

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306358714>

Mythology of Gods: Origin and Development of the Concept of Gods in Indian Religion

Article · December 2015

CITATION

1

READS

11,918

2 authors:



Wimal Hewamanage

University of Colombo

27 PUBLICATIONS 4 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)



Jingyu Sang

Wuhan University

11 PUBLICATIONS 143 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Early Buddhism and Emptiness [View project](#)



Preparing a dictionary for Pali, Sanskrit, English & Chinese Buddhist terms [View project](#)

Sri Lanka International Journal of Buddhist Studies (SIJBS)

Volume IV (2015), ISSN- 20128878

Mythology of Gods: Origin and Development of the Concept of Gods in Indian Religion

Jingyu Sang & Wimal Hewamanage

Chief Editor: Dr. Iromi Ariyaratne



Sri Lanka International Buddhist Academy (SIBA)

Pallekele, Kundasale

Mythology of Gods: Origin and Development of the Concept of Gods in Indian Religion

Jingyu Sang & Wimal Hewamanage

Abstract

The existence of god or gods is one of the crucial subjects in the field of religious studies. This paper is centered on the origin of the concept of gods in the Indian religions and how it has developed during its history through a variety of myths.

Though Jainism and Buddhism are clearly different from Hinduism, they are also Indian religions. This research will be limited only to Hinduism. Indian religions believe in many gods and goddesses but adherents can notably believe in one particular god and the rest are allowed by him or her unlike in the monotheistic religions.

Since there are many gods in Hinduism the paper will focus on only six prominent gods namely; Agni, Indra, Varuna, Brahma, Viṣṇu and Śiva. The origin of the gods in Hinduism is basically threefold; wonder of nature, hero worship and religious concept. Agni, Indra and Varuṇa are appropriate examples respectively. From the very beginning of the Indian religions, there were prominent gods and it seems clear that these three gods are made by man. In the course of time, there appear three other prominent gods; Brahma, the creator of the world, Viṣṇu, the sustainer of the world and Śiva, the destroyer of the world.

All these gods' weapons, chariots and body features etc. represent the imagination of Indian environmental and social characteristics. Consequently, they created gods with many faces and many hands to emphasize their power. They attributed vehicles, weapons, consorts and abodes to the gods with a variety of myths and it was similar to a man who has a healthy and wealthy life in this world. Understanding of these mythologies will be helpful to open reader's mind and to see the beauty and meaning of religious mythologies.

Introduction

India is one of the most diverse lands with respect to history, philosophy, culture, religion and languages in the Asian continent. It has been shown to have a history of several thousand years from the Mohenjodaro and Harappa civilizations, and it gave birth to several world religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism and also to various languages; Hindi as its national language and hundreds of local languages including some that are old and many that are modern.

The term god can be seen as *deva*, derived from the root *div*(to shine), and is used in both Pali and Sanskrit languages for introducing some supreme sort of being. There are many synonyms in those two literary traditions; Sanskrit dictionary of synonyms, the Amarakoṣa (has a) collection of more than 26 similar words and the Abhidhānappadīpikā, dictionary of synonyms in Pali, also contains more than 16 words for gods. *Tidasa*, *amara*, *deva*, *vibudha*, *sudhāsi*, *surā*, *marū*, *divokā*, *amatapā*, *saggavāsi* are a few of them.

Tiān (天) in Chinese, *cheon* in Korean, *ten* in Japanese are utilized to introduce this concept of god with correspondences and differences. In the western languages, in general several names are utilized; lord, deity, divinity, absolute being, all powerful, all knowing, Allah, almighty, creator, divine being, father, holly spirit, infinite spirit, Jehovah, king of kings, maker, Yahweh, demigod, godhead, holiness, master, omnipotent, power, prime mover, providence, soul, spirit, totem, tutelary, universal life force, world spirit, idol, etc. to introduce ‘God’ starting with a capital letter.

