

Mainstream Hinduism and the Rise of Devotion to the Great Deities

The deities who dominated Hindu life by the classical age differed in name and conception from those of the earliest Vedic hymns. An entirely new collection of Sanskrit texts called *puranas* was composed to extol the glories of the emerging deities, specify their forms of worship, and celebrate the early saints. The purana stories recount examples of human incarnation, instances of divine omniscience, and episodes of grace. Heroes in these stories become models of exemplary devotional faith, or *bhakti*. Just as Hanuman the monkey king serves Rama, or Radha the consort loves Krishna without limit, so should one devote the full commitment of heart and mind to one's own *bhakti* practice.

All the puranas—which many Hindus revere today as the “fifth Veda”—share an important assumption about humanity living in the Kali Yuga, the post-Vedic age: this era, said to have begun in 3102 BCE, is defined as a period of degeneration in which human spiritual potential is declining. In view of this, the puranas declare that the deities have extended their grace to humanity in ever-increasing measure in return for their devotees unselfish devotion. While the ascetic practices of yoga do not end (and not all Hindus accepted Kali Yuga theory), this ideal of *bhakti* became the predominant one for Hinduism throughout the centuries until the present day.

Hinduism's shift toward *bhakti* follows its characteristic “add-on pattern” in merging a new theology with the fundamental ideas of the formative era: *samsara*, *karma*, and *moksha*. The devotional tradition accepts the early cosmic model but builds upon it by asserting that the great deities like Shiva, Vishnu, and Durga have the power to reward devotion by altering the *karma* of the *bhakta* (devotee). Though these deities are omnipotent and omniscient, they are seen as augmenting the earlier tradition, not challenging it. By absorbing human *karma*, they can bring their grace to persons seeking liberation from worldly suffering and ultimately from *samsara*. This view is most dramatically expressed in the *Bhagavad Gita*, where the deity Krishna argues that desireless action is possible only through ego-less *bhakti* faith and that the true suspension of all action (which produces additional *karma*) is impossible.

By the classical era, purana texts asserted the existence of 330 million deities. How could the theologians account for such mind-numbing diversity? The *bhakti* gurus argued that polytheism reflected the grace of the divine, since the diverse needs of a humanity comprising innumerable individual *karmanas* could only be met by a diverse set of gods. The crucial goal facing each Hindu is to find and focus upon the one deity whose form is most appropriate to his or her level of spiritual maturity.

The common principle of simplification in later Hinduism was that each devotee should choose a personal deity (*ista deva*) to be at the center of his or her religious life, a focus for personal communion through an emotional relationship. Although most teachers (and families) believed that “good Hindus” should respect all the great deities as well as the lesser spirits thought to dwell in each locality, it was nonetheless essential for each person to establish a

single divinity to meditate upon and venerate as a channel for grace. Among theologians, the terms and mechanisms of salvation vary; in many of the puranas, rebirth in one's chosen deity's heaven—not exit from *samsara*—is proclaimed as the highest human goal.

The concept of “chosen deity” entailed commitment to knowing extensively and loving selflessly that particular god. This meant making offerings (*puja*, to be discussed later), meditating, and studying the purana stories to be able to discern as completely as possible the divine personality. One formula for the stages of *bhakti* progress described the stages of devotion moving from listening, singing, and worshiping to self-surrender.

Each of the great deities of Hinduism has come to be known through the purana texts, and theologians provide different explanations for how and why the divine beings have manifested themselves to save humanity from mundane dangers and to bestow ultimate salvation.

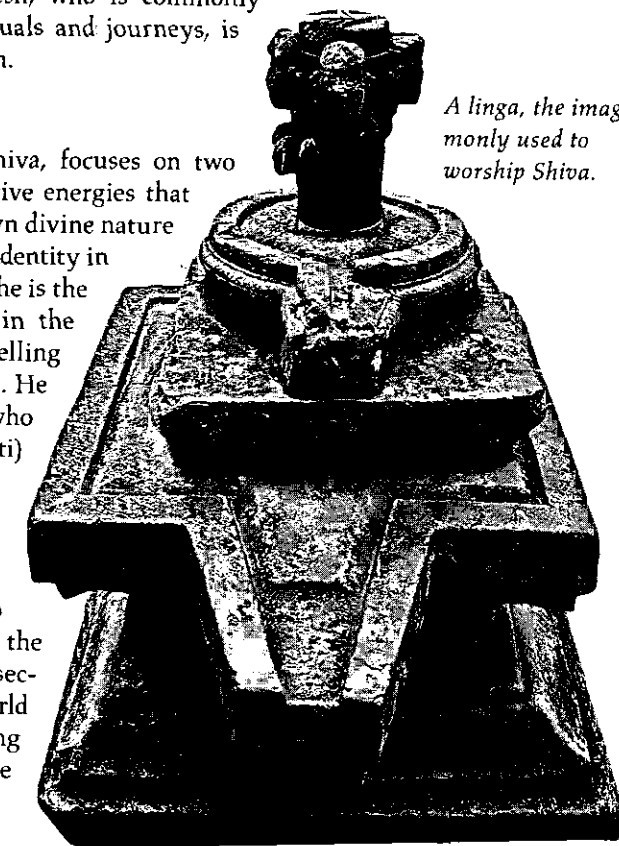
Ganesh

Judged by the number of shrines and the universality of his image, the elephant-headed Ganesh is the tradition's most popular divinity. Most Hindus worship Ganesh, not as a divinity who will help them achieve salvation but more to secure his aid in worldly well-being. With a potbelly and love of sweets signaling his sensual orientation, Ganesh, who is commonly honored with offerings at the start of most rituals and journeys, is regarded as the kind, “fix it” god in the pantheon.

Shiva

The *Shaivite*, or one whose chosen deity is Shiva, focuses on two beliefs: that Shiva's essence is found in all creative energies that saturate this world, and that one can find one's own divine nature by dedicating *bhakti* practice to this lord. Shiva's identity in the puranas merges opposing sides of Hindu life: he is the ideal ascetic revered by yogins, the god who in the Himalayas underwent long penances while dwelling with cobras, clad in deer skin, and covered in ash. He is also conceived of as a divine householder who marries the goddess of the snow mountains (Parvati) and fathers divine sons Ganesh and Kumara.

