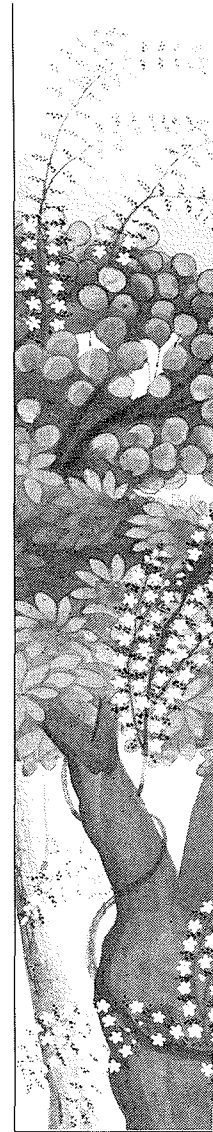


# Hinduism and the Fate of India

In May, only days before he was assassinated on the campaign trail, Rajiv Gandhi warned that if India's Hindu nationalists triumphed at the polls, "the country will burn." Indian democracy survived Gandhi's death and the challenge that he thought the Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) represented. But the fact remains that in India, a country founded on the secularist principles of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, the rising political force is an overtly religious one. The next election could well leave the world's largest democracy—and the Third World's boldest political experiment—under the sway of a new and unfamiliar form of religious fundamentalism.

If an Indian from a century ago could observe all of this, surprise would almost certainly be his reaction. Surprise that Hinduism, with its multitude of gods, beliefs, customs, and peoples, is now referred to so adamantly as a single faith. Surprise at who is now considered Hindu (including certain tribal groups) and who is not (such as the Sikhs). Our contributors—John Stratton Hawley, Alf Hildebeitel, Wendy Doniger, and Prasenjit Duara—explore the creation of this new Hindu identity and the implications of the new Hindu politics for the future of India.



## NAMING HINDUISM

*by John Stratton Hawley*

**H**induism—the word, and perhaps the reality too—was born in the 19th century, a notoriously illegitimate child. The father was middle-class and British, and the mother, of course, was India. The circumstances of

the conception are not altogether clear. One heard of the “goodly habits and observances of Hindooism” in a Bengali-English grammar written in 1829, and the Reverend William Tennant had spoken of “the Hindoo system” in a book on Indian manners and history written at the beginning of the century. Yet it was not until the inex-



A 19th-century gouache showing milkmaids searching in vain for the divine Krishna. In India, gods do not remain in the "other world" but descend to Earth.

pensive handbook *Hinduism* was published by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in 1877 that the term came into general English usage.

The author of this book was Sir Monier Monier-Williams, then Boden Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford. Monier-Williams had approached the same topic in an earlier

work, *Indian Wisdom* (1875), but that book, being an introduction to Sanskrit literature, had a limited readership. *Hinduism* was more popular, for it was a volume in the Society's widely read series on "Non-Christian Religious Systems." Its very existence in that series served to set the Hindu religion on a par with Buddhism, Judaism,

Confucianism, and all the other “isms” that still figure, for better or worse, as the major building blocks in our modern conception of world religion.

Monier-Williams understood that there was a problem in this—two problems, in fact. First, the “system” he proposed to describe had an utterly “variable character.” Hinduism was “all-tolerant, all-comprehensible, all-absorbing,” he said, so much so that it resembled the great Indian banyan tree, whose “single stem sends out numerous branches destined to send roots to the ground and become trees themselves, till the parent stock is lost in a dense forest of its own offshoots . . . .” To the “parent stock,” a majestic pantheistic creed, Monier-Williams gave the name “esoteric” Hinduism or simply Brahmanism. As the name showed, he conceived it to have been produced by Brahmans, the priestly caste that had exerted its scholarly influence over the shaping of India ever since the Indo-European Aryans descended upon the subcontinent during the second millennium B.C.\* As for the branches of his banyan tree, the “popular side of the same creed,” these Monier-Williams called “exoteric” Hinduism or just plain Hinduism, for short. His distinction between a religious core and a periphery—between learned and popular, between higher and lower—had long been a leitmotif in European thinking about religion. Monier-Williams furnished names that made realities of both sides of the split in Hinduism, instead of suggesting, as many of his predecessors had, that one aspect was really more than religion (philosophy)

\*The Indo-Europeans were tribes who spoke related languages and occupied the pastureland between the Caspian and Black seas. Their dispersal from that region around 2000 B.C. sent some tribes as far west as England and Ireland while the easternmost or Indo-Aryan tribes eventually crossed the Hindu Kush mountains to the Indus Valley.

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while the other was really less (superstition).

These very names, however, constituted Monier-Williams’ second problem, and it is to his credit that he perceived it. As he candidly admitted, Brahmanism and Hinduism “are not names recognized by the natives.” They were 19th-century English neologisms that had parallels in other European tongues but no place in any Indic language. In Hindi, one of India’s major languages, it would not be until the early 20th century that a real parallel to “Hinduism” could be found—the word *hindutva* (Hinduness, Hinduism)—and this term was patently an ideological and political invention, a tool in India’s nationalist movement. It was created for a pamphlet literature supporting rallies where Indians of various stripes attempted to forge a common Hindu identity by training with staves, as in traditional Hindu gymnasia, and marching in khaki shorts, in the fashion of the British police force in India. The shorts aptly symbolized the derivative element in this new “Hinduism”: The raw material and the idea of a half-size pant may have been Indian, but the cut, definition, and standard ritual usage came from Europe.

The word “Hindu” is much older than “Hinduism,” but it too is a bit of a stranger in India itself. Though the Greeks knew a version of the word (*hindoï*), it was apparently first used as a religious term by the Muslim invaders who entered India early in the second millennium A.D. to designate the practices of people they found living in the region of the Indus River. These people—Hindus—were simply Indians, natives. Hindus themselves were slow to take up the term, and, when they did, it was with a similar purpose: to

distinguish themselves from outsiders, especially Muslims (or “Turks” as they tended to say). Even in the 16th century, 500 years after the Muslim conquerors had come, the term Hindu was rarely used—certainly never in Sanskrit or in any even vaguely scriptural document—and when it was, its range was such that it would have embraced Buddhists and Jains as well as the people we today would call Hindus.

At the beginning of the 19th century a coterie of upper-class Bengalis who had regular contact with the British (including Ram Mohun Roy, the so-called “father of modern India”) began to use the word in roughly its modern sense, preferring it to “Gentoo,” which was equally popular in British usage and was derived through the Portuguese, from the word “gentile,” meaning heathen. Yet it was only much later in the 19th century that it became commonplace for Hindus to respond to questions about their religious identity by using the term “Hindu.” It was the official British census, a basic reflex of enlightened empire-building, that created the need for such a response, and many Indians gave it amid confusion, or not at all. Low-caste and Untouchable leaders resisted being lumped together under the rubric “Hindu” because real political and economic gains were at stake: The British had inaugurated a system of government designed to give representation to various religious and ethnic communities. During the censuses of the 1920s and ’30s, following an earlier example set by Sikhs, these leaders urged their followers to answer the religion question with a firm “We are not Hindus!” Even those who were content to have themselves described as Hindu did so with little conviction: Hindus were



*Hinduism in a Eurocentric mirror. This fanciful Westernized engraving from 1672, truer to Indian views than most, illustrates the 10 incarnations of Vishnu.*

what was left after others—Muslims, Untouchables, Christians, Sikhs, and so forth—had set themselves apart.

After Independence (1947), when the word became truly common, this pattern persisted. Already in the early 20th century leaders such as Sri Aurobindo and Mohandas Gandhi had articulated versions of Hindu nationalism, but it is probably safe to say that Indians began to think of themselves as Hindus more because of the creation of Pakistan in 1947, which was by charter a country for Muslims, than because of anything intrinsic to their own religious identity. Even today Hindus are apt to describe themselves by sect (as Vaishnavas, say) or caste-groupings (as Nagar Brahmins, for example) rather than to call

themselves Hindus, and the term *hindutva* has a still more arcane ring. Likewise the phrase *hindu dharma* ("Hindu religion"), which has become conventional in certain sorts of official and public literature, tends to function as a call to the battlements rather than as a simple designation of fact.

So there has been little Hindu about Hinduism, this supposedly ancient religion, until very recent times. Hindus had a concept of India as sacred space and they had histories and epics that established their complex common ancestry, but they never developed a concept of themselves as a society unified by religion. To the contrary, the Hindu idea of *dharma*—of right conduct in conformity to ultimate laws—typically insisted upon distinctions between various groups.

Hinduism originated as a European term, not an Indian one, and it may be significant that Europeans living in Europe, not the many Europeans who lived in India during the 19th century, were most responsible for crediting it. It served as a component in a conceptual map that was of far greater use in expansionist, imperialist Europe than in Asia itself. At the same time, however, it represented the consolidation of a tradition of scholarship that was some three centuries old by the time Monier-Williams spoke *ex cathedra* from Oxford, and most of that tradition did indeed grow up in the Indian subcontinent. Today we call this tradition Orientalism, probably with a pejorative twist, but that too is a term with a history, and the first practitioners would have been very surprised to hear themselves referred to in such a way.

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In the English-speaking world, Sir William Jones is often thought of as the first true Orientalist. By founding the Asiatic Society of Bengal and its journal

*Asiatick Researches* in 1784, Jones created the first forum for systematic Western scholarship about India.

Yet the roots of Orientalism go deeper: Roberto de Nobili, a Jesuit missionary of the early 17th century and a remarkably colorful figure, may deserve to be called the first European Orientalist of India. Scion of a Tuscan noble family that produced two popes, nephew of a precocious cardinal whose name he inherited, born into the temporal and spiritual aristocracy of Rome, Nobili forsook it all to board a Portuguese ship bound for Goa in 1604. Sailing onward around the tip of India, he received permission from his Jesuit superior to travel inland and set himself up in the Tamil city of Madurai, which was venerated as South India's foremost center of Brahman learning.

Nobili's purpose was, as his superior put it, "to open a door for the conversion of those Gentiles who are remarkable for their ability, judgment, and sense of honor." His approach to Indian society was unabashedly elitist. He ignored most of the crazy quilt of Hindu life. Rather, Nobili began with the class he took as corresponding most closely to his own: the spiritual aristocracy of learned (but not necessarily wealthy or temporally powerful) Brahmans. In explaining himself to his Brahman peers, he emphasized his own fine education and noble birth. He denied that he was a foreigner (*parangi*) in the sense to which they had become accustomed—that is, a Portuguese—depicting himself instead as a Roman monk, a religious ascetic (*sanyasi*). He had come to Madurai as a pilgrim, he said, and for penance, but had decided to stay. This information he published in a Tamil-language manifesto that he tacked to a tree in front of his house.

Nobili acted out his analogies. He adopted a Brahman diet (no eggs, no meat, a Brahman cook); he received permission

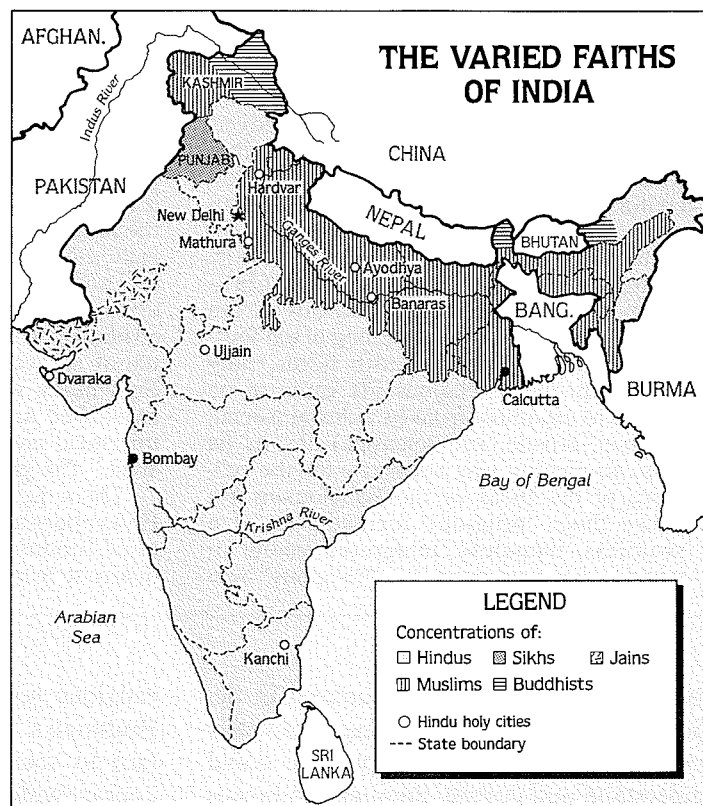
from his Jesuit superior to refrain from touching members of the lowly castes; he wore a long saffron-colored ascetic's "toga," carried a mendicant's staff and water-gourd, and painted the ashen marks of Shiva on his forehead. In justifying these practices to his superior, he cited the success in China of Jesuits who had adopted the dress of the Mandarins. And as would befit the first Orientalist, he learned Sanskrit, which he saw as the Latin of India.

