



David R. Kingsley, 'Introduction: Banares'

Reading A5 is taken from *Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective* and is reproduced by kind permission of Prentice-Hall.

Even before the sun has risen, the streets and alleyways of Banares leading to the Ganges River swirl with devout pilgrims making their way to the broad steps that lead down into the river. By the time the sun is up the steps teem with pilgrims and devout residents taking ritual baths in Mother Ganges' sacred waters, which are believed to cleanse one of all sins. Small shops specializing in religious paraphernalia crowd the area around the steps and do a thriving business. Hundreds of priests whose task it is to aid pilgrims are setting up their large umbrellas against the heat of the sun, and by midday the steps leading to the river look as if they are overgrown with immense mushrooms.

Dawn also signals the beginning of activity in the thousands of temples and shrines throughout the city dedicated to the many gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. In the impressive Vishvanath temple of the ascetic god Shiva, hereditary priests prepare to do *puja* (worship by personally waiting upon a deity), and devotees crowd the temple precincts to have a view of the image of the deity, a sight that is held to be auspicious, and to watch the colorful ceremony. Throughout the day devotees stream to the thousands of temples scattered all over Banares to worship their favorite god or goddess. The variety of images from which they can choose reflects the extraordinary richness through which the divine has revealed itself in the Hindu tradition.

Enshrined in these temples is a veritable kaleidoscope of divinity: Vishnu, the great heavenly king who descends to the world from time to time in various forms to maintain cosmic stability; Shiva, the ascetic god who dwells in yogic meditation in the Himalayas, storing up his energy so that he can release it periodically into the world to refresh its vigor; Krishna, the adorable cowherd god who frolics with his women companions in the idyllic forests of Vrindavana; Hanuman, the monkey god, who embodies strength, courage, and loyalty to the Lord Rama; Ganesha, the elephant-headed god who destroys all obstacles for his devotees; Durga, the warrior goddess who periodically defeats the forces of evil in order to protect the world; Kali, the black goddess who dwells in cremation grounds and is served with blood; and many more.

Dawn is a busy time at the cremation grounds on the Ganges too. A steady stream of funeral processions wends its way to a particular set of steps where several funeral pyres burn constantly. At the funeral grounds the stretcher-borne corpses are set down to await their turn in the purifying fires. The constant activity at this particular burning ground reflects the belief of pious Hindus that death in or near the Ganges at Banares results in *moksha*, the final liberation from the endless cycles of birth and rebirth that is the ultimate spiritual goal of most Hindus.

Thousands of devout Hindus, in their old age, come to die in Benares, and many funeral processions seem joyous, reflecting the auspicious circumstances of the person's death. As one watches the crackling fires consume the corpse, the rising tendrils of smoke suggest the soul's final and longed for liberation.

Benares is the center of several religious orders, and the city's population includes a great number of ascetics who have chosen to live in the holy city permanently or who are simply wandering through. It would not be unusual to see several of these holy men or women sitting in meditation around the steps. The burning ground itself is an auspicious site to perform meditation, as the funeral pyres remind the ascetics of the transcendence of the worldly life they have renounced. The appearance of these renouncers is striking. Typical ascetics wear a minimum of clothes or are perhaps even naked. Their bodies are smeared with ashes, sometimes taken from the cremation grounds. Their hair is long and matted, indicating their utter neglect of bodily appearance, or their heads may be shaven. Their only possessions are a water pot and a staff. In the midst of a bustling city like Benares, which like all cities caters to the inexhaustible worldly desires of its populace with markets, cinemas, shops, and so on, the ascetics look like wayfarers from another world. They are a common sight in Benares, however, and remind one of the importance of world renunciation and asceticism in the Hindu tradition.

Before the day is over, a visitor to Benares will have witnessed many scenes common to the Hindu tradition: Brahmins performing ancient Vedic rituals; devotees from Bengal performing communal worship to Lord Krishna with much singing and dancing; students at Benares Hindu University consulting an astrologer to determine if the day on which their exams will be held will be auspicious; a low-caste pilgrim making an offering at the shrine of a beloved saint who is little known outside the pilgrim's own caste; a traditional pundit, or teacher, expounding the ethereal subtleties of Hindu philosophy to his students; a priest or storyteller animatedly telling stories from Hindu scriptures to groups of devotees in the precincts of a temple; and a pious person ritually worshipping a cow, many of which wander freely in the streets of Benares, perhaps in fulfillment of a vow to some deity for a favor granted in the past or expected in the future.

