

3

HINDUISM

CHAPTER



There is only one God, but endless are his aspects and endless are his names. Call him by any name and worship him in any aspect that pleases you, you are sure to see him.

(Shri Ramakrishna, quoted in *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, page 353)

The esteemed holy man Shri Ramakrishna (1836 to 1886) speaks for most of his fellow Hindus when he emphasizes the harmony and tolerance that are characteristic of his religion. A harmony of many different beliefs and practices, all aiming for the common goal of salvation, like many rivers converging into one ocean, Hinduism also tends to be highly tolerant of other religions. True to the ideals of Hinduism, Shri Ramakrishna lived what he taught. From early boyhood, he mastered a variety of Hindu paths of worship, later he became a Muslim and then a Christian, and all the while, from his own perspective, he evolved into a better Hindu.

Throughout the ages, harmony amid diversity and tolerance toward other faiths have characterized Hinduism. The nearly

Rig Veda (rig vay'duh)

A collection of 1,017 Sanskrit hymns composed about 1500 BC or earlier; Hinduism's oldest sacred text.

four-thousand-year-old **Rig Veda** (rig vay'duh), Hinduism's oldest sacred text, declares: "God is one but men call him by many names" (1.64.46). The great twentieth-century Hindu, Mahatma Gandhi, echoes the ancient wisdom of the Rig Veda: "Even as a tree has a single trunk, but many branches and leaves, so is there one true and perfect Religion, but it becomes many as it passes through the human medium" (*The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, volume 1, pages 542–543). Like Ramakrishna, Gandhi revered Christianity; he even placed the Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew alongside Hinduism's Bhagavad-Gita as his favorite religious texts. Of course—and this could probably be said of any religion—not all Hindus have been so tolerant. But it is fair to categorize Hinduism as relatively tolerant and diverse.

In this chapter, we will consider the main aspects of the vast diversity of beliefs and practices that together form Hinduism. We will chart many rivers, but it is important

not to forget that all flow eventually into one ocean.

HUMAN DESTINY: FROM WORLDLY REALMS TO THE DIVINE BEYOND

Learning about Hinduism depends first on understanding a perspective of reality—the universe, human beings, and the divine—that is fundamentally different from common Western perspectives. Because Hinduism emphasizes above all else the concerns of human beings, we will chart the Hindu perspective on reality by first considering human destiny. It is best to begin this story at its conclusion, for the final destiny of salvation through liberation returns the individual to the original source. Spiritual fulfillment amounts to a return to the beginning.

Liberation: Returning to the Sacred Source

Salvation through liberation from the constraints of the human condition is the ultimate goal of all Hindus, the ocean into which all the rivers of Hinduism eventually flow. For most it is a distant goal, not to be attained in this lifetime. Hindus believe in reincarnation (rebirth in new life-forms) and thus anticipate a long series of lifetimes, so they can afford to be patient regarding the goal of liberation. Hinduism is not in a hurry.

The Hindu term for "liberation" is *moksha* (mohk'shuh), a Sanskrit word that also means "release." *Moksha* is a release from this ordinary, finite, limited realm of existence into the infinite ocean of the divine. It is an experience characterized by infinite being, infinite awareness, and infinite bliss. The details of this experience defy description, for it is completely beyond the experiences of this world.

Never again to be reincarnated, the Hindu who has attained *moksha* is united

Mahatma Gandhi, the great Hindu political leader, is revered for his ideas on social justice. His practice of nonviolent disobedience helped to free India from British rule, establishing it as an independent nation.



Mahatma Gandhi (low photo), Indian Photographs, (20th century) / Private Collection / Onoda / Bridgman Images

forever with the divine, having returned to the sacred source.

The Divine:

One Ultimate Reality, Many “Masks”

Hinduism perceives the nature of the divine very differently than do the Western monotheistic religions Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Rather than believing in one personal God, who created all things and exists independently of them, most Hindus believe that all reality—God, the universe, human beings, and all else—is essentially one thing. At the same time, Hindus worship many gods and goddesses, appropriately thought of as the various masks of God.

Monism: All Is Brahman

Most (though not all) Hindus believe in **monism** (only-one-ism), the doctrine that all reality is ultimately one. This basic feature of the doctrinal dimension of Hinduism differs markedly from the predominant monotheism (only-one-God-ism) of the Western religions, in which God is held to be both the creator of the world, and above and independent of it.

An analogy can help to make sense of the difficult concept of monism. Rivers, ponds, lakes, and oceans appear to be quite distinctive, yet they share a common essence: they all are made up of water. Monists believe that similarly all forms of reality—gods and goddesses, plants and animals, the material universe, and humans—share a common essence. Hindus call this essence **Brahman** (brah'muhn).

Infinite and eternal, Brahman is the ground of existence and the source of the universe. It is discoverable only through the most profound contemplation, and its true nature is not revealed on the surface of things. Brahman is impersonal, without characteristics that can be seen, heard, or even intelligibly

thought about. The **Upanishads** (oo-pah'ni-shuhdz), the ancient philosophical texts that form the basis of most Hindu doctrines, teach that Brahman can be described only as *neti, neti*: “not this, not that.” Whatever the senses can perceive, whatever the mind can ponder, these are not Brahman, for Brahman is beyond the reach of human perception and thought. Just as atomic particles are invisible and yet are the basic building blocks of matter, so does Brahman reside beneath all surfaces, forming the essence of all things. Unlike atomic particles, however, Brahman is not material at all, but rather pure spirit.

Ultimate reality, called Brahman when referring to the essence of all things, can be described in another way as well. The Upanishads teach that ultimate reality can be understood through inward contemplation of the self. The ultimate reality within is named **Atman** (aht'muhn), the eternal Self.

The fundamental discovery of the Upanishads is that Brahman, ultimate reality understood through contemplation of the universe, and Atman, ultimate reality understood through contemplation of the inner self, are in fact one and the same. Brahman is Atman; all reality is one.

One famous passage in the Upanishads consists of a dialogue between a father and a son. Svetaketu asks his father:

“Please, sir, tell me more about this Self.”

“Be it so. Put this salt in water, and come to me tomorrow morning.”

Svetaketu did as he was bidden. The next morning his father asked him to bring the salt which he had put in the water. But he could not, for it had dissolved. Then said Uddalaka:

“Sip the water, and tell me how it tastes.”

“It is salty, sir.”

“In the same way,” continued Uddalaka, “though you do not see Brahman in

moksha
(mohk'shuh)

Liberation or release of the individual self, *atman*, from the bondage of *samsara*; salvation; one of the four goals of life.

monism

The doctrine that reality is ultimately made up of only one essence.

Brahman
(brah'muhn)

The eternal essence of reality and the source of the universe, beyond the reach of human perception and thought.

Upanishads
(oo-pah'ni-shuhdz;
from Sanskrit:
“sitting near a
teacher”)

A collection of over two hundred texts composed between 900 and 200 BC that provide philosophical commentary on the Vedas.

Atman (aht'mahn)

The eternal Self, which the Upanishads identify with Brahman; often lowercased to refer to the eternal self or soul of an individual that is reincarnated from one body to the next and is ultimately identified with Atman.



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Agni, God of fire, portrayed by Charles Étienne Pierre (1755-1835) (colour litho). Baudel, Louis Thomas (1804-1841) (letter) / Private Collection / The Stapleton Collection / Bridgeman Images



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Among Hinduism's many gods are (clockwise from top left) Krishna, depicted in a typical dancing pose; Agni, god of fire; Shiva, god of destruction, shown in this eleventh-century bronze ringed by a circle of flames and dancing on the back of a demon; and Ganesha, elephant god.

this body, he is indeed here. That which is the subtle essence—in that have all things their existence. That is the truth. That is the Self. And that, Svetaketu, that art thou.”

(Chandogya Upanishad 6.12.3—6.13.3)

“That art thou” (*tat tvam asi* in Sanskrit) is frequently cited in Hindu literature. Brahman is Atman. This is monism. All reality—the universe, oneself, and everyone else—shares one essence. And that one is Brahman. Or that one is Atman. In the light of the understanding that all is essentially one, the terms Brahman and Atman are interchangeable.

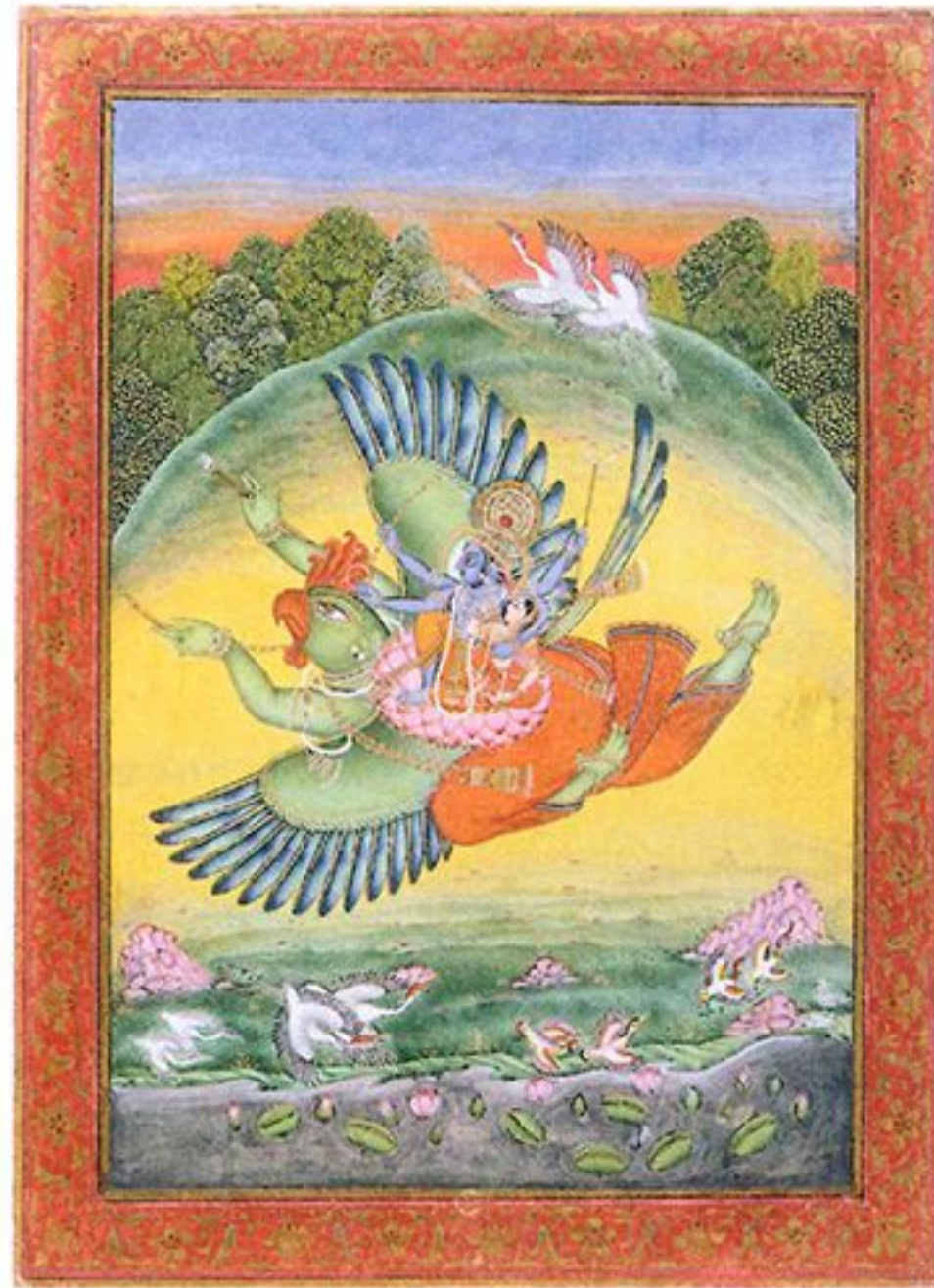


ACTIVITY

Imagine you are Svetaketu’s father. Create another analogy that might answer the boy’s question about the Self.

