



Hindus cremate their dead. Scattering the ashes together with sacred marigold flowers onto the River Ganges ensures the soul's continued life.

have gone, they have taken with them their culture and religious ideas and practices.

One faith or many?

Hinduism embraces a wide diversity of religious belief.

- The vast majority of Hindus believe in God in some way or other, but there are some who do not.
- Some Hindus believe that a respect for all living creatures demands that they be vegetarians; others will sacrifice animals at the temple and joyfully share in a roast by the river-side.
- Some Hindus worship Shiva; others Vishnu or his incarnations (*avatars*), most notably Krishna or Rama; others again are worshippers of the goddesses.
- The inhabitants of one village do not share in the precise focus of worship which will unite the villagers in another place.
- The individual Hindu may reverence one god, a few, or many, or

none at all!

● He may also believe in one god and in several gods as manifestations of him.

● He may express the ultimate in personal or impersonal terms.

It has been suggested that Hinduism is 'a federation of cults and customs, a collage of ideas and spiritual aspirations'. So, is it possible to speak of 'Hinduism' in the singular, or are there many 'Hinduisms'?

Under one umbrella

For Hinduism, as for other religious traditions, the name is an umbrella term which does not demand a total homogeneity. (To draw a parallel: the ritual of an African independent Christian church will be far removed from a Coptic or Armenian liturgy, and yet all come under the name 'Christian'.) But if Hinduism embraces a 'family of religious beliefs', we still need to find something which can be called the 'ethos' of Indian religion.

The flow of life

One concept which is found everywhere within Hinduism today is the idea of reincarnation or transmigration. Whereas Christianity thinks in terms of the importance of decision-making within one life, and sees salvation in terms of the individual (though not neglecting the group or the whole), the Hindu thinks of the flow of life through many existences. This lies behind the notion of *samsara* which expresses this flow from birth to death and then on to rebirth, and so on. As a result the limited span of history is lengthened to billions upon billions of years.

Linked with the notion of *samsara* is the concept of *karma*. *Karma* literally means 'work' or 'action', but also indicates the *consequences* of actions within one existence which flow into the next existence and influence its character—and so the chain goes on. Hindu hope, therefore, is for release (*moksha*) from this chain of cycle.

The other great unifying feature is the attitude of Hinduism to society (see 'Roots').

Roots: The Development of Hindu Religion

Raymond Hammer

The roots of Hinduism (as we now meet it) go back thousands of years. So what do we know about the earliest forms of religion in the Indian subcontinent?

Temple-citadels

The earliest evidence we have comes from excavations that have taken place since 1922 in the Punjab and the Indus Valley. A homogeneous urban culture was established in the third millennium BC, and two cities have been excavated: Harappa, the prehistoric capital of the Punjab on the banks of the River Ravi, and Mohenjo-daro, 400 miles/645 kilometres away in Sindh, on the banks of the Indus.

It is evident that the rivers were vital for their inhabitants, irrigating the broad, fertile plains with their flood-waters. Ritual purity was most important to these early people and the ancient temples incorporated ceremonial ablutions (as they still do today). Ritual bathing was not confined simply to the baths at the sanctuary. People also bathed in the rivers which provided the livelihood for their community, and so could be thought of as 'rivers of life' and therefore sacred.

The finds at the temple-citadels suggest that there was a unity of the political and the religious. There may be parallels

with the sacral kingship in ancient Babylon, where the ruler was seen as a 'son' of the divinity—in both cases a mother-goddess, the symbol of creativity and the ongoing flow of life. There are many figurines of the goddess, signifying the origin of life (a pregnant figure) or the nurture and continuance of life (figures which emphasize the breasts). All the indications are of an early matriarchal society as the background to the host of goddesses in India today. Each village seems to have its own goddess, venerated as the giver of life and fertility. They may also be seen as embodiments of the female principle, called *Shakti* in developing Hinduism.

There are figures of a male god, too, with horns and three faces (seemingly the original of the triad, *Trimurti*, later expressed by the three deities Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva). He is shown in the position of a yogi (one who practises yoga, the way of self-discipline) in a state of contemplation. He is also seen surrounded by animals, which suggests that he is the original form of the great god Shiva, who is often spoken of as 'Lord of the Beasts'. The fertility symbols, the *lingam* and *yoni* (representing the male and female sexual organs), both still present in

popular forms of Hinduism, have also been found.

It would appear, therefore, that this ancient Indus Valley civilization shows traits which are still a powerful force in Indian religion.

The Aryan faith

In the middle of the second millennium BC the Aryan (literally 'noble') peoples invaded India, bringing their language and traditions and profoundly influencing, although in no way ousting, the older religions, ideas and practices. Their language developed within India into what we call Sanskrit—a parallel of Greek, Latin and other Indo-European languages. It appears that their religion, too, had close affinities with that of Homer's Greece. At any rate, the Aryan pantheon recalls the gods of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*—fundamentally manifestations of nature.

