Chapter 1

Hinduism: The Basics

Hinduism can be said to be the oldest and at the same time the youngest of the so-called world religions. It can be argued that it is the oldest surviving religion in the world as its roots can possibly be traced back to the third millennium BCE. The claim that Hinduism might be thought of as being the youngest world religion is based on the observation made by many scholars that the nineteenth century was the first time when the term Hinduism was used to signify a single religious tradition. In order to understand the idea that Hinduism is both young and old at the same time, it is necessary to explore the etymology of the term and the diversity that is subsumed under the umbrella of Hinduism.

Etymology

The term Hindu derives from the Indo-Aryan term *sindhu*, which is generally translated as ‘river’. In Persian this term became ‘hindu’, and this was used as a designation for the river that is now known as the Indus, which flows through the northwest of the subcontinent, in present-day Pakistan. The term then came to be used to indicate the land through which the Indus flowed and the people living in that area. In other words the term ‘Hindu’ was in origin a term that was coined by outsiders to designate a territory and the population of that territory, and had no cultural or religious significance.

In the eighth century CE Muslims began to make their presence felt on the subcontinent, and some of the indigenous population converted to Islam. Consequently, the term Hindu came to indicate those who lived in the region who were not Muslims. In this period, the term Hindu was not used to indicate either a self-designated identity or a unified religious
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community. The term Hindu gradually began to acquire a more narrow definition signifying Indians who were clearly not Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Parsis or Buddhists. Eventually, in the nineteenth century, the term Hindu acquired the suffix ‘ism’ and it came to be considered as being a single unified religious tradition.

It can be argued that to represent Hinduism as a religion is also a misconception. There is no word in any of the Indian languages that is directly equivalent to the English word ‘religion’. There are a number of terms that have religious connotations, but these are not precisely captured by the term ‘religion’ either. Consequently, to label Hinduism as a religion misconstrues the actual beliefs and practices of Hindus. Indeed it is not uncommon for Hindus both to deny that Hinduism is a religion as such, and to suggest that Hinduism is itself a misnomer. It is frequently suggested that Hinduism is not a religion, but ‘a way of life’. It is also common to hear Hindus suggest that the term Sanātana Dharma, which can be roughly translated as the eternal truth, is a much more appropriate term than Hinduism.

Nonetheless, there is a sense in which many people in the world today identify themselves, and/or are identified by others, as being Hindu. For example, in the 2001 British census 558,000 people identified themselves as being Hindu. In 2001 there were over 800 million Hindus in India and figures of up to 900 million Hindus worldwide (Adherents.com). There are numerous places of worship, both in India and other parts of the world that are clearly identifiable as being Hindu. There are also many organizations that identify themselves as being Hindu. Hinduism is taught as a subject in both schools and universities. So, clearly, there is a strong sense, among both insiders and outsiders, that Hindus constitute a religious community.

Diversity

Like all religious traditions, Hinduism is very diverse. However, it can be said that the diversity of Hinduism is of a completely different order to the diversity found in other religious traditions. The reason for this claim of radical diversity is that Hinduism has no founder figure or foundational event, no universally accepted canon of texts, no credal statement and no overarching institutional structure. There is no single source of authority that universally applies to all Hindus for all times. There is nothing that you can say about Hindus or Hinduism without some form of qualification. This has led some commentators like

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Heinrich von Stieltencron (2001, p. 33) to suggest ‘our problems would vanish if we took “Hinduism” to denote a socio-cultural unit or civilization that contains a plurality of distinct religions’.

**Historical Developments**

In order to understand the diversity of the Hindu tradition(s) today, it is necessary to have some idea of some of the major historical developments. Rather than give an extended historical account, I have highlighted four particular periods, which in many ways can be seen as representing different aspects of the religious culture found on the subcontinent. These periods are: the Indus Valley Civilization, the Vedic period, the classic medieval period, and the Hindu Renaissance.

*The Indus Valley Civilization*

The earliest evidence of religious activity on the subcontinent are some archaeological finds that were made in the 1920s at two sites near to the river Indus, called Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa. Consequently, the culture has been named as the Indus Valley Civilization. There have since been more than a thousand related sites discovered by archaeologists. The Indus Valley Civilization (IVC) covered an area of roughly a million square miles. It probably began to develop around 2500 BCE and fell into decline some time around 1800 BCE. There is considerable conjecture about the religious life of the IVC and whether certain aspects of Hinduism today can be traced back to this culture. Speculation focuses on three particular finds. First, a number of terracotta figurines were found, some of which might represent a Mother Earth goddess and hence could possibly be the antecedent of goddess worship. Second, a large number of soapstone seals, one of which depicts a figure seated in what some commentators have suggested is a yoga posture, and might possibly represent an early form of the god Śiva. Third, a large bitumen-lined tank, which could possibly be the precursor to the tanks used for ritual purification still found in the temples in South India.

*The Vedic Period*

While there is speculation regarding a continuity between the Indus Valley Civilization and Hinduism today, the next historical evidence is more clear. However, this evidence also raises a number of issues that still have resonance for many Hindus today. By about the middle of the second millennium BCE, a group of people calling themselves Aryan, literally ‘Noble Ones’, began to make their presence felt on the subcontinent. We know about these peoples through an extensive corpus of
compositions that are collectively known as the Vedas. What is less clear is where the original homeland of these people was, and this continues to be a sometimes highly emotive issue for certain sectors of the Hindu community.

The most widely accepted thesis is that the Ārya probably originated somewhere in the region of the Caspian Sea, then migrated West into what is currently Iran, and then split, some continuing West into Europe, and others migrating south into the subcontinent. However, this migration thesis, which implies that the foundations of Indian culture lie outside the Indian subcontinent, has been challenged. There is some archaeological evidence, albeit rather tenuous, that the IVC was an Indo-Aryan culture, and this would suggest that the Āryan homeland was in fact the northwest region of the subcontinent, which would mean that the foundations of Hindu culture could be traced to the subcontinent itself. While there is no substantive evidence as yet to fully support the thesis that the Ārya were originally from the subcontinent, at the same time the migration thesis is also highly speculative. It is important to stress that this is not just a dry intellectual issue confined to academics, but a deeply political and contentious debate alive within the Hindu community. Many Hindus perceive the thesis that the Ārya originated outside of India as a continuation of a colonialist discourse that suggests the inferiority of Indian culture.

We know about the religious life of the Ārya through the compositions known as the Vedas. The Vedas were primarily communicated orally, and were not written down for at least a thousand years, and this makes it very difficult to date them. Most scholars date the earliest portion to between 1500 and 1200 BCE, and the later compositions as late as between 500 and 300 BCE. The Vedas must be regarded as a corpus, rather than a single unified work. The Vedic corpus reflects substantial changes in beliefs and practices. While much of the Vedas remains obscure and the majority of Hindus know very little of the actual content, the Vedas still retain a hugely important place in contemporary Hinduism.

The central ritual of the Ārya was a fire ritual known as yajña. This ritual tended to be an immensely complicated rite that involved constructing a special site according to very precise geometric configurations and orientation, and involved different types of priests. The ritual would be sponsored by an individual to obtain a specific end, such as health or wealth. The focus of the ritual would have been on a number of invisible entities known as the devas. The devas were mostly associated with natural phenomena such as thunder, fire, the dawn, and
so on. Many of these *devas* also displayed human qualities. Over a thousand different names of these *devas* can be discerned in the Vedic corpus, though only a handful of them seem to have played any significant role in the religious life of the early Indo-Aryans. While most Hindus today would recognize the names of the most important of the Vedic *devas*, they have largely become marginalized in favour of a quite different pantheon of deities that became increasingly significant in the medieval period.

*The Medieval Period*

There is no archaeological evidence from the Vedic period of any visual representations of the *devas* or any permanent places of worship. This greatly contrasts with the rich visual culture of the medieval period. The Gupta Period (4th–7th century CE) is often referred to as The Golden Age of Hindu Art. Images continue to play a central role in the religious life of most Hindus.

The Brihadishwara Temple, Thanjavur (Tanjore) This beautiful temple was built in 1010 by Raja Raja, in the Chola style.

Alongside the growing salience of images, permanent places of worship also came to be significant features of religious life. The most common term for a temple is *mandir*, which means dwelling. In other words temples are regarded as dwelling places for the *devas* in the
form of images. In the medieval period, temple building came to be closely allied with political power. The large and magnificent temples, particularly those in South India, were clearly very costly to construct. These temples represented not only the genuine devotion of rulers, but also their political and economic status. While it is frequently suggested that it is perfectly possible to be a good Hindu without ever going to a temple, temples are still being built and continue to be an important part of the Hindu religious life.

It is also in this period that the devas of the Vedic pantheon recede in importance, and what might be referred to as the classic pantheon of deities becomes prominent. In particular there are three clusters of deities that came to be of particular significance. These are various manifestations and deities associated with Śiva, the various manifestations and deities associated with Viṣṇu, and various manifestations of the goddess.

Linked to the increasing salience of images, temples and the growing prominence of this different pantheon of deities is a new form of worship, known as pūjā, which involves the sequenced offerings of various items to an image of a deity. Pūjā remains as the core ritual practice of most forms of Hindu devotionalism.

The Hindu Renaissance

Between the late eighteenth and early twentieth centuries there were a number of significant reinterpretations of the Hindu tradition. While there is no absolute accord as to the precise dates, this period is frequently referred to as the Hindu Renaissance. Indeed, it is possible to argue that it was only in this period that the very idea of Hinduism as a religion coalesced. From the late eighteenth century onwards there was increasing contact between India and Europe, and this led to what Wilhelm Halbfass (1988) has termed a new hermeneutic situation. This hermeneutic situation is exemplified by a Bengali intellectual called Rammohun Roy (1772–1833). Roy is sometimes referred to as ‘The Father of Modern India’, and he is often attributed with being the first Indian to use the term ‘Hinduism’.

Paul Hacker (1995) argues that Rammohun Roy is the precursor of what he terms ‘neo-Hinduism’. He suggests that this began around 1870 and continued through to the middle of the twentieth century. As Hacker’s terminology suggests, this was a novel form of Hinduism, which can also be understood in terms of modernity. The apologetic discourses of ‘neo-Hinduism’ have added another stratum to Hinduism, which is still prevalent today. While it is important to acknowledge that
neo-Hinduism is itself a very diverse phenomenon, there are a number
of important themes that run through most of the new forms of
Hinduism that emerged between the end of the nineteenth century and
middle of the twentieth. The most significant of these themes posits that
Hinduism is a religion and that Hindus constitute a religious community.
While there was no absolute agreement on what Hinduism is or on the
precise boundaries of the Hindu community, the debates about them
were instrumental in reifying these concepts.

Linked to these overarching themes was the necessity to provide a
history. In the discourses of neo-Hinduism, as is still the case, the Hindu
community is said to have had an unbroken history that can be traced
back to the Vedic period. In particular, the experiences of the ancient
Vedic seers, known as the ṛṣis, are given a foundational role in the
formation of the Hindu community. Linked to this understanding of the
foundation of Hinduism, neo-Hindu discourses often suggested that the
religion had degenerated from its Vedic roots, and that it was necessary
to return to those ancient roots. Further, they suggested that these roots
had been misinterpreted, and that if they are understood properly they
are entirely compatible with modernity. Indeed, this discourse suggests
that the truth expounded in the Vedas, if interpreted correctly, is scien-
tific and rational.

For many Hindus as well as academics, Swami Vivekananda
(1863–1902) has come to epitomize neo-Hinduism. However, it is
important to stress that although Vivekananda is regarded as having a
seminal role, he is not the only figure of importance in this period.4
Swami Vivekananda was a disciple of the Bengali mystic Ramakrishna.
After Ramakrishna’s death in 1886 Vivekananda became the leader of
the small band of Ramakrishna’s devotees, and his reinterpretation of
Ramakrishna’s teaching as having a universal salience has become
278) suggests that ‘Modern Hindus derive their knowledge of Hinduism
from Vivekananda, directly or indirectly.’

This very brief historical overview highlights some of the develop-
ments of the religious tradition that we now know as Hinduism. All of
these developments are important in understanding some of the basic
beliefs and practices that can be identified in Hinduism today. As I have
indicated, the first substantial evidence of the religious life on the
subcontinent are the compositions known as the Vedas. While many
Hindus today know little of the content of the Vedas, they are still
regarded by many Hindus as foundational texts.
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Texts

There are literally thousands of different Hindu texts, of diverse types. These texts are classified into two types: those that have primary authority, referred to as ‘that which is heard’ (śruti); and secondary texts, referred to as ‘that which is remembered’ (smṛti). There is no universal or absolute agreement on which texts fall into which category; however it is generally agreed that the Vedas belong in the primary category of śruti.

The Vedas

The Vedas are generally regarded as not being of human origin, but as containing an eternal truth that was revealed to the Vedic seers (rṣis). The structure of the Vedas is highly complex. There are four different Vedas and four different strata to each of these Vedas. This can be diagrammatically represented as in Table 1.

Table 1: The structure of the Vedas

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<th>Rg Veda</th>
<th>Śāma Veda</th>
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<td>Upaniṣads</td>
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It is possible to fill in all of the empty cells with names of particular compositions; however for our purposes it is not necessary. The earliest portions of the Vedas are the Sāṁhitās of the Rg Veda. These, for the most part, are extravagant hymns of praise to the various devas. The Sāṁhitās of the Rg Veda only record the hymns and give no indication as to how they were sung or incorporated into ritual practice. The majority of the Śāma Veda comprises hymns taken from the Rg Veda and arranged in a form for use in a ritual context with notations as to how they were to be chanted in the ritual (yajña). The Yajur Veda also derives much of its content from the Rg Veda Sāṁhitās. It also contains a collection of prose formulae, known as yajus, which were muttered by a priest during the ritual. The style and content of the Atharva Veda is quite different to that of the other three Vedas, as it is much less
concerned with the ritual and mostly contains spells and charms to ward off problems of everyday living, such as ill health, snake bite and so on.

There is a rough chronological development through the strata or genres of the Vedic corpus. However, it is important to note that the boundary between these different genres is not always clear-cut. The Sanskrit verses are verse compositions and are the earliest portion of the Vedas. They are primarily focused on the deus. The Sanskrit verses also contain the mantras, which Fritz Staal identifies as ‘bits and pieces from the Vedas put to ritual use’ (cited in Alper, 1991, p. 10). These mantras are still incorporated in numerous Hindu rituals, even though many people may no longer understand their meaning. The Brahmanas are later prose compositions and may be considered as appendices to the Sanskrit verses. The Brahmanas primarily focus on the correct performance of the ritual itself. Clearly identifiable in the Brahmanas is the concept that creation is governed by an inherent order and is not merely the subject of the capricious intervention of greater powers. This concept of an inherent order is referred to as dharma, which becomes a dominant theme in much Hindu thought. The Aranyakas develop some of the ideas in the Brahmanas. Aranyakas roughly translates as ‘forest or wilderness treatise’, which suggests that this portion of the Vedas contained esoteric knowledge.