Polytheism: 330 Million Gods and Goddesses

The divine is thought ultimately to be one essence. And yet Hindus subscribe to polytheism, believing in many gods and goddesses (traditionally 330 million!). We can best understand this apparent contradiction by returning to our water analogy. We have referred to water as the common essence of rivers, ponds, lakes, and oceans. We have also noted that oceans are unique in that they are the final destination or ultimate receptacle of all of the earth’s water. Though we speak of different oceans that fill separate areas of the earth’s surface, there is in reality only one body of water. One person could be surfing in the Pacific while thousands of miles away her cousin is sailing on the Atlantic, each



De Agostini Picture Library / Bridgeman Images

The Hindu god Vishnu and his consort, Lakshmi, ride on the mythical bird Garuda.

apparently enjoying a different ocean. But if you look at a map or a globe, you will see that the oceans of the world are not divided by any continuous landmasses; ultimately they form one body of water. In terms of our analogy, this one universal ocean can therefore be thought of as the ultimate ground of the common essence of reality.

Hinduism generally regards its 330 million deities as extensions of one ultimate reality, many names for one ocean, many “masks” for one God. Because the divine reality of Brahman or Atman is beyond the reach of the senses and of thought, humans need accessible points of contact with the divine. Ultimate reality must be revealed if it is to affect the individual. Hinduism’s many deities provide these points of contact, each with its own personal characteristics. Hindus can freely worship whichever gods and goddesses they like. Given the vast number of deities, at

samsara
(sahm-sah'ruh)

The wheel of rebirth or reincarnation; the this-worldly realm in which rebirth occurs.

Bhagavad-Gita
(buh'guh-vuhd gee'tah; Sanskrit: "Song of the Blessed Lord")

A short section of the epic poem *Mahabharata* in which the god Krishna teaches the great warrior Arjuna about *bhakti marga* and other ways to God; Hinduism's most popular sacred text.

least one will surely provide an effective point of contact with the divine.

Many Worlds, Many Lifetimes:
Hindu Cosmology

All religious traditions set forth a cosmology—an explanation regarding the nature of the universe. Hindu cosmology, relative to the great Western religions and to modern science, is noticeably distinctive in many of its aspects.

With the Hindu tradition, before examining *what* the universe is, it is appropriate to consider *why* the universe is. If everything is ultimately and originally one thing, all unified in the divine Brahman, why does there appear to be anything else? What happened in the first place that caused the human need to seek salvation? Such questions are of obvious interest, and yet they have no easy answers. Hinduism tends to regard such issues as great mysteries. Just as Brahman itself is ultimately a mystery, beyond the reach of logical explanation, so too does its creative energy flow forth mysteriously. This universe—this ordinary, finite, limited realm of existence—somehow has come to be. Humans call it home, at least for now. The important thing for Hindus is to deal with the universe as it is, to seek salvation through liberation from the world's bonds.

Cycles of Creation

The West has generally stressed the linear progression of time, from a distant beginning (such as the six days of Creation recounted in the Book of Genesis, or the big bang theory of modern astrophysics) to an eventual end of creation as we know it. Hinduism, in contrast, charts time and creation in ongoing cycles.

The cyclical cosmology of Hinduism declares that the universe undergoes long periods of creation and destruction, a

rhythmic pattern that repeats itself endlessly. The end of the present period is drawing near—although millions of years remain. As the end of the cycle approaches, the destructive forces already at work will gradually gain the upper hand, eventually bringing all of creation to a deep stillness and long pause. Then the entire universe will be re-created: the galaxies will be remade, souls will arise again and come to inhabit the various life-forms, Hinduism will evolve all over again.

Reincarnation

Within the cyclical pattern of the universe, each individual is also created and re-created repeatedly, until finally attaining release from this realm through *moksha*. In its barest outline, this is the Hindu perspective on the human condition. According to the doctrine of *samsara* (sahm-sah'ruh), or "wheel of rebirth," the individual is reincarnated from one life-form to another. Accounts vary as to precisely what is reincarnated. At the very least, it is the atman, the individual "self" or "soul," the divine spark within that is destined to eventually be reunited with its source. Most aspects of the personality are generally not thought to be transmitted into the next life-form. For instance, individuals usually cannot remember past lives.

Reincarnation occurs on a vast number of levels of existence, including the various life-forms (human, animal, according to some texts, even plant) of this earth and other similar worlds, gods and goddesses in the many Hindu heavens, and demons in its many hells. Traditional accounts also specify a realm of semidivine "titans" just below the heavens, and a realm of "ghosts" just above the hells. Like all realms of *samsara*, even those of the gods do not last forever—they are not Brahman. An individual might enjoy heavenly pleasures for ten thousand years, but then the wheel of rebirth is destined to



continue, and the individual's atman will continue being reincarnated until *moksha* is achieved.

Reincarnation puts an interesting twist on the problem of mortality. On one hand, to die without attaining liberation must be considered a defeat, because the atman is then destined to remain on the wheel of rebirth. On the other hand, the prospect of reincarnation denies death at least some of its sting. Death is not so final for Hindus—in fact, it is likely to be experienced again!

In the **Bhagavad-Gita** (buh'guh-vuhd-gee'tah), Hinduism's most popular sacred text, the god Krishna teaches the great warrior Arjuna about many important religious issues, including reincarnation. As Krishna explains to Arjuna, the eternal atman (self) puts on new bodies like we put on new clothes:

Never have I not existed,
nor you, nor these kings;
and never in the future
shall we cease to exist.
Just as the embodied self
enters childhood, youth, and old age,
so does it enter another body;
this does not confound a steadfast man.

.

As a man discards
worn-out clothes
to put on new
and different ones,
so the embodied self
discards
its worn-out bodies
to take on other new ones.
(Bhagavad-Gita 2:12–13,22)

This Hindu monument in Rishikesh, India, presents Krishna, the chariot driver, and Arjuna, in a scene from the Mahabharata.

karma (Sanskrit: “action”)

The moral law of cause and effect of actions; determines the nature of one’s reincarnation.

dharma (dahr’muh)

Ethical duty based on the divine order of reality; one of the four goals of life.



ACTIVITY

Many religions and philosophers, including Plato, have believed in reincarnation, considering it to provide a logical view of human destiny. How might reincarnation explain who we are, what we know, what we look like, and how we act?

Law and Order: Divine Principles in the World

Two principles, *karma* and *dharma*, connect the divine with this world. These principles form the crucial link between the realm of *samsara* and the divine source. By providing a basis for a moral life in this world, *karma* and *dharma* permeate the earthly life with spiritual significance.

Karma

Karma functions hand in hand with *samsara*, in that it determines the nature of each reincarnation. *Karma* literally means “action” or “deed.” This principle, best understood as the moral law of cause and effect, states that every action produces an outcome that is justified by the action’s moral worthiness. *Karma* thus determines all the particular circumstances and situations of one’s life. *Karma* functions independently of any deity or of a procedure of divine judgment. Individuals are automatically held to be morally responsible for their actions; as the old saying goes, “As you sow, so shall you reap.”

Karma permeates the realm of *samsara*, such that an individual’s *karmic* record stays with the self from reincarnation to reincarnation. *Karma* thus determines the life-form into which the *atman* is born, whether it be

a deity or other supernatural being, a human, or an animal. Of the various life-forms, only humans have the will to affect the status of their *karma*. Therefore being human is both a privilege and a demanding responsibility.

At least in theory, *karma* secures a high degree of justice. Unlike followers of Western religions, Hindus have an easy answer to the question, Why do bad things happen to good people? Because they have committed evil deeds in their past lives and therefore deserve to be punished! The criminal can never escape justice, and the saint will never be denied a just reward. Because of this foolproof feature, the law of *karma* has been called the most logical system of divine justice the world has ever known.

Dharma

The law of *karma* holds people responsible for their actions. Applying that law requires some standard for determining the rightness or wrongness of actions. That standard is *dharma* (dahr’muh), or ethical duty based on the divine order of reality.

The significance of *dharma* can hardly be overstated. The term *dharma* is Hinduism’s closest equivalent to the West’s term *religion*. More than just a specific list of rights and wrongs, *dharma* is the complete rule of life. For every activity, there is a way of acting that conforms to *dharma*. Hindus look to four sources when seeking guidance about *dharma* in particular situations. These sources, in order from highest to lowest level of authority, are (1) divine revelation, as expressed in the sacred scriptures; (2) sacred tradition, as passed on from generation to generation; (3) the practices and example of those who are considered the wisest members of society; and (4) conscience.

Whenever Hindus strive to fulfill desires, *dharma* limits their pursuits. *Dharma* also

shifts the focus from satisfying private cravings to caring for others. In its ultimate effect of nourishing unconditional concern for the world, *dharma* has much in common with the primary Christian ethical principle of unconditional love and with the Buddhist counterpart of infinite compassion. *Dharma* is thus a major feature of the ethical dimension of Hinduism.



ACTIVITY

In the right-hand column of a sheet of paper, write the main actions you have taken during the last twenty-four hours. In the left-hand column, write what caused you to take each action. Then answer these questions: Is it possible for an action to lack a cause? Why or why not?

HINDU SOCIETY: MAPPING THE INDIVIDUAL'S IDENTITY

Despite their sometimes dizzying complexity, the many aspects of Hinduism are for the most part in harmony. Basic principles are interconnected. *Karma*, the moral law of cause and effect, is based in *dharma*, ethical duty. *Dharma*, in turn, is connected to social order. A person's particular *dharma* is determined by gender, caste, and stage of life. Within this social order, Hindus are free to choose from among four legitimate goals. Together these circumstances map an individual's identity.