The idea of god is common for both religions called monotheistic and polytheistic. The monotheists believe in one and only God; Judaism, Christianity and Islam are well known monotheistic world religions. The God in monotheistic religion and gods in polytheistic religion are key notions of religion even though there is no fully clear and agreed definition of it. Various definitions can be seen such as belief in a God who is the creator and sustainer of the universe, God as the creator but not the sustainer of the universe, God as the universe itself. Respectively these represent theism, deism and pantheism. Though there are varieties of definitions among scholars regarding god there is agreement about his power that God has omnipotence (unlimited power), omniscience (infinite knowledge), omnipresence (present everywhere), Omni benevolence (perfect goodness), divine simplicity, and eternal and necessary existence.

To be aware of the concept of god, first we need to understand some key terms regarding this matter like theism, monotheism, monism, polytheism and pantheism because the multiple approach regarding gods can be seen in Indian religions.

In general, the term theism has been used to speak about any belief in one God (monotheism) or gods (polytheism). In theism, the God/gods exist realistically, objectively and independently of human thought and God/gods create and sustain everything. Also he is omnipotent and eternal and God is personal and interacts with the universe through, for example, religious experience and the prayers of humans.¹

According to deism God is wholly transcendent and exists but does not intervene in the world beyond what was necessary to create it. Monotheism is the doctrine in which there is only one god and many religious followers who believe in one god and worship him using different names. If there are many gods it is called polytheism. The doctrine that believes in only one ultimate principle or being exists is identified as monism. Pantheism represents that god is the universe and the universe is the god.

The history of Indian religion shows that their key concept regarding god or gods has changed according to their new understandings. “Gradually the conception of God grows: there are the Olympian type of gods, and then monotheism, and later, rather mixed with it, the conception of monism. Thought carries them to strange realms, and brooding on nature’s mystery comes, and the spirits of inquiry. These developments take place in the course of hundreds of years, and by the time we reach the end of the Veda, the Vedanta (*Veda* plus *anta* end), we have the philosophy of Upanishads”.²

Three gods in Vedas

The origin of the concept of god in Indian religion is between 2000 B.C. and 1200 B.C. It is connected with Aryan tribes, who came from Iran with their deities, and moved into the northern part of India. These Aryan gods named as the Vedic Gods most probably were similar to ancient Aryan gods and they were depicted in anthropomorphic form. The well-known god in the Rgveda named Indra shares the same characteristics with ‘Thor’ and other gods. The influence of Aryans, among Vedic gods in India has also made a preference for male gods rather than female. They have not emphasized the matriarchal as much as the patriarchal because males represented the dominant and more powerful figures in the Aryan society while females had only a sustaining responsibility. “Among the many people and races who have come into contact with and influenced India’s life and culture, the oldest and most persistent have been the Iranians. Indeed the relationship precedes even the beginning of Indo – Aryan civilization, for it was out of some common stock that the Indo – Aryans and the ancient Iranians diverged and took their different ways. Racially connected, their religions and languages also had a common background. The Vedic religion had much in common with Zoroastrianism, and Vedic Sanskrit and the old Pahlavi, the language of the Avesta, closely resemble each other.”³

There are basically three steps to making gods in Indian religious history namely worship of nature, worship of a hero, worship of a religious concept. As we know, in the early history of humans, they were aware that there were many things that they could not understand. Sun in the early morning, moon at night, fire, thunder shower etc. people were surprised and unsafe and they were unaware of the process of phenomena. Later on; big trees, rivers, mountains also became gods. Therefore, they thought that there were some special powers than them to rule their world and then they started to respect and follow them. Considering the modern world, the well-developed scientific world we are talking about there is no such sufficient attention to the environment as in these nature-centered religions.

The ancient people believed that the earth was given by the gods to men as a dwelling place. Aside from the fact that all the gods, in heaven, earth, and everywhere reveal their power in the waters, herbs and trees, and have implanted will in man’s body, they have chosen a representative from their midst to dwell here, among mortals as immortal. Like a loving friend they have placed in the dwelling of men Agni, the god of fire.⁴

The god Agni is a good example of converting a natural resources or elementary power into a god. He is not only the most powerful god in the terrestrial realm but is also one of the most powerful Vedic gods in general. He is the destroyer of darkness; he drives away demons and night too. Agni is born from floods of heaven (the clouds); he first came down to earth as lightning.