All this constituted his own *apologia* to the Brahmans of Madurai, but in several of his written works he performed the same gesture in reverse, defending Brahman ways to Europeans. Three centuries earlier his Venetian countryman Marco Polo had perceived the Brahmans of Tamil Nadu as "enchanters" who uttered incantations and spells for a price to make the pearl divers of the Coromandel coast confident in the face of danger. Nobili, by contrast, depicted them as scholars, not priests, and went so far as to call himself an Italian Brahman (*Brachmanem Italum*) when addressing the pope. He portrayed the Brahmans not as mystifiers but as interpreters of law and of the sciences.

Marco Polo had described the idolatrous habits of the Indians he observed—in particular, their dressing and feeding of images—whereas Nobili attempted to distinguish between the highest echelon of Brahman scholars and those who officiated in the temples. The former were held by their countrymen to be

"perfect," he says—"proficient in the sciences" and "given to the contemplation of the true God." But even the idolaters (*idololatrae*), whom he classified into sects such as Shaivas and Vaishnavas, came off well. Nobili endeavored to show how aspects of "the law of Christ," including the mystery of the Holy Trinity, were embedded in "the laws of the idolaters," so idolaters were "not to be altogether condemned." It was a remarkable effort of cultural and religious translation.

Several features of Nobili's effort deserve particular attention. First, both in life and in scholarship, he characteristically situated the doctrines of those he studied in their social context. This served his apolo-



*In India there are many faiths and many variations within Hinduism. For example, Shaivite (Shiva-worshipping) sects predominate in the far north, in the south near Kanchi, and near Bombay. And castes, numbering more than 3,000, divide India in other ways.*

## OF CAMPHOR AND COCONUTS

Of all the world's religious traditions, none has been more closely scrutinized for its fissures than "Hinduism." Put simply, it is now fashionable to argue that there is no such thing.

Two prominent scholars, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Robert E. Frykenberg, have been instrumental in establishing the idea that it was not just the history of Hinduism that was invented by outsiders but its very identity. It is worth looking at the work of Smith and Frykenberg to see whether the idea of "Hinduism" is as fragile and recent as contemporary scholarship suggests.

Smith, who until recently headed the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard University, inspired an influential school of comparative religion. In *The Meaning and the End of Religion* (1962), he attributes the coinage of the term "Hindu" to the consequences of the Muslim invasions of North India beginning in A.D. 1001. Originally, "Hindu" defined not a religion but a geographical attribute of all non-Muslim peoples south and east of the Indus River: that is, in "Hindustan." Smith argues that Hinduism as a distinct religion was a 19th-century construct, as were most other "Eastern" religions or "isms." The single exception was Islam, which named itself, distinguishing itself from Judaism and Christianity, its fellow Abrahamic religions of "the Book." The 19th-century naming of the Eastern "isms" occurred, Smith notes, only when a people's religious life came to be treated as separable from its cultural (social, political, artistic, and scientific) life. As he says, no naming was necessary for the religions of the Incas or the Babylonians because their "religion" formed part of a seamless, nameless, integrated whole in which what was done for "religious" rea-

sons was virtually inseparable from what was done for, say, economic reasons.

Smith argues that this 19th-century naming process followed a "trend toward reification" of religion, in which faith in God was replaced by an allegiance to newly named "things," the religions themselves. Smith finds it important that Hinduism provides no good equivalent to the Western term "religion," but then he fails to note that this is equally true for his concept of "faith." Smith would like to argue, for example, that the *varna* system of social classes is "an expression of faith," but no one else writing on the subject has ever made that argument. More generally, Smith states, "Hinduism" is "not a unity and does not aspire to be." He admits, however, that "classical Hindus were inhibited by no lack of . . . [group] self-consciousness." Such self-consciousness, however, implies some unity after all.

Robert Frykenberg, a historian at the University of Wisconsin, carries these arguments even further. In the anthology *Hinduism Reconsidered* (1989), Frykenberg argues that present-day, so-called Hinduism is quite different from the Indian religious past that it supposedly incorporates. For Frykenberg, the term Hinduism is not so much theologically misleading (as it was in Smith's view) but politically dangerous and intellectually erroneous. Political interests in India have attributed to modern Hinduism the character of a "world religion"—"a character," Frykenberg writes, "which is all too easily swallowed and then certified by naive and uncritical savants of oriental religions in the West." The gauntlet has been thrown down.

There is, indeed, much to be said for Frykenberg's position. The reified, politicized Hinduism he speaks of is a reality. It is different from what preceded it and what

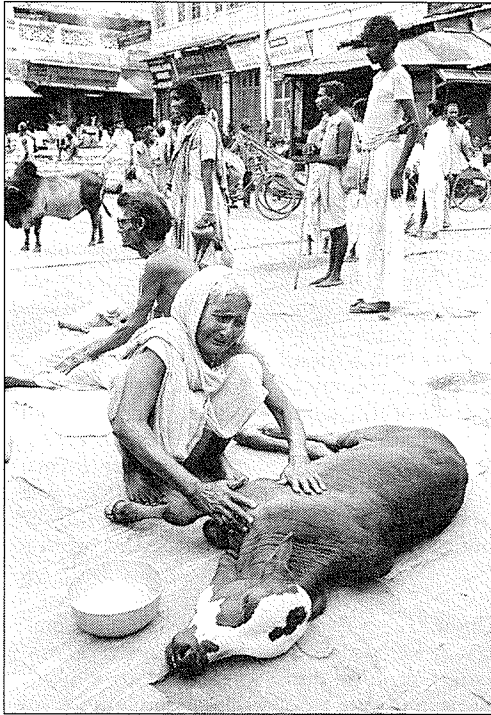
getic ends, for if he could succeed in depicting the Brahmans as playing a primarily social role, not a religious one, he could understand and portray them as candidates for initiation into the higher law of Christ. Though making up less than 10 percent of the population, the Brahmans typically performed all major religious functions, and

religious regulations shaped much of the Brahman's life from diet (usually vegetarian) to social activity (severely restricted contact with lower castes) to profession (no plowing or handling of impure materials like leather). Yet Nobili tended to downplay such religious underpinnings and instead attributed the Brahmans' prominence to

surrounds it in its contemporary milieu. But the fact that many current Hindu movements have strong, and even dangerous, political overtones is not in itself a sufficient reason to toss out the concept of Hinduism.

Although scholars have dissected the idea of a single Hinduism, its image as one of the world's great religions remains popularly accepted. In books on the world's religions, Hinduism is readily defined, indeed much as the earlier Orientalists defined it—as a religion united intellectually by the age-old Vedas, socially by the four classes of castes (*varnas*), and spiritually by the

laws of *dharma/karma* which govern the transmigration of souls. Frykenberg argues that this textbook definition has “been made to encompass everything from the philosophical and the ritual features of the cosmic order in all its highest sophistication to the bloodiest, crudest, meanest, and most savage practices of the most primitive peoples.” Indeed, he laments, “blood sacrifices” and “blood rituals”—such as the offering of goats and bulls—continued after 1817 under the British and are allowed to continue to-



*Cows, because they give milk and ask no recompense, are nearly sacred symbols of purity and motherhood. Hindus allow them to roam in temples and even in their homes.*

symbolize the offering of one's head to the deities. Likewise, they light camphor to wave before the temple deity as the medium through which their offerings are carried to the gods.

Frykenberg tries to expose the futility of defining a Hindu by asking whether the participation of Muslims or Christians at Hindu temples and festivals “makes them Hindus?” The point, however, is that these events would not even occur if Christians and Muslims were the only people involved. It is the

day under India's present state governments.

Frykenberg, like others, recognizes the impossibility of defining Hinduism by “essentials.” Here Frykenberg disregards a modern scholarly truism: Hinduism has no orthodoxy, but only orthopraxy (correct practice). A Hindu need not define himself by a statement of beliefs or by allegiance to a set of doctrines (as Smith would have it) or even by a response to the government census. What defines a Hindu is his or her practices. Many Hindus, for example, are united by the rituals of coconuts and camphor. Some Hindus break coconuts to

their noble birth and their being the seekers and custodians of the truth.

Second, he attempted, on the basis of what we today might call field work, to undo the preconceptions about India that were inherited from classical times. Since the time of Herodotus India had symbolized life at the edge of the known world—

vast, complex, confused, and fabulous. Nobili tried, by contrast, to find direct analogies between what was familiar to him at home and what he found in Madurai.

Third, Nobili established a double distinction in regard to Brahmans. On the one hand he made the common observation that the Brahmans were the cognoscenti of



practices (including the building and maintaining of the temples) themselves that are Hindu. And we may as well face it, so are the majority of the people who keep such temples and festivals going. If you ask why these people perform the rites the way they do, you will almost invariably hear that they do it because their ancestors did it or because it is custom, not because it fulfills some doctrine or teaching. The meaningful question, then, is not "who is a Hindu?" but "what are the things that Hindus do?"

I recently attended a large multi-village festival for a South Indian deity with a friend of mine, Lee Weissman of the University of Chicago. Lee was asked by one of the young men in the crowd. "Are you Hindu?"

"No," he answered, "I am a Jew."

"Is a Jew a Hindu?"

"Well, they do many similar things."

"Do you break coconuts and light camphor?"

"No," Lee answered.

"Then you're not a Hindu."

Here we have, I think, a rather profound folk definition of Hinduism. One differentiates Hindus by what they do and don't do: They break coconuts and light camphor; they do not light candles or candelabras, or offer lambs or doves.

In *Hinduism Reconsidered*, anthropologist Gabriella Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi argues that "it is not necessary to abandon the term Hinduism or deny it the status of a religion. What should be abandoned instead is the conviction that all concepts can be defined . . . [with] clear-cut boundaries." She turns helpfully to the philosopher Wittgenstein's notion that certain concepts may be held together by a "family resemblance," by a "complicated network of similarities overlapping and crisscrossing." Such concepts "cannot be defined but only exemplified." Recall our coconuts and camphor as exem-

plifications of Hinduism. Lawrence Babb, in *Redemptive Encounters* (1986), points to a similar family resemblance in what are on the surface highly distinct Hindu religious movements. And he reminds us that "Hindus mean something when they call themselves that, and what they mean goes deeper than mere matters of subcontinental politics or cultural chauvinism."

Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi introduces the idea of "prototypes" in Hinduism, referring to those features that recur most prominently and frequently in the crisscrossed Hindu fabric. Pilgrimage, asceticism, and vegetarianism are good examples that she cites. Sacrifice is clearly another such prototype, despite Frykenberg's disparagement of its bloodier forms. Not all Hindus follow such practices, and they are not unique to Hindus. But they each have a distinctive frequency and prestige, and, I would add, style within the Indian context that marks them as Hindu.

While one can agree with Frykenberg and other scholars who lament some of the misuses to which the name Hinduism has been put, there are good reasons to resist their conclusions. In Hinduism, we are faced with a deep and diverse tradition, one that cannot be expected to rethink the name it wants to call itself, no matter how recent the name may be.

—Alf Hiltebeitel

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India, the carriers of its learned and religious traditions. So while Brahmans were primarily a hereditary group, one could also speak of "the Brahmans of the Buddhist or atheist school" and, as we have seen, Italian ones too. On the other hand, Nobili noted the difference between Brahmans who were *gnanis*, "wise men," and

those who were "idolaters" involved in cultic life. Nobili then articulated something like the distinction between center and periphery or high and low that was to become critical for Monier-Williams.

Finally, and most obvious, Nobili's main object of concern was not the religion of the Hindus—as far as I know, he did not

use the term—but of the Brahmins. What he was concerned with was aligning two traditions of learning, the Christian and the Brahmin, so that they might converge. Other missionaries and travelers had understood the Brahmins' sacred thread and boxlike forehead mark as the insignia of idolatry, but for Nobili they were symbols of learning. He himself assumed them happily, hoping thereby to solidify a bond that would make it possible for him to teach his Brahmin acquaintances "the lost Veda," the Christian Veda; and by teaching them, teach the rest of Indian society as well.

