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### The Four Yugas - Epochs of Hinduism

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**KRISHNA PREACHING THE GITA TO ARJUNA**

***"Paritranya Sadhunam, Vinashaya Cha Dushkritam,  
Dharmasamsthapanarthaya, Sambhavami Yuge Yuge!"***

***"For the protection of the good and the destruction of the evil,  
For the purpose of reinstating righteousness, I shall incarnate in every Yuga!"***

The above were the words spoken by Krishna in a revelation he made about his own divinity to Arjuna, during the Great War of Kurukshetra.

## What is a Yuga?

According to Hindu philosophy, the world is made up of four main "Yugas" - ages, epochs or cycles of time - each made up of tens of thousands of human years. These 4 yugas are the Satya Yuga, the Treta Yuga, the Dvapara Yuga and lastly, the Kali Yuga. According to the laws of Hindu cosmology, the Universe is created wholly, only to be destroyed entirely, once in every 4.1 to 8.2 billion years. This is believed to constitute one full day and night for Lord Brahma, the Creator of the Universe. One Brahma's lifetime is considered to be around 311 trillion and 40 billion years. These Yugas are believed to repeat themselves in cyclical patterns, much like the waxing and waning of the moon; like the four seasons; like the rising and ebbing of tides.

Each of these four Yugas involves stages of change; of evolution; one in which not only the physical universe undergoes change, but the whole thought process and consciousness of mankind metamorphoses either for better or for worse, depending upon that particular Yuga. The entire cycle of a Yuga starts from its highest point, the Golden Age of enlightenment. From there, it gradually proceeds stage by stage, till it reaches a Dark Age of evil and ignorance, again moving ahead towards positivity, reaching back to the Golden Age, in order to complete the cycle. One entire cycle of the Yuga, Hindus believe, denotes the time the solar system takes to revolve around another star.

## Time Duration of Each of the Four Yugas

According to the Laws of Manu, which was the earliest known text describing the four yugas in detail, the length of each yuga is as follows:

4800 years + 3600 years + 2400 years + 1200 years, which equals 12,000 years. This figure denotes only a half cycle and hence, the entire cycle takes 24,000 years to complete. This is also one precession of the equinox.

There is no clear mention here of the exact span of a year of life for demigods. However, the most recent interpretation of the Srimad Bhagavatam seems to indicate that the duration of the Satya Yuga is equivalent to about 4,800 years of the demigods; the duration of the Dvapara Yuga is about 2,400 years; and that of the Kali Yuga is about 1,200 years of the demigods. Hence, one could probably infer from these statistics that one year of a demigod would be the equivalent of about 360 human years.

This would also lead us to believe that the Satya Yuga lasted for  $4,800 \times 360$ , that is, about 1,728,000 years. The Treta Yuga, on the other hand, went on for  $3,600 \times 360$  years, which works out to 1,296,000 years. Similarly, the Dvapara Yuga continued for  $2,400 \times 360$ , that is, 864,000 years. The Kali Yuga is supposed to be the shortest of them all, lasting for only  $1,200 \times 360$  years, which totals to 432,000 years. From the aforementioned statistic, it can be understood that the four Yugas follow a timeline ration of 4:3:2:1.

As mentioned earlier, each subsequent age is witness to a gradual decline of wisdom, knowledge, intellect, life span, physical and spiritual strength in humankind as a whole. This automatically also implies decline and destruction of dharma or righteousness.

- **Satya Yuga** - Dharma reigned supreme at this time, with human stature being estimated at 21 cubits. The average human lifespan at this point in time was 100,000 years.
- **Treta Yuga** - This yuga witnessed the decline of virtue to a quarter of the previous one. Human stature was valued at 14 cubits and average human lifespan was 10,000 years.
- **Dvapara Yuga** - Virtue and sin were divided into equal halves. Normal human stature was 7 cubits and human lifespan went down to 1000 years.
- **Kali Yuga** - This yuga has only one quarter virtue and the rest is taken over by sin. Human stature is reduced to 3.5 cubits and average human lifespan is about 100 years. It is believed that, towards the end of this terrible Dark Age, average human lifespan would go down to 20 years.

