

Important Hindu Gods and Goddesses

There are many Hindu gods and Goddesses- below is a brief outline of some of the major ones:

The 3 supreme Gods are Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva

Brahma

Brahma is the Hindu god of creation. Statues of Brahma, paintings and other artwork normally represent him as having four heads- this is symbolic of him watching over the whole world. He sometimes is shown with a beard, usually white- this is to symbolise that he is eternal and to show that he is old and wise. He is usually also shown as having four arms and unlike most Hindu Gods- he carries no weapons.

He sometimes is pictured riding on a swan called Hamsa. The swan is Brahma's vehicle and symbolises- grace.

He often carries all or some of the following items:

- A lotus flower- to symbolise nature and the living essence of all things and beings in the Universe.
- Books- to symbolise knowledge- the books are usually the Hindu Vedas- these are very ancient Hindu holy books.
- A spoon/ladle- which is associated with the pouring of holy ghee or oil onto a sacrificial pyre- signifying Brahma as the lord of sacrifices.
- A jar known as a 'kamandalu'- this is a jar made of metal or even coconut shell, containing water. The water in this jar is holy
- A string of prayer beads called the 'akshamālā' (literally "garland of eyes") which He uses to keep track of the Universe's time.





Vishnu

Vishnu is the Hindu god of preservation. He is the maintainer, preserver and protector of all in the universe.

Of all the Gods- Vishnu has many incarnations. An incarnation is a human or animal that represents or 'embodies' the God on earth. The reason Vishnu has more incarnations of himself appear on Earth is because his role is to preserve and maintain the universe- so he appears on Earth in different forms to put right problems.

In Hindu stories and mythologies, the best known characters said to be incarnations of Vishnu are:

1-Matsya, the fish- who saved Manu – (the man whom all humans descend from -in Hinduism) from the great deluge and rescued the Vedic scriptures by killing a demon.

2-Kurma, the turtle- who helped with the churning of the ocean by bearing the entire weight of a mountain on his back.

3-Varaha, the boar who rescued the earth from the ocean, by killing a demon

4- Narasimha, the half man-half lion - who killed the tyrant demon-king to rescue the demon's son Prahlada, who was a Vishnu-devotee

5- Vamana, the dwarf, who subdued the king Maha Bali

6- Parashurama, sage with the axe who killed the thousand-armed king Kartavirya Arjuna

7- Rama, the king of Ayodhya and the hero of the Hindu epic Ramayana

8-Balarama- the older brother of Krishna

9- Krishna, the king of Dwarka, a central character in the Bhagavata Purana and the Mahabharata and reciter of Bhagavad Gita

10- Buddha- The thinker

11- Kalki ("Eternity", or "time", or "The Destroyer of foulness"). This incarnation has not yet appeared on Earth but it is expected to appear at the end of one of the Hindu time cycles- the cycle of Kali Yuga- which the world is currently in.

In paintings Vishnu is often coloured Blue- this is to symbolise the divine colour of water filled clouds and the infinite expanse of sky and ocean.

He sometimes is pictured riding on an Eagle called Garruda- the Eagle is Vishnu's vehicle and is symbolises courage and the speed to spread knowledge.

Sometimes Vishnu is also pictured with a many headed serpent- this is due to a famous image of Vishnu in the Mahabharata story where he rests on a many headed serpent drifting on the milky ocean. The image symbolises the ocean of the universe.

