

## The Forms of Vishnu

Above all else, early Hinduism is famed for its two great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, extraordinary narratives that celebrate the two most famous incarnations (*avatars*) of the god Vishnu. From c. 500BC, a number of popular epics – whose tales of honour, love and war recounted the exploits of a new race of gods – superseded the *Vedas*, as a dynamic Hinduism began to evolve, characterized by exuberant devotionism and a doctrine of disinterested action.

From these epics, particularly the *Puranas*, emerged the *trimurti*, the Hindu trinity: Brahma, the Creator; Vishnu, the Preserver; and Shiva, both Creator and Destroyer. The popularity of Vishnu and Shiva greatly exceeds that of Brahma, and it is in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* that the cult of Vishnu is most fully celebrated. The *Ramayana*, enacted in India to this day, tells the story of Rama, the seventh *avatar* of Vishnu, a hero whose honour and sense of duty surpass even his love for Sita, the tragic heroine. The *Mahabharata*, the story of a war between two dynasties, is probably the longest poem ever composed. Among the passages it contains is the *Bhagavad Gita*. At the heart of the action is the eighth *avatar* of Vishnu, Krishna, a mischievous lover and shrewd tactician, the best loved of all the Hindu gods.

*Krishna, the eighth avatar of Vishnu, is the most enduring symbol of the devotionism that marked the classical period of Indian history. This 19th-century miniature from a Bhagavata Purana series depicts him as a pastoral god, protecting his herd from the evil intentions of Aghasura, a demon.*



## The trimurti

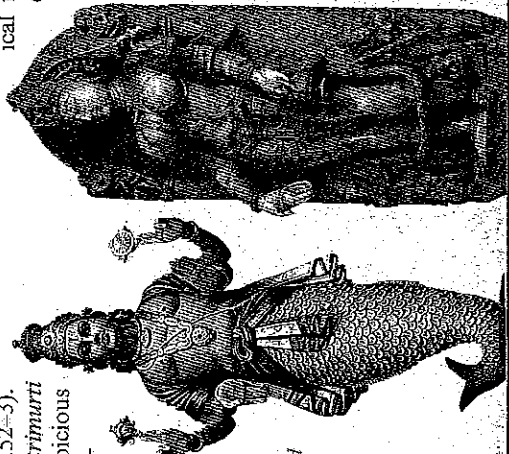
The bewildering array of deities and demons - traditionally 330 million - in the modern Hindu pantheon has its roots both in the Vedic gods and in the intellectual speculation of the *Upanishads* and "forest philosophies". But from the 4th to the 12th centuries AD, the growth of a more popular religion, based around the *Puranas*, placed at its heart the *trimurti* of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.

Brahma is the personified creator of the universe. He is the most abstract of the three deities, and is often considered a fusion of Prajapati, the creator god of the *Vedas*, and the utterly impersonal concept of *brahman* (godhead). Brahma is also he who "brings diversity into unity", a mediator between Vishnu and Shiva, who represent opposites.

Vishnu (the Preserver) is the protector of *dharma* (righteousness) and the guardian of humanity. He is a solar deity who fights on the side of good and comes down to earth to help humankind. His most famous incarnations, or *avatars*, are Krishna and Rama, the heroes of the epics the *Mahabharata* (see pp.56-7) and the *Ramayana* (see pp.52-3).

The last of the *trimurti* is Shiva (the Auspicious One), simultaneously destroyer

*Vishnu appears in many forms, the most popular being the ten avatars. The first avatar is the fish, or Matsya, represented in this modern plaster statue from Tamil Nadu.*



and creator. Shiva is the Lord of Yoga, worshipped as the *linga* (see pp.66-7), whose dance, to the beat of his own drum, is said to be the rhythm of the universe. He is the most ambivalent of the three gods of the *trimurti* because of his destructive aspect.

Just as the *atman* (soul) was thought to mirror *brahman*, so the fast-evolving Hindu pantheon was seen to embody the many forms that *brahman* must assume to make itself knowable in the material world. The Hindu gods thus represent the visible and manifest aspects of godhead. Unlike *brahman*, they act within this world, answering prayers, fighting evil or destroying illusion (*maya*). Each Hindu god is simply an aspect of *brahman*, and a devotee may choose any one of them as the main object of his or her veneration.

A devotee's *ishita* (personal deity) is worshipped as a representative of the total godhead, and although every god and goddess bears particular attributes and powers, they are not completely distinct but share many of the same characteristics. To a Hindu, there is nothing heretical or paradoxical in proclaiming any one of a number of deities as the Lord of the Universe.