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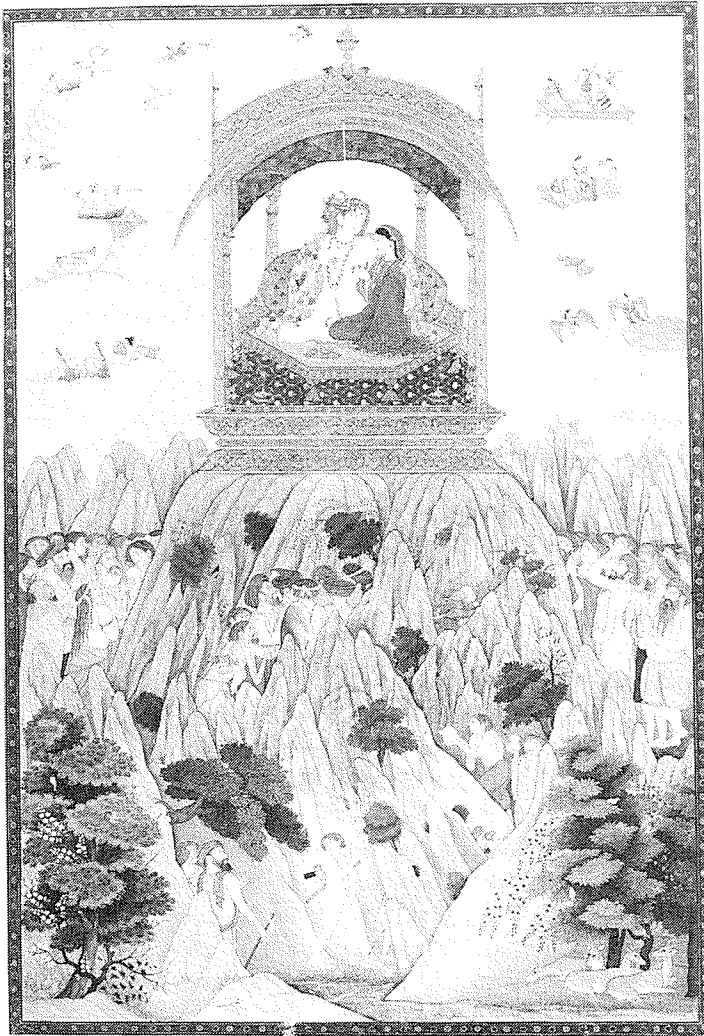
The next major phase in Europe's naming of Hinduism came with the Enlightenment. Yet just as important themes in the Catholic Reformation paled before Roberto de Nobili's immediate missionary preoccupations, so were broad Enlightenment motifs muted by the local concerns of British Orientalist scholarship in Bengal in the 18th century. Take, for example, Nathaniel Halhed, who published a *Code of Gentoo Laws* in 1776 and was therefore, in a sense, the Nobili of his time. Halhed created this document not to fill a chapter in some great encyclopedia but to meet the practical needs of his superior in the British East India Company, the governor of Bengal, Warren Hastings. In his Judicial Plan of 1772, Hastings had called for what Halhed termed "a new system of government" that would make it possible for British administrators to deal with Indian litigation on the basis of local canons. These were understood to be based in the Qur'an so far as Muslims were concerned and in the "Shaster," that is, the *dharmashastra* ("treatises on duty"), when the issue concerned Hindus. Notably, then, it was a comparison with Islam—Muslims had ruled Bengal before the British dis-

placed them—that suggested the terms by which a summary of Hindu institutions began to be drawn up.

The naming of Hinduism in its late 18th-century phase was thus again dictated by European needs—in particular, the need to rule. But now it was northern Europe rather than Italian or Portuguese, and Protestant—or worse, Deist!—rather than Catholic concerns that shaped the comprehension of Hinduism.

Meanwhile in Europe, during the Enlightenment, intellectuals were engaged in a new public debate about the status of Christianity in relation to other religious traditions. As Europe's trade and colonies spread throughout the world, its educated classes had become especially intrigued—in part through Jesuit reporting—by traditions that appeared to represent standards of rationality and social organization that rivaled those of the West. On the whole, Europe's self-confidence remained unshaken, but knowledge of the achievements of China and then India did have an effect.

For someone like Halhed there was no *crise de confiance*, at least not in the earlier, more productive part of his life. Here was a man from a prominent mercantile family, who had trained at Harrow, written farces with Richard Sheridan when they were students at Oxford, and cut quite the figure among the ladies of Calcutta (some of them already married). His approach was evenhanded and secure: He wished to give "a precise idea of the customs and manners of these people which, to their great injury, have long been misrepresented in the Western world," lest his countrymen, in their vanity, try to reconcile "every other mode of worship in some kind of conformity with our own." He deplored the popular idea that Asians were more inclined to violence than Europeans and hoped to correct this notion by publishing a digest of Indian law. As for Hindu religion, like all religion, it



*Hindu gods are full of contradictions. Shiva—shown with his divine consort, Parvati—embodies fertility (he devised 84 million sexual positions) and asceticism, yet is also lord of destruction.*

was to be understood as a stage on the upward road from barbarism to science.

Other British students of Hindu manners and doctrine felt differently. John Zephaniah Holwell was a surgeon in the East India Company who took an active interest in Indian civil affairs. He contributed to the Deist discovery of Hinduism and thus brought Hinduism into the great debate about the status of the Christian Church. His first major work—*Interesting Historical*

*Events, relative to the Provinces of Bengal and the Empire of Indostan . . . As also the Mythology and Cosmogony, Fasts and Festivals of the Gentoos, followers of the Shastah*—created quite a stir when it was published in 1765. It was swiftly translated into German and French; Voltaire had read it in the original by 1767; and it was to have a lasting impact on Orientalist scholarship.

Halhed had proposed a common source of Indo-European language and religion, but Holwell believed that India itself was the source from which the others sprang. He believed that the “original principles, religious and moral, of the ancient Brahmans” included a belief in the immortality of the soul and in a single, eternal God long before the time of Moses or Jesus Christ. (Indeed, according to Holwell, Jewish and Christian monotheism and belief in immortality are descended from the Brahman religion.) Holwell main-

tained, similarly, that Pythagoras had learned the doctrine of metempsychosis, the migration of souls, by visiting India.

An interesting facet of Holwell’s position is that he seems to have believed that he had at one time been in possession of the oldest extant texts in which these original principles were inscribed. Alas, the manuscripts were destroyed when Calcutta was sacked by the Muslim ruler of Bengal in 1756. Holwell summarized his “Shastah”

in such a way that it sounded like an earlier, brahmanical version of the Christian doctrine of the Fall, replete with a final judgment and angels good and bad. On the good side were the major Hindu deities Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, while their enemies (Ravana, for example, the villain in the *Ramayana*) stood in for Lucifer and Beelzebub. In all likelihood, however, Holwell's "Shastah" was not some ancient Sanskrit text, as he believed, but a relatively recent document. It is ironic that Holwell, who was to become one of the great challengers of Christian truth, did so in large part on the basis of documents he accepted as brahmanical; in truth they stood quite outside the general edifice of Brahman learning.

No matter. Holwell's "Shastah," along with the *Ezour-Vedam*, a French document which was fabricated out of whole cloth probably with the intention of having Jesus use it in converting natives, made a deep impression on Voltaire. He subscribed eagerly to Holwell's conclusions, pointing out that they established the Brahmans as several centuries older even than the Chinese Confucians. Christianity, he informed Frederick the Great, was entirely founded on "*l'antique religion de Brama.*" And thus was joined one of the great debates of the Enlightenment, with the anti-Christian side being taken up more characteristically on the Continent than in sober Britain.

Whichever side of the debate one embraced, by the end of the 18th century most educated Europeans had come to accept a series of points about Indian religion quite unlike what had been believed earlier, when India was still primarily a land of mystery and dark idolatry. First, "the doctrine of Brihma," as Halhed called it, was understood to be unusually tolerant (except in relation to the women of its own society, who were subject to *suttee*, cremation on their husband's funeral pyre). Second, the

doctrine possessed two levels: the idolatrous, which could now be interpreted not just as crass paganism but as behavior of a symbolic sort, and more exaltedly, the monotheist. Third, "the doctrine of Brihma" affirmed the immortality of the soul by teaching metempsychosis. Fourth, that doctrine embraced a series of moral principles that were held at least by some European minds to be the rival of those endorsed in the Christian West. And finally, this system bore a real relation to Semitic—and specifically Christian—religion.

When Henry David Thoreau, halfway through the 19th century, stepped into a life of seclusion at Walden Pond, he took with him a copy of that major Hindu religious text, the Bhagavad Gita, along with this entire set of conceptions about Hindu religion. There, at the end of winter, his silent isolation was broken by a hundred workers cutting Walden's ice into chunks that would be exported to Madras and Bombay and Calcutta. As the ice-cutters labored, Thoreau imagined a more fundamental connection that linked the Ganges with his own pond and indeed his own well.

In the morning I bathe my intellect  
in the stupendous and cosmogonical  
philosophy of the Bhagvat Geeta,  
since whose composition years of the  
gods have elapsed, and in comparison  
with which our modern world and its  
literature seem puny and trivial . . . I  
lay down the book and go to my well  
for water, and lo! there I met the  
servant of the Brahman . . . come to  
draw water for his master, and our  
buckets as it were grate together in  
the same well. The pure Walden water  
is mingled with the sacred water of  
the Ganges.

Seven centuries after Marco Polo, Thoreau and other Westerners had come to see "the doctrine of Brihma" as equal to the best that Christendom had yet produced.

As Thoreau's appropriation of it would suggest, most of the 18th-century Oriental-

ist description of “Gentoo” religion depicted what Monier-Williams was to call Brahmanism, a philosophical system more or less laid out in the five points listed above. The “popular religion” that Monier-Williams dignified with the title Hinduism in 1877 was mainly ignored. It is true that Holwell made some attempt to catalogue “fasts and festivals,” but on the whole it was not until the 19th century that this aspect became a regular feature in scholarly descriptions of Hinduism. Only then did “Hinduism” fully emerge before European eyes—

just at the time, paradoxically, when some of the most influential Indian interpreters of the subject were eager to subtract such practices from their tradition.

A major historical change had occurred in India in the century between Holwell’s *Interesting Historical Events* and the publication of Monier-Williams’s *Hinduism* in 1877. By the time Monier-Williams wrote, the British hold on India had assumed the proportions of empire, and their cataloguing of native castes, tribes, and sects was well under way. Especially influential was Horace Hayman Wilson’s *Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus*, which first appeared in Bengal in 1828 and was reprinted in Britain in 1846.

Monier-Williams’s job was to integrate this new information about “popular Hinduism,” and he did so, predictably, by putting it at the end of his book. In a way, this was natural, for the other major 19th-century advance in the study of Indian reli-



*Hindu architecture has its own language. This 7th-century A.D. temple tower in Orissa, India, resembles a mountain, home of the gods.*

gion clearly belonged at the beginning: a knowledge of the Vedas, the earliest hymns and incantations known to Hindus. Orientalist scholars tended to conceive of the Vedas as being comprised of distinct books that needed to be found and translated. The great force in the field was Friedrich Max Müller, an Oxford professor who produced a six-volume edition of the most important Veda, the Rig Veda, from 1849 to 1873 under a commission from the East India Company and later inaugurated the series “Sacred Books of the East.”

For centuries Brahmans had been telling Europeans about the Vedas, depicting them as the collection they venerated most highly but quoting them primarily through the Upanishads or other later texts. The Vedas were distant and immense, and because Vedic hymns were remembered primarily through rigorous oral traditions, they did not readily suggest themselves as candidates for translation. Yet the European predilection to see religion as based first and foremost on texts and to accord the highest status to the oldest text in a given group led religion-minded Orientalists to search the Vedas out. Once isolated and produced as books, these necessarily formed, to European eyes, the foundation stones for an adequate conception of Hinduism—or rather, as Monier-Williams and others put it, Brahmanism.