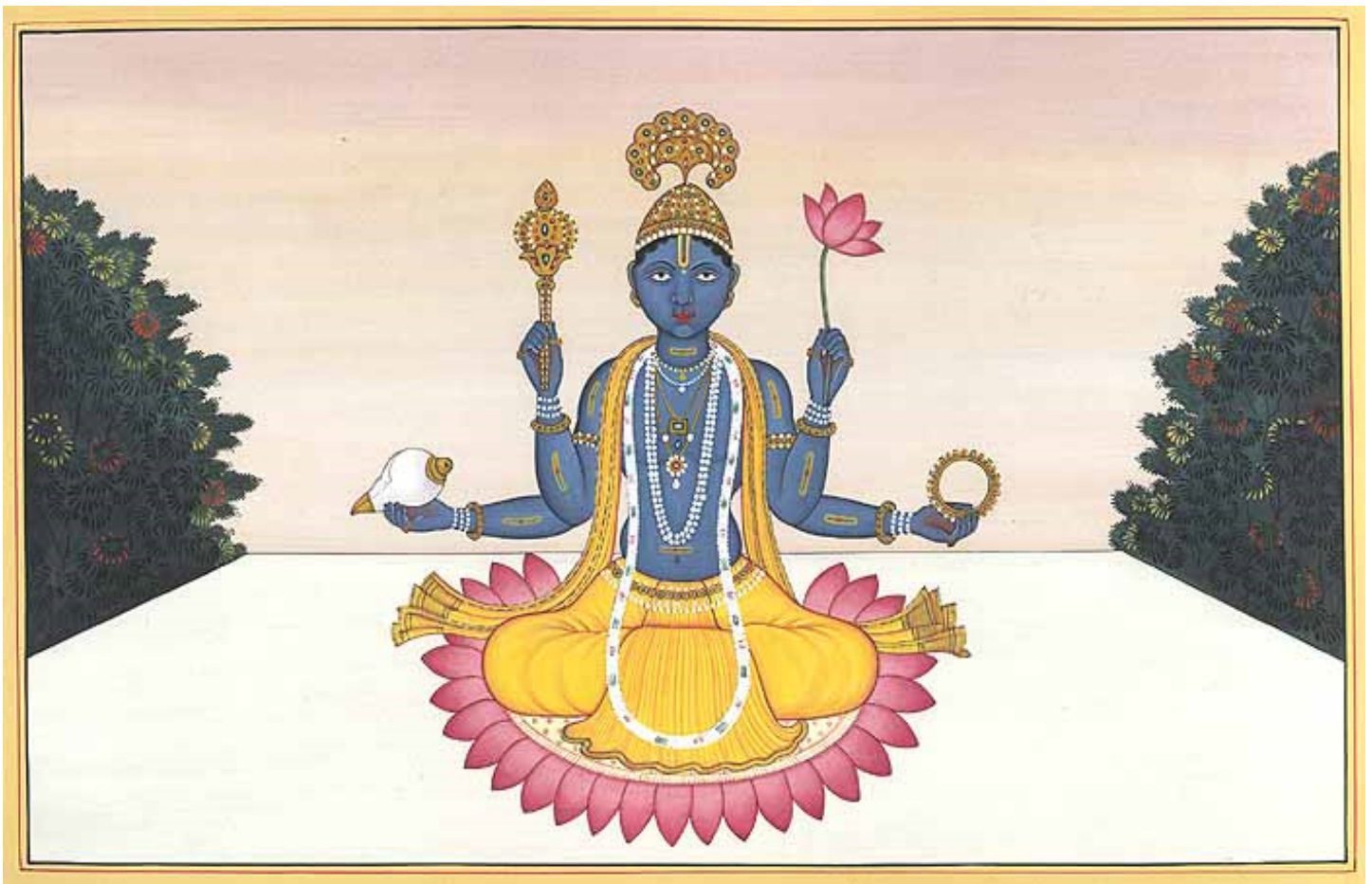
In statues/paintings Vishnu often has 4 arms. He carries:

-A conch: the sound this produces is 'Om', which in Hinduism- represents the primeval sound of creation

-A chakra/or discus - this is a wheel shaped object and symbolises the mind/cycle of time- the wheel sometimes appears as though it is spinning on his finger.

-A lotus flower- this an example of glorious existence and liberation

A mace/club- this represents mental and physical strength





Shiva

Shiva is the Hindu god of destruction. Shiva's role is to destroy the universe in order for things to be re-created. Or another way of looking at it is that he is part of Hinduism in order to destroy the illusions, imperfections and old ideas of the world to make way for positive changes.

Shiva is often shown to be in deep meditation or to be dancing the eternal dance of creation and destruction. When shown dancing, he is referred to as 'Nataraja' - the 'lord of the dance' and is usually dancing on top of the body of a small demon figure- called 'Apasmara'. In Hindu mythology, Apasmara represents ignorance- the enemy of enlightenment.

Shiva is often shown with a bull called Nandi. Nandi is Shiva's vehicle and symbolises strength and faith.

He often is shown with a snake coiled around his neck- this is said to be symbolic of many things- mastering fear, self control and even the different coils of the snake represent past, present and future.

Shiva is usually shown with four arms and carries:

-A trident (called a Trishula)- this is to fight enemies with as the three prongs of the trident represent the 3 primary qualities of nature- Rajas, Sattya and Tamas. (Rajas symbolises creation, Sattya symbolises preservation and Tamas symbolises destruction).

-A drum (called a damaru) – this represents the sound of creation and development.

-Fire- Shiva sometimes is shown holding or surrounded by the fire of creation (Agni)

-his empty hands are sometimes shown making symbolic gestures and hand shapes used in Indian dance.



