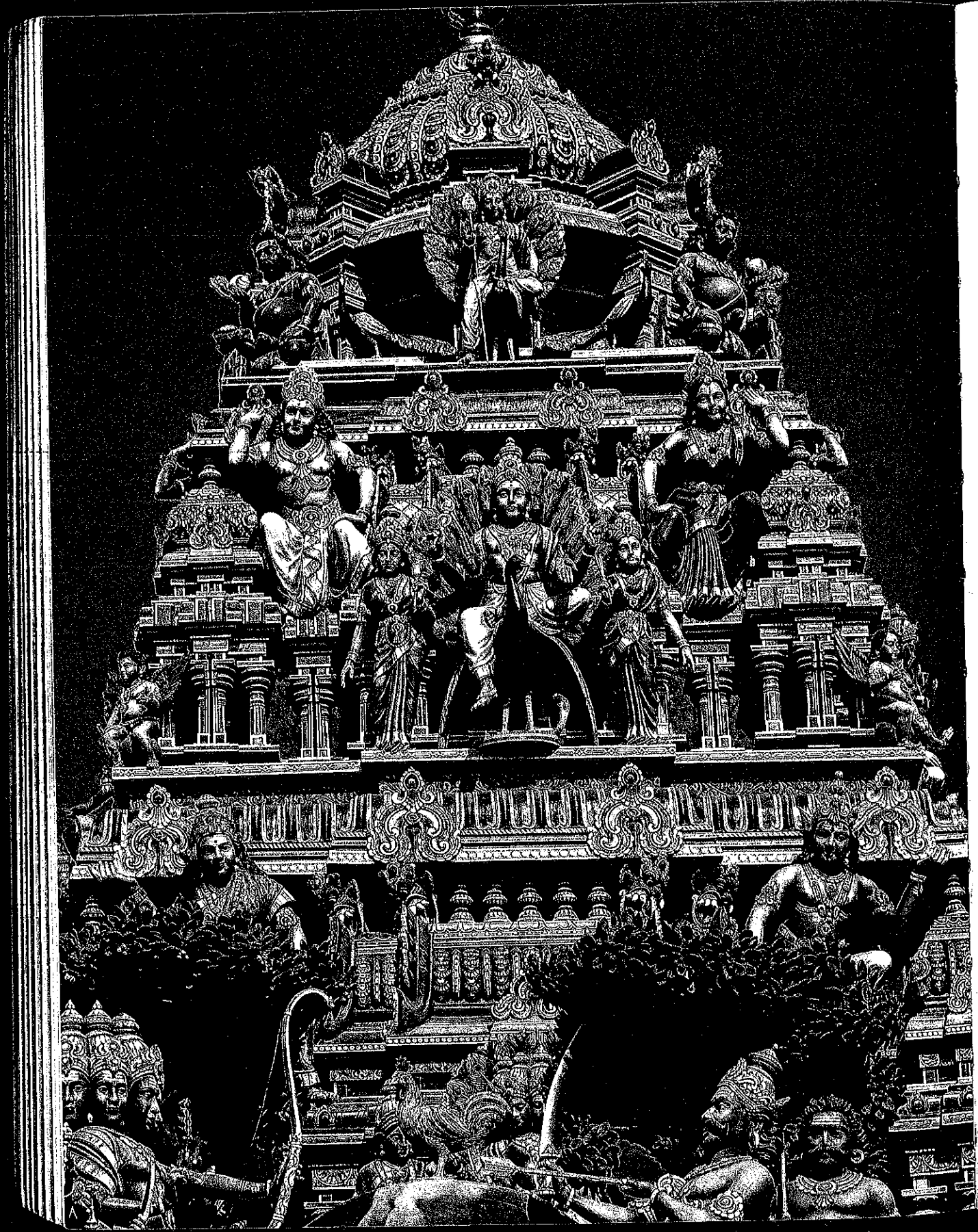

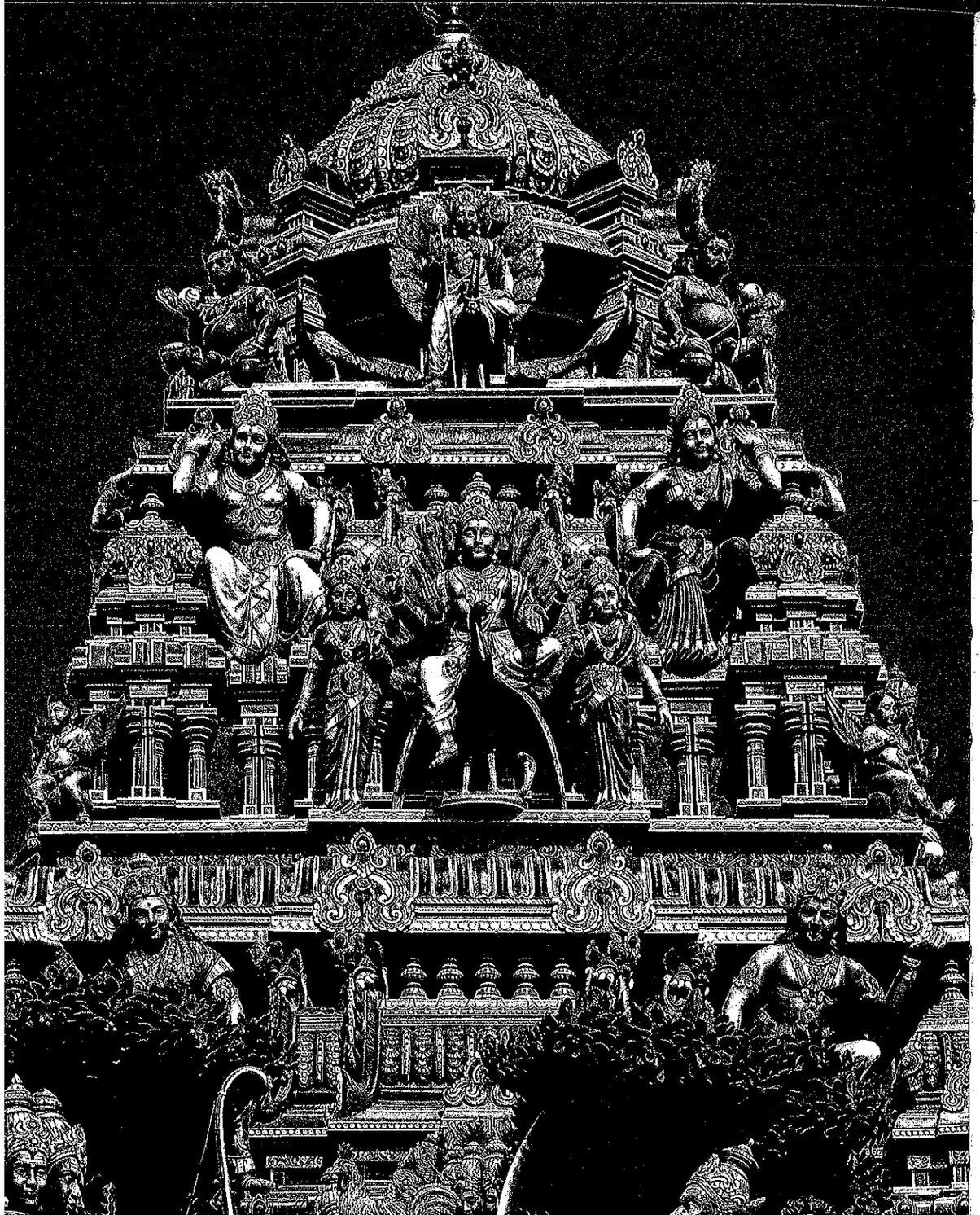

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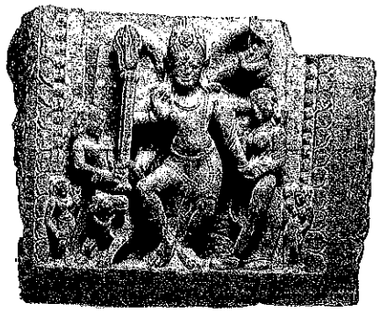
*Chapter Four*

# HINDUISM

*Vasudha Narayanan*



*A sandstone figure of ca. 800CE from Madhya Pradesh depicting the god Shiva in his important manifestation as Nataraja ("Lord of the Dance").*



OPPOSITE *Colorfully painted images of gods, goddesses, and other divine beings adorn the exterior of Kadirampuram temple, Hampi, in Karnataka province.*

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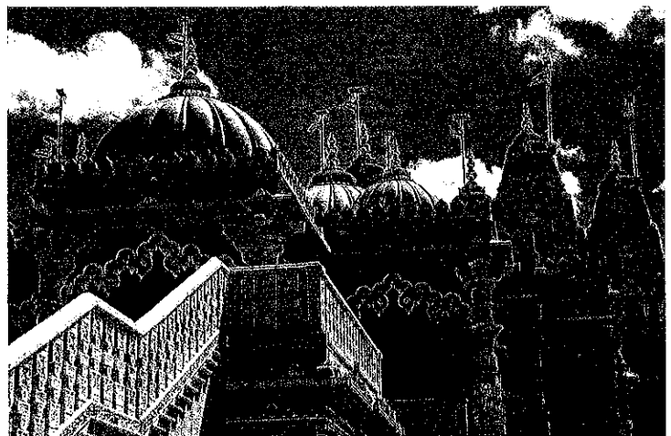
# INTRODUCTION

Eighty percent of India's population of almost one billion are Hindu, and there are Hindus in every part of the world today. Yet the term "Hinduism" is somewhat difficult to define. The religion has no single founder, creed, teacher, or prophet acknowledged by all Hindus as central to the religion, and no single holy book is universally acclaimed as being of primary importance.

The use of the word "Hindu" itself is complex. Both "India" and "Hindu" derive from *Sindhu*, the traditional name of the Indus river. In ancient inscriptions and documents, "Hindu" refers to the people of "Hind," the Indian subcontinent. In the Muslim-ruled empires of medieval India, it was used for all non-Muslim Indians, of whatever faith. Only after the late eighteenth century did the term come to refer to the dominant religion of the Indian people.

"Hinduism" is not a term most Hindus have applied to themselves in the past, or use with great specificity even now, although the term "Hindutva" ("Hinduness") has received political currency in recent years. Hindus identify themselves with reference to their caste, community, region, and language. The phrase *sanatana dharma* ("eternal faith") has become popular in the last two centuries, but it applies more to philosophical interpretations of the religion than to its colorful local manifestations. In early texts, *sanatana dharma* meant the ideal religious obligations of human beings, but did not express the idea of a faith community.

In Indian law, the term "Hindu" may even include those who belong to traditions usually thought of as theologically distinct from Hinduism. It is



*The Shree Swaminarayan Mandir temple at Neasden in London, England, serves one of the world's many substantial Hindu diaspora communities. Opened in 1995, it is the largest Hindu temple outside India.*

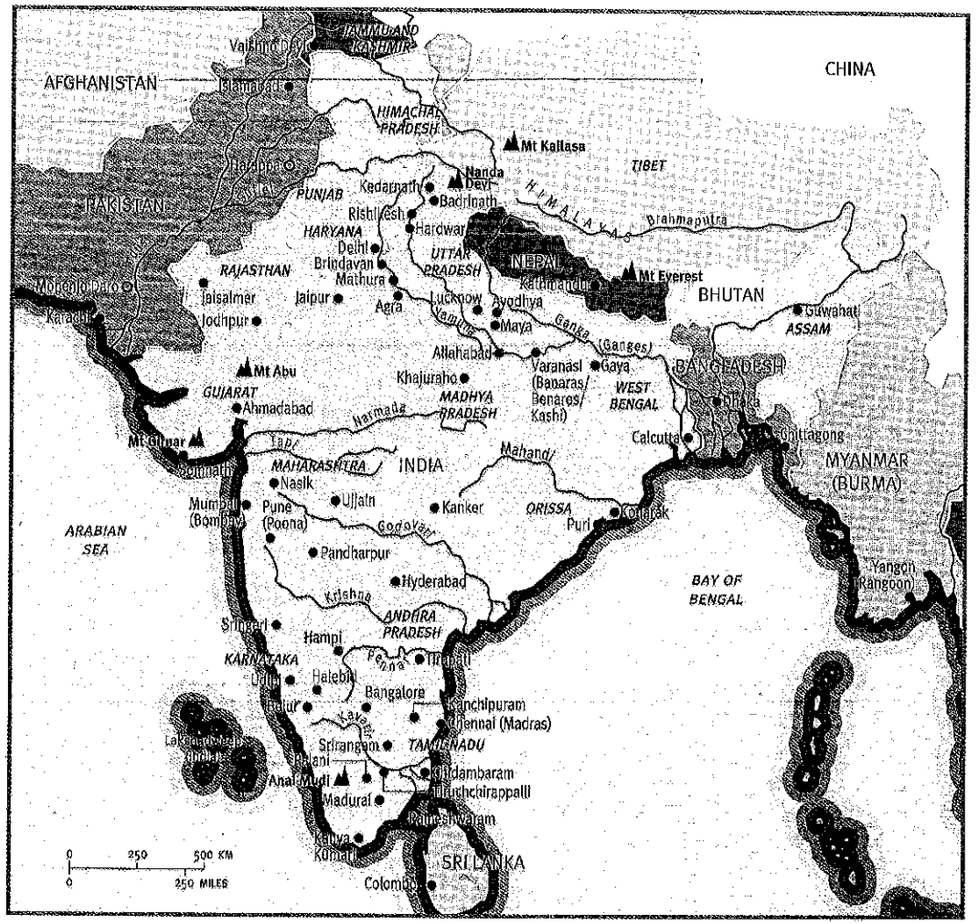


## HINDU SACRED SITES

This map indicates many of the major holy sites of Hinduism, including towns, mountains, and rivers. Most towns shown are sacred to one or more deities (such as Ayodhya, the birthplace of Rama); others, such as the Harappa cities, Ellora (the site of Hindu caves), and the temples of Khajuraho, are of historical rather than present-day significance. Other towns are marked for reference; but while they may possess no specific religious importance, most will possess a multitude of holy places, from temples to roadside shrines.

