

Hindu God and Goddesses

Contents

1. [Introduction](#)
2. [The Concept of God in Hinduism](#)
3. [A General Note on the Gods of Hinduism](#)
4. [The Vedic Gods](#)
5. [The Trinity](#)
 - Brahma
6. [The Trinity \(Continued\)](#)
 - Vishnu
 - Avataras of Vishnu
 - Caturvyuhas
 - Minor Incarnations
 - Other Aspects of Vishnu commonly worshipped
 - Minor Deities associated with Vishnu
7. [The Trinity \(Continued\)](#)
 - Siva & Sivalinga
 - Aspects of Lord Siva
 - Minor Deities associated with Siva
8. [Sakti or the Divine Power as the Goddess SarasvatI](#)
 - Lakshmi
 - Samudramathana (Churning of the Ocean) Aspects of Lakshmi
 - Eight Saktis of Vishnu
 - Aspects of Lakshmi
 - ParvatI
 - Aspects of ParvatI-Saptamaq-kas Dasamahavidyas
 - Durga
 - Kall
 - Lalita
 - Other Aspects of ParvatI
9. [Minor Deities](#)
 - Ganapati
 - Icons of Ganapati
 - Subrahmal)ya
 - Sasta
 - Navagrahas
 - Astadikpalakas
 - Other Deities
10. [From Gods to Godhead](#)

INTRODUCTION

The gods of Hinduism have successfully created enough confusion in the minds of the followers of alien faiths who have chanced to come across them. Even more successfully have they created enough conflicts among the Hindus themselves! It is ignorance that causes confusion and creates conflicts. Hence, discovering this ignorance and dispelling it should automatically lead to clearing the confusions and resolving the conflicts.

There is the story of the atheist who vehemently preached throughout his life that neither God nor soul existed, praying at the last moment of his life thus: 'O God, if there is a God, save my soul, if there is one!' This story may sound funny, but, nevertheless, it poignantly reveals man's psychological necessity for God.

Belief in God has sustained mankind for millennia. Faith in and adoration of gods and goddesses has fulfilled a practical necessity in the lives of millions of the ordinary Hindus. It is naive to suggest that the Hindus did not or could not conceive of one God, the Supreme. Philosophical thinking in Hinduism has risen to sublime heights in the Upanisads, the Bhagavad Gita and the Brahma Sutras. However, these great works, and the thinkers following in their footsteps, recognized the limitation of the average human mind and its emotional needs. That is why they wisely provided for various kinds of Upasanas (meditations and modes of worship) to suit the different tastes and needs of the votaries.

THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN HINDUISM

Before proceeding further, it is worthwhile, even necessary, to know something about the concept of God in Hinduism. It is true that Hinduism does not depend upon a single scripture as the other religions of the world do. However the entire body of its philosophical literature accepts the Upanisads and the Bhagavad Gita as authoritative and does not go against them. Hence any concept of God based on these books is welcome to practically all sections of Hinduism.

While deriving the concept of God, it is but natural for man to start from the world in which he lives and moves. So, the God of Hinduism, when looked at from this angle, is the Creator. However, He creates the entire world, not out of nothing which is illogical, but out of Himself. After creation, He sustains it with His power, rules over it like an all-powerful emperor, meting out justice, as reward and punishment, in accordance with the deeds of the individual beings. At the end of one cycle of creation-Hinduism advocates the cyclic theory of creation-He withdraws the entire world order into Himself.

The Hindu scriptures wax eloquent while describing the qualities of God. He is all-knowing and all-powerful. He is the very personification of justice, love and beauty. In fact, He is the personification of all the blessed qualities that man can ever conceive of. He is ever ready to shower His grace, mercy and blessings on His creation. Really speaking, the very purpose of His creating this world is to shower His blessings on the creatures, to lead them gradually from less perfect states to more perfect ones. He is easily pleased by the prayers and supplication of His devotees. However His response to these prayers is guided by the principle, that it should not be in conflict with the cosmic law concerning the general welfare of the world, and the law of Karma concerning the welfare of the particular individual.

The Hindu concept of God has two special features. Depending upon the needs and tastes of his votaries" He can appear to them in any form they like to worship, and respond through that form. He can also incarnate Himself amongst human beings in order to lead them to His own kingdom. And this incarnating is a continuing process, taking place whenever and wherever He deems it necessary.

Then, there is the other aspect of God, as the Absolute. 'Brahman' is the name usually given to this aspect. It means what is infinitely big. It is the Infinite itself. It transcends everything that is created. Yet, it is immanent too, immanent in all that is created. It is so unlike anything we know that it defies all description. It has been stated that the only way by which it can be predicated, is the negative way: 'Not this! Not this!'

In its own essential nature, it is defined as 'Sat-cit-ananda,' 'Existence-consciousness-bliss'. It is the basis or substratum of all existence, consciousness and joy.

Metaphysics points towards Brahman, the Absolute. A thinking mind and a feeling heart-that is what a human being is-can accept only God, the Creator and the Ruler (Isvara), since the world is very much a reality to it. The correlation between the Brahman and this Isvara, though instinctively felt by the feeling heart, will ever remain an enigma to the thinking mind! Could this be due to the mysterious power of Maya?

A GENERAL NOTE ON THE GODS OF HINDUISM

The polytheism of the Hindus, though apparent, has remained a mysterious riddle. It will continue to remain so until it is viewed in the right perspective.

There are three aspects to this polytheism. The three main cult deities-the Trinity consisting of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva along with their consorts, form the first aspect. Here all the cult deities are considered to be different facets of God, the Supreme (Isvara). The minor deities like Ganesa and Kumara, form the second aspect. Though these deities also are sometimes described as the facets of God the Supreme, their position is usually inferior to that of the Trinity. They represent limited manifestations of the Supreme God. The Lokapalas (protectors of the world), also called as Dikpalas (protectors of the cardinal directions) like Indra, Varuna) and Agni and others, comprise the third aspect. They are actually offices of power in the cosmic scheme of creation and human beings who have acquired extraordinary religious merit necessary for getting those places, will occupy them in each cycle of creation. Then there are many number of village deities and demigods who can be regarded either as very limited manifestations of the Supreme God or as forces of nature deified or as human beings who by virtue of some special merit and power are elevated to godhood in course of time, after their death.

The statement of Lord Sri Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita (4.11; 7.21) that He, the Supreme Lord, will respond to the devotees in whichever form they worship Him and in whichever way they approach Him, can form the philosophical basis, typical to Hinduism, for this polytheism. So God can be all things to all men, and human beings can supplicate Him for anything-from the sublime to the ridiculous!

However, the Vedic gods form a class by themselves and so need separate treatment.

THE VEDIC GODS

The Rig veda Samhita forms the basic scripture of Hinduism and tradition accords it the highest place. This great book is full of hymns, Suktas as they are called, which attain supreme heights of poetical beauty and philosophical acumen, a rare combination indeed!

A major part of this work is devoted to prayers to gods like Indra, Agni, Varuna) and others. These Vedic gods are usually enumerated as thirty three: eight Vasus, eleven Rudras, twelve Adityas, Indra and Prajapati. These gods are assigned to the three regions of the earth (Prthvi), the heavens (Dyaus) and the intermediary space, (Antariksa). Apart from these gods, we also find many inanimate objects like grinding stone, qualities like faith, emotions like anger, aspects of nature like dawn, deified and described. There are several female deities also, though they are not as prominent as the male deities.

Who are these gods? Are they different aspects of the One Supreme God? Or, are they different deities competing and conflicting with one another like the Greek gods? Or, are they just animals and totems masquerading as gods?! Since the main purpose of this small book is to acquaint the average reader with a general idea of gods and goddesses in Hinduism, we cannot embark upon a research into this aspect of the question. Suffice it to say that the famous statement in the 1j.gveda itself viz., 'ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti,' 'Truth is One; sages call It by various names' (1.164.46) sets the tone for the philosophy of the Vedas which is amplified later on by the Upanisads. Hence, though these deities appear to be different and independent, they are really facets of the same Brahman, the Supreme God.

Let us now consider briefly the more important of these deities. For the sake of convenience they are arranged and dealt with in alphabetical order:

Adityas: The Adityas represent a group of deities. They are six in the Rgveda, eight in most of the Brahmanas, but become twelve in the Satapatha Brahmana. In the later mythological literature, they are always twelve.

The Adityas can be described as the personifications of laws that rule the universe and the human society. They regulate the relationships of human beings among themselves and with the forces of nature.

Aditya is one of the names of the sun. Hence the Adityas can be taken as the imperishable eternal beings, the gods of light, by whom all manner of luminous life is manifested and sustained in this universe.

The twelve Adityas are: Mitra (the friend), Varuna (one who encompasses and binds), Aryaman (the destroyer of foes), Daksa (the skilful), Bhaga (the giver), Amsa (the liberal), Tvastr (the shaper), Savitr (the vivifier), Pusan (the nourisher), Sakra (the mighty), Vivasvat (the resplendent) and Visnu (the pervader).

Sometimes, the twelve Adityas are linked with the twelve aspects of the sun spread over the twelve months and hence described as the twelve spokes of the wheel of time.

Agni: Since the religion of the 1j.gveda was mainly sacrificial, Agni, the god of fire, naturally got the pride of place. A maximum number of hymns are devoted to describing and praising Agni. He is often eulogised as the Supreme God, the creator, the sustainer, the all-pervading cosmic spirit. All other gods are his different manifestations. He manifests himself as fire (Agni) on this earth (Prthvi), as lightning or air (Indra or Vayu) in the sky (Antariksa) and as the sun (Surya) in the heavens (Dyuloka). He acts as a mediator between men and gods by carrying the offerings of men to gods. He is all-knowing and all-powerful. He is all-merciful too. Though an immortal, he lives among the mortals, in every house. He protects them by dispelling their



difficulties and giving them whatever they pray for. Without him, the world can never sustain itself.

In later literature, Agni is described as the lord presiding over the southeast quarter.

The image of Agni in temples, represents him as an old man with a red body. He has two heads, a big belly and six eyes, seven arms in which he holds objects like the spoon, ladle, fan etc., seven tongues, four horns and three legs. He has braided hair, wears red garment as also the Yajnopavita (the sacred thread). He is attended on either side by his two consorts, Svaha and Svadha. The smoke is his banner and ram, his vehicle. Obviously, this is an anthropomorphic representation of the sacrificial fire.

Asvins: These are twin deities, always described or praised together. What exactly they represent, is a moot point. While some say that they represent the earth and the sky, there are others who opine that they stand for night and day or the moon and the sun. That they were once kings who acquired extraordinary merit, and were elevated to the position of gods, is another guess that is also hazarded sometimes.

They represent the semidarkness before dawn. They pervade this world with moisture and light. Described as eternally young and handsome, they are the youngest of the gods. However, their chief characteristic is that they are constantly striving to do good to others. They are expert physicians and surgeons and know the arts of healing, rejuvenation, and even plastic surgery! Being supplicated, they can grant boons like children, food, wealth, health and protection from enemies. Hence one should never fail to invoke them during sacrifices.

Indra: Indra, undoubtedly, is the chief deity in the Rgveda. Almost a quarter of its hymns, is devoted to

praising him. He is the most important deity in the sky. Armed with the thunderbolt (Vajrayudha) and riding in a chariot whose speed exceeds that of the mind, he travels everywhere.

His valour is awe-inspiring. His exploits are many. He killed the demon Vrtra and released the waters imprisoned by him. He clipped the wings of the mighty mountains and made them behave. He recovered the cows of the gods that had been abducted by the demons. He is fond of Soma-drink. Being a war-lord, he became a symbol of the royal power. Hence warriors worshipped him before going to the battle-field.

Indra has often been equated with the Supreme God. His love and affection for his devotees has been eulogized. Scholars opine that Indra may: just represent the natural phenomenon of rain being released from the dark clouds as a result of being "bombarded by lightning and thunder"!

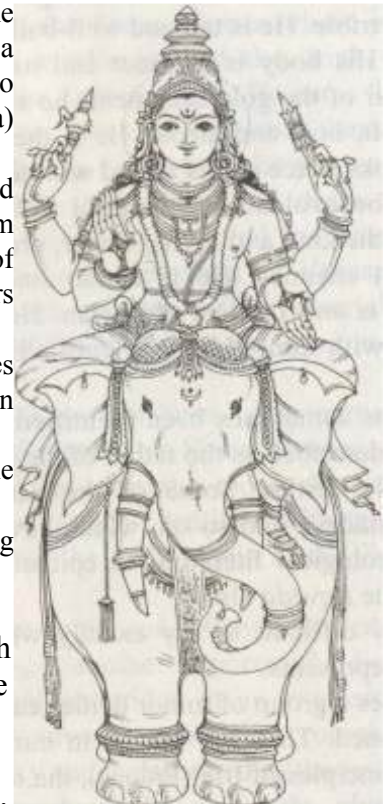
Indra's prestige gradually declined and he was relegated to a secondary place by the Pural)as, retaining however, his place as the king of gods.

In some of the temple sculptures, Indra is depicted in a human form with four arms, riding the celestial elephant Airavata.

Rudra and Rudras: Rudra is the god who howls or roars. He is terrible. He is tall and well-built. He has a long braided hair. His body is brilliant and its colour merges with the colour of the gold ornaments he wears. He wields the thunderbolt, bow and arrow. He is the god of storms. Though he looks fierce and is armed with terrible weapons, he is always benevolent and merciful to humanity. He is the protector, the kind and loving father, protecting humanity against its enemies. He is extraordinarily intelligent and wise. He is an excellent physician. He has thousands of medicines with him which can cure all the diseases of Humanity.

Rudra has sometimes been identified with Agni. He has also been described as the father of the Maruts, another class of Vedic deities. Some of the names like Siva, Kapardin, Mahadeva and so on, which have been used in the later mythological literature as epithets of Siva have been used in the Rgveda also.

It is very difficult to say exactly which aspects of nature Rudra represents.



Sometimes a group of minor deities called the Rudras is also mentioned. They are eleven in number. They are actually the principles of life (Pral:1as), the ten vital breaths and the mind.

Rudras are also mentioned as eight in number and the eight names-Bhava, Sarva, Isana, Pasupati, Bhlma, Ugra, Mahadeva along with Rudra-represent the eight aspects of Rudra-Siva in later literature.

Soma: Soma, also called as Indu or Soma-Pavamana, is one of the most important deities in the Rgveda. The entire ninth Mandala is devoted to his praise. He is the presiding deity of the Soma creeper whose juice is often used in sacrifices as offering and also drink. He is sometimes praised as the Supreme God. He cures the mortals of their diseases, gives them joy and leads them to immortal blissful worlds. It was because of the power he bestowed that Indra was able to do wonderful deeds and slay the demon Vrtra. He rules over the mind and activates speech. Hence he is sometimes described as Vacaspati, 'lord of speech'. It is he who makes ordinary mortals Rsis, wise sages. He creates the worlds, rules over mountains and rivers.

The name Soma has been used in the Rgveda for the deity that animates the Soma creeper, the juice of the creeper itself, as also the moon. In later literature, Soma has been practically identified with the moon itself. Scholars opine that the deity Homa of the Zend-Avesta is this Soma itself.

Surya: Surya or the sun, often identified with Aditya, Savitr and Pusan, is another important Vedic deity. He is extremely brilliant and rides in an exquisitely beautiful chariot drawn by seven horses. He is compared to a bird that flies in the sky and is described as the jewel of the sky. He gives light, produces day and night, gives power and strength to the living beings, makes them active and destroys their laziness and disease.

Savitr is the aspect of the sun before sunrise. He is golden all over. He establishes people in their respective places. He gives life and energy and guides people in the right path.

The famous Savitr. Gayatri Mantra is dedicated to this Savitr.

The nourishing and life-supporting aspect of the sun is personified and praised as Pusan. He is exceedingly beautiful. He destroys the evil ones with the discus he wears. He looks upon all with an equal eye. He is extremely generous and ever ready to protect.



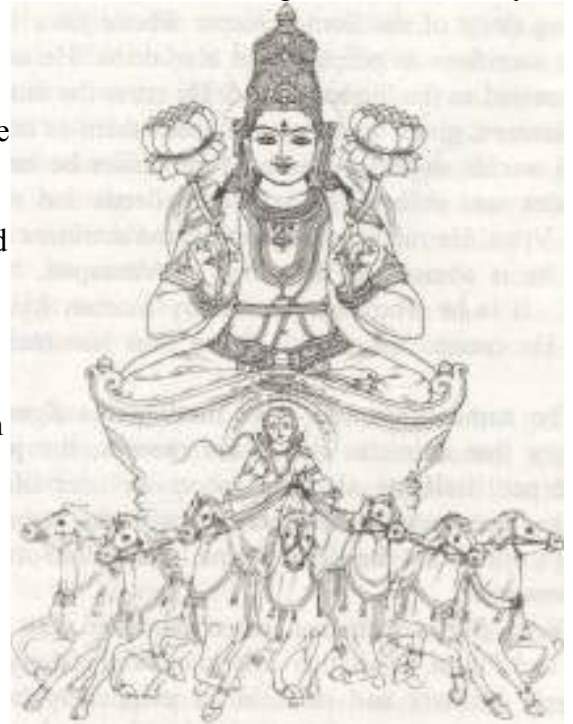
Varuna: Varuna 'the one who econompasses the whole world,' is one of the oldest Vedic deities. May be he is the personification of the sky; but he is also associated with clouds and water, rivers and ocean. He is sometimes clubbed with Mitra and praised (Mitravaruna).

Varuna is the king of the universe and lives in the highest world. His knowledge and power are unlimited. He has thousand eyes and oversees the whole world. Hence he is the lord of the moral law. He punishes those who transgress this law but forgives them out of compassion if they repent and pray. By activating Vayu, the lord of the wind, he sustains life by giving rain and crops.

Though Varuna was the chief deity in the beginning, he seems to have yielded his place later on to Indra and Prajapati.

In the subsequent mythological literature Varuna is described as the presiding deity of the western quarter and as the lord of oceans, water and aquatic animals. In some of the temples he is depicted as riding on a crocodile. In two of his four arms he holds the serpent and the noose (pasa). Sometimes he is pictured as riding in a chariot drawn by seven swans and holding the lotus, the noose, the conch and a vessel of gems in the four hands. There is an umbrella over his head.

Vasus: Vasus are a class of deities, eight in number, chiefly known as attendants of Indra. The word Vasu is derived from 'vas' ('to dwell,' 'to cause to dwell,' 'to shine') and hence Vasus are deities representing all spheres of extension or space, and height. They were perhaps personifications of nature and natural phenomena.



The eight Vasus are: Dhara (the earth), Anala (the fire), Ap (the waters), Anila, (the wind),. Dhruva (the polestar), Soma (the moon), Prabhasa (the dawn) and Pratyusa, (the light).

Vayu: Vayu is the god of, or personification of, wind, air or lifebreath (Pralaya). As the lord of the sky (Antariksha) he shares his power with Indra. He rides in a chariot drawn by two, ninety-nine, hundred or even thousand horses, (the number perhaps, depends upon his wish to produce an ordinary wind current or a storm or a cyclone!) His chariot announces his arrival with terrific roars. However, he himself is invisible. Like Indra he is also fond of the Soma juice. It is he who is the basis of all life here. Inside our bodies he works as the five vital airs (Pancaprana). Like Rudra, he is also a physician and can effect wonderful cures.

In mythology he is the ruler of the north-western quarter. He is described as blue in colour and as holding a fan and a flag in two hands, the other two hands showing the Abhaya and Varada Mudras (indicating protection and granting of gifts).

Visnu: It is rather strange that Visnu (i.e., 'one who pervades'), the Supreme deity of the Vaisnava tradition, the second of the Trinity and highly popular deity of later Hinduism, finds a secondary place in the Rgveda. He is a friend of Indra. He is a solar deity, an aspect of sun when he envelops the whole universe with his rays. The words Urugaya and Trivikrama, meaning one who has great strides or who covers the universe in three steps signify the sun as he crosses the sky in the three times of the day, viz., dawn, day and dusk. His abode has been highly eulogised. He is described as the personification of time. He is an eternal youth and extremely handsome. The sun is sometimes described as his discus. He is the creator and protector of the worlds. There is none equal to or superior to him. He is extremely kind and generous. He is easily pleased by the offerings made at the sacrifice also.

