

A history of Hinduism Part 1: Development

This is the first of three documents explaining the Hindu religion to a lay audience. This first document traces the religion from the time of the Pontic-Caspian Steppe culture, through the Vedic Era, the Kuru Kingdom, Maurya Empire, and the Gupta Empire, ending at the time of Ādi Śaṅkara. The second will examine the most interesting form of Hinduism, the coherently parsimonious metaphysics of Advaita Vedānta introduced by Ādi Śaṅkara. This is likely the most elegant of all religious doctrines, but it is still unfalsifiable and its impersonal, deindividualizing and dispassionate nature makes it unattractive to the vast majority of adherents of Hinduism. The third will then examine how Advaita Vedānta impacted the worship of the other Hindu gods, with a specific focus on the metaphysics and understanding of Vaiṣṇavism (the worship of Viṣṇu and his avatāras), Śaivism (the worship of Śiva in his various forms), Śāktism (the worship of the Goddess Śakti in manifestations such as Durgā and Kālī), and Smārta tradition (the worship of a quintet of deities: Śiva, Viṣṇu, Śakti, Gaṇeśa, and Sūrya).

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1 Indo-Aryan origins

The Indo-Aryans trace their linguistic and cultural ancestry to the Proto-Indo-Europeans, a prehistoric people who lived on the Pontic–Caspian Steppe around 4500 to 2500 BCE. From this homeland—likely in what is now Ukraine and southern Russia—various groups began migrating outward, eventually developing into distinct branches such as the Italic, Celtic, Germanic, Greek, Anatolian, and Indo-Iranian families. This wide dispersal marked the initial phase in the diversification of the Indo-European language family.

One major offshoot of the Proto-Indo-European speakers was the Indo-Iranian branch, which began to form around 2500 to 2000 BCE. This group developed in the southern steppe and parts of Central Asia and was influenced both by steppe traditions and by the settled, urban cultures of the Bactria–Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC). The Indo-Iranians maintained many steppe customs but began to adopt new religious and social ideas, as seen in later Vedic and Avestan traditions.

By around 2000 to 1800 BCE, the Indo-Aryans began to split from the broader Indo-Iranian group, separating from the ancestors of the Iranians and Nuristanis. This division is supported by linguistic features unique to the Indo-Aryan languages, as well as archaeological and textual evidence. One important clue is the presence of Indo-Aryan deities such as Mitra, Varuṇa, and Indra in treaties of the Mitanni kingdom in northern Syria around 1500 BCE, suggesting that some Indo-Aryan groups moved westward into the Near East before or alongside those who migrated eastward.

The main body of Indo-Aryans entered the Indian subcontinent around 1800 to 1500 BCE, likely passing through the Hindu Kush and entering the northwestern regions of the Indus Valley. There, they encountered remnants of the Indus Valley Civilization and merged or displaced local cultures, bringing with them their own language, ritual practices, and social organization. This migration marks the beginning of the Vedic period in Indian history, during which the earliest hymns of the *Rigveda* were composed, reflecting a distinct Indo-Aryan worldview shaped by both steppe heritage and interaction with South Asian environments.

In summary, the Indo-Aryans emerged through a long and gradual process of separation from the Proto-Indo-Europeans, forming first as part of the Indo-Iranian group in Central Asia before splitting off and migrating into South Asia. This sequence of movements, spanning from roughly 2500 to 1500 BCE, is supported by linguistic, archaeological, and textual evidence, and marks a major transformation in the cultural and religious history of the Indian subcontinent.

2 Indo-Aryan religion

The religion of the early *Indo-Aryans*, as reflected in the *Rigveda*, shares many core features with the broader *Indo-European* religious tradition. These similarities are best understood through comparative mythology and linguistics, which reveal common deities, ritual structures, cosmological themes, and social-religious roles that appear across Indo-European cultures—from the Greeks and Romans in the west to the Iranians and Indo-Aryans in the east.

One major point of similarity is the *tripartite structure of society and the cosmos*, which the French scholar Georges Dumézil famously identified in many Indo-European cultures. This structure includes three hierarchical functions: *sovereignty* (priestly or juridical authority), *warfare* (the warrior class), and *fertility or productivity* (associated with farmers, herders, and wealth). In Vedic India, this is reflected in the roles of *Brahmins*, *Kṣatriyas*, and *Vaiśyas*, as well as in the gods: *Varuṇa* and *Mitra* embody sovereign authority, *Indra* represents the warrior, and gods like *Pushan* and the *Aśvins* relate to fertility and prosperity. Similar structures appear in Roman religion (Jupiter–Mars–Quirinus) and Norse myth (Odin–Tyr–Freyr).

Another striking parallel is the *pantheon of sky and storm gods*, often linguistically related across branches. The Vedic *Dyaus Pitr* (“Sky Father”) closely resembles the Greek *Zeus Pater* and Roman *Jupiter* (from *Dyeus Ph₂tēr* in Proto-Indo-European). Similarly, *Indra*, the thunder-wielding warrior god of the Vedas, has

parallels with *Thor* in Norse myth and *Perkūnas* in Baltic tradition. These gods typically wield thunder or lightning, slay serpentine or chaotic monsters (like *Vrtra* in the *Rigveda*), and bring rain and order to the world—mirroring a shared *storm god vs. chaos serpent* motif.

The Vedic ritual of *sacrifice* (*yajña*) also reflects a deep Indo-European heritage. Sacrificial practices, particularly those involving fire, are central to many Indo-European religions. The Vedic *Agni*, the fire-god who transports offerings to the gods, parallels the importance of hearth and sacrificial fire in Roman (*Vesta*), Greek (*Hestia*), and even early Germanic tradition. Similarly, the sacred drink *soma*, pressed and offered in Vedic rituals, may have a counterpart in the Iranian *haoma*, and perhaps in the mead of Norse myth, all of which suggest a *ritually significant, intoxicating substance* tied to divine inspiration or immortality.

In summary, the religion of the early Indo-Aryans retains many features likely inherited from a shared *Proto-Indo-European* religious system. These include a pantheon with sky and thunder gods, a threefold functional structure of society and divinity, fire-based sacrifices, and possibly even shared myths of cosmic battles and sacred drinks. While local developments and interactions with pre-existing cultures transformed each branch, the underlying framework reveals a deep, common ancestry across the Indo-European world.

3 Vedic polities

The *Vedic period*, often divided into the *Early Vedic* (c. 1500–1000 BCE) and *Later Vedic* (c. 1000–600 BCE) periods, saw a gradual shift from tribal, pastoral communities to more centralized political organizations. Governance evolved from clan-based leadership to early kingdoms with hereditary monarchies and formalized rituals.

Early Vedic polities (c. 1500–1000 BCE)

During the Early Vedic period, Indo-Aryan society was organized into tribes known as *janas*, each headed by a *raja* (chief or king). Political authority was shared with assemblies such as the *sabha* (council of elders) and the *samiti* (popular assembly). These polities were typically semi-nomadic and did not resemble later state structures. Notable tribal groups included the *Bharatas*, *Purus*, *Yadus*, *Anus*, and *Druhyus*. The intertribal *Battle of the Ten Kings* (*Daśarājña*) reflects the competitive and unstable political landscape.

