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

and the search for origins has been important for Indology as a scholarly articulation and justification for colonialism. The quest for origins is also relevant in the contemporary politics of Hinduism, which traces continuity between an ancient past and the present, bearing witness to India's past, Hindu, greatness (see p. 262).

In examining the roots of Hinduism we must be aware of the rhetoric of origins, as it might be called. Indeed, the very quest for an 'origin' may suggest an 'essence' which is highly problematic. In searching for an origin we find only 'traces' or signs which constantly point beyond themselves, are constantly deferred.[1] That is, an 'origin' is always the consequence of something which has gone before, and the 'origin' cannot be regarded in a teleological way, with hindsight, as pointing towards that which follows. In examining the 'traces' which constitute a past culture, we should remember that such a culture was complete in itself rather than in some sense preliminary, lived by people who experienced the fullness and contradictions of human life, and that any sketch must necessarily be selective and restrictive.

With these qualifications in mind, this chapter will examine the roots of Hinduism in the Indus valley and Aryan cultures, and discuss the vedic religion of early Indian society.

The Indus valley civilization

In 1921 Sir John Marshall, Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India, directed D. R. Sahni to begin excavations at Harappa. He and R. D. Banerjee, excavating at Mohenjo-Daro in Sind, discovered the Indus valley civilization. As with the great civilizations of Sumer and pharaoic Egypt, this urban civilization was centred on a river and located in the basin of the Indus which flows through present-day Pakistan. This Indus valley or Harappan civilization developed from about 2500 BCE, though its origins reach back to the Neolithic Period (7000 – 6000 BCE), reached its peak around 2300–2000 BCE (trade links with Mesopotamia have been dated to this period), was in decline by 1800 BCE and had faded away by 1500.[2]

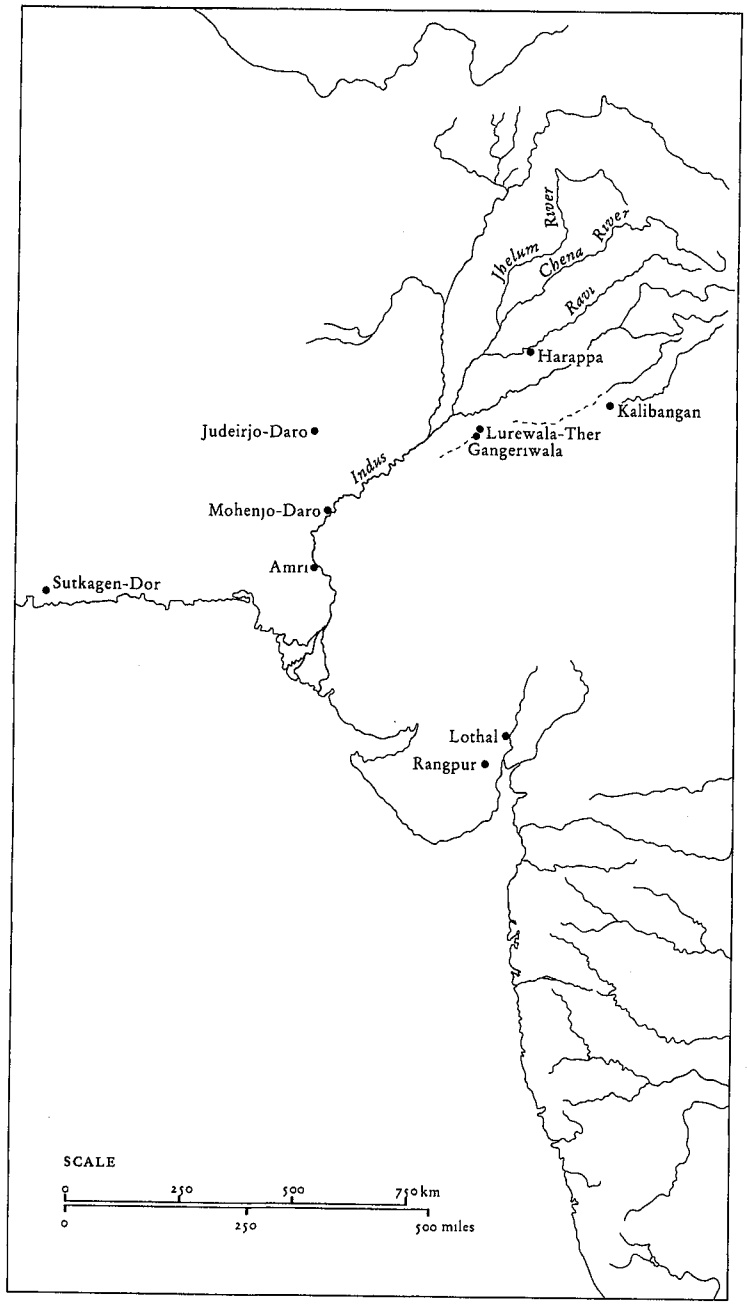
This was a developed, urban culture. Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa, separated by some 40 miles, were two of this civilization's most important cities and housed some 40,000 inhabitants who enjoyed a high standard of living. The cities had sophisticated water technologies, most of the houses having drainage systems, wells, and rubbish chutes emptying into waste-

pots which were emptied municipally.[3] As in ancient Mesopotamia, grain was the basis of the economy and the large store-houses in the Indus towns may have been for grain collected as tax. There were trade contacts with the Middle East and with the hunter-gatherer tribes of Gujarat, the town of Lothal in Gujarat being one of the most important centres for importing and exporting goods. There remain other cities of the Indus valley civilization yet to be excavated, at Judeiro-Daro, Lurewala Ther and Ganaweriwala Ther on the course of the Hakra, an ancient dried-up river in present day Haryana. The antecedents of this culture can be traced to the site of Mergarh, 150 miles north of Mohenjo-Daro in Baluchistan, where the French archaeologist Jean-Françoise Jarrige has dated the agricultural community to before 6000 BCE and has established an unbroken cultural continuity from that early date to the period of the Indus valley civilzation.[4]

THE DEVELOPMENT AND CONTINUITY OF THE INDUS VALLEY

The development and expansion of the Indus valley culture was probably the consequence of a growth in population, itself due to the development of farming and the availability of food supplies grown on the rich alluvial deposits of the Indus valley. Indeed, the importance of arable farming is demonstrated by the large granaries in Mohenjo-Daro on the west bank of the Indus, and in Harappa on the east bank of the Ravi. Evidence for this civilization has come mainly through the excavations of these two cities and from other, smaller, sites. Apart from Mergarh, the sites at Amri, 100 miles south of Mohenjo-Daro, at Kalibangan in the Punjab, and at Lothal near Ahmadabad in Gujarat, are notable.

This culture was very extensive and archaeological evidence for the mature Indus valley civilization has been found at over 1,000 sites covering an area of 750,000 square miles, from Rupar in the east in the foothills of the Himalayas near Simla, to Sutkagen Dor in the west near the Iranian border, to Lothal on the Gujarat coast.[5] Judging by the archaeological record, there was a unity of material culture, notably pottery, architecture and writing, in the Indus valley by as early as the fourth millennium BCE, which was preceded by a period of continuous development at different sites from the early Neolithic Period. The Indus valley culture did not develop due to the direct influence of external cultural forces from Sumer or Egypt, but was an indigenous development in the Baluchistan and Indus regions, growing out of earlier, local cultures.



