

towards *bhakti*.

The *bhakti* movement had been seen as a threat to Brahmin orthodoxy, based on the *Veda*, but Ramanuja sought to create a bridge between the two, to bring *bhakti* within the classical Hindu tradition. He began by accepting the authority of the *Vedas* and the inspiration of the *Bhagavad Gita* and wrote commentaries on both the *Brahma Sutra* and the *Gita*. He saw the cosmos as God's body, but, just as the self transcends the body, so God transcends the material mani-

festation. The world functions in dependence on the purposes of God. So *karma*, too, has to be understood as the expression of God's will.

Ramanuja interpreted the 'thou art that' in the *Upanishads* as meaning not that the individual self is identical with God, but that God is the reality within the self. So he rejects Shankara's threat to the religion of worship and devotion and his assumption that salvation comes from within. Salvation, deliverance, for Ramanuja is a gift from above.

Madhva

Madhva was influenced by the Jain belief in the difference between souls and non-living matter. He therefore stresses particularity and plurality. He postulates the existence within God of attributes that no other being could possess. In the same way, each individual is different from every other, and no sequences of *karma* can ever be the same. This means that each soul must have something within itself which somehow or other determines its destiny.

The Hindu Gods

The gods of the Vedic period

AGNI

The life-force of nature. The god of fire and sacrifice.

INDRA

The sky-god and god of war.

VARUNA

The upholder of the cosmic order, with power to punish and reward.

The later gods

BRAHMA—THE CREATOR

The lord of all creatures. He is above and beyond worship, and there are hardly any temples dedicated to him.

VISHNU—THE PRESERVER

The controller of human fate. He draws near to mankind in ten incarnations (*avatars*). He is generally kindly.

SHIVA—THE DESTROYER

The source of both good and evil. The destroyer of life and also the one who re-creates new life.

SARASVATI

Consort of Brahma. The goddess of knowledge, learning and truth.

LAKSHMI

Wife of Vishnu. The goddess of fortune and beauty.

KALI/DURGA

Consort of Shiva. The 'great mother'. She is the symbol of judgement and death.

The ten avatars of Vishnu

1. MATSYA

The fish. He appeared at the time of the great flood, to warn mankind.

2. KURMA

The tortoise. He rescued treasures from the flood.

3. VARAHA

The boar. He raised the earth from the flood.

4. NARA-SIMHA

The man-lion. He defeated evil demons.

5. VAMANA

The dwarf. He defeated evil demons.

6. PARUSHA-RAMA

'Rama with an axe'. He destroyed the members of the Kshatriya warrior-caste who threatened to dominate the world.

7. RAMA-CHANDRA

The hero of the *Ramayana* epic. He was a noble hero who combated the evil in the world. He is the epitome of virtue.

8. KRISHNA

As well as being an *avatar* of Vishnu, Krishna is a god in his own right, the most popular of all the gods. He is also the hero of many myths, depicted as a lover, a warrior and a king.

9. BUDDHA

'The enlightened one'. The ninth *avatar* is Gautama the Buddha, founder of Buddhism.

10. KALKI

The tenth *avatar* is yet to come.

Concepts of Hinduism

Raymond Hammer

In the *Veda* the ultimate or absolute is Brahman, defying all attempt at definition.

The Absolute

Brahman is neutral and impersonal—the origin, the cause and the basis of all existence. In it are to be found:

- pure being (*sat*);
- pure intelligence (*cit*);
- pure delight (*ananda*).

Brahman is the unknowable one. But the only way he can be considered is in terms of a personal deity. So it was natural for the Indians to see the several attributes or functions of divinity manifested in a multiplicity of forms. In the Vedic hymns god is not fully seen in human terms. The gods are the manifestations of nature or cosmic forces. The divine names may be countless, but they are all understood as expressions of Brahman. For, although it may have limitless forms, it is still regarded as one in essence.