Key

- Hindu sacred site
- Other towns
- Sacred mountain
- Harappa civilization site



generally applied to anyone who lives in India and accepts the Hindu tradition—which is not defined—in any of its forms or developments. This therefore embraces Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs. The term also applies to anyone else who is not a Muslim, Christian, Parsi (Zoroastrian), or Jew.

On the other hand, "Hinduism" has been a problematic label even for some traditions that many people would generally consider to be Hindu. At different times several Indian sects and movements have gone to court to argue against their official "Hindu" status.

Hinduism has been portrayed in the last two centuries as being a more or less unified religion. However, it is important to note that there are hundreds of internal divisions created by caste, community, language, and geography. Regional manifestations of a deity or a local sacred text may sometimes be more significant to a particular group of worshippers than any pan-Hindu concept. Many such groups may extensively share common texts, deities, traditions, and patterns of ritual, even though they interpret them variously; but there may be other groups with whom they have very little in common. Yet there are also threads that run geographically throughout the subcontinent and historically across thousands of years. At certain times, therefore, it may be more useful to talk of many Hindu traditions, and at others, of one tradition.

Is Hinduism a religion, a culture, or as many Hindus would say, a way of life? It is all three, but what in the West might be viewed as the boundaries between the sacred and nonsacred spheres do not apply to the Hindu

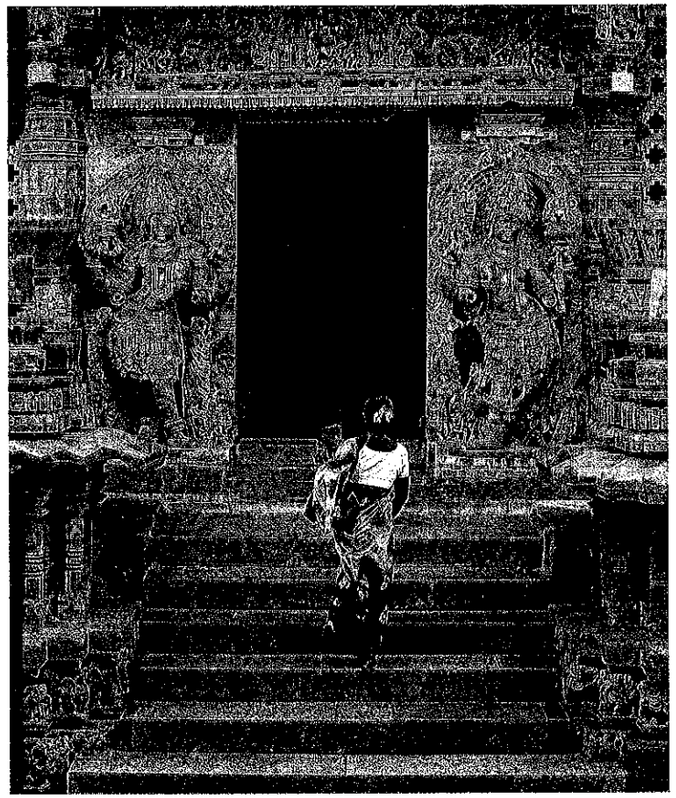
**CHRONOLOGY** *All dates are CE, except where stated*

ca. 3000–1750BCE • Indus Valley (Harappan) civilization
ca. 1500BCE • Aryan invasions of northern India
ca. 800BCE • Compilation of oral *Vedas*
ca. 600BCE • Production of the *Upanishads*
326BCE • Greek armies under Alexander the Great reach as far as India
ca. 272BCE • Accession of Mauryan emperor Ashoka
ca. 100BCE • Composition of *Bhagavad Gita*
ca. 200CE • Compilation of *Laws of Manu*
ca. 500 • Hindu Tantric tradition established
ca. 700 • *Alvars*, Tamil *bhakti* (devotional) poets, including Nammalvar, active
ca. 800 • Philosopher Shankara produces *Advaita Vedanta*, key work of nondualist philosophy
1137 • Death of Ramanuja, Vaishnava theistic philosopher
ca. 1175 • Life of the *bhakti* poet Jayadeva
1206 • Muslim sultanate established at Delhi
1450?–1547 • Life of Princess Mira, *bhakti* poet
1483–1530 • Reign of Babur, founder of the Mughal empire
1483–1563 • Life of Surdas, great Krishna devotee
1486–1583 • Death of Chaitanya, Bengali Vaishnava *bhakti* leader
1518 • Death of Kabir, north Indian *bhakti* poet
1543?–1623 • Life of Tulsidas, north Indian *bhakti* poet
1556–1605 • Reign of Mughal emperor Akbar
1757 • British rule established in Calcutta
1772–1833 • Life of Hindu reformer Ram Rohan Roy, founder of Brahmo Samaj ("Society of Brahman"), 1828
1824–83 • Life of Hindu reformer Dayananda Sarasvati, founder of Arya Samaj ("Society of Noble Ones"), 1875
1857–8 • Abolition of Mughal empire and establishment of direct British rule
1875 • H. Blavatsky and H. S. Olcott found Theosophical Society, drawing on Hinduism and Buddhism
1893 • Vivekananda, founder of Ramakrishna Mission, Hindu devotional order, attends World Parliament of Religions, Chicago
1914 • Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) founds first *ashram* (religious retreat) at Pondicherry
1920 • M. K. ("Mahatma") Gandhi (b.1869) launches anti-British campaign based on *ahimsa* (nonviolence)
1947 • India gains independence from Britain
1948 • Gandhi assassinated
1966 • A.C. Bhaktivedanta founds the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, New York
1992 • Hindu militants destroy 16th-century mosque at Ayodhya



traditions. While many Hindu holy texts and practices are intended to provide the devotee with spiritual paths to liberation from the repeated cycle of life and death, many other aspects of Hindu life and ritual do not lead directly to such transformation, but are perceived to enhance one's quality of life on earth. Thus such activities as tree-planting, singing, dancing, medicine, archery, astrology, sculpture, architecture, and building a home might all be considered part of the religious domain.

In studying the many Hindu traditions, therefore, the words "secular" and "sacred" have to be used with caution. More meaningful terms in a Hindu context are *dharma* and *moksha*. *Dharma*, a Sanskrit word from a root meaning "to sustain," is truth, righteousness, duty, law, and justice. *Moksha* literally means "liberation," that is, liberation from the cycle of life and death that every soul is believed to undergo (see pp.156–7) and which is repeated endlessly, until such time as the soul achieves liberation into a state of bliss. While not unique to Hinduism, the belief in this process is perhaps the one thing that all "Hindus" can be said to share.



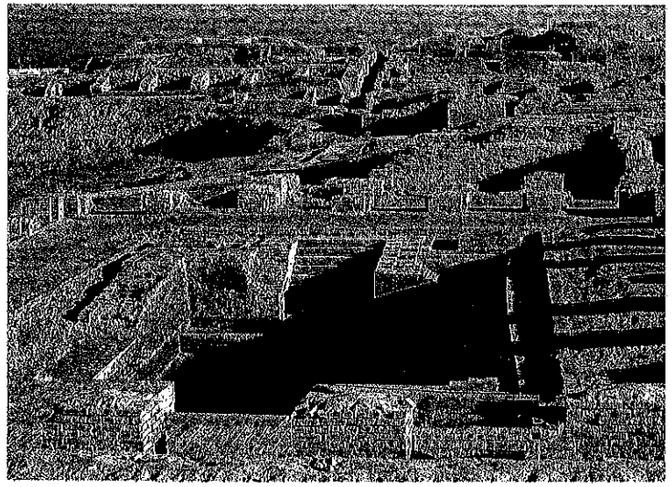
*A woman and child enter the Hoysala temple at Halebid, Karnataka. The temple is dedicated to Hoysaleshvara ("Lord of the Hoysala dynasty or people"), a regional manifestation of Vishnu, one of the great pan-Hindu gods.*

# FIVE MILLENNIA OF TRADITION

The Hindu tradition has no founder figure and cannot date its origin to a particular year or century. It is generally believed that its beginnings lie in the ancient indigenous culture of India and of the Indo-European people, who appeared in India some four thousand years ago. The stages of early Hindu history are marked not by remarkable personalities (although there must have been many) and great proselytizing movements, but rather by the composition of orally transmitted sacred texts expressing central concepts of what we now call Hinduism.

The earliest known Indian civilization existed ca. 3000–1750BCE in a broad area around the region of the Indus river and probably elsewhere. Entire cities have been excavated at Harappa and Mohenjo Daro. The people of this civilization (often called "Harappan") were literate but their script remains undeciphered. Some Harappan seals bear images of figures that share characteristics with the later Hindu deity Shiva. The "Great Bath," a huge pool complex at Mohenjo Daro incorporating porticos and side rooms, may have had a religious function. From such fragmentary evidence we can tentatively state that some features of the present-day Hindu religion may be nearly five thousand years old.

The Harappan culture was followed by the "Age of the *Vedas*," so called from the sacred compositions of the Indo-European people. It is widely held that Indo-Europeans moved into India from central Asia



*The remains of the "Great Bath" at the ancient Indus Valley site of Mohenjo Daro, Pakistan. Built of brick, the bath may have been a sacred pool for ritual ablutions, much like similar structures at later Hindu temples.*



ca. 2000BCE, although some scholars think that India was the original homeland. The work of archaeologists, anthropologists, and linguists suggests that it was a peaceful process, undertaken in pursuit of new lands to farm. The Indo-Europeans referred to themselves as "Aryans" or "Noble Ones." Their speech was the ancestor of the ancient Indian language of Sanskrit, which is closely related to all the other tongues referred to by linguists as "Indo-European," including Latin, Greek, and English.

In India, the Indo-Europeans composed many sacred poems and, later, entire manuals on rituals and philosophy. The earliest such compositions are known collectively as *Veda* (Sanskrit, "Knowledge") and form the core of India's ancient "proto-Hindu" Vedic religion (see box, below).

The sacrifice-based worldview of the early Vedic age gave way to philosophical inquiry and discussion in the later texts known as the *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads* (see p.138). These were composed around the early sixth

### VEDIC RELIGION

A dominant feature of religious life in the Vedic period was ritual sacrifice. Most rituals involved fire (see p.155) and were conducted by ritual specialists and priests who also supervised the making of altars and the recitation of hymns. Many sacrifices involved the use of *soma*, an intoxicating liquid.

Vedic religion perceived a delicate connection between the performance of rituals and the prevalence of *rita* ("truth," "justice," and "rightness"). *Rita* makes harmony and peace possible on earth and in the heavens and was upheld by early Vedic gods, such as Varuna. According to Vedic hymns composed before ca. 1000BCE, the world itself may have come into being through an act of cosmic sacrifice. One creation hymn explicitly mentions the beginnings of the social divisions referred to today as "caste" (see pp.158–60).

*An 18th-century CE manuscript of part of the* Rig Veda *("Wisdom of the Verses"), a collection of over 1,000 hymns to ancient Vedic gods that refer to various sacrificial rituals.*

century BCE, a time of great intellectual speculation, when Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha; see pp.168–71), Mahavira (the founder of Jainism), and others questioned and even rejected the authoritarian structures of traditional Indian religion, such as the religious leadership of the priestly caste (the *brahmins*), the caste system itself, and the status of the *Vedas* (see sidebar, left). The *Upanishads* seek liberation from the cycle of life and death and introduced the notion of immortality as reality. The ultimate quest of the Hindu tradition, as it subsequently developed, has been to achieve the immortality of the soul and, in this life, happiness and peace.

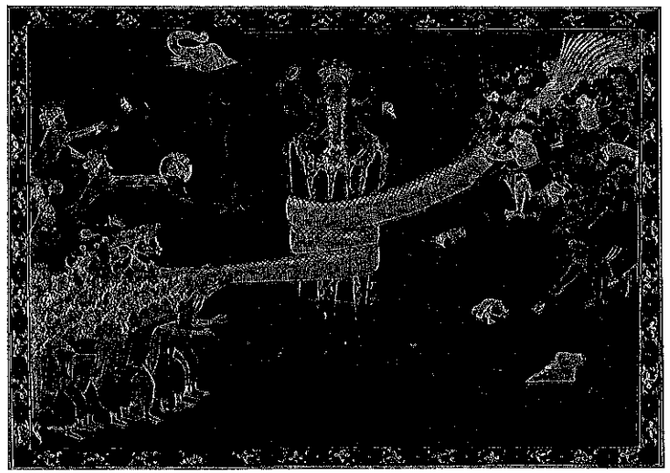
Most of the later literature in Sanskrit deals directly or indirectly with *dharma* (a word with multiple layers of meaning, including "righteous behavior," "truth," and "law"). The *Bhagavad Gita* emphasizes that *dharma* should be performed without expectation of reward but with devotion to one God. The "supreme being," conceived of in the *Upanishads* as *brahman*, an abstract concept (see pp.134–5), is referred to in the *Bhagavad Gita* as the deity Krishna or Vishnu. Devotionalism (*bhakti*)—the intensely personal worship of, and surrender to, this supreme being, whether it be manifest in the form of Vishnu, Shiva, the Goddess, or any other divine being (see pp.134–7)—has been one of the most common features of many Hindu communities in the last two millennia.

Two factors contributed to the spread of such devotion. One was the use of vernacular languages, rather than Sanskrit. The other was its appeal across all social classes. Some of the most famous devotional poet-saints, such as Nammalvar in the eighth century CE and Tukaram in the fifteenth, were perceived as being from very low castes. Yet their influence cut across all levels of a highly stratified society, their simplicity of

### HINDUISM, THE BUDDHA, AND MAHAVIRA

**The sophisticated philosophy of the *Upanishads* was contemporaneous with the spirit of critical enquiry in many parts of northern India. Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) and Mahavira the Jina ("Victorious One," whose followers are today's Jains) both challenged the notion that the *Vedas* were divine revelation. They, and others, relied on their own spiritual experiences to proclaim a path to liberation that was open to all, not just to the higher castes of society.**

**Both Siddhartha and Mahavira emphasized nonviolence (*ahimsa*), and this virtue has been very significant in Hinduism and many other south Asian traditions. In modern times, it informed the strategy of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (known as the Mahatma or "Great Soul"), who led India's struggle for independence in the twentieth century.**



*An 18th-century miniature illustrating an ancient Hindu creation story in which the god Vishnu (center) presides over the churning of a vast primordial ocean of milk to produce the sacred liquid called* soma. *To turn the great churning-paddle, deities (left) and demons (right) pull the head and tail of a cosmic serpent.*



### HINDU REFORMERS

Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) was born into an orthodox *brahmin* family, but became familiar with Western social life and the Christian scriptures, and met members of the Unitarian movement. Following his study of the *Upanishads* (see p.138) and other texts, Roy came to the conclusion that certain Hindu practices were not part of "classical" Hinduism. In 1828, he established a society to debate the nature of *brahman*, the supreme being (see p.135). This organization came to be called the Brahmo Samaj ("Society of Brahman").