Visvedevas: Literally the word means 'all the gods.' Perhaps, all the gods left over without being specifically mentioned in prayers, are meant to be included under this word. But they gradually seem to evolve as a specific group like the Adityas or the Maruts. These deities are the protectors of Rta, the moral law. They destroy the enemies of their devotees, protect the good, give auspicious abodes and control like kings. They are ever young and handsome. They are easily pleased by devoted obeisance.

Later mythology describes them usually as ten in number: Vasu (dwelling place), Satya (truth), Kratu (will), Daksa (skill), Kala (time), Kama (desire), Dhrti (forbearance), Kuru (the ancestor of the Kurus), Pururavas (a being dwelling in the atmosphere), Madravas (cry of joy). These deities are said to be fond of funeral offerings.

Yama: Yama is one who restrains, who curbs, who controls. He was the first of men to die and to depart to the celestial world. He is the god of the dead and so the spirits of the departed dwell with him. He has two very fierce dogs, with four eyes and wide nostrils, which guard the path of the departed souls leading to Yama's kingdom.

In the mythological literature he is described as the god of death and the judge, Dharmaraja, meting out rewards and punishments to the souls of the dead brought to him. In this he is ably assisted by Citragupta, the recorder.

He is the ruler of the southern quarter, is green in colour, wears red garments, has a mighty mace and noose, and rides a he-buffalo.

THE TRINITY

Broadly speaking, Hindus can be divided into three main groups: Saivas or those who worship Siva, Saktas or those who worship Sakti (consort of Siva), and Vaisnavas or those who worship Visnu. However, popular Hindu theology, which has its roots in the ancient scriptures, adds another important deity, Brahma. The three-Brahma, Visnu and Siva-together form the Hindu Trinity.

Brahma creates the world, Visnu sustains it and Siva destroys it. This process of creation (srsti), preservation (sthiti) and destruction (pralaya) perpetually continues in that cyclic order.

If the world were a myth as some extreme forms of Advaita Vedanta philosophy aver, there would have been no theology and hence no theological problems. But the world being a fact of our day-to-day experience, cannot be explained away or wished away! Once we accept it as real-whatever may be the degree of reality we ascribe to it-the theological questions of creations and creator will have to be squarely faced and answered. This is what the various Hindu scriptures have attempted.

Three types of tendencies or characteristics seem to accrue to every created object. These have been technically designated as Gunas: Sattvaguna, Rajoguna and Tamoguna. These three Gunas in their purest form, are fundamental entities, the permutation and combination of which produce this world of phenomena. Of these, the Sattvaguna makes for light and lightness, goodness and purity, knowledge and wisdom. It can be likened to the centripetal force. Tamoguna, which is the antithesis of Sattvaguna, is responsible for all that is dark and heavy, evil and impure, ignorant and deluded. It is the centrifugal force as it were. It is the business of Rajoguna to maintain a delicate balance between these two opposing forces. Hence it has got to be in a

state of constant internal tension and activity. This restless activity is its chief characteristic and it manifests itself as passion and ambition in the psychological world.

The three deities of the Trinity, correspond to the three Gunas in the cosmic play of creation, preservation and destruction. Visnu represents Sattva, the power of existence and preservation. Siva represents Tamas, the power of annihilation. Brahma stands in between these two and represents Rajas. He symbolises the possibility of existence resulting from the union of opposites.

Brahma

Thus Brahma is the source, the seed, of all that is. He is, as his very name indicates, boundless immensity, from which space, time and causation originate, names and forms spring up. Philosophically, he is the first stage of manifestation of the notion of individual existence (AhaiIkara). Theologically, he is the uncreated creator (Svayambhu), the self-born first Person.

He has several designations which are as instructive as they are interesting. From the cosmological point of view he is the Golden Embryo (Hiranyagarbha), the ball of fire, from which the universe develops. Since all created beings are his progeny, he is Prajapati, 'the lord of progeny, as also Pitamaha, the patriarch. He is Vidhi, the ordinator, and Lokesa, the master of the worlds, as well as Dhatri, the sustainer. He is also Visvakarma, the architect of the world.

Hindu mythological literature describes Brahma as having sprung from the lotus originating from the navel of Visnu. Hence he is called Nabhija (navel-born), Kafija (water-born) and so on.

Curiously enough, the name Narayana ('one who dwells in the causal waters' or 'the abode of man') has been applied to him first and only later to Visnu.

Brahma, the creator, and SarasvatI, his consort, are the subject of several tales in our mythological literature. They can be summarised briefly thus:

(1) Brahma was born out of the golden egg produced in the boundless causal waters. His consort Vac or Sarasvati was manifested out of him. From their union were born all the creatures of the world.

(2) Brahma represents the Vedas and Sarasvati their spirit and meaning. Hence, all knowledge, sacred and secular, has proceeded from them.

(3) Once Brahma became the boar and raised the earth from beneath the waters and created the world, the sages and Prajapatis. (This story was later transferred to Visnu).

(4) The forms of tortoise and fish (later considered as Avataras of Visnu) have been attributed to Brahma also.

(5) The great sages Marici, Atri, Ailgiras and others are his 'mind-born' children. Manu, the Adam of the Aryan race, is his great-grandson.

(6) He is easily pleased by austerities and bestows boons on the supplicants, be they gods, demons or men.

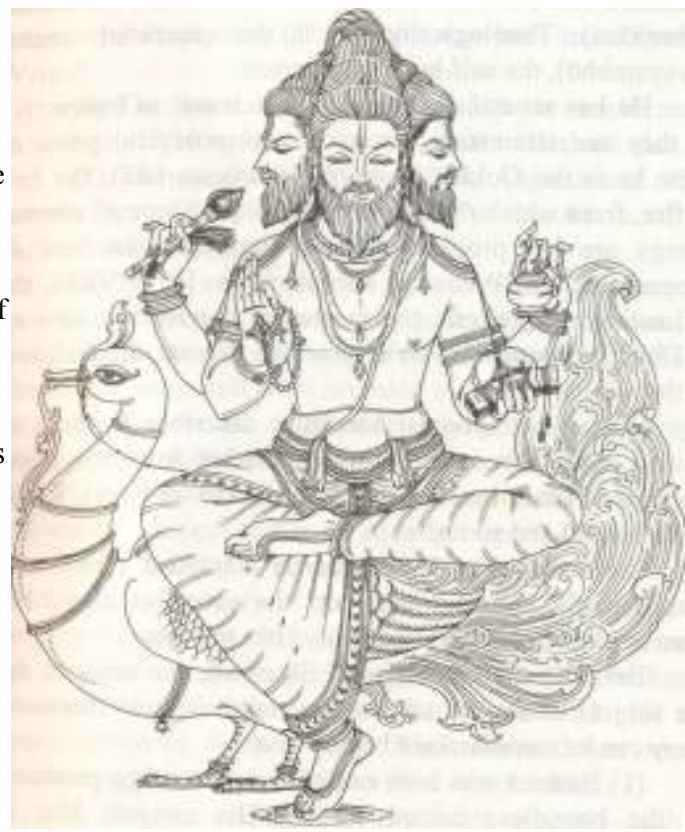
(7) He is the inventor of the theatrical art. Music, dance and stagecraft were revealed by him.

(8) He was the chief priest who performed the marriage of Siva with Parvati.

In spite of the fact that Brahma is God the Supreme in the creative aspect and is an equally important member of the Hindu Trinity, it is strange that there are no temples dedicated exclusively to him, the one at Puskar being the solitary exception. Notwithstanding the crude reasons given in some of the Pural.as for this loss of Brahma's prestige, some scholars opine*[* See The Cult of Brahma, by Tarapada Bhattacharya, pp.88-89.] that the Brahma cult was predominant in the pre-Vedic Hinduism and was superseded or suppressed by the later Siva- Visnu cults.

In fact, the evolution of the Sakti concept-each of the gods Siva and Visnu having his Sakti or Power as his consort-and the explanation that creation proceeds out of the combination of the god and his Sakti, has made Brahma superfluous.

The icon of Brahma has four heads facing the four quarters; and they represent the four Vedas, the four Yugas (epochs of time), and the four Varnas (divisions of society based on nature, nurture and vocation). Usually, the faces have beards and the eyes are closed in meditation. There are four arms holding different objects and in different poses. The arms represent the four quarters. The objects usually shown are: Aksamala (rosary), Kurca (a brush of Kusa grass), Sruk (ladle), Sruva (spoon), Kamandalu (water pot) and Pustaka (book). The combination and arrangement vary from image to image. The rosary represents time, and the water pot, the causal waters, from which all creation has sprung. So, Brahma controls time as well as the principle of causation. The Kusa grass, the ladle and the spoon being sacrificial implements, represent the system of sacrifices which is



the means to be adopted by the various creatures to sustain one another. The book represents knowledge, sacred and secular. He is the giver of all knowledge-arts, sciences and wisdom.

The poses of the hand (Mudras) are Abhaya (assuring protection) and Varada (granting boons).

The icon may be either in standing posture (standing on a lotus) or in sitting posture (sitting on a Harhsa or swan). Harhsa, his vehicle, stands for discrimination and wisdom.

Sometimes, Brahma is shown as riding in a chariot drawn by seven swans, standing for the seven worlds.

In temples exclusively dedicated to Brahma, his aspect as Visvakarma (the architect of the universe) is adopted. In this form he is shown as having four heads, four arms holding the rosary, the book, the Kusa grass and the water pot, and riding on his swan.

Every temple, be it of Siva, or Visnu, must have a niche in the northern wall for Brahma, and his image must receive worship every day since he is an important Parivaradevata (attendant of the Chief-deity).

THE TRINI'Y (Continued)

Visnu

Visnu, also known as Mahavisnu, is the second deity of the Hindu Trinity. He represents Sattvaguna and is the centripetal force as it were, responsible for sustenance, protection and maintenance of the created universe, Etymologically speaking, the word 'Visnu' means 'one who pervades, one who has entered into everything.' So he is the transcendent as well the immanent reality of the universe. He is the inner cause and power by which things exist.

Another name of Visnu which is extremely common and popular is Narayana. The word means:

- (a) One who has made the causal waters his abode;
- (b) One who is the abode of all human beings.
- (c) One who has made the hearts of human beings his abode;
- (d) One who is the final goal of all human beings.

The first interpretation has given rise to a description of Narayana which is common and popular, as follows:

After the destruction of the universe of the previous cycle and before the creation of the next, Narayana, the Supreme God, falls asleep on his bed of the great serpent Sesa (also called Ananta), which is floating on the waters of the ocean Ksirasamudra ('ocean of milk'). One of his legs is resting on the lap of his consort LaksmI, who is gently pressing it. When he is dreaming as it were, of the next creation, a lotus springs forth from his navel along with god Brahma seated on it. After waking tip, he instructs Brahma to proceed with the act of creation.

This is a highly allegorical picture. The ocean represents causal waters from which all life springs a concept not uncommonly found in other religions also. Or, since it is Ksirasamudra, the ocean of milk, it stands for the purest form of Prakrti or nature in its undifferentiated state, whiteness' indicating this purity.

Out of the several equivalents of the word Apas (water), is the word Amrta (nectar, signifying bliss also). Hence we can say that the Lord Narayana is floating on the ocean of bliss, which is as it should be.

The serpent Sesa or Ananta is said to have a thousand heads and is supporting the worlds on its hoods. Ananta, which literally means the 'endless' or 'infinite' actually stands for cosmic time which is infinite or endless. Created worlds come into being in time and are sustained in time. This is the meaning of the thousand hoods supporting the worlds. The thousand hoods, simply indicate the innumerable divisions of time.

The concept of the thousand hoods supporting the worlds can also lead to the interpretation that the serpent represents the cosmic space, in which everything exists.

The word Sesa is also significant. It actually means 'the remainder', 'what is left over at the end'. Since creation cannot proceed out of nothing, it is to be assumed that 'something' is 'left over' (sesa) from the previous creation, which forms the seed as it were, for the next. So, Sesa represents the totality of the Jivas or individual souls in their subtle form, left over from the previous cycle and needing more opportunities for regeneration.



Serpent can also represent Kama or desire which is always left over (sesa), even after acquisition and enjoyment of the desired object. This goes on until Moksa or final liberation. Hence, in a cosmic sense, it can stand for the desire of the Lord to proceed with the next cycle of creation after rest!

Visnu is always described as Nilameghasyama, of a dark blue hue like that of the rain-bearing cloud. Since the infinite empty space appears as deep blue in colour, it is but proper that Visnu the all-pervading cosmic power, be depicted as blue in colour.

The commonest form of the Visnu icon has one face, four arms holding Sahkha (conch), Cakra (discus), Gada (mace), Padma (lotus) and wears a necklace with the famous gem Kaustubha dangling on the lock of hair Srivatsa, on the left chest. He is also wearing a garland (of gems, or fragrant flowers) Vaijayanti by name.

The four arms represents the four quaters, hence, absolute power of the Lord in all directions. The Sahkha represents the five elements like the earth, water etc., Cakra stands for the cosmic mind, Gada indicates the cosmic intellect and the Padma points to the evolving world. Just as the lotus is born out of water and unfolds gradually in all its glory, this world also is born out of the causal waters and evolves gradually in all its splendour. Hence the lotus stands for the evolved world. This world can be created only by a combination of the five elements, the mind and the intellect. Hence the total meaning of this symbology would be that the Lord Visnu is the creator and master of this world.

The curl of hair, Srivatsa, represents all objects of enjoyment, the products of nature. The gem Kaustubha, resting on it, stands for the enjoyer. So, this world of duality consisting of the enjoyer and the enjoyed, is like an ornament for the Lord. The garland Vaijayanti is symbolical of the subtle elements (bhnta-tanmatras).

Sometimes two more weapons, Nandaka the sword (representing wisdom) and Sarilga the bow (representing the cosmic senses) are added to the arsenal of Lord Visnu.

AVATARAS (INCARNATIONS) OF LORD VISNU.

To ward off the extraordinary perils to which mankind is prone-maybe the visitations from the demons, maybe from the human malefactors-and to preserve the socio-ethical order, Lord Visnu whose duty it is to preserve this world, often incarnates himself Though such incarnations are popularly considered to be ten, there is no limit to their number. Nor are there any restrictions regarding the time and place of their appearance. Whenever Dharma declines and Adharma prospers He bodies Himself forth to restore the balance in the world.

In the Matsyavataara (Fish-incarnation), the Lord is said to have saved Manu (the progenitor of mankind) and the Saptarsis (the seven sages, mind-born sons of Brahma) along with their wives during the deluge. The world was repopulated through them later on.

Lord Visnu incarnated himself as the Kurma (the Tortoise) in order to support the mount Mandara which started sinking during the churning of the ocean (Samudramathana). The gods and the demons had jointly undertaken this adventure to get Amrta (nectar) from the ocean.

Next in the series is the Varahavataara (Boar-incarnation) in which the Lord killed the demon Hiranyaksa and lifted the earth out of the flood waters in which it had been submerged. This may be a symbolic representation of the extrication of the world from the deluge of sin by the power of the Supreme Being.

When Prahlada, the great devotee of Visnu was being severely tortured by his father, the demon Hiranyakasipu, (who was a non-believer in the existence of an omnipresent and omnipotent God), Narasimha (Man-lion) appeared, emerging out of the pillar shown by him and killed him. Being a combination of man (the best of higher creatures) and lion (the best of lower creatures) Narasimha represents the best of creation. Incidentally this also proves the omnipresence of God. Narasimha is especially the embodiment of valour which is a divine attribute and hence worshipped by rulers and warriors. His Mantra is said to be very powerful, capable of destroying enemies and exorcising evil.

When Bali the grandson of Prahlada conquered the three worlds, Indra was deprived of his heavenly kingdom. At the request of Aditi, the mother of Indra, Lord Vigm incarnated as Vamana (the Dwarf), a young



Brahmana boy, and approached Bali who was known for his munificence, for a gift of land that could be covered by three steps. With the first and the second he covered the earth and heaven, and with the third, he pushed down Bali to the netherworld. Hence he is also known as Trivikrama, one who encompassed the world with three big steps.



This myth teaches us that since even God had to resort to the dwarfs form while begging, one who begs makes himself small! Secondly, a true Brahmana can conquer the three worlds by the power of the spirit. These five Avatars have been referred to in the various sections of the Vedas.

The next five incarnations are in the human form.

Parasurama (Rama with the battle-axe) is the sixth Avatara. Born as the son of the sage-couple, Jamadagni and Renuka, he exterminated the tyrannical among the Ksatriyas led by Kartavirya, who were oppressing the people. Whether this story has any historical basis and represents the struggle for supremacy between the Brahmanas and Ksatriyas, it is difficult to say.

SrI Rama, the next incarnation, met Parasurama and absorbed his power into himself. Hence the latter is sometimes considered as avesavatara, an incarnation by the temporary possession of Visnu's powers.



SrI Rama, one of the two most popular incarnations of the Lord Visnu, comes next in the series. His story is too well-known to need any repetition. He typifies the ideal man. His story, the Ramayana has now become an immortal epic. His name is known as the 'Taraka-mantra,' the Mantra that takes one across the ocean of transmigration.





This list of the ten Avatars of Lord Visnu is by no means the standard one accepted by all. Taking Sri Krishna as Visnu Himself, he is not included in some lists. His place is taken over by Buddha. In some other lists, Buddha replaces Balarama. Iconographically speaking, Buddha seems to have disappeared from such lists only after the 15th century.

Strangely enough, the purpose of the Buddha-incarnation was to mislead men of low birth and genius, who had become too proficient in the sacred lore and were a threat to the supremacy of the gods! This looks more like a joke than a serious proposition. It is obvious that the Hindus sealed the fate of Buddhism in this country by absorbing Buddha into the pantheon of the Avatars.

Harsha, Satvata, Yajna, Dattatreya, Vedavyasa are some of the Avatars included in other lists, keeping the total as ten only. The number, however, rises sometimes to as high as twenty three.

CATURVYUHAS

Bhagavata or the Pancaratra religion, which preaches the cult of Visnu-Narayana, puts forth the theory that the Supreme Lord Visnu has four aspects of manifestation: (a) the Para or the supreme; (b) the Vyuha or the emanation; (c) the Vibhava or the incarnation and (d) the Arca or icon.

Para is the Supreme as He is, in all His glory. Vibhava represents the incarnations already dealt with. Arca is the descent of the Lord into the icon ceremonially installed and worshipped in the temples.

The Vyuhās or the emanations are four in number. Hence the term caturvyuhas, also called caturmurtis. They are: Vasudeva, Sankarsana, Pradyumna and Aniruddha. According to Vaisnava mythologies, while Sri Krishna is Vasudeva; his brother Balarama is Sankarsana. Pradyumna and Aniruddha are Krishna's son and grandson respectively. Historically speaking, it is possible that these Yadava heroes were, in course of time, apotheosised into these Vyuhās. Symbolically, Vasudeva represents Citta (mind-stuff), whereas Sankarsana stands for Ahankara (egoity), Pradyumna for Buddhi (intellect) and Aniruddha for Manas (mind). They represent the cosmic psychological evolution.

Later on, these Vyuhās were increased to as many as twenty-four. Iconographically, all these Vyuhās are identical in appearance except for the arrangement of the four emblems-Sankha, Cakra, Gada and Padma.

The Pancaratra theology often adds another aspect of the manifestations, viz., the Antaryamin (the indweller), which obviously, cannot be represented through icons.

MINOR INCARNATIONS

Hindu mythology abounds in stories of Lord Visnu's Avatars, which may be Purnavatas (full manifestations) like Sri Krishna, Amsavatas (partial manifestations) like Kapila or Avesavatas (temporary infilling of the divine power) like Parasurama. A few of these may now be dealt with.

Dattatreya:

He was the son of the great sage Atri and his wife Anasuya, one of the paragons of chastity in Hindu mythology. He was the originator of certain magical rites and the creator of the Soma plant. He was a teacher of non-Aryan people. Association with people of low birth and objects of pleasure, has made him ritually impure. But, learning and enlightenment have made him so pure that nothing can ever stain him. Being the incarnation of the Trinity, he is shown as having three heads, four hands and accompanied by four dogs of different colours which represent the four Vedas.

The Dattatreya concept may be an attempt at harmonising the three cults of Brahma, Visnu and Siva. It may also have been the medium through which non-Vedic cults were brought into the Hindu fold.

Dhanvantari:

Dhanvantari rose from the ocean, at the time of churning, holding the Amrta-kalasa (pot of ambrosia) in his hand. He is the originator of medical sciences. Reborn as the king of Kasl he brought medical science to the earth.