The Kuru kingdom (c. 1200–900 BCE)

The *Kuru Kingdom* emerged in the Later Vedic period as the first state-like polity in the Vedic world. Located in the region corresponding to modern-day Haryana and western Uttar Pradesh, the Kurus consolidated ritual authority and standardized the oral transmission of Vedic hymns. In alliance with the *Pañcālas*, they helped shape Vedic orthodoxy and social hierarchy, including the early formulation of the *varṇa* (class) system. The Kuru era marked the institutionalization of kingship and the growing influence of the Brahmin priesthood.

Post-Kuru regional powers

Following the decline of the Kuru kingdom around 900 BCE—possibly due to internal strife and pressure from non-Vedic groups such as the *Salvas*—several successor polities rose to prominence, especially in the eastern Indo-Gangetic Plain:

- **Pañcāla** — Once allied with the Kurus, the Pañcālas became a major kingdom in their own right, patronizing key later Vedic texts like the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*.

- **Kāśi** — Centered in present-day Varanasi, Kāśi was a flourishing kingdom during the later Vedic period, although later eclipsed by Kosala and Magadha.
- **Kosala** — Located in eastern Uttar Pradesh, Kosala emerged as a powerful kingdom late in the Vedic period and played a central role in later epic and Purāṇic literature.
- **Videha** — Situated in northern Bihar, Videha was notable for its learned kings such as *Janaka*, who features in both the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*.
- **Magadha** — Though still peripheral during the Vedic era, Magadha would become a major imperial power in the subsequent *Mahājanapada* period.

These kingdoms represent the eastward expansion of Indo-Aryan culture, laying the foundations for urbanization and the emergence of historical empires in early Iron Age India.

4 The codification of Vedic hymns and the role of the Kuru Kingdom

Before the rise of centralized authority in the Vedic world, particularly in the period prior to the emergence of the Kuru Kingdom (c. 1200 BCE), Vedic verses and hymns were largely *fluid*, transmitted orally within families of priests (*brahmins*) and modified to suit context, dialect, or ritual need. These hymns, composed in an archaic form of Sanskrit, were directed toward various deities and reflected the concerns of a predominantly pastoral, tribal society. Their transmission was flexible, and no standardized corpus or fixed ritual use had yet crystallized.

The rise of the *Kuru Kingdom* marked a turning point in the history of Vedic religion. With the emergence of a stable and hierarchically structured polity, Kuru rulers began to invest in the formalization of Vedic ritual as a means of asserting both political and cosmic order. The Kuru kings patronized brahminical scholars and priests to collect, preserve, and standardize the orally transmitted hymns. This led to the creation of a ritual orthodoxy in which precise memorization, recitation, and sacrificial performance were essential. The shift from fluid composition to fixed oral canon was thus closely tied to the needs of royal patronage and the legitimization of state authority.

The first and oldest collection to emerge from this process was the *Rigveda*, a compilation of over 1,000 hymns (*sūktas*) addressed to deities such as *Indra*, *Agni*, *Soma*, and *Varuṇa*. These hymns were not randomly selected but were organized into family books (*maṇḍalas*), typically attributed to specific priestly lineages. The inclusion of hymns in the *Rigveda* was likely influenced by ritual utility, poetic merit, lineage prestige, and conformity to the evolving orthodox theology promoted by the Kuru state. The priests, in cooperation with royal patrons, curated a corpus that served both liturgical and political purposes.

Following the canonization of the *Rigveda*, three other Vedic collections were gradually compiled, each serving distinct ritual functions. The *Sāmaveda*, composed mostly of verses borrowed from the *Rigveda*, was adapted for melodic chanting in soma rituals. The *Yajurveda* contained prose formulas and ritual instructions for sacrificial performance. The *Atharvaveda*, with a different tone and content, preserved incantations, spells, and hymns used for healing and domestic rites, some of which may predate the *Rigveda* or reflect non-Kuru traditions.

The canonization of these Vedas likely took place over several centuries:

- The **Rigveda** was codified by c. 1000 BCE during or shortly after the height of the Kuru kingdom.
- The **Sāmaveda** and **Yajurveda** reached fixed forms by c. 900–800 BCE, in the context of elaborated soma and fire rituals.

- The **Atharvaveda** was the last to be formally accepted as a Vedic text, canonized by around 800–700 BCE, and initially excluded from orthodox ritual.

No single council or authority “decided” the contents of the Vedas; rather, canonization was the outcome of priestly lineages preserving and transmitting specific traditions with exceptional fidelity. Over time, these traditions achieved consensus recognition within the Brahmanical community. The development of oral techniques such as *padapāṭha* (word-by-word recitation) and *krama-pāṭha* (sequential recitation) ensured extraordinary accuracy in transmission, making the Vedas among the most precisely preserved oral literatures in human history.

5 The Vedic understanding of the universe

In the earliest Vedic texts, particularly the *Rigveda*, the universe is conceived as a dynamic and ordered cosmos maintained through the power and actions of the *gods (devas)*. These gods are not abstract metaphysical entities but personified forces of nature, guardians of moral and cosmic order, and powerful beings who interact with humanity. Each deity has distinct attributes, domains, and temperaments. For example, *Indra*, the warrior and storm god, is celebrated for slaying the serpent *Vritra* and releasing the waters (Rigveda 1.32); *Agni*, the fire god, serves as the divine messenger who conveys offerings to the gods (Rigveda 1.1); and *Varuna* is the upholder of *rta* (cosmic order), watching over the moral actions of humans (Rigveda 1.25).

The relationship between humans and gods in the Vedic period is fundamentally transactional and reciprocal. Through the careful performance of *sacrifices (yajña)* and recitation of *mantras*, humans seek tangible benefits: rain, health, progeny, victory, and prosperity. In return, the gods are sustained and empowered by the offerings. Ritual accuracy and proper invocation are seen as essential, often more important than inner belief. Priests (*brahmins*) act as the crucial mediators in this divine economy, using memorized verses and established procedures to ensure the success of the ritual.

This understanding of divinity is closely analogous to that found in other Indo-European traditions. The Vedic gods, like the Olympians of Greece or the Aesir of Norse myth, are powerful but not omnipotent; they act within the cosmos rather than beyond it. They can be swayed by human action and even dependent upon it. Just as Greek heroes might offer sacrifices to Zeus or Athena in hopes of favor, Vedic patrons perform *yajñas* to secure Indra’s help in battle or Agni’s favor in domestic rites. The gods are anthropomorphic, emotionally complex, and sometimes morally ambiguous. There is no concept of an all-knowing, all-good supreme being in this phase of Vedic thought.

