



Change and Evolution

Diversity of Hinduism



Figure 13: Shiva *Bhagavad Gita*

Modern Hinduism can in part be traced to indigenous Indian practices several thousands of years old. What we now call Hinduism was once known as—and in many places is still preferred to be known as—*Sanatan Dharma*. *Sanatan* means eternal. *Dharma* may be translated as religion, law, order, duty, or ethics. *Sanatan Dharma* may be thought of as meaning the eternal path or way of life.

Sanatan Dharma was impacted upon by the arrival of Proto Indo-European speaking tribes from the Middle East and north, approximately four thousand years ago.

Due in part to its long life, the historical record surrounding Hinduism is not only complex and multi-faceted, but also fragmented and a matter of continuing debate. Many Hindus focus less on attempting to work out accurate historical reconstructions than on the challenges and opportunities posed by the interaction of their beliefs and faith in the world today.

God and Gender in Hinduism

In Hinduism, god is conceptualized in different ways with respect to gender. For many, their focus is upon an impersonal Absolute (*Brahman*) which is genderless. Some Hindu traditions see god as being androgynous, having both female and male aspects. Alternatively a supreme god may be seen to be either male or female while embracing gender henotheism; that is without denying the existence of other gods in either gender. The *Shakti* tradition conceives of god as a female. Other *Bhakti* traditions of Hinduism have both male and female gods. In ancient and medieval Indian mythology, each masculine Deva (god) of the Hindu pantheon was partnered with a feminine Devi (god).

As well, in the Hindu narrative tradition, there is great gender fluidity and there are stories of gods and humans changing gender. For example, the epic *Mahabharata* features the transgender character Sikhandin, and describes the warrior Arjuna cross-dressing to become Brihannala, teacher of fine arts.

Lesbian, gay, and transgender Hindus commonly identify with and worship the various Hindu deities connected with gender diversity. A few examples of these deities follow:

- Ardhanarisvara, the androgynous form of Shiva and his consort Parvati
- Aravan, a hero whom the god Krishna married after becoming a woman
- Harihara, an incarnation of Shiva and Vishnu combined
- Gadadhara, an incarnation of Radha in male form
- Bhagavati-devi, a Hindu goddess associated with cross-dressing

Within Hindu philosophy there is also a concept of a third sex or third gender (*tritiya-prakriti*—literally, “third nature”). This third gender category includes a wide range of persons with mixed male and female natures. The third genders and aspects of their lives varies by region and culture. Third gender sects include the *Hijra* of Northern India, the Aravani or Ali of the Tamil Nadu in southern India, and the Jogappa also in southern India.

However, in some cases the third gender lived in their own communities and were considered separate from the binary male and female genders.

Many argue that traditional Vedic culture allowed transgender people of the third gender to live openly according to their gender identity. *Hijras* participated in religious ceremonies, especially as cross-dressing dancers and devotees of certain temple gods/goddesses, and this was considered auspicious in traditional Hinduism. However, contemporary attitudes towards transgender persons or the third gender can vary greatly among different Hindu organizations and societies.

Worship of Specific Gods

While there are many forms of Hinduism, it is possible to partially organize the tradition into three groups. These groups are distinguished by the embodied, personal form of *The Brahman* they worship in particular. The groups are *Vaishnavites* (they worship primarily Vishnu and the incarnations of Vishnu: Ram and Krishna), *Saivites* (they worship primarily Shiva), and *Shaktas* (they worship primarily the feminine power of the Divine, the *Shakti*).

Vaishnavites give particular consideration to *The Brahman* as embodied in Vishnu. In the cycle of creation, preservation, and destruction, Vishnu occupies the middle role, that of the guard or preserver of existence. He is often understood and depicted as merciful, kind, and generous. Ram and Krishna are the popular, much-loved incarnation of the god Vishnu.

Shaivites worship Shiva (or Siva) as the supreme embodiment of the Divine. In contrast to Vishnu, Shiva is often understood as a god of destruction. This, however, is not meant in a negative sense, but as an essential part of the cycle of existence. Shiva is the Lord of Peace and is called upon to destroy the characteristics or qualities that prevent peace. Shiva is often connected to ascetic practices such as various forms of yoga and meditation and, in general, to ascetic figures. In Hindu narrative, Shiva and his wife Parvati are the parents to Ganesha, depicted with the head of an elephant. Ganesha is often called upon for auspicious events (especially those related to beginnings or openings, such blessings as marriages, the birth of a child, entering a new home, and so forth).

Shaktas worship various feminine expressions of the Divine. These expressions may be depicted as Durga, a gentle and beautiful woman bearing arms, or as Kali, a fierce and violent-looking figure. In each case, the goddess in question not only plays an essential part in both destruction and death, but also life, birth, and rebirth.

Charts providing an overview of the male and female forms of the major deities as well as some of the more popular deities follow.

