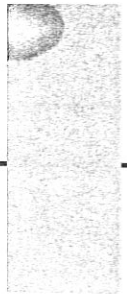


e. "Hinduism has no single prophet, and it demands ideas add to the confusion."<sup>18</sup> one another over whose best. Instead, Hinduism is g religions and accommodis because all Hindus actu- e, divine being or force that s force Brahman, and they nonliving, come from and

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## Hindu Gods and Goddesses

**M**ost historians consider Hinduism the world's oldest living religion—one that people still believe in and practice. "No world civilization has been as continuous as that of India," says Bansi Pandit, a writer and speaker on Hinduism. "Hindu civilization has not only survived the onslaughts of time, but also is as vibrant today as ever before."<sup>20</sup> On timelines of human history, Hindu beliefs appear earlier than significant events of most other modern religions, such as the birth of Jesus Christ for Christianity or the coming of the Prophet Muhammad for Muslims.

The Hindu concept of time, however, is not a straight line. Hindus envision most things—from the universe to time itself—as part of a cycle. They believe the universe was created long ago and will eventually be destroyed, but these are not one-time events. Much as the earth's seasons come and go, this cycle of destruction and re-creation will continue forever. "The Vedas teach that creation is without beginning or end and appears in eternal cycles of creation and dissolution,"<sup>21</sup> Pandit says.

Life, according to Hindu teachings, follows a similar pattern. Birth and death are not end points on a straight line but part of a recurring process of living, dying, and being reborn. Hindus believe in reincarnation, the idea that after a physical

body dies, the soul or spirit that inhabited it can be reborn into another body. These two beliefs—that the universe is repeatedly created and destroyed and that a soul can take many physical forms—help explain how Hindus can believe in Brahman, a single spiritual force or divine being that controls the world, and simultaneously accept the existence of many gods as different forms of Brahman.

In the Hindu worldview, the divine being appears in unlimited ways. “If one were to count all the minor spirits of only local importance as well as the major deities, one could come up with a thousand gods and goddesses at least,” says religion professor James B. Robinson. “Hinduism’s divine beings are everywhere.”<sup>22</sup> These spiritual forms of god have different personalities, talents, and abilities to reflect all the different aspects and capabilities of Brahman.

Hindus also believe that Brahman, the overall divine being, has three primary purposes in the cycle of the universe—to create the world, preserve the peace and prosperity of that world, and destroy the world so the process can start again. These three main roles lead to the Hindu Trimurti, the three major forms Brahman takes in the Hindu belief system: the creator, the preserver, and the destroyer. These are the gods (or the forms of god) at the center of Hindu mythology, and it is from these three that most other Hindu deities take their own forms in the world.

### **Brahma, the Creator**

Brahma is one of the major Hindu classifications of Brahman. The two have similar names, but they are not the same thing. Brahman is the ultimate force present in all things in the world, whereas Brahma is just one form of that force. Brahma is the creator god, the one who made the current world as people know it.

Brahma, like all Hindu gods, is given a human-like image so people can picture him. He is usually shown as a man with four heads and four bearded faces, symbolizing a mature and wise being who watches over all four directions of the world he created. Brahma’s heads also stand for the four Vedas, the most sacred texts of the Hindu religion, which were created by Brahma because he knows the origins of everything.

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*Hindus believe in Brahman, a single spiritual force or divine being that created and controls the world, while simultaneously accepting the existence of many gods, whom they see as different forms of Brahman.*

Brahma also has four (or sometimes more) arms, as do most Hindu deities, symbolizing the many special powers he possesses. His hands hold objects that help him in his role as creator, such as a bowl of holy water, a string of prayer beads, and a book or scroll to symbolize the Vedas. In many images he also grasps a spoon to represent the act of pouring oil onto a pyre—a pile of flammable material—to purify a body during Hindu funeral ceremonies, which are meant to send a soul forward to begin a new life. Brahma also may

hold a lotus flower, a symbol of purity in Hinduism. Like most of the Hindu gods, Brahma is usually shown with an animal companion—a swan or a white goose that represents knowledge and wisdom.