Let us now analyze each one of these Yugas in detail.

### Satya Yuga

The Satya Yuga, also referred to as Sat Yuga and Krita Yuga, marks the "Yuga of Satya" of Truth. This is an age when the whole of mankind is ruled by the most benevolent Gods and also where one can find the purest and most ideal behaviour in one and all. In this particular Yuga, mankind allows intrinsic goodness to reign supreme. Also commonly referred to as the "Golden Age", this is the most balanced and idealistic life that a human being can ever lead.

It is believed that the Dharma Bull, which embodies the quality of morality, stood on all four legs during this period. During the Treta Yuga, it would be reduced to three, and two in the Dvapara Yuga, which comes next. At present, in the immoral age of Kali, the Bull is believed to be standing only on one leg.

## Satya Yuga According to Holy Texts

The Satya Yuga is the first and the most significant one of all the four Yugas. This epoch is witness to men that possessed true knowledge and wisdom; and were constantly undertaking meditation, penance and other austerities. Generally speaking, all the main pillars of religion are firmly embedded in this Yuga.

During Satya Yuga, all the people performed only Punya Karmas or good, sublime, deeds. This was a time when there was nothing like evil, cheating and deceit. There was no class, caste and creed difference and everyone was treated as one. No one had worldly desires or the mindset to conquer or overpower someone else. There was no hatred or enmity with someone else. Hence, the Krita Yuga was also one where people were free of sorrows, sadness, disease and decay.

## Krita Yuga and Akshaya Tritiya

The Krita Yuga is believed to have begun on the Vaishakh Shukla Tritiya day, also commonly known as the Akshaya Tritiya. In this era, the Supreme Lord, Sri Maha Vishnu, took the first four of his avatars, namely, Matsya (the Fish), Kurma (the Tortoise), Varaha (the Boar) and Narasimha (the Half-Man Half-Lion form).



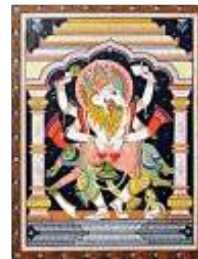
[Buy this Poster](#)  
**MATSYA AVATAR**



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**NARASIMHA AVATAR**

It is believed that the average height of human beings was more than what it is today. The only text which was supposedly followed during this epoch was Manu's Dharma Shastra.

It is also said that the Satya Yuga would be re-established by Kalki after the end of the Kali yuga. At the start of this new era, it is said that the Sun, Moon and Jupiter would jointly enter the Pushya Nakshatra or the Zodiac of Cancer. During this point in time, the stars and constellations would become resplendent and all of them would be considered auspicious.

Resultantly, all creatures would experience well-being and happiness. It is further prophesized that Vishnu's final incarnation, Kalki, would take birth in a Brahmin family. This mighty, intelligent and valiant avatar would engage in good of all benefactors. He would look like a soldier and would wield the power to be armed with all the weapons, armours and an army, all at a mere thought. Kalki would be hailed as the Supreme King and would have no equal and hence, no enemy. He would be a benevolent and radiant Brahmin; the one born to emancipate the ones in misery.

Kalki is believed to be coming with the mission of destroying the Kali Yuga and reinstate the glory of the Satya yuga. In the Satya yuga, Bhagwan Kalki would destroy all sins and evils. He would perform the Ashwamedha Yagya and then leave the whole world under the care of Brahmins. He would hence re-establish the auspicious ideals and principles propounded by Lord Brahma. After completing his mission, he would travel deep into the forest to practice penance.

It is prophesized that many would want to follow the ideals set by Bhagwan Kalki and would re-engage themselves in spiritual and religious activities. This would significantly add to the amount of good deeds performed during the new Satya Yuga.