Principal Hindu Gods and Goddesses

The *Trimurti* (Hindu Trinity)



Brahma—The Creator

Supreme god in diverse versions of Hinduism. Usually credited as being the creator of the universe.

Distinguishing Features:

Brahma is traditionally depicted with four faces, each pointing to a cardinal direction, and four hands. The hands hold symbols of knowledge and creation; one hand holds the *Vedas*, the second holds *mālā* (rosary beads), the third holds a ladle, and the fourth holds a utensil with water. The four mouths are credited with creating the four *Vedas*. Often depicted with a white beard, implying his sage-like experience. Brahma sits on a lotus, is dressed in white (or red, pink), and has his vehicle (*vahana*)—*hansa*, a swan, or goose—nearby.



Vishnu—The Preserver/Protector

In Vaishnism Hinduism, he is the Supreme Being.

Distinguishing Features:

Vishnu is usually depicted as having a dark or pale blue complexion and four arms. He holds a *padma* (lotus flower) in his lower left hand, *kaumodaki gada* (mace) in his lower right hand, *panchajanya shankha* (conch) in his upper left hand, and the *sudarshana chakra* (discus) in his upper right hand. Often depicted reclining on the coils of *Ananta*, accompanied by his consort devi Lakshmi as he dreams the universe into reality.



Shiva—The Destroyer/Transformer

He is a Supreme Being within the *Shaivism* tradition of Hinduism and has many benevolent and fearsome depictions. He is depicted as an omniscient *yogi* who lives an ascetic life on Mount Kailash along with his wife Parvati and their two children, Ganesha and Kartikeya. He is also often depicted slaying demons. Known also as Adiyogi Shiva, he is the patron god of yoga, meditation, and arts.

Distinguishing Features:

Shiva has a third eye on his forehead, the serpent around his neck, the adorning crescent moon, the holy river Ganga flowing from his matted hair, the *trishula* as his weapon, and the *damaru*.

Principal Hindu Gods and Goddesses

Shaktis (Trivedi of Female Forms)



Saraswati—Goddess of Knowledge, Arts, Wisdom, and Learning

She is worshipped throughout Nepal and India.

Distinguishing Features:

Saraswati is usually depicted as a beautiful woman dressed in pure white, seated on a white lotus, often near a flowing river or other body of water and usually shown with four arms. When shown with four hands, they symbolically mirror husband Brahma's four heads. The items held in the four hands are a *pustaka* (book or script), a *mālā* (rosary, garland), a water pot, and a musical instrument (*vīnā*). A *hamsa* or swan, a *citramekhala*, is often next to her feet.



Lakshmi—Goddess of Wealth, Health, Fortune, and Prosperity

Wife and *shakti* (energy) of Vishnu. She is endowed with six important and divine qualities, or *gunas*. Ancient scriptures of India view all women to be embodiments of Lakshmi.

Distinguishing Features:

Lakshmi is often depicted elegantly dressed in a red dress embroidered with golden threads. She typically stands or sits like a *yogin* on a lotus pedestal and holds lotuses in her hands. Her four hands represent the four goals of human life *kharma*, *kāma*, *artha*, and *moksha*. She is sometimes shown with an elephant and occasionally with an owl.



Parvati (also known as Uma)—The Divine Mother; Goddess of Fertility, Love, and Devotion

She is the central deity of the *Shakti* sect, the wife of Shiva, the daughter of the mountain king Himavan and queen Mena. She is the mother of Hindu deities Ganesha and Kartikeya.

Distinguishing Features:

Parvati is usually depicted as fair and beautiful, with golden skin, wearing a red *sari*, and sometimes a headband. When with Shiva, she is shown with two arms, but when she is alone, she may have four. Her hands may hold a conch, crown, mirror, rosary, bell, dish, farming tool such as *goad*, sugarcane stalk, or flowers. One of the arms may be in the *abhaya mudra* gesture (fear not). Often, Ganesha is on her knee while her younger son Skanda may be playing nearby.

Other Popular Hindu Gods and Goddesses

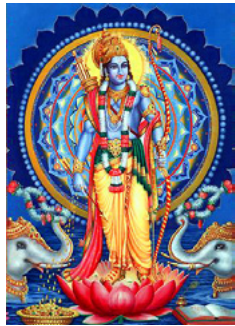


Ganesha (also known as Ganapati, Vinayaka, or Binayak)—Remover of Obstacles, Patron of Arts and Sciences, and Deva of Intellect and Wisdom

He is one of the best-known and most worshiped deities. As god of beginnings, he is honoured at the start of rituals and ceremonies.

Distinguishing Features:

Ganesha is almost always depicted with an elephant head. He may be shown in different poses—standing, dancing, fighting demons, playing with his family as a boy, and sitting down or on an elevated seat. Often depicted with four arms, he is usually holding an axe or a *goad* and a *pasha* (noose) in the upper arms.