The term Upanishad more or less translates as ‘to sit near’. This suggests a group of students sitting near to a teacher (guru), and again seems to imply that the teachings were regarded as esoteric. The focus of the Upanishads is on the meaning of ritual performance. There are 108 canonical Upanishads, and 14 of these are considered particularly significant. As with all Hindu texts, it is extremely difficult to date the Upanishads accurately. The earliest were probably composed about the eighth century BCE, and the latest were probably composed towards the beginning of the Common Era. Consequently, even when looking just at the Upanishads, it is not possible to identify a consistent doctrine. Nonetheless, it is clear that a number of new interrelated ideas emerged in this period, ideas that became central to most subsequent forms of Hinduism. These are: there is a continuous cycle of life, death and rebirth (samsāra); that activity (karma) is the driving force of samsāra; and that it is possible to escape the wheel of transmigration (mokṣa).

Vedānta

The Upanishads are sometimes referred to collectively as Vedānta, which literally means ‘the end of the Veda’. The implication is not just that the
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Upāniṣādś appear as the last portion of the Vedic corpus, but also that they represent the culmination of the thought that has preceded them in the other strata of the Vedas.

Vedānta is also the term used for philosophical schools of thought that base their metaphysical speculation on ideas found in the Upāniṣādś. Arguably the most influential school of thought is the monistic school of Vedānta known as Advaita (literally 'non-dual'). The most famous exponent of this school of thought was Śankara (8th–9th century CE). Advaita Vedānta is based on ideas found in the Upāniṣādś that are encapsulated in a number of aphorisms referred to as the ‘great sayings’ (mahāvākyaś). The most famous of these sayings is found in the Chīndogya Upāniṣād, which states ‘tat tvam asi’. This literally translates as ‘thou art that’. The implication of this is that there is only one fundamental reality that pervades existence, which is referred to as Brahman, which for lack of a better translation I will refer to as Absolute Reality. We mistake this Absolute Reality for the phenomenal world of names and forms. The phenomenal world is regarded as a misperception (māyā) of the underlying and pervading reality of Brahman. There are a number of analogies and metaphors used to describe this misperception. So Śankara suggests:

All modifications of clay, such as jar, which are always accepted by the mind as real, are (in reality) nothing but clay. Similarly this entire universe which is produced from the real Brahman, is Brahman Itself and nothing but That. (Śankara’s Vivekacūḍāmāni 251, Madhavānanda translation, 1978)

Underlying our individual self is also a true Self, which is called ātman. However, we also mistakenly identify our selves with our bodies and minds. Once we really know that our true Self is the ātman, we will also know that ātman (thou) is in reality nothing other than Brahman (that). The metaphor that is commonly used to illustrate this idea is that the drop (that is the sense of ourselves as discrete individuals) will realize that we are in reality nothing other than the ocean (Brahman). Once we achieve this state of knowledge – that in reality we are nothing other than Brahman – we will become liberated from the wheel of transmigration.

‘That which is Remembered’
While most Hindus know of the Vedas, many know very little about the actual contents of this extensive corpus of compositions. Most Hindus
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are far more aware of the secondary literature. The secondary class of texts are referred to as smṛti, which means ‘that which is remembered’. These relate to compositions that are said to be of human origin, and are regarded as retelling and elucidations of the revealed texts. There are a vast number of texts that fall into this category, some of which have continued to play a very significant role in the lives of Hindus. Within the broad category of smṛti are a number of different types of texts, the most important types being the dharma texts (Dharmaśāstras & Dharmasūtras), the Epics (Itiḥāsa) and the Ancient Tales (Purāṇas).

Dharma Texts
These texts are very difficult to date, and were also composed over a considerable period of time. Ludo Rocher (2005, p. 110) tentatively suggests between 500 BCE to 500 CE for the composition of the most important dharma texts. Dharma is a very important concept that still informs Hinduism today. It is a complex concept for which there is no direct translation into English. In different contexts, dharma can have connotations of righteousness, law, duty, justice, morality and religion. The term derives from the root word dhṛt, which means ‘to uphold’, and literally translates as ‘that which holds together’. Dharma indicates all the things that sustain and hold together creation at cosmological, social and individual levels. Its opposite is adharma, which implies chaos.

Perhaps the most important of the dharma texts is the Laws of Manu, which was probably composed sometime around the beginning of the Common Era. The Laws of Manu systematizes orthodox conceptions of dharma, and deals not only with the duties of caste, but also with cosmolology, how to choose a wife, forbidden foods, the correct demeanour for a king, how to treat guests, how to clean various objects and so on. While many Hindus are not necessarily familiar with the text itself, The Laws of Manu still informs many Hindu conceptions of social relations.

The Epics: the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana
The Epics are perhaps the most well known of all the Hindu texts. The Sanskrit term for these texts is itiḥāsa, which means ‘so it was’. The implication is that these texts are histories. These texts are narratives interspersed with sub-plots and didactic passages. The stories have been told and retold and have become what Chris Rojek (2007) has called myths of genealogy, which he identifies as stories ‘that dramatise the culture or world-view of a people’ (p. 68). There are two texts that fall into this category – the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyana.
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The Mahābhārata is fundamentally a story of a civil war, in which two sets of cousins, the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, are in dispute about the line of succession to the throne of the land. It could also be said to be a story of dharma, in that the Pāṇḍavas could be considered to represent dharma and the Kauravas adharma. It is also sometimes referred to as the Fifth Veda, as it is suggested that the truth revealed in the Vedas is retold in narrative form. It is the longest narrative poem in the world, having in the region of a hundred thousand verses. There is considerable debate as to when it was actually composed, but it is clear that it grew through a process of telling, retelling and accretion.

The Bhagavad Gītā is located in the narrative of the Mahābhārata. The Pāṇḍavas have done all that they could do in order to resolve the dispute with their cousins, but all negotiations have failed to shift the Kauravas' intransigence, and consequently war has been declared. The Bhagavad Gītā begins with the two armies, which are lined up facing one another, ready for the battle to be unleashed. Arjuna, who leads the Pāṇḍavas' army, takes advantage of this brief pause, prior to the charge, to get his charioteer to take him between the opposing armies. Arjuna's charioteer is in fact the god Kṛṣṇa. Arjuna looks across the field at the two armies, and sees that brothers, friends, sons and fathers are on opposing sides, and knows that there will be a terrible slaughter with death, bereavement and injury on both sides. Arjuna breaks down and says to Kṛṣṇa that he can see no good coming from the battle and that even the Kauravas are his own kin and that this battle will bring nothing but chaos (adharma). Arjuna then declares that he will not fight. The Bhagavad Gītā is basically Kṛṣṇa's explanation to Arjuna as to why he must lead his army into battle. For many modern Hindus the Bhagavad Gītā has become the most important religious text and source for doctrinal ideas.

Kṛṣṇa employs three basic arguments, which can be found in summary in the second chapter. In the first argument Kṛṣṇa indicates that Arjuna has made a basic misidentification by confusing the Self (ātman) with the body. One's true Self is not born and cannot die. Kṛṣṇa states that just as we cast off old clothes 'so the embodied self, casting off its worn-out bodies, goes to other new ones' (Bhagavad Gītā 2.22, W. J. Johnson translation). Therefore there is no need to grieve, as ultimately no one is killed. Clearly this is a reference to the doctrine of transmigration. The second argument that Kṛṣṇa utilizes is that death is ineluctable. Finally, Kṛṣṇa indicates that Arjuna has not fully understood the nature of dharma. His duty as a warrior supersedes all other aspects of dharma.

The rest of the Bhagavad Gītā can be seen as an exposition of three paths to liberation from the wheel of transmigration (mokṣa): the yoga of action...
(karma yoga), the yoga of devotion (bhakti yoga) and the yoga of knowledge (jñāna yoga). The yoga of action suggests that while one has to act, one should become detached from the consequences of action, and that this attitude will lead the aspirant to liberation. The yoga of devotion (bhakti yoga) suggests that the path of personal devotion to Krṣṇa will liberate the devotee. The yoga of knowledge (jñāna yoga) suggests that the knowledge of the true nature of the Self (ātman) leads to liberation.

The Rāmāyaṇa is possibly the most loved of all Hindu texts. It tells the story of Rāma, who is commonly regarded as an incarnation (avatār) of the deity Viṣṇu. He is the eldest and most loved son of Daśaratha, King of Ayodhya. When Daśaratha appoints Rāma as his successor, his youngest queen, Kaikeyī, is concerned that she and her son Bharata will become completely marginalized. Kaikeyī had saved the life of the king, and had obtained Daśaratha’s promise that he would grant her any two wishes that she cared to ask for. Recalling this, she requests that her son Bharata be crowned king and that Rāma be forced to go into exile in the forest for 14 years. The king has to keep his promise, and Rāma accepts his fate and retires to the forest with his beautiful wife Sītā and his half-brother Laksmana. In this period the 10-headed demon Rāvana becomes enamoured with Sītā’s beauty, abducts her and takes her to his island kingdom of Lanka. Rāma enlists the help of the monkey kingdom, and in particular the monkey god Hanumān, to rescue Sītā. Rāvana and his demon allies are defeated, and Sītā is rescued. Rāma returns triumphantly to Ayodhya where he assumes his rightful place as king and he reigns over a golden era. In many ways this narrative is also about dharma. Rāma represents the dutiful son and the ideal ruler who fulfils all of his duties to his people. Sītā represents the ideal wife, the embodiment of wisely duty (strīdharma). The relationship between Hanumān and Rāma represents the ideal relationship between the devotee and god.

The Rāmāyaṇa was originally composed in Sanskrit and is attributed to the sage Vālmiki. There is also a version composed in Hindi by the poet Tulsīdās at the end of the sixteenth century known as the Lake of the Deeds of Rāma (Rāmacaritmānas). Although Tulsīdās’ Hindi retelling of the narrative is probably the most popular rendition, there is no single authoritative version of the Rāmāyaṇa. Ramanujan (1994) argues that the Vālmiki version must not be seen as an original telling from which all other tellings diverge. He suggests (p. 46) that there is a pool of signifiers (like a gene pool), signifiers that include plots, characters, names, geography incidents and relationships. Each narrator, including Vālmiki, draws on this symbolic pool in order to construct their own particular narrative. In other words, the narrative has both structure and a fluidity that ensures the telling of the
story can be both familiar and new at the same time. It is this dual nature that has entailed that the story retains vitality, and therefore a special place amongst the vast array of Hindu texts.

The Ancient Tales: The Purāṇas
Traditionally there are said to be 18 Purāṇas. However, as with all genres of Hindu religious texts there are no clear criteria for determining what defines the Purāṇas, and Ludo Rocher suggests a list of 82 (cited in Matchett, 2005, p. 129).

A number of important themes can be identified in the Purānic literature, which continue to significantly inform the Hindu worldview. These themes constitute what Madeleine Biardeau (1994) has called ‘a universe of bhakti’. This is a context in which devotion to a personalized form of the deity, who is also considered as an all-pervading reality, is considered as the religious practice par excellence. The deities of what might be called the classic pantheon come into prominence in this universe, and deities like Śiva, Viṣṇu and the goddess come to take precedence over the earlier Vedic devas.

This mythic universe is informed by a very complex understanding of time and space. Just as the individual Self (ātman) undergoes a continuous cycle of life, death and rebirth, so too does the universe. The universe is considered as alternating between manifestation and dissolution. The metaphor that is often used is that creation is like a spider that alternates between spinning a web and then reabsorbing it back into its body. This period is envisaged as a day and night of Brahmā. The day of Brahmā is the period when the universe is manifest and lasts for 4,320,000,000 years. The night of Brahmā is the period when the universe resolves back into its undifferentiated form, and lasts a similar length of time.

As well as developing a highly elaborate conception of time, the Purānic cosmos also has a very complex notion of space. The Purāṇas suggest that there are many thousands of parallel universes. Furthermore, the Purāṇas propose that there are different worlds or realms (loka) inhabited by different beings. In particular, the Purāṇas suggest three worlds: the world of the gods (devas), the world of humans, and the world of demons (asuras). Although these are regarded hierarchically it would be wrong to think of the realm of the asuras as equivalent to the Western concept of hell. In some places in the Purāṇas seven or even fourteen different lokas are indicated.
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Gods and Goddesses

The Purāṇas are the source of many of the narratives of the gods and goddesses that might be thought of as belonging to the classic pantheon. Anyone arriving in India cannot but be overwhelmed by the diverse and colourful images of an extraordinary pantheon of gods and goddesses with multiple arms, animal heads or festooned with a garland of skulls. These images are not only found in temples and shrines, but can be found in virtually all Hindu shops, offices and homes. These deities are, for the most part, different to the earlier Vedic pantheon. However, before looking at some of these gods and goddesses, it is necessary to have some idea of how this amazing and colourful pantheon should be understood, and for this we need to look at some terminology.

Terminology

The presence of many gods and goddesses seems to suggest that Hinduism is a polytheistic tradition. While many Hindus might well believe in a multiplicity of gods and goddesses, this term really distorts the nature of belief of many other Hindus. The reformer Rammohun Roy suggested that the belief in a multiplicity of gods and goddesses was a misinterpretation of the allegorical nature of the Vedas, and that the many deities actually represent aspects of one deity. Rammohun Roy (Roy and Ghose, 1978, p. 90), for example, argued that ‘the real spirit of the Hindu scriptures ... is but the declaration of the unity of God’. Rammohun was clearly advocating that Hinduism, if understood correctly, must be considered as being a monotheistic tradition. This interpretation that the many gods and goddesses reflect different aspects or characteristics of one supreme deity is widely accepted amongst certain sectors of Hindu society, particularly the well educated.

