



PREFACE

Of all the world's religions, Hinduism is probably the most difficult to present in a concise introduction. The sheer dimensions of this cluster of traditions point to the challenges of the task. Reckoned by number of practitioners, it is the world's third largest, exceeded in size only by Christianity and Islam. Calculated by age, it is arguably the world's oldest, with roots reaching back at least five thousand years. In terms of influence, it is undoubtedly one of the most prominent, directly shaping the worldviews of millions who are not even Hindus, namely, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs. And measured by diversity of belief and practice, it is certainly the richest and most complex. This diversity, more than anything else, makes it hard to reduce the Hindu traditions to a compact introductory text. Any brief treatment of these traditions always runs the risk of omitting important features, neglecting important

texts, and slighting important eras. A short introduction, moreover, risks making Hinduism seem more coherent and systematic than it actually is.

But despite the obvious hazards, there is a real need for texts to present the Hindu traditions in a concise and introductory way. In an age in which it is increasingly necessary to understand the perspectives of our neighbors, books such as this one are essential to provide a basis for appreciating worldviews other than our own. And in some cases, these texts are useful to introduce us to our own worldview, especially when we have been raised within a tradition without knowing its history and breadth. Those who desire a rudimentary knowledge of Hinduism will find here a clear presentation of the fundamental components and dynamics of the Hindu traditions informed by the latest scholarship. And those who wish to develop a deeper

understanding of Hinduism will discover here a solid basis for the pursuit of topics that can only be mentioned briefly.

This book is by no means comprehensive. Specific choices have been made to emphasize certain aspects of the Hindu traditions to the exclusion of others. Such decisions are essential to present Hinduism in a succinct, introductory format. I can only hope that others familiar with the breadth and depth of the Hindu traditions will consider these decisions to be well informed and judicious. Undoubtedly, others would have chosen to highlight different aspects of the traditions and to present them in a different manner. The richness of Hinduism itself makes possible a wide variety of introductory texts. Just as the Hindu traditions admit many valid approaches to the divine, there are many valid approaches to Hinduism.

The approach adopted here has been governed principally by the needs of the college classroom, although the text will serve well in other contexts. *The Hindu Traditions* will be valuable in courses for which a short overview of Hinduism is desired, particularly when no previous knowledge is assumed. Instructors teaching courses in the history of India or Asia and survey courses on the religions of Asia or world religions should find the approach and scope of this volume especially attractive. The book may also serve as a foundational text for introductory courses in Hinduism. The number of chapters corresponds closely to the number of weeks in an average college semester. Each chapter can be used to provide a topic of study for an entire week when supplemented by other resources such as films and primary texts. To facilitate the use of this volume in collegiate courses and other venues, questions for review and for reflection have been appended to each chapter. For those interested in pursuing top-

ics in greater depth, each chapter also has a selected bibliography.

The book attempts to mediate between a strictly historical (diachronic) approach and a thematic (synchronic) one. To meet this objective, the book follows a basic chronological format, beginning with the earliest known expressions of Indian religion and moving through its classical manifestations to its responses to modernity. Along the way, salient aspects of Hindu life are discussed and placed in context. The overarching structure is such that a reader should be able to have a clear sense of the development of the major Hindu traditions as well as a good understanding of how these traditions inform Hindu life today.

But the story of Hinduism begins not in ancient history, but rather in the modern era, when the idea of “Hinduism” was first proposed. For this reason, the introduction opens this study with a brief analysis of the concept of Hinduism and its problematical nature. Although the term *Hinduism* is useful, I argue that the expression “Hindu traditions” is a more adequate way of referring to this vast and multifaceted cultural complex.

Beginning with chapter 1, we start our journey through five thousand years of Hindu history with an examination of the early cultures that most significantly shaped the development of Hinduism. We make a brief visit to the indigenous culture of northern India, the Indus Valley Civilization, and consider the elements of its religious practice that may have influenced the Hindu traditions. Then we introduce the Indo-Aryans, who bequeathed to the Hindus their most sacred and authoritative scripture, the Vedas. Today, the origin of Indo-Aryan culture is the subject of a vigorous debate. We briefly examine the issues involved in that debate, although ultimately we take the

view of the majority of scholars by presenting the Aryans as arriving in the Indian Subcontinent from Central Asia. From this point of view, we are able to discuss the close connections of the Indo-Aryans with their cousins, the Irano-Aryans. Chapter 2 sets the stage for exploring Indo-Aryan religion by considering its oldest beliefs and practices, as we can best reconstruct them. Considering Aryan culture in its Central Asian and Iranian contexts is one way in which this introduction to Hinduism differs from others. Even though the origin of the Aryans is a source of contention, their influence on subsequent Indian religion is not. In chapter 3, we examine the religious world of the Indo-Aryans as disclosed through the Vedas.

Chapter 4 discusses the transformations that began in the first millennium B.C.E. and that precipitated the development of the “classical” Hindu worldview, which included the decisive concepts of rebirth and karma. To indicate the connections between Hinduism and other religious and philosophical developments beyond the Indian Subcontinent, we situate these transformations in the context of the Axial Age, a broad cross-cultural movement that ultimately produced the major world religions. Analyzing the emergence of the classical Hindu traditions within the framework of the Axial Age is another feature that distinguishes the present introduction from others. In chapters 5 and 6, we continue to present the components of the classical traditions with a study of the principal social arrangements of Hindu culture, namely the caste system and the ideal life patterns for men and women.

Building on the foundations of the classical transformations, the remaining chapters explore the diverse religious and philosophical features of the Hindu traditions. This part of the book follows the traditional typology of the *Tri-*

marga, the three pathways to spiritual liberation, and explains the three major Hindu religions, Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Shaktism. Chapter 7 outlines the way of action, the spiritual discipline pursued by a majority of Hindus. This path, at least in part, aims to improve an individual’s future births with meritorious actions such as participating in religious rituals, festivals, and pilgrimages. Chapter 8 describes the way of knowledge, a rigorous and less-traveled pathway to ultimate salvation. Although relatively few Hindus are inclined to seek liberation by means of knowledge, this tradition offers a profound vision of the self and ultimate reality that has influenced almost all other Hindu traditions and perspectives. Chapter 9 focuses on the different ways Hindus conceptualize the divine reality, providing a transition between discussions of the way of knowledge and the way of devotion. In this section of the book, we explain how Hinduism can be both monotheistic and polytheistic, and we discuss the function of images in Hindu worship. In chapter 10, we explore the way of devotion through one of the most important and best-loved Hindu texts, the Bhagavad Gita. Chapter 11 concerns devotion to the goddess and surveys her many manifestations in the Hindu pantheon. Finally, the book concludes in chapter 12 with a discussion of Hinduism in the modern era, particularly its sometimes ambiguous relationship with the West. We will explore the Hindu-Muslim relationship, the British Raj and the Indian independence movement led by Mohandas K. Gandhi, and the movement of Hinduism into the West.

Because this book is introductory rather than comprehensive in nature, it has its limitations. But even if it were a comprehensive text, I would feel compelled to acknowledge that no written work could do justice to Hinduism, or,

for that matter, to any living religious tradition. We always distort Hinduism—and any religion—by trying to bring it into the classroom or discuss it in a text. There is simply no way adequately to describe the lived reality of nearly a billion people. In the classroom and in books,

we deal mainly in ideas and concepts. But Hinduism, like all religions, is vastly more than that. To understand Hinduism, it should be not only thought about but also—and perhaps especially—seen and felt and tasted and heard and smelled. For that, no book can suffice.