Rama (also known as Ramachandra)—Avatar of Vishnu/ Supreme Being

He is a major deity (especially in *Vaishnavism*) and the seventh *avatar* (incarnation) of the god Vishnu. For some sects he is the Supreme Being, the central figure of the ancient epic *Ramayana*.

Distinguishing Features:

Rama shares some similarities with depictions of Vishnu and other *avatars*. Always depicted with two hands, he is often shown holding a *bana* (arrow) in his right hand, a *dhanus* (bow) in his left. He is usually standing in *tribhanga* pose (thrice bent “S” shape) with black, blue, or dark colour skin and may be shown with wife Sita and brother Lakshmana .



Hanuman—Patron of Martial Arts and Meditation, Ardent Devotee of Rama

He is a central character in the epic *Ramayana*, and is admired for his combination of supernatural abilities, strength, heroic initiative, assertive excellence, and devotion to his personal god Rama. He symbolizes the human virtues of inner self-control, faith, and service.

Distinguishing Features:

Hanuman has monkey-like facial features, and is often depicted with other main characters of the *Ramayana*. In group images, he appears bowing or kneeling before Rama with a *namaste* (*anjali hasta*) posture. He often carries weapons such as a big *gada* (mace) and thunderbolt (*vajra*).

Other Popular Hindu Gods and Goddesses

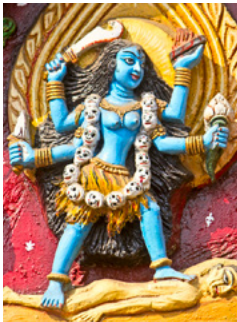


Durga (also known as *Devi* or *Shakti*)—The Warrior Goddess

She is a fierce warrior who battles against evil and demonic forces that threaten peace, prosperity, and the *dharma* of the good. She is the fierce form of the protective mother goddess and a central deity in the *Shaktism* tradition.

Distinguishing Features:

Durga is often depicted with many arms, each carrying a weapon, riding on a lion or a tiger, and attacking the demon Mahisha. She appears as the wife of Shiva, as another Parvati. The weapons she holds are from various Hindu Gods, given to her to fight the evil forces and include *chakra*, conch, bow, arrow, sword, javelin, shield, and noose.



Kali (Kalika)—The Destroyer and Liberator of Souls

Believed to be misunderstood in the West, she is the most compassionate goddess because she provides *moksha* or liberation. She is the counterpart of Shiva the destroyer, both are destroyers of unreality.

Distinguishing Features:

Kali is often depicted half-naked, with a garland of skulls, a belt of severed limbs; and waving scary-looking weapons with two of her 10 hands. She is often dancing on a prostrate Shiva, who looks up at her admiringly. Two of Kali's hands are empty and in the *mudras* (gestures) of protection and fearlessness. Her tongue is stuck out to swallow up evil and negative thoughts.



Surya (also known as *Aditya*, *Arka*, *Bhanu*, *Savitr*, *Pushan*, *Ravi*, *Martanda*, *Mitra*, or *Vivasvan*)—God of the Sun

He is the solar deity in Hinduism and is one of the five deities considered as equivalent aspects and means to realizing *Brahman* in the *Smarta* Tradition.

Distinguishing Features:

Surya is often depicted riding a chariot pulled by seven horses, which represent the seven colour rays of the rainbow. In medieval Hinduism, Surya is also an epithet for the major Hindu gods, Shiva and Vishnu. In some ancient texts and artwork, Surya is presented syncretically with Indra, Ganesha, or others.

Other Popular Hindu Gods and Goddesses



Krishna (also known as Govinda, Mukunda, Vasudeva)—God of Compassion, Love, and Tenderness

He is one of the most revered and popular deities and is worshipped as the eighth incarnation of the Hindu god Vishnu. He is the central character in the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Distinguishing Features:

Krishna is depicted in diverse ways by different Hindu sects, but with some common features. He is usually shown with black, dark, or blue skin, like Vishnu, and is often wearing a peacock-feather wreath or crown, and playing the *bansuri* (Indian flute). When standing, he is usually shown in the *tribhanga* pose (graceful and sensuous pose). He may be accompanied by a cow or a calf, symbolizing the divine herdsman Govinda and is often depicted as a loving person, in the company of *gopis* (milkmaids), making music or playing pranks.



Murugan (also known as Kartikeya, Skanda, Kumara, or Vishakha)—God of War; Hunter, Warrior, and Philosopher

He is the son of Parvati and Shiva, and the brother of Ganesha and is a god whose life story has many versions in Hinduism. He is a primary deity in temples of Tamil people worldwide.

