INTRODUCTION

A Brief History of Religions in India

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Now Vidagdha, Śakala's son, asked him, "Yājñavalkya, how many gods are there?"

Following the text of the Veda, he replied, "Three hundred and three, and three thousand and three, as are mentioned in the Vedic hymn on the Viśvadevas."

"Right," replied Vidagdha, "but how many gods are there really, Yājñavalkya?"

"Thirty-three."

"Right," he assented, "but how many gods are there really, Yājñavalkya?"

"Six."

"Right," he persisted, "but how many gods are there really, Yājñavalkya?"

"Three."

"Right," he answered, "but how many gods are there really, Yājñavalkya?"

"Two."

"Right," Vidagdha replied, "but how many gods are there really, Yājñavalkya?"

"One and a half."

"Right," he agreed, "but how many gods are there really, Yājñavalkya?"

"One."

"Right," Vidagdha said. "And who are those three hundred and three, and three thousand and three gods?"

Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad 3.9.1

In one of the world's earliest recorded philosophical dialogues, the Indian sage Yājñavalkya pointed to the multiplicity of theological views concerning the number of gods in India. He then went on to show how, following different ways of enumerating them, each of these views could make sense.

Much the same can be said about the religions of India. Some scholars and observers focus on the tremendous diversity of distinct schools of thought and religious sects that have appeared over the course of Indian history. Others prefer to specify the three or five "great" or "world" religions that have occupied the subcontinent: Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, plus Jainism and Sikhism. And still

others, of a more syncretic persuasion, maintain there is really just one religious tradition.

The readings collected in this anthology convey much of the multiplicity, and may also suggest something of the unity of intent to which the syncretists point. The selections are drawn from ancient texts, medieval manuscripts, modern pamphlets, and contemporary fieldwork in rural and urban India. They represent every region of South Asia. Some are written texts reflecting the concerns of literate political elites and religious specialists, whereas others are transcriptions of oral narratives told by nonliterate peasants. Some texts are addressed to a public and pan-Indian audience, others to a limited coterie of initiates in an esoteric sect, and still others intended for a few women gathered in the courtyard for a household ceremony.

The editor has reinforced this diversity by not arranging the selections in the two most common ways. He has not grouped together all entries affiliated with each major religious community of India, nor has he placed them in a chronological sequence. Rather, he places the readings within several overarching themes and categories of discourse (hymns, rituals, narratives, and religious interactions), and encourages us to make our own connections. There is no set order. We may rearrange them as we see fit, finding new patterns in the materials as we do so.

For all of us who want to understand Indian religions more fully, there are major virtues to this varied collection and kaleidoscopic arrangement. The selections here highlight types of discourse (especially ritual, folktales, and oral narratives) and voices (vernacular, esoteric, domestic, and female) that have not been sufficiently represented in previous anthologies and standard accounts of Indian religions. Few of the usual canonical texts are here. Moreover, the selections juxtapose materials from different religious traditions that we often regard as separate and distinct. This format has the effect of broadening the range of what we consider. More important, it should push us to find areas of shared concern and dialogue, as well as areas of contestation and conflict among the widely varied materials of different communities. If this anthology helps us to see Indian religious history less as the unfolding of distinct, self-contained formations, and more as a dynamic process of borrowing, conflict, and interaction between and within religious traditions, it will have served a valuable role.

The same multiplicity and ahistorical arrangement, however, may leave the student approaching Indian religions for the first time in a state of bafflement. In the introduction I provide a brief account of the main periods, principal schools of thought, and most significant texts in Indian religions, to enable the reader to locate the individual selections of the anthology within a larger narrative. It is a historical thread to which the readings may, when necessary, be tied. Over the course of this account, I focus on certain key issues or points of controversy that appear and reappear through Indian religious history and in the anthology selections. I focus also on a set of terms—Veda, brahman, yoga, dharma, bhakti, Tantra, and the like—that constitute a shared religious vocabulary in India. As we will see, such terms were often considered too important to be left uncontested, and so different authors or traditions would attempt to redefine the terms to suit their own purposes.[1]

The Question of Hinduism

The dominant feature of South Asian religious history is a broad group of interconnected traditions that we nowadays call "Hinduism." Although other distinct non-Hindu religious ideologies (notably Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity) have challenged its dominance, Hinduism is now and probably has been at all times the most prevalent religious persuasion of the subcontinent. According to the most recent census figures, 83 percent of India's population is classified as Hindu, a total of perhaps 700 million Hindus. This anthology reflects the dominance of Hinduism among the religions of India, devoting well over half the entries to Hindu materials, without isolating it from the other religious groups that have also made India their home.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that Hinduism does not share many of the integrating characteristics of the other religious traditions we conventionally label the "world religions." Hinduism has no founding figure such as the Buddha Śākyamuni, Jesus of Nazareth, or Muhammad. It has no single text that can serve as a doctrinal point of reference, such as the Bibles of the Judaic and Christian traditions, the Islamic Qur'ān, or the Ādi Granth of the Sikhs. Hinduism has no single overarching institutional or ecclesiastical hierarchy capable of deciding questions of religious boundary or formulating standards of doctrine and practice.

This is not to say that Hinduism, lacking these supposedly "essential" attributes of other religions, is therefore not a religion. Rather, the historical process by which Hindus and others have come to consider Hinduism a unitary religious formation differs markedly from other traditions. In one respect, Hinduism is one of the oldest, if not the oldest continuous recorded religion, tracing itself back to a text that was already edited and put into final shape by about 1200 B.C.E. In another respect, though, it is the youngest, for it was only in the nineteenth century that the many indigenous Indian religious formations were collectively named "Hinduism." Before this, not only did these groups not have a name for themselves as a religious unity, but for the most part they did not consider that they were members of a single religious collectivity.

Since histories of names often tell us a good deal about the realities they signify, let us look more closely at the word "Hinduism." The term derives originally from the Indo-Aryan word for sea, *sindhu*, applied also to the Indus River. Persians to the west of the Indus picked up the term, modifying it phonologically to *hind*, and used it to refer also to the land of the Indus valley. From Persian it was borrowed into Greek and Latin, where *india* became the geographical designation for all the unknown territories beyond the Indus. Meanwhile, Muslims used *hindu* to refer to the native peoples of South Asia, and more specifically to those South Asians who did not convert to Islam, lending the term for the first time a reference

to religious persuasion. Non-Muslim Indians did not commonly take up the terminology, however, until much later.

