

How many Gods do Hindus have?

This is a very interesting question; no one seems to know the correct answer of. Ask different people and you will get a very answer between zero (for non-believers) and 330 million. I believe the answer is both “One” and “infinite”. First answer is equally true as later.

Hindus broadly define God as omnipresent, omniscient, unborn, immortal, *nirgun* (formless, can not described using physical properties) but *sarvagun sampan* (has all possible qualities), creator, preserver and destroyer (to make way for new creations) of the entire universe.

By this definition there can only be one God. Then why do Hindus have so many Gods? Which one of them is the real one? The answer lies in the broader, most flexible and realistic philosophy of Hinduism. Ancient Hindus recognized human need for the freedom of expressing individual opinions. It was recognized that principles of *dharma* will evolve and change as humans encounter new situations and society evolves into sophistication. And so will change the human perception of God. A concept of absolute truth is fake and can not be defined. A normal human tendency is to present one's own perceptions as absolute truth, and thus no one can be absolutely sure of what the truth is. Then how can one be sure of who the God is. So Hinduism provided us the freedom to approach God in our own way, without demanding conformity to any dogma. This freedom makes the concept of God in Hinduism the richest in all the world's religions.

Let us look at the definition of God again. Hindus believe that God is omnipresent. That means God is everywhere. He is inside me as well as everywhere outside me. He is in the person I am interacting with. That is why we greet each other saying *namaste* (I bow to the God within you). I believe the person who came up with 330 million Gods was just counting the World human population at that point in time. God is in every molecule present in this universe. Once we believe that God is omnipresent, God is present in anything and everything *jad* (non-living) or *chetan* (living) and since nobody can count that, we have infinite Gods.

Which one of the Hindu Gods Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Durga, Ganesh, Laxmi, Ram, Krishna, Hanuman, etc. is the real one? The answer is none of them is real and all of them are real.

But if the God is *nirgun* than why do most Hindus worship God as *sagun* (as idols)? Hindus should worship by meditating on the abstract, formless God. But ancient *rishis* also recognized that it is almost impossible for an ordinary human living as a *grihasth* (family man) to meditate on an abstract God. Ordinary human will not have necessary mental focus required for such meditation. Human brain being very creative will imagine and associate something or other with God. Humans will look for real life role models and try to emulate them, often to the extent of idolizing. That is where Hinduism recognized the importance and supremacy of individual faith. Since God is omnipresent, any thing and everything has God. So any form of worship with absolute faith is

acceptable, even when the person is not meditating on the abstract God. Any human can imagine and create his own God, and he is not violating any of the core principles of Hinduism. In fact, to facilitate prayers and to ensure that prayers encompass all necessary functions, medieval dharma gurus created functional Gods as *Laxmi* as goddess of wealth, *Saraswati* as goddess of knowledge, *Hanuman* as god of strength, *Indra* as God of rain etc. Hinduism also allowed for the *Avatars*. Though, there is a great variation in number and forms of *Avatars*. Again, since faith rules, each variation is right.

However, this concept has been misused by individuals proclaiming themselves as Gods. Frequency of misuse has increased in modern times. Often a voluble conman, with little knowledge of scriptures or sometimes even without any such knowledge will assume Godhood. Superstitious people will flock to see and meet such God for their salvation. Motive is to relieve the masses of their hard earned money. These conmans can be very easily identified by their flashy life styles sporting Rolls Royce's. They only interact with wealthy in person. Ordinary masses can have *darshan* only from a distance.

Despite of misuse, this concept of supremacy of faith has made Hinduism a dynamic and ever growing religion.

Note from Author:

This article was written and published in 2006, after just a few months of my introduction to Arya Samaj's Vaidik philosophy. Even though, the Vaidik philosophy appeared logical and made sense, my mind was still not able to let go of the Pauranik beliefs I was brought up with. This article can be viewed as my attempt to reconcile the inner conflict I was experiencing after my exposure to both beliefs. I had not started reading the Vedas yet and was still trying to convert the "Aacharyaji" to Pauranik beliefs. It was much later after I started donning the Yajnopaveet and reading the Vedas myself, that I realized how little I knew.

Other articles written by me later, should not be viewed as in conflict with this article, but more as my progression in the search of the Truth. I bow at the feet of my Aachaaryaji for being patient with my ignorance and subtly guiding me in my journey.

Sanjay Mittal