

Teaching Modern Hinduism

By Jason D. Fuller

HINDUISM—ANCIENT OR MODERN?

Textbooks dealing with Asian religions tend to make short work of Modern Hinduism. In doing so, they reflect the demands of an academic market that places a premium on conciseness. When a teacher is in the awkward position of having to introduce students to the dizzying array of Hindu traditions in a brief amount of time, something has to give. What usually gives in discussions of Hinduism is the modern period. Students are therefore denied a complete picture of the tradition.

The neglect of the modern period is understandable but regrettable. Even those of us whose scholarly work focuses on the modern period tend to avoid confronting it squarely in our comparative Asian religions courses. The historiographical and theoretical issues seem too complex to introduce in a succinct way. Anyone who has taught introductory comparative courses dealing with Hinduism knows that sufficient confusion arises among students in the consideration of the ancient and medieval periods without some treatment of more recent times, including the twentieth century.

The common omission of figures important to the study of modern Hinduism is lamentable for two reasons. First, an over-emphasis on the ancient Hindu past at the expense of the modern period tends to conceal historical innovations. This can lead students to conclude that Hinduism is a static religion that has not changed since ancient times. Second, it is precisely the modern period that many students find most interesting.

If one pays too little attention to the modern period, one runs the risk of denying students the opportunity to make fruitful connections between modern Hinduism and alternative trajectories of modernity in other socio-historical contexts. Many of the issues with which students wrestle in other disciplines—gender, race, class, colonialism, nationalism, science and religion, religious conflict, pluralism, death-of-god philosophy—are especially germane to the study of modern Hinduism. This makes the study of the period an especially valuable component of an integrated liberal arts education.

An investigation of the modern period can make Hinduism come alive for those who might otherwise see it as a subject disconnected from the rest of their humanistic education. Even though the Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagavad-Gita are universally recognized as world masterpieces, the study of Hinduism transcends the study of traditional texts. Hinduism has a vibrant modern life, and its study is relevant to a wide range of contemporary concerns.

WHEN DID THE MODERN PERIOD BEGIN?

Before any serious consideration of Hindu modernity can be undertaken, the question of temporal definition must be addressed. Approaching the modern period of Hinduism is complicated by the fact that debates among specialists on exactly when time periods in the development of Hinduism begin and end make the historical waters murky. Nevertheless, the following general schema is widely accepted: **The Indus Valley Period (2500–1500 BCE)**. Although there are clear discontinuities between the Indus Valley Civilization and the later

Aryan culture, some elements of later Hinduism can arguably be traced back to this period. Potential connections between the religion of the Indus Valley peoples and later Hinduism include the existence of a Hindu-like “bathing pool” unearthed within the citadel of Mohenjo-Daro along with sacrificial fire altars and clear indications of mother goddess worship. Pictographic seals from the Indus Valley may depict an ithyphallic figure seated in yogic posture, surrounded by iconography associated with the later Hindu god Śiva.

The Early Vedic Period (1500–800 BCE). During this period, the nomadic culture of the Indo-Aryans came to dominate northern India along the Gangetic plain. The sacrificial religion of the *yajñā* (fire sacrifice) proliferated as the Vedas were composed. A tripartite division of society into priests, warriors, and commoners reflected the cosmic order of heaven, atmosphere and earth, respectively. The polytheistic pantheon of gods celebrated in the Vedas included heavenly deities, atmospheric deities, and earthly deities.

The Late Vedic or Upanishadic Period (800–400 BCE). Philosophical and metaphysical texts dominated this period. The issues of world renunciation and liberation (*mokṣa*) took precedence over the worldly concerns of the Vedic sacrificial religion. The monistic principle of a unified deity (Brahman), which is identical with the individual self (*Ātman*), superseded the earlier polytheistic model. Attaining liberation from the bondage of karma and worldly entrapment (*samsāra*) through mystical knowledge became the goal of religious practice.

The Epic and Classical Periods (400 BCE–600 CE). As the Indo-Aryans consolidated power along the Gangetic plain and settled into towns and cities, they composed the great epic poems of The Mahabharata and The Ramayana. The epics told the stories of political rivalries and regal heroes in the construction of the great imperial kingdoms of northern India. The idea of a religious life rooted in adherence to the duties (dharma) of social class (*varṇa*) and life stage (*āśrama*) developed as an alternative path to the renunciatory traditions of the Upanishads. The Bhagavad-Gita emerged from The Mahabharata as a particularly compelling synthesis of religious elements circulating around the time of the birth of Jesus.

