

or accomplishments (*siddhi*): the ability to become as small as an atom, levitation, the ability to expand, all-pervasiveness, the power of irresistible will, control over the natural elements, the power to create and the fulfilment of desires.⁶¹ This is a standard list of magical powers found in other texts, though there are variants. These powers are included in the Buddhist system as the first of the five higher knowledges (*abhijñā*) attained by meditation, which shows that the association of meditation or yoga with supernormal powers has been within Indian meditation traditions from an early date. We are dealing here with oral traditions of teachings in which the list of powers, as well as of other states, has been standardized and the original meaning of some of this terminology has become obscure.

Summary

This chapter has surveyed a complex set of concepts, practices and social forms which are at the heart of Hinduism and which have developed over thousands of years. Renunciation, while being incorporated within mainstream vedic tradition, may have originated outside that tradition in the śramaṇa movements of which Buddhism and Jainism are a part. Yet whatever its origin, whether from within the vedic tradition or from outside it, renunciation is a vital institution within Hinduism and central to Hindu soteriology. Along with renunciation go ideas of karma – that a person reaps the consequences of their action – reincarnation, and liberation or salvation from the cycle of rebirth. Yoga is the method of attaining liberation, for both renunciators and laity, and we have in this chapter surveyed the origins of yoga and some of the central developments in its early history. Yoga has been adapted to different doctrinal systems and has been used in the service of different traditions within Hinduism, most notably of the traditions of Śiva and Viṣṇu. To the latter tradition we now turn.

5 Narrative traditions and early Vaiṣṇavism

The first millennium BCE saw the development of the brahmanical traditions of ritual, adherence to *varṇāśrama-dharma* and the ideology of renunciation. These developments occurred within the context of the growth of kingdoms, such as Māgadhā in the fourth century BCE, and an ideology of sacral kingship. From about 500 BCE through the first millennium CE, there was a growth of sectarian worship of particular deities, and vedic sacrifice, though never dying out, gave way to devotional worship (*bhakti*). Performing *pūjā* is a way of expressing love or devotion (*bhakti*) to a deity in some form, and became the central religious practice of Hinduism. Bhakti to a personal God (*Bhagavan*) or Goddess (*Bhagavati*), became a central, all-pervasive movement. This growth of Hindu theism and devotionism is reflected in the Sanskrit narrative traditions of the Epics (*itihāsa*), in mythological and ritual treatises known as the Purāṇas, and in devotional poetry in vernacular languages, particularly Tamil. This chapter will trace some of these developments, focusing on the rise of the gods Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa and the traditions associated with them, which came to be characterized as 'Vaiṣṇava'.

Hindu narrative traditions

There is no historiography in south Asia, with a few exceptions, of the kind which developed in the Greek, Arabic and European traditions. This lack of historiography has made the dating of Sanskrit texts difficult and has reinforced a tendency to construct India as ahistorical, mythical and irrational, in contrast to the West – seen as historical, scientific and

rational. The construction of India as the West's irrational 'other' has tended to hide the strongly 'rationalist' element in Hindu culture (the science of ritual, grammar, architecture, mathematics, logic and philosophy) and to underplay the mythical dimension in western thought. Nevertheless, Hinduism did produce elaborate mythical narratives in which there is no clear distinction between 'history', 'hagiography' and 'mythology'. Indeed, the Sanskrit term *itihāsa* embraces the western categories of 'history' and 'myth'. We have texts written in Sanskrit, and vernacular languages, which are clearly presenting what were regarded as important ideas, stories and presentations of normative and non-normative behaviour, and the historicity of particular events is either assumed, or is simply not an issue. Rather, what seems to be important with these mythological narratives is the story being told, the sense of truth that it conveys, and the sense of communal or traditional values and identity being communicated.

The two most important groups of Hindu narrative traditions embodied in oral and written texts are the two Epics, the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the Purāṇas. The *Itihāsa Purāṇa* is even known as the 'fifth Veda', although it is classified as *smṛti*, texts of human authorship, and not *śruti*, revelation, and all castes have access to it, not only the twice-born. In these texts we see reflected the concerns of political life at the court, the concerns of Brahmans, the concerns of ordinary people, and descriptions of ritual, pilgrimage and mythology. These texts also document the rise of the great theistic traditions of Hinduism focused on the gods, particularly Viṣṇu, Śiva and Devī, the Goddess. Hindu traditions have been communicated through the generations in these narrative genres, which still play a vital role in contemporary Hindu life, though sometimes now mediated through the television and cinema screen. The *Itihāsa Purāṇa* has had, and continues to have, immense impact upon Hinduism at all levels.

