

CHAPTER THREE

Gods and Goddesses



Hindus recognize and worship many gods and goddesses. Some sources put the number of deities worshiped in the thousands. Others limit the number to the hundreds. Regardless, to someone trying to understand Hinduism, sifting through the Hindu family of gods and goddesses can be both confusing and mind-boggling. But as was mentioned in the Overview, the picture becomes much clearer if one remembers that Hindu deities are nothing more than representations of the many aspects or sides of Brahman, the Supreme Being described in Chapter Two. Each god or goddess provides Hindus with a different way of worshiping Brahman.

The Trimurti

The most important of the Hindu gods who represent some aspect of Brahman are *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, and *Siva* (or *Shiva*). Again, Brahma is the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Siva the Destroyer. (The labels "Preserver" and "Destroyer" are explained later.) They form what is called the *Trimurti*. The prefix *tri*, of course, refers to "three," and you learned previously that *murti* is an image or statue representing a particular deity.

Of the three who make up the Trimurti, Hindus consider Vishnu and Siva the most important. They rarely worship Brahma. This is because they believe that after Brahma created the world he had little to do with what happened on earth. Still, Hindus are aware of his presence. In pictures and images, he is portrayed as having four faces and four arms. The four faces show that he sees everything that is happening. The four arms represent the



four points of the compass, again pointing to the belief that he sees everything and is everywhere.

Because Vishnu and Siva are worshiped more than any of the other deities, each is covered in a separate section.

Section Review:

1. What is the *Trimurti*?
2. Why is Brahma not as important to Hindus as Vishnu and Siva?
3. Why is Brahma shown having four faces?

There are thousands of gods and goddesses in Hinduism, but the three most important—called the *trimurti*—are (at left) Brahma, the Creator, Vishnu (center), the Preserver, and Shiva (at right), the Destroyer.

Words to remember:

Trimurti



Vishnu

Words to remember:

avatars
chakra
Rama
Krishna
Ramayana

Vishnu is believed to have appeared in at least ten different bodies including a fish, a tortoise, and a boar.

Vishnu is worshiped more than any other god. He is called "the Preserver" because Hindus believe he has come to earth a number of times to protect it from danger. They believe he has appeared in at least ten different bodies, some of which are animal. (The forms in which Vishnu has appeared are called *avatars*.) In addition to various human forms, Vishnu is believed to have appeared as a fish, a tortoise, a boar, and a creature who is half-lion and half-man.

Vishnu is often shown as having four arms. In one hand he holds a lotus, in a second a conch shell, in a third a mace,

and in a fourth a chakra, a wheel that symbolizes time, creation, and death. Each of these objects holds a special meaning. The lotus is a symbol of purity. The conch shell reminds worshippers to destroy ignorance and evil in their lives. A mace, of course, is a club Vishnu uses against his enemies. And the chakra serves the same purpose; it returns to Vishnu's hand after it has struck an enemy.

Although Vishnu is believed to have returned to earth in many forms, the two most important are *Rama* and *Krishna*. Rama's story is told in the *Ramayana*, one of several Hindu scriptures that appeared sometime between 600 B.C. and A.D. 200. (More about this in Chapter Six, "Sacred Writings.") Centering around Rama's rescue of his wife, *Sita*, from *Ravana*, the ten-headed demon, the story teaches how good overcomes evil.

Krishna is the hero of the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is part of a poem called the *Mahabharata*. (This too is discussed further in Chapter Six.) In the *Bhagavad Gita*, Krishna explains to his friend *Arjuna* that the seemingly endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth can be broken through devotion to him. This is the basis of *bhakti yoga*, which you read about in Chapter Two. Remember that *bhakti* means "devotion."

Krishna is usually depicted with sky-blue skin. This is because, like the sky, he is everywhere and eternal. He is also seen playing a flute for the benefit of cows and *gopis*. (*Gopis* were women who cared for cows.) Krishna is looked upon as a god of love. He is said to have healed the deaf and the blind, helped lepers and the poor, and raised people from the grave. Hindus believe that Krishna will make one last appearance when the world ends. This time he will be called *Kalki*. They believe he will come as a rider on a white horse and that he will judge all people according to their deeds.



Section Review:

1. Why is Vishnu called "the Preserver"?
2. What are *avatars*?
3. What message is conveyed by Rama's story in the *Ramāyana*?
4. How did Krishna say one could end the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth?
5. Why is Krishna shown as having blue skin?
6. What do Hindus believe Krishna will do when he returns as Kalki?

Sivā (Shiva)

Siva is an interesting god. He is at the same time both frightening and kind. He is called "the Destroyer" because he destroys (and recreates) the world, as well as such bad things as wars and diseases. But he is also a creator in that he paves the way for new things to replace the old that he has destroyed. He is worshiped as the god of reproduction. While he may be associated with evil spirits, ghosts, goblins, and vampires, he is at the same time thought to be kind and easy to please. This contradictory aspect of Siva is true of other Hindu deities as well.

Siva has been known by more than a thousand names. He is usually shown as *Natraja*, the Lord of the Dance. As such, his dance provides the energy that keeps the universe moving. *Natraja* has four arms and is often shown dancing on a demon or monster that represents ignorance. He is encircled by flames that are symbolic of the destruction and recreation of the world. Siva is also known as the Lord of Time and has three eyes so he can look at the past, the present, and the future.

Some images of Siva show him with a river flowing through his hair. This is the Ganges River, the holiest of rivers to Hindus. The Ganges is said to have flowed from heaven through Siva's hair to India. Other images show Siva as a householder with his wife, the goddess *Parvati*.

Siva is said to live on *Mount Kailasa* in the Himalaya Mountains. Unlike Vishnu, Hindus do not believe he has returned to earth in the form of various avatars.