Effectively, one would see the creation of wonderful gardens, temples and Dharmashalas (Resting Inns). Brahmins, sages and ascetics would always be absorbed in penance and the authorized ones would keep performing holy yagyas to raise the element of spirituality among the peoples of the world. The Brahmins would tirelessly continue studying the religious texts, teaching them, giving away their money to charity and performing such other punya karmas (holy deeds).

This era would also usher in better agriculture and, as a result, richer crop produce and abundance for all, throughout the course of all the four seasons. While people would generously donate their money to the needy, the rulers would protect their subjects and land, with all sincerity and service-mindedness.

The Vaishya or trader class would also conduct business in a fair and honest manner, only taking the money that they justly deserve, without fleecing their customers. The Kshatriya class of warriors would also be transformed by this change in era. They would be more inclined to the mere exhibition of valiance and might, as against warring with each other to prove the same. The Shudras would sincerely serve the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas, who in turn, would also treat them with love and respect. This attitude of mind would last all through the course of the newly formed Satya Yuga.

In this yuga, the Sanatana Dharma (Eternal Religion) would be re-established and would emerge stronger than ever before. All the gods, demigods, demons, Gandharvas and Yakshas would give up their hatred and jealousy for each other and join forces to form a uniform, strong, whole. People too would renounce their ill-will and negativity, never point out faults in others and generally live a life of peace and happiness. As a result, a mere thought would work miracles and transform itself into materialization of positive action.

All people would easily attain divinity and would be pure, pious and utterly unselfish. They would effortlessly be able to attain the sublime state of uniting with the Paramatma. Very valiant, wise, intelligent and talented people would take birth in this era. These people would then give birth to thousands of children, many of whom would go on to become great saints, sages and seers of this era.

## **Satya Yuga to the Brahma Kumaris**

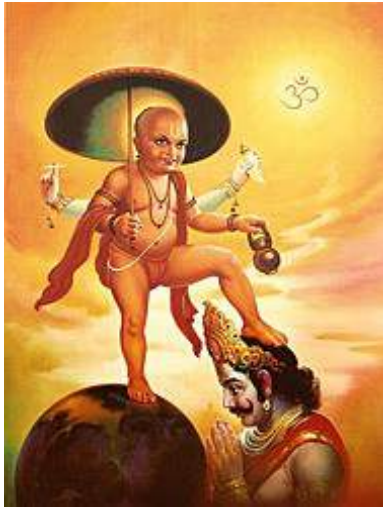
According to the Brahma Kumaris and the Prajapita Brahma Kumaris, each Yuga consists of five ages in a single cycle of 5000 years. In this cycle, the Sat Yuga or Golden Age emerges as the very first yuga and lasts for a period of 1250 years.

## **Treta Yuga**

The Treta Yuga is the second of the four yugas. The most important events that took place in this particular yuga were Lord Sri Maha Vishnu's fifth, sixth and seventh incarnations as Vamana, Parashurama and Sri Ramachandra respectively. While the Dharma bull had been standing on all four legs during the preceding Satya Yuga, in this yuga, it is said to stand only on three legs during this period.

We go on to discuss each of the three incarnations of Vishnu during this Treta yuga.

## Vamana



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**VAMAN AVATAR**

In his fifth avatara, Vishnu incarnated as Vamana, the dwarf. He was born to Aditi and his main avatara lakshya (mission) was to subdue King Mahabali, who came from the Asura race.

Mahabali, a wise and humble king, was the grandson of Prahlada. So good was he and so happy were his subjects during his rule in Kerala, that Indra, the King of the Devas, felt insecure that his position may eventually be taken over by Mahabali. He hence requested Vishnu to destroy the great ruler, who ironically, was himself a great bhakta (devotee) of Vishnu.

