Hinduism and Modernity

David Smith

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namo gurubhyaḥ

For J., A., W., M., D.

Dare to reason for yourself!
Horace, Gassendi, Kant

You, the individual self, are the Universal Self.
tat tvam asi
Chhandogya Upanishad

For the learned,
every country is one's own country,
and every town one's own town.
Tirukkural

Contents

Preface

This book is a product of Lancaster University, where colleagues past and present in Religious Studies, Sociology and the Institute for Cultural Research have done much to further understanding of modernity and postmodernity. Notwithstanding scepticism on my part in respect of both modernity and postmodernity – especially postmodernity, which I suspect relates to what it is like to be a well-to-do resident of a metropolis at any point in the history of civilization – the work of my colleagues prompted me to attempt a presentation of Hinduism in relation to modernity.

By modernity I mean not modern times, but the theorization of modern times, the quasi-theological sociological reductionism which is a reified caricature of modern times. Modernity means rationalization, the autonomous individual, capitalism and the nation-state. Modernity, product of the Enlightenment, is generally brought into sharper focus by the contrast with what are called 'traditional societies', and somewhat blurred by the further contrast with the agglomeration of qualities known as postmodernity.

By Hinduism I mean of course the religion (or religions) of Hindus, religion that is a prime example of tradition, the product of 'a civilization which in its origins is probably as ancient as either the Egyptian or the Sumerian, but unlike them is yet functioning as a vital factor in the lives of nearly a fifth of the entire population of the world'. Thus Radhakrishnan described Hinduism in 1941.[1] In this book Hinduism is discussed both in terms of its historical scope and more particularly as it is manifested today.

In the chapter by Radhakrishnan I have just cited, he asks, 'What is the spirit of Hinduism? What are its essential principles?' These are not fashionable questions, for essentialism is now seen, rightly, to be dangerous. But essentialism is an important part of Hinduism. 'The brahminical scriptures of the Buddha's day, the Brahmanas and the early Upanisads, were mainly con-

cerned with a search for the essences of things: of man, of sacrifice, of the universe. Indeed, brahminical philosophy continued in this essentialist mode down the centuries.'[2] Whereas the Buddha taught an active practice of liberation from rebirth, the Upanishads teach meditation upon the inner essence that is consciousness. The Hindu essence implies techniques to reach it, just as eating salt implies the process of extracting salt from water, but the goal is highlighted rather than the path. The essence as a point of focus is what counts in Hinduism. The image of the deity expresses the spiritual essence for the worshipper, who concentrates upon that essence, establishes contact with it, and absorbs it into himself. A common metaphor for essence is butter produced from milk. The essence of the male is the semen slowly distilled within, so easily lost. The essence of the female is her female power, her *shakti*, expressed in her milk and her menstrual blood. The brahman is the essence of the caste system, the mouth of the originary cosmic giant. Gold, the essential metal, hoarded over the millennia in India, and displayed as jewellery, is a physical expression of the essence of life. Everything behaves in accordance with its essential quality. Life is the expression of inner substance, of milk and semen; the spiritual is the expression of the inner essence, formless consciousness.

The answer to the question 'What is Hinduism?' depends on the degree of accuracy demanded, on the degree of zoom. What Hinduism is could be answered by a photograph from outer space of the tens of millions of Hindus assembled in the 2001 Kumbhamela at the confluence of the three rivers: Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical Sarasvati. That huge body of people purifying itself of its sins by bathing in holy water, mass action on a unique scale, that mark on the surface of the earth visible from outer space is for a brief time the visible essence of Hinduism. If we zoom in, we are confronted by individual faces, life histories, each of which would have to be plumbed were there to be a complete understanding of Hinduism today. The same applies to the extensive variety of texts. I take Hinduism in the largest sense – even though viewed here primarily in its articulation by the Sanskrit tradition – englobing also its borderlands of Dalits and Muslims, against which it has reacted and with which it has coalesced, borderlands in the absence of which it cannot, so to speak, be its proper self; and also a Hinduism that has broken free of India and come to the West!