OTHER GODS AND GODDESSES:

Sarasvati

Sarasvati (also spelled **Saraswati**) is perhaps the most ancient goddess that is still widely worshipped today. She is the Hindu muse: the inspiration for all music, poetry, drama, dance and science. Musicians pray to her before performing and students ask for her help before taking a test. She is the wife of Brahma, the creator god who is rarely worshipped anymore.

In statues and paintings, Sarasvati is fair-skinned and dressed in white to symbolize pure illumination. She rides a swan or a peacock, and usually is shown with four hands: in one she holds a book; in another she holds prayer beads (because she is the source of spiritual knowledge, too); her other two hands hold a Veena- this is a sitar-like musical instrument.

Sarasvati is especially revered by students and teachers.



Lakshmi:



Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth, prosperity and luck, so naturally she is quite popular. She provides not only material wealth, but also good health and a joyful family life. She was born from the milky ocean seated on a lotus and holding a blossom in her hand. In Hindu art, she is always smiling kindly. She wears a red sari and coins rain down from two of her hands. In her other two hands she holds lotuses, representing the spiritual gifts she bestows. She is often shown seated on a lotus and being anointed by two elephants.

Her vehicle is the white owl.

Lakshmi's husband is Vishnu. According to Hindu mythology, Vishnu has manifested himself in earthy forms many times. In each of his

incarnations, his wife Lakshmi has accompanied him: she was Padma to his Vamana, Sita to his Rama, Rukmini and Radha to his Krishna. The love stories of these divine couples are among the most beloved tales in Hinduism.

Lakshmi is worshipped by many modern Hindus, usually in the home every Friday and on festival days throughout the year. She is also highly revered in Jainism.



Parvati: Wife of Shiva, Mother of Ganesh

Parvati is the dark-skinned wife of Shiva and the mother of Ganesh and Skanda. According to Hindu tradition, Shiva was once married to Sati. Tragically, Sati committed suicide by jumping into a fire, and Shiva could not be consoled. The distraught widower never wanted to marry again. However, years later, a young woman named Parvati ("Daughter of the Mountain") committed herself to living an austere life of meditation to win over Shiva. She meditated in the Himalayas for years, not budging through driving rain, blistering heat, or elephant stampedes. But one day, she heard a child cry in suffering and she immediately sprang up to help. But it was Shiva, testing her resolve. She had failed the test, but he was so touched that she would give up what she desired most to help someone in need that he took Parvati as his wife. By some accounts, Parvati was Sati in a former life.

Parvati is depicted in art as a mature and beautiful woman, usually with Shiva.



Durga: Warrior Goddess

Durga is a fierce warrior goddess. She is depicted in Hindu art as riding on a lion or a tiger. She has many arms and is always brandishing a variety of weapons and attacking the buffalo demon Mahisha. Her battles against evil are told in popular Hindu stories and it is said that hearing the stories cleanses one from sin.



Kali:

In Hindu mythology, Kali sprang from the furrowed brow of Durga when Durga could not defeat the demon Raktabija. Every time Durga struck the demon, drops of blood would fall the ground and form another demon. Durga was getting frustrated, but Kali took care of it. She stuck out her tongue and caught all the drops of blood, then ate the demon right up.

Kali's name means "She who is black." She is often associated with death and with violence. She is generally shown half-naked, with a garland of skulls, a belt of severed limbs and waving fierce weapons with most of her 10 hands. She is often dancing on a prostrate Shiva, who looks up at her admiringly. Often, two of Kali's hands are empty and show the gestures of protection and fearlessness. Her tongue is stuck out to swallow up evil and negative thoughts.



Ganesh

Ganesh is depicted with an elephant's head on a human body and in the Hindu tradition he is the son of Lord Shiva and the Goddess Parvati. He is usually shown with one tusk- the other tusk broken off. Sometimes he is shown holding the broken tusk.

He is known as the Remover of Obstacles and is prayed to particularly when people are embarking upon any venture like beginning a new enterprise, starting a new business or even in performing arts- performers often pray to Ganesh before the performance to ensure it is successful. Ganesh is also known as the patron god of travelling.



Hanuman

Hanuman is depicted as a monkey god. In Hindu mythology, Hanuman is a warrior from a race of ape like people called the Vanara. In Hindu stories, the Vanara dwelled in the forests and are said to be brave and inquisitive.

Hanuman is a symbol of strength, perseverance, devotion and energy in Hinduism and is a popular God. Hanuman is worshipped for his unyielding devotion to Rama and is remembered for his selfless dedication to Rama. Below he is pictured to symbolically show he has Rama and Sita in his heart.