Roy translated some of the *Upanishads* and other Sanskrit texts and distributed them for free. An educational pioneer, he also set up new periodicals and teaching institutions, and worked to improve the status of Hindu women.

Dayananda Sarasvati (1824–83) considered only the early hymns of the *Rig Veda* (see p.131) to be the true scripture. He was impressed by the joy of living they expressed and their concern for the individual, the family, and the community. In 1875 Dayananda founded the Arya Samaj ("Society of the Noble Ones"). It was based on the teachings of the *Rig Veda* and advocated a life of education and vigorous work. For him, the ideal person served other human beings and thus lived a full life, not one of renunciation. A good society, he asserted, is one in which people work to uplift humanity; this in itself leads to the welfare of body and soul.

worship appealing to the élite and masses alike. Other popular *bhakti* poets came from a wealthier social milieu. One of the most famous, Mira (1450?–1547CE), was a Gujarati princess who wrote passionate poetry about her love for the god Krishna. According to some legends, at the end of her life Mira merged with Krishna's icon in a temple.

The sixteenth century saw the emergence of Sikhism under its Gurus, beginning with Guru Nanak (1469–1539), and the zenith of the Muslim-ruled Mughal empire under the emperor Akbar and his successors (see sidebar, right). In this period, the Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French began to establish trading settlements in India. In time, as Mughal power disintegrated, their agenda came to include the possession of territory, and in the eighteenth century large parts of the subcontinent became loosely unified under British control. Many social and religious practices of the Hindus—in particular "idolatry" and the caste system—came in for severe criticism from European missionaries and others, and some practices, such as *sati* (the cremation of widows with their husbands), were banned. One response to external criticism came in the shape of reform movements that arose within Hinduism in the early modern period (see box, above).

The many traditions that make up the tapestry of Hinduism continue to flourish in the diaspora. Hindus who migrated to southeast Asia in the first millennium CE sought to transmit their culture through the building of the great temples of Cambodia and Java. Similarly, Hindu emigrés to Britain and the United States in the past few decades have sought to perpetuate their culture into the next millennium through the religious and cultural nuclei of their own community temples.

### HINDUISM UNDER THE MUGHALS

**Five centuries ago, much of India's Hindu population came to be governed by the Mughals ("Mongols"), a Muslim dynasty of central Asian origin. However, the social and the doctrinal gulf that existed between Hinduism and Islam could be transcended by devotional spirituality. Hindu devotionalism (see main text) had its counterpart in Islam's own mystical tradition, Sufism (see pp.101–3). Where Hindus lived in contact with Muslims, their piety could be seen as having much in common.**

**The tolerant rule of the emperor Akbar (1556–1605) even led to attempts to synthesize the two faiths, or at least identify their common ground, notably by Akbar himself and Prince Dara Shikoh, a son of the emperor Shah Jehan (ruled 1627–58). Dara Shikoh was executed by his brother, Aurangzeb (ruled 1658–1707), whose reign brought a return to strict Islamic orthodoxy at the Mughal court.**

# GODS AND GODDESSES

### SACRED IMAGES

Hindus worship the supreme being in temples in the form of an "image," a word often used (together with "idol") to translate the Sanskrit *murti*, which, however, is more accurately rendered as "form," "embodiment," or "incarnation." Most Hindus think of a sacred image as an actual incarnation of the supreme being, a form taken by the godhead in order to receive worship.

During a consecration ritual called *prana pratishta* ("establishment of life"), an image ceases to be gross matter and becomes an actual presence or incarnation of divinity on earth. The divine spirit is believed to remain in the icon for as long as devotees wish.

The towns and cities of India may have dozens of temples and shrines dedicated to many deities. But images of gods and goddesses are also prominently displayed in stores, hospitals, government offices, and on altars and shrines in Hindu homes.

Hindus may acknowledge many deities, but consider only one to be supreme; or they may consider all gods and goddesses equal, but worship one who is their favorite. However, most Hindus view all divinities to be manifestations of a single godhead. For many, to say that this God is male or female, one or many, is to limit it, to impose human ideas of gender and number on the divine.

The *Upanishads*, Hindu sacred texts composed ca. 600BCE (see p.138), refer to the supreme being as *brahman*, which is considered to be ineffable and beyond all human comprehension (see sidebar, opposite). However, the texts called the *Puranas* ("Ancient [Lore]") claim that this divine entity assumes a form and name to make itself accessible to humankind. Hence Hindus speak of the supreme being as both *nirguna* ("without attributes") and *saguna* ("with attributes," such as grace and mercy). Texts identify the supreme being variously as Vishnu ("All-Pervasive"), Shiva ("Auspicious One"), or the Goddess in one of her many manifestations, such as Shakti ("Energy"), Durga, and Kali (see box, opposite).

Although Vishnu, Shiva, and the Goddess are the most important deities in Hindu texts, other very popular deities include the elephant-headed Ganesha (a son of Parvati), Kartikkeya/Murugan (a son of Shiva), and Hanuman (a divine monkey-devotee of Rama, an incarnation of Vishnu). Many roadside shrines are dedicated to Ganesha and Hanuman. Ganesha is depicted as riding a mouse and is also called Vigneshwara ("He who overcomes all obstacles"). Hindus worship him before embarking on any task, project, or journey.

Gods and goddesses all have their own iconographic characteristics, and every position of the hands or feet, every associated animal, plant, or bird, has a special significance. Many deities have several hands, each carrying a weapon or a flower to protect his or her devotees from harm. Some Hindus interpret the numerous arms of a deity as representing omnipotence. Most deities are associated with one or more animals or with birds. Although sacred texts give specific mythological reasons for

### THE DIVINE FEMALE

Hindus have continuously venerated the divine in female form—very often referred to simply as the Goddess—for over two thousand years. The tradition may even go back to the pre-Hindu Harappan civilization (see p.130). The Goddess, sometimes called Devi in Sanskrit literature, is usually seen as a manifestation of Parvati, the wife of Shiva. As a beneficent deity, she is frequently called Amba or Ambika ("Little Mother"), and is widely venerated as Shri or Lakshmi (see p.136). As Kali, the Goddess is dark, dishevelled, and awe-inspiring, with a necklace of skulls. Even in this form, she is called "mother" by her devotees.

As a warrior goddess, she is Durga, depicted with a smiling countenance but wielding an array of weapons. Durga, riding a tiger or lion, is one of the most popular goddesses in India. Strong and beautiful, the weapons in her hand show her readiness to assist her devotees. In one celebrated story, she manifests herself with the energies of all other deities in order to combat a buffalo-demon, Mahisa Asura. She emerges victorious after nine nights of struggle, commemorated by the festival of Navaratri ("Nine Nights") in the fall (see p.153).

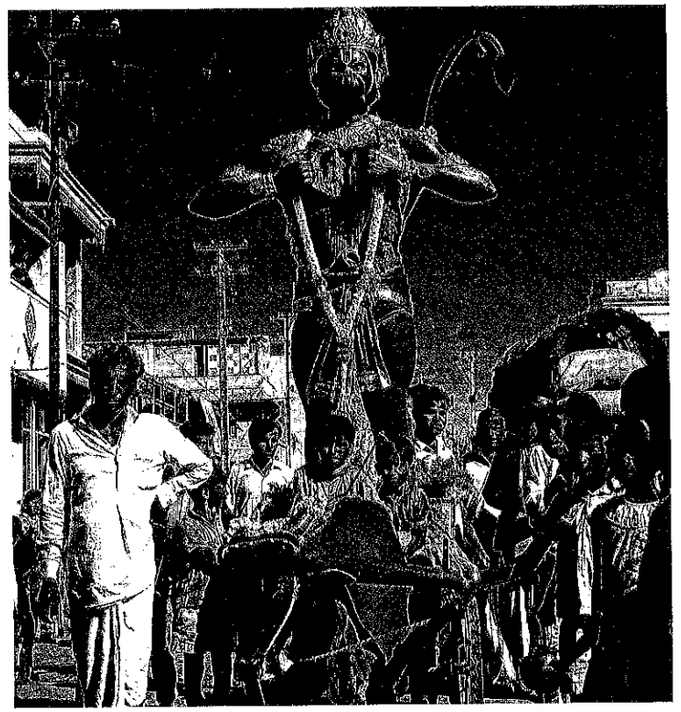
There are many other goddesses throughout India. In some regions a goddess may be known only by a local name and celebrated in stories with a local setting; elsewhere she may be identified with a pan-Hindu goddess. Some communities may offer animal sacrifices to their local village goddesses or Kali.

*An 18th-century painting of the fearsome—but much adored—goddess Kali bestride the god Shiva, a popular image that represents the union of the female and male divine principles.*

### *BRAHMAN* AND HIGHER WISDOM

For centuries the definition of *brahman*—the supreme being, according to the *Upanishads*—has been the subject of intense speculation. *Brahman*, according to the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, is truth (*satya*), knowledge (*jñana*), and infinity (*ananta*). Beyond this, all that can be expressed about *brahman* is that it is existence (*sat*), consciousness (*chit*), and bliss (*ananda*). Ultimately, *brahman* cannot be described, since to describe is to confine, and with the infinite, this is impossible. The sage Yajñavalkya said that one may come close to describing *brahman* only by stating what it is not.

A similar difficulty surrounds any definition of the relationship between *brahman* and *atman* (the human soul). In a famous dialogue in the *Chandogya Upanishad*, a father asks his son to dissolve salt in water. He says that *brahman* and *atman* are united in a similar manner and ends his teaching with a famous dictum: *"Tat twam asi"* (Sanskrit, "You are that"). "That" (*tat*) refers to *brahman* and "you" (*twam*) to *atman*. The philosopher Shankara (eighth century CE) believed this statement to imply that *brahman* and *atman* are identical. But Ramanuja (eleventh century CE) saw it as indicating that *brahman* and *atman* are inseparable, but not identical.



*A statue of the monkey-deity Hanuman is paraded through Mysore during a festival. The deity is shown tearing open his breast to reveal his beloved Rama and Sita (see p.138) in his heart.*

### THE DIVINE IN NATURE

**Many Hindus attribute divine status to natural features and phenomena. For example, the rivers Ganga (Ganges), Kaveri, Yamuna, and others are personified and worshipped as mother goddesses. Hindus also revere heavenly bodies and propitiate the *navagraha* ("nine planets"—the sun, the moon, Venus, Mercury, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, and two mythical entities called Rahu and Ketu) in rituals. Many temples in south India and in the diaspora incorporate images of the planets.**

their presence, believers may understand them more metaphorically. Thus Ganesha's elephant head and mouse companion represent his power to overcome hindrances: an elephant crushes large obstacles, and a mouse gnaws through little ones. Like Ganesha, many deities have specific functions, so a person may worship one god or goddess in order to achieve success in their career, another to cure illness, and so on.

In addition to the pan-Hindu deities, there are many local gods and goddesses who may have distinctive histories and functions. Many are regarded as local incarnations of the great divinities. Thus Vishnu is known in many parts of south India by specifically regional names.

Devotees of a deity may perceive him or her to be the supreme being. Some early writings express the idea of a divine trinity (*trimurti*) of Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver), and Shiva (the destroyer), but this concept was never widely popular. In time, Brahma became marginal and the functions of creation, preservation, and destruction were combined in one deity—either Vishnu, Shiva, or Devi (the Goddess), depending on the individual devotee.

The manifold aspects of Shiva's power are expressed in his often paradoxical roles: he is both threatening and benevolent, creator and destroyer, exuberant dancer and austere *yogi*, lone ascetic and husband of the goddess Parvati. Stories of his powers of salvation present him as granting wisdom and grace to his devotees. Iconographically, Shiva and Parvati are portrayed in the abstract form of a shaft (*linga*) within a womb (*yoni*), which represent their creative powers.

*An image of Shri-Lakshmi among other deities on a domestic altar decorated for the Dipavali festival (see pp.152–3).*

### SHRI, THE GRACIOUS GODDESS

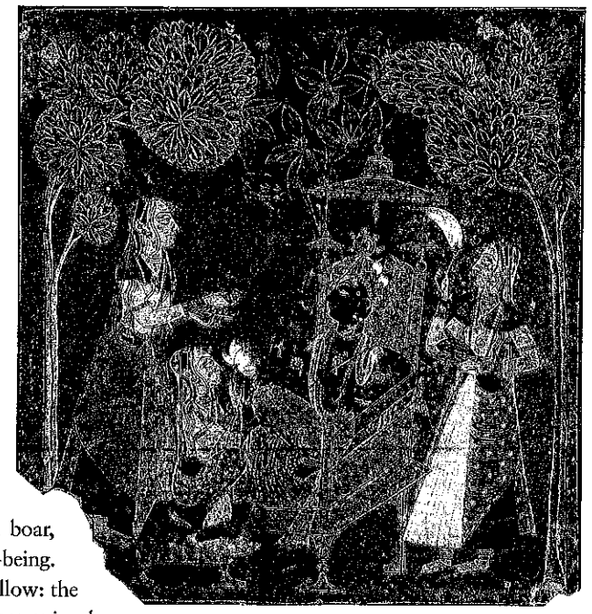
Perhaps the best known manifestation of the Goddess in the Hindu and Jain traditions is Shri, more popularly known as Lakshmi. She is the goddess of wealth and good fortune and her picture graces millions of homes, shops, and businesses. Shri-Lakshmi is called the mother of all creation, bestower of wisdom and salvation and grace incarnate. Many teachers have composed hymns celebrating her compassion and wisdom. She brings good fortune on this earth, but above all she is instrumental in granting liberation from the cycle of life and death.