Whereas the older Indus Valley religion seems to have included yoga, renunciation and purification rites—all of which continue to mark the 'holy men' of India—the Aryans appear to have been much more world-affirming. They were originally nomads (coming perhaps from the Baltic regions). They appreci-

ated the 'openness' of nature—trees, fields, sky and so on. Like Homer's Greeks, they made their sacrifices to gods who represented the forces of nature. Animal sacrifice was very much a feature of their practices. Whereas rivers provided the meeting-place for the pre-Aryan worshippers, the Aryans gathered around fire and performed their ceremonies there. They would cast grain, butter and spice into the flames.

Unfortunately there have been no archaeological finds from the early period of Aryan settlement, but we do possess a literature (written down probably about 800 BC, but reflecting an oral poetical tradition from centuries before). The Vedic texts (*Vid* expresses 'knowledge') enshrine the main evidence for the original Aryan faith.

Songs of knowledge: the Rig Veda

The *Rig Veda* ('songs of know-

ledge') are the oldest. Many of these religious hymns may have been composed when the Vedic peoples were still in central Asia. But most of them probably date from a time after the settlement in India. In later times they were considered to be a revelation from Brahman (the ultimate source of all being) in the form of words, received by the inspired sages (*rishis*). The sages, it was held, had been granted the ability to apprehend the knowledge which was eternal (hence the title *sanatana*—'eternal'—*dharma*) and divine. The religious tradition later distinguished between what was revealed (*shruti*) and what was remembered (*smriti*) and so possessed not direct, but only a secondary, inspiration.

The gods

The *Rig Veda* is made up of more than 1,000 hymns. They are usually addressed to a single god, and several dozen different gods feature in them. The most popu-

lar is Indra, who is portrayed as a warrior who overcomes the powers of evil and brings the world into being. The god Agni is the personification of the sacrificial fire (Latin *ignis*) and so links earth and heaven, carrying the gifts which the priests pour into the flames into the presence of the gods.

'May that Agni who is to be extolled by ancient and modern seers, conduct the gods here.'

The divine parents, Heaven and Earth, symbolize the expanses of nature. Their marriage indicates the indissoluble link between two worlds, the celestial and the terrestrial. Varuna (Greek Uranus) is the chief of the gods, because ceremonial rite (*rita*) and law (*dharma*) are administered and regulated by him. The cosmic order is within his control and he ensures that there is no transgression, cosmic or human.

The *Veda* distinguishes between the World Soul (*purusha*)

Hinduism Outside India

Raymond Hammer

From the seventh century AD Hindu culture and religion exercised a widespread influence throughout south-east Asia, taking in the modern-day countries of Burma, Thailand, Kampuchea, Laos and Vietnam as well as many of the islands of Indonesia. (For 1,000 years, even then, there had been contact with Sri Lanka, formerly Ceylon, and during the time of Ashoka who was ruler in the third century BC, Buddhist ideas had been introduced.) Generally speaking, this influence persisted for about eight centuries and is dominant on the island of

Bali to the present day.

In most countries, however—and this is also true of Bali—the Hindu culture incorporates a great deal of popular, indigenous, pre-Hindu religion. The Angkor Wat structures in Kampuchea reflect interest in Brahminic religious rites, the worship of Vishnu and Shiva, as well as pronounced ideas of kingship. A stylized religious art marks most of the countries, and in Thailand and Kampuchea the sculptures bear witness to the popularity of the *Ramayana* cycle of stories.

Since Hinduism, in some form or other, is the

religion of most Indians, we would expect to find Hindus wherever Indians are to be found. The dispersion takes in Europe (especially, of course, the United Kingdom), the Americas and Pacific areas as far as Fiji. Until recently, there were also a considerable number of Indians in eastern and southern Africa.

Although it has been largely through Buddhism that Indian thought (and especially religious ideas) has had its impact on the West, Indian *swamis* and gurus have had a considerable following and Hare Krishna groups are to be found in both Europe and America.

Many in the West also look to yoga. Just as Buddhism had its Eightfold Path, so royal yoga (Raja Yoga) had its eight stages—mainly

physical disciplines directed to the goal of deep, concentrated meditation. This involved self-control (to which the name yoga points), observance, posture, control of breath, restraint of the senses, control of the thought-processes and contemplation.

Although many in the West regard yoga simply as a discipline which strengthens the body and provides relaxation and a quiet mind, in the context of Hinduism it is the means by which a person strives for salvation. This is achieved when the dualism of self and Brahman is overcome and all selfhood is lost in the streams of being. Movements such as Transcendental Meditation (TM) look to this goal with yoga.

and substance (*prakriti*). The former is seen as the cosmic sacrifice, which ensues in life and order. There can be no life without sacrifice, we are told, and the divisions of the World Soul are seen as the basis of the human social order. The mouth is the priestly order (the Brahmins), the arms are the rulers (Rajanya, later known as the Kshatriya), the thighs are the land-owners, merchants and bankers (*vaishya*) and the feet are the workers, artisans and serfs (*shudra*). (It is likely that the *shudras* represented the subject-peoples who came from the indigenous population and were subordinated to the conquering Aryans.)