So Hinduism is not troubled by the fact that each village may have its own divinity or divinities. The multiplicity is not seen as polytheism, since Brahman is One. The gods are simply ways of approaching the ultimate.



The phallic lingam pillar is the symbol of the creative god Shiva.

The Vedic gods

Indra is the god most frequently invoked in the *Veda* and many stories are told of his deeds of prowess. With his thunderbolt he was able to suppress the dragon that sought to stem the flow of the waters. He appears as conqueror of the sun, releasing from the sun's grasp the imprisoned dawns. He is depicted astride an elephant, bejewelled and with a kingly turban or tiara, thunderbolt in hand. Like the other divinities, he has his female partner, **Indrani** or **Saci**.

Agni is the god of fire and sacrifice—the one who unites earth, heaven and the atmos-

phere in between. He is seen as the life-force within nature. The *Rig Veda* hails him as the one who 'restores life to all beings'. 'The all is reborn through you!'

Chief of the Vedic gods is **Varuna** who is the preserver of the cosmic order. He is described as clothed in a golden mantle and is often associated with **Mitra** (the Mithra of Persian religion—the deity in Mithraism).

There are, of course, a number of other gods and goddesses—symbolizing the sun, the moon and the stars—as well as **Dyauspitr**, the 'heaven father' (Jupiter

in Roman religion and Zeus in Greek religion), **Vayu**, the wind, and **Prajapati**, the father of the gods (*devas*) and the demons (*asuras*) and lord of all creatures.

The Vedic pantheon, however, gave place to another hierarchy of divinities, which reflect the non-Aryan elements in the religion. At the head of the other array of divine forms stands a divine triad (*Trimurti*) who share the activities of **Ishvara**, the one supreme god who symbolizes Brahman:

● The power to create belongs to **Brahma**.

● Preservation is in the power of **Vishnu**.

● **Shiva** is the great destroyer.

Their three-fold activity corresponds to the rhythm of the world. This is seen first as emerging from Brahman; next as reaching its full embodiment; then as being reabsorbed either into Brahman or into the period which precedes the next age. Creation, like history, is understood in cyclical terms. There is no true beginning or end. The beginning is an end and the end a new beginning.

Brahma

Despite his function as creator, Brahma remains fairly abstract. His function is to bring multiplicity into being in place of a primal unity. His female counterpart is **Sarasvati**, the energy that comes from him. She is identified with the Word on the one hand, the goddess of the sacred rivers; on the other, the symbol of knowledge and of 'the waters of truth'.

Brahma is often portrayed with four faces, embracing the four points of the compass, and with four arms, in which he holds the four *Vedas*. At times he is depicted as riding on a swan; at other times he sits upon a lotus—a symbol of the fact that he comes from himself and is not begotten.

Vishnu

Vishnu, as the great preserver, is thought to be in charge of human



This image of Shiva, the destroyer, is uncovered once a year, when a ritual sacrifice of bullocks is made to him.

fate. He is usually portrayed in symbolic form. He may be reclining or asleep on the ocean, which stands for chaos—the thousand-headed serpent. He may preside over the heavenly court. Or, as a symbol of the sun, he may appear mounted upon the heavenly eagle (*Garuda*), traversing the heights of heaven. The cult of Vishnu is very popular. He is the symbol of divine love—sometimes in company with **Lakshmi**, his female counterpart—

the symbol of beauty and good fortune; but more often drawing near in grace to mankind through his ten 'descents' or incarnations. Many of these incarnations are thought to be partial. The significance of **Krishna** (by far the most popular of the manifestations of Vishnu) is that in him the being of Vishnu is held to be totally present. There is a similar approach to Rama on the part of his worshippers. They would see in him, too, all the fullness of the being of Vishnu.

Shiva

The third of the *Trimurti* is Shiva. He is the deity in whom

all opposites meet and become resolved in a fundamental unity. Although the phallus (*lingam*) is his symbol and he is naturally identified with the masculine role in fertility and procreation, he is often portrayed as perpetually chaste. (In most of the temples dedicated to Shiva there is the statue of a bull, the symbol of virility.)

