u Purāṇa: A System of
utta: Punthi Pustak,

Viṣṇu, SBE 7 (Delhi:

gar, *The Yoga Upaniṣads*

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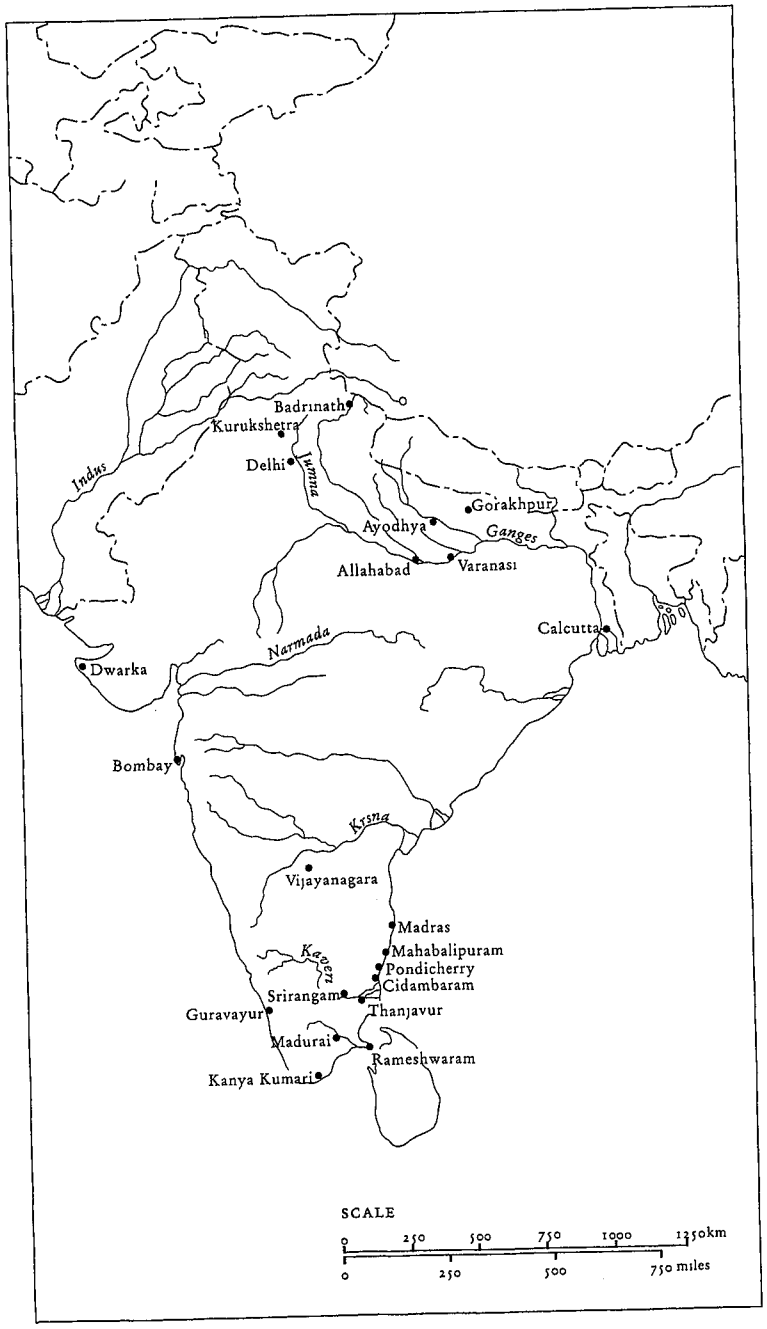
Introduction

Visiting India during the first half of the eleventh century, the remarkable Islamic scholar Al-Bīrūnī made a distinction between the views of the Hindu philosophers and the ordinary people.[1] In the former he thought he could find analogues for his own monotheistic belief. Al-Bīrūnī may or may not be correct in this, but what is significant is that we have here an early recognition, by an outsider, of both the diversity of Hinduism and its seemingly unifying features. For Al Bīrūnī, underlying the diversity of the popular religion is a philosophical unity to Hindu traditions. In this book I hope to survey the wide diversity of what has become known as 'Hinduism' as well as to indicate some common elements and unifying themes.

Hinduism is the religion of the majority of people in India and Nepal, as well as being an important cultural force in all other continents. Any visitor to south Asia from the West is struck by the colour, sounds, smells and vibrancy of daily ritual observances, and by the centrality of religion in people's lives. There are innumerable wayside shrines to local goddesses or divinized ancestors, majestic temples to the 'great' deities such as Viṣṇu or Śiva, festivals, pilgrimages to rivers and sacred places, and garlanded pictures of deities and saints in buses, shops and homes. Hindus will often say that Hinduism is not so much a religion, but a way of life. Hinduism also contains developed and elaborate traditions of philosophy and theology, which can be very different from those of the West, Al-Bīrūnī's comments notwithstanding.

