Searching for the origins of Hinduism is a bit like exploring a thick forest: there are so many paths and trails that it is difficult to decide which ones matter. Perhaps that is because Hinduism is itself something of a forest — a disorderly, unregulated, tangled growth. Judaism, Christianity and Islam look so neat in comparison: one god, one founder, one book. Hinduism has not just many gods, founders and books, but as many as you like; in fact, you are free to keep adding to them. You may, if you wish, start worshipping a new god (how about a god of exams, say, Pariksheshwara?) or write a new Upanishad, though you may have to wait for a few centuries for it to be accepted as such.

Defining Hinduism, in the first place, is a challenge, and we have as many definitions as we have scholars. In “The Harappan Legacy” (BBC Knowledge, April 2012) archaeologists have agreed to see in the Indus civilization (2600–1900 BCE) some of the roots of Hinduism: tree worship, figures in yogic postures (and the well-known “Priest-King” in contemplation), symbols like the swastika, the linga and the trishula, three-faced gods, fire altars, sacred proportions and much more. It bears repetition that John Marshall, who directed excavations at Mohenjo-daro, asserted in 1931, “Taken as a whole, the Harappan religion is so characteristically Indian as hardly to be distinguished from still living Hinduism.”

The Early Texts
We must turn to the early texts for its conceptual framework, starting with the Vedas, especially the oldest of the four, the Rig-Veda. While its date remains
untrammelled, its 1,028 hymns, which have been faithfully memorised and orally transmitted by generations of students and teachers to the present day, are invocations to gods and goddesses, such as Indra, Agni, Mitra or Sarasvati.

Certain fundamental concepts do emerge clearly from the Rig Veda, especially its insistence on a single divine essence taking many names and forms: “The Existent is One, but sages express It variously; they say Indra, Vayu, Mitra, Agni ...” (1.164.46). These powers, ultimately, are mere aspects of ‘That One’ (sat samah), or ‘that truth’ (tat satyam).

Absent from the Veda, however, are notions like dharma, karma and rebirth, which is what makes the Vedic religion rather different from the Hinduism we know: Hinduism reveres the Veda and claims them as its source, but in practice has little use for them, beyond including some of their mantras in rituals and ceremonies. A few centuries after the Veda were composed, the concepts of dharma and rebirth emerged in the Upanishads, texts which also gave expression to the central spiritual principles of Hinduism in a philosophical language: they taught that all is the divine (“you are That”, “tat tvam asat”), and that the microcosm (our small individual scale) and the macrocosm (the cosmos) are essentially correlated, implying that everything in this universe is symbolic. Our body, for instance, is made of the same five elements — earth, water, fire, wind, ether — as the universe, and while in the world, corresponds to the higher worlds, its feet symbolise the earth. And there are at least five heavens in us: the material, the emotional, the mental, the spiritual and the highest self.

There are no mere abstractions, since they are the foundations of Ayurveda and ordain the actual treatment of this ancient Indian system of medicine. They also gave rise to the mental, the spiritual and the highest self. Dharmic and Yoga systems of thought, which ultimately aim at the spiritual and divine essence.

Popular Hinduism

Like all religions, Hinduism operated at other levels, those of popular literature, art, worship and ritual. Popular literature was taken care of by vast collection of heroic or legendary stories (often conveyed by many encyclopedia texts known as the Ponnas), legends, parables and ballads. The best-known examples are of course India’s two great epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which travelled to every nook and corner of the subcontinent through countless retellings, translations, and adaptations. The two epics fulfilled several functions: they gave everyone — long or subject, husband or wife, guru or student — role models to be followed. They provided a readily accessible teaching on the intracies of dharma. And they contributed greatly to the land’s cultural unification.

The Borders of Hinduism

While its non-dogmatic and amorphous nature, its apparent polytheism, its refusal to limit itself to one founder and one book, were often critiqued or even ridiculed by nineteenth-century Indologists, in practice those theories encouraged a plethora of cults, sects, modes of worship, and of course deities. In its long-standing (and, in fact, on-going) interaction with rural and tribal communities, Hinduism generously exchanged deities, rituals and cults. Gods like Jagannath, Ganesha, Nara Narasimha and many aspects of the mother goddess have tribal origins; on the other hand, rural and tribal communities often accepted a ‘mainstream’ gods, such as Shiva or Rama, niti, nish Aganya, or heroes such as the five Pandava brothers of the Mahabharata.

This symbiosis is what has been so disconcerting to many students of Indian religions: the one hand, a mainstream Hinduism based on texts like the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita or the Ramayana and sometimes called sananda dharma or the ‘eternal law’, which has produced manifold teachings and methods of self-exploration and self-realisation; on the other, a popular Hinduism which may appear to be little more than a loose fusion of regional cultures, customs and traditions, absorbing more of them from successive waves of invaders, and yet somehow managed to build up an identity of its own, contributing to the creation of a united and yet multicultural India where spiritual and religious freedom was always highly valued.

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