The *dharma* of women, for example, has traditionally emphasized obedience to men—first the father, then the husband, and finally the sons. The duties of caste and stage of life,

which figure prominently in constituting the *dharma* of men, are less relevant for women. But women's primary role of providing for the welfare of the family has always been a basic aspect of Hindu society. By traditionally performing this role with energy and perseverance, women have tended to earn a reputation for having more integrity of character than men, who are sometimes regarded as less dependable and more prone to frivolity. On the other hand, women's domestic responsibilities have limited their educational and career opportunities compared with those of men.

Doing One's Job: The Caste System

Hinduism's **caste system** incorporates a traditional division of society into four distinct classes—**brahmin** (brah'min), consisting of priests; **kshatriya** (kshuht'ree-yuh), including warriors and administrators; **vaishya** (vish'yuh), made up of producers, such as farmers, merchants, and artisans; and **shudra** (shoo'druh), composed of servants and laborers. The original term used for this division by class, *varna*, means "color," which is apparently related to the differences in skin tone between the darker original inhabitants of India and the fairer Aryans who migrated from the north and penetrated most of India during the centuries of Hinduism's origins (beginning about 2000 BC). The Aryans considered it important to prevent the two racial groups from intermingling, so they distinguished their own classes—the *brahmin*, *kshatriya*, and *vaishya*—from that of the native peoples, the *shudra*.

The original four classes of the caste system were divided and subdivided until over three thousand distinct categories emerged.

caste system

Traditional division of Hindu society into various categories; there are four main *varnas*, or classes: *brahmin*, *kshatriya*, *vaishya*, and *shudra*; each class contains numerous subgroups, resulting in more than three thousand categories.

brahmin (brah'min)

The highest of the four classes of the caste system, traditionally made up of priests.

kshatriya (kshuht'ree-yuh)

The second of the four classes of the caste system, traditionally made up of warriors and administrators.

vaishya (vish'yuh)

The third of the four classes of the caste system, traditionally made up of producers, such as farmers, merchants, and artisans.

shudra (shoo'druh)

The lowest of the four classes of the caste system, traditionally made up of servants and laborers.

These categories correspond primarily to different occupations, especially for men. For women the primary significance of caste pertains to whom they can marry; traditional *dharma* provides specific rules regarding marriage with respect to caste. An additional category consists of the “outcastes,” those who are considered to be outside of society altogether. This group includes the Untouchables, who only recently have begun to enjoy some legal rights, thanks to the work of Mahatma Gandhi. He renamed the outcastes Harijan, “God’s children.”

In general the caste system is rigidly based on heredity. One is simply born to a lifelong caste identity, as determined by *karma*, which directs the soul into whatever situation it deserves. The Upanishads explain:

Accordingly, those who are of pleasant conduct here—the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter a pleasant womb, either the womb of a [*brahmin*], or the womb of a [*kshatriya*], or the womb of a [*vaishya*]. But those who are of stinking

conduct here—the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter a stinking womb, either the womb of a dog, or the womb of a swine, or the womb of an [outcaste].

(Chandogya Upanishad 5.10.7)

In this way, *karma* can be seen to justify the caste system itself. People do not just happen to be born outcastes; they deserve their lowly status because of their “stinking conduct” in previous lives. Likewise *brahmins* deserve their privileged position because of their meritorious *karma* in previous lives: they have lived in conformity to their *dharma*, and consequently are now closer to salvation.

Karma determines caste identity, and caste, in turn, determines the specific *dharma* governing a person’s actions. For example, the ethical duties of a *brahmin* differ from those of a *kshatriya*. The Bhagavad-Gita presents a striking illustration of how caste identity determines *dharma*. Arjuna, a great warrior (thus of the *kshatriya* class), is poised to enter a crucial battle. As he considers the gruesome



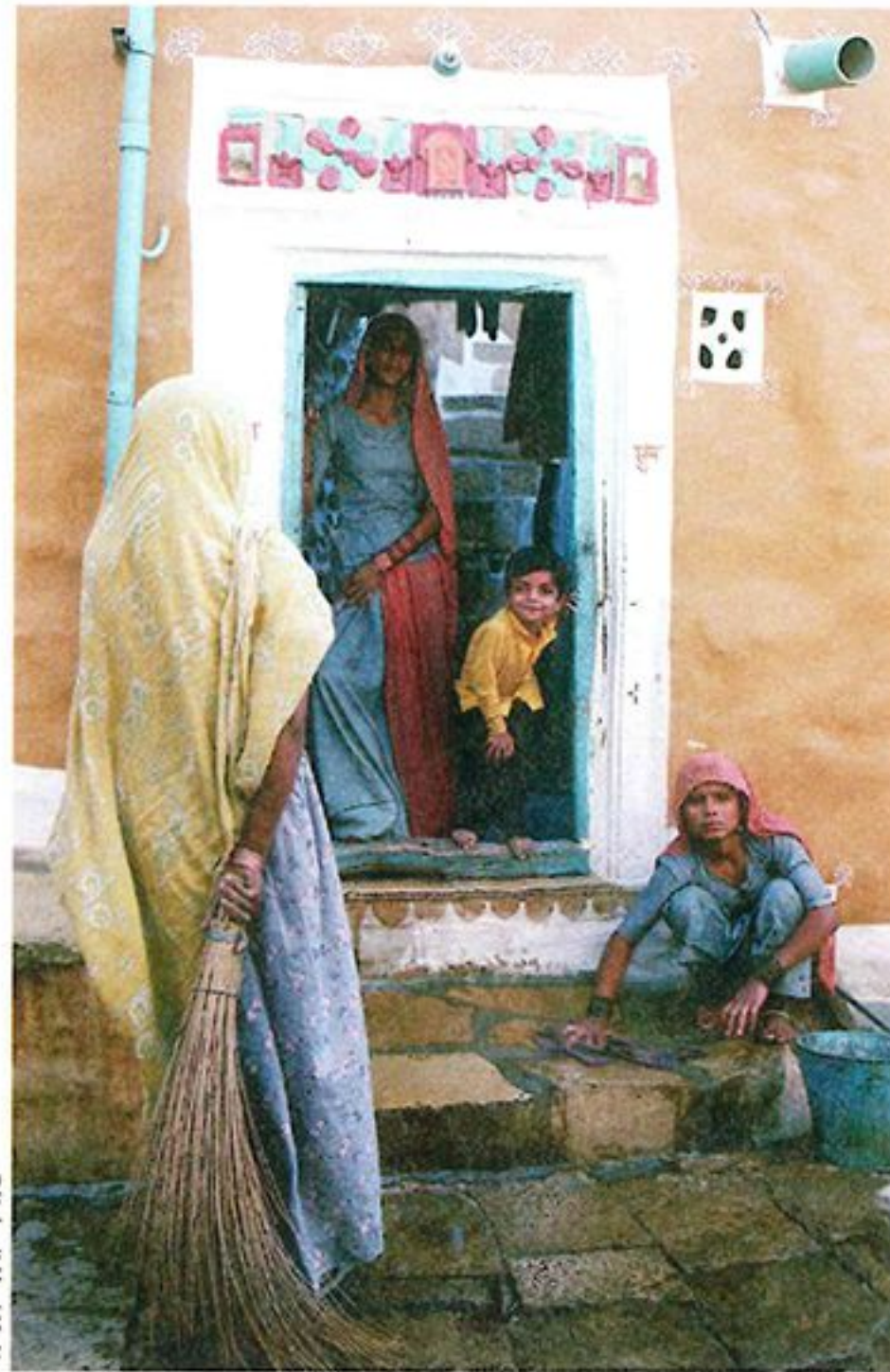
Hinduism’s caste system divides society into four major classes. Ricksha drivers are generally members of the *shudra*, or laborer, class.

© Pius Lee / Shutterstock.com

tasks that lie before him, including the killing of kinsmen and old friends, he hesitates, wondering if he should avoid battle. The god Krishna, disguised as Arjuna's charioteer, reminds Arjuna of his *dharma*:

Look to your own duty;
do not tremble before it;
nothing is better for a warrior
than a battle of sacred duty.
The doors of heaven open
for warriors who rejoice
to have a battle like this
thrust on them by chance.
If you fail to wage this war
of sacred duty,
you will abandon your own duty
and fame only to gain evil.

(Bhagavad-Gita 2:31–33)



Top: These women, considered Untouchables, perform lowly tasks such as sweeping and mopping streets. Gandhi called them Harijans, or "God's children."

Bottom: This farmer selling his vegetables at market is part of the *vaishya* class.



A Hindu marriage ceremony marks the start of the householder stage of life.



ACTIVITY

Hindu society is separated by caste identity. Is Western society separated in any ways that are similar to the caste system? Explain your answer.

Acting One's Age: Four Stages of Life

Hindu society distinguishes four stages of life, each with its own set of specific duties. The stages have traditionally been especially relevant for males who belong to the *vaishya*, *kshatriya*, and particularly *brahmin* classes.

Upon undergoing an initiation ritual at about the time of puberty, a Hindu boy enters the first stage, that of the student. Characterized by intensive study of the Vedas (*vay'duhz*) and other sacred literature, this stage lasts until marriage.

Hindu marriages are traditionally arranged by the parents, and the bride and groom commonly do not know each other until the

time of the wedding. Though customs such as these are changing, especially in urban areas, many Hindus adhere to the traditional way. A contemporary young woman named Vimla, whose marriage was arranged, reasons: "We don't choose the family we're born into, we adjust to it. So why should we risk choosing our marriage? It's too important to be left up to individual choice" (quoted in Mitter, *Dharma's Daughters*, page 18).



ACTIVITY

Who do you think should choose a person's marriage partner? How does your perspective on this issue compare with Vimla's? What aspects of Hinduism might help account for any differences in perspective?

In the second stage, that of the householder, the worldly tasks of pursuing a career and raising a family are central. Women are involved in this stage along with their husbands.

The birth of the first grandchild marks the beginning of the third stage, the forest dweller stage. A man may choose to ask his wife to accompany him through this stage, which allows him to retreat from worldly bonds (sometimes literally by dwelling in the forest) in order to engage fully in a spiritual quest.

The fourth stage is that of the *sannyasin* (sun-yah'sin), or wandering ascetic. This stage is for forest dwellers who are ready to return to society but remain detached from the normal attractions and distractions of social life. Engaged with the world but not attached to it, the *sannyasin* is, as described in the Bhagavad-Gita, "one who neither hates nor desires" (5:3). Women who have accompanied their husbands into the forest might naturally advance to the fourth stage as well. If they do so, the husband and wife live detached from each other, having transcended the ordinary ways of this world, including those of marriage.



ACTIVITY

Describe the four Hindu stages of life, comparing each stage to a similar stage in Western society.

