

Hinduism Project

YOU WILL BE GIVEN TIME TO WORK ON THIS PROJECT IN CLASS. YOUR HINDUISM BOOKLET AND NOTES WILL BE THE MAIN SOURCE OF REFERENCE AND YOU ARE EXPECTED TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS **IN YOUR OWN WORDS** AND IN PROPER GRAMMATICAL SENTENCES. IF I CAN'T READ IT, I CAN'T GRADE IT. **THIS IS YOUR TITLE PAGE. DO NOT LOSE IT, YOU WILL NOT GET ANOTHER ONE AND YOUR PROJECT WILL NOT BE MARKED WITHOUT IT.**

- A) Explain the importance of **Brahman** to the Hindus. Be sure to deal with the *atman* and the *maya* in your explanation. (T/I 10 marks)
- B) List the major Hindu festivals and indicate what they communicate. (T/I 10 marks)
- C) Describe the three general branches of contemporary Hinduism. Make sure to identify the main differences between them. (Com 20 marks)
- D) Describe the **common basis of belief** of Hinduism - Ahimsa/Karma/Samsara. (Com 10 marks)
- E) Outline the 3 different paths to salvation according to Hinduism. (App 15 marks)
- F) Illustrate how the Hindu notion of time is different from ours. (App 5 marks)
- G) Identify the major Hindu Gods and describe their **personality** or **physical features**. (K/U 10 marks)
- H) Identify the **three historical stages** in the development of Hinduism. Describe what happened during each stage. (K/U 10 marks)

T/I /20 Com /30 App /20 K/U /20

Please use the time wisely and read and write well.

Introduction to Hinduism

What do Hindus believe?

The fact that Hinduism has no single founder, sacred text, creed, or hierarchy led to the organic development of a variety of customs, practices, gods and goddesses, theologies, and philosophies, creating a rich pluralism in the field of Hindu beliefs. Hinduism is not, nor has it ever been a single, unified faith tradition. Instead, Hinduism is the umbrella term used to denote a network of Indian belief systems united by shared philosophical concepts and interrelated theologies founded upon the Vedas, a set of ancient religious and ritual texts. Hinduism defies easy categorization in terms of whether it is monotheistic, polytheistic, pantheistic, or panentheistic. According to Hindu belief, Brahman is the eternal origin and foundation of all existence, but views on the precise nature of Brahman and how Brahman manifests it-self/himself vary amongst different Hindu groups. Hindus generally recognize three different gods (*devas*), known as the *Trimurti*, as the three primary manifestations of Brahman: Brahma the creator god, Vishnu the preserver god, and Shiva the destroyer god. Hindus believe these gods incarnate from time to time in human form, though they are not actually human, in order to defeat evil and help humanity live according to the laws of the universe (*Dharma*). Such an incarnation is known as an *avatar*. Brahma is typically not worshipped in the same way as other gods because it is believed that his work – that of creation – has been done. Those who practice the most popular forms of Hinduism usually choose to serve either Shiva or Vishnu.

Across denominations, Hindus believe that the power (*shakti*) of a deity is actually present in that deity's image (*murti*). Hindus do not worship the image itself, but their worship is offered to the deity whose power is in the image. During ritual worship (*puja*), the gods are served and cared for as honored guests through the offerings made to their images.

The most basic and widely known concept in Hinduism is *dharma*. *Dharma* (with a capital "D") refers to the communal order of a society and the cosmic order of the universe. Related to this is *dharma* (with a lower-case "d"), which refers to the individual's religious and communal duties according to his or her place and position in life. From this standpoint, even the gods and goddesses within Hinduism must take account of *dharma* when they act, aligning their personal *dharma* with the universal *Dharma*. Hindus generally believe that the true self (*atman*) of every person is eternal and that they have no say into the way of things. Therefore, human survival depends on the choice to live according to *Dharma* by consistently doing one's *dharma*.

Hindus also believe in *samsara* – the endless cycle of rebirth. For millennia, the image of the world as a place where the soul is continually reincarnated has dominated the Indian imagination. Hindus view the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth both in positive and negative terms. Positively, since the cycle causes people to be reborn after their deaths, every life should be lived ethically to maximize one's enjoyment in both the present life and in future lives. Negatively, since life is often filled with hardship, the ongoing experience of tragedy reveals a morbid reality. It is not surprising, therefore, that the goal of many Hindu practices is to end this cycle.

The idea of rebirth is not exclusive to Hinduism, but the belief that one's future incarnation is dependent on the ethical quality of one's behavior in this life was pioneered by early Hindu sages. This belief that one's ethical behavior determines one's place in *samsara* is known as *karma*. *Karma* determines the rank and form of one's next birth in the cycle. In a more general sense, it refers to the actions that a person performs and the consequences of those actions. These consequences or effects, considered as part of the act itself, will at some point return to the person who performed the act in the first place. In short, the idea of *karma* means that every person gets what he or she deserves based on the totality of one's actions throughout all one's lives, current and previous.

The Hindu concept of *moksha* refers to escape from the cycle of rebirth and liberation from its web of ignorance and desires by realizing that one's *atman* is either the same as or united with the supreme *Brahman*. Believers reach this goal by recognizing that the differences they perceive between themselves and *Brahman*, and between themselves and the rest of creation, are merely illusion (*maya*). There are a variety of ways to achieve *moksha*, but many Hindus believe dedication to a particular deity is the most powerful. Religious rituals and praiseworthy actions may also alleviate the karmic consequences of past transgressions, assisting one in achieving *moksha* by diminishing the power of *karma* to keep him or her en-meshed within *samsara*. Some

Hindus even withdraw from the world and live an ascetic life to diminish their negative *karma*. However, the most famous Hindu text – the *Bhagavad Gita* – teaches that obedience to one’s dharma combined with inner denial of attachment to or desire for the results of one’s actions can lead to *moksha*.

Denominational differences

The three general branches of contemporary Hinduism are Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shaktism, each characterized by distinct views of *Brahman* and each internally diverse. Vaishnavism, one of the largest branches of Hindu thought, upholds the god Vishnu (or one of his *avatars*, such as Rama or Krishna) as the one supreme God. Vishnu preserves and protects the universe and has appeared on the earth through his *avatars* to save humankind from tyranny. Vishnu is most often worshipped in his incarnation as Krishna as the personification of divine love. Thus, Vishnu is linked most closely with kingship and the preservation of order. For Vaishnavites, *moksha* is not merely understood as the *atman* merging into *Brahman*; Vaishnavites believe that the ultimate destination for those who attain *moksha* is an eternal afterlife in Vaikuntha, the blissful abode of Lord Vishnu.

In Shaivism, believers devote themselves to the god Shiva. Shiva is a necessary part of the *Trimurti* because, without destruction, there can be no recreation. Even though Shiva destroys life in order to make room for new creations, generosity to his devotees is common. Shiva is typically depicted as a young man with matted hair, and often with a body smeared with ashes and meditating on burning ground.

Shaktism focuses its worship on Shakti (also called Devi), the Divine Mother goddess of the Hindu pantheon, as the one true God-head. Unlike Vaishnavism in particular, Shaktism does not acknowledge the existence of other gods independent of the one on which it focuses worship. The goddess Shakti is identified with *Brahman* and, as such, all other gods are viewed simply as different manifestations of her. Shaktas hold a number of similar views as Shaivites, which is reflected in the close association that Shaktas believe exists between Shakti and Shiva; Shiva is the completely transcendent male divine force, while Shakti is the transcendent and immanent female force through which all divinity reveals itself in the human world. Shaktas believe that all women are appearances of Shakti and thus deserve respect, which male followers must grant before being able to worship the Goddess.

