



BRAHMA THE CREATOR



DEV DUTT PATTANAIK



Devdutt Pattanaik

BRAHMA: THE CREATOR



PENGUIN BOOKS

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BRAHMA: THE CREATOR

Devdutt Pattanaik writes, illustrates and lectures on the relevance of mythology in modern times. He has, since 1996, written over 30 books and 600 columns on how stories, symbols and rituals construct the subjective truth (myths) of ancient and modern cultures around the world. His books with Penguin Random House India include *The Book of Ram*, *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata*, *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, *The Girl Who Chose* and the Devlok with Devdutt Pattanaik series, among others. He consults with corporations on leadership and governance, and TV channels on mythological serials. His TV shows include *Business Sutra* on CNBC-TV18 and *Devlok* on Epic TV. To know more, visit www.devdutt.com.

Praise for the Book

‘Folklore hasn’t been written with such simplicity, economy of words, even humour ... Recommended to every kind of reader—uninitiated or expert’—*First City*

‘Hitch-hikers, here’s your guide to the Hindu multiverse and all the thirty-three million deities. Mythology demystified but not dumbed down. Delves for the *sat* behind the *mithya*, and isn’t heavy-handed or maudlin about it; there’s real affection in these retellings’—*Tehelka*

‘Who doesn’t love a good story? Devdutt Pattanaik knows that it’s a human weakness [and] his *Myth=Mithya* tells lots of the glorious stories that make Hinduism so endlessly fascinating’—*Time Out Mumbai*

To all the Gods, Goddesses, gods, goddesses,
demons and angels there are

Author's Note

- The stories in this book are my own retellings, often simplified with a great deal of poetic licence, to accommodate—without losing the essence—details from various versions of the same story found in different scriptures
- No italics have been used to distinguish between English and non-English words
- Capital letters have been restricted to names and titles except where explicitly stated
- ‘Gods’ and ‘Goddesses’ spelt with an initial capital letter need to be distinguished from ‘gods’ and ‘goddesses’ in lowercase. The former are manifestations of the infinite divine while the latter are finite forms of the divine. Shiva is God but Indra is god. Durga is Goddess but Ganga is goddess.
- Sanskrit words are sometimes used as proper nouns and begin with a capital letter (for example, Maya, the Goddess who embodies delusion) and sometimes as common nouns spelt without capitals (for example, maya, delusion)
- This handbook is *a* decoding of Hindu mythology, firm in the belief that:

Within infinite myths lies the eternal truth,
Who sees it all?
Varuna has but a thousand eyes
Indra a hundred
And I, only two.

How to Read This Book: Author's Recommendation

You don't have to go through this book sequentially. While that helps, you can also choose to dip into the book at random and read the captions under the illustrations and the tables and flowcharts. If you do decide to read it sequentially, do so at a leisurely pace. Take time to absorb and enjoy the ideas before you move on.

Definitions

The Hindu worldview can be startling to those accustomed to a Western thought process, until we challenge the old definition of myth (‘the irrational, the unreasonable, the false’) and embrace a new definition (‘subjective truth expressed in stories, symbols and rituals, that shapes *all* cultures, Indian or Western, ancient or modern, religious or secular’). The Sanskrit word for subjective truth is *mithya*—not the opposite of objective truth, but a finite expression of *satya*, that which is infinite.

Introduction

*In which the meaning of myth, its value
and expression are elaborated*

Everybody lives in myth. This idea disturbs most people. For conventionally myth means falsehood. Nobody likes to live in falsehood. Everybody believes they live in truth.

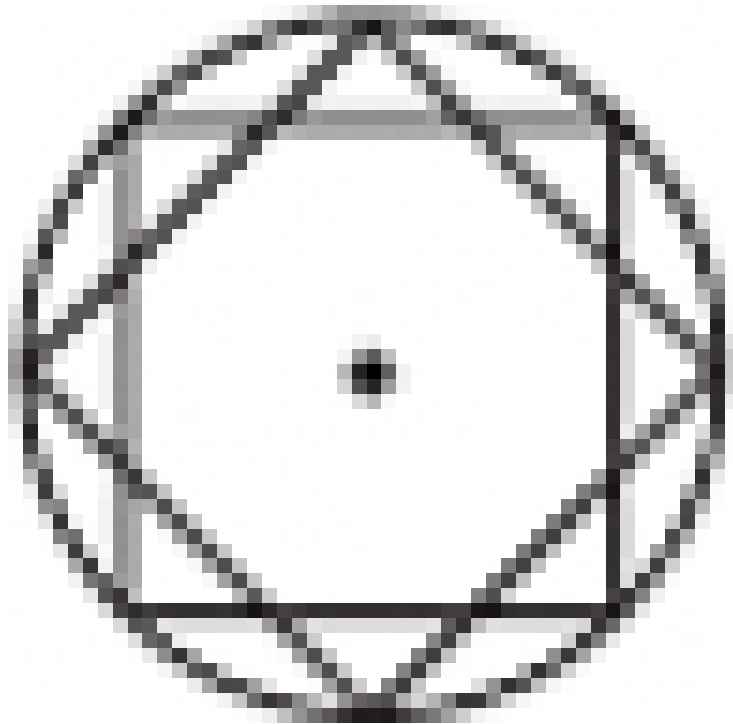
But there are many types of truth. Some objective, some subjective. Some logical, some intuitive. Some cultural, some universal. Some are based on evidence; others depend on faith. Myth is truth which is subjective, intuitive, cultural and grounded in faith.

Ancient Greek philosophers knew myth as mythos. They distinguished mythos from logos. From mythos came intuitive narrations, from logos reasonable deliberations. Mythos gave rise to the oracles and the arts. From logos came science and mathematics. Logos explained how the sun rises and how babies are born. It took man to the moon. But it never explained why. Why does the sun rise? Why is a baby born? Why does man exist on earth? For answers one had to turn to mythos. Mythos gave purpose, meaning and validation to existence.

Ancient Hindu seers knew myth as mithya. They distinguished mithya from sat. Mithya was truth seen through a frame of reference. Sat was truth independent of any frame of reference. Mithya gave a limited, distorted view of reality; sat a limitless, correct view of things. Mithya was delusion, open to correction. Sat was truth, absolute and perfect in every way. Being boundless and perfect, however, sat could not be reduced to a symbol or confined to a word. Words and symbols are essentially

incomplete and flawed. Sat therefore eluded communication. For communication one needs symbols and words, howsoever incomplete and flawed they may be. Through hundreds of thousands of incomplete and flawed symbols and words, it was possible to capture, or at least to indicate, the infinite perfection and boundlessness of sat. For Rishis therefore the delusion of mithya served as an essential window to the truth of sat.

Myth is essentially a cultural construct, a common understanding of the world that binds individuals and communities together. This understanding may be religious or secular. Ideas such as rebirth, heaven and hell, angels and demons, fate and freewill, sin, Satan and salvation are religious myths. Ideas such as sovereignty, nation state, human rights, women's rights, animal rights and gay rights are secular myths. Religious or secular, all myths make profound sense to one group of people. Not to everyone. They cannot be rationalized beyond a point. In the final analysis, you either accept them or you don't.



