

[home](#)

symbolism in Hinduism

[contents](#)

Hinduism is often labeled as a religion of 330 million gods. This misunderstanding arises when people fail to grasp the symbolism of the Hindu pantheon. Hindus worship the nameless and formless Supreme Reality (Brahm) by various names and forms. These different aspects of one reality are symbolized by the many gods and goddesses of Hinduism. For example, Brahma (not to be confused with the over-arching Brahman) is that reality in its role as creator of the universe; in Vishnu it is seen as the preserver and the upholder of the universe; and Shiva is that same reality viewed as the principle of transcendence which will one day 'destroy' the universe. These are the Trimurti, the 'three forms,' and they are not so much different gods as different ways of looking at the same God. Each emphasizes a particular aspect or function of the one reality. The forms are many, the reality is one; the principle is very deeply rooted in Hindu thought, and was stated at the very outset in the [Rg Veda](#):

They call him Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni
And he is heavenly nobly-winged Garutman.
To what is One, sages give many a title:
They call it Agni, Yama, Matarisvan.

It is the same with all the gods and goddesses: they are not rivals but aspects of a single principle. Hindus have represented God in innumerable forms. Each is but a symbol that points to something beyond; and as none exhausts God's actual nature, the entire array is needed to complete the picture of God's aspects and manifestations. It has been said that images are to the Hindu worshipper what diagrams are to the geometrician. The Hindu devotee, while he will generally have one particular form of god - his or her ishta deva, or chosen deity - on whom his devotion centers, moves easily between one god and another. The same idea carries over into the human sphere. Krishna and Rama are not strictly speaking gods, but avatars, 'descents' - human incarnation of Vishnu - since he is the 'upholder' of the world. This idea is brought forth clearly in the following doctrine of the [Artharva Veda](#):

" He is the one, the one alone, in Him
all deities become One alone."



[Introduction](#)

[Ganesha - The Lord of Beginnings](#)

[Trimurti \(Lord Brahma, Lord Vishnu & Lord Shiva\)](#)

[Lord Ram](#)

[Lord Krishna](#)

[Goddess Saraswati](#)

[Goddess Durga](#)

[Goddess Lakshmi](#)

[Symbols - Om and Swastika](#)

[Conclusion](#)

Introduction



"Yes, said he, "but just how many gods are there, Yajnavalkya?" "Thirty-three." ..."Yes," said he, "but just how many gods are there, Yajnavalkya?" "One..." - [Bṛhadaranyaka Upanishad III, IX, I](#)

God's innumerable forms, and the acknowledgment of His Presence in everything, are



an expression of the extraordinary vitality of India's collective imagination down through the ages.

(source: [Travel through Sacred India](#) - By Roger Housden p. 58).

"The one God wears many masks," wrote mythologist [Joseph Campbell](#). **In no other religion does the Supreme Being wear so many masks and invite worship in so many different forms as the eternal religion of Hinduism.**

Hindus love to worship. Every aspect of life is worship. "Let my walking be circumambulation of You," wrote [Shankaracharya](#). "Let my speech be the recitation of Your holy mantras. When I lie down to sleep, may it be prostrating to You."

The Supreme Being has no form at all and yet is inherent in all forms.

(source: [Hinduism](#) - By Linda Johnsen p. 145).

Idol or image is a kind of yantra or a device for harnessing the eye and mind on God. As the [Vishnu Samhita](#) (ch 29, v 55-7) an ancient ritual text, persuasively endorses the use of imagery and puts it:

"Without a form how can God be mediated upon? If (He is) without any form, where will the mind fix itself? When there is nothing for the mind to attach itself to, it will slip away from meditation or will glide into a state of slumber. Therefore the wise will meditate on some form, remembering, however, that the form is a superimposition and not a reality."

Symbolism, for two reasons, plays a greater role in the religion and art of India than in those of other nations. For one thing, India's is the oldest continuous civilization in the world. **Its traditions extend back long before recorded history. For another, the Indian mind, having established itself firmly in the belief in a transcendental reality, is completely comfortable with an exuberance in its expression of images and allegories that comes from knowing and accepting that everything is illusory anyway.**

"Aham Brahm asmi (I am Brahman/the spirit or essence of everything), "Tat twam asi (Thou art that/Brahman alone exists and is the essence of everything), "Aham sa (I am He(Brahman)/an individual is a soul wrapped up in a physical body)," ? Since the unenlightened mind hasn't the capacity to perceive these statements as proceeding from the ultimate refinement of consciousness. **These lofty teachings of the Vedas and Upanishads had to be clothed in symbolism, and presented in allegories.** The purpose of concealing them in part to protect the truth from profanation, and in part also to ensure their endurance during centuries of spiritual darkness. The hope was to suggest to deep truth seekers, at least, that there are levels of truth beyond any of those suggested by orthodox religions.

A painting of Lord Krishna playing his flute awakens devotion in the hearts of Hindu devotees, because it reminds them of God calling the soul to eternal wakefulness in Him.

(source: [The Hindu Awakening: Its Revelation, Its Symbols](#) - By Swami Kriyananda (J Donald Walters) p. 28--49).



The idea of Brahman put forward in the Upanishads is not one which can satisfy the demands of the mind. The 'knowing' of which the Upanishads speaks is of a different order. Brahman-Atman can only be known by identify with it, by direct intuition. It is therefore not surprising that in the period succeeding the Upanishads the idea of Brahman came to be clothed in forms which the human mind and the imagination can grasp. The result was a vigorous development of theism, during which gods and goddesses which today characterize Hinduism assumed much of its character. Gods and goddesses are the varied expressions of the one all-pervasive Reality.

The Hindu deities are not viewed as separate and rival powers, but as different functions, different aspects, different ways of understanding and approaching the one Reality.

Perhaps the first thing to strike a Western observer about Hindu deities is the multiplicity of limbs they display. Nineteenth century writers, brought up on Greek sculpture, found this grotesque and inexplicable. Yet the reason why the Hindu deities are represented in this way is very simple: it is to show that they are gods, that they differ from human beings and have more and greater powers than we do. Thus, Vishnu is usually shown with four arms, but his avataars or incarnations, Rama and Krishna, who have human forms, are invariably represented with two.

(source: [The Elements of Hinduism - By Stephen Cross](#) 30 -32).

T. A. Gopinath Rao, author of [Elements of Hindu Iconography](#) writes: "It has been said that images are to the Hindu worshipper what diagrams are to the geometrician."

(source: [The Spirit of Modern India - Edited by Robert A McDermont and V. S. Naravane](#) p. 136).

Dr. Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) The late curator of Indian art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, was unexcelled in his knowledge of the art of the Orient, and unmatched in his understanding of Indian culture, language, religion and philosophy. He is the author of 'The Dance of Shiva: Essays on Indian Art and Culture'

To conceive of Hinduism as a polytheistic system is in itself a naivete of which only a Western student, inheriting Graeco-Roman concept of "paganism" could be capable. The Hindu Ishavara (Supreme God) is not a jealous God because all gods are aspects of Him, imagined by His worshippers; in the words of Lord Krishna: "When any devotee seeks to worship any aspect with faith, and when by worshipping any aspect he wins what he desires, it is none other than Myself that grants his prayers. Howsoever men approach Me, so do I welcome them, for the path men take from every side is Mine."

This was the Hindu method; Indian religion adapts herself with infinite grace to every human need.

(source: [The Infinite Grace of Images - The Spirit of Modern India - Edited by Robert A McDermont and V. S. Naravane](#) p. 136 - 149).

According to the [Bhagavad Gita](#), **even those who worship other gods (anya-devatah), ancestral deities, elemental powers, if they do so with faith, then their faith is justified, for the Divine accepts every form conceived by the worshipper.**

(source: [Eastern Religions & Western Thought - By. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan](#) p. 319).

[Top of Page](#)

Ganesha - The Lord of Beginnings

Lord Ganesha, popularly known and easily recognized as the Elephant-God, is one of the most important deities of the Hindu pantheon. Before every undertaking, be it laying of the foundation of a house, or opening of a store or beginning any other work, Lord Ganesha is first worshipped so as to invoke his blessings.

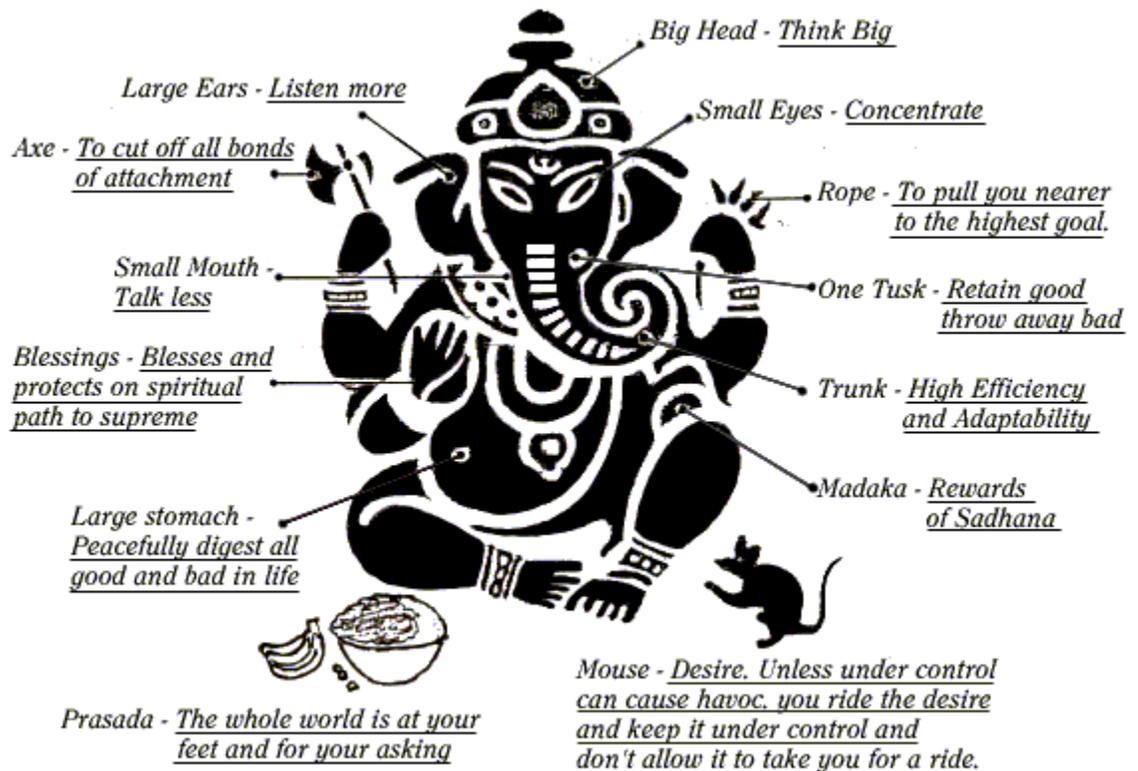
Ganesha has many names. The main ones are Ganapati (lord of the ganas, or attendants), Vighneshwara (controller of all obstacles), Vinayaka (the prominent leader), Gajaanana (elephant-faced), Lambodara (pendant-bellied), and Ekdanta (having one tusk).



