1 India and the West

India has created a special momentum in world history as a country to be searched for.

—G. W. F. Hegel

Since the beginning of recorded history, the West has been fascinated by India. From Classical Antiquity, countless fanciful tales and amusing fables circulated throughout Europe, concerning India’s peoples, its animals and plants, its sun and rains, its mountains and rivers; and these continued to be retold until the late Middle Ages. But not all was fancy and fable. Accurate descriptions of certain parts of India were given in ancient times by writers who had either accompanied Western adventurers or who had traveled there on their own initiative, for purposes of trade or simply out of curiosity.

EARLY CONTACTS BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

The greatest single impetus in this direction in Antiquity was the invasion of India by the armies of Alexander the Great in 327–326 B.C.E. More than one eyewitness described the battles Alexander fought, the rivers he crossed and the cities he conquered, the allies he won and the kings he defeated. The newcomers were awed by the heat of the Indian plains, the great numbers of war elephants, the enormous size of the population, and the curiosity of their customs and manners. Even then, the wisdom of Indian holy men was proverbial; accordingly, one of the first things Alexander did on entering India was to call upon and converse with some of these “gymnosophists”; this in spite of the fact that they were instrumental in encouraging Indian resistance against the Macedonian invasion. The Greeks seem to have admired the brusque and incisive manner of these men, and so famous did they become that eventu-
ally Alexander asked one of them (whom the Greeks called Kālanos) to succeed his preceptor Aristotle as his constant companion and counselor. This “naked wise man” seems to have been a Jain muni of the Digamba sect: he was to end his life voluntarily on a pyre, having discovered that he was suffering from an incurable disease.4

The early mediaeval Alexander romance contains an exchange of letters between Alexander and an Indian king called Dindimus in which Alexander asks for, and receives, information about the Brahmins. “We Brahmins,” the king writes, “lead a pure and simple life; we commit no sins; we do not want to have more than what is reasonable. We suffer and sustain everything . . .” In short, the Brahmins lead an ideal life, they can teach wisdom and renunciation. In his reply to Dindimus Alexander recognizes that “only the Brahmins are good people.”5 This high opinions of Brahmins is still noticeable in the eighteenth century, when Lessing in his Nathan proclaims that only at the Ganges can one find morally perfect people.

For several centuries a lively commerce developed between the ancient Mediterranean world and India, particularly the ports on the Western coast. The most famous of these ports was Sopāra, not far from modern Bombay, which was recently renamed Mumbāi. Present day Cranganore in Kerala, identified with the ancient Muziris, claims to have had trade contacts with Ancient Egypt under Queen Hatsheput, who sent five ships to obtain spices, as well as with ancient Israel during King Solomon’s reign. Apparently the contact did not break off after Egypt was conquered by Greece and later by Rome. According to I. K. K. Menon, “there is evidence of a temple of Augustus near Muziris and a force of 1200 Roman soldiers stationed in the town for the protection of Roman commerce.”6 Large hoards of Roman coins were found also on the East Coast, near today’s Mahabalipuram; a sign of commerce with Roman traders, who must have rounded the southern tip of India to reach that place. Taprobane, identified with today’s Śri Lanka, plays a major role in ancient accounts of India—an island described to be even more wonderful and exotic than India herself. The kings of Magadha and Malwa exchanged ambassadors with Greece. A Maurya ruler invited one of the Greek Sophists to join his court, and one of the greatest of the Indo-Greek kings became famous as the dialogue partner of the great Buddhist sage Nāgasena,7 while in the opposite direction, Buddhist missionaries are known to have settled in Alexandria, and other cities of the Ancient West.8 These
early contacts were not limited to the exchange of pleasantries; one Greek ambassador went so far as to erect a Garuḍa column in honor of Vasudeva, while Greek epic poetry was translated into Indian languages and heard with appreciation in the court of Broach. The celebrated collection of Indian animal fables, the Pañcatantra, found its way into the West in a variety of translations and adaptations, including a version of the life of Buddha that resulted in the creation of the legend of Saint Josaphat.9

It is evident, then, that Indian thought was present in the fashionable intellectual circuit of ancient Athens, and there is every reason to suppose that Indian religious and philosophical ideas exercised some influence on early and classical Greek philosophy.10

Interest in India increased considerably during the time of the Roman emperors. During the time between the reign of Augustus and that of Caracalla, East-West commerce flourished. A colony of Indian merchants is known to have existed in Alexandria; and under Augustus, Claudius, and Antoninus Pius, Indian embassies visited Rome. At least one celebrated Greek philosopher, the neo-Pythagorean Apollonius of Tyana (first century C.E.), is reputed to have visited India to improve his knowledge of Indian wisdom.