Section Review:

1. Why is Siva called "the Destroyer"?
2. What does the circle of flames around *Natraja*'s head represent?
3. What is represented by the demon on which *Natraja* is dancing?
4. What is the significance of images that show a river flowing through Siva's hair?
5. Who is *Parvati*?

Other Gods and Goddesses

As you have learned, Hindu gods and goddesses number in the hundreds, perhaps thousands. Below are a few who rank below Brahma, Vishnu, and Siva in importance.

Siva represents both destruction and creation and is most often shown as *Natraja*, the Lord of the Dance. His dancing provides the energy that keeps the universe moving.

Words to remember:

Sita
Ravana
Arjuna
gopis
Kalki
Natraja
Parvati
Mount Kailasa



Ganesha (or Ganesh)

In the Hindu family of gods, Ganesha is the elephant-headed son of Siva and his goddess wife, Parvati. Ganesha is worshiped as the god of wisdom and strength who prevents things from going wrong. He is also called *Vigneshwara*, which means "he who overcomes all obstacles." Hindus pray to him before they start anything new, be it a task, a project, or a journey.

Images of Ganesha show him with a pink body to go with his elephant head. He also has a pot belly, which symbolizes the universe. Even though he is quite large, he is very gentle. His gentleness is represented by a mouse at his feet. The mouse, though tiny, shows no fear.

Ganesha is perhaps the most likeable of gods.

With his pink body, elephant head, and pot belly (which symbolizes the universe), he is as gentle and wise as he is large and strong.



You may be interested in the legend about how Ganesha got his elephant head. The story states that Parvati one day made the figure of a boy and breathed life into him. Shortly afterwards, she decided to go for a swim, and she told the boy to guard the house. Siva, who was gone at the time, returned home to find an unknown boy refusing to let him enter. In anger, Siva drew his sword and cut off the boy's head. Upon her return from her swim, Parvati was distraught to see the boy dead. She told Siva that she considered him her own son. At this, Siva promised to replace the head. He sent his servants out with instructions to cut off the head of anyone found sleeping with his head facing north. The servants found an elephant sleeping in such a position, and cut off its head and brought it to Siva. Siva attached the head to the body of the boy and brought him back to life.

Hanuman

Hanuman is the Hindu monkey god. He is pictured with the head and long tail of a monkey. Legend has it that his mother, Anjana, was married to a monkey named Kesari. In the Hindu *pantheon*, or family of gods, Hanuman represents intelligence.

Hanuman is noted for his great strength. He is also famous for his heroic efforts in helping Rama free his wife Sita from the evil ten-headed demon king named Ravana. (Look back in the section entitled "Vishnu.") But before Sita was rescued, Hanuman had an opportunity to show just how strong he was. During the battle with Ravana, Rama's brother and other warriors were wounded. Their wounds could only be treated with medicinal herbs found on a faraway mountain called *Gandamadana*. Hanuman was sent to Gandamadana to gather the herbs, but when he got there, he discovered he couldn't tell one herb from another. So what did he do? He lifted the entire mountain and took it to

the battlefield. When the necessary herbs were provided to the attending physician, Hanuman carried the mountain back to its proper place.

Shakti, the Mother Goddess

The most important Hindu female deity is *Shakti*. Sometimes she is referred to as the *Mother Goddess*, or simply the *Goddess*. She was worshiped by the early inhabitants of the Indus Valley and then adopted by the invading Aryans.

Shakti is the wife of Siva. As such, she is also known as Parvati. (Refer back to the section entitled "Siva.") Like most Hindu gods and goddesses, she appears in various forms and under different names. Sometimes she is simply *Devi*, the Sanskrit word for "goddess." At other times she appears as *Durga*, the warrior goddess who rides a lion and who goes about slaying demons. Then she is sometimes *Kali*, who is shown having six or eight arms and wearing a necklace of human skulls. Regardless of what she is called, Hindus see Shakti as the "mother" of the world. She is a symbol of the earth's fertility.

Lakshmi

Lakshmi is worshiped as the goddess of wealth and prosperity. She is thought to bring good fortune to those who worship her. She is one of the daughters

of Siva and Parvati. (The other is *Saraswati*, who is worshiped as the goddess of wisdom.) She is also the wife of Vishnu, as well as the wife of his avatars, or different forms. When Vishnu became Rama, Lakshmi became *Sita*. When he appeared as Krishna, Lakshmi was *Rukmini*.

Lakshmi is often shown standing in a lotus throne and holding lotus buds in her hands. Householders hoping for good health and welfare for their families pray to her. So do business people praying that their business endeavors will be successful.

As you have seen, a study of Hindu gods and goddesses can be confusing. But keep in mind what was mentioned at the beginning of the chapter: all gods and goddesses represent in some way manifestations or aspects of Brahman, the Supreme Being or spirit that is everywhere and is a part of everything.

Section Review:

1. Why do Hindus worship Ganesha?
2. How did Ganesha come to have an elephant's head?
3. Describe Hanuman's appearance.
4. What does Hanuman represent in the Hindu family of gods?
5. Who is Shakti?
6. Why do Hindus worship the goddess Lakshmi?

For Further Thought:

1. Why do you think the early Hindus, like all ancient peoples, invented so many gods and goddesses to worship?
2. Do you see any similarities between the Hindu Trimurti and the Christian Trinity? Write a short paper telling why you think the two are either similar or different.
3. Which Hindu god or goddess discussed in this chapter did you find the most interesting? Explain.
4. Hindus do not try to convert others to their beliefs and religious practices. What does this tell you about their religion?



Words to remember:

Ganesha
Vigneshwara
Hanuman
pantheon
Gandamadana
Shakti
Devi
Durga
Kali
Lakshmi
Saraswati
Rukmini