is not what life should be about.

Brahman all-pervasive world soul, the absolute, a philosophical derivate of an omnipotent and ubiquitous divinity

ātman the core individual self, which survives after the death of the person and transmigrates to another body; it is the form in which the absolute is present in each individual

The major contribution of the *upanishads* to the Brahmanic worldview is the idea that the absolute world-soul, *Brahman*, is essentially identical to the core self of a person, or *ātman*. The goal of religious practice is to attain a deep-level knowledge of this, which makes it possible that the self of the individual is released after death and can dissolve itself in the *Brahman*, instead of transmigrating to another body. This is the idea of liberation, which becomes one of the central topics also for the reform movements. Even though the Jains and the Buddhists have their own terms for some of these concepts and they may disagree about the details of how the mechanics work, the idea that individuals should liberate themselves from an otherwise uninterrupted circle of rebirths by proper behaviour and practice remains the same.

‘Put this chunk of salt in a container of water and come back tomorrow’. The son did as he was told, and the father said to him: ‘The chunk of salt you put in the water last evening – bring it here’. He groped for it but could not find it, as it had dissolved completely.

‘Now, take a sip from this corner’, said the father. ‘How does it taste?’ ‘Salty’.

‘Take a sip from the center. – How does it taste?’ ‘Salty’.

‘Take a sip from that corner. – How does it taste?’ ‘Salty’.

‘Throw it out and come back later’. He did as he was told and found that the salt was always there. The father told him: ‘You, of course, did not see it there, son; yet it was always right there. The finest essence here – that constitutes the self of this whole world; that is the truth; that is the self (*ātman*). And that’s how you are, Shvetaketu’.

(*Chāndogya Upanishad*, 6.13, trans. Patrick Olivelle)

Language. Even before the rise of properly philosophical thinking, we can observe the development of critical views on language, as the only vehicle that can articulate such ideas. In India, we find language in a prominent role already in the sacred Vedic texts. The *Rigveda* contains a hymn (X 125) dedicated to the goddess Vāk, the impersonation of speech, which credits her, in the usual Vedic manner, with the most supreme powers including omnipresence and involvement in everything that happens. This view is taken even further in later texts, where language is called the endless source of what all gods consist, the primary truth, the mother of knowledge, and the navel of immortality. Occasionally language is in rivalry with thought and their relation to each other is not made quite clear. Finally, in the *Bṛihadāranyaka Upanishad*, *Brahman* itself, the absolute world-soul, is equated with speech (4.1.2).

Given the multilayered and multicentral nature of the early Indian worldview, we cannot, of course, draw very broad conclusions from these extracts. In some other narratives of creation and order maintenance, language is much less central, if mentioned at all. Nonetheless, even occasional attributing of such colossal powers to language is not accidental. The emergence of the caste system with the priests, or Brāhmans, at its head had to be justified by their extraordinary capacity to manipulate the world order. The privileged knowledge that the scriptures contained, in particular the technology of sacrifices, made the divine creatures dependent on the priests who could control them by their actions. This knowledge was embodied in linguistic form, and particularly the sacred formulas called *mantra* (more often than not senseless syllables, even though full of esoteric meaning explained to the followers), which had to be appropriately pronounced at certain stages of the ritual.

[Language speaks:] I am ruler, assembler of goods, observer foremost among those deserving the sacrifice.

Me have the gods distributed in many places – so that I have many stations and cause many things to enter me.

Through me he eats food – whoever sees, whoever breathes, whoever hears what is spoken.

Without thinking about it, they live on me. Listen, o you who are listened to: it's a trustworthy thing I tell you.

Just I myself say this, savored by gods and men:

'Whom I love, just him I make formidable, him a formulator, him a seer, him of good wisdom'.

(*Rigveda* X 125: 3–5, trans. S. Jamison and J. Brereton)

Sacred knowledge. The possession of this knowledge was almost equivalent to mastery over the universe. This is most likely the origin of the belief in the magic powers of words, also written texts, shared everywhere in Asia where currents of Indian thought (such as Buddhism) have reached. It was believed that studying texts, reciting them (in the Brahmanist tradition) and copying them (in Buddhism) created significant karmic merit. The Buddhist *Diamond Sūtra*, for example, asserts plainly that understanding and explaining no more than four lines of it creates more merit than filling ten thousand galaxies with treasures to be distributed to the poor. But even understanding is not really necessary. In the Jain tradition, for example, certain texts have been so sacred and important that even the priests were not supposed to touch them, until those manuscripts had to be

rescued from decay. And in Japan we find a priest covering the body of a blind musician with phrases from *sūtras* when he is sought after by ghosts who want to listen to his performance, so that only the ears, difficult to write on, remain unprotected – and are therefore ripped off by disappointed ghosts. Such powerful words or phrases encapsulating the sacred were called **mantras**.

The same kind of power continued to be attributed to mantras also during later times, when the political centre of the Indian society shifted to the warrior class, but held on to this body of higher knowledge. But gradually their rationale changed: little by little some mantras acquired the status of psychotechnical devices, with the help of which the Hindu or Buddhist ascetic could manipulate his or her (some, albeit very few of the ascetics were women) own consciousness. It was believed that the sounds affect the mind directly and may produce mental states necessary for reaching higher understanding. These practices are still alive today, among the Hindu in India as well as esoteric Buddhist traditions which have survived in Japan and Tibet.

Attention to form. Whatever the cosmogonic role of language may have been, its function as the carrier of sacred knowledge in the Vedic tradition and, accordingly, its crucial importance for the successful implementation of rituals, was beyond any doubt. This is why a distinction was made at a very early stage between texts belonging to the sacred ‘heard’ and the humanly produced ‘remembered’ texts – the former had to be memorized exactly in their correct phonetic form, while, for the latter, only the semantics mattered and they could be paraphrased or even translated into spoken languages, which gradually started to diverge from the Vedic norm. As a result, various procedures of linguistic analysis were undertaken by the priests in order to preserve the integrity of the most holy texts. The early Indian linguists noticed quite soon that certain regularities govern the behaviour of sounds that share other traits and devised a fairly sophisticated classification of sounds as a result, something that has not only become the foundation of all domestic Indian scripts, but has also influenced the composition of other writing systems from Tibet to southeast Asian islands and even Japan. But certain analytical procedures even predated the invention of Indian scripts: it was necessary to break the texts down into single words in order to best preserve their form and content. The structure of their language made this undertaking quite complicated: it is customary in Sanskrit to fuse the last sounds of preceding words with the first sounds of the following ones so that long compounds result within which single individual meaning-carrying units – words and grammatical indices – are not always easy to identify. Moreover, the relations between the singular units of such compounds can be very different, they can form new words (with up to 30 elements joined into one semantic whole), but they can also be sentences in which syntactically connected words similarly melt into each other (as, for example, in the English expression ‘killjoy’).

Language as a system. A radical leap in the Indian debate on the nature of language took place with the grammar of **Pāṇini** (around 400 BCE). Among other things, he devised a tentative classification of such compounds which made it easier for a reader to establish the relations between single meaning-carrying units in a long word, or sentence, or a fusion of both. But what is perhaps most innovative about his work is the ingenious metalanguage he created to formulate rules that cover grammatical material. For example, he inserted markers into the phonetically arranged systemic sequence of Indian sounds in order to define borders of sound groups by them – from vowel ‘a’ up to the mark ‘K’, that is, a group consisting of a, i, u, ṛ, and ḷ, would be denoted as ‘aK’, an artificial term that could then be treated as an independent word and accept, for example, case endings. (A group consisting of only u, ṛ, and ḷ would correspondingly be ‘uK’.) Thus Pāṇini could very efficiently code the rules of regular sound alterations as short formulas that were easy to remember and decode. Similarly, he developed formulas for categories of morphemes, such as case and tense endings, and as a result achieved a complete and flawless system of rules that could describe the entire system of Sanskrit.

Even more important than this practical toolbox, however, was the methodological separation of the language under scrutiny from the language used to describe it. The former contained everything normal people would say or write, the latter was a code for the initiated that enabled them to formulate rules, systematic principles quite unknown to most users of the language themselves, to which any single sentence they pronounced nonetheless had to conform. For Pāṇini, Sanskrit was most probably still quite close to the language that he himself grew up with. For most later grammarians, it was an acquired cultural language, which they learned already together with Pāṇini’s metalevel view of it. Thus his accomplishment also linked the notion of a perfect order not to language as such, but to a distinct form of it, the classical Sanskrit.

This understanding of language as a system of rules that generates specific individual utterances was remarkably advanced for those early times and subsequently served as a foundation for rather sophisticated discussion about other issues in linguistic philosophy, such as the theory of meaning. A need for a good theory of meaning was again dictated by priestly concerns. For example, early texts had specified with precision the materials and ways of producing necessary implements for conducting rituals in the proper way, but migration to new places of settlement had made some of these materials, such as particular plants, unavailable. How, then, were the priests to preserve the integrity of their sacred knowledge? The answer was a linguistic theory that explained how names had been given to particular objects, and how the efficient sacred essences of these objects could be preserved even though the objects themselves would be replaced.

Theory of universals. Thus, for example, one of the central concerns of later authors was the principle by which words were connected to the objects that they denoted, and the systematicity of such links. According to earlier grammarians, these links are a permanent part of reality and grounded in qualities that objects have in their essential selfsameness – a sheep is a sheep because of its ‘sheepness’. Similarly, the sentence ‘the sky is blue’ refers to a ‘sky-is-blue-ness’ that characterizes reality at that moment, a little like ‘the snow is white’, in Tarski’s view, is true if and only if the snow is white. Approximately eight centuries later, however, this theory was superseded by that of **Bhartrihari** (c. fifth century CE), who developed the observations of other earlier grammarians into a claim that meaning is not sustained by qualities of things, but universals. The distinction may seem like hair-splitting, but is actually substantial. For example, both aspirin and paracetamol can help against headache. But there is a difference between drugs sold under various commercial labels that contain paracetamol and those that are based on aspirin, because quite a few people are allergic to paracetamol, while aspirin would not be a problem for them. So it is possible that two things share the same universal as two concoctions based on the same ingredient, while sharing a quality such as curing a headache would not necessarily require that. This makes it possible to put the priestly concerns on a more substantial footing. For example, if the texts specify that a white goat has to be sacrificed and white goats are not available, then one should sacrifice a black goat, and not, for example, white flowers, because it is the ‘goat’ universal on which the meaning of the text relies. Another difference lies in that a quality is contained by the thing it is the quality of, while a universal, in Bhartrihari’s view, is independent of any of the phenomena that manifest it. More than that: these universals form a hierarchy. Higher-order concepts are entailed in the lower-order concepts, and in turn they themselves also entail yet higher ones, so that finally all concepts are contained in one, a primary Meaning, which is the equivalent of the Absolute in religious thinking. According to Bhartrihari, the universe thus has a conceptual, logical structure, ordered as neatly as Pānini’s grammar – which is precisely why grammar is in his view the most direct way to cognizing the absolute, the ‘door to salvation’ and the foundation of philosophical reasoning. The theory of universals was later developed and acquired an even more prominent role in the Vaisheshika school of philosophy.

Words and sentences. Bhartrihari also proposed a philosophically more solid ground for the phonetic selfsameness of words. Similarly as things, he argued, words also have universals, ideal phonetic shapes to which they, in principle, should conform, but do not, in actual speech practice, which in Bhartrihari’s times had evolved from a range of dialectal variations into a multitude of languages incomprehensible to each other’s speakers. And the relation of meaning obtains precisely between the word-universal and the thing-universal, both being

integral elements of the abstract, conceptual sphere. No wonder thus that as single things of the same general kind are different from each other, so are the ways people pronounce the words indicating them.

It is with the discovery of Sanskrit and its grammatical tradition that European linguistics began to evolve towards the form it has taken today. Ferdinand de Saussure, the most crucial figure in formulating modern ideas about language, wrote his dissertation on Sanskrit grammar and lectured on the subject for the remainder of his life. Thus we can be fairly sure that he was thoroughly familiar with Indian linguistic thought. Leonard Bloomfield studied Pāṇini's work and considered him one of his models, and so did his most ardent critic, Noam Chomsky, who also considered Pāṇini's grammar to be the first generative grammar 'in essentially the contemporary sense of this term'. Thus the influence of Indian linguistic thought, even though rarely highlighted, has been constant in the development of Western linguistics during the twentieth century.

Early legal and political thought. Towards the end of the Vedic period, India became increasingly diverse in the political sense. The eastern parts of the sub-continent started to be dominated by monarchies, where the position of power was inherited, while in the north-west the clan societies evolved into a more democratic (in the Athenian sense of the word) model of governance, where political decision-making was shared and negotiated among a fairly large group of noble houses. The term *rājā*, usually translated 'king', thus had different meanings according to the region: in a monarchy, it meant the ruling family, in a republic, anyone with the right to participate in the political process. The monarchies tended to uphold the Brahmanist orthodoxy, while the republics were less strict about it, and therefore the reform movements originated in them.

To ensure the support of the royal families, the caste of priests had to concoct a new narrative that would enable the rulers to stand out among the rest of the warrior estate. Several myths, presumably dating from that time, tell about the divine choice of a ruler from many candidates. However, the most thorough effort to ground monarchy in the emerging Hindu tradition is made by the epic poem *Rāmāyana*, one of the most influential texts in India and throughout South East Asia. Relating the adventures of the righteous prince Rāma, the text also claims that he is an *avatar* of the god Vishnu, who gradually takes on the role of the preserver of the cosmic order. This led to the emergence of a new doctrine of legitimization, according to which royal power itself had a divine source and thus it was the king who guaranteed that cosmic order prevailed on Earth. This doctrine

of *devarājā* ('divine ruler') spread together with the Hindu tradition to South East Asia, where it is influential to this day, for example, the kings of Thailand still bear the official title of Rama.

The Brahmanist tradition has also produced several other prominent legal and political texts. One of these is the ***Mānava-dharmashāstra***, or 'Laws of Manu', also known as *Manusmriti*, a compilation that most probably emerged in its extant form around the end of the second century CE at the latest, after several centuries of textual development, and also draws on a large number of earlier sources. Some scholars, however, believe in a single authorship and an even earlier date. The text belongs to a larger group of *dharmashāstras*, or legal treatises, none of which is actually a code of laws in the proper sense, but only articulates what its authors believe to be just and correct. The judges appointed by particular kings therefore had much more freedom in considering particular circumstances than the treatise (and others of the same tradition) would lead us to believe. The *Mānava-dharmashāstra* was translated into English already in 1794 and became very influential during the colonial era, as the British used it to craft the so-called 'Hindu law', or a legal code that would apply to the indigenous population of India under their rule.

The *Mānava-dharmashāstra* is attributed to Manu, the Indian Noah who survived the mythical flood, and claims to derive its content from the Vedic tradition. The treatise formulates unambiguously the doctrine of the four castes and four stages of life, going on to stipulate in extreme detail what the desirable conduct of particular people should look like – up to saying that women at least two months pregnant should be granted free passage on a river-crossing ferry.

When a Shūdra has sex with a guarded or unguarded woman of a twice-born class – he loses a limb and all his possessions, if she was unguarded. If she was guarded, a Shūdra loses everything; Vaishya is imprisoned for a year and all his property is confiscated; and a Kshatriya is fined 1000 and his head is shaved using urine. If a Vaishya or a Kshatriya has sex with an unguarded Brahmin woman, the Vaishya is fined 500 and the Kshatriya 1000. If any of these two has sex with a guarded Brahmin woman, he should be punished in the same way as a Shūdra or he should be burnt with a straw-fire. A Brahmin who has forcible sex with a guarded Brahmin woman should be fined 1000; for sex with a willing partner, he should be fined 500.

(*Manu's Code of Law* VIII: 374–378, trans. Patrick Olivelle and Suman Olivelle)

Punishments for misdeeds become more draconic the lower the caste, while they are rather lenient for Brāhmins, thus in their case even the death penalty is replaced by shaving their head, while for others it is real, and neither is the property of criminal Brāhmins to be confiscated when they are exiled. But non-Brāhmins have to be mercilessly persecuted for whatever crimes they have committed. Indeed, upholding the law, the ‘eradication of thorns’ from the body of the society is one of the principal obligations of the ruler. The book also describes in minute detail all other duties and routines of the king, including the schedule he should follow every day, what his administration should look like and how the fortress, his site of government, should be built. And obviously he should respect the Brāhmins and listen to what they have to say.

Possibly the most important early Indian political and economical text by way of its theoretical impact is the *Arthashāstra* (‘The Science of Wealth’). This book was discovered by chance in 1905, when an anonymous Brāhmin presented a manuscript to the newly opened Mysore Oriental Library. The extant text of the *Arthashāstra* is most likely more or less contemporary with the established text of *Mānava-dharmashāstra*, but the text similarly draws on a long and even older tradition of ‘wealth science’. It quotes from numerous authors whose work has not survived, possibly because it was considered outdated after the success of this treatise. However, most likely its initial version has been supplemented and significantly amended by later copyists. Credited to the Machiavelli-like figure of Kautilya, a wily Brāhmin and kingmaker who stood behind the empire-building effort of the first Mauryan ruler Chandragupta (reigned 321–297 BCE), the treatise discusses in detail everything a king needs to know about economy, politics, and governance, which, in the Indian view, are inextricably intertwined.

By way of political stability, the *Arthashāstra* recognizes the merits of the early Indian republics, governed in solidarity, while monarchs always had to fear treason and rebellion. However, as an economic formation, monarchy is seen to be much superior – it is able to tax and centralize large resources needed for any ambitious and socially beneficial economic endeavour: the building of infrastructure for public needs as well as aesthetically excelling palaces, the enforcing of laws and standards on larger territory, the maintaining an army capable not only of self-defence, but also of expansion. The latter is also one of the righteous king’s duties. Four principles of foreign policy are enumerated: conciliation and gifts for the friendly, ‘sowing dissent’, and use of force for the hostile neighbours. Of these, only the principle of ‘sowing dissent’ would help to subdue a republic.

The king also needs to uphold a large army of spies and agents, because among his officials, no one would tell him things he does not want to hear. The spies would also need to perform ‘black ops’ if necessary. However, even though the doctrine of the *Arthashāstra* is immensely practical at the

expense of moralizing, the previous tradition, if anything, must have been even more cynical. For example, the treatise quotes earlier authors as saying that wayward princes should either be introduced to drinking and whoring so that they would not mature into political opponents, or tempted by agents to mutiny and liquidated, if they agree. The *Arthashāstra* opposes such practices decisively and recommends only instruction in political science as a cure for seeds of insubordination: by learning, any prince would come to agreement with the principles according to which a sage-king governs – if indeed he does so. However, if that does not bring about the desired result, the king is obliged to surrender control of the state to someone else and thus to forfeit his dynasty, rather than transferring the throne to a wicked only son.

The centralized politics of an ideal state also imply strong economic intervention. For example, prices should be regulated so that neither would the trade of the artisans be undercut by too low prices that endanger their livelihoods, nor would the profits of the merchants grow too high at the expense of their clientele. Thus the economic policies of the state should benefit the population as a whole, not a certain class or group. Similarly, taxation should not be too high – the share of the king should normally amount to one sixth of agricultural produce and between one tenth and one fourth in other spheres. The king had the right to raise extraordinary taxes should the situation require that, but also the duty to provide tax relief in times of famine, drought, and other calamities. Unlike the majority of legal systems across the world of that time, the *Arthashāstra* also considered crime to be an affair of the state: even though one citizen may have done wrong by another, the conflict between them was not a private matter, but an insult to the public order, which was guaranteed by the king, and therefore indirectly a transgression against him. Punishments should be proportional to the crime, and masterminding criminal activity was considered a bigger offence than actually carrying someone else's plans out.

While such views might leave a rather favourable view of the *Arthashāstra* as an early political theory, it should not be forgotten that the treatise is a practical 'science of wealth', not a moral teaching: it is simply the case, according to the text, that prosperity, its ultimate aim, is easier to achieve and maintain in a balanced and stable society, where no one needs to fear the whims of the powerful and can rest assured of the continuance of their livelihood. It is in that sense that the social superiority of the early republics is being dismissed in favour of the more efficient governance of monarchy. Indeed, history has proved the *Arthashāstra* right – soon enough, the republics were conquered by the emergent kingdoms, which remained the dominant political form on the subcontinent until the end of the colonial period.

Reform Movements: Jains and Buddhism

Background. There were quite a few teachers active during the period of reform movements, proposing alternatives to the orthodox Brahmanist tradition and trying to recruit disciples. Two of these traditions remain alive to this day: the Jains, who are still active in several regions of India, and Buddhists, whose main foothold on the subcontinent is Sri Lanka, but who are more influential in South East Asia, Tibet and Japan, and even in the West, where Buddhist teachings also continue to attract new followers. At present, we can speak about the Jains and Buddhists as full-fledged independent and institutionalized worldviews, but at the time of their emergence this was not necessarily the case. Even though the Buddha and Mahāvīra were not Brāhmins and did not uphold the orthodoxy in their own practice, their intent most likely was not to displace the Vedas entirely; they used the same concepts and re-interpreted them for the purposes of non-Brāhman spiritual seekers. These people of other castes who, accepting the doctrine of the *upanishads* that the goal of existence is to break free from the cycle of *samsāra*, relinquished their householder status and became wandering ascetics, were collectively called ‘strivers’ (*śramana*), and most of them came from the republics.

