BALI:
SEKALA
AND
NISKALA

VOLUME I:
ESSAYS ON RELIGION,
RITUAL, AND ART

Fred B. Eiseman, Jr.

with two chapters by
Margaret Eiseman
he takes various measurements from the body of the head of the household. The most important measurements are those governing the construction of the pillars, for it is their dimensions that will control the size of the buildings. The principal measurements are the length of the index finger, the width of the little finger, the width of the three middle fingers, and the width of the second joint of the index finger. From these measurements, a set of three notched bamboo sticks, called gagulak, are made, and these are used as measuring sticks for the pillars of the bale and associated structures. The basic measurements for the layout of the house compound are taken from the length and width of the owner’s foot. The outside wall dimensions are determined by the span of his outstretched arms and the distance from elbow to outstretched thumb. The architect himself may bring the building to life when it is completed, or he may require the services of a priest if he does not know the proper prayers and procedures. The living trees that have been chopped down to make the pillars, the long grass that has been cut for the roof thatch, and other materials of construction, once assembled according to dimensions taken from a human body, are themselves brought to life, reincarnated, as a living house.

Organizations by threes may seem quite strange to the Western visitor. Certainly, Christianity has its trinity and groupings by three are not unknown in the West. But our thought is much more dualistic, we are much more accustomed to paired opposites. In our thought, social relations, and politics, we seek resolution between two Manichean sides — us and them, pro and con, good and bad. When we balance our arguments, what we really do is subtract the “cons” from the “pros” and go with the remainder. This is fundamentally different from the Hindu-Balinese. They do not seek resolution as such, their worldview is not based on conflict + resolution = “progress.” They seek to better organize and balance their lives around fixed ideas, already centuries old.

The vivid accounts of journalists and travelers who visited India after the British conquest have greatly colored popular Western notions of Hinduism. Hoping to arouse interest, these writers emphasized the more lurid and sensational aspects of some of the Hindu sects: suttee, burning of the deceased’s wife (or wives) upon his funeral pyre; drenching idols with goat’s blood; temples with frescoes of erotic art; ritual prostitution; the contortions of the practitioners of yoga; the strict rules of caste, including untouchability — and on and on. Nobody can deny that these practices existed and, in a few cases, still do exist. But they are not at all central to the fundamentals and philosophy of Hinduism. The Hinduism that came to Bali with the Javanese Majapahit dynasty was not a particularly glamorous sect. The official name of Balinese Hinduism is Agama Hindu or Hindu Dharma. Agama means “religion”; dharma does not slip into place very easily. In fact, understanding the concept of dharma is really the most straightforward way to understanding the basic philosophy of Hinduism.

Hinduism is founded on the belief that there is order in the world, that the universe is not random. Left entirely to itself, any natural system will tend toward a state of maximum disorder: rocks roll downhill, cold things warm up, living cells die. There exists everywhere in the universe a disordering force. Because order does exist, there must be an equivalent organizing force. What Hinduism seeks is an equilibrium, a balance, between these two forces or tendencies. Order is personified as the gods, dewa and dewi, or bhatara and bhatari. Disorder is personified as the earth demons, bhatas and kalahs. One can think of order as good, or positive, and disorder as evil, or negative. Or you can call order dharma, and disorder adharma.
Hinduism is largely concerned with dharma, the organizing force that maintains order. Dharma is the organization that governs the universe as a whole, the relationships between various parts of the universe, and actions within the various parts of the universe. Hinduism recognizes the universe as an ordered whole of which each person, each animal, and each thing is an integral part. And each of these parts stands in a definite and established relationship to every other part — this relationship is dharma. A Hindu feels that his actions, his karma, must be in harmony with his dharma, “duty” or “order.” A Hindu cannot look at the world from the point of view of his own interests, without regard for those of his fellow men, his fellow living creatures, and his fellow inanimate objects. His karma must be related to them and to his own dharma. If his karma fulfills his dharma, he contributes toward order and harmony. If it does not, he contributes toward disorder, chaos, and adharma.