Seeking One's Desire: Four Goals of Life

Liberation from *samsara*, in the Hindu view, is the summit of spiritual fulfillment. *Moksha* is the ultimate goal of life. But what if we enjoy this world, welcome the challenges of this life, and relish its fruits? What if we are so content in this world that we appreciate reincarnation as yet another opportunity to seek the many pleasures of existence?

Sensual Pleasure

Hinduism embraces such pleasure seeking, even as it teaches the ultimate goal of liberation. Pleasure, or *kama* (kah'muh), is a legitimate aim of life. No religion denies that humans desire pleasure. Religions differ drastically, however, in their judgments as to the goodness or rightness of fulfilling that desire. Hinduism tends to surpass most religions in its outright celebration of the pursuit of pleasure. *Kama*, which refers mainly to the pleasures of sensual love, is to be embraced by whosoever desires it, provided that the lovers remain within the limits of *dharma*. So legitimate is the pursuit of *kama* that some of Hinduism's sacred literature is devoted to the enhancement of sensual love.

Material Success

Despite its complete legitimacy, the appetite for *kama* is believed to have a limit. Eventually the fulfillment found in love will no longer satisfy completely. A complementary yearning arises for *artha*, material success and the social power and prestige that accompany it. Just as North American secular society tends to embrace the pursuit of money, Hinduism celebrates the goal of *artha*. But also like the pursuit of money,

sannyasin (sun-yah'sin)

A wandering ascetic who has advanced to the fourth and highest stage of life.

ascetic

One who renounces physical pleasures and worldly attachments for the sake of spiritual advancement; common in Hinduism and many other religious traditions, most notably Jainism.

kama (kah'muh)

Pleasure, especially of sensual love; one of the four goals of life.

artha

Material success and social prestige, one of the four goals of life.

Material success, or *artha*, is a legitimate goal in Hindu life and may be signified by jewelry and gold woven into a woman's sari.



artha eventually proves unfulfilling. In due time, people experience a yearning to strive for something beyond pursuits that provide for only personal and material needs.

Harmony with *Dharma*

This yearning leads to the third goal of life, which is called *dharma*. *Dharma* as a life goal maintains its meaning as the general principle of ethical duty. But it is no longer merely a duty, begrudgingly performed. It is now that which is most desired. The deep joy of living in harmony with *dharma* is known firsthand. No one needs to tell the Hindu who pursues this goal that it is more blessed to give than to receive. The blessings of *dharma* give fuel to its fire. Yet even perfect harmony with *dharma* is a limited joy, destined eventually to lead to even deeper yearnings. After all, the world for which the ethical person

has concern—even if the concern is unconditional—is still the world of this realm, afflicted with the unending pains of *samsara*.

The Bliss of *Moksha*

All Hindus are destined to seek the fourth goal of life: the infinite being, awareness, and bliss of *moksha*, the great ocean into which all rivers eventually flow. And the paths to *moksha* that are available to Hindus are as numerous and diverse as the rivers of India.



ACTIVITY

Reflect on a major goal you have set for yourself and have achieved. Was the satisfaction of accomplishing the goal permanent? Did it cause you to desire to achieve new goals? From the experience, what did you learn about desire?

THE LAWS OF MANU ON *DHARMA*

Some of the classical texts of Hinduism devote a great deal of attention to spelling out the details of dharma, setting forth specific rules of conduct. The Laws of Manu, composed by about AD 200, is the most famous of these texts. Its contents continue to dictate the ways of tradition-minded Hindus to this day. Here are two examples:

On the Proper Place of the Hindu Woman

Day and night women must be kept in dependence by the males (of) their (families), and, if they attach themselves to sensual enjoyments, they must be kept under one's control.

Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her sons protect (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence.

Reprehensible is the father who gives not (his daughter in marriage) at the proper time; reprehensible is the husband who approaches not (his wife in due season), and reprehensible is the son who does not protect his mother after her husband has died. (9:2–4)

On the Student Stage of Life

Let [the student] not pronounce the mere name of his teacher (without adding an honorific title) behind his back even, and let him not mimic his gait, speech, and deportment.

By censuring (his teacher), though justly, he will become (in his next birth) an ass, by falsely defaming him, a dog; he who lives on his teacher's substance, will become a worm, and he who is envious (of his merit), a (larger) insect.

(2:199,201)



© Howard Davis / Corbis

This nurse dedicates her expertise to alleviating the suffering of poor people in urban Delhi. She is following *karma marga*, “the path of works.”

THREE PATHS TO LIBERATION

Hinduism offers three great paths to *moksha*. People have different talents and strengths, and each of the three paths draws primarily on one of the following human tendencies: to be active, to gain knowledge, and to experience emotional attachment. The paths are not mutually exclusive; in practice Hindus usually follow more than one. All three are revered as effective means of moving closer to the ultimate goal of liberation.

For the Active:

***Karma Marga*, “The Path of Works”**

Most people—those engaged in the day-to-day tasks of earning a living and raising a family, those for whom physical activities come naturally—prefer to seek liberation through *karma marga*, “the path of works” (also referred to as *karma yoga*). Simple to understand and to practice, this path has

everything to do with living in accordance with *dharma*.

Recall that *dharma* in its most general meaning is ethical duty, and includes observance of many traditional aspects of Hinduism: household rituals, public ceremonies, and social requirements, such as conforming to dietary laws and marriage restrictions. *Dharma* also involves an ongoing concern for the world and one’s fellow human beings, as exemplified in the most influential modern advocate of *karma marga*, Mahatma Gandhi. For Gandhi, religion itself is none other than concern for the world expressed through social service:

I am being led to my religion through Truth and Non-violence, i.e., love in the broadest sense. I often describe my religion as religion of Truth. Of late, instead of saying God is Truth I have been saying Truth is God, in order more fully to define my religion. . . .

karma marga
(also *karma yoga*;
Sanskrit: “the path
of works”)

One of three Hindu paths to salvation, emphasizing performing right actions according to *dharma*.

jnana marga
(nyah'nah mar'guh;
also jnana yoga;
Sanskrit: "the path
of knowledge")

One of three Hindu paths to salvation, emphasizing knowing the true nature of reality through learning and meditation.

Vedanta
(vay-dahn'tuh)

A system of Hindu philosophy and one approach within *jnana marga*, "the path of knowledge," holding that all reality is essentially Brahman; most notable advocate is the medieval Hindu philosopher Shankara.

maya (mah'yah)

Cosmic illusion brought about by divine creative power.

The bearing of this religion on social life is, or has to be, seen in one's daily social contact. To be true to such religion one has to lose oneself in continuous and continuing service of all life. Realization of Truth is impossible without a complete merging of oneself in and identification with this limitless ocean of life. Hence, for me, there is no escape from social service; there is no happiness on earth beyond or apart from it.

(*The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, volume 1, page 461)

In all its aspects, *karma marga* is marked by an attitude of unselfishness. When traveling this path, one must avoid selfishly claiming credit for having accomplished an action. This is challenging, for humans are inclined to be selfish. As Krishna remarks in the Bhagavad-Gita, "Deluded by individuality, / the self thinks, 'I am the actor'" (3:27). If every accomplishment requires a pat on the back, the bondage of individuality is strengthened, and the self is further deluded into feeling removed from the universal ocean of Atman, its true source and essence. The path of works succeeds when one does the opposite, performing the right action without needing to claim the credit.

In a similar way, selfish attachment to the results of action must be avoided. Krishna instructs Arjuna:

Be intent on action,
not on the fruits of action;
avoid attraction to the fruits
and attachment to inaction!

(Bhagavad-Gita 2:47)

Do the right thing only because it is right. Be a good student, not because being a good student will earn you a good grade, but because being a good student is right in itself. Mahatma Gandhi did great deeds, but he did not act in order to be rewarded by the praise of others or even by a sense of

self-satisfaction. He simply did what he perceived to be the right thing.



ACTIVITY

"Do the right thing only because it is right." Must right actions be rewarded for people to want to do them, or should they be their own reward?

For the Philosophical: *Jnana Marga*, "The Path of Knowledge"

The shortest but steepest ascent to liberation follows *jnana marga* (nyah'nah mar'guh), "the path of knowledge" (also known as *jnana yoga*). This path is intended for those with talent for philosophical reflection. It requires the follower to devote a great deal of time to learning and meditation. These demands render *jnana marga* most practical for members of the *brahmin* class.

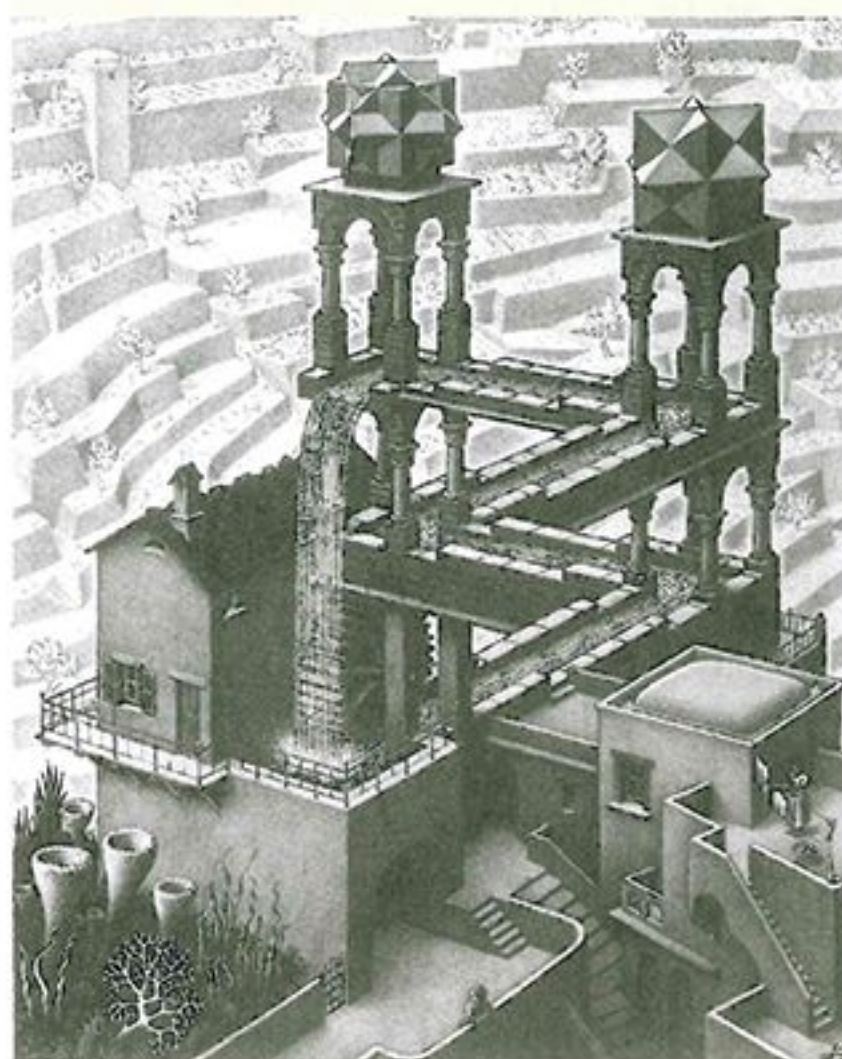
Whereas the path of works emphasizes doing the right thing over the wrong thing, *jnana marga* emphasizes attaining knowledge over ignorance—knowledge of the true nature of reality. This is an enormous challenge because *jnana* is knowledge of a very special sort, amounting to extraordinary insight that is far beyond merely knowing about the subject matter. To attain this kind of knowledge is to live it, to be that which is known, to experience the true nature of reality. *Jnana marga* is thus primarily part of the experiential dimension of Hinduism. The knowing itself is the experience sought; it does not culminate in knowledge *about* this or that doctrine or other aspect of Hinduism. With this experience, reached through profound contemplation of the innermost self, comes a full awareness of truth, a certitude that has the power to transform the knower, thus leading to liberation.