This book is both a historical and thematic survey of Hinduism. It is an



Map 1 India showing some important sacred sites

attempt to make clear the structures of Hinduism and to explain its internal coherence as well as its apparent inconsistencies. While recognizing that it is impossible to include everything in a subject which covers a timespan of 5,000 years and which has existed over a vast geographical area, this book aims at giving comprehensive coverage of the history, traditions, rituals and theologies of Hinduism. Inevitably, in an approach which is both thematic and historical, there is some overlap in the material covered, but it is hoped that this will provide mutual reinforcement of important themes and ideas. The book presents the realms of the householder and the renouncer as distinct, and highlights ritual as a unifying feature of Hindu traditions. It also lays emphasis on the influence of Tantra which has often been underestimated. For the reader wishing to get a general impression of Hinduism, the introductory chapter 1 and chapter 9 on Hindu ritual (which I take to be more important than doctrine in understanding Hinduism) are the most relevant. For the reader mainly interested in theology and philosophy, chapter 10 provides a systematic overview. The book's intended readers are students taking humanities courses in universities and colleges, though it is hoped that others, particularly from Hindu communities themselves, may find something of interest in its pages.

Chapter 1 begins with the question 'what is Hinduism?' This is a complex issue, as the term 'Hindu' has only been in wide circulation for a couple of centuries and reading 'Hinduism' into the past is problematic. This chapter discusses these issues, goes on to develop ideas about Hinduism's general features and relates its study to some contemporary scholarly debates. The second chapter begins the historical survey of Hindu traditions, starting with the vedic religion and examining the relation between the Aryan culture which produced the Veda, Hinduism's revelation, and the Indus valley culture. Chapter 3 develops the historical survey, discussing the idea of *dharma*, truth and duty, and the institutions of caste and kingship. Chapter 4 introduces the idea of world renunciation and examines its ideals of liberation from the cycle of reincarnation through asceticism and yoga. Chapters 5 to 8 describe the great traditions of Vaiṣṇavism, whose focus is the deity of Viṣṇu and his incarnations, Śaivism, whose focus is Śiva, and Śāktism, whose focus is the Goddess, Devī. Chapters 9 and 10 are thematic, examining Hindu ritual and Hindu theology respectively, and chapter 11 traces the development of Hinduism as a world religion and its more recent manifestations in Hindu nationalist politics.

387,223, most of whom would be Hindu, while in the UK the number of Hindus for the same year is estimated at 300,000.[3] There are also many Westerners from Europe and America who would claim to follow Hinduism or religions deriving from it and Hindu ideas, such as karma, yoga and vegetarianism, are now commonplace in the West.

The actual term 'hindu' first occurs as a Persian geographical term for the people who lived beyond the river Indus (Sanskrit: *sindhu*). In Arabic texts, Al-Hind is a term for the people of modern-day India[4] and 'Hindu', or 'Hindoo', was used towards the end of the eighteenth century by the British to refer to the people of 'Hindustan', the area of northwest India. Eventually 'Hindu' became virtually equivalent to an 'Indian' who was not a Muslim, Sikh, Jain or Christian, thereby encompassing a range of religious beliefs and practices. The '-ism' was added to 'Hindu' in around 1830 to denote the culture and religion of the high-caste Brahmans in contrast to other religions, and the term was soon appropriated by Indians themselves in the context of establishing a national identity opposed to colonialism,[5] though the term 'Hindu' was used in Sanskrit and Bengali hagiographic texts in contrast to 'Yavana' or Muslim, as early as the sixteenth century.[6]

Defining Hinduism

Because of the wide range of traditions and ideas incorporated by the term 'Hindu', it is a problem arriving at a definition. Most Hindu traditions revere a body of sacred literature, the Veda, as revelation, though some do not; some traditions regard certain rituals as essential for salvation, others do not; some Hindu philosophies postulate a theistic reality who creates, maintains and destroys the universe, others reject this claim. Hinduism is often characterized as belief in reincarnation (*saṃsāra*) determined by the law that all actions have effects (*karma*), and that salvation is freedom from this cycle. Yet other religions in south Asia, such as Buddhism and Jainism, also believe in this. Part of the problem of definition is due to the fact that Hinduism does not have a single historical founder, as do so many other world religions; it does not have a unified system of belief encoded in a creed or declaration of faith; it does not have a single system of soteriology; and it does not have a centralized authority and bureaucratic structure. It is therefore a very different kind of religion in these respects from the monotheistic, western traditions of Christianity and Islam, though there are arguably stronger affinities with Judaism.

Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of independent India, said that Hinduism is 'all things to all men',[7] certainly an inclusive definition, but so inclusive as to be of little use for our purposes. Yet while it might not be possible to arrive at a watertight definition of Hinduism, this does not mean that the term is empty. There are clearly some kinds of practices, texts and beliefs which are central to the concept of being a 'Hindu', and there are others which are on the edges of Hinduism. I take the view that while 'Hinduism' is not a category in the classical sense of an essence defined by certain properties, there are nevertheless prototypical forms of Hindu practice and belief. The beliefs and practices of a high-caste devotee of the Hindu god Viṣṇu, living in Tamilnadu in south India, fall clearly within the category of 'Hindu' and are prototypical of that category. The beliefs and practices of a Radhasaomi devotee in the Punjab, who worships a God without attributes, who does not accept the Veda as revelation and even rejects many Hindu teachings, are not prototypically Hindu, yet are still within the sphere, and category, of Hinduism. The south Indian devotee of Viṣṇu is a more typical member of the category 'Hindu' than the Radhasoami devotee. In other words, 'Hinduism' is not a category in the classical sense – to which something either belongs or it does not – but more in the sense of prototype theory.