Map 2 Major sites of the Indus valley civilization (adapted from Parpola, *Deciphering the Indus Script*, p. 7)

THE RELIGION OF THE INDUS VALLEY

Needless to say, we know little of the polity or religion of this civilization. There is a system of writing, the Indus valley script, which has been found inscribed on steatite seals and copper plates, but this has not yet been successfully deciphered and, until more samples or a bilingual inscription are found, will probably remain largely obscure. The biggest issue which has bearing on the development of Hindu traditions from the Indus valley, lies in the answer to the questions: what is the language of the steatite seals? And to what group of languages is it related? There have been two predominant views among scholars, one that it represents a language belonging to the Dravidian linguistic family, the other that it is an early form of Indo-European.[6]

The Dravidian languages include the south Indian languages of Tamil, Kannada, Telegu and Malayalam, as well as Brahui, the language of a hill people in Pakistan. The presence of these languages is strong evidence for there being a pan-Indian Dravidian presence, before the predominance of the Indo-Iranian language group, itself a part of the Indo-European family. The Indo-European languages include Greek, Latin, and the Indo-Iranian languages which comprise Avestan (the sacred language of the Zoroastrians), Sanskrit, and the north Indian vernaculars of Gujarati, Urdu, Hindi, Kashmiri, Oriya and Bengali.

Colin Renfrew makes the point that in deciphering the script we need to begin with something known, but there are no bilingual inscriptions, so decipherers assume a solution and then try to demonstrate its plausibility.[7] The successful decipherment of the script would tell us something about the daily transactions of these people and might tell us something of their religion or religions. As it stands we have to infer social and religious contents from the material culture, though Asko Parpola claims to have made significant advances in understanding the Indus script and its relation to Dravidian languages and Dravidian forms of Hinduism.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the Indus civilization is the high degree of uniformity of urban planning and even a conformity in size of building bricks. Many of the houses were built on a similar ground plan around a central courtyard, and many houses had a water supply and drainage system. This suggests a sophisticated administration and a hierarchical structure of authority. In both Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro there was a fortified lower city separated from a fortified citadel or 'acropolis' sit-

uated on a raised mound, which contained halls and temples. Such uniformity may suggest more than wide diffusion of a culture, even a polity imposed on a large area through conquest, with the centre of this empire and its administration at Mohenjo-Daro. If so, this would be the earliest imperial formation in South Asia, which may also have involved the imposition of an official religion, perhaps centred on the cult of the king. There is, however, no conclusive evidence without the decipherment of the Indus valley script and ideas about the nature of the state must remain speculative.

The religion of the mature Indus valley culture has to be inferred from the buildings which were most probably temples, stone statues, terracotta figurines and particularly the steatite seals. The state religion seems to have involved temple rituals, perhaps animal sacrifice, and ritual bathing in the 'great bath' found in the citadel at Mohenjo-Daro. This bath is reminiscent of tanks found in later Hindu temples and reflects a concern with ritual purification through water, an important idea in Hinduism. At Kalibangan a ritual area has been found in which animal sacrifice seems to have been practised and seven 'fire altars' have been located. Indeed, the brick platforms by the great bath at Mohenjo-Daro may have served a similar purpose.[8]

The large number of female terracotta figurines unearthed during the excavations, may have been goddess images and the presence of the goddess in later Hinduism may be traced back to this early period. It is, of course, impossible to say whether there is a continuity in the cult of the goddess from this early age, and the fact that the goddesses are the focus of worship in the Indus culture does not necessarily mean that these are the forerunners of the Hindu goddesses. Goddess worship and the central concerns of fertility seem to have been common in the ancient world and the Harappan goddess or goddesses may have more in common with Sumerian than with later Hindu deities.

Perhaps suggestive of the later religions are the images on the remarkable steatite seals, particularly the 'Pasupati' seal, of a seated, perhaps ithyphallic, figure surrounded by animals, either horned or wearing a headdress. Sir John Marshall and others have claimed that this figure is a prototype of the Hindu god Śiva, the yogin and Lord of the animals (*paśupati*), sometimes represented with three faces, and the posture with the knees out and feet joined has been interpreted as evidence of yoga in pre-Aryan culture (see fig. 1).[9] However, it is not clear from the seals that the 'proto-Śiva' figure has three faces, as is claimed, nor is it clear that he is

Figure 1 Indus valley 'proto-Śiva' seal

seated in a yogic posture. Asko Parpola has convincingly suggested that the proto-Śiva is in fact a 'seated' bull, almost identical to figures of seated bulls found on early Elamite seals (*c.* 3000–2750 BCE).[10] While the claim that in the seals we have representations of a proto-Śiva is speculative, it is nevertheless possible that iconographic features are echoed in the iconography of Śiva; the half-moon in Śiva's hair resembling the horns of the bull-god. 'Phallic'-shaped stones have also been found, suggestive of the later aniconic representation of Śiva, the *liṅga*.

However, while these connections may be speculative, Parpola has tried to demonstrate that there are a number of linguistic and iconographic continuities between the Indus valley civilization and south Indian, Dravidian forms of Hinduism. The South Indian god Murugan, the young man identified with the god of war, Skanda, is represented in the Indus valley script, argues Parpola, by two intersecting circles (the word *muruku* in Dravidian languages, suggestively denotes 'bangle'), and a seal depicting a person bowing to a figure standing in the middle of a fig tree echoes in later Indian iconography of fig trees (such as the Buddhist banyan tree which

indicates the Buddha in early representations). The fig is furthermore associated with the planet Venus, which is in turn later associated with the goddess Durgā, and with the *tilak*, a red dot worn on the forehead.[11]

It is tempting to speculate that there are continuities of religion from the Indus valley into Hinduism, which would make the roots of the religion go back a very long way, but we must exercise caution. The ritual bath, the fire altars, the female figurines, the horned deities and the '*liṅgas*' are certainly suggestive of later Hindu traditions. However, ritual purity, an emphasis on fertility, sacrifice, and goddess worship are common to other religions of the ancient world as well. Indeed, the steatite image of a figure battling with lions is more reminiscent of the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh myth than anything found in later Hinduism, though again Parpola has argued continuities with the Goddess Durgā battling with the buffalo demon.[12]

The Indus valley civilization seems to have declined rather suddenly between 1800 and 1700 BCE, primarily due to environmental causes such as flooding or a decrease in rainfall. A squatter's period continued for some time after this and smaller Indus valley towns and villages survived the abandonment of the large cities. At Mohenjo-Daro a number of skeletons were found where they had fallen, the victims of a violent death. It has been claimed that these deaths were caused by early Aryan invaders.[13]

The Aryans

The most commonly accepted theory to date has been that Hinduism is the consequence of incursions of groups known as Aryans into the northern plains of India from central Asia, via the mountain passes of Afghanistan, around 1500 BCE. Some of these groups went into Iran and there are close affinities between the Iranian religion of the Avesta (the sacred scripture of Zoroastrianism) and the religion of the Veda. This narrative has maintained that the Aryans were of the same stock as groups which went west into Europe. Their language was an Indo-European tongue which developed into vedic Sanskrit and finally into classical Sanskrit, the sacred language of Hinduism, and they worshipped primarily a fire god, Agni, a hallucinogenic plant, Soma, and a warrior god, Indra. The self-designation of these people was the Sanskrit *ārya*, meaning 'noble' or 'honourable', which referred to the three highest social classes of their society, as distinct from the indigenous people of south Asia whom they encountered and subjugated by means of a superior war technology. They spread over the northern plains and, some time after 1000 BCE, reached the Ganges region which became known as the 'Aryan homeland' (*āryāvarta*). Aryan culture slowly spread to the Deccan and was established in south India by around the sixth century CE. Thus the Indo-European-speaking Aryans are contrasted with the indigenous, Dravidian-speaking descendants of the Indus valley civilization whom they conquered. Knowledge of the Aryans comes mostly from their sacred text the *Ṛg Veda Saṃhitā*, the earliest literature of Hinduism.