Yet the path from the early Rig Veda to contemporary Brahmanism was not ex-

actly obvious nor free from controversy. While Horace Hayman Wilson had understood the history of Hindu religion as an upward swing—"the course of time and the presence of foreign rulers have very much ameliorated the character of much of the Hindu worship," he said—Monier-Williams and his generation tended to see it as a downward trajectory. Monier-Williams made special efforts, therefore, to avert his readers' eyes from the "puerile conceits" that could surely be found in the Vedas and Upanishads and draw their attention instead to the "striking ideas, original ideas, and lofty language" that could "redeem the absurdities of the mysticism."

In *Hinduism*, Monier-Williams was at pains to bridge the two extremes of Indian religion that had come to light in the course of the 18th century—the ancient and the modern, or, as he saw it, the elevated and the mundane. He accomplished the trick through his coordinate use of the terms Brahmanism and Hinduism, which he saw not just as ideal types but as realities, with one succeeding the other. Brahmanism evoked the higher teaching of the Vedas, especially as achieved in the fifth and sixth centuries B.C. when "Men began to ask themselves earnestly such questions as—What am I? Whence have I come? Has the Creator form, or is he formless? . . ." The term Hinduism, by contrast, gave a name to "Brahmanism after it had degenerated—to wit, that complicated system of polytheistic doctrines and caste-usages which has gradually resulted out of the mixture of Brahmanism and Buddhism with the non-Aryan creeds of Dravidians and aborigines." Hinduism was what was left after Brahmanism lost its Aryan—and, be it noted, Indo-European—purity.

It was only at the end of his book that he ventured into the actual subject of "idol-worship, sacred objects, holy places and times," and he did so with a certain sense

of lingering resentment. "No account of Hinduism can pretend to completeness without some notice of its modern idol-worship," he admitted. Monier-Williams saved this subject for last because in his mind it was least, and he justified his approach by characterizing idol-worship as a modern phenomenon. It was seemingly impossible for him to concede that images of many deities had played a major role in Hindu thought and worship for thousands of years. The idolatry that Marco Polo had seen all about him was still not something that deserved a place at Oxford.

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A number of important Indian intellectuals agreed with Monier-Williams that idolatry deserved no place in their religion. Their efforts to reconceive and reform Hindu life are not to be understood entirely as a reaction to European views, but the European understanding of the prestige of scripture in general and of the Vedas in particular contributed to their thinking. How delicious it was in the late 19th century for Swami Dayanand, founder of the influential Arya Samaj, a major Hindu revivalist organization, to excoriate the impurities and superstitions of the Bible before Christian missionaries in the Punjab, confident that his own Vedas, once cleansed of their unessential elements, could stand pristine.

Yet there has been another approach to the creation of a pan-Indian or "syndicated" Hinduism. Once again the European intervention is significant, but this time at a bureaucratic level. Early in the 19th century, British officials in Madras began administering religious properties such as the great temples of South India. Back home, upright Britons, thinking it dreadful for a Christian nation to sully its hands with paganism, created an Anti-Idolatry Connexion

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League. The government slowly had to retreat, but not before Brahman lawyers formed the Madras Hindoo Association and began to learn to manipulate the emerging law of the Raj to their own ends. They ultimately created a body of legal precedent, which treated the "Hindu religion" as a single, legal entity, and in doing so they not only named but defined a Hinduism that never before had existed—"an entirely new religion," as the historian Robert Frykenberg has said.

**T**he Madras instance is only the first link in a considerable chain. Over the years a number of half-political, half-religious issues have led Indians to form self-consciously Hindu groups. The latest and most serious eruption began during the late 1980s in the holy city of Ayodhya in North India where Hindu militants mounted a loud campaign to "liberate" the birthplace of the god Rama from its captivity in a Muslim jail—that is, from a 16th-century mosque built on that site by the Mughal emperor Babar. Hindus from all over India and abroad as well have contributed to construct a new temple on the site. It is no accident that this Ayodhya campaign was timed to precede the critical national parliamentary elections of 1989, and many felt it was responsible that year for turning out of office Rajiv Gandhi's Congress Party, which had cautiously opposed the campaign. As the Congress Home Minister, Buta Singh, quipped at the time: "It's

hard to win when you're running against Rama himself."

Today's Hindu activists who press the struggle at Ayodhya are seeking to create a homogenized Hinduism in other ways, too. They borrow from the religious practices of England, the nation that first produced the word Hinduism—and, incidentally, from Islam as well: They advocate a congregational form of temple worship that is utterly different from the clangor of simultaneous individual devotions one often finds in a Hindu temple. They also want to replace the elastic rhythms of traditional Hindu piety, which filled the temples at all hours, with exact and invariant times of worship—again borrowing from Christianity and Islam. And instead of—or in addition to—the crazy quilt of Hindu pilgrimages to hundreds of holy sites scattered throughout India, they orchestrate a common, central pilgrimage point at Ayodhya, hoping thereby to establish that Hinduism is indeed a shared, single faith.

Given Hinduism's recent birth, it comes as no surprise that such efforts of self-definition are still required. Yet few doubt—and many fear—that the great rising force in Indian national identity is a Hindu force, far removed from the secularism that Jawaharlal Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi and his grandson Rajiv propounded. Unmistakably, Hinduism is still abuilding, and the bricks assembled in Ayodhya may indeed contribute to the edifice that is yet to be.

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*Religion takes to the streets. Crowded public demonstrations of religious faith, like this Ganesha Festival in Bombay, are increasingly commonplace throughout India.*

## HINDUISM BY ANY OTHER NAME

*by Wendy Doniger*

"But it isn't a Hedgehog, and it isn't a Tortoise" [said the young Painted Jaguar]. "It's a little bit of both, and I don't know its proper name."

"Nonsense!" said Mother Jaguar. "Everything has its proper name. I should call it 'Armadillo' till I found out the real one. And I should leave it alone."

—*Rudyard Kipling, "The Beginning of the Armadillos," in Just So Stories (1902).*

**K**ipling is one of the most dastardly of villains in the comic tragedy now playing in contemporary Indology. The White Man's Burden that he named now falls upon our shoulders, to embarrass us in the opposite way: The bur-

den of being White Men is what hobbles us in our study of Hinduism. Or so Columbia University's Edward Said tells us, and his words are echoed by those who would deconstruct the study of "the Orient" in general and Hinduism in particular. Since Said's shattering denunciation in *Orientalism* (1978), Orientalists—Westerners who



study Eastern religions and societies—have perceived themselves to be hopelessly tarred by the brushes of racism, colonialism, Eurocentrism, and sexism. They have become so self-aware and self-critical that they have begun to self-destruct: They argue that it is not possible for non-Indians to study India, and, on the other hand, that we ourselves have created the India that we purport to study. Like Mother Jaguar, they warn us to “leave it alone.”

There is, unfortunately, much to their argument, but it is not the whole story. The name “Hinduism” was indeed of recent and European construction, but it is Eurocentric to assume that when we made the name we made the game. “Hinduism” (dare I use the “H” word, and may I stop holding up my hands for mercy with quotation marks?) is, like the armadillo, part hedgehog, part tortoise. Yet there *are* armadillos, and they were there before they had names. I would like to suggest some ways in which the disparate parts of what *we* call Hinduism have in fact existed for centuries, cheek by jowl, in a kind of fluid suspension.

It is not a simple matter of listing things that “all Hindus” believe or, even, that “all Hindus” do. We need something rather more like a Venn diagram, a set of intersecting circles of concepts and beliefs, some of which are held by some Hindus, others by other Hindus, and still others shared not only by Hindus but also by believers in other South Asian religions, such as Buddhism or Jainism. We would need a similar Venn diagram to do justice to Christianity or Judaism; religions are messy. It has proved convenient for us to call this corpus of concepts Hinduism; naming is always a matter of the convenience of the namers, and *all* categories are constructed.

Walt Kelley’s Pogo used to use “Samskrimps” to describe anything hopelessly arcane and intellectual. Some Westerners even mispronounce it “Sanscript,” implying that it is a language without (*sans*) a (comprehensible) script. But we now understand ways in which all of the linguistic traditions in India—Sanskrit and vernacular, liturgical and secular, as well as the Aryan languages of north India and the Dravidian languages of the south—have culturally influenced one another. The noted Indian folklorist A. K. Ramanujan has given us the concept of “intertextuality” to describe the ways in which these different linguistic groups refer to or implicitly assume knowledge of a corpus of shared oral and written texts.

And these people did have ways of referring to themselves long before they called themselves “Hindus.” The term “Hindu” was coined in opposition to other religions, but this self-definition through otherness began long before there was contact with Europeans (or, indeed, with Muslims). All of us identify who we are in contrast with who we are not, and the “who we are not” changes all the time. In the earliest preserved text of what is now called Hinduism, the Rig Veda—a collection of over a thousand liturgical hymns composed in about 1,000 B.C.—“we” in ancient India defined ourselves in contrast with the “aliens” or “slaves,” who spoke non-Indo-European languages, had dark skin and flat noses, and had been in possession of the Indian subcontinent before the Indo-Europeans entered it.

Hindu identity—today as in earlier periods—is complicated by the intricate, fluid interplay of caste and class. Caste (*jati*), of which there are many thousands, is the ac-

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tual social group into which one is born and with whose other members one eats, works, and marries. Class (*varna*) is more a theoretical construct within which each caste situates itself. A whole caste may occasionally change its class, though traditionally an individual cannot. A caste of leatherworkers, for example, because it works with dead skins is quite low on the social rung. Yet if the caste prospered, it could adapt Brahman ritual and diet, change its trade, begin to associate with Brahmans, and perhaps even become a Brahman class. (A complication: "Class" often translates into English as "caste.")

In the Rig Veda, Indo-European society was already divided into four classes: the priests (Brahmans) who ruled the roost of the first class, the warrior-kings of the second class, the merchants and landowners who made up the third class, and a fourth class of servants, the defining "others" who were disenfranchised, not Aryan, but still marginally Hindu. Later, other groups below even the servants formed the ranks of the "not-us" who were only questionably Hindu or not Hindu at all. The largest "not-us" group was the Untouchables, whose deep-rooted pariah status was reinforced by their performing jobs, such as sweeping cremation grounds, that Hindus did not do. Others in the "not-us" category included Buddhists, Jains, various sorts of heretics, and most foreigners.

But there were also ways in which this group attempted to define who they *were*, as well as who they were *not*. Our word "Hindu" originates in the geographical feature of the Indus River, and many scholars



*More complexity: Kali, another consort of Shiva, is the black goddess of death. But in her benevolent form, she destroys ignorance and maintains world order. Here, she attacks an army of demons.*

still define Hinduism as the religion of India. The Hindus, too, sometimes defined themselves by geography. Not everyone in that geographical area is Hindu. (Today, in fact, an estimated 600 million of India's 843 million are Hindu, which still leaves enough Muslims—110 million—to make India, after Indonesia, the most populous Muslim nation in the world.) Nor, for that matter, do all Hindus live there. (Hindus spread first throughout Southeast Asia and later through the British Empire, and they can now be found scattered from Trinidad to Africa to Fiji.) But by and large this geographical definition of Hinduism is a place to begin; more significantly, it is where Hindus begin. Thus *The Laws of Manu*, the most important textbook of Hindu religious law, composed around A.D. 200, states: "From the eastern sea to the western sea, the area in between the two mountains is what wise men call the Land of the Aryans. Where the black antelope ranges by nature, that should be known as the country fit for sacrifices; and beyond it is the country of the barbarians. The twice-born should make every effort to settle in these coun-

## CITY OF SHIVA

*In Banaras, City of Light (1982), Harvard professor of religion Diana Eck discerned the essence of Hinduism in one of India's holiest cities.*

There are few cities in India as traditionally Hindu and as symbolic of the whole of Hindu culture as the city of Banaras, which Hindus call Kashi—the Luminous, the City of Light. And there are few cities in India, or in the world for that matter, as challenging and bewildering to Western visitors. It is a city as rich as all India. But it is not an easy city to comprehend for those of us who stand outside the Hindu tradition . . . .

The India we see here reflects the elaborate and ancient ritual tradition of Hinduism. It is a tradition of the pilgrimage to sacred places, bathing in sacred waters, and honoring divine images. It is a tradition in which all of the senses are employed in the apprehension of the divine. Its shrines are heaped with fresh flowers and filled with the smell of incense, the chanting of prayers, and the ringing of bells. It is a tradition that has imagined and imaged God in a thousand ways, that has been adept in discovering the presence of the divine everywhere and in bringing every aspect of human life into the religious arena. It is a religious tradition that understands life and death as an integrated whole. Here the smoke of the cremation pyres rises heavenward with the spires of a hundred temples and the ashes of the dead swirl through the waters of the Ganges, the river of life.