He is the destroyer of life and yet also its recreator; the terrible one, and yet the epitome of mildness. In him there is both ceaseless activity and eternal rest. In him there is sexual differentiation and yet he is also the symbol of unity which transcends all division. He is the source of both good and evil.

In artistic representations from the twelfth century AD onwards he is often portrayed as the king of the dancers—the embodiment of cosmic energy. The sculptures show both the unfolding of the universe and its ultimate destruction. The dance speaks of rhythm at the heart of all existence—whether in the cosmos or in the individual consciousness, the will or the emotions, where knowledge and illusion (*maya*) are in conflict. He is also shown with many hands, one pair to express the balance between life and death, another indicating the clash between good and evil, and so on.

Both Vishnu and Shiva are the focus of cults in which the worshipper seeks for unity with the god. In the Shaivite form (which looks to Shiva) it is identity with the source of movement (life itself) which is the goal. But the sense of creatureliness is not lost. The strength of Shiva worship in south India from the twelfth century AD and also in Bihar and Bengal (areas where the Aryan influence was late) reflects the rejection of the Brahminic Aryan forms of worship—animal sacrifice, prayers for the dead and other rites.

In one popular story Shiva is the one who averted a catas-

trophe, when the waters of the River Ganges flowed down upon the earth. Knotting his hair, he received the waters upon his head, so that they flowed harmlessly away. But he is also the master of the yogis (the disciplined ascetics) and, in this capacity, he is portrayed as half-naked, smeared with ashes, with skulls around his waist and a necklace of intertwining serpents.

Kali

Shiva, like the other gods, has his female partner to whom his powers are delegated, but the different names probably reflect the varying qualities of the 'Great Mother', who is present in Indian thought from the earliest times. Most significant is Durga or Kali who, in her strength and dominance, reflects the matriarchal approach of the older, pre-Aryan culture. This is probably the background to Shaktism, where the divine being is thought of in female terms and the female is the dynamic and the male the more passive manifestation. There is a contrast between the inner self-sufficiency of Shiva and the creative-destructive power of Durga-Kali.

Kali is portrayed in paradoxical terms. On the one side, there is the ferocious aspect, expressing judgement and death—with the figure of Kali wearing a garland of skulls and a skirt of severed hands. On the other side, her serenity is indicated by her portrayal as the night of rest and peace between the cycles of world-creation. Even in her most fearful aspect, Kali is understood as granting peace to her followers by overcoming their fears. She can therefore be the object of an intense and passionate devotion.

Although Shiva is sometimes considered to be the supreme deity—far removed from time and creation—it is Kali who touches him and brings him into the world of time and touch as the creator and animator of all.

The act of destruction can be interpreted as the abolishing of ignorance, in order that the soul may come to knowledge, or the removal of all dross and impurity, so that the heart becomes pure and god-like.

These portrayals are never meant to be representational. Hindu art, unlike Greek art where the divinities are portrayed simply as humans, indicates that the divinities are far more than humans. Power is expressed by a multiplicity of arms, and divine wisdom (as in the case of Shiva) by a third eye in the middle of the forehead. Even animal characteristics are pointers to special qualities possessed by the god. Ganesha is always portrayed with an elephant's head and a single tusk. The portrayal speaks of the strength of the one who protects through life. The monkey form of Hanuman is the pointer to dexterity and intelligence.

Bhakti and the concept of grace

Bhakti, the devotion to a particular god, which became such a strong element in popular religion, was perhaps a reaction to the severity and rigour of yoga. The yogis had sought to suppress desire, love and feeling in general. How, then, were the worshippers' emotional needs to be met? By bringing together *bhakti*, knowledge (*jnana*) and *karma*, the *Bhagavad Gita* suggests that it is not simply the expression of the emotional; it is always associated with the intellectual and practical side of human living. Nevertheless, at the popular level, the intellectual or rational element is often lacking, and it is the ecstasy and rapture of a loving relationship which come to the fore.