In addition to these three devotional branches of the Hindu tradition, which are divided based on which deity they consider supreme, there is also a spectrum of different philosophical schools that differ on the true relationship between *Brahman* and creation. On one end of the spectrum is the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta, which suggests that there is no difference between *Brahman* and creation; all appearances of difference are merely illusion. This view is known as Hindu monism. Followers of Advaita Vedanta believe that their *atman*, or personal soul, is one and the same as the universal *Brahman*. *Brahman* is not just the source of all existence but is existence itself, not just the source of consciousness but consciousness itself. All things in the universe are not merely united but are actually one and identical, like a drop of water in an infinite sea.

Dvaita Vedanta, known as Hindu dualism, supports the view that there is a distinction between *Brahman* and the created world, though the nature of the distinction varies widely from a high level of differentiation to almost none. Generally, followers of this philosophy believe that one should strive to bring oneself as close as possible to *Brahman* but will never achieve complete one-ness, which is impossible. Dvaita Vedanta views the relationship between creation and *Brahman* as that between fish and water: fish are born in water, live in water, and, at death, dissolve back into the water, but they still are not the water.

These two ends of the Hindu philosophical spectrum, and the various positions in between them, exist in each of Hinduism’s devotional denominations, with the strongest diversity seen in Vaishnavism and Shaivism, in which devotees can see themselves as either one with or near to Vishnu and Shiva, respectively. These different denominations – Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shaktism – along with the different schools of philosophy – Advaita Vedanta and Dvaita Vedanta – give Hinduism the rich pluralism of beliefs and theologies that characterize the tradition.

Other notes:

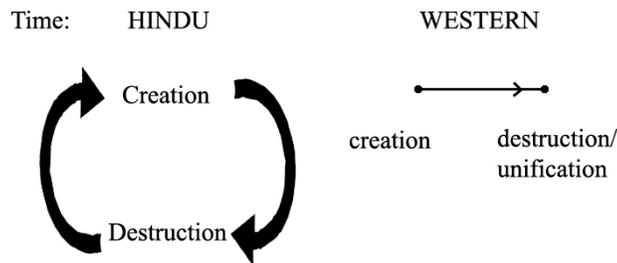
- Doctrine of Non-Violence (Ahimsa) – believe that Brahman permeates the world, so it is wrong to kill anything; it is an attack on Brahman

Cyclical Time

- samsara also refers to the Hindu notion of time
- after billions of years of existence all of creation is dissolved and enters a state of suspended being when Brahman alone exists
- the world is recreated, society reformed and scriptures recomposed.

Cosmology – an explanation regarding the nature of the universe

- it is important to understand what the universe is, and why it is, but there are no easy obvious answers
- Hindus deal with the universe as it is now, seeking salvation from the world's bonds



Development:

Occurred over a 5000 year period, in 3 distinct historical periods or stages

1. The Pre-Vedic Period (2500 – 1500 BCE)
 - in the *Indus Valley* in northern *India*, where a mother goddess was worshipped; she was a predecessor to the many goddesses worshipped in India today
 - sacrifices made to a horned, three-faced god (early form of the Trimurti)
 - may have practiced renunciation rites and exercise like yoga.
2. The Vedic Period (1500 – 600 BCE)
 - the *Aryans* invaded northern India in the middle of the second millennium BCE, imposing their gods and elaborate system of sacrifice on the residents.
 - Marked the origin of the *Vedas* (veda = “seeing” or “knowing”), the earliest Hindu scripture.
 - Traditions focus on *this world*: rituals are aimed at maintaining a social order that will ensure for the individual a long and robust life; afterlife is believed to be a continuation of this life.
3. The Upanishadic Period (600 BCE – present)
 - Upanishad literally means “to sit down before” a teacher
 - The last book of the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads* are different from them; they seek liberation from the world; they advocate withdrawal from society and the use of meditation and techniques associated with *asceticism* (severe exercises in self-denial).
 - The tension between fulfilling a social role and renouncing the world totally has been a focus of Hindu writings of this period.

Three Paths to Liberation

The Path of Action

- selfless to others
- right actions are performed for the sake of Brahman

The Path of Knowledge

- 3 steps
 - learning – from the outside
 - thinking – internal reflection
 - viewing – seeing from God’s point of view
- use meditation to see how the person is attached to this world

The Path of Devotion

- most common
- pure, lifelong devotion to Brahman

Hindu Festivals

Diwali

- joyous autumnal festival; national festival of India; “garland of lights”
- beginning of a new year & a fresh start: new house paint, banking
- special devotion to Lakshmi – fireworks, gift-giving

Kumbh Mela

- once every twelve years, millions of people gather to worship at the *Ganges River*, or “Mother Ganges” (people worship there daily)

Ugadi

- Hindu New Year
- officially at the beginning of the Indian summer though may be at other times
- rituals to welcome the New Year – asking for gifts from god
- make *Rangdi* – coloured patterns on the ground outside (words or greeting)

Pilgrimages:

- go to worship at special places (religious duty)
- often end at a temple; 12 have been identified especially important; 4 of greatest importance: Badrinath, Rameshwaram, Puri, and Dwarka

Two Reasons for Festivals

- celebrate events in the lives of the gods
- mark the changing seasons

Hinduism and Christianity

Hinduism

Salvation is self directed – it
Depends on your own efforts

Many Gods (*aspects of
Brahman)

No fixed – Doctrines
- Sacred Books
- Moral Teaching

Christianity

Only Jesus Can Save us from our
sins

Only one God

Official set of – Doctrines
- Books (Bible)
- Moral Teaching

Reincarnation – soul gets as many chances as needed

Soul only gets one chance

Atman exists in all people

One soul to one person

Moksha – Goal in life to disappear

Goal in life is eternal happiness with God

Priest direct, not perform rituals

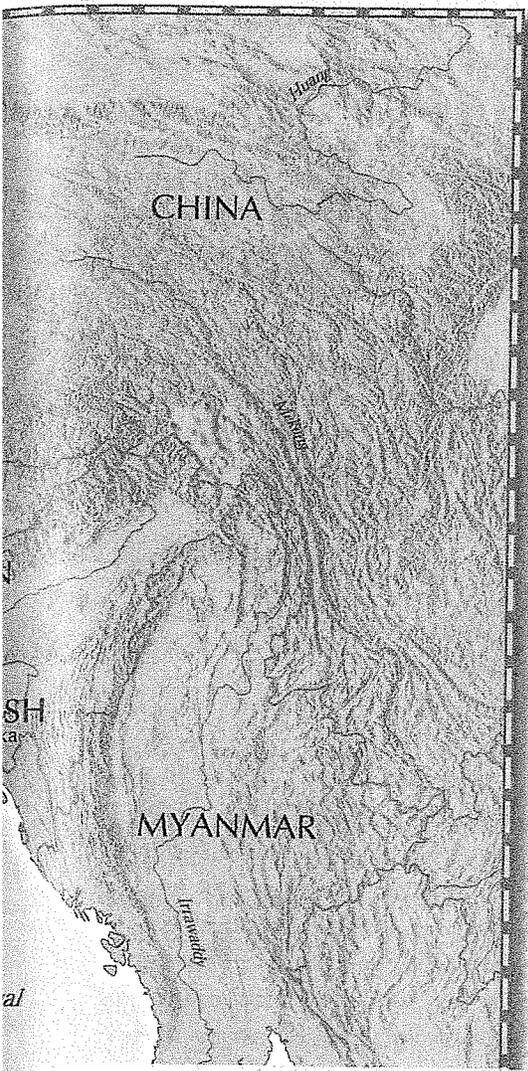
Priests lead religious rituals

Rituals usually solitary of family

Most rituals are congregational

- Hindus do not see themselves as participants with God in making the world a better place to live – Hinduism is basically “world-denying”
- Christians see themselves as “the hands of God” whose purpose it is to bring God’s kingdom to the earth. Christianity is “world-transforming”
- this is changing, as Hinduism is becoming more involved in civil and human rights in India – the caste system is now illegal

Mahatma Gandhi – social reformer in India; spent most of his life living out the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita (part of the Hindu Scripture), in which Krishna teaches that renunciation of the world is the surrender of selfish action. His campaign was to teach non-violence and fearlessness. He worked for the abolition of the “Untouchables” and independence from British rule.