Lakshmi is said to bestow wealth and saving grace just by glancing at a person. One of her hands points to the ground in what Hinduism refers to as the *varada* ("giving") position. In Hindu art, she may be portrayed giving wealth to her devotees, with a shower of gold coins emanating from her hand. The other hand may be held upright, denoting her protection of the devotee. While she is depicted as an independent goddess, and has her own shrine in many temples, she is often also portrayed as the inseparable consort of Vishnu.

Shri-Lakshmi is persistently associated with the lotus. She is all-pervasive, latent in everything, but manifests herself only in auspicious places, of which the lotus is a great example. She may be depicted holding these flowers, and is said to dwell on a resplendent lotus or even in "a forest of lotuses." She shares their hue and their fragrance: the scent of the lotus is as inseparable from its source as Shri's grace is from the goddess. The flower reminds humans of how to regard their relationship to the world: it rises from mud and dirty water, yet is never tainted by them.



Vishnu is portrayed as having several incarnations, or *avatars* (Sanskrit *avatara*, "descent"). It is believed that over the ages he has descended to earth several times in animal and human form to overthrow evil and establish *dharma*, or righteousness. By the fifth century CE, ten incarnations had come to be considered the most important. Vishnu's first *avatar* was as a fish that saved Manu (the progenitor of the human race), his family, and many animals from a flood. Vishnu was subsequently incarnated as a tortoise, a boar, a creature half lion and half man, and a dwarf-being.



*Krishna among the cowherd maidens. A painting of ca. 1710.*

The fully human incarnations of Vishnu follow: the warrior Parasurama; Rama (the hero of a great epic, the *Ramayana*; see p.138); Balarama; and Krishna. It is believed that the tenth incarnation will come at the end of the present world age, which according to some reckonings began ca. 3102BCE and will last 432,000 years. Some texts omit Balarama and introduce the Buddha as the ninth incarnation, after Krishna. The progression of the incarnations from fish to full human is understood by some Hindus today as anticipating evolutionary theory. But the more prevalent explanation is that Vishnu takes the form most suited for the crisis on hand.

Vishnu's ninth incarnation, Krishna ("the Dark One"), is one of the most popular Hindu gods, celebrated in folksongs, narratives (such as the *Bhagavad Gita*; see p.139), sculpture, painting, and performance. While Krishna is generally perceived to be an incarnation of Vishnu, several traditions, such as that of Chaitanya and the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (see sidebar, right) think of him as the supreme deity. To some extent, most Hindus accept Krishna's supremacy among the incarnations of Vishnu, considering him to be what is termed the "full" descent of the deity, the lord of grace, mercy, and peace. Krishna is also the alluring lover, dancing moonlit nights away with adoring *gopis* (cowherd maidens). Their dances are reenacted in many communities: the Gujarati *raas lila* dances are particularly renowned. Sanskrit texts such as Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* (twelfth century CE) identify the *gopi* Radha as Krishna's lover, and the two are commonly depicted together (see illustration, p.141).

### "KRISHNA CONSCIOUSNESS"

**In 1966 A. C. Bhaktivedanta (born Abhaycharan De, 1896–1977) launched the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) in New York. Both its theology, attributing divine grace to Krishna, and its emotive, devotional chanting, may be traced back directly to the great *guru* Chaitanya (1486–1583). Members of ISKCON study the *Bhagavad Gita* (see p.139) and the stories of Vishnu in the *Bhagavata Purana*. The name "Hare Krishnas," often given to ISKCON members in the West, derives from their practice of chanting the devotional *mantra* "*hare Krishna, hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, hare hare*" ("hail to Krishna").**

**ISKCON followers are vegetarians and also avoid garlic, onions, and other foods considered impure in Vaishnava ("Vishnu-following") traditions.**

### THE *RAMAYANA*

This great epic focuses on the young prince Rama, who is born in Ayodhya, the capital of the Kosala kingdom. On the eve of his coronation, his father Dasaratha exiles him. In the forest, Sita, the beautiful wife of Rama, is captured by Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, and the epic focuses on Rama's struggle to win her back. After a protracted battle, Rama kills Ravana and is reunited with Sita. They eventually return to Ayodhya and are crowned.

Revered as the seventh incarnation of Vishnu (see p.137), Rama is held to be an ideal just king. While many Hindus have traditionally viewed Sita as the perfect wife who follows her husband into exile, others see her as a model of strength and virtue. She complies with her husband as he does with her, and their love is worthy of emulation. Yet she also stands her ground when asked by Rama to prove her virtue. Once, in Lanka, she acquiesces, but the second time, in the act of proving her purity, she rules out any possibility of a reunion—she asks Mother Earth to swallow her up if she is pure.

There have been many vernacular versions of the *Ramayana*, and the story has been understood in many ways. In one thirteenth-century interpretation, Sita voluntarily undergoes captivity and suffering to rescue other human beings and the world from evil. In a metaphorical reading, the human soul (Sita) is captured by the material body (Ravana), which is defeated by Rama, who saves the soul from the clutches of the senses. Some versions of the tale, called the *Sitayana*, tell the story from Sita's viewpoint.

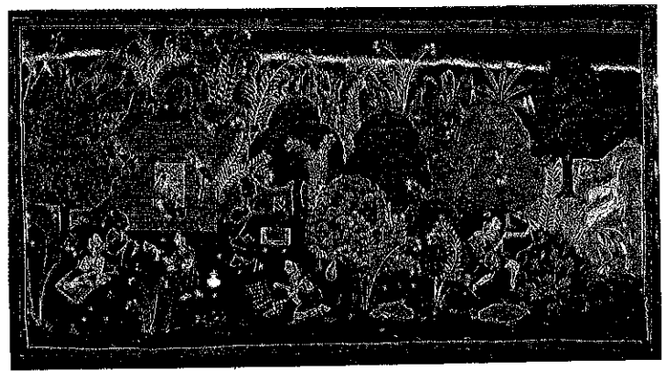
# WORDS OF DEVOTION

The oldest Indian sacred texts are the *Vedas*, first collected ca. 800BCE, although some are centuries older in origin (see p.131). Each of the four Vedic collections (*Rig Veda*, *Sama Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, and *Atharva Veda*) comprises hymns and ritual treatises, together with *Aranyakas* ("Compositions for the Forest") and *Upanishads* ("Sitting Near [the Teacher]"), philosophical works composed ca. 600BCE or a little later.

Many Hindu traditions consider the *Vedas* to be transhuman, that is, not authored by human beings. They are said to be eternal in nature and revealed in every cycle of time. The Vedic reciters, or "seers" (*rishis*), did not invent or compose the *Vedas*; they "saw," or "envisaged," them. For centuries, to write the early Vedic texts down was considered defiling and hence taboo. The seers transmitted them to their disciples, starting an oral tradition that has come down to the present. The order of the sacred words must remain fixed, and committing them to memory is an elaborate and disciplined process involving the use of many mnemonic devices to ensure accurate pronunciation, rhythm, and diction.

The Vedic corpus was followed by a body of works called *smriti* or "remembered" literature. Although of human authorship, *smriti* was nonetheless considered inspired, and while of lesser authority than the *Vedas*, it has played a far more important role in the lives of the Hindus over the last two and a half millennia. The *smriti* is sometimes divided into the categories of epics, ancient stories (*Puranas*), and codes of law and ethics (*dharmashastras*; see p.159).

The two *smriti* epics, the *Ramayana* ("Story of Rama"; see sidebar, left) and the *Mahabharata* ("Great Epic of India" or, alternatively, "Great Sons of Bharata"; see sidebar, opposite), are the best known works of the Hindu tradition. They have been interpreted, commented upon, and enjoyed for over two thousand years and form the heart of Hindu sacred literature. Their popularity down the centuries has cut across sectarian and social divisions, and for children, the narration of the epics is invariably their first and most lasting encounter with Hindu scripture. For many Hindus, the phrase "sacred books" connotes these epics in particular. The *Ramayana* especially has been a source of inspiration for generations of devotees in India and in many parts of the world. When the epic was televised in sixty weekly episodes, it drew the largest audience in the history of Indian television. The *Ramayana* is danced out and acted in places of Hindu (and Buddhist) cultural influence in southeast Asia, and its characters are well known as far away as Thailand and Indonesia.



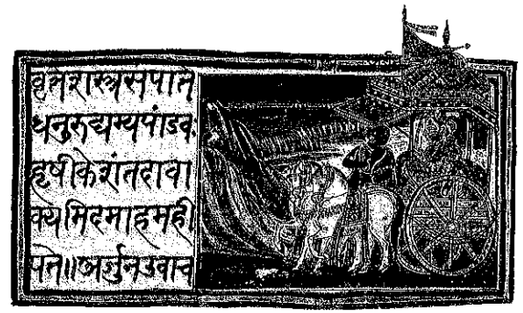
*An illustration to the* Ramayana *from Rajasthan showing various incidents in the life of Rama and Sita during their exile in the forest.*

The epics and the *Puranas* are written in Sanskrit, the ancient "perfected" language, which, rather like Latin for many centuries in Europe, was largely the province of male members of the social élites. However, in India, men and women of other castes voiced their devotional passion and quest for divine compassion in local tongues. Today, India has over eighteen official languages and hundreds of dialects, and many of them have a long and rich history of religious literature.



### THE *BHAGAVAD GITA*

One of the holiest books in the Hindu tradition is the *Bhagavad Gita* ("Song of the Blessed One"), or the *Gita* for short. Just as the war of the *Mahabharata* (see sidebar, below) is about to begin, Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers and hitherto portrayed as a hero who has emerged victorious from several battles, becomes distressed at the thought of having to fight against his cousins, uncles, and other relatives.



*Krishna (left) converses with Arjuna in his chariot in this illustration to a 19th-century manuscript of the* Bhagavad Gita.

Putting down his bow, Arjuna asks his cousin Krishna (who is now portrayed as an incarnation of Vishnu) whether it is correct to fight a war in which many lives, especially of one's own kin, are to be lost. Krishna replies in the affirmative: it is correct if we fight for what is right. One must fight for righteousness (*dharma*) after trying peaceful means. The conversation on the field of battle between Krishna and Arjuna takes up about eighteen chapters. It is these that constitute the *Bhagavad Gita*.

The *Gita* speaks of loving devotion to the lord and the importance of selfless action. In the *Gita*, Krishna instructs Arjuna—who is generally understood to represent any human soul who seeks spiritual guidance—on the nature of the soul, God, and how one can reach liberation.

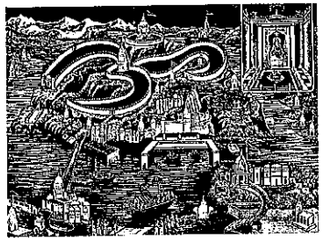
One may reach Vishnu/Krishna/God through devotion, knowledge, or selfless action. Later interpreters think of these as three paths, while other commentators consider them to be three aspects of the one path of loving surrender to the supreme being.

### THE *MAHABHARATA*

With around one hundred thousand verses, the *Mahabharata* is considered the world's longest poem. It is the story of the great struggle among the descendants of a king called Bharata (whose name is used by many Indians to mean "India").

The main part of the story deals with a war between two families, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The Kauravas try to cheat the Pandavas out of their share of Bharat's kingdom, and a great battle ensues that forces every kingdom to take sides. The Pandavas emerge victorious, but at great cost—all their sons and close relatives die in the battle.

Few Hindu households will have the complete *Mahabharata*, but many will have a copy of one celebrated episode, the *Bhagavad Gita* (see box, above).



*In this modern poster of the temple complex on Omkareshvera island on a lake in northern India, the roads (in red) take the form of the written syllable* Om.

### OM: THE SACRED SYLLABLE

**The syllable *om* is recited at the beginning and end of all Hindu and Jain prayers and recitations of scripture, and is also used by Buddhists, particularly in Tibet. *Om* is understood to consist of three sounds, *a-u-m*. The sound of the word begins deep within the body and ends at the lips; this is claimed to be auspicious.**

**The history of *om* in Hinduism is ancient, and its meaning and power are discussed in the *Upanishads*. All Hindus believe that *om* is the most sacred sound, but they disagree on its meaning. Some derive the word from a Sanskrit verbal root, *av-*, to mean "that which protects." It is said to represent the supreme reality or *brahman*. According to many Hindu philosophers, *om* was the first sound and contains the essence of true knowledge. Some say that its three sounds represent the three worlds: earth, atmosphere, and heaven; for others they represent the essence of three of the *Vedas* (*Rig Veda*, *Yajur Veda*, and *Sama Veda*; see p.138). Among Vaishnavas (Vishnu devotees) it is claimed variously that *a-u-m* represents Vishnu, the human being, and the relationship between the two; or Vishnu, Shri, and the devotee.**

As early as the sixth century BCE, Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) and Mahavira, the founder of the Jain tradition (see p.132), had rejected Sanskrit and started to address their followers in the vernacular language. However, the devotees of the *Vedas* and the epics—people whom we call Hindu today—retained Sanskrit as the medium for religious communication until well into the Common Era.

The earliest Hindu religious texts in a vernacular language are in Tamil, a south Indian language spoken by about seventy-five million people today. A sophisticated body of literature in Tamil existed two thousand years ago. The oldest works, usually referred to as *Sangam* ("Academy") poems, are secular texts about kings and chivalry or love and romance. These became the model for later devotional literature, where the deity was cast in the role of a ruler and lover.

The Hindu *bhakti* (devotional) movement began in south India around the sixth century CE. Saints traveled from temple to temple singing hymns in Tamil (language not related to Sanskrit) in praise of Vishnu or Shiva. These hymns, Hinduism's earliest sacred works in the vernacular, draw on earlier Tamil poetry and address the deity in highly personal, intimate, and tender language. In the vernacular literature, Vishnu and his incarnations (see p.137) and Shiva are cast in several roles by the devotee, who considers the deity to be a father or mother, lover, bridegroom, protector, innermost soul. Often the deity is even portrayed as a young child, to whom the devotee sings with maternal love.