Both Greeks and Romans habitually tried to understand the religions of India by trying to fit them as far as possible into Greco-Roman categories. Deities in particular were spoken of, not in Indian but in Greek terms and called by Greek names. Thus Śiva was identified as “Dionysos,” Kṛṣṇa (or perhaps Indra) as “Heraclès.” The great Indian epics were compared to those of Homer. Doctrinally, the Indian concept of transmigration had its counterpart in the metempsychosis taught by Pythagoras and Plato; nor was Indian asceticism altogether foreign to a people who remembered Diogenes and his followers.11 According to one persistent legend, Jesus spent the time between the twelfth and thirtieth years, a period of his life about which the Gospels are silent, in India, studying with Buddhist bhikkus and Vedāntin ācāryas.12

Towards the end of the second century C.E., Tertullian, a Christian writer, defended his fellow believers from the accusation that they were “useless and should therefore be exterminated” by stating that the Christians were “neither Brahmans, or Indian gymnosophist, forest-dwellers or withdrawn from life,” but that they participated fully in the public and economic activities of Rome.13 Some centuries later, the writer of the treatise De moribus Brachmanorum (originally thought to have been written by Ambrose of Milan, now considered to be the work of Prosper of Aquitania) has
high praise for the Brahmins, who could serve, he says, as exemplars to Christians.\textsuperscript{14}

With the victory of Christianity in the West and the simultaneous decline of the Roman Empire and still more with the Arab conquest of the Near and Middle East, the West lost contact with India; all that remained were faint and often distorted memories of India as a land of fabulous riches, exotic creatures, and a fantastic religion. However, the Arab conquest of India once more intensified exchange between India and the West, a West over which Arab influence was also now becoming more deeply felt.\textsuperscript{15} Alberuni, a Muslim traveler who visited India between 1017 and 1030 C.E., gave an admirably comprehensive account of many aspects of India's culture, including a fairly detailed summary of some important works of religious literature, unknown to the West until then.\textsuperscript{16} It was through the Arabs that Indian learning reached the West, particularly in the fields of medicine, mathematics, and astrology. Indeed, the Indian decimal system and its symbols became known in the West as "Arabic numerals."

The great merchant-adventurer Marco Polo (1254–1324 C.E.) visited and described a number of places in India that he had seen, but his accounts were not usually taken seriously by his contemporaries, who considered him to be something of a storyteller rather than a serious topographer.\textsuperscript{17} It was the search for India which led Cristopher Colomus to the discovery of America in 1493. To this very day we call the original inhabitants of America Indians and find it often awkward to specify whether we mean "American Indians" or "Indian Indians." The West's contact with India intensified after Vasco da Gama's historic voyage around the cape of Good Hope in 1498, which led to an increased interest in India by the European powers. Together with the generals and the merchants came Christian missionaries. Some of them became interested in India's local religions and, though frequently showing a heavy apologetic bias, the works produced by some seventeenth and eighteenth century missionaries provided much useful material about India.\textsuperscript{18} Of particular interest, both to their contemporaries and to us today, is the work of some artists of the eighteenth century who traveled through India and left vivid sketches and paintings of life and country. William Hodges\textsuperscript{19} spent three years in India between 1780 and 1784, most of them in Banaras, which offered vast scope to his pen and brush. He was one of the few white men to ever see a sati performed,\textsuperscript{20} leaving a moving description. Between 1785 and 1788 he published Select Views in India. His slightly younger con-
temporaries Thomas and William Daniell, famous for their paintings of Indian landscapes, traveled in India between 1786 and 1793 and inspired an Indian fashion in architecture in Britain.

BEGINNING SCHOLARLY INTEREST IN INDIA

By the middle of the eighteenth century, European scholars were starting to get interested in India's literature; but they were initially severely handicapped because of the Brahmin's reluctance to teach Sanskrit to mlecchas (foreigners) or to allow them to read their scriptures. The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), whose enthusiastic praises of the Upaniṣads are frequently cited, had to rely on a Latin translation made by Anquetil du Perron from a Persian version made by Prince Dara Shikoh of the original Sanskrit text!

