

# *Karma*, Time, and Cosmology

## In This Chapter

Since antiquity the Hindus conceived of time and space as vast in scale, and formulated effective symbol systems through which to describe them. Time was viewed as cyclical, undergoing repetitive processes of various orders, from the daily and annual cycles to those of much longer duration. Hindus imagined the universe as geometrically harmonious, following an evident sacred symmetry. Human lives were viewed as aligned with this cosmic order, and subject to the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth through the various realms of existence. Only a profound intuitive realization about one's true nature could free one from this endless series of incarnations. This was spiritual liberation.

## Main Topics Covered

Hindu Conceptions of Time and Creation  
The Hindu Calendar  
The Hindu Universe  
*Karma*, *Saṃsāra*, and Reincarnation  
*Mokṣa*

## Hindu Conceptions of Time and Creation

Hindus accept the notion that time and creation move in repetitive cycles. The origin of this idea may derive from observations of the yearly cycle of repetitive seasonal change. The Dharma Śāstras describe various divisions of the cycles of time, such as a *muhūrta* (about 48 minutes) and a *yuga*. A *muhūrta* is traditionally composed of thirty *kalās*, each of which is made up of thirty *kāṣṭhās*, each of which is the time it takes to blink fifteen times. By the time the Purāṇas were being composed an elaborate conception of cyclical time had developed.

There are **four main yugas (ages)**, each progressively shorter in duration. They are the Satya or Kṛta Yuga (lasting 4800 god (*deva*) years), the Tretā Yuga (3600 *deva* years), the Dvāpara Yuga (2400), and the Kali Yuga (1200). The total, known as a *mahāyuga* (great age) is 12,000 god years. Since one human year of approximately 360 days is but a day in the life of the gods, one *deva* (god) year is 360 human years. Thus the actual duration of the Kṛta Yuga is 1,728,000 human years. A *mahāyuga* is thus 4,320,000 years. Seventy-one *mahāyugas* make a *manvantara*, an age of humanity, presided over by a divine being known as a Manu. We are in the twenty-eighth *mahāyuga* of the seventy-one that make up our particular *manvantara*. A thousand *mahāyugas* constitute a *kalpa*.

There are fourteen *manvantaras* within a *kalpa*. We are in the Vaivasvata *manvantara*, the seventh of the fourteen within our particular *kalpa*. Two *kalpas* constitute a day and a night of the creator god Brahmā, whose life span is 100 years. This figure, which describes the duration of a single cycle of creation of the universe, is about 311 trillion solar or human years. We are believed to be roughly in the middle of this vast cosmic time cycle, and only a few thousand years into the Kali Yuga in our particular *mahāyuga*.

When the cosmos is first created, it is renewed, but undergoes degeneration through Time. This progressive decline is mirrored within a *mahāyuga*, where the Kṛta Yuga is marked by human life-spans of 400 years, and where creatures naturally adhere to *dharma* or righteousness. Likened to an animal standing firmly on four feet, with each passing *yuga* a supporting foot is removed. Life-spans diminish by one quarter and *dharma* decays. The destructive nature of Time is symbolized and personified (or deified) by the goddess Kālī, whose name may be translated as “time” or “black.” Since the current age in which we live, the Kali Yuga, when *dharma* stands like a cow precariously balanced on one leg, is the most degenerate and ultimately heading for destruction, people sometimes think of it as the Kālī Yuga. However, the *yugas* are named after various throws in an ancient Indian

game of dice. “Kali” is the most unfavorable throw, while Kālī is the dark goddess of time and destruction.

At the end of a life cycle of Brahmā, the cosmos enters a period of dissolution known as the *pralaya*. The symbolic representation of the *pralaya* is the deity Viṣṇu asleep on the cosmic serpent, Ananta, whose name means “without end.” Viṣṇu represents a subtle, yet powerful principle that endures beyond the seeming end to a cosmic cycle of creation. Some estimate the duration of the *pralaya* to be as long as a life span of Brahmā, but it may well transcend the categories of time and space.