After the tenth century, Tamil devotional poems were introduced into temple liturgy in Tamil-speaking areas and were regarded as equivalent in status to the Sanskrit *Vedas*. Devotionalism spread to the west and north of India after the eleventh century CE, transmitted through sacred texts such as the *Bhagavata Purana* as well as the figure of Ramananda (1299?–1400), a famous and influential Hindu saint and charismatic. In the thirteenth century, the poet Jñaneshvar discussed the ideals of the *Bhagavad Gita* in a famous treatise that bears his name, the *Jñaneshvari*, composed in Marathi, the language of the Maharashtra region.

Two features contributed to the spread of vernacular devotion. One was the use of contemporary living languages. The second was its appeal across all social classes, as demonstrated by the "low" caste devotional poet Tukaram (1598–1649) and the "high" caste Princess Mira (1450?–1547). Mira composed hundreds of songs which remain very popular and are sung in homes and at shrines in India and the diaspora.

One of the most celebrated poets of northern India was Surdas (ca. 1483–1563), a blind singer and poet who settled just south of Delhi near Agra. He composed in a dialect of Hindi. In his *Sursagar*, the youthful Krishna is celebrated in lyrics popular among many Hindus.

Puri, in Orissa to the east, is famous as the setting of the annual Jagannatha street procession featuring a massive float or wheeled cart (whence the word "juggernaut"). Probably associated with this cult was the poet Jayadeva (ca. 1175CE?), author of the Sanskrit *Gita Govinda*, a famous work extolling the love of Radha and Krishna. However, later eastern Indian Krishna devotees wrote in the local language, Bengali.

Another important vernacular devotional writer was Tulsidas (1543?–1623), who settled in Varanasi. His *Lake of the Deeds of Rama* was more than a recounting or translation of the *Ramayana*. Its widely known verses have their own beauty, inspiring hundreds of traditional storytellers and millions of Rama devotees in Hindi-speaking areas.



### VERNACULAR WRITINGS AND VEDIC TRADITION

With the spread of the *bhakti* movement all over India (see main text), the status of Sanskrit works as scripture was diminished, since the presence of vernacular lyrics in temple liturgy challenged the orthodox claim that Sanskrit was the exclusive vehicle for revelation and theological communication. While some *brahmins* have always learned and hence kept alive large sections of the Sanskrit Vedic tradition, others may know only a few Sanskrit hymns. Almost all Hindus have heard the stories from the great epics, although they may not be able to read them in the original Sanskrit.

However, overwhelming numbers of Hindus can recite devotional verses written by Hindu saints in their own languages. The Hindi poems of Surdas on Krishna (see main text), the songs of Princess Mira, and the Tamil poems of Nammalvar and Andal (eighth–ninth centuries CE), may serve as scripture for a particular community. In this sense, vernacular poems and songs guide, inspire, console, and offer hope and wisdom to the mass of the faithful more directly than the *Vedas* and other Sanskrit writings.

This is not to say that the vernacular literature is considered to be at variance with the message of the *Vedas*. Rather, in most communities, there is a belief that the holy people who composed in the living tongues gathered the truth from the incomprehensible *Vedas* and made it accessible to everyone, inspiring devotion and hastening the attainment of divine, saving grace.

The vernacular *bhakti* poets came from different castes—one was apparently an outcaste—and were held up as ideal followers of the gods and goddesses they revered. The *bhakti* poets, venerated irrespective of their sex or caste, call into question the hierarchical caste system, which sometimes denied saving knowledge to the "lower" castes, women, and outcastes (see pp.159–61).

*Krishna plays the flute for his lover, Radha, in this illustration from an early 18th-century vernacular text from Himachal Pradesh. The couple's rapturous physical union became an important way of depicting the union between a human soul and the divine in later devotional poetry and classical dance. In the Hindi-dialect poems of Surdas (see main text), Krishna is a mischievous butter thief, but also a seductive flute player, who dances in the moonlight with Radha. Surdas celebrates Radha's affection for Krishna as a model of devotion, and his distinctive poetry served to reinforce Krishna veneration throughout northern India.*

### WOMEN *GURUS*: ANANDAMAYI MA

Many female *gurus* today have acquired a large following of devotees. Among the most famous is Anandamayi Ma (1896–1982), a Bengali, whose name means "Bliss-Filled Mother." She was married but led a celibate life, and her husband became her devotee. After a number of spiritual experiences, she heard an inner voice, telling her that she was divine and should bow to no one. Many charismatic teachers who do not come from a lineage of institutionalized *gurus* undergo a similar transforming experience.

Anandamayi Ma attracted thousands of followers who saw her not simply as a *guru*, but as a manifestation of the Goddess: one disciple recalled seeing her as a beautiful deity, illuminating a room like the sun at dawn. While she did not explicitly manifest magical phenomena, her devotees saw her as quietly working miracles for their own good.

# TEACHERS AND LEADERS

Indians of the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions have long looked to holy men and women to instruct them on how to attain peace in this lifetime and, eventually, liberation from the cycle of life and death (see pp.156–7). For many Hindus, the primary religious experience is mediated by a teacher who may be called *acharya, guru,* or *swami*. The term *acharya* usually denotes the formal head of a monastery, sect, or subsect, or a teacher who initiates a disciple into a movement. Sometimes the word is used simply as a synonym for *guru*, which, like *swami* ("master"), is a looser and more widespread word for any religious teacher. For many Hindus, the paradigmatic *guru* is the god Krishna, who instructs his cousin Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita* (see p.139). For others, Shiva (see pp.135–7) is the ultimate *guru*. As well as teachers, there are thousands of ascetics, individuals possessed by a deity or spirit, mediums, storytellers, and *sadhus* ("holy men"), who all command the veneration and sometimes obedience of their followers.

Each of the many Hindu philosophical traditions forms a distinct sect and has its own leader. At any given time there are many influential theologians, and new sects with substantial followings arise under the inspiration of charismatic *gurus* (see box, below) in almost every generation. Often the leadership of such schools has passed from teacher to teacher in a line of succession that has continued for centuries down to the present day. This is the case with, for example, the schools founded by Shankara (ca. 800CE; see sidebar, right), Ramanuja (eleventh century), Madhva (thirteenth century), and Chaitanya (sixteenth century). Schisms often occur in such communities, with complementary or competing leaders vying for the loyalty of the disciples. In the Ramanuja school, as part of a complex initiation ritual, the leader brands a new member lightly on the shoulders and gives him or her a new name and a personal *mantra* for meditation. However, membership in other devotional communities may be much more informal.

In the *Taittiriya Upanishad*, a departing student is exhorted to consider his mother and father as God, and also his teacher; this placing of spiritual teachers on a par with the godhead has continued to the present day. Adherents of the philosophical traditions founded by Ramanuja, Chaitanya, and others, venerate their religious teachers almost as much as the deities that are the focus of their worship. In their pious writings, the living, human teacher is seen to be of more immediate importance than God, and absolute surrender to him or her is said to be one path to liberation.

Many teachers are celibate ascetics. Sanskrit scriptures suggest that "high" caste male *brahmins* traditionally go through four stages of life: student, householder, forest dweller, and ascetic. Shankara apparently went from the first stage directly to the last. Following his example, initiates into the Ramakrishna Mission, a popular order founded by Swami Vivekananda in the nineteenth century, become ascetics without marrying.

Today, many *gurus* have Internet sites maintained by devotees (see p.149); their itineraries, sermons, and songs are broadcast through these web pages, creating a worldwide Hindu "cyber-community."

### CHARISMATIC LEADERS

*Sai Baba (right) and some of his devotees, who are believed to number upward of 50 million worldwide.*

Although the distinction may not be clear in the minds of followers, it is possible to distinguish between those spiritual leaders who belong to ancient or more recent lineages, and charismatic teachers who attract devotees through "supernatural" phenonomena ranging from the "magical" manifestation of objects to faith healing. Such leaders defy straightforward classification, and each has a large following. Devotees sometimes consider these *gurus* to be an incarnation of a divinity, who has descended to earth in the form of their teacher for the welfare of humanity. This is the case with Sri Satya Sai Baba (born Satya Narayan Raju, 1926), a charismatic leader from Andhra Pradesh, who is believed by his followers to be an incarnation of the deities Shiva and Shakti (the Goddess).

In other cases, devotees revere their teachers simply as spiritually elevated and highly evolved souls, beings who have ascended above the cares of human life to a state of self-realization or perfection. Occasionally, a charismatic religious leader may have a title such as *rishi* ("seer"), like the composers of the *Vedas*. One well-known example is Mahesh Yogi (born 1911), the founder of the Transcendental Meditation movement—popularly referred to in the West as "TM"—who is known as the Maharishi, or "Great Seer."



### THE LINEAGES OF SHANKARA

One of the most important Indian theologians, Shankara (ca. 800CE), is said to have established four or five monasteries in different parts of India: at Dvaraka (west), Puri (east), Sringeri and Kanchipuram (south), and Badrinath (north). In each of these monasteries there is an unbroken lineage of teachers, all of whom bear the title "Shankara the Teacher" (Shankaracharya). They have often engaged with social and political issues, and exercise considerable leadership among the educated urban population, as well as influencing those who adhere to the philosophy of their founder. A similar role is played by intellectual philosophical commentators such as Swami Chinmayananda, whose followers have been active in the preservation of traditional scriptures in print and electronic media.

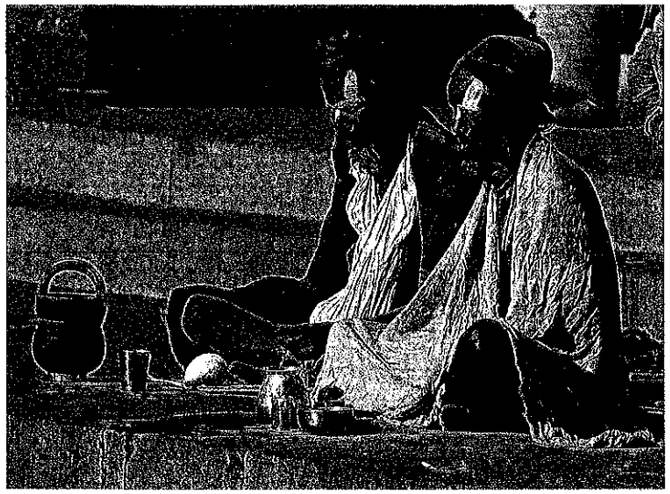
*The sage Sukadeva (center), a famous* rishi *("seer"), at the court of King Parikshit, a ruler who claimed descent from Arjuna, the warrior advised by Krishna in the* Bhagavad Gita. *A painting of ca. 1760.*

# PATHS TO LIBERATION

The religious traditions originating in India have portrayed human beings as caught up in a continuous cycle of life and death (see pp.156–7). Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists have spoken of this predicament in terms of perpetual suffering and being trapped on earth. However, the traditions differ on how to attain liberation from the cycle.

Within Hinduism itself, among several possible routes to liberation two broad perspectives stand out. The first characterizes Hindu traditions that believe the human soul (*atman*) to be identical with the supreme being (*brahman*) (see pp.134–5). Because there is only one supreme being and we are identical with it, liberation is the final experiential knowledge that we are divine. This worldview, best described by the teacher Shankara (see p.143), emphasizes the importance of human effort and striving in achieving the necessary transforming wisdom. The second perspective comes from the schools that speak of an ultimate distinction, however tenuous, between the human being and God. Proponents of this outlook advocate devotion to the supreme being and reliance on God's grace.

In the course of the *Bhagavad Gita* (see p.139), Krishna describes three ways to liberation: the way of action; the way of knowledge; and the way of devotion. Some Hindus view these as multiple paths to the divine, others as aspects of one discipline. The way of action (*karma yoga*) is the path of unselfish action; a person must do one's duty (*dharma*), such as studying or good deeds, but not out of fear of blame or punishment, or hope of praise or reward. In thus discarding the fruits of one's action, one attains



*Holy men meditating, Varanasi. In Hindu tradition, meditation (*dhyana*) is one path toward the acquisition of "true wisdom."*

### HINDU TANTRA

Tantra began to gain importance in the Hindu tradition around the fifth century CE and influenced many sectarian Hindu movements. Shaiva and Vaishnava temple liturgies are in large measure derived from Tantric usage. For example, when images of deities are installed in temples, geometric drawings (*mandalas*) representing the deity and the cosmos are drawn on the floor for use in meditation and ritual.

The Tantric tradition advocated its own form of *yoga*, known as *kundalini yoga*. Literally "the one with earrings," *kundalini* refers to Shakti or the power of the Goddess, which is said to lie coiled like a serpent at the base of one's spine. When awakened, this power rises up through the body, passing through six cosmic centers known as *chakras* ("wheels") to the final center, located under the top of the skull. This center is envisaged as a thousand-petaled lotus.

The ultimate aim of this form of *yoga* is to awaken the power of the *kundalini* and make it unite with Purusa, the male supreme being, who resides in the lotus. This union grants the practitioner visions and psychic powers and leads eventually to emancipation from the cycle of life and death.



abiding peace. A related concept is the idea of "detached action" as the best way to acquire liberation. This entails acting altruistically for the good of humanity and performing all actions in a compassionate manner.

According to the way of knowledge (*jñana yoga*), by attaining scriptural knowledge one may achieve a transforming wisdom that destroys one's past *karma* (see p.156). True knowledge is an insight into the real nature of the universe, divine power, and the human soul. This wisdom may be acquired through the learning of texts from a suitable and learned teacher (*guru*), meditation, and physical and mental control in the form of the discipline called *yoga* (see box, below).

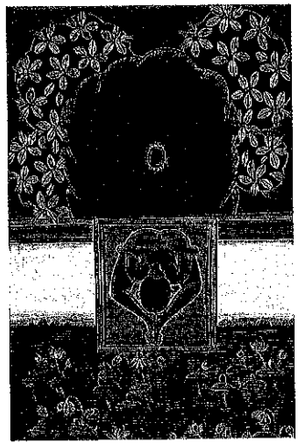
The third way is the one most emphasized throughout the *Bhagavad Gita*: the way of devotion (*bhakti yoga*). This path may be the most popular one among Hindus of every walk of life. Ultimately, as Krishna promises to Arjuna, if one surrenders to the Lord, he forgives all sins and eradicates *karma*. Such complete devotion to a god or goddess, leaving oneself open to divine grace, is considered by many Hindus the only way to salvation. The paths of striving with wisdom and with the many other forms of *yoga* are considered laudable, but are not widely practiced.