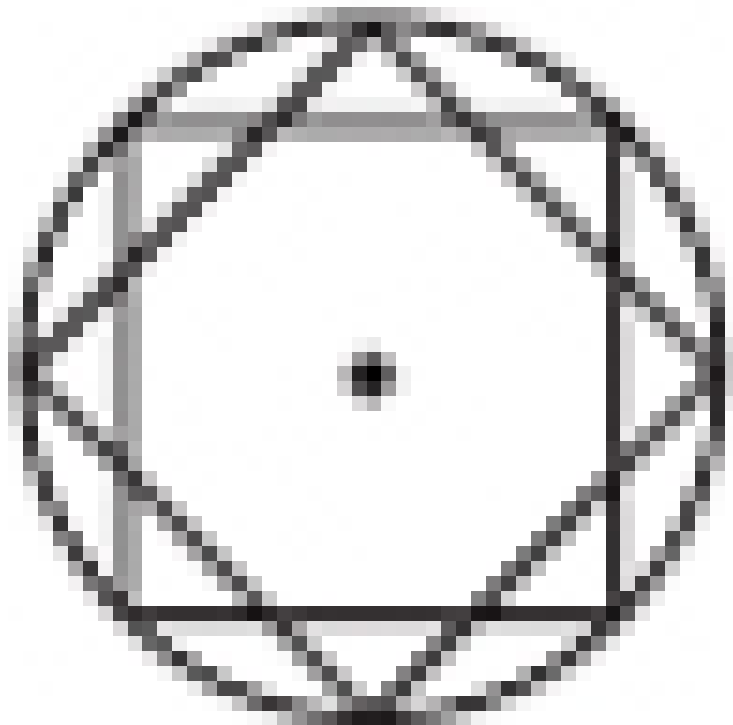
If myth is an idea, mythology is the vehicle of that idea. Mythology constitutes stories, symbols and rituals that make a myth tangible. Stories, symbols and rituals are essentially languages—languages that are heard, seen and performed. Together they construct the truths of a culture. The story of the Resurrection, the symbol of the crucifix and the ritual of baptism establish the idea that is Christianity. The story of independence, the symbol of the national flag and the ritual of the national anthem reinforce the idea of a nation state.

Mythology tends to be hyperbolic and fantastic to drive home a myth. It is modern arrogance to presume that in ancient times people actually believed in the objective existence of virgin births, flying horses, parting seas, talking serpents, gods with six heads and demons with eight arms. The sacredness of such obviously irrational plots and characters ensures their flawless transmission over generations. Any attempt to challenge their validity is met with outrage. Any attempt to edit them is frowned upon. The unrealistic content draws attention to the idea behind the communication. Behind virgin births and parting seas is an entity who is greater than all forces of nature put together. A god with six heads and a demon with eight arms project a universe where there are infinite possibilities, for the better and for the worse.

From myth comes beliefs, from mythology customs. Myth conditions thoughts and feelings. Mythology influences behaviours and communications. Myth and mythology thus have a profound influence on culture. Likewise, culture has a profound influence on myth and mythology. People outgrow myth and mythology when myth and mythology fail to respond to their cultural needs. So long as Egyptians believed in the afterworld ruled by Osiris, they built pyramids. So long as Greeks believed in Charon, the ferryman of the dead, they placed copper coins for him in the mouth of the dead. Today no one believes in Osiris or Charon. There are no pyramids or coins in the mouth of the dead. Instead

there are new funeral ceremonies spawned by new belief systems, new mythologies based on new myths, each one helping people cope with the painful inevitability and mystery of death.

It is ironical that for all the value we give to the rational, life is primarily governed by the irrational. Love is not rational. Sorrow is not rational. Hatred, ambition, rage and greed are irrational. Even ethics, morals and aesthetics are not rational. They depend on values and standards which are ultimately subjective. What is right, sacred and beautiful to one group of people need not be right, sacred and beautiful to another group of people. Every opinion and every decision depends on the prevailing myth. Even perfection is a myth. There is no evidence of a perfect world, a perfect man or a perfect family anywhere on earth. Perfection, be it Rama Rajya or Camelot, exists only in mythology. Yet everyone craves for it. This craving inspires art, establishes empires, sparks revolutions and motivates leaders. Such is the power of myth.



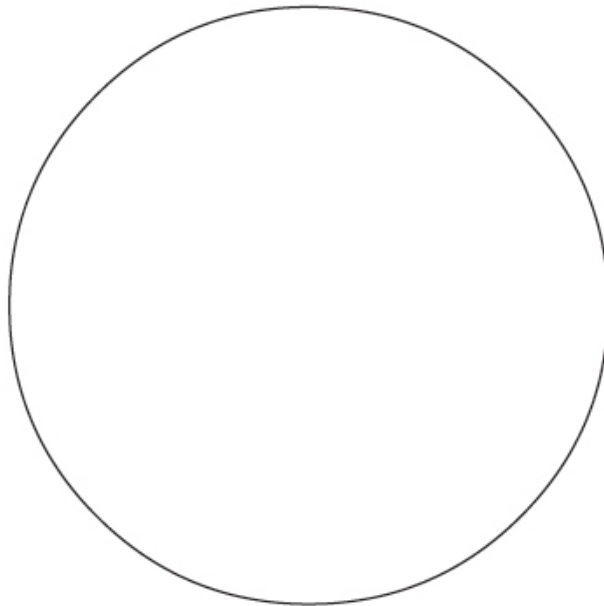
This book explores Hindu mythology. Behind the mythology is a myth. Behind the myth a truth: an inherited truth about life and death, about nature and culture, about perfection and possibility, about hierarchies and horizons. This subjective and cultural truth of the Hindus is neither superior nor inferior to other truths. It is simply yet another human understanding of life.



1

The Circle of Brahma and Saraswati

In which the nature of the universe is explored



The circle is the most spontaneous of natural shapes, taken by the horizon, by stars, planets and bubbles. It best represents the Hindu universe because

Hindus see the world as being timeless, fetterless, boundless, cyclical and infinite. This universe is the medium through which the divine presents itself; hence for Hindus every element of this universe can serve as a window to the divine.



Brahma

God as creator looks like a priest, chanting Vedic hymns and holding in his four hands instruments of ritual. Every ritual is concluded with the chant ‘Shanti, shanti, shanti’, which means ‘Peace, peace, peace’. Peace is the aim of every ritual. Peace comes when one comes to terms with the three worlds: the personal world, the cultural world and the natural world. For that one needs to appreciate the world in its totality, from every point of view. That is what Brahma does with his four heads facing the four directions.

For Hindus, Brahma is God who creates the world. The world he creates is known as Brahmanda. This world is not just the outer objective world governed by mathematical principles. It is also the inner subjective world of thoughts and feelings. According to Vedic scriptures, God does

not 'create' this world. He simply made all creatures aware of it. Awareness leads to discovery. Discovery is creation.