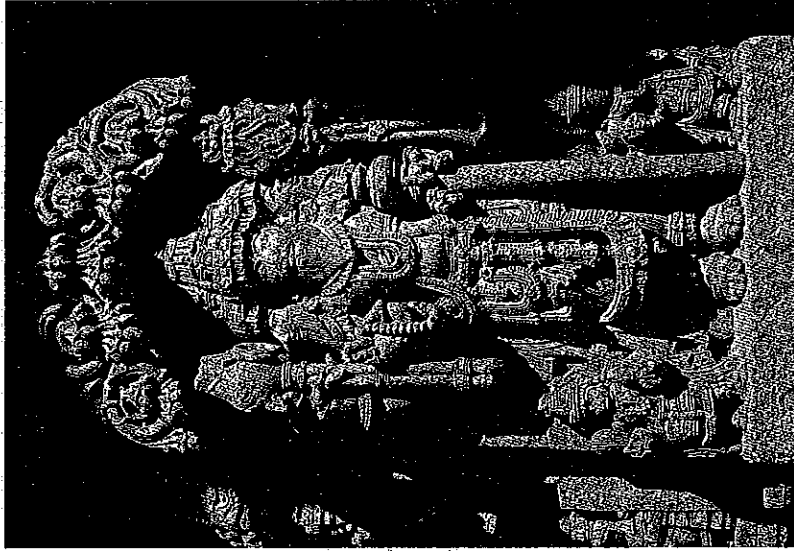
*The three gods of the trimurti are always accompanied by goddesses. Sarasvati, shown in this 12th-century sculpture from Rajasthan, is the consort of Brahma.*



## BRAHMA

Brahma, the creator, is a significant Hindu god, despite the fact that he has few devotees or temples dedicated to his worship. Even in medieval India it seems likely that his popularity was limited. He is said to have created the universe and then withdrawn, leaving its maintenance to Vishnu, the Preserver. This perhaps explains his lack of appeal. Brahma is often depicted with four faces turned towards the four points of the compass, his four hands holding the four books of the *Vedas*. His heads are usually crowned and his faces bearded, giving him the appearance of a wise, compassionate old man. He is sometimes depicted on a lotus that emerges from Vishnu's navel, a reference to his being "born of a lotus".

*Brahma is depicted in this 12th-century temple at Halebid in Karnataka, with three of his four heads visible.*



## THE PURANAS

The *Puranas*, or Antiquities, rank with the *Vedas* as sacred Hindu texts. They were compiled between the 4th and 12th centuries AD, but their origins are far older.

Attributed to the sage Vyasa, the supposed author of the *Mahabharata* (see pp.56-7), the *Puranas* contain a massive bulk of mythological material from which much of the dazzling pantheons and epics of later Hinduism were drawn. They list entire dynasties, descended both from

Manu, mythical ancestor of the human race, and from the deities and heroes of the *Mahabharata*, while their prophecies predict future royal dynasties.

The *Puranas* are written in simple language and are seldom highly mystical or hard to understand or interpret. They list sacred sites and pilgrimages, specify caste relations and give instructions for the portrayal of divine images.

Much of their importance lies in the fact that the language in which they are

written is accessible to women and to those of low caste who were prevented from reading the more esoteric *Veda* texts, which were reserved for men of the *brahmin* caste.

The eighteen principal *Puranas* are dedicated to the *trimurti*. They provide not only the mythological background from which many of the tales of the gods were fashioned, but also the origins of more abstract theological concepts such as *dharma*, *karma* and the nature of *atman*.

## Avatars of Vishnu

In the books of the *Vedas*, Vishnu appears only rarely, as the junior partner of the great god Indra. His most famous exploit, recounted in the Vedic hymns, was his "measuring" of the universe with three giant strides to claim it for humanity from the demon kings. The myth tells of his might and omnipotence which were developed by later authors into a power greater than Indra's, such that the Vedic king of the gods was eventually forced to ask Vishnu for help.

In the *Puranas*, Vishnu is depicted as Lord of the Universe and Protector of Humanity. His attributes are the disk (*chakra*), the conch shell (*shankha*), the club (*gada*), and the lotus (*padma*). His consort is Lakshmi, the beautiful goddess of wealth, honour, faith and love, who sits on a lotus flower.

Vishnu is best known, however, through his *avatars*, the incarnations that he assumes to assist humanity in its struggle against darkness. Early on, he was credited with as many as twenty-eight *avatars*, as the deities of the Vedic pantheon were incorporated into the later epics, but by the 8th century AD he was widely recognized as having ten. The first three *avatars* (Matsya, a fish, Kurma, a tortoise, and Varaha, a boar) are mythological creatures, drawn from cosmogonic accounts in the *Vedas*,