### PATAÑJALI AND YOGA

The Sanskrit term *yoga* (literally "yoke") refers to the practice of various disciplines whereby a devotee "yokes" his or her spirit to the divine. It is held in high regard in Hindu texts, and has had many meanings. Its origins are obscure, but are generally thought to be pre-Indo-European. Many Hindus associate *yoga* with Patañjali (ca. third century BCE), author of the *Yoga Sutras*, a series of brief, aphoristic sentences.

Patañjali's *yoga*, as interpreted by commentators, involves moral, mental, and physical discipline, and meditation. This form of *yoga* is described as having eight "limbs," or disciplines, the first two being *yama* (restraint from violence, falsehood, and other negative practices) and *niyama* (positive practices such as equanimity and asceticism). Patañjali also recommends bodily postures (*asanas*) for meditation, and the practice of breath control (*pranayama*) and mental detachment from external stimuli (*pratyahara*). Perfection in concentration (*dharana*) and meditation (*dhyana*) lead to *samadhi*, the final state of union with the divine and liberation from the cycle of life and death; it is a state that cannot be adequately described in human language.

While Patañjali's *yoga* is considered the classical form by many scholars, *yoga* was probably an important element of Indian religious life for several centuries before his text was written, and there are many other varieties. In the past century a distinction has been drawn between *raja yoga* and *hatha yoga*. *Raja yoga* deals with mental discipline; occasionally this term is used interchangeably with Patañjali's *yoga*. In *hatha yoga*, which largely focuses on bodily postures and control, the human body is said to contain "suns" and "moons"; final liberation can be attained only after one harmonizes different centers in the body with the cosmos. It is this form of *yoga* that has become widely popular in the West.



*A posture for meditation, from an 18th-century* hatha yoga *handbook.*

HOLY TOWNS

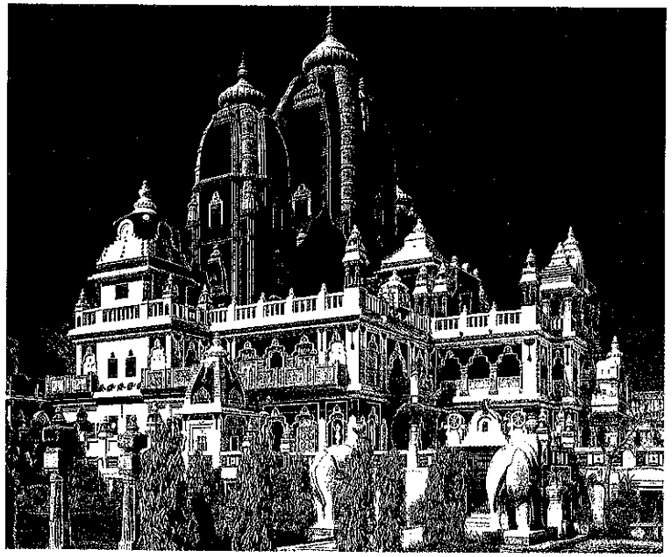
**Hindu holy texts, especially the epics and the *Puranas*, extol the sanctity of many individual sites. For pious Hindus, to live in such places, or to undertake a pilgrimage to one of them, is enough to destroy one's sins and *karma* and assist in the attainment of liberation from the cycle of life, death, and rebirth (see pp.156–7). There are numerous lists of sacred cities and villages, many regional and some spanning the entire subcontinent. A short verse known by millions of Hindus draws attention to seven of the most famous holy towns:**

**"Ayodhya, Mathura, Maya,**
**Kashi, Kanchi, Avantika**
**And the city of Dvaraka;**
**These seven [cities] give us**
**Liberation."**

# A LAND OF HOLINESS

Millions of Hindus regularly visit sacred towns, worship in temples, bathe in holy rivers, and climb sacred mountains, in order to pray for happiness in this life and in the next. According to some Hindu texts, all of India is holy, as it is the place where the actions that form the basis of *karma* come to fulfillment. The idea of India as a sacred land began around the beginning of the Common Era. Manu, the author of a book on *dharma* (see p.129) and ethics, defined a region south of the Himalayas and between the eastern and western oceans as the holy Aryavarta ("Country of the Noble Ones"). In time, the concept of the sacred land was extended to cover the whole subcontinent. From the late nineteenth century, India came to be personified as a divine mother. In many songs, "Mother India" (Bharata Mata) is extolled as a compassionate mother goddess. This image has had political overtones: during the struggle for freedom from British rule, Mother India was portrayed as being held captive by foreign forces.

The map of India is filled with holy places. Although there are many standard Hindu pilgrimage itineraries—for example, all the famous temples of Vishnu or Devi—thousands of other towns, villages, and sites across India are also held sacred. Pilgrimage routes are often organized thematically: devotees might visit the one hundred and eight places where Shakti, or the power of the Goddess, is said to be present; the sixty-eight places where emblems of Shiva are said to have emerged "self-born"; the twelve places where he appears as the "flame of creative energies" (*jyotir lingas*); the eight places where Vishnu spontaneously manifested himself; and so on.



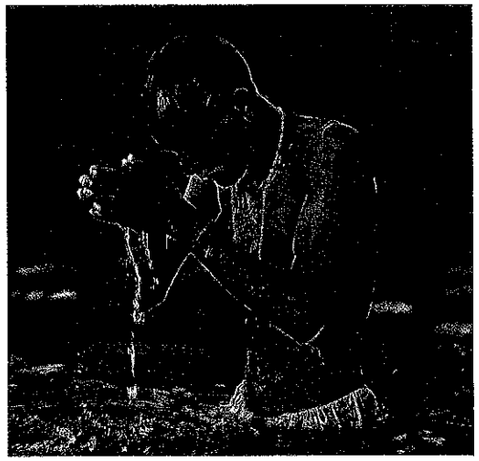
*The Lakshmi Narayan temple in New Delhi, also known as the Birla temple after the family who constructed it in 1938. It is principally dedicated to the deities Vishnu and Lakshmi. Hindu temple exteriors are often brightly decorated, and the towers (*shikharas*) are typical features of north Indian sacred architecture. They represent the cosmic mountains where the gods and goddesses are believed to dwell.*



HOLY RIVERS

The Ganga (Ganges), Yamuna, Kaveri, and Narmada rivers are believed to be so holy that merely by bathing in them one's sins are said to be destroyed. Confluences of two rivers or of a river and the sea are particularly sacred. Pilgrims journey regularly to bathe at Triveni Sangama ("Confluence of Three Rivers") at Prayag (Allahabad), where the Ganga, the Yamuna, and a mythical underground river, the Sarasvati, all meet. Small sealed jars of holy water from the Ganga are kept in homes and used in domestic rituals to purify the dead and dying.

The water from the Ganga or another holy river in the north may be taken to a sacred site in the far south, such as the coastal town of Rameswaram, and sand from Rameswaram may be taken back to the Ganga and immersed there. This practice serves to mark the completion of a circular pilgrimage and demonstrates one way in which the various holy places and traditions of Hinduism can be interlinked. When temples are consecrated in Hindu communities outside India, water from Indian sacred rivers is mingled with water from rivers in the host country and poured onto the new temple, physically and symbolically connecting it with the sacred motherland.



*A worshipper performs morning prayers in the Ganga at Varanasi. Immersion in the sacred waters of the river is held to be a great act of spiritual purification.*

Almost every holy place is associated with a *sthala purana*, a text that details the site's antiquity and sacredness. The temple itself is like a "port of transit," a place from where a human being may "cross over" (*tirtha*) the ocean of life and death. In fact, many temples and holy places are also located near the sea, a lake, a river, or a spring. When such a body of water is not close by, there is usually an artificial ritual well or pool, a feature that may date back to the time of the Harappan civilization (see p.130)—the "Great Bath" of Mohenjo Daro resembles the pools attached to hundreds of Hindu temples in south India today. Pilgrims cleanse themselves physically and spiritually in these pools before praying in the temple.

Many holy sites are near mountains and caves, places where Hindu deities are said to reside in *Purana* stories. For example, Shiva lives on Mount Kailasa in the Himalayas, which for the devotee is represented

by every Shiva temple. In some regions, particularly in the north, large temple towers (*shikharas*) represent these cosmic mountains (see illustration, p.146). The innermost shrine of a Hindu temple is traditionally a windowless space, like the sacred caves that were among the earliest Hindu places of worship.

Although there is evidence of worship at temples dating from the beginning of the Common Era, large sacred complexes were built only after the sixth century CE. Migrants to southeast Asia also built temples to preserve and transmit their religion. Temples were major religious, cultural, and economic centers and were constructed according to elaborate rules to represent the whole cosmos. Some of the larger ones have seven enclosures, representing the seven layers of heaven in Hindu cosmology.

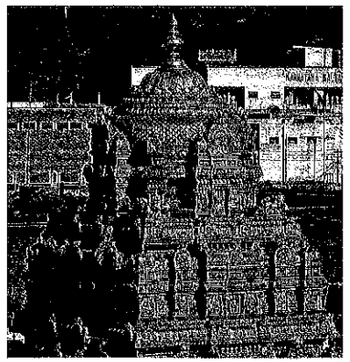
Many of the temple complexes in India are associated with the major sects—that is, they enshrine Vishnu, Shiva, or the Goddess and their entourages. In many of them, the deities are known by their local or regional names. A typical temple may have separate shrines for the deity, his or her spouse, other divine attendants, and saints. For example, an eighth-century CE temple in Tiruvanmiyur, a suburb of Chennai (Madras), has shrines for the main god, Shiva, his wife Parvati—known locally as Tripura Sundari ("Beautiful Lady of the Three Worlds")—and their children, Ganesha and Murugan. The temple also incorporates images of other manifestations of Shiva, such as Nataraja (the cosmic dancer; see illustration, p.125), and icons of his devotees. Temples in the diaspora generally cater to a broader community of worshippers and have images of Shiva, Vishnu, the Goddess, and other deities enshrined under one roof.

Most Hindus attend their local temple or other holy place that has been important to their families for generations, or they may save for an extended pilgrimage to a famous distant sacred site. Émigrés and other devotees who cannot physically go on such a pilgrimage may watch the rituals that take place there on specially commissioned television programs or videos. At all times, Hindus can also worship at home, where a special area will be designated as the family's domestic worship space.

The human body itself is sometimes spoken of as the "temple of the supreme being." Some Hindu traditions, such as the Virashaivas (a community organized ca. 1150CE), explicitly denounce temple worship and revere every human being as the temple of the supreme being, Lord Shiva. Other traditions, for example the communities that worship Vishnu and Lakshmi in south India, uphold the practices of temple worship, but also think of the human body as divine. In one song, the eighth-century CE poet Periyalvar declared: "Build a temple in your heart. Install the lord called Krishna in it; Offer him the flower of love."

### TIRUMALA-TIRUPATI

India's richest temple—and one of the wealthiest religious institutions in the world—is the temple of Tirumala-Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh. Referred to in ancient literature as Tiru Venkatam, it is dedicated to Vishnu, who is popularly known as Venkateshvara ("Lord of the Venkatam hills"). Devotional literature addressed to Venkateshvara dates back to the seventh century CE, but pilgrims are known to have been visiting the site of the temple for almost two millennia. The temple is located in the scenic Tirumala hills and until 1965, when the government took them over, it owned more than six hundred surrounding villages.



*The central shrine of the Tirumala-Tirupati temple complex. The temple has spawned offshoots dedicated to Lord Venkateshvara in Pittsburgh, Atlanta, New York, Chicago, and other major cities in the US.*

Tirumala-Tirupati enjoyed the patronage of Indian royalty for over a thousand years, but has become a destination for large numbers of pilgrims only in the past century. The popularity of the temple is said to have increased phenomenally following a major reconsecration in 1958. The enormous wealth of the temple is also frequently reported and commented upon in the Indian media. In the temple's offering container devotees regularly leave diamonds among donations of jewelry and gold that amount to around twenty kilograms (forty-four pounds) every month. Gifts to the temple of cars and trucks are not unknown. Annual donations of cash by pilgrims can amount to tens of millions of dollars.

The Tirumala-Tirupati temple employs its huge financial resources to fund a range of projects and enterprises, including charities, hospitals, universities and other educational institutions, housing developments, and publications. One major objective of the temple in recent years has been to contribute to the solution of India's considerable ecological problems, to which end it has subsidized massive reforestation projects.



### DEVOTIONAL "CYBERSPACE"

**A holy space in the Hindu tradition is one in which devotees come to see the enshrined deity and hear sacred words from holy texts. In the past, religious teachers were careful about whom they imparted their teachings to, and screened their devotees carefully. But now, the Internet allows anyone to see images of deities, teachers, and *gurus*, and even hear the recitation and music of sacred texts and songs.**

**Important *gurus* may have as many as fifty websites set up by their devotees. Some organizations portray their home pages as "electronic *ashrams*." An *ashram* was a traditional place of hermitage or learning. Other websites, such as "Om Sweet Om," are dedicated to the sacred syllable "*Om*" (see p.140).**

**Internet images of deities are taken seriously by devotees; some websites remind Internet surfers that it would be disrespectful to download such images. The sermons of *gurus* and recitations of prayers are all available on audiofiles accessible to the "cyber-devotee."**

*A man tends the shrine in his home in Puri, Orissa. Hindus worship in temples and also at home, where an altar, a shelf, a cabinet, or even an entire room, may be set apart for devotion and filled with images of gods and goddesses.*

PREVIOUS PAGE *The Kumbh Mela ("Festival of the Jar," or "Aquarius") at Hardwar, where the Ganga river enters the plains of northern India, is one of the largest religious gatherings of human beings on earth. It takes place every twelve years, when close to 15 million Hindu pilgrims may descend on the city at an astrologically propitious time to bathe in the river—an act that is said to destroy one's previous sins. The last full-scale Kumbh Mela was celebrated at Hardwar between February and April of 1998 (this photograph was taken at the previous festival in 1986). Smaller versions of the Kumbh Mela take place every four years, rotating among the cities of Hardwar, Nasik (on the Godavari river), Allahabad (the confluence of the Ganga and Yamuna), and Ujjain (on the Sipra river). These celebrations are attended by hundreds of thousands of Hindu ascetics.*

# REJOICING IN THE DIVINE

Hindu festivals are filled with color and joy and almost always associated with feasting and pleasure, although they usually also involve periods of ritual fasting. The birthdays of the gods Rama, Krishna, and Ganesha are widely popular throughout India, while important regional festivals include Holi (a jubilant spring festival held in parts of northern India to celebrate the new colors of the springtime flowers), Onam (a harvest festival celebrated in the southern state of Kerala between August and September in honor of the fifth incarnation of the god Vishnu (see p.137), and Pongal (a mid-January harvest festival in Tamil Nadu).