Accordingly, Vishnu took the form of Vamana, a short-statured, podgy Brahmin, in order to send Bali to Patala, the Netherworld. Vamana entered the yagnashala, where Bali was conducting a sacrificial ritual. This was a major affair, where the King paid his respects to all the Brahmins present there, also giving them whatever they asked for,

thereby fulfilling their every wish. When Bali saw Vamana enter the venue, he rushed to him, fell at his feet, seated him comfortably and washed his feet with water.

When Bali asked the Brahmin to ask for the Dakshina he wished for, Vamana requested for just three feet of land. Surprised and rather amused by this small demand, Bali promised the same to him.

Immediately, Vamana took a Vishwarupa (gigantic form), spanning from the earth to the sky. While his one step spanned the entire universe, the second one measured the entire skies. He asked an astounded Bali where he would place his third step. The king, understanding that this was Vishnu himself, humbly bowed down and offered his own head. Vamanan smiled and placed his foot on his head, sending him down to Patala. There, Vishnu offered him a luxurious place to live and also sovereignty of one of the lower worlds. Vishnu also gave him the boon of being able to visit his subjects once every year. This is celebrated throughout all of Kerala as the festival of Onam.

## Parashurama

Next, Vishnu incarnated as the Brahmin, Parashurama. Since there were too many Kshatriyas who were constantly at war with each other at the time, he incarnated in order to destroy most of the world's warriors. However, the Kshatriyas who survived produced children, thereby increasing the population and getting it back to what it originally was. Eventually, the avatara of Parashurama ended, though some believe that he continued to live on as a mighty warrior-hermit for many years after that.

Parashurama is known to have had an awful temper and once angrily confronted Lord Sri Rama, several years later. Rama, however, effortlessly established his supremacy over him. Finally, Parashurama acknowledged his powers and retired into the mountains.

Parashurama also lived on during the next Dvapara Yuga. There, he had a duel with Bhisma for the sake of begetting Amba. He, however lost to Bhisma. Later, he taught Karna the method to use the Brahmastra. But when he came to know that Karna was a Kshatriya and not a Brahmin as he thought him to be, he cursed that Karna would forget all that he ever learnt, just at the time when he would



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**PARASHURAM AVATAR**

need it the most. Incidentally, Parashurama had vowed never to teach any Kshatriya.

## Sri Rama



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**RAMA, LAKSHMANA  
SITA AND HANUMAN**

Next, Vishnu took the avatara of Lord Sri Rama, also known as Ramachandra. His mission was to curb the steady rise of evil and to destroy Ravana, the demon king of Lanka. Ravana had conquered all the three worlds and was terrorizing everyone, including the Devas. Ravana's son, Meghanada, had earned himself the name Indrajit, by defeating Indra. All the gods were under his control.

At the behest of the devas, Vishnu incarnated as the son of King Dasaratha and Kausalya. His stepmother, Kaikeyi, was very jealous of him. She cleverly sent Rama away to the forest on exile for a period of 14 years. During this time, Ravana, who had always wanted to make Rama's wife Sita, his own, kidnapped her and took her away to Lanka.

Rama, together with Hanuman and the Vanarasena (Army of Monkeys), fought Ravana and won against him, thereby restoring peace on earth. Taking Sita

back to Ayodhya, he was coronated King. From then, Rama ruled the Kingdom of Ayodhya for eleven-thousand years. This Golden Age is also known as the Rama-rajya or Rama's Kingdom, which was considered a veritable heaven on earth.

Rama, though known as the Maryada Purushottam, had committed certain mistakes during his own lifetime. Before bringing back Sita to Ayodhya, he had asked her to undergo an agnipariksha (trial by fire). She willingly did so and, due to her purity, came out unscathed. They peacefully lived together in Ayodhya for a while, after which they realized that Sita was pregnant.