Power for the priests

The priority of the priestly class is linked with the crucial position given to sacrifice and the magical use of incantations. The priests alone could bring the people into touch with the cosmic powers and guarantee the continuation of life. This priestly ascendancy was not accepted without question, as the ruling class seem to have held the leadership for much of the time. It was only the elaboration of rite and ceremonial which increased the power of the priests. The more complicated the forms of worship, the more essential it was to have the expert!

But the *Veda* also reflects a growing speculation which was to lead to the *Upanishads* (the *Vedanta*, the end of the *Veda*) with which the revealed word was to terminate. In the early creation myth Indra was seen as the personal agent in creation, bringing existence out of non-existence. In later speculation the 'One God', described in personal terms, gives way to 'That One'—the impersonal force of creation. There is also a questioning

note: 'Who knows it for certain; who can proclaim it here; namely, out of what it was born and from what creation proceeded ... whether he made it or whether he



has not? ... he alone knows, or, perhaps, even he does not know.'

In this passage we have the basis for the future philosophizing which was happier to describe the ultimate or transcendent in negative rather than in positive terms and which was to accept a basic relativism in all attempts to describe the absolute.

Classes and castes

From the four class groupings of the poem on creation, the idea grew that some hierarchic structure in society is a part of the divine intention for the natural order. The classes (*varnas*—colours) were later to proliferate into

The god Shiva is the destroyer. This Nepalese carving shows him killing an evil demon.

a large number of birth-groups (*jatis*), which differentiated families much more according to work done in the community.

Although some aspects of the caste system have been outlawed by the Indian government in recent times, the system continues as an integral part of Indian society. Questions of marriage and eating are all linked with the class caste groupings. The first three classes are cut off from the fourth by being 'twice-born', or 'the initiated'. They



The Ramayana is an epic poem which tells the story of Rama, the sixth incarnation of Vishnu. He was a great hero, dedicated to ridding the earth of evil-doers.

wear the sacred thread as an indication of superior status. In addition, birth-groups differentiate between the 'pure' and the 'impure', indicating both the importance of ritual purity and the impurity that accrues from mixing with another group.

It is likely that the *shudras* were first despised by the invading Aryans and regarded as belonging to an inferior colour (*varna*), being dark instead of light-skinned as they were. The idea of the

cycle of rebirth later indicated that the *shudras* could hope for salvation only in a future life, as they were not yet among 'the initiated'.

The priests were gaining a stranglehold on society through class differentials. But this was not to go unchallenged.

Revolt in the temple!

By about 600 BC the ascendancy of the priest in society was commonly accepted in northern India. The priestly ritual of sacrifice and its appropriate *mantra* (verbal utterance) as set out in the manuals of the priestly class

dominated the sacrificial system. It was at this point that the movements of Jainism and Buddhism (see relevant articles) emerged within Hinduism. At the same time the *Upanishads* provided a redirection of the Vedantic tradition, being accepted as 'revelation'. These formed an indispensable ingredient in the new synthesis which was to emerge and be called 'Hinduism'.

The Jains

Both Mahavira (c.599–527 BC), the figure behind Jainism, and the Buddha (about 563–483 BC), the founder of Buddhism, belonged to small republican city-states that had emerged amongst the Aryan tribal units. They came from 'noble' families of the ruling class which had once held the leadership in society.

The Jains believe that Mahavira was the twenty-fourth 'Ford-maker' in the current era of cosmic decline. (The cyclical view of history was unquestioningly accepted.) He, like the Buddha after him, had wandered in search of 'release' or 'salvation' from the age of thirty. He found it when he was forty-two, when he became a completed soul (*kevalin*) and conqueror (*jina*). (The name 'Jain' is derived from *jina*.) He died at Pava (near Patna in Bihar) after teaching for thirty years.

Mahavira was much more of a rationalist than the Brahmanists. He rejected revelation and based his religious scheme on logic and experience. He accepted the somewhat pessimistic view of the human situation and was concerned for release. As he saw the situation, the human soul was enmeshed in matter and needed to regain its pristine purity and thereby achieve immortality. It can only gain liberation as it loses its accumulation of actions and their consequences. Each soul is seen as an entity in its own right. Jainism in this way affirms a plurality of beings as against one

Men and Movements

Raymond Hammer

Over the past 200 years Western culture and the fundamental beliefs of Christianity have had a profound impact upon Hinduism. For quite a time it was customary for the more educated Indian to identify himself with the religion of the foreign occupier of his country. Hindu belief and practice continued unchanged in the villages, but in the cities the more affluent tended to undervalue Indian culture and literature and to disassociate themselves from popular religious practice.

Rammohan Roy

Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) has been called 'the father of modern India' because of his attempt to reform Hinduism, whilst reaffirming Hindu values. He claimed that all that was of value in Christian ethics was already present in his own Hindu heritage. He came from a Brahmin family and showed himself a remarkable student from his early years. He not only studied Hindu and Buddhist texts in Sanskrit, but mastered Persian, Arabic, Greek and mathematics. He organized the Brahmo Samaj (a society for the worshippers of God) and, as the ideals of the society, selected those passages in the classical Hindu scriptures which came closest to an ethical monotheism.