Three Schools of Philosophy

Different teachings within *jnana marga* offer various specifics regarding the true nature of reality. The most important are those of three schools of Hindu philosophy: *Vedanta*, Sankhya, and Yoga. Despite their differences, the three approaches are in harmony regarding the same basic task: the attainment of knowledge over the ignorance that binds the self to *samsara*.

Vedanta. The school *Vedanta* (vay-dahn'tuh) is most faithful to the predominant monism of Hinduism. Even within *Vedanta*, though, the characteristic diversity of the religion is apparent. The most prominent form of *Vedanta* is that espoused by the great medieval philosopher Shankara (788 to 820). Most Hindus who traverse the path of knowledge embrace this philosophy.

Shankara's understanding of reality amounts to the basic monism predominant in Hinduism: All reality is essentially one—Brahman, the indescribable, impersonal



M. C. Escher's lithograph *Waterfall* demonstrates the Hindu concept of *maya*, or cosmic illusion. For the person viewing Escher's work, as for the individual trapped in *maya*, the world is not as it seems.

ultimate. The world and all finite beings within it are the stuff of *maya* (mah'yah), cosmic illusion brought about by divine creative power. In a state of ignorance, people are tricked into thinking of their individual

SHANKARA ON MAYA

This tale is told of the great Vedanta philosopher Shankara and one of his pupils, a powerful king, who decided to test his teacher regarding the nature of maya (cosmic illusion brought about by divine creative power):

The following day, therefore, when the philosopher was coming along one of the stately approaches to the palace, to deliver his next lecture to the king, a large and dangerous elephant, maddened by heat, was let loose at him. [Shankara] turned and fled the moment he perceived his danger, and when the animal nearly reached his heels, disappeared from view. When he was found, he was at the top of a lofty palm tree, which he had ascended with a dexterity more usual among sailors than intellectuals. The elephant was caught, fettered, and conducted back to the stables, and the great [Shankara], perspiration breaking from every pore, came before his pupil.

Politely, the king apologized to the master of cryptic wisdom for the unfortunate, nearly disastrous incident; then, with a smile scarcely concealed and half pretending great seriousness, he inquired why the venerable teacher had resorted to physical flight, since he must have been aware that the elephant was of a purely illusory, phenomenal character.

The sage replied, "Indeed, in highest truth, the elephant is non-real. Nevertheless, you and I are as non-real as that elephant. Only your ignorance, clouding the truth with this spectacle of non-real phenomenality, made you see phenomenal me go up a non-real tree."

(Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, page 20)

Sankhya (sahng'kyuh)

A system of Hindu philosophy and one approach within *jnana marga*, "the path of knowledge," asserting that reality comprises two distinct categories: matter and eternal selves.

Yoga

A system of Hindu philosophy and one approach within *jnana marga*, "the path of knowledge," seeking to free the eternal self from the bondage of personhood, culminating in the experience of *samadhi*; sometimes lowercased to refer to physical and psychological techniques for spiritual advancement.

selves as being ultimately real, just as the world of a dream seems real to the dreamer.

This persistent sense of individuality prevents one from experiencing the truth. Just as one might think a droplet of ocean spray exists separately from the ocean, so do individuals imagine they exist independently of Brahman. But in an instant the droplet is absorbed back into the ocean, indistinguishable from its infinite source. So too is the individual eventually absorbed back into Brahman, its infinite source. For despite the illusion of separateness, in truth all are one. The atman, the self deep within, is really the eternal Atman, the infinite Self. And Atman is Brahman.

When one experiences this truth, one has followed the path of knowledge to its end: liberation of the self from *samsara* into the ocean of Brahman. But as the Upanishads warn, it is an arduous path, demanding that

a unique kind of knowledge be applied to a difficult lesson:

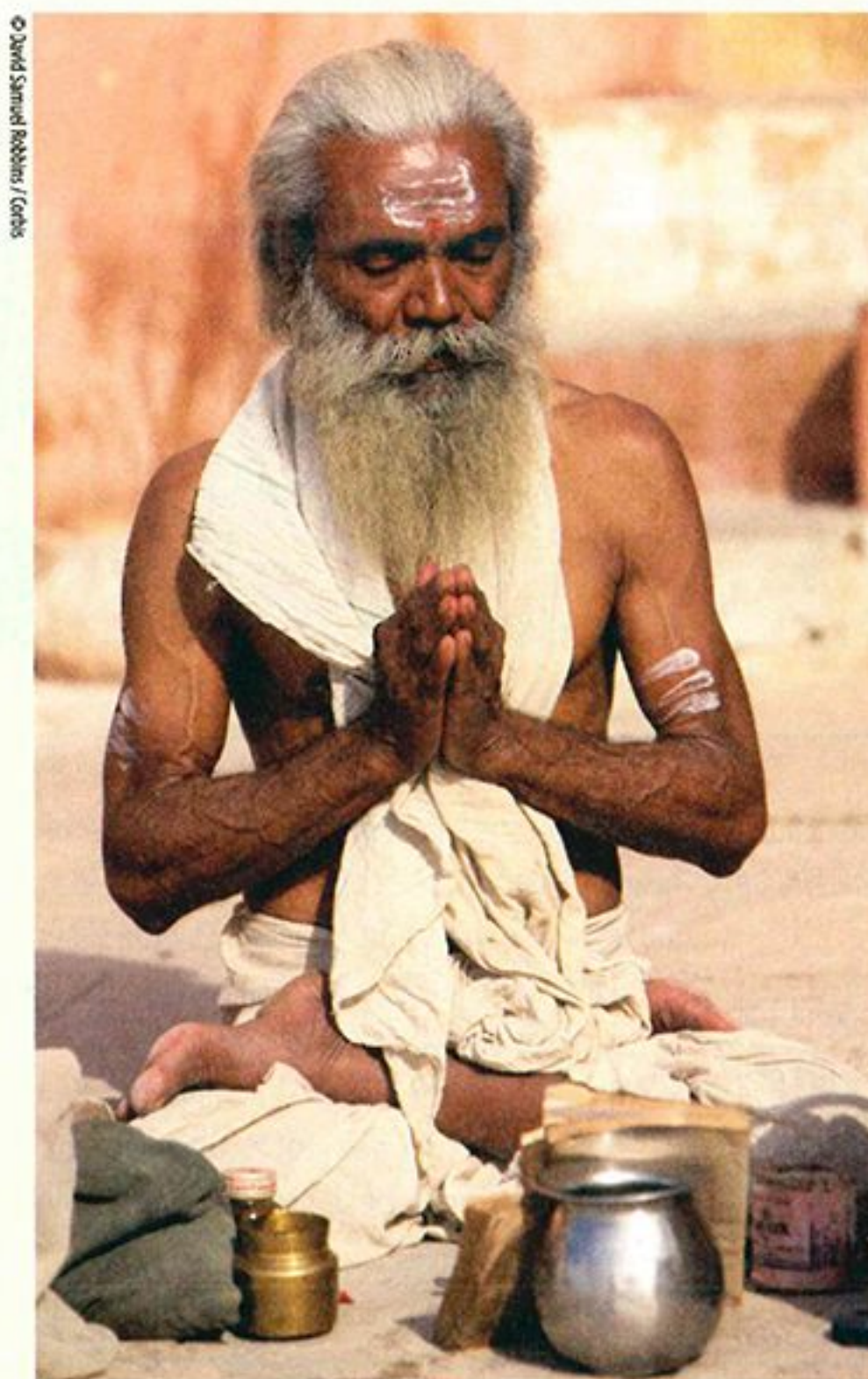
Subtler than the subtlest is this Self, and beyond all logic. Taught by a teacher who knows the Self and Brahman as one, a man leaves vain theory behind and attains to truth.

(Katha Upanishad 1.2.8)

Sankhya. Contrary to Hinduism's predominant monism, **Sankhya** (sahng'kyuh) asserts that reality is composed of two distinct categories: matter and an infinite number of eternal selves. Somehow, for reasons beyond explanation, selves get entwined with matter, thereby becoming bound to the world of *samsara*. Such is the origin and the predicament of human beings. The follower of Sankhya strives to free the eternal Self from the bondage of the personality. The basic teachings of the Sankhya school are important for the religions Jainism and Buddhism, and underlie the Hindu approach of Yoga.

Yoga. The term *yoga* has different meanings in Hinduism. In the general sense, it refers to any sort of spiritual practice—as it does in the terms for the paths to salvation, where it is substituted for *marga*, as in *jnana yoga*. In a more limited usage, it refers to a philosophical school that emphasizes physical and psychological practices.

Yoga carefully acknowledges the connection between the self and the other parts of our human makeup—the body and its sensations, the mind and its thinking, and the subconscious. The objective of the yogi, or practitioner of Yoga, is to free the eternal self from bondage by stripping away the many levels of personhood in which that self is wrapped. Note how Sankhya's teaching of the division of reality into eternal selves and eternal matter underlies Yoga. Like Sankhya, Yoga regards sensations, the mind, even the subconscious as aspects of matter.



© David Samuel Robbins / Corbis

The objective of the practitioner of Yoga is to free the eternal self from bondage.