Prototype theory, developed by George Lakoff,[8] maintains that categories do not have rigid boundaries, but rather there are degrees of category membership; some members of a category are more prototypical than others. These degrees may be related through family resemblance; the idea that 'members of a category may be related to one another without all members having any properties in common that define the category'.[9] Hinduism can be seen as a category in this sense. It has fuzzy edges. Some forms of religion are central to Hinduism, while others are less clearly central but still within the category.

To say what is or is not central to the category of Hinduism is, of course, to make judgements about the degree of prototypicality. The question of the basis of such judgements arises. Here we must turn, on the one hand, to Hindu self-understandings, for Hinduism has developed categories for its own self-description,[10] as well as, on the other, to the scholar's understandings of common features or structuring principles seen from outside the tradition.

Although I have some sympathy with Jonathan Z. Smith's remark that religion is the creation of the scholar's imagination,[11] in so far as the act of

scholarship involves a reduction, a selection, a highlighting of some discourses and texts and a backgrounding of others, there is nevertheless a wide body of ritual practices, forms of behaviour, doctrines, stories, texts, and deeply felt personal experiences and testimonies, to which the term 'Hinduism' refers. The term 'Hindu' certainly does refer in the contemporary world to the dominant religion of south Asia, albeit a religion which embraces a wide variety within it. It is important to bear in mind that the formation of Hinduism, as the world religion we know today, has only occurred since the nineteenth century, when the term was used by Hindu reformers and western orientalists. However, its origins and the 'streams' which feed into it are very ancient, extending back to the Indus valley civilization.[12] I take the view that 'Hinduism' is not purely the construction of western orientalists attempting to make sense of the plurality of religious phenomena within the vast geographical area of south Asia, as some scholars have maintained,[13] but that 'Hinduism' is also a development of Hindu self-understanding; a transformation in the modern world of themes already present. I shall use the term 'Hindu' to refer not only to the contemporary world religion, but, with the necessary qualifications, to the traditions which have led to its present formation.

Religion and the sacred

What we understand by Hinduism as a religion partly depends upon what we mean by 'religion'. Our understanding of Hinduism has been mediated by western notions of what religion is and the projection of Hinduism as an 'other' to the West's Christianity.[14] While this is not the place for an elaborate discussion of the meaning of religion, it is nevertheless important to make some remarks about it, and to indicate some parameters of its use. The category 'religion' has developed out of a Christian, largely Protestant, understanding, which defines it in terms of belief. This is indicated by the frequent use of the term 'faith' as a synonym for 'religion'. If 'religion' is to contribute to our understanding of human views and practices, its characterization purely in terms of belief is clearly inadequate and would need to be modified to include a variety of human practices.

Definitions of religion provoke much debate and disagreement, but to use the term we have to have some idea of what we mean by it. Religion needs to be located squarely within human society and culture; there is no privileged discourse of religion outside of particular cultures and societies. The famous sociologist Emile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, first published in 1915, defined religion as 'a unified set of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things' which creates a social bond between people.[15] This unified set of beliefs and practices is a system of symbols which acts, to use Peter Berger's phrase, as a 'sacred canopy', imbuing individual and social life with meaning. The 'sacred' refers to a quality of mysterious power which is believed to dwell within certain objects, persons and places and which is opposed to chaos and death. Religion, following Berger, establishes a 'sacred cosmos' which provides the 'ultimate shield against the terror of anomy'.[16]

This sense of sacred power is of vital importance to the experience of men and women throughout the history of religions. In Hinduism a sense of the sacred might be experienced as the sense of a greater being outside of the self, a 'numinous' experience to use the term coined by the German theologian Rudolf Otto, characterized by a feeling of awe, fascination and mystery;[17] or the sense of the sacred might occur as an inner or contemplative experience within the self, what might be called a 'mystical' experience.[18]

There has been a tendency in recent studies to reduce the 'religious' to the 'political'.[19] While it is important to recognize that the religious exists only within specific cultural contexts, as does the political, the concept of the sacred is distinctive to a religious discourse within cultures. The sacred is regarded as divine power manifested in a variety of contexts: temples, locations, images and people. While this power is not divorced from political power, it can nevertheless exist independently, as is seen in popular religious festivals and personal devotional and ascetic practices which result in states of inner ecstasy.

The sacred exists entirely within culture. The categories of the sacred and the everyday are not substantive, as Jonathan Smith has observed, but relational; they change according to circumstances and situation. There is nothing in Hinduism which is inherently sacred. The sacredness of time, objects or persons depends upon context and the boundaries between the sacred and the everyday are fluid. A ritual dance performer who is possessed by a god one day, mediating between the community and the divine, will the next day be simply human again; or the temple image or icon prior to consecration is merely stone, metal, or wood, but once consecrated is empowered and becomes the focus of mediation: 'it becomes sacred by having our attention directed to it in a special way'.[20] The sacred in Hinduism is mediated through innumerable, changing forms which

bear witness to a deeply rich, religious imagination, centred on mediation and transformation.

