

Devotional Hinduism

HPRS4003 Asian Religious Traditions

From Ritual to Devotion

- First millennium BCE:
 1. Emphasis on sacrificial ritual, adherence to *varnashrama-dharma*.
 2. Emphasis on liberation from *samsara* and ideology of renunciation/detachment.
- 500 BCE through the first millennium CE (the 'Classical' period): growth of sectarian worship of particular deities.

The *Bhakti* Movement

- ***Bhakti*** ('*Bhaj'*, 'to belong to/to be attached to'): the intense love or devotion of the devotee towards God.
- *Bhakti* to a personal God (*Bhagavan*) or Goddess (*Bhagavati*) became a central, all-pervasive movement.
- The belief that a personal relationship with a deity is possible and that this path of loving devotion (***bhakti-yoga***) can lead to liberation.
- The growth of Hindu theism reflected in the narrative traditions of the Epics (*Itihasa*), in mythological treatises known as the *Puranas*, and in devotional poetry in vernacular languages (e.g. Tamil).

The Decline of the Vedic Deities

- *Sramana* movements ushered in the decline of most of the Vedic deities.
- Although the worship of Vedic deities does not disappear entirely from Hinduism, their significance is reduced.
- Other deities such as Shiva and Vishnu rise to prominence.

Bhakti/Theistic Traditions

- **Vaishnavism:** Vishnu is the Absolute Reality and main focus of *bhakti*.
- **Shaivism:** Shiva is the Absolute Reality and main focus of *bhakti*.
- **Shaktism:** Shakti (the female divine energy) or the Mahadevi (the Mother Goddess) is the Absolute Reality and main focus of *bhakti*.

Narrative Traditions

- The two Epics (*Itihasa*): the ***Mahabharata*** and the ***Ramayana***
- The ***Puranas***
- Although classified as *smṛti* (humanly-authored), the *Itihasa-Purana* is often known as the 'fifth Veda'.
- These texts document the rise of the great theistic traditions of Hinduism.

The Epics: The *Mahabharata*

- One of the longest poems in the world, comprising over 100,000 verses.
- Compiled over several centuries from the first half of the first millennium BCE, reaching its established form by the 1st century CE, though still being formulated by the 4th.
- Northern and southern recensions, as well as regional variations of the text.
- The origins of the Epic lay in non-brahmanical social groups, though the story was appropriated by orthodox Brahmins.

The Epics: The *Bhagavad Gita*

- One of the most famous texts in the whole of Hindu literature.
- *Bhagavad Gita* = 'Song of the Lord'
- Possibly a later insertion into the *Mahabharata*.
- Takes the form of a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna on the battlefield.

The Epics: The *Bhagavad Gita*

- Krishna gradually reveals his divinity to Arjuna, a process which culminates in a theophany.
- The path of action (*karma-yoga*) emphasized as a way of reconciling worldly commitment with liberation.
- Above the path of action is the path of devotion to the Lord (*bhakti-yoga*).

The Epics: The *Bhagavad Gita*

'Understand that this is the source of all living beings; I am the origin and dissolution of this whole universe...there is nothing at all higher than me; all this is strung on me like pearls on a thread...I am taste in the waters, light in the moon and sun, the sacred syllable [OM] in all the Vedas, sound in the air, manhood in men. Also I am the pleasant fragrance in the earth, the radiance in fire, the life in all beings' (ch. 7, vv. 6-9).

'Even the evil-doer, if he shares in me with single-minded devotion, may be thought of as good, for he has fixed on what is right...For whoever depends on me, Partha, however low their origins – whether they are women, farmers and merchants, or even labourers and serfs – they go by the highest path' (ch. 9, vv. 30-32).

'Fix your mind on me, devote yourself to me, sacrifice to me, do homage to me, and so you shall in reality come to me. I promise you: you are dear to me' (ch. 18, v. 65).

The Epics: The *Ramayana*

- The story of King Rama.
- By the last books of the text, Rama is referred to as an incarnation (*avatara*) of Vishnu.
- In circulation by the first century CE.
- The annual *Ram Lila* festivals and performances, particularly at Ramnagar near Varanasi, attracts thousands of pilgrims.

The Epics: The *Ramayana* (*Ram Lila*)



The *Puranas*

- 'Stories of the ancient past'
- The bulk of the material established during the reign of the Guptas (c. 320 – c. 500 CE).
- 18 major *Puranas* and 18 related subordinate texts known as *Upapuranas*.
- The *Puranas* contain essential material for understanding the religions of Vishnu, Shiva, the Goddess and other deities in the Hindu pantheon.