Brahma is often referred to as the father god. Hindus believe he was the creator not only of the world but of the first human. However, Hindus hardly worship Brahma. One reason is that he has already fulfilled his main role and has little left to do. “Brahma seems to have been thrown into the shade probably because in Hindu mind he has ceased to function actively after creation of the world,”<sup>23</sup> say Hinduism researchers Kailash Nath Seth and B.K. Chaturvedi. Brahma is in a period of rest until the world needs to be created again, so Hindus spend more time worshipping gods who are still active in the world.

Another reason Brahma is less popular than other gods is that he sometimes gives help and favors to characters who later use their new powers to become villains in popular



*Brahma is often referred to as the father god. Hindus believe he created the world and the first human.*

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Hindu stories. “It is more than a coincidence that all the deadly demons . . . received their boons from Brahma which made them singularly notorious in damaging the noble virtues of the world,”<sup>24</sup> say Seth and Chaturvedi. Brahma creates all things in the universe—not just good things but also situations that lead to evil. Such evil is necessary, because without strong villains to fight, mythical Hindu heroes would never accomplish their great victories. Nevertheless, Brahma’s often unwitting role in aiding characters who go on to become evil has made him among the least popular of the Hindu gods.

### Vishnu, the Preserver

The second member of the three-part Hindu Trimurti is far more significant to most Hindus than Brahma. Once Brahma created the current world, someone had to look after it. That is the role of the god Vishnu, the world’s protector and preserver. Among Vishnu’s most important responsibilities is to keep a balance between good and evil. He is known for mercy and helps rescue people from the effects of their errors and sins. “Vishnu is one of the most popular Hindu gods today,” says Hindu art and symbolism expert T. Richard Blurton. “His devotees believe that at times of spiritual and political decline, he appears on earth as a saviour, guiding erring mankind, benefitting them with an outpouring of his love.”<sup>25</sup>

Vishnu is considered an all-powerful and all-knowing deity. He is typically shown with blue skin, since Hindus think of him as being everlasting and existing everywhere, like the sky or the ocean. Images of Vishnu often have three vertical lines painted on the forehead to show that he is one of the Trimurti.

Like Brahma, Vishnu is shown with four or sometimes more arms. In his hands are objects that stand for his most important roles in the world. In one hand Vishnu holds a white lotus flower, symbolizing purity. In another he holds

## Mystical Lyrics

George Harrison, lead guitarist of the 1960s rock band the Beatles, had a deep interest in Hinduism. In 1970 he independently wrote and recorded the song “My Sweet Lord” for Krishna and Rama and named both these human forms of the god Vishnu in the lyrics.

*Once Brahma created the current world, someone had to look after it. That is the role of the god Vishnu (shown), the world's protector and preserver.*



a white conch shell, an item that is important to Hindus on many levels but especially because of the humming sound it makes when someone blows through it. Conch shells were used in ancient India to signal the beginnings and ends of battles, and warriors blew through a conch when they were victorious. Hindus also believe the conch makes the sound of the world being created, a sound they know as “om” and often hum during prayers or religious chants. Hindus believe the sound of the conch can ward off evil spirits or save peo-



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ple from disasters. Many of Vishnu’s followers believe the conch’s sound may even be the breath of the god himself.

Vishnu also carries weapons that he uses to protect the world from evil. In one hand he holds a golden discus, a flat, razor-edged disk that represents the shining power of the mind and also the circular nature of the universe. In another hand he holds a golden club or mace, or sometimes a bow and arrows, all of which represent physical force and power. Vishnu can be a fierce warrior and may use his weapons to fight demons and uphold righteousness.