The understanding of these aspects of human experience is, as Ninian Smart has pointed out, indispensable in the plural cultures of the contemporary world.[21] This study of Hinduism assumes this point and assumes that the academic study of religion, or religious studies, draws on a number of methods within the human sciences: anthropology, history, philosophy and phenomenology. There has been much recent debate concerning the nature of objective studies of other cultures by 'western' social scientists and a questioning of the very possibility, or desirability, of objectivity. The French social thinker Pierre Bourdieu has asked that we clarify the position of the author, and that the researcher be aware of the limitations of his or her perspective on the object of study.[22] While it may be true that we are all personally affected by what draws us, methodologically, the present study is written from a perspective standing outside Hinduism, rather than from inside. We should, however, be wary of regarding these categories as watertight, for there is a dialectical relation between the objective structures of Hinduism, its beliefs and practices, and the dispositions of the method used.[23] The methods of religious studies must mediate between, on the one hand, the objective structure of Hindu traditions and Hindu self-reflection, and, on the other, the community of 'readers' who are external (whether or not they happen to be Hindus).[24] Needless to say, I am not concerned with the truth or falsity of the claims made by the traditions described here. These claims are part of the social and psychological fabric of Hindu communities which have given them life, and which have had profound personal significance for people within them.

General features of Hinduism

Many Hindus believe in a transcendent God, beyond the universe, who is yet within all living beings and who can be approached in a variety of ways. Such a Hindu might say that this supreme being can be worshipped in innumerable forms: as a handsome young man, as a majestic king, as a beautiful young girl, as an old woman, or even as a featureless stone. The transcendent is mediated through icons in temples, through natural phenomena, or through living teachers and saints. Hinduism is often characterized as being polytheistic, and while it is true that innumerable deities are the objects of worship, many Hindus will regard these as an aspect or

manifestation of sacred power. Devotion (*bhakti*) to deities mediated through icons and holy persons provides refuge in times of crisis and even final liberation (*mokṣa*) from action (*karma*) and the cycle of reincarnation (*saṃsāra*). The transcendent is also revealed in sacred literature, called the 'Veda', and in codes of ritual, social and ethical behaviour, called *dharma*, which that literature reveals. The two terms *veda* and *dharma* are of central importance in what might be called Hindu self-understanding.

VEDA AND *DHARMA*

The Veda is a large body of literature composed in Sanskrit, a sacred language of Hinduism, revered as revelation (*śruti*) and as the source of *dharma*. The term *veda* means 'knowledge', originally revealed to the ancient sages (*ṛṣi*), conveyed to the community by them, and passed through the generations initially as an oral tradition. There is also a large body of Sanskrit literature, inspired but nevertheless regarded as being of human authorship, comprising rules of conduct (the Dharma literature) and stories about people and gods (the Epics and mythological texts called Purāṇas). These texts might be regarded as a secondary or indirect revelation (*smṛti*).[25] There are also texts in vernacular Indian languages, particularly Tamil, which are revered as being equal to the Veda by some Hindus.

The Veda as revelation is of vital importance in understanding Hinduism, though its acceptance is not universal among Hindus and there are forms of Hinduism which have rejected the Veda and its legitimizing authority in the sanctioning of a hierarchical social order. However, all Hindu traditions make some reference to the Veda, whether in its acceptance or rejection, and some scholars have regarded reference to its legitimizing authority as a criterion of being Hindu.[26] While revelation as an abstract, or even notional entity, is important, the actual content of the Veda has often been neglected by Hindu traditions. It has acted rather as a reference point for the construction of Hindu identity and self-understanding.[27]

Dharma is revealed by the Veda. It is the nearest semantic equivalent in Sanskrit to the English term 'religion', but has a wider connotation than this, incorporating the ideas of 'truth', 'duty', 'ethics', 'law' and even 'natural law'. It is that power which upholds or supports society and the cosmos; that power which constrains phenomena into their particularity, which makes things what they are.[28] The nineteenth-century Hindu reformers speak of Hinduism as the eternal religion or law (*sanātana*

dharma), a common idea among modern Hindus today in their self-description. More specifically, *dharma* refers to the duty of high-caste Hindus with regard to social position, one's caste or class (*varṇa*), and the stage of life one is at (*āśrama*). All this is incorporated by the term *varṇāśrama-dharma*.

One striking feature of Hinduism is that practice takes precedence over belief. What a Hindu does is more important than what a Hindu believes. Hinduism is not credal. Adherence to *dharma* is therefore not an acceptance of certain beliefs, but the practice or performance of certain duties, which are defined in accordance with dharmic social stratification. The boundaries of what a Hindu can and cannot do have been largely determined by his or her particular endogamous social group, or caste, stratified in a hierarchical order, and, of course, by gender. This social hierarchy is governed by the distinction between purity and pollution, with the higher, purer castes at the top of the structure, and the lower, polluted and polluting, castes at the bottom. Behaviour, expressing Hindu values and power structures, takes precedence over belief, orthopraxy over orthodoxy. As Frits Staal says, a Hindu 'may be a theist, pantheist, atheist, communist and believe whatever he likes, but what makes him into a Hindu are the ritual practices he performs and the rules to which he adheres, in short, what he *does*'.[29]

This sociological characterization of Hinduism is very compelling. A Hindu is someone born within an Indian social group, a caste, who adheres to its rules with regard to purity and marriage, and who performs its prescribed rituals which usually focus on one of the many Hindu deities such as Śiva or Viṣṇu. One might add that these rituals and social rules are derived from the Hindu primary revelation, the Veda, and from the secondary revelation, the inspired texts of human authorship. The Veda and its ritual reciters, the highest caste or Brahmans, are the closest Hinduism gets to a legitimizing authority, for the Brahman class has been extremely important in the dissemination and maintenance of Hindu culture. It is generally the Brahman class that has attempted to structure coherently the multiple expressions of Hinduism, and whose self-understanding any account of Hinduism needs to take seriously.