Importantly, early Vedic religion is not concerned with metaphysical speculation. There is no sustained inquiry or doctrine into the nature of the self or the soul, the origin of the cosmos beyond myth, or the idea of liberation; nor are there clear concepts of the moral consequences of one’s actions or one’s ethical duty or obligation based on cosmic and social order. Human beings were primarily understood in relation to their ritual roles and their place within the tribal and sacrificial community. There was no focus on the consequences of one’s personal behavior in terms of future reward or punishment, such as rebirth into a higher or lower state of existence. Likewise, there was no articulated sense of moral duty to act righteously in accordance with a divine law or individual calling. Instead, the emphasis was on performing prescribed rituals correctly in order to secure tangible benefits in this life—such as health, offspring, victory in battle, or rain—and to ensure a favorable place in the ancestral afterlife. Some hymns, such as Rigveda 10.14 and 10.16, suggest belief in a continued existence among the ancestors (*pitrs*), but there is no unified or detailed account of ethical accountability beyond death. In the *Rigveda*, the cosmos is understood and maintained through ritual, and knowledge is primarily ritual and poetic, not philosophical. Even the famous creation hymn (Rigveda 10.129), which begins to question the origins of the universe, ends in ambiguity—suggesting that not even the gods know how creation occurred.

In sum, the Vedic worldview of this early period is mythic and pragmatic, grounded in ritual interaction

between humans and a pantheon of gods. It reflects a world in which power is distributed, favor must be earned, and the cosmos is held together not by abstraction but by practice.

6 The emergence of the Upanishads and the Purāṇas

Following the close of the Vedic period (c. 600 BCE), the religious and philosophical landscape of the Indo-Aryan world began to shift. New corpuses of oral literature emerged to address deeper metaphysical questions, moral concerns, and mythological narratives not fully developed in the early Vedas. Chief among these were the *Upanishads* and the *Purāṇas*, both of which originated as oral traditions and were transmitted for centuries before being committed to writing.

The *Upanishads*, composed roughly between 700 and 300 BCE (though some later ones were added up to the early centuries CE), represent a culmination of philosophical inquiry arising from the *Brahmana* and *Āraṇyaka* layers of Vedic literature. These texts shift the focus from external ritual to internal reflection, exploring concepts such as the self (*ātman*), ultimate reality (*brahman*), karma, rebirth, and liberation (*mokṣa*). The earliest and most influential Upanishads—such as the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka*, *Chāndogya*, *Taittirīya*, and *Kauṣītaki*—are associated with specific Vedic schools and geographic regions, including Videha (with its capital at Mithilā), Kuru-Pāñcāla, and Kosala. The authority of the Upanishads was not determined by a single religious council but rather by their preservation and transmission within prominent priestly lineages (*śākhās*) attached to each Veda. Over time, certain Upanishads became canonized as part of the *Vedānta* (“end of the Veda”), particularly those later regarded as foundational by classical schools of Hindu philosophy.

The *Purāṇas*, by contrast, are narrative texts that emerged from around 300 BCE onward and continued to evolve well into the medieval period. They contain myths of gods and cosmic cycles, genealogies of kings and sages, cosmology, pilgrimage geography, and moral teachings. There are traditionally eighteen *Mahāpurāṇas* and numerous *Upapurāṇas*, though the lists and content vary by region and sect. While many Purāṇas reflect older oral traditions, their current forms show evidence of substantial editorial layering and sectarian influence, especially by Vaiṣṇava, Śaiva, and Śākta communities. Unlike the Vedas and Upanishads, which were tightly preserved by specific schools, the Purāṇas were more flexible and adaptive in content, often moderated or expanded by temple-based priesthoods and local communities.

Both the Upanishads and the Purāṇas were transmitted orally for centuries before being committed to writing, likely not until the early centuries CE. The emphasis on exact memorization was strongest in the Vedic corpus; while the Upanishads retained some of this precision, especially the older ones, the Purāṇas were more fluid and interpolative. Writing materials such as birch bark and palm leaf were likely used beginning around the first few centuries CE, but the oral tradition remained dominant well into the medieval period. As a result, these corpuses represent both a continuation of and a departure from the Vedic emphasis on ritual, reflecting the evolving spiritual, philosophical, and narrative interests of the broader Indic world.

7 Enduring works of oral tradition and their lasting influence

In addition to the Vedas, Upanishads, and Purāṇas, several other monumental works of oral literature emerged in ancient India, preserving hymns, epics, and moral teachings that continue to shape the religious and cultural lives of millions today. These texts, though eventually written down, were originally composed, memorized, and transmitted orally for generations, often through bardic recitation, temple performance, and didactic storytelling.

Foremost among these is the *Mahābhārata*, the longest epic poem in the world, traditionally attributed to the sage Vyāsa. Composed over many centuries (c. 800 BCE to 200 CE), it recounts the dynastic conflict between the Pāṇḍavas and the Kauravas, culminating in the great war of Kurukṣetra. Within this epic is

the *Bhagavad Gītā*, a self-contained philosophical dialogue between the prince Arjuna and his charioteer, the god Krishna. The *Gītā* explores themes such as duty (*dharma*), detachment, the nature of the self (*ātman*), and the paths of knowledge, action, and devotion. Though composed orally around 300–100 BCE, it remains one of the most widely read and cited spiritual texts in Hindu tradition, with a lasting impact on Indian philosophy, devotional practice, and even modern political thought.

Alongside the *Mahābhārata* is the *Rāmāyaṇa*, attributed to the sage Vālmīki and composed between roughly 500 BCE and 100 BCE. This epic narrates the life of Prince Rāma, an idealized king and incarnation of the god Viṣṇu, as he rescues his wife Sītā from the demon Rāvaṇa. Like the *Mahābhārata*, the *Rāmāyaṇa* was orally transmitted and exists in multiple recensional traditions across regions and languages. Its stories, characters, and moral themes are celebrated annually through festivals such as Rāmlīlā and continue to be reinterpreted in modern media.

Other orally preserved works include the *Itihāsa* and various *Smṛti* texts, such as the *Manusmṛti*, a treatise on law and social order, and the *Dharmaśāstras*, which codify duties and norms for various social classes. While these are more prescriptive and legalistic than epic or devotional in nature, they too were memorized and recited within priestly and educational lineages before being written down.

Together, these orally transmitted works form the narrative and ethical backbone of Hindu civilization. Though their precise content evolved over centuries and varied by region, their core themes—cosmic justice, moral struggle, divine intervention, and personal duty—remain central to contemporary religious practice and cultural identity throughout South Asia.

8 Summary of major oral texts in the Hindu tradition

The ancient Hindu textual tradition encompasses a wide range of orally transmitted literature, spanning sacred hymns, philosophical dialogues, legal codes, mythological narratives, and epic poetry. These texts were composed over many centuries and preserved with extraordinary care through oral recitation before being written down in later periods. The following table summarizes the most significant works, with approximate dates of composition, known or traditional authors, and key thematic content.