Various versions of Yoga are based on this understanding of the human condition. The most famous sets forth eight steps:

1. Preparing morally by abstaining from five acts: harming living things, lying, stealing, acting unchastely, and being greedy
2. Preparing morally by observing five virtues: cleanliness, calmness, self-control, studiousness, and prayerfulness
3. Sitting in a posture that promotes comfort while discouraging drowsiness (Eighty-four postures are described; the most popular is the lotus position, with feet crossed and resting on the thighs, hands crossed in the lap, eyes focused on the tip of the nose.)
4. Breathing properly so that the entire body is brought into a simple rhythmic pattern
5. "Closing the doors of perception": withdrawing the senses from any contact with objects
6. Concentrating on one thing so the mind empties itself of all other thoughts

7. Meditating, an ever deepening state of concentration moving toward the final step
8. Going into *samadhi* (suh-mah'dee), a trancelike state in which self-consciousness is lost, and the mind is absorbed into the ultimate reality

In *samadhi* the knower becomes that which is known; the path of knowledge has been traversed to its goal. Although in practice the yogi normally comes back out of the trance, the transforming power of *samadhi* leads to final liberation. Here we have a good example of a type of spiritual fulfillment involving the transcendence of the human condition, eventually leading to salvation. As is typical of the climactic phenomena of the experiential dimension of any religion, *samadhi* cannot adequately be explained by way of language. Like the final liberating experience of *moksha*, *samadhi* must be experienced to be fully understood.

samadhi
(suh-mah'dee)

A trancelike state in which self-consciousness is lost, and the mind is absorbed into the ultimate reality; the culmination of the eight steps of Yoga.

A Hindu woman follows the path of devotion by visiting a temple, where she places water on a statue of the god Nandi.



bhakti marga
(buhk'tee mar'guh;
also *bhakti yoga*;
Sanskrit: "the path
of devotion")

The most popular of the three Hindu paths to salvation, emphasizing loving devotion to one's chosen god or goddess.



ACTIVITY

What might be some differences between the knowledge sought by a Hindu on *jnana marga* and the knowledge sought by a student working on a high school diploma or college degree?

For the Emotional: ***Bhakti Marga*, "The Path of Devotion"**

Based in loving reverence for one's chosen god or goddess, ***bhakti marga*** (buhk'tee mar'guh), "the path of devotion" (also referred to as *bhakti yoga*), is most suitable for those to whom emotional attachment comes naturally. In contrast to the inward journey of *jnana marga*, this path directs spiritual energy outward, in worship of the deity. This is beneficial because the gods and goddesses favor their devotees and answer their prayers. Most important, *bhakti marga* moves its adherents

closer to liberation. Worship requires a focusing of attention on the divine and away from the adherent's selfish concerns. Through worship, the path of devotion helps to reduce the individuality that binds the self to *samsara*.

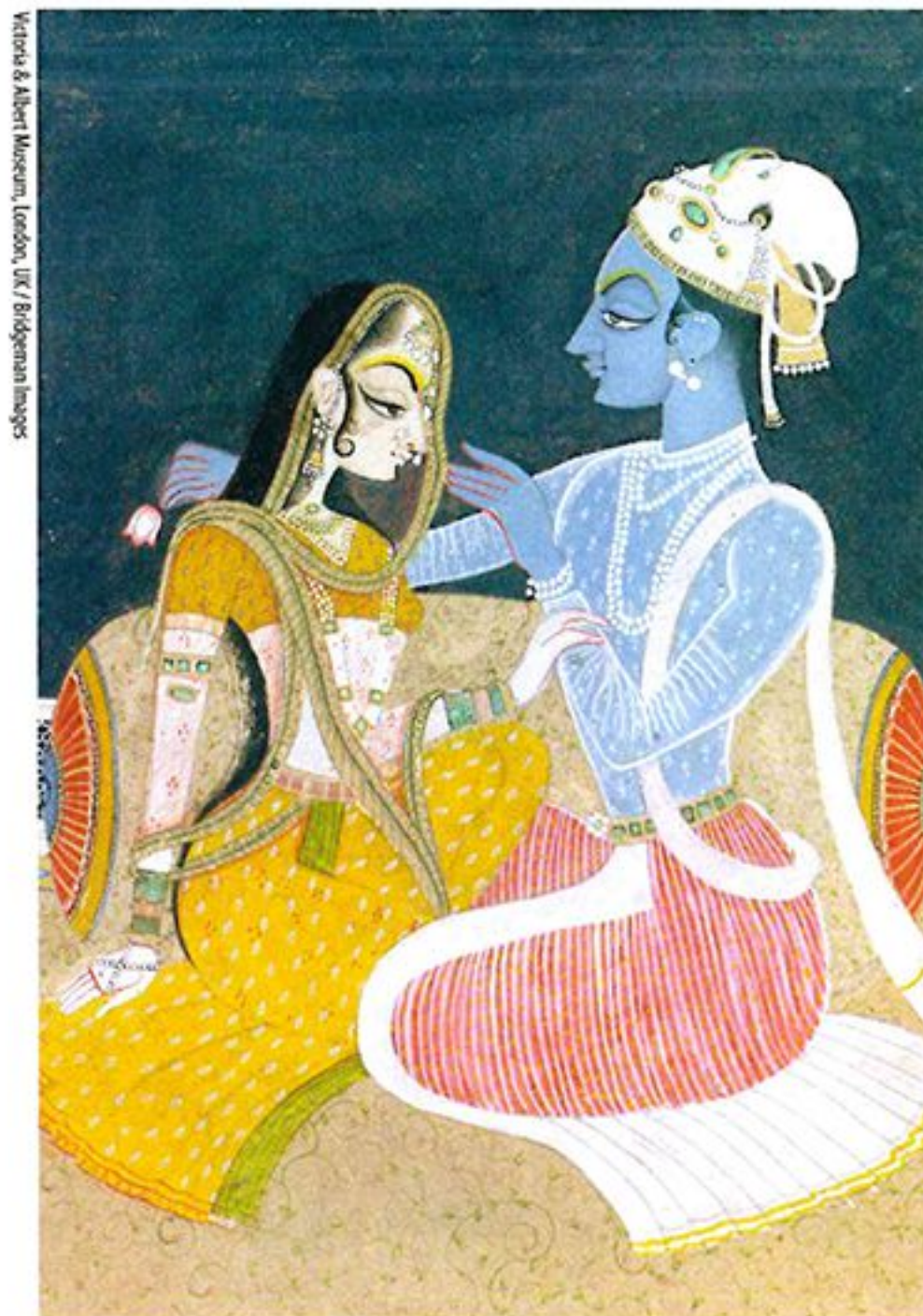
Gods and Goddesses

Stories about Hinduism's many deities form the heart of the mythic dimension of Hinduism. Some of the deities have been a part of the tradition from the beginning, whereas others are newly acknowledged.

The vast variety of gods and goddesses points to an important fact about *bhakti marga*: a typical Hindu is devoted to more than one deity, depending on the specific needs of the day. Still it is common to choose a personal deity as the object of special devotion. Some of Hinduism's most popular deities are Vishnu, Shiva, Kali, and the *avatars* Krishna and Rama.

Among the 330 million gods and goddesses is an important triad: Brahma, the Creator; Vishnu, the Preserver; and Shiva, the Destroyer. Brahma, though still highly thought of, is rarely worshipped anymore. Today, as for centuries, Vishnu and Shiva are worshipped by millions. As his role as the Preserver suggests, Vishnu, with four arms and various symbols of power and goodness, is regarded by his devotees as their supreme protector and example of moral perfection. It is notable that Shiva, a god known for destruction, should be so popular. In fact, this fits logically within the Hindu cyclical cosmology, for the destruction brought about by Shiva makes way for new creation.

The cycle of destruction and creation is similarly a primary theme of the popular goddess Kali, a wife of Shiva's. Black and wearing a necklace of skulls, she is a bloodthirsty, violent destroyer of her enemies. Toward her devotees, though, she shows steadfast care and affection, providing for their needs. The great Ramakrishna was one of her millions of devotees.



Depictions of Krishna with his favorite consort, Radha, symbolize perfect love.

Avatars

An *avatar* is an incarnation, or living embodiment, of a deity, commonly of Vishnu, who is sent to earth to accomplish a divine purpose. The relationship of the *avatar* with the deity from which he comes is illuminated in the Bhagavad-Gita. Here Krishna, an *avatar* of Vishnu, actually speaks as Vishnu when he addresses Arjuna:

Though myself unborn, undying,
the lord of creatures, I fashion nature,
which is mine, and I come into being
through my own magic.

Whenever sacred duty decays
and chaos prevails,
then, I create
myself, Arjuna.

To protect men of virtue
and destroy men who do evil,
to set the standard of sacred duty,
I appear in age after age.

(4:6–8)

Krishna has a prominent role in the epic poem *Mahabharata* (mah-hah-bah'rah-tah), of which the Bhagavad-Gita is but a small section, and also is popular in another role—that of a somewhat mischievous and always amorous male cowherd, often accompanied by adoring bands of female cowherds. Hindu art beautifully depicts scenes that symbolize the loving adoration of souls (the female cowherds) for God (Krishna). Krishna is also frequently depicted with his favorite consort, Radha. The intensity of their feelings is clearly expressed, and they function as a symbol of perfect love.

Rama is another popular *avatar*. He is the hero of the *Ramayana*, an epic poem from ancient times that continues to have enormous influence among Hindus. Like Krishna, Rama is an incarnation of Vishnu. Through the centuries, he has come to be

so highly regarded that many Hindus revere him as the supreme deity.

The Bhagavad-Gita

The Bhagavad-Gita contains ideas that are relevant to many aspects of Hinduism. Still it is most closely associated with *bhakti marga*. The content of the Bhagavad-Gita acknowledges the fruitfulness of the path of works and the path of knowledge but tends to favor the path of devotion. This oft-quoted passage, in which Krishna again addresses Arjuna, especially reveals the universal appeal of that path to salvation:

Whatever you do—what you take,
what you offer, what you give,
what penances you perform—
do as an offering to me, Arjuna!

You will be freed from the bonds of action,
from the fruit of fortune and misfortune;
armed with the discipline of renunciation,
your self liberated, you will join me.

I am impartial to all creatures,
and no one is hateful or dear to me;
but men devoted to me are in me,
and I am within them.

(9:27–29)

Aspects of Daily Devotion

If we were to ask a follower of *bhakti marga* to describe Hinduism, we would most likely learn first of the various acts of worship practiced from day to day. Along with a host of individual practices, such as prayer and visits to temples and shrines, Hindu worship includes numerous household and community rituals, pilgrimages to holy places, and veneration of the ever present and much adored sacred cows. Together such acts of worship constitute to a great extent the ritual dimension of Hinduism, and the objects that are the focus of these acts enrich the material dimension.

avatar

An incarnation, or living embodiment, of a deity, usually of Vishnu, who is sent to earth to accomplish a divine purpose; Krishna and Rama are the most popular *avatars*.

Household and village rituals. Hindu households are homes to “masks” of a great variety of deities. Typically households maintain shrines that honor chosen deities and contain some form of image or symbol for them. Domestic worship includes the tending of a sacred fire, ritual bathing, and daily devotional rites before these shrines. Though the use of material representations of deities, such as clay figurines, may appear to be a form of idolatry, or idol worship, it is not. Hindus worship not the image itself but rather the god or goddess that the image represents.