Between the seventh and tenth centuries AD a number of Tamil writers (Tamil is one of the four Dravidian languages in south India) expressed their religious



feelings and experience with tremendous warmth and fervency. And in the *Bhagavata Purana* (which was written about AD 900), the source of many of the Krishna stories, there is even more passion. One writer has said that, in this work: 'Bhakti is a surging emotion, which chokes the speech, makes the tears flow and the hair thrill with pleasurable excitement and often leads to hysterical laughing and weeping by turns, to sudden fainting fits and to long trances of unconsciousness.'

In the eleventh century Ramanuja brought *bhakti* within the classical, developed Hindu tradition. For him it was more a type of intellectual meditation, accompanied by love, but lacking the rapture and ecstasy which continue to be present at the popular level. He pointed to the significant link with the *avatara* doctrine in the Vaishnavite form of *bhakti*, when he asserted that God becomes incarnate simply out of compassion, 'to give light to the whole world with his indefectible and perfect glory and to fill out all things with his loveliness'. The Vaishnavite usually dresses in orange or white with a rosary in his hand. He paints red or white vertical lines on his forehead or red, black or white spots between his eyebrows.

In the fifteenth century AD the Chaitanya sect of the Krishna *bhakti* movement was established in Bengal. This sect lies behind the Hare Krishna movement, seen in the West, where music and dance mark the worship of Krishna and ecstatic trance is a means of achieving unity with the

A Hindu holy man meditating.

Hindus living in Jinja in Uganda hold an annual nine-day festival in honour of Kali. A sacred fire is kept burning by feeding it with ghee, a concentrate of butter.

The red mark on an Indian woman's forehead usually signifies that she is a Hindu, but practices vary from area to area.

deity. In the West, because of the stress on history in the Christian tradition, adherents of the movement tend to accept the myths attached to Krishna as historically true and they give unquestioning adherence to every utterance of Chaitanya.

If it is a person's duty to commit himself in loving devotion to God, it follows that the attainment of *moksha* (release) is made possible by God. Does this mean that it is 'grace alone', or is human effort also involved? Something like the debate about grace which emerged in Christian theology is present in the Hindu debate.

Two theories of the operation of grace were put forward: the 'kitten' and the 'monkey' approach. A she-cat seizes the kitten and carries it where she wills. This involves a total passivity on the part of the kitten and there were those who stated that God's grace operates in the same way. All is effected by God, and man does nothing to achieve *moksha*. By contrast, the baby monkey clings to its mother. The mother monkey is responsible for the baby monkey's continuance of life and movement, yet there is not total passivity. Most Hindu teachers within the *bhakti* tradition took this standpoint. We cling to God, and God effects our salvation.

The path to salvation

For the Hindu, the great goal is *moksha*. The word speaks of 'release'—deliverance, emancipation and liberty. On the negative side, it points to 'being loosed from' or 'rid of' something felt to be undesirable—i.e. the cycle of rebirth and attachment to the material world. On the positive side, it indicates an expanded outlook, a sense of calm and security, the notion of attainment (reaching a goal) or the power to be and to do. More often than not, this goal of salvation is described in negative terms—the

negating of evil, grief and decay.

The way of knowledge

The idea of *moksha* was not always present in Indian religion. It is likely that, as the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*) became the fundamental presupposition (about the seventh century BC), indicating an unending round of existences which were influenced by the deeds each individual performed (*karma*), the desire for release emerged.

The desire for freedom was not political, but spiritual, and the Upanishadic tradition stressed release from the bonds of ignorance. It was ignorance which tied

a person to the round of birth-death-rebirth which was expressed by *samsara*. Release would be attained as knowledge replaced ignorance—when reality was properly understood and the transient or illusory rejected.