Rama overheard some of his subjects talk about Sita's time in Lanka and discussing whose child it was that Sita was carrying. He immediately ordered his brother, Lakshmana, to leave her in the forest, where Sita eventually gave birth to Lava and Kusha. When he finally met his sons some years later in the forest, he requested Sita to come and live with him again. Sita, who was still smarting from her repeated humiliation at his hands, refused and asked her mother, Bhoomi Devi (Mother Earth) to accept her. At that instant, the earth opened up under her feet and Sita joined her mother forever.

These three avatars of Vishnu indicate the steady decline of the Dharma in the Treta yuga. It further declines during the next yuga, the Dvapara

## Dvapara Yuga



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**KRISHNA  
AVATAR**

The Dvapara Yuga, the third of the four yugas, mainly talks about the life and times of Lord Sri Krishna, the ninth avatara of Maha Vishnu. In fact, this yuga ends when the Krishna completes his life mission and returns to his original abode of Vaikuntha.

The two mainstays of religion in the Dvapara yuga were Kama and Artha. This also marked the time when Vishnu assumed a glowing yellow colour. During this time, the Vedas too were categorized into four parts, namely, Rig, Sama, Yajur and Atharva. With this classification of the four Vedas came the different Varnas or classes of society, each assigning people belonging to a particular class with a particular set of activities.

### **The Emergence of Varnas or Classes**

It is believed that all people belonging to the Dvapara Yuga were predominantly the pleasure-seeking variety and also had a highly competitive nature. This reduced their ability to reach out towards the supreme divinity and they ceased to be wholly truthful in their actions. As a result, the people in this Yuga started being victimized by various ailments and illnesses, as also by various unnatural forms of desires.

After a long while of suffering from these varied conditions, these people realized their fault and decided to bring back the balance in their lives by performing penance and other austerities. While some of these people conducted Yagnas for seeking divine intervention, others did so merely to attain material benefits.

### **The Brahmin Class**

The Brahmins became deeply involved in Yagyas, contemplation, meditation, charity and teaching activities. They did this in order to attain celestial bliss and the grace of the divine. With constant meditation and austerities, many of them also developed a sense of calm and self-restraint.

### **The Kshatriya Class**

Kshatriyas being rulers and warriors, their duty was to protect their subjects. Many of the rulers were wise and humble and strived to protect their provinces and states. They were sincere in their efforts and executed all policies, maintaining the law of the land.

However, a few rulers lacked all these positive qualities and instead, conspired along with other evil people in order to attain more material benefits. Such rulers committed violent sins, torturing their subjects, including women and children.

The Dvapara Yuga mainly included two Kshatriya dynasties, the Surya Vansha and the Chandra Vansha.

## The Vaishya Class

The Vaishyas included mostly landowners and merchants. Their duties comprised trade, business and agriculture. The Vaishyas among this class who were generous and giving eventually attained higher planes of existence due to their charity and hospitality.

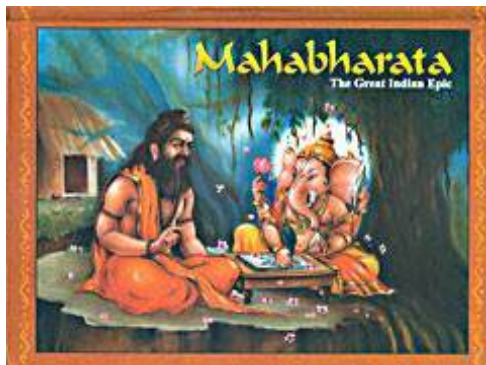
## The Shudra Class

The duty of Shudras was to involve themselves in highly physical labour. Their form of labour was very different from that of the other three classes. However, they were not discriminated against. Interestingly enough, Vidura, the famous Prime Minister of Hastinapura, was born into the Shudra community. However, he attained the status of a Brahmin due to his level of learning, wisdom and righteousness. Krishna too was brought up in a Vaishya family, though he was born a Kshatriya.