During the first half of the eighteenth century J. E. Hanxleden wrote the first Sanskrit grammar under the title "Grammatica Granthamia seu Samscrdumica." It was never published, but was put to use by J. P. Wessdin (Fra Paolino de St. Bartolomeo), who wrote two Sanskrit grammars and some quite informative works on India toward the end of the eighteenth century. The greatest incentive to the scholarly study of India's history and culture was, however, provided by the British administration, which encouraged research and the publication of materials pertinent to its own purposes. Typically, the first Sanskrit works to be translated into English were the Hindu law codes which the British officials needed to know. The British East India Company commissioned a group of Indian pandits to compile a compendium of current Hindu law from the numerous original sources. The resulting work, named Vīnā-dārṇavaśetu, had first to be translated into Persian before an English translation could be made. It was published in 1776 by the East India Company under the title A Code of Gentoo Law.

The first Englishman to have a good knowledge of Sanskrit was Charles Wilkins, whom Warren Hastings (then governor general of Bengal) had encouraged to study with the Brahmans in Banaras. In 1785 he wrote an English translation of the Bhagavadgītā, followed two years later by a translation of the Hitopadeśa. His Sanskrit grammar, which appeared in 1808, became the basis for all later work.

One of the most important figures in European Indology was Sir William Jones (1746–1794) who had acquired a good command of Persian and Arabic before coming to India in 1783, where he
immediately took up the study of Sanskrit. One year later he founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal, which was soon to become the leading center for the publication of text editions and translations of important Hindu sources. Jones translated the Manusmṛti and published it in 1794 under the title Institutes of Hindu Law, or the Ordinances of Manu. After Jones’s untimely death the work was continued by Thomas Colebrook, who edited and translated numerous Sanskrit works. As professor of Sanskrit at Fort William College Calcutta he wrote in 1798 a four volume series entitled A Digest of Hindu Law on Contracts and Successions, which consisted of translations of legal materials collected by a group of Indian pandits. Less interested in literature and poetry than in more scholarly Hindu works on law, arithmetics, astronomy, grammar, philosophy, and religion, he was the first Western scholar to provide correct and precise information about the Veda in his paper “On the Vedas, or Sacred Writings of the Hindus,” Roberto de Nobili’s Ezour Vedam being exposed as a fraud.

Another Englishman, Alexander Hamilton, who had studied Sanskrit in India and was detained in Paris on his way back to England on account of Anglo-French hostilities, became instructor to the first generation of French and German Sanskritists, for whom university chairs were established in the first half of the nineteenth century. Although thus far those in continental Europe who wished to study Indian culture had had to rely on French and German translations of English versions and monographs, they now could draw upon the resources of their own scholars, who began to produce text editions and original versions. August Wilhelm von Schlegel, the brother of the poet Friedrich Schlegel, became the first professor of Sanskrit at the newly established university of Bonn in 1818. A. L. Chézy, the first French Sanskrit scholar, held the chair at the Collège de France in Paris. Franz Bopp, a fellow student of Schlegel’s at Paris, became the founder of comparative philology and linguistics.

Although the East India Company did not allow Christian missionaries into its territories and maintained a policy of religious noninterference, Western Christians considered India a mission field and tried to employ Indian studies for this purpose. Missionary activities on East India Company territory began in 1813, though William Carey had been at work in Serampore (Srirampur), a Danish settlement near Calcutta, since 1800. A further important step was taken in 1830, with the opening of Scottish missionary Alexander Duff’s school in Calcutta. In the same year the famous
Sanskritist H. H. Wilson became the first holder of the Boden professorship in Oxford, founded “to promote the translation of the Scriptures into Sanskrit, so as to enable his countrymen to proceed in the conversion of the natives of India to the Christian religion.” Both H. H. Wilson (1832–1860) and his successor to the chair, M. Monier-Williams (1860–1888), engaged in lexicographic work to lay the foundations for Bible translations, which were soon made into the main languages of India.\(^{23}\)

Following the historical trend that dominated in European scholarship in the nineteenth century, French and German scholars concentrated on studying the Vedas, the oldest document of Indian religious literature. Some of the students taught by Eugène Burnouf at the Collège de France later attained lasting eminence as Vedic scholars. One of these was Rudolph Roth, who together with Otto Böthlingk edited the seven volume *St. Petersburg Wörterbuch* (1852–1875), which remains unsurpassed.\(^{29}\)

Friedrich Max Müller became the most famous of them all. The son of the poet Wilhelm Müller, he earned fame through his monumental edition of the *Rgveda with Sāyana’s Commentary* (1849–74). Of even greater significance than his Indological work is the fact that due to his wide general education and interests he became the founder of Comparative Religion as a scholarly discipline. Perhaps the crowning achievement of his life’s work was his editorship of the fifty volumes of the *Sacred Books of the East* (1876–1904).\(^{30}\) Müller did not find in his native Germany the support for his studies offered by England, which subsequently became the main center of Indian studies and libraries.