In Hindu legend, Shiva saves the world repeatedly and requites devotion with his grace. However, Shiva also has a wrathful side and will punish humans as well. The puranas attribute to Shiva the periodic cosmic upheavals that return the universe to a formless, empty resting state. The sectarian *Shaivite* theologians see the linking of world creation, fertility, and destruction as signifying Shiva's omnipresence, making him the supreme Great God.”



A linga, the image commonly used to worship Shiva.

Vishnu and His Avatars

Although they may respect Shiva, Vishnu devotees (*Vaishnavites*) believe that their chosen deity is the one who truly underlies all reality. Vishnu alone sleeps atop the cosmic ocean in the universe's eras of dissolution, and he alone begets the god Brahma, who then begins another cycle of creation.

The great theme of Vishnu theology is that of incarnation. The puranas dedicated to him recount many episodes in the earth's history when demons or evil threatened creation. At these times, Vishnu assumed the form of whatever was needed to smash the threat. Some of these incarnations, or *avatars*, were animals and most were local heroes.

Vishnu remains alive and connected to the human community of devotees through temple icons and rituals and through the singing of songs recounting

The Dance of Shiva

One of the most lyrical and evocative symbols of Hinduism, especially in the sweeping design of South Indian artisans, is that of Nataraja, Shiva as Lord of the Dance. The upper right hand holds the twin-sided drum, from which sacred sound emerges, counting time and originating sound's creative resonance. The opposite hand shows on it a flame so that in Shiva's holding a fire, he points to his being a refuge in the fires of *samsara*. Fire also alludes to this deity's role as destroyer at the end of a great world era. Both hands move together in Shiva's great dance, ceaselessly integrating cosmic creation and destruction, including all the gods. Another hand shows the "fear-not" gesture, and the fourth points to his upraised foot, the place Hindu devotees touch most often in ritual. Shiva dances while treading on a demon who symbolizes heedlessness. Thus, to enter into the Dance of Shiva means to brave the circle of rebirth, transcend the limitations of time and apparent opposites, and join with the divine powers of the great deity whose grace and eternal energy can remove spiritual obstacles. Because the cosmos has become a manifestation of Shiva's power, a dance done simply for the purpose of his own entertainment, wherever individuals can cultivate artistic pleasure, they can find union with Shiva.



Shiva Nataraja, Lord of the Dance: twelfth-century bronze image from southern India.

his greatness. The texts also sense his being poised for humanity's future salvation, and one avatara, Kalki, is expected to come riding on a white horse to guide humanity as the Kali Yuga turns darker.

Vishnu avatara theory thus provides the most systematic example of Hinduism's theological pattern that spawned a profusion of sects, moving readily from the acceptance of multiple particular deities to arrange them in ordered hierarchies. But most Hindus, whether intellectuals or commoners, will assent to the same theological understanding, namely, that "ultimately all the gods are one." There is also a long history of Hindus (and Buddhists) refraining from staking out one final dogmatic position, since many traditions hold that Ultimate Reality is beyond all human naming or philosophical comprehension. Accepting this limitation has given Hinduism its flexible strength and its adherents an openness to ongoing revelation.

Rama

We have already encountered Rama, hero of the *Ramayana*, who slays the demon Ravana and reveals the ideal of proper filial obedience to parents, loyalty to brothers, and the exemplary conduct of Hindu kings. His alliance with the monkey leader Hanuman also signals the ideal of harmonizing the divine with the natural world. A second form of Rama is one dedicated to destroying any evil kings who would molest brahmins or their rituals.

Krishna

The most complex and multifaceted of the Vishnu avatars, Krishna is revered in many forms: the infant trickster god, whose every prank and gesture reveal his underlying divinity; the child who as "the butter thief" also steals the hearts of the world's mothers and fathers; the brave youth who rescues villagers from the poison of evil serpent deities (*nagas*) and from the cruel rains sent by the Vedic god Indra; and the divine paramour and consort of the female cowherds (*gopis*). Finally, Krishna is the mature guru who offers counsel about the necessity of serving the world according to one's dharma, clarifying choices among the many spiritual practices. Many of his sectarian devotees believe that Krishna is in fact the reality from which all the gods originate.

Devis

The consolidating pattern in Hindu theology is readily apparent in the development of the myths of the goddess. Hindu goddesses are born of the earth and can bestow its wealth. Rivers are all goddesses. From ancient times onward each locality had its own *devi* who protected it. Early Indian art depicts the fertile, creative power of the universe in scenes where a young woman touches a tree, her innate energy (*shakti*) causing it to burst into bloom. Those who predominantly worship goddesses are thereby called "shaktas" and theirs is the third major group among Hindu deity worshippers alongside Vaishnavites and Shaivites.

The earth goddess may be addressed as Ambika ("Mother"), Sita ("[born of the] tilled furrow"), or Sati ("the Virtuous"). All these forms draw upon the



Bearing a mace, a discus, and a conch, Vishnu is represented as Lord of the universe.



Durga, riding her vehicle, the tiger, carries the weapons of the male gods.

creative, mothering female force. Another widespread and primordial sense of female divinity is that associated with destruction; this has been primarily in the form of the smallpox goddess, called in the north Shitala or Ajima. Yet other related female forms are the goddesses who destroy demons, Durga and Kali. Those needing to confront death to arrive at mature spirituality can make Kali their "chosen deity": to visualize the dance of Kali means seeing that life inevitably becomes encircled by death and so always keeping in mind that the gift of human life should not be frittered away.

Hindu theology also views the pantheon as balancing the distinct powers that are uniquely those of male and female. The cosmos, like the human species, is seen as created and sustained by the same combination of gender energies: the male shakta and the female shakti. Each is incomplete and even dangerous without the balancing influence of the other. Thus, the Hindu deities are married. Shiva is married to Parvati, or Uma, Vishnu to Lakshmi (important as the wealth goddess), Brahma to Saraswati (goddess of learning), Krishna to Radha, Rama to Sita, and so on. We shall see later how tantric Hinduism carries on the implications of this theology into individual yoga practice.

PREMODERN HINDUISM: THE POSTCLASSICAL ERA (900 CE–1500 CE)

The Formation of Hindu Schools of Thought

During the late classical era, the brahmin elite concerned with philosophical views (called *darshana*) consolidated their positions in systematic expositions, which became and have remained authoritative for the tradition. Every school's texts sought to explain the nature of the physical world, the boundaries of individuality, the basis for establishing human knowledge, and the means to salvation.