3 Hinduism

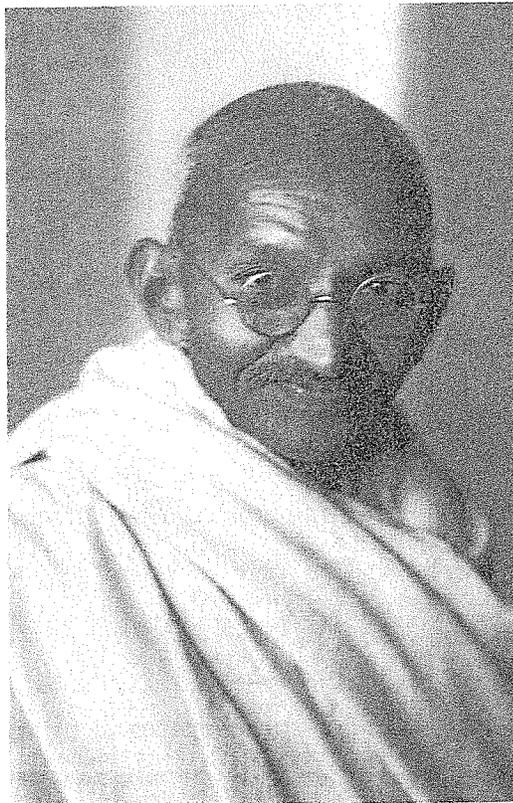
There is only one God, but endless are his aspects and endless are his names. Call him by any name and worship him in any aspect that pleases you, you are sure to see him. (Shri Ramakrishna, quoted in Prabhavananda with Manchester, *The Spiritual Heritage of India*, page 353)

Many Rivers to One Ocean

The esteemed holy man Shri Ramakrishna (1836 to 1886) speaks for most of his fellow Hindus when he emphasizes the harmony and tolerance that are characteristic of his religion. A harmony of many different beliefs and practices, all aiming

for the common goal of salvation, like many rivers converging into one ocean, Hinduism also tends to be highly tolerant of other religions. True to the ideals of Hinduism, Shri Ramakrishna lived what he taught. From early boyhood he mastered a variety of Hindu paths of worship, later he became a Muslim and then a Christian, and all the while, from his own perspective, he evolved into a better Hindu.

Throughout the ages, harmony amid diversity, and tolerance toward other faiths have characterized Hinduism. The nearly four-thousand-year-old **Rig Veda** (rig vay'duh), Hinduism's oldest sacred text, declares: "God is one but men call him by many names" (1.64.46). The great twentieth-century Hindu, Mahatma Gandhi, echoes the ancient wisdom of the Rig Veda: "Even as a tree has a single trunk, but many branches and leaves, so is there one true and perfect Religion, but it



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

becomes many as it passes through the human medium" (*The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, volume 1, pages 542–543). Like Ramakrishna, Gandhi revered Christianity; he even placed the Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel of Matthew alongside Hinduism's Bhagavad-Gita as his favorite religious texts.

In this chapter we will consider the main aspects of the vast diversity of beliefs and practices that together form Hinduism. We will chart many rivers, but it is important not to forget that all flow eventually into one ocean.

Human Destiny: From Worldly Realms to the Divine Beyond

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

Liberation: Returning to the Sacred Source

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

be patient regarding the goal of liberation. Hinduism is not in a hurry.

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

Never again to be reincarnated, the Hindu who has attained *moksha* is united forever with the divine, having returned to the sacred source.

The Divine: One Ultimate Reality, Many “Masks”

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

Monism: All Is Brahman

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

An analogy can help make sense of the difficult concept monism. All rivers, all lakes, even all droplets of rain share a common essence, originating from the ocean and eventually returning to it. Monists believe that similarly all forms of reality—gods and goddesses,

plants and animals, the material universe, and humans—share a common essence. Hindus call this essence **Brahman** (brah'muhn).

Infinite and eternal, Brahman is the ground of existence and the source of the universe. It is discoverable only through the most profound contemplation, and its true nature is not revealed on the surface of things. Brahman is impersonal, without characteristics that can be seen, heard, or even intelligibly thought about. The **Upanishads** (oo-pah'ni-shuhdz), the ancient philosophical texts that form the basis of most Hindu doctrines, teach that Brahman can only be described as *neti, neti*: “not this, not that.” Whatever the senses can perceive, whatever the mind can ponder, these are not Brahman, for Brahman is beyond the reach of human perception and thought. Just as atomic particles are invisible and yet are the basic building blocks of matter, so does Brahman reside beneath all surfaces, forming the essence of all things. Unlike atomic particles, however, Brahman is not material at all, but rather pure spirit.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It is salty, sir.”

“In the same way,” continued Uddalaka, “though you do not see Brahman in this body, he is indeed here. That which is the subtle essence—in that have all things their existence. That is the truth. That is the Self. And that, Svetaketu, THAT ART THOU.” (Chandogya Upanishad 6.12.3–6.13.3)

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

Polytheism: 330 Million Gods and Goddesses

The divine is thought ultimately to be one essence. And yet Hindus subscribe to polytheism, believing in many gods and goddesses (traditionally 330 million!). We can best understand this apparent contradiction by continuing to think of the ocean. Though we speak of different oceans that fill separate areas of the earth’s surface, there is in reality only one body of water. One person could be surfing in the Pacific while thousands of miles away her cousin is sailing on the Atlantic, each apparently enjoying a different ocean. But if you look at a map or a globe, you will see that the oceans of the world are not divided by any continuous landmasses; ultimately they form one body of water.

Hinduism generally regards its 330 million deities as extensions of one ultimate reality, many names for one ocean, many “masks” for one God. Because the divine reality of Brahman or Atman is beyond the reach of the senses and of thought, humans need accessible



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

points of contact with the divine. Ultimate reality needs to be revealed if it is to affect the individual. Hinduism’s many deities provide these points of contact, each with its own personal characteristics. Hindus can freely worship whichever gods and goddesses they like. Given the vast number of deities, at least one will surely provide an effective point of contact with the divine.

Many Worlds, Many Lifetimes: Hindu Cosmology

All religious traditions set forth a cosmology—an explanation regarding the nature of the universe. Hindu cosmology presents a radical alternative to the great Western religions and modern science.

With the Hindu tradition, before examining *what* the universe is, it is appropriate to consider *why* the universe is. If everything is ultimately and originally one thing, all unified in the divine Brahman, why does there appear to be anything else? What happened in the first place that caused the human need to seek

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

salvation? Such questions are of obvious interest, and yet they have no easy answers. Hinduism tends to regard such issues as great mysteries. Just as Brahman itself is ultimately a mystery, beyond the reach of logical explanation, so too does its creative energy flow forth mysteriously. This universe—this ordinary, finite, limited realm of existence—somehow has come to be. Humans call it home, at least for now. The important thing for Hindus is to deal with the universe as it is, to seek salvation through liberation from the world's bonds.

