

## Chapter 7

### The Origins of Yogic Religions

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#### Chapter Summary

Since the early 1970s the term “Hinduism” has gradually fallen into disuse among many scholars in Britain and North America. “The Hindu religious tradition” is now a more popular designation to identify the religions of the Indian subcontinent. Most Indians within India, however, use the terms “Hindu” and “Hinduism” to refer to their own religious beliefs and practices.

Max Müller advanced the long-standing view that a carefully preserved oral tradition of the Aryan peoples who conquered India was captured in religious texts that prevailed until around the fifteenth century AD. At that time various Hindu oral traditions were written down as ordered by Muslim rulers who wanted to know what Hindus believed. In the nineteenth century, the British continued this tradition of converting oral traditions into written texts.

In the 1920s significant attention was given to what became known as the Indus Valley civilization which appeared to provide a context to the earliest scripture of the Hindu tradition, *Rig Veda*, which referred to gods such as Indra that hurled thunderbolts. A fairly elaborate history of India arose that featured the Aryans gradually absorbing the customs, practices, and beliefs of the locals and developing what became the caste system within Indian society. Indian religion was placed within a general evolutionary framework.

The Aryan emphasis on sacrifice eventually gave way to a focus on self-knowledge and questions about the essential nature of existence. A new, world-renouncing religion came into being that saw all things as part of an original being or essence, known as Brahman. Life became a series of rebirths and the aim of religion was to break the bonds of karma and enter into union with either God or the gods, or to be absorbed into the Void.

It took around a thousand years for this religion to permeate Indian society. Meanwhile, many other Hindu reform movements such as Jainism and Buddhism sprang up, all of them embracing philosophical reflection and the renunciation of life. Toward the end of this period, popular discontent with an abstract and impersonal religious quest was modified by intense personal devotion to individual gods. These new religions became known as *Bhakti* or devotional movements, and numerous groups devoted to personalized gods flourished between AD 700 and 1200; popular epics such as *Mahayana* and *Ramayana* were ideally suited for incorporation into this outpouring of personal piety.

Indian religious history changed decisively when Islamic invaders began a series of incursions in the eighth century AD, leading to the conquest of northern India and the establishment of a sultanate in Delhi in the thirteenth century. Gradually, Muslim control spread over a large part of India, culminating in the establishment of the Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century. By the time of the establishment of the British East India Company in the 1700s, Hinduism appeared to be a dying religion. Nevertheless, Christian missionaries from England did not enter India until the early nineteenth century.

Although many Hindus and Muslims attended the schools that Christians established, there was not the widespread conversion to Christianity that some expected. Instead, the late 1800s saw a renaissance of the Hindu faith. Since Indian independence was established in 1948, the Hindu religion has revived and revitalized itself.

Recent scholarship such as Gregory L. Possehl's *The Indus Civilization* has demonstrated several major misunderstandings regarding established belief about the Indus Valley and supposed religious developments there. Other features have come to light that support the idea of a stronger continuity between the religious practices of the Indus Valley civilization and later Hinduism. There is some evidence that *suttee*, the later Hindu practice whereby a widow was expected to accompany her husband to the grave, was practiced there.

Although the Aryan invasion thesis regarding the origins of religion in India has encountered stiff criticism, it is still taught as fact in most religious studies textbooks. The possibility still remains, however, that new information gleaned from ongoing archaeological research could totally revise our present understanding of Indian history, including the beginnings of religion in this region.