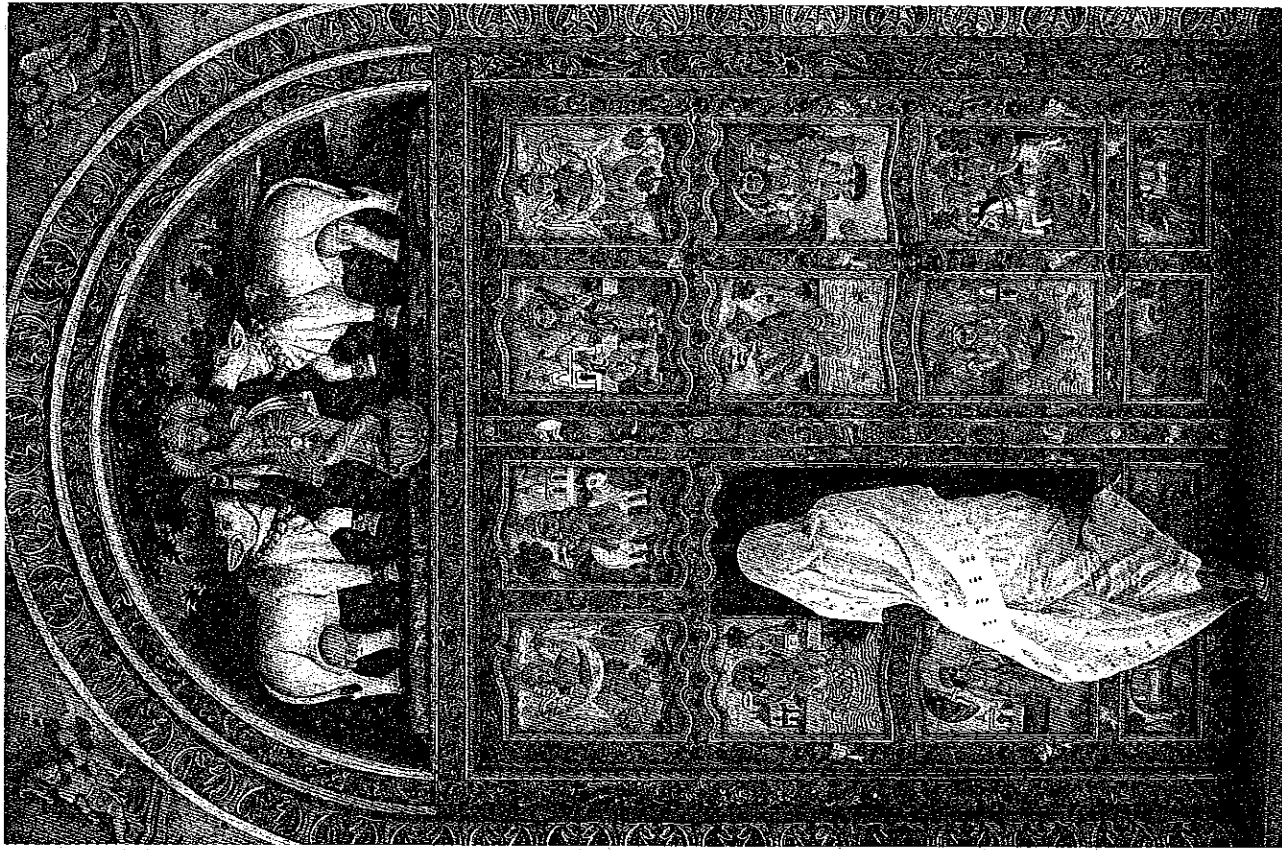
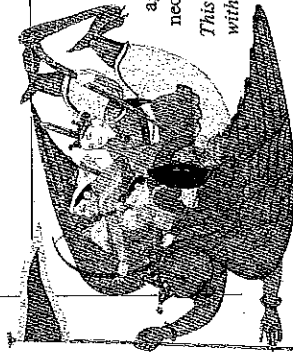
none of whom were linked with Vishnu in the original texts. The fourth *avatar*, Narasimha, is a man-lion who rescues the world from a terrible demon, while the fifth, Vamana, is a dwarf who claims the universe for humanity by covering it with three strides. This tale has clear links with the Vedic exploits that were attributed to Vishnu.

The sixth *avatar* is Parashurama, "Rama with the axe", who killed many arrogant barons and warriors. His inclusion in the pantheon may reflect strife between the *brahmins* and the *kshatriyas*, as each class vied for power and influence. Rama and Krishna, the seventh and eighth *avatars* of Vishnu, are the resplendent heroes of the *Ramayana* (see pp.52-3) and the *Mahabharata* (see pp.56-7), and it is above all from them that Vishnu derives his reputation as lord and benign protector of humanity. The ninth *avatar* is the Buddha, despite the hostility of many Buddhist teachings to Hindu beliefs. The Buddha's inclusion is a remarkable testament to Hinduism's ability to evolve by absorbing and redefining any culture or doctrine that rose to challenge it. Finally there is Kalki, the future *avatar*, who will appear at the end of this world age to punish the wicked, reward the pious and return the universe to *brahman*.

### GARUDA

Vishnu's mount is the eagle Garuda. Like Nandi, Shiva's bull, Garuda is invoked as a god himself, eager to help humanity against demons. Garuda's great gift to humankind was *soma*, the nectar of immortality that he stole from the gods.

This 18th-century illustration shows Garuda flying to the aid of humans with armed *avatars* of Vishnu on his back.



The panelled doors to the Swaminarayana temple at Btuj in Gujarat are painted with Vishnu's ten *avatars*; above them is Krishna, with a lotus below his feet, flanked by cows, a monkey and an angel.

## The Ramayana

The *Ramayana*, one of the great Sanskrit epic poems, helped to develop a more popular, devotional religion. A product of the less exclusive world of the *kshatriya* ethic, it is not so heavily dominated by the *brahmin*-controlled sacrificial and ritual elements of Hinduism. It remains a popular source of religious teaching, through public readings and dramatizations.

The core of the epic poem was first composed in the 4th century BC as a secular tale recited by bards who were attendant on the royal courts. However, as the centuries passed, the religious elements of the story were expanded upon, and Rama, its hero, became transformed

from a warrior king into a warrior deity. By the 4th century AD, Rama was widely identified as the seventh incarnation of the Hindu god, Vishnu.

The *Ramayana's* links with Vedic religion are, however, still strong. *Brahmin* priests are widely honoured in its verses, and the horse sacrifice (see p.17) plays a crucial part in the narrative. Like the *Vedas* (see pp.16-17) and the *Mahabharata* (see pp.56-7), the *Ramayana* is believed to have been divinely revealed: the story is supposed to have come to its composer, Valmiki, while he was meditating upon



Crowds gather in Rannagar near Varanasi, during the ten-day performance of the Ramalila.