The Sun with its various characteristics like dawn, morning, noon is also regarded a representative of Agni. Indian religious history shows that the power of gods and leadership of god have been changed according to the followers’ awareness but there are no facts that totally reject any god from the adherent’s heart. Therefore, he is sometimes believed as the twin brother and close friend of Indra.

Agni is also the messenger of the gods. “He is portrayed as being either golden or red in color. He is depicted as having a burning head, sometimes two or three, and faces in every direction with his all-seeing eyes. Just like Indra, he too is shown carrying a bow and an arrow. He is often likened to various animals, most frequently the bull; and also inanimate objects like the sun, a hatchet, a chariot loaded with riches, or to wealth acquired through inheritance”.⁵ Agni protects his worshipers from failures and supplies them with an abundance of food, invincibility in battle, deliverance from poverty, and children to the childless.⁶

As far as the power to bestow children, Chinese religion states that the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (觀音 Guānyīn) has the ability to give children to the childless. Therefore, the power attributed to the Agni for giving children to the childless is also a creation of his adherents. This power has occasionally been attributed to various gods as concerning the prominence of the pantheon of Indian gods.

The next source of divine beings were human beings who were heroes in their culture and history. They were changed from their position of humans into gods. Indra is one such god.

According to the Vedic history, Indra is one of the famous and respected gods in the R̥gveda literature depicted in more than 250 hymns. Most of the hymns highlight his power that he can support his believers and at the same time some hymns point out his power shown against some group of enemies.

The origin of this attribute of great power in war is that when the Aryans came to India from Iran, early inhabitants who had already settled and developed their minds were killed by the Aryans. During this war there were some people who gave good service by using their physical power. A good example is that there are a few names of gods in Pali and Sanskrit literature like Indra, Virūḍha, Vaiśravaṇa, and Virūpākṣa are related to war. Indra means strong and he was praised by adherents as a person who always had a thunderbolt as his weapon. Virūḍha means a giant person. He who has broken ears is called Vaiśravaṇa and he who has broken eyes is called Virūpākṣa. These names illustrate that to become a god their physical power was considered more important than their spiritual qualities because during the war in ancient history physical power was essential.

The question is why a person who has lost his ears or eyes or other parts of the body was selected as a god by the Aryans? Sometimes when they were involved in war with inhabitants they lost their parts of the body and it could be a reason to become a hero among Aryans. Sometimes it could be that losing ears, eyes or any other part of the body in a war with inhabitants made them famous war heroes.

Indra is depicted as a burly man, with handsome prominent nose, long neck, fine lips, comely chin, big belly, strong arms and also addicted to drinking sweet, intoxicating *soma*. Hymns remind us of the significance of the physical power and attractive features of the leader because the physical power is more helpful than the mental culture in the battle. He who gave his great contribution to Aryans during the war with Indian inhabitants has been admired in his hymns as ‘god of war’. He was invoked by Aryans before going to battle because Indra is regarded as a friend and helper to his adherents and he gave his adherents wealth, wives, cattle, horses, and

male children. Male children are prized in warlike societies as they can contribute to the war effort.

The development of god Indra shows that there are various legends surrounding him. According to the legends, most of the Indian gods have their own vehicles which were commonly used by them and Indra used a golden chariot drawn by two steeds or his white elephant named Airavaṇa. It was created by an ocean of milk. He had several weapons like the thunderbolt which he used in his battles with the demons, a bow and golden arrows, which he used to strike down his human foes; a hook, with which he bestowed wealth or utilized as a weapon; and a net, which entrapped all his enemies. The thunderbolt was the most prominent weapon and vajravat (armed with the *vajra*), vajradakṣiṇa (holding the *vajra* in his right hand), and vajrabāhuor Vajrahasta (holding the *vajra* in his hand) are synonymous with Indra, 'god of thunder' in the Ṛgveda.

