



Starting the fire by means of a fire-bow is still considered the only proper way to begin the performance of Veda-based ritual in contemporary Hindu practice. Here, smoke begins to rise from the fire-stick as master ritualist V. A. Padmanabhacharyulu presses down on the spindle and assistants seated in front and behind him pull cords in alternation to spin it.

Photo courtesy of Guy Welbon.

HINDU BEGINNINGS

Assessing the Period 1000 BCE to 300 CE

By Guy Welbon

“Hinduism”—What’s in a Name?

The first awkward issue is definition. What is Hinduism, anyway? During the past several decades, increasing numbers of scholars have occupied themselves with the “problematic” of “Hinduism”—asking not “What is it?” but rather “Is it anything at all?”

We hoped that revisionist attitudes would be more helpful than they have been. More effort directed to complexities and intertwinings in India’s history than to re-writing European history and to exorcising one colonial demon or another could have shed more helpful light on expressly Indian topics. Those who insist that “Hinduism” is merely an instance of European imagining, hence part of the unhappy legacy of colonial impositions, have found that their efforts to deconstruct and/or dismantle “Hinduism” commonly have been irrelevant to anyone who comfortably identifies him/herself as “Hindu.”

For our purposes, “Hinduism” comprises the actions and understandings of all those who hold in common acceptance of (1) the (nominal) authority of the Veda, (2) specific descent structures (caste system), and (3) Viṣṇu, Śiva, Subrahmanya, Gaṇapati, or the Goddess, as principal deity (or at least among the divinities). Whatever specific differences distinguish individual communities of practice, this collectivity, by virtue of holding in common a sufficient number of religious practices, attitudes, and values, constitutes a “family.” In short, “Hinduism” is roughly what Hindus and the rest of us have come to think it is.



Hindu temple in motion. At major annual festivals, the principal deities of South Indian Hindu temples are processed around their villages in giant cars (*ratha*). Participation in pulling these cars is open to all, a pious act thought to bring spiritual benefit.
Photo courtesy of Guy Welbon.

Conventional Wisdom—How is this period usually summarized?

To start, it is better to think of the 1300-or-so years from around 1000 BCE to around 300 CE as a span of time rather than a distinct “period.” Usually this millennium and a half is held to witness three interlacing developments crucial in the shaping of Hindu traditions:

- (a) the final flowering of Vedic tradition both in its ritual extravagance and in the emergence of *vedānta*—the major *upaniṣads* that constitute the apex of Vedic speculation;
- (b) the rise of alternative visions and voices challenging Vedic spiritual and ritual authority most familiarly embodied in the traditions of the Jains and the Buddhists; and
- (c) the appearance of adaptive and integrative strategies that, drawing from the assumptions and assurances of Vedic convention as well as from the contrasting assertions of “heterodoxies,” yield syntheses to an important extent epitomized in the *Bhagavadgītā*.

On Classicisms, Axial Ages, and the Significance of “roots”

How important is it to know early stages? What can we learn that is significant for understanding today’s “Hinduism”? A survey of World History needs no excuse to “begin at the beginning.” Those of us who teach courses simply called “introduction to Hinduism,” however, know the hazards of spending time on “ancient history” or “foundations.” We don’t want to transform a course into a giant historical parenthesis. Neither do our students.

So we want to show the relevance of Hinduism’s past, so far as we can trace it, to its present. We are aided by reference to synchronisms elsewhere: In the Mediterranean, for example, from around 1000 BCE Greek Civilization heard Homer and, subsequently, the plays of Aeschylus, Euripides, Sophocles, the teachings of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and the oratory of Pericles and Demosthenes. Greeks learned history from Herodotus and Thucydides, saw the building of the Parthenon and the statuary of Pheidias, and experienced the devastation of great war. Rome rose from minor town through the Republic to become the then greatest empire of all time; and by circa 300 CE she was poised to adopt Christianity as the religion of empire.

Elsewhere, Buddhist traditions began in Siddhartha Gautama’s life and teachings in the six to fifth (or, more likely, the fifth to fourth) centuries BCE. Those teachings spread; interpretations proliferated, schools formed; and a self-designated Great Vehicle (*mahāyāna*) articulated itself as an alternative to continuing, monk-centered traditions, sometimes called “Hīnayāna.” Various Buddhist teachings and practices progressed from Northwest India into the trade corridors of Central Asia and East to enter China by the first century CE.