### THE RAMALILA

The festival of Dasahra celebrates Rama's victory over Ravana and his demon army. During nine days of fasting, the epic tale of Rama and

Sita is narrated throughout India, and in the *Ramalila* it is acted out with music, dance and elaborate costumes. Celebrations climax with Sita's rescue, and huge effigies of Ravana, his brother Kumbhakarna and son Maghanada, are paraded through the streets — stuffed with fireworks, they explode in colour when set alight by an effigy of Rama.

A painted paper effigy, from Delhi, of the demon king Ravana, Rama's great enemy.

by a *valmika* (anthill) — hence his name, meaning "son of the anthill".

Despite the secular nature of the poem in its original form, the narrative scheme of the *Ramayana* clearly shows the influence of essentially Vedic elements. In its early pages, for example, Rama is frequently linked with the glorious Vedic sun god Indra and with the battle against evil. Like Indra, Rama is an ideal warrior, and — unlike the confused Arjuna of the *Mahabharata* — he never hesitates to raise his bow, and clearly draws the battle lines between good and evil.

### RAMA AND SITA

Rama's actions in the *Ramayana* epic are governed by *dharma*, the irrefutable law that is the foundation of both the cosmic and the social orders. Although the *Ramayana* is a tale of martial glory, it is also a corpus of moral and ethical precepts, providing a guide to statesmanship, human conduct and relationships.

Rama is an idealized figure, a perfect king, warrior and husband. The epic traces his life, beginning with his birth as the eldest son of the good king Dasharatha. He wins Sita — the epitome of purity —

for his wife. But on the eve of their accession, they are denied the throne, and sent into exile for fourteen years by Rama's father. Typically, Rama acts with honour: in accordance with the rule of *dharma*, he obeys his father, who then dies of sorrow.

Rama does not return until he has served the full term of his exile. He roams the wilderness with Sita, fulfilling his caste duty by protecting *brahmin* hermits from local demons. The greatest demon, Ravana, kidnaps Sita and takes her to Lanka (Sri Lanka). Rama's devotion leads him to spend many years in search of her.

The narrative climaxes with Sita's eventual rescue, as Rama and his monkey ally Hanuman (see pp.54-5) obliterate the capital of the demon kingdom. The lovers are finally reunited but still

Rama puts *dharma* above his own interests, and in a tragic denouement he banishes Sita. Although he knows her to be pure, the *dharma* of a king decrees that her time spent in the company of another man brings him dishonour. Still loyal to her husband, Sita prays to the earth to swallow her up, and Rama is left to mourn her loss until he too offers himself to the god of death.



Scenes from the Ramayana are a favourite topic in Indian miniature painting. Rama and Sita seated in exile, with Hanuman kneeling at their feet (above); an energetic depiction of the siege of Lanka (left), from an early 17th-century Mughal painting on paper, now in the National Museum of New Delhi.

## Hanuman

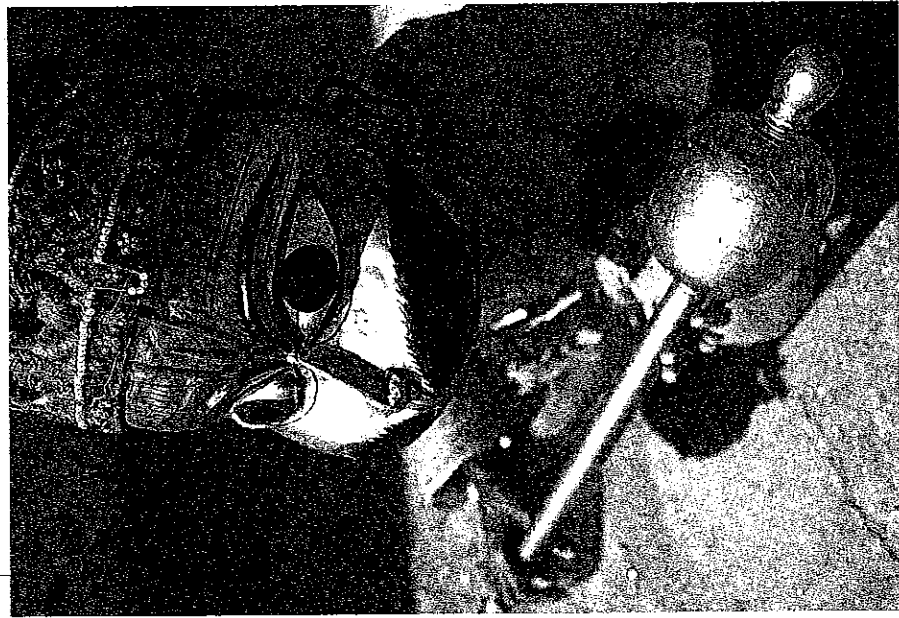
Hanuman, the *Ramayana's* monkey hero, is Rama's most loyal devotee. He is the embodiment of *bhakti* (devotion), who gladly offers his own life in the service of his god. He is the son of Vayu, Vedic god of the wind, from whom he inherited the strength of hurricanes and the power to fly. The swiftest of the epic warrior-heroes, Hanuman also possesses the ability to metamorphose into whatever form he chooses.