Vedas also mention a Dhanvantari, a god associated with herbs and medicines.

He is described as a handsome person holding the pot of ambrosia and seated in front of Visnu's insignias.

Hayagriva or Hayasrifa:

Yajnavalkya, the great sage, lost the Yajurveda as a result of his Guru's curse and performed severe penance. Sun-god, pleased by his penance, appeared before him as a deity with the horse's head and taught him the same Veda in another form. This section has come to be known as the Vajasaneyi Samhita (Vaji=horse). The origins of the Hayagriva Avatara (the deity with the horse's head) are perhaps found here.

Two demons Madhu and Kaitabha had stolen the Vedas and hidden them under water. Lord Visnu took the form of Hayagriva, dived to the bottom of the ocean and rescued them after killing the demons.

Hayagriva is the god of learning, akin to the goddess Sarasvati.

He is shown in the human form, with the horse's head, possessing four or eight arms" carrying the various weapons and emblems of Visnu.

Kapila:

Kapila, the son of Kardama and Devahuti was a great sage who reduced to ashes the sixty thousand sons of the king Sagara, just by a glance. Probably this story is at the back of his being identified sometimes with Agni. He taught Sankhya philosophy to his mother. .

Kapila icons usually have the hair dressed up as a crown (Jata-mukuta), a beard, four arms, two of which are in Yoga holding a pitcher and the other two holding Sankha and Cakra.

Mohini:

At the behest of the gods who had been deprived of the ambrosia by the demons during the churning of the ocean, Lord Visnu appeared as Mohini, the enchantress, who successfully duped the demons and distributed the nectar among the gods. Even Siva is said to have been bewitched by her beauty.

The story teaches us that immortality (Amrtatva) can be gained only by the conquest of delusion (Moha).

Mohini is shown as a beautiful young woman wearing colourful garments, decorated with ornaments and carrying a vase of nectar in hand.

Nara-Narayana:

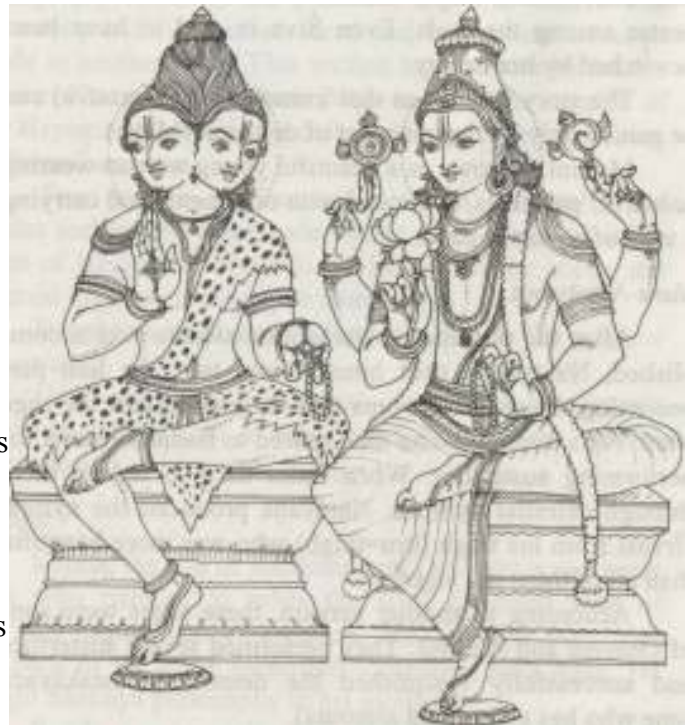
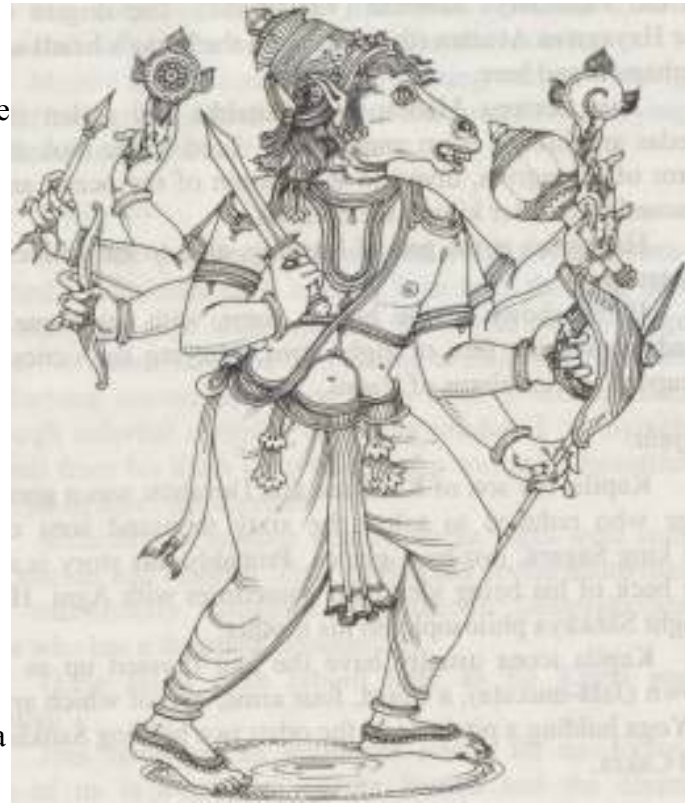
After the purpose of Narasimha-avatara was accomplished, Narasimha split himself into two, the lion part becoming the sage Narayana and the human part the sage Nara. Nara and Narayana then retired to Badarikasrama for performing austerities. When Indra tried to seduce them through celestial nymphs, Narayana produced the nymph Urvasi from his thigh (uru=thigh) who was more beautiful than all of them put together.

According to another version, these sages were sons of Dharma and Ahirhsa. They performed severe austerities and successfully vanquished the demon Sahasrakavaca (one who has a thousand armours).

These sages were reborn later as Sri Krisna and Arjuna.

This story has an important lesson for us. Everyone of us is a mixture of the human and the divine elements. The anti-human and the anti-divine demon is ever attempting to seduce us with his thousand wiles. To successfully vanquish him, we need to perform Tapas or austerity.

Nara-Narayana is represented either as a single person or as two persons. In the former case the icon may have two or four arms carrying the Japamala (rosary) or the usual emblems of Lord Visnu. In the latter case, Nara may be shown as having two heads



and two arms and wearing the deer skin. Narayana is depicted with the usual four arms carrying the emblems Sankha, Cakra, Padma and Japamala.

Vyasa:

Vyasa is a cosmic entity born in every age to propagate the scriptures.

The sage Krsna-Dvaipayana, the son of Parasara, is the well-known Vyasa of this age. He got that name since he collected all the extant Vedic hymns and divided them (vyas=to divide) into the four Vedas. He is the author of the great epic Mahabharata as also all the Puranas (mythologies) and the Brahmasutras.

In images, he is shown as of slender build, dark in complexion and with the hair dressed up as a crown. His four disciples Paila, Vaisampayana, Jaimini and Sumantu are also shown by his side.

Yajna:

Visnu has been identified with Yajna or sacrifice in early Vedic literature. The Bhagavata calls Varahavata as Yajna-varaha and identifies his limbs with the various parts of a sacrifice. In other mythological lore, he as Yajnesa, is described as the son of Ruci and Akuti. The entire universe which is in a constant state of flux is like a sacrifice and the Lord responsible for this creation is looked upon as the personification of that sacrifice. Hence he is Yajna or Yajnesvara.

His image has two heads, seven hands, three legs and four horns. The hands carry the sacrificial implements like Ajyapatra (vessel holding the ghee) Sruk, Sruva and Juhu (various kinds of spoons and ladles), apart from Sankha and Cakra.

Obviously this is a symbolical representation, the various limbs representing the various items of the sacrifice. The description is rather too technical to be dealt with in a small work like this.

OTHER ASPECTS OF VISNU COMMONLY WORSHIPPED

Jagannatha of Puri in Orissa is a Vaisnava deity which draws huge crowds; especially during the annual car festival. The image appears rather grotesque and is shaped out of a log and has prominent eyes. Once in twelve years the log-image is renewed, the log being brought every time mysteriously. The insertion of some ancient relic into the new image sanctifies it. It represents Sri Krsna with similar images representing Balarama and Subhadra (Krsna's sister).

Panduranga Vitthala commonly known as Vighala or Vithoba is the deity of the famous Visnu temple at Pandharpur in Maharashtra. In fact, the word 'Vigha' is a corrupted form of the word Visnu. Rakumabai (Rukmini) is his consort standing by his left side.

This is the form of the Lord Visnu revealed to a Brahmana, Pundali by name because of his intense devotion to his parents.

Ranganatha, along with Varadaraja of KancIpuram and Venkatesa of Tirupati, is the most popular aspect of Visnu worshipped in South India. The well-known temple at SrIrangam in Tamilnadu is the very heart of the Srivaisnava cult. This temple—at least the original icon is said to have been born out of the ocean and given by Sri Rama to Vibhisana. While carrying it from Ayodhya to Lanka, Vibhisana placed it on the ground at the present site, in order to rest a while. Unfortunately for him (and fortunately for others!) it got firmly fixed there!

The image is of the Yogasayana type (lying on the serpent-bed in Yoga) with only two hands, the right hand apparently supporting the head. While the left rests on the serpent-bed.

The lotus with Brahma, the Ayudhapurusas (the weapons in human form), the demons Madhu and Kaitabha who were killed by him, as also some sages like Bhrgu and Markandeya are often depicted along with the Lord.

Similar Yogasayana images are found in Srirangapatna of Kamataka and Tiruvananthapuram of Kerala where it is known as Padmanabha or Anantasayana.

Varadaraja, the king among the bestowers of boons, is another aspect of Lord Visnu which is very popular. Also known as Karivarada, it represents that aspect of the Lord responsible for saving Gajendra, the elephant king, from the death-clutches of the crocodile.

He is shown as riding on his vehicle Garuda and in the act of discharging the discus. The elephant Gajendra with its foot caught by the powerful teeth of the crocodile is also shown. Sometimes a human figure with its hands in obeisance is also shown near the crocodile, to represent the Gandharva (a demigod) who had been delivered from his curse which had resulted in his birth as a crocodile.

The temple of Sri Varadaraja at KancIpuram in South India is one of the most important and famous Visnu temples.

Venkatesa, also known as Venkatesvara Snnivasa or Balaji of Tirupati in Andhra Pradesh is perhaps the most popular of all the Hindu deities in our country and the temple on the Tirupati hills gets fabulous income. The word

Vengadam of Tamil origin signifies a hill. So Venkatesa is the Lord of the hill. The story goes that Lord Visnu as Varaha (the boar) decided to continue his stay on the earth and that Garuda brought down the hill of Vaikuntha to earth for the Lord's residence. Lord Srinivasa or Venkatesa, another aspect of Visnu, also manifested himself there at that time to reside on the earth for the good of mankind.

The image is said to be an Udbhavamurti (spontaneously manifested) and does not conform to known Agama traditions. As regards the exact nature and form of the image, doubts exist, some opining that it represents Harihara, and others considering it as Subrahmanya or even DevL

Visvaksena or 'the all-conquering' is an aspect of Visnu, which occupies the same place in Vaisnava tradition as Ganesa in the Saiva tradition. He is worshipped at the beginning of any undertaking, to avoid obstacles. He is shown with four hands, wearing Sankha, Cakra and Gada in three hands and the fourth exhibiting the Tarjanimudra (threatening finger pose). The right leg is usually hanging down from the pedestal.

Visvaksena is also depicted sometimes as the gatekeeper or chief attendant of Lord Visnu. He is shown standing on a white lotus and with long matted hair as also a beard. He represents the worldly sciences.

MINOR DEITIES ASSOCIATED WITH VISṬU

Garutman or Garuda, the mighty bird-vehicle of Lord Visnu is a minor deity invariably found in all the Vaisnava temples. He is described as the son of the sage couple Kasyapa and Vinata and as the younger brother of Aruna, the charioteer of Sun-god. The chief among his multifarious exploits is his bringing of the pot of nectar from Indra's heaven. It is precisely this that made Lord Visnu choose him as His vehicle.

Literally, the word Garuda means 'wings of speech'. He actually personifies Vedic knowledge. On his wings, as it were, Vedic Knowledge has come down to us, from the world of God.

The Garuda image is usually anthropomorphic. He is shown with a sharp beak, and two wings at the back. The hands may be eight or four or just two. Two of the hands are always in the adoration pose. In the others he carries the conch, wheel, mace, sword, snake and nectarpot. The image is usually installed right opposite the central shrine.

It may appear to be rather intriguing that Lord Visnu has a serpent as his couch and an eagle, its arch enemy, as his vehicle! This is to show that he is the Lord of balance and harmony which is an essential quality for one charged with the responsibility of sustaining this multifarious universe.

Another deity invariably found in the Visnu temples, especially in the South, is Hanuman the monkey-god. The Ramayana pictures him as a highly erudite, cultured and refined person. He is as strong as he is wise, and as devoted as he is strong and wise, a rare combination indeed.

He is represented in two postures: When in the company of Sri Rama, Sita and Lakshmana, he is shown standing humbly at a distance or sitting devotedly at the feet of Sri Rama. In shrines specially erected for him, he strikes a heroic pose, usually with the mace in his left hand and carrying the Sanjivini mountain in his right hand.

Apart from these, it is common to show the weapons of Lord Visnu also in human form. They are then called Ayudhapurusas (weapon-beings). The Ayudhapurusa may be male, female, or neuter, depending upon the gender of the word indicating it. For instance, Gada (mace) is a female deity whereas the Cakra (discus) is a neuter deity.

The Sudarsana-cakra is shown as a person. with a hexagon as his background, brilliant as fire and having four or eight or sixteen arms holding bow, arrow, trident, noose, goad and other implements as also weapons, apart from the usual Vaisnavite symbols. It is said to represent the cosmic mind, the will of the Lord to multiply as well as His infinite power to create and destroy the universe. The Sudarsana-mantra is said to possess the power to neutralize poisons and exorcise malignant spirits.

The Kaumodaki, the Gada (mace) of Lord Visnu is depicted as a female deity, with one face and two hands which are in the posture of adoration. It symbolises power and sovereignty.

No account of Lord Visnu will be complete without mentioning about the Salagrama, a blackish rounded and polished stone with a hole containing the fossils of tiny molluses, which is worshipped as an emblem of-His. There are several varieties of them representing different aspects of the Lord. Salagramas can be installed in temples but are usually worshipped in one's own home privately. Once it is kept at home, its worship becomes obligatory.

THE TRINITY (Continued)

Siva



Siva is the last deity of the Trinity. He is responsible for the dissolution of the universe. He is the embodiment of Tamas, the centrifugal inertia, the tendency towards dispersion and annihilation. Literally, Siva is one in whom the Universe 'sleeps' after destruction and before the next cycle of creation. All that is born, must die. All that is produced, must disintegrate and be destroyed. This is an inviolable law. The principle that brings about this disintegration, the power behind this destruction, is Siva.

Siva is much more than that. Disintegration of the universe ends in the ultimate thinning out, into a boundless void. This boundless void, the substratum of all existence, from which springs out again and again this apparently limitless universe, is Siva. So, though Siva is described as responsible for destruction, he is equally responsible for creation and existence. In this sense, Brahma and Visnu are also Siva. It is perhaps this identity that is revealed by some of the stories in the Puranas. If one story makes Siva speak from the womb of the infinite pillar of fire to Brahma and Visnu that they are his own aspects, other stories make Siva as being born from the brows of an angry Visnu or from Brahma who was intensely desiring to beget a son.

Though Siva is often called Rudra, especially in his terrific aspect, whether the two are identical or not has been a subject of discussion and even controversy. Many scholars are inclined to think that the Rudra of the Vedas and the Siva of the Puranas and Agamas are two different deities fused into one at a later date as cultural integration of the two races accepting them progressed. According to these scholars Siva the pacific deity is a non-Aryan god, 'more ancient' than the Vedic Rudra. Though the 'Aryan conquerors' despised and derided the Saivas and their Siva (apparently because of some of their mysterious rituals and practices) as the two races had to live together, rapprochement and consequent cultural reconciliation became inevitable.

Whatever may be the truth of these statements they are irrelevant to our study here, since we are more interested in discovering the significance of the symbology concerned, to enrich our lives.

Siva is worshipped both in the anthropomorphic aspect and as the Linga, the latter being the rule whereas the former is an exception. The most common of his pictures and images shows him as a very handsome youth, white as camphor. His limbs besmeared with ashes are strong and smooth. He has three eyes-the third eye being on the forehead between the eyebrows-and four arms, two of the arms holding the Trisula (trident) and Damaru (drum) while the other two are in the Abhaya (protection giving) and Varada (boon-giving) Mudras (poses). He has a crown of long matted hair from which flows the river Ganga. He also wears the crescent moon as a diadem. A tiger-skin and an elephant-skin adorn his body as his garments. There are serpents all over his body forming the necklace, the girdle, the Yajnopavita (sacred thread) as also arm-bracelets. There is also a garland of skulls round his blue neck.

Man, being what he is, cannot help super-imposing his own states on his gods too! Therefore it is but natural for him to conceive of Siva as a man with family. Parvati is his consort. Ganesa and Kumara (also known as Skanda or Subrahmanya) are his sons.

Then there is the large retinue forming a veritable zoo as it were! Nandi his vehicle bull, Bhrngi the Rsi with three legs and three arms, the mouse of Ganesa, the peacock of Kumara as also a host of ghosts, goblins and imps constantly capering round him-form his large retinue.

Though he has his headquarters in the icy mountains, the Himalayas, he is fond of roaming the earth, especially the burial grounds and cremation sites. All this is in perfect consonance with his nature as the Lord of destruction and dissolution.

Before embarking upon the explanation of all this, which is obviously symbolical, it is better to summarise first the various stories about Siva recounted in our mythological literature.

(1) Once Parvati, in a playful mood, closed his two eyes, and lo! the entire world was plunged in darkness. To save the worlds from this predicament, Siva willed a third eye in between his eyebrows, sending forth light, fire and heat. Later on, he opened this third eye-normally kept closed out of infinite mercy for humanity- to burn up Kamadeva, the lord of lust.

(2) When the celestial river Ganga, which was descending from the heaven to this earth, fell ferociously on Siva's head out of pride, he just got her locked up there! Only after much prayer and supplication by Bhaglratha (who was responsible for bringing the celestial river down to this earth) and due apologies by Ganga, did he allow her to stream out.

(3) When the Ksirasamudra, the ocean of milk, was being churned, one of the objects to rise was the cool crescent moon. Siva seized it and made it his diadem. When the deadly poison Halahala also rose and started destroying the worlds with its leaping tongues of fire, Siva gathered it on to his palm and drank it, thus saving the worlds. ParvatI, getting alarmed about the safety of her spouse, pressed his throat so that the poison could not go down into the stomach! It thus remained in his throat, lending its blue colour permanently to it.

(4) Being angered by Siva whose extraordinary beauty had attracted their wives, the Rsis of Darukavana tried to kill him through sorcerous rituals. Out of the sacrificial fire rose a tiger, a deer and a red-hot iron. Siva killed the tiger and wore its skin, caught hold of the deer with his left hand (which has remained there ever since) and made the iron one of his weapons.

(5) Other stories relate to his destroying the sacrifice of Daksa, his cutting off, of one of the five heads of Brahma for having spoken disrespectfully, his destroying the three cities built by the demon Tripurasura, his killing the elephant demon Gajasura and wearing his hide, his having granted to Arjuna as a boon the weapon Pasupatastra, his having become Ardhanarisvara to dispel the ignorance of his devotee Bhrngi, his appearing as a pillar of fire to teach a lesson to Brahma and Visnu, his vanquishing Yama, the god of death, to save his votary Markandeya, and so on.

An attempt can now be made to unravel this mysterious symbology of the Siva-picture. Siva is snow-white in colour, which matches wonderfully with that of his abode, the Himalayas. White stands for light that dispels darkness, knowledge that dispels ignorance. He is the very personification of cosmic consciousness. It may appear strange that Siva who represents Tamas (the force of darkness and destruction) is pictured as white, whereas Visnu who represents Sattva (the force of light and enlightenment) is pictured as dark! There is nothing strange in this since the opposing Gunas are inseparable. Hence Siva is white outside and dark inside whereas Visnu is the reverse of it.

The three eyes of Siva represent the sun, the moon and the fire, the three sources of light, life and heat. The third eye can also indicate the eye of knowledge and wisdom and hence his omniscience.