The predominance of Aryan culture over Dravidian culture is not disputed, but the origin of the Aryans as coming from outside the subcontinent has recently been questioned. Two theories concerning the origin of the Aryans have emerged: what might be called the Aryan migration thesis and the cultural transformation thesis.

- The Aryan migration thesis. The Indus valley civilization, which speaks a Dravidian language, declines between 2000 and 1800 BCE. The Aryan migrations, or even invasions, occur from about 1500 BCE and the Aryans become the dominant cultural force. This has been the traditional, scholarly picture and is the one roughly sketched above.
- The cultural transformation thesis. Aryan culture is a development of the Indus valley culture whose language belongs to the Indo-European family, possibly spoken in the region as far back as the Neolithic Period, in interaction with Dravidian culture. On this view there were no Aryan incursions into India, but Indus valley culture is an early Aryan or vedic culture.

These positions are stated rather baldly here for the sake of clarity and there may be variations of these.

THE MIGRATION THESIS AND THE ARYAN MYTH

Although there is an undisputed connection between Sanskrit and other Indo-European languages, the picture may be much more complex than the Aryan migration thesis allows. Indeed, the history which has been portrayed of the Aryans in India may reflect to a large extent the European social world in which the theory developed. According to Poliakov, the idea of invading Indo-Aryans developed in the eighteenth century when western scholars were wishing to be free from the confines of Judeo-Christian thought while at the same time becoming aware of Indian culture through colonization.[14] The idea of an Aryan invasion developed

with interest in Sanskrit, linguistics and vedic studies and, according to Shaffer, was perpetuated by Indian historians after independence in order to demonstrate the equality of ancient India with Europe.[15]

Laying aside, for the moment, the question concerning the truth or falsity of Aryan migrations into north India, this history, which Poliakov has called the 'Aryan Myth', has constructed Hinduism in a certain way. The Aryans, representing a world-ordering rationality, a 'higher' religion, are contrasted with the irrationality of the Dravidians, the pre-Aryan original inhabitants of India. According to this line of thinking, the Dravidian culture increasingly makes incursions into 'Hinduism' after the vedic period. Inden has shown how the history of Hinduism has been seen by 'the founders of Indological discourse' as an initial phase of pure, intellectual vedic religion, followed by the classical phase which reacted with devotionalism against the 'higher' religion of the earlier period, followed by a third religion of an animistic folk level, 'the religion of the Dravidian or pre-Aryan race'.[16]

Essentially, the argument goes, the intellectual, nature-religion of the Aryans – a religion with Greek and Scandinavian equivalents – became corrupted by the emotional devotionalism of the Dravidians. In other words, western reconstructions of Indian history, particularly the early period of its formation, have been governed by deeper cultural interests. This picture has recently been questioned.

THE CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION THESIS

If there were Aryan migrations, let alone an invasion, into India after the decline of the Indus valley culture, then this would hopefully be corroborated by archaeological evidence. The most convincing evidence to date for the Aryan incursions has been a kind of pottery, painted grey ware, found in the Ganges–Yamuna region, supposedly occupied by the Aryans. Carbon 14 dating places this painted grey ware between 1100 and 300 BCE, precisely the dates of the postulated Aryan migrations. Some of the sites where this pottery has been found, such as Hastinapur, have been associated with the later Sanskrit epic poem the *Mahābhārata*, thereby further establishing the connection between the Indo-Aryans and the painted grey ware.[17]

However, continuities have been found between the painted grey ware and indigenous protohistoric cultures of the region, thereby suggesting a continuity of culture rather than a disjunction as would be implied by

Aryan incursions. Furthermore, Shaffer has argued that iron technology developed within the Indian subcontinent itself,[18] rather than being introduced by an external source such as the Aryan invaders. According to Shaffer, modern archaeological evidence does not support the idea of Aryan migrations into India. Rather, in Shaffer's words, 'it is possible to document archaeologically a series of cultural changes reflecting indigenous cultural development from prehistoric to historic periods'.[19] The idea of Aryan incursions based on the linguistic evidence of the connections between Sanskrit and European languages has been read back into the archaeological record which, upon re-evaluation, is not supportive of that theory. It should be noted here, however, that Parpola thinks that the pattern of distribution of painted grey ware corresponds to the distribution of vedic, Aryan culture.[20]

Even if the Shaffer line of argument is correct – that the painted grey ware is incompatible with Aryan incursions – there is still the linguistic evidence to be considered. On the one hand archaeological evidence supports the idea of a continuity of culture from the earliest times in north India, and, according to some, does not support the Aryan migration thesis. Yet, on the other, the strong links established between Sanskrit and Indo-European languages and between vedic religion and the religions of other Indo-European groups is undeniable.

One argument which brings these ideas together is that the language of the Indus valley does not belong to the Dravidian language family, but, as Colin Renfrew and others suggest, to the Indo-European. This hypothesis 'would carry the history of the Indo-European languages in north India and Iran back to the early Neolithic Period in those areas'.[21] There would then be continuity at all levels from the Indus valley through to the Aryan culture of the first millennium BCE. According to this view, Indus valley religion develops into the religion of the Hindus. Indus valley language develops into vedic Sanskrit and Indus valley agriculture develops into the vedic agrarian lifestyle.

THE ARYAN MIGRATIONS RECONSIDERED

Both the Aryan migration thesis and the cultural transformation thesis have bodies of supporting evidence. Arguably, however, the meticulous, thorough work of Asko Parpola establishes strong evidence for the Indus valley script belonging to the Dravidian language group. His evidence is based on an analysis of language from a wide-ranging cultural sphere,

from Anatolia to the Deccan; on iconographic continuities between Indus valley and Dravidian forms of Hinduism, and on discontinuities between vedic or Aryan forms and those of the Indus valley. The Aryan sacred text, the *Ṛg Veda* speaks of the Aryans subduing cities of the Dāsas, which it describes as comprising circular, multiple concentric walls. While this seems not to refer to the cities of the Indus valley, which are square, it does, Parpola argues, correspond to the hundreds of fortified Bronze Age villages in Bactria. The Dāsas, the enemies of the Aryans, are not the inhabitants of the Indus valley, but other groups who spoke an Aryan language, and whose migration preceded those of the Aryans.

One piece of evidence that the Indus valley people could not have been Indo-European speakers, suggests Parpola, is the absence of the horse and the chariot. Wherever Indo-Aryan cultures have been identified, horse remains have been found as well as chariots. The Aryan tribes who entered the north-west of India, argues Parpola, drove in two-wheeled war-chariots drawn by horses, terms which have Indo-European etymology. Nowhere in the Indus valley culture have the remains of horses been found, and nowhere depicted on the seals.[22] The horse is an Aryan animal and the chariot an example of a superior war technology.