The Brahmin, Kshatriya and Vaishya classes were supposed to protect the Shudras.

## The Fall of Dharma during the Dvapara Yuga

The dharma took a steep fall during the Dvapara Yuga, mainly because of the wrongdoings of certain rulers, who ultimately brought defeat both to themselves and to the land that they ruled.



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**MAHABHARATA  
THE GREAT INDIAN EPIC**

This yuga predominantly talks about the Mahabharata, featuring the tale of the Pandavas and the Kauravas. These warring factions, actually cousins, had a raging rivalry between them. The Pandavas, or the five sons of Pandu, were on the side of the dharma. This was the reason that they also had Krishna on their side. The Kauravas; the 100 sons of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari; were always filled with discontent and jealousy for their cousins and looked for every opportunity to defeat or demean them.

Inviting the eldest Pandava, Yudhisthira, for a game of dice, Duryodhana, the eldest of the Kauravas, cheated the former of all his belongings and property; even going so far as gaining supremacy over his brothers and their wife, Draupadi.



Having had an eye on Draupadi and being resentful that he could not win her hand in marriage, Duryodhana proceeded to humiliate her in public, in the sabha (court) of elders present there. He asked his brother, Dushasana, to bring Draupadi to the court. Dushasana dragged her by her hair and presented her before the shocked sabha, draped in a single piece of fabric. Duryodhan next asked Dushasana to disrobe her.

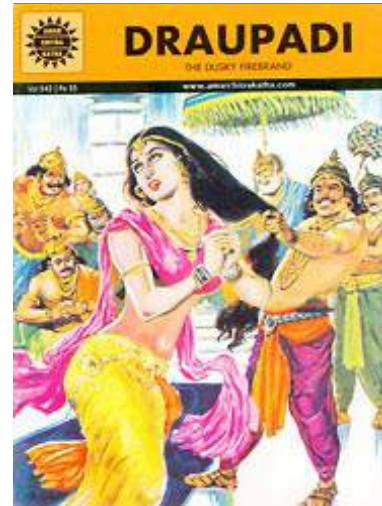
In spite of Draupadi's pleas, all the elders present there did not come forward to help her. Even her five husbands remained rooted to their place, their heads held down in shame.

Dushasana began to disrobe her slowly. Draupadi, realizing that only Krishna could help her out now, started calling out to her Sakha. Immediately, Krishna covered her with unending reams of fabric. Dushasana eventually got tired and fell to the ground. Thus, Krishna protected Draupadi's modesty. However, the deed had been done and a woman had been humiliated in a way unthinkable for any royal dynasty of that stature.

While this had already incensed the Pandavas, further instances of adharmic (unrighteous) behaviour by the Kauravas finally drove the former to think of war. Eventually, the great war of Kurukshetra broke out among the Pandavas and the Kauravas.

After days of fighting and many acts of injustice committed by both sides; mostly by the Kauravas; the Pandavas won the war.

All these acts of injustice further brought down the level of dharma, also setting the stage for a further steeper decline in the next yuga, the Kali Yuga.



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**DRAUPADI  
THE DUSKY FIREBRAND**

## Kali Yuga

The Kali Yuga, literally the age of the apocalyptic demon, Kali, is the last of the four Yugas. Though the Kali Yuga is believed to last about 432,000 years, there is no record of the start of or the exact time duration of this Yuga. However, it is generally believed that the Kali Yuga commenced the day Krishna left his mortal coil and proceeded toward his actual abode, Vaikuntha.