According to Kosambi, "Indra smashed the enemies of the Aryans, looted the 'treasure-house of the godless'. The demons he killed are named: Sambara; Pipru, Arasanas. Sushna (who may be a personification of the drought), and Namuci among others; many of these names sound (un-) non-Aryan. It is always difficult to separate Vedic myth from possible historic reality; rhetorical praise may or may not represent some military success on the battle field. Were the women in Namuci's 'army' human or mother goddesses? Did the demons have two wives or did they represent the local god of two rivers seen so often on Mesopotamian seals? The Aryans had destroyed other urban cultures before coming to India. In India they wiped out the remnants of the Varasikhas at Hariyupiya on behalf of Abyavartin Cayamana, an Aryan chief. The tribe they destroyed was that of the Vricivats, whose front line of 130 warriors was shattered like an earthen pot by Indra on the Vyavati (Ravi) river, Such vigorous language describes some actual fights at Harappa, whether between two Aryan groups or between Aryans and non-Aryans."⁷

Some records available in Pali literature, one of the old literary traditions that explained the Buddhist teachings, are valuable to understand these historical circumstances. At that time, the people who were newly settled in India, were named Sura (means god, great) and natives were named as Asura (means non-gods, not great). According to the Vedic literature Asuras were the enemies of Vedic gods. The god Indra of the Indian religion during the Vedic period has been transferred to the Buddhist tradition as the key god of the heaven; he changed his wicked face to a good social worker and a person who is full of life with good characteristics.

During the Vedic era adherents attributed special power for those three gods; Indra, atmospheric (*antarikṣa*); Agni, terrestrial (*bhūmyastha*); and Varuṇa, celestial. The god Varuṇa is a good example for the concept of religion because he is the master of the concept of '*ṛta*'. Though he is the god of sky and water at the same time he is the god of law and punishment. Dragon (*makara*) is his vehicle and it was used by goddess Gangā as her vehicle too. This vehicle is generally depicted as half animal and half fish. The front part is in animal form either of an elephant, crocodile, stag or deer, while the hind part is in the form of a fish or seal's tail. Sometimes it is

depicted as a peacock tail. For some limited period of time Varuṇa was the most prominent figure among the Hindu gods.

Trinity in Indian religion

As we have already mentioned, the Indian standpoint of god is multiple, not only in its history but also in the modern times as well. As we have basically stated in Hinduism or Indian religion there are a number of gods who are working together for followers without any problems from monotheistic religion. Consequently, scholars say that in Hinduism, there is no unified system of belief but it is rather an umbrella term comprising the plurality of religious phenomena originating and based on the Vedic traditions.

In any case, it can be recognized as four major denominations;

- A. **Vaishnavism:** worship Viṣṇu as the supreme god
- B. **Shaivism:** worship Śiva as the supreme god
- C. **Shaktism:** worship power personified through a female divinity or Mother Goddess
- D. **Smartism:** Smartas believe in the essential oneness of five or six deities as personifications of the supreme.

In Hinduism, there is the concept of trinity (three gods) namely; Brahma, Viṣṇu and Śiva. Brahma is the creator, Viṣṇu is the preserver and Śiva is the destroyer. The mythology says that god Brahma or Brahman grew in a lotus out of the navel of the God Viṣṇu. Day light and darkness at night are his creations. In Hinduism Brahma is the 'Supreme Cosmic Spirit' of the universe. There are ten mind born sons (*manas putra-s*) namely; Marici, Atri, Aṃgīrasa, Pulaha, Pulasthya, Krathu, Vashista, Prachethaa, Bhrigu, Nārada and he has nine sons; Agni (eye brows; eldest son), Daksha (right thumb), Dharma (chest), Kama (heart), Anger, Greed, Māyābheda, Lust, Joy, Yama and one daughter named Aṃgaja born from various parts of his body.

Brahma's wife is called Saraswatī, who was created by Brahma himself and is considered as his daughter and she is a goddess for wisdom and learning. It is the way that Brahma was involved in giving birth to the human race. Brahma is the god of wisdom and he has four heads. The four *Vedas* which are considered as sacred scriptures were delivered from each of his four faces with four heads. He has four arms. In one arm he carries the *Vedas*, in another a sceptre, in a third a *komondul* (a special type of water jug that is still utilized by Hindus during worship), and in a fourth a bow or, variously, a string of beads or a spoon. He has red skin and wears white clothes. He rides on a swan. Compared with heavens of other gods Brahma's heaven is more superior with various splendors.