A modified Aryan migration theory is therefore supported by Parpola's work. At the beginning of the second millennium BCE, Aryan nomads entered the Indian subcontinent. They were, of course, a minority, and, while the Indus valley culture continues without a break, as the archaeological record shows, the Aryan culture lived and developed alongside it and absorbed elements of it. However, there is little doubt that there are continuities between the Indus valley and vedic cultures. The new groups, who possessed *ārya*, 'nobility', formed a dominating elite speaking the Aryan language, though Sanskrit has absorbed proto-Dravidian features, such as the retroflex sound which does not exist in other Indo-European languages, as well as agricultural terms. Dravidian languages, as one would expect, have also absorbed elements of Sanskrit.[23] Over a number of centuries bilingualism would have developed until the majority of the population adopted the Aryan language, a form of vedic Sanskrit, as Modern French developed from vulgar Latin.[24]

The idea of bilingualism is perhaps problematic – there would need to be strong social pressures to adopt a new language – but Parpola's arguments are well supported. The vital evidence must come from the Indus valley script, and only when that is successfully deciphered can the question of the relation between Aryan and Indus valley culture be adequately addressed. Yet, wherever the Aryans originated, whether their culture was a development of indigenous cultures or whether they migrated from elsewhere, our knowledge of their social structure, their mythologies and, above all, their ritual comes from their self-representation in their Sanskrit texts, the Veda.

The Veda

The Veda is regarded by some Hindus as a timeless revelation which is not of human authorship (*apauruṣya*), is eternal, and contains all knowledge, while others regard it to be the revelation of God. It was received or 'seen' by the ancient seers (*ṛṣi*) who communicated it to other men and was put together in its present form by the sage Vyāsa. Indeed, a popular definition of a Hindu is somebody who accepts the Veda as revelation. This idea is not without problems and exceptions, but indicates the undoubted importance of the Veda in Hindu self-perception and self-representation.

From the perspective of the believer the Veda is timeless revelation, yet from the text-critical perspective of the western-trained scholar, it was compiled over a long period of time and reflects different periods of social and religious development. The two perspectives are not, of course, incompatible: revelation could be gradual and there have been, and are, many scholars who have also been believers.

The term 'text' or 'canon' in the Indian context implies an oral tradition passed down with meticulous care and accuracy through the generations from, according to tradition, the vedic Aryan seers of *ṛṣis*. The priestly class of the vedic Aryans, the Brahmans, were – and continue to be – the preservers of this tradition, who preserve the oral recitation of the texts. Indeed the Veda was not written down until some thousand years after its composition and the very act of writing was itself regarded as a polluting activity.[25] Although the main body of the Veda is clearly delineated, the category of 'revelation' sometimes incorporates more recent material. For example, texts calling themselves 'Upaniṣad' were composed into the seventeenth century CE and even the writings of modern holy men and women might be regarded as revelation. It is this Sanskrit, vedic tradition which has maintained a continuity into modern times and which has provided the most important resource and inspiration for Hindu traditions and individuals. The Veda is the foundation for most later developments in what is known as Hinduism.

The Veda is intimately connected with vedic ritual and its primary function is a ritual one. The categorization of the Veda is not only the way in which Hinduism has organized its scriptures, but is also connected with ritual. One of the primary vedic distinctions for its own literature is between *mantra*, verses used in liturgy which make up the collection of texts called Saṃhitā, and *brāhmaṇa*, texts of ritual exegesis. The Brāhmaṇas are texts describing rules for ritual and explanations about it concerning its meaning and purpose. They contain aeteological myths, posit elaborate correspondences (*bandhu*) between the rite and the cosmos, and even maintain that the sacrifice ensures the continuity of the cosmos. The Āraṇyakas, texts composed in the forest, form the concluding parts of several Brāhmaṇas. They are concerned with ritual and its interpretation and form a transitional link between the Brāhmaṇas and the Upaniṣads. The Upaniṣads develop the concerns of the Āraṇyakas, explaining the true nature and meaning of ritual.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE VEDA

The term *veda* is used in two senses. It is a synonym for 'revelation' (*śruti*), which is 'heard' by the sages, and so can denote the whole body of revealed texts, and is also used in a restricted sense to refer to the earliest layers of vedic literature. The Veda in the former, general sense comprises four traditions, the Ṛg, Yajur, Sāma and Atharva, which are divided into three or four categories of texts: the Saṃhitās, Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads (these last two are sometimes classified together). In the latter, more restricted sense, the term *veda* refers to the Saṃhitā portion of this literature; itself comprising four groups of text identified by the four traditions, the *Ṛg Veda Saṃhitā*, *Sāma Veda Saṃhitā*, *Yajur Veda Saṃhitā* and the *Atharva Veda Saṃhitā*. Each of these would have its own Brāhmaṇa, Āraṇyaka ('forest treatise') and/or Upaniṣad ('Secret Scripture'). A further group, the *sūtra* literature is sometimes added to this scheme, but this group is not part of the primary revelation (*śruti*) but part of secondary revelation (*smṛti*), the texts composed by human beings. This sequence is roughly in chronological order, the earliest text being the *Ṛg Veda Saṃhitā*, the latest being the Upaniṣads. As we shall see, this pattern reflects an interest in ritual which becomes overlaid with an interest in the understanding and interpretation of ritual, an important move in the development of Hindu ideas. The structure is therefore as follows:

Saṃhitā:	Ṛg	Yajur	Sāma	Atharva
Brāhmaṇa:				
Āraṇyaka:				
Upaniṣad:				

The *Ṛg Veda* is a collection (*saṃhitā*) in ten books (*maṇḍala*) of 1028 hymns to various deities, composed in vedic Sanskrit from as early as 1200 BCE over a period of several hundred years.[26] Each of its ten books was composed by sages of different families, the oldest being books two to seven. These texts are our earliest and most important sources of knowledge about vedic religion and society. The *Sāma Veda* is a book of songs (*sāman*) based on the *Ṛg Veda* with instructions on their recitation (*gaṇa*). The *Yajur Veda* is a collection of short prose formulae used in ritual, of which there are two recensions, the 'black' and the 'white' – the former being a mixture of prose and verses, the latter being composed entirely of verses or *mantras*. The white Yajur Veda contains one book, the *Vājasaneyi-Saṃhitā*, the black Yajur Veda comprises three books, the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā*, the *Maitrāyanī Saṃhitā* and the *Kāṭhaka-Saṃhitā*. Lastly the *Atharva Veda* is a collection of hymns and magical formulae compiled around 900 BCE, though some of its material may go back to the time of the *Ṛg Veda*. The *Atharva Veda* has less connection with sacrifice and has been considered somewhat inferior to the other three Saṃhitās. Most of this truly vast literature has yet to be translated into any modern European language.