Vishnu’s animal companion is Garuda, a mythical being with the head, wings, and talons of an eagle but the body, arms, and legs of a man. According to Hindu stories, kind-hearted Garuda weighs so much that he snaps the branches off trees. Vishnu’s arm, however, is mighty enough to hold him. The two are friends and companions, and images of Vishnu often show him riding Garuda.

Artists also depict Vishnu reclining on the coils of a serpent, often while riding ocean waves. In Hindu mythology serpents often represent the desire for material things like wealth. Such desires distract people from the ultimate goal of Hinduism, which is to disconnect from the material world and find spiritual peace. When Vishnu stands or sits on a serpent, he represents the power to help his followers overcome their dependence on material things, which can be a source of unhappiness in life.

### Shiva, the Destroyer

The third major function of Brahman is death and destruction, and this role is embodied by Shiva, the final god of the Trimurti. Shiva’s ultimate role is to destroy what Brahma created and what Vishnu protects. To non-Hindus, it may seem as though Shiva would be a fearsome deity and an enemy of Brahma and Vishnu, since his job is to take away life when theirs is to create or protect it. However, Hindus believe that just as the changing seasons bring death to aging plants in the fall so they can bloom colorfully in spring, Shiva’s destructive nature allows the whole world to be refreshed.

Hindus revere Shiva rather than dread him. In fact, his name means “fortunate or gracious.” He is a necessary and

much celebrated part of the Trimurti, for without him, Hindus would have no hope of getting a fresh start. “He is repulsive as well as attractive,” says Hindu religion professor Diana L. Eck. “He destroys as well as creates; he wounds and yet he heals. His many weapons . . . make Shiva dangerous and destructive as well as comforting and protective.”<sup>26</sup>

Images of Shiva show him in different forms and doing different activities, but he is easy to recognize because of his long, matted hair, often wound into a knot on top of his head. The hair symbolizes the forces of wind that Hindus associate with the breath of life. Shiva wears a crescent moon on his forehead, because the moon’s cycles mimic death and rebirth. He is usually shown wearing only a loincloth, the typical dress of an ascetic—someone who has given up the material world in favor of spiritual meditation.

Shiva’s body is often covered in ash to represent fire, the method he usually uses to destroy things. He has a third eye in the middle of his forehead, symbolizing that he can see the past, present, and future. This eye remains closed except when Shiva encounters things that displease him. He then opens his extra eye, and flame shoots out to destroy anything in his path. Shiva carries a trident, a weapon with three prongs that stand for the Trimurti, which he can also use to destroy evil with fire. Like Vishnu, he usually has three lines on his forehead to show he is one of the Trimurti.

Shiva usually carries or sits on a tiger skin and has one or more cobras wrapped around his neck to demonstrate his power over fearsome creatures. His animal companion is a white bull named Nandi, who symbolizes snow-covered mountains but also bodily impulses. When Shiva rides Nandi, he shows that he dominates both of those things.

Shiva is a god with a complicated personality. At times he is shown sitting with one leg crossed over the other and his eyes closed, deep in silent meditation and rubbing prayer beads in one of his hands. At other times Shiva dances happily in a ring of flames as he celebrates the destruction of the world. While dancing, he is often shown playing a drum that represents the cyclical rhythm of life and death.

Despite his ruinous reputation, Shiva has a good side. He has been known to help preserve and protect the world if



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## A River's Fall from Heaven

Rivers have enormous importance to the people of India, and the most sacred of all the subcontinent's rivers is the Ganges. Hindus revere it not just as a river but as a goddess, Ganga. Myths tell how the Ganges, along with India's other rivers, originally existed in the heavens. When the world was created, the soil was parched. Seeing that the world needed

flowing water, the gods decided to release Ganga from the heavens. They knew she would cause tremendous flooding if she poured down all at once, however. Their solution was for Shiva to catch Ganga in his long, matted hair and release the water a little at a time. This is why images of Shiva often show him with water flowing from his head.