Jains. Apart from Buddhism, the only tradition that traces itself to these reform movements and is still alive is that of Jains. The word derives from *jina* ‘conqueror’, and refers to the effort of breaking out of the cycle of rebirths to achieve omniscience. The Jains uphold the principle of non-violence in the extreme, and this can be seen as their principal contribution to Indian thought as a whole.

The Jain religion is divided into two major branches called the Digambara and the Shvetambara. Apart from some differences in the teaching and their canons of scripture, the minority branch of Digambaras also distinguishes itself by radical forms of asceticism: male Digambara ascetics renounce the wearing of clothes and bathing, for fear that water might hurt some insects living on the body, whose life is also sacred. This has led to the formation of a prejudicial Hindu stereotype of Jains as filthy and indecent. The majority of Jains lead a lay life, however, perfectly able to unite their views and a normal social existence. Currently they make up about 0.4% of the population of India, and about one third of them live in the state of Mahārāshtra. Among all the religious groups of India, Jains are the most literate.

The ‘fordmakers’. We know the historical founder of the faith as **Vardhamāna Mahāvīra**, but neither of these names occurs in the earliest strata of Jain scripture. He was nonetheless a historical person and an older contemporary of the Buddha. Current research places his death around 425 BCE, although the Jain

tradition prefers a date about a hundred years earlier. His traditional biography is replete with legends, including an episode where he, as a foetus, was accidentally placed in the womb of a Brāhman woman and then miraculously transferred into a lady of the warrior caste. What we can assume, however, is that he was indeed born into a warrior clan, had an experience of religious awakening, performed austerities and achieved some sort of enlightenment, which he then preached to an increasing following.

The Jain tradition does not view him as its founder as it considers itself the uncreated reflection of everlasting universal history. According to the canon, Mahāvīra was only the 24th and last of the so-called ‘fordmakers’, teachers who help people to cross to the ‘other side’ and who appear now and again to re-establish the Jain faith. The first of these were cultural heroes, extraordinary in size and longevity, who taught people not only the correct teaching, but also brought to them fire, agriculture, writing, and social institutions such as marriage. All ford-makers followed the same pattern of warrior birth, austerities, and enlightenment. As the positive period of history was drawing to a close, the intervals between them became shorter and soon humanity is to enter the ‘downward’ cycle during which the true faith will be forgotten, until the wheel of history starts turning upward again and new fordmakers will appear.

Scriptures. The Jains claim for their own scriptural tradition the same kind of authority as the Vedas possess for orthodox Brahmanism – they are eternal truths, not created, but transmitted. However, the status of scriptures in the Jain tradition is quite different: they are sacred objects rather than material to be studied by the devout, and in some branches the reading of the scriptures is explicitly forbidden to lay people. Quite a few of these texts were only worshipped, not read, also by priests, who had even lost the ability to understand the script in which the texts they venerated had been written down. One text, the *Kalpasūtra*, is recited during an annual festival, but in a manner that makes it impossible to understand even if you know the language in which it is written (a middle Indian language supposedly spoken by gods in heaven). Different branches of the tradition also dispute the authenticity of each other’s texts. However, this reverential attitude to scriptures has also induced Jains to highly value literacy and to establish India’s oldest manuscript libraries. The attitude of Jains towards scripture is thus twofold: most of them do not know the contents of their holy books and have never read them, while they think of them with devout reverence.

Ideas: a realist cosmos and sticky karma. While the scriptural canon does not really serve as a source of information for the mostly directly transmitted Jain teachings, a text called ‘Scripture on the Meaning of the Real’ (*Tattvārthasūtra*) from around the fourth and fifth centuries CE, accepted as

correct by all branches of the tradition, sums them up neatly. However, later developments have added substantially to the doctrine, and scholars representing different branches of the Jain tradition continue to debate the teachings to this day.

The three central blocks of the Jain tradition are 'correct teaching', 'correct knowledge' and 'correct behaviour'. The word 'teaching', sometimes also translated as 'faith', is *darshana*, the same term that is used for the Hindu philosophical systems, and means a correct attitude to reality rather than blind faith, while 'knowledge' denotes argumentative reasoning, without which such an attitude would be insufficient.

The Jain view of reality is realistic and relatively commonsensical. It does not posit supernatural beings in control of the universe – while it recognizes Brahmanist gods, these are viewed not as powerful deities able to impose their will on the course of things, but rather as capable helpers of pious believers, who are themselves also subject to the same laws of causality that hold humans and other living beings in samsaric bondage. Their divine status is not eternal, but the result of accumulated good karma. When that will be used up, they will also revert to the cycle of rebirths. The same applies to those condemned to hells – after their bad karma is exhausted, they, too, are reborn somewhere else. The same view is also held by Buddhists.

The doctrine of karma is perhaps one of the most original features of Jain thought. Karma is considered to be a material substance that somehow sticks to the immaterial soul-monads and makes them suffer. There are several forms of it, with different colours. It is produced even by involuntary actions and can only be burned off by ascetic practice. The glue that attaches the material karma to immaterial souls is passion, especially hatred and desire, but it remains unclear how something immaterial can actually be united with something material. At one point, an idea was even developed that material objects could also accumulate karma – for example, an axe used for killing – but this was dropped by later Jain theorists.

The soul-monads themselves are eternal and similar to each other in their pristine state. It is karma that causes them to take up different material existences, during which they transform themselves so that they have the same size in their immaterial form as their material bodies have – thus, the souls of elephants and ants are essentially of the same size, but differ while they occupy these respective bodies. Immediately after the death of one body, the soul-monad enters another. Karma determines the kind of rebirth, its future life span and social status within its species, but it does not limit the actions of the individuals, who can improve their status by abstaining from bad deeds and performing good ones. The soul-monads continue to exist separately even after liberation, when they occupy the uppermost level of the universe, in eternal, perpetual bliss. However, there are also souls incapable of achieving this state, who will remain in the samsaric cycle forever.

This final liberation is distinguished from enlightenment, which can be attained by a person while still alive, although not at present, when the world is going through an era of decline. Enlightenment, for Jains, means omniscience – actual knowledge of all things present, past, and future. Mahāvīra is supposed to have reached this, and so are some of his followers, but a disciple of one of them was the last one to attain this level for the present world cycle. Omniscient teachers are able to live on and expound the doctrine for a period, but they do not generate new karma.

Jain ethics. As there are soul-monads everywhere and they are all essentially equal, causing suffering to any one of them is a grievous offence. This is why the Jains uphold the principle of *ahimsā*, or non-violence, which initially distinguished them most sharply from orthodox Brahmanism with its animal sacrifices.

ahimsā complete abstention from any kind of violence towards other living beings

In theory, the Jains also credit plants with consciousness and feelings (a story even tells of a greedy tree that wrapped its roots around a buried treasure chest), but the principle of *ahimsā* rather sensibly does not prohibit using them for food. The principle also includes passive transgressions, for example, not giving food to anyone who is starving is considered an act of violence. All Jains have to take a vow to uphold this principle, along with four other vows of speaking the truth (except in cases where this could lead to violence, such as telling hunters how to find their prey), not taking anything without permission, staying chaste, and not acquiring more possessions than needed. The last one also includes ‘internal possessions’, or passions and attachments. These vows had a stricter meaning for ascetics than laymen – for example, staying chaste meant complete celibacy for an ascetic, and appropriate sexual behaviour for the common people. The latter, however, had to take additional vows, such as only eating their own food after having fed the ascetics and not sending anyone else to a foreign country to conduct their business. At the end of their lives, laymen had to take one final vow of non-attachment to life and its pleasures, thus voluntarily accepting their death.

In practice, the principle of non-violence is upheld rigorously – not only do some ascetics renounce clothes or washing themselves, some lay people also prefer to wear veils so that their breathing would not harm any insects. *Ahimsā* is the major contribution of Jainism to Indian thought, as other Indian religions also took it in, albeit not so rigidly, and it was proclaimed by Mahātma Gandhi as one of the ethical principles of India’s struggle for independence.

Kundakunda. There is a rich tradition of Jain scholarship, but not much of it has had broader influence. However, one Jain thinker of later ages deserves special mention. It is **Kundakunda**, traditionally dated around the second or third century CE, while some scholars place him as late as 750 CE. He is the foundational figure of Jain mysticism who, in particular, reinterpreted the doctrine of omniscience as the full cognition of one's own soul.

Kundakunda disagrees with Jain orthodoxy on the subject of karma: according to him, nothing can actually modify the soul, only distort its point of view and delude it so that it forgets its own fundamentally omniscient nature. Everything else in the universe is provisional and ultimately worthless, including the upholding of Jain rituals and the observance of vows, unless this is done with the correct attitude of directing one's efforts towards one's soul. Later Jain thinkers have made efforts to accommodate this fairly subversive doctrine in mainstream thought, and quite possibly interpolations have been added to Kundakunda's works to reduce its impact. In any case, Kundakunda's 'two levels' view of the world echoes the developments in Buddhist philosophy around the third century CE, and some scholars even claim it might have been Kundakunda who initiated this train of thought, provided, of course, that his traditional dates are indeed correct.

Buddhism. One of the major world religions, Buddhism currently claims more than 500 million practitioners around the world, with an estimated 7 million in Western countries. However, although all the branches of Buddhism claim their descent from **Siddhārtha Gautama Shākyamuni**, its historical founder, it might be argued that it is more appropriate to characterize Buddhism as a family of worldviews, similarly to the 'people of the Book' that comprise Jews, Christians, and Muslims, who all share the narratives of the Old Testament and a number of doctrines from monotheism to the immortal soul. The differences between the pragmatic Theravāda, the devotionism of Japanese Pure Land schools, and the esoteric mysticism of Tibet are indeed quite comparable to what distinguishes Islam from Christianity, for example.

Buddhism originated in India during the period of reform movements and initially its goals were similar to other such movements. While the teaching of the historical Buddha did indeed reinterpret the key concepts of Brahmanist heritage and formulated quite a few radical innovations of its own, its initial purpose was most probably not to reject the tradition entirely, simply to broaden its horizon. Due to its success, however, in particular the support of the Mauryan monarch, Ashoka, Buddhism spread quickly and transformed from a community of spiritual 'strivers' into an institution capable of managing a mainstream worldview. This development naturally led to splits and divisions, the most important of which was the separation of two branches: **Theravāda**, the 'way of the elders' (also

derogatorily called *hīnayāna*, or ‘small vehicle’, by its critics), centred on the monastic community, and **Mahāyāna**, ‘the great vehicle’, which also acknowledged the capability of lay people to attain liberation. Both schools developed their own, rather sophisticated philosophies, which soon started to compete with the Brahmanist scholarship.

Ashoka is reported to have sent Buddhist missions to other countries during his time already, and in the first centuries CE the teachings indeed started to spread to neighbouring areas. Soon enough, Buddhism attained a strong position in China from where it spread to Korea and Japan, and later it also appeared in the kingdoms of South East Asia and Tibet. While Buddhism in India experienced a decline before and during the Muslim invasions, it still retained a strong spiritual presence in these other countries. However, as mentioned before, the different forms of Buddhism differ from each other considerably.

The historical Buddha. The founder of Buddhism – without doubt the single most influential thinker of the period of reform movements in India, and one of the greatest religious leaders of all times and places – was given the name **Siddhārtha** by his parents. He adopted the name of **Gautama** as a wandering ascetic, and also earned the sobriquet of **Shākyamuni** (‘the sage of the Shākya clan’), but most importantly he is the **Buddha** (‘the awakened one’) – initially the only one of his kind, but later literature treats him only as the latest in a long row of Buddhas. All Buddhist schools recognize his authority. However, not all of them consider him to be the most important of his kind.

The tradition places the death of the historical Buddha at 483 BCE (the Burmese and Thai favour even earlier dates), while recent scholarship favours a later date around 400 BCE. Legends would have him born as a prince and raised carefree in a magnificent palace, while actually his childhood home may have amounted to a station for changing horses at a crossroads. Nonetheless, his father belonged to the warrior caste and had the right to the title of *rājā*, which meant ‘king’ in a monarchy, but little more than a voting citizen in the republics. According to the legend, the young prince was taken on rides by his charioteer and encountered someone old, someone sick, and finally a corpse during these outings, which depressed him so that he decided to find a cure against these conditions. The latter half of his life probably corresponds more closely to what the tradition has been saying about him: he left his home and family, wandered around and studied with renowned ascetics, was dissatisfied with all of them, finally joined a group of independent *śramanas*, and, after a period of prolonged meditation, went through an enlightenment experience, which he then communicated to his fellow ‘strivers’. They acknowledged his superior achievement and became his first followers. He continued to roam around for another 45 years, acquiring more support, including that of local kings, until he finally died as the head of a successful

congregation. He was 80 years old and, just before his death, told his followers that no leader should take his place.

Scriptures. Like Socrates and Jesus, the historical Buddha did not write anything himself. According to the tradition, a meeting of Buddha's 500 disciples was convened some time after his passing, where they agreed on the contents of his teachings. Ānanda, one of those disciples, recited the teachings from his memory – this is why all Buddhist *sūtras* begin with the phrase 'Thus I have heard'. Another disciple recited the rules of conduct. These texts were accepted and memorized by everyone present, and, for a couple of centuries, the teaching survived in oral form. The teachings were finally written down in the first century BCE, in Sri Lanka, where the Theravāda branch has since established its base.

These texts were transmitted and written in Pāli, an artificial literary language based on the Middle Indian languages from the regions where the Buddha was active. It is still in use as the sacred language of the Theravāda branch of Buddhism, although the Mahāyāna adherents reverted to the use of Sanskrit. Throughout this book, Buddhist terms are normally given in their Sanskrit form, except for terms that are used mostly or only in Pāli.

Tripitaka (Sanskrit) or ***Tipitaka*** (Pāli) the early canon of Buddhist scripture, consisting of *sūtras* (sutta), or the Buddha's talks; *vināya*, or rules for monastic life; and *abhidharma* (abhidhamma), Buddhist metaphysics

The canonical Buddhist scriptures are collectively called ***Tripitaka***, or 'Three Baskets', one 'basket' comprising the talks (*sūtras*) of the Buddha, one for monastic rules (*vināya*), and one for metaphysical elaborations of the teaching (*abhidharma*), developed by some schools during the period between the Buddha's death and the fixation of the canon. Most scholars agree that nothing much was added to this Pāli canon by the Theravāda branch, which still abides by it. The Mahāyāna canon is quite different in content and is based on later scriptures, which were composed only in the first centuries CE. These have been preserved mostly in Chinese and Tibetan translations, but some fragmentary Sanskrit manuscripts have also survived.

In addition to canonical scriptures, early Buddhism has produced a significant amount of other literature. The ***jātakas***, or 'birth stories', which started to circulate around the fourth century BCE in Pāli, are instructional tales that tell about the meritorious deeds of the Buddha in his previous lives, in both human and animal form. As soon as doctrinal divisions started to emerge in the community, treatises arguing for specific points of view as well as commentaries of accepted canonical texts also appeared.

One of the most interesting texts of early Buddhism is *Milindapañhā*, or ‘The Questions of Menander’, written between 100 BCE and 200 CE, which records conversations between a Greek king ruling over a successor state of Alexander’s empire in north-western India, and the Buddhist monk Nāgasena. Menander is a historical person (coins with his portraits have been preserved) and he may indeed have had conversations with Buddhist monks, but otherwise there is no reason to believe that the dialogue is anything but fiction. It does, however, pose questions from within a rational frame of mind and the answers provided do not appeal to historical or transcendent authority, calmly, and reasonably arguing the points of Buddhist philosophy for an outsider.

Ideas: the Four Noble Truths. The core of the Buddhist teaching is summed up as the **Four Noble Truths**. The first of these is usually formulated as ‘everything is suffering’, but this translation is not entirely correct even though the word used indeed means ‘painful’ or ‘unpleasant’, it would be more correct to translate it as ‘unsatisfactory’, because it comprises both the pleasures and sufferings that life has to offer. The idea is that, while suffering is painful in itself, there is no real pleasure in whatever we enjoy as these things, too, will inevitably pass and sometimes we already feel this regret of passing when enjoying them. This is because all phenomena are impermanent and devoid of inherent self-nature. The second noble truth explains why this is the case: everything that exists comes about as a result of a strict causal nexus, starting with ignorance and ending with sickness and death. Buddhism has inherited from Brahmanism the idea of *samsāra*, or wandering through the cycle of rebirths, as it was simply regarded as common sense at the time, and one way to read the causal nexus is precisely as an explanation of the mechanism that leads a person to be reborn in another shape, in which sickness and death inevitably follow. However, the interim links between ignorance and death demonstrate the strong tendency of Buddhist teaching towards the psychological: we see how reality emerges from the point of view of the perceiver as the object of desire, something to be attached to, and these entanglements in turn cause the illusion of an independent selfhood.

While traditionally it has been held that the links of the chain describe the emergence of an individual over time, recent scholarship is inclined towards the view that the process of causation is constant, takes place at great speed and is a part of each of our acts of cognition. The view of reality as something not given to our perception as it is, but always already modified by our attitudes towards it, is a point that Buddhist philosophy has in common with Western post-structuralist and postmodern thinkers and indeed, in recent years, comparisons between them have started to appear.

anātman the Buddhist idea that the view of selfhood as self-reliant, independent, and enduring is false; empirical selfhood is grounded only in the temporary co-occurrence of various factors, such as body and consciousness, themselves also transient

The doctrine of ‘no-self’ (*anātman*) is one of the most original as well as the most disputed and differently interpreted tenets of Buddhist thought. A classic explanation of this view is to be found in *The Questions of Menander*: when the king asks Nāgasena what does he mean by saying that his name is just a conventional designation, but there is no real self that it points to, Nāgasena in turn asks whether the king arrived to the meeting on foot or in a chariot. As the latter was the case, Nāgasena proceeds to interrogate what this ‘chariot’ is, and they agree that it is neither the wheels, the basket nor the axles, nor would a heap where all these lie together be appropriately called ‘chariot’. What the word points to is the specific arrangement where all these relate to each other in a particular way. Similarly, Nāgasena says, the name ‘Nāgasena’ does not refer to a specific entity, but to the relationship of his body, his perceptions, his consciousness, etc., to each other so that a ‘person’ is seen to emerge, while that person has no reality of its own.

Not all early Buddhists were satisfied with such an explanation, and a school existed at least until the seventh century CE that stipulated the existence of a ‘person’. It was also difficult to reconcile this view with the received theory of rebirths, which Buddhist doctrine endorsed: if there is no self, how can a person then be reborn? One way to answer this question was that the subject of rebirths was precisely the illusory self that emerged as a result of the causal nexus grounded in ignorance, and the overcoming of this ignorance would also result in the dissolution of this illusion and, accordingly, liberation.

The Buddhist idea of liberation, **nirvāna**, or ‘extinction’ is the subject matter of the third noble truth. While the Jain and Brahmanist doctrines tell us how it transpires that the individual soul exits the cycle of rebirths, in the Buddhist view it simply ceases to constitute itself. However, *nirvāna* is described both as a state of bliss and as a state empty of all cognitions, including blissful ones. The question of whether *nirvāna* itself exists in some form or not is again a matter of debate between various Buddhist schools.

The fourth noble truth provides us with a practical instruction on how to proceed towards liberation. This is the truth of the ‘middle way’ – between the

enjoyment-oriented life of lay people and the ascetics such as Jains who subject themselves to all kinds of austerities, the Buddhist is expected not to opt for either extreme. This is because the austerities of the ascetic are similarly a matter of attachment, or perhaps competition about who is more austere and has therefore more merit, as are worldly desires. And it is this attitude of attachment that engenders the karma that binds one to samsaric existence.

The Four Noble Truths

- 1) The truth of pain: everything leads to pain, nothing in life provides satisfaction.
- 2) The truth of the origination of pain: everything we perceive is caused by desires causally grounded in ignorance.
- 3) The truth of the cessation of pain: it is possible to exit from the causal nexus and to cease to be determined by it, which is liberation.
- 4) The truth of the path to cessation: in order to achieve liberation, one should refrain from the two extremes of worldly pleasures and radical austerities, and follow the eight prescribed forms of behaviour.

Monks, all is burning. And what, monks, is the all that is burning? The eye is burning, forms are burning, eye-consciousness is burning, eye-contact is burning, and whatever feeling arises with eye-contact as condition – whether pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant – that too is burning. Burning with what? Burning with the fire of lust, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of delusion; burning with birth, aging, and death; with sorrow, lamentation, pain, displeasure, and despair, I say. ... Seeing thus, monks, the instructed noble disciple experiences revulsion towards the eye, towards forms, towards eye consciousness, towards eye-contact, towards whatever feeling arises with eye-contact as condition—whether pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant; experiences revulsion towards the ear ... towards the mind ... towards whatever feeling arises with mind-contact as condition ... Experiencing revulsion, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion [his mind] is liberated. When it is liberated there comes the knowledge: 'It's liberated.' He understands: 'Destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being'.