Although the Epics contain a wealth of material which cannot be neatly categorized as belonging to any particular tradition, there is nevertheless a case for saying that the Epics are primarily Vaiṣṇava in orientation, as, indeed, are many of the Purāṇas. Even the *Mahābhārata* which is sometimes compared to an encyclopaedia of Hindu deities, stories, yoga, rituals and theologies, is orientated towards the traditions of Viṣṇu. Some review of this vast literature is necessary in order to understand the unfolding of Hindu theistic traditions in general and the religions of Viṣṇu in particular.

The Mahābhārata

The *Mahābhārata* is an epic of universal proportions with appeal across centuries and across cultures, as the popularity of Peter Brook's nine-hour English stage production has attested. It is the longest epic poem in the world, comprising over 100,000 verses. According to tradition, the author of the text was the sage Vyāsa whose name means 'an arranger', though scholarship has shown that it was in fact compiled over several centuries from the first half of the first millennium B.C.E., reaching its established form by the first century C.E., though still being formulated by the fourth century. There were probably two major stages in its composition. The first, a version of about 7,000 verses or *ślokas*, attributed to Vyāsa, the second, an elaboration by Vaiśampāyana. By the medieval period the Epic existed in two major recensions, one northern and one southern, and was retold in a Tamil version. The critical edition of the Sanskrit version was produced by scholars at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute at Poona, in India, who compared many different manuscripts.¹ Their version is the one formulated by the Brahman family of Bhārgava, descended from the ancient sage Bhṛgu, who rewrote the epic incorporating into it much material on *dharma*. Indeed, the central hero of the Epic, Yudhiṣṭhira, is the son of Dharma personified as a deity. The text itself is divided into eighteen parts of varying length, the longest comprising over 14,000 verses, the shortest having only 120 verses. The text is further subdivided into 98 sub-portions. There is also a supplement to the Epic, the *Mārvanśa*, a text about the life of Kṛṣṇa.

Apart from the northern and southern recensions, there are regional variations of the text and it is important to emphasize that the *Mahābhārata* exists not only as a 'critical edition' or as the object of scholarly study, but also as a vital and fluid part of contemporary Hinduism, still in the process of being recast in different modes. The Sanskrit narrative traditions of the *Mahābhārata* are also acted out and recited orally in vernacular languages throughout the villages of India at popular festivals. The *Mahābhārata* lives in these presentations and recitations, not to mention in a television series which presented the story to rapt audiences throughout India in the 1980s.

The origins of the *Mahābhārata* lay in non-brahmanical social groups of the 'Aryan homeland' (*āryavarta*), namely the Kṣatriya aristocracy, and it gives us some understanding of the life of those groups, though the story

was quickly appropriated by orthodox, Sanskrit Brahmins and overlaid by the Bhārgava family with a brahmanical ideology which emphasized the performance of social duty (*dharma*). While the text is enjoyed simply as a story, it is also understood to have different levels of meaning and to be a metaphor for the ethical battle on the human plane, and for the battle between the lower and higher self on a world-transcending plane.