*Lord Ganesha - the lord of beginnings
(source: Indian Art - By Vidya Dehejia)*

Lord Ganesha, also called Ganapati or Vinayaka, is presented in the form of a human body with the head of an elephant. This blend of human and animal parts is a symbolic representation of a perfect human being, as conceived by Hindu sages. His head symbolizes wisdom, understanding, and a discriminating intellect that one must possess to attain perfection in life. By worshipping Ganesha, a Hindu seeks God's blessings for achieving success in one's endeavors in the physical world and for attaining perfection thereafter. **Hence, Hindus worship Ganesha to seek God's blessings before beginning such activities.**

Lord Ganesha is the son of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati (a form of Goddess Durga). The other son of Lord Shiva is Karttikeya also known as Muruga, Skanda, Subramanya, Shanmukha. Ganesha has got two wives, one named Siddhi (Success) and the other named Riddhi (Prosperity). One who pleases the Lord, automatically comes in the good books of his two wives. Ganesha, the embodiment of wisdom, is also depicted as the scribe to whom sage Vyasa dictated the Mahabharata. He is accepted as the god of learning and the patron of letters.



The ancient sages, in their infinite wisdom, have designed Hindu deities with specific Vedantic attributes in mind.

Ganesha was born on the fourth day of the month of Bhadrapad, the sixth month of the Hindu lunar calendar. In the south, especially in Maharashtra people celebrate 'Ganesh Chaturthi' by buying or making of clay image of Ganesha, worshipping the idol at home or a community center and then taking it in a procession to be immersed in a river, lake or sea.

Vighneshwara (Remover or controller of all obstacles), Who is Ganapati/Ganesa? Ganapati is the Self. In a sentence, Ganesa simply means **"Self-realization is but the removal of obstacles to the recognition of the eternal, immanent, inner self, here and now."**

(source: [Ganapati: Song of the Self - By John A. Grimes](#) p. 194).

Ganesha has been a major deity, since the seventh and eighth centuries, in Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. Ganesha Buddha - as he is also known as [Shoden](#) in Japan. It is from Vinayaka that the old Myanmar name for Ganesha, Mahapinary purha, was derived. Other names with a similar meaning occur frequently in Cambodian inscriptions, such as Vighnasha and Vignesvara, both of which mean "Lord of removing obstacles". A popular temple at Futako Tamagawa, Tokyo, Japan, displays Ganesha far more prominently than Buddha. Ganesha was extremely popular in the art of Indonesian islands, especially of Sumatra and Java and compare favorably with the eighth-century Ellora caves, in images, style and iconography. At Candi Sukuh in central Java, a remarkable fifteenth century relief shows three figures, with a dancing Ganesha in the centre. There are paintings and stone sculptures of the deity found in China, apart from the textual references to Ganesha in the Chinese Buddhist canon. In Japan, there is the Shingon ritual practice that centers on Ganesha, with texts tracing back to China. To some Chinese He is Kuan-shi t'ien or Ho Tei, the large-bellied God of Happiness. To the Polynesians He is God Lono. The Tamils call him by the affectionate term Pilliar, Noble Child. The Tibetians know Him as ts' ogs-bdag, and the Burmese worship Maha-Pienne. In Mongolia His name is Totkhar-our Khaghan. Cambodians offer worship to Prah Kenes, and the Japanese supplicate Vinayaksa or Sho-ten. By some He is envisioned as the feminine Mother Nature, and even non-believers seek to understand Him through personifying His great powers as Fate, Destiny or Numen. The Greeks called Him Janus and sought His blessings at the outset of any new venture.

In the Tibetan Buddhism, the practice associated with Ganesha, as Buddhist Tantric deity, survives up to this

day. In Jainism, Ganesha occasionally found a place alongside Mahavir. The Tibetan Ganesha appears, besides bronzes, in the resplendent Thangka paintings alongside the Buddha. In a single Kathmandu valley of Nepal, there are four principal manifestations of "Binayak" in a protective role: Ashok, Surya, Chandra and Bighna. In that valley, Ganapati guards the Buddhist viharas where bhajans are sung in his praise. In Greece, Janus, the god in Greek mythology after whom the month of January was named, has the head of an elephant. Sometimes, he is depicted as a two-headed deity. Like Ganesha, Janus is worshipped at the beginning of any auspicious occasion. In Sri Lanka, the oldest image of Ganesha is found in the Kantak Chaitya in Mihintale which is dated to 1st century BC. The Ganesha idol at Subrahmanyam temple in Katargama town is still worshipped. People who do not practice Hinduism also visit this temple for this Ganesha is believed to grant the wishes of his devotees. Ganesha is a vibrant presence whose benediction is sought by traders, travelers, artists and statesmen. As lord of business and diplomacy, he sits on a high pedestal outside Bangkok's World Trade Centre, where people offer flowers, incense and a reverential sawasdee. A gilt Ganesha presides over the bustling charivari of lucrative tourism in the lobby of the Rama Hotel. **Even Muslim Indonesia reveres him and European scholars call him the 'Indonesian God of Wisdom'**. Bandung boasts a Jalan Ganesa, and his image adorns 20,000 rupiah notes. For more refer to chapter on [Suvarnabhumi](#) and [India and China](#).

मणेश मणेश मणेश मणेश मणेश मणेश मणेश मणेश

[Top of Page](#)

Trimurti - (Lord Brahma, Lord Vishnu & Lord Shiva)



*Trimurti - the three apparently contradictory aspects of existence:
"creation, conservation and dissolution, which are "one and the same thing as to the origin, the
significance and the term."*

According to French art historian, **Rene Grousset** (1885-1952) who speaks of the Trimurti statue at **Elephanta Caves**:

"Universal art has succeeded in few materialization of the Divine as powerful and also as balanced. He believed that it is "the greatest representation of the pantheistic god created by the hands of man." He concludes with poetic enthusiasm: "Never have the overflowing sap of life, the pride of force superior to everything, the secret intoxication of the inner god of things been so serenely expressed."

(source: [The India I Love - By Marie-Simone Renou](#) p. 88-93).

In the words of Rene Grousset, " The three countenances of the one being are here harmonized without a trace of effort. There are few material representations of the divine principle at once as powerful and as well balanced as this in the art of the whole world. Nay, more, here we have undoubtedly the grandest representation of the pantheistic God ever made by the hand of man...Indeed, never have the exuberant vigor of life, the tumult of universal joy expressing itself in ordered harmony, the pride of a power superior to any other, and the secret exaltation of the divinity immanent in all things found such serenely expressed."

(source: [The Civilization of the East – India - by Rene Grousset](#) p.245-6).

The Hindu Trinity also called Trimurti (meaning three forms), is the **representation of the three manifestations of the Supreme Reality**, as Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva. Brahma symbolizes creation, Vishnu preservation and renewal, and Shiva dissolution or destruction necessary for recreation. It must be understood that the members of the Hindu Trinity are not three different and independent gods, but three aspects of one Supreme Reality called Bramh by the seers of the Upanishads.



1. Lord Brahma - the first member of the trinity though much less important than the other two, namely Vishnu and Mahesha, is manifested as the active creator of this universe. The name Brahma is not found in the Vedas and the Brahmanas, where the active creator is merely known as Golden-embryo (**Hirayna-garbha**) or the Lord of Progeny (Prajapati). The Mahabharata considers him as born from the embryo which took shape in Vishnu's mind when he began to think of creation.

After the destruction of one universe Vishnu falls asleep, floating on the causal waters. When another universe is to be created, Brahma appears on a lotus, which springs from the navel of Vishnu. Hence Brahma is also called Navel-born (Nabhi-ja) or the Lotus-born (Kinja-ja). When Brahma creates the world it remains in existence for one of his days, which means 2,160,000,000 years in terms of Hindu calendar.

When Brahma goes to sleep after the end of his day, the world and all that is therein is consumed by fire. When he awakes he again restores the whole creation. This goes on till the hundred years of Brahma's life is completed. When this period ends he himself loses his existence, and he all gods and sages, and the whole universe are dissolved into their constituent elements.

Today though Brahma's name is invoked in many religious services, his image is worshipped in only a few temples.

Brahma seems to have been thrown into shade probably because in Hindu mind he has ceased to function actively after creation of the world, though he will exert himself again while creating a new universe when this present one will meet its end. Understandably, the legends about this god are not so numerous or rich as those centered round the other two of the trinity.

Brahma has four arms and he holds a lotus flower, his sceptre, his bow parivita, a string of beads, a bowl containing the holy water and the Vedas. He has four heads and is therefore called Chaturanana or Chaturmukha. His vehicle is the swan or goose, the symbol of knowledge. He is therefore said to be

riding on the swan (hansa-vahana). He is the source of all knowledge and his consort, **Saraswati**, is the goddess of knowledge.



2. Lord Vishnu is the central and major deity of the trinity. He is the preserver and for all practical purposes he is deemed to be omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. The name Vishnu comes from the root vish, which means to spread in all directions, "to pervade." Hence, Vishnu is the Pervader.

Lord Vishnu symbolizes the aspect of the Supreme Reality (Brahm of the Upanishads) that preserves and sustains the things and beings in the world. He is symbolized by a human body with four arms. He is portrayed as carrying a conch (shankha), a mace (gada), and discus (chakra). He is blue body and wears yellow clothes. The worship of Lord Vishnu is very popular among Hindus, especially among the followers of the Vaishnava tradition (Vaishnavism). He is the second member of the Hindu Trimurti (trinity). He is also known by other names, such as Vasudeva, Hari, Kesava, Purusottama and Narayana.