Hinduism cannot really be understood only in terms of monotheism, as this misrepresents the actual beliefs of many Hindus. This conundrum led the famous Sanskrit scholar Friedrich Müller to coin the term henotheism, meaning the belief in a single deity while not denying the existence of other gods and goddesses. While this term perhaps captures the important concept that many Hindus have of a chosen deity (iṣṭa deva) as the main focus for their devotion, it still fails to exhaust all the ways in which Hindus understand the sacred. Almost all types of ‘ism’ – animism, pantheism, monism, monotheism, polytheism, henotheism and so on – can be found within Hinduism. Indeed it could be questioned as to whether these distinctions make much sense in relation to Hinduism.
The *Trīmūrti*: Creator, Preserver and Destroyer

It is often suggested that there are three main gods in the Hindu pantheon, each having a different role. These are Brahmā the creator deity, Viṣṇu the preserver, and Śiva the destroyer. These three deities are referred to as the three forms (*trimūrti*). While there are references to the *trimūrti* in the Purānic literature, they are not normally represented together, and they do not play a significant role as a group. Śiva and Viṣṇu are important deities in their own right. However, Brahmā, while he plays a significant role in the Purānic narratives, is not regarded as a significant focus for devotional practice. Iconographically, Brahmā is most commonly portrayed as seated in a lotus that is emerging from Viṣṇu’s navel. In other words, he is represented as secondary to Viṣṇu, and this might be considered as a visual representation of henotheism. Furthermore, there are many references to Śiva and Viṣṇu performing all three functions of creation, maintenance and destruction as individual deities. A clearer way of trying to comprehend the diverse multiplicity of Hindu deities is to think of them in terms of three broad devotional strands. There are the devotees of various forms of Śiva known as Śaivites, devotees of various forms of Viṣṇu referred to as Vaiṣṇavas, and devotees of various forms of the goddess who go under the generic name of Śāktas.

![Brahmā seated in a lotus, emerging from Viṣṇu’s navel. The goddess Lākṣmī is seated at his feet.](image)
Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism and Śāktism

Heinrich von Stietencron (2001) argues that we should understand Śaivism, Vaiṣṇavism and Śāktism as distinct religions. However, two arguments contradict this thesis. First, although these three devotional branches tend to refer to different mythic narratives, they all involve very similar ritual practices, such as the performance of pūjā and the practice of pilgrimage. Second, the dividing line between these three groups is not as distinct as von Stietencron supposes. It is not unusual to find Śaivite images in a Vaiṣṇava temple and vice versa. In fact there is a general movement towards a more ecumenical form of devotionalism apparent in some contemporary forms of Hinduism. In her study of contemporary temples, Joanne Waghorne describes a temple in the outskirts of Chennai, established about thirty years ago, called the Sri Sankara Narayan Mandir – Sankara is an epithet of Śiva and Narayan an epithet of Viṣṇu. In this temple there is an image (mūrti) in which half the body is Viṣṇu and half is Śiva. ‘A superb stone image of Vishnu still waits with a linga, Śiva’s iconic form, to be installed together in the central sanctum’ (Waghorne, 2004, p. 6).

Forms of Śiva

Śiva, literally ‘Auspicious One’, like all the Hindu gods, has many different forms and names. Traditionally, Śiva is said to have 108 different names, and the Śiva Purāṇa lists 1,008 names. There are also numerous different Śaivite sects, all of which conceptualize Śiva in a variety of ways. For the purposes of this brief introduction, I will only indicate some of Śiva’s most popular iconographical forms. One of the most popular representations is as Lord of Yoga. In this depiction Śiva is shown seated in a meditational posture on a tiger skin. He has long matted locks, which are adorned with the crescent moon, and also the Goddess Gangā is seen emerging from his hair. He is generally depicted as wearing an animal pelt around his waist, he has a snake wrapped around his neck and he is festooned with beads known as Rudrakshas. There is a third eye on his forehead, which is also marked by three horizontal stripes. To one side his trident (triśula) is embedded, points up, in the ground. Draped over this trident is an hour-glass-shaped drum (damaru). Each of these elements of the image has a particular meaning. For example, it is sometimes suggested that the three prongs of the trident represent creation, maintenance and destruction. Overall, this image represents Śiva as the ideal ascetic.

The most common representation of Śiva in temples is his aniconic form – the linga. This is normally a smooth stone column with a rounded top.
that stands on a plinth called a yoni. While the linga and yoni suggest the male and female genitalia, and much is made of this in the academic literature (see, for example, Flood, 1996, p. 151; Smith, 2008 p. 800), most Hindus themselves do not relate to the sexual connotations of this image, but perceive the linga simply as a form of Siva. Nonetheless, there is a sexual element in some narratives of Siva. Wendy O’Flaherty (1973) nicely captures the ambivalent character of Siva by referring to him as the ‘erotic ascetic’.

Siva, as well as being characterized as both ascetic and erotic, is also represented as a happily married family man. One of the most popular representations of Siva in contemporary iconography pictures him with his consort Pārvatī and two sons in their mountain abode. Consequently, Siva appears as a very ambivalent figure: he is not only a householder, but also an ascetic, he is both sexual and renunciant. He is depicted as being wild, frenzied and uncontrolled, yet also represented as the epitome of restraint. For an outsider these contradictions, which are implicit in the representations of Siva, can appear to be very confusing, but for the majority of Hindus such apparent oppositions are not antagonistic, but complementary.

Siva has a constellation of other deities that are associated with him; the most important are his consort Pārvatī, and his two sons Skanda and Gaṇeśa. Skanda, like many Hindu deities, has a number of different names: he is also known as Kārttikeya and in South India he is called Murugan or Subrahmanya. Skanda is often depicted with six heads and riding a peacock. The worship of Skanda as an independent deity is primarily found in South India, generally under the name of Murugan, and in the Punjab as Baba Balaknath, where he is often iconographically represented as a young ascetic (see Geaves, 2007). Gaṇeśa, also known as Gaṇapati, is perhaps the most popular deity in all of India. He is easily recognizable because of his elephant head. He is regarded as the remover of obstacles, and consequently you often find images of him above doorways. It is common practice to propitiate Gaṇeśa before embarking on a journey or beginning any new venture.

Forms of Viṣṇu

Viṣṇu is not such an ambiguous figure as Siva, but like Siva appears in many different forms. References to Viṣṇu can be found in the Rg Veda, but he was probably a relatively minor deity. However, by the time of the Viṣṇu Purāṇa in the early centuries of the Common Era, Viṣṇu had become an important focus of devotional activity and was regarded as the supreme deity. Various manifestations of Viṣṇu remain central to Hinduism today.
One of the most important forms of Viṣṇu is that of Nārāyaṇa. This form can be easily recognized, Viṣṇu being represented iconographically as holding the four main objects associated with him: the conch, the discus, the club and the lotus. Nārāyaṇa is often represented as reclining on the serpent Śeṣa afloat on the cosmic ocean. When Viṣṇu sleeps, the cosmos is un-manifest, but when he awakes the cosmos once again becomes manifest.

However, perhaps the most important conceptualizations of Viṣṇu are his divine descents (avatāras). The term avatāra derives from the root word tr, which means ‘to cross’, and avatāra translates as ‘to cross down’. The implication is that the sacred ‘crosses down’ into the mundane world. The reason for this is to restore dharma to the world. Kṛṣṇa explains to Arjuna that: ‘Whenever dharma decays and adharma prevails, I manifest myself. For the protection of the good, for the destruction of the evil, and for the establishment of dharma I take birth from age to age’ (Bhagavad Gītā 4: 7–8).

While there are a variety of different lists, 10 avatāras are most commonly accepted today:

1. Matsya – the Fish.
2. Kūrma – the Tortoise.
5. Vāmana – the Dwarf.
6. Parashurāma – Rāma with the Axe.
7. Rāma – the hero of the Rāmāyana.
8. Kṛṣṇa – mentor to the Pāṇḍavas and destroyer of the demon Kaṁsā.
10. Kalkī – the avatār yet to come, who will announce the end of the current cycle of time.

The tales of these avatāras are primarily to be found in the Purāṇas, and are familiar to most Hindus. The two most significant and well-known avatāras for Hindus today are Rāma and Kṛṣṇa.

Rāma is of course familiar through the various tellings of the Rāmāyana, and most Hindus know the basic story. Iconographically, Rāma is easy to identify: he invariably carries a bow, and is often depicted with his brother Laksmana on one side, his consort Sītā on his other side, and his devotee the monkey god Hanumān kneeling at his feet. In many ways Hanumān has eclipsed Rāma in popularity. In northern India numerous shrines have...
emerged dedicated to him. In Delhi there is a 50-metre-high image (*mūrti*) of Hanumān that towers over the newly built metro line. Every day, but particularly on Tuesday which is Hanumān’s special day, hundreds of people flock to this *mūrti*.

Non-Hindus are probably more familiar with Kṛṣṇa than any other of the Hindu deities. The reason for this is that the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)\(^1\) has become relatively popular, and has a significant profile in the West. There are three main sources for tales about Kṛṣṇa – the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, the Mahābhārata and a text called the Hariyamya, which was conceived as a supplement to the Mahābhārata. Although there seem to be two different Kṛṣṇas, the pastoral Kṛṣṇa and the warrior Kṛṣṇa, Hindus only perceive one Kṛṣṇa. Episodes from Kṛṣṇa’s life are very popular themes in both tribal art and brightly coloured poster art. Representations of Kṛṣṇa as a child (Bāla Kṛṣṇa) are very common. Kṛṣṇa is represented as having been a very mischievous child, who was inordinately fond of butter. The conceptualization of deity as child relates to the notion of divine play (*līlā*). The concept of *līlā* suggests that creation is a joyful, self-determined activity that has no goal beyond itself.

The most popular representation of Kṛṣṇa portrays him as a youthful cowherd playing a flute. All the milkmaids (*gopīs*) are totally enamoured of this beautiful youth in their midst. In the devotional poetry of the medieval period there are descriptions of Kṛṣṇa’s radiant beauty. There are many rich narratives that relate to the pastoral Kṛṣṇa’s play with the *gopīs*. For example, Kṛṣṇa is said to have stolen the clothes of the *gopī* when they were bathing in the river. Another episode relates how Kṛṣṇa multiplied himself so that all of the *gopīs* believed that they were dancing with him. In particular, the *gopi* Rādhā is regarded as having a special relationship with Kṛṣṇa, and they are often portrayed together. There is clearly a great deal of sexual imagery in the narratives of Kṛṣṇa and the *gopīs*, but most Hindus do not relate to the erotic aspects. The relationship between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa is regarded as a metaphor for the ‘pure love’ (*prema*) that the devotee should have for the Lord (Flood, 1996, p. 139).

This pastoral and erotic Kṛṣṇa seems to be quite different to the warrior Kṛṣṇa of the Mahābhārata. In the Mahābhārata Kṛṣṇa is the ruler of the kingdom of Dvāraka, and is called by the epithet Vasudeva. He is represented as the advisor to the Pāṇḍavas and Arjuna’s charioteer. Images of Arjuna with Kṛṣṇa either in or alongside the chariot before the commencement of battle are also very popular. In Chapter 10 of the Bhagavad Gītā Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna his real nature; that he is: the Vedas (10:22); Śiva (10:23); the beginning, middle and end of creation (10:32), and so on. At the beginning of Chapter 11, Arjuna indicates that he now

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\(^1\) Continuum International Publishing. p 35

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knows Krṣṇa's true nature and asks him to reveal his supreme form. Krṣṇa bestows Arjuna with divine sight, and in a very famous passage Arjuna describes what he sees.

O God, I see in your body the gods and all kinds of beings come together, Lord Brahma on his lotus seat, all the seers and divine serpents.
I see you everywhere, many-armed, many-stomached, many-eyed, infinite in form; I cannot find out your end, your middle or your beginning – Lord of the universe, form of everything. (Bhagavad Gītā 11:15–16)

This form of Krṣṇa is known as Svarūpa Viśālakṣaṇa, and can be found iconographically depicted with multiple heads, many of them clearly recognizable to Hindus as various other deities and sages. The various arms of Svarūpa Viśālakṣaṇa hold objects associated with the other deities, such as Śiva's trident and Viṣṇu's conch. Normally, a comparatively smaller Krṣṇa and Arjuna are depicted to one side. This iconographic representation of Krṣṇa clearly indicates that the other deities are somehow incorporated within the cosmic form of Krṣṇa, and are therefore subsequent and lesser powers. It also is a visible representation that Krṣṇa is both the material and efficient cause of creation, and is therefore both immanent and transcendent.

Forms of Devi
The goddess has an important place in Hinduism. On one level there are many different goddesses, but on another level there is only one Goddess often referred to as Mahādevī (Great Goddess). In this account all the various goddesses are actually different manifestations of the supreme Goddess who is equated with Ultimate Reality. As we have seen, there is some, although equivocal, evidence to suggest goddess worship in the Indus Valley Civilization, but it is impossible to substantiate a continuous tradition of goddess worship from this time. The goddesses of the Vedas, like Uma the goddess of dawn, play a very minor role in relation to the masculine devas. However, by the time of the Epics and the Purāṇas the goddess had an important place in the religious life. In Hinduism today, various aspects of the goddess are a clearly visible and vibrant aspect of religious life for many Hindus.

There are two different ways of trying to comprehend the various different goddesses. The first typology suggests that there are three types of goddess: goddesses that are subservient consorts to male deities;
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goddesses that are equal to or dominate a male deity; and independent goddesses. The second typology, suggested by Wendy O'Flaherty (1980, p. 91), indicates that there are two types of goddesses. The first type are dangerous, ambivalent and erotic, which O'Flaherty calls 'goddesses of the tooth'. The second are the more benevolent goddesses that O'Flaherty terms 'goddesses of the breast'. There is some overlap between these typologies in that, in general, goddesses of the breast tend to fall into the subservient consort category.

We have already encountered one of the most benevolent consorts – namely Pārvatī. Pārvatī's sole purpose is to lure Śiva away from his extreme asceticism and she 'extends Śiva's circle of activity into the realm of the householder' (Kinsley, 1987, p. 35). She is almost invariably depicted with Śiva and represents the ideal Hindu wife and mother.

However, perhaps Śri, more commonly referred to as Lakṣmī, is the most significant of the consort 'goddesses of the breast'. Lakṣmī is portrayed in the image of Viṣṇu reclining on the serpent massaging the god's feet, clearly indicating her subservient role. However Lakṣmī is often depicted standing alongside Viṣṇu in a form referred to by the composite name Lakṣmīnārāyan. Lakṣmī is also often depicted on her own. Iconographically she is depicted either standing or seated in a lotus, with elephants showering her with water, and gold coins spilling from her hands. In this form Lakṣmī is associated with wealth and prosperity. The lotus is a very popular motif in Hindu iconography. The lotus is a flower of great beauty that seems to float free on the surface of the water, yet it is rooted in mud. The mud, as it were, represents the material world, and the ability to float above the mire clearly suggests transcendence. Consequently Lakṣmī is often perceived as the mediator par excellence between the mundane and the sacred. Lakṣmī pūjā is regarded by many as the most important day in the festival of Divāli. Clay lamps are lit in order to invite Lakṣmī into the home to ensure prosperity for the coming year. In Northern India, many businesses begin the new financial year on this day, and account books are sometimes bought to the temple to be blessed.