Text or Corpus	Approximate Date	Attributed Author(s)	Key Themes and Content
Rigveda	c. 1500–1000 BCE	Various priestly lineages	Hymns to gods (Indra, Agni, Varuṇa); ritual praise; cosmic order (<i>ṛta</i>); sacrificial worship
Sāmaveda	c. 1200–900 BCE	Derived from Rigvedic hymns	Melodic chants for soma sacrifices; musical form of Rigveda verses
Yajurveda	c. 1100–800 BCE	Multiple schools (e.g., Vājasaneyi, Taittirīya)	Prose formulas and instructions for rituals; sacrificial procedures
Atharvaveda	c. 1000–700 BCE	Multiple priestly traditions	Domestic rituals, healing spells, charms; practical religion; social concerns
Brāhmaṇas	c. 900–600 BCE	Priests of Vedic schools	Ritual exegesis; mythic justification for sacrifices; origins of divine and social order
Āraṇyakas	c. 800–600 BCE	Forest-dwelling hermits	Transition from ritual to contemplation; symbolic interpretation of rites
Upanishads	c. 700–300 BCE (early); later up to 200 CE	Various sages (e.g., Yājñavalkya, Uddālaka Āruṇi)	Metaphysics; self (<i>ātman</i>), ultimate reality (<i>brahman</i>), karma, rebirth, liberation (<i>mokṣa</i>)
Mahābhārata	Oral layers from c. 800 BCE; final form by c. 200 CE	Traditionally Vyāsa	Dynastic war; dharma; duty and conflict; includes Bhagavad Gītā
Bhagavad Gītā	c. 300–100 BCE	Krishna (as speaker); attributed to Vyāsa	Philosophical dialogue on duty, renunciation, yoga, devotion, and the eternal self
Rāmāyaṇa	c. 500–100 BCE (earliest core); expanded later	Traditionally Vālmīki	Life of Rāma; ideal kingship; virtue, exile, and divine incarnation; dharma in action
Purāṇas (e.g., <i>Viṣṇu</i> , <i>Śiva</i> , <i>Bhāgavata</i>)	c. 300 BCE–1000 CE (layered over time)	Multiple anonymous compilers; later sectarian editors	Mythology; cosmology; genealogies; avatars; moral tales; rituals; pilgrimage geography
Manusmṛti (<i>Laws of Manu</i>)	c. 200 BCE–200 CE	Manu (legendary progenitor of mankind)	Dharmaśāstra; social order; caste duties; law and moral conduct

These works form the foundation of Hindu religious, philosophical, and literary culture. Though composed in different regions and eras, they are unified by their oral transmission, enduring ritual and ethical concerns, and their profound influence on Hindu civilization to this day.

9 The rise of Buddhism and Jainism

By the 6th century BCE, northern India was undergoing a major religious and intellectual transformation. The later Vedic period, characterized by hereditary ritualism, social stratification, and complex sacrificial

rites, was increasingly challenged by a wave of heterodox movements collectively known as the *Śramaṇa* traditions. These movements emphasized personal spiritual effort, ethical conduct, and renunciation, offering alternatives to the Vedic worldview. Out of this environment arose two of India’s most enduring non-Vedic religions: *Buddhism* and *Jainism*.

Jainism was formalized by *Mahāvīra* (c. 599–527 BCE), the 24th and final *Tīrthaṅkara* of Jain tradition. While Jainism claims a lineage of enlightened teachers stretching back into mythic antiquity, Mahāvīra’s life marks the historical emergence of the religion in its recognizable form. Jainism rejected the authority of the Vedas, the social privileges of the Brahmin priesthood, and the efficacy of animal sacrifice. Instead, it emphasized radical *ahimsā* (nonviolence), rigorous asceticism, and ethical self-discipline as the path to liberation (*mokṣa*) from the cycle of rebirth.

Buddhism was founded shortly thereafter by *Siddhārtha Gautama* (c. 563–483 BCE), later known as the *Buddha*. Born into a princely family of the Śākya clan, he renounced worldly life in search of liberation and attained enlightenment through meditation. The Buddha taught the *Four Noble Truths*, the *Eightfold Path*, and the doctrine of impermanence and dependent origination. Like Jainism, Buddhism rejected the ritualism and caste structures of Vedic society, but it pursued a more moderate path—neither extreme asceticism nor indulgence—called the *Middle Way*. It also remained agnostic on questions such as the eternal self, focusing instead on practical liberation from suffering.

Both religions were part of the broader Śramaṇa movement and did not split off from Hinduism in a sectarian sense; rather, they arose as independent, parallel responses to Vedic orthodoxy. Their emphasis on ethics, meditation, and personal insight laid a foundation for enduring philosophical traditions that would spread throughout Asia. The rise of Buddhism and Jainism marks a turning point in Indian intellectual history, predating the writing down of Hindu scriptures but helping to define the cultural and religious landscape into which that literary tradition would eventually be committed.

Religion	Founder	Date (approx.)	Core Opposition to Vedic Tradition
Jainism	Mahāvīra	c. 599–527 BCE	Rejected Vedas and sacrifices; emphasized extreme nonviolence and strict asceticism
Buddhism	Gautama Buddha	c. 563–483 BCE	Rejected Vedas and caste; emphasized insight, impermanence, and the Middle Way

10 Religious development in the late post-Vedic period (600–100 BCE)

Between 600 and 100 BCE, the religious landscape of northern India became increasingly diverse and philosophically rich. This period, often referred to as the Late Post-Vedic era, was defined by a sustained shift away from Vedic ritual orthodoxy and toward more ethical, philosophical, and experiential forms of religious practice. The dominance of Vedic sacrifice began to wane, and the idea that liberation (*mokṣa*) could be achieved through knowledge, meditation, and ethical living gained widespread traction.

The *Upanishads*, which continued to evolve during this time, provided a speculative and introspective alternative to ritualism. They developed central metaphysical concepts such as *brahman* (the ultimate reality), *ātman* (the inner self), *karma* (action and consequence), and *saṃsāra* (the cycle of rebirth), which became shared frameworks for multiple traditions. These ideas influenced not only emerging forms of Brahmanical spirituality but also parallel movements such as Buddhism and Jainism, which flourished during this same period.

This era also witnessed the rise of proto-devotional (*bhakti*) currents, centered on increasingly personal and

morally engaged deities such as Viṣṇu and Rudra-Śiva. While not yet part of a formal temple-based tradition, these forms of worship began to replace impersonal cosmic forces with accessible divine figures responsive to devotion and moral behavior. This shift paralleled a growing preference for household rituals (*gṛhya* rites) over public fire sacrifices, making religious practice more intimate and socially accessible.

In sum, by 100 BCE the Brahmanical tradition had absorbed new philosophical ideas, adapted to changing social dynamics, and coexisted with powerful heterodox movements. The religion was no longer centered solely on priestly sacrifice but had expanded to include paths of knowledge, ethical discipline, and emerging forms of devotion—all still preserved in oral form.

11 The Maurya Empire and its indirect influence on Brahmanical religion

Although the Maurya Empire (c. 322–185 BCE) is most often associated with the rise and spread of Buddhism—especially under Emperor Aśoka—it played an important contextual role in shaping the broader religious environment of ancient India. While not a promoter of Brahmanical orthodoxy, the Mauryan state helped create the social, political, and intellectual conditions in which Brahmanical religion responded and evolved.

Emperor Aśoka's edicts, issued in the mid-3rd century BCE, emphasize ethical behavior, religious tolerance, and the principle of *dharma* as a universal moral order, rather than a specifically Vedic duty tied to caste or ritual. Although he promoted Buddhism, Aśoka explicitly called for mutual respect among all sects, including Brahmins. This policy of pluralism contributed to a period in which Brahmanical traditions had to coexist and intellectually compete with Buddhism, Jainism, and other Śramaṇa movements.

