

The Hindu Trinity

As you know, Hinduism is a polytheistic religion, meaning that its followers believe in more than one god. In fact, worshippers commonly devote themselves to one god, their personal deity. Household shrines feature pictures and statues of the chosen gods. Individuals may choose this god for its special attributes. For example, Ganesh, the god with the head of an elephant, is known for overcoming obstacles and bringing success.

Some of these gods appear in the famous Hindu epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. These poems originated from the storytelling and parables of the Brahmins and ascetics. In present-day India these stories are beloved and more popular than the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*. Accessible and entertaining, rich with heroes and villains, they simultaneously provide moral and spiritual instruction.

The *Rig-Veda* introduced the foremost of the Hindu gods: Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Although each of these deities possess special attributes, many Hindus believe they represent three properties of one god. Together they form the Hindu Trinity. This trinity will be explored below and through page 139.

Brahma: The Creator

Brahma is considered the mystical creator, the supreme presence, or God. Many Hindus believe that all other gods originate from Brahma. To the right is a depiction of Brahma. His four faces stand for the four corners of the universe. He holds a sacrificial ladle, the four Vedas, a jar of holy water from the Ganges, and a necklace of prayer beads. Like all Hindu gods, he sits upon a lotus throne.



The Hindu Trinity *(cont.)*

Vishnu: The Preserver

“Whenever the Sacred Law fails, and evil raises its head, I (Vishnu) take embodied birth. To guard the righteous, to root out sinners, and to establish Sacred Law, I am born from age to age.” (Bhagavad Gita IV. 6-8)

Followers of Vishnu worship him as the preserver, greatest of the gods. His role is to maintain a balance between good and evil powers in the universe. In order to do this, Vishnu returns to earth in different forms, both animal and human. Tradition holds that there are ten *avatars*, incarnations, linked to Vishnu. However, only Rama and Krishna remain the focus of worship among Hindus. Here are the ten incarnations of Vishnu and the task each performed:

1. **Matsya** (Fish): As a giant fish, Vishnu warned the world of a great flood, rescuing both a famous sage and the Vedas from the flood.
2. **Kurma** (Tortoise): After the flood, Vishnu, in the form of a huge tortoise, retrieved the gods' elixir of immortality, which was lost in the depths of the ocean.
3. **Varah** (Boar): After the demon Hiranyakasipu plunged the earth into the ocean, Vishnu, in the form of boar, hoisted the world above water.
4. **Narasimha** (Man-Lion): In order to destroy another demon, Vishnu became half-man, half-lion. This was because the demon, Hiranyakasipu, could be killed by neither animal nor man alone.
5. **Vamana** (Dwarf): When Vishnu first came as a human avatar, he did so to outwit the ruling demon-king, Bali. As a dwarf, he convinced Bali to give him as much land as he could cover in three steps. Immediately, Vishnu transformed himself into a giant, striding across the universe.
6. **Parashurama** (Rama with an axe): Vishnu returned as Rama with an axe to defeat the ruling warrior class and restore the Brahmins to power.
7. **Rama** (Prince): As prince of Ayodya, Rama is the hero of the epic poem, *The Ramayana*.



The Hindu Trinity (cont.)

Vishnu (cont.)

8. **Krishna** (Young hero and lover): Krishna is considered by many Hindus to be the most important avatar. Fleeing the King (his evil uncle), he was raised in a forest where he slayed many demons. Eventually, he killed his uncle and restored his kingdom. When he returned to the forest to battle demons, he was accidentally slain by the arrow of a follower. Krishna's charm and power are the subject of many stories in Hindu mythology. Here he is in one of his famous poses, dancing upon the head of a tamed snake.
9. **The Buddha**: The story of Prince Siddhartha, the Buddha, is told in full on pages 170-172.
10. **Kalki**: Yet to come, some Hindus believe Kalki will appear upon a white horse, yielding a flaming sword, at the end of time.



Shiva: The Destroyer

Shiva is worshipped as the destroyer or purifier. Like Vishnu, Shiva appears in many different forms throughout Hindu legends. However, the most widely known is that of Shiva Nataraja, the Lord of the Dance.

Shiva dances in a halo of fire, representing the cycle of birth and death. As he dances, he crushes the dwarf, the demon of ignorance. In his right hand, he keeps rhythm beating a drum, while in his left hand he holds the flame of destruction, purification, and renewal. His other hands are in a position of blessing or refuge. Around his arms and neck he wears deadly snakes. The snakes symbolize Shiva's power over evil forces, while its ability to shed its skin makes it a symbol of fertility as well.

Finally, Shiva Nataraja is a symbol of sexual power and union. This is demonstrated by the female earring on his left ear and the male one on his right.

Name _____

The Hindu Trinity *(cont.)*

Shiva *(cont.)*

Use the information on the previous page to identify parts of Shiva.



Name _____

Hindu Goddesses

The worship of the goddess in Hinduism has its roots in the Indus Valley civilization where the mother was revered as the renewer of life and as a symbol of fertility and strength. Like their male counterparts, each goddess possesses particular attributes, and worshippers adopt each for the personal qualities she brings.

Three of the principal goddesses are directly related to the gods of the Hindu Trinity: Sarasvati, daughter of Brahma; Lakshmi, wife of Vishnu; and Mahadevi Shakti, wife of Shiva. For many, Mahadevi Shakti, like Brahma, is the ultimate reality. She is the "great goddess" from whom all the goddesses are born. While an abundance of minor goddesses are featured in village shrines, Mahadevi is the central figure of goddess worship.

Mahadevi, like many Hindu deities, takes on many forms, some of which are very different in nature. Like her husband, Shiva, her role can either be forceful or self-sacrificing. One of her most popular and feared manifestations is that of Kali.

Kali: Goddess of Destruction

This common depiction of Kali shows her wearing a necklace of human skulls while wielding a sword in one hand and the decapitated head of a giant dripping blood in the other. Her tongue hangs out and a third eye watches from her forehead. Because death cannot touch her, she stands on a corpse and resides in the cremation ground. As the ultimate symbol of death and pain, many Hindus revere Kali, believing that going beyond her will bring enlightenment.

Although Kali leaves behind her bloodshed and death, one legend tells of how she destroyed the terrible oppressor, Raktabija. Each time a drop of Raktabija's blood fell, multitudes of demons came to life. Kali rescued the world by slaying the tyrant and then draining his blood.

Extension:

For each goddess (below and on the next page), research and describe her characteristics. Can you explain her posture, what she is holding, and why?

Kali: Goddess of Destruction

