

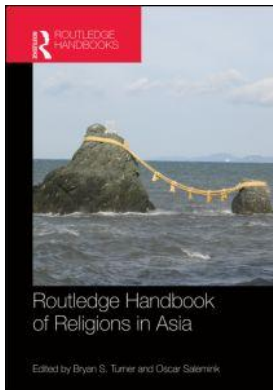
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Revealing the Vedas in ‘Hinduism’

Foundations and issues of interpretations of religion in South Asian Hindu traditions

Andrea Marion Pinkney

In contemporary discourse about religion, ‘Hinduism’ is naturally counted among the major ‘World Religions’ – those religious traditions with a legacy of scriptures, sacred language(s) and ancient monuments, linked to a people or focused on a place, and understood as possessing world-historical significance, transnational scope or some combination of these elements. Many scholars have reflected on the ‘construction’ of the World Religions (King 1999; Pennington 2005), but in practice the framework continues to be used with great frequency in departments of religious studies in North America. Organizationally, the world religions are often paired in geographical opposition: the ‘Western’ religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) are contrasted to the so-called ‘Eastern’ religions (Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, Shinto, Taoism, Confucianism). From the globalized perspective of the twenty-first century, however, it is clear that many of these religions have been flourishing in both the eastern and western hemispheres for centuries – for example, Arabs have been identifying as Muslims since the seventh century but there have been Muslims in India and outwards into Asia from the eighth century onwards. The characterization of Islam as a ‘Western’ religion thereby obfuscates its ‘Eastern’ nature, and flags the underlying inadequacy of this framework.

The humanist and positivist project of framing of the world’s religious experience comparatively began in the nineteenth century. The rubric of the ‘World Religions’ was itself linked to the emergence of nationalist, colonial, and even post-colonial, narratives in new nation states such as India and newly modernizing states such as Japan. In this chapter, I review some of the issues related to the framing of Hinduism as an Eastern contrast to ‘the West’, and discuss how this early inter-culture was itself an expression of newly modern revisionist ideas about Christianity and Western culture, with particular attention to the role of Hindu Vedic literature within it.

Hinduism is simultaneously understood as of distinctively Indic and South Asian provenance. Yet the details subsumed under the present category of ‘Hinduism’, may appear as a bewildering amalgamation of elements that – lacking the rubric of Hinduism to unite them – might otherwise cancel one another out. For the diverse kinds of religious beliefs and practices that may be subsumed collectively as ‘Hinduism’ may encompass lavish devotional religious ceremonies (*śodāśopacāra*), ascetic austerities (*tapasya*), congregational worship (*satsaṅgh*) and individual ritual; a sense of antiquity that transcends regional and ethnic histories alongside highly politicized Hindu

nationalisms; egalitarian religious movements and rigid social hierarchies; awe of feminine religious, moral and spiritual authority alongside doctrinal and customary misogynies; broadly Indic patterns of practice and belief and distinct regional ideologies – complemented by approaches to divinity that range from pantheism, henotheism, kathenotheism (worship of one god at a time), monotheism, agnosticism and atheism; and naturally overlapping through devotional links to gods via family tradition (*kuldevatā*) and tutelary tradition (*grāmdēvatā*) – but also through devotion to divinity through one's own personal choice (*iṣṭadēvatā*).

Hinduism is also popularly understood as the world's oldest living religion. This claim is based on the continuous reverence given to the oldest strata of religious authority within the Hindu traditions, the Vedic corpus, which began to be composed more than three thousand years ago, c. 1750–1200 BCE. Respect for the textual legacy of this remote past has been remarkably resilient, so that imaginings of the Vedic legacy as 'traditional' continue to find traction in contemporary understandings of Hinduism in important – if attenuated – ways. How does this distant Vedic past relate to the present? The Vedic religion that can be pieced together from texts is very removed from contemporary Hindu religious practices, beliefs, social norms and political realities. The society that is recalled by the record of Vedic materials is such a peculiar and singular one, and its worldview is of such extreme antiquity, that it was already ancient at the beginning of the Common Era.

By the time of the Buddha (c. fifth century BCE), the descendants of the Vedic people had already begun to produce interpretations and reinterpretations of their own forebears' textual legacies, which served to keep the religious practices and beliefs of its Vedic origins comprehensible and relevant. In dedicated communities of Vedic Brahmins, the tradition of performing Vedic rituals and transmitting Vedic learning persists in contemporary India, despite dwindling resources and other challenges (Kashikar 1964; Smith 2000: 261). The unbroken reverence for the Vedas is most immediately appreciated in the living legacy of Indian communities of Vedic Brahmins who must negotiate their ancient heritage with their contemporary needs (McCartney 2011: 61ff.). Borayin Larios has described how post-Vedic gods such as Rāma are routinely incorporated into 'Vedic ritual' performance at contemporary Vedic ashrams in Maharashtra (Larios 2013: 306). However, in the apt phrasing of Timothy Lubin, 'the religious climate of India is so far removed from Vedic ... piety that its periodic appearance in the public religious domain is a novelty and a source of some confusion to non-Vedic Hindus' (Lubin 2001a: 381). A fascinating example is detailed by Frederick M. Smith, who reflected on the 1996 inaugural performance of Vedic ritual (*agniṣṭoma*) in London. He noted that: 'the audience was enthralled by [the ritual] as performance regardless of its near complete incomprehensibility' (Smith 2000: 266).

French Indologist Louis Renou famously characterized the Vedas as: 'a distant object, exposed to the hazards of an adoration stripped of its textual essence' (Renou 1965: 53) and asserted that '[e]ven in the most orthodox domains, the reverence to the Vedas has come to be a simple "raising of the hat"' (Renou 1965: 2). In popular, contemporary terms, we may consider an evocative example of this incorporation of Vedic texts as a 'sign' in devotional practices, thereby imbuing them with value as being 'traditional': Yesudas, a renowned Keralan-Christian Bollywood playback singer, is credited with the popular 'Hymns from the Rigveda' (1979). Described promotionally as 'the earliest lyrical effusions of the Hindus, which have been handed down to posterity', this recording combined a textual performance of ancient scripture in alignment with contemporary 'light classical' musical aesthetics (Oriental Records 2014). In setting verses from the Rig Veda to keys or scales (*rāgas*) familiar from the contemporary Carnatic music tradition such as *haṃsadhvani* and *śubhapantuvarāli*, it continues to be commercially available more than three decades after its release. In short, while the social history and context of the Vedic texts are extremely distant from contemporary Hindu religious beliefs and practice,

a reverence for 'the Vedas' as an exemplar of Hindu heritage continues to inform a contemporary understanding of Hinduism.