By the end of the day the visitor to Benares seeking to discern the essential outlines of the Hindu religious tradition probably will be very confused and tempted to conclude that Benares, with all its diversity, is not the best place to look for the essential ingredients of Hinduism. Indeed, Hinduism itself, like Benares, tends to defy neat analysis and description and leaves the impression that what happens in the name of Hinduism is chaotic. Hinduism, it seems, eludes and frustrates attempts to summarize it neatly because it offers exceptions or even contradictions to what at first might seem essential or generally true.

For example, many Hindus in Benares say that *ahimsa* (noninjury) is essential to the Hindu vision of reality, and they will be able to cite countless texts to support that view. They will mention Mahatma Gandhi as a recent example of the centrality of this theme in Hinduism, and possibly also the Hindu respect for cows and the emphasis on vegetarianism. You may be convinced that here, indeed, is an essential aspect of Hinduism. Thanking your informant, you will go on your way, only to come upon a temple of Kali or Durga, where worshippers are beheading a goat in sacrifice to the goddess. Or you might happen upon a copy of the *Artha Shastra* of Kautiliya, an ancient and authoritative text on Hindu political philosophy from around the fourth century AD. You will look in vain for Gandhian political principles in this book, because the *Artha Shastra* is consistently ruthless and cunning in its approach to seizing and holding power.

You might, on the other hand, be told by an ascetic in Benares that Hinduism involves essentially the renunciation of society and all egotistical desires and the achievement of liberation from the lures of the world. But before long you would find a group of orthodox Brahmin performing ancient rituals from the *Vedas*, also affirmed to be the essence of Hinduism, the explicit aim of which is the

stability and welfare of the world, what the Hindus call *loka-samgraha*, one of the central teachings of Hinduism's most famous scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Who is right? The orthodox Brahmin who performs daily rituals prescribed by the ancient *Vedas*? The ascetic who performs no such rituals, who may even show disdain for them, and who denies any obligation to society? The low-caste farmer who daily praises the Lord Rama and celebrates his heroic exploits? The untouchable who makes a pilgrimage to Benares to honor a saint beloved by his or her entire caste but virtually unknown to most high-caste Hindus? Or the pious businessman who consults his astrologer before closing a deal? One must believe them all, it seems, for they are all Hindus undertaking common and acceptable Hindu practices. And this leads to our first generalizations about the Hindu religious tradition.

One cannot find the equivalent of a Hindu pope or an authoritative Hindu council in Benares. Historically Hinduism has never insisted upon the necessity of a supreme figure in religious matters and has never agreed upon certain articles of belief as essential for all Hindus. Throughout its long history, then, Hinduism, has been highly decentralized.

Another feature of Hinduism follows from this one, a feature reflected in both the caste system and the different paths one may take in the religious quest. Hinduism affirms in a variety of ways that people are different from one another and that these differences are both crucial and distinctive. People have different *adhikaras*, different aptitudes, predilections, and abilities. What is natural to one person is unnatural to another. So it is that different ways are made available to different types. Some may have an aptitude for philosophy, and a path centering on knowledge is available for them. Others may be of a devotional aptitude, and so a path of devotion is appropriate for them. Over the centuries, then, Hinduism has accepted a variety of paths, spiritual techniques, and views of the spiritual quest that all succeed in helping man fulfill his religious destiny.

On the social level the Hindu emphasis on differences manifests itself in the caste system. Human differences are systematically arranged in hierarchical order, and people are segregated into specialized cohesive groups called castes. Social contact with other castes is carefully circumscribed in such a way that the religious beliefs and practices of a particular Hindu will often reflect his or her caste tradition and differ markedly from the religious practices of other castes. The philosophical ideas underlying the caste system are *karma*, the moral law of cause and effect according to which a person reaps what he or she sows, and *samsara*, rebirth according to the nature of a person's *karma*. The basic idea is that what a person is now is the result of all that one has done in the past, and what one will become in the future is being determined by all one's actions in the present. In effect, a person's present caste identity is only a brief scene in an endless drama of lives that will end only with *moksha*, liberation from this endless round of birth, death, and rebirth.