There are two most common representations of the more fearsome goddesses, namely Durgā and Kāli; however it is equivocal whether or not these can be regarded as separate goddesses. There are a number of narratives that give different accounts of Durgā's origin. The best-known account relates how the demon (āsura) Mahiṣa, through his intense austerity, wins a boon from Brahmā that he cannot be killed by a man. Consequently, he conquers both the human world and heaven (svarga). The gods, seemingly unable to defeat Mahiṣa, gather together,
and in their anger and frustration, each emits a ray of energy that coalesces together to form the Goddess Durgā. The gods each provide Durgā with the weapon particularly associated with them, so Śiva gives her a trident, Viṣṇu gives her a discus, and so on. Durgā then mounts her lion, and sets off to defeat Mahiṣa, who often takes the form of a bull. On one level Durgā is the product of the male gods, yet she is also independent and defeats the asura and his armies without the assistance of the male deities.

Another tale relates how two powerful asuras, Sumbha and Nisumbha, defeat the devas, who then have to petition Durgā to come to their rescue. At one point in the narrative Durgā faces the two generals of the asura army, and in her anger Kāli springs from her brow. Kāli is clearly the personification of Durgā’s wrath. She is described as dark skinned, emaciated with lolling tongue, armed with a sword and noose, and festooned with a garland of skulls. Kāli cuts a terrifying swathe through the demon’s army. Clearly the goddess of the margins, she seems to be the antithesis of benign consorts like Śita.

Although fearsome and independent, Kāli is also closely associated with Śiva. This, of course, makes sense, as Śiva is also wild and associated with the margins. Kinsley (1998, p. 74) observes that, while Pārvatī brings Śiva into the realm of domesticity, Kāli encourages his wild behaviour. In some mythic narratives Śiva is represented as dominating Kāli; however, one of the most commonly found representations of Kāli depicts her standing over the inert form of Śiva. This seems to suggest that the goddess has the dominant role. In this image Kāli represents the animating principle of creation known as sakti, which literally means ‘power, energy’. Sakti is therefore conceived as the power to create, and is envisaged in feminine terms. Creation, or more accurately the manifestation of the cosmos, is contingent upon the interplay of the pair of primordial binary opposites represented in terms of gender. In other words, the image of Kāli standing over the inert form of Śiva can be seen as a visual representation of a very complex metaphysical worldview.

The rich visual culture of Hinduism and its colourful iconography is central to any understanding. As we have seen, these images can give a good insight into the complex Hindu worldview. Although many Hindus might have some comprehension of the metaphysical intricacy of these images, most Hindus see them in a very different way. I use the word ‘see’ very deliberately here, as sight is central to the way in which most Hindus approach images of the deities.
Ritual Practice

Perhaps the most important concept in the religious practice of Hinduism is *darśan*. This term means ‘to see’ and has the connotation of ‘auspicious sight’. When they go to a temple Hindus do not say they are going to worship or to pray but that they are going for *darśan*. Similarly, when a Hindu goes on a pilgrimage they conceive of going for *darśan* of the particular deity associated with the place of pilgrimage. When a Hindu goes to see their spiritual preceptor (*guru*) they also use the term *darśan*. Often simply to sit in the sight of and see the *guru* is considered more beneficial than any formal teaching. *Darśan* is a two-way process. That is, the worshipper both sees and is seen by the deity. The deity or the *guru* is said to give *darśan* and the devotee is said to receive *darśan*.

There are numerous examples of eyes in Hindu imagery, which emphasize the belief that it is not only the devotee who sees the deity, but also the deity who sees the worshipper. Some village shrines, for example, are little more than roughly hewn rocks with large stylized eyes painted on them; the famous image of Jagannāth, a form of Kṛṣṇa, is depicted with huge saucer eyes, and Śiva is often portrayed as having a third eye. When the devotee goes to the temple the most important thing is to be ‘seen’ by the deity.

The image of the deity in the temple is known as *mūrti*, which means form. This suggests that the infinite, which transcends all form, takes on a defined and limited shape. The images are ‘brought to life’ or imbued with the deity through a special ritual of establishment, which transforms it from something mundane into something sacred. For many Hindu devotees the deity is perceived in some fundamental way to reside in the image; the latter is not simply a symbol. In Vaiṣṇava theology in particular, the *mūrti* is regarded as an especially accessible form of the sacred.

*Pūjā*

The most important ritual activity in contemporary Hinduism is called *pūjā*. *Pūjā* is practised in both homes and temples, by both priests and ordinary people. *Pūjā* is a daily ritual, but it is also incorporated into annual festivals. In the temple, *pūjā* is generally performed by the priests (*pūjārī*) on behalf of the devotees. However it is not a congregational form of ritual, and will be performed regardless of whether or not there are devotees present. In some wealthy households a priest might be employed to conduct the *pūjā*. *Pūjā* can also be performed
without the intermediary of a ritual specialist. It is performed before an image. In a home or shop this may well simply be a brightly coloured picture from the bazaar. In the temples these images might be carved out of stone or wood, or cast in bronze.

_Pūjā_ involves making ritual offerings to an image. This may be very simple – such as lighting some incense and waving it before an image in a domestic shrine – or immensely complex and involved, with the offering of a wide range of different objects to the accompaniment of chanting. Shortened forms do not mean that the _pūjā_ is considered as being incomplete in any way. In fact it is common practice to shorten and simplify the ritual. For example, at dawn or dusk the ritual may be reduced even more. A tray with burning camphor or an oil light is waved before the image of the deity while the devotees chant a _mantra_. This simplified ceremony is termed _ārati_. As Fuller (1992, p. 68) observes, ‘ritual abbreviation and simplification are ubiquitous procedures’ and this simple waving of a flame before the image is considered to be effectively performing the complete ritual. At the end of the _pūjā_ or _ārati_, the priest will present the oil lamp or burning camphor, and the devotee will cup their hands around the flame and then bring their hands up to their forehead. A red powder made from turmeric (_kumkum_) or the ash from the burning incense will also be offered. The devotee will then mark the centre of their forehead with this.

Offering of food to the deity is also a common feature of daily worship. This might involve simply some sweets or it might be an elaborate meal. This food is then distributed amongst the priests and the devotees. The Sanskrit term _bhoga_ literally means enjoyment of the sense objects; more specifically, it means food. By offering food to the deity, it becomes transformed into _prasād_, literally ‘grace’. In other words, the food becomes a symbol of the grace of the deity instead of being simply an enjoyable indulgence. The flame, the red powder or incense ash, and the _prasād_ have all been in contact with the deity in the form of the image. So cupping the hands in the flame, marking the forehead and eating the _prasād_ all symbolize the transfer of divine grace to the devotee.

Although _pūjā_ is not the only form of ritual found in Hinduism, it is incorporated into most forms of ritual activity, such as pilgrimage. We will discuss this more fully in the following chapter, which will use the small town of Rishikesh as a case study to explore in more depth some of the facets of Hinduism raised thus far.
Chapter 2

Hinduism in India

Rishikesh: A Place of Pilgrimage

Rishikesh, in many ways, can be considered a microcosm of the Hindu world. It is a small town about 200 kilometres north of Delhi, on the banks of the sacred river Ganga (anglicized as the Ganges), in the state of Uttarakhand. The area around Rishikesh is sometimes referred to Dev Bhoomi – the ‘Land of the Gods’, as there are a number of important pilgrimage places (tīrthas) that are located in the region. Rishikesh is regarded as the gateway to four sacred places, known collectively as the four abodes (cār dhām).

1 These are Badrinath, Kedarnath, Yamnotri and Gangotri. The significance of these places of pilgrimage, and of Rishikesh itself, is indicated by the fact that during the pilgrimage season (May to October) the population of Rishikesh increases tenfold (Keemattam, 1997, p. 22).

As well as being a necessary place en route to the cār dhām, Rishikesh itself is regarded as a tīrtha. There are three main reasons for this. First, there are references to Rishikesh in both the Purānic and Epic literature. In the Skanda Purāṇa, it is mentioned that Viṣṇu, pleased with his austerities, appeared to the sage Raibhya Muni. Viṣṇu consented to the sage’s request to remain. The place then became known as Ṣīkṣēṣa, which roughly translates as ‘one who has conquered the senses’, indicating that the sacred can be readily accessed at this place because of the ascetic practices of Raibhya Muni. This name, over time, became Rishikesh.

Second, Rishikesh is associated with the religious practices of many holy men. Rishikesh itself is also sometimes referred to as the city of saints, as it traditionally has been a place where individuals have come to practise austerities. According to the devotees, some of these ascetics...
have had a direct experience of the sacred, and consequently have achieved liberation (*mokṣa*). Perhaps the most influential of these individuals was Swami Sivananda (1916–63), who arrived in 1924 in Rishikesh, which he himself describes as a ‘holy place with many Mahatmas’ (Sivananda, 1995, p. 21). Sivananda settled in a spot about two miles north of the town of Rishikesh, where he began a period of intense spiritual practice (*sādhanā*) and service to others. In 1934, responding to increasing numbers of people who were attracted to his teaching, Sivananda established his own ashram, to accommodate these followers. The Sivananda Ashram is now a thriving institution with about two hundred permanent residents. There are now several dozen ashrams in the area, which are home to various monastic communities that offer a variety of services such as providing accommodation to devotees, classes in yoga, and various charitable activities.

The ghāts at Rishikesh.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, Rishikesh is located on the banks of the sacred river Gangā. Pilgrims and locals all flock to the banks of the Gangā, and every day one can see Hindus making ritual ablutions (*snān*) in Gangā’s sacred water. Much of the banks around Rishikesh is lined with steps (ghāts), to allow relatively easy access to
Gangā’s swiftly flowing current. In the bazaars, pilgrims can buy plastic containers in order to take Ganges water (Gangā jal) back home. They add this to water from their normal supply, which transforms it into a ritually pure form that can then be used in domestic worship. Many local shopkeepers and café owners will sprinkle their premises with Gangā jal, to purify them before opening for custom in the morning.

**Pilgrimage: Tīrthayātrā**

For many Hindus pilgrimages to holy places (tīrthayātrā) is still an important aspect of their religious life, the sacred being regarded as particularly accessible at places like Rishikesh. Tīrtha literally translates as ‘to cross over’, and is often understood as meaning a ford. The connotation is that a tīrtha is a place where it is possible to cross from mundane space to sacred space. Furthermore, many pilgrimage places, like Rishikesh, are also located on the banks of rivers.

Alan Morinis (1984, p. 2) observes that pilgrimage is ‘both an individual’s behaviour and a socio-cultural institution’. The social-cultural institutions that support the process of pilgrimage, like other aspects of the Hindu tradition that have their roots in the mists of time, have also undergone transformation in the context of the contemporary world. In the numerous pilgrimage places scattered throughout the sacred geography of India, the ritual specialists are the prime factor in the perpetuation of pilgrimage as a socio-cultural institution. Furthermore, the priests at the places of pilgrimage (tīrtha purohit) play a significant role in the maintenance and transmission of Hinduism as a religious tradition. Pilgrims return home with the sacred knowledge obtained at the tīrtha, and disseminate it amongst friends and family. Pilgrims must be familiar with the ritual practices at the tīrtha, and yet at the same time recognize the special and distinctive nature of the place. In many ways, the ritual network that constitutes the sacred geography of Hindu India can be thought of as a spatial manifestation of the philosophical idea that pervades much of contemporary Hindu thought: namely, unity in multiplicity.

Pilgrims visit sacred places for particular benefits that are supposed to accrue from visiting them. Although in the normative discourses religious practice is intended to achieve final liberation from the cycle of life, death and rebirth, in practice most pilgrims suggest the reasons for pilgrimage are the acquisition of karmic merit or more mundane goals such as good health, prosperity, successful marriage and so on.
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There are a number of reasons why pilgrimage not only remains a very popular religious practice in the contemporary context, but is arguably more widely practised than ever before. First, it is achievable by the vast majority of Hindus. It does not necessarily entail elaborate ritual performance or rigorous ascetic practice. Second, a pilgrimage entails a clearly defined break from the routines of daily life and consequently can be an enjoyable undertaking. Many pilgrimage places, like Rishikesh, are located in places of great natural beauty. Furthermore, these places cater not only for the religious needs of the pilgrims, but also for more mundane requirements. In most pilgrimage places, there are bazaars where pilgrims can buy religious paraphernalia – such as coloured lithographs or framed photos of the images (mūrti) of the deity or deities associated with the particular tirtha – as well as jewellery, new clothes, and toys for the children, etc. Eating out has for many also become an enjoyable part of the pilgrimage experience. Third, widening access to new media, in particular television and the Internet, means that growing numbers of people know about various pilgrimage places. This, coupled with modern modes of transport, means that many tirthas are far more accessible than ever, and pilgrimage has become a less arduous and hazardous activity.

Religious Tourism

The combination of increased mobility and a growing middle-class sector with a disposable income has led to a new phenomenon that has been labelled ‘religious tourism’. Pilgrimage and tourism are normally thought of as being two distinct forms of travelling. However, ‘these two forms of travel increasingly overlap, because many people travel with the objective of achieving both the recreational and the religious need, and there are immense difficulties in distinguishing between the two’ (Shinde, 2007, p. 24).

The local economy of many tirthas has become reliant on the influx of pilgrims, and the concept of religious tourism has now been recognized by many regional and local governments, which are developing the infrastructure to cater for this potentially lucrative market. Religious tourists require more modern conveniences than the traditional pilgrim. In the Rishikesh area, this is reflected in several recently opened luxury hotels, and a large number of new businesses offering leisure activities such as rafting and trekking, as well as jeep rides up to one or more of the cār dhāms. A trip to Rishikesh is regarded as much as a holiday as a chance to visit sacred places. Rishikesh is only 250 kilometres north of Delhi and many people visit from the urban capital for a weekend, or even a single day, mostly by car. Although many of these urban
visitors might briefly visit a temple or ashram, and possibly even take a ritual dip in the Gangā, the primary impetus is leisure, and the characteristic structure is more akin to tourism than pilgrimage.