Popular reverence for Vedic scripture is similarly focused on the abiding authority and prestige of the Vedas rather than on any particular exegesis or engagement with the subject matter of the text. In this reading, 'the Vedas' have come to symbolize a revived interest in an attenuated notion of Hindu heritage and are often conflated with 'tradition'. This approach to the Vedas is a hallmark of 'Neo-Vedanta' – a dominant form of Hinduism within the transnational Hindu community, and within India's middle and upper classes of 'neo-Hindus' (Williamson 2010: 18). Strikingly, this type of contemporary Hinduism presents India's Hindu traditions as simultaneously universalist and uniquely Indic. How does this reading of a distant past help to strike this balance and serve present-day understandings of 'Hinduism'? In short, how does one appreciate the appearance of popular, mass-marketed, devotional readings of the Rig Veda as an element with contemporary Hinduism?

In this chapter, I reflect on the role of Vedas in contemporary Hinduism in multiple contexts. I first turn to an overview of the methodological issues involved in studying South Asian religions, with particular attention to the historically recent framing of the category of 'Hinduism'. As has been discussed by many scholars, the origin of the English term 'Hinduism' is relatively recent and is related to early nineteenth-century initiatives to place non-Christian religions within a comparative framework that juxtaposed a number of major 'world religions' (Lorenzen 1999). The framing of non-Western religious traditions into Western religious categories is not limited to South Asian religions, but also deeply informs contemporary understandings of religion in East Asia, as discussed by Jason Ānanda Josephson in the current volume. During this phase of negotiation between Hindu reformers and apologists, Christian religionists, early Western Indologists and British colonials, a new relevance was accorded to selected aspects of the Vedic legacy. Now understood as primordially 'Hindu', Vedic religion became an essential foundation in the fortification of 'Hinduism' as one of the world's great religious traditions. In the third section, I move into the contemporary study of South Asian religion and conclude by looking at some of the ways that 'Hinduism' is understood now. I ask, in the balance, what does it mean to identify as 'Hindu' and what does 'Hinduism' mean in a popular sense? In the final section of this chapter, I review some of the foundational features of the Vedas, from Indological and philological perspectives. As we will see, the ritual complexities and criteria for membership of Vedic religion meant that it was exclusionary and elite – and never 'popular' or inclusive. In conclusion, I introduce two contrasting engagements with the Vedic legacy that employ the Vedas as a source of authority to legitimate very modern concerns, and hopefully illuminate thereby how modern re-readings of the Vedas stand at the centre of contemporary understandings of Hinduism.

A genealogy of 'Hinduism' and the world religions framework

For a variety of historical reasons, the religions most frequently cited as 'world religions' are significantly variable in character: some are characterized as world-historic, universal religions (Christianity and Islam); others as philosophical or ethical systems (Buddhism and Confucianism); and some are culturally imprinted (Shinto and Taoism). Hinduism is unique in being conceived of as a world religion that combines all three markers – universalist, philosophical and culturally specific.

Scholarship on comparative religious studies has produced usefully reflexive perspectives on how to frame a methodology that places all the formerly incommensurate 'world religions' on newly equal ground. This project has been singularly influential in the study of religion, for its success in advancing a non-confessional and culturally pluralistic approach to emic and etic

religious systems. One of its most important interlocutors was Ninian Smart (1927–2001) (Smart 1983), celebrated for framing the enterprise of comparative religion within a level playing-field by suggesting seven dimensions to the world religions: (1) ritual; (2) narrative and mythic; (3) experiential and emotional; (4) social and institutional; (5) ethical and legal; (6) doctrinal and philosophical; and (7) material (Smart 1998: 11–22). These categories, collectively applied, promised to provide a generalizable framework to understand religion, and render the variations across cultures mutually intelligible.

Yet some scholars have argued in recent years that the very idea of religion – conceived of as a universally applicable category – is, at base, a hindrance to understanding the range of religious phenomena in human societies. In this section, I re-approach the 'construction' of Hinduism by retracing a part of its genealogy through the lens of 'the Veda' (Pennington 2005). Russell T. McCutcheon's scholarship on the world religions framework has pitched debate on religion in terms of its construction and has called for a recasting of the ways in which religion is taught. He argues that the meaning of 'religion' denoted in the Western academy is largely incommensurate with the breadth of phenomena and civilizations it purports to cover:

'Religion' is an emic folk category scholars acquire from a rather limited number of linguistic/cultural families, a category that we simply take up for the sake of etic analysis and use *as if it were* a cross-cultural universal ... many of the peoples that we study by means of this category have no equivalent term or concept whatsoever.

(McCutcheon 2001: 10)

Similarly, Daniel Dubuisson characterized religion as a 'native concept, typically European, gathering and summarizing under its aegis the struggles of a Western consciousness grappling with itself' (Dubuisson 2003: 6). While McCutcheon and Dubuisson focused attention to the problematic application of the term 'religion' outside of Western contexts, Timothy Fitzgerald argued that the 'world religions' framework, studied through the comparative approach, was just as problematic, and particularly so in the study of Indian religious traditions (Fitzgerald 1990). Fitzgerald noted that, in some measure, by suggesting that 'the social', for example, was somehow a discrete category within 'religion', Smart revealed a tendency to view religion as existing discretely from its given social milieu. Fitzgerald contends that this bias pervades the teaching of 'world religions' and is especially problematic in teaching 'Hinduism' as a 'religion' to Western students, which expresses core principles characteristic of Indic civilization:

In the case of Hinduism it leads to all the problems that Religious Education specialists sometimes acknowledge but can never resolve, about how to account for this World Religion's stubborn and all-but-marginal refusal to budge from its moorings in a specific social system, and the problems about how to analytically separate the religion from its social dimension, including caste.

