



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).

Kipling 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*

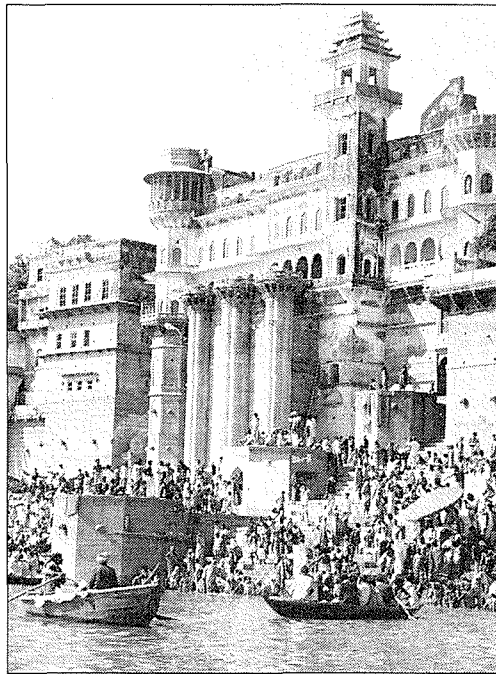
are found in many of the Puranas, the most famous and extensive being the *Kashi Khanda* of the *Skanda Purana* and the *Kashi Rahasya* of the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*. These *mahatmyas* are not descriptive statements of fact about an ordinary city, but statements of faith about a sacred city.

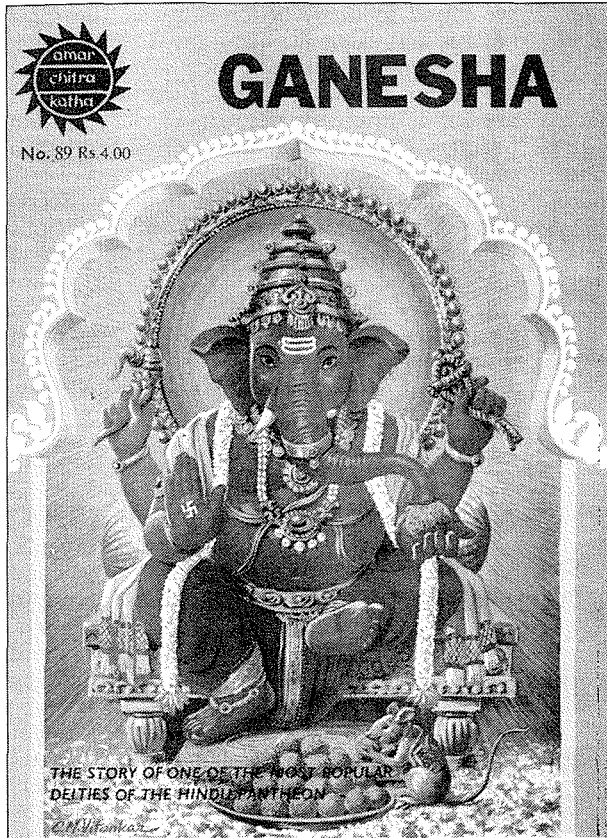
Kashi is the whole world, they say. Everything on earth that is powerful and auspicious is here, in this microcosm. All of the sacred places of India and all of her sacred waters are here. All of the gods reside here, attracted by the brilliance of the City of Light . . . And all of time is here, they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