And in China, Master Kong’s (Confucius’) teachings and influence were perpetuated through Menzi’s (Mencius) and others’ establishment of Confucian traditions. Classics of so-called Daoism—*Zhuangzi* and *Daode Jing*—were composed; and, much later, in the second/third centuries, Daoism as a definable, historical phenomenon emerged in millenarian movements such as “Way of the Celestial Masters” and “Movement of Great Equality.”

Indeed, so much of fundamental cultural significance happened independently and simultaneously across cultures just between the eighth and fourth centuries BCE that some attribute a special, universal significance to this time. Karl Jaspers spoke of it as “an axial age (*achsenzeit*).”

What is new about this age, in all three areas of the world [China, India, and Europe], is that man becomes conscious of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations. He experiences the terror of the world and his own powerlessness. He asks radical questions. Face to face with the void he strives for liberation and redemption. By consciously recognizing his limits he sets himself the highest goals. He experiences absoluteness in the depths of selfhood and in the lucidity of transcendence (p. 2).

While we may remain unconvinced that there were profound, universal meanings in cultural developments around the fifth/sixth centuries BCE, locating the history of Hindu traditions in the larger context of World History is helpful. It can also prove useful to view the study of Hinduism’s historical “depth” as an archaeological rather than a historical exercise. The retention or embedding of the older in the newer witnesses a special kind of conservatism characteristic of Hindu—and, more broadly, Indian attitudes. It also means that at any time one is never far from the ancient past.

How old is “Hinduism,” really?

As already suggested, it is usually taught that the beginnings of historical Hinduism date from around the beginning of the Common Era. This view is anchored in literary evidence, and in particular to surviving late *Upaniṣads* and to the *Bhagavadgītā*. While I will sketch below a brief for this perspective, other material seems to beg to be taken as evidence for Hinduism’s—or at least some dimensions of it—being far older. We can no more leave utterly out of account this material evidence than we can yet properly assess it. So we must allow for the possibility that many practices associated with “historical Hinduism,” as I’m calling it, were common and widespread in South Asia long prior to our oldest surviving text.

And, while we are at it, we should look at another, related problem that also directs our attention to the boundary of “the historical.” What contributions to the shaping and substance of Hinduism are traceable to the ancient urban-centered South Asian civilization commanded by two cities near present-day Harappa and Mohenjodaro, along the Indus River (now within Pakistan)? This sophisticated Indus civilization flourished from near-mid-third Millennium BCE to around 1900 BCE. Although it was a literate culture, we have discovered only inscribed seals, texts no longer than a few symbols, and we have not been able to make them out. In effect, the civilization is mute. Surviving material evidence, however, suggests highly developed aesthetic and religious sensibilities.

Could an early form of the god Śiva have been the focus of cult praxis in ancient-most Indus civilization? Maybe. And perhaps even earlier, for such a cult may already have been old in the late third millennium, its sources earlier than the rise of that riverine civilization. So some cult forms that we could call the ancestors of Hindu praxis may predate the *Bhagavadgītā* and even the Indus Civilization by centuries. Ritual practices unacknowledged in surviving, early texts may have been as responsible as any literature for historical Hinduism’s emergence.

But there was no pre-Vedic Hinduism. Whatever forms of “proto-Hinduism,” whatever cults and special practices might arguably be said to have existed before this period, none could itself properly be called “early Hinduism.” It is only at or just before the beginning of the Common Era that the key tendencies, the crucial elements that would be encompassed in Hindu traditions, collectively came together. A time when Hinduism became *saṃskṛta* (“constructed, well-formed”).

And . . . what’s the Veda got to do with it?