THE DATING OF THE VEDA

Although difficult to date, the earliest text and the most important for our understanding of the early Indo-Aryans is the *Ṛg Veda Saṃhitā* composed probably around 1200 BCE, though some, such as Kak and Frawley, would date it very much earlier to the Indus valley culture, assuming that the Indus valley language was Indo-European.[27] The more sober chronology proposed by Max Müller suggests a date of 1500 to 1200 BCE. Assuming the birth of the Buddha to be around 500 BCE (which scholars now think is later), Müller suggested that the Upaniṣads were composed from 800 to 600 BCE. However, this dating may be rather early. Given the re-dating of the Buddha to the fourth or fifth rather than the fifth or sixth centuries BCE, the Upaniṣads were probably composed between 600 and 300 BCE, as some texts are post-Buddhist. The earlier Brāhmaṇa literature

Müller dates between 1000 to 800 and the Saṃhitā literature around 1200 to 1000, allowing about 200 years for the formulation of each class of texts, though even Müller admits that the *Ṛg Veda* could be earlier.[28] The Brāhmaṇa literature, however, may be later than the dates proposed by Müller, given the probable later date of the Upaniṣads.

THE VEDIC SCHOOLS

The classification scheme of the Veda is further complicated by theological schools or branches (*śākhā*) which specialized in learning certain texts. A Veda might have a number of theological schools associated with it. For example, Brahmans of the Taittirīya branch would learn the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* of the black Yajur Veda, its Brāhmaṇa, Āraṇyaka, Upaniṣad and Śrauta Sūtras. The school of the *Sāma Veda* would learn its Brāhmaṇa, the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa*, and the *Lāṭyāyana Śrauta Sūtra*. The Brahmans of the *Ṛg Veda* would learn the *Aitareya* and *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇas*, which include the Āraṇyakas of the same name, the *Aitareya* and *Kauṣītakī Upaniṣads* and the *Āśvalāyana* and *Śāṅkhāyana Śrauta Sūtras*, and so on (see fig. 2). These schools ensured the accurate transmission of the Veda through the generations with the help of rules for recitation, even though the meaning of the early texts may have been lost to most reciters as the language moved away from its vedic origins. An example of this structure can be seen in fig. 2 which shows the branches of the *Ṛg* and Yajur Vedas.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about vedic literature is that it has been orally transmitted with little change to its contents for up to 3,000 years. This accuracy has been enabled by a system of double checking. The texts were learned at least twice: as a continuous recitation, called the *saṃhitāpāṭha*, in which the Sanskrit rules for combining words (*sandhi*) operated, and as the recitation of words without the rules of euphonic combination, called the *padapāṭha*. Frits Staal gives an illustrative example from the vedic Saṃhitās, the verse 'the immortal goddess has pervaded the wide space, the depths and the heights' is remembered in two versions, as the continuous flow of the *saṃhitāpāṭha* ('orv apra amartya nivato devy uḷvataḥ') and word for word in the *padapāṭha* ('a/ uru/ apraḥ/ amartya/ uḷvataḥ/ devi/ udvataḥ//').[29]

However, not only has the Veda been preserved through oral traditions of recitation, but also through the transmission of ritual. The Veda is primarily a liturgical text and its use in ritual has been its primary and

Saṃhitā	**Brāhmaṇa**	**Āraṇyaka**	**Upaniṣad**	**Śrauta-Sūtra**	**Gṛhya-Sūtra**
Ṛg	Aitareya Kauṣītaki	Aitareya Kauṣītaki	Aitareya Kauṣītaki	Āśvalāyana Śāṅkhāyana	Āśvalāyana Śāṅkhāyana
Taittirīya	Taittirīya	Taittirīya	Taittirīya	Baudhāyana Bharadvāja Āpastamba Hiraṇyakeśin Kāṭhaka Mānava	Baudhāyana Bharadvāja Āpastamba Hiraṇyakeśin Kāṭhaka Mānava
Kāṭhaka Maitrāyaṇī	Kaṭha	Kaṭha	Kaṭha Maitrī		
Vājasaneyi	Śatapatha	Śatapatha	Bṛhadāraṇyaka	Kātyāyana	Pāraskara

Figure 2 The traditions of the Ṛg and Yajur Vedas

invariant function. Interpretations of the ritual enter Hinduism at a later date with the Upaniṣads.

The Upaniṣads

The Upaniṣads are a development of the Āraṇyakas and there is no clear break between the two genres. The *Aitareya Āraṇyaka*, attached to the *Ṛg Veda*, calls itself an *upaniṣad*,[30] and one of the earliest, if not the earliest, of the Upaniṣads, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* ('Great Forest') of the white *Yajur Veda*, calls itself an *āraṇyaka* (as does the last book of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* belonging to the same *śākhā*). The oldest Upaniṣads (the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, *Chāndogya* and *Taittirīya*) are in prose, while the later Upaniṣads, moving away from the Āraṇyakas, are in verse.

The Upaniṣads are not a homogeneous group of texts. Even the older texts were composed over a wide expanse of time from about 600 to 300 BCE, given that some early texts are post-Buddhist, and texts with the title *upaniṣad* continue to be composed throughout the middle ages into the modern period. Because of this some scholars have begun to re-evaluate the category of 'revelation' (*śruti*), which, Thomas Coburn argues, must be seen as an 'ongoing and experientially based feature of the Hindu religious tradition'.[31] Yet it is nevertheless the case that the older group of Upaniṣads, rather than later ones, have been taken to be authoritative and been commented upon by Hindu theologians.[32]

Vedic ritual

The central religious practice of the vedic Aryans was sacrifice and sharing of the sacrificial meal with each other and with the many supernatural beings or *devas*. In sacrifice the gods could be propitiated, material benefits such as sons or cattle received from them, and the social standing, power, or purity of the sacrificer (*yajamāna*), the person who had instigated it, enhanced. Such religious practice would not require elaborate buildings or icons, but merely the presence of the qualified priests who knew the necessary procedures and recitations. Jamison has observed that vedic religion is 'the ideally portable religion' with no fixed places of worship and no images or sacred texts to be carried around,[33] perhaps suggestive of a nomadic lifestyle. The term 'sacrifice' (*homa*, *yajña*) is not confined to the immolation of animals, but refers more widely to any offering into the sacred fire, notably of milk, clarified butter or ghee, curds, grains such as rice and barley, and the *soma* plant, as well as domestic animals (goats, cattle, sheep and horses). Indeed the offering of milk into the fire was more common than animal offerings. These ritual substances would be transported through the fire to the *deva* or *devas* which had been invoked. Fire is the central focus of vedic ritual and is both a substance or element and a *deva*: the transformative link between the worldly and divine realms.

THE SOLEMN AND DOMESTIC RITES

Two kinds of ritual were developed, the *śrauta* or solemn, public rites and the *gṛhya*, domestic and life-cycle rites. The *śrauta* rites are the older and the two types can be formally distinguished from each other by the number of fires used. The *śrauta* rites required the burning of three sacred fires, while the domestic observances required only one. The principal deities which were the focus of the *śrauta* observances were the fire god Agni and the plant god Soma, to whom milk, clarified butter, curds, vegetable cakes, animals or the stalks of the *soma* plant itself would be offered into the fire. Vedic religion was closely associated with the rhythms of the day and the seasons and *śrauta* rites would involve offerings at various junctures (*parvan*) between night and day, at the new and full moons and at the junctures of the three seasons (rainy, autumn, hot).