If the sun and the moon form his two eyes as it were, then the whole sky including the powerful wind blowing in it, forms his hair. That is why he is called Vyomakesa (one who has the sky or space as his hair).

Tiger is a ferocious animal that mercilessly devours its hapless victims. Desire, which consumes human beings, without ever being satiated, can be compared to a tiger. That Siva has killed the tiger and wears its skin as his apparel shows his complete mastery over desire.

The elephant being a powerful animal, wearing its skin implies that Siva has completely subjugated all animal impulses.

The garland of skulls (Mundamala) that he wears and the ashes of the funeral pyre with which he has besmeared his body indicate that he is the lord of destruction. The garland of skulls also represents the revolution of ages and successive appearance and disappearance of the human races.

Siva is the lord of Yoga and Yogis. He is often shown as sitting in deep meditation immersed in the enjoyment of the bliss of his own self. The water of the river Ganga represents this. Or it can represent Jnana, knowledge. Since Ganga is highly adored as a great purifying agent, it goes without saying that he whom it adorns, is the very personification of purifying or redeeming power.

The crescent moon stands for time, since measurement of time as days or months depends upon the waxing and waning of the moon. By wearing it as a diadem, Siva is showing us that even the all-powerful time is only an ornament for him!

And then, the snakes. The venomous cobras which symbolise death for us adorn his frame in all possible manner embellishing it further. He alone, to whom symbol of death is a decoration, can gulp down the deadly poison Halahala to save the worlds. All this points to one thing: he is Mrityunjaya, the conqueror of death! Coiled serpents

may also represent cycles of time in the macrocosm and the basic energy-akin to sexual energy-of living beings in the microcosm. So, Siva is the master of time and energy.

Ichtnographically Siva may have two, three, four, eight, ten or even thirty-two hands. Some of the various objects shown in these hands are: Trisula (trident), Cakra (discus), Parasu (battleaxe), pamaru (drum), Aksamala (rosary), Mrga (deer), pasa (noose), Danda (staff), Pinaka or Ajagava (bow), Khatvailga (magic wand) Pasupata (spear), Padma (lotus), Kapala (skull-cup), Darpana, (mirror), Khadga (sword) and so on. It is rather difficult to find a meaning for everyone of these items. However an attempt will be made to explain some of them.

The Trisula (trident) being an important weapon of offence and defence, indicates that Siva is the supreme ruler. Philosophically it can stand for the three Gunas or the three processes of creation, preservation and dissolution. Hence Siva the wielder of the trident is the master of the Gunas and from him proceed the cosmic processes.

It is said that while dancing the Tandavanrtya Siva sounded his Damaru (small drum) fourteen times, thereby producing sounds like a-i-un, r-Ir-k and so on, which are now known as the Mahesvarasutras, the fourteen basic formulae containing all the alphabets arranged in the most ingenious manner, facilitating innumerable grammatical processes. Hence the pamaru represents the alphabets, grammar (the science of language) or language itself. In other words it stands for all words-spoken or written or otherwise expressed-and hence for the entire gamut of all arts and sciences, sacred and secular. It also represents sound as such, the logos, from which entire creation has proceeded. By holding it in his hand, Siva is demonstrating the fact that the entire creation, including its various arts and sciences, has proceeded out of his will, his play.

If the Aksamala (rosary) shows that he is the master of spiritual sciences, the Khatvanga (magic wand with a skull fixed at one end) shows that he is an adept in occult sciences too. The Kapala (skull-cup) with which he drinks blood, is another symbol that points to his all-destroying power. The Darpana (mirror) indicates that the entire creation is just a reflection of his cosmic form.

The icon of Siva is never worshipped as the Mulamurti (original, installed in the sanctum sanctorum), but only as an Utsavamurti (the icon used during festivals for taking out in a procession).

SIVALINGA

As regards the Linga, the emblem of Siva universally venerated, some explanation is needed. Literally Siva means auspiciousness and Linga means a sign or symbol. Hence the 'Sivalinga' is just a symbol of the great God of the universe ('Mahadeva') who is all-auspiciousness. As already explained 'Siva' means the one in whom the whole creation sleeps after dissolution. 'Linga' also means the same thing-a place where created objects get dissolved during the disintegration of the created universe. Since, according to Hinduism, it is the same God that creates, sustains and destroys the universe, the Sivalinga represents symbolically God Himself.

Whether the Sivalinga is a phallic emblem or not, is a moot point. Phallic cults have existed in all countries and in all civilizations. It is quite likely that the phallic cults of an aboriginal civilization were absorbed into Hinduism and the worship itself was elevated to honour the Father Mother-Principle of creation. This is one view. That it is a remnant of the Vedic Yupastambha, to which sacrificial victims used to be tied, is another view. According to this view, the Hindu temple is a metamorphosis of the Vedic Yagasala (sacrificial shed). That it is an imitation of the Buddhist stupa is another guess that is sometimes hazarded but not substantiated, since Sivalingas have been found even in the pre-Buddhistic civilizations of Harappa and Mohenjo Daro.

Since God is beyond name and form, and since we cannot conceive of an abstract principle like Him, without the aid of concrete symbols, a rounded surface is perhaps the nearest approach to him.

Sivalingas may be Cala (movable) or Acala (immovable). The Cala-Lingas may be kept in the shrine of one's own home for worship or prepared temporarily with materials like clay or dough etc., for worship and dispensed with after the worship or worn on the body as Istalinga as the Virasaivas do. The Acala-lingas are those installed in temples. They are usually made of stone and have three parts. The lowest part which is square, is called Brahmabhaga and represents Brahma, the creator. The middle part which is octagonal, is called Visnu-bhaga and represents Visnu, the sustainer. These two parts are embedded inside the pedestal. The Rudrabhaga which is cylindrical and projects outside the pedestal is the one to which worship is offered. Hence it is called Pujabhaga.

The Pujabhaga also contains certain lines technically called Brahmasutra, without which the Linga becomes unfit for worship.

ASPECTS OF LORD SIVA

Comparable to the Vyuhās or emanations of Lord Viṣṇu, is the Pañcanaṇa form of Lord Śiva. Pañcanaṇa or the five-faced one represents the five aspects of Śiva vis-a-vis the created universe. The five faces are respectively Hana, Tatpuruṣa, Aghora, Vamaḍeva and Saḍyojata. The face Hana turned towards the zenith, represents the highest aspect and is also called Saḍasiva. On the physical plane, it represents the power that rules over ether or sky and on the spiritual plane, it is the deity that grants Mokṣa or liberation. Tatpuruṣa facing east, stands for the power that rules over air and represents the forces of darkness and obscuration on the spiritual plane. Aghora, facing south and ruling over the element fire, stands for the power that absorbs and renovates the universe. Vamaḍeva facing north, ruling over the element water, is responsible for preservation. Saḍyojata, facing west represents the power that creates.



Iconographically, all the five aspects are shown in different ways.

There are several other aspects in which Lord Śiva is depicted or worshipped. These can be broadly divided into the following categories: (1) Saumya or Anugraha Murti; (2) Ugra, Raudra or Samhara Murtis; (3) Nr̥tta or Tandava Murti; (4) Dakṣinaṃmurti; (5) Lingodbhavamurti; (6) Bhikṣatanamurti; (7) Haryardhamurti; (8) Ardhanarisvaramurti.

Peaceful form of Śiva as also the form showing mercy and grace belong to the first group. The forms showing grace or granting boons to Candesa, Nandiṣvara, Viḡṇeṣvara or Ravana belong to this category.

All terrific aspects can be classed under the second group. Kankala Bhairava represents Śiva who cut off the fifth head of Brahma for having reviled him and who had to wander as a beggar for twelve years to get rid of that sin. Gajasuraṁvadhāmurti represents him as killing the demon Nila (an associate of Andhakasura) who had assumed the form of an elephant.

Tripurantaka-murti depicts him as destroying by his arrow, the three cities of iron, silver and gold built on the earth, in air and in heaven by the three sons of Andhakasura who had become almost invincible because of these three impregnable shelters. Sarabheṣāmurti pictures Śiva as a Sarabha (an imaginary animal more ferocious than the lion) destroying the Narasir̥ḡha form of Viṣṇu, a story obviously conceived by the Saivites to assert the superiority of their Lord over Viṣṇu! Kalari-murti portrays him as vanquishing Yama, the god of death, who wanted to take away the life of Markandeya, a great devotee of Śiva. Kamantakāmurti illustrates him as destroying Kama, the god of lust, by the fire emitted through his third eye. Andhakasura-ṁvadhāmurti shows him as vanquishing Andhakasura and later on, on supplication, conferring on him the commandership of the Gaḡas (dwarf attendants). Andhaka became Bhr̥ḡgisa.

Lord Śiva is a great master of dance. All the 108 modes of dancing known to the treatises on dancing have come from him. It is said that he dances every evening in order to relieve the sufferings of creatures and entertain the gods who gather in Kailasa in full strength. (Hence he is called Sabhapati, the lord of the congregation.)

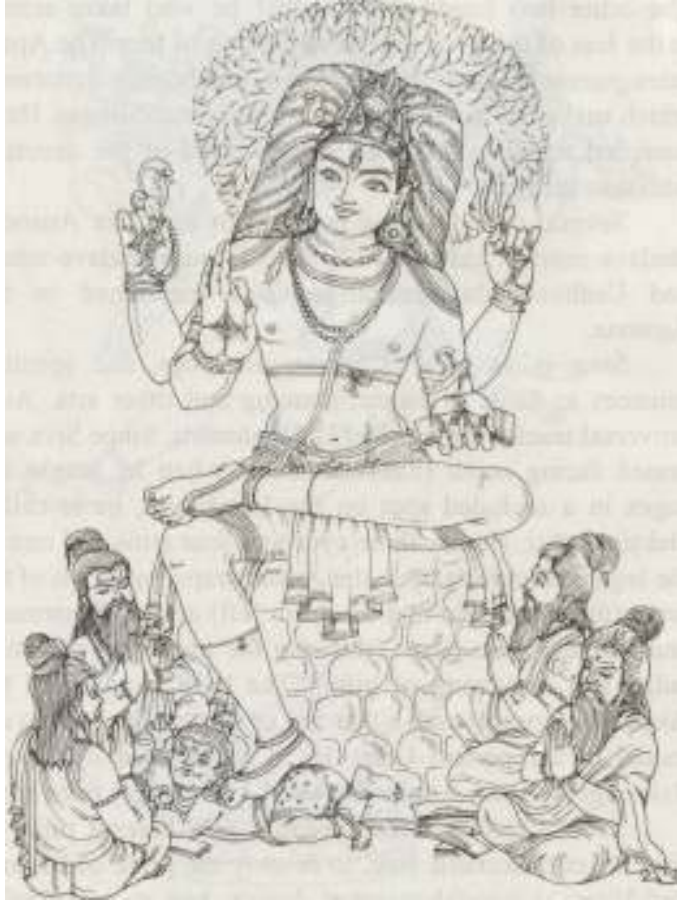
Only nine modes of dancing are described of which the Nataraja aspect is the most well-known. The Nataraja icon shows him with four hands and two legs, in the posture of dancing. There is the Damaru (drum) in the upper right hand and fire in the left. The lower right hand is in Abhayaṃmudra (pose of protection) and the left is pointing towards the uplifted left foot. The left foot is resting on the demon Apasmaraṃpuruṣa. The whole image may or may not be surrounded by a circle of blazing fire.

Siva's dance indicates a continuous process of creation, preservation and destruction. The Damaru represents the principle of Sabda (sound) and hence Akāṣa (ether), which proceeds immediately from the Atman and is responsible for further creation or evolution. Fire represents Pralayaḡni, the fire that destroys the world at the time of dissolution of the world, and hence symbolises the process of destruction. Thus damaru and fire represent the continuous cycle of creation, preservation and destruction. The other two hands indicate that he who takes refuge at the feet of the Lord will have nothing to fear. The Apasmara-ṃpuruṣa (Apasmara=epilepsy) symbolises ignorance which makes us lose our balance and consciousness. He is trampled upon by the Lord for the good of the devotees who take refuge.

Siva's dance indicates a continuous process of creation, preservation and destruction. The Damaru represents the principle of Sabda (sound) and hence Akāṣa (ether), which proceeds immediately from the Atman and is responsible for further creation or evolution. Fire represents Pralayaḡni, the fire that destroys the world at the time of dissolution of the world, and hence symbolises the process of destruction. Thus damaru and fire represent the continuous cycle of creation, preservation and destruction. The other two hands indicate that he who takes refuge at the feet of the Lord will have nothing to fear. The Apasmara-ṃpuruṣa (Apasmara=epilepsy) symbolises ignorance which makes us lose our balance and consciousness. He is trampled upon by the Lord for the good of the devotees who take refuge.

Several other dancing postures of Siva like Anandatandava-murti, Uma-tandava-murti, Tripura-tandava-murti, and Urdhva-tandava-murti are also mentioned in the Agamas.

Siva is as great a master of Yoga and spiritual sciences as he is of music,



dancing and other arts. As a universal teacher he is called Dakshinamurti. Since Siva was seated facing south (daksina=south) when he taught the sages in a secluded spot on the Himalayas, he is called Dakshinamurti. He has three eyes and four arms and one of the legs is trampling upon the Apasmarapura. Two of the arms (the front right and the front left) are in Jnanamudra and Varadamudra poses (showing the imparting of knowledge and bestowing of gifts). The back hands hold the Aksamala (rosary) and, either fire or serpent. He is the very model of the perfect Guru. He is surrounded by several Rsis eager to learn Atmavidya (Self-knowledge) from him.



Siva is said to have

appeared as a blazing pillar of fire, of immeasurable size, to destroy the pride of Brahma and Visnu. Lingodbhavamurti depicts him as manifesting in the heart of the Linga. The image has four arms. Brahma and Visnu stand on either side adoring him.

The Bhiksatanamurti shows Siva as a naked Bhairava, begging his food in the skull cup. It is almost the same as the Kankalamurti.

The Haryardha-murti, also called as Hari-hara and Sankaranarayana, has Siva on the right half and Visnu on the left. A fusion of these two aspects into one god is an obvious attempt at a happy reconciliation of the warring cults of Siva and Visnu.

The Ardhanarisvara (half man and half woman) form with Parvati as the left half represents the bipolar nature of the created world and hence the need to look upon woman as equal and complementary to man.

MINOR DEITIES ASSOCIATED WITH SIVA

There can be no Siva temple without Nandi, the recumbent bull placed in front of the shrine. Nandi or Nandikesvara may be depicted exactly like Siva-with three eyes and two hands holding the Parasu (battle axe) and Mrga (the antelope). But the other two hands are joined together in the Anjali pose (obeisance). More commonly he is shown as a bull-faced human being or just as a bull.

The Puranas describe him as born out of the right side of Visnu resembling Siva exactly and given as a son to the sage Salankayana who had practised severe austerities. Other versions describe him as the son of the sage Silada who got him by the grace of Siva.



Nandikdvāra, also known as Adhikaranandi, is the head of the Ganas of Siva and also his Vahana (carrier vehicle).

Symbolically, the bull represents the animal instincts, especially the sex, and Siva's riding on it reflects his absolute mastery over it.

Then comes Bhrngi, the sage, who was singularly devoted to Lord Siva, and was elevated to the retinue of Siva's abode. The sage was so fanatical in his devotion to Siva that he did not care even for Parvati, his consort! When Parvati merged herself into the body of Siva and Siva thus became Ardhanarisvara, Bhrnga was still so bigoted that he became a Bhrnga (=bee) and bored through the centre of the Ardhanarisvara form to complete his circumambulation! Hence the name Bhrngi. Siva, of course, made him realise his mistake.

Virabhadra is another deity associated with Siva. He is the personification of Siva's anger manifested during Daksa's sacrifice because of the contemptuous treatment meted out to him. Siva is said to have created him out of a hair plucked out from his head. Virabhadra successfully destroyed Daksa's sacrifice and humiliated all the gods who had assembled there. He is usually shown with three eyes and four arms holding bow, arrow, sword and mace. He wears a garland of skulls. The face is terrific. Bhadrakali, his counterpart created by Parvati, is sometimes shown by his side. Siva temples may have a small shrine dedicated to him, located usually in the south-east.

Next comes Candesvara, a human devotee raised to the status of a deity, by Lord Siva because of his intense devotion. He is a fierce deity holding weapons of war and destruction like the bow, arrow, trident, chisel, noose and so on. Though independent shrines dedicated to him are not uncommon, he is usually installed in every Siva temple in the north-eastern corner, facing south. Devotees believe that he can act as a messenger and mediator interceding with the Lord on behalf of the devotees. Hence supplication before him is a duty of every devotee visiting the Siva temples.

Other attendants of Siva are the Ganas, also known as Pramathaganas or Bhutaganas (demigods or malignant spirits). If they are not propitiated, they can do harm.

SAKTI OR THE DIVINE POWER AS THE GODDESS

The universe that we see and experience is a bundle of energy, both packed and unpacked. This is the discovery of modern science, which incidentally, has demolished the distinction between matter and energy. According to it, there is one basic energy behind all forms of matter and energy. However, it seems to be still far off from discovering the relationship between matter on the one hand, and, mind and life on the other. Are they also, though apparently poles apart, manifestations of the same basic energy? Could it be that the same energy or matter, at one level of vibration is called 'matter', at another, 'mind' and yet another, 'life'? Modern science or the modern scientists, devoting most of their attention to the manifest material universe may not even be prepared to concede this possibility! Hindu philosophy, based on the Vedānta and a group of works based on the Vedānta and more commonly known as the Tantras postulates exactly this! The source and sustenance of all creation, whether at the level of matter or life or mind, is one and one only. It is Sakti (energy). Brahman (the Absolute) of the Vedānta and Sakti or DeVI of the Tantras are identical. When that 'energy' is in a static condition, with neither evolution nor involution, when the universe to be created is not even in a seed-form as it were, it is called Brahman. When it starts evolving into this creation, sustains it and withdraws it back into itself, it is called Sakti. If Brahman is the coiled serpent in sleep, Sakti is the same serpent in motion. If Brahman is likened to the word, Sakti is its meaning. If Brahman is like fire, Sakti is its burning power. The two are inseparable: one in two and two in one.

In the Hindu mythological literature, as also in the Tantras, this energy is always pictured as a female deity, the Devi, as the consort of its counterpart male deity. Each member of the Trinity has his Sakti or Devi as his consort: Sarasvatī of Brahma, Lakṣmī of Viṣṇu and Parvatī of Siva. However, the mother-cult that has evolved over the last few centuries, is predominantly centred round Parvatī, the consort of Siva.

Mother-worship and mother-cult are not alien to the Vedic religion as some suggest. The concept of Aditi, the mother of gods, personification of nature and the Ambhrinisukta as also the Rātrisukta of the Rgveda clearly contain the origins of mother-worship.

Sarasvati

Sarasvati is the Sakti, the power and the consort of Brahma the creator. Hence she is the procreatrix, the mother, of the entire creation.

Literally Sarasvati means 'the flowing one'. In the Rigveda she represents a river and the deity presiding over it. Hence, she is connected with fertility and purification. Here are some of the names used to describe her: Sarada (giver of essence), Vagisvari (mistress of speech), Brahmi (wife of Brahma), Mahavidya (knowledge supreme) and so on. It is obvious that the concept of Sarasvati, developed by the later mythological literature is already here. The 'flowing one' can represent speech also if taken in an allegorical sense. Hence Sarasvati represents power and intelligence from which organized creation proceeds.

She is considered as the personification of all knowledge arts, sciences, crafts, and skills. Knowledge is the antithesis of the darkness of ignorance. Hence she is depicted as pure white in colour. Since she is the representation of all sciences, arts, crafts and skills she has to be extraordinarily beautiful and graceful. Clad in a spotless white apparel and seated on a lotus seat, she holds in her four hands a Vina (lute), Aksamala (rosary) and Pustaka (book). Though these are most common, there are several variations. Some of the other objects shown are: Pasa (noose), Ankusa (goad), Padma (lotus), Trisula (trident), Sankha (conch), Cakra (discus) and so on. Occasionally she is shown with five faces or with eight hands. Even three eyes or blue neck are not uncommon. In this case she is the Mahasarasvati aspect of Durga or Parvati.

Though no separate carrier vehicle is mentioned, Hamsa or swan, the vehicle of Brahma, her spouse, is usually associated with her also. In popular mythological literature and pictures, a peacock is also shown as her carrier vehicle.

