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## BACKGROUND BOOKS

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# 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.

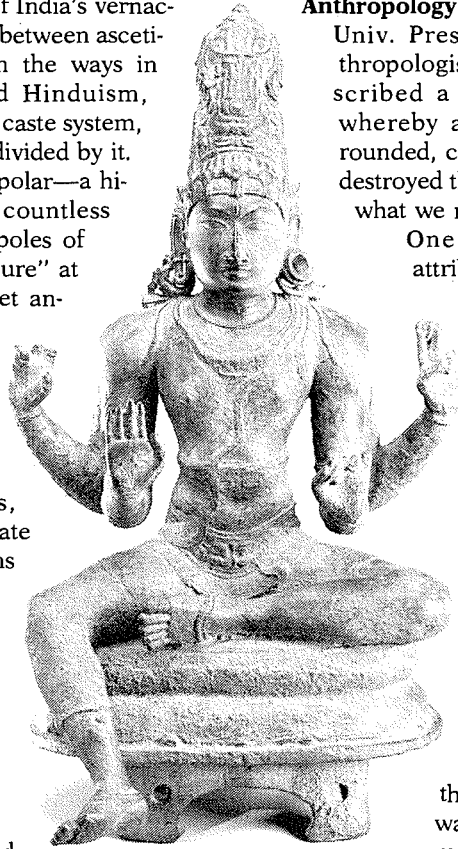
In the last 30 years, modern scholarship on Hinduism has radically shifted its focus from holy scripture to ethnographic studies. After 1950 it became possible for Americans and Europeans to do extensive fieldwork in India, as British restrictions on such research went the way of the Raj. With ethnography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

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