This was, basically, the way of knowledge (*jnana-marga*) towards *moksha*. It would involve yoga and the ascetic practices associated with it. It was thought

The term 'sadhu' applies to any Indian 'holy man'. Some are ascetic hermits, others are popular wonder-workers. Devotees of Vishnu mark their foreheads with three vertical lines of ash. Devotees of Shiva have three horizontal lines.



Karma and Dharma: Hindu Ethics

Raymond Hammer

In classical Hinduism actions (*karma*) and duty (*dharma*) were the dominant concepts. *Karma*, as the accumulation of good and bad acts, would influence a person's destiny, but there was no one way to acquire good *karma*. Early in the *Veda* there had been the notion of an overriding moral law (*rita*) of which Mitra and Varuna were the guardians. Man had to recognize a divine imperative, and prayer and sacrifice were necessary to maintain a right relationship between the divine and the human. Sin, however, could be either moral or ritual.

All relative

The moral law expressed the basis of the social order, controlled by the manuals of the priests and enforced by the rulers. But responsible action was increasingly within the framework of one's class. That is why *dharma* came to be not an absolute duty, but one related to a person's status and so to the class/caste complex. The *Bhagavad Gita* considers it wrong to try to fulfil someone else's *dharma*. It is better to do your own *dharma* badly than that of another well! The action as such does not modify *karma*, it is action appropriate to the person and to the time of life. The epics stress a child's duty to parents, the love and attachment that parents must show to children, the mutual respect to be displayed in marriage, and the love and harmony

belonging to other relationships.

For those living in the world, ethical pursuits—the pursuit of wealth (i.e. engagement in a livelihood), the enjoyment of pleasure or ritual piety—were all relative. The only absolute ethic was related to the release of the individual from the cycle of rebirth. This was what the ascetic concentrated on. For him the duty of 'seeking for salvation' was paramount. He had to maintain a basic morality, refraining from killing, lying or the consumption of intoxicants. Unless he observed these prohibitions he could not attain the basic purity required to take him further on the path to *moksha*.

Source book

The *Laws of Manu*, a metrical work of 2,685 verses dealing with religion, law, custom and politics, is the most often quoted 'source book' of Hindu ethics. Its date is uncertain, but it belongs perhaps to the first century BC or first century AD and its author is well versed in the Vedic literature. It is concerned primarily with duty, whether the general *dharma* incumbent upon all or the particular *dharma* arising from caste or relationship. The *Laws* are concerned to bolster up conventional thought at a time when it was being threatened. They accept the class structure in terms of a common endeavour for a common good. Each has

to perform the function for which his nature best suits him. Right and wrong are determined in four ways: through the authoritative scriptures, through the other inspired writings, through good conduct and through conscience.

The four orders

Four separate orders are considered—the student, the householder, the hermit and the ascetic—and, each has an appropriate duty to perform. For example, the student has to study the *Vedas*. There is an initiation ceremony for the three upper classes, appropriate to each grouping, and rules of personal purification, of sacrifices and the morning and evening devotions to be followed are duly taught by a teacher (the guru or *rishi*). The student, we are told, gains the nether world by honouring his mother, the middle sphere by honouring his father, but the world of Brahman (the absolute) if he obeys his teacher!

It is important not to seek to discharge the *dharma* of another grouping, because this involves forfeiting membership in one's own. Ethics and ritual acts are, of course, intermingled and it is the priest's *dharma* to go through no fewer than twelve sacramental rites from his foetal period to marriage.

In modern times, there is more stress on progress than on cycles of time. Universal values such as truthfulness, kindness and love are stressed and the need to alleviate suffering. Present-day Hindus will speak, too, of the common good as a goal to be attained.

that the control of breath would allow the self to escape from the body by closing the artery from the heart to the forehead—the path by which the self was understood to move to its home in the heart. The special knowledge is attained through meditation, accompanied by yogic discipline and the repetition of the mysterious mantra 'Om', which represented the ultimate in all its fullness (some would say 'the triad of gods seen in their fundamental unity as Brahman, the absolute'). The repetition of the phrase would both assert and effect the unity of the worshipper with the ultimate—and this would be *moksha*. But the unity need not be identity. It is sometimes seen as the condition of a gnat in a fig or a fish in water—neither total identity nor complete disassociation.