The world discovered by Brahma is embodied in the Goddess. She has always existed, even when no one observed her. For Brahma, the Goddess is Shatarupa, she who takes infinite forms. Shatarupa is Saraswati, goddess of knowledge, for in her infinite forms she reflects the answer to Brahma's question: Who am I? This question is the impulse of creation. It made God open his eyes and look at the Goddess.



Saraswati

Saraswati is Goddess as embodiment of knowledge. She is the world that informs and inspires. She wears no jewels or cosmetics and drapes herself in a plain white sari with no desire to allure. She must be sought out. She rides a heron, the symbol of concentration, or a gander, the symbol of intellectual discrimination because it is believed to possess the ability to separate water and milk from a mixture. She holds in her four hands a lute, a book, a pen and a string of memory beads. Difficult to acquire yet eternally faithful, she is the container of all answers.

Three Hundred and Thirty Million Deities

Here we uncover the layers of divine manifestations and understand the relationships between them.

The idea of 330 million Hindu deities is a metaphor for the countless forms by which the divine makes itself accessible to the human mind.

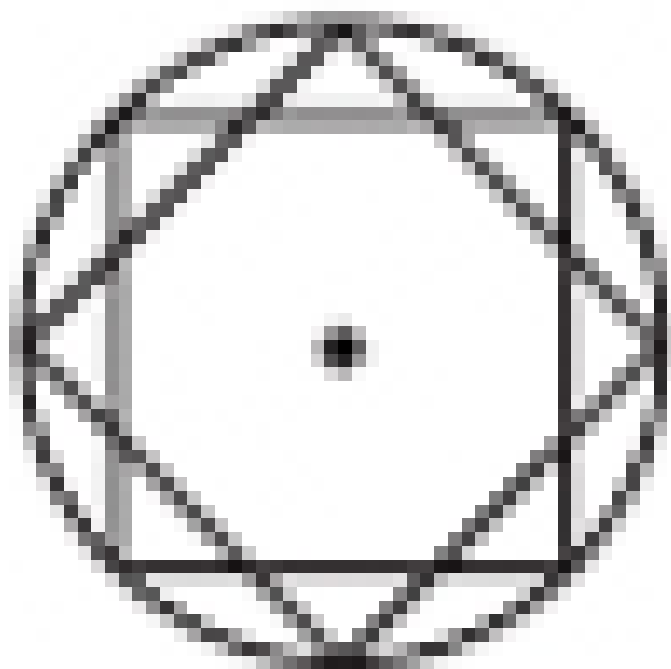


Vishwa-rupa

Vishwa-rupa or Virat-Swarup is the cosmic form of God. For Hindus, God is the container of all things. All existence is a manifestation of the divine. This understanding of the world makes no room for the notion of 'evil'. Evil means that which is devoid of Godliness. When everything is God, then nothing, not even things we despise and shy away from, can be

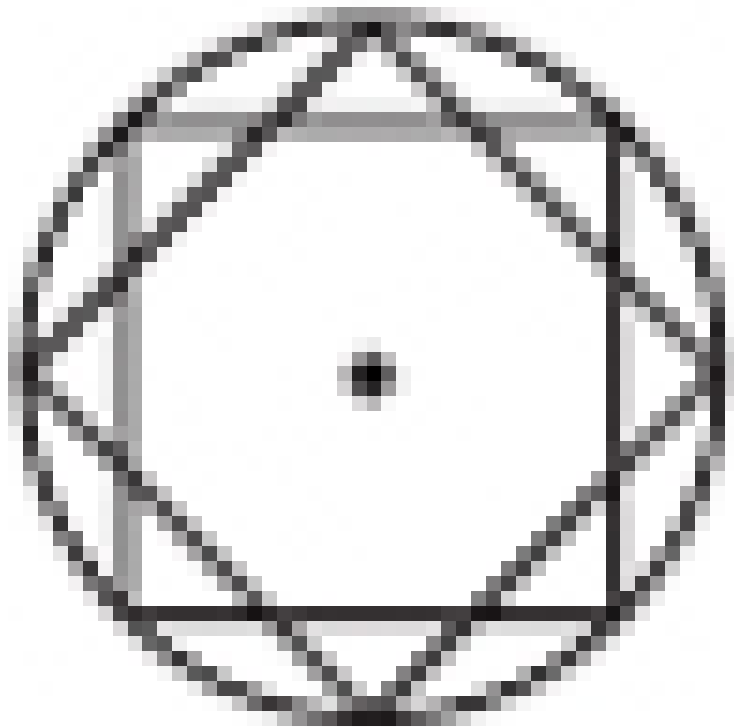
ungodly. Good and bad are judgements based on human values. Human values—critical though they may be to establishing civilized society—are based on a limited understanding of the world. When understanding changes, values and judgements change and with them society. The Sanskrit word ‘maya’ refers to all things that can be measured. Human understanding of the world is limited, hence measurable, hence maya. To believe this maya is truth is delusion. Beyond maya, beyond human values and human judgements, beyond the current understanding of the world, is a limitless reality which makes room for everyone and everything. That reality is God.

For Hindus, all of creation is divine. Everything in nature is therefore worthy of worship. There is no discomfort visualizing God in plants, animals, rivers, mountains, rocks and in man-made objects such as pots, pans, pestles and mortars. Stories such as the one following transform rivers into molten forms of God.