At the outset, we cannot even *see* the scope and dimensions of this religious tradition. We do not know the myths, the symbols, and the images that are the language of access to Hinduism. In an important sense, we do not see the same city Hindus see. We see the waters of the River Ganges, we see stone images adorned with flowers, and we see cows browsing with leisurely sovereignty through the streets. So do the Hindus. We see a city of narrow lanes surging with life, streets noisy with the jangling of rickshaw bells, buildings crumbling about the edges and sagging in the balconies. So do the Hindus. But it is as if we see these things in one dimension, while Hindus see them in many dimensions. What Hindus “see” in Kashi only begins with the city that meets the eye. To know what else they see we must know what Kashi means and has meant in the Hindu tradition. What is its symbolic significance? What stories do Hindus tell of it? What mighty events do they ascribe to this place? . . . What vision do

they see of the City of Light? . . .

A multitude of Hindu deities is visible everywhere in Banaras. Over the doorways of temples and houses sits the plump, orange, elephant-headed Ganesha. On the walls of tea stalls and tailor shops hang gaudy polychrome icons of Lakshmi or Krishna. And on the white-washed walls of houses and public buildings the episodes of Shiva's marriage to Parvati, or Rama's battle with the 10-headed Ravana, are painted afresh after the season of rains by local artists.

In temples one sees the *linga* [phallus] of Shiva, or the four-armed image of Vishnu, or the silver mask of the goddess Durga. Such images are crafted according to carefully prescribed rules of iconography and iconometry. When they are finished, the “breath” or “life” of the deity is invited to be present in the image . . . . The last act of the elaborate consecration rites is opening the eyes of the image, which is done symbolically with a golden needle or by placing large enameled eyes upon the image. Contact between God and the worshiper is exchanged most powerfully, they say, through the eyes.

The Hindu tradition has entrusted the senses, especially the eyes, with the apprehension of the holy. When Hindus go to the temple, they do not say, “I am going to worship,” but rather, “I am going for *darshana*.” The word *darshana* means “seeing.” In the religious sense, it means beholding the divine image and standing in the presence of God. Hindus go for *darshana* especially at those times of the day when the image is beautifully adorned with flowers, and when offerings of incense, water, food, and camphor lamps are presented to the deity. The central acts of Hindu worship are having the *darshana* of the Lord and receiving the *prasada*, the consecrated food offerings, which are the Lord's special “grace” or “blessing.” For Hindus, therefore, the image is not an object at which one's vision halts, but rather a lens through which one's vision is directed . . . .

Of course, it is not only the divine image, but the fact that there are so many different images that invites our understanding. It is fundamental to the Hindu tradition and to the Hindu way of thinking that the Divine, the Supreme Lord, can be seen in a great variety of ways and

from many different perspectives. From one perspective it is perceived that there are more gods, or faces of God, than we can count—350 million, they say. And yet, from another perspective, it is obvious that there is One. The fact that there may be many gods does not diminish their power or significance. Each one of the great gods may serve as a lens through which the whole may be clearly seen.

When Hindus travel on a pilgrimage to a holy place such as Banaras, it is also for *darshana*—not sight-seeing but “sacred sight-seeing.” They want to have the *darshana* of the place itself as well as that of its presiding deity, who in Kashi is Shiva Vashvanatha, the “Lord of All.” Their vision is sharpened and refined by the rigors of the pilgrim journey. Some travel long distances by train or bus. Some come on foot, as the many generations before them have done, walking the dusty roads of rural India, balancing a bundle of provisions on their heads . . .

As pilgrims arrive in Kashi and travel by bicycle rickshaw from the train station to their rest house, the city that meets the eye is not so different from the city described by its Western visitors—the narrow streets, the cows, the temples, the *ghats* [stone steps leading from the river up to the city], the river. Hindus, however, see also the city that engages the religious imagination. For hundreds of generations, Kashi has received pilgrims like themselves, who have seen this city through the eyes of the collective imagination and the power of religious vision.

From childhood, these pilgrims have known of Kashi, not through the diaries of travelers, but through a type of traditional literature called *mahatmya*. A *mahatmya* is a laud, a hymn of praise, a glorification. These praises, of particular places or of particular gods, form a part of the many Puranas, the “ancient stories” of the gods, kings, and saints. Kashi *mahatmyas*

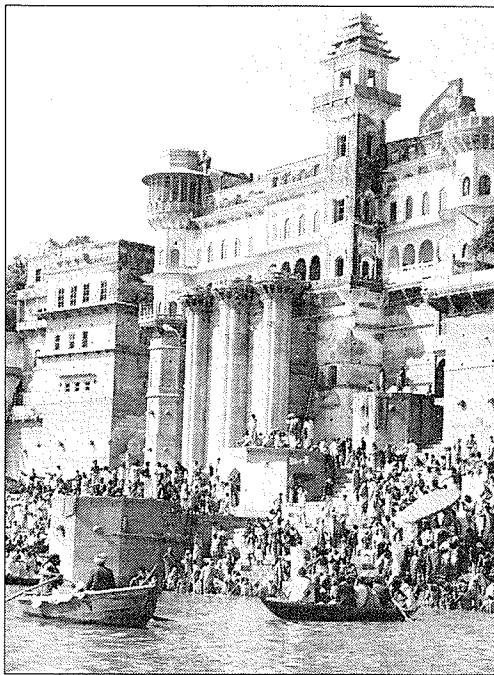
are found in many of the Puranas, the most famous and extensive being the *Kashi Khanda* of the *Skanda Purana* and the *Kashi Rahasya* of the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*. These *mahatmyas* are not descriptive statements of fact about an ordinary city, but statements of faith about a sacred city.

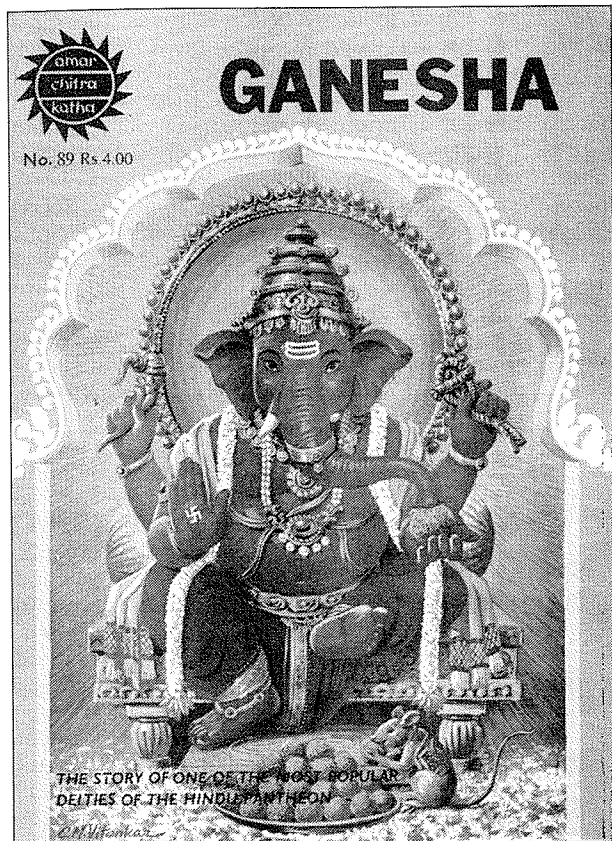
Kashi is the whole world, they say. Everything on earth that is powerful and auspicious is here, in this microcosm. All of the sacred places of India and all of her sacred waters are here. All of the gods reside here, attracted by the brilliance of the City of Light . . . And all of time is here, they say, for the lords of the heav-

enly bodies which govern time are grounded in Kashi and have received their jurisdiction over the days and the months right here. Thus, all of the organizing forces of space and time begin here, and are present here, within the sacred boundaries of the City of Light . . .

As pilgrims stand at the top of the *ghats* and see the famed riverfront of Kashi and the great sweep of the Ganges for the first time, what do they know of the *mahatmyas* that glorify this city? There are thousands of hymns and stories of Kashi’s pilgrims and temples in the *mahatmya* literature and in the oral tra-

ditions of different regions and even different families. Pilgrims may know very little, and perhaps no two pilgrims know quite the same stories. During the two or three days they spend here, they will learn a little more, from the *pan-das* [people who act as hosts for the pilgrims], storytellers, and charlatans, or from the penny-paperback *mahatmyas* for sale in the bazaars. But even as they arrive, they bring with them the wealth of tradition which has drawn their ancestors here for as long as the mind can imagine, since “the days before the Ganges came from heaven to earth,” they might say. And the city they see, they see in the light of a long tradition of faith.





*Popular Hinduism: Religious comic books are big sellers. Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, is the son of Shiva and Parvati. He is the patron god of authors, thieves, and newlyweds. He receives the first invitation to a wedding.*

tries; but a servant may live in any country at all if he is starving to death.”

Sometimes the Hindus defined themselves not by geography but by texts: “We are the people whose canon is the Veda.” This textual definition was often given a social corollary: “We are the people who revere the Brahmans, the custodians of the Veda.” And this social corollary, in turn, was also expanded: “We are the people who follow the way of life (*dharma*) of the four social classes and the four stages of life: student, householder, forest-dweller, and renouncer.” This definition in terms of social praxis prevailed for such a long time that Europeans often argued that Hinduism

was not a religion but a social system (just as they argued that Buddhism was not a religion but a philosophy).

In general, Hindus have defined themselves not by beliefs but by practices. The Hinduism of the Vedas, a Hinduism which has essentially survived to the present day, was and is pluralistic. It advocates the worship (often through animal sacrifice) of a pantheon of many gods, most of whom by A.D. 200 had been assimilated to Shiva, Vishnu in his many incarnations (including both Krishna and Rama), or the Goddess in her many forms (which range from the bloodthirsty Kali to Parvati, the mild-mannered wife of Shiva). Pluralistic Hinduism is further characterized by its *dharma*s that differ not only for every caste but for different individuals in different stages of life and for different social groups.

Identifying Hinduism by naming its various gods can be tricky. Indeed, in India even pantheism had, from the start, a monistic tinge. In the Veda, one hymn will praise one god as the supreme god (though not the only god), but another hymn will use exactly the same words to praise another god. F. Max Müller, the renowned 19th-century Oxford Sanskrit professor, aptly named this phenomenon “henotheism,” the worship of one (supreme) god at a time. Bearing in mind the way in which the metaphor of adultery has traditionally been used by monotheistic religions to stigmatize polytheism (and used by Hinduism itself to characterize the love of god), we might regard this attitude as a kind of theological serial monogamy: “I love you, Indra, and have never loved any other god.” “I love you, Vishnu, and have never loved any

other god." Serial monogamy remains characteristic of devotional Hinduism: The worshipers who regard Vishnu as the supreme god not only acknowledge other gods such as the elephant-headed Ganesha (or, for that matter, Jesus) but offer them worship on special occasions, just as they will occasionally use penicillin to supplement, rather than replace, one of the native homeopathic systems.

Another unifying principle is *karma*, to which the gods as well as the bodies below them are subject. *Karma* is the law of rebirth as a result of the cumulative merit and demerit of one's actions. Almost all Hindus assume that *karma*, retributive rebirth, is what happens to people. But some think that good *karma* is good and try to amass it, while others think that all *karma* is bad and flee from it; some accept the effects of *karma* as inevitable, while others regard the power of *karma* as a challenge that human effort may overcome.

The Vedas spoke of the fear of death and the fear of rebirth. These fears led to the desire for freedom from the wheel of rebirth and *karma*, which was to be achieved by the renunciation of all worldly goals. But in later centuries, the ideal of freedom was reabsorbed into mainstream Hinduism and inverted into the desire to be reborn, but reborn better in worldly terms: richer, fatter, with more sons, and so forth. (Worldly Hindus believe, wisely, that you can't be too rich or too fat.) Freedom or renunciation of earthly ambition and desires, while still extolled in theory, often was now indefinitely postponed. Many Hindus offered a version of Saint Augustine's prayer, "Make me chaste, O Lord, but not yet." More generally, the two groups—worldly and transcendent, pure and impure—are both considered necessary to compose society as a whole. Thus the holi-

ness and knowledge of the renouncer are fed back into the society that supports him.