Figure 2.1 A stone relief depicting the creator god Brahmā seated upon a lotus flower emerging from the navel of Viṣṇu, who reclines on the endless serpent Ananta (Vijayanagar).

From this state, because the principle of repeated cyclical creations symbolized by Viṣṇu still endures, the creation re-emerges once again. This activity is symbolized by a lotus flower with a long stalk growing like an umbilical cord from Viṣṇu’s navel. Seated atop the lotus flower is the creator god Brahmā, who brings forth a new creation through his contemplation. There have been, and will be, countless Brahmās, as universes are produced again and again.

## The Hindu Calendar

Hindus follow both the solar calendar, consisting of a seven day week, and a monthly **lunar calendar** based on cycles of waxing and waning fortnights followed by the full and new moon, respectively. A lunar day is known as a *tithi*. The waning or dark fortnight is favored by deceased spirits, while the waxing or bright fortnight is the more auspicious of the two. Hindus use the solar calendar for birthdays and sectarian activities, but religious rituals often follow the lunar system. So the Hindu festival of Navarātra, in honor of the Great Goddess, takes place on the first nine nights of the waxing fortnight of the lunar month of Āśvina. Because of the discrepancy between the **solar and lunar systems** (a lunar month is a little over 29 days), this festival could occur in either September or October.

In 1957, in order to standardize the **calendrical system**, the Government of India initiated the use of a **National Calendar**, which is sometimes called the **Hindu Calendar**. It is based on an authoritative version of an ancient astrological compendium, or *pañcāṅga*. Beginning with the Śaka Era (78 CE), it consists of 365 days, with months of fixed durations. Its first month is Caitra, which falls mostly on March 20 or March 21 on leap years. This marks the beginning of spring, the first of the six traditional seasons. Spring is followed by summer, the rainy season, autumn, winter, and the cool season prior to the spring. Despite this effort at standardization, Hindus actually continue to follow a number of **different calendar schemes**, making the process of establishing the exact timings of religious rituals particularly challenging. It is therefore common to consult religious specialists, who work with various *pañcāṅgas*, to determine the relationships between solar days and lunar *tithis*, and discern when inauspicious influences of *grahas* may make the performance of a rite unsuitable.

## The Hindu Universe

Hinduism does not have a single authoritative cosmology. There is an assortment of descriptions about the origin and nature of the universe. The **Vedic Saṃhitās present a**

fundamental dualism, mirrored in early Chinese thought, between heaven and earth. Heaven is regarded as male and paternal, while Earth is feminine and maternal. In the *Ṛg Veda*, we encounter hymns to the sky god Dyaus-Pitṛ and the earth goddess, Pṛthivī. In a portion of the *Ṛg Veda* (10.90) that is believed to have been composed relatively late, there is the *Puruṣa-Sūkta*, a hymn that describes the cosmos as a giant being/person (*puruṣa*), mostly transcendent, only a quarter of whom is the manifest universe. He has a thousand heads, eyes, and feet. Puruṣa begets Virāj (the Widespread), a feminine principle, who in turn is said to beget Puruṣa. It is unclear if this refers to a mutual creation or if a second Puruṣa, a “son,” is created from Virāj. Puruṣa is sacrificed by the gods and sages, along with everything, as an offering to himself. From that sacrifice, Puruṣa created the cosmos, including the gods. In this paradoxical fashion, typical of many Vedic hymns, where sacrifice is the paradigm of creation, the divided portions of Puruṣa become the cosmos. The moon arose from his mind, the sun from his eye, the sky from his head, Indra and Agni from his mouth, and the Wind from his vital breath. The sacrificial beast, which in this case is the Cosmic Being Puruṣa, through the act of sacrifice, which in this case involves the offering of totality, is thus offered to himself. Out of the sacrifice, the manifold cosmos emerges, poised to make sacrifices

to itself. Through the act of sacrifice, the cosmos is kept in order.