(*Ādittapariyāya Sutta*, adapted from the translation by Bhikkhu Bodhi)

Buddhist ethics. As a practical code of behaviour, the ‘middle way’ is spelled out as the ‘eightfold path’ of right views and correct behaviour. Just as most other ethical codes around the world, the eightfold path prescribes ‘right speech’, that is, not lying or gossiping as well as ‘right behaviour’, or abstention from violence, theft, and sexual misconduct. ‘Right livelihood’ refers to not possessing more than one actually needs. What is notable about Buddhist ethics, however, is the attention it pays to the psychological: the wishes to commit evil or licentious acts amount to little less than the actual performance of these acts, because the mind of the person is obsessed by the attachments and a certain amount of harmful karma is already generated. Four of the eight prescriptions of the path therefore deal with the states of mind: ‘right views’ are those of the Buddhist doctrine, ‘right resolve’ means the renunciation of pleasures for their own sake, ‘right effort’ means constantly staying on guard against a relapse into sensuality and ‘right mindfulness’ entails one being constantly conscious about one’s situation. The eighth prescription is that of ‘right meditation’, or psychotechnical exercises aiming at the realization of the doctrine of no-self not simply rationally, but with one’s whole being, which is the prerequisite of liberation.

Clearly, the ‘eightfold path’ was initially meant as a code of conduct for spiritual professionals who, without yielding to the temptation of showing off with austerities, also renounced worldly life and dedicated themselves full-time to the pursuit of liberation. However, it was soon reworked into a set of rules that could also apply to lay people who were able to abide by them simply through detaching themselves from the worldly environment in which they continued to live and work. This was a necessary prerequisite for Buddhism to become a lay worldview and notably for the emergence of Mahāyāna schools.

One item of controversy between various Buddhist schools was the concept of ‘merit’. Some Buddhists said that pious deeds, which exceeded what could be expected from a normal person, would gain them merit able to wipe out negative karma. This idea was capitalized on by the community who used it for getting material support from lay believers led to believe they could improve their own position in this way. Others, however, opposed the idea and claimed it led to the formation of attachment to oneself and the idea of performance, which would relate to spiritual progress roughly in the same way as anorexia to losing excess weight. Nonetheless, giving alms and supporting the community was not discouraged and the critique applied only to the egoistic reasons for doing so.

The early community. Buddha, the doctrine and the community are collectively known as the ‘three jewels’ of Buddhism and a later code of conduct specifies causing a split of the community as one of the five ‘heinous crimes’ along with the intentional killing of one’s parents or shedding the blood of the Buddha. Such

crimes made it impossible for their perpetrator to attain any spiritual progress in the next lifetime.

This does not mean that the community would have stayed unitary for a long time. Monks normally wandered around during the dry season and for the rainy season they gathered to special places, such as groves donated by wealthy supporters. There they discussed and meditated together. These locations later developed into full-fledged monasteries active throughout the year. The word, *sangha*, used for the Buddhist community is the same that was used for the early Indian republics, and as the Buddha had not appointed a successor, indeed, had explicitly forbidden anyone to pose as such, we may imagine that the atmosphere of those places was fairly liberal and nobody was stigmatized for voicing differing opinions in the framework of the accepted. As the number of such places grew, they started to differ from each other both in their interpretation of the teaching and by the rules of common life. The latter caused the first splits, as some monks were more eager to regulate the behaviour of community members than others. Nonetheless it was customary even for monks representing different schools of teaching to live together in the same community and to argue with each other. It is therefore proper to use the word 'school' for these subdivisions of Buddhist thought and not 'sect', because they had none of the sectarian mentality of proclaiming one's own truth to be superior to that of all other co-believers. Unlike the Western monastic orders, then, these communities were perhaps more similar to academic faculties, where different trends in a field may well be represented within one department, but sometimes a department is composed of like-minded people.

Abhidharma. During the last centuries BCE, the discussions in various Buddhist communities took a decisively philosophical turn and a number of writings emerged that expounded the metaphysical and psychological foundations of Buddhist thought in a more systematic manner. These texts are collectively known as *abhidharma* and form the content of the third 'basket' of the Pāli canon. The prefix *abhi-* can have the meanings of 'taking possession of' or 'exceeding, surpassing' and applied to *dharma*, in this case 'teaching', it means both summing up and going beyond its surface message, similarly as 'metaphysics' means going beyond the science of things in nature. The goal of *abhidharma* thinkers was to systematize the ontological and epistemological premises on which the Buddhist message relies; the result is a very detailed and rather scholastic taxonomy of types of consciousness, minimal existents and so on.

Abhidharmic theory was not accepted uncritically. The most influential school of Buddhism it engendered is called Sarvāstivāda (literally, 'the theory that everything exists'), which credited all the minimal carriers of existence, including the past and future ones, with a certain ontological status. Otherwise, the

Sarvāstivādins argued, it would be impossible for them to participate in causal chains. Although the present reality is available to us in our perceptions, it is nothing more than a slice of a longer process, similarly as the picture on the screen of a cinema is the derivate of the film stored on some material medium. For others, this view implied too much reification. Another school, claiming to go back to the *sūtras* (hence Sautrāntika) rejected the reality of the past and the future dharmas and claimed that only what exists in the dimensionless present moment can be called really existing. In due course, this controversy led to the elaboration of the Mahāyāna doctrine of ‘emptiness’ as the characteristic of all forms of being, present included.

Politics. Although the Buddha himself came from a republic and called his community after this form of government, his teaching had more success in the monarchies, where it was able to enlist royal support. A major victory for Buddhism was the conversion of **Ashoka** (c. 268–c. 232 BCE), the third and most successful of the Maurya rulers. Devastated after a decisive battle (which he won), Ashoka sought spiritual comfort with a Buddhist monk and subsequently embraced the faith wholeheartedly, sponsoring, among other things, its first missions abroad. Ashoka has also left inscriptions all over India, which command his subjects to follow the ‘teaching’ or *dharma*, even though it is not precisely Buddhism that is meant, but simply any just and unaggressive lifestyle. Moreover, he presented an example of what someone who rules by the *dharma* should look like, by building roads, financing hospitals for both people and animals, and even providing short-term financial help to people recently released from prison so that they would be able to restart their lives.

Relations with such worldly rulers compelled Buddhism to devise a political discourse of its own, because the Brahmanist view that kings were legitimate by divine sanction was not compatible with its teachings. With their republican origins, Buddhists stressed that the legendary first kings of India were chosen as a result of social contract, and in order to have the legitimacy to rule, the monarch must behave like one who indeed bears the responsibility for those governed by him. Such a person merits the title of *dharmarājā*, ‘ruler by teaching’, or *cakravartin*, ‘the one who sets the wheel in motion’, and who conquers by peace and wisdom rather than military power. Sometimes translated as ‘universal monarch’, the term *cakravartin* indeed implies the right of such a king to govern the entire world because of his merit. Both the Hindu and Jain traditions have also adopted the term, but without the Buddhist ideas of leadership associated with it.

New developments. During the centuries after Buddhism’s successful spread over India, several new developments took place. First of all, while Buddhism had initially constituted itself as a worldview for people who would withdraw

from normal social life into communities of monks and nuns, this was soon no longer an option, as it was counterproductive for the maintenance of social life at large. A Buddhist lifestyle had to be devised for those who did not want to leave their homes and dedicate themselves to religious practice full-time. The growth of a supportive Buddhist laity also had a favourable effect on the development of monasteries, where monks could now dedicate themselves to meditation, discussion, and the study of scriptures without having to worry about their livelihood.

At the same time, the philosophical debates and controversies propelled Buddhist thinkers to develop increasingly more advanced theories and arguments in defence of their particular schools. For many, the scholasticism of *abhidharma* scholarship was not simply dry and unsatisfying, it also expressed a certain kind of attachment to the activity of conceptualization itself. The new theories that appeared posed themselves as radical critiques of such doctrines, and the conceptual apparatus they devised managed to revolutionize Buddhist thought for centuries to come.

The new developments in Buddhism thus paradoxically contained two contradictory tendencies – towards higher degrees of intellectual sophistication and away from it. At the same time when the Buddha was elevated to a transcendent object of worship and an emerging cult of ahistorical sacred characters provided the laity with more conventional channels of religious activity, the philosophical base of Buddhist thought reached new and unprecedented heights in such figures as Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250) and Vasubandhu (fourth–fifth centuries).

The rise of Mahāyāna. The seeds of the ideas we now call Mahāyāna probably began to ferment in Buddhist communities approximately around 100 BCE. At first, they did not entail an institutional split and supporters of the new trend lived together with their conservative colleagues in monasteries all over India. Some critics of the received tradition also downplayed the significance of the historical Buddha, placing him in a long line of Buddhas who had taught the world before him, mentioning also the next Buddha, who is currently waiting in a celestial abode for the time when it is appropriate for him to be reborn on Earth. Becoming a Buddha was thus no longer a singular feat, but something that, in theory, each follower of the teaching could expect to accomplish.

For a time, it remained possible to accept some of these innovations and reject others. However, when the new ideas began to be formulated in scriptural texts that claimed *sūtra*-level authority, things became more difficult. Soon enough the ideological division became rather heated. Some Mahāyāna texts started to explicitly criticize the older schools of Buddhism and to claim that their doctrine was inferior, or only a preparatory step for the higher message that they themselves claimed to possess. Yet a clear-cut split never occurred in India, though Mahāyāna

had more success in its missions abroad, particularly in China. In the meantime, Theravāda continued to dominate in Sri Lanka and its missionaries finally managed to convert South East Asians, who had also embraced Mahāyāna, back to its doctrines.

Scriptures. The ideas of Mahāyāna first appeared in a group of texts which bore the generic title of *sūtra* and also followed the same pattern as the Pāli *sūtras* did, starting with ‘thus I have heard’ and going on to report a dialogue between the historical Buddha and one of his disciples. However, Mahāyāna *sūtras* sometimes contain episodes of magic and miracles and refer to the participation of supernatural beings in the assembly. They are not written in Pāli, but in Sanskrit, although not the highly sophisticated literary form of it, but a ‘hybrid Sanskrit’ mixed with colloquialisms and irregular use of grammar. Mahāyāna *sūtras* continued to be produced until the seventh century CE, but the most important among them come from the first centuries CE.

The anonymous authors of these *sūtras* used different tactics to bolster their authority. One way was to base them on revelations that they had in their sleep, another widespread claim was that the historical Buddha had indeed preached these texts, but their content was too advanced for the time and therefore the texts had been hidden until the people capable of understanding them appeared.

upāya (‘skilful means’) teachings and practices which, in reality, were untrue or empty of meaning, but were adopted as beneficial for people who were unable to grasp the truth of Mahāyāna Buddhism without preparation

This reflected a doctrine that helped to reconcile the two mutually opposing tendencies within Mahāyāna thought – namely the idea of ‘skilful means’. It was believed already in traditional schools that the historical Buddha was able to adjust his teaching precisely to the level of understanding of his listeners, so that they got the maximum out of it, while he never overwhelmed them with content they could not grasp. This view was now developed to include untrue, but beneficial teachings (something like Santa Claus, who induces children to behave correctly): certain parts of the established scripture could prove to be false when read on a higher level of interpretation, but nonetheless necessary as they helped the followers with a lower level of understanding to advance. This was obviously not something that the traditionalists were eager to accept.

Possibly the most influential Mahāyāna scripture is the **Lotus Sūtra** (*Saddharma-pundarika-sūtra*), which, among other things, explains this doctrine in detail. Most likely the text was initially written in verse, and prose renderings of the content were added later. It is a polemical text, which champions the superiority of Mahāyāna

teachings over traditionalist ones and provides a number of parables to illustrate this thesis. Philosophically, it proclaims the important message that all living beings have the capacity to become Buddhas. Another important group of Mahāyāna scriptures is the *Perfection of Wisdom (prajñāpāramitā) sūtras*, of which there are a large number, ranging from the 100000-verse long exposition to the *Diamond-Cutting Sūtra (Vajracchedika-sūtra)* of a few hundred lines and the **Heart Sūtra (Hridaya-sūtra)** of a few hundred words. The latter, which expounds the doctrine of emptiness in a condensed form, is often used in liturgy.

One *sūtra*, which deserves special mention even though its canonical status is not quite clear even in Mahāyāna circles, is the **Vimalakīrti Sūtra**, which tells the story of a householder who manages to best all the members of the Buddha's retinue in debate (arguing for a number of subtle philosophical points in the process) and also presents the example of the ideal lifestyle. Such texts offered a discourse in which wealthy supporters of Buddhism were provided a more respectable paradigm of self-identification than merely the role of lay worshippers of relics and images.

Ideas: compassion and wisdom combined. The tendency to accommodate the lay world was also seen in the launching of a new ideal spiritual path for the follower. The **bodhisattva**, 'enlightened being', was what the Mahāyāna adherent expected to become – not someone who had actually attained liberation and exited from *samsāra*, but someone who had indeed reached this level, but given up its perks for the benefit of all other beings still entrapped. The *bodhisattva* was thus opposed to the **arhat**, a word initially denoting the disciples of the historical Buddha, but later the career model of traditionalist Buddhist schools – a person now allegedly selfish and caring only about their own liberation. This ideological thesis had no real ground in the reality of earlier teachings, as *arhats* were supposed to achieve their understanding of no-self through empathy with all others.

bodhisattva the Mahāyāna ideal of a being who has attained enlightenment, but forsaken entry to *nirvāna* in order to help other beings still entrapped in the cycle of rebirths

arhat the alleged ideal of traditional Buddhism striving only for one's own liberation

Even so, it is in the Mahāyāna that compassion (**karunā**) is elevated to one of the two distinguishing marks of the *bodhisattva* ideal. The other one is 'perfect wisdom' (**prajñā**), or a correct understanding of how the world works. Here,

Mahāyāna thinkers made a huge leap. While traditional Buddhist doctrine taught only the absence of personal selfhood, but credited the external world with an indisputable existence (which does not contradict the transience or finality of all things), Mahāyāna philosophy asserts that ‘emptiness’ (*shūnyatā*), the absence of an internal self-nature, is the characteristic of all existence. What exactly was meant by this claim was a subject of much controversy. In general, Mahāyāna thinkers agreed that the principal problem was our inadequate perception of the world that we think we inhabit – desires, attachments, and traces of past actions coloured our perception of it to a degree that made it impossible to see it for what it was. However, there were some who denied the self-same existence of the outside world completely, while others admitted of a self-identical outside reality, only contesting our ability to cognize its constant evanescent flux and to say anything tenable about it. This led to philosophical debates of extreme sophistication.

***shūnyatā* (emptiness)** the primary characteristic of existence in Mahāyāna thought, the absence of self-nature of any existent, not just the perceiving subject

***karunā* (compassion)** ‘compassion’, the extension of all protective feelings one has about oneself to all other sentient beings

***prajñā* (perfect wisdom)** the in-depth comprehension of the empty nature of all reality

One way to describe emptiness was to point out that any actual thing was always composed of parts and materials, as were these in turn, so that all things were interdependent and similar precisely in their lack of self-sustaining identity. In this way a level of primary, enduring, self-sufficient substantiality can never be reached. The Buddhists started to use the word *dharma* not only for their teaching and the morality it implied, but also in its literal sense of ‘carrier’, in this case, of existence. Dharmas are neither material nor ideal. Their existence, as the ‘perfection of wisdom’ *sūtras* tell us, is dimensionless – they neither come into existence nor fade out of it, as this would imply a temporality. We can assume that each dharma is a flash, or perhaps something akin to how the foundation of being is described in quantum physics, which, in fact, has prompted comparisons between Buddhist philosophy and contemporary science. However, even though the dharmas literally mean ‘carriers’, they are not vehicles for loads or charges that can be thought separately from these charges themselves. And just like physics describes different substances by specifying the ‘emptiness’ separating the minimal particles of being in atomic structures – and not essential differences between the

particles themselves – the Mahāyāna ontology similarly rejects the *abhidharma* qualification of dharmas and posits the emergence of different things through the emptiness that constitutes them. This resembles how coal and diamonds consist of the same kind of atoms and the difference comes about only through how these atoms relate to each other, that is, of how much emptiness there is between them.

A lived and transformative experience of such understanding is ‘perfect wisdom’ and its attainment enables the *bodhisattva* to see reality as it really is. Because *nirvāna* has become an egoistic goal to pursue, this experience of enlightenment replaces it in the Mahāyāna paradigm as the aim towards which the followers should strive. But the Mahāyāna *sūtras* go even further: because the exit from the cycle of rebirths has been identified as a trap for the egoist, it is now assumed that there is no *nirvāna* apart from *samsāra* – the difference between the two is simply that of one’s attitude towards reality. Similarly, it is not necessary to posit physically existing hells or paradises – these, too, are nothing else than states of the perceiving mind.

Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250). Possibly the greatest Indian Mahāyāna thinker is **Nāgārjuna**, although nothing reliable is known about his life. Technically he is the founder of the Madhyamaka school, but his authority extends far beyond its borders. Historically, however, his legacy was overshadowed by other schools for nearly five centuries, during which the competing school of Yogācāra gradually gained prominence. A revival of his thought took place in the sixth and seventh centuries, when contradictory interpretations of his thought caused the school founded by him to split into two separate branches, both of which produced substantial literature to underpin their respective positions.

Nāgārjuna’s main work, *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way* (*Mūlamadhyamakārikā*) is a verse treatise that scrupulously analyses, in 27 chapters, all phenomena for the logical possibility of their having an independent and enduring nature. He finds none. However, this does not mean he espouses a doctrine of philosophical nihilism – on the contrary, nihilism is ruled out just as naive realism is, which is why he calls his philosophy the ‘middle way’ between these two extremes.

Nāgārjuna’s real target is not the nature of reality at all, but our views of it. In separate chapters of the treatise, he deconstructs causation, motion, senses, time, desires, compound phenomena, and so on, in other words, all ideas, which could theoretically be employed for the development of a discourse explaining how the world ultimately and self-reliantly is. His method is nonetheless not to judge these discourses by a constant standard he proposes himself – as this would again imply unwarranted reification – but to show that all of them,

taken on their own premises, inevitably lead to conclusions that their proponents should be unable to accept.

Emptiness is thus primarily the lack of substantiality in anything that we can think or say about reality, which is why substantializing claims about it are all necessarily misleading. What Nāgārjuna proposes instead is a two-tiered view of truth: the ‘ultimate’ truth about how things really are cannot be articulated, but this does not disqualify the ‘shared’ truth of statements we can make about our lifeworld. From the fact that nothing is essentially, independently, and unconditionally a ‘chair’ and that ‘flying’ cannot be described without reference to things engaged in this kind of motion, it does not follow that it would be wrong to say that chairs cannot fly.

The view that truth has two levels actually goes back to earlier *abhidharma* scholarship, where it was used to reconcile apparent contradictions between different statements in the talks of the historical Buddha, and later conceptualized as a difference between the truthfulness of empirically verifiable and speculative statements. Nāgārjuna has developed this into an intellectual tool to reconcile the logical emptiness of essentialist statements about reality and the ‘truth–false’ distinction of simple sentences about situations we encounter in the world. On this view, ‘shared’ truths are not inferior to ‘ultimate’ ones, but just the expressions of a different perspective, just as we can speak of a glass of ‘still water’ even though we know that vigorous Brownian motion is actually taking place in it. Conveniently, this view also bolsters the doctrine of ‘skilful means’ – even as we know that a certain moralistic story, for example, is not strictly true in the referential sense of the word, the moral truth contained in it can absolve its falsity.

After their dissemination, Nāgārjuna’s ideas became a topic of much debate and acquired an authority for a significant part of all Mahāyāna thought. Prominent Buddhist schools, including, for example, East Asian Chan/Zen and the Geluk-pa of Tibet, claim him as one of their predecessors and, in more recent times, his thought has been compared to such Western philosophers as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida.

Yogācāra. The other dominant Mahāyāna philosophical school is Yogācāra ‘yoga practice’, also known by other names such as ‘consciousness-only’ or ‘impressions-only’, because its doctrine denies the reality of material objects. It arose in the fourth century largely due to the work of Asanga and **Vasubandhu**, two Brāhman-born half-brothers. In his youth, Vasubandhu studied traditional *abhidharma* and, in fact, one of the most reliable summaries of *abhidharma* philosophy is written by him (though some scholars believe it is by a different author with the same name). The connection to this tradition is also visible in his Yogācāra

treatises, which carefully deal with arguments traditionalist thinkers might pose against his views.

Yogācāra takes as its starting point the position according to which we do not have direct cognitions of outside reality, only distorted mental impressions of it. To this view, Vasubandhu applies ‘the principle of lightness’, the Indian equivalent of Occam’s razor, which states that if there are two theories of anything with equal explanatory power, one should opt for the ‘lighter’ one, which posits less about what is. The rationale behind this theory is that when we approach reality with our minds capable of distorting it, ‘heavier’ theories probably distort more. Accordingly, if mental impressions are the only thing accessible to us, the stipulation that there have to exist material objects that cause them is superfluous heaviness and should be rejected.