The orthodox schools formed in response to the heterodox, or nonstandard, schools of Buddhism and Jainism. Some of them were confined to small circles of high-caste scholastics, but others, discussed here, came to dominate the Hindu intellectual tradition.

Sankhya

One of the first systematic schools to appear, and closely aligned to the Yoga classical school, the Sankhya school's ideas were especially important in subsequent Hindu thought. The Sankhya school (literally, "analysis") posits a dualistic universe of matter (*prakriti*) bonded in various combinations with spirit (*purusha*). Both matter and spirit are eternal, with an infinite number of purushas eternally distinct from one another.

Sankhya admits the reality of gods but denies the existence of a transcendent God. The purpose of spiritual life is isolating *purusha* from *prakriti*. Although its goal is to go beyond the material world, the Sankhya nonetheless developed a powerful analysis of material formations, specifying twenty-five *gunas*, qualities, by which matter can be clearly understood. Sankhya's differentiation of spirit-matter combinations, which has informed Hindu culture to the present, is applied to the analysis of human personality, gender, species, the seasons, aesthetics, and even foods.

One typical use of Sankhya theory is to assess the spiritual status of human beings. All beings are combinations of three primary material qualities or "strands" that bind spirit to the material world: *sattva* (associated with purity, goodness, subtlety), *rajas* (passion, raw energy), and *tamas* (darkness, inertia, grossness). In the Sankhya view, too, even the gods are qualitatively similar to humans, different only by having more *sattva*. This school thereby sees the incarnation of divinities in human form as part of the universe's natural processes.

Advaita Vedanta

The Advaita Vedanta school is monistic; that is, it regards the singular reality of the universe as impersonal spirit, a view that draws upon the Upanishads' formula Brahman = atman. This school of thought began at the time of the Buddha and became the prevailing scholastic philosophy of South Asia after 500 CE, and it is often emphasized by modern Hindu reformers as well. Advaita Vedanta's enduring central place among Hindu philosophies was due to the brilliance of the great religious virtuoso Shankara (c. 788–820). His succinct commentaries and original works received additional exposure through public debates with proponents of other schools (including Buddhists).

Shankara argued that the apparent difference between the material and physical worlds is pure illusion (*maya*). Only study and yoga practice can enable a seeker to gain true knowledge, reversing the "superimposition" on pure spirit of deluded perceptions of two worlds. This path the Vedantins called *jnana yoga*, "union through discriminating knowledge."

Shankara admitted that one could in elementary and intermediate stages of spiritual development relate to Brahman as a personal divinity with characteristics ["*sa-guna*"] such as power and grace (*saguna* Brahman). But ultimately, *moksha* can be achieved only by going beyond this projection of a deity in terms of human characteristics to experience Brahman by merging one's own soul with *nirguna* Brahman, that reality "without characteristics."

Shankara also organized the first great network of Hindu monasteries (*mathas*) that supported male ascetics whose rule of conduct specified vegetarianism, dress in an ochre robe, use of a walking staff, and horizontal forehead markings. At monasteries established originally at Dvaraka in the west, Puri in the east, Badrinath in the north, and Shringeri in the south, this order grew, expanded, and survives to this day.

Living with Karma: Rituals, Astrology, and Rebirth

The classical doctrines associated with karma, reincarnation, and salvation are the center of Hindu (and Buddhist) belief, regardless of the school one follows or one's focus on a particular chosen deity. Karma is thus the most important spiritual force in the universe, determining one's place in the cosmos (as an animal, member of a human caste, etc.). What one does in a particular incarnation, however, then influences future destiny so that, properly speaking, Hindu belief does not posit a closed fatalistic worldview. Nonkarmic causalities (natural forces, biological reactions, chance) also shape human life, so that Hindus can say, like many Americans, "It was meant to be," as well as "Things just happen." Only enlightened saints are thought to be capable of knowing their karmic past and future; everyone else remains uncertain. For this reason, a steady menu of meritorious ritual is a sensible approach to living with karma, as is consultation with astrologers (again, a practice some Americans incline to).

Karma doctrine assumes that a natural causal mechanism conditions individual destiny; but a person's destiny can be shaped by group actions, too. Husbands and wives worship together and act together in many ways. Marriage ritual ties couples for life and can include a vow to be reborn together in future incarnations (a popular motif in South Asian folklore). Entire families are thought to be shaped by the actions of elders.

Hindus today may explain their individual and collective destiny in terms of karma causality. For example, stretches in life may seem to be inexplicable except in terms of karma accumulated in the past, and some individuals do indeed see everything in life as fated from earlier lifetimes. But the great majority of Hindus believe that their destiny today and in future lifetimes is also determined in significant part by their moral actions and ritual acts. The puranas and guru parables often state that being human and being Hindu are rare incarnations in samsara and should not be wasted. People may be reborn

A Hindu astrologer. Astrology provides suggestions about when to act in the world, in harmony with the gods and one's own karma.



Namaskara or namaste. The gesture of respectful greeting directed to the gods and humans

as other beings inhabiting this world, into purgatories (*naraka*) that receive evil human beings, or into heavenly realms (*svarga*) created by each great deity as dwelling places reserved for good and devout devotees. Indeed, many Hindus today regard being born in heaven, not in the disembodied realm of moksha, as the highest destiny.

Gestures of Respect for the Divine

Despite the attraction of many middle-class Hindus today to the neotraditionalist movement, which we shall discuss later, there is much more unity among Hindus in their ritualism than in their beliefs. Respectful gestures and puja are the means by which Hindus relate to the divine wherever and in whatever form they find it. Stylized, formal greetings, prostrations, and a circumambulation are among the best-known ritual gestures.

Hindus greet each other by raising the joined palms to shoulder level and repeating "Namaskara"/"Namaste" ("salutation"/"greetings"), sometimes bowing. Some gurus teach that saluting other humans in this way is a theological statement: "I center my physical self in the atman located in my heart, and salute your same holy center."

The core gesture of namaskara can be multiplied into any number of prostrations (*pranam*), principally either with the knees touching the ground or fully prone. This gesture, too, is one humans may do to other humans by, for example, grasping the feet of the one honored such as a guru, a priest, an elder in the family, a mother-in-law (for a daughter-in-law), a husband (for a wife), or parents (for children).