(Fitzgerald 1990: 106)

In other words, 'religion' must be reified as an entity that somehow exists independently of society in order to propose it as a phenomenon that crosses societal borders and functions at a level that transcends communities. Fitzgerald argues that this treatment of religion as an object ultimately reflects the universalist perspective of Christianity, which, he argues, condemns the idea of 'religion' as unfit for comparative analysis as it seeks to identify equivalent or approximately equivalent objects of study. Instead, the world religion model seems to put 'religions' on a spectrum, where the 'greatest' of them are the world religions, understood as having institutions

that transcend societal embeddedness. At the other end of the spectrum are those ‘religions’ that express a viewpoint of cultural relativism and cultural specificity.

‘Hinduism’, as one of the ‘great world religions’ does indeed incorporate an astonishing breadth of historical influences, but these influences need to be put in post-colonial historical context to be appreciated. For many of the apparent continuities with the past and the present must be questioned. What is understood as ‘Hinduism’ today may suggest that these ties to antiquity have had an uninterrupted relevance, while instead they were obscure prior to the nineteenth century and have been woven back into the tradition as it is imagined today as a form of religious ‘heritage’. With the post-colonial context of contemporary Hinduism foregrounded, the evolving stages of the ‘Hindu traditions’ are concomitantly rendered more coherent.

In summary, scholarly approaches towards ‘Hinduism’ may be largely understood in two camps. For some, the category of religion itself continues to be a viable analytic lens and the categorization of India’s indigenous religious traditions – readily appreciated as having evolved over time – as the ‘world religion’ of Hinduism is natural and necessary. For others, the rubric of the ‘Hindu traditions’ is preferable as a framework that privileges the social and historical conditions of religious beliefs, practices, community identity. Understanding these culturally derived practices as *ad summa*, ‘religion’ amounts to a reification of them – while religion itself, rather than a neutral comparative category, is seen as replicating a universalist type of Christian worldview that floats free from societal and historical, and political, exigencies.

The ascendance of ‘neo-Vedanta’ within Hinduism

What is the particular role played by ‘Vedic origins’ in the understanding of ‘Hinduism’? As I detail in the following section, the earliest Vedic religion was elite, esoteric, and has been obscure for millennia rather than centuries. The substance of the texts – in terms of deities, sacrificial rituals, language and metaphysical concerns – is largely alien to contemporary Hinduism. This is partially because of the impracticality of effort, expense and eligibility of maintaining such a standard of religious piety for all but a very limited community. Yet an attenuated idea of ‘the Vedas’ persists as one of the core identity markers of what is frequently imagined now as ‘Hinduism’, within which new readings of the Vedas are overwritten. Finally, aspects of transnational contemporary Hinduism may be referred to by scholars and practitioners variably as ‘neo-Hinduism’, ‘neo-Vedanta’, ‘Vedanta’ and ‘*Sanātana Dharma*’ (the ‘eternal’ religion): here I provide some elaboration about these terms, in relation to the Vedas.

For many contemporary Hindus, an understanding of Hinduism includes a relationship to the universalist framing of the ‘Hindu traditions’ popularized from the nineteenth century onwards, broadly drawn from ‘pan-Indian’ modes of religious identity that have since been deeply naturalized. Two charismatic Hindu intellectuals who have been closely identified with a reframing of Hinduism and Hindu identity are Ram Mohan Roy (1772–1833) and Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), who both conceived of the Hindu traditions in rationalist, devotional and universalist terms – a modernist revision that made a tremendous impact on promoting greater unity among regional Hindu groups in the service of Indian nationalism. The success of this movement’s efforts to recast perceptions of religions of South Asia is still largely responsible for what we popularly understand as ‘Hinduism’ today, both inside and outside of India. What were the main objectives of this movement? In 1903, a work called *Sanātana Dharma: An Advanced Textbook of Hindu Religion and Ethics* was published by the board of trustees of Central Hindu College, an institution founded by Annie Besant in 1898 that was to form the core of

Banaras Hindu University, one of the principal institutions of higher learning in India. The aim of this textbook was no less than to unite all that divides Indians, specifically in the service of nation-building and – less explicitly but not less obviously – in the service of anti-colonialism. The influence of the view expressed of this text is enormous, in articulating and propagating a particular reading of the myriad Hindu traditions that influences innumerable presentations of 'Hinduism' from the 'monotheistic' (Chakravarti 1991: 23) and the 'great oriental religions' model (Eliade 1959 (1987): 1962) to the 'world religions' model (Smith 1958 (1989): ix) and the 'worldview' model (Smart 1983: 1–2) and so on.

The universalist view of Hinduism is exemplified in the writings and works of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975), a philosopher and scholar of comparative religion, who was also the first vice-president and then president of India following Independence in 1947. Of many representative examples, Radhakrishnan's following statement exemplifies the neo-Vedanta characterization of Hinduism as a higher brand of universality that rebukes the exclusivity of 'High-Church Episcopalian-Protestant-Christianity' (Radhakrishnan 1960: 51):

Hinduism does not believe in bringing about a mechanical uniformity of belief and worship by a forcible elimination of all that is not in agreement with a particular creed ... Its scheme of salvation is not limited to those who hold a particular view of God's nature and worship. Such an exclusive absolutism is inconsistent with an all-loving universal God.