Many Hindus today refer to the Veda(s) as the source of Hindu values, practices, and institutions—suggesting in various ways that Hinduism elaborates an earlier Vedism. Here we want to be cautious. Conventional Indological wisdom continues to support the idea that groups of Indo-European-speaking pastoralists began to filter into the subcontinent through Northwest passes starting early in the second millennium BCE. These peoples, so the now conventional view holds, referred to themselves as “noble” (*ārya*) and possessed *inter alia* a growing body of authoritative oral literature they referred to as *veda* (“knowledge, wisdom”). By contrast—and again according to this view, the citizens of Harappa and Mohenjodaro were distinct from these self-styled *āryas*: indigenous or at least long-settled in the subcontinent.

That the Veda is an importation or anyway an “alien” work is not a proposition always cordially received by those who consider the Veda central to Hinduism; and it is not without its challengers, who insist that there is no clear-cut evidence supporting it. Perhaps the Vedic Aryans weren’t outsiders, in the sense of coming to South Asia from beyond the Hindu Kush. The Indus civilization could have numbered

“Vedic Aryans” among its citizens, who could also have included “non-Vedic Aryans.” Further, none of these communities may have been newly arrived. (Edwin Bryant has now comprehensively documented the different sides of this argument in *The Quest for the Origins of Vedic Culture* [Oxford University Press, 2001].)

As the migration or invasion theory is disputed, so is the precise significance of Vedic culture for understanding historical Hinduism. What does Hinduism owe to “Vedism?” “The legacy of the Vedic religion in Hinduism is generally overestimated,” responds Axel Michaels in an excellent new study, *Hinduism: Past and Present*:

The influence on the mythology is indeed great, but the religious terminology changed considerably: all the key terms of Hinduism either do not exist in Vedic or have a completely different meaning. The religion of the Veda does not know the ethicized migration of the soul with retribution for acts (karma), the cyclical destruction of the world, or the idea of salvation during one’s lifetime (jīvanmukta, mokṣa, nirvāṇa); the idea of the world as illusion (māyā) must have gone against the grain of ancient India, and an omnipotent creator god emerges only in the late hymns of the ṛgveda. Nor did the Vedic religion know the caste system, the burning of widows, the ban on remarriage, images of gods and temples Pūjā worship, Yoga, pilgrimages, vegetarianism, the holiness of cows, the doctrine of the stages of life (āśrama) or knew them only at their inception. Thus, it is justified to see a turning point between the Vedic religion and Hindu religions (p. 38).

Centered on the Veda, “knowledge,” the oldest surviving religious literature in any Indo-European language, Vedism celebrated a world of gods and powers and humans ordered by mutual responsibility, action, and fidelity to individual and group obligations. Acts made and structured the world; and Vedism is epitomized in ritual acts (*karman*)—sacrifices, offerings into fire—held equivalent to those acts that first created the world; and like these acts, inevitably potent: no rite without a consequence.

Quintessentially this-worldly at the outset, Vedism affirmed the world we make and remake. But that very affirmation of action, consequence, structure, order, and life generated reactions, too, as begin to be seen in the early *Upaniṣads*, texts collectively called *Vedānta*, “end/culmination of the Veda.” And the most consequential reactions entailed negations and rejections. If order is made, if actions are as inevitable as their consequences, then action may be omnipotent: always and ever generating consequences that must be endured now or later. We act to create, restore, revivify. We survive to enjoy and endure the consequences of acting and, all the while, we act anew. The life of action potentially never ends.

Heterodoxies? Buddhist and Jain Contributions to earliest Hindu traditions.

The implications of the omnipotence of intentional action that are illustrated strikingly in the notions of “dying again” and birth and rebirth—of cycling through existence after existence (= *saṃsāra*)—helped turn India’s religions inward by the middle of the first millennium BCE. Challenges to Vedism’s central values and many of its assumptions are clear in movements like Buddhism and Jainism. In them, heroic innovators rejected the main religious practices of Vedism, argued against rank and privilege except when based on merit, and insisted that the world is unsatisfactory, that ordinary life in the world binds us to perpetual discomfort and restriction. Only by renouncing ordinary life and ambition, these heroes taught, and by pursuing release from the world’s structures and strictures can men attain (or regain) their proper freedom.

Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, and Mahavira, the Jain *Tīrthaṃkara*, (“one who makes a crossing or crosses over [to release from *saṃsāra*]”) showed alternatives to life and action in the world. The release they taught also involved action, but it was a disciplined action (= *yoga*), which included regimens of concentration and meditation that would lead to new awareness, new knowledge, new states of being. The very historicity of these teachers—that they lived and taught in our own human time—added an entirely new element to Indian religious life. Not only would their biographies become sources of inspiration and models for emulation, but they would draw attention to all biographies as potential records of progress to enlightenment.

Although the *Tathāgata* (“one who has gone thus,” a common epithet of the Buddha) and the *Tīrthaṃkara* both insisted that their teachings were important rather than their own persons, they were embraced by many even during their lifetimes as unique heroes who had devoted themselves compassionately to the welfare of all beings. And the devotion of those intensely loyal and dedicated followers was another major influence on emerging Hinduism.

Far from being reactions against Hinduism, then, Buddhist and Jain teachings rather rejected Vedism. And among their great contributions to rising Hinduism were:

- (a) to express a profound experience of the world’s unsatisfactoriness and a readiness to seek alternatives through renunciation;

- (b) to show the potential for change in individual lives, hence the decisively historical nature of those lives; and
- (c) to direct attention to wise, compassionate teachers who encourage and exemplify and who are experienced at once as profoundly transcendent and altogether near.

All these—especially the last-mentioned—evidenced a new intimacy of religious experience that, in turn, offered new models for relating to such compassionate heroes. And these helped displace the formality of *yajña* with *pūjā*, which comprised devoted services performed for the comfort of great beings who compassionately choose to live among us.

The Gita: how important?

The Gita is the oldest surviving masterwork of Hindu self-definition. Calling itself *bhagavadgītā-upaniṣad*, and thus claiming Vedic legitimacy, it is, rather, post-Vedic. In fact, it is a threshold text: a culmination of Vedic/Brahmanic speculation about action, order, duty, and knowledge and a fresh synthesis that redefines and stitches together divergent strands of thought.

The Gita “invented” a “Hinduism” some 2000 years ago. (Scholarly opinion concerning the Gita’s composition ranges from circa 300 BCE to 200 CE. It ought to make some difference which date we choose, but we are not agreed about that either.) Europeans who encountered it first about 225 years ago thought it defined Hinduism. In fact, there is much more to Hindu tradition than can be found in the Gita; but it has been hugely popular and influential for centuries, as witnessed by the fact that the oldest texts in several of India’s vernacular languages are translations and commentaries on it. And every time the Gita is “rediscovered” and re-examined in Hindu India it seems to lead to a new flowering of Hindu thought.

Religious devotion in Hindu traditions occurs in a context of the polytheism that is such a celebrated if misunderstood element in Hinduism. Among the many gods and goddesses, the *bhakta* (“devotee”) chooses one; and this divinity is the Hindu *bhakta*’s *iṣṭadevatā*: “chosen divinity.” As one scholar has put it helpfully: *bhakti* creates a personal monotheism out of a social polytheism. In a sense, as already suggested, the origins of Hindu bhakti-devotionalism—or at least crucial models for it—are found in the anti-Vedic movements like Buddhism and Jainism. The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* and particularly the *Bhagavadgītā* witness, shape, and develop these influences.

Bhakti is pivotal in the history of Hinduism. It dissolves the dilemma about action in the world. Should one act at the risk of perpetual engagement in action? Should one renounce at the peril of losing one’s identity, one’s way, one’s world? *Bhakti*, the *Bhagavadgītā* reassures us, solves that problem: one can act dutifully, then offer the fruits to one’s chosen divinity.

The *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad* taught that the absolute reality beyond the structured order had a face. In the *Bhagavadgītā*, it was learned that the absolute descended to our world for particular world-saving purposes. That *avatāra*, divinity’s specific “descending” to save us and world order, is certainly prefigured in the traditions of Buddhists and Jains. Graciously, lovingly, divinity seeks us out to cure our anxiety and indecision before what we otherwise take to be a threatening chaos of competing and irreconcilable values and ideas by explaining how everything fits together; and finally by assuring us that as his devotees we need fear nothing.