Modernity, not unlike Hinduism, has become a single, reified entity, that casts a long shadow. Modernity is the encrustation of modern times with a kind of secular theology. Modernity has an ethics, a logic, and an ontology. It fulfils itself in globalization. Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* is 'modernity's Sermon on the Mount'.[3] And so on. It is not my purpose to study the ideology of modernity in any depth. I shall give merely the briefest outline of modernity; but I do set out what part India and Hinduism have played in the formation of that ideology, and also consider what further effect Hinduism might have upon it.

Hinduism and modernity are opposite poles that are in some ways parallel entities. Imaginary in so far as they are held to be single entities, their changing shapes are not always dissimilar. Both Hinduism and modernity, to some extent and in differing ways, are subject to sustained critiques by feminism and postcolonialism. This book seeks to map the intellectual scene within which Hinduism may be situated. Like the reader inescapably within the confines of my own time, I look at Hinduism through the eyes of modernity, but attempt also to look back at modernity through the eyes of Hinduism.

The opening chapter of this book introduces modernity and shows the part – the small part – that India and Hinduism played in its formation. The second chapter considers the transposition of tradition into modernity in India via the image of the Juggernaut. The third chapter introduces the traditional literature of Hinduism and its modern developments.

The second part of the book takes a longer look at the reception of Hinduism: through the eyes of Islam (chapter 4), through the eyes of Europe (chapter 5), and contemporary revisionism of Orientalism and postcolonialism (chapter 6).

The third part of the book examines basic aspects of classical Hinduism and contrasts these with modernity. Here the core of Hinduism and its most distinctive features – though caste is only lightly touched upon – are set against parallel features of modernity. In order to present the Hindu equivalent of modernity's view of the self, four chapters are necessary. I begin with 'woman caste' (chapter 7), for Hinduism emphasizes, or at least does not seek to deny, woman's biological difference from man. The power Hinduism attributes to women, especially to mothers, leads naturally to Hindu goddesses (chapter 9), the area where Hinduism differs most notably from other 'world religions'. In this chapter mention is made of the attempt by the women's movement to make use of Hindu goddesses outside Hinduism. I then consider the divine in Hinduism more generally (chapter 10), looking at the whole notion of image worship, in addition to surveying the pantheon. The chapter concludes with a conspectus of multiple gods and polytheism, from the Enlightenment to the present.

We now have sufficient context to present the Hindu view of the Self (chapter 10). Here we start from a poster print of Shiva and his family, a print that is presented as a family photograph. The gods mirror the human family, and the human family mirrors the gods. Gods, other divine beings, and film stars present life on a bolder canvas that instructs and encourages. In the South, images of politicians and film stars appear on giant posters beside the road, just like the giant images favoured by Buddhism and Jainism in the past. Human events become superhuman. Human beings are able to attain superhuman powers. Hinduism inculcates superhuman possibilities, and superhuman realities.

The last part looks at specific aspects of Hinduism in the modern world: at the phenomenon of godmen and godwomen in India and in the West (chap-

ter 11), and at politics, nationalism and the Hindu–Muslim divide in India (chapter 12). The chapter on politics is the one chapter fully and solely concerned with Hinduism in India today.

India today is referred to through the book, but here we face the current situation of Hinduism in India. This might be thought regrettable, but in fact our journey is made easier by postponing till the last moment confrontation with the dire reality of Hinduism's current political situation. It is here that Hinduism and modernity finally meet in the manifestations of Hindu nationalism, dissolving into the Hindutva which haunts India today.

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Part I

Hinduism and Modernity Explained

Chapter One

Modernity and Hinduism

Hail to Ganesha, the God of Beginnings, the Remover of Obstacles.

The most powerful institutions over time are those whose membranes give the impression they are impermeable, but are the most porous.[1]

The Ganesha milk miracle

On the morning of Thursday, 21 September 1995, a miracle took place in a Delhi temple. The image of elephant-headed Ganesha drank up the milk offered to him in worship. News of this event spread throughout India and was reported world-wide the next day. Hindus in every continent, in temples and in homes reported that their Ganesha too was drinking the milk offered to him. A barrister reported from Malaysia that the plastic Ganesha on his car dashboard had exhibited the same thirst. The London *Guardian* of 23 September reported it as 'probably the first example of global religious fervour propagated by mass telecommunications'.