It is said that Vishnu is the god of Time, Space and Life. It is also said that he is the god of Joy and that his footsteps are impregnated with infinite sweetness and felicity."

The worshippers of Vishnu, known as Vaishnavas, recognize in him the Supreme Being, out of whom emerge Brahma, the active creator, Vishnu himself the preserver, and Shiva or Rudra, the destructor. Vishnu's preserving, restoring and protecting powers have been manifest on earth in a variety of forms, called Avatars, in which one or more portions of his divine attributes were embodied in the shapes of a human being or an animal or a human-animal combined forms. He is blue-skinned and in all images and relief he is seen in rich ornaments and regal garments. His wife is Lakshmi or Sri, the goddess of wealth and fortune. His place of abode is Vaikuntha (heaven) and his vehicle is Garuda, a giant-sized eagle.



Vishnu is the infinite ocean from which the world emerges. The blue body of the Lord signifies that He has infinite (as the universe) attributes. The Lord is shown standing or lying down on a thousand-headed snake (named **Shesha or Ananta Nag - timeless or ageless snake**). The snake stands with its hoods open over the head of the Lord.

The following ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu are described in Hindu mythology and are popular. These incarnations reveal the help rendered by God during various stages of human evolution. The first two incarnations are in the animal form, the third one is half-human and half-animal, and the fourth and the subsequent ones are all in human form. **These incarnations relate to human evolution, from aquatic life to human life, and are consistent with modern theory of evolution.**

1. **Matsya (fish)** - saves Sage Manu from floods and recovers the Vedas from demons. The only (ancient) temple for Matsya Vishnu's incarnation at the time of the "great flood" is only found at Shankhodhara in [Bet Dwaraka](#).
2. **Kurma (tortoise)** - sustains the earth on his back.
3. **Varaha (boar)** - brings the earth back from the bottom of the ocean where it was dragged down by a demon, known as Hiranyaksha; Varaha kills the demon.
4. **Narasimha (man-lion)** - kills the demon King Hiranyakashipu, who was planning to kill his own son, a devotee of Lord Vishnu.
5. **Vamana (dwarf)** - the first human incarnation of the Lord, kills the demon King Mahabali, who had deprived the gods of their possessions.
6. **Parasurama (the warrior with an axe)** - saves Brahmins from the tyranny of the arrogant Kshatriya.
7. **Rama** - kills Ravana, the demon king of Lanka.

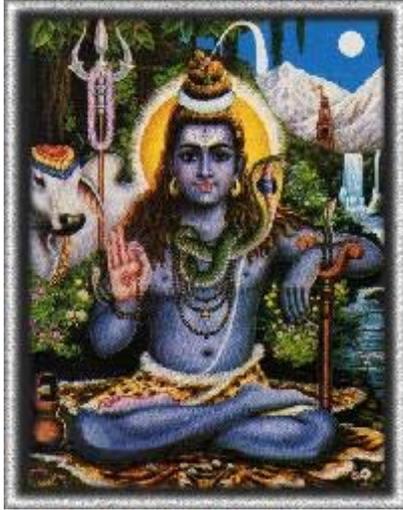
8. **Sri Krishna** - the most popular incarnation; Krishna's contributions throughout his life include the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita to Arjuna.

9. **Buddha** - Hindus consider Buddha as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu and accept his teachings, but do not directly worship him.

10. **Kalkin - (a man on a white horse)** - this incarnation is yet to come and will mark the end of all evil in the world.

(For more on Vishnu avatars refer to [The Hindu Mind - By Bansi Pandit](#) p. 167 and [A Survey of Hinduism - by Klaus K Klostermaier](#) p. 146 and 241 and [Hinduism - By Linda Johnsen](#) p. 184-193).

3. Lord Shiva - The Grace and the Terror of God



Lord Shiva represents the complete cyclic process of generation, destruction, and regeneration. The all embracing nature of Lord Shiva is reflected in his 1008 names. Lord Shiva represents the aspect of the Supreme Reality (Brahm of the Upanishads) which continuously recreates, in the cyclic process of creation, preservation, dissolution and recreation. He annihilates evil, grants boons, bestows grace, destroys ignorance, and awakens wisdom in His devotees. He is also called Rudra. In Yajur-Veda, Rudra is also called "Mahadeva."

One of the three great gods of Hinduism, Shiva is a living god. The most sacred and most ancient book of India, the Rg Veda, evokes his presence in its hymns; Vedic myths, rituals, and even astronomy itself testify to his existence from the dawn of time. From the dawn of creation, the Great Yogi, the sum of all opposites, has been the guardian of the absolute. **He is the totality of existence - male and female, light and dark, creation and destruction.**

Shiva is shown in various ways. Shiva another well-known name is **Yogiraja**, i.e. the Lord of Yoga.

He is seated on a skin of a tiger, a number of cobras all around his neck, his long matted hair into a mop atop of his head, the crescent that he wears on the mop of his hair, the sacred river **Ganga** falling from his head and flowing by his side who was brought down from heavens by Bhagiratha, the trident (**trishula**), the symbol of his power, the sacred bull (**Nandi**), and the mendicant's bowl. Besides, these symbols another very important physical characteristic of Shiva is his vertical third eye. In **Mahabharata**, the great Hindu epic, the legend of how Shiva got the third eye is given this way. One day his beautiful consort **Parvati** (daughter of the King of Himalayas), stealthily went behind Shiva and playfully placed her hands over his eyes. Suddenly darkness engulfed the whole world and all beings trembled in great fear as the lord of the universe had closed his eyes. Suddenly a massive tongue of flame leapt from the forehead of Shiva; a third eye appeared there and this gave light to the world.

Another popular image of Shiva has no human form but is represented by **Linga - The Linga of Light**

The myth is one of the most popular of the entire **Puranic** corpus and is told many times in various settings. It recounts the first appearance of Shiva linga which pierced the three worlds as a brilliant shaft of light and was witnessed by Brahma and Vishnu long ago.

The **Vedas**, however, testify one by one that neither Brahma nor Vishnu, but Shiva is supreme. As the two stand in disbelief, **a huge column of fire splits the earth between them and blazes up through the sky to pierce the highest heavens.** Astounded, Brahma and Vishnu decide to determine the source and extent of this brilliant pillar of light. Vishnu becomes a boar and burrows deep into the netherworlds. Brahma mounts his goose and flies as far up as the heavens reach. But even after thousands of years they cannot find the bottom or the top of the shaft of light. When they have returned to their starting place, Shiva emerges from the light in his "partial" bodily form.

The linga of light is thus the image of the supremacy of Shiva. It is as what Mircea Eliade has called the **axis mundi** or **the pillar at the center of the world, originating deep in the netherworlds, cracking the surface of the earth, and splitting the roof of the sky.** In this linga Shiva is not one god among others, but the unfathomable One. This light is the mysterium tremendum which finally cannot be

described or comprehended by any or all faces and attributes.

The linga of light was the first linga. After that, Shiva vowed that this unfathomable linga would become small so that people might have it as an emblem for their worship. Wherever, the linga is, there is a tirtha, because the linga by nature is a "crossing place" where the worlds are knit together by the shaft of Shiva. Other deities have muris, images, but only Shiva has the world-spanning form of a linga."



The word linga means an **emblem, symbol or a mark** and the worship of this shaft alarmed and horrified many early Western visitors to India. In Varanasi, at the famed Kedarnath temple there is a Sivalingam in the main sanctum, which is a low flat rock with speckled light granite on one side, a line of white granite going across the rock and on the other side dark speckled granite. The **Puranic** story is that this lingam represents a plate of rice and lentils. The linga is certainly a bisexual symbol but not a phallic symbol alone. The shaft of the linga of Shiva is set in a circular base, called a "seat." It is the seat of that **divine energy** (shakti) personified as Shiva's **female half** and often called by the proper name **Shakti**.

Many ancient civilizations recognized the wonder of this concept—including the Chinese, who represent it somewhat more abstractly in the symbol of Yin and Yang. Thus it depicts the generative symbol or the fountain-source of light, this Linga represents the Lord of the Universe. The phallus aspect has been overdone by **western scholars** though Linga actually means a 'sign', 'mark' or 'symbol'.

(source: [Banaras: City of Light - By Diana L. Eck](#) p 107-109).

The **Sanskrit-English Dictionary** edited by P. K. Gode and C. G. Karve is widely regarded as an authoritative work and it gives a wide range of meanings for lingam:

"The primary meaning given is: "A mark, sign, token, an emblem, a badge, symbol, distinguishing mark, characteristic."

Shiva-lingam is a sign by which Shiva is symbolized. Note that besides the popular Shiva-lingam of the column or round egg-shaped sign, the Natraja is also the lingam of the dancing Shiva, symbolizing the universe's creation, sustenance and dissolution. The trishul ("weapon" that pierces the veil of ignorance) is his lingam in the context of yoga, as he is also considered the supreme yogi. The Maitrayaniya-Upanishad (6.10) applies the term lingam to the entire "creation extending from the first principle (mahat) to the particulars (vishesh). It contrasts this with the linga that is "without foundation", i.e. the unthinkable Reality itself.

In the Mahabharata (12.195.15) the linga is the vehicle, or body, of the transmigrating psyche. The term linga can also denote the phallus or, by extension, the cosmic principle of creativity.

(source: [The Meaning of Lingam - By Rajeev Malhotra](#)).

God, to us is not the creator who lives apart from the Universe but has manifested Himself as the Universe and pervades everything within. Thus, He is the indweller in all beings, material and energy. He has no form but at the same time, all forms are His. **Linga Purana** states, 'The foremost Linga which is devoid of smell, color, taste, hearing, touch, etc, is spoken of as prakriti (nature).

Linga means a "mark" in Sanskrit. It is a symbol that points to an inference.

When one sees a big flood in a river, one infers that there had been heavy rain earlier. When one sees smoke, one infers that there is fire. This vast Universe of countless forms is a Linga of the omnipotent Lord. When a Hindu looks at the Linga, his mind is at once elevated and he thinks of the Lord, especially Lord Siva. A Hindu knows that Lord Siva is formless. Lord Siva has no form of his own; and yet, all forms are His forms. Lord Siva pervades all forms. Every form is the form or Linga of Lord Siva. **The Linga is only the outward symbol of the formless being, Lord Siva— Lord Siva incarnate, who is the**

indivisible, all-pervading, eternal, auspicious, ever-pure, immortal essence of this vast universe, who is the undying soul seated in the chambers of one's heart, who is one's Indweller, innermost Self or Atman and who is identical with the Supreme Brahman.

