ESSENTIAL HINDUISM

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To Saragrahi Vaishnavas
Throughout the world.
They seek only the essence.

Contents

Foreword

Historian Arnold Toynbee predicted that "India will conquer her conquerors." While addressing The Philosophical Society of Edinburgh University in 1952, he proposed that while the balance of the twentieth century would belong to the West, the twenty-first century would see India become a major world culture. *Essential Hinduism* provides a compelling glimpse into what may have inspired Toynbee's vision.

As the title suggests, Steven Rosen's work reviews the core of Hindu culture, practices, and teachings. It explores this rich tradition through its history, literature, and people. The book focuses, particularly, on the ancient traditions of Vaishnavism (the worship of Vishnu)—the major theistic religion of India—for these traditions collectively constitute the numerically largest portion of the Hindu world. Readers will thus come to see Hinduism from the inside—from the point of view of the majority of its practitioners.

Thus, *Essential Hinduism* will be useful to scholars and the general reader, practitioners, and Indophiles. It is the first book of its kind to use the Vaishnava tradition to reveal overarching truths about the Hindu tradition as a whole. That being said, Rosen does not neglect the other major Hindu religions—Shaivism, Shaktism, and Smartism. Rather, he presents them initially from a Vaishnava point of view, and then with an addendum explaining how these traditions see themselves. The effect is interesting: the reader is thereby invited into the ways in which one Hindu tradition appreciatively views another closely linked tradition, revealing

a prominent built-in ecumenism that we are generally lacking in Western traditions.

Rosen also shows how the Vedas, the oldest scriptures in the world, form a foundation for all of Hinduism (even if few Hindus today really know their contents). He provides a thorough treatment of the Vedas, showing how their primary concern is ritual and the cultivation of knowledge. And he goes further, explaining how the Vedic mystery is only resolved with the help of "the fifth Veda" (the Puranas and the Epics). While this is also suggested in other good texts on Hinduism, it is explained here with depth and clarity.

The work is especially important in that it offers Rosen's analysis of Vishnu in the Vedas. The author collects information from primary sources as well as from leading scholars in the field, revealing, perhaps for the first time in a readable, accessible volume, why Vishnu's place is important in Hinduism as a whole, as he connects Vaishnavism with the early Vedic tradition.

In addition, Rosen's summaries of the two Epics share details that will encourage readers to explore the original sacred works themselves. Students of Hinduism, especially, will benefit from these colorful summaries, which accurately convey the essential meaning of the works, giving the teachings and implications of the texts as well as their narratives. This is important. Often, the Epics are quoted or explained in a cursory way, but, overall, remain quite incomprehensible. What are they really trying to say? What is the violence, found in each of the Epics, and war, which is central to both stories, really all about? Rosen explains what the texts are trying to convey in simple and clear language.

A special feature of this book is its readable life cycle of Krishna. To reconstruct this story, Rosen utilizes several sources, such as the *Harivamsa*, the *Vishnu Purana*, and the *Bhagavata*, along with the writings of traditional masters. I have never seen such a succinct retelling, with such attention to detail. The author also explains the implications of the Krishna story and provides metaphorical readings so that students can understand the lessons meant to be gleaned from Krishna's divine descent.

Overall, Steven Rosen is to be commended for this contribution to the study of Hinduism in general and Vaishnavism in particular. It is hoped that this work will stimulate further study into the sophisticated theological systems of thought and the devout life practices of Hinduism—one of the world's greatest religious traditions. And if India—particularly Hinduism—were to be truly appreciated in the twenty-first century, as

Toynbee suggests, then Rosen's book would be a significant step in that direction.

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Introduction

"Truth is one, though the wise refer to it by various names."

— *Rig Veda* 1.164.46

The above verse, found in one of the oldest religious scriptures known to man (which is, incidentally, a "Hindu" scripture), hints at the mystery and diversity that is Hinduism. Since the stanza is central to the Hindu tradition as we know it today, let us look at it more closely, in terms of context and meaning. Just prior to this verse, the *Rig Veda* praises its exotic pantheon of gods, and only then are we told that God, or Truth, is ultimately one, though known by various names. What does this mean? It points to a monotheistic idea of deity, surely, but to what else? And how does it relate to what we today know as Hinduism, with its many gods and goddesses?

On the face of it, Hindus believe in many divinities—Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, the Goddess, and many others—and because of this, from the outside, the tradition is commonly understood to be polytheistic. Simultaneously, however, Hindus also believe in the existence of one supreme God, whom they call Bhagavan (All-Opulent One), Paramatma (Supreme Self), Parameshwar (Supreme Controller), Parampita (Supreme Father), and so on. Thus, according to Hindu tradition, God is one, but also many. He manifests in innumerable forms and shapes and further expands into lesser divinities, and even into the entire perceivable world, which we will explain later.