The story is as follows. A king of the lunar dynasty, Vicitravīrya, had two sons, Pāṇḍu and Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the elder prince, should have succeeded his father on the throne, but as he was born blind, a particularly inauspicious karma, he could not. Pāṇḍu reigns and has five sons, the Pāṇḍavas or 'sons of Pāṇḍu'. When Pāṇḍu dies, his blind brother Dhṛtarāṣṭra takes over the throne and the Pāṇḍavas (namely Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, Arjuna, Nakula and Sahadeva) grow up with their 100 cousins, the sons of Dhṛtarāṣṭra: the Kauravas. The eldest of the Kauravas, Duryodhana, claims to be the rightful successor to the throne and has the Pāṇḍavas, and their common wife Draupadī, exiled. Duryodhana becomes king and his father abdicates. The Pāṇḍavas, however, challenge his right to the throne, so, to avoid conflict, the blind old ex-king divides the kingdom in two, with Duryodhana ruling in the north from Hastinapur, and Yudhiṣṭhira, the eldest Pāṇḍava, ruling in the south from Indraprastha (modern Delhi). Duryodhana pays a visit to Indraprastha, but while he is there he falls into a lake which provokes laughter from Yudhiṣṭhira. Duryodhana cannot abide this insult and challenges Yudhiṣṭhira to a game of dice at Hastinapur for the entire kingdom. Yudhiṣṭhira who has a passion for gambling, loses everything to Duryodhana, including his wife Draupadī. She is publicly humiliated by the Kauravas who try to tear off her clothing, but it miraculously never unfolds due to the power of Kṛṣṇa's grace. They play one further game of dice, the loser having to go into exile in the forest for twelve years and spend a further year incognito. Once again Yudhiṣṭhira loses and so begins the Pāṇḍavas' thirteen-year exile with Draupadī.

In the forest many adventures befall them, all recorded in the *Mahābhārata*, and there are stories within stories told by different characters. They spend the thirteenth year in disguise in the court of a king and emerge from exile in the fourteenth year to reclaim their kingdom. By now, however, Duryodhana is no longer willing to give up his kingdom and so the stage is set for war. The war lasts eighteen days. On the field of Kurukṣetra the two armies are lined up and the eve of the battle sets the

scene for the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the famous dialogue between Kṛṣṇa and Arjuna. The battle is fierce and all the Kauravas are killed. Although the Pāṇḍavas win, they are filled with sorrow at the loss of so many allies and relatives, even though they were their enemies. Yudhiṣṭhira abdicates, leaving the kingdom under the sovereignty of a younger relation, and with his brothers and Draupadī leaves for the realm of Indra's heaven in the Himalayas. Draupadī and four of the brothers die along the way. Only Yudhiṣṭhira, accompanied by a devoted dog which had attached itself to him, continues the journey. Indra in his chariot meets Yudhiṣṭhira and invites him into heaven, but Yudhiṣṭhira will not go without the dog who has been devoted (*bhakte*). The dog, however, turns out to be the god Dharma himself, who then leads Yudhiṣṭhira into heaven where he is astonished to see Duryodhana, the cause of so much suffering, enjoying heaven because he had fulfilled his *dharma* as a warrior. Yudhiṣṭhira, the exemplum of dharmic conduct, has yet to be reborn on earth because of his affection: a last attachment to be purged before liberation can be attained.

Within this basic narrative structure many other stories are embedded which may originally have been independent tales, such as the love story of Nala and Damayantī² and the story of the nymph Śakuntalā.³ The famous *Bhagavad Gītā*, 'the Song of the Lord', dated to not before the second century BCE, may well have been inserted into the *Mahābhārata*, though some scholars think that it was composed as part of the text.⁴ This dialogue between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa, narrated by the sage Sanjaya to the blind king Dhṛtarāṣṭra, became one of the most important texts in Hinduism. As the dialogue unfolds, Kṛṣṇa responds to Arjuna's doubts about the war and gradually reveals himself as a supreme Lord, the creator, maintainer and destroyer of the universe.

The Rāmāyaṇa

The second, slightly shorter, Epic is the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the story of King Rāma, attributed to Vālmīki. This text was certainly in circulation by the first century CE, though on stylistic grounds its origin may be later than the *Mahābhārata*. As with the *Mahābhārata* there are two major recensions, the northern and the southern, the southern being the earlier.⁵ There are later Sanskrit versions of the text and versions were composed in vernacular languages, of particular note being Kampan's Tamil rendering (ninth–twelfth centuries) and the famous Hindi *Rāmācariṭmānas* ('The

Lake of Rāma's Deeds') by Tulsīdās (c. 1543–1623). Apart from these texts, there are innumerable versions of the text told and retold in different regions.⁶ The *Rāmāyaṇa* exists in many versions and in many tellings, from a Hindi television production in 1987 which attracted 80 million viewers to village performances in Tamilnadu or stage productions in the USA.⁷ The annual Rām Līlā festivals and performances, particularly at Rāmnagar near Varanasi, attract thousands of pilgrims and express the living, enacted tradition of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.⁸