However, it would be a mistake to assume, as it is sometimes done, that Yogācāra denies the existence of anything external to the perceptive and self-conscious mind. What is negated is the reality of stable, continuous, self-same material objects that make up the world – these are believed to come into the existence that they exhibit only in contact with a perceiving consciousness to which their existence is exhibited. We know that physically, sounds exist only when there is an ear receiving them – the same applies, according to Yogācāra, to any phenomenon we believe to exist. Yogācāra does, however, admit the reality of ‘constant becoming’, which is what the enlightened being will have access to in the course of the disintegration of its own illusionary stability. The ‘grasper’ and the (stable) ‘grasped’ are interdependent – when one is gone, then so is the other. Therefore, we should also reject the idea that our desires are caused by something else than our own minds.

As a description of such internal contamination, Yogācāra proposes a reinterpreted earlier term, ‘perfuming’, which expresses a particular type of causation. When we normally think of the relationship of causes and effects as that between a pushing hand and a moving cart, or a seed maturing into a plant, Yogācāra proposes an indirect form of causality akin to the fragrance of perfume (or the stink of tobacco smoke) sticking to your clothes when you spend a lot of time in a room filled with it. The perfume or the smoke are not specifically directed towards your clothes, nor do they have to exist earlier in time, and two entities may also mutually ‘perfume’ each other. In the Yogācāra view, sense data and the effects of karma, stored in the consciousness of the individual, perfume each other and thereby bring karmic effects to maturation, creating deluded desires and producing new contaminating karma in the process.

To explain how this works, Yogācāra proposes a new view of the structure of the mind, in which there exist not six consciousnesses (Indian theory normally adds the cognition of mental objects to the five senses), but eight: there is also a seventh ‘self-consciousness’, which unites the activities of all others into a whole that it

Vasubandhu skilfully answers his imaginary opponents' critique, even though some of his arguments might not sound as convincing to us as they may have seemed to his contemporaries. For example, he discusses the ontological status of the demons who torture beings in hell. If these would be real beings themselves, they would have to be sent to hell for their own karma to suffer, but this is clearly not the case, as they thoroughly enjoy torturing others. It is therefore more likely that the denizens of hell only imagine what is happening to them. But if that is true, why should we also not be imagining what is happening to us? Vasubandhu does not, however, draw the consequence of solipsism from this, as he does not believe in the existence of a self. He therefore concedes the existence of separate individual consciousness bundles, which are able to interact and produce impressions for each other, or even terminate each other (which would correspond to what we normally call killing). At this point, however, his theory actually becomes heavier than expected, because it needs to account for the structure of the karmic laws that produce these sense impressions, bearing in mind that the origin of these may be in consciousnesses that have since ceased.

believes to be real and continuous. This is the source of our delusions. Finally, there is the eighth, or 'store consciousness' in which karmic seeds are stored and germinate into the impressions we believe to deliver reality to us. This concept has been sometimes compared to the Freudian and Jungian unconscious, which also stores impressions of past experience and transforms them into impulses that influence present behaviour. In both Yogācāra and psychoanalysis, this process is subject to natural, mind-independent laws.

According to Yogācāra, an enlightened being experiences the 'reversal' of the store-consciousness so that it is freed from karmic seeds and only reflects 'thusness' or 'constant becoming'. The mind is thus not the locus of whatever might be considered ultimately real, but the obstacle that an individual has to overcome in order to attain liberation.

Buddha-nature. One of the new notions Mahāyāna thought introduced to Buddhist doctrines is the idea of **Buddha-nature**. This concept evolved from two separate ideas. On the one hand, the extension of the capacity to attain liberation from monks to all humans naturally led to its further broadening to all living beings. The practice of the 'eightfold path', on this view, only led to liberation because beings already possessed an innate potential for it. On the other hand, theories of mind had started to analyse the mechanism of rebirths in more detail. Abhidharmic scholars had already posited the existence of a deep-level conscious flow that ensures the continuity of the individual even while in coma or deep

sleep. It was concluded that it is this flow that continues after death and ensures rebirth. The Yogācāra idea of ‘store consciousness’ assumed a similar, if not more efficient function, as it was the repository of karmic effects.

Soon enough, these two ideas conflated into a core potential to evolve, something that all living beings have. This capacity came to be called Buddha-nature. It is stored in the foundation of our mental structures and ensures our ability to evolve spiritually, whatever the circumstances of our birth. Most schools believe that each individual is endowed with it, but there are exceptions. Notably Yogācāra assumes that there is a class of individuals who do not possess Buddha-nature and are thus unable to become enlightened, ever, no matter what happens. Some Mahāyāna scriptures, admitting that such persons exist, nonetheless state that they can be saved by the Buddha, who can transfer his own merit to them and emancipate them from this position.

Buddhist logic. The debates between various philosophical positions raised a practical need to be able to articulate one’s views and arguments coherently and rationally. Soon enough, Buddhist monasteries included Hindu treatises on logic in their curricula for the monks to learn this art from. However, Hindu logic relied on an ontology that was quite incompatible with Buddhist thought. A theory of Buddhist logic emerged in due course, which was able to resolve the paradox between the limited nature of language, its inability to express the final truth about things, and the need to derive correct and acceptable arguments from theses about how things stand.

The system of logic was first developed by **Dignāga** (480?–540?) and brought to perfection by his commentator **Dharmakīrti** (sixth–seventh century). In order to overcome the gap between our inability to say anything final about the world and the need to speak about it coherently, Dignāga suggested an ingenious device called *apoha*, or ‘exclusion’. It is true, Dignāga concedes, that we cannot claim that our words refer to the things they designate in their totality. ‘Apple’ does not translate into the complete and exhaustive list of all the properties a particular apple has, as this list is ineffable and keeps changing constantly. Moreover, all the properties on that list cannot be defined unambiguously either. So when we point to an object on the table and say ‘*this* is an apple’, we are overstepping our bounds in the strictly logical sense, as ‘apple’ cannot completely describe ‘*this*’. What we can do, however, is to say ‘*this* is not a non-apple’. This is because a ‘non-apple’ only refers to something that does not have all the properties on the complete and exhaustive list. Dignāga’s point becomes more understandable, perhaps, when we apply it to an abstract concept such as ‘justice’. It is impossible to define ‘justice’ in a way that all people would accept and that would help us to judge all past, present, and future cases unambiguously. However, there would be any number of cases in which people with different views of justice might agree that justice has not been

served. Buddhist logic has thus developed a discourse of argumentation that makes much weaker claims about reality and is in accord with its ontological commitment to the transient and empty nature of all things. On this basis, further sophisticated theories of logical modelling were elaborated and put to practical use in scholarly debate.

Mahāyāna ethics. Traditionalist Buddhist ethics of the ‘middle path’ had been based on the assumption that by gaining control of one’s consciousness it is possible to extricate oneself from the entanglements of desires and hatreds and, consequently, to attain the state of mind necessary for exiting the *samsāra*. This option now left behind, Mahāyāna thinkers had to solve the difficult task of how to reconcile the idea of ultimate emptiness with the need for regulated behaviour. After all, if everything is ultimately empty and devoid of substantial foundation, what is the basis on which good and evil could be distinguished at all? More importantly, what would be the benefits of abiding by moral precepts, when there is no self and nothing ultimately real with respect to which one could restrain oneself? This question appears now and again and is indeed a difficult one with which many Buddhist thinkers have had to wrestle, providing different answers.

A mechanistic and somewhat circular answer is extracted from the definition of the *bodhisattva* itself. Compassion for all living beings is one of the two principal aspects of the ideal, so consequently it is also impossible for anyone practising (or striving towards) this ideal to do anything harming other living beings. But this has been countered by the idea that violent and apparently harmful ‘shock therapy’ can indeed be more beneficial to those beings than treating them in the frames of traditional morality. The Tibetans have even devised the idea of ‘merciful killing’, without hatred, to prevent someone from committing harmful acts, and indeed, an evil king was killed by a Buddhist monk for this very reason. However, if this view were adopted as a general principle and people allowed to commit seemingly evil deeds allegedly out of compassion for other living beings, havoc would surely result.

A more productive approach is suggested by the *Vimalakīrti sūtra*, which turns the question around: it is precisely the baselessness of ethical acts that makes them ethical. A *bodhisattva* upholds precepts and performs good acts while knowing that the goodness of those acts is based on a deluded understanding of reality – but this is why these acts are good, and not self-serving behaviour oriented towards rewards or escape from punishment. Thus the Mahāyāna considers blindly followed moral discipline and exercise useful on the ‘skilful means’ level and not grounded in objective reality, while the genuinely ethical person practises virtues without an external reason for doing so.

Mahāyāna practice. The new developments also led to many innovations in the practice of worship. First of all was the appearance of a multitude of

bodhisattvas and Buddhas other than the historical Shākyamuni. Their number grew very quickly into a veritable pantheon and came to resemble the European medieval cult of saints, with the difference that the Mahāyāna version was not based on historical persons or connected to particular places. Nonetheless we may assume that quite a few pre-Buddhist local practices found their way into these new forms of worship, and very likely Mahāyāna and emergent Hindu practices mutually influenced each other. The *bodhisattvas* and new Buddhas also started to make regular appearances in believers' dreams, thus providing further ground for religious innovation.

Ritualistic worship of sacred figures loosely organized into a complicated hierarchy thus became a characteristic of Buddhism that it had not previously had. The discourse for the legitimization of such practices was grounded in the ability of the Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* to transfer the merit they had acquired to people who needed it to emancipate from their current situation and embrace more serious practice. As compassion was one of the two key attributes of *bodhisattvas*, they would not deny a fellow living being this, and worship at temples became a way to attract their attention as well as establish a channel of communication needed for such transfer. This coincided with the development of Buddhist art. The code of monastic conduct in the Pāli canon initially forbade the depiction of the Buddha or the use of human figures in religious practice, but Mahāyāna abandoned this requirement and Theravāda soon followed suit. Already starting with the first century CE, Buddhist sculpture began to develop, first under the influence of the realist Greek aesthetic still influential in the north-west of India, and later exhibiting its own characteristic styles.

Monasteries. The intellectual efforts of Buddhist thinkers depended strongly on such institutional support that the early community would have been unable to provide. Buddhist monasteries gradually developed into centres of learning, with huge libraries, lectures, and debates constantly going on. During the emergence of Mahāyāna, the number of monasteries also increased quickly, and it is believed that between 100 BCE and 200 CE, approximately 1000 monasteries were built. Some of these appeared on particularly significant sites, such as the birthplace of the historical Buddha, the place of his enlightenment, and so on, others appeared near prosperous towns on the crossings of trade routes. Some monasteries were even built into caves that provided relief during the hot season. A proper monastery included living quarters for monks and nuns, while a lesser temple might be built just adjoining to a *stūpa*, a pillar initially built for containing relics, but later simply as an architectural element. Gradually, monasteries split into Theravāda and Mahāyāna centres, with the latter housing (as well as producing) many images and objects of veneration, while the former were more austere.

Probably the greatest Buddhist monastery was Nālandā in the north-east of India. Some sources claim that it had a longer history, was possibly founded by

king Ashoka, and many celebrated Buddhist thinkers taught there, including, for example, Nāgārjuna, but its credible history started with the royal patronage of the monastery in the fifth century CE. Subsequent kings sponsored new buildings and the monastery attracted more and more talent, soon becoming the major centre of learning, where pilgrims from as far as China, Korea, and Tibet chose to study. The example of Nālandā inspired other rulers to set up competing centres of their own, all of which contributed to the flourishing of Buddhist scholarship until the Islamic conquest, when many of the monasteries were destroyed and monks either killed or forcibly returned to lay life.

The Development of Hinduism

Background. The present form of the religion that started out as Brahmanism is commonly called Hinduism, and it is clearly distinct from its previous stages of development. However, it would be a mistake to assume that there exists a systematically ordered orthodoxy, coherent in all details, that all Hindus share. Like all great religions, Hinduism is diverse, and the word serves as a vague label for a variety of traditions with a common core rather than a designation of one clear-cut worldview. It is also futile to look for full systematicity in any one version of it, because each particular, lived form of Hinduism also acknowledges certain narratives possibly at odds with it, and individual practitioners may also have diverging opinions about them. Believing in one's own version of the truth still does not make the Hindu think of those who believe otherwise as heretics, but merely as people who similarly believe in their own version of the truth. This, of course, concerns only the members of the broader community, and Hindu zealots can be very aggressive towards the representatives of other religions, particularly Islam, with which it has a long-standing and politically coloured feud.

Perhaps we might define the end of Brahmanism and the starting point of Hinduism as the shift of focus away from sacrifice. Even though rituals of sacrifice exist to this day and the Hindu tradition mentions it commendably in many of its scriptures, the actual attitude towards animals gradually started to change and accordingly modified the mechanics of how the relations worked between this world and the higher one. The *Mānava-dharmashāstra* includes passages which discourage Brāhmans from eating beef, but on the whole this seems to apply only to such meat that has not been offered in sacrifice. But the Hindu scripture of *Bhagavata-purāna* already explicitly forbids animal sacrifice, saying that it is not allowed in the present 'dark age' of history. This may have occurred under the influence of the Jain tradition and its stress on total abstention from violence. Gradually, the idea of 'sacred cows' started to emerge. At some unidentifiable point in time cows started to be associated with feminine divinity and fertility, the idea of the mother goddess, and were thus not to be harmed. However, it is also

possible that the resolute form of bovine sanctity only emerged during the Muslim conquests, as a protest against the slaughter of cattle that Islam allowed. 'Cow protection laws', pushed by Hindu politicians since the nineteenth century, have been one of the main sources of Hindu-Muslim conflict, given the importance of beef in the Muslim diet.

Another new development of Hindu thought during the classical period was the de-monopolization and de-ritualization of the communion with the gods, which now was no more the domain of the priestly caste alone, nor only available through the ritual of sacrifice. This brought Hindu deities closer to their worshippers and endowed them with a presence in the world of the devout. This presence is acutely felt and ritually enacted. For example, the figures in which gods are supposed to dwell can be touched and handled, thereby establishing a contact with the higher spheres that Brahmanic rituals did not provide for the lay people.

While the Hindu tradition upholds the hierarchy of castes against which the social challenge of the reform movements was directed, the three higher castes of 'twice-borns' (priestly, warrior, and the self-employed) developed a certain solidarity and started to be collectively opposed to the lower strata of hired labour and untouchables. The term 'twice-born' refers to the initiation ceremony that the male members of these castes went through and which qualified them for the study of scriptures, no longer the exclusive domain of the priests. Yet they maintained the idea of hierarchy and the duty of each person to live out their own destiny in the general order of things.

The changes in the pantheon. Another important development that occurred in this period is the eclipse of the most important Brahmanist deities by new figures. Brahmā, himself a late arrival, retains a position also in the new

The *Bhagavad-gītā* tells us the story of the warrior hero Arjuna, who falls into despair on the eve of a decisive battle because so many of his former friends and relatives will be fighting for the other side. He goes on a chariot ride through the territory between the two camps to think about things, and engages in a conversation with his charioteer. But that happens to be none other than the god Krishna, who teaches him the true nature of things, including that it is his duty as a warrior to fight, and that refraining from killing his friends would be an immoral violation of this duty. Similarly, everyone else also has to abide by the destiny they were born with and to fulfil their role in this life, in anticipation of a better chance in the next. This principle has been enshrined in ancient texts on political and legal thought and will later be elaborated into a full-fledged philosophical doctrine by the proponents of the Mīmāṃsā system.

pantheon as the creator of the universe, but the two central figures of **Vishnu**, the keeper of order, and **Shiva**, the destroyer of evil, now occupy central stage. Each of the two gods plays the main role in the two distinct branches of Hinduism, named **Vaishnavism** and **Shaivism** according to them. Though these two branches are sometimes called monotheistic in their excessive devotion to one god, this is not correct, because both of them recognize the other's god (as well as a host of minor deities not mentioned here), they just revere their own particular god ahead of all others. Historically, they have coexisted peacefully and acknowledged each other, so that only minor conflicts have emerged, and even those because of political rather than ideological reasons. Collectively, the three gods are known as the **Trimurti**, embodying the three divine powers of creation, preservation, and destruction. Frequently religious symbols (such as fertility-denoting phalluses) have three distinct parts jointly symbolizing the Trimurti.

Each of these gods also has prime consorts, who appear in narratives, but are also independently manifested as divine carriers of female creative power. Each of the male gods also has a designated animal or bird vehicle, thus Brahmā rides a swan, Vishnu the mythical *garuda* bird, and Shiva a giant bull.

We met Vishnu briefly as one of the companions of Indra in the Vedic pantheon, and as the source of royal power in the legitimization discourses of early Indian monarchies. Now his role is becoming more and more central. In a Rigvedic hymn, Vishnu is mentioned to take three steps on his way to cover the earth, the ether and the entire universe and establish himself as its keeper, 'who alone supports heaven and earth in their three parts and all living beings'. Even though the rest of the *Rigveda* does not credit him with such status, with the shift to Hinduism he indeed became the supreme being for a large number of believers. A characteristic of Vishnu is a large number of *avatars* – the most prominent among these are Rāma and Krishna – the god who expounds the doctrine in the *Bhagavad-gītā*. The historical Buddha is also considered an *avatar* of Vishnu by many Hindus. Around the tenth century CE it was agreed that Vishnu had 10 main official *avatars*, though some texts mention 39 and others speak of innumerable ones. Not unexpectedly, there is an abundance of literature, scriptural and apocryphic, about their miraculous deeds.

Compared to Vishnu, the origins of Shiva are not so clear. As an adjective meaning 'auspicious', this word has appeared in the Vedas as an epithet of several deities, but it has also been proposed that it derives from a Dravidian word meaning 'red' – the latter explanation supported by his connection with the sun. He may be an amalgam of several divine figures, including the gods Indra and Rudra of the Vedic pantheon, with elements inherited from pre-Aryan deities. Rudra's rise to prominence started in the *upanishads*, where he is sometimes credited with the

creation of the universe and even described in the same terms as *Brahmā/Brahman*, the absolute inherent in everything. Certain devotionalist texts follow this view, but the more widely accepted narrative sees him as one of the three main gods. Unlike Vishnu, Shiva does not have many *avatars*, but some texts claim that certain mythological personages, such as the monkey king Hanuman, a powerful ally of king Rāma in the *Rāmāyana* epic, is his incarnation. Another frequent way to symbolize Shiva is the phallus, or *lingam*, often representing him in temples.

Shakti. Special mention deserves to be made of the Hindu goddesses, or more precisely the collective goddess personified as **Shakti** or Devi (Mahādevi), because the consorts of Brahmā, Vishnu, and Shiva are all identified as her in different texts, and in other narratives she is also the mother of all three the Trimurti gods. The word *shakti* means ‘power’ or ‘energy’ and in a personified shape refers to a supreme female sacred figure. This is the term/name mostly used for female divinity in devotionalist practice, which is often identified as the third branch of Hinduism (beside Vaishnavism and Shaivism) called Shaktism. The word *devi* simply means ‘goddess’, and there are many narratives associated with her, as well as rituals not necessarily associated with *bhakti*-type worship. Scriptures that credit the female with a cosmic energy sustaining all creation and identifying her with the unchanging absolute have already appeared in the sixth century CE, and soon afterwards various devotional movements dedicated to the goddess started to proliferate, continuing to this day.

The gods beheld a dazzling concentration of light, like a mountain ablaze, pervading all directions with its flames. Then that incomparable light, born from the body of all the gods, pervading the three worlds with its brilliance, coalesced into the form of a woman ... Honored by the gods, she roared on high with a boisterous laugh over and over, filling the entire heavens with her dreadful bellow ... The demon Mahishāsura [rushing towards the roar] then saw her brilliance pervading the three worlds, her feet trampling the earth while her crown scraped the sky. The twang of her bowstring jolted the underworlds. Her thousand arms reached out in all directions.

(*Devi-Mahātmya* 2.12–2.13, 2.32, 2.37cd–2.39ab, trans.
C. MacKenzie Brown)

But the goddess also has a much more frightening aspect, which is manifested in **Kālī**, the destructive feminine power. The origin of this can be traced back to some of the historically first depictions of the goddess as the personalized wrath

of the gods, who victoriously destroys an attacking demon. While the good and benevolent goddess is associated with meeker qualities, Kālī is the untamed female, who is often depicted dancing on the prostrate body of Shiva. The word *kālī* can be traced back to ‘black’ and ‘time’, and she is usually depicted with black or blue skin, while the idea of time is connoted in her destructive capacity, as everything perishes over time. However, her tremendous energy can still be harnessed by the respectful devotees for their own purpose: addressing Kālī as ‘mother’, they invoke her caring instincts and so she destroys threatening evils on their behalf.

It should also be pointed out that the respect for the divine female energy in Hinduism did not manifest itself as an attitude towards actual women. Even though femininity is sometimes credited with the highest possible status and power, this is mostly done from the male point of view and for the spiritual emancipation of male worshippers. It is only relatively late that the authority of female teachers came to be accepted in devotional practice, while in lay life the idea of female power has not managed to disrupt the male-centred social order to any significant degree.

Scriptures. The Hindu tradition recognizes the orthodox status of the Vedic canon, or the *shrūti* (‘what is heard’, authorless, orally transmitted texts), which is retained in it, similarly to the Christian Bible containing the Judaic Old Testament. However, more central to the new form of the faith are the *smṛiti* (‘what is remembered’, texts ascribed to particular authors). Possibly the most influential Hindu scripture is the *Bhagavad-gītā*, a section of the *Mahābhārata* epic, traditionally credited to its legendary author Vyāsa. The text has most likely developed over centuries, starting not earlier than the fourth century BCE and achieving its present form no later than the fifth century CE, with the bulk of the composition originating from around the second–first centuries BCE. A dialogue between the warrior Arjuna and the god Krishna (who is actually none other than Vishnu), the *Gītā*, as it is called for short, touches on many aspects of the emerging Vaishnavist branch of the Hindu doctrine.