This hierarchical series of divine manifestations, of spiritual *separateness* as opposed to oneness, is often neglected in Western scholarship (and even within certain Indic traditions) where it is generally taught that these manifestations are all the same, and that they somehow coalesce in a higher reality.

For now, it should at least be understood that differentiation is as much a part of Hindu spirituality as is oneness. Or, to use the words of a noted Hinduism scholar: "At times, the ordering of the diverse parts of the whole seems best described as hierarchical; yet it is also true that the parts of the whole are knotted together in interrelations that seem more like a web than a ladder. The unity of India, both socially and religiously, is that of a complex whole. In a complex whole, the presupposition upon which oneness is based is not unity or sameness, but interrelatedness and diversity."[1]

As a prime manifestation of that diversity, Purusha (the Universal Male) enters Prakriti (Nature, Matter) and brings forth numerous planets and beings. As Shakti (the Universal Feminine Energy), he, now she, pervades all existence and gives it life. Indeed, the Hindu Godhead goes beyond the common patriarchal dimension of mainstream Western religion. Rather than pandering to sexist perspectives, in India the divine is seen as both male and female, depending on His/Her manifestation. Indic religions expert Graham M. Schweig refers to this as "polymorphic *bi*-monotheism," stating that, in Hinduism, "there are many forms of the one dual-gendered divinity."[2]

And this is just the beginning. Hinduism boasts an inconceivably large number of individual deities—330 million, say the ancient Indic texts. Each of these gods and goddesses, while expressions and manifestations of Brahman, the supreme spirit, is considered an individual, with a distinct story or "history," if transcendental chronology can be referred to in that way. For those who choose to embrace the worship of one of these deities, the scriptures offer a unique set of rituals, tailor-made for that particular form of worship. Some of these deities are male, others are female, while still others are androgynous.

Some resemble humans, some animals, and there are even those who are a combination of the two. Brahman also comes to us in certain trees or stones or other aspects of material nature. But all of these are manifestations of one supreme Truth. In the words of popular author Shashi Tharoor, India is "a singular land of the plural"[3] and, more, a "land of maddening paradoxes."[4]

Westerners should bear in mind their natural difficulty in understanding the paradoxes of the Hindu world: Europeans and Americans, especially,

are here confronted with a people of alien history, traditions, climate, and habits, not to mention differing modes of thought, fundamental assumptions, and standards of assessment. Amidst all this, the Indian mind thrives on the idea of unity in diversity, a theme to which we will repeatedly return throughout this book. Unity in diversity, to make a long story short, is at the heart of the Rig Vedic verse.

The multiplicity or diversity of Hindu deities points to the tradition's spiritual hospitality, its willingness to accommodate personal proclivity, and tastes innumerable. Indeed, the "legal definition of Hinduism," established by the Supreme Court of India in 1966, views the Hindu faith as "a spirit of tolerance and willingness to understand and appreciate other points of view based on the realization that truth is many-sided." This principle of tolerance is considered second only to "the acceptance of the Vedic literature—the sacred scriptures of the Hindu East—as the highest authority in spiritual matters," thus establishing the importance of religious tolerance in Hindu doctrine.[5]

To better understand this sense of Hindu catholicity, let us look at two related ideas, both fundamental to the practice of Hinduism: The doctrine of spiritual qualification (*adhikara*), and that of emphasizing one's chosen deity (*ishta devata*). The first of these takes into consideration the spiritual competence of the individual, or the state of his or her spiritual evolution. According to one's *adhikara*, one is inclined or disinclined to worship a particular deity, and to do it (or to not do it) in a particular way. Each person is advised to study, learn, and practice a form of spirituality that is appropriate for his or her needs at any given time.

Accordingly, the divergent forms of religious practice, and the images they serve, are meant to be user-friendly, to assist the masses according to each person's taste, knowledge, and spiritual capacity. It serves little purpose, say the Hindu sages, to teach abstract philosophical concepts to a person whose heart thirsts for interpersonal relationship, and vice versa. Thus, impersonalism and personalism, two forms of Hindu religion, serve different purposes, for different people, and at different times.

The doctrine of one's "chosen deity," which works conjointly with that of one's *adhikara*, allows a person the freedom to choose an aspect of Brahman that speaks to his religious needs, that satisfies his spiritual appetite. Here it is understood that the Hindu deities are the same and yet different as well. They are the same in that they are all aspects of Brahman, but different in how and in what way they actually represent this ultimate spiritual Truth. All this will be explained as the book moves on. For now, it should be understood that despite this diversity in both deity and method of worship, there is a subtle unity that pervades them as well.