Another Hindu perception of the body involves the differentiation between its two sides: the right side is the pure side and one eats with the right hand;

the left hand is used to wash after calls of nature and is regarded as impure. As an extension of this, *pradakshina*, the circumambulation of an icon or temple, should be performed in a clockwise manner, keeping one's right side closest to the sacred object.

Puja

The concept of puja, or homage, is also built on the assumption that humanity and the divine must maintain an intimate connection, one marked by respectful hierarchy. For humans, the great deities (such as Shiva, Durga, and Vishnu) are superiors. Puja involves all the expressions by which an inferior can welcome, show respect for, and entertain a distinguished guest. Ideally, all ritual acts express a faithful bhakta's submissive, adoring, and self-negating service to the divine.

One doing puja seeks to please the deity as if the divine personage were human, that is, possessed five senses. All that Hindus offer as puja can be classified accordingly: incense pleases the sense of smell; flowers please the senses of sight and smell; foods gratify the taste; mantras and music please the hearing; cloth and pastes please the deity's tactile sense.

The inseparability of otherworldly and mundane blessings is seen in the full process involved in making a puja offering and then receiving back the remains, *prasad*. These substances, having been proximate to the image, carry a subtle infusion of divine blessing, turning all *prasad* into "medicine." Food can be eaten, flowers can be worn in the hair, incense smoke wafted around the body, and holy water (*jal*) sipped. Colored powders that decorate an icon are carefully collected, mixed with water, and used to mark the forehead with a *tilak*, a spot in the center of the forehead above the eyes.

While the norms of different dharmas and of following one's own chosen deity have led Hindus to accept differences in religious orientation even among close family members, this "spiritual individualism" is balanced in most instances by the widespread and daily custom of families sharing from the same plate the *prasad* returned from the common family puja.

A good Hindu today, like a good Muslim, need never worship in public and may make all puja offerings to icons in a home shrine. In temples with priestly attendants, devotees usually place on the puja tray coins or uncooked rice to be taken by the priests, a meritorious service donation. It is through the medium of puja therefore that Hindu householders contribute to the subsistence of their priests and temples.

It is literally true that all the fine arts of South Asia developed as offerings made to the gods: instrumental and vocal music, dance, sculpture, and painting are all connected to temple rituals. Hindu temples are simply homes for ritually

Hindu puja. Ritual is the means of expressing individual devotion and soliciting divine grace.



empowered icons that have been given "life" by brahmins chanting their heart mantras and by ritual painters who carefully paint in their eyes. They can be humble thatched buildings sheltering crude stones with no resident priests, or magnificent palaces built to house jeweled images attended by hosts of priests and other temple servants. Great temples may be surrounded by monasteries, music pavilions, pilgrim hostels, and sacred ponds; these are the preeminent centers of Hindu culture, and to visit them is to see all these cultural forms directed toward serving the gods with beauty, grace, and dedication.

Hindu Samskaras: Life-Cycle Rites

Being Hindu means following the proper path in life determined by the dharma codes set forth by the ancient sages. An individual's life—like society's groups—should be properly organized. The *Dharmashastra* lists over forty life-cycle rituals, *samskaras*; they are most observed today by families at the top of the caste hierarchy. We summarize the most popular contemporary practices briefly here, using terms and culture of northern India as representative.

Birth Rituals Pregnant women are given empowered charms to protect the fetus and are made to stay within the family, isolated from demons and from sources of pollution. Despite the spilling of the mother's blood and bodily fluids, birth is a time of "happy pollution," and for the period of the mother's recovery (up to ten days), the family abstains from puja and does not eat with outsiders. A special "release from birth pollution" ritual (*chati*) must be done in which the house is cleaned and purified, mother and family bathe, the father shaves, and the family holds a feast.

Early Childhood Rituals The ritual called *namkaran* serves to give an infant its formal name. Naming children after the deities is a common practice and this can be done according to a parent's chosen deity, for the day on which the child is born, or simply for auspiciousness. The carefully noted birth time must be used to construct a horoscope, which will be kept for lifelong consultation. Before the first birthday, the final early childhood rite of first rice feeding introduces the baby to solid food.

Coming of Age Boys and girls are led on different ritual paths emphasizing male dominance and female fertility. The rites marking adulthood for both sexes establish expectations and responsibilities of full Hindu personhood; most significant is the assumption of accountability for actions, as these now "count" in karmic retribution. Since the *Dharmashastra* forbids teaching Vedic verses to women, adult females are not assigned brahmanical rites but participate in their husbands' rituals. Women's ritual customs have nonetheless developed.

Girls are initiated as women when they have their first menstruation, usually by going through a week of strict isolation, in which they are prohibited from seeing the sun or males. During this time, elder females in the family tell stories of the deities and instruct the girls on aspects of adult religious practice and the duties of Hindu women.

Boys of the top three castes are ceremonially given a sacred thread, after which they receive the first teachings from the family guru, including the rituals associated with the wearing of a multistranded thread (*janai*) over the left shoulder and right hip, a burden taken on from this day until death. (In modern times, this "wearing the thread" is maintained most consistently among brahmin families only.) Boys are also given their first mantra to memorize, the Rig Vedic Gayatri (3.62.10), to be repeated daily at the rising and setting of the sun:

We meditate on that excellent light of the divine sun
May he illumine our minds.

In adult initiation, boys become "twice-born" through this second birth into the knowledge of the Veda and Vedic ritual.

Householder Marriage is usually arranged by the couple's families, although many young people today can veto a choice proposed for them. The relatives setting up the match must be satisfied that the individuals' horoscopes match harmoniously, to ensure that their characters and karmas are compatible. This is a judgment usually requested of an astrologer.

Upon marriage, a Hindu woman leaves her home, often with a dowry, to live with her mother-in-law, shifting forever her ritual center to the husband's family line. (This pattern is breaking down today in the urban middle classes, where employment patterns require transfers; also, among the rural population that is drawn to migrate to cities in search of jobs and education, nuclear families are common.)