Expressed in and sustained by these understandings, the characteristic features of so-called classical Hinduism manifested themselves as the practice of Vedism declined:

- (a) Interest in the mighty acts of divinities—Viṣṇu, Śiva and the goddess and uncounted others—increased, inspiring the telling, retelling, collecting, and transmitting of enormous amounts of lore that remain today great sources of information about Hindu thought and practice: the epics—*Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*—and, eventually, the great *purāṇas*, whose composition and compilation extends to at least the eleventh century.
- (b) Where Vedism’s ritual acts were performed in specially and temporarily consecrated spaces, Hinduism celebrated sites permanently sacred due to acts performed at them in ancient days or because of their natural, self-revealing sacrality. So were holy temple sites fixed, collectively describing a sacred *bhārata* (India) and sponsoring pilgrimage traditions.
- (c) While Vedism’s central rituals, the *yajñas* (“sacrifices”), had been elaborate banquets to which gods were specially invited for helpful exchanges, emerging Hinduism knew gods and goddesses as royalty who descend graciously to dwell in our midst. Many Hindus aver that the divinities descend into images to reside in our homes and in temples, where we will see and serve them. Ritual sacrifice yielded to rituals of hospitality and service to divine, royal guests that are commonly known as *pūjā*.

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HINDU BEGINNINGS—TIMELINE (2500–100 BCE)

	Religions in India	Other Asia	Mediterranean	Other Europe
2500	Indus Civilization flourishes			
from 1900	Indus Civ. declines; Indo-Aryan pastoralists arrive in NW India?			
1500	Early Vedic hymns composed.	Zoroaster [14th C? 12th C?]; Moses [13th C].		
1000	A formal Vedism crystallizes	Saul, David, Solomon.		
900	<i>Brāhmaṇas</i> [to 6th C BCE].	Elijah.	Carthage founded.	
800	Pārśva and founding of Jainism [?]; Oldest Upaniṣads.	Isaiah.	Homer [?]; Rome founded; Hesiod.	
700	High Vedic era (to 4th C BCE): ritual more elaborate, speculations more subtle.	Laozi [?]; Zoroaster [628–551?]	Draco, Orphic, Apollonian and Dionysian cults.	Byzantium (= Constantinople) founded.
600	Ascetic Alternatives to Vedism become prominent; Māhāvīra (Jaina founder? reformer?).	Fall of Jerusalem; 2nd Temple period; Confucius.	Rome a republic; Aesop; Aeschylus; Pythagoras, Solon.	
500	Siddhārtha Gautama, the Buddha [circa 480–370]; Pāṇini (Sanskrit grammarian).	Zoroastrianism dominates in Persia.	Pericles, Herodotus; Hericlitus; Socrates; Plato; Peloponnesian War; Thucydides; Euripides; Sophocles.	
400	<i>Mahābhārata</i> (redaction to 4th C CE).	Menzi; Zhuangzi [?].	Aristotle; Alexander the Great	
300	Asoka (reigns circa 267–234); <i>Rāmāyaṇa</i> [?].	Great Wall of China begun (continued to 16th C CE).	Hannibal; <i>Septuagint</i> .	
200	A Classical Hinduism emerges; <i>Bhagavadgītā</i> [?].	Book of Daniel; Han dynasty (to 3rd C).		
100 BCE	Pali Buddhist texts written in Sri Lanka.		Virgil, Horace; Julius Caesar; Pax Romana (to 180).	Caesar raids Britain.

HINDU BEGINNINGS—TIMELINE (CE–1000)