The Medieval Period (600–1800 CE). This period witnessed the meteoric rise in the popularity of personified deities such as the four armed *Viṣṇu* (Vishnu) reclining on the serpent of time in an ocean of chaos, the elephant-headed *Ganeśa* with his potbelly and broken tusk, and the Goddess in her alternately ferocious and loving forms. New devotional poems in Sanskrit and vernacular languages, along with tantric literature, developed at the same time that Hindu philosophical thought was systematized into the six traditional schools. The tenor of the period was shaped by the arrival and influence of Islam, particularly from the thirteenth century onward.

The Modern Period (1800 to the Present). The modern period has been characterized by increasing exposure to—and engagement with—“the West,” first in the form of British colonization and then by the rise of Hinduism as a major world religion. The early phase of



Photo of the Baptist Mission Press c. 1975 by Bernard Ellis.
Image source: The Baptist Mission Press Web site at <http://www.wmcarey.edu/carey/baptmisspress/bmp-bernardellis.jpg>.

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Soon after 1800, vernacular and English-language presses began to proliferate exponentially in India. The coming of the press inaugurated a period of socio-religious reform, revival, and renewal the likes of which had never been seen in the history of Hinduism. So profound were the religious changes that swept across India in the nineteenth century that the period is commonly referred to as the “Hindu Renaissance.” A short time after the introduction of the printing press to Bengal, a

modern development in the nineteenth century was defined by the reform and revival movements of the “Hindu Renaissance” that were prompted and/or enabled by British political and economic dominance in India. The later phase of modern development, from the second half of the twentieth century onward, has been distinguished by the international exchange of ideas, practices, and people.

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WHAT’S SO “MODERN” ABOUT MODERN HINDUISM ANYWAY?

The modernity of the type of Hinduism that began in the early nineteenth century, with the coming of the printing press, can be considered in at least two ways. On the one hand, the term “modern” in the couplet modern Hinduism refers to all of those thinkers, institutions, ideas, behaviors, and practices that manifested after 1800. On the other hand, the term can be used adjectivally to refer, not simply to the recent past (implied by such phrases as “modern times”) but rather to a particular way of engaging and experiencing the world. This historically peculiar manner of experiencing and engaging was characterized in India (as elsewhere) by the self-conscious deployment of European Enlightenment—reason and rationality—to rethink, reshape, reform, and revitalize time-honored traditions and institutions in India.

The printing press was the technological innovation that propelled the modernizing Hindu movements during this period. The important Serampore press of Bengal was run by Baptist missionaries. William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and William Ward printed works in English and vernacular languages. The initial impetus for printing was to promote the habit of reading among Hindus and Muslims in India so that they might one day be led to embrace the Bible and Western civilization. However, the missionaries could not have predicted the side effects that would emerge as a result of the incipient print culture that they initiated.

Hindu intelligentsia emerged to create and populate new schools and colleges. The rise of print culture in nineteenth century India accompanied the rapid expansion of literacy rates and the development of voluntary societies, debating clubs, and salons. The proliferation of newspapers, periodicals, and novels fostered active civic engagement. Hindus began to organize publicly in order to take control of representations of Hinduism. Through the use of the press and voluntary organizations, Hinduism became part of the modern public sphere. In the process, the power to define Hinduism shifted from traditional religious specialists to the modernizing intellectuals who were most conversant with the new colonial idioms of the Enlightenment.

Colonialism, Westernization, Protestantization, and modernization came to India in a bundle at the turn of the nineteenth century. Hindu responses to the challenges and opportunities posed and enabled by modernity roughly approximated parallel reactions to nineteenth century modernism in Europe and America. Reactions can be plotted along a continuum from liberal accommodation to fundamentalist rejection. Just as the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of both liberal and conservative theological responses to the challenges of modernist rationality, scientific enquiry, and technological innovation in the United States and Western Europe, so too in India did the period of colonial rule see the rise of both reformist and revivalist camps of Hinduism. The post-1800 period witnessed the emergence of a particular set of concerns and practices that came to define Hindu modernity. They were/are (among others):

- The use of modern technologies (the printing press, books, novels, periodicals, newspapers) and institutions (colleges, the courts, voluntary societies) to discipline, define, and promote religion in the public sphere;
- The development of religiously grounded responses (traditional and reformist) to the vexed questions of caste and gender inequalities within Hinduism;
- A critical engagement with the uses to which science and Enlightenment—rationality could be put in the construction of religious identity—particular attention was paid to critiques of “idolatry” and “superstition” in this regard;
- The partial transfer of traditional religious authority from gurus and ritual practices to “texts”—engagement with



Detail of a portrait of Ram Mohan Roy by Alul Bose. Image source: http://www.nvo.com/ghosh_research/pictures/view.nhtml?profile=pictures&UID=10121.