A *R̥g Veda* hymn (10.121) tells of a Golden Embryo (*hiranya-garbha*) -- associated with primeval waters -- who generated both sky and earth. There are numerous other qualities accorded to the various principles or powers that seem to be associated with creation. For instance, *R̥g Veda* 10.81-82 praises the One, the Maker of All (Viśvakarman), who, like a supreme designer, shaped and implemented the cosmic order. Likened to the processes of Vedic sacrifice, he is both sacrificial priest (10.81.1) and the sacrifice (10.81.5), who sacrifices the worlds of his cosmic creations as offerings (10.81.1). The orderly arrangement of the cosmos is like the ritual construction of the sacrificial altar, which subsequently re-enacts the creation. This creator, likely identified with the Golden Embryo (10.82.5) of *R̥g Veda* 10.121, is vastly powerful, profoundly wise (10.82.2), conceals what has past, and enters into what is yet to come (10.81.1). All our wonder and speculation is directed to this power (10.82.3). And yet he is concealed, even from those who merely chant the hymns of praise (i.e., priests), since they are described as shrouded in ignorance, babbling nonsense, and being intoxicated with worldly pleasures (10.82.7). *R̥g Veda* 10.72 tells of the mother goddess Aditi, and Dakṣa, the male creative principle, born from each other (10.72.4),

after manifest existence emerged from the unmanifest (10.72.3). With legs spread, suggestive of childbirth, Aditi gave birth to the earth, the sky (10.72.4), and eight gods (10.72.9).

Many of the Vedic hymns utter such statements about the nature of the gods, the creation, or aspects of reality. However statements are also often framed as questions, such as: To whom should the sacrifice be offered? What was the source and substance of the creation? One of the most intriguing and influential of the cosmological hymns is the *Nāsadiya Sūkta* (*R̥g Veda* 10.129), which gives us a remarkable insight into the sophistication of philosophical speculation already evident in the earliest collection of Hindu scriptural literature. The hymn typifies the aforementioned juxtaposition of speculative assertions and questions. It begins by asking: “Then, before the presence of the manifest, and the non-manifest, what was there? Where was it? Overseen by whom?” (10.129.1). The poem continues with a number of descriptive cosmological declarations. “Before the existence of death, or of deathlessness, before a sign of day and night, The One breathed, breathless, and self-sustained” (10.129.2). “Desire (*kāma*), which arose in The One, was the primal seed of mind. Poets, who have looked wisely within their hearts, know the connection between that which is manifest and the unmanifest” (10.129.4). However, these

declarations are quickly juxtaposed with a number of questions. “Who indeed knows to say how, from what, and where this creation has emerged?” (10.129.6). Asserting that since the gods came with the creation (10.129.6), it asks: “Who really knows its origin?” (10.129.6). And the hymn concludes with a striking speculative note: “Whether or not it formed itself, maybe that One, who looks down from the highest heaven knows, or perhaps even He does not know!” (10.129.7).

As part of the tenth book (*maṇḍala*), the *Nāsadīya Sūkta* is a relatively late addition to the collection of hymns in the *Ṛg Veda Samhitā*. It is evident that the *ṛṣi*(s) who composed this hymn was aware of a host of cosmogonic ideas in circulation. It appears to suggest that there is a type of intuitive understanding, which poets (i.e., seers, sages) are capable of achieving through meditative introspection. As such, the hymn prefigures the teachings of the Upaniṣads and the Hindu philosophical traditions that subsequently develop.