Other Hindu scriptures include the *āgamas* (‘what has come down’), a diverse group of texts of mostly devotional nature that have been reported to exist (though not necessarily in their present form) by the seventh century CE at the latest, and *purāṇas*, mainly mythical and historical narratives containing a certain amount of philosophical speculation. These, too, have been credited to Vyāsa, while they are in fact collective works of various authors – the earliest sections date perhaps from the third century CE, the latest to the end of the first millennium, and minor alterations may have been produced even later.

The last group of texts, which forms a tradition of its own in Hindu culture, is called **tantras**. The term (literally ‘weaving’) means ‘theory’ or ‘method’ and

denotes a category of scriptures, which is not restricted to Hindu traditions, but also appears in Buddhist and Jain traditions. The tantras are esoteric teachings, which claim to provide the follower with technologies for mobilizing the energies of the body to the pursuit of perfect knowledge. Most notoriously, some of the advocated techniques concentrate on the sexual drive, and tantras indeed abound in sexual imagery, starting with the casting of the creation of the universe in terms of divine intercourse. Other techniques to emancipate the self include the recitation of mantras, which were supposed to bring about the unity of the mind of the follower and the cosmic divine consciousness, and the practice of *mūdras*, specific significant gestures or poses with spiritual meaning, which were used by followers in order to manipulate the psychophysical processes believed to take place in their bodies. One further practice was the contemplation of *mandalas* and *yantras*, or symbolic representations of the universe through religious imagery.

Tantra practice has later split into ‘right-handed’ and ‘left-handed’ tantra – while the first sees the sexual imagery as metaphors, the second encourages the followers to actively use sex as well as other sensual pleasures, according to detailed methods, for attaining spiritual progress.

Ideas: internal renunciation and discipline. The Hindu worldview retains much from its Brahmanist past (including the idea of rebirths and liberation from them as its goal), but reconfigures many of those inherited elements just as it does with the Vedic pantheon. One of the tasks the emerging faith has had to face is how to reconcile the more advanced society of its age with the inherited understanding of the world. A prime example of this transformation is the treatment of the heritage of the Vedas and *upanishads* in the *Bhagavad-gītā*.

Nominally the *Bhagavad-gītā* (or *Gītā* for short) is the account of describing how Krishna convinces Arjuna to overcome his existential crisis and to fight, even though the opposite camp contains friends and relatives. However, the text covers much more ground: it presents a model of self-development for the individual, which bridges the gap between the two contradictory ideals of living in the world and renouncing it. The solution proposed by the *Gītā* is striking: one should carry out one’s destined duties in the world, but without attachment or desire for their results and rewards. In other words, one should live in the world as if one had already renounced it, because the real renunciation is internal and not an ‘external’ withdrawal to a hermitage. After all, as we know well from many Western religious testimonies, one can go on to pine for worldly pleasures even while living the life of a recluse. What the *Gītā* recommends is precisely the opposite: to have the mind of an ascetic but the life of a regular member of the society.

yoga a practical discipline aimed at harnessing the psychophysical resources of an individual for attaining spiritual progress

One of the key concepts of the *Gītā* is *yoga*, and each of its chapters is called the exposition of a specific form of it. The root of the word is cognate to the English ‘yoke’ and refers to the harnessing of one’s psychophysical resources, which are considered to form an integrated system. Perhaps the most adequate equivalent for *yoga* would be ‘discipline’ in a sense which unites an academic discipline as a systematized body of knowledge with an order imposed on one’s life in pursuit of certain goals. For *yogas* of different stripe, this goal is always spiritual progress. In due course, *Yoga*, written with a capital letter, also advanced into a distinct system of Hindu philosophy. In our times, the word is mostly associated with the physical exercises used for shaping the body into a more harmonious state, but fitness was never the goal of *yoga* practitioners, even if desirable for its positive effect on the mind. For the follower, however, the entire life is converted into *yoga* in the sense of keeping oneself in check and advancing towards higher mental states.

Acts of sacrifice, giving and austerity are not to be given up, but rather should be performed, as sacrifice, giving and austerity purify even the wise.

My final judgment, Pārtha, is that these actions should be performed out of duty, abandoning attachment and interest in their fruits.

One’s prescribed duty should not be renounced; when one renounces his duty out of delusion, that renunciation is to be considered of the nature of darkness.

When one renounces his duty for fear of bodily difficulties, thinking it too troublesome, his renunciation is considered to be of the nature of passion, and thus he does not reap the fruit of his renunciation.

When one performs his prescribed duty having abandoned any attachment and desire for fruits whatsoever, considering only that it ought to be done, his renunciation is of the nature of goodness, o Arjuna.

(*Bhagavad-gītā* 18.5–18.9, trans. Ithamar Theodor)

Practice. Unlike the early Buddhists, the Hindus saw liberation not as ‘cessation’ or an exit from the cycle of rebirths, but a reunification with the absolute in total bliss. On a practical level, this developed into devotionism, or *bhakti*, of certain branches of Hinduism that include constant chanting and dances seeking spiritual communion with the god who is worshipped in this way. Different sects

proclaim different deities (mostly Vishnu or Shiva or one of their forms) to be the most important object of such devotion, but in practice their approach to these gods is fairly similar. This devotionalism is not a very early phenomenon, but only started to evolve towards the end of the classical period and gained impetus after the Islamic conquest.

bhakti devotionalist religious practices (including chanting, dancing, etc.) seeking communion with the absolute, which is personified in a particular deity

In the life of most Hindus, however, the divine occupies much less space than for the enthusiastic devotionalist. It is considered proper to offer homage to the gods on a daily basis, but it is not strictly necessary to visit a temple for the purpose – most Hindu homes have an altar where the preferred deities of the family are enshrined, and daily worship can be conducted just by washing them and offering them food and gratitude.

Temples. Another characteristic feature of Hindu religious life is the importance of temples, which in smaller places serve as central nodes for local communities, while larger and more awe-inspiring structures attract pilgrims from afar and contribute to the economy of urban centres often dependent on them.

Given the precision with which Vedic rituals had to be carried out in order to be efficient, the site used for them could most certainly not have been a small matter. However, nothing reliable is known about the precise shape and form of early Brahmanist temples, nor even whether these actually existed as permanent structures or were just sacred enclosures constructed for the purpose, as altars for fire rituals are to this day. (Considerations of safety suggest the latter.) Fragments of Vedic texts provide us with some information about the cosmogonic principles that have to be reflected in the construction of altars, and these became the basis of Indian architectural theory, which was systematized into a special body of knowledge probably in the first centuries CE. One reason for moving towards permanent temple structures was the shift from the Brahmanist idea that gods dwelled in the heavens and messages would reach them by smoke from fire rituals, to the Hindu view that gods can be invited to inhabit images in temples or on the home altar.

During the Gupta empire (third–sixth century CE), Indian architecture started to develop into a refined art form, which was practised both in the building of palaces and elaborate sacred structures that resembled each other as royal and divine power were essentially the same. Still, architectural theory has survived only in fragments and the first extant treatises of Indian architectural theory come from the sixth century CE.

According to these texts, the Hindu temple is a model of the macrocosm, and a sacred site where gods are believed to physically come down and enter the sacred images of various sizes. This makes them available for direct worship, which involves also a physical relationship – from visual contact to bathing, clothing, and offering food to the sculptures of the gods. For the devout, it was important not only to see the images, but also to be seen by the deity residing in them, which is why the statues often have really big eyes. The art of producing these images was strictly regulated and brought great spiritual merit on the artists, if they were successful – an image had not only to conform to the rules, but also be aesthetically pleasing in order for a deity to decide to inhabit it. The procedure of purifying and consecrating the image also involved numerous rituals, for example, covering it with honey and ‘opening its eyes’ with a special golden needle.

The construction of a temple has to take careful note of the cardinal directions, the trajectory of the sun and other matters that might influence the actual experience of the visitor in the temple. The manner in which temples should be built is spelt out in detail: a site likely to attract divine attention has to be cleared from the local spirits that inhabit it, a circle drawn on the ground, and a small treasure buried in its centre. This will be the site of the inner sanctum of the temple, topped by a tower and only accessible to the priests. A walkway will be built around it, so that the worshippers can circumambulate the sanctum where the god resides. A hall is built in front of the sanctum, where people can worship images and singing and dancing can take place for divine entertainment.

A parallel development to the construction of temples was the local spontaneous emergence of sacred sites. Certain trees were venerated as the abodes of village deities, and offerings were brought to them in hope or gratitude. Some other trees were seen as the Hindu trinity, with Brahmā as the roots, Vishnu as the trunk, and Shiva as the leaves on the branches. Quite often small shrines were erected by such sacred trees, and even after the tree died, the spot was still considered sacred and sometimes commemorated with the erection of a more solid structure. At this point, the principles governing the building of temples had to be observed, which accordingly raised the prestige of the site.

With the higher status came stricter rules. Hindus are obsessed with ritual purity. Strong caste and hygienic restrictions were imposed on the visitors to the temples, thus untouchables (and sometimes even members of lower castes) as well as menstruating women were barred entry to temples because their presence was considered polluting. These rules have been officially abolished in modern India, but reports that the practice is even now still upheld by some temples are being published in the media.

Pilgrimages. Temples had to be built on grounds which had the potential of becoming attractive for the gods, yet they possessed no internal sanctity of their

own. However, numerous places in India are traditionally believed to be so-called ‘crossing points’ (*tirtha*), where the divine world is directly accessible. Millions of Indians flock to these places every year as a visit to a *tirtha* provides great spiritual merit and has a purifying effect on the person. Other reasons to perform pilgrimages include vows or obligations taken on oneself in case of answered prayers, penance for committed misdeeds, and mourning. Many of these ‘crossing points’ are hard to access and the pilgrims have to endure real hardships during their travel, which have the same cleansing effect as austerities performed by an ascetic. Other, more accessible sites include holy cities such as **Vārānasi**, where there are 84 paved landings on the banks of the Ganges for performing ritual bathing and communion with the gods, some of them reserved for cremation and the dissolution of ashes brought by pilgrims. Incidentally, Vārānasi is revered also by the Jains and Buddhists – the Jains consider it to be the birthplace of two fordmakers, who appeared in this world prior to Mahāvīra, while the historical Buddha is supposed to have delivered his first sermon in this city. Vārānasi thus deservedly enjoys the reputation of the spiritual capital of India, but there are other sacred cities similarly flocked by Hindu pilgrims all around the country.

Philosophical Systems

Background. The Indian philosophical tradition contains six so-called *darshanas* or ‘ways of seeing’, orthodox philosophical systems that nominally derive from the Vedic tradition. However, it should be pointed out that these systems also often present claims that are far from what the scriptures seem to mean – and some thinkers in some schools explicitly adhere to certain sections of the scripture while rejecting others. Since the textual tradition itself is far from monolithic, such controversies are not unexpected at all.

Most of the *darshanas* claim to rely on foundational texts traditionally dated to the age of the *upanishads*, but may come from a later age, and in any case, their systematic development into separate schools occurred during the classical period, from around the fourth–fifth century CE. Subdivisions occurred later, and in the case of Vedānta, this led to the development of three independent schools with little overlap but for their name. In most cases, however, the branches of particular *darshanas* disagree with each other only on relatively minor points.

Even though the *darshanas* are interesting to us primarily as philosophical systems, the aims of the thinkers who have developed them have not necessarily been philosophical in the strict sense of the word, but much more practical. For example, the need to perform rituals following the Vedic instructions as accurately as possible soon led to speculations about the nature of language, which then developed into theories about the nature of truth, and from there to logic and

to ontological commitments about what exists and what does not. Most of the Hindu systems adhere to a belief in an underlying soul or self, but the Buddhist challenge also compelled their proponents to think their theories of personhood through more precisely. As a result, rich and intellectually stimulating discourses have emerged, which continue to inspire philosophical discussion to this day.

Most of these systems have a long history with uncertifiable beginnings, but the majority have acquired the form in which they are known during the classical period, the high tide of Indian culture from approximately the third century CE until the twelfth century. One of the characteristic features of this period is an infatuation with theory. There had to be a theory of everything, and any phenomenon had to be precisely classified in a taxonomical scheme of things. Thus, there were nine mental states, each of which had a colour of its own and a link to a certain deity, as there were six proper ways to conduct politics and eight correct ways to scratch your partner with fingernails during sex. The more philosophically inclined thinkers developed similar taxonomies for all phenomena that they were discussing, and sought to define as precisely as possible the relationships between them. For example, Kumāṛila (c. 700) of the Mīmāṃsā school distinguished between four different kinds of non-being.

This long development also means that the Hindu philosophical systems were all subjected to varying degrees of influence of Buddhism, which remained the other dominant intellectual trend of the era. Indeed, many philosophers dedicate a significant proportion of their work to the repudiation of Buddhist arguments that are incompatible with their Hindu convictions. Each of these schools also has a history of internal dispute. Some of these schools have a tradition that has remained alive to this day, others, however, have become extinct.

Common topics. The exposition of Indian philosophical systems frequently follows the line of reasoning of the proponents of these systems themselves. The problem with such an approach is the resulting difficulty in comparing their ideas to each other. Similarly, it makes it harder to spot the problematic aspects of these systems, at least unless they are a reason for debate within those schools themselves or have elicited forceful critique from the outside. However, all *darshanas* address a number of common topics, even though some systems pay more attention to only some of them. These include the *nature of existence*, as it is quite obvious that the concept of being, or being real, may have a different meaning for different thinkers. For example, Shankara of the Advaita Vedānta school admits that objects of perception exist, and can constitute separate links of causal chains, while they are ultimately unreal, because only the unchanging, eternal, absolute consciousness called *Brahman* is real in this sense of the word. If something can exist without being real, there is certainly reason to look at the issue more closely.

Second, we should address the question of *what exists*, real or otherwise, because here, too, the discrepancies between the systems are numerous. A closely related issue is that of *categories* or *qualities* that entities have – each *darshana* has its own system of them, and quite often the lists of categories are debated between the adherents of one school. What we should perhaps be more concerned with, however, is how these categories/qualities relate to the way the world is and the form in which it appears to us. This, in turn, leads to the problem of *causality* and *change*: accounts of how these are possible and come about also differ between systems.

The next item to be discussed is that of the *mind* – the ego, the self, consciousness, person, or whatever substratum is proposed for the role of the perceiver of reality and the agent of good and bad deeds. Indian philosophy offers far more sophisticated constructions of psychological processes than Western philosophy does, and uses a much broader range of terms for mental phenomena. Some of these terms have different meanings in different *darshanās*. A subtopic of this is the *cognitive process*, the status of perceptions, logical inferences, memory, and knowledge. Some of these debates are resemblant of the issues that are currently debated in Western neuroscience and philosophical discussions of artificial intelligence. Is the cognitive process fully describable in physical terms? Does it matter whether the cognitions are carried by a live consciousness? What is the ontological status of the elements of that process?

Another aspect of personhood that all *darshanās* take up is *agency*, or the status of acts. In order to remain orthodox, they have to accept the teaching of transmigration and the concomitant doctrine of karma, or the influence of persons' acts on their future destiny. However, here, too, the *darshanās* offer a range of possible interpretations, dependent on the rest of their doctrine. Finally, each *darshana* also has a vision of *mental emancipation*, or liberation from the unenlightened view of reality. Some of these are bleak and unappealing, others more inspiring, and some schools, such as Mīmāṃsā, seem to have incorporated the idea unwillingly as an alternative to a plain pursuit of the pleasures of a paradise.

There are not only differences between all six systems (and sometimes between branches within them), but also significant similarities, in particular between the Nyāya and Vaisheshika, on the one hand, and the Sāṅkhya and the Yoga, on the other hand. Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta form a pair in a different way – although there is not much in common in their teachings, they are considered to be parts of the same endeavour of 'investigation' (which the word *mīmāṃsā* stands for). Thus what is usually known as Mīmāṃsā is technically called Pūrva Mīmāṃsā, or 'prior investigation', dealing with the texts of the Vedas and other sacred texts, while Vedānta is also known as Uttara Mīmāṃsā, or 'ulterior investigation', which systematizes the message of the *upaniṣads*. As said, the name of Vedānta is itself an umbrella term for three mutually

incompatible systems, each of which presents its own, original, and coherent view of how to interpret the scriptural heritage.

Nyāya and Vaisheshika. These two systems provide the most convenient point of entry into Hindu thought for the Western reader, since they present an effort to posit a common-sense worldview that would not contradict Vedic scripture.

Both systems assume the reality of the external world, which is composed of self-identical objects that can be divided into constituent parts, until we come down to the indivisible atomic level. Both schools also assume the reality of the perceiving subject, even if the cognitive process itself is described slightly differently than what we might expect. The difference between the schools lies primarily in their focus: the **Nyāya** is more concerned with logic and the correct ways of ascertaining what we know about the world, while the Vaisheshika addresses more metaphysical questions.

Ideas: the world as a logical structure. The criterion of being real, or existing, which are synonymous terms for these schools, consists in a continuity independent of observation. Nyāya and Vaisheshika believe that the world has a logical structure, and the goal of intellectual inquiry is to understand it. Vaisheshika, in particular, has developed an atomist theory of minimal entities, which can be combined into substances that have qualities, some of them general, others particular. All of these are parts of the objective world, which changes according to objective rules. Objects have essences which are separate from the essences of their constituents. Being something entails belonging to a logical kind, a universal. Nyāya and Vaisheshika were ‘realist’ in the medieval European sense of the word in that they credited these universals with a real existence. Thus a pot is a ‘pot’ because it partakes of ‘potness’. This is also the reason why an object is more than the sum of its constituents – each existing thing has its own emergent quality of ‘beingitselfness’.

There are also objective laws or principles that regulate the relationships between such essences. Particular things can interact according to these laws and produce causal chains. However, the result always inheres in the cause from the beginning – this is precisely how these objective essences of things form the comprehensive logical structure of reality.

Whatever divine agency can be observed in the world consists in precisely the enactment of these natural laws – any omnipotence as the capacity to suspend natural laws is inconceivable. Therefore, the blueprint of the world according to Nyāya and Vaisheshika is largely mechanistic, which provides cause for optimism: liberation is supposed to be reached through objective knowledge, and since the order of things follows clear rules, these can be discovered and known.

Nyāya and Vaisheshika share the belief that, to a large extent, the process of cognition also follows such a mechanistic blueprint. According to this view, cognition equals consciousness, which always has a content – it has to be a consciousness of something and not consciousness just by itself. A material object causes the appearance of a cognition of it, which is also material. However, these schools distinguish between ‘mind’ and ‘self’ in a different way than most others. Nyāya and Vaisheshika consider the capacity to process cognitions to be a quality of the ‘self’, or *ātman*, rather than the ‘mind’ (*manas*). The latter is simply a bit of mental machinery that delivers cognitions for the self to organize and process. Selfhood therefore comes with a distinct mental agency, it is an instance, a mental thing, and its history – the memory that it carries – affects its actions. In other words, it cannot be trusted always to deliver correct judgements on its own.

Whatever the self processes into a mental representation therefore has to undergo a further process, that of validation by logical proof. This is where Nyāya excels. Its logic was recognized as a major achievement also by thought systems that did not accept its metaphysics – even Buddhist monks were required to read Nyāya treatises during their studies.

Sāṅkhya and Yoga. The terms *sāṅkhya* and *yoga* predate the actual systems bearing these names. Both terms are met in the *upaniṣads* as well as the *Bhagavad-gītā* as distinct forms of knowledge and practice, and – perhaps in order to ground their authority in the tradition – the philosophical systems also pick up and develop some of the key concepts that the *Gītā* associates with them. The first texts summarizing the positions of **Sāṅkhya** as a distinct school most probably come from between 200 and 350 CE, while **Yoga** is grounded in the *Yogasūtra*, composed most likely sometime before or around 400 CE, although the tradition credits it with a much earlier date.

These two systems also form a pair and share most of their metaphysical positions, which have been developed mostly by Sāṅkhya thinkers, while the representatives of Yoga have dedicated their attention to practical ways of extracting an individual from the chains of being.

Ideas: the two tiers of existence. Existence, as these schools understand it, is strictly two-tiered: on the one hand, there is matter – divided into crude and subtle sorts – on the other, there are individual souls. Unlike some other schools of Indian thought, which posit the fundamental unity of consciousness, it is the souls that are many in Sāṅkhya, while crude matter is only of one kind, just organized into a variety of forms by the multiple combinations of three types of subtle matter called *guṇa*. This word points to qualities or categories in most other thought systems, but here its varieties are thought of as physical, even if invisible. They correspond to the three mingling elements mentioned in the

Bhagavad-gītā – the good, the passionate and the dark. In principle, everything exists from the very beginning, and anything that is produced as the result of some activity, has to be inherent in at least one of the elements of that activity, which is its cause. As a result of such processes, a material and physical plurality emerges that has some structural similarity to how souls are. That similarity causes the entanglement of the souls in a world with which, in principle, they have nothing in common.

