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DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT MYTHOLOGY

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SUNS: THE MYTHS OF INDIA

The roots of those Indian myths are also very old, stretching back more than 4,500 years to the broad plains of the Indus River Valley. Once centered in what is now the border region between northwestern India and southern Pakistan, the ancient Indus Valley civilization flourished for a thousand years. Most likely, it was anchored by a very ancient, fertility-based, goddess worship, as well as the worship of cows deemed sacred for the milk they provided and the dung that helped fertilize their crops. This civilization lasted until a group of warlike nomads swept in around 1500 BCE. Speaking a language called "Sanskrit," which is at the root of all other Indo-European languages, these new arrivals probably originated near the Caucasus Mountains in central Asia. They called themselves *arya* (meaning "kinsmen" or "noble ones"), and eventually came to be known as Aryans.\* Just as the people later

\*Due to its unfortunate association with Hitler and Nazism, the word "Aryan" has acquired a taint. Hitler and the Nazis used the term to refer to Germans and other northern Europeans, whom they considered racially superior to all other people.

called “Mycenaeans” had barreled into Greece bringing some of their own gods with them and absorbing some of the local deities they found, the Aryans conquered the remnants of the Indus civilization and imposed their “alpha male” pantheon of gods on the locals. That is, at least, the prevailing view; another school of thinking holds that this was a kinder, gentler Aryan migration.

Once settled, the Aryans spread to the south and east, eventually extending their rule over most of India. Over time, the gods and culture of the Aryans gradually combined with those of the existing local cultures, and what Westerners later called “Hinduism” evolved from this ancient marriage. Although the Aryans never developed a great and voracious imperial government intent upon world conquest—just as no dominant state emerged in ancient Greece—their myths eventually knit together the people of this vast and diverse “subcontinent” as no single state or government bureaucracy ever could. Their beliefs and sacred rituals, the Sanskrit language, the holy temples to the cosmos of gods and goddesses—and the unshatterable “caste” system these beliefs cemented rigidly in place—formed the soul of Indian culture.

Yet to talk about “Hinduism” as a monolithic religion is a mistake. It has no pope or hierarchy. No founder or central prophet. No uniting creed. No Vatican or Mecca or Jerusalem. As it exists today, Hinduism—along with its two most significant offshoots, Buddhism and Jainism—is a complex collection of beliefs with a vast pantheon of gods and differing schools of thought. Its dizzying diversity has led writers such as historian Ninian Smart to comment, “Even to talk of a single something called Hinduism can be misleading because of the great variety of customs, forms of worship, gods, myths, philosophies, types of ritual, movements and styles of art and music contained loosely within the bounds of the religion . . . It is as if many Hinduisms had merged into one. It is now more like the trunk of a single ordinary tree; but its past is a tangle of most divergent roots.”

This racist use of the term continues among white supremacist groups, such as the Aryan Nation in the United States. Even the swastika, adapted as the symbol of Nazi power, has its roots in a similar ancient but benign Hindu symbol, which originally meant “let good things happen.” Among the other people who referred to themselves as Aryans were the Iranians; the name “Iran” itself comes from the word “Aryan.”

## What role did myth play in ancient India?

A better question might be, “What role didn’t myth play in ancient India?”

Although there is oddly no equivalent word for “myth” in India’s numerous languages, few other places were as engulfed and pervaded by their myths as was ancient India. From the vegetarian diet many Indians embraced, to their view of the Ganges River as sacred water, to the rigid social classes into which their people were divided, religious ideas born of myth completely dictated life in ancient India. As Anna Dallapiccola writes in *Hindu Myths*, “Myths permeate the totality of Indian culture, mementoes of mythical events dot the whole country, old myths are told anew and new myths are created . . . Each story is connected to many more, one more exciting than the previous; each merges in an ocean of stories.”