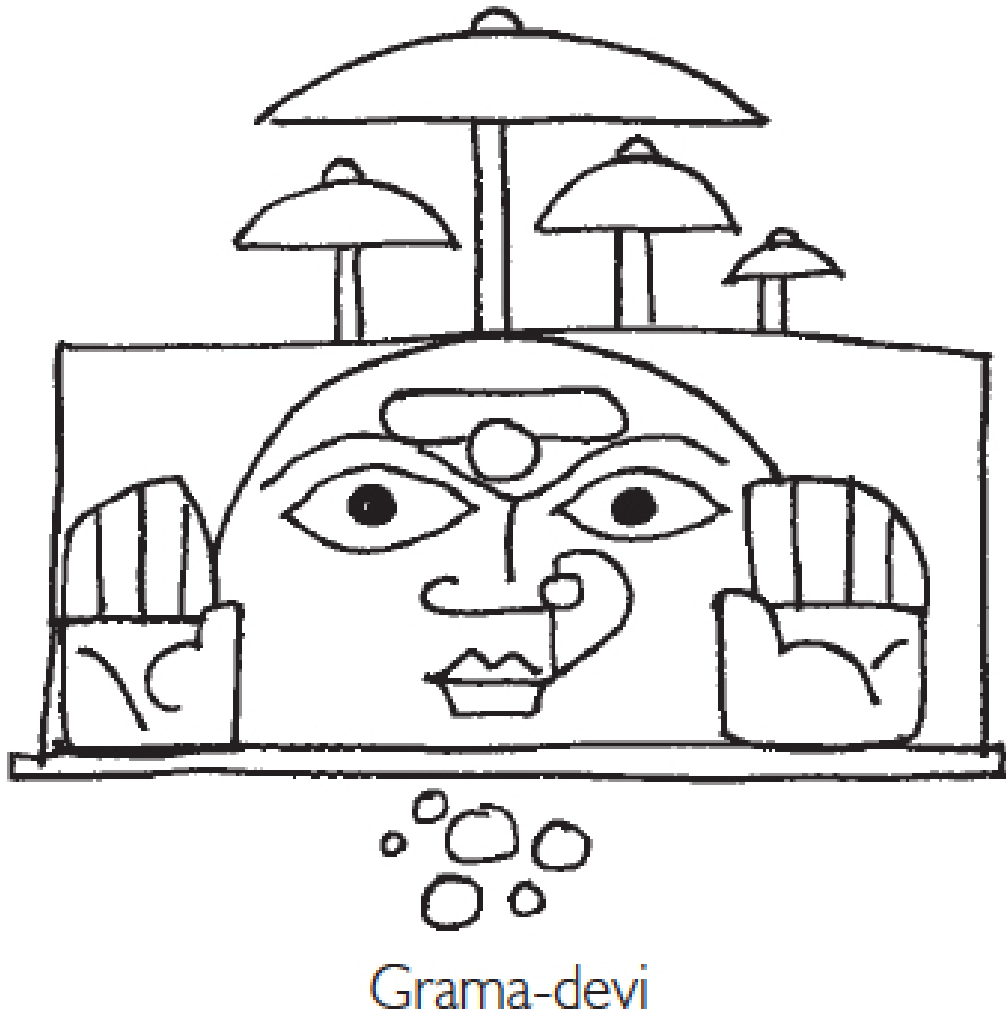
Vishnu Melts

God creates the world as Brahma, sustains it as Vishnu and destroys it as Shiva. One day, Shiva started to sing. Vishnu was so moved by the melody that he began to melt. Brahma caught the molten Vishnu in a pot. This was poured on earth. It took the form of the river Ganga. The Ganga nourished the earth. To bathe in Ganga's waters is to bathe in God. (Ganga Mahatmya)



A Hindu deity may be just a rock in a cave, a tree growing in an orchard, a river flowing down the plains, a cow wandering in the street, or perhaps an elaborately decorated idol of stone, clay or metal enshrined in a temple. Anything can be God. So long as it can respond to the human condition. In many shrines, deities are given human form merely by placing a pair of eyes and a pair of hands on a rock. Eyes represent sense organs and hands

represent action organs. This indicates the deity is conscious, sensitive and responsive.



A village goddess or Grama-devi is characterized by her eyes, indicating she is sensitive to the needs of her worshippers. With an upward-pointing palm, the goddess offers emotional comfort. With a downward-pointing palm, the goddess offers material gifts. Her nose ring and bangles are a reminder that the goddess is domesticated: her power has been harnessed for the benefit of the village.

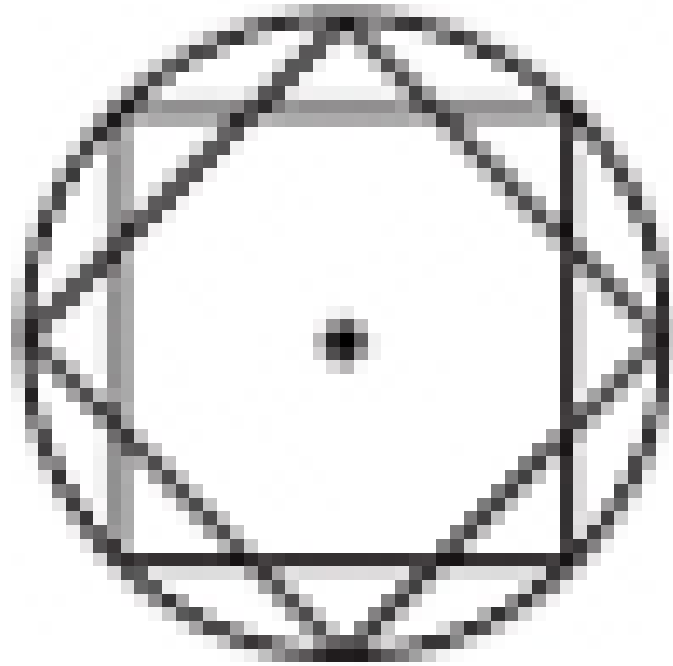
Divine sensitivity and responsiveness vary from place to place. Certain natural rock formations are found to be more potent than others. This explains why a particular set of three stones in a cave in Jammu attracts hundreds of pilgrims who identify them as the tangible manifestation of the Goddess, locally known as Vaishno-devi. Or why a particular icicle in a remote, inaccessible Himalayan cave is identified with Shiva and revered as Amarnath, the eternal lord.

Divine potency can also be a function of time. The confluence of the Ganga and the Yamuna is for Hindus more sacred than the confluence of any other rivers. Hence more pilgrims bathe at this sangam. The flow of pilgrims rises dramatically when the planet Jupiter enters the house of Aries, and the sun enters the house of Capricorn. This planetary alignment takes place once in twelve years, which is marked by the Maha Kumbha Mela, the great gathering of holy men, believed to be the largest religious congregation in the world.

It is possible, through certain prescribed rituals, to transform an idol into a deity, make an ordinary object of art sensitive and responsive to the human condition. In such images divine aura wanes over time, with more and more people seeking its darshan. Regular rituals performed by well-trained priests ensure the aura is replenished. To minimize loss of aura, the image is isolated in the sanctum sanctorum, a room which is rather dark, cramped and off limits to the public. Only priests who have been ritually cleansed are allowed to enter the room and touch the idol. Devotees can look upon the image from afar and that too for not more than a few minutes. Once or twice a year, during festivals, the deity or its effigy leaves the temple in a grand procession to mingle freely with the people.