God Viṣṇu: Sri Lakshmi or Lakshmi is his wife and he has four arms and each hand holds a symbol of his divinity such as the conch, discus, club, and lotus. Though there are various classification like four or twenty-four in number for his incarnation. He is best known through his ten avatars (incarnations), which appear on earth when there is disorder in the world. They are; *Matsya* (fish), *Kurma* (turtle), *Varāha*

(boar), *Narasimha* (man-lion), *Vāmana* (dwarf), *Parashurāma* (warrior-priest), *Rāma* (prince), *Krishna* (cow-herd), *Buddha* (the Prince Siddhartha), *Kalki* (horseman, who has not yet appeared).

According to the Hindu myths it is shown how god Viṣṇu became a sustainer of the world and how Viṣṇu sacrificed on behalf of mankind. Once the wickedness of mankind was limitless and Śiva, then, transformed himself into a wrathful form known as Bhairava. He showed his power by killing, maiming, and ripping out hearts of humans and drinking blood, his menacing laughter thundering all around. Having seen this, Viṣṇu felt sympathy and compassion for mankind and requested him to stop the slaughter. Bhairava said “Until my bowl is filled with enough blood to quench my thirst I will go on killing. Viṣṇu replied, “Let me give you all the blood you need. You don't have to bleed mankind.” Then, he struck his forehead with his sword and let his blood spurt into Bhairava's bowl. It continuously happened for several years and Bhairava, then, realized the sacrifice of Viṣṇu for the sake of the world. Bhairava said “As long as you protect the world I will not attempt to quench my thirst because of your generosity but whenever the world will be corrupted, even you cannot sustain then I will start again and take every drop of blood from the heart of man.”

Both Viṣṇu and Śiva are gods in the same Indian religion and Bhairava is also a transformation of god Śiva. Therefore, the mythology states that these two gods are friends and both of them are supporting to the benefit of the world. One is following a cruel way and the other sympathetic way. If we consider without any kind of religious feeling they are doing teamwork. It points out that you should abide by the god Viṣṇu if the slaughter will come again.

The statue of god Viṣṇu god is intriguing here. The four arms express dominion over the four directions of space; the quest for knowledge (*brahamachārī*), family life (*gṛhastha*), retreat into the forest (*vānaprastha*) and renunciation (*śannyāsī*). At the same time these symbolize the four aims of human life named as *Puruṣārthas*; duty and virtue (*Dharma*), material goods, wealth, success (*artha*), pleasure, sexuality, enjoyment (*kāma*) and liberation (*mokṣa*). In any case, the four arms also represent the four castes and the four Vedas.

Viṣṇu, further, holds the four implements; conch shell, discus, lotus and mace in his hands. The symbol of conch shell held by the upper left hand indicates the sacred sound ‘om’, the breath of Viṣṇu that encompassing all space. The discus held by the upper right hand symbolizes fast thoughts in the human mind and as a weapon it has special ability to return to the hand of he who throws it like a boomerang. The mace named *kaumodakī* held by the lower right hand, symbolizes the divine power of Viṣṇu. That is the source of all spiritual, mental and physical strength. The lotus flower held by the lower right hand, represents spiritual liberation, divine perfection, purity and the unfolding of spiritual consciousness within the individual and also it represents divine truth, the originator of the rules of conduct, divinity and knowledge.

As we know life of the world is a very decisive question considered among mankind regardless of its religion, philosophy and science. Viṣṇu's conch shell and its

interpretation as the sacred sound 'om', the breath of Viṣṇu illustrate how ancient Indians connected the life of the world with their beliefs.