This world-wide Hinduism was counterbalanced by the modernity of the national press in India which generally declared it to be no miracle, to be indeed a waste of time and milk – under such headlines as 'Ganesh Hysteria Peters Out', 'Have the Gods had their Fill?' and 'Temples Deserted, Rationalists Prove Capillary Action Works Always'. The usual editorial line was that such superstitious credulity was incompatible with the secular and scientific orientation of independent India. Among English-language publications it was left to the Hawaii-published *Hinduism Today* to lament that 'in India, which has taught mankind so much about religious tolerance, it is a surprise to see such an anti-Hindu bias. Years of British "divide and rule" policy, Christian missionary attacks and Marxist influence have created this atmosphere of bias. Lord Ganesha, Guardian of Dharma and Remover of Obstacles, has now revealed this anomalous situation to the entire world.'[2] That is, Ganesha had deliberately exposed the anti-Hindu bias of the Indian press. Here we see at once the global scope of Hinduism today, the strength of traditional belief, the rational scepticism of the Indian press, and the embattled attitude of the new fundamentalism.[3]

Ganesha became the first god to span the world instantaneously. What occurred was not simply world-wide reporting of a miracle, but the instantaneous world-wide occurrence of multiple instances of the same miracle. This miracle contrasts with the popular myth wherein the chubby Ganesha opts out of the hassle of circumnavigating the globe: when Shiva offers his two sons a mango as prize for the first to race round the world, six-headed Skanda dashes off on his peacock, while Ganesha merely ambles round his parents to claim the mango, explaining that they are the universe in themselves.

Hinduism and modernity

Like six-headed Skanda, modernity encircles the globe. Ganesha, with his elephant trunk, pot belly, and plate of sweets, most bizarre of gods to Western eyes, sums up in himself the chaotic variety of Hinduism. Shiva got his sons to run a race. I venture to set Hinduism against modernity: I propose a consideration of Hinduism and modernity by means of which each will cast light on the other. Skanda, of course, is no less profoundly Hindu than Ganesha, an 'ejaculation' of Shiva's semen while Ganesha is made from a fold of Parvati's sari; Skanda's origins lie deep in south India. But the rivalry of the two brothers justifies for the moment my metaphor.

Both Hinduism and modernity are somewhat arbitrary intellectual constructs. Modernity is not a word used in ordinary speech. Modernity is not simply the modern world or modern times; it is the theorization of the modern world. Hinduism too, though an older term than modernity, began as an extraneous, external term for the indigenous religions of India other than the reform movements that became separate, clearly self-identified, religions: Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism. Hinduism comprises Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shaktism, themselves refracted in turn into more distinct groupings. Both terms – Hinduism and modernity – constitute theorizations.

Our point of focus is not India and the West today, though that combination is the background of our investigation, the theatre in which this performance proceeds, the stage that Hinduism and modernity tread. Hinduism is the religion of 80 per cent of Indians, but it has only recently been sharply defined. Modernity is the time in which we all live, but here it is used in the sense of a coherent body of doctrine, a kind of sociological theology, a reified entity. Hinduism as a unit is set out in a stream of mainly Western books; it is mainly Western scholarship that has set out for inspection Hinduism as a 'world religion'. Modernity is conjoined with endless subjects in hundreds of book titles; its hard core is provided by studies of such authors as Max Weber and Walter Benjamin. The world has become disenchanted, art has lost its aura. For Weber the peculiar conditions of the modern world were to be explained by the uniqueness of Europe; for Benjamin, messianic materialist, modernity

is the landscape of the metropolis. For Weber, modern bureaucracy has created an iron cage for mankind; for Benjamin, mankind is seduced by the bright lights of arcades of shops in the big city. These two cult figures for current definers of modernity serve to delimit our view of modernity.[4]

For modernity, the self is autonomous and God is dead. The death of God is 'the inescapable "fact" of modern life'.[5] For Hinduism, new gods jostle for place with old ones. For Hinduism, the self is hierarchical, people differ widely, and almost everyone is subordinate to someone else; yet it is open to the Hindu to abandon the social self and become a spiritual self. The clearest contrast between Hinduism and modernity is perhaps that the latter claims to be a unique period in history, while the former has the longest history of any living culture.