Distinguishing Features:

Murugan is typically depicted as a youthful man, riding on or near a peacock and sometimes near a rooster. He is mostly shown with one head, but may have six heads reflecting the legends associated with his birth where six mothers took care of the newly born baby. He is dressed as a warrior, carrying a weapon called *vel/saktii*, a divine spear and is sometimes shown with several weapons: a sword, a javelin, a mace, a discus, and a bow.

In addition to groups organized around devotional/worship practice, it is also possible to categorize Hindu practice by way of philosophical systems and understandings. **Hindu philosophy** refers to a group of *darshanas*, world views, or teachings that emerged in ancient India. Mainstream Hindu philosophy usually includes six systems or *saddarshana*: *Samkhya*, *Yoga*, *Nyaya*, *Vaisheshika*, *Mimamsa*, and *Vedanta*. These are also called the *Astika* (orthodox) philosophical traditions and are those that accept the *Vedas* as an authoritative source of knowledge. Each of these philosophical systems also has sub-schools that integrate ideas from two or more of the six orthodox philosophies.

Other philosophies, that are related or share similar concepts, but rejected the *Vedas*, also emerged from ancient and medieval India. These have been called *nastika* (heterodox or non-orthodox) Indian philosophies. *Nastika* Indian philosophies include *Buddhism*, *Jainism*, *Carvaka*, *Ajivika*, and others.

For most purposes, *Samkhya*, *Yoga*, and *Vedanta* are of particular importance because of their influence on contemporary Hinduism.

Samkhya, the oldest of the systems, understands existence from a dualistic perspective. Its founder, a sage-philosopher named Kapila, put forth the idea that suffering is the result of misunderstanding two basic levels of existence or reality. One is eternal, unchanging, uncreated, and pure. The other is the material universe which we inhabit and directly experience. Suffering, then, comes about when we identify with the material universe, or misunderstand elements of it as belonging to the eternal. One of the goals of *Samkhya* is to assist the devotee in properly understanding each plane of existence and focusing one's attention on the transcendent realm of eternity.

Yoga is closely linked to many ideas from *Samkhya*. The goal is to have a vibrant life and lead a path to enlightenment. *Yogic* practice aims to enable this type of realization through both mental and physical practices. There are four forms of *yoga* practices (*Gyan yoga*—intellectual discipline, *Bhakti yoga*—devotional discipline, *karma yoga*—daily routine and practice, and *Raja yoga*—meditative and consciousness practice). These include moral and ethical codes of conduct, non-violence, proper breathing and posture, meditation, study, devotion, and mind and body control, amongst many other practices. *Yogic* practices were likely systematized by around 200 BCE.

The third philosophical system, *Vedanta*, is constructed upon the teachings of the *Upanishads* and *Brahma Sutras* from the first millennium BCE. It is considered to be the most developed and well-known of the Hindu schools.

The emergence of the *Vedanta* school represented a period when a more knowledge-centered understanding began to emerge within Hinduism. The focus became on *gyan* (knowledge) driven aspects of the *Vedic* religion and the *Upanishads*. This included metaphysical concepts such as *Atman* and *Brahman*, and emphasized meditation, self-discipline, self-knowledge, and abstract spirituality, rather than ritualism. However, the *Upanishads* were interpreted differently by various ancient and medieval era *Vedanta* scholars leading to several distinct branches. These *Vedanta* branches range from theistic dualism to non-theistic monism, each branch interpreting the texts in its own way and producing its own series of understandings.

The *Advaita* branch sub-school of *Vedanta*, asserts spiritual and universal non-dualism. *Advaita* literally means “not two, sole, or unity”. Its belief system is a form of absolute monism in which all ultimate reality is interconnected oneness. The Advaita Vedanta School is the oldest and most widely acknowledged *Vedantic* school.

In addition to changes in the internal diversity of Hinduism, the tradition has also had many contacts with other religions, cultures, and belief systems. Some of these have been peaceful and productive; others involved repression, violence, and fear.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries CE, portions of India came under Muslim rule. While this rule was at times violent, intolerant, and marked by friction, it was somewhat inclusive of the native Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist populations. The legacy of the Muslim conquest of South Asia has been a widely debated issue that continues today. Many Hindus believe that Muslim rule was marked by widespread violence and destruction, and brutally forced conversions of Hindus to Islam. However, not all Muslims were simply raiders. Later rulers fought not only to win kingdoms, but also stayed to create new ruling dynasties. These new rulers and their subsequent heirs (some of whom were born of Hindu wives of Muslim rulers) varied considerably in their practices and approaches. While some were uniformly hated, others were esteemed and developed popular followings. The Mogul Muslim Empire was eventually replaced by British colonial rule. In 1857, India came under direct rule of Britain. The British, who were at first relatively accepting of the dominant Hindu and other Indian religions, eventually actively worked to convert the Indian population to Christianity. Several Hindu social institutions, notably the caste system, were formally abolished.