(Radhakrishnan 1960: 50)

In this sense, 'Hinduism' refers to Hindus' self-understanding of their 'religion' as 'Hinduism', one of the great 'world religions', and framed within the ontological categories of religiosity discussed above, and even exceeds the others for its humanism, universality and rationalism. The prominence of this variety of contemporary Hinduism may be partially accounted for by its association with the transnational Hindu community, as well as urbanites and the upper and middle classes in India. These communities possess and exercise their strong capacity to influence the terms of discourse regarding Hinduism in the public sphere in India and internationally. This sector includes in its 'traditional' mindset reverence for the 'Veda', the 'Vedas' and all things 'Vedic'. Veda, meaning 'wisdom' means something primordial, with a timeline for Vedic civilization falling on the exaggerated side of antiquity. For example, the BAPS *Akshar Purushottam Sansthā* claims that 'astronomical references' in the *R̥gveda* (e.g. 10.64.8) indicate an initial date range of 6500 BCE, pushing the antiquity of the Vedas back an additional *four* millennia, in contrast to the dates assigned by Indological scholarship on the basis of internal textual references.

Some aspects of very ancient Hindu traditions, particularly the philosophical and theological writings of the *Upaniṣads*, were revived during the colonially informed religious reform of the nineteenth century. This has meant that some of the rarified discourse and technical terms of these difficult texts, such as the symbol *aum*, have re-entered modern Hindu discourse as re-naturalized elements of contemporary 'Hinduism' for the last 200 years.

Another hallmark of the solidification of a Vedantic worldview is an imagining of the past according to contemporary norms. For example, there has been a significant shift of ritual practices towards vegetarianism and away from animal sacrifice, as has been the norm in many *Shakta* (goddess) communities. Since the Vedic inheritance includes meat-eating, this is one of the least well-fitting pieces of the past to be adjusted to contemporary norms. One example of this is the anachronistic reading of early Hindu traditions as being aligned with vegetarianism and conflated with the post-Vedic ideal of *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) to living beings. For example, the

characterization of Sitansu S. Chakravarty, in a concise 'guidebook of Hinduism', exemplifies a strong version of the neo-Vedantic viewpoint on Hindus and meat-eating:

A large number of Hindus take vegetarian food without meat or eggs, but with milk. Non-vegetarian Hindus do not eat meat of female animals out of respect for motherhood. Beef and beef-products are absolutely forbidden. The cow that nourishes us with milk is to be treated virtually as our own mother; the bull cannot be killed for it is the mount of Lord Shiva.

(Chakravarti 1991: 33)

While 'Hinduism' has become strongly associated with vegetarianism in later eons, many sub-threads of the Hindu traditions include animal sacrifice, particularly Vedic religion. In his field-work with contemporary Vedic Brahmins in Maharashtra, Lubin describes how, ritually, Vedic sacrificial spaces were proscribed as having unsealed openings, but that halls are now sealed to 'avoid interference from outsiders during offerings that call for animals to be killed' (Lubin 2001b: 299). Vedic practices are thus deeply unaligned with the trend towards 'Vaishnavization', discussed by many scholars, which is a post-Vedic religious movement that is characterized by vegetarianism (Busch 2011: 32; Vaudeville 1987: 27).

Issues regarding Hindu religious identity

In this section, I distinguish between 'Hindu' as a religious identity uniquely understood by individuals and the meaning of 'Hinduism' as one of the world's so-called 'world religions'. For 'Hindu', as a transnational religious identity, is applied to and embraced by people, communities and organizations, each networked within an extraordinarily vast spectrum of social and cultural systems worldwide. The meaning of this identity varies enormously for individual people within a broad range of various lived circumstances; so too does the meaning of 'Hinduism' in its various contexts.

Nevertheless, the identity of 'Hindu' has been applied collectively to Indian subjects as a category of religious identity for 140 years through the decennial all-India census exercise, first conducted in 1871–1872. It is now well known that the historical question of religious identity in British India and the categories offered to respondents as determined by the colonial administration were greatly at odds with existing modes of South Asian religious identity (Cohn 1984: 25; Jones 1981: 73). While the practice of census-taking started in the colonial era, the designation of religious identity continues to have important political and personal consequences for citizens of contemporary India, as the Indian constitution provides quotas or 'reservations' for members of particular communities deemed disadvantaged in parliament, educational institutions and civil service. An important factor in the politicization of religious identity in India since the late nineteenth century has been its government's practice of classifying citizens on the bases of caste and religion. The contemporary Census India website notes that 'religion' has been a constant category, while 'sect' was dropped as a qualifier from the 1941 census onwards:

[t]he question on 'Religion' was asked from each individual since the beginning of the census – 1872. In 1971 the religion of each individual as returned by him was recorded. In 1881 the caste of Hindu and the sect of the religion other than Hindu was recorded. In 1891 besides the religion, the question on the sect of the religion and in 1911 the sect of Christian was also recorded. In 1931 the question was worded as 'Religion and Sect'. In rest of the censuses, no information was collected on the sect of the religion.

(Government of India 2013a)

In the current census, the possible categories are: Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain and 'Others'.¹ Reflecting on the absence of any hyphenated relationship to these great religious communities – the qualification of 'sect' having been dropped from the census more than six decades ago – we may say that modes of religious identification in South Asia have rigidified since the nineteenth century (Oberoi 1994: 1–29). This means that subjects were permitted to choose the one category of their preference; the problem is that the categories themselves – framed as oppositional, either/or, religious identities – were largely incommensurate with the realities of religious pluralism in pre-colonial India.

One of the many consequences of this hardening of religious identity in India was violence between members of different religious communities – understood as animated by the factor of religious identity – with genocidal consequences following the partition of British India and independence of Pakistan and India in 1947 (Brass 2003: 71–90). While common linguistic identity was used to create new state boundaries in most of India, religious identity was the deciding factor for boundary delineation in Punjab and Bengal, so that the diverse religious identities of the people dwelling in these regions were bluntly polarized. On the new western border between India and Pakistan (then West Pakistan), Hindu and Sikh Punjabi speakers were divided from Muslim Punjabi speakers; on the new eastern border between India and Bangladesh (then East Pakistan), Hindu Bengali speakers were divided from Muslim Bengali speakers. In contrast, the rationale of linguistic identity was used to create state lines in most of India, as was done in Kerala (Malayalam speakers), Tamil Nadu (Tamil speakers), Orissa (Oriya speakers) and so on. This means that speakers of two religiously diverse language communities – Punjabi and Bengali respectively – were abruptly divided by different citizenships based on a binary notion of religious identity: Pakistan for Muslims and India for Hindus (and others).