The *Ramayana* relates that after his divine birth, Hanuman grew stronger and wiser with every passing year, destroying local demons, slaying rogue elephants, and even flying up to grasp the rising sun, which he mistook for an apple. One day while Hanuman and his master, the exiled monkey king, Sugriva, were hiding in a forest, they met Rama and his brother Lakshmana. Rama related the story of the kidnapping of his wife, Sita, by the demon Ravana, and his search for the place where the demon king had taken her. Deeply moved, Hanuman realized that his destiny was to serve at Rama's side, and he rallied an army for that purpose.

When the monkey army failed to find Ravana and his hostage, it was Hanuman who discovered the demon's hideout in Lanka. He assumed the form of an ordinary monkey to escape legions of powerful demons, so that he could enter Ravana's magnificent palace.

Hanuman found Sita sitting dejectedly in a garden, surrounded by demonesses. He emerged from his hiding place to

*A masked player enacts the exploits of Hanuman in a performance of stories from the Ramayana.*



comfort her. Seeing a talking monkey, she swooned, but was reassured by the ring that Hanuman had brought from Rama. He told his story and swore that Rama was destitute without her. The monkey offered Sita the chance to escape by flying on his back, but Sita refused out of respect for her husband, whose honour would be tainted if she were rescued by anyone but him.

To prepare the way for the battle that lay ahead, Hanuman taunted the demon king, smashing the city walls and annihilating thousands of demon guards. In revenge, the king set fire to Hanuman's tail. Growing to an enormous size, the monkey ran through the city with his burning tail, setting buildings ablaze, before returning to Rama with the message from his wife, Sita. Hanuman and the monkey armies destroyed Lanka and its demon king, and Sita was reunited with her lord.

When the guru Ramananda brought devotionalism (*bhakti*) from southern India to the north in the 14th century

*This 18th-century engraving depicts the battle between Rama and the multi-headed demon Ravana, and shows Hanuman poised for action.*



AD, Hanuman became one of its principal deities. Ramananda's followers worship Rama as the supreme deity, and honour Hanuman as Rama's greatest devotee. Due to his shape-shifting skills, Hanuman is also revered by the *bhakti* movement as a powerful magician and *siddha* (possessor of occult powers).

### HANUMAN'S HEART

In the concluding chapter of the *Ramayana*, Hanuman's devotion to Rama is further elaborated. The monkey armies finally finished their celebrations after the triumphal victory over Lanka and prepared to return home from Rama's palace. Only Hanuman was left, but he declared that he must stay to serve Rama and his queen, Sita. Sugriva, the monkey king, asked for proof of

Hanuman's devotion, at which the most loyal of all devotees tore open his own chest to reveal images of Rama and Sita within.

*A modern plaster statue of Hanuman shows him tearing open his chest to reveal Rama and Sita inside it.*



## The Mahabharata



The *Mahabharata* ("Great Epic of the Bharata Dynasty") was originally entitled *Jaya* ("Victory"). With over 100,000 stanzas it is perhaps the longest poem ever composed. It stands, with the *Ramayana* (see pp.52-5), as one of the two great Sanskrit epics. It was probably begun in the 4th or 3rd centuries BC, but many amendments were made and it was not completed until the end of the Gupta dynasty in the 4th century AD. Much of the material is far older, however, dating back to the Vedic period; some of the stories would have been familiar to audiences as early as 1000BC. Indra, the Vedic sun god, is mentioned several times in earlier parts of the text, for example, although by the 4th century BC he was scarcely more than a figure from folklore.

*This modern painting depicts the Contest of the Princes, an episode in the Mahabharata.*

Krishna (see pp.62-3) appears in the epic, as the leader of his people and an ally of the Pandavas. He still appears more a superhuman warrior than a god in his battles alongside the Pandavas, but he grows in stature to emerge finally as the divine teacher of humanity.

According to legend, the entire *Mahabharata* was dictated by Vyasa to the elephant-headed god Ganesha (see pp.72-3), who made one condition: he would only agree to write it down if it were told without a pause. However fast it was dictated, Ganesha kept pace. At one time he broke off a tusk to use in place of a damaged stylus so as not to interrupt the flow of sacred words. The denser, more speculative passages were apparently attempts to slow the deity down, forcing him to stop and think whenever the meaning became unclear.

The central plot of the *Mahabharata* concerns two dynasties, the Pandavas and Kauravas. The rival families are cousins, the sons of Vyasa's two sons: the blind Dhritrashtra and the pious Pandu. Dhritrashtra is the eldest, but, because he is blind, Pandu is made king. Pandu has five sons: the eldest and righteous Yudhishtira, Bhima of ferocious strength; Arjuna the skilled warrior; and the twins Nakula and Sahadeva. Dhritrashtra, on the other hand, has 100 sons, the eldest of whom is the scheming Duryodhana.

When Pandu dies, his blind but well-intentioned brother, Dhritrashtra, takes Pandava's sons into his own palace. In time Dhritrashtra divides the kingdom, giving half of it to

Yudhishtira and half to Duryodhana. However, Duryodhana becomes jealous of the affection his father feels for his cousin, and even more so of the lands that the Pandavas have inherited. Through trickery and cunning, the Pandavas are forced into exile, and have

to wait thirteen years before they have a chance to reclaim their kingdom. This is the cause of the terrible war that follows, resulting in the destruction of the entire race except for one survivor, who continues the dynasty. This war forms the backdrop to the *Bhagavad Gita*.