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Christian missionaries and the colonial education system caused many Hindu thinkers to embrace a scriptural understanding of religion in the modern period whereby sacred texts and the attendant academic values of historical criticism, skepticism, rational argumentation, and the religious search for “origins” became all important in defending the legitimacy of Hinduism;

- A concern with the place of Hinduism in a pluralistic religious world, along with attendant efforts to make Hinduism a universal religion capable of national and transnational transplantation.

The transformations of the modern Hindu period created a particular mode of belief and practice that is recognizably distinct from earlier forms of Hinduism that preceded it.

WHO WERE/ARE THE MAJOR THINKERS THAT DEFINE THE MODERN PERIOD?

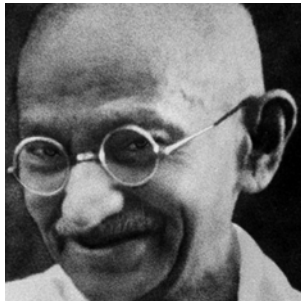
The first major thinker to attempt to reconcile Hinduism with modern trends of thought and practice circulating in Europe, America, and India in the nineteenth century was Ram Mohan Roy (1774–1833). Roy has often been called the “father of modern India.” In his founding of the *Brahmo Samaj* (Society of God), and through his many written works in a variety of languages, he set the stage for most of the reform movements that were to come after him. Roy rejected idolatry, fought against the practice of *sati* (self-immolation of widows on their husbands’ funeral pyres), lobbied on behalf of the rights of women in legal affairs, argued for a monotheistic conception of God as exemplified in the ancient Upanishads, and developed a program of publishing that rivaled anything Christian activists in the West or India could achieve. In his use of the press, as well as in his creation of a voluntary society to propagate his message of a reformed Hinduism, Roy effectively deployed the technologies and institutions of colonial modernity for creative indigenous purposes. His concern with hot button modernist issues like equal rights for women, the eradication of “superstition” from Hinduism, the criticism of high caste Brahmins, and his push for a pluralistic understanding of God that could unite rather than divide nations and peoples, all identified Ram Mohan Roy as a modern thinker influenced by the universalism of the Enlightenment. Most importantly, Roy’s reverence for rational thought, logical argumentation, and scientific modes of enquiry enabled him to cast a mold which would form all modernizing Hindu thinkers who came after him.

On the other end of the spectrum of Hindu responses to modernity was Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836–1886). Ramakrishna did not disagree with many of Ram Mohan Roy’s modernist ideas about reforms. However, he did represent in both his person and teachings a very different way of thinking about the proper Hindu attitude toward the challenges of modernity. Unlike Roy, Ramakrishna was very traditional in his beliefs and spiritual practices. He was a proud Brahmin

and a temple priest. He had little acquaintance with or interest in books, publishing, voluntary societies, or rational argumentation. Whereas Roy favored a Deistic understanding of the Absolute without qualities or active involvement in the world, Ramakrishna was devoted heart and soul to the severe personality of the multi-armed black mother Goddess Kali, with her necklace of severed heads, lolling tongue, bloody fangs, and wildly unkempt hair. Ramakrishna was known for his lack of affectation. He was considered by many to be uncultured, uneducated, and unsophisticated, but it was precisely his rustic simplicity that endeared him to many Hindus in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In fact, unlike Roy and several other modernizing religious leaders during the colonial period whose movements never gained traction in India, even though their ideas were revolutionary and influential, Ramakrishna’s followers set up institutions—the Ramakrishna Mission and the Vedanta Society—that continue to attract devotees and subscribers in the millions to this day. Ramakrishna’s mystical pluralism eased the oppressive weight of colonial reason that modernity represented for many Hindus.

Ramakrishna’s most well known disciple was Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902). Vivekananda was the first successful Hindu missionary to bring a modern Hindu message to the West. At the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, Vivekananda addressed an international audience for the first time. By all accounts, his speeches made a tremendous impact on the body of the parliament and significantly broadened the otherwise insular tone of the primarily Christian gathering. Vivekananda declared the deep unity of all the world’s religions and argued for mutual respect and tolerance in inter-religious dialogue. He chastised the West for trying to send religion to India, when what the country really needed was economic assistance. Vivekananda argued that the Europeans and Americans had gotten it wrong by thinking that India needed to be Christianized even while her material riches were being extracted and sent back to the West. In his inaugural speech, he urged Americans and Europeans to begin importing religion from India while exporting to India the material wealth and scientific understanding that the West had accumulated. Vivekananda saw this as the path to both India’s economic progress and the West’s spiritual development.