Coming to the symbology: Being the consort of Brahma the creator, she represents his power and intelligence, without which organized creation is impossible. To show that this intelligent power is stupendous and absolutely pure, she is pictured as white and dazzling.

As usual, the four arms show her unimpeded power in all directions or her all-pervasiveness.

Being the goddess of learning, it is but proper that Sarasvati is shown holding a book in her left hand. The book represents all areas of secular sciences. Mere intellectual learning, without a heart tempered by higher feelings, sentiments and emotions, is as dry as saw-dust. So she holds a Vina (lute) on which she actually plays, to show the need for the cultivation of fine-arts. Then there is the Aksamala (rosary) held in the right hand. This symbolises all spiritual sciences or Yoga including Tapas (austerities), meditation and Japa (repetition of the divine name). By holding the book in the left hand and the rosary in the right hand she is obviously teaching us that spiritual sciences are more important than secular sciences.

The peacock with its beautiful plumage stands for this world in all its glory. Since the attractions of the world lead the spiritual aspirant astray, the peacock can actually symbolise Avidya (ignorance or nescience). On the other hand the swan, which is supposed to possess the peculiar power of separating milk from water, stands for Viveka (wisdom, discrimination) and hence for Vidya (knowledge). Though it is true that Vidya or Paravidya (spiritual illumination) alone can give us Moksha (beatitude), Avidya signifying secular knowledge – the sciences and arts of the world need not be and should not be neglected. As the Isavasya Upanisad (11) puts it (Avidyaya mrtyum tirtva vidyamrtamasnute', we transcend hunger and thirst through the secular sciences and then alone can obtain immortality through the -spiritual sciences. It is to teach this great truth to us that Mother Sarasvati has chosen the two carrier vehicles, the swan and the peacock.



Lakshmi

For obvious reasons, Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune, is more sought after than Sarasvati, the goddess of learning.



Being the power and consort of Vishnu, the preserver, she is represented as the power of multiplicity and the goddess of fortune, both of which are equally necessary in the process of preservation.

'Sri' or 'Lakshmi', as depicted in the Vedas, is the goddess of wealth and fortune, power and beauty. Though there is scope for the supposition that Sri and Lakshmi are two separate deities, the descriptions of them are so identical, that we are tempted to conclude that they represent one and the same deity. Some scholars opine that 'Sri' was a pre-Vedic deity connected with fertility, water and agriculture. She was later fused with Lakshmi, the Vedic goddess of beauty.

In her first incarnation, according to the Puranas, she was the daughter of the sage Bhrgu and his wife Khyati. She was later born out of the ocean of milk at the time of its churning. She, being the consort of Vishnu, is born as his spouse whenever he incarnates. When he appeared as Vamana, Parasurama, Rama and Krishna, she appeared as Padma (or Kamala), Dharani, Sita and Rukmini. She is inseparable from Vishnu as speech from meaning or knowledge from intellect, or good deeds from righteousness. He represents all that is masculine, and she, all that is feminine.

Lakshmi is usually described as enchantingly beautiful and standing on a lotus, and holding lotuses in each of her two hands. It is because of this, perhaps, that she is named as Padma or Kamala. She is also adorned with a lotus garland. Very often elephants are shown on either side, emptying pitchers of water over her, the pitchers being presented by celestial maidens. Her colour is variously described as dark, pink, golden yellow or white. While in the company of Vishnu, she is shown with two hands only. When worshipped in a temple-separate temples for Lakshmi are rather rare-she is shown seated on a lotus throne, with four hands holding Padma, Sankha, Amrtakalasa (pot of ambrosia) and Bilva fruit. Sometimes, another kind of fruit, the Mahaliilga (a citron) is shown instead of Bilva. When shown with eight hands, bow and arrow, mace and discus are added. This is actually the Mahalakshmi, an aspect of Durga.

We can now attempt an explanation that is behind this highly symbolical picture. If Lakshmi is pictured as dark in complexion, it is to show that she is the consort of Vishnu, the dark god. If golden yellow, that shows her as the source of all wealth. If white, she represents the purest form of Prakriti (nature) from which the universe had developed. The pinkish complexion, which is more common, reflects her compassion for creatures, since she is the mother of all.

Her four hands signify her power to grant the four Purusharthas (ends of human life), Dharma (righteousness), Artha (wealth), Kama (pleasures of the flesh), and Moksha (beatitude).

The lotuses, in various stages of blooming, represent the worlds and beings in various stages of evolution.

The fruit stands for the fruits of our labours. However- much we may toil and labour, unless the Mother is gracious enough to grant the fruits of our labour, nothing will be of any avail. If the fruit is a coconut-with its shell, kernel and water-it means that from her originate the three levels of creation, the gross, the subtle and the extremely subtle. If it is a pomegranate or a citron, it signifies that the various created worlds are under her control and that she transcends them all. If it is a bilva fruit which, incidentally, is not very tasty or attractive, but which is extremely good for health-it stands for Moksha, the highest fruit of spiritual life.

Amrtakalasa also signifies the same thing, viz., that she can give us the bliss of immortality.

In some of the sculptural depictions of Lakshmi, the owl is shown as her carrier-vehicle. It looks rather odd and strange that the goddess of fortune and beauty should have an ugly bird, the very sight of which is considered inauspicious, as her carrier! Once the symbolical significance of this oddity is unravelled, we will be in a better position to appreciate the poor bird and its compassionate mistress!

The word in Sanskrit for the owl is Uluka. Uluka is also one of the names of Indra, the king of gods! Hence Lakshmi being the goddess of fortune could not have found a better person to ride on, than the king of gods, who personifies all the wealth, power and glory that a living being can aspire for in life. At the same time, here is a warning administered to the seekers of secular wealth, instead of spiritual wealth, by comparing even the glory of Indra to the ugliness of an inelegant and partially blind bird.

Based on the beautiful description given in the Bhagavadgita (2.69) we can be generous enough to compare our owl to the Sthitaprajna, the man of steady wisdom. Then, the symbol would mean that Mother Lakshmi is the mistress of spiritual wisdom. If we are not so generous, then, we can learn a lesson from it in another way, viz., 'Do

not shut out your eyes to the light of wisdom coming from the sun of knowledge!' Out of consideration for mankind, the all-compassionate Mother has kept this personification of ignorance under her control.

SAMUDRAMATHANA (Churning of the Ocean)

It may be interesting and even instructive to digress a little and deal with the story of Samudramathana (churning of the ocean of milk). Indra, the king of gods, lost his all to the demons, due to the disrespect shown out of pride, to a great sage Durvasas. Lord Vishnu advised him to make up with his enemies (the demons) and with their help, to churn the ocean of milk, out of which Amrta (ambrosia) could be got. By drinking it, the gods could become immortal and regain their lost sovereignty. Accordingly, the gods and the demons started churning the ocean, making the Mandara mountain as the churning rod and Vasuki, the great serpent as the rope. Vishnu took the form of a gigantic tortoise (Kurma) to support the mount Mandara from sinking. The first product of this joint venture and adventure was Halahala, the most deadly poison! Siva the auspicious one, swallowed this, thus saving the worlds from sure destruction. Then were produced Kamadhenu (the wish-yielding cow), Uccaisravas (the white horse), Airavata (the elephant), Kaustubhamani (the matchless jewel), Kalpavrksha (the wish-fulfilling tree), Lakshmi (the goddess of fortune), Sura or Varuni (the goddess of wine) and Dhanvantari (the physician of the gods) bearing the vessel of Amrta (the ambrosia) in his hands. The Rsis took away the cow Kamadhenu, Bali (the king of demons) cast his eye on the horse Uccaisravas, Indra (the king of gods) accepted the elephant Airavata and got the tree Kalpavrk~a planted in his garden in heaven. Vishnu chose to wear the jewel Kaustubha on his chest whereas Lakshmi chose Vishnu's chest as her dwelling. The gods chose Sura who had been, strangely enough, rejected by the demons. Contravening the original agreement that the Amrta should be shared by both the groups equally, the demons forcibly snatched away the pot from Dhanvantari's hands to appropriate the entire quantity for themselves. Selfishness and greed, however, led to disagreement, discontent and conflict. Taking this opportunity Vishnu took the form of Mohini, the enchantress, lured the vessel of ambrosia into his hands and cleverly managed to distribute its contents among the gods only. Then the inevitable happened. Being intoxicated by the new strength gained thus, the gods fell upon the demons, vanquished them and regained their lost sovereignty.

This myth has great lessons for us. In order to get the greatest good of the greatest number, the saner elements of the society should influence the masses to bury their hatchet, sink all their petty differences and make a coordinated and cooperative effort to achieve it. Since the task is stupendous, the effort will have to be equally stupendous. The early results of all such joint ventures need not always be good or pleasant. Due to conflict of personalities and clash of interests which naturally arise in the field of joint ventures, it is Halahala that appears first and not Amrta. This deadly poison starts destroying all the parties involved in the conflicts irrespective of who is right or who is wrong! Hence out of sheer necessity, the entire society should unite and appeal to the leaders to save it. Any true leader of the society, worth the name, will, like Siva the auspicious one, voluntarily and willingly come forward risking his life to assimilate this poison and save the society from sure destruction. Once these conflicts are resolved and the efforts are redoubled, Lakshmi signifying Abhyudaya (well-being, fortune) and Amrta signifying Nissreyasa (moral and spiritual elevation ultimately leading to beatitude) are bound to arise from the firmament of their joint adventure. But, again, contrary to the covenant, if the selfish and belligerent groups of the society try to appropriate to themselves all the fruits of the common labours, God, the law-giver and justice personified, will thwart their efforts. The good shall and will vanquish the evil.

This story can be interpreted at the subjective level also. Anyone who is tired of the vicissitudes of life and is hankering for peace and bliss should seek it only in the highest spiritual enlightenment. Amrta signifies just this enlightenment. To get this, an all-out effort will have to be made. The sense-organs which usually pull the mind down and create confusion, conflicts and heart-burns, should be tactfully mobilised in this effort even as the demons were used by the gods. Spiritual life is a long struggle. Meditation is actually mind-churning. Hence, this process will inevitably throw up the deadly poison hidden in the recesses of the mind as passions and prejudices, which try to destroy the every process of Sadhana (spiritual efforts). An intense and earnest prayer to God, Siva, will save the situation by getting it sublimated. The conquest of Mara by the Buddha or Satan by Christ, can be understood in this light. Once the worst is over, the spiritual aspirant will gradually start reaping the benefits of his efforts in the form of Siddhis (powers), psychic or otherwise. Kamadhenu and Kalpavrkhas can mean such powers. This will be crowned with success when he gets a vision of the all pervading cosmic energy (Lakshmi) resulting in immortal bliss (Amrta).

ASPECTS OF LAKSHMI

Eight forms of Lakshmi, known as Astamahalakshmi, are recognized in iconographical works. Out of these, Gajalakshmi is the most popular. She is usually figured on the lintels of door frames. She is seated on an eight petalled lotus, has four hands' and is carrying a lotus, a pot of nectar, a bilva fruit and a conch. Behind her two elephants are shown pouring water over her from pots held in their trunks.

When the same goddess has two hands, she is called Samanyalakshmi, or Indralakshmi.

If she is depicted with two lotuses in two hands, and the other two hands display the Abhaya and Varada mudras, she is

designated as Varalakshmi.

The other forms are not so common.

EIGHT SAKTIS OF VISNU

The protecting power of Vishnu has eight aspects and each of these is pictured as a goddess.

Sridevi is the goddess of wealth and fortune. Bhudevi, representing the earth, and often with Srdevi, as the junior consort of Vishnu, stands for sovereignty over the earth. Sarasvati signifies learning. Priti is love personified. Klrti and Santi give fame and peace whereas Tusti and Pusti grant pleasure and strength.

ALAKSMI

Alakshmi is the opposite number of Lakshmi She is misfortune personified. She was also born during the churning of the ocean. Since she appeared earlier than Lakshmi and hence elder, she is also called Jyestha (the elder one). A sage, Dussaha (=the unbearable) by name, married her. According to another version, it was the sage Kapila. Adharma (unrighteousness) is her son. She is pictured as an old hag riding an ass. She has a broom in her hand. A crow adorns her banner. Her image finds a place in some temples. When propitiated, she can dispel evil and grant prosperity!

Sometimes Jyesthadevi is identified with Lakshmi herself.

Since the created world is a mixture of opposites and things happen in cyclic order both fortune and misfortune are the two sides of the same coin. Being part and parcel of this creation and hence of our life, misfortune is no less divinely ordained than fortune. It is perhaps to teach us this great fact of life that even misfortune has been deified.

Parvati

Parvati is the power and consort of Siva, the god of disintegration and destruction. An overwhelming majority of the goddesses of Hinduism are aspects and variations of Parvati. The names by which she is known or worshipped are too numerous to mention. If some of the names like Parvati, Haimavati, Girija and Dakshayani indicate her origin from the Himalayas or Daksa (one of the forefathers of mankind), other names like Siva, Mrdanti, Rudrani and Sarvani stress her aspect as the spouse of Siva. Still other like Aparna and Uma have specific references to certain stories in the Pauranic literature.

One of the earliest references to this deity is found in the Kenopanisad (3.12) where she is mentioned as 'Uma Haimavati' enlightening Indra, the king of gods, about Brahman, the Absolute or God. This reference is enough to conclude that the worship of this goddess is very ancient.

According to the Pauranic accounts, in her 'first' incarnation, she was Dakshayani, the daughter of Daksa and Prasuti, and married to Lord Siva. Unable to understand Lord Siva's greatness, Daksa once reviled him and started harbouring hatred towards him. When he undertook the performance of a great sacrifice, the notable exception among the dignitaries invited was Siva himself. Much against the advice of her spouse Dakshayani went to the sacrifice uninvited and being slighted, ended her life by igniting herself through the fire of yoga. Hence she came to be known as San, the chaste one. She was next reborn as Parvati, the daughter of Himavan, and Mena. After performing intense austerities she succeeded in pleasing Siva and making him accept her again as his consort.

During the performance of these severe austerities, she refused to eat even dry leaves to sustain herself and hence got the appellation Aparna. Her mother Mena unable to see her dear daughter languishing by austerities, tried to dissuade her by the words, 'Uma' (=my dear, don't do like this!) which became her another name (Uma). Being the daughter of the Himalayas (the abode of snow) she has to be Gauri (the white one). As the mother of the universe she is Amba and Ambika, both the words meaning 'mother'.

Like her consort Siva, she also has two aspects: the mild and the terrible. As Parvati or Uma she represents the mild aspect. In this aspect she is usually shown with Siva. . Then she has only two hands, the right one holding a blue lotus and the left hanging loosely by the side. The image is richly decorated. When represented independently she is shown with four hands, two hands holding red and blue lotuses and the other two exhibiting the Varada and Abhaya Mudras.



Though all the female deities are called Saktis of their male counterparts, the words 'Sakti' and 'DevI' are more particularly- or even exclusively-used to denote the Sakti of Siva, the innumerable aspects of Parvati. Considering Siva as Mahadeva, the Supreme God, Parvati represents his power by which the universe is created, sustained and destroyed.

The Himalayas represent the Akasa or ether, the first fundamental substance. Mena stands for intelligence. Hence Parvati their offspring, represents the conscious substance of the universe. That is why she is also called Uma (=light, the bright one).

At the subjective level, Uma-Haimavatl represents Brahmavidya or spiritual wisdom, by which union with Siva or God, is attained.

Being the consort of Siva, who is Rudra, the terrible, she also has her terrible aspects which need a separate study.

It is interesting to note that the Vaisnava symbols Sankha and Cakra-are often shown in her hands also. Though the Puranas describe her as the sister of Vishnu, it is possible that Vishnu is considered as the active power of Siva and hence these symbols in the hands of the Devi. This surmise is strengthened by the fact that in the Haryardha-murti of Siva, the left half is Vishnu and in the ArdhanarIsvara form, Devi forms the left half.

ASPECTS OF PARVATI

Sapta-matrkas:

According to the Durgasaptasati, one of the basic texts on the Mother-cult, when Kausiki Durga was fighting the demon Raktabija-whose blood, if spilled, could produce demons similar to him-she manifested out of herself seven emanations. These are usually called the Saptamatrkas or the 'Seven little Mothers'. They are BrahmI (or Brahmani) Mahesvari, Kaumari, VaisnavI, VarahI, NarasimhI and AindrI (or Indral)I). As their very names indicate, they are the Saktis of Brahma, Isvara, Kumara (Skanda), Vishnu, Varaha, Narasimha and Indra. Hence they have the same forms, weapons and vehicles as their lords. Since the DevI, according to the same work, was formed out of the combined energies of all the gods, this theory of the Saptamatrkas becomes intelligible to us.

Sometimes, NarasimhI is substituted by Camul)qa (or Camundi). Along with the original deity-called Durga Mahalakshmi they are counted as eight.

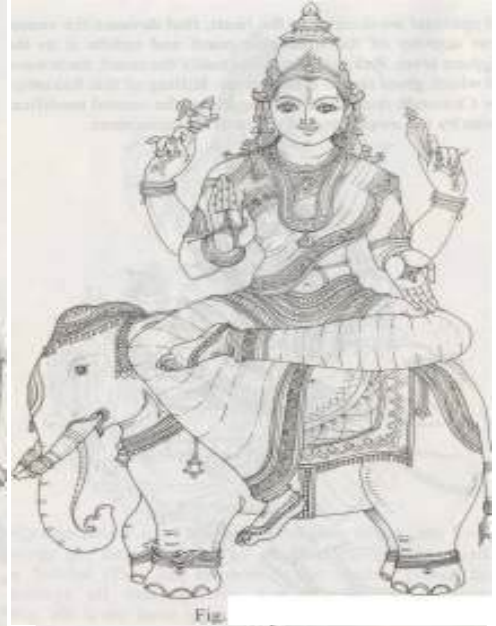


Sometimes, an esoteric interpretation is given by the followers of Tantrasastra, with regard to these seven matrkas. BrahmI, according to them, represents the primordial Nada, the energy in which even the first throb has not yet appeared. This is the unmanifest sound (Logos), the origin of all creation. It is the same as the substance or energy represented by the Pranava (Om). When BrahmI creates the universe, the power of Vaisnavi gives it a definite shape. The symmetry, beauty, organisation and order in the universe are the work of Vaisnavi. Mahesvari stands for the power that individuality to the created beings. She resides in the hearts of all and makes them play, like the dolls mounted on a machine. KaumarI, the ever youthful deity, represents the ever present force of aspiration of the evolving soul. She is 'Guruguha, (Guruguha being one of the names of Kumara or Skanda whose energy she is), the 'Guru' (guide, teacher) in the 'Guha' (the cave of the heart, the intellect). Varahl is the all-consuming power of assimilation and enjoyment. Because of her, the living beings get their food and all physical enjoyments. AindrI or Indrani symbolises the terrible power that destroys all that opposes the cosmic law. Camunda (Fig. 30) is the force of concentrated awareness, the power of spiritual awakening in the heart, that devours the ceaseless activity of the



present force of aspiration of the evolving soul. She is 'Guruguha, (Guruguha being one of the names of Kumara or Skanda whose energy she is), the 'Guru' (guide, teacher) in the 'Guha' (the cave of the heart, the intellect). Varahl is the all-consuming power of assimilation and enjoyment. Because of her, the living beings get their food and all physical enjoyments. AindrI or Indrani symbolises the terrible power that destroys all that opposes the cosmic law. Camunda (Fig. 30) is the force of concentrated awareness, the power of spiritual awakening in the heart, that devours the ceaseless activity of the

immature mind and uplifts it to the highest level. Raktabijasura is actually the mind, each wave of which gives rise to other waves. Killing of this Raktabija by Camunda means the destruction of the mental modifications by the awakening of spiritual consciousness.



These deities are generally represented as red in colour and with two hands, holding a skull and a lotus. However, since they are Saktis of the above-mentioned gods, they are shown more often as female replicas of the male deities.



Sometimes each deity is assigned a tree as specially sacred to it. For instance: Udumbara (fig tree) for Kaumarī, Asvattha (peepal tree) for Vaiglavī and the Karafija (Indian beech) for Varahi.

They are usually grouped together with Ganesa and Virabhadra flanking on either side and shown on panels in the Siva temples. Occasionally they have a separate shrine built for them. The order or arrangement varies according to the effect desired. If the safety of the village is desired Brahmī is installed in the centre. If increase in the population is the goal, Camunda occupies the central place.