This unity extends to concepts of God found in other religious traditions, which Hinduism embraces and supports as alternate aspects of Brahman:

> Just as we can say, "the French call a spoon a *cuiller*," the Hindu will say, "the Christians worship a form of Visnu [phonetic: Vishnu] named Christ," because for him Visnu is not an individual god pertaining to a particular religion but a general principle, as inevitably represented in any theology, in any code of symbols, as words representing objects (nouns), actions (verbs), and qualities (adjectives) are inevitably found in any language.[6]

In this way and in many others, Hinduism is unlike any of the world's major religious traditions. To give another example of the religion's uniqueness, in contradistinction to Judaism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, the Hindu tradition cannot be traced to any one historical founder—its origins are shrouded in the mystique of prehistory and, for those who believe, in the actions of supernatural beings.

Historically, Islam goes back 1,300 years and is traced to the Prophet Mohammed; Christianity is 2,000 years old and begins with Jesus; Buddhism was founded by Siddhartha Gautama some 2,500 years ago; and Judaism, as we know it today, began with Abraham 4,500 years ago. The origins of Hinduism, however, are obscure. Some have tried to trace its origins to the Sanskrit literature known as the *Vedas*, but even this is problematic, since the dating of the *Vedas* eludes modern scholarship and the texts themselves claim to be eternal. Modern scholars have for many decades claimed the tradition datable to 1,500 BCE. But this was based on an assumption that is currently being revised—the Aryan Invasion Theory. Details of this theory will be discussed in a later chapter.

Hinduism is also unique in that it is not a monolithic religious tradition, and this hearkens back to the diversity aspect described above. The Hindu tradition is a potpourri of many separate religions, a medley of miscellaneous beliefs and practices. Vaishnavism (the worship of Vishnu), Shaivism (the worship of Shiva), and Shaktism (the worship of the Goddess), are but three—albeit the most prominent—of the many religions placed under the Hindu umbrella. Thus, while the above *Rig Veda* quote certainly embodies a fundamental truth at the core of all Hindu traditions, a diametrically opposed proposition might ring true as well: "Truths are many, though they can all be known by one name—Hinduism." Or can they? This book seeks to explore this question and many others as well.

But before launching into an elaborate explanation and analysis of this ancient Indic tradition, a brief statement is in order about the rather specific methodology chosen for this book. Our focus is squarely on Vaishnavism,

India's largest Hindu tradition, and through this prime example of Hindu spirituality we hope to convey the truth of essential Hinduism. That is to say, unlike other books that tend to merge all existing Hindu traditions or gloss over specifics that define particular religious groups, this work will focus on Hinduism's most elaborate religious enterprise, thus bringing to light the overall flavor of Hinduism in general. Other major Hindu traditions, of course, will be enumerated and explained as well, but only in relation to this central religious tradition.

METHODOLOGY: FOCUS ON VAISHNAVISM

The subject of Hinduism is vast and beyond the scope of any one book. Acknowledging this enormity, our present study, while touching on the many facets of what is today known as Hinduism, will have to choose an area of emphasis, allowing this to serve as an overarching representation of the greater Hindu tradition, as stated previously. For this purpose, again, we choose Vaishnavism, or the traditions surrounding the worship of Vishnu, the "Oversoul" of the universe, and that for the following reasons.

First of all, two-thirds of the known Hindu world identifies themselves as Vaishnavas. Given that India is overrun with numerous religious groups, and specifically with Hindus of all denominations, this statistic might seem unlikely. But the world's leading anthropologists and sociologists attest to its accuracy. Prominent Indic historian, Gerald Larson, is one such person. He is the Rabindranath Tagore Professor of Indian Cultures and Civilizations and Director of Indian Studies at Indiana University. In regard to the high number of Vaishnavas worldwide, he bases his findings on the work of the late anthropologist Agehananda Bharati, whose admission of Vaishnava predominance is particularly significant, for he himself was a Shankarite *sannyasi*, a group whose philosophical position is opposed to that of the Vaishnavas. Klaus Klostermaier, University Distinguished Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Manitoba, Canada, too, affirms that Vaishnavism constitutes the numerically most significant branch of modern Hinduism.[7]

The implications here are staggering—that the Hindu majority emphasizes Vishnu or one of his incarnations as India's preeminent manifestation of divinity. It should perhaps be pointed out that the high percentage of Vaishnavas in India is likely to include some practitioners from nonexclusivist groups, like the Smartas, who worship numerous gods if also sometimes emphasizing Vishnu. Still, given that there are some 800 million Hindus in India alone, there are more than 600 million people who

identify themselves as Vaishnavas of some kind. This being the case, it is not unreasonable to assume that exploring the worship of Vishnu would allow us entrance into the general mysteries of Hinduism.

But there is more: When considering the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva[8]—who, in pan-Indian consciousness, are the three primary manifestations of divinity, presiding over realms of passion, goodness, and ignorance, respectively—Vishnu is always seen as the cohesive center.