(source: [Sivalinga, the Formless Form - Hinduismtoday.com](http://Hinduismtoday.com) 2001).

Another image of **Ardhanarishwara**, represents Lord Shiva as the **union of substance and energy**, the life principle and **Shakti**.

Shiva, as Destroyer, needs plenty of power and energy. This is what Parvati, or Durga or Shakti as she is called, provides. **It is only the Hindu tradition, which provides, even at the conceptual level, this picture of the male and female principles working together, hand in hand, as equal partners in the universe.** This concept is carried further to its logical climax in the form of Ardhanarishwara, formed by the fusion of Shiva and Shakti in one body, each occupying one half of the body, denoting that one is incomplete without the other.

Shivaratri, i.e. Shiva's Night is the famous festival in honor of Lord Shiva. It is held on the 14th night of the dark half moon in the month of Magha (Jan-Feb).



Marriage of Shiva and Parvati

The most celebrated Shiva motif is that of the **Nataraja, the Lord of the Dance. The Cosmos is His theatre, there are many different steps in His repertory, He Himself is actor and audience.** This is the pose in which Shiva Nataraja has been immortalized in countless beautiful sculptures, especially in South India, each detail of this image is invested with meaning. This image symbolizes the divine activities of God. " Creation arises from the drum, (sound) protection proceeds from the hand of hope, from fire proceeds destruction, from the foot that is planted upon muyalahan (dwarf) proceeds the destruction of evil, the foot held aloft gives deliverance." His serene smile shows his uninvolved transcendence, the three eyes are interpreted as sun, moon, and fire, or as the three powers of Shiva: will, knowledge, and action. The garland of skulls around his neck identifies him as time, and the death of all beings. Chidambaram is where Shiva is said to dance his cosmic drama.

"Grandest of all such representations symbolizing a synthesis of science, art and religion is the image of Nataraja as the Cosmic Dancer. The central idea of the dance is creation, preservation, destruction, giving rest and release.

Rene Grousset's (1885-1952) French art historian, gives a fine interpretation of the image:

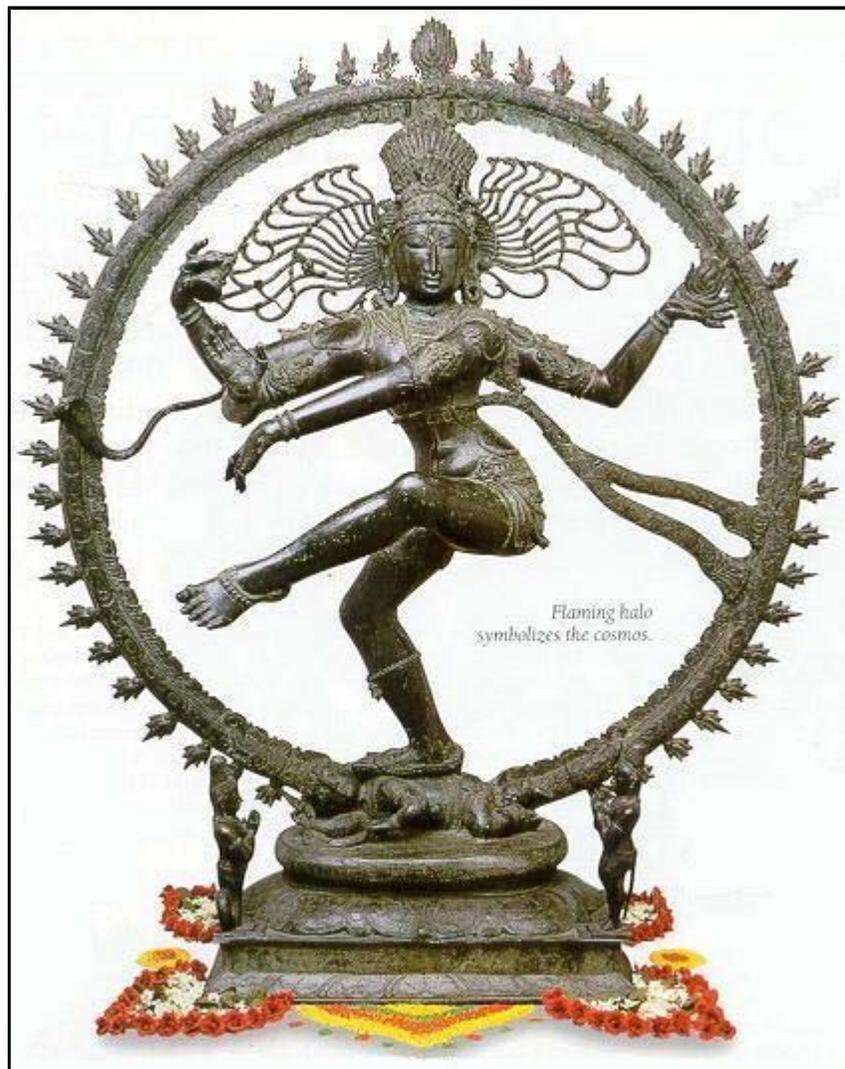
"Whether he be surrounded or not by the flaming aureole of the Tiruvasi (Pabhamandala) – the circle of the world which he both fills and oversteps – the King of the Dance is all rhythm and exaltation. The tambourine

which he sounds with one of his right hands draws all creatures into this rhythmic motion and they dance in his company. The conventionalized locks of flying hair and the blown scarfs tell of the speed of this universal movement, which crystallizes matter and reduces it to powder in turn. One of his left hands holds the fire which animates and devours the worlds in this cosmic whirl. One of the God's feet is crushing a Titan, for "this dance is danced upon the bodies of the dead", yet one of the right hands is making a gesture of reassurance (abhayamudra), so true it is that, seen from the cosmic point of view...the very cruelty of this universal determinism is kindly, as the generative principle of the future. And, indeed, on more than one of our bronzes the King of the Dance wears a broad smile. He smiles at death and at life, at pain and at joy, alike, or rather,..his smile is death and life, both joy and pain...**From this lofty point of view, in fact, all things fall into their place, finding their explanation and logical compulsion. Here art is the faithful interpreter of a philosophical concept.** The plastic beauty of the rhythm is no more than the expression of an ideal rhythm. The very multiplicity of arms, puzzling as it may seem at first sight, is subject in turn to an inward law, each pair remaining a model of elegance in itself, so that the whole being of the Nataraja thrills with a magnificent harmony in his terrible joy. And as though to stress the point that the dance of the divine actor is indeed a sport, (lila) – the sport of life and death, the sport of creation and destruction, at once infinite and purposeless – the first of the left hands hangs limply from the arm in the careless gesture of the gajahasta (hand as the elephant's trunk). And lastly, as we look at the back view of the statue, are not the steadiness of these shoulders which uphold world, and the majesty of this Jove-like torso, as it were a symbol of the stability and immutability of substance, while the gyration of the legs in its dizzy speed would seem to symbolize the vortex of phenomena."

(source: [The Civilization of the East – India - by Rene Grousset](#) p. 252 - 53).

"Be it in the Vedas, the Upanishads or the Puranas, the Lord Shiva is always referred to with great reverence as well as under different names. The conception of Shiva is not simply that of a godhead whose powers have become concentrated in a single figure dominating a certain period of Indian history. Shiva is identified with the Eternal and All powerful; he is the Primal Soul and the great Soul from which unaccounted other souls have sprung. Shiva is beauty, Shiva is all, he is everywhere. There is no life, no motion and no rhythm without Siva, for he is the Cosmos itself."

(source: [La Danse Hindoue - by Usha Chatterji](#) Translated from the English By Manah Garreau-Dombasle).



Nataraja, the King of the Dance: The clearest image of cosmic activity of God which any art or religion can boast of. This conception itself is a synthesis of science, religion and art.

An entire cosmology, theology and way of salvation are embodied in this single form. To really see the meanings of Nataraja is to see into the inner workings of our own existence. Though all sacred art in India is deeply symbolic, the one figure of Nataraja can lay the workings of our life before us.

(source: [Travel through Sacred India](#) - By Roger Housden p. 110).

The Form of Nataraja, the Cosmic Dancer, "**a symbol of superhuman lyricism by which....medieval India has expressed its heroic adhesion...to Joy, Pain and Universal Force.**"

To summarize the whole interpretation of Shiva's dance: The Essential Significance of Siva's Dance is threefold: First, it is the image of his Rhythmic Play as the Source of all Movement within the Cosmos, which is Represented by the arch; Secondly, the Purpose of his Dance is to Release the Countless souls of men from the Snare of Illusion; Thirdly, the Place of Dance, Chidambaran, the Center of the Universe, is within the Heart.

The cosmic activity is the central motif of the dance.

Ananda K Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) the late curator of Indian art at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, was unexcelled in his knowledge of the art of the Orient, and unmatched in his understanding of Indian culture, language, religion and philosophy. Praising this grand achievement of art, he writes:

"This conception itself is a synthesis of science, religion and art. In the night of Brahma, Nature is

inert, and cannot dance till Shiva wills it. He rises from His rapture, and dancing sends through inert matter pushing waves of awakening sound, and lo! matter also dances appearing as a glory round about Him. This is poetry; but nonetheless, science.

Whatever the origins of Siva's dance, it became in time the clearest image of the activity of God which any art or religion can boast of.

"How amazing the range of thought and sympathy of those rishi-artists who conceived such a type as this, affording an image of reality, a key to the complex tissue of life, a theory of nature, not merely satisfactory to a single clique or race, not acceptable to the thinkers of a country only, but Universal in its appeal to the philosopher, the lover and the artist of all ages and all countries..."

"Every part of such an image as this is directly expressive not of any superstition or dogma, but of evident facts. **No artist of today, however great, could more exactly or more wisely create an image of that Energy which science must postulate behind all phenomena.** "It is not strange that the figure of Nataraja has commanded the adoration of so many generations past; familiar with all skepticisms, expert in tracing all beliefs to primitive superstitions, explorers of the infinitely great and infinitely small, we are worshippers of Nataraja still."