The extent to which one’s karma fulfills one’s own particular dharma governs the future of one’s atman, “spirit.” Karma that does not fit with one’s dharma produces suffering — either at the moment of inappropriate behavior or at some future time or in some future life. The only salvation for dharma is that the ordering force be kept at least as strong as the disordering force, so as to maintain equilibrium. Local pockets of prevailing disorder may form, and every effort must be made to insure that these pockets do not spread to other areas that are in equilibrium, lest adharma prevail generally. An example of a pocket of adharma on Bali might be a volcanic eruption, an illness, or a lepak (witch). Such pockets are generally only ephemeral. Local pockets of prevailing dharma may also form, and one must take quick advantage of them, because they too are but ripples on the sea, quick to fade. An example of a pocket of dharma might be an odalan (temple festival), a new grandson, or a pedanda (priest).

A Hindu lives according to dharma. He or she tries to respond to desire, kama, with action, karma, that is appropriate to the dharma. The key word is “appropriate.” One does not “do good deeds” as a Hindu, one “behaves appropriately.” Upon death, one’s atman will be reborn into another corporeal vehicle, the station of which — animal, priest, farmer, etc. — will have been determined by the degree to which one’s karma was proper to one’s dharma. This cycle of reincarnation, samsara, will continue until the spirit is freed from all desire. Only then is the atman freed from the necessity of rebirth. At that point the spirit reaches a state called moksa. Then the atman fuses with the unmoved mover of the universe, representing both ordering and disordering forces, both order and disorder: Ida Sanghyang Widhi Wasa. The sacred Hindu texts refer to this mover as brahman.

People may lead lives in which the result of their activities is destructive, producing adharma and disorganization. For their efforts they will be rewarded with the fruit, pala, of punishment in the now and the hereafter, and rebirth of their spirit in a shell stationed in a lower order of life. People can live with desire, if they are content with its transitory nature. But they can only do so if they understand three principals: kama, the desire itself; dharma, the laws governing the proper fulfillment of the desire; and artha,
the means by which one achieves the lawful desire. Another choice, available to only a very few people, is the total avoidance of any form of desire, which will ultimately lead one's spirit to moksa and fusion with the unmoved mover. This third choice is the one chosen by ascetic Hindus, particularly in India. The five fundamentals of Hindu philosophy are: brahman, the one God; atman, the imperishable spirit; samsara, reincarnation; karma-pala, action and resulting reward and punishment; moksa, uniting with God after the disappearance of desire. These are called the Panca Crada, or "five principles."

A HIGHLY EVOLVED CULTURE flourished as far back as 3000 B.C. along the banks of the river Sindhu, now called Indus, in what is now Pakistan. It is from this name, Sindhu, that the word Hindu derives. The existence of this early civilization has come to light only in the past 60 years or so, with excavations at Harappa and Mohenjodaro, not far upriver from modern Karachi. Until this find historians supposed that the invading Aryans from eastern Europe civilized India. But the cities they discovered had broad, paved streets, sophisticated water supplies, sewage disposal, active markets, and spacious homes some 5,000 years ago. As well as the inhabitants of the Harappan cities, societies of unknown origin were living in India before the Aryan invasion. Their religion was animistic, and their world was full of demons, spirits, and forces that they struggled mightily to control through magical incantation and prayer.

The Aryans were a hardy, light-skinned, warlike people who lived in the vicinity of the Caspian Sea. Some migrated to what is now Iran. Some went farther east to northern India, seeking pasture land for their cattle. These were not the Aryans of Nazi mythology — the blue-eyed, fair-haired master race. They were lighter in skin color than the indigenous tribes whose territories they invaded, the Nagas and Dravidians. And they must have been considerably more skilled at warfare, because it did not take them long to overcome the natives and establish themselves as rulers. Historians date the Aryan migration at some time around 1600 B.C.