The decline of public Vedic sacrifice, which began prior to Aśoka, continued under Mauryan rule, as state patronage shifted toward ethical and renunciant traditions. In this environment, Brahmanical thinkers increasingly emphasized metaphysical speculation, personal virtue, and household rituals. The early formulation of dharma literature, including proto-versions of the *Manusmṛti*, likely reflected Brahmanical efforts to articulate a comprehensive social and moral order in response to Mauryan models of kingship and law.

Under Emperor Aśoka in the 3rd century BCE, the Vedic concept of *dharma*—originally referring to ritual duty and social order—underwent a profound transformation. In his royal edicts, Aśoka redefined dharma (*dhamma*) as a universal moral code grounded not in sacrifice or caste, but in ethical behavior accessible to all: nonviolence toward living beings, compassion, truthfulness, respect for parents and teachers, religious tolerance, and concern for the welfare of subjects. This version of dharma served both as a personal ethical guide and a principle of imperial governance, providing a moral framework that transcended sectarian boundaries. Though rooted in his Buddhist convictions, Aśoka's dharma drew on widely shared values and helped displace ritual centrality with ethical universality. Yet in the centuries that followed, Brahmanical thinkers would reinterpret and reclaim the concept of dharma, folding it back into a more expansive and hierarchical religious system.

Although the Maurya Empire did not directly shape Hindu theology, its infrastructure, urban centers, and religious policies helped stimulate the transmission, contestation, and reformulation of religious ideas. After the fall of the Mauryas, the gradual resurgence of Brahmanical influence in regional courts and religious life set the stage for the later synthesis of Vedic, devotional, and epic traditions that would characterize classical Hinduism.

12 The transition from oral to written Sanskrit literature

For over a millennium, the vast body of sacred and epic literature in India was preserved exclusively through oral tradition. The Vedas, Upanishads, epics, and early philosophical texts were memorized and transmitted across generations by highly trained specialists, using rigorous mnemonic techniques. The transition to written transmission occurred gradually, beginning in the early centuries CE, coinciding with both the development of writing systems suited to Sanskrit and the growing institutionalization of religious and philosophical schools.

The first major step in this transition was the adaptation of writing systems to accommodate Sanskrit phonology. Early inscriptions from the 3rd century BCE, such as the edicts of Emperor Aśoka, were written in the Brāhmī script, but these were primarily in vernacular Prākṛits, not classical Sanskrit. The use of Sanskrit in inscriptions became prominent only by the 1st to 2nd centuries CE, particularly under the Indo-Scythian and Gupta rulers. Scripts like Gupta Brāhmī and later Nāgarī were adapted to capture the precise phonetic requirements of Sanskrit, enabling the eventual transcription of orally preserved literature.

The recording of sacred texts likely began in earnest between the 2nd and 6th centuries CE, during the Gupta period and afterward. Texts such as the Upanishads, Purāṇas, Mahābhārata, Rāmāyaṇa, and various Dharmaśāstra works began to be written down to support growing educational institutions, monastic centers, and temples. Despite being transcribed, these works continued to be memorized and recited, and the oral tradition remained the authoritative mode of transmission for many centuries.

Manuscripts were typically written on organic materials, especially *birch bark* (*bhūrja-patra*) in the northwest and *palm leaves* (*tāla-patra*) in the south and east. Scribes used styluses or metal pens to inscribe the leaf surfaces, and the characters were often darkened with natural inks such as soot-based *masi* or plant extracts. Birch bark manuscripts were common in Kashmir and Gandhāra, while palm-leaf manuscripts predominated in regions like Kerala, Odisha, and Bengal. These materials were delicate and had to be regularly recopied, which makes the survival of very ancient manuscripts rare.

As a result, there are virtually no surviving manuscripts from the BCE period. The oldest known Sanskrit manuscripts are from the early centuries CE, particularly from the greater Gandhāra region (modern Afghanistan and Pakistan). A small number of birch bark scrolls in Kharoṣṭhī script containing early Buddhist texts, dated to the 1st century CE, have been recovered. The earliest surviving manuscripts of Hindu texts, however, date from around the 9th century CE or later, with much of our knowledge of earlier content relying on the internal evidence of the texts themselves and their continued oral preservation.

Thus, while the oral tradition defined early Indian intellectual life, the eventual adoption of writing—particularly in Sanskrit—enabled the preservation, dissemination, and standardization of India’s vast religious and literary heritage. The shift from oral to written form did not replace memory-based learning but rather complemented it, ensuring that these traditions would survive into the modern era.

13 From oral to written: religious consolidation and the rise of sacred literature (100 BCE–300 CE)

Between 100 BCE and 300 CE, Indian religion underwent a period of literary consolidation and formalization. Although the oral tradition remained dominant, this era saw the beginnings of widespread use of writing for the transmission of religious and philosophical texts, particularly in Sanskrit. The shift from purely oral preservation to written manuscripts allowed for the stabilization of textual content, the emergence of canonical forms, and the expansion of religious education beyond hereditary priestly lineages.

During this period, the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* reached near-final narrative forms. While these epics had long existed as oral traditions, their redaction and structuring into coherent wholes likely occurred between the 1st century BCE and the 3rd century CE. These epics combined older heroic tales with ethical

instruction, metaphysical dialogue, and the glorification of divine figures such as Kṛṣṇa and Rāma. Their growing influence marked the increasing importance of narrative and devotional modes of religious expression.

In addition, the early layers of the *Purāṇas* began to develop, integrating myth, genealogy, cosmology, and ritual instruction. These texts provided a flexible medium for incorporating local deities and customs into a broader Brahmanical framework. Meanwhile, the codification of *dharma* literature, such as the *Manusmṛiti*, offered prescriptive social and legal norms that reflected the ambitions of a more systematized and textually grounded religious order.

The use of writing materials such as birch bark and palm leaf, along with the adaptation of Brāhmī-derived scripts to Sanskrit, allowed for the copying and dissemination of these texts within newly emerging educational and temple institutions. However, oral memorization remained the primary means of transmission, and written texts were often regarded as aids rather than replacements.

By 300 CE, Brahmanical religion had transformed into a multi-faceted system combining Vedic heritage, philosophical inquiry, household ritual, emerging temple worship, and rich narrative traditions. It had begun to take on many of the characteristics that would define classical Hinduism—just before its large-scale imperial endorsement in the Gupta period.

14 The Gupta Empire and the classical consolidation of Hinduism

The Gupta Empire (c. 320–550 CE) marked a turning point in the religious and cultural history of India. Often referred to as the “Classical Age” of Indian civilization, the Gupta period witnessed the flourishing of Sanskrit literature, the codification of religious and social norms, and the emergence of a distinctly recognizable form of Hinduism. Unlike earlier imperial formations such as the Mauryas, who favored heterodox traditions like Buddhism, the Guptas actively promoted Brahmanical religion as the ideological foundation of their rule. Kings such as Chandragupta I, Samudragupta, and Chandragupta II patronized Vedic scholars, sponsored temple construction, and used titles like *parama-bhāgavata* (supreme devotee of Viṣṇu), helping to elevate Brahmanism into a state-supported system.