Although he was not sympathetic to Christianity and was deeply moved by the person of Jesus, he rejected what he termed

the 'doctrinal shell', welcoming only what he felt to be its 'humanitarian message'. As a result of his influence, the study of the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* was popularized and he laid the basis for the Hinduism of the Indian intelligentsia.

Sri Ramakrishna

Another significant figure in Hindu renaissance was Sri Ramakrishna (1836–86) who came from a Brahmin family in Bengal. From an early age he experienced religious ecstasy and was particularly involved in the Kali cult. In his mystical trances he sought for communion with the 'Divine Mother' and, from the age of twenty, he was the chief priest of the Kali temple in his neighbourhood. Later, however, he came under the influence of Vedantic philosophy and so came to approach salvation by combining the paths of devotion and knowledge. He held that there was a universal truth present in all religions and saw God present in a variety of manifestations—as the Divine Mother, as Sita, as Rama, as Krishna, as Muhammad and as Jesus Christ. He was accordingly ready to accommodate himself to the dress, food or prayer patterns of other religions when he associated with their adherents. He had great influence among the Westernized middle class in Calcutta, and his deep piety and patent sincerity led them, in

turn, to value their Hindu origins.

'I am a child of God,' he asserted; 'the son of the King of Kings; who can bind me? . . . I am not bound, I am free.'

The Ramakrishna Mission was organized in 1897, after his death, to carry on both his missionary and his social and educational work. It was reorganized in 1909, when its educational, charitable and missionary activity was separated from the monastic side (identified with the *ashrams*—open monasteries or retreat houses). The mission stresses the universal character of Hinduism (thus facilitating missionary work amongst Westerners) and adapts to the needs of a society in transition.

Vivekananda

The growing influence of the Ramakrishna movement and its international appeal were largely due to Vivekananda (1863–1902). Named Narendra Nath Datta, he had planned to study law in England, but was 'converted' by Ramakrishna. After twelve years of ascetic discipline he became famous as a religious teacher (*swami*), the apostle who carried Ramakrishna's teaching to the world. He was responsible for the stress on social work and religious education, and his fiery speeches aroused a new idealism among the young elite of India, so that they devoted themselves to uplifting the millions of poor and starving in India.

At the World Congress of Faiths in Chicago in 1893, he 'sold' to the world the greatness of the Hindu tradition. Not only

were Indians given a pride in their own culture but, for the first time, Westerners who were disillusioned with Western society and had rejected the Christianity of the West turned to India for religious values and a new spirituality. (Madame Blavatsky's Theosophical Society was one group influenced by Vivekananda.)

His fundamental message was that each person was potentially divine and so should work to unleash the unlimited power within and also enable others to do the same. The mingling of the theistic and monistic language which marks much Hindu thought is present in his teaching, although 'pantheism' (i.e. everything is within God) might better describe his standpoint.

'He is in everything; he is everything. Every man and woman is the palpable, blissful, living God. Who says God is unknown? Who says he is to be searched after? We have found God eternally. We have been living in him eternally.'

Vivekananda was ready to accept caste, regarding it as part of the natural order, but he rejected the notion of privilege derived from caste differentiation. Instead, he advocated equal chances for all.

Rabindranath Tagore

A contemporary of Vivekananda was Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) who gained the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913 and whose poems were quoted by the elite of British Edwardian society in their drawing-room parties. He reflected the continuing influence of the Brahmo Samaj, giving it artistic expression. Nehru once

said that 'Tagore was primarily the man of thought', as contrasted with Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948) whom he spoke of as the man 'of concentrated and ceaseless activity'.

Gandhi

Gandhi had been influenced by Vivekananda and once observed: 'My life is my message.' For him truth was God, and non-violence (*ahimsa*) was the way to achieve the realization of God. His life was devoted to winning independence for India and raising the country's status. His Hinduism was all-embracing. Although he respected the Vedantic tradition and had a particular affection for the *Bhagavad Gita*, he claimed that his version of Hinduism included 'all that I know to be best in Islam, Christianity, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism'.

On the other hand, his teaching cannot be understood apart from the three basic Hindu concepts of *dharma* (duty), the *karmayoga* (the discipline of action) and *moksha* (spiritual deliverance). He interpreted the *Bhagavad Gita* as selfless action (*anashakti*), seeing Arjuna as the one who has to be calm and yet generous in the midst of suffering. Non-violence is not to be thought of in terms of passivity—it is the way of action. (There is some parallel here with the fact that Christians see in the suffering of Christ God's supreme action—the liberation of mankind from sin and death. It is not without significance that the cross of Christ had a fascination for Gandhi and that his favourite hymn was 'When I survey

the wondrous cross'.

Gandhi rejected the caste system. He regarded it as an accretion to Hinduism. He was particularly concerned for the untouchables or outcaste groups, demanding that, far from being rejected by society, they should be seen as the privileged children of God (*Harjans*). In his retreat-house (*ashram*) he demanded of his followers the same vows which he had taken upon himself: the pursuit of truth, non-violence seen as love in action, abstinence from sexual activity (his own stance from 1906) and poverty.