The Aryans had a pantheon of nature gods, which constituted a religion we call Vedism. Indra was one of the more powerful gods, the wielder of thunderbolts and lightning and the god of storms and war. Agni was the god of the fire that the Aryans used to perform their religious sacrifices. Rudra was god of the strong harsh winds. Sita was god of the yarrow of the plowed field. Varuna was god of the earth. Savitar was the giver of life; and Surya, sometimes called Mitra or Wisnu, was god of the sun. Dyus, the personification of the sky itself, was perhaps the most important of the early Vedic gods. The Sanskrit word deva, or dyes, originally meant "bright." It later came to mean "divine." Since the names of these deities were handed down to us in the Sanskrit language, and since many Sanskrit sounds do not occur in English, spellings vary.

We know a great deal about the religion and daily affairs of the Aryans because a substantial body of written material has survived. These are the Vedas, books that Hindus, both Indian and Balinese, consider to be divinely inspired and sacred. But the Vedas were oral texts, and were not recorded for many hundreds of years after they were created. They were composed as songs and hymns. The ancestral script of all Indian writing was not devised until the eighth or ninth centuries before the common era, yet it is estimated that the Vedas were sung at least 1,000 years earlier. Even after writing became commonplace in India the people preferred to have their sacred works transmitted orally, and it never occurred to them to have them written down. Only merchants and bankers kept written records. Four of what were probably dozens of Vedas have survived to this day:

THE RIG-VEDA. The oldest religious "text" in the world, this Veda was likely composed sometime between 1500 and 900 B.C. It is a collection of 1,028 hymns to be used at the religious sacrifices of the Aryan aristocrats.

THE SAMA-VEDA. Sometimes called "The Knowledge of the Melodies," the Sama-Veda is a collection of some of the verses of the Rig-Veda that have been arranged for religious purposes.

THE YAJUR-VEDA. Considered to be not as old as the Rig-Veda by some 200 years, the Yajur-Veda contains sacrificial formulas, in prose and poetry, for the use of the priests of lesser importance.

THE ARVATA-VEDA. The most recent Veda, the Artava-Veda contains mostly magic spells and formulas in verse. This Veda has many non-Aryan elements, and scholars consider it to be the product of a less sophisticated source.

Each of the four Vedas has four parts:

1) Mantras, or hymns
2) Brahmanas, appendices to the mantras, manuals for priests
3) Aranyakas, appendices to the Brahmanas, manuals for forest meditation
4) Upanishads, also appendices to the Brahmanas, confidential sources for the study of philosophers
These works were composed at different times. The Brahmanas date from about 800 to 600 B.C., and the oldest Upanishads overlap the most recent Brahmanas. Taken as a whole, these are the components of what is referred to as the Vedic literature. The language in which they were originally composed and sung is unknown. As they come to us they are written in fairly sophisticated Sanskrit, which is obviously not an artifact of such an ancient civilization. But, the roots of these sacred works undoubtedly date back a thousand years or more into the untraceable shadows of pre-Aryan times. The Rig-Veda is the only one of the four that can be called a work of literature, as opposed to a work of magic, philosophy, or religion. Its hymns praise the various objects that the Aryans worshiped, forces of nature such as the sky, the earth, the sun and moon, rain, and so on. Some are prayers for long life, fertility, and rain. Some are poems of wonder. The religion of the people who composed the Vedas and Brahmanas and Upanishads was not Hinduism. But several hymns in the Rig-Veda give a hint at what was to become the main thrust of Hinduism centuries later. One is a hymn of creation in which the universe is described before anything existed in it—that is, anything except what is translated as “that one thing,” or “the only one.” This is brahman, the unmoved mover, the unknown knower. This theme of brahman is taken up at great length in the Upanishads, but it has roots in the earliest of all the Vedas.

**SOME DEFINITIONS**

**BRAHMA** — the manifestation of the supreme god as creator of all living things. Brahma was not an important part of the Aryan pantheon, but evolved into prominence at a later time.