Gupta-era Hinduism was not a monolithic or doctrinally unified faith but rather a synthesis of multiple streams: Vedic ritualism, emerging devotional worship (*bhakti*), epic narratives, and ethical-legal codes. Central deities such as Viṣṇu, Śiva, and Durgā gained widespread popular and royal devotion, often expressed through temple worship and Sanskrit hymns like the *Viṣṇu Sahasranāma* and the *Śiva Mahimna Stotra*. The epics—the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*—were standardized in this period, and the *Purāṇas* were actively compiled and expanded, providing a mythological framework that could integrate local cults and regional practices into a coherent religious worldview. Dharmaśāstra literature, particularly the *Manusmṛiti*, was promoted as a social and legal ideal, reinforcing caste hierarchies and gender norms.

Philosophically, however, Hinduism during the Gupta period remained largely *dualistic* or *theistic* in orientation. Devotees worshipped Viṣṇu or Śiva as supreme beings distinct from the individual soul (*ātman*), and the goal of life was typically framed as reaching their heavenly abode through righteousness, devotion, or ritual merit. While metaphysical ideas such as karma, rebirth, and liberation were present, the notion of a formless, all-encompassing reality (*brahman*) identical with the self had not yet become dominant. These monistic ideas—most fully expressed in the philosophy of *Advaita Vedānta*—would be systematically articulated only after the decline of the Gupta Empire, particularly by Ādi Śaṅkara in the 8th century CE.

Thus, the Gupta period did not create Hinduism, but it provided the conditions for its classical formulation. By patronizing Sanskrit learning, temple building, and the integration of epic, *Purāṇic*, and devotional elements, the Guptas helped shape a flexible, hierarchical, and textually rooted religious system that could adapt across regions and social classes. This form of Hinduism would endure and evolve long after the political unity of the Gupta Empire had faded.

15 Advaita Vedānta and the philosophical resolution of Hindu theology

By the 8th century CE, centuries of layered religious development had produced a vast and internally diverse corpus of Hindu sacred literature. The Vedas, Brāhmaṇas, Upanishads, epics, Purāṇas, and Dharmaśāstras contained conflicting theological voices—some ritualistic, others devotional, and still others philosophical. Among these, the Upanishads posed a special challenge: they presented profound metaphysical ideas in poetic, often cryptic language, with no single coherent doctrine. While later traditions had read the Upanishads as supporting theistic dualism or devotional monotheism, the question remained: *What, ultimately, is the nature of the self, the universe, and the divine?*

Advaita Vedānta, meaning “non-dualistic¹ end of the Vedas,” emerged as a powerful philosophical response to this question. Its most influential form was articulated by **Ādi Śaṅkara** (c. 700–750 CE), a South Indian scholar and renunciant who composed systematic commentaries on the Upanishads, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the *Brahma Sūtras*. Śaṅkara argued that the central teaching of the Upanishads is the non-duality of reality: that the ultimate reality (*brahman*) is formless, infinite, unchanging consciousness, and that the individual self (*ātman*) is not separate from this brahman, but identical to it. All apparent plurality—gods, souls, rituals, and even moral distinctions—is the result of ignorance (*avidyā*) and illusion (*māyā*).

Several key verses from the Upanishads informed Śaṅkara’s interpretation. In the *Chāndogya Upanishad* 6.8.7, the teacher Uddālaka Aruṇi tells his son: *tat tvam asi* (“That art thou”), asserting the identity of the individual self with ultimate reality. The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upanishad* 1.4.10 declares: *ahaṃ brahmāsmi* (“I am Brahman”), and the *Māṇḍūkya Upanishad* 2 states succinctly: *ayam ātmā brahma* (“This self is Brahman”). In Śaṅkara’s reading, these are not metaphorical statements or devotional hyperbole—they are literal metaphysical truths. The goal of human life is to realize this identity through inner knowledge, not through ritual action or devotional surrender.

Śaṅkara’s contribution was not only in his interpretation but in his synthesis: he unified dozens of scattered teachings into a consistent metaphysical framework. He preserved the Vedic authority by interpreting the ritualistic and devotional portions as lower or preparatory knowledge (*avidyā*) while elevating the Upanishadic teachings as the highest, direct knowledge (*jñāna*). This allowed for continuity with traditional texts while redefining their ultimate purpose.

Over time, Advaita Vedānta became one of the most respected schools of Hindu philosophy, especially among the educated elite and monastic institutions. Though it was never the only interpretation—dualistic (*Dvaita*) and qualified non-dualistic (*Viśiṣṭādvaita*) schools also thrived—Śaṅkara’s Advaita has had a profound and lasting influence. It shaped modern Hindu self-understanding, inspired reformers like Swami Vivekānanda, and continues to inform contemporary Hindu views on the unity of all beings and the illusory nature of material distinction. For many, the philosophical insight of non-duality is seen as the culmination of Hindu metaphysics and the deepest realization of what the ancient Vedic seers had intuited.

16 The limits of non-dualism and the rise of sectarian devotion

Although Advaita Vedānta offered a sweeping and elegant resolution to the philosophical contradictions of Hindu scripture, its implications were socially disruptive. If the self (*ātman*) is identical with the absolute (*brahman*), and if all distinctions are ultimately illusory (*māyā*), then caste, temple ritual, and the worship of gods are at best provisional and, at worst, obstacles to liberation. Śaṅkara maintained the importance of

¹ *Dvaita* refers to dualism, while *Advaita* (non-dualism) uses the prefix *a-* to negate the root term, a pattern inherited from Proto-Indo-European. This negation prefix is preserved across many Indo-European languages. In Sanskrit, for example, *anāgni* means “without fire,” and in Greek, *atheos* (ἄθεος) means “without god.” In English, this survives as “atheist” (one who is not a theist). In the Germanic branch, the PIE negation prefix evolved into forms like *un-* (as in “unknown”), which serves the same grammatical function. These parallels demonstrate the deep and lasting influence of Proto-Indo-European morphology across descendant languages.

ethical living and Vedic learning, but the logical outcome of his teaching was a form of inner renunciation that bypassed temple hierarchies and priestly mediation. In this sense, Advaita Vedānta—though born within the Brahmanical tradition—undermined its institutional foundations by offering a universal and inward path to salvation.

As a result, more socially integrative and theologically flexible forms of Vedānta began to emerge in the centuries following Śaṅkara. These included qualified non-dualism (*Viśiṣṭādvaita*) articulated by Rāmānuja, and dualistic Vedānta (*Dvaita*) formulated by Madhva. These schools preserved the metaphysical importance of brahman while insisting that individual souls and the supreme deity—often Viṣṇu or one of his avatars—remain distinct. In doing so, they reinforced the legitimacy of temple worship, devotional ritual, and hierarchical social structures. The act of loving surrender (*bhakti*) to a personal god became central, not only as a means to liberation but as a form of religious fulfillment accessible to all castes.

This development aligned more comfortably with the social realities of medieval India, where temples served as centers of wealth, power, and caste-based access to the divine. The worship of Viṣṇu in his forms as Kṛṣṇa and Rāma came to dominate much of Hindu religious life, aided by the proliferation of vernacular devotional poetry and temple networks. In this transformation, Hinduism retained the metaphysical vocabulary of the Upanishads and Vedānta, but it reshaped their implications to support a devotional, ritual, and hierarchical public religion—one more consistent with its social foundations.