RITUAL AND SALVATION

Dharma implies a fundamental distinction between the affirmation of worldly life and social values on the one hand, and the rejection of worldly life or renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*) in order to achieve salvation or liberation (*mokṣa*) on the other. Religion in worldly life is concerned with practical needs; the help of deities in times of crisis such as a child's illness, the ensuring of a better lot in this life and the next, and the regulating of one's passage through time in the social institutions into which one is born. This kind of religion is concerned with birth, marriage and funeral rites; the regular ordering of life through ritual which is generally distinct from religion as leading to personal salvation or liberation (*mokṣa*). Richard Gombrich, who has highlighted this distinction, has called the former 'communal religion' to distinguish it from soteriology, the path of salvation.[30] Religion as soteriology is concerned with the individual and his/her own salvation, howsoever conceptualized, whereas communal religion is concerned with the regulation of communities, the ritual structuring of a person's passage through life, and the successful transition, at death, to another world. The former involves an element of faith and, more importantly, initiation into the particular way or method leading to the practitioner's spiritual goal. The latter is concerned with legitimizing hierarchical social relationships and propitiating deities.

The relationship between soteriology and practical religion is variable. Paths might demand complete celibacy and the renouncing of social life, in which case the Hindu would become a renouncer (*saṃnyāsin*), a wandering ascetic, or they might be adapted to the householder continuing to live in the world, for example by demanding a certain yoga practice. Some spiritual paths might allow women to be initiated, others might not; some might be open to Untouchable castes, while others might not. The aim of a spiritual path is eventual liberation rather than worldly prosperity which is the legitimate goal for the follower of practical religion. Hindus might, and do, participate in both forms of religion.

This distinction between practical religion and religion as soteriology, between appeasement and mysticism, is expressed at the social level in the figures of the householder, who maintains his family and performs his ritual obligations, and the renouncer who abandons social life, performs his own funeral and seeks final release. The purposes of the householder and renouncer, as Louis Dumont has shown,[31] are quite different, even contradictory, yet are both legitimated within Hindu traditions. The high-caste householder is born with three debts (*ṛṇa*) to be paid: the debt of vedic study to the sages (*ṛṣi*) as a celibate student (*brahmacārin*), the debt of ritual to the gods (*deva*) as a householder, and the debt of begetting a

son to make funeral offerings to the ancestors (*pitṛ*). Traditionally, only once these debts have been paid can a householder go forth to seek liberation. Sometimes, as in the famous text of secondary revelation, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the ideals of household obligation and ascetic renunciation are brought together by saying that a person can work towards liberation while still fulfilling his worldly responsibilities.

ONE AND MANY GODS

The term polytheism can be applied to Hinduism in so far as there is a multiplicity of divine forms, from pan-Hindu deities such as Śiva, Viṣṇu and Gaṇeśa to deities in regional temples, such as Lord Jagannāth at Puri, and deities in local village shrines. These deities are distinct and particular to their location; the goddess in a shrine in one village is distinct from the goddess in a different shrine. While most Hindus will regard these deities as distinct, many Hindus will also say that they are aspects or manifestations of a single, transcendent God. Some Hindus will identify this transcendent focus with a specific God, say Kṛṣṇa or Śiva, and maintain that the other deities are lower manifestations of this supreme God. Other Hindus will say that all deities are aspects of an impersonal absolute and that deities of mythology and the icons in temples are windows into this ultimate reality. What is important is that the deities as icons in temples mediate between the human world and a divine or sacred reality and that the icon as deity might be seen as a 'spiritualization' of matter.

MEDIATION AND THE SACRED

Central to any understanding of Hinduism is the role of mediation between the sacred and the everyday or 'profane'. The place of the interaction of the sacred with the human is the place of mediation; the connection between the community or individual and the religious focus. Mediation underlines difference; the difference between humans and deities, and the differences between human groups. These differences are mediated temporarily through ritual and festival cycles, and spatially through temples, icons, holy persons and holy places. In ritual, offering incense to the icon of a deity mediates between, or is thought to open a channel of communication between, the Hindu and the transcendent power embodied in the icon. Similarly, renouncers and gurus mediate between the sacred and the everyday worlds, as do people who become temporarily possessed during certain festivals.

The distinction between the sacred and the everyday overlaps with the important distinctions between the pure and the impure, and the auspicious and the inauspicious: distinctions which have been emphasized in recent studies of Hinduism.[32] The sacred is generally regarded as pure, though may also be manifested in impurity, as in the Aghori ascetic living in the polluting cremation ground. The sacred is also auspicious, yet may on occasion be inauspicious, as when a goddess of smallpox and other diseases visits one's family.