Classical Hinduism

- The Epics and the *Puranas* mark the rise in so-called 'Classical Hinduism', characterized by the ascendancy of deities such as Shiva, Vishnu, and the Mahadevi/Great Goddess.
- Classical Hinduism also marked by the building of Hindu temples, and the *bhakti*-oriented performance of *puja*.
- All of these innovations were gradually accepted into what constituted a newer kind of orthodoxy.

Shaivism: Factfile

- A branch of Hinduism that worships Shiva as the Supreme Lord.
- Often, Shiva is worshipped in the form of his ***Lingam***, a symbol of Shiva's creative power and energy.
- Shaivas also worship Shiva's companion **Sati/Parvati** and his sons **Ganesha** and **Skanda**.
- Many temples consecrated to Shiva but Nataraja in Tamilnadu is considered one of the most sacred.
- *Na-ma-si-va-ya*

Shaivism: Origins and Development

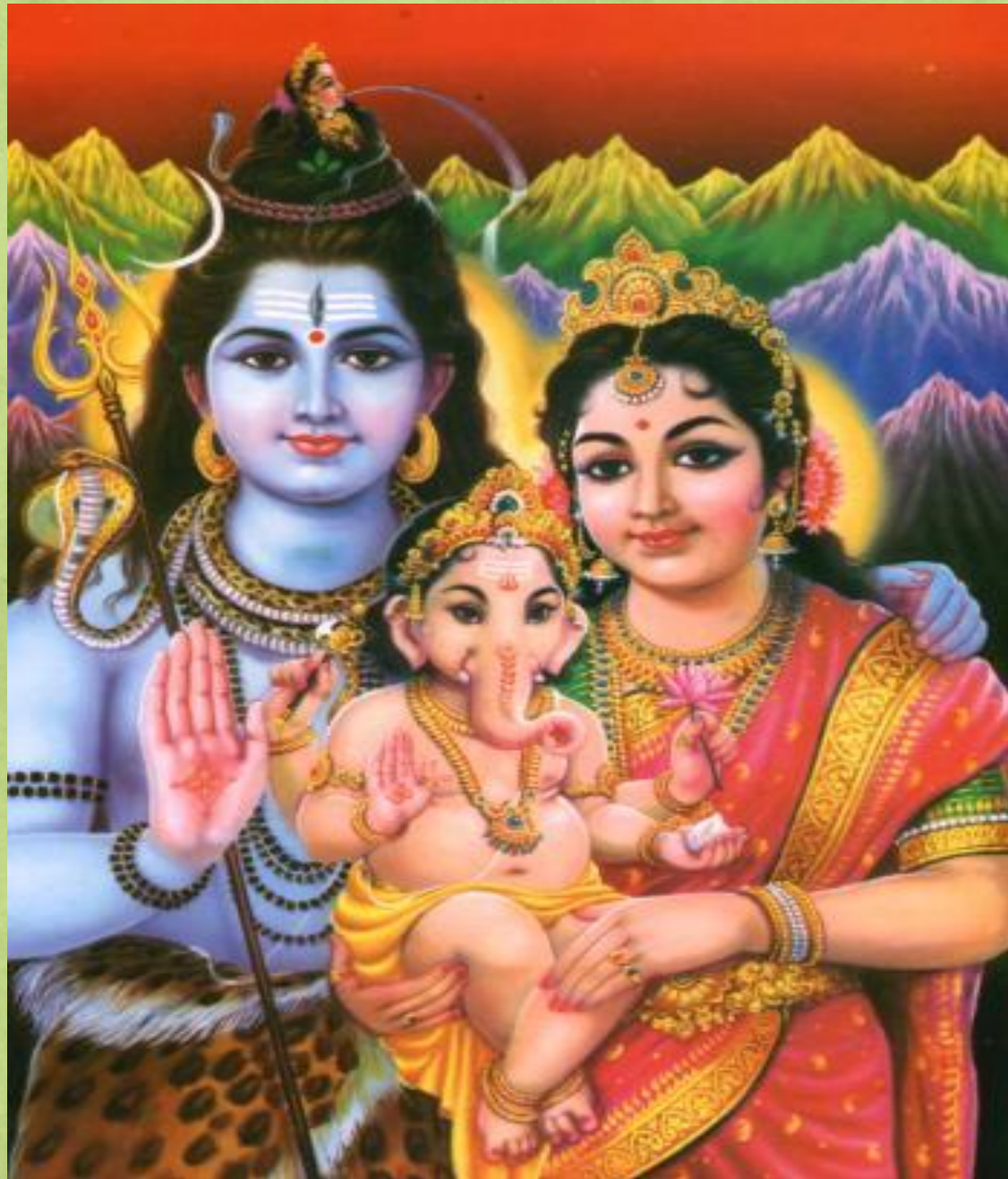
- Rig Veda hymns to **Rudra** first mention the word *shiva* ('auspicious').
- Evidence of a bhakti-like sentiment developing from as early as the 4th century BCE (see the **Svetasvatara Upanishad**).
- Many references to Shiva and his deeds in the Mahabharata (see, for example, the myth of Shiva's destruction of Daksa's *yajna*).
- The rise of Shiva-bhakti is evident in South India in the poems of the **Nayanars** (6th-8th centuries CE).