Death Death produces a crisis in the family and a state of corporate pollution that for immediate kin endures for an entire year. When someone dies, the family out of love wishes to perform all the rites carefully to ensure that the soul will go to its best possible rebirth. However, the death of a loved one also produces fear that the soul might be reincarnated as a dangerous ghost. This concern has given rise to the custom of cremating a corpse as soon as possible after death, and before sundown. Carrying the body to the cremation site, the *ghat*, is men's work, with the eldest son lighting the pyre for the father and the youngest doing so for the mother. Hindus believe that when the heat of the cremation fire causes the skull to burst, the soul has been released to go to its next birth. The women, who stay at home during the cremation, must remove their ornaments and sweep the house, beginning to repurify the house polluted by death. The men who cremate must collect the burned remains so that the family can immerse them in a holy river.

After-Death Rites Before the family may reestablish purity in their homes and resume social life, they must perform the first rites of feeding the departed soul who is thought to wander as a ghost (*preta*) from twelve days up to one year. Here, Hindu tradition is preserved in the performance of the ancient Vedic rites: the mourners offer *pinda* puja, ritual rice ball offerings, to feed the soul and build up its intermediate-state body to be a *preta* and

continue on its afterlife journey. Shradha rites for parents and especially fathers are done yearly on the death anniversary.

HINDUISM IN PRACTICE

Many Hindus today carry a small pocket almanac that organizes the Western, lunar, and solar succession of days. Why are these so popular? Since the year is punctuated by a succession of great and small festivals, or *utsavas*, some lasting only a day, others, stretching over ten days, Hindus must harmonize personal, family, and business affairs with the religious celebrations. Being a Hindu today entails celebrating this yearly cycle of festival observance: doing special rituals, recalling acts of divine grace, and feasting with family.

Part of the reason for this elaborate festival agenda is that across South Asia, it is customary for each important deity to have a special day and procession (*jatra*) that is the occasion for extraordinary acts of devotion. At these times, the god or goddess is felt to be more accessible to devotees and more inclined to extend grace to those who demonstrate their faith. The Hindu *utsavas* offer the chance to live in a profoundly different and sacred time, when the great salvific deeds known from legend and myth are retold by religious scholars (*pandits*) or enacted through live cultural performances. In many of the *utsavas*, special foods, drinks, and decorations are made that appear at no other time. Some festivals are reserved for fasting, ascetic acts, or other penances.

Festivals

The greatest festivals celebrated in the notable religious cities of India are immense spectacles, and arranging for the myriad cultural performances and sideshows requires the participation of thousands. The gatherings can create a marvelous sense of community among *bhaktas*, drawing pilgrims from afar to witness and to seek blessings. The time chosen to visit the great pilgrimage sites often coincides with the major festival celebrations.

Diwali

In India, the new year begins around the vernal equinox, a date also marking for Hindus the moment when creation in each world era begins anew. But across the north, the year begins with *Diwali*, the festival around the autumnal equinox that focuses on Lakshmi, goddess of wealth. On the main day families wear new clothes, sweep their houses clean, arrange a special altar with puja laid out for the goddess, and set up lamps (now, most are "Christmas lights") to guide her. On a subsequent day, brothers and sisters honor their kin ties, and individuals may do other special pujas to strengthen their health for the year ahead. Middle-class families now send "Diwali cards," akin to Christmas cards.

Sri Panchami

The festival of Sri Panchami is dedicated to Saraswati, the goddess of learning and the fine arts. Students, scholars, and artists all will flock to her temples. Some temples set up a whitewashed wall on which young children are to write their first letters, for traditional Hindu parents wait until this day to begin to teach their offspring to read and write.

Shiva Ratri

Shiva's Night, Shiva Ratri, is the end-of-winter festival, one of two festivals each year dedicated to Shiva. This festival emphasizes fasting and grand offerings to Shiva's phallic icon, the *linga*. Shiva Ratri also in some localities connects with the god's identity that imagines him controlling the myriad ghosts and goblins that occupy the lower portions of the Hindu pantheon. It is also the time for ascetics to make offerings at Shiva's great temples, which accordingly fill with thousands of sadhus and yogins who meditate, instruct devotees, receive donations, and demonstrate their powers.

Sacred Cows and Hinduism

One of the striking first impressions of South Asia is the free-ranging movement of cows in villages and on city streets. Up through the 1960s, when India suffered its last major famine, many in the West said, "If only Hindus would eat beef, all their food needs could be met." What is certainly true is that cows are integral to Hinduism in many respects: one *purana* text suggests that all the divinities exist in the cow, and another sees the cow as an incarnation of the goddess Devi. Killing a cow is thus unthinkable. The cow's centrality is further seen in ritual practice: to mark and purify any space and make it suitable for *puja*, cow dung is a necessary ground coating; in addition, the five products of the cow (milk, curds, butter, urine, dung) are one of the most potent sources for the inner purification for humans when they are ingested.

Anthropologists have also sought to link the logic of "mother cow" veneration with its crucial contributions to South Asia's subsistence agriculture. Dried cow dung is an essential cooking fuel; composted cow dung is irreplaceable in the reinvigoration of the soil for intensive growing of rice and wheat crops. Cows are also capable of eating nearly everything and recycling chaff, odd roadside vegetation, even garbage. Finally, oxen, the gelded offspring of cows, are the most reliable beasts of burden for plowing deep enough to turn over the soil. Thus, for a subsistence farming family to harvest its (typically) sole cow at times of food shortage risks its long-term survival. Here, argues the cultural ecologist Marvin Harris, lies the reason for the cow's sacrality: it is holy because it promotes survival. And besides, the initial supposition is in fact false: tanner castes (ranked as untouchables because they collect dead cows) do eat beef. Modern fundamentalist groups have chosen the cow to symbolize "Mother India" and agitate for a ban on cow slaughter to define their religious goals.

Holi

Hinduism's "feast of love," or holi, is the year's primary festival honoring Krishna in his guise as the playful trickster god. In harmony with the theology called *lila* (divine play), devotees establish a set period for honoring the youthful Krishna. For the primary three or so days, all of society is at play, and normal caste and gender rules are suspended. In imitation of Krishna and to find harmony with his spirit that transcends the mundane, all society should join in the *lila*, inverting established hierarchies and expectations. Women may sing lewdly in public or douse male passersby with buckets of water, and public officials such as policemen suffer usually playful insubordinations; in villages, an untouchable may be declared "headman" for the duration of the festival. On the last day, bonfires are lit to consume evil, commemorating Krishna's defeating a female demon who sought his demise.