On regular occasions, the village joins together in worship. Often this occurs at the local temple, where ceremonies are conducted by a priest. Villages also celebrate annual festivals in honor of certain gods; sometimes these can last for days. For example, a festival in honor of Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom and patroness of education and the arts (and hence a popular goddess at schools), can involve days of celebration before a life-size image that has been specially crafted for the festival. On the final day, the image is given a funeral and disposed of—among the cheers of smiling devotees! The cycle of creation and

THE QUEST FOR TRUTH

Shubhabrata Dutta, known as Shuvo to his friends, is a young Hindu man now living in the United States. He offers the following thoughts on the role of Hinduism in his life:

As far as I can remember, the first time I really thought about Hinduism was in sixth grade, through some sayings of Shri Ramakrishna. Before that, although I attended all the religious festivals (there are lots of them!), I never really questioned or understood my faith. The saying of Ramakrishna that left a deep impression on me was: “If you put zeroes after a one, it makes a great number, but if you erase the one, the zeroes by themselves are not of any worth. Likewise, if we remove God from the creation, the creation, by itself, does not make any sense.”

I was struck by the depth and the intelligence of the analogy. I thought that only a great scholar could have come up with this kind of simple but deep uttering. So I asked my father, himself a devotee of Shri Ramakrishna, about the scholarly career of Shri Ramakrishna, and found out to my surprise that Ramakrishna could not even sign his name properly. That was a real shock! But much later I came to realize that the unscholarly way of Shri Ramakrishna may very well answer the questions philosophers have been asking for the last three thousand years. In light of Ramakrishna's life, I understood Hinduism with all its complications; I realized that it is not that complex after all if we can just “live the life.” And above all, being a “true” Hindu is no different than being a “true” Muslim or a “true” Christian. Religions are not God but many “ways” to God. One who quarrels about the ways but forgets about the destination is nothing but a fool.

Being a Hindu is very simple, actually, at least from my point of view. Being a Hindu is no more than being an honest human being. There are no universally held dogmas (except perhaps the prohibition against eating beef), no unanimous theological or philosophical doctrines, and no single ethical practice. From both inside and outside, Hinduism looks like a total mess, an enormous forest of ideas and practices of very dissimilar (and sometimes totally opposite) nature. What then can I believe? What path will I choose? What is the right way? A Hindu will say: “Through self-examination you will find the answers. All you need is a burning desire to know the truth, and the rest will follow automatically.” I believe in this, and to my great joy, the greatest spiritual personalities of India also believed in it and showed it in their lives.

As a Hindu I grew up with certain concepts that may seem funny to other people. One of them was that all the deities are associated with particular things. So I pick up a penny from the street and touch it to my forehead because money represents the goddess Lakshmi, or I scrupulously avoid touching any paper with my feet because I fear that Saraswati, the goddess of learning, might get angry with me. Such practices are necessary sometimes and unnecessary at other times. Why? Because, as Swami Vivekananda said, “A man does not proceed from falsehood to truth, but he moves from lower truth to higher truth.” As a Hindu I believe that a certain ritual or a particular belief is necessary until I reach a point where it no longer helps me toward my moksha, my liberation. In the famous words of Shri Ramakrishna: “First you pluck out the thorn of ignorance using the thorn of knowledge. But then you throw both of them away.” What remains then? Indescribable bliss.

destruction applies to the worship of the deities as well.

Holy places. Pilgrimages to holy sites, some long and arduous, are another common form of devotion. Sometimes the destination is a temple or other site of a great festival. It can also be a natural entity, such as a river. Most rivers are regarded as sacred. The most famous river—and the one deemed most sacred—is the Ganges. Thought to fall from its heavenly source of Vishnu's feet onto Shiva's head and out from his hair, the water of the Ganges is sacred enough to purify all sins. Pilgrims seek its banks to partake in ritual baths, and the ashes of the dead are swallowed by its life-giving water.

Cow veneration. Mahatma Gandhi referred to the protection of cows as the “central fact of Hinduism” and “one of the most wonderful phenomena in human evolution” (*Young India*, page 804). For him, and for millions of his fellow Hindus, the cow represents life. It provides for Hindus in a multitude of ways and yet suffers along with them. Therefore Hindus venerate cows, worshiping them like deities, and on regular occasions decorating them with garlands and anointing their heads with oil. In the past, the killing of a cow was sometimes a capital offense.

Gandhi describes the encompassing significance of cow veneration:

The cow to me means the entire sub-human world. Man through the cow is enjoined to realise his identity with all that lives. . . . The cow is a poem of pity. One reads pity in the gentle animal. She is the mother to millions of Indian mankind. Protection of the cow means protection of the whole dumb creation of God.

(Page 804)



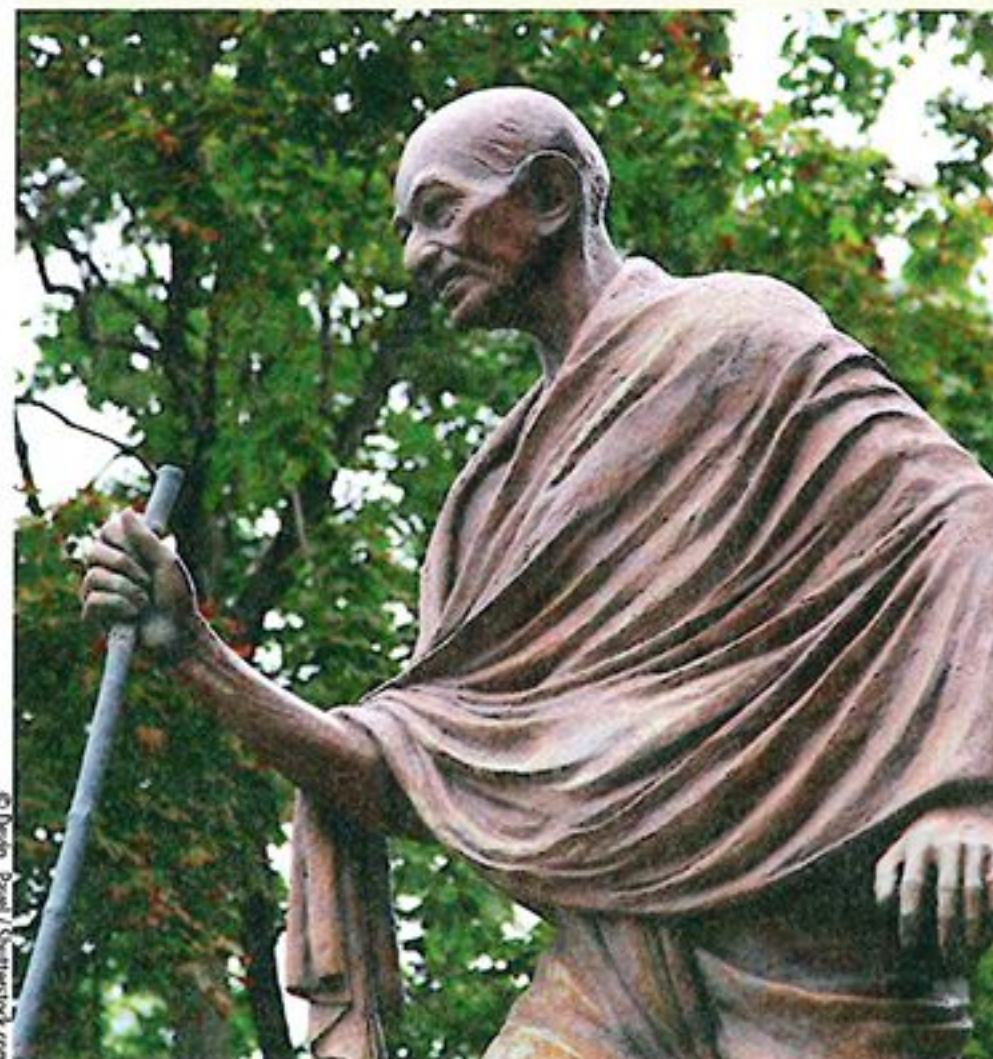
ACTIVITY

Discuss the differences between your own experience of worship and the worship of a Hindu on *bhakti marga*, “the path of devotion.”

HINDUISM IN THE MODERN WORLD

All traditional religions are challenged by the modern world. Scientific and secular views can erode the authority of perspectives based in ancient myths. Other religious traditions can become more familiar, offering new alternatives. And new movements, some in response to those very threats, can arise within a tradition, threatening the old ways.

The modern world seems to pose an especially acute challenge for Hinduism. India, home to most of the world's Hindus, is the world's largest democracy, and sets itself apart from religion, as a secular state. It is also rapidly becoming an economic powerhouse. For its many citizens who tend to equate Hinduism with India, and whose



Gandhi's practice of nonviolence and peaceful resistance continues to inspire people throughout the world. Statues to his memory can be found in many cities across the globe.

sati (suh´tee)

The traditional practice of burning a widow on her husband's funeral pyre; outlawed in 1829, though it still occurs rarely.

patterns of existence are provided by the ancient principles of *dharma*, the interplay of traditional religions with the secular state and its dynamic economy is frequently unsettled and contentious.

Some familiarity with the figures and issues of modern Hinduism can help us to make sense of the contemporary situation.

Those Whom Hindus Revere: Religious Leaders

Along with the pervasive caste system and all that it implies, the social dimension of Hinduism features many significant religious figures, holy people in various roles who tend to provide continual spiritual nourishment for a tradition in the grip of change. *Brahmins* tend to ancient rituals; gurus, or enlightened teachers, teach the truths of the Upanishads to the young; *sannyasins* bear the serenity of spiritual transcendence even as they walk among their fellow villagers. All nourish Hinduism, connecting it with its illustrious past and directing it toward its future.

Mahatma Gandhi

Remembered primarily for his work as a social and political reformer, Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869 to 1948), reverently called Mahatma, meaning "great souled," is also revered by many for his role as a religious reformer. His steadfast efforts to stand up to oppression through nonviolence and civil disobedience forever changed the nature of India, and of Hinduism. And yet his assassination by a Hindu extremist in 1948, just months after the accomplishment of his long-term goal to gain Indian independence from British rule, is darkly symbolic of the modern challenges that Hinduism faces, now as much as then.

Although Gandhi as a man is dead, Gandhi as a religious figure lives on. His insights continue to fuel Hinduism's tendency to accept all wisdom as lighting the way to the

divine. Statues of Gandhi across India remind Hindus of his revered presence.

The Sacred among the Secular: Contemporary Issues

A seemingly countless number of pressing issues are emerging as traditional Hinduism and secular India continue their journey together in the twenty-first century. Let us consider three of them.

