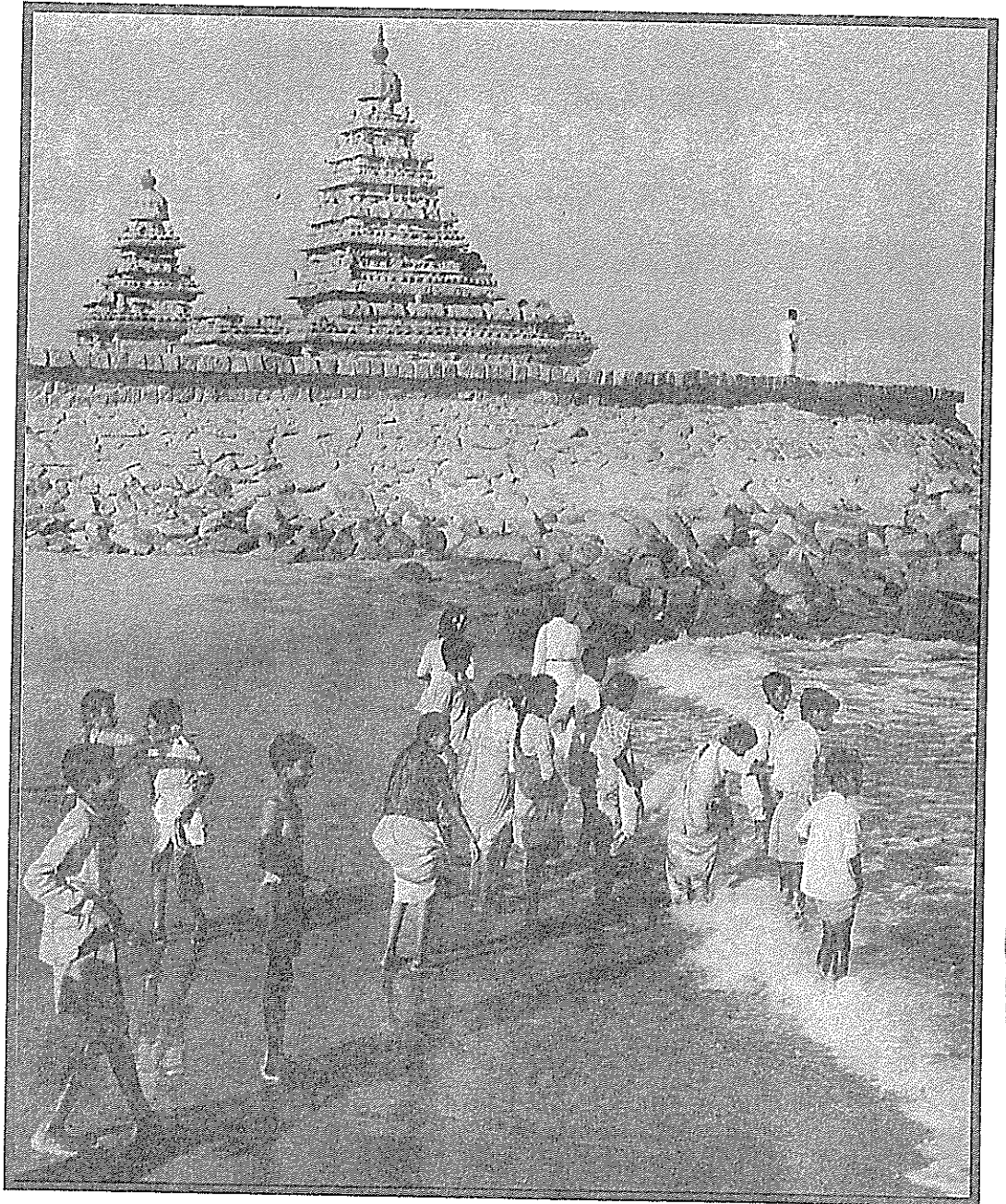


The Hindu Religion

"Hinduism is much more than a religion; it is a total way of life, including the customs, beliefs, practices, institutions of the people in all parts of the subcontinent [India], developed in all periods of human settlement there. . . . Hinduism is not a single religion, but many religions tolerating [willingness to allow beliefs or actions in which one does not necessarily believe] one another in the shifting framework of caste [Hindu social class]."¹



An example of a Hindu temple built many centuries ago in Madras by the seashore.