Feature	Advaita Vedānta	Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta	Dvaita Vedānta
Founder	Ādi Śaṅkara (8 th c. CE)	Rāmānuja (11 th c. CE)	Madhva (13 th c. CE)
Nature of Ultimate Reality (<i>Brahman</i>)	Formless, impersonal, pure consciousness	Personal god with attributes (Viṣṇu/Nārāyaṇa)	Personal god distinct from all else (Viṣṇu)
Relationship of Self (<i>Ātman</i>) to Brahman	Identical: <i>ātman</i> = <i>brahman</i>	Distinct yet inseparable (like a body to its soul)	Completely separate: eternal difference between self and God
View of World (<i>Jagat</i>)	Illusory (<i>māyā</i>) in ultimate sense	Real and a mode of Brahman	Real and completely independent of God
Path to Liberation (<i>Mokṣa</i>)	Knowledge of non-duality; inner realization	Devotion (<i>bhakti</i>) + grace + virtuous action	Exclusive devotion (<i>bhakti</i>) + grace of Viṣṇu
Role of Ritual and Temple Worship	Preliminary aid, ultimately unnecessary	Necessary and valid expression of devotion	Central to spiritual practice
Social Implications	Potentially egalitarian; bypasses caste-based ritual	Retains caste hierarchy but allows devotion for all	Reinforces traditional roles and temple-based authority
View of Deity	Ultimate reality is impersonal; gods are provisional	Viṣṇu as the supreme, personal brahman	Viṣṇu is supreme and eternally distinct from souls

Table 1: Comparison of the Three Major Schools of Vedānta

17 Conclusion: The Historical Formation of Hinduism

The history of Hinduism is not the story of a single religious doctrine but the long evolution of a diverse set of beliefs, rituals, and philosophies that took shape over three millennia. Its origins lie in the Proto-Indo-European religious worldview, which brought a pantheon of sky gods, sacrificial rites, and social stratification to the Indian subcontinent through the migrations of the Indo-Aryans around 1500 BCE. In the early Vedic period, these elements coalesced into a ritual-based religion centered on fire sacrifice, priestly authority, and hymns preserved through oral transmission. With the rise of the Kuru kingdom, the Vedas began to be systematized, and Brahmanical ritual practice acquired institutional strength. Yet even then, the seeds of metaphysical inquiry—found in the Upanishads—were already challenging the primacy of ritual with questions about the self, the cosmos, and ultimate reality.

From 600 to 300 BCE, the intellectual ferment of the Śramaṇa movement and the pluralism of post-Vedic society fostered the growth of alternative traditions like Buddhism and Jainism. These heterodox paths rejected the authority of the Vedas and reshaped the religious imagination around ethics, renunciation, and universal dharma. In response, Brahmanical religion adapted—deemphasizing sacrifice, embracing philosophical inquiry, and introducing the beginnings of devotionism. The Maurya Empire under Aśoka gave prominence to a new, ethical conception of dharma, which Brahmanical thinkers would later reclaim and recast into hierarchical social and cosmic duty. By the time religious literature began to be written down in the early centuries CE, Hinduism had become a complex system of ritual, myth, devotion, and law, grounded in Sanskrit textuality.

The Gupta Empire (c. 320–550 CE) marked the classical consolidation of Hinduism. With royal patronage of temple worship, Sanskrit learning, and epic and Purāṇic literature, Hinduism emerged as a flexible and enduring religious framework, integrating local deities, regional customs, and social hierarchies. Yet even in this era of apparent unification, deep philosophical diversity remained. While theistic and socially integrative schools gained institutional dominance, thinkers like Ādi Śaṅkara reinterpreted the Upanishads to develop Advaita Vedānta, a radical non-dualism that saw all difference as illusion and all selves as one with the absolute. Though marginalized institutionally, this interpretation profoundly shaped modern Hindu thought.

Hinduism today retains the imprint of each of these historical layers. Its rituals, deities, festivals, philosophies, and ethical ideals reflect an ongoing negotiation between the ancient and the local, the metaphysical and the social, the mystical and the political. What began as the religion of Indo-European pastoralists became, through centuries of adaptation and synthesis, one of the world's most internally diverse and resilient religious traditions.

18 Other stuff...

The *Vedas* (Vay-dahs, “knowledge”) are a collection of sacred texts composed of hymns, rituals, chants, and philosophical reflections that were passed down orally for many generations before being written down. The earliest, the *Rigveda* (Rig-veh-da, “Veda of verses or hymns”), reflects the traditions of the Indo-Aryan peoples who migrated into the Indian subcontinent around 1500 BCE. While the *Rigveda* (Rig-veh-da, “Veda of verses”) does not directly derive from the Indus Valley Civilization, some scholars suggest that elements of earlier indigenous cultural and religious practices may have been absorbed into the evolving Vedic tradition. The *Rgveda* (Rig-veh-da, “Veda of hymns”) is the oldest of the four Vedas, composed around 1500–1200 BCE. It is a collection of over 1,000 hymns (*sūktas*) arranged into 10 books (*maṇḍalas*). These hymns are directed toward various deities and cosmic principles, and they primarily serve to praise, invoke, and make ritual offerings to these divine forces. The focus is on maintaining cosmic order (*ṛta*) through sacrifice, rather than on philosophical speculation or metaphysical unity:

Focus on cosmic order (*ṛta*):

Rigveda 1.25: A hymn to *Varuṇa*, the upholder of moral and cosmic order, who sees all actions and punishes falsehood.

Rigveda 10.190: A hymn describing the origin of the universe and the establishment of *ṛta* (cosmic order), time, and laws.

Praise:

Rigveda 1.32: A famous hymn praising *Indra* for slaying the dragon *Vṛtra* and releasing the rivers.

Rigveda 1.1: The very first hymn, praising *Agni* as the divine priest and messenger of the gods.

Invocation:

Rigveda 3.62.10: The *Gāyatrī* mantra, invoking *Savitṛ* (the solar deity) to enlighten the mind.

Rigveda 2.23: Invocation of the divine seer *Bṛhaspati*, asking for protection and wisdom.

Ritual offering:

Rigveda 9.96: A hymn to *Soma*, describing the preparation and offering of the sacred drink in ritual sacrifice.

Rigveda 1.94: A hymn to *Agni*, requesting him to accept offerings and carry them to the gods.

Unlike later texts such as the Upaniṣads, the *Rgveda* does not introduce the concepts of *Brahman* (universal reality) or *Ātman* (true self) in explicit terms. However, certain hymns like the “Hymn of Creation” (*Rgveda* 10.129) and the “Cosmic Person Hymn” (*Rgveda* 10.90) contain poetic and speculative elements that would later be interpreted in philosophical terms by the Vedānta schools.

The most frequently praised deities in the *Rgveda* are associated with natural forces such as storms, fire, wind, and the sun. Among them, *Indra*, the storm god and slayer of the dragon *Vṛtra*, receives the greatest number of hymns. *Agni*, the fire god and mediator of sacrifices, is also central. *Vishnu* (Vish-noo), while present, appears in only a few hymns and does not yet hold the central, supreme role he would acquire in later Hinduism.