By the time of the Upaniṣads, the notion of a triple world system or Tri-loka was well established. These were typically: 1) the world of the gods, known as heaven (*svar*), or the *deva-loka*, 2) the world of the ancestors, known as the atmosphere (*bhuvah*) or the *pitṛ-loka*, and 3) the human world, known as the earth (*bhūr*) or *manuṣya-loka*. By the Puranic period, the system was **greatly**

**elaborated**, with many variations. The *Viṣṇu Purāṇa* describes the world egg (*brahmāṇḍa*) made up of seven *lokas*, with four other worlds above the aforementioned three. Some sectarian scriptures might place **Viṣṇu’s heaven, Vaikunṭha**, or Śiva’s mountain abode, Kailāsa, at the very top. In addition to these *lokas*, there are the seven netherworlds (*tala*). The lowest is Pātāla, the serpent kingdom of the Nāgas, and the highest, Atala, the realm of the Yakṣas. Below the Talas are as many as 28 or more hells (*naraka*), although seven major ones are typically listed. It is also common for the term Tri-loka to refer to the upper worlds, the earthly world, and the underworlds.

By the Puranic period an elaborate spatial model had developed which linked the geography of the Hindu world with an idealized vision of the cosmos. It consists of a series of concentric islands. The innermost island is Jambu-dvīpa (The Island of the Jambu (Rose-apple) Trees), at the center of which towers the Golden Mountain, Mount Meru or Sumeru, an *axis mundi*, or cosmic pivot. Jambudvīpa is further divided into nine regions (*varṣa*), of which the southernmost is **Bhāratavarṣa**, or India, which is to this day known in Hindi as Bhārat. Jambudvīpa is surrounded by the salt ocean. Six other ring shaped islands surround Jambudvīpa, each progressively larger and each separated by an ocean of similar size. The entire system of worlds and islands is enveloped by the

Brahmā Egg (*brahmāṇḍa*). Hindu emperors, such as the Khmer ruler Suryavarman II, modeled the great temple tomb of Angkor Wat on such a cosmograph. However, due to the complexity of the system, and its many variations in Purāṇic accounts, there is no particular model that is known or universally shared by most Hindus. However, there is a general belief in multiple worlds, including heavens and hells, populated by a range of beings, human and spirit, semi-divine, divine, and demonic, who, if not indifferent, may be benevolently or malevolently disposed towards human beings.

## *Karma, Saṃsāra, and Reincarnation*

The word *karma* derives from the Sanskrit verbal root “*kr*” and simply means “to do,” or “to act.” Thus *karma* originally referred to activity of any kind. However, as early as the Upaniṣads, the idea had developed that one’s actions have consequences both for this lifetime and future ones. The notion of birth in other worlds is prefigured in the Vedic Saṃhitās, which indicate a fear of re-death (*punar-mṛtyu*), namely, dying repeatedly. By the Upaniṣadic period the concept of repeated reincarnations, or *punar-janman* (birth-again), unless one attained Self-realization, is clearly articulated. *Karma* thus developed into the notion of a moral principle of causality, in which

no deed is without its consequences. Good deeds are meritorious (*puṇya*), while evil or sinful deeds (*pāpa*) have painful effects.

According to the *Bṛhadāranyaka Upaniṣad* (VI.2. 15, 16) and *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (IV.15), upon death a person’s *karma* can lead them either via the **path of the gods** (*deva-yāna*) or the path of the ancestors (*pitṛ-yāna*). Those who have faithfully meditated and have attained Self-realization, whether or not their funerary rites are performed, go to the light, via daylight, to the bright fortnight of the moon, and from there via the bright half of the annual cycle (the so-called northern circuit, when the sun ascends through the Zodiac), to the sun, the moon, to lightning, and finally merge with Brahman. For those ones there is no rebirth. However, those who have followed the path of sacrificial offerings, charitable deeds, or asceticism enter the *pitṛ-yāna*. From the smoke of the cremation pyre, they enter the night, and then move through the dark fortnight of the moon, to the dark half of the solar cycle, to the world of the ancestors (*pitṛ-loka*). From there they journey to the moon, where they are fed upon by the gods. They then move into space (*ākāśa*) and finally make their way back into the earthly realm, taking birth either as human beings or other life forms.