While Brahma (rarely worshipped as a separate divinity in India) represents the passion associated with the act of creation, Vishnu brings equilibrium and a sense of stability—he gives all creation sustenance and meaning. While Shiva (Vishnu's only true contender for primacy in the Hindu pantheon) represents cosmic destruction and the mode of nescience, Vishnu gives us maintenance and the light of goodness. In other words, Vishnu is Shiva's right and Brahma's left. He inhabits central space, both conceptually and theologically, giving a sense of both extremes and what lies in between. As deity in the middle, then, he seems the appropriate candidate for supplying a balanced view of reality in general and of Hinduism in particular.

As an aside, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva are yet another example of the One and the Many, of unity in diversity, and this is clear from the *Bhagavata Purana*, considered by many to be India's most important religious text: "The Lord is self-effulgent and supreme. He creates the material world by his personal energy and assumes the names Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshvara [Shiva] when he performs the acts of creation, maintenance, and annihilation." (8.7.23) And further: "The Supreme Lord accepts the three forms of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva for the purposes of creation, maintenance, and destruction. Of these three forms, living beings derive ultimate benefit from Vishnu, who is situated in pure goodness." (1.2.23)

To be thorough, we should also mention the Goddess, a study of whom would also tell us much about Hinduism. However, even here we do not find the balance characteristic of Vishnu. Despite the Goddess's more nurturing and loving dimensions, as Earth, or as the Divine Mother, she is more commonly associated with Shiva, the lord of destruction, and her dark side as Durga or Kali is usually emphasized by practitioners. Indeed, the word *kali* means "black" and is usually understood in terms of "time" and "death." Kali and Durga are fierce, even bloodthirsty, manifestations of the divine and, as such, they lean more toward the "terrifying" side of the supreme. Thus, the Goddess does not provide the same balance of forces found in Vishnu.

Moreover, in Indian thought, goodness and truth are interrelated, both conceptually and semantically. The Sanskrit words *sattva* ("goodness") and *satya* ("truth") hearken back to the *Bhagavad-Gita* (14.17), which informs us that, "From the mode of goodness one develops true knowledge." In fact, the two words, *sattva* and *satya*, are cognate, from the verb *as*, "to be," or the neuter present participle, *sat*, "being." From *sat*, comes *sat-tva*, "being-ness," and *satya*, or "truth." In other words, "that which is good and true is that which actually constitutes existence." Thus, implicitly, Vishnu's association with goodness suggests that the acquisition of true knowledge is to be found in him.[9] We will explain this further in our chapter on the *Puranas*.

There are additional reasons for focusing on Vaishnavism: The most valued texts in all of Hinduism—that is, the Epics and the *Puranas*, upon which we will elaborate in upcoming chapters—primarily focus on Vishnu. As Professor Gavin Flood, who teaches in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at University of Wales, Lampeter, writes in his classic textbook on Hinduism: "The two most important groups of Hindu narrative traditions embodied in oral and written texts are the two Epics, the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, and the *Puranas*." He elaborates: "Although the Epics contain a wealth of material which cannot be neatly categorized as belonging to any particular tradition, there is nevertheless a case for saying that the Epics are primarily Vaishnava in orientation, as, indeed, are many of the *Puranas*."[10]

In other words, Hinduism's most prominent scriptures basically espouse Vaishnavism, with easily explainable exceptions. Also, the concept of *avatars*, or the idea of God as he descends into the world of three dimensions—so central to Hindu thinking—never became fully established in other Hindu traditions. It is mainly a Vaishnava doctrine, though all Hindus subscribe to it. Here, again, by explaining this fundamental Vaishnava phenomenon, we might more easily understand the greater Hindu tradition.

In Indian courts of law, people swear with their hand on the *Bhagavad Gita* instead of the Bible. Even in America, the Judicial Studies Board has declared that, "Of their many holy scriptures, the *Bhagavad Gita* may be considered suitable for the purposes of swearing oaths." This is not the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, which is largely dedicated to Lord Shiva, or the *Devi-Bhagavata*, which sings the praises of the Goddess. It is a Vaishnava scripture. Period.[11]

One of the world's prominent authorities on Hinduism sums up:

> The Vishnu tradition is perhaps the most typical of all the forms of Hinduism, and the greatest books of Indian literature reflect it strongly. The *Mahabharata* is

mainly a Vaishnava book; the *Ramayana* treats of Rama, the *avatara* of Vishnu. One of the most ancient of the *Puranas* is the *Vishnu Purana* and the numerous Vaishnava *samhitas* have been the models on which the sectarian works of other [Hindu] religions have been based. The most popular book of the entire Hindu literature, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, is a Krishna scripture. Countless inspired devotees of Vishnu have composed throughout the ages an incomparable store of *bhakti* ["devotional"] hymns that live in the literally incessant *bhajans* [devotional recitation] and *kirtans* ["communal religious singing"] throughout India even today.[12]

In other words, Vaishnavism represents a sort of microcosm of the Hindu macrocosm. A microcosm is something that represents the universe, or humanity, in miniature. As it is said, "A single human being is a microcosm of the whole of humanity," or, "Their village was a microcosm of our world." A macrocosm is essentially the converse and is a term either for the universe or for any complete structure that contains smaller structures: "Society is the macrocosm of each of its individual members."