'Hindu', then, is the response reported by the government of India as the religion of 80.5 per cent of India's citizens (827,578,868 people) or, conversely, is an available label for 80 per cent of India's people (Government of India 2013b). In other words, the lack of consensus about what 'Hinduism' means has not been an obstacle to 800 million people being identified by – and identifying with – the label of 'Hindu' according to the census exercise. With some perspective on how the dangers of conflating the identity category of 'Hindu' with the meaning of 'Hinduism' as a religion, let me now turn to reflect on the content of this category.

Contemporary scholarship on South Asian religion may take a guarded approach to the idea of 'Hinduism' per se, as it has such a loaded history in the colonial framing of religion in South Asia. While the term, of course, stands for a plurality of meanings, its implicit suggestion is that 'Hinduism' suggests a homogenization of diversity among those who identify as Hindu. This is problematic for many reasons, one of the more disturbing is that within the category of 'Hindu', as classified by the census, is a solid majority of those who may associate 'Hinduism' with social disenfranchisement, namely Dalits (members of the 'Scheduled Castes', also formerly known as Untouchables), Scheduled Tribes and certain members of the 'Other Backward Classes' (OBCs). In short, while the critique of McCutcheon, Dubuisson, Fitzgerald and others is an essential one, the contemporary idea of 'Hinduism' now flourishes in infinite ways in the transnational Hindu communities as an overarching category that has served to unite people, communities and organizations who identify as 'Hindu'.

So far, I have explored issues of interpretation in South Asian Hindu traditions and reviewed the systematization of those traditions, culminating in the ascendance of neo-Vedantic ideology and its dominance in the contemporary framing of Hinduism. In the second half of this chapter, I now turn to illustrate some of the ways that Vedic literature is read and reread through examples drawn from three contexts. First, I give an overview of Vedic literature and civilization derived from an Indological reading of the Vedas; then I turn to a pair of complementary and contrasting

readings of the Vedas in two different contemporary Hindu communities – a local Shaiva community in Singapore, and in the transnational Swaminarayan sect of Hinduism. On reflection, we can appreciate how the status of the Vedas as ancient authenticates neo-Vedantic interpretations of Hinduism as transcending culture and exceeding the limits of human history.

Indological perspectives on Vedic origins

There have been no ruins, graves, habitations or inscriptions unearthed that may conclusively provide insight into how Vedic people lived. Instead, there is a vast body of literature, composed by the Vedic peoples and transmitted by their descendants, which reveals facets of this ancient world in astonishing detail, and also highlights how extremely removed is the past of the intellectual, ritual and idealized world of Vedic civilization. In this section, I introduce the earliest strata of Hindu civilization, Vedic religion, with an overview of its earliest linkages, periodization and some of its most interesting and distinctive characteristics according to an Indological perspective.

Our access to Vedic society is through a received body of texts produced during the Vedic era, broadly dated from 1750–1500 BCE according to current scholarly conventions. While the historical period when Vedic literature was produced is impossible to ascertain definitively – especially its earliest stages – there is a store of philological evidence that has produced some degree of consensus among Indologists about the historical relationship and chronologies of the language of the *Ṛgveda* and other early civilizations. According to Asko Parpola, the Proto-Indo-Aryan civilization was influenced by two external waves of migrations. The first group originated from the southern Urals (c. 2100 BCE) and mixed with the peoples of the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC); this group then proceeded to South Asia, arriving around 1900 BCE. The second wave arrived in northern South Asia around 1750 BCE and mixed with the formerly arrived group, producing the Mitanni Aryans (c. 1500 BCE), a precursor to the peoples of the *Ṛgveda*. One of Parpola's many contributions has been to identify archaeological zones with centers of reconstructed language communities. He also suggested that characteristic elements of the Vedic traditions, such as the prominent use of chariots and the deities Mitra-Varuṇa and the Aśvins, be associated with the first wave of migrants, and that the second wave introduced Indra as the chief deity and the *soma* cult. Michael Witzel has assigned an approximate chronology to the strata of Vedic languages, arguing that the language of the *Ṛgveda* changed through the beginning of the Iron Age in South Asia, which started in the Northwest (Punjab) around 1000 BCE. On the basis of comparative philological evidence, Witzel has suggested a five-stage periodization of Vedic civilization, beginning with the *Ṛgveda*. On the basis of internal evidence, the *Ṛgveda* is dated as a late Bronze Age text composed by pastoral migrants with limited settlements, probably between 1350 and 1150 BCE in the Punjab region (Parpola 2013: 119–184). It then went through four subsequent stages: the late *Ṛgveda* (the tenth book and portions of the *Atharvaveda*); the language of ritual formulas (mantra, e.g. *Yajurveda*, *Sāmaveda Saṃhitā*, *Atharvaveda*, *Ṛgveda Khilāni*); the prose of the *Yajurveda*; the principal *Brāhmaṇas*; the late *Brāhmaṇas*, *Āraṇyakas*, earliest *Upaniṣads* and *Sūtra* literature, especially the *Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra* (Witzel 2003). This latest group of texts is called 'Vedānta', or the 'end of the Veda', and forms the terminal boundary of the Vedic literature under consideration here.

In the most general sense, 'Vedic literature' can refer to anything composed in Vedic Sanskrit during the Vedic era; it can also refer to a large body of literature that was produced over centuries that is considered 'connected to the Vedas'. The internal perspective of the texts' provenance is that they were not written by mortal authors, but that they were revealed or 'heard' as primordial sacred syllables, only audible to a class of exalted sages in an unsullied era (*satyayuga*) of an unimaginably distant past. These syllables, said to emanate from the universe itself, were not

trusted to writing, but were instead safeguarded for posterity through the more reliable route of oral transmission, as practiced with remarkable dedication by communities of Brahmins, the caste or class of people described in Vedic literature (*R̥gveda* 10.90.11–12) as occupying the highest ranking social order. Brahmins are typically designated as priests or ritual specialists.