The power of myth in ancient India’s everyday life grew out of the Vedic traditions, which formed the heart of the country’s religious practices for centuries. Stretching back to before 1500 BCE, when the Vedas were written, the Vedic traditions were steeped in an older generation of gods, but were ever-present in the actions of priests who petitioned the gods for favors by chanting and making offerings of flowers, food, and gifts. They also oversaw such rites of passage as marriage, childbirth, and death, and—perhaps most important—made sacrifices at fire altars in the hopes of currying the favor of the gods. Tolerant of local customs and

beliefs, the Vedic priests—later the Brahmins—accommodated the local cults that worshipped trees, snakes, mountains, rivers, and other regional deities as they spread across India. Bringing these localized cults into the Vedic fold not only expanded the number of worshippers in India, it also swelled the vast pantheon of gods.

With the introduction of the Upanishads between 800 and 500 BCE, a striking shift in India's mythic mindset took place. The emphasis was no longer on the simple, ancient belief in sacrificing to individual gods who could provide protection, send a good husband, or bring rain to make the plants grow. The emergence of the Upanishads ushered in a new era of far more abstract belief, in which the many gods of ancient times were reduced to the single concept called Brahman, and the emphasis was placed on escaping an endless cycle of death, rebirth, and reincarnation in order for the human soul to link with Brahman, the Absolute Godhead.

Making that cosmic leap involved another notion introduced with the Upanishads—that of karma, the law of cause and effect which dictates that every action has consequences that influence how the soul will be reborn. Unlike the Egyptian or Christian notion, in which proper behavior might guarantee a pleasant afterlife, this Indian concept—simply put—held that living a good life means the soul will be born into a higher state in its next incarnation. An evil life did not mean eternal damnation but a rebirth of the soul into a lower state, possibly even as an animal. This ongoing cycle of life-death-reincarnation continues until a person ultimately achieves spiritual perfection, at which point the soul enters a new level of existence called *moksha* (“release” or “salvation”), in which it is joined with Brahman, the divine godhead.

As these, more abstract religious concepts took hold, the old rituals were not abandoned, but made part of a new order that was contained within a concept called dharma—an all-inclusive sense of moral and spiritual “duty” with implications of truth and righteousness as well. In essence, dharma means the correct way of living. Maintaining dharma is believed to bring rhythm to the natural world and order in society. When dharma is not upheld, the result is uncertainty, natural disaster, and accidents—what *Star Wars* would call “a great disturbance in the Force,” or as Lemony Snicket of children's book fame might put it, “A

Series of Unfortunate Events.” Essential to maintaining dharma was careful adherence to sacred religious observances and the social order. Every man was supposed to do his duty as defined by his station. For women, as Devdutt Pattanaik notes, “There was only one dharma: obeying the father when unmarried, the husband when married, and the son when widowed.” Not exactly a modern feminist’s idea of Nirvana, but certainly in line with the notions of most other male-dominated ancient societies.

The core of Brahmanism’s order was the Brahmin social structure, which evolved into the Hindu caste system. A highly rigid division of social classes, the caste system may have existed in some form before the Aryan invaders—or immigrants—arrived in the Indus Valley. But as the Aryans and their descendants gradually gained control of most of India, the caste system was used, at first, to limit contact between themselves and the aboriginal people known as Dravidians. The Sanskrit word for caste means “color,” and it is widely thought that the tall, fairer-skinned, and possibly blue-eyed Aryans imposed this system on the darker-skinned aboriginal Dravidians.

The three original divisions later became four principal castes—gradually divided into many layers of subcastes—each with its own rules of behavior, particularly regarding marriage. Marrying outside of one’s caste—like an English aristocrat marrying a “commoner”—just wasn’t done. It was not dharma.