Aurobindo Ghose

Another influential figure in recent times was Aurobindo Ghose (1870–1950). He also displayed Western influence in his thought, emphasizing cross-cultural fertilization between East and West. The son of an English-educated Bengali doctor, he studied at Cambridge, but then turned to Indian culture and politics. Like Gandhi he was influenced by Ramakrishna and Vivekananda and interpreted the Vedantic tradition through their eyes. When in prison for his political activities, he claimed to hear the voice of Vivekananda, guiding him in the practice of yoga. Although he saw all men as incarnations of God, evolving in their consciousness, he saw India's national revival as the first step in spreading 'the universal truth of Hinduism' throughout the world.

'That which we call the Hindu religion is really the eternal religion, because it is the universal religion which embraces all others.'

It is not without reason,

therefore, that some have caricatured the Hindu approach as being: 'All religions are equal, but Hinduism is a bit more equal than the rest!'

CHARISMATIC LEADERS

In addition to these reformers, a large number of charismatic leaders have been responsible for the emergence of a number of popular sects. These have been influential both within India and in Hinduism outside India. Most come within the *bhakti* tradition, although in some cases there is an attempt to fuse *bhakti* with the Vedantic understanding of Hinduism.

Swami Narayan

One example is a Gujarati called Ghanshyama (1781–1830). As leader of the Satsang sect, he was known as Swami Sahajananda and Narayana. The last name stressed his claim to be divine. A vigorous preacher and masterly organizer, he won a large following. He had a hypnotic influence on his followers, whom he prepared to face persecution and suffering. He was the 'Guru Nanak' of the Gujaratis: as the Punjabis had become Sikhs, so large numbers of the Gujaratis joined the Swami Narayan sect. They saw in the Swami authority in teaching and the focal point of their devotion. The Swami Narayan sect exercised a strong influence upon Indians in East Africa and from there it entered Britain.

Sai Baba

Another movement, largely among the Gujaratis, is that

associated with Sai Baba (died 1918). It is *bhakti* in character, but strangely enough, Sai Baba is held to have been an *avatar* of Shiva. His successor, Sathya Sai Baba (born 1926), is held to be an *avatar* of Shiva and Shakti. He has attracted a huge following. As immigrants have brought the movement to the West, there has been stress on the fact that there is only one human race and so, fundamentally, only one caste. It is sometimes affirmed that the Sai Baba movement is no new religion, nor a particular form of Hinduism; but a spiritual path that any religionist may follow, because it is held to bring fulfilment to all.

ultimate reality (monism) which was the most significant affirmation of the *Upanishads*.

Though the existence of superhuman beings is not explicitly denied, the approach of Jainism is fundamentally atheistic, rejecting both the concept of creation and all thought of the operation of providence in the world. The path to knowledge is the important thing, and the Jain analysis of right conduct. (See the article on Jainism.) First of the five virtues was non-violence (*ahimsa*), or what Albert Schweitzer called 'reverence for life'. This was adopted by Buddhism and, in modern times, has been the fundamental element in Hinduism, as Mahatma Gandhi interpreted it. The other virtues in Jainism are speaking the truth, honesty, chastity and a non-attachment to worldly things.

The Buddha

If we can sift history from legend, the Buddha, Siddharta (his personal name) Gautama (his family name) rejected the sacrificial cults and the caste system, and taught a new way to release and salvation, which he described in terms of a 'quenching' (*nirvana*). What needed quenching was the desire which kept a person prisoner to the cycle of

rebirth by reason of his actions. If desire was the reason for the anguish and suffering which marked the human lot, it was clear that the desire had to be set aside before release was attained and *nirvana* reached.

Like a doctor, he not only analysed the symptoms of the human malaise, but also prescribed a cure. Here he pointed to a 'middle way' which came out of his own experience. For he had found that neither a sensual life in the world nor the extreme asceticism of the hermits had satisfied him. His teaching set forth the Noble Eightfold Path to *nirvana* (see further the articles on Buddhism).

The Buddha's message was perpetuated through the community of his disciples and Buddhism spread rapidly—to the south of India and from there to Sri Lanka and Burma. Schools of Buddhism grew up and from the first century BC Mahayana ('the great vehicle') emerged.

Mahayana Buddhism made some accommodation to Hindu thought and there was interaction with it. The Buddha was thought of as the incarnation of the ultimate Buddha for this age (i.e. an historical manifestation) and the *dharma* came to be virtually identified with Brahman in the sense of an absolute and eternal law

within the universe. Nagarjuna, the great Buddhist thinker, introduced the notion of accommodated teaching, which allowed for a multiplicity of religious approaches, because none, as such, was grasping at the reality. The 'Buddha nature' was within all and needed to be expressed, but the truth was to be apprehended intuitively and not through sense-experience.