Shiva

- Shiva = 'Auspicious'
- *Lord of the Ascetics/Lord of the Dance*
- The god of procreation and sexuality (see, *lingam*).
- Father of Ganesha, the god of wisdom.
- *Shiva-Ratri* ('the night of Shiva') – the festival held in honour of Shiva.











Vaishnavism: Factfile

- Extremely devotional and emphasizes personal worship of Vishnu, or one of his incarnations, as the Supreme Lord.
- Approx. half of the world's 1 billion Hindus are Vaishnavas.
- Popular in north-west India especially.
- Vaishnava worship often involves ecstatic dancing and the chanting of sacred names, e.g. Rama and Krishna (see ISKCON).

Vaishnavism: Origins and Development

- In the Rig Veda, Vishnu is a solar deity, often coupled with Indra. However, relatively few references indicate his minor status.
- The **Harivamsa**, a Mahabharata supplement, develops Krishna's mythology. This is further elaborated upon in the **Bhagavata** and **Vishnu Puranas**.
- Rulers in the Gupta period patronized the worship of Vishnu through the construction of temples to him.
- The South Indian bhakti movement, exemplified by the **Alvars**, further promoted the worship of Vishnu.

Vishnu

- The name 'Vishnu' derives from the root *vis* ('to spread out in all directions').
- Identified with his 10 manifestations/incarnations (*dashavatara*), especially Krishna and Rama.
- **Lakshmi**, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, is the companion of Vishnu.