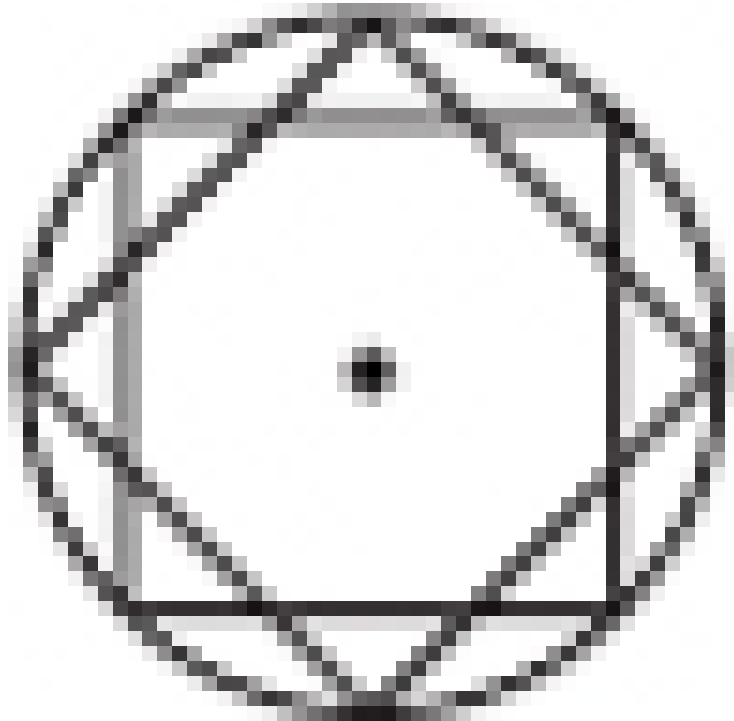
For Hindus, looking at the image of God is important. This ritual act is known as darshan. During darshan the deity looks at your condition and responds to it. Thus darshan draws the transformative power of God into one's life. Devotees of Shrinathji suffer long waits for hours in the

crowded halls of his haveli in Nathdvara, Rajasthan, even though his darshan lasts for barely a few seconds, which is why it is locally known as jhanki or a teasing glimpse.



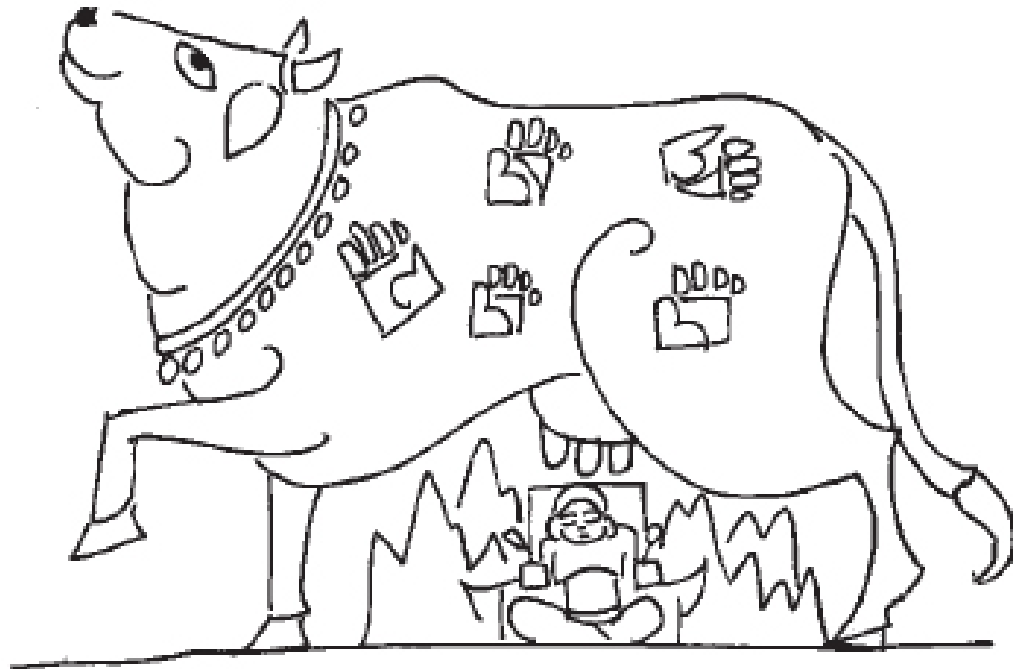
Turning for Kanakadasa

The image of Krishna in the temple at Udipi used to face the east. Only high-caste people were allowed to enter this temple. Kanakadasa, a low-caste devotee, stood outside near the western wall, desperate to catch a glimpse of the lord. To everyone's surprise, the image in the sanctum turned west, allowing Kanakadasa to see him through a crack in the western wall. (Udipi temple lore)



Some images are svayambhu, naturally potent, hence attract throngs of devotees. They need few, if any, aura-replenishing rituals. Balaji, the deity who resides atop the hills of Tirumala, Andhra Pradesh, is said to be so sensitive to people's needs that even though his eyes are covered with sandal paste he is able to respond to the needs of over a hundred thousand pilgrims who visit his temple every day.

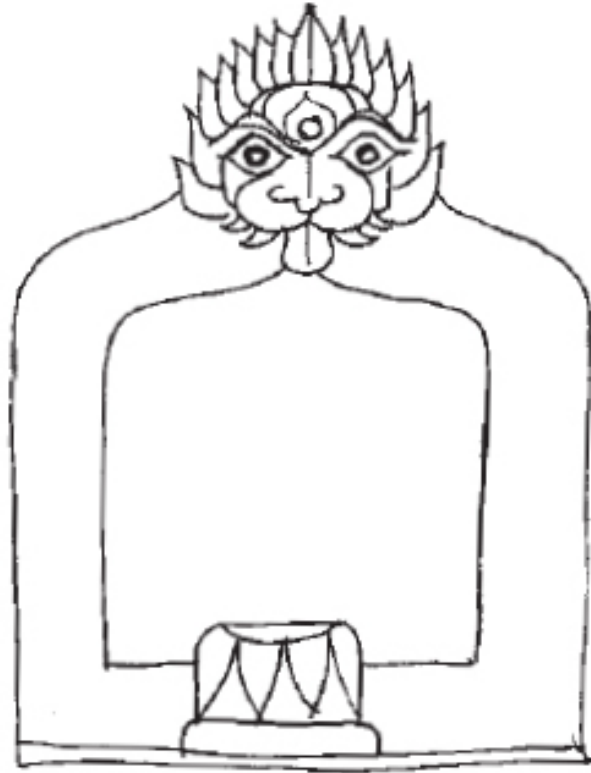
As devotees leave a shrine, they try to carry with them anything that has come in contact with the deity: dry flakes of sandal paste, ash, water, flowers, cloth or food. This is prasad. It contains divine aura by coming in contact with God. It has the power to carry divine blessings wherever it goes. The principle underlying this practice is called 'contagious magic', the ability to transmit sacredness through contact.



Nandini's Milk

Many temples claim that the images they enshrine are not carved by human hands. They are said to have been found in a termite hill by cowherds who found their cows shedding milk over it. Such tales transform the images into svayambhu svarupas, self-created images of a very conscious God, who wants to be found.

A deity may be worshipped in a temporary open-air shrine made of bamboo, cane and cloth that is dismantled after the ceremony. Or it may be placed in a permanent shrine: inside the house, restricted to the family, or in a public space, open to the community. A Hindu temple is not a prayer hall or the space where the faithful gather; it is the residence of God. Each day the presiding deity is bathed, fed, bedecked and adored. Each day the deity grants audience to devotees, accepting their offerings and answering their prayers.