Dasamahavidyas:

Ten aspects of Sakti are sometimes described in Tantric works. They are termed 'Dasamahavidya's. These are the representations of transcendent knowledge and power, the sources of all that is to be known.

The first is Kaī, the goddess of time, that destroys everything. Tara, the second, is the power of the golden embryo (Hiranyagarbha) from which the universe evolves. She also stands for void or the boundless space. The third is Sodasi. The word literally means 'one who is sixteen years old.' She is the personification of fullness, of perfection. Bhuvanavarī, the fourth Vidya, represents the forces of the material world, whereas Bhairavī the fifth, stands for desires and temptations leading to destruction and death. Then comes Chinnamasta, the naked deity holding her own severed head in hand and drinking her own blood! She simply represents the continued state of self-

sustenance of the created world in which are seen continuous self destruction and self-renewal, in a cyclic order. Dhumavati, the seventh, personifies the destruction of the world by fire, when only smoke (Dhuma) from its ashes remains. She is sometimes identified with Alakshmi or Jyesthadevi. The eighth Vidya, Bagala, is a crane-headed goddess, and represents the ugly side of living creatures like jealousy, hatred and cruelty. Matangi, the ninth, is the embodiment of the power of domination. The tenth and the last, Kamala, is the pure consciousness of the self, bestowing boons and allaying the fears of the supplicants. She is identified with Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune.

Durga

Durga is, perhaps, the most widely worshipped aspect of Sakti. An entire Puraṇa, the Devībhagavatam, has been dedicated to her. Another work, more wellknown than the Devībhagavatam, but containing practically the same material in a concise form, is the Devīmāhātmyam. It is also known as the Durgasaptasatī or Candi, and forms a part of another wellknown Purana, the Markandeyapurana. This work is so highly venerated that every verse of it is considered to be a Mantra (sacred formula) of the Devī and its repetition is believed to confer whatever boons the votary prays for.

Literally 'Durga' means one who is difficult to approach, or, difficult to know. Being the personification of the totality of the powers of the gods, she is naturally difficult to approach or to know. However, being the Mother of the universe, she is the personification of tender love, when supplicated.

Out of the several aspects of the Sakti put forward by this work, Yoganidra ('meditation-sleep') comes first. She is the power of sleep, taking recourse to which, Lord Vishnu rests between two cycles of creation. She is praised as responsible for the creation, sustenance and withdrawal of the universe. She is the mysterious power, the very personification of knowledge, wisdom and memory. She is pleasant and beautiful. At the same time she is terrible also. This combination of the opposite qualities is possible only for her. She is described as wielding several weapons like the bow, arrow, sword, discus and trident.

The next is Mahisasuramardini, the deity who took shape as a result of the pooling together of the powers of all the gods, who had been oppressed by the demon Mahisasura. Vishnu, Siva and Brahma were incensed by hearing the accounts of the misdeeds of Mahisasura and the Devī was born out of their wrath, followed by the wrath of the lesser divinities. The powers of these gods formed her limbs and the exact duplicates of their weapons formed her arsenal. Armed with these formidable weapons and riding on a fierce lion, she challenged Mahisasura and destroyed him along with his army.

This story is followed by an exquisite hymn which combines in itself both poetic excellence and devotional fervour and insight.

She is the power inscrutable, by which the whole universe is permeated and energised. She is the personification of all wealth, power, beauty, as also virtues. She is the embodiment of Yajna (sacrifice), Paravidya (the highest knowledge concerning the spirit) as well as Aparavidya (knowledge of the secular sciences). It is she who bestows wealth-both material and spiritual-dispels difficulties, and annihilates the evil ones. Her beauty as well as her valour, is incomparable.

The gods could not enjoy their freedom for long. Very soon, they were overpowered by the demons Sumbha and Nisumbha. So they had to run to the Himalayas and supplicate the Devī again. This hymn, wellknown as the 'Aparajitastotra,' praises her as the 'unconquered.' Her immanence in all the living beings is the main theme of this hymn. The powers and activities of all beings are manifestations of only her power.

In response to this prayer, she manifested herself as Kausikī Durga, emanating from the body of Parvatī, who herself became Kālī the dark one, after this manifestation.

The world-bewitching beauty of Durga attracted the attention of Sumbha and Nisumbha who sent proposals of marriage through a serf. Unfortunately for them, in a moment of 'weakness and foolishness' she had vowed to marry



only him who would vanquish her in battle. All attempts at forcibly dragging her away ended in disaster for the demons. Heads rolled, the intervention of giants like Dhumralocana, Canda, Munda and Raktabija not with standing. Kali, the fierce black goddess who emerged from the DevI's forehead, beheaded Canda and Munda and thus won the name Camunda for herself. Only the battle with Raktabija was longdrawn needing some special efforts by the DevI since he had the mysterious power to multiply himself through the drops of blood spilled in the battle. Even the Saptamaq-kas who came out of her body to battle, seemed helpless. It was Kali who managed to spread her extensive tongue and drink away all the blood gushing out of Raktabija, thus preventing the emergence of more demons and enabling Durga to exterminate him. The rest was easy. Nisumbha was easily put to death after a mockery of fight. Sumbha being exasperated by now, accused her of taking the help of 'others!' Laughing derisively, the DevI withdrew all her emanations and manifestations into herself, showing that she was always the One without a second. In the ensuing battle, Sumbha the lord of the demons, was easily killed, thus ridding the worlds of a great terror.

This is followed by another piece of prayer, an enchanting poetical hymn, which is as simple as it elegant. Known as the 'NarayaIstuti' it starts with fervent appeal to the Mother by the grateful gods to be benign and gracious. The hymn describes her as the mistress and the mother of the whole creation. She is the physical universe. She is the mysterious power of Visnu (VaisnavIsakti), the original cause, as also the power that deludes beings. It is only by pleasing her that one can hope to get spiritual emancipation. All arts and sciences as also womankind, are her manifestations. She is residing as the intellect in the hearts of human beings. She is the all-devouring time. She is the very personification of all that is good and auspicious. She is ever engaged in protecting her children. The Saptamatrkas are really her aspects. Kali, the terrible, with a garland of human skulls round her neck, is also another of her aspects. When pleased, she can remedy all diseases. If displeased, she can destroy all that we love and like to possess. Her votaries are always free from troubles. She is the Supreme Truth described in all the scriptural works.

The work also describes her other manifestations like VindhyavasinI (one who lives in the Vindhyas), Raktadanta (of red teeth), Sataksi (of hundred eyes), SakambharI (sustainer of vegetables), Durga (slayer of demon Durgama) BhIma (the terrible) and BhramarI or Bhramaramba (having the form of bees).

The DevI as depicted in this work has three major manifestations: Mahakali, Mahalakshmi and MahasarasvatI. These aspects should not be confused with the Pauranic deities, ParvatI, Lakshmi and SarasvatI. They are actually the three major manifestations of the One Supreme Power MahesvarI, according to the three Gunas (Tamas, Rajas and Sattva).

The first, Mahakali, has ten faces and ten feet. She is deep blue in colour, like the gem Nilamani. She is bedecked with ornaments and wields in her ten hands, the following weapons and objects: sword, discus, mace, arrow, bow, iron club, lance, sling, human head and conch. Being the personification of the Tamasic aspect of the DevI, she is also the Yoganidra, who has put Lord Vishnu to sleep. It is to her that Brahma prayed, requesting her to leave Vishnu so that the latter could destroy the demons Madhu and Kaitabha.

She is the personification of Maya, the mysterious power of Lord Vishnu. Unless she is pleased and voluntarily withdraws, the Lord in us will not awake and destroy the powers of evil which are trying to destroy us. This seems to be the import of the story of Brahma, Madhu and Kaitabha.

Mahalakshmi, the second, the Rajasic aspect of the DevI is described as red in colour like the coral. She holds in her eighteen hands the rosary, battle-pot, cudgel, lance, sword, shield, conch, bell, wine-cup, trident, noose and the discus Sudarsana. Being 'born' out of the combined wraths and powers of all the gods, she is the personification not only of the powers but also of the will to fight the evil forces. That is why she is shown as red in colour, the colour of blood, the colour of war. It is she who destroyed Mahisasura. The story of Mahisasura has several implications. Mahisasura, the he-buffalo, represents the jungle law that might is right. He is the ruthless brute force that does not brook any opposition where selfish ends are concerned. And he succeeded even against the gods; but only when they were divided. But he fell before their combined powers and the will to fight, which is exactly what the DevI, MahisasuramardinI, represents. The lesson of this story at the social level is too obvious to need an explanation. Nor can we ignore its social implications. At the subjective level, Mahisasura stands for ignorance and stubborn egoism. Its subjugation and conquest are possible only when the Sadhaka (spiritual aspirant) pools all his energies together and fights it with a tenacious will. Since God helps him who helps himself, the intervention of the divine power in his favour is always there.

MahasarasvatI is the third deity representing the Sattvic aspect of the DevI. She is bright like the autumn moon and has eight hands in which she holds the bell, trident, ploughshare, conch, pestle, discus, bow and arrow. It is she who manifests out of the physical sheath of ParvatI and hence known as Kausiki Durga. She is the very personification of physical perfection and beauty. She is the power of work, order and organization.

The section dealing with her exploits is the longest. Dhumralocana, Canda, Munda, Raktabija, Nisumbha and Sumbha are the chief demons destroyed by her; All these demons known as Asuras, are archetypes of highly egoistic people who revel in a life of the pleasures of the body and the sense-organs. Symbolically they represent various stages and states of egoism. If Dhumralocana ('the smokyeyed') stands for the grossest state of ignorance and egoism, Raktabija represents -a more subtle state which multiplies itself and our troubles! While Munda is the low profile of our egoism (munda=the low), Canda is the more horrible side of it (canda=fierce). Sumbha and Nisumbha signify more enlightened aspects of egoism (Sumbh= to shine).

DhUmrlocana was destroyed by a Hunkara, by a mere frown! Canda and Munda were too mean to be handled by the DevI directly. Hence KaI, the horrible, finished them at her behest. RaktabIja required more skilful handling. The source of his strength was destroyed first before destroying him. As for Nisumbha and Sumbha, the DevI was obliged to give them a straight fight.

Lower states of ignorance and egoism as typified by DhUmrlocana, Canda and Munda, should be destroyed by sudden bursts of energy and rough handling. More crafty states which result in endless multiplication of desires that is what Raktabija signifies-should be tactfully handled by going to the root, by suppressing them as soon as they arise. 'Enlightened egoism,' if one can use such an expression, which is egoism all the same, needs a straight fight. It may be a long drawn fight and Devi's grace is absolutely necessary for success.

Aspects of Durga mentioned in the Puraifas and Agamas are legion. For instance: Sailaputri, Kusmanda, Katyayani, Ksemailkari, Harasidhih, Vanadurga, Vindhyavasini, Jayadurga and so on. They are of greater interest in iconography and to the supplicants who can get different types of desires fulfilled by worshipping the different aspects.

Images of Durga can have four or eight or ten or eighteen or even twenty hands. The eyes are usually three. The hair is dressed up as a crown (called Karandamuku!a). She is gorgeously dressed with red cloth and several ornaments. Among the objects held in hand, the more common ones are-conch, discus, trident, bow, arrow, sword, dagger, shield, rosary, winecup and bell. She may be shown as standing on a lotus or on a buffalo's head or as riding a lion.

Lion, the royal beast, her mount, represents the best in animal creation. It can also represent the greed for food, and hence the greed for other objects of enjoyment which inevitably leads to lust. To become divine (Devatva) one should keep one's animal instincts under complete control. This seems to be the lesson we can draw from the picture of the Simhavahini (the rider of lion).

Kali

Of all the forms of the Hindu pantheon, that of Kali is perhaps the most enigmatic to the modern mind. Who will not recoil in horror and disgust from the form of a dark nude woman wearing an apron of human hands and a garland of human heads, especially if she is also holding a freshly severed human head and the chopper used in the slaughter, dripping with blood? Throughout its history, mankind has been baffled by profound symbology. More so when it does not conform to its own 'sweet and refined' standards. Even when one particular group or cult successfully assimilates it and starts revering it, other groups or cults continue to abhor it. It is natural for one group to abhor the symbols of all others, forgetting conveniently that the 'other groups' are doing the same! The picture of the 'Slain Lamb' or the cultus of the 'Sacred Heart' are just two illustrations to show this. On the other hand, a close look at such symbols will not only dispel our ignorance about them but can also produce positive admiration. Is not the water of the sea, which appears as dark blue or green from a distance, really colourless and transparent when examined at close quarters?

The word 'Kali' comes from the wellknown word Kala, time. She is the power of time. Time, as we are all well aware, is all-destroying, all-devouring. That is why the Lord says in the Gita (11.32) that He is time which has grown to infinite proportions and is destroying the worlds. A power that destroys has got to be depicted in terms of awe-inspiring terror.



Let us now turn to the Kall imagery as normally I found in the scriptures, pictures and icons. The background is a cremation ground or a burial ground or a warfield, showing the dead bodies including the mutilated ones. She herself is standing in a challenging posture, on a 'dead' body, which is her own spouse, Siva himself. If Siva is pure white, she is deep blue in colour bordering on blackness. She is completely naked, except for an apron of human hands. She is wearing a garland of fifty human heads or skulls. Her luxuriant hair is completely dishevelled. She has three eyes and four hands. In her upper hands she is holding a freshly severed and bleeding human head, as also the sword (or chopper) used in the carnage. The two lower hands are in the Abhaya and Varada Mudras. Her face is red and the tongue protruding.

The background or the setting is in complete harmony with the theme. The severed head and the sword are graphic representations of destruction that has just taken place.

God is said to have created this universe and then entered into it. (Taittiriyaopanisad 2.6). So the universe becomes a veil, a cloak for the divinity. When that is destroyed, the divinity remains unveiled. This is the meaning of Kall being naked. She is hence termed 'Digambara' ('clad in space'), having the vast limitless space itself as her only vesture.

Being the embodiment of Tamas, the aspect of energy responsible for dispersion ad infinitum producing limitless void, a void that has swallowed up everything, she is black. She represents the state where time, space and causation have disappeared without any trace as it were. Hence she is black.

The hand represents the capacity for work. Hence the apron of severed hands can signify that she is so pleased with the offerings of our works and the fruits thereof that she wears them on her body.

The hand can also stand for kinetic energy. Therefore, severed hands can stand for potential energy, the energy that has stopped all outward manifestation, and yet is tremendously powerful, ready to manifest itself when desired.

The dishevelled hair, for which she is called 'Muktakesi,' bespeaks her untrammelled freedom.

And then, the garland of skulls or heads which number fifty. They represent the fifty letters of the alphabet, the manifest state of sound, or sound (Sabda) in general, from which the entire creation has proceeded. To show that the manifest creation has been withdrawn, she is wearing the garland on her body. The skulls or severed heads indicate the state of destruction.

Since she is the supreme energy responsible for the dissolution of the created universe, her form as depicted here naturally strikes awe and fear. But then she is the creatrix, the Mother also. Hence she is reassuring her fearstricken children through the Abhaya Mudra saying, 'Don't be afraid! I am your own dear Mother!' Simultaneously she is also exhibiting her desire to grant boons through the Varada Mudra.

So far, so good! But what about Siva Mahadeva being 'trampled' under her feet? According to one of the mythological accounts, Kall once destroyed all the demons in a battle and then started a terrific dance out of the sheer joy of victory. All the worlds began to tremble and give way under its impact. At the request of all the gods Siva himself asked her to desist from it. She was too intoxicated to listen. Hence Siva lay like a corpse among the corpses on which 'she was dancing in order to absorb its shock into himself. When she stepped upon him she suddenly realised her mistake and put out her tongue in shame!

Siva Mahadeva is Brahman, the Absolute which is beyond all names, forms and activities. Hence he is shown lying prostrate like a sava, corpse. Kall represents his sakti or energy. The energy however can never exist apart from its source or act independently of it. It can manifest itself and act only when it is based firmly on the source. It is exactly this that is meant while showing Kall standing on the chest of Siva.

From all this, one should not jump to the conclusion that Kall represents only the destructive aspect of God's power. What exists when time is transcended, the eternal night, of limitless peace and joy, is also Kall (Maharatri). Again it is she who prods Siva Mahadeva into the next cycle of creation. In short, she is the power of God in all His aspects.

Lalita

Another aspect of the Devi which is more widely worshipped in South India is Lalita Tripurasundari. Repetition of the wellknown Lalitasahasranama and Trisati*[* Thousand names and three hundred names, respectively of Lalita Devi], as also the worship of her emblem, the 'Sricakra' are extremely popular. The initiation into her powerful Mantra, the Paicadasak~arl (Mantra of 15 letters) is an esoteric rite. Regular worship of the Sricakra is said to yield any result the devotee desires.

If Durga and Kali represent the aspects of power of the Goddess, Lalita represents the aspect of beauty. Hence her form is depicted as extremely beautiful and her worship more refined.

According to the Lalitopakhyana of the Brahmnda Purana, Lalita Devi manifested herself in the midst of a



disc of extreme brilliance, that arose from the sacrificial pit when Indra was performing a sacrifice in honour of her. At the behest of the gods assembled there, she chose to wed Kamesvara (Lord Siva). She destroyed the demon Bhandasura and annihilated his city, the Sonitapura. Visvakarma, the engineer of the gods, built a gorgeous city 'Sripura' on the mountain Meru, for her sake, where, along with her spouse Siva Kamesvara, she is residing eternally. The Sricakra actually represents the Devi in this SriPura.

Bhandasura, the shameless demon, living in the Sonitapura, the city of blood and flesh, is actually the ego which makes the soul identify itself with the body and estrange itself from all the divine forces. When the Devi, who is the embodiment of God's power and grace, 'kills' it, she is actually liberating it from its stifling limitations.

Lalita is usually depicted as slightly red in colour (as that of the dawn) and extraordinarily beautiful. In her four hands she is holding a bow of sugarcane, arrows, the goad (Ailkusa) and the noose (Pasa). Sometimes she is shown holding a wine cup made of diamond. One of her feet, usually the left, is shown resting on a pedestal, also of diamond.

The bow made of sugarcane actually represents the mind. It is through the mind that we experience all joy Hence it is described as made of sugarcane. The bow is the instrument for discharging the arrows. The mind is the instrument by which the sense organs are 'shot' towards the sense-objects. Hence it is described as a bow. The arrows are the Panca-tanmatras, the five subtle elements of Akasa (ether), Vayu (air), Agni (fire), Apas (water), Prthivi (earth). The sense organs like the eye and the ear, are products of these subtle elements and are discharged like arrows, through the mind, towards the sense-objects. Hence the subtle elements are described as the arrows in her hand. She is the power that energises and controls our minds and sense organs. This is the underlying idea. The Pasa (noose) is actually Raga (attachment) which binds. The Ailkusa (goat)

Krodha (anger, aversion) which hurts. The power that animates our attachments and aversions is also hers. If we forget her, she can bind us with Ragapasa, and pierce us with the Krodhailkusa. If we take refuge in her, she can withdraw them into her hands and thereby free us from their torment.

An account of Lalita cannot be complete without a few words of description of the Sricakra. The Sricakra is essentially a yantra * [*Practically every deity of the Hindu pantheon has three modes of expression or manifestation: (a) the Murti, the three dimensional form which can be sculptured; (b) the Yantra, a two-dimensional or geometric pattern which can be drawn; and (c) the Mantra, the sound form or the thought form, which can be uttered in contemplation. The 'Murti' is usually described in the appropriate Dhyanasloka (verse chanted at the beginning of meditation, to call up the form of the deity into the mind) and dealt with in greater detail in the iconographical works. The Yantra and Mantra are described in Tantric works. The Mantra, when received from a competent Guru and repeated with intense faith and devotion, is capable of revealing the form of the deity by setting up appropriate vibrations in the akasa (ether) which pervades everything including one's own body and mind. The yantra, the geometrical abode of the deity, when drawn properly (using the dot, the straight line, the triangle, the circle, the segment and so on), and installed, gets charged as it were, binding the contemplated deity to itself. Though the Sricakra is comparatively more well-known, there are a good number of other Yantras or Cakras which are still very much in vogue.] the form of the deity. It is a rather complicated geometrical figure of forty three triangles formed by the intersection of nine triangles, of which five have their apexes downward and the other four upward. This is surrounded by concentric circles with eight and then sixteen lotus petals. The whole figure is skirted by a square of three lines with openings in the middle of each side. There is a dot in the centre of the entire diagram.