Dasaavataara of Lord Vishnu







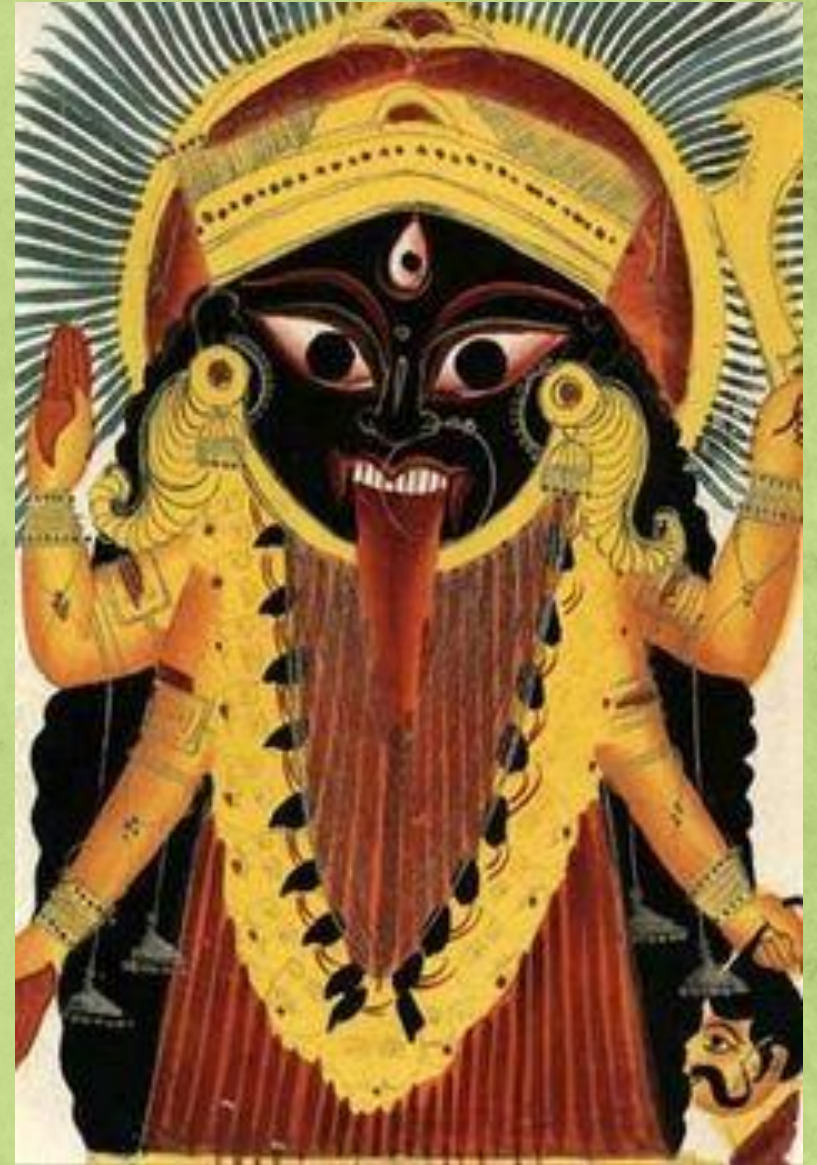
Shaktism: Factfile

- Both Vishnu and Shiva associated with a female energy – **Lakshmi**, the goddess of riches and prosperity, is the companion of Vishnu; **Parvati**, the goddess of the mountains, is the companion of Shiva.
- These goddesses are considered to be expressions of the same Absolute Reality, the divine female energy (**Shakti**), also described as the Mother Goddess or 'Great Goddess' (**Mahadevi**).
- Shaktism is particularly strong in north-east India.

Shaktism: Origins and Development

- There are relatively few hymns to goddesses in the Rig Veda.
- A number of goddesses, such as **Korravai**, worshipped among the non-Sanskritic Tamils, were eventually subsumed into the Vedic deities.
- Among the few goddesses in the Vedic sources, some are benign and nurturing, while others are dangerous and feared.
- The ***Devi Sukta*** hymn in the Rig Veda, sung by the goddess Vac to herself, presents a number of characteristics with which the Mahadevi will eventually be associated.







Puja

- The chief way of demonstrating love or devotion (*bhakti*) to a deity or deities.
- ***Puja*** ('to respect/worship') refers to the daily act of worship performed before the icon/image (*murti*) of a deity or deities (usually before breakfast).
- Icons or images allow the devotee to experience direct communication with his or her gods – tangible expressions of the intangible.

Puja

'In contrast to animal sacrifice, *puja* is the offering of vegetarian food, flowers and incense to a deity. All deities accept these offerings and are the focuses of *puja*, though some accept blood sacrifice (*bali*) as well. *Puja*, a Sanskrit word which can be loosely translated as 'worship', is performed in private homes and in public temples throughout Hindu south Asia. Minimally it might involve making a small offering of a coin to the icon of a deity and receiving the deity's blessing in the form of a mark (*tilak*) of sandalwood paste (*candana*) or red turmeric powder (*kunkuma*) on the forehead. In private homes, *puja* would be performed before the icon of the deity installed in either a separate room, in the houses of the better-off, or in the purest room in the house, the kitchen. In the temple a *puja* might become very elaborate, with sacred verses (*mantra*) being uttered by the temple priest (*pujari/pucari*) while the icon is bathed and dressed, and a variety of foods offered, accompanied by the strong smell of incense and the loud ringing of bells and banging of drums. Many people might be present at such *pujas* to gaze upon the deity – to have its *darsana* – and to receive back the offered food blessed by the god (*prasada*)'

– Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, pp. 208-209.

Performing *Puja*



- *Puja* can be performed at home or in the temple.
- Can be offered to any image or icon that the individual feels represents God.
- Usually involves washing and dressing the murti, followed by the offering of water/milk, vegetarian food, flowers and incense.
- An expression of affection and familiarity between worshipper and worshipped – enables a relationship of intimacy and mutuality.

Performing *Puja*



Performing *Puja*



Summary: The Rise of *Bhakti*

- The focused and intense expression of love for the divine, as a means of attaining liberation (*bhakti-yoga*).
- The narrative traditions of the Classical period testify to the growth of *Bhakti* traditions.
- *Bhakti* need not be polytheistic; it can also be monotheistic, monistic, henotheistic.
- Performing *puja* as a way of expressing love or devotion to a deity became the central religious practice of Hinduism.

Suggested Reading (see folder on Moodle page)

- Cush, D., C. Robinson, and M. York (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), see the entries on 'Bhakti (as Path)' and 'The Bhakti Movement'.
- Klostermaier, K. K., *A Survey of Hinduism*, 3rd edition (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), see especially ch. 14.
- Lorenzen, D. N., 'Bhakti', *The Hindu World*, ed. S. Mittal and G. R. Thursby (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 185-209.