The Caste System

The complex social distinctions based on the caste system, especially those of the outcastes, came under careful scrutiny during the twentieth century. Significant changes have occurred, some quite recently.

In a major development, one for which Gandhi struggled for years, the Indian government in 1948 officially forbade discrimination against outcastes. Governmental programs since that time, similar to affirmative action programs in the United States, have sought to further promote the economic and social rights of those people. Among some upper-caste Indians, such programs are meeting harsh resistance. In general, attitudes based in something so deeply traditional as the caste system tend to change slowly. Such is the case as India struggles with this issue.

Women in Hindu Society

Traditional Hindu society has always been strongly patriarchal—under the domination of men. Typically women's *dharma* has required them to be obedient to men. But, as is the case with Hinduism in general, opinions on the topic of women's roles in Hinduism differ. The degree to which Hindus follow such traditional teachings varies considerably between locales, especially between cities and towns. For many urban Indians, the norms are clearly changing.

One striking example of the controversial treatment of women in Hinduism—and of

the vast changes that have occurred in some cases—is the practice of *sati* (suh'tee), the burning of a widow. The following passage from a Hindu text called the Padmapurana sets forth some of the traditional teachings, both on *sati* and on the general obedience expected of a wife:

A wife must eat only after her husband has had his fill. If the latter fasts, she shall fast, too; if he touch not food, she also shall not touch it; if he be in affliction, she shall be so, too; if he be cheerful, she shall share his joy. She must on the death of her husband allow herself to be burnt alive on the same funeral pyre; then everybody will praise her virtue.

(Quoted in Noss and Noss, *A History of the World's Religions*, page 119)

Although the authority of texts such as this has been questioned throughout the history of Hinduism, for centuries, *sati* was a common practice in Hindu life. Since 1829 *sati* has been officially forbidden. It does still occur, though rarely.

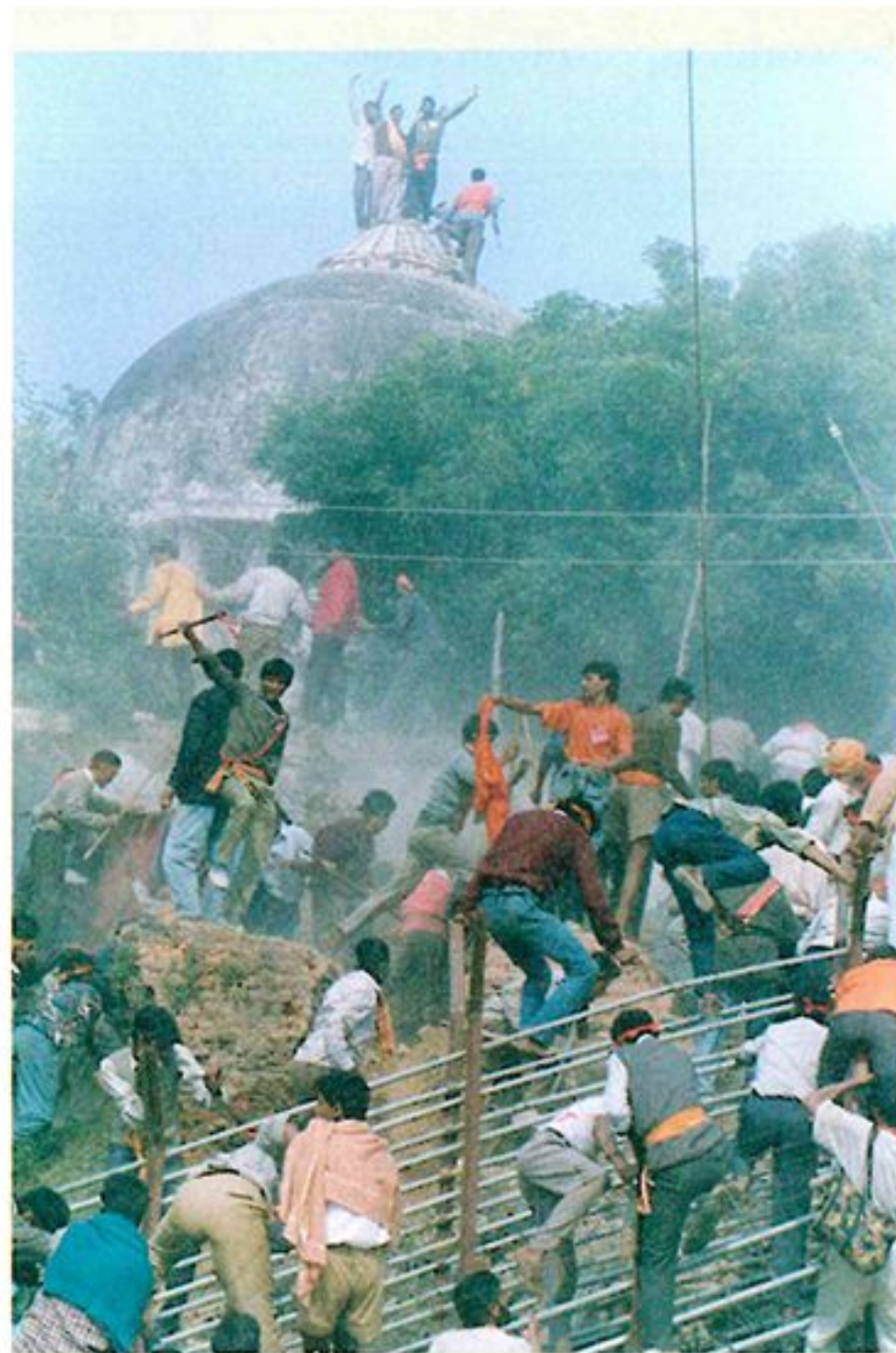
In some ways, traditional Hinduism has been able to conform to modern norms. In others traditional practices are changing slowly. For instance, the enduring preference for raising boys rather than girls is made clear through an array of statistical evidence showing general preferential treatment of boys. One study among rural children found that more than two-thirds of those considered severely malnourished were girls (Mitter, *Dharma's Daughters*, page 116).

Hindus and Muslims

Islam and Hinduism have experienced a long history of contact, beginning in the eighth century. The contact has not always been peaceful. This is not surprising when one considers that these two religions are vastly different from each other. Still, for centuries

Hindus and Muslims (adherents of Islam) have lived side by side in South Asia. For the most part, they have influenced each other's religious traditions very little, although Muslims have had a substantial effect on the artistic and scientific life of India.

In recent decades, relations between Hindus and Muslims have remained uneasy, at times erupting into violence. In 1947 the Muslim community forced the partitioning of India to form the divided nation of Pakistan (the eastern part of which is now Bangladesh), thus providing a Muslim homeland. This turned into a bloody ordeal in which many followers of both religions were killed. The assassination of Gandhi occurred in its aftermath. More recently another bloody confrontation broke out in the ancient city of Ayodhya, where a Muslim mosque stood on the site traditionally regarded as the birthplace of the *avatar* Rama. In 1992, after months of tense standoffs, some three hundred thousand Hindus stormed the mosque



Residents of Ayodhya, India, gather around the ruins of the mosque destroyed by Hindus in 1992.

and tore it to the ground. The challenges posed by relations between Hindus and Muslims continue to be of great concern for India. Now that both India and neighboring Pakistan possess nuclear capabilities, the simmering conflict between the two nations is especially dangerous.



ACTIVITY

The secular state of India and the traditional religion Hinduism tend to disagree over some important issues. How does religion relate to the secular state in your country?

Hinduism outside of South Asia

Most Hindus still live in India and Nepal (in both nations the Hindu population exceeds 80 percent), but during the modern period, enough people have left India to give rise to significant Hindu populations throughout the world, especially in cities.

Hinduism has also moved outside of South Asia in the form of sects and philosophical societies that, though based on the teachings of Hinduism, have often been adopted and advocated by non-Indians. Beginning in the 1960s, movements such as the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (the Hare Krishna movement) and the Transcendental Meditation Movement became popular in the West, especially among young people.

Swami Vivekananda and the World's Parliament of Religions

A follower of Shri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda (1863 to 1902) took up his master's teaching on the unity of religions and established the Ramakrishna Mission, which is a significant organization within Hinduism today. Vivekananda also became the first Hindu missionary, and he achieved fame in 1893 by explaining the teachings of Hindu *Vedanta* to the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. He went on to establish the *Vedanta* Society in New York, San Francisco, and

Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Sikh religious leaders come together for an interfaith conference.



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Left: In the villages of rural India, subsistence farming continues today as it has for centuries. *Right:* Mumbai, with its office complexes and apartment buildings, symbolizes modern currents in the ancient traditions of Hinduism.

many other cities. Thanks largely to Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, Hinduism is alive and flourishing in the Western world today.

THE EVER CHANGING CURRENTS OF HINDUISM

The many rivers of Hindu belief and practice are more numerous today than ever. Along with the diversity that has always come so naturally, the modern world presents a vast new set of challenges, alternatives, and opportunities.

Hinduism is experiencing a great coming together of old and new. In many towns of

India, the traditional ways have changed little. The temples are still in place, the festivals occur as they always have, and *brahmins* perform ancient rituals. In the cities, on the other hand, high-rise offices and apartment buildings are filled with the typical features of modernity, including the high-tech devices familiar to Westerners. And more commonly today than yesterday, India herself is responsible for developing the world's technology.

And so these many rivers—ancient and modern, rural and urban—continue to flow toward the distant ocean of salvation, finally merging the millions of Hindus in the harmony that unites their religion.

CHAPTER REVIEW

1. Explain the meaning of the term *moksha*.
2. What doctrine says all reality is ultimately one? Give an analogy that describes it.
3. Define *Brahman* and *Atman*. How are the two related?
4. What is the general function of Hinduism's many deities?
5. Give a brief explanation of the doctrine of *samsara*.
6. What is the name of Hinduism's most popular sacred text?
7. According to Hinduism, what are the two principles that connect the divine to this world? Briefly explain each.
8. Name the four classes of the caste system and describe the people who belong to each.
9. In the Bhagavad-Gita, why does Krishna encourage Arjuna to engage in war?

10. Identify and briefly explain the four stages of life.
11. Name and briefly describe the four goals of life.
12. Identify the three paths to liberation. Which type of person is best suited for each path?
13. What are the three most important schools of Hindu philosophy? What is the basic task that concerns all three?
14. Identify three important gods or goddesses of Hinduism.
15. What is an *avatar*? Name two important Hindu figures identified as *avatars*.
16. What Hindu text is most closely associated with *bhakti marga*?
17. Identify three aspects of Hindu devotional life.
18. How did Mahatma Gandhi influence Hinduism?
19. What significant changes in the caste system took place in the twentieth century?
20. What is *sati*? What is its status today?
21. What significant development occurred in relations between Hindus and Muslims in 1947?