

# CHAPTER SIX

## Sacred Writings



Hindu scriptures are made up of a number of *shastras*, or holy books. Some date back to the time of the Aryans. They fall into two groups. One group is referred to as the *shruti* texts. The other is the *smriti*. Each is described below.

### *Shruti* Texts

*Shruti* means “revealed.” Hindu tradition holds that the earliest holy books were revealed in ancient times to wise men called *rishis*. The *rishis* are thought to have heard Brahman’s words directly and passed them on to their disciples. The words of these texts were never written down. People believed they would have been made impure or unholy had they been recorded.

### The Vedas

The oldest Hindu texts are the *Vedas*. (*Veda* is a word that means “knowledge” or “wisdom.”) There are four. The first and most important is called the *Rig-Veda*. It consists of hymns and poems praising the 33 Aryan gods and goddesses. There are exactly 1,028 poems arranged in verses called *mantras*.

The other three vedas are the *Yajur-Veda*, the *Sama-Veda*, and the *Atharva-Veda*. The *Yajur-Veda* contains prayers and instructions to priests. The *Sama-Veda* is similar to a hymn book, consisting of melodies and chants. The *Atharva-Veda* is a book of spells, charms, and magic formulas.

The Vedas were compiled between 1200 and 1000 B.C. They were not written down until about A. D. 1400. This means that they were remembered and passed on by word of mouth for some 2,500 years.



### The Upanishads

The *Upanishads* are often referred to as separate scriptures, but they are actually the last part of each Veda. They were compiled sometime between 800 and 600 B.C. *Upanishads* can be translated to mean “near-sit-down,” or “sitting near the teacher.” They refer to students and others sitting around wise men (*gurus*) and listening to teachings in the form of stories and parables.

There are 108 Upanishads. Of these,

The ancient Indian language, Sanskrit, is the language of most Indian scriptures. Reading scripture is an important part of Hindu worship. Public readings from the holy books are given during festivals.



15 are considered the most important. They contain the basic ideas of Hinduism. As you learned in Chapter Two, some of these ideas are:

*From the darkness  
lead me to light  
From death  
lead me to immortality*

**Words to remember:**

- shruti
- smriti
- rishis
- Veda
- Rig-Veda
- Yajur-Veda
- Sama-Veda
- Atharva-Veda
- Upanishads

- Brahman is in everything and is eternal and without form.
- The goal of every Hindu is for his or her *atman*, or soul, to merge or unite with Brahman. This state is referred to as *moksha*.
- On the way to *moksha*, the soul passes through a series of births, deaths, and rebirths. This is called *reincarnation*.
- The form a person is reborn into depends on his or her *karma*, or actions on earth. Good karma results in rebirth into a higher life-form.

Some Upanishads are very brief, but their messages are clear. One that is often read before a deceased person is cremated is:

*From the unreal  
lead me to the real*

**Smriti Texts**

The word *smriti* means “remembered.” Smriti texts differ from the shruti in that Hindus believe they were not revealed by or received directly from Brahman. They were composed by wise

There are 108 Upanishads. Of these, 15 are considered the most important. One of the Upanishads (please see quotation beginning in the left-hand column) is often read before a deceased person is cremated.



men and passed along by memory for centuries.

There are two important smriti texts. They are the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Both deal with forms that the god Vishnu took on earth. The *Mahabharata* is about Krishna. The *Ramayana* focuses on Rama.

### The Mahabharata

The *Mahabharata*, or the “Great Epic of India,” is the longest poem in the world. It contains 100,000 verses. It relates many stories, but the story that is most often read and is the most popular is the *Bhagavad Gita*. *Bhagavad Gita* means the “Song of the Lord” or the “Song of the Blessed One.” It explains in simpler terms what is discussed in the Upanishads. Basically, as you read under the section entitled “Vishnu” in Chapter Three, the story has Krishna explaining to his friend and cousin Arjuna that moksha, or union with Brahman, can best be obtained through devotion to him, Krishna.

Like most religious epics, the *Bhagavad Gita* uses an interesting story to get a point across. Much of the tale centers around a war for power between two related families, the *Kauravas* and the *Pandavas*. Arjuna is a Pandava prince, but he is reluctant to go to war. He tells Krishna (who is serving as his charioteer) that he doesn’t want to fight against his cousins, uncles, and respected elders. He even lays down his bow on the battlefield. But Krishna explains that people must do their duty, regardless of how unpleasant it might be. He reminds Arjuna that the *Kauravas* have tried to cheat the *Pandavas* out of what is rightfully theirs. Arjuna listens to his advice and carries on the fight.

The *Bhagavad Gita* makes other points as well. Here is one that might remind you a little of one of the teachings of Christianity:

*Whoever offers me a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or water with devotion, that*

*offer of devotion I will accept from the pure of heart.*

Krishna, of course is saying that the size of a gift or offering is not important. What is important is the love in the giver’s heart. He concludes by saying:

*Give me your mind and give me your heart ... and making me your supreme goal, you will in truth come to me.*



As has already been mentioned, the *Bhagavad Gita* is one of the most popular of the Hindu scriptures. Even so, devout Hindus accept it and other smriti texts only if they do not conflict with the older shruti texts. The older texts are considered the final word because Hindus believe they came directly from God (Brahman).