An astonishingly large number of brilliant scholars devoted themselves in the decades that followed to the study of India’s past. Indology became a respected discipline at most major European universities, and scholars produced a steady stream of critical text editions, translations, monographs, and dictionaries.\(^{31}\) They even impressed the traditional Indian pandits by their learning, and soon the first Hindu scholars arrived to study in European departments of Sanskrit to familiarize themselves with the scholarly methods developed in the West. Recognized Indian scholars, especially those proficient in English, were invited on lecture tours through the West and were thus given opportunity to explain authentically the traditions of India to an attentive but often misinformed audience.\(^{32}\)

In the United States the popular philosophers Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) were
the first to show some serious interest in Indian thought, especially in Vedānta. The first to teach courses in Sanskrit was Isaac Nordheimer, who offered a course at the City University of New York as early as 1836. Edward Eldridge Salisbury introduced Sanskrit at Yale in 1841, and the prestigious American Oriental Society was founded in 1842. Though Indologists form only part of its membership, its journal and its monograph series are the major organ for classical Indian studies in the United States. Since the latter half of the nineteenth century several outstanding Sanskritists have taught and worked in the United States: Charles Rockwell Lanman (1850–1941), one of Rudolph Roth’s students, became the founder-editor of the Harvard Oriental Series. His Sanskrit Reader is still in use. J. H. Wood’s (1864–1935) translation of the major commentaries and glosses to Patanjali’s Yogasūtra is still widely referred to. Maurice Bloomfield (1885–1928) emerged as one of the major vedic scholars of his time; his Vedic Concordance, a monumental work, has been recently reprinted. Edward Washburn Hopkins’s (1857–1932) books on the Mahābhārata are still authoritative on many points. Robert Ernest Hume (1877–1948) has deservedly gained fame for his translation of the Thirteen Principal Upaniṣads which has seen many reprints. Franklin Edgerton’s (1885–1963) Bhagavadgītā has been acknowledged as the most scholarly translation to date.33

Today all Western countries have university departments and research institutes in which advanced studies in Indology, including religious and philosophical Hinduism, are being undertaken. An impressive percentage of scholars referred to in this book are native Indians who enjoy the added advantage of working with materials from their own traditions. It almost goes without saying that India is today once more the leading country in Indian studies, both in the traditional way of learning as represented by the pañḍīt-schools and in the modern methods, as initiated by Western scholars and continued and refined by Indian academicians. Indian universities publish numerous scholarly journals in English and in this way contribute to the West’s understanding of Indian traditions.

SCHOLARLY AND EXISTENTIAL INTERESTS

Early Western interest in Indian studies was kindled, on the one hand, by the requirements of the British administration in India and, on the other, by the predominantly historical and philological interests of Western scholars, trained in their own classical Greek
and Latin traditions. More recently the accent has shifted to the contents of Indian philosophical and religious literature. The attitude of classical Western Indology had been that of strictly objective scholarly research; the professionals often frowned upon people who tried to identify themselves with certain positions of the Indian tradition on which they worked. The great works of this period, like Christian Larsen's monumental *Indische Altertumskunde* or Friedrich Bühler's *Grundriss der indoarischen Philologie und Altertumskunde* dealt with India as the established classical scholars had dealt with ancient Greece and Rome. For all their enthusiasm in their professional studies (which centered on India's classical past) these scholars did not give up their typically Western way of thinking. By their own choice they remained outsiders, fulfilling their calling as scholars according to the Western ideal, sometimes even refusing, as Max Müller did, to pay a visit to India.