When it comes to Hinduism, Vaishnavism is, in a sense, both microcosm and macrocosm. Since it is, numerically, the largest of the Hindu traditions, it is not a "micro" anything. All of the smaller Hindu traditions can be understood by looking at Vaishnavism's various customs, traits, and practices. But in the present context, it can be seen as a smaller representative of Hinduism as a whole, of the larger Hindu tradition, and in that sense, it is a microcosm of the Hindu universe. Clearly, the outer portions of this universe, including Shaivism, Shaktism, and so on, include galaxies of difference, and Vaishnavism is hardly representative of every nuance of these rich religious perspectives. Still, by looking at Vaishnavism as a sampling of the rest, we can likely get the flavor of all existing Hindu traditions.

The book is conceptually divided into two sections. The first might be called "The Basis." Here we begin with the fundamentals of the Hindu tradition, from antecedents, such as the Indus Valley Civilization and its implications, to the misconceptions surrounding the terms "Hindu" and Hinduism"; from an explanation of the word *dharma* ("duty") and how, as a concept, it underlies the entire Hindu tradition, to an analysis of India's holy texts, such as the *Vedas*, the Epics, the *Puranas*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and the life of Krishna himself. This much background is needed to pursue an understanding of essential Hinduism.

The second section of the book is about "The Practice." In this section, we begin by describing the basic theistic traditions that are today identified as modern Hinduism, always keeping in mind our special focus on

the Vaishnava tradition. This will be followed by an exploration of certain philosophical ideas that affect the practice of Hinduism as a whole. We will then highlight specific practices that virtually define the Hindu tradition, including vegetarianism, holy food (*prasadam*), deities (that is, iconic images), temples, religious festivals and holidays, and methods of meditation and worship.

A more thorough examination might have included a look at the six traditional systems of Indian philosophy, as well as Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, which, while not exactly Hindu traditions themselves, impact greatly on the way Hinduism is practiced. We could have also explored the *Manu-Samhita*, Patanjali's *Yoga-Sutras*, or examined the many regional scriptures and traditions that have cropped up over the last several centuries.

Or perhaps we could have looked more into Tantric literature or the seemingly endless writings of the tradition's great teachers, such as Madhva, Ramanuja, Shankara, Vedanta Deshika, Rupa Goswami, Jiva Goswami, and uncountable others. There are certainly numerous practices, too, that didn't work their way into this book. We could have looked at the concept of a personal teacher, or a guru, more closely, or perhaps analyzed the Samskaras, the traditional "rites of passage" experienced by all believing Hindus. The importance of holy places, and descriptions of them, could have filled several chapters as well. Some aspects of these subjects did indeed make their way into the book; a good deal of it did not.

Our task, remember, is to present "essential" Hinduism, and, on that score, our choices should suffice. It would require several volumes to address the above subjects with any modicum of thoroughness, and so they are only peripherally explored in the upcoming chapters, rather than specifically analyzed. If the reader becomes grounded in the facts and procedures outlined in this book, a basic, working understanding of Hinduism's many traditions should unfold, revealing a complex and multifaceted religion indeed.

CHAPTER 1

The Antecedents: Everything Comes from Something

> "India's history is shrouded in myth; yet much of Indian mythology, if not all of it, has roots in historic reality."
>
> —Stanley Wolpert, Indian historian,
> University of California

Since Hinduism predates recorded history, precious little is known about its foundation. Its own earliest texts, the *Vedas*, refer to its origins as supernatural, not human-made, eternally present, and the whole early part of the tradition is basically viewed in the same way. This makes a search for antecedents particularly discomfiting. In this chapter, therefore, we will look at two options. First, we will see what light, if any, modern scholarship brings to the subject of Hindu beginnings. After a brief analysis, it will quickly become apparent that the scholarly method, at least in this case, offers more heat than light, and so we will also explore the Hindu tradition's own view of the same subject.

A BRIEF LOOK AT INDIAN HISTORY

Conventional wisdom tells us that Hinduism is inextricably linked to the exotic soil of India. And so this seems an appropriate place to begin our inquiry. Historians tell us that India is an ancient land with a continuous civilization that goes back well over 5,000 years. Relatively recent findings

reveal an ancient "Indus Valley Civilization" that goes back considerably further, even if its archeological remains tell us precious little about the origins of modern Hinduism.