### VYASA

The legendary author of the *Mahabharata*, the sage Vyasa (whose name in Sanskrit means "Compiler"), boasted that "that which cannot be found here exists nowhere". Vyasa was reputedly the son of the ascetic Parasara and the Dasa princess Satyawati. Called "the Homer of the East" (although far more has been ascribed to him than to the Greek poet), Vyasa is said to have composed the entire *Mahabharata* and all eighteen *Puranas* (see p.49), besides compiling the four books of the *Yedas* (see pp.16-17). He was also a priest and teacher.

Many writers now consider Vyasa to be a composite name for the many *brahmins* who worked on the text over the centuries, but he also has a vital place in the narrative. He is the father of some of the principal characters in the epic – the opposed dynasties of the Sons of Darkness and the Sons of Light – and he himself often appears in the story to advise characters in need or to soothe the distressed.

*This 18th-century manuscript depicts Vyasa as a seated bearded sage, dictating the Mahabharata to the elephant-headed Ganesha, with Durga above and Brahma below.*



## Bhakti



*Krishna's love for Radha symbolizes bhakti devotion in this 19th-century painting.*

**Bhakti** (in later Sanskrit, "reverent devotion") was a movement which stressed the emotional attachment and love of a devotee for his or her personal god. It therefore implied a dualistic relationship between worshipper and god. Although all major deities in the Hindu pantheon had devotional cults, *bhakti* has been especially common in the worship of Krishna, an *avatar* of Vishnu. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, (see pp.60-61), Krishna taught *bhakti yoga* ("the way of devotion"), placing it above other paths to salvation through *karma* (ritual activity) and *jnana* (spiritual knowledge). He declared to his devotees: "Worshipping me with love, I bestow the rule of understanding, whereby they come to me."

The *bhakti* movement reached its height from c.AD500 to c.AD1500, starting in southern India before spreading

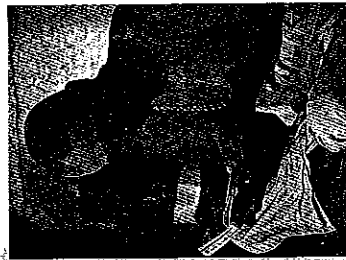
north. Its chief characteristic was an intensely emotional worship, expressed in terms of personal love, yearning, courtship and ecstasy. *Bhakti* cults reacted against the rigid exclusivity of the *brahmin* priests, with their elaborate rituals that required a knowledge of Sanskrit. They often rejected the role of the priest as an intermediary between devotee and deity, teaching instead that divine grace was available to all, irrespective of caste or sex. While *bhakti* scholars filled the temples of southern India, bands of devotees travelled the countryside, visiting shrines, singing devotional hymns and engaging local holy men in debate.

All *bhakti* sects shared the basic doctrine of divine grace and ecstatic love. *Bhakti* poets wrote of an intensity of guilt and a yearning for redemption, familiar to Christian theology. Like the New Testament, the *bhakti* sects taught that divine love could also be expressed through love of one's neighbours, whatever their social status. But unlike Christian churches, *bhakti* sects welcomed women into their priesthood.

*Bhakti* adherents were opponents of Buddhism and Jainism, and they had hastened the decline of both in southern India by the 10th century. The arrival of the Muslims in the Ganges basin from the 12th century onward paradoxically also helped the *bhakti* movement, for *brahmins* with their ritualized Hinduism found it harder to survive without royal support than *bhakti* devotees. *Bhakti* devotionalism even affected Islam: there are Muslim poems which start with the standard invocation of Allah, but go on to claim that Krishna is one of the Muslim prophets

### THE LINGAYATS

The Lingayat sect was founded in the 12th century by Basava, a Shaivite *brahmin* who at the age of sixteen threw away the sacred thread marking his priestly caste to propagate a message of social equality, rejecting orthodox Hinduism. Seeing no need for a priest to mediate between Shiva and his devotees, Basava instructed his



*Devotees of Shiva belonging to the Lingayat sect wear silver containers holding miniature lingas around their necks.*

followers to wear a small *linga* (see pp.66-7) about their necks and worship Shiva directly. This explains their name, the Lingayats. Basava rejected the authority of the *Vedas* and the *brahmin* caste, declaring that sacred texts were useless if they did not lead to a personal experience of God. Basava

married two untouchable women, and encouraged the demolition of all caste barriers. When marriage between a *brahmin's* daughter and an untouchable led a local king to persecute Basava's followers, they rose in rebellion and Basava himself was killed.

### THE ALVARS

Twelve Alvars (Vaishnavite saints) are recognized as founders of Vaishnavite *bhakti* in southern India. Their hymns to Vishnu and his *avatars* were intensely emotional. Of over 4,000 hymns, most were composed by the Alvars Tirumangai and



*Praying to temple deities is the usual form of bhakti. This worshipper has offered his hair as a token of devotion at Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh.*

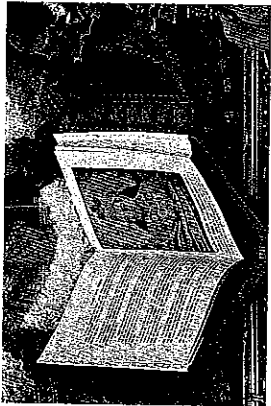
Nammalvar. One Alvar king, Kulaśekhara, so loved Rama that he raised an army to rescue Sita, the deity's consort, from demons.