The Upanishads

Although Jain and Buddhist ideas had a great influence on the development of Hinduism, later Hindu teachers regarded them as unorthodox. By contrast, there was another form of semi-secret teaching which was circulated by teachers who were within the Vedic heritage, but reshaped the Hinduism of the future. This teaching came to be known as the *Upanishads* (*upa* = near, *ni* = down, *shad* = sit), because those who received it sat down beside their teachers!

These teachers were not involved in pleading with the gods or ritual sacrifice. They were more concerned to discover the ground of the universe, the Reality (Brahman) which was prior to all other existence. At the same time they were concerned to explore the nature of human consciousness. They came to the

'Arjuna, of this be sure:
None who pays me
worship of loyalty and
love is ever lost.
For whosoever makes
me his haven,
base-born though he
may be,
Yes, women too, and
artisans, even serfs—
Theirs it is to tread the
highest Way ...'

Bhagavad Gita IX.31,32

'If men thought of God
as much as they think
of the world, who
would not attain
liberation (*nirvana*)?'

Mañtri Upanishad 6.24

'My life is my
message.'

Gandhi

'At the heart of this
phenomenal world,
within all its
changing forms,
dwells the
unchanging Lord.
So, go beyond the
changing,
and, enjoying the
inner,
cease to take for
yourself what to others
are riches.'

The first verse of the *Isha*
Upanishad

'The Self is all-
knowing,
it is all-
understanding,
and to it belongs all
glory.
It is pure
consciousness,
dwelling in the heart
of all,
in the divine citadel
of Brahma.
There is no space it
does not fill.'

From the *Mindaha*
Upanishad

'Thou art the Eternal
among eternal,
the consciousness
within all minds,
the Unity in
diversity,
the end of all
desiring.
Understanding and
experience of Thee
dissolve all
limitations.'

From the *Shivatashvatara*
Upanishad



The large Hindu temples are breathtaking buildings. This gate-tower or gopuram leads into the temple of Minakshi at Madurai. Minakshi is a consort of the god Shiva.

conclusion that what was basic to the individual self (*atman*) was none other than the Reality which undergirded the cosmos.

Like the Jains and the Buddhists they were concerned to overcome the fundamental sense of anxiety and frustration which marks human existence. They also recognized the sense of flux and impermanence in life. But they looked for the essence of permanence not only outside

man, but also within. Their way to salvation was that of knowledge or spiritual insight.

Like the manuals of the priests, each *Upanishad* is attached to one of the four Vedic hymn-collections. They are speculative treatises which draw upon parable to communicate their view of reality. Every book on Hindu religion quotes the story of Svetaketu in the *Chandoya Upanishad*. He is asked to split off the fruit from the banyan tree and then continue to subdivide it until he can see nothing at all. His father reminds him that nothing comes from nothing and that even within the infinitesi-

mally small there is still present the power which pervades the whole universe and is the basis of all existence.

'Have faith!' he is told. 'That is the spirit-breath (Brahman) which lies at the root of all existence, and that is what you are too, Svetaketu!' 'That is what you are' expresses the unity of the human self (or soul) with the ultimate Reality. He is told, too, to see the impossibility of extracting salt from water in a saline solution. It penetrates the whole. In the same way, he is assured that the reality within the human self (*atman*) is Reality itself (Brahman).

Radhakrishnan has stressed the subjective and the objective sides in the *Upanishads*. Svetasvatara (one of the speakers), he says, 'saw the truth owing to his power of contemplation and the grace of God.' It follows, therefore, that the truths are to be verified not only by logical reason but also by personal experience.

Although the *Upanishads* are speaking of the ultimate there is a great deal of personalized language which could later be brought into devotion (*bhakti*). We are told that 'Brahman dwells within all and outside all—unborn, pure, greater than the greatest, without breath, without mind' and yet Brahman is 'ever present in the hearts of all—the refuge of all and their supreme goal'. 'In Brahman exists all that moves and breathes.' Brahman is seen as 'the adorable one'. To 'know' Brahman is to find one's being within Brahman.

Age of the epics

The period from 300 BC to AD 300 was crucial for the emergence of what we may call classical Hinduism. Although Buddhism and Jainism reached their widest growth within India during this time, it was also the period when Vedantic 'orthodoxy' was developing. *Sutras* were written. These were for the most part

collections of aphorisms which sought to highlight the teaching of the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*.

But, even more significantly for the future of popular religion, this was the time when *bhakti* (devotion to one of the gods) entered religion, so that what was already part and parcel of religion at the grass roots received approval. There was also a wider synthesis of Aryan and non-Aryan elements in the tradition. The divinities of the *Vedas* were either replaced by the older gods or identified with them. For example, Rudra, the powerful one in the Vedic hymns, was identified with Shiva, the 'dancing god' whose figurines are among the finds in the Indus Valley excavations.

Legend and story

This was also the time for writing up stories of the past. What had originated and been circulating as local legends came to be regarded as the best statement of the Indian view of the world. Although there may be some historical allusions to events long past, the epics point rather to the perennial struggle between good and evil, cosmos and chaos in human affairs. They provide the assurance that order will prevail and that there is a way through the morass of doubt and puzzlement.