As with most Hindu myths, this one is meaningful on different levels. Shiva is the god who can destroy the whole world, usually with fire. Ganga, herself a powerful force who perpetually flows from Shiva's hair, helps dampen his fiery personality, just as water soothes and cools. The story is meant to be symbolic more than historically accurate, helping people understand that everything in nature—even destructive forces like water and fire—works to balance other things and can therefore be helpful and protective.

Myths about Ganga have some scientific meaning behind them, as well. She is considered one of the daughters of the god of the Himalayas, which is where the Ganges River originates. She embodies the Hindu understanding that rivers are born in the mountains.



*The important River Ganges in India is recognized by Hindus as the goddess Ganga (shown).*

it is not time to destroy it. Some images of Shiva show him with a blue stain on his throat, because of a story that he once drank poison out of the ocean to save the world. Shiva usually is shown with one empty hand, which he extends in front of him as a sign that he will protect and bless those who worship him. "He bestows grace," says Eck, "revealing his mercy to his devotees."<sup>27</sup>



*This statue represents the preserver (Vishnu), one god of the Trimurti, or triple form, which also includes the creator (Brahma) and destroyer (Shiva).*

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## Hindu Goddesses

Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva all represent different aspects of Brahman, but Hindus believe the divine being has no gender. “Brahman is neither female nor male but is beyond gender and indeed is beyond description or comprehension by humans,”<sup>28</sup> say religion professors Lynn Foulston and Stuart Abbott. Since males and females are equally important to life and are balanced in the natural world, Hindus believe they must be balanced within Brahman as well. Thus, each of the Trimurti gods relies on feminine power, called *Shakti*, to blend with and balance his male power. “The energy of *Shakti* manifests itself as a goddess,” says Priya Hemenway, an expert on Eastern religions. “It is the complement of the male energy of the triad and is inseparable from it.”<sup>29</sup>

To Hindus the Trimurti gods depend on their goddesses, also known as their consorts, just as all life on earth depends equally on females and males. “Without *Shakti*,” Hemenway says, “the gods are nonexistent.”<sup>30</sup> Each goddess, like each god, is revered by Hindus and represented in a human form with symbols that stand for her special powers or abilities.

### Goddess of the Arts

Brahma’s consort is the goddess Saraswati. Just as Brahma is believed to have created the first humans, he also created Saraswati from his own body. She is a beautiful goddess, and Hindu legends tell how Brahma was so infatuated with her that he annoyed her by staring at her too much. This is another explanation for why Brahma is usually shown with multiple heads—he is always looking for Saraswati.

As the consort of the god of creation, Saraswati is the goddess of creativity. She represents knowledge, learning, speech, and creative activities like art and music. “All the Indian goddesses are connected to creativity,” says spiritual philosophy teacher Sally Kempton. “But Saraswati is the one whose cosmic function it is to embody the creative flow through language, speech, and sound.”<sup>31</sup> Hindu artists, poets, musicians, and craftspeople consider Saraswati their muse, and students pray to her for good fortune on tests.

*Hindu artists, poets, musicians, and craftspeople consider Saraswati their muse, and students pray to her for help on tests.*



Saraswati is elegantly dressed in white. She is often shown sitting on a lotus flower to represent pure thoughts and brilliance. One of her four hands holds a book that stands for learning and knowledge, and another usually holds a string of prayer beads. Her two remaining hands clasp a veena, a stringed musical instrument similar to a lute. The veena is one of the most important musical instruments of India, and Saraswati plays it to show her creative role in the Hindu world.

Goddesses, like gods, have favorite animal companions, and Saraswati's are birds. She is most often shown with a swan to mirror her own grace and beauty. A peacock may



She is often shown with four arms. Her upper right hand holds a string of pearls, her upper left hand holds a lotus flower, her lower right hand holds a string of pearls, and her lower left hand holds a lotus flower. The veena is a musical instrument of India, and she is often shown with a peacock.

Her animal companions, often shown with a peacock.

also accompany Saraswati, reminding her followers to seek and appreciate beautiful things.