The social and spiritual convulsions of our time, beginning with the First World War, together with the renewed self-consciousness of the generation that had experienced the Indian Renaissance, have made many of our contemporaries more ready to listen to what India has (and always had) to say. There was a remarkable growth of interest in Buddhism in the early 1920s. On a more scholarly level, a great stimulus for Indian studies was provided by the first East-West Philosophers' Conference organized by Charles A. Moore (1901–1967) in Honolulu in 1939. Subsequent meetings have been attended also by a considerable number of eminent scholars from India.34

It is not easy to analyze the reasons for this new development. The contemporary West no longer has a unifying world-view, a commonly accepted religion or philosophy of life as basis for the solution of its social or psychological problems and as sustenance in times of crisis. The experiences of the last fifty years have undermined the naive optimism that had grown from a faith in unlimited technological progress. Having witnessed a complete breakdown of much that was taken for granted in former times, we are now faced with a deep-rooted insecurity and probably the irreparable loss of the authority of those institutions that for centuries had provided Westerners with a firm frame for their life and thought. An increasing number of people are opening to the suggestion that they might replace some traditional Western values and attitudes, which have proven short lived and self-destructive, with Eastern modes of thought, which have nourished cultures that have endured for thousands of years.35 Slowly, however, the realization is also dawn-
ing that a mere replacement of one set of ideas and values by another would help us as little as did the timid or arrogant aloofness of former times.

Patterns of partnership are beginning to dominate in international relations, a partnership that includes dialogue on all levels, allowing differences—even of a basic nature—to coexist without interrupting communication. Much of what we find in Hinduism has no counterpart in the West. Hindu thinkers have anticipated ideas and developed theories in many areas that have only recently begun to be explored in the West. In the analysis of language, in the technicalities of hermeneutics, in the methods of psychosomatic activation, and last but not least in philosophical and religious speculation and spiritual training, Hindu India is centuries ahead of the West. Western thinkers, through their study of Indian philosophies and religions have “discovered a new technical philosophy of undreamed-of complexity and ingenuity” and this contact has “expanded the imagination, increased the number of categories, made possible new studies in the history of logic, revealed new sensations and has driven the mind back to its origin and out to its possibilities.”

INTERPRETING HINDUISM IN WESTERN TERMS

Early Western Indologists used to deal with everything that concerned India. Meanwhile the field has grown to such an extent that specialization has become necessary both for the sake of the integrity of research and for the sake of students interested in Indian studies. Even within the specialized field of Hinduism one has to narrow down one’s enquiry to either a particular school of thought, a period, or even a single person. Nevertheless, to assign the correct place of one’s particular research within the larger framework of Hindu culture, one must reach out and familiarize oneself with other aspects and the history of the total phenomenon.

There is a certain temptation for Westerners who study Hinduism to follow through vaguely familiar thoughts and complete them according to their own thought models. We have to resist this temptation because all further interpretation is based upon principles that have been borrowed from elsewhere. We have to take seriously the historicity of each tradition, not only in the vaguely idealistic (and ultimately unhistorical) Hegelian sense, but in its own exact and precise historical factuality. Hinduism is what it is today because it has developed that way through its own history. It is not
necessarily what we would like or wish it to be. History always offers several alternatives for the development of a certain idea; this development depends on circumstances and unforesseeable factors that translate one of these possibilities into historical fact. Western approaches to reality, the compartmentalization of knowledge into such categories as science and arts, philosophy and theology, sociology and psychology do not coincide with Indian approaches and their specific avenues of enquiry. Despite more than 150 years of diligent work by a handful of devoted scholars on many essential points we have not yet reached a verbal understanding. Western languages have no adequate translations for many of the key terms in philosophical and religious Sanskrit texts. Ananda Coomaraswamy, who must have suffered quite acutely under this situation, stated: “Asiatic thought has hardly been, can hardly be presented in European phraseology without distortion and what is called the appreciation of Asiatic art is mainly based on categorical misinterpretations.” Misunderstandings are thus bound to happen even with the best of intentions (and even good intention cannot always be taken for granted). To try to avoid some misunderstandings, the following representation of Hinduism uses original terms wherever practicable.