A good example of his relationship to Brahma is the synonym called Padmanābha or the one with the lotus-navel because when Viṣṇu contemplated the creation of mankind; a lotus sprang out of his navel. It is the seat for the four-headed Brahma who illuminates all the directions of the world with his brightness. How god Viṣṇu is popular and venerated by followers is proved through thousands of synonyms, utilized for him. Govinda means protector of the cows and Brahmins; master of the senses, Hari means one who takes away, Jagannātha means owner or ruler of the world or universe, Krishna born during the third epoch, Nārāyana means shelter of the whole universe, Rāma born during the second epoch, Hariṣikeṣ means lord of the senses etc. These are only a few prominent names.

Next and the last god among the Hindu trinity is called Śiva. He also has hundreds of names like Mahādeva, Great God (*mahā* = Great + *deva* = God), *Maheśvara*, Great Lord (*mahā* = Great + *īśvara* = Lord), and *Parameśvara*, Supreme Lord (*Parama* = *Supreme* + *īśvara* = Lord). The history of Śiva is connected up to Mohenjodaro civilization which is more than 5000 years old in general. In the Purāna literature, Śiva is a continuation of the Vedic god Indra because both of them are known for having a thirst for soma, associated with mountains, rivers, male fertility, fierceness, fearlessness, warfare, transgression of established mores. On the one hand, since this movement of Śiva is precisely popular in South India and his skin colour is also somewhat black. And sometimes he may be the reincarnation of a god who was believed by inhabitants in early India. On the other hand, it seems that the image of Śiva has a South Indian appearance.

Pārwati is his spouse and her very famous form is Śakthi (Power). She was his second wife, the first was Sati. Both of them have several forms; Durgā, Kālī, Annapūrṇa and Śakhi. He had two sons namely, Gaṇeṣa and Kartikeya. As most of Hindu gods are associated with Yoga and meditation, Śiva's art of meditation takes its absolute form. Within his meditation not only mind but also every other thing is also stopped. This attribution of two wives is also emphasized as the imagination of god.

As a tradition, Indian religious adherents like to believe in the divine origin of art, medicine, language, dance etc. The depiction of Śiva as Naṭarāja (Lord of Dance) is one such belief. Among the synonyms for him can be identified two names as Naṭaka (dancer) and Nityanarṭa (eternal dancer) and emphasizes the inter-relation with dance and music of the god Śiva. The Naṭarāja (dancing lord) posture of Śiva is very popular in India, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia and especially in South India.

The form *Ardhanārīśvara* shows him with one half of the body as male and the other half as female. This shows how mythological concepts have been attached to gods of Indian religion similar to other religions. They needed to emphasize the power of god over human beings but they forgot to classically think about the final result. If one who has half male and half female features it will be abnormal in the human society. But respect to the religious mythology shows that Śiva has a power regardless of gender.

Śiva is often depicted as a Tripurantaka because he is an archer in the act of destroying the triple fortresses of the Asuras. The meaning of this name is ‘destroyer of triple fortresses’ (*tripura+antaka*). Śiva, in this posture, is depicted with four arms wielding a bow and arrow to show his power. After destroying the three fortresses of Asuras he smeared his forehead with three strokes.

The three eyes of Lord Śiva represent the sun and the moon respectively via right and left eyes and fire through the third eye. The form of Maheśvara is the god Śiva depicted in Tantrayāna Buddhist scriptures. Statues of the above mentioned gods outside of India are also changed by adherents similar to their customs. In brief, these three gods represent the three states of mind; sleep, dream, and awareness. Therefore, Śiva is in the dreamless sleep, Viṣṇu in the vision of dreams, and Brahma in the state of awareness.

As we know, according to the history of gods in Indian religion it has passed several epochs in its development of belief; *bahudevavāda* (many gods), *ekadevāda* (one god) and so on. The uniqueness of Hinduism is that we cannot say just at the end of the monotheism (*ekadevavāda*), polytheism (*bahudevavāda*) or atheism (*advitavāda* - no god) was begun because India is the land for plurality of beliefs.