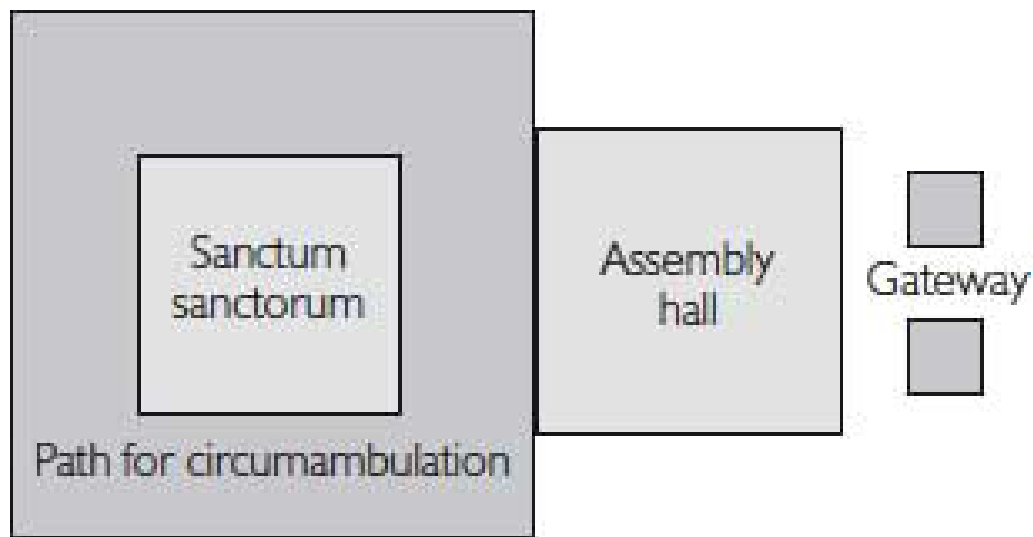
Kirtimukha

This rather fierce-looking head with tongue sticking out often adorns doorways and arches of temples. Its irreverent, mocking expression contrasts with the serenity of the presiding deity. It reminds everyone that God can see beyond the piety being expressed. The unspoken truths in the hearts of the devotees are not hidden from God.

For Hindus, the temple is as important as the deity within. The deity gives meaning to the temple; if the deity did not exist, the devotees would not go to the temple. If the temple did not exist, if there were no magnificent archways, embellished walls, decorated roofs or fluttering flags, devotees would not know where to look for the deity. Thus the temple and the deity within validate each other. The temple is the body and the deity, its soul.

Hindu temple walls are covered with all kinds of images, both real and imagined. There are scenes from everyday life: priests performing yagna,

kings fighting battles, warriors hunting, courtesans dancing, couples making love, children playing and sages giving discourse. Then there are fantastic forms: gods with multiple heads, goddesses with many arms, demons with fangs, mythical beasts—part serpent, part lion, part elephant. The sacred and the profane, the sexual and the violent, the factual and the fictional, the desired and the disgusting merge and mingle with each other. Hindu temple art informs the viewer that everything can and does exist in the world. There can be no limits to God. Hence Brahmanda is boundless, the possibilities within endless. Hindu temples are thus architectural expressions of the Hindu understanding of the world.



Elements of a Hindu Temple



Narasimha

Narasimha is a form of Vishnu that is neither man nor animal. It is neither this nor that. For many, this is a monster because it cannot be classified. For the devotee, this is God, because it defies classification. Images such as these which emerge from beyond the limits of human vision and vocabulary embellish Hindu temple walls. They remind all that what is impossible in human reason is possible in divine thought.

In the earliest phase of Hinduism, known as the Vedic age, there were no temples. The need for permanent shrines came much later when the nomadic lifestyle gave way to a more settled agricultural life. Temple or no temple, the aim of invoking the divine in all phases of Hinduism has

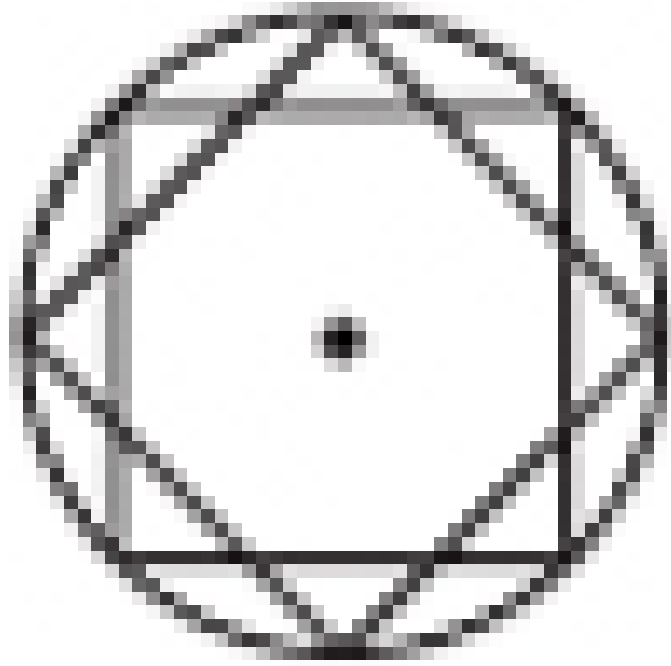
been the same: to cope with the stress of existence. The response took, and continues to take, three forms:

1. Fight: rites and rituals aimed at changing circumstances in one's favour
2. Flight: monastic ideologies that sought an alternative, less tumultuous reality
3. Freeze: submission to a higher power who then guides one's destiny

The ritual known as yagna was the cornerstone of religious activity in Vedic times. Priests, on behalf of a patron, sat around a fire altar, chanted hymns and made offerings of milk and butter into the flames, invoking celestial beings known as Devas and compelling them by the power of ritual to satisfy the material aspirations of the patron. Pleased with the chants and offerings, the Devas gave victory in battle, brought rains on time and gave children to the childless.