Our information concerning the *śrauta* rituals comes mainly from the Śrauta Sūtras associated with the various branches of vedic knowledge and formulated between the eighth and fourth centuries BCE. Although this is about half a millennium after the composition of the *Ṛg Veda*, we can assume that some form of the *śrauta* rites was already established at that early period. The *Ṛg Veda* refers to the various, numerous kinds of priests involved in the rituals, refers extensively to *soma* and its preparation, and describes the horse sacrifice (*aśvamedha*).[34] There was also a human sacrifice (*puruṣamedha*) modelled on the horse sacrifice, though the human victims were set free after their consecration.[35]

Among some Brahmans, notably some Nambudri families in Kerala studied by Frits Staal, the *śrauta* rituals have remained intact to the present day, since at least the time of the Śrauta Sūtras.[36] The pre Ṛg-vedic origin of ritual is, of course, inaccessible, unless it lies in the fragmentary suggestions of the Indus valley.

This continuity of ritual traditions in south Asia needs to be stressed. On the whole they have, surprisingly, survived even radical political changes and a variety of different interpretations. This ritual continuity,

which may be linked to a continuity of social relations, is the most important factor in linking modern forms with ancient traditions, though admittedly the elaborate *śrauta* rites are only performed among a minority of Brahmans in Kerala.

Although the central act of all vedic ritual, both solemn and domestic, is simple – the offering of substances into the fire – the preparatory and closing rites can be very complex due to the embedding of one type of ritual and its accompanying verses into another. In the *śrauta* rites, the complexity is compounded by the need for a number of specialists. These specialists, and their assistants, were required for specific parts of the rituals and would know the appropriate recitations from the Veda. In the most elaborate rituals, such as the sacrifice of the *soma* plant, four priests would be present, each of whom would be a specialist in one of the four Saṃhitās, though only two priests would be necessary in most rites. The chief priest or *hotṛ* would recite verses from the *Ṛg Veda*, a second priest, the *udgatṛ*, would chant or sing songs (*stotra*) comprising verses set to the melodies of the *Sāma Veda*, and the *adhvaryu* priest would chant verses from the *Yajur Veda* and perform many of the necessary ritual actions. In later times all this would be overseen by a priest associated with the *Atharva Veda*, the *brahman*, whose function was to watch out for omissions or incorrect procedures. There were originally only three priests associated with the first three Saṃhitās, for the Brahman as overseer of the rites does not appear in the *Ṛg Veda* and is only incorporated later, thereby showing the acceptance of the *Atharva Veda*, which had been somewhat distinct from the other Saṃhitās and identified with lower social strata, as being of equal standing with the other texts.

Śrauta rites would minimally involve the establishing of the three fires: the householder's fire (*gārhapatya*) in the west, the fire to be offered into (*āhavaniya*) to the east and a third southern fire (*dakṣiṇāgni*). The altar or *vedi*, which was a shallow pit, narrow in the centre and strewn with grass, or, for specific rites, a more elaborate brick structure, was placed between the eastern and western fires. The ritual implements needed for the sacrifice were placed there and the sacrificers and gods invited to sit there. For animal sacrifice a post (*yupa*) would be required, to which the victim was tied.

A number of śrauta rituals, ranging in complexity, are recorded in vedic texts. The *agniṣṭoma* was a fairly simple one-day *soma* sacrifice, though preceded by various preparations, and the *agnicayana*, the 'piling up of

Agni', a complex proceeding lasting several days. The *agnicayana* rite as a living tradition among Nambudri Brahmans in Kerala, has been clearly documented and analyzed by Staal.[37] This rite involved the building of an altar from over 2,000 bricks, in the shape of a large bird, to the west of the standard ritual enclosure of three fires. Near to this altar are two areas for chanting the texts and for preparing *soma*. This altar is built in five layers with the appropriate recitation of mantras. Over a period of twelve days a number of ritual sequences are performed, which involve singing verses (*stotra*) from the *Sāma Veda*, reciting from the *Ṛg Veda*, offering *soma* to the deities and the drinking of *soma* by the sacrificer and some priests. The sacrificer or patron (*yajamāna*), who has paid a fee of cattle or money for the rites, reaps the benefits, though throughout the proceedings he remains fairly passive. Before the ritual the *yajamāna*, accompanied by his wife, undergoes an initiation (*dīkṣā*), which might involve some degree of asceticism (*tapas*) such as fasting, to achieve purification.

SOMA

The *soma* drink, requiring an elaborate preparation during the Soma sacrifice, was probably originally a hallucinogenic or intoxicating substance prepared from the *soma* plant. It was almost certainly not a fermented drink which the vedic Aryans also possessed and called *sūrā*. This 'plant', Gordon Wasson has argued, may have been the fly agaric mushroom (*Amanita muscaria*) whose use in inducing mystical states of consciousness is attested in Shamanism.[38] Alternatively many scholars now think that it was *ephedra*, the 'sea grape'; a jointed but leafless desert plant. Traces of this plant have been found in jars from sites in Iran, where *soma* was called *haoma*.[39] *Ephedra* is a stimulant rather than a hallucinogen, but if *soma* was *ephedra*, then this circumvents the problem of the fly agaric mushroom not growing in northern India.

Whatever its identity, the important point is that *soma* induced exalted states and possibly visions in its takers.[40] The original *soma* was eventually lost by the vedic Aryans and replaced by *soma* substitutes; plants without intoxicating properties. We can see in the vedic material that ritual was the primary religious concern of the Indo-Aryans, but also that mystical experience induced by the *soma* plant was, at an early date in the development of the tradition, important. These two concerns, ritual and mysticism, are found throughout the later traditions of India.

The *soma* sacrifice was embedded within other rituals as well, most

notably within animal sacrifices, the most important of which was the horse sacrifice (*aśvamedha*), and the consecration of a king (*rājasūya*). The horse sacrifice[41] described in the *Ṛg Veda* and in the Brāhmaṇas[42] could only be carried out by a king. The sacrifice involved allowing a stallion to wander free for a year before it was ritually suffocated. Before the horse was dismembered and the various parts of its body offered to different deities, the king's wife would symbolically copulate with the dead stallion: divine power from the horse – who is also identified with the deity Prajāpati – entering the queen and thereby entering the king and the people.[43]

The meaning and functions of ritual in Indo-Aryan culture cannot be reduced to any one factor. Sacrifice could have had a cathartic function, expressing a society's aggression in a controlled and socially acceptable way, as Girard has argued.[44] Whether or not the sacrifice had a cathartic effect, it certainly functioned to establish the patron's status and power within the community and may, in a Durkheimian sense, have served to reinforce social values and legitimate power relations within a society, not only in allowing only higher classes of society to perform the rituals, but also in excluding others. The ritual was important not only for those it included, but for those it excluded as well, drawing a line between higher and lower social groupings.[45]

Vedic mythology and theology

The vedic universe is populated with benevolent and malevolent supernatural beings of various kinds. In one sense every tree and river has a divine being associated with it, yet undoubtedly some deities are more important than others. In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*[46] the sage Yājñavalkya is asked how many gods there are, and he gives an ambiguous reply. Firstly he says there are 303, then that there are 3,003, when pressed further that there are 33, 6, 3, 2, 1½, and finally 1. In the next verse he settles on 33. Although this must be seen in the light of the later monistic philosophy of the Upaniṣads – that all deities are manifestations of a single power – the text is certainly echoing the early vedic identification of the various gods with each other; the Moon is identified with Soma, Soma is identified with Agni, Agni with the Sun and so on.