The later songs in the *Rig Veda* saw man groping in darkness, but becoming conscious of the unfathomable mystery at the very centre of being. Nevertheless, bit by bit, he becomes assured of reality and light in the world around him, and so reaches out for *moksha*.

'From the unreal lead me to the real!

From darkness lead me to light!
From death lead me to immortality!

But this release will also be from life as it is now experienced. The way, therefore, will be by the suppression of a craving. As the Buddha put it, the craving is itself what links a person to the cycle of rebirth. Even the rapturous assurance of release must be purified of the element of desire which may cause us to accept a fantasy for the reality.

The *Bhagavad Gita* sees *moksha* as involving liberation from evil, from the body, from lusts and anger, from decay and death, from *karma* and from *maya*. In other words, *moksha* speaks of release from bondage, however conceived. The rapture is to be experienced at the level of

Members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness have been a familiar sight on the streets of Western cities for the past decade.





emotion, for *moksha* involves a sense of security and assurance.

The way of action

But there is also the way of action (*karma-marga*). This path to release recognizes that we live our lives in the world, where there is work to be done and there are obligations to be met. Our status in society involves duty. We are not to opt out of the ethical demands of which we are conscious. The *Bhagavad Gita* indicates that it is 'not by refraining from action' that 'man attains freedom from action'. It is not by mere renunciation that he 'attains supreme perfection'. 'Action,' we are told, 'is greater than inaction' and so there is the command to 'perform your task in life'.

The way of devotion

Faith comes in with the way of devotion or love (*bhakti-marga*). It is in commitment to God that we accept the leap from the tem-

Indra is the god of war.

Krishna was a playful and often mischievous incarnation of Vishnu.

Ganesh, the elephant-god, is very popular as god of wisdom and good fortune.

poral to the eternal, the realm of limitation to the boundlessness of what is ultimate and absolute. This path accepts the truth that the absolute confronts us in personal form—so there can be human response to divine grace. In place of an impersonal Brahman, God is seen as approachable, evoking within humanity a spirit of adoring faith.

The *Bhagavad Gita* speaks of Arjuna seeing in Krishna countless visions of wonder, as Krishna asserts that 'only by *bhakti* can men see me and know me and come to me'. For the followers of this way—and this is the path to



which most Indians instinctively lean—salvation is not the result of human striving, but is seen as a gift from God. Obviously, very few frame for themselves an articulated theology or religious philosophy. It is a faith expressed in life and not as dogma.

But *bhakti* also demands acts of worship. Apart from ritual acts and ceremonies, there are the hymns of praise to be sung and the statues to be venerated and adored. It is not 'idol-worship' as such. The idol becomes the focus through which God (who cannot be represented in any image) is worshipped.

Hindu Worship and the Festivals

Raymond Hammer

In Aryan times, worship took place in the open air, often concentrated on the sacred fire. Temple worship, as such, probably comes from the early Indus Valley practices. Early temples were made of wood and so have not survived. Later ones were patterned on the royal court. As the gods were thought to dwell in the mountains, many temples were built in the style of a mountain home. There was a tower and walls, with the symbol of the divinity in the centre, surrounded by the many symbols of the spirit world.

In the temple

The needs of the gods would be met by the worshippers who had to prepare themselves through purification rites to draw near to their god. For example, in Vaishnavite morning worship there were sixteen operations, including washing the feet, rinsing the mouth, bathing, dressing, perfuming and feeding. During these there was hymn-singing, bells were rung, incense burnt and ritual music was played. Then the worshippers would come to perform their *pūja*, first paying respect to the god and

In the River Ganges at Varanasi this woman is offering up the sacred water to the rising sun.