The basic thesis of both the *Ramayana* (which has 24,000 couplets) and the *Mahabharata* (90,000 couplets) is that history is divided into cycles. At the beginning, righteousness and order (*dharma*) marks the world. But then, through four ages, standards deteriorate until the gods decide to destroy the world and fashion it afresh. The poems indicate the need to discover meaning and purpose, even during the period of disorder.

The loving husband and faithful wife: *Ramayana*

The *Ramayana* is placed within the second age, when order,

though under attack, is still largely intact. It is the story of intrigue in which Rama is ousted from the throne and his faithful wife Sita abducted and taken off to Sri Lanka. The monkey-god, Hanuman, the symbol of loyal service and ingenuity, assists in the rescue of Sita by establishing a monkey-bridge from the mainland of India to Sri Lanka. Rama is the personification of righteousness and is looked upon as one of the ten incarnations (*avatars*) of Vishnu. The notion grew up that the gods send one *avatar* for each age. (This same notion of a series of ages or aeons and the appearance of a saviour-figure in each age is also present in Buddhist thought.)

In popular Hinduism the Rama story is not only heard from earliest childhood, but becomes the basis for everyday life. Rama will be invoked at the start of any undertaking and thanked on its successful completion. His exploits become an example to

follow and an encouragement to upright behaviour. His name will be used to console the aged and chanted by the assembled mourners, as the bodies of the dead are taken away for cremation.

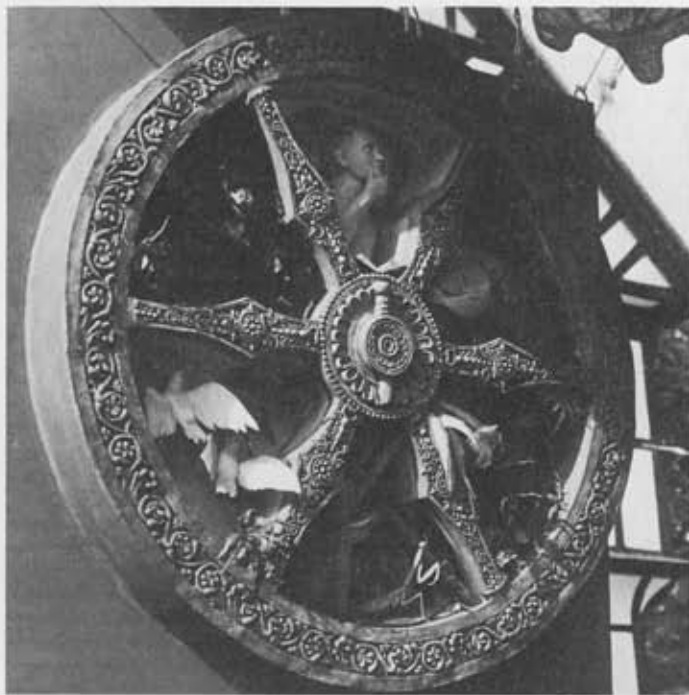
Sita, too, becomes the model of the faithful wife who is so identified with her husband that, at one time, she would even ascend his funeral pyre and be cremated with him. Sita is praised for the virtues of piety, loyalty and unassuming courtesy.

'Song of the Lord': *Bhagavad Gita*

The *Mahabharata* story is set towards the end of the third age. And the civil war of which it tells ushers in the fourth age, the era of final disintegration and un-

It has been said that the one unifying theme in the diversity of Hinduism is the honour paid to cows. Why they are considered sacred is not known. But they are permitted to go anywhere and eat anything.





righteousness. Two sets of cousins claim to be the rightful rulers. The five Pandora brothers prevail in the end, but only after a bitter and lengthy conflict.

The reaction of the five brothers is crucial to the story. The eldest, Yudhishtira, finds war distasteful and wishes to opt out of the conflict. He looks in the direction of ascetic meditation. Attention finally rests on the third brother, Arjuna, who shares his brother's distaste for war, but shows great ability as a general.

The high point of the lengthy epic is the section entitled *Bhagavad Gita* ('Song of the Lord'), where Arjuna is hesitating about entering the battle against his kith and kin. He is engaged in dialogue with his charioteer, who is none other than Krishna, the eighth incarnation of Vishnu.

The *Bhagavad Gita* has some-

This modern carving shows the age-old Hindu theme of the 'wheel of life'. The doctrine of samsara teaches that after death the soul moves to a new body.

times been called 'the bible of Hinduism' because of its popular appeal. There have been more commentaries written on it than on any other Indian writing. The story tells how Arjuna is finally persuaded by Krishna to issue the order for battle against the Kuru family. Krishna argues that death does not destroy the soul and that a man must fulfil his duty in accordance with his class. To perform one's duty does not involve guilt, if it is done in a spirit of detachment. Krishna points out that knowledge, work and devotion are all paths to salvation. Through devotion to himself (in whom the impersonal Brahman becomes a personal, loving god), Arjuna can be freed

from his doubts and attachments. The *Gita* stresses that salvation is available to all: class distinctions are not a barrier but a way of securing salvation.