Cycles of Creation

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

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

Reincarnation

Within the cyclical pattern of the universe, each individual is also created and re-created repeatedly, until finally attaining release from this realm through *moksha*. In its barest outline, this is the Hindu perspective on the human condition. According to the doctrine of *samsara* (sahm-sah'ruh), or "wheel of rebirth," the individual is reincarnated from one life-form to another. Accounts vary as to precisely

what is reincarnated. At the very least, it is the atman, the individual "self" or "soul," the divine spark within that is destined eventually to be reunited with its source. Most aspects of the personality are generally not thought to be transmitted into the next life-form. For instance, individuals usually cannot remember past lives.

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

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

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

Never have I not existed,
nor you, nor these kings;
and never in the future
shall we cease to exist.

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

Just as the embodied self
enters childhood, youth, and old age,
so does it enter another body;
this does not confound a steadfast man.

As a man discards
worn-out clothes
to put on new
and different ones,
so the embodied self
discards
its worn-out bodies
to take on other new ones.

(Bhagavad-Gita 2:12–13,22)

Law and Order: Divine Principles in the World

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

Karma

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

Karma permeates the realm of *samsara*, such that an individual’s *karmic* record stays with the self from reincarnation to reincarnation. *Karma* thus determines the life-form into which the atman is born, whether it be a deity or other supernatural being, a human, or an animal. Of the various life-forms, only humans have the will to affect the status of their *karma*. Therefore being human is both a privilege and a demanding responsibility.



Krishna, right,
counsels Arjuna, in
a stage production
of *Mahabharata*.

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

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

Dharma

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

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

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

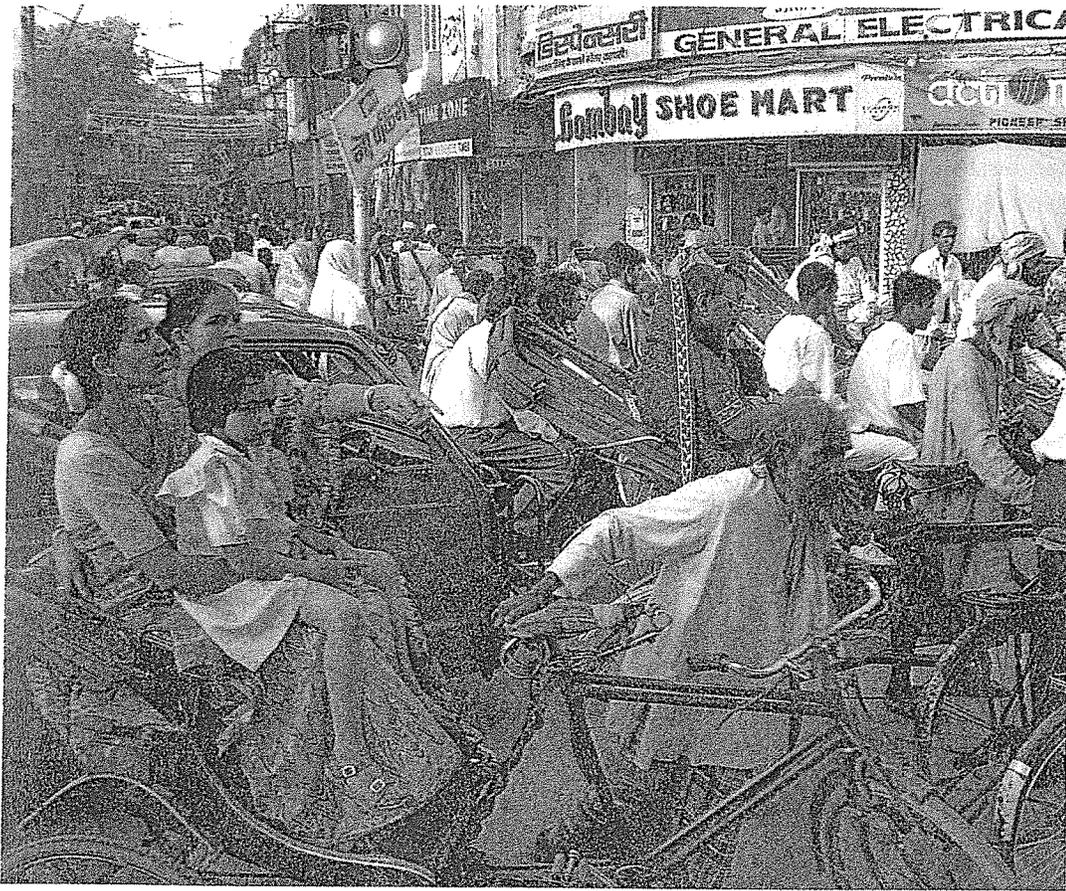
Hindu Society: Mapping the Individual's Identity

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

The *dharma* of women, for example, has traditionally emphasized obedience toward men—first the father, then the husband, and finally the sons. The duties of caste and stage of life, which figure prominently in constituting the *dharma* of men, are less relevant for women. However women's primary role of providing for the welfare of the family has always been a basic aspect of Hindu society. By traditionally performing this role with energy and perseverance, women have tended to earn a reputation for having more integrity of character than men, who are sometimes regarded as less dependable and more prone to frivolity. On the other hand, women's domestic responsibilities have limited their educational and career opportunities compared with those of men.

Doing One's Job: The Caste System

Hinduism's **caste system** incorporates a traditional division of society into four distinct classes—*brahmin* (brah'min), consisting of priests; *kshatriya* (kshuht'ree-yuh), including warriors and administrators; *vaishya* (vish'yuh), made up of producers, such as farmers, merchants, and artisans; and *shudra* (shoo'druh), composed of servants and laborers. The original term used for this division by class, *varna*, means "color," which is apparently related to the differences in skin tone between the dark-



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

er original inhabitants of India and the fairer Aryans who invaded and conquered most of India during the centuries of Hinduism's origins (beginning about 2000 B.C.). The Aryans considered it important to prevent the two racial groups from intermingling, so they distinguished their own classes—the *brahmin*, *kshatriya*, and *vaishya*—from that of the native peoples, the *shudra*.

The original four classes of the caste system were divided and subdivided until over three thousand distinct categories emerged. These categories correspond primarily to different occupations, especially for men. For women the primary significance of caste pertains to whom they can marry; traditional *dharma* provides specific rules regarding marriage with respect to caste. An additional category consists of the "outcastes," those who are considered to be outside of society altogether. This group in-

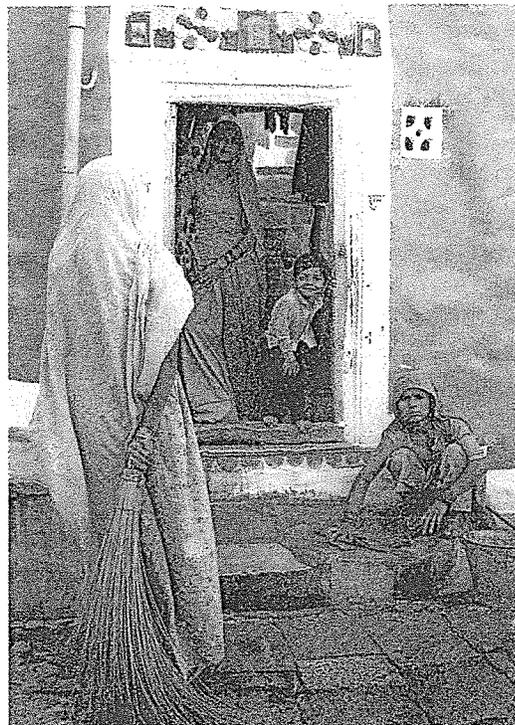
cludes the Untouchables, who only recently have begun to enjoy some legal rights, thanks to the work of Mahatma Gandhi. He renamed the outcastes Harijan, "God's children."

