



VISHNU

VISHNU THE PRESERVER—and to many Hindus, the Universal God—usually holds four symbols: a discus, a conch shell, a mace and a lotus. Whenever mankind needs help, this benevolent god appears on earth as an avatar, or reincarnation. It is generally believed that nine avatars have already appeared; a tenth is yet to come. Some feats of the avatars reflect Indian history.

THE HORNED-FISH MATSYA represents Vishnu's intercession at a time of universal flood. The fish warned Manu (the Hindu equivalent of both Adam and Noah), then saved him in a ship hooked on to his horn.

THE TORTOISE KURMA, the second avatar of Vishnu, appeared on earth after the flood to retrieve treasures, including the ambrosia of the gods. The tortoise churned the ocean, bringing up the ambrosia.

THE BOAR VARAHA, originally the sacred pig of a primitive cult, became an avatar of Vishnu after a second flood. Digging under water with his tusks, the boar raised the earth and restored it to dry land.

THE MAN-LION NARASIMHA was another avatar of Vishnu. Brahma had given a demon invulnerability day and night against god, man or beast. The avatar—god, man and beast—killed the demon at dusk.

THE DWARF VAMANA, another avatar, became a giant to foil a demon who sought control of the universe. Granted permission to keep all he could cover in three steps, Vamana encompassed the earth, sky and middle air.

PARASURAMA was Vishnu as the son of a brahman robbed by a kshatriya king. Parasurama killed the king, whose sons, in turn, killed the brahman. Parasurama then killed all male kshatriyas for 21 generations.

RAMA, the hero of India's great religious literary epic, the "Ramayana", was Vishnu as an avatar who overcame the world's most terrible demon, Ravana. Rama represents the ideal Hindu: a gentle husband, a kindly king and, most significantly, a leader valiant under oppression.

SITA, Rama's wife, an incarnation of Lakshmi, represents the ideal Hindu wife. She was abducted by the demon Ravana and taken to his abode, but remained devoted to her husband.

HANUMAN, the monkey king, lent his agility, speed and strength to Rama to help to free Sita from Ravana. In return, he asked to live as long as men remember Rama; thus, Hanuman is immortal.

KRISHNA, Vishnu's most important avatar, was a hero-god beloved in many aspects: a prankish child, an amorous adolescent, a mature hero who spoke the great lessons of the "Bhagavad Gita". These aspects of Krishna had different origins: Aryan, Dravidian, perhaps Christian.

BUDDHA, as an incarnation of Vishnu, exemplifies Hinduism's ability to absorb disparate religious elements. The avatar Buddha appeared, Hindus say, primarily to teach the world to have compassion for animals.

KALKIN, the avatar of Vishnu yet to come, is pictured on a white horse, punishing evil-doers and rewarding the righteous. Some Hindus look to his arrival as some Christians do to Christ's Second Coming.

LAKSHMI, Vishnu's wife, often shown both sitting on a lotus and holding a lotus, represents good fortune. Her attendants are two gentle elephants. An important goddess in her own right, she is also worshipped as the avatar Sita.

GARUDA, Vishnu's mount, is a mythical white-faced bird with the head and wings of an eagle and the body and limbs of a man. Carrying the god on his flashing golden back, he was sometimes mistaken for the fire-god, Agni.



KRISHNA



RAMA