Within the period of *ekadevavāda* mankind thought that there is only one god whose existence is absolute, knowledge absolute and bliss absolute, the inner ruler of this body and mind, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, permanent, eternal, perpetual, indestructible, immutable, imperishable. During the period of *bahudevavāda*, people followed many gods in history. In brief, it is very clear most of them are following many gods but one of them is more convenient than the other gods. As John Hicks states “The Indian sub-continent, on the other hand, was always a multi-faith region, with the Shaivites and the Vaishnavites within what is today called Hinduism, and the Jains, Parsis, Buddhists, and later the Muslims, Christians and Sikhs all coexisting, sometimes as hostile, and even violently hostile, but most of the time friendly, neighbors.”⁸ Rabindranath Tagor describes Vedic hymns “as a poetic testament of a people’s collective reaction to the wonder and awe of existence.

A people of vigorous and unsophisticated imagination awakened at the very dawn of civilization to a sense of the inexhaustible mystery that is implicit in life. It was a simple faith of theirs that attributed divinity every element and force of nature, but it was a brave and joyous one, in which the sense of mystery only gave enchantment to life, without weighing it down with bafflement the faith of a race unburdened with intellectual brooding on the conflicting diversity of the objective universe, though now and again illumined by intuitive experience as: ‘Truth is one: [though] the wise call it by various names’.”⁹

In the Vedic religion, there were three prominent gods; Indra, Agni and Varuna, and later three other prominent gods; Brahma, Viṣṇu and Śiva. One of them was occasionally highlighted; it proves that the responsibilities related to them have been occasionally mixed with each other.

The power of gods and originating authority of the world has been randomly changed according to different mythologies. As we have discussed that the

origination of the world is the great power of the Brahma. But the earlier myths acknowledge Yama and his sister Yami as the creators of the human race. It means that there was no common agreement about the origin of the world or power of the gods within the same Indian religion. While Christianity presents its own interpretation Islam, Jainism, Buddhism also state their standpoints.

The iconography of gods can be very attractive. All the above mentioned prominent gods in Indian religion have similar external structure of human beings and thereafter, gods specialize adding some parts to their bodies. For example god Brahma has four heads and four hands, god Viṣṇu has four hands. The person who drew their pictures needed to show gods as more powerful than human beings.

Then the question arises as to why the artists decided to draw the picture of gods as human beings. Further, though the vehicles and their weapons attributed to gods were powerful in the history those are also not enough to show their power in the modern world with nuclear power. It means that the artist made the pictures of gods according to contemporary world interpretations where he lived. "Mythology affected me in much the same way. If people believed in the factual contents of these stories, the whole thing was absurd and ridiculous. But as soon as one ceased believing in them, they appeared in a new light, a new beauty, a wonderful flowering of a richly endowed imagination, full of human lessons."¹⁰

If we pay our attention on sacred utterances, *mantra* in Sanskrit, related to above mentioned gods it will be clear that those are mere honorary phrases for them. For example the following mantra recommended for the god Viṣṇu is very popular among adherents.

Om Viṣṇave namah (Om, may worship to Viṣṇu)
Om namo bhagavate Vāsudevāya (Om, may worship to Vāsudeva)
Om namo Nārāyanāya (Om, may worship to Nārāyana)
Om Śri Hari Viṣṇu (Om, may worship to Shri Hari Viṣṇu)
Hari Om (Om, Hari)

In this mantra Viṣṇava, Bhagavata, Vāsudeva, Nārāyana, Śri Hari or Hari are adjectives or synonym for the god Viṣṇu. *Om* is the holly religious symbol of Hinduism. There is no mysterious connotation but the adherents who do not know the meaning of this verse attribute some mysterious meaning and power. The Śiva mantra is; *Om namah Śivāya*, the Indra mantra: *Om indrāya namah* and Agni mantra; *Om Agnidēvāya namah* are further examples which illuminate the same point.

Conclusion

The basic differences among polytheistic religions and monotheistic religions were also discussed. It was clarified, at the discussion on gods in Indian religion as a plurality concept. The origin of the concept of god in Indian religion is not made by them because some gods came to India when the Aryans came from Iran, or what was called Persia in the past.

In the Vedic era, there were three highlighted gods named Agni, Indra and Varuṇa. They represent gods who had a god-ship as natural powers, who were considered as

gods due to hero worship, and as gods due to religious concepts. It was clearly shown that gods are made by mankind, specially, according to their environmental and social circumstances, and then there were hundreds of myths created by adherents. At present, there are three key gods; Brahma, Viṣṇu and Śiva, sometimes it seems they represent old gods. The power and myths regarding them are also most probably similar to the early stage of gods.