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

Accordingly, those who are of pleasant conduct here—the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter a pleasant womb, either the womb of a [*brahmin*], or the womb of a [*kshatriya*], or the womb of a [*vaishya*]. But those who are of stinking conduct here—the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter a stinking womb, either the womb of a dog, or the womb of a swine, or the womb of an [outcaste]. (Chandogya Upanishad 5.10.7)

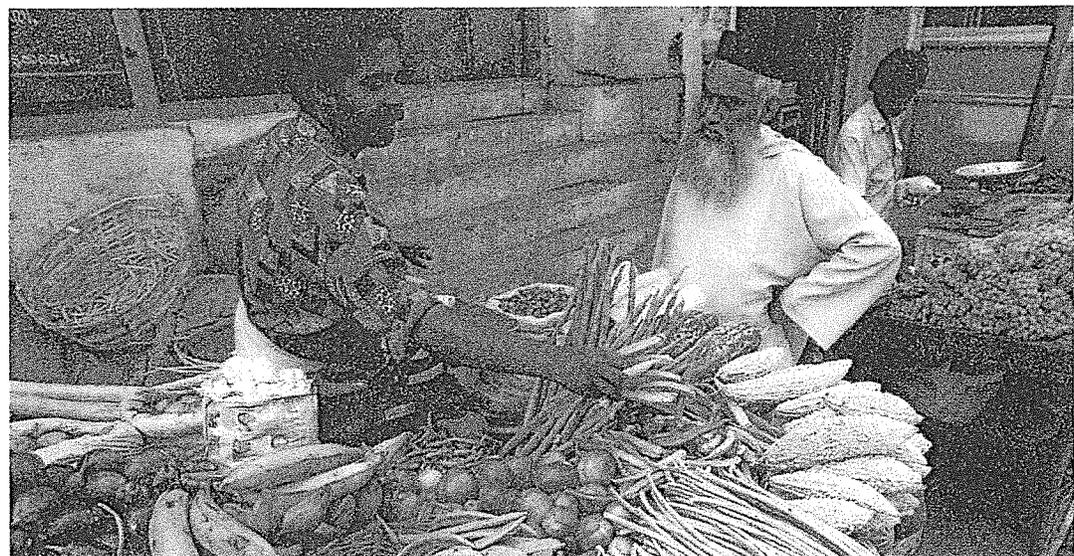
D Hindu society is rigidly separated by caste identity. Is Western society separated in any ways that are similar to the caste system? Explain your answer.

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



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

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



Karma determines caste identity, and caste, in turn, determines the specific *dharma* governing a person’s actions. For example, the ethical duties of a *brahmin* differ from those of a *kshatriya*. The Bhagavad-Gita presents a striking illustration of how caste identity determines *dharma*. Arjuna, a great warrior (thus of the *kshatriya* class), is poised to enter a crucial battle. As he considers the gruesome tasks that lie before him, including the killing of kinsmen and old friends, he hesitates, wondering if he should avoid battle. The god Krishna, disguised as Arjuna’s charioteer, reminds Arjuna of his *dharma*:

Look to your own duty;
do not tremble before it;
nothing is better for a warrior
than a battle of sacred duty.

The doors of heaven open
for warriors who rejoice
to have a battle like this
thrust on them by chance.

If you fail to wage this war
of sacred duty,
you will abandon your own duty
and fame only to gain evil.

(Bhagavad-Gita 2:31–33)

Acting One's Age: Four Stages of Life

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

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

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

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

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

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

Seeking One's Desire: Four Goals of Life

Liberation from *samsara*, in the Hindu view, is the summit of spiritual perfection. *Moksha* is the ultimate goal of life. But what if we enjoy this world, welcome the challenges of this life, and relish its fruits? What if we are so content

E

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

F

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



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

in this world that we appreciate reincarnation as yet another opportunity to seek the many pleasures of existence?

Sensual Pleasure

Hinduism embraces such pleasure seeking, even as it teaches the ultimate goal of liberation. Pleasure, or *kama* (kah'muh), is a legitimate aim of life. No religion denies that humans desire pleasure. Religions differ drastically, however, in their judgments as to the goodness or rightness of fulfilling that desire. Hinduism tends to surpass most religions in its outright celebration of the pursuit of pleasure. *Kama*, which refers mainly to the plea-

ures of sensual love, is to be embraced by whosoever desires it, provided that the lovers remain within the limits of *dharma*. So legitimate is the pursuit of *kama* that some of Hinduism's sacred literature is devoted to the enhancement of sensual love.

Material Success

Despite its complete legitimacy, the appetite for *kama* is believed to have a limit. Eventually the fulfillment found in love will no longer satisfy completely. A yearning arises for something else. For most people this yearning is for *artha*, material success and the social power and prestige that accompany it. Just as North American secular society tends to embrace the pursuit of money, Hinduism celebrates the goal of *artha*. But also like the pursuit of money, *artha* eventually proves unfulfilling. In due time people experience a yearning to strive for something beyond pursuits that provide only for personal and material needs.

Harmony with *Dharma*

This yearning leads to the third goal of life, which is called *dharma*. *Dharma* as a life goal

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



The Laws of Manu on *Dharma*

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

On the Proper Place of the Hindu Woman

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

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

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

On the Student Stage of Life

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

By censuring (his teacher), though justly, he will become (in his next birth) an ass, by falsely defaming him, a dog; he who lives on his teacher's substance, will become a worm, and he who is envious (of his merit), a (larger) insect. (2:199,201)

maintains its meaning as the general principle of ethical duty. But it is no longer merely a duty, begrudgingly performed. It is now that which is most desired. The deep joy of living in harmony with *dharma* is known firsthand. No one needs to tell the Hindu who pursues this goal that it is more blessed to give than to receive. The blessings of *dharma* give fuel to its fire. Yet even perfect harmony with *dharma* is a limited joy, destined eventually to lead to even deeper yearnings. After all, the world for which the ethical person has concern—even if the concern is unconditional—is still the world of this realm, afflicted with the unending pains of *samsara*.

The Bliss of Moksha

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

Three Paths to Liberation

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

For the Active:

Karma Marga, “the Path of Works”

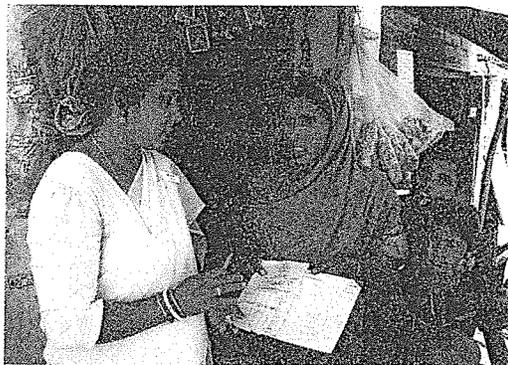
Most people—those engaged in the day-to-day tasks of earning a living and raising a family, those for whom physical activities come most naturally—prefer to seek liberation through *karma marga*, “the path of works”

(also referred to as *karma yoga*). Simple to understand and to practice, this path has everything to do with living in accordance with *dharma*.