_A Middle-class Religious Disposition_

Religious tourism is primarily a phenomenon associated with the middle class. Class as a social category has largely been overlooked, primarily because scholars have typically seen it as an alien concept that cannot be imposed on the Indian context. However, many Indians do identify themselves as being middle class. The middle class in India is not a clearly defined category, but can be understood as primarily being an urban phenomenon where meritocracy is regarded as taking precedence over, although not totally replacing, ascriptive social categories.

It is clear that the middle class is an economic category defined by a certain level of disposable income. However, it is also a cultural category characterized through discourses that pertain to lifestyle choice, and in which identity is expressed through specific cultural practices. The middle classes are not only located between the rich and the poor, but also locate themselves between the superstitious practices of rural India, and the godless West. This has led to what might be considered a distinctive form of middle-class religious disposition, which is articulated in terms of both authenticity and modernity.

Though still appealing to a perceived authentic tradition, this middle-class religious disposition is not only expressed in terms of lifestyle choice, but also tends to support the belief that there is a natural progress from less to more rational forms of religiousness. This view suggests that the majority of people are incapable of perceiving that Brahman pervades and transcends all of creation and is beyond name and form. Consequently, most people require some sort of tangible focal point in order to understand the sacred. This is not wrong, as such, but the veneration of the sacred with a name and form is a very partial understanding of the sacred reality. Ultimately, this view suggests that we will all come to an understanding of the sacred without the necessity of an intervening object of worship. Swami Sivananda (2007, p. 115) suggests that ‘an idol is a support for the neophyte. It is a prop of his spiritual childhood. A form or image is necessary for worship in the beginning.’

For the middle classes, this account legitimizes various religious practices, as these are perceived in terms of leading to spiritual achievement. This notion of spiritual progress is a direct corollary of the sense held by the middle classes that achievement in the mundane
world is something that has to be earned. In other words, there is a rational explanation for ritual performance. This rationalization not only legitimates their own ritual practices, but also enables the middle classes to suggest that Hinduism is an all-inclusive tradition. The discourse is not so much about right and wrong as about a progression from rudimentary to more evolved religious practices.

As choice is a defining characteristic of middle-class religious disposition, it is of no surprise that middle-class religiosity manifests in a number of different, albeit overlapping, arenas. These include the sponsorship of and participation in a new style of temple worship. Joanne Waghorne (2004) argues that in many ways the middle classes have taken the place of royalty as the primary patrons of temples. One of Waghorne’s (2004, p. 9) informants observed: ‘Once only kings could build temples, but now we middle-class people are able to do this.’ The building of large temples in the medieval period was symbolic not only of the devotion, but also of the political and economic might, of ruling dynasties. In the contemporary period, the patronage of temples by groups from the middle classes is similarly indicative not only of their piety, but also of their social, economic and political significance. The middle classes also are drawn to transnational gurus such as Satya Sai Baba (see Babb, 1991), Mata Amritanandmayi (see Warrier, 2005) and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. Many of the middle classes are also active in various ashrams, and practise yoga and meditation.

Choice is considered to be commensurate with the ethos of modernity and being authentically Hindu. The middle-class Hindu is making a choice as a reflexive and autonomous individual, yet paradoxically at the same time appealing to a reconstructed tradition in order to anchor and legitimize that choice. This narrative of choice is often articulated in terms of the famous verse in the Rg Veda, ‘That which exists is One; sages call It by various names.’ The middle-class religious disposition accepts that the sacred, although ‘One’, manifests, and is therefore approachable, in an infinite number of ways. The appropriate mode of religious expression and practice is thus determined by personal predilection, rather than imposed tradition.

An Exuberant Popular Disposition

Modern transport has also had a dramatic impact on the way in which less economically successful Indians undertake pilgrimages. The disposition of these pilgrims is quite different to that of the middle-class religious tourist. It is less restrained and more exuberant. While there is an opportunity for making small purchases, the impetus and focus of
the journey remains primarily religious. For these pilgrims, this style of journey to a sacred place is less about a personal individual choice and more embedded in senses of collective identity.

In the month of Srāvana (July/August), thousands of relatively poor villagers, mostly small-scale farmers, descend on Rishikesh in order to go to the small temple dedicated to Śiva in the form of Neelkanth in the hills about 12 kilometres from Rishikesh. The month of Srāvana is believed to be particularly sacred to Śiva, and in particular the last three Mondays are regarded as especially sacred. This is a period in the agricultural year when the needs of tending the land are minimal, and it is possible to get away. Modern transport, even for the less affluent, enables people to travel much further afield. Many villagers club together and hire a bus to take them to various sacred places. This is a relatively new phenomenon, which enables pilgrims to visit a number of different religious sites across India, and is sometimes referred to as a *darśan tour*.⁶

The temple at Neelkanth. The myth of the churning of the ocean is depicted in stucco work.

Neelkanth is associated with the famous myth, the churning of the ocean (*samudra manthan*), which is found in various recensions in the Purāṇas and Epics. The narrative tells of how the gods (*devas*) and the demons (*asuras*) have to cooperate in order to produce the nectar of immor-
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tality (amrīt). Mount Mandaranchal is placed on the back of Kurma, the incarnation (avaṭār) of Viṣṇu in the form of a tortoise. The king of the serpents wraps himself around the mountain, the asuras take hold of his head, and the devas grab his tail in order to churn the ocean. In the process of the churning a number of treasures, for example the moon, emerge from the ocean. However, the churning also produces a poison that threatens to destroy everything. Śiva swallows the poison in order to protect creation and holds it in his throat, which consequently turns blue. One of the epithets of Śiva is Niḷkanṭha, which literally means ‘Blue Throated’. Like many temples, the small temple at Neelkanth also has a visual representation of the mythic narrative realized in stucco work. These visual representations are significant in perpetuating the mythic narratives. The vast majority of Hindus do not read the Purāṇas, but the encounter with visual images often provides the occasion for the retelling of the narratives.

The Sacred River Ganges (Gangā)

By far the most important feature of the area around Rishikesh is the River Ganges, better known as Mahā Gangā (Great Gangā) or Mātā Gangā (Mother Gangā). Diana Eck (1983, p. 214) suggests that ‘the Ganges carries an immense cultural and religious meaning for Hindus of every region and cultural persuasion’. One of the most significant ritual activities for many pilgrims to Rishikesh and many of the other tīrthas located on the banks of Gangā is to take a ritual dip (snān) in her sacred water. The ritual purificatory power of water has long been, and remains to this day, an important aspect of Hindu religiousness, and Ganges water (Gangā jāl) is regarded as the purifying substance par excellence.

There are numerous mythological narratives about Gangā. The most widely known tale tells of King Bhagiratha, who is informed by the sages (rajas) that he must invoke the cleansing presence of Gangā in order to lift a curse on his ancestors, which prevents them from entering heaven. Since Gangā’s descent from the heavens would completely submerge the earth, Śiva agrees to break her force, and she flows harmlessly through his matted locks and frees Bhagiratha's ancestors from the curse. One of Śiva’s many epithets is Gangādhara – the bearer of Gangā – and in most iconographical representations of Śiva it is possible to identify Gangā emerging from his locks.

Gangā is frequently associated with death rituals. In particular, there are four tīrthas – Hardwar, Banaras, Prayag (Allahabad), and Gaya – that are regarded as being particularly auspicious places to die or be
cremated (see Parry, 1994 and Justice, 1997). For Hindus, cremation should take place as soon as possible after death. If it is not possible to arrange either the moment of death or the cremation at one of these tīrthas located on the banks of Gangā, some ritual performance at one of these crossing places is regarded as particularly desirable. This might involve the offering of the flowers used during the funerary rituals, or consigning bone fragments that are retrieved after the cremation to the Gangā.

Male relatives, in particular the eldest son, will endeavour to make the journey to the tīrtha associated with their family and perform a ritual known as śrāddha on the thirteenth day after death. In this thirteen-day period, the immediate family, and especially the eldest son, should not participate in any activity other than the rituals associated with death; they should eat frugally and avoid leaving the house as much as possible. However, in the modern world, this period is often curtailed to three or four days. Nonetheless, the ritual requirements of the death of an immediate family member can be very disruptive to the household for upwards of a year. For example, no marriages are supposed to be arranged or celebrated until the first anniversary after the death.

In places like Hardwar and Banaras, the ritual specialists (pančas) are also the record keepers. The relationship between a particular family and a specific family of pančas in many instances goes back for generations. Lining the banks of Gangā, at places like Banaras and Hardwar, these pančas set up wooden platforms for their consultations, and they will record details of births, marriages and so on, when family members make a special journey in order to perform śrāddha. Śrāddha might also be performed on the anniversary of the death, or during the fortnight of the ancestors.

Gangā is regarded as both the archetypal sacred waters and a goddess who can wash away one’s sins. As a goddess, she is most often iconographically represented as emerging from Śiva’s locks. She is also portrayed as a benign goddess riding a crocodile with a lotus saddle, and holding a pot in one hand and a lotus in the other. However, the river itself might also be considered as a form of the divine (mūrti). Every evening, just before dusk at a number of places along the ghats at Rishikesh, Gangā Arati is performed. This normally begins with kirtan (literally “to repeat”), a form of congregational devotional singing and chanting. Many of the sacred songs, often referred to as bhajans, derive from the development of the medieval devotional (bhakti) traditions, but remain very popular today. A number of these popular bhajans also find their way into the soundtrack of Bollywood films.
These devotional songs have catchy tunes, sometimes derived from the film versions. They are sung out by an individual, frequently to the accompaniment of harmonium and percussion, with the refrain being repeated by a chorus or more commonly by the entire congregation. The Gangā Āratī will also include chanting of some of the widely known mantras. The ritual ends with the waving of lamps over Gangā, which are then passed around all who are gathered. Many of the gathered devotees will also buy small boats made from stitched-together leaves, which contain flowers, a small cube of camphor, and a stick of incense. The camphor and incense are lit, and this offering is then released into the swirl of the fast-flowing current.

Renouncing the World

Pilgrims come to places like Rishikesh and other sacred places (tirthas), not only because of the association with the mythic narratives of the Purāṇas and Epics, but also because of the association with holy men (and occasionally women). Just as the sacred can take form in an image (mūrti) and in nature as in Ma Gangā, the sacred can also manifest in specific individuals. For the most part, although there are important exceptions, the sacred manifests in particular individuals because of their ascetic practices. Renouncing the world is a very significant aspect of the Hindu worldview, as it is commonly believed that it is not possible to achieve liberation while actually being involved in mundane activities. Ascetics of various types are still a very visible part of the Indian landscape, and in particular in the various tirthas. The importance of asceticism is indicated by the number of different terms used to denote ascetic practices. The generic term for such practices is sannyāsa, and those who have adopted a life of abstinence and austerity are referred to as sannyāsins. While this typology is not absolute, and there is a degree of overlap between the categories, I suggest that there are three main types of holy men and women: sādhus, swāmīs, and gurus.

Sādhus and Swāmīs

The term sādhu is usually used to refer to those ascetics who adopt a peripatetic lifestyle and/or adopt very rigorous forms of asceticism. Swāmi is generally used as a title of respect, most frequently to refer to ascetics who have adopted a more monastic lifestyle. All sādhus and swāmīs must undertake a ritual of initiation, which frequently entails the performance of the initiate's funeral and the adoption of a new
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name. This rite signifies that the initiate is no longer a part of the social world, and therefore no longer concerned with the three mundane goals: pleasure (kāma), 8 wealth (artha) and social duty (dharma), but are intent on liberation (mokṣa). Most adopt a specific mode of dress, or in some instances no dress at all. Many choose to wear saffron robes, which signify a life of renunciation. In general, although there are exceptions, sādhus tend to wear their hair in long matted locks, whereas swāmis frequently shave their heads. Both are indicative of an ascetic lifestyle, and in particular of celibacy.

There is no way really to assess how many ascetics there are in India. Dolf Hartsuiker (1993, p. 7) suggests there are four to five million. Although this is a very small percentage of the population, the influence of these ascetics reaches far beyond their actual numbers. Louis Dumont (1970, p. 275) rather overstates his case when he suggests that the renouncer is ‘the agent of development in Indian religion and speculation, the creator of values’, nonetheless there is no doubt that both the continuity and transformation of many aspects of the Hindu traditions can be attributed to particular individuals who have renounced the world.

Gurus

Because of their ascetic practices, swāmis and sādhus are believed to have special access to the sacred. Consequently, they play a very significant role in the religious life of many Hindus. While the various types of priests such as pujāris and paṇḍitas are ritual specialists, the renouncers are the source of religious knowledge. Some renouncers come to be regarded as gurus. It is important to note that not all renouncers are regarded as gurus, and conversely not all gurus are necessarily renouncers. Etymologically, the term guru is regarded as being composed of two parts: gu meaning darkness and ru signifying removal. Consequently, the guru is one who removes darkness or ignorance. That is, gurus are regarded as having the capacity of helping others achieve liberation.

It is impossible to underestimate the role of gurus in both the maintenance and transformation of the Hindu tradition. Many began lineages known as paramparās, which constitute an unbroken chain of succession. In the contemporary world, some gurus like Mata Amritanandamayi (see Warrier, 2005), Sri Mataji Nirmala Devi (see Coney, 1999) and Satya Sai Baba (see Babb, 1991) have become transnational figures who draw devotees from beyond the Indian community. Swami Sivananda is the most well known of the gurus who settled in Rishikesh.
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Sivananda is regarded by his devotees as a Sat Guru – or true guru. The implication of this is that Sivananda is believed to be a fully realized being, who has understood his true divine nature. Sivananda is often referred to by devotees as Guru Dev, literally the guru who is god. Individuals such as Sivananda are believed to be liberated souls (jivan-mukta). These realized individuals do not die as such, as they have escaped the wheel of life, death and rebirth, and when they leave their physical body they enter a state known as mahā samādhi. The term samādhi refers to the highest meditational state, when it is thought that the mind becomes totally absorbed in Brahman. The term mahā means ‘great’ and when added as a prefix to the term samādhi refers to the state attributed to liberated souls after they have left their physical body. The implication of this for the devotee is that Sivananda remains a very real presence. In his speech after taking over as the President of the Divine Life Society, Swami Chidananda suggested: ‘Though he (Sivananda) has left one akara (form) and become nirakara (without form), he has now come to dwell in his more pervasive akara, namely this Ashram’ (cited in The Divine Life, XXV [9], August 1963).