Deity	# Hymns	Description (with pronunciation and meaning)
<i>Indra</i> (In-drah)	~250	God of storms, war, and kingship. Slays the demon Vṛtra to release rain and restore order. Most frequently invoked deity.
<i>Agni</i> (Ug-nee)	~200	God of fire and sacrificial flame. Acts as a mediator between gods and humans.
<i>Soma</i> (So-mah)	~120	Deified sacred plant and drink; source of inspiration, vitality, and immortality.
<i>Vāyu</i> (Vaa-yoo)	~20–30	God of wind and breath.
<i>Varuṇa</i> (Vuh-roo-nah)	~40	Guardian of cosmic order (<i>ṛta</i>); associated with the waters and moral law.
<i>Mitra</i> (Mit-rah)	See Varuṇa	God of friendship, contracts, and truth.
<i>Aśvins</i> (Ush-vins)	~50	Twin horsemen gods associated with healing and rescue.
<i>Uṣas</i> (Oo-shahs)	~20	Goddess of the dawn, often praised for her beauty and regularity.
<i>Savitṛ</i> (Sah-vit-ri)	~10	Solar deity invoked in the famous <i>Gāyatrī mantra</i> ; associated with the creative impulse.
<i>Pūṣan</i> (Poo-shun)	~10	God who protects travelers, herds, and guides the dead.
<i>Vishnu</i> (Vish-noo)	~5	Cosmic god praised for his three strides across the universe; minor in the <i>Rgveda</i> , later becomes central in Vaishnavism.

These are the gods and goddesses that almost certainly came from the proto-Indo-European pantheon:

- ***Dyēus ph₂tēr*** (Dyeh-oos puh-tair, “Sky Father”): Cognate with Vedic *Dyaus Pitar*, Greek *Zeus*, and Latin *Jupiter*.
- ***H₁ngʷnis*** (un-gwis, “Fire”): Basis for Vedic *Agni*, Latin *Ignis*, though not personified in PIE.
- ***H₂éusōs*** (ow-sos, “Dawn”): Appears as Vedic *Uṣas*, Greek *Eos*, Latin *Aurora*.
- ***Sawel*** (sah-well, “Sun”): Root of Vedic *Savitṛ*, Latin *Sol*, Greek *Helios*.
- ***Méh₁tēr*** (meh-tehr, “Mother [Earth]”): Basis for Latin *Terra*, Greek *Gaia*, possibly Vedic *Prthivī*.
- ***Perkwunos*** (per-koo-nos, “Striker” or “Oak God”): Storm god; survives as Slavic *Perun*, Baltic *Perkūnas*, possibly linked to Vedic *Parjanya*.
- ***Diwós Suh₂unós*** (dyoo-os soo-hu-nohs, “Sons of Sky”): Divine Twins; Vedic *Aśvins*, Greek *Dioskouroi*, Lithuanian *Ašvieniai*.

These are the gods and goddesses that do not seem to originate from the proto-Indo-European pantheon, but rather from innovations introduced by the Indo-Aryan peoples:

- ***Indra*** (In-drah, “Possibly from ‘drop’ or ‘power’ root”): Warrior god, slayer of Vṛtra; no PIE cognate.
- ***Agni*** (Ug-nee, “Fire”): Personified god of fire and sacrifice; more developed than PIE fire concept.
- ***Soma*** (So-mah, “Extract” or “Pressed juice”): Sacred ritual drink; unique to Indo-Aryans and Iranian *Haoma*.
- ***Vāyu*** (Vaa-yoo, “Wind”): God of wind and breath; PIE had the root *weh₂- but no wind deity.
- ***Varuṇa*** (Vuh-roo-nah, “Binder” or “Encompasser”): Overseer of cosmic and moral order; some thematic overlap with *Dyēus*.
- ***Rudra*** (Rood-rah, “Roarer” or “Howler”): Fierce storm and healing god; precursor to *Śiva*.

- **Pūṣan** (Poo-shun, “Protector” or “Nourisher”): Pastoral god, guide of travelers; no PIE equivalent.
- **Vishnu** (Vish-noo, “All-pervading”): Cosmic strider; later supreme deity in Vaishnavism.
- **Savitṛ** (Suh-vit-ri, “Impeller” or “Stimulator”): Solar deity associated with inspiration and the *Gāyatrī mantra*.
- **Yama** (Yuh-mah, “Twin” or “Restrainer”): God of death; appears also in Avestan texts.
- **Tvaṣṭṛ** (Tvah-sht-ri, “Craftsman” or “Shaper”): Divine artisan; sometimes likened to Greek *Hephaestus*.

The *Upaniṣads* (Oo-puh-nee-shuds, “Sitting near [a teacher]”) are a collection of philosophical and poetic texts composed between approximately 800 and 300 BCE. They form the concluding portion of the Vedic literature, often referred to as *Vedānta* (Veh-daan-tuh, “end of the Veda”). While the earlier Vedas—particularly the *Rigveda* (Rig-veh-da, “Veda of hymns”)—focus on hymns, sacrifices, and praise of deities such as *Indra* (Indrah), *Agni* (Ug-nee), and *Soma* (So-mah), the Upaniṣads mark a subtle but profound shift. Rather than being concerned primarily with external ritual or divine appeasement, these later texts explore the nature of reality, consciousness, and the inner self. The language becomes more introspective, symbolic, and poetic. Dialogues between sages and students replace liturgical hymns, and speculation about gods gives way to inquiry into the self and the cosmos.

The gods are not rejected but are reinterpreted or absorbed into a deeper metaphysical framework. For instance, *Agni*, once the fire of sacrifice, becomes a symbol of the inner fire of knowledge. Instead of asking which god to worship, the Upaniṣadic seeker asks, “Who am I? What is real? What lies beyond death?” This transformation represents one of the most remarkable shifts in religious thought in human history.

Major themes that recur across the Upaniṣads include:

Brahman (Bruh-muhn, “ultimate reality”): The infinite, formless, unchanging source and ground of all existence.

Ātman (Aht-muhn, “self”): The inner self or soul, beyond the body and mind, the essence of individual being.

Identity of Ātman and Brahman: The central insight that the individual self (*ātman*) is ultimately identical to the universal (*brahman*); expressed in phrases like *tat tvam asi* (Tut twum uh-see, “you are that”).

Māyā (Mah-yah, “illusion”): The appearance of separateness and change that veils the unity of all things; the world as experienced through the senses is not the ultimate truth.

Mokṣa (Mok-sha, “liberation”): Release from the cycle of rebirth (*saṃsāra*, Sum-saa-rah, “wandering”) through the realization of the Self’s unity with Brahman.

Karma and rebirth (Kurr-mah, “Action”): Actions have consequences that determine the circumstances of future births. Only through knowledge of the Self can one transcend this cycle.

Guru and teaching (Goo-roo, “Teacher”): Wisdom is transmitted through personal instruction and contemplation, often in forest hermitages. The relationship between teacher and student is sacred.

Negation (*neti neti*) (Nay-tee nay-tee, “Not this, not that”): A method of describing the Self by negating all that it is not; pointing beyond all conceptual descriptions.

Inner sacrifice: The true sacrifice is not external but internal: the renunciation of ego, the control of desires, and the pursuit of self-knowledge.

Cosmology as metaphor: Myths of creation and cosmic order are used as metaphors to explore the unity between the universe (macrocosm) and the individual (microcosm).