The possessed man or woman recapitulates the temple icon. Both contain sacred power and are identified with the deity. Both icon and possessed person are not merely representations of the deity, but have actually become the deity within the particular, circumscribed, ritual situation. The transformation of the non-empowered icon into empowered icon, or of the low-caste performer into the sacred deity, is a central structure of Hindu religious consciousness. The icon, or person who has become an icon, mediates between the sacred realm and the human community. Should the divine interact with the human outside ritual contexts, such as in an unexpected possession illness, then the unlooked-for mediation might not be welcome and, indeed, could be dangerous.

Not only certain people, but also certain places, mediate between the sacred and the everyday. Places of pilgrimage are called 'crossings' (*tīrtha*). One such crossing is the sacred city of Varanasi which is so sacred that liberation will occur at death for those lucky enough to die there. Here, the crossing from everyday to the sacred will be permanent. Again, rivers, such as the Ganges in the north or Kaveri in the south, are places where the sacred is manifested and Hindus receive blessings through visiting these sites.

Yet, while difference mediated by innumerable spatial and temporal forms is central, identity rather than hierarchy, and by implication the absence of mediation, is also important. While the deity is worshipped as distinct, the deity and devotee nevertheless share in the same essence and at a deep level they are one.[33] The idea of a boundless identity is at the heart of many Hindu soteriologies which assert the essence of a person, their true self (*ātman*), to be identical with the essence of the cosmos, the absolute (*brahman*). Even traditions which emphasize the distinction between God and the self at some level usually accept the identity or partial identity of worshipper and worshipped, of lover and beloved. This idea of an identity between the worshipper and the deity has even been called, by the

anthropologist Chris Fuller, one of Hinduism's 'axiomatic truths'.[34] Yet the coexistence of identity and difference, of immediacy and mediation, is also axiomatic. There is unity, yet there is difference: the god Kṛṣṇa's consort, Rādhā, is united with him, yet she retains her distinct identity; the self and the absolute might be one, yet caste and gender differences matter.

Hindu traditions

The idea of tradition inevitably stresses unity at the cost of difference and divergence. In pre-Islamic India there would have been a number of distinct sects and regional religious identities, perhaps united by common cultural symbols, but no notion of 'Hinduism' as a comprehensive entity. Yet there are nevertheless striking continuities in Hindu traditions. There are essentially two models of tradition: the arboreal model and the river model. The arboreal model claims that various sub-traditions branch off from a central, original tradition, often founded by a specific person. The river model, the exact inverse of the arboreal model, claims that a tradition comprises multiple streams which merge into a single mainstream.[35] Contemporary Hinduism cannot be traced to a common origin, so the discussion is directed towards whether Hinduism fits the river model or, to extend the metaphor, whether the term 'Hinduism' simply refers to a number of quite distinct rivers. While these models have restricted use in that they suggest a teleological direction or intention, the river model would seem to be more appropriate in that it emphasizes the multiple origins of Hinduism.

The many traditions which feed in to contemporary Hinduism can be subsumed under three broad headings: the traditions of brahmanical orthopraxy, the renouncer traditions and popular or local traditions. The tradition of brahmanical orthopraxy has played the role of 'master narrative', transmitting a body of knowledge and behaviour through time, and defining the conditions of orthopraxy, such as adherence to *varṇāśrama-dharma*.

BRAHMANICAL TRADITIONS

The brahmanical tradition can itself be subdivided into a number of systems or religions which are distinct yet interrelated, and which refer to themselves as 'traditions' (*saṃpradāya*) or systems of teacher–disciple transmission (*paramparā*). These traditions, which developed significantly during the first millennium CE, are focused upon a particular deity

or group of deities. Among these broadly brahmanical systems, three are particularly important in Hindu self-representation: Vaiṣṇava traditions, focused on the deity Viṣṇu and his incarnations; Śaiva traditions, focused on Śiva; and Śākta traditions, focused on the Goddess or Devī. There is also an important tradition of Brahmans called Smārtas, those who follow the *smṛti* or secondary revelation, and who worship five deities, Viṣṇu, Śiva, Sūrya, Gaṇeśa and Devī. These traditions have their own sacred texts and rituals, while still being within the general category of Hinduism.[36]

Cutting across these religious traditions is the theology of Vedānta; the unfolding of a sophisticated discourse about the nature and content of sacred scriptures, which explores questions of existence and knowledge. The Vedānta is the theological articulation of the vedic traditions, a discourse which penetrated Vaiṣṇava and, though to a lesser extent, Śaiva and Śākta thinking. The Vedānta tradition became the philosophical basis of the Hindu renaissance during the nineteenth century and is pervasive in the world religion which Hinduism has become.

THE RENOUNCER TRADITIONS

The renouncer traditions, while their value system is distinct from that of the Brahman householders, are nevertheless closely related to the brahmanical religions. Indeed, some brahmanical householder traditions, such as Śaivism, originated among the world-renouncers seeking liberation while living on the edges of society in wild places and in cremation grounds. The renouncer traditions espouse the values of asceticism and world transcendence in contrast to the brahmanical householder values of affirming the goals of worldly responsibility (*dharma*), worldly success and profit (*artha*), and erotic and aesthetic pleasure (*kāma*). The ideal of renunciation is incorporated within the structure of orthoprax Hinduism, though orthoprax renunciation must be seen in the context of general Indian renouncer traditions known as the Śramaṇa traditions. These Śramaṇa traditions, including Buddhism and Jainism, developed during the first millennium BCE and were in conflict with brahmanical, vedic orthopraxy.