**BRAHMAN** — a member of the priestly class or caste, in Aryan times and today. Brahman refers to the unknown and unknowable soul of the world, or god as the spirit that pervades the universe.

**BRAHMANA** — the priestly class or caste just like Brahman. But, as explained above, the word also refers to a group of Vedic materials that is concerned with manuals of rituals and prayer.

**BRAHMEN** — a term that is also used to mean any member of the priestly class or caste, whether a priest or not. It also has a more general meaning in English, “blue blood” or “aristocrat.”

The second very interesting hymn in the Rig-Veda is called the “Hymn to Purusha.” The word *purusha* or *purusa* literally means “person” or “man.” But it also means *brahman*, “god.” This hymn is one of the first statements of the religious concept in which the god becomes a victim of sacrifice. From this primordial immolation of the supreme god came forth all human beings. And the hymn describes how from the mouth of Purusha came the Brahmanas, from his arms came the Ksatriya, from his thighs the Wesa, and from his feet the Sudra—the four castes of Bali. Remember that this text is the earliest religious work in the world, created at least 4,000 years before the Portuguese invaders applied their word “casta” to the social structure of India.

What we see in the Vedas, taken apart from the Upanishads and Brahmanas that are grouped within them, is an emphasis upon the powerful forces of nature and a personification and deification of them. The essential intent of the Vedic prayers was to maintain order—to monitor the usual course of natural affairs and happenings so that by imitating them they might continue forever. The Aryans had an open society. There were classes, but these were not rigid castes. Upward (and downward) mobility was possible, depending upon individual worth and achievement. The ruling class was that of the warriors. Next in status and prestige came that group known, even then, as Brahmanas—the priests whose responsibility it was to maintain balance by offering sacrifices and prayers to brahman and the nature gods. Apparently Vedicism’s principal religious ceremonies involved sacrifice to the gods using fire as the medium to carry the offerings. There were no permanent temples or shrines or idols. Unlike later Hinduism, the Vedic Brahmanas were quite below the warrior class, acting merely as those who officiated at rituals, with no political power.

One of the most sacred hymns of the Rig-Veda is called the Gayatri. It was whispered into the ear of an upper class boy by a priest at the climax of the initiation ceremony in which the boy was inducted as a full member of his class and society. The Sudras—workers and servants—and those lower were not allowed to undergo this ceremony and, in fact, could not even hear the sacred text. This was a very ancient rite, dating far earlier than the Aryan invasion. The verse is addressed to the god of the sun, Savitar:

Tat Savitur vareni
bhargo devasya dhimahi
dhiyo yo nah pracodayat.

“Let us think on the lovely splendor of the god Savitar, that he may inspire our minds.”

Doubtless this means nothing to you, unless you are a Balinese Hindu. If you are, you will immediately recognize it as the opening of that very
important mantra called the Trisandhyा. It is considered so important that, for example, it is recited every day when the Denpasar television station, TVRI, opens its broadcast schedule. Virtually every Balinese knows at least the opening four or five lines. And it comes from the most sacred verse of the most ancient religious text extant.

The Upanishads mark the real beginnings of Hinduism. The name comes from the Sanskrit words "nāma, meaning "near," and "sīdhd, "to sit." "Sitting near" refers to the relationship between teacher and student. More than 100 Upanishads have been printed in Sanskrit, and their total length is about the same as that of the Old and New Testaments of the Bible combined. Their constant, relentless theme is that of brahma and atman. Atman is usually translated as "soul" or "spirit"; it is the essence of a person. It is not the mind or the individuality, but rather that which is described as a formless, silent depth of being. The first lesson of the Upanishads is that the essence of a person is his atman. The second lesson is the acceptance and understanding of the concept of brahma, as previously described. And the final and most important teaching is that atman and brahma are one and the same. This is really the essential teaching of Hinduism. You can strip away all the externals — the offerings, the prayers, the ceremonies, the temples — everything. Because it is the concept of the unity of brahma and atman that has as its natural consequences the special attitudes that Hindus have about the nature, purpose, and importance of life, death, the world of man, and the universe.