The trinity of the Indian religion appeared in human form and all of them have four arms. Primordial mankind was afraid of natural phenomena of the world like thunder and lightning and thought of them as dangerous and hostile. The attitudes towards big trees and mountains were also similar. Then, they created the idea of gods with varieties of myths to comfort themselves.

However, the development of the concept was closely connected with human life. Therefore, adherents attributed vehicles, weapons, body features, and consorts for gods with especial additions surrounding myths. Birds and animals are selected as gods' chariots; a swan for Brahma, garuda for Viṣṇu, a bull for Śiva, the white elephant named Airāvaṇa for Indra, a male sheep for Agni, a dragon (*makarā*) for Varuna or for the goddess Gangā, the thunderbolt (*vajra*) for Indra, the javelin (spear, pole weapon) for Agni, the sudarshana chakra and kaumodaki gada for Viṣṇu, and the trident (*thriṣula*) for Śiva. These are some of the weapons attributed to gods.

Similar to human beings, the gods have consorts Shachi or Indrani for Indra, Svaha for Agni, Lakṣmi for Viṣṇu, Sarasvati for Brahma, Parvati (*Durgā*) for Śiva, to name a few of them. Therefore, it seems clear that the gods of Indian religion are not characters in other abodes and they are creative productions of mankind. Refutation of these myths are very difficult because those were narrated by their adults during adherents' childhood. Though they become adults since those narratives are in their unconscious mind they would like to believe gods and related myths as true.

Through these mythologies, intellectuals wish to sustain the ethics of the society. For example, the mythology of Śiva's transformation into a wrathful form known as Bhairava states the ethical decadence of the society. Viṣṇu, the sustainer of the world, sacrificed on behalf of mankind and released from the disaster of Bhairava. This mythology motivates the people for living an ethical life. Therefore, awareness of the origin and development of the concept of gods in Indian religion will assist in opening readers' mind and in observing the beauty and significance of religious mythologies. Further, it will provide the knowledge for consideration of gods in other religions.

References

- Hick, John. (1999). *The Fifth Dimension: An Exploration of the Spiritual Realm*. Oxford: One world.
- Kaegi, Adolf. (1886). *The Rigveda Oldest Literature of the Indians*. Boston: Ginnand Company.
- MacDonnell, A. A. (1974). *Vedic Mythology*. Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

- Marasinghe, M. M. J. (2009). *Gods in Early Buddhism: Origin, Functions and Relevance*. Sarasawi: Nugegoda.
- Nehru, Jawaharlal. (1945). *The Discovery of India*. New York: The John Day Company.
- Smart, Jack. (2003). *John Haldane Atheism and Theism*. Blackwell Publishing.

End Notes

- ¹ Smart, Jack; John Haldane (2003) *Atheism and Theism*, Blackwell Publishing. p. 8
- ² Nehru, Jawaharlal (1945) *The Discovery of India*, New York: The John Day Company, p.68
- ³ Nehru, Jawaharlal (1945) *The Discovery of India*, New York: The John Day Company, p.137
- ⁴ Kaegi, Adolf (1886) *The Rigveda Oldest Literature of the Indians*, Boston: Ginnand Company, P.85
- ⁵ MacDonnell, A. A. (1974) *Vedic Mythology*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, p. 89
- ⁶ MacDonnell, A. A. (1974) *Vedic Mythology*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, p.98
- ⁷ Marasinghe, M. M. J. (2009) *Gods in Early Buddhism: Origin, Functions and Relevance*, Sarasawi, Nugegoda, p.109
- ⁸ Hick, John (1999) *The Fifth Dimension: an Exploration of the Spiritual Realm* Oxford: One world, p.78
- ⁹ Nehru, Jawaharlal (1945) *The Discovery of India*, New York: The John Day Company, p.69
- ¹⁰ Nehru, Jawaharlal (1945) *The Discovery of India*, New York: The John Day Company, p.67,68