Modernity is global but, as the opening of this chapter shows, Hinduism is now by no means restricted to the single subcontinent that was its origin. Hinduism is closely connected with Jainism and Sikhism, and also with Buddhism, another 'world' religion. Hindu nationalists would see the three as aspects of Hinduism; certainly all three subsist within the penumbra stemming from ancient Hinduism. There is not space here to discuss these other religions in detail, despite their importance, though I will return to them in the final chapter. Modernity dissolves – at its edges at least – into postmodernity, its light becoming darkness when truth becomes relative. In the final analysis nothing is clear. We shall, however, stay in the light as far as is possible.

Both Hinduism and modernity are contentious terms, threatened and threatening. Hinduism as Hindutva, that is to say, Hindu nationalism, has become the battle-cry of fundamentalists and fascists, modernity the boast of the still imperializing West. Some Hindus feel threatened by Islam and left-wing thinkers; modernity is threatened by postmodernity and by all forms of fundamentalism. Hinduism is threatened by modernity, and modernity is threatened by Hinduism. As Al-Azmeh says, 'Naming is not an innocent activity . . . [it] lies at the very heart of ideology . . . concrete images put forward as factually paradigmatic . . . serve as iconic controllers of identities and take on general values generated by a truncated and telescoped history.'[6] Hinduism and modernity, first merely coinages, have taken on their own momentum – in their power, their mightiness, their volume, they have become juggernauts.

Why compare Hinduism and modernity?

Hinduism is not the most obvious religion to juxtapose with modernity. It is remote from those religions usually considered in relation to modernity: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Judaism has a most intimate relationship with modernity. Gillian Rose's essays on Judaism and modernity treat modernity as an in-house concern of Jewish thought, as indeed it has largely been. Thinkers of Jewish ori-

gin have had a dominant role in the formation of modernity. Hinduism, by contrast, is an outsider. For Emmanuel Levinas, 'Europe *is* the Bible and Greece.'[7] For Chief Rabbi Herzog, Greeks and Jews are the 'master-builders of the gigantic temple of civilization . . . Civilization exhibits two forces – religion and science – contending for mastery over the human mind. Science is ultimately traceable to the contribution made by the Hellenic race, Israel, on the other hand, has brought into the world the light of religion in its highest and purest form.'[8]

Christianity, Islam and Judaism are religions of a book (*the* book, is the way they put it), and are largely defined by their respective central codified texts, though they have their borders, their heterodox traditions, their badlands. Hinduism is a religion of many books and of no book, of myriad oral teachings and ritual practices. There is no overall religious authority to define and exclude. The watchwords are both unity and multiplicity, not either/or, but a dynamic fuzzy logic allowing endless manipulation of the hierarchy that dissolves into universal oneness.

The relativity of truth that Hinduism accepts is well shown by the Indian story of the blind men and the elephant. Each man touched one part of the elephant, and declared the elephant to be what he experienced. Every account was accurate as far as it went, but none of the men had any idea of what an elephant really was. All human truth is relative. However, until recently Hinduism has lacked desire to define itself, to proclaim the unity of the elephant of the story. Taking the long view, a complete survey of all forms of religion that claimed to be Christian would scarcely be less diffuse, contradictory, and bizarre than the forms of Hinduism. Indeed such a total body of forms of Christianity would conceivably be less coherent than Hinduism. It is fashionable for good political reasons to deny the unity of Hinduism, but its multiple forms are more mutually accessible than are the disparate sects of other religions.

My title is chosen to articulate the working assumption of a potentially revealing duality of opposites. Hinduism is the best, or at least the largest, single instance of traditional culture. As such it can stand as the type, the very image of tradition, as modernity's opposite, this polarity taking its place in the line of such oppositions as ancient and modern, Matthew Arnold's Hebraic and Hellenic, and Nietzsche's Dionysian and Apollonian (There is more truth in this the more we ignore the impact of modernity upon India.)