Tij

Tij is the festival for women, who can act in imitation of Parvati, one form of Devi, who fasted, meditated, and underwent purification in the hopes of winning the husband she deserved. In her case, this was Shiva; for unmarried women, the hope is for a good human husband; for those already married, it is for the long life of one's spouse. For *Tij*, some women join to spend the night at a temple, one ideally situated beside a river or having a large bathing tank, where they sing devotional songs and dance to secure divine blessings. As they pass the night they also fast, listen to stories associated with Parvati and other exemplary women, then immerse themselves in the sacred waters to repurify themselves before sealing their vows.

Dashara

In many places the largest yearly Hindu celebration, Dashara usually falls just before the first rice harvest. It has become the occasion for marking two separate divine events. For Rama bhaktas, this festival is *Rama Navami* (Rama's Ninth) the time for celebrating both Rama's birth and his victory over the demon Ravana, when he rescued his consort Sita and instituted an era of proper Hindu rule. *Durga Puja* similarly enfolds the community in Durga's "Nine Nights" of struggle against Mahisha, the demon who could not be killed by a man and so threatened the gods and all creation. The "Victory Tenth Day" commemorates Durga's slaying of Mahisha, who had taken the form of a buffalo demon. To imitate the goddess in her moment of triumph and to bathe her images in the blood offerings that she most loves, devotees perform animal sacrifices at her temples, beheading primarily goats, fowl, and water buffalo. *Durga Puja* ends the festival year at the time of the rice harvest: tradition evolved so that divine and human feasting on animal meat coincides with the time that farmers need to cull their herds, especially of old and young males, who can wreak havoc in the luxuriant rice paddies if they escape the confinement imposed by humans.



A middle-caste priest prepares to sacrifice a goat to the goddess Durga.

Pilgrimage

From earliest times, Hindus believed the land bounded by the Himalaya mountains and the oceans to be holy. Thus the mountains and rivers of this region were imagined to be abodes of the deities and the places where sages have realized the highest truths. From then until now, devotees have gone on pilgrimage to see these sacred persons and places (for *darshan*, viewing the divine) and to dwell in the precincts blessed with spiritual powers. On their journeys today, Hindus do the rituals described for temples, make elaborate offerings and countless expressions of respect, and bring home treasured *prasad*. Modern transport has facilitated the expansion of pilgrimage in modern times.

Himalayas

The most dramatic and famous among the myriad Hindu sacred sites are located in the Himalayas, the world's highest mountain chain, where the very names of the snow-clad peaks reflect the perception of divine residence. According to one passage in the *Skanda Purana*, seeing any of the Himalayan peaks will transform one's karma: "As the dew is dried up by the morning sun, so are the sins of mankind by the sight of Himalayas."

Ganges

Rivers are also focal areas for pilgrimage. The Ganges and its tributaries that flow down from the Himalayan glaciers all are associated with divinity: the Ganges itself, conceived as a goddess, was sent by the gods to succor humanity in the midst of a horrific drought. The Ganges is thus a divine entity; and as such, many bathing rites are done along its banks, where devotees hope to draw upon her capacity to "wash away" bad karma. Ganges water is seen as the best source for purifying a ritual space, so that pilgrims collect it and store it for future ritual use.

All rivers in South Asia are identified with the Ganges. A common legend known across the continent states that each river shares a subterranean connection with it. The points on the river best suited for human pilgrimage and ritualism are tributary confluences called *tirthas*. The literal translation of the word (ford, or river crossing) also indicates metaphorically that it is easier to cross the great river of *samsara* to reach heaven or *moksha* at a *tirtha*. Many of the great religious cities of South Asia are located along rivers.

The Kumbha Mela

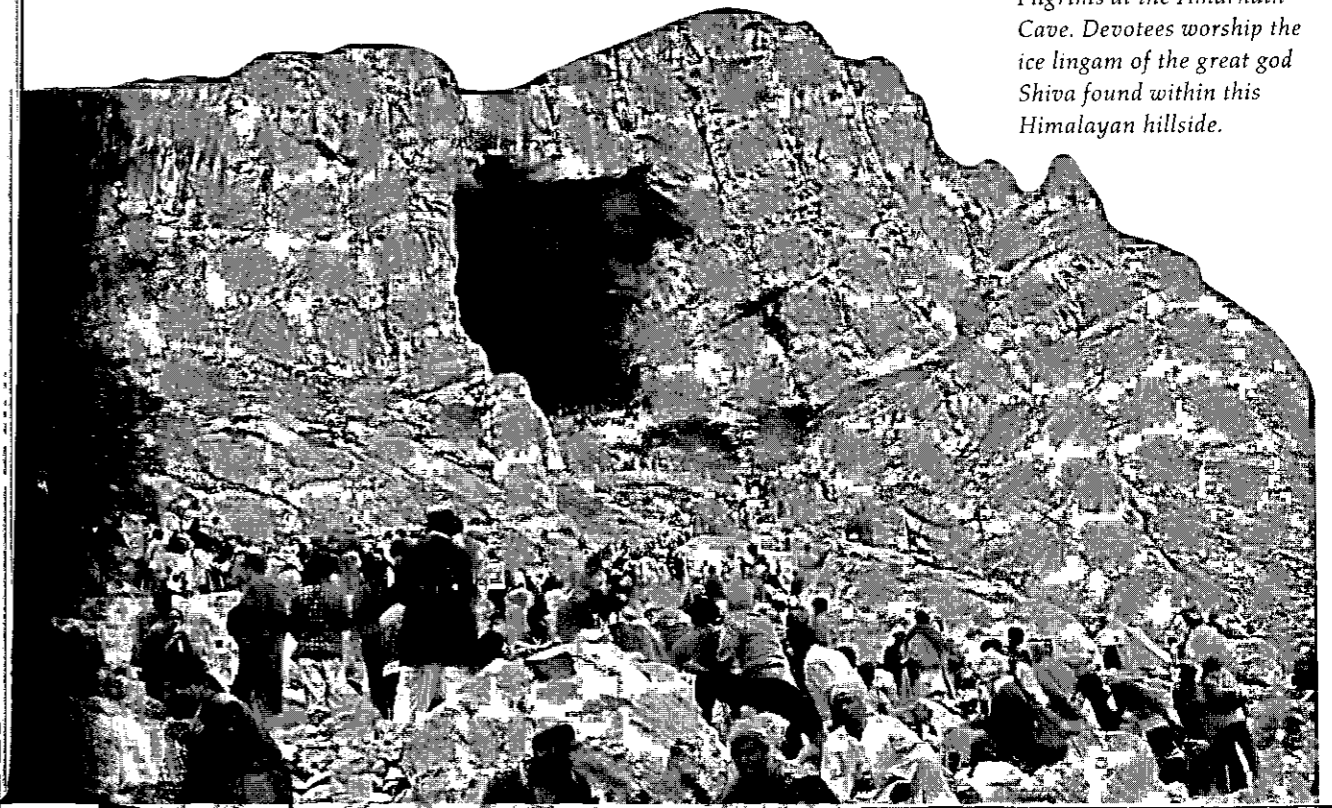
The largest single religious gathering on earth in the early twenty-first century was not Muslims assembling in Mecca for the hajj but Hindus congregating at a *tirtha* for the Kumbha Mela in 2001. At least 30 million Hindus gathered to bathe at Prayag ("place of sacrifice"), the *tirtha* near modern Allahabad, where the Ganges, Yamuna, and invisible Saraswati rivers meet. The pilgrims entered the water at the exact auspicious moment connected with a story in the *puranas* in which the gods battled the demons over possession of a pitcher (*kumbha*) containing an immortality-giving