Vivekananda’s American appearance in 1893 marked a seismic shift in inter-religious relations between India and the West. Many participants in the Parliament agreed with the fundamental assertion that Christians had much to learn from Hindus. Soon after his initial presentation, Vivekananda was asked to give additional talks in America. He stayed on in the United States for a couple of years and established the Vedanta Society in New York in 1895. Upon returning to India later that year, he founded the Ramakrishna Mission in Calcutta. The mission was a monastic institution designed to promote the general welfare of Hindus through the building and maintenance of colleges, preparatory schools, and hospitals. Vivekananda was committed to a



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Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Image source: <http://www.speakbindas.com/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/mahatma-gandhi.jpg>.

monistic view of the Absolute, and used the Vedanta Society and the Ramakrishna Mission to propagate a pluralistic form of Hinduism that came to be known as Neo-Vedanta. Vivekananda’s unflinchingly nationalistic affirmation of the spiritual superiority of India and his re-envisioning of Vedanta as a theoretical framework capable of encompassing the large diversity of newly interacting religions around the globe at the dawn of the twentieth century marked a significant milestone in the development of Hinduism as a transnational religion.

Although he lived much longer than did his Bengali counterpart, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948) was a contemporary of Vivekananda. Gandhi is most well known globally for his active political engagement in the nationalist struggle for Indian independence. In his marrying of politics with religion, he was not alone among modern Hindu thinkers. As the modern religious period and the colonial political period arose together in India, the two areas of concern quite often and naturally overlapped. Yet, whatever the political genius of Gandhi, he also developed his own uniquely modern and very “Hindu” worldview.

Gandhi was born a *Vaiṣṇava* (a tradition of Hinduism) in Gujarat, India. He received his most profound spiritual sustenance from the Bhagavad-Gita. He read and traveled widely and was influenced by Jainism and Islam as well as Christianity. Gandhi’s core religious commitment was to the equation of Truth (*satya*) with God. Although the linkage of truth, God, and the human soul was a metaphysical idea with roots in texts like the ancient Bhagavad-Gita, Gandhi was able to foreground the principle’s significance in a way that captured the modern imagination of the multitudes. His theology demanded a religious practice in line with the realization that truth and holiness are one in essence. Gandhi referred to his religious and practical movement as *satyāgraha* (literally “holding to the Truth”). Through adherence to a code of strict self-discipline, self-denial, communal sentiment, ethical conduct, and the practice of non-violence (*ahimsā*), the modern Hindu aspirant could be brought into contact with his essential divine nature. According to Gandhi, those who lived a life of non-violence and truth could bring about quasi-magical changes in the world. In this way, the personal religious quest was seen as a precondition for effective political change that flowed naturally from the spring of religious practice.

Contemporary movements have built effectively upon the reformism and revivalism of the colonial period and thinkers like Roy, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, and Gandhi. Although countless numbers of traditional and modern Hindus continue to thrive in India, the most noteworthy innovation in the post-WWII period has been the emergence of powerful international gurus and movements that have created and defined new forms of globalizing Hinduism(s). In 1965, the US government promulgated the Immigration and Nationality Act that eliminated the “National Origins Formula” for immigration policy. After the passage of the act, immigration from India to the US became much easier. Along with the influx of gurus like the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi (TM—Transcendental Meditation movement), Shree Bhagwan Rajneesh (also known as Osho) and A.C. Bhaktivedanta (ISKCON—

Hare Krishna Movement) came the emergence of an affluent middle-class Indian diaspora.

In order to meet the needs of the Indian middle class diaspora in the United States and around the globe, new forms of Hinduism have developed. These new forms of Hinduism are often traditionalist/revivalist in content but modernist/reformist in structure. As local groups in the United States and around the world build temples and create voluntary associations for the perpetuation of traditional Hindu belief and practice within a diasporic context, they are drawn of necessity into dialogue with the modernizing debates of the colonial period. The hard work of the reformers and revivalists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries helped to forge new forms of universalist Hinduism that could be transplanted on multiple continents. The gurus who lead these movements, along with their followers, move seamlessly to and from India facilitating flows of thought, patronage, and religio-political influence that would have seemed inconceivable just two generations ago. In so doing, they represent the culmination of a modernizing process that began with the publication of a few Hindu books from the missionary presses of Serampore in the early nineteenth century.

The contemporary period of modern Hinduism has also seen attempts to consolidate multiple regional and communal Hindu identities into singularized nationalist identities. Mention should be made of the existence of very powerful Hindu nationalist organizations that represent unique responses to the challenges of modernity in the contemporary period, but this phenomenon constitutes a topic for another essay.

CONCLUSIONS

It is unfortunate that the modern Hindu period is often neglected in textbooks and courses dealing with Asian religions. The modern period has been a time of momentous import and profound innovation. An examination of modern Hinduism reveals insights into the complex interplay of religion, politics, society, economy, and culture that manifested in the wake of global modernity. One hopes that increasing attention will be paid to the modern period as India continues her movement to the center of the geo-political stage in the twenty-first century. ■

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