This process takes place in the sphere of cognition, which, according to these systems, is a mechanical process, as the intellect is physical and so are sense impressions – just as some contemporary neuroscientific and physicalist explanations of consciousness also see them. The soul, interspersed with materiality, starts to take the cognitions of the material intellect as its own, a little like the consciousness of a person might naturalize an artificial limb or teeth implants as parts of their organism. The mind in the two systems is thus also dual: the non-material soul has a physical counterpart, with which it starts to mistakenly identify itself. Agency takes place on the material level, and the intermingling of the three types of subtle matter bears the traces of individual karma, which predetermines the soul to reincarnation. Liberation, accordingly, consists in the separation of the individual soul from the material entanglement, resulting in pure bliss uncontaminated by sensual perceptions.

While the two systems mostly share this metaphysical foundation, there is a difference between them that consists in their attitude towards the divine. Sāṅkhya is atheistic and does not rely on an absolute that is independent of matter. Yoga, however, is theistic, and posits an ideal soul of the Lord, Īshvara, which is free from material entanglement, neither the creator nor the absolute, but a guide for the follower towards spiritual emancipation.

Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta. The last pair of Hindu philosophical systems is Mīmāṃsā and Vedānta. These two have very little in common in content, but have been paired as complementary – while **Mīmāṃsā** is sometimes also called Pūrva Mīmāṃsā, or ‘first philosophy’, **Vedānta** goes by the parallel name of Uttara Mīmāṃsā, or ‘final philosophy’. The idea of finality or an achieved goal is also implicit in the word *vedānta*, which literally means ‘end of Vedas/knowledge’. However, the label of Vedānta actually comprises three quite different systems, the non-dualist (*advaita*), the unity-in-complexity (*vishishtadvaita*) and the dualist (*dvaita*) schools, among which the non-dualist version is the most influential.

Mīmāṃsā ideas: finding your place in the sacred order. The word *mīmāṃsā* actually means ‘investigation’ or even ‘exegesis’, rather than ‘philosophy’, and the school emerged from the need to investigate the texts of the Vedas for their ulterior meaning. However, the gods glorified in the Vedic hymns are, for Mīmāṃsā

theorists, of relatively little importance. Instead they focus on the eternal and sacred order of dharma that the Vedas express in their view. To exist means to occupy a place in that order. Reality is in constant change, but the change is far from random, it is governed by rules, which are derived from that same order. Karma, or the trace of actions, operates in the framework of these rules. Therefore, the Mīmāṃsā view of causality regards results as not only inevitably following from causes, but already inherent in them, as an oak is inherent in the acorn. Each individual thing is charged with its own energy (called *shakti*, but unrelated to female divinity) that has led it to develop from its initial form towards a mature result.

Mīmāṃsā also presents us with a rather original theory of cognition. While other schools usually stress the distorted character of the reality that reaches us in the form of sense-data, Mīmāṃsā views cognition as an act undertaken from the part of the individual subject, a movement in the direction of the universal order. Therefore, at the moment of its occurrence, each act of cognition is truthful and provides us with valid knowledge. Errors occur, of course, but only as a result of distortions that are already present in the mind. As to selfhood, this was a matter of controversy between different Mīmāṃsā thinkers. What they agreed upon was that the self had to be eternal and, from the point of view of individuals, the entity that united their various bodily forms and states of mind for the entire duration of their life from birth to death. But whether it was to be identified with the whole of consciousness or separated from the apparatus of cognition, and whether it was itself conscious, remained a topic of debate.

Early Mīmāṃsā was not very much concerned with liberation, as it did not ascribe much importance to the *upanishads* in comparison with the earlier layers of the Vedic corpus. Its ethical views were limited to instructing people to perform their duty within the universal order, which would lead to a better rebirth or, eventually, paradise. When liberation became the common topic of Hindu schools, however, Mīmāṃsā thinkers proposed their own, rather uninspiring versions of it. Depending on their view of the self, the exhaustion of negative karma would have the result of either eternal abiding in pure consciousness or a state where consciousness, too, had been left behind.

Advaita Vedānta. In modern times, **Advaita Vedānta** has evolved into the most influential orthodox Indian thought system and, in many ways, it is the source of Western ideas about Hindu philosophy, which is why it merits a little more attention than other *darshanas*. Though Advaita Vedānta is the oldest of the three schools of the Vedānta family, it is still relatively young compared to other schools. Its most important systematizer and proponent was **Shankara**, who most probably lived in the eighth century CE, was born in a Brāhman family of South India, and travelled extensively during his life, meeting various teachers of different

persuasions and studying the Vedic tradition with them. Traditional biographies end his life at the early age of 32, while some scholars think this must be untrue, given the large number of probably authentic works ascribed to him. While it is true that he inherited a few of his philosophical positions from his teacher, and the teacher of his teacher, it is nonetheless Shankara who raised the school of Advaita Vedānta to its prominent position among the Hindu *darshanas*, where it still remains.

Ideas: existence, reality, and superimposition. One of the most characteristic features of Advaita Vedānta is the separation of existence and reality, which is presented to us as the rather counterintuitive idea that to exist is not enough in order to be real. Evidently, we need to accept that ‘existence’ and ‘reality’ do not necessarily mean the same thing for Indian thinkers as they do for non-Indian thinkers. But the difference may not be so crucial or incomprehensible after all. For example, in our own lifeworld, we admit that quite a few things are socially or culturally constructed and not ‘real’ in themselves, even though they exist and play a part in our life. Thus ‘money’ is what we call pieces of paper or metal, or even certain ways how electrons are organized in a certain element of server hardware, and yet it can be the cause of many things. Evidently its ‘moneyness’ is something we collectively superimpose on these objects (for the sake of clarity, let us talk only about cash), and even these objects may lose their ‘moneyness’, in financial reforms or when the states that have issued them lose power. If we say that money ‘exists’ because of this moneyness that has been superimposed on it by our minds, but ‘really’ we are only dealing with pieces of metal and paper, we are getting closer to the difference that Advaita Vedānta thinkers make between these concepts, except that with them, the distinction goes much deeper. Superimposition (*adhyāsa*) of an ignorance-based illusion on the absolute reality is what ultimately lies behind any particularity that exists for us. ‘Materiality’, for example, is no more solid than socially constructed ‘moneyness’: all things in our world are not real, nor are we ourselves as the perceiving and acting subjects, even though we exist. The only real thing is the pure, contentless, eternal, unconditioned consciousness that pervades everything, everywhere and forever, and which cannot really be captured by words, but is called *Brahman*, because it has to be named somehow. Just as it has been told in the *upanishads*, it is this *Brahman* that the inner core of each individual, or *ātman*, is identical with. But even though *Brahman* and *ātman* are both contentless consciousness, this does not mean that *ātman* is restricted only to conscious beings. On the contrary, what we normally consider to be our consciousness, is the mechanical working of superimposed appearances and not the real thing itself. Most beings are too entangled in these appearances to be able to free themselves from them, but it is not impossible. From within the illusory materiality, when we try to grasp

Brahman with the same sensory apparatus that we use for the world, we fail, of course. What we are able to conceptualize, however, is a sense of divinity – not really *Brahman*, but our mistaken understanding of it. Although this divinity, or **Īshvara**, is no more real than we are, it is able to drag us out of the ignorance that has produced the world for us. Thus, religious practice and veneration of gods (Vishnu in particular) was not quite pointless.

The origin of illusions. The concept of ignorance is the least satisfying aspect of Advaita Vedānta as an intellectual achievement. We are told that it is ignorance (*avidya*) that is to blame for the emergence of all these superimposed illusions of particular existence, but we are never told where this ignorance comes from or how it works. For Shankara, the *Brahman* itself is emphatically not its source. The world just is, because there is ignorance. Nonetheless, the theory of causation that Advaita Vedānta proposes credits *Brahman* with the only real causality. Similarly to most of the systems reviewed until now, Advaita Vedānta believes that the result inheres in the cause, and the only real cause is the only real existent, that is, *Brahman*. However, *Brahman* is not actively involved in the production of these illusions. The simile often used for the purpose is that of a rope mistaken for a snake. The rope is the cause of alarm in the person who thinks it is a snake, but it is that person's ignorance, not the rope itself, that has produced the illusion. Just as the rope has not changed or done anything, when it seems to be a snake, so is the *Brahman* without agency and unchanging.

Some later Vedānta thinkers started to re-evaluate this position and to impute to *Brahman* a greater role in the appearance of the illusory world, especially because some passages in the *upanishads* have lent credibility to such assertions. The concept of *Īshvara* has helped to bridge the transition, and in the school of Vishishtadvaita Vedānta the role of the absolute as the basis of the world that we perceive has been clearly formulated.

Shankara and Buddhism. The idea of the phenomenal world emerging for us because of ignorance is very similar to the position of Buddhism and, indeed, Shankara has, not without some reason, been accused of being a crypto-Buddhist. Doubts in his orthodoxy can also be supported by his selective view of Vedic scriptures: he did not accept all of them unconditionally, but only those that conformed to his own understanding of the self and the Absolute. The rest was not necessarily untrue in Shankara's view, merely inefficient: someone who would want to spend time in paradise could, indeed, learn the procedures from them of how to accrue good karma through rituals. However, Vedānta was a higher-order truth meant for those whom paradise did not interest. This, too, was a view that he shared with the Buddhists.

And yet, the differences between Shankara's philosophy and Buddhism are more significant than their similarities. First of all, the belief in an unchanging Absolute is quite alien to Buddhist thought that is grounded in the transience of everything without exception. This is a point Shankara himself often underscores in his writings. Given that he wrote after a multitude of sophisticated Buddhist thinkers had provided their worldview with detailed philosophical defences, it is understandable that he also had to face their counterarguments. We can perhaps say that Shankara's relation to Buddhism is comparable to that of the later (post-Buddha) *upanishads* to the initial teachings of Buddhism: a reasonable gambit that incorporated some of the insights of the opponents in order to strengthen one's own argumentation without compromising on core issues.

Vishishtadvaita Vedānta. Literally, the word *vishishtadvaita* can be interpreted as 'qualified non-duality', but it has been pointed out that such a translation is misleading. A better equivalent would be 'unity-in-complexity', as the system grants the status of reality to both the ultimate and the empirical. The school was developed in the eleventh–twelfth centuries in order to provide devotional religious practice with a reliable philosophical basis. The tradition grounds itself in the work of earlier thinkers, but probably in order to enhance its authority rather than because of actual mentionable intellectual debt to them.

For the Vishishtadvaita Vedānta, empirical reality is real. It is dependent on the absolute, yet distinct from it. And the absolute is not without qualities, as existence without qualities is considered to be a contradiction in terms. The absolute also has a will, and wills empirical reality, which is its ongoing, constantly changing creation. In this way Vishishtadvaita has removed many issues with which the Advaita model presented us, such as how the world comes into existence if the *Brahman* is not to be held responsible for it, but yet the only causality of whatever is caused. The Vishishtadvaita model of causality is different: the result is inherent in the cause, but only as a potentiality, which may or may not be actualized and become real. As an actual reality, the result is different from its cause. We thus have a plurality of phenomena on the one hand, and an unchanging primary cause (*Brahman*) on the other. They are inseparable, but the relationship is not symmetrical. Phenomena depend on the absolute, while the absolute does not depend on them. (Even though the term *Brahman* is retained in Vishishtadvaita theory, for all practical purposes the absolute is identified with the god Vishnu.)

Something similar can be said about individual souls. They are particular, substantial, and independent of the bodies that they inhabit. Embodiment, which occurs as a result of past karma, is something without which souls cannot really express their dedication to the absolute. Karma, in the meantime, does not operate as a law of nature like, for example, Sāṅkhya thinkers believe, but is always and only effectuated by the will of the absolute god. And yet the decision of the god is never wrong, it is

absolutely just and corresponds to what the past actions of the soul have merited. The relationship with the self and consciousness is also fairly simple: consciousness is something that the self has, not what it is. Thoughts are its acts, its properties, not its parts. And our perception of ourselves as persons is not a distorted view that has to be corrected through liberation – we see ourselves as we really are. The relationship of souls to the bodies they inhabit is analogous to the relationship of the absolute to these souls – a particularization, an unsymmetrical dependence. Liberation for Vishishtadvaita is the realization of this dependence by the soul. It is not something it can achieve on its own, though – it is only available through the will, or grace, of the absolute. But it is only bestowed on those who practise *bhakti*, and thereby bring themselves nearer to god.

Dvaita Vedānta. This last ‘dualist’ school of the Vedānta family was developed in the thirteenth century. Critical of both Advaita and Vishishtadvaita, this school claimed that the souls and the absolute are different in their nature. Similarly to Vishishtadvaita, Dvaita distinguishes between the independent reality of the absolute and the dependent phenomenal reality (sentient souls and non-sentient matter), but differently from its predecessors, Dvaita claims that the dependent reality is also essentially different from the absolute, its cause. But the absolute is in this case not an active, pre-existent cause or creator, it is just the necessary condition for the existence of the universe, which is constantly sustained by it. Even though the universe is caused by the absolute, it is also without beginning and end, and its existence is independent of consciousness. Creation, in this sense, is ordering and organizing rather than producing the world *ex nihilo*. This school, too, identifies the absolute with Vishnu.

From the point of view of contemporary philosophy, Dvaita Vedānta advances an interesting theory of positive, constitutive difference. The difference from everything else is the constitutive feature of each particular object, its individuating form. It is also this difference that assures the entity of its continuity, as it continues to be different from all other entities in the same, individual way. Dvaita distinguishes between kinds of differences on a general level, but this does not mean that the differences between things are essentially similar: each entity has its own way of differing from the rest of reality. This is also how individual souls differ, both from each other and from the absolute, and this difference is not given up even in liberation. The latter is only possible through an act of love by the absolute: while those who do not express their devotion to Vishnu through the practice of *bhakti* will never achieve it, those who do are not contributing towards it either, as only the absolute is able to provide it.

Kashmir Shaivism. Although traditionally not listed among the *darshanās*, the philosophical schools developed in Kashmir in the eighth to eleventh centuries

also deserve our attention. While neighbouring areas were already fighting back the onslaught of Muslims from the West, the successive mountain kingdoms of Kashmir kept their independence and the region remained the centre of rich intellectual life, both Hindu and Buddhist. A key characteristic of Hindu thought in Kashmir was its reliance on esoteric tantras and *āgamas* rather than mainstream texts. Even though some followers of the teachings now collectively called 'Kashmir Shaivism' believed that one should observe the traditional duties associated with one's caste in daily life, this was only conducive towards a better rebirth, while ultimate liberation could only be attained by an initiated few, with the help of secret teachings. According to one influential version of these, release from karmic bondage is an effect of the actions of Shiva on the soul. By its nature, the soul is equal to god, but impeded from realizing this unity by 'dirt', which is material and attaches itself to the soul, and has to be removed by action. The goal is thus the recognition of Shiva in oneself, realizing one's own divinity, rather than the dissolution of one's self in an external absolute, as *upanishad*-based philosophies have taught.

Perhaps the most influential thinker among the Kashmir Shaivites is **Abhinavagupta** (tenth–eleventh century), a scholar of a radical tantric school, which rejected all conventional morality as illusory. Unlike other schools, the initiation ritual of his cult was supposed to remove caste membership and other earthly connections from the follower along with any obligation to keep precepts and uphold taboos. The initiates worshipped the goddess Kālī in her most frightening shape, as well as other female divinities, whose supernatural powers they aspired to acquire by offerings of impure and powerful substances, such as blood, alcohol, and sexual fluids. While this may sound rather eccentric, the philosophy they professed was intellectually sound and coherent. Abhinavagupta authored a number of treatises containing detailed critiques of other traditions and commentaries to the works of his own predecessors, in which he defended a philosophy of extreme idealism, rejecting the reality of material objects as well as the unmoving absolute of Advaita Vedānta and the impermanence of being as theorized by Buddhists. According to him, reality was one, conscious and characterized by internal dynamism, symbolically represented by the copulation of Shiva and Shakti. This reality is only partially accessible to human cognition in the guise of mental representations. However, it is emphatically not the product of individual minds, but perhaps more like the Platonic world of ideas without a real material world manifesting them. These ideas are not self-reliant, but themselves expressions of the universal consciousness which, in its natural state, constantly abides in the kind of bliss human beings experience during orgasm.

Kashmir Shaivism went underground soon after the Mongol conquest of the area in the thirteenth century, and in the fourteenth century Kashmir converted to Islam. It is thought that the tradition continued in secret, but it was openly

revived in the twentieth century by scholar-practitioners and soon started to attract academic interest.

Cārvāka. The last to be mentioned among the classical philosophical systems is the heterodox and materialist school called **Cārvāka**. Nothing reliable is known about its proponents and the original works of the school have been lost. But critique of Cārvāka continues well into the sixteenth century, as supporters of other traditions judge their own views to be superior to that school on moral grounds, so at least on hearsay level the teachings of that school must have persisted. Not acknowledging the authority of the Vedas, Cārvāka thinkers are supposed to have held that only perception presents us with valid knowledge, while inference and other mental operations necessarily distort it. As a result, they claim that any positing of beings or powers that cannot be perceived is groundless and the same applies to the human soul. Theories about what happens after death cannot be verified because of the same reason. As a result, Cārvāka thinkers reportedly propose a hedonist ethics, saying that the maximizing of pleasure in this life is the only reasonable strategy. This is also the reason why they are criticized by other schools as preachers of immorality and egoism.

Indian Worldviews Under Muslim Rule

Background. Neighbouring Muslim rulers started to invade the north-western regions of the Indian subcontinent in the eighth century, but a more permanent Islamic polity was established there only in 1206 as the Delhi sultanate. Successive conquerors overthrew each other until the last of these, Babur, the founder of the Mughal empire, arrived in 1526, retreating from his previous kingdoms of Fergana and Samarkand that fell to invaders from the north. The Mughal rule proved to be the most persistent and was overcome only by the British in the nineteenth century. Under Mughal emperors, India was again mostly united and enjoyed a period of economic growth as well as a cultural revival, exemplified in the splendid architectural monuments of the age such as the Taj Mahal, the mausoleum erected in 1632–1653 for the favourite wife of one of the Mughal rulers.

However, the Muslim conquest also signified the end of the classical period of Indian culture, even though the initial hostile attitude of the Muslim rulers towards Hindu symbols, resulting in the destruction of many temples, was soon replaced by a more tolerant attitude of cultural coexistence. Sanskrit nonetheless lost its prominent position as the main vehicle of literary expression, because Arabic, the sacred language of Islam, and Persian, the literary language of the conquerors, claimed their share of the intellectual space. Arabic needed to be

studied by Muslim scholars because the Islamic scripture of the Qur'ān was believed to contain direct divine revelation, dictated to the prophet Muhammad by the archangel Gabriel, which might become distorted in translation. Persian was the language of the administration and secular culture, as it had the capacity to culturally unite the diverse tribes of Turkic and Indo-Iranian origin, who made up the body of the conquering armies and their elites, and it naturally retained the position in the newly established Mughal imperial court. At the same time, the retreat of Sanskrit also gave an impetus to modern Indian languages to develop, especially when one of the spoken idioms, now called Urdu, started to be written down in a modified Arabic script from the thirteenth century onwards. Those emphatically defining themselves as non-Muslims began to use the native devanāgarī script for the same spoken language, calling it Hindi, around the same time. The two languages started to develop separately – for new concepts, Hindi created words using Sanskrit roots, while Urdu used Persian and Arabic borrowings for the same purpose.

Another strong blow to the tradition was the destruction of the Buddhist institutions. After centralized rule had declined during the period before the Muslim invasion, much of aristocratic patronage had switched from Buddhist institutions to the emergent Hindu schools. This did not affect the Buddhist monasteries of northern India, however, as these were situated on major trade routes and benefited from the traffic of people, goods, and ideas. Monasteries and universities, great centres of learning and debate, were attracting intellectually minded people from far and wide, and over the centuries they had acquired large libraries of manuscripts as well as other treasures. Many of these were ransacked by Muslim chieftains and the residents were killed or dispersed. The role of Buddhism in Indian intellectual life became virtually negligible as a result for many centuries until it was revived in modern times.

Islam is a strictly monotheistic religion in the same tradition with Judaism and Christianity. It mostly accepts the narrative of the Old Testament and also recognizes Jesus as one of its prophets, but denies his divinity. The last and most important prophet of the religion is Muhammad (570?–632), who managed to convert a sizeable number of Arabs to his faith and mobilized them into building a new world-state. In the fourth generation of rulers, Islam split into two opposing factions, Sunni and Shi'a, and this division is a major cause of conflict in the Muslim world to this day.

Islamic thought developed in dense contact with the inheritance of ancient Greek philosophy and is predominantly rational, consisting largely of successive efforts to combine monotheistic theology with Aristotelian thought and

polemical responses to these. It is indeed the influence of Islamic philosophy that produced the revival of ancient Greek philosophy in Europe, following the theory of Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126–1198) that divine and rational truth are two forms of the same thing, and if revelations seem to be in conflict with rational argument, they need to be reread as metaphors for the expression of hidden meaning, and not verbatim. However, Islam also has mystical undercurrents such as Sufism, sometimes accused of heresy, but widely influential in devotional poetry.

