

Who Hindus Worship

Many Hindus understand God to be Brahman or the Absolute -- an ever-present, all-powerful presence beyond form and comprehension. Brahman has no attributes, whether physical characteristics of gender or personality traits like “merciful” or “compassionate.” Brahman simply is the energy that holds together the universe.



Brahman can take various manifestations, however, both with form and without, to which Hindus offer prayers and devotion. The abstract form of Brahman is seen as difficult for the human mind to focus upon for prayer, and these manifestations, with their specificity of form and purpose, Hindus believe, offer human minds a more tangible focus point, and serve as a reminder of positive values and ways of being.

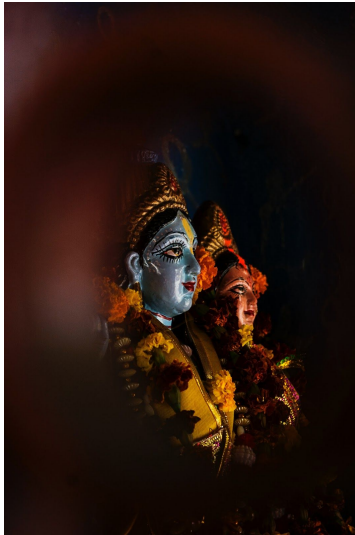
Many of these forms share folklore and origin stories, but have different names, appearances, and associated traditions and rituals based on the region of India, or the world, in which they are being worshipped. One way that Brahman’s manifestation is understood is through the twin energies of masculine (Shiva) and feminine energy (Shakti), which are equal and necessary in all things. Another, more concrete and tangible example of Brahman’s manifestation is in the *Trimurti* or *Trideva* (trinity) of Lords Brahmā, Vishnu, and Shiva, and another is the *Tridevi*, the trinity of Goddesses Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Pārvati.

Trideva

Lord Brahmā (distinct from Brahman!) is seen as the creator of the universe. Lord Brahmā is often depicted with four heads, each facing a different direction. He is usually shown sitting on a swan and holding a book, indicating his knowledgeable nature. There are very few remaining temples devoted to Lord Brahmā, in comparison to others gods of the trinity. Different stories with different symbolic messages are told about why this is so. Despite this, his role as the creator is important to Hindu lore as a balance to the other forces of the Trinity. His consort,

Goddess Saraswati, is described as Lord Brahmā's daughter in some legends, and as his wife in others.

Lord Vishnu is the preserver or protector of the universe, and is chiefly in charge of maintaining order and harmony. His skin is usually shown as dark blue, and he is seen holding a discus, a weapon useful in his battles to preserve *dharma* (cosmic order and righteous harmony). An eagle is often by his side. Vishnu is worshipped in many forms. As the protector of the universe, Hindus believe that Lord Vishnu has incarnated on earth as an *avatāra* (form) many times to protect the world. Ten major incarnations, referred to as *Dashavatāra*, are widely known. The first five of these incarnations were as a fish, a turtle, boar, half man-half lion, and a dwarf. Each of these are believed to have taken form to save the entire planet and particularly devout devotees. As an axe wielding warrior-sage in his sixth incarnation, Lord Vishnu intervened as Sage Parshurāma to stop the abuse by kings and princes of the time.



Lord Vishnu then incarnated as Lord Rāma, a warrior-prince, seen as the embodiment of *dharma* and the ideal man and king. The epic Rāmāyana is about the life of this *avatāra*. Next, Lord Vishnu incarnated as Lord Krishna, the king maker. A prince himself, Lord Krishna is known for his charming, often mischievous ways. He destroyed a number of tyrants, impacted the events of the Mahābhārata, a major Hindu epic, and delivered the wisdom of the Bhagavad Gita. In contrast to the more serious Lord Rāma, who was wise and rarely if at all deviated from the "rules," Krishna offers a stance that many Hindus find more relatable. Lord Krishna is known to have sometimes bent the rules in order to uphold righteousness, arguably in a world far darker and more sinister than that of Lord Rāma's. While Lord Rāma lived the life of a king, upholding laws and his duties to his people, Krishna showed the way to upholding righteousness in a time when the rules could not always be interpreted in a black and white manner.

Siddhārtha Gautama, or Lord Buddha, is considered by many to be the ninth *avatāra* of Lord Vishnu. To Hindus, Lord Vishnu took this form to be a reformer and remind worshippers that the quest for Truth was more important than the rituals that many in Hindu society at the time were focusing on. He also preached non-violence. Some Hindu traditions, however, view Balarama, the younger brother of Lord Krishna, as the ninth avatar of Lord Vishnu. Other traditions consider both Balarāma, the brother of Lord Krishna, and Lakshman, the brother of Lord Rāma, as *avatāra* of Ādi Sesa, Lord Vishnu's serpent. Lord Vishnu is expected to take one

more incarnation before the end of the universe as Kalki, a man that will be armed with a sword astride a white horse, ready to destroy all evil, and usher in a new age of purity, as the cycle of time restarts. Lord Vishnu's consort is Lakshmi, took the form of Goddess Sita with Lord Rāma, and both Goddess Rukmini and Goddess Rādhā with Lord Krishna. Lord Vishnu is worshipped widely by Hindus through his *avatāra*, which make the imposing figure of the Preserver more relatable.