### MADHYA

The 13th-century philosopher Madhya was one of the most striking and extreme dualist teachers. His prodigious output included commentaries on the *Brahmasutra* and *Bhagavad Gita*, as well as thirty-five other works. Most

unusually for a Hindu, he rejected the theory of *maya* (see pp.130-31) saying the material world, although transitory, was real. Madhya also believed in eternal damnation and salvation. He was perhaps influenced by Nestorian Christians, for his life has many parallels with that of Christ, most notably his miracles.

## The Bhagavad Gita



A modern printed version of the Bhagavad Gita, showing the warrior Arjuna to whom Krishna delivered his great sermon.

The *Bhagavad Gita* ("Song of the Lord") is one of the most important and popular of Indian religious texts, although it is not strictly speaking a *shruta* (a divinely revealed text such as the *Vedas*). It is a comparatively brief episode within the *Mahabharata* consisting of 700 verses in eighteen chapters written in a semi-dialogue form.

It opens with two vast armies facing each other on the "field of *dharma*". On each side are tens of thousands of fearsome warriors, as well as gods, demons and giants with supernatural weapons. These were the armies of the Pandavas and Kauravas, cousins and rivals for a single throne. The most glorious warrior of all was Arjuna, so skilled in the arts of battle that he was thought invincible. His charioteer was Krishna, Lord of the Universe (see pp.62-3), and behind Arjuna stood legions of mighty allies ready to do battle in his name.

At that moment, as the final trumpets sounded and the air filled with dread, Arjuna looked at the army opposing him and weakness overcame him. "Facing us in the field of battle are teachers, fathers and sons ... I do not

wish to kill these people, even if I myself am killed. Not even for the kingdom of the three worlds: how much less for a kingdom of this earth!" said the warrior to Krishna. "What happiness could we have if we killed our own kinsmen? ... I will not fight," he said, and then fell silent. Krishna smiled and spoke the verses which form the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Krishna first appealed to Arjuna's honour and *dharmaic* duty as a *kshatriya* (see p.25). "There is no greater good for a warrior than to fight in a righteous war," he said, adding that there was no need to be sorrowful about what was inevitable. "Arjuna, you grieve because you think that you are the doer of your actions," he continued. "Think instead of God as the doer. You are but an instrument in his hands. You are only

### THE THREE PATHS

The discipline or path of action (*karma yoga*) which Krishna outlined to Arjuna as he hesitated before the battle is not the only way to *brahman* which the *Bhagavad Gita* acknowledged, although it has proved very popular with those who must live and struggle in the world. Mahatma Gandhi was only one of many people in the 20th century inspired by this passage. The other two paths are the discipline of knowledge (*jnana yoga*), in which release is sought through asceticism and contemplative retreat from the world in a way comparable to Buddhism, and devotion to God (*bhakti yoga*). This is considered the highest form of yoga, and in it the self humbly worships God, hoping less for a release from reincarnation than for an ecstatic divine vision. In return for such worship, God extends his favour to his devotees, thereby enables them to transcend their earthly bonds. All three of the paths share the belief that God is manifest in every single aspect of life, including nature and society.

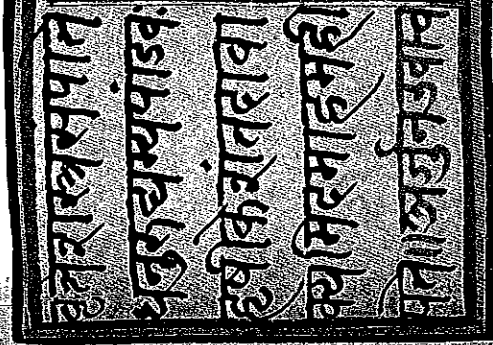
carrying out his will." But Arjuna was still uncertain. "How can I kill my kinsmen?" he asked, and sank again into despondency, his great bow lying useless on his knees. Krishna answered in one of the best-known passages of the *Bhagavad Gita*. "Death is not final," he told Arjuna. "If any man thinks that he slays, and if another thinks that he is slain, neither knows the truth. The Eternal in man cannot kill: the Eternal in man cannot die. The soul in man is neither born nor does it die. Weapons cannot cut it; fire cannot burn it ... What makes you think that you can destroy the soul?"

Krishna, having defined the *atman* (see pp.24-5) in every person, revealed a new way of releasing the soul from the cycles of reincarnation: the discipline of action, *karma yoga* (see p.86). As opposed to the Buddhist and Jain paths of asceticism and renunciation, this is a

yoga of positive action, a way to *brahman* (godhead) that can be followed by anyone, however immersed in worldly affairs. Krishna argued that it is not acts in themselves which bind people to the round of rebirth, but the selfish intentions so often behind them. The true opposite of selfish action is disinterested or selfless action; total inaction is anyway impossible.

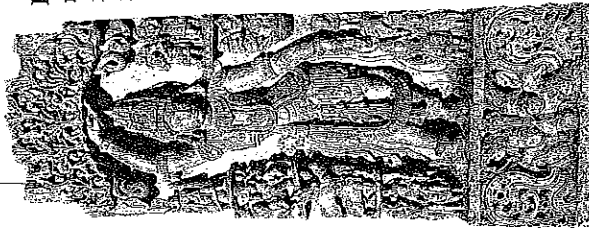
In the *Bhagavad Gita*, action is no longer the sole cause of *karma*. The yoga that Krishna taught Arjuna offers a path to enlightenment based on the abandonment of desire. An enlightened mind, he says, is indifferent "to pleasure and pain, gain and loss". "Prepare yourself for the fight," he tells Arjuna. "Whatever you do, do it as an offering to me." Arjuna therefore returned to the world of battle, and his path has since been followed by millions of Hindus.