One of the most famous dialogues between teacher and student in the Upanishads is found in the Chandogya Upanishad. Here we find the teacher explaining by parable the doctrine of the identity of atman and brahma. He asks the student to bring him the fruit of a nearby tree and break it open. The student is asked what he sees within. He replies that he sees tiny seeds. And the teacher then asks him to break open one of them and tell what he sees. He replies that he does not see anything. The teacher replies that the subtle essence that the student does not perceive is the very essence upon which the fruit tree exists.

"That which is the subtle essence, in it all that exists has its self. It is the true. It is the self. And you, my son: tat tvam asa."

This last phrase is often quoted as being the very pith of Hinduism. It means "You are that." In other words, your atman and that of the tree, and that of brahma are one and the same. You, the individual, are identical with the ultimate principle of things — brahma. After the Upanishads we can say that Hinduism, as we now know it, really began. The world of the nature gods began to disappear from the thinking of the philosophers, and an internalization of thought began which led to the rather abstract ideas of atman and brahma. The Vedic literature, however, was not very accessible because it was written in obscure, allegorical language and guarded by the priests. The flowering of popular Hinduism really began with the creation of a body of literature that was readily available and could be understood by the average person.

The first Hindu epic poems began to appear in the beginning of the last millennium before the common era. The two greatest epics of Hindu literature, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, were hugely influential. They were lessons in morality; they were entertainment; they were subjects for discussion; and they presented an opportunity for the average person to appreciate how important a role the ideas of Hinduism played in the life of gods, legendary heroes and heroines, and men and women. Even today the epics provide great entertainment. They describe enough wild battles to keep even the most somnolent awake. The heroic exploits they relate will warm the heart of the most adventurous. Three thousand years after they were composed, one has only to visit a wayang kulit — shadow puppet — performance in one of the villages in Bali and see the rapt attention of the audience to understand the grip that these wonderful stories have upon Hindus even today.

But within the Ramayana and Mahabharata are contained passages that are extremely sacred to even the most learned Hindu. And the most sacred of all is the Bhagavad-Gita. This long passage of the Mahabharata is a kind of lecture given by Krishna to Arjuna, who is about to lead his family into battle with his cousins. Krishna is Arjuna’s friend and charioteer, and when Arjuna hesitates to do battle with the family, Krishna reveals himself as Visnu and proceeds to offer at some length some of the central lessons that were first developed in the Upanishads. The average Hindu could now get a glimmer of what his religion was all about, because these pronouncements were being made not by a high caste, remote, and unapproachable priest, but by one of the heroes of a popular story that was being recited or sung by a local or traveling bard. The epics humanized Hinduism 2,500 years ago, and they appear to be just as effective now as they were then.

The story of the Mahabharata is long and very complex. The action takes place in north central India, not far north of the present New Delhi, a region then called Kuruksetra. Dhritarashtra and Pandu were the sons of the mighty hero Bharata (hence the name of the story, "Great Bharata"). Dhritarashtra, the elder of the two, fell heir to the Kuru Kingdom, the capital of which was Hastinapura. But Dhritarashtra was blind, which meant that he could not rule. So his younger brother Pandu took over the throne. Then Pandu was afflicted with a curse and had to give up the kingdom and
flee to the mountains with his two wives — leaving the blind Dhritarashtra in charge. Pandu had five children, the Pandawas, by various wives. They were Yudhisthira, Bhima, Arjuna, and the twins Nakula and Sahadeva. They were quite young when Pandu died, and they were taken to Hastinapura to be educated with their 100 cousins, the children of Dhritarashtra, called the Kurus or Korawas.