¹ W. Norman Brown, from S. Ferish, *India and South Asia*. New York: Macmillan, Inc., p. 35.

Main Ideas of Hinduism

Reincarnation

Three main ideas are important in understanding the Hindu religion and the caste system. The first of these ideas is **reincarnation**. According to this belief, each person and every other living thing has a soul. When a living thing dies, its soul moves into another human being or animal. In other words, when death comes, the soul is reborn in a newly created life.

Karma

The second idea is **Karma**. Karma teaches that every action brings about certain results. If a person behaves badly, the results will be bad. If a person behaves well, the results will be good. There is no escaping the consequences of one's actions. If a person does what he or she is supposed to do, his or her soul will be rewarded in the next rebirth by being reincarnated into a higher ranking human.

Thus, if an **untouchable** (see the next section) does a job well and does not complain, the untouchable may be reborn into a higher caste. Some day, if the untouchable continues to behave well, he or she may reach the highest caste and become a Brahmin.

Dharma

The third idea is **Dharma**. Dharma is a set of rules that must be followed by all living beings if they wish to work their way up the ladder of reincarnation. Each person's Dharma is different. (How have these ideas created a sense of order for the Hindus of India?)

The Caste System

The caste system began in India more than 3,000 years ago. The Aryans, who conquered India, took for themselves the kind of work that they thought was desirable. They became the religious leaders, the rulers, the traders, and the landowner farmers. The other people were forced to become servants for the Aryans, or to do work that was necessary but took more effort, or was considered less respectable, such as the tasks of the barber, carpenter, tailor, potter, or street cleaner.

Lowest of all the jobs was sweeping the streets, handling dead people and animals, and tending pigs that fed on village garbage. No one even liked to come near people who did these jobs that other villagers considered to be unclean. This attitude probably sprang from the idea that disease was carried from person to person, and that it was better to stay away from anyone who touched dead or dirty things.

The Five Orders of Castes

The caste system divides the Indian population into **hereditary** (passed from one generation to the next) social groups (Varnas). There are five general orders, or groups, of castes. The three highest orders are Brahmin (priests), Kashatriya (soldiers), and Vaishya (merchants). The fourth order is Sudras (laborers). The members of the fifth (lowest) group of castes, those who do jobs that others consider unclean, are referred to as "untouchables" or "outcasts." To many Hindus, untouchables rate so low as to be considered outside or beneath the caste system itself. They must live apart from the rest of the people and are not permitted to use the village wells.

The Main Ideas of the Caste System

A major idea of the caste system is that people are born unequal in both opportunity and ability. Thus, while untouchables have few privileges, less is expected from them than from a Brahmin.

The caste system also teaches that a person belongs to a specific caste from birth. His life, marriage, and work are governed by specific caste rules. The son of a laborer becomes a laborer; the son of a teacher becomes a teacher. And, of course, the son of a king usually

became a ruler upon the death of his father. Girls are regarded as inferior to boys and are married into families that do the same work as their fathers and brothers did. In this way, a small kingdom or a village is almost certain, year after year, to have all of the kinds of workers it needs.

In other words, the purpose of the caste system is to develop a plan by which villagers can live and work together. Its main goal is to produce enough food and to provide enough labor of all the necessary types so that each family has everything it needs.

Castes are often divided into clan or landowning groups called *jatis*. In the cities, jatis are often in competition with each other for power and access to government funds. In the villages, however, jatis are frequently interdependent and cooperative. Voting is a perfect way to show how belonging to a jati works. With rare exceptions, members of a jati will vote the same way, as will their servants and other workers.

Each caste has its own Dharma, which is carefully taught to the young by the elders. Within the caste Dharma, each person begins to understand his or her own personal Dharma as well.

Relationship Between Hinduism and the Caste System

Can you see how Hinduism and the caste system are related? The caste into which a person is born is determined by the way that person performed his or her Dharma in a previous life. According to the law of Karma, if one is an untouchable, one has no one to blame but one's self. Instead of complaining, that person had better do a good job. If not, he or she will sink to the level of an animal that crawls.

If a person behaves well through an unknown number of reincarnations, that person's soul will reach *Moksha*, the final resting place. To enter Moksha is desirable because the soul will then be free of all the pain that life brings, and it will be able to rest from its long, sad travels on earth. (Why did many Hindus accept their roles as "untouchables" in the past? Why might they be unhappy about that place in society today?)