This dot represents the combination of Siva and Sakti, as also the first throb, which gradually gathers momentum and gets concentrated into a polarisation of Siva and Sakti, but continuing to keep the original Siva Sakti combination also. The process repeats continuously resulting in various levels of creation, which are depicted by the different triangles and the lotus petals.

The Sricakra can be used for permanent worship either in the form of a Yantra (two dimensional engraved figure) or in the form of Meru (three dimensional embossed figure).

OTHER ASPECTS OF PARVA TI

As already mentioned, the number of aspects, both major and minor, of DevI or Sakti (i.e., ParvatI) is too numerous to deal with in a small book like this. Apart from the three major ones dealt with so far, a few others which are more commonly known will now be dealt with very briefly.

Annapurna: 'The possessor and giver of food.' ParvatI got this name since she served food to Siva when he was roaming about as a mendicant. She is shown serving food from a vessel of ruby. Her worship ensures that the household will never lack food. Her temple at KasI is very famous.

Aparajita: 'The Invincible.' It is actually one of the names of Durga and the wellknown series of verses in the Cal)qI ending with the words 'namas tasyai' are called 'Aparajitastotra' .

Bala: 'The Child.' Considered to be the daughter of Lalita and always nine years old, she is said to have destroyed the thirty sons of Bharyqasura.

Bhadrakali: One of the several aspects of Mahakali. She is said to have sprung from Vma's wrath when Dak~a insulted Siva and fought along with Vrabhadra to destroy Dak~a's sacrifice.

BhUtamata: 'The Mother of goblins.' She resides under the Asvattha (pi pal) tree and has a host of demons, goblins and demigods as her retinue.

Camunda: Same as Kali. She got this name since she killed Canda and Munda in the battle against Sumbha and Nisumbha. She is sometimes included under the Saptamatrkas.

GayatrI, SavitrI and SarasvatI: These three goddesses represent the presiding deities of the famous GayatrI Mantra chanted three times a day. GayatrI is the presiding deity of the morning prayer, rules over the Rigveda and the Garhapatya fire. * [* Every householder of the first three Varnas was expected to keep five or three sacred fires in his house, for the performance of Vedic rituals.] She has four faces, four or ten arms and rides on a swan. SavitrI presides over the noon prayer, rules over the Yajurveda and the Daksina fire. She has four faces, twelve eyes, four arms and rides on a bull. SarasvatI is the deity presiding over the evening prayer, rules over the Samaveda and the Ahavanlya fire. She has one face and four arms, and rides over Garuda.

Indraksi: "One whose eyes are similar to Indra's." She is the aspect of DevI specially worshipped by Indra as also the Apsara women (heavenly damsels). She is richly decorated and holds the Vajrayudha. If she is pleased by hymns, she can cure even incurable diseases.

Jagad-dhatrI: 'One who sustains the world.' Another aspect of the DevI which is more common in Bengal. She has four arms carrying the conch, discus, bow and arrow and rides on a lion.

Kamesvari: 'The Mistress of desire.' Since Lord Siva destroyed Kama, the god of lust, he is known as Kamesvara, 'One who is the lord of lust or desire.' The DevI being his consort, is known as KameSvarI. This is actually one of the names of Lalita. She can fulfil any of our desires for which we supplicate her.

Katyayani: Since the DevI was once born as the daughter of a sage Kata by name, she is known as KatyayanI. She is the totality of the powers of the Hindu Trinity. Her description practically tallies with that of Durga as MahisasuramardinI.

Manonmani: 'One who lifts the mind up to the highest state of Yoga.' She is the Sakti established in the psychic centre in the top of the head, just below the Brahmarandhra. She is pictured as blue or black in complexion and carries a skull-cup as also a sword. When she is pleased by the devoted prayers of her votaries, she can grant wealth and terrify their enemies.

Rajarajesvari: 'One who rules over the king of kings.' The DevI is the mistress of even Brahma, Vishnu and MaheSvara as also Kubera (the lord of wealth), who are known as 'king of kings'. She is an aspect of Lalita.

Sivaduti: In her battle against Sumbha and Nisumbha, the DevI once sent her spouse Siva himself as a messenger (Duta) to them. Hence she came to be known as Sivaduti, 'one who has Siva himself as her messenger.' Iconographically she is sometimes shown like Kali and sometimes like Durga.

MINOR DEITIES

Ganapati

Ganapati or Ganesa, also known as Vinayaka, is perhaps, the most popular of the Hindu deities worshipped by all sections of the Hindus. No undertaking, whether sacred or secular, can get started without first honouring and worshipping him. This is understandable and highly desirable, since he is said to be the lord of obstacles (VighneSvara or Vighnaraja). However, what is not understandable and certainly not very agreeable is his repulsive origin and grotesque form! Even for those who admire Lord Siva's skill in the surgical art of head-transplantation, it becomes rather difficult to admire the end product! Once we successfully manage to delve into the mysteries of this symbolism our repugnance will give rise to respect and respect to reverence and worship.

Notwithstanding the fact that the Ganapati referred to in the famous Rgvedic mantras, 'gananam ganapatim havamahe...' (2.23.1) and 'visu sida ganapate...' (10.112. 9) and the Ganapati we worship today are strangers to each other, all unbiased scholars agree that the seeds of the Ganapati concept are already there in the Rigveda itself. In the subsequent centuries, this concept has passed through the mills of the epics and the Puranas to produce the Ganapati as we know him today. In any community, the development of the concept of God and the modes of His worship are as much the products of geographical, historical and cultural factors as of mystic experience and spiritual realizations of the highly evolved persons. It is quite reasonable to suppose that the 'Ganapati-Brahmanaspati' of the Rgveda gradually got metamorphosed into the deity, 'Gajavadana-Ganesa- Vighnesvara.'

The Rgvedic deity 'Ganapati-Brahmanaspati'- also called as Brhaspati and Vacaspati-manifests himself through a vast mass of light. He is golden-red in colour. The battle axe is an important weapon of his. Without his grace no religious rite can succeed. He is always in the company of a group (gana=a group) of singers and dancers. He vanquishes the enemies of gods, protects the devoted votaries and shows them the right way of life.

Another class of Rgvedic deities, known as the Maruts or Marud-gana, described as the children of Rudra, also have similar characteristics. In addition, they can be malevolent towards those who antagonise them and can cause destruction like the wild elephants. They can put obstacles in the path of men if displeased and remove them when pleased. They are independent, not subject to any one's sovereignty (Arajana=Vinayaka).

A perusal of these two descriptions will perforce lead us to the obvious conclusion that Ganapati is the metamorphosed form of the Brhaspati-Marudgana deities. There is nothing strange in this, especially if we can recognize the transformations that have taken place among the various Vedic deities, as they were gradually absorbed among the gods of the later Hindu pantheon. The once all-important and all-powerful Indra was demoted to the rank of a minor deity ruling over one of the quarters. His lieutenant Vishnu was elevated to the central place in the Trinity. Rudra, the terrible, became Siva the auspicious. Many other deities like Dyaus, Aryaman and Puran were quietly despatched into oblivion!



Despite the fact that Ganapati is a highly venerated and all-important deity, his 'head' has often been a mystery, for others. No doubt, our Puranas have easily 'solved' this problem, each in its own way. But this has satisfied neither the layman nor the scholar.

It will be extremely interesting to bring together, though in brief, all the stories about the origin of this wondrous deity:

- (1) At the request of the gods who wanted a deity capable of removing all obstacles from their path of action and fulfilment, Siva himself was born of the womb of Parvati as Gajanana.
- (2) Once Parvati, just for fun, prepared an image of a child with an elephant's head, out of the unguents smeared over her body and threw it into the river Ganga. It came to life. Both Ganga, the guardian deity of the river and Parvati, addressed the boy as their child. Hence he is known as Dvaimatura, 'one who has two mothers'.
- (3) Parvati prepared the image of a child out of the scurf from her body, endowed him with life and ordered him to stand guard before her house. When Siva wanted to enter the house he was rudely prevented by this new gatekeeper. Siva became 'Rudra' and got him beheaded. Seeing that Parvati was inconsolable owing to this tragedy that befell her 'son' and not finding the head of the body anywhere-while one of the goblins of Siva had gourmandized it!-he got an elephant's head, grafted it on to the body of the boy and gave him life. To make amends for his 'mistake', Siva appointed this new-found son as the head of all his retainers, who thus became 'Ganapati'.
- (4) He sprang from Siva's countenance which represents the principle of ether (Akasatattva). His captivating splendour made Parvati react angrily and curse him, resulting in his uncouth form!
- (5) Ganesa was originally Krishna himself in the human form. When Sani, the malevolent planet spirit gazed at him, his head got separated and flew to Goloka, the world of Krishna. The head of an elephant was subsequently grafted on the body of the child.

Equally interesting are the other myths about his adventures: He lost one of his tusks in a fight with Parasurama, which he successfully used as a stylus to write the epic Mahabharata dictated by the sage Vyasa. He tactfully won the race against his brother Skanda by circumambulating his parents and declaring that it was equivalent to going round the worlds. He thus won the hands of two damsels Riddhi and Siddhi. He cursed the moon to wax and wane, since the latter derisively laughed at him when he was trying to refill his burst belly with the sweets that had spilled out. He vanquished the demon Vighnashura and successfully brought him under his subjugation.

There is no gainsaying the possibilities of man developing the concept of God and faith in Him as a result of his experiences through the various vicissitudes of life which prove his helplessness. He often disposes, what he proposes. Such a God must needs be allpowerful. If he is pleased, all the obstacles in our path will be removed. If displeased He may thwart our efforts and make them. infructuous. Hence the paramount need to appease Him and please Him.

What could be the form of this almighty God? For a simple aboriginal living in a group (=Gana) near a forest or a mountain, the mighty elephant might have provided the clue. This might have led to the worship of an elephant-like God. He being the Pati (=Lord) of the Gana (clan or group) might have obtained the name Ganapati. As the group became more refined and cultured, this Elephant God might have been transformed into the present form.

However plausible or attractive this hypothesis may be, it is at best a guesswork, if not an invention! Since Ganapati had gained de facto recognition in the hearts of millions of votaries, over several centuries, the Puranas rightly struggled to make it de jure! True, they have given very confusing accounts. Nevertheless they have succeeded in fusing together the votaries by giving them a scriptural or authoritative base. There is certainly no contradiction or confusion in the accounts as far as the worship and its result are concerned.

It is a favourite pastime of some western scholars and their Indian counterparts to 'discover' a Dravidian base for many interesting developments in our cultural and religious life and then to 'unearth' the further fact of the white skinned Aryan 'conquerors' graciously and condescendingly absorbing these, tactfully elevating the same to 'higher' levels all the while. This has naturally led to a vigorous reaction and these 'reactionaries' go the whole hog to 'prove' it the other way round! When our Ganapati is caught in the web of such controversies one may be driven to the ridiculous conclusion that he is not an Aryan deity at all, but, most probably, imported from Mongolia! It is therefore better to play safe, rescue our deity from embarrassing situations and get the best out of him for our spiritual life.

The most commonly accepted form of Ganapati depicts him as red in colour and in a human body with an elephant's head. Out of the two tusks, one is broken. He has four arms. Two of the arms hold the PaSa (noose) and Ankusa (goad). The other two are held in the Abhaya and Varada Mudras. The belly is of generous proportions and is decorated with a snake-belt. There is also a Yajnopavita (sacred Brahminical thread), either of thread or of serpent. He may be seated in Padmasana (lotus-posture). When the belly does not permit this, the right leg may be shown bent and resting on the seat.

Apart from beautiful robes and ornaments, he wears a lovely carved crown.

The trunk may be turned to the left or to the right.

He is normally seen helping himself to liberal quantities of Modaka (a kind of sweet).

A mouse, of ridiculously small proportions, is seen near him, nibbling at his share of the sweets, hoping perhaps, to gain enough strength to carry his master!

A third eye may sometimes be added on the forehead, in the centre of the eyebrows. The number of heads may be raised to five. The arms may vary from two to ten. Lotus, pomegranate, water-vessel, battle-axe, lute, broken tusk, sugarcane, ears of paddy, bow and arrow, thunderbolt, rosary, book-these are some of the other objects shown in the hands. His Sakti is often shown with him as sitting on his lap. Sometimes two Saktis, Rddhi*[* According to some accounts, she is replaced by Buddhi] and Siddhi, are also shown.

Let us now make an attempt at unravelling this symbology. 'Gana' means category (group). Everything that we perceive through our senses or grasp through our mind can be expressed in terms of kind, of category. The principle from which all such categories have manifested themselves is Ganapati, the Lord of categories. In effect, it means the origin of the whole creation, God Himself.

A common Sanskrit word to denote the elephant is 'Gaja'. Hence the name Gajanana or Gajamukha ('elephant-faced') for Ganapati. But the word 'Gaja' has a much deeper connotation. 'Ga' indicates 'Gati,' the final goal towards which the entire creation is moving, whether knowingly or unknowingly. 'Ja' stands for 'Janma,' birth or origin. Hence 'Gaja' signifies God from whom the worlds have come out and towards whom they are progressing, to be ultimately dissolved in Him. The elephant head is thus purely symbolical and points to this truth.

Another factor we observe in creation is its two-fold manifestation as the microcosm (Suksmanda) and the Macrocosm (Brahmanda). Each is a replica of the other. They are one in two and two in one. The elephant head stands for the macrocosm and the human body for the microcosm. The two form one unit. Since the macrocosm is the goal of the microcosm, the elephant part has been given greater prominence by making it the head.

Perhaps, the boldest statement concerning philosophical truths ever made is contained in that pithy saying of the Chandogya Upanisad: 'tat-tvam-asi,' 'That thou art.' It simply means: 'You, the apparently limited individual, are, in essence, the Cosmic Truth, the Absolute.' The elephant human form of Ganapati is the iconographical representation of this great Vedantic dictum. The elephant stands for the cosmic whereas the human stands for the individual. The single image reflects their identity.

Among the various myths that deal with Ganapati's origin, the one that attributes it to the scurf or dirt taken out of her body by Parvati: seems to be the most widely known, and considered as odd and odious. It is therefore worth while to delve a little deeper into this mystery.

One of the epithets by which Ganapati is well known and worshipped is 'Vighnesvara' or 'Vighnaraja' ('The Lord of obstacles'). He is the lord of all that obstructs or restricts, hinders or prevents. With the various grades and shades of the powers of obstruction under his control, he can create a hell of trouble for us if he wants! In fact, according to the mythological accounts, the very purpose of his creation was to obstruct the progress in the path of perfection!

How does he do it? If he is not appeased by proper worship, all undertakings, whether sacred or secular, will meet with so many obstacles that they will simply peter out. This is to show that nothing can succeed without his grace. If he is pleased by worship and service, he will tempt his votaries with success and prosperity (Siddhi and Rddhi) the very taste of which can gradually lead them away from the spiritual path. Why does he do it? To test them thoroughly before conferring upon them the greatest spiritual boon of Moksa. Being the master of all arts and sciences, and the repository of all knowledge, he can easily confer success or perfection in any of these. However, he is unwilling to give spiritual knowledge leading to the highest spiritual experience, lest it should appear easy of achievement in the eyes of men. Hence the severity of the test. The path of the good is fraught with innumerable obstacles, 'sreyarhsi bahuvighnani.' Only the very best of heroes, who can brave the roughest of weathers, deserve to be blessed with it. Human beings by nature are inclined towards the enjoyments of the flesh and intoxications of power and pelf. It is only one in a million that turns towards God. Among many such souls, very few survive the struggles and reach the goal. (vide Gita 7.3)

When compared to the highest spiritual wisdom, which alone is really worth striving for, even Rddhi and Siddhi (success and prosperity) are like impurities, Mala, as it were. Since Ganapati's consorts are Rddhi and Siddhi (personifications of the powers of success and prosperity), he, their spouse, has been described as created out of Parvatt's bodily scurf.

Again, the word 'Mala' need not have any odium about it. If Siva represents Paramapurusa, the Supreme Person, Parvatt stands for Parama PralqIi, Nature Supreme, considered as His power, inseparable from Him. She is, in

the language of philosophy, Maya-prakrti, comprising the three Gunas - Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. Sattva is stated to be pure and, as compared to it, Rajas and Tamas are said to be 'impure'. Since creation is impossible out of pure Sattva, even as pure gold does not lend itself to be shaped into ornaments unless mixed with baser metals, it has got to be mixed with Rajas and Tamas to effect it. This seems to be the import of the story of the 'impure' substances being used by Mother Parvati to shape Ganapati.

Let us now try to interpret the other factors involved in the symbology of this god. His ears are large, large enough to listen to the supplications of everyone, but, like the winnowing basket, are capable of sifting what is good for the supplicant from what is not. Out of the two tusks, the one that is whole stands for the Truth, the One without a second. The broken tusk, which is imperfect, stands for the manifest world, which appears to be imperfect because of the inherent incongruities. However, the manifest universe and the un-manifest unity are both attributes of the same Absolute. The bent trunk is a representation of Omkara or Pranava which, being the symbol of Brahman, the Absolute, is declaring as it were that Ganapati is Brahman Itself. His large belly indicates that all the created worlds are contained in him.

The Pasa (noose) stands for Raga (attachment), and the Ankusa (goad) for Krodha (anger). Like the noose, attachment binds us. Anger hurts us like the goad. If God is displeased with us, our attachments and anger will increase, making us miserable. The only way of escaping from the tyranny of these is to take refuge in God. Or it can mean that it is far safer for us to surrender our attachment and anger to Him. When they are in His hands, we are safe!

How we wish that Lord Ganapati had chosen a big bandicoot as his mount. The fact, however, is otherwise and that privilege has been conferred on a small mouse! The word Musaka (=mouse) is derived from the root 'mus' which means 'to steal'. A mouse stealthily enters into things and destroys them from within. Similarly egoism enters unnoticed, into our minds and quietly destroys all our undertakings. Only when it is controlled by divine wisdom, it can be harnessed to useful channels. Or, the mouse that steals, can represent love that steals the human hearts. As long as human love is kept at the low level, it can create havoc. Once it is directed towards the Divine, it elevates us. The mouse that is wont to see the inside of all things can stand for the incisive intellect. Since Ganapati is the lord of the intellect, it is but meet that he has chosen it as his vehicle.

ICONS OF GANAPATI

There are several varieties of Ganapati icons available in our temples and archaeological monuments. Whether the number is 71,50,31, or 21, it is certain that there are several aspects of this deity. Only a few of them can be dealt with here.

'Balaganapati' and 'Tarunaganapati' images depict him as a child and a young man, respectively. 'Vinayaka' is shown with four arms holding the broken tusk, goad, noose and rosary. He holds the sweet modaka in his trunk. He may be standing or seated. 'Herambaganapati' has five heads, ten hands, three eyes in each face and rides on a lion. 'Vravinghnesa' exhibits the martial spirit with several weapons held in his ten hands. 'Saktiganapati,' several varieties of which are described in the Tantras, is shown with his Sakti, called variously as Lakshmi, Riddhi, Siddhi, Pusli and so on. Worship of this aspect is said to confer special powers or grant the desired fruits quickly.

One of the varieties of this 'Saktiganapati' is called 'Uchistaganapati,' the Ganapati associated with unclean things like orts, whose worship belongs to Vamacara ('the left-handed path,' i.e., the heterodox and unclean path) and said to give quick results. There is nothing to dread or recoil in this concept. Dirty things are as much a part of nature as clean things. But, do not scavengers and doctors handle them in a hygienic way and serve the people? Are not all people obliged to be scavengers in varying degrees? Why not do it religiously, as an act of service and worship? Nature converts clean things into unclean things and vice versa. Making Ganapati preside over it and handle dirt scientifically and religiously can also be a spiritual discipline. This seems to be the philosophy behind this concept.

'Nrttaganapati' is a beautiful image showing him as dancing. It seems once Brahma met Ganapati and bowed down to him with great devotion and reverence. Being pleased with this Ganapati started dancing gracefully. That is why Ganapati is declared to be the master of the arts of music and dancing.

'Varasiddhi Vinayaka' is the aspect worshipped during the famous Ganesa Caturthi festival. He is said to be a celibate.

Ganapati is sometimes depicted as a Sakti (female deity) under the names of Ganesani, Vinayaki, Surpakarni, Lambamekhala and so on.

Ganapati is worshipped not only in images but also in Lingas, Salagramas, Yantras (geometrical diagrams) and Kalasas (pots of water). Ganapati Salagramas however, are very rare. The Svastika is also accepted as a graphic symbol of Ganapati.