THE *DEVAS*

The *Ṛg Veda* is filled with hymns of praise to the various deities (*deva*) invoked in ritual. There are, however, few straight narrative accounts of the

gods, either in the *Ṛg Veda* or in the Brāhmaṇas, and the texts assume a common knowledge of their stories. The great nineteenth-century Sanskritist, Max Müller, thought that all the deities of the Veda were 'the agents postulated behind the great phenomena of nature', such as fire, water, rain, the sun and storms etc.[47] While it is certainly true that many deities of the Veda are related to natural phenomena, some gods do not fit into this model and vedic scholarship no longer accepts this as an explanation of the pantheon. The gods also have human qualities. The majority of deities are male, though there are a few goddesses (*devī*) such as Aditi, the mother of the universe, Uṣas, the dawn, Nirṛti, destruction, and Vāc, speech. They can be addressed in hymns, they share in human emotions, they have desire, they can be invited to the sacrifice and can share in the ritual meal.

Indeed in the later texts, the Brāhmaṇas, their connection with the sacrifice is what distinguishes them from other supernatural beings such as the 'demons' or 'anti-gods', the *asuras*. According to the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*[48] both the *devas* and the *asuras* are said to have been born from Prajāpati, the 'lord of creatures', a deity who becomes the creator god. The *asuras* made sacrificial offerings to themselves, whereas the *devas* made offerings to each other. Because of this, Prajāpati gave himself to the latter as their nourishment and so the *devas* accept ritual offerings, whereas the *asuras* do not. The *devas* are beings intimately connected with, and, indeed, defined by, the sacrifice as the class of supernatural beings who accept offerings and, in return, give help or, in the case of more wrathful deities such as Rudra, simply stay away from the human world. It is possible that the *devas* represent the original deities of the Aryans and the *asuras* the deities of their enemies the Dāsas.

The *devas* inhabit a hierarchical cosmos. In one scheme, encapsulated in the three utterances pronounced each day by orthodox Brahmans, this cosmos is divided into the three worlds of sky or heaven (*svar*), atmosphere (*bhuvas*), and earth (*bhūr*), each realm populated by different deities. The three realms and the principal deities they contain are:

- heaven (*svar*), contains the sky god Dyaus; the lord of righteousness (*ṛta*) and of night, Varuṇa; the companion of Varuṇa and god of night, Mitra; the nourisher Pūṣan; and the pervader Viṣṇu.
- atmosphere (*bhuvas*) contains the warrior Indra; the wind Vāyu; the storm gods, the Maruts; and the terrible Rudra.
- earth (*bhūr*) contains the plant god Soma; the fire Agni; and the priestly god of creative power, Bṛhaspati.

Another classification places a group of gods called Ādityas, the sons of the Goddess Aditi (namely Mitra, Aryaman, Bhaga, Varuṇa, Dakṣa, and Aṃśa), within the category of heaven; the Maruts or Rudras, the sons of Rudra, within the atmosphere; and the Vasus, the attendants of Indra, personifications of natural phenomena, namely Āpa (water), Dhruva (the pole star), Soma (the moon), Dhara (the earth), Anila (wind), Anala (fire), Prabhāsa (dawn), and Pratyūṣa (light), at the level of the earth.

There is no supreme deity in the *Ṛg Veda*, though some are undoubtedly more important than others. The two most significant *devas*, placed at the level of the earth, are Agni and Soma. Agni mysteriously pervades the world as heat and is identified with the earth as the sacred cow Pṛśni, with the sun, with the dawn and with fire hidden in its stomach.[49] While being simply fire, Agni is particularly the sacrificial fire. He transports the dead to the realm of Yama, the lord of death, and transports, and purifies, all offerings to the realm of the gods. The mythology of Agni plays on the idea of fire being hidden within the world and awakened by the fuel-sticks which kindle him.

Like Agni, Soma is a deity who intercedes between men and gods and is regarded as a link between the human and divine, the pillar of the sky and bringer of ecstasy and understanding of the divine realms.[50] Indeed Soma is identified with Agni and with the moon which contains the ambrosia of immortality (*amṛta*) and there are parallels between the mythology of Soma and that of Agni. Agni, hiding within the waters from where he was originally born, is discovered by the gods and agrees to convey the sacrifice to them.[51] Similarly Soma, like Agni, was hidden from the gods upon a mountain and captured by Indra riding an eagle.[52] There are parallels here with the Greek myth of Prometheus and both Agni and Soma can be seen as bringers of culture, as things which distinguish the human world from the natural world.

Other deities in the *Ṛg Veda* are important, though none have such transforming power in the world as Agni and Soma. Indra is the warrior king, empowered by *soma*, who destroys obstacles with his thunderbolt club. His most famous myth is the destruction of the snake Vṛtra (whose name means 'obstacle'), symbolizing cosmic chaos, thus freeing the waters of the sky.[53] The storm gods, the Maruts, accompany Indra on his adventures which seem to reflect the warrior ethos of vedic society: Indra captures the cows as the Aryan warriors would have gone on cattle raids to neighbouring groups.

Although Indra stands out in clear profile, many of the gods in the Veda are opaque. The Ādityas, the sons of the goddess Aditi, include Varuṇa, the distant, majestic sky god who protects the cosmic and social order (*ṛta*); Mitra, the god of social responsibilities or contracts, who accompanies Varuṇa; Aryaman, the god of custom such as marriage, and, though very inferior to these other three, Pūṣan, presider over journeys.[54] Of these, Varuṇa, the lord of the ethical order, is the most important, and is asked for forgiveness and mercy for any moral transgression or for 'going against the current'.[55]

The young Aśvin twins are deities of good fortune and health. Apart from these, the elements and natural phenomena are deified, such as the sun (Sūrya), the sun at dawn and sunset (Savitṛ), the wind (Vāyu), the waters (Apas), the goddess earth (Pṛthivī) and her consort, father sky (Dyaus Pitar). There are other deities in the pantheon such as Viṣṇu and Rudra (i.e. Śiva) who become the central focuses of later traditions.

EARLY THEOLOGY

In the vedic worldview ritual has supreme importance and the vedic Saṃhitās primarily serve as liturgical texts. Although their use is primarily liturgical, the contents of the vedic songs or hymns reflect and presuppose narrative traditions about the gods, and the origins of the world and of human society. There are also philosophical speculations concerning the origins of life. The most famous of these hymns[56] asks unanswerable questions about what existed at the beginning of time when there was neither existence (*sat*) nor non-existence (*asat*), neither death nor immortality, neither light nor dark. The final verse conveys the hymn's sense of cosmic mystery and we can read into it both the beginnings of a theistic tradition and also the beginnings of Indian scepticism. It reads: 'Whence this creation has arisen – perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not – the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows – or perhaps he does not know.'[57]

However, it is with the Brāhmaṇas, later developed in the Upaniṣads, that more systematic speculation begins, particularly on the nature of sacrifice. The Brāhmaṇas are a discourse by the Brahmans on the *śrauta* rituals, which attempt to explain ritual action and relate it to wider cosmic and mythological phenomena; one Indian commentator on the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* clearly and succinctly defined a Brāhmaṇa as 'an explanation of a ritual act and of the *mantras* belonging to it'.[58] The sociologist Emile

Durkheim once wrote that 'the moment when men have an idea that there are internal connections between things, science and philosophy become possible'.[59] One of the Brāhmaṇas' central concerns was the establishing of such hidden or inner connections (*bandhu, nidāna*) between the *śrauta* rituals and their purposes, and between ritual and mythology. For example, the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* clarifies the connection between the upper and lower fire-sticks used to kindle the sacred fires and the divine beings Urvaśī and her husband Purūravas, whose names are invoked during the fire-kindling ceremony. The redactor of the text is aware of the sexual symbolism of the fire sticks and identifies the ghee in the ghee pan, touched by the *adjvaryu* priest, with Āyu, the child of the divine couple, which is placed on the lower (female) fire stick. Ghee is also identified with semen (*retas*), and *retas* in turn is identified with an embryo and also with rain.[60] These kinds of identifications and analogies are found throughout the texts and express a cosmology in which the hierarchical structure of the wider cosmos is recapitulated in the structure of society, in the individual's body and in the ritual. The ritual is a microcosm reflecting the wider macrocosm of the cosmos and the mesocosm of society.