This complex system of interlocking, sometimes contradictory ideas and ideals—caste, *karma*, renunciation, and the worship of various gods—has formed the religious scuttlebutt, the common wisdom, of all Hindus for many centuries. Different Hindus may accept or deny different elements of this scuttlebutt, and while all Hindus pay lip service to certain ideals, relatively few truly embody them. But all Hindus have been part of the same conversation: All Hindus *know about* these things, as we know about Adam and Eve. Their kids pick them up in what we euphemistically refer to as "the street," just as our kids pick up their ideas about Darth Vader and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. As A. K. Ramanujan has often remarked of the great epic, the Mahabharata (recently presented to the West in a play and a film by Peter Brook), "No Indian ever hears the Mahabharata for the first time." Hindus are programmed with unconscious, unexamined assumptions, whether or not they believe them or like them.

So the fact that the people whom we call Hindus have defined themselves in many different ways—and that these definitions do not always delineate the same sets of people—does not invalidate the category of Hinduism. For this is how categories always work. Scientists nowadays make a similar sort of assumption when they define light as both a wave and a particle. Categories have to be recycled, like newspapers or tin cans; they are ladders that we climb up and then kick out from under us. The Venn diagram of Hinduism is constantly in motion, because it is made of people, also constantly in motion. But it is *there*, no matter what we, or they, choose to call it.

# THE NEW POLITICS OF HINDUISM

*by Prasenjit Duara*

**I**t was an amazing spectacle, and one could have witnessed it almost anywhere in India. In 1989, from every corner of the country Hindus set off on pilgrimages—which in itself would not have been so unusual, except that every person clutched in one hand a single brick. If all those bricks were laid side by side and on top of each other, they would have made an incredible edifice, which was exactly the intention. The thousands of Hindus were on their way to Ayodhya in northern India where they hoped to build a temple, a shrine, to the legendary sage-king Rama at the site of his birthplace. There was but one problem: The site was already occupied—by a 16th-century Islamic mosque.

That a mosque stands on Rama's birthplace has come to symbolize the division between Hindus and Muslims in India. Secular-minded intellectuals have derided the Ayodhya campaign as "brick worship." But Ashok Singhal's nationalistic Hindu organization, the VHP (Vishwa Hindu Parishad or Universal Hindu Council)—which first startled the country in 1983 when it mobilized Hindus to crisscross the land distributing sacred water from the Ganges—has succeeded in making "Ayodhya" a major issue in Indian politics.

What strikes the historian about the Ayodhya affair is how hard it would be to imagine such a mobilization of Hindus even a mere hundred years ago. For centuries, Muslims and Hindu pilgrims worshipped quietly at the site (the temple to Rama was rebuilt nearby). What we call Hindu or Hinduism today was not a par-

ticularly meaningful category in those days. At first, the VHP, founded in 1964, had little success in bringing together the different sects and religious groups that are involved in the Ayodhya affair today. Few would have predicted that followers of Vishnu, disciples of Shiva, Tantric occultists, and other groups in the "Hindu melange," with their long history of mutual hostility, could come together with such apparent peace under the banner of Hinduism at Ayodhya.

The developments at Ayodhya represent the latest chapter in the century-long emergence of a national or "syndicated" Hinduism. From the outset syndicated Hinduism was a phenomenon more political than religious. Indeed the type of experiences we call "religious"—either routine forms of worship or transcendent spiritual experiences—cannot be easily found in syndicated Hinduism. What brings together the Hindus at Ayodhya is less common religious beliefs and ideas than their shared hostility to Muslims. Syndicated Hinduism also has other, explicitly political goals—such as reversing affirmative-action legislation for Islamic and other minorities in India—by which the VHP and other groups hope to construct a constituency for a pan-Indian Hinduism.

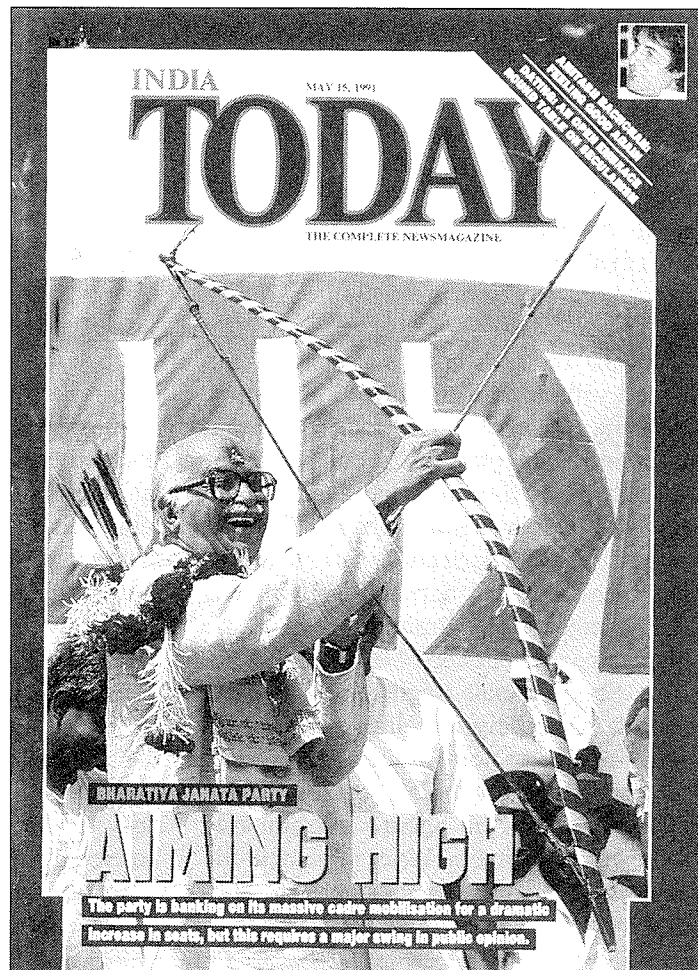
Meaningful religious life in India exists at the level of the sects or divisions of Hinduism. Even the expression "sects of Hinduism" is misleading because Hinduism is not a religion the way other world religions such as Christianity or Islam are. While those religions also have sects, they all have a central reference point, be it the historical founder and his teachings or a single

sacred text. Although latter-day Hindus have attempted to transform the Bhagavad Gita (or some other text) into the religious canon, it is exceedingly difficult to find a text or, for that matter, a practice or even an idea that would be acceptable to all the groups called Hindu. Even such a seemingly ingrained Hindu idea as reincarnation was absent from the ancient Vedas and has been rejected by numerous groups, such as the Charvakas in the sixth century B.C., the medieval Kapalikas, and 19th-century Hindu reformers like Ram Mohun Roy.

Although its origins may be traced to European Orientalists, the new monolithic Hinduism was welcomed by Indian nationalist intellectuals in the late 19th century. The reasons have much to do with the era's emerging systems of nations and nation-states. In the late 19th century, nationalistic Indian intellectuals faced the challenge of unifying their country. The British rulers maintained that India was a mosaic of castes and communities with no national consciousness, held together only by colonial rule. Indian leaders responded to this charge in contradictory ways. Some held that the historical unity of India lay in a common secular culture. Others, however, found it in the shared religious traditions of Hinduism. Although the Indian national movement wrested independence from the British in 1947, neither of these approaches has fully succeeded in integrating

Hindus and non-Hindus into the new Indian nation. John Kenneth Galbraith, former U.S. ambassador to New Delhi, recently observed that ever since independence, India has remained in a state of "suspenseful indecision."

The Indian national movement was Janus-faced with regard to the question of Hinduism. One face of it, the more public and constitutional representatives such as Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964), the nation's first prime minister, and the Nobel Prize-winning poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861–



*In India's 1991 election, the Congress Party pledged stability and the Janata Dal promised caste reform. But L. K. Advani's Hindu-based BJP claimed to speak for "the nation" as a whole.*



1941) were committed to secularism. Nehru saw India as a secular nation composed of different communities and religions, each of which had made distinctive historical contributions. Hinduism for him was merely one of the sources of India's greatness, along with Buddhism, the Muslim emperors, and even traditional science. In explaining how the subcontinental polity had become "Indianized," Nehru gave pride of place to the Moghul emperor, Akbar (1542–1605): "Akbar's success is astonishing," Nehru wrote, "for he created a sense of oneness among the diverse elements of north and central India . . . It was not merely an attachment to his person; it was an attachment to the structure he had built." For Nehru, the glorious history of India was the most authentic testimony to the country's capacity to maintain a "unity among diversity." This secularist conception is enshrined in India's constitution and was upheld by Nehru's daughter Indira Gandhi and by her son Rajiv.

But the state in India is also subtly implicated with Hinduism. Indeed, the activities of the modern Indian state reveal that the foreign conception of "secularism" has not really taken root in India. Even picking an official language is a problem. The government seeks to derive a common vocabulary from classical Sanskrit—but that is the language of the Brahmanic texts, the language par excellence of Brahmanic Hinduism. State officials might like to think a Sanskrit vocabulary is religiously neutral, but in the eyes of non-Hindus or even non-Brahmans, that vocabulary makes the Indian state appear an agent of Brahmanic Hinduism. Imagine a West in which the wall between church and state was suddenly breached. The use of Latin words in

the English language might likewise be interpreted as Catholic domination.

Recently, All-India Radio sent out a directive to its employees, and particularly the newsreaders-translators in the respective languages, including Hindi, Urdu, and Kashmiri, ordering that *rashtrapati* be used for president, *up-rashtrapati* for vice president, and so on. Those words are Sanskrit, and to groups such as the Muslims of Kashmir, who have begun a campaign for secession from India, the directive sounds suspiciously as though Hindu chauvinists are denying them the right to imagine the nation in their own language. In India's highly charged religious and cultural atmosphere, minorities hardly perceive the state's insistence on using Sanskrit as "secular"; they become even more determined to liberate themselves.

This interplay of Hinduism and national politics has a history, but in many ways it is a peculiarly recent history. In the first half of the 20th century two types of groups were chiefly responsible for the creation of a national Hinduism. First, there were the nationalist intellectuals and leaders, including Mahatma Gandhi, who emphasized its most universal and abstract features, seeking to develop a tolerant attitude toward the many other religious groups within India. Quite opposed to them were those who tried to define a Hindu fundamentalism which would clearly demarcate believers from nonbelievers. Syndicated Hinduism as it exists today is the product of these two contradictory tendencies. Today, sadly, most of the universalism and tolerance promoted by Gandhi and others is gone.

The Hinduism of nationalists such as

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Gandhi was drawn essentially from the Brahmanic tradition and capped off by the universalism of the Advaita Vedanta, a radically monastic faith whose central tenet is the unity of all being. The great early designers of national Hinduism who espoused the Vedantic faith were Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) and Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950). It was Vivekananda who presented this Hinduism to the West at the Congress of Religions in Chicago in 1893. But it was Sri Aurobindo who fashioned Hinduism as the cultural ideology of Indian nationalism. Cambridge-educated, Aurobindo was a charismatic man who reacted violently against his highly Anglicized upbringing, turning initially to revolutionary nationalism and finally ending his days as a Vedantic mystic in the Aurobindo Ashram at Pondicherry. For Aurobindo, Indian society differed essentially from that of the West: Western society was permeated through and through with base materialist principles, while Indian caste society was founded on the equitable distribution of spiritual and moral duties. As a revolutionary, Aurobindo did not accept caste as it existed—his was a reformist or even radical agenda—and he regarded socialism as part of the Hindu/Indian order. But, nonetheless, all of his seemingly modern ideas Aurobindo saw as simply fulfilling the divine as conceived by the Brahmanical tradition.

The religious ideas of Mahatma Gandhi, the most important Indian nationalist leader, were uniquely his own. But he was drawn to this tolerant, reforming Hinduism as the cultural and spiritual foundation of Indian nationhood. Thus while Gandhi condemned the “sin” of caste and the “deadlier sin” of Untouchability, he believed in the utopian Hindu ideal of *Rama Rajya* (kingdom of Rama) as the blueprint of India’s new social order. This was to be a patriarchy ruled by an exemplary moral lead-

er, an economic utopia in which reciprocal production ruled out competition and differences in status. Like Aurobindo, Gandhi found his inspiration for a perfect society in a Hindu ideal, but he was able to use it to rally a vast popular following that he yoked to the freedom struggle.