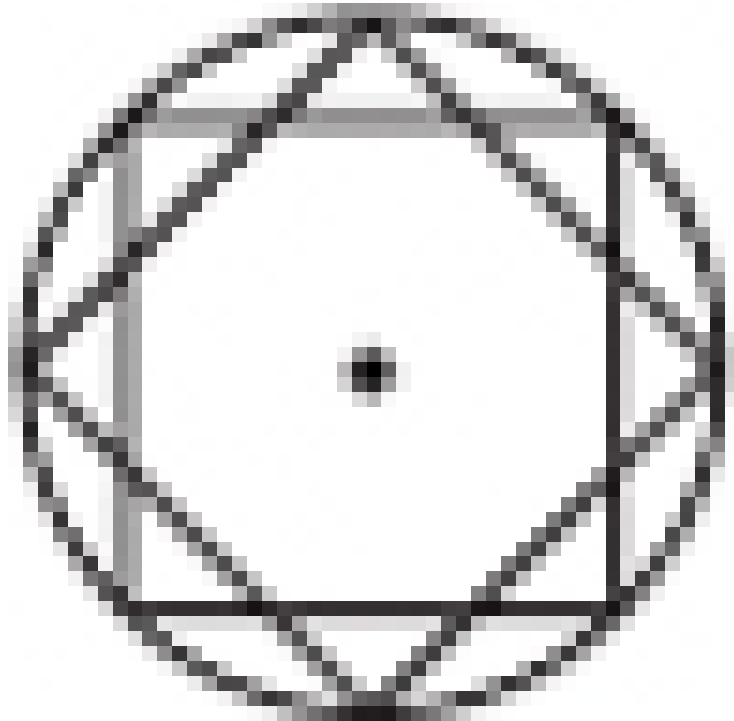
Table Three Phases of Hinduism

Phase of Hinduism	Characteristic Feature	Approximate Dating
Age of Rituals (Karma Kanda)	Focus on execution of rituals that realizes desire or changes destiny (highly mechanical)	1500 BC to 500 BC (Vedic era)
Age of Speculation (Gyan Kanda)	Focus on a deeper understanding of desire and destiny (highly intellectual)	500 BC to AD 500 (Upanishadic era)
Age of Worship (Upasana Kanda)	Focus on appeasement and adoration of deities whose grace can realize desire or change destiny (highly emotional)	AD 500 to present times (Bhakti era)



Dasharatha's Sons

Dasharatha had three wives but no sons. So he invited Rishi Rishyashringamuni to perform a yagna. At the end of the yagna, a Deva appeared from the flames and gave Dasharatha a pot of sweet porridge. 'Give it to your wife and she will bear a son,' said the Deva. Dasharatha gave half the porridge to his senior queen, Kaushalya, and half to his favourite queen, Kaikeyi. Both queens gave half of their share to the youngest queen, Sumitra. As a result Kaushalya gave birth to Rama, Kaikeyi to Bharata and Sumitra to the twins Lakshmana and Shatrughna. Rama and Lakshmana were inseparable, as were Bharata and Shatrughna. (Ramayana)



Vedic gods resided above the earth. There was Agni, fire, who stood on the ground. There was Vayu, wind, who extended between earth and sky. There was Indra, who ruled the sky and brought rain by attacking monsoon clouds with his thunderbolt. Then came Surya, the sun, Chandra, the moon, and seven other celestial bodies or Grahas whose movements across the twelve solar houses and twenty-seven lunar houses aroused great curiosity. Not only did they indicate the change of seasons, they also mapped out the destiny of man. It was in Vedic times that Jyotisha-shastra or astrology came into being. It enabled man to distinguish favourable times from unfavourable times. It foretold future calamities and provided the means to realize dreams or modify destiny using the power of gemstones and rituals that realigned the power of the Grahas.



Chandra

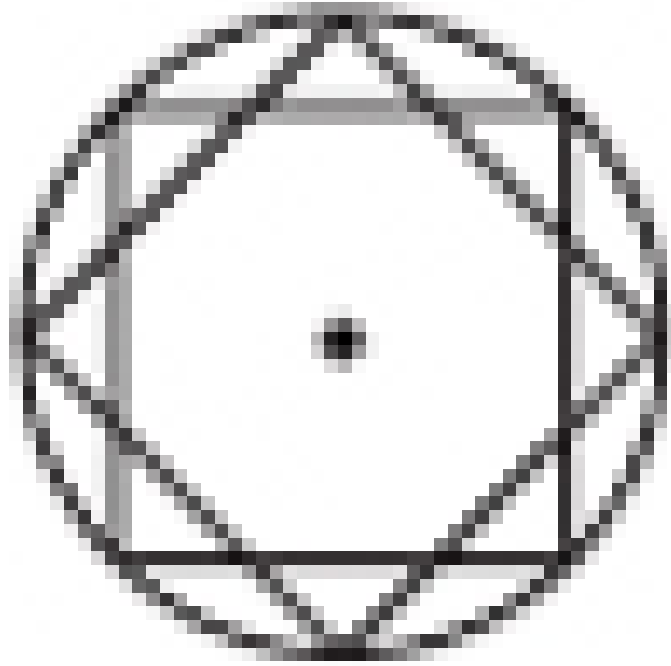
Like all celestial bodies, Chandra, the moon-god, travels through the twelve solar houses, the Rashis, and the twenty-seven lunar houses, the Nakshatras. The Nakshatras are said to be the wives of the moon. His favourite Nakshatra is Rohini. He waxes as he moves towards her and wanes as he moves away from her. On the twenty-eighth day, when there is no wife next to Chandra, the sky is dark, with no trace of the moon. On this day the moon sits on Shiva's head. The story goes that he was so handsome that Tara, the star-goddess, wife of Brihaspati, Jupiter, eloped with him. The child thus conceived was Budh, Mercury. Indra, king of the sky, decreed though the child was fathered by the moon its legitimate father was Brihaspati.

The list of astrological deities includes not only Devas but also Rishis (Brihaspati and Shukra) and Asuras (Rahu and Ketu). Rishis were keepers of Vedic lore and, in Vedic times, those who possessed a deep understanding of this highly revered scripture were considered as powerful as the gods. Asuras were enemies of the Devas; they resided under the earth. Though Asuras, Rahu and Ketu were special. They lived in the skies

as eclipses and comets influencing the design of the celestial regions and hence influencing the destiny of those on earth. Rahu and Ketu therefore became worthy of worship, to be appeased rather than adored. The following story explains how Rahu and Ketu came to sit alongside the gods.

Table The Gods of Time

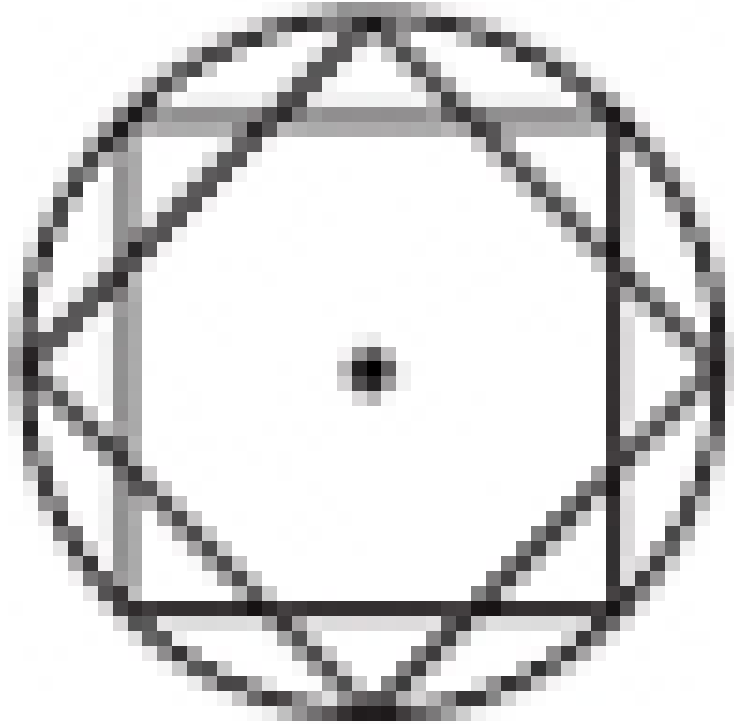
Name of Deity	Celestial Body	Associated Mental State	Associated Animal	Associated Mineral
Surya	Sun	Leadership	Horse	Ruby
Chandra	Moon	Mood swings	Antelope	Pearl
Mangal	Mars	Aggressiveness	Lion	Coral
Budh	Mercury	Intelligence	Lion with an elephant's trunk	Emerald
Brihaspati	Jupiter	Rationality	Elephant	Yellow sapphire
Shukra	Venus	Creativity	Horse	Diamond
Shani	Saturn	Impatience	Vulture	Blue sapphire
Rahu	Eclipse	Confusion	Serpent's head	Hessonite
Ketu	Comet	Restlessness	Serpent's tail	Cat's eye