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

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

The bearing of this religion on social life is, or has to be, seen in one’s daily social contact. To be true to such religion one has to lose oneself in continuous and continuing service of all life. Realization of Truth is impossible without a complete merging of oneself in and identification with this limitless ocean of life. Hence, for me, there is no escape from social service; there is no happiness on earth beyond or apart from it. (*The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, volume 1, page 461)



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

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

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

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

Be intent on action,
not on the fruits of action;
avoid attraction to the fruits
and attachment to inaction!
(Bhagavad-Gita 2:47)

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

For the Philosophical: *Jnana Marga*, “the Path of Knowledge”

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

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

Three Schools of Philosophy

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

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

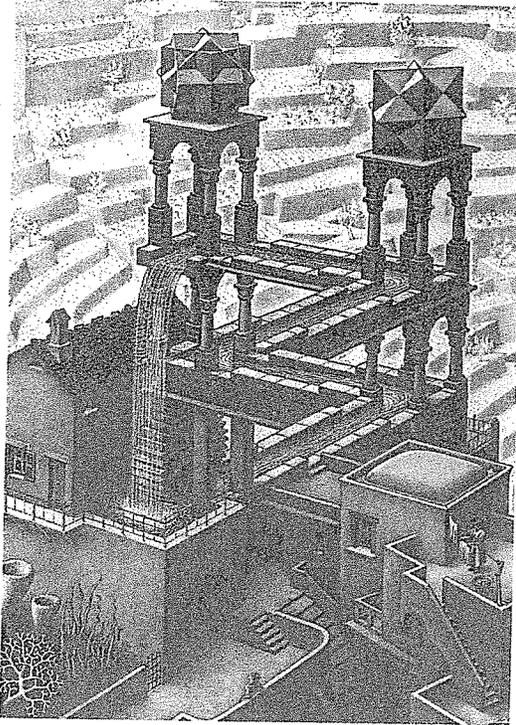
Shankara's understanding of reality amounts to the basic monism predominant in Hinduism: All reality is essentially one—Brahman, the indescribable, impersonal ultimate. The world and all finite beings within it are the

H
“Do the right thing only because it is right.” Must right actions be rewarded, or should they be their own reward?

stuff of *maya* (mah'yah), cosmic illusion. In a state of ignorance, people are tricked into thinking of their individual selves as being ultimately real, just as the world of a dream seems real to the dreamer.

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

When this truth is experienced, the path of knowledge has been followed to its end: liberation of the self from *samsara* into the ocean of



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

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Shankara on *Maya*

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

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

great [Shankara], perspiration breaking from every pore, came before his pupil.

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

The sage replied, "Indeed, in highest truth, the elephant is non-real. Nevertheless, you and I are as non-real as that elephant. Only your ignorance, clouding the truth with this spectacle of non-real phenomenality, made you see phenomenal me go up a non-real tree." (Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, page 20)

Brahman. But as the Upanishads warn, it is an arduous path, demanding that a unique kind of knowledge be applied to a difficult lesson:

Subtler than the subtlest is this Self, and beyond all logic. Taught by a teacher who knows the Self and Brahman as one, a man leaves vain theory behind and attains to truth. (Katha Upanishad 1.2.8)

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

Jainism and Buddhism, and underlie the Hindu approach of Yoga.

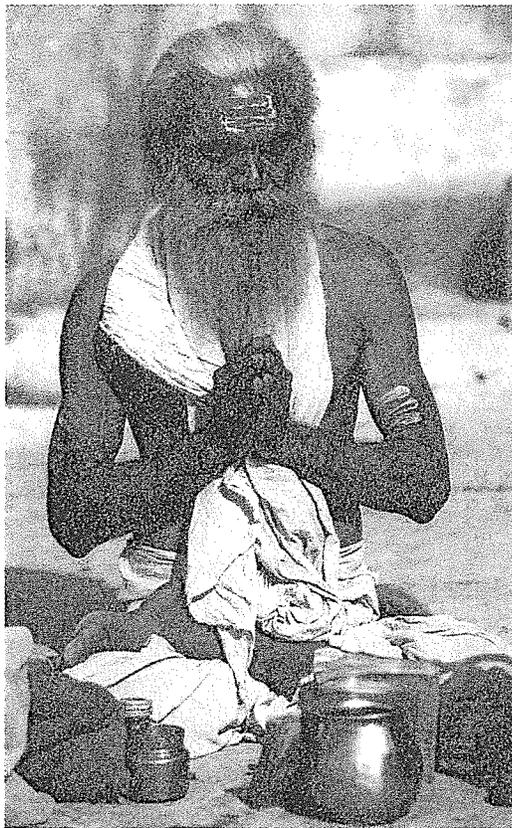
Yoga. The term *yoga* has different meanings in Hinduism. In the general sense, it refers to any sort of spiritual practice—as it does in the terms for the paths to salvation, where it is substituted for *marga*, as in *jnana yoga*. In a more limited usage, it refers to a philosophical school that emphasizes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

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

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

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

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



6. Concentrating on one thing so that the mind empties itself of all other thoughts
7. Meditating, an ever-deepening state of concentration moving toward the final step
8. Going into *samadhi* (suh-mah'dee), a trancelike state in which self-consciousness is lost, and the mind is absorbed into the ultimate reality

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

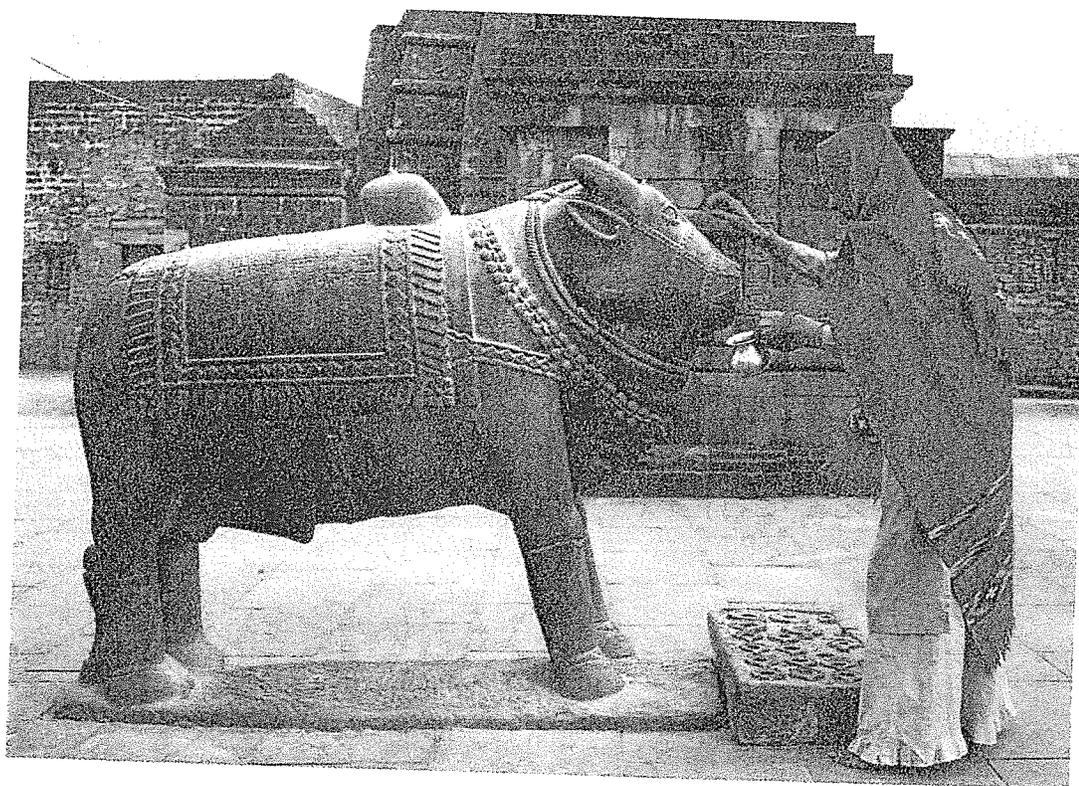
For the Emotional: *Bhakti Marga*, "the Path of Devotion"

Based in loving reverence for one's chosen god or goddess, *bhakti marga* (buhk'tee mar'guh), "the path of devotion" (also referred to as *bhakti yoga*), is most suitable for those to whom emotional attachment comes naturally. In contrast to the inward journey of *jnana marga*, this path directs spiritual energy outward, in worship of the deity. Such worship is beneficial because the gods and goddesses favor their devotees, and answer their prayers. Most important, *bhakti marga* moves its adherents closer to liberation. Worship requires a focusing of attention on the divine, and away from the adherent's selfish concerns. Through worship, the path of devotion helps to reduce the individuality that binds the self to *samsara*.