However inclusive these men wished their Hinduism to be, and however necessary it may have been for political mobilization, a national Hinduism so closely associated with Brahmanism was bound to cause problems for both Hinduism and the national movement. And most of the leaders of the national movement were either Brahmans or upper-caste Hindus. Gandhi’s reformist Hinduism and Aurobindo’s mysticism were hardly as virulently exclusive as syndicated Hinduism is today. Yet the creation of Pakistan in 1947 can be traced to the anxieties of a Muslim elite which feared that an independent India would be increasingly Hinduized. National Hinduism also forced those on the borders of the Hindu melange to choose whether they were Hindu or not, and, in certain cases, like that of the Sikhs (who now threaten to secede from the nation) even whether they were Indian or not.

The other major group behind national Hinduism were “fundamentalists” who interpreted strictly what it meant to be a Hindu. These activities lay outside the nationalist movement led by the Congress Party, but these fundamentalists too sought to define Hinduism as the basis of a national culture. This strain developed originally in reaction to Christian missionary activities, but eventually reproduced many of the features of Christianity itself. The militant Arya Samaj was founded in the late 19th century by Dayanand Saraswati (1824–1883), an ascetic who preached throughout northern India. The Arya Samaj actually emerged

## PLAYING THE HINDU CARD AT THE POLLS

Independent India's 10th national election, interrupted for three weeks by Rajiv Gandhi's assassination on May 21, took place against the backdrop of caste and religious unrest, rising inflation, incipient government bankruptcy, and regional revolts. But what may be most notable about this election is what did *not* happen.

For the second time in a row, the Congress Party—which has ruled India for all but four of its 44 years of independence—failed to win a majority in the 543-seat Parliament. Although Congress's P. V. Narasimha Rao has formed a new coalition government, it is doubtful that the 70-year-old Gandhi loyalist can lead it anywhere. Already, attention in India has shifted to the next election, not constitutionally required before 1996, but likely to be held much sooner. It is an election that the Hindu revivalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) stands a very good chance of winning.

The BJP was this year's real winner, replacing former prime minister V. P. Singh's Janata Dal as India's major opposition party. Formed in 1988 by an amalgamation of five anti-Congress parties, the Janata Dal appealed for social justice for India's "other backward castes," the so-called OBCs, which make up about 45 percent of the Hindu population (and do not include the Untouchables). As prime minister in 1990, Singh tried to impose hiring quotas that would have reserved 22 percent of the country's future job openings for OBCs. In the ensuing protests, nearly 100 upper-caste youths burned themselves to death in the streets. This year, the Janata Dal lost almost two-thirds of its places in parliament, retaining barely more than 50 seats.

The BJP, meanwhile, won 120 seats. In 1984, only two elections ago, it was a regional party supported by some Brahmans and Vaisha-Banyas (merchants and traders) in north-central India; it won only two seats.

The party's success is a testament to the strategy of its avuncular president, Lal Krishna Advani. The BJP maintains a united front, by marked contrast to the strife-ridden Congress and Janata Dal, while also seeming to distance itself from other, more fundamentalist Hindu groups. Its platform is strongly nationalist and pro-business; it includes a call to equip India's armed forces

with nuclear weapons. BJP campaigners evoke an India of restored greatness, an India unfettered by the "bogus secularism" espoused by Congress, which, in the BJP's view, invidiously favors minorities, especially Muslims. The BJP's promise of "equal treatment" for all Indian citizens has broad appeal; Rajiv Gandhi's acceptance of a separate civil code for Muslims in 1986 still sits badly with most Hindus.

There are several reasons to believe that the BJP may win next time. The declining professionalism of the military and the low morale of elite civil servants favor a cohesive party confident of its message. The party's clean image and serene public face go down well in a country where people are prone to equate governance with malfeasance. Its promise of an unshackled domestic economy is likely to gain favor as New Delhi's deficits and appallingly inefficient socialized business enterprises continue to drag down the economy. And of course there is always the "Hindu card" to play—for example, by fanning communal tensions through the Ayodhya temple dispute.

But the results of a BJP victory are not likely to be as apocalyptic as some detractors predict. Despite their implicitly anti-Muslim rhetoric, Advani and his colleagues are pragmatic men. Indeed, BJP *state* governments have maintained public peace far more effectively than their Congress predecessors did. India's foreign relations may also benefit. No crash program to build nuclear weapons is likely. And just as it took the anticommunist Richard Nixon to establish a Sino-American link, so may the BJP be able to smooth India's troubles with its Muslim neighbors. With its impeccable Hindu credentials, the BJP may be able to make concessions that other parties cannot consider. The same advantage could help the BJP resolve the secessionist crisis in the predominantly Muslim state of Kashmir.

A BJP victory is certainly not guaranteed. Yet the party's appeal will continue to grow if India's multiple problems do. And that is only too likely to happen.

—James Clad

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*James Clad is a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment.*

from its leaders' debates with missionaries in the bazaar pulpits of the Punjab. Its educational agenda and combative missionary spirit were evangelical in method, even though its message was strongly anti-Western. Thus it set up schools and introduced the novelty of the reconversion of Muslims and Christians to Hinduism. Dayanand believed that Hinduism, like Christianity and Islam, possessed central authoritative scriptures: the ancient Vedas. He believed in the pure theism expressed in the Vedas and rejected the so-called accretions of medieval Hinduism, such as child marriage and the proliferation of castes. In this way the Arya Samaj came, ironically, to define a new Hindu fundamentalism which was, in fact, completely alien to the history of the various groups in the Hindu melange.

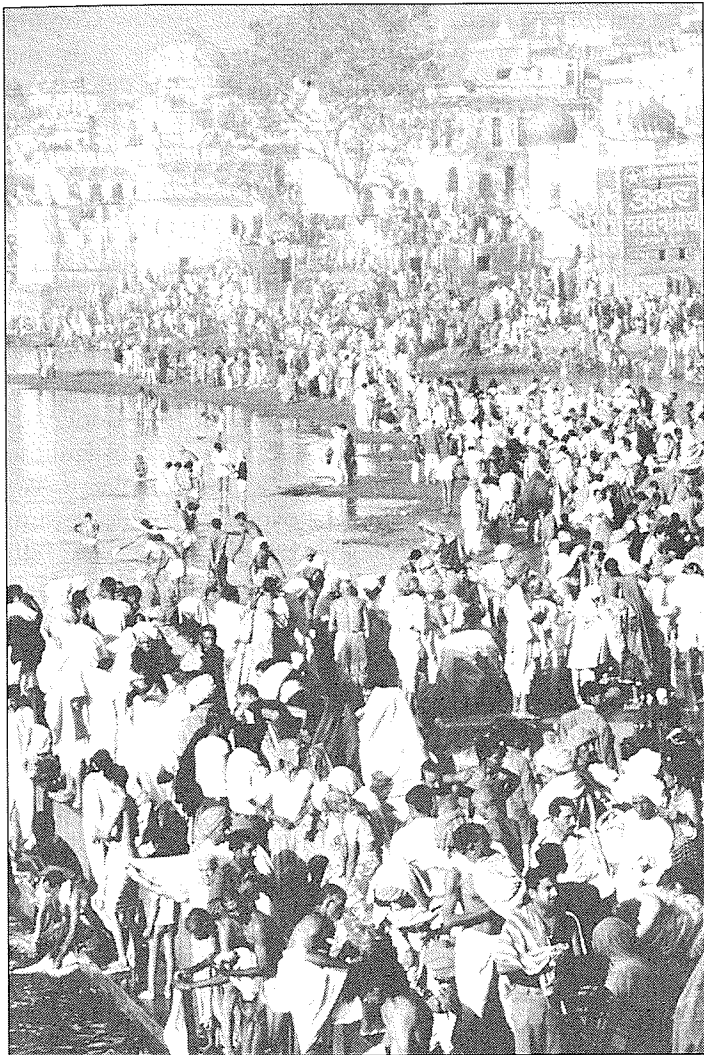
Today's Sikh secessionist movement in the Punjab cannot be understood without reference to the Hindu fundamentalism of the Arya Samaj. Sikhs rallied to the movement in 1984, after Prime Minister Indira Gandhi ordered Indian troops to assault a band of Sikh militants holed up in the Sikh's holiest shrine in Amritsar. Gandhi was later assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, and 1,000 Sikhs were killed during Hindu riots that followed. Sectarian violence—kept alive by Sikh separatist guerrillas—has raged ever since. Last year, it cost more than 3,000 Indians their lives.

Yet until a century ago, Sikhism in the Punjab would have been considered just another religion within the Hindu melange. Sikhism was founded by a Hindu mystic and guru, Nanak (1469–1539), who taught a devotional approach to the divine (called *bhakti*) instead of the customary Brahman or sacrificial approach. The differences between Sikhs and Brahmans could be likened, loosely, to those between Protestants and Catholics. In numerous ways a Sikh distinguishes himself from a Brahman Hindu: The holy language of Hindus is San-

skrit, of Sikhs, Punjabi; Hindus worship many icons and statues of the gods, the Sikhs worship no images. Although Nanak had welcomed both Hindus and Muslims to his fellowship, the Muslim rulers in the Punjab certainly did not welcome Sikhs. In the long centuries of resisting persecution, the Sikhs became a militarized people, a "community of martial lions." (The most common Sikh surname, Singh, means "lion.") They set themselves apart physically by wearing the five *ks*: the long hair (*kesh*), the comb (*kanga*), the undergarment (*kachha*), the bracelet (*kara*) and the dagger (*kripan*). Politically, there was a Sikh kingdom after the overthrow of the Muslim rulers of northern India in the late 18th century. But theologically the Sikhs did not perceive themselves as radically different from other groups in the Hindu melange, and by the mid-19th century, the distinction between the Sikhs and other Hindus had begun to disintegrate. This was a time when, according to contemporary Sikh writer Khushwant Singh, Sikhs were "faced with the prospect of being reabsorbed into Hinduism and ceasing to exist as a separate community."

At first, Dayanand's reformed Hinduism appealed as much to the Sikhs as to the Hindus in the Punjab. But it did not take the Sikhs long to appreciate the uncompromising stance of the Arya Samaj's Hinduism. In their desire to rid Hinduism of its post-Vedic accretions, the Arya vilified all those who did not conform to its fundamentalist vision. Indeed, Dayanand was said to have denounced the first guru Nanak as a hypocrite. "The more the Samajists claimed Sikhism to be a branch of Hinduism," Singh writes, "the more the Sikhs insisted that they were a distinct and separate community." The polarization of Hindu versus Sikh thus originated a mere hundred years ago.

Ironically, the more vigorously that syn-



*Sacred river: The life-giving Ganges is worshipped like a goddess, and its waters are used in a variety of Hindu religious ceremonies.*

dicated Hinduism proclaims itself the sole inheritor of the indigenous Indian religion, the more it becomes denuded of any true Hindu religious values—such as tolerance and nonviolence. Hindu fundamentalists often turn to violent means to suppress Muslims, assertive Untouchables, and other minorities. Since independence, they have been involved in hundreds of communal riots costing thousands of lives throughout North India. It was a Hindu fundamentalist

who assassinated Mahatma Gandhi in 1948 for trying to bring the Untouchables into the mainstream of Indian life.

Since syndicated Hinduism is less religion than politics, it is hardly surprising that one of its main architects, Veer Savarkar (1883–1966), was by no means a man of religious faith and at best an agnostic in private life. Indeed, for him, Hinduism as a religion was but a small part of what he called *hindutva*, or Hindu-ness, which he saw as the “racial” unity of all Hindus. In this sense, syndicated Hinduism does not differ from other dominant racial or ethnic groups that have achieved solidarity by persecuting minorities. Since the word Hinduism is in the West associated only with religion, Westerners tend to perceive “Hindu” conflicts in India as purely religious in nature but, significantly, Indian public opinion refers to them as “communal” conflicts.

Being political, syndicated Hinduism cannot find expression in everyday religious practices and even less in any theological principle. Rather, Hindu militants try to take control of the public spaces, the bazaars and streets, where people can be mobilized and the Islamic or Sikh enemy can be confronted. The process began around the turn of the century when nationalist leaders in western India, such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak, invented pan-Hindu religious ceremonies like the

Ganapati Utsav—the celebration of the elephant-headed god, Ganesha. Songs written for these festivals urged Hindus to boycott the Muslim festival of Muharram, which they had once joined in celebrating. Since then, Hindu street festivities have been occurring with ever increasing frequency, their blaring loudspeakers and surging crowds announcing that Hindus command the public sphere.