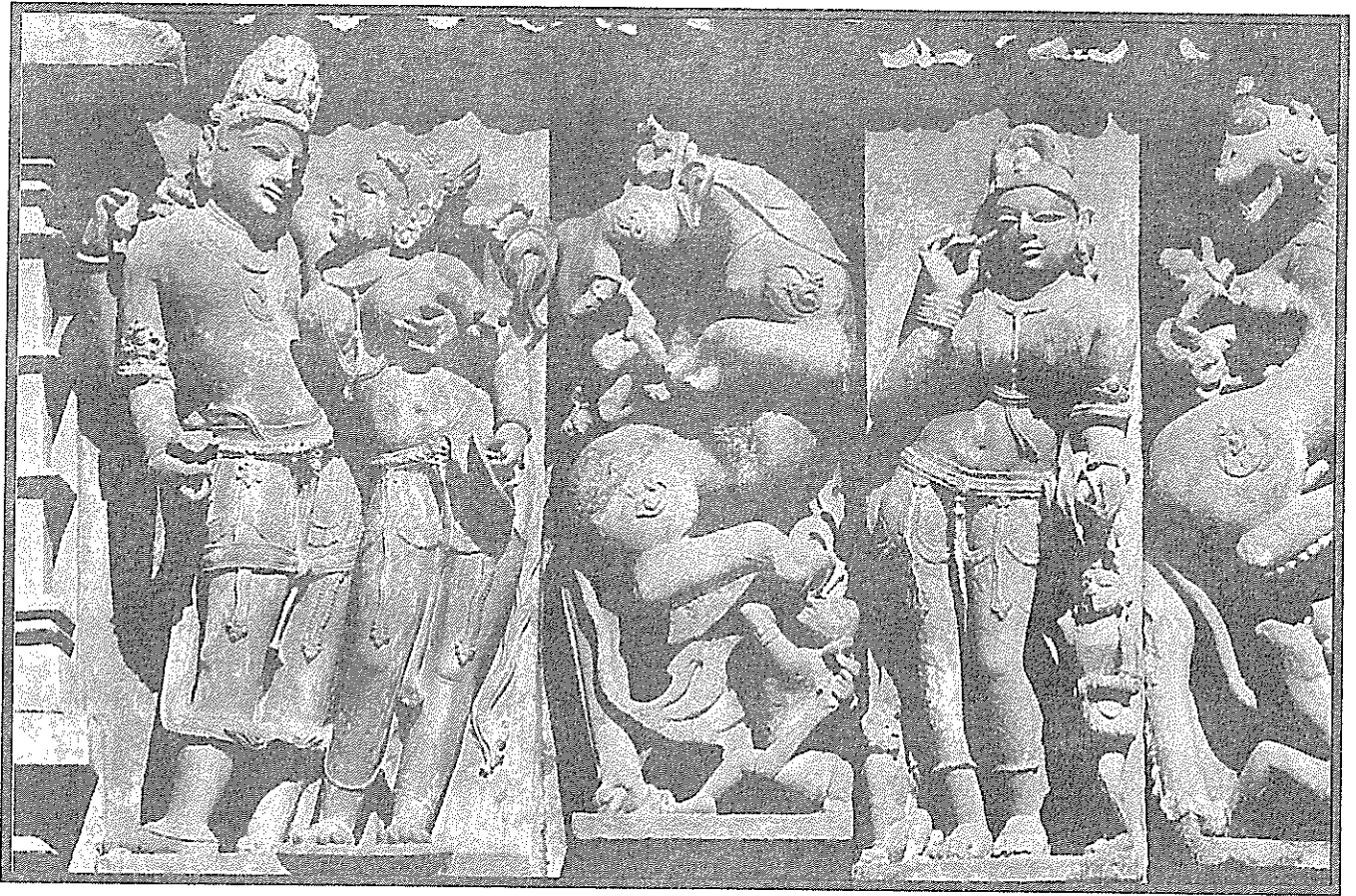
The Literature of Ancient India

India has a tradition of learning that stretches far back into the past. Much of its culture and writing grew out of Hindu teaching and practices. Many of the stories and traditions were passed on from generation to generation by the village storyteller, usually an elderly person. By hearing the stories over and over, and by seeing them staged at holiday festivals, Indians remained close to their traditions.

Many centuries later, the great literature of the early Indians was written down to be enjoyed not only by the village dweller but also by all the other peoples of the world.