The story is essentially simple. *Rāma*, a prince of Ayodhyā, son of King Daśaratha, marries Princess Sītā, the daughter of King Janaka of Videha (who first appeared in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*). Because of his father's second wife, Kaikeyī, who makes Daśaratha promise to banish him, Rāma is forced to go into exile into the Daṇḍaka forest, out of filial duty. He is accompanied by his wife and brother Lakṣmaṇa. While the brothers are away hunting, Sītā is abducted by Rāvaṇa, the ten-headed demon-king of Sri Lanka, but with the help of a monkey army sent by the monkey king Sugrīva, Rāma wins her back. Under the leadership of the monkey general Hanumān, who is no ordinary monkey but the son of the wind-god Vāyu, a causeway is built from India to Sri Lanka, which allows Rāma and his army to cross over and defeat the demon-king. Rāvaṇa and his army are killed and Rāma returns with Sītā to Ayodhyā where he reigns as king. The people of the city, however, suspect that Sītā did not remain chaste while held by Rāvaṇa, though Rāma himself has no doubts about her virtue (since she had previously proved this to him by emerging unscathed from a fire ordeal). To fulfil his duty to his subjects, Rāma banishes Sītā to the hermitage of Vālmīki, traditionally the author of the text, where she gives birth to twins. Many years later Rāma discovers the twins and wishes to take back Sītā along with their children, but not wishing to return to Ayodhyā, Sītā calls on the Earth, her mother, who opens and swallows her. The text ends with Rāma and all the inhabitants of Ayodhyā going to the Sarayu river and there entering the body of Viṣṇu.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* is the story of a heroic king who becomes deified. Indeed, by the last books of the text Rāma is referred to as an incarnation (*avatāra*) of Viṣṇu. Above all, however, as with the *Mahābhārata*, it is a tale about *dharma*. Daśaratha is forced to banish his son because he must keep his word, and his word is his power; Rāma must go to the forest to obey his father, as *dharma* dictates; and Rāma must banish Sītā in the end to fulfil his duty to his subjects, even though her virtue is not in question.

The *Rāmāyaṇa* is the story of the triumph of good over evil, of order over chaos, of *dharma* over *adharma*. Rāma and Sītā are ideal examples of dharmic gender roles for Hindu couples. He is honest, brave, the fulfiller of all his ethical responsibilities, and devoted to his wife, while she is modest, demure, virtuous, dedicated to her Lord and husband, yet strong in herself. This strength, and some degree of independence, asserts itself at the end of the narrative when Sītā, whose name means 'furrow' and who perhaps originated as an independent goddess associated with agriculture, returns to her mother the Earth, whence she sprang when her father, Janaka, was ploughing. Sītā is the ideal Hindu woman, fulfilling her 'womanly duty' (*sṛiśvadharmā*) to the letter, yet who retains self-possession and an element of autonomy and identity independent of her husband Rāma.

The story is more straightforward than the *Mahābhārata* and has widespread, popular appeal. The language is beautiful in its detailed descriptions, even down to describing the spiral movements of the hairs on Hanumān's tail, and is a precursor of later Sanskrit poetic literature or *kāvyā*. The worship of Rāma became widespread in the medieval period in northern India and the name 'Rām' became a synonym for 'God'.⁹ The worship of Rāma has become highly significant today as the focus of politicized Hindu movements in recent years (see pp. 264–5). Yet the *Rāmāyaṇa* is important beyond these considerations and plays a vibrant part in contemporary Hinduism. Like the *Mahābhārata* it is an oral tradition recited and acted out throughout the villages and towns of India.

The Purāṇas

In contrast to the Epics, the Purāṇas, 'stories of the ancient past', are a vast body of complex narratives which contain genealogies of deities and kings up to the Guptas, cosmologies, law codes, and descriptions of ritual and pilgrimages to holy places. With the Purāṇas we are dealing with oral traditions which were written down and which have absorbed influences from the Epics, Upaniṣads, Dharma literature and ritual texts. The Purāṇas would have been recited at gatherings by specialists who were traditionally the sons of Kṣatriya fathers and Brahman mothers, and today the texts are recited by special individuals known by the Hindi term *bhai*.

There are eighteen major Purāṇas and eighteen related subordinate texts known as Upapurāṇas, though there are variations as to which texts are included within the ideal number of eighteen. The Purāṇas have