The Samādhi shrine at Sivananda Ashram. The full-sized image of Swami Sivananda is positioned above the place where Sivananda is buried. Large pictures that illustrate the life story of Sivananda painted by a devotee line the walls.
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Individuals, such as Sivananda, who are believed not to have died but to have entered a state of maha samadhi, are either buried or the body is submerged in the Gangá and not cremated as is the normal Hindu custom. Sivananda was buried in meditational pose and in a chamber that was then filled with salt, camphor and sandalwood. There is now a large hall with a shrine directly above the spot where Sivananda is buried, with a life-sized statue of Sivananda seated in meditation. This Samādhi Hall is the spiritual centre of the ashram.

Āśrams and Sādhana

The āśram founded by Sivananda, initially to provide accommodation for a growing number of devotees, is now the centre of a large multinational and modern organization. The āśram is headquarters of the Divine Life Society (DLS), which was founded by Sivananda in 1936. It now has branches throughout India and the world, including most European countries, the USA, South Africa and Malaysia.

The origins of ashrams can be traced back to the Vedic period, and in the contemporary period they have become important institutions for the maintenance, transmission and transformation of Hinduism. Ashrams in contemporary India are a very diverse phenomenon. Some, like Kailash Āśram in Rishikesh, are very traditional institutions. The latter was founded in 1880, and is primarily focused on learning Sanskrit, the study of the sacred texts (śāstras) and the philosophical schools (darsānas), particularly Vedānta. The head of Kailash Āśram is regarded as the most senior religious figure in the Rishikesh area. Other ashrams do little more than provide accommodation for pilgrims. However Sivananda Ashram, like many of the institutions that have sprung up around the spiritual preceptors of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is a thoroughly modern institution. Sivananda’s motto, ‘Serve, Love, Meditate and Realize’, gives a good indication of the main focal points of most modern ashrams and many forms of contemporary Hinduism.

Serve

The concept of service (seva) as a spiritual practice (sādhana) has become a central defining core of many forms of contemporary Hinduism. In large part, Swami Vivekananda reformulated the notion of service, and made it a central aspect of modern ashrams and the lives of contemporary renunciants (sannyasins). The underlying rationale for
sannyāsa is to seek liberation from the wheel of life, death and rebirth (samsāra). Consequently, for the traditional sannyāsin the phenomenal world, including the suffering of others, is a mere distraction from the soteriological goal of liberation. Furthermore, if Advaita Vedānta provides the philosophical framework for renunciation, then not only is the world, including the physical body, a distraction, but it is also regarded as fundamentally unreal. There seems no place in this worldview for the sannyāsin to become involved in the world at all, not even to help alleviate the suffering of others.

While it would be an oversimplification to identify a single individual or organization as responsible for reinterpreting this paradigm, nonetheless Swami Vivekananda and the founding of the Ramakrishna Mission were deeply influential in fomenting the idea of selfless service as a spiritual practice (for a full discussion of this see Beckerlegge, 2006). The young Vivekananda in a period of wandering was shocked by the living conditions of many Indians that he encountered. In a letter written in 1894 to one of his fellow devotees of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda observed that Hinduism is a ‘religion that fails to remove the misery of the poor’. Later on in the same letter Vivekananda suggests that he had a plan to use ‘disinterested Sannyasins, bent on doing good to others ... disseminating education and seeking in various ways to better the condition of all down to the Chandala’ (Vivekananda, 1984, Vol. VI, pp. 254–5).

Vivekananda worked out a philosophical foundation for this practical idea that involved a radical reinterpretation of Advaita Vedānta. Swami Vivekananda termed this reworking ‘Practical Vedanta’, and presented it as a series of lectures given in London in 1896. His argument runs that ‘Vedanta teaches Oneness’, and that since every individual is part of that sacred unity, each individual has to be concerned for everyone’s welfare, as ultimately there is no real distinction between the individual’s existence and everyone else’s. Sannyāsa is not therefore about retiring from the world and living in the remote Himalayas, but actively engaging in the world, and in particular helping to ameliorate the suffering of others. In 1897, the newly founded Ramakrishna Mission organized the first systematic programme of aid for victims of a famine (see Beckerlegge, 2006, pp. 27ff.).

The ideal of service (seva) pervades many forms of contemporary Hinduism. Like Swami Vivekananda, Swami Sivananda (2007, p. 67) suggests ‘the basics of Hindu ethics is this: “There is one all-pervading Atman. It is the inner soul of all beings.” Consequently, “Feed the hungry. Clothe the naked. Serve the sick. This is the Divine Life’.
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(Sivananda, cited in The Divine Life, August 2008, p. 21). Sivananda, a trained physician, operated a free dispensary for the sādhus in Rishikesh. In 1950 he opened the Sivananda Charitable Hospital, which remains an integral part of the ashram. The ashram also runs four leprosy colonies, and an educational trust to fund school and college fees. All of these services are provided free. Sivananda suggests that service to others is integral to the divine life. It not only creates harmony in this life, but also is important for the achievement of liberation. The sannyāsins living on the ashram are expected to fully engage with any number of mundane activities, from basic administrative tasks to working in the kitchen or hospital.

Love

The second term in the motto of the Divine Life Society is ‘love’, and this clearly refers to bhakti – or loving devotion to God. ‘Bhakti has succeeded in becoming the religion of the Indian masses, undermining caste distinctions and providing forms of worship with a common language of ritual practice’ (Geaves, 2008a, p. 89). Many Hindus’ religious life is centred on images, and Hinduism still retains a vibrant visual culture. The area around Rishikesh is replete with brightly coloured statues of various gods and goddesses, many of them more than life sized. One of the most popular places for pilgrims to visit is Parmarth Niketan, a large ashram on the opposite side of Gangā to the Sivananda Ashram. In its well-tended gardens are a large number of painted images depicting scenes from various Hindu narratives. Many pilgrims wander quietly around these gardens, often slightly bowing their heads with hands joined together in respect before each image (pranām). They might well remind each other of the stories associated with the image and throw a coin at the base as an offering.

There is clear evidence of the importance of bhakti on Sivananda Ashram. The most important places for devotional practice are the Samādhi Shrine, The Viswanath Mandir, and the bhajan hall. The Samādhi Shrine is both the symbolic and physical centre of the Sivananda Ashram, as it is here that the body of Sivananda is interred, and Sivananda is regarded as having a real, albeit incorporeal, presence. Consequently, devotees come to the hall for darśan of Guru Dev. A number of ritual activities take place here, the most important of which is called satsang – which literally means ‘good company’. There are three overlapping connotations to the term: it indicates the importance of being in the company of the guru; it suggests the importance of keeping company with fellow devotees; and it also is used as a general term to indicate a group of people gathered to listen to a religious discourse (Geaves, 2008b, p. 774).
In many ways the satsang in the Samādhi Hall at Sivananda Ashram includes all three aspects. The satsang begins at about 7.30 in the evening and finishes at about 9.30. It is the only activity which visitors staying on the ashram are expected to attend. The presence of Swami Sivananda is emphasized by large paintings of various aspects of Sivananda's life that adorn most of the wall space, and by the life-sized statue of Sivananda above the spot where he is buried. In the middle of the long wall, there is a small throne, with a garlanded picture of Sivananda with the mantra Om Namo Bhagavate Siva namah (Om Salutations to the God Sivananda) inscribed on the wall above.

Devotees gather for satsang not only to be in the presence of Sivananda, but also because many of the senior swāmis attend, and being in their august presence is also regarded as beneficial for the religious life. Being in the company of other devotees is also important. Many devotees feel a very real connection to other devotees, and often use the term guru bhai, literally 'guru brother'. The ritual of satsang at Sivananda Ashram involves congregational singing and chanting (kirtan); often a chapter of the Bhagavad Gītā is chanted; a short extract from one of Swami Sivananda's many works is read; there will be a discourse in either Hindi or English given by one of the senior swāmis or a guest speaker; and the evening ends with ārati and the distribution of prasād.

Temples
Although it is an often cited aphorism that it is perfectly possible to be a good Hindu without ever going to a temple, the temple still plays a very important role in the lives of many contemporary Hindus. This remains the case across the wide spectrum of class, caste, and educational background. In Rishikesh, as well as the ghāts, temples are an important arena for ritual activity. As in all Indian towns, there are numerous temples in Rishikesh.

The Bharat Mandir claims to be the oldest temple in the region. The name refers to a form of Viṣṇu holding his most identifiable iconic objects: a conch, mace, discus, and lotus. It is here that it is said that Viṣṇu appeared to the sage Raibhya. Furthermore, this mandir claims that the central image (mūrti) was installed by the great medieval philosopher Śankarācārya. This claim is important as it both substantiates its claim to being an ancient temple, and also links bhakti to Vedānta philosophy. Like most temples, the Bharat Mandir is actually a small complex. The main shrine is dedicated to Viṣṇu, and to the side there is an image of the child Kṛṣṇa (Bāla Kṛṣṇa) in a swing. There are small separate shrines, one dedicated to the elephant-headed Ganesa,
the other containing a small Śiva līṅga. This might seem surprising as Gaṇeśa and Śiva are both clearly located within the Śaivite tradition rather than Vaiṣṇava tradition. On one level this is a clear indication that these two broad traditions are not as distinct as some scholars suggest. On another, as these shrines are satellites to the main shrine containing the images of Viṣṇu, it could be regarded as a visible signifier of henotheism.

A pūjārī can be found in the temple. His position, like those of most ritual specialists, is hereditary: he follows in his father’s footsteps, and is training his son to take over from him. He performs a simple ārati in the morning and evening, and the rest of the day is available for anyone that visits the temple. Throughout the day worshippers visit the temple. These visits mostly entail a simple bow of the head with hands held together in front of the chest before the image (prāṇām). The pūjārī spoons a small amount of sacred water into the right hand of the worshipper, who sips it. The pūjārī then marks the forehead of the worshipper with a spot of red powder made from turmeric (kumkum) and gives them a few sugar crystals as prasād. The worshipper generally gives the pūjārī a few rupees, makes a final prāṇām and leaves. They then may visit the other shrines, where a similar routine will be followed. The whole ritual process may take only a minute or two. It might seem very perfunctory to Western eyes; however, for the devotee, they have had dārsan of the sacred and received the grace of the deity in the form of prasād.

Rishikesh is a town not only of temples, but also of shrines. There are wayside shrines throughout India. These might simply be stones placed under trees, a rock roughly hewn in the shape of a deity and painted bright orange (frequently Hanumān in North India), or a fully realized carving housed in a fairly permanent structure. There are three interconnected differences between shrines and temples. First, shrines are obviously far less grand and imposing than most temples. Second, in shrines the demarcation between sacred and profane space is not as clearly defined as for temples. Third, an intermediary ritual specialist is not normally present at shrines.

Swami Sivananda clearly believed that the temple was an important requisite for the divine life and consecrated the Visvanath Mandir on the ashram in 1943. Visvanath is an epithet of Śiva – and literally means ‘Lord of the Universe’. According to the ashram’s website:

In India, there is a tradition and common practice to have a family deity or Kula-Devata. So, we find a temple in most of the
Ashrams and the main Deity of the temple is like the presiding Deity of the Ashram. In this sense, Lord Visvanatha is the presiding and protecting Deity of Sivananda Ashram and the entire Sivananda family of devotees spread all over the world. (Sivananda Ashram, 2005).

The main mūrti is a Śiva linga, but there is also a prominent image of Kṛṣṇa, as well as an image of Śiva in his form as Lord of Yoga, and images of Gaṇeśa, Devi and Śāṅkara. The Visvanath Mandir is where the more traditional religious activities of the ashram take place. The temple day begins at 4.00 a.m. when a brahmacarya rings the bell to awaken the deity. From around five, devotees start to drift in, most of whom are women. After a ritual bow (pranām) or a full prostration before the main shrine, they begin the chanting of the six-syllable Śiva mantra Om Namah Śivaya (Om, homage to Śiva) to the accompaniment of the harmonium.
Mantras

Repetition of mantras is known as japa and is widely practised. Harvey Alper (1991, p. 2) goes as far as to suggest that ‘the history of religious life in India might plausibly be read as a history of mantras’. Although the precise definition of what constitutes a mantra is contested (see Alper, 1991) I will take a mantra to be a syllable, phrase or short verse that is believed to possess power, and the repetition of which can produce religious, spiritual or magical effects.

Many mantras, such as the six-syllable Śiva mantra, are short phrases that are normally associated with a particular deity. Perhaps the most well known of these is the mantra that is chanted by the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)

Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna Hare Hare;
Hare Rama Hare Rama, Rama Rama Hare Hare.

These are different names for God. In ISKCON understanding, just as the mūrti is not simply a visual representation of God but is God, the mantra is not simply an aural representation, but is also God. ‘Simply put, Kṛṣṇa is his name, and anyone who utters that name at once directly associates with Kṛṣṇa’ (Deadwyler III, 1996, p. 81). In the bhajan hall on Sivananda Ashram, repetition of this mantra has been continued, night and day, unbroken since December 1943.

The repetition of mantras (japa) takes three different forms. The first is silent or mental repetition, and is often used as a form of meditational practice. A rosary of beads (mālā) is often used in the silent repetition of a mantra. The second form of japa is the recitation of mantras aloud. While the silent repetition of mantras tends to be an individual and meditational practice, the vocalization of a mantra tends to be a collective practice which is incorporated into ritual performance. Almost all forms of Hindu ritual practice include the chanting of mantras at some point in the ritual performance. The third form of mantra repetition is the writing out of mantras as a meditational practice, and this is known as likhita japa. While this is not as common as the other two forms of japa, it is still fairly widely practised. In Sivananda Ashram there is a small room housing thousands of notebooks sent by devotees, filled with the mantra of the individual’s chosen deity (iṣṭa devatā). Sivananda (1994, p. 86) suggests, ‘The very presence of these Mantra-notebooks will create favourable vibrations requisite for your Sadhana.’
Rituals: Abhiṣeka, Āratī and Yajña

At six o’clock in the morning the abhiṣeka is performed in the Visvanath Mandir. Abhiṣeka, the ritual anointing of an image of the deity (mūrti) can be quite a simple affair, or like most forms of Hindu ritual can be elaborated into a highly complex ritual. It is performed in one way or another in virtually all Hindu temples. At Sivananda Ashram, devotees are able to sponsor the performance of the abhiṣeka. This means that they are permitted to sit within the main sanctum and around the Śiva linga with the pūjārī who conducts the ritual. This is highly unusual, as in most temples the central sanctum is the preserve of the priests, and worshippers are not normally allowed to cross into this most sacred space.

