Chapter 1

Hinduism: The Basics

Hinduism can be said to be the oldest and at the same time the youngest of the so-called world religions. It can be argued that it is the oldest surviving religion in the world as its roots can possibly be traced back to the third millennium BCE.[1] The claim that Hinduism might be thought of as being the youngest world religion is based on the observation made by many scholars that the nineteenth century was the first time when the term Hinduism was used to signify a single religious tradition. In order to understand the idea that Hinduism is both young and old at the same time, it is necessary to explore the etymology of the term and the diversity that is subsumed under the umbrella of Hinduism.

Etymology

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

In the eighth century CE Muslims began to make their presence felt on the subcontinent, and some of the indigenous population converted to Islam. Consequently, the term Hindu came to indicate those who lived in the region who were not Muslims. In this period, the term Hindu was not used to indicate either a self-designated identity or a unified religious

community. The term Hindu gradually began to acquire a more narrow definition signifying Indians who were clearly not Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Parsis or Buddhists. Eventually, in the nineteenth century, the term Hindu acquired the suffix 'ism' and it came to be considered as being a single unified religious tradition.

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

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

Gods and Goddesses

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

Terminology

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

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

The *Trimūrti*: Creator, Preserver and Destroyer

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

Brahmā seated in a lotus, emerging from Viṣṇu's navel. The goddess Lakṣmī is seated at his feet.

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

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

Forms of Viṣṇu

Viṣṇu is not such an ambiguous figure as Śiva, but like Śiva appears in many different forms. References to Viṣṇu can be found in the Ṛg Veda, but he was probably a relatively minor deity. However, by the time of the *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* in the early centuries of the Common Era, Viṣṇu had become an important focus of devotional activity and was regarded as the supreme deity. Various manifestations of Viṣṇu remain central to Hinduism today.

One of the most important forms of Viṣṇu is that of Nārāyaṇa. This form can be easily recognized, Viṣṇu being represented iconographically as holding the four main objects associated with him: the conch, the discus, the club and the lotus. Nārāyaṇa is often represented as reclining on the serpent Śeṣa afloat on the cosmic ocean. When Viṣṇu sleeps, the cosmos is un-manifest, but when he awakes the cosmos once again becomes manifest.

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

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

1. *Matsya* – the Fish.
2. *Kūrma* – the Tortoise.
3. *Varāha* – the Boar.
4. *Narasimha* – the Man-lion.
5. *Vāmana* – the Dwarf.
5. *Paraśurāma* – Rāma with the Axe.
7. *Rāma* – the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa*.
8. *Kṛṣṇa* – mentor to the Pāṇḍavas and destroyer of the demon Kaṃsa.
9. *Buddha* – leader of the unorthodox astray.
10. *Kalkī* – the avatār yet to come, who will announce the end of the current cycle of time.

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

Rāma is of course familiar through the various tellings of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and most Hindus know the basic story. Iconographically, Rāma is easy to identify: he invariably carries a bow, and is often depicted with his brother Lakṣmana on one side, his consort Sītā on his other side, and his devotee the monkey god Hanumān kneeling at his feet. In many ways Hanumān has eclipsed Rāma in popularity. In northern India numerous shrines have

emerged dedicated to him. In Delhi there is a 50-metre-high image (*mūrti*) of Hanumān that towers over the newly built metro line. Every day, but particularly on Tuesday which is Hanumān's special day, hundreds of people flock to this *mūrti*.

Non-Hindus are probably more familiar with Kṛṣṇa than any other of the Hindu deities. The reason for this is that the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON)[12] has become relatively popular, and has a significant profile in the West. There are three main sources for tales about Kṛṣṇa – the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, the *Mahābhārata* and a text called the *Harivaṃśa*, which was conceived as a supplement to the *Mahābhārata*. Although there seem to be two different Kṛṣṇas, the pastoral Kṛṣṇa and the warrior Kṛṣṇa, Hindus only perceive one Kṛṣṇa. Episodes from Kṛṣṇa's life are very popular themes in both tribal art and brightly coloured poster art. Representations of Kṛṣṇa as a child (*Bāla Kṛṣṇa*) are very common. Kṛṣṇa is represented as having been a very mischievous child, who was inordinately fond of butter. The conceptualization of deity as child relates to the notion of divine play (*līlā*). The concept of *līlā* suggests that creation is a joyful, self-determined activity that has no goal beyond itself.

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

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

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

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

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

Forms of Devi

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

There are two different ways of trying to comprehend the various different goddesses. The first typology suggests that there are three types of goddess: goddesses that are subservient consorts to male deities;

Ritual Practice

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

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

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

Pūjā

The most important ritual activity in contemporary Hinduism is called *pūjā*. *Pūjā* is practised in both homes and temples, by both priests and ordinary people. *Pūjā* is a daily ritual, but it is also incorporated into annual festivals. In the temple, *pūjā* is generally performed by the priests (*pūjārī*) on behalf of the devotees. However it is not a congregational form of ritual, and will be performed regardless of whether or not there are devotees present. In some wealthy households a priest might be employed to conduct the *pūjā*. *Pūjā* can also be performed

without the intermediary of a ritual specialist. It is performed before an image. In a home or shop this may well simply be a brightly coloured picture from the bazaar. In the temples these images might be carved out of stone or wood, or cast in bronze.

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

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

The Epics: the Mahābhārata *and the* Rāmāyaṇa

The Epics are perhaps the most well known of all the Hindu texts. The Sanskrit term for these texts is *itihāsa*, which means 'so it was'. The implication is that these texts are histories. These texts are narratives interspersed with sub-plots and didactic passages. The stories have been told and retold and have become what Chris Rojek (2007) has called myths of genealogy, which he identifies as stories 'that dramatise the culture or world-view of a people' (p. 68). There are two texts that fall into this category – the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

The *Mahābhārata* is fundamentally a story of a civil war, in which two sets of cousins, the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, are in dispute about the line of succession to the throne of the land. It could also be said to be a story of *dharma*, in that the Pāṇḍavas could be considered to represent *dharma* and the Kauravas *adharma*. It is also sometimes referred to as the Fifth Veda, as it is suggested that the truth revealed in the Vedas is retold in narrative form. It is the longest narrative poem in the world, having in the region of a hundred thousand verses. There is considerable debate as to when it was actually composed, but it is clear that it grew through a process of telling, retelling and accretion.

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

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

The rest of the *Bhagavad Gītā* can be seen as an exposition of three paths to liberation from the wheel of transmigration (*mokṣa*): the yoga of action

(*karma yoga*), the yoga of devotion (*bhakti yoga*) and the yoga of knowledge (*jñāna yoga*). The yoga of action suggests that while one has to act, one should become detached from the consequences of action, and that this attitude will lead the aspirant to liberation. The yoga of devotion (*bhakti yoga*) suggests that the path of personal devotion to Kṛṣṇa will liberate the devotee. The yoga of knowledge (*jñāna yoga*) suggests that the knowledge of the true nature of the Self (*ātman*) leads to liberation.