This is the first of many remarkable features of Vedic literature, for the dedication of the Brahmin priests throughout their lineages means that the integrity of transmission of Vedic literature transmission is unmatched in any other world civilization, through the use of mnemonic structures in the texts themselves and memorization enhanced by the use of kinetic techniques. Since the texts are held as transcending human and even divine agency, they are considered sacrosanct and are the legacy of four extended family clans (*śākhās*) that have, over the millennia, preserved the tradition of Vedic learning and recitation in these groups. Hence, the first way of organizing Vedic literature is by the schools of transmission, or *śākhās*, with centuries-old traditions of learning and oral transmission that evolved out of family lineages. The oldest tradition is associated with the *R̥gveda*. The *Sāmaveda* and *Yajurveda* complete this earliest triad, which is affirmed in canonical *dharma* texts such as the *Laws of Manu*, wherein the tripartite core of Vedic literature is noted. The fourth Veda, the *Atharvaveda* is somewhat different in character and is definitively later than the earlier three. The four *śākhās* roughly cover four different religious spheres, which correspond to overlapping divisions and concerns among the Brahminical families that produced them. While each of these *śākhā* lineages are, naturally, far more complex than may be covered here, they may be characterized as follows: the *R̥gveda* is the source of the most ancient ritual texts with hymns to Vedic deities such as *Agni*, *Indra*, *Varuṇa* and so on. The *Sāmaveda* is concerned with the core *R̥gveda* material in metrical or musical terms and provides structure for recitation. The *Yajurveda* provides ritual formulas or *mantras* and commentary required for the proper execution of Vedic sacrificial ritual. The *Atharvaveda* covers esoteric topics, medicine, disease and matters related to domestic ritual. For a fuller account of them, see Olivelle (1999).

In addition to these lineages, there is a second standard way of organizing Vedic literature: by genres, arranged from oldest to youngest. The oldest is *Samhitā*, then *Brāhmaṇa* and *Āraṇyaka*, with *Upaniṣad* as the most recently produced. This fourfold categorization is an idealized one as the genres' dates of production overlap and they share many stylistic characteristics. However, it is useful as it presents a semi-chronological way of understanding how Vedic literature fits together over time. The four genres are layered around one another, with the *samhitā* texts at the centre. By the time of the *Upaniṣads*, the approach to religious life had changed greatly, but one of the distinctive features of Vedic literature is that, despite this distance, the earliest core of *samhitā* remains the ultimate religious authority.

Samhitā is a genre of religious songs in praise of various deities concerned with maintaining balance in the cosmic order through performing fire sacrifices of ritual food, other substitute sacrificial items and animals (*pasuyajña*) (Kane, Vaman 1941: 1109–1132). The *samhitās* were produced in the earliest phase of the Vedic era over the course of approximately half a millennium. The oldest and most important *samhitā* is the *R̥gvedasamhitā*, a collection of 1028 religious songs associated with the *R̥gveda śākhā*. According to Michael Witzel, current archaeological and philological evidence suggest that this material was produced between 1650/1500 BCE and 1200/1000 BCE, as the internal evidence of the text suggests that it pre-dates the use of iron among the Vedic peoples, proximately located in modern-day Swat and Punjab in north western India (Witzel 2008: 55). This means that the *R̥gvedasamhitā* is the oldest scripture considered as a source or religious authority in the Hindu traditions, in terms of both genre and school. It is usually what is intended by the imprecise expression 'R̥gveda'.

The next genre to arise was *brāhmaṇa*, which interprets the *samhitā* and sheds light on technicalities that had become obscure with the passage of time. The era of *brāhmaṇa* prose literature

may be placed around 1000–700 BCE, which means that the world of the *brāhmaṇas* is already very far removed from that of the earliest Vedic literature. Next, a third genre of explanatory commentary, *Āraṇyaka*, arose with a shared concern to elaborate on the language and referents of the older texts. Finally, the fourth Vedic genre is the *upaniṣads*. By now, we can discern many significant shifts of emphasis; the authors retain reverence for the *saṃhitā*, but they reinterpret it in light of new concerns. Taking the most prominent place now are metaphysical issues such as rebirth and liberation from it, and the internalization of sacrifice and ritual into interior practices. There is also a new emphasis on renunciation, the performance of austerities to gain power over the self and viewing the quotidian world as an obstacle to perceiving the true nature of reality. The nature of the texts has changed too; the *upaniṣads* are structured as dialogues between teachers and students, who seek knowledge and insight into philosophical questions.

Now to turn to the limitations of Vedic literature alluded to at the outset of this section. Our only historical access to this society is provided by its own interlocutors, and there is no other known ancient contemporary source that can corroborate or challenge our reading of Vedic society as portrayed in Vedic literature. Furthermore, there are no external sources that could give perspective on the texts either, because there is no material or archaeological evidence that has been linked to Vedic society. We are thus limited to understanding this society only in terms of its own texts, which represent it in very particular ways. The texts mention other communities, but are read against the Vedic norms, which naturally dominate this literature, and foreigners are described as *mleccha*, stammerers or babblers – those who cannot speak Vedic Sanskrit. With, essentially, a single worldview represented in this literature – that of its putative human authors – it is extremely problematic to try to draw conclusions about the community that produced these texts and its broader social context; we can only understand the authors of these texts as a particular sub-community, which is representing itself. One thing that the textual evidence makes clear is that there must be additional caveats in understanding the Vedic community through its own self-representation because of the ideology of self-representation that comes through in this literature.

In summary, the content of Vedic literature is addressed to an extremely limited audience. The ideals of Vedic society, as interpreted through the language and ideas of Vedic literature, are hierarchical, patriarchal and insular. The language of Vedic literature, Vedic Sanskrit, is a highly restricted language of a male elite. As far as the texts can be said to represent gender norms, women participated in Vedic religious life as subordinates to men. Furthermore, Vedic literature, composed over centuries, contains statements that are difficult to reconcile with one another, a natural consequence of the differing contexts of literary production over time. For example, animal sacrifice was a standard element of Vedic religion, but so too were injunctions to avoid violence towards plants and animals. As discussed by H. W. Tull, Vedic religion, while predicated on sacrifice, was also deeply concerned with the effects of violence on the sacrifice and the sacrificial victims, based on a mutual identification between them (Tull 1996: 228).