## Goddess of Wealth and Prosperity

The goddess Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu the preserver, represents wealth and protection against misfortune. To Hindus, riches—in the form of money and belongings but also family, friends, and overall happiness—are necessary for life. Lakshmi helps Vishnu sustain the world by providing people with material things they need to prosper and be content. She is one of the best-loved Hindu deities and is especially popular among businesspeople. “Her image is everywhere, associated with wealth, prosperity, good fortune,” says women’s spirituality expert Karen Tate. “Practitioners who honor . . . Lakshmi with songs, chants, and meditation believe she is generous in her boons.”<sup>32</sup>

Lakshmi is usually shown wearing a red gown with gold trim and gold accessories. The gold symbolizes wealth and prosperity, and red is the color of activity—Lakshmi bestows good fortune on people who work hard to earn it. One of her four hands usually pours a shower of coins. Like many gods, she holds lotus flowers in one or more hands and is often shown sitting or standing on a lotus flower to represent that her followers should have pure, unselfish thoughts and not be undone by greed. In fact, Hindus believe Lakshmi withholds blessings, wealth, and prosperity from those who do not work hard or share their good fortune with others. “Though Lakshmi answers prayers, her gifts won’t stay with you if you don’t practice embodying her qualities—generosity, loving-kindness, balance, carefulness, unselfishness, gratitude, and the more mundane qualities like discipline, cleanliness, and order,”<sup>33</sup> Kempton says.

Lakshmi is usually accompanied by one or more elephants that hold jugs of water or spray water from their trunks. Hindus revere elephants, believing they symbolize good luck and prosperity. Elephants are also associated with

## Passionate Pilgrims

The Balaji Temple in the south India city of Tirupati is believed to host more visitors than any Hindu temple in the world. An estimated twenty-five thousand people go to the temple every day. It has six thousand staff members.

rain. Water is sacred in India because without it, food crops cannot grow and people go hungry. The water-spraying elephants that accompany Lakshmi are signs of nourishment and having plenty of the material things people need to survive. Hindus believe that when they worship Lakshmi, she and her elephants will shower them with good fortune.

### The Mother Goddess

Of all the Hindu goddesses, Parvati, the consort of the destroyer god Shiva, is thought to be the most powerful. In fact, many Hindus consider Parvati the mother goddess, the source of all other goddesses. Much the way the Trimurti gods are thought to be aspects of the same divine being, Hindus often think of the goddesses Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Parvati as one being: the triple goddess, source of all feminine energy in the universe. Shiva is perfectly balanced by the feminine qualities of Parvati, who helps soften his often fierce impulses. "She is a great force for preservation and reconstruction in the world and as such offsets the violence of Shiva,"<sup>34</sup> says religion professor David R. Kinsley.

According to Hindu myths, Parvati started life as a human. She was born in the Himalayas, and her name comes from the word *parvata*, meaning "mountain." Shiva spends most of his time in the mountains meditating, and one day Parvati saw him and fell in love with him. She was determined to marry him, despite his wild appearance and ways. For a long time he ignored her, but she finally won him over by meditating and praying nonstop to show her devotion.

Parvati encourages Shiva to take part in society and have fun. Shiva's lively dances are one result of their marriage. Hindus sometimes dread his dancing, which can be so energetic that it shakes the earth and oceans, but they believe Parvati helps mellow his emotions and minimize his destructive enthusiasm. A loyal wife, Parvati rarely leaves Shiva's side. Images of her usually show her next to Shiva, often with one of their children on her lap or nearby. She symbolizes female qualities that are important to Hindus, such as being a gentle, loving, and devoted nurturer.