Arjuna and Krishna on the battlefield, the latter turning his head to deliver the famous sermon known as the Bhagavad Gita, from a 19th-century manuscript.





## Krishna



The legend of Krishna holding up Govardhan mountain to shield the herds from the storm of Indra is illustrated in this sculptured wall panel from the 12th-century temple at Halebidu in southern India.

his native Yadava clan, whose territories increased with Krishna's growing reputation. The Yadava hero is thought to have become the leader of a religious cult, and was defined as Bhagavat, "the blessed one", from which the *Bhagavad Gita* (see pp.60-61) drew its name.

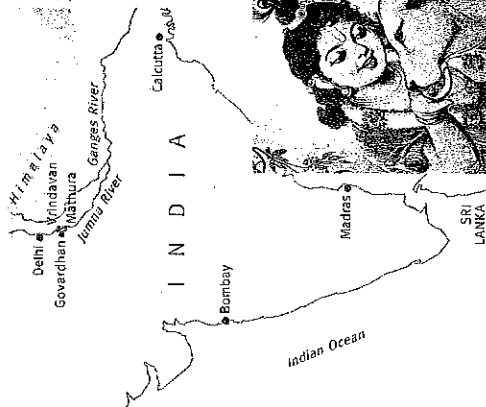
In the *Mahabharata*, particularly the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna often appears as the perfect ally, skilful in war and loyal to the end. He slays enemies with an appetite even greater than the

### BALARAMA

In early Krishna worship, Krishna's entire family were objects of devotion. The second half of the *Harivansa*, "Chronicle of Hari" (an alternative name for Krishna), recounts the exploits of his descendants. Krishna's sister and brother played major roles in later cults of Vishnu. Only his brother, Balarama, knew of Krishna's constantly mischievous intentions. Balarama was originally an agricultural deity, linked with ploughing and fertility, and is strongly associated with pre-Aryan *naga* (snake) worship (see pp.68-9).

### KRISHNA CENTRES

The worship of Krishna is popular all over India with sacred shrines concentrated in the north of the country (see map below). Popular prints and posters showing Krishna (see inset below) are sold to visitors when they visit these shrines and then distributed among relatives and friends on the return home.



● Krishna Centres  
■ Major Cities



Krishna subduing the serpent-demon Kaitiya, shown in a 10th-century bronze.

Pandava brothers', to whose aid he comes.

But in some passages, Krishna is not all-virtuous. At times he is mischievous, unscrupulous and deceitful. Not only mortal enemies are defeated by Krishna: the Vedic deities Indra and Varuna bow before his might, and even Shiva, the fearsome destroyer, is defeated by him.

As Krishna's reputation grew in the early centuries AD, the deeds of other deities were attributed to him. When Krishna was born, he miraculously escaped his uncle who had ordered that every newborn child must die. When the infant Krishna was being rescued, the waters of the River Juma parted and he was carried in a basket to safety — a story which has clear parallels with the Bible stories of Moses and Jesus.

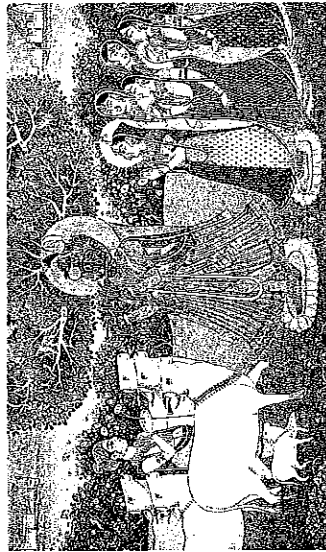
Krishna is the principle deity of the *bhakti* movement that flourished from c.AD 500 to c.AD 1500 (see pp.58-9). He was worshipped as the embodiment of divine love and as the most mischievous expression of "divine play" (*lila*).

### THE SEDUCTION OF THE GOPIS

Krishna's seduction of the gopis, the wives and daughters of the cowherds, is represented in song, painting and popular culture throughout India. On Sharad Purnima (the full moon in November), Krishna, the favourite spot in the forest and began to play his flute.

As the divinely sweet notes reached the village, the gopis were entranced and, mad with desire, they followed the music. A whirling frenzy of dancing and passion ensued and even the gods and the dead descended to earth to witness the spectacle. The *Brahmavainarta Purana* describes a lush glad ripe with swelling fruit and loud with the buzz of honeybees.

Among the 900,000 gopis, "like a jewel in the midst of her company", was Radha. Krishna, overcome by love, dropped his flute, and "even



Krishna playing the flute to the gopis and the cowherds is a popular subject in Indian miniature painting.

the clothing dropped from his body". Although he ravished every one of the gopis in the thirty-three-day dance, he embraced Radha all the time. This story is astounding for the detailed extravagance of its eroticism.

Performances of the story of Krishna and Radha are usually enacted by boys. This production takes place at Brindavan in northern India, the setting of many of Krishna's exploits.