(source: [The Dance of Shiva - By Dr. Ananda K Coomaraswamy](#) p. 57-66).

The late astrophysicist, **Carl Sagan** (1934-1996) in his book, *Cosmos*, asserts that the **Dance of Nataraja** (Tandava) signifies the cycle of evolution and destruction of the cosmic universe (Big Bang Theory). "It is the clearest image of the activity of God which any art or religion can boast of." Modern physics has shown that the rhythm of creation and destruction is not only manifest in the turn of the seasons and in the birth and death of all living creatures, but also the very essence of inorganic matter. For modern physicists, then, Shiva's dance is the dance of subatomic matter. Hundreds of years ago, Indian artist created visual images of dancing Shivas in a beautiful series of bronzes. Today, physicist have used the most advanced technology to portray the pattern of the cosmic dance. Thus, the metaphor of the cosmic dance unifies, ancient religious art and modern physics.

He further says: "**The most elegant and sublime of these is a representation of the creation of the universe at the beginning of each cosmic cycle, a motif known as the cosmic dance of Lord Shiva. The god, called in this manifestation Nataraja, the Dance King. In the upper right hand is a drum whose sound is the sound of creation. In the upper left hand is a tongue of flame, a reminder that the universe, now newly created, with billions of years from now will be utterly destroyed.**"

(source: [Cosmos - By Carl Sagan](#) p. 213-214).

Fritjof Capra (1939 -) Austrian-born famous theoretical high-energy physicist and ecologist wrote:

"Modern physics has thus revealed that every subatomic particle not only performs an energy dance, but also **is an energy dance**; a pulsating process of creation and destruction. The **dance of Shiva is the dancing universe**, the ceaseless flow of energy going through an infinite variety of patterns that melt into one another". For the modern physicists, then Shiva's dance is the dance of subatomic matter. As in Hindu mythology, it is a continual dance of creation and destruction involving the whole cosmos; the basis of all existence and of all natural phenomenon. Hundreds of years ago, Indian artists created visual images of dancing Shivas in a beautiful series of bronzes. In our times, physicists have used the most advanced technology to portray the patterns of the cosmic dance."

(source: [The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism - By Fritjof Capra](#) p. 241-245). For more refer to chapters [Quotes251 270](#), [Advanced Concepts](#), [Hindu Cosmology](#) and [Hindu Art](#)).

Dr. Heinrich Zimmer (1890-1943), the great German Indologist, a man of penetrating intellect, the keenest esthetic sensibility has observed:

"Shiva – Nataraja. The dance is an act of creation. It brings about a new situation and summons into the dancer a new and higher personality. It has a cosmogonic function, in that it rouses dormant energies which then shape the world. On a universal scale, Shiva is the Cosmic Dancer; in his "Dancing Manifestation", (nritya murti) he embodies in himself and simultaneously gives manifestation to Eternal Energy. **The forces gathered**

and projected in his frantic, every-enduring gyration, are the powers of the evolution, maintenance, and dissolution of the world. Nature and all its creatures are the effects of his eternal dance. Shiva is Kala, "the Black One" "Time"; but he is also Maha Kala, "Great Time," "Eternity." As Nataraja, King of Dancers, his gestures, wild and full of grace, precipitate the cosmic illusion; his flying arms and legs and the swaying of his torso produce – indeed, they are – the continuous creation-destruction of the universe, death exactly balancing birth, annihilation the end of every coming-forth. The choreography is the whirligig of time. But the face remains, in sovereign calm.

Shiva Nataraja is the embodiment and manifestation of eternal energy."

(source: [The Myth and Symbols in India Art and Civilization](#) – By Heinrich Zimmer p. 18 and 152 - 155).



[Top of Page](#)

Lord Ram



Lord Ram, the **dark skinned God** - is the seventh Avatar (incarnation) of Vishnu. Born during the second age of the world called Treta Yuga, he is the immortal hero of the great religious epic of India, the **Ramayana**. Lord Ram, the most famous incarnation of God, appeared on Rama-navami (Chaitra 9). He is known as **Maryada Purusottama** and is the emblem righteousness.

Ram occupies a very reverential place in the religious life of India and in the religious history of the world. He is the embodiment of righteousness and is believed to be incarnation of the solar aspect of Lord Vishnu.

The Ramayana was written by **Rishi Valmiki**, who is also considered as the father of epic style of poetry. Innumerable temples are scattered all over India with the images of Ram, his younger brother Lakshman and his consort Sita, and sitting in devotional posture is Hanuman, the greatest devotee of Lord Ram.

Raama was dark; like Vishnu; MeghaVarnam, KaalaMegham, MeghaShyaamam are the various descriptions of Vishnu.

Lord Ram is depicted to be having two arms and not four, which emphasizes the character of Ram as a human being and the way god Vishnu preferred to adopt this form just to re-establish the golden age of justice and happiness. The expression of **Rama Rajya** even today means the reign in which peace and prosperity prevails.

Ram lived during the end of the **Treta Yuga** or the second age of the world, when the sages, the holy men and even gods were terrorized and alarmed by the misdeeds of **Ravana**, the demonic king of Lanka. Ravana had pleased Brahma, who had given the



boon of invulnerability from the wrath of god or goddess. Ravana misused his power, and to provide deliverance, Lord Vishnu promises to descend on the earth in the form of a man by taking birth as a son to Dasharatha, a king of Ayodhya.

The festivals associated with Rama's incarnation and celebrated in India are Ram Navmi, Dussehra and Diwali. The first one is associated with the birth of Lord Rama. Dussehra is the culmination of the ten-day celebrations, organized to exhibit the episodes of the life of Lord Rama. On the tenth day the last episode of Rama's victory over Ravana is shown and the effigies of Ravana, his brother Kumbhakarna and his son Indrajit are burnt amidst loud rejoicing. Diwali is celebrated on the day on which Rama was crowned after his return to Ayodhya with Sita.

According to one of the Upanishads, named **Rama-purv-tapni Upanishad**, "Just as the whole nature of the large banyan tree is contained in its tiny seed, so also the whole universe moving and unmoving, is contained in the seed word Rama."

हरी ॐ , जय राम जी की! हरी ॐ , जय राम जी की!

* राम *

[Top of Page](#)

Lord Krishna

The Lotus-Eyed God. Keshava, One Who Has Long, Black Matted Locks. **Krishna, Dark-Complexioned Lord.**



Krishna, the god who delivered the message of the **Bhagavad Gita** (the timeless masterpiece of Spiritual wisdom) to **Arjuna**, is worshipped in thousands of temples throughout India.

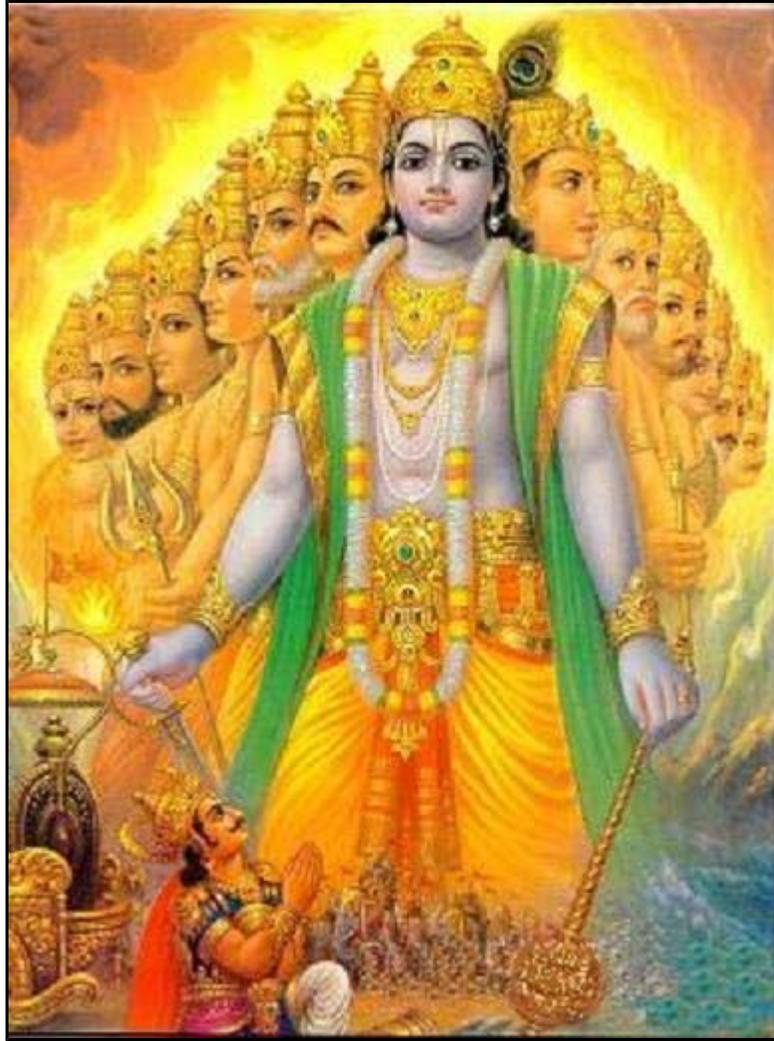
Krishna, "the Dark One," because of the dark color of his skin, was born to Devaki in prison. As a lovable child, as a shrewd diplomat, as a great sage and even as a fearless man of action, Krishna's personality has fascinated for ages not only Indians but also thinkers of other lands.

Krishna's picture is depicted in so many styles; in fact Lord Krishna has probably been the subject of numerous masterpieces of art. Sometimes he is shown as a child eating butter, at other times he is seen dancing with maidens or playing the flute or advising Arjuna in the battlefield of **Kurukshetra**. Krishna's skin color is blue the color of the sky.

The eighth incarnation of Vishnu, Krishna, has evolved into a distinct and composite persona over the millennia. Krishna devotees ardently look upon him as the Godhead, more emotively evocative than most of the other avatars.

His birthday on the eighth day in the dark fortnight of Sravana, in or around the month of August, is still celebrated with great joy and enthusiasm every year as Janmashtami. In many places, especially in Mathura, where he was born, *jhankis*, comprising glimpses into his childhood episodes, are displayed with lights and images of the divine child. In Maharashtra, pots of curd and buttermilk are hung high in the streets and human pyramids are formed to go up and reach out for their contents, reminiscent of the child Krishna's playful exploits for wresting milk and butter from the pots kept beyond his reach. A similar ceremony is observed in south India, where people climb up poles to win the prize money. The **Jagannath temple** at Puri has

wooden images of Jagannath (Krishna), a Balabhadra (Balaram) and Subhadra, their sister.