Other festivals, such as Navaratri (see box, opposite) and Dipavali (known colloquially in some areas as Diwali) are pan-Hindu festivals and generally mark the victory of the forces of righteousness over evil. Dipavali ("Necklace of Lights") is probably the most widely observed Hindu festival. It falls on the new moon between mid-October and mid-November and is celebrated by decorating the home with lights, setting off fireworks, and wearing new clothes. Presents may be exchanged and festive meals are eaten. In south India, it is believed that Dipavali marks the day on which Krishna killed a demon, Narakasura, thus ensuring the triumph of light over darkness. In the north, it celebrates the return of the god Rama to Ayodhya and his coronation (see p.138). In Gujarat, it heralds the beginning of the New Year. In many parts of India, people rise before dawn on Dipavali for a ritual bath, because it is believed that on this day the holy waters of the Ganga river are present in all other water.

*A painting of ca. 1780 from Himachal Pradesh depicting Krishna (center) celebrating the jubilant spring festival of Holi. As shown here, people throw brightly colored powder over each other as part of the festivities.*



Temple worship forms a key element in Hindu religious life. In most temples, worship is traditionally not congregational in the sense that people do not gather for communal worship at fixed times. There is no seating in the temple: devotees usually stand for a few minutes while they view the deity in its shrine. The closest thing to a religious congregation in Hinduism is when people gather to listen to a religious teacher—although in most cases this will take place in a public hall rather than a temple—or to sing traditional religious songs together at home and in other public places. This type of group worship is common in the diaspora, particularly on weekends.

Footwear is always left outside the temple precincts, a custom that symbolizes the worshipper's temporary abandonment of the dust and grime of worldly thoughts and passions. The simplest act of temple worship is to make the deity an offering of camphor, fruit, flowers, or coconut, all of which may often be bought at stalls outside the temple. In a small temple, the devotee may make the offering directly to the image of the deity, but in most places the worshipper first hands the gift to a priest, who then presents it to the god or goddess. In many north Indian temples,

### HINDU CALENDARS

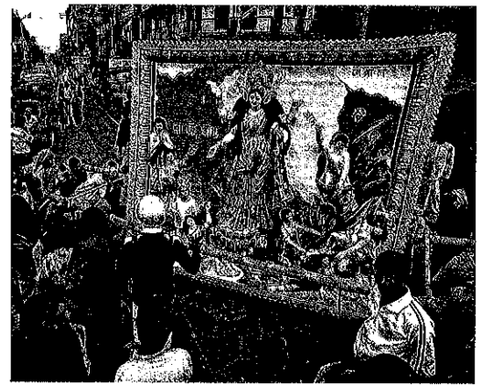
**The many Hindu calendars and systems of reckoning time are all connected with the phases of the moon. These calendars are adjusted to the solar cycle regularly so that the festivals fall within the same season every year. The different parts of India celebrate New Year at different times of the year. In the state of Gujarat, for example, it falls a day after Dipavali (see main text). Elsewhere it may fall on the new moon closest to the spring equinox, or in the middle of April.**

### NAVARATRI

The festival of Navaratri ("Nine Nights") is celebrated all over India and begins on the new moon in the lunar month from mid-September to mid-October. In many parts of the country it is dedicated to the worship of the goddesses Sarasvati, Lakshmi, and Durga. In general, however, it is a time when people acknowledge with respect the tools of their trade, whatever it may be. In some regions, cars and buses are decorated with garlands, and in recent years typewriters and computers have been blessed with sacred powders and allowed to "rest" for a day.

The ninth day of Navaratri is dedicated specifically to Sarasvati, the patron of learning and music. In south India, all the musical instruments in the house, any writing implement, and selected educational textbooks are placed before the image of the goddess in order to receive blessings for the coming year.

The last day of Navaratri is dedicated to Lakshmi, the goddess of good fortune (see p.136). On this day, after ritually writing the auspicious word "Shri" (a name of Lakshmi), people traditionally embark on ventures, open new business account books, and take up courses of learning. To mark the day, new prayers, pieces of music, and items of knowledge are learned, and great Hindu teachers are honored.



*Worshippers parade a framed stucco portrait of the goddess Sarasvati through the streets of Calcutta to celebrate the festival of Navaratri.*

## SACRED PERFORMANCE

For Hindus, two of the most important ways of attaining a religious experience are through dance and music. These are more than just entertainment: both singer and dancer are considered to be emulating the great devotees of the past and in doing so may achieve liberation from the cycle of life and death (see pp.156–7)—even if they follow no other route to salvation.

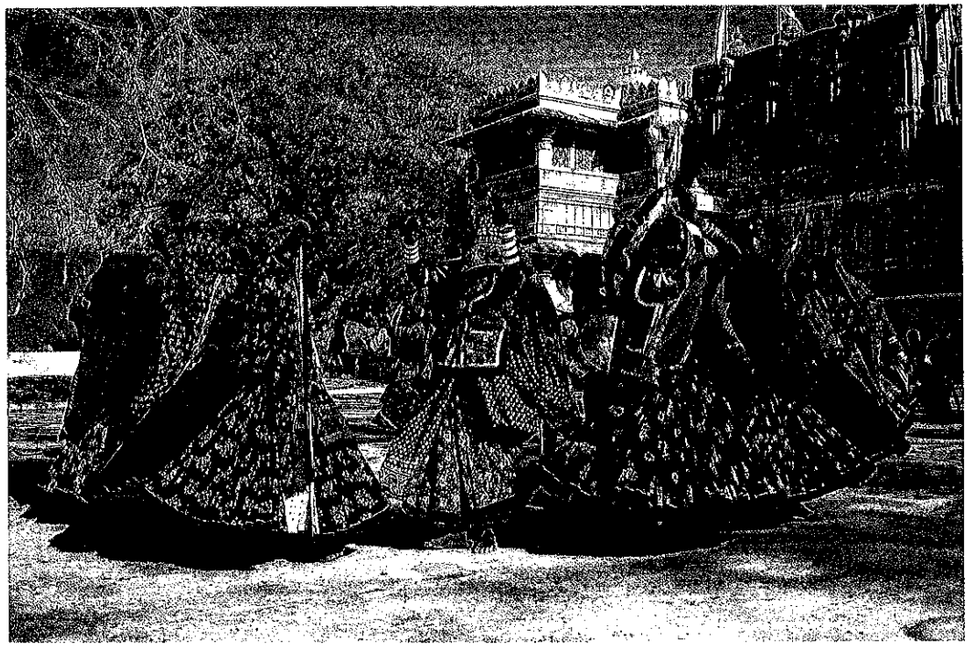
While folk dancing has always been widely performed, for centuries classical Indian dance was confined to the dancers of India's royal courts and the temples. It is only in the twentieth century that men and women from all walks of life have had access to this ritual path to liberation.

The elements of dance are contained in a book called *Natya Shastra* ("Treatise on Dance") of ca. 200CE. This work is highly revered, to the extent that it is considered by many Hindus to constitute a fifth *Veda* (see p.138), created to make the paths to the divine accessible to all human beings. Sacred dances are frequently performed in Hindu temples for the deity to enjoy.

Worship in the Hindu tradition has included the performance of music since the time of the *Vedas*. Music is believed to be divinity manifest on earth as sound, and some Hindu texts say that Vishnu and Shri may be present as Nada Brahman—*brahman*, the supreme being (see pp.134–5), in the form of sound.

The great Hindu religious narratives (see pp.138–41) are transmitted not so much through the medium of books as through song and dance, and stories from sacred texts—especially those about the gods Krishna and Rama—are dramatized all over India. In the most celebrated of these sacred dramas, the *Ramayana* (see p.138) is performed annually in a huge park near the city of Varanasi as part of the celebrations known as Ramalila. The actors who take part in this performance are actually considered to be divine for the duration of the play.

*Colorfully costumed dancers celebrate the spring festival of Holi (see p.152) at a temple near Sadri, Rajasthan.*





ordinary worshippers may enter the innermost shrines, but in the south access to these areas is restricted to priests and other initiates.

To the devotee, the most meaningful part of temple worship is the experience of seeing the deity (in the form of an image; see p.134) and being in his or her presence. After the offering has been presented to the divine image it is considered to have been "blessed" by the deity and to contain its "favor" (*prasada*). It is then returned to the worshipper. This simple act of viewing the deity, making an offering, and getting the sanctified offering back is the most popular of all Hindu votive rituals.

As in the temple, a deity worshipped at home is considered to be a royal ruler and is treated accordingly. Members of the family may regularly light an oil lamp or incense sticks before the divine image, and make offerings of fruit or other foods (see illustration, p.149).

When a group of devotees prays at home or in the temple, the ritual may end with an *arati*, or "waving of lamps." The attendant priest or one of the worshippers will light a piece of camphor in a plate, and sanctify it by waving it clockwise in front of the deity. The burning camphor is then shown to the worshippers, who briefly, but reverentially, place their hands over the flame and then touch their eyelids, as if to absorb the light of spiritual knowledge emanating from the supreme deity.

Single and married women—but not widows—frequently perform special votive observances called *vrata*. Many of these rituals are domestic in nature and observed for the welfare of the husband, the extended family, or the community. Sanskrit manuals claim that these rites enable a woman to attain liberation from the cycle of birth and death, but most women perform them simply for happiness in the home. After prayers to a domestic deity, women may eat together and distribute auspicious substances, such as bananas, coconuts, turmeric, and *kum kum* (a red powder that is daubed on the forehead). A *vrata* may last from a few minutes to five days, with periods of fasting alternating with communal meals.

In northern India, many women's rites focus on the welfare of male relatives. For example, in the lunar month from mid-October to mid-November, women undertake two fasts on the fourth and eighth days of the waning moon for the benefit of their husbands and sons. In much of south India, spiritually empowering women's rituals take place in the lunar month from mid-July to mid-August. *Brahmin* women pray to the goddess Lakshmi (see p.136) for domestic well-being. Non-*brahmin* women may take special pots of water and milk to temples of a local goddess as offerings on behalf of their family, or they may cook rice and milk dishes and then distribute them. At the temples of the powerful regional goddess Draupadi Amman (a principal character in the *Mahabharata* epic), women and men alike may enter a trance and walk over hot coals in a ceremony euphemistically called "walking on flowers."

### RITES OF PASSAGE

The Hindu tradition, like other religions, possesses numerous rituals marking an individual's transition from one stage of life to another. In some sacred texts, the life-cycle sacraments begin with the birth of a child, while in others they begin with marriage, for it is then that the life of a person is believed truly to begin. While some life-cycle rites are pan-Hindu, many are purely local celebrations, particularly women's rituals (see main text).

Like all significant Hindu sacraments, rites of passage must take place in the presence of a sacred fire. The importance of fire (Sanskrit *agni*) can be traced as far back as the Vedic period. Early Vedic rituals (see p.131) were performed around an altar of fire, and fire was thought of as the master of the house.

Offerings are made to the sacred fire during prenatal rites, when a child is one year old, during weddings—indeed the ceremony is valid only if the couple is married before a fire, which is deemed to be the cosmic witness to the sacrament—and when a man reaches the ages of sixty and eighty. Finally, when a person dies, his or her body is offered up to the flames. Annual rites to commemorate one's ancestors are also performed before a fire.

Auspicious times are chosen for the conduct of all life-cycle sacraments. These times are in accordance with a person's horoscope, which is cast at birth.

# *KARMA*, DEATH, AND REBIRTH

*The author's son, Venki Narayanan, takes part in his "sacred thread" ceremony at Chennai (Madras), a ritual that will permit him to study and teach the ancient Vedic scriptures (see p.159). Study of the holy texts is one way in which to pursue* moksha *(the liberation of the soul), since it enables the devotee to acquire supreme knowledge. Hindu philosophers have said that just as fire reduces firewood to ashes, so too the fire of knowledge eradicates all* karma.

One distinctive characteristic of the religions that began in the Indian subcontinent is the belief in *karma*, an idea first occurring around the seventh century BCE. *Karma* literally means "action," especially ritual action, but after the *Upanishad*s (ca. 600BCE) it came to mean the concept of rewards and punishments attached to various acts.

Underlying the theory of *karma* is the idea of the immortality of the soul. Although the early *Veda*s contain a nebulous notion of an afterlife, by the time of the *Upanishad*s it was claimed that the human soul existed forever, and that after death it underwent rebirth or reincarnation (*samsara*). The "law of *karma*" thus refers to a system of cause and effect that may span several lifetimes. It dictates that human beings gain merit (*punya*) or demerit (*papa*) from every action they perform. Good deeds and bad deeds do not simply cancel each other out; one has to experience the fruits of all actions in the course of many lives. The balance of *punya* and *papa* acquired in one lifetime determines the nature and quality of one's next existence.

Liberation (*moksha*) from this pattern, according to the *Upanishad*s, comes from a supreme, experiential wisdom. In acquiring this transforming knowledge, one has a profound insight into one's own immortality (*amrta*), from which point the soul ceases to possess the ability to be reborn. Rebirth and its connection with *karma*—notions central to the later Hindu tradition—are thus clearly articulated in the *Upanishad*s, as is the ultimate goal of every human being—liberation from the unending cycle of birth and death and the attendant human suffering implied by experiencing multiple lifetimes (see pp.144–5).