Only in the nineteenth century did the colonial British begin to use the word Hinduism to refer to a supposed religious system encompassing the beliefs and practices of Indian peoples not adhering to other named religions such as Islam, Christianity, or Jainism. This coinage, based very indirectly on the indigenous term *sindhu*, followed the Enlightenment reification of the concept "religion" and the scholarly attempt to define a series of distinct individual "world religions," each with its own essence and historical unfolding. "Hindu" was then incorporated into the Indian lexicon, taken up by Indians eager to construct for themselves a counterpart to the seemingly monolithic Christianity of the colonizers. As much as anything, it may have been British census taking, with its neat categories of affiliation, that spread the usage of "Hindu" as the most common pan-Indian term of religious identity. To specify the nature of this religion, Western scholars and Indians alike projected the term retrospectively, to encompass a great historical range of religious texts and practices.

Even though anachronistic, the term "Hinduism" remains useful for describing and categorizing the various schools of thought and practice that grew up within a shared Indian society and employed a common religious vocabulary. However, applying a single term to cover a wide array of Indian religious phenomena from many different periods raises some obvious questions. Where is the system? What is the center of Hinduism? What is truly essential to Hinduism? And who determines this center, if there is any? Scholars and Indians have largely adopted two contrasting views in dealing with these questions, the "centralist" and the "pluralist" views.

Centralists identify a single, pan-Indian, more or less hegemonic, orthodox tradition, transmitted primarily in Sanskrit language, chiefly by members of the brahmanic class. The tradition centers around a Vedic lineage of texts, in which are included not only the Vedas themselves, but also the Mīmaṃsā, Dharmaśāstra, and Vedānta corpuses of texts and teachings. Vedic sacrifice is the privileged mode of ritual conduct, the template for all subsequent Indian ritualism. Various groups employing vernacular languages in preference to Sanskrit, questioning the caste order, and rejecting the authority of the Vedas, may periodically rebel against this center, but the orthodox, through an adept use of inclusion and repressive tolerance, manage to hold the high ground of religious authority. Previous anthologies of Indian religious literature have generally over-represented the texts identified by the centralists as forming a Hindu "canon"; in this anthology they are largely absent.

The pluralists, by contrast, envision a decentered profusion of ideas and practices all tolerated and incorporated under the big tent of Hinduism. No more concise statement of this view can be found than that of the eminent Sanskrit scholar J. A. B. van Buitenen in the 1986 *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

> In principle, Hinduism incorporates all forms of belief and worship without necessitating the selection or elimination of any. The Hindu is inclined to revere the divinity in every manifestation, whatever it may be, and is doctrinally tolerant. . . . Hinduism is, then, both a civilization and a conglomeration of religions, with neither a beginning, a founder, nor a central authority, hierarchy, or organization.

Adherents of this viewpoint commonly invoke natural metaphors. Hinduism is a "sponge" for all religious practices or a "jungle" where every religious tendency may flourish freely. Within the pluralist view, the Vedic tradition figures as one form of belief and worship among many, the concern of elite brahmans somewhat out of touch with the religious multiplicity all around them.

This anthology might seem to favor a pluralist viewpoint, simply by presenting so many varieties of Hindu literature, belief, and practice side by side. Yet contrary to the pluralist notion of passive Indian "tolerance," the materials here suggest a lively religious atmosphere of interaction and criticism, of satire and polemic, existing among different Hindu groups.

In India, various contending religious groups have vied to present a view of the cosmos, divinity, human society, and human purposes more compelling and more authoritative than others. One finds such all-encompassing visions presented in many Hindu texts or groups of texts at different periods of history: the Vedas, the Epics, the puranic theologies of Viṣṇu and Śiva, the medieval texts of the bhakti movements, and the formulations of synthetic Hinduism by modern reformers. The religious historian may identify these as the paradigmatic formations of Hinduism of their respective times. Yet such visions have never held sway without challenge, both from within and from outside of Hinduism.

The most serious challenges to Hindu formations have come from outside, from the early "heterodoxies" of Buddhism and Jainism, from medieval Islam, and from the missionary Christianity and post-Enlightenment worldviews of the colonial British. These challenges have been linked to shifts in the political sphere, when ruling elites have favored non-Hindu ideologies with their patronage and prestige. In each case, such fundamental provocations have led to important changes within the most prevalent forms of Hinduism. This introduction will follow this pattern of historical challenge and transformation.

The Indo-Aryans and the Vedas

The textual history of Indian religions begins with the entry into the subcontinent of groups of nomadic pastoralists who called themselves "Āryas," the noble ones. Originally they came from the steppes of south-central Russia, part of a larger tribal community that, beginning around 4000 B.C.E., migrated outward from their homeland in several directions, some westward into Europe and others southward into the Middle East and South Asia. These nomads were the first to ride and harness horses; they also invented the chariot and the spoked wheel and fabricated weapons of copper and bronze. Such material innovations gained them obvious military advantages, and they were able to impose themselves on most of the indigenous peoples they encountered as they migrated. Wherever they went

they took with them their language, and it was this language that formed the historical basis for Greek, Latin, the Romance languages, German, English, Persian, Sanskrit, and most of the modern languages of northern India. We now call these pastoral peoples the Indo-Europeans, and those who migrated south into the Iranian plateau and the Indian subcontinent we call the Indo-Aryans.

As early as about 2000 B.C.E., Indo-Aryan peoples began to move gradually into the Indus River Valley in small tribal groups. In 1200 B.C.E., they were still located primarily in the Punjab, the fertile area drained by the five rivers of the Indus system, but by 600 B.C.E. the Indo-Aryans had gained political and social dominance over the Gangetic plain and throughout much of northern India.