Lord Krishna's awesome cosmic form

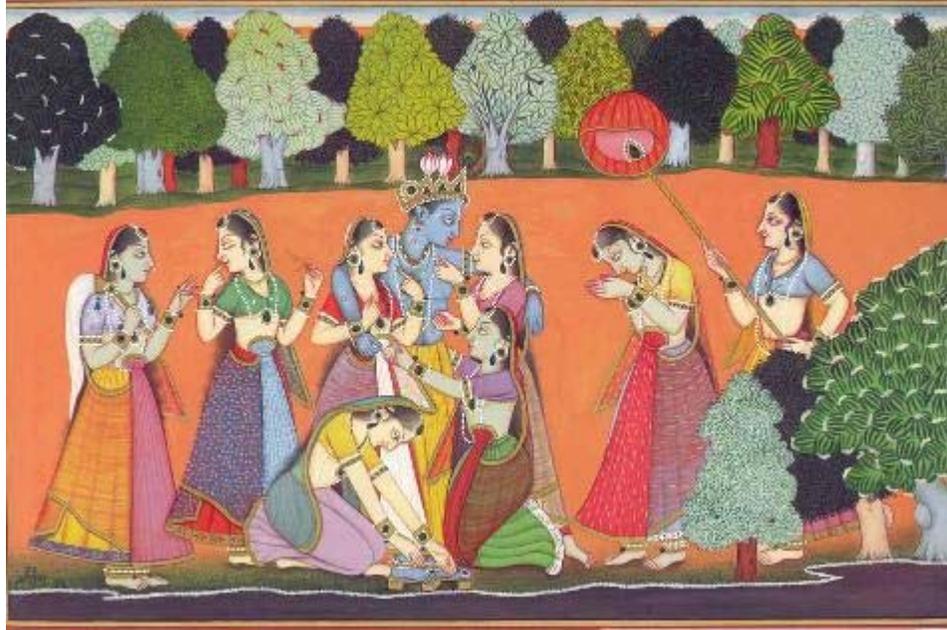
As for the theophany in the eleventh chapter of the Bhagavad Gita, **Arjuna has a vision of Krishna's awesome cosmic form and feels overwhelmed.** The Lord assures him that those with an unswerving devotion to him, in the true spirit of bhakti, can see him. A complex amalgam of the human and the Divine, he is seen differently by different people. To the Pandavas he was their true friend and guide, to the cowherds he was just one of their own, to the Vrajagopis the highest object of love and the yogis saw him as the absolute truth. The Kurukshetra war symbolizes the perennial fight between the forces of light and darkness. The forces of light are guided by Krishna, the one who embodies cosmic consciousness, the Divine Incarnate who has come to lead humanity toward its greater destiny.

In the **Bhagavad Gita**, Krishna points out that to a warrior nothing is nobler than a righteous war and declares that one should do his duty without any attachment for results. He explains to Arjuna the three noble paths. First, is that of **Yoga** (knowledge), which means yoking mind and body to achieve perfect unity beyond the limits of thought and language; second is that of **Dharma** (righteousness), which means religious duties and customs, while the third is that of **Bhakti** (devotion). Devotion implies love to a personal God and complete surrender to Him. This is the path that commands the strongest approval of Krishna. He says:

"Have your mind in Me, be devoted to Me, to Me shall you come...Though I am unborn, the changeless Self...to save the good and destroy evil doers, to establish the right, I am born from time to time."

Bhakti, as advocated in the Gita entailed total self-surrender to the supreme Lord in the form of Krishna, shorn of the wasteful accessories of costly rites and rituals, as a simple way to salvation, without displacing the methods of moksha through karma and gyana which evolved out of the Vedic religion.

Krishna and the Gopis: Symbolic representation of a Passionate Lover to Inspire Souls.



Lord Krishna and gopikas

Krishna, the youthful and delightful flute-player: as **Murali-manohar**, "the handsome one with a flute" he is often depicted standing beneath a sacred Kadamba tree, with his flute to his lips, his leg crossed in a graceful pose, a garland of flowers round his neck, a milk cow at his side affectionately licks his foot. It is this image that has inspired much of the devotion of the **Alvar poets - Andal**, for example often imagines herself as one of the Gopis. Full of devotional fervor and charming detail, it has become the classical expression of devotion to Krishna. From then on the imagery of Krishna's love affair with the Gopis became irresistible. It swept across the whole of India as poet after poet poured out his or her devotion to Krishna. For a thousand years the arts of Hindu India - poetry and music, drama, painting and dance - have found their greatest inspiration in this vision of love in the blessed land of Braj.

The notes of Krishna's flute drifting through the woods are the call of the divine. Thus the objective of Bhakti is fulfilled, and the emotional life of man in all its richness and energy is sublimated and lifted onto the plane of the spiritual life. And, as in all real love, the individual forgets himself utterly and entirely: only the object of love, the divine Krishna, the Lord, the inner Self of man, remains.

The **Gita** says: "**God is the immutable center of infinite mobility.**" and Krishna is the symbol of this.

Central to Krishna's childhood was his dance with the gopis, called **raasa-lila**, which later became the object of worship by many of the devotional sects. Scenes from raasa-lila are now enacted with great verve not only in the Mathura-Vrindavan region but also in Assam and Manipur, sometimes in the Manipuri dance style.

The tales of women abandoning their families to run after him served as poetic expressions of the soul's quest for union with divinity. Worshippers of Krishna were expected to neglect all worldly duties to devote themselves single-mindedly to the adoration of the god.

Krishna's popularity derives partly from the fact that unlike other deities, Krishna appears in all the aspects of life usually associated with childhood, adolescence and adulthood--as a flute-playing trickster,

lover of cowgirls and, finally, as a royal advisor on statecraft. What's endearing about Krishna is not so much his superhuman deeds but his human characteristics, captured in literature and art against the idyllic, pastoral background that still defines much of the Indian landscape. The Bhakti movement is broad and many-sided, and we can only touch on some of its aspects. It is first seen as distinct form around the fourth century B.C. Vasudeva (the good god), Bhagavan (the Adorable One), Narayana and Hari are several other names.



Numerous heroic incidents happened before Krishna left the human body and returned to his heavenly abode. Legend says that the gods, headed by Brahma and Shiva approached Krishna begging him to return as the latter's mission on earth had been completed. Krishna promised the gods that within seven nights he would complete the destruction of Yadavas and return to his perennial home. Bad omens started appearing in Dwaraka; strong hurricanes, screaming birds, wailing cats and dogs, howling jackals and headless spirits drew the attention of all Yadavas in Dwaraka. Krishna advised the residents to leave Dwaraka and move to Prabhasha, a site further inland.

Only Krishna and Daruka, his charioteer were left. Only those left behind at Dwarka were spared to continue the race of this tribe. Balarama, his brother and companion of Krishna, went to the seashore, performed yoga and left his body returning to his real self, viz. Sheshanaga, the serpent of eternity. Once when Krishna

was sitting under a fig tree in a yogic posture a poisonous arrow by a hunter, mistakenly struck the sole of his left leg which served as a prelude for his final departure. He instructed Daruka, his charioteer, to go to Dwaraka and break the news to the residents about his end. Finally the ocean came up and swallowed the city of Dwaraka engulfing everything except the temple. (for more on Dwaraka, please refer to the chapter on [Dwaraka](#)).

The entire legend of Krishna's life and his *leelas* (deeds) provide a great opportunity for presentation of those events through architecture, poetry, art, music and dancing. The many facets of his endearing activities have fired the imagination of people, which no other incarnation has done. **He is a naughty boy, a romantic lover, a heroic warrior, a shrewd diplomat and a great 'Sanyasi' (ascetic).** Krishna is the impish prankster whose leela brings the country to a standstill. He is not only the pivotal character of an epic, the [Mahabharata](#), but also the author of one of the most sacred books of the Hindus - a treasure house of philosophy and a fountain of solace to the troubled hearts.

But while rendering advice to Arjuna at Kurukshetra, Krishna unabashedly reveals — in the [Bhagavad Gita](#) — that he is infinite, his vibhutis or divine manifestations and opulences being unlimited. No one, not even the gods, can know him completely. Krishna then proceeds to impart what he calls the most sovereign knowledge and profound mystery, contemplating on which alone one can attain moksha or liberation.

Krishna said: "Everything that one can see or know emanates from me. I am...the generating seed of all existence; the source of both the mundane and spiritual wor-lids. All this world is pervaded by me... I am its creator, maintainer and destroyer... **I am antaryami, residing in the heart of every jiva. I am the goal, support, Lord, abode, refuge, and friend of all.** I am immortality and death, being and non-being. No entity, either moving or non-moving, can exist separately from Me...

"I am the syllable Om. I am Vishnu, Shiva and Brahma. As the substratum of the material universe, I support it; as the presiding authority, I preside over it, and as the controller, I control it; being all-pervasive, I pervade it and as the creator, I am its cause. My vibhutis are endless; what I have described to you is a mere indication of them. And yet, although everything emanates from me, I remain the same, unchanged and transcendental."

It has been said that in Krishna we have the fullest and the most perfect manifestation of the Divine.

Swami Ramdas: "Krishna is an avatar of perfect love. The word Krishna is derived from akarshana which means attraction. So the name itself signifies that Krishna is the Supreme Truth, manifest in human form, to attract the whole world towards Him."

"Such as would be the radiance of a thousand suns bursting forth suddenly in the sky, such was the

radiance of that Mighty Spirit. There the son of Pandu beheld the whole world with all its differences, gathered together in the body of that God of gods. "

- [Bhagavad Gita](#) chapter 18, verses 64-6.

[Top of Page](#)

Goddesses

One of the most striking characteristics of the ancient and multi-faceted Hindu tradition is the importance of goddess worship. No other living religious tradition displays such an ancient, continuous, and diverse history of goddess worship.