The definition of modernity

I take modernity as the single destination to which 'all lines of developmental traffic lead', the Eurocentric, Euro-American-centric view, and treat only cursorily the impact of modernity on India. Such writers as Breckenridge and Appadurai affirm that modernity is a global experience 'as varied as magic, marriage, or madness'.[9]

> Every national society now creates its own ways of playing with modernity . . . As far as this sort of play with the 'means of modernity' is concerned, the advanced capitalist countries may have a head start, but they are no longer gatekeepers. The genie is out of the bottle . . . particular societies become locations not of pristine cultures, but rather of complex and specific negotiations between history and globality.[10]

For the most part I shall restrict myself to the genie before it left the bottle. What I am dealing with here is Western modernity, above all and indeed almost entirely a codified and reified Western modernity, which I call simply modernity.

How then is modernity best defined? 'There are few terms which seem to unleash such a flood of words and debates as that of "modernity".'[11] Perhaps the simplest formulation is that modernity is what succeeds the pre-modern, and which may or may not be succeeded in turn by the post-modern, but that gives us two more terms to deal with, each predicated on the modern. Modernity is the Enlightenment project, with its certainties of reason and progress; it is the detraditionalizing of the traditions which preceded it. According to Charles Taylor, as summarized by Felski, modernity is 'a general philosophical distinction between traditional societies, which are structured around the omnipresence of divine authority, and a modern secularized universe predicated upon an individuated and self-conscious subjectivity'.[12]

When did modernity begin? That is a hard question. As Cahoone points out,

> any century from the sixteenth through the nineteenth could be, and has been, named as the first 'modern' century. The Copernican system, for example, arguably a cornerstone of modernity, dates from the sixteenth century, while democratic government, which can claim to be the essence of modern politics, did not become the dominant Western political form until very recently.[13]

According to their interests, writers speak of modernity as social structure, or psychological experience, or philosophical project, and tend to assume that all aspects share a common time-frame, and that as modernity spreads elsewhere in the world all the aspects will be found together. A confidently precise definition, based on Max Weber's understanding of the spirit of capitalism, is provided by Bryan Turner:

> modernity is an effect of the processes of social rationalization which had their origins in the asceticism of the Protestant sects, in the ethic of world mastery of the seventeenth century, in the evolution of positivistic experimental sciences (especially Dutch and English experimental medicine), in Enlightenment rationalism and in the slow and uneven formation of a general secular culture.[14]

It is fashionable to speak of 'the project of modernity' rather than simply 'modernity', for modernity is credited with an agenda, it has a plan, a trajectory almost as if it were a rocket, a rocket that must fall to earth eventually. The contemporary German philosopher Habermas expresses the general view: 'the project of modernity' was 'formulated in the eighteenth century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment'. It 'consisted in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic . . . The Enlightenment philosophers wanted to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life – that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday social life.'[15] In the words of Ernest Gellner, 'The creed of the Enlightenment *philosophes* was a kind of social programme, a vision of a rational order on earth which would also be a happy one.'[16] The canonical eighteenth-century French text on the idea of progress was *Sketch of a Historical Survey of the Progressions of the Human Mind* by Condorcet (1743–94), wherein it is shown that, thanks to scientific knowledge, mankind will continuously develop in health and happiness, its conduct ever more rational. Karl Marx was to argue that, through rational awareness of the working of society, people could free themselves from the blind, irrational forces that had hitherto governed their lives. Liberalism and socialism, the major ideologies of the West in the twentieth century, spring from the Enlightenment and share its belief that reason and freedom will prevail.

The lineage of modernity

Each of the European nations has it own lineage of modernity. Here I will pick out only the very greatest figures. I begin with Francis Bacon (1561–1626), herald of the Enlightenment according to Voltaire and D'Alembert, whose doctrine can be summed up as utility and progress:

> To make men perfect was no part of Bacon's plan. His humble aim was to make imperfect men comfortable . . . the aim of the Platonic philosophy was to exalt man into a god. The aim of the Baconian philosophy was to provide man with what he requires while he continues to be man. The aim of the Platonic philosophy was to raise us far above vulgar wants. The aim of the Baconian philosophy was to supply our vulgar wants.[17]

Bacon gave a visionary account of the experimental science of the future.