POPULAR TRADITIONS

While there are pan-Hindu traditions of Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Śāktism alongside the renouncer traditions, there are also local or popular traditions which exist within a bounded geographical area, even within a

particular village. Their languages of transmission are the regional, vernacular languages rather than the Sanskrit of the brahmanical tradition. They are less concerned with asceticism than with ensuring that crops grow, that illness keeps away from the children, and that one is not haunted or possessed by ghosts. Such popular traditions are low-caste and need to appease 'hot' deities, particularly goddesses, who demand offerings of blood and alcohol. While the concerns of popular religion are different from those of the renouncer and brahmanical traditions, they are nevertheless informed by the 'higher' culture.

The process whereby the brahmanical tradition influences popular religion is called Sanskritization. Local deities become identified with the great deities of the brahmanical tradition and local myths become identified with the great, pan-Hindu myths. For example, the Dravidian goddess of pustular diseases, Māriyamman, might be identified as a manifestation of the great pan-Hindu goddess Durgā. Local deities can also become pan-Hindu deities and local narratives become commonly shared myths.[37] The god Kṛṣṇa, for example, may have been a local deity who became pan-Hindu. More recent examples might be the northern Goddess Santoṣī Ma, who has become a pan-Hindu deity through having become the subject of a movie, or the Kerala deity Aiyappan, who is coming to have trans-regional appeal. The influence of south Indian Dravidian culture on the grand narrative of the Sanskritic, brahmanical tradition has been underestimated and, until recently, little investigated.

The relationship between the popular and the brahmanical levels of culture is the focus of much debate among scholars of Hinduism. On the one hand popular tradition can be seen as a residue or consequence of the grand narrative of the brahmanical tradition: an imitation of the higher culture. On the other hand popular tradition can be seen to function independently of the high, brahmanical culture, but interacting with it.[38] Scholars who interpret Hinduism holistically, such as Madeleine Biardeau, tend to favour the importance of brahmanical culture in shaping the tradition.[39] Others, particularly anthropologists who have carried out fieldwork in a specific locality, stress the discontinuities of tradition, emphasizing the importance and independence of regional or popular religion.[40]

Hindu traditions, with their emphasis on continuity and the importance of the teacher or *guru* in the transference of knowledge, are essentially conservative and resistant to change. There is a fine balance between

such conservatism, which preserves the tradition, and the necessity to adapt to prevalent historical conditions. If traditions adapt too much then they are no longer the traditions that they were, yet if they do not adapt they are in danger of dying out. Some Hindu traditions have faded and others have arisen. Hinduism has adapted and reacted to political and social upheavals throughout its history, while maintaining many of its ritual traditions and social structures almost unchanged for centuries. The impact of modernity and the development of a middle class in India will inevitably effect Hinduism, and debates about civil rights, nationalism, the rights of the scheduled castes, and the Indian women's movement will inevitably transform it.

Hinduism and contemporary debate

Issues which have arisen in the contemporary study of Hinduism relate to wider cultural problems and general intellectual debates about agency, the relation of religion to politics, and gender issues. Many of these issues have arisen out of what is generally termed 'postmodernism', a movement originating in the West, which manifests in all areas of culture, and a discourse which questions and challenges traditional, rationalist views. Cultural studies, which cuts across traditional divisions in the humanities of sociology, history, philosophy and even theology, has developed within the general postmodernist framework. In 'deconstructing' rationalist discourses, cultural studies has highlighted traditions which have been occluded, both in the West and the East.

One of the most important examples of this with regard to India and Hinduism has been the work of the historian Ranajit Guha and his colleagues, who have worked on the subordinated or subaltern classes of India. One of the themes of this group is that in western, i.e. colonial and post-colonial, historiography of India, the highlighting of some themes and backgrounding of others has demonstrated the exercise of power and a denial of the agency of those who were oppressed. Historical discourse, according to Guha, has tended to write out subaltern classes (the lowest castes) and to see protests by those groups as merely an 'eruption' of discontent akin to natural disasters.[41] This critique of the western scholarship of India, particularly of the discipline of Indology, can also be seen in Ronald Inden's important and influential book, *Imagining India*.[42] Inden critiques the epistemological assumptions and political biases of orientalist 'constructions' of Hinduism, which have seen Hinduism primarily in

terms of caste, as a romanticized, idyllic community, or as 'oriental despotism'. He argues that all these views deprive Hindus of agency and sees them governed by external forces outside of their control.

Related to the discussion about the importance of understanding human agency and practice, in contrast to emphasizing impersonal structures which govern people's lives,[43] is the debate about gender issues. The history of Hinduism is the history of a male discourse. Its written texts and narratives have, with the exception of some notable devotional poetry, been composed by men, usually of the highest, brahmanical caste. In a tradition's self-reflection it is generally high-caste, male perceptions of themselves and of women which have come down to us, though some modern scholarship has highlighted women's voices from the past.[44] Because Hinduism has been dominated by men, this book reflects this fact, while being aware that women's self-perceptions and experience have generally been 'written-out' of the tradition. These debates, of course, are not exclusive to Hinduism and some contemporary concerns of the Indian women's movement, about whether Hinduism is inherently androcentric or whether Hinduism can be separated from androcentrism, have echoes in Christianity and other religions. Recent scholarship has begun to uncover these marginalized traditions and I refer the reader to some of that work where appropriate.