What forces in Indian society sustain this syndicated Hinduism? After independence, as the democratic process brought the lower castes and other new social groups into the political fray, syndicated Hinduism provided them a sense of identity and a strategy for acquiring cultural respectability. At the same time, groups such as the upper-caste Marathas, who ruled their own state in western India during the 18th century and who now feel threatened by increasingly militant Untouchable groups, find it in their interest to nationalize their cause—to raise the flag of Hinduism in danger—to protect their own particular interests.

And with the Ayodhya temple affair, religious issues for the first time in the history of independent India threatened to overshadow secular ones in a national election. During the Ayodhya controversy, the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party, or Indian People's Party)—often regarded as the parliamentary wing of Hindu organizations such as the VHP—experienced an enormous surge in popularity. The BJP, led by L. K. Advani, advocates both an aggressive foreign policy against India's Muslim neighbors and the repeal of affirmative action for religious minorities. After suffering major defeats in the past, the BJP emerged from the 1989 elections poised to be the single most powerful party in North and Central India where it already controls several state governments. Nationally the BJP

was strong enough by last November to bring down the coalition government of Prime Minister V. P. Singh, who had opposed building the Ayodhya temple, by withdrawing its support.

At the same time, however, the Ayodhya controversy shows the very thin basis for religious unity among the groups involved. There is a covert, and sometimes not so covert, contest for leadership of the Hindu side between the VHP, the wandering ascetic sects known as *sadhus*, and recently, the head monks of the Vedanta order. These groups have little in common save their hostility to Islam; they try to build unity by constantly referring to *Bharat Mata*, Mother India, a concept that didn't exist before the Independence movement. *Bharat Mata* is indeed a loaded term, for not only is *bharat* a Sanskrit word, but the rallying cry of "Mother India" reveals that, ultimately, these groups are appealing to politics, not to religion.

Indeed, religion has become so mixed up with politics that several of the established parties committed to secularism, such as the long-dominant Congress Party, are now also exploiting religious issue for political gain. It was during the rule of Indira Gandhi that the Congress Party first became involved with religious politics. In the early 1970s, she promoted, for instance, an obscure Sikh fundamentalist in the Punjab, Bhindranwale, in order to undermine the more moderate Sikh political opposition to her own party. Bhindranwale, who turned out to be a powerful charismatic figure, quickly seized the opportunity and came to lead a new Sikh fundamentalist movement, and that movement eventually took Indira Gandhi's very life. More recently, after its losses in the 1989 elections in the north to the BJP, the Congress Party began to reorient its image as a secular party, to remove the impression that it was going out of its way to please minorities.

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The question of minorities is crucial. Syndicated Hinduism has alienated not only those who were never Hindu, such as Muslims and Christians, but also those at the margins of the melange: the Sikhs, the non-Brahmans in the south, and the Untouchables. Since independence, hundreds of thousands of Untouchables have converted to Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. Not only individuals but whole Untouchable communities find it easy to opt out of Hinduism precisely because there is now something called Hinduism.

Untouchable communities, which form over 20 percent of the population, now have something against which they can organize themselves. The most militant Untouchable group calls itself the Dalit Panther (or Oppressed Panthers—an obvious play on America's Black Panthers). Formed in the early 1970s by a group of Buddhist converts from the Untouchables—poets, writers, and public figures—the group launched a series of civil disobedience campaigns in western India. (Despite their name, they are not necessarily wedded to violence.) The Dalits' rejection of Hinduism and their conversion to Buddhism clearly show how the element in the Hindu melange, Brahmanism, has become identified with Hinduism as a whole, and therefore, why groups like the Dalits reject it.

Religious strife in modern India is scarcely the responsibility of national Hinduism alone. The British colonizers intentionally polarized the country along religious and communal lines during the first half of the 20th century. As part of their "divide and rule" policy, the British encouraged Muslims, lower castes, and other minorities to develop their communal identity by granting them separate elections for the

local councils. But these minority communities have, since independence, hardened their stance against majoritarian religious domination. In response to their defiant stance, syndicated Hinduism becomes even more intransigent, and so it goes in a vicious cycle. The gains of the BJP in the 1991 election, the signs of a turn in Congress politics, and the portrayal of local conflicts as battles between Hindus and non-Hindus all show with dismaying clarity how thoroughly India's political process is now dominated by religion.

**A**s syndicated Hinduism captures political power in India, we can expect more dire consequences for the various minorities than the early "secular nationalists" like Gandhi or Nehru could ever have imagined. Indeed, we need to reconsider the meaning of modern secularism. If the distinction between the secular and the religious is arbitrary, and if Western societies have learned to respect that distinction only after the gradual waning of religious influence, then in India, where religion is alive and growing, secularization will appear an uncomfortable import. The modern secularism of the enlightened Indian intelligentsia may have always been misplaced. Maybe Indians are recovering the language they feel most comfortable with—the language of religious ties and identity. This is certainly what we have seen throughout Indian history: Politics and society have been inseparable from religion. If this is so, India's Hindu majority will have to relearn the most important lesson of its past: how to live as Hindus with a plurality of traditions, not only with Muslims and other minorities, but also with the variety within.

## BACKGROUND BOOKS

# HINDUISM AND THE FATE OF INDIA

Centuries ago, when Muslims classified the nonbelievers under their rule, they used “people of the Book” to distinguish Christians and Jews from Hindus. That distinction remains useful, and any consideration of Hinduism must first confront the problem of what I might call the “booking” of Hinduism, the slow solidification of a fluid religious tradition into ink and paper, print on page. This transformation from oral tradition to book can be traced to the 19th-century search in Europe for a single Hindu holy book analogous to the Bible.

The early search for “the essence” of Hinduism began when the East India Trading Company commissioned the Sanskritist, F. Max Müller, to edit and publish the Rig Veda, which officials assumed was the Indian equivalent of the Bible. Although he never set foot in Mother India, Müller’s early essays on Hinduism (recently reprinted as **Chips from a German Workshop**, [Scholars Press, 1985]) were enormously influential: Müller hypothesized that the Vedas were the oldest Indo-Aryan scripture in the world, thus suggesting that the elite in Britain and in India shared a common spiritual heritage.

When Müller’s English translation of the Rig Veda was finally published (1878–84), however, it failed to provide an analogy to holy books as the West had known them. These esoteric Sanskrit poems, magical invocations of the gods, were neither narrative nor didactic. They bore little resemblance to the Bible or the Qur’an. But where the Rig Veda had failed, the Ramayana (along with the Bhagavad Gita and the Mahabharata) seemed to fit the 19th-century definition of scripture. In addition, inspired by writings such as Alfred Lord Tennyson’s **Idylls of the King** (1859) and Thomas Carlyle’s books on heroes, scholars began searching other literatures for heroic, epic narratives: a criterion that the Ramayana—the story of the legendary sage-king Rama’s struggle with the demon Ravana, who abducted Rama’s wife Sita—satisfied perfectly. By 1900 the Ramayana had become the special focus of study and concern, and Western scholars cited its speeches on ethics, justice, and truth to

prove that not only was morality at the heart of Indian religion but that it was a morality happily in harmony with British social ethics.

The fate of the Ramayana is one of the great ironies in the history of religion. Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, Western scholars attempted to simplify the infinitely complex melange of groups and ideas associated with Hinduism by linking them to one religious text, such as the Ramayana. But already by 1910, nationalists and other Western-influenced Indians were grabbing the work out of European scholars’ hands and beginning to disseminate translations and inexpensive popular retellings to their countrymen. By the mid-20th century, the Ramayana was slowly becoming the central book of Hinduism. Yet, at the same time, Western scholars began to discover that Hinduism was more multifaceted and complex than any holy book (or books) could suggest.

In the last 30 years, modern scholarship on Hinduism has radically shifted its focus from holy scripture to ethnographic studies. After 1950 it became possible for Americans and Europeans to do extensive fieldwork in India, as British restrictions on such research went the way of the Raj. With ethnography came a new picture of almost overwhelming complexity.

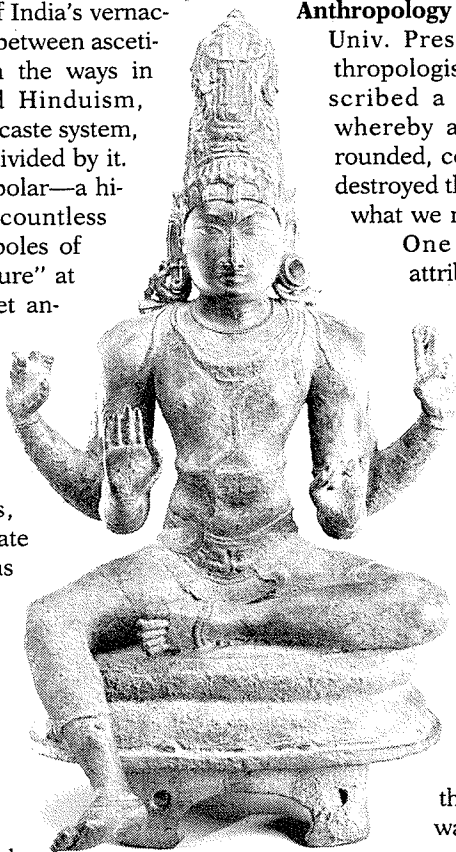
The Indian sociologist M. N. Srinivas challenged the basic understanding of how contemporary Indian society worked, the notion that individuals advanced to the extent that they became Westernized. In **Caste in Modern India** (Asia Pub. House, 1962), Srinivas argued that the basic unit of Indian society is not the individual but the caste, and that castes advance through a process not of Westernization but of “Sanskritization.” Sanskritization means abandoning local customs and adopting traditions associated with Sanskrit liturgy—such as the rules of purity in eating and in dress and the use of the Sanskrit language for ritual—which gradually moved diverse castes and tribes into the orthodox fold.

Even more influential than Srinivas was the French sociologist Louis Dumont, who, in **Homo Hierarchicus** (Univ. of Chicago, 1970), identified caste as the one unique characteristic



feature of the Hindu system and yet the cause of its vast diversity. In other words, although the acknowledgement of caste unites most Hindus, caste itself is a fragmenting force, making India a fragmented society. Paradoxically, Dumont said, it was those few who renounced the system to enter the fold of asceticism who provided the creative drive in Hinduism: Freed from rigid caste rules, these ascetics have produced, for example, much of India's vernacular literature. This division between asceticism and caste only began the ways in which Dumont described Hinduism, united on the surface by the caste system, as actually divided and subdivided by it. He defined caste as itself bipolar—a hierarchical structuring of countless small groups between the poles of "pure" at the top and "impure" at the bottom. This masked yet another polarity: Within the "pure" castes a conflict continued between the kings, who held political power, and the Brahman priests, who controlled the law. Caste, this suggests, masked but did not eliminate the enormous contradictions within Indian culture.

During the 1980s, scholars uncovered new ways in which Hinduism was more diverse and contradictory than had been supposed. Wendy Doniger in her *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Shiva* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1973, reprinted as *Shiva, the Erotic Aesthetic*) offered the startling revelation that even God in his embodiment as Shiva lived in an eternal conflict between his roles as the paramount ascetic and as the source of all fertility, the font of the erotic. The Dutch sociologist J. C. Heesterman in *Inner Conflict of*



*Tradition: Essays in Indian Ritual, Kingship and Society* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1985) plumbed the Vedas and discovered, instead of the sublime unity that Max Müller had found, an old warrior's world of sacred violence barely covered by an overlay of priestly ritual: Once again, an appreciation of complexity and even disorder replaced the older view of a harmonic Indian social order. In *Hinduism: The Anthropology of a Civilization* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1989), the French anthropologist Madeleine Biardeau described a process of "englobing" whereby an uneasy orthodoxy surrounded, covered, redefined but never destroyed the many constituent parts of what we now call Hinduism.

One of the most celebrated attributes of this diverse Hindu tradition has been its tolerance. Scholars must now confront the fact of a new fundamentalism within Hinduism, one that was in some sense the creation of earlier Orientalists who nailed Hinduism to scripture and then to the printed page. Although the scholarship and experiences of the last 30 years may have brought a new appreciation within the academic community of the multiculturalism that is or was "Hinduism," the fact remains that booksellers in the holy city of Ayodhya hawk, as though it were a Hindu fundamentalist gospel, *the Ramayana*. The issue of India's "true" religion, which Western scholars originally disputed with words, is now being fought with bricks and paid for in blood.

—Joanne Punzo Waghorne

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