elixir. After a long struggle, the gods won and became immortal; during the course of the battle, however, four drops of the elixir fell to earth at four places, and the site of the Kumbha Mela, which occurs every twelve years, rotates among them in a prescribed order. The Kumbha Mela draws hundreds of thousands of *sadhus* from their retreats to immerse themselves in the hyperdivinized river waters, where they are joined by millions of pilgrims seeking an infusion of grace.

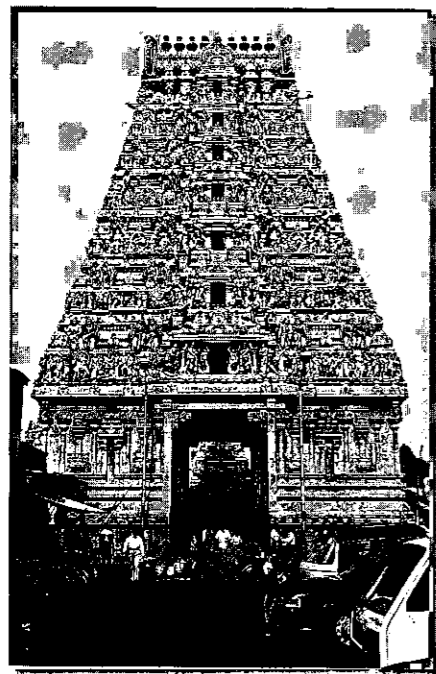
Pilgrimage in Hinduism is not a requirement of the faith as in Islam, but the benefits are elaborately outlined in the later Hindu texts: healing, good karma, personal transformation. Pilgrims can go alone on foot or in highly organized groups traveling on airplanes and buses. The goal may be to perform a ritual, such as a mortuary rite for a kin member. The more typical goal, however, is to seek general benefit through *darshan* and *puja*.

The Religious Institutions of Contemporary Hinduism

Although there is no single formal institution that unifies all Hindus, there are standard relationships that support the regular practice of ritual and the transmission of religious ideas. Most families have a relationship with a *brahmin* family priest whom they call upon when there is the need for a life-cycle rite or when someone wishes to perform a special *puja*.



Pilgrims at the Amarnath Cave. Devotees worship the ice lingam of the great god Shiva found within this Himalayan hillside.



Temple in Madras.
Large temples are complex institutions with landholdings, charities, and resident priests.

spread of Hinduism now impacts the faith in South Asia. Cassettes and videos with sermons by gurus reach the middle class, affording traditional doctrinal teachings far wider exposure than was ever possible by word of mouth.

Thus, Hinduism has assumed more forms today than ever in its history, and the linkage of religion to politics is growing. Since there is no one version or center of Hinduism that can stand alone, we will draw upon a series of representative case studies to suggest the broad sweep of Hinduism in the postcolonial era. First we will discuss the modernizers; second, those who have *not* been influenced by science; and finally those proponents of Hindu nationalism who would end India's postindependence character as a secular state.

Some teachers and movements begun in the modern era (such as the Ramakrishna Mission) make strong assertions about the compatibility between scientific thought and venerable Hindu doctrines. The "big bang" hypothesis of creation, relativity theory, and the cosmological theories of multiple universes are referred to by these modernizers as compatible with—even anticipated in—the ancient scriptures. Hindu exponents have also proposed scientific explanations for rebirth and karma doctrines. Even the Vedas have been interpreted to credit the seers with awareness of contemporary technological possibilities (e.g., airplanes, genetics, brain waves). Hindu confidence that the traditional teachings will stand up to whatever science discovers is striking among modernists. Just as many scientists around the world (including many in India) refrain from suggesting that their discoveries are ever likely to disprove the existence of God or the reality of spirit, many educated Hindus have found no reason to abandon the essentials of their faith. Those with technological savvy have energetically expressed their faith on the World Wide Web, and by 2004 almost ten thousand Web sites were dedicated to the many sides of Hinduism. A sample of recent events and developments indicates how Hinduism has endured so strongly among such modernists.

Ganesh's Milk Miracle

A deity who attracts the devotion of nearly all Hindus is elephant-headed Ganesh, divine son of Shiva and Parvati. Ganesh is beloved for his earthy character, his potbellied silhouette, and his reputation as a remover of life's obstacles. Ganesh temples are found in nearly every locale where Hindus live. On September 21, 1995, at temples across North India, priests and devotees reported that icons of Ganesh had begun to drink the cows' milk that was being offered to them as part of the daily puja. The stories soon spread across the subcontinent by telephone and in press accounts, so that thousands of Hindus from all walks of life rushed off to visit their local temples to offer milk, hoping to witness the phenomenon. Telephone and the Internet just as quickly spread the news across the globe, and Hindus in London, Jersey City, Los Angeles, and Toronto began to report similar experiences.