Hinduism also affirms that during one's life a person changes, and different kinds of activities are appropriate to various stages of life. Traditionally four stages have been described, with different obligations for each one. The ideal was designed primarily for men, and only very rarely did a woman follow the pattern. Ideally, a high-caste male is to pass through these stages in the following order: student, householder, forest recluse, and wandering holy man. As a student one's duty is to study his tradition, particularly the *Vedas* if he is a Brahmin. As a householder he is to foster a family, undertake an occupation appropriate to his caste, and perform rituals, usually Vedic rituals, that help insure the stability of the world. As a forest hermit, he is supposed to leave his home, retire to the forest with his wife, continue Vedic rituals, and meditate on those realities that will bring about liberation from the world and rebirth. Finally, he is to abandon even his wife, give up Vedic rituals, wander continually, begging his food, and strive for the knowledge that emancipates him from the cycles of rebirth. Although this pattern is not always followed, it affirms the tradition's liberality in permitting a variety of approaches in one's spiritual sojourn:

study; supporting the world through rituals, work, and family life; meditation away from society; and renunciation of the world through extreme asceticism.

The Hindu insistence on differences between people, then, leads to the very common definition of Hinduism in sacred texts as *varna-ashrama-dharma*, which may be loosely translated as performing the duty (*dharma*) of one's stage of life (*ashrama*) and caste or social station (*varna*).

Hindus also have acknowledged that differences exist among the regional areas of the Indian subcontinent, and the Hindu Law Books accept as authoritative regional customs and peculiarities. These regional dissimilarities help us understand another aspect of the diversity of belief and practice among Hindus in Benares. Hindus from Tamilnad in the South have a cultural history that differs greatly from, say, Hindus from Bengal. Each region has its own vernacular tradition, its favorite gods and goddesses, its own distinctive customs and rituals. In Benares, where pilgrims from all over India congregate, these differences further complicate one's attempts to discern common themes, patterns, and beliefs. The history of Hinduism is, to a great extent, the record of what has gone on in the regions of India and is therefore marked by much diversity in belief and practice.

On the other hand, a strong, articulate, and authoritative tradition, called the Great, Sanskrit, or Aryan tradition, has counterbalanced this diversity by imposing upon it certain myths, beliefs, customs, and patterns of social organization. Dominated by a literate Brahmin elite, Hinduism over the centuries always has manifested a certain coherence because of the prestige of this tradition throughout India. Thus, Hinduism today is, as it always has been, the dynamic interaction of various regional traditions with an all-India tradition in which the particular beliefs and rituals of any given Hindu will be a combination. For orthodox Benares Brahmins, very little if any of the regional traditions may affect their brand of Hinduism. For low-caste Bengali peasants, on the other hand, very little of the Sanskrit tradition may be a part of their religion.

All this adds up to what one might call a liberal tendency in Hinduism that permits and even encourages men and women to undertake their religious sojourns in a variety of ways. Some things, to be sure, are encouraged for all Hindus: caste purity (intermarriage between castes is discouraged strongly), respect for Brahmins, and life-cycle rituals, for example. Certain ethical precepts also are encouraged for all, and certain underlying beliefs are accepted by most Hindus: *karma*, *samsara*, and *moksha*, for example. In Benares, then, we find very general parameters defining Hinduism that for the most part are provided by the Sanskrit tradition and that permit a great diversity of belief and practice. What goes on within these parameters, finally, may be summed up as representing four accents within the Hindu tradition:

1. *The Vedic Tradition*. Historically, the Aryans, who composed the *Vedas*, were foreigners who succeeded in superimposing on the indigenous peoples of India their language, culture, and religion. This Vedic religion is still dominant in living Hinduism and is best represented by the orthodox Brahmins. One of the central aims of this religion is the stability and welfare of the world, which achieved through a great variety of rituals. In Benares today this accent is represented by those Brahmins who study the traditional Law Books and sponsor elaborate Vedic rituals.
2. *The Devotional Tradition*. The Hinduism of the majority of people in Benares is devotional, and this accent within the tradition goes all the way back to at least the time of the *Bhagavad Gita* (around 200BC). Devotion is of varying types and is directed to a great variety of gods and goddesses, but generally we can speak of three strands within this tradition: (a) devotion to Shiva or to one of his family; (b) devotion to Vishnu or to one of his *avatars* (incarnations), the two most popular of which in the Benares area are Krishna and Rama; and (c) devotion to one of the many manifestations of the Great Goddess, the Mahadevi. It is primarily against the background of the devotional tradition

that Hindus will identify themselves as Shaiva (devotees of Shiva), Vaishnava (devotees of Vishnu), or Shakt (devotees of the Goddess). Devotion to all three manifestations of the divine is concerned with liberation from the cycle of endless births (*moksha*) or with eternal proximity to the deity in his or her eternal heaven.

3. *The Ascetic Tradition.* The several thousand ascetics in Benares are the living representatives of a tradition that is probably as ancient as the *Vedas* and that has been highly honored in Hinduism for over 2,500 years. The underlying assumptions of this tradition are that (a) life in the world is a hindrance to realizing one's spiritual destiny; (b) renunciation of society, including family ties, is necessary to realize one's spiritual essence; (c) various kinds of austerities are the necessary means of purifying oneself of both ignorance and attachments; and (d) the ultimate goal of this arduous path is complete liberation from the wheel of rebirth. There are various types of ascetics, ascetic orders, and spiritual exercises undertaken by ascetics. Generally, though, they all share these ideas and emphasize the importance of the individual's emancipation rather than one's obligations to the social order and its maintenance. In this respect there has often been a tension between the Vedic tradition and the ascetic tradition, a tension we shall return to later.
4. *The Popular Tradition.* This tradition refers to all those other rites and beliefs of Benares Hindus that do not fit neatly under the other three traditions. The sanctity of Benares itself, and of the River Ganges that flows through it, points to the central importance of sacred places and pilgrimage in the Hindu tradition. For Hindus the entire subcontinent bubbles with sacred places, where immediate access to sacred and purifying power is obtainable. Most prominent geographical features, such as mountains and rivers, are sacred and are the focal points of pilgrimage. Most cities contain famous temples and are also sacred centers. In addition to geographical sites and cities, some plants are held to be sacred. To the worshipers of Vishnu, the *tulasi* plant is particularly sacred, whereas to many devotees of the Goddess, it is the *bilva* tree. Time is punctuated by auspicious and inauspicious moments that are determined by the movements of the stars, the planets, the sun, and the moon. Many Hindus are extremely sensitive to these rhythms and will undertake nothing of significance unless they have been assured by their astrologer that the time is auspicious. Most Hindus know precisely at what time they were born, because they, and their parents, need that information to determine the compatibility of marriage partners. We also include under the popular tradition the preoccupation many Hindus have with diet. Many Hindu scriptures give lists of pure and impure foods and characterize the different properties of foods according to the physical and spiritual effects they produce. The preoccupation of many Hindus and many Hindu scriptures with signs and omens is also part of the popular tradition, as are rituals that have to do with gaining control over enemies and members of the opposite sex. In short, the popular tradition refers to things that we might call magical or superstitious simply because we do not understand them fully; we are unable to do so because those who practice them cannot articulate in ways we can understand what these practices and beliefs mean to them or meant to their forefathers.

By way of concluding this introductory portrait of Hinduism, let me suggest an image that might be useful in thinking about its diversity. We all know someone who is a collector, who rarely throws anything away, whose possessions include the exquisite treasure, the tackiest bauble, the unidentifiable photograph, the neglected and dusty item, and the latest flashy gadget. The Hindu religious tradition has shown itself to be an incurable collector, and it contains in the nooks and crannies of its house many different things. Today this great collector may hold one or another thing in fashion and seem to be utterly fascinated by it. But very few things are ever discarded

altogether, and this is probably one of the most interesting and distinctive features of Hinduism. Like a big family, with its diversity, quarrels, eccentricities, and stubborn loyalty to tradition, Hinduism is a religion that expresses the ongoing history of a subcontinent of people for over 3,500 years.

From D.R. Kinsley (1982) *Hinduism: A Cultural Perspective*,
New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, pp. 2–9.