Finally, on reflecting upon Vedic deities, the Vedic hymns to the gods are concerned with gods who have been obscure for centuries, if not millennia. For example, the most important Vedic deities are *Agni*, the fire that consumes the all-important sacrifices and conveys them to the gods, and *Soma*, a plant that imparts hallucinogenic insights upon ingestion, deified as a keystone of ritual insight (Falk 1989). Indra was another of the most important deities of Vedic literature, but has become marginal in contemporary times. Likewise, *Sarasvatī*, Vedic goddess of knowledge, is linked to a river deified so long ago that it is conjectured to have been the ancient Sarasvatī river, the contemporary Ghaggar-Hakra river in northwest India that no longer flows above ground as a viable riverine system. Other Vedic deities may be still found today but their importance in the pantheon has radically declined. Conversely, some deities that make minor appearances in the

Vedas, such as Shiva (Rudra), have evolved into the major deities of contemporary Hinduism. In short, it is the ability of the texts to signify Hindu heritage that continues to inspire interest and reverence, rather than engagement with the detailed contents of them. This means that reverence for the Vedas involves a focus more on their canonical status as revealed literature than on the substance of the revelations.

Contemporary Vedas as universal – Singapore's Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple

In this and the final section of this chapter, I discuss how the Vedas are overwritten in different contemporary, transnational Hindu contexts to represent Indic cultural heritage so variably as to suggest that the 'essence' of the Vedas is both Indic-universalist (Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple) and Indic and particularist (BAPS Swaminarayan). In both of these and other contexts, the 'Vedas' continue to enjoy the weight given them as a source of religious authority, while an attenuated reading of them continues to strongly inform understandings of Hindu heritage. What are the motivations and agendas involved in keeping Vedic traditions alive?

Of the many contemporary Hindu institutions that exemplify inclusivist 'Hinduism', I turn to an example of great interest in Singapore – the Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple (*Śrī Senpaga Vināyakar Ālayam*). This temple has been a focal point of the Hindu Sri Lankan (Ceylonese) Tamil community for the last 150 years. Ethirnayagam Pillai is recalled as having founded a small temple at this site in the 1850s, after chancing upon a statue of *Vināyakar*, or Ganesh, underneath a *Senpaga* tree (*Magnolia champaca*). The Hindu temple then established passed into the formal custodianship of the Singapore Ceylon (Sri Lanka) Tamils' Association (SCTA) in 1923. It was consecrated in 1930 and newly rebuilt in 2003, when it received National Heritage Board designation (Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple 2013: 3–4). Aesthetically, the Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple is clearly a centre of Tamil culture, in that the building is adorned with images of Shiva, Ganesha and Nandi, Shiva's bull guardian and vehicle, and other members of the Tamil Shaivite divine pantheon (see Figure 2.1). In terms of religious practices, the temple promotes Tamil Shaivite devotional activities and cultural norms in terms of materials used in rituals and requests visitors to 'respect our customs' in dress and decorum.

The Sri Senpaga Vinayaka Temple serves and is maintained by Ceylonese-Hindu Singaporeans – a community with a very particular cultural, ethnic and national identity (Figure 2.2). At the same time, the ethos of the temple conceptually exemplifies what Brian A. Hatcher has described as 'Vedantic universalism' (Hatcher 2004: 196). Here, all beliefs and practices deemed to be 'spiritual' are subsumed under the category of 'Hindu'. For example, prominent signage at the temple entrance notes that, 'this place of holiness is for people of all religion and races. There is no conversion required. Everyone is deemed to be a Hindu' (Figure 2.2). This view is stated even more explicitly on massive painted slabs in the temple interior, which repeat the text from the first paragraph of the temple guidebook: 'Hinduism is the oldest religion in the world. Anyone can practice Hinduism – there is no conversion required' (Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple 2013: 1). Similarly, the temple literature characterizes the chief deity of the temple, Ganesha, by his 'universality', and claims that he belongs 'to the world and not only to the Hindus. He has myriad names but as the Divine One, is revered and worshipped throughout the world' (Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple 2013: 13).

While the temple's community has a strong sense of its distinctive regional and linguistic heritage, the kind of 'Hinduism' that the community expresses through its temple is both highly particular to Hindu devotional practice and to inclusivist Hinduism. Within this framework of Vedantic universalism, 'the Vedas' are interpreting simply as meaning 'wisdom' and are stated to



Figure 2.1 Exterior ornamentation at the Sri Senpaga Vinayaka Temple, Singapore

Source: Andrea Marion Pinkney

be equivalent to the Hindu ‘Bible’ (Sri Senpaga Vinayagar Temple 2013: 22). This kind of totalizing Hindu discourse appears to fit well with Joanne Waghorne’s discussion of globalization and universality, where she defines globalization as able to accommodate ‘locality’, while universalization ‘tends to blunt both locality and neighborhood in the religious dimension of worldwide migration’ (Waghorne 2004: 178).

Contemporary Vedas as ‘Indian’ – Swaminarayan Hinduism

For an illuminating case study of one contemporary use of Hinduism’s Vedic heritage, we need look no further than the sect known as Swaminarayan Hinduism. Various divisions and sub-communities have arisen but all generally look to Swaminarayan (1781–1830), as a Gujarati saint and founder of the *sampradāy* or community (Williams 2001: 54–55). Within the groups, the fastest growing and most influential is known as BAPS, the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha, or the Bochasanwasi Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha (*Bochāsānvāsī akṣar puruṣottam svāminārāyaṇ saṁsthā*). It has been identified as ‘the most prominent form of transnational Hinduism’ and has adeptly created an identity for itself as a ‘transnational world religion’ that fosters Gujarati ethnic ties with the global Gujarati Hindu population (Williams 2001: 198).