There is much more to Parvati's personality than just dotting on her family, however. Hindus believe gods and god-



## Religion in Bloom

Many Hindu myths mention the lotus, a type of water lily that grows in Africa, South Asia, and Australia. The lotus has roots in the mud at the bottom of a stream, lake, or pond, but its blooms, which may be pink, blue, or pure white, rest on the water's surface. To Hindus, a lotus blossom represents the soul. A person's body comes from a muddy, soiled world, but the spirit remains pure and clean as it emerges from murkiness and reaches toward heaven.

Images of Hindu gods often show them holding lotuses or sitting on them.

According to myth, Brahma, the creator god, emerged from a lotus plant that grew from the navel of Vishnu, the preserver god. Pictures of Vishnu or his human avatars often show him with skin the color of the blue lotus.

Hinduism is not the only religion to give the lotus a special meaning. This flower has a place of honor in Buddhism, for example, and ancient Egyptians also revered it. For Hindus, as for these other cultures, the lotus is a sacred symbol connecting earth to heaven.

goddesses can take many forms, and Parvati readily branches off into alternate personalities. In one of her forms, Parvati becomes Durga, a mighty warrior goddess who fights the demons of the world.

Demons, like Hindu gods, often take physical forms, but deep down they stand for unwanted qualities like jealousy, greed, selfishness, and prejudice. These are the things Durga combats. "Durga is portrayed as a beautiful golden warrior goddess," say Foulston and Abbott, "but her looks do not belie her excellence in battle."<sup>35</sup> She is usually shown wearing red clothes to signify action and riding a tiger to show her power to subdue fierce opponents. Images of Durga show her with many arms, usually at least ten, to hold different weapons she needs to slay demons. In one hand she often holds a conch shell like the god Vishnu, which she blows to signal victory after a fight.

Durga is a formidable opponent of evil. Sometimes, however, she loses her patience with particularly difficult or troublesome demons. This is when Parvati can take still another form—Kali, a dark-skinned goddess with a terrifying image. Kali is usually shown wearing a string of human



*The fierce goddess Kali is usually shown with many arms and wearing a necklace of human skulls and a belt of human arms.*

heads around her neck and a belt of human arms at her waist. She holds a bloody knife in one of her many hands and a severed head in another. She sticks out her tongue and often dances on the chest of Shiva, who lies on his back at her feet. “Her unwholesome appearance and strange practices have led many to misunderstand her completely,” say Foulston and Abbott. However, they add, “Hindu goddesses cannot simply be taken at face value.”<sup>36</sup>

Kali appears dreadful and scary, the total opposite of the loving, motherly Parvati, but Hindus worship rather than fear this form of the goddess. They believe her role is to battle only the most persistent demons—essentially, the most difficult of people’s negative qualities. Many Hindus turn to fearsome Kali if they need help with a particularly stubborn personal flaw like jealousy.





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Hindus also believe the soul can become a prisoner of the body when someone becomes too attached to his or her physical self. The body parts Kali wears actually symbolize souls she has freed from attachment to their bodies. Outsiders often misunderstand this dark goddess and mistakenly believe that those who worship her celebrate violence and death, but actually, Kali's followers celebrate freedom from negative personality traits. Shiva himself, in drawings of Kali dancing on his chest, looks peaceful because he understands her necessary role in the world.

## The Extended Family of Hindu Gods

Hindus worship many more gods and goddesses than the Trimurti and their consorts—thousands or even millions more. Hinduism has deities for countless occasions, natural phenomena, and character traits. There are gods and goddesses of nature and geographic formations as well as of healing, humor, hope, courage, chaos, revenge, gambling, and lost things.

The seemingly endless variety of the Hindu pantheon, or family of gods, leads many who are outside the religion to believe that Hindus are confused about God or do not take the idea of him seriously. On the contrary, Hindus have a very clear idea at the center of all their religious beliefs: There is actually only *one* god, a divine force that is everywhere and in everything all at once. The Hindu deities are all connected, their powers coming from the same source that can do and be anything. The different names, images, and stories of deities are simply the many ways Hindus have invented to better understand the infinite divine being that creates, preserves, destroys, and performs every other function in the universe.