The chronology of Hinduism

Before the first millennium CE there is no historiography in the south Asian cultural region and texts are not dated. The chronology of Indian religions has therefore been notoriously difficult to establish. We have to rely on archaeological evidence of coins, pottery and, particularly, inscriptions, and on the internal evidence of texts. The dating of early texts is very problematic. The sequence of texts can sometimes be established in that if one text is quoted by another, the former must be earlier, but precise dating is impossible. Chinese translations of Buddhist texts are dated, which helps establish the chronology of Buddhism, but is less useful with regard to Hindu material. The more accurate dating of the Buddha to almost a century later than the traditional dating of 566, to 486, BCE, discovered by Richard Gombrich and Heinz Bechert,[45] will hopefully lead to reassessment of the dating of all early Indian material.

One of the cliches about Hinduism has been that it is ahistorical and sees time as cyclic rather than linear, which has militated against the keeping of accurate historical records. While it is true that Hinduism does have a view of time repeating itself over vast periods, it is not the case that Hindus have not been interested in their past. Within India, as elsewhere, the record of the past has reflected the concerns of the present, though any historical awareness has been embedded in myths, biographies of people in authority (the *carita* literature), in genealogies of families (the *vaṃśānucarita* sections of the Purāṇas), and in histories of ruling families in specific locations (the *vaṃśāvalī* literature). The earliest writing of history in the south Asian region occurs in the fourth century CE with the chronicles written by Sri Lankan Buddhist monks.[46] Myths and genealogies have been recorded particularly in the Hindu Epics and texts called Purāṇas, reaching their present form in the mid first millennium CE.[47] A particularly striking text, part of the *vaṃśāvalī* genre, more concerned with historicity than with mythology, is the 'History of the Kings of Kashmir', the *Rājataraṅgiṇī* composed during the twelfth century by Kalhaṇa. This records the genealogies of the kings and brief descriptions of their exploits.[48]

The chronology of south Asia has been divided into ancient, classical, medieval and modern periods. While this scheme does reflect genres of texts, it is important to remember that there are continuities between these periods. The following pages assume the following general chronological scheme:

- the Indus valley civilization (*c.* 2500 to 1500 BCE). Elements of Hinduism may be traced back to this period.
- the vedic period (*c.* 1500 to 500 BCE). The rise of Aryan, in contrast to Dravidian, culture occurs during this period, though there may be more continuity between the Aryan and Indus valley cultures than was previously supposed. During this period the Veda was formulated and texts of Dharma and ritual composed.
- the epic and purāṇic period (*c.* 500 BCE to 500 CE). This period sees the composition of the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, as well as the bulk of the Purāṇas. A number of important kingdoms arise, particularly the Gupta dynasty (*c.* 320 CE to 500 CE), and the great traditions of Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Śāktism begin to develop.
- the medieval period (*c.* 500 CE to 1500 CE) sees the development of devotion (*bhakti*) to the major Hindu deities, particularly Viṣṇu, Śiva and Devī. There are major developments in the theistic traditions of Vaiṣṇavism, Śaivism and Śāktism. This period sees the composition of

devotional and poetic literature in Sanskrit and vernacular languages, as well as the composition of tantric literature.

- the modern period (*c.* 1500 CE to the present) sees the rise and fall of two great empires, the Mughal and the British, and the origin of India as a nation state. The traditions continue, but without significant royal patronage. The nineteenth century sees the rise of Renaissance Hinduism and the twentieth century the development of Hinduism as a major world religion.

2 Ancient origins

The origins of Hinduism lie in two ancient cultural complexes, the Indus valley civilization which flourished from 2500 BCE to about 1500 BCE, though its roots are much earlier, and the Aryan culture which developed during the second millennium BCE. There is some controversy regarding the relationship between these two cultures. The traditional view, still supported by some scholars, is that the Indus valley civilization declined, to be replaced by the culture of the Aryans, an Indo-European people originating in the Caucasus region who migrated into south Asia and spread across the fertile, northern plains, which, throughout India's long history, have offered no obstacle to invaders or migrants. The alternative view is that Aryan culture is a development from the Indus valley civilization and was not introduced by outside invaders or migrants; that there is no cultural disjunction in ancient south Asian history, but rather a continuity from an early period. Yet, whether the Aryans came from outside the subcontinent or not, Hinduism might be regarded as the development over the next 2,000 years of Aryan culture, interacting with non-Aryan or Dravidian and tribal cultures, though it is Aryan culture which has provided the 'master narrative', absorbing and controlling other discourses.

The views and arguments regarding the origins of Hinduism have not been free from ideological interests and the quest for origins itself has been a factor in the development of Hinduism over the last two centuries. Hindu revivalists in the nineteenth century, such as Dayānanda Sarasvatī, looked to Hinduism's Aryan past to imbue it with new moral impetus