When he grew up, Yudhishthira, the eldest of the Pandawas, was determined to be heir apparent. But the sons of Dhritarashtra, led by the eldest, Duryodhana, did not like the Pandawas, resented their presence, and plotted against them. Duryodhana could not force the Pandawas to leave because his father, because of his blindness, was not really king. The Kurus made a number of attempts on the lives of the Pandava brothers, so the Pandawas decided to leave and made their way around the countryside. Along the way, at the kingdom of the Pancalas, Arjuna won Princess Draupadi in a contest, and she promptly became the wife of all five jointly. Here too the brothers met their great future friend Krishna, head of the Yadavas. Shortly thereafter Dhritarashtra decided to give up his throne, called the five brothers home, and split the kingdom evenly between them and his sons, the Kurus. The Pandawas built a new capital city at Indraprastha. But the Kurus were still resentful. Duryodhana invited Yudhishthira to a game of dice and, assisted by his uncle Sakuni who was a master of cheating, won the entire kingdom, all five brothers, and Draupadi. The Pandawas agreed to go into exile for thirteen years, spend their last year incognito, and then return to Duryodhana who would return their kingdom to them. This they did, and at the end of the thirteen years, demanded their lands from Duryodhana. He refused.

War was declared, and each side summoned its allies from all over India — even China and Bactria. The two huge armies faced each other on the plains of Delhi. At this point Arjuna hesitated to go into battle against family and friends, and Krishna revealed himself as Visnu, telling Arjuna that his business was the deed, not the result, and that the right course must be chosen according to circumstances, without considering personal interest or sentiment (the Bhagavad-Gita). The war lasted 18 days, and at the end virtually the only survivors were the five Pandawas and Krishna. Yudhishthira became king and the five ruled happily for a long time in peace. Finally Yudhishthira gave up the throne, putting Arjuna’s grandson in his place, and, with Draupadi, the brothers climbed Mount Meru and entered heaven. As indicated, there are many diversions to the story between dramatic scenes, and there is every indication that the epic began as a simple story and grew by accretion over the years.

The Ramayana is much shorter than the Mahabharata and includes fewer diversions. According to tradition it was composed by one man, the sage Valmiki, who lived at the same time as Rama. The scene of the story is the capital of the kingdom of Kosala, named Ayodhya. Dasaratha, king of Kosala, had four sons by three wives. Of these sons, Rama and Lakshmana were the most famous. The four boys attended the court of a nearby king, where Rama won the hand of the king’s daughter, Sita, at an archery contest. Rama and Sita were married and lived happily at Ayodhya with Dasaratha. When Dasaratha grew old he named Rama as his heir. But Dasaratha’s second wife, Kaikeyi, reminded Rama of a promise the aging king had made to her many years ago, namely that her own son Bharata be named king and that Rama be banished. In spite of the protests of Dasaratha and Bharata, Rama insisted upon fulfilling his father’s promise and took Sita and Lakshmana into exile in the forest. Dasaratha died, and Bharata took over the rule, but only until such time as Rama might return.

While in the forest of Dandaka, Rama killed many demons who were bothering local ascetics and villagers. A beautiful princess from the South, Surpanakha, met Rama wandering in the forest, fell in love with him, and tried to seduce him, but Rama remained true to Sita. Furious at Rama, Surpanakha sought revenge by asking her demon brother, Rawana, king of Langka (Ceylon) to come and kidnap Sita. He did so, distracting Rama and Lakshmana by changing himself into a golden deer, which Lakshmana chased, temporarily abandoning his guardianship of the safety of Sita. Rawana took Sita back to Langka. Rama and Lakshmana, aided by the monkey king, Sugriva, and his general, Hanuman, and by Rawana’s brother, Vibhishana, raised a large army and journeyed to the Strait Separating Langka from India. Hanuman was sent ahead to scout out Langka, and, leaping over the
strait, found her in Rawa's palace. With his monkey army, Rama built a causeway of stones across the strait, invaded Langka, and, after a great battle, killed Ravana and rescued Sita.