Islam prohibits the forceful imposition of the faith on believers of other religions, but encourages voluntary conversion. During the early centuries of Muslim rule, Hindus were able to follow their own religion and taxes on non-Muslims were not regularly imposed, although many poorer Hindus converted because of economic reasons. The Muslim rulers depended heavily on the support of upper-class Hindus and also had many capable non-Muslims as officers in its army, for whom separate facilities were provided for their religious needs. Efforts to convert were undertaken, but without significant results. The success of Islam as a mass religion in India started in the thirteenth century, first with the outcasts and lower castes, who were excluded from social mobility by the Hindu system, but also as a result of interfaith marriages in the merchant class. By the time of the Mughals, India had a sizeable population of Muslims of local origin, even though exact numbers are unknown as a population census was first carried out in India only in the nineteenth century.

As to Islamic thought, India has contributed less to its development than might perhaps be expected. One of the reasons for this might be that the conquest of the subcontinent was finalized more or less at the same time that the Mongols destroyed Baghdad (1258) and subdued the caliphate, putting an end to the bustling intellectual life in the heartlands of the Islamic world. Indian Muslim scholars were mostly content with commenting on earlier works, composing technical study aids and writing for their local audiences. They had no ambition to engage in a wider dialogue with the rest of the Islamic world and therefore produced little of lasting influence.

The same cannot be said about syncretic movements, which sought a common ground for the religious aspirations of people as human beings, apart from their being Muslims and Hindus. It has been pointed out that the Islamic stress on strict monotheism and the equality of worshippers has had a strong impact on the *bhakti* movement, which indeed increased its influence in Hindu circles under Muslim rule. Identifying the absolute with a particular god did bring the foundations of the Hindu faith closer to monotheism, as the other gods, although

retaining their divinity, were now reducible to the main one, and thus became something like the angelic figures that also abound in Islam. Many religious visionaries in India tried to find a common ground between the two faiths. The greatest of them was **Kabīr** (fourteenth–fifteenth century), whose name signifies just that ('great'). We know little about his life except that he was born into a recently converted Muslim family, studied with a Hindu teacher, and became critical of both religions. Although the worldview expressed in his poetry draws on both traditions, he belongs to neither, nor is it a synthesis of Hindu and Muslim thought, but an emancipation from both, which is what he recommended to his followers. The popularity of his devotional poetry grew quickly, many of his texts were set to music and sung by *bhakti* worshippers. During his lifetime, he was supposedly also abused and hated by Hindu and Muslim zealots alike, but after his death he was claimed by both traditions as their own. His poetry has been preserved in several collections and it has contributed in a major way to the emergence of the Sikh faith.

The Hindu says Ram is the Beloved,
the Turk says Rahim.
Then they kill each other.
No one knows the secret.
They buzz their mantras from house to house, puffed with pride.
The pupils drown along with their gurus. In the end they're sorry.
Kabir says, listen saints:
they're all deluded!
Whatever I say, nobody gets it. It's too simple.
(Kabīr, *Bijak* I: 4, trans. Linda Hess and Shukdeo Singh)

The attitude of tolerance and mutual recognition became the official policy of the Mughal empire under its greatest ruler, **Akbar** (1542–1605; the name also signifies 'greatest'), who occupied his throne for the same period as Elizabeth I in England, plus a few more years before and after, and with a similarly positive effect. Having inherited the empire amid rebellions and strife, Akbar soon established himself as a just ruler, who was able to pardon his erstwhile enemies, and the same generosity was extended to the common people. He abolished the tax that non-Muslims had to pay as well as pilgrim taxes for Hindu holy places. He promoted those loyal to him, fairly and without regard to their faith. But he did not endorse Hindu customs wholesale, for example, he prohibited the self-immolation of widows (*sati*) who had not consummated their marriage (that is, very young girls) and strongly discouraged the custom also for older women.

Akbar was very interested in cultural and religious matters, looking for an ideology that would suit the needs of his religiously diverse empire. Thus, for example, he commissioned a large translation effort of scriptures (as well as secular literature) from Sanskrit into Persian. He also organized a hall of debates on religious matters, initially reserved only for the Muslim clergy, but as the leading mullahs were unable to agree or even behave in an orderly manner, he opened the debates to other religions, including not only all domestic ones, but also Zoroastrians and even Christians, whom he invited to his court from the Portuguese mission in Goa. Akbar also met with the leader of the Sikhs and reportedly even gave their community a large donation of land, on which the Golden Temple was later built. Yet nobody convinced him. Scholars disagree whether he finally really decided to establish a new religion of which he was himself the central figure, as his traditionalist Muslim critics have claimed, or only a religious order of people committed to the same kind of tolerance he held dear. In any case, nothing much came of it. After his reign, his followers mostly continued a similar policy of tolerance and coexistence, even though certain political conflicts, for example with the Sikhs, have retrospectively been given religious colouring.

The Sikhs. The syncretic tradition of the Sikhs was established by **Nānak** (1469–1539), an approximate contemporary of Martin Luther, who was born in a merchant family near Lahore in Punjab (now Pakistan). As the Sikh scripture came to include many texts by or attributed to the poet Kabīr, and there is some evidence of Nānak belonging to a group of his followers, it is sometimes said that the Sikh faith came to embody the philosophy expressed in Kabīr’s poetry, a claim disputed by other scholars who insist that the ideas behind Nānak’s reform movement were primarily his own. The Sikh tradition has filled Nānak’s biography with incredibly auspicious events from early on, but we do actually know some things about his life, for example, that he was married and had two sons. Shortly after the birth of his second child, he evidently had a religious experience. After that, he began teaching and travelling around the country and even beyond its borders, expounding his new faith. Towards the end of his life, having gathered a following, he again settled down in Punjab and established a religious centre in the village that he chose for his new residence.

Thus Nānak became what the Sikhs call their first *guru*, or ‘teacher’, the spiritual leader of the new community. Altogether, their tradition counts 11 gurus, but only 10 of those are people. The eleventh and final one is the Sikh scripture entitled **Ādi Granth** (‘first book’), a collection of around 6000 hymns, mostly by Nānak and his successors, but also including many texts by Kabīr.

Even though the message of Nānak had been one of solidarity and transcending all religious boundaries, the emerging Sikh community had to contend with the hostility of outsiders. The fifth guru, the compiler of the scripture, was arrested,

The scripture of *Ādi Granth* is the final authority on the teaching and, as decreed by the 10th guru, there should be no other leader of Sikhs after him, except for this text. There is supposed to be a copy of it in every Sikh home, every morning the book is opened at a random page and the first passage is read aloud as the message for the day. Every evening the book is closed again. For the global Sikh community, a daily message is presently sent out from the Golden Temple of Amritsar.

Ādi Granth is written down in the Gurmukhi ('facing the teacher') script, one of the two alphabets now used for the Punjabi language, but the text is, in fact, written in a mix of languages, including not only Punjabi, Hindi, Sanskrit, and Persian, but also a number of non-literary languages spoken in the region at the time of its composition. About one sixth of the hymns are by Nānak, but almost one third of the book is written by the fifth guru, who was also its editor. The main body of the book is organized according to types of music, according to which the hymns are supposed to be performed. The section best known to Sikhs is the beginning of the book, a short mantra condensing the essentials of the faith followed by a hymn that is to be recited daily.

tortured, and killed on the orders of Akbar's son and successor on the Mughal throne. Narratives differ whether this was because the guru had blessed one of the monarch's enemies for rebellion, or because of the increasing influence of the Sikh community in northern India. In any case, the sixth guru, who was also the son of his predecessor, established the rule that Sikh men had to carry arms and be able to defend their community against aggression. A century later, the tenth guru upped the stakes by establishing the order of 'the pure ones' within the Sikh community – dedicated warriors ready to die for their guru without asking questions. From those times onwards, Sikhs have been trusted allies for some and feared enemies for others, until the Sikh kingdom of Punjab was defeated by the overwhelming forces of the British after two bloody wars in 1849. At present, Sikhs are just below 2% of the entire population of India, and about one third of them live abroad.

Doctrines. The verbatim meaning of the word *Sikh* is 'learner, disciple', or someone who follows the teachings of the teacher, the guru. The philosophical foundations of the Sikh worldview are straightforward and simple to grasp. The most important concept in the teaching is 'the One', a concept of the absolute that is analogical to both the Muslim monotheism and the Hindu idea of *Brahman*, even though at the time the latter tended to be equated with one of the personalized gods, Shiva or Vishnu. For Sikhs, the One has no definite characteristics, no

human or other form, no beginning or end nor can it be represented adequately in any way. All particular faiths and forms of worship are accepted by the teaching as worshipping the same One in principle.

The One has two important qualities: its will, which brings about creation and order in the world, and its grace, its permanent gaze on things that affirms its benevolent presence. The One is equated with truth, and truth resides deep in the soul of every human being. A further notion is ‘the word’, which is the channel through which Sikh truth is activated in the consciousness of the individual – it is not real speech though, but rather the understanding that religious experience produces in a person, a ‘soundless word’, as it is called in the scripture. It is only humans who are capable of understanding this ‘word’, which makes human life very precious.

Sikhs believe in reincarnation, and egoism is considered to be its cause. An individual who is obsessed with oneself and one’s personal interests is so full of egoism that the divine word cannot be heard. The Sikh views of social order are strictly egalitarian – there are no hierarchical differences of caste and gender, no permissible boundaries between ethnic groups. Reportedly even emperor Akbar, when visiting the Sikh community, had to stand in line for food during a jointly shared meal.

Practice. The Sikh faith is adamant that spiritual advancement has to be achieved in the middle of an active life, dedicated to the service of the community, and not as a result of recluse practices or other forms of specifically spiritual activity. A devout Sikh has to rise early, take a bath and recite passages from the scripture while meditating on the One, work during the day and recite other hymns in the evening. A Sikh has to be in possession of five symbols, which initially indicated membership of the community of the Pure, but are now worn by everyone regardless of gender. These are uncut body hair signifying continuity, a comb for neatness, a bracelet as a sign of the unbroken circle of the One, a sword or dagger indicating a readiness to fight against injustice, and specific trousers that stand for sexual propriety.

Voluntary work for the benefit of others is valued much more highly than rituals, which are considered by the gurus to be distracting and pointless. Still, the Sikhs celebrate the Hindu holidays, but they have created narratives related to the tradition of the Sikh community to legitimize them – for example, the Hindu harvest festival is celebrated as the anniversary of the creation of the order of ‘the pure ones’, and new initiates are accepted to the order on that day every year. These festivals are also occasions for thousands of Sikhs to undertake pilgrimages to the Golden Temple or other sacred sites of Sikh history.

The Sikhs also do not have a special clergy, only people who have been trained to read aloud the *Ādi Granth*, but maintain a normal life apart from that duty. Although there are temples, these are considered to be larger versions of

communal rooms that also exist in Sikh homes – places where the *Ādi Granth* is stored, and where people can gather and recite hymns together as well as discuss communal affairs and enjoy a shared meal, which is an important part of Sikh life.

The rites of passage are also fairly simple in their core content, even though celebrations associated with them can be as pompous and joyful as those of any other community. The marriage ceremony, for example, consists only of someone reading from the scripture (a copy of which has to be present) and the couple circumambulating the book four times. A name is given to a child when the parents come to a communal room and the scripture is opened at random. The first letter of the left-hand page is what the child's name must begin with. Every Sikh also has a middle name, which tells their gender: Singh ('lion') for all boys, Kaur ('princess') for all girls.

Modern Indian Thought

Background. In the seventeenth century the Mughal empire started to fall apart because of internal tensions and outside pressure. Wars of succession weakened the ruling house, local chieftains asserted their independence from the central power and European nations showed up on its borders, demanding, and being granted, trade agreements that quickly led to their economic domination. Soon, the real struggle for control continued between the Europeans, as no Indian party could muster the necessary strength to emerge victorious from the political chaos. The Portuguese, the Dutch, the French, and the British were all interested in establishing themselves as the rulers of India, and it was the British who finally succeeded in attaining this goal. Negotiations and wars placed more and more territory under the control of the British East India Company, which was technically a private enterprise, but enjoyed the full backing of the government. By the middle of the nineteenth century its sphere of domination included practically the entire subcontinent. After a rebellion in 1857, Indian territories were placed under direct control of the British crown and the company was dissolved. In the following years, British expansion continued eastwards and the Anglo-Burmese wars brought Burma (now Myanmar) under British control as well. Parts of the Malay peninsula had been acquired previously. Only Thailand, which embarked on a modernization campaign of its own, managed to resist.

The colonial regime had a twofold effect on Indian society. On the one hand, it brought harsh racist discrimination and overbearing administration, on the other hand, it also mediated European thought to India, which included Enlightenment ideals of emancipation as well as Herderian national romanticism. Colonial policies elicited a variety of Indian reactions, conservative and liberal, moderate and extremist, which finally led to an independence movement that was crowned with

success after World War II – albeit at the price of the country’s partition into mostly Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan. Since 1947 India has been the largest secular democracy of the world, where all religions are at least nominally equal and many of the oppressive traditional prejudices declared to be a thing of the past. Nonetheless, old thinking habits have proved to be remarkably resilient and religious conflict and caste feud have still not become completely extinct.

Colonial modernity. Much of modern Indian thought is defined by its relationship with the colonial system, which is far from unambiguous. First of all, we should note that the Hindu society had been accustomed to foreign rule during centuries of Muslim domination, which they had not accepted as their own, so British rule did not present them with an entirely new situation of losing their country to a conqueror. British colonialism always sought to identify figures of influence in subdued territories, and to co-opt them for administrative purposes, thereby securing a certain degree of legitimation to its power. A system of education and recruitment of Indian officials was set in place. Influential Hindu families soon realized the possibilities of the new system and collaborated with the British towards such ends to the extent that it suited them. For example, in 1817 some prominent Hindus of Calcutta (Kolkata), the capital of Bengal and the administrative centre of British rule, established an English-language school for raising a new Indo-British elite. This and other similar projects brought about what is now called the **Bengali renaissance**, a movement for the restitution of the cultural identity of the educated Bengalis as a modern nation. Especially among the younger generation, many were captured by a mix of European ideas – British liberalism, French revolutionary ardour as well as German national romanticism. The last one led them to a re-evaluation of their own, Indian heritage. A vision emerged of a culture that was Indian in spirit, but cleansed of the backward and socially oppressive traditions such as the self-immolation of widows (*sati*) and caste prejudice. This was the ethos of the ‘Brahma Society’ (***Brahmo Samaj***) founded in 1828 by **Ram Mohan Roy** (1772–1833), one of the central figures of the Bengali renaissance, who attracted a large following, but also a lot of critique from traditionally minded Hindu clergy. Roy proposed a version of a rationalized, monotheist Advaita Vedānta combined with the triple ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity of the French Revolution. He was convinced that British rule would help India to achieve social progress and help it to overcome the dark sides of its heritage. Roy was multilingual and wrote some of his texts in Persian, thus addressing also the Muslim community, as well as English, in order to bring the Indian ideas to a broader arena.

While the ideas of Roy attracted a large following, there were also other interpreters of the tradition who were far less optimistic about the British influence. Indeed, while the British saw themselves as the carriers of a superior civilization

when they abolished the sati and raised the age of legal sexual maturity for girls from 10 to 12, they were also openly racist and disdainful of a number of Hindu cultural practices, such as vegetarianism. However, the Hindu opposition to such racism often did not make a distinction between racist prejudice and social advancement. Thus the raising of the sexual maturity age was met with violent protest and some patriotic writers glorified the sati as a courageous and noble act.

Re-interpreting the tradition. Inspired by the ideas of Johann Herder, Indian intellectuals started to look for the roots of their identity in the tradition, producing novel and occasionally surprising interpretations of ancient works. Just as Ram Mohan Roy had interpreted the *upanishads* to show that modernity and social justice are compatible with the traditions, others turned to the *Bhagavad-gītā* for the justification of a violent response to the British rule. In that work, as we know, Arjuna the warrior is persuaded by Krishna to follow his warrior's destiny in spite of the violence he must inflict on his own friends and relatives. The nationalist thinkers took that to mean that aggressive action does not produce undesired results if it is not undertaken because of selfish motives, but instead directed towards a goal benefiting the whole community. Others turned to the Vedas, which predate the development of the caste system, in order to justify a more communal form of Hinduism, as well as to divorce it from ethnicity and turn it into the base of a more universal religion which everyone could embrace regardless of their provenance.

One person stands apart in the large group of Hindu reinterpreters as the one who probably contributed the most to the development of contemporary Hinduism. This is **Swami Vivekananda** (1863–1902), the grandson of a scholar and the son of a well-to-do lawyer. He received a European-style education and entered the circle of Bengali intellectuals. Vivekananda was interested in both the religious Hindu heritage and Western esotericism, which at the time sought active contact with Indian thought. He also studied Sanskrit along with Western philosophy and science, and the modernized Hinduism of the Brahmo Samaj appealed to him. But a chance encounter with Ramakrishna, an illiterate guru of a Kālī cult, inspired him to the extent that he gradually fell completely under the mystic's spell and became his disciple, and eventually spiritual heir.

Vivekananda managed to combine his broad-ranging knowledge of Western philosophy, his command of the English language, and his devotion to the tradition of his guru into the single pursuit of establishing a new form of the Hindu faith, and a modernized version of its philosophy, loosely based on the Vedānta. The goddess Kālī had to give way to the masculine Shiva, and the trance-based mystical visions to a teaching that could co-exist with Kant, Hegel, Darwin, and Spencer – Vivekananda had translated works by Spencer and had been corresponding with him. In due course, Vivekananda embarked on a global mission,

visited the United States, and spoke at the 'Parliament of Religions' in 1893. This was a conference of oikumenic mysticism convoked to demonstrate the fundamental unity of all religions. Vivekananda's short, but inspired speech established his reputation in the United States, and opened to him the possibility to tour and lecture in America and later in Europe. He was offered academic positions, including a professorship at Harvard University, which he declined in order to pursue his spiritual goals. Upon his return to India, he was celebrated as the spokesperson for his country, and received with pride. His stature now made it possible to start raising issues of social critique, yet never questioning the legitimacy of the traditional order itself. He continued to travel both in India and abroad until his death in 1902.

Another influential figure in the making of modern Hinduism is **Aurobindo Ghose** (1872–1950), who started his career as a political activist and was imprisoned on charges of terrorism, but released when a prosecution witness was murdered. After that, he decided to abandon politics and to dedicate himself to spiritual pursuits, gradually attracting followers and publishing his writings on yoga. Like Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, as he was now known, was also conversant with the ideas of Western philosophy and admired Plato, Nietzsche, and Bergson. Recent scholarship has also pointed out his affinity with Hegel, notably his appropriation of the Hegelian 'absolute spirit', which he reinterprets as an ecstatic supramental awareness. However, Aurobindo's concerns were primarily spiritual and his lasting influence comes from the reformulation of traditional views in terms suitable for the modern age. In this, he has proved remarkably successful as his books on integral yoga are still in print and continue to appeal to spiritual seekers worldwide.

Moderates and extremists. Imported enlightenment values and the spirit of traditionalism gradually developed into two conflicting ideologies that consolidated themselves on two wings of the Indian reform movement. The 'moderates', building on the ideas of the Bengali renaissance, were interested in social emancipation and relied on the effects of British rule which they considered beneficial, and the 'extremists' were interested in the revival of the Hindu ideas which they saw as suppressed by racist British oppression. The moderates preferred the legal political channels available to the advancement of their cause, while the extremists wanted to take the struggle to the streets and did not shun away from political violence. The moderates were content to project the realization of their goals into a more remote future, while the extremists wanted results immediately. The more astute among the British administrators realized that the shifts in society required the establishment of a new balance, but there were also headstrong conservatives, driven by racism and a sense of superiority, who saw their colleagues' willingness to concede

anything as a weakness, and they were often supported by like-minded politicians in London. As a result, the colonial regime always proposed too little and too late, which gradually shifted popular support towards the extremist wing. A case in point was the disastrous effort, in 1905, to partition the province of Bengal into a Hindu and a Muslim part, which was opposed by both communities and sparked a ferocious wave of protest. But even when the partition was revoked a few years later, it was done in a way that satisfied neither community.

In 1907, the moderates and extremists had reached a point where unified and coordinated resistance to oppression was no longer possible. Extremists had resorted to violence and the British cracked down on them, which the moderates considered a damaging development to the reform movement, as loyally presented demands of justice could now also be dismissed as terrorist ultimatums. Both wings continued the struggle on their own, until the movement was reunited under Mahātmā Gandhi's leadership after 1915.

swaraj 'own rule', the government of India by Indians elected by Indians

swadeshi '[produce] of own country', a shorthand for the boycott of imported goods as a means of political protest

Two concepts emerged during those debates, which are often left untranslated: *swaraj* and *swadeshi*. The idea of *swaraj* ('own rule') means the government of India by Indians who are elected or appointed by Indians, even if India itself would still remain a part of the British empire. *Swadeshi*, in turn, means 'of own country', and the word came to be used primarily in the context of a boycott of British imports, notably as a protest against the partition of Bengal. At the time, India had become one of the main markets for British industrial products, such as cotton cloth, and the boycott of these products hit the British economy quite hard: during 1905–1906, for example, the imports of British cotton fell by 44% and the imports of footwear dropped by 68%, because Indian consumers stopped buying them. This was also a boon to the rising local industries which acquired the market share.