Since the time of the *Upanishad*s, Hindus have taken the notions of *karma* and *amrta* for granted. However, the various Hindu traditions differ on what happens to the soul when it is ultimately liberated from the cycle of life and death. For some, the soul experiences a joyous devotional relationship with the supreme being. Other schools, such as that of Bengali Vaishnavism, think of the ultimate liberation as a state of passionate separation of the human soul from God. In this tradition God is thought of as Krishna, and the soul is cast in the role of the young female cowherd with whom the deity consorts.

A number of writings describe the soul's journey after death. A soul that has achieved liberation and will not be reborn may enter the abode of Shiva or Vishnu (see box, opposite). As for unemancipated souls, none of the Hindu sacred texts discuss the details of what happens immediately after death or even between lifetimes. While it is clear that one's *karma* accumulated from previous lifetimes is believed to influence what sort of life will follow, the holy books offer no theories about how long it takes before a soul is reincarnated. Nor is there any discussion or explanation of why people do not remember their past lives, although in popular belief it is claimed that many people do indeed recall small pieces of previous existences. Only the truly evolved souls, the great spiritual leaders and teachers, are said to remember all their past lives.

Many texts speak of the repellent nature of this life and urge human beings to seek everlasting "real" life through the liberation of the soul. Others, however, state that by glorifying God on earth one can achieve the experience of heaven in one's present lifetime. To this end, sacred pilgrimage centers offer a break from the daily rhythms of earthly existence and the opportunity for divine revelation. Some Hindus consider that a life lived in praise of the divine is a truly joyful experience that is not merely an imitation of a state of liberation, but that state itself.



### HINDU HEAVENS AND HELLS

Although reincarnation and liberation (see main text) are the most frequently discussed aspects of the afterlife in Hinduism, the *Purana*s talk of many kinds of heavens and hells. In some writings, seven underworlds and seven heavens are described in detail, while accounts of the various paradisiacal regions typically refer to dancing girls and trees that grant wishes—fairly generic imagery of a (male-centered) place of delight.

In the Hindu tradition, a soul's sojourn in a hell or paradise is generally seen as being temporary. A soul is reborn in such a region if it has accumulated certain kinds of good or bad *karma*; but once this *karma* is exhausted, the soul moves on into a different form of existence.

According to some texts, a soul that has attained emancipation from the cycle of life, death, and rebirth crosses a river called Viraja ("Without Passion") and enters a heavenly paradise, either Vaikuntha (the abode of Vishnu) or Kailasa (the mountain abode of Shiva on the borders of India and Tibet). Devotees of these gods imagine their heavenly dwellings as places filled with other devotees singing his praises. Vaikuntha is sometimes described as an enormous palace with a thousand pillars and filled with light.

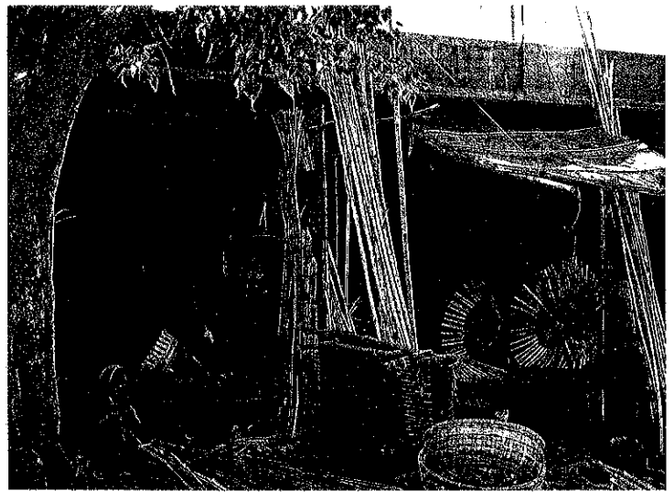
*The family of the god Shiva and his consort, Parvati, with their children Ganesha and Skanda, in their dwelling on Mount Kailasa (a Himalayan peak in southwestern Tibet). Other deities and worshippers look on in adoration.*

# DIVISION AND IDENTITY

Until recently, the word "Hindu" has seldom been used as a signifier of identity in India. A person's position in society has depended much more intimately on his or her social "class" (*varna*, literally "color"), "subclass" (*jati*, literally "birth group"), religious sectarian community, and philosophical allegiance.

There are four major *varna*s and, today, over a thousand *jati*s. The earliest mention of distinct social classes within Indian society occurs in the *Veda*s. In discussing a cosmic sacrifice, in which the various elements of the universe arise from the body of a primordial cosmic man, the *Rig Veda* declares: "From his mouth came the priestly class, from his arms, the rulers. The producers came from his legs; from his feet came the servant class" (*Rig Veda* 10.90). While some have seen these verses as the origin of what eventually came to be called the "caste system" (Portuguese *casta*, "social division"), it is probable that the stratification of Indian society had begun long before the composition of the text.

These initial four broad *varna*s were the priests (*brahmin*s), the rulers and warriors (*kshatriya*s), the merchants and producers (*vaishya*s), and the servants (*shudra*s). The latter two, at least, were always broad groupings, and while in time it came to be expected that members of all classes would, in theory, pursue the vocation associated with their particular group, it is likely that this prescription was not far-reaching. Today, while some *jati*s can be fitted loosely into the ancient fourfold division, hundreds more cannot be defined easily as "merchants" or "servants."



*Basketmakers in Jodhpur, Rajasthan. There are many* jatis *whose occupational specialty is basketmaking. In many parts of India they are considered to be of "low" social status.*



Members of the priestly, warrior, and merchant groups were sometimes known as the "upper" castes, and their male members were known as the "twice born" because of their traditional initiation ritual of spiritual rebirth called *upanayana*. Through this, they become invested with a "sacred thread" that grants them the power to study the *Veda*s (see illustration, p.156, and below). Women and members of the *shudra* class are traditionally prohibited from reading the *Veda*s, even though some of the Vedic hymns had female authors.

Underlying the hierarchical social system is the fundamental Hindu idea that people are born into an existence that is the fruit of their past *karma* (see pp.156–7). One's social status in this life is therefore traditionally considered predetermined and immutable, and the individual must adhere to

### THE DUTIES OF THE FOUR CASTES

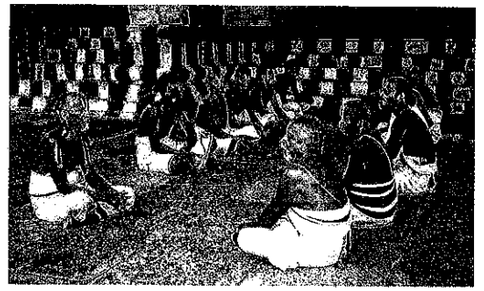
By the first centuries of the Common Era, many treatises on righteousness, moral duty, and law had been written. Known collectively as the *dharmashastras* ("texts on righteous behavior"), of which the most famous is the *Manava Dharmashastra* (*The Laws of Manu*), these formed the basis of later Hindu laws.

The *dharmashastra*s outline the duties and privileges of the four main *varna*s (classes) of society. The *brahmin* (priestly) class retained sole authority to teach and learn the *Veda*s. For centuries, the *brahmin*s—who included teachers and counselors as well as priests—jealously guarded this monopoly, and forbade the *Veda*s to be written down.

The former kings and princes of India belonged to the *kshatriya* ("royal," or "warrior") class that traditionally held the reins of secular power. *Kshatriya* men were allowed to learn, but not teach, the *Veda*s; their duty was to protect the people and the country. Most *kshatriya*s traced their ancestry back to primeval divine progenitors of humanity—in Hinduism, to this day, claimed lines of descent are highly important—and later Hindu rituals explicitly emphasized their connection with divine beings.

The mercantile class (*vaishya*s) were in charge of trade, commerce, farming, and thus potential possessors of great wealth and economic power. According to the law codes, the *vaishya*s, too, possessed the authority to study the *Veda*s but not teach them.

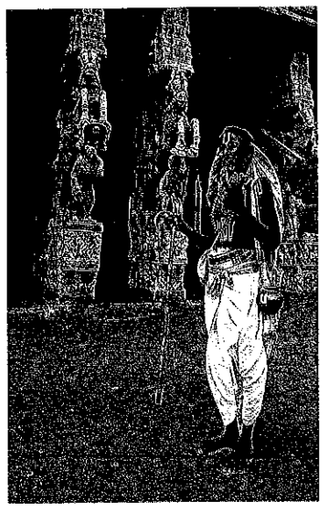
The law texts state that the duty of a *shudra* is to serve the other classes, especially the *brahmin*s. *Shudra*s are not allowed to accumulate wealth, even if they are well able to do so, and a *shudra* may be respected on account of his or her advanced years but for no other reason.



Brahmin *priests reciting from the* Vedas, *photographed by the author at a temple in Kanchipuram, Tamil Nadu. Each wears the "sacred thread" that denotes his status as one qualified to learn and teach the ancient Sanskrit scriptures.*

The caste system was—and is—far more complex and flexible than the behavior the *dharmashastra*s advocate, and historical evidence suggests that their prescriptions on class, like Manu's pronouncements on women (see p.160), were probably not taken too seriously by many classes of society and apparently not followed at all in many areas. For instance, the *jati* called Vellalas were technically a *shudra* caste but in practice they were wealthy landowners who wielded considerable economic and political power in the south. The *dharmashastra* prohibitions seem to have had no effect on their fortunes.

Eventually, various groups of "outcastes" emerged who were not covered by the law codes. These arose either from mixed marriages or more often from association with professions deemed inferior (see p.160).



*A Vaishnava (devotee of Vishnu) at Sri Rangam temple, Tamil Nadu. Vaishnavas are identifiable by the distinctive markings painted on their foreheads.*

the particular ritual practices and dietary rules of his or her *jati*. In past centuries, any deviation from caste practices may well have resulted in a person being excluded from the *jati* and being forced to live as an outcaste.

It has been widely debated whether caste originally depended on birth or simply on a person's qualifications. The Sanskrit word *jati* implies the former, but some discussions in the epic *Mahabharata* (see p.139) imply that the situation may once have been less clear cut. This discussion has not been prominent in subsequent Hindu practice, and today one's social status is entirely dependent on which group one is born into. However, historically there has always been a degree of caste mobility. For example, members of "low" *jati*s have usurped thrones and declared themselves to be of divine descent, thus raising their caste to *kshatriya* status.

To this day, people continue regularly to identify themselves by their *jati*, and the entire Indian caste system is such a strong social force that non-Hindu communities such as the Christians, Jains, and Sikhs have absorbed parts of it. For instance, Nadar Christians in the south of India will only marry people of the same heritage.

While various texts and practices do clearly imply the hierarchy of the castes (see box, p.159), some Hindus have interpreted the traditional system as an equal division of labor, with each major group being responsible for a particular area of activity essential to society. But even in the modern era, the strength of the caste system has proved an obstacle to social reform. Mahatma Gandhi, for example, especially sought to overcome the prejudice against some of the most disadvantaged people in Indian society, the so-called "Untouchables"—those who pursued occupations considered "unclean" and "defiling" to the "higher" castes.

### WOMEN IN HINDU WRITINGS

On the whole, Hindu literature has expressed paradoxical views on the role and position of women. *The Laws of Manu*, written at the beginning of the Common Era, implies that contemporary women were accorded a low status, for example: "Though destitute of virtue ... a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife"(*Manu* 5.154). Although Manu goes on to say that women must be honored if the gods are to be pleased, on balance, the negative statements outweigh the positive ones.

Underlying many of the attitudes expressed by male religious writers is the concept of "auspiciousness." Essentially, a person or thing is auspicious if it promotes the three goals of *dharma* (duty), *artha* (prosperity), and *kama* (sensual pleasure). Thus, in the *dharmashastras* (see box, p.159) and in Hindu practice to this day, it is auspicious for a woman to be married and thus a full partner in *dharma*, *artha*, and *kama*. Only a married woman may bear the title *Shrimati* ("Possessor of Auspiciousness"). She is *Grhalakshmi*, "the Goddess Lakshmi of the Home" and the most honored woman in Hindu society, especially if she bears children.

The dictates of Manu and others were not necessarily followed. Even in the Vedic age, women composed hymns and took part in philosophical debates. After the eighth century CE, there were women poets, temple patrons, philosophers, religious commentators, and writers of scholarly works. They were respected, honored, and in some cases even venerated.



*A modern painting depicting Chaitanya (1486–1583), a great Bengali saint, among his followers. The adherents of Chaitanya, a devotee of Krishna, form one of the most prominent Hindu "philosophical communities," whose ideas are also fundamental to the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (see p.137).*

Such occupations included dealing with animal hides and corpses, because dead skin and flesh are considered polluting (the use of the Tamil word *pariah*—"drummer"—to mean "outcaste" derives from the fact that drumskins were made of "unclean" animal hides). Gandhi called the outcastes Harijans ("Children of God"), and the postindependence Indian constitution makes discrimination against them illegal. But so far such official declarations have had little effect in practice.

Sectarian, philosophical, and regional allegiances cut across caste lines and provide a different basis for social identification. Hindu sects are determined by the god they worship—Vaishnavas are devotees of Vishnu, Shaivas of Shiva, and so on. Philosophical communities—followers of such great thinkers as Shankara (eighth century CE), Ramanuja (eleventh century CE), and Chaitanya (sixteenth century CE)—also form distinct groups in many parts of India. Regional identity is important, too: Hindus tend to marry partners who come not only from the same *jati*, sectarian community, and philosophical group, but also from the same geographical area.

In general, the Hindu wife is traditionally expected to be monogamous, faithful to her husband in life and to his memory after he has died. Some of these notions are still adhered to in Hindu society, and while a man may abandon his wife, social pressures still make it difficult, in some communities, for a woman to leave her husband. However, while Manu (see box, opposite) may have been quoted with enthusiasm by male writers on Hindu law—whose works have informed many Western notions of Indian womanhood—many Hindu women have always enjoyed, as they do today, a degree of religious and financial independence and have made an important contribution to the culture of their homeland.