Modern philosophy – the 'philosophy of subjectivity'[18] – is usually said to begin with Descartes (1596–1650), who established the priority of internal subjectivity. His delight at achieving the famous insight *cogito ergo sum* led him to offer thanks to the Black Madonna at Loreto. However, his *Discourse*

on Method reduced knowledge to the measurable, and his stress on reasoning led him to fear the Inquisition of the Catholic Church which had recently forced Galileo to recant his proof of Copernicus's claim that the earth goes round the sun. It is all too easy today to overlook the power of the Inquisition, and thus to exaggerate the religious sensibilities of philosophers whose very lives were threatened by it and wished to put it off the scent. Goya, a profoundly modern painter, had reason to fear the Spanish Inquisition even in the nineteenth century.

A junior contemporary of Descartes was François Bernier (1620–88), a minor figure in European intellectual history, but who is nevertheless important in the present book, and he will be referred to frequently in the early chapters. Bernier is usually described as a traveller, but his account of seventeenth-century India is based on a 10-year stay, mainly in Delhi, and his letters from India are treatises of great intellectual weight. I shall carefully consider his accounts of Hinduism and Mughal India. His formulation of Oriental despotism has resonated to the present day. A doctor of medicine, he was a disciple of Descartes's opponent Gassendi (d. 1655), who wished to revive the philosophy of Epicurus – atomism, the advocacy of pleasure over pain and liberation from the bonds of religious superstition. Despite being a canon of the Church, Gassendi's motto was 'Dare to reason for yourself!'[19] The followers of both Descartes and Gassendi are mentioned in a skit by Bernier, who speaks in mock alarm of their attempting to assist 'an obscure person, who goes by the name of Reason' 'to make forcible entry into the schools of our University' in order to expel the Aristotle of the theologians.[20] It was perhaps Bernier's attack on the influential astrologer Morin that made it advisable for him to leave France, and led him to India in 1659. Returning in 1669, he later had the same patroness as La Fontaine, whose highly successful *Fables* told of speaking animals modelled on and partly retold from sources originating from the Hindu *Panchatantra*, introduced to him by Bernier. Descartes stressed the separation of mind and body: only the mind could attain certainty; the body was a machine. In his view, animals did not have souls, but were merely machines.

The flow of information about India and other Eastern countries had been steadily increasing from the Middle Ages onwards, as has been set out by Donald Lach in his masterly *Asia in the Making of Europe*.[21] Much information was obtained by Jesuits. A Portuguese translation of the *Jnaneshvari*, Marathi paraphrase of the *Bhagavad Gita*, was made as early as the sixteenth century, but remains unpublished. It was only in the Enlightenment that the significance of this information began to be taken on board by philosophers. At first the stream of pagan Indian thought, that is Hindu thought, was held to be extremely ancient and correspondingly pure. Voltaire used Indian paganism to attack Christianity, ironically using as proof of Hindu

wisdom the *Ezour Veda*, a Sanskrit text faked by Jesuits in support of their own belief. One of the most widely read texts of the Enlightenment was Raynal's treatise on colonialism, *The Philosophical History of the Two Indies*, surveying the whole range of European colonization. Raynal in his day was as famous as Rousseau, and, no less than Rousseau, an oracle of the coming French Revolution:

> Religion was everywhere an invention of skilful politicians who sought in the sky the force they lacked themselves, and brought down terror. Their reveries were generally accepted in all their absurdity. It was only by the progress of civilization and the enlightenment that we have become emboldened to examine them and begun to blush at belief.[22]

Raynal (1713–96) and others, such as his fellow countryman Anquetil-Duperron (1731–1805) and the Dutchman Jacob Haafner (1754–1809) who both wrote accounts of their travels in India,[23] are now praised for their opposition to colonialism, but this opposition was perhaps prompted by the fact that their own national interests were pre-empted by Britain. As we shall see at the end of this chapter and in chapter 6 on Orientalism, postcolonialism and feminism point up the contrast between the Enlightenment stress on reason and freedom and the beginning of European colonialism.