Gods and Goddesses

Stories about Hinduism's many deities form the heart of the mythic dimension of Hinduism. Some of the deities have been a part of

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



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

the tradition from the beginning, whereas others are newly acknowledged.

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

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

brought about by Shiva makes way for new creation.

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

Avatars

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

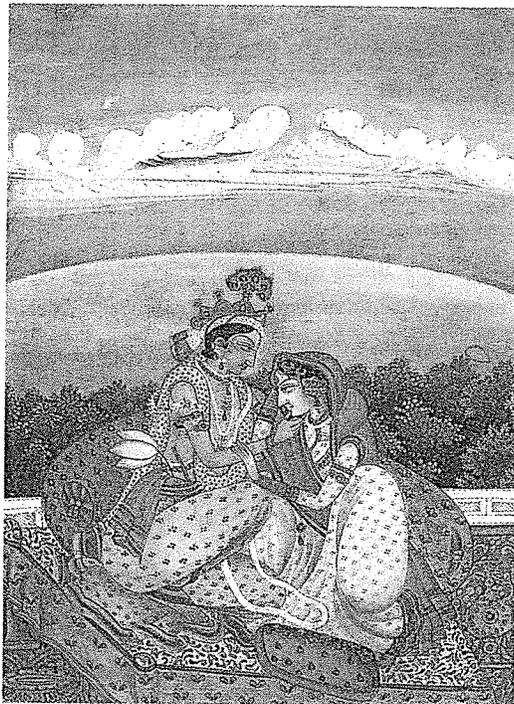
Though myself unborn, undying,
the lord of creatures, I fashion nature,
which is mine, and I come into being
through my own magic.

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

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

(4:6–8)

Krishna has a prominent role in the epic poem *Mahabharata* (mah-hah-bah'rah-tah), of which the Bhagavad-Gita is but a small section, and also is popular in another role—that of a somewhat mischievous and always amorous male cowherd, often accompanied by adoring bands of female cowherds. Hindu art beautifully depicts scenes that symbolize the loving adoration of souls (the female



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

cowherds) for God (Krishna). Krishna is also frequently depicted with his favorite consort, Radha. The intensity of their feelings is clearly expressed, and they function as a symbol of perfect love.

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

The Bhagavad-Gita

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

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

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

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

(9:27–29)

Aspects of Daily Devotion

If we were to ask a follower of *bhakti marga* to describe Hinduism, we would most likely learn first of the various acts of worship practiced from day to day. Along with a host of in-

dividual practices, such as prayer and visits to temples and shrines, Hindu worship includes numerous household and community rituals, pilgrimages to holy places, and veneration of the ever present and much adored sacred cows. Together such acts of worship constitute to a great extent the ritual dimension of Hinduism, and the objects that are the focus of these acts enrich the material dimension.

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

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

Holy places. Pilgrimages to holy sites, some long and arduous, are another common form of devotion. Sometimes the destination is a temple or other site of a great festival. It can also be a natural entity, such as a river. Most rivers are regarded as sacred. The most famous

river—and the one deemed most sacred—is the Ganges. Thought to fall from its heavenly source of Vishnu's feet onto Shiva's head and out from his hair, the water of the Ganges is sacred enough to purify all sins. Pilgrims seek its banks to partake in ritual baths, and the ashes of the dead are swallowed by its life-giving water.

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

Gandhi describes the encompassing significance of cow veneration:

The cow to me means the entire sub-human world. Man through the cow is enjoined to realise his identity with all that lives. . . . The cow is a poem of pity. One reads pity in the gentle animal. She is the mother to millions of Indian mankind. Protection of the cow means protection of the whole dumb creation of God. (Page 804)

Hinduism in the Modern World

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

The modern world seems to pose an especially acute challenge for Hinduism. India,

home to most of the world's Hindus, is also the world's largest democracy, and sets itself apart from religion, as a secular state. For its many citizens who tend to equate Hinduism with India, and whose patterns of existence are provided by the ancient principles of *dharma*, the interplay of the secular state with traditional religion is frequently unsettled and contentious.

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

Those Whom Hindus Revere: Religious Leaders

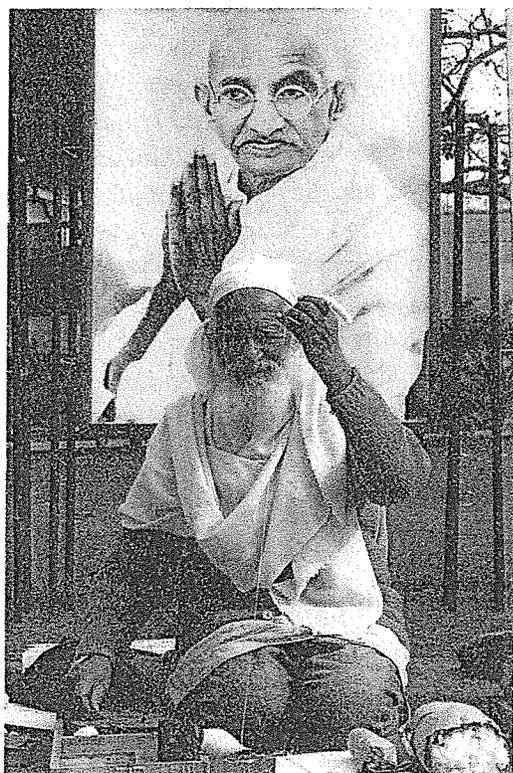
Along with the pervasive caste system and all that it implies, the social dimension of Hinduism features many significant religious figures, holy people in various roles who tend to provide continual spiritual nourishment for a tradition in the grip of change. *Brahmins* tend to ancient rituals; gurus,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

Mahatma Gandhi

The one figure who has loomed larger than any other holy person of recent times, and who is in almost every way a symbol of Hinduism as the past meets the future, is Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869 to 1948), reverently called Mahatma, meaning “great souled.” His steadfast efforts to stand up to oppression through nonviolence and civil disobedience forever changed the nature of India, and of Hinduism. And yet his assassination by a Hindu extremist in 1948, just months after the accomplishment of his long-term goal to gain Indian independence from British rule, is darkly symbolic of the modern challenges that Hinduism faces, now as much as then.

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

A follower of Gandhi's spins thread and fasts to protest Hindu attacks on Christians and church properties. Gandhi introduced the practice of spinning to promote Indian self-sufficiency after the British cut off the thumbs of Indian tailors and forced them to buy British cloth at high prices.



Although Gandhi as a man is dead, Gandhi as a religious figure lives on. His insights continue to fuel Hinduism's tendency to accept all wisdom as lighting the way to the divine. In villages all across India, statues of Gandhi, under the protective guard of Vishnu's multi-headed cobra, remind Hindus of his revered presence.