Temples and shrines dedicated to Ganapati are very numerous. They are spread all over the country. He appears in the campuses of temples of most other deities also.

Subrahmaryya

If Ganapati is universally revered by almost all the Hindus, Buddhists and Jains, and has even succeeded in going abroad to many countries of South East Asia, China, Japan and Afghanistan, Subrahmaryya his brother, has somehow remained confined to South India. Historically speaking, he is a much older deity, being mentioned in stone inscriptions and shown on coins (1st cent. to 5th cent. A.D.), and was well-known in North India. The sixth day of a lunar month (sasthi) is considered sacred to him (as with serpent deities). He is said to have been married to a forest maid Valli-amma. The peacock is his carrier mount. His temples are usually found on hill-tops. All these factors may indicate that he was a sylvan deity connected with serpent-worship and treeworship, and hence was more popular among the people of lower strata in the society. Now, however, all sections of Hinduism have accepted him and they venerate him.

He is said to have been born of Siva from Parvati, to destroy the demon Tarakasura. Before conceiving him, even these Parents of the World had to perform severe Tapas or austerities! This teaches the world, of the great need for Tapas on the part of the parents desirous of excellence of offspring. He is stated to have been born in a forest of arrow-like grass (hence the name Saravanabhava) and reared by the six divine mothers of the constellation Krttika (Pleiades). Hence the names 'Karttikeya' and 'Sanmatura'. It seems he assumed six faces to suckle the milk of the six mothers and so got the appellation 'Sanmukha or Sadanana'. He was appointed the commander-in-chief of the gods and thus became 'Devasenapati'. With his matchless weapon, the Sakti or lance, shining brilliantly like fire, he easily destroyed Tarakasura, thus becoming 'Saktidhara' and 'Tarakari'. Being very young and virile he is 'Kumara' or 'Sanatkumara.' A forceful attacker in war, he is known as 'Skanda'. 'Skanda' also means one who has accumulated the power of chastity. He likes holy people (Brahmanas) and is always good to them. Hence he is 'Subrahmanya'. Once he broke down the Kranca-parvata (a mountain), earning the name Krancabhetta. At another time he exposed Brahma's ignorance of the Vedas and hence got the name Brahma-Sasta. His other names are Guha (the secret one), Gangeya (son of Ganga) and Svami-natha (the preceptor of his own father).



In icons, he is shown as a boy either with one head and two arms or with six heads and twelve arms. His lance and his peacock are also prominently displayed. A fowl adorns his banner.

Subrahmanya, the son of Siva and Sakti, represents the highest state to which a spiritual aspirant can evolve. Etymologically the word 'Subrahmanya' means 'one who tends the spiritual growth of the aspirants'. It is only he who has reached the summit of spiritual perfection in this life that is capable of tending the spiritual growth of others. Mythology describes him as the Son of God begotten to save the world from the tyranny of the fiend Tarakasura. This is more true in the spiritual sense.

Subrahmanya, the Sanmukha, is depicted with six heads and twelve hands, all of them being attached to one trunk resting on two feet.

Of course, even a boy knows that biologically this is impossible even as an angel with wings is! But a concept like this can be conceded if it fits into useful philosophical postulations. His six heads represent the five sense organs and the mind, which co-ordinates their activities. When these are controlled, refined and sublimated, man becomes a superman. This is the implication of the symbology.

According to Yoga psychology, there are six centres of psychic energy, of consciousness, in the human body, designated as Cakras. They are:- Muladhara (at the anus), Svadhisthana (at the root of the sex organ), manipura (at the navel) Anahata (at the region of the heart), Visuddha (at the throat) Ajna (between the eyebrows) and Sahasrara at the top of the head which is the destination for this energy. When the Yogi successfully raises his psychic energy to this topmost centre he has a vision of Siva-Sakti.

Though it is the same energy that flows through all the six centres, in the case of an ordinary being it is concentrated in the three lowest centres. In a perfect being the flow is so refined and uniform, that practically all the centres have been elevated to the highest level. Subrahmanya represents this perfected state of spiritual consciousness.

Man has only two hands. But, his superior intellect has enabled him to invent so many tools and instruments through which he can accomplish manual tasks, even simultaneously. Subrahmanya with his twelve hands, symbolically represents this power and capacity of man.

The combination of the six heads and twelve hands teaches us that the ideal of humanity is the perfected being who is not only a great Yogi but also a great worker!

Subrahmanya has two consorts: Valli and Devasena. The former is the daughter of a humble chieftain of a race given to agriculture and woodcraft. The latter is the daughter of Indra, the king of gods. This is just to show that God does not make any distinction between the humble folk and the elite. He loves both equally. Alternatively, this can also mean that the true leader of a society will espouse agriculture and industry on the one hand, and the armed forces on the other, in order to develop the society as also to protect it.

The lance of dazzling brightness, is the weapon with which this Devasenapati vanquished many an enemy. It actually stands for knowledge and wisdom with which all the ugly demons of ignorance can be destroyed.

The peacock is his mount. It is shown as belabouring a snake with one of its legs. The snake stands for time. The peacock that kills it stands for what is opposed to it. By riding the peacock he is showing that he is beyond what is within time and outside it. He is beyond all dualities.

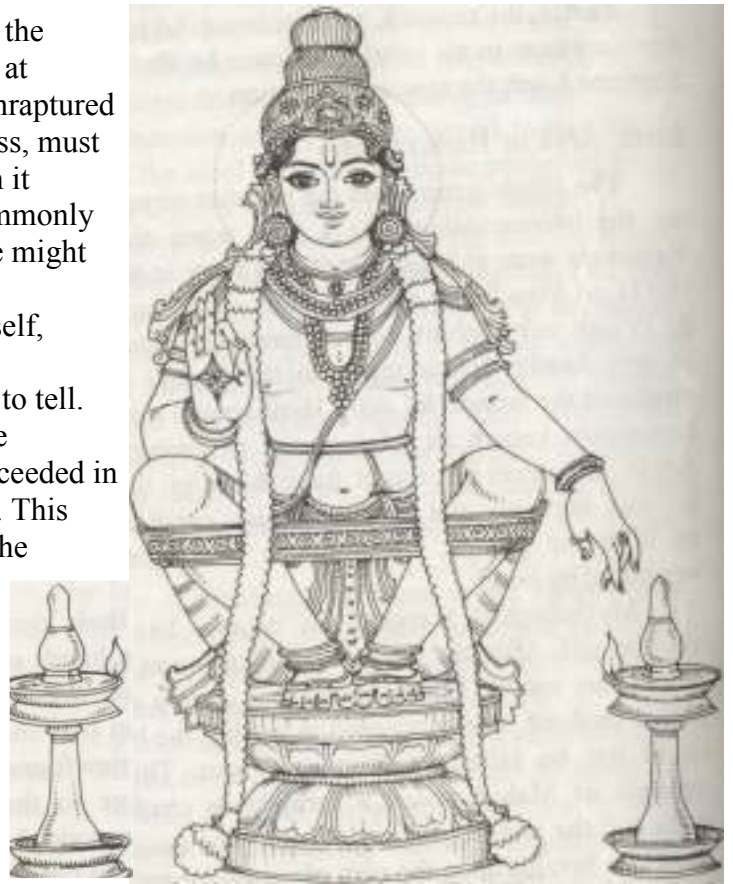
If the snake represents lust, as it often does in the symbology of psychology, the peacock signifies the power of celibacy. As Skanda, he is the very personification of the powers of chastity and hence is shown as riding on the peacock.

Lastly, the peacock, with its beautiful plumage, represents creation in all its glory. Hence he that rides it is the Supreme Lord, the master of creation.

Sasta, Arya or Hariharaputra

The Hindu genius has the peculiar virtue of reconciling the irreconcilables. At a time when the Saivas and Vaisnavas were at loggerheads, the story in the Bhagavata (8.12), of Siva being enraptured by the voluptuous beauty of (Vishnu as) Mohini, the enchantress, must have come in very handy. By taking it to the logical conclusion it produced the wonderful deity Hariharaputra or Sasta, more commonly known as 'Ayyappan' (a corrupted form of Arya). Whatever he might have been in the beginning, he was certainly not a compromise candidate tolerated by both the groups, but Supreme God Himself, highly venerated by both.

Mythological accounts, of course, have their own story to tell. After the death of Mahisasura at the hands of Durga, his spouse Mahisi performed severe austerities to please Brahma. She succeeded in getting the boon that she could not be killed by Siva or Vishnu. This newfound strength of Mahisi posed a formidable challenge to the gods and the world. Siva and Vishnu, who could not singly vanquish her, hit upon the plan of coming together to create her destroyer. The child thus created was found by King Rajasekhara of Panthalam in Kerala who named it as Manikanthan and brought it up as his own son, since he had no offspring. When Manikanthan was twelve years old, he killed Mahisi and brought leopardesses to his father's palace since their milk was needed to cure the 'headache' of the queen. Meanwhile to the king had been revealed the secret of Manikanthan being God Himself. Adored by the king Manikanthan disappeared, after instructing him to build a temple at the place where his arrow would land. That was the summit of the hill Sabanmalai. The temple is said to have been built by Visvakarma and the image prepared and installed by Parasurama. The place attracts millions of pilgrims even now.



The word 'Sasta' means one who controls and rules over the whole world. Mahasasta and Dharmasasta are the

other names by which the deity is known. 'Sasta' is one of the names of Buddha. The deity is said to ride on a white elephant called Yogi. He is also described as the protector of Dharma. Hence some scholars opine that Dharma-Sasta may be Buddha absorbed into the Hindu pantheon by the South Indian Hindus.

The image of Sasta has four arms, three eyes and a peaceful countenance, and is seated in Padmasana. Two of the hands carry the sword and the shield and the other two exhibit the Abhaya and Varada Mudras.

According to another version, the image should have only two hands and two eyes, and should be seated with the legs folded. It should be bedecked with ornaments and have the Yajnopavita. A crooked stick, fruits and tender leaves of plants are sometimes shown in his hands. A Vajradanda is also shown occasionally.

Images in the standing posture are also seen to exist, though rare. The ritual pilgrimage to the shrine of Sri Ayyappan at Sabarimalai is considered to be extremely auspicious and meritorious. The pilgrimage itself has to be preceded by forty-one days of austerity during which period strict celibacy is to be observed as also restrictions regarding food, speech and sleep.

NA VAGRAHAS

For thousands of years, people all over the world have believed in the influence of the planets on human life and history. Logically speaking, the creation of the planets precedes that of the living beings. Hence, some sort of cause and effect relation must subsist between these two. This seems to be the basis for this belief.

The Navagrahas or the nine planets are regarded by the Hindus as of the greatest astrological significance and are believed to influence the life of the individual as also the course of history.

As per the traditional list, the nine planets are Ravi or Sarya (sun), Soma or Candra (moon), Mangala, Kuja or Angaraka (Mars), Budha (Mercury), Brhaspati or Guru (Jupiter), Sukra (Venus), Sani (Saturn), Rahu and Ketu. The seven days of the week have derived their names from the first seven planets. Rahu and Ketu are not planets but ascending and descending nodes of the moon. Sometimes Ketu is depicted as the personification of comets and meteors.

Sani, Rahu and Ketu are considered inauspicious, even positively maleficent, and responsible for children's diseases. Hence they need to be propitiated.

The nine planets are invariably found in every Saiva temple in South India. In many North Indian temples they are depicted on the lintels of doors, to protect the temple and all those who enter it. They may also be housed in a separate Mandapa (a small pavilion) or at least a platform where the images of these nine Grahas are installed in such a way that no two of them will face each other. It is sometimes stated that the images of the planets are set up in the temples in the order in which they are in zodiacal circle at the time of construction of the temple.

The image of Surya must always be placed in the centre of the planets, facing east, with the other Grahas fixed round him, each in a specified direction. He has two hands, holding a lotus in each. His chariot has one wheel, is drawn by seven horses and has Aruna (deity of the dawn) as the charioteer.

Soma or Candra has only a face and two hands but no body. He is shown holding white lotuses in his two hands. He rides on a two or three wheeled chariot drawn by ten horses.

Mangala or Kuja has four hands, carrying the weapons mace and javelin in two, showing the Varada and Abhaya Mudras with the other two. He rides on a ram.

Budha also has four hands, three of them wielding the weapons sword, shield and mace. The last hand shows the Varadamudra. He rides on a lion or a chariot drawn by four horses.

Brhaspati, being the Guru, is shown holding a book and a rosary in his two hands. His chariot is golden and is driven by eight horses.

Sukra is also seated in a golden chariot drawn by eight horses or in a silver one drawn by ten horses. He has two hands holding a Nidhi (=treasure) and a book. Sometimes he is shown with four hands holding the staff, rosary and waterpot, the fourth exhibiting the Varadamudra.

Sani rides in an iron chariot drawn by eight horses. He is more often shown as riding on a vulture. A buffalo also may be his mount. He holds the arrow, bow and javelin in three of his hands, the last hand being in the Varada Mudra.



Rahu is usually described as having only a face and Ketu is depicted like a serpent's tail. Iconographical works, however, describe them differently.

Rahu may be shown riding a black lion or as seated on a Sirhhasana (throne) or in a silver chariot drawn by eight horses. He may have two hands, the right hand carrying a woollen blanket and a book, the left hand being shown empty. If four hands are shown, they can carry sword, shield and lance, the fourth one being in Varadamudra.

Ketu has an ugly face and rides on a vulture. In his two arms he exhibits a mace and the Varadamudra or Abhayamudra.

All the Grahas have crowns and ear-rings. The eight grahas round the Sun always face him.

The planets are sometimes described as having connection with the incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

ASTADIKP ALAKAS

They are the eight deities ruling over the eight quarters of the universe. Though frequently mentioned, they are rarely worshipped. They are mostly represented on the central panel of the ceiling in the Mahamandapa (chief pavilion) of a temple.

Indra, Yama, Varurya and Kubera are the deities that rule over the east, south, west and north. The intermediate directions are ruled by Agni (south-east), Niqti (south-west), Vayu (north-west) and Isana (north-east).

Indra, Yama, Varurya, Agni and Vayu have already been dealt with in the fourth chapter on Vedic Gods.

Nirrti is said to be the chief of the demons. He may be shown riding on a donkey, a lion or a man and surrounded by the demons and seven apsaras.

Kubera, the king of the Yaksas (a kind of demigods) is famous as the lord of wealth. He is often depicted as riding on the shoulders of man or in a carriage drawn by men. Ram or elephant also can be his mount. Two Nidhis (personified treasures) are shown by his side.

Isana is an aspect of Siva.

OTHER DEITIES

Among the subsidiary deities in Siva temples, Ksetrapala occupies an important place. He is the chief guardian of the temple. His image is usually naked and aweinspring. He is worshipped first before commencing the regular service for the day. He seems to be an aspect of Bhairava.

Ksetrapala can also an independent deity with his own shrine, usually set up in the north-east comer of the town or the village. The shrine may face west or south, and rarely, east.

At the entrance of every temple are seen the Dvarapalakas ('guardian deities of the door'). They are invariably images in a standing posture. Their form and ornaments as also insignia vary according to the main deity whose temple they guard.

Practically every village has a goddess as its patron deity. Their number is legion. Almost all of them represent the terrible aspects of Parvati

Sometimes diseases which bring havoc are deified. For instance, SitaladcvI is the goddess of smallpox. Or it can be the fear of the venomous reptiles that can create a deity like the Manasa (sister of Vasuki, the serpent king), the goddess of snakes. Pangs of childbirth may have induced married women to hope for relief at the hands of Sasti, the deity that acts like a midwife and takes care of children!

FROM GODS TO GOD HEAP

We have come, a long way, passing through a veritable labyrinth, as it were, of the Hindu pantheon. The variety of the deities is as fascinating as it is bewildering. However, as long as we do not forget that the divine form we worship is an embodiment of the attributes that reveal the Supreme Principle in one way or the other, we are on safe ground. This knowledge should develop into an intense awareness of the Reality that is at the back of everything in the universe.

One more thing: This Reality, which is solidified consciousness as it were, can and does assume the forms of these various deities described here, in response to the wishes of the devotees who supplicate It. That innumerable mystics and seers have realized these forms is proof enough. Hence these deities are not just symbols but real.

Siva is not just the god of destruction, dwelling on the Himalayas or the cremation ground. He is the embodiment of

renunciation and destruction of all evil. He is the personification of contemplation and divine consciousness. He is 'the one Brahman, without a second, the All' (Skandapurana 4.1.1 0.126).

Is Vishnu merely the lord of protection and preservation? He is the embodiment of the divine Principle that permeates the entire universe in which the world-play of creation, preservation and dissolution is enacted. He 'abideth in all.' He is 'all.' He assumes all forms (vide Visnupurana I.I 2. 7 I).

Similarly with the Mother Divine. Whether She is worshipped as the goddess of prosperity or propitiated out of fear for Her deadly dance of destruction, She is always the Power Supreme, the same as Brahman.

Again, Rama is not just an ideal man but the personification of all virtues and the indweller of all beings. Krishna is the highest ideal of divine love. His Visvarupa ('Universal Form') makes us exclaim, like Arjuna, 'Oh Lord! Thou art everything! Infinite in power and Infinite in prowess, Thou pervadest all' (Bhagavad Gita 11.40).—

But are we capable of perceiving this truth? As long as we are identified with our psycho-physical organism and feel its stifling limitations, we have to take the help of images and imagination. Is it not better to 'dream truer dreams,' as Swami Vivekananda puts it, than get stuck in morbid fancies of a mundane world? If images and imagination are adopted in the right spirit, they help us to evolve inwardly, leading us ultimately to the Infinite Spirit.

Notwithstanding all our logic and explanations, there still are academicians steeped in the Western traditions of comparative religion who discover fetishism or polytheism or henotheism or other 'isms' in our concept of gods and goddesses. These explanations or theories may hold good in the case of the Semitic religions but not with the religions of Aryan or Vedic origin. In Judaism the development was from the tribal gods called Molochs to the Supreme Molach. Each tribal god was identified with the tribe as its protector, as the embodiment of the tribal ego.

In the internecine wars the victory of one tribe meant the breaking of the emblems or images of the god of that tribe and imposition of the god of the victorious tribe. Jehovah was the god that was finally victorious.

In Islam too we find the same trend. From the two hundred and odd gods in the Kaaba, Prophet Muhammad declared that Allah, one of them alone, was the only God and broke down the images of all the others. This act as also the well-known slogan of Islam, 'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His Prophet,' paved the way for the militarily victorious forces to break the objects of worship of the vanquished. Thus the journey from polytheism to monotheism lay through physical might rather than spiritual insight.

The development of the concept of God and gods among the Aryans was entirely on different lines. Even the anthropologists have agreed that the several gods of the Vedic pantheon were the presiding deities over forces of Nature. There was neither competition nor conflict among them, leading to displacement as among the Semitic gods. Gradually all these gods of natural forces were unified into one God the Supreme, who controls Nature and to whom Nature is a pointer. It is this that is signified by the well-known Vedic dictum, 'ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti.'

So, there is in Hinduism no polytheism as understood by the Western thinkers. No doubt there is a tendency occasionally to exalt one god over all the others. This is due to Istanistha or singular devotion to one's own Chosen Deity and hence, cannot be dubbed as 'henotheism' as Max Muller does. The statement of Sri Ramakrishna that there are several ice-bergs in the boundless ocean clinches this issue very well. All the ice-bergs as also the ocean itself, are all WATER only! Once this Vedantic background is grasped, the ideal of polytheism vanishes completely. The worship of Siva, Sakti or Vishnu becomes the adoration the one Supreme Being who is Personal-Impersonal. The Bhagavad Gita (4.11; 7.21) states the same truth in an unmistakable language.

This simile of the Supreme God or the Godhead as the infinite ocean can now be looked upon from a slightly different angle, useful to the Sadhakas or spiritual aspirants. The various gods can then be considered as Its waves. We, ordinary mortals that we are, with extraordinary attachment to our bodies and minds, are like bubbles. It is only when the bubble gets attached to the wave that it becomes conscious of its unity with the ocean. Upasana (worship and contemplation) of the various gods is thus the means by which we, the bubbles, become conscious of our divine heritage first, then, achieve the dissolution of our little selves in the Godhead, the universal Self. Since 'Knowledge is power,' a knowledge of these various gods of the Hindu faith will endow us with the power to know the Power behind them and BE FREE!