Buried in the depths of India's prehistory until it was rediscovered in the 1920s, the Indus Valley Civilization shares a unique position with Mesopotamia, China, and Egypt as one of the four earliest civilizations known to man. Scholars say it existed from 3000 BCE to 1800 BCE, but has roots extending into the Neolithic Period, 7000–6000 BCE. They also tell us that the Indus Valley was surprisingly advanced, with planned cities, agriculture, writing, architecture, and so on. Her first excavated sites were on the Indus River, in the northwest of the Indian subcontinent, which explains how the discovery received its name. At its height, in 2200 BCE, say most researchers, the Indus Civilization boasted an area that was larger than Europe.[1]

However one chooses to view this legendary epoch of India's distant past, it eventually gave rise to "the Sanskrit Era." This foundational segment of Indian history is also known as the Vedic Period, usually cited from 1500 BCE to 500 BCE. Here, the Indian world, or so the theory goes, became privy to the *Vedas* and its surrounding culture. Traditionalists will often debate these dates, pushing Vedic compilation back to about 3000 BCE. Indeed, many modern scholars support them in this.[2] Nonetheless, at least officially, the more conservative dates persist.

Parenthetically, traditionalists moved a step forward in 2002, when a new name was given to the Indus Valley Civilization, mentioned above—a gesture indicating that the earlier dates for Vedic compilation were becoming more acceptable. This new name was "Sindhu Sarasvati Civilization," and it can now be found in most Indian schoolbooks. The Sanskritized "Sindhu," rather than the Western "Indus," and the addition of "Saraswati," an ancient river central to Hinduism's sacred geography, suggest that the Indus Valley Civilization was originally part of Vedic culture. This is an attempt by traditionalists to deny the validity of the Aryan Invasion Theory, to be discussed below.

Be that as it may, toward the end of the Vedic Period, or soon thereafter, it is said, the Buddha appeared—this is roughly four or five centuries before the Common Era.[3] The ancient Jain tradition won many adherents during this period, too. But India's initial love affair with these two ascetic traditions was not to last. Before she had time to digest the vegetarian doctrine of these two peace-loving paths, which indeed emphasized noninjury (*ahimsa*), Alexander the Great and his fierce Macedonian troops stormed the homeland about a hundred years later. Alexander's mission in India, of course, was largely unsuccessful, but his assertiveness sparked in Indians

a thirst for power and territory that had for some time been dormant on the palate of the subcontinent.

To make a shortened story even shorter, the need to protect interior Indian concerns led to the first of its legendary empires, beginning with the work of Chandragupta Maurya (274–237 BCE), famous for his reign throughout much of India and Pakistan and initiating an entire lineage of conquerors. It was he who forced Alexander to retreat, and his Mauryan Empire became the savior of India, at least temporarily.

Soon after, Emperor Ashoka emerged, along with a second popularization of Buddhism. For many Indians, this was a time of deep questioning and reevaluation. Ancient Vedic rituals and traditions were being replaced by new religious sentiments. Here we find India's first major countercultural milieu—a reordering of priorities and, likely, the rise of Hinduism as we know it today, with its numerous religious systems.

Still, these "new" Hindu religions were based on fragments from much earlier traditions, and so they were not entirely new. The post-Ashoka empires brought ancient Hindu ideas back to the fore: the Gupta, Pratihara, Pala, Chalukya, Chola, Pandya, and Vijayanagara dynasties, among others, were known for supporting traditional Hindu arts and for developing Hindu culture in significant ways.

The Gupta Empire (ca. 320–550 CE), in particular, ushered in a new "Classical Age," if you will, when most of North India became reunited under Hindu rule. Because of considerable royal patronage and pronounced cultural achievements, this period is famous as a type of Hindu renaissance, in which diversity, religious tolerance, and synthesis, for which Hinduism is so well known, came to the fore.

But there were serious challenges during this period, too. Sometime in the eighth century CE, Muslims invaded India and, gradually, established their foreign regime. This gave rise to the Mogul Empire (1526–1757), and with it came an end to much of what might be called "Hindu tolerance." This is when many Hindu temples were destroyed and deities desecrated.

Just prior to this, India was comprised of a vast number of small kingdoms, each with varying degrees of power—but all Hindu. Now things were different. There were alternately Muslim or Hindu sovereigns in the various kingdoms. Without doubt, some Muslim leaders were sympathetic to indigenous Hindu culture and continued to support it, but this spirit of tolerance ebbed and flowed like the tide of the Indian Ocean.

As time went on, the Portuguese, Dutch, Danish, French, and, of course, the British, sometime in the seventeenth century, streamed in. While initially in India for purposes of trade, or so they said, many of these outside forces eventually imposed their religious beliefs (read: Christianity) on the

"Hindoo heathens." Needless to say, these multiple invasions left much of India confused about her own identity, her once impervious walls now eroded by the force of time and by the wear of foreign abuse. India's ceiling, somewhat surprisingly, did not collapse under the pressure. Rather, in the midst of it all, there were those who courageously supported the walls of Hinduism's hallowed traditions.