Saraswati - The Goddess of Speech

Saraswati means "the essence of one's own self." Saraswati denotes that aspect of the Supreme reality which represents knowledge, learning, and wisdom. In Hindu mythology Saraswati is the divine spouse of Brahma, the god of creation. **Goddess Saraswati** is the embodiment of the mighty **Saraswati River of the Vedas**. Saraswati means "the essence of one's own self." The Sanskrit word 'sara' means essence and 'swa' means 'self'. **She is the earliest goddess who is associated with a river in the Indian tradition**. She is the divine spouse of Lord Brahma, the creator. Since knowledge is necessary for creation, Saraswati symbolizes the creative power of Lord Brahma. She is also praised for her ability both to cleanse and fertilize the earth, and has been equated with the goddess of learning, poetry, music, and culture. She is associated with speech- Vac: the goddess of riverlike, streaming speech.



Saraswati - The goddess of learning

Saraswati is typically shown seated on a lotus. Like the swan, the lotus seat of the goddess suggests her transcendence of the physical world. She floats above the muddy imperfections of the physical world,

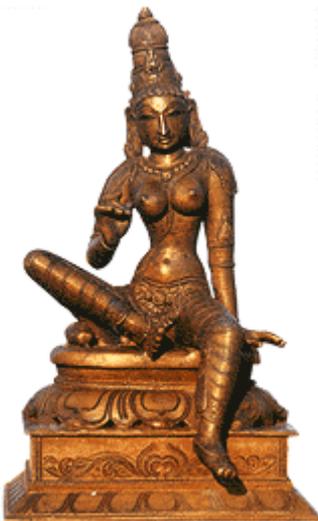
unsullied, pure, beautiful. Although rooted in the mud (like man rooted in the physical world), the lotus perfects itself in a blossom that has transcended the mud. She inspires people to live in such a way that they may transcend their physical limitations through the ongoing creation of culture. Goddess Saraswati is worshiped throughout India and on her special day in spring, Vasant Panchmi, she is worshipped by school children as the patron goddess of learning. The [Benaras Hindu University](#) was also founded on this day.

Saraswati Vandana is a beautiful poem to art, culture and spirituality. It is a praise of learning and among those who approved the singing of Vande Mataram at the Nagpur Congress was Mahatma Gandhi.

[Top of Page](#)

Goddess Shakti - Parvati/Durga

Shakti, the divine source from which all arises, is thought of as the 'wife' of Shiva. She has many mythological forms. Often she is simply Devi, 'the Goddess', or Mahadevi, 'the Great Goddess'. She is also Jagad Mata, 'World Mother'; Ambika, 'Gauri' 'Mother'; Uma, who nourishes the world; Parvati, the dutiful wife of Shiva, who seated high in the Himalayas by the side of her Lord represents the stability and continuity of life; the smiling and auspicious Lalita, especially worshipped in South India; the ceaselessly warring Durga; and Kali, the destroyer.



Parvati, which means "she who dwells in the mountains" or "she who is of the mountains" She is the mother of Kartikeya and Ganesha.

Durga -renowned slayer of demons, wife of Shiva personifying Shakti or divine energy.

It is Durga that the Goddess is most widely worshipped and it is she who most fully expresses the energy and complexity of Shakti. Her great festival, Durga Puja or Dussera, lasting for ten days, is an event of great importance. A Distinct group - that of the **Shaktas**, or worshippers of Shakti - center on her, is especially strong in Bengal. For them, the Goddess is the supreme deity, Brahman itself in feminine form. It is the third most popular group within Hinduism, giving place only to the worship of Vishnu and Shiva in importance. The name Durga indicates one who is 'hard to approach' and Durga is represented with a stern expression, suitable to the unswerving force which drives the universe. At once supremely beautiful and fierce, Durga rides upon a lion. She may be pictured with four, eight, ten or twenty arms, and in these she brandishes an impressive array of instruments and weapons - conch, discus, trident, bow, arrow, sword, dagger, serpent, mace and other objects. Each has its specific meaning, and taken together they express the ceaseless activity and complexity of Shakti.



She is first and foremost a slayer of demons. She is the goddess of warfare, and in medieval India military campaigns were commenced on the last day of her festival. In Bengal and some other areas blood sacrifices are made to Durga and to Kali, although, as the only blood sacrifices to survive in Hinduism, they are regarded with distaste by the majority of Hindus. Yet at the same time Durga is the all-merciful Mother who nourishes the universe and bestows both material and spiritual wealth. Full of tenderness to those who turn to her, she is greatly beloved by her devotees.

Kali is said to have come forth from the forehead of Durga. If Durga is the fierce side of the Mahadevi, Kali is her terrible aspect: She is represented with a hideous and terrible countenance, dripping with blood, encircled with snakes, hung round with skulls and human heads, and in all respects resembling a fury rather than a goddess.

Explanations are offered for the image, black color refers to her ultimate nature, which lies beyond manifestation and is therefore unknowable, the

cremation ground on which she is often shown dancing is where all worldly desires are burnt away, the necklace of severed heads is the universe of names and forms which she, as Shiva's power, creates and destroys; she is, as the name Kali suggests, **the destructive aspect of time**.

Kali is life, seen with all its dangers, bloodshed, suffering, fierce, competition, and inevitable destruction.

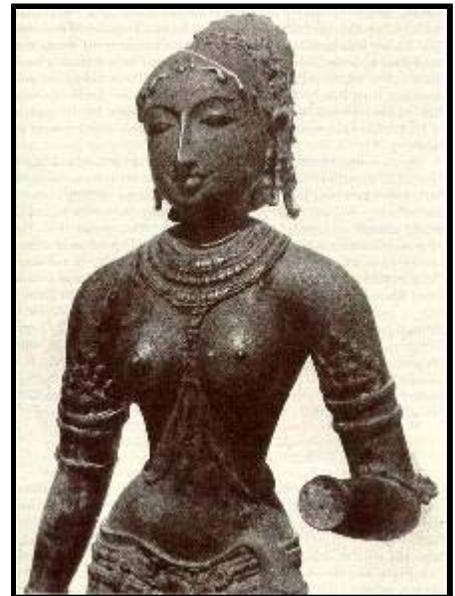
[Top of Page](#)

Goddess Lakshmi - Prosperity and well-being



The goddess Sri, who is also commonly known as Lakshmi and is the consort of Lord Vishnu.

She is associated with prosperity, well-being, royal power, and illustriousness. Lakshmi in the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses is personified as the goddess of fortune and also as the embodiment of loveliness, grace and charm. She is seated on a lotus flower though sometimes she is also seen as standing on a lotus. In pictures, gold coins are seen dropping down from the palms of this goddess of prosperity.



Sita

Her emergence in the world is connected with a famous episode in the Hindu myth called **Samudranmanthan** (Churning of the Cosmic ocean), when with great efforts, by churning, the ocean was made to give up all its treasures and benefits to the world. She is the most faithful companion of life, has always appeared as the life partner in every incarnation of Vishnu. When Vishnu assumes his various avatars in order to uphold dharma, she incarnates herself as helpmate, on earth. When Vishnu came as Vamana (the Dwarf), she came to earth as Lotus (Padma), when he came here as Parshuram, Lakshmi followed him as his wife Dhari, when Vishnu appeared as Rama, she came here as **Sita**, and when Vishnu appeared as Krishna, she came in two forms, first as Radha, and later as his wife Rukmini.

[Top of Page](#)

Symbols

Om - the sound of the universe itself.

**The imperishable sound
is the seed of all that exists.**

The past, the present, the future.

- all are but the unfolding of OM.

And whatever transcends the three realms of time.

That indeed is the flowering of OM.



For millennia, mystics have recounted their experience of this energy, which is said to manifest in our hearing awareness as a humming vibration around and within everything else. In the Sanskrit tradition, this sound is called "Anahata Nada," the "Unstruck Sound." So, sound that is *not* made of two things striking together is the sound of primal energy, **the sound of the universe itself**. And the ancients say that the audible sound which most resembles this un struck sound is the syllable OM. Tradition has it that this ancient mantra is composed of four elements: the first three are vocal sounds: A, U, and M. The fourth sound, unheard, is the *silence* which begins and ends the audible sound, the silence which surrounds it. There are several traditional and allegorical

interpretations of this ancient sound.

The loveliest explanation of OM is found within the ancient Vedic and Sanskrit traditions.

"Aum stands for the supreme Reality.
It is a symbol for what was, what is,
And what shall be. A U M represents also
What lies beyond past, present and future."

- **Mundakya Upanishad**

There is a Vedic verse as follows :

**Prajapati vai idam agra asit
Tasya vak dvitiya asit
Vag vai paramam Brahma**

"In the beginning was Prajapati, the Bramh with whom was the Word,
and the Word was verily the Supreme Bramh."

Omkar Prayers:

Om karam bindu samyuktham
Nityam dhyanathi Yoginah
Kamadam mokshadam chaiva, Omkaraya namo namah

Swastika - an auspicious symbol



is an auspicious symbol, an elaboration of the equal armed cross, but with the arms bent, hence also called the 'limbed cross'. Its name is said to be a combination of su (well) asti (is) ka (a noun ending) i.e., 'It is well.'

In Hinduism, the swastika is believed to be derived either from the wheel, symbolically reduced to four spokes and set at right angles to indicate the cardinal points, or from the two fire sticks of the Vedic sacrificial fire which were always set down in the form of a cross. As



a fire and sun symbol it was also called the fire cross or solar cross.

This symbol was well known among the ancients. The archaeological discoveries in Egypt; in Hissarlik, site of Homer's Troy; in China, Greece, Scandinavia, Scythia, Mexico and Peru have proved its

widespread usage.

The swastika symbol is supposed to be marked on the hood of the cobra, and is often associated with the heliolithic culture of snake-worshipping peoples such as the Nagas. It is a symbol of good luck, is often found stamped on various objects or used as motif for border designs on textiles. The rainy season is especially devoted to its honor in Maharashtra, when women draw swastikas on floors and worship them.

(source: [Gods and Goddesses of India - By Kailash Nath Seth and B. K. Chaturvedi](#) p. 180-181).

According to Belgium scholar, Koenraad Elst, in his book *Swastika Saffron*: "A good luck asana in yoga named swastikasana is sometimes assumed in meditation in the form of an enclosed as distinct from an outstretched cross. The swastika is and remains the symbol of auspiciousness, of the eternal Cosmic Law (rta). Indeed the swastika is an obvious symbol of cosmic cyclicality, hence of endlessness or eternity. Cyclicality is a luck force in that every decline brings the perspective of future revival, and that eternity lurks behind every fleeting phenomenon. It suggests that the world never started and will never end, that every cycle is preceded and followed by more cycles. For **Jains** even more than for the Hindus and Buddhists, the swastika is part of their identity: **a hand with a swastika on it is the official symbol of Jainism.**"

(source: [The Saffron Swastika - By Koenraad Elst](#) Voice of India ISBN 8185990697).