The Vedas

We know something about the customs, institutions, and religious practices of the Aryans from four collections of sacred writings called Vedas. The Vedas are very ancient; in fact, they are the earliest collection of writings in India (1500 to 800 B.C.). The Vedas are a collection of hymns, sacred prayers, and chants that are still recited at weddings and funerals today. The Vedas tell of nature worship. (There were gods of the sun, the wind, and the rain.)



A frieze from the temple at Konarak in Orissa that is a fine example of temple sculpture. The figures portray the pleasures of life.

The most famous Veda is the Rig-Veda, which was written about 800 B.C. and is the oldest known religious document in the world. (*Rig* means "hymn" and *Veda* means "knowledge.") There are 110 Hymns of Knowledge. One of these, called the Hymn of Creation, is in many ways similar to the creation story told in the Old Testament of the Bible. There is also a belief shown in a universal spirit or Creator.

Of the three other Vedas, the Sama Veda is a collection of hymns; the Yajur Veda is a manual used by priests in the performance of their religious duties; and the Atharva Veda contains many magical spells.

The Vedas were passed by word of mouth from one generation to the next for many centuries before being written down. In the Vedas may be found the roots of Hindu beliefs and ideas.

The Upanishads

The Upanishads, a collection of rituals and ceremonies written about 2,500 years ago, is a valuable source of information about Hinduism. It is written in both prose and verse. The writers discuss the origins of the universe and also the meaning and importance of the soul. The prayers contain messages on religious thoughts and present a way of life for the Indian people. ("Truth conquers ever, falsehood never.")

The Mahabharata

The Mahabharata is the longest poem in the world and contains about 200,000 lines (100,000 couplets). *Maha* means "great," and *Bharat* is the legendary name of India during the ancient Vedic Age.

The Mahabharata tells the story of a war between two Indian families, so savagely fought that few survived its end. Within the poem is a section that has become famous throughout the world, the *Bhagavad-Gita* or *Gita* (the Song of God).

The Gita tells the story of Arjuna, the perfect warrior. Arjuna is unhappy because many of his friends and relatives are in the army opposing him. He does not want to kill them, but he doesn't want to lose the fight either. He asks advice from one of his soldiers, who turns out to be Krishna, one of the gods. Krishna explains to Arjuna that the purpose of life is to know God and that each person must do his or her duty. Good deeds will bring good results and put human beings closer to God; bad deeds will bring bad results. Krishna points out that it is not bad for a person to kill within the line of duty or in self-defense. It is Arjuna's duty to fight and win. One must never forget duty or fear death. The story ends with Arjuna's victory in battle. The moral of the story is that duty should be done without emotion or desire. (Do you agree?)

Over the years of Indian history, scenes from the Mahabharata have been told by the village storyteller, dramatized on the Indian stage, and repeated in many books. There are few Indians who are not familiar with its content and teachings. The great Indian leader Gandhi called the Gita "a dictionary of conduct." This poem is also well known to other Asians in Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar (Burma), Indonesia, and elsewhere.

The Ramayana

The Ramayana, written about 400 B.C., tells the story of Prince Rama and his wife, Sita. Rama loses his throne to his stepbrother and for 14 years is forced to travel through India. During his travels he has many exciting adventures.

One day Sita is kidnapped by the evil demon Rawana, king of Sri Lanka (Ceylon). After many battles and setbacks Rama, with the help of his loyal brother, Lakshmana, and the brave monkey general, Hanuman, finally traps Rawana on the island of Sri Lanka. The monkeys, led by Hanuman, build a bridge of stones to connect the mainland to the island. Rama kills Rawana in a fierce and bloody battle, and Sita is then rescued. Without the help of the monkeys, this victory would not have been possible. For this reason, it is said, monkeys are considered sacred by the Hindus. Hanuman is looked on as the god of strength and loyalty. He is considered the special friend of athletes.

After 14 years of wandering, Rama returns to his home to become king. The people welcome Rama and Sita with great joy.

According to one of the more popular endings of the Ramayana, Rama and Sita live happily ever after. However, another ending tells that the people come to believe that Sita had not remained true to Rama while living with Rawana. The people insist that Rama send Sita away and he does. The lesson is that Rama places the wishes of his people above his own desire.

To generations of Hindus, Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana have shown how human beings should behave. Their loyalty, love, devotion, obedience, and sense of duty have been held up as a model to Indian children.



Folk dancers from Himachal Pradesh in the northwest part of India.