The Sacred Among the Secular: Contemporary Issues

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

The Caste System

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

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

Women in Hindu Society

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

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

A wife must eat only after her husband has had his fill. If the latter fasts, she shall fast, too; if he touch not food, she also shall not touch it; if he be in affliction, she shall be so, too; if he be cheerful, she shall share his joy. She must on the death of her husband allow herself to be burnt alive on the same funeral pyre; then everybody will praise her virtue. (Quoted in Noss and Noss, *A History of the World's Religions*, page 119)

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

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

Hindus and Muslims

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

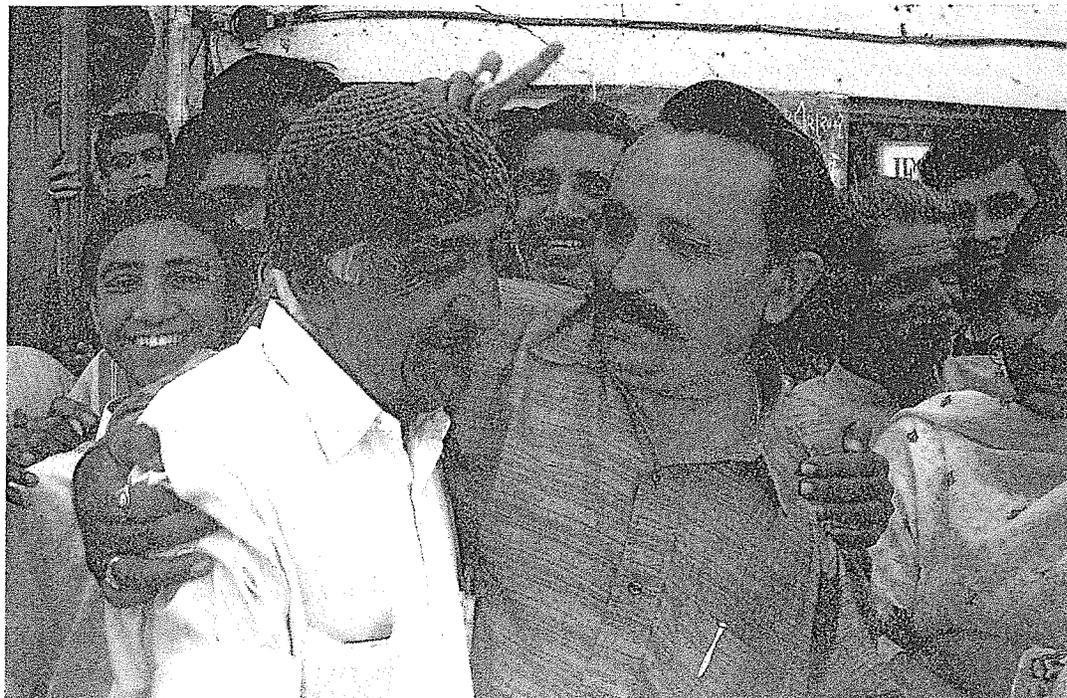
Hindus and Muslims (adherents of Islam) have lived side by side in South Asia. For the most part, they have influenced each other's religious traditions very little, although Muslims have had a substantial effect on the artistic and scientific life of India.

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



Violent clashes between Hindus and Muslims threaten religious tolerance and breed widespread rioting.

Muslim and Hindu leaders come together in Ahmadabad, where rioting between Muslims and Hindus in February 2002 left more than one thousand people dead.



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

Muslims continue to be of great concern for India. Now that both India and neighboring Pakistan possess nuclear capabilities, the simmering conflict between the two nations is especially dangerous.

Hinduism Outside of South Asia

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

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

Swami Vivekananda and the World's Parliament of Religions

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

The Ever Changing Currents of Hinduism

The many rivers of Hindu belief and practice are more numerous today than ever. Along

with the diversity that has always come so naturally, the modern world presents a vast new set of challenges, alternatives, and opportunities.

Hinduism is experiencing a great coming together of old and new. In many villages of India, the traditional ways have changed little. The temples are still in place; the festivals occur as they always have; and *brahmins* perform ancient rituals. In the cities, on the other hand, you will find high-rise offices and apartment buildings filled with the typical features of modernity, including televisions. And on television on almost any Sunday morning, you can watch the ancient story of the *Ramayana* unfolding in the modern world.

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

Chapter Review

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

The Seven Dimensions of Religion: Hinduism

Dimension	Examples
Experiential	<i>moksha, samadhi</i>
Mythic	stories and descriptions of the 330 million gods and goddesses
Doctrinal	monism, teachings of Sankhya and Yoga
Ethical	rules and ideals of <i>dharma</i>
Ritual	various forms of worship practiced by followers of <i>bhakti marga</i>
Social	the caste system; various Hindu holy figures, such as the <i>sannyasin</i>
Material	the Ganges River, clay figurines of deities, sacred cows

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



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



Glossary

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

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

Atman (ah't'muhn). The eternal Self, which the Upanishads identify with Brahman; *often lowercase:* the eternal self or soul of an individual that is reincarnated from one body to the next and is ultimately identified with Atman.

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

Bhagavad-Gita (buh'guh-vuhd gee'tah; Sanskrit: The Song of the Blessed Lord). A short section of the epic poem *Mahabharata* in which the god Krishna teaches the great warrior Arjuna about *bhakti marga* and other ways to God; Hinduism's most popular sacred text.

bhakti marga (buhk'tee mar'guh; also *bhakti yoga*; Sanskrit: "the path of devotion"). The most popular of the three Hindu paths to salvation, emphasizing loving devotion to one's chosen god or goddess.

Brahman (brah'muhn). The eternal essence of reality and the source of the universe, beyond the reach of human perception and thought.

brahmin (brah'min). The highest of the four classes of the caste system, made up of priests.

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

dharma (dahr'muh). Ethical duty based on the divine order of reality; one of the four goals of life.

jnana marga (nyah'nah mar'guh; also *jnana yoga*; Sanskrit: "the path of knowledge"). One of three Hindu paths to salvation, emphasizing knowing the true nature of reality through learning and meditation.

kama (kah'muh). Pleasure, especially of sensual love; one of the four goals of life.

karma (Sanskrit: "action"). The moral law of cause and effect of actions; determines the nature of one's reincarnation.

karma marga (also *karma yoga*; Sanskrit: "the path of works"). One of three Hindu paths to salvation, emphasizing

performing right actions according to *dharma*.

kshatriya (kshuht'ree-yuh). The second of the four classes of the caste system, made up of warriors and administrators.

maya (mah'yah). Cosmic illusion brought about by divine creative power.

moksha (mohk'shuh). Liberation or release of the individual self, atman, from the bondage of *samsara*; salvation; one of the four goals of life.

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

Rig Veda (rig vay'duh). A collection of 1,017 Sanskrit hymns composed about 1500 B.C. or earlier; Hinduism's oldest sacred text.

samadhi (suh-mah'dee). A trance-like state in which self-consciousness is lost, and the mind is absorbed into the ultimate reality; the culmination of the eight steps of Yoga.

samsara (sahm-sah'ruh). The wheel of rebirth or reincarnation; the this-worldly realm in which rebirth occurs.

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

sannyasin (sun-yah'sin). A wandering ascetic who has

advanced to the fourth and highest stage of life.

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

shudra (shoo'druh). The lowest of the four classes of the caste system, made up of servants and laborers.

Upanishads (oo-pah'ni-shuhdz; from Sanskrit: "sitting near a teacher"). A collection of over two hundred texts composed between 900 and 200 B.C. that provide philosophical commentary on the Vedas.

vaishya (vish'yuh). The third of the four classes of the caste system, made up of producers, such as farmers, merchants, and artisans.

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

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