### The Ramayana

*Ramayana* means “Rama’s Story.” It was written about the year A. D. 200 by a man named *Valmiki*. It is an epic consisting of 24,000 verses. As was

Depicted above is an illustration of Krishna and the reluctant warrior, Arjuna, going into battle. The story of Krishna and Arjuna is from the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is the most popular story from the *Mahabharata* Epic.



mentioned briefly in Chapter Three, it deals with Rama rescuing his wife Sita from the evil demon, Ravana.

Below is a scene from the Ramayana Epic in which Rama (who is one of the forms of Vishnu) enlists the help of the monkey god, Hanuman, in the rescue of his beautiful wife, Sita, from Ravana, the prince of the demons. The rescue attempt fails when Ravana sets Hanuman's tail on fire and he flees into the forest.

Rama is one of the forms of Vishnu. In the Ramayana, he is the son of Dasaratha, the king of Ayodhya. When the time comes for Dasaratha to pass his throne on to Rama, he meets with opposition from his youngest wife, Kaikeyi. Kaikeyi has another son named Bharata, whom she wants to become king. She convinces Dasaratha to banish Rama to the forest for fourteen years.

Honoring the wishes of his father, Rama gives up claim to the throne and goes into exile. He is accompanied by his

wife, Sita, and his brother, *Lakshmana*. While in the forest, a terrible thing happens. Sita is kidnapped by Ravana, who rules the island of Lanka (Sri Lanka). Ravana has heard of Sita's beauty and is determined that he must have her for his own. He disguises himself as a wandering holy man and, while Rama and Lakshmana are distracted, whisks her off to his island kingdom.

Rama enlists the help of Hanuman in rescuing his wife. Hanuman is the monkey god who commands an army of monkey soldiers. Hanuman, who can make himself enormous, does so and takes one giant step to the island of Lanka. He finds Sita and tells her that he has come to rescue her. But Ravana sets his tail on fire, and he retreats to the forest.

The story of Rama concludes when Hanuman and his monkey army build a bridge to Lanka. Rama then approaches Ravana and kills him. Afterwards, he returns to Ayodhya and claims his throne. So, you might be thinking, what is the point of the story? What is it telling Hindus? The answer is that the Ramayana stresses faithfulness and truth, and it shows how good overcomes evil.

You may remember from Chapter Four, "Festivals," that on the last day of the Dasera festival, a giant puppet of Ravana is burned. The story of Rama is performed (through dance and theatre) throughout India. It is so popular that when it was portrayed on Indian television in sixty weekly episodes, it drew the highest rating in the history of television in that country.

### The Puranas

The *Puranas* are another of the smriti texts. They were written down sometime after A. D. 500. *Purana* means "olden or ancient times." The Puranas contain myths and stories about the gods and goddesses, primarily Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, and Shakti. They also explain how the universe was created.



## The Manu-Smriti, or the Laws of Manu

The *Laws of Manu* are as much a code of laws as a religious text. They were compiled by a lawgiver named Manu. No one knows when Manu really lived, or even if he was a real person. His laws started to be written down about A. D. 200 or A. D. 300. They explain how Hindus should live their lives. They also point out the duties of each caste and list punishments for various crimes.

A quick look at some of Manu's laws is interesting. This is especially true in his laws regarding women. Three of these that show it was definitely a "man's world" are summarized below.

*In childhood, a female must be subject to her father; in youth to her husband; when her lord is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be independent.*

*She must always be cheerful, clever in the management of her household affairs ... and economical in expenditure.*

*By violating her duty toward her husband, a wife is disgraced in this*

*world; after death she enters the womb of a jackal, and is tormented by diseases, the punishment of her sin.*

Regarding punishment, Manu states:

*The whole world is kept in order by punishment, for a guiltless man is hard to find. Through fear of punishment the whole world yields the enjoyments (which it owes).*

The above are just a few of the quotes from the Laws of Manu. All told, there are 2,685 verses in the books that make up the laws.



### Words to remember:

Kauravas  
Pandavas  
Valmiki  
Dasaratha  
Kaikeyi  
Bharata  
Lakshmana  
Puranas  
Laws of Manu

### For Further Thought:

1. In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna explains to Arjuna how to attain moksha, or union with Brahman. Moksha is in some ways similar to the Buddhist concept of nirvana. Look up nirvana in an encyclopedia or other source. Then write several paragraphs comparing/contrasting it with moksha.
2. Some messages contained in the the Bhagavad Gita and the Ramayana bear resemblance to the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament. If there are indeed similarities, what does this seem to say about humankind and religion?
3. Compare/contrast Hindu scriptures with those of other religions.
4. Which of the smriti texts—the *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana*—do you think you would enjoy reading the most? Why?
5. What is your opinion of Manu's laws regarding women? Have other religions throughout history placed women in the same inferior position? How do you think women feel about this lowly status?
6. Tell why you agree or disagree with Manu's statement that "the whole world is kept in order by punishment."