Although Sita had not yielded to Ravana, she had, in fact, lived in his palace, and so she could not be accepted as a wife by Rama, according to sacred law. She threw herself on a funeral pyre in despair, but Agni, the god of fire, would not accept her. This proved her innocence well enough to Rama, who returned with her to Ayodhya, where Bharata gave up the throne and Rama reigned in his rightful place. However, the people of Ayodhya were upset because of Sita's living at Ravana's house, and they suspected her of impurities, in spite of the trial by fire. So Rama had to banish her to the forest, even though he knew of her innocence. After bearing two of Rama's children, Sita called upon her mother, the earth, to take her back, whereupon she was swallowed up. And Rama returned to heaven and resumed his identity as Wisnu. It must be remembered that Sita means "furrow," and that Sita was a goddess of the furrow in Aryan times.

These two stories are too well known to warrant further analysis here. The Mahabharata is by far the longer of the two, containing more than 100,000 verses, most of them of 32 syllables each, making a work that is about three times as large as the entire King James Bible. The central theme, the war between the Pandawas and their cousins, the Korawas, apparently did have a basis in historical fact, probably having occurred some time around 900 B.C. But this war is only the outline of the story. Between the stories that lead up to the battle and the battle scenes themselves is woven a vast complex of totally unrelated episodes that may or may not involve some of the characters of the main story.

One of the most popular subjects for wayang kulit is the story of Bhima Suci, in which Bhima, one of the five Pandawas brothers, is sent by his teacher to find a certain important kind of holy water. The story is quite simple in and of itself. It involves Bhima's encounters in heaven with a number of people who have been sent there for reward and punishment according to their karma. The discussion surrounds what they did in their previous lives to merit such reward or punishment. And this, of course, offers a theological and moral lesson. But in the context of entertainment by a professional entertainer-teacher, the dalang puppet master, the lesson is easily learned by the audience. These methods of education are so effective that the Indonesian Government today uses the wayang kulit to teach secular duties like family planning and conservation of resources. (See Chapter 28.)

The Hindu epics are not the only source of popular Hindu inspiration. Over the millennium straddling the beginning of the common era, 500 B.C. to A.D. 500, there arose a huge body of what are called the Puranas — the old stories. There are 18 of them, and the total text is four times longer than even the Mahabharata — more than 400,000 couplets. These stories were written specifically for ordinary people so that they might learn about their religion and history. Creation is explained, as is the periodic evolution and dissolution of the world. The doctrine of karma is dealt with at some length. Transmigration, the seven heavens, the twenty-one hells and punishments therein, and much more are treated in these long works. Some of the materials are taken from the two major epic poems. All of them are written in intelligible, popular language without pretense to superior literary form. Thus they admirably fulfill their function as a means of popular education in a world that lacked it.

The post-Upanishad flowering of Hinduism saw profound changes in the way the people looked at God. To the fore came the concept of the Trimurti, or "three shapes" — the Hindu triad Brahma, Wisnu, and Siwa. Wisnu was resurrected from a role as a rather minor sun god in the Aryan pantheon. Brahma was given a supreme position of importance as creator, but was not given sufficient attributes so that he attracted followers or attention. He remains still in the background as an attribute of God, impersonal, intangible and distant from the ordinary person — important, but detached. Wisnu's role represents the bright side of Hindu life. Wisnu is the approachable helper of man who has come to man's aid nine times in the past (the avatars) when danger threatened on earth. Wisnu is a bit like the Virgin Mary of the Christians — not an "earth mother," but an aspect of divinity that seems human and reachable, sympathetic and understanding. Wisnu's incarnations as Krishna and Rama are enormously important to, and popular with, Hindus. Rama especially seems like the ideal man, the hero who devotes his life to avenging a wrong against great odds.