The pūjārī greets those who have sponsored the abhiṣeka and seats them around the linga. The ritual lasts about an hour, in which various offerings are poured over the linga by those in attendance while the pūjārī chants various mantras. The most important offerings are the five nectars (paṇcāṃrita); these are curds, ghee, milk, honey and unrefined sugar (this last nectar is often dissolved and mixed with a fruit pulp). There are three explanations for this offering. The first is that these five substances are believed to have cooling properties. The second is that they directly relate to the five elements (earth, water, fire, air and ether). Finally, the number five is particularly sacred to Śiva. In some forms of Śaivism, Śiva is said to perform five activities: veiling (the true nature of reality), granting grace, creation of the cosmos, maintenance, and destruction.

The linga is carefully washed after the anointing with the five nectars, and a silver coiled serpent is placed over it. The serpent is associated with Śiva, and is also regarded as having cooling properties. The serpent represents death and signifies Śiva’s mastery over death. Furthermore, the serpent symbolizes the yogic power known as kuṭḍalini, which normally resides as a dormant force at the base energy centre (cakra) of the human body. The hooded serpent that shades the linga like an umbrella represents the awakening of this yogic power, and its rising to the highest cakra, signifying liberation. The pūjārī then decorates the linga with garlands of flowers, anoints it with three horizontal lines of sacred ash (vibhūti) and a sacred mark (tilak) made from a red powder (kumkum) and sandalwood paste. The participants are each provided with a tray of flowers and bilva leaves (also known as bael). Bilva leaves normally have three leaflets and therefore vaguely resemble the end of a trident, and are consequently sacred to Śiva. These are scattered around the linga, as the pūjārī chants further mantras. This signals the
end of the abhiṣeka and the participants are instructed to leave the sanctum, where they wait in the main hall of the temple with other devotees who have been gathering. The pūjārī finally finishes the adornment of the linga with offerings of fruit.

The pūjārī at Sivananda Ashram performing ārati before an image of Kṛṣṇa at the end of abhiṣeka. The Śiva linga can be just seen, swathed in garlands of flowers and decorated with coconuts. In front of the Śiva linga is Nandi, the bull who is regarded as Śiva's vehicle. To the right are images of Rāma and Sītā.

It is now time for the ārati, which is announced by a cacophony of bells, gongs, drums and the blowing of a conch. The pūjārī rings a bell in his left hand and waves various lamps in front of all the images in the main shrine. The ārati culminates with the lighting of a lamp that has 108 wicks, which after it has been presented to the images is taken to the awaiting devotees, who proffer their hands to the flames and then bring them up to touch their foreheads. As the devotees file out of the temple, they get a mark of sacred ash on their foreheads, a sip of sacred water and a small sweet (prasād). The ārati at Sivananda Ashram is a very organized and ordered ritual. Men and women are kept in separate lines on either side of the main shrine, and although the devotees are eager, there is none of the pushing and showing that
can occur in the performance of some ārati. Because Sivananda was originally from the state of Tamil Nadu, the rituals of abhiṣeka and ārati are very much in a South Indian style. Consequently, many of the darṣan tour buses from South India touring some of the sacred sites of northern India make a stop for the ārati at Sivananda Ashram.

There is a small room in one corner of the Visvanath Mandir, which contains a small square pit, surrounded by a low wall, for making a ritual fire. This room is known as the Yajña Hall (Yajñā Shala). The term yajña means sacrifice, and often is used to refer specifically to the Vedic fire ritual. Although pūjā remains the core ritual of devotional forms of Hinduism, yajña remains an important role in contemporary ritual life. However, the place and understanding of yajña in contemporary forms of Hinduism is very different to that of the Vedic period. For example, in the Vedic period the yajña shala would not have been a permanent structure and would have been specially consecrated for a single ritual performance. At Sivananda Ashram, the yajña is performed every Monday morning, and any other morning when there is a sponsor. The ritual itself is quite lengthy, lasting for over two hours. The main part of the ritual involves 108 repetitions of a mantra. At each repetition, the sponsors and priests pour some ghee using long-handled spoons into the ritual fire. The couple who sponsored the yajña that I witnessed informed me that the ritual was dedicated to Lord Śiva, and they performed it for the sake of good health and a long life.
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_Bhakti_, or the loving devotion to a personal deity, therefore remains an important aspect of many forms of contemporary Hinduism. It is also true that many of the ritual practices associated with _bhakti_ remain a significant part of the religious life for most Hindus and cut across many demographic divides. Ritual performance is an important expression of _bhakti_. This might simply mean going for _daršan_ in a temple and receiving a few sugar crystals as _prasād_, or can involve long and complex rites.

**Meditate**

The third aspect of Sivananda's Yoga of Synthesis is meditation. Sivananda means something quite specific by this term. The most commonly used Sanskrit term for meditation is _dhyāna_, and this is one of the stages in the systemization of yoga expounded by Patañjali. This systematized form of yoga is sometimes referred to as Kingly Yoga (Raja Yoga), and also eight-limbed yoga (_aṣṭāṅga_ _yoga_), as it involves eight different spiritual practices.

1. _Yama_ – abstentions
2. _Niyama_ – observances
3. _Asana_ – posture
4. _Prāṇāyāma_ – control of the breath
5. _Pratyāhāra_ – withdrawal of the senses from sense objects
6. _Dhāraṇā_ – concentration
7. _Dhyāna_ – meditative absorption
8. _Samādhi_ – union (enstasis)

Abstentions and observances pertain to social relationships, and constitute an ethical code. The most well known of these is non-violence (_ahimsa_), which Gandhi famously made a central tenet of his philosophy. _Asana_, the physical postures, are what most people in the West think of as yoga. Yogic thought suggests that controlling the physical body (_āsana_) and the breath (_prāṇāyāma_) helps to control the mind. Withdrawal of the senses (_pratyāhāra_) is the transition point between external and internal practices. The analogy that is sometimes used to describe this stage is that of a tortoise drawing its limbs into its shell. Concentration (_dharanī_) refers to concentrating the mind on a single point. This is followed by a state of meditative absorption (_dhyāna_). The difference between concentration and meditative absorption is very subtle. An analogy that is often used is the comparison between pouring a steady stream of water as opposed to oil. The final goal of yoga is known as _samādhi_, in which all distinctions
between the meditator, the act of mediation and the object of meditation collapse. *Samādhi* enables the meditator to grasp the true nature of reality that underlies all phenomenal existence, undistracted by what Patañjali terms the fluctuations of consciousness. Swami Vivekananda used the term superconsciousness to try to convey the meaning of the term *samādhi*.

Elizabeth De Michelis (2004) has identified distinctive forms of modern yoga, which she argues are quite different from classical forms. It is important to note at this point that classical forms of yoga can still be found in India, and, as with many aspects of Hinduism, the new does not necessarily replace the old; rather, modernity and tradition exist side by side, interacting in highly complex ways. Yoga and meditation are traditionally associated with *sannyāsins*, and not householders. However, modern forms of yoga do not advocate ascetic practices beyond sometimes suggesting a vegetarian diet and avoidance of intoxicants.

Yoga is very popular in that it is perceived as an authentic aspect of Hindu culture. It is authentic, because its roots can, in theory, be traced back to an ancient past. Many modern yogis point to the enigmatic Indus Valley Seal of the so-called ‘proto Śiva’ as evidence of the ancient origins of yoga. It is further represented as being scientific, and also superior to Western forms of medicine. The practice of yoga is now firmly identified with the ability to prevent and cure diseases, and to alleviate the stress of modern living. One of the foremost proponents of what might be called therapeutic Hinduism is the highly popular Swami Ramdev, who not only holds regular yoga camps, but also has a regular slot on cable television. His popularity demonstrates the power of yoga to satisfy a national and transnational nostalgia for tradition (Chakraborty, 2007, p. 1174).

While Sivananda Ashram provides facilities for both yoga and meditation, the majority of visitors do not avail themselves of these facilities, and the yoga classes are predominately attended by Western seekers. Nonetheless, yoga and meditation play an important symbolic role in the minds of many Hindus. It could be argued that they have become increasingly significant in the contemporary period. There are three main interconnected reasons for the growing salience of yoga and meditation. The first reason is what Agehananda Bharati (1970) has called the pizza effect. By this he means a process of re-enculturation whereby a cultural phenomenon is exported and transformed, is then re-imported to the original cultural milieu in its transformed state and re-evaluated accordingly. The second reason is that yoga and meditation
have been reframed in terms of being both rational and scientific, and consequently are commensurate with a modern ethos. Third, these practices have been divorced from ascetic practices and rearticulated with discourses on physical health and psychological well-being.

Realize
Sivananda’s final term, ‘realize’, encapsulates three interrelated concepts that play an important role in many forms of contemporary Hinduism. These are absolute monism (Advaita Vedānta), knowledge (jñāna) and liberation (mokṣa). These three concepts play an important symbolic, rather than actual role in contemporary forms of Hinduism. Advaita Vedānta, the absolute monistic school of philosophy as espoused by Śankara (8th–9th century CE), has been reinterpreted in the apologetic discourses of modern forms of Hinduism, and represented as the acme of all religious thought. This discourse begins with the premise that Advaita Vedānta recognizes that there is only one fundamental reality that underlies the diversity of the phenomenal world (Brahman). The corollary is that this absolute reality can be expressed and accessed in an infinite number of ways. All expressions of this absolute cannot fully encapsulate its reality in toto, consequently all religious expressions have an equal, but partial validity. However, because Vedānta recognizes the relative and partial nature of all modes of religious expression, this places it in a privileged position.

This assertion facilitates the gathering of all modes of religious practices under the umbrella term of Hinduism, and underpins the often cited phrase that Hinduism is characterized by ‘unity-in-diversity’. Vedānta is represented as a sort of meta-religion. Consequently, Hinduism in the modern world is frequently represented as being tolerant. Vedānta does not evaluate different modes of religiousness in terms of right and wrong, but suggests that each person’s religiousness is expressed in terms of what is appropriate to their own religious development. Ultimately, each person has the capacity to realize the truth, and this is referred to as knowledge (jñāna).

Clearly the sumnum bonum of Vedānta is the knowledge (jñāna) that is encapsulated in the great Upaniṣadic sayings (mahāvākyā), such as ‘I am the Absolute’ (aham brahmaāsi). This is sometimes expressed in various metaphors such as the drop realizing its oneness with the ocean. Jñāna means something other than knowing a fact; it is the knowledge that leads to liberation (mokṣa) from the eternal cycle of life, death and rebirth (samsāra). It is a knowledge based upon experience, and the discourses of many modern swāmis tend to emphasize experience.
Hinduism in India

While most Hindus acknowledge the Vedas as the source of Hinduism, and recognize them as a source of knowledge, their role in contemporary Hinduism is minimal. There are a few places, like the Kailash Ashram in Rishikesh, where exegesis of Sanskrit texts (sāstras) is still the main focus of religious practice (sādhana). However, the Vedas tend to be a symbolic, rather than an actual, source of authority, and this enables almost anything to be regarded as authoritative in religious matters.

Four sources of religious authority have come to be prominent in contemporary Hinduism: religious experience itself, various gurus, the Bhagavad Gītā and the Rāmāyana. The religious experience of sages might be regarded as a paradigmatic model. The Vedic ṛṣis in many ways provide a template, as it is their experiences that revealed the truth embodied in the Vedas. Many contemporary gurus are regarded as authoritative as they speak from their own religious experience. This has given them a special status, and consequently knowledge is derived from the articulation of the guru's experience and not necessarily from any textual source. Some gurus spend a great deal of time discoursing on various topics such as Vedānta. However, for many devotees, having a sacred sight (darśan) of the guru is more significant than any didactic discourse. The importance of being in the presence of the guru is especially significant in movements like the Sathya Sai Baba and Mata Amritanandamayi movements. It is of course the love of the guru for his or her devotee and vice versa that is the main emphasis in these particular modern movements.

It is clear that the Bhagavad Gītā had a special status in premodern times, but it has also come to play a particularly significant role in contemporary Hinduism. John Brockington (1997, p. 28) observes, 'To most Vaishnavas, and indeed to most modern Hindus, the Bhagavad Gītā is their main religious text and the real source of many of their beliefs.' There are a number of interconnected reasons for this increasing salience. The Bhagavad Gītā was one of the very first Sanskrit texts to be translated into English. It had a deep impact on a wide variety of Westerners, including the Romantics, the Transcendentalists and academics. In other words, it was the first Hindu text to not only be made accessible in the West, but also be evaluated positively amongst certain sectors of the Western intelligentsia (see Sharpe, 1985). The Bhagavad Gītā has been allocated a special place by many prominent Hindus themselves. For example, Mahatma Gandhi often extolled its uniqueness and significance, not only for Hindus in general, but in his own life. The Bhagavad Gītā is a very short text, particularly in
comparison to the Vedic corpus. Consequently, many commentators have suggested that this short composition encapsulates Hindu beliefs. However, it also has a universality, and as Will Johnson (1994, p. viii) indicates, it has ‘an apparently limitless capacity to inspire new and necessarily valid meanings’.

While many Hindus might know more of the content of the Bhagavad Gītā than the Vedas, it still plays a largely symbolic role in the majority of Hindus’ lives. However, almost all Hindus know at least the basic story of the Rāmāyana. It is a very compelling narrative that tells how Rāma rescues his wife Sītā from the ten-headed demon Rāvaṇa. This narrative is recited, told in comics, and acted out in street performances. It has also been filmed and made into a television series. The central theme of the Rāmāyana is dharma, which will be the theme of the next chapter.
Chapter 3

Hindu Dharma in the Contemporary World: Caste, Gender and Political Hinduism

There is no word in any of the Indian languages that is equivalent to the term religion. It is fairly common to hear Hindus suggest that there is no such thing as Hinduism, and that the term in itself is a misnomer. In fact many Hindus find the very term Hinduism rather insulting. The reason for this is that it is claimed, with some justification, that it is a foreign term imposed during the colonial period. It is suggested that the correct term for the religious culture of Hindus is Sanātana Dharma. Sanātana can be translated as ‘Eternal’; however, there is no single word in the English language that is equivalent to the term dharma.