The Akshar Purushottam Sanstha is Vaishnava, meaning its primary devotional orientation is to the deity Vishnu in his various *avatāras*, and to Swaminarayan himself. In line with typical Vaishnava food norms, BAPS strongly promotes the consumption of exclusively vegetarian food. The imagining of ‘Hinduism’ in the Swaminarayan community is grandly universalist, and also



Figure 2.2 Entrance to Sri Senpaga Vinayaka Temple, Singapore

Source: Andrea Marion Pinkney

deeply celebratory of a particularly ahistorical reading of Indic civilization. In 2005, the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha officially opened a massive temple project, Akshardham, which has become one of New Delhi's most frequently visited tourist landmarks. In building such 'monumental architecture', Kavita Singh described BAPS as delivering an, 'aestheticized version of Indian culture that appeals to older and younger generations and generates pride in Indian traditions' (Singh 2010: 3–4). In BAPS' own framing, Akshardham is where: 'art is ageless, culture is borderless, values are timeless' (Akshardham 2010: 1). There are many other hallmarks of the 'world religion' framework in Swaminarayan literature and *Sanātana Dharma* is named as one of its organizing principles. There it is asserted that, spiritually, India's diversity can be reduced to the essence of *Sanātana Dharma*, '[i]n spite of India's mosaic of cultures, languages, boundaries and human features, its spirituality pervades from north to south to east to west' (ibid.: 8, 21).

In this kind of usage, *Sanātana Dharma* encompasses the meaning of an all-purpose framing of the Hindu traditions. It also embraces embodied forms of Hindu devotional practice, in that it typically includes ritual practices associated with images of sages and revered gurus and depictions of the god's images and statue form. When instantiated three-dimensionally, representations

of the gods, goddesses and people understood to be saints are a focus of devotional practice. This meaning of *Sanātana Dharma* is understood in Indic terms as a ‘*saguna*’ orientation to divinities; that is, gods are understood as having embodied forms, distinctive individual characteristics and presence in human history. Conversely, the ‘*nirguna*’ orientation understands divinity as being transcendent and formless.

What is fascinating to note in the worldview of the Akshar Purushottam Sanstha is its integration of selected elements of Vedic heritage in its self-presentation as a contemporary beacon of *Sanātana Dharma*. The founder, whose life spanned the turn of the nineteenth century, is described as preaching ‘Vedic wisdom’ tempered with devotion (*bhakti*), a combination of strands of the Hindu traditions that historically fell some two millennia apart (Akshardham 2010: 22). Among the site’s visitor attractions is something called a *yagna kund*, or sacrificial pond, which is described as ‘traditionally Vedic’ with a ‘spectacular musical fountain’ (Akshardham 2010: 26). Akshardham has many state-of-art exhibitions within its environs, including an IMAX theater and a 14-minute boat ride exhibit through ‘more than 10,000 years of India’s ancient culture and contributions to the world’, which graphically represents a contemporary imagining of Vedic heritage and exemplifies some of the ways in which Vedic heritage continues to underwrite innovations in the Hindu traditions (ibid.: 31). Numerous tableaux during the boat ride are identified as scenes from ‘Vedic times’, including a blacksmith’s workshop (*dhātu udyog*), a potter’s workshop (*kumbhakāra*) and a ‘Vedic bazaar selling clothes, jewellery, and other hand-made articles’ (ibid.: 31–32). Some 800 life-size scale figures of men and women sit around brick homes and shops, so that visitors may ‘[e]xperience the sights and sounds of a Vedic village and bazaar’ (ibid.: 31).

Sanjay Srivastava described one of the site’s major appeals as presenting ‘its tableau of consumption (of objects and spaces) as contiguous with the world outside’ (Srivastava 2009: 341). As Srivastava rightly identifies, the site itself does not induce a sense of nostalgia for Hindu antiquity, but instead relates to it as a ‘traditional’. At Akshardham, the element of time in Hindu heritage is elided, so that its vision is anchored on the remote Vedic past as ‘based on authentic heritage’ and is made relevant to modern India through its state-of-the-art visitor and museum facilities (Akshardham 2010: 4). Regarding time and also space, J. E. Tunbridge and G. E. Ashworth note that the contemporary production of heritage hinges on a ‘peculiar’ relationship with time, but also, ‘a strong intrinsic spatial component’ (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996: 5). Material evidence of the Vedic past being unavailable, the localization of it at Akshardham for contemporary consumption is freed from any potential dissonance. In fact, the site’s ability to resonate with the antiquity of ‘Hinduism’ embodies an aspirational sense of Indian modernity upon on a selectively curated foundation of Vedic heritage.

Concluding reflections

In this chapter, I have tried to foreground and also foreshadow some of the other issues arising in the study of non-Western religious traditions following upon the discipline’s legacy as a byproduct of the colonial enterprise in South Asia. From an academic viewpoint, some now prefer to work with the framework of the ‘Hindu traditions’ as a historical and pluralistic approach to a 3000-year-old tradition. And from a post-colonial perspective, we can appreciate the so-called ‘construction’ of ‘Hinduism’ as having been part of a particular moment in history with long-lasting repercussions in our understanding of religious life in South Asia.

In the case of the Hindu traditions, religious beliefs, ethical systems, social organizations and practices span the spectrum of cultural specificity and universality. Certain beliefs and practices show high cultural specificity, including patterns of marriage, social relations and commensality.

Alongside these are other patterns, which aspire to universality, such as devotional religious practices, modern guru and spirituality movements, and so on. As I have discussed above, the idea of the Vedas is also used in both ways – particularistically, as the singular crown jewel of Hindu civilization – and universalistically, as India's spiritual bequest to humankind.

Note

- 1 According to the 2001 Government of India census, India's total population of 1,028,610,328 can be fully classified according to the following categories of religious affiliation: Hindus (827,578,868; 80.5 per cent); Muslims (138,188,240; 13.4 per cent); Christians (24,080,016; 2.3 per cent); Sikhs (19,215,730; 1.9 per cent); Buddhists (7,955,207; 0.8 per cent); Jains (4,225,053; 0.4 per cent); Others (6,639,626; 0.6 per cent); Religion not stated (727,588; 0.1 per cent) (Government of India 2013b).

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