At some later state we may be able to discover for ourselves that Hinduism and Western religions do not differ so much in the answers they give to similar problems, but in the problems they consider relevant. Problems that never occur to the Westerner may be of the utmost significance for the Hindu. Hinduism is not just a variant of Western religion; the very structure of Hinduism is different. Scholars like Betty Heimann, Heinrich Zimmer, Maryla Fahl, Rene Guénon, Stella Kramrisch, and Wendy O’Flaherty—Westerners well-grounded in their own traditions—have made structural studies of Hinduism that presuppose not only specialized Indological expertise but also a comprehensive general knowledge and a great deal of empathy. We must not expect everything we find in Hinduism to fit into the frame of our present knowledge. Modern science cannot be adequately explained in the terminology of medieval philosophy of nature; equally, Indian philosophical and religious thought cannot be satisfactorily reproduced using our current Western idiom. Translations of authoritative Hindu literature are always interpretations, for better or for worse, according to the insight of the translator. This is true for the translations of many a European philologist with an insufficient philosophical background (not to mention those “translators” who,
 ignorant of the original languages, simply restyle an existing translation in the fashion and idiom of the day). This applies still more to some Indian translators who are unfamiliar with the real meaning of the Western terminology they frequently use. And occasionally a translation can be more tendentious than an original work, if it is meant to support the particular viewpoint of a particular proselytizer. In those points that are really crucial, the meaning of a text cannot be found without a thorough study of the sources in the original languages within their original context. The literary sources of Indian philosophy and religion, moreover, are quite frequently written in such a concise and condensed style that a student cannot even understand them grammatically without oral instruction and commentary. Furthermore, the same terms are used in different senses by different systems. There are also frequent indirect quotations from and references to writings with which the Indian expert is familiar but that a Western reader without a competent guide would overlook. It is from learned Hindus that a Western student of Hinduism has to learn how to read and to understand Hindu sources: the premises they work with, the axioms they take for granted, the problems they consider relevant.

Although India and the West quite obviously and visibly differ from each other, as every casual visitor of India will notice, one ought to beware of the dichotomization of East and West along the lines of spiritual vs. materialistic, or collective vs. individualistic, or archaic vs. modern. Whether it has to do with more recent developments or with a better knowledge of both East and West than previously available, it appears that all these characteristics are fairly evenly distributed throughout East and West, and one will, in all likelihood, have to choose others, if one wishes to insist that the “East is East and West is West” and so forth. Indians have made some major contributions to contemporary modern science and technology, and Westerners have been recognized by their Indian colleagues as specialists in Sanskrit learning and commended for their genuine understanding of Hindu culture. It is, in all likelihood, less a question of fundamental differences but of mutual recognition and learning from each other in the interest of developing a truly cosmopolitan civilization.

ENCOUNTERING HINDUS AND HINDUISM

A book can never replace the experience of the living encounter, but it can prepare the ground for it. Thorough familiarization with the
background of the dialogue partner is the first requirement for a meaningful encounter. It goes without saying that no claim can be made to an exhaustive treatment or to an interpretation that would not show shortcomings due to personal limitations. There are, even now, subtle and highly competent Hindu philosophers whose teaching is virtually inaccessible to those who have not undertaken the necessary training. And there are millions of Hindus who practice diverse archaic cults and ceremonies, rationalizing in their own peculiar ways the effectiveness and meaning of what they are doing. If we are to understand Hinduism as it is and not to construct to our own purposes an artificial Hindu religion that we are able to manipulate, we have to be open to the whole panorama of phenomena that together constitute the living tradition of Hindu India.

More and more Hindu gurus and swāmīs in ochre robes are coming to Europe and America to lecture, to collect funds, to establish centers, and to launch religious movements adapted to the Western mind. The quite phenomenal expansion of Mahesh Yogi Maharishi’s Transcendental Meditation Society, the success of Swami Bhaktivedanta’s International Society for Krishna Consciousness, and the mass pilgrimages of planeloads of Americans to Balyogeshwar Guruji’s camp are not merely the result of smart organization and cleverly manipulated publicity; they also reflect an obvious need on the part of many people in the West, especially among the young. By now a number of Westerners have been initiated into Hindu orders and are recognized, also by Indians, as legitimate teachers of Hinduism. In the new Hindu movements they hope to find what they have missed in their synagogues and churches: practical guidance in self-discovery, an integrated worldview, systematic training of psychic powers, emotional satisfaction, and perhaps, true mystical experience. It would be very sad if Hindu propaganda in the West were to lead only to the establishment of a few Hindu sects and if the great opportunity for the growth of new and genuinely modern forms of spirituality by entering into dialogue with the still living Western religious tradition were missed. Such an encounter would certainly prove beneficial to both partners; it may even be necessary for them if they are to survive as interpreters of the meaning of life in a time of confused and disintegrating local traditions.
2 The History and Development of Hinduism

Thus I saw the moving drama of the Indian people in the present, and could often trace the threads which bound their lives to the past, even while their eyes were turned to the future. Everywhere I found a cultural background which had exerted a powerful influence on their lives.