Thus the belief in **repeated rebirths** in various realms, as various types of beings, became, and still is,

commonplace in Hinduism. The term *saṃsāra* literally means “to flow together,” or “to wander,” and thus refers to this cycle of repeated rebirths. Beings wander through the various realms, taking up birth and ultimately dying again and again. *Saṃsāra* is thus often rendered as “the cycle of rebirth.” This cycle is virtually endless, and is generally regarded as having no beginning. Eventually, the term *saṃsāra* is also applied broadly to worldly existence itself and reality as it is experienced by those ignorant of the nature of the true Self (*ātman*). The individual soul (*jīva*) carries with it a subtle body that is the vehicle for *karma*. As the *jīva* transmigrates from one rebirth to the next, it brings along its karmic residue.

The mechanics of *karma* are consistently described as akin to other processes observed in the natural world. Acts are spoken of as seeds (*bīja*), which, although they may lay dormant for long periods of time, will eventually germinate and bear fruit (*phala*) under the appropriate conditions. The fruits of *karma* may be produced in this lifetime or in any future incarnation. The notion of rewards for actions performed is related to the relationship thought to exist between Vedic ritual action and its purported fruits. If a ritual that was commissioned was performed by a priest with exactitude, it was believed to render results with certainty. However, certain rites were believed not to produce results immediately, but at

some later point in time. Vedic ritual was grounded on manipulating cosmic powers, deities, and laws, compelling particular responses on behalf of the performer and patron. Vedic ritualists are to this day called *karmakaṇḍi*. So ritual action, or *karman*, may have played a role in the subsequent development of the notion that all actions, not just ritual ones, had consequences for the actor. The principle thus holds that if one accumulates good *karma*, through the performance of good deeds, this may result in more fortunate rebirths, perhaps as a *gandharva* (celestial musicians known for lives of pleasure), or even as a god (*deva*). In fact, the inexplicable causes for the present circumstances of one’s life are also attributed to *karma*. If one is beautiful or intelligent, born into a wealthy home, or gifted with talents, these are regarded as the fruits produced from previously sown karmic seeds. Similarly, *karma* is also regarded as responsible for misfortune. The ramifications of this principle are that all acts are either *karma*-producing seeds, or the fruit of previous *karma*. Essentially, beings are in the thrall of *karma*, which rules their lives with the unerring certainty of other laws of nature.

## *Mokṣa*

*Mokṣa*, derived from the Sanskrit root “*muc*,” meaning

“to release,” is related to its synonym “*mukti*” and refers to freedom from *saṃsāra*. The idea of liberation arises in conjunction with the *śramaṇa* (wandering philosopher) movements that began in the Upaniṣadic period, and reflects a pivotal shift in values from the preceding period. The religious goals of the Vedic Saṃhitās and Brāhmaṇas are often centered on ritual performance and karmic action to secure wealth, longevity, and other such worldly ends. Their trans-worldly concerns are at best concerned with better rebirths in heavenly realms. However, the Upaniṣads, and such *śramaṇa* movements as Buddhism and Jainism, promote shedding one’s pursuit of those goals. *Mokṣa* or *mukti* is contrasted with *bhukti*, the enjoyment of worldly pleasures. The cycle of rebirth, or existence in *saṃsāra*, is viewed as painful. One is in bondage to the karmic laws of causality, and enmeshed in ignorance about the true nature of the Self. Thus *mokṣa* becomes synonymous with freedom from *saṃsāra* and freedom from *karma*. *Mokṣa* is release from worldly existence. It is freedom from the bondage of ignorance into the liberation that comes with knowledge of the Self (*ātman*) or Absolute Reality (Brahman).

Various Hindu philosophical systems vary in the terms they use to designate the concept of *mokṣa*. In Sāṅkhya philosophy, for instance, one encounters the term *kaivalya* (aloneness), a term also used in Yoga

texts. The word *yoga* itself may be understood as meaning *mokṣa*, because *yoga* refers both to a spiritual path to Self-realization and its goal. The Buddhist notion of *nirvāṇa* is akin to *mokṣa*, since both refer to the goal of emancipation or freedom from *karma* and *saṃsāra*, and insight into the true nature of reality and the Self. However, Buddhism and Hindu systems can differ, quite fundamentally, in their descriptions of what constitutes the ultimate realization. Nevertheless, they value the ultimate attainment of *mokṣa/nirvāṇa* above all other achievements.

