



A pictorial representation of Brahma - the Creator of the Universe according to Hindu mythology

GETTY

# ORIGINS OF Hinduism

Indologist Michel Danino traces the roots of one of the world's oldest religions - Hinduism

Searching for the origins of Hinduism is a bit like exploring a thick forest: there are so many paths and trails that it is difficult to decide which ones matter. Perhaps that is because Hinduism is itself something of a forest — a disorderly, unregulated, tangled growth. Judaism, Christianity and Islam look so neat in comparison: one god, one founder, one book. Hinduism has not just many gods, founders and books, but as many as you like; in fact, you are free to keep adding to them. You may, if you wish, start worshipping a new god (how about a god of exams, say, Pariksheshwara?) or write a new Upanishad, though you may have to wait for a few centuries for it to be accepted as such.

Defining Hinduism, in the first place, is a challenge, and we have as many definitions as we have scholars. In 'The

Harappan Legacy' (BBC Knowledge, April 2012) archaeologists have agreed to see in the Indus civilization (2600–1900 BCE) some of the roots of Hinduism: tree worship, figures in yogic postures (and the well-known 'Priest-King' in contemplation), symbols like the swastika, the linga and the trishula, three-faced gods, fire altars, sacred proportions and much more. It bears repetition that John Marshall, who directed excavations at Mohenjo-daro, asserted in 1931, 'Taken as a whole, [the Harappan] religion is so characteristically Indian as hardly to be distinguished from still living Hinduism.'

#### The Early Texts

We must turn to the early texts for its conceptual framework, starting with the Vedas, especially the oldest of the four, the Rig-Veda. While its date remains ▶



unsettled, its 1,028 hymns, which have been faithfully memorised and orally transmitted by generations of students and teachers to the present day, are invocations to gods and goddesses, such as Indra, Agni, Mitra or Sarasvati.

Certain fundamental concepts do emerge clearly from the *Rig-Veda*, especially its insistence on a single divine essence taking many names and forms: “The Existent is One, but sages express it variously; they say Indra, Varuna, Mitra, Agni ...” (1.164.46). These powers, ultimately, are mere aspects of ‘That One’ (*tad ekam*), or ‘that truth’ (*tat satyam*).

Absent from the *Vedas*, however, are notions like *dharma*, *karma* and rebirth, which is what makes the Vedic religion rather different from the Hinduism we know: Hinduism reveres the *Vedas* and claims them as its source, but in practice has little use for them, beyond including some of their mantras in rituals and ceremonies. A few centuries after the *Vedas* were composed, the concepts of *dharma* and rebirth emerged in the Upanishads, texts which also gave expression to the central spiritual principles of Hinduism in a philosophical language: they taught that all is the divine (“you are That”, *tat tvam asi*) and that the microcosm (our small individual scale) and the macrocosm (the cosmos) are essentially correlated, implying that everything in this universe is symbolic. Our body, for instance, is made of the same five elements — earth, water, fire, wind, ether — as the universe, and while its head corresponds to the higher worlds, its feet symbolise the earth. And there are at least five beings in us: the material, the emotional, the mental, the spiritual and the highest self.

These are no mere abstractions, since they are the foundations of Ayurveda and orient the actual treatment of this ancient Indian system of medicine. They also gave rise to many systems of yoga, which ultimately aim at union with our spiritual or divine essence.

**Popular Hinduism**



Like all religions, Hinduism operated at other levels, those of popular literature, art, worship and ritual.

Popular literature was taken care of by vast collection of heroic or mythological stories (often conveyed by many encyclopaedic texts known as the *Puranas*), legends, parables and ballads. The

best-known examples are of course India’s two great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, which travelled to every nook and corner of the subcontinent through countless retellings, translations, and adaptations. The two epics fulfilled several functions: they gave everyone — king or subject, husband or wife, guru or student — role models to be followed. They provided a readily accessible teaching on the intricacies of *dharma*. And they contributed greatly to the land’s cultural unification.

**The Borders of Hinduism**

While its non-dogmatic and amorphous nature, its apparent polytheism, its refusal to limit itself to one founder and one book, were often criticised or even ridiculed by nineteenth-century Indologists, in practice those features encouraged a plethora of cults, sects, modes of worship, and of course deities. In its long-standing (and, in fact, on-going) interaction with rural and tribal communities, Hinduism generously exchanged deities, rituals and cults. Gods like Jagannath, Ganesha, Narasimha and many aspects of the mother goddess have tribal origins; on the other hand, rural and tribal communities often accepted ‘mainstream’ gods, such as Shiva or Rama, rishis like Agastya, or heroes such as the five Pandava brothers of the *Mahabharata*.

This symbiosis is what has been so disconcerting to many students of Indian religions: on the one hand, a mainstream Hinduism based on texts like the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad-Gita* or the *Puranas* and sometimes called *sanatana dharma* or the ‘eternal law’, which has produced manifold teachings and methods of self-exploration and self-realisation; on the other, a popular Hinduism which may appear to be little more than a loose fusion of regional cultures, customs and traditions, absorbing more of them from successive waves of invaders, and yet somehow managed to build up an identity of its own, contributing to the creation of a united and yet multicultural India where spiritual and religious freedom was always highly valued. □

**Michel Danino** has been living in India since 1977. He is a guest professor at IIT Gandhinagar. His recent titles are *The Lost River: On the Trail of the Sarasvati* (Penguin India, 2010) and *Indian Culture and India's Future* (DK Printworld, 2011).

# Important Gods of Hinduism

## TRIMURTI



**Brahma – The Creator**

Legend has it that Brahma was born from Vishnu's navel.



**Vishnu – The Preserver**

He is said to take birth in the form of various avatars to return cosmic order in the Universe. His tenth and final avatar is called Kalki.



**Shiva – The Destroyer**

Represents the force of destruction and austerity. His third eye, if opened can destroy the world.

## TRIDEVI



**Saraswati – The Goddess of Knowledge, Arts & Music**

According to Hindu mythology, she is credited with the invention of writing.



**Lakshmi – The Goddess of Wealth**

When the Gods were in exile, Lakshmi hid in the ocean. During the churning of the ocean, Lakshmi was reborn and became Vishnu's consort.



**Parvati – The Goddess of Strength**

Shiva's consort, she is the reincarnated form of Sati, his first wife. She is the source of all powers and weapons.

## POPULAR DEITIES



**Indra – God of Rain**

He is described in the texts as having a thousand eyes.



**Varuna – God of Ocean & all Waters**

Sits on a throne of diamonds watching over demons arising from the waters.



**Vayu – God of Wind/Air**

Is the father of Lord Hanuman (through Anjana) and of Bhima (through Kunti).



**Yama – God of Death**

Legend has it that Yama was the first mortal to die.



**Surya – Sun God**

The Sun temple in Konark Orissa is built in his honour.



**Chandra – Moon God**

He is the father of planet Mercury and is said to be descended from Varuna.



**Nataraja – the Lord of Dance**

An avatar of Shiva, he performs the dance of destruction to destroy an unbalanced Universe.



**Prithvi – Goddess of Earth**

One of the avatars of the Goddess is that of a white cow. She is also a mother to Indra and Agni.



**Agni – God of Fire**

He is Indra's twin brother and is the messenger between Gods and mortals.



**Kamadeva – God of Pleasure**

Kamadeva was reduced to ashes by Shiva, as he interrupted Shiva's meditation.