The caste question. The extremist wing of the movement was also resolutely committed to all elements of the traditional Hindu heritage. This precluded low-caste and untouchable activists from joining their ranks. But moderates were not very eager to welcome them either, as their movement was also primarily driven by the traditional elites. And yet the oppressed gradually managed to make their voice heard. One of the early activists was **Jotirao** (Jyotirao, Jotiba) **Phule** (1827–1890), for whom even a reformed and modernized Hinduism seemed too oppressive. He belonged to the hired labour caste by birth, but his family had done

quite well. After attending an elementary school, he continued his studies in an English-language school run by Scottish missionaries. This institution combined a strict and non-compromising Christian spirit and complete intolerance for Hindu beliefs with a democratic attitude that did not respect caste differences and a broad curriculum that included natural science and other disciplines. Enlightenment authors were readily available, and their criticism of Christianity convinced Phule and many of his friends that all religions were wrong in their specifics, only what they shared could be believed.

In 1848, Phule reportedly had a life-defining experience, when the parents of a Brāhman friend rebuked him, as a low-caste Hindu, for attending his friend's wedding procession. When he returned home, shaken, his father endorsed the rebuke and said that in earlier days, things might have taken a much worse turn. At the same time Phule had been reading Thomas Paine's critique of traditional social institutions, which extremistic anti-British Brāhmans were propagating as an ideological foundation for resisting British domination. The ideas of Paine inspired in Phule a social radicalism of a different kind. He became active in promoting social reform, established schools for women as well as low-caste and untouchable students and protested Brāhman oppression, which soon led him to conflicts with his friends of the Brāhman caste as well as his own parents. One point he stressed were the common interests of all oppressed groups: at the time the caste system had become increasingly complicated because of separate qualifications for children of inter-caste marriages and a further division according to inherited professions. Slightly higher-standing groups in this hierarchy often sided with those still higher and shared their disdain of those below them. Phule tried to convince them of the wrongness of such views, insisting that the Brāhmans were responsible for all social injustice, and emancipation from the caste system would be in the interests of all oppressed groups. However, Phule did not oppose British colonialism, as the British sided with him in his condemnation of the traditional hierarchy.

Phule's work contributed towards the emancipation of many single individuals, including some of India's first feminists, but did not manage to overturn the system itself, as the majority of educated Hindus were of Brāhman descent. However, he managed to raise social awareness – among other things, he is credited with the introduction of the (still used) word ***dalit*** ('broken') as the designation of untouchable social groups into the parlance of reformers who spoke out against their oppression.

The gender question. The patriarchal norms of the traditional Indian society came to be questioned by the new, English-educated middle class, as the men who saw themselves as the new elite were not content to accept the old model of arranged marriages to illiterate, uneducated women. In this, they were

supported by the colonial administration, which also considered the Indian traditional view of women as backward. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, efforts were made to raise the status of women and to provide them with a level of education that would help them to advance in the world. Women's magazines promoted the ideal of an educated and domestically competent lady of the house, who could be the ideal companion for an Indian-born British civil servant.

This was very much in accordance with the views of the moderates, but rejected by the extremists. For example, when in 1891 a law was passed raising the age of marriage consent from 10 to 12 years for women, a Bengali paper wrote that 'the Hindu family is ruined' as a result. Moderates, who welcomed the law, were painted as traitors to their own nation and supporters of the oppressing racist colonial regime. Similarly, while the British had prohibited the self-immolation of widows in 1829 (largely because of the campaigning of Ram Mohan Roy), the women who committed the act in spite of the prohibition were now praised by extremists as the true daughters of the nation.

Such was the atmosphere in which the first women thinkers and activists emerged. One of these was **Savitribai Phule** (1831–1897), the wife of Jotirao Phule and the first teacher of the first Indian-run school for girls, many of whose pupils later grew to be important figures of the women's movement themselves. Another prominent early feminist was **Pandita Ramabai** (1858–1922), the daughter of a progressive Brāhman family. She was well-educated and not forced to marry at an early age, but lost her parents and had to move to Calcutta at the age of 20. In the Bengali capital she became acquainted with the ideas of social reformers and was welcomed among them as an intellectual of her own right. She was widowed after a brief marriage and then travelled to England where she converted to Christianity. Having been involved in the promotion of women's equality already before her travels, she opened a 'Home of Learning' for high-caste widows (as she herself had been one) after her return to India in 1889. In a book, written in English, she speaks about the conditions of high-caste Hindu widows, but also about the oppression of women more generally.

Ramabai, however, soon became the target of critique by extremist politicians. Even though her conversion to Christianity had presumably been not much more than a gesture of emancipation from the Hindu social structure (and Indian religious controversies), she was attacked as a zealous Christian missionary and started to be distrusted by the very women she tried to defend. As a result, she did then start to move more towards Christianity and opened a chain of missions open to anyone in need. These, too, are reported to have been run by women and evolved into centres of a women's movement.

The Muslim question. The British constantly made efforts to pit the Hindus and Muslims against each other. In some cases, as with the partition of Bengal, they did not succeed, but some of their measures produced real discord. For example, when a delegation of Muslims petitioned the British authorities in 1906 to grant them separate voting constituencies which would ensure that a number of Muslim deputies were elected even in regions with a Hindu majority, support was assured to them, but not necessarily because the British considered such a solution more democratic. A more likely explanation is that they anticipated that Hindu–Muslim debates might cripple the elected legislative councils and prevent the formation of a unified front against the British. The All-India Muslim League was established soon after, and confrontation between the religious communities grew. In the following years, in spite of a few rather successful efforts to collaborate, Muslim and Hindu leaders kept to separate paths of resistance. Eventually this led to the split of India as a nation into two opposite camps, enshrined after the achievement of independence in the partition into India and Pakistan (including the present Bangladesh, which seceded from Pakistan in 1971).

The idea of partition itself evolved from the thought of the poet and mystic thinker **Muhammad Iqbal** (1877–1938), who rose to prominence as an advocate of pan-Islamism in the 1920s. In his youth, Iqbal had been an Indian patriot, glorifying his homeland and opposing British rule in Urdu verse. At the same time, he was strongly inclined towards mysticism. In 1905 he continued his studies of philosophy in Europe, and the experience changed him: at the time, no love was lost between the European powers and the Ottoman empire, which had tried, but not succeeded, to implement modernizing reforms. Iqbal developed a sense of solidarity with the Islamic powers and was disappointed in secular enlightenment ideals. After his return to India in 1908, he no longer believed in the idea of the nation as the basis of an integrated community and as the solution for the political future of his country. He now took to writing in Persian, which educated young Muslims of India could read, but which would also be understood by people in Iran and Turkey. In his poetry he expounded a philosophy influenced simultaneously by the mystical traditions of Islam and the work of Bergson and other Western thinkers, while in his political statements he voiced the concerns of Indian Muslims who were growing increasingly wary of the nationalism of the Hindu reformers. Iqbal was no traditionalist, the Islam he endorsed was, he believed, capable of acting as a modernizing and emancipating ideology. For him, the positive programme of Islam was universal and could not be subjugated to the particular domination of one nation. On a more practical level, he understood that Hindus, the majority in each administrative unit, would easily be able to dominate the Muslim minority.

In 1930, in his presidential address to the Muslim League, Iqbal stated for the first time that the Muslims of India constitute a separate nation and therefore should have their own territory to live in. At this point, the idea was not to divide the state into two, only to ensure that there would be administrative units in India in which Muslims would be at the helm. During the following years this idea matured into the demand for partitioning India into two separate states, which indeed became a reality in 1947.

Views from the West. The rise of Indian self-consciousness coincided with several important developments in the Western world. One of these was the progress of humanist scholarship. The success of comparative linguistics established the relationship among Indian, Iranian, and most big European languages on a scientific basis and beyond any doubt. Studies of Sanskrit became an essential part of historical linguistics, and Western scholars were soon astonished by the level of scholarship of early Indian grammarians, which was superior even to their own current understanding of the nature of language. Translations of other Sanskrit and Pāli texts, including Brahmanist and Buddhist scriptures, inspired Western scholars of religion, who were quickly emancipated out of their previous limits of critical studies of the Bible and related texts. The academic discipline of Indology gained momentum, scholarly societies were established and some of the pioneer work accomplished at the time has not lost its importance to this day.

The second important development was the renewed interest in paranormal phenomena, accompanied by the increased faith in science and its capacity to explain everything. Movements such as theosophy emerged, which claimed to provide scientifically valid theories of the supernatural, seances, and mediums also attracted the attention of people with a rigorously rational frame of mind. The idea that all religions expressed, on an intuitive level, realities that can now be tackled with scientific rigour, enjoyed wide support. Many leading figures of the movement, including **Helena Blavatsky** (1831–1891), the founder of the Theosophical Society, were very interested in Indian thought, as they imagined that corroboration for their own theories can be discovered there. Blavatsky travelled in many parts of India and claimed to have reached Tibet in search of ancient wisdom, which endeared her to gullible Western sponsors and ensured her writings a large audience.

One person whom she managed to convince in her truth was **Annie Besant** (1847–1933), a passionate Irishwoman, who had already established a strong reputation as a champion of the disenfranchised and an advocate of women's rights, and had been arrested for promoting birth control and involvement in the organization of strikes. After meeting Blavatsky, she soon became interested in theosophy, moved to India, and became involved in politics there, eventually becoming the president of both the Theosophical Society (1907) and the Indian National

Congress (1917). Her opposition to the British raised her popularity in the political circles and her experience of the Irish independence movement was certainly helpful for Indians in planning their own actions of resistance.

In 1909, Besant met the son of a clerk of the Theosophical Society and became convinced the boy was the incarnation of the Buddha whom the doctrines of theosophy were predicting to arrive. This boy, **Jiddu Krishnamurti** (1895–1986) grew up in the custody of Besant and her associates and though he rejected any claims to supernatural descent or an inspired mission in 1929, he maintained a warm relationship with Besant until her death. Krishnamurti did not receive any academic education, but developed an eclectic worldview of his own, which he continued to publicize in talks, discussions, and writings. His influence was far-reaching – over the years his interlocutors included the Dalai Lama, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Aldous Huxley, as well as several prominent natural scientists. Some of these dialogues have been published and continue to enjoy a wide readership.

The path to independence. After 1916, Hindu and Muslim leaders abandoned their disagreements for a while in order to work together for the common purpose of constitutional reforms. This was made possible because two leaders of the younger generation had appeared on the scene – **Mahātmā Gandhi** (1869–1948) on the Hindu side and **Muhammad Ali Jinnah** (1876–1948) at the head of the Muslim League. Both of them were English-educated and had adopted a British lifestyle, including clothing and eating habits, something that Gandhi later dropped for an altogether different image. Both of them had also studied law, initially in India and later in London. Jinnah became a successful lawyer after his return to India and he joined politics ostensibly for quite pragmatic reasons. His aim was to overcome the dissent in the ranks of Indians opposed to British rule, and he was quite certainly no religious fanatic, just someone looking out for the interests of his own community. The Muslims and Hindus who were opposed to British rule, according to Jinnah's views, should focus on what they had in common rather than on what divided them. This is why he was critical of all political groups and thinkers who stressed religious identities, including Muhammad Iqbal. However, his pragmatic line had little success. For a time, Jinnah even quit active struggle and went to live in London, but still retained his connections to Muslim politics in India. When in 1937, the Muslim League did not win any seats in the elections even in the provinces where Muslims were a majority, Jinnah realized that in a united India the interests of his community would not be duly represented. He now became inclined to accept Iqbal's doctrine of two nations and even radicalized it into the demand of two separate states. After the partition of India, he became the first leader of Pakistan.

Mahātmā Gandhi (1869–1948). Mohandas Karamchand (Mahātmā) Gandhi is probably the best-known Indian political ideologist and leader of the twentieth

century, whose tactics of non-violent civil disobedience proved to be more efficient in pursuing the aims of the liberation movement than the conciliatory efforts of the moderates or the violent opposition of the extremists of the previous generation.

Gandhi's goal was to forge an Indian identity that would include also Muslims and he remained opposed to the partition of India until it happened. Yet, on a different level, his own views of India were very much Hindu-centred. He did not succeed as a lawyer on his return from London, and took a job in the British colonial administration of South Africa instead. He was thinking of himself as primarily British at the time, but his ideas soon changed when he experienced racism first-hand. He read widely and even corresponded with Leo Tolstoy, whom he greatly admired. Soon enough he started to put his philosophy into practice. One of the chief notions he developed was the idea of *satyagraha* ('insistence on truth'), a form of civil disobedience, which implied ignoring morally wrong acts of power and peacefully suffering the punishments inflicted because of this, while still not submitting to the pressure. The idea of *satyagraha* was to be combined with the Jain idea of *ahimsā*, or complete abstention from violence. In Gandhi's view, the idea of *satyagraha* was derived from the traditional idea of dharma as a moral order, which is intuitively known to the individual, and thus the 'truth' to be insisted on was a shared understanding to begin with. And the British discrimination of people based on the colour of their skin had nothing to do with it.

However, in South Africa Gandhi was only concerned with the British racism directed against the local Indian community, ignoring similarly oppressed native Africans. He is even quoted as evoking the shared Indo-European heritage of Indians and the British as an argument against racism, thus implicitly leaving Africans out of the equation.

satyagraha 'insistence on truth', a form of civil disobedience combined with the principle of non-violence, inducing protesters to peacefully suffer the punishments inflicted because of their refusal to bend to oppressive laws and regulations

Gandhi returned to India in 1915 and joined the political struggle. He proved to be remarkably efficient as a tactician, forging, among other things, a temporary alliance with pan-Islamist Muslims (whom Jinnah opposed because of their fundamentalism) and organizing a campaign of non-cooperation with the British as a result of the massacre of protesters in the Sikh temple grounds of Amritsar. Gandhi now became markedly anti-British, wearing only Indian traditional clothing. As his popularity grew, he was able to convert the protests into mass politics involving more and more of the population and turning local grievances into national concerns. In the meantime, he remained true to his commitment to

non-violence. Thus, to the dismay of many of his colleagues, he called off the non-cooperation campaign after a group of protesters killed policemen in a violent clash.

But his ideas also included a few blind spots. One of these was his decisive opposition to modernization. According to Gandhi, the future of Indian economy should consist of small-scale rural artisanal production. He was opposed to industrialization and urbanization, and in a letter written in 1909, he even argued that railways, hospitals, telegraphs, and lawyers ‘had to go’ after India would be able to control its own destiny. Upper classes, too, would have to learn to enjoy simple, happy, and religious peasant life. This vision may have endeared him to the simple and religious, but not yet happy peasants. However, India was lucky to have other leaders actually designing its economy after independence was regained.

Another oddity in Gandhi’s thought was his support for the caste system, even though he opposed the oppressive social practices directed against lower castes and untouchables. This led him to conflict with some of his collaborators, notably Bhimrao Ambedkar, who, coming from the untouchable group himself, was committed to the eradication of the whole notion of caste from Indian society as a source of social evil.

Gandhi continued the struggle for an independent and united India, leading massive popular protests, negotiating with the British and trying to appease the Muslims until the very end. It is ironic that after independence was finally achieved, but at the cost of the partition of India, Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu nationalist, and the tensions he tried to overcome – some of them with roots deep in his own worldview – persist to this day.

Independence. It has been argued that India finally gained its independence at least as much due to the problems into which the colonial administration had run as to the activities of Indian politicians. According to the British’s own laws and regulations, the crown had accumulated a massive debt to India during World War II, which it was unwilling to pay back. After long and difficult negotiations, the British instead conceded their power in India to the new constituent assemblies of the two new countries of India and Pakistan. India’s leadership was assumed by an interim government led by **Jawāharlāl Nehru** (1889–1964), a prominent activist of the independence movement, only recently released from prison to participate in the transition negotiations. Nehru had been a close ally and collaborator of Gandhi, but his vision of independent India differed significantly: he pushed for a quick industrialization under the auspices of the state, thus combining a version of state socialism and ancient Indian political theory. Nehru did not endorse Soviet-style

communism, however, and he was also hostile to Indian communists. In foreign politics, Nehru followed the politics of non-alignment, which raised India's profile as a moderator in conflicts likely to be accepted both by the West and the Soviet bloc.

The position of the minister of law and justice in the first post-independence government was held by **Bhimrao Ambedkar** (1891–1956), a professor of economics and law with two doctorates, one from Columbia University and the other from the London School of Economics. Ambedkar was born as a member of the untouchable (*dalit*) group and one of his lifelong aims was to eradicate the basis for the social evils that *dalits* had to suffer. His best-known work from the pre-independence period is a monograph, published in 1936, entitled *The Annihilation of Caste*, in which he systematically argues against the traditional social system, demonstrating its incompatibility with modern statehood. The constitution of India, of which Ambedkar was the chief architect, indeed posits the equality of all citizens, granting everybody the same civic rights, as well as the secular character of the republic. Ambedkar also almost single-handedly revitalized Buddhism in India, converting to it in 1956. As Buddhism did not acknowledge any caste differences, this became an attractive way out of the still-persisting social structure for *dalits*. Indeed, about 500 000 of them followed Ambedkar in his conversion and the number of converts has risen to millions afterwards. Ambedkar's revivalist movement was remarkable in that it specified negative vows that new converts had to make, stating that they will not worship Hindu gods, believe in their incarnations, and, specifically, that they will renounce the idea that the historical Buddha was an *avatar* of Vishnu.

Another influential intellectual who was involved in the creation of the Indian state was **Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan** (1888–1975), the first vice president and the second president of the new republic. Radhakrishnan had studied at a missionary school where his teachers were critical of Hinduism and he accepted the critique as a challenge. His confidence in his faith was restored by Vivekananda's interpretations, and his subsequent engagement with the philosophy of Hegel already took place in the context of Advaita Vedānta and its understanding of the absolute. Proving that Indian thought was not just a spiritual endeavour, but also intellectually equal to Western thought and productive in a modern society, became one of Radhakrishnan's lifelong goals. His voluminous writings on Indian philosophy and translations of classics as well as his participation in the rising movement of comparative philosophy have made a lasting contribution to intercultural dialogue. After a successful academic career, which culminated with a professorship at the University of Oxford, Radhakrishnan entered politics, as his international reputation and academic mind made him an ideal spokesman for his country.

The role of Hindu nationalism in Indian politics. The radical wing of Indian anti-colonial ideologists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fashioned the future worldview of their country as a return to the dominant position of the Hindu faith. This spirit of religious national identity has retained its strong position in contemporary India, which is constitutionally secular, that is, the state power positions itself at equal distance from all the religious communities represented among Indian citizens. Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority, around 80% according to official data, identify as Hindus, and political forces who claim India for Hindus have been active throughout the history of the Republic of India. A right-wing political party with such a programme, allied with a paramilitary Hindu organization, was formed a few years after the achievement of independence, and its descendant, the Bhāratiya Janatā Party (BJP, ‘The party of the people of India’), is one of the two major political forces in today’s India, claiming to be the biggest political party in the world. This party has led the government of India since 2014 and also holds the positions of chief ministers in a number of Indian states.

BJP is a right-wing party based on an ideology called **Hindutva**, or ‘Hinduhood’, developed in the 1920s by V. D. Savarkar (1883–1966), a London-educated radical Brāhman. Savarkar opposed the view of Hindu faith espoused by such thinkers as Gandhi and Radhakrishnan – a personal, individual way of life in harmony with society, nature, and the universe, without any claims on anyone else. Hindutva, in contrast, purported to construct a doctrine of communal life based on principles derived from scripture, and envisioned for India a political structure that recognized the superiority of Hindus over all other identities. Some proponents of Hindutva acknowledge the right of Indian inhabitants of other cultural backgrounds to merge into the group of Hindus, which, they claim, is primarily a cultural and patriotic self-identification. Opponents, however, have compared the Hindutva ideology to fascism and consider it incompatible with a democratic, secular form of government.

Contemporary Indian thought. The social and cultural institutions of contemporary India are modelled on a Western blueprint, which means that philosophy has become an academic discipline and religions have been divorced from politics, at least in the eyes of the law. And yet traditional thinking retains a strong foothold on many levels, from the daily cultural practices of the common people to the minds of religiously engaged politicians who try to enlist their communities for their particularistic agendas. India has also kept its appeal for the spiritual seekers from around the world, looking for charismatic gurus and cult leaders such as **Sai Baba** (1926–2011), whose organization currently has branches in 126 countries. Moreover, conversant with both the Western tradition and their own,

Indian thinkers such as Daya Krishna (1924–2007), Bimal Matilal (1935–1991), and Jitendra Mohanty (b.1928), to name but a few, have continued their efforts to synthesize Indian thought with other conceptual systems and to analyse it for its philosophical significance. No longer constrained by a need to prove the legitimacy of their work, and happily divorced from any type of spiritual quest, the work of these thinkers has laid the foundation of a modern Indian philosophy, which develops as well as questions both its own traditional origins and the insights of global thought. A younger generation of Indian thinkers is active in universities worldwide, bringing the dialogue to the doors of Western philosophy departments in which it will hopefully soon find a more permanent abode.