At least from the time of Spinoza (1632–77), atheism was an important element of the Enlightenment. A distinction may be made between the radical, atheistic, enlightenment of Spinoza and others, and the moderate, mainstream Enlightenment which included most of the well-known figures of the period. But the distinction is rather between the plain speakers and the cautious. A widely distributed text prior to Raynal's best-seller was the anonymous work sometimes attributed to Spinoza called *The Three Impostors*. Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad are investigated to 'judge afterwards who are the best founded: those who revered them as Holy men and Gods, or those who treated them as schemers and impostors'. The text takes the latter view:

> Although there was a multitude of divinities, those who worshipped them, whom we call pagans, had no general system of religion. Each republic, each state and city, each particular place had its own rites and thought of the divinity as fancy dictated. Following this came legislators [i.e. Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad] more cunning than the first legislators, and who employed methods more studied and more certain by giving out laws, forms of worship, and rituals which were fit to feed the fanaticism they wished to establish.[24]

I shall now consider to what extent the four greatest names in the formation of modernity used India and Hinduism as reference points. Each of them used Hinduism as an occasional background against which to illuminate their study of the mechanisms of their own 'modern' world.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)

When in 1784 a newspaper posed the question 'What is Enlightenment?' Kant declared:

> Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's understanding without guidance from another. This immaturity is self-imposed when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another. Sapere Aude! ['Dare to reason for yourself!'] 'Have courage to use your own understanding!'–that is the motto of enlightenment.[25]

In *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason* (1793), Kant contrasted 'the religion of the priests' with the 'heroic opinion' of contemporary philosophers. The former, he said, claimed 'that the world began with something good: with the Golden Age . . . But then they make this happiness disappear like a dream, and they spitefully hasten the decline into evil . . . so that now . . . we live in the final age'; the latter claimed that 'the world steadfastly (though hardly noticeably) forges ahead in the very opposite direction, namely from bad to better; that at least there is in the human being the predisposition to move in this direction'. For the pessimistic view, that 'the Last Day and the destruction of the world are knocking at the door', Kant instances India: 'in certain regions of India the Judge and Destroyer of the world . . . Shiva . . . already is worshipped as the God now holding power, after Vishnu, the Sustainer of the World, grown weary of the office he had received from Brahma the Creator, resigned it centuries ago'.[26] The roles of the gods are correctly expressed here by Kant, but setting them in a historical sequence is a misreading prompted by the Jesuit forgery, the *Ezour Veda*. The three gods are always contemporaries, though each can be the first-born or last-born in relation to the others.

In defining the Enlightenment in 1784 Kant wrote not only for the general public but also for his sovereign, Frederick the Great, who exemplified the responsible freedom Kant believed to be synonymous with the spirit of true Enlightenment. For Kant, the emperor was 'truly enlightened in his ability to permit freedom in matters of religion and personal conscience while remaining constant with respect to the necessity of maintaining a sense of duty and obedience amongst his subjects regarding matters of social and cultural order'.[27] For Kant, maturity meant freedom of conscience with respect to matters speculative and theoretical, and duty with respect to social obligations (as it happens, this position resembles that of Hinduism). German thinkers were under greater political constraint than their French and British counterparts. It is all the more interesting that Kant, threatened with censorship from 1786 by Frederick's repressive successor, never praised the tolerance of Hindus, tolerance he referred to in the series of geographical lectures he gave over many years:

> It is a doctrine of the Indians (Hindus) that every nation has a religion of its own. Hence they compel no one to accept theirs. Whenever Christian missionaries tell about Christ, his teachings, his life etc., they listen attentively and raise no objections. But afterwards, when they begin to narrate about their religion, and the missionaries get indignant over it and censure them, as to how they can believe such untruths, then the Indians resent it saying that they believed . . . everything they had said, even though they could not prove their stories, why then could they not likewise believe them?[28]

G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831)