It is often forgotten, however, that the profound truths at the heart of Hinduism were always the property of the *sadhus*, the saintly people, or those who devoted their lives to the spiritual pursuit. The mass of people inherited abbreviated stories of indecipherable gods, half-truths, or incomplete philosophical notions. That is to say, most of India is comprised of Shudras and Untouchables, the lower classes, who did not study the *Vedas*, Sanskrit, or the higher theological tradition.

Most common folk, then, were ignorant of India's complex spiritual heritage. With the many foreign incursions and their resultant chaos, this situation naturally worsened. But India's highly spiritual culture—as found in her art, music, literature, theology, and so on—would not be lost. It was preserved in the confidential *sampradayas*, or esoteric lineages, that were guardian to these truths from the beginning. This will be described more fully toward the end of this section.

As an addendum, perhaps, it is ironic that Hinduism, as we know it today, appears to arise after Buddhism and Jainism, since these are both considered Hindu heterodoxies. To be clear, Hindu tradition is ancient, with origins in the fertile soil of the *Veda*. But its current traditions and modes of expression are largely traceable to this later period, and, in this sense, it was open to the influence of Buddhism and Jainism. True, Jainism, in particular, has hoary roots in the culture of India's distant past. But both Buddhism and Jainism, as we now perceive them, began about 2,500 years ago, and grew out of dissatisfaction with earlier Hindu religion. Implicitly, Hinduism is the parent faith.

To sum up: Modern Hinduism's rather late genesis on India's historical landscape would account for its divergence from early Vedic practices, as discussed in an upcoming chapter. It would also explain why later traditions, such as Buddhism and Jainism, might appear to be prior, and that the ancient Vedic religion went through transformations causing it to branch off into many individual religions, with one or many gods at their helm. In other words, India's ancient traditions hearken back to the Vedic period, if not to the prior Indus Valley Civilization, where earlier forms of Hinduism are implicit in archaeological finds and in Vedic texts. The tradition took part in a long journey, in which dynasties, conquerors, and foreign invaders came and went. Ultimately, Hinduism emerged as a

plethora of sectarian traditions, manifesting, for better or for worse, as we see it today.

THE ARYANS, THE PERSIANS, AND THE INDUS VALLEY

Scholars sometimes trace the Hindu complex of religions to a merger of beliefs, especially those of the Aryans, the Dravidians, and the Harappans, ancient peoples who found their home in the Indian subcontinent. The idea of the Aryans is especially significant in the study of early Hinduism. The word originates from the Sanskrit root *arya*, which means "noble" or "honored." For most of us in the West, an "Aryan" is usually associated with the blond-haired, blue-eyed ideal of Nazi Germany. But it originally referred to a people who looked completely different.

Historically, the word *Aryan* can be traced to the ancient Indo-Iranians—Indo-European peoples who inhabited parts of what are now Iran, Afghanistan, and India. They referred to themselves as *arya* or *riya*, roots from which we get the name "Iran" (the original name for Persia) and even "Ireland." Interestingly, these same linguistic roots are found in early Sanskrit texts, where they refer to the higher echelon of ancient Indian society.

In the nineteenth century, European scholars became aware of the *Aryan* concept, too, and, by the twentieth century, German linguists had maneuvered an Aryan background for anyone with a "Caucasian ancestry," particularly for the Germans themselves. This honorary distinction, of course, soon devolved into the racial theories of the Nazis, popularized by Adolf Hitler in his autobiography, *Mein Kampf* ("My Struggle"). His misuse of the word "Aryan" was rooted in political propaganda meant to feed local vanity.

The idea of "the master race" (German: Herrenrasse, Herrenvolk), as he saw it, was that the Germanic and Nordic people represent an ideal and "pure" human culture. This was not Hitler's original thinking. It can be traced to nineteenth-century racial theory, which proposed a hierarchy of peoples, with African Bushmen and Australian Aborigines at the bottom and white Europeans—the descendents of the Indo-Iranians—at the top.[4]

This concept of an "Aryan race" arose soon after linguists identified Avestan, the ancient language of Persia, and Sanskrit, the honored tongue of Northern India, as oldest among the earliest languages groups. This led to the idea that the major European languages, such as Latin, Greek, and the various Germanic and Celtic languages, all descend from them. The speakers of these languages, it has been argued, must have been the ancestors of all European peoples.

