

## INDIAN RELIGION - Postclassical Period

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**Overview** It is difficult to overstate the significance of religion in India, both historically and in modern times. The ancient Hindu texts of the Vedas are the oldest religious texts still recited and remembered. Buddhism, one of the few truly 'world' religions, originated and flourished in India until its demise starting around 1000 CE. Islam has been in India for than a millennium and represents a fascinating instance of religious synthesis, especially at the local level of practice and belief. In addition to these, there is Jainism, still a presence in parts of the country, Christianity, thoroughly assimilated and woven into the social fabric, and finally, the shamanistic systems of India's many tribal populations.

### Early Postclassical Period

**Devotionalism** The second historic shift in Indian religion (after the turn from the ritualism in the Vedas to speculation in the Upanishads) was the development of devotionalism, known as *bhakti* ('to share in', 'to belong to'). Characterised by an intense and personal attachment to a particular god or goddess, saint or guru, devotionalism illustrates the regionalism of the period. Until the bhakti movement, religious thought had been expressed almost exclusively in Sanskrit, the preserve of ritual specialists and court poets. Then, beginning in about 500 CE in the Tamil country, religious poetry, myth and song were composed and sung in the languages of common people. Favoured by royal patronage, the movement spread across the face of the subcontinent and has been the life-blood of Hinduism ever since. Even Buddhism, which the bhakti poets 'sang out of India,' was affected by devotionalism. New Mahayana figures, such as bodhisattvas (Avalokitesvara and Maitreya) and goddesses (Padmini and Tara) were worshipped in shrines and with rituals similar to those in Hinduism.

**Philosophy** A parallel shift occurred in Hindu religious philosophy, as illustrated by Shankaracharya. Shankaracharya was a religious philosopher who lived in South India, probably in Kerala and probably in the first half of the 8<sup>th</sup> c. CE. He is arguably the most influential theologian in all Indian history. Tradition holds that he became a wandering ascetic at an early age, travelled north to Benares and debated with religious thinkers all over India. It was a time of fierce rivalry, and even violence, between Hindus, Buddhists and Jains. In this maelstrom Shankaracharya wrote commentaries on major Hindu texts to explicate the *advaita* or 'non-dualism' school of Hinduism, which claimed that beneath the flux of our impressions there is an unchanging reality. This is the *brahman*. All else is *maya* or illusion. Although he did not agree with the emotive devotionalism that was sweeping south India at the time, he did provide Hinduism with an uncompromising foundation in its battle against rival religions.

**Buddhism** Buddhism grew out of Hinduism in the 6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE through a new eschatology (*nirvana*) and the embrace of a more austere path to enlightenment, especially in the Theravada/Hinayana school. This new, heterodox belief system also rejected the domination of Hinduism's priestly elite in favour of monks and laymen and laywomen, who could follow the path of non-violence and virtue. This ideology, which appealed to the emerging mercantile and trading communities in the cities, was patronised by the Mauryan Empire and spread quickly all over India, including the far south, where it played a major role in literary, social and political life.

**Jainism** Like Buddhism, Jainism is an offshoot of Hinduism and based on a historical figure who lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE (Mahavira, 'Great Hero'). Again like Buddhism, asceticism and non-violence are central to Jainism. However, a key tenet of Jainism is the indestructible and immortal individual soul (*jiva*), which differentiates it from both Hinduism and Buddhism. Jainism also spread through mercantile groups and contributed to literature and scholarship in many regional languages.

**Islam** As these large scale developments were unfolding, another key event occurred when Muslims arrived in the subcontinent in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century CE. Indian Islam did not diverge much from Islam in the Arab or Persian world, although Sufism (itself a Persian import) became a major force and mingled with forms of local Hinduism. For example, Hindu devotionalism and Sufism both focus on a saint as a conduit to divine power, rather than on God himself, and the cults of the Sufi saints (*pir*) became almost indistinguishable from their Hindu counterparts.

## Late Postclassical Period

**Islam** Early Indian Islam was guided by the Qur'an and the Sunna, which tradition held were the words and principles of the Prophet. Thus, the Islam practiced in Delhi in this period would have differed little from that observed in Baghdad or Damascus. There were minor differences, however, especially in the interpretation of Islamic law (*shariah*), resulting from a recognition that adjustments had to be made when Islam conquered people of different faiths.

**Sufism** Islam during the Delhi Sultanate was also tempered by the Sufis, the wandering Muslim mystics who took their name from the coarse wool tunic they wore. Sufis represented the ecstatic impulse suppressed in legalistic schools of Islam and expressed in their statement: 'Mystics learn from God; scholars learn from books.' Although Islam held that the only path to Paradise was unwavering faith in God, Sufi saints believed that one could draw closer to God during one's lifetime and thereby experience mystical oneness. As singers and poets, they helped to spread Islam through the countryside in a way that traditional Islamic teachers could not. The Sufi poet-saints were virtually identical to the poet-saints of devotional Hinduism. Both groups sang of a direct, personal contact with the divine, a power that they believed transcended petty social categories like caste and religious identity.

**Hinduism** Devotionalism, which had begun centuries earlier in the Tamil country, spread like wild fire across the entire subcontinent during this period. Hindu poet-saints composed songs in Kannada, Marathi, Malayalam, Telugu, Gujarati, Hindi and Assamese, which sang the praises of deities in the language of common people. The Chola kingdom in the far south and the Vijayanagar kingdom in the Deccan provided the patronage to promote the worship of Visnu and Siva in large temples and local shrines. The philosopher Ramanuja (c. 1017–1137 CE) established a theological basis for devotionalism with his school of *Vishistadvaita* ('qualified non-dualism'). He explained that a worshipper need not merge into oneness with god (the goal of the rival *Advaita*, or non-dualism, school). Instead, the worshipper could become immersed in god, while still retaining a personal identity; indeed, that personal identity was a prerequisite to forming a bond with god.

## Reading

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