COSMICAL HOMOLOGY

Identification, or 'cosmical homology', as the historian of religions Mircea Eliade has called it,[61] along with hierarchy, might be said to be a principle of Indian religion. It is present in the vedic tradition from the *Ṛg Veda* and is found in all later Indian traditions, including Buddhism and Jainism. One of the fundamental vedic identifications or homologies, which becomes central in later esoteric traditions, is between the body, the universe and the sacrifice. A key text here, occurring late in the *Ṛg Veda*, which is quoted and reiterated throughout the Hindu tradition, is the famous hymn of the cosmic man, the *Puruṣa Sūkta*.[62] This hymn occurs in a late book of the *Ṛg Veda* and probably does not accurately reflect vedic society in the earlier period which may have had less clearly delineated boundaries between social groups.

This hymn describes the creation of the world by the gods, who sacrifice and dismember a cosmic giant, the 'male person' (*puruṣa*), from the different parts of whose body the cosmos and society are formed and even the verses, songs and formulae of the Veda itself. The highest sacerdotal class, the Brahmans, came from his mouth as society's voice; the warrior class (*rājanya*, or later *kṣatriya*), as society's strength, came from his arms; the common people (*vaiśya*) came from his thighs as society's support, and the serfs (*śūdra*), those on whom society stands, came from his feet.[63] In many ways this is an idealized picture; the Brahmans as the priests sustaining the community with spiritual sustenance, that is, performing vedic ritual; the rulers or warriors protecting and ruling the community; the common folk practising, primarily, animal husbandry and agriculture; and the serfs serving the other classes. Yet this important hymn shows that the hierarchical, hereditary social groups were part of the structure of the cosmos. If the cosmos was in some sense sacred, then so was society which manifested its hierarchical order. Moreover, this order is reflected in sacrifice and in the hierarchical structure of the body. The scale of this order was the degree of purity or pollution associated with the body: the head, as the highest part of the body, was the purest and the feet, the lowest part, the most polluted. The social and individual bodies were reflections of each other, and both were part of the larger structure or body of the cosmos. This integration of society and cosmos, of body and society, is the sacred order or law (*ṛta*) of the universe, which is eternal and unchanging, brought to life in vedic ritual, expressed in the songs of the vedic seers, and elucidated in the Brāhmaṇas.

Vedic society

Of the four classes (*varṇa*) of Aryan society, the highest three are known as the 'twice-born' (*dvija*) because their male members have undergone an initiation (*upanayana*), a rite of passage, which gives them access to being full members of society, who can marry and perpetuate the ritual traditions. This rite separates the twice-born from the fourth estate, the 'serfs' (*śudra*), and clearly marks the boundary between those who have access to the vedic tradition and those who do not. Georges Dumézil, a scholar of Indo-European studies, has argued that Indo-European ideology is characterized by a social structure of three classes or functions: the function of the priest, the warrior or ruler and the farmer.[64] The sacerdotal class would serve the ruling, military aristocracy. This structure has been present throughout Indo-European communities.

In vedic India, Dumézil's three functions correspond to the twice-born classes of priests (*brāhmaṇa*), warriors or rulers (*kṣatriya, rājanya*) and commoners (*vaiśya*). The argument has been that upon entering the subcontinent the Aryans with their tripartite social structure placed the local population on the bottom, which is the serf class (*śūdra*) composed of

non-Aryan Dravidians. However, the process of class formation in early Indian society is more complex and may go back to an indigenous structure in the ancient past, perhaps present in the Indus valley civilization. Indeed, the priestly and ruling classes of the Indus valley cities probably lived separately in or near the citadels of their towns.

Whatever the origins of the system, it must be remembered that the fourfold class structure is a theoretical model and ideological justification based on sacred revelation. The reality of social classes in vedic society seems to have been more complex. Rather than a priestly class serving a ruling aristocracy, at least at the time of the *Ṛg Veda*, there seems to have been two ruling elites, the Sūris and the Aris, each of which were served by their own priesthoods. Aguilar i Matas has argued that Ṛg-vedic religion was patronized by the Sūris and so the *Ṛg Veda* favours them at the expense of the Aris who have a negative reputation in the text. This is reflected at cultic and theological levels when Indra, the favourite god of the Sūris, triumphs over and becomes more important than Varuṇa, the supreme god of the Aris. Furthermore the two liturgical deities Agni and Soma, pass from the side of Varuṇa to Indra, thereby ensuring the Sūris' ritual power.[65]

Summary

We have seen how the origins of Hinduism lay in the ancient cultures of the Indus valley civilization and Aryan culture. Although the issue is contentious, there is strong supporting evidence to show that the language of the Indus valley civilization was Dravidian, which contrasts with the Indo-European language of the vedic Aryans. These two cultures, the Dravidian Indus valley culture and the Aryan vedic, contribute to the formation of Hindu traditions, and Hindu civilization can be seen as a product of the complex interaction between the Dravidian and Aryan cultural spheres. While the Aryan culture of the Brahmans provides the 'master narrative' for later traditions, the importance of the Dravidian cultural sphere should not be underestimated and Aryan culture itself, including the Sanskrit language, has absorbed Dravidian elements.

3 *Dharma*

During the late vedic period by the time of the composition of the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* and the early Upaniṣads, Aryan culture had become established in the Ganges plain; we know that the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* were composed in the Videha region.[1] Larger kingdoms replaced smaller ones and a process of urbanization began. This was a formative period in the history of Indian religions, which saw the rise of the renouncer traditions, particularly Buddhism, and the establishing of brahmanical ideology. Between the Mauryan dynasty (*c.* 320–185 BCE) and the Gupta empire (320–500 CE), there was a politically unsettled period prompted by incursions from the north-west. The last Mauryan king, Bṛhadratha, was assassinated by his Brahman general Puṣyamitra Śuṅga in 185 BCE. The Śuṅga dynasty (*c.* 185–73 BCE) lost much of its empire to Greek invaders from Bactria under King Demetrios who founded an extensive empire, the most important king of which was Menander (*c.* 166–150 BCE). After Menander's death the kingdom broke up to be eventually replaced by the Śāka empire, established by Sai-Wang tribes from central Asia (*c.* 140 BCE – 78 CE). With a slight decline in Śāka power, the Kuṣāṇas (Kuei-shang) invaded, and established an empire which extended along the Ganges plain to beyond Varanasi, culminating in the rule of Kaniṣka (between 78 and 144 CE). Finally the Gupta empire was founded by Candragupta I (*c.* 320 CE) and spread across all of northern, and much of central, India.

Political support for religions varied with different dynasties and with different kings. Aśoka (268–233 BCE) was favourable to Buddhism, as was