On top of the caste system were the Brahmins, the priests and scholars concerned with spiritual matters; next came Kshatriyas, the rulers and warriors who administered the society; beneath them were the Vaisyas, the merchants and professionals who managed the society’s economy; and then the Sudras, the laborers who serviced the society. For centuries, one large group has ranked below even the lowest, Sudra caste. Known as Dalits (“broken” or “ground down”), they were the “untouchables” who performed the most menial tasks and existed outside the four castes—giving us the English word “outcast.”\*

\*Dalits, or untouchables, have traditionally held such occupations as tanning, street sweeping and other menial jobs forbidden to members of the four castes. In 1950, untouchability was constitutionally outlawed, but discrimination against the Dalits is deeply ingrained and a form of caste-based “apartheid” still exists in

Just as priests ruled the European medieval world, and the imams and ayatollahs dictate to modern Islamic governments in places like Iran, the Brahmin caste of priests, philosophers, and scholars held the high ground in ancient Indian society. Elite and powerful, they attained and held their status through religious principle. In *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, his groundbreaking view of human history, Jared Diamond coined the word “kleptocracies” to describe powerful ruling classes and the ways in which they were able to transfer wealth—and power—from commoners to themselves. Far from limited to India’s Brahmins, Diamond’s fairly cynical view of these systems neatly sums up the underpinnings of the caste system: “[One] way for kleptocrats to gain public support is to construct an ideology or religion justifying kleptocracy. Bands and tribes already had supernatural beliefs, just as do modern established religions. But the supernatural beliefs of bands and tribes did not serve to justify central authority, justify transfer of wealth, or maintain peace between unrelated individuals. When supernatural beliefs gained those functions and became institutionalized, they were thereby transformed into what we term a religion.”

Whenever myth morphs into religion, elaborate rituals usually emerge.\* This was certainly apparent in India, where the sacred Ganges, a river originating high in the Himalayas and revered as the physical manifestation of the goddess Ganga, had been associated with purification since ancient times. Bathing in the waters of the Ganges is still a lifelong ambition for Hindu worshippers and, each year, thousands visit such holy cities as Varanasi (Benares) and Allahabad in pilgrimages to do just that. Temples line the banks of the Ganges and ghats (stairways) lead down to the river, where the pilgrims come to bathe and carry home some of its water. While some come only to cleanse and

India, where, according to Human Rights Watch, Dalits are often the victims of violence. “Pariah,” a Tamil word used for people with no caste, has also come to mean a social outcast.

“There is a school of mythology called ritualism, which suggests that rituals precede myths—merely stories created to justify the ritual. A “what came first, the chicken or the egg?” debate, the ritualist concept does not alter the fact that rituals and myths combine as powerful forms of belief and social order.

purify themselves, the sick and crippled come—just as thousands of Christian pilgrims flock to such “miraculous” sites as Lourdes—hoping that the touch of the water will cure their ailments. Others come to die in the river, because the Hindus believe that those who die in the Ganges will have their sins removed.\*

Another later symbol of the order permeating Indian society was the construction of Hindu temples, which began to be built around 300 CE, during the period of the Gupta Empire (c. 320–550 CE), a period known as India’s Golden Age for its accomplishments in literature, science and mathematics, the arts, and architecture. Constructed to venerate a particular deity, these temples, now located across India, housed the god whose devotees came to the temple for a glimpse of the divine, in order to absorb the god’s power and carry that power with them in their daily lives. When they came to the temple, worshippers expressed adoration, made offerings, and sought blessings. Often adorned with erotic sculptures celebrating the Hindu pantheon, these temples represented another step in India’s evolving society. As Devdutt Pattanaik points out, “Not satisfied with approaching the divine through trees, animals, rivers, and natural rock formations, the kings sponsored the making of idols of Gods and Goddesses in metal and stone that were enshrined in temples. Between 800 and 1300, vast temple complexes came into being. They were controlled and managed by brahmins, who once again came to dominate society. . . . Caste hierarchy manifested in the temple tradition too, with caste based on occupation determining whether one was allowed to enter the temple or not. With rituals came the idea of pollution. Those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy—sweepers, cobblers, and other menial laborers—were the most polluted.”

\*Unfortunately, the Ganges has also become an industrial chemical dump, an open municipal sewer for the millions who live along its great length and a depository for animal carcasses and human remains. It may indeed be a divine river, but it is a river seriously soiled by human hands.