

The Hindu Pantheon

The Hindu Pantheon

An Introduction
Illustrated with 19th Century Indian Miniatures
from the St Petersburg Collection

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Introduction

Hindu life and belief is rooted in a mythology of gods and goddesses. The origins and adventures of the members of the pantheon, in their myriad and mutating forms, are the source of Hindu philosophy, religious practice and social behaviour.

It is an ancient, vast and varied mythology, which has changed across historical eras and geographical regions. Deities have their origins in different cultures that have gradually coalesced and, across time, the gods themselves have undergone vast shifts in role and importance.

The myths, and the divinities themselves, embrace all aspects of experience: creation and destruction, benevolence and terror, love and rage; orderly Vishnu (18, 20, 24–44) contrasts with anarchistic Shiva (22, 46–58). The mythology works at many levels: sometimes combined with local folk beliefs it provides simple personifications of natural phenomena, teaches moral lessons, explains the creation of the universe; at the other extreme it offers sophisticated theories of matter, energy, time and space.

The earliest written sources for Hindu mythology are the *Vedas*. These texts were composed by an invading people, known as Aryans, who came to India from Central Asia in the centuries before 1500 BC. They were unwilling and slow to assimilate with the existing inhabitants, so the Vedic writings express the views of a ruling elite. The first and mythologically most significant of the four *Vedas* is the *Rigveda*, which contains hymns to deities of the period

(c. 1400 BC). Other Vedic texts include the *Brahmanas*, with important mythical narratives. Over years, however, the composition of the pantheon altered and, by the time the *Upanishads* were written (c. 1000–500 BC), the gods of the *Rigveda* had been pushed into the background by a more philosophical concept of a universal God, known as Prajapati.

The subsequent classical period, from c. 500 BC to c. 1000 AD, produced the most significant literature, philosophy and the organisation of the major sects (of Vishnu and of Shiva). The mythology grew further away from its Aryan beginnings, and incorporated non-Vedic and also folk elements. Subject matter of the mythology expanded from the ritual focus of the *Vedas* to the wide sweep of the epics, the *Mahabharata* (including the famous *Bhagavadgita*) and the *Ramayana*, and to the *Puranas*, a sort of sacred encyclopaedia. Goddesses had always been revered by ordinary people for their nature and fertility powers, and had characterised Indian religion before the Aryan influx – however, they had been neglected in the earlier literature. Now, though, they began to feature prominently. Mother goddess cults contributed to Shaktism, the worship of the creative feminine principle in its multiple guises: the goddess Shakti (46, 48, 60–72) was elevated to higher status to be a consort of Shiva. The animal deities of the original inhabitants of India now turned into mainstream divinities – Hanuman the monkey god (74) and elephant-headed Ganesha (12, 14), for instance. What is more, the functions of individual gods changed to

Note: numbers in italics are page references

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reflect the different perspective. Indra, for example, was the leading deity, God of War, in the *Rigveda*. Yet now his more everyday role as a rain god was emphasised, and his status diminished, while that of rival divinities increased.

Chief among the Hindu gods who grew in status were Vishnu (18, 20, 24-44) and Shiva (22, 46-58). These two gods had appeared in the *Vedas* in relatively minor capacities (with Shiva referred to by the name of Rudra) but during the classical period they went on to be elevated, with Brahma (16), a somewhat conceptual deity, to form the great Hindu triad (*trimurti*): Brahma the Creator; Vishnu the Preserver; Shiva the Destroyer. The mythology of Vishnu and Shiva is extensive and complex, as befits their positions.

Vishnu is believed to have had a number of incarnations (or avatars, usually ten, 24-42), when he descended to Earth in time of crisis to act as saviour. These avatars were in the form of animals (Turtle, Boar, etc.) or humans (Dwarf, Krishna, Buddha). One incarnation of Vishnu is yet to come: Kalkin will descend at the end of the present era to usher in the Golden Age.

Vishnu, the highly socialised keeper of law and order and friend to mankind, is the antithesis of the unpredictable, ascetic and antisocial Shiva. Shiva represents the wild forces of nature and his many aspects (known as manifestations) can be broadly categorised as either benevolent or horrific. His anger is expressed in the shape of the

many terrifying Bhairavas (50-58) and also, in female form, by the fierce aspects (Durga and Kali are the best known) of his consort (64-72).

In India, to this day, Vaishnavite and Shaivite religious movements are (together with Shaktism) predominant, each ascribing supreme status to their chosen deity. The distribution of religious affiliations follows a geographical pattern. Broadly speaking: in the North, Shaivism and Shaktism are predominant; in the East and Northeast the main movement is Shaktism (and some Vaishnavism); in the West, it is Vaishnavism; in the South, Shaivism and devotional Vaishnavism (and worship of village female deities) dominate.

A number of traditions associated with Hindu divinities and their artistic representation are shown in the pictures from the album. Certain objects (called attributes) generally appear within the image of many gods and goddesses, often, but not necessarily, held in the deity's hand. Vishnu has the lotus, for example, while Ganesha has among his attributes a bowl of sweets. Each attribute has a symbolic meaning, which may range from the sublime to the trivial: whereas Vishnu's lotus signifies both power and the whole world, Ganesha's sweets simply mark the fact that he is a fat little god with a large appetite.

Gods and goddesses also have symbolic mounts (or vehicles, *vahanas*) upon which they ride. Shiva has the white bull Nandi (connected with fertility, and probably

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stemming from an ancient pre-Aryan bull cult, 22, 46), while Vishnu rides the mythical bird Garuda (originally a sun deity, 76). On a lower and more obvious level, the river goddesses Ganga and Yamuna (92, 94) ride on fishes.