The Ṛg Veda

The religious beliefs and practices of this community are contained in a corpus of texts called the Vedas. Since the term *Veda* comes up frequently in all discussions of Indian religious history, it is helpful to consider briefly some of its meanings and usages. The term derives from the verbal root *vid*, "to know," and so the broadest meaning of *Veda* is "knowledge," more specifically knowledge of the highest sort, religious knowledge. It denotes several compendia of religious knowledge composed in an early form of Sanskrit (the "perfected" language) by the Indo-Aryan community, the four Vedic "collections" (*saṃhitā*): the *Ṛg Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, *Sāma Veda*, and the *Atharva Veda*. Supplementary compositions were attached to each of these four Vedic collections—namely, the Brāhmaṇas, Āraṇyakas, and Upaniṣads—and these too became part of the Veda. This entire corpus of sacred literature came to be portrayed by its proponents as revelation, something that was only "heard" and not composed by human beings. Additional texts were later added to the corpus: the Vedāṅgas or "limbs" of the Veda, auxiliary works that aimed to explain and extend the significance of the Vedas. These later texts did not have the same revelatory status as the Vedas themselves, but they did belong to the Vedic corpus in an extended sense. The Vedas constitute a huge, diverse, and fascinating corpus of texts composed over many centuries.

The earliest of the Vedic collections, and one of the world's oldest intact religious texts, is the *Ṛg Veda*. It consists of 1,028 hymns, numbering around 10,000 verses, roughly equal in size to the complete works of Homer. These hymns were composed over a period of several hundred years by different lineages or families of poet-priests, and then compiled into a single large collection sometime around 1200–1000 B.C.E. This great collection was carefully memorized and transmitted orally, virtually without alterations, for almost 3,000 years by generations of religious specialists.

The hymns of the *Ṛg Veda* reflect the religious concerns and social values of the Indo-Aryan community as it settled in the Punjab. Most often the hymns address and praise a pantheon of deities, of whom the most important is undoubtedly Indra. The hymns portray Indra as an active, powerful, unpredictable, combative god who leads the other gods in a series of antagonistic encounters

with a competing group of superhuman beings, the demons. The poets honor and extol Indra for his courage and strength, and also supplicate him to be generous to his votaries. Moreover, they view him as a model chieftain: as Indra leads the gods in defeating their enemies, the poets proclaim, so may our leaders guide us to victory over our enemies.

Indra's paradigmatic status reminds us that the Indo-Aryans were not simply occupying uninhabited territory as they moved into the Indian subcontinent. They encountered other peoples there whom they regarded as posing a threat to their own well-being and expansion. These others, often referred to as *dāsa*s, were described in the *Ṛg Veda* as dark-skinned, flat-featured stealers of cattle, speaking a different language and living in fortified citadels.

In fact, from around 2500 to 1700 B.C.E. a complex, urbanized, centrally organized civilization flourished in the Indus River Valley, with two capital cities and a host of other towns and smaller settlements. Although archeologists have excavated a great deal of evidence from the Indus Valley civilization, including several thousand brief inscriptions, much about its religious culture remains mysterious since no one has yet convincingly deciphered the Indus Valley script. Yet most linguists believe the language of this civilization was a member of the Dravidian family, which also includes the languages of southern India where the Indo-Aryan language did not penetrate. This suggests that the Indus Valley civilization was linked, in language and presumably in culture, with pre-Aryan peoples in other parts of the subcontinent.

Many elements of Indus Valley material culture suggest religious usage, and these have led scholars to postulate Indus Valley influence on the development of later Indian religion. For example, archeologists have interpreted the numerous terra-cotta figurines of fleshy women with accentuated breasts and hips and fabulous headpieces found in the Indus Valley cities as popular representations of a "Great Mother," whose domestic and rural cult would reappear in medieval Hindu literature. While such connections remain speculative, they do point to an important problem in Indian religious history. Much that appears as innovation in recorded Indian religious traditions may have been borrowed from nonliterate or undeciphered traditions that we do not yet know.

Although the urban civilization of the Indus Valley had largely collapsed prior to the arrival of the Indo-Aryans, the dāsas of the *Ṛg Veda* were probably the descendants of that culture, and they must have posed a significant obstacle to Indo-Aryan expansion. The *Ṛg Veda* shows us an Indo-Aryan culture primed for battle. Even the poets participated in battle, apparently, as singing charioteers, invoking Indra's strength on behalf of the warriors as they drove the horses.

If Indra was for the *Ṛg Veda* poets the divine prototype of the warrior, the second most important deity in the pantheon, Agni, can be seen as the model priest. Agni is fire, in its multiple forms: the sun, the hearth fire, the fire of the sacrifice, the digestive fire in one's belly, and the fire of poetic inspiration. But Agni's primary role in the *Ṛg Veda* pertains to sacrifice (*yajña*), the central ritual practice of Vedic society. Agni is the priest of the gods and yet is also accessible

to humans, so he is most fit to serve in sacrifice as the primary intermediary, bringing gods and humans together. The poets of the *Ṛg Veda* know sacrifice to be a powerful ritual, one that enables the gods to defeat the demons and that likewise can assist the Aryans to overcome their earthly enemies. It brings a host of worldly results: wealth, cattle, victory, and ultimately order. Yet in the *Ṛg Veda* sacrifice remains rather loosely organized, inchoate, experimental; only later is it systematized and elaborated into a full-fledged worldview.

One other figure in the Rg Vedic pantheon deserves attention: the mysterious Soma, also closely associated with sacrifice. Soma is simultaneously a plant, a liquid made by crushing the stalks of that plant, and a god personifying the effects of ingesting this concoction. The identity of the botanical soma has proved to be a major scholarly conundrum, but the effects ascribed in the *Ṛg Veda* to drinking its juice are clear enough. It is a drink of inspiration, of vision, of revelation. At their sacrificial gatherings the poets pound and imbibe the soma juice, and through it they come to mingle with the gods. They perceive the resemblances and identities between things that we normally see as different and unrelated, weaving the world together in a fabric of connectedness. The revelations inspired by soma, moreover, are not regarded as mere hallucinations or dreams, but as more real, more true than the awareness of normal consciousness. This is the first example of a recurrent theme in Indian religions: what is ontologically most real is often not accessible through ordinary human experience but must be sought through some other means—whether it be soma, yoga, meditation, devotional fervor, or ritual.