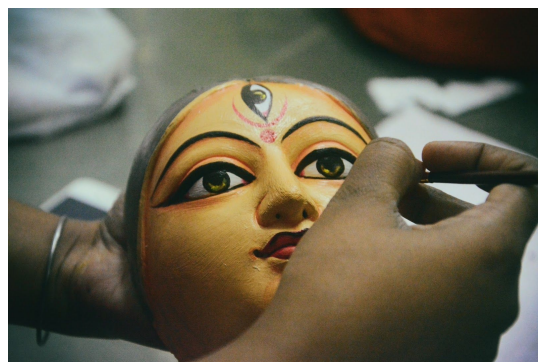
Lord Shiva is the transformer of the universe, often called the destroyer or liberator in the trinity. He is tasked with unmaking the universe at the end of each time cycle to usher in a new universe. His destructive power is regenerative -- without it, transformation cannot occur. He is often depicted in deep meditation, as an ascetic with a blue throat and sometimes four arms. He has a third eye which is usually kept closed, as opening it unleashes his destructive force. One of Lord Shiva's forms is a simple conical form, or lingam. It is the simplest and most ancient symbol of Lord Shiva and is said to represent God beyond all forms and qualities. According to Hindu seers, the Lingam is a visible symbol of the Ultimate Reality which is present in all objects of creation. It is believed by many that at the end of the various aspects of creation, all of the different aspects of the Divine find a resting place in the Lingam.

Lord Shiva's consort is Goddess Pārvati. They have two sons: Kārtikeya and Ganesh.

Lord Brahmā, Lord Vishnu, and Lord Shiva are depicted as balanced forces that work together to maintain the order of the Universe. Folklore often depicts the minor gods (see below) going back and forth between the members of the Trinity to solve a problem, to demonstrate that all forces are needed equally. Lord Brahmā is often depicted as a priest, Lord Vishnu a king, and Lord Shiva a renunciate, denoting their different associations with spiritual knowledge, earthly conduct, and meditative power. A similar division of power is mirrored in their consorts as well.

The Goddesses

Goddess Saraswati, Lord Brahmā's consort, is worshipped by Hindus as the Goddess of learning, wisdom, speech, and art. She is depicted wearing a white sārī, holding the *veenā* (an instrument), *japa mālā* (prayer beads), and a book in her four hands. She exudes knowledge and serenity. She is seen riding a swan or a peacock, or sitting on a white lotus. Hindus often offer a prayer to Goddess Saraswati before any intellectual or artistic pursuit. Festivals



honoring Goddess Saraswati focus on the need to acquire wisdom (both material and spiritual) to live life.

Goddess Lakshmi, Lord Vishnu's consort, is the Hindu Goddess of Prosperity, both material and spiritual. She is often shown wearing red, standing or seated on a pink lotus, and showering gold coins as a sign of abundance. As Lord Vishnu's consort, she plays a role in many of his incarnations, usually as his wife. Diwāli, the Festival of Lights, is devoted to Goddess Lakshmi, as Hindus invite her into their homes to bless them with prosperity and well-being.

Goddess Pārvati, the Mountain Goddess, is the wife of Lord Shiva, and mother of Lords Kārtikeya and Ganesha. She takes many forms. As Goddess Durgā, she embodies Shakti, or power, and is responsible for defeating many demons who threatened humanity. She is depicted in red, sitting on a lion, and holding weapons in her many arms. Festivals to Goddess Durgā emphasize the need for strength in the quest to protect righteousness. Goddess Kāli is the terrifying aspect of Goddess Durgā, who fights against illusion. She is depicted with dark skin, standing on top of a corpse, with her tongue out in laughter.

Other Notable Gods

Lord Kārtikeya, the son of Lord Shiva and Goddess Pārvati, is known by many names depending on the region in question: Murugan, Skanda, or Subrahmanya. He is particularly revered by Tamilians, and is known for his military prowess.

Lord Ganesha is revered as the remover of obstacles, and is worshipped before any other God or Goddess to seek blessings for a hindrance-free prayer. This leads to his ubiquity among Hindus across the world. He is depicted with an elephant head, and a portly belly, holding a bowl of sweets. There are many stories about how Lord Ganesha came to have an elephant head, which generally is seen to be symbolic of his great intelligence.

There is a class of gods and goddesses, who do not have many temples dedicated solely to their devotion, but who are revered by Hindus all the same. They represent nature, the planets, and specific values. Lord Indra for example, is the King of Heaven and Lord of these gods. He is also the god of thunder and rain. Other gods include Surya, the Sun God, Brihaspati, the God of Jupiter and the teacher of the other gods, and Mitra, the God of Friendship and contracts. Goddess Bhumi represents the earth, and there are Goddesses associated with many of the rivers that flowed through ancient Indian civilization such as Goddess Ganga and Goddess Yamuna.

The depictions of Gods and Goddesses are replete with overt meaning and subtle symbolism. Almost every color, object, and feature reminds the devotee of a value to imbibe or inspires a positive way of being.

Key Takeaways

- God is understood to be beyond form and comprehension.
- Hindus believe that God can take many manifestations, each with a different physical form, personality, origin story, and set of associated rituals.
- Goddesses are very important to Hindus as they balance the qualities of their male counterparts, but are also worshipped for the powers they have in their own right. Brahman, understood by many Hindus as the root of all Gods and Goddesses, however, is beyond gender.