Kant remained sceptical about moral progress, saying that 'the history of all times attests far too powerfully against it'.[29] It was Hegel who argued the implementation of reason in history. Whereas Kant called on individuals to dare to reason for themselves, Hegel claimed that it was the Spirit that called to the self.[30] 'That world history is governed by an ultimate design, that it is a rational process – whose rationality is not that of a particular subject, but a divine and absolute reason – that is a proposition whose truth we must assume; its proof lies in the study of world history itself, which is the image and the enactment of reason.'[31] In Ernest Gellner's words,

> [Hegel's generation] had trouble with the old deity, but was eager to find something it could worship . . . The old deity, simultaneously personified and hidden, was taken to be a code term for a guiding impersonal culture-spirit which guides and bestows meaning on history . . . The impersonal Agency was the Spirit of the Age, or rather, it successively manifested itself in a whole *series* of such Spirits. It was really only a spirit with a succession of incarnations. Each of them was but its temporary avatar. But it could also be identified with the Author and Producer of the great historical drama itself, *and* it could constitute its ultimate culmination . . . the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham had, at long last, become one and the same.[32]

For Hegel, India was a land of 'sunrise', of early origins and 'childhood'.[33] His lectures on religion put all religions into a temporal sequence of development in which Hinduism comes very near the beginning, as a religion of fantasy. India is 'the character of Spirit in a state of Dream'. Hegel was concerned to refute the post-Enlightenment German Romantics who held that the human race began in a state of innocence, and that traces of an immediate vision of God could be found in, for instance, the earliest Indian religion.[34] But his own view was hardly less romantic when he described India as 'a Fairy region, an enchanted World'. We are far from the informed anthropological understanding of Kant, but then that understanding did not inform Kant's own philosophy, and Kant would have agreed with Hegel that the relationship between Orient and Occident was a relationship of subordination, the Orient

having been superseded by the Occident[35] – 'it is the necessary fate of Asiatic Empires to be subjected to Europeans'.[36] We see here an early statement of what Said and Inden call Orientalism, which is considered in detail in chapter 6 below. Hegel's dialectic of the self and the other, manifested for instance in the interrelationship of master and slave, came to have great importance in the revision of the Enlightenment that took place in the second half of the twentieth century.[37]

When Habermas tells us that 'Hegel was the first philosopher to develop a clear concept of modernity,'[38] we must remember that this clarity of concept is brought about by the imputation of unclarity to other cultures. If we have to go back to Hegel to understand the 'internal relationship between modernity and rationality' this is because it was Hegel who was the most extreme in denying rationality to other cultures. Yet not much in Hegel is clear. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, he defines 'the True' as 'the Bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunk'.

Karl Marx (1818–1883)

Marx was greatly influenced by Hegel, but stood him on his head, taking his method but rejecting his mysticism. He completely accepted and continued to develop the notion of the progressive development of humanity. However, for Marx religion had no part to play in this development. The Judaeo-Christian God, gravely weakened by Hegel, who dissolved him into Spirit, now vanishes. What for Hegel is the cunning of the Spirit realizing its goals in history through the human struggle becomes for Marx the dialectical operation of the 'material' laws of history, expressed in the forces of production (the workers) overturning the relations of production (capitalism) by revolutionary struggle. No less confident than Hegel in the unbounded human capacity for progress, for Marx not just Hinduism but all religion was a fantasy projected by a humanity that hitherto had found no fulfilment in this world. Religion, he thought, was the 'opium of the people'. Marx may have had in mind Hegel's comparison of the Hindu's view of the world to an opium dream (though, conversely, opium was the religion of the poor in Europe).

Marx, writing in England in the midst of the Industrial Revolution, in the home of capitalism, was deeply influenced in his view of things by the society in which he found himself. The terrible conditions to which the majority of industrial workers were reduced, their lack of satisfaction in their work, their alienation from their employers and from the end product of their labour – as reported to him by his friend Engels – impressed him so much that his philosophy focused on this level of society. It was from here, from the proletariat, that change was going to come, and it was this level of society that would reap all the benefits that Marx's doctrine would in due course bring. Engels's close observation of the textile industry and other rapidly changing technologies