[Top of Page](#)

Conclusion

Hinduism is greatly misunderstood in the West. Most occidentals do not realize that Hinduism is a monotheistic belief in one God, who as Creator is beyond time, space and physical form. The entire pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses are merely symbolic representations of different attributes of the One, Unmanifested spirit.

Dr. S. Radhakrishnan has written: "From the beginning, India believed in the superiority of intuition or the method of direct perception of the supersensible to intellectual reasoning. **The Vedic rishis ' were the first who ever burst into the silent sea' of ultimate being and their utterances about what they saw and heard.** The **Kena Upanishad** says: "The eye does not go thither, nor speech nor mind. We do not know, we do not understand how one can teach it. It is different from the known, it is also above the unknown." Hindu thinkers are not content with the postulating a being unrelated to humanity, who is merely the Beyond, so far as the empirical world is concerned. From the beginnings of Hindu history, attempts are made to bring God closer to the needs of man. Though it is impossible to describe the ultimate reality, it is quite possible to indicate by means of symbols aspects of it, though the symbolic description is not a substitute for the experience of God."

(source: [The Legacy of India - ed. G.T. Garratt](#). p. 256 -286).

Hinduism created a different deity for each of God's numerous qualities to make God seem more real and approachable.

(source: [India Unveiled - By Robert Arnett](#) p. 8).

Fritjof Capra (1939-) the famous theoretical high-energy physicist has observed:

"The rich Indian imagination has created a vast number of gods and goddesses whose incarnations and exploits are the subjects of fantastic tales, collected in epics of huge dimensions. **The Hindu with deep insight knows that all these gods are creations of the mind, mythical images representing the many faces of reality.** On the other hand, he also knows that they were not merely created to make the stories more attractive, but are essential vehicles to convey the doctrines of a philosophy rooted in

mystical experience. The Ultimate reality called Brahman, is the unifying concept which gives Hinduism its essential monistic character in spite of the worship of numerous gods and goddesses.

(source: [The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels Between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism](#) - By Fritjof Capra p.43 and 87).



Image worship is a symbolic worship. It is the worship of supernatural realities through the symbols which are thought to represent them best. It is the translation for the present, of the infinite in terms of the finite, of the spiritual in terms of the material. A great pantheon of gods, goddesses, semi-divine beings and lesser deities unfolds in the countless myths of Hinduism which exist in numerous versions throughout Indian literature, particularly the Puranas and Epics. The myths present the collective wisdom of a timeless, anonymous and many-sided civilization and are much more than just fanciful 'biographies' of the gods. **Like the great philosophical systems of India, the myths of Hinduism, reveal the ultimate reality of the universe by giving symbolic expression to that which cannot be discursively expressed.**

(source: [The Hindu Temple](#) - By George Michell p. 20).

Mahatma Gandhi wrote in an essay published in 1921 in [Young India](#): "**Idol worship is part of human nature. We hanker after symbolism. Images are an aid to worship.**"

René Guénon (1886-1951) has pointed out: "In India, in particular, a symbolic image represents one or another of the 'divine attributes', which is called pratika, for it is neither an 'idol', nor does it take on any qualities from that thing which it really is, an aid to meditation and a supplementary means toward realization."

(source: [Introduction a l'étude des doctrine hindoues](#) - by René Guénon p. 209).

Hindus believe in the existence of one and only one Supreme Being (the Brahman of the Upanishads), but worship Him in various forms known as deities or gods (note small g). This worship of many deities (gods) is not polytheism, but monotheistic polytheism. The monotheistic Hindu pantheon is an affirmation that the Supreme Being can be known in many ways and worshipped in many forms. Hinduism recognizes the diversity of the human mind and the potential for a different level of spiritual development in each individual. Hinduism does not, therefore, throw everyone into the pigeonhole of a single creed. The [Mahabharata](#) declares:

"Just as the rain water that falls from the sky eventually reaches the ocean, so also all the worship

offered to Him, by whatever name you wish, or in whatever form you like, ultimately goes to the one ultimate, infinite, Supreme Reality."

(source: [The Hindu Mind - Fundamentals of Hindu Religion and Philosophy for All Ages - By Bansi Pandit](#) p. 37-38).

Huston Smith has said: "Enter Hinduism's myths, her magnificent symbols, her several hundred images of God, her rituals that keep turning night and day like never-ending prayer wheels. It is obtuse to confuse Hinduism's images with idolatry, and their multiplicity with polytheism. They are 'runways' from which the sense-laden human spirit can rise for its "flight of the alone to the Alone". Even village priest will frequently open their temple ceremonies with the following beloved invocation:

O Lord, forgive three sins that are due to my human limitations:
Thou art everywhere, but I worship you here;
Thou art without form, but I worship you in these forms;
Thou needest no praise, yet I offer you these prayers and salutations,
Lord, forgive three sins that are due to my human limitations.

(source: [The World's Religions - By Huston Smith](#) p. 34).

Diane L. Eck observes: "Hinduism is an imaginative, an "image-making, religious tradition in which the sacred is seen as present in the visible world – the world we see in multiple images and deities, in sacred places, and in people. The notion of darsan call attention as students of Hinduism, to the fact that India is a visual and visionary culture. God is eminently visible, although human beings have not always had the refinement of sight to see. Furthermore, the divine is visible not only in temple and shrine, bit also in the whole continuum of life – in nature, in people, in birth and growth and death. Although some Hindus, both philosophers and radical reformers, have always used the terms "nirguna"(quality-less) and nirakara (formless) to speak of the One Bramh. Yet the same tradition has simultaneously affirmed that Bramh is also saguna (with qualities) and that the multitude of "names and forms" of this world are the exuberant transformations of the One Bramh. Hinduism is sensuous in that it makes full use of the senses – seeing, touching, smelling, tasting and hearing. One "sees" the image of the deity (darsan). One "touches" it with one's hands (sparsa), and one also "touches" the limbs of one's own body to establish the presence of various deities (nyasa). One "hears" the sacred sound of the mantras (sravana). The ringing of bells, the offering of oil lamps, the presentation of flowers, the pouring of water and milk, the sipping of sanctified liquid offerings, the eating of consecrated foods- prasad – these are the basic constituents of Hindu worship, Puja.

(source: [Darsan - Seeing the Divine Image in India - By Diane L. Eck](#) p. 10 - 12).

Huston Smith says: "Its all together wrong to think that the images are idols as though the copper itself is being worshipped – **they are reminders that the God who dwells in the depth of our souls.** Wherever an alter is raised, there is the center of the universe. The world's axis passes through it, yet no visible alter is no more than a symbol for the one time alter – the human heart and to say the cosmic axis pierces it is to say that it is in direct touch with the infinite. **Man is not just made in the image of God – He is God.** It is difficult for us to fathom the sheer immensity of the Self of notion involved. When we see ritual acts being performed they look like they are directed at some far of celestial potentate – and so they doubtlessly appear to the beginning of the journey – but further along they begin to look like chemical formulae – **a science of transformation to awaken us to the realms of gold that lies buried in our depths** – for we are kings who have fallen victim to amnesia and wander through our kingdom in tatters not knowing who we truly are."

(source: [The Mystic's Journey - India and the Infinite: The Soul of a People – By Huston Smith](#)).

[Top of Page](#)



Did You Know?

Antiquities from Indian shore - stolen heritage The richness of Hindu iconography

Fifty-four years past India's independence, Britain continues to be the largest market for precious artifacts leaving the country illegally

Indian temple towns are also an ideal hunting ground for antiquities, where the temple priests are often the chief collaborators. **The panchadhaatu (five metals: gold, zinc, copper, silver, and iron) idols of the gods and goddesses, which are in high demand in the underground markets, are quietly replaced by fakes and taken through the quickest route out of the country.** The theft is rarely discovered because no one but the priest ever goes inside the sanctum sanctorum of the temple.



Tandav: Shiva and the pose of death

"The real enemy is the massive poverty and ignorance at home combined with the high prices that items such as **Chola bronzes** command abroad. Often foreigners, who are likely to be more aware of the true value of antiquities than the impoverished villagers who live near archaeological sites, are involved in the thefts," says Dr D. K. Sinha, retired director of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).

"It is possible that many idols that are now in the temples of Tamil Nadu may be fake, with the originals having long been spirited away", says M Ram, the superintendent of the antiquities wing of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). Sinha agrees: "Theft or disappearance of ornaments used on deities are not uncommon and simply cannot happen without the knowledge of priests, many of whom consider it their sole right to dispose off temple property".

In one of the uncommon discoveries of such a theft at **Kondhali's 200-year old Taka Deosthan temple**, a devotee who looked into the sanctum sanctorum found the idols of the gods missing.

In the rare case when thefts or sale of stolen artifacts are traced, winning court cases become difficult. Sale often is organized through reputed and powerful institutions such as **Sotheby's**, which conducts a thriving trade in Indian antiquities. (In fact, the CBI has been taking a close look at the activities of agents for Sotheby's who have been scouring the Indian countryside with the connivance of Indian art smugglers for items for their famed auctions.)

However, there are reports of idols that have returned home from sojourns - reports which evoke hope among those concerned about the fate of Indian antiquities. **In one instance, a Nataraja stolen from the Easwaran temple in the Tiruvilakkudi village, Thanjavur, in 1978, was traced with the help of Interpol to the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas and returned to its sacred seat.**

Three ancient idols were found missing from the 13th century **Sri Jagannath temple in Puri** on Sunday, temple administration sources said. One of the missing idols was that of Lord Madan Mohan. The two-feet high idol, made of *Astadhatu* (eight metals) are regarded as a representative of Lord Jagannath have been just recovered.

(source: [Antiquities from Indian shore - Hindustan Times](#) and [rediff.com](#)
<http://www.rediff.com/news/2001/nov/12puri.htm>).



[Top of Page](#)

[home](#)

symbolism in Hinduism

[contents](#)

Copyright © 2001 - All Rights Reserved.

[Guest Book](#)

Updated - September 7, 2005