Dharma has the connotation of order as opposed to adharma, which implies chaos. When combined with Sanātana, the term dharma is best understood in terms of ‘truth’. Therefore the closest translation of Sanātana Dharma is the ‘Eternal Truth’. This gives us a clue as to why many Hindus suggest that Hinduism is not a religion. The argument goes that all other religions can be traced to a founder or foundational event. However, the truth that is articulated in the Vedic corpus is eternal, and was revealed to the ancient Vedic seers (ṛṣis). It is therefore not a composition of a founder, but the truth that transcends both time and space.

In particular, dharma is concerned with the maintenance of the social order. This social order is linked both to individual behaviour and to the maintenance of the cosmos. In other words, the individual, the social and the cosmological are inseparable. The correct behaviour of the individual is perceived as bringing balance and order to both society and the cosmos.
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_Dharma_ is often regarded as applying to specific groups and is referred to as _varṇāśramadharma_. This rather ponderous word is actually three words joined together: _varṇa_ – which is often translated as caste; _āśrama_ – which means stage of life; and _dharma_ – which in this context can be translated as duty. Therefore _varṇāśramadharma_ roughly translates as ‘one’s duty as determined by one’s caste and stage of life’. I will not be discussing the _āśrama_ system, as it is largely an ideal and is rarely adhered to. However the concept of caste continues to play a significant, albeit contested, role in contemporary Hinduism.

Caste

Caste is perhaps the most widely misunderstood aspect of Hinduism. There are two interconnected reasons for the misunderstanding. First, the term caste is not an Indian term but is derived from the Portuguese term _casta_, which roughly translates as race or tribe. However, the Portuguese ‘casta’ does not correspond with the social structures of Hindu society. Second, the term caste has come to stand for two distinct systems of social structure: _varṇa_ and _jāti_. _Varṇa_ refers to the division of society into four groups, whereas _jāti_ refers to thousands of groups that were originally determined by occupation.

_Varṇa and Jāti_

_Varṇa_ refers to a system that divides society into four hierarchically arranged groups: the priests (_brāhmins_); warriors and rulers (_kṣatriyas_); artisans, farmers and traders (_vaiśyas_); and those who serve the other groups (_śūdras_). Louis Dumont, in his seminal work on caste, argues that the underlying principle of this hierarchy is the opposition between purity and pollution. Furthermore Dumont (1980, p. 74) argues that this opposition ‘is a religious, even a ritualistic affair’.

The origin of _varṇa_ can be traced back to a hymn found in the _Rg Veda_ called the Hymn of the Cosmic Man (_Puruṣa Sūkta_). This hymn suggests that creation is due to the sacrifice and dismemberment of the cosmic man. ‘His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the Warrior, his thighs the People, and from his feet the Servants were born’ (O’Flaherty, 1981, p. 31).

This hymn, although it does not use the term _varṇa_, suggests that society is an organic whole, homologous to the structure of both the cosmos and the body. However, there is no unequivocal evidence that the Vedic society was actually organized according to this structure.
A clearly defined social structure in terms of four distinct varṇas is only outlined in the later dharma texts, and in particular The Laws of Manu, which clearly delineates the duties (dharma) of each varṇa. The Laws of Manu (1:88–91) indicates that the duty of the priests (brāhmins) is to learn the Vedas and perform the sacrifice, the duty of the warriors (kṣatriyas) is to protect society, the duty of the people (vaishyas) is to farm and engage in trade, and the duty of the servants (śūdras) is only to serve. The three highest varṇas are sometimes collectively referred to as twice born (dvija). This refers to the fact that at about the age of eleven all males of the three highest varṇas undergo an initiation in which they receive a sacred thread. This is a triple loop of thread, which is worn over the left shoulder and under the right arm. This initiation is generally perceived in terms of a spiritual birth. Beneath the four varṇas is a fifth stratum of society, not formally classified as a varṇa, which is sometimes referred to by the generic term ‘Untouchable’. Members of this stratum, because of their occupations, are regarded as ritually impure. The structure of the varṇa system can be diagrammatically represented as in Table 2.

Table 2: The structure of the varṇa system

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Varṇa</th>
<th>Duty</th>
<th>Purity</th>
<th>Pollution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brāhmin</td>
<td>Learn the Vedas and perform the sacrifice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kṣatriya</td>
<td>Protect the people</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaishya</td>
<td>Tend cattle and trade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Śūdra</td>
<td>Serve the twice born</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Untouchables</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The jāti system is a taxonomy of all life forms including animal, human and celestial beings. Members of the same jāti are believed to share the same bodily substance, which distinguishes them from members of all other jātis. While the varṇa system divides society into four basic strata, there are literally thousands of jātis. In fact, the number of jātis is not fixed. Jāti was originally determined by locality and occupation. However, nowadays, many members no longer perform their traditional occupation, and might well have moved away from their original
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locality. *jātis* are endogamous groups, and the practice of marrying only within one's own *jāti* is still prevalent. *Jāti* is bothascriptive and immutable. However, this does not mean to say that there is no social mobility within the system.

In this highly complex system, each *jāti* might be also subdivided into sub-castes. In the colonial period the British tried to map the *jāti* system onto the *varṇa* system, despite the fact that there is no direct correlation between the two systems. Although the *jāti* system is also hierarchical, it is often highly problematic to categorize specific *jāti* in terms of a particular *varṇa*.

Caste is an incredibly sensitive issue, mainly because many outsiders, without fully understanding the nuances of either *varṇa* or *jāti*, have been extremely critical of the caste system. A new apologetic on caste is emerging amongst Hindus. This involves a discourse about both *jāti* and *varṇa*. It is widely acknowledged that *jāti* is not confined to the Hindu community, but extends to other religious communities. This has led many Hindus to argue that *jāti* is not a religious, but a socio-cultural phenomenon. In a survey conducted by the Hindu Forum of Britain, one respondent suggested: ‘Varṇa is within the construct of Hinduism. *Jāti* [sic] on the other hand is just a social and cultural phenomenon. It has nothing to do with the core principles of Hinduism’ (Kallidai, 2008, p. 7).

Hindus sometimes suggest that it is only natural that one would want to interact most closely with those who are perceived to share an equivalent cultural background. This argument is often used to indicate why marriage within the same *jāti* is normally preferred. This view of *jāti* denies the conceptualization of *jāti* as a group of people who are considered as sharing the same ‘bodily substance’. In other words, there is a shift from thinking about *jāti* in physical terms to a cultural conception of caste, whereby *jāti* is conceived of in terms of lifestyle. There is therefore a move away from thinking about marriage within a specified group as physiologically predetermined, to the idea that selection of a marriage partner within a specified group is a matter of cultural preference. In this way the concept of *jāti* is preserved, but reinterpreted so that it is more compatible with the ethos of the contemporary world.

On the other hand, it is recognized that *varṇa* is a Hindu concept, but this is also reinterpreted by many Hindus in the contemporary context. This interpretation suggests that the Vedic seers recognized that society is an organic whole, and that societies require different people to fulfill different functions. These functions are determined by attitude and
aptitude, rather than by hereditity. However, it is suggested that, over time, this model of society was appropriated by the brahmmins, who reframed it in terms of hereditity, in order to maintain positions of power. Consequently a true understanding of caste would look to the Vedic origins, and not to the later corruption of this social system. This allows for caste to be seen as an ancient and authentic Indian phenomenon, and at the same time as entirely compatible with the ethos of meritocracy that structures modern Western societies. Nonetheless, caste still contributes to the social and economic disenfranchisement of large numbers of Indians.

Dalits, Adivasis and Other Backward Classes
There are three categories of groups that are recognized by the Constitution of India as being socially and economically deprived. In the official idioms these are known as Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC). It must be stressed that all of these categories are diverse and each is composed of a wide range of different jatis. All have a certain degree of legal protection under the Constitution, not only in terms of outlawing discrimination, but also in terms of having reserved seats in the legislative assemblies at state and national levels. There are also certain proportions of places in education and other institutions that are reserved for those classified as SC, ST or OBC. In other words, the Government of India has adopted a policy of positive discrimination. This itself has contributed to the politicization of these groups. It has also led to some backlash, which has sometimes been violent. Some anti-reservation demonstrations by higher-caste Hindus have relied simply on a rhetoric of the inherent inferiority of Untouchables. However, most critiques of reservation have adopted a discourse that refers to more contemporary themes such as ‘fairness’ and ‘merit’.

Untouchability
There are some aspects of life, particularly those associated with birth, death, menstruation and bodily excretions in general, that are considered as especially defiling. Consequently, those people engaged in activities such as laundry, leather work and so on are considered as especially polluting. They are regarded as untouchable, as their touch is thought of as being ritually polluting. Although caste discrimination has been outlawed by the Constitution of Indian, there is no doubt that still today many Untouchables are economically deprived, and suffer from social stigmatization.
Before looking at untouchability in more detail, it is necessary to say something about nomenclature. The term ‘Untouchable’ has of course derogatory connotations. The names of particular untouchable jātis, such as chamar who are traditionally leather workers, are also sometimes used as disparaging terms. Mahatma Gandhi, although he did not critique the varṇa system itself, was acutely aware of the social injustices created by the concept of untouchability. In an attempt to circumvent the social stigmatization implicit in it, he coined the term Harijan, literally ‘children of god’, to denote untouchable groups. However, many untouchable groups find this term very patronizing. The Indian Government uses the term Scheduled Castes as a legal designation for untouchable groups. However, in recent years, many Untouchables have adopted the term dalit, literally ‘oppressed ones’, as a self-designation, and although this has not been universally adopted by all Untouchables, I will primarily use this term interchangeably with the more formal terminology of Scheduled Castes.

There are numerous different jātis classified as dalit. In other words, the dalits cannot be considered as a homogeneous group. The 2001 Census of India indicates that there are 166,635,700 people, about 16 per cent of the population, who are classified as Scheduled Castes.

Resisting Opposition
The dalits and other deprived groups have also adopted four broad strategies of resistance to their condition of exploitation. I have termed these: rejection, opposition, rearticulation and politicization. These are not necessarily alternative strategies, but are a range of possibilities upon which different individuals and groups draw in various combinations and degrees.

Rejection
Rejection refers to a strategy whereby oppressed individuals and groups argue that Hinduism is inherently hierarchical and exploitative, and the only possibility of improving one’s social status and economic condition is to reject Hinduism. This frequently involves adopting another religious tradition that is perceived to be intrinsically egalitarian. There has been, and continues to be, a practice of individuals and groups converting to Islam, Buddhism or Christianity in an attempt to opt out of the caste system. However, this strategy has not necessarily been effective in alleviating the social plight or economic status of low-status jātis. Furthermore, this strategy has not only been controversial, but has also in some instances caused a violent backlash in certain parts of India.
For example, in 2008 in Orissa, violence broke out between Hindus and the Christian community.

Resistance by *dalits* to the overarching exploitation of the caste system cannot be understood without a brief mention of Dr Bhimrao Ambedkar, who has become an icon to all *dalits* who totally reject the hierarchical structures of the caste systems. Ambedkar was an extraordinary individual. Although he was a Mahar, which is classified as an untouchable *jati*, he gained a PhD from Columbia University in 1917 and passed his bar exams in London in 1923. He was a member of Jawaharlal Nehru’s first independent government, and was largely responsible for drawing up India’s Constitution. In a speech in 1935, Ambedkar suggested that because ‘we have the misfortune of calling ourselves Hindu, we are treated thus. If we were members of another Faith, none would dare treat us so’ (cited in Zelliot, 2001, p. 206). Shortly before his death in 1956, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism, and this has inspired roughly three million *dalits*, mostly Mahars, to convert to Buddhism in turn.

In 1972 in the state of Maharashtra, the Dalit Panthers was formed. As its name suggests, it was modelled on the Black Panther movement in the USA. It was a revolutionary movement that drew on Marxist ideas and acknowledged Ambedkar as an important symbolic leader in the struggle against oppression. The Dalit Panther Manifesto suggested that: ‘To eradicate untouchability, all the land will have to be redistributed. Age-old customs and scriptures will have to be destroyed and new ideas inculcated’ (cited in Joshi, 1986, p. 141).

The Dalit Panther movement did not last long; this was partly because of the fragmentation of the *dalit* community, and partly because their agenda to completely overturn the socio-religious structures was perhaps too radical, even for those at the bottom of the heap. However, the Dalit Panthers did stimulate the flourishing of a *dalit* literary tradition known as *dalit sabitva*, literally ‘the literature of the oppressed’.

**Opposition**

Opposition is a strategy that attempts to resist exploitation primarily through various forms of artistic expression which critique the hierarchical structures of caste. The use of poetry and literature as a way of expressing opposition to the hegemonic narratives of caste-based Hinduism has a long pedigree, and is intrinsic to certain forms of *bhakti*. *Bhakti* in general has been seen as a way of expanding the soteriological franchise of Hinduism. According to the Brahminical texts, such
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as *The Laws of Manu*, the best lower castes can hope for is a better rebirth. However, many forms of bhakti suggest that true devotion to the sacred can lead to liberation for all, regardless of caste status.

David Lorenzen (1995, p. 20) observes that devotion to the sacred with attributes (*saguna bhakti*) has ‘served to justify vargāśramadharma and the status and privileges of Brahmans and other upper caste groups’. On the other hand, the ideology and theology of those who extol devotion to the sacred without attributes (*nirguna bhakti*) have tended to explicitly oppose the hierarchical structure of varṇa and the privileged status of the brāhmins. The founding figures of the various strands of *nirguna bhakti* mostly date from around the fourteenth to fifteenth century CE, and are often referred to as Sants. Sants such as Kabir (1398–1448) and Ravidās (15th–16th century CE) suggest that devotion is the only path to salvation; the Vedas, ritual and yogic practices are all ineffectual; and the brāhmins are dishonest hypocrites. For example, Kabir challenges the concept of untouchability:

> Pandit, look in your heart for knowledge.  
> Tell me where untouchability  
> came from, since you believe in it ...  
> We eat by touching, we wash  
> By touching, from a touch  
> the world was born.  
> So who’s untouched? asks Kabir.  
> Only he who has no taint of Maya.  

(Cited in Hess and Singh, 1986, p. 55)

The compositions of Sants, such as Kabir and Ravidās, are an important resource for dalits and OBCs to express opposition to their exploited condition.

Rearticulation

Rearticulation involves the construction of various narratives that provide an account for the exploited condition of marginalized groups. These narratives can take two slightly different forms. The first narrative form challenges a jāti’s position in the hierarchical structure. For example, the Yadavs, who are formally classified as sūdra, claim to be ksatriya, and to have been wrongfully denied their true status. The Yadavs suggest that they are in fact descended from Kṛṣṇa, making them as pure as, if not purer than, brāhmins. They support this claim...