According to Hindu philosophy, the Kali Yuga symbolizes the Dark Ages and marks a time when human civilization faces a steep downward spiral, due to an alarming decline in spirituality and dharma. Interestingly, the word "Kali" implies "strife, war or contention". According to the Mahabharata, the following are some of the main attributes of Kali:

- Rulers will become aggressive and unreasonable, levying unjust taxes on their subjects.
- They will no more be inclined to protect their subjects - they will consider only their own well-being.
- People will flee migrate from their own land in order to find safety, security and a means of livelihood.
- Greed and avarice will reign supreme and violence will result from an open display of animosity between human beings.
- Qualities such as morality will disappear and no one will see anything wrong with destroying others at the slightest provocation.
- Promiscuity will be viewed as a socially acceptable form of behaviour and an increasing number of people will give in to the use of alcohol and drugs.

- While virtue will eventually fade out, sin will take over and flourish till the very end of this yuga.

At the end of the Kali Yuga, there will come a point when things just cannot get any worse. It is said that the Lord will incarnate at that time, in order to destroy all wrongdoers and restore balance on earth.

### **At the Start of the Kali Yuga**

Many experts believe that the Kali Yuga started on 18 February, 3102 BC. According to the Brahma Vaivarta Purana, the first ten thousand year period of this yuga would be special, as it would consist of a few bhakti yogis. This, the Purana believes, would happen only in this particular cycle of Maha Yugas.

Lord Krishna is believed to have told Mother Ganga about the Kali Yuga, just before it started. It is widely believed that this yuga commenced about 5000 years ago. By that figure, we would still have another 5000 years of this Golden Era within the Kali Yuga.

Krishna stated that some of his devotees would still be present on the earth at this time. After this time, all these devotees would depart and there would be only one varna - the class of the outcaste. Krishna also said that for these initial ten thousand years, deities and demigods would be worshipped and the Puranas would have some value yet.

### **Towards the End of the Kali Yuga**



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**INFANT KRISHNA  
ON LEAF**

At the end of the Kali Yuga, it is believed, Krishna will come down on earth, taking the form of an infant on a leaf. He will take this final incarnation in order to destroy all evil and recreate everything on earth, starting right at the very beginning.

Many Hindu scholars believe that we are in the final stages of the Kali Yuga and the inevitable Pralaya or apocalypse is very close. Many of these scholars agree with the Mayan perspective of the End of Days, which states the world will come to an end in December 2012.



## Symbolic Significance of the Four Yugas

According to Hindu philosophy, Kaala or time is a manifestation of the Supreme Lord himself. This Brahman is indivisible, timeless and eternal. Hence, the Lord God contains the past, present and future within himself. However, once the Lord creates the physical world, time becomes divisible and starts moving cyclically, thus giving rise to the Kalachakra, or the Wheel of Time. God uses this concept of time in order to prevent chaos, as also to create the illusion of impermanence in Samsara - creating the cycle of life and death.

Both Prakruti (Nature) and Purusha (Self) are both eternal, but while the Self is static and unchangeable, Nature is dynamic and subject to change, growth and evolution. When the Self is exposed to Nature, it goes through all the changes that the latter is ordained to experience. The Purusha becomes free of these changes only when it realizes its own transcendental nature and dares to travel beyond its limitations.

The Kalachakra puts us through repeated cycles of joy and suffering, depending upon our individual levels of karma. Time in Hinduism is cyclical, and not linear, in nature. Hence, the entire process of creation is viewed as a cyclical movement of evolution and involution. This entire process comprises four different phases - the start, the middle and the end, after which there is a period of rest.

It is said that when one cycle of creation ends, God withdraws all of his energies into himself and rests for a period of time, when he is utterly inactive. After this period of rest, God resumes his activity and begins to recreate a whole new world, manifesting himself in an infinite number of new living beings and life forms.

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This article was written by Priya Viswanathan, a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Classical Music and Classical Instrumental Veena. A recipient of several awards for both music and dance, Priya is also a freelance writer online. She currently writes for About.com, a subsidiary of the New York Times Company (<http://mobiledevices.about.com>)

Our efforts have been directed at making this article informative and refreshing for you. We will truly appreciate all forms of feedback. Please send your feedback to [info@dollsofindia.com](mailto:info@dollsofindia.com).