—Jawaharlal Nehru

Every living tradition—and the Hindu tradition perhaps more than others—is profoundly shaped by its own history. Through that history even those features that the tradition itself considers to be non-historical are strongly affected. Attempts to describe the “essence” of Hinduism in terms of absolute doctrinal formulations must fail simply because they neglect the historical dimension and the development that has led to those beliefs. As J. C. Heesterman has said,

Tradition is characterised by the inner conflict of atemporal order and temporal shift rather than by resilience [sic] and adaptiveness. It is this unresolved conflict that provides the motive force we perceive as the flexibility of tradition. Indian civilization offers a particularly clear case of this dynamic inner conflict. The conflict is not just handled surreptitiously by way of situational compromise. Once we look beyond the hard surface of the projected absolute order, it appears subtly, but no less effectively, to be expressed by the same scriptures that so impressively expound the dharma’s absoluteness.

ORIGINS OF HINDUISM

It is impossible to give a precise definition of Hinduism or to point out the exact place and time of its origin. The very name Hinduism

30

Copyrighted Material
owes its origin to chance; foreigners in the West extending the name of the province of Sindh to the whole country lying across the Indus River and simply calling all its inhabitants Hindus and their religion Hinduism. Hindus, however, appropriated the designation and use it themselves today to identify themselves over against, for example, Muslims and Christians. In spite of the impossibility of defining it, the term can be meaningfully employed. Contemporary Hinduism preserves many elements from various sources, differently emphasized in various parts of the country and by individual groups of people. Roughly speaking we may identify four main streams of tradition that have coalesced to form Hinduism:

1. The traditions of the original inhabitants of India, whose stone-age culture has been traced back about half a million years and some of whose practices and beliefs may still be alive among the numerous tribes of adivasis;

2. Influences from the so-called Indus civilization, which was rediscovered only half a century ago and which extended over an area of more than 800,000 km in Northwestern and Northern India;

3. The very old and highly developed Dravidian culture, represented by the Tamils today and possibly preserving certain features of the Indus civilization;

4. Vedic religion, codified in India by Aryan settlers, and spread throughout the greater part of India by conquests and missionary movements.

Later invasions, and contacts with the Muslims and the modern world, have again contributed to the development of certain ideas within Hinduism. Despite the frequency with which Indian patterns of life have been disrupted, we nevertheless find that India is “a country of enduring survivals,” an open-air museum of the history of religion and culture. A continuing Indian tradition underlies the attempts to define the Hindu identity in terms of religion.

The most common description which Hindus give to their religion is sanātana dharma, “eternal religion,” a term that has several overtones. It presupposes that the Vedic Sanskritic tradition is the religion; it also gave rise to exclusivist tendencies with Hinduism. Śaṅkara reestablished in the ninth century sanātana dharma
against the heresies of Buddhism and Jainism in India and sent out his missionaries to spread the pure doctrine all over India. The claim to be defenders of sanātana dharma was also made by schools of thought hostile to Śaṅkara. In modern times movements like the Ārya Samaj, which considered popular purānic Hinduism to be a corrupt form of the true religion, tried to reestablish a purely Vedic sanātana dharma. In contemporary Hinduism we find attempts to widen the circle of sanātana dharma, or Hinduism, so as to embrace also the Jainas, Buddhists, Sikhs, and all the sects of Hinduism.

Most Hindus prefer even now to define their religion in a more restricted fashion, and they call themselves Śaivas, Vaiṣṇavas, Śaktas, or whatever group they belong to. There are others who feel the need to define the unity underlying the nationhood of India in terms that would allow Hindus to transcend sectarian boundaries within India and at the same time distinguish them from the followers of other traditions. A collection of statements on the topic Essentials of Hinduism by some thirty prominent Hindus, which appeared about fifty years ago, shows as many different standpoints without allowing one to single out any specific characteristics of Hinduism.10 V. D. Savarkar, for many years the chief ideologist of the Hindu Mahāsabha, distinguished Hindudharma, Hinduism that defies definition, from Hindutva, Hindudom, a more inclusive term. Hence he wrote:

A Hindu is one who feels attachment to the land that extends from Sindhu to Sindhu (sea) as the land of his forefathers—as his Fatherland; who inherits the blood of the great race whose first and discernible source could be traced by the Himalayan altitudes of the Vedic Saptaśindhus and which assimilating all that was incorporated and ennobling all that was assimilated, has grown into and come to be known as the Hindu people; and who, as a consequence of the foregoing attributes, has inherited and claims as his own the Hindu sanaskṛti, the Hindu civilization, as represented in a common history, common heroes, a common literature, a common art, a common law and a common jurisprudence, common fairs and festivals, rites and rituals, ceremonies and sacraments.11