Despite its initial emphasis on ritual action, orthodox (i.e., Vedic) Hinduism eventually promoted four goals or aims of life, in which *mokṣa* is regarded as the supreme and most valuable pursuit. Significantly, *mokṣa* cannot be achieved merely through the pursuit of good karmic acts, such as routine ritual performances and the avoidance of pernicious *karma*. These latter activities might only result in desirable karmic fruit, such as better rebirths, still within *saṃsāric* reality. Since *mokṣa* is the complete transcendence of *karma*, karmic action alone cannot free one from *karma*. *Mokṣa* requires attainment of liberating wisdom, a penetrating insight into Truth, into the Self, or Absolute Reality. And it is regarded as possible and necessary to achieve such a realization while one is alive. Thus *mokṣa* is not a state that is typically achieved in the afterlife, like a heavenly reward for

a good life. Rather, it is an understanding that grants immortality before one physically dies. Such a Self-realized being is veritably Brahman, and is known as a *jīvanmukti* (liberated while alive). Such sages or saints are highly sought after for teachings and blessings.

## Key Points in this Chapter

- Hindus believe that both creation and time move in repetitive cycles. Time cycles can be of immense duration.
- According to Hindu cosmology, when the cosmos is first created, it is renewed, but undergoes degeneration through Time.
- Hindus follow both the solar calendar and a monthly lunar calendar, often creating challenges for non-specialists regarding the exact timing of various religious rituals.
- Hinduism does not have a single authoritative cosmology, but a variety of descriptions concerning the origin and nature of the universe.
- Many of the Vedic hymns utter assertions concerning the nature of the gods, the creation, or aspects of reality, but such statements are often framed as questions.

- For most Hindus, there is a general belief in multiple worlds, populated by an assortment of beings, any of whom, based on their *karma*, may be reborn repeatedly as any type of being into any of these worlds.
- *Karma* developed into the idea of a moral principle of causality, in which good deeds are meritorious (*puṇya*), while evil or sinful deeds (*pāpa*) have painful effects in this or future lifetimes.
- *Samsāra* is the cycle of repeated rebirths, but it can also refer to worldly existence itself and reality as perceived by one ignorant of the nature of the Self (*ātman*).
- *Mokṣa* refers to freedom from *samsāra* and is contrasted with *bhukti*, the enjoyment of worldly pleasures.
- Hindu and Buddhist concepts of ultimate realization can differ greatly; however, both value the attainment of *mokṣa/nirvāṇa* over all other achievements. Additional material at *Hinduism Online*

## Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Hinduism does not have a single authoritative cosmology? And, do you think this

has had a positive or negative impact on the tradition?

2. Many of the Vedic hymns make assertions about the nature of the gods, the creation, or aspects of reality, but such statements are often framed as questions. Why do you think this is so?
3. There are a few general beliefs regarding cosmology which Hindus agree upon. What are some of these general beliefs, and why do you think they are agreed upon while other beliefs are contested?
4. Hindus have an elaborate conception of Time. Give a detailed description of this concept, explaining where humanity is currently located within this notion of Time.
5. Hinduism offers an assortment of explanations regarding the origin and nature of the universe. What are some of these explanations?
6. Define *karma*, *saṃsāra*, and reincarnation. Then discuss the concept of *mokṣa* giving a detailed explanation of its relationship to the three aforementioned concepts.
7. Consider the social implications of the belief in

*karma* as determining one's caste status, abilities, and dispositions. How might this belief affect persons who regard themselves as currently benefiting from past karma? How about its implications for those who feel that they have not benefitted from it?

8. Why might the notion of *karma* appeal to non-Hindu Westerners, and for what reasons might it not appeal to them?

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