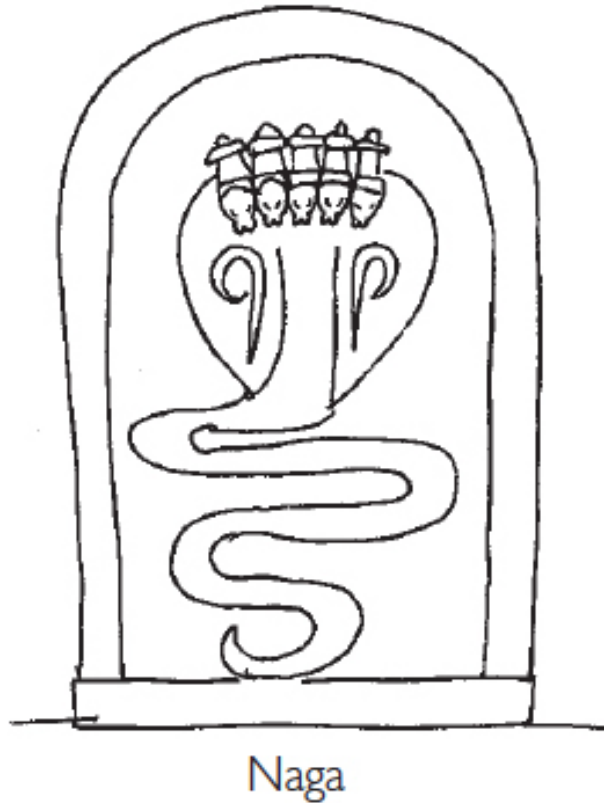
Rahu and Ketu

Once the Adityas and Daityas, sons of Aditi and Diti by the sage Kashyapa, were fighting over a pot of Amrita, the nectar of immortality. Vishnu, who is God, took the enchanting female form of Mohini and offered to distribute it between them. Smitten by her beauty, both sets of half-brothers accepted the offer. Distracting the Daityas with her alluring smile, Mohini poured Amrita down the throats of the Adityas. One Daitya got suspicious. He went and sat among the Adityas. As the Amrita fell into his mouth, the sun and the moon recognized the intruder. They alerted Vishnu, who immediately hurled his discus and severed the Daitya's neck. The head became the demon Rahu, who swore to eclipse the sun and the moon from time to time. The body became the demon Ketu, a directionless comet. Since the Daityas did not get a drop of Amrita, they became known as Asuras, those who did not drink the divine nectar. The Adityas became known as Suras, those who did drink the divine nectar. The

Suras were Devas, or gods of light, illuminated by Amrita.
(Mahabharata)



Rahu is represented as having a serpent's head while Ketu has a serpent's tail. Nagas or hooded serpents have a close relationship with Asuras. Both live under the earth. Both crave for Amrita that the Devas jealously guard. Both are associated with the idea of renewal. Deprived of Amrita, the Asuras take the help of Shukra, Venus, their guru, who has knowledge of Sanjivani Vidya, which allows him to resurrect dead Asuras. Nagas possess the power to regenerate themselves, replace their old skin with new ones because they had slithered on the grass where the pot of Amrita was once kept. This ability to be reborn, renewed and resurrected has made the Asuras and Nagas earth-bound deities. They are associated with fertility rites, and invoked for children and harvest.



Naga

Serpents are symbols of change and renewal. Like the earth they renew their fertility by replacing old skin with new. Since they could slither above and below the earth, they were considered keepers of the earth's secrets and hence symbols of occult lore. Serpents reminded Rishis of rivers meandering through the plains. They become symbols of life and time that keeps moving in one direction. Hindu deities are commonly associated with serpents. Shiva, the ascetic form of God, lets a serpent sit on him, while Vishnu, the royal form of God, sits on top of a serpent. This is because Shiva merely witnesses the earth's fertile rhythms while Vishnu controls it to establish society. The Goddess holds the serpent in her hand. She is the serpent—the earth, the river, time and life—that Shiva and Vishnu respond to.

Glossary of Non-English Words

ananda	bliss, tranquillity, serenity
Apsara	water-nymph, celestial dancer
ashrama	stage in life
Asura	subterranean being who hoards wealth
atma	soul
avatar	incarnation
bhakti	passionate devotion
bhoga	sensory indulgence
chitta	consciousness, spirit, mind
daan	charity
dakshina	service fee
Deva	celestial being who draws and distributes wealth
devata	personal deity
dharma	order, regulations
Gandharva	celestial musicians
jiva	living organism
jiva-atma	soul of a living organism that is crumpled/knotted
kalpa	lifetime of the world
kama	desire
karma	action and reaction
manas	mind
Manava	human
mantra	potent Vedic chants

marga	path or approach
maya	delusion; a limited, conditional understanding of the world
mithya	relative truth seen through a frame of reference
moksha	liberation
murti	image
nivritti	inward
param-atma	soul of god that is uncrumpled/unknotted
Prakriti	ever-changing aspect of life, mind and matter
pravritti	outward
puja	adoration or worship of a deity with flowers, incense and food
Purusha	unchanging aspect of life, soul
Rakshasa	wild forest spirit who follows the law of the jungle
rasa	material fluids
Rishi	sage with a deep understanding of Vedic lore
samadhi	using spiritual powers to break free from the world
samaja	society
samhita	collection of chants
samsara	the material world that changes constantly
samskara	rite of passage
sat	absolute truth without a frame of reference
shakti	energy, matter
shanti	peace
sharira	body
siddhi	the act of using spiritual powers to change the working of the world
Tantra	occult practices based on Vedic understanding of the world
tapa	spiritual fire

Tapasvin	an ascetic who churns spiritual fire
tapasya	practices that churn spiritual fire
tat tvam asi	that's what you are
tirtha	pilgrimage to a waterbody: river or lake or tank
Upanishad	deliberations and discussions on the Veda
varna	station in society
Veda	ancient revelations containing timeless truths
yagna	invocation of celestial beings through chants and offerings
Yaksha	wild forest spirit who guards treasures
yantra	potent Tantrik diagrams
yatra	journey
yoga	sensory discipline
Yogi	he who practises yoga
yuga	an era in the lifetime of the world

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