These hypothetical ancestors were given the name "Aryans," and, from this point, the term was associated with "white Europeans"—naturally excluding Jews and Arabs, since their ancestral languages (Hebrew and Arabic) do not belong to the Indo-European family. This, of course, played into the prejudices of the Nazis. For now, let us just say that in the *Vedas* themselves the word *Aryan* is not used in a racial or ethnic sense. Rather, it is used by Hindus, Zoroastrians, Buddhists, and Jains to mean "noble" or "spiritual." It is also used as an epithet of respect.

Still, such ideas about race are not alien to India. One theory posits that the lighter-skinned Aryans and the darker-skinned Dravidians constitute two distinct races. It is further said that the Dravidians were the original inhabitants of India whom the invading Aryans conquered and dominated, sending them to the south. From this came the additional idea that much of what we call Hindu culture was initially Dravidian, later appropriated by the Aryans and never again associated with the people of Dravida. Those with political agendas eventually used such ideas, in a Machiavellian attempt, to turn the people of South India against the people of the north. There are numerous variations on this theme.

But most important in understanding the ancient idea of an Aryan people would be to briefly analyze the Indo-Iranians. It should not be overlooked (though it usually is) that ancient Persia (Iran) might offer certain secrets about the origins of Hinduism. Long before the time of Zarathustra (628–551 BC?),[5] also known as Zoroaster, Persia shared much in common with Vedic culture. Religious reformer that he was, Zoroaster opposed the bloody animal sacrifices of the *Vedas* like his contemporaries Buddha and Mahavira. But unlike those two, his connections with ancient Vedic religion are now lost in historical obscurity.

Still, there is much we do know. Zoroaster addressed the Lord as Ahura Mazda, the supreme God among all others, and was renowned as the founder of a monotheistic religion (known as Zoroastrianism, whose practitioners are called "Parsis" in India), perhaps the first of its kind. In some ways, Ahura Mazda resembled the Vedic sky-god Varuna, though he could just as easily be seen as Vishnu—he was a solar deity, identified with the sun, as is Vishnu in the *Rig Veda*. Ahura Mazda is also represented symbolically by outspread eagle wings—Vishnu's famous eagle carrier is known as Garuda.

Early Persian religion, in fact, does more than merely resonate with the Vedic tradition; the two actually overlap. For example, in addition to Ahura Mazda, Persian texts refer to a host of lesser gods, several of whom are also found in the *Vedas* and are mentioned by the exact same names—Indra, Mithra, Vayu, and so on. Zoroaster often equated these

gods with evil spirits, who seduced practitioners from the true worship of the one Supreme Being. A similar phenomenon, again, can be found in Vaishnavism, where worship of the demigods is sometimes considered a pious distraction from the worship of Vishnu.

Ancient Persian religion includes a particular initiation ceremony (*upanayana*) for boys of the three upper classes—a ritual that in both Zoroastrianism and in Hinduism involves a sacred thread. The divine and/or hallucinogenic sacred drink, known as *soma* in Vedic texts, corresponds to the sacred *haoma* of Zoroastrianism. The ideas of *devas* ("gods") and *asuras* ("demons") can be found in both religions, too, though the meanings of the words are reversed in Zoroastrian understanding, and both Vedic and Persian texts tell us about the perennial battle between the forces of darkness and those of light. Finally, the hymns of the *Rig Veda* and the *Gathas*, as some of the Zoroastrians texts are known, exhibit such a similarity in grammar and vocabulary that it is incontestable that they derive from a common parent language and perhaps even a common cultural heritage.

As interesting as all of this is, most scholars do not look to Persian roots for enlightenment about Hindu origins. Rather, they are more concerned with the Indus Valley Civilization, first discovered or defined in 1920, as mentioned earlier, by the British archaeologist Sir John Marshall, whose exploratory work at Mohenjo-Daro is now legendary. Marshall's findings were followed by the contributions of M. S. Vat. The latter's excavations at Harappa, which gives the Indus Valley Civilization its alternate name, the Harappan Civilization, brought Indian archeology to new heights. And with the passage of years came still more significant finds, but not always with answers to the mysteries that came along with them.

Still, the discoveries at these sites reveal impressive town planning and architecture, along with a sense of sophisticated social organization. The remains of cities seem to indicate well-planned roads and houses with efficient drainage systems and ventilation. Tools of stone, copper, and bronze have been found, and these appear technologically advanced, considering the time period in which they were used. The actual origin of the Harappan people, though, is still a matter of dispute. While one group of scholars believes that they were Dravidian (i.e., native to India, or Indo-Aryan), another section believes they were either Sumerians or Cretans.

Most importantly, perhaps, the excavations have given us a rich collection of arts and crafts as well as images of revered deities. Archaeologists have discovered thousands of seals with crude but clear figures of animals, such as unicorn, bull, tiger, elephant, goat, buffalo, and others. The most remarkable seal depicts what appears to be Pashupati, a form of Shiva, one of the Hindu gods, perhaps indicating an early form of his worship. There