	Religions in India	Other Asia	Mediterranean	Other Europe
CE	Kuṣāṇas in NW India sponsor 1st Buddhist images; <i>Laws of Manu</i> [?].	Jesus is crucified; 4 Gospels; St. Paul and St. Peter; Buddhism in China.		
100	Amarāvātī Buddhist culture flourishes; Nāgārjuna [?].			Hadrian's Wall built.
200	<i>Arthaśāstra</i> ; <i>Viṣṇu Purāṇa</i> (to 5th C).	Mani is crucified.		
300	Rise of <i>tantra</i> [to 11th C+]; <i>Harivāṃsa</i> (= <i>Mahābhārata</i> appendix).	Buddhism in Korea.		Constantinople capital of Roman Empire.
400	Kālidāsa.		Attila; Rome sacked.	St. Patrick in Ireland.
500	Vernacular Hindu Devotionalism rises. Kāraikkālamayār (=1st Śaiva <i>Nāyaṇār</i>); 1st Caves at Elephanta, Ellura, Badami.	Buddhism in Japan.	Byzantine Empire dominates to 1453.	
600	<i>Pāñcarātra</i> and expansion of <i>āgama</i> ; Temple Hinduism flourishes ; Formal <i>Vedānta</i> school rises.	Muhammad; Islam spreads: The 4 Righteous Caliphs; Ummayyad dynasty (to 750).		
700	Earliest Vaiṣṇava <i>Āṅvārs</i> ; Arab Islam in Sind; Śaṅkarācārya.	'Abbasid dynasty (750–1258); Buddhism in Tibet; Saicho, Kukai in Japan.	Papal States (to 19th C).	Charlemagne.
800	<i>Śivapurāṇa</i> ; <i>Vaiṣṇava</i> & Śaiva sectarianism grows.			Alfred the Great.
900	<i>Bhāgavata Purāṇa</i> ; Nāthamuni; Yāmunācārya.	Ghaznavids (to 11th C).		Holy Roman Empire (to 19th C).
1000	Rāmānujācārya; 1st vernacular <i>Gītā</i> commentary; <i>Vaikhānasas</i> in inscriptions.			Norman conquest.

300 CE—what was and what was not . . . yet

Candragupta II's ascent around 330 CE is frequently held to have inaugurated a "Golden Age," not only for the Gupta dynasty but for classical India and Hinduism as well. No doubt developments over the previous millennium had been striking. Still, much of vital importance for the richness of Hindu traditions in our own times was yet to come. My list cannot be exhaustive; but, in addition to noting the vast increase in the volume and content of puranic literature, I must mention five complex "events" that, though they were fateful individually and in interaction with one another in the shaping of Hinduism as we now know it, still lay beyond the horizon as the fourth century opened:

- (1) Emergence of esoteric but intensely practical spiritual traditions, especially in the fourth to eleventh centuries, that are generically called *tantra* ("stretched or laid out; that which is set forth: directives"). Contributing to developing temple ritual traditions on the one hand and regimens of personal realization on the other, tantric traditions frequently witness further influences from Buddhist and other extra-Vedic sources;
- (2) Consolidation and formalization of Hindu temple ritual accompanied by the rise of ritual schools and their literatures (all collectively referred to as *āgama* ["received; tradition"]) from the fourth to the tenth century;
- (3) Blossoming of regional, devotional (*bhakti*) traditions in vernacular languages and the concomitant development of sectarian Hindu religious movements. Apparently starting with the ecstatic devotional songs of the Śaiva *nāyanārs* ("guides") from the mid-sixth to ninth century and the Vaiṣṇava *ālvārs* ("divers") from the seventh through ninth centuries in Tamil Nadu, the vernacular *bhakti* impulse spread across and up India through the seventeenth century.
- (4) From the seventh century, establishment of the speculative paradigms of Hindu India's most famous philosophical school: the Vedānta, whose three greatest heroes are the uncompromising non-dualist (*advaitin*), Śaṅkarācārya (eighth century); Rāmānujācārya, who taught the "non-dualism of distinguished/distinct [forms]" (*viśiṣṭādvaita*) in the eleventh to twelfth centuries; and the resolute dualist (*dvaitin*), Madhvācārya (thirteenth to fourteenth centuries); and
- (5) The arrival and spread of Islam in South Asia. First and tentatively along the upper west coast of the subcontinent within decades of the death of the Prophet (witness the incursions and emergent Arab kingdom of Muhammad bin Qasim in Sind in the early eighth century), Islam spread across India in a sustained fashion (beginning in the North) from 1000 CE onward, introducing new understandings and ideals of society, political and economic order, aesthetics, philosophy, theology, and spirituality that would challenge, interact with, and influence Hindu attitudes consequentially up to the present.

So Hinduism was not a simple, fixed, unchanging system by 300 CE. Nor is it today. Rather it was and remains a dynamic, changing, and responsive complex of attitudes and practices. But, although it was not a set institutional entity at the end of the third century, its character and contours had been shaped. And the Hinduism of that time remains the Hinduism of our own. ■

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