The worship of Siwa seems to be one of the oldest elements in India, if not in Hinduism. The presence at Mohenjodaro of the most common symbol of Siwa, the phallic linggam, led excavators there to conclude that the Harappans did indeed worship Siwa — perhaps 2,500 years before the Upanishads and the epics. But Siwa did not play an important role in the pantheon of the Aryans. Taken literally, the word Siwa means "propitious." This is a euphemism, since Siwa is that aspect of God involving death and destruction. In India the two most important Hindu sects are those who worship Wisnu as their principal deity and those who worship Siwa.

In Bali Siwism is by far the more important of the two. Hindu man, faced with the overwhelming problems of life, sees Siwa as a vigorous force that energetically breaks down everything that Wisnu has protected and Brahma has produced. Why the linggam as the symbol of Siwa? The linggam is a phallic — symbolic of creativity, not of destruction. Should
this not the symbol of Brahma, the creator? Siwa is often depicted in statues as performing a dance. It may seem odd that the arch destroyer is dancing. But to a Hindu, death is almost the same as rebirth, and rebirth is the frustration of death. In the Hindu mind this balance of forces seems perfectly natural. Siwa is not only a destroyer, but also a creator, and the dance is an accompaniment to the perpetual dissolving and reforming of the world. The creative or reproductive nature of Siwa is often personified as Siwa’s wife, Durga, sometimes called Uma, Parwati or Kali. This has some significance to Balinese Hinduism, since the common figure of Rangda is similar in many ways to Durga. This goddess is not only the ruler of death and destruction, but also of motherhood. There is nothing obscene about phallic symbols to the Hindus. Siwaism is a system of beliefs which requires the most extreme self-discipline, asceticism, and intellectualism. Ghandi once wrote that the first time he learned that lingams were obscene was when he was studying a missionary’s book.

There are many ways to achieve liberation, moksa. One is by meditation. That is rather restricted to intellectuals, because it involves close contact with brahman. It is called jnanamarga. A second is by ordinary prayers and by making offerings. This is called bhaktimarga. And a third is by doing something that will please God, such as creating fine artwork, performing sacred music and dances, and so on, according to one’s talents. This is called karma marga.

Alternatively, one may look at the three ways of worshiping, the Tri Pramana. The first is pure dogmatism, Agama Pramana. This means simply doing what you are told to do by heads that are presumably wiser than your own. A second is by studying, questioning, and drawing conclusions from that study — Anumana Pramana. And the third route is by meditation, Pratyaksa Prama. All of these methods are equally valid and acceptable, according to the abilities of the devotee. There is no “best” way to achieve liberation. Liberation may be easier for an uneducated farmer to achieve by following dogma than it is for a Brahmana to achieve by meditation. It all depends upon his feelings and how he goes about it.

Of all the aspects of Hinduism, caste is the least understood and the most execrated. The caste system of India, with its outcasts, the untouchables, is often compared in the popular imagination of the West to political systems of discrimination, like apartheid in South Africa, or “Jim Crow” in the United States. A Westerner finds the rigidity of caste, and the cruelty of untouchability, to be by definition unjust. But caste is not a government policy, it is a complex system of social organization historically based on social function — smith, farmer, priest, etc. — which eventually became entwined with Hindu doctrine.

The word “caste,” as applied to the ordering of Hindu society, comes from the Portuguese, who upon arriving in India in 1498 used the word caste, “division,” to refer to the stratification of Indian society. But caste is not the same as class, or station, or “division” in a Western society. It is the manifestation on an individual level of an elaborate web of cultural organization in Hindu society wherein balance and propriety are privileged concepts. Caste is the social codification of dharma. Caste lies outside, or perhaps deeper than, political organization by governments. Both the Indian and the Indonesian governments have “banned” discrimination by caste. But in India, and in Bali, caste is too ingrained to disappear by edict. Away from the offices, or schools, caste in Bali is still quite important. “Where do you sit?” a polite way of asking, “What is your caste?” is the first or second question a Balinese will ask upon meeting a stranger. Caste prerogatives are maintained, in address and codes of deference, and individuals associate more freely and often with those of their own caste than with others. Although there are those in Bali who would seek to reform the system,