For believers, this was merely the latest in a long-running series of demonstrations that the divine is alive, connected to humanity and capable of

conferring grace upon those who serve the gods. From uneducated peasants to brahmin priests, people were citing the reports of disappearing milk as ample proof of the existence of a Supreme Being who accepts the offerings of his disciples. Whatever else this incident reveals about the role of media and the Hindu diaspora, it also demonstrates that modern believers hold the conviction that the divine is immanent, a traditional view that has shifted little amid all the changes of the modern era.

The reaction was interesting, too: the "miracle" gave rise to widespread public debate and rallies organized by Hindu societies (such as New Delhi's "Guru Busters") whose purpose is to expose charlatans and promote rational faith. Predecessors for these modern skeptics and atheists can be traced as far back as the time of the Buddha (fifth century BCE). Although the popular Western imagination about India and Hinduism has been informed by romantic accounts highlighting mysticism and exotic theistic spirituality, it is important to note that there is an equally long-established South Asian tradition of hard-nosed skepticism.

Comic Books and Televised Epics

The modern printing press gave early Hindu reformers a means to reach a mass audience across the subcontinent more quickly than ever before. Ritual manuals, vernacular translations of texts, tracts on saints, interreligious debates, or even reformers' reductive definitions of "true Hinduism" (such as that proposed by the Arya Samaj or modern fundamentalists) reach the literate masses through such publications. South Asia's religious environment during the modern era has also been unified by the lithography of religious poster art, which has spread common inexpensive images of the deities.

An important mass media format appearing well after the end of colonialism is the religious comic book. Adopting reformist doctrines and linking far-flung Hindu communities is the Amar Citra Katha series of over two hundred titles, in which newly standardized versions of the great stories of Hindu scripture are offered in colorful illustrated formats; the text is written in English and in various vernaculars. Under the editorship of Anant Pai, more than 280 million copies of Amar Citra Katha texts have been sold. These have emphasized for middle-class readers that "true Hinduism" is rational, opposed to violence and superstition, upheld by heroic devotees, and based upon the respectful accommodation of other spiritualities (Hindu and non-Hindu) in the interest of national integration.

Television broadcasts of religious epics have also been pivotal cultural events. In 1987 India's national broadcasting system, Doordarshan, began showing in weekly installments its Hindi version of the *Ramayana*, one of the two great religious epics that date back to the early classical era. Although most Indians do not own television sets, groups crowded into tea stalls or banded together to rent TVs and view the series. Many treated the experience of viewing the transmitted image like a visit to a temple. Bathing beforehand, they arrived carrying incense and garlanded the television sets. Some watched



Ganesh, the most popular Hindu deity, beloved for his potbelly and his ability to help with everyday problems



In India, there are countless comic books devoted to describing the stories of the Hindu gods and human saints. Most are printed in the vernacular languages of the subcontinent, as well as in English. Here, a scene from the great epic, the Ramayana.

with their hands joined together, using the namaste gesture directed to the divinities on screen, and some muttered prayers as the sacred scenes unfolded, weekly for over a year.

An estimated audience of 80 million watched the one-hour Sunday morning program, and the pace of life on India's streets visibly slowed. The media's Ramayana gave the nation its first "national version" of the epic, one that celebrates the glories of the legendary Hindu king Rama and his struggle to establish a just and prosperous Hindu nation. Doordarshan had to extend the series to meet popular demand. It has subsequently produced and broadcast an even longer series on Hinduism's second great epic, the Mahabharata, as well as dramatizations of other devotional stories centered on the great deities such as Krishna and Shiva.

The accessibility of lavishly produced TV productions of religious epics, complete with special effects, has in places undercut the relation between priest, teacher, and laity. Many argue, however, that Hindu nationalism has been strengthened by the common experience of viewing these sacred scenes.

The Dilemmas of Reform: A Young Bride Commits Sati in 1987

Following Hindu traditions, Roop Kanwar, an 18-year-old bride, went to live with her husband's family in Deorala, in the western Indian state of Rajasthan. But seven months later, on September 4, 1987, her husband, Mal Singh, died suddenly. Following ancient custom, the young man's kin prepared to cremate him on a pyre outside the town boundaries immediately before sunset. What happened next shocked India: Roop Kanwar was burnt alive atop her husband's funeral pyre, becoming a *sati* ("virtuous [one]"), one of forty-two known cases since 1947. Five hundred people reportedly witnessed the act. What remains unclear were the widow's motivations and how freely she went to this death.

Rajasthan state officials were called to act on the basis of India's National Penal Code that holds widow immolation under any circumstances to be illegal. Reformers argued that those connected with Roop Kanwar's death should be prosecuted as murderers. Eventually, under pressure from national politicians and women's groups, members of Mal Singh's immediate family were arrested and an investigation ensued. Several months later the family members were released on bail, but no charges were ever filed. Few witnesses could be found who were willing to testify.

Sati is one of the few Hindu practices that the British had sought to reform through explicit legal prohibition. The immolation of widows was held up for ridicule by many Hindu modernizers as evidence of how Indian society needed to break with blindly followed traditions and to reform its ways. Yet in 1987, over fifty thousand devotees gathered for a commemorative ceremony for Roop Kanwar held thirteen days after her death. The site of the burning pyre has been transformed into a shrine, outside of which artisans sell ritual photos of the site and other mementos. Since 1987, the Singh family has received many thousands of rupees from donations. Throughout the town, the young widow is now celebrated by drummers and chanting youth as a brave Sati-ma, a divine figure who was blessed by and merged with the mother goddess, Devi. This act put Roop Kanwar, her husband's family, and Deorala in the tradition of devout adherents. As a Sati-ma, she became identified with part of the Hindu pantheon, a righteous suicide like the goddesses Sita and Savitri.

All India became caught up in the debate about whether Roop Kanwar's death was truly voluntary, as the Singh family maintains, or whether murder was being concealed under the veil of religion. Should the role of the secular state be to regulate this religious practice? Should the state enforce its legal code that defines sati as barbaric and prohibits the custom, as reformers urged? Or as Hindu traditionalists insisted—and many in this camp were local citizens and state politicians—should the state respect freedom of religion and allow Hindus to follow whatever path they choose to seek salvation?

The Spiritual Marketplace for Neotraditionalism: Popular Guru-Based Movements

Most conspicuous over the last decades has been the rise of cults and sects catering to the urban middle class. What is it like to live in the urban middle