Hindutva has in recent years become a political issue of the first magnitude—few of those who propose or oppose it may know about its origin. Even less modest is the description of the “indefinable Hindu” given by the former RSS (Rāṣṭriya Swayamsevak Sangh = National Volunteer Association) leader M. S. Golwalkar.
We the Hindus, have based our whole existence on God. . . . In a way, we are anūdi, without a beginning. To define such a people is impossible, just as we cannot express or define Reality because words came into existence after Reality. Similar is the case with the Hindu people. We existed when there was no necessity for any name. We were the good, the enlightened people. We were the people who knew the laws of nature and the laws of the Spirit. We built a great civilization, a great culture and a unique social order. We had brought into actual life almost everything that was beneficial to mankind. Then the rest of humanity was just bipeds and so no distinctive name was given to us. Sometimes in trying to distinguish our people from others we were called the 'enlightened', the Āryas, and the rest, the Mlecchas. When different faiths arose in foreign lands in the course of time and those alien faiths came into contact with us, then the necessity for naming was felt.12

The RSS has risen to prominence in the last decade and its present leaders command a large following both among RSS members and outside.

More specific is the definition given to Hinduism by the Viśva Hindū Parishad, the World Council of Hindus, which was founded in 1964 and held "a historic assembly" during the Kumbha Melā at Prayāga (Allahabad) in January 1966. There the attempt was made to formulate something like a basic creed to which all Hindus could subscribe, devise some common rites, and develop a canon of holy books to give visible unity to Hinduism.13

THE ANTECEDENTS OF HINDUISM

Definitions of Hinduism, even in a very vague form, have usually taken their inspiration from Vedic religion. Recently, however, the great importance of the other streams of Indian tradition have gained more attention. Therefore D. D. Kosambi remarks:

It is still not possible to establish a general sequence of development from the Stone Age down in the most densely settled areas, namely the Punjab, the Gangetic basin, the coastal strip of the peninsula. There were notable intrusions in each of these regions. Yet India shows extraordinary continuity of culture. The violent breaks known to have occurred in the political and theological superstructure have not prevented long survivals of observances that have no sanction in the official Brahmin works, hence can only have originated in the most primitive stages of human society; moreover the Hindu scriptures and even more the observances sanctified in practice by Brahmanism show
adoption of non-brahmanic local rites. That is, the process of assimilation was mutual, a peculiar characteristic of India.\footnote{14}

Nobody has as yet interpreted the religious significance of the prehistoric cave paintings (Figure 2.1) at Bhimbetka (ca. 30,000 B.C.E.) that were discovered only in 1967, and we do not know whether and how the people who created these are related to present-day populations of India.\footnote{15} The religions of most of the Indian adivasis of today show strong Hindu influences; but some more or less universal Hindu beliefs like rebirth and transmigration of the jiva from animal to human existence probably originated among the autochthonous populations.

For over a century most Indologists assumed that the Aryans, the people connected with Vedic religion, invaded India around 1500 B.C., coming from the general direction of today’s Iran-Afghanistan. The closeness of the language of the Avesta and the Rgveda, the similarity of the ritual, especially of the fire sacrifice and the pattern of social organization suggested a common origin of Vedic Indians and Avestan Iranians. Archeological as well as linguistic evidence was marshalled to support the argument that the ancestors of these two people, the Proto-Aryans, invaded Iran and India from a Central Asian or Southern Russian home.\footnote{16} When, in the first half of our century the remnants of Mohenjodaro and Harappa were excavated, the ruined cities of the Indus valley were adduced as a further argument for the thesis, that it was the vigorous seminomadic Aryans who destroyed the decadent city-civilization of the Harappans. Numerous references in the Rgveda to the destruction of fortresses and the release of waters by Indra were interpreted as reminiscences of the struggles of the Aryans against the Dasyus, dark-skinned original inhabitants of India, linked with the Indus civilization. Early dating of the Indus civilization—a peak between 2500 and 1700 and a rather rapid decline and complete disappearance by 1500 B.C.E.—seemed to neatly fit the Vedic chronology established by Max Müller. Meanwhile, both the spatial and the temporal extent of the Indus civilization has expanded dramatically on the basis of new excavations and the dating of the Vedic age as well as the theory of an Aryan invasion of India has been shaken. We are required to completely reconsider not only certain aspects of Vedic India, but the entire relationship between Indus civilization and Vedic culture.

To begin with, the continuingly expanding finds relating to the Indus civilization (see Figure 2.2) not only suggest a geographical