The Hindu gods and goddesses are regarded and depicted as royalty, living in lavish court environments with retinues of servants. In many ways they act like people, with spouses and children, their activities and emotions very human. However, with their energies seen as presiding over certain realms within the universe, the gods' deeds have eternal and immeasurable significance in the cosmos. This explains the infinite importance of deities' participation in mythological events and the reason for their artistic representation.

Hinduism has a fluid and accommodating religious structure. The orthodoxy of belief in the Vedic gods merged with the pre-existing crowd of deities in a dynamically developing system still in evolution. By accretion, aspects of Prajapati (Creator) and Agni (Fire, 80) have been absorbed by Shiva, and those of the once-mighty Indra (War and Rain) by Vishnu. Divinities are not strictly defined, to the extent that they are often syncretic (that is, made up of more than one deity). Ardhanarishvara (48), for instance, is half Shiva and half his wife Parvati, thus symbolising male and female unity and interdependence. More extreme, Harihara is half Vishnu and half Shiva, truly the union of opposites. On a deeply philosophical level, the intense polytheism of

Hinduism ultimately becomes reduced to a theoretical monotheism: the One God with a Thousand Faces.

Indian astrology

The practice of astrology is thought to have originated in Mesopotamia in the Near East in c. 1000 BC. Some Mesopotamian literature on celestial omens reached India in the fifth century BC, and in the thirteenth century AD Arabic versions of similar Mesopotamian works arrived via Persian translations.

However, astrological knowledge was predominantly transmitted from the ancient Greeks in the second and third centuries AD via several Sanskrit translations. In the process the astrological literature lost its Greek philosophical structure but the techniques remained much the same, with Indian modifications to make them more applicable to the local situation. Thus, in India astrology dealt with the caste system, reincarnation, and other elements of Hindu life, while various technical elaborations were added.

The astrological pictures in the album show the remarkable similarity between the Indian and Western systems, while illustrating the ways in which astrology has been assimilated with Hinduism and its deities.

i n t r o d u c t i o n

A note on the paintings

The miniature paintings illustrating this book come from the oriental manuscripts collection in the Institute of Oriental Studies, St Petersburg. The 65 pictures are found in a two-volume album devoted to the Hindu pantheon. The two volumes contain 32 and 33 miniatures, respectively. There is unfortunately no information on the history of the album. It has a black leather cover in European style, bearing the words 'Hindoo Mythology' and may have been bound while in the ownership of an English lover of traditional Indian painting.

The style of the paintings implies a nineteenth-century origin in Jaipur, Rajasthan. Here an artistic influence of Mughal derivation was current, characterised by rather flat drawing and stiff, round-faced figures. The paintings are not signed but most appear to have been painted, in tempera, by the same artist (44 and 98 are exceptions – they are slightly cruder in technique). He displays skilful use of colour, minute attention to detail, humanisation of remote mythical personages, direct expression of feeling, and sound knowledge of the mythology of the *Ramayana* and *Puranas*.

The artist has broadly followed the traditions of Hindu religious painting in order to express the accepted view of the pantheon and the place and role of deities in the universe. The canonical rules for the representation of gods and goddesses were

described in the *Puranas* from c. 500 AD. Special instructions for depicting gods, demons, kings, etc. are found in the *Chitralakshana* (Treatise on Painting) and rules for colour schemes and sets of attributes in the *Shilpashastras* (Treatises on Art).

The paintings bear bilingual inscriptions, in Sanskrit (not entirely accurate) and in Persian (from the Mughal tradition). The original purchaser may have been Hindu, although sets of pictures of deities and mythological figures were also popular with European collectors and travellers.

The size of each miniature (around 13 x 20 cm) means that they were not intended to illustrate a manuscript. They succeed in forming an integral series devoted primarily to three principal deities – Vishnu, Shiva and Shakti (in the form of Mahadevi).

For clarity, this book does not follow the order of the paintings as arranged by the compiler of the album (a list with the original numbering appears at the back). However, both this publication and the two volumes of the original album open, in the traditional fashion, with Ganesha, patron of beginnings and of the arts.

t h e h i n d u p a n t h e o n

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Volume 1

1. Ganesha
2. Vishnu and Lakshmi
3. Brahma
4. Shiva
5. Sarasvati
6. Narada
7. Narayana and Lakshmi
8. Garuda
9. Hanuman
10. Kama
11. Kandarpa
12. Ardhanarishvara
13. Shankara and Gauri
14. Karttikeya
15. Mahadevi
16. Durga
17. Chinnamasta
18. Kali
19. Bhuvaneshvari
20. Bhairavi
21. Tara
22. Varuna
23. Ganga
24. Yamuna
25. Kalabhairava
26. Batukabhairava
27. Tamracudabhairava
28. Chandracudabhairava
29. Planetary deities
30. Mahakalabhairava
31. Agni
32. Yama

Volume 2

33. Ganesha
34. Matsya
35. Kurma
36. Varaha
37. Narasimha
38. Vamana
39. Parashurama
40. Rama
41. Krishna
42. Buddha
43. Kalkin
44. Footprints of Vishnu
45. Mesha
46. Vrisha
47. Mithuna, the Pair of Lovers
48. Karka
49. Kanya
50. Simha
51. Tula
52. Vrishchika
53. Dhanus
54. Makara
55. Kumbha, the Jug
56. Mina, the Fish
57. Surya
58. Chandra
59. Mangala
60. Budha
61. Brihaspati
62. Shukra
63. Shani
64. Rahu
65. Ketu