The Krishna cycle

There is a further cycle of stories about Krishna, which are widely circulated. The most important is the *Bhagavata Purana*. The stories begin with him as a prince of the tribe of the Yadavas, and there are miraculous stories of his birth and infancy. In devotional art-forms he is often portrayed as a plump baby full of vitality.

During his youth he fled from his wicked cousin Kamsa and dwelt among the cowherds of Vrindaban. The stories tell of his skill as a flute-player and the pranks he played upon the wives and daughters of the cowherds, outdoing Don Juan in his ways of seduction. The suggestion is that he is father, friend and elder brother to his worshippers—but also lover and husband. The sexual imagery of union with Krishna is symbolic of the intimacy of the worshipper with God, which is a feature of the *bhakti* emphasis in Hinduism. The Krishna stories are not intended to be taken literally as something to emulate!

The sacred cow

The fact that Krishna is commonly portrayed as the cowherd is also significant, for it brings Krishna-worship into the context of the ancient cult of the mother-goddess. The cow is the living symbol of Mother Earth and of the bounty she bestows upon mankind. Feeding the cow is in itself an act of worship. Even the cow's urine is seen as sacred, being used, for example, in purification rites by those who have broken caste taboo. (Although some Hindus eat meat, the majority are vegetarian, for reverence for the cow is also a symbol of reverence for all animals.)

Approaches to Truth: The Great Interpreters

Raymond Hammer

The Vedic tradition ended with the *Upanishads* and the emergence of the notion of the identity of the individual self (*atman*) with the absolute (Brahman). The next step was to see the identity of every individual with every other individual and so to postulate that there is only one reality. This understanding of existence is called monism. It is the basis of Vedantic philosophy and it became the main philosophical tradition within Hinduism, though with a great variety of interpretation.

This variety was partly due to the attempt to systematize Hindu thought—done first during the period of the epics, when Hinduism in its classical form was emerging. A number of *sutras* (collections of aphorisms) emerged, but they were often too brief to be intelligible and so a commentary was needed. The production of commentaries led on the one hand to a tradition of interpretation, and on the other to several variants in interpretation. The *Brahma Sutra* (belonging to the sixth century AD) sought to sum up the teaching and so came to be known as the *Vedanta Sutra*.

Parallel with *Vedanta* was a school which gave pride of place to scripture. It stressed those portions of the *Veda* which spoke

of appeasing the gods and accumulating merit to acquire heavenly joy. There was also reasoning (*shankhya*) which stressed the two entities of spirit and matter. Matter is without feeling, but spirit acts upon it and brings about evolution within matter. It is also seen as responsible for human experience and misery. The yogic philosophy followed *shankhya*, but had a place for Ishvara as the supreme, omniscient, ever-existing teacher.

Much of the philosophical development had parallels with the earlier schools of Buddhist thought, but there was one fundamental difference. Buddhism rejected the notion of a continuing self and saw everything as subject to flux. But all Hindu thought presupposes the permanence of the self (the *atman*).

The three great interpreters of *Vedanta* were Shankara (about AD 788–820), Ramanuja (died AD 1137) and Madhva (about AD 1197–1276).

Shankara

Shankara wrote commentaries on the *Brahma Sutra* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, and also produced spiritual treatises and hymns (for he was a worshipper of Shiva). He was responsible for a revival of Hindu thought, over and against Buddhism, although

he owes a debt to the Buddhist concept that nothing has substance, all being void. The mystic appreciates this and so is set free from a world which is mere illusion. Nothing can be said about reality; what is needed is mystical insight. He therefore postulated two levels of truth. At the lower level of appreciation of the truth, everything is provisional and transitory. But much of life is lived at this level.

For Shankara the world is seen as illusion (*maya*). Even the idea of each of us as a separate self is also regarded as illusory. The truth, however, is that there is only one being—the 'Brahman *atman* reality', which involves not simply my *atman*, but that of others as well. He sought to establish a link with the *Vedas*, where God is seen as the wielder of *maya*. But this, in turn, raises the question of whether God is himself an illusion and the creator of an illusory world. It is here that Shankara accepts being itself as his ultimate. The world may seem to be vividly real but, from the standpoint of the higher level of truth, it is then seen to be illusory.

Ramanuja

Ramanuja came from a background with a strong tendency

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.
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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 (<i>avatars</i>). 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.	4. NARA-SIMHA The man-lion. He defeated evil demons.	7. RAMA-CHANDRA The hero of the <i>Ramayana</i> epic. He was a noble hero who combated the evil in the world. He is the epitome of virtue.	9. BUDDHA 'The enlightened one'. The ninth <i>avatar</i> is Gautama the Buddha, founder of Buddhism.
2. KURMA The tortoise. He rescued treasures from the flood.	5. VAMANA The dwarf. He defeated evil demons.	8. KRISHNA As well as being an <i>avatar</i> 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.	10. KALKI The tenth <i>avatar</i> is yet to come.
3. VARAHA The boar. He raised the earth from the flood.			

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