Sacrifice and Society

If the Indo-Aryans entered India as nomads over the ruins of the urban civilization of the Indus Valley, during the period from 1200 to 600 B.C.E. they reinvented urban society on a new cultural basis. The later Vedic literature reflects the social transformations of this period, particularly the growing role of sacrifice in the religious life of the Indo-Aryans and the beginnings of criticism of sacrifice. By 600 B.C.E. the Indo-Aryan community had changed from a nomadic and pastoral tribal society into a predominantly agrarian one. The introduction of iron during this period facilitated the clearing of the heavily forested Gangetic plain and the development of plough agriculture. A more stable population and greater food resources led in turn to larger settlements, and the tribal organization of the Indo-Aryan nomads began to give way to an incipient class society based on occupational specialization and status distinction. Those outside the Indo-Aryan community, rather than being treated as threatening dāsas, were increasingly incorporated into society as laborers and social inferiors, śūdras. Larger political formations, primarily kingdoms, began to form, and with these early kingdoms came the rebirth of cities as capitals and centers of trade. By 600 B.C.E. there were a dozen substantial cities in northern India.

These changes naturally had their consequences for Vedic religion. Surplus

production enabled society to support a nonproducing class of religious specialists, who could devote themselves to elaborating sacrificial ritual and articulating its significance. At the same time, the new rulers found in increasingly dramatic sacrifice a means to extend and legitimate their political authority over larger, mixed populations. The interests of nascent ruling and priestly groups thus converged in sacrifice. And with the defeat of the Indo-Aryans' primary autochthonous opponents, sacrifice came to be seen less as a way of defeating enemies than as a means of creating, maintaining, and stabilizing the order of the cosmos and of society.

One can already see this in some of the later hymns of the *Ṛg Veda*, most notably the famous Puruṣasūkta (*Ṛg Veda* 10.90), where the entire cosmos as well as human society come into being out of a primordial sacrifice. The sacrificial cosmology emerges still more clearly in the later Vedic texts devoted to prescribing sacrificial procedures (the *Yajur Veda*) and the interpretive texts known as the Brāhmaṇas. These texts outline a complex system of sacrificial practice, ranging in scale from modest domestic rites around home fires to elaborate public ceremonies sponsored by the wealthiest kings. The gods who figured so importantly in the *Ṛg Veda* seem to have been demoted; what is most important in the later Vedic period is the sacrifice itself.

As the role of sacrifice grew, so did the status of the new group of religious specialists who called themselves *brāhmaṇas* (Anglicized as "brahman" or "brahmin"). Like *Veda*, this is a crucial term in the history of Indian religions. The poets of the *Ṛg Veda* employ the term *brahman* primarily to refer to the Vedic hymns themselves, understood as powerful and efficacious speech. The notion that certain kinds of liturgical speech are inherently powerful is common to many schools of Indian religious thought. The Indian term most often used for such potent verbal formulae is *mantra*. The *Ṛg Veda* poets also used *brāhmaṇa* to refer by extension to those who fashioned and recited the hymns. At that time the brahman reciters did not constitute a hereditary or endogamous social group, but in later Vedic texts *brāhmaṇa* came to be defined, at least by the brahmans themselves, as a hereditary occupational social group, specializing in ritual matters and the teaching of the Vedas.

A crucial first step in the social institutionalization of the brahman class can be found in the Puruṣasūkta hymn. According to this hymn, four social classes emerged from the Puruṣa, the original sacrificial victim: the brahmans from his mouth, the kṣatriyas (warriors) from his arms, the vaiśyas (merchants) from his loins, and the śūdras (servants) from his feet. Thus the poem portrays the brahmans and other social classes not simply as social groups, but as an order of creation. Because the brahmans emerge from the mouth of the Puruṣa, they enjoy in this order the highest status.

The Puruṣasūkta hymn is the earliest depiction of what later became known as the fourfold *varṇa* scheme, a model of society as an organic hierarchized unity of classes or castes that was to have great persistence through Indian history. The word "caste" derives from *casta*, the Portuguese word for social class. Yet histor-

ically it was a flexible and contentious model, one that was just as often questioned and opposed as it was accepted and defended. One can get a taste of the kind of criticism and satire that was recurrently directed against brahmanic claims of privilege in Kabīr's poem, "The Sapling and the Seed" (Chapter 2), while a defense of the varṇa system appears even in such an unlikely setting as the "Dog Oracles" of the *Śarṅgadhara Paddhati* (Chapter 16).

The Upaniṣads and the Renunciatory Model

Within the supplementary texts of the Vedic corpus composed around 900–600 B.C.E., one sees evidence both of a growing sophistication in reflection concerning the sacrifice and also the beginnings of an opposition to sacrifice. The texts called the Brāhmaṇas, arising from discussions and controversies that engaged the new class of brahman ritualists as they conducted the sacrifices, devote themselves particularly to explication of ritual action, providing a learned commentary on the myriad sacrifices of the Vedic system. The idea underlying these hermeneutical texts is that the most adept priest not only performs the actions of sacrifice, but also understands their inner meanings.

The Āraṇyakas (literally, "forest books") and especially the Upaniṣads ("sitting close to a teacher") took the sacrificial worldview in a different direction. As their names imply, these texts were intended for a more restricted audience, often recounting private discussions between teachers and students in the forest. The Upaniṣads pose themselves, and were later accepted by many Indians, as the "culmination of the Veda" (*vedānta*), its highest teachings. For example, in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, one of the earliest and most influential Upaniṣads, we learn of the brahman teacher Yājñavalkya, whom we have already met in his enumeration of the gods. At the conclusion of a royal sacrifice, Yājñavalkya claims that he is the most knowledgeable of all present in Vedic matters. A series of interlocutors—not only priests, but also a woman, a cart driver, and the king himself—question him, trying to rebuff his declaration and gain for themselves the thousand head of cattle he has claimed as his reward. Yet as Yājñavalkya substantiates his superior Vedic knowledge, he introduces several important ideas unknown to earlier Vedic tradition. So too the other Upaniṣads: together they introduce a set of new concepts that grow out of earlier Vedic thought while calling into question some of its central premises. These concepts, simultaneously old and new, proved to raise enduring issues for Indian religious and philosophical debate.

Yājñavalkya was the first recorded spokesman for the notion of transmigration, which holds that upon death a person is neither annihilated nor transported to some other world in perpetuity, but rather returns to worldly life, to live and die again in a new mortal form. This continuing succession of life, death, and rebirth is termed *saṃsāra* (circling, wandering) in the Upaniṣads. *Saṃsāra* comes to denote not just the individual wandering of a person from life to life, but also the

entire world process seen as a perpetual flux. This cyclical worldview of the Upaniṣads grows out of an earlier Vedic concern with natural cycles of the moon, day and night, and the seasons, but projects it in a new direction.

Although transmigration answers the question of beginnings and ends, it also raises two new issues. What determines a person's subsequent form of rebirth? Is there anything other than eternal transmigration? To answer the first question, Yājñavalkya redefines the Vedic notion of *karman*. *Karman* (derived from the verb root *kṛ*, to do or to make, and usually Anglicized as "karma,") means action in a very broad sense; in the Vedas the term refers particularly to sacrificial actions, as the most efficacious kind of activity. In Vedic sacrifice, all ritual actions have consequences, leading to fruits (*phala*) that are often not apparent at the time but will inevitably ripen. Yājñavalkya accepts this extended notion of causality and gives it a moral dimension: the moral character of one's actions in this lifetime determines the status of one's rebirth in the next. Behave in this life as a god and you will become a god. But gods, in this view, are not immortal either, and may after a long period of heavenly hedonism be reborn as humans.

Yājñavalkya also suggests an alternative to this endless cycle of becoming. The release from the cycle of rebirth is most often called *mokṣa*, liberation or salvation. According to Yājñavalkya an individual may attain liberation through lack of desire, since desire is what engenders saṃsāra in the first place.

In postulating an alternative state superior to worldly life and attainable through individual conscious effort, mokṣa is perhaps the most consequential of all Upaniṣadic ideas for later Indian religious history. In contrast to the Vedic ideology of sacrifice, in which goals were as much social and collective as individual, the pursuit of mokṣa takes an individualist goal to be the highest attainment. If Vedic sacrifice was responsible for engendering and maintaining the world process, the search for mokṣa posed a direct abnegation of that process, an escape from saṃsāra into something transcendent. This division of aims forms a major point of contention throughout Indian religious history. "Ascetic Withdrawal or Social Engagement" (Chapter 37), a collection of passages from Vedic and other sources, engages the issue directly, and it reappears centuries later in the life stories of two modern women renouncers, Mīrāṃ (Chapter 31) and Śrī Arcanāpuri Mā (Chapter 27).

Although the Upaniṣads are not united in their views, the strategies they recommend to those seeking mokṣa most often include a regimen of renunciation and asceticism coupled with instruction in the higher forms of knowledge, namely, the world according to the Upaniṣads. If mokṣa is an escape from the world cycle, it makes sense that one would reach it through progressive abstention from worldly involvements. That is exactly what the renouncer (*sannyāsin*) does. He (or occasionally she) would leave home and family to live in relatively isolated and austere circumstances, sleeping on the ground, restricting the diet, practicing control of the breath, and bringing the senses under control—in short, withdrawing from all that might bind one to the world, with the ultimate goal of escaping

from rebirth itself. Such psychophysical practices were not confined to adherents of the Upaniṣads, as we will see, but the logic of renunciatory practice was first articulated in Upaniṣadic texts such as the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*.

The Vedas, then, contained a large variety of religious ideas and practices, introducing a host of terms and questions that would recur throughout Indian religious history. In sacrifice, the Vedas provided a system of public and private rituals that engendered the order of cosmos and of society, and that was utilized by political powers to validate their own authority. The brahmans appeared as an endogamous class of religious and intellectual specialists claiming high social status, and through the articulation of the varṇa system they portrayed society as an organic unity of distinct ranked classes pursuing different occupational specialties. The renunciatory model presented by the Upaniṣads centered around the individual pursuit of liberation through austerity and knowledge.

In later times the Vedas became one gauge for Hindu "orthodoxy." Those who adhered most closely to the Vedic tradition claimed a superior status and judged others as either within or outside the Vedic fold, even though the actual language of the Vedic texts had become incomprehensible to most. Many new Hindu groups honoring new deities with new forms of worship claimed allegiance to the Vedas, or portrayed themselves as extensions of the Vedas. The epic *Mahābhārata*, for example, poses itself as the "fifth Veda," whereas the Vaiṣṇava devotional poetry of Nammāḻvār is said to constitute a "Tamil Veda." Nineteenth- and twentieth-century reformist movements like the Brāhmo Samāj and the Ārya Samāj sought to return Hinduism to what they claimed were its purer Vedic roots.

Proximity to the Vedic tradition, however, is not an altogether reliable criterion for defining Hinduism. Although non-Hindus like Buddhists and Jains define themselves by rejecting the authoritative claims of the Vedas, so too do many later religious teachers such as Kabīr and the Bengali Bāuls, whom most Hindus view as Hindu. Theistic Hindu schools often contested Vedic authority in a different manner. Rather than rejecting the Vedas outright, the Śaiva devotional poet Māṇikkavācakar, for instance, simply asserts that Śiva is "Lord over the Vedas" (Chapter 7). His strategy, typical of many, is to establish a new hierarchy of religious values, within which the Vedas are included but subsumed under the higher authority of his god, Śiva.

In the end, what is most striking about the Vedas is their longevity rather than their hegemony. In the shifting, changing, contentious discourse of Indian religious history, one hears over and over echoes of the concerns, the terms, the goals, and the practices first recorded in India in the ancient Vedas.

The New Religions of the Sixth Century B.C.E.

Upaniṣadic sages like Yājñavalkya were not the only renouncers in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E. From all indications, there were many peripatetic seekers wandering the fringes of Gangetic civilization during this period. The authors and

teachers of the Upaniṣads allied themselves with the Vedas, recommending that renouncers continue reciting the Vedas and view their ascetic practices as "interior sacrifice." Other forest teachers of the same period, including some undoubtedly not of the Indo-Aryan community, were willing to dispense altogether with Vedic models. They developed new teachings and practices with no attempt to link them to the established ideology of sacrifice and the Vedas. A teacher named Ajita of the Hair-Blanket proclaimed a thoroughgoing materialism (later identified as the Cārvāka school), denying both ethical prescriptions and existence after death. The Ājīvika school led by Makkhali Gosāla adhered to a doctrine of fatalism, claiming that human free will was an illusion; destiny was all.

Varied as they were, most teachers accepted a common intellectual foundation, not differing greatly from that taught by Yājñavalkya. With few exceptions, they accepted the notion of cyclical transmigration (*saṃsāra*), the causal connection between act and consequence (*karman*) as the moral determinant of one's rebirth, and the possibility of escape (*mokṣa*) from this cyclical existence. Within this broad consensus, disagreement and debate continued. What is the underlying cause of saṃsāra? What kinds of activities engender karma? What are the best means of avoiding or removing the consequences of one's actions? What is the character of mokṣa? What exactly is it that attains liberation?

The seekers also generally accepted certain kinds of psychological and physical practices as particularly conducive to the religious attainments they sought. The general Indian term for such practices is *yoga*, from the verbal root *yuj*, to bind together, as one harnesses animals to a yoke. In Indian religious discourse, *yoga* refers to all sorts of disciplined practices aimed at restraining one's unruly inclinations in order to attain a higher state of concentration or "one-pointedness." In the vivid metaphor of one Upaniṣad, the senses are wild horses hitched to the chariot of the body; the mind is the charioteer who must somehow bring them under control. Yoga is what one uses to do so.

The earliest systematic exposition of yoga is found in the *Yogasūtras*, a text composed by Patañjali in about the second century B.C.E. but systematizing a much older body of practices. Patañjali describes eight "limbs" of yoga, starting with physical restraints such as limiting one's food and practicing celibacy, proceeding through a mastery of physical postures, the control of the breath, gradual withdrawal of the senses from the outer world, and culminating in fixed meditative awareness. As the practitioner masters each limb, he or she gradually detaches from the physical world, reins in the wayward senses, and achieves a reintegration or unification of self.

Patañjali himself adhered to the dualistic metaphysics of the Sāṃkhya school, but the techniques he described and systematized were practical tools for all religious seekers, adaptable to various philosophical viewpoints. Later in Indian religious history, new groups developed new forms of yogic practice as well. Medieval devotional and tantric forms of yoga emphasize such practices as meditative visualization of deities (Chapter 11), repetitive chanting of the name of God (Chapters 4, 5, 40), and ritualized sexual intercourse (Chapters 9, 20), among

many others. Alchemists incorporated yoga into their transformative practices (Chapter 15), and non-Hindu religious specialists like Islamic Sufis also adapted yogic techniques to their own purposes.

Out of the questing milieu of the sixth century B.C.E. grew two new religious formations that have had a powerful and continuing impact on Indian religions—Jainism and Buddhism. Both were historically established in the Magadha region (present-day Bihar) by members of the warrior class who renounced their positions in society to find enlightenment: Vardhamāna (c. 599–527 B.C.E.) called Mahāvīra ("great hero"), and Siddhārtha Gautama (c. 566–486 B.C.E.) called the Buddha ("awakened one"). Both advocated paths of monastic austerity as the most effective means of attaining liberation, and both were critical of the Vedic formation. Adherents of the Vedas, in turn, characterized followers of Jainism and Buddhism as "outside the Veda," and accordingly modern scholars often classify the two religions as heterodoxies in contrast to Vedic orthodoxy.

Jainism

The name Jains use to designate themselves, *jaina*, derives from the verbal root *ji*, to conquer, and points to the central religious concern of the Jain community. Jaina monks must fight an ascetic battle to conquer the senses and karma, seeking to attain a purity of soul that liberates them from all bondage. Those who have succeeded in this quest are Jinas, conquerors, and their followers are Jainas.

According to Jain tradition, Vardhamāna Mahāvīra was only the most recent in a succession of twenty-four Tīrthaṅkaras, or "path-makers." His most immediate predecessor, Pārśva, may well have founded an earlier Jain community, but Mahāvīra is the first clearly attested historical Jain leader. Born of royal parents, the traditional biographies relate, Mahāvīra left his family and home at age thirty, abandoned all possessions, stripped off his clothes, and pulled out his hair by the roots. With these dramatic renunciatory acts he began twelve years of severe austerities, until finally at the age of forty-two he attained mokṣa, and so became a Jina or Tīrthaṅkara. Gradually a large group of followers grew around him. The first disciple was Indrabhūti Gautama, a proud brahman and Vedic scholar; in fact, Vardhamāna's eleven primary disciples were all converted brahmans. According to one tradition, Indrabhūti's conversion occurred when Mahāvīra delivered a sermon on the virtues of nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*) at a Vedic animal sacrifice—pointing to a major issue on which the Jains would most pointedly criticize the Vedic order.

Mahāvīra was a human being born of human parents, but he was also, as all Jain accounts make abundantly clear, something more than human. They describe his conception and birth as surrounded by auspicious omens and marvels preordaining his spiritual career. After he was liberated, the supramundane quality of Mahāvīra became still more apparent. His body, free of all impurities, was said to shine like a crystal on all sides. According to the Jain texts, the Vedic gods themselves, far from condescending to Mahāvīra as a mere mortal, recognized

that his powers, knowledge, and status were superior to their own and honored him accordingly. Later Jain reformers like Ācārya Vijay Ānandsūri (Chapter 42) argue that the Jina is God.

The Jain community, male and female, divided itself into two groups: lay followers and renouncers. For lay followers, Mahāvīra and later Jain preceptors advocated self-restraints and vows. A Jain layperson should avoid meat, wine, honey, and snacking at night. One should also give up falsehood, stealing, and especially violence. Jain texts also recommend fasting and distributing one's wealth to monks, nuns, and the poor as means of strengthening the discipline of a lay adherent.

Jains soon developed forms of devotional practice directed toward the Tīrthaṅkaras and other worthy figures. Most prominent among these rituals is devapūjā, in which followers worship the Jinas physically represented by statues depicting them in poses of deepest meditation (Chapter 19). Worshipers approach and bow before the image, chant the Jina's names, circumambulate, bathe the image, make a series of physical offerings to it, and wave lamps before it. Considering the transcendent status of the liberated beings, strict-minded Jains do not regard the Jinas as actually present in their images, nor do they suppose that offerings have any effect on the Jina, but rather view devapūjā as a meditational discipline intended to remind worshipers of the ideal state achieved by the Jina and to inspire them to seek that state for themselves. However, Jain devotional hymns indicate that most Jains have looked to the Tīrthaṅkara for direct benefits, and have believed the Jina to inhabit the images they honored.

Jains also incorporated into their temple liturgy the worship of goddesses and other guardian deities, lesser beings who may intervene in worldly affairs on behalf of the votary. As the stories in "Jain Stories of Miraculous Power" (Chapter 28) indicate, Jaina goddesses like Cakrā could grant practical rewards such as wealth and release from earthly prison, as well as helping their devotees on the way to escaping the prison of karma.

The ethical and ritual disciplines of the Jain laity were regarded as preparations for the more rigorous and more efficacious life of a Jain renouncer. Indeed, Jains organized their religion largely around the necessity of renunciation for attaining true purity of soul. This central theme emerges even in the didactic stories of medieval Jain collections (Chapter 26), in which the narrator seeks to instill in his audience a feeling of revulsion toward the world and to nudge it toward renunciation through exaggeration and macabre humor.

When a lay person decides to relinquish worldly life, this is treated as a great event both in the prospective renouncer's own spiritual career and in the life of the Jain community. In the ceremony of renouncing social life and entering upon a new monastic life—a veritable death and rebirth—Jain initiates cast off all their former possessions, pull out their hair in large handfuls, and give up their own names. They are presented with the austere provisions of mendicants and with new monastic names. At this point the new monk or nun undertakes the five "great vows," abstaining from all violence, dishonesty, theft, sexual intercourse,

and personal possessions, under the close supervision of monastic preceptors. Through self-restraint, careful conduct, physical austerities, and meditations, the anchorite gradually removes the karma that inhibits the soul's inherent powers and virtues, aiming always at the final victory. The Jain path of rigorous austerity may culminate most dramatically in sallekhanā, voluntary self-starvation, in which the Jain renunciant gradually abandons the body itself for the sake of the soul's ultimate purity.

One of the first major royal patrons of Jainism was the Mauryan emperor Candragupta I (r. 321–297 B.C.E.). According to Jain tradition, this ruler was also involved in the major schism of Jainism into two communities, named Śvetāmbara (white-clad) and Digambara (sky-clad—that is, naked) after the monks' characteristic robes or lack thereof. In the third century B.C.E., the Jain leader Bhadrabāhu apparently moved half the Jain community south to Karnataka in order to escape a famine in Candragupta's kingdom. Candragupta himself went along as Bhadrabāhu's disciple. Divided geographically, the two Jain communities began to diverge doctrinally, and eventually formalized those differences at the Council of Vallabhī in the fifth century C.E. The Śvetāmbaras were and continue to be based primarily in the western Indian regions of Rajasthan and Gujarat, whereas the Digambaras have always been most prominent in Karnataka, and were also influential for a time in Tamilnadu.

Throughout the early medieval period, Jain monks and advisers played prominent roles in the courts of many Indian rulers. During this period Jain authors produced a remarkable array of literary and scholarly works in virtually every field, and Jain patrons sponsored impressive Jain temples. In the later medieval period, with Islamic rulers powerful in northern India and the Hindu state of Vijayanagar dominating the south, Jains lost much of their public patronage and became a more self-sufficient, inward-looking community. They survived, however, and now number some four million adherents, mostly in India but with substantial groups of Jains in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and other parts of the English-speaking world.

Buddhism

Buddhists are those who follow the way of the buddhas, beings who have fully "awakened" (from the root *budh*, to wake up) to the true nature of things. In our historical era, the Awakened One was a kṣatriya named Siddhārtha Gautama, born in the foothills of the Himalaya Mountains in about 566 B.C.E. According to traditional accounts, the future Buddha Siddhārtha spent the first twenty-nine years of his life ensconced in affluent family life before renouncing society to seek liberation as a wandering ascetic. After spending six years in austerities, study, and meditation, Siddhārtha sat down under a fig tree in the town of Bodh Gaya one night in 531 B.C.E. and vowed that he would not get up until he had gained enlightenment. That night he attained nirvāṇa and became a buddha. One may view the remainder of the Buddha's life, and indeed all of Buddhist religion, as

an attempt to enable others to replicate for themselves what Siddhārtha accomplished that night under the Bodhi tree.

The Buddha delivered his first public discourse, the first "turning of the wheel of Buddhist doctrine (*dharma*)," to an audience of five ascetics outside Varanasi. As soon as he had gathered sixty disciples, he sent them out in all directions to spread his teachings. From its inception, Buddhism was a proselytizing religion, and within a few centuries it was successful not just in the Indo-Aryan society of northern India but throughout South Asia. Spreading the message still further afield, Buddhist missionaries soon traveled to Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia as far as Indonesia, China, Japan, Korea, and Tibet. From the second through the seventh centuries C.E., Buddhism was the major cosmopolitan religion throughout Asia and probably the predominant religious community in the world at that time.

As a pan-Asian religion, Buddhism receives a separate volume in this series. It would be redundant to attempt to outline the complex doctrines or practices of Buddhism here. But Buddhism was first a powerful religious movement in India, and it had a major impact on the development of other religions in India, so it is necessary to refer to a few of its salient features.

Like Mahāvīra and the early Jains, the Buddha considered that the most effective way for his disciples to work toward individual salvation was in small monastic groups. Although renunciation of society was necessary, it was desirable also to avoid the isolation of the hermit. Monastic cells would allow for instruction, support, and enforcement of moral precepts. Establishing mendicant orders, however, posed a challenge to the brahmanic religious specialists and the sacrificial order. After all, mendicants still depend on alms, and the surplus production available to support the various religious claimants was finite.

In this competitive situation the Buddha and his followers developed a penetrating critique of the Vedic religion, much as the Jains did. Not only did the Buddha denounce the public sacrifices advocated by brahman specialists as overly costly, violent, and uncertain in their results, but he also sought to undercut the brahmans' own claims to authority. Satirizing the creation myth of *Ṛg Veda* 10.90, in which the brahman class emerges from the mouth of the primordial male Puruṣa, he pointed out that anyone could see that brahmans in fact emerge from the same female bodily organ as everybody else. He questioned brahmanic claims that the Vedas were revealed texts, not human in origin, as well as their claims to a special inborn religious authority.

Even early followers in the Buddhist community, however, considered the Buddha Śākyamuni to be a superhuman figure. Buddhists preserved his bodily charisma in his ashes and relics, entombed in burial mounds called *stūpas*. Located within monastic settlements, stūpas became centers of Buddhist devotion, where votaries would circumambulate, present flower garlands, burn incense and lamps, serenade with music, and recite eulogies. By the first century C.E. if not earlier, Buddhists also began to use physical images of the Buddha and other important Buddhist figures as objects of devotion. These informal acts of homage toward the Buddha in the form of stūpa or image were later formalized as the ritual of

pūjā. During this same period, bodhisattvas, those motivated by compassion to achieve enlightenment, became objects of veneration and emulation in a movement that came to be known as the Mahāyāna (great vehicle).

Buddhist monks and nuns often established their "retreats" on the outskirts of the largest cities of the time and actively sought the patronage of royalty and the wealthy urban merchant class. With the conversion of the great Mauryan ruler Aśoka in the third century B.C.E., Buddhism became the imperial religion of South Asia. Aśoka patronized Buddhist institutions lavishly and sent out missionaries to spread Buddhist teachings abroad. He also publicized his new policies with inscriptions carved on pillars or rock faces throughout the empire. In his epigraphs, Aśoka speaks of his pursuit of dharma, by which he means a common ethical code based on values of tolerance, harmony, generosity, and nonviolence. While proclaiming tolerance toward all religious seekers, he also emphasized nonviolence, thereby effectively ruling out the animal sacrifices that had been the heart of the Vedic system of sacrifice. Far better, he announced, to practice the nonviolent ceremony of dharma, by which he meant giving gifts to Buddhist monks and nuns and other worthies.

Though the Mauryan empire fell apart rather soon after Aśoka's death, he had established a model for Buddhist kingship. For several centuries, every successor dynasty seeking to claim imperial status in India would begin to patronize Buddhists as its primary, though never exclusive, religious recipients. By the time of Harṣavardhana, the seventh-century emperor of Kanyākubja, however, there were clear signs that the role of Buddhism in India was diminishing. It was at this time that the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang toured South Asia, and he observed the dramatic ceremonies of Buddhist gift-giving that Harṣa held at his capital; but he also noticed many abandoned Buddhist monasteries and temples throughout the subcontinent. Patronage and support apparently were drying up, a trend that accelerated after Harṣa's demise. Only in eastern India, the Himalayan regions, and Sri Lanka did Buddhism continue to flourish in South Asia. By the time of the Turko-Afghan raids of the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, Buddhism in northern India was confined to a few rich monastic institutions and universities, which made ripe targets for plunder. Many of the monks fled to Tibet, and Buddhism was effectively exiled from its land of origin.

Since the 1950s, Buddhism has been revivified in India from unexpected sources. A reformer and leader in the struggle for Indian independence, B. R. Ambedkar, was a member of a Maharashtran untouchable community and spokesman for untouchables nationwide. After a lifetime fighting for social justice, Ambedkar decided that Hinduism as it existed would never allow full status to the lowest orders of society, and at a huge public ceremony in 1956 he converted to Buddhism. Many of his followers did also, and the latest census estimates nearly four million Buddhists in Maharashtra alone. During the same period, the Chinese takeover of Tibet forced many Tibetan monks and lay Buddhists to flee south: The Dalai Lama, spiritual head of the Tibetan people, established his new home

in exile in India, where he leads a substantial and visible community of Buddhist refugees.

Hinduism Redefined

During the period of Buddhist initiative and imperial spread, those social and religious groups who remained loyal in some way to the Vedic tradition were not inactive. In fact, as one historian puts it, "in the face of this challenge Brahmanism girt itself up by a tremendous intellectual effort for a new lease on life."[2] This statement overstates the degree to which "Brahmanism" reacted as a cohesive entity; historical sources suggest rather a multiplicity of initiatives. Nevertheless, the intellectual and socio-political challenge posed by Buddhism, Jainism, and the other renunciatory groups did inspire many creative and fruitful responses, which collectively add up to a virtual transformation in "orthodox" circles, from the Vedic worldview to forms of classical "Hinduism" that explicitly maintained continuity with the Vedic tradition but effectively altered it into a new religious formation.

The literature of this period is extensive. There was continued production of texts within the Vedic corpus: new Upaniṣads, new auxiliary texts, and texts that styled themselves "appendices" to the Vedic corpus. During this period the formative texts of six major philosophical schools were first put together—the Mīmāṃsā, Vedānta, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Nyāya, and Vaiśeṣika schools. Of these, the Mīmāṃsā school occupied itself primarily with the interpretation of the Vedic sacrificial texts and ritual, whereas the Advaita Vedānta reformulated some of the teachings of the Upaniṣads into a consistent monist metaphysics. Sāṃkhya developed an alternative dualist philosophy, and Yoga systematized the psychophysical practices of the ascetics in accord with Sāṃkhya teachings. Nyāya was most concerned with the logic and rhetoric of philosophical disputation and the nature of reality, and Vaiśeṣika sought to develop a realist ontology of substances.

Another major genre of religious literature was the Dharmaśāstra, whose central concern, as the name implies, was the definition and delineation of dharma. The term *dharma* comes from the root *dhṛ*, to uphold, to maintain, and dharma may well be defined as "that which upholds and supports order." Yet different parties could hold very different ideas of what constitutes "order." In the Vedas the term *dharma* referred to the sacrifice as that which maintains the order of the cosmos. In Buddhist texts it meant the teachings of the Buddha, and Jain sources spoke of a Jaina dharma. Aśoka employed the term to describe his own religio-political policies. In the Dharmaśāstra literature, dharma referred to an overarching order of the cosmos and society, and to a person's duties within the world so constituted. It determined specific duties for all groups belonging to